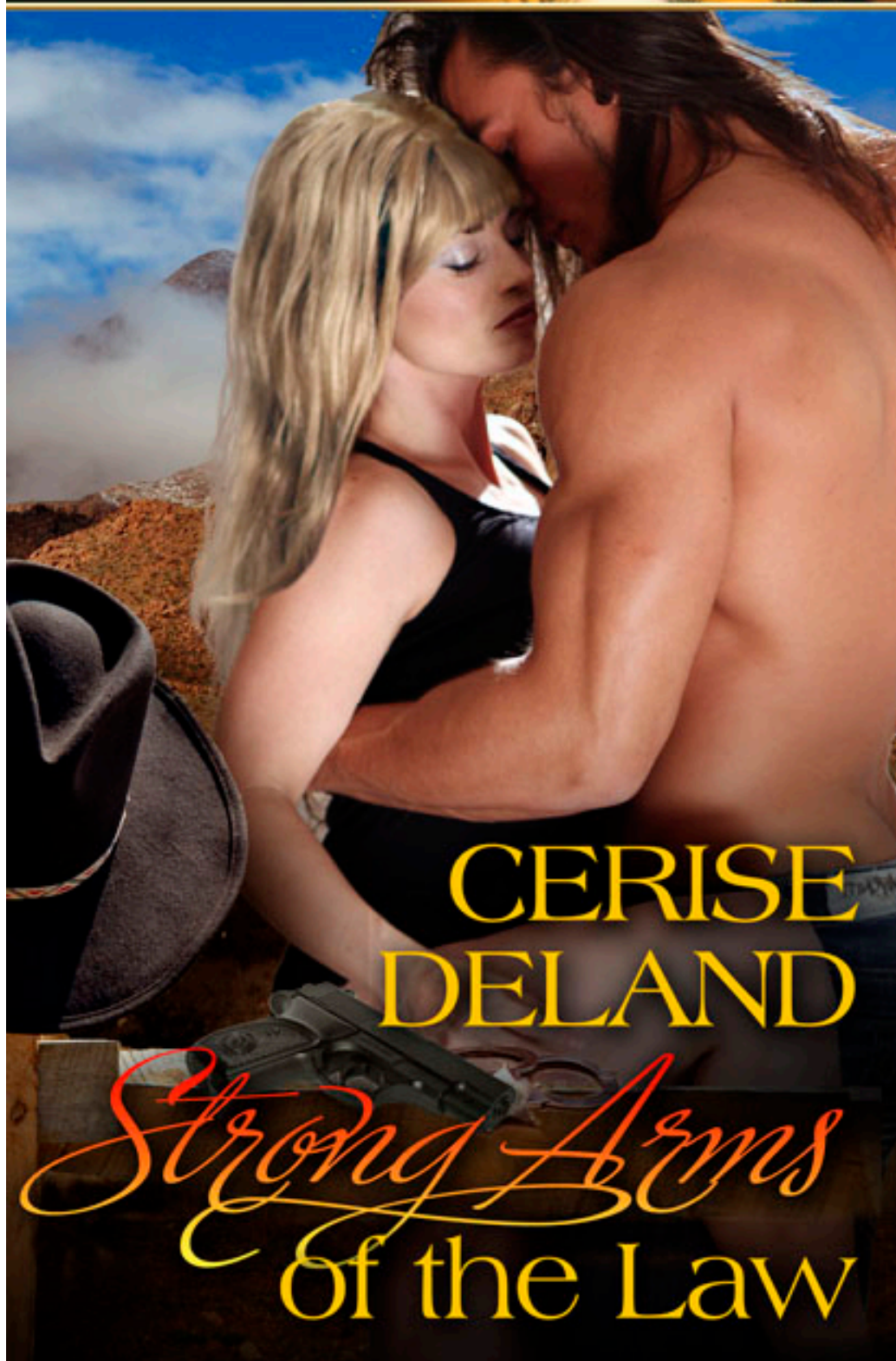


ELLORA'S CAVE **LAWLESS**



CERISE
DELAND

Strong Arms
of the Law

Strong Arms of the Law

Cerise DeLand

Rex Martinez is one tough Texas Ranger who's always gotten his man. No woman has ever resisted him either. But the saucy little number currently under his protection makes him nuts. Makes him hard. And makes him eager to put her in her place...which is, of course, in his arms. And his bed.

Crime writer Skye Chamberlain chafes under Rex's rigid rules. He's too macho, too yummy to stay cooped up with while she's trying to remain celibate.

When Skye calls his bluff and demands they embrace their relationship now instead of later, Rex can't resist. But his need to keep her hot and happy makes him drop his guard – which is exactly when trouble comes calling.

Ellora's Cave Publishing



www.ellorascave.com

Strong Arms of the Law

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STRONG ARMS OF THE LAW

Cerise DeLand

Dedication

To my editor, Helen, who catches all those pesky things I seem to breeze over – and puts me to rights every time. My great gratitude for her incomparable efficiency, talents at “reading” me and her insights. Thank you!

And to my gal pals, the Gang of 7: Nicole Austin, Regina Carlisle, Samantha Cayto, Desiree Holt, Allie Standifer and Brenna Zinn! Buddies and inspirations, every one! Thanks, my darlings, for the laughter and the insights.

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Texas Lottery: Texas Lottery Commission The State Agency Texas

Chapter One

Skye Chamberlain crawled out her bedroom window of the tiny house outside Alpine, Texas before sunrise on a sweltering August morning, biting back a shout that she was finally escaping the strong arms of the law.

Who knew she had it in her?

Crime writer. Bookworm. Former ER nurse. Turned fugitive.

She grinned. Even—she thought as she stretched her dangling toes to reach for the ground—if it meant she'd be in hot water with her captor. *I'm going swimming, Ranger Martinez, before you're up and learn I'm gone.*

She felt the cool earth beneath the soles of her feet and stifled a sigh of relief. There was only so long she could stand this blazing August heat. "And the scalding gaze of Rex Martinez," she murmured to herself as she tucked her boobs back inside her cotton bra, hiked up her flimsy panties and flung her towel over her shoulder.

She headed for the pool behind the barn, picking her way along the pebbles and brush barefoot. She needed to do five laps, maybe more to get relief from the tension of wanting to jump the bones of the tall, dark Texas Ranger who had been her bodyguard for more than two months.

He was an ogre, a tyrant, refusing to let her go anywhere except prowl that teensy-weensy house like a caged animal. But she had to get away, do something physical, if only for a few minutes. She would melt like ice cream if she spent one more day enthralled by his gruff cowboy charm. *Denying we're headed for bed.*

Hell. She hurried along. Any exercise would be better than another twenty-four hours cooped up with the Texas lawman who played cards like Godzilla, talked like smart-ass Indiana Jones and took charge like Pancho Villa.

"Your birdie, buddy, has flown the nest."

* * * * *

"Coffee's ready," Rex Martinez spoke to the closed bedroom door of the cabin. "Come on out. I made it like you want it. *Weak.*"

He smirked. Skye Chamberlain didn't act like she wanted anything watered down. Not her prospects for survival once she testified against the Gonzaga Familia. Not her hope for a life free of reporters harassing her for interviews about the Texas drug gangs in cahoots with a local mayor. So why she liked her coffee less than rocket-ready stumped him.

"Rise and shine, Chamberlain," he called when he heard no sounds. Usually she would throw a shoe at the door or grumble at him to leave her be. Early riser, the buxom blonde booty-licious novelist from Chicago, Skye Chamberlain, was not. "We didn't stay up that late watching that movie."

Nada.

All right, then. You asked for it.

Rex Martinez thrust open the bedroom door, zeroed in on the rumpled sheets, the empty bed, the curtains fluttering at the wide open window and heard footsteps crunching on gravel.

He cursed.

She was gone? *Again?*

Shit! He had never met such an infuriating woman!

"You will *not* do this!" he vowed and spun for the back door, the barn and the sure knowledge that she'd tippy-toed out to the pool. That Olympic-sized extravaganza was the only outdoorsy distraction to his confinement with this tempting piece of gorgeous Anglo ass. Best-selling crime writer Chamberlain and he had been holed up in this hideaway near Big Bend for long enough to make his cock a permanently stiff medical marvel. So now, horny and hot and irritated with the fact that she denied their mutual attraction with her every look and breath, he would eat his Ranger badge if Skye Chamberlain was going to defy his orders to never leave the house!

Like a jackrabbit, he jumped the porch steps and sprang headlong for the barn and beyond it, the pool. In a dozen swift strides, he reached his quarry. He grabbed one slim wrist and hooked an arm around her naked middle. Bikini underwear and all, she fell backward against him. The feel of her bare skin shot electric testosterone through him. It was the same jolt he'd endured ever since the judge had ordered her into his care two long hot months ago.

"Come on, Miss Congeniality." She kicked back at him and he barked, "You are not going swimming. I told you before, woman!"

She tried to buck backward in his arms. "Stop it! Rex! You're hurting me!"

"Nothing like I'm going to, if you don't stop disobeying me!"

Slowly but surely, he hauled her around to face him. "What the hell is the matter with you? We're safe here. You go out and you never know if one of those roaches'll spot you!"

"We are thirty miles from the nearest town."

"Thirty-two point eight miles from the town where you saw them kill those three women and thirty-one point one miles from the courthouse where you will testify against them. Not so far, lady, that they can't be all around here."

"Oh, you are infuriating. They are not out here." She pointed to the copse of live oaks and tall cacti that surrounded the house they occupied. "They certainly do not get up at seven in the morning to spy on the *puta* reporter they hate." She began to walk back inside. "If they are even aware I'm close."

"You can bet that they're looking everywhere within a hundred mile radius." He caught her arm. "That's why you are here with me and under my care."

"Don't you get it? We've tried this for two months now, Ranger Martinez, sir. I am *not* safe here with you!" She struggled with him, her ponytail springing free of its band and that cloud of Marilyn Monroe platinum spilled around her slim shoulders.

"Don't trust me?" *Hell. What would it take to strip these two scraps of fabric off her? A flick of two fingers? No. A court order.*

She pushed at his chest to no avail. "I cannot stay in that house with you cooped up like a prisoner!"

"Yeah?" He checked her expression. Pouting. Demanding. "How do you think I feel?"

She snorted, pushing herself flush to his poor melting body. That surprised him. Paralyzed him. She was usually so ladylike, so dainty in how she spoke and how she moved, that this made him blink. Then she rubbed up against him, her plump breasts a fiery brand to his shirt as she cupped a hand over the bulge in his jeans and purred, "Martinez, I *know* how you feel."

He clamped a hand on her ass, holding her against him. Like he'd get any relief this way! "No, you don't."

"Like now? How could I miss it? With your eyes all over me for breakfast, lunch and dinner. I cannot pee but what you know it!" She wrenched away from him and stalked her way down the garden path back to the house. "Helluva way to hide out."

He was hot on her classy little tail, grabbing her arm. "It's the only way I know to keep track of you."

"You could at least let me take a swim!" She threw out a hand toward the pool. "That house was built for midgets. And the air conditioner peters out at eighty."

He chuckled. "What can you expect? It was made when Ike was in the White House."

She stomped her foot. "Stop being funny!"

"I'll try mean." He bared his teeth.

"Do that." She stifled a smile, but whirled away to hide it.

He was right on her heels. "Where you're concerned, I'm dedicated."

She spun and they collided. "To suffocating me, yeah."

"To keeping you breathing! No swimming. No walks. No swinging on the front porch."

She huffed, turned and kept on walking. "One Ranger. One tight-ass."

"Yeah. You got a problem with that, tough shit, lady."

She tramped up the steps of the porch, the cheeks of her ass jiggling beneath the skimpy black panties. He forgot to breathe and halted in his tracks, loving the view.

She yanked open the screen door, tossing back at him. "I like rules. Law and order. Nothing wrong with them. What I'm tired of is being tied down with you."

He blinked. *She was bored with him?* What a crock. "Thought you liked how I beat you at cards. Chess, too. Every time," he rubbed it in.

She spun, hands on her hips. "Why would I?"

He rocked back on his heels and surveyed every inch of the curvy woman in front of him. "Because you have never had a man beat you at anything."

She stiffened.

"Do I detect a little shiver going up that pretty spine of yours?"

"You do not."

"You bet I do. I see who you are, lady. Had you pegged after about a week together. Can't hide from me."

She began to turn away.

But she froze when he said, "Never had a man you wanted to dominate you, did you?"

He watched her profile closely. The up-turned nose lifted a tad higher. Her trim chin rose a bit more firmly. So. *Can't find the gumption to deny it?*

"I didn't think so, darlin'. It's okay. You don't have to admit I'm right. It's enough that we both know I am."

"You can't say that," she whispered as she stared at him.

