

# *Real Love*



JEANNE MCCANN

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*Jeanne McCann*

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## **Real Love**

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## CHAPTER 1

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“Rhea, when are they going to be here?” Alicia bubbled with excitement as she glanced out their hotel window at the city below. She’d never been to Australia before and she was interested in everything. She’d taken several hundred pictures and couldn’t sit still for one minute. Rhea was tickled to death that Alicia was so enchanted with her new home; it made Rhea feel much better about asking Alicia to uproot herself from everything she had grown up with and move across the world. Rhea was still amazed that Alicia had agreed not only to move but had been adamant that it was the best choice for their future. Rhea had to pinch herself in order to believe that Alicia was really in love with her, because Rhea was completely head over heels for the tiny woman.

“They won’t get in until late tonight, and we’ll meet them for breakfast tomorrow morning and fly out to the ranch.” Rhea Cameron, an Australian by birth, was equally as nervous to see her father and brother. She was finally going home, something she had been putting off for a long, long time. At the age of forty-one she was moving back home to help her brother run their sheep ranch, a sprawling five thousand acre spread. Giving up her life in San Francisco and her job as a pilot for British Airways had been extremely difficult, especially since she had just begun a new relationship and a very special one indeed.

Alicia Manor was an exceptionally talented commercial illustrator and the love of her life. They had met at an art showing, one that Rhea had been dragged to by a woman she had been dating for several months. She had been unhappy with the relationship and it had cooled quickly, but they still went out occasionally.

The fact that her first weekend off in five weeks was being spent in what she had imagined would be a boring waste of time, did not make her the least bit thrilled or happy. The art hanging on the walls was classified as *modern* meaning that it resembled nothing that Rhea could recognize nor appreciate. She was standing in front of a particularly disturbing painting, sipping bad red wine, and glowering. All she wanted to do was tell Tracey she was leaving. As of a month ago, their relationship was no longer intimate, and she knew that it was not going to continue beyond tonight. Tracey was not a woman that Rhea could trust, and trust was everything. The fact that Tracey had been sleeping with another woman at the same time she was sleeping with Rhea was a huge factor. When Rhea had found out, Tracey had just laughed and told her to lighten up. Rhea had known from that moment on that she could not continue to see Tracey and sleep with her. She would have liked trying to remain friends with Tracey, but that was proving to be difficult. Rhea didn't like her cavalier attitude toward women and sex.

"Art is supposed to invoke emotion in people, but I don't think the artist expected complete disgust." A low, throaty voice laced with humor and a slight southern accent interrupted Rhea's thoughts about making a quick escape. She turned to look at the woman who stood to her right and was struck blind, deaf, and dumb. Rhea had never experienced such a strong physical reaction to a woman quite like the one she was experiencing now. Her skin tingled and her heart pounded. She felt her thighs tremble as she gazed at the sexiest face she'd ever seen.

Dark blue eyes, large and full of fun, encircled by long blond eyelashes, gazed up at her from a beautiful face surrounded by an abundance of blond wavy hair. Part elegant woman, part pixie, it was a face that Rhea found breathtaking. The woman grinned up at Rhea waiting for a response.

"I'm not disgusted I'm just surprised that people will spend so much money on ugly art." Rhea wasn't known for being tactful, her thoughts and feelings were strong, and she had no problem expressing them, much to the discomfort of many people.

The laugh that burst from the tiny woman surprised Rhea with its robustness, and it rolled through her body. She reacted to the sensuous sound with a shiver. Obviously, the woman wasn't offended by Rhea's comment. "I'll have to let Stephanie know what your reaction to her art is. She appreciates knowing that she has struck a chord with people."

"You know the artist?" Rhea felt a little guilty about having made such a harsh statement.

"I know her very well, but don't worry she feels pretty much the same way you do. She can't understand why people are willing to spend so much on her art. She actually thinks most of it is junk!"

"Why does she display it?"

"Because her agent wants her to and, as you've noticed, she makes a great deal of money selling it," Alicia teased the tall, striking woman standing next to her. She was very appealing glowering at the painting, her long black hair loose and falling in a shiny cascade to her hips. Alicia had a weakness for tall women with long hair. "I should introduce myself. I'm Alicia Manor."

"Hello, I'm Rhea Cameron. Are you an artist?"

"I am. Are you British? You have a wonderful way of speaking."

"No, I'm Australian. Are you showing anything here?"

"No, I'm not showing right now. Why are you here?"

"I'm on a date, sort of."

"Where is he?" Alicia was disappointed. She had felt something when the woman had looked at her. She would have sworn that she was a lesbian.

"She's over there flirting with the tall, bohemian artist," Rhea commented with a flip of her head.

Alicia turned and laughter once again bubbled out of her. "Obviously your date isn't averse to buying ugly art! That's Stephanie, the reigning artist."

"I think my date is more interested in the artist's body than the artwork."

"I thought you said you were on a date!" Her tone was glacial, her eyes fierce.

"We are, but that's never stopped Tracey from looking around, especially since we're going out only as friends."

"You're kidding!" Alicia was a little surprised at Rhea's casual attitude. "Doesn't that bother you?"

"It would if we had a relationship. We just go out together once in awhile to keep in touch. There's nothing more than friendship between the two of us. How do you know Stephanie?"

"She was my first girlfriend many years ago, and we've stayed friends. I always come to her showings."

Alicia and Rhea watched as Stephanie and Tracey didn't hide the fact that they were interested in each other. Their bodies were almost occupying the same space, their hands frequently touching.

"It looks like I'm going to need a ride home," Alicia commented, turning back to Rhea, a slight smile on her face.

"I have my car, and I can give you a ride. In fact, I'd like to get out of here soon. Do you have any objections to leaving early?"

"None at all, but don't you think you might want to know where I live before you volunteer to drive me home?" Alicia's face lit up with a huge smile.

"Unless you live in Oregon, I'm not going to worry," Rhea commented dryly. Alicia's deep, sexy laugh made Rhea smile as once again it rolled warmly through her. "You have a wonderful laugh."

"Thank you. You want to leave now?"

"I do, but I need to tell Tracey I'm going."

"I can tell Stephanie at the same time."

Slipping out of the gallery with Alicia had been the smartest thing Rhea had ever done. They hadn't gone directly home but had spent a long evening talking and drinking coffee at a restaurant close to Alicia's townhouse. The more they talked, the more Alicia intrigued Rhea. She was definitely a free spirit, and she dressed the part. She was wearing a long, deep purple linen dress. A brilliantly hued scarf, with swirls of purple, blue, and green was draped loosely around her neck. Long blond hair full of large, loose curls spilled over her shoulders. She was the sexiest woman Rhea had ever met.

In contrast to this flamboyance, Rhea was wearing a sage green silk suit, tailored, elegant and tasteful. It fit her tall frame to perfection. She was five feet eleven and slender, her black hair the only unstructured part of her appearance. With eyes deep brown bordering on black, her face was as elegant as her attire. She had high cheekbones, a strong jaw, and a full, wide mouth. Alicia would have described her face as Reubenesque—sensuous and sexy.

Over coffee, Alicia did most of the talking while Rhea found herself tentative and unsure, not her usual direct and confident self. It was obvious that Alicia was special. Two hours later, Rhea dropped Alicia off at her townhouse after agreeing to her plan for brunch and a morning walk on Sunday.

It took Rhea all of one week to fall in love with Alicia, finding her laid-back personality and her delight with life and everything it offered irresistible. Alicia, on the other hand, had fallen in love with Rhea the minute she had seen the irritated look on her face at the gallery. Rhea was a down-to-earth, "what-you-see-is-what-you-get" kind of person, a bit on the pragmatic side. She didn't always see the humor or the appeal of the unstructured part of life. The fact that they clicked was as much a surprise to Rhea as it was to Alicia. And click they did as increasingly they shared their lives with one another.



For three weeks both women kept their feelings to themselves as they grew to trust each other. Alicia was a naturally affectionate person and she hugged and kissed a lot. Rhea was less physically spontaneous, but her attraction to Alicia was huge. They saw each other as much as possible given that Rhea's schedule was hectic, though Alicia's was more fluid. They had spent many long hours talking on the telephone late into the night.

The first time they shared a kiss was exactly three days after they met while having dinner at a restaurant. Alicia had picked Rhea up from the airport after a flight and taken her to dinner.

"Have I told you how sexy you look in your uniform?" Alicia commented, smiling at Rhea across the table. It had made Rhea flush and burn with sexual desire for the petite woman across from her.

"*You* look fantastic." And she did. Alicia was wearing a pair of slim black pants and a bright red tunic, her hair piled carelessly on top of her head. All Rhea wanted to do was touch her. Her eyes glowed with attraction, and Alicia didn't miss the look.

Alicia leaned over the table and kissed Rhea slowly, her lips full and soft, and amazingly gentle. Rhea's fingers tangled in Alicia's hair as she held her and kissed Alicia back, her tongue slipping between Alicia's lips forgetting that they were seated in a restaurant. Alicia felt her heart shudder in her chest as she returned the kiss, caught in a passionate haze. The controlled and organized pilot was also a passionate and ardent lover.

It was two weeks later when, aching with frustration and need, they made love for the first time. They had gone to a romantic movie, one Alicia had picked out. As they sat in the dark holding hands, Rhea kept glancing at Alicia, and her body tingled as she anticipated touching her. Both women were dressed casually, but even in a pair of jeans Alicia was exciting. Her jeans were faded and she had belted them with colorful cording. She was wearing a hand stitched vest and tank top. Rhea's eyes kept returning to Alicia's bare arm resting next to hers, unable to pay any attention to the movie. Alicia turned and caught Rhea's hot eyes on her. She leaned into Rhea and whispered in her ear.

"You don't really want to see this movie, do you?"

"I want to touch you. I'm going nuts sitting here," Rhea's voice vibrated against her ear raising goose bumps on Alicia's arms.

Alicia gazed sweetly up at Rhea and stood up, tugging on her hand. Alicia dragged her out of the movie house and headed for the car. Once inside she became shy as she stared at Rhea in the dark, her eyes locked on Rhea's face.

"That was a short movie," Rhea commented, her eyes dark and mysterious.

Alicia started laughing as she watched Rhea. "Honey, I was going crazy sitting next to you in the theater."

"Do you want to go back to my place?" Rhea gathered Alicia's hand in hers.

"Yes, I would."

Rhea smiled as she started the car and began the drive back to her condominium. Alicia placed her hand on Rhea's thigh and Rhea jumped.

"Sorry."

"Honey, don't apologize, I'd just as soon pull over on the side of the road and ravish you right now."

Rhea's dry tone and her delivery made Alicia giggle. "Ravish—what an appealing suggestion. I've never been ravished before."

"Twenty more minutes and you won't be able to make that claim again," Rhea promised her with a grin.

*Ravished* was just how Alicia would remember it. Rhea unlocked the door of her condominium and, as the two of them entered, Rhea turned to Alicia. The look of lust in her eyes was enough for Alicia, and she closed the space between them, sliding her arms around Rhea's neck. The kiss rocked them both, and Rhea's hands quickly traced Alicia's body before she lifted her up and carried her to the couch.

"I've got to get my hands on you," she gasped as she began to remove Alicia's tunic. Alicia's fingers went immediately to Rhea's blouse and unbuttoned it, her fingers sliding against the snowy white bra that Rhea's breasts all but overflowed.

"Ah, my God..." Rhea gasped as Alicia's lips nuzzled between her breasts while her agile hands unclasped her bra. Heat surrounded Rhea's nipple and she cried out in pleasure while Alicia's mouth covered her naked breast. Rhea's plans to ravish Alicia were delayed as Alicia stripped her of her clothes and covered her body with her mouth, her hands touching every inch of her. Alicia's fingers unerringly found her hot, wet cavity and slid into her slowly, filling her completely. Her mouth teased Rhea's swollen lips as her fingers stroked her closer to orgasm. Rhea had never been so wholly excited. Her hips arched up off the couch as Alicia's hands guided her to her mouth. Alicia's shoulders pushed against Rhea's thighs so that she was completely open to her wondrous lips. Sucking Rhea's clitoris into her hot mouth was Rhea's undoing as she shuddered and cried out before falling back, totally spent. Alicia gently let go of her thighs showering kisses on her naked body before gathering her in her arms and holding her tightly.

"And I thought I was going to ravish you," Rhea sighed as she looked up at Alicia, still fully clothed.

"I'm looking forward to it," Alicia responded, kissing her softly. "I want your hands on me, Rhea."

Rhea took her time removing Alicia's clothes, savoring the healthy body of her new lover. Full, firm breasts beckoned Rhea's lips and she suckled on both while Alicia moaned with pleasure. Alicia's hands held Rhea's head to her as she bathed her nipples with her tongue. Alicia's sighs told Rhea what she liked, and Rhea took her time loving her. Her fingers traced over the slim muscles of her thighs before touching the very center of her to find her dripping with welcoming moisture. Running her fingers back and forth against Alicia's swollen lips, Rhea could feel the trembling begin and she filled Alicia completely, drawing a shudder from her. Alicia's body rippled around Rhea's fingers as an orgasm welled up inside her. Rhea's fingers filled her over and over as Alicia's hips closed against Rhea's hand.

"Rhea..." Alicia tumbled as her back arched and she cried out, tightening her arms around Rhea's shoulders. Rhea kissed Alicia fully, as she continued to tease her into another orgasm. Alicia tucked her face against Rhea's, flooded with feelings so overwhelming she couldn't speak.

For more than an hour Rhea loved Alicia over and over with her fingertips and her mouth until Alicia was limp and sated, then they both lay silent on the carpet next to the couch. Alicia lay draped over Rhea's body, Rhea's arms holding her lovingly as they both recuperated.

"So that is what ravished means," Alicia's eyes were full of humor, a rakish grin on her face.

"I'm not sure what just happened, but I wouldn't mind if it happened again," Rhea admitted with an intriguing smile of her own.

"Do you have a bed?"

"Of course I do."

"Do you think we could find it?"

"I think that can be arranged."

Rhea and Alicia spent as much time in bed that next week as their busy schedules would allow. The more they made love, the more they wanted each other and, as their physical attraction grew, so did their feelings for one another. Both women had fallen in love, deeply and completely in love.

## CHAPTER 2

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Two months later, the controlled and structured pilot found herself living with a free spirited, creative, and extremely loving artist. For the first time in Rhea's life she was in love, blissfully so, and looking forward to living happily ever after. Alicia's career was blooming, and she had been chosen to illustrate a favorite children's book. Her townhouse included her studio on the top floor, and Rhea's office was right next to it. She had insisted that Rhea move in with her and share her home. It was completely paid for and very large. Rhea knew that Alicia had lost both parents when she was in high school and had been left financially secure. Rhea had no financial worries either, due in part to her high paying job and the fact that she was frugal. Moving into Alicia's place and renting her condominium seemed like the right thing to do.

Their life together was surprisingly normal and full. Both enjoyed their careers and sharing their life with each other. Alicia's open and energetic nature was a constant pleasure to Rhea as was her talent. Rhea loved the art that Alicia created and would steal into her studio just to watch her work. Alicia was also extremely fascinated with Rhea's being a pilot. She flew on a round trip to New York in order to see her girlfriend at work. She'd even been allowed to slip into the cockpit to see Rhea seated at the controls, and it amazed her. This logical and brilliant woman was also her passionate lover. If Alicia hadn't already fallen in love with her, seeing Rhea piloting a plane full of passengers would have made her vulnerable. As it was, her heart pounded painfully in her chest, her eyes shiny with love and pride.

Everything seemed perfect, and both women were extremely pleased with their life together. It wasn't until Rhea's brother Ted paid them a visit from

Australia later that year and dropped a bombshell that their lives changed completely.

"Rhea, I need help. I can't run the place by myself. You know you love the ranch. I'm asking you to come home and be my partner," Ted pleaded with his sister.

"Ted, you know I love the ranch, but Dad doesn't like who I am. I can't go back where I'm not wanted. Besides, Alicia and I have a life here."

"Honey, it was Dad who suggested I contact you. He and Mom don't want to work so hard any more. Besides, they're both getting up in age and they want to travel. You and I are it, honey. You know we are the sole heirs."

"I can't just pick up things and move. Alicia and I have a home and careers."

"Rhea, I need you; Sheri is pregnant." Rhea knew her brother and sister-in-law had wanted children and had all but given up on having any. She was thrilled that they were going to have a child. The emotion in Ted's voice made her think twice.

Rhea's face showed surprise and pleasure for her brother as she hugged him tightly. "Congratulations, I'm very glad for you both."

"Thanks, but that means I'm going to need more help."

"Ted, I can't..."

"Just think about it, sis. You and Alicia take your time and just talk about it. I'm going to be here for a week. We can talk some more." Ted knew Rhea wasn't one to be pressured into making a decision. She would analyze it completely, reworking it in her mind until she came to her own conclusions.

Rhea and Alicia had done nothing but talk, and Ted continued to ask for help. Knowing that Rhea's first love was her family's ranch had helped make up Alicia's mind, and she encouraged Rhea to consider the move. Alicia could work anywhere and would follow her lover wherever she went. She was madly in love with Rhea, and she knew very well that Rhea missed her family a great deal.

Four months after they had moved in together Alicia and Rhea made a joint decision: they packed up their belongings and set off for Australia, more specifically New South Wales, where Rhea would become a full partner in the running of her family ranch. Alicia had plans to continue her work illustrating, and she looked forward to meeting the rest of Rhea's family with great anticipation.

## CHAPTER 3

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“What would you like to do tonight? We can go out and take a tour of Sidney. We probably won’t get back here for a couple of months.”

“How far is the ranch from here?”

“It’s about a four hour plane flight, and then about twelve hours of driving across dusty, rough roads.”

“Is there a town near the ranch?”

“There’s a town about three hours away and we have a small store on the ranch.”

“So, are you going to wear cowboy boots and chaps and things?” Alicia whispered as she slid her body against Rhea’s, her eyes full of mischief.

“I’ve been known to,” Rhea grinned as she wrapped her arms around Alicia. “We need to get you some cowboy boots, hat, duster, and some work clothes. I’m afraid your dresses and skirts aren’t going to cut it.”

“You’re going to buy me some chaps?”

“I am. Do you think I can get you to wear them in our bedroom with nothing else on?” Rhea’s grin was rakish as she hugged her paramour.

“So you like cowgirls, do you?” Alicia fluttered her eyelashes at Rhea.

“No, I love *you*, and I like looking at you in anything. I need to thank you again for leaving San Francisco and moving to Australia with me.”

“Honey, I’d follow you to the ends of the earth,” Alicia promised, leaning up to kiss Rhea.

“That’s just about where we’re going. It’s going to be completely different than anywhere you’ve ever been. The weather goes through extremes: hot, dry winds, and rainy seasons with flash floods, and electrical storms; then there are bugs and snakes.”

"I think I can deal with anything but snakes," Alicia shivered in her lover's arms.

"When we get to the ranch you'll need to learn to handle a gun, honey. No one goes anywhere on the ranch without a gun."

"I don't like guns."

"You just haven't been around them enough to be comfortable," Rhea reassured her.

"Do you think I'm going to fit in?" Alicia was very nervous about her role as Rhea's partner.

"You'll be fabulous. Now, let's go out and see the city, unless you're too tired. We have some shopping to do." Rhea lifted the petite woman up into a hug.

Four hours later Rhea and Alicia lay amid a pile of bags and clothing, resting after a bout of furious lovemaking brought about when Alicia was kind enough to model her new cowboy boots and hat, and nothing else.

"I love you, cowgirl," Rhea grinned at her tiny love.

"So when do I get to see you in your boots and hat?"

"As soon as I get to the ranch. I have several pairs just waiting for me."

"I can't wait to meet your parents."

"Honey, my dad is a little on the gruff side, so don't expect him to give you a big hug and welcome you to the family."

"I still can't wait to meet him and your mother."

Rhea was very nervous about seeing her father again after so many years had passed. Every time she visited, they had avoided each other. Talking wasn't their strong point, and the rift in their relationship grew wider. He hadn't been pleased that his only daughter had been caught in bed with a neighbor girl the summer before she left for college. And because the two of them were so much alike, stubbornness kept them at odds even after Rhea went away to college in Sydney.

Flying had always intrigued Rhea, having watched her father and brother fly their own planes, and after graduating from college she'd signed up for flight school and training at British Airways. At the young age of twenty-five, Rhea became a full-fledged pilot, much to her father's dismay, as he was expecting her to come home and work on the ranch. Their relationship had never been close, but for the last ten years it had been extremely strained. Rhea missed her family and her home very much, but after being transferred to San Francisco, her life had settled into one she was comfortable with. Meeting Alicia had

made it close to perfect. Now, she was heading back home with her girlfriend and had a lot of doubts, huge doubts.

“My mother is going to love you.”

“I hope so.”

“We’d better go to sleep. We have a very long day tomorrow.”

“Are you tired?” Alicia’s hands moved down her lover’s body, knowing just where to touch her.

“Not any longer,” Rhea moaned as Alicia’s fingertips wreaked havoc on her senses.

It was several hours later before Alicia fell asleep next to Rhea. Rhea was wide-awake and worrying about their transition to the ranch. Rhea’s family was one of the wealthiest in all of Queensland, having been in the ranching business for over four generations. Raising sheep was just one of their sources of income. They raised Arabian horses and were lucky enough to have several working gold mines on their property, as well as a source of rare opals. Ted’s wife, Sheri, made these opals into high end, very expensive and sought after jewelry. The family’s influence was far-reaching since Rhea’s father had built a small airport and started a cargo service to support the territories surrounding the ranch. It had grown into a very lucrative business that was run as a separate activity from the ranch. Her father, Ted, and Rhea could all fly a plane, and that was their preferred mode of transportation from the ranch to any of the larger cities.

Rhea’s worries were twofold. She was unsure as to what her father’s attitude would be, and she was also worried about how Alicia would fit in. Alicia was a city girl, born and raised in San Francisco, and an extremely talented illustrator. She was literally giving up a lot of her career to move with Rhea, and that scared Rhea to death. What if Alicia didn’t like living in Australia? What if she couldn’t work there? What if she stopped loving Rhea? Rhea’s heart ached as she thought of her worst fear, losing Alicia.



## CHAPTER 4

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“August Campbell, this is Alicia Manor. Alicia, this is my father, August.”

“You’re a bloody pretty one, aren’t you? Welcome to Australia.”

“Thank you, it’s nice to meet you.” Alicia shook the huge hand that August held out.

“Rhea’s mother is anxious to meet you. She would be here but one of her mares is foaling and she stayed behind to help with the birthing.”

“Ted, how is Sheri feeling?” Rhea nervously directed her conversation to her brother.

“Pretty good. She has morning sickness right now, but it’s supposed to go away soon. She’s remodeling a bedroom into a nursery.”

“Didn’t you just finish remodeling your home?”

“We did. We weren’t expecting to get pregnant at this late date.” Ted’s grin was evidence of his happiness. He and Sheri had been shocked and poignantly pleased to find out she was pregnant.

“What do you think, Grandpa?” Rhea teased.

“I’ll be glad to have a grandchild. It’s about time.”

Alicia remained quiet as she watched the family dynamics. August was a large, solidly built man over six feet tall, with hair that still showed signs of red among the almost silver mane. His face was tanned and covered with freckles, his eyebrows bushy over his penetrating gold eyes, his expression intense. It was the same expression Alicia saw whenever she looked at Rhea. Ted was as tall as his father, with a full head of dark brown hair and dark eyes. He was as large as his father, too, and both men exhibited the signs of physical strength that their lives required. When Rhea stood next to them you could see the fam-

ily resemblance in her height and her dark eyes. There was the almost hidden dimple in her right cheek that was identical to her father's.

Ted had hugged the two of them tightly, his greeting full of emotion and pleasure. August was a little less forthcoming as he shook Alicia's hand and patted his daughter on the shoulder. Obviously, he wasn't as comfortable with outward displays of affection, just like his daughter. Their breakfast was pleasant as Ted brought Rhea up to date on the ranch and its activities. August barked a comment here and there but chose to let his son do most of the talking.

"Alicia, Ted tells us that you are an artist. What kind of artwork do you do?"

"I'm an illustrator. Most of the time I illustrate books, sometimes ad campaigns, and I do some illustrations for sale."

"So, are you good?"

"I am, yes," Alicia quirked her eyebrows at the imposing man.

"Good. I'd like to see some of your work."

Alicia flashed an impish grin at the gruff man, her eyes twinkling. "I'll show you some when everything gets to the ranch."

"It will all be there by the time we get back. I had one of our cargo planes pick it up."

"Great."

"We've prepared the third floor of the ranch house for the two of you. Mommo has been cleaning for a week."

"Who's Mommo?"

"She's our housekeeper and has been for the last twenty years."

August Cameron didn't scare Alicia at all. He hid a soft heart behind his gruff exterior; she saw it and liked him. She'd seen the gleam of emotion in August's eyes when he saw his daughter for the first time since their long separation.

"She must be a valued member of your family."

