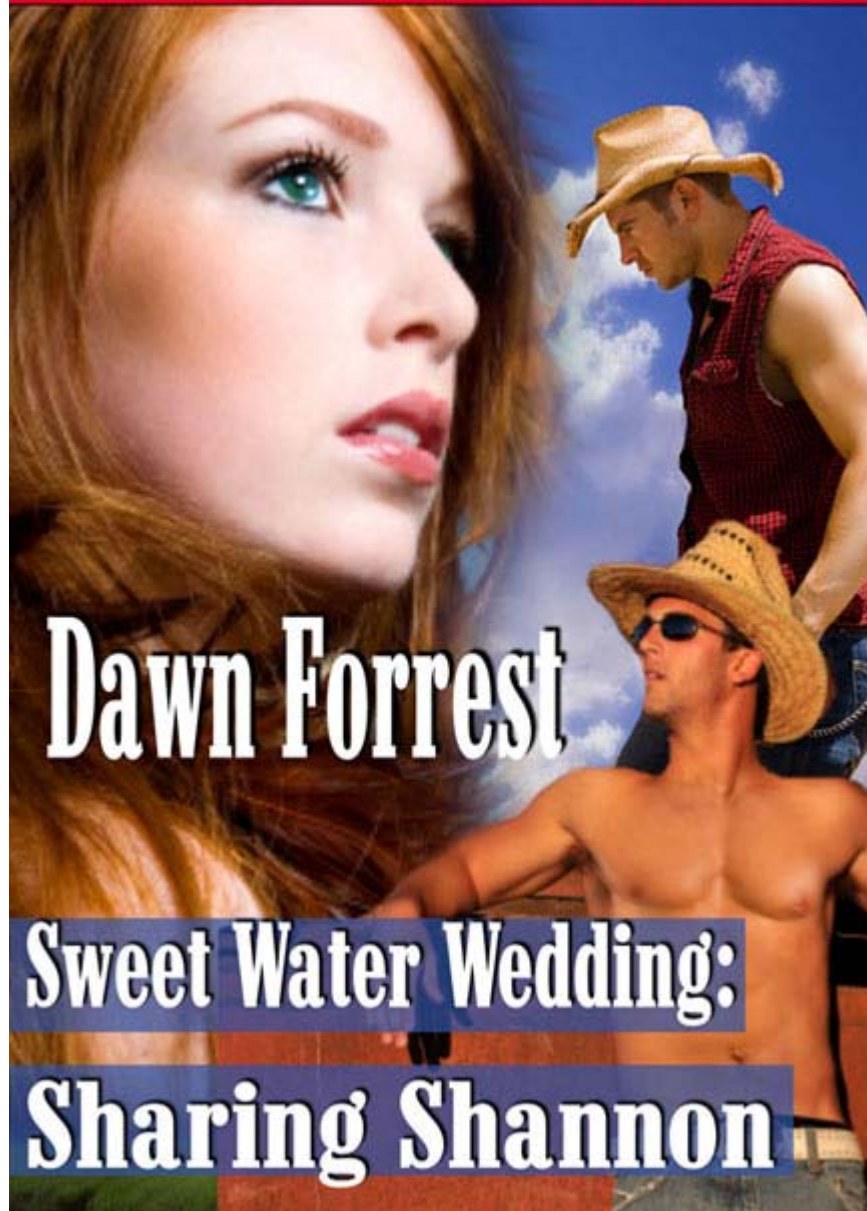


Siren Publishing

Ménage Àmour



Sweet Water Wedding:

Sharing Shannon

Irish environmental consultant Shannon O'Reilly can't envisage accommodating one man in her busy life, never mind two sexy Texas cowboys who want to share her.

Shannon discovers that James and Luke are best friends, business partners, and seasoned players. They both want her, and they don't mind sharing. Shannon can't contemplate one man in her busy life, let alone two, and their ideologies and lifestyles are poles apart. They try to convince her that such a relationship is possible in a place like Meadow Ridge County, with men like them. But when oil spills, bullets fly, and lust burns, can love really conquer all?

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

Length: 104,955 words

SWEET WATER WEDDING: SHARING SHANNON

Dawn Forrest

MENAGE AMOUR



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DEDICATION

To my very own roughy, toughy, North Sea tiger for his help in petroleum matters and steadfast support, and to my sister for her advice on US immigration rules and procedures.

SWEET WATER WEDDING: SHARING SHANNON

DAWN FORREST
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Prologue

Shannon rifled through the packet of Jelly Babies, seeking out her favorite purple one. Before she popped it into her mouth and savored the fruity flavor, she made a final voice recorded note for her report. Her work contract was for a large environmental consultancy. They had been commissioned by the Ugandan Government to investigate the potential impacts of more oil exploration in and around the Lake Albert area. She sucked on the little sweet and sighed, admiring the beautiful vista across the lake and appreciating the stunning African natural landscape. One of the perks of her job was that she traveled to remote and interesting places. The past three weeks had been hectic but yielded some very interesting information. There were a lot of complicated and interrelated issues to consider and she was looking forward to flying back home to Ireland tomorrow, finishing the report and maybe taking a well earned break from work.

Shannon felt the exact moment when Alex tensed. She stilled and tracked the Ugandan Guide's gaze as he stared intently at a rocky outcrop on the edge of the lake about four hundred and fifty yards away.

"Rebels or poachers," he whispered urgently. "Get into the Jeep!"

She hesitated for only a fraction of a second while her brain engaged her legs. She spun on her heel and sprinted to the vehicle, yanked open the door, and threw herself inside. For the first time in her life she heard the sound of bullets hitting hard baked soil. A cry of pain caused Shannon to turn and see Alex writhing on the ground, struggling to bring his rifle to bear on men moving along the waterline toward them.

“Crap!” she exclaimed as she scrambled to the other side of the Jeep. She fell out of the driver’s door, crawled to the rear of the vehicle and carefully peaked out past the tailgate to assess the situation. Alex was down with what looked like a hit to the lower leg, but he was still conscious and now returning fire at the three men cautiously approaching.

A rush of adrenaline surged through her body and she shouted, “I’m going to drag you backwards, for goodness’ sake keep firing.”

She ducked out from the cover and relative safety of the vehicle, praying to God, Mother Nature, and The Wizard of Oz that no more bullets would find their target. Grabbing the sturdy, thick cotton collar of the guide’s shirt, she heaved and slowly dragged him backwards. He was heavy but able to assist her with his good leg. Once they were behind the Jeep and unable to return fire, the rebels, or whoever they were, gained ground, closing the distance between them.

“Get in, get in,” she cried as she helped Alex to haul his body into the Jeep.

He gave a strangled cry of pain when she none too gently pushed his legs out of the way and crashed down into the driver’s seat. She couldn’t waste the time trying to be careful because the men were now only two hundred yards away. The ping of metal impacting on metal had Shannon gasping for breath and shaking as she slammed her foot on the gear pad, yanked the stick into first, and hit the accelerator. The wheels skidded and the Jeep took off rapidly, fishtailing with a cloud of grit spraying behind. In quick succession she went through the gears and was able to pick up speed even as the

Jeep bounced over the deeply rutted track. She grunted, and Alex hissed with each jarring movement.

Soon she could no longer see the men in her rearview mirror nor hear gunfire, but decided that she couldn't risk stopping just yet.

"Alex?" she shouted, not daring to take her eyes off the potholed track as they sped along. He was slumped forward, wheezing gulps of air. "Can you hang on for just a few minutes?" She wanted to put as much distance as possible between them and the shooters.

"Yes, but I am feeling dizzy, and the pain, it is very great." He barely managed to reply in agony.

"Hang in there. Just don't go to sleep, and I'll stop in a minute." She tried to keep the panic that she was feeling out of her voice, knowing that they needed to quickly stem the flow of blood from his leg before he went into shock.

She drove a little further and then stopped the Jeep. From the first aid kit in the glove box she tied a tourniquet above the wound and pressed a thick pad of gauze on it.

"There, hold that down tightly. It's the best I can do just now, the camp isn't far away."

"Yes, Miss Shannon, it is better to get to the base quickly. Perhaps you could radio ahead?"

"Of course, sorry I didn't think of it."

She mentally scolded herself to calm down and think logically. She quickly explained the situation to the radio operator at the base camp of the government-private joint venture oil company assisting her. As fast as the road conditions would allow she drove to the other side of the lake where the base was located.

She nearly wept with relief as she pulled into the camp and saw the group of people, including a medic, waiting to take Alex.

"Are you okay, Miss O'Reilly?" asked a heavily built man with a startlingly ruddy complexion and thick South African accent.

Shannon looked at the man whom she recognized as Mr. Van Zyle, the head of camp security.

“Yes, I’m fine, luckily,” she replied shakily. *But I’ve bloody well had enough of this nonsense.*

She quickly told him details of the incident.

“Were they carrying backpacks or any other equipment?”

“One had a pack on. I only saw guns, AK-47s I think.” Even Shannon who knew next to nothing about firearms could recognize the weapon of choice in Africa. “But they had been hiding behind rocks, so I don’t know what was stashed there.”

“Okay, we’d better get the army in. If they are rebels they may have mined the road by now, expecting us to come chasing after them. Are you sure that you’re okay?”

“Yes, Alex spotted them first and warned me.”

“Good, he was doing his job,” he said bluntly.

Shannon knew that the guides didn’t get paid much and that Alex would not be able to work for a while. He’d been very helpful to her on this visit and she really liked the man. Although she didn’t have a lot of money, he’d definitely be getting the biggest tip that she could afford.

Van Zyle headed to the radio shack just as her cell phone rang. She saw that it was from her best friend Rachael Harrison, and gave a yelp of delight and relief. A familiar voice was just what she needed right now.

“You know you pick your moments. I’m so very, *very* glad to hear from you.” Her voice almost cracked and she realized that she was more affected by the incident than she had thought.

“Shannon, I’ve got something to tell you that will shock your socks off. Where are you? Are you sitting down?” Rachael’s excitement was evident by the flurry of her words and the tone of voice that Shannon loved and knew so well.

“Well, I’m in the middle of Africa, Uganda to be precise. About half an hour ago I was shot at. My guide was hit but is okay. I need a stiff drink and I wish you were here, or rather, I wish, *really* wish that

I were there. Top that if you can.” She took a long draft from her water bottle and sat down on an old wooden bench under a tree.

Rachael was quiet for a moment. “Wow. Are you okay?”

“Yeah, just a little shaken. What’s your news?”

Rachael exhaled loudly. “I’m in love and getting married to a Texan in eight weeks time and I want you to be the chief bridesmaid.”

Shannon nearly fell off the bench as she reeled back in shock and was momentarily lost for words.

“Bloody hell...you win.”

Chapter 1

It was eight thirty and Rachael Harrison had just finished the evening shift at the Vet Practice where she worked. She reckoned that creativity and inspiration must have been running low on the day her cousin, Colin Farley, had decided to name his veterinary business. At least his business acumen was better because Colin had realized that it made common and commercial sense to open two evenings a week. The service was now easily accessible to those who worked during the day and it was busy as usual with a steady stream of clients.

Sandy the receptionist had already headed home, but Rachael stayed on a little longer to quickly finish some outstanding stock taking work. In truth, she tended to prefer to work with livestock rather than domestic pets, but found that she was enjoying meeting the locals and taking time to getting reacquainted with the folks of Ridge Water town and Meadow Ridge County. Many people seemed to know her fiancé's family, the Rydens, the Sweet Water ranch, and of her impending wedding to Joshua.

Rachael had very recently returned from England, to the place of her birth and early childhood, in Meadow Ridge County, Texas. She had immediately met and fallen hard for the big dominant rancher and oilman Joshua Ryden. Rachael couldn't think of him without a thrilling sensation coursing through her veins and, funnily enough, ending between her legs. Oh, yes, beyond any doubt she was passionately in lust and love. She knew to her very bones that they were right for each other. They were kindred spirits and physical mates.

Whirlwind romances had never been part of her normal relationship repertoire. In fact the behavior was so far off her chart that she had thoroughly expected the shocked reaction from her best friend Shannon O'Reilly, when Rachael had briefly spoken to her a few weeks ago to tell her the news. Shannon had sounded astounded, but it hadn't been a good time for a long conversation. Since then they had talked several times on the phone. Shannon still seemed a little wary, but she was definitely happy to take some time off work to be her bridesmaid.

Tonight Rachael was meeting Joshua at her cabin for a late dinner, and she had offered to buy Chinese takeout on the way home. Even though they had spent almost every night together since their engagement she still felt excited at the thought of seeing him. He was a most inventive man, and she was a most satisfied woman.

She made sure that all the lights were switched off as she prepared to leave and lock up. The place looked a little spooky with the fading grey twilight retreating through the windows, casting long claw-like shadows in its wake. Just as she was opening the door to leave she felt as much as heard movement directly behind her. The door slammed shut and she was pushed against it. Instinctively she shoved backwards and elbow-jabbed her attacker in the ribs. *Ow!* It was like hitting oak. Suddenly she was trapped between the door and a rock hard body. Her arms had somehow been captured and held behind her back in a one handed viselike grip. The scream that she was about to let loose died in her throat as another hand clamped over her mouth. Panicking, she grunted and squirmed as she felt hot breath on her neck, but as she inhaled deeply through her nose, she inexplicably began to relax. Apparently her body was ahead of her brain as she breathed in the familiar male scent.

"Not gonna use your safe word are you, darlin'?"

Joshua, she realized, with fear and anger rapidly morphing into relief and then desire. Damn and then bless the man because he sure knew what she wanted and it wasn't altogether wholesome.

“No, damn you.”

“Didn’t think so.” He growled as he began to strip the shirt off her back and unclasped her bra.

Strong arms snaked around her and big, warm hands began to knead her breasts. She moaned and pressed her body back, writhing up against his groin and rubbing herself along the substantial erection that she could feel straining to be released from his jeans. She gasped when he pinched her nipples firmly between his thumbs and index fingers for a few seconds, causing a small shot of pain, and then rubbed away the hurt with the flat of his palms.

“Rachael, you are everything. I need you so much, darlin’.” He kissed her neck and sighed in her ear, “I couldn’t wait until you got home.”

“Joshua, take what you need, I’m yours.” She breathlessly spoke the truth. He was like oxygen to her enflamed desire. “God, I want you so much, I love it, love you.”

“I know.”

He grabbed her arm, swung her around, leaned down, and kissed her fiercely. As his tongue twined with hers he easily picked her up, and holding her tightly against his six foot seven inch frame he carried her through to the next room.

“Bend over.” His voice had lost all gentleness as he placed his big hand on her back and pushed her over the steel examination table.

God, only Joshua could do this to her, balancing fear with trust, and love with lust. Quickly divesting her of her jeans and panties he admired the view.

“Um, shall I take you here?” He reached around and stuck a finger in her mouth and twirled it with her tongue. “Or here?” He moved to plunge it into her slick pussy and half whispered, half groaned, “Always ready for me.” Then, with his finger sufficiently lubricated with her juices, he withdrew and eased it into her tightly puckered rear entrance, “Or here?”

Rachael whimpered as desire and need now raged, in response to his words, the slow caress of her back, and his other hand teasing back and forth as he fingered her tight back passage.

“I don’t know. Perhaps I should have a taste first and then decide. I’ve already kissed that sweet mouth, so where to next?”

In the dim light he leaned to the side and grabbed an antiseptic wipe from the box she kept next to the table. Slowly he dragged it from her pussy, all the way up the crack of her ass.

“You have a gorgeous ass, I’ll start there.”

“W...what?” He liked to keep her on her toes, but this was new. “You can’t mean...” She spluttered, but when he crouched down behind her and parted her butt cheeks she understood exactly what he meant. “Oh, God.” She groaned as he swiped his tongue over the delicate, receptive skin.

She began to pant with the sheer pleasure of the sensation as he played around the sensitive area with his oh so talented tongue. She felt vulnerable, exposed, and naughty. Moisture from her arousal now coated the top of her thighs and she couldn’t stop from clenching her core pelvic muscles. After a few heavenly minutes the rimming stopped.

“Now there’s not one part of you I haven’t kissed and licked,” he declared with a lust strained voice. “I love it, but there’s still some pussy to try.”

* * * *

He spread her legs wider and nudged his face between them. He could smell her excitement and it made his cock throb hard enough to hit a home run. For a moment he used his hot breath to tease her flesh and then he softly probed into her warm, wet opening, lapping up her liquid passion. He adored the taste of his woman, soon to be his wife, and he would love her for the rest of his life. When she wasn’t near he missed her like an addict missed his fix. He drank her in then traced

his tongue to her swollen, gleaming clit. She hissed and shifted, pressing back into his face as he sucked on her little bud. Her hips began to rock and her moans grew louder.

She was mumbling now, saying that she was close, telling him that she wanted his big cock in her ass. Well, he wasn't about to deny her. When he felt her body begin to tremble and jerk in climax he stood up quickly and shoved his jeans and Jockeys down his thighs. His imprisoned tool sprang free, straining in her direction like an eager soldier ahead of the charge. He positioned the wide, bulbous head at the opening of her egg slick pussy and thrust forward to the hilt forcefully, holding onto her hips and feeling the power of her orgasm gripping and massaging his cock. She howled as he grunted, settling in to a deep penetrating action. In reply to his invasion her pussy continued to spasm.

Pulling free was misery. Her greedy cunt wanted to keep him locked to her, but she had said she wanted an ass fucking and that's what he was going to give her. His cock was now well coated with her cream and with a finger he spread some of the natural lubricant on her twitching little rosette. He placed his angry, red cockhead at her back door and very slowly pressed forward. At first the tight iris of muscle resisted entry, but then relaxed, and he slipped through to feel her hot passage grip him tightly. It was exquisite and then miraculously became even better as Rachael tilted her ass and slowly pushed back against him until he was seated up to the hilt and his ten and a half inch cock was buried deep. She began to rotate her hips, massaging his large balls against her twat.

He groaned his pleasure and obscenities. "Submission...skewered on my dick...fucking amazing...never get enough..."

He pulled back nine inches then slowly forged forward again and again, establishing a steady rhythm. His hands moved from gripping her hips to between her legs where he began to press on her clit and fill her pussy with two thick fingers, moving in time with his thrusting. Her cunt began to flutter around his fingers. He could feel

another orgasm building and became dimly aware that she was urging him on with her own crude words.

“Take me...fuck me deep...ass stretched full...so good...”

Her pussy clenched around his fingers and her stretched backside clamped down, squeezing tighter around his wide girth and taking him with her. He couldn’t stop now if his life depended on it.

“I’m coming,” she yelled as another climax racked her body.

His orgasm broke around him like huge waves crashing over a boat. He roared in ecstasy and triumph as he was swamped with the sensation. Three more thrusts and jet after jet of thick, warm cum pulsed down her dark passage.

The room seemed suddenly very quiet with only the sound of their harsh panting as they caught their breath. Joshua leaned over Rachael, covering her back, holding her close, and languidly stroking her hair.

“You’re really in for it later,” Rachael croaked.

What a woman. He laughed and cuddled her even closer. “Is that a promise?”

Chapter 2

The little organic veggie patch was in a fearful state of neglect with weeds outnumbering vegetables two to one. As Shannon stood next to the old drystone boundary wall, she realized that some areas of her life had clearly slipped in the last six months—probably more like the last year if she were honest. In fact the little garden could be a metaphor for nearly all areas of her life unconnected with work.

At college Shannon had an active social life. Later when she'd started work she had managed to keep up on the social scene, even though she continued further with her education at the same time. However, since starting her own business and becoming an independent environmental consultant, her social life had dwindled to a small circle of friends and the occasional short-term boyfriend. Clearly she'd given the same attention to cultivating relationships as she'd given to her vegetables.

Shannon had gradually developed an expertise in mineral extraction, including land based oil and gas development. There was only a limited amount of quarry environmental impact and restoration work in Ireland, so she was traveling farther afield, for longer. Consequently it had become difficult to devote the time required for new friendships and for love to develop. Guys with a matching high sex drive didn't want to wait around for her to get back. She found that out the hard way about six months ago when she had come home early from a trip and discovered Carl, her so-called boyfriend, shagging another woman on his sofa. At first she'd been tempted to just turn around quietly and leave in a dignified manner, but couldn't resist at the last minute smacking his bare ass hard with a slipper

she'd found on the floor. And yes, it had made her feel better. His red butt had matched his face and that of the shrieking beauty underneath him. In fact, now, later, she could actually look back and laugh. The incident had been a wake-up call though, and she'd never give anyone else the chance to do that to her again.

She had joked to her best friend, Rachael Harrison, that if only her vibrator could open a pickle jar she'd have no need to concern herself with a man. It was a lie that she'd almost convinced herself of. The fact was that Shannon liked men and liked the lover-friend relationship. She told herself that she didn't need a "special someone" in her life at the moment, other than her tomcat, Baggie, who incidentally had gradually moved in with her neighbor. It appeared that even her feline friend had had enough of waiting for her.

Shannon reasoned that what she really needed and, frankly, deserved was a break from work, a bit of fun, and some R&R—rest and relaxation. Rachael's wedding would be the perfect opportunity to do just that. She definitely did not need another stressful relationship that involved the juggling skills of a circus clown. She had some money saved and she had made the time. Over the past month she had rescheduled projects and deferred work to fellow consultants.

Shannon had first met Rachael when she was a student, often getting into mischief like tying herself to railings and protesting outside the offices of big corporations who were reportedly damaging the environment through their practices. They'd been best friends since college and gone through that critical time of becoming relatively responsible adults with their friendship strong and still intact. Both women were independent souls through choice not necessity.

The more she thought about it the more she realized that the wedding couldn't have come at a better time, although it served to demonstrate just how quickly circumstances can change. There was Rachael, a strong, independent, career woman, suddenly getting

hitched to a cattle rancher and oilman to boot. From what Rachael had said about her fiancé, Joshua Ryden, he seemed to be an amazing guy. Shannon just hoped that her friend wasn't only seeing things through the rose-colored spectacles of love. What if he turned out to be an ignorant, pesticide and petroleum polluting type of rancher? She couldn't imagine Rachael getting involved with someone like that, but then this whole wedding was a big surprise. How the hell had that happened so fast? Well, she'd gleaned part of the reason from their recent conversation—sex. Yeah, that was always a clincher.

Shannon understood that there are some things best friends can only talk about with a bottle of wine and wearing pajamas, but she got the gist. It appeared that this Joshua Ryden fellow was the embodiment of Rachael's fantasies. Whilst details were sketchy, Shannon had the impression there was some kinky business going on. In fact Meadow Ridge County sounded an altogether intriguing place. Rachael had explained that it was not uncommon to find one woman with two husbands. It was a throwback from the early settler days when times were hard and women were few. Apparently the relationships worked well and the practice hadn't died out. Rachael had been quick to point out that, although Joshua came from such a family, he wasn't inclined to share her with anyone and he was the only man for her.

The whole idea should be unsavory, but Shannon had felt a certain tension in her body when hearing Rachael's words. She felt hot and bothered and, yes, damn it, more turned on than ever. In fact Mr. Tommy Tall, who resided on her right hand, had gone to work that night as she lay in bed thinking about all the possibilities. Masturbation had never worked so quickly. She mentally shook herself out of her fantasy. *Two men? Now that's just double the trouble.* She started toward the garden shed with the air of a woman on a mission, but the shrill ring of her house phone diverted her from her task.

"I'll get you later," she muttered, critically eyeing the weeds as she jogged into the house.

She was surprised to hear the voice of Keith Armstrong, an ex-boyfriend from a few years ago, who was now an Environmental Sciences and Management lecturer at some university she couldn't recall in America. Their paths had professionally crossed a few times since. After exchanging pleasantries he got to the point of the call.

"Shannon, the Texas Oil and Gas Association are hosting a conference in Houston and this year they have decided to include an environmental element. I got a phone call yesterday from a contact who asked me to suggest an environmental consultant with experience in oil and gas development. Apparently the speaker they had lined up had a nasty car accident and can't make the presentation. I thought that your involvement in drawing up the International Impact Associations guidelines for decommissioning wells and land restoration would make you ideal. It's quite a hot topic here at the moment as some oil and gas fields are nearing the end of their lives. It is a bit last minute, but would you be willing to give a talk?"

"You want to throw me to the sharks, Keith?" She snorted. "Actually I was planning on taking a break from work. When is the conference?"

"You, fish bait? Never. It's a week-long event, but they only need you near the end, on Thursday, July tenth."

"Flights and accommodation covered?" she queried, suddenly interested because Rachael's wedding was taking place on Saturday, July twenty-sixth in Meadow Ridge County, Texas.

"Of course, are you interested?" He sounded eager.

She quickly assessed the pros and cons of going. If she gave a talk for the conference she could change her existing flight reservation and the trip to Texas would be covered. It was a moot point really because Rachael's fiancée had offered to reimburse her for the trip, but she felt better about paying for it this way. She could surprise Rachael by turning up a few days earlier than planned. Their friendship was one

of the few things that Shannon had made a conscious effort to sustain. It would be wonderful to have a little more time with her friend before the wedding and help out in the moral support department.

Despite her declaration to take a break, the conference appealed to her because she sometimes gave lectures at Dublin University and other institutions and businesses, so it wouldn't take a lot of preparation. A little extra money wouldn't hurt before beginning her vacation. Representatives of large, multinational companies would be attending, and the opportunity to increase the environmental awareness of these people was too important to miss. The fact that they wanted to include an environmental talk was a move in the right direction. She couldn't think of any reasons not to go.

"Keith, you're in luck, as it happens I have a prior engagement in Texas in July and I suppose I could go a bit earlier."

"Great. I'll also be attending and look forward to seeing you again, Shannon. I can't thank you enough, although maybe you could think of a way?" He chuckled.

He sounded far too suggestive for her liking, so she sweetly replied, "Yes, and I'd love to meet your new wife, Keith, perhaps we could all have dinner?"

"Er, yes, that would be...great. I'll e-mail the details to you. See you then."

Shannon put the phone down then nabbed a Jelly Baby from a packet sitting on the table. Raising the little, soft sweet to her mouth, she said, "Bye bye, Keith," and bit its head off, enjoying the taste as she stood at her kitchen back door looking at her garden. Realizing that she would be away for a while, she resigned herself to doing what she should have done months ago, and rang a cousin who owned a garden maintenance business.

Chapter 3

Two weeks later Shannon strolled into a large, plush hotel where the Oil and Gas Conference was being held. She had arrived a day early to check out the venue, speak to the organizers, and ensure that the equipment she intended to use for her talk actually worked.

She was checking in and collecting some information documents that had been left for her at the reception, when she heard a deep, smooth voice that caused a delightful shiver to caress its way down her spine. She paused and closed her eyes for a moment, listening to soft yet strong tones of a Texan drawl. God, that voice managed to make even a mundane inquiry sound sexy. Distracted, she opened her eyes and turned to sneak a peek at the owner of the seductive voice, but as she moved, her elbow knocked her documents, some of which were bound and some loose, to the floor. The papers scattered over a pair of black leather, expensive-looking shoes.

“Oh no,” she shrieked in panic. “I’m so sorry, but don’t move.”

She didn’t even have time to glance at the man before she dropped to her knees and frantically gathered the papers that were lying at and on his feet, desperately trying to keep them in order. When his feet were clear he shifted and squatted down next to her.

“Here, let me help,” he said calmly, and picked up a few remaining stray papers.

As he handed them to her she found herself looking into a pair of dark brown eyes with long black lashes. It seemed as if time slowed, the air thickened, and all noise and activity beyond the two of them grew muffled and distant. She was dimly aware of her heart thumping a strong beat in her chest, where very peculiar yet pleasant warmth

began and permeated throughout her body. His gaze drew her deeper and, although she had never met this person before in her life, she experienced something akin to recognition.

She couldn't help the small gasp that escaped her lips, and his eyes widened a fraction in surprise. They continued to stare, eyes locked in some subconscious, primal communication, leaning closer, parting lips and tasting breath.

"Are you okay, Ms. O'Reilly?" The loud, almost shrill, voice of the receptionist broke the spell as she leaned over the counter looking down at them.

Shannon jerked back. "I, er, yes, thank you." Confused, she glanced up at the woman and then at the handsome stranger next to her. She gave herself a mental shakedown—*get a bloody grip*—and briskly said, "I'm sorry about that, thanks for your help."

She began to stand up, but it was a struggle with her hands full. Suddenly she felt a strong hand at her elbow as the stranger assisted her. That warm feeling began again, and although he immediately stepped back once she was upright, her heart continued to pound.

"No problem, ma'am." His voice sounded a little less smooth. "I'm Luke McKay."

"Shannon O'Reilly. Oh no," she yelped as the papers began to slide.

He came to the rescue, holding above and below the documents as she carried them to the nearest table and dumped them in a pile.

"These," she said, gesturing to the papers and rolling her eyes, "are why I love my laptop. Thanks again, Mr. McKay." She smiled and stuck out her hand.

"Please, call me Luke."

His handshake was firm but gentle, and his large, warm hand snugly enveloped hers, evoking comfort and calming her whirlwind character. Whether it was intentional or not, the pad of his thumb briefly caressed her hand before they broke contact. The sensation and

effect of his touch lingered, diffusing slowly over her skin and deep to her core.

She couldn't help giving the guy an unobtrusive look over, hoping that her assessment and approval hadn't been noticed. He was certainly very good-looking with a wide, generous smile that he wasn't averse to using, and that more than anything was attractive to her. He had straight dark brown hair that was just long enough to reach the nape of his neck and it framed a strong, wide, expressive looking face. Right now it appeared friendly and possibly a little interested.

She had to crane her neck to look up at him. Given that she was only five feet four inches short that wasn't unusual, but she reckoned he must be at least six foot four inches tall. He wore a fine tailored suit that comfortably hugged his large frame. He appeared muscular, but it was difficult to tell. As he looked down at her, his genuine smile reached his eyes, revealing slight creases. He was probably around twenty-eight to thirty years old.

"Let me give you a hand with those." He nodded to the documents.

"Oh, that's okay, I can manage thanks," she breezed, even though she knew it was going to be a struggle.

"I'm sure that you can, but I think a little help would make it easier, please at least let me take this." He leaned past her and grabbed her laptop case. "Is there anything else?"

His voice was low and polite yet somehow firm, and she simply couldn't refuse—didn't want to.

"A porter should be bringing the rest of my things. I'm in room"—she paused as she looked at the key the receptionist had given her—"five-zero-five."

"Okay, this way I think."

She piled up the documents and walked with him to an empty elevator. When the doors closed she became acutely aware of his presence, as if it wrapped around her, including her within his

personal space. She couldn't think clearly and didn't know what to say or how to break the awkward silence. She had to stop herself from tunelessly humming. It was very odd because being Irish she never normally had a problem with light conversation.

"You're from Ireland?" he suddenly asked, then grimaced and added, "That was a bit of a Captain Obvious statement wasn't it?"

She laughed. "Yes, I've only just arrived in the US this morning, and I guess I'm feeling a little tired and uncoordinated. Unfortunately I have a bit of *light* reading to do before tomorrow." She sighed and indicated to the documents in her arms. "I'm guessing from your accent that you're a Texan, right?"

"Sure am, homegrown, born and bred," he drawled. "Are you attending the Oil and Gas Conference?"

"Sort of, I'm presenting a seminar tomorrow morning."

The elevator doors opened and they walked along the corridor until they came to her room. He leaned down and placed her laptop bag on the ground by the door. When he stood up close to her she was directly eye level with his impressive chest. Being this near the mass and solid substance of him nearly caused her to sway again.

"Thanks for your help," she muttered breathlessly.

"I know that you'll be busy, Shannon, but you have to eat. Would you like to have dinner with me this evening?"

He smiled down at her and she found herself smiling back and agreeing to meet him at seven in the bar of the hotel. *What the hell?* He took her door key from her overfull hands, opened the door for her, and handed back the key.

"Thanks...again."

"My pleasure," he said in that sexy, languid voice. He headed back toward the elevator as she entered her room.

Phew wee, thought Shannon, leaning against the closed door. *What was that about?* It was clear that they had both felt a sort of connection and attraction when they had first laid eyes on each other and that it had surprised them both. Actually, she'd felt the attraction

even before that, when she'd first heard his voice. Shannon had never experienced such a thing before and her smile began to falter when she realized that the concept of "love at first sight," or in this case "sound," didn't seem quite so ridiculous now. No, no, no, falling for a local lad wasn't part of her plan. That would just be too complicated. *He's probably some oil business executive, who thinks a carbon footprint is something left behind by a miner's boot*, she chided herself. Well, she'd find out later over dinner, but first she simply had to have a soak in the tub and then get on with some reading and preparations for her talk tomorrow.

* * * *

Luke took the elevator to one of the luxury suites on the tenth floor. It was convenient for him to stay at the Thorn Bush hotel where the conference was being hosted and a large suite provided the space he required to conduct business. His friend and business partner James Ryden had been here earlier in the week attending some seminars with his brother Joshua, but they had returned home before the end of the conference. They were not overly interested with the environmental element because their wells were on their own land, which they carefully looked after. Joshua had his wedding arrangements to get on with and James was helping him by covering more at the ranch. Luke suspected that the main reason for not staying on was that Joshua wanted to get back to his fiancée, Rachael. Josh would never admit it though, and Luke wasn't about to tease *that* man. Anyway, he really couldn't blame him because Rachael was lovely.

He was thankful for the comfortable and well-fitted suit that he was wearing because remembering Shannon O'Reilly on her knees at his feet had his cock standing to full attention. A myriad of wicked thoughts played in his mind; a dropped zipper, a handful of her hair, eyes locked on his as full lips parted around—he groaned. As he

thought of Shannon he wished that James were here because there was a sense of rightness about her. He realized that was ludicrous, after all he'd hardly interacted with the woman, but he couldn't deny the feeling.

He and James were friends and business partners. They'd also participated in *ménages* and shared many a woman in bed—if he were honest with himself, too many. Until recently they'd been playing around, having a good time, and not particularly looking for anything more serious from a woman. That had now changed and they had both acknowledged that they wanted to be part of a permanent polyandrous partnership. They were both from families with two fathers and one mother. It wasn't an uncommon form of relationship where they grew up, in Meadow Ridge County. They wanted to settle down and find a woman with whom they could share life, love, and a family. She would have to be a special person, though, someone who they both wanted and who could and would take them both on.

He couldn't stop thinking about Shannon, with her soft Irish accent and cute smile. She had looked a little tired after her journey and a little worn in her baggy, comfortable travel clothes. Her long, thick, curly red hair had been tied back in a simple ponytail. It contrasted sharply with her pale complexion. She had a petite, slight physique but carried herself in such a way that suggested confidence and strength, not frailty.

For some reason her appearance didn't actually seem all that important, which was ironic because she was actually very beautiful. She had lovely eyes that were hazel near the pupil but bled to light olive green around the outer edge of the iris. When they had held each other's gaze, he felt as if he had peered through those expressive windows to her soul, and thought that he recognized her.

He shook himself out of his reverie. He had two important business meetings, after which he could relax, take a nice long shower, and get ready to meet the little Irish beauty. First, however, he couldn't resist Googling her. He discovered that her field of

expertise appeared to be EIA—environmental impact assessment—and restoration. She had a résumé that would intimidate a lesser man but fortunately, he wasn't one.

Chapter 4

It was seven o'clock in the evening and Luke was waiting at the bar slowly savoring a scotch on the rocks and observing his fellow clientele, the majority of whom were men. Even in this day and age the oil and gas industry tended to be male dominated. He was casually watching an exuberant group of guys in the corner of the room, when he noticed all their gazes focus toward the main entrance. He turned to see what had distracted them and nearly fell off his bar stool.

Gliding toward him was a vision of classic feminine beauty. Her long, silky red hair had been tamed and hung loose around her shoulders. The soft curls provided a seductive backdrop for her attractive, heart-shaped face and slender neck. She wore a formfitting, black satin sleeveless top that emphasized her slight curves and slender waist. Her full black and white patterned skirt flowed over the lower half of her body. The soft material provided only a suggestion of what it temptingly covered. Shapely calves and ankles were revealed and emphasized by a pair of risqué killer heels. *Wow.*

Blood rushed to his member, stretching tissue with throbbing intent. He almost growled at the premonition that this was going to be an uncomfortable evening in the trouser department, but when she saw him her face lit up with a beamer of a smile, and all discomfort was forgotten. He felt his chest constrict as if a metal band were being ratcheted tighter around him. She quite literally took his breath away, and he couldn't help but think that any man would be in paradise if he saw that smile every day. He fought to hold back a self satisfied grin as he felt the envy of half the men in the room—the other half were either gay or very happily married.

* * * *

When Shannon had walked into the room and first laid eyes on Luke, she had gone weak at the knees and it had taken all her concentration to walk smoothly toward the bar. He looked smart but casual in a well-tailored pair of dark tan chinos and a black fitted shirt unbuttoned at the neck. She could now see that his size was all firm muscle. If she hadn't done a double check she might have missed that his muscles weren't the only firm looking part of his anatomy. She felt a flood of moisture between her legs as she glanced at the thick outline of his cock. *Impressive. Oh, yes, a hard man is indeed good to find.* The butterflies in her tummy took flight the moment she heard his voice.

"Good evening, Shannon." He stood up, stepped toward her, and took her hand in his own, giving more of a gentle caressing squeeze than a shake. "I take it you managed to wade through those badly behaved documents?"

She chuckled and said in a conspiratorial tone, "I disciplined the wee beasties with a stapler and they are quite secure now." She raised her eyebrows mischievously.

Luke grinned. "Would you like a drink?"

"After reading all that dry literature this afternoon? You bet."

She asked the barman if he had a good Irish whiskey, straight, no ice.

"A woman after my own heart," he said as he raised his own scotch and they touched glasses. "I know a great Mexican restaurant not far from the hotel, but if that's not to your taste we can eat here."

"Mexican sounds good to me." *Anything sounds good to me when you say it.*

They finished their drinks and left the hotel for a short taxi ride to the restaurant. The manager seemed to recognize Luke, and even

though the place was busy they were given a good table in a quieter part of the room.

“Do you come here often?”

“Enough I guess. I do quite a lot of business in Houston although I prefer country life to the city. What about you?”

“I have a wee cottage just outside Dublin, but I travel abroad a lot with my work and I haven’t spent as much time as I’d like to there.”

“I saw the amended conference program showing a change in the speaker, and I read that you’re an Environmental Consultant. What is it that you do?”

She gave him a very brief description of her work. “Well, all development impacts on the environment. It’s my job to guess and assess what the impacts will be and how to prevent negative effects. I’m particularly interested in mineral extraction, I like the dirt,” she joked self-depreciatingly. “I’ve tended to concentrate on environmental involvement in the pre-planning stages, but lately I’ve done a lot of post development work, you know rehabilitation and restoration stuff. Anyway, if you want to know more you should come to my seminar tomorrow.”

“I plan to. I’m very interested in what you have to say about restoration of well sites.” He leaned forward and took a sip of his cool Mexican beer.

“Really? What is it that you do?”

“My background is in engineering. I develop and build machinery used in both the exploration and extraction of oil and gas.”

A few years ago, she’d have thought of him as the enemy and, on principle, she wouldn’t have touched him with a barge pole. She chuckled to herself at how she’d mellowed from her perhaps overzealous youth.

“I’m very interested in your talk because my partner and I are thinking of branching out into decommissioning work.”

“Your partner? As in business partner only, or business and relationship?” She had to ask. Married or committed men were not on her menu.

He chuckled. “Business and friendship. I’m not married or anything if that’s what you’re asking.” He watched her and she felt herself blush.

“I don’t go on dates with attached guys, that’s all. Not that this is a date or anything,” she blurted, backpedaling quickly.

He leaned back but regarded her closely. “Oh? I rather hoped that it was.”

Shannon raised her eyebrows and saw that his expression had changed. It was altogether more heated and intense. It looked good on him.

She smiled nervously and changed the subject. “So, what do you like to do in your spare time?”

She always thought that the answer to this question revealed a lot more about a person than what line of work they were in. If he was into stamp collecting or computer gaming he was not going to get to first base.

“I like to ride.” He drawled the words and his gaze flitted to her breasts for a fraction of a second before fully locking eye contact with her. “I like to go on long rides with my business partner and longtime friend, James.”

Shannon knew that she had an overactive imagination, but she felt certain that Luke was being suggestive. Was he gay? No, she didn’t think so. Bisexual then?

Ignoring his sexy expression she breezed, “Really? I like riding, too. My grandfather was a horse breeder, and we always had horses around when I was growing up. I loved to trek along sections of the Irish coastline; it’s really wild and beautiful. My friends and I also used to race along the shore for a healthy dose of adrenaline.” She simply couldn’t stop herself from briefly running her eyes over his

torso. “What do you prefer to ride?” She cocked her head and smiled innocently.

Luke narrowed his eyes. “My preference is for a feisty filly.”

Definitely not gay then, yahoo. But he had insinuated something she was sure.

He was still watching her closely. “What about you?”

“A big gelding,” she wickedly chirped without hesitation and tried, unsuccessfully, to hide a smirk as she saw his face momentarily drop.

He recovered, grinned and laughed. “You’ll find in Texas we have more balls.”

She nearly spluttered her drink and then also started to laugh.

The rest of the evening was spent in easy conversation with great food. He seemed genuinely interested in her work and fairly knowledgeable about environmental issues, which was a pleasant surprise. She was delighted to discover that, amongst other things, he was developing equipment to better clean up oil spills on water and land. It just went to show that nothing was ever black or white; there were always shades of grey.

Luke described his business partner, James, as more of a “sleeping partner,” explaining that James had helped to part finance the expansion of the company and owned thirty percent, but wasn’t so actively involved in the business side. Again Shannon had the feeling that there was more to it than that, but couldn’t pin down what.

There was an edge to the air, a sexual tension, but it wasn’t overwhelming and just simmered in the background. Shannon was aware of a strong attraction yet was relaxed enough to be comfortable. She learned that Luke enjoyed the outdoor country life and physical pursuits such as riding and helping out on his parents’ ranch, but was comfortable in the city and had a good head on his shoulders. His parents were still alive and he had three siblings, one older, married sister and two younger brothers. He was thirty years old and had his

own business and home. In a nutshell he seemed perfect, perhaps a little too good to be true.

* * * *

Luke couldn't remember the last time he'd shared a woman's company like this nor enjoyed it so much. He felt as if he'd known Shannon much longer, yet there was also an undercurrent of anticipation. She was a darn sexy lady, and when they had talked about riding he'd imagined her wildly rocking in the saddle, the scene morphing to her riding his cock fast and hard.

Above and beyond the sexual attraction, he actually *liked* her. She was easy to be with, obviously intelligent, but also a practical person. She got her hands dirty and understood the realities of life. She was funny and kept him interested and amused throughout dinner. He discovered that she was twenty-nine years old and had both an honors and master's degree in Environmental Science and Management. In her teens and early twenties she had been an environmental activist, involved in marches and other acts of protest.

"So, were you a lefty and a greenie?" he asked with an expression of mock horror.

He tried to imagine her with a red beret sat jauntily on her head, her fiery, wayward curls inevitably escaping, and waving a placard...cute.

She laughed. "Actually I was. A teacher of mine once said, 'If you're not a communist by the time you're sixteen, then you haven't got a heart. But if you're still a communist by the time you're thirty, you haven't got a brain.' I think the realities of life became a little clearer after leaving college."

She explained that one day she'd had an epiphany. She believed that she could make a bigger, more positive impact by educating the heads of industries, providing solid research information, influencing

and rigorously applying environmental legislation. He was impressed by her commitment.

She had worked a few years for the United Nations Environmental Program, and later for a large engineering consultancy. A year ago she had started her own environmental consultancy. She lived alone in Ireland but traveled a lot with her work. Her mother and father had separated when she was young. She had two full brothers and three half sisters through her father. The primary reason for her being in the US was to attend the wedding of her best friend in two weeks' time. July must be the commitment season he mused, because that was when Joshua and Rachael were getting married.

He didn't want the evening to end, but when they finished eating Shannon had decided against a coffee even though she confessed that the jet lag was taking its toll. She had to be up fresh and early to prepare for the talk she was giving.

"If I have a coffee I'll be up all night," she explained

Luke was thinking that he would love to be up all night with her, but he guessed that Shannon needed the sleep and wanted to do the best presentation possible. An all-night sex session was out of the question and he had no doubt that was what it would be. Man, it was just too bad, because he was feeling as hot and horny as a goat in a pepper patch.

* * * *

Back at the hotel they were waiting for the elevator to arrive when Shannon spied Keith Armstrong.

"Hey," he called, "I've been looking for you." He obviously hadn't realized that Luke was with her. "You still look gorgeous, darling. Do you fancy a coffee and a chat about old times?"

Shannon took a sharp intake of breath and noticed that Luke stiffened.

“Keith, I’m not your ‘darling’ and ‘old times’ are just that. How is your wife Mary?” Although irritated at his presumptuous behavior, she tried to sound platonically friendly.

“Oh, we can catch up over coffee in my room,” he said, leering toward her. She could smell alcohol on his breath.

“Keith, for heaven’s sake, we’ve both moved on, you’re married.”

“But—”

“The lady said no.” Luke’s normally lazy deep drawl had morphed into something more menacing. He pulled himself up to his full height and stepped into Keith’s personal space.

“It’s nothing to do with—” Keith began, but Luke cut him off.

“Ms. O’Reilly is with me, but if you want to discuss the matter further we can step outside.” He slowly growled the last few words quietly but with intent.

Keith looked at them both and then sniffed, “I was just being friendly.” He turned and walked away at a rapid pace.

“Thanks.” She breathed a sigh of relief but felt compelled to continue with an explanation. “Keith recommended me to speak at the conference. He’s an ex-boyfriend. It was a brief thing years ago, before he met his wife Mary. Unfortunately sometimes he’s not an ex jerk.”

“No problem, we all have history. I’ll walk you to your room.” He appeared relaxed and at ease again as if nothing had happened.

When they arrived at her door Shannon thanked him for a great evening. They stood facing each other and she was acutely aware of the attraction between them and the possibilities before them. He leaned down toward her and she inhaled his masculine scent. It fired synapses, causing a flood of hormones to be released in her body and erode at her will to go to bed alone. He stopped when his lips were almost touching her slightly parted ones. She could feel his body heat, hear his irregular breathing and became even more aware of his mouthwatering aroma. God, she was so aroused, she fought the urge to simply wrap herself around him. Instead she raised her hand to

slightly trace his jaw with the tip of her finger. He inhaled deeply then turned his head and kissed her open palm. It was the single sexiest yet chaste gesture that anyone had ever made to her.

“Goodnight, Shannon,” he murmured in her ear, sending shivers down her spine. “I’ll see you tomorrow.”

He stepped back and lowered his arms to his sides with his hands clenched, as if it were a monumental effort to refrain from touching her more. She blinked, feeling like she was surfacing from a dream.

“Goodnight, Luke.”

On autopilot Shannon entered the room and closed the door softly behind her. She prepared for bed thinking about the oh-so-near kiss. He had behaved like a gentleman all evening and she appreciated the maturity, confidence, and consideration that such an attitude entailed. Still, she also liked spontaneity and a bit of rogue. *Shannon, you don’t want much do you?* She stared at herself in the bathroom mirror. *In fact you really don’t know what the hell you want at all, so stop overthinking and just go to sleep.*

She hopped into bed with a sigh. Envisaging Luke naked she brought her middle finger to her lips and wet the tip, then slid her hand under the bed covers and down between her legs. It was a poor substitute, but at least sleep soon followed.

Chapter 5

Luke awoke at 6:00 a.m. sporting a rock-hard erection despite having brought himself off before going to sleep. Shannon O'Reilly was on his mind but unfortunately not on his body. He wrestled with the situation. He was certainly physically attracted to her and he liked the woman, *really* liked her, but how to proceed? She didn't live in Texas, hell she didn't even live in the USA, so how would that work? He probably wouldn't see her again after the conference.

He idly wondered if she and James would have chemistry and how would she feel about fucking two men. James was the more reckless, energetic, fun, and wild side of the partnership. Luke was the more serious yet empathetic of the two. He seemed to know what a woman wanted and how she was feeling. Taking his clues from the woman, he often showed James the way to go and together they were a potent combination. While they obviously enjoyed one-on-one sex alone with a woman, they found the ultimate satisfaction when they were both involved. Then the sexual experience was always much greater than the sum of the parts. He suspected that they both enjoyed the voyeurism in watching a sex scene unfold, seeing each other's cock split engorged gleaming pussy lips and slide inside.

He sighed and ran his fingers through his hair. It was a complex situation because now it wasn't only about sex, it was a whole lifestyle and loving choice, but he had a feeling that Shannon would be worth the effort. He was a little concerned over how she would feel about dating a rancher and oilman. Her opinions would certainly make life interesting. He had sensed a certain pragmatic quality to her character and didn't think that she would be prejudiced. He threw the

bed covers back and grabbed his dick in one hand, wishing he were about to plunge into her. Instead he muttered, “A cold shower will sort you out, buddy.”

It helped, but not much.

* * * *

Shannon dressed in a smart black suit, applied a little makeup, tied her hair back into a neat bun and went down to have an early breakfast with the conference organizers. Keith sat down heavily next to her and immediately whispered an apology for his behavior the night before.

“I’m sorry, Shannon. I guess that I was just happy to see you. It won’t happen again. I’d had a few beers and my judgment was off.” He sounded sincere.

“I’m happy to see you, Keith but our *brief* relationship is past history. Let’s keep things simply friendly and professional shall we?”

“Who’s the big guy?”

“Keith,” she sounded exasperated, “that’s too personal.” She swiftly changed the subject. “Now, what projects are you currently working on?”

After breakfast she headed to one of the larger rooms where she would be performing. She always thought of lecturing and giving presentations that way; playing to an audience, keeping them interested and anticipating what she was going to say next, leading them along the thought processes to come to an understanding of a particular subject. She hoped that when she finished, the attendees would understand why it was so important to consider environmental issues at an early stage in any project development and just how far reaching direct and indirect impacts could be. The restoration section of her presentation covered land management issues, dealing with land contamination, improvement schemes, and biodiversity concerns.

She introduced herself to the room full of people and then began her PowerPoint presentation.

* * * *

Luke sat enthralled. Shannon was a brilliant speaker. She was clear and concise but not dry. She used lots of real life anecdotes to support her statements, some funny and some serious. It allowed the oilmen and women to better relate to the topic. Her slides were interesting and the time passed quickly. There was lively discussion at the end and Luke thought that it was an informative, successful seminar.

He hung around to speak with her as everyone began to file out of the room for lunch. He waited patiently as she spoke with a few people but when he caught her eye she excused herself and approached him.

“That was a great lecture, Ms. O’Reilly.” He dropped his voice so that only she could hear. “Would you like to have dinner with me again tonight, Shannon?”

She stared at him for a moment. “I’d love to, but it’ll have to be a light meal or I’ll be Ten Ton Tessa before long.”

He raked his gaze up down and up her body and smiled. “I doubt that. How about dinner in my suite? The room service menu has some good lighter options.”

“Luke McKay, dinner in your room? Do you plan to show me your etchings too?” She raised one quizzical eyebrow.

He chuckled. “The only drawing I do is with a Smith and Wesson.”

“Oh, I see.” Shannon spoke as if she’d had a sudden realization. “That *was* a gun in your pocket last night. Are you a quick draw?”

He was taken aback for a second and watched the color rise in her cheeks. She’d said those words without thinking and mistaken his

surprise for disapproval. She looked like she now wanted to take them back. He wasn't going to let her.

"That depends, under certain circumstances yes," he softly rumbled, "but I can fire repeatedly." It was his turn to smile and hers to look shocked and, if he wasn't mistaken, a little turned on. "See you at half past seven tonight. I'm in room one thousand, on the tenth floor."

He turned and strolled away, not waiting for her answer. She'd be there. He had to concentrate fiercely on not obviously repositioning his buddy and balls, which were now throbbing in his tight pants.

* * * *

Assailed by an onslaught of lust and desire Shannon stood as if rooted to the floor watching him leave. She inhaled deeply and the air in her lungs seemed to tingle and radiate out into her chest. Her nipples hardened and she desperately wanted to rub her breasts to ease the ache. Her mouth actually began to water, and it wasn't the only place weeping moisture, her panties dampened too. Dear God, a man hadn't made her feel like this in a long while, well, actually...ever, and he hadn't even touched her.

There was something so elementally attractive and right about Luke. She wished that there was more time to explore whatever they had between them because it was unlike anything she'd experienced before. Yes, the Pheromone Fairies were definitely out and about in force; there was no other logical explanation for the fact that she was contemplating screwing a stranger. She wanted to eat that man alive and yet she hardly knew him. *Morality be damned*. Shannon philosophically shrugged. *Even if I never see him again*. But that sad thought dampened her excitement.

Initially Shannon found it difficult to concentrate on anything other than the delicious thought of Luke McKay sprawled naked across a bed. Nevertheless she somehow managed to get through

lunch, keeping up light chitchat with oil business executives, gently pressing the need for early environmental input, particularly at the site selection stage of any development. She politely declined two dinner invitations from very pleasant men. After the buffet meal she attended a workshop on the issues surrounding Arctic and Antarctic development, and she soon became engrossed because the environmental implications were potentially huge.

After the workshop officially ended she became involved in further discussion and also chatted to the conference organizers who thanked her for stepping in at the last minute. She was caught by surprise when she looked at her watch and saw that it was 7:10 p.m. *Damn, better hoist my sails and get a move on.* Shannon nearly sprinted to her room. No way was she turning up without showering and wearing granny knickers and nylon tights, no one needed to see that. She deposited her laptop on the bed, stripped off her clothes, and headed to the bathroom with a pink plastic cap on her head. *Gorgeous look.* She complimented herself with a snigger as she caught her reflection in the mirror.

It was a quick but rigorous scrub in the shower, followed by a vigorous towel shimmy as she rapidly dried herself. She brushed her teeth and applied a little makeup, but decided to leave her hair pinned up due to lack of time. Literally hopping around the small room and nearly eating the carpet a few times, she dressed. Remembering the Scout motto, “Be Prepared,” she donned a black lace bra with matching panties and stockings. *Oh, yes, I wear sexy uncomfortable lingerie all the time.* Next she threw on a black skirt that finished just above the knee and an emerald-green fitted blouse with short sleeves and a low neckline. Due to lack of choice, she wore the same black heels as last night, her “shag me shoes,” Rachael called them.

She checked herself in the full-length mirror. *Ta-da. Ladies and gentlemen, I give you Shannon O'Reilly, sexy and sophisticated to be sure.* Then she turned around and tripped over her handbag on the floor. *Agh! Maybe not.* Ready with no minutes to spare she grabbed

the offending handbag. She didn't bother to empty it of paper, pens and Jelly Babies, but added a condom, *better make that three*, as she was feeling optimistic. Five minutes later, looking cool and unhurried, she was knocking on Luke's door.

Chapter 6

Luke took a deep breath when he heard the soft knocking. *Slow and steady seduction, slow and steady, boy*, he warned himself. No way did he want to scare off the interesting and beautiful woman that he knew was on the other side of the door. He wanted to persuade her to stay longer, try to get her home to Meadow Ridge County, and introduce James.

The simple act of opening the door had never felt so dauntingly significant before. It was the first part of the mating game. There she was, the object of his desire, standing before him, smiling and looking irresistible.

He cleared his throat and softly welcomed her. “Hi, come on in.”

He stepped back to give her room to pass and detected her natural fragrance wafting through the air, teasing his nose and sending his libido into overdrive. He shut the door slowly and gently, closing his eyes and trying to steady himself. He turned around to find her watching him. Was she checking out his ass? He smiled at the sheepish look in her eyes, and the slight blush of pink on her cheeks, yeah, she was.

She looked away quickly and gestured to the large room. “Now, you see this illustrates the difference between oil business people and environmentalists. My room’s a shoe box,” she joked.

He leaned over with the intent of only giving her a kiss on the cheek but, as he moved to close the gap between them, he caught her alluring natural feminine fragrance again and couldn’t resist inhaling deeply and savoring the scent. His nostrils flared and his eyes closed briefly. When he opened them he held her heated stare.

“I’ve never...what’s happening?” she murmured, their lips only an inch apart. Her sweet, minty breath sounded shallow.

He knew exactly what she meant. “I don’t know.” He spoke softly, almost a whisper. “It’s new for me too.”

For a moment neither moved, then Shannon leaned forward, raised her arms around his neck and captured his lips with hers. What first began as a gentle kiss soon progressed into a passionate plunder of his mouth. At first he followed her lead, restraining himself, but when she ran her fingers through his hair and her tongue slid over his, he lost it. *Slow and steady? Not going to happen.*

He took control, pressing back, taking possession, and gave in to his escalating need. God, she tasted sweet, felt good, and sounded so sexy with the little moans that escaped from her lips. She cleaved to him, rubbing up against his body and very obvious erection. It enflamed his desire and lust burned away any thought other than to have this woman.

He groaned and responded, kissing her deeply and almost savagely. He pushed her against the wall, running his large hands down her body as she ran her hands under his plain white T-shirt, and pulled it over his head. Then she did a most curious thing, she sniffed the T-shirt and murmured a soft sound of appreciation. With his hands against the wall on either side of her head he stared at her with an eyebrow raised in query. For a second she looked a bit embarrassed.

“You smell great,” she offered by way of explanation.

“Come closer,” he said temptingly, “and experience the real thing.”

She licked and bit her lower lip, then leaned closer to his bare torso, inhaling deeply through her nose. She rested her little hands on the hard wall of his well-developed pectoral muscles and the smattering of dark chest hair on his tanned, taut skin. He was now more than ever thankful for the time and effort he put in helping out on his parents’ ranch because she seemed to appreciate his work-hardened physique.

Luke deftly undid the buttons of her blouse while he continued to kiss her, pulling on her bottom lip and nibbling her neck and ear. He palmed her breasts, gently rubbing in a circular motion, lightly squeezing the lace cups. Her fingers wove into his hair, urging him on with teasing little pulls. He redirected a hand to her skirt, bunching it up around the top of her thighs so that she could wrap her legs around him as he lifted her up. He noted with surprised glee that she wore stockings.

Now he had her literally trapped between the wall and a hard place and could feel his hard, cotton-covered cock against her panty-protected pussy. There were too many layers separating them.

“Hold tight,” he instructed as he grabbed her ass and walked easily with her to the bedroom.

He sat down on the edge of the big bed and she straddled his lap even closer, grinding against his groin and pushing her breasts against his chest. He quickly got rid of her blouse as they continued to kiss and explore each other’s mouths. She pushed him so that he leaned back a little, needing his arms for support.

“Stay,” she ordered, giving a little wiggle before climbing off him.

She shimmied out of her skirt and stood before him in her sexy underwear and high heels. He made a deep growl of appreciation.

“You are a very beautiful woman Shannon. I want to pleasure you, darlin’, give you what you want, what I think we both need.”

“I’m very hungry, Luke,” she informed him huskily.

“Well, how about an appetizer?” he drawled, undoing his pants and pushing them and his boxers down. His nine-inch long and very thick cock stood proudly to full attention.

She gasped. “Hell, McKay, that looks more like a main course.”

“Texan prime beef, darlin’, wanna try some?”

She licked her lips and slowly moved closer to him. Sinking to her knees she helped him out of his trousers and then spread his legs, settling herself between them. He could feel his heart beating faster in response to his anticipation. Holding his lust filled gaze with her own,

she leaned over and licked the pre-cum from the top of his glistening, round, purple-red helmet. He took a sharp intake of breath as she swept the flat of her tongue around and under the rim.

“Mm, you taste good,” she breathed. She licked the length of his shaft as she cupped his balls, gently squeezing the heavy sac.

He faced a dilemma, he wasn’t going to last very long but didn’t want to stop her exquisite oral ministrations. She deepened the cock kiss, clamping her full-lipped, rosebud mouth around his girth and sliding tightly all the way down, taking him completely to the back of her throat. Creating a little suction, she dragged her lips back up along his length. Again and again she did this with small variations, lightly scraping her teeth, or probing around the underside of his cockhead, tickling the sweet spot.

Holy hell, Shannon O’Reilly was a maestro on the purple oboe. He couldn’t help but lie further back on his elbows as his body began to quake. At one point she carefully sucked one of his balls into her mouth and licked the sensitive skin between his cock and anus. Jesus, she was giving the best head he’d ever had and he was going to come hard.