The warning in her words only made him madder. He took the steps in two lunges, hauled her up against him and gave in to the red-hot torment of her sassy lips. His mouth crashed down on hers. And *damn*. She was warm, sweet and *Christ*, was she willing. Her mouth opened, her tongue came out to dance with his, and he got such a juicy piece of her he drew away, stunned.

She stared at him. Her purple eyes growing wider, her mouth parting, swollen.

He wrapped her close, the touch of her sleek supple flesh drilling into his fogged mind and shaking loose one promise. "After this trial is done, you can bet your next paycheck I'm coming after you."

She pushed away, their rough play dislodging her thin bra, the material hooking on the peaks of her nipples and slipping slowly to the floor. Her heavy breasts bounced as she stepped away.

He watched them. His cock twitched. Tightened.

She shivered as his eyes narrowed.

His tongue slid along his lower lip. "You better go put some clothes on those pretty things fast."

She pivoted and made for her bedroom and shut the door with a click.

He thrust one hand out against the doorjamb, his eyes closing while he massaged his heavy, unhappy cock.

What was wrong with her?

Cabin fever was one thing.

Horny is another, Skye.

She fell backward against her bedroom door and rubbed her palms over her aching breasts. *God, how she wanted his hands on her. His mouth. His cock. His everything.*

Two months in the wilderness with the Lone Ranger has you stupid for him, Skye. So what if he's built like the Starship Enterprise? All right, all right. So he's droll as John Wayne. Handsome as the devil. Wise as an owl. And endowed like a rock-hard porn star.

Ohhh, stop this! He's only interested in you because you're his only choice. Bet the girls all drool over him at the local dancehall. Texas Ranger, white hat, big gun, big hands and huge balls.

Get over it, Chamberlain!

All you want is a good roll in the hay.

But that wasn't all she wanted. Not from Rex Martinez. No sir. From him, she wanted more than one great fuck. She wanted all day, all night. His honed muscles plastered to her body. His thick, rasping bass voice rubbing her senses, letting her feel him deep inside her pussy, all the way up in her cunt, his thighs rocking against hers.

She pushed away from the door, strode to her closet and stepped out of her panties. She wanted to be surrounded by strength like his.

Mountainous strength.

Indomitable.

Like she'd never known.

Like she'd only read about in novels.

A man so centered, so realistic, so sure of himself and what he was meant to do in the world, that she was in awe of him.

How she even got a few words out to talk with him had begun to astonish her. And she was never enthralled by anyone. Years in the savage realities of the ER. She knew it. So did her editor, and it was how she was able to go into some rough crime areas and do research. How she kept her cool and her stomach from up-chucking. How she made her living. Even this gig that had gotten her in so much trouble with this Gonzaga clan, had not frightened her. At first.

"Blonde, built and begging for it," was how her editor billed her desire to come to South Texas and see if she could meet any of the Gonzagas. "You have to be safe out there, Skye. No series is worth getting killed for. And you know this *familia* is one of the most cruel along the Rio Grande. I do not want you kidnapped or maimed. Get another plot. I can do without this story."

"But you can't, Chuck," she'd told her boss at her publishing house. "Journalists aren't going in anymore. Hell, even if a newspaper has the research staff, they think twice about sending them in to Mexico. But these Gonzaga boys are women's worst nightmare. Importing sex slaves from Asia into Mexico and across the border into Texas. Kidnapping women from the border towns and forcing them into prostitution in bordellos in Chihuahua and Monterrey. Last year, they kidnapped two female sheriffs. One they killed, but the other one we think they have kept alive in Nuevo Laredo. This makes the basis for a great novel."

He had agreed to the angle, but hated the fact she would be such a blonde Anglo target. But she had lucked out. Renting a house across the American-Mexican border in Nuevo Laredo, she had attracted the amorous attentions of the man whom many suspected of being the *familia's* second-in-command. He was hot for her and ready to make her his own special *puta*, too, when she'd heard him admit to killing three women. Then the next night, she'd witnessed his buddy kill three females. Skye had been able to feed information to the Texas Rangers about that and a raid the Gonzagas planned on an all-girl's high school in Texas. They had caught the murderer and then put the second-in-command behind bars. Skye was their star witness against both men.

The Gonzagas put a price on her head.

"And here I am," she whispered, looked back at the bedroom door and decided what to do with the rest of what the odds said would be a shorter life than she predicted. "Here I am, Rex Martinez, wanting you."

She strode, naked as a bird, to the door. She opened it and there he was. Her Ranger, still standing in the same spot she'd left him.

Surprised, he moved only his brows as his baby-blue eyes flamed at the sight of her nude body.

“You know what I think, Ranger?”

“Got me, honey.” Truth was, his gaze said he got her lips, and her nipples and her bellybutton and her blonde-haired pussy.

“I think the trial might be too long, and your paycheck too small.”

“To do what?”

“Wait.”

He sucked in his breath.

She stood on tiptoes, brushed her lips across his, wound her hands around his nape and sank her fingers into the thick dark curls. “So my next question is, why?”

His big arms yanked her so close, she could have sworn her flesh melted into his. “Why what?”

Chapter Two

"Why wait?"

His turn now to be struck dumb. The only useful answer he found was the obvious one. "I'm sworn to protect you."

She rolled those big purple eyes at him. "Is that a 'no'?"

His gut clenched. Did he detect disappointment in her tone? He pressed her so close, he could feel her huge, hard nipples poking holes in his chest. In his patience, too. He'd thought about her breasts, measured them with his eyes, weighed them in his imagination for more than two long, tortuous months. "That's an 'I can't'."

She swallowed, her eyes getting misty. "You're awfully noble."

You're awfully beautiful. "You're a pain in the ass."

"I thought I gave you a pain in the balls."

"That too." He snorted, then stepped back. "Much as I want to, we won't do this."

She crossed her arms, pushing up the wealth of her breasts and pointing those big rosy nipples at him. "I won't tell anyone."

He wiped his mouth with the back of his hand and chuckled. "Doesn't matter. I'll know."

She winced. "You must have a girlfriend at home."

"No. I told you that before. No one."

"Then some woman long ago tore a big hole in your heart."

"Not true."

"Rex," she said with the barest of sounds, her eyes defining his body, "a man like you? You cannot tell me you have no woman who keeps your bed warm."

"No one I see regularly." *No one I crave.*

"Has any woman ever made you need her?"

Not like you do. He raised his chin toward her bedroom. "Go put some clothes on and come back out here. Time for coffee and breakfast."

"And then what?" She tapped her foot at him.

"What we always do."

She harrumphed. "You read and whittle. While I write."

"It works."

"Does it?" She strode toward him, her hands splaying on his chest, stroking him beneath the chambray of his shirt, skimming his nipples and driving him nuts.

He retreated. "Yeah, it—"

"You could let me on the internet." She followed him.

"No."

"Not to do email. Just let me surf."

"No."

"Let me ride into town with you."

"No."

"Buy two big juicy steaks and a bottle of cabernet."

"No drinking."

"No fun."

"No foolin'!"

She smirked. "You *could* be fun." She reached up and brushed her mouth on his.

At this point, backed against the wall, what else was he supposed to do but put his hands in that river of champagne hair and bring her close? "I am fun. A regular guy. When I am not tormented by a *chica* with bad intentions."

"I'm not bad, Rex," she whispered, brushing her lips over his. "But I want to be. With you."

He breathed like a bull through his nose. "No." He pushed her away from him and walked out the door. On the bottom step of the porch, a tiny breeze did nothing to cool him off. He hooked his thumbs in his belt and squeezed shut his eyes.

Images of her danced in his mind. The first time he'd seen her in Austin in the Ranger headquarters. On the run from a Gonzaga who had held a knife to her eyes. Scared, pale, no makeup on that perfect oval face. Looking exactly like her name. Like the sky at dawn. The hair that was so white, the eyes so deep purple, the skin utterly flawless. She looked like an Anglo doll his sister had wanted one year for Christmas. But he soon saw that Skye Chamberlain was no doll. Without a prissy bone in her body, the spirited crime novelist was educated, sharp-witted and funny. She was a pushy broad, too. Testing his boundaries from the first moment they had arrived here in this safe house.

She had wanted to make cell phone calls.

No.

Go for walks.

No.

Swims.

No!

She begged him for movies.

Yes.

Fish.

Sure.

Chocolate.

Okay.

Newspapers and books.

All right.

He'd found a way to get them for her, when he could make arrangements to have another Ranger acquire the goods and meet him a few miles down the back road. Rex wanted to take no chances with her life. She was his responsibility.

She was his job.

She was his delight. His torment.

She came to stand behind him now and wrapped her arms around his shoulders. He could tell by the feel of her supple flesh she had not followed his orders. She was still naked. "I get it, Rex. I get it." She kissed his earlobe. "You don't want me to think you do this for every woman you babysit."

"I don't." God help him, but she felt as warm and welcome as summer Texas sun. "Bad ethics."

"I hear you. What if I told you, I'm as good as you are? I haven't been with any man for more than two years."

"That could mean a lot of things, Chamberlain."

"*Skye*." She ran the tip of her nose along his nape. "My name is Skye, Rex. And what my failure to have a man means is that I didn't see anyone I was interested in. Not that I'm a prude. Or celibate. But you and I have been walking around each other for two months, honey. The trial is soon but I can't wait until afterward. I'm anxious and irritable and needy. Why should we wait any longer? If I don't have you, I think I will come without you. Just to look at you makes me —"

He turned in her arms then. Her mouth was level with his and it was easy to kiss her. A swift delve between her pleading lips.

She tore her mouth from his. "I'm very wet, Rex. And very swollen and if you don't make love with me soon, I'll have to go in my bedroom and use my fingers. Stroke my pussy. Touch my clit. Make my cream flow. You wouldn't want to listen to me do that, would you? Or would you want to watch?"

He growled, the very idea of her fingering herself throwing him over the edge. "You asked for this." Hoisting her up over his shoulder like a sack of corn, he marched back inside the little house they'd holed up in by order of a Texas judge.

Damn, if she wasn't laughing. "Nice view here, Ranger."

He slapped her on one taut cheek. "Keep it down there, Chamberlain."

"Hmm," she was humming as they passed the living room and headed for his bedroom. "Honey, as long as *you're* up, we're in good shape."

He laid her down on his bed. Good thing it was a queen size because he was determined to use every inch of it to pleasure her. And himself.

Yanking off his boots, he let them drop to the floor while he got a great picture of her lying there. Those luscious breasts ripe as August peaches, her pussy a pale cloud of hair. He climbed over her, his legs straddling her curvy hips.

She smiled up at him like she'd just won the Texas Lottery. "Let's take all these clothes off you." Her hands got busy on his shirt buttons while he worked at his belt buckle. "Rex," she sighed his name when she got most of his shirt undone. "Rex," she crooned as she spread the shirt wide and put her mouth on one of his nipples. "God, honey, you are so cut."

He snorted, her tongue teasing him so well his cock strained against his jeans. "Darlin', if you don't help me get my clothes off, you're in for a rude awakening."

"Why's that?" Giggling, she pushed the fabric from one shoulder and lazily kissed her way to his other nipple.

He sucked in a breath. "I'm so hard, I'm numb, and if you don't let me inside this body of yours asap, my cock'll fall off."

She burst out laughing but rolled him to his back, her eyes dancing. "Let me unveil the goods then."

He flung his hands out, surrendering. "Get to it."

She went to work then on his belt, his zipper, to reach inside his skivvies and take his shaft in her palm. Eyes closing, she paused, mewled and massaged him. "Huge and hot."

"In a damn big hurry, too." He skimmed his open hand down her torso to cup her mound. "Put your mouth on me or let me eat you up."

Her big purple eyes got wider as she drew his cock out to play. "Thought about eating me, did you?"

"Devouring you." He found her slit and sent one long finger up inside her wet folds. He cursed at how succulent she sounded.

She dropped her chin to her chest. "I've wanted you since that first day in the office."

"Yeah?" He got her to spread her thighs so that he could stroke her pussy lips more easily. "You didn't look it. You gave me a lot of guff."

She arched up as his fingers claimed more of her. "I didn't want you to think I was easy."

"Oh, darlin'," he laughed as he found her clit and pinched it for her, "you looked scared and flustered, but never have you looked easy."

Her nails dug into his shoulders, her head fell so far back, her breasts jutted out. "I don't fall into bed with just anyone."

"No, baby. I got that up front." He rose up and took one of those big pointed nipples in his mouth. Christ, all of her tasted like liquid satin. "You fuck only me."

"Yes!" She drove the fingers of one hand into the hair at his nape and put her mouth to his. "Only you."

He took her under him then, and like a blind man, he spread her out with a reverent touch, her arms wide, her legs open, her long platinum hair like a halo around her head. "Don't want to gobble you up, darlin', but you are a tempting piece. I love your hair." He touched it briefly. "Love your eyes." He blessed them with his mouth.