Alicia couldn't have been more right. Mommo had kept the house clean and running smoothly since before Rhea had left for college. Mommo's mother had helped raise Ted and Rhea when they were very young and had taken care of the house until Mommo had taken over. Mommo's father and grandfather worked on the ranch doing whatever was needed. Being aborigines, they were prone to go off for lengths of time into the bush and would reappear and begin to work like they hadn't been gone at all. It was behavior that August Cameron had grown up with and accepted. The aborigines were native to Australia and were highly respected by the Cameron family.

"We need to stop and pick up a few things for Sheri and Mom and then we should be ready to go. Are you all packed?" Ted asked as he finished his cup of coffee.

"We are. The bellman has everything stored."

"You might want to change, city girl." Ted tapped his sister on her arm. "I brought you some things from home."

Ted handed a stuffed bag to Rhea. She grinned at him as she peeked inside. "I'll go change."

Alicia and Ted visited as Rhea walked into the bathroom. She had to hand it to her brother. He knew her well. Her favorite boots were in the bag along with a pair of her jeans, a belt, a yellow, long sleeved shirt, her hat, and her duster. She lived in the outfit whenever she was on the ranch. Her gloves were stuffed in one pocket of the jacket, and a note was stuffed in the other one. "Welcome home. We missed you, Sheri and Ted."

Rhea changed quickly from her slacks and sweater into the familiar jeans and shirt. Ted had even remembered a pair of socks. She laid the jacket over her arm and hung the hat down her back. Anyone looking at her would see a beautiful rancher, and she fit the part to perfection. Alicia's eyes never left her as her long strides carried her to the table. She obviously liked what she saw because Rhea recognized the look, and it pleased her no end that Alicia found her sexy, dressed in what she would call her *working clothes*.

"There's my sister, the ranch hand," Ted teased as she slipped into her chair. "Now, all we need is to get Alicia into a pair of boots."

"We bought a couple pair for her yesterday and a hat and duster."

"Do I need to wear them on the plane?" Alicia teased. She was wearing a long colorful skirt, bright red sweater, and leather boots, making her look stylish and feminine.

"No, but you might want to change before we get in the jeep. There are a lot of dust storms across the ranch, and we aren't going to be able to land near the house."

Rhea's look of concern was immediate. "Are the storms causing any problems with the sheep?"

"Not right now, but we may have to move some of them if the weather gets any worse."

"Alicia, why don't you change into a pair of jeans and your boots now? You might be more comfortable on the flight," Rhea suggested.

"Okay, but I'll need to get my suitcases from the bellman."

“The two of you can go get your things and let Alicia change. Dad, you can come with them to the plane, while I go pick up the stuff for Mom and Sheri. Everything should be waiting at the cargo office.”

“All right, I could use another cup of coffee.”

Alicia and Rhea found the bellman, who located their suitcases. While they waited for their things, Alicia leaned into Rhea and whispered in her ear. “You are so hot-looking dressed like that. I can’t wait until we get to the ranch. I want my hands on you.”

Rhea’s body heated up as she looked down at Alicia’s appealing face. “I love you, Alicia.”

“I love you, cowgirl.”

“Come on, let’s get you changed. I think I’m going to like seeing you in a pair of cowboy boots again.”

“I don’t think your dad would appreciate my wearing boots and nothing else,” Alicia teased as she went to change.

## CHAPTER 5

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The flight was uneventful, especially since the airplane was as luxurious as any noncommercial plane could be with plush leather seats and a kitchenette that had more appliances than Alicia's old kitchen. While Ted and Rhea gave each other a bad time in the cockpit deciding who was going to fly the plane, Alicia and August visited in the back.

"August, tell me about your family. Rhea said you've been ranchers for four generations. How did your family begin ranching?"

"My great-grandfather was a convict from England. He was sent here to serve out his sentence as a horse thief. The history is a little hazy at that point, but rumor has it that he married a local farmer's daughter and was given a thousand acres of dry, arid farmland. There is also the fact that he was married at the point of a shotgun after getting the farmer's daughter pregnant." August's eyes twinkled as he talked. He obviously enjoyed telling the story. "After many years of struggling, he found water on his land and gold. Instant wealth was quite a story, and instead of spending it all at once, my frugal Scottish relative invested in more land. More land begat more gold and more sheep, and before you knew it he was the wealthiest rancher in Queensland. It has grown from there."

"Very interesting—I would have liked to have met your great-grandfather."

"He was a rogue and a character. Now you tell me, are you going to make my daughter happy?"

Alicia wasn't surprised at the question. Somehow she knew that August loved his daughter deeply. "I already do make her happy and I will for the rest of our lives."

"Do you have parents?"

"My parents passed away years ago, and I was an only child."

"Well, you're a part of our family now."

Alicia's eyes filled with tears, and she reached over and hugged the large man tightly. His huge arms wrapped around her and held her gently. "Thank you."

Rhea turned to see what Alicia and her father were doing and her mouth dropped open. "Ted, look!"

Ted's eyes just about popped out of his head. "She's already won the old man over."

Rhea grinned at her brother. "I'm not surprised. Alicia is so full of love you'd have to work very hard not to like her."

"I'm glad for you, sis. I like her."

"I do too, and I feel very lucky."

Ted and Rhea took turns flying, and for a brief time Alicia sat up in front with Rhea while she was piloting. "Wow, I know I saw you flying a jet but this is so much more real."

"So what do you think of Dad?"

"I love him, Rhea. He's so gruff and so full of love. He told me the history of your ranch, and he's so proud of having a convict for a relative."

"I know. He loves the ranch."

"He also told me the story of how he met your mother. It's such a romantic tale."

Rhea broke into laughter. She'd heard the story many times from both parents. Her mother's version was considerably different. "You need to hear my mother's version before you call it romantic."

"I can't wait to meet her. She sounds wonderful."

"She's the perfect match for my Dad. She never does what he tells her, she just ignores him. She has always done exactly what she wants to do, but she's as much a rancher's wife as anyone could be. Her first love, besides my dad, is her love of horses. They are beautiful animals, and she has made quite a name for herself raising Arabians. People come from all over the world to buy her foals or to breed their mares with her stallions. She knows more about horse genetics than you would ever want to know."

"Rhea, you are all are so talented and hard working. I hope I can contribute in some way." Alicia's insecurities came through her voice, her face serious with worry.

"Honey, you'll be just fine. Give yourself some time to figure things out." Rhea was hoping she was right.

After listening to Rhea explain the equipment in the cockpit, Alicia switched places with August and, while Ted and Alicia visited in the cabin, August and his daughter sat silently next to each other. They sat that way for ten long minutes.

It was August who spoke first, and his statement brought tears to Rhea's eyes. "I like your girlfriend. She's got spunk."

"Yes, she does," Rhea agreed, "and she's a very talented artist."

"We'll have to make sure that she has everything she needs in her studio."

"Dad, I'm glad to be back."

"Your mom has missed you, lassie," August's voice was rough with emotion.

"I've missed her."

"I expect you and Ted to start taking over everything so I can get your mom to go on an extended vacation. She works too hard."

"We will. Where are you planning on taking her?"

"Back to Venice and Florence."

"Where you spent your honeymoon, she'd like that," Rhea grinned. Her father was such a romantic. Rhea had inherited her more pragmatic side from her mother.

"So tell me, has Alicia ever been on a horse?"

"No. I imagine it's going to take her a while to get used to the ranch. She's never been out of the city."

"A city girl, is she? Well, we'll get her fixed up in no time."

"I love you, Dad." Rhea's eyes filled with tears, her heart bursting with emotion.

"I love you, little girl." August's burly hand covered Rhea's for a moment. "It's about time you came home."

Rhea felt a heavy weight lift off her shoulders as she smiled at her father. Now all she had to do was make sure Alicia would be comfortable enough to make Australia her home. It was so important that Alicia liked living at the ranch.

## CHAPTER 6

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Ted efficiently dropped the plane down onto the dirt runway outside the town of Tambo. They transferred everything from the plane to a large dusty Rover, and Alicia was very glad she had changed into jeans and boots. The ground was dry and dusty, the wind hot, as dust swirled around them. Alicia grinned as she watched Rhea and her brother strap on guns that had been locked in the Rover. With a pair of gloves hanging off her belt, Rhea looked every bit the part of a rancher, a very sexy, beautiful one.

“I’m going to grab some cold water before we head out,” Ted announced as he began the trip to the local airport building.

“Wow, it is dusty,” Alicia commented as she watched the dirt swirl around in the wind.

“This is nothing. When there’s a full dust storm, it can make your face bleed if you don’t protect yourself. Here, put this bandanna around your neck. If it gets too dusty for you, pull it up over your nose and mouth.”

“Girls, lets get in the Rover out of this wind,” August suggested.

Twenty minutes later the four of them started their journey to the ranch along a dusty road. Occasionally cars would pass them, but for most of the trip there weren’t many people to see, but animals were everywhere. Alicia’s first kangaroo sighting warranted pulling over on the side of the road so Alicia could snap several pictures. A pack of dingoes was cause to stop the car for a few more snapshots. Alicia’s excitement was contagious, and August regaled her with wild tales about Australia and its wildlife. She absorbed it all, her eyes bright with curiosity, and Rhea was pleased beyond belief.

Three hours later they passed a large open gate with the name CAMERON RANCH on it, and in another forty-five minutes, they pulled up in front of a



huge complex surrounded by green grass and white painted fences. There was a stately modern ranch house built in the tradition of old plantations with porches completely wrapping around all three stories. Connected to the right side of the house was a glass enclosed pool and greenhouse. Next to the large ranch house was a huge barn and some smaller outbuildings, along with a large corral. There was a six-bay garage and another building next to it. Off in the distance behind the ranch house were several other homes, one a modern ranch style, and at least twenty smaller homes with another large barn and several other buildings. A plane was sitting next to one of the buildings. There was a large satellite dish on top of the garage and three huge water towers behind it.

Alicia was shocked at the scale of the ranch. She'd had no idea that Rhea's family had such an impressive place.

"August, this is beautiful."

"Thanks lassie. Let's get you into the house so you can get settled. Rhea's mom is anxious to see the two of you." August couldn't hide the hint of pride in his voice.

"Get your tail in here and get cleaned up," boomed a voice from the front porch.

Alicia watched as Rhea flew up the stairs and was enveloped in the arms of a very short, heavysset black woman. "Mommo, you look wonderful."

"Well, *you're* a mess! Let's get you inside for a hot bath and get some of this dirt off you. Where's this girl you brought home to meet me?" The woman's black eyes snapped with intelligence.

"Alicia, this Mommo. Mommo, this is Alicia Manor."

"Hello, ma'am, it's nice to meet you." Alicia smiled into the sharp black eyes that stared holes into her.

"Call me Mommo. Boy, you're a tiny one aren't you? Well, come on inside and let's get you two comfortable."

"Where's Mom?"

"She's out in the barn. She just delivered a baby."

"I'm going to take Alicia to meet her. We'll be back in just a minute to get unpacked and cleaned up." Rhea hugged the large woman again. "I'm glad to see you. I've missed you."

"Go on, go see your momma." Mommo affectionately shoved Rhea away.

Rhea grabbed Alicia's hand and pulled her toward the barn bursting through the open doors. "Mom, where are you?"

"In here, honey."

Rhea and Alicia peeked over a stall door to see a petite woman seated on the floor watching a new foal trying to stand next to his mother.

"He's beautiful, Mom."

"Yes, he is." She stood up slowly and turned to smile at her daughter and her daughter's girlfriend.

Alicia smiled back at the elegant, beautiful woman and could see the same features on her face as she had come to love on Rhea's. Her hair was still black and pinned up on top of her head in a stylish knot, her eyes large and deep brown. Her magnificently classic face lit up with a smile as she gazed up into her daughter's face. "Welcome home."

Rhea bent and hugged her mother tightly as Alicia felt her eyes fill with tears. It was obvious that mother and daughter were very close. They hugged for several long minutes before her mother stepped away from Rhea, her hands still holding her daughter's. "Introduce me to Alicia."

"Mom, this is my partner, Alicia. Alicia, this is my mom, Sophia Cameron," Rhea proudly introduced the two most important women in her life.

"It's nice to meet you, Mrs. Cameron."

"Call me Sophia, and it's my pleasure. I'm so glad to have you both here. Have you introduced her to Mommo?" Still holding one of Rhea's hands she gathered Alicia's hand in her small one as she smiled at the beautiful young woman who had captured her daughter's heart.

"Yes."

"She's been readying the top floor for the two of you for weeks. I understand you are an artist, Alicia. I can't wait to see what you do. I hope you'll find your new home comfortable."

"Your place is so beautiful, and I can't wait to see everything. I've never been on a ranch before."

"She's a city girl, Mamma," Rhea explained with a laugh.

"Well, so was I when I first came here." Sophia squeezed Alicia's hand. "You look like you can handle just about anything. Come on, and let's get you two comfortable. Your things arrived yesterday, and we put everything upstairs."

The three women climbed the front stairs and entered the spotless entryway. A huge sweeping stairway led the way up, and they climbed it together as Alicia stared at the priceless works of art that hung on the walls. They passed the second floor and proceeded to the third floor. "We have set up the whole top floor for you two. Let me know if you need anything and Mommo and I will take care of it. Why don't you both take your time getting settled? It'll be hours before we have dinner at six."

"We will, Mom, thanks."

"You're welcome. Alicia, welcome to Cameron Ranch," Sophia hugged her tightly before releasing her with a grin just like her daughter's.

"Thank you."

Rhea and Alicia walked down the hallway and entered the first open doorway. The room was huge and was divided into a large sitting area and bedroom. The bed was a large canopied version placed next to open French doors that led out to the porch overlooking the ranch. There was an immense fireplace on one wall and elegant couches and chairs placed around it in an intimate setting. The walls had a few pieces of art hanging on them and, if Alicia wasn't mistaken, one appeared to be of Flemish style. The walls were covered with subtly striped silk wallpaper and fit well with the casually elegant style of the room.

"Honey, this is beautiful!" Alicia spun around trying to take in everything at once.

"Yes, it is. According to Ted, Mom and Mommo just finished the room."

"They did this for us?"

Rhea turned to Alicia and smiled, gathering her hands in her own. "They want us to feel welcome. I hope you don't mind."

"Not at all, I love it! Show me the rest of the floor."

"I'm not sure what I'll find. This is all new." The two women ventured into the first open doorway to discover a large walk-in closet. Their clothing was already hanging in the closet and their accessories were on the shelves. Passing through the large closet, they entered an enormous bathroom that included a Jacuzzi tub and a glass-walled shower, all designed in marble. Two sinks and twin mirrors were along one wall, and over the tub was a bay window that was filled with lush green plants.

"Rhea, is this bathroom just for us?" Alicia's eyes were huge in her face.

"Yes. According to Ted, there are two more rooms up here, an office, and a room that's not decorated yet. Mom and Dad thought you might want to set up your own studio so they have left it empty except for your supplies."

Alicia dragged Rhea into the office, her eyes bugging out of her head. The office was as high tech as an office could be, with a state-of-the-art computer, fax machine, and a flat screen television. There was even a stereo system and a bank of controls that would rival the cockpit of a plane. "Oh my God, Rhea, look at this room!"

Rhea just grinned at her shocked girlfriend. Ted had shared with Rhea how much work had gone into preparing their rooms. He had explained that her

father had bullied everyone into getting everything done before the two women were scheduled to arrive. It was August's way of telling his daughter how much he loved her, and Rhea locked it in her already full heart. He would never admit it aloud, but Rhea's father had missed his only daughter terribly. He had blown up after Rhea and a neighbor girl had been found in bed together. He had demanded that she never *ever* bring up the word lesbian again, and he had forced his only daughter to leave home in order to be herself. She was now returning after years of uncomfortable visits to take her place in her family. Her father had never apologized for his behavior until now. He was doing everything he could to make Rhea and Alicia welcome, and that was better than any words he could have spoken. Acceptance for who and what she was all Rhea had ever wanted from her father.

"Rhea, honey, did you hear me?" Alicia was looking up at Rhea, concern on her face.

"I'm sorry, sweetie, what did you say?"

"I said your family must love you very much to do all this to welcome you home."

"They're doing this for both of us, Alicia. You are my family."

Alicia's eyes filled with tears as she moved into Rhea's arms. "I love you so much."

"I love you, and after we take a look at your soon-to-be-filled studio I want to take a shower with you. We have a couple of hours until dinner and I need a nap with my love."

"Hah, you don't fool me. You don't want to take a nap." Alicia laughed as she allowed Rhea to pull her down the hall.

The room designated as Alicia's studio was airy and full of light, due in part to a large skylight that had been built in. One wall had two sets of French doors that could open up to the porch and let in fresh air. Two fans hung from the ceiling sending a lazy breeze through the room. The walls had been painted a bright sunny yellow and left empty. Alicia loved the room.

"Your work bench and shelves will fit nicely in here."

"So would ten other benches. This is huge and wonderful." Alicia spun around in the room. "I love it."

"Good, next week we will get you all set up before I start working with Ted."

"Honey, you don't need to hang around while I get things together. I know you want to jump right in. It won't bother me to be left alone."

"I just want to make sure that you're comfortable." Rhea was still worried about Alicia fitting in.

"I'll be fine. Didn't you say something about a shower and a nap?" Alicia's hands circled Rhea's hips as she tilted her face up to be kissed.

Before Rhea could respond, the sound of a throat being cleared made them jump apart and turn toward the door. Mommo stood in the doorway of the room, her black eyes locked on them.

Alicia approached the woman with a smile. "Mommo, I love this room. It's perfect!"

Mommo's expression didn't change and Alicia couldn't tell if she was pleased or not. "Your things are being stored in the garage. When you're ready I'll have Abo bring them up and help you arrange things."

"Abo is here?" Rhea grinned. She and Abo had grown up together, along with Mommo's other son Edu. They had run wild over the ranch, Abo teaching her the aboriginal ways and Rhea teaching him to read and ride a horse. They had been inseparable as youngsters.

"Yes, he is a new father and is working part time at the ranch to stay near his family."

"I can't wait to see his new baby. Alicia, I told you about Abo. He has three children and is one of the leaders of the aboriginal nation. He spends part of his time in Sydney trying to get our government to recognize and value the aboriginal culture. He's done quite a bit to encourage them to preserve their history."

"I can't wait to meet him."

"You two go clean up and take a nap. Dinner is at six. I will come wake you."

"Thanks, Mommo." Rhea hugged the large woman tightly. Mommo patted Rhea's back then pulled away and moved gracefully down the hall. She moved softly on her bare feet despite her size.

"She's a beautiful woman," Alicia commented, taking Rhea's hand and following her back into their bedroom where their suitcases lay open and ready to be emptied.

"She's revered by all of the aborigines who live around here. She's known for her gift of sight."

"She can see things?"

"She can sense things that might happen. She also has the gift of healing, as did her mother and grandmother."

"What does her other son do?"

"He has taken to the old ways of the Bushman, like his father."

"What do you mean?"

"They will disappear for weeks on end, hunting and traveling in the bush, then show up like nothing has happened. They wear the traditional Bushman garb and participate in ancient ceremonies."

"Wow, I have a lot to learn," Alicia commented as she began to undress. "I want to know as much as possible about where we live."

Rhea stopped to watch her girlfriend shed her clothes and couldn't help but smile. Alicia was a constant surprise to her. She was physically beautiful, but it was her soul that Rhea found most attractive. She was as lovely on the inside as she was on the outside. She would work hard to fit in because she was naturally curious and friendly. Rhea hoped that it would be enough. She ran her hand down Alicia's naked back and pulled her gently against her. "I can't wait until after we take a shower."

Alicia's fingers went immediately to Rhea's jeans and fumbled with the zipper. "Come here, cowgirl, I can't wait either."

Rhea was unprepared for the heat that encompassed her as Alicia's fingers entered her swiftly, her jeans barely down her hips. A cry burst from her lips as Alicia's mouth covered hers in a kiss that rocked her to her toes. She was thrown instantly into an orgasm that made her go slack. The two women slid to the floor as Alicia pulled Rhea's blouse open and her hot mouth nuzzled against Rhea's breasts. Rhea could barely breathe as Alicia unfastened her bra and feasted on her nipples, while her fingers once again filled her completely.

"I want my mouth on you," Alicia gasped as she pushed Rhea's jeans further down her legs to just below her knees. She pushed on Rhea's thighs to part them and unerringly found her with her mouth.

"Jesus, Alicia, oh my..."

Alicia feasted on her until Rhea was limp and completely drained. Alicia wiped her mouth on Rhea's jeans and lay with her face on Rhea's stomach trying to catch her breath.

"I can't believe what just happened," Rhea's voice was hoarse as she lay with an arm over her eyes.

"Four times is what happened," Alicia gloated as she looked up at her overwhelmed lover.

Rhea opened her eyes and glanced down at her satisfied girlfriend and laughed. "I still have my boots on."

Alicia sat up and giggled. "Actually you still have everything on, sort of."

Rhea began to remove her twisted shirt and bra and bent to kick her boots off so that she could get out of her clothes. "I take it you like making love to a cowgirl?"

“Oh yeah, as long as that cowgirl is *you*.” Alicia fluttered her blond eyelashes at Rhea.

“Now it’s my turn,” Rhea grinned and pulled Alicia to a seat on her hips guiding her legs to either side of her.

“So what do you have in mind, cowgirl?” Alicia snaked her arms around Rhea’s neck as she straddled her. Her question was answered quickly as Rhea shoved her fingers into Alicia tightly and held her motionless against her. “Don’t move, I want you to feel me inside you and know that it is going to be only me for the rest of our lives.”

Alicia could feel her body responding to Rhea’s fingers and she wanted to move so badly. She needed to move. Her eyes locked onto Rhea’s and held her gaze as Rhea began to remove her fingers tantalizingly slowly. Again, she slid them into Alicia watching her reaction as she teased her.

“I have to move,” Alicia sighed, her body slick with welcoming moisture.

“Not yet,” Rhea whispered, her fingers soaked with Alicia’s wetness.

She stroked Alicia repeatedly until her body began to tremble and Rhea bent to kiss her. She spoke against Alicia’s mouth before sliding her tongue into her mouth with the same rhythm as her fingers. “Now you can move.”

Alicia’s body erupted as her hips pounded against Rhea’s hand until she fell limp against Rhea’s body. Rhea held her tightly as both of their hearts hammered loudly in their chests. Alicia’s lips tasted the smooth skin of Rhea’s neck as she nibbled sexy little kisses along her jaw.

“I love you, Alicia.”

“And I thought you just liked me because of the great sex.”

Rhea grinned at her lover who lay sprawled naked on top of her. “That too.”

“Good, because I kind of like having sex with you, too.”

“Can we take a shower now?”

“Yes, as long as you don’t put those cowboy boots back on. I can’t seem to control myself when you’re wearing cowboy boots.”

Rhea laughed as she helped Alicia up off the floor. They both stumbled into the bathroom and entered the large shower. The hot water and the fragrant soap slicked over their bodies proved too much for both of them, and they shared another furious bout of lovemaking in the shower stall before toweling off and climbing into bed for a nap. Just an hour is all Alicia needed to be refreshed, but Rhea had other ideas as she wooed Alicia with generous kisses and gentle touches and once again made love to her.

“I love touching you, especially right here next to your nipple. You’re so soft, and when I touch you just right I can feel you shake. When I suck on your

nipples I can tell by the sounds you make how much you like me touching you. I love the scent of you right before I taste you”

Alicia gasped as Rhea’s tongue slid against her awakening body. Arching her hips, she held Rhea’s head as she teased her. Rhea’s fingertips moved against Alicia’s clitoris squeezing and stroking until Alicia couldn’t stand it anymore.

“*Now please, honey, now.*”

Rhea smiled as she heard the urgency in Alicia’s voice. Her tongue darted inside her along with her finger and drove Alicia screaming into an orgasm. Rhea’s own body shuddered with pleasure as she held her lover until she ceased to move. She slid up to embrace Alicia as they lay quietly on the bed, recuperating.

“So, I guess a nap is out.”

“You can go to sleep. I’ll tell them you were too tired to eat.”

“Not on your life! I’m not going to miss your first dinner at home. It’s a celebration. Besides, for some reason, I’m no longer tired.” Alicia whispered as her hand moved over Rhea’s backside, spreading her legs so that Rhea’s hips were sealed against hers.

Rhea smiled at her lover as she recognized her body’s invitation. She rose up on her arms pushing her hips tight against Alicia’s until she could feel her wetness against her own body. Rolling her hips, she began to move, while Alicia’s legs hooked around her own and her hands tightened around her hips. The slap of bodies echoed in the room and Rhea reached down and hooked her arms around Alicia’s thighs pulling them up to open her even more.