He felt the small tremors that warned of impending ejaculation.

“If you don’t want to—” he started to say, but she responded by sucking harder and holding him tight in her warm, wet mouth, looking into his eyes just before he lost his load.

He threw his head back, jerked his hips and yelled out. “Ahhh, God above.”

She held him, swallowing all his cum as it pulsed into her mouth and down her throat. When he collapsed back onto the bed she slowly licked him clean and kissed the tip.

“That should do for now,” she said smiling, looking very satisfied with a job well done. “I hope that you weren’t boasting about that repeat action.” She grinned smugly raising an eyebrow.

“I guess I was boasting,” he said as he caught his breath and watched her smile falter, “but I wasn’t lying.” Her face brightened up

again and she slapped his thigh playfully. “Shannon, that was fantastic,” he added, slowly sitting up to pull her onto the bed next to him.

“My pleasure,” she purred.

He had the impression that she really had enjoyed doing that to him. She was one passionate woman.

“Your pleasure? You ain’t seen nothin’ yet, sweetheart.”

He kissed her full on the mouth, registering but not caring that he could taste his own essence. He carefully removed the clips and band holding her hair in place and broke away from her mouth so that he could watch the curtain of blazing red curls tumble down around her bare shoulders. Holding her heated gaze, he undid her bra and slowly peeled it from her body. His eyes settled on her chest. She wasn’t flat by any means, but she wasn’t well endowed either. He’d always thought that more than a handful was wasted.

“Beautiful,” he murmured.

Luke ran his fingers through her hair and gently pushed her to lie back on the bed. He leaned over her, lightly trailing his lips down her throat to her firm globes of milky white flesh, capped with dark pink areolas and very prominent nipples. He suckled first one and then the other, teasing the puckered flesh around each taut peak, before flicking his tongue over the proudly erect mini pillars of pleasure. She sighed as his hand stroked its way down her the smooth, soft skin of her body and slipped under her panties. His thick, blunt finger delved into her cream coated depths, slowly tunneling to the third knuckle before lightly caressing the channel walls, searching for and finding that sweet, sensitive spot that caused her to moan and grind her pelvis against his hand.

Abandoning her breasts he kissed down her flat abdomen until his hot breath lingered over her pubis. He swiftly pulled off her panties and for a moment did nothing except stare and deeply inhale the intoxicating aroma of her arousal.

“You smell great, too,” he murmured, revering her scent.

He observed that she was definitely a natural red head. Her plump pussy lips peeked out from a nest of short, closely cropped curls that glistened with jewel-like droplets of her sex juices. He spread her wide, holding the swollen outer petals open with two fingers while another worked inside, massaging and teasing. Her breath hitched and quickened.

He smiled wickedly at her, and then, not breaking eye contact, he probed in a circular motion around her clit with the tip of his tongue. She hissed but held his gaze for a long moment, biting her lip as a groan arose from deep in her throat. She lay back and gave herself up to his undivided attention.

He felt her hips gently undulate as he moved his finger within her and used his tongue to tease her clit. Luke established a rhythm necessary for her to reach climax. He could hear her panting and mewling as she climbed higher and higher, her soaked, strong pussy muscles starting to grip tighter. If James were here he would be giving them an in-depth commentary, ramping up the desire, pushing psychological boundaries farther.

Shannon gave a strangled cry—"Luke, I'm coming"—before her whole body stiffened and convulsed.

He could feel her channel clamping down on his finger, and heard the wet suction as he pulled it from her reluctant release. In haste he grabbed a condom from the bedside cabinet and rolled it on smoothly over his recovered hard cock. She was still panting but watching him closely as he positioned himself over her and in one solid thrust, glided...home. That's how it felt, like a reunion with a long lost love.

Shannon nearly jerked off the bed, slamming into his hard chest, as his thick, long cock slid inside her, forging through the slick but tight spasming muscle and nudging the end of her cervix as he came to rest, balls deep, against her.

"Oh, don't stop, fuck me please," she half cried, half begged.

It pleased him that any reservations she may have had were lost with her panties. He loved her confidence and lack of inhibition.

“Don’t fret, sweetheart, I told you I’d give you what you want, what you need.”

He rose up off her body, slipped off her heels and placed her legs over his shoulders, lifting her ass, deepening the angle of penetration. He pulled nearly all the way out of her then slammed back hard repeatedly. His balls slapped against her butt as he thrust into her, shunting her body up the bed.

She was on fire, her internal heat only tampered by her wetness, and he could feel her peristaltic pussy stimulating his cock even more than he thought possible. Dear Jesus, he was having the ride of his life. Her breasts swayed with the fast hard rhythm of his penetration and another orgasm started deep within her, bloomed, and swept them both howling away. He gave a last ferocious thrust, nearly sending her into the headboard.

For a minute Luke couldn’t move, he had to concentrate on getting enough air into his lungs. Either he was out of practice flying solo without his partner in the cockpit or he had just fucked both their brains out. He looked down at Shannon and guessed it was the latter. She looked flushed and faintly overwhelmed. He smiled, feeling immensely pleased with himself for having pleased her so thoroughly. Releasing her legs he lay lightly over her body to kiss her again, slowly and gently this time.

“Amazing, that was...incredible,” she sighed in between kisses.

“It was,” he wholeheartedly agreed.

They petted and caressed each other for several more minutes before Luke went to the bathroom to dispose of the condom. He grabbed two bathrobes because he reasoned there was no point in getting dressed again. When he came out she was lying on her side propped up on her elbow smiling at him and looking like she was enjoying the view.

“Like what you see?”

“Well, the curtains could be brighter,” she commented, deliberately misunderstanding.

He snorted, “You’re not looking at the curtains, babe.”

“Yeah, but I’m thinking about them,” she teased.

“No, you’re not.” He pretended to frown. Luke was used to women fawning over him, but he liked her quirky humor. “You will be thinking about food soon though. You must be hungry, let’s order.”

He found the room service menu and took it over to the bed. Admiring the curve of her waist and hip, he couldn’t resist running a hand gently over her toned, rounded little ass.

“I already know what I’m going to have for dessert,” she stated saucily, wiggling her eyebrows and making him chuckle.

“You’re almost as bad as James.” He slipped before realizing how that might sound and instantly regretting it.

“What?” Her voice wavered a little with uncertainty.

“James, you know, my business partner. He’s got a one-track mind.” He tried to sound nonchalant.

“Luke, is there something that you’re not telling me? Are you bisexual?”

“Christ no!”

“Because, I guess it doesn’t really matter if you are.”

“I’m not,” he said indignantly, “although I’m glad that you’re so open-minded.”

“You don’t have to be embarrassed about it.”

“Shannon, I am not bisexual. If I was I would tell you, but I’m not.” He said it seriously and with all the sincerity he could muster.

“Okay, well, then this James sounds an interesting guy.”

“He is. I wish you could meet him, I think you’d get on. Now, what shall we order?” He waved the menu in front of her and effectively changed the subject.

They both chose lighter options from the menu. Luke didn’t like strenuous activity on a full stomach. They had ordered a bottle of Cabernet Sauvignon and were halfway through it.

"If you don't mind me asking, Shannon, are you attached to anyone?" Luke swirled the red wine around in the large glass trying to look unconcerned.

She regarded him as if it were a silly question. "I wouldn't be here with you if I was."

"That's good to know." He found himself disproportionately relieved at her answer.

"Look, I don't really do this," she airily waved her hand around, "one-night stand thing. I don't know why, but I really wanted to be here with you. I haven't ever had sex with a complete stranger before." She paused as if considering something. "Perhaps I've been missing out." She grinned.

"It's often not what it's cracked up to be. I'll be honest, I've been a player in the past, but it gets old. I'm not looking for a casual fuck anymore. I want more. I just turned thirty and maybe that has something to do with it. I'd like to get to know you better, Shannon, but if you're not cool with that, then I'll just be glad for tonight." Which was a lie, he'd never be happy if it was only one night with her.

"Well, that's honest. I'd like to spend more time with you, too, but I'm leaving tomorrow to go and see my friend, and I'm not sure what I'm doing after the wedding. Rachael suggested that I could stay on and chill out at her cabin when she's away on her honeymoon." She paused and appeared to come to a decision. "I'll give you my cell phone number and you can call if you still want to."

"I'd like that." He smiled warmly then frowned slightly as her words registered a pretty big coincidence. "Rachael? Your friend's name is Rachael?"

"Yeah, she's actually my best friend and I'm going to be chief bridesmaid, whatever that actually means. Will I get to boss the others around?" Shannon chuckled and sipped her wine. "She's the type of friend that will call when she's feeling happy about something just as often as when she's feeling down, you know, just to share the

happiness and best of times. We've both been busy with our careers and haven't seen each other half as much as we'd like. She's a vet, great with animals, especially livestock, and she absolutely loves her job, which is why I was surprised about her going back to Texas and then suddenly getting engaged." She shook her head.

"A vet? She's a vet? Her name's Rachael and you're going to her wedding?" He didn't care if he sounded like a confused parrot; he was beginning to calculate the odds.

"Aye, and she's getting married to a cattle rancher, so that'll be handy for them both. I must admit though, I hope that he's not a 'rednecked good ol' boy' because we might not get on if that's the case. She's my best friend, so even if he is like that I'll just have to fake liking him." The wine must have blunted Shannon's senses a little because she didn't notice the wide-eyed look of shock and comprehension that must be developing on his face. "It appears he's a real demon in the sack though," she giggled, "and I don't mind telling you, Luke, this place where she's living, Meadow Ridge County, my goodness, you should hear some of the tales she's been telling me about that place."

Fucking hell! "Yeah, what?" he almost croaked.

His heart galloped. This was Rachael's friend, and she was going to be chief bridesmaid to the wedding where his partner James was the best man. It was one hell of a coincidence and if he believed in fate then he'd have a better time accepting it. He could barely comprehend his incredible good fortune. It solved the problem of how to get her home, but hell, it was definitely about to get complicated.

"Well, apparently it's not uncommon for two men to share or marry the same woman." She snorted a laugh. "That's definitely more appealing to me than the normal 'ménage a trois' combination, but it's a bit weird, don't you think?"

"Er, well, maybe polyandry works well for them." He ventured, his mind was working fast, trying to think of the best way of dealing

with the subject and laying down a positive foundation point from which he and James might begin to progress.

“Polly who?”

“Polyandry.” He chuckled. “That’s what it’s called when a woman has more than one male partner.”

“Really? There’s a name for it?” She shook her head. “I must be more naïve than I thought. I wonder how it works. I mean do they take turns in different beds or what? How do they cope with jealousy, children, and all of that?”

“Well, I guess if they know from the start that they’re sharing everything, including kids, then jealousy shouldn’t come into it. I don’t think the guys take individual turns, it would defeat the object wouldn’t it?”

“Eh, what do you mean?” He had her attention. She had started to nibble her bottom lip, looking curious and even a little turned on.

“Well, what’s the point of just doing it like regular couples? I don’t see any real difference or advantages that way, and there must be some good reasons for that sort of relationship or they wouldn’t do it, don’t you think?”

“Keep going, you’re giving me a new fantasy.” She chuckled.

“If they were all together I can imagine that the experience would be something quite different, more intense and erotic for sure. Two mouths, two cocks, and four hands? Nah, can’t see the appeal for a woman there,” he joked, scattering the idea like seed to be germinated later. “If they have serious, committed relationships I should imagine that there’d be a whole lot of love involved, and not just physically either. It must be the ultimate female fantasy. Really, Shannon, wouldn’t you consider sex with two men? Loving and being loved, caring for and being cared for by two men?”

He watched the warring expressions of lust, interest, and caution on her face as he stroked her leg, gliding his hand to the now slick apex of her thighs. She spread her legs wider and he slid a thick finger into her wet channel, slowly stroking the warm, muscular walls. She

writhed and groaned. This was better than he had expected; she was hot for it.

“It’s totally kinky and you are a tease. How would you feel about sharing a woman? I mean, you’d have to be pretty up close and personal with the other guy.” She gently fondled his balls.

He gulped and cleared his throat before he could talk. “I think it might be quite erotic to watch as well as participate.” He saw the surprise on her face and shrugged his shoulders nonchalantly. “As for the other guy, well, I’d want to know him very well, but we’d be concentrating on you, not on each other...I guess.”

He watched her skin become flush just above her chest and her pupils were so dilated that her eyes appeared almost black, deep and yet bright like the starry night sky.

“On *me*? So the fantasy is personal now, is it? You want to be part of it?” She sounded a little hesitant.

“Oh, yeah,” he drawled seductively. “Would you take him in your mouth while I fucked your pussy from behind? I might enjoy a spit roast.” He deliberately used the crude term to judge her response. Shannon took a sharp breath but didn’t seem upset, on the contrary. She watched him like a bird mesmerized by a cobra. He removed his finger and licked the evidence of her heightened desire. “I think you make enough of this sweet cream for two.”

His words were outrageously rude, but she clearly wasn’t offended. Instead it appeared to have aroused her further. Shannon moved and stood in front of him and he pushed his chair back to give her more room. Slowly she peeled off the bathrobe and let it fall to the floor. She stood almost naked in only stockings before him. With uninhibited sensuality she caressed her own breasts and pushed two of fingers between her legs. He could hardly believe her feverish, wanton response.

“Perhaps he would be buried to the hilt in your juicy pussy while I fucked your beautiful ass.” As he spoke he pulled her hand away and

replaced it with his own, dipping two thick fingers inside, at the same time stroking her anus with his pinkie and her clit with his thumb.

He felt her shudder at his erotic suggestion and intimate touch. He was talking and strumming her to the verge of climax. Saying nothing she leaned over to snag her handbag hanging on the chair and found a condom. Ripping open the foil packet with her teeth she then rolled it over his granite hard cock, pushed his hand out from between her legs and slid slowly down, impaling herself on his length.

“Fantasies aren’t reality, but then again, you’re here with me and we have all night,” she gasped.

Locked together, gripping each other’s forearms, she began to move, clenching her core muscles tight as she dragged her cunt up and down his shaft. Primitive moans and groans filled the air as she rode him with a steady intensity that kept them both near the edge of release but not crashing over. Sweat coated their bodies as Shannon continued to clamp, squeeze, relax, and then push herself around his cock repeatedly. It was exquisite torture and he thrust his hips to meet her.

As he experienced the familiar clawing in his balls demanding that he purge them imminently, he tugged her closer. Moving his grip from her forearms to her back and shoulders, he slammed her down repeatedly. Rampaging toward release, he felt her come first, and her tight muscular spasms catapulted him over the edge. He grunted loudly and shuddered with total sexual satisfaction.

They clung to each other, breathing ragged, slick with sweat and boneless. Slowly Shannon shifted, and he slipped out like an otter sliding from the riverbank.

“That was...interesting. You sure know how to turn a girl on.”

“I think I had some inspiration,” he murmured softly in her ear.

“I’ve never been someone’s sexual muse before.” She chuckled throatily. “I’m not at all sure that I should invite you to Meadow Ridge, you might get corrupted.”

“It might be life-altering for the both of us,” he carefully joked.

“No, not likely, I’m all talk and no trousers.”

“All moans and no trousers,” he corrected, stroking her bare butt.

Luke felt that the he was past the moment of explaining who he was, coming clean and getting off lightly, he just couldn’t take the risk of scaring her off so soon, but perhaps he would tell her later, in the morning. He hoped that he was making the right decision, but the revelation that she was Rachael’s friend had, quite frankly, floored him. He remembered an old saying, “if in doubt say nothing,” and surely it was wiser to wait until he had discussed the matter with James.

He only hoped that at a later date Shannon didn’t hold this slight deception against him. As soon as he could he would call James, and together they would come up with a plan. Deep in his heart he was already considering that he might be prepared to go it alone with Shannon if James wasn’t interested. It was a sobering and unpleasant scenario to consider. Right now he was going to enjoy his time alone with her and would darn well make love to her like she’d never been loved before.

Chapter 7

It was 6:30 a.m. when Shannon's alarm on her watch beeped quietly but persistently. She felt almost too tired to even raise her hand to cancel the annoying sound and wished she could ignore it. Bleary eyed and uncoordinated, she eventually fumbled with every button until the darn thing stopped. Then for the next ten minutes it went off sporadically until she could stand it no longer. It was worse than Chinese water torture. She sat up and hit the correct button. *Ah, peace at last.*

The sleeping form of the man next to her turned over and threw an arm across her lap but otherwise didn't wake up. She wasn't surprised because they had spent most of the night making love one way or another. She would have to expand her definition of "safe sex" to include a padded headboard. Luke, it turned out, had not exaggerated about his sexual ability, he had come four times and she'd lost count of the number of her orgasms.

Not wanting to disturb him, she slipped gently out of the bed and carefully dressed. Her flight to the small local airport of Ridge Water was at 8:00 a.m. and she still had to freshen up, pack the few things that she had in her room and check out. For a minute she watched Luke sleeping, and a warm, tender, fuzzy feeling wrapped around her heart. She didn't have the time or inclination for a serious relationship, but for once she might have herself a holiday romance. Yes, she wanted to see him again, but tried not to get too hopeful. Taking a piece of hotel stationery she wrote down her cell phone number and a little message, nothing too verbose or simpering, just a few words thanking him for a wonderful night. She put the note on

the table next to the bed with two Jelly Babies placed in the missionary position on top. With one last look at the scrumptious man horizontal on the bed, she regretfully left the room.

* * * *

James Ryden sat in the comfortable office chair with a steaming cup of coffee reading his e-mails. Although both he and Joshua had their own private study spaces attached to their rooms in the big ranch house, the main business of the day was conducted here in the beautifully converted old barn, next to the stables. Usually at this time early on a Friday morning, after having already done a round of the yard, he would be sitting down to breakfast with his brother Joshua, discussing the business of the day. Today he was on his own as Joshua had spent the night at Rachael's cabin. He had decided to catch up with correspondence that had gone unanswered while they had attended the Oil and Gas Conference earlier in the week. His inbox wasn't too full with Sweet Oil business as their manager ran things smoothly from the Houston office. There were a few Sweet Water Ranch messages but nothing urgent, things were ticking over nicely.

James was just about to grab his cup and go speak to their foreman, George, about fencing in more paddock area, when the phone rang. It was Luke.

"Hi, partner, how's it going at the conference?"

"Good, better than good, in fact I'd have to say great. Are you sitting down? I have something to tell you."

James sensed that it was something important, so he sat back and put his feet up, getting settled for whatever Luke had to say. "I'm sitting comfortably, so now you may begin," he drawled.

He heard Luke take a deep breath. "The most incredible coincidence has happened, it's like fate or something, but I think I've met *the* woman."

Luke sounded apprehensive and yet excited. James was confused. “*The* woman?” he repeated.

“It’s kinda new territory, partner, but yeah, *the* woman, who, if all goes well, could be *our* woman...maybe even something more.”

“What?” James said sharply, shifting his feet back to the floor. Luke was not normally prone to exaggeration or dramatics; that was usually his department. “Are you fuckin’ with me?”

“Not yet, but I hope so soon. She was the substitute speaker for the environmental seminar. She is amazing, just incredible. She’s smart, funny, sexy, beautiful, and—”

“Have you slept with her?” James interrupted Luke’s enthusiastic praise.

“Jesus, you have a one-track mind. Yes, I have, but there wasn’t much sleep involved. It was all night my friend, all fuckin’ fantastic night.”

James felt his mouth go dry, “You lucky, greedy bastard, when do I get to meet her?”

“Ah, well that’s the most incredible part of it all. I mean, what are the odds of meeting this really great woman and then finding out, quite by chance after the first round of amazing sex, that her best friend, Rachael, is getting married to a cattle rancher on July twenty-sixth, and that she’s going to be the chief bridesmaid?” He paused for breath. “Her name is Shannon O’Reilly, and as we speak she is on her way to Ridge Water.”

James’s mind was doing a mental jigsaw, filling in the pieces as he absorbed the information.

“Hello? You still there?” Luke queried after half a minute of silence had passed.

James let out a breath that he didn’t realize he’d been holding. “But Shannon’s not due to arrive here for a few more days, July thirteenth I think.”

“She was asked to fill in at the conference at the last minute, and I guess she thought she’d surprise Rachael by pitching up earlier.”

James stood up and began to pace the room. “Shit, Luke, this could get complicated. Does she know about our partnership?” He had a sharp mind and was running through all the possibilities.

“Ah, well, not exactly, not all of it.”

“What *exactly* doesn’t she know?”

“The bit about us sharing women.”

James winced when he heard that.

“I was completely shocked when I found out who she was. I didn’t know what to say and I didn’t want to scare her off before she’d even met you. She was gone when I woke up this morning, but she left a note, phone number, and,” he snorted a laugh, “a cute model.”

“What?” This was getting bizarre.

“Never mind. I did manage to get in a bit of positive suggestion about polyandry ménages though.”

“Luke, start from the beginning and tell me everything.” James sat back down, put his feet up again, and took a long swig of his coffee, thinking he might as well get comfortable.

Ten minutes later, he was sporting an erection that could pound nails and not feeling very comfortable at all. Luke’s description of Shannon’s reaction to the ménage fantasy heated his blood. Trying to think clearly they analyzed the situation and came up with a loose plan of action. James needed to meet Shannon to see if there was attraction between them or not. Either way, there wouldn’t be much time before they had to explain everything to her. Although Luke had really only omitted the truth and not told an outright fib, it would get more difficult to not lie as time went on. Soon someone, probably Rachael, would mention Luke and the threads of information would weave together into an exaggerated tale of deceit. Then the shit would really hit the fan.

If there was mutual attraction the plan became a little vague with only a loose theme of coming clean and showing her how good it could be with them both. Luke’s idea was to court her and take things

slowly. James wasn't so sure, thinking that it was all very well for Luke who'd already had some. Before he hung up Luke impressed upon him how much he liked Shannon.

"Behave and don't screw this up, partner," he warned.

"Hey, it's *me* you're talking to, I can do depraved, er, I mean, behaved," he chuckled at Luke's groan and cut the call.

James sat back in his chair smiling, looking out of the big window onto the yard and wondering how he was going to proceed with Operation O'Reilly as he'd just nicknamed it. Luke had always had darn good taste when it came to the ladies, so he was expecting to like her looks, but this wouldn't be only a physical thing, and that upped the ante. He also had to consider the real possibility that Joshua would lynch him if he did anything to upset Rachael or the wedding. As he pondered the facts, he first heard and then saw Joshua's truck roll up to the house. His brother languidly got out and looked around at the morning activity. Some of the hands were in the closer fields seeing to the feed and water for the young calves. Two were cleaning the yard and stables. A few were away, out on the range.

Joshua's face was set in its usual hard, neutral expression until the passenger door opened and Rachael hopped out. The beginnings of a slight smile hovered on his lips as he watched her move fluidly around the vehicle to stand by his side. She said something to him as she absentmindedly ran her hand down his back and leaned into him, resting her head briefly against his arm. His face relaxed into a seldom seen gentle expression, his love for her clearly visible as if he'd shouted it from the rooftop.

James noted that his big brother moved gracefully when he was around his fiancée. They were in harmony, bound by some unseen force, like planets caught in each other's gravitational pull. Rachael was a well-grounded, smart, strong woman, yet she obviously dealt with, even relished, his brother's sexual proclivities. He was happy for them and mused how a chance meeting could change everything.

With his coffee in hand, James strolled out to meet them, slapping his brother on the back and giving Rachael a peck on the cheek

“Good morning. I thought you’d be in much later. Doesn’t Rachael have the day off because she worked last evening?”

“Yeah, well, I planned to visit Old Man Connor; it’s been a while since I looked in. I heard that his dog’s not too good, but he doesn’t come into town much, you know how the old coot is. Rachael suggested that she could come with me this morning so she can take a look at the mutt. He shouldn’t get too riled up, he’ll think she’s just there to keep me company and introduce herself.”

“Nice plan, want a coffee before you go?”

“No, thanks, I expect we’ll have to stomach the tar Mr. Connor makes.” He grimaced and looked apologetically at Rachael.

“We only came by the ranch first because Josh wants to get a particular book for Mr. Connor.” She pushed at Joshua’s arm, “Go get it, I’ll wait here. Oh, would you mind connecting my mobile to the charger, the battery is flat.” She handed him her phone with exaggerated nonchalance, not meeting his eye.

“Rachael, darlin’, you must never let it run down and always carry it with you. At least put the car phone charger in your Jeep. I’ve told you that before, and I’ll give you a good spankin’ if it happens again.” Joshua wasn’t joking; his face was a picture of hard intent.

Rachael didn’t look concerned. “Ha, like that’s going to happen. You’d have to catch me first.” She challenged him with her chin held up defiantly.

James was surprised because nobody challenged his brother like that. He watched in amazement as Joshua’s nostrils flared and he stared at his bride-to-be with what looked a lot like raw hunger. His six foot seven inch frame loomed over Rachael until his nose almost touched hers. Ninety-nine percent of the population would be quaking in their boots, but she didn’t back down, instead she clenched her hands by her sides as if willing herself not to grab him.

“Just let it happen again and we’ll see how far you get,” Joshua growled.

For a moment they were too preoccupied with each other and some serious sexual tension that they forgot about James. Then Joshua straightened up his body, glanced at his brother, bit off a curse, and headed into the house taking three steps at a time.

Rachael blew her curly fringe up off her forehead and let out a loud sigh. “God, I love that man.” Then she turned to James and smiled as if only just remembering that he was there. James wasn’t used to women ignoring him, but from the start Rachael only had eyes for his brother and he was glad for them both.

“Do you have a busy day planned?” she asked as if nothing had just happened.

“Just the usual. How are the wedding plans going?” He wasn’t really all that interested in wedding stuff, but thought it polite to ask.

“I’m not going to bore you with the details. We’re just keeping it small and uncomplicated. Mum, dad, my brothers, and Shannon will all be arriving at some point next week. I think I’ve all the accommodation sorted out.”

“Well, there’s the guest room behind the office and spare room in the main house,” he offered, obviously keeping quiet about Shannon arriving sooner.

“Thanks, Josh mentioned that, too, but I don’t want to encroach on you and Janet too much.”

“Nonsense, it doesn’t bother me, and when she gets home from college my sister will probably be spending half her time at Mitch’s place. Your friend Shannon might get a bit lonely at the cabin by herself when you’re away on your honeymoon.”

Rachael narrowed her eyes, “That’s very...thoughtful of you.”

“That’s me, honey, all heart.”

“Mmm,” she looked pointedly between his legs, “that’s not what I’ve heard.”

He looked at her in mock shock but before he could say anything further Joshua returned.

“Come on, let’s see if we can actually make it to Mr. Connor’s place this time,” Joshua muttered and Rachael, bless her, actually blushed.

It was nearly 10:00 a.m. when Jerry, a young ranch hand, came to tell him that there was a lady waiting in the yard to see him. James was working with two other men, fencing in another paddock area. Both he and his brother liked to be directly involved in ranch work and he found that hard physical labor helped to clear his mind and ease out any stress. It was the same with sex, which for him and Luke was long, hard, physical activity of another kind.

The other men looked at him with cheeky grins as if to say ‘not another one,’ but knew better than to voice it. James rolled his eyes and tugged his shirt back on; no need to further encourage whoever she was. He was a little irritated because he hadn’t invited anyone over and didn’t want the interruption.

“Keep working. I’ll be back soon,” he instructed before turning to leave.

As he walked away he heard Jerry say to the others, “She’s real pretty and she came in a taxi.”

He frowned, a taxi? He was sure that he hadn’t given his address to anyone from out of town. He vaulted over the wooden post and rail fence and, while walking toward the house, began taking his leather gloves off in order to fasten up his shirt. As he looked up he saw a woman standing by a car, watching him approach. He definitely didn’t know her, he was sure because there was no way he’d forget this little beauty with such distinctive red hair. Even though she was dressed in casual, tight jeans and white T-shirt, the description Foxy Lady came immediately to mind. He stopped a few feet away, regarding her with interest. Dang, she was lovely. Operation O’Reilly could wait. He decided to leave his shirt undone.

“Hello, I’m James Ryden, can I help you?”

James noticed that her expression went from wariness to relieved recognition when she heard his name. She hit him with an out-of-this-world smile that lit up her whole face, and radiated outwards so that he felt the warmth of it in his chest.

“I’m so pleased to meet you, James. I’m Shannon, Shannon O’Reilly, Rachael’s friend and soon-to-be bridesmaid.”

His heart flip-flopped and his throat constricted. For the first time in his life he was speechless in front of a woman. He automatically took her offered small, cool hand in his own and didn’t let go. No wonder Luke had sounded smitten on the phone, and the lucky devil had spent the whole night between her firm, slender-looking thighs. That image inflated his dick faster than a pneumatic pump. He took in her delicate yet expressive features. She had a face that easily conveyed emotions, her mobile mouth was used to smiling, but those lips, oh, those plump, pouty, luscious lips were made for kissing, and sucking cock.

* * * *

Shannon couldn’t help but stare at the living embodiment of Michelangelo’s statue of David. James Ryden had to be hands down the best looking man she had ever seen. His worn, figure-clutching jeans and open plaid shirt wrapped a delicious package. When he had easily vaulted over the fence she’d caught a glimpse of the strength and vitality within. She couldn’t help think of the power behind those muscular flanks and chiseled abs and what they could do for a woman. Hot diggity damn, or whatever they said here in Texas, she was going to blush crimson if she didn’t lock down those thoughts. She focused on his face but that really didn’t help much. It was classically handsome with high cheekbones and symmetrical features, clear, deep blue eyes and a strong jaw. He’d raised his hat in greeting, which she found both quaint and sexy. His sun streaked, golden-brown, curly hair looked feather soft, and she itched to run her fingers

through it. This was her first proper meeting with a real-life cowboy on a ranch and she was impressed. *Stop it, you slut. You left a warm, hunky man in bed just this morning. Jesus, if there are more like him in this kinky ass place I'm done for.*

Shannon waited for him to speak again, or move, or at least let her hand go, but the gorgeous man in front of her seemed incapable of doing anything. He just stood staring at her looking stunned and dumbstruck with a grin on his face. There she was thinking about shagging his brains out when it looked as if someone had beaten her to it. From nowhere the dueling banjos tune from the film *Deliverance* popped into her head. *Oh no, maybe the poor man isn't the sharpest tool in the shed.* It was such a pity because what he clearly lacked in mental capacity he made up for on the physical front; a sort of Forrest Gump but better looking.

Patting the strong warm hand that was holding hers she spoke a little louder and slower, "Is Rachael here? Is your brother Joshua home? Is there anyone here that I can speak to?"

James blinked slowly and shook his head as if coming to his senses. His cheeks pinked with a blush. He let go of her hand and the sappy grin on his face morphed into a pleasant smile.

Suddenly reanimated, he responded energetically, "Of course I know who you are Shannon, Rachael has spoken of you. Sorry, but my mind was a bit preoccupied just now, and we weren't expecting you so soon. I'm afraid that you've missed Rachael, but come on in, I'll get your bags and you can wait here."

He swept past her, liberated her suitcase and laptop from the trunk of the car, and paid and dismissed the taxi driver. Without further ado he hustled her up the steps and into the house. Shannon ditched her first impression that James was slow, but was now wondering if he had bipolar disorder or schizophrenia because one minute he'd been apparently struck dumb, the next he'd become a man of action, and now he was being charming. She was getting mental whiplash trying to keep up. Perhaps it was her fault, she was tired, confused about

already missing Luke, and James's beautiful torso displayed by his open shirt was so very, very distracting.

She tried not to look too closely at the fabulous body of the man as he led her into a large kitchen and pulled out a chair at the breakfast bar for her to sit on. Rachael had only briefly mentioned James, but Shannon knew that he was going to be his brother's best man at the wedding. Shannon decided that, in terms of looks, he'd be the best man anywhere.

* * * *

James wrestled to get his thoughts in order as he launched into damage limitation mode. It had taken him a minute to get over the shock of meeting Shannon. Oh he'd made a great first impression, behaved real smooth, staring at her and grinning like the farm idiot. Holy crap, he'd even blushed. It was almost unheard of.

"Can I get you anything, Shannon, a coffee perhaps? I bet you're tired after your journey." *Or because you were up all night screwing.*

"Thanks, yes, a coffee would be great. I am tired, but not from the journey. I just didn't get a lot of sleep last night." She sighed with a satisfied, faraway look in her eye. "I've just arrived from Houston. I was there for two days on business before coming here, that's why I'm early."

"Oh, I see, strange bed and all." *With a strange man.*

She gave an almost undetectable small chuckle, "Yeah, you could say that."

Indeed I could, you sexy vixen. James was thinking about what Luke had told him. Now that he had the lovely Shannon in front of him he was finding it hard not to overlay those erotic images.

"Rachael and Josh are visiting a neighbor. I bet you tried to call, but her mobile—"

"Is dead?" Shannon interrupted.

He nodded with a smile.

“Aye, that’s my girl Rachael, it used to drive me crazy at college.”

“You and my brother both,” he chuckled.

She grinned. “I first went to the Vet Practice, but the very nice receptionist said it was Rachael’s day off. Then I went to her cabin, ‘Flora’s Place,’ but she wasn’t home, so here was the next logical choice.”

“Well I’m glad you made it. How’d you like your coffee?”

“Strong with milk and one sugar, please.”

He secretly smiled to himself as he remembered asking Rachael the same question two months ago. Her answer had been strong, dark, and not sweet— definitely Joshua. He thought that Shannon’s choice described him better.

* * * *

She sat at the large breakfast bar feeling a little unsettled and tense in the company of James. As he moved close-by to grab a mug from an overhead cupboard she couldn’t miss the enticing aroma of fresh, healthy, male sweat. Instinctively she sniffed and further inhaled his musky, outdoors scent. It evoked unfamiliar feelings of longing and desire and her heart rate increased. James turned in response to the sound.

“I’m sorry if I smell a bit ripe, I’ve been working hard in the paddock,” he explained apologetically. “I’ll go get freshened up once I’ve made your coffee.”

“No, no, please, you don’t smell bad at all,” she rushed her words, mortified that he’d heard her.

“I don’t? Well, how would you describe it?” He turned to meet her gaze straight on with open interest and perhaps intent, putting her on the spot, unbalancing her.

She sensed that something was happening, that barely perceptible underlying shift in space, where a single action changes the course of a life, changes everything.

“Er, not unpleasant. Good actually.” She slowly inhaled again deeply through her nose, closed her eyes, and described his fragrance. “Wood, hay, musk, autumn.” She began to lose herself with every breath and conscious intake of his scent. “Virility, male, sex.”

Jesus, what did I just say? Shannon couldn’t believe her own words and kept her eyes tight shut as she cringed with embarrassment. She heard his sharp intake of breath and felt the heat of his body as he drew nearer. His scent, even stronger now, triggered an involuntary, soft moan. She sensed the warmth of his close proximity and felt the tentative touch of his lips on hers, gently melting away the tension. She relaxed and their mouths mated, molded in perfect symmetry as if made for each other, missing pieces finally slipping into place. It was only a first kiss and yet with it was a future promise, the absolute inevitability of sweet, final surrender. It was enchanting and exquisite, conveying everything that meager words could not. Shannon felt overwhelmed, even more so than when Luke had kissed her last night. *Luke. Bloody hell, what’s happening to me?* Here she was kissing a virtual stranger five minutes after meeting him and less than twelve hours after making love to another. What a floozy. Her eyes flew open and she forced herself to lean away.

“I’m sorry,” she whispered, breathless in a voice that sounded small, even to her own ears.

James looked equally baffled, his blue eyes were hooded and unfocused and his breath was shallow. He shook his head slightly, whether in response to her apology or some inner conflict she didn’t know. Abruptly he turned to pour her coffee, when he set it down in front of her she noticed his hand tremble.

“I think I’ll take a cool shower anyway,” he rasped. “I’ll be back in fifteen minutes, why don’t you sit in the living room or out on the back veranda where it’s more comfortable?” He indicated the general direction to go and then beat a hasty retreat out of the kitchen.

Shannon blushed with horror and embarrassment at her behavior and the fact that James had felt the need to leave her presence so fast

that she was surprised to not smell burning rubber from the soles of his boots.

* * * *

James almost ran to his wing of the house, putting distance between him and Shannon. Once he was safely behind the thick internal door he leaned heavily against it and let out a low groan. The experience of that single kiss had been monumental, in a signal changing, tracks realigning, and life altering way. His train was now hurtling in another direction, destination Shannon.

One kiss and he'd nearly lost it. He could have taken her there, in the kitchen, seduced her with their mutual desire overriding any possible objections. Being such a responsive woman she would have yielded. He knew it would have been a fierce and passionate mating. The problem was that he didn't know her and how she would feel about it all later. She might be sorry afterwards. That was one of the quintessential differences between men and women—regret and how they dealt with it.

James stripped off, sighing in relief as he unbuttoned his jeans and loosened the constricting material. Judging by the achingly hard state of his dick and the heaviness of his balls he knew that he would have to gain at least a temporary reprieve. Cupping his weighty sac in his left hand, he spat on the right and gripped himself firmly. He didn't want to make this last long; he just needed to ease the throbbing. With no movements designed to tease, he established a regular rhythm of squeezing and pulling and thought of Shannon. Within five minutes his seed spewed into his fist. *What a waste with prime pussy not twenty yards away. Now for that cold shower.*

Chapter 8

Shannon seriously considered the merits of hightailing it away from the Sweet Water ranch and waiting at Rachael's cabin, but the taxi had gone and she hadn't noted the number. She considered accessing the internet via her mobile and finding a taxi company to come and get her, but that would take ages and defeat the object of quickly putting some space between her and James Ryden. The weight of that kiss scared and unsettled her. The significance of it was quite possibly too huge to contemplate.

On unsteady legs she wobbled through the beautiful house, eyeing the spacious yet comfortable living room with big leather sofas that begged to be flopped down and curled up upon. Double doors led onto a shaded veranda area that continued to form a deck and patio around a swimming pool. The surrounding larger garden area was stunning. She noted with appreciation how the outer boundaries carefully blended away into the natural landscape. It was the perfect place to relax, so she chose a lounge in the shade and attempted to do just that.

Who was she trying to kid? She couldn't relax one iota with the knowledge that the most gorgeous man she'd ever laid eyes on was twenty yards away, naked under a shower. She tried to convince herself that she was capable of controlling her reactions. *I'm a twenty-nine-year-old woman of the world and I can handle a randy rancher.* Except he wasn't the only one feeling randy.

She decided that her behavior must be due to tiredness and overstimulation by all that had happened over the last forty-eight hours. What bugged her was how James had reacted to her. Did it

signify that he had experienced something similar? Or was he used to adoring women throwing themselves at him and assumed that she would fall the same way? When she'd broken the kiss he must have thought that she was a rotten tease and he regretted doing it, hence the hasty retreat.

Shannon sipped her coffee, and gave a little moan of appreciation; it really was good. She bet that he did most things well. Her thoughts slipped to Luke, who was similar in a way, but calmer and more serious. It was bloody typical, men *were* like buses, you waited in vain for one but then two turn up at the same time. What was it Luke had said? "Texan prime beef." That described a few of the men she'd noticed around here. She was beginning to understand her friend Rachael's actions a whole lot better. Shannon closed her eyes and waited for the caffeine to hit her system.

* * * *

After a quick shower and change of clothes James rang his partner, Luke, and filled him in on the events of the morning.

"I'm telling you she's right here and you'd better get your ass back double quick."

"What's happened? What have you done?" Luke sounded worried.

"Nothin' much yet, but it's going to be a struggle to keep my paws off her."

"You feel it too then?"

"Hell yes. I haven't been as intimate as you, but I'd like to be," he admitted.

"I'll be home tomorrow morning. She'll want to see Rachael today, so it'll be hard to get her alone with just the two of us. Use this brief time you have to get to know her."

James agreed and went in search of Shannon. He found her reclining on a lounge in the shade of the veranda. She really was a

good-looking woman with an understated beauty. He didn't think that she needed to spend a lot of time in front of the bathroom mirror. He suspected that she wasn't inclined to either. She had that distracted air of a woman whose time and attention was probably directed on other, more interesting things.

"Hi again," he drawled.

Shannon jerked in surprise. She'd obviously been daydreaming with her eyes closed and hadn't heard his approach.

"Oh, hi." She gave him a tentative smile.

At least she didn't seem upset or annoyed with him. He leant against the doorframe and hoped that he looked relaxed and happy, as he told a little white lie.

"I can't seem to get through to Josh, he must be out of cell phone range, but they should be back for lunch and I'll keep trying." He dropped his gaze for a moment and added lightly, "I should say I'm sorry for kissing you, darlin', but I'm not. I am sorry if it made you feel uncomfortable though."

"What I said, well it just popped out. I didn't mean to lead you on." She winced. "Can we just forget it and start again?"

Not likely. "Fine, because I need to wheedle lots of information out of you about Rachael for my best man's speech." He comically wiggled his eyebrows, hoping to put her at ease.

"I can help you with that, but my first loyalty is to Rachael, so I'll be very selective." She grinned up at him.

"Yeah, I thought so. I'll have to come up with a cunning plan to extract the intelligence I need."

"Let me guess, something concerning a lot of alcohol?"

"Damn you're good." He wagged his finger at her. "I can see I'm gonna have to up my game. Was I that obvious?" he teased, feeling pleased that they were freely interacting.

She gave an exaggerated sigh, "I'm thinking subtlety isn't a strong point."

He laughed and nodded. "Maybe not, but I can do devious."

“Devious or deviant?”

“Now, sugar, just how much has Rachael said about me?” He cocked his head to one side and shifted away from the doorframe.

“Actually, James, I know very little about your family, perhaps you could fill me in. Obviously Rachael’s told me a bit about Joshua and Meadow Ridge County, but to be honest she’s been uncharacteristically mean with the details.” She gave a mock look of indignation.

James laughed. “Well I’ll tell you what I know in return for some speech material.”

“It’s a deal. I must say that I’m looking forward to meeting your brother. A man who can hold Rachael’s attention and respect must be worth knowing.”

“He’s a good man, the best,” he said sincerely.

“They’ll be a perfect match then.”

“They are. You have to see it to believe it. It’s quite sickening,” he joked. “While you’re waiting would you be interested in a mini tour of the ranch? I know you’re an environmental consultant, but does that make you a green hippy? Are you going to wallop me with daffodils if you don’t like the way we run our well sites, or worst still inundate me with a strongly worded leaflet campaign?” He affected a shudder.

“Har har, very funny.” She groaned sarcastically. “I am a definite shade of green, but I’m not against development per se, just development that’s not sustainable. Look, I flew here on a plane, so I can’t really be a hardcore true environmentalist. I contribute to projects such as native tree planting schemes and the like, to try to offset my carbon footprint, but there’s always an imbalance. I do what I can within the constraints of everyday living, as do a lot of others. I’d love to see the ranch.”

He held out his hand and smiled warmly. “Come on then, I’ll introduce you to Sweet Water.”

Without hesitation she slipped her hand into his and accepted his help up. He felt a small thrill at the feel of her slender fingers entwined with his. Keeping a hold of her hand he led her through the house to the front door.

“Here, take my sister Janet’s spare hat, we don’t want that pale skin getting burned.” He plucked a straw cowboy hat from a peg and carefully placed it on her head, absentmindedly tucking a stray strand of hair behind her ear. His fingers briefly grazed her neck as he put both hands on her shoulders, leaned back and regarded her at arm’s length. “Just like a cowgirl, all you need now are the boots.”

She smiled. “Thanks, with my skin it’s either ghost, tomato, or,” she shuddered and grimaced, “more freckles.”

“Freckles look cute,” he offered.

“Yeah, on a six-year-old.”

He shook his head with a smile. “My Irish Granddaddy used to say that a face without freckles was like a night sky without stars.”

She looked pleasantly surprised at his comment.

“Irish? Well that explains your gift of the gab.”

“To be sure,” he said, affecting an Irish accent.

Not wanting to overdo the charm, he dropped his arms and held the door open.

“This way, if you please.”

He couldn’t help appraising her slim waist and nicely rounded, pert ass as she walked past him murmuring a thank-you and looking a bit perplexed. What he really wanted to do right now was wrap her legs around his head and wear her like a feedbag. He tried to clear his mind of such thoughts and launched into a brief description of the ranch.

“There has been a house here as far back as 1840, but nothing remains of the original except for a small cellar. Rydens have been here since 1880 and the family slowly consolidated the Ranch to the size it is today, twelve thousand acres plus five hundred on long-term lease. The main activities are cattle and oil, although we have a few

fields of crops, mainly for supplementary animal feed.” He slipped his hand lightly under her elbow to guide her down the steps to the yard, pointing out the buildings and what they were. “This is the main nerve center of the ranch, but because it’s a large spread we have a few satellite bases scattered around, some with temporary buildings and modern conveniences, like where the oil wells are concentrated. Others are little more than camp sites, usually near a source of water.”

“I’d like to see those.”

“The best way to get a feel for the place is on horseback. I’d be happy to take you on a tour but it’ll take a few days to see a good cross section.”

“Thanks that would be great. I can ride and I’m dying to try out an American saddle. I’ve heard they’re really comfortable. Maybe I could take a wee tour after the wedding? If you don’t have time perhaps one of your men could take me?”

Like hell. “I should be able to spare a few days and I’d like to personally check on the spread. Want to see the horses?”

They went to the stables and paddock area, and he introduced her to the men working on the fencing. He noticed that they shyly gave Shannon appreciative glances. He was unprepared for the twinge of possessiveness that tweaked his tail.

“I’m giving Shannon a short tour of the ranch, so carry on without me,” he explained curtly.

“Oh, please don’t let me interrupt your work. I don’t want to be a bother.”

“You’re no bother, darlin’, it’s my pleasure.” He had an idea and quickly steered her away toward a work truck. “I’ll take you to Look Out hill to get a good view of the ranch house and surrounding range.” He opened the truck door turned on the engine. “Wait a minute to give the AC time to work before getting in because it’s hotter than hell in the cab. Be careful that you don’t brand yourself with the seat belt buckle. I just need to have a quick word with Isabella, our housekeeper.”

James walked swiftly to the house and phoned Josh. He explained that Shannon had turned up and suggested that they surprise Rachael by meeting on Look Out hill and having a picnic lunch. Josh said that they were only twenty minutes away and he'd meet them there. James asked him to pick up the picnic from the house on the way and then hung up to find Isabella, who was cleaning upstairs. He asked her if she wouldn't mind making a little picnic for four people with a few beers thrown in. Although he wanted to spend some time alone with Shannon, he thought that it might be a good idea to chalk up some brownie points, figuring he'd need them later. He also wanted to get further into Rachael's good books as she could be an important ally. When he returned Shannon was still waiting outside of the truck.

"You look happy," she commented.

"Got a surprise for you later, but interrogation ain't allowed," he said as he gave her his best friendly-guy grin.

He opened the truck's door for her and, with hands spanning her waist, boosted her up into the passenger seat. It took all his self-restraint not to cop a feel. Keeping his hands balled into fists he stepped back and shut the door before walking over to the driver's side and jumping in.

* * * *

James drove the big utilitarian ranch truck down a track heading in the opposite direction from the way she had arrived.

"It's only a fifteen minute drive. Feel free to ask any questions."

Do you have a girlfriend? Do you have a big cock and can you use it? How many times can you come in a night? Are you good at eating pussy? Oh crap!

"I read that land fragmentation, due to urbanization and the conversion of natural rangelands and crop land to improved pastures, has resulted in a significant loss of natural habitat. It's apparently the biggest threat to wildlife and the long term viability of agriculture in

Texas.” *Oh, God, I’m babbling like an uptight geek. Not only a ginger but also a nerd.*

“Yeah, unfortunately that’s true although it tends to be more of a problem with smaller ranches of five hundred acres or less. Larger ranches of two thousand acres or more tend to keep the natural range. The Nature Conservancy of Texas is trying to consolidate large tracts of land to protect the natural habitat, but obviously it’s costly.” He sounded knowledgeable and not at all put off by her comments.

“Do you have an environmental management plan for the ranch?”

“Nope, but it might be a good idea. Know someone who could do it?” He was watching the dirt road but she could see the corners of his mouth turn up in a cheeky grin.

“Oh I’m sure that I could come up with a name.”

What was she playing at? She was supposed to be here for a month at the most and taking a break from work. *The ranch would make a very interesting piece of research.* The thought snuck in from nowhere. No, with regret she realized that was a much longer term commitment, and she didn’t have the time or the resources.

James pointed out little things of interest along the way like the new calves, water holes, and old-fashioned, wind driven water pumps. She found his voice pleasant to listen to as they rattled along the track heading toward a small copse of trees on the brow of a hill. They came to the top and stopped just on the edge of the trees, in a patch of shade. James dived out and opened her door before she’d even unclipped her seat belt.

“The view is pretty good from here.” He sounded excited and pleased to be showing her the sight.

As she got out and looked around, she saw that he wasn’t kidding.

“Would you look at that. The ranch looks like a doll’s house from up here.” She smiled, taking in the beautiful open vista of the rangelands. The sky seemed farther away than anywhere she’d been before.

“If you look through these binoculars you can see the woods where Rachael’s cabin is located.” He handed her the binoculars and stood behind her pointing over her shoulder to where she should look. Shannon became hyper aware of his proximity, and it felt good, too good. She took a deep breath to steady herself and savored the slow, delightful shiver creeping down her spine. In the distance she could see a trail of dust following a vehicle moving along the same dirt road they’d used.

“Hey look, someone’s heading this way.”

“Mmm, I wonder who that could be.” He murmured close to her ear and she had to actively remember to breathe.

He didn’t appear too curious or concerned. Gently taking her hand he led her into the trees. Shannon gasped because in the middle were three graves side by side. The middle grave was Eleanor Ryden; either side was Peter Ryden and John Ryden.

“Our parents died in a car crash eleven years ago. Dad Peter and Mom died instantly, Dad John a few days later in hospital. Josh was twenty-one, I was seventeen, and Janet was only ten. Josh dropped out of college to look after us. He completed the course and final exams two years later, but by then he’d already been successfully running the ranch and our other business concerns. I went to college and got my degree in Engineering. Now I like to be hands-on at the well sites and around the ranch. Josh is a great brother but has been so much more, especially to Janet. He literally took on the role of our parents. He held it all together.”

“I’m sorry for your loss; it can’t have been easy for any of you. Not that it’s any consolation, but this is a beautiful place to rest.”

“Yeah, most Rydens are in the town cemetery, but Josh knew how much our parents used to like to come up here. It’s a place we come to when we want to just think about stuff or for some peace. We also get a pretty good view of what’s going on in the area.”

Shannon realized that there were hidden depths to James. He gave off a lot of energy, but she was now seeing a calmer, more contemplative side to his character.

“I’m sure that you’re sick of people prying about the unusual setup of one woman and two men, but I’m curious, what was it like growing up with two dads?”

“I don’t mind you asking at all. You have to remember that it’s not that unusual here and certainly nothing I’m ashamed of. We were a happy family. Mom was a very satisfied woman I think, and I don’t mean just physically, obviously I can’t comment on that, but with two men I doubt she was left wanting.” He gave her a knowing look. “As a teenager I was aware that there was this attraction and bond between them. There was a lot of physical affection, hugs, and casual touches. The responsibility of the Ranch and family were shared between them all, which eased the burden and gave them a little more personal time. Mum was never short of someone to talk to and as a child I can’t remember not having the attention of one of my parents if I needed it.”

Shannon shifted her feet and looked around, out past the trees toward the ranch, anywhere rather than at his face. James Ryden alone looked more than enough for any woman. She wondered what his partner was like.

“You make it sound idyllic.”

“There were arguments, don’t get me wrong, just like any other family.” He chuckled, “Mom was a strong minded woman; she had to be to handle two Rydens. They were brothers and both big, tough men. Other people used to joke that the softest thing about Peter was his two front teeth. He was great with Mom and us kids though.”

“It’s probably indelicate to ask, but do you know who your father is?”

“It doesn’t matter, as I considered them both as my dad. Mom legally married Peter, who was the oldest brother by three years, and his name is on the birth certificates, but as far as and the folks of

Ridge Water town and the County were concerned John was just as much a husband and a father. John was fairer than Peter, so it's likely that he's my biological dad. These days some families have DNA tests and try to work it so that each husband has a child that is genetically his, but he will still consider himself to be father to all of the kids. That's more common where the dads aren't related. Families work it out for themselves, and that's the key to success I think. Everything is discussed up front and agreed upon so there are no hard feelings."

"I'm not sure that's humanly possible."

"You have to look at it differently, from the perspective of the family being a team, a strong unit with all members working together. Mom once said that there was so much love in the family that it didn't need to be rationed and apportioned out, it just was, endless. It's not hard to share something so big."

"Bloody hell, I worry that you're going to be disappointed in life if that's what you're expecting."

For a brief second sorrow flitted across James's face. She felt mean for being so negative, but in her experience family life was fraught with petty jealousies and regrets. What James suggested seemed fantastical.

"When they died it was as if a big chunk of our lives had been lost. The quietness in the house was, still is, the hardest thing. When you think about it, it's ironic that an absence can be physically felt." He shook his head slightly as he looked past her toward the graves. "I know that their relationship was real and not some impossible fantasy. We just have to find the right woman. I'm not expecting anything, but I'm hoping."

He shifted his gaze to her and she could see the absolute conviction in his eyes. Perhaps such a family setup was possible with men like him, in a place like this. She was distracted from that interesting thought by the sound of an engine getting closer.

“Do you know who that is?” she asked, cocking her head in the direction of the track.

“I might do.” He smiled. “Come on, let’s go say hello.”

A big truck pulled up and Shannon heard a familiar squeal as the passenger door opened and Rachael leaped out. She gave a little shriek of delight herself and ran to her friend. They hugged each other, jumping around like teenagers.

“How? When? Oh, it’s great to see you.” Rachael rushed.

“I think your future brother-in-law may have set us up.” Shannon turned to James and mouthed a ‘thank-you’ to him.

“This is my fiancé, Joshua Ryden.” Rachael indicated to the mountain of a man who was unfolding from the vehicle.

Shannon knew that her eyes must be nearly popping out. “Jesus, you weren’t kidding, your man’s big all right.”

Rachael leaned closer and whispered in her ear, “Yes, and he’s all in proportion.” She wiggled her eyebrows and Shannon had to choke down a laugh. Fortunately it appeared Joshua hadn’t heard the exchange

“It’s great to meet you, Joshua.”

He looked down at her and surprised them all by picking her up for a hug. “I’m glad that you’ve come earlier than expected, I know Rachael will appreciate it, thank you.” He set her down and put his arm around Rachael.

She felt herself instantly warm to the man. “He’ll do, Rach.” Shannon laughed.

“We’ve a picnic courtesy of James’s planning and Isabella’s culinary skills,” Joshua informed them.

“That was really thoughtful, James.” Rachael thanked him with a quick squeeze.

“As I said earlier, I’m all heart.” He winked at her.

They set the blanket out on the edge of the trees so that they were still in the shade but had a great view of the ranch. Shannon explained that she’d been at the oil and gas conference.

Rachael gasped, “Gosh, what a coincidence. Josh and James and were there at the beginning of the week, in fact I think L—”

“Ow!” James cried out slapping his neck, “Sorry, something stung me. Wasp, I think.”

“Are you okay? Let me take a look.” Shannon knelt closer and brushed his shirt collar aside. “I can’t see anything.” She did however note the rigid cords in his neck as he held himself stiffly.

“Sometimes I take a while to react.”

He trembled as her fingers lightly traced the area. She abruptly dropped her hand and moved away.

James swallowed and changed the subject. “Do you know how long you’re staying, Shannon?”

“I was planning on a month, if that’s okay with you, Rachael?”

“That would be great. We’ll be away for a two-week honeymoon somewhere, Josh won’t tell me where, but you can stay at my cabin if you want. Chill out or use it as a base for exploring.”

Rachael opened the cool box and handed around some still cold beers. “Here’s to grooms, brides, best men, and bridesmaids everywhere. Cheers.” They toasted with their bottles and drank deeply.

* * * *

James decided that he could get used to this; a pleasant picnic with his family and the woman he was rapidly falling for. All that was missing was Luke. He could envisage a day in the future, doing just this sort of thing perhaps with Janet and maybe Mitch joining them, and all their brats running around causing havoc. Such a thought would have had him heading full speed in the opposite direction not too long ago. He wanted to get to know Shannon better and was trying to think of the best way of breaking it to her that Luke was his best friend and partner. It had been a close thing earlier when Rachael had almost mentioned Luke. He’d conjured up a nonexistent wasp

sting and deflected the conversation, but it was only a matter of time before she found out.

“There are a few new tracks going across Crossling’s land. I wonder what he’s up to.” Joshua was looking through the binoculars. “They lead into the wooded area, not far from the Sweet River and close to the boundary with the land we’re leasing from him and his dad.”

“As long as he stays away from me I don’t care what he does. He’s a real weasel of a man, Shannon. He tried to blame me for the death of his horse just over a month ago. We think he sold it secretly then tried to besmirch my good name.”

“Ye Gods,” exclaimed Shannon in mock shock. “Besmirching Rachael Harrison? Why, the man’s a scoundrel no less. I take it he’s one neighbor who’s not invited to your wedding?”

Rachael shook her head, “My dear, he truly is a nasty little fucker. The man would be as welcome as a rattlesnake at a square dance.”

“Castration with a blunt pair of shears too good for him, eh?” Shannon mused while lying on her side, propped up on her elbow.

James and Joshua sat stunned and silent listening to the banter between the two friends.

“No, that’s too easy. You could sing to him, Shannon.”

“Ah, Rachael, you always were the more diabolical of the two of us.” She shook her head and sighed.

“Not in the choir then Shannon?” Joshua ventured.

“I couldn’t carry a tune in a reinforced bucket, but it doesn’t stop me.”

James laughed. He found her attitude refreshing. Most women he knew harbored the illusion that they could sing like Celine Dion.

“Oh no, I’d forgotten your morning recitals in the shower. Where do you keep the ear defenders, Josh?”

“Did you two live together?” asked James.

“Yeah, in college and for a year after, but then unfortunately careers took us to different locations, and now I’m in Ireland and you,” she said pointing at Rachael, “are here.”

“There’s plenty of room in Meadow Ridge County for a wee thing like you.” Rachael grinned.

James wanted to raise his hands and give praise for Rachael, but he affected a nonexistent nonchalance.

“You have an American passport, Rachael, but it wouldn’t be that easy for me to get residency and a green card.”

Maybe it would if you were married to me. Where that leap in reasoning came from he didn’t know— it just sort of popped into his head. Today he was having all sorts of domestic, homey thoughts. His brain must be impaired by the fact that blood was being diverted to an altogether different region of his body.

“I’m sure with your skills it wouldn’t be a problem but failing that you could pay someone to marry you. Old Mr. Connor could do with some cash,” James joked.

Rachael laughed, “I think Shannon could do better than that.”

“Mmm, I suppose so. Look, as you’re a friend of the family I could offer my services, at a push,” he gave Shannon a wink.

“She can do better than you, too.”

Like hell she can. James suddenly grew serious as he lazily turned to Rachael. “There’s no one better than me,” he drawled. Then he moved his gaze to Shannon and slowly undressed her with his eyes.

* * * *

Shannon would have laughed except for the fact that he was looking intently at her with more raw desire than anyone ever had before. Shit, he wasn’t joking. It was an arrogant and very immodest statement, but somehow she knew it wasn’t false. It was as thrilling as it was unnerving. She automatically looked to Rachael for support but saw that she was looking at Joshua and rolling her eyes.

“Well, if I’m desperate I’ll bear your kind offer in mind,” she said quickly in a voice a little too high and squeaky to be cool.

“In that case you should know that I’m only half the package. My partner and I share. Unlike my brother here, I want all our parents had.” He didn’t take his eyes off her and she couldn’t bring herself to look away from this suddenly more intense and authoritative man. “Could you handle that?”

God, what was he asking? James alone would be more than enough for one woman. Again she wondered what his partner was like, probably five foot four, skinny, with a small penis and a face only a mother could love. Surely anything more potent and a woman would spontaneously combust. She suddenly felt way out of her depth but couldn’t help her body from reacting with a flush to her face and a flood to her panties.

“And here he is, the real James Ryden. I was wondering when the flirting would start. You’re a bit slow off the mark today,” Joshua teased with a weary sigh.