"Your ears are cute." He nipped one lobe, then pulled on the other. "Like your cheeks." He brushed his own against hers. "The soap you use? Hell, you can make me come just inhaling the aroma." He chuckled and she wiggled beneath him. "Love your fine chin. Character there, don't you know. And your throat. Long. Elegant. You deserve diamond necklaces."

"Don't want anything but you." She undulated, her eyes half closed and blissful looking as she touched the hollow of her throat. "Kiss me there."

And he did. "Like your cleavage, too." His fingers defined the valley between her big breasts. He sat up, straddling her and tapped her nipples. "How big are they, baby?"

"Forty C."

"That big? God, I'm a lucky man. Pretty things. Don't want you to wear any more bras while we're here. Okay by you?"

"I won't." She tried to squeeze her thighs together. "I promise," she said as innocently as if she were eighteen and having her first lover. "As long as you lick them for me whenever I need you to."

He bent, blowing gently on one nipple then the other. "Just lick you?"

"Bite me. Suck me."

He grinned at her eager face, thumbing both her areolas. "You just tell me when they need tending, okay, darlin'? I'll gladly put a smile on your face."

"Like now?" she asked breathless.

"Oh, yeah," he growled and caught one big rosy bud between his teeth and tugged. "Like now."

She moaned, her hips rising off the bed.

"Like this," he said as he graced her other lovely peak with the favor of his teeth and his tongue.

She caught his head and held him to her chest. "More, please, more."

He cupped one of her lush breasts and sank his mouth over her smooth flesh. Inside the cavern of his mouth, he tongued her and sucked her. He'd never had such a mouthful of luscious woman.

Her hands drifted down his ribs to his hips and his ass. She squeezed him and urged him nearer. "Have me. Do me."

"Got to see you, first."

"No," she pleaded. "Need you now."

"You wanted me to eat you before. Why the rush?"

"Can't wait."

"Sure you can. Let me show you what you'd miss." He pushed away from her, his lips taking an intimate tour of the hollows and swells of her belly, her pubic bone and her mound. The pale fluffy pussy hair that proclaimed she was no bleached blonde was a neatly trimmed bush over her plump little pussy. He threaded his fingers through the wealth of it and tugged to reveal her pink slit. She smelled like a combo of that citrusy soap she used and her own thick, sexy musk. Her cream was what he needed to taste. He'd dreamed of eating her out. Licking her until she keened. Sucking on her juicy pussy until she came in his mouth just from the touch of his tongue. "Now I've got you, baby. Enjoy. God knows, I am."

He dipped low, settled himself between her thighs and trailed a fingertip down her seam. With two thumbs, he rolled her open and pushed up her lips to expose her clit. The glistening nub was huge, coated with her milky lube. He bent to lave her, a delicate touch to her sweet button. She yelled, but he came back for more. Much more. She was hard to the touch, hot to the taste and sweet to his heart. How could he have ever wanted any other woman? They paled beside the natural abandon of this one who plucked at his shoulders while he sucked on her and licked her dry only to see how she creamed again in need of him.

He groaned and praised her. "That's right, baby. Let me hear you. Let me feel you."

She pushed her breasts together and thumbed her nipples, writhing, frantic.

He drove his hands beneath her ass and held her to his mouth as he dined on her. "I may never need another woman," he heard himself say as he savored her swollen labia. Then, he sank his fingers inside her and scooped out her cream. "You are so sweet. Ever tasted yourself?"

She shook her head, her large eyes huge with expectation.

"Here." He put two fingers to her lips. "Lick it off, honey."

She laved his fingers, one by one, taking her sweet time. Then she sucked them both into her mouth and all the while, her beautiful purple eyes focused on his, then said, "Let me do the same for you."

His mind blanked. His cock twitched. He caught her against him. "An offer I'll never refuse."

Chapter Three

She pushed him to his back and rolled over him, her thighs to either side of his, her wet cunt smack against his groin. "Wow. I can even feel how hot you are here."

He traced the outline of her mouth. "Your pussy is burning up."

She flexed, rubbing her juice into his skin. "Can I mark you with it?"

"Be my guest."

She grinned at him, repeated the act and shimmied down to lie between his legs. He examined the ceiling, fighting for sanity, her warm breath skimming over his cock and balls as she took her sweet time looking him over. Finally, she wrapped her hand around his cock and he sighed. "Rex Martinez," she cooed, "you are beautiful, sweetie. Red, white and blue. Like a Texas flag."

He huffed. "You want to talk history or you want to give me some action?"

"Oh, I do. I *do*. But, um, gee." She pumped him nice and slow so his teeth ground together. "Got to give praise where it's due, don't you think?"

"Honey." He clamped a hand over hers and made her halt. "I think you'd better not squeeze me so hard." He lifted his head to look down at her and grimace. "That leaves two choices. Either stroke me or suck me. Now."

Her eyes danced, then she directed them to the item at hand. "I love how long you are." She slid her palm up his cock. "How thick, too." She wiggled her brows. "Got a few drops coming out for our party." She promptly licked the fluid off his slit, her soft tongue eliciting a groan from him. "Really nice."

He wrinkled his nose. "Nice? *Hell*. I'm dying here."

His reward was her tongue laving his seam, lapping up the newest drops of pre-cum dribbling out of him. Her strokes were rhythmic, mesmerizing. Her tongue was

deft, coaxing him to hold on to his willpower and let her have all of him she wanted. She was diligent, bobbing over him, and then she shifted, one hand rolling his balls, holding up his cock so that she could kiss him and drive him wild.

He sank a hand in her hair, lost in her power over him.

She mewled, took all of his cock and sucked him.

He drove both fists into the bed. She had the strongest lips, persuasive and determined. He knew if she kept this up, he'd be coming in her mouth. Damn, if he'd let that happen right off the bat. He needed to show her a proper good time.

He sank a finger into the corner of her mouth. "Love this, darlin', but I have got to fuck your pretty pussy."

"Condoms?" she asked, looking up at him like a million dollars rode on his answer.

"I got 'em."

She licked her lips, her breath fast and shallow. "How many?"

He chortled. Drove a hand through her blonde tresses. "Two? Three? Enough to do right by you. Now let me up."

She rolled off him, but all he had to do was open the end table drawer. He'd stuffed the few he always carried with him in there when they had first moved in here, assuming then he'd never have the chance to use them with her. He'd also wrongly assumed he would have better self-control than to give in to the ache in his cock. And she? Well, she might have looked like she was interested in him, but she was so grouchy in the beginning, he thought she'd fight their attraction forever. And after the trial and her testimony, he figured she would go back to her life in Chicago and never give him a second thought.

That was then.

This was now and he had been wrong. So wrong about himself and her. And now, as he tore open the foil packet and she reached to take it from him and roll it on him, he marveled that she had blossomed into a sexpot.

And he?

What have you become, Martinez?

Hers?

Stunned by that idea, he watched her bite her lower lip as she concentrated, trying to put the rubber over his throbbing cock. He had to smile at her lack of dexterity. "Let me do the honors." In two flicks, he had himself covered and ready to party. He gave her a silly grin and hauled her up against him, one hand covering one of her big breasts and positioning her cunt to straddle his leg again. "Rub that pussy on me once more. Let me know whose man I am."

She arched like a prize cat and undulated against him. "Going to let me know whose woman I am?"

"Oh, yeah." He grabbed a handful of her hair and brought her lips to his. "Claiming my territory."

Kissing him fast, she pushed away, rolled to her back, her thighs splayed to put him in her saddle. The smile on her lips was wide as the Texas sky as she whispered, "You did. The first minute you looked at me."

He stared at her, the truth of her statement zinging through him. He traced a fingernail down her pretty pink seam, then caressed one of her swollen lips.

She stilled, her gaze on his as he found her clit and circled it, over and over. Then she spread her thighs wider. "Have me, Rex."

The fragrance of her open cunt wafted up to him and the invitation to mate careened through him like a stag in rut. He positioned over her, his cock nudging the entrance to her channel and then he sank. Hell. He sank so far inside her, he knew he had claimed all of her in one drive. The euphoria of that stilled him and in the next second, he hauled her legs up over his forearms and rocked into her like a wild man. She was his, hot, sweet, thick, juicy and ripe. He drove into her over and over, his temptation to have her now a bright reality that blinded him. Groaning, she clutched at his ribs. He fucked her harder, her cries mingling with the slapping sounds of their

flesh. She shuddered, she trembled, her strong cunt milking him, squeezing him, taking him out of his mind.

“Dear God,” he murmured as he collapsed over her and buried his face in the crook of her shoulder. A rag doll had more energy than he did. But not more testosterone.

He swirled his cock inside her, the flesh temporarily weak, but the spirit oh, so willing to fuck her once more.

How could he want to possess her all over again and he’d just had her?

Minutes later, she flexed her pussy and massaged his cock, still filling her though semi-turgid. She grinned at the knowledge he was so intrigued by her. She’d never had a man so virile. Did they grow men like this only in Texas?

Hmm. She just needed one. This one.

Wrapping her arms around this wonderful lover of hers, Skye marveled that she could keep Rex so interested. She hadn’t had many boyfriends. The ones who came to her, were first attracted to her buxom bod. Never to her brains. But in this man—this dear, funny man—she had sparked his interest because of her intellect.

Who said sex was a head job?

They were right. She had the proof in her arms. She hugged Rex closer now at the memory of the first moment she had known he was fascinated by her mind. It had been the day over peanut butter sandwiches when she told him how she loved her college courses in criminology. Especially the early investigations of criminal phrenology and body types. That discussion was the one that made his blue eyes twinkle. Later that same day, she discovered they both liked the westerns of Louis L’Amour. Movies with Tommy Lee Jones. After all that, it was easy to fall head-over-heels for Rex’s cowboy humor, his spicy Tex-Mex menudo and fajitas and his daily devotion to vacuuming. The man won the prize for Housemate of the Year. Little wonder she easily made the transition to loving his wide slashing mouth. His hearty chuckle. His huge, calloused hands. His slim hips in tight jeans.

Or out of them. She ran one hand down his torso as he withdrew from her pussy.

She sighed, feeling so heady, so fortunate. She never went gaga for good-looking men, always measuring a man by other means. His brains. His education. His funny bone. His professional success. Never an order to her assessment. Only good judgment. Here with Rex, she had no order. No assessment. Just total submersion. Like being engulfed, surrounded, consumed by a personality so expansive, so damn macho, that she felt constantly off balance. *But alive.*

Alive to talk with him. Alive just to look at him. Rough, big, not handsome by Hollywood standards, he could still star as the tough lawman with the heart of gold. With thick, glossy black hair, curling to his nape. Blue eyes, so cerulean and crystalline they seemed neon. Thick brows with a wide arch that made him look like drawings of marauders like Genghis Khan and Geronimo. And then, he had a body that, to look at him, let alone touch him like she was now, made her whimper inside with raw need. He was a Texan. A *Tejano*, he had corrected her, telling her he was a mix of Hispanic and Anglo, a descendant of the men who first settled Texas in the Spanish colonial period. A six-foot-four wall of masculinity, with a sculpted chest and two tree-trunk legs, all honed with a rigorous workout schedule. Hell, he'd even brought his dumbbells with him here and offered them to her. She'd taken up the challenge and worked off some of her sexual anxiety.

But working out anywhere near him hadn't doused the rage to make love to him. To taste his mouth. To have his lips all over her body. His tongue inside her. Her mouth. Her cunt.

She shivered in his arms.

"Cold?" He drew away to look down at her.

"Excited."

His eyes narrowed, his mouth curved. "Need me again?"

"How long do you take to recover?" She teased him, batting her lashes at him.

He ruffled her hair. "Ordinarily? Or just with you?"

"Just me."

He sent his hand down her hip, over her mound and into her sopping-wet pussy. His cock, still inside the full condom, was lax against his thigh but rising to the occasion. "Hmm. I'm getting hard again just thinking about being inside all this sweetness."

"Don't know if I can wait."

"Impatient, aren't you?" he asked, good humor his biggest hallmark.

She laughed and ran her hands over his chest muscles. "You make me ravenous."

"Lucky me." He rolled to the side of the bed and offered her a hand up. "Time for a shower."

She wrinkled her nose at him. "It's so small. Think we'll both fit in there?"

"I'll tell you once I get you up against the shower wall."

"Really?" She was stunned. "I thought that happened only in romance books."

"Whatever you're reading, they're accurate. Let me prove it to you." He motioned her forward with his fingers.

"Yippee-i-o-ki-ay!" She rolled out of bed, tingling with the excitement of another bout with him. "I like being a cowgirl."