Rhea moaned as they glided against one another, her sensitive mound aching for release. Once, twice their bodies met and when Rhea heard the hitch in Alicia’s breathing she held their bodies tightly together, straining for that perfect connection. The spiral of pleasure started between her legs and blossomed, causing her hips to jerk over and over against her lover’s until she was completely spent and lay gasping in Alicia’s arms. Alicia ran her hands up and down Rhea’s back as she too recovered from their lovemaking. Rhea’s fingers crept their way into Alicia’s long hair and possessively twisted in it as she fell immediately asleep. Alicia smiled into her girlfriend’s slumbering face and held her tightly, filled with love.

It had been like this between them since the first time they had made love. Intense, thrilling, and full of emotion, making love with Rhea had been incomparable. Alicia had known the instant she had met Rhea that she had fallen in love with the passionate woman. But she hadn’t known how deeply she would fill her heart until Rhea had made love to her the very first time. She just hoped



that loving her would be enough, and she let this small bit of worry enter her mind. Alicia knew nothing about Australia and ranching. She had never ridden a horse before and she was deathly afraid of snakes, two things she knew she would have to deal with. And what if Rhea's family didn't take to her? It was so important that they accept her.

## CHAPTER 7

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Alicia followed Rhea into the elegant dining room at exactly six o'clock. Alicia had worn a dress not knowing whether or not dinner was formal. She was pleased to see Sophia was also wearing a dress.

"Alicia, this is my wife, Sheri. Sheri, this is Alicia Moran."

A slender woman with short brown hair that curled appealingly around a pixie face smiled at Alicia. She was wearing a pair of slacks and matching jacket, stylish and fashionable. "Alicia welcome. It's so nice to meet you. I can't wait to see your artwork. I searched the Internet and saw some of your illustrations; they're incredible!"

"Thank you. Rhea told me you make one-of-a-kind jewelry. I'm absolutely fascinated by that kind of work. Could you show me some of yours?"

"I'd love to."

Rhea stood next to Alicia smiling. She could tell Sheri had accepted Alicia already.

"You don't look like a pregnant mother."

"Give me a hug," Sheri demanded, wrapping her arms around Rhea. "Believe me, I am. So what do you think about being aunts?"

Rhea appreciated the fact that she had included Alicia and her smile acknowledged Sheri's question. "I'll love being an aunt. How are you feeling?"

"Good most of the time. Mornings are a little difficult right now, but it's worth it."

"We're very happy for both of you."

"We're ecstatic. We'd all but given up." Sheri's eyes filled with tears as she responded. Being parents had been a dream that they had all but forgotten.

"Where are Dad and Ted?"

“There was a problem in the big barn with the shearing. They’re on their way up now.”

“They should have let me know.”

Rhea’s mom slipped her arm through her daughter’s and spoke. “Honey, you’ll have plenty of time to get involved. You just got here, and you and Alicia should take advantage of some time off. You’re going to have plenty to do very soon with shearing starting.”

“Shearing?” Alicia had no clue as to what they were talking about.

“It’s when we cut the wool off our sheep. The sheep are brought into the barns and we cut the wool off with electric shears. We then sell the wool to be cleaned and processed.”

“Do you shear your own sheep?”

“We can, but we hire temporary workers to come in and do the shearing. We have almost one hundred thousand sheep that need to be sheared,” Rhea explained.

“One hundred thousand sheep?” Alicia’s eyes were enormous.

“That’s fewer than usual. We have managers who take care of the sheep on different parts of the ranch and we stagger the shearing so that we can cover the whole ranch.”

“Wow, I can’t wait to see the whole process.”

“I’ll take you down to the barn after dinner and show you how we shear a sheep,” Rhea promised with a grin.

“Really?”

“You aren’t going to show her how bad you are at shearing,” Ted teased as he entered the dining room with his dad. “Rhea’s first sheared sheep looked like a punk rocker.”

“I can still shear one faster than you can,” Rhea boasted.

“And I can still beat the two of you,” August stated as he bent to kiss his wife. She looked so tiny standing next to her tall husband, and her eyes glowed when she looked up at him. “Sorry, we’re late.”

“Dinner is just being served. Let me go tell Mommo.”

“I can do it, Mom.” Ted hugged his wife and then popped into the kitchen while the rest of them were ushered to their seats by Sophia.

“Sit, sit.” Mommo shoved Ted out of the kitchen as she carried a platter of meat to the table. “Behave yourself.”

Ted grinned at her as he sat down next to his wife. “I always behave myself.”

The snort from Sheri and Rhea was enough to make Alicia burst out laughing. This was a family that knew how to enjoy life. Rhea reached down, interlaced her fingers with Alicia's and squeezed. "Welcome to the family."

The dinner was delicious and the conversation stimulating. They talked for over two hours. Sheri was very interested in San Francisco and Ted shared funny stories of their growing up. Rhea shared a few of her own, and Alicia found herself relaxing and enjoying herself immensely. She helped Rhea clear the table and as she passed through the door into the kitchen Mommo met them with a hard stare.

"Do I look like I need help?"

"No Mommo, but Alicia and I wanted to tell you what a wonderful dinner that was." Rhea knew Mommo well.

"It was delicious." Alicia was smart enough to recognize the look Mommo gave them.

"If I need your help, I'll ask." She began to clean up the remaining dishes in the already spotless kitchen.

"Mommo, I missed you so much." Rhea hugged the large woman, grinning the whole time.

"Mommo missed you, too—now get out of my kitchen."

Rhea pulled Alicia out the back door but not before Alicia saw the hint of a smile on Mommo's face. "She loves you."

"I love her. She's never once said anything about my being a lesbian and she knew before anyone."

"Your mom and dad are going out of their way to make us feel welcome."

"They are, and I appreciate it very much. But it still stings when I think of my dad telling me to leave his house."

"Honey, parents don't always react very well to finding out they have a homosexual child. It doesn't mean they don't love you."

"I know. I love you, Alicia." Rhea smiled and hugged her diminutive partner.

"You know what, cowgirl? I love you. Now, are you going to show me how to shear a sheep or what?"

Rhea laughed and pulled her girlfriend toward the garage. "We're going to have to drive to the barn. It's a little too far to walk with you in a dress."

Rhea headed for a small jeep and climbed into it. The keys were hanging in the ignition. Alicia climbed into the passenger seat, and Rhea started the jeep and backed it out of the garage. She chatted to Alicia all the way to the barn, pointing out Ted and Sheri's home and Mommo and Abo's. She explained that

most of the cabins were the homes of several aboriginal families that had worked for her father for many years. Most of the other ranch hands had homes somewhere on the ranch. Her father allowed them to farm small parcels of land and build houses for their families. The shearers were temporary workers that put up tents while they worked at the ranch.

"How many people are currently on the ranch?"

"Not counting the temporary workers, around seven hundred people; there are probably five hundred temporary shearers."

"Wow! And you're one of the bosses!"

"Yes, I am, and if you sleep with me I can guarantee certain favors."

"I already sleep with you," Alicia giggled "But I'd love to hear more about these favors."

"I'll tell you later," Rhea promised with a lift of her eyebrow. "Come on. Let's go look at your first sheep."

"Rhea, do they bite?" Alicia asked, her voice wavering, a look of fright on her face.

Rhea laughed and was still laughing as she led the way into the massive barn. There were hundreds of people working, and the barn was full of smells and sounds foreign to Alicia. Rhea reassured her that the sheep weren't hurt as they were placed into a restraint that held them securely for the shearing, even though they cried mournfully. Alicia watched fascinated as the sheep were rapidly stripped of their wool and were moved out of the device and replaced with another sheep. The speed at which the workers moved was impressive.

"How long will they work?"

"They'll continue in shifts until all of the sheep in this part of the ranch are sheared. Then they'll move on to another location."

"Can you do that?"

One of the men shearing heard Alicia's question and stood up when he finished his sheep. "Rhea, show her how it's done." Rhea shook his hand smiling in greeting.

"Is that you, Raoul? How is your family?"

"Good, my Gina is going to college to be a vet."

"Congratulations! Is your wife with you?"

"No, she stayed home this time." The man was small and wiry, his hair dark and long, pulled back into a ponytail. He looked like a Gypsy. Many of the transient workers were of different nationalities that had gravitated to Australia. Raoul was exactly what he looked like, a Gypsy. "So are you going to show this gorgeous woman how bad you are at shearing?"

Alicia could see the teasing glint in the man's eye. Rhea laughed and hugged him before turning to Alicia. "Alicia, this is Raoul Baptiste. Raoul, this is my partner, Alicia Manor. Raoul taught me everything I know about shearing sheep. He's the best."

"Ah, she boasts. I didn't teach her *everything* I know," Raoul grinned at Alicia.

"I'll show you. Do you have another apron?"

Within minutes Rhea was seated on a stool, a long apron covering her clothes. She winked at Alicia who stood next to Raoul watching.

"Okay, get a stopwatch ready. I believe the record for shearing a single sheep is a minute and ten seconds."

A sheep was led into the rack system in front of Rhea and she waited for Raoul to give her the nod. A crowd started to congregate around the three of them as Rhea's face grew serious. Alicia's heart started to pound as she stared at her girlfriend. "Go!"

Rhea's head bent to her work, and the electric shears moved over the body of the sheep faster than Alicia could believe. The wool fell in rolls to the ground as the crowd began to whistle.

"Thirty seconds!"

Rhea's face was glistening with sweat, her arms ropy with muscles as she moved the sheep around in the racking.

"Forty-five seconds!"

Alicia felt warmth spreading through her body as she stared at her lover. Who would have known how sexy sheep shearing could be? She couldn't wait to get her hands on Rhea's body. The crowd began to chant as Rhea came closer to finishing the shearing.

"One minute!"

Rhea grunted and finished the sheep, throwing her hands in the air. "One minute and fifteen seconds! Close, but the record still stands." Raoul grinned as Rhea released the sheep to a waiting man.

"Damn, I'm out of practice."

"You did well for someone who's gotten soft," Raoul commented as he stepped up to the rack. "Watch a master at work."

Raoul had the sheep sheared in one minute flat accompanied by cheers from the watching crowd. He grinned as another sheep was placed in the rack. "I need to work. Go on and get out of here."

Rhea waved her hand at him and tugged Alicia out of the barn, tossing the apron to one of the other workers. "What did you think of your first glimpse of sheep shearing?"

Rhea climbed into the jeep and waited for Alicia to respond. Alicia's glittering eyes locked on to Rhea's, and there was no mistaking the look. "How long before you can get us back home?"

"Ten minutes."

"Good, hurry," Alicia's voice was low, her response almost a growl.

Neither woman said a word on the short drive home nor did they touch until they made it to the sanctuary of their bedroom. The door had barely shut before Alicia launched herself at Rhea. "Honey, I need to wash my hands before I touch you."

"God, Rhea, you looked so sexy sitting there." Alicia kissed her as she walked her backwards into the bathroom. "How fast can you get out of your clothes?"

Alicia turned the shower on and dropped her dress to the floor. Rhea watched as she slowly removed her bra and panties and stepped into the shower. Rhea's clothes rapidly hit the floor as she stepped in behind her girlfriend and slipped her hands around her.

"What took you so long?" Alicia asked turning around to face Rhea as their bodies glided against each another.

Their lovemaking in the shower was rapid and consuming. It continued into the bedroom where the two women loved each other thoroughly before falling asleep in each other's arms. Rhea was the last to close her eyes as she watched Alicia sleeping next to her. It was moments like this when Rhea found herself thanking God for bringing Alicia into her life. Alicia's fingers were wrapped around Rhea's wrist, something she did only when she was sound asleep. It was one of Alicia's most endearing traits. Rhea fell asleep watching her lover, her heart full, and her life just about perfect.

## CHAPTER 8

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The following week Alicia spent most of her time setting up and arranging her studio. Rhea and Ted made a tour of the ranch, reacquainting her with everything that was going on. She spent long hours traveling by jeep or by horse arriving back home well after dinnertime. She would get cleaned up and spend the rest of the evening sharing with Alicia what she had seen that day. Alicia had brought many books about Australia and she read them from cover to cover. She would pepper Rhea with questions about everything she read. Then they would crawl into bed and make love before drifting into sleep, safely locked in each other's arms.

One week grew into two, and two grew into four as Rhea settled into working with Ted. Her hours weren't quite so long except for an occasional overnight trip to the bush. She finally convinced Alicia to accompany her and Ted on an overnight excursion to the far side of the ranch. They left early one Thursday morning before the sun came up and, for the first time in Alicia's life, she rode a horse further than a short distance. He was a gentle old plodder that made it easy for Alicia to lose her fear. She'd been practicing riding in the corral for weeks with Sophia's help in order to be able to make the trip.

"We're going to head out to the north just past Tambo. We have around thirty thousand sheep in that area that we need to check on. We're also going to test some of the wells on the way up."

"Why don't you drive or fly?"

"There are no real roads out there, and we couldn't land the plane close enough. Now, do you remember all the rules we went over?"



"I'm not supposed to go up to any animal I see. I'm to pay attention to the ground around me and watch for snakes, and I'm not to wander off by myself," Alicia recited as she gazed up at her lover.

"Excellent," Rhea responded with a smile, "but you forgot the most important rule."

"What?"

"To have fun!"

Alicia grimaced at her as she bounced along on top of her saddle. She was going to enjoy herself, but the thought of running into a snake still scared the willies out of her. She followed Rhea and Ted, while two other men followed behind her. She felt pretty safe, since everyone but she was armed. Alicia had promised Rhea she would learn to handle a gun and had spent one afternoon shooting at tin cans to no avail. She had missed every damn one of them. She didn't seem to have any skill when it came to firing a gun.

By late afternoon, Alicia was losing feeling in her rear end, and she was bruised from hours of riding a horse. She didn't want to complain, but if they didn't stop soon she was going to cry.

"I think we can stop here for the night. The sheep are just over the rise. We can set up camp and then head over to check on things. I don't want to be too close to them or the water hole," Ted explained as he swung off his horse and began to unload his pack. Alicia was so thrilled she almost fell off her horse.

"I'll get the fire started for dinner," Rhea volunteered.

"What can I do?" Alicia asked as she painfully slid from her saddle.

Rhea grinned at her as she watched. "Are you okay?"

"I will be now that I'm off that horse!" Alicia massaged her aching muscles. "What can I do?"

"You can take everything out of our packs. We have bedrolls to put out and food to cook before it gets dark."

By nightfall, the group had shared a meal of canned beans and muffins that one of the men had cooked over the campfire. Alicia was so hungry she would have eaten anything. Most of the day she had munched on trail mix and jerky, drinking water as often as possible. It was amazing how quickly the sun had set and the ninety-degree heat of the day turned to cold. Rhea had warned her that it could get close to freezing when the sun went down. She slipped her heavy duster back on for warmth as they all began to roll their bedrolls out. They had checked four wells and tested the water at each one. They had the sheep to check in the morning and two more wells to test before heading back.

"Honey, I've got some warm water here for us to wash with."

Alicia rinsed her face and hands removing as much dust and grime as she could. Her body ached so badly from the abuse it had taken from hours in the saddle that she really didn't care how dirty she was. She and Rhea had placed their bedrolls next to each other, and Alicia was sure they weren't going to get much closer than the couple of inches between the bedrolls. She watched as Rhea washed up and felt the familiar warmth spread through her body. Every day she learned something new about Rhea. She was so competent on the ranch, working just as hard as anyone else. She had lost weight after a month of work, her body stronger and slimmer than when she arrived. Alicia fell in love with her over and over again as she watched her relax and settle into her life on the ranch.

Alicia was blossoming in her new home as well. She had tapped into a creative flow that had her working in the studio for long hours. August would come up once a week to poke his head in and see what she was working on. He'd already asked to purchase one of her newer illustrations. She was working on a collection of colorful works that portrayed life on a ranch, and she had captured sheep shearing, horse birthing, chicken feeding, and a great deal more that comprised the everyday business of an Australian sheep ranch. She'd also connected with the spirit of the aborigine people. She had completed an illustration of Mommo that depicted her as regally as a queen while she shelled peas on the stifling back veranda. It was that picture that had locked Alicia inside Mommo's heart.

They spent every morning in the kitchen after Rhea and August left, drinking tea and visiting. Mommo shared with Alicia the life and culture of her people, and Alicia showed her enormous respect by recording it in her artwork. They had an immediate and emotional connection. Momma had adopted Alicia as one of her own, and Alicia had returned that love.

Two days a week Alicia would spend most of the day with Sophia and her Arabians. Alicia wasn't afraid of the foals, and they loved to play with her as she talked to them and plied them with apples. Sophia had plans for Alicia and one of the foals and, as she watched Alicia's rapport with the young horses grow, she knew she was right. She was going to turn one of the new foals over to Alicia and show her how to train it. Alicia had an affinity with the young horses that Sophia recognized and valued.

Alicia sighed as she waited for Rhea to finish washing. She loved her new home and her life with Rhea. Everything seemed to fit like the pieces of a well-constructed jigsaw puzzle, and she felt like she was a part of the large and loving Cameron family.

“Honey, are you okay?” Rhea whispered as she sat down on her bedroll.

“I’m fine.”

“Why the serious face?”

“I was just thinking how perfect my life has become,” Alicia shared with a gentle smile for her girlfriend. “I love living at the ranch with you and your family. I love you, Rhea.”

Rhea looked over at her girlfriend, smiling back at her. “I’m so glad you like it here. I love you and if you hadn’t been happy living here I told Ted we wouldn’t stay.”

“I want to stay, honey. I want to spend the rest of our life together here.”

“So, will you marry me?”

“Marry you?” Alicia’s heart was in her throat.

“Yes, I want a commitment ceremony with my family and their friends. I want to stand up in front of all of them and tell them how much I love and respect you.” Rhea’s eyes were shiny with emotion as she enfolded Alicia’s hand in her own.

“Yes, Rhea, I will marry you.” Alicia’s eyes filled with tears as she stared at her girlfriend, emotion overflowing her heart.

“I know my timing isn’t very good since we’re sharing a campfire with three others, but I love you, sweetie.”

“Do you think we can sneak a kiss without anyone knowing?”

“I can do better than that,” Rhea promised with a grin.

And Rhea made good on her promise as she snuggled up to Alicia in the dark and teased her into a quiet orgasm that made Alicia melt. She drifted off to sleep still holding tightly to Rhea’s wrist, and even the howls of the dingoes didn’t scare her. As long as Rhea was there she felt safe and loved.

## CHAPTER 9

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The five returned from their overnight trip in the bush, and work around the ranch continued. Alicia was very pleased with her artwork and she spent hours working in her studio. One morning Mommo entered the studio and stood watching Alicia work.

“Hi, Mommo, would you like a chair?”

“Alicia, you do beautiful pictures up here.” Mommo’s piercing eyes missed nothing.

“Thank you, I love the ranch. It has so many wonderful and interesting things that I love to draw.”

“You were meant to be here with Rhea.”

“I think so.”

“Would you like to go with me to a ceremony with other women of my tribe? We would leave this afternoon and we will be back tomorrow afternoon.”

“I’d love to. What do I need to wear and what should I bring?” Alicia didn’t think twice about going. She trusted Mommo completely. She was family.

“Dress for the bush. We’ll leave in an hour.”

Alicia watched as Mommo left her studio before she cleaned up her desk. She needed to let Rhea know where she was going. Rhea was up in the plane with August doing a flyover of the ranch. She would have to call her on the radio.

“Rhea, this is Alicia, over.”

“Alicia, is everything okay? Over.”

“Yes, I’m going with Mommo out into the bush for a night. I’ll be back tomorrow afternoon. Over.”

“Okay honey, have fun. Love you. Over.”

“Love you. Over.”

Rhea began to laugh as she signed off the radio. Her father sat in the seat next to her and turned to her with a puzzled look on his face. “What’s so funny?”

“Alicia is going out in the bush with Mommo.”

August face exploded with a big smile. “That is quite an honor for Alicia. Mommo doesn’t take just anyone out into the bush.”

“I know. It took me years to convince her to take me.”

“Your mother wasn’t invited until she’d been living here for over four years.”

“Mommo likes Alicia.”

“Mommo *loves* Alicia. Besides, what’s not to love? She’s a sweetheart.”

“I’m glad you like her. Dad, I want to have a commitment ceremony with Alicia here at the ranch. I know you don’t accept my relationship, but it would be important to the two of us that you and Mom let us get married here.”

“Rhea, I admit I don’t understand your lifestyle that well, but I love you and I love Alicia. If getting married here on the ranch is what the two of you want, your mother and I will do everything we can to make it happen.”

“Thanks, Dad. I love you.”

“I love you, little girl. You and Ted are doing a great job with the ranch, and your mom and I are looking forward to taking a vacation after the holidays.”

Rhea’s eyes filled with tears as she reacted to her father’s words. They had become very close since her return to the ranch. Not only was he more affectionate with both his children, but hugging and kissing were becoming as natural as breathing to August.

Alicia and Mommo left an hour later with Abo driving them in a beat up old pickup. Alicia wasn’t sure what direction they were headed, but she trusted Mommo and sat back to enjoy the adventure. Five hours later, Alicia was no longer wearing jeans and a shirt. She had been presented with a traditional dress, her hair braided and decorated with beads and feathers. She ate whatever was handed to her, including what looked like large worms, and drank something that tasted like bad beer. It had taken every bit of courage Alicia could muster, but it was important that she honor the aboriginal ways. After dancing with the other women she was escorted to where Mommo was seated with several of the elder women.

“Alicia, we would like to record your addition to our family by placing a tattoo on your body. You can choose the location, and the elder women will do the work.”

Alicia smiled at the revered woman and nodded her head. "I would be honored."

Alicia was painfully tattooed for almost an hour and then she danced until the early morning before falling asleep in one of the huts. Mommo woke her early the next day, and Abo was waiting to return them to the ranch. Hours later, Alicia, still wearing her dress, her hair braided and decorated, walked into the quiet house and headed upstairs. Sophia came out of her room on the second floor and met her on the stairs.

"Alicia, how did you like the ceremony?"

"It was incredible," Alicia's eyes were full of emotion.

"Were you honored with a tattoo?"

"Yes, I was. It's amazing how beautiful and spiritual it all was. Celebrating womanhood is so special."

"It is indeed. You must be tired after your night."

"I'm not, I'm energized. Did you go through the ceremony?"

"I did, years ago."

"Where did you get your tattoo?"

Sophia grinned and tapped her right breast. "August thinks it's sexy."

"Mine's on my right hip."

"Why don't you go take a nap and then I have a project I want to talk to you about."

"I'll go change and be right down. I don't need a nap, really."

"Then meet me in the barn when you have changed. Rhea and August will be back around seven. They're picking up some supplies for a barbeque next weekend. August wants to have a party."

"I'll be there in twenty minutes."

## CHAPTER 10

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“Sophia, where are you?” Alicia called out in the barn.

“I’m out in the corral.”

Alicia entered the corral to find Sophia with a rope around the neck of one of the young foals. He was cantering around the space playing with the rope. Alicia leaned on the fence and watched as the playful colt ran around Sophia. She was amazed at how slender the legs were on the young horses. They were so elegantly beautiful.

“Alicia, come over here, please.”

“Sure.” Alicia approached Sophia in the center of the paddock.

“I want you to take this rope and lead the colt around the corral. If he changes direction, force him to go in the direction you want.”

“Okay.” Alicia took the rope and moved with the colt as he scampered around the yard.

“Keep him moving in the same direction. Talk to him.”

Alicia began speaking to the horse in a soft, gentle voice, calling him honey as he started to fight the rope. She kept tugging on it and made the pony continue his circles, her quiet voice commanding the young horse’s attention.

“Now, I want you to stop and say, ‘Whoa.’ Every time he stops I want you to praise him and rub his nose or his back. He needs to learn how to follow your voice commands.”

“I’ll try.” Alicia worked for forty minutes with the colt and was completely amazed that the colt was stopping at her command. He was listening to her and following her direction.

"I think that's enough for today. Why don't you take him back to his stall with his mother? And you might want to run a brush over his coat. He likes to be curried."

"Okay. Come on, gorgeous, let's go find your mamma. You were a good boy today." Alicia nuzzled the colt as she led him into the barn and spent twenty minutes brushing him before putting him back in his stall. She hugged him tightly before closing the stall door and Sophia smiled to herself as she watched Alicia. She had good instincts when it came to horses and people. Alicia was a natural when it came to the colt. Sophia made up her mind quickly.

"Alicia, did you like working with the colt?" Sophia asked as Alicia met her coming out of the barn.

"I did. He's a sweetheart."

"I would like to give him to you and teach you how to train him."

"Give me a horse? Why would you do that? He's a very valuable animal." Alicia stopped abruptly, shock registered on her face.

"Yes, he is and he's yours. I'll help you train him. We'll work with him every other day for a couple of hours until he gets a little older and then we'll have to put in more time."

"But I don't know anything about horses," protested Alicia.

"You know enough to give them affection and love and that's what youngsters need. Once he trusts you, training will be simple."

"I don't know what to say." Alicia felt tears fill her eyes.

"*Thanks* works," Sophia grasped Alicia's hand.

"Sophia, I'm honored. I don't know how I can thank you enough." Alicia threw her arms around Sophia, hugging her closely.