It broke the tension as he’d obviously intended, but Shannon still caught the guarded glare he directed at his brother. James didn’t seem to care, he held her gaze for a few more seconds before taking a swig of his beer. Rachael changed the subject and asked about the shooting incident in Uganda. Relieved, Shannon relayed the tale.

“I’d never heard a real gunshot before in my life, just in the movies. It seemed surreal at the time.”

“So you’ve never shot a gun before?” James asked sounding surprised.

“No. Gun ownership in Ireland is strictly regulated.”

“I could teach you to shoot a pistol and rifle, Shannon, if you want to,” James offered.

“That might be interesting, I’ll try anything once.”

“Really?”

Shannon couldn't help but laugh at James's cheeky grin of delight. "Will you give over?" She pushed his shoulder and he deliberately toppled backwards.

Joshua cleared his throat, "I hate to break up the picnic, but we've got to get back and do some work this afternoon. I'll take the ladies to the cabin so that Shannon can drop her bags off and get settled. I don't know what you want to do about tonight, darlin'. Would you prefer to catch up with Shannon and come over to the ranch tomorrow for lunch?"

Indecision swept across Rachael's features for a fraction of a second as she looked at Joshua and then Shannon. He leaned down to give her a kiss and whispered quietly and privately in her ear. Whatever he said had Rachael looking flushed and aroused.

"That's a good idea," she croaked.

Shannon raised an eyebrow in question and glanced at James, who was now the one rolling his eyes.

"It must run in the family," she muttered.

Chapter 9

“What’s going on, and don’t give me any bullshit. I’m getting married in fifteen days and I don’t want my bride upset because her best friend the chief bridesmaid is being messed around with by my brother the best man.” Joshua took his eyes off the paddock fencing work for a moment and James felt the full weight of his fierce regard. “Spill it.”

“It’s complicated.”

“How do you eat an elephant?” Joshua asked sternly.

James knew that the answer held the solution for dealing with many of life’s difficulties. It could have been their family motto.

He sighed, “One piece at a time.”

There was no point in avoiding telling Joshua because all would be revealed soon anyway. James explained what had happened, obviously leaving out details of a very intimate nature.

“Luke felt that there was something special about her and now I do, too. Look, I’ve only just met her, but I want to get to know her better and not just in the biblical sense. The problem is to find a way of breaking it to Shannon without scaring her off.”

Joshua was quiet for a minute. “Twenty-four hours. I’ll give you twenty-four hours to tell her before I explain things to Rachael, but if she asks me directly before then I ain’t lying to her.”

“The sooner the better right? But I have to find a way of getting her alone with both me and Luke.”

“You could take her shopping for some wine, beers, or groceries for lunch tomorrow. We’re not low on anything, but she doesn’t know

that. You could swing by Luke's place on the way. Just be sure that you're serious about her, because Rachael knows how to castrate."

James grimaced. "I've never been more serious about a woman in my life."

Josh snorted, "Like that's saying much."

"Ouch. Jesus, I have to contend with this reputation as well. Look this is new for me, for us. Luke feels the same way. We hardly know the woman, but we both feel that we could possibly have something with her, something like Luke's parents have and ours had. It'll be worth any amount of effort, but I know it's got to be real, no point in pretending we're something we aren't. And you know that that dynamics have got to be right between the three of us not just how we are as individual couples. It's just awkward that we've not been entirely honest from the start but we'll set that right as soon as we can."

Josh gave a curt nod and didn't repress a small chuckle, "You're gonna have your hands full. I suspect she's as red-hot as her hair."

James grinned. "I'm counting on it."

* * * *

Rachael and Shannon sat on the small veranda that ran the length of the little cabin called Flora's Place.

"This is really pleasant; no wonder you wanted to come back." Shannon sat in a wooden chair with comfy over stuffed cushions, her bare feet propped up on a small coffee table strewn with magazines. There was a piece of open ground with patchy grass around the cabin, and beyond that a wood and a running stream.

"You can stay as long as you like, it's great to have you here." Rachael was sprawled across an old wicker sofa piled with pillows and cushions of assorted bright colors.

“Your man, he’s impressive and seems like a capable chap. He’s a big bugger, too, and very...ahem...masculine. How the hell did you get to know him without being terrified?” She snorted a laugh.

“We’re the same height lying down.” Rachael giggled. “I think it was lust and love at first sight and it certainly helped that he is the living embodiment of my fantasies.”

“You saucy minx, you must have some dark desires.”

Rachael gave a wicked little chuckle, “You have no idea.”

“I’m beginning to.” Shannon paused for a moment, chewing her lip, “Rachael, tell me what you think of James because he behaved very oddly when I first met him this morning. A little later in the kitchen he kissed me—”

“He did?” Rachael interrupted, sounding shocked.

“Yeah, I know, but I have to say, it was a kiss like no other. It was divine, or more like profound. It was certainly more than the normal upper persuasion for the lower invasion if you know what I mean, although it was all that too.” She sat up straight and tried to find the right words. “It felt like a juncture, you know, ‘all roads lead from here.’ I’m probably not making any sense but I really felt a connection to the guy. I must be going mad or getting desperate because while I was at the conference in Houston, I met a really great guy and I felt a bond with him too. Maybe I’m imagining it. I’m tired and obviously I needed this break more than I thought, or maybe I just need to get shagged more.” She gave a little laugh, but it didn’t hide her confusion and doubt.

Rachael also sat up straight, rearranging a few cushions. “James is a great guy, I really like him.”

“But...?”

“But he’s not been exactly chaste over the last few years. The guy is great-looking, charming, and genuinely likes women, and boy, do they like him and his partner Luke. They’ve never been short of female company. Individually they are both gorgeous, but together they must be many a girl’s dream come true.”

“Luke? That’s James’s partner’s name?” Shannon immediately registered the coincidence.

“Yeah, he’s quieter and more intense than James but just as sexy. I’m in love with Josh, but I’m not blind.” She giggled. “Until very recently they’ve been players of the highest order, sharing women in bed and unconcerned about trying to find Miss Right. Lately though they’ve been a bit subdued. I think the desire to settle down is growing stronger. Josh mentioned that when they were at the conference, James and Luke said they wanted a serious relationship. I don’t know what James’s intentions are, Shannon, but I don’t think that he would deliberately lead someone on or make any false promises. My understanding is that so far he hasn’t ever made any promises at all to anyone, except to have a fun time.”

Shannon frowned. *Partner? Luke? James? At the conference?* She picked up the threads and ran with them, recalling Luke’s words; ‘I’ll be honest, I’ve been a player in the past, but it gets old. I’m not looking for a casual fuck anymore, I want more.’ *No fucking way!*

“Rachael,” she gulped, eyes widening, and breath shortening, “is Luke about six four, well built, straight dark brown hair just past the ears, dark brown eyes, and very long lashes...by any chance?”

Rachael jerked back in apparent shock. “From that accurate description I’d say chance has nothing to do with it.”

“Oh no, no it can’t be,” Shannon’s breath caught in her throat. “What’s his second name?”

Rachael looked very puzzled. “I can’t remember exactly. Something Scottish sounding I think.”

“McKay?”

“Yeah, that’s right. McKay. His mother brought an injured cat in to see me last week, turned out it was also pregnant, but how did you know?”

Shannon let out a wail. “Ohhhhhh, my God!”

“What the hell’s the matter with you? Are you okay?” Rachael’s eyes were like saucers as she watched her meltdown with astonishment.

She muffled some curses as colorful as the cushions she buried her face in.

“I don’t fockin’ believe it, Jaysus.” Her Irish accent had intensified as it always did when she was upset. “Of all the fockin’ hotels in all the world, he had to walk into mine!”

“What are you talking about?” Rachael sounded worried and confused.

Shannon stared at her for a moment then started to laugh, but it wasn’t a hearty sound.

“I spent last night, at the Thorn Bush hotel,” she took a deep breath, “in the arms of a certain Luke McKay.”

Rachael gasped. “No way.”

“Yes way.” Shannon groaned. “And he mentioned his *sleeping partner* James, only he made it sound like just a business arrangement. He even said that he liked to go on long rides with him. Bugger!” The expletives were coming fast and furious now. “What a jolly fockin’ wheeze that must have been for him. Oh, God, Rach, I feel such a bloody fool.” She closed her eyes tight against the sting of restrained tears.

“Hey, hey, hang on a minute, you don’t know that.” Rachael leaned over and gave Shannon a hug. “There is a saying, ‘never attribute to malice that which is adequately explained by stupidity,’ or in this case perhaps explained by stupidity and coincidence. Tell me what happened and we’ll think about it.” Rachael sat back and gave her an encouraging smile. “First though we need a little something nice and cold from the fridge.”

Rachael dashed to the kitchen and returned waving a bottle of Chardonnay and two glasses.

"I've missed you and your sayings. How do you remember them all?" Shannon smiled weakly, still hot faced but calming down slowly.

"Oh, it's not too difficult when you're a genius."

Shannon raised her glass, "Cheers." She took a big gulp, then another. "Okay, well I guess it all began with a telephone call from an old colleague, not long after you called me about the wedding..."

Shannon went over the events of the last few days, regularly sipping her wine. Rachael listened carefully.

"So I am right in thinking that on the first date you didn't give details about where you were going or who you would be seeing?" Rachael, ever practical, was starting to analyze the information that she had given her.

Shannon shook her head, "No, not until the second date." She frowned in concentration, going over that evening in her mind. "Actually I don't think I gave any details until after, er, you know, the first time."

Rachael raised her eyebrows. "So at least up until *that* point Luke didn't know that you were coming to Meadow Ridge County, right?"

"Yeah, right, but he didn't confess that he participated in ménages or the full extent of his partnership with James either." Shannon wailed again. "This cannot be happening."

Rachael let out a deep breath, "It's true that an element of deceit was involved," she nodded then turned her palms up and raised her hands in the universal gesture of conciliation, "but at that point in time neither of you knew that you would ever see each other again. It was for all intent purposes just a one-night stand. I'm sorry to be blunt but neither of you thought it would be more than 'until dawn do us part.'"

"It sounds terrible doesn't it?" Shannon focused her gaze on the peeling paint on the wooden ceiling of the veranda.

"You're twenty-nine years old and not a nun. What's so bad about sleeping with a hot body like Luke McKay?"

“You say that, Rachael, but you’re like me, we don’t generally do the casual sex thing. Luke affected me. I really liked and fancied him. I was hoping that he’d call and maybe even visit.” She sighed deeply. “But you are correct, because I didn’t really think it could go anywhere. At the most I guess I considered the possibility of a holiday romance.”

“Okay, so up until the point when he must have guessed who you were, all Luke can be really be accused of is not confiding a personal detail that was irrelevant to a one-night stand and may have put you off him.”

“In a nutshell,” Shannon groaned, “but why didn’t he fess up later?”

“He’s a bloke and he didn’t want to risk pissing off the Shagtastic Shannon. Maybe he was caught by surprise, or perhaps wanted you to meet James first, or he just made an error in judgment? He didn’t actually lie; it was more of an omission of facts.”

“Come on, Rach, that’s just semantics, it was still deceitful.”

“Oh, cut the amateur dramatics. It was also understandable. I wonder if James knows about you and Luke. I’d say the odds are that he does because Luke must have called him. Oh, wait a minute, that wasp sting very conveniently cut me off from telling you that Luke was at the conference. Ooh he is good. Of course he knows.” She looked altogether too impressed with James for Shannon’s liking.

“Do you mind? I’ve been deceived and I feel really pathetic.” But Shannon couldn’t really get annoyed at her because she loved her friend dearly. Rachael was always so supportive, reasonable, and positive about things and knew how to handle her. “What do you think they are playing at?”

Rachael snorted, “It’s been less than twenty-four hours since Luke knew who you are and less than five hours since you met James, they probably don’t have a master plan; they’re guys after all. James clearly fancies you so I bet that right now they are trying to think of the best way of coming clean.” She rubbed her chin and looked deep

in thought. Then suddenly she perked up with a huge grin. “It’ll probably include lots of mind-blowing sex. You lucky mare.”

“Jaysus, will you just stop! I’m not looking for a man and all the hassle that comes with one...let alone two! Anyway, you can’t be sure that they both like me. They’re probably worried about how I’ll react when I see Luke”

“No, trust me, if they weren’t interested James wouldn’t have organized that picnic on the hill.” Rachael swirled her wine in the big glass. “So, Ms. O’Reilly, them not liking you isn’t your biggest problem is it?” She gave a little wicked chuckle.

Shannon frowned with a feeling of unease creeping over her. “What do you mean?”

“I mean that you should be more concerned about what you are going to do when they come for you.” Rachael looked pointedly at her.

Shannon’s face felt hot and flushed again. “Oh, my God, I don’t stand a chance.”

“You know that Luke also comes from a ménage family, both he and James want the same thing. You understand what that means?” Rachael topped up their glasses because they needed it.

“Broadly, yes but I don’t know the details.”

“It means that some day they want to share a wife, kids, home, and bed.”

“James told me a bit about it. I’m not sure it can work.”

“Oh it works all right. Luke’s mum is lovely, she is married to two brothers, and the family seems to be very happy. My cousin Colin shares his wife Janet with his best friend Mark and there’s a lot of laughter in that house I can personally attest to that. You’re not in Kansas anymore, Dorothy, this is Meadow Ridge County.”

“But the sex part,” Shannon pulled her face, “Christ, it’s got to hurt having, well you know, two thingies inside. Luke isn’t exactly petite.” She made an accompanying hand gesture that had Rachael spluttering some of her drink.

“God, can you imagine having one in the front and one in the back, or two in the same place?” Shannon was both scandalized and titillated.

Rachael blushed, “I don’t need to imagine. You’ve seen the size of my man, he’s big all over and his mitts are huge too, with fingers like bratwursts. Maybe it’s a little uncomfortable at first, but the pleasure quickly surpasses any pain.”

“Pain?” she yelped. “Oh God, it’ll be like a cat flap in an elephant house!” *Ouch*, that was a sobering thought. “Oh, sweet heaven, I can’t believe that we are having this conversation.”

“Yeah but who else are you going to talk to, your mother?”

“Now you see right there,” Shannon pointed and wagged her finger, “that’s another problem isn’t it? How to break something like that to my devout Catholic of a mother.” She shook her head. “No way, no bloody way.”

“You cross that bridge when you come to it or you avoid it I guess. You’ve got your own life to lead. You certainly don’t have to listen to your mother, who wasted years of her life in bitterness and sorrow never really accepting that your father divorced her.”

“I know, but still it’s an issue. Anyway, let’s not get ahead of ourselves, because we are a long way off any kind of relationship. My life is not geared up to catering for the whims of one man let alone two. Even if it was just a temporary fling, I don’t think that I could have sex with two guys at the same time. That’s the stuff of hot fantasies, not real life. I don’t even think I could have sex with two guys at the same time separately, if you know what I mean. I’m the faithful sort.” Shannon sighed in exasperation.

“Well it wouldn’t be being unfaithful would it? Shannon, life is full of surprises, just say ‘never’ and you’ll see. Look what’s happened to me. Josh is a dominant man, both in and out of bed and here’s the shocker, I love it.” She grinned saucily. “All I can say is that Luke and James have been friends and partners for a while, and if you decide to take them on, even for just a fling, then you’ll be

getting the benefit of all that experience.” She rubbed her hands together with relish. “I think that they’ll take good care of you, Shannon.”

“Oh, yes, all that ‘experience.’” Shannon made little quotation marks with her fingers. “I’ll seem like a naive ninny.” It crossed her mind that if James was as good as Luke, and half as good as she thought he’d be, then she was done for. Could she just have a fun time with the two of them and not get emotionally attached? Truthfully?—It was unlikely. “Rachael, I’ve got to hold out, if I don’t I’ll be lost and unable to think straight. This is a huge decision; it’s not just about sex or even a relationship. If it goes further, then it’s a whole lifestyle thing and something like that needs careful consideration.”

“It does, but I will say one thing, you don’t always need a lot of time to know if someone is right for you. What I have with Joshua is a kind of physical and spiritual connection that happened in a very short time, but even so, it’s no less real or durable than love which develops over years of togetherness, from trust and companionship.” Rachael smiled gently at her. “But if someone had said that to me two months ago I probably wouldn’t have believed them either.”

“I really am so happy for you, Rachael,” Shannon squeezed her friend’s hand, “and we are not going to get distracted from the fact that this is *your* time, you are getting married, and I’m here to support you, not the other way around.”

“The two things aren’t mutually exclusive.” Rachael grinned.

Shannon looked at Rachael and felt the warm glow of friendship in her heart. There was no way that she was going to do anything that even remotely detracted from the wedding and her friend’s bliss. Once Rachael and Joshua were away on their honeymoon...she’d think about that later.

“Well, I’m not rushing into anything.” But she knew that she was already halfway there.

“I’m not sure that you have much of a choice, it all seems like kismet to me and even you may have a difficult time talking your way out of your fate.”

Kismet, fate, or just one hell of a coincidence. Where would it lead?

“A month’s not a long time, but it should be enough to know if it’s worth a serious shot or if it’s one to chalk up to experience. It took less time for me to agree to marry Joshua.” Rachael laughed. “I’m not that sure you’ll be able to hold out on them, they are real charmers you know.”

“I think you are enjoying this way too much, Ms. Harrison. I shall have to revise what I’m going to tell James about you for his best man’s speech.” Shannon smirked.

“What?” Rachael blanched.

“You heard, now pour me another glass and start being nice to me.”

Chapter 10

The next morning Shannon was awakened by the sounds of Rachael getting ready for a morning run. They hadn't stayed up too late the night before because they'd both been tired. Shannon was sleeping on a mattress in the open section of the loft.

"Good morning." Her voice was rough and sleepy. "Coffee, I need coffee."

"I'm just making a cup, I always have one before a run, peps me up a bit. Want to join me for a workout?"

"No. Have you forgotten that I get enough exercise just pushing my luck? I'm more into yoga at the moment. I'll get up and do some Salutations to the Sun."

"We've slept in late. It's half past eight, so I'm guessing that you were comfortable? You're lucky because last week I replaced the ancient, old, lumpy mattress that was up there."

"I slept like a baby. I thought that it would take me a while to get to drop off, churning all the thoughts in my head, but no, I was asleep as soon as my head hit the pillow."

Last night they had talked more about Joshua and how he and Rachael met, marveled at the coincidental meeting and attraction between Shannon and Luke, and pondered the whole Meadow Ridge County phenomenon. They also decided on a loose plan of action for Shannon. It entailed her doing very little and giving James and Luke time to make amends for what was so far only a small deception. It was very mature really, and Shannon only hoped she could do it.

It was a beautiful morning and already the temperature was climbing. Rachael had said that she preferred to run earlier to avoid

the heat and had decided that she would only do a twenty or thirty minute jog. She passed Shannon laying out a towel on the veranda.

“Don’t just do something, Shannon...sit there!” She laughed as she ran down the steps.

Shannon playfully scowled and shouted back, “The only reason you run is so that you can hear heavy breathing.” She only just heard Rachael’s laughter fading as she jogged off down a trail into the woods.

Shannon sat on the veranda and did some stretches, working out the knots of stiffness caused by tension, traveling, and bed changes. She concentrated on her breathing and tried to dispel thoughts of certain hunky men in certain positions. *Ah, yes, yoga is great for the kinks.* She stifled a giggle which soon turned into a groan as she changed her pose.

Rachael returned half an hour later covered with a sheen of sweat glistening on her skin, and proceeded to spend five minutes at her punch bag, which hung on the end of the veranda.

“Still peace loving I see,” quipped Shannon.

“It’s my way of relaxing and keeping fit.” Rachael grunted as she gave one last powerful punch.

“I started Tai Chi last year, that and the yoga keep me focused and my redhead temper in check.” She chuckled. “It’s also something I can do easily when traveling.”

Rachael nodded, flopped down on Shannon’s vacated towel and groaned her way through some simple stretches.

It was just after 11:00 a.m. by the time the girls had showered, dressed, French braided Shannon’s hair, and eaten a light breakfast. They decided to head on over to the Sweet Water ranch.

“Remember, no letting on that you know that he knows okay?”

“Right, act naturally.” She clapped her hands together and sliced them through the air to emphasize her focus. “No problemo.”

“Oh, and in case you haven’t already figured it out, they are both smart guys so don’t underestimate them. James has an IQ of one hundred and fifty.”

“Fuck.” Her confidence dipped.

When Rachael’s Jeep pulled into the yard both Joshua and James came to greet them. Joshua had been in the office and James in the stable. Both men exuded confidence and self-assurance. They were clearly comfortable in their home environment. Shannon couldn’t help but compare the two men.

Joshua had dark hair and was a very masculine, strong, solid-looking man. He had a stern, intimidating expression that made him appear hard, until he smiled, and then a genuine kindness and honesty shone through. His eyes were the most incredible ice blue, enhancing his penetrative stare, but when he looked at Rachael his whole face softened with an expression of tender love. Shannon had ascertained that sometimes “tender” had nothing to do with it, and she blushed at the thought. His soft expression was fleeting, being replaced by a hard and demanding stare. He almost wrenched the door off the car and hauled Rachael out, put her over his shoulder, and strolled into the house. She heard Rachael’s laughter amidst halfhearted protests and pleas to be put down.

She turned her attention to James. He was physical perfection, similar to his brother but fairer, with less prominent, slightly more symmetrical facial features. He had a more relaxed, easygoing air about him and a smile was never far from his lips, nor a twinkle from his eyes. He was a few inches shorter than Joshua and not quite as broad, but still a big man with solid, well defined muscles. He had long, strong-looking legs, and his jeans gave a hint of the muscles on his thighs, not to mention his—oh, now that looked bigger than any bratwurst she’d ever seen. She inwardly cursed Rachael. James was smiling at her with a quizzical expression, then, without any sign of embarrassment, he briskly adjusted his crotch. Damn, she’d been caught ogling.

Shannon now suddenly felt flustered. Act natural? Natural at this point was a gibbering wreck on the floor. She gave herself some moral support. *Come on, pull it together. I'm participating in this little charade, but on my terms.*

"Here goes," she muttered to no one just as James opened her door.

"Good mornin'," James drawled. "Did you sleep well, Shannon, in another strange bed?"

You sneaky bugger. "Yes, thanks." She smiled sweetly. "I had the deep, dreamless sleep of someone with a clear conscience. You look a bit tired though." He didn't, but it wouldn't help to put a little dent in his confidence and tweak his sense of integrity a bit.

He narrowed his eyes for a brief moment. "Thoughts of a certain redhead kept me up and awake."

Though his words were innocent enough Shannon was left in no doubt which part of his anatomy was up. *Smooth devil.* But she couldn't keep from smiling at his cheeky charm. As she stepped out of Rachael's Jeep he moved closer and leaned down to kiss her on the cheek. She thought that he subtly yet deliberately inhaled her scent, just loud enough for her to be aware of it and gave a very low, barely audible rumble of appreciation. *I'm doomed,* was her first thought, followed quickly by a mental kick on the ass. *Focus, you ninny.*

"Coming down with a cold?" she asked politely.

He raked his gaze over her body, "No, I think I'm coming down with something else." Then before she could feel uncomfortable he abruptly brightened up as if he hadn't been flirting outrageously and grabbed her sports bag. "Did you bring some swimming stuff? The pool sure is nice and cool for an afternoon dip."

"Yes, and I can carry that," she muttered.

"I know." He grinned pleasantly but continued to hold the bag. "I'll just put this in the house first. I'm heading into Ridge Water because we're low on beers. Heaven forbid that we'll be compelled to live on only food and water for the next twelve hours if I don't go."

Shannon couldn't help a chuckle but stopped when he added, "I was hoping that you'd come with me, you'll get to see a bit of the town." Before she could say anything he leaned closer again and added in a conspiratorial tone, "It'll give the newlyweds an hour to themselves." He grinned and gave her a wink.

Shannon had to hand it to him, he was good. Playing the "let your friend have her fun" card to get her alone was a sneaky tactic worthy of appreciation. She decided to play along as planned.

"All right, I'll just tell Rachael."

"Don't bother, Josh knows. I wouldn't disturb them if I were you. They'll be busy already." Amusement twinkled in his eyes.

When Rachael came to the front door, James looked surprised but Shannon wasn't. She knew that her friend was concerned about her and wouldn't be happy to leave her with James without checking first.

"Are you okay going into town with James?"

"Sure." She winked at her when James wasn't looking, but it was more to assure Rachael because she didn't feel that confident.

"Okay, see you la—oh!" Rachael squeaked as a big arm wrapped around her waist and tugged her back. The last thing that Shannon saw was Rachael's feet in midair, disappearing into the house.

"Okay, I was out by a minute," James drawled.

"Close enough," Shannon muttered, now glad that she was going out with James while still apprehensively wondering just what he had planned.

James put Shannon's bag just inside the front door, then jumped down the steps and walked over to a large, new-looking SUV that sat high off the ground on huge wheels. It was a cool-looking vehicle, but she suspected that it must be a real gas-guzzler.

"I'd hate to have to change a flat tire with these monsters."

"It doesn't happen often because they're big."

He opened her door and stepped aside. As she moved forward he was suddenly close behind her with his hands resting on her hips and around her waist. He waited a few seconds longer than necessary,

moving a little closer, before assisting her up into the passenger seat. “They weigh heavier than you, that’s for sure.”

He was *very* good; in fact she had to admit that his powers of improvised seduction were exceptional. He lightly swept his hands across her body when he reached across her to click the seat belt into place. If she hadn’t known better she’d be panting and whimpering by now. Hell, her breathing already seemed ragged to her own ears but forewarned is forearmed, and as he leaned over she “accidentally” sighed in his ear and huskily breathed her thanks. He stopped all movement for a second, before slowly straightening up and looking into her eyes, one arm still across her lap. What she saw stole her breath away—desire, raw desire, tempered with fading control. Abruptly he stepped back and shut the door, leaving her frightened and thrilled in equal measure and of more concern, wanting.

* * * *

James had to reach far into his rapidly dwindling reserve of discipline to move away from Shannon. The woman did peculiar things to him, and he no longer felt fully in control of his own actions. Apart from an almighty physical attraction to her he also felt nervous, excited, pensive, and elated, all at the same time. He recognized that he hadn’t felt this way since he was nineteen and in love with Maddie Cooper. In love? Well, he’d thought so at the time. It was both a wonderful and horrible experience. Did Shannon know what she did to him?

He had to get her quickly to Luke’s place and end the charade. Luke had arrived back from Houston earlier that morning and they’d discussed bringing Shannon to the house to meet him again. They hoped that she would be happy to see him and not angry or, heaven forbid, upset; he didn’t think that he could cope well with that. He flung himself into the driver’s seat and they headed out at a fast pace.

They hadn't gone very far when Shannon took a deep breath and turned to him

"Do you have a girlfriend, James?" she inquired, rushing the words.

He glanced at her cautiously. He hadn't expected her to initiate a conversation along those lines, but was happy that she had. He divided his attention between her and the track and lightly answered, "No, why are you thinking of applying for the position?"

Shannon laughed, "I hear there's a queue."

James bristled because she was right and for the first time he was regretting his reputation. Normally he'd laugh it off with a flirtatious remark, something like "you could jump it any time," or "I'll give you a special pass," but such remarks now seemed tacky and cheap. He stared at the road ahead, choosing his words carefully.

"I've had an active social life, its true and I'm not going to apologize for it. I've never cheated, intentionally hurt, led on, or disrespected a woman, and I never will." He slowed down for the cattle grid at the end of the dirt road. They passed under a metal arch with "Sweet Water Ranch" emblazoned across it. "I'm not trying to make out I'm a saint. The truth is it was easy not to do those things because I've never committed to a serious relationship."

He caught her skeptical expression as she said, "Mmm. You don't think that any of those 'non serious' girls ever secretly hoped for more? That just by being intimate you were sending out signals?"

He knew that he had to be careful because he wanted to be honest but not seem like an uncaring player either.

"It's a possibility I guess, but I've always tried to be up front and clear about it and most of the girls I've fu—been with haven't complained. I'm not even sure if intimate is the right word to use for what I've done, physically yes, but emotionally...not really." He realized how cold and rather pathetic that sounded. "Until recently we weren't really looking to settle down. There have been a few times in

the past when either my friend or I thought something might get more serious but it didn't work out. There were no hard feelings though."

"I'm no expert on relationships that's for sure. Six months ago I caught my boyfriend shagging someone else."

Shocked, he sucked in a sharp intake of breath. "That must have hurt."

She shrugged it off with a tight chuckle. "At the time it did, but don't feel sorry for me, I got the last laugh, I'll tell you about it sometime. Anyway even my cat has left me because I'm never home due to work. But I think that I'm safe in saying that getting to know someone before diving into bed just might be a more successful strategy for a lasting relationship." She settled back into her seat. "Call me wacky, but I'm putting that idea out there for you."

He checked the rearview mirror and saw that the road was clear behind and it was safe to slow down a little.

"Sex is an important part of a ménage relationship. If that doesn't work, then part of the foundation on which the lifestyle is based is flawed."

"Really, are you so sure that you have to have sex straight away to know that? What about attraction that comes with finding someone appealing for many reasons on different levels? Things like character, humor, looks, *trust*, and all of that stuff that lasts beyond infatuation, you know, for enduring 'true love?'" She made little quotation marks in the air with her fingers. "If you are planning to spend your life with someone, then there has to be more doesn't there?"

James kept his eyes on the road as he considered her words. She was right of course, but still, he'd rather not wait. "Why not do the fact finding after having great sex?" After all, that's what she'd be doing with Luke.

"That's a good point, although great sex has a way of clouding the mind. Then again Rachael and Joshua obviously didn't take much time." She frowned. "I'm just suggesting another possible approach, but what the heck do I know? Perhaps it's a mix of both? If the

attraction deepens doesn't the sex also develop into something better, something more meaningful? I'm going to be candid here, James. For most women I'd say that there would have to be a lot of lust *and* trust before they'd think about the type of relationship that you want."

Lust and trust. He liked that.

James shrugged. "We weren't looking for anything other than a good time before to be honest; this is new for us." He smiled and turned to her. "You remember when I talked about what my parents had, the other day on the hill? You were skeptical, and yet you have just mentioned the very things that make it possible."

* * * *

Shannon had to remind herself yet again that James really was very smart, still his words were reassuring.

"You're sneaky." She grinned. "Remind me not to get into any strategy board games with you. Come on, let's get those groceries."

For the rest of the journey into town they talked a little about themselves and Shannon almost forgot that James must have a hidden agenda for taking her with him.

"We only really need some fresh bread, snacks, and a few beers." James said as he drove the big SUV into the crowded parking lot. "I forgot that it gets busy on a Saturday."

He again managed to get around to her side of the vehicle and open the door before she'd even got her hand on the handle. When he helped her out with a hand on her arm she almost shivered at the contact.

"Grab a trolley, I'll push if you pick," she quickly suggested. "Let's get this over with as fast as possible. I hate crowded shops."

"Me, too, but I'll push. Let's grab and go."

It wasn't going to be that simple though. Almost as soon as they entered the store Shannon noticed that there was something odd about the way James had looked at a pretty dark haired woman that

suggested he wanted to avoid contact. She wondered if it was an old flame. He quickly executed a nifty one hundred and eighty degree wheelie maneuver and veered off to the left down a different aisle. Unfortunately it sent him directly in the path of a good-looking blonde wearing a very tight T-shirt, and a bra one size too small that pushed up her weapons of mass distraction.

“Oh, hi, James, I was hoping to see ya. How’s it goin’?” She gave him a salacious smile while chewing gum and dismissively ran her eyes over Shannon, then ignored her completely. “I was wonderin’ when we could get together *again*.”

Shannon was left in no doubt that the last word was emphasized for her benefit.

“Hi, Shirley, it’s been a while,” James greeted her warily. “I’m in a bit of a rush right now, can’t talk.” He surprised and irritated Shannon by putting his arm around her and steering her away.

Shirley snagged him by his other wrist. “Are you gonna call me, James, because I’m free tonight?” She gave him a practiced sultry look.

Shannon couldn’t ever imagine being so persistent with a guy who clearly wasn’t interested. She could only surmise that James must be brilliant in bed.

“No, Shirley, I’ve already told you.” James spoke quietly and gently but firmly.

The blonde turned her attention to Shannon, her mouth smiling but her eyes cold with dislike. “What interestin’ hair, just like a gorilla I saw the other night on Animal Planet.”

Shannon felt James stiffen, but she ignored him and turned to the woman. “Really? I think you mean an orangutan don’t you?” Shannon could do patronizing very well when she wanted to. “Coincidentally, I was watching the Discovery Channel not too long ago and you’ll be happy to know that scientists have found a way to create artificial intelligence. They get a dumb blonde and dye her hair red. Absolutely fabulous to meet you, Shirley, take care now.” She grabbed James and

waltzed off down the aisle, leaving the blonde speechless and gaping like a fish.

“Oh, darlin’, you’re gonna be a lot of fun.” James chuckled under his breath.

Yeah, fun for him all right, but not exactly a bag of laughs for her. She was astonished at the proprietary way she’d reacted, dragging him away with her from Shirley. What business was it of hers if another woman was interested in him? Shannon was aware of the constant female attention James received. It was annoying but also a warning of what it would be like to be in relationship with him; forever looking over her shoulder, contending with old lovers and fending off wannabe girlfriends, worrying what he was getting up to when she was away. Who needed that? Who needed that times two? She suspected that Luke would have the same effect. No, the very most she should get into is a two week “shag and go” relationship.

Once they were out of the store, James packed the bags in the back of the SUV while Shannon quickly took the opportunity to get into the passenger side unassisted. It wasn’t easy.

“I’m sorry about all that,” he said as they pulled out of the parking lot.

“Why, it’s not your fault and it’s really has nothing to do with me.”

James nodded but looked distracted and awkward.

“Are we going back a different way?” Shannon had observed that they were heading out of town in a different direction. With concern she noted that he was gripping the steering wheel tightly.

“Are you okay, James?”

“Yeah, fine. I just want you to meet someone before we go back to the ranch.” He sounded unusually subdued.

Oh, Lord, this is it; he’s taking me to see Luke. Rachael was right. She sat quietly as they turned down a private tree lined track into the driveway of a pleasant, modest, white timber house.

“This is lovely, who lives here?”

She thought that she already knew the answer.

“My best friend and partner.”

Shannon’s heart rate rocketed and, damn it all, her cheeks took on a rosy hue. Yet again James managed to open the car door for her but this time he swept her up and held her close to his body.

“I just want you to know, Shannon, that I’d never mess you around or intentionally hurt you.”

She looked at him and believed that he meant what he said. Whether he’d still mean those words days or weeks later was debatable. Still, she wouldn’t be denied her little bit of fun. He carried her around the car and set her down before the front door. Through the side glass panel Shannon noticed movement in the house.

“Wait!” she said loudly. “I want to be honest with you, James. I met a man two days ago while I was at the conference and I was intimate with him.”

He smiled down at her indulgently. “That’s okay, babe, it’s really not a problem.”

“Yes I know but I wanted to tell you about it. There is absolutely nothing for you to be concerned about, because it meant *nothing*.”

“What?”

“Well, I had an okay time but nothing to rave about. His name was Luke...er I can’t remember his surname but ‘Warm’ would be appropriate. Mr. Luke Warm because he wasn’t exactly stimulating company,” she simulated a yawn, “and didn’t get any better in the sack. I guess I can excuse his less than impressive equipment, but there is really no excuse for poor technique.” She was on a roll and enjoying her Oscar deserving performance.

“What?” James looked shocked and mystified.

“I know, it’s unfair to compare but the description heavy hung doesn’t spring to mind.” She raised her hand and wriggled her pinky.

“W-What?”

It was all Shannon could do to keep a straight face because James looked like a man grappling with disbelief and a plan that was failing

fast. Shannon thought that she also heard a sharp intake of breath from behind the door, so she forged on, wondering how long it would take to get a reaction.

“They say, ‘it’s not the size of the sea but the motion of the ocean,’ right? But I have to tell you, I was tired yesterday because I was up half the night faking orgasms.”

“Now that just not true!” a voice bellowed as the door swung inward with such force that it made a loud bang as it hit the wall.

Luke stood on the threshold with fury and embarrassment warring for first place on his face. Shannon stood with her hands on her hips feeling very smug indeed.

“Well, hello, Luke McKay, fancy meeting you here.” She could also do sarcasm very well.

“Crap,” a voice groaned behind her.

“Shannon,” was all that Luke seemed able to say when they made eye contact.

Shannon could sense his righteous anger diffuse away like smoke on a breeze. When he looked at her that way she felt herself relax. She couldn’t help it, she began to giggle, because he looked so cute standing there with that stunned and offended yet gentle expression. Her shoulders shook and it was like a pressure valve had been released. She started to gasp for breath and leaned forward clutching her belly.

“Oh, God, see what you’ve done, you’ve upset her, you idiot!” James shouted, clearly panicking at her breakdown before his eyes.

Luke stared at her and slowly a huge smile encompassed his face and a deep baritone laugh escaped from his lips. It only took James a second to catch up, and Shannon’s laughter was infectious.

“Oh, the look on your two faces has got to be the funniest thing I’ve seen in a long while,” Shannon explained, wiping her cheeks with the back of her sleeve. “Anyone got a tissue?”

“Come in, there’s a box on the coffee table.” Luke grinned, standing aside as Shannon walked into a clean tidy living room. She

snaffled a few tissues from a box, dabbed her eyes, and blew her nose as delicately as she could. When she turned around she noticed that the guys stood between her and the door that Luke had just shut. She sobered up immediately realizing that she was trapped in their territory, but they just looked relieved.

“When did you know?” James groaned frowning lightly.

“Last night. You must think that I’m an idiot or that Rachael and I aren’t best buddies if you thought it wouldn’t come out.”

Luke stepped forward. “I am very glad to see you again, Shannon. You left without saying goodbye.”

Uh-oh, here goes. She began to feel the by now familiar sexual tension curling around them, looking for a weakness through her defenses. Her eyes met his, and the depth of emotion she found threatened to drown all of her common sense and caution.

Holding his gaze she softly explained, “I had a flight to catch and you were out of it when I left. I couldn’t bring myself to disturb you. I hoped you’d call.”

“Honey, you disturbed me anyway,” Luke chided. “By cutting out so early you didn’t give me an opportunity to tell you about James and our lifestyle choice. I’m sorry that I didn’t mention it sooner, but to be honest I was stunned. I couldn’t believe my luck but I didn’t know what to say, how to break it to you.” He looked pensive, as if expecting her to fly off the handle.

“I think I understand.”

“You do?” both men uttered in surprise.

“Yes, despite my red hair I’m not a drama queen or unreasonable.”

“Shannon,” Luke started to move even closer but she put her hands up to block him. “What’s the matter?”

“Two days ago you were one thing, now you’re another. I have to get my head around it.”

“Two days ago I was a one-night stand, now I’m not.” Luke put a slightly different interpretation on her words.

“You know I’m talking about this two for one deal, and anyway you still are.”

“Not for long, sweetheart.” Luke had regained all composure.

Hairs prickled on the back of her neck and she knew that James was close behind her. How the heck he had moved there without her seeing him, she didn’t know, but now she sensed his presence, heard his breathing, and then felt the physical touch of his body against hers.

“Don’t fight it,” he said, his warm breath tickling her ear.

She instinctively tilted her head, allowing him better access to her skin. She sighed at the sheer pleasure of his light lingering kisses along her neck and gentle hands caressing along the top of her arms and shoulders. Luke’s eyes were locked on hers and her breath hitched at the brazen raw desire she saw in his expression. It should have shocked her, should have shook her out of her reverie, but instead it fed her desire, looped back the lust, short-circuiting her brain. He held her with that deep, penetrating gaze that so captivated her two nights ago and moved closer, his body heat tangible as he brushed up against her breasts. Slowly he stroked his hand down her body to her waist while the other gently tilted her chin as his lips found hers.

“Don’t deny the attraction,” James whispered as Luke deepened the kiss.

Shannon felt almost suffocated by desire as James found the erogenous zones on her neck and Luke slipped his tongue into her mouth. Her arms automatically found their way around his neck. Her fingers laced in his hair, holding him to her, taking his breath, her tongue dueling his. She became aware that James’s arms now enfolded her and that his hands were inside her T-shirt, cupping, squeezing, and stroking her breasts. Instinctively she arched her back to push into his palms and grind her butt against him.

She felt hot, wanton, and darn well needy. Less than ten minutes with both of them and she was putty in their hands, pooling her

panties, and rubbing herself against them like a bitch in heat. What the hell was she doing? Rachael was right; it was going to be a monumental battle to not keel over with her legs spread wide.

“Stop.” She spoke clearly with a certainty that she didn’t possess. “Back off...please.”

She uttered the plea with such desperation that the men stopped what they were doing and backed away leaving her feeling chilled, alone, and exposed. Both James and Luke were breathing unevenly, their pupils were dilated, and impressive bulges pressed against their jeans.

Do not look at their crotches, do not! “I find you both unbelievably attractive in a way that is new to me, I’m not denying it, and the other night was amazing, Luke. I can’t...can’t think clearly around either of you, but I know that I shouldn’t rush in where a more rational person would fear to tread.”

“Darlin’, you can see and feel what you do to both of us. The other night was something else, something special, and it will only get better if you give us a chance. We won’t do anything you don’t want us to, Shannon, don’t be afraid.”

But she was afraid, afraid that she wanted them to do *everything*.

“We’ll take it slow if that’s what you want.” James smiled at her gently. “But give us the opportunity to get to know you and keep an open mind about what we want and what we can give you.” He turned to Luke. “She has to trust us.”

Luke looked mildly surprised at his partner’s insight. Shannon was comforted that James had taken onboard the comments she’d made earlier and relaxed a little.

Luke nodded in agreement. “Shannon, we’ll lay it out for you. We want to get to know you better. Meanwhile we’d like an exclusive ménage, no other women for us, and no other men for you. Honesty is an important part of the lifestyle, and if you think that there is just no way on earth that you could get involved with us, *ever*, then you need to tell us now, otherwise we intend to pursue and court you.”

“Court me?” Shannon had visions of Mr. Darcy and Mr. Bingley, top hats and tails. “What do you mean?”

“We’ve only just met you, Shannon, and we want to get to know you better—go out, stay in, have fun, have sex, maybe even have an argument or two, all that stuff. Darlin’, it’s new territory for us too.”

She knew that it was, and bet that they’d never had to pursue anyone in their lives. They were saying that they wanted more than casual sex, but it was a new thing for them too.

“Maybe what you really have is a desire for new sensations, another form of entertainment. For all I know you’re going to follow your peckers to greener pastures once the novelty of ‘courting’ has worn off. I’ve heard that you two have been busy with the ladies, like bees flitting from pretty flower to flower, pollinating as you go.”

“Hey, I’ve pollinated no one,” James exclaimed indignantly.

“We’ve not been monks, that’s for sure,” Luke interjected. “We’ve had a good time, but as I told you the other night, we want something more than a temporary diversion, we’ve just been waiting to find the right woman.”

“And you think that could be me?” Shannon was wary. “Look, I am far from perfect and I worry that you are setting me on a pedestal from which I’m going to fall.”

“Honey, we know that nobody’s perfect, we sure as hell aren’t...well, he isn’t anyway,” Luke joked, jerking his head in James’s direction, “but maybe we can be perfect for each other. Let’s find out.”

She looked at them both and believed that they were sincere but there were many obstacles, like the significant fact that she lived in Ireland, and had a good career curtailing the activities of people like them. There were some basic objections, ones of morality and decency. Still, this County seemed to operate by a different code.

“I’m not sure which scares me most; the thought of sex with two guys or a relationship with two guys involved with oil and cattle and

all that that entails. I wasn't looking for or expecting either, and now suddenly here you are offering both. It's a lot to take in."

"The worst thing that can happen is that you have a really great holiday," James reasoned.

Oh no, that was not the worst thing, there were many worse things she could think of, like a broken heart. Nevertheless, Shannon knew she had never felt this way about anyone before. It was unfathomable how she could be falling for two men with such different lives and no doubt ideologies from her. Still, she wasn't foolish, she wasn't about to deny herself an unforgettable experience with these two gorgeous, smart men who might also be a big part of her future. She knew that if it went further, if she trusted them with her body, she would more than likely end up entrusting them with her heart. It could mean major heartache when she left or ultimately a total lifestyle change for her. Such a thing couldn't, *shouldn't* be rushed. If something was worth having it was worth waiting for wasn't it? It was going to be a battle of biology versus mentality, and her traitorous body had a way of muddling her thoughts when they were around. It was as wonderful as it was disconcerting. *Bloody hell, I think that I've a real risk of falling in love with two men.* That realization hit her like an unexpected fall to the bottom of a deep hole. She felt like Alice on her way to Wonderland. What the hell, she'd give it a go. Better to have loved and lost than never to have loved at all, right? Rachael would be proud of her.

"You'll go at my pace and help me to understand how the ménage lifestyle works?"

"Sure, honey, and there are a lot of people you can talk to about it, like Susan who is married to Rachael's cousin Colin and to Mark."

Shannon couldn't imagine discussing this with anyone except Rachael.

"And if you find that I'm not the woman for you, you'll tell me straight away, before I get in too deep, sooner rather than later?"

Shannon dreaded the thought that it wouldn't be long until she was at that point.

"Sure, and you will do the same for us. We'll be thankful you gave it a go." Luke spoke softly, as if he didn't want to even consider it.

"Okay." Shannon looked at them both and nodded her head.

"Okay?" they repeated together as if they didn't quite believe it.

Luke whooped and picked her up, kissed her lightly and spun her around before passing her to James who did the same. He didn't let her go though. Instead he held her tight and buried his face in her hair. She instinctively wrapped her arms around his neck and her legs around his hips. Even through the layers of clothes that separated them she could feel the solid length of his manhood. *Jesus, he's as big if not bigger than Luke!*

"I don't suppose you'd consider taking pity on my poor cock now?" James pouted.

"No! Jaysus, you push your luck more than me," Shannon cried out in exasperation, and quickly unwrapped herself to stand on her own, admittedly shaky, two legs.

"Patience, partner, patience," Luke cooed.

"It's all very well for you to say, you've already—"

"Gentlemen please," Shannon cut in, already wondering just what she'd let herself in for. "I think it's time to go back to Sweet Water. Luke's coming with us, right?"

Without waiting for a response she pushed past the hard bodied men and marched out of the house, not glancing back. Relief flooded her as she took a big gulp of pheromone free, fresh air. It made no difference to her decision; she was along for the ride, even if it turned out to be only a short gallop. She had a suspicion that it may just turn out to be the trip of a lifetime. The men swiftly followed Shannon outside. As James bounced around the car looking well pleased, Luke opened the back passenger door.

"Wanna sit in the back with me?"

Before Shannon could answer, James snorted, “Hey, I’m not a damn chauffeur; Shannon can sit up front with me.”

“Boys, please, no squabbling, I’ll sit in the back,” Luke began to smirk but she continued, “and both of you can sit in the front. Problem solved.” She began to think that if this was the sort of balancing act she had to look forward to then she would soon be exhausted. As if he read her mind Luke put his arm around her and gave a quick squeeze.

“Don’t worry, darlin’, we’re just playing about. James and I are compadres, like close brothers except I’m nicer and better looking.”

James barked a laugh.

“Sit in the front next to James. You’ll get a better view of the countryside.”

With one fluid movement she picked her up like a child, placed her in the front seat and buckled her in.

“I can do that myself.”

“I know.” He grinned and winked at her, then threw himself into the back.

James and Luke told her stories about the various places they passed on the way to the ranch. They had known each other since they were kids, went to the same schools and the same college, although they were not in the same year as Luke was two years older than James. *James is twenty-eight, Luke is thirty and I’m twenty-nine, between the two, how prophetic.*

Their banter reminded Shannon of the way she and Rachael sometimes spoke, with the easy familiarity and understanding that close friendship brings. She liked their lighthearted humor, witty dry comments, and gentle teasing. She adored their accent and low, deep voices, redolent of warm, flowing honey. She could get used to listening to those sexy tones. She could get used to having them around.

Chapter 11

Rachael and Joshua lay in a tangled, sweating heap on a huge platform bed. For the past hour and a half Joshua had thought of nothing but his fiancée and what she did to him body and soul.

“Do you think that we’ll ever get enough of each other?” she asked him, languidly stroking his butt and lower back.

“No.”

“I hope that we die old trying.” She chuckled. “What a way to go.”

“Come into the world between a woman’s thighs, and go out the same way? Sounds like a great plan to me.” He rolled onto his back, dragging her over him.

Rachael looked down at him with concern in her eyes. “Do you think that Shannon is okay? I wonder if I should call to check.”

Joshua stroked her waist and stomach. “James will take care of her.”

“That’s what I’m worried about. You see it’s a little more complicated than you think.” Rachael briefly told him about her conversation with Shannon last night. “I don’t want to betray Shannon’s trust, but I also won’t keep secrets from you that directly concern you, and this could get complicated. Shannon seems like she’s really confident and independent and to some extent she is, but she is also a very caring and kind person who feels a lot. She said that she felt a connection to both Luke and James and I think it frightens her a bit. She was hoping for some R&R—rest and relaxation, not raunchy romance. Personally I think some real raunchy romance could be just what she needs, but I don’t want James to hurt her, she

isn't hard. She's my best friend, so James and Luke better not mess her around."

He stiffened and stopped his caress. "James told me a similar story last night too. They like her a lot and have serious intentions. I gave him twenty-four hours to sort it out because then I was gonna talk to you." Joshua was glad that they had the same priorities and sense of loyalty to those they loved. "He said that they aren't messing around and I believe him because I've never heard him talk about a woman that way before."

"Shannon wants to be sure and take it slowly."

He snorted. "She's got a snowball's chance in hell of putting them off." He knew his brother better than almost anyone. James gave the impression of being easygoing and relaxed, but he was a persistent devil when he wanted something badly enough.

"That's what I thought."

Joshua looked at his bride to be, draped across his body like a sensuous yet comfortable garment. She felt incredible, soft yet firm. She smelled amazing, her scent he would forever associate with passion and love and laughter. She tasted even better.

"Now, unless you want to waste our rollin'-in-the-sheets time, woman, stop talking and sit on my face."

A pleasurable hour or so later a car horn beeped announcing its arrival. Joshua cocked his head as he continued to pull on his shorts.

"That doesn't sound like James's vehicle, I'd better go check."

Rachael was pulling on a T-shirt and shorts over her bikini. They had just showered and were about to lie by the pool. She followed him out from his wing of the house.

"Hello, anyone home?"

He recognized his sister's voice. "Oh, hey, Munchkin," Joshua called happily.

"Don't call me that," wailed Janet.

The hulking deputy, Mitch Mathews, stood behind her, and winced. Joshua remembered that his sister didn't want him to

emphasize her youth around the thirty-year-old deputy. It reminded her of the nine-year age difference and she was apparently worried that it would make Mitch uncomfortable. Mitch was clearly off duty wearing a pair of faded denims and a black T-shirt that did nothing to hide his heavily muscled, massive physique. Janet skipped over to her brother and gave him a peck on the cheek and Rachael a hug. Mitch shook his hand.

Joshua had always been very protective of his little sister, but she was a young woman now, and he realized that he had to give her space. It hadn't sat well with him that anyone was dating her, but he liked and respected Mitch and knew that Janet could do a lot worse. His sister had always had a thing for the deputy and he thought that it was a serious relationship.

"When d'ya get home?" Joshua asked.

"Last night. Sorry I didn't call, but I thought I'd get home in time for the weekend. My exams have finished and I've nearly completely my dissertation. I just have to get it printed and bound, which I can do in the office here. Then it's over and done with, what a relief. I only have to go back to college to hand it in and wait for the results. I can relax now and enjoy your hen night." She grinned mischievously at Rachael.

"My what?"

"Ah, now don't protest because you can't get out of it. We are just waiting for Shannon to turn up and then you, Susan, Sandy, Shannon, and I are going to paint the town red."

The honking of another horn interrupted Rachael's colorful response.

"Speaking of Shannon, that should be her." Rachael grinned. "She surprised us by arriving a little earlier than expected."

"That's great." Janet ran to open the door. "Oh, James and Luke are with her, and they're...oh my. Is something going on that I don't know about?" She turned with a surprised expression flitting happily across her face.

“Rachael will explain later. It’s a long story that happened quickly.” Joshua deferred the details.

James entered the house, followed by Shannon, followed by Luke. A quick look of amusement passed between the friends.

“Oh, hey there, Mun—Janet,” James corrected quickly. Obviously he’d also figured out how much Janet hated being called Munchkin in front of Mitch. “Hi Mitch, how ya doin’?” The big deputy shook James’s hand and also greeted Luke.

“Oh, great, you must be Shannon.” Janet gave a little jump in excitement and smiled broadly at the petite redhead standing between her brother and Luke. She hopped forward to shake Shannon’s hand then pulled her into a hug. “I’m so glad to finally meet you. Now we can have that night out.”

Joshua stood back studying the chatting group. There were two conversations going on at the same time, the girls were discussing a hen night and the guys were talking about James’s new SUV. Only a few months ago the house had been achingly quiet and empty, now, since Rachael, it was alive and vibrant. He was surprised to like it and the possible future it foretold, one with a house full of family and kids. Rachael of course noticed. It amazed him that after such little time she knew him so well. She slipped an arm around his waist and gave him a quick squeeze.

“Do we have enough steaks for the barbecue?” she asked.

He raised his brow. “This is a cattle ranch, what do you think?”

She laughed and swatted his arm. “I meant, should I get some more out of the freezer?”

“I’d say that Mitch and Luke are capable of consuming half a steer, a few more steaks won’t get wasted. There’s some already marinated and frozen, Isabella marked them ‘grill’ on the packs. They’ll just need a blast in the microwave to defrost.”

James turned his attention to his brother. “You and Rachael go and relax by the pool, we’ll see to the food for a change, you need to rest.” He winked at Rachael. “Luke, you’re on salad and bread duty,

I'll sort the steaks, and, Shannon, you can go and get changed. Janet will show you to my rooms."

James had casually tacked that last instruction on as he walked toward the kitchen. Joshua watched Shannon's reaction. Her eyes narrowed for a second but she didn't make an issue of it. That and the fact that Luke was with them indicated that things had gone well. He couldn't quite get his head around the fact that in such a short time his family was on the way to more than doubling.

* * * *

Janet led Shannon to a wooden door at the end of the house. If she was surprised that Shannon was using James's rooms she didn't let on.

"His lair is through there, you'll find a bathroom off his bedroom. I'll see you by the pool. Come on, Mitch, let's go and get changed." She headed toward the stairs with her beefy boyfriend hot on her heels.

Shannon felt a little uncomfortable as she entered through the solid, thick wooden door. This was James's private domain that he had skillfully manipulated her into and at the same time let the family know that there was something between them. She shrugged, they'd have known soon enough anyway. As she looked around it occurred to her that James was well off. Of course he was, with the ranch, the oil wells, and the partnership with Luke. It must add up to a fair whack of cash or rather assets. She liked that the fact he didn't advertise his wealth and could see that understated style in the decor of the house, it was comfortable and homely yet the furniture was clearly of an excellent quality. A lot of the pieces looked as if they had been handcrafted and specifically made rather than generic so-called designer items where one paid for the label.

She passed through a room that was half study, half lounge. It was fairly plain yet cozy with a sofa and two overstuffed armchairs. There

were paintings of horses and family photographs on the walls. She didn't want to pry but couldn't help having a closer look at an older photograph that caught her eye. It showed two boys and one girl toddler stood in front of a lovely brown haired woman who appeared to be caught mid laughter. Two tall, handsome men, one with sandy light brown hair, and the other almost black, flanked her. Obviously it was the Ryden family, taken some years before the accident because Janet looked about four years old. It made Shannon sad to think that their parents' lives ended so suddenly and too soon.

Shannon slowly passed through another door that led to James's bedroom. *Wow, who would have guessed?* She had been expecting a plain light room, similar to the lounge, but instead the decor had a Japanese influence. There was a huge black lacquered bamboo bed with red sheets and black cushions. It dominated one end of the room and faced the large predominantly glass gable end looking west onto the garden. There were sliding wooden shutters on the inside for privacy and shade. Vases of green bamboo stems were strategically placed on black and red lacquered furniture that had touches of gold. Her feet sank into a gold colored, plush woolen rug as she moved further into the room. She inhaled deeply through her nose and instantly recognized James's scent. Her heartbeat quickened in response. She looked at the bed and imagined what they could get up to in it. A soft snort escaped her nose as she tried to dismiss her reaction to being in his room.

Another door led to a large bathroom with all the modern conveniences. The shower looked amazing with jets positioned all over the tiled walls. Shannon quickly found her bikini and sarong in her bag and changed. She wrapped the sarong around her waist and armed herself with her factor seventy sun-cream, floppy-hat, and sun top for later if she needed it. The temptation to look in the bathroom cabinet was huge. Was it stuffed full of condoms or herpes cream? Did he have athlete's foot? She resisted taking a peek, telling herself that James was entitled to his privacy.

Shannon hurried out leaving her clothes folded neatly on top of a chest of draws and her underwear in her bag. As she opened the main door to the rest of the house and hastily walked through, she collided with James. The impact sent her bouncing backwards and she would have fallen over if James hadn't snagged her arm. It had been like hitting an oak tree.

"Hell, are you okay, I was just about to knock and...er..." James appeared to lose track of what he was saying. "I'm sorry."

"I'm okay, it was my fault. I wasn't looking where I was going." Shannon wondered why James was having trouble focusing on her face.

"Er...sweetheart, is it cold in here or are you just happy to see me?" James bit his lower lip. He was staring at her chest as if it had some kind of tractor beam.

"What?" Shannon was puzzled for a second before her gaze shot down to where his eyes were riveted. The sudden movement when she'd ran into him must have dislodged her bikini top because one creamy globe, topped with a very erect nipple, had escaped. "Oh, God." She cursed under her breath as her hand flew up to cover the wayward bit of flesh. She tucked her boob back in the bikini cup muttering, "How embarrassing," and blushed profusely.

James had the nerve to chuckle. "At least one part of you wants to get to know me."

She sensed a little uncertainty in his comment and responded, "There's definitely more than one part of me that wants to say hello and you know it."

He perked up, "Well I'm here and ready when you are." He wiggled his eyebrows.

Shannon grinned up at him, "Any time anywhere right?"

"Well, here and now would be great."

"Jeez, just go and get changed will you." She waved him away with her hands. "Put some distance between me and your hormones before I...never mind. Where's Luke?" she blustered.

“Kitchen. Tossing,” he paused for effect, “salad.”

“Okay,” she took a step back and turned around. But before dashing off she looked over her shoulder pointedly at his erection outlined beneath his jeans and added, “Maybe you could give yourself some of that salad treatment.”

“It wouldn’t be the first time you’ve driven me to it,” he muttered, loud enough for her to hear as he went into his rooms.

That gave her something to think about. A part of her was secretly flattered that she had such an effect on him but of course she had to wonder if it was any different with other women he found vaguely attractive. She stopped in mid-stride; perhaps she was letting her own paranoia and inexperience get in the way of seeing the truth of the situation. These rancher types seemed refreshingly direct and both men had been very clear and honest about what they wanted. Was there any reason to doubt them? She should cut them some slack and not be a tight ass, oops, unfortunate term to use given the circumstances. Now *that* really was something to be worried about.

Shannon took a steadying breath, squared her shoulders and headed to the kitchen. She stood in the doorway watching Luke crumble feta cheese into the salad. He was a hottie, looking just as good in casual clothes as in a business suit. She knew that he looked even better without any clothes on at all.

He turned and caught her staring at him. Wiping his hands on the dishtowel he smiled and gave a whistle of appreciation.

“See something you like?” she said, echoing his words from the hotel.

He nodded, “You, half naked.”

She smiled and ran her eyes over his yummy body.

“See something *you* like?” he asked, leaning back against the sink.

A small smile played around the corners of her mouth. “Mmm,” she nodded her head, “a man working in the kitchen. Can I help?”

He snorted. "You could put it on the table for me. Everything else is done. I'll just go and change." He dropped a little kiss on her forehead as he passed her in the doorway. "See you by the pool."

* * * *

As he undressed in James's study Luke considered how Shannon was very unlike any woman he'd met before, except for maybe Rachael. She didn't fawn over him and had a quick wit that kept him on his toes.

James was just coming out of the bedroom as Luke was stripping off. He took one quick look at Luke's aroused state and sympathized.