"Oh, what have I created? Let's get this pretty ass in the shower and we'll see how you do, western style." He tugged her along into the bathroom.

Setting her against the wall, he opened the door, reached inside the tiny shower and turned on the spray. In two swipes, he had his condom off and in the trash. Then he turned back to her, "Until the water gets warm," he told her, "we'll practice here." With one hand to her shoulder, he bent down to lift a breast. Damn, if he wasn't able to kiss her and suck nearly all of her into his impressively talented mouth.

Her knees buckled.

"Ah, ah. No swooning." He caught her around the waist, then serviced her other breast with the same ardor. "You'll give me a big head."

"Thought I already had," she whispered as her fingers touched his slit, all wet with pre-cum.

"Got that right." He bit her nipple, then soothed it with small flicks.

"You're a breast man," she said, her voice hollow as a new gush of cream ran down her thighs.

"With you, I'm a breast man," he whispered as he plucked at her nipples, then sent his hands down to her buttocks. "And an ass man. A pussy man." He spread her labia with two powerful hands to sink two fingers inside. "But at the moment," he grabbed her under her thighs, wrapped her legs around him and pressed her against the wall. "I'm a leg man."

She moaned as he lifted her and rubbed his hardening cock against her mons. Her eyes drifted closed as he massaged his shaft against her. "Rex, you need another rubber, honey."

"Not going to fuck you yet."

Her eyes flew open. "No? *Oh Rex*," she was pleading, "why not?"

"Want to tease you 'til you're crazy for me." He rocked against her, his own breath hot and short.

"I am!"

He grinned, set her to the floor, then pulled her inside the shower with him. "We're gonna get all nice and wet everywhere." He picked up the bar of soap and began to wash her face.

She spat soap from her mouth. "No need to wash my eyeballs, there, Martinez."

He guffawed. "I'm gonna lick every inch of you," he said as he ran soap suds all over her arms and shoulders, down her nipples, between her tender folds, up her ass and down her legs to her feet. "You're gonna do the same for me."

"I am, huh?" she asked, entranced as he kissed her knees and tickled her calves.

"Yeah, you'll love every minute."

"I expect to." She moaned as he skimmed his lips back up her thighs to her bush and her bellybutton. "I haven't had enough of you. Don't know if I ever will."

"We've got time, honey," he whispered as he sank two fingers in her pussy, drew out some of her juice and sucked on his fingers.

Her gaze was hooked on his mouth. "Two weeks and only two more rubbers."

"Never worry." He caught her against him and looked down at her breasts crushed against his chest. "We'll get more."

"Lots and lots more," she insisted, tilting her mound against his pelvic bone.

"Promise." He dropped a quick kiss to her cheek. "Now be a good girl, and turn around."

"You've practiced this before, have you?" God, she hoped not. But he seemed so clever, so inventive about all this love play. He kissed her nape and her scapula. Trailed one hand down her spine to delve a finger into her asshole and massage her slit in long, languid strokes. She was panting, her heart racing. She widened her stance, eager, begging him to touch her more. But he crouched, defining her thighs, her calves, tickling her toes and then coming back up to spread her ass cheeks and kiss her just above her tiny hole. The touch of his mouth was like feeling heaven. She whimpered, wild to know if she was the only one he'd ever had so often, so voraciously. "Tell me. Have you done this a lot?"

"I've done my share." He whirled her back around to face him, then kissed her until her breath stalled. "But never like this, never with anyone as giving as you. And it's going to be as good as the first time."

"Wow. Promise?" she teased him, catching a glimpse of his mouth, full and sensual with lust.

Growling, he shoved her under the shower. "Bet on it."

"What do I get...?" She sputtered and coughed, water in her throat and eyes and nose. "What do I get if you're not as good as the first time?"

Grinning, he wiped water from her face with his two big hands and brought her flush to him. "You get to have me over and over until you are totally satisfied."

She beamed at him as he turned off the water. "A guarantee of customer service."

He stepped out of the shower, grabbed a towel from the rack and helped her walk out to face him. "I aim to please."

"Afterward, do I get a customer survey?" she whispered as he reverently patted her dry and smiled down at her.

"Absolutely." Drying himself off, he dropped the towel to the floor and led her back to bed. "Before you complete the form, come sample more of the goods."

Chapter Four

How lucky could one girl get?

She scrambled up on the rumpled bed, her skin damp, her breasts afire from his mouth and his hands, her cunt so flowing with juice she felt delectable and very racy. Her eyes went wide as he crawled over her, cupped her nape and kissed her as if he'd been starving for decades.

Then he pushed her to the mattress and began to lick her earlobe. His tongue was delicate, flicking her there, then darting beneath to trace the long path down her throat. God. He really was going to sample every inch of her. She gulped, her cunt swelling and throbbing, making her squirm with impatience.

He must have intuited what she wanted, two of his fingers sliding up inside her pussy and stroking her G-spot. She lifted her hips as his mouth wended its way down her cleavage, then sucked on one of her nipples, high and hard.

She arched into him, his mouth and his fingers teasing her, pleasing her, making her crazy as she pulsed in appreciative response.

She clutched at his shoulders and rode out the glorious rippling orgasm.

But he sank down to put his mouth to her seam. "Got to give me another chance to lick you all over, honey. Seems my determination doesn't last too long with you. Your pretty body drives me nuts. I love the way you smell, the way you taste. Open this pussy for me and show me how you like to be touched."

"You mean" — Her eyes widened. She'd never shown any man how she served herself. No man had ever asked. She had never offered or even thought she might entertain a man that way. But with Rex, she'd be — she gulped in laughter — informing him. Educating him. So why withhold on the basis of girlish modesty? He'd just tasted

nearly every bit of her. Why not show him what her fingers had accomplished for her before he had come along?

“Why wait?” he echoed her words. “Isn’t that our motto today? Especially when I’ve seen and felt almost every wonderful thing God gave you, hmm?”

She swallowed hard. Her imagination zoomed away. If she showed him how she liked to be stroked deep inside her labia, she would love it. She hummed with the expectation.

“Aw, honey,” he insisted, thinking she delayed out of shyness, “come on and give this man a chance to make good marks on that customer survey.”

She chuckled.

He winked at her. “Okay. A little persuasion.” With two fingers, he opened her labia, found her clit with his tender lips and kissed her. Then he pulled away, rested on his elbow and repeated his demand. His fingers combed her pussy hair, then tugged. “I need to see you pleasure yourself.”

Courage rushed through her bloodstream.

Lost to his charm, she reached down to open her lips. The sound of liquid parting made her shiver. He smiled. Thrilled at his response, she sank her index finger far inside and stroke herself ever so delicately. She moaned and so did he. Biting her lips, she found her tiny nub, now large, hard and slick with cream. In a daze, she circled it with the tip of her finger, then thrust two fingers of one hand inside herself while the other caressed her clit. She was drenched, plush, molten and so entranced by the rapturous look on his face. His lust was almost too bright, too fierce to watch. She’d burn up, go to ashes, never feel him inside her again. “Rex, honey,” she murmured as she tapped her clit over and over, her whole body crying out with need of him.

He shifted on the bed, removed her fingers and replaced them with his own.

In a minute, she was bucking, rising off the bed, his fingers fucking her while his mouth nibbled on her clit and made her keen.

Her insides pounding so violently she shook, she grabbed him to her and let him rock her in his arms. His hands stroking her hair, he told her how wonderful she was.

"I'm impressed. How many times can you come?" he asked after a minute or so.

She shrugged. "By myself? Twice. With you, clearly, more than that and more quickly too."

His eyes went half lidded with desire. "And with other men? How often?"

"Not like this. Not like now."

"Are you telling me no man has ever explored this lush bod more than twice in a night?"

She chuckled. "You have a great opinion of the male gender! Try no more than once."

"They were stupid."

"Or incapable!"

He chuckled. "I'm honored."

"That you are creative? Rex Martinez, sir. I'm the one who's—"

"About to come again." His blue eyes turned wicked as he massaged her clit. "We'll set a record for you."

Her pussy welcomed his fingers with fresh cream. Her legs clamped together to intensify his caress. "I want you inside me this time," she declared, bit her lower lip and stretched to reach for the bedside table and another condom.

"Not yet, darlin'."

"But—"

"We've got only two more of those. Got to make 'em last."

"No," she objected and knew she was nearly wailing. "Now. We'll buy more. Have to."

He kissed her as if his life depended on it, hard and stern and desperate. "The way I want you, there aren't enough of these little guys in the world to keep me happy. So we

need to be inventive. And I'm not done tasting you. So, flat on your back, baby, and let me swing around so you have a good taste of me."

With his beautiful big cock near her lips like this, she wiggled in frenzied delight. His hands gripped her thighs and pulled her open. Her cunt filled with more lube and she knew she'd gone to paradise. Taking his balls in one hand, she stroked him slowly as she encouraged him to lower his hips so that she could take all of him into her mouth.

The minute she swallowed his crest, he took possession of her pussy. With two fingers probing the depths of her channel, he sucked her clit into his mouth and laved her with his big rough tongue.

"Honey," he whispered to her between lavish licks of her labia, "I want to make you scream for me."

She captured her breath, vowing to make him come in her mouth and make him the first one to cry out. His cock was thick, soft as down and hard as steel beneath. His shaft was red, heavily veined, his helmet purple fragrant. His slit giving her savory drops of his cum that she licked up with a reverent thirst. And though he nipped and sucked on her pussy with a dexterity that made her sizzle and steam, he paused now and again to gasp at her ministrations.

Inside, she thrilled that she was capable of making him happy. So happy, that she had only two or three good tastes of him before he yanked away. She followed, her body arching over him to give him more of her. Despite the fact that he had stopped eating her, she was ready to burst with an orgasm and yet ravenous to make him come. She wanted to have everything he had to give, every drop of his being.

He gasped for air, his hands covering his cock and balls. "Honey, stop, wait! Damn, who taught you how to do this to a man?"

From the sound of his voice, she knew he loved it all and nudged his hands away. "No one. Ever," she said between long luscious pulls on his shaft. "I want to make you come."

He cursed, but in two more strokes, he was growling, his hips bucking as he gave himself up to her. His cum was thick and salty, and when he was drained, he lay there, an arm over his face. "Hell, what a ride," he finally commended her. Reversing himself, he grabbed her and rolled her under him. "You are so talented, I may never leave this bed."

She giggled. "Just my idea of a good time, Ranger, sir."

His fingers brushed down her tummy to tangle in her bush. "Your pussy is so wet and swollen, it would be a crime to let all this go to waste."

She widened her eyes at him. "What did you have in mind?"

"A nice long fuck."

She gulped. "Better be with your cock inside me."

"No other way."

She glanced at his shaft, resting on his thigh. "When? Soon? I hope, I hope."

He chuckled. "Let me taste this pussy again and I'll give you an ETA."

She shifted in the bed so quickly, they both laughed. "Predictability is part of great customer service."

"Let me prepare the way." He leaned over, broke the seal on a foil wrapper from the bedside table and plunked it on top. Agile as an athlete, he rolled back over and pulled her close. Flush to his supple flesh, she felt his strength impart a sense of peace she hadn't felt since this nightmare of being stalked by the gang began two months ago.

"I really liked what you just did," he told her, his fingers combing her hair.

She knew what he was really asking, and she supposed that the time was right to discuss her past affairs. "What I just did was nothing I've ever done before for any man. I've gone to bed with men, sure. But never done that. Never even close." She looked up at him. "I loved doing that for you and I want to do it again."

One side of his mouth hitched up, his fingers never stopping their caress of her hair. "Christ, I'm so glad about that, I could crow."

"Care to take my customer survey?"

"I'll give you a ten, baby. All stars. All the time."

She snuggled into him and kissed his chest, a small quick blessing for the sweetness of his loving. "I've had a couple of steadies. Only one guy came close to being a candidate for husband."

"What happened?"

"I learned he had a nasty streak."

Rex froze. "Look at me. He hurt you?"

She shook her head. "He was rough. Pulled me around. Gave me a couple of bruises. If I didn't move fast enough through a door, or keep up with him on the sidewalk. There was something underneath there that frightened me off him."

"I'll say."

"When I broke up with him, he wasn't happy. Threatened me with his fist."

"Bastard."

"I told him if he ever came near me again, I'd call the police."

"Serves him right. And?"

"He hasn't. I think he even moved to another city. I haven't seen him in months."

"He lived near you."

"No. He had an office in the same building that I rent in. We met in the coffee shop one morning." She sighed and cuddled into Rex, enjoying the contrast between this man and the one she shooed away. "Working an Emergency Room, I saw too many battered women to ever think a macho guy was one who beat up on the woman he loved."

Rex dropped a kiss into her hair. "I hear you."

"No one is worse than someone who abuses you."

"True." There was a long brooding silence that led her to believe he was mulling that over.