"Honey, you're a part of our family. You don't have to say another word. We love you."

Alicia wept silently as Sophia held her securely in her arms. She had always wanted another daughter, and Alicia was as much her daughter as Sheri and Rhea. "Come on. Let's go get a bite to eat. It's almost five and since August and Rhea won't be here for dinner we can eat early. It will bug the hell out of Mommo if we eat in the kitchen with her."

Alicia started to laugh as Sophia tucked her arm in Alicia's and walked back to the house. "You just love doing something that no one expects."

Sophia grinned mischievously at her. "It keeps everybody on their toes."

"Yes, it does."

"I have another favor to ask of you."

"Sure."



"I would like you to have a showing of all the illustrations that you've done since you arrived in Australia. The Chamber of Commerce in Sydney is interested in artwork of the bush and ranch life in Australia. I've told them about your work and they're interested in showing it during the October city celebration."

"Wow! Why would they be interested in *my* work?"

"Because I told them it accurately portrays the Australian way of life."

"You must have a lot of influence."

Sophia chuckled. "I do. So, what do you say? Are you interested?"

"Hell, yes!" Alicia bubbled over with excitement.

"Good. We'll talk more about it later. I don't know about you, but I'm starving."

"So am I." Alicia was also a little overwhelmed at everything that had happened in the last couple of days. She was very emotional and needed to see Rhea.

"You might want to put an ice bag on your tattoo tonight. It's going to hurt like hell."

"It already does."

"Take some ice out of the freezer when Mommo's not looking and she'll never know." Sophia grinned as they entered the back door in to the kitchen.

## CHAPTER 11

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“Honey, let’s get you into bed.” Rhea bent over and touched Alicia’s face softly. She was sound asleep on the couch. She looked so beautiful and so perfect, Rhea hated to disturb her.

“Hi, baby, I waited up for you. I must’ve fallen asleep.” Alicia’s eyes were heavy lidded as she slowly sat up.

“It’s late, sweetie. It’s after eleven. We were held up at the cargo office.” Rhea sat down next to Alicia.

“You must be exhausted.”

“I am. I thought I would take a quick shower and drag myself into bed. Why don’t you go get in bed and I’ll meet you there?”

Rhea stood up and Alicia’s eyes traced her slim body, sheathed in well-worn jeans. “You are so sexy. I missed you last night.”

“How was the ceremony?”

“Beautiful and moving.”

“Where did you get your tattoo?” Rhea grinned. Alicia had already seen hers. It was on her left shoulder.

“On my hip, right here.” Alicia’s finger touched her right hip. “Want to see it?”

Rhea’s eyes lit up as she watched her girlfriend pull her nightgown up over her head until she stood nude in front of her. Rhea groaned appreciatively as she gazed at her gorgeous girlfriend. The tattoo stood out on her hip against the pale skin. The fact that Alicia had not questioned going off with Mommo and that she had fully participated in the sacred ceremony was terribly meaningful to Rhea. She dropped to her knees in front of Alicia and kissed the tender skin before nuzzling her lips against the very center of Alicia. Alicia’s

fingers clasped Rhea's head as Rhea stroked her tongue against Alicia's wet center. Alicia's head fell back as Rhea's fingers moved deep inside her and paralyzed her with pleasure.

"Oh, my God..." Alicia slid to the carpet as she shivered into an orgasm. Rhea's tongue continued to probe Alicia until she exploded again and trembled in ecstasy.

"I love you, Alicia, more and more every day. My life would be so empty without you in it. I will need you for the rest of my life."

"I need you, too. I love you, Rhea. You are my heart."

"Will you marry me?"

"I already said yes with all my heart."

"I asked my dad tonight if we could have a commitment ceremony here at the ranch and he said he and Mom would be honored." Rhea began to weep softly. "I thought we could be married this fall."

Alicia rolled to her knees bringing Rhea up with her. They knelt face to face, and she placed her hands on Rhea's tear streaked face. "I'll marry you in the fall in front of your family, and I will love you for the rest of your life and longer."

Slowly Alicia unbuttoned Rhea's shirt, lowered it from her shoulders and dropped it to the floor. She then removed her bra and stood up bringing Rhea to her feet next to her. Silently she smiled at her lover as she unzipped her jeans and pulled them down her muscular legs removing them and her socks. Rhea stood in front of her majestically, completely naked and striking in her beauty.

"You are so damn beautiful." Alicia ran her hands up Rhea's ribs and cupped her breasts, teasing her nipples with her thumbs. Her mouth bent and covered one nipple drawing it into her hot mouth. While Alicia's mouth teased Rhea's breasts her hands stroked her thighs and buttocks until Rhea was shaking in anticipation.

Her hand cupped Rhea, and her sensuous touch made Rhea cry out against Alicia's shoulder. The feel of her skin sliding against Rhea's was electrifying. Her fingers barely touched Rhea's moist center, but it was enough to trigger an explosion of heat and pleasure so intense that Rhea's knees buckled. Alicia's mouth covered Rhea's in a kiss so full of passion and love it shook both of them to their cores.

The two women descended slowly to the floor, arms around each other, faces touching as they tried to calm their wildly racing hearts. It was several long minutes before Alicia stood up and held out her hand to Rhea. Rhea joined her and kissed Alicia's fingers before following her to the bed. They settled under the covers and clasped each other gently as they closed their eyes

and drifted off to sleep. Both women slept heavily through the night, exhausted and comfortable, sated with love.

## CHAPTER 12

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“Come on, Alicia. You look perfect.” Alicia was looking at herself in the mirror having changed her outfit for the third time.

“I have to look perfect. These are your parents’ friends and neighbors.” Alicia had been nervous all day anticipating the barbeque that evening.

“Honey, you could wear nothing and you would be perfect.”

Alicia’s exasperated look was enough to wipe the smile off Rhea’s face. She had no trouble choosing a pair of clean jeans, a bright red blouse, and her favorite cowboy boots. Her hair was tied back in a youthful ponytail. Alicia decided upon a long dress, bright yellow in color, with a pair of leather boots and her choice of distinctive scarves around her waist. She had pinned her hair up on her head in a loose jumble of curls that Rhea longed to run her fingers through. She’d been warned twice not to touch Alicia’s hair. She looked incredibly appealing and beautiful.

“I mean it, sweetie, you look absolutely fantastic, but if we don’t go downstairs now, Dad’s going to come drag us out.”

“Okay.” Alicia looked once more and sighed. She wanted the night to be perfect.

The two women reached the foot of the stairs in time to meet Ted and Sheri coming in the front door. Ted was dressed in his usual jeans but wore a dressy, western style shirt in honor of the event. Sheri wore a leather slit skirt and vest, looking every bit the rancher’s wife.

“Alicia, you look gorgeous,” Sheri commented as she hugged her. She could tell by Alicia’s face how nervous she was and she hadn’t forgotten the first party she had attended with Ted.

“Thanks, I like your outfit.”

"It's perfect for dancing. I'm going to make Ted dance with me all night."

Ted rolled his eyes and groaned as Rhea poked him in the ribs. "Better you than me, Sheri. Ted's always been a rotten dancer."

"No worse than you."

"Children, children behave." Sophia came out of the living room with August. "You'd think we raised hooligans, Aug."

"We did." August looked stately in a pair of dark grey slacks and white shirt, his cowboy boots polished to a sheen. Sophia was wearing a long dress that flowed around her, a bright shimmering blue swirl, her leather boots brown and stylish. "Let's go greet the guests."

The six of them exited the house, and Alicia gasped when she saw the crowd of people milling about in the yard. Huge tents and been put up along with many tables, and a wooden platform had been erected for dancing. Three large barbecues had been rolled out and were smoking away with slabs of meat on them. Everywhere there were tubs filled with ice, beer, pop, and water, and kids were laughing and darting merrily through the crowd.

"How many people are here?"

"Let's see, probably close to two hundred. Not everyone has arrived yet. It takes awhile to get here." August surveyed the crowd as the party ambled over to the tent area.

"Where are they all from?"

"Most of the people work on the ranch, some are from neighboring ranches."

Alicia barely had a chance to speak as she was introduced to no less than fifty people before they made it to the tent. Her mind was swimming with names and faces as she smiled and responded. Rhea seemed to know everyone and dispensed hugs and handshakes to all. She was handed a newborn baby to hold for a moment. Thankfully, Sheri stayed by Alicia's side so that she didn't get completely overwhelmed. Everyone wanted to meet Alicia and for some reason she was inundated with nerves.

"Sheri, I'll never remember all their names," she whispered as another crowd introduced themselves to her.

"Honey, don't worry about it. You'll get to know them. Relax and have some fun. Let's get something to drink and make Ted dance with us."

The band had started to play lively country music and the platform filled immediately with dancers. August and Sophia were dancing the two-step along with several other couples.

"Sheri, I don't know how to dance like that."

“Don’t worry, you’ll learn.”

“But...”

“Alicia, you’re a member of this family. We love you whether you can dance or not. Come on.”

That was the last time Alicia worried about anything. She was whirled and twirled on the dance floor by August, Ted, and many other men that worked on the ranch. She and Rhea ate plates of ribs, corn, and huge helpings of potato salad before dancing some more. Her sides hurt from laughing, and she relaxed and enjoyed herself completely. Her natural friendliness and personality sparkled as she began to feel a part of the crowd. It didn’t matter that she couldn’t remember everyone’s names. They just reintroduced themselves and then swung her around the dance floor again.

Even Mommo stood swaying to the music, as she watched the dancers. She refused to get out on the dance floor but she obviously enjoyed the music because her bare feet tapped in the dirt, her skirt moving back and forth rhythmically. Alicia finally took a break and stood next to her watching the dancers, while Rhea went to get more ice. It was four in the afternoon, and the barbeque had been going on for three hours, but Alicia needed a rest from the festivities. She slid her arm around Mommo’s ample waist and was content to stand and observe.

Rhea stepped through the barn door and went to the large ice bin. She would grab a few bags and make sure they had enough to fill the ice buckets.

“Well, well, the prodigal daughter returns to the ranch.”

Rhea froze. She knew *that* voice very well. She turned and stared at the woman she hadn’t seen for so many years—one she knew very well.

“Leann, how are you?”

“I’m just fine, and from what I can see you are just as gorgeous as ever.”

Leann was a tall, well-built redhead, with a huge appetite for women. She was the daughter of a neighboring rancher and the girl that Rhea had fallen in love with while preparing to attend college in Sydney. It was Leann who had seduced Rhea one weekend during a similar party at her father’s ranch, and Rhea had fallen in love for the very first time. There was only one problem: Leann had been engaged to be married. Throughout the summer they made love often, stealing off into the brush away from prying eyes whenever they could.

It was Leann who had snuck into Rhea’s room one hot night and that had been caught by Sophia early that morning, naked and asleep, wrapped around one another. The only person in Rhea’s life who knew about her attraction to

women was Mommo. She had accepted Rhea without question but had kept the information to herself. Neither of Rhea's parents had a clue until that moment. In one night Rhea's life had changed dramatically. August had been furious and had given Rhea an ultimatum: *Give up Leann or leave*. Rhea couldn't give up her first love and she had screamed at her father until there was nothing more to say.

She left the very next day expecting Leann to join her in Sydney as they had hastily planned. Leann had other ideas and she kept making excuses to Rhea until she finally admitted she would not be moving to Sydney. She was going to be married by the end of the summer to a wealthy rancher in the area. Rhea had been devastated. Not only had Leann broken her heart, but also Rhea no longer spoke to her father, and her relationship with her mother was fragile. It had taken many months before Rhea had stopped grieving over the loss of her first love, and she had never stopped grieving for the loss of her family.

Rhea sighed as she stared at Leann. She was still very beautiful, dressed in faded jeans and a green silk shirt tucked in to show off her small waist and exceptional cleavage. She had long legs that stayed in shape because she was a championship horse jumper. "You look great, Leann. How are you?"

"Good—divorced and wealthy. How about you? I heard you brought a cute little city girl back with you." Leann sauntered over to Rhea, her green eyes flashing as she flirted boldly.

"Alicia Manor is my partner."

"Alicia, what a sweet little name. I saw her dancing. She's a tiny thing, isn't she?"

"She's a smart, talented artist." Rhea didn't like the way Leann talked about Alicia.

"Whoa, a little protective aren't you? Do you still like to fuck in the barn?" Leann moved to within inches of Rhea. "Do you remember how you used to get so hot you couldn't wait for me to fuck you? I've never been with a woman who liked it as much as you did. I miss that."

"I'm sure you've had many opportunities." Rhea backed away from her.

"But I remember you so fondly. I wouldn't mind getting my fingers inside you again."

Rhea couldn't prevent the rush of heat, but she also felt disgust well up inside her. "Shut up, Leann. I'm not interested."

"Your flushed face tells me you are." Leann insinuated her body against Rhea's in invitation. "Come on, lover, who'd have to know?"



"I'm *not* interested." Rhea pushed Leann away and stalked out of the barn, the ice forgotten.

Alicia saw Rhea exit the barn, her face flushed, and then she saw the tall, redhead slip out behind her. She didn't know what to think as Rhea approached her obviously upset.

"Honey, what's going on?"

"Nothing, sweetie," Rhea smiled weakly, trying to ignore the anger that just waited to explode.

"Who was that woman you were talking to?"

Rhea looked at Alicia and sighed loudly. She would have to explain who Leann was sooner or later. "Come on, honey. Let's go find a table. I need to talk to you."

Alicia and Rhea found a relatively quiet spot and sat down. Alicia watched Rhea carefully as she waited for her to speak. "Alicia, I told you about my first lover, the one that Mom found me with?"

"Yes, it was when your dad kicked you out."

"She's here. Her name is Leann."

"The redhead that was in the barn with you?"

"Yes." Alicia waited for Rhea to volunteer more. "She lives on her father's ranch about four hours away. I just wanted you to know she was here."

Alicia pressed Rhea's hand. "Did it hurt to see her?"

Rhea's eyes filled with tears as she registered what Alicia had said. "Oh honey, I love you. And no, it didn't hurt me at all. She pissed me off."

"Why?"

"Because..."

"She wanted to sleep with you," Alicia spoke softly, her eyes locked on Rhea's face.

"How do you do that?" Rhea snorted as she fidgeted next to her lover.

Alicia smiled up at her. "She'd be nuts not to want to sleep with you, you're sexy as hell."

Rhea dropped her forehead against Alicia's and laughed. "Thank you."

"For what?"

"For being you."

"Honey, I said she'd be nuts for not wanting to sleep with you but I will shoot her if she tries again," Alicia promised with a wry smile.

"You can't even hit a bale of hay," Rhea laughed as she hugged her.

"Motivation, honey; given the right motivation I could do anything."

Rhea's heart filled with emotion as she stood up and pulled Alicia out of her chair. "Come on, let's go dance."

For the next hour, thoughts of Leann completely disappeared from both Rhea and Alicia's minds as they gave themselves up to the laughter and the music. Darkness had fallen and the dancing had begun anew when Alicia found herself face to face with Leann as she was coming from the house.

"Well, hello." Leann allowed her eyes to travel over the Alicia's trim figure. Leann had to admit she was one desirable woman.

"Hello," Alicia's tone was cold, her face devoid of all emotion.

"I'm Leann."

"I know who you are." Alicia couldn't find it in herself to be polite.

"So you know I was the woman to bring Rhea out," Leann boasted, watching the impression her words had on Alicia.

"I know you were the woman that broke Rhea's heart and almost destroyed her relationship with her family." Alicia spat out the words.

"You wouldn't be here if she hadn't left," Leann responded smugly.

"You're right about that."

"You know, people are taking bets as to how long you will last here. You can't ride, you know nothing about ranching, and you're scared of everything. My money is on less than six months."

"I'm not going anywhere." Alicia couldn't help but smile. Leann didn't know who she was dealing with. "I'll have to place my own bet."

"She's just infatuated with you. It'll wear off when she sees how out of place you are here."

"I don't need to discuss our relationship with you."

"I'll have her in my bed within a month."

"You have no respect for Rhea, do you?" Alicia angrily shoved past Leann. "She wouldn't sleep with you even if she wasn't in love with me. She thinks more highly of herself than that."

Leann felt fury build up and she lashed out, "I promise you she will sleep with me and forget all about you!"

Alicia was so furious, she could barely see straight as she turned and plowed right into Ted.

"I'm sorry, I didn't see you, Ted."

"I don't know why. You look like you could take on an army," Ted responded knowingly. "And I see the reason why."

Leann strolled off in the distance, smiling arrogantly at Alicia.

"She's disgusting."

“Yes, she is, and Rhea knows it.”

“She’s just so...”

“Obvious.” Ted batted his eyes at Alicia. He liked her very much and didn’t want to see her worrying about Leann.

“That too.” Alicia blew out a breath. “She *is* beautiful.”

“No, she’s crass and cheap.”

“Ted, you know just how to make me feel better,” Alicia laughed, linking her arm in his.

“Good, come on, sister, you owe me a dance.”

Alicia was able to ignore Leann for the rest of the evening, and she and Rhea enjoyed the rest of the festivities. They fell into bed well after three in the morning, both exhausted. Most people had left for home around midnight, and the extensive clean up had been completed without too much fuss. Everyone was taking Sunday off. Sheri and Ted planned to finish painting their nursery, Mommo was going to spend it with her sons, while August and Sophia were going to take the plane to Sydney for the day. Rhea and Alicia were going on a ride and a picnic all by themselves.

## CHAPTER 13

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Rhea's lips tasted Alicia's naked breasts and she was teased deliciously from sleep with warmth flowing through her body. Moaning, she arched against Rhea's hot mouth and insistent hands stroking her body. Rhea didn't wait until Alicia was completely awake before pushing her fingers into Alicia's body.

"Rhea, Jesus, oh my..." Alicia couldn't speak as she awoke in a passion, her body writhing.

"I love how you taste, honey." Rhea tasted Alicia's flavors, her tongue teasing her until Alicia thought she would melt. Waves rippled through her body, as she lay open and vulnerable to Rhea's lovemaking. Her hands fluttered by her hips unable to hold on to Rhea's shoulders as she rolled around on top of the bed.

"Come for me, baby," Rhea breathed against the very center of Alicia and drove her screaming over the edge. Rhea rolled Alicia's body on top of hers and held her tightly while she tried to catch her breath. She placed featherlike kisses all over Alicia's face as she wooed her again with pledges of love and commitment.

Alicia rolled them back over and ran her hands down Rhea's back and buttocks pulling her tightly against herself. She locked her legs around Rhea's thighs and felt Rhea's wet center rub against hers. Rhea's hips rocked against Alicia's harder and faster as her heart pounded in her chest. Her eyes closed as she welcomed the familiar feelings pulsing through her body. Reaching down she pulled Alicia's thighs up until their bodies were sealed tightly against each other and arched her back, prolonging their connection. Alicia fingertips fluttered against Rhea's breasts and teased her nipples, her lips kissing Rhea's neck and jaw. Rhea gasped and shuddered as she collapsed on top of Alicia.

Alicia's hands stroked Rhea's back as she held her tightly, soothing her lover with gentle touches and soft kisses. They lay quietly in bed, relishing their time together with no reason to get up. They had the whole day together by themselves and they were going to take their time enjoying it. They didn't get up for another hour.

"Honey, you ready?" Rhea called to Alicia who was busy kissing her colt, aptly named Gentle Runner because of his smooth gait.

"Yes, coming."

Alicia strolled up to Rhea and slipped her arms around Rhea's waist. "I love you."

Rhea bent down and kissed Alicia on the nose. "I love you. Now, quit stalling and get your pretty butt on this horse."

Alicia rolled her eyes at Rhea and placed her foot in the stirrup, pulling herself up onto the placid horse. "I'm on."

Rhea laughed and swung herself up onto her more spirited mount and led the way out of the barn. Both women were wearing jeans and cowboy boots, long sleeved shirts, hats to protect them from the sun, and had dusters tied to their horses. Rhea's mount had a pack filled with food and water, and on Rhea's hip was a fully loaded gun. She never left the house without it. She also had a rifle in a holster attached to her saddle. The only things that Alicia carried in her saddlebags were a camera, her sketchpad, and two bottles of water. She still wasn't comfortable carrying a weapon, especially one she couldn't seem to fire accurately at anything smaller than a barn wall.

For two hours they rode leisurely through the brush until they came to a small hill and a ramshackle hut. Rhea dismounted and helped Alicia to the ground. She let her body slide down against Rhea's so tightly it made them both groan.

Hey, cowgirl, are you trying to seduce me?"

"Trying, I *am* seducing you."

"I like a confident woman." Alicia grinned up at Rhea as they shared a slow, lingering kiss.

"First I'm going to show you the very first Cameron opal mine."

"Really, is it still being worked?"

"No, it's been played out for many years but it's what started the Cameron fortune and I thought you might find it interesting."

The two women climbed the small hill and looked at the crumbling shack and the gaping chasm that used to be a mine. Alicia snapped pictures and then took out her sketchpad. She wanted to include some of these drawings with the

work she was completing for the show in October. As she sat on a rock sketching, Rhea was busy preparing their picnic lunch. She had secret plans, and she was just about prepared to spring them. She smiled as she patted the box in her jacket pocket. She was going to ask Alicia to marry her while they were visiting the opal mine since she had a rare black opal set in a gold band burning a hole in her pocket. She'd had it for three weeks just waiting for the perfect moment to give it to Alicia.

She climbed the rocks to get to Alicia and her heart froze in her chest as she saw her seated sketching, oblivious of the snake coiled five feet away from her. Slowly she removed her gun from the holster as she approached Alicia.

"Honey, I need you to stop moving." Alicia's head jerked up to look at Rhea. "Don't move!"

Rhea moved a foot closer as Alicia froze in place, fear etched on her face as she watched Rhea. The sound of the gunshots and the rapid firing made Alicia jump. Rhea reached her in two strides, picking her up off of the rock into her arms in one move.

"Jesus Christ!"

Alicia clung to Rhea as she carried her down to where the horses were grazing unconcerned. Rhea couldn't put her down, her arms wouldn't release her, and the gun was still locked in her hand. Rhea had dealt with snakes before, and she had even seen one of the ranch hands get struck by a rattler, but she had never felt this clutch of fear before. She could have lost Alicia in the blink of an eye.

"Honey, I'm okay," Alicia whispered against Rhea's face, still hanging onto her. "You saved me."

"I could've lost you," Rhea's face was streaked with tears as she kissed Alicia over and over.

"You didn't, I'm here." Alicia was also crying as she tried to calm herself and Rhea.

Rhea's arms tightened around Alicia almost painfully as she reassured herself that Alicia was really okay. Then she reluctantly let her down to stand on her own feet.

"I can't lose you, I just can't."

"You won't, baby, I'm staying for the rest of your life. Snake or no snake, you won't lose me."

Rhea bent and placed her face against Alicia's as she tried to calm down.

"I want to marry you."

"I want to marry you."

Rhea reached in her jacket pocket and pulled out the tiny box flipping the lid open with one hand.

"I love you, Alicia, more than life, and I want to be with you for the rest of ours. I will never look at another woman, and if you want to move back to San Francisco we will leave tomorrow. Just be with me, please."

Alicia had never been more in love or more moved by a pledge of love than Rhea's. "It's a beautiful ring and I will take it from you on one condition. That you know I want to stay here on the ranch with you for the rest of our lives. I love it here."

Rhea sighed as she placed the thick band that Sheri had designed several weeks earlier on Alicia's finger. The matching band was back in Rhea's dresser waiting to be put on Rhea's ring finger. "Sheri designed this. The opal is over fifty years old and is from our largest mine. She made two rings similar in design, one for you and one for me."

"I love it, and I love you." Alicia kissed Rhea with a heart so full of love she feared it would burst.

"Did you bring your ring?"

"No, it's back at the house in our dresser."

"When we get back, I want to place it on your finger. Promise me you'll never ever remove it."

"I promise."

"You also promised me a picnic."

Rhea felt the fear drain from her body as she released Alicia.

"I did. Come on then, let's picnic."

## CHAPTER 14

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“You brought the snake back with you?” Ted stared at Rhea.

“Yes, but don’t tell Alicia. I’m going to have it made into a belt for her.” Rhea grinned at her brother.

“Jesus, Rhea, she could have been killed.”

Rhea’s face turned stark white. “I know. It scared the hell out of me.”

“Good thing it was you with a gun and not Alicia. She couldn’t shoot her way out of a paper bag.” Ted smirked at his sister.

“You know, it’s the only thing she can’t do around here.”

“You’d think with all the practicing Dad does with her she’d show some sign of improvement. She just continues to miss everything.”

“Ted, she’s never going to be comfortable with guns.”

“I see you’re wearing your ring.”

“Yes.”

“I thought you were going to wait until your commitment ceremony to exchange rings.”

“I couldn’t wait.” Rhea finished saddling her horse. “I love her, Ted, more than I ever thought possible.”

“I know, sis. I feel the same way about Sheri.” Ted hugged his sister. “We’re very lucky.”