"Shannon?" he said indicating with a flick of his hand toward Luke's stiff cock.

"Who else? I tell you ever since I met her I've been hard, it's been damn uncomfortable."

"Well excuse me, but you did get a little relief, unlike me. My poor dick's been aching without any respite. It's been over three weeks since it's been nice and snug inside a pussy and now, since yesterday, it's not interested in anyone else but her." He jerked a thumb in the direction of the pool.

"Well a taste of honey's worse than none at all. I've got this clawing need to have her again. She's worth the wait though," Luke growled.

"I don't wanna wait, not minutes, not days, and heaven forbid not weeks. It'll kill me." James ran his fingers through his hair looking desperate.

"We need to spend time with her together and alone so that she feels comfortable with us both. I admit that I can hardly wait to make love to her again." He groaned and his cock twitched at the memory of her. "I should say 'make love *with* her' because she sure ain't passive." He felt a familiar throbbing start between his thighs.

"Really?"

“Oh, yeah, if ever a woman was made to be loved by two men it’s Shannon O’Reilly. She nearly wiped me out,” Luke admitted.

James looked surprised at Luke’s confession. He closed his eyes as a look of lust and hope molded his features.

“If that’s the case, then she’s definitely the one for us.”

Chapter 12

As she walked out onto the deck, Shannon saw that Rachael was already in the pool. She was floating quietly, then abruptly turned like an otter and dived to the bottom of the deep end. She must have pushed off the mosaic floor to propel her body rapidly upwards, because she broke the surface of the water with some force and the top half of her body arose out into the warm air. She gasped and then lay on her back, floating lazily again. Joshua was reading some “country life” sort of magazine, but often his eyes flitted from the page to watch his fiancée frolic in the water. His lips curved just a fraction at the sides on his otherwise hard stern face.

“Hey, Shannon, you coming in?” Rachael called to her from the pool when she spied her.

“Sure, but first I have to grease up,” she waved her bottle of sun cream, “and wait a few minutes for it to sink in.”

Shannon looked around the deck and pool area. Only Joshua was there, so she chose a reclined lounge not too far from his but in the shade. He rested the magazine on his lap and regarded her carefully.

“You okay?”

“Fine, good.” She smiled nervously and began rubbing in her sun-cream, trying to think about anything other than sex with Luke, sex with James, sex with Luke and James.

“Have you ever been to Texas before?”

“No, actually I’ve only been to New York. I don’t know the US very well at all. I’ve done environmental work in oil and gas fields of Alberta, Canada, but never in the US.”

“So how come you were at the conference?”

“Well, it was a last minute decision because the original speaker couldn’t make it. A lot of the companies that attended are international corporations and the Oil and Gas Association wanted a broad based environmental seminar, looking at a range of issues, some of which might not be considered if you have only have experience here. I’ve done some work on decommissioning wells and restoration of sites, which seems to be a hot topic here at the moment.”

Joshua nodded. “I apologize for missing it but we didn’t know that you were the new speaker. We decided that Luke could fill us in. We’ll certainly be wrapping up some wells in the not too distance future. I also didn’t want to be away from Rac—the ranch for a whole week.” He looked a little uncomfortable at nearly admitting that he missed his fiancée.

Although very tempted to tease him, Shannon politely let the slip go by. He looked like a hard, independent man coming to terms with his own emotional needs. Rachael had mentioned how Joshua was always there for his family and friends, how he wasn’t used to giving up control to anyone. For him to admit his need for Rachael must have been a big deal.

“I’m quite interested to see how it works here. James said he’d show me around the ranch on horseback, after the wedding.”

“He did? That’s a first.”

She found Joshua’s comment heartening. He looked over her shoulder.

“Shannon was just telling me that she would like to see the ranch. It would be better if you took her before the wedding because you’ll need to be readily available when I’m not around.”

Before Shannon could say anything or turn around, James sat down next to her whilst Luke stood behind her and plucked the sunscreen from her hand.

“That’s true, but Rachael may want Shannon around before the big day,” James said, looking over at Rachael for confirmation.

"I still have to work and my family will be arriving soon. I can spare you for a few days, Shannon, if you'd like to go," Rachael said, resting at the edge of the pool, looking mischievous.

It must have occurred to Rachael that if she hit it off with the guys, she'd be seeing a lot more of her in the future. It was an appealing point. Luke squeezed the lotion onto his hand and began to spread it across her shoulders and down her back.

"I can do that," Shannon said, distracted by the firm but gentle motion he used to rub it in.

"Not as good as I can," he replied.

His strokes, though not quite sensual, still caused her body to thrum with pleasure. Something in the way he touched her made Shannon feel cherished. She didn't contradict him because it was true.

"So Shannon, are you up for a three-day horse riding trek?" James asked.

"Maybe. When and who else will be coming?" She needed to know just what she was getting into.

She saw James throw a look of silent communication behind her to Luke.

"How about next Saturday, Sunday and back Monday afternoon? That way we'll only miss half a business day. It will just be me and you and Luke."

She didn't say anything for a long moment, fully aware that she was being manipulated into being alone with them. Well, if in a week's time she didn't trust them enough to put herself in their hands, she would make an excuse and call it off.

As she was thinking it over Luke added, "Oh, I nearly forgot, my parents have invited me and James over for a family get-together and an early supper tomorrow. Wanna come with us?"

She thought about it for a moment.

"Okay, I'll go," she said quietly, twisting the end of her sarong in her now sweating palms. "With you both on a ride," she couldn't help

glance at Luke when she said that, “and to Luke’s parents if that is okay with Rachael.”

A rigorous nodding of the head told her that it was.

Luke put his lips to her ear and whispered so that only she could hear, “Still want a big gelding or would you rather ride a stallion or two?”

There was no mistaking their intentions and she felt her face grow hot. He chuckled throatily at her blushing response.

James cleared his throat, “Great, I’ll make the arrangements.”

“Make arrangements for what?” Janet said as she and Mitch strolled onto the deck area. She looked slightly flushed and, even to Shannon eyes, freshly fucked.

“Luke and I are gonna take Shannon on a tour of the ranch next Saturday.”

Janet skipped from foot to foot, barely containing her excitement. “Well, then that settles it. We will have our hen night on the town this weekend, tonight.”

“It’s a bit short notice,” Rachael said hopefully.

“Nah, I’ll rally the troops. I’m sure they’ll be able to make it. It’s best not to overplan these things.” Janet bounced away happily to use the house phone.

And that was how Rachael and Shannon ended up that night belly dancing on the bar of the Lone Star Saloon.

* * * *

“My God, this is the funniest thing I’ve seen in ages,” Susan shrieked, clutching her sides. She thought that she might just pee herself laughing as she catcalled heartily along with half the clientele in the bar. She clapped and hooted as Shannon and Rachael undulated and shook their hips in time to a Country and Western number on the jukebox. “Talk about east meets west. Just wait until I tell Colin and Mark, they’ll never believe me.”

She turned to Sandy, the new receptionist at her husband's vet practice, and noted that, for a change, the usually withdrawn young woman seemed to be enjoying herself. The five girls had cerise feather boas around their necks and had been drinking and dancing their way across town, celebrating Rachael's last few days of being single.

Janet was clapping and yelling encouragement to the dancers. "Oh, my brother is a very lucky man." She paused. "In fact they both are."

"Really?" Susan wasn't sure what Janet was talking about.

"Let's just say that Luke and James are seriously set on Shannon. Soon she may need some friendly advice from you on how to handle two husbands."

Susan saw Sandy blush and take a quick sip of her drink. She sure was a shy one.

"No problem, I don't mind sharing trade secrets. Speaking of sharing, I've an idea." She snaffled her phone from her handbag and recorded the girls dancing on the bar. "Now my guys will have to believe me."

She knew that it would be a little shaky due to her laughter but at least she managed to get some good footage. Sandy was grinning and clapping until she saw her videoing the girls with her phone. Suddenly her face froze.

"Do you think they'll mind?" Sandy indicated to the phone, with a strange expression that Susan couldn't quite name, but 'horror' was close enough.

"Oh, I doubt it, don't worry," Susan brushed her off lightly but couldn't help wonder, not for the first time, if there was something bothering Sandy, something that had happened before she came to Ridge Water. Her thoughts were interrupted as Janet hollered, "Woo, woo!" in response to a particularly nifty maneuver by Rachael.

The whole room was laughing and cheering, and enjoying the show. Most of them figured out that it was Rachael's hen party.

Suddenly Rachael stepped back and slipped, with a yelp she fell backwards off the bar...and landed in the arms of Lance Goodyear. For a second there was a collective sharp intake of breath before everyone realized that she was okay and a loud cheer went up.

“Hey there, little lady, I haven’t had a chance to say congratulations.” Lance smiled, continuing to hold Rachael.

“Thanks, Lance.” Rachael giggled, patting his arm. “I’ll tell Josh how you saved me from limping with a plaster cast to the altar.”

“Might be better not to mention it.” Lance grimaced.

He was probably guessing that Joshua, being somewhat protective of his nearest and dearest, might be a little concerned that she could have broken her neck. Susan finished recording, knowing that Joshua was going to find out anyway.

“Stiddle flicks, I mean fiddle sticks.” Rachael pushed her index finger into his solid-looking chest and gave him a goofy grin. “You saved me.”

“Enjoying yourselves, ladies?” Paul asked as he stepped out from behind his brother. His gaze lingered on Sandy, who quickly looked anywhere other than at him.

Colin, who was Rachael’s cousin and one of Susan’s husbands, had told her that Paul and his brother Lance were sweet on Sandy. Over the past month, armed with only the flimsiest of excuses, they had visited the Vet Practice, hoping to have a few casual words with Sandy. They must have spent a small fortune in vet bills on stray and feral cats.

Apparently from the moment they first saw her, about six weeks ago, they were smitten. The shy little receptionist was certainly easy on the eyes, but she had a quiet, guarded way about her, and a vulnerability that Susan suspected had a story to it. At first Sandy had been polite but distant and a little nervous with the guys. In fact Susan realized that Sandy was nervous with most young men. Lance and Paul had asked her out and she had flatly refused. Susan couldn’t think why, they were nice guys. They had not pursued a date and

Susan reckoned that they were hoping Sandy would become more accustomed to their presence. She mused that good hunters must have patience. It appeared to be working because now Sandy seemed a little more relaxed in their company.

“Last party as a single woman for me girl Rachael,” Shannon needlessly explained to Paul, as she slid down from the bar.

“We have one more place to go, the largest night club in town, Bronco’s.” Janet raised her voice above the noise in the bar.

“Oh, God, is it as bad as it sounds?” Shannon giggled, sounding a little light-headed.

“No, it’s worse,” Sandy muttered, blushing when Lance caught her eye and winked.

“Ah, come on, girls, we’ll rock the party, let’s go,” Janet ordered, waltzing out the door with a flick of her feather boa over her shoulder.

“Last one there is first to ride the Buckin’ Bronco!”

They all scrambled after her.

Chapter 13

Bang, bang, bang.

Shannon heard what sounded like thunder to her sleep addled, aching brain.

“Hey, the door’s open, that’s not good,” a semi recognizable voice muttered.

“God damn it, anyone could have come in,” a second even deeper voice cursed. “Wait ‘til I see Rachael.” It was Joshua and he didn’t sound pleased.

The other voice chuckled. “It must have been some party the girls had last night if they aren’t up before noon.”

Noon? No way!

“Take a look at this.” Joshua sounded amused. “Colin sent it this morning.”

Shannon heard the electronic, tinny sound of music and laughter being played on...what? A phone?

“Is that...is that Rachael and Shannon belly dancing on a bar?” The first man sounded shocked and amused. She heard muffled laughter then a sharp intake of breath, “Jesus, she could have really hurt herself then, thankfully Lance was there to catch her. I’ve got to send this to Luke.” Obviously the voice belonged to James. There were more deep chuckles.

“Wait, watch this.”

There was another sharp intake of breath. “No way, not in a million years. Shannon and Rachael together on the buckin’ bronco! That’s...that’s kinda kinky actually.”

She heard a slap.

“Ow!”

Shannon blearily recalled the events of the evening. She half giggled, half groaned because it had been a lot of fun, but she was feeling the after effects.

“I think Shannon’s waking up, I’ll get the coffee on.” James spoke quietly as he entered into the cabin.

“I’ll see you later, I’m gonna get close to my woman, even if it is just to hold her hand as she leans over the toilet bowl,” Joshua grumbled.

Shannon listened to Joshua walk across the open plan lounge and enter Rachael’s room after gently knocking but getting no response. She heard the wooded steps creaking as James partially climbed the steep stair leading to the open attic area, where she was snoozing on a mattress on the floor.

* * * *

James poked his head just above the floor level and saw Shannon’s curled up body outlined under a sheet and a shock of curly, wild red hair sprouting from the end.

“Coffee, two aspirin and a glass of water please,” a little voice croaked from underneath the sheets and hair.

He grinned as his heart warmed. “Sure thing, darlin’.”

Ten minutes later he was sat on her mattress with a tray of dry toast, two mugs of strong coffee, aspirin, a glass, and a jug of water. He had experienced enough hangovers to know the drill. He tried not to grin too much as she slowly emerged from the sheet, blinking and rubbing her eyes like some fluffy critter waking out of its nest after winter hibernation. Her tresses were in turmoil; some wayward curls and frizzy waves were sticking out at unruly angles whilst another section was plastered to her head. To him she looked cuter than a speckled pup in a red wagon.

“What time is it?” she rasped, stifling a yawn.

“Half past noon. Do you think that you’ll be up to going to Luke’s parents for three o’clock?”

Shannon groaned. “I’ll be okay. I must be feeling the effects of jet lag,” she weakly joked. “Water please.” With her eyes closed she held out her hand for the glass, which he pressed into her palm. “Thank you.” She gulped it down with a satisfied gasp for air at the end. “Ah, I needed that.”

“Here, chew down some toast before you take the aspirin or you may feel sick.”

James held some toast up to her mouth. She looked at him a little embarrassed and sheepish but nevertheless took a bite and slowly chewed and swallowed. He held up more and she took another bite, a slow smile playing around the edge of her mouth. He thought that she looked beautiful, even with a hangover and in a disheveled state. It brought out a tender, protective side that he didn’t know he had and he just wanted to take care of her.

“Now here have some more water and swallow these pills,” he instructed gently, taking the time to wipe a few crumbs off the side of her mouth with his thumb.

Shannon did as she was told. She seemed too weak to put up any resistance to his pampering. When she tried to twist around to reposition her pillows against the wall, he reached past her, plumped them vigorously and propped them behind her back. She sank into them.

“Thanks, James,” she shyly murmured, looking genuinely grateful.

The expression on her face had him wanting to cosset and cuddle her. He smiled, passed her a mug of coffee, took one for himself and moved up the makeshift bed to sit next to her. He’d left his boots near the front door and so positioned his long legs straight out in front of himself on the mattress, crossed casually at the ankles, and pressed lightly against her outer thigh. When he put his arm around her she relaxed into it and snuggled closer, it felt somehow familiar and right.

“So, I guess it was a good night last night?”

Shannon chuckled, remembering. “It was. We had a blast, a ‘real crack’ as we say in Ireland, although I think that Rachael may at this moment be feeling worse than me. I managed to sneak in a few Sodas during the evening.” She sipped the coffee. “This tastes excellent. I’m starting to feel better already.”

Suddenly Rachael’s bedroom door burst open and Rachael dashed out to the bathroom with her hand over her mouth, closely followed by Joshua. Even through the closed door they heard retching.

“Oh dear,” winced Shannon.

They heard muffled curses and apologies and Joshua’s deep, consoling tones. Eventually the toilet flushed and Rachael trooped out looking miserable and a slight shade of green. Joshua headed to the kitchen to pour her a glass of water and make some toast.

“I’m so sorry,” wailed Rachael. “I’m never going to drink again.”

“We’ve all done it, more than once. Don’t worry about it, darlin’. It looked like it was worth it.” Joshua rumbled a low chuckle.

“What? How do you know?” she whimpered.

“The perils of modern technology, darlin’. Susan made a few videos with her phone and Colin sent them on.”

“Oh no. Please tell me...not the belly dancing?”

Joshua nodded solemnly. “You’ve been holding out on me.”

“And the bucking bronco?”

“Fraid so.”

Shannon turned and saw him trying not to laugh. She blushed a pretty shade of pink.

“Oh no. You’ve seen it, too?”

“Fraid so. I’m hoping for a repeat performance sometime...maybe a private viewing?” He grinned, living in hope.

Shannon pulled her face and ignored him. “How are you feeling now, Rach?” She called down as softly as she could, knowing that Rachael had to be feeling the wrath of grape and grain much worse than she was.

“Horrible, it feels like something is jumping in my head. It’s probably dancing at the funeral of whatever died in my mouth,” she croaked.

“Ooo,” Shannon grimaced, “that good eh?”

“Yep, but it was a fun night. How are you feeling and how the heck did we get home?”

“A little fragile but not too bad. I vaguely remember...what’s Susan’s husband name?”

“My cousin Colin or Mark?”

“Mark, yeah, Mark took us home after we ended up at Susan’s house. We dropped Sandy off on the way and Janet went to Mitch’s.”

“Yeah, Mitch called, Janet ain’t feeling too spritely either,” Joshua drawled shaking his head in mock disgust. “Colin checked on Sandy, she’s okay.”

Rachael groaned wearily. “The details are a little vague. I am going to have to lie down again, sorry guys, today is a right-off for me. Enjoy the rest of the day, Shannon.” She began to shuffle back toward her room but Joshua swept her up in his arms, dropped a kiss on her forehead and tenderly carried her there.

James wasn’t in any particular hurry to move, he was enjoying being so close to Shannon, even if he was fully clothed. At least all she had on was a skimpy camisole top and boxer shorts.

“You managed to get undressed and changed for bed. I’m impressed.”

“Auto pilot, and I hardly ever go to sleep without taking makeup off and having a glass of water, habit I guess. I must look a mess, you obviously don’t frighten easily. Thank God I actually put some pajamas on.”

Damn, he wasn’t going to praise the Lord for that one.

“You look kinda sweet, all fuzzy and cute.”

“You make me sound like a kid’s pet when I’m actually starting to feel human again.” She chuckled, pressing into him more. “I could stay like this all day,” she sighed sleepily.

He wouldn't mind at all. He held her close, lightly stroking her arm, feeling the heat of her back against his chest. He was simply happy to be with her, quiet and peaceful, providing some comfort and companionship. They stayed that way for more than an hour and a half, not speaking much, just lazily holding each other, relaxed and at ease. He was aware that to be like this was intimate but not overtly sexual, and was surprised to discover that he enjoyed this sort of closeness.

"We should make a move if we're to get to Luke's parents on time," she said, turning her face to look up at him as he slowly and gently stroked her hair. She was looking a lot better.

"Worried about making a bad impression? That's got to be a good sign."

"I just don't want to be rude and, well, I think it would mean a lot to Luke."

"You're right." It pleased him that she was considerate; it was a good trait in a partner. "You first." He snickered, and with three shoves pushed her off the mattress.

"You stinker," she yelped as she scrambled to her knees. It provided him with a nice view of the back of her thighs before they disappeared into pink boxers stretched over a neat heart shaped bottom. Man he just wanted to rip off her clothes and get to know her inside and out.

She laughed, grabbed a pillow and threw it at him. "Bugger off and give me some privacy to get ready. I need a shower. My hair smells of cigarette smoke, Yuk. And I probably have morning breath."

"You don't actually, but your hair whiffs a bit. Don't take more than half an hour."

"I only need twenty minutes." She snatched up her wash-bag and towel. "You wait outside."

"Ah, really?"

"Out!" She stamped her foot and pointed to the door.

Exactly twenty minutes later she was ready, with washed hair hastily dried and tied back in a long braid and a light dusting of makeup on her face. She was wearing a flowing, long, cotton skirt and a pretty, patterned, short-sleeved blouse. James thought that she looked perfect, just right for a first casual “meeting the family” occasion.

“Let’s go,” she cheerily ordered as she stepped lightly outside.

“Feeling better I take it?”

“Much, thank you.”

“You look lovely, Shannon.”

“Maybe a bit better than an hour ago.” She flashed him a big, bright smile full of life and mischief. “I now feel alive.”

In his SUV, on their way to Luke’s parents’ house, he questioned her more about Rachael and in particular if she knew any stories that he could use at the wedding. There were quite a few funny vet stories. One in particular involved a parrot repeating a few choice words that Rachael had said about its neglectful owner.

“The funniest story I know is something that happened in winter on Dartmoor, in England.” Shannon grinned wickedly. “She was with a male vet colleague at the time. They had visited a remote farm and were on their way back to town. It was bitterly cold, around minus twenty centigrade, that’s about minus four Fahrenheit I think. It was probably even colder if the wind chill factor was taken into account because it was blowing a blizzard. The snow was deep on the ground and it was a long, slow journey back.” The way she told it, and her tone of voice, had him almost shivering at the imagined cold. “Anyway, Rachael needed to go for a pee, so she stopped the Land Rover, got out, went behind the vehicle, dropped her pants and did the business as fast as she could. But as she was rising and pulling up her pants she leaned against the metal bumper of the Landy and her bare butt got frozen to it.”

“Ouch. What did she do?” He couldn’t keep the chuckle down.

“She had to hammer on the vehicle to get her colleague’s attention and help. Rachael was at this point beyond being embarrassed and just wanted to get unstuck. She asked the guy to check if there was any warm coffee left in the flask that he could pour onto her butt and the bumper so that it would defrost enough to allow her to break free without damage to her skin. Unfortunately there was no coffee left. So what do you think they did?” Shannon paused, waiting to see if he got the solution quickly.

“No!” he exclaimed. “He didn’t!”

“Yep. Body temperature is about 98.5 Fahrenheit, so he peed on her and the bumper. I should imagine he took great care to avoid any contact between his pecker and the metal.” She laughed. “Anyway it worked.” Shannon shrugged.

“Oh, that is priceless, I’ll get some mileage out of that,” James sniggered.

“Well, they’re the only embarrassing stories I’m telling you, and only because I know she laughs about them now. If you want more you should speak to her brothers. I will tell you that she is a generous, kind, honorable, courageous, loyal friend and I love her dearly.”

James suspected the traits she had listed were also applicable to her.

“Can we stop off somewhere along the way so that I can get some flowers for Mrs. McKay?”

“Sure, sweetheart, that’s a nice idea. There’s a gas station on the edge of town that sells them.”

“You had better fill me on Luke’s family, anyone I should be wary of?”

She bit her bottom lip and James realized that she was a little nervous at the prospect of meeting the parents.

“No, although his younger brothers Sam and David are tormentors and wind-up merchants, so expect some teasing. Diana and her husband Guy are nice, easygoing folks. Molly, Luke’s mum, is great and has always treated me like one of the family. She loves her

children and just wants them to be happy. She'll love anyone who loves Luke." James glanced at her and winked. "I don't think you need to worry. His dads are brothers but they have very different characters. Will is a joker and Stuart is more serious, but they all get on well. They own a small spread that, as luck would have it, produces a few barrels of oil, and a vehicle repair garage in town. Luke used to tinker about there and help out in the school holidays. His younger brothers look set to take over the family garage business because Luke, as you know, has his own engineering company."

"Ah yes, and you're the 'sleeping partner.'" She made quotation marks with her fingers in the air.

"That would be me, yes, we share a lot of things," he flirted.

"Why Luke? What made you decide that you wanted to partner up for life with Luke?" Shannon was clearly very curious about their friendship.

James didn't hesitate. "He's 'The Thousandth Man.'"

She blinked in surprise. "You mean like in the poem by Kipling?"

"Yeah, you know it?"

"Not by heart, but I get the gist. That's a special friendship, but then I guess that it would have to be." She paused, biting her bottom lip and fiddling with her hands. "I would hate it if I caused any problems between you."

Ah, so that was something she was worried about. He strove to set her mind at rest. "Darlin', we've argued in the past and we will again, but that's just part of living with others. We know how to give each other space and if you join us we'll just do what normal families do, talk about it and work it out."

James thought that she wouldn't be the type of woman to try to play them off against each other and that was part of her appeal. She was straight talking, honest, and smart. Beguiling women with hidden agendas didn't make good partners for the ménage lifestyle. Generally speaking it was easier if the husbands were related but Luke had

become like a brother to him and they were equals with no childhood roles attached.

“That’s not actually been my experience of normal family life,” she said sadly.

“Is that so? Well you’ll know what not to do then, eh?” He tried to make light of her comment.

He knew that there was a lot to discover about Shannon O’Reilly, but didn’t think that there would be any major stumbling blocks, once they got past the whole ménage family and lifestyle issue...easy peasy...he hoped.

* * * *

Molly McKay was in the kitchen finishing a potato salad. She heard the dogs barking, obviously heralding the arrival of James and Shannon, right on time; she approved. Wiping her hands and removing her apron, she left the kitchen and poked her head outside to the back veranda, where the rest of the clan were sat.

“I think they’re here,” she sang.

Her two younger sons scrambled up and lunged forward only to be yanked back by their elder brother. “Stay,” he commanded. “I don’t want you crowding her.”

Molly glanced at her husbands, trying to tamp down the huge grin on her face. Will looked amused while Stuart scowled at his sons, David and Sam. She grabbed Luke’s elbow and steered him through the house.

“Let’s go meet your lady,” she said with unrestrained glee.

Since her son and James Ryden had started on the road to a ménage partnership Luke hadn’t brought anyone home to meet his family, so now it was a big event. She could tell that he was a little tense, and had never seen him so preoccupied by someone. Earlier he had filled them in on what he knew about Shannon, so she understood that the Irish woman would find their whole setup a bit strange. She

also knew that Shannon would be observing her relationship with Stu and Will closely. Luke had said to just act normal because they all understood the importance of trust and honesty for lasting relationships. That being said, her brood, particularly David and Sam, were under orders to curtail some of their exuberance, at least this first time.

“Ma, just take it easy, it’s early days,” Luke sighed.

“Don’t worry, son. Now where did I put that red carpet?” she joked.

“Ma.” Luke groaned, rolling his eyes. He still gave her a loving squeeze though.

* * * *

Shannon stiffened momentarily as two huge mongrels loped toward the car.

“Don’t worry, they’re soft. Their bark is definitely worse than their bite,” James reassured her.

“They bite?” yelped Shannon.

“Only strangers, and you’re with me.”

Shannon tried to remember what Rachael had said about strange dogs. Stay calm, show no fear, and ignore them at first until they settle down. Okay, she could do that. She let James get out of the car first and this time actually waited for him to open the door without any irritation at all. Immediately a big snout pushed inside and landed in her lap, almost squashing the bouquet of flowers that she was holding. She locked down a squeak and the urge to scramble into the backseat. Big doleful eyes looked up from a goofy face and a large tail vigorously thumped loudly on the side of the open door. Shannon couldn’t help but giggle, all fear vanished, and she carefully stroked the top of the hairy head.

“Hey there,” she cooed. “You look like you’ve a touch of the Irish Wolfhound in you.”

Relieved, she slid down from the SUV and continued to stroke the hound while the other dog ran around them in circles. A loud whistle pierced the air and both dogs stopped dead, and then they turned and ran back toward the house. Shannon looked in the direction they went and her eyes met their master, Luke. It was like being punched in the solar plexus. He was a mighty handsome man, all kinds of fine, fine hair, body, face, and oh that sexy smile that started on his mouth and was echoed in his eyes. From the brief time she had known him, from what others had to say and from what she herself instinctively knew, she realized that here was a man of worth, a man she could even love.

* * * *

Molly McKay closely watched the young woman getting out of the vehicle. She looked lovely that was for sure and old Ben seemed to have taken to her straight away. She noticed that Shannon's pretty face smiled warmly at the dog vying for her attention but when she saw Luke her face flushed and became a thing of true beauty.

"That girl is certainly smitten with our Luke," whispered Stuart from behind.

"How d'ya know?" Molly asked out of curiosity.

"She has the same look on her face that you had when you first met us," he explained matter-of-factly.

"Really? Don't I still look at you like that?" She was suddenly worried that her husband thought that she didn't feel the same anymore.

"No. Now you look like the cat that got the cream but is still hungry for more," he murmured close to her ear.

"Good," she breathed deeply. "I think I'll have a good lick later."

"Hell, woman, now I'm in no state to meet the girl." He growled. She pressed back into him and felt what he meant.

“Serves you right, you old rogue.” She chuckled, reveling in the fact that even after thirty-two years of marriage they still turned each other on.

Luke had strolled forward to greet their guests. He gave James a man hug, a kind of slap on the back but no lingering squeeze, and Shannon a hug of an altogether different kind that ended in a brief but deep kiss. Molly noticed that Shannon raised her right foot back as she responded and cleaved to Luke. She gave a knowing smile to her husband. *Yes indeed, that girl loves my boy whether she knows it or not.*

* * * *

Any fears that Shannon had secretly harbored about meeting Luke’s family turned out to be groundless. She liked them a lot and they made her feel welcome. The dinner reminded her of the lively get-togethers at her relatives’ houses in Ireland when she was a child, with various aunts, uncles, and cousins. She felt guilty to admit it but she had enjoyed those gatherings much more than spending time with her own maudlin mother.

When she saw Luke’s sister she did a double take. She was the same dark haired woman whom James had avoided in the supermarket and now Shannon understood the real reason why. She explained to Diana that she had seen her before and they laughed at her rendition of James’s avoidance tactics with a shopping cart in a supermarket full of admiring women.

Luke’s brothers weren’t subtle in their appreciation of her and made occasional comments about her picking the wrong brother, which earned them a slap on the head from whichever father was closest at the time. All the while either Luke or James was near her, casually touching her body with an easy familiarity that she wondered at. How could she feel so at home in the company of people she

hardly knew? She guessed that Rachael was right and some things didn't take long.

"I didn't ask, but do you have any special dietary requirements?" Molly asked, suddenly looking worried.

"Well, I used to eat only natural foods," Shannon paused as everyone went quiet, "but then I heard that most people die of natural causes so I stopped that."

Molly burst out laughing. "Oh, for a moment I thought you were gonna tell me you were a fruitarian or something."

"No, I eat most things. I'm not fussy." She wasn't about to go into the whole 'reducing meat intake as part of a more sustainable lifestyle' thing. There was a time and a place for that, and this wasn't it. She didn't want to appear to be a sanctimonious hippy.

When it was time to deep-fry the turkey Shannon was fascinated, she had never heard of such a thing before and both Will and Stuart took the time to explain how it was done. She couldn't believe that it took under an hour to cook a fifteen-pound bird. When they served the turkey partially carved it looked succulent and smelt wonderful.

"Anyone want stuffing?" Molly innocently inquired.

Shannon caught the briefest of smirks on both David and Sam's faces.

"You should try it, Shannon," David advised with his purest choirboy smile.

Shannon very subtly narrowed her eyes and pursed her lips at David, silently telling him she knew exactly what he was up to.

"Is it made out of ground up sausage meat, Molly?" she asked sweetly, noting with satisfaction the grimace on both the younger men's faces.

"Why yes, dear, it is."

"Yum, I'll love some then, thanks."

She glanced around the table and saw amused looks on a few faces and felt relief, but when she looked at the stuffed turkey she felt something akin to empathy.

After the meal Shannon offered to help tidy up, but Molly insisted that her husbands and two younger sons would do it later. She offered Shannon a coffee or a stronger drink, whichever Shannon preferred. Shannon suggested that they might like to combine the two and she could make them all Irish coffees.

“It has caffeine, alcohol, sugar and fat, everything a healthy body needs. A little taste of Ireland,” she joked as she set down the glasses of coffee with added sugar, whisky and cream.

Everyone seemed to appreciate the beverage. James glanced at her, and she understood by his smoldering gaze that he wished he could have a little taste of Ireland in a different form. She blushed but couldn’t help smile. Her guys had behaved perfectly all day by being attentive but not claustrophobic. *My guys?* She wondered at how easily she considered them as such.

By eight-thirty Shannon was starting to flag, the previous late night was beginning to catch up with her. Luke made his or her excuses to leave, explaining that she had been out with Rachael for her hen night and everyone understood. In fact she heard Sam snicker something about seeing the video. *Damn.*

“It was lovely to meet you, Shannon,” Molly said pulling her into a big hug. “Thank you again for the flowers, and come and visit any time dear.”

“Thank you for your hospitality. I had a lovely time.”

She shook hands with Luke’s dads and waved goodbye to the others. They all diplomatically disappeared to allow Luke to say goodnight. He had driven over from his house and would return the same way. James walked to his vehicle as Luke turned to Shannon and pulled her into his arms. It was twilight, and long shadows began to blend into the darkness. The air was still and warm, and smelled of cut grass and a faintly floral aroma. They were hidden from the house by thick bushes and the dimming light.

“You have a great family.” Shannon smiled up at him, craning her neck because he stood so close. “Thanks for inviting me over.”

“You’ve done it now; they are all taken with you. If you don’t go out with us I’ll never live it down,” he warned, stroking his fingers along the back of her neck and gently caressing her jaw with his thumb.

He lightly traced her lips with a swipe of his thumb and she responded brushing the tip of her tongue on his calloused pad. He made a rumbling noise that seemed to emanate from deep within his chest. It resonated inside her body, causing her pelvic muscles to clench frustratingly around nothing, building a need to have his cock sliding against the walls of her pussy, filling her, giving her core something to clasp and work around.

Their mouths met and they slowly shared the ardent experience of finding, holding, and cleaving to the one who was everything and made nothing else matter in that moment. He grazed his free hand down her back to gently squeeze her ass before sliding lower, snaking under her skirt and up, finally settling at the apex of her thighs. He slid a finger under her panties and dipped it into her moist sheath. She moaned and echoed his movement, stroking her hand along his solid erection straining for freedom in his jeans. If they had been alone she would have slid to her knees and sucked him dry.

“Oh, God, you must know that I want to eat you alive, Luke McKay. What kind of magic are you weaving?” She panted.

“The old-fashioned kind, Shannon.” He breathed between kisses.

She kissed him again feeling hot, horny, and in hell from the torment of resisting.

“What about James? I don’t want to be a tease, but I’m not ready for you both at the same time yet.” She groaned, regretfully.

“Don’t worry, he won’t interfere, he understands baby. I don’t want to push you, but God, I need to feel you.”

He plunged his thick finger deeper into her ripe cunt and deftly stroked the sweet spot that only he had ever been able to find. At the same time his thumb circled her clit.

“No one has ever made me feel the way you do,” she confessed.

The drawing and tightening sensation deep in her pelvis began as her muscles convulsed and her cunt quivered in joy. She came hard, her scream caught by his mouth. She would have collapsed if Luke had not held her close.

“God, she’s even more beautiful when she comes,” James murmured appreciatively. He was stood about ten yards away, leaning against his SUV.

Shannon thought that she should be embarrassed. She was totally unprepared for the onslaught of lust that assailed her at the thought of James watching. They were her own personal brand of aphrodisiac, and her craving for them increased with her exposure to them.

“I need you, Shannon.”

Luke sounded frustrated and in pain. Her legs buckled again and Luke let her slide down his hard body to her knees. She gripped his muscular thighs as he hastily undid his jeans and pushed then down on his hips. His stiff, engorged cock sprang free directly in her face and without hesitation she grasped the base and sucked him deep into her hot, wet mouth, taking him all the way until his balls nestled under her chin. She held his sac, caressing the full globes as she pulled back, sucked hard and released him with an audible slurp. Slowly she licked her way down his shaft and carefully took one round, suspended soft stone into her mouth, swirling her tongue around it, sucking and nibbling against it, before turning her attention to the other. She lathered his scrotum, tickling and teasing the sensitive skin. He was so responsive, already charged up, and she knew it wouldn’t take long. She was focused on loving the beautiful, full cock with her eager mouth, but she still heard James murmur, “Holy hell.”

“Fuck, that’s so good. Suck me, Shannon, take me in your mouth and suck me hard.”

He placed his hand on her head and dictated the bobbing pace as she heard his plea and responded. When she opened her eyes she saw James staring at them, leaning against his SUV with his very large,

hard dick in his hand, clutching and squeezing in time to the rhythm of her head. Oh, Lord, she felt her pussy clench again with the eroticism of that act. Luke began to shake, and with a guttural moan he spurted warm, thick, sweet cum down her waiting throat. She swallowed it all, even lapping up and cleaning off his cock.

“Jesus, woman, that was incredible,” he panted. “I want to bury my face between your thighs and my cock in that snug pussy of yours again soon.” He helped her up off her knees and kissed her. “Don’t take too long to come to your senses and say yes to us both. James is dying for you, too.”

“Good night Luke.” She sighed with satisfaction.

Until she’d met Luke it had been a long time since she’d felt so inclined to really give herself over to the act of physically pleasing a man. She wanted him to feel wonderful, it mattered that he did. She should feel cheap that the man who had just come in her mouth was trying to pass her on to his best friend, but she didn’t. She felt desired because it was as if Luke wanted her to be part of something. She was still as horny as hell and wished that she were ready to take them both on together. Still after this afternoon, seeing a ménage relationship in a domestic setting, she was beginning to understand how it could work. She joined James who now sat waiting in the SUV. For the life of her she couldn’t think of an appropriate thing to say.

She didn’t think that he had ejaculated and his still hard cock was now crammed back in his jeans. He had watched the entire exchange and she could see from his expression that he was aroused and uncomfortable. She was conflicted, her body spoke volumes, but her mind was trying to keep it muted. She couldn’t remember having ever faced such temptation before in her life as having James sat next to her now. The image of him watching the thoroughly executed cock sucking that she had given Luke would be forever branded on her mind. James stared ahead at the dark road, face and body rigid as they drove in silence.

They pulled up in front of Rachael's cabin, just far enough outside the pool of light that shone from the porch so that when James killed the engine and lights it was dark in the cab. The atmosphere was thick and charged with sexual attraction. Bound and captivated by the tendrils of mutual craving that threaded around them, they sat staring ahead, neither moving. Like her, he must have been battling his own demons of desire.

James didn't take his hands off the wheel. He looked like a man in pain and she knew that she had the cure. He didn't push her, wouldn't push her, but now, Christ almighty she wanted him. All the way home she had experienced a burning, persistent throb of need that grew and intensified. By the time the car stopped her nerves were almost frayed through.

"Bugger this," she snarled and launched herself into his lap, straddling his hips and wedging herself between his body and the steering wheel.

She looked into his eyes and what she saw made words superfluous, because his need matched her own. Their lips met and she could hear blood music, a steady swishing in her ears, and her heart beating hard in her chest as if it would break through and fly away. She placed her hand over his heart, confirming a pounding duet.

Their tongues danced and explored each other's mouth. A blasphemous thought crossed her enraptured mind; that this was akin to a religious experience. It was as if his breath carried part of his spirit and she took it into herself as she breathed him in. Shannon entwined her fingers through his hair, pushed her body closer and deepened the kiss with savage intensity. They were in a vortex of desire; all emotion, passion and need were channeled through that kiss. She didn't want it to end. She needed more.

"Hey, who's out there?" a feminine voice called.

"Bloody hell," heaved Shannon in frustration.

James swore under his breath, then opened the door and shouted, "It's only us, James and Shannon, give us a minute."

Rachael squinted into the night. She obviously couldn't see much but recognized the voice.

"Oh, hey, no problem, I'll see you inside. Do you want to come in for a coffee, James?"

"No thanks, Rachael, I'd better get back," he called out.

* * * *

They stayed still for a second, settling their breathing. His self-control was frayed, but the interruption had returned gravity and bought them crashing back to reality. He tried to convince himself that he didn't want their first time to be a quick fuck in the front of his car. His whole body had been one throbbing ache since watching Shannon on her knees, worshipping Luke's cock. And it really had been an act of worship, untaken with a passion and reverence unlike anything he'd ever seen before. Luke was one lucky bastard.

He gave a humorless laugh, shaking his head, "It's like being a teenager all over again."

Shannon leaned her forehead to his. "Well I can only speak for myself but a kiss was never that good in my teens, in fact never that good...ever."

"I know." He had kissed hundreds of women, but only hers had branded his heart. He couldn't express that it was like opening himself to a great well of feeling and that maybe he already falling in love with her. "I'll call you tomorrow."

Shannon must have sensed his deflated withdrawal because she held his face gently between her small hands and said, "I had a great time with you today, thanks for looking after me. It means a lot to me."

"It was my pleasure." He smiled, but of course he had wanted more. She could probably feel the outline of his erection pressed

against her butt. At this rate his cock was going to have a permanent button pattern embedded along its length. Slowly and carefully she unwrapped herself from his body and dropped out of the vehicle.

“Good night, James,” she murmured regretfully.

He nodded, winked, and waved as he pulled away. That little redhead was unintentionally leading him in a merry song and dance. Except for the fact that his dick was pointing the way he wouldn’t know down from up. He had to admit it though, courting was a lot of fun, frustrating definitely, but fun-filled with sweet anticipation. He envied his partner’s carnal knowledge of her, but realized that today they had made significant progress toward the ultimate goal of having her together. He just needed to bear that in mind and keep his eye on the prize.

* * * *

As Shannon watched the red taillights disappear she tried to fathom out her behavior. She wasn’t an exhibitionist, yet she had dropped to her knees in a garden and sucked a man’s cock in full view of another, and it had aroused her more knowing that James was watching. That was so far out of her box as to be unreal. Her comfort zone had clearly got a whole lot bigger because she didn’t regret it at all, she just felt a bit confused and a whole lot turned on.

A low cough snapped her out of her reverie.

“Did I interrupt something?” Rachael sounded apologetic.

Shannon sighed wistfully. “Yes, but don’t worry about it, I’ve a sneaky suspicion we’ll be picking up where we left off.” She shook her head to help clear her thoughts. “Anyway you gin-soaked reprobate, how are you feeling now?”

“I’ll live.”

Chapter 14

The following week was busy, and James lamented the fact that he and Luke hadn't had chance to be alone together with Shannon. They still had to work and both he and Shannon had responsibilities concerning the wedding. They had talked and had fun but always in the company of others. There had only been time for a few snatched kisses. Even so James knew that he was definitely falling in love with Shannon and that Luke was ahead of him. They'd been friends and lovers with a lot of woman and from experience he knew that what they felt for Shannon was different.

Rachael's mother and father arrived on Monday and of course family and friends turned out to welcome them. James had the distinct impression that Rachael's father, Richard Harrison, was at first taken aback by Joshua's size and physical presence but he seemed to relax after Joshua had taken him and his wife, Meg, aside for a private talk.

Rachael's older twin brothers, Liam and Cameron, arrived on Wednesday. Apparently staying true to their exuberant form, they entertained everyone until the wee small hours. James liked both guys and fortunately they seemed to get on well with Joshua, their future brother-in-law. They all had a lot in common with engineering backgrounds and working in the oil industry. He thought that they would be good to have along to the surprise bachelor party he was planning next week. The more strong guys they had to help kidnap his brother the better, because he strongly suspected that Joshua wouldn't go quietly.

James had at first bristled with irritation when the twins hugged Shannon closely and teased her, but he soon realized that it was

brotherly in nature and relaxed. Rachael had mentioned that her brothers were considering leaving Britain and returning to Ridge Water. She had also hinted that they were interested in the polyandry lifestyle. He knew a few pleasant women that liked causal threesomes and the thought of introducing them flitted across his mind. He dismissed the idea because the guys were looking for the real deal, not something casual, which was another thing they now had in common. Still he knew a few girls from ménage families that he might be able to orchestrate a meeting with, especially as they were attending the wedding reception.

* * * *

Shannon cheerfully undertook her chief bridesmaid and best friend duties. She kept Rachael calm, assisted with a few vet visits, ran errands, helped to double check things like the catering and flowers and attended the wedding rehearsal. Now she was enduring the final dress fitting before the wedding.

“Oh thank you, thank you, thank you for not making me wear peach,” Shannon said, grateful for the deep green dresses that the bridesmaids would be wearing.

“Are you kidding? I knew that you would be miserable in anything remotely peachy,” Rachael explained. “I also avoided red because I remembered you once saying that with your complexion it made you look like a ketchup bottle.” Shannon snorted a laugh as Rachael continued, “This color suits your red hair, Janet’s dark brown and Susan’s blonde. I’m going to get changed in private,” she blushed and mumbled. “The dress has a few modifications that only Joshua will ever see.” With that intriguing statement she quickly ducked into the changing room.

The three bridesmaids looked at each other and shrugged but didn’t say anything. They all were vaguely aware that Joshua wasn’t a ‘vanilla’ kind of guy. Janet threw a questioning look at Millie, the

seamstress, but she just smiled and shook her head while making a zipping gesture across her mouth; she wasn't saying a thing. When Rachael reappeared, there was a collective gasp of appreciation from the four of them.

If there was something kinky or odd about the dress, Shannon couldn't see it. Rachael looked gorgeous in the white raw silk creation. The outfit was a relatively simple design, with a long A-line skirt falling to the floor and a strapless fitted bodice overlapping and finishing at her hips. It actually looked like a complete dress but Shannon knew it wasn't. The neckline was scooped low and finished with a hanging of gauzy thin chiffon that emphasized Rachael's generous breasts without revealing a thing.

"You look beautiful." Shannon smiled at her friend as the others nodded in agreement. There was no danger of anyone upstaging the bride. The girls chatted lightly as the final adjustments to their dresses were made.

"Now we mustn't overindulge over the next week and a bit," Susan warned, patting her tummy and hips, "I may even have to forgo a date night."

Shannon was surprised. "You have a date night? I thought that was for couples with kids."

"Do guys ever really grow up?" Susan sighed. "No, my date night is for my big boys. Sometimes they need a bit of one on one time with me. We go out for dinner and stuff, just either me and Colin or Mark, and well, you know, have a night to ourselves. We do it maybe once a month."

Shannon couldn't contain her curiosity given that she might be facing a similar relationship.

"How did you get married to two men Susan, you're not from Meadow Ridge County, and isn't polyandry one husband too many?" she chuckled.

Susan barked a laugh. "Before I met them, that's exactly what I thought about monogamy. I most certainly wasn't looking to settle

down with even one guy let alone two. I was the new teacher in town, and I met Colin first when I took my cat to the vet.” She smiled, clearly remembering when she’d first laid eyes on him. “Colin said that he had never been so happy that the rules about doctors not dating patients didn’t apply to vets and pet owners. To cut a long, convoluted story short, I couldn’t resist either of them. They whisked me off to Vegas for a quick civil marriage ceremony to Colin. Afterwards we had a family binding service in the local church here where we all said our vows.”

Shannon was still grappling with the idea of someone having two husbands, so she asked Susan if she wouldn’t mind explaining some of the mundane yet important aspects.

“We considered all the legal stuff very carefully. We have additional contracts regarding property and assets should something go wrong or heaven forbid one of us dies. I have kept my maiden name and of course the guys have kept theirs. Everyone in Ridge Water who knows us calls us by my surname. She laughed. “We are ‘The Joneses.’ Our children will have my surname, but the registered father will depend on DNA results. Both the guys will be equally active and involved no matter who the biological father is and will include all the children in their wills. We will try to work it out so that they have at least one child each. Other people do it differently. Fraternal polyandry is more common here. Luke’s fathers are brothers, as were the Rydens.” She smiled and nodded in Janet’s direction. “They just registered all the kids in the oldest man’s name who was also legally married to their mom.”

“Sounds complicated, why bother getting married at all in this day and age?” Shannon sounded exasperated.

Susan shook her head. “Ah, Shannon dear, you will find that as much as some things here are very different, some things are regarded as tradition and for many, sacred. Marriage, when a commitment is made, is regarded very seriously indeed here. I think that’s why the divorce rate is so low.”

Rachael grinned and squeezed Shannon's hand. "Well at least that's one thing that you could tell your mother!"

Shannon rolled her eyes. "Please, guys, let's not get ahead of ourselves, it is very, very, early days."

"That may be," chortled Janet, "but you've got James's tail in a spin, that's for sure. I've never seen him so totally and carefully focused about a woman. I'm just warning you because he tends to get what he really wants, but is so charming that you'll say yes before he's actually asked the question."

Great, two smart guys, one who is a genius level manipulator. My odds just get better and better.

"I'm beginning to think that resistance is futile. Where's that 'luck of the Irish' when you need it?" Shannon mused.

"Honey, if Ryden and McKay want you, I'd say it's sitting in a pile on top of you," drawled Millie with a sly grin, to everyone's surprise.

When all the adjustments were made, they said a cheery good-bye to Susan and headed back to the Sweet Water ranch to drop Janet off. As they pulled in front of the house Shannon noted that Joshua was stood on the veranda watching the Jeep as it rolled to a stop, but he didn't come to open the car door, which was unusual for him. As they got out his hard stare settled on his fiancée. Hell, she wouldn't want to be on the receiving end of that look. Even Rachael appeared a little nervous.

"Where's your phone, Rachael?" he said in a deceptively calm low voice.

Rachael's eyes widened, and then she recovered quickly with a smug grin and said, "Here, I've not forgotten it, silly." She waved it around and quickly turned back to the car.

Silly? Calling Joshua silly? Shannon thought that at this moment in time her friend had more guts than sense.

"Get in the car now, Shannon," Rachael desperately whispered out of the corner of her mouth.

Shannon was confused and began to move back around the Jeep.

“Stop right there.” Joshua’s hard tone allowed no disobedience and they both stopped dead in their tracks. He made a deliberate show of retrieving his phone from his back pocket, tapping the buttons and putting it to his ear. “It’s not ringing is it ... *silly*.” He growled, moving one step down toward Rachael.

Shannon guessed that it wasn’t a question, more of a statement. She could almost hear the wheels of Rachael’s mind grinding. The look on her friends face was almost comical.

“Oh fuck.” Rachael’s eyes were now like saucers.

Shannon wasn’t sure what was going on but one thing was certain, there was no way they’d both get into the car and away if Joshua decided to move quickly, and she was in no doubt that he would. Rachael must have come to the same conclusion, because without any warning she turned on her heel and sprinted across the yard. At that moment Shannon thought Rachael looked glorious, like an Amazon princess, running with long powerful strides toward the barn. She turned and saw Joshua tracking Rachael’s progress with narrowed eyes and a hard, tight expression. She didn’t know him well enough to understand what that might mean. He stalked after Rachael with a steady, determined stride of his own. Shannon didn’t know what to do. She looked over at an equally baffled Janet and was about to take a step after Joshua when strong arms pulled her back against a hard body.

“You weren’t there, sweetheart, but he clearly told her that she’d get a good spankin’ if she didn’t keep her phone charged.” James spoke softly close to her ear.

She hadn’t heard him behind her and his stealth shocked her. Slowly she registered his words.

“That’s...that’s outrageous, he wouldn’t dare,” she stammered, glancing at Janet who gave a little shrug and grimace as she headed quickly into the ranch house.

Arms tightened around her and she squirmed as he drawled, “We’re ranchers, darlin’, and there are some things we know a lot about—roundin’ up, ropin’ and ridin’.”

Shannon gulped and now stood stock-still. She didn’t think he was talking about cattle and horses. Her eyes darted to the barn, Joshua had reached the large door but it was obviously barred. He moved to the smaller side door that was also locked. With seemingly little effort he kicked it in. The lock must have given because the door slammed back but was still intact. Joshua headed inside and closed the door. It moved twice as if something heavy was being placed behind it.

Shannon, still restrained in James’s arms, was breathing deeply. She wondered what the hell it was about the men in this place that had their passions running so high. Maybe they ate too many oats? Suddenly a shriek cut through the ominous silence that had cloaked the barn, followed by muffled curses, then another yelp, before silence descended again.

“I’ll think your friend will be tied up for a while,” James murmured, kissing her neck and making her knees turn to jelly. “I’d better be a good host and keep you entertained. I know a good game we can play.”

With that he spun her around, dipped down and before she could say more than ‘agh!’ she was being carried into the house over his shoulder, with her head upside down near his ass. *Nice view.*

She was shocked and a little disappointed when, instead of heading to the bedroom, he dumped her on the big sofa and waved a box at her.

“Scrabble?” She blinked in surprise.

Chapter 15

Rachael had bolted all the doors and looked frantically for a place to hide. The hayloft was too obvious, but she moved the ladder so that it was slanted hoping that Joshua would think that she was up there. If he went up to check she could sneak out of the barn and make a quick getaway. By the time he found her at the cabin he would be more reasonable...she hoped.

There was a large square wicker basket in the corner of this section of the building and it looked big enough for her to fit into. She moved quickly as she heard Josh try the large barn door. She tore open the lid and jumped in on top of a few empty feed sacks. Just as she shut herself in she heard the side door splinter and crash against the wall. *Fuck me, he's serious.* She began to panic while at the same time her pussy fluttered like the wings of a hummingbird. She wondered if there was something seriously wrong with her mentally because this surely wasn't the reaction any sane person would have with *that* after them. Of course she knew deep down, deep, deep, deep down, that he would never hurt her. He was probably secretly enjoying this as much as she was...yes...definitely... maybe.

* * * *

Joshua shut the side door behind him and barred it with a heavy seed sack, better make that two, because knowing Rachael as he did, he expected she'd try to make a break for it. He took a piece of rope and with speed that came from lots of practice, tied a complex knot

around the wooded bar holding the larger door closed. Now he could turn his attention to finding his prey.

His fiancée never disappointed him, she was a sure source of sexual inspiration, but he was serious about teaching her a lesson that she wouldn't quickly forget. Being without a working mobile phone out here could be the difference between life and death. He let his eyes adjust to the gloom and saw that the hayloft ladder was a bit askew, *bingo*.

Just as he was about to climb he noticed the disturbed dust and straw on the floor, leading away from the ladder to a large basket in the corner. *My clever girl*. He discovered a certain amount of pride at her attempted little deception, but his darlin' was out of her league. He idly thought that when he had the time later he'd mention that she should cover her tracks better.

He rattled the ladder and clunked his boots on the bottom rung. Then he quietly moved to a dark corner stall and waited, counting silently to ten. Right on cue the lid of the basket slowly lifted. He watched as she poked her head out, checking that the coast was clear. She carefully slivered out of the basket and tiptoed across the room. First she went to the side door. He saw her fists clench and shake when she realized that the noise and time it would take to move the heavy sacks rendered that option hopeless. As covertly as possible she moved to the larger barn door only to reel in shock a finding it tied shut.

As he soundless moved behind her, he heard her whisper, "The sneaky, cunning devil." Despite the words he detected admiration in her voice.

Joshua stood silently waiting, his eyes boring into the back of her head. He wiped the smile off his face when he saw her stiffen. She slowly drew herself up to her full height of five feet seven inches, a whole foot shorter than him, and turned around.

“Oh, there you are,” she blustered in clipped tones, her chin tilted defiantly as she looked up at him. “I’ve been waiting for you. Now come along and open this door.”

He had to hand it to her, his fiancée had guts and he loved the fact that she was such a living challenge. He’d watched her from behind a stall as she’d sneaked across the room and now she was trying to blab her way out. He didn’t say anything, just slowly shook his head keeping his expression neutral. Before she could bolt, his arm struck out with lightening speed and his hand caught her wrist yanking her to him. She shrieked in surprise but then began to level a few choice words at him as he dragged her over to the wicker basket.

She tried to tug away from him but he might as well have been reeling in a small fish for all the effort it cost him to drag her closer. With both of her wrists now held in one large hand he roughly undid her jeans and yanked them down her thighs. As Rachael squirmed and cursed in protest it actually helped him work the material further down her legs.

“Don’t you dare,” she snarled.

Joshua just raised an eyebrow, sat down on the basket and in one fast, fluid motion he had her over his lap, head down, and ass in the air, pinned with one arm across her back. She yelped in surprise at how easily he manipulated her physically. Her somewhat moist panties lasted one further second before being ripped off and tossed away and then...nothing. He waited and waited, while her gluts clenched tight in expectation. Just when she began to relax he slapped her hard on first one cheek and then the other.

“Ow!”

“Don’t,” *slap*, “let,” *slap*, “the battery,” *slap*, “run down,” *slap*, “again,” *slap*.

“You...you...barbarian!” she shouted.

Slap, slap. “Yes, I am, but that’s not the right answer.”

* * * *

Rachael was now outraged not only at the spanking but also at her traitorous body's response to it. Her clit was thrumming and she couldn't help but grind against his lap, noting that it appeared to have a similar effect on him.

"You didn't ask a question!" she yelped.

He shook his head and gently ran his palms over her red butt.

"You want a question? Okay, how about this? Will you," *slap*, "ever let," *slap*, "your battery," *slap*, "run down," *slap*, "again?"

"Ow! No." She gasped.

"Promise?" he asked, sounding very smug.

"I promise I won't," she whimpered, not really in pain from the slapping, which had gentled somewhat, but at the need now throbbing between her legs.

"You've been a naughty girl, Rachael. You disobeyed me, you ran away, you hid, you lied about waiting for me, and then you challenged me." He sounded distinctly put out. "What should I do with you?"

"Let me go?" she answered hopefully.

He snorted. "Now *that* wasn't really a question honey, it really doesn't matter what *you* think, it's what *I* want that matters because right now *I'm* in charge."

That did it, hearing him talk like that had her slicking the top of her thighs. Keeping her held in place with the one arm still across her back, Joshua rubbed his other big hand over her hot, red ass then dipped a chunky finger into her sopping pussy.

"Oh, yes, a very naughty girl," he growled. "I wonder, do you need further discipline or do you accept I'm the boss?"

Rachael didn't fancy another spanking, so she nodded her head vigorously as she agreed. "Oh, I most certainly think that you are the chief... here and now."

She liked to push it, but he seemed to let that little bit of defiance go.

“Prove it. Prove to me you’ll do what I say.” He released his restraining hold and helped her to stand up. “Take your jeans all the way off.”

She complied shaking slightly with excitement and a smidgeon of fear, such a delicious blend she found. First she kicked off her leather ankle boots and socks, then the jeans.

“Turn around and spread your legs shoulder width apart.”

She did as he instructed, locking her legs at the knees to keep steady.

“Bend over. That’s it. Now pull your ass cheeks apart. Mmm,” he rumbled in appreciation, “I gotta say, darlin’, that you have a pretty pussy and ass, even when it’s bright red. You look great in jeans but nothing is better than seeing you all bare and presented to me like this, well nothing except seeing my cock sliding inside.”

She couldn’t help the involuntary clench between her legs. She loved the way he verbally and physically expressed his possessive sexual dominance. On occasion she topped him, but this wasn’t going to be one of those sessions.

He laughed softly. “You sure do like dirty talk, but we already know that, don’t we?”

“Yes, I think we’ve established that many times over,” she quipped

“Ah Rachael,” he sighed, “still giving pithy replies even with your bare ass and wet pussy so temptingly and shamelessly on display. Well, I have something that should keep you quiet for a bit.”

Snagging a coil of rope from the wall he prowled toward her.

Oh, my—

Chapter 16

“What’s wrong with Scrabble? Don’t you know how to play?” James asked cheerily.

He knew full well that Shannon had expected him to go Caveman Cowboy on her and cart her off to his den, but he was playing for keeps. He wanted her to *want* to want him, to feel good about it, not guilty. Doing the unexpected would keep her guessing and make her reassess her ideas about things, about him and a possible life together with Luke. Doing ordinary stuff was just as important as creating heat between the sheets.

“Yeah, sure I do,” she smiled up at him, visibly relaxing, “but no using Greek letters of the alphabet as a word, even though they are in the dictionary, that’s cheating.”

“Okay, and we can use both Anglo-English and American-English spelling.”

They chatted as they began to play, just light conversation about travel, work and so forth. She seemed to be enjoying his company. As the game progressed a pattern emerged to his play.

“Are you trying to distract me with rude words? You really don’t need to because I’m distracted enough by what might be going on in that barn. Look, how lame is that?” She indicated to her word ‘egg’ which she had made using the ‘e’ in his word ‘sexy’.

“I don’t know what you are talking about,” he denied, while at the same time using and connecting letters from several other words to form a long and complicated looking arrangement. When he revealed it she looked both amused and impressed.

“Cunnilingus?” She chuckled.

“Yeah, it’s one of my favorite words, because it’s such a tongue twister.” He licked his lips suggestively.

“You’re too good. How do you do it?” She laughed.

“Do what? Scrabble or cunnilingus?” He affected confusion. “I suppose I could show you,” he said with an exaggerated, weary sigh.

She threw a cushion at him. “You know full well what I mean, but I bet I already know the answer to both—intelligence and a lot of practice, you slut you.”