"No," she told him, getting the jump on the next obvious question she thought he'd ask. "No one else ever did abuse me. In fact, my life has been very free of problem people. My parents were great people. Gone now. I have a brother stationed in Afghanistan. He's a paramedic. I'm very ordinary."

"Except that you write books about criminals."

"And how they're caught and put away." She grinned at him. "And you? Where did you get your passion for putting the bad guys in the slammer?"

"My dad was the sheriff in Kendall County for more than thirty years. I'd visit the jail after school and see the ones he'd put away. Compared to today's crop of bad guys, those old cusses were tame. Boring."

"Is he retired now? Your father?"

"No. Gone, like yours. My mother, too. They were swell people. You would have liked them and vice versa." He hugged her. "I've had a good life. I figure it's my duty to help others have a good one, too, free of worry."

"You do a fine job of it, too," she praised him, then went for more info. "So who taught you how to make love to a woman so well?"

He drew away, one hand under her chin as he murmured, "You did."

She gave a little cry at his tenderness and put her lips to his cheek. "How did you get to be so sweet, Ranger Martinez?"

"I credit my mother, ma'am."

Tears came to her eyes. "She did a superb job."

"My father taught me other things. How to ride. Rope. Shoot. Told me to find a good woman and hang on to her."

She dared to hope she was that one woman. For now. She couldn't bet on longer than that. She'd be foolish, presumptuous to hope for more than that until this trial was over. But this interlude with Rex was too dear, too stunning, too rare and new to let slip through her fingers unappreciated. Unfulfilled. His care of her had soothed her. His

fierce take-charge attitude had strengthened her. His easygoing manner had lured her to him as a companion—and now a lover. But the remembrance of the Gonzaga men beating up those women in a bar and hauling them out to their car had Skye trembling. Fear of the gang who vowed to kidnap her and kill her made her burrow into Rex. “Don’t let the Gonzagas get me.”

“No man,” he vowed. “No man will ever take you away. I promise.”

As if to show her how impossible that was, he crushed her body to him as if he would absorb her. His kisses teased and probed, intoxicating and fragile. Mindless, she drifted into a sensual haze thick with Rex’s murmurs of how he cared for her and wouldn’t ever let her go. His hands molded her, smoothed her. His lips savored and sucked. His tongue defined and lingered over her nipples, now so sensitive with their love play that she cried out, delighted. Drifting over her body, he briefly kissed her seam, sank a finger inside her pussy and primed her, then rolled her over. Massaging her shoulders, he turned her face and kissed her, hungry and demanding. Outlining her rib cage, he caressed her waist and sank down to spread her cheeks and stroke her pussy from behind.

She mewled and melted. He slid an arm under her hips and pulled her up to sink down to kiss her asshole. Playing with her flesh, he rimmed the edge with a finger, then titillated her with his tongue. Tapping her rosy hole, he toyed with the entrance and put his thumb inside. Arching, she gasped. He gave a sound of male satisfaction. “No one there, ever, either.”

“No,” she whispered as he flipped her over.

“Just mine,” he murmured.

Boneless, she lay on the bed watching him roll on the condom. Done, he loomed over her. “You are the prettiest woman I’ve ever seen. The smartest.”

The warm and fuzzy endearments made her nuts with need. “If you don’t fuck me fast, Ranger, I’ll be the long-gonest woman you’ve ever seen.”

He put the head of his shaft at the entrance to her greedy, eager pussy and said, "Tell me how you want to stay, Miz Chamberlain, ma'am." He drove all the way up inside her to make her gasp and clutch. "Tell me now."

But she was speechless. Her mouth open, her hands straining to bring him closer, her legs straddling him as he rode her fast at first, hard, sweetly and then relentlessly. He was sure and swift, taking all of her for himself and straining to give all of himself in return. He drove so hard, so long into her, she came once in a low, wide ripple and a second time in crashing waves that had her pussy clenching him, draining him, making her scream and him cry out as she milked him.

And when they lay twined together, gasping and spent, she ran her fingers through his hair and said, "Honey, you better tear up that customer survey."

"No good?"

"Irrelevant."

Chapter Five

"Why do you think Sanchez hasn't called yet?" she asked Rex for the third time that afternoon, her fingers drumming on her laptop as she sat on the sofa. "He's more than an hour late."

Jose Sanchez was the Ranger who worked this Gonzaga case with Rex. For the past two months, Jose had been prompt and helpful, running errands. Now, suddenly on the day they needed to have him buy something special for them, he was missing in action. Frustrated, Skye jumped up from her chair, plunked her tiny computer on the coffee table and marched to the window. Her breasts jiggled, her areolas aching, hard and bare beneath her t-shirt. Buck naked, just like Rex wanted her. She wanted to massage them, pluck them, she was so primed to hop in the sack with him again.

She had never been so needy of a man. His laughter. His caress. His attention.

"He'll call, honey." Rex sat in the chair across from her, a forensics book in his lap. One, she noted with a wry smile, he had not read much of this morning. "We're not the only item on his list, you know."

But we've used up the last condom in a sweet, long mating worthy of a porn movie. And heaven help me, but I'm horny as hell once more. She whirled to face him, an idea in mind to cure their problem. "I'm healthy."

Rex's dark slashing brows rose by tiny increments. His blue eyes bored into hers. "Darlin', that's not the only —"

"Totally healthy," she emphasized, going for broke here. "I had a test—over two years ago. I haven't been with a man since before that." *Tell me about you and then maybe we can —*

"I am, too. Had a test four months ago."

Her turn to raise her brows.

"I get the test every six months."

Her brows arched higher.

He cursed, got to his feet and came toward her. "I did—*do* sleep with women occasionally. And every time I do, I go afterward to make certain I'm good."

"Well then." *Four months since you last had a woman makes me wildly, ridiculously, illogically happy. A man like you needs good loving more frequently than that because you can give it often. Very often. Like twice within minutes.* "We can—"

He lifted her chin. "No, we can't. I won't take the chance."

"No chances."

"Yeah?" He gave her his Lone Ranger dark and disbelieving look. "I noted you didn't tell me you're on the Pill."

She pursed her lips.

"Truth here between us," he pressed her.

"I'm not. No need to be."

Sighing, he pulled her into his arms and cradled her against him. Just the feel of those sculpted muscles had her shivering and dying to strip him naked. "I'm gonna make love to you a thousand times. You'll be sick of me."

She snorted, wrapping her arms around his waist, rubbing her aching nipples against his chest. "I can't wait any longer."

"There's only so much a man can stand." He put her from him.

She crossed her arms, reached down and pulled her t-shirt over her head. At the abrasion, her nipples blossomed higher and harder.

Rex's blue eyes flamed, his gaze locked on her breasts. "You're beautiful and a temptation. But I will not do this to you. To us."

"You could pull out before climax," she urged on a voice that was damn near a purr. Then she cupped her tender breasts and thumbed her nipples.

He guffawed, took a step backward. "Oh, no. That's not a guarantee you won't get pregnant. Besides, I don't know that I'd have presence of mind to withdraw." His voice mellowed, his gaze adored her features. "You're so different for me, baby."

Her heart lurched. "For me, too. You mean so much to me. Not just the sex. That's icing."

His tongue slid across his lower lip. "Damn sweet icing, darlin'."

"So let's —"

"Skye, hear me. If we're going to have each other after this, I want it to be because we want to be together. Not because we have to."

"Rex." Tears sprang to her eyes. When had she last met a man who wanted to do all the right things by a woman? She only wrote about men like that, created them as her private detectives in her crime novels. She followed him, step by slow step to the wall. "Honey, I can't wait."

He wrapped his big hands around her wrists. "I won't do this without protection. Not with you. Not when we get so damn lost in each other."

"You're controlled," she followed him, step by slow step to the wall.

"You're nuts."

"For you." She melted against him.

"That way is messy." He was shaking his head.

And his cell phone rang.

He closed his eyes.

She shut her own.

Pushing her firmly from him, he walked to the kitchen and picked up his phone. "Hey, man." He cleared his throat. "Yeah, we're good here. How are you?"

She took in a big gulp of air. *Okay. An hour, maybe less, until we've had good old Jose Sanchez buy up the local drug store's complete stock of rubbers.* She shifted, straining her thighs together, her cunt swollen, wet and throbbing. *You can wait. Can't you?*

"Yeah, we need the usual," Rex said, opening kitchen cabinets and the refrigerator. "Milk, cold cuts. Couple of steaks. Oatmeal. Granola for the lady. And ah, one more thing."

There was a pause. A long pause.

Was Rex not going to ask for them?

She pivoted for the kitchen. He stood, his arm up across the refrigerator door, the cold air blasting out.

"No, no. I get it. Sure. Sure. No, we have enough until later. Yeah. Call me when you can meet." He shut the refrigerator door. Turned. Closed his cell phone. His gaze dropping from her eyes to her bare breasts and remaining there as he told her, "An emergency down in Marathon. Robbery. Shooting. He's got to go. The suspects took off, headed for Lajitas and the border. The Rio is so shallow there, it's usually a trickle in August. Jose's pursuing them now. Best to get to them before they cross into Mexico."

Her mind understood. The rest of her objected like a love-crazed teenager. Her pussy gushed fresh cream. Her nipples turned to diamonds, stiff, cold and needy of his mouth. She was certain she sounded like a rotten kid when she managed to ask, "And if he doesn't catch them soon? Today? What do you want to do?"

His gaze didn't stray from her breasts. But his hands flexed. And beneath his fly, his cock swelled so big, so fast, she moaned.

"Get your t-shirt."

Her heart gave a silly cha-cha beat of joy as she watched him grab his truck keys from the kitchen counter, strap on his holster and slip his gun inside. "You're going to buy supplies?"

"We are going to the store."

Quick as a bunny, she whirled. Did as she was told. And followed him out the back door. In the front seat of the pickup truck he'd been given for this assignment, she settled in and scooted next to him.

"Over on your side, Miz Chamberlain, ma'am. Belt on." He revved the engine and gunned the 4X4 around the side of their house to the street.

He hardly ever let her come with him. Was he planning to have her in the truck? *Ouuuie*. She pressed her ass to the seat, grinning. "What kind are you going to buy?"

"Whatever they have," he said between clenched teeth.

"You know, I'd really like to try the ribbed ones."

He shot her a look. "Ribbed."

"Are they any good?" she asked, beaming.

"How the hell do I know?"

"I thought maybe one of your partners might have —"

"No one ever said. No one ever requested them, either."

"Didn't think they needed more than you, huh?" she teased, giddy as a lottery winner.

"Hell, I dunno." He was scowling now.

And she saw the reason why, too. "Shall I open your fly, honey, and make it all better for you?"

"What?" he yelped as she put a hand to his thigh. "Stop that!"

She retreated. "You're a bear, aren't you, when you're hard like that and —"

"You are impossible," he muttered. "Now be a good girl, keep your hands to yourself and no talking."

"Not even if I need a chocolate shake from the Dairy Queen?"

"We are going to the nearest drug store. Period."

"Well, if you buy me one of those flavored condoms, too, we won't have to stop for my chocolate fix."

"I'll fix you, lady."

She crossed her arms and her legs to stop the thrills going up her spine. "Oh, I know you will, Ranger Martinez, sir. And I," she whispered as she wiggled her brows at him, "am going to reward you for it. Big time."

He stepped on the gas. "Woman. You'll kill me yet."

Not at all what I had in mind. She tossed him a saucy smile.

"Talk to me about something besides getting you in the sack," he said as he put his hand down between her thighs.

"Ummmmm. Well, let's see," she began as the heat from his palm infused her flesh with flaming new desire.

"How about how you decided to write crime novels?" he asked as he took his hand away to shift gears, then dropped it back between her damp legs.

"Being an ER nurse I saw a lot of gunshot victims." He squeezed her thigh muscles and she squirmed. "Honey, if you want this story you better not be teasing me or I will open that fly and suck you 'til you roar."

Throwing her a cockeyed grin, he took his hand away. "Better?"

"Yes and no. But yes is the operative word. So..."

"So. Tell me, Nurse Chamberlain."

As the scenery rushed past their windows, she recalled her first years in a hospital. "I did the women's ward, saw a lot of abused wives and girlfriends who had no idea how to get out of their circumstances. That was about the time the medical profession began to pay attention to injuries that didn't seem natural and we began to offer counseling for those we suspected were victims. Their stories were heartbreaking."

"Is that a reason you came down here to research the Gonzaga family?"

"Yes. I'd read so much about how they treated their own women and how they pressed others into prostitution that I wanted to do one novel totally devoted to that kind of oppression. But all my interest in writing about crime really stems from a combination of those criminology courses and my years in the Emergency Room. You

know, the sooner you get someone into a stable condition after a trauma, the faster they recover. So I trained in emergency procedures and transferred. I was in the ER for more than six years when I started to write. I knew I'd need a dynamite story to get published, so I joined a writers' group and met a few editors and agents. The first agent I signed with really worked hard for me. And here we are, six novels later and I'm able to write full time."