“Yes we are, except for the fact that we have to be out on the ranch away from our nice warm beds for over a week.”

“Did you ask Alicia if she wanted to go?”

“I did and she would have except that she needs to spend more time with her colt. She’s following Mom’s training schedule to the letter.”



Rhea chuckled as she spoke. "I also don't think she's fond of riding a horse for hours on end. She hasn't quite mastered the saddle well enough for it to be painless."

"She's good with her colt."

"She's a natural. She just doesn't know it."

"Come on, sis, the sooner we get on the road, the sooner we'll get back." Ted and Rhea swung up into their saddles and rode out of the corral. Six mounted men waited at the end of the road for Rhea and Ted to join them. There was a problem with dingoes and the sheep on the south end of the ranch, and they were going to try to solve the problem with the help of three other ranchers. Packs of dingoes could be trouble to the younger sheep and periodically had to be controlled. It was not a pleasant job but a necessary one.

They rode for four hours before joining another eleven riders a little after noon. Rhea swore under her breath when she saw that Leann was with her father's crew. She was a crack shot, but Rhea didn't want to have any contact with her, especially after their last encounter. The only gesture Leann made was a nod of her head before the riders continued on.

They didn't stop riding until close to dusk and then they efficiently set up camp. Their work was just beginning. Dinner was quiet and most of the men sat around the fire, smoking and telling tales of previous ride-outs. Rhea pulled the radio out of her saddlebags and prepared to call Alicia and Sheri. It was their only contact while they were out on the ranch land away from the main house. Sheri was staying at the house while Ted and Rhea were gone.

"Rhea to base, over."

"Rhea, this is Alicia, over."

"Hi, sweetie, we made it to just south of Adavale. Ted says hello to Sheri, over."

"Be safe, we love you, over."

"Will call tomorrow night, over and out."

Before Rhea could turn off the radio, Leann came out of the shadows and spoke loudly enough for the radio to pick it up. "Hello lover."

Rhea swore loudly as she flipped the radio off hoping that Alicia hadn't heard Leann's voice. She would tell her about Leann when she got back. "God-damn it, Leann, go away."

"Honey, you don't mean that. You want me, I know that."

"You're crazy. Why would I want you when I have a beautiful, smart partner waiting for me at home?"

"Because, she is waiting at home, probably frightened to death. She can barely ride a horse, she can't shoot a gun, and you know how much you love to fuck out here in the bush." Leann started to touch Rhea.

"Don't even think about it!" Rhea barked, moving back into the light of the fire. She wanted to get as far away from Leann as possible.

Ted's eyes didn't miss the anger on Rhea's face nor the satisfied look on Leann's. He stood up and moved over to stand next to Rhea speaking quietly to her. "Everything okay?"

"Everything's just fine." Rhea all but spit the words out.

"Did you speak to Alicia and Sheri?"

Rhea's face softened as she smiled. "Alicia told me to tell you Sheri loves you. God knows why, you're so ugly."

Ted just laughed and poked his sister in the arm. "Get some sleep."

"You too."

Alicia wasn't quite so lucky. She'd heard Leann's voice over the radio and she wasn't very happy. Very rarely did Alicia lose her temper but once she did there was hell to pay. "If she thinks she's going to go after my girlfriend she's got another thing coming. Goddamn bitch, she knew I wasn't going on the trip. God damn it!"

Sheri and Sophia watched Alicia stomp out of the house in the direction of the barn, and they followed her as she muttered and fumed all the way inside. Instead of checking on her foal as she usually did at night, Alicia paced back and forth kicking over and over at a hay bale. Her fifth *god damn it* made Sophia and Sheri burst out laughing.

"If you kick that hay bale any harder you might hurt your foot," Sophia commented as she walked up to Alicia, a grin on her face. "I take it Leann has joined up with Ted and Rhea?"

"God damn her, she knew I wouldn't be there. I know she planned it!"

"Are you worried about Rhea being interested in Leann?"

"Of course not, it just pisses me off that Leann is there."

"So if you aren't worried about Rhea, what is the problem?"

"Leann can ride a horse, she can shear a sheep, and she can shoot a gun." Alicia continued to pace back and forth as Sheri and Sophia grinned at her. "She belongs here."

It was the last comment that set Sophia's teeth on edge. Up until that moment she had been thoroughly entertained. "And you don't?"

Alicia's head snapped up when she heard Sophia's tone of voice. She had heard about Sophia's legendary temper from August but she had never seen it displayed until this moment. "I didn't mean that!"

"What did you mean? Are you not in love with my daughter?" Sophia's glacial voice cut into Alicia's heart.

"Of course I am."

"Are you not training your own Arabian stallion?"

"You know I am." Sheri was just about to laugh as she watched Sophia tear into Alicia. She'd been on the receiving end a couple of times, and her money was definitely on Sophia.

"Are you going to let a cheap floozy push you around?"

Alicia began to sputter as she floundered for a response. Before she could say anything Sheri burst into laughter, causing both women to turn and look at her. "A floozy, you called Leann a floozy."

Sophia began to smile as Alicia started to giggle. "What she is is a sneaky bitch."

"Yes, she is, and since Rhea isn't at all interested in her, you're wasting your time getting all worked up over her," Sophia reminded her.

Alicia's smile disappeared and her head dropped. "I know."

"Honey, I have a suggestion. Why don't you, Sheri, and I have a movie night? We'll kick Aug out of the television room and curl up in our pajamas and eat junk food."

"That sounds wonderful. I miss Rhea so much."

Sheri threw her arm around Alicia's shoulders and squeezed. "I miss Ted, too."

"Come on, ladies. I'll just bet that Alicia is going to get another call on the radio sometime tonight."

Sophia was right. They had just entered the house when August called Alicia to his study and handed her the radio. "Rhea wants to speak to you."

Alicia hugged August and took the radio from him.

"Rhea, it's Alicia, over."

"Honey, I needed to tell you Leann is here with her father, over."

"I know, over."

"I love you, over."

"I love you, hurry home, over."

"I will, over."

"Tell Leann I will shoot her if she touches you, over."

Rhea was laughing over the radio. "I will, over and out."

Alicia turned and found August grinning at her from the doorway. “You sound just like Sophia.”

“I consider that a very high compliment.” Alicia grinned as she moved toward August.

“You should, but I think you should take credit for your own strengths. You are a talented artist, a brilliant, articulate woman, and a valuable part of my family.”

“Oh August, I love you.” Alicia burst into tears as he hugged her.

“I love you. Now, stop your crying and go watch your girly movies. Leave me to my cigars and brandy.”

## CHAPTER 15

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The last ten days were the longest that Rhea had ever spent. Leann used every excuse in the book to be around Rhea. She was forever pressing her body against Rhea's, making sexual comments, and reminding Rhea of their past. Rhea was not in the least bit attracted to the woman. In fact, she was completely disgusted with her behavior and the fact that at one time she had loved her. Rhea's eyes were no longer blinded by love and she saw Leann for what she really was—a lonely, tragic woman who used her body try to control others.

When they returned to the ranch, Ted and Rhea unsaddled their horses in the barn, brushing them, and bedding them down for the night. Alicia was up in her studio, unaware that they had returned. Sheri was on her way to pick Ted up to take him home. Rhea poked her head in to give her mother and father a hug before she went upstairs to the top floor to surprise her girlfriend. She wanted to peel her dirty clothes off, take a hot shower, and snuggle into bed with Alicia. She stood in the doorway for several minutes watching Alicia work. Alicia was wearing a pair of shorts and a tee shirt, her feet hooked around the legs of her chair, and she hummed happily as she worked. Rhea fell in love all over again as she stared at Alicia. She waited until Alicia's pen was off the page before she spoke so as not to startle her.

"Alicia."

"Rhea, you're back!" She leaped up off of her chair and flung herself into Rhea's arms. The kiss they shared was exquisite—slow, full, and incredibly moving. It went on and on.

"Honey, I'm filthy. I need to get out of these clothes and take a shower and then I'd like to crawl in bed with you."

“That sounds perfect. Why don’t you go get out of your clothes, and I’ll finish up in here.”

Rhea looked fondly at Alicia for a moment and then turned toward the bathroom. Alicia watched Rhea until she disappeared into the bathroom and recognized the tiredness in her walk. Alicia closed up her inks and quickly stored her pens, then followed her girlfriend into the bathroom. She smiled indulgently as she noticed the trail of clothes leading to the shower. On a good day Rhea wasn’t all that neat. Alicia gathered up the discarded clothes, her nose wrinkling at the smell as she stuffed them into the clothes hamper. She grabbed a large towel and went toward the shower. It wasn’t long before Rhea stepped out of the shower, her hair and body dripping with water. Alicia wrapped the towel around Rhea and drew her near, rubbing the water off her body. “Come on, sweetie. Let’s dry your hair and get you into bed.”

Alicia hadn’t finished toweling Rhea’s hair before she fell into an exhausted sleep. She placed a kiss on Rhea’s cheek, covered her up, and left her sleeping while she went downstairs to get a cup of tea. Mommo was sitting at the kitchen table, her eyes closed. “Mommo, is everything okay?”

“Yes, I was just resting.”

“Why don’t you go home?”

“I was just getting ready to. Can I get you anything?”

“Nothing. Can I drive you home?”

“No, Abo is outside waiting.”

“Mommo, are you sure you’re okay?”

“I’m fine. I’m just a little tired.”

Alicia felt dissatisfied with that answer, and she approached Mommo and touched her forehead with the palm of her hand. “Mommo, you have a fever.”

“I’m fine.”

“You wait here. I’m going to get a thermometer.” Alicia touched Mommo’s cheek. Alicia was one of the few people who could tell Mommo what to do because of the deep love in her heart for the wonderful woman.

Within minutes Alicia was taking Mommo’s temperature. “You have a temperature of one hundred. You need to be in bed. I’m going to get Abo and make sure you go home and stay in bed.”

There was no arguing with Alicia, and Abo was given strict instructions to put his mother to bed. Alicia would be over in the morning to check on her and she was not to come to work until Alicia said she could. Mommo’s smile was one of deep affection and love for Alicia as she and Abo pulled away from the house.

Alicia gave up on the cup of tea and decided to crawl into bed with Rhea. She would get up early to make sure Mommo was okay. She changed into her nightgown and slipped into bed next to her slumbering girlfriend. Rhea murmured in her sleep and rolled over until she was spooned against Alicia's body, her arms around her waist.

Rhea didn't wake up until well after ten in the morning, and Alicia was nowhere to be found. She threw on a pair of jeans and a shirt before heading to the kitchen and was surprised to find her mother putting dishes away.

"Hey, Mom, where's Mommo?"

"She's home with what looks like a case of the flu. Alicia is over there taking care of her. I'm going to go stay with her after lunch until dinner time."

"Is she okay?"

"I just spoke to Alicia, and she said Mommo is sleeping soundly. How are you, honey? You look like you could use another night's sleep."

"I'm fine. You know what it's like being out in the bush."

"I do. And how was Leann?" Sophia watched her daughter carefully.

"Does everyone know she was there?" Rhea groaned as she poured herself a cup of coffee.

"Of course, especially when, after talking to you on the CB, Alicia went out to the barn and tried to kick a hay bale apart." Sophia grinned at her daughter.

"She did?" Rhea chuckled. "She told me to tell Leann if she touched me she'd shoot her."

Sophia's eyebrows rose and she smiled. "Good for her, even though we all know Alicia probably wouldn't know what end of the gun to point at her."

"That isn't the point, Mom."

"Give me some credit, honey."

"Alicia doesn't need to worry about Leann. I realized on this trip that I don't even like Leann. She's a very lonely, unhappy woman."

"Yes, she is, and she's bound and determined to try and mess up your relationship."

"I know."

"What are you going to do about it?"

"What can I do about it?"

"End it."

"And how do I do that?"

"I suggest that you and Alicia need to end it together."

"That helps." Rhea rolled her eyes.

Sophia patted her daughter on the hand. "You'll figure it out."

## CHAPTER 16

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“Honey, I missed you so much.”

Rhea’s fingertips traversed Alicia’s naked body, traced her hipbone where the tattoo stood out, continued up along her ribs, and then touched her nipple. She had just spent the last hour making love to Alicia one inch at a time. They lay in the middle of their bed, their breathing returning to normal. Rhea couldn’t seem to stop touching Alicia and had been doing so ever since they had gotten into bed. Alicia had spent dinner time over at Mommo’s making sure she was comfortable and recuperating before Rhea picked her up to bring her home. Rhea had promised to come back in the morning to check on her.

Once they were home, Rhea led Alicia upstairs where she had stashed a bottle of wine, some fruit and cheese and had lit candles all over the bedroom. She was going to make love to her partner all night long.

“You know what I figured out on my trip last week?”

“What, honey?” Alicia ran her hand down Rhea’s arm.

“I realized that I feel very sorry for Leann. She uses her body to get attention because she’s lonely and doesn’t know how to love anyone. We are the lucky ones. We need to do one thing, though; we need to confront her together and let her know there’s no chance of ever getting between us. Then I’m going to marry you in front of God and everyone.”

“I still want to shoot her,” Alicia commented as she ran her lips along Rhea’s shoulder.

“That’s okay. I’ll give you more lessons with the gun so you can hit her.” Rhea leaned over and kissed Alicia lingeringly.

Thoughts of Leann faded into the background because the next week was chaotic. Summer lightning storms wreaked havoc on the ranch. Flash flooding



endangered the sheep and made travel difficult. Between the heat and the thunder, Alicia's nerves were on edge. She found it impossible to work in her studio. She went over to the barn and went into the stall with her colt. She ran her hands over his back and neck to reassure him while she spoke quietly to keep him calm. He had been anxious because of all the storms. The whinny of a horse in pain caught her attention and she rushed over to another stall where a pregnant mare was stabled. Alicia could tell by the rolling eyes and nervous movements that the mare was very agitated. She ran back into the house calling for Sophia.

"Sophia, I think Midnight Jewel is foaling." Midnight Jewel was Sophia's pride and joy. She was a beautiful dark sable, pure Arabian, with perfect conformation. Sophia had bred her with a full-blooded Arabian stallion of impeccable bloodlines and was expecting a very good foal.

"I'm on my way."

"What do you want me to do?"

"Go back with Midnight and talk to her. Rub her neck and help her to relax. Foaling takes a long time."

"Okay." Alicia ran out of the house as Sophia grinned at her back. Alicia had no clue that she'd become a rancher. This was Midnight's first foaling, and Sophia was inordinately pleased that Alicia would be there. When it was time, she would turn over the management of her Arabians to Alicia. She would be excellent at it.

Alicia would have fainted dead away if she had known what Sophia had planned. She'd never seen any animal give birth and she certainly didn't know what to do with a prize Arabian mare. She entered the stall slowly and began whispering to Midnight as she stroked her neck.

"There, there, baby, I'm here. You're going to be just fine. You know what to do." The horse whinnied softly as she nuzzled her head into Alicia's shoulder. Alicia clasped the horse to her and stroked her hands down both sides of the mare's neck over and over. She began to hum softly. Her actions seemed to soothe the mare, and Midnight ceased her restless movements and stood quietly against Alicia. Sophia watched in silence from outside the stall as Alicia worked her magic. And that's what it was, a touch of horse magic. Mommo had told Sophia that Alicia had it and much more. Sophia believed in Mommo's intuition.

For four hours the two women took turns soothing the horse as she started to go through contractions and began to move around the stall again, impatient to deliver her foal. Rhea and August traded off bringing coffee and keep-

ing the two women company as they waited for nature to take its course. At one-thirty in the morning, Midnight delivered a perfectly formed stallion, the deepest darkest brown Alicia had ever seen. Both she and Sophia shed tears of relief as the foal slid from his mother. Midnight cleaned her baby up and for the next hour they watched as the young foal struggled to his feet, his spindly legs weak and unsure. When he was successfully enjoying his first meal, they called it a night and headed back to the house. August was waiting in the kitchen with Rhea and listened attentively as Alicia excitedly told them about the birth.

"He stood right up on his legs and wobbled for a bit then went right to his mom. He's gorgeous."

"Yes, he is, but I'm not. I'm filthy. I'm going to go take a shower and go to bed. We can check on the foal in the morning. He and mom will be fine," Sophia sighed as she leaned against her husband.

Alicia looked down at herself and was surprised to find her clothes covered with blood and grime. She'd helped to deliver a horse! Her eyes filled with tears as she looked up at Rhea, Sophia, and August. "I can't believe I helped deliver a foal."

Rhea felt love deep in her heart as she looked down at her exhausted, filthy, yet excited lover. "Yes, you did. Now, let's go get you cleaned up and into bed."

Alicia allowed Rhea to lead her out of the kitchen as she chattered away. "Rhea, it was amazing when he slid from his mother, and he is so beautiful."

Sophia and her husband shared a meaningful look as Alicia's voice drifted away. "She could have delivered the horse without me."

"She still doesn't see herself as belonging here." August commented as he pulled his wife into his arms.

"I know. I'm not sure what we can do to make that happen."

"She'll figure it out when the time is right."

"I know you've never been able to understand Rhea being a lesbian, but if I had to choose someone exactly right for her it would be Alicia."

"I love her too, Sophia."

"I know you do. What do you say about giving me a backrub after I take a shower? I'm getting too old to deliver horses."

"Old my eye, I'll give you a backrub." The gleam in August's eyes let Sophia know he had much more in mind than a backrub. They may have been getting on in years, but he never tired of making love with his wife. And she would always desire her husband's touch.

## CHAPTER 17

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Alicia was lying on the chaise lounge after taking a swim with Sophia. Sheri was sitting next to her reading a book and relaxing. The three of them were spending a lot of time together due to the fact that the weather had unleashed heavy storms that were devastating the ranch lands. Ted and Rhea had been gone for four days moving sheep and repairing washed out roads and fences. August was involved with his freight company that was flying emergency goods into remote regions to help small towns and villages deal with the flooding.

Alicia and Sophia were handling the emergency communications among August, Ted, and Rhea, as well as managing the day-to-day ranch activities. They were tending to the horses and all the rest of the animals. Most of the ranch hands were out assisting flood victims. The radio crackled at Alicia's side.

"Cameron Ranch, over."

"Alicia, Ted here. Rhea and I are heading over to the Riley ranch. Gus has been injured, over."

"How badly, over?"

"Don't know. He's trapped by an overturned jeep, over."

"What do you need, over?"

"Nothing. Will contact you later, over."

"Okay, here's Sheri, over."

After a brief *I love you*, Sheri disconnected from her husband. To conserve battery life, Ted used the radio sparingly. They carried spares, but they couldn't predict how long their trip would be so all conversations were kept brief.

"I hope Gus is okay. He's not a young man," Sophia commented.

"I hope so, too. He doesn't have much help running his place." Sheri knew Gus very well.

"Isn't that Leann's father?"

"Yes, and she's his only child. Gus always hoped that she would marry someone who could take over handling the ranch." Sophia's face showed her dislike of Leann.

Alicia snorted and sat up. "If Leann had been smart she would have married Rhea."

Sophia's stunned look and Sheri's surprised expression brought a quick grin to Alicia's lips. Sheri laughed as she responded, "We all know *that* isn't going to happen."

Alicia sighed and relaxed in her chair. "I really don't like that woman."

Rhea wasn't too pleased with Leann either. "Ted, she got us all the way over here to find out Gus just wrenched his ankle. We should be out helping other victims instead of hand-holding Leann."

Ted was equally disgusted, but there wasn't much they could do about it. It was after one in the morning and he wouldn't mind sleeping in a bed for the night. "Rhea, we'll get out of here tomorrow morning. I need to get home and see my wife."

"I understand that feeling. I'll meet you downstairs at five."

"Get some rest, sis."

"Same to you, Ted. You look like hell."

"Have *you* looked in a mirror?" Ted grinned at his sister. They hadn't seen a shower in three days.

"I'm going to take a nice hot shower and dive into bed."

"Goodnight." Leann had given them rooms for the night in the massive ranch house. She had been nothing but polite since they'd arrived, and even though both Ted and Rhea didn't think Gus' injuries warranted an emergency call, they were polite in return.

Rhea could have cried because she was so tired, and when the hot water of the shower pummeled her body, she felt every ache and pain. She'd been on a horse for almost three straight days, and her body was paying the price. She would have to wear her filthy clothes one more day, but at least she could get four hours or so of sleep. She crawled naked between the sheets and was instantly asleep.

Rhea's body responded reflexively as a hand covered her breast and her nipple was sucked into an insistent mouth. Jerking away, she shoved at Leann, sit-

ting up and covering her body with the sheet. "Goddamn it, Leann, get the hell out of here!"

Leann was totally nude lying next to her on the bed. "Lover, you want me here. Your body is just begging to be fucked. Who would know?"

Rhea was furious. "Get the hell out, *now*. I don't want you. I'm ashamed I ever wanted you! That's the problem with you, Leann. You don't know the difference between fucking and making love."

Leann's face grew white with rage as Rhea's words hit home.

"You're going to regret pushing me away. You'll pay for this. Alicia will never know that you didn't sleep with me, especially when I tell her you did."

"Go ahead and tell her. She won't believe you."

Leann grimaced maliciously, "She'll believe me."

Leann stood up slowly and shrugged back into her robe. A self-satisfied smirk remained on her face as she turned and left the room. Rhea stood up and gathered her clothes. She couldn't sleep anymore and she needed to get out of the room. She started to dress and realized that her panties were gone. She looked in the bathroom and the bedroom and still couldn't find them. She rummaged through her pack for another pair and finished dressing, and then she headed downstairs to find some coffee. She was disgusted with herself that she had responded at all to Leann. She could blame it on being startled from a sound sleep, but it still didn't make her feel anything but horrible.

At five o'clock, she and Ted were on their way to the barn and met their four other ranch hands already there. They saddled their horses. They planned to circle around to the washed-out road and see what the damages were before they made the long ride back to the ranch. Rhea's body was totally numb. She'd been in the saddle for so many days that they all ran together.

## CHAPTER 18

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Ted and Rhea didn't return to the ranch house until well after midnight the following night and, as they rode into the yard, Alicia and Sophia met them at the barn. Without a word they helped unsaddle and settle the horses. Sheri met Ted outside and bundled him into the jeep for the quick trip to their home. Rhea walked with Sophia and Alicia back to the house.

"Honey, peel your clothes off down here. I'll go get a robe for you." Rhea looked down at Alicia's face and couldn't speak she was so exhausted. She just stared at her face, too tired to react.

"Sit, let me take your boots off."

"I'll go get a robe," Sophia suggested, leaving the two women in the kitchen.

Alicia looked up and her heart almost stopped as she recognized the look of pure love on Rhea's face. She didn't have to be told Rhea loved her, she could see it in her eyes. "I love you, too, Rhea."

"God, Alicia, I love you so much. I don't know what I'd do if I lost you."

"Honey, you aren't going to lose me. Come on, sweetie. You're exhausted."

"I need to take a shower."

"Rhea, here's your robe." Sophia handed it to Rhea, and she slipped into it.

"Alicia, I'll take care of the dirty clothes and her boots."

"Thanks, Mom."

"Honey, you don't have to thank me. I'm so very proud of you."

Rhea's eyes overflowed with tears as she bent to hug her mother. "I love you."

"I love you, too. Now go take a shower—you smell like a horse!"

Alicia laughed as Rhea grinned at her mother. "That's because I've been on one for almost fourteen hours."

"I'm going to monitor the radio and, unless there's an emergency, no one is getting up before noon."

"When's Dad getting back?"

"He said he'd be back tomorrow. He's making one more run with emergency supplies."

"Goodnight, Sophia. Come on, cowgirl. You're going to bed."

Alicia tucked her hand in Rhea's and walked slowly upstairs with her. They didn't say a word until they entered the bathroom. Rhea turned to Alicia and spoke, "I need to tell you something, Alicia."

"Can't it wait until tomorrow?"

"No, it's important."

"Okay sweetie." Alicia slid her arms around Rhea's neck and looked up at her.

"You know we went to Gus Riley's ranch to check on him because Leann called about his being badly injured."

"Yes, how is he?"

"He twisted an ankle. Ted and I spent the night at the ranch." Alicia's body stiffened. "Honey, nothing happened even though Leann snuck into my bedroom in the middle of the night."

Rhea grasped Alicia's hands in hers as she saw the reaction on Alicia's face. Alicia's voice was glacial, "What happened?"

"She climbed into my bed without any clothes on."

"What were you wearing?"

"Nothing." Rhea's voice was full of regret and sorrow.

"What did she do?"

Rhea could have cut her heart out when she saw the hurt on Alicia's face. Tears slid down Rhea's face. "I woke up when she touched my breast. I pushed her away and told her to leave. She threatened to tell you we slept together. You know I wouldn't do that."

"Honey, I know you wouldn't sleep with Leann." Alicia was extremely upset, but now wasn't the time to talk about it. Rhea was too tired and she was overly emotional. Besides, she trusted Rhea completely. "Come on let's get you into the shower."