He jerked back as if she’d slapped him in the face.

“Oh, God, James, I didn’t mean it nastily, it was a joke. But it obviously wasn’t that funny.” She looked worried. “I don’t care how many lovers you’ve had, it doesn’t bother me.” She paused for a moment. “I guess I may feel a little intimidated, I mean you and Luke have a lot of experience and women to compare me to. I feel a little self-conscious about it, but that’s my problem, I don’t think any less of you for it.”

He didn’t want the ghosts of past sexual encounters to get in the way of their budding relationship, and he needed to make her understand how he felt about her.

“I don’t even think of the others when I’m with you and I hope that there will never be anyone one else.”

“Oh...okay.” Her voice sounded small and uncertain. Then she drew herself up and became more resolute. “Look, I’m really sorry, it was meant as a joke, so please don’t be upset and huffy about it. We have to face the fact that we are going to be running into a lot of your exes and you know what James, it doesn’t bother me much because the past is the past, it’s happened, no regrets. I don’t want to have to walk on eggshells around the issue, afraid of upsetting you. Just stop being so bloody touchy!”

She sounded and looked a little pissed off now, probably because if anyone should be upset about his philandering past it was her, not him. He hadn’t given much consideration to the double standards that apply to men and women who have had a lot of lovers. Being called a

slut had shocked him, even though it had been in jest. He guessed that if he had been a woman he probably would have heard it long before now, yet another reason to be thankful for his meat and two veg. He lightened up and smiled because she was right, if it didn't bother her that's all that mattered to him.

"Okay, dear," he intoned in the placating way of countless husbands and partners throughout history and the world.

She crossed her arms and narrowed her eyes at him, "And don't be bloody cheeky either."

He laughed. "Come here and give me my kiss."

"What kiss?"

"My makeup kiss. That was our first little tiff."

Laughing, she launched herself at him, bowling him backwards on the sofa, snuggling into his chest and neck.

"I really like you." She kissed him lightly on the neck. "I like your character." She kissed his cheek. "I think that we could be good friends." She kissed his forehead.

"Well that's great, honey, but I was kinda hoping for a bit more. At least we are now horizontal, that's progress."

She swatted his head and chuckled. "I meant that I like you over and above this attraction thing, which I'll admit is way beyond anything I've ever experienced until this week and meeting you and Luke. Everything I've learnt about relationships says that it's wrong to feel so strongly about two men at the same time, yet it doesn't feel wrong at all, it actually feels sort of natural. Are you really okay with that?" She looked deep into his eyes and a wash of pleasure surged through him like a balm of happiness to his soul.

He pulled her face down to his and kissed her gently yet firmly on the lips. "I like you, too, sweetheart, and I'm over the moon by the fact that you feel a strong attraction to both me and Luke."

His hand roamed over her back and butt while the other tangled in her hair as he took possession of her mouth again. Responding

instinctively, matching his passion, she kissed him back, synchronizing her lips to his, their tongues caught up in an oral ballet.

Someone cleared their throat loudly.

“Ahem. Get a room.” Rachael sounded amused.

Shannon stiffened but James just continued to kiss her, his resolve to play it cool evaporated like a summer rain on warm earth.

“I was just thinking the exact same thing. Just say yes,” he whispered softly into her ear, hoping with all his heart that she would.

“Maybe we should retire to my rooms and give them a bit more time?” Joshua said sounding hopeful.

“You are a greedy, insatiable man— lucky me— but I feel remiss enough in my friendship duties. Oi, O’Reilly, are you okay?”

Shannon slowly raised her head and swept aside the curtain of hair that had blocked their faces from prying eyes. She looked first at Rachael and then at James lying underneath her before pointedly saying, “Yes.”

It was enough for him. He stood up and tossed her over his shoulder again.

“We may be a little while,” he called back as he strode determinedly toward his wing of the house.

He felt Shannon try to shrug, which must have been a hard thing to do upside down, and as he looked over his other shoulder he saw her wave at a shocked but grinning Rachael. Her giggles faded away as they entered his bedroom and he locked shut the door. He patted her on the ass as he tipped her onto his bed like a sack of grain, with a satisfied, “There you go.”

She fell back onto the firm mattress in an unsophisticated sprawl but quickly scrambled back away from him as he stood at the end of the bed staring down at her. The shutters that lined the glazed gable end wall were half tilted and intermittent shafts of warm afternoon sunlight penetrated into the shaded interior. The occasional dust mote was rendered visible, swirling lazily in the gentle air current of the air conditioning. For a few moments they simply regarded each other,

then Shannon arched an eyebrow and it was enough of an invitation for him. He deliberately undid the buttons on his shirt slowly, giving her time to fully understand his intentions.

“I was planning on waiting until we’re together with Luke tomorrow, but it seems the opportunity has presented itself, and, darlin’, you should know that I’m nothing if not a pragmatist.”

Since the interruption in his SUV a few nights ago he had thought of little else. He’d delayed their physical gratification long enough. Scrabble was fun and provided an opportunity for some mental stimulation, but he wanted sex now. He saw an opportunity to have her and he was going to take it.

“I think I should demonstrate a few of those words.”

* * * *

Shannon was compelled to watch male perfection revealed. She almost forgot to breathe as he shrugged off his shirt and placed it over the back of a chair. He stood before her, a potent cocktail of masculinity and desire served with...with what she could only describe as a loving smile.

Without taking her eyes off him, she reclined back against the pillows and undid the buttons on her blouse with trembling fingers. James watched as the fabric parted. He sucked in a breath sharply when he saw that she wasn’t wearing a bra. Raw desire etched his features. He took another deep breath, and undid his belt buckle. She watched him closely, her cheeks feeling warmer and no doubt taking on a rosy hue. Her nostrils flared and her breathing became irregular. She couldn’t remember being swamped by such a mass of desire before. When he unbuttoned his fly she swallowed nervously but she wasn’t going to say no. He pushed his jeans down and stepped out of them with the grace that came only with a maneuver well practiced. Standing before her in his tight Jockeys he slightly tilted his head to the side and waited.

Dear God, the man standing before her had the body of an archangel, or a horny devil judging by the bulging package so tantalizingly covered by straining cotton. Her eyes roamed over the clearly defined planes of muscle that folded around his frame. There was not a feminine curve to be seen. No, here was something different to her, a counterpart, and it called her primal female to join with it, unite in the act of creation. Her body wanted to chase it down. The beauty of his form was undeniable and breathtaking. Without any doubt that she wanted him, she pulled off her shoes and socks and wriggled out of her jeans.

They openly appraised each other, their eyes roaming but constantly returning to capture each other's gaze and communicate a reassurance that they felt the same way. Her heart blossomed like wild spring flowers under the warm sun when he smiled. She wanted him to cover her, to feel his skin pressed close along hers, with nothing to break the contact. He was smoldering temptation and she wanted to fan the flames. Boldly she slipped off her black lace panties and shifted further down the bed, beckoning him to her with a little crook of her finger and a mischievous sexy grin. Her heart didn't lie below her waist, but it was one of the ways to it.

He stripped the last piece of cloth off his body and his cock sprang forward eagerly like a prisoner joyfully escaping his cage. Her eyes widen when she saw his length and girth. He was very big.

"I can see your creaming cunt from here, all slick and ready for my cock to slide in. You want me don't you, Shannon?"

"Yes I want you," she confessed, shocked yet aroused by his rude words.

He smiled and crawled onto the bed with the grace and power of a big cat, his cock swaying like a thick tail, until he was over her. The heat of his body settled over her skin, and his very essence mingled and diffused into hers. She waited for the touch of his body upon her.

* * * *

He studied the delectable naked woman under him. She was all slender, soft curves, no hard angles but no signs of overindulgence either. Her firm breasts sat pertly on her chest, begging him to take a bite. Those very prominent nipples that jutted proudly up from pink peaks were surely designed to be pinched and suckled. He steadied himself, trying to find calm in the churning waters of his lust. Her skin was almost luminescent in its paleness but there were sporadic patches of freckles, like an exotic animal print. They would need to keep a close eye on it in the future in order to be aware of any sun damage that might occur; it wouldn't be a chore.

Slowly he eased himself down into the cradle of her body, and discovered the delight of lying with shafts of sunlight and the air on his back, skin to skin with the woman he was falling in love with. He allowed just enough of his weight to settle on her, making her aware of his mass and strength without it being uncomfortable. He shifted to place his legs between hers and she responded by parting them wider and bending her knees a little more.

"James." She spoke his name like a caress and welcome home.

"Hello, my love." He smiled down at her. It was the first time he had ever used that endearment.

Taking most of the weight of his upper body on his elbows but still pressing enough to tease and tempt her, he gently tucked a stray strand of hair behind her ear. He caressed her cheek, jaw, nose, and lips, learning her face like a blind man yet also seeing every detail.

"Beautiful," he whispered as he moved his face closer to hers. She tilted her head to meet his kiss with willing lips.

In the past he had always been good at compartmentalizing sex and isolating intimacy, but now, with Shannon, it felt different. He wanted to ravage yet protect, take yet give, possess yet share, and these contrary desires seemed possible with the woman underneath him. He had never felt this way before and knew that it was only because of her.

She ran her hands through his hair and over his wide shoulders, pulling him closer and at the same time pushing against him. Using the leverage of her feet against the mattress she ground her hips against his torso and his long, hard cock rubbed against her thigh. With fluid strokes she swept her hands down his body, drew swirling patterns with her fingertips in the small of his back and brushed downwards over his flanks. It felt divine.

He groaned as her small hand finally found and wrapped firmly around his primed dick. His hips flexed slowly, first following her gyrations and then leading. He ran a hand down her body and hooked it under her knee, raising it higher and wider, allowing better access to her sex. As he kissed his way down her throat to her nipples, his fingers parted her warm, velvet like soft folds and he pushed into her wet, slick flesh. She moaned and pushed her mound onto his hand. He averted his gaze from her breasts for a moment to see her eyes fluttering shut in ecstasy. It took his breath away. He now understood what he had been missing; intimacy that came from the soul through the body of the person you loved. He realized that he wasn't falling in love. He'd landed.

* * * *

Shannon relaxed, luxuriating in the press of his body against hers. She felt infused with his presence. His touch, his smell, his desire seemed to reach her through the deliciously sensitive semi-permeable membrane that was her skin.

She felt his finger push inside, penetrating her as her passage relaxed and then tighten around it. When he withdrew she mewed in protest and opened her lust-fogged eyes in time to see him bring his cream coated finger to her breast and wiped around her nipple before drawling it into his mouth and sucking deeply. Jesus, she moaned again at the sensation and eroticism of the act. His hand returned to

her warm wet depths, this time also gathering some of her juices on his thumb and slowly rolling it across and around her clit.

The triple sensations of penetration, clitoral stimulation and the suckling on her breasts had her panting and grinding, needing more.

“Please, James; I need you inside me, now.”

He kissed her again and she knew that the kisses they had already shared hadn’t been one-of-a-kind, never to be repeated spectaculars, no, that was just the way they kissed and how it was and would always be between them.

“Nothing would please me more.” He pulled away from her but kept one hand engaged between her legs and reached over to the bedside cabinet to take a condom out of the drawer. “My hands are busy, would you mind?” He grinned down at her as she took the foil packet, tore it open, and shakily rolled the latex sheath around his rock hard cock.

Shannon noted that, unlike Luke, he was uncut, not circumcised, and the wicked thought that she would easily be able to tell them apart in the dark flitted across her mind. *Oh, sweet heaven, am I so corrupted?*

* * * *

She lay back but kept a grip on his stiff shaft, guiding it between her legs to the entrance of her satin soft and warm dripping cunt. Poised over her body, James kissed her again, twining tongues and tasting her fragrant breath before pulling back to watch her face as he forged forward, all the way, balls deep into paradise. Bliss, the first moment of sweet surrender, sinking into velvet soft, warm, moist flesh. He knew that he was a good lover. Women were enthusiastic to have repeat performances, but it had never felt this way before. In a moment of clarity he understood the vulnerability of a woman beneath a man and the real meaning of naked. It was the physical and emotional exposure of the soul and heart to a lover. It rocked his

world, *she* rocked his world and he wanted her to feel the same way too.

Shannon gasped and whispered his name as if chanting a spell binding him to her. He really wished there wasn't even a thin latex membrane of protection between them and that he could feel all of her heat as he forged up the narrow passage to her womb. She wrapped her legs around him and urged him on and his thrusts became harder and deeper. It was incredible, he didn't want to stop but he also wanted it to last. He withdrew.

"James, don't leave me," she pleaded.

"I need a taste and I've gotta slow down or it'll be over too soon," he ground out, wanting to extend the experience, wanting to give them both unforgettable pleasure.

He kissed his way down her body and settled his face between her thighs. She hissed and moaned at the first pass of his tongue across her slit and engorged clit.

"Shannon, you taste even better than I thought you would. God, woman, just your scent drives me crazy." She was like a fine wine and he should fully appreciate his first few sips, not guzzle away at her like he felt compelled to do.

Steeling himself, he didn't hurry but almost languidly played around her swollen pussy lips and clit, establishing a slow rhythm and steady pressure. She was already very aroused and it didn't take long before he could feel her beginning to lose control. She reached down and grabbed his hand, their fingers wove together and she held on tightly, anchoring herself to his steadfast grip as she rode the storm, coming hard.

James was overwhelmed for a few seconds. Who would have known that the simple act of holding a lovers hand as they came could convey trust and true intimacy even beyond giving a climax? She was calling his name, begging him to enter her again, and now pure, possessive male lust coursed through his veins. He raised himself up, held her legs wide open at the knees and forged his throbbing cock

forward again through tight wet and hot flesh. Her soft yet taut muscles parted around the invader but gripped hard, clenching against his warm, bone-hard length.

“James,” she cried out as the delicious friction of his cock against her channel took her plummeting over the edge again.

She was so wet now after her second climax that he slid like a well-greased piston, working back and forth between her legs. He could feel her regular squeezes, milking away at his resolve to slow down and last longer. Lord God, this wasn’t a marathon, but he didn’t want to sprint either. He pulled out again, flipped her over onto her stomach and pulled back on her hips so that she was on all fours, leaning lower on her forearms, pushing her ass further up. From this angle he could clearly see her cream coated cunt, all puffy and glistening as a shaft of sunlight lay across her ass. *Beautiful.*

Shannon was panting hard. She parted her legs wider and pushed her shoulders lower on the mattress, displaying her ass like a target with a red bulls-eye clearly in sight. He growled, his playfulness was lost, and he became fierce with lust. She looked over her shoulder, her face an expression of wanton desire. She mouthed only two words but they were more than enough.

* * * *

“Fuck me.”

She had climaxed twice already but still felt incredibly heated and aroused. When he’d withdrawn from her body she’d felt empty at the loss, her soft yet muscular walls clenching uselessly at nothing. She needed him inside her again and sighed in relief and almost desperation when she felt him position up close behind her with his cockhead snuggled between the tender folds of her pussy.

With his hands holding her hips he pushed forward at the same time as pulling her back onto him. From this angle she felt stuffed full of his cock, it stretched her channel even more, the head butting

against her cervix. She felt impaled and cried out with both pleasure and discomfort. He held still inside her for a moment, taking the time to run his hands over her breasts, torso, and ass before alighting on her tender bud, alive with overstimulated nerve endings. From around the base of his cock he coated his thumb with her cream and used it to lube up her asshole. It felt exquisite as he began to rock against her again whilst pushing his thumb through her tight, constricting sphincter.

“Oh, God, James, that feels fantastic.”

“Darlin’, imagine how it’ll feel when it’s my cock and not my thumb breaching you?”

She stiffened. “I’ve never done that before,” she muttered into her arms, her head down.

James gently pulled on her hair and she looked back over her shoulder.

“When you’re ready, baby, it’ll feel amazing. We’ll make you feel so good.” He almost cooed the words, softly reassuring her.

Shannon remembered that she was looking at a ménage situation in the very near future and thought that at least she might die of pleasure first, before she died of embarrassment. The erotic image had her dropping her head again and pushing back against his hand and cock.

* * * *

James groaned as she moved on him, bouncing her heart shaped ass against his groin.

“You feel wonderfully, baby, so hot and snug that I don’t ever what to leave.”

He heard her moan and took control intensifying the thrusts of his hips and hand, quickening the pace and deepening penetration. Soon he could feel the ripples begin in her pussy and then strong spasms as she came around him, clenching tightly on his thumb and howling his

name. He grunted at the familiar throbbing of his cock and tightening of his balls as she milked him. Like crackles of electricity the sensation shot from the tip of his cock, up his spine and back again—he came. With scrambled thoughts he wished he were splattering the inside of her womb with his semen and not the latex reservoir of the condom he was wearing. God though, it felt superb, she was magnificent, and she would be his...theirs.

For a few minutes more Shannon stayed on all fours as he continued to gently stroke in and out, reveling in the torturous pleasure of her pussy still fluttering and spasming around his ultra sensitive cock. She mewed, enjoying the aftershocks that he could feel. When he began to soften he pulled from her warm embrace, not wanting to risk conception. He had emptied his full balls into the condom but didn't want to risk a leak and one of the little critters hijacking a fertile egg, not yet anyway. They collapsed sideways, limbs entangled and breathing hard.

"I've felt deprived all week after hearing about you from Luke, seeing you suck his cock and kiss him. Now I know what I was missing and it was worth the wait."

"Wow, a whole week? I'm surprised you didn't expire with the tension," she joked tartly.

James raised himself on his elbow and kissed her neck. "You don't know how hard it was because you don't know how I feel about you."

Shannon sighed, "No I don't, it's all happened so fast."

"I've never felt this way about anyone but I think I'm...I'm in love with you." He faltered, tripping over his own words. It was as if hearing them spoken aloud somehow validated and confirmed his feelings. "No, I *know* I'm in love with you."

She turned her face and smiled softly. "That's a good start to a relationship."

“Yeah, and hell, it sure makes for amazing sex.” He chuckled. He never would have believed how much better it was with someone he loved.

“I’m sure that you have always been a grade-A lover. For me it was wonderful,” she murmured.

“It’s not just the sex, Shannon. I think you’re great and I like you.” He squeezed her hand in his and held it to his heart.

“I wasn’t looking for a relationship or love, but I’ve found it anyway. I feel confused because I also love Luke. That should mean that I don’t love either of you enough, but it isn’t that way at all. Instead I feel that my heart has grown to accommodate you both.”

James felt elated; this was what a woman who truly loved two men should feel. She didn’t get it yet, but she would.

“That’s as it should be, Shannon, like I told you on Look Out hill, there isn’t a finite supply of love, and you don’t have to rob Peter to pay Paul.”

“You are really okay with it? You haven’t had to share someone you loved before.”

“Sure I have, I love all my family don’t I? Okay, not sexually but it is just a different sort of love.”

“You have a silver tongue, you know that?”

“Yeah, but just to be sure let me show you again.”

* * * *

“We have an early start tomorrow. Luke will pick Shannon up early at about five thirty, unless you want to drop her off here at around six, Rachael? James asked as he piled some apple pie onto his plate.

Shannon reckoned he needed the extra calories after the wonderful afternoon they’d shared. They were all enjoying an impromptu dinner at the ranch. Mitch had swung by to visit Janet, and as Shannon and

James hadn't emerged until early evening, Joshua had asked Isabella to cook for three more people.

"I'll do it, because then I can have Josh with breakfast. I mean breakfast with Josh." Rachael said, flustered.

"You were probably right the first time," muttered Shannon.

Rachael smirked at her. "Will you eat here or on the trail, James?"

"We'll have a coffee and something to eat here first because it means we'll carry less with us." He turned to Shannon and smiled. "Of course we can call for food to be delivered to the camps but this way is more authentic, like it was in the old days. Unless someone is staying at a camp for a while we usually take all we need with us."

"Sounds great, I'm looking forward to it." Shannon grinned with excitement.

After dinner their men walked them to the Jeep. Joshua picked Rachael up in a hug and whispered something in her ear that caused her to give a little moan. James gave Shannon a light but sensual kiss on the lips and leaned his forehead close to hers.

"Get a good night's sleep and I'll see you bright and early tomorrow," he advised softly.

The girls were quiet until they had driven clear of the yard, then the giggles started.

"Jesus, Rach, this whole place is—"

"Intense." Rachael finished for her. "I know, but it's wonderful. I've never been so—"

"Happy." Shannon followed through. "I can tell. Wow, the guys here are—"

"Amazing!" they both laughed together.

"Sore wrist, Rach?" Shannon had noticed what looked like chafe marks on one of Rachael's wrists.

"A little. God, that man takes me and makes me seven ways 'til Sunday." She sighed, looking wistful. "Variety is definitely the spice of life, and with two guys to keep you occupied, you aren't going to be bored any time soon either."

Shannon almost shrieked, “Oh Lordy, on their own they are potent, together they’ll be dynamite, I’ll explode!” Suddenly she grew quiet. “Actually the thought of it is a bit frightening to tell you the truth. Don’t you get at all scared of Joshua?”

“Terrified *and* excited. Thrilled I guess is the right word, but that’s because I trust him with my life and with my heart.”

“Rach, I’m in love with two men,” she snorted, “and yeah, even though it’s utter madness, it feels thrilling.” She suddenly sobered up. “I’m not sure that we can have a serious relationship though. The logistics aren’t good.” Already she knew that there would be serious heartache when she left.

“Just go with the flow, enjoy this holiday, and open your mind to the possibilities. Look, I won’t deny that I have more than a passing interest in getting you to stay here, but I wouldn’t put that above and before your happiness.”

“I know that, Rachael, you’re my best friend. It just all seems to have happened so fast. I’m waiting for the banana skin.” Shannon grimaced. “What about my work? My home? God I sound like such a Johnny Raincloud.”

“A home is where the heart is. You can work anywhere. You could start up a consultancy here. I’m not saying that there aren’t a few hurdles to jump, but I think that it would be worth it for James and Luke.”

Shannon nodded. “I’m passionate about my work, Rachael, like you are, but now, since meeting them, I want to make room in my life for love. There’s something about this place that makes me rethink my priorities.”

Rachael snorted. “Yeah, tell me about it.”

The girls decided to make it an early night, knowing that they had to get over to Sweet Water by six the next morning.

As Rachael went to her room she called up to Shannon, “Don’t forget to pack the most important things.”

“Sun-cream?”

Rachael laughed heartily. "Condoms and lube, although sun-cream might work if you forget the latter."

"Rachael!" Shannon shrieked.

She tried not to think too much about why Rachael might think she needed lube. No way was she ready for that yet.

After she had packed very lightly, Shannon lay in bed and decided to call Luke to say goodnight. As she reached for her phone it rang. It was the man himself.

"Hi, honey, how ya' doin'?" His low drawl sounded tender.

Even over the phone his rich, baritone voice was a slow, smooth sensual caress of her auditory senses. She closed her eyes and let the feeling flow through her. She had been a little worried that she wouldn't feel the same way about him after having slept with James, but that simply wasn't the case. On hearing his voice the tension slipped away like a heavy cloak falling to the floor.

"Luke," she breathed softly. Somehow that single word conveyed a quiet confidence of possession, and desire. She still wanted him. "I'm feeling better than fine. I've had a lovely day but I'm in bed now, we've an early start tomorrow. I was just about to call you to say goodnight."

"Did James tire you out, honey?" He chuckled.

So that's the way it was. She felt her face heat up and was glad that he couldn't see her.

"Has James given you an in-depth debrief?" she asked, unsure how she felt about that.

"Not a complete *blow-by-blow* account, but we talk about what concerns us both, and what concerns us most is you."

"Oh. Well if you want to know, we had a great time."

"I do want to know, honey...in detail."

"Maybe we should just show you." It was a risky statement but she felt secure. She was only flirting on the phone; it was the ultimate safe sex.

“Shannon, careful with your teasing, honey, you’re pulling a tiger by the tail.” He sounded amused but also a little dark and edgy—irresistible.

She gave a husky, short laugh. “Pulling something else between his legs I think.”

He groaned. “I’ll be uncomfortable all night. You’ll pay for that, darlin’. What are you wearing?”

A pair of beige baggy boxers and an old T-shirt...not likely! It’s time for some improvisation.

“I was just getting undressed. I’m wearing my black lace thong and matching bra, why?” Oh, she was going to hell with that whopper. She had to repress the giggle that bubbled near the surface.

Luke groaned. “Lie on your bed and take your bra off. Put your phone’s speaker on. Touch yourself, Shannon. Pluck your nipples.”

She threw off the T-shirt and lay on the bed. With her phone on the pillow next to her she did as he instructed.

“Okay. Oh, that feels nice.” It really did

“Pinch them harder, Shannon.” He sounded strained.

She increased the pressure of her thumbs and index fingers and gasped.

“Move your right hand inside your panties and finger your pussy. Is it wet?”

She delved into her boxers.

“Yes.” She was slick and getting wetter by the second.

“Move the scrap of material aside and describe your cunt.”

Oh God. She pushed the boxers down to her ankles with one hand.

“My curls have droplets of moisture. My labia are very red and swollen.” She was so turned on that her breathing became shallower and her voice trembled. “My finger is coated with thick, slick, cream.”

“Use that finger to strum your clit.” His words dripped with desire. “Tomorrow it’ll be my hand there, my tongue pressing against

your little bud, teasing back the hood, sucking and licking you to oblivion.”

Her breathing sped up as she rubbed herself faster. “Luke, I’m going to come soon.”

“Stop!” His voice was harsh and commanding.

She froze, shocked “What?”

“Don’t you dare come, O’Reilly. Not without me. Take your hand out of your panties, now.”

“But—”

“Do it!”

Fucking hell, this was a different side to the man. If he kept it up she might just reach a climax without touching herself. She held still, bound by just his vocal chords.

“Promise me that you’ll not touch yourself.”

I must not tell lies, I must not tell lies. “Okay,” she said hesitantly. There was a lot of leeway and room to maneuver in that promise.

“Promise that you won’t have an orgasm until I say so.”

Oh, rotten heck. “I promise,” she said reluctantly. She yanked her boxers up.

“I have to trust your word, Shannon, don’t let me down. I’ll see you tomorrow morning at Sweet Water.

She grumbled “Luke, I—”

“You’ll do what I say and stop pouting.”

How did he know? She retracted her bottom lip.

His voice softened. “I sympathize with you, honey. We’ll both be frustrated and uncomfortable tonight.”

“Uncomfortable? I’ll be in agony, you meanie.”

She meant it. Even though James had thoroughly sated her, Luke had fanned the embers of her passion until they were ready to burst into flame again. Her pussy was in need of his big cock or at the very least a little clutching climax, but no, the bastard was denying her.

He chuckled, “I’ll scratch that itch for you good and proper tomorrow. Goodnight, sweet dreams, darlin’.” He disconnected the call.

“Ahhh, curse you!”

Even so, horny as hell, she followed his command and didn’t finish what they’d started... and that annoyed her even more.

Chapter 17

After a light breakfast at the Sweet Water ranch house, Shannon had packed her few things into what little space was left in the saddlebags and said goodbye to Joshua and Rachael. They had trotted away, side by side with her in the middle—no surprise there—leaving behind the ranch buildings, roads, and Rachael waving. A shaggy long legged mutt, aptly named Rug, was accompanying them and seemed to have no problem keeping up.

Throughout the morning they had intermittently walked and trotted, encountering fewer fences and signs of civilization. The air temperature was still pleasant and Shannon was enjoying listening to only natural sounds. There were no engines, no electrical droning of any kind, no radio or television, just the creaking of leather, hooves clopping on earth, the rustle of wind over vegetation and, her favorite sound, the resonating tones of Luke's and James's voices as they talked about the ranch and pointed out things of interest as they passed by.

"The oil and gas wells are now our primary source of income. We have about a thousand head of cattle, which is less than the ranch can easily accommodate. Too many animals can cause problems of soil erosion and feeding during winter when there is less grass available. We don't see the point in exhausting the land when we don't need to. It's ironic really but the oil wells have, in effect, resulted in less pressure on other resources. We do it old school, that's free range and no routine use of antibiotics and hormones."

"Yeah, and it also gives you an excuse to do a roundup. He sure likes to be a cowboy." Luke laughed good-naturedly.

“I can’t argue with that, it’s true. The main herd still makes a profit, but when compared to the oil income they are really more of a lifestyle choice, and as I’ve already said Sweet Water has been a Ryden ranch since 1900. We excel with our breed stock and have fine thoroughbred Angus, and Charolais bulls. Our herd is mostly crossbred Brahman-Brangus and Angus-Charolais. Our best bulls are highly prized for their stud value.”

The same could be true of the Sweet Water men, she thought, obviously including Luke in that. When she had first laid eyes on them both that morning she could have been forgiven for thinking that she had walked into the set of some western and that the hunky handsome heroes were before her.

She snuck a sideways glance at James, the typical cowboy. He really was gorgeous and looked particularly hot with leather chaps over jeans and a gun at his hip. She also noted a rifle holstered in his saddle, maybe she would have a go at shooting later, if there was time. Luke looked just as hot with his hat pulled down low over his eyes. His darker looks made him seem more like the dangerous gunslinger.

She thought back to the hippy, guitar toting, free spirited guys that she’d fancied in the past and how different they were to the men riding next to her. James and Luke were comfortable in their world, not riling against it. They were strong, capable men who would protect her, their family and friends, and she found that quite thrilling. It was ironic that she’d found love in the most unlikely of places with the most unlikely of men.

She began to realize that riding with soggy panties wasn’t a great idea and that she hadn’t packed nearly enough changes. She needed to stop thinking about what they could do together, *had* done individually, between her thighs.

“You must be kept pretty busy with cattle, oil, and an engineering company to think about,” she said to James. It occurred to her that here was a man who could actually multitask.

“I’m never short of things to do, but I’m not alone and I delegate. Obviously Joshua and Janet have a stake and interest in Sweet Oil and the Sweet Water ranch, although in terms of effort it’s mainly me and Josh because Janet’s only just finishing college. Being the oldest and working the hardest to grow the business to what it is today, Joshua has the biggest interest. We have a foreman and hands at the ranch and Josh and I are physically based here, but there is a Sweet Oil office in Houston where our management, sales, and administration staff are based. The operations guys are at the well sites. Luke has the most involvement in managing M&R Engineering. No prizes for figuring out the name.”

Suddenly Rug began to growl and then took off into the bush with a yap.

“What’s that about?”

“Oh, probably got wind of a wild hog, we get a lot of them and Rug sure loves to chase ’em.” He whistled loudly and within a minute the hound returned panting, with his long tongue lolling around. “How are you finding the saddle?”

“It is the most comfortable I’ve ever sat in, and much better for a long journey than the kind I’m used to.”

“Want to try it out at a gallop? We aren’t far from our first water stop. The river is just over there.” He pointed to a line of trees. “Let’s see if you can keep up. Ya!” he whooped, urging his mount on without waiting for her answer.

Luke grinned like a maniac at her, hollered and took off after him. Shannon wasn’t about to be outdone. Her horse sprang forward in delight as she gave it a little kick and leaned forward in the saddle yelling, “C’mon girl.” It was exhilarating, as the animal’s long strides had the ground flying by beneath them. Poor Rug was left to follow in the dust.

Ten minutes later with barely half a horse’s length between them, they came to the river and pulled up their mounts. Both horses and riders were breathing hard.

“That was great,” Shannon laughed, “I might have taken you both if you hadn’t had a head start.”

“Really? Remind me to let you go first next time,” James drawled sexily, giving her a thorough looking over.

She snorted, “Luke, you were right, he does have a one-track mind.”

“Many tracks, darlin’, but just one train of thought...you,” James winked. With athletic grace he swung down from the saddle.

“Oh, *puleeze*.” She rolled her eyes and began to slide down to the ground.

Her feet never connected to the earth as strong hands held her waist and then flipped her around to enfold her in a full warm embrace.

“Okay, if you’re begging me.” He smiled and brought his mouth down hard on hers.

Each and every darn time he kissed her it sent her into a tailspin. It was ridiculous, it was wonderful, and she couldn’t get enough. Something very long and hard brushed against her leg. *What the heck? That’s some serious muscle control!* Then she realized that Rug had finally caught up with them and wanted some attention too. She started to giggle and James eased away looking puzzled.

“Rug wants in on the action,” she chuckled pointing down to where his snout nuzzled between them.

“He’s not the only one.” Luke deftly tackled her from James, spun her around and kissed her so sensually and completely that she was panting for air when he pulled away.

James scowled, “I’ll make a darn rug out of that dog if he doesn’t give over. Rug sit!”

The dog obediently parked his ass down in the dirt.

“Good boy. Go drink.” He pointed to the river and immediately Rug trotted off to the river’s edge and began to lap up the cool water.

“He’s a well trained dog.” Shannon was impressed.

“Most things can be trained with a little time and patience.” He looked down at her with an arrogant crooked smile.

“Really? Most things? Sit!” she said sternly looking up at him. “I think you’re going to take some effort.”

James snorted. “He’s a cow dog, smart, and great at herding. I’m a cowboy, smart and great at—” He paused. “Well, you know.”

Boy, did she ever.

“You met his sire, Ben, the other day at Luke’s parents’ house. His only weakness is chasing after hogs. Mine is chasing after you. Come on, let’s loosen the saddles and give the horses a drink before you distract me again.”

“Something can’t be called a distraction if you were actually looking for it,” she announced snootily.

“Baby, you’re right, everything else is the darn distraction from you,” he huffed as he led the horses to the water, leaving Shannon feeling surprised and, yes, she had to admit it, a little flattered.

After the horses had their fill of water, they led them along the riverbank on foot to give their own legs a stretch. James explained that they would follow the river for about an hour, cross, stop for lunch, and take a break from the afternoon heat. They would resume riding again for another two hours until they reached a water hole where they would make camp for the night.

Sure enough, just over an hour later an obvious place to cross the river came into view. There were large slabs of stone and shallow pools, the water came up to the belly of her horse but no deeper and her boots didn’t get wet.

“It’s beautiful here,” Shannon commented as she dismounted on the other side of the river. She loosened Sunny’s saddle and tied the mare under a tree in the shade. It was just past midday and the temperature had risen uncomfortably high.

“Yep, the water is cool and fresh. Fancy a swim?” Luke said as he strolled over and pulled Sunny’s saddle off completely. “We’ll break for a couple of hours until the air’s a bit cooler”

“I didn’t bring my swimsuit.”

The two men looked at her with enough heat to warm the water. James cocked his head. “Neither did I. Did you, Luke?”

“Nope, but I don’t mind if you don’t.”

“Are you trying to get me naked?” She narrowed her eyes at them and pursed her mouth in a mock scowl.

“Yep. We could promise not to peek, but we all know that’d be a lie.”

Shannon couldn’t help but rake her eyes over Luke’s frame as he stood about four yards away.

“Okay,” she breezed, “you first.” She put her hands on her hips and waited.

“Sure.” He shrugged. He stripped down quickly and methodically until he stood in all his naked glory, arms hanging relaxed at his side in a nonthreatening stance, completely at ease, even with his flag at full mast. Another thing she now knew about Luke, he wasn’t shy and definitely not a shrinking violet. It occurred to Shannon that even though he was nude he didn’t look it because there was nothing vulnerable about his exposed body. He was dressed in hard muscle and tanned skin, except for his ass, which was comically white. “Your turn.” He grinned.

“No, I think Mr. Ryden here should go next.”

James shrugged and peeled off his clothes, only he did it in a more teasing manner, drawing out the final exposure of his beautiful, long, thick cock. Goodness, they were both a sight for sore eyes and a tempting feast for a hungry pussy.

“What if someone else comes?”

“Honey, no one is coming...except us.”

Why oh why did he have to say that? She’d be peeling her panties off as it was.

“If anyone else appears I’ll save your honor by shooting them, okay?”

She couldn't help but laugh. Luke had a knack for putting her at ease when he wanted to. He could also make her feel hot and bothered. Slowly she undressed and tried to avoid his now burning gaze. Funnily enough, standing naked in the full light of day didn't feel that uncomfortable, although Shannon knew that she couldn't expose her skin to the sun for very long, it actually felt wonderful and almost liberating.

James stalked quickly toward her and picked her up. "I don't want you hurting those bare soft little feet," he explained as he carried her to the water's edge with his cock brushing against her butt. "Oh, that's a bit refreshing." He winced as he dipped a foot in the clear water.

"Put me down," Shannon said as he and Luke moved a little deeper.

"In a minute." He laughed.

Shannon realized too late what he was going to do. "Don't you dare!" She squealed as he dumped her into a waist deep pool. "Ahhh, b—bloody hell, it's freezing." She stuttered. "You bastard, just wait till I get hold of you."

She splashed him and he yelped, "Damn it *is* cold."

"Ow!" she cried, "I think I've cut my foot."

James leaned over, concern showing on his face. "Are you okay?"

"Yes." She hissed as she leapt forward, grabbed his arm and tugged him in. As he overbalanced he grabbed onto Luke who was also pulled deeper.

"That should cool your ardor." Shannon reckoned that there was no way any man could have an erection in water that cold.

James and Luke broke the surface laughing and started horsing around, ducking each other under. They were making such a commotion that Shannon thought she could slip away and get out unnoticed—no chance. James yanked her to him.

“Jesus, O’Reilly, you’d better be careful, you could poke someone’s eye out with those,” he said, looking at her very erect puckered nipples.

“Only yours,” she warned as she put her arms around his neck and her legs around his waist.

“Well you know what they say? In the kingdom of the blind, the one eyed man is king.” He looked down at his cock, which admittedly had shrank somewhat but was rallying again with her wrapped around him. She could feel it thickening against the warmth of her sex.

“Jesus, have you taken Viagra and cocaine?”

“Honey, love is the drug.” He winked then shuddered. “But my poor testicles feel a bit cold. I think they’re trying to climb back up into my body.” He adopted a mournful tone. “My penis needs a nice warm muff to snuggle into.”

Shannon snorted, “My fanny’s freezing, it’s numb, but I can feel the hot sun on my shoulders, perhaps we should get out and move to a shady spot, like under that tree?”

James carried her out of the water, one hand on her ass, the other around her waist and stood on the grass. She locked her ankles behind his back for more support and hugged him tighter.

“Well, if that isn’t a fine sight,” Luke drawled, glancing over at them as he grabbed two large blankets from the backs of their saddles and laid them under a large leafy tree.

It really didn’t seem to bother Luke that she was naked and wound around James. They all lay down on the blankets with Shannon in the middle again and the guys sprawled out on their sides, facing her. She rolled onto her front, and propped up on herself up on her elbows and forearms. She felt a little less exposed in this position but had an inkling it wouldn’t last long. Luke caressed her back while he nuzzled her shoulder with his cheek and lips.

“I could get used to having you with me on the range. There are some definite fringe benefits,” James murmured as he lazily traced his fingers along her arm and then under to play with her nipples.

"I bet this goes down well with whomever you bring out here," she murmured with a brief tight smile, her insecurities showing.

"I've never brought a girlfriend on a trail ride with me before."

"Me neither," Luke added.

"Really?"

"Really."

She felt relief and knew that she was being ridiculous, because so what if others had been here before her? Logically it shouldn't lessen the moment, because it would have occurred before she knew them. Yet she did feel happier knowing that it wasn't so.

"Listen, Shannon, we don't want you to think that all we want to do is fuck you. I mean of course we want to, but we want you to get to know us and to feel comfortable with us both around. Ménages are about good dynamics between more than two people." Luke stroked down her torso, hip, and outer thigh as he spoke.

"I'm just not ready for d—" She faltered. "d—double penetration yet, but perhaps we could explore some other of those fringe benefits together?"

"We'll take it slowly, Shannon, and if you feel uncomfortable about anything we'll stop, okay?" James watched her face as he rolled her nipple between his finger and thumb.

She swallowed down a gulp and nodded.

"Were you a good girl last night? Did you obey me and not come?" Luke asked as he cocked his head to one side with an amused expression on his face.

Shannon frowned. "Obey?" That word lodged itself in her throat and her mind. Had she obeyed when he had told her not to come? "I prefer the word complied." In her mind there was a difference.

He gave a low deep chuckle. "But you wanted to come."

"Yes, but I wanted to wait for *you* more."

She heard his breath hitch before he said, "The waiting's over."

At some unspoken signal they pulled her over so that she was on her back and suddenly their hands and lips were everywhere. She lost

track of who or what was touching her where. It felt heavenly and decadent. After a few minutes or maybe it was longer, they settled down, breathing deeply. James began to lavish all his attention on her breasts, while Luke kissed her face and mouth.

“Darlin’, we’re gonna take good care of you,” Luke whispered.

His hands traveled southwards, tracing swirling patterns in her skin like magical runes, bonding them all together. His fingers finally found their way between her thighs and she shifted her legs a little farther apart to give him the access they both desired.

He gently slipped his finger through her swollen, hot, and sensitive folds. It slid along her seam, back and forth, gathering her slick cream before plunging up and deep inside her. A moan escaped her lips and James responded by sucking more forcibly on her nipple while rolling the other a little harder between his finger and thumb. She arched her back in response to the pleasure that zipped through her body.

Luke stopped kissing her to watch James.

“Hot damn but she has the sexiest, longest nipples.”

It was true. What she didn’t have in the overall breast size department she made up for where it counted. They were darn sensitive too.

“I bet they’re sensitive, aren’t they, honey?”

Luke seemed to have a knack of knowing what she liked.

“Yes, very.”

“And I bet you’re sensitive here too.” With those words he hooked his finger inside her and gently fluttered it against that secret place on the wall of her pussy.

“Oh. My. God.” She panted and keened.

Her back arched and she ground her hips upwards against his hand. If he kept that up she would be climaxing very quickly.

“Whatever you’re doing, man, our woman loves it.” James had stopped playing with her breasts for a minute and was watching her face intently.

"I've found her sweet spot. Hell, you should feel how tight she's gripping me and all those little ripples..." He groaned. "I can hardly wait until it's my cock in there."

The way they spoke about her, in intimate, crude detail, it should have shocked her out of this fevered lust. Instead it had the opposite effect.

"You're right, I should feel for myself," James responded quickly.

Suddenly Shannon felt another hand at her entrance.

"Oh, honey, you're so wet." James slowly worked his finger in alongside Luke's. "Hell, that's amazing, she's gripping tighter than a pair of Steven Tyler's pants. Where is it?"

Shannon felt Luke move his finger over and James's replaced it to touch the pleasure point.

"Yes, oh, yes, there," she cried out softly.

James gently rubbed and pressed.

"Oh, oh, that feels incredible."

"It certainly does." James closed his eyes for a second.

Luke pumped his finger in and out and James massaged her G-spot. She gained altitude quickly, climbing toward release. Luke pressed his finger against her muscular wall, down toward her lower spine, in the opposite direction to her G-spot. At the same time he rubbed her clit with his thumb. It blasted her into orbit. She screamed and bucked, clamping down on their fingers, slamming her thighs closed on their hands.

"Partner, she's not letting us go." James chuckled.

After several long seconds she slumped back onto the blanket and relaxed her legs. She was vaguely aware that she had held their free hands tightly in hers. Luke leaned over for a deep yet quick kiss, only to be replaced by James a split second later. They slid their fingers out of her now sopping cunt. When she released their hands they immediately did something that looked an awful lot like "rock, paper, scissors."

Luke gave a triumphant sounding "Ha!"

What were they up to? Shannon slowly gained her breath back and smiled. “Just give me a moment will you? I’m coming back down to earth.” She sighed contentedly.

“No, honey, you’re not.” Luke’s deep voice took on a darker timbre.

Before she knew what was happening she felt her legs being spread farther as Luke settled between them. She looked down and saw that he was rolling on a condom. Unprepared for the shot of lust and desire that hit her right between the thighs, she gasped. James was rolling one on too.

“It’s all right, Shannon; we’ll go one cock at a time. All you have to do is relax, feel, and enjoy.” James was back to plucking her nipples and kissing the neck. Relax? Impossible, her body felt like one huge erogenous zone with them.

* * * *

Luke didn’t hang around. To the victor go the spoils, whether it was war or merely “rock, paper, scissors.” He was up first. He rubbed his cock along her slick, pouting pussy, gathering her natural lubricant, and then surged forward into her sweltering core. He leaned over her, resting his hands on the ground on either side of her for leverage, and flexed his powerful flanks as he fucked his way into her again and again. He knew that if he kept up this pace it would be over too soon, so he slowed down to savor the friction and squeeze of her muscles against his hard length. He adjusted his angle to slide against her clit.

Shannon moaned, “That feels sooo good.”

“So fucking good, darlin’. I love the way you grip and push around my cock. Oh, baby, hot damn, but you sure know how to please a man.”

Her heavy lidded, half closed eyes seemed to lose focus as her mouth opened wider to catch her breath and release a moan. The urge

to possess her, to ram his cock deep and butt against her cervix, raged in his veins. With monumental effort he tampered it down. He didn't want to hurt her and there was still James to come, who he doubted would show the same restraint.

She must have seen the struggle in his eyes. "Faster, Luke, don't hold back," she encouraged.

It amazed him that she seemed to know what he needed. He couldn't help but increase the speed and force of his thrusts.

"Honey, your neat, sweet, pert breasts bounce beautifully. One day I'll have my cock between them while Luke makes 'em jiggle and sway, pounding into that pussy of yours like he is now."

This is what James did. He liked to conjure up erotic images for everyone to enjoy.

"I won't wear a condom. I'll come all over your tits and watch you lick them clean."

Fuck, James was sure feeling inspired today. Luke closed his eyes, imagining Shannon covered in cum. Christ, he wasn't going to last much longer, but when he looked at her he didn't think that she was either. She was panting and making small mewling sounds, looking more wanton and aroused than ever. He heard an erotic squelching sound as he continued to ram his cock into her soaking core.

"A little help here with her clit, partner," he said, shifting back to make room for James's hand.

James licked his middle finger and rubbed it around Shannon's swollen bud until she shrieked. Luke saw James clamp his mouth over hers, stealing the sound of her climax as her body jerked uncontrollably. His cock felt on fire with the effort of holding back until she came. Now he could let go, and with one final shove he came with the pressure of a geyser.

He heard her soft moans through the pounding beat of his heart. Had he been too much for her? Too rough?

He was about to express concern when, unbelievably, he heard her feminine, soft voice say, “That was absolutely amazing, Luke. Now can James fuck me please?”

At that moment any doubts he may have had fled. Shannon, their woman, couldn’t get enough of them, and he didn’t think he’d ever get enough of her. Unfortunately he wasn’t going to get the chance to bask in the snug, warm delight of her pussy. James pushed him off her with a desperation Luke had never seen before, and buried his face between her legs. He tongued her hard and fast. Luke watched as Shannon writhed, clutching at the cloth she lay on. He saw James lick her from ass to clit and then suck on the sweet nubbin like a baby on its mama’s teat.

Shannon howled, “Oh, God, it’s too much!” as she came again, but she didn’t tell James to stop. Instead she cried, “I need you inside me now!”

When James lifted his head Luke thought that the man looked almost rabid. His face was wet with her juices, his expression wild with passion, and his cock the biggest Luke had ever seen. James swiftly impaled her, coming to rest balls deep, with an animalistic cry thrown from his throat. He waited for a moment, clearly savoring the feel of her hot, wet cunt clasping him. Then, when she tilted her hips and pushed up, he went at her like a man possessed.

Shannon became a thing of raw need and savage passion and it was a sight to behold. She unclasped her legs from around James’s waist, letting her legs fall further open and pushed herself up on her elbows and feet to meet his thrusts.

“Fuck me, fuck me harder,” she demanded through gritted teeth.

With a deep growl James pulled out, flipped her over, and pulled her up onto all fours and straight back onto his glistening cock. It was all Luke could do to only watch and not grab her hair and shove his cock into that passion slackened mouth. Christ, James was really going at her now, plowing deep and hard and she was pushing back against him, yelling, “Yes, yes, yes.”

He'd never before seen James be so utterly beyond control as he was now, ravishing Shannon. He'd never seen a woman so unreserved in wanting it all. They copulated like animals rutting in mating season. Luke could hear the loud slap of James's balls against her pussy. Then Shannon reared up and James held her tightly to him, his arms crossed over at her waist. She howled and shuddered while he roared and flexed his hips one last time. Holy fuck.

"Are you okay, baby?" Luke asked after what seemed an eternity.

She held out her arms to him and James released her, his cock slipping out as she fell into Luke's arms. James flopped down onto the blanket and rolled to the side, making room for both him and Shannon. He gently laid her next to James, cuddled up to her and softly kissed her cheek.

"Shannon, are you okay?" James repeated the question. "I...I got a bit carried away. I'm sorry."

"Don't be. I got carried away, too, and I'm not sorry," she said, ruffling James hair with a dreamy look on her face. "I love you both."

Those four words jolted his heart. He looked over her shoulder at James and saw the reflection of what he was feeling on his face. They lay together and their breathing eased and settled as they all drifted off into a post coital nap.

* * * *

It was early evening, an hour before sunset when they reached the first camp. Shannon was relieved because for the last half an hour she'd felt a little uncomfortable and tender between her thighs, as she'd rocked gently in the saddle.

Shannon could see only a little evidence of previous human occupation. There was a circle of stones and blackened earth, a large pile of wood, two long horizontal tree trunks that she guessed were used for sitting on, a cooking tripod, and a metal box which James said held some emergency supplies. There were a few trees, but the

surrounding ground was mainly covered in grass and low scrub. She had noticed that the farther they moved from the river the fewer trees there were. They removed the saddles and bridles and gave the horses a rubdown. About thirty-five yards away from the camp there was a chain staked into the ground and Luke tethered the horses to it. It was long enough to allow them to graze and reach the water.

Shannon watched as James started a fire with a little lighter fuel and some dried grass. He moved with a precision and competence that she envied. As he worked he explained that when they next came this way with vehicles they would replenish the wood supply.

“We try not to disturb the land too much. The small collapsible shovel is for digging a hole and burying your business, the paper bags are for used toilet paper if we have a fire to burn it on. Basically pick a direction away from the water, walk at least thirty yards, stamp your feet and double check for snakes, dig, squat, and cover. Simple.”

“What, no bidet?” She faked shock. She’d camped in much worse spots on her travels.

“Nah, you’ll have to wash your ass in the water hole.”

“The same water that we’ll be drinking from? Eeuw!”

“Not today, I filled up the canteens from the river, but yeah, sometimes we use the water here. I have a small hand pump filter that takes out germs and bacteria but it is a bit of a mission. It’s easier to strain the water through some cloth and then leave it in the pot over the fire. Most bugs are killed after twenty minutes of boiling. I’ll also boil the river water to be on the safe side.”

Soon they had some hot coffee and ate a simple meal of spaghetti with bolognese sauce from a foil packet. She found it surprisingly tasty. There was some of Isabella’s homemade pecan pie for pudding. Rug had a bowl of pellets. It was a warm evening and Shannon marveled at the beautiful orange and purple hues of the big, open sky as the sun sank low on the horizon.

“I brought along a little treat,” Luke said, rifling through a pack. He produced a bottle of Green Spot.

“Wow,” chirped Shannon in delight. “Pure pot stillied Irish Whiskey. Okay, I’m definitely keeping you.” She grinned at him in delight. “You remembered that I’m partial to a little *uisce beatha*.” When he looked blank she added, “That’s the ancient Gaelic word for whiskey, which literally translated means ‘water of life.’”

“I’ll not argue with that.” He chuckled, pouring them all a generous measure. “To all delicious Irish things.” He toasted, clinking his enamel cup against hers and James’s.

James asked her about her family and she found herself talking about her mother and how, because of her strong Catholic convictions her mother hadn’t accepted the divorce from her father. It was something she often found very difficult to discuss. They listened patiently.

“It was horrible. I felt so sorry for my mother, but there wasn’t any love left between them. Anyway, times change, Ireland modernized, and my dad managed to get his divorce years later and marry the mother of his three younger daughters. As far as my mother is concerned she is still married in the eyes of God and the church until death do they part and she hasn’t allowed love into her life again.”

“That’s sad. Are you close to your mom?” James asked as Luke got up and threw a small log on the fire. Sparks flew into the approaching night air.

She answered honestly. “I love her, but no, we aren’t really close, I’m not religious and we have little in common. Truth be told I get on better with my dad. My brothers don’t live too far away and they see her and occasionally go to church with her.”

“I guess because my parents aren’t alive I consider what family I have got to be really important. Would a relationship with us cause a problem for you?”

How could she tell them that it would go over about as well as a pregnant pole-vaulter?

“Maybe, it would depend.”

“On what?”

“On how much I tell them,” she sighed. “I wouldn’t want to lie but I think me Ma would go ballistic. Me Da would probably be okay, eventually. Me brothers would probably want to kill you.” She gave as joyless chuckle. Her accent thickened as it always did when she was bothered about something. Despite her attempted cool demeanor, it gave her away.

“James and I have been brought up in ménage families, and it’s easy for us to forget that others may have a real objection to it,” Luke said as he sat back down next to her.

Shannon sighed. “Out here I’m finding it hard to be too worried about anything. It seems as if just *being* is enough. Thanks for bringing me. I didn’t realize how much I needed a break.”

For the first time in a while she felt cozy and peaceful and it wasn’t just because of the whiskey.

“Now I feel a bit selfish.” Luke said. “We’re not exactly letting you get some rest and relaxation.”

“No, don’t be daft. I’m having a great time. Anyway, they say that a change is as good as a rest.”

In reality she’d had a lot of changes and she did need a rest, so it wasn’t really a relevant remark, but she didn’t want them to feel bad about pursuing her, and she was enjoying herself.

James stood up. “We’d better do our ablutions before it gets too dark, the water is fine for brushing teeth as long as you don’t swallow too much.”

Shannon reckoned she only needed a quick “lick and a promise” of a wash. They’d done a thorough job in the river earlier that afternoon, after waking up from their Olympian, sweaty, sex-induced nap.

She stood up to get her wash bag and groaned in discomfort. “Oh goodness, my legs are starting to stiffen up. It’s been a while since I’ve ridden.”

"I have some of Isabella's homemade ligament rub. I'll give you a massage, but first we'd better use what's left of the fading twilight to wash by."

Later, refreshed and relaxed but with aching thigh and butt muscles, Shannon lay back on her bed roll as James and Luke applied the aromatic oil and began to massage her sore legs.

"Ahhh, ooo, ahhh." She moaned at the bliss and agony of it.

"I'm sorry, love, but if we don't loosen your muscles now you'll really be in pain in the morning. Turn over."

She lay on her stomach. "Hey, what are you doing?" she cried as James peeled off her nighttime boxer shorts.

"Shush, I can't do your butt with your shorts on," he explained.

"Okay, but no funny business, I'm too sore," she grouched.

"Really, what kind of a cad do you take me for?"

"The opportunistic kind, the pragmatic kind, to use your own words."

"Oh yeah, I did say that didn't I?"

Sighing deeply, James got to work, rubbing into the tense muscles of her upper leg and butt with his thumbs, working out the knots. Luke did the same with her other leg.

They rolled her gently onto her back again and spread her legs just wide enough for her to feel the cooler evening air waft across her warm, moist skin, but not enough to hurt her muscles. They were staring between her legs, both biting their bottom lips. She closed her eyes, feeling a little exposed and a lot like an all you can eat buffet.

"Er, guys, I'm sore from riding and a bit tender from being ridden." She felt embarrassed to own up to it, but she'd never get back in the saddle tomorrow if they went at it again like a hammer and nails.

"Damn, were we too rough?" James looked stricken.

"No, no, it was great, definitely worth it, but I haven't had as much sex as this in a while." *Ever*. "I'll be okay tomorrow, but penetration would be uncomfortable just now."

“Ok. Just relax, Shannon,” Luke cooed.

His tongue gently dipped into her wet folds. She wasn’t expecting it and gave a little yelp, which morphed into a soft moan of pleasure.

“And let me kiss it better.”

He was an exceptional pussy eater, applying perfect pressure and tempo. He didn’t rush but took his time, conveying the pleasure he had for the act with sounds of appreciation. His tongue explored away from her clit, probing between the soft folds, but always returned to torment her again in time to maintain the momentum.

James lay next to her, caressing her breasts, tweaking her nipples, and whispering all kinds of kinky fantasies. Soon her sore thighs achingly registered their protest as she clamped them around Luke’s head and rode his mouth to a crashing climax. Throwing back her head she yelled a primal cry into the still night air. A few seconds later they heard a coyote’s answering call and a whine from Rug.

Luke quietly chuckled. “Not as private as we thought.”

Still holding one of her hands in his and licking her juices off his lips, he waited for a minute, giving her time to come down from her orgasmic high. He shifted up to rest next to her and he held her close. She could feel his thudding, rapid pulse through her lips as she kissed his neck. Luke McKay was a sensual, responsive being and she wanted to love him all over. Then she’d start on James.

“Luke, James, I want to spread my legs wide and wrap them tight around you, but I can’t, I’m too bloody stiff and sore,” she cried in frustration.

“Don’t fret, love. I just couldn’t resist having a little taste.”

“Neither can I,” added James as he crawled down her body.

It wasn’t long before she was thrashing through her second orgasm of the evening. Her pussy fluttered like an aspen leaf in a light breeze for long several minutes after. Feeling tired she decided to close her eyes for only a minute, then she would show them just what she could do.

She must have fallen asleep because she awoke some time later in the night. The fire still glowed but had died down a lot. They had tucked a blanket around her and both men were sleeping on a bedrolls next to hers, also wrapped in a similar blankets. Luke was still holding her hand and James had his arm draped over her. She squirmed out from under its comforting weight and carefully released Luke's hand so that she could roll lightly onto her back. She looked up and was in awe of the night sky. Being so far away from civilization there was no light pollution to wash away the dramatic clarity of the thousands upon thousands of stars that she could see. Knowing that there were billions of them out there made her feel small but not insignificant, rather she felt privileged to be part of something so magnificent. There were atoms in her body that at some point had been the stuff of stars, and gazing up at the vastness overhead she felt a connection to the cosmos, as if it held a tugging attraction for those particles that were now part of her.

She turned her head toward another source of attraction and in the dim light looked at the sleeping men next to her. She wondered at how big their hopes and hearts must be to want to include each other and her in their lives. Slowly she shifted closer to James and slid down under his blanket, aware of his scented warm body heat enshrouding her, tempting her in closer. He was wearing loose boxer shorts and she gently fumbled for the open fly and carefully and reverently unveiled his warm, soft cock.

Shannon licked and sucked him delicately, so delicately, not wanting to drag him uncaringly from his sweet slumber but rather slowly tug him through a deliciously decadent dream. She coaxed life-giving blood into the soft flesh. He moaned and subconsciously tilted his hips toward her face, nudging against her in small, pulsing gyrations. His cock expanded, responding to her loving attention, filling her mouth. She used more pressure, sucked a little harder, and fondled his balls. The skin of the sacs tightened and puckered in response. With her tongue she felt his foreskin stretch and slide back,

effectively undressing his increasingly turgid cockhead. She swiped around the underside and across the smooth top, tasting the delectable pre-cum now seeping from the slit. Her man and he tasted heavenly.

* * * *

James was languidly pulled out of a sweet dream, surfacing to discover a better reality. His cock was inside something warm and wet—Shannon. He cracked open his eyes, blinking to adjust to the weak star lit darkness. He couldn't see her and was still partially sleep addled and confused. He whispered her name, and when he heard her responding groan he pulled back the blanket and saw with his own eyes what he could feel.

With a slurping suction she released him and tilted her face to his. He could barely see her features, just a hint of pale skin and a flash of white teeth as she smiled.

“Just lie back, cowboy, and enjoy,” she drawled sexily.

He rolled from his side onto his back and looked up at the star laden sky, for once doing as he was told. It was pure heaven, around and above him, lending a surreal quality to the experience. Shannon moved to kneel between his legs and gripped his shaft with a saliva-coated hand. He simply lay back and let her continue uninterrupted because there was nothing he could do to make it any better. She was a diva at sucking cock and he couldn't improve on perfection.

The combined squeezing, sliding, and sucking sensations took him and kept him hovering at the pinnacle of pleasure, craving completion. When she slid a wet finger over his asshole it pushed him onward toward imminent release. Pleasure flushed through his system, launching him higher, sending his body and soul soaring past the summit. Prophetically, at the moment he climaxed, calling her name, he opened his eyes and saw shooting stars streak across the firmament, just as semen rushed up his cock. She held his rigid, pulsing shaft in her hollowed out cheeks as he came down her throat.