"And do research that puts you in harm's way," he added, his tone telling her he was none too happy about it.

"It brought me you," she said with an awe and reverence that had him turning to her, finding her hand and squeezing it.

"I won't complain," he told her.

But there the conversation died. And Skye wasn't quite sure why.

Then Rex said, "But if you and I continue together after this is over, I might."

She wanted to hug him. Instead, she looked out her side window. "I'm not the only one with a dangerous job, here, Ranger, sir."

"If you keep getting yourself on criminals' hit list, you'll have a tough time staying alive, Miz Chamberlain, author, ma'am."

"There are things you don't know about me, Rex," she said in a more congenial voice, lowering the tension between them. She hoped. "I've walked rough streets and I—"

"Walking them does not mean you will survive them!"

She took his hand now and pressed it reassuringly as he stared at the road dead ahead. "What I should tell you is that I know how to protect myself."

"Not from the Gonzagas who want to scoop you up off the streets and take you away to do, God knows what, rape you? Sell you to their *compadres* in Mexico? Shoot you up with—"

"Whoa! Whoa! Rex, listen to me. I told you weeks ago I know how to shoot a gun. Remember?"

"Sure. But in a fight? Can you pull the trigger, honey?"

"Why not?" she asked but inside she knew the stock answer to that one.

"If you've got one in your hand, you have to use it, or the other guy will grab it from you and use it on you."

"I know. I've heard that, Rex. But I wouldn't clutch. And I'm a damn good shot because I practice every month at a range outside Chicago. I own a Sig Sauer. So I'm not as green —"

"As a gringo?" He was smiling even though his expression said he was not totally happy with what he was hearing.

"Right. And there's more."

He cast her a look of tolerance. "Hurry up. Tell me before I spit wooden nickels here."

"I'm learning karate. I do *tai chi* when I can and —"

"Fuck me."

"Well, I do hope so, honey." She laughed and crossed her arms, her breasts loving the movement, in lieu of having him lick them and nip them.

He reached over, sank his fingers in her hair and ruffled her curls wildly. "Hope these last few months haven't atrophied your muscles."

"I've done some work in my bedroom."

"Yeah? You were awfully quiet about it. Why didn't you come out and show me?"

"Didn't want to give you any ideas."

"Darlin', I *had* ideas. I still have 'em. And no amount of gyrating that body of yours in any way shape or form would make me want you more."

She inhaled mightily. "Oh goody."

He snorted. "God help us both."

“Tell me more about the ER duty.”

As the miles went by, she told him about some of her most memorable patients. The young thirty-something window-washer who had fallen from his platform onto piles of garbage and miraculously broken only an arm and a leg. The gang member who had taken a bullet to the head and survived to stand trial for murder of one of his buddies. The teenage girl who suffered from a head injury incurred when her boyfriend pushed her from his speeding car. The thief who came in with multiple gunshot wounds given him by the man whose house he’d tried to rob.

“All that blood, all that destruction to a human body,” she concluded on a somber note, “makes you value more every breath you take. Makes you treasure every day that’s good. Makes you want to seize every good person who comes into your life and make it a bigger joy.”

He lifted her hand to his lips and pressed a kiss to her fingers. “Sounds like you for me.”

At his endearment, she felt her heart expand and fill with all the sweet things she’d never sensed for any other man, never even considered saying to any other man. “And you for me.”

Chapter Six

"Wait here," Rex pulled into the lot of a convenience store on the outskirts of Alpine. A gas station, the place was tiny, selling traps for javalinas and bobcats outside and fresh tacos inside. "Be right back." He hit the remote to lock her in.

She sat, grinning like a Cheshire cat. How had she been so lucky to get Rex? She'd never lived with a man, never wanted to. But this one was perfect for her. And if she wanted to keep him, nurture the relationship, she knew it was she who would have to move from the big city to wild west Texas. No hardship there. What was scenery compared to the love of a good man? Her gaze took in the scorched high plains, the scrub that gasped for water to survive, the dust that covered everything with a fine mist. The blazing hot sun that baked the truck so that she tried to open the window and couldn't because Rex had taken the key and the automatic windows didn't work without it. Glancing around, she saw an old yellow Camaro pull into the slot next to her. But no one else was in the parking lot so she felt safe hitting the lock, and opening her door a crack. Inhaling, she felt the August heat seep into her lungs.

Rex came outside to frown at her as he climbed into the truck. "Not a good idea to open that, darlin'. My fault, I know. I should have left you the keys." He dumped a brown paper bag in her lap.

She fished inside, happy as a clam. "Chocolate sauce?" She held up the container, a question in her eyes.

"No condoms in there."

"You must be kidding me. Doesn't anyone do it in south Texas?"

He chuckled, as he checked the rearview mirror and put the truck in gear. "Evidently, they do it so much in this part of town, the guy is sold out."

She muttered her dismay.

"But I bought you that." He cast her a devilish look. "For your chocolate fix."

"Oh, yeah?" She wiggled in her seat, her pussy gushing in response to the image in her mind of how to use it. "Gonna let me try it on my favorite confection?"

His brows knit with horrified delight. "I rather thought you'd let me get a good taste of it on your nipples."

"I might." She nibbled on her lower lip. "Any place else appeal to you?"

He sent his smoldering gaze down her body. "Yeah. All over you. It's gonna be messy good fun."

"Damn, boy! You better buy a couple dozen boxes of those little foil babies."

"Exactly my plan," he promised, gunning the engine on the highway to Alpine.

Within five miles, he pulled into a strip mall where an old pharmacy stood on the corner.

"Here." He tossed her the keys. "Lock it up, sweetheart."

She did as she was told, leaving the air-conditioner on and pressing her thighs together. The chocolate sauce in her hot little hands was an inspiring talisman to the future. When had she ever had a lover who gave in to her foibles? Never. She thanked her lucky stars for Rex. Someone was watching out for her. And the very idea that she could fall in love with a man so right for her...

Fall in love.

She closed her eyes. Repeated the phrase. The very idea made her tingle all over. But what else could it be?

Hot sex.

Sure. The hottest, craziest bed gymnastics she'd ever known. Ever even hoped for. But that wasn't where they'd started this relationship. And that was a good thing. The best thing.

At thirty-two, she knew enough about men, her past relationships, and sex in general to feel comfortable concluding that the wild fucking they did was a result of how well they fit together. Yin and yang. Man and woman. Lawman and crime writer.

He exited the store, a shit-eating grin on his handsome face, jiggling a brown paper bag.

When he climbed in the truck, he pushed the package into her lap. She peeked inside. Boxes! "Four of them?"

Smug, he was so pleased with himself. "I won't have to ask Jose for them."

Squealing, she couldn't help herself, she threw her arms around him and gave him the biggest smacker of a kiss.

"Hey, woman. Let me drive us home, will you?"

She nibbled his ear, kissed his neck. "What if I can't wait?"

"Your new signature line, is it?"

"Oh, yeah." She wrinkled her nose at him, then sat back. "Maybe I could persuade you to stop on the side of the road."

"You. Can. Not." He smiled, but shook his head as he turned the truck toward their little house.

"Okay." She threw up her hands. "Okay. Just saying, you know."

"Yeah, I know."

"Hope we don't run out of gas," she offered, eyes on the two-lane road home.

He laughed and shoved his hand back down between her thighs. "I'd fly us there is I had wings. Never been like this with a woman."

She locked her legs together, the feel of his fingers grazing her damp jeans killing her patience. "I think we have something rare."

When he faced her once more, his expression was dear and sweet, melting her insides to mush. "We're gonna talk about that. Soon."

She nodded, her gaze admiring the passion written all over his face. "Today."

"I'm gonna use at least one of those first," he told her, his voice rough as gravel.

"Can't talk while you make love?"

He roared, clutching her thigh tighter. "Can't think while I'm making love to you."

She preened. "Such a good thing. You won't get any complaints from me. I can't seem to get enough of you."

"We have two more weeks until the trial, darlin'."

She made goo-goo eyes at him. "We might have to go shopping again before that."

On Rex's side, a car pulled alongside them on the double lane.

"What the hell?" he murmured, putting his other hand on the steering wheel as he decelerated...and so did the car.

A yellow one.

Skye stretched up to see it more clearly. "Camaro?"

"Yeah," Rex said cryptically, checking his mirrors.

"He was in the gas station lot," she added, her chest tightening.

"He was." Rex fell completely back to let the guy take the road, but the yellow vehicle hung back, too, parallel with their pickup. "Did you get a look at him?"

"No," she was ashamed to say. "He didn't get out."

"Right." Rex was examining the car, looking down to the inside. "He's got a buddy in there. Talking on the phone."

She gulped. This was not good. "Is there a way to escape them?"

"A crossroads up here," he answered, his gaze all over the road and their surroundings. Bounded by rock-strewn berms, the country road offered no exits. Straight ahead was the only way to go, and she could bet that their pickup was not agile enough to have a wheel radius that could turn them easily in such a narrow space. And in the few minutes necessary to beat the Camaro to a one-eighty reverse. "Hang on, honey."

Rex gunned the pickup. A newer model than the Camaro, the pickup sped ahead, leaving the driver of the Camaro to step on the gas. The older car must have had a new, souped-up engine because within two minutes, they were once more even on the road.

Another vehicle, straightaway about three or more miles ahead of them, barreled toward them in the on-coming lane.

"He'll have to drop back," Skye said like a prayer.

"I will," Rex told her, his jaw tense. "Rather have our Camaro boys dead than us."

"Or them," she indicated the other truck.

But at that moment, the other truck switched lanes, heading dead on for their pickup.

If Rex cursed, if she screamed, she didn't know. But the horror of the coming impact, made her brace herself.

The next thing she heard was the screech of their own truck's tires.

A huge jolt. A crunch of metal. The shattering of glass.

Voices. Loud. Crazy. Spanish. English.

Her own voice, saying, "No, no. Don't touch me. I'm fine." But not feeling it. "I'm fine." Wanting to vomit. Stumbling from the truck. Retching into a ditch. Warm hands to her arms. Rough hands on her arms.

She turned, her gaze going to the man who held her. "Rex?"

She heard a man grunt, shout her name.

"Get her in the car, Marco."

She was being yanked away.

Her knees gave out, as she saw three men beating Rex. Outnumbered, he still managed to get in punches of his own. To one man's head, another's ribs. A third, his groin.

But she was hustled off, lifted, carried.

"No! No!" She kicked at one man. He was small, thin, evil looking. A mustache. She twisted away from the one who held her arms. But he held on, cursing at her in Spanish and calling for help. But there were no more men. *Were there?*

She writhed and twisted.

Grappling with the two guys who carried her, she writhed. They let her drop. The air gushed out of her, but she scrambled away. Getting no farther than a few feet, she cut her hands. The two grabbed her up again. She fought for calm, reason.

Where was Rex?

Where were these guys taking her?

She had to get into a position so that she could hit them to the jugular or the balls.

Next thing she felt was one man's hand on her head, stuffing her into the backseat of a car. She choked on the smell of old fast food wrappers, empty beer cans and an old bottle of tequila.

"Tie her up," she heard one of her captors yell to the other. "Don't let her back there alone!"

"*Si, si,*" the other man yelled and rattled off a spate of Spanish as he climbed in beside her.

"Put a gag on her," one ordered.

No need. Who am I going to yell out to?

"Hey, hey, Ricardo, the lady wears no bra," the one guy rubbed his dirty hands over the points of her breasts. "See?"

He laughed as he lifted her t-shirt and she twisted away. *Him, she would kill. Soon.*

The other two ran their bleary-eyed gaze over her bare breasts and what they said in Spanish, Skye did not want to know. She squeezed her eyes shut and prayed the guy in the backseat with her had better more life-preserving things to do than molest her. Or rape her.

She pivoted in the seat, glimpsing Rex, one foot on the throat of one of his assailants, while the other guy took out a handgun and pointed it at Rex.

"Nooooooooo!"

"Shut her up!"

She whirled away, but the guy next to her forced her head around and pressed her to the foul-smelling seat. He made a fist and in one blow, hit her in the jaw.

When she came to, the sun was going down in a red-hot blaze. Fierce mountains, black as midnight and odd rocky formations formed the horizon. *Where the hell am I?*

Remembering her predicament, she shut her eyes. And went lax.

Listening for movement in the car, she heard none. Yet she felt the warmth of the man in the seat next to her. Smelled him, too. Rancid little fart, reeking of whiskey and tobacco. His legs were draped over her lap as insurance, she supposed, that she not move while he slept. Figuring that the driver would not see her open her eyes from his rearview mirror, she took a quick peek at the scenery again. *No clue where I am.*

And where are you, Rex?