Rhea stared at Alicia for a long moment before she turned and dropped her robe, stepping into the shower. Alicia gasped when she saw the scrapes and bruises that marred her lover's body. Rhea worked so damn hard. She turned away and walked out of the room while Rhea showered. Alicia slumped on to the bed, her mind in a jumble, her chest heavy with emotion. There was no

question that she believed Rhea, but Leann had touched her intimately, and that bothered her a great deal. She started to cry as she thought of how perfect her lovemaking had been with Rhea. Now she felt that Leann had tainted it. She knew her reaction wasn't reasonable, but she wasn't thinking rationally.

Rhea stepped out of the shower and grabbed a towel. She heard muffled sobbing from the bedroom and rushed in. Alicia was lying on the bed crying quietly. "Honey, don't, please. I'm sorry. I'm so sorry." She gathered Alicia into her arms and held her tightly, whispering in her ear, "I love you, honey. Nothing happened. I swear nothing happened. Please don't cry."

"I know nothing happened, it's just that Leann keeps getting in the middle of us. It hurts that she touched you. I know that's petty."

"It's not petty, honey. I'm so sorry." Rhea kissed her tear-streaked cheeks. She didn't know how to make amends. Alicia looked so devastated and hurt.

"I'm sorry I'm keeping you up. Please get into bed, and we'll talk about this tomorrow."

Rhea looked at Alicia and spoke softly, her heart in her throat. "Are we okay?"

Alicia melted when she saw the fear in Rhea's eyes. "Oh honey, of course we are."

Alicia kissed Rhea slowly, her fingers touching her cheek before hugging her closely. "I love you, Alicia."

"Rhea, I love you more than my life. Now, into bed, please."

Rhea shrugged off her robe and crawled under the covers. Alicia changed into her nightgown and slipped into bed next to Rhea. Rhea waited to see if Alicia would reach for her. When Alicia turned out the light and rolled onto her side, Rhea's tears welled up and spilled over the corners of her eyes, silent, hot tears that she couldn't control. She fell asleep crying. Alicia lay wide-awake and miserable as she thought of her reaction to what Leann had done. The more she thought about it the angrier she became. She finally fell into a fitful sleep, visions of Leann and Rhea intruding upon her dreams.



## CHAPTER 19

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For three nights and days Alicia refused to speak about what had happened, no matter how many times Rhea tried to discuss it with her. She was very distant physically, kissing and hugging Rhea, but they had not made love since Rhea returned. Rhea was hurt and frustrated, and Alicia was still very angry. Everyone around them knew something was wrong and was not sure what to do about it. It was August who cornered Alicia in the barn one afternoon and found out what was going on.

“Alicia, can I speak to you for a minute?”

“Sure, August.” She looked up from currying her foal.

“What’s going on with you and Rhea?”

“Nothing, really, we’re just working through something.” Alicia didn’t look at August. She knew she couldn’t without crying.

“I thought working something out meant you spoke to each other.” August’s voice was slow and patient.

Alicia grunted irritably, “We *are* talking to each other.”

“Are you going to let Leann spoil your relationship, which, by the way, is exactly what she was trying to do?”

“August, I’m not letting her interfere with my relationship. I just need some time to think things through.” Alicia sighed heavily and finally looked up at him.

“I can understand that, but meanwhile you are miserable, and Rhea is heartbroken.”

Alicia’s face fell. “I’m not trying to hurt Rhea. I love her very much.”

"And she wouldn't hurt you for the world. But you're hurting each other by not confronting the problem. Sophia and I love you both, and we hate to see you two hurting."

Alicia smiled up at the burly man who was a friend as well as a father figure. "Have I told you I love you, August?"

"A time or two, and I love you."

"Where is Rhea?"

"She's over in the big barn seeing to some baby lambs."

"I'm going to borrow the jeep."

August watched her climb in the jeep and speed down the road toward the large barn. Sophia poked her head out of a horse stall and called to her husband, "Aug, you're a meddler!"

"Yes I am, and it worked."

"Yes it did, come over here and let me thank you." August smiled as he approached his wife. The look on her face told him he was going to be a very lucky man.

Rhea was standing in a big pen where a bunch of young lambs milled around bleating. Their mothers were answering their babies from the outside pen. Rhea and Ted were inoculating the lambs and examining some of them for signs of sickness. Rhea stood in the middle of the unhappy animals and felt as miserable as they did. She was heartsick over her problems with Alicia. She was so lost in her own misery that she didn't see Alicia enter the barn. But Ted did, and he quietly slipped out after he received a wink from Alicia. She hadn't smiled at anyone for the last few days, and he was happy to see it.

"Rhea?"

Rhea turned at the sound of Alicia's voice and looked at her, raw emotion in her eyes. "Alicia, is everything okay?"

Alicia climbed into the pen and approached Rhea. "No, everything isn't okay. I miss you, sweetie. I'm sorry I've been such a pain in the ass. I love you, and I'm sorry."

Rhea reached out and picked Alicia up squeezing her tightly. Alicia wrapped her legs around Rhea's waist and kissed her face over and over, covering every inch of it. She finally covered Rhea's mouth in a kiss full of desire, and Rhea groaned as she returned the kiss. They were interrupted when a lamb bumped in to Rhea's leg almost knocking them to the ground.

"I guess we'll have to continue this later," Rhea grinned as Alicia slid down to her feet.

"You bet we will, cowgirl." Alicia slid her hand into Rhea's waistband. "I'm sorry. Do you think we can make it an early night? We need to talk about a few things."

Rhea smiled down at her girlfriend and nodded. "I'll be done in an hour."

"Good." Alicia climbed out of the pen, patting several of the lambs on their heads. Rhea just grinned as she watched her girlfriend. Three months earlier Alicia had been scared to death of the baby lambs. As Alicia strode to the car she called out to Ted, who was in the pen with the mothers, "Thanks, Ted!"

He waved her off with his hand and shook his head. He was sure that Rhea and Alicia were going to be fine. He couldn't wait to tell Sheri.

Rhea was back at the house in exactly an hour and, as she came in the back door, Mommo spoke to her. "Alicia's waiting in the poolroom."

"Okay, I just need to wash up."

"Take your damn boots off!" Mommo had recovered completely from her illness!

Rhea grinned as she sat down and kicked them off. "Sorry."

She couldn't get to the poolroom fast enough. The patio table was set for dinner complete with candles and flowers. Alicia sat looking sexy as hell in a pair of shorts and a tank top, her feet bare.

"Hello, cowgirl, I thought we could have a romantic dinner out here by ourselves."

"I'd like that *very* much."

"Good, have a seat."

Rhea took the chair across from Alicia still smiling into her eyes. Alicia stood up, came around and sat on Rhea's lap, twining her arms around her neck. "I'm really sorry about being so weird about this whole thing with Leann. I know you didn't encourage her."

"Honey, if I could do something more about it I would."

"I know, sweetie. Do you think we can put it behind us after today?"

"Definitely. I love you, Alicia. I would never cheat on you. You are my life."

"I love you, cowgirl. And after dinner I'm going to show you just how much." Her kiss had so much promise in it Rhea was ready to skip dinner altogether. "I'll be right back, don't go away."

Within minutes Alicia was back with two plates of food. She set one in front of Rhea and one at her place. It was Rhea's favorite meal, pasta primavera, made by Alicia just for her. They ate their dinner while having easy, friendly conversation about the past week. They were getting back to normal and putting the Leann issue behind them. An hour and a half later, Alicia and Rhea

carried empty plates into the kitchen before going upstairs together. Rhea took Alicia's hand as they walked into the bedroom, and she felt so lucky she picked Alicia up and twirled with her.

"Honey, what are you doing?" Alicia laughed as she held on.

"I love you so damn much. I just feel so blessed." She stopped and lowered Alicia to her feet.

"I feel the same way." Alicia tugged her face down for a kiss. "What do you say to sharing a shower with me and then getting into bed?"

"I like that idea."

The shower proved to be a pleasant experience for both women. Rhea made love to Alicia until she could barely stand, her mouth teasing her from one orgasm to another as her fingers filled Alicia fully. Alicia kissed every trace of Leann's touch from Rhea's breasts before overwhelming her with fingers deeply inside her. Neither woman was sated. They fell onto the bed still wet from the shower, and what had been fast and furious in the shower was now slow and gentle, building layer upon layer of passion, until both women succumbed to emotion and pleasure. Still clinging together, they eased softly into sleep, all troubles settled, their love for each other palpable in the room.

## CHAPTER 20

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Over the next six weeks, life became routine as the weather settled down and ranching became less hectic. Ted and Rhea were gone most days and a few nights, but most days they were back at home by six-thirty or seven. Alicia's days were very full, with three hours in the morning spent training her foal and then a couple more hours helping Sophia. Two days a week she spent an hour and half teaching the ranch children how to read. Usually, she worked a good three to four hours in her studio, and on the nights that Rhea was gone, she'd stay in her studio until late. Saturday, she and Rhea would do minor chores, ride horses around the ranch, and help Mommo with the house, much to Mommo's irritation. Sundays were for lounging at the pool, reading books, and generally relaxing. Last Sunday, Rhea had taken Alicia up in the plane, where they flew over the ranch and surrounding areas for over three hours. They were feeling very secure with each other and their relationship. Leann ceased to exist as they slipped back into their affectionate and passionate partnership. Life was very, very good.

Monday morning started out much like any other day as Alicia and Sophia began work in the corral with her colt. He was very unruly because he was no longer a baby, but a very young stallion that was feeling frisky. He was also reacting to a mare that was in heat. Because stallions can get quite temperamental around a mare, they were kept in separate areas. Alicia worked with Gentle Walker on carrying a weighted saddle and bridle. He was just about ready to carry a rider. Contrary to what she perceived, Alicia was becoming an excellent rider, and was the only other person that could ride Sophia's mare, Dream Walker. She had been trained for the saddle and to be ridden bareback. Alicia intended to train her stallion the same way. She had learned a lot from

Sophia about training horses and even more about herself. She could do just about anything she put her mind to. She was contributing to the operation of the ranch as well, and she felt very good about that. She belonged. She was part of a very large and affectionate family.

"Well if it isn't the city girl."

Alicia froze as she heard the languid voice. She couldn't believe Leann was showing her face at Cameron Ranch. "Hello, Leann. Can I help you?"

"I expect you can." She was wearing shiny red cowboy boots, her jeans skin tight, and her red silk blouse unbuttoned enough to show her impressive cleavage. She was a physically beautiful woman but, in Alicia's opinion, rotten to the core. "I need to talk to you. I wanted to apologize to you for sleeping with Rhea. I know it wasn't very nice since the two of you are a couple."

"So you and Rhea slept together?" Alicia's face remained calm as she waited for Leann to respond.

"Yes, when she spent the night at my ranch."

"I see." Alicia was seething inside, but she would not allow Leann know it. She trusted Rhea completely and loved her enough to not allow Leann's interference.

"You don't believe me, I can see that. But I have evidence to prove my claim." Leann pulled a pair of panties out of her back pocket, and Alicia didn't have to be told whose they were.

"So you've told me. Now leave."

"I think that's my line. You don't belong here, and Rhea knows that. Why do you think she slept with me?"

"I'm not leaving. This is my home."

"Why would you stay where you aren't wanted?"

"I will stay because Rhea and the Camerons are my family."

"You're making a big mistake." Leann was getting angry.

Alicia spoke in a low, calm voice. "No, you made a mistake when you thought you could turn Rhea away from me. I just feel sorry for you."

"Sorry, are you kidding? Sorry!" Leann was furious.

She stalked back into the barn while Alicia tried to settle her anxious stallion. She turned and spoke softly to him trying to calm him down. She didn't notice when Leann led another young stallion from his stall to the corral. His ears were back and his nose flared as he reacted to the presence of the mare and another stallion. He was rearing back before Alicia realized what was happening. Her stallion jerked the reins out of her hands and prepared to do battle. He reared up and kicked out with his hooves, barely missing Alicia's head. Gentle

Walker's eyes rolled back in his head as he reacted to the attacking stallion's screams. Alicia ignored the other stallion and focused on her horse. He could be killed if she couldn't get him under control and away from the other stallion. She whispered commands to him over and over staying between him and the other agitated horse. Sophia heard the horses' screams and came running into the corral. She gasped as she saw the flaying hooves within inches of Alicia's face and head as she struggled to keep her horse safe. Sophia ran out with a lasso in hand and was joined by a quick-thinking ranch hand. Swiftly, they roped the other stallion and pulled him back, but not before a hoof caught Alicia on the back of her shoulder, slicing through her shirt. She didn't flinch as she struggled, finally getting Gentle Walker to settle down so she could move him back into his stall. When she finally shot home the bolt to the stall door, she rested her head against it and caught her breath. Her shoulder hurt like hell, but she was angry, white-hot, furious.

"Alicia, you're hurt. Let me see your shoulder." Sophia's hands shook as she reached out to help Alicia. She was still reeling after watching Alicia nearly killed protecting her foal. Few people had the strength or courage to stand between two fighting horses.

Alicia turned and saw Leann standing outside the barn talking to Rhea. Rhea's face was flushed, her body rigid with anger. Alicia was through dealing with Leann, and she was going to do something about her. "I'll worry about it later. I have something to do."

Alicia stalked out of the barn past Rhea and Leann, straight into the back door of the house. It was only then that Rhea saw the blood staining the back of Alicia's shirt.

"Alicia, what the hell..." But Alicia never responded as the back door slammed shut. "Mom, what happened to Alicia?"

"She got struck by a horse hoof and..."

Sophia didn't get to finish as Alicia flew out of the back door brandishing a handgun. "Leann, I warned you if you touched Rhea I would shoot you."

Leann stood frozen as Alicia stopped ten feet from her waving the revolver in front of her. Rhea started to approach Alicia, but Sophia held her back. "This is between Alicia and Leann."

August and Mommo crowded onto the back porch watching the scene with fascination as Alicia cocked the gun and fired, a bullet slamming into the ground inches from Leann's right boot.

"Goddamn, I have been practicing for weeks. You'd think I'd be able to hit something by now."

Alicia cocked the gun again and fired at a shocked Leann, the bullet landing inches from her left boot. "Shit, I missed again."

Leann was so stunned she just stood facing Alicia, her eyes bulging. She couldn't believe Alicia was shooting at her. One more bullet hit the ground dead center of her boots.

"Jesus, I can't even hit something ten feet away. Get the hell out of here, Leann. I'm going to practice every day until I can hit you. Go on leave!" Alicia turned and walked up to the back porch the gun pointed down.

"August, Mommo, I'm sorry I fired a gun at Leann," she repented.

August grinned at Alicia and spoke, "That was some damn skippy shooting."

Alicia's mouth turned up at the corners as she handed the gun handle first to August. "It was, wasn't it?"

"Come here, baby. Let's get you cleaned up." Mommo gently led Alicia into the kitchen.

Sophia turned to Rhea anticipating her reaction. She wasn't disappointed. "Leann, get the hell off of our property. You're not welcome here."

"She shot at me," Leann pouted. She knew that Alicia's shooting was deliberate. She could have put a bullet anywhere she wanted. It took enormous skill to put three bullets exactly where those had landed. She had terrified Leann.

"I'm sure you can understand her reaction after you tried to get her hurt or killed," Sophia responded, anger making her voice shaky.

"Mom, what are you talking about?" Rhea had no idea what her mother meant. She could understand that Alicia was angry with Leann for getting into bed with her, but Sophia's comment made no sense at all.

"I'll leave. I didn't mean to hurt her. I only meant to scare her into leaving," Leann spoke as she headed toward her car.

"Leann let one of the stallions loose in the corral with Alicia and Gentle Walker with a mare." Sophia's words burst from her explosively.

"Jesus, Mom." Rhea knew what two stallions could do. She had seen it more than once.

"Alicia took a hoof in the back of her shoulder while she kept the stallions apart. She stayed between them and controlled her stallion until Jake and I could rope the other horse and get him back to his stall."

"I have to go to her," Rhea's voice was urgent.

"Before you do, you need to think long and hard about how you see Alicia." Sophia's anger was now directed at Rhea.

"What do you mean?" Rhea looked very puzzled.



"You still consider Alicia a city girl that has made a life here with us."

"I don't understand what you mean."

"Alicia didn't miss Leann. She can shoot a gun better than most of our ranch hands. She can control my Arabian mare while riding bareback. She communicates with her foal by voice and hand signals, and she can speak in the native aboriginal language. She's as much an Australian rancher as any one of us."

"I didn't know, Mom."

"Ask yourself why," Sophia snapped. She wasn't going to let Rhea off the hook.

"I wasn't paying attention."

Sophia's voice softened seeing the hurt and pain on her daughter's face. Rhea's face was streaked with tears.

"Honey, we all don't always pay attention. We have to work hard at it. Go check on Alicia. I'm going to make sure the horses are okay. She'll want to know."

"Thanks, Mom." Rhea flew up the stairs and burst into the kitchen.

Alicia sat on a kitchen chair. Her shirt had been removed, and Mommo was gently washing the gash left by the horse's hoof. It wasn't deep but it was already swelling and showing dark bruising. August was seated next to Alicia holding her hand.

"Alicia, honey, I'm sorry." Rhea slipped into the chair next to her and reached for her other hand.

Alicia turned and smiled at Rhea. "You didn't do anything to apologize for. I don't think Leann is going to be bothering us anymore."

Rhea was still crying, but she burst into crazy laughter as she responded to Alicia's comment. "I'm sure of that. She streaked out of here like a bat out of hell."

"Good, because I don't think I could have missed her one more time."

"You always told me that good shooting depended upon motivation." Rhea's voice was full of pride.

"And I was extremely motivated." Alicia bent her head and rested it on Rhea's shoulder. "I'm pooped."

Rhea turned and planted a kiss on Alicia's nose. "You just saved the life of one, maybe two horses. They would have killed each other if you hadn't handled Gentle Walker so well."

"He's a good baby."

"Alicia, you are one of the most talented people I've ever met. You are as good a horse trainer as my mom, and you've gone out of your way to learn to speak in Mommo's native tongue. You not only belong here, you were meant to be here."

"I second that," Sophia spoke softly as she walked into the kitchen. "You were very brave when you stood between those two horses. You could have been badly injured or killed. I've have seen ranch hands shy away when two stallions go after each other."

"You wouldn't have shied away." Alicia would always measure herself against Sophia and the rest of the Camerons.

"We love you, Alicia, as a daughter, and as the woman who loves our daughter. You are a valued member of this family." August spoke softly but his words were clear and his voice full of pride.

Before Alicia could say anything more, the kitchen door flew open and Sheri came bounding in followed closely by Ted. "Alicia, are you okay? Ted and I heard you were hurt."

"I'm fine, I just barely got scratched. Be careful, you shouldn't get so excited. Remember, you're pregnant."

"I'm fine, what happened?" Ted and Sheri gaped while Mommo spread a special healing salve over the torn skin on Alicia's shoulder. Mommo reassured everyone. "She got kicked in the shoulder; she'll be fine."

"Thanks, Mommo." Alicia turned and tugged her down for a kiss.

Mommo responded with a quick retort in her own language that caused Alicia to tear up. Sophia translated for Sheri. "Mommo told Alicia she was proud of her 'daughter of the heart.'"

"You go upstairs, keep ice on your shoulder and rest. I'll bring dinner upstairs in an hour." Mommo patted Alicia on her head.

Alicia was still weeping as she replied, "I don't need to eat upstairs."

"Go!" When Mommo commanded there was no one who would go against her. Her hand, gentle on Alicia's head, took the sting out of her gruff command.

Rhea grabbed a bag of ice while Alicia accepted hugs and kisses from everyone. August began retelling the whole story to Sheri and Ted as Rhea took Alicia's elbow and led her upstairs. They entered their bedroom, and Alicia headed directly for the bed. She'd kicked her boots off downstairs. Now, all she wanted to do was get out of her jeans and what was left of the shirt hanging off her uninjured arm. Her shoulder was throbbing. Rhea knelt in front of her and began to remove her clothes.

"Why don't you stand up and I'll take your jeans off."

Alicia leaned forward and laid her cheek against Rhea's. "You're not mad at me, are you?"

"Mad at you? How could I be mad at you?" I'm so proud I can barely stand it. You stood between two angry stallions and saved both of them from being badly injured, without any thought for your own safety. Most of all, you calmly shot three perfectly placed bullets in the ground around Leann's feet and scared the hell out of her. She knows you aren't a city girl any longer. I love you Alicia, and I am so glad you're my partner. I think you're amazing."

"I love you, Rhea."

"Alicia, I not only love you, I respect you so much. You can do anything you put your mind to."

They kissed slowly as Rhea gingerly held her lover. Alicia pulled away from Rhea, an impish grin on her face. "I really did terrify Leann."

"Yes, you did," Rhea chuckled. "She isn't going to bother us again."

"Then it was worth it."

"Yes, it was. Now, will you get into bed with this ice bag? We need to keep the swelling down on your shoulder."

"You know, I am feeling a little tired."

"Tell you what. You curl up on your stomach, and I'll put the ice bag on your shoulder. I want you to close your eyes. And Alicia, remind me not to piss you off."

"Damn right, I'd have to shoot you."

Rhea smiled as she helped Alicia get comfortable. Alicia slid under the covers and felt the ice pack cool against her shoulder. Rhea sat next to her on the bed as Alicia quickly dropped off to sleep. Rhea waited until she could tell by her regular breathing that she was sound asleep before she returned downstairs.

Sophia and August were sitting in the living with a drink, Ted and Sheri had gone home, and Mommo was preparing dinner. Rhea walked heavily into the living room and slumped onto the couch next to her mom.

"Alicia is asleep."

"Good. She's going to be very sore by morning. She was badly shaken up. Try to keep her in bed."

"I know. I will."

"That was some fancy shooting," August commented, sipping his whiskey.

"She put the bullets exactly where she wanted them." Rhea grinned at her dad.

"She scared the hell out of Leann," Sophia chortled gleefully.

"Leann can't call her a city girl any more."

"No one can," August commented, puffing on his cigar. "There aren't many people who could have done what she did today."

"She could have been killed." Rhea's face was stark with fear. "Jesus, Mom and Dad, she could have been killed. What was Leann thinking?"

"Leann is an idiot. And yes, she could have been killed, but Alicia knew her horse well and she controlled him until we could get the other stallion out of the corral. She's a very talented horse trainer. She has the gift," Sophia reminded them.

"She has more than a gift. I can't believe everything she is able to do. Her art work is incredible, but more than that she's gone out of her way to make herself fit in." Rhea spoke softly, her voice full of love and caring.

"Everyone on the ranch loves and respects her," Sophia commented.

"She's a hard person not to love," Rhea responded.

After a few moments of silence, Rhea spoke again. "I'm going to go give Mommo a hand in the kitchen."

Rhea found Mommo working at the kitchen counter. She inched her arms around Mommo's ample waist and hugged. "Thanks for taking care of Alicia."

"How is she?"

"She's sound sleep."

"Good, she needs it."

"Can I help you with dinner?"

"You cut up the potatoes for French fries."

Rhea grinned at Mommo. They were Alicia's favorites. "Alicia loves you Mommo."

"I love her. She's a daughter of my heart, like you."

"I love you, Mommo."

"Go, cut up the potatoes." Mommo patted Rhea before pushing her toward the pile of potatoes.

Rhea couldn't help humming as she worked. She felt incredibly lucky with her life. She had a wonderful girlfriend and a family that she was very proud of. She and Alicia did belong here. An hour later Rhea went upstairs with another ice bag and to check on Alicia. Alicia was still sleeping soundly though her shoulder was very swollen and black and blue. It was warm to the touch and Rhea knew it was going to hurt like hell.

She went back downstairs where her parents were eating in the dining room. "She's still sound asleep."

“Sit down and eat.”

Rhea sat down and had a cozy meal with her parents. They talked about the workings of the ranch and enjoyed each other’s company. They avoided talking about the day’s activities and kept things light. Rhea went upstairs a little while later to find Alicia still sound asleep. She took a quick shower, slipped her nightshirt on, and climbed into bed next to Alicia, a good book in her hand. Around nine she replaced Alicia’s ice bag and climbed back into bed.

“What time is it?” Alicia’s voice was fuzzy with sleep, as she began to stir.

“It’s a little after nine. How’re you feeling?”

“Okay.” Alicia rolled over and tried to sit up. Her shoulder bumped into the pillow and she winced in pain.

“Honey, your shoulder is really bruised and swollen.”

“It hurts like the dickens.”

“I’m not surprised. Are you hungry?”

“A little.”

“Mommo made fried potatoes for you with ham steaks.”

“That is so nice of her, but I don’t think I could eat that much. My stomach is a little upset.”

“How about a peanut butter sandwich and a glass of milk?” It was Alicia’s very favorite meal.

“That would be perfect. Let me throw on my robe and I’ll come down with you.”

“You can stay right here. I’ll bring everything back upstairs.”

“I can get up.”

“I know you can, but do me a great big favor and stay up here, please.” Rhea bent over and dropped a light kiss on Alicia’s lips.