She maintained a light suction as she slowly pulled off him. When the oversensitive, large head sprang free past her tight lips he jerked again, groaning loud. It was almost too much, and he needed to catch his breath. He felt drugged with pleasure.

“What’s the matter?” Luke sat bolt upright, blinking and looking confused, having been awakened by the noise.

“Nothing, just go back to sleep.” James half groaned half chuckled.

Luke lay back down, but Shannon wasn’t having it. “No. I want seconds.”

God, she was a little trooper.

“What?” Luke said groggily. “Shannon, what are you—aaaah.”

A little later, after Luke had shuddered and loudly groaned into the night air, Shannon scooted up the bedroll and lay in their arms. Within minutes they were all asleep again.

Chapter 18

With her eyes closed, attempting to enter a meditative calm, Shannon held the pose with her legs spread wide, back straight and her butt pushed out in the direction of her men. After a minute she fluidly moved into another position, trying to concentrate on breathing deeply and steadily. At first the pain from her sore muscles had been almost unbearable, but slowly as the exercise progressed it became what could only be described as deliciously therapeutic as her muscles stretched and loosened. The morning's yoga and last night's massage and abstinence from penetrative sex, would mean that she could bear another day in the saddle. As she executed the last pose and opened her mind to the world around her again, she was immediately aware of Luke. She opened her eyes and sure enough he was staring at her from his prone position on the bedroll. She gave him a wide grin. James was still fast asleep.

Quietly Luke whispered, "That has to be the most beautiful and tempting sight that I had ever woken up to on the trail. A show before breakfast, what a great start to the day."

He smiled sleepily as he slowly sat up and stretched. Shannon couldn't take her eyes off his bulging biceps and shoulder muscles. Lord, he was sexy, and her hands itched to stroke his washboard stomach.

"Yoga," she managed to say quietly with a dry throat yet salivating mouth, "you should try it."

"I think I should." His eyes seemed to drink her in and he subconsciously licked his lower lip. He stayed rigidly still, though, as if locking himself down. She smiled.

"I'm not sore anymore."

He pounced forward and snagged her around the waist, lifting her off the ground and carrying her back to the roll mat. She couldn't help the little cry of surprise that escaped her lips. James turned over. His eyes remained closed, but his lips curved in a sinful grin as if enjoying a satisfying dream.

"Do they have a Doggy Pose?" Luke growled.

She gulped, it was a rhetorical question but she nodded anyway.

"On your knees," he casually instructed, flipping her over and pulling her onto all fours. "Yep, I think I remember this one."

Half an hour later Luke and Shannon lay in a heap panting. Although Luke had been gentle they had gone through several "poses" and she had been molded and bent like a pretzel. She was dimly aware that James was awake, resting on one elbow watching them.

"I'm never going to scoff at yoga again. You sure are flexible, darlin', and it's got my mind working overtime with all the new possibilities." He sat upright and she noticed a tenting in the blanket around his waist. "Ever played Twister?"

Still wrapped in hormonal bliss she chuckled throatily and patted Luke's thigh. "Yes, and that few extra inches in length really do make a difference."

"Oh, yeah," Luke drawled. "A world of new play positions awaits us, especially when you also take into account a third body."

"Darn right. I enjoy a good show, but I do like to participate." James yawned and stretched like a cat about to become active. All that latent strength and power evident in the way his muscles moved.

Shannon was suddenly assaulted by guilt. She hoped that James didn't think that she loved him less. She'd gladly give him a ride if he wanted.

As usual, as if reading her mind Luke gave her a reassuring smile.

"Shannon honey, if this was just a one-night stand we'd be keeping score and trying to outdo each other, but we're in this for the

long haul. You can't be getting worried about upsetting one of us and trying to keep things equal all the time. That'll be no fun for you and it'll just exhaust you, sweetheart. Even if we'd like to continue but you're too tired or sore, then we'll just have to wait until you aren't. If one of us ever feels a bit neglected, then we'll talk about it, okay? I'm not going to be upset if you and James get together without me and James feels the same."

That had her thinking about Susan's date nights.

"Damn straight." James leaned over and affectionately slapped Luke's shoulder. "That was one hot session, bro. I spilled like a teenager just watching you."

They way they talked! She couldn't get over the open and deep friendship they shared. It was really a wonderful thing and, by God, she wanted to be a part of it.

"All right but you know I want you both? I...I...love you both."

She felt a little awkward, clearly declaring it like that, because this love, it was such a new, raw, and tender thing.

"We guessed." Luke nodded.

They both gave her those slow southern smiles that made her go weak at the knees and want to jump their bones. James stood up and she could see his glistening cock, but it didn't look soft and spent. Yep the seamstress was right; the 'luck of the Irish' was piled all around her. She must have been sleeping on a bed of four-leafed clovers.

Luke laughed at her expression. "You hungry again, honey? Can you imagine what it'll be like when the three of us—" He stopped short, as if remembering that she hadn't actually given the go-ahead for that.

"It's...it's okay, Luke. I want to do it with you both at the same time. Tonight."

James glanced at Luke and then back at her. "See how you feel tonight, darlin'. You can have us anytime you want. Now, I don't know about you two, but I'm darn hungry for some food."

Just at that moment her stomach rumbled loudly. Damn it.

“I guess there’s my answer. The call of coffee and food can no longer be denied, sweetheart, let’s fix some breakfast.”

Rug whined as if in agreement; he had sat waiting patiently for his food, looking confused by the moans and groans that she and Luke had made.

James and Luke talked lightly about business, and she asked them questions about what they were working on at the moment. After washing and eating they broke camp and began the journey to a well site that James wanted to show her. They intermittently slowed the horses to a walk and used the time to talk more about themselves. They told her about how they began their partnership. James explained that they had always known and liked each other, but initially he thought that he and his brother Joshua would have a fraternal ménage like their parents had. Although the brothers had shared women it turned out that Joshua didn’t want a polyandry relationship and was too dominant for James to take the active, more playful role he preferred. Luke knew he’d never share with his younger brothers, but he had always wanted the kind of relationship that his parents had. One night, three years ago, the guys had been chatting up the same girl in a bar and one thing led to another. Before long they were regularly sharing women and recently decided that they wanted to commit to a ménage relationship.

“Do you have anything specific that you want to ask us about the lifestyle?” James asked.

Shannon decided that she’d better bite the bullet and find out as much as she could. “Are you into kinky sex?”

James and Luke both spluttered a laugh but then grew serious. They must have realized that it was a source of concern for her because her face burned hot and she stared straight ahead.

Luke cleared his throat. “Well, it depends on your definition of kinky. Most people would think having three bodies in the bed is kinky enough. We wouldn’t do anything that you didn’t want us to

and we'd go at your pace love. We are adventurous though, we're tri-sexuals...we'll *try* anything once," he joked.

"But what if I'm not passionate or kinky enough for the two of you?" She knew that her insecurities were speaking but she wasn't experience in that sort of thing, what if she bored them?

They both look momentarily stunned, as if they couldn't believe what she had just said.

"You've got to be kidding," James mumbled, trying not to laugh.

"I really don't think that's going to be a problem, Shannon." Luke reached over to grip her hand and stop the horses. Catching her eye and holding her gaze he looked deep into her eyes. "I have absolutely no doubt that you can *more* than handle us and that it'll be fantastic for all of us. We'll give you the most incredible sexual experience of your life yet."

Shannon couldn't tear her eyes from his because what she saw belied the arrogance of his words. He sincerely and utterly meant what he said, with no swagger or pretense.

"And I suspect the same will be true for us, too," he added.

"Jesus, spare me the pressure, why don't you?" she muttered.

He laughed. "There's no pressure doing what comes naturally with people you care for. This isn't a competition or a test; it's a lifestyle choice and just as easy and difficult as normal relationships. We'll all be learning and probably making mistakes as we go."

Shannon had a lot of questions, but it seemed a little premature to ask about which man would be the legal husband, if they wanted kids, where did they want to live and all of that more detailed stuff. No, now wasn't the time but it would soon be important if they wanted to go further. Instead Shannon focused on the immediate issues.

"If this relationship is to go further it might be a good idea for us all to get tested for STDs."

Luke nodded. "We're ahead of you, darlin'. James and I went to the clinic the day after you arrived, we're both clear, the papers are at home, and I'll show them to you tomorrow."

“Why am I suddenly feeling like a foregone conclusion?” she half joked. “I’ve always insisted on the use of a condom and I also had a full checkup six months ago, after I caught Carl, my ex, with that other woman. I was worried that the weasel may have somehow given me something. Fortunately it was all clear, and I haven’t had sex since. I’ll go for another test though if you want.”

* * * *

Six months? Holy cow. James nearly reeled. By her standards he was definitely a slut. He knew that it was old-fashioned, but it gave him a certain satisfaction to know that she had been a damn sight more selective about her partners than he had. It also alerted him to the fact that she really wasn’t as experienced as they were, which is why she had doubts about being enough for them. She didn’t realize that her reaction to them individually showed just how passionate and responsive a woman she was. There was no doubt in his mind that when they finally got her together at the same time, she would go up in flames. Hell, they all would.

“That won’t be necessary, Shannon, we trust you. Are you on the pill?”

God, he hoped that she was. It had been a long time since he’d not used a condom and the thought of riding her bareback had him gritting his teeth as mercurial hormonal heat coursed through his body—one vein in particular.

“Actually, no.”

Damn.

“But I’ll consider it, if you’d prefer to skin dive. I bet that would feel great.” She looked dreamily at them.

“Hell yes,” they said together. Just the thought of it made him harder than calculus.

They rode on, mostly in companionable silence, until the first well came into sight. There was no apparent activity, only a structure

that was a haphazard looking tangle of assorted pipes and valves called a Christmas tree.

“We don’t need to use the nodding donkey type of pump here because there is sufficient pressure underground in the oil reservoir. We remote monitor the equipment electronically and a technician comes out to check once a week. This is a small, remote site, so we use oil storage tanks instead of a pipeline. The tanks are monitored and when they’re full a tanker comes to collect the oil. Later today we’ll see a well that is being drilled, that’ll be a bit more interesting.”

“I’ve actually been around a lot of similar sites recently in Canada, looking at how best to decommission wells and restore areas to their natural state.” She said nodding and looking around with interest.

He enjoyed talking to her in this way. It reinforced the possibility that she could be a full partner in their life.

“Did you tell her that we are looking to get into that line of work?” He asked Luke.

“Yep, mentioned it in Houston.”

Shannon noticed with approval that there were catchment bunds around each tank in case of a spill or leak, and that there was a concrete apron on which an oil tanker could park that also had an oil catchment trench.

“Hey, what’s that?” Shannon pointed at a rotting wooden structure.

“Oh, that was one of the earlier wooded oil tanks from the 1930s.”

“Shouldn’t it be conserved or something?”

“Never really thought about it.” James shrugged.

* * * *

They rode on, and just when Shannon thought that she might have to call for a rest stop she heard the sounds of clanking metal and the hum of a diesel engine. In the distance, through the shimmering hot

air, Shannon could see a blur of what looked like low buildings and a tall tower. As they got closer she could see that the tall structure was a rig and the smaller ones were generators and container units similar to those she'd seen on remote sites in Africa. The commonly used rectangular metal storage containers could be converted for a number of uses, such as a canteen of sorts, an office, a store and so forth. They had air conditioning units tacked on to the side.

As they moved closer into the small base Shannon heard the deep, gruff shouts of the men working before she saw them in hard hats and orange coveralls moving about the drill floor. For the sake of the horses they dismounted a good distance from the rig and tied them to a post on the shaded side of a container unit where a bucket of water was waiting. A big bear of a man who looked to be about fifty-five to sixty years old, strolled over to meet them. He was distinctive-looking with Father Christmas rosy cheeks, twinkling eyes, and a full white beard to match. He was wearing a hard hat and grey coveralls with the name Kirby Dare emblazoned on the breast.

"Hey, howdy, James, Luke, we've been expecting you. How ya doin'?" He shook their hands with an exuberance that demonstrated his fondness for the younger men.

"I'm real good, Kirby." Luke grinned.

"Me, too," James added. "This here is our girlfriend, Miss Shannon O'Reilly. She's gonna be a bridesmaid at the wedding."

Crap. He'd basically told this kindly looking older fellow, that she was doing them both. *Gee, thanks, James*. She expected a shocked look. Instead Kirby turned to her with a genuine, friendly smile and a little curiosity.

"Howdy, ma'am, Kirby Dare, Operations Manager for Sweet Oil in these parts. I'm pleased to meet you." He stuck out his huge paw again and Shannon happily shook his hand.

"Nice to meet you, Mr. Dare." She smiled up at the giant grinning down at her.

“Oh, call me Kirby please,” he drawled with a pleasant smile. “Now let’s get out of this blasted heat and have a cool drink eh?”

They went into the canteen closely followed by Rug, and Kirby filled them in on what was going on. “We’ve just hit three thousand feet, the casing is in, and the cement is being pumped as we speak. There are no problems yet.”

James nodded and turned to explain to Shannon. “The plan is to drill to ten thousand feet here, but we have to do it in stages. We encase the hole with steel pipe and pump cement up the outside to seal everything as we go along. Once that’s done, tubing is put down the pipe and then explosives are put down the tubing. They are set off at the depth we think the oil is, to blow holes through the pipe and allow the oil to flow.”

Shannon nodded. She already understood the basics, as it was the same the world over.

“There are no storage tanks here because it’s part of a large field with several wells spaced out. Each well has a small pipe leading from it to a larger pipe that transports the oil to our depot.” He held his forearm straight and splayed his fingers out to demonstrate. Shannon couldn’t stop herself from fantasizing about his long fingers.

“That reminds me,” Kirby said turning to Luke. “We’ll need some pipe handling equipment on another rig by Friday. Do have any available?”

“Yeah, we got some back from another job last week. I’ll get it to you on Thursday.”

She drank her Coke slowly as the men discussed business. She half listened and half daydreamed about both James and Luke. They had lunch in the cool interior of the canteen then had a look around the rig. Seeing James in his element, discussing and directing the operations, impressed her. In fact both of her men clearly knew their business and exuded a familiar, easy confidence on the drill floor. Someone came out of the office holding a phone and waved to Kirby. A minute later he was in deep conversation with Luke.

It tweaked her conscience that they were involved in the production of a product that was ultimately harming the environment. Her guys were to a fossil fuel addicted world what opium farmers were to heroin addicts. Cattle weren't exactly environmentally friendly either. What the hell was she doing with them? Falling more and more in love, that's what. At least they were taking care of their immediate environment and operating responsibly. She was shaken out of her thoughts when Luke approached her looking a little pissed off and regretful.

"What's the matter?"

"Darlin', there's a problem on another rig and they need some of M&R's equipment. It's not a straightforward job, so I can't leave it to my guys back at our base. I'll have to leave you in James's capable hands. It ruins our plans for tonight. I'm really sorry."

He looked like he was.

"So am I." *Very, very, very sorry!* "But I understand. I'll see you tomorrow?"

"Definitely. I'll call you."

Luke had to leave his horse with them and get a lift back to Ridge Water. She felt his absence as they headed to the next camp with Luke's empty horse trotting behind, tethered to James's saddle.

Chapter 19

It was early evening when they arrived at the next camp by the river. James lamented the fact that Luke wasn't with them. There was a good vibe between the three of them and he missed his partner. Still, it did have its compensations—alone time with Shannon.

"Is this the same river as yesterday?" she asked as she began to dismount.

"Yep, the Sweet River meanders, but we took a more direct route. We'll follow it tomorrow past near Rachael's land. The stream that goes through her property flows into this river."

He quickly moved next to her horse as she dismounted, and caught her in his arms for a slow sensuous slide down his body. He didn't need any excuse to feel her up, but he sure used any opportunity. They dealt with the horses and Rug first, set up camp, started a fire, and then decided to go for a wash and swim.

"I'll wash your back if you wash mine," Shannon teased.

He grinned at her, thinking that he would be doing a lot more than just washing her back.

"Okay."

She had a look in her eye, almost predatory yet playful. He decided to see what she had in mind. He stood with his arms hanging relaxed at his side in an almost submissive stance as she moved toward him. She stopped so close to him that he could detect her unique scent mingled with a leather and equine aroma. It had an almost narcotic effect on him.

"Stay still, let me," she whispered as she reached up and took his hat off, carefully placing it on a tree stump and then turned back to

undo the buttons of his shirt. As each little button was released she caressed and kissed the skin revealed.

“You really are handsome, with a body made for loving.” She cooed as if talking to a skittish stallion.

When the material finally hung loose and the fabric parted, she slowly slipped it off one shoulder, stroking his skin lightly as she moved around behind him to mirror the action. Sliding his shirt completely off she gently kissed her way down his spine then moved to the tree stump and into his line of vision.

James watched as she ran her hands over the soft material to smooth out any creases and folded the fabric with care, as if it were something special, like the clothing of a beloved. The time and care she took made him feel cherished. It brought a lump to his throat because it had been a long time since he had experienced such tender consideration, probably only his mother’s care in the past came close.

Moving behind him again Shannon reached around and undid the buckle on his gun belt, “accidentally” brushing her hand over his full groin as she slowly removed the gear. For a moment his hands fisted as he experienced an overwhelming desire to reach out and touch her. He restrained himself and stayed still, guessing that was what she wanted.

Next came the chaps, they were easy, but before she could go further she needed a little help.

“Lift your foot back please.”

He complied, leaning against a tree for balance. She pulled his boots off easily and placed them side by side, next to his clothes. Again, she stood behind him and reached around his waist to undo his silver belt buckle and the buttons of his fly. She slipped her hand inside the opening for a gentle cup and squeeze. His responding rumble had her placing her cheek against his back. He adored any skin contact with her. She sighed contentedly before pushing his jeans and Jockeys down, allowing him to shuffle free of them.

Once she had undressed him, she quickly shed her own clothes, picked up her wash bag, and led him down to the water's edge. He decided to go with the flow and see what his lovely little red head had in mind. He watched as she rummaged around in her bag, produced a sponge and soap, and waded into the fresh water.

"Ooo, it's not got any warmer." Her voice quavered as the water came up to her thighs. "Come on in, I won't bite."

He had to laugh. He was bigger, stronger, faster, harder and probably meaner than she could ever be; yet she had him in a heartlock so tight it hurt.

"Don't mind if you do, darlin', in fact, I'm sure I'd like it."

"I'm sure that we'll both later appreciate the fact that we washed away the sweat and dust of the day." As she spoke she lathered soap onto the sponge. "It's biodegradable, just in case you were concerned."

"Yep, it was the only thing on my mind." He rolled his eyes.

"I believe you because it strikes me that you might be doing most of your thinking with something else right now." She made a point of staring at his cock that was standing to full attention.

"You seem to have that effect on me, Miss O'Reilly. Now, are you going to wash my gorgeous body so that I can worship yours or not?"

Shannon took her time to thoroughly explore his body in the soft light of the dying day. She diligently glided her soapy hands everywhere, but paid particular attention to his balls and the crack of his ass. He was a little surprised when she pushed a slender finger against his anus and slowly breached the tight muscle, shallowly dipping in before retreating and continuing with feather light caresses over the puckered, sensitive skin. Thank God she kept her nails filed short. He had never been on the receiving end of any anal play, but the prospect now intrigued him.

Shannon finished up with one long, firm, soapy slide of her hand down and up his hard cock before passing the sponge to James.

“Your turn.”

“Yes, ma’am.”

In one swift move he pulled her into his embrace, hoisted her up with his hands on her ass and without further ado impaled her onto his waiting cock. He immediately felt the warm pleasure of her liquid heat surrounding him.

“Hey! That’s not washing,” Shannon yelled.

“Well, my dick’s all soaped up, so I thought I’d use it. What? You meant only externally?” He feigned surprise.

“You’d better withdraw. I don’t want to end up pregnant, there’s always a tiny chance even if you don’t ejaculate inside of me.”

“Yeah, I just wanted a quick sample.” He regretfully lifted her off him and instantly missed her warmth.

He threw the sponge onto the bank and lathered up his hands before running them sensually all over her already primed body, spending a disproportionate amount of time on her chest and between her legs. Taking a leaf from her book he, hooked one of her legs up over the crook of his arm and pushed his little finger into her ass, she gasped and murmured something about it being a lot thicker than any of her digits. She’d better get used to it because his cock was way bigger. He slipped two fingers of the same hand into her pussy and teased her swollen clit with his thumb.

Within minutes Shannon was panting and writhing, grinding his fingers deeper and pulsing against his hand. The sounds she made turned him on to no end. She kissed his neck and tugged his head down to find his lips, just in time for her to keen and moan into his mouth as her climax hit. She stiffened and then collapsed around him. He easily supported her and held her tight.

“God, now I know what a glove puppet feels like.” Her small voice trembled with spent passion.

He chuckled, loving her quick and light sense of humor; it went well with sex. Gently he pulled his hand from her now relaxed flesh and carefully cleaned her between the legs again.

“Now, what can I do for you?” she asked saucily.

“Just about everything I want and need, I think.” He meant it and her eyes widened a fraction as she held his gaze. “We’d better get out of the water before we get too cold.”

Shannon blinked and then appeared to notice that the sun was very low on the horizon. “Great, time for sundowners, I rather fancy a wee dram of the Green Spot Luke brought.”

“Baby, that sounds just perfect. You do the honors while I put some water on to boil for coffee later and get the sandwiches they made for us at the base this afternoon.”

Later, dressed in only underwear and a blanket, they toasted the dying day and ate the food. It was their last night sleeping outdoors, and although Shannon was looking forward to a comfortable bed she would miss the amazing show of stars as the earth’s rotation revealed the constellations.

“How’s your fanny feeling?” James inquired.

“I beg your pardon?” Shannon spluttered.

“Are you sore from all the riding?”

“Er, no, not really.” Shannon was a little taken aback by his casual tone; after all he was talking about sex and her vagina, not her feet.

“Our rubbing and your yoga seems to have done the trick,” he carried on as if talking about the weather.

“Well, yoga is good for the pelvic floor muscles I suppose, but I don’t think your *rubbing* helped much.”

“Oh really?” He looked puzzled. “Maybe I should have another go?”

“You are wickedly insatiable,” she giggled, “but you might be right.”

He leaned over and kissed her hard on the mouth, lighting the blue touch paper that sent her hormones into overdrive. She didn’t think she’d ever get enough of the effect his kiss had on her, it was better than any high she’d ever known.

Within seconds they were tearing what little clothing they had off each other. Shannon fell on top of James, not breaking the wild kiss but getting even closer to him, straddling his hips.

“Quick, pass me a condom.” She gasped.

He reached over with one outstretched arm, tugged his nicely folded jeans closer, and fumbled in the back pocket. Result—a condom. He passed it to her and she tore at the small foil wrapper as if it were the first piece of candy after Lent. As soon as she had him bagged she rose up, positioned his cock at her warm, wet entrance, and plunged down. They both groaned with relief as her pussy hugged around his tall, thick dick. She rocked back and forth on him, gyrating her hips and grinding her twat hard into his groin. It wasn’t hard or fast enough. She couldn’t get the rhythm she needed.

“James, screw me harder,” she desperately demanded.

He rolled her beneath him, placed her legs over his shoulders and jerked his hips, thrusting repeatedly deep and hard into her.

“Yes, oh yes, fuck me, James, fuck me however you want to.” She was mindless with need, intoxicated by the full long length of cock induced friction.

* * * *

He slowed, unsure of what she was allowing.

“I really want to fuck that sweet fanny of yours. I’ll be slow and gentle.” He could live in hope.

“No, hard and fast.”

What? That wasn’t quite what he’d been expecting. He was confused, he thought that when they’d made love she’d said that she’d never been taken there before but he must have been mistaken.

“Have you done it before?” he asked, just to make absolutely sure.

“What? Of course, several times if you’ll recall. Once quiet recently,” she giggled.

Recall? No he couldn't remember her ever telling him about that. Maybe she had spoken to Luke. He didn't think that six months was quite recent either, unless...unless she'd done it with Luke and he'd neglected to mention it. That didn't sound right, but he wasn't about to argue when he could be knocking on heaven's back door. He withdrew, flipped her over, pulled her up on her knees, and pushed her shoulders down.

"Yes, get back inside me, James, fill me, stretch me, I need you, now," she ordered.

There was no mistaking that desperate demand. He was nicely lubricated with her juices and he didn't want to keep his woman waiting. He thanked his lucky stars that he'd finally met her and then, like a snooker player about to hit the pink ball with his cue, he lined his velvet smooth yet granite hard cock up with her little, puckered rosette. He forged forward, tunneling into her hot back passage, hard and fast.

"Fuck," she shrieked, rearing up and forward then falling on her hands again.

Yes! So responsive, he thought joyously and grabbed her hips pulling her back onto his length, sinking into her tight, dark depths again and again and again.

"Yeah, darlin', just keep on buckin'," he yelled, gripping her hips tightly, holding on for the rodeo ride of his life.

She scrambled forward but he jerked her back, repeatedly impaling her, balls deep. Woo-wee, what a ride, she was a hot one. He could almost imagine one gloved hand clutching her hair like reins, the other holding his hat high and then spanking her ass. *Yeah, cowboy, stay on and ride that wild filly!*

"Yeeha!"

"Jaysus! What the fuck!" Shannon cried out. "What the fuck are you doing?"

He slowed as it seeped through his lust clouded mind that she wasn't crying out in the throes of passion, that she sounded hurt and pissed off.

"Shannon?" He croaked as the cold hand of fear began to wrap its talons around his chest.

"Don't you fucking move one inch," she whimpered.

"Jesus, did I hurt you?" He stayed stock-still, his mind now suddenly crystal clear.

"James, you just rammed your nearly ten-inch cock up my ass, what the hell do you think? Why did you do that?" She gulped for air and sounded on the verge of sobbing.

"Oh, shit, honey, I'm so sorry. I don't understand. I said that I wanted to fuck your fanny and I thought that you told me to."

He was now on the verge of tears himself, being upset at the thought of hurting her. Though still lodged deep inside her his cock was beginning to deflate faster than a balloon in a tack factory.

"Yes, my fanny, pussy, twat, cunt, muff, vagina. Not my bloody arse!"

Cold, hard, horrible comprehension settled on him like a suffocating shroud. They had just had what could be called a 'failure to communicate.'

"Shannon, I'm so very, very, sorry, but in American the word fanny doesn't refer to that part of a woman's anatomy, it simply means the ass or butt." James's distress was evident in his breaking voice.

"Just give me a minute." She panted. "I'm okay now. Phew, that was a first."

"Oh, shit—really?"

If it was at all possible he now felt worse. He had screwed up big time and could kick himself. He imaged that Luke would want to rip off his cock and beat him about the head with it, if, *when*, he found out. The first time should be done with care and very gently. It would

probably be her last time after the reaming he'd just given her. He lay over her back and cuddled up close.

"Shannon, my love, I feel terrible. Is there anything I can do for you?"

* * * *

The searing cramping pain had been intense but brief. It was more the sudden and unexpected experience of having his cock crammed up her ass that had shocked her. Now that she was calming down and there was no actual pain she could begin to think clearly. She didn't feel quite so full and guessed that he was shrinking fast.

"It was a misunderstanding, James, I know that you'd never intentionally hurt me." She took a deep breath. "Perhaps if we go very slowly you could try it again?" Shannon didn't want this incident to put a dampener on the wonderful two days that they had spent together and she worried that James would not easily forgive himself.

"You want to continue?" he sounded incredulous. "Hell, darlin', I don't think I can carry on now."

Which was exactly what Shannon had been concerned about.

"Well now you've plowed the field you might as well sow it. I'll be even more pissed off if it was for nothing." She tried to make light of the incident. "Move on out, cowboy, but go *real* slow. Show me what you can do for me, make it worth it." She glanced over her shoulder and gave him a reassuring smile as she wiggled her ass.

James wrapped his arm tighter around her as she pressed back against him. She felt his warm breath on her skin as he nuzzled his cheek on her shoulder and nibbled along her neck.

"Trust me; I'll make it good for you."

Shivers skipped down her spine and she moaned. "I do trust you."

She felt his cock stiffen and swell again inside her. It wasn't painful, just a new and different sensation of fullness. He snaked his arm down between her legs and skillfully attended to her clit. She

moaned again in pleasure and tilted her hips as he very slowly backed up and then pressed closer in shallow, gentle pulses.

* * * *

Trust and Lust. He could work with that. She had miraculously given him a second chance, and he wasn't going to blow it.

"Does that feel okay, darlin'?" He murmured softly in her ear.

"Yes, it feels good." She breathed, her voice tinged with a palpable mix of anxiety and desire.

He lifted off her back and caressed her spine, rubbing the indents at the bottom with his thumbs. His cock had reacted to her like quick drying cement and he was now hard again. He could feel the tight grasp of her sphincter and pelvic muscles as he fully occupied the space, stretching her warm, soft flesh. It was a delicious form of torture as he held himself back from release. He wanted her to come first and so reached around to play with her clit again.

"You are so beautiful, Shannon, you feel so hot and tight around me. Do you like having my cock in your ass, darlin'?" All the while he pumped gently into her, slowly increasing the degree of movement.

"Yessss," she hissed.

He could feel her internal muscles beginning to quiver. He slipped first one finger then two into her sopping cunt and deftly found the magic sweet spot that stoked her desire. The muscular tension increased in her internal core. At the same time he continued to tease and rub her now plump clit. He could hear her breathing faster and feel her body tremble.

"Oh, James, James, I'm...ahhh." She mewed, shrieked, and bucked, only this time in orgasmic bliss.

James held on to her hips and let her take him over as she jerked uncontrollably back and forth on his cock. His guttural cry, louder than any sound she made, resonated in the still night air, proclaiming

his pleasure. He pulled her upright off her elbows and held her in a soft embrace, kissing her neck and shoulder.

Shannon looked slightly dazed, basking in the afterglow of a powerful climax, but she was still able to reach back, stroke his hair, and in a breathless voice say, "Thank you."

He stilled. His chest burned with love and admiration for her.

"No, my love, thank *you*. Thank you for being so brave, generous, and forgiving. Now stay there while I see to this condom and get a cloth for you."

"I can do that myself."

He sighed, wondering how many times he was going to hear those words. "I know, but indulge me please."

She did, then and two more times in the night.

Chapter 20

They started out early the next day after coffee and biscuits for breakfast. James had been concerned about how she was feeling, if she was sore, and would she be okay riding? She actually felt fine except for a slight tenderness centered between her buttocks and a little stiffness in her leg muscles. They sometimes stopped to check fencing and survey the land. She saw more small herds of cattle as they rode closer to the ranch. According to James, they would be back by midday.

They followed the Sweet River and Shannon felt happy and relaxed as the horses ambled along. She was entertaining thoughts of a future here in Texas and all the possibilities that were before her. She contemplated how strange it was that less than two weeks ago there was a whole different set of options; before the wedding invitation; before her fateful meeting with Luke; and before James.

“We aren’t far from Flora’s Place, Rachael’s cabin. See that stream up ahead entering the river?” He pointed.

She nodded. “Yes.”

“That runs past her cabin. We aren’t far; in fact, we are actually on her land. It’s a small fifty-acre patch surrounded on three sides by our land and by the Sweet River Ranch owned by Crossling, on the other side of the river.

Shannon thought that Rachael was very lucky to have such a beautiful place to live, although she wouldn’t be living in the cabin for much longer, after she married Joshua. She wished that she could take up Rachael’s offer to stay on a little longer at Flora’s Place. She sighed and took a good long look around her. There was another

similar small stream on the other side of the river. As they drew opposite, Shannon noticed something that wasn't quite right. When the sun shone on the water surface it reflected a slick rainbow pattern.

"James, what's that?" She pulled her horse to a stop and tugged a pair of binoculars out of the saddlebag.

James looked in the direction she had pointed. "What?"

"The water surface, it looks like some oily residue."

He pulled out his own binoculars and trained them on the stream. When he lowered them his face looked serious.

"It's on Crossling's land, but we should go and take a look. A few minutes back the way we came there's a shallower crossing place. It'll be better for Rug and the horses if we cross upriver of whatever that is. Let's go."

When they came to the stream on the other side they could see the extent of the problem. A thick, slimy oil residue clung to the banks and in the faster flowing water the oil washed out into the Sweet River.

"This isn't good. Where the hell is it coming from?"

James shook his head. "I don't know. The rigs we have out here are about two miles away on land we lease long term from Crossling." He looked puzzled and worried.

"It could come from a long way away, even from underground." Her mind was racing with a number of possible ways oil could have entered the stream. It must come from the wells because there was nothing else around.

"I don't understand it. Something must have gone wrong." James looked confused.

"That's usually what happens. Technical or human error and the environment suffers." She felt angry and disappointed and couldn't keep the tone of accusation from her words.

James was frustratingly quiet, deep in thought.

"We have to report it." Shannon knew that time was of the essence.

“Yeah, we need to speak to the Sweet River Authority, but I want to check something first.”

“We can’t delay. I’m sorry if it’ll get you into trouble, but the sooner it’s investigated the better.” No matter what he meant to her she couldn’t let him try to cover this up.

He looked agitated. “I’m not trying to delay, Shannon. Do you remember the tracks we saw on Crossling’s land when we were on Look Out hill? Maybe that has something to do with this. I want to check it out, but we’ll have to be careful.”

She nodded, hoping that his company wasn’t responsible for the slick.

“The tracks went into the trees not far from here. We’ll head in that direction and follow the stream. Keep your eyes and ears open.”

The land rose gently from the river as they cautiously rode inland through the trees.

About ten minutes later Rug began to growl.

“Steady, boy,” James commanded as he slid down from the saddle. “Heel.” Rug stayed close to his left leg.

Shannon also dismounted and they tied the horses to a branch. The wood seemed to thicken and she couldn’t see anything up ahead. James suddenly grabbed her arm and pulled her to a stop. He stared straight forward, his eyes narrowed, searching.

“There’s camouflage netting, up ahead.” He sounded surprised and confused.

They both instinctively turned their heads to survey the surrounding trees for any signs of life. They couldn’t see or hear anything.

“We’ll take a look. Stay sharp, just in case.”

Just in case of what? She began to feel apprehensive but desperately wanted to find the source of that oil leak.

Suddenly there was a rustling and squealing noise as a wild hog broke from the cover of a bush. Shannon let out a pathetic little yelp

of surprise and immediately felt embarrassed. Rug loudly yapped with joy and lurched off to give chase.

“Damn that mutt. Hogs are his only downfall,” James cursed. “At least he’s out of the way.”

“Sorry, this isn’t exactly turning into a stealth operation is it?”

James rolled his eyes good-naturedly and then turned his attention to peering under the netting.

“Son of a bitch,” he cursed quietly.

“What?” She was desperate to know.

He pulled back and turned to face her. “It looks as if Crossling has drilled an oil well and I know that he doesn’t have a license and I didn’t think that there was any oil here. The rock is fractured at about eight to fifteen thousand feet down, and the oil isn’t on this side.” James looked again. “I think the bastard has deviated into our concession.”

Shannon understood what deviation drilling meant. Not all rigs consisted of a single well going straight down vertically. It was possible to drill multiple wells from one rig and to drill at an angle. It had been described to her as being like an upside down inverted umbrella. James was suggesting that the Crosslings had drilled at an angle to the oil under the land that the Rydens leased and owned the mineral rights to. It looked as if they were stealing the oil.

“Why would he do that?”

“It’s a long story, but many years ago the Crosslings were about to lose the Sweet River ranch. Neil Crossling, Roy’s dad, has a gambling and drinking problem. It cost him his wife and it nearly cost him his ranch. The bank had finally decided to threaten foreclosure if he couldn’t repay at least the interest on money owed. He came to my daddies to ask for help. At that time they could barely afford to lend him the cash outright. They knew it would just go quickly to waste at the bottom of a bottle. He would still lose his ranch and they would take a financial hit, so they came up with an alternative plan to help him.” He paused for a second, scanning around.

“What did they do?” she prompted.

He turned his attention back to her. “They offered to rent five hundred acres of Crossling’s land for fifty years at a fair price that kept up with inflation, and they bought the mineral rights for that ground. The bank was happy as long as the rent money went directly to them and Neil Crossling was able to repay the interest debt. No one knew for sure that there would be oil under that land, but my daddies suspected that there might be and they took a risk.” He turned to look at her as he explained. “It cost them a lot in time and money. They had to do a lot of work surveying the land before they finally found the reservoir five years later. That was thirty years ago. Of course Roy and Neil Crossling are worried that all the oil will be gone by the time the lease expires. That might happen although we suspect that there are some deeper reserves. Anyway there is nothing they can do about it, and it was a fair deal. Roy had been real pissed about it for most of his life.”

James lifted the net to let Shannon have a look. On the other side of the netting the land sloped downwards. It was the perfect place to hide a drilling rig. The natural dip in the ground meant that the overall height would have been no taller than the nearby trees. Now all that was visible on the site was a Christmas tree and five storage tanks. The camouflage netting ran in a crescent shape around most of the perimeter. It was clearly aimed at disguising the well from the most likely direction of approach by someone like Rachael or the Rydens. A channel had been dug around the Christmas tree to an open pit in the ground. Oil could easily have seeped from this pit and through the earth into the stream. The five squat storage tanks were located closer to the water and also didn’t have concrete oil catchment bunds. It was obvious there had recently been a leak from one of the tanks.

“It appears as if there was a one major leak incident but additional spills may also have occurred when the storage tanks were emptied. What a bloody cowboy operation—oh, sorry, no offense.” She shrugged and grimaced at James.

“None taken. Look, I think that’s Roy’s truck over there.” He indicated to a gap in the boundary. “I don’t want a confrontation out here. We’d better head back to the ranch quickly.”

They wriggled quickly back under the netting, stood up and brushed themselves off.

“This makes things more complicated. The Railroad Commission will get involved as petroleum matters are in their jurisdiction and of course we’ll have to notify the sheriff.” James spoke, keeping his voice low.

They started to walk quickly back toward the horses.

“Can we keep this from Josh and Rachael? It’s only five days until the wedding and then their honeymoon.” Shannon didn’t want Rachael’s wedding to be marred.

“In this place? Not a chance. Once the investigation and clean-up start then the whole County will know.”

“Bugger.”

“Exactly.”

“Well, on the bright side, a clean-up should be straightforward and relatively easy to implement, although without an investigation it isn’t possible to know the full scale of the problem.” She felt saddened by the effects of the spill that she could see, and worried about what she couldn’t see.

“That will be Crossling’s and The Sweet River Authority’s problem to deal with. We’ll be involved with them both in a whole other legal issue with Crossling and the Railroad Commission concerning the deviation drilling and the theft of our oil.”

“Don’t you care about the spill?” She was disappointed with him.

“Of course I do, and not only because it’s my land that’ll be affected if this continues. It’s just that the reaction to this incident is not within our jurisdiction; it’s a matter for the appropriate authorities. M&R Engineering can help with the clean-up. If we get the go-ahead from the River Authority we can move quickly with that.”

Shannon nodded. She understood that there were procedures to follow and that Sweet Oil wasn't responsible. "I just hope that they'll act quickly."

"They won't delay; they're strict when it comes to things like this. It's gonna be a major problem for Roy Crossling and his father though. There'll be a hefty financial cost attached to the clean-up and then possible prosecution, at the very least a huge fine. I think it may break them because, as far as I'm aware, they don't have the cash assets and the drilling must have cost a small fortune. They'll probably be forced to sell their ranch. That's not even considering the oil theft issue. They could be looking at prison time." He sighed, and sadly shook his head.

They reached the horses and were too preoccupied untying the reigns that they didn't notice the man behind them until it was too late.

"Stop right there and put yer hands where I can see 'em."

Shannon went to automatically turn around.

"I said stop and put yer hands up," he shouted viciously.

"Stay still, Shannon," James calmly instructed, "and do as he says."

"Now turn around real slow and don't drop yer hands."

Crap. This was surreal. She felt as if she were suddenly in a Western, and turned to find herself looking at the business end of a pump action shotgun. Shannon had seen enough movies to recognize the weapon.

"I ain't goin' to jail and I ain't losin' the ranch."

So this sweating, mean looking individual was Roy Crossling. He must have been hiding behind a tree, waiting for them, and overheard their conversation. Not good. The sympathy she had felt toward him on hearing James's story was dwindling fast.

James gave a whistle then shouted aggressively, "What the fuck are you doing, Roy? You can't be serious."

Shannon didn't think it was a good idea to whistle and shout angrily at a man holding a gun on you. Maybe it was how they did

things here, but from the surprised and irritated look on Roy's face she didn't think so.

"Shut up, pretty boy, and undo your gun belt, real slow with one hand. That's it, now throw it over there."

"Roy, don't be stupid, put down the gun and face the problem like a man." Again James sounded pissed.

"Shut the fuck up! I've had about all I can take from you Rydens. Move away from the horses."

He waved the gun in the direction he wanted them to move, and watched them like a hawk as they complied. His face was red and his piggy little eyes darted between her and James. Shannon thought perhaps a little calm diplomacy might work better.

"Roy, my name is Shannon. This is not the way to resolve things. Theft and property damage are small crimes compared to murder. Think about it carefully. Is it worth it? Doesn't Texas still have the death penalty? You *will* get caught, there's too much evidence. People know our route and they'll be all over the area. This little operation will be discovered and then you'll be in a much worse position than you are now."

"Hush there, darlin', I'm sorry that such a pretty little thing like you is involved. You probably think you're special, but the truth is Ryden's had every willin' cunt in the County and spreads a different set of legs every weekend, sometimes more than one set." He laughed nastily. "Him and his partner like to share the pussy. They must like their sloppy seconds, but I bet you know that." He gave a nasty snigger and spat to the side. "You ain't no different, gurl, just a wet place to park their dicks."

"Shut your filthy mouth," James yelled.

"That's it!" Roy fractionally moved the barrel of the gun toward James.

At that moment a blur of fur leapt from seemingly nowhere and launched itself growling at Roy. Rug clamped his jaws around the arm holding the gun. It went off with a startlingly loud bang. Rug

yelped and one of the horses reared and bolted. Taking advantage of the confusion James lunge forward to tackle Roy. He tried to wrench the gun from Roy's hands, but Roy was clearly holding on for dear life as he stumbled over Rug's body. The dog howled pitifully, blood freely flowing from his mangled rear leg.

Acting on impulse Shannon hurtled sideways, going for James's guns. She slid along the ground like a baseball player passing fourth base, and grabbed a gun out of the holster. Shit, she didn't have a clue what to do. Was there a safety catch or something? She looked over at the men, both of whom had work hardened physiques and looked strong and powerful as they grappled viciously for the shotgun. Suddenly there was another loud bang. Everything seemed to freeze. Shannon looked over at the two men in horror. They had stopped struggling and were locked so close together their noses almost touched. They seemed to be waiting for something, as if each man expected the other to drop. Shannon looked at the gun in her hand in confusion and horror. Oh, God, what had she done? She quickly dropped it on the ground.

"That's enough o' that. Now don't either of you young'uns move 'til I gits a good look at y'all."

Startled, Shannon spun around and stared wide-eyed as an old man, with a rifle trained on James and Roy, moved closer.

"Howdy, ma'am, 'preciate you not movin' either." He stared at the men as he spoke to her.

With relief she realized that she hadn't fired. Of course she hadn't, she knew enough to know that she would have felt some recoil. No one moved a muscle. She wasn't the only one looking stunned. Roy and James were just realizing that it wasn't Roy's gun that had gone off either.

"Well, if it ain't young Jimmy Ryden, and who's that there with you? Crossling, ain't it? Never did like you, boy." He focused his rifle on Roy.

“Now, Roy, real careful like your life depends on it—’cause it does— release your grip on that there gun and give it to Jimmy. Keep the barrel pointin’ down. That’s it, nice and slow.”

Once James had the gun he stepped away from Roy and stood with Shannon. Shannon now understood that James had whistled to get Rug’s attention and yelled aggressively at Roy so that the dog would know there was trouble.

“Thank you, Mr. Connor. This here is Shannon O’Reilly. You met her best friend, Rachael, the other day with my brother Josh. D’ya mind keeping the gun on Roy a bit longer?”

“No problem.” The old man looked delighted to do it.

“James!” cried Shannon as she noticed a bloodstain spreading on his shirt. “Are you hurt?” *This can’t be happening, not again. Not twice in as many months.*

“No sweetheart, it’s just a scratch. Most of the blood is Rug’s. The same shot that got poor Rug must have grazed me. It’s only a flesh wound thankfully, nothing to worry about.”

She wouldn’t take his word for it and carefully lifted the fabric to look for herself. There seemed to be a lot of blood, but it was hard to tell how much damage there was. She dabbed at the wound and he hissed.

“Smarts a bit, sweetheart.”

“Sorry.” She very gently wiped away the blood and the flow appeared to be slowing. “Thank heavens, I think you’re right, it was a near miss, or near hit, I’m not sure what you’d call it.” She sighed in relief. “Here, hold this and keep the pressure on it until I get the first aid kit.” She placed a folded neckerchief on the shallow wound. “I’ll also take a look at Rug.”

“Okay, and I’ll call Josh.”

Shannon nodded as James took his phone out of his pocket.

The dog hadn’t fared so well, his back leg had a huge chunk missing and he was bleeding heavily. She knew that at an almost point blank range a shotgun wound was devastating, but it looked as if

the hit was on the edge of the leg. She ran back to the remaining horse and pulled a small first aid kit out of the saddlebag. There were a few sterile pads, bandages, tape, a bottle of saline, antiseptic cream, scissors, safety-pins, steri-strips and some other things she wouldn't need. She moved quickly over to James again.

"Swap the cloth for this sterile pad, but first let me clean you up a bit."

She gave him the pad while she poured some of the saline over James's wound and dabbed it dry. It didn't look too bad. She closed the wound up and held it together with steri-strips. Working fast she tore off strips of tape and fixed the sterile pad tightly in place. She then ran over to the dog, and repeated the cleaning procedure. Rug's injury was much worse. She had to use a pad to pack the wound first and then bound it as tightly as she could with a length of bandage. She knew next to nothing about such injuries but it didn't look good. Rug only made a quiet wheezing cry.

"It's okay, boy." She spoke softly to him and stroked his shaggy head.

She heard Mr. Connor say, "Y'ave bin real stupid, Roy, ya coulda' kilt someone."

Roy muttered something about "hating the fucker."

"That ain't right neighborly of ya, boy." The old man growled and spat to one side.

James was talking to Joshua on the phone, quickly giving him the details of what had happened. He deliberated taking Roy's truck and driving them all into Ridge Water. She heard him say that he didn't want to leave the crime scene nor give Roy a possible opportunity to attack them again, but he was also worried about Rug. In the end his concern for the loyal mutt won out.

He disconnected the call and focused his attention on Roy.

"You," he said with venom to Roy, "lie down on the ground with yer arms behind yer back and yer legs spread. I don't wanna see ya itch, scratch, or move a muscle, ya hear?"

Shannon noted that she wasn't the only one whose accent intensified under pressure or with stress. Under different circumstances it would have been funny.

James whistled again, this time a different pitch and within a minute his horse returned. He stroked and reassured the animal with soft tones and kind words, then handed the reins to Shannon and took a coil of rope that hung from the saddle.

"Where are the keys to yer truck?"

When Roy didn't answer he received a sharp kick to the ribs that seemed to loosen his tongue.

"In the truck, you motherfucking bastard."

James ignored the insult and tied Roy's arms together tightly behind his back.

"I ain't carryin' ya to yer truck, ya sack of shit. Get up." James roughly helped Roy to stand. "Git movin'."

There was plenty of rope left over to act as a long leash and they all followed Roy down the slope to his truck. James hauled him into the open flat bed at the back end of the vehicle and tied his legs together with the remaining length of rope. He rang Joshua again and told him to meet them at the county jail and to send some ranch hands out to get the horses. He gave the coordinates from the GPS on his phone.

"Mr. Connor, can you drive to the Vet Practice in Ridge Water first and then we'll head to the jail? I'll stay in the back with Roy and Rug."

Mr. Connor nodded sharply twice and then quickly climbed into the truck. James leaned down and whispered in her ear, "I think we're making the old coot's day. I'd have asked you to drive, but I didn't want to upset his ego."

"That's okay, I understand." She also understood that he was a thoughtful, considerate man and not just to someone he wanted to shag either.

“Josh is going to meet us at the jail. He’ll let them know we’re bringing Roy in and tell the sheriff what’s happened. I’m sorry our trip ended this way.” He pulled her into a hug and stroked her hair.

“Well, it could have been much worse.” She felt protected and safe in his arms. “Apart from the last few hours it’s been great.”

She heard a snort from the truck. “I can see why he’s sniffin’ around you. Nice new flesh to poke. Sorry to tell you that’s all you’ll be. Ryden here is probably more concerned about the dog than some bitch he’s boning at the moment, eh, Ryden?” He taunted, spittle glistening on his chin. “He’ll get tired of your cunt and ass soon enough, but not before him and that partner of his have made you as loose as a wind sock.”

Shannon wished she had some duct tape, but she wasn’t about to be intimidated by the vile, despicable man. James looked as if he was ready to commit murder, but Shannon stayed him with a hand on his arm and a wink. She leaned over the side of the truck.

“You should stop concerning yourself about me and start thinking about your immediate future, because from where I’m standing it doesn’t look too bright. Mind you, if you’re happy about starting a ‘loving relationship,’” she made quotation marks in the air, “with Big Bob, your cell mate, then you’ve no need to worry have you?” She smiled sweetly at him.

Roy glowered back but actually started to look worried. James chuckled as he climbed into the back with Rug and Roy, the shotgun cradled over the crook of his arm.

* * * *

He may be an old man, but Mr. Connor sure didn’t hang around. They hightailed it to Ridge Water as if the Devil himself was at their back with a sharp pitchfork. James made a mental note to not underestimate old people, especially ornery, long lived, hard ranchers. Mr. Connor was a seventy-three-year-old bachelor who mostly

seemed to prefer his own company to that of others. When his ranch had become too large for him to continue he had sold it to the Rydens, but with a condition that he could continue to live in his house, rent free, for as long as he wanted. They had given him a good price for the property but they suspected that, after the bank was paid off, there wasn't a lot left over. Joshua was happy with this arrangement because it meant that he could legitimately keep the house in a good state of repair for the old man without it looking like charity. Joshua was one of the few people that the old coot actually seemed to like. He tolerated James and had little to do with Janet.

Rug gave a whimper and James stroked his side. The bandages were soaked with blood.

"Roy, what the hell was you thinking?" He was angry, but it came out sounding tired.

Roy didn't answer except to say, "Fuck you and the horse you rode in on." For the rest of the journey James did his best to ignore Roy and his urge to pound the little bastard through the floor of the truck.

Fortunately Mr. Connor slowed down to the legal limit as they passed through town. Rachael and Sandy were waiting as they pulled up outside the Vet Practice. While he and Shannon followed them inside with Rug, Mr. Connor kept an eye on Roy. Rachael took one look at the wound and inhaled sharply.

"Please, Rachael, do whatever it takes to keep him alive." His voice quavered but he didn't care, his mutt was a goddamn hero.

"This is going to take a while. You'll all need to go to the jail to make statements. I'll call you when I'm finished." Rachael was all business and they were effectively dismissed.

He didn't want to leave his dog. He'd trained Rug from a pup and the dog followed him around everywhere when he was home on the ranch.

Shannon squeezed his hand. "She'll do her very best."

He looked down at her sympathetic face and nodded, at least he was leaving his dog in capable hands. Rachael would do everything she could to keep him alive. He noted that Shannon looked a little rough around the edges herself. It had been a hectic day and it wasn't over yet by a long chalk. She hadn't complained once. His sexy little Irish lass had grit. Beauty certainly bred desire but character kept it, and more than ever he knew that she was perfect for him...for them. He squeezed her hand back. "Come on, let's get this over with."

* * * *

It was 9:30 p.m. and Shannon sat curled up in a nest of cushions on Rachael's front porch, feeling strangely deflated. She sipped at the sweet strawberry smoothie that Rachael had conjured up for her.

"The natural sugars should help replenish some of your dwindling energy and make you feel a bit better. You've had one hell of a day." Rachael sighed and smiled sympathetically.

That was an understatement. Shannon nodded and took another sip, then wiped off the milky mustache that she could feel on her top lip. She'd had the adrenaline rush, and now she was experiencing the crash. The danger was over and she should be relaxing happily, but instead she felt miserable and empty.

"I know. I feel....It's just..."

No matter how hard she tried she couldn't prevent her face from scrunching up. Tears flowed.

"There, there," cooed Rachael, holding her close and gently rubbing and patting her back. "Let it go, let it go, Shannon."

"I think that Roy would have killed James. I'd have been next," she said between snuffles. "He's filled with hatred and he said some nasty, poisonous things"

Rachael said nothing, just continued to hold her and let her get it out of her system. A few minutes later she felt calmer and the heavy weight that had sat in her belly mysteriously lifted.

“Thanks, I don’t know why, but I needed that. Please don’t tell the guys.”

She didn’t want to appear weak or for them to worry. Mind you, judging by the look on Luke’s face when he burst into the sheriff’s office looking for them, she guessed that she wasn’t the only one to get emotional. Luke had looked ashen faced when he saw the blood on James’s shirt and the dirt on her clothes. He had stayed with her and James, hardly letting her hand go. If the sheriff or deputies thought it was odd to see her holding both men’s hands they didn’t let on.

“Hey, it’s nothing to be ashamed of, but what goes on at my cabin *stays* at my cabin. A good cry is like a safety valve for letting off steam. That little blubber probably saved you thousands in shrink fees.”

“You know, I feel better already. Sorry for being so silly.”

“Shannon you are not being silly. It’s been a long, exhausting day for you. Here, have a Jelly Baby, they always cheer you up.”

Rachael had obviously found her stash of sweets and threw the packet to her. It had been a full-on day. When they’d taken Roy to the sheriff they’d given statements and been interviewed. Once James’s wound had been looked at and dressed by a doctor the sheriff took them back to the site and the oil spill. Luke came with them, never straying far from her side. Meantime Rachael had worked on Rug and managed to keep him alive and save the leg, but he wouldn’t be herding cattle or chasing hogs anymore.

“Do you know what’s going to happen about Crossling’s oil well and the spill?”

“Well, with regards to the oil there are two issues; one is the pollution and clean-up, the other is the deviation drilling, if that is what Roy is doing,” Shannon explained. “Joshua won’t be involved in the pollution issue except where it affects their land along the river. Hopefully the Sweet River Authority will instigate a clean-up operation. Of course Sweet Oil will be involved in the oil theft and

the Railroad Commission will deal with the drilling without all the necessary licenses. It'll be a while before it goes to court. It won't affect your honeymoon."

Rachael laughed. "If I know Josh, nothing short of death or serious injury will put off our wedding or honeymoon." Then she clearly realized how close it had come to just that scenario and shuddered.

In an attempt to lighten the mood, Rachael nabbed three Jelly Babies and placed them in a compromising position, the little orange one nestled between two others. *Oh, har bloody har.*

"So come on, O'Reilly, how did it go?"

"Well, apart from the last bit, I had a great time with James and Luke." She felt her face color as her eyes were drawn to the three little Jelly Babies.

"Oh, no, you don't get off being all shy. You've not had to endure the humiliation of being spanked and hog-tied in a barn with the full knowledge of your nearest and dearest."

"Hog-tied?" Shannon's voice went up a couple of octaves.

"Ahem. That's for another time. Now, how did it go? Nonspecific details will suffice."

Shannon heaved a sigh. "James is a superb lover, like Luke. They say that they both love me and want a serious relationship. That's the landscape and it looks good. It seemed a bit premature to get into all the details, as it is still very early days. The problem is that the Devil's in the details."

"What do you mean?"

"Well, just how exactly it's going to work. I'll be making myself vulnerable, emotionally, physically, and financially. I can't just give up my job and home without a real commitment. There's all the visa stuff to contend with. I'll have to return to Ireland for a while, and Rachael, I can't see either of them coping without a woman for too long." *Doubting Dora strikes again.*

“I don’t think they’re the cheating type, Shannon. From what I’ve seen they’re crazy about you. I think you’re more likely to find two big Texans turning up on your doorstep in Ireland and crowding your little cottage if you don’t wrap things up quickly.” Rachael chuckled.

Shannon had to admit that the image of James and Luke in her wee home was amusing, that is until she thought of how her family would react.

“Anyway, we’re still getting to know each other.” She tried to sound cool but really she thought that she knew them enough, enough to want to be with them, enough to want to give it a go, enough that she really did love them both.

“So, have you done it with them both at the same time then? What’s it like?”

“Rachael Harrison! You are a pervert.” She sat back in mock shock, and then smiled wickedly. “I’ll only say this; sort of but not really; so far flipping fantastic; have every intention of finding out soon. Satisfied?”

“Hardly,” Rachael grumbled.

“Oh, that reminds me, where can I get contraceptive pills?”

Shannon knew that her period was due to start on July twenty-eighth and that was the first day she would have to take the pill. It wouldn’t be effective for seven days, which meant that they could have unprotected sex only from August fourth. Unfortunately she was due to leave on August seventh. She decided that if James and Luke turned out to be only a holiday fling then it was not worth messing up her body chemistry for the sake of three days of skin on skin sex... no matter how tempting it was. She’d make the decision about it later, but would get the pills anyway, just in case. She reasoned that it was better to have them and not want them, than want them and not have them.

“You’ll need a prescription from a doctor. There’s a walk-in clinic in town, and it’s open until eight in the evenings on weekdays. That

would be the easiest way. What are your plans for tomorrow? Do you need to borrow a car?"

"Well, I was going to chill out here. I think that James and Josh will be busy tomorrow with the Railroad Commission, the River Authority, and the police. Luke will be busy in the day as well. I think he is preparing equipment for the oil clean-up if the River Authority give the go ahead. I'm actually looking forward to some quiet time. Luke mentioned taking me out and a sleepover. Is that all right with you?"

"God, Shannon, you make it sound like a pajama party, when really you'll be getting some double hot sex." Rachael grinned. "Sure, I'm okay with it."

"I don't want you to think I'm not spending enough time with you."

"Don't be silly. I've spent the last two days with my family. If you're sure that you'll be away tonight, then Josh may come over. Otherwise, I'll go to Sweet Water. It'll be our last between the sheets liaison before the wedding because I'm making this Wednesday, Thursday, and Friday no sex and sleeping with the fiancé days. I've a feeling that James may be planning something for Josh on Wednesday. Saturday I'll be a married woman. Wow, that takes some getting used to." She giggled. "I've booked us into the local spa on Thursday for our six month service."

At least twice a year they got together for a bit of pampering, usually in the form of a massage or some beauty treatment.

"Is it that long since we last spoiled ourselves?" Shannon couldn't get over how fast the time had flown.

Rachael nodded.

"Well, I'd love that."

"Good, and its Josh's present to our chief bridesmaid so we are getting the works." Rachael winked. "Maybe it's also a present for my groom and our best man."

"I love it even more." She laughed.

Chapter 21

“You did what?” Luke yelled at the phone.

“I know, I know, believe me, no one can feel worse than I do about it. It was a major translation error and I’m sorry.”

No one? He bet that didn’t include Shannon, however Luke had to admit that James did indeed sound contrite. He conceded that his friend and partner had been through a lot in the last twenty-four hours, and perhaps he shouldn’t give him too much shit this early in the morning.

“Is she ever going to let anyone near her ass again?” Luke sighed.

James gave a little snort of disbelief. “Luke, she was darn amazing. I think that she was more worried about me being upset. Can you imagine that after what I did? She was so understanding. We have *got* to keep that woman.”

“I know, I’ve never felt this way about anyone before, but she loves her work and independence. We have to let her know that she had a lot of options and choices with us. Money’s not an issue, she doesn’t have to work, but if she wants to work independently for herself she can, or she can work with us at M&R. We want to expand and diversify, and with her skills we can go in a whole new direction. We should plant the idea tonight.”

“We are going to have to take a leaf from Josh’s book and woo her.” James sounded resolute.

“Really? Josh actually wooed Rachael?” Luke couldn’t imagine it.

“In a manner of speaking, yes. He cooked for her.”

“Well we can do that, but I thought tonight we’d take her out and let her see how this whole threesome thing isn’t a big issue here. I’ll

rally some support from the Joneses. Susan likes Shannon, so she'll help us out. We are in for a busy day today, but this may be our last opportunity to put some lovin' on her before the wedding. Anyway, how are you feeling?"