What happened back there?

She wanted to scream out her pain that someone of these thugs had shot the finest man she'd ever known. *Because he was protecting me.*

No. I will think of that later. The guilt. The anguish. Christ. Just let me get out of here. I'll testify, by God. I'll put them so far away, they'll think hell has light.

Noting the horizon once more with her head banging against the window rim, Skye saw they were headed west. But she closed her eyes again, not wishing to invite any more attentions from her captors with her moves. Slowly, she took stock of where she was, what was happening. She swallowed quietly as could be, her throat as dry as dust. Her jaw hurt like hell where the asshole had slugged her, and she had to pee something fierce. Her illustrious companions were quiet, the driver the only one moving. The air-

conditioning was crap and Skye felt herself sweating like a pig. Her hands were cut, stiff, tender, from scrambling away from them. But she had her shoes on and her jeans. That was a plus.

They haven't raped you yet. Or killed you.

Why not?

She thought about that and the answer came to her much too readily.

They're taking you to their leader. She forced back a groan of terror. And that means, they're headed across the border.

But where was there a crossing they could do that without attracting law enforcement interest?

They couldn't drive over one of the International Checkpoints. Ever since Homeland Security beefed up inspections after 9/11, those bridges were guarded like the gates to hell. She had no passport—and since last year, anyone crossing needed that. And these dudes? They were lucky if they had an idea what their real names were, let alone official documents to get them across an international border.

So where are we going?

She opened her eyes again to scan the road for mile markers.

The only thing she could see was a speed sign that said "Speed limit 60."

That meant they were not on a major interstate where traffic usually was ten miles more per hour. Plus, the three-lane highway, she could now see, curved. And it ran up and down abrupt hills. Those black ugly ones she saw in the distance. *We're headed for them. Okay...*

Every few seconds she would open her eyes to see if she could find a mile marker to the next town, whatever it was. Dusk shaded the horizon like a gray veil and soon, she wouldn't see anything from this vantage point because she was outside the range of the car's headlights.

But what if you're not going across a border? What if they're taking you to a hideaway here in west Texas? She assumed, from the timing, they were still in Texas and had not gone north. Not by this landscape, we haven't.

The Gonzagas had safe houses in many parts of south Texas. If this was Big Bend, then a hideaway here in the most deserted, least populated counties of the state would make sense. The *familia* would like this godforsaken landscape. Especially to run a headquarters.

And if we arrive at their headquarters, I won't live long after that.

She fought down a groan of terror.

Feeling for the handle of the door, she wondered if she could open it. But her fingers were numb from the ropes binding her wrists together. *Was the door locked? Dare she try to force her fingers to move? Would they notice? And then could she open the door and hurl herself out of the car?*

What then?

Would she break an arm? A leg? Hit her head?

She could hope she would be in good enough shape to run. Run like hell. And where could she hide in this primeval world? There were no trees. No big fat ones to hide behind. Plus there were wild boars out there. Huge pigs with long scraggly black hair and sharp white tusks to gouge and kill people. Bobcats, too, who liked a good meal of human now and then.

Worst of all, she had no gun. No knife. No weapon. Only her meager training in karate. Her feet and her hands were her most lethal weapons. And hardly dangerous enough to set her free.

She prayed that when she got to use them, she had enough strength in her limbs to deliver a violent blow.

The car slowed, the driver lit a cigarette, then said something to the other two men. She felt the car turn onto a rough road as all three of her captors began to chatter in Spanish. She couldn't understand much, but she did hear, "Manuel."

And she tried not to tremble. Tried not to freeze.

To meet the head of the Gonzagas, she would need every bit of her courage and stamina. Manuel was known to have the greatest number of notches in his belt. For the women he had bedded. And the enemies he had killed.

Chapter Seven

The driver and his honcho buddy who had sat in the front seat hauled her by the wrists and neck from the backseat of the car. They laughed and joked to each other in Spanish. Skye didn't need an interpreter to tell her what they meant. Their sneering, salacious looks told her everything she needed. Her Anglo looks fired them up. Their *jefe* was going to like raping her. Before, of course, he killed her and...she was pretty sure one of them said, then fed her to the dogs.

She expected no mercy from any of them. After all, she had cozied up to their second-in-command. She had planned that flirtation, intending it to be colorful but brief. Plus, she never expected Jorge Gonzaga to like her too much. But he had considered her an Anglo prize. Blonde. Buxom. A trophy girlfriend. She had never slept with him and the night of the murders, she'd planned to leave him. Leave town. Return home to Chicago and disappear from his life. He'd changed that when he'd killed those women. Oh, she had disappeared from his life all right. Immediately running away from him. Reporting it to the local office of the Rangers, Skye had bypassed the local sheriff, knowing that man was in league with the Gonzagas and accepting bribes from them.

Now here she was. Thrust inside a rustic log cabin to stand in the center and watch the head of the brutal Gonzaga Familia walk around her like a rancher inspecting a prize horse.

Manuel Gonzaga was tall, dark and painfully ugly. With a scar that cut the left side of his face from hairline to chin, he was the very vision of a savage criminal. His black hair was greasy. His body smelled of salsa, cigarettes and sweat. And his clothes—his jeans and t-shirt—spoke of a man who thought skintight was sexy and dirty was in.

He approached her, grabbing the hair that wended over her shoulders. "Very nice. You are even more pretty than Jorge said. Your name?"

She stared at him.

He yanked her hair. "Your name?"

"Skye."

He repeated it, the brief syllable poison on his tongue. "The eyes for the sky, *si*? And the hair?" He pulled again. "For the stars?"

She glared at him.

"Answer me!" He tore at her hair.

"Yes. Whatever you think, that's what it is."

"Your mama and papa would not be happy to see you here with us, would they?"

"No," she replied because she didn't want to become bald talking to this creep.

"Why would you even come here to fuck Jorge, huh? Why?"

"I didn't come here to do that," she said, her peripheral vision taking in that Manuel had only one other person with him in this cabin. "Untie me. I can't run from you. You know it. I'm numb." She put out her hands. "Please."

He narrowed his eyes at her. "I am not stupid."

"Neither am I. I know what you plan for me." She stared at him, daring him to do as she wished. Then she thrust out her hands again. "Where can I run to? How far, eh?"

He tipped his head, lifted a knife from his back pocket and sliced through her ropes.

"Why then? Is it true that you write books?" Manuel asked, edging closer to her and repelling her with his stench.

"Yes. I do." She wiggled her fingers freely now, and the pins and needles were diminishing. She widened her stance, her feet feeling more stable now. Could she walk? Run? Stand up to this jerk? "I write novels."

"About us?" Manuel spread his thin lips in a gruesome smile. "Eh? Tell me!"

"No. Not about you. I was researching gangs that work the Rio Grande border for a fictitious group I created."

"What is this, fik-shous group?"

"Fictitious," she corrected him, watching the three who had captured her, head for the kitchen and return with bottles of beer. They stood behind their leader and guzzled their drinks, listening and grinning like fools. "It means I wasn't writing about the Gonzagas but creating my own gang."

The five of them doubled over with laughter.

Manuel's hand tightened on her hair as he came closer and slid his crooked nose along her throat. In Spanish he said something soft and low that made her swallow hard and step back.

He wouldn't let her escape but followed her, crushing her body close to his wiry one. "I have had no woman in a long time. You will be mine tonight. All night. As you were once Jorge's."

She licked her lips, forced her head back to look him in the eye and declared, "I was never Jorge's."

Manuel cut her a disbelieving look. "He said you have a tight cunt. That you took him all. Liked him rough."

"He lied."

"He would not do that. Not to me." Manuel was definitely cocksure.

An idea formed in her mind. If she could not use her body to run from him, might she use her brains to save herself? "No? You think not? What else did he tell you about me?"

"That you have big breasts."

She snorted, braver suddenly though she had little other than her instinct about his predatory nature to tell her why. "Anyone can see that. You did not need Jorge to tell you."

Manuel ran his hand down her spine and pushed her to him with his hand on her ass. "He said you have a birthmark on your leg—" Manuel touched her inner left thigh. "Here."

She let a small smile curl her lips. "He lied."

Manuel flinched.

"Did he tell you, too, that he didn't want to introduce you to me? That he kept putting off the meeting because he said he would have to kill you when you wanted me?"

Manuel cursed. "Now you lie."

"Why would I?" she asked him, though she knew if she could keep him talking to her, every minute was another one to live. "I know he planned to show me off to the others in the gang," and this was true. "He wanted the others to envy him."

"Good for him."

"Bad for you," she shot back. "He wanted to use me to let the others think he would be a better leader than you." *He certainly smelled better.* "That he could get a blonde Anglo. That he was stronger, wiser."

Manuel shoved her against the wall. She stumbled, but caught her balance, her palms to the rough timbers.

He whirled on his men. Shouting in Spanish, he was grilling them about what she'd said. Skye knew because Jorge was in every vitriolic phrase he uttered.

And as the five of them yelled at each other, denying, proclaiming, asserting their own truths, she stepped slowly toward the front door. A foot away, almost there, she froze.

Directly ahead, she spotted the only window in the cabin. And outside, shadows—long, tall shadows—rippled across the window panes.

Did these five see that?

No. No!

Were those shadows friendly to her?

Oh. God.

She couldn't wait to find out.

She spun, her legs lunging for the door and just as she got there, the thing swung open and in charged two huge men.

Rex!

Rex!

She cried out in joy as he rushed into the cabin, Jose right behind him, both of them firing their guns, yelling at the Gonzagas.

Gunfire split the air.

The sharp cracks told her to drop to the floor, crawl away, outside. She scrambled on her hands and knees. Frantic, she got to her feet and ran toward the gang's car. Spying two huge trucks in the gloom at the far end of the drive, she ran like hell toward them. One was marked with the Ranger symbol.

From inside the cabin, she heard men shouting at each other. She bit her lips, wondered what the hell she should be doing to help.

Then she scrambled inside the Ranger truck, slinging open the glove compartment. She stretched and in the backseat spied and a long wooden box. Ah, *this* was what she wanted.

A rifle. No handgun, but that seemed like a small matter at the moment.

She had fired a rifle a few times in Chicago at the shooting range she frequented. Now if she could just freaking remember how to use the damn thing, she'd be golden.

Hefting it up to her shoulder, she stood outside and opened the barrel. Loaded. There was only one shot in the barrel but she had to use what ammo she had, didn't she? Cocking it with one sure shove, she sited down the barrel, smiled, then hooked it under her arm and strode toward the house.

Scuffling was still going on, but she felt the weapon in her hand would soon end that bit of mayhem. “No one messed with a woman with a rifle,” her handgun instructor had told her. “Just know, with a rifle in your hands, you have to use it fast...or the other guy’ll wrestle it from you and use it on you.”

Up on the porch, she strode to the wide open door and scanned the room. Rex had Manuel by the scruff of his shirt, aiming his fist for the gangster’s jaw. Jose held a gun on three of the men. But the fourth?

Where are you?

She sought him out amid the ruins of the furniture.

Just then her missing man ran out from the kitchen firing full blast—at Rex! But Skye had a clear shot of him. Aimed, fired and blew a hole in him that had all of them turning to stare as he fell to the floor, a mess.

Rex went down on one knee, blood gushing down his shirt.

“Noooo!” she screamed and aimed her rifle at Manuel.

But he threw his hands up while Jose yelled at her to put her weapon down. “Down! Down!”

Manuel took the order as one for him. He sank to his knees, his hands up, his snake’s eyes on her, primly pleading for his life.

Dropping the rifle to the floor, she ran to Rex who looked stunned as he sank to a sofa, one hand over his shoulder.

Skye yanked at the buttons on his shirt, pulled it open and pressed him to lie down. “Let me,” she ordered him as she spread the material wide and saw that the bullet had entered his shoulder. “Thank you, God,” she murmured as she examined it for proximity to a major vessel. “I think you’ll live, Ranger, sir.”

He gave her a cockeyed smile. “Am I living with you, author, ma’am?” Then his eyes went a little loopy.

And Skye saved her response for a time and place where few others would hear the conversation this answer required.

Big Bend Regional Hospital in Alpine might be small by Skye's big city standards but the emergency care was fast and efficient. That was all she needed to feel confident handing Rex over to the ER team who met them at intake.

"He'll do just fine, ma'am," Jose told her as they walked toward his truck in the small parking lot. The night was silent, dark and deep, only the stars dotting the velvet of midnight. "He's strong, healthy. And he knows how to take care of himself."

"I'm grateful his wound was only the shoulder."

"We all are. And that you weren't hurt badly, too." Jose opened his door for her, closed it and walked around to climb up in the cab.