“I will if you kiss me again.” Alicia’s eyes were glazed with pain but she still looked at her lover with emotion so strong it made Rhea’s heart beat faster.

“My pleasure.” Rhea kissed Alicia slowly, her tongue sliding into her mouth and tasting the flavor of her lover. Soft, wet, and full, the kiss went on and on.

“God, I love how you kiss me,” Alicia whispered against Rhea’s mouth.

“As much as I love your mouth on mine. I’m so glad we found each other.” They spent several moments holding each other and sharing another kiss. Rhea knew how close she had come to losing her, and Alicia was thinking that they had finally purged Leann from their lives.

“Okay, it’s one peanut butter sandwich coming up. Don’t go anywhere.” Rhea ran downstairs while Alicia swung her legs around to get up. She pushed up with her right arm and cried out in pain. She stood up slowly and walked

carefully to her armoire to find a tee shirt. After the painful effort of putting it over her head, she went into the bathroom to clean up.

Rhea entered the kitchen to find her mother sitting at the table with a cup of tea. "Mom, is everything okay?"

Sophia smiled up at her daughter. "Yes, honey. I'm just having a cup of tea before going to bed. How's Alicia?"

"She's black and blue, very swollen, and extremely sore. I'm going to fix her a peanut butter sandwich and a glass of milk."

"She's very lucky, I'm very glad she wasn't hurt much worse."

"I am too."

"I'm going to go up and poke my head in before I turn in for the night. I need to talk to you about something first, though."

"Okay." Rhea sat down and waited for her mother to continue.

"I want to put Alicia in charge of the Arabian breeding and training program. I'll continue to be an active participant for a while, but eventually I'll turn it over to her completely. You and Ted have the ranch, the cargo business, and the mines, and Sheri has her jewelry business."

Rhea was so moved she couldn't speak. She finally responded, "Are you sure Sheri and Ted will agree to this?"

"I've already spoken to them and August. We all agree that Alicia is the perfect person to handle it."

"Well, then I suggest you ask Alicia what she thinks." Rhea hugged her tiny mother tightly. "I love you, Mom."

"I love you, too. Now, finish making your sandwich while I go talk to Alicia."

Alicia finished up in the bathroom and was just sitting down on the bed when Sophia knocked on her door. "Can I come in?"

"Of course you can." Alicia started to stand up.

"Don't get up, honey. I just wanted to see how you're feeling."

"I'm pretty sore. I'm sure I'll be better in a couple of days."

"Alicia, I personally wanted to thank you again for keeping both colts from harm."

"You don't have to thank me—you would have done the same thing."

I've spoken to August and the rest of the family, and I would like to turn the Arabian breeding and training program over to you."

"I, I, but it's yours," Alicia stammered, completely stunned.

"And it will be yours. I'll still help you, but August and I want to retire. We want to travel and spend more time together. The question I have for you is, do you want the business? It will take a lot of time away from your art work."

"I would love to take care of the Arabians, but I don't know anything about raising horses."

"You already know how to begin their training and how to deliver a foal. And you'll learn much more."

"I'd be honored to learn the business."

"Then it's settled. I'll leave you to get some sleep." Sophia kissed Alicia's cheek.

Rhea had been waiting in the hallway for her mother and Alicia to finish talking. "Here is your dinner, my lady."

Sophia patted Rhea on the arm as she left the bedroom. Rhea approached the bed and found Alicia crying. "Honey, what's wrong?"

"Your mom just told me she's giving me the Arabian horse breeding and training business."

"I know." Rhea grinned at her. "What did you say?"

"I said I'd do it." Alicia began to cry in earnest.

"Honey, congratulations, you'll be great at it. Could you please stop crying?"

"Everything is just so perfect, you, the ranch, the horses."

"Will you be able to keep up with your art work?"

"I think so. I'll just have to make the time."

"I love you, sweetie. How about you eat your sandwich and get some rest?"

"Will you come and sit with me?"

"Of course I will."

Rhea climbed into bed next to Alicia. Alicia leaned her head on Rhea's shoulder. "I love you, Rhea."

"I love you; now eat your sandwich and keep your strength up."

## CHAPTER 21

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“How’s she feeling?”

“Awful. She’s going to stay in bed. I’m going to bring her a cup of tea and some toast, along with another ice bag. Her shoulder is so swollen she can’t move it, and it’s horribly bruised.”

“I’ll bring everything upstairs. Take this ice bag back up.”

“Thanks, Mommo.”

“Don’t thank me. Go on up and get Alicia comfortable.”

“Yes, ma’am. Where are Dad and Mom?”

“Your mom went to see to the horses and your dad is in his office.”

“I’ll take this up to Alicia and come back down for her tea and toast.”

“I’ll bring it up. Go.”

Rhea grinned at Mommo as she turned to go upstairs. When Mommo wanted you to do something, you didn’t go against her more than once. Rhea had learned as a young child that Mommo was not to be messed with. She also had an uncanny ability to know exactly what young kids were up to. She used that same talent with adults.

“Rhea, can I speak to you for minute?” August stood in the doorway of his office.

“Sure Dad.”

“How’s Alicia?”

“She’s very sore and bruised. She’s going to stay in bed for awhile. I’m taking an ice bag up to her.”

“Do you mind if I come up with you?”

“Not at all. What did you want to talk to me about?”

“I want to talk to you both together.”



Rhea was puzzled by her dad but remained silent until she entered the dimly lit bedroom. "Alicia honey, Dad wants to speak to us for a minute."

"Okay, let me sit up." It was obvious that moving was a painful struggle. "Here, let me help you." Rhea gently tucked a pillow behind Alicia's back. "I brought an ice bag for you."

"Thanks."

August didn't miss the grimace of pain on Alicia's face when Rhea placed the icy compress against her shoulder. "Alicia, I won't bother you too long, I just wanted to speak to the two of you for one minute."

"Take as long as you want."

Rhea sat down next to Alicia and held her hand as she watched her father for any indication of his feelings.

August drew a deep breath. "I need to apologize to my daughter in front of you, Alicia. I kicked Rhea out of the house so many years ago because of my own stupidity and stubbornness. I drove her away from her home and her family. I'm terribly sorry for that. I missed out on years of her company. One thing I now know for sure is that my daughter has chosen a partner that not only is smart and talented, but someone her mother and I respect and love very much."

Rhea had begun to weep, and Alicia's face was tearful as they listened without speaking. They were both overwhelmed by August's softly spoken words. "Sophia and I spoke last night and we wanted to tell you both that we're going to help you with your commitment ceremony. We love both of you very much, and would be honored if you would let us be a major part of it."

Alicia tightened her grip on Rhea's hand as she watched her girlfriend struggle to speak. "We would love to have you both be a part of our ceremony, Dad. We love you."

August's face filled with raw emotion before he relaxed. "Good. Now I'll leave you alone."

Alicia spoke before August could leave. "August, could I have a hug?"

His smile was broad as he approached her and gently hugged her. "I'm glad you're going to be okay, lassie."

"I love you, August."

Rhea got to her feet and met her dad as he stood up. She wrapped her arms around him and hugged him tightly; his arms surrounded her and returned the hug. "I'm sorry too. I love you, Dad."

"I love you, little girl. You let me know if you and Alicia need anything." He turned and left the room.

Rhea turned to face Alicia and then knelt next to her bedside, smiling. “I guess you’re stuck with me.”

“Yep, because I’d shoot you if you ever tried to get away.” Alicia grinned as she leaned over to give Rhea a kiss.

Rhea laughed as she kissed her back. She had seen firsthand Alicia’s talent with a gun. It wasn’t just an idle boast.

## CHAPTER 22

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“Come on sis, let’s head home. I’m exhausted.”

“So am I, let alone filthy.”

“It’s worth it. We can all go to Sidney for the opening of Australia’s Best Artists and not worry about the ranch.”

“I’m really pleased that you and Sheri are going.”

“I wouldn’t miss Alicia’s first showing. Her artwork is phenomenal. Besides, she’s family.”

“I’m glad she went ahead with Sheri, Mom, and Dad. She was so damn nervous.”

“It’s understandable since she was chosen as one of Australia’s ten best artists. She showed her work to only one of the committee members. It’s quite an honor.”

“Let’s get back to the ranch and get a good night’s sleep. We need to be in Sydney by five tomorrow. The reception starts at six.” Rhea urged her horse into a trot.

“If we leave first thing in the morning we’ll get there by lunch. It’s amazing that you convinced Mommo and Ebu to fly on the plane with us. It’s important that Mommo be there. Alicia’s most famous piece of artwork is of Mommo and the women she grew up with. It’s unbelievably moving.”

“All of her pieces are.”

“Does she suspect that Sheri made her something special for the night?”

“Not at all.”

“When do you plan to give it to her?”

“Right before we go down to the reception.”

“Race you back to the barn,” Ted challenged as he kicked his horse into a run.

“You’re on!” Rhea could never resist a contest, and she commanded her own horse to gallop and tore after her brother.

Rhea and Ted didn’t land their plane until one the following afternoon. They immediately got Mommo and Ebu to the hotel so that Mommo could calm down. She’d been a nervous wreck during the whole flight, alternately praying and swearing for the whole trip. Ted headed to his own room to catch up with his wife while Rhea found her hotel room and looked for Alicia. She wanted some quality time with her girlfriend before the reception. She felt disappointment well up inside her when she found the room empty. She unpacked her things and prepared to climb into the shower. A knock on the door caught her as she was beginning to undress.

“Yes?”

Alicia stood outside the door pushing a cart with a pot of tea on it. “Room service, ma’am. I’m here to take care of your every need.”

Rhea grinned happily at her as Alicia came into the room and pushed the cart to the side of the bed. “What services are available?”

“Let’s see, I think I can provide a full pleasure package if you’re interested.” Alicia’s fingers rapidly unbuttoned Rhea’s shirt and unhooked her bra, her mouth finding her nipple and teasing it with her tongue.

Rhea groaned as Alicia unzipped her pants and slid her hand between her legs. It had been several days since they had seen each other, and Rhea was already hard and throbbing with need. Alicia pushed her jeans down her hips along with her panties—just far enough to give her the room she needed—and she thrust her fingers into Rhea’s body, meeting her mouth with a kiss that rocked Rhea with its intensity. Alicia’s mouth plundered as she rapidly brought Rhea to an orgasm that enveloped her entire body. That wasn’t enough for Alicia. She walked Rhea backwards to the bed and pushed her back before tugging her boots and the rest of her clothes off.

“I want you naked,” Alicia whispered as she lifted Rhea’s legs up and placed her feet next to her thighs. She kneeled down between her legs and covered Rhea’s trembling center with her mouth. Her tongue stroked, and she fed on the pulsating clitoris until Rhea all but screamed with her release. Alicia was relentless as she drove her up again until she could go on no longer.

“Enough, honey. I can’t again.”

Alicia kissed her way up Rhea's lean figure until she lay next to her on the bed. "You taste so good."

Rhea opened her eyes and looked into the smiling face of her lover. "I don't even know my name after that."

"Its *Sexy Cowgirl*, and I'm going to let you rest for just a few minutes before we start up again."

"Don't you think it would be more fun if you were naked?"

"We'll get to that, but I'm not done with you yet."

Rhea's eyes glittered as Alicia's fingertips played with her nipples and stroked her breasts. Her eyes didn't leave Rhea's face but her hands covered every inch of her breasts and stomach before sliding down both of her thighs. The slow kindling of passion was too much for Rhea and her hips began to move on the bed in anticipation. Alicia's fingers touched her drenched center and she held them tightly against Rhea as Rhea arched her hips and pushed against Alicia's hand. She ground herself against Alicia's palm as she cried out her need.

"Please honey, I want you inside me."

Alicia penetrated Rhea so swiftly she had to bite back a scream as she was infused with heat. Her body jerked against Alicia's hand, their eyes locked on one another's as Alicia watched the play of emotion across Rhea's face.

"I love you, Rhea." Her lips kissed her slowly as she felt the release of Rhea's body once more.

Rhea was too overcome to respond, as her eyes dropped shut and she shuddered. Alicia rolled on top of Rhea and held her close as she lay spent and drained.

It was quite a few minutes before either woman spoke. Finally Rhea gasped. "Well, that was certainly the best welcome I've ever received."

"I missed you, cowgirl." Alicia hugged her girlfriend tightly.

"How long do we have until we need to be downstairs for the reception?"

"We're going to meet everyone at five and it's a little after one now. I thought we could take a nice long nap. I have a wakeup call scheduled for four."

"A nap?" Rhea rolled Alicia over on the bed. "I'm not very tired."

"What have you got in mind?" Alicia grinned up at Rhea.

"I think we should take your clothes off and then you need to join me in the shower."

"I like that plan."

Alicia was out of her clothes and in the shower within minutes as she stepped in behind Rhea and slid her arms around her. "Have I told you how

much I love your body? You are so strong and athletic looking. I just can't seem to keep my hands off you."

"I want your hands on me, but it's my turn to show you how much I love your body." Rhea turned and dropped to her knees in front of Alicia. She lifted Alicia's thigh up and rested it on her shoulder as she lapped at the very center of her, sliding her tongue the length of Alicia's wet and trembling lips.

"Oh, God, I've missed you so much." Alicia tried to control her reactions but she'd gone over a week without making love with Rhea and her reaction was immediate. "Now, honey, please?"

Rhea's tongue darted in and out of Alicia's body as her fingertip played with her anus, and Alicia was lost. Her hands clenched Rhea's shoulders as she leaned back against the shower wall for support. Rhea dropped her thigh off of her shoulder and stood up, turning Alicia until she was facing the wall. Her fingers slid between her buttocks before entering Alicia deeply. Her other hand reached around and pulled Alicia tight against her body. She rolled her hips hard against Alicia's, her fingers pumping in and out of her. Alicia reached up and flung her arms around Rhea's neck, her head thrown back on her shoulder. The two women made love blindly until both Alicia and Rhea slumped against each another for support.

"I'm not finished yet," Rhea stated as she turned Alicia around to face her again. She reached down and lifted Alicia up until her legs were wrapped around Rhea's hips. "Hold onto me."

Rhea and Alicia kissed with a hunger that neither woman expected while Rhea thrust two fingers deep into Alicia again and again. Alicia rocked against Rhea in perfect harmony, stroking as the slap of their bodies echoed in the bathroom.

"That's it, baby, I love being inside you."

Alicia welcomed the tight fit as she rode her until she could no longer hold back the all-consuming orgasm that rippled through her body. She trembled in Rhea's arms as she was buffeted over and over. Their lovemaking reached the perfect culmination. Her legs slid down Rhea's as Rhea pulled her fingers from deep inside her. Rhea tightened her arms around Alicia as they stood embracing.

"How do you do that to me?" Alicia asked with a smile as she placed gentle kisses on Rhea's face. "You make me crazy."

"I'm supposed to make you crazy. I love you."

"I love you so much, Rhea. Can you believe how wonderful our life is? I feel so lucky to have your family and Mommo and her family."

"They are as much your family as mine."

"I know, and that makes them so special."

"We are lucky," Rhea agreed as she leisurely soaped Alicia's body. "Now, are you going to tell me how your art work looks on the walls of the gallery?"

"It looks good. I'm proud of the work I did, and it fits with the other artists very well. With Mommo and her family as the central theme, I really think I've emphasized how important it is to preserve the aboriginal culture."

"Abo told me you are considered a sacred woman artist to Mommo's tribe."

"I didn't do anything other than draw what I saw," Alicia flushed with feeling.

"You breathed life and love into your illustrations, Alicia. There isn't a person in the world that could look at what you created and not see how much love and honor you have for Mommo and her family."

Alicia gazed up at her lover. "It means so much to me that you could see that."

"Honey, I see everything about you. You do everything with a full heart, and I've always found it amazing that you see so much more than anyone else. You are an artist in everything you do, whether it's illustration, training horses, or loving me."

"You're going to spoil me," Alicia smiled up at Rhea.

"No, I'm going to love you for the rest of your life," Rhea picked up Alicia's right hand and kissed her ring.

They took their time showering and then collapsed into bed, wrapped their arms around each other, and quickly went to sleep. Neither woke up until the telephone jangled noisily.

"Hello."

"This is your four o'clock wake up call."

"Thank you."

Rhea rolled over and watched as Alicia slept on undisturbed. Her hair was loose and full of curls all the way down to the middle of her back, her face flushed from sleep. Her hands were tucked under her pillow, and she was flat on her stomach. She slept like that when she was relaxed and it made Rhea react with emotion. She had never in her wildest dreams thought that she would find a woman who would match her so perfectly. She reached out and touched Alicia's hair as it lay streaming down her shoulders to the top of her hips.

"Honey, it's time to wake up," Rhea spoke softly as she ran her hand down Alicia's back.

“Already?”

“It’s four, and I don’t want our artist to be late to her own reception.”

Alicia sat up and got to her feet. Rhea lay back against the pillows, her own long hair in a dark stream, the sheet up to her waist. She was still smiling up at Alicia.

“Come on sexy, if you don’t cover up I’ll be late.”

Rhea just laughed and pulled the sheet up. “You use the bathroom first.”

Alicia strolled around to Rhea’s side of the bed and bent over planting a big kiss on her lips. “Thanks for the lovely afternoon, cowgirl. When you are back in town again, give me a call.”

Rhea chuckled, watching Alicia’s sleek backside as she walked into the bathroom. She got up and went to her luggage. She pulled out her suit for the reception and hung it in the closet. She grabbed a tee shirt to wear while she ironed out the wrinkles in her outfit. Alicia spent twenty minutes in the bathroom before emerging with her makeup on and her hair pinned up on the back of her head. She walked naked to the dresser and pulled underwear out, preparing to dress. Rhea watched her the whole time as she slipped into her bra and panties. Alicia finally looked up and caught Rhea staring at her.

“Honey, you need to go get ready, unless you’re wearing that tee shirt.”

“I will. I just can’t believe how much I love looking at you. I don’t think I’ll ever tire of seeing you naked.”

“I feel the same way about you. Now, get your gorgeous butt in the bathroom.” Alicia’s smile was indulgent as she ushered Rhea into the bathroom. Rhea took her advice. Thirty minutes later both women were dressed and preparing to leave the hotel room. They were elegantly attired, Rhea in a formal silk suit the color of melon, and Alicia wearing a long evening gown in deep emerald green, swirls of cream adding a special flair. Alicia was just putting her opal earrings on when Rhea stepped up to her with a small, beautifully wrapped package.

“I thought you might like something to remember your night.”

“I have you here. That’s all that matters.” Alicia leaned up and kissed Rhea’s cheek.

“This will help make it even more special.” Rhea handed the package to her.

Alicia tore the wrapping away and opened the black velvet jewelry box that she knew well. Sheri’s one-of-a-kind jewelry was always sold in the same type of box. She flipped up the lid and gasped. Glowing against the black background was a gold broach. It was a stylized galloping horse about one by two



inches with a gold quill pen as the base. The stunning pin was inset with black opals that flashed fire. Alicia felt the tears start as she continued to stare.

"It's incredible," she whispered reverently. Sheri's talent was enormous; her jewelry pieces works of art.

Rhea tilted Alicia's chin up until she was looking at her. "I want you to know how proud I am of what you have accomplished since we made our home in Australia. No one could have done more to become a part of the ranch than you have. This gift is from your family, and we all feel blessed to be a part of your celebration."

"I don't know what to say," Alicia cried as she looked up at Rhea.

"Tell me you love me and let's get downstairs before you melt off your beautiful makeup."

"I love you so much, honey. You are my heart and soul."

"You are mine. Now, let's wipe those tears away and get downstairs before we're late."

## CHAPTER 23

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The art show, reception, and dinner were more successful than anyone could have imagined. The crowd was thrilled with the creative work that highlighted ranch life in Australia. Selected pieces were chosen to go on a tour throughout the country before being presented at a show in London eight months later. All the artists were expected to attend the London affair, and Alicia and her family were already making plans for the trip. Several respected art critics had called Alicia's work refreshing, exceptional, and stunning, and several of her illustrations were sold during the evening. Since all the proceeds were donated to the preservation of Australia's history, people were willing to spend hundreds of thousands of dollars to own one of the pictures after the tour was over. Alicia was beyond thrilled; she was in shock. Gallery owners from far and near approached her hopeful of wooing her into their stable of artists. She was so overwhelmed, she declined to answer until she and her family could discuss the offers. Alicia was floating on a cloud. She couldn't take everything in during the evening. She was overflowing with emotion. Her life was so perfect. She felt like God had given her a gift, and she intended to treasure it.

"August, I can't believe this night is happening," Alicia bubbled as they took a break from the crowd and sipped champagne on the open-air terrace.

"Honey, you've earned every bit of this attention. I've never met anyone who works as hard as you do."

"You, Sophia—your whole family works hard."

"Alicia, you're a part of our family and I would expect nothing less from you. What I didn't expect was that we would all love you within a week of your arrival here. You're an exceptional woman and one I'm glad my daughter chose as a partner. You'll also keep Rhea out of mischief."

Alicia stood against the tall rancher. "I love you, August."

"I love you. Now, let's rejoin the party. This is a night for revelry."

Rhea watched her father and Alicia, her heart full of love for both of them. He embraced her tiny body and turned her around. "Go with your girlfriend and have some fun."

Rhea grinned at her dad as the three of them re-entered the crowded ball-room.

"Where's your mother, Rhea?"

"She's talking to Ambassador Tindel."

"That Yank from the United States?"

"Yes, he was talking about trying to get the tour to go to New York City."

"Let's go save her from him."

It was well after two in the morning before Rhea and Alicia finally returned to their hotel room. Both women were beyond exhaustion as they peeled off their evening clothes.

"I'm so tired I think I could sleep for a week."

"Honey, we don't have to be anywhere in the morning. We aren't going to meet everyone for lunch until one."

"Good, I want to get in bed with you and sleep for hours."

"Sounds heavenly."

Rhea and Alicia didn't delay as they climbed under their covers and reached for each other. Alicia rolled over onto Rhea's side of the bed and snuggled tightly against her. Rhea's arm tightened around Alicia's waist, and they slept immediately, neither woman stirring all night long.

It was well after ten in the morning before they woke up. Rhea stretched and hugged Alicia more closely to her, unwilling to give up their morning together. Alicia moved closer to Rhea, her hand sliding across Rhea's stomach and roaming over her chest, brushing her nipples with her fingertips before cupping Rhea's breast.

Passion bubbled through Rhea's body as she reacted to Alicia's touch. "I love waking up touching you."

Rhea smiled as Alicia moved on top of her, her eyes still closed. "I thought you wanted to sleep in."

"Oh no, I just wanted to stay in bed with you for as long as possible." Alicia sat up, straddling Rhea's hips. She bent over and covered Rhea's mouth with her own. Need welled up in Rhea as Alicia's hungry mouth nibbled on her lips. Her teeth caught Rhea's lower lip and nibbled her before sliding her tongue

across it to soothe. Rhea's tongue slid into Alicia's mouth tasting her as she met Alicia's voracious kisses with her own. Alicia's lips covered Rhea's face with soft, gentle kisses, before moving on to her neck and nipping her ear lobe, drawing a hiss from Rhea.

"Don't move, honey," Alicia breathed against her mouth as her hands raced quickly over her shoulders and arms while Rhea enjoyed her attentions. "I missed touching you this week."

Alicia's hands were everywhere, as was her mouth, her teeth capturing a nipple before soothing it with a stroke of her tongue. Fingertips tracing over the slack muscles of thighs and hips, memorizing the shape and texture of skin, she ran her tongue along Rhea's cleavage and nuzzled under her heavy breasts where she was most sensitive. Alicia listened to Rhea's breathing to know just where and how long to touch her.

Rhea was steeped in passion so thick she couldn't move, her body open and welcoming. Alicia made love to her perfectly. "Honey, roll over."

Rhea turned over and lay flat on the bed as Alicia once again straddled her hips. Her kisses began on the tops of Rhea's shoulders and the back of her neck. Her fingers gathered Rhea's hair and pushed it out of the way as she tasted the tender skin below her ear. Fingers stroked the defined muscles and silken skin of her lover as she wooed Rhea with her touch. Alicia loved Rhea's long lean body, and she wanted to cover every inch with kisses.

It took Alicia over an hour to completely kiss Rhea from head to toe and by that time Rhea was in such a state of readiness that she could only beg as Alicia's hands grasped her buttocks and her tongue probed between her cheeks.

"Alicia, please." She cried as she shivered with anticipation.

"Tell me what you want," Alicia's breath tickled the back of Rhea's thighs as she kissed her slowly.

"I want your mouth on me."

"Roll over, sweetie."

Rhea rolled onto her back as Alicia's lips left a trail of kisses along her hip and her fingertips touched her waiting center. Alicia's tongue tasted her and her fingers filled her completely. Rhea's body tensed against Alicia's fingers and welcomed her with drenching wetness, as she arched up against Alicia's probing mouth. The pleasurable ache between Rhea's legs grew in intensity as Alicia filled her over and over until she exploded with a cry. Again Alicia drove up against her as she suckled her swollen organ.