"Fine, it was just a deep scratch really, looked worse than it was. Don't you worry; I'll be able to keep my end up." They both chuckled. "See ya later, bro."

Luke set the alarm on his watch for half past five because he knew from experience that he tended to get absorbed in his work. He had called Shannon and made a plan to pick her up at six that evening and bring her over to his house where James would meet them.

He'd thought that he was going to have trouble concentrating and getting work done that day but he was wrong. He was so run off his feet that he didn't have time to stew in the huge vat of desire that was bubbling away for little Miss O'Reilly. He had received another call later that morning from James telling him to prepare for the oil spill cleanup. His partner was out on site at the polluted stream with some people from the River Authority and the police. Luke had to check the inventory of their equipment and begin detailing the logistics.

The official request for M&R Engineering to submit a tender for the clean-up work came from the River Authority that afternoon with a phone call and a follow up e-mail, so the rest of the day was spent drafting up a contract and pricing the work. Luke knew that there were no other businesses in the area who could do the work and certainly none who could mobilize as quickly. Of course if it had come to it they would have done the work at cost price rather than see it not done at all, but he had a business to run and the River Authority would no doubt be getting their pound of flesh from Crossling. It was tempting to screw that bastard with an extortionate fee but he didn't want to be a vulture and, ever the businessman, he considered the possibility of future work for the River Authority. He decided to price at the high end of reasonable.

He canceled his watch alarm just before it beeped the five-thirty alert. He hadn't needed it because, despite the complicated work, Shannon had hovered on the edge of his conscious thoughts all day. He took half an hour to finish up and say goodnight to a few of the guys still in the workshop getting equipment ready for the cleanup. He herded Sara, his secretary, out of the office and told her to go home, then headed on over to Flora's Place.

The drive helped him to unwind and he began to relax. As he drove up to the cabin he saw Shannon come outside, she must have heard the sound of the engine. She waved and smiled, waiting for him on the veranda. It was all he could do to stop himself from running to her and sweeping her up in his arms. Hell, why not? He didn't run but he sure didn't amble either and when he reached her he clasped her small body to his, lifting her off the ground. As he held her he realized that he needed her like a tree needs the sun after a long, cold winter.

"You're a sight for sore eyes," he said as he nuzzled her neck.

The tension of the day dissipated with her presence. He felt her body relax and she leaned back to regard him.

"You've had a difficult day?" she inquired.

"A little, just the sort of day that makes a man appreciate having someone like you to hold at the end of it."

She beamed at him and leaned in for a gentle kiss. Her lips were soft and luscious.

"You're a sweet morsel for a hungry man," he murmured to her mouth.

He gave her a squeeze and buried his face in her hair, inhaling her mouthwatering scent. *Oh, to come home and have this every day would be heaven on earth.* He released her slowly and she slid down his body. There was no way she couldn't feel his hard, full erection. By now it must be familiar to her.

"Want to take the edge off?" she asked, gently stroking her hand over his groin.

Fuck yes. “I’d need an angle grinder to take the edge of this need I have for you, Shannon. You could tempt a saint, but we have plans for this evening and James will have my ass if I don’t exercise some control and make us late.” Regret laced his words.

“He’s already had mine,” she muttered as she followed him to his car.

He thought it best not to comment.

* * * *

They pulled up at Luke’s house and the first thing that she noticed was James’s huge SUV was parked off to one side. She couldn’t help scathingly wonder just how few miles to the gallon that thing did. She had to admit though, it was a tough yet luxurious, fun vehicle and yes, it did look ultra cool—a wee bit like its owner. Shannon wondered why James hadn’t come out to greet them.

As if reading her thoughts Luke said, “He’s probably in the shower. He came straight over from visiting the well site and then the doc’s.”

Luke strode around the truck, opened the door and helped her out into his arms.

“Welcome again to my home, sweetheart.” He sounded pleased and even a little self-satisfied that she was there.

They went in but there was no sign of James.

“C’mon, my room is upstairs and I expect that he’s using the ensuite shower.”

Luke led the way up the stairs giving her ample opportunity to ogle his ass. *There really must be something in the water*, she speculated, because ever since she’d arrived in Texas she’d been as hot and horny as two rabbits in a wool sock. His jeans clutched his ass and thighs with just enough slack to allow the material to move slightly in a very tantalizing manner. It was too sad—she was jealous of a piece of denim.

He headed across a landing to the door opposite. He opened it and stepped back to allow her to enter first.

“Wow, you guys do everything big, don’t you?” She whistled as she stood just inside the doorway.

“It’s a good sized room,” he said casually although it was obvious that she was referring to the huge wooden platform bed.

She turned to him and cocked her head to one side. “If I go missing while I’m here you should search this bed first. You may need a posse and a tracker dog.”

“No dog and just a posse of two ought to do it.” He chuckled.

Shannon felt her chest constrict at the thought of what was likely to happen in that very bed tonight. She had the sudden urge to rub her thighs together and squirm.

James’s clothes were folded over a chair and his overnight bag was on the floor. Luke dropped hers beside it. They could hear the shower running from the ensuite bathroom and deep voice softly singing some tune that she didn’t know. Wait—she did recognize it.

“Is that John Denver’s ‘Annie’s Song?’” She put her hand over her mouth to try to stifle the laughter.

Luke grinned broadly. “Yep. It sounds as if you’ve inspired him, darlin’. He started to laugh with her.

Shannon looked at Luke, grinned, and jerked her head in the direction of the very pleasant voice. He nodded. Within seconds they were shedding clothes and trying to stop chuckling like mischievous kids. As she headed to the bathroom Luke gently pulled her back and held her against him with his arms crossed in front of her and hands resting on each breast. It was a lovely intimate gesture to be naked with her skin touching and yielding against his.

“I love that you’re here, in my home.” His lips gently nibbled her ear. “I can’t wait to have you in my bed, in the shower, on the dining table, and anywhere else we can think of.”

Shannon sighed. There was a hint of possessiveness in those words. That and his deep, sliding southern tones sent signals to her

sex. Glands pumped out the hormones that surged into her system, readying her for their attention. She pushed her butt back against his thighs and felt his warm, hard cock brush with a satin soft caress against her back.

“Let’s go give James a nice surprise,” he whispered against her neck as his hands gently kneaded her soft, sensitive globes.

He gave her a little nudge forward with a flex of his hips, and loosened his hold to allow her to move. She turned slightly and reached back behind to the object of her desire. She gently towed him behind her by his cock. What was that saying? “Take them by the balls and their hearts and minds will follow?” How very apt.

Shannon poked her head around the shower wall and saw that James’s back was facing her and that he wasn’t yet aware of their presence. The steamy air was warm and lush. His scent coalesced into a tangible thing, riding on the vapor that she breathed in through her nose and mouth. He turned around with his eyes closed tight as he washed his hair. God he had a fantastic body, even with his cock hanging down. She hadn’t ever properly seen it in a relaxed state before.

“Oh come let me love yooou, let me give my life to yooou,” he sang, and she couldn’t help the giggle that escaped her lips.

Suddenly he stopped and she snapped her eyes away from his body to see that his eyes were now wide open and looking at her. A slow smile spread across his face. It was one of the things that she loved about him—when he smiled at her he always looked like he meant it.

“Hey, honey. Wanna help me wash my back?”

Did she ever—back, balls, and all his body. She noticed that his cock twitched like a snoozing dog suddenly awakened by a strange noise. She swore that it was looking at her with its single eye as the foreskin retracted. Within seconds it was standing to full attention. Trying not to laugh and point—he might take it the wrong way—she stepped closer into his open arms and tender embrace.

“Pass me the soap. Is your scratch sore?”

“Bullet wound, sweetheart, *bullet* wound, get it right. I’ll live.” He exaggerated with a mischievous smile

“He’ll be milking it for all it’s worth, just you see,” Luke grouched.

She lathered up her hands and then reached back to clasp one hand around Luke’s cock again and the other around James’s.

“Speaking of milking, I just knew there had to be a reason that I’m ambidextrous.”

“Seriously?” James asked. He looked like a kid suddenly being presented with an unexpected, longed-for gift.

She didn’t reply because actions were better than words. Gripping them both at the base of their shafts she applied a long upward stroke ending with a twist when she reached each coronal ridge. Both men hissed and groaned as she squeezed around the sensitive glans. She saw James cast a look of pleasure over her shoulder, sharing the experience with Luke.

The warm water from the large showerhead beat down on her shoulders as she pumped their cocks in a steady rhythm. James leaned down to kiss her mouth and palmed her breasts while Luke graced her shoulders and neck with butterfly light kisses as he stroked his finger tips up and down the back of her thighs and buttocks. She was losing and finding herself with them. Her mind shut down to everything but the way they made her feel and her body let them lead the way.

“Oh, lads, I know you want to wine and dine me, but please just sixty-nine me.” She half chuckled half pleaded. “I promise I’ll respect you later.”

Luke’s soapy hands glided over her ass, parted her buttocks, and gently rubbed around her puckered, little rosette. The shower water streamed down her back and in between her legs.

“We’ll sixty-eight you, Shannon. We’ll do you and you can owe us one.”

Her responding chuckle was cut short when he gently pushed her thighs wider with his knee.

“James, have yourself a pussy appetizer while I kiss this beautiful little rose better after the ravishing you gave it.”

Shannon stiffened and stopped mid cock stroke.

“Don’t worry, darlin’, I just want to show you how good I can make you feel with a bit of ass play.”

“Er, I’m not sure—oooo.”

Luke had swiftly pulled his dick out of her hand, squatted down behind her, and thrust his face between her cheeks. She felt his lips brush against the secret, sensitive skin, and it sent a slow wave of pleasure across her body. She subconsciously arched her spine and widened her stance like a filly preparing to be mounted. At that moment James dropped down in front of her and plundered her pussy with a long lapping lick, thrusting his tongue into the entrance of her channel. She gripped his shoulders for balance but realized that she couldn’t completely collapse because the two of them supported her from the hips down.

“Mmmm, you’re very wet, honey, and it ain’t the water,” James mumbled as he lapped away like a starving cat at a bowl of cream.

She heard a responding rumble from Luke and felt his tongue circle lightly and tickle all around the tight ring of muscle. He was like a new world explorer sampling her undiscovered territory. He proceeded gently and almost cautiously, and it was exquisite. James alternated between swirling his tongue around her clit and sucking lightly on it. *Oh my, two heads really are better than one.*

When both of their fingers reached and probed into her pussy she gasped and sucked in a gulp of air as her chest began to convulse. Working in tandem, one of them found her sweet spot and the other pumped in and out. She didn’t know or care who did what. Her orgasm gathered and burned through her body like primer chord to dynamite. She exploded with a primal howl that echoed off the tiled

surfaces, and shook her like a force ten quake. She slumped and would have slid down onto the floor if not for James and Luke.

“Hot damn, I love it when you come, darlin’.” James said, wiping his face on his arm and standing up to hold her.

Luke stayed squatting, resting his cheek on her buttocks and hugging her around her thighs. She got her breath under control and rallied enough coherent thought to recognize that she wanted Luke to finish what he’d started.

“Luke, will you take my ass from behind while I blow James?”

There was silence for a few seconds. Luke stood up behind her.

“You don’t have to do that yet. We don’t want to pressure you.” Despite his words she heard longing in his tone.

“I know, but I want to. You’ve made me all hot and bothered for some double barreled pump action.”

She heard his breath hitch. He liked it when she talked graphically.

“Bend over and hold onto James thighs. You’re flexible, so it shouldn’t be a problem, but let us know if you need to move. It’ll be more comfortable than kneeling a hard shower floor. James, you can help support her. Do you want me to wear a condom?” He asked gently, stroking her back as she leaned over toward James and his massive erection.

“No.”

He leaned over and switched the water off.

“I’m gonna quickly dip into your pussy and lube up.”

He slid his warm thick flesh into her, flexed his hips twice, and withdrew. She felt the warmth of his cock much more without a latex barrier and cursed that she wasn’t already on the pill.

“God, I want to ride your pussy bareback.” Obviously he was thinking along the same lines.

She felt his fingers slide along her slit, collecting her cream and then lathering her rear entrance with it.

“Spread your legs a bit wider, and hold onto James.”

She felt the head of his cock pressing against her puckered entrance.

“Relax and move back against me.” His voice sounded strained.

She did as instructed and felt his smooth, slippery, hard cock forge gently forward and slip inside. The tight ring of muscle stretched uncomfortably over his flared cockhead for a moment and then eased around the rest of his slightly narrower girth.

“Jesus, I’m in. It feels so hot and she’s gripping me like a vise.”

She could also feel the heat of his naked flesh stuffed inside her.

“I’m not gonna last long if I move much. Shannon, honey, you’d better get your mouth around James’s cock if you want us to come together.”

She barely had to move, James had his cock already pressed up against her lips. She partially opened her mouth and made a tight *O* for him to push through. When he did she sucked in her cheeks and pulled on his cock causing him to curse and wrap her hair around his hand.

“Fuck, she could suck a golf ball through twenty yards of garden hose. Honey, that’s so good,” he groaned. “Yeah, suck me hard while Luke rides that ass. Do you like bein’ filled with cock at both ends?”

“Yeaammmmmahsss.” She found that wasn’t easy to talk with a mouth full.

“I think that was a yes, bro,” Luke said through gritted teeth.

He picked up his pace to match James. Like a rocking horse she swayed back and forth between them. Luke held her hip with one hand while he wrapped the other under her waist and found her clit with his fingers. He pinched, rubbed and gently pulled on her swollen bud and she felt the tremors gathering for the mother of all quakes.

She had one hand clasped on James’s forearm for support; with the other she held him around the waist and grabbed his ass. He used the hand in her hair to gently hold her head steady as he fucked her mouth. Their control over her body thrilled her. All too soon she felt the rush of heat and warning tingles as a climax rush up and overtook

her. She came with her pussy spasming, her whole core muscles clenching and her mouth humming around James's cock.

"Fuck, yes," James's shout of ecstasy echoed in the steamy air as warm fluid filled her mouth. She swallowed quickly, taking it all.

Seconds later, Luke gave a guttural roar of satisfaction and flexed his hips in three hard, deep shunts as he emptied his load into her.

"God, that's good, so good," he groaned as he leaned over her back.

After a minute of soft caresses and murmured praises, someone, probably Luke, switched the shower back on. He slipped out of her ass, gave it an affectionate pat, and grabbed the soap. James helped her to straighten up slowly and embraced her.

"Are you okay?"

She nodded and held him close. "Very."

"When she came she tightened all around my cock, it was amazing," Luke said as he slowly soaped her buttocks and cleaned her up. "Are you okay, darlin'? Not sore?"

"Not really, just aware that I've been stretched. It was perfect Luke."

"Okay, but no more of that tonight. When we take your ass and pussy at the same time we want you to be comfortable afterwards."

She felt a pout coming on at his words, but Luke kissed it away before it got a chance to get established.

"Don't fret, you'll get a good seeing to tonight," he said as he pulled away.

When she had rinsed off, James and Luke dried her with a fluffy, soft towel and Luke carried her to the bedroom.

"We're supposed to be going out, not fucking." Luke chuckled and sat down on the bed with her in his lap.

"I hope that you like handling big balls, darlin'." James grinned at her. Before she could look affronted he added, "Because we're going bowling tonight."

“What, ten pin bowling?” Shannon grinned. She had played a couple of times and enjoyed it.

“Yep. We have a match against the Joneses—Susan, Colin, and Mark. We’ve time for a quick snack to eat here, and then we’ll head on over to the bowling alley. We can eat properly later. Does that sound okay?”

“Sounds great.”

And it was. Shannon had a fabulous time. She was relieved that even though they lost she hadn’t disgraced herself with her performance. She enjoyed the company and was intrigued by how Susan and her men got along. Colin and Mark touched their wife a lot and had the same familiarity with each other that Luke and James had. No one else in the building batted an eyelid at seeing one woman with two men who were obviously in love. Did she look like that with Luke and James?

“We’ll be back for a rematch,” Luke challenged.

“Any time, McKay, any time,” Mark replied, giving Susan a big squeeze. “We can’t get complacent, darlin’,” he said to his wife. “I think Shannon might turn out to be their secret weapon with a bit of practice.”

Shannon smiled but had to remind herself that she was going back to Ireland in just over two weeks time. The guys spoke as if she lived here and was a permanent fixture in their lives. She didn’t and she wasn’t, but found herself wanting to be. They said goodnight to Susan, Mark, and Colin, promising a rematch next week.

* * * *

After the bowling they picked up some Tex-Mex food and headed back to Luke’s house. Shannon helped set the table and they piled the food in the middle to serve themselves. Luke smiled to himself at the primitive satisfaction he felt at having her near, and the possessive pleasure he found from of her being in his home.

“Here’s to big balls and long skittles.” Shannon toasted with a broad grin as she held her beer bottle up. Both he and James snorted and knocked their bottles together. “This place is a bad influence on me. I have eaten more meat this week than I usually do in a month.” When they looked at her quizzically she just shrugged. “It’s a part of my whole ‘sustainable living’ philosophy.” When they both looked blankly at her she shook her head. “Never mind, that’s a discussion for another time.” She looked a little regretful but then quickly changed the topic. “So, while I was relaxing today I bet you two were busy. What’s happening about the spill?”

It occurred to Luke that there would have to be some changes on all sides if the relationship went further. Some adaptations would have to be made but he found that he was open to making compromises if it meant keeping her happy. They didn’t normally talk about work with the women they’d known. It was good to be able to relax and not rack his brain for topics of discussion. James started telling them about his day.

“I took a man and woman from the River Authority out to the spill this morning with the sheriff. A team of guys from the Railroad Commission met me and the sheriff at the well site this afternoon and they shut it off. The tanks will be properly drained tomorrow. They’ll try to find out as soon as possible where the well goes and then determine whether or not to permanently decommission it. If it is drilled into our reservoir Roy could have caused damage and a drop in pressure by his activities. It’s a serious matter to fuck with a nation’s oil reserves. That could be another nail in his coffin.” He took a small bite out of a chicken wing. “After that I went to the doc’s so he could have a quick look at my *bullet* wound,” he emphasized the injury in his usual melodramatic manner, and ignored the two pairs of rolling eyes. “It’s fine and will be nearly healed completely in about a week. Pass the ribs please.”

Luke handed over the bowl while telling them about his day.

“M&R will do the clean-up work. Everything is good to go, James. You and I will need to be there to personally oversee the start of the work tomorrow.” He looked at Shannon and sniggered, “Later, early evening, we’re kidnapping Josh. Our men will be able to handle the cleanup on Thursday if we are, let’s say, incapacitated.”

“Kidnapping Josh?” Shannon looked skeptical.

“For his bachelor party. Don’t worry, we have reinforcements.” Too right they did, they’d need them.

“Can I ask what you’ll be doing?”

“Yep, but we ain’t gonna tell ya.” James laughed.

“I will tell you that Rachael’s brothers will be joining us so she doesn’t have to worry what Josh will be getting up to in his last few days as a single man.” Luke winked at her.

“You’re joking right? Those two are wild.” Shannon laughed while shaking her head.

James snorted, “Why the hell would Josh go for hamburger when he’s got steak at home?”

Luke wondered if Shannon was worried about what they’d get up.

“That’s right, and you don’t need to worry none either, we’d never cheat.”

“I’m not really your girlfriend you know,” she said quietly.

“The hell you’re not!” shouted James, dropping his rib. “What else would we call you?” He jabbed a finger in her direction. “You sure ain’t just our fuck buddy, Shannon. Hell, we took you bowling—that’s almost a proposal!”

She laughed good-naturedly in James’s face at that comment. “Okay, okay.” She held up her hands defensively. “I don’t assume a thing, that’s all.”

“You should. You can assume that we’re in love with you, Shannon.” She obviously needed reminding. “Now can you pass the tortillas?” As he rolled a chicken fajita tortilla he changed the topic. “I appreciate that you’re on holiday, but we could do with some input

from you on this whole environment restoration thing. We're serious about branching out into that area of work."

"Sure, I can give you all my conference notes and additional information if you want." She gave him a dazzling smile before she attacked a succulent-looking, sticky rib. "Obviously my interest is in protecting the environment, but there is money to be made from the scrap metal and parts."

"You know I think that there is a lot that someone with your education and experience could do here, Shannon," James said quietly as if only just thinking of it. "There's environmental impact work related to oil and other developments, but there's also teaching or research based on the rural environment. The Texas Nature Conservancy is doing a lot of good stuff protecting the natural landscape and biodiversity of the area. Heck, our ranch alone could do with the benefit of an environmental management plan, looking at water resources, soil erosion, hog control, and the like."

Luke as always, was impressed with James's knowledge and his ability to charmingly manipulate. It was a real asset when conducting business.

"Yes siree, you should give it some serious consideration Shannon." James finished nodding his head and smiling sweetly at her.

"Umm. I already have a good client base, although I wouldn't necessarily lose them all if I relocated. There is the problem of getting a work or residency visa, I believe that can take quite some time. I guess it is something to think about."

"All we're saying is that you could have a lot of options here, Shannon." *Options that include us.* "As for a visa, we could help you with that." He was thinking along the lines of a K-1 fiancée visa. "We know a few good lawyers."

"What's happening about Roy Crossling?" she asked James, changing the subject.

“It’s early days, but I think that he is looking at prison time. I’m not sure that the state prosecutor can make an attempted murder charge stick, so it might only be assault, theft, and damage to property that he gets nailed for. He’ll be hit with a hefty fine. I think his dad will have to sell the ranch if he wants to help him. So far he’s still in jail until his dad bails him out”

“Will you try to buy it?”

“What? No! They wouldn’t sell it to us. Roy wouldn’t piss on me if I was on fire. He sure as hell won’t sell us any land.”

To lighten the mood Luke asked them both, “Is everything running to plan with the wedding?”

“Yep. No hiccups yet.” James looked at Shannon and shrugged.

“We’re all good to go. Actually I am having my bridesmaid present on Thursday with Rachael. We are having a day at the Lemon Tree spa.”

Both he and James looked at her with interest.

“So what are you having done, darlin’?” James of course had to ask.

“Well, now, that all depends.”

“On what?” they both asked.

“On how much you like my red curls.” She made an exaggerated look downward so that there was no mistaking what she meant.

“I love *all* your curls honey, but the thought of your pussy bald makes me harder than a baseball bat.” He almost groaned thinking of her swollen cunt lips, naked and vulnerable to his tongue and cock.

“Me, too. I’m not sure what I’d prefer to devour. I’ll eat you out with curls and then without and let you know okay?” James had a sinful grin on his face. “I’m done here, but I fancy something sweet.” He shared a look with Luke who nodded.

“Get on the table, Shannon, time for our dessert.

* * * *

Shannon slowly awoke with the sound of gentle snores emanating from behind her. She was aware of a heavy arm resting on her hip as she blinked a few times to clear her vision. The soft snoring turned to a snuffle and then died to heavy breathing as the arm across her moved slightly... James.

The subdued early morning light penetrated through a gap in the curtains and she found herself peering into the dark brown eyes of Luke McKay. Luke's head was resting on the far end of the pillow and they lay facing each other with their hands clasped together. She could see his handsome face clearly and his lips started a smile that finished in his eyes. He looked at her like she was special and with a glimmer of...hope?

The memory of last night would be seared into her mind forever. It had been stupendous. They had brought her to orgasm after orgasm and she honestly lost count. She had flown with angels while doing devilish deeds. They had done things she had never experienced before and they hadn't even touched her ass again.

As she looked at Luke she had the vision of him last night sitting naked in the comfy big armchair like a king on his throne. He had beckoned her over, turned her back to him and pulled her into his lap and onto his cock. She'd easily slid down his tall shaft, her pussy being so slick and ready after their combined teasing. He'd hooked her legs over the arms of the chair, splaying her wide with his cock buried deep. He barely moved with just small pulses as James knelt on the floor between their legs and licked her clit in earnest. It hadn't seemed to bother him that his face was mere inches from Luke's balls. He'd concentrated solely on sucking and tormenting her clit, bringing her quickly to a smashing climax.

Luke had groaned and mumbled about the tight grip and ripples. He'd moved in earnest as James backed away and stood up. Luke flexed his powerful hips and butted her up and down his thick shaft, setting off more devastating detonations. She'd wailed like a siren with each thrust and responding clench of her cunt. At some point

he'd slipped his big hands under her ass to lever her farther up and down his cock.

"Fuck, that's hot." James had watched them with lust defining his expression. "I can't let your jiggling tits go to waste."

He'd passed her the lube and instructed her to grease his cock, while he stood in front of her and captured her mouth with his. He'd leant against her bouncing breasts and pushed them together. They'd only just managed to snugly capture his cock. Then he'd moved in time to Luke's shunts, holding her breasts together with both big hands.

"I'm gonna to cover you with my cum," he'd said with a feral gleam in his eye.

He'd flexed his hips faster and harder and she had arched forward, balancing herself with her hands on the arms of the chair. A few more thrusts and he'd shouted her name as he came. Streams of thick, white, warm fluid roped across her chest. It must have shoved Luke over the edge because he'd given one last hard jerk and, with a strangled cry, shouted her name. She'd rubbed James's cum over her chest and sucked her own nipples clean. The look on his face had been a priceless mix of lust, satisfaction, and adoration. It had taken several minutes before they'd recovered enough from that one, to continue.

Shannon squeezed Luke's hand and leaned forward for a light good morning kiss. She felt completely at ease, snuggled between their warm naked bodies.

"What time is it?" she whispered.

"Six thirty. You must have tired our boy out. He's used to being up early on the ranch." He jerked his head indicating to James.

"I'm awake, just enjoying lying here with our woman." A deep relaxed voice piped up.

She rolled over. "Good morning," she said as she gave him a quick kiss too and then rolled onto her back.

“It sure is, darlin’,” James said as he sat up. “Got a busy day today though. This morning we’ll get the clean-up started. Early evening we’ll nab Josh when he’s at Rachael’s. She said that he’ll be coming by her cabin at around seven to say goodnight, but won’t be staying as she’s rationing him before the wedding.” He chuckled and shook his head.

“That’ll be fun to watch. Listen, last night was great, really, really great, but I’m going to spend the next few evenings with Rachael because it’ll be the last chance I get to spend time with her before I leave.”

She caught the fleeting, stricken looks on both their faces.

“We understand, but we’re block booking you after the wedding. If you’d like to spend the morning with us and see some of the clean-up you’re most welcome. If you just want to relax at Flora’s Place I can take you there instead.” Luke leaned over and tweaked a nipple.

“I don’t want to get in your way, but I am interested in what you do,” she said, liking the idea of getting involved.

“Spend the morning with us and I’ll take you back after lunch.” James smiled and palmed a whole breast.

“Okay, but I need coffee first.”

* * * *

James enjoyed having Shannon around. She asked pertinent questions and he didn’t feel the need to constantly check on her or be chief entertainment manager. She chatted with the other guys and had some interesting observations and words of advice about dealing with what she called a “riparian habitat”—riverside stuff to him. They had a light lunch in the office and she even seemed to hit it off with Sara, their middle-aged secretary and administrator, who was often darn rude to any of the ladies who had pitched up in the past. Admittedly, they had nearly always been uninvited.

Shannon went out on site with them when they dropped off the clean-up equipment and the men, then Luke stayed while he took her back to Flora's Place in the afternoon. He was sorely tempted to stay a little longer and ravish their woman...again. Man, she was making him hornier than a two peckered billy goat. Last night he'd come five times. She was incredible.

"I've gotta get back, there's a lot to do before we can finish work for the day. Luke will have my ass if I stay to play."

She laughed. "He said the same thing yesterday. Go on, bugger off, I'm looking forward to seeing you get Josh later." With a kiss and a wave they said goodbye.

Luke and James were a little tired and stressed by the end of their working day but they were now in for some much deserved fun. When Joshua took off to see Rachael, James rang around and within half an hour he had a truck full of men ready to have a bachelor party. They were all dressed up smartly for a night on the town. What most of them didn't know was that town was Houston, not Ridge Water, that way Josh couldn't escape easily. They were taking the company jet. Josh could get cleaned up on the way and it wouldn't cause the same fuss as trying to manhandle a six foot seven, angry rancher onto a scheduled flight. This way was definitely better.

When they were close, he rang Shannon to warn her. He pulled up near the house and the guys in the truck all started to holler and shout. One of Rachael's brothers and a big rancher named Davie took up position on one side of the door and Luke and Mitch waited on the other side. James stood in front.

"What in the blazes is going on?" Josh shouted as he stomped out of the cabin.

He only had about two seconds to register James standing there before he was set upon by four large men, with handcuffs courtesy of Mitch and the sheriff's department. Davie proved his roping skills and in less than a minute his brother was going nowhere under his own steam.

“Evenin’, Rach, Shannon,” he said, lifting his hat as if he was out for a Sunday stroll. “We’ll have him back to Sweet Water later tomorrow, don’t you fret none.”

Rachael laughed. “You’d better take of that man; he’s the only one I’ve got, the only one I want.”

James winked at the girls then, with big grins all ’round and more hoots and hollers from the guys in the truck, they hauled Joshua off. If his brother’s curses could kick, he’d have a sore ass.

Chapter 22

“Ow! Oh, my God! I can’t believe I’m paying for this!” Shannon yelped.

Technically she wasn’t, Joshua was, but still, it was like being in Helga’s House of Pain, not a beauty spa. She thanked every deity she could think of that she had taken ibuprofen half an hour before the waxing began. She would never bitch about her Bic again and would laugh in the face of razor rash.

“Nearly finished, hon,” said a little voice from between her legs.

Shannon whimpered. “Just do it quickly before my legs take over and I’m out of here.”

She gripped the sides of the table. The bikini area had been bad enough but she was now finding out that at the Lemon Tree spa a Brazilian meant *all* hair on her undercarriage, including a few stray ones that she never knew she had in the crack of her ass. The overhead lighting took on a more sinister, torture and interrogation look—she squeezed her eyes closed and held her breath. *Rip*.

“Ahhh, Holy Mary Mother of God!”

“There, all done. That wasn’t so bad was it?” said the sweet voice that surely must belie a cruel, sociopathic mind.

Shannon opened and narrowed her eyes at the bubbly little blonde and decided that you really couldn’t judge a book by its cover. Who would have guessed that sweet looking Sally was a sadist? She felt her eyes cross and glaze in relief.

“Now, we’ll just put some soothing lotion on.”

Oh God, could it get any more embarrassing?

“We are now offering a complimentary anal bleach with every Brazilian, would you like one?”

Yes, apparently it could.

“You do that?”

“Sure,” Sally shrugged as if she did it every day. Heck, she probably did.

She certainly didn’t want to set the bar too high. Start as you mean to go out with room for improvement was her motto.

“No, I think that’s quite enough thanks.” Shannon affected a pleasant voice as if discussing the weather.

“Okay dokey, we’re done. Your men are gonna love it.”

Her *men*? Was nothing private in this place?

“Can you call Rachael in on your way to your head massage?”

Shannon wrapped her towel tight around her and shuffled out. Rachael was just arriving. “Oh, that head massage is wonderful. You’ll love it. I feel so relaxed. “

Not for long, ba ha ha ha har. “Sally is ready for you.”

“Did it hurt?”

“Mmm, a little. Let’s put it this way. I’ll be taking alcohol with the painkillers next time.” *If there ever is a next time.* “Oh, and do you think my asshole would look good in pink?”

“What?”

“Never mind, you’ll find out. Cheerio, see you in the massage room.”

* * * *

When Joshua opened his eyes, he wished he hadn’t, because half the Sahara was in them and the light streaming through the shutters stung like hot needles. He groaned and his throat protested. Water, he needed water. He rolled over and found a glass and a jug of what seemed to be the sweetest tasting liquid to ever pass his parched lips.

He sat up and his brain felt detached from his skull. A thousand little demons, high on ecstasy, danced a dervish in his head.

He blearily looked around and was relieved to find that he was home, in his own bed. He couldn't say how he got there, but he was in his boxers and no limbs were missing, that had to be good. The pressure in his bladder told him he needed to head to the bathroom. He stretched, yawned, and dragged himself out of bed. As he remembered some of the events of last night he chuckled. Fishing out his cock he siphoned the python. As he was tucking it away he realized he felt tender in the groin area. Almost in slow motion and with a growing sense of unease, he pushed his boxers down. His brother was a dead man. He looked in horror at his partially shaved pubic hair and tried to read the words tattooed in red and black ink on his skin. *Rachael's*, it said.

"James!" he yelled.

The house was quiet, too quiet. Like a bear with a sore head he lurched out of his wing of the house and over to his brother's rooms. He didn't bother knocking; he just burst in, through the outer room and straight into the bedroom. James was spread eagled butt naked, fast asleep on his bed. Joshua stopped in his tracks, took a good long look and started to laugh quietly. His brother sported a similar hair cut and tattoo, only his said *Shannon's*. He sure hoped that James was serious about the girl. He backed away, thanking his lucky stars that at least he was marrying Rachael on Saturday and wouldn't have that much explaining to do.

* * * *

James was awakened by his mobile ringing. He groaned and cracked his eyes open to find the pesky thing.

"Huh?" he said.

"James, have you got one?" Luke sounded panicked.

"What? One what?" he asked, confused and hung over.

“A tattoo.”

“Not since I last looked.”

“Look again, at your groin”

“Holy crap.” Vague swampy memories came back to him; a tattoo parlor, Betty the tattoo artist, him, Luke and Josh, the others... hell, he was in for it. “It seemed like a good idea at the time.” He croaked.

“Are you crazy? How long does it take pubic hair to grow back? We can’t let Shannon see this, not yet. She’ll think we’re weird.”

James felt like he’d slipped off the far side of weird a while ago.

“Nah, she’ll see the funny side. “

“Y’ think?”

“Yeah, but we can get them removed at a push. It won’t be pleasant and I’m hoping we won’t have to. She’s the one, Luke, and we both know it.”

“We gonna ask her to marry us soon then?”

“After the wedding, when things settle down a bit.”

“Who’s going to legally marry her? I think we both want to.”

Yep, they both did. It shouldn’t really matter either way because she’d be married to them both in the eyes of the community here and to each other. Still, he wasn’t about to volunteer to step down.

“Well assuming she wants us we could let her decide, or we could go about it in a logical, mature manner.”

Luke sighed. “Rock, paper, scissors it is then.”

* * * *

It was early evening by the time Shannon and Rachael arrived back at the cabin. All in all, apart from the waxing, both women thought it had been a wonderfully relaxing experience and even Shannon had reluctantly admitted that her nether regions felt silky, smooth, and delightfully sensitive. They’d had a lovely early dinner in the Lemon Tree’s restaurant, and Rachael felt that their connection and friendship was as strong as ever. She would miss Shannon. By the

time she got back from her honeymoon, Shannon would be gone. She was holding that sad thought when the house phone rang.

Ten minutes later she flopped down on the sofa next to Shannon.

"That was Josh. He's coming over with James and Luke for the evening. We can maybe watch a movie if that's okay with you?" Rachael asked.

"Sure. How did he sound?"

"A bit subdued." She chuckled. "A hangover tends to have that effect."

When the guys arrived, they all looked a little rough and sleep shy.

"Was it a good night, lads?" Rachael asked with a smirk.

"You could say that, darlin'." Joshua rubbed his bristly chin. He obviously hadn't shaved too carefully. It made him look more dangerous and sexy in her eyes.

"Don't be fooled by that cool demeanor, once he got over the fact that he wasn't getting away he fell right into the spirit of things and we had a great time," James teased. "We couldn't keep up with him."

Joshua glared at his brother. "We had a good time, Rach but I wasn't celebrating my last days of being single. I was celebrating *because* it's my *last* days being single, my bachelor days are over and I'm marrying you."

She saw Luke's eyes widened in surprise when he heard Joshua's romantic words. Joshua didn't miss his reaction.

"What?" he said gruffly. "You think I can't tell the woman I love how important she is to me?"

Even she was surprised by the bold public statement. Her husband to be wasn't prone to declaring his love. Luke just held up his hands in defense.

"A man can only make a fool of himself over a woman if she doesn't love him back; otherwise it's always worth it." Joshua let forth that pearl of wisdom and she felt a warm delight bloom from her heart.

She noticed that the three of them unconsciously rubbed their groins as if desperate to scratch an itch at the mention of doing foolish things. Just what had they been up to? Not surprisingly none of the guys wanted a beer but instead opted for a glass of lemonade and a plate of cookies. As she went into the kitchen area, Josh followed.

“I can’t wait to show you my waxed smooth pussy,” she whispered. “And there’s another little surprise for you too.”

When Sally made an offer to touch up a certain area on her body Rachael had thought, *What the hell?* and gone for it.

Joshua smiled, but then he uncharacteristically looked a bit embarrassed. “I’ve something to show you, too.”

Now she was intrigued but she didn’t bother trying to wheedle any more information out of him. The man was like a clam when he wanted to be.

By consensus they chose to watch an old spaghetti Western, *For a Few Dollars More*, with Clint Eastwood and Lee Van Cleef. Shannon and Rachael both had a soft spot for the poncho wearing bounty hunter played by Eastwood and the boys of course loved the gritty western. Rachael snuggled up to Joshua on one sofa and Shannon lounged against Luke on the other with her feet in James’s lap.

They had a pleasant evening, but Rachael had the sense of an era drawing to a close. It wasn’t a bad feeling, but soon things would change and her life would be more entwined with that of the man next to her. If she wasn’t mistaken, the same thing might just happen to Shannon. She could happily see a future with families growing stronger and friendships flourishing with love and new blood. She and Josh had agreed to wait at least a year before trying for a baby, but she knew that she’d be more than ready when they did. She really shouldn’t jump the gun, but if Shannon ended up with James and Luke, then their children would be cousins. Cool!

Rachael and Shannon spent most of Friday with her family. In the early evening only Joshua came over to see her one final time before they were to be married. She guessed that Shannon must have talked

to Luke and James because they decided not to join them, and Shannon made herself scarce with a book on the front porch. Joshua didn't stay long, but before he left she told him how much she was looking forward to tomorrow and that she loved him with all her body, mind and soul. That was about as poetic as she got but he seemed to appreciate it. They gently kissed and she realized that, in all probability, it was the last time she'd ever French kiss a single man.

After Joshua left she and Shannon quietly checked over her dress and all the little bits and bobs they needed tomorrow. They then had one glass of Shannon's Irish whiskey with ice and toasted love, happiness, and tall cowboys with big wangers. They retired early for the night. As she exited the bathroom she caught herself signing, "I'm Getting Married in the Morning," from the musical *My Fair Lady*. A zip of excitement ran up her spine because it was true. She didn't really think that she would be able to get to sleep quickly but found herself nodding off as she read her book. Within minutes of her head hitting the pillow and her eyes closing, she was gone.

Chapter 23

“Rachael, you have to eat something or you’ll faint by the time you get the chance later,” Shannon said in her most persuasive voice.

“But I’m too nervous,” Rachael whined.

Shannon changed tactics. “Just bloody eat this piece of toast, damn it, before I shove it down your throat.”

“God, okay okay.” Rachael nibbled the toast. “Oh actually, that makes me feel a little less sick, can you do me another slice?”

Shannon smiled. “Anything for the blushing bride.”

At around noon Susan, Janet, Meg and the hairdresser arrived with fresh orange juice and champagne. Immediately the pensive atmosphere in the cabin turned to one of a happy, excited party. The bridesmaids helped each other dress, Rachael insisted on doing herself, and Meg Harrison fussed over them all. Rachael looked stupendous in the white silk dress, silk slippers, pearl jewelry, and pearls threaded in her hair.

Richard Harrison arrived at two o’clock with two limousines. One was to take his wife and bridesmaids to the church and the other was for him and Rachael. When he saw his daughter he sniffed once, choked back the tears, and told her she looked as beautiful as her mother had on their wedding day. Shannon gave Rachael a soft hug before she went to the waiting limousine.

When they arrived at the little church, just before three o’clock, there was a small crowd waiting outside. Meg went in to take her seat in the packed interior. Shannon and the other bridesmaids waited outside for Rachael and her father who arrived shortly after. Shannon helped distribute the flowers and to straighten Rachael’s dress.

Rachael's father held out his arm to his daughter, the bridesmaids took up position behind her, and, on some unseen cue, the music started and they all walked slowly toward the altar.

Shannon couldn't see past Rachael and her father, but she saw all the smiling faces as they passed each packed wooded pew. Her eyes were drawn to the right and immediately locked onto Luke's. The smile he gave her radiated admiration, tenderness, and passion. He obviously liked what he could see and she gave him a reciprocal smile that she hoped conveyed the same things. She admired how his athletic build filled out the suit he wore like a sports star in the pages of a glossy magazine advertising a car or expensive watch. She felt soft with affection and love when she saw his smile. When she saw the hungry look in his eyes her heart tripped with a fervent response.

As they reached the altar she could finally see Joshua and James standing tall and proud. Joshua looked handsome and every bit the successful man that he was. His poise and large, muscular stature conveyed authority and control. The man looked great in his wedding suit, like a modern day king, tall and regal. James appeared trim and compact next to his brother. He was every inch the dashing handsome prince, in a similar suit and matching green silk cravat. Both men had turned to watch the bridal party arrive. Joshua didn't take his eyes off Rachael. His face was at first set in stone, except for his ice blue eyes, which flashed with love, desire and pride. Then he broke out into a full smile that lit up his masculine face and at that moment he looked as if he was the happiest human on the planet.

James grinned at the bride with friendly admiration and then his eyes sought out hers. For a brief moment his smile fell as a fiercely ardent expressive flitted over his features and his eyes shone with the carnal knowledge of her. A soft, sexy smile spread across his face and his eyebrows raised a fraction in a secret greeting. She smiled back as her heart danced the flamenco. When Rachael and her father stood next to Joshua, Richard squeezed his daughter's arm, then slowly released her and stepped back, gracefully passing her to the groom.

Joshua moved closer to Rachael and leaned down to whisper something into her ear. Richard, James, Shannon, and the other bridesmaids moved to seat themselves in the first pew.

The ceremony was short with hymns, a few words from the Reverend, and traditional vows spoken. It wasn't a fussy or overly sentimental service, which suited the couple perfectly. All the while James held Shannon's hand and she felt a slight pressure when the groom said in a strong, deep, clear voice, "I do." She caught herself mimicking the gesture when Rachael made her promise. She didn't think about what that meant because at that moment she was overwhelmed by the beauty of the act of marriage and her own feelings for James and Luke.

Soon it was time for the bride and groom to sign the register and to have photographs taken. Shannon craned her neck and looked around for the wedding singer, a young woman who was supposed to sing while people waited in the church before heading to the reception. She recognized Simon, the violinist making his way along the side wall of the church. He was also the singer's boyfriend. He was frantically gesturing to her. She quietly slid along the pew and met him halfway.

"Carla can't make it. She's really ill with a sore throat and high temperature." He looked stressed.

"Sorry to hear that. It's a pity, but I guess there's nothing we can do about it. Maybe you can play some tunes to tide us over unless you know someone else who can sing?"

"Er, Shannon," said a quiet voice to her right. She turned to see Sandy Smith sitting between Lance and Paul Goodyear, near the end of the pew. "I couldn't help overhearing. I'll...I'll sing if you need someone. I'd hate to see Rachael even a little disappointed."

Shannon was momentarily stunned. From the look on the faces of Paul and Lance, she wasn't the only one. In the short time that she'd known Sandy the woman had been very shy and retiring.

“Well, if you’re up to it I know that Rachael would really appreciate it.”

“I could sing a few wedding appropriate songs if it would help.” She sounded nervous but, bless her, she looked resolved to step up and help them out.

“Sandy, that would be fantastic. I know that Rachael and Josh would really appreciate it.” Shannon hoped to heaven that Sandy wasn’t deluded and could in fact sing. “This is Simon; the two of you had better hustle up to the altar and start if that’s okay. Just let me tell James and he’ll introduce you.”

A few minutes later, James stood up and cleared his throat. “Folks, unfortunately our wedding singer can’t be here today.” Rachael’s face fell as she sat with a pen poised in her hand. “But our friend Sandy Smith has just very generously volunteered to fill in. I know you’ll listen quietly and give her your support. Thank you.”

Rachael looked just as surprised as almost everyone else in the church who knew Sandy. Simon started to play Ave Maria. Sandy briefly closed her eyes, relaxed her posture and started to sing. Magic happened. There was no other way Shannon could describe it. The air vibrated with the purest, sweetest, pitch-perfect voice she had ever heard. Even Simon lost a note in surprise but quickly recovered. Except for that angelic sound and the violin, the church was silent. When Sandy finished the song she could have heard a pin drop. Everyone must have been wondering who this talented, mysterious young woman really was. Then James started to clap and soon the whole church echoed to applause. Sandy smiled shyly.

“Sandy, that was so beautiful, thank you.” Rachael had arisen from her seat at the desk where she had been about to sign the register and thanked and hugged the young woman.

“Okay, everyone,” James shouted. “Settle down, there’s a few more to come and the newlyweds still have to sign on that dotted line.”

A few people laughed, but everyone quieted down and Sandy sang two more songs, including a sentimental country tune where she even added a southern twang. Not bad for a girl from Boston, Shannon thought. She caught a glimpse of Lance and Paul Goodyear; they had adoration stamped all over their faces. If they didn't love her before they certainly looked like they did now. Shannon thought that most of the people in the room were charmed and a little in love with Sandy at that moment, or at least with her voice. What she would give to be able to sound even a tiniest fraction as good.

"Wow." Luke sighed as he slid next to her when Sandy had finished singing.

"Yeah, I know, she sounded incredible. Sorry to say that you are never going to hear anything that sweet from me."

"Darlin', I already have. You make the sweetest sounds when you come," he whispered in her ear.

Shannon quivered, and it was as plain as the hot flush now creeping over her skin how his words affected her.

While most of the congregation headed over to the Lemon Tree hotel, where the reception and evening dance was being held, James and Shannon had to stay behind for wedding photographs.

"You look great in a suit, James," Shannon said as they were herded around by the photographer.

"Thanks. You look ravishing, which is just as well because later—"

"Later." She cut in as Rachael came close. "Congratulations, Mr. and Mrs. Ryden," Shannon cried as she hugged both Rachael and Joshua.

James and Shannon were kept busy the whole of the afternoon. It was their job to look after the wedding presents. A room with a member of the hotel staff was set aside for the safekeeping of the gifts. Luke also helped to move the packages, boxes, and cards of all shapes and sizes, which freed them up for their other role of looking after the guests and ensuring that everyone was comfortable. James

and Shannon were seated on the top table with family and the other bridesmaids. Luke was sitting with his family and some friends at another table on the main floor.

After the meal it was time for the speeches. Mr. Harrison stood up and Shannon had to hand it to him, he did a good job. It was an amusing, touching, and loving speech. He talked about Rachael and said like most daddies he hadn't ever thought that there would be someone good enough, or who could handle his strong willed lass, but conceded that Joshua Ryden was that man. He said how ironic it was that Rachael came back to the place where her life started to find love and a promising looking future. He ended by thanking his wife for giving him such a wonderful daughter and wished the couple much love and happiness in their life together. Shannon could see that Rachael was touched by her father's words and noticed Joshua's hand squeeze her leg under the table.

It was James's turn next to give his best man's speech. He started off by talking about their parents and how on a day like this they were particularly missed. He retold some funny stories from their childhood when their parents were alive. He praised his brother for keeping the family and business together after their parents died and for filling the void as best he could for Janet. He relayed a few funny stories of how Joshua had dealt with suddenly being the head of the household with a teenage brother and a nearly teenage sister. James told everyone how Joshua had put his family first, above his own personal needs and what a strong, honorable, good man he was. He also hinted that Joshua had in some ways become a little distant due to the weight of responsibility that he carried on his shoulders.

"That changed," he said, "the day Joshua met Rachael."

The speech became a little bawdier at this point as he retold how they first met. He confessed that when he first saw Rachael push a yard long probe up their prized bull's ass, he had a feeling she might be the gal for Josh. That caused some laughter from the rancher guests. Of course he mentioned of the freezing Land Rover incident,

weaving the tale with other incidents to highlight how resourceful she was. He cryptically added that, since the bachelor party, Rachael would know every night when she went to bed just who Joshua belonged to. That comment had Joshua narrowing his eyes at James but with a smirk also hovering on his lips. James welcomed Rachael to the family and thanked her for the happiness that she obviously brought his brother. At the end everyone toasted the bride and groom.

After all the thank-you speeches the guests moved to another room for a cocktail hour while the dance floor was cleared of tables and the band set up. Images of Joshua and Rachael at different times in their lives were projected onto a large white wall. Shannon grinned at the couple's surprise; they hadn't known that the families had organized that. As the late afternoon merged into the evening new guests arrived and then the real party began.

Rachael and Josh started the evening off with their wedding dance and were soon joined by Rachael's parents. James then pulled her onto the dance floor, followed by Janet and Mitch, Susan and Colin, and then everyone else. Luke cut in for the next dance and so on. Then the square dancing started and, being clueless, she was pushed and manhandled into formation, slowly getting the hang of it.

"This band is great." Shannon laughed and shouted over the noise.

In fact, it was turning out to be the best wedding she'd ever attended, and she had attended some pretty raucous affairs in Ireland, to be sure. Shannon barely had time to catch her breath before her do-si-do with James and was then pushed onto the next person in the formation. Square dancing was a hoot, but when done at the speed that the Five Star Amoebas was playing, it was cardio workout. The band finished and she made a time-out gesture with her hands to Luke and James and then crashed down onto the nearest chair. From the moment the first song played she'd been dancing and she needed a break.

The hour was late and soon Rachael and Joshua would be leaving to start their honeymoon. Joshua had finally confided to Shannon that

they were flying to Mexico. They were going to a luxury resort for a week where they could dive and sail and enjoy the private honeymoon suite. Then they were taking a tour of some of historic ruins and nature reserves for the second week, staying in luxury lodges. Shannon promised not to tell Rachael, but she knew that her friend would love it. She wasn't a "laze on the beach" kind of girl, and she would in particular love the nature and wildlife aspect of the diving and tour.

Shannon noticed that Lance and Paul Goodyear danced with Sandy and spent the whole evening with her. The McKay younger boys had danced with several different girls but seemed to have some competition from the Farley brothers, Rachael's younger cousins. Of even greater surprise was that Rachael's brothers hit it off with a girl. Everywhere she looked she saw one of the identical twins with the same girl. She pointed this out to James and Luke who then began to laugh.

"What's so funny?"

"Well, I think that isn't the same girl. It seems that the Harrison twins have met their match with the Scott twins. I wonder if they all realize they are twins or are they playing their usually games of swaperoo? That could lead to some very interesting combinations." James leered and high-fived Luke. "Let's not say anything and leave them to it."

"You sound as if you personally know something about it," Shannon sniped

"Well they did it to me. I thought that I was going out with Kate, but in fact I was seeing both her and Laura. When I say that they're identical I mean it."

"Did you shag them?"

"Yeah, both of them, although I didn't know it at the time. They don't do ménages or polyandry as far as I'm aware, but that could change." He looked at her as if gauging her reaction.

“Oh, don’t worry, I’m not bothered. This place has that effect on me. But if you ever touch another woman while you are going out with me I’ll dry roast and salt your nuts.”

“You’re all we want, so that’s not gonna happen, but you can still eat my nuts if you’re hungry.”

“Luke, don’t let him drink anymore. I want him to be useful tonight.”

“Yes, ma’am.” Luke sniggered. “It’s a soda next for you partner”

Shannon felt the weight of a presence behind her and knew at once, without turning, that it was Joshua.

“Rachael and I are leaving in a minute. I think she wants to say good-bye to you properly, Shannon.”

Shannon turned and looked up, up, and up at him and smiled. She nodded, knowing that she would probably be blubbing in a few minutes time.

She walked over to where Rachael was stood hugging her mom and dad.

“Hey, Harri—Ryden, you have a great honeymoon d’you hear?”

“I’m going to miss you, O’Reilly, when I get back.” She hugged her close. “I know it’s not any of my business, but I’ve just got to say it, those men love you, Shannon, and I know you feel the same way. Give it a shot and don’t overthink things. I honestly believe that you can trust James and Luke. They’ll wait for you, Shannon, even if the bloody visa takes a year to get processed.”

“What bloody visa?”

“Er, well, if you decide to apply for a particular type of visa. Bugger, I’ve said too much. Just trust them. I love you, you know?”

Shannon was curious, but now wasn’t the time. “Aye, and I love you. We’ve changed a wee bit since our wilder student days, but our friendship is one thing I’ll always treasure.”

“Okay, enough of this emotional nonsense. Ta-ta for now. I hope I’ll see you sooner rather than later.”

“Adios, amiga.” Shannon thought that was a fitting farewell, taking into account where Rachael was going.

The bride and groom left to a barrage of good wishes. The limo to take them to the jet had been decorated with shaving foam and tin cans tied to the bumper. Shannon stood with the crowd, flanked by James and Luke and blinked back the tears as she waved heartily with the rest of them.

* * * *

Joshua finally released his wife from a long kiss just as the limo pulled into the hanger.

“What the heck...” He groaned when he saw the outside of the plane.

The words “Just Married,” and “Welcome to the mile high club,” were emblazoned on the side. Streamers decorated the wings.

“That paint better come off,” he said with a snort.

Trust the boys to find the time to do this. He helped Rachael out of the limo and passed a few of their bags to Mac and Jake, their pilots. They’d volunteered to fly the couple as Joshua often used them when he couldn’t fly himself. They had been at the wedding and meal but left early. Of course they hadn’t drunk any alcohol.

“Good evening, Mr. and Mrs. Ryden,” Mac greeted them cheerily. “I hope you’ll enjoy the flight tonight.”

He had been pleased when Rachael agreed to take his name but he hadn’t realized how much he would absolutely love it. Joshua had already told the guys that once they were in the air they were not to be disturbed unless it was an emergency.

“I’m now on my honeymoon, Mac, so I know I’m going to love it.” She smiled happily and started up the steps to the plane with his hand on her ass.

He thanked the Lord Almighty again for his good fortune. He hadn’t really been bothered about having a big wedding, but it had

turned out to be one of the best days in his life so far. He said a soulfelt prayer for his parents and hers and followed her into the cabin.

They sat in big, comfortable leather seats facing each other. He had taken his jacket off a long time ago, after the first dance, and now he placed it on the seat next to him. Once the plane had taken off and leveled out he opened a bottle of darn fine champagne and poured them both a glass.

“To us,” he said and they clinked glasses. “Crystal just isn’t good enough for the quality of this champagne. I want to sip from the finest vessel.”

Rachael looked puzzled.

“Take off your dress.” He deliberately used that steely, commanding voice that got her hot and wanting.

She looked startled at first, but then smiled seductively as she undid her seat belt and stood. She reached to the side of her dress and fiddled for a second at the waist. As the material floated to the floor he discovered that she wasn’t wearing a dress but a bodice and skirt. She stepped out of the skirt and stood before him in white, dainty silk shoes, stockings, suspenders and a lacey string thong. She deliberately turned her back on him, widened her stance and bent over at the waist to pick her skirt up off the floor. As she most certainly intended he got an eyeful. There was definitely something different but he couldn’t figure out what. She looked very...pink and fresh.

“Stay there. I want to see my ass and pussy.”

He leaned forward and inhaled her unique scent of sex and the tangy fresh ocean combined with the natural vanilla oil she often wore.

It suddenly clicked what she’d had done. “My oh my, Rachael. For a woman who ain’t too bothered about preening and makeup you certainly do it where it counts.” He appreciated the now light pink little rosette that had a “come hither” look about it.

“I thought you’d like it,” she said, twisting her head to give him a wink.

“I like everything about you, darlin’, spruced or not, but I must say that’s the prettiest asshole I’ve ever had the pleasure of seeing.”

“Great, because it’s the only one you’ll ever see.”

She really couldn’t resist making the little comments, remarks, and snappy rejoinders that just had him wanting to...*take* her. She darn well knew it too.

He groaned, leaned back, and tightened his grip on his seat.

“Stand up straight and turn around. I want to see what is mine.”

She placed the skirt on another seat, turned, smiled at him, and then began to remove the soft material that decorated the plunging scooped neckline. Just like that the modest bodice was transform into a half cup basque, displaying her breasts on a shelf like fruit for purchase.

Damn, she’d been wearing this disguised outfit the whole time. Just looking at her presented this way had his mouth watering and his cock thrumming. He exercised extreme control and locked down his expression because the game was only beginning.

He nodded with restrained approval. “Very, very good, I like it, darlin’, now come here.”

She stepped in front of him. He played with the lace of her thong, hooked his thumbs under the string, and gently pulled down. He blew hot breath on her clit and heard her gasp. He slowly ran his hands across her ass and then down her legs as he pulled the thong to her ankles. She put her hands on his shoulders for balance as she stepped out of the scrap of material that was hardly worth wearing, except of course so that he could take it off. For a long moment he simply inhaled her scent.

“Sit on the seat and place your knees over the armrests. I want to better look at my cunt. Yes, that’s very good, love. Now spread your pussy lips wide for me.” He could see moisture glisten on and within

her petal-like folds. “You’re creaming yourself again, aren’t you, darlin’?”

She nodded, breathing shallowly. The by now familiar pink first flush of desire was creeping across her pale skin.

He leaned forward and sucked a nipple hard, then reclined her seat right back to horizontal and placed two cushions and a napkin under her ass. She was now spread wide open before him with her bottom tilted upward. Her freed tits looked just as great from this angle. He raised his glass to her.

“You’re not going to—” She gasped but didn’t finish as he knelt between her legs and poured some of the champagne from his glass into her cunt. Then he lapped at her like a parched dog at a water bowl.

“Your pussy juice tastes delicious with champagne, darlin’.”

“Mmm, a sort of ‘Fucks Fizz,’” she managed to moan.

He chuckled. She was quick-witted even with his tongue swirling and his lips slurping at her soft flesh chalice. It was time to make his wife mindless with pleasure. He felt a real buzz of excitement and satisfaction now that he could call her that. He coated his fingers with the contents of a small bottle of lube that he had stashed in his jacket pocket. Slowly he slid two thick fingers into her pretty ass, two into her pussy and used his tongue and thumb to tease and suck on her plump clit. He scissored his fingers and slowly pumped in and out until she was shrieking, chanting his name and writhing on the seat. He knew when she’d climaxed by the strangle hold that her pussy and ass locked on his hand. She knew better than to plead with him to stop. He was, however, feeling merciful; after all, they’d had a long day. He slowed his movements and waited a minute before starting again, and then again.

“Joshua, I’d be passed out by now if the blood wasn’t rushing to my head.” She gasped, catching her breath.

“One advantage of being at an incline,” he drawled as he wiped his face. He was surprised to find that he hadn’t spilled much of the drink at all and the napkin was practically dry.

He removed the cushions but didn’t put her totally upright. When he saw her lying with her eyes glazed and mouth open, panting, he just couldn’t help himself. He lost his pants and Jockeys in seconds, and because he was so tall, he easily straddled her chest. His feet were planted either side of the half reclined seat. His very large balls nestled on top of her soft tits.

“What. Is. That?” she said, taking a hold of his cock and moving it to the side.

She was looking at his shaved pubic hair and the tattoo. It was a competition to see if shock or mirth won out. She started to chuckle, yeah he figured it’d go that way.

“It’s the truth.” He growled.

Her mouth split open in a wide smile and he wasn’t a man to miss an opportunity.

“Open just a little wider, darlin’, I’ve something here that belongs to you.”

He threaded his hands into her hair on either side of her head and slowly fed her his huge, very hard cock.

“Take it all, baby, like I know you can,” he ordered.

She’d been practicing the art of deep throating on bananas and that just smacked of love and dedication in his eyes. Problem was he was bigger. He knew that Rachael liked it rough, but he didn’t want to bruise her tonsils with his ten and a half inch tool. He pushed forward slowly and felt her relax her throat to prevent gagging. God, he nearly came just from the sight of her lips spread full, wide, and tight around his girth, his balls hanging under her chin. It fed that sinful, perverted desire he had to sexually dominate. It was the desire he knew she craved. The heat and wetness of her mouth compounded his need. He retreated and constrained himself to shallower thrusts, allowing her to run her tongue along his length and apply a strong suction. He pulled

out to delay his release and offered up his heavy balls for her to lick and suck. Fuck, the sight of his big, swollen, cum-filled balls on her face sent him over. He lost it. He grabbed his cock in one hand and came, roaring his release and spurting warm, thick globs of his cum all over her face, marking her as his own.