She shifted in the seat. Her limbs were sore, her hands and wrists aching from the rough handling and the ropes, but with the nurses' help at the hospital, she felt better. But tired. Exhausted, actually. "I have no idea how you found me."

Jose turned the ignition and they were off, down the road through town. "West Texas might look gigantic, but when it comes down to it, there are only a few roads and a few ways you can get around. We knew from Rex's phone message what direction those Gonzaga boys took off. It was easy to do process of elimination and track them without them getting any idea we were on their tail."

"Knowing there were three men who took me, I'm surprised you and Rex didn't call for more help."

Jose's dark brows shot high. Then he chuckled. "You don't know the Ranger motto, do you?"

She shook her head. "No. Rex didn't tell me."

"I'm not surprised. We do try to be modest."

She snorted. "Right. Humble, too, I hear. What's the motto?"

"One Ranger. One town."

"Earned by some Ranger who stood off a whole mess of varmints, I suppose."

Grinning, Jose nodded at her attempt at Texan twang. "It's not unusual. I was on my way to your house and passing close by to where they attacked you both, so I came along with Rex. We figured we might need lots of firepower, knowing how the Gonzagas kill first and ask questions later."

She shivered, clutching her arms. "Thanks, Jose. I needed that."

"Sorry, ma'am." He put his gaze on the road and frowned. "While you were in the ER with Rex, I received orders for the next few weeks."

"Oh?" She sat back, ready for the news. Amid her worries about Rex's gunshot wound and his recovery, she expected that local law enforcement would have a new plan for her until the trial. Rex needed time to recuperate and taking care of her should not be high on his to-do list. But she had hoped they could stay together and she could take care of him. "What do the Powers That Be have in mind?"

"We have no idea if your house was detected and we can't let you go back there."

Sad for that, missing Rex already, she rubbed her hands down her jeans. Torn and dirty, her clothes were a wreck. *Like my state of mind.* "So what's the plan?"

"I'm your new housemate."

Rex had told her that Jose was engaged and his fiancée was a very possessive redhead. Skye gave him a horrified smile. "How will that go over with your girlfriend?"

"She knows it's my job. Besides, it's only for a few weeks."

"Two until the trial."

"Right. Maybe one more in court for you to testify, and then you're done! You go back to Chicago."

Skye glanced out her window to watch the muted grays and blacks of the rugged landscape. *What if I'm not going back to Chicago? Can I live here? Did Rex mean what he said, about living together?* "Then where are you taking me?"

"Farther west. A safe house we run over near El Paso."

"What happens to the other house?" she asked, wondering who would go in, see their bed and know what happened there. She certainly wasn't ashamed of how they'd made love, but the intimacy of it was so real, so raw, it should be only hers and Rex's. "What happens to my clothes, my belongings?"

"We'll have an officer go in and supervise while we get your things and get a maid service to clean up."

"And Rex?"

"What about him?"

"Will he know where we are?" *Where I am?*

"Best not to, no."

"I need to know how he is, Jose. Can I call him and —"

"Not a good idea. Sorry."

"Right. Got it." She turned away, lost suddenly without Rex. *As if he were my anchor. And I'm drifting away.*

"Don't worry. He's going to be at the trial. And I'm sure you'll be able to talk there in the courthouse."

She bit her lower lip to stop herself from crying like a kid. *Must be nerves from all the terrors of the day.* "Sure. Good."

Jose reached across, took her hand and squeezed it. "Know what the other motto of the Texas Rangers is?"

Sniffing back her tears, she inhaled and smiled at him. "No, tell me."

"One Ranger. One woman."

She blinked. Then smiled at him. "That obvious, is it?"

"Your attraction for each other?" Jose laughed. "On him, since about week one with you. On you? Since...oh, week two."

Her propensity to cry was lost in the next few miles as the two of them chuckled about men, women and obvious attractions.

Chapter Eight

When the jury entered the courtroom over three weeks later, Skye watched the twelve men and women take their seats, then listened to the judge's invitation to the foreman to stand and deliver their verdict on Manuel Gonzaga for murder in the first degree. But her eyes focused on Texas Ranger Rex Martinez who stood on the other side of the room, his hands clasped behind his back. She'd seen him here only once on opening day of the trial. Then he'd worn his uniform, but beneath it he wore a bulky bandage on his shoulder. And his skin was pale and taut. Today, with his brown Ranger uniform on, his broad-brimmed white Ranger hat shielding his eyes, he was the very essence of raw Texas power. His stance easy, his bandage seemingly gone, his shoulder wound healing. His color was healthy. And his melting blue eyes were zeroed in on hers.

At the foreman's announcement of "Guilty," Skye breathed an audible sigh of relief. With a few more formalities, the trial was over. Skye was free. Ranger Jose Sanchez who had protected her these last few weeks stood next to her and shook her hand.

"Thank you, Ranger Sanchez," she told him using his formal title in public. "You were wonderful to me and I will never forget what you did for me and for...us."

"You're very welcome, Miss Chamberlain. It was my duty, but more than that, my pleasure. I wish you well and I hope to see you again. Soon. In fact, I—"

"He says," Rex's rough voice rumbled through her as he came to stand beside her, "you have an invitation to his wedding."

"Wonderful," Skye beamed at Jose, as she stepped backward slightly to feel Rex's deliciously warm body heat ooze into her soul. "When is it?"

"Two weeks from Sunday. In Del Rio." He pressed a vellum card into her hand. "Excuse me, will you? I promised the judge I would talk with her after the proceedings. You have things in order here, I know, Rex."

Jose and Skye said their goodbyes and then Skye allowed herself the intense pleasure of gazing up into the stunningly handsome face of the man she adored. "I missed you like the devil."

He gave her that disarming half smile that tipped one corner of his mouth. "Same goes. You look rested. Fit."

"I told Jose I needed a set of weights."

"He wouldn't let you leave the house, either, is that right?"

She nodded, unwilling to stop admiring how healthy he looked. "No. He was a bigger ogre than you."

"Good." Rex frowned. "I failed you."

She put her hand to his wrist and whispered, "Like hell you did. Can we leave here? Are you free?"

"I did. We can and I am." He put a hand out toward a side door. "Shall we?"

He didn't touch her as he followed her out. She was immensely grateful for that, because the next time they touched, she was certain she'd kiss him for hours and strip him bare to make love to him. When he pushed open the door for her, she stepped through to a long hall and paused.

"This way," he said as he walked around her and opened another door off the corridor.

She followed him through and swung around as she heard him close the door and click the lock. Gasping in delight, she felt her feet leave the floor and her lips crushed by his.

"God, darlin'," he crooned as he ravaged her mouth with torrid kisses. "I was nuts without you."

Fighting to catch her breath, she drove her hands into his thick hair and swallowed hard as his lips trailed down her throat. "Where were you? I missed you." She was wailing like a kid denied candy. "I looked for you every day here."

"At first," he told her as he pulled off her suit coat and yanked her blouse from her skirt, "I was either in physical therapy or filling out report forms. Then," he said as he hoisted her in his arms and walked with her to the end of a long conference table, "I was put on another case. Easy duty for a wounded man recuperating from a dustup."

She unhooked his belt and lowered his zipper. At the bulge of his cock beneath his black briefs, she moaned, "I needed you."

"Got me now." He pressed her back along the table, lifted her legs and rucked up her skirt to her waist. "No pantyhose. Works for me," he growled as he peeled down her panties and threw them across the room. Then his fingers splayed in her bush and she undulated at the heat of him cupping her pussy.

"I never want you to leave me again," she said as she pushed down his briefs and took a handful of his hot long cock.

"Never will," he promised as he bent and put his mouth to her seam. "Let me prove it." With his clever tongue, he parted her lips, found her clit and titillated it until she groaned.

"Hurry," she demanded.

"Mmm," he said sounding as though he were considering that in his own good time, while he pinched her clit and made her buck. "Impatient, still."

"With you. I always will be. Rex," she urged him.

He darted two fingers inside her drenched pussy to caress her there and make her shudder. "Maybe just this once."

"Considering..." she said as she watched him grin at her and reach inside his trouser pockets to pull out half a dozen condoms in each hand. "Wow. You came prepared, Ranger Martinez."

His eyes flashed, dark blue promises of electric heat to come. "I cannot even look at you, lady, without having the right equipment. Now be a good girl and spread those pretty pussy lips for a man who wants you, will you?"

And as she reached down to part her sopping-wet folds, she watched him inhale her musk, then throw his packets on the shiny oak table, peel one back and roll a rubber on in one swift stroke. Then he put that hand around one of her thighs and nudged the entrance to her core with the blunt head of his hot shaft.

"Don't tease me," she pleaded in a thread of sound.

"No, ma'am," he vowed as he slipped ever so solidly into her tight core. "Oh, well now," he gulped, pausing to shut his eyes a moment and then look at her like he would never let her out of his sight, "that is the sweetest second of my last three weeks. Hang on, darlin', 'til we get a whole lot more."

She braced herself as he drove his cock right up to her limit. She felt him in her cunt, in her bones, her skin, to the tips of her fingers and the roots of her hair. And she hung on as he plunged inside her in a fierce rhythm that proved to her without a doubt that no other man would do for her. She loved this one. This lawman. With the strong arms and the big heart. And if she was lucky enough to charm him into her arms, could she lure him into a love affair more permanent than the witness protection he'd signed up for?

Perspiration dripping from his brow, he pounded into her with a ferocity she hadn't known he possessed. But she didn't care, she loved him for it. Needed him, and so she went with him, his desperate, wild thrusts that shook her, hollowed her, filled her to the brim. As she quaked inside and cried with the beauty of her orgasm, he quickly followed with his own. He shook and stopped, still filling her, then sank to cover her. His lips to her ear, his words dear and devoted ones that told her he never intended to leave her, that she was now forever his.

He rose up, his gaze delving into hers as he brushed her hair from her cheeks. "I mean it. You are mine."

She combed his hair back from his brow. "Same goes here, Ranger. I want you for more than today."

"Can you move to Texas?"

She let her answer fill her eyes. "I can. But where will I live?"

"I hope you'll live with your husband."

Her heart turned over and her lips curved in delight. "I don't have one," she whispered.

"I can get one for you."

Smiling at his tender beseeching look, she rubbed her nose on his. "Do you think I'd like your choice?"

He circled his cock inside her. "I think you would. After all, he loves you."

Tears burned her eyes. "Oh, my. Does he really?"

He thrust inside her to prove his point. "Like the earth needs rain and flowers love sun. And birds need air. I love you, Skye."

She wrapped her arms around his neck and squeezed him tight. "I adore you, Rex. I need you every day, every hour. You'll be so tired of me hanging on you," she whispered as she rolled her hips up against his. "So tired of me showing you how I want you that you'll need to go to work to escape me."

Laughter rumbled in his chest and she felt it flow through her with a joy that had them both chuckling.

She cupped his jaw and kissed his lips. "When? How long does it take to get a marriage license in Texas?"

He lifted one dark brow at her. "In a hurry? Again, ma'am?"

She squeezed his cock with her strong pussy. "You bet I am."

"Well," he said and put on an innocent look. "If you're really in a rush?"

She cuffed in his good shoulder. "Tell me you're not!"

He snorted. "Three-day wait after we get the license."

“Okay.” She nodded, eager as a puppy. “Not too long.”

“Shall I take you down the hall and over to the marriage license department?”

“It’s here?” she asked, but in the next second, felt like an idiot when she knew this was a state courthouse – and of course, the records bureau would be nowhere else.

He shifted inside her, his flagging cock still hard enough to grab her attention. “Unless you want to think about it more.” He lifted her chin. “I love you, baby, and I want you in my bed and in my life like the devil needs sinners. But if you’re not sure, if what we had was just one of those things, then –”

She kissed him then, big, hard and long. “I want you, Rex Martinez. For now and all our lives. Zip up, honey. You are about to become an engaged man and I don’t want any other women getting a glimpse of the goods and getting any ideas about my Texas Ranger.”

He grabbed her arms and helped her stand. “Better straighten out that straitlaced business suit then, ma’am. Don’t want any other man thinking he can have my woman. Ever.”

“No one ever will,” she told him as she gave him a quick peck.

“And from now on, you are never going anywhere without me.”

“My own private long arm of the law,” she said with a satisfaction that had her scurrying to make herself presentable to buy her first and only marriage license.

About the Author

An award-winning author of more than two dozen romances and mysteries, Cerise DeLand creates heroes readers crave. Cerise has met many men in her worldwide travels and created the best of the best from all the wonderful places she's lived and visited. Today, she lives – and writes – in wild west Texas, where a never-ending stream of cowboys, vaqueros, para-military types and diplomats stroll into town and fuel her imagination for red hot affairs.

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

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