Rhea's hands grasped Alicia's shoulders as she experienced a series of orgasms that left her totally breathless.

“Honey, I need to hold you,” she managed to gasp.

“I’m right here, baby.” Alicia snaked up Rhea’s body and wrapped her arms around her shoulders, tucking her face against Rhea’s. “I love you.”

“God, I love you so damn much.” Rhea rolled Alicia over onto her back and kissed her as she moved her hands down her torso to her hips and legs. She pulled Alicia’s legs up and rocked her hips against her as she ground her wet center against Alicia’s waiting body. Rhea knew what Alicia enjoyed, and she was going to love her completely. Rhea squeezed her hand between their bodies and entered Alicia fully. Rhea raised her hips as she teased Alicia closer to an orgasm. Her strokes were slow and deep, just like Alicia wanted, and Rhea felt intense pleasure of her own as she made love to Alicia.

Alicia moaned softly as she moved closer and closer to that perfect plane where love and physical pleasure connect. Her hands grasped Rhea’s buttocks and pulled her tighter against her hips. She needed the closest of connections with Rhea. Rhea slid her fingers out and spread Alicia open against her own wet center. The instant they touched Alicia began to moan as Rhea pressed herself against her and held still to prolong the exquisite moment that both of them were experiencing.

“Rhea, please,” Alicia whispered against Rhea’s mouth before kissing her deeply. Rhea opened her mouth to Alicia’s tongue as she brought her hips hard against Alicia’s over and over. Alicia’s hips met Rhea’s in the same intense rhythm, as she began to gasp and tense against Rhea before going limp on the bed, her body slack. Rhea lay on top of her, breathing hard, as she too was overwhelmed with her body’s reaction. Her hand reached up, her fingers threaded into Alicia’s hair, and she closed her eyes relishing the feeling.

They both dozed off, Rhea clutching a strand of Alicia’s hair, and Alicia’s arms locked around Rhea’s waist. They stayed asleep for another hour and a half before waking up and cuddling for a long time. It was moments like this that made both women feel extremely blessed with their lives and love.

## CHAPTER 24

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Life on the ranch was comfortably normal again, as Rhea and Ted managed everything competently. Sheri grew larger by the week. She was finally over her morning sickness and had moved into the placid *I'm-enjoying-every-minute-of-this-pregnancy* phase. She would spend most afternoons at work side by side with Alicia in her studio. They visited while Alicia sketched and Sheri designed her jewelry. They had developed a friendship that included long, comfortable silences and lots of laughter.

"Ladies, can I interrupt you a minute?" August poked his head in.

"Of course." They both looked up expectantly.

"Sophia and I are going to take a week or so and go to Paris. Do you think the two of you could keep my children out of trouble until we get back?"

Alicia chuckled and Sheri grinned as she replied, "It's a tough job but we'll certainly do our best."

"I knew you were up to the task. We're going to leave on Sunday morning and should be back in about a week to ten days."

"Sounds like fun."

"Sophia wants to do some shopping, and I'm going to tag along."

"Shopping, huh! A week in the most romantic city in the world and Sophia wants to shop? August, you must be slipping," Sheri teased the huge man.

"Just you wait. Sophia is going to be swept off her feet again."

"I'm going to be what?" Sophia walked into the room, a small smile on her face.

"I told them I'm going to sweep you off your feet in Paris like I did when you agreed to marry me."

"You certainly didn't sweep me off my feet!" Sophia snorted.

Sheri nodded wisely. She had heard the story of the courtship but Alicia had not, and it was worth hearing.

"Sophia, tell Alicia how you came to meet and marry August."

Sophia pulled up a chair and sat down. "This is going to be a long story; you might want to make yourselves comfortable."

August moved to the door looking a little disconcerted.

"August, where are you going?" Sheri asked, knowing full well that he didn't want to stay and hear Sophia's story.

"I have details to take care of before we leave." He made a quick getaway.

"He hates it when I tell my version," Sophia grinned mischievously.

"I was attending college in Sidney and was in my second year. I was studying to be a teacher. I always thought teaching was a noble profession. I had just become engaged to a nice young man studying to be a doctor. His name was Leonard Jarvis. He was the son of a wealthy family, and he was due to graduate that year and start attending medical school."

"You were engaged to someone else?"

"Yes, we had known each other since we were young, and it had always been expected that we would marry when the time was right. Before my parents passed away they had given the relationship their blessing."

"Did you love him?"

"Not in the way that two people should if they're going to marry. But I didn't know any better," Sophia sighed. "There was a huge party to celebrate our engagement and Leonard invited several of his college buddies. August was attending college at the same time getting a business degree. He was also four months from graduating."

"I bet August was handsome when he was younger," Alicia commented.

"Oh he was, and arrogant and bossy. He came to the party slightly inebriated wearing an Italian suit that fit him perfectly. Leonard introduced us, and he asked if he could dance with me. I agreed and we danced to an old fashioned waltz. Boy, could that man dance. We whirled around the dance floor until I was breathless." Sophia's face grew thoughtful as she remembered.

"I remember looking up into his golden eyes and thinking he was gorgeous. He kept staring at me, never once looking away. When the dance ended we stood still for a moment, and I started to walk back to Leonard. August grabbed my hand and pulled me to him. He made the most startling declaration."

"You can't marry Leonard," August spoke quietly, but with authority.

"Why can't I?" Sophia couldn't believe his arrogance.

“Because you’re going to marry me.”

“He said it so matter of factly that I could only stare at him, thinking he’d lost his mind.”

“What did you do?” Alicia listened raptly.

“I told him I didn’t even know him. He looked at me for the longest time and then he pulled me against him, and he kissed me.”

“He kissed you on the dance floor?” Alicia’s mouth dropped open. Sheri just grinned. She’d heard it all before.

“Right in front of my fiancé and everyone else. I struggled to get away but he just held me more tightly, thoroughly kissing me. He finally released me and I drew back my hand to slap him. He stopped my hand and held it gently in his. He looked right into my eyes and said, ‘Now you know me.’ I didn’t know whether to laugh or cry.”

“What did your fiancé do?”

“He grabbed my arm and pulled me away from August. He was going to fight him right there on the dance floor. He punched August once in the mouth, and August never raised a hand. He just stood there watching me. Some of Leonard’s friends pulled Leonard away and made August leave the party. He never said another word; he just continued to stare at me as they escorted him out.”

“Oh, wow,” Alicia commented as Sheri chortled. She knew the story got even better.

“‘Oh wow’ is right! Leonard was furious and wanted to know what I had done to encourage him. I was so angry and unnerved. I left the party and went upstairs to my room, refusing to speak to Leonard. I was also confused and overwhelmed because August’s kiss had rocked me right to my toes. I had never been kissed like that before. I stayed in my room until the party broke up and refused to speak to anyone. Around three that morning, I was lying in bed unable to sleep when a dark shadow appeared on my balcony. Before I could react with more than shocked silence, August was standing in my bedroom.” Sophia closed her eyes. She remembered the night so vividly.

“Get out! Don’t you think you’ve caused enough trouble?”

He never moved from the door, but I could see his golden eyes staring at me. “You can’t marry Leonard, lassie.”

“I am engaged to him.”

“Get unengaged and marry me.”

“I don’t know you.”



“Yes, you do. I’m the son of a successful sheep rancher. My full name is August Cameron, and I will love you for the rest of your life.”

“August, you can’t just come into my room and tell me that. I’ve never met you before.”

“We are meant to be together. You felt it. I know you did.”

“I was scared, but August was right. When he kissed me I had felt something I had never felt before. He crossed the room and picked me up in his arms kissing me again. That kiss lasted for a long time, and then he put me back on my feet and started to leave my room. The last thing he said to me was, ‘You know I’m right. We’re meant for each other.’ He slipped out of my bedroom and was gone.”

“What did you do next?” Alicia asked, her eyes wide with anticipation.

“Nothing, I never told anyone what happened. I went on with my life for the next month like it hadn’t happened. There was only one problem. Every time Leonard kissed me, I felt nothing. Four weeks to the day of the party, I was back at college studying for an exam. It was about ten o’clock at night when someone knocked on my door. It was August and he was holding a bouquet of red roses. He handed them to me with a flourish and a little bow, wished me luck on my test, and walked away. The following week I received a box of chocolates, the following week a bushel of peaches. Somehow he knew I loved peaches. The more often he showed up, the more enamored of him I became. He never said anything other than that he was thinking of me, and he always gave me that smile. After five weeks of gifts, I was going out of my mind. Not only was I *not* in love with my fiancé, but I had fallen in love with August.”

Sophia smiled at her memories as Alicia and Sheri waited for her to continue. “I was so mixed up, and I had no one to talk to about it. Both my parents had passed away, and I had no brothers and sisters. My best friend was Leonard’s sister, so I couldn’t tell her what was going on. I didn’t know what to do. Late one evening I was sitting in my room after spending a miserable evening with Leonard and his family. I realized that I couldn’t marry Leonard and I needed to tell him so. All of a sudden August was standing in my room, his golden eyes staring at me. I stood up and was going to tell him to leave, but my heart told me differently, and I rushed into his arms. He kissed me, and I told him I loved him. He laughed and said he knew that and then he picked me up and carried me to my bed. We made love all night, and I knew what I had to do. I made August leave early the next morning, and I promised him that I would marry him after I told Leonard that our engagement was over. That’s when everything became messy. My aunt and uncle were my guardians, and

when I went to them and told them I wasn't going to marry Leonard, they were furious. They wouldn't listen to me when I tried to explain. I told Leonard I wasn't in love with him and I couldn't marry him. He didn't care. He was going to marry me, and I wasn't allowed a say in the matter. My uncle and Leonard were adamant."

"You must have been heartbroken," Alicia said, taking Sophia's hand.

"I was scared and angry more than anything. It wasn't like I was a pauper and couldn't live on my own or make my own decisions. But uncle was managing my inheritance, and I think that had a lot to do with his behavior. I had not told anyone about my promise to August. I couldn't even talk to August and tell him what was going on, because my uncle insisted I stay in their house, and I was watched like a hawk. But August was not to be stopped, and he snuck in about three weeks before graduation."

Sophia sighed as she remembered that night. "He told me not to worry about anything and to go ahead and attend Leonard's college graduation ceremony with my aunt and uncle. August was going to receive his diploma as well. He promised me that everything would be fine and, strangely enough, I believed him."

"The night of graduation I was a nervous wreck because Leonard and my uncle had moved up the wedding date to a week after graduation. I felt trapped, and I hadn't seen August for almost two weeks. I hadn't been able to tell him the plans had been changed. But I shouldn't have worried. August wouldn't let a silly thing such as a wedding stand in his way. We watched as Leonard received his diploma, and then I remember August standing up and receiving his. He was so intense, as he gazed out into the audience to where I was seated. His parents were also at the ceremony. August took his diploma in his hand and headed back toward his seat, but he didn't sit down. He strode through the crowd to where I was and pushed his way through the aisle until he stood in right in front of me. He knelt down as he grabbed my hand and spoke very loudly, 'Will you marry me Sophia?'"

"Oh my God, in front of everyone?" Alicia was shocked and thrilled.

"Yes. My uncle tried to push him away, but August waited for me to answer, and of course I said yes. August grinned at me and stood up. He picked me up out of my chair and threw me over his shoulder and made a dash for the door, Leonard and my uncle in hot pursuit. August had planned everything perfectly, and he tossed me into a waiting car and we took off. We met some of his friends who helped us get on a train, and we were gone before anyone knew what had happened. A justice of the peace just outside of Sydney married us.

August and I caught an airplane and we flew to Paris for a week and then on to Italy for another two weeks.”

“That is so romantic. What did your aunt and uncle do?”

“Nothing, what could they do? We sent a telegram to them to let them know where we were. It seems August had confided in his parents, and they met with my uncle. He was very pleased when he found out that August was a wealthy young man. Leonard’s family was very angry, but there was nothing anyone could do about the marriage. It was legal. When we came back from our honeymoon, August’s parents threw us a huge party to celebrate.”

“That’s *so* not the story that August told. He said he swept you off your feet, and you agreed to marry him immediately,” Alicia laughed, completely captivated by the story.

“August tends to overlook a lot of the details,” Sophia chuckled. “If you haven’t figured it out, August is an incurable romantic and the most stubborn man you could ever hope to find. All Camerons are stubborn.”

“Don’t I know it!” Sheri snorted. “Ted was exactly the same way.”

“How did you and Ted meet?”

“I met August and Sophia in Sydney at the jewelry store where I was working. August wanted to get some of the family opals made into jewelry. I was known for my work with opals, and he hired me to do the work. There was rather a lot of work and it was going to take a quite a bit of my time, so August suggested that I work exclusively for the Cameron family and specialize in opals from their mines. I was ecstatic, because Cameron opals are highly prized. He invited me out to the ranch and to take a tour of the working mines. I agreed, and he sent Ted in the airplane to pick me up in Sydney.”

“Did he sweep you off your feet?”

“Hardly, he was surly, unfriendly, and hadn’t bothered to change his clothes after spending two days in them. He smelled like sheep. He was not happy about having to pick up some city girl right in the middle of his busiest time at the ranch. Rhea had just graduated from high school and was preparing to go to college, so she wasn’t helping out as much as he thought she should. All in all, Ted was just plain rude the whole flight.”

“When we got to the ranch, Sophia immediately lit into him about his clothes and general appearance, and he made some smartass crack about how city girls should be able to put up with working ranchers. I got to see the legendary Sophia temper my very first day at the ranch.”

“I wasn’t that bad,” Sophia interjected. “He was being very inhospitable.”

Alicia grinned at Sophia as Sheri continued her story.

"Sophia told him in no uncertain terms that he was to go clean up and be back for dinner by six o'clock with an entirely new attitude. Ted glared at me and left. I wasn't looking forward to seeing him again."

"I was sitting in the living room with Sophia and August when Ted came in, and I was shocked at the transformation. He was even wearing a suit, of all things. He came up to me and immediately apologized for his earlier behavior, and then he smiled at me. It was like a lightning bolt hit me. He was gorgeous and sexy and I accepted his apology. Before I could say much more Rhea came bounding into the room. She was equally as sexy, and the Cameron siblings took me aback. Ted grabbed his sister in a headlock, teasing her about not helping with the shearing. It was immediately apparent that they loved each other very much. I think I fell in love with all of the Camerons at that moment."

"I remember telling them to quit behaving like unruly hooligans."

"Yes, Sophia was displeased, but August was more tolerant. Rhea was very friendly, and she, her mother and August kept the conversation moving along during dinner. Ted barely spoke, but when he did he was attentive and very articulate. He asked me several questions about my jewelry making. By the end of dinner, August suggested that Rhea and Ted take me on an early morning horse ride before we looked at the mines. I agreed, and then I went off to my room. Around ten o'clock I heard noise coming through my open window, and I went and looked out. Ted was standing outside the barn in a pair of jeans, cowboy boots, and no shirt on. He had just helped with a difficult calving. He looked so male and so sexy all I could do was stare. He looked up at me and stared back. I didn't realize then that he could see right through my nightgown because of the light that was on behind me." Sheri blushed with embarrassment.

"What did Ted do?"

"He began to recite Shakespeare to me. He started to say Romeo's words when he wooed Juliet."

"You're kidding me?" Alicia laughed heartily. "Do all the Camerons have some special sexy gene?"

"That's my thinking. Ted made me smile as he stood below me reciting the words. He stopped and looked some more at me and then he whispered good-night and turned and walked away. I stepped away from the window, and I realized my heart was pounding. I tell you it was difficult sleeping that night."

The next morning Rhea loaned me some of her riding clothes and the three of us went for a horseback ride. Ted didn't say much at all to me, but he kept

watching me the whole time. I couldn't keep my eyes off him. From his faded jeans to his cowboy hat, he was something to see.

After the ride, August took me up in the plane. We flew to two of his largest working mines. I was allowed to see opals being mined and was completely captivated by the raw stones. I wanted to start immediately on the Cameron line of jewelry.

Later that day I was working in my bedroom when there was a knock on my door. It was Ted, and he wanted to know if I would like to go on a picnic with him. I agreed, and I followed him downstairs and outside where he had a jeep waiting. He took me to a secluded area around a well where it was very peaceful and green. We talked for several hours, and he told me his plans for the ranch. I told him about my plans for making jewelry. By the end of the picnic I was completely enamored with him. He held my hand as we walked back to the jeep. We shared our first kiss when he lifted me up into the jeep."

Sheri stopped talking for a minute and looked at Sophia and Alicia.

"I can't tell you what that first kiss did to me. It was like nothing I'd ever experienced, and it completely knocked me out. We didn't say anything on the way back, but as we pulled up and stopped in front of the house, Ted turned to me and asked me a question. I'll never forget how he spoke or what he looked like. He stared directly into my eyes and said, 'You are going to marry me aren't you?' I was so astounded that I couldn't even speak. I just sat there like an idiot staring at him. He picked up my hand and kissed my fingers one by one and asked again, 'Will you marry me?'"

"Ted, I don't know you well at all. We just met."

"Does that matter when you recognize your soul mate?"

"I remember thinking that he was right. It didn't matter how long we had known each other. I knew I would love him for the rest of my life. I said yes."

"He grinned and jumped out of the jeep and lifted me down swinging me around and around until we were both laughing. August came out and belted at him to let me go, but Ted just yelled back that I was going to marry him. Do you know what August said?"

Sheri's eyes twinkled as she looked at the two women. "He said, 'What took you so goddamn long? I knew the minute you met each other.'"

"Like father, like son. They are two peas in a pod."

Sheri and Sophia turned expectantly to Alicia. "Okay, it's your turn. How did you and Rhea meet?"

"The story isn't quite so romantic as yours. We were both at the same art gallery. My ex-girlfriend was showing her work, and I had gone with her to be

supportive. Rhea was there on a date. She was standing in front of a fairly abstract work with such a glower on her face that I had to laugh. She looked absolutely disgusted. When she looked at me, I was struck by her beauty and her intensity. Her date ended up with my ex, and Rhea offered me a ride home. We went out for coffee and talked for several hours. I asked her to go out to breakfast with me the following Sunday and she agreed.”

“When did you fall in love with her?”

“The minute she looked at me. I knew that very second that she was ‘it’ for me. It took a little longer for Rhea to admit that she was in love with me. She was very careful, analyzing her feelings until she was absolutely sure.”

“She takes after me,” Sophia laughed. “Sometimes you just have to wait for us to come around.”

“I waited for almost three weeks, and by then I had driven her so crazy she couldn’t even sit through a movie next to me. We made love that night for the first time and have been together ever since.”

“How long did it take her to tell you she was in love with you?”

“A month, and she told me at the grocery store as we were shopping. I could have killed her,” Alicia laughed. “She just stopped in the middle of the aisle and turned around to face me, a bag of lettuce in her hand. I remember asking her if something was wrong, and she just smiled at me and shook her head no. She just stood there and said, ‘I love you, Alicia.’ I was so astounded I could barely speak. Then I said, ‘Could you have picked a better time to tell me?’ She just hugged me and said she had to tell me that very minute.”

“My daughter, the romantic one,” Sophia grimaced as the other two women grinned.

“She is very romantic, once she gets going. She has the sweetest heart, Sophia. She is everything I could ever want in a partner.”

“I think she found the same thing in you, Alicia.”

“Can you believe how lucky we’ve all been? Now, I’m having a baby, and I hope the Cameron romance genes are passed on.” Sheri placed her hands over her slightly rounded stomach.

Sophia smiled at the two women she loved deeply. “I need to get back to work, ladies. It was very nice to share memories with you. Remember, you need to keep my two kids out of trouble while we’re gone.”

“We will, Sophia. You’ll have a great time in Paris.”

“I plan on it.” Her eyes sparkled as she walked out of Alicia’s studio.

“Alicia, I couldn’t have asked for a better sister-in-law. I just love that you’re here with all of us.”

“Thanks—I love you, too, Sheri. Have you and Ted picked out any baby names yet?”

Alicia and Sheri continued to visit as they returned to their work. Rhea found them still working when she arrived home for dinner several hours later.

## CHAPTER 25

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"I hear you two are going to keep me and Ted in line while Mom and Dad are in Paris," Rhea commented as she walked into the room.

"We are, so watch your step." Alicia smiled in welcome to her girlfriend, who bent to kiss her. "Whoa, honey, where have you been? You stink to high heaven."

"Is that the way to greet your hardworking partner?" Rhea smirked as she moved closer to Alicia. "I've been mucking out the sheep barn."

"Well, my love, I'm very glad to see you but I'm not touching you until after you take off those clothes and have a shower."

"Aw come on, honey, I've missed you all day long," Rhea teased as she stalked Alicia.

Alicia bounced up out of her chair and made a dash for the door. "Not on your life. Go take a shower."

Rhea's long legs allowed her to catch Alicia, and she wrapped her arms around her, locking her tightly against her body, her lips nuzzling her neck. "I missed you, sweetie."

Sheri was laughing hysterically as Alicia squirmed in Rhea's arms. "Now I'm going to have to take a shower just to get the smell off me."

"That was my plan," Rhea admitted, as she carried Alicia out of the room. "See you at dinner, Sheri. Ted's cleaning up back at your place. He'll be here in about thirty minutes."

Sheri didn't stop giggling until the two women disappeared from view. She suspected that Alicia was going to give up her objections rather quickly.

"Rhea, what is wrong with you?" Alicia asked as she struggled to get away from her.



Rhea carried her all the way into the bathroom before setting her on her feet and turning her around. Before Alicia could make another sound, Rhea covered her mouth in a hungry kiss, and she was turned inside out. "I love you, Alicia."

Alicia swallowed Rhea's words as she allowed herself to be seduced. Haphazardly shedding clothes, Rhea moved herself and Alicia into the shower and turned the water on hot. They continued to kiss as Alicia scrubbed every inch of Rhea's body before Rhea covered Alicia with soapsuds. Then Rhea rinsed her off and knelt down placing her face against her stomach.

"I've been thinking about you all day, and I just needed you close to me. I love you, honey." Rhea's lips kissed Alicia's blond curls as her fingers slid slowly into her. "I love touching you."

Alicia succumbed almost immediately, as her lover wooed her with love-making and words. Alicia trembled as an orgasm chased through her body. Rhea stood up and held her gently against her, her face pressed against Alicia's as she whispered loving words to her. Alicia was completely undone by Rhea's actions.

"Let me love you now," Alicia murmured as she reached down and parted Rhea's thighs. Her fingers unerringly found Rhea's pulsing center and teased her as her mouth covered Rhea's. Her tongue tasted the familiar flavor of her lover, and she entered her deeply and stopped moving. Rhea's body rippled around her fingers, and she began to move her hips. Alicia's tongue probed her mouth as she began to move inside Rhea, filling her completely over and over.

"Oh God, Alicia..."

Rhea's head fell on Alicia's shoulder as she hung on while her body reacted. Alicia pulled her drenched fingers out of her lover and trailed them up her stomach before wrapping her arms around Rhea's waist.

"I love you, Rhea."

"Even when I come in smelling like sheep?" Rhea's eyes told Alicia she was still teasing her.

"Especially when you come in after working so hard. Rhea, you are one of the hardest working people I've ever met. I love that you enjoy your life here, because I love mine. We ended up exactly where we're supposed to be."

Rhea placed her forehead against Alicia's and just held her as emotion made her heart pound. They both felt very lucky that life had turned out so wonderfully. They stepped out of the shower and dried each other off before getting dressed. They couldn't stop touching, and their eyes kept locking on each other. Happiness engulfed them, and they smiled and held hands as they

walked down the stairs to join Ted and Sheri who were sitting in the living room with Sophia and August.

"Ladies, can I buy you a drink?" August inquired as they entered.

"No thanks, August." Alicia very rarely drank anything but a glass of wine.

"Dad, I'd like a cold beer, please."

"Coming up, honey. Ted was telling me that you finished mucking out the sheep barn. You deserve one." August had mucked out many a barn, and he knew how messy the job was.

"Alicia didn't appreciate the aroma of sheep," Rhea grinned, her eyes sparkling mischievously.

Alicia snorted with irritation as Sheri burst into laughter. "I certainly didn't appreciate it when you made me smell just as bad."

"She has no sense of humor, Dad." Rhea teased her, and squeezed Alicia's fingers.

"I seem to remember Ted tackling Sheri in the horse barn two days before their wedding. She was covered with horse manure, if I remember correctly." Sophia reminded her son and daughter-in-law.

"Twenty minutes before we were to have lunch with my parents who had just arrived. They hadn't even met Ted yet," Sheri reminded everyone. "I was covered from head to toe with manure and all this big jerk did is laugh."

"It was your reaction, honey. You looked so damn angry, I couldn't help but laugh. Even your parents laughed."

"And you remember what I did to pay you back?" Sheri turned to her husband, her eyebrows raised in warning.

"Yeah, I remember," Ted colored with embarrassment.

Rhea started