Shit, he'd never done that before, she'd always swallowed it. Concern for Rachael and worry that she might be pissed off swamped the absolute bliss of a few seconds ago. Rachael said nothing for a moment, just sat looking at him with cum slowly sliding down her lovely face. He couldn't help himself; it turned him on big time. She closed her eyes and sighed with what sounded like satisfaction before extending her tongue out of her mouth and licking around her lips. *Holy fuck.* She gave him a slow sexy smile and he knew that he was a blessed man. He reached for another napkin and wiped her face clean, then kissed her gently and kissed her some more.

Chapter 24

Shannon was talking with Susan when the Farley brothers, Colin's siblings, pulled her onto the dance floor as the band started to play a slow song. They had her trapped between their hard bodies like brackets on a bookcase.

"Are you sure that you wouldn't rather have our company tonight at Flora's Place?" Harry asked seductively.

"Sorry, boys," she said wriggling to give herself more room, "but I think that James and Luke might have something to say about that."

"They're too old for you, you need some young fun. Anyway, they don't usually complain."

"What do you mean?"

Tom shrugged. "It wouldn't be the first time we've had a woman after them. Don't fret, Shannon, we like the fact that they've broken you in for some double riding. Ain't nothin' to be ashamed of in these parts. You're a beautiful, single woman, and we can show you a good time."

"No, boys, you can't." Shannon heard the deep, serious tones of Luke's voice. "We don't take too kindly to anyone disrespecting and hitting on our girlfriend." He looked a little pissed off.

"Girlfriend?" Both boys sounded surprised.

"Yep, so run along and get your own."

"We're very sorry, Shannon. We didn't know it was serious. No offense, we think that you're lovely," Harry said looking sheepish.

Shannon didn't know whether to feel shocked, angry, insulted or flattered. She was in a good mood so she erred on the happy side.

“No problem, boys.” Shannon smiled, knowing that they hadn’t meant to be rude, not that kind of rude anyway.

“Sorry, Luke man,” Harry said backing away.

“Nice going, dude.” Tom grinned with a parting wink.

“The vultures are circling and I think it’s time to leave. I don’t want to be completely beat when we get back to Sweet Water.” Luke grinned suggestively at her.

“Well if you’re too tired I guess I know where there are a couple of young, fun things waiting in the wings,” she teased.

“We’ll manage to keep you entertained lady, make no mistake.” He scowled then sighed, “And now my privates are aching again.”

“Privates? Seems to me they’re altogether too public.”

Before Luke could reply James came sauntering over.

“Janet and Rachael’s parents have everything covered, y’all wanna slip the rope?”

“Yes,” they replied at the same time.

A few guests formed a human chain and helped Shannon, Luke, and James, pack the wedding presents into the trunk of the limo. Shannon’s overnight bag was already stashed in the back. They were going to stay at Sweet Water for the night, or more accurately, the morning. Janet was staying at Mitch’s house, which was close to the hotel, so the three of them would have the ranch house to themselves. The party was still going strong when they said goodnight to the other guests, thanked the hotel staff and management, and left.

James ensured that the privacy screen between them and the driver was in place once they were seated in the limo.

“This has been a great wedding,” Shannon sighed, snuggling up between them.

“It’s not over yet. We’re gonna put some cowboy lovin’ on you that you’ll never forget,” James drawled as he kissed her neck. When he deliberately thickened his accent his words flowed like rich, smooth molasses on a hot summer’s day in Texas.

“You may never want to leave after tonight, little darlin’,” Luke whispered in her ear. “We’re gonna give you reasons to think about staying.”

She could immediately think of two very sexy, hunky reasons. Crap, she was in deep. Both men kissed her while reaching down to her ankles and then under her skirts, slowly tracing the silk stockings back to the top of her thighs, bunching up her fancy dress in the process.

Luke groaned and then pushed aside her satin and lace panties to plunge his long finger into her wet core.

“Man, she’s so wet.”

“My lips feel dry. It’s a win-win situation, Shannon.”

Fast as a flash James was on his knees and tunnelling under the dress. He ripped her panties off and buried his face between her thighs while Luke continued to finger her and stroke her sweet spot.

“Oh god, her bare pussy looks and feels amazing,” James said as he played her clit with his tongue.

It wasn’t long before she was moaning, shaking, and trembling on the edge of release. Luke must have known how close she was because he leaned over and kissed her full on the lips. At the same time he increased the pressure of his finger in her channel and James pressed his tongue harder against her clit. Her scream was captured by Luke’s mouth as she bucked and held on tight to his shoulders.

Mindless with the need to be filled and stretched by a big cock, she twisted and crouched on her knees on the back seat next to Luke.

“You better have a condom, James, because I want you to fuck me while I suck Luke.”

She was unzipping Luke’s trousers and reaching through the material of his boxers for his cock.

“Hey, what’s this?” she asked when she saw a big patch on Luke’s groin.

“A surprise, maybe a shock, but not for now,” Luke mumbled furtively. “It’s not sore, not now anyway.”

She heard the tearing of plastic and turned to see James quickly rolling on a rubber. He also sported a patch in the same location. She was puzzled, and under normal circumstances her inquisitive side would have been suspicious, but right now she was running on physical instinct and her body didn't care.

James shuffled behind her and gathered up the material of her dress, throwing it over her back, exposing her bottom.

"Fuck, Luke, her pussy looks fantastic all bare and smooth. The folds are all plump, dark red and glistening."

She could feel the latex covered head position up against her twat as he continued to describe the scene. Her core ached urgently to be filled, but James seemed to want to savor the moment.

"I'm gonna feed you my dick one inch at a time and when I'm balls deep against your cunt I'm gonna— hey!"

Shannon surprised him by slamming back onto his cock, sending him divinely deep.

"Fuck me, James, now! No talking. You've already given me oral. I need you to give it to me fast and hard."

He had had audacity to laugh. "You'll pay for that one later, I'll make you beg. Now, I'll give it to you how you want it."

She bobbed up and down on Luke's delicious cock and paused to say a muffled, "Do it already."

Luke muttered some nonsense about teaching her patience but soon stopped when she increased her suction and massaged his sweet spot under the flare of his cockhead. "Christ," was all he managed then.

James hammered into her very juicy cunt. She could hear the squelch and slap of flesh on flesh. The long stretch and friction of his thick shaft, sliding rapidly in and out, soon had her body blooming again. His well-muscled flanks powered his thrusts as he repeatedly flexed his hips and drilled into her. He half knelt behind her, one knee on the seat, one foot on the floor, a position that enabled him to throw some of his weight behind each thrust. The momentum shoved her

face into Luke's lap, forcing her nose up against the shaved base of his cock and the patch, pushing him deeper into her mouth.

"Jesus, she's tight and her muscles are milking my cock with all those ripples and spasms. I can't last, I'm gonna—ahhh." James clutched her hips and held her tight to him, fully impaled on his nine and a half inch cock.

Shannon could barely breathe as her body convulsed and her core constricted and relaxed fast and hard over and over again. A flood of pleasure swamped her and she couldn't care less about the continuous muffled moaning and whining sound that issued from her throat and escaped from her nose and lips clapped around Luke's cock. She increased her pace moving faster up and down his length, sucking hard and holding tight with her lips. When he came with a restrained yell, she swallowed it all down.

"Er, guys." James panted. "The limo's stopped. I think we're home."

How embarrassing, what would the driver think? There was no "think" about it. Could they have been more obvious? Maybe, with a neon flashing sign with the words *2 in 1 Fuck* on the top of the limo. They straightened themselves up and gingerly exited the car.

"Evening, Sir, Ma'am, Sir," said Arnie, the driver, without the hint of a smirk or leer or anything remotely suggesting that he knew what they'd been doing. The man's a real professional, Shannon thought.

"May I help you unpack the gifts?"

"That would be a help, Arnie, thanks," said James, also pretending as if nothing out of the ordinary had happened.

Maybe it wasn't out of the ordinary in this kinky place. When they had all of the gifts in a pile on the dining table James thanked Arnie and was about to slip him a tip, but the driver held up his hands.

"Oh, no, sir. Mr. Ryden, the groom, has very much taken care of that, but thank you all the same. It's been a pleasure to be of service and please pass on my thanks to the new Mrs. Ryden for sending out a

plate of very delicious food this evening while I was waiting, it was very much appreciated.”

James nodded and Arnie left.

“I guess he’s seen some interesting things driving lots of different folks around.” James mused.

“Guess so,” agreed Luke.

“Let’s check on Rug first and then go to bed,” Shannon said.

* * * *

“You’re insatiable, darlin’. How did you ever get by with no or only one man?” Luke asked.

James looked at their woman, standing in her silk bridesmaid’s dress next to his bed, radiating desire. She looked how he felt.

“She didn’t know what she was missing,” he answered for her.

“Too true,” Shannon muttered.

“I’ll have to punish you for the little stunt you pulled in the limo, Shannon.”

She looked at him with saucer wide eyes. “What stunt? What punishment?”

“Stealing my cock, sweetheart, taking without asking. Not letting us all savor the moment. That’s a spanking offense,” he said answering both questions.

“You’re not serious,” she blustered with well and truly misplaced confidence. “Anyway, you didn’t seem to mind when I *stole* your cock that night on the range, beneath the stars, when you howled your release.” She looked both sexy and smug at that moment. “If you don’t want me to do that again, hey, just say.”

“He speaks for himself, darlin’,” said Luke, the traitor.

“Luke, do you mind? I’m trying to lay some ground rules here.”

“That was different, Shannon, we weren’t in a scene and you were leading.”

“Seemed like I was leading in the car, too.”

Ha, that got Luke's attention and he quickly corrected her. "Oh, no, baby, that was us, you were just shouting.... suggestions."

She acted like she was miffed, but her dilated eyes and the flush to her skin told a different story.

"We won't spank you tonight because you didn't know the rules." He had to really try hard to stop himself from laughing at the look of horror and lust on her face. "Not unless you want us to."

"Certainly not," she huffed.

Yeah right, he'd bet dollars to donuts that she'd go wild after a few quick, hard, fanny pats.

"Are you gonna behave and let us take care of you?"

She smiled. "Yes, I am." Then she sort of pouted and peeped up at him through her long red lashes. "And...well I want to say I'm sorry, James, for interrupting you in the car. I really like it when you tell me what you're going to do. It...it really turns me on. I just got carried away with such a burning need like I can't describe." She bit her bottom lip. "I love you."

He held her gaze and softly said, "You don't have to explain. We all feel it."

He knew that if she would have them, he would love her forever, and that would be his reward. It didn't take long to undress her as they whispered caresses and words of desire across her skin. She was wearing white silk stockings, a suspender belt, no bra, and of course no panties thanks to them. He noticed that she was more comfortable being nearly naked around them and he liked it. She was so responsive to their every touch and reciprocated at every opportunity. It appeared as if she honestly couldn't get enough of touching them either. The gossamer light caress of her lips on his chest, his back, wherever she could reach, refueled his passion, if it were ever really spent.

"Can we all be together tonight? You know, with the two of you inside me at the same time, not my mouth?" she asked.

"Yes," said Luke with a strained voice.

When he looked at his partner he saw all his own hopes and wishes showcased on his friends face.

“Tell us where you want us, Shannon,” he coaxed. He wanted to hear the words.

“I want... I really don’t care. How about Luke in my pussy and you in my ass?”

“All right,” Luke said as they both nodded. “I’ll wear a condom. Is it okay if James doesn’t?”

He heard a groan of need escape James’s lips.

“Yes, and later on perhaps you could swap?”

Insatiable. They laughed, and it lightened the mood for some loving.

* * * *

Shannon looked at the two handsome, hot men before her. She must have done something seriously kind and amazing in another life to be here with them tonight. No doubt many people would now think that she deserved to be reincarnated as a naughty, small boy’s hamster. Her mother would believe that she was going straight to hell. Shannon thought that perhaps people make their own heaven and hell here on earth. James and Luke and half the folks in Meadow Ridge County weren’t fixed to normal codes of social and moral convenience and, darn it, she wouldn’t be either.

James sat on the comfy chair pulling off his boots, and Luke sat on the bed. With their dark trousers and dress shirts they looked sophisticated and sexy, but if she had to choose, she would see them in jeans, hats, boots, and casual shirts. Rough and ready, that’s how she liked to think of them both.

“We’d better have a quick shower first,” Shannon said, thinking of how hot and sweaty she was after dancing and then sex in the car.

“Just a quick one, and you go first, on your own, otherwise we’ll never get you into bed,” Luke said.

She strolled past them, holding herself as tall as she could and putting a little extra swagger in her hips.

“I won’t be long, boys.”

Too bloody right, she’d be in and out faster than a teenage boy in a brothel. She took off the rest of her underwear—shame, really, because it was sexy—and gave herself a thorough but quick wash under the high-powered shower. When she emerged, James was waiting to hop in after her. While he was in the shower Luke diligently dried her off and she undressed him. Then James came out and Luke went in. She thoroughly dried James with a big, fluffy towel. It was like a soap tag team. When they were all dry they sat on the bed wrapped in towels. James turned the lights down to a soft glow and Luke gently pushed her back to lie on the bed in his arms. James joined them on the other side.

“Shannon,” Luke said sounding serious, “tonight is not about swinging from the chandeliers and only hot, kinky sex. We want this to be about the three of us, together, us sharing and loving you, you taking whatever you need from us and giving us your love in return.”

“It’s about bonding and developing our little love triangle, baby,” James said cheerily, as if the thought gave him joy.

It all sounded very committed and serious to Shannon. Her last boyfriend had disappointed her, she had been hurt and angry, but in truth those feelings hadn’t lasted long. It would be different with James and Luke because the hope factor was already far greater than any she had experienced. When she thought of them a heat radiated out from within her chest and she was glad for the prison of her ribs containing her full heart. Her body trembled for the want of them and she knew there was no turning back; she was hurtling down relationship road with no stop signs in sight.

They began to gently love her. It was different from the flash fire passion in the limo and almost every other occasion they’d all fucked together. James and Luke moved slowly and carefully as if performing a sacred ritual. Caresses and kisses settled on her skin.

Whispered words of delights diffused into her mind. They played her body like master musicians, and very soon she was crying climatic notes.

“Look how her swollen clit pulsates in time with the contractions of her cunt,” Luke marveled.

Both men were positioned with their heads between her legs. Their fingers and tongues had touched, licked, and sucked her on to heaven.

“I think she’s ready for us,” James said as he crawled up the bed, a master of understatement.

Her two gorgeous men knelt next to her. She shifted to sit up a little against the pillows, regained her composure and slowed her breathing—passing out by hyperventilating would not be a clever move. It was then that she looked at them, really she looked at them. *Oh, my God, they’re never going to both fit.*

“We’ll fit.” Luke must have noticed the look of apprehension on her face.

“But you’re both so big.” She gulped.

James nodded, “We’ve a lot of cock to pack into you and it’ll be tight, there’s no denying it, but we’ll make it so good for you, baby.”

He kissed her and her apprehension was soon overtaken by desire.

“James is gonna sit back against the pillows and headboard and let you mount up and ride him reverse cowgirl. It’ll be easier to take the tightest place first, little darlin’.” Luke’s voice took on that rolling, sexy Texan timbre that would have her agreeing to anything.

They must have given tonight some thought because James took over and continued to explain the scene.

“When you’re settled and leaning back in my arms, Luke will carefully give your pussy his cock, one slow inch at a time. If you need him to go slower or stop just say the words and he will. Once we’re both in and you’re comfortable, then we’ll rock us all to paradise.”

“And, darlin’, feel free to move, add your own rhythm if you need to,” Luke added.

“Okay.” That seemed a bit inadequate and lame, so she added, “I trust and love you both.”

The guys kissed her again, making her chuckle and moan as they competed for her lips. James plumped the pillows against the headboard and sat up, leaning back. His thick unsheathed cock stood to full attention as he applied a clear gel. When sufficiently coated, he opened out his arms in invitation. She sat in his lap with her back to his chest and positioned her legs on the outside of his. She raised herself up on her knees and leaned forward, taking most of her weight on her arms resting on his thighs. Luke swooped in for another kiss while James slid a well-lubricated finger around and then into her twitching ring. She moaned and rocked back slightly.

“Yeah, honey, that’s good. Now move back a little more,” James coaxed.

She felt the press of his fat, warm cockhead against her sensitive skin.

“C’mon, girl,” James encouraged gently. “Just push back and relax.”

She did. Slowly her flesh gave and she pushed her ass onto him. She was in control as James stayed still. His hands gently rubbed and squeezed her hips. With small movements designed to tease she rocked back and forth along his length.

He groaned. “Lord above, she’s hot and snug.”

Shannon felt full but comfortable and enjoyed the stretch and pull of her bottom around the thick girth of his cock.

“Woo wee.” Luke whistled. “If that isn’t one sexy sight. Take a look, lover.” He pinched and rolled her nipples between his fingers.

She craned her neck forward. She could see her bare pussy looking moist and swollen. James’s big balls were hanging under her butt like some ripe fruit. The erotic vision set off a series of little

contractions in her pelvic area. She moaned along with James's deeper groan.

"Now lean back a little against James."

Shannon rested back and planted her feet firmly on the bed, outside of James's spread thighs. His arms enfolded her in an embrace and he took over playing with her breasts. He bent his legs and opened them wider, which splayed her further open for Luke.

"I've just gonna have another quick taste," Luke said as he dipped his head between their legs.

"Luke, I can feel all these little contractions going on, man." James warned after a few minutes.

So could she, wonderful, fluttering spasms and pre-orgasmic tremors.

Luke raised himself up on his knees in front of her. With one hand gripping his cock, he rubbed it against her dripping slit and around her clit. Soon she was squirming against James and clenching her muscles and she heard him groan about how hot and tight she was. Tight? He should feel it from her end, every solid inch of his long length and wide girth. Still, she wanted more, she needed Luke inside. It was a biological imperative. She didn't have a choice because in nature there was no free will.

"D'ya want Luke's cock in your little cunt now, Shannon?" James whispered in her ear after a few minutes of teasing.

"Yes," she hissed.

Luke continued to rub her with his cock.

"Please. Please," she begged.

"You'd better mount up," James ground out. "She's killing me back here."

Luke reached past James and gripped the headboard to provide some stability. He then slowly pushed into her pussy.

"Fuck, you're hogging all the space, partner," he groaned in frustration.

Shannon could feel Luke push harder. It was uncomfortable yet erotic. Her muscles began to give and he commenced a sinful slide in and up.

Shannon mewed as she experienced the intense friction and stretch of Luke's cock forging through her unoccupied yet crammed tight channel.

"Ohhhhhh fuck, I can't, I—"

"You can, baby," growled Luke. "I'm in."

"Fucking hell." James cursed and moaned. "I felt you slide by."

Luke glanced at James and then concentrated on her. "You okay?"

She was stuffed full of cock. She had taken the two men whom she loved inside and it felt decadently divine. She gulped and gave a single nod. Luke touched his forehead to hers and nuzzled her nose to nose. It was an intimate and yet chaste gesture, considering that she was impaled on his shaft.

"Darlin', are you ready to ride?" James's voice sounded strained.

"Let's move out," she gasped.

They did, slowly. They moved out, and in, and out, in time with each other. The pleasure brewed slowly like an ancient mystic spell, gathering strength, seeping through her cells with every gentle push and slide. Soon she needed more.

"Faster, boys."

Luke thrust harder, which sent her higher up James's cock and when he pulled back she dropped down more onto James. James accentuated the action by flexing his hips and she helped by pushing up from her feet. The bed rocked under the weight and momentum of their combined thrust and fall. Shannon was dimly aware of the cacophony of noise they made; headboard banging, flesh smacking flesh, grunts, moans, and groans. It occurred to her that Luke's balls must have been slapping against James's. The thought didn't turn her off, on the contrary. It wasn't long before her orgasm built until she could stand it no longer. She had to come.

“Touch your clit, Shannon,” Luke ground out between kissing her lips and her nipples. It shouldn’t still surprise her that he knew her needs.

She licked her finger and shoved her hand between her and Luke. He moved back a little to give her fingers more space to work on her clit and palmed her breast with his free hand. She felt like bursting, filled to overflowing with emotion and sensation. It was too much, but now she would always want it. A sob escaped and then she looked into Luke’s eyes; he was with her, supporting her, the eye of the storm, and so she remembered to simply relax, to stop trying to hold on to it, to let it soak through her like summer rain.

Seconds later she screamed, jerked, and stiffened. Her core muscles contracted and clamped down on the two large cocks lodged within her. Both men lost their steady rhythm and frantically pumped into her, shouting her name as they came.

James wrapped his arms around her and Luke pressed closer. All of them were panting and covered in a slick sheen of sweat. She felt euphoric, high on endorphins and love. She never would have thought it in a million years, but the peace that followed such a frenzied lovemaking and endless ecstasy was in itself a joy. There was pleasure in lying with her lovers, breathing and simply reveling in the respite.

“Well, fuck me,” Shannon chuckled with a moan.

“Just give us a few minutes to recover, will ya?” James joked while Luke nearly choked laughing and trying to get his breath back.

Chapter 25

Shannon was first aware of deep, low male voices, murmuring softly over her head. She wasn't disorientated as she began to waken. There was no misty, vague memory of what had happened before she had finally gone to sleep. There was complete clarity. The long loving they had given her had been down and dirty, real and unforgettable. They had made love with her for hours; slow, fast, hard, and gentle, they'd done it all.

Warm fingertips were absently caressing her hip and shoulder. She slowly opened her eyes and rolled onto her back. James and Luke were sat alongside her drinking what smelled like coffee.

"Good morning, lads."

"Mornin', darlin'," Luke said as he leaned over to kiss her softly on the lips.

"Mornin', sweetheart." James kissed her nipple.

"What time is it? Have you guys been up long?"

"Eleven. We just went out to check that the animals were okay. Phil drew the short straw for working this morning and he's up and about." James answered. "Want a coffee?"

"Is the pope Catholic?" she answered.

"I'll be back in a minute."

James leapt off the bed with far too much energy for someone who had been up, in every sense, for most of the night.

She shuffled to sit up. Luke repositioned her pillows behind her and she leaned back next to him.

"How are you feeling this morning?" she asked him.

"Happy. How about you?"

“Well loved.”

James strolled back in the room with a mug of coffee that she gratefully accepted. He sat on the end of the bed.

“It was a fantastic wedding. I think that everyone enjoyed themselves, and most importantly Rachael and Joshua seemed to have a great time.” She sipped at the hot drink with a sigh of appreciation.

“Yeah, I’m sure happy for them both. It was a great party,” Luke agreed.

“Last night, with you two... well, I’ve never experienced anything like that, you were both wonderful. Thank you.”

“We are fantastic together, Shannon,” James said in his characteristically confident way.

“Believe us when we say we’re experienced enough to recognize the real deal when we see it,” Luke said quietly. “We also know that you may not see it quite as clearly as we do yet.”

She was certainly beginning to. She wasn’t sure how to respond but she was literally saved by the bell as the house phone next to the bed rang. James answered it. After greeting Mitch and asking about Janet he went quiet as he listened to whatever Mitch had to say. His face began to take on a much more serious look and his voice an icy timbre.

“I understand. I don’t agree, but I know the law. I thought he’d do something like that. Okay, thanks for calling, Mitch.”

“What?” she and Luke said at the same time.

“Crossling’s out on bail. His lawyer is saying that we were trespassing on his property and that my dog assaulted him first.”

Shannon gasped, “But he held us at gunpoint.”

“Yep, but what he is saying is also true. Listen, Shannon, I’d feel a whole lot better if you’d stay here at Sweet Water or at Luke’s place for the next two weeks. I don’t feel happy with you being at Flora’s place on your own with that madman on the loose.”

She stared at him, eyes wide with concern.

“You can stay in the guest room or the studio over the office if you’d feel more comfortable there. I’d obviously rather you stay here in the main house, in my bed with me.”

Luke coughed.

“You’re invited, too, didn’t think I needed to ask,” James grinned.

Shannon didn’t want to be at the cabin on her own and it made more sense for her to move in with James than the other way around as they still had work to do. Luke didn’t have animals to worry about at his place, his horse was stabled at his parents ranch.

“Okay, but I must warn you that in a few days I’ll be premenstrual, and sometimes it isn’t pretty.”

“Hell, not another one. Janet’s a total bitch for a few days each month.” James groaned in jest.

“Diana was the same when we were living at home. I used to keep my head down. If you get too bad we can always tie you to the bed...and leave you.”

Both guys laughed. As they’d no doubt intended Shannon wasn’t sure what she was most piqued about, the suggestion of tying her up or leaving her.

“As if!” She snorted. She took a long sip of her coffee and peeped over the rim of her mug to see them staring at her. “Shit, you would try it, too.”

“Try? No,” was all Luke needed to say.

“What’s up, honey? Worried you’d like it?” James asked in a sexy soft drawl.

“She’d love it, but she’d be madder than a wet hen if we left her too long.” Luke was grinning way too much for her liking.

James chuckled. “Woo wee, can you imagine how she’d look tied to the bed, all riled up and desperate like? I can’t wait.”

“Laugh it up, boys, keep dreaming. Just remember you’re vulnerable when you’re sleeping.”

“Ah, we’re just kidding, Shannon.” Luke laughed and Shannon looked smugly at James. “We wouldn’t actually leave you alone,” he continued. “That wouldn’t be safe.”

She rolled her eyes but had a feeling that they weren’t joking.

“Being with you two would never be boring, I’ll give you that,” she chuckled.

She noticed that James and Luke shared one of their silent communicating looks.

“It wouldn’t only be fun and games. We work hard but we play hard, too.” Luke sounded suddenly serious. “Shannon, we know that we’ve not had much time to get to know all about you, but we really think that you could be a full partner in our lives.”

“What are you asking?” she said, looking back and forth between them.

“Have you got a criminal record?” James asked.

That was just plain weird, and she wasn’t sure where they were going with this line of questioning.

“What? I...no!”

“You were never arrested protesting as a student?”

“Er, no. I was lucky and I never caused damage. What has this got to do with anything?”

“That’s great. There shouldn’t be a problem with your visa then.” James beamed at her and Luke.

“What visa?” She was really very confused now.

“The K-1 Fiancée Visa that we’re gonna apply for, if you agree,” Luke explained cautiously. “We’ve already started the process on the hope that you’ll say yes.”

“Yes to what?” Her brain must really be sleep addled because this wasn’t making sense.

“Look, we know you haven’t known us long but we can’t lose what we have just because of time and distance. We want you to apply for residency here in the US with a view to marrying us.” Luke

looked serious when he spoke those words. He took her mug and both men held her hands.

“There are a few important details to sit down and discuss, but we are confident that any problems can be overcome. Will you marry us, Shannon?” James asked, looking sincere and nervous. It was a foreign expression on his face, he was normally supremely confident about most things.

She was so shocked that she didn’t say anything.

“Marry, as in commit yourselves to me, forever forsaking all others?”

Luke nodded. “That’s the way we see it”.

Her mind was whirling, tumbling disjointed thoughts. All the possible difficulties and negative points loomed. They were ranchers, oil and cattle men, with vastly different upbringings and lifestyles. She wouldn’t change her stance on environmental issues and sustainable living. Those principles were important to her; could they live with that? She would have to leave Ireland. Her father might not approve and her mother certainly would not. Those points were easily surpassed by the good stuff, like being near to her best friend Rachael, and being part of a new family. As James had said there were plenty of new career opportunities, and she loved Meadow Ridge County. Of course none of that really mattered because of the one thing that outweighed everything else, she loved Luke and James.

“I really think that we could have a good, happy life together,” Luke ventured.

“Hell, Luke, make it sound boring, why don’t you?” James rolled his eyes. “We both love and adore you, Shannon. We want you to be our wife, our lover, to be part of our lives and someday the mother of our children.”

Shannon sat stunned for a moment and then she dared to dream. Putting aside the skin-deep good looks and their sexual abilities, they were still good men. There would have to be some compromises made on all sides because at the moment their lifestyles were poles

apart. She knew that despite all their differences she loved them, because this love was an accepting thing. She felt bound to them and could clearly see their futures entwined like the roots of a sturdy oak tree. They could grow together and enrich each other's lives. She instinctively knew that to hold their hearts and to give them her love in return was the best bargain she could ever make.

She nodded her head. "Yes." She stated to chuckle because she could hardly believe what she was agreeing to. "Yes, I'll marry you," she said more firmly and without a shadow of a doubt that it was the right thing to do.

* * * *

Luke could barely contain himself. He was happier than a flea in a doghouse. Here was the woman, the one whom he respected, liked, loved, and lusted after, and she had just agreed to be their wife. She looked a little shell-shocked, but a big smile lit up her face. He swiped the coffee mug out of her hand and James launched himself on her. Luke watched as his friend covered her in kisses that tickled her and caused her to shriek and laugh. His own deep chuckles joined theirs and he dived in. It was a few minutes before they calmed down and caught their breath.

"You have to get off me. I need to go to the bathroom." Shannon sighed as she patted their arms.

Both of them were sprawled over her but they rolled away to allow her to move. His stomach suddenly made the muffled growling noise of a tiger hiding in dense jungle.

"Hungry?" Shannon chuckled as she crawled over him to get out of the bed.

"Always," he replied as he took advantage of her open legs and rubbed his hand between her legs.

She slapped his arm and fell out of bed. To his amusement it occurred to him that she was sometimes a bit clumsy and that it was a

good thing she was flexible or she'd have done herself an injury. He realized that if she'd been coordination personified they probably wouldn't have met that first time at the conference.

"Well, I'm hungry, too, and we've some things that we need to talk about, so how about we have breakfast downstairs?" She said standing up quickly and rummaging in her overnight bag.

"Sounds like a plan," James agreed.

Shannon pulled out a pair of panties and a T-shirt and headed to the bathroom. He and James already had their boxers on so they grabbed a T-shirt each and headed downstairs, giving each other a congratulatory slap on the back.

"Man, I feel invigorated ya know, like I've got more energy. I'm so darn happy." James was rattling away, his accent becoming more pronounced with his excitement.

Luke put an arm around his shoulders and gave him a brief hug, one that conveyed solidarity and friendship. He loved James like a close brother and he understood exactly what he was feeling. They were going to spend the rest of their lives together with Shannon and dang, he couldn't wait to get started.

Shannon entered the kitchen and she appeared radiantly happy despite her obvious tiredness from their nocturnal activities.

"Is it just me or does anyone else feel really excited?" She did a little happy feet type of dance on the spot, as if she couldn't contain herself. "God, I love you so much!"

Fast as lightening, James had her in his arms and swung her around. "Darlin', I was just saying the same thing."

James planted a big kiss on her lips and then passed her over to him. He buried his face in her vibrant, wayward hair and held her close. He was unprepared for the strong feeling of protectiveness that embracing her inspired and the wave of warmth that seemed to push out from his chest. The absolute pleasure that he found in simply holding her, was a treasure without measure. If he wasn't careful he might hold her too tightly and never let go.

“I smell bacon beginning to burn.” Shannon sniffed.

“Crap.” James dashed over to the grill. “Phew, saved in the nick of time. Get the plates will you, love? Luke, you’d better see to those eggs that you were scrambling.”

They sat at the breakfast bar as they tucked into their brunch, and began to discuss their future.

“So, what’s a K-1 Fiancée Visa?” Shannon asked as she put a dollop of strawberry jelly on her toast.

“It’s what you apply for if you are engaged to an American citizen and want to live in the States. It has a shorter waiting period than a visa based on an existing marriage and you are allowed to apply for a work permit and be engaged in employment once it’s granted.” Luke explained.

“The main condition is that you have to get married within ninety days of entering the US” James added.

“What do we have to do?” She said as she licked some crumbs off her lips. It nearly distracted him completely.

“Er...It’s a two-step process. Either James or I must file a visa petition on your behalf. Approval can take up to four months although we hope it’ll be faster. Then you have to apply for a K-1 Visa at a US consulate. The embassy in Dublin would be the easiest for you. That can take up to another four months. You have to provide a lot of information, including a police check, which is why we are pleased that you don’t have a police record no matter how minor the incident. Once you have the visa you can come to live in the US, but we do have to get married within three months of you arriving. You then have to apply for a green card if you want to work—I’m assuming that you do.”

She nodded. “Does that mean we could be apart for eight months?” She sounded upset at the prospect.

“It could take that long to get the visa but you can probably still come over for short holidays, and we can come and visit you...if you

want us to. We understand that you may not want us to meet your family.” Luke couldn’t quite keep the sadness from his voice.

“I’ll have to think about that, give me a little time.” She didn’t look too happy about it either. She wasn’t a deceitful person and he knew that she would find it difficult to lie to her family or even bend the truth.

“We’d love for you to work with us at M&R, but if you’d prefer to do your own thing that’s cool.” James said, forking a second helping of crispy bacon onto his plate.

“We three have careers and lifestyles that define us and let’s be honest we’re not exactly on the same page. There will have to be some changes, for all of us. I want to live a sustainably as I can. I’m not going to be a nag, but perhaps you might consider cutting down on the meat, for health and environmental reasons,” she said frowning at James’s plate.

Luke had to choke off a laugh as James froze in the act of shoveling a sausage into his mouth.

“I ain’t no vegetarian, Shannon. I’m a cattle rancher.”

He couldn’t imagine James chowing down a bean burger. Clearly some things were not going to change and Luke was interested in how she would handle that.

“I know that, and neither am I. I think that we could all get by with a little less, that’s all. If I can come up with some tasty alternatives will you at least try them?”

“I’ll try anything darlin’, especially if you make it, but I am a meat eating cowboy and that’s never gonna change.”

“That you are, and I love you...and your beef.” She giggled suggestively.

That went fairly well.

“I’ve a few work contracts that I’ll have to finish and you realize that at some point I will not be earning for a few months. I’ll be honest, the prospect of making myself financially vulnerable feels a little uncomfortable. I don’t have a huge amount saved and I’d rather

not sell my cottage. It's so beautiful and quaint that it'll be easy to rent out for holiday lets." She played with the food on her plate and avoided their gazes as if embarrassed.

"Shannon, we fully realize what you'll be giving up and that you'll be losing most of your clients. You've probably guessed that we aren't exactly poor and that we are more than able to look after you, but we also know that you're used to your independence. We will each deposit twenty thousand dollars into your bank account."

Shannon protested, "No, you don't need to do that."

They both shook their heads.

"It's only fair, darlin'. That should cover any loss of earnings as you wrap things up, overseas moving expenses and living costs until we are married. Anything leftover can go into our joint family account. We can thrash out details later. Ultimately we'd like to combine everything."

"Guys, don't run a mile when I say this, but I'm twenty-nine years old. I don't want to wait too long before trying for babies." She flushed bright red when she said that.

He was surprised. He had thought that it was going to take some clever persuading to get her to even think about kids. He guessed that a ticking biological clock was a powerful thing.

"I never really thought about kids before I met you two, but it has crossed my mind since then, so what do you think?"

His heart nearly burst when she looked at them both with nervous but hopeful eyes.

"As far as I'm concerned we can start right now. I want lots of little redheaded rug rats." James winked at her.

Luke was getting a few surprises today. He thought that James would want to wait at least a year or two.

"Me, too," he added for good measure and saw her look of relief.

"I think that we could give ourselves one or two years together first." She smiled.

"Sounds good to me," he agreed.

“Okay, well I can’t think of anything else just now but there is one thing that I need to know.” She grinned. “Why the patches?”

He and James looked at each other and decided to show her rather than explain. They stood up and proceed to wince and grimace as they pulled off the large patches covering their respective tattoos. Shannon’s hand flew over her mouth and she nearly choked on a bit of egg. For a few long moments she stared.

“Josh has one, obviously with Rachael’s name,” James said as if that somehow made it all understandable.

“Oh, God,” she said with eyes as wide as a bush baby’s. “That’s not how you spell my name.”

“What? Fuck! You’re kidding!” they both shouted.

She looked at them both with a poker face. “Yes, I am.”

Chapter 26

The clean-up work on the stream and the Sweet River was progressing well. Shannon was out on site with Luke, James, and an official from the River Authority, to assess what more they could do. As they were agreeing to a finish up work program, James's phone rang. He looked intently serious as he talked and marched back and forth. When he finished the call he came to speak to her.

"Shannon, that was Mr. Whyte, our attorney. He's been contacted by Roy's attorney about making some kind of out of court deal regarding the shooting." He looked confused. "He's up to something. We should go and see them today."

Later that afternoon Shannon and James sat in his lawyer's meeting room, across the table from Roy Crossling and a sharp-faced little man who had introduced himself as "Harold Clegg, Mr. Crossling's legal representative." She didn't like him at all.

"What's this about, Roy?" James asked.

"Drop your charges and I won't make any against both of you."

Shannon had to stop herself from snorting in disbelief. Was he crazy? Did he think he could get away with it? She noticed James staring intently at Roy and knew that his sharp mind was working fast.

"I want a few private words with my lawyer," James said.

They left the room and walked farther down a corridor for privacy.

"Can he press charges against us?" he asked Mr. Whyte

“He can try. He’ll argue that you were trespassing on his land, that your dog attacked him, and that he shot you in self-defense. I don’t think it’ll amount to anything but it’ll be an added complication.”

Mr. Whyte was a distinguished looking gentleman, an excellent lawyer by all accounts, and a family friend of the Rydens.

“What’s the real problem?” Shannon knew that the two men were considering things beyond the immediate issue.

“Shannon, darlin’, I don’t want there to be anything that may affect you getting a visa. I don’t care how small the chance is, nothing is more important to me than marrying you and you living here in Meadow Ridge County.”

A sense of doom settled in her belly.

“Do you suppose that Roy is thinking along those lines? He surely doesn’t know we’re engaged. Even if he did I doubt that he knows about the visa process.”

“I think he’s just taking a chance that we don’t want the hassle and that’s the way we’ll play it, okay?”

She nodded and Mr. Whyte agreed.

When they were all seated again in the room Mr. Whyte cleared his throat and addressed Mr. Clegg. “As we all know, taking into account the circumstances of the events and the trouble that Mr. Crossling is currently in over the polluting of the Sweet River, deviation drilling, and stealing Sweet Oil reserves—”

“Allegedly,” Clegg interrupted.

Mr. Whyte gave him a scathing look and continued. “My clients have nothing to fear from your threat.” He paused to let that sink in. “However, because of all the serious *allegations* that Mr. Crossling is currently facing, my clients will not pursue the assault charge. Of course the final matter rests with the police. My clients simply feel that it is not worth their time and effort given that Mr. Crossling will no doubt present a different interpretation of the events. You are a fortunate man, Roy.”

Roy looked at Mr. Whyte, then at her, and finally glared at James.

“Fortunate? I’ve lost the ranch Ryden, you son of a bitch.” He spat with venom. “My pa and I will have to sell to cover all the legal costs and fines. Don’t get too excited ’cause you’ll never get your hands on the Sweet River Ranch. A deal is currently being worked out as we speak.” He gloated at them.

If James was surprised, he didn’t show it.

“I’m sorry it’s come to that, Roy, but you’ve only yourself to blame,” he said in a neutral, even tone. “But if you *ever* threaten me or mine again, I will kill you.”

That last part was said in the coldest, hardest, deadliest way that Shannon had ever heard. She shivered that it came from the man she loved. If he ever spoke like that to her she’d wither on the spot. His face was blank but his eyes regarded Roy as if he were something nasty to be scraped off the on the bottom of his boot. Roy recoiled and sat back with a visible gulp.

“Well, now, it won’t come to that. I have advised my client to stay well away from you and your property. This was a satisfactory meeting, thank you for your time.” The little man bobbed his head, gathered his papers quickly, and stood up as if he couldn’t get out of the room fast enough.

Roy recovered his bravado and exited with a snide grin and a swagger.

“Well, my dear, try to forget that unpleasant character and let me offer my congratulations on your engagement,” said Mr. Whyte smiling at her, “I am thrilled that both the sons of my old, sadly departed friends, have found such delightful partners.” He shook her hand and kissed her cheek.

“Thank you,” she said, grinning back at the handsome older man.

“Did you enjoy the wedding, Travis?” James asked.

“Yes my boy, it’s been a while since I’ve attended such a lively gathering.” He chuckled. “It has worked out well that I’m here for the wedding because I can begin to deal with the oil theft issue and other

things.” He very briefly glanced at Shannon and she had a vague notion that it somehow concerned her.

James had already explained to Shannon that Travis Whyte was the senior partner in a large law practice in Houston. He was originally from Ridge Water and had a small branch office here. James said it gave him an excuse to come home.

“If what Roy says is true about selling the property, that is one quick deal considering all the legal problems.” James commented.

“Yes. Between us I heard via the bush telegraph that Sullivan and Morgan, the estate agents, have an interested party already lined up. A lawyer from Boston, representing a trust fund, contacted them a month ago, looking for properties in the area. Obviously the new buyer will want to ensure that they do not incur any debts, legal problems or financial penalties as a result of the oil spill and the drilling. The contract will have to be tight but from what I’ve heard their lawyer is very good. That’s all I can say, anything else is confidential I’m afraid but you may well have a new neighbor sooner than you think.”

James and Shannon met up with Luke at Dana’s Diner for an early dinner. Shannon had to try hard not to behave like a rubbernecked tourist. It was just how she imagined an American diner to be, even down to the red vinyl bench seats and the waitresses wearing pink uniforms complete with apron. They made their way over to Luke, who was sitting in a booth talking to a pretty waitress. It didn’t look like she was taking his order and a small but sharp stab of jealousy poked her. When he noticed them heading over his face lit up with a smile so bright that the waitress turned around to see what he was looking at. Shannon gave a little wave.

As they reached the table, Luke stood up and kissed her.

“Ah, this must be Shannon.” The young waitress grinned. “I’m Tracey. There’ll be a trail of broken hearts, shattered dreams, and, more to the point, frustrated women in Meadow Ridge County now that these two are off the market.” Then she seemed to realize how

that could be taken and her hand flew up to her mouth. “Oh, I’m sorry, that didn’t sound good.”

She blushed as red as a beetroot and Shannon took pity on her. “Don’t worry, I know about their reputation, but their player days are over. Isn’t that right, my stud muffins?”

Tracey laughed and Luke and James blanched at her nickname for them.

“Stud muffins?” James said in disbelief.

“I think it fits.” Shannon smirked.

“Oh I think you may be just what they need.” Tracey grinned. “I’ll get y’all a menu.”

Luke quickly explained that Tracey was at college but sometimes helped out waitressing at her mom’s diner in the holidays, especially if they were short staffed like today.

“I’d like to point out in my favor that I have never slept with Tracey.” Luke said, obviously looking for brownie points.

“No, but you did her mom when you were eighteen,” James replied quickly.

“God damn it, James, why d’ya have to say that? It’s not like it sounds, Shannon, Dana wasn’t married at the time and well, I was young and she was a good-looking older woman.”

“Save it, it doesn’t matter.” She laughed.

“So how’d it go?” Luke asked, still frowning at James.

They explained what happened and Luke listened and agreed with what they’d decided.

“The most important thing is getting that visa and marrying Shannon. Tonight we’ll decide which one of us has to put his name on the application form.”

* * * *

That night they sat cozied up on the big sofa in the living room of the Sweet Water ranch. Luke must have sensed that Shannon was upset about something.

“Shannon, what’s the matter?” Luke asked, placing his arm around her.

To his horror James saw a fat single tear rolled down her cheek. Concern and worry were etched on Luke’s face as he held her.

“I love you both. I can’t, I won’t choose who will be my legal husband.”

Phew, he’d thought that it was something serious.

“To us the binding ceremony is more important,” he explained as he hugged her.

It was true, but even so he realized that it was going to be a hard decision to make. He’d always quietly assumed that he would not be the one to marry the woman in their polyandry relationship because he was the youngest, but they had both agreed that was hardly fair. He hadn’t factored into account how much he’d love their future wife and it somehow was a little different sharing with a friend rather than a blood brother. He and Luke had talked about it and they had reminded themselves that it was only a piece of paper. They had agreed that if Shannon didn’t have a preference, they would let chance decide.

“Do you honestly have no preference or comment to make about whom you’ll legally marry?” he queried.

Shannon shook her head and asked, “Do you?”

“Look, we wish it could be both of us but it can’t. We can see a lot of good reasons why either of us should be the legal husband, but it is only a piece of paper. We’ll make other contracts that make us equal partners and give all us power of attorney.”

Luke appeared to consider things. “I guess we’ll just have to make the choice in the best, logical way we know.”

He grinned.

Shannon groaned. “Rock, paper, scissors?”

“See now, darlin’, you know us well already.”

"I can't watch," Shannon said. "You do it and call me back when you've decided. I love you both."

She kissed them each on the cheek then moved quickly through the thick door that led to James's wing of the house.

He turned to Luke. "You sure this is the way to do it?" he asked suddenly feeling the same as when he'd opened his exam results or before he'd got on an unbroken horse for the first time. The nervous, gut-clenching apprehension almost made him sick.

"Seems the best way, that or toss a coin. Look, whoever loses is gonna be disappointed."

"Yep, let's just do it," he said, taking a deep breath.

Each man held out his closed fist.

"Rock." They hammered the air, once. "Paper." They repeated the move. "Scissors." They brought their fists down and... For a moment no one said anything. James's hand was stretched flat to represent the paper symbol. Luke's hand remained in a tight fist—a rock.

"Paper covers rock." Luke croaked.

James felt tears prick his eyes. He'd won, but it wasn't a victory.

"Hey, man," Luke said. "It's okay."

Luke took James's still stretched hand and placed his clenched fist up against it. James wrapped his fingers around it holding tight.

"Partners," Luke said with a nod, as they looked into each other's eyes, gauging the strength of their friendship.

"Partners," he said in a strong voice.

* * * *

Shannon waited, pacing the room, wondering what was taking so long. She didn't care who would marry her, but she did care about any hurt or disappointment that one of her men may feel. She couldn't wait any longer. Taking a deep breath she headed back into the main house.

James and Luke were in the middle of a sort of man hug, which they broke once they realized she was there. Luke smiled but James had unshed tears in his eyes and her heart fractured.

"I love you both so much. James, I'm sorry that you can't be my legal husband, but I promise that you'll always be my husband in my heart and soul."

"I lost," Luke said softly. "James will be your legal husband."

James didn't look too happy and Luke's smile had a forced air.

"Shannon, I know that Luke wants to marry you as much as I do. I'm sorry for him; he's my best friend and my partner. I love you so much that although I know he feels disappointed I'm not prepared to give way. So you see it's a bit difficult to celebrate."

She looked at them and thought that it was such bullshit that she couldn't marry them both in the eyes of the law. Despite what they had said, it was still emotionally difficult for them.

"I understand. You are absolutely right, James. Luke, what I just said to James also applies to you. Now, I have given this some thought and I would like to change my name once everything is sorted out. So what do you think of Shannon Mary McKay Ryden?"

Luke smiled. "It has a certain ring to it."

Chapter 27

Shannon was soaking in the big tub in James's bathroom, thinking how time really does fly by when you're having fun. The past week had gone way too quickly and she only had three more full days until she had to fly back to Ireland. With the help of Travis Whyte and an immigration lawyer in Houston, James had filed a petition for a K-1 visa for her. They had been advised that complete applications, with no errors, were currently taking about two months to process. Once granted, she would have to apply at the US embassy in Dublin and no one could give them a clear answer on how long that would take. The worst thing was that once the process was underway it was possible that she may not get a visa to visit the US in the meantime because she could be considered to have intent to stay. It would depend on the official doing the visa. One thing was certain; they would have to visit her and that would be interesting.

She had decided that she would tell her family. Loving James and Luke as she did would give her the courage and strength that she needed to face her mother and father. She simply couldn't imagine lying about Luke and denying that he was just as much her husband as James. She would live her own life, and if they wanted to be a part of it, then they'd have to accept her choices. She wanted to wear her love on her sleeve, not tucked away in a deep back pocket as if in shame. She decided that the best strategy would be to tell her family about Meadow Ridge County and the unusual relationships and slowly drip feed them information, so that it didn't come as too much of a shock when she told them... she hoped.

She decided that she'd better get out of the bath before she turned into a prune. The long soak was supposed to be relaxing, but she was still excited about the prospect of bare-naked sex, without condoms. They didn't know and it was her little surprise and going away gift.

The past week she'd been surfing the crimson tide and at the beginning had wondered how it would affect sex. The answer was it didn't. Her comfort zone had definitely expanded with them.

As she dried off, she heard the door to the bedroom open and the sound of deep male voices.

"Mmm, Shannon must be in the bath, smells nice. Oh darn it she's out," James complained when she stood in the doorway with a big, fluffy towel wrapped around her like a cotton cocoon.

"We timed that wrong," Luke chuckled.

Luke and James had showered as soon as they'd finished work for the day. They'd all eaten a meal with Mitch and Janet who were also staying at Sweet Water. It wasn't a problem, the house was big enough and Shannon enjoyed the warm family atmosphere. Her guys had been having a late evening beer on the pool patio, discussing their day and relaxing while she took a long bath. She realized that it was a new experience for them to be living like this, but one they seemed to enjoy. When she left, Luke would go back to his house, but they had agreed to build a new home for when they were married.

"Come here, gorgeous," Luke said with his arms open and a gleam in his eye.

She walked into his embrace and he lifted her up off the floor to kiss her lips. She sighed and buried her nose in his neck.

"I love the way you smell, all manly and woodsy—it turns me on."

She felt a tug on her towel as James pulled it away from her warm, fragrant skin, leaving her naked. He kissed the nape of her neck and sparked delightful, tingling, little signals along her nerves, causing her to tremble and moan.

As she was kissing Luke she was aware that James was undressing fast. Once he was naked, he took hold of her and pulled her away from Luke into his own embrace. She wrapped her legs around his waist and passionately kissed him, feeding her love to him and devouring his. James turned to carry her to the bed, and when she peeked over his shoulder she saw Luke shedding his clothes faster than Clark Kent in a phone booth, and goodness, was he ever a superman.

James sat on the bed with her straddling his lap. His aggressive-looking, long, thick, erection was trapped between their bodies. The foreskin was pulled back tight, revealing his deep red, shiny cockhead. As he sucked on a nipple she pushed her hand between her legs and smeared her slick juices onto her open palm. She firmly gripped his hot shaft and gently moved her well-lubricated hand up and down its length, squeezing and pulling.

“Shannon, you’d better ease up, honey or I’ll disappoint you.” James groaned.

“You’ll never disappoint me,” she breathed close to his ear. “You never cease to amaze me.”

Luke stood next to the bed and swooped in for a long, languorous kiss.

“C’mon, honey, take pity on my cock and ride your cowboy,” James pleaded.

She hoisted herself up and slowly slid down on his cock, inch by inch, flexing her soft internal muscles as if feeding on him.

“Oh, fuck yeah. She’s swallowing my cock with her tight, wet cunt.”

It felt wonderful, the heat of his flesh sliding inside and the friction of his velvet soft skin against her warm, slick walls.

“Oh, Shannon, that feels amazing, but we gotta stop, we forgot a condom,” James ground out as if stopping were the very last thing he wanted to do.

“No, we don’t,” she said between kisses. “I started taking the pill last week and it’ll be effective now.” He pulled back, his eyes searching hers. “I wanted to ride my cowboys bareback,” she explained.

A look of excitement and desire swept across his features and he flexed his hips, thrusting deeper as he claimed her lips.

“Shannon, you are a real gift,” she heard Luke murmur. “James, stop hogging her lips, my cock needs to be sucked,” he said more forcefully.

She felt Luke’s long, thick fingers burrow into her hair. When she turned, his big dick was near her face. Without a moment’s hesitation she wet her lips and sucked him in.

“Jesus, I’m getting one hell of a close up.” James chuckled.

“D’ya mind?” Luke asked, and slowed his shallow thrusts.

“Nope, just don’t shoot on my face or I’ll shoot you,” James joked.

“Nah, Shannon will take it all, won’t you, honey?”

She eased off and licked his balls.

“Yes.”

“I want to see our cum leaking out of her two little holes.” James growled. “But it’s your cock, so it’s your call.”

“Hell yes,” hissed Luke as she sucked him back deep into her mouth.

Such erotic and explicit words caused Shannon’s pussy to clench like a tight fist around James’s girth. Desire dripped and coated his cock as she rode him faster and deeper.

“Woo wee, I think our little redhead also likes that idea,” James groaned. “She’s gripping me like a milkmaid.”

“Shove up the bed,” Luke directed as he stepped back and pulled from her mouth.

She reluctantly lifted off James as he back crawled like a crab up the bed. He put two large cushions under his butt, grabbed her wrist, and pulled her over him. His cock stood tall and proud and she

marveled at how it fit inside of her at all. Her pussy must be some kind of TARDIS. She couldn't quite understand why she wanted them both so much, why being near them inspired such craving, need and wantonness.

"Wait, we're too hot, and I want this skin dive to last more than a minute. Sit on James's face and give him your honey."

Shannon saw James nod and lick his lips, so she moved up the bed and straddled his face. He brought his hands to her hips and pulled her down onto his waiting mouth. A long, high moan escaped her throat as James speared her with his tongue, then lapped along her slit to her clit and began to gently lave her swollen bud. She fell forward and grabbed the headboard to steady herself as her thighs began to shake.

Suddenly she felt Luke part her butt cheeks and a cold, gel-coated finger strummed across her sensitive anus then pushed into her back passage. Within seconds she was racing toward the finishing line, only she knew it wasn't the checkered flag that awaited her because this was only the first lap. She bucked and jerked as it hit. She pulled away from James's wicked mouth with a high, keening moan.

"Let's fuck our woman," Luke said with unrestrained lust.

James reached up grabbed her arms pulling her down to face him. "We are gonna fuck you and fill you up with cum. You're ours." He almost snarled. The savage intense nature of his desire thrilled her.

"Yes, yours." She almost sobbed, her body wracked with need.

Luke was now behind her and gripped her hips as she still straddled James's face. He pulled her down James's body to their waiting cocks. She felt the hot tip of James's cock kiss her pussy just before Luke lifted her up, pulled her back and impaled her onto it. She let out a low wail of satisfaction and ground down, forcing him deep. When she lifted slightly James pulled back then thrust up hard into her willing flesh.

A large, warm hand on the flat of her back pushed her down to lie against James's now slick chest. Luke wasn't wasting any time. She immediately felt the press of his wide, gel-coated cockhead against

her constricted, puckered skin. He pushed against her sphincter and the muscle slowly relented, giving way to his flared girth. Luke didn't pause as he forged forward, gliding inside her like a train slowing to a stop at the end of the line. His balls buffeted up against her pussy and presumably James wedding tackle as well.

This is where she wanted to be—sandwiched between the two men she loved and desired most in the world. For a long moment there were no sounds except their heavy breathing, then Shannon mewled and moved her hips, like a rider gently nudging her steed and they began.

First they went at a slow, easy trot.

"Oh, darlin', I can feel you and him," James panted. "It's never been this good, never."

Very soon it turned into a canter.

"Fuck, I can't stop, it feels too good. This is heaven with my two favorite people. I love you, Shannon," Luke said through gritted teeth.

Then they were in full gallop.

"Oh, God, I'm coming again, oh fuck, it's too much—ahhh," Shannon screamed.

"Yes," both men yelled as they pumped hard, spewing the contents of their balls into her body.

Luke held onto her hips for a minute then pulled out and fell to the side. She took the weight off her knees and collapsed more onto James's chest.

"Shannon, thank you. We've never done it like that without a condom," James said after he got his panting under control.

Luke disappeared into the bathroom for a minute and returned with a cloth.

"Wait, I wanna see," James said, rolling her onto her back and withdrawing his very red and ravished looking cock. "Bend and spread your knees, Shannon."

"Wider," demanded Luke, his features dark with lust.

It was a little disconcerting, but she complied.

“Fucking hell, that’s hot.” James sounded as if his throat was constricted.

Both men looked like hungry wolves as they stared between her legs.

“Er, this is a bit embarrassing,” she said, crossing her arms over her face.

“Sorry, love, but it’s such a turn on to see our cum dripping from you. We’ll clean you up now,” Luke said.

“Hurry up, I’m hard again. This time I’m using the back door and it’ll be slower and longer, baby,” James said.

“Me, too, I want that sweet pussy, skin to skin.” Luke headed off the bathroom to properly clean up first.

“You guys are going to kill me,” she groaned, but she always seemed to want them, she really couldn’t get enough.

“There’s a definite danger of being loved to death,” Luke conceded.

As the night progressed, Shannon wondered how she’d ever managed being alone or with only one man. She was going to miss them like the desert missed the rain when she left for Ireland, but, all being well, it was only for a few months and then she’d have them both for the rest of her life...a permanent monsoon. She was distracted from her thoughts when her phone rang.

* * * *

Rachael Ryden waited, hoping that Shannon would answer her phone. She wanted to talk to her friend while she was still in Meadow Ridge County and wish her a safe journey home. She wondered if James and Luke had made good on their intention to ask Shannon to marry them and if she had said yes. After about six rings, Shannon answered.

“Hey, Rachael, how’s the honeymoon going?”

“Great. I just wanted to check up on you before you leave and wish you a good journey. Anything interesting happen?”

“You could say that. It’s been a wonderful and eventful holiday. How about you?”

“Well, I was very nearly eaten by a shark, but Josh punched it on the nose and saved me.”

“Heck, are you okay though?”

“Yeah, but it kinda put me off swimming for a while, you know; dar dum, dar dum... dum dum dum dum.” Rachael did the Jaws tune.

“So, can you top that?”

There was a moment of quiet.

“I’m engaged to be married to two Texans and you’ll be my new sister-in-law in the not too distant future.”

“Yes!” Rachael shrieked and punched the air in delight, causing Joshua to look surprised. “Bloody hell, O’Reilly, this time you win!”

Epilogue

Three months later

Shannon turned and gave her family one last final wave before she walked with James and Luke through the airport security checks and into the departure lounge. Most of the clan had turned out to wish her farewell, all except her mother. Mary O'Reilly had looked at the three of them with disapproval, disappointment, and disdain when they had explained the nature of their relationship. Shannon realized that her mother would never accept her two men, but the loss of her mother's approval was a small price to pay for the happiness of three people in love. At least she knew she'd tried. Her father and the rest of the family had been surprisingly accepting, and they all seemed to genuinely like Luke and James.

The visa application had been granted faster than they expected, which was just as well because her car, cottage and bed were not big enough for her two large Texans. They hadn't complained on the three occasions they'd visited, even though their legs hung off the edge of the bed and their knees were around their ears in her little, compact hybrid car.

She and James had an appointment scheduled at the registry office in Ridge Water to get married in four weeks time. They would quietly go and do the legal marriage in the morning with no guests other than Rachael and Luke as witnesses. They didn't want to make a big deal of it because it wasn't as important to them as the binding ceremony that would take place that same afternoon, in the same little church

where Rachael got hitched. Her father, brothers, stepmother, and half sisters would be attending that service.

She guessed that traveling first class with her lovers had made the journey more interesting and enjoyable than last time. In fact the time had passed quickly and now they were in the company jet, about to land at the small, local airport at Ridge Water, Meadow Ridge County, Texas, where her future awaited. It had been three months since she had left and yet she felt right about returning, because that was where her heart had led her. It was now home.

She thought back to the picnic on Look Out hill with James, Josh, and Rachael. The idea of a ménage relationship at that time had seemed fantastical, but she had been right when she'd guessed that such a thing was possible in a place like this with men like James and Luke. With that happy thought she popped a Jelly Baby into her mouth, slipped her hand into Luke's, and followed James out of the plane, into the bright autumn sunshine.

THE END

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

I was born in England, and became a voracious reader of fiction from an early age. I have always had an interest in the built and natural environment and I studied Town and Regional Planning and later Environmental Management. Writing fiction came later in life.

I met my husband in Scotland. We were married in the USA, in a hot air balloon, and our feet haven't touched the ground since. We have lived in several countries and I have met many lovely people with interesting stories to tell.

I write from home, wherever in the world that may be at any given time. I feel incredibly lucky that I have found something that I love doing. Erotic romance is fun to write and I love to create characters that I can relate to, and give them romance, love, hot sex and a happy ending. Someday I would like to write a story that my children can read, but perhaps instead I'll just have to wait until they grow up...a lot.

I hope that you enjoy reading my stories.

Also by Dawn Forrest

Siren Classic: *Sweet Water Vet: Taking Rachael*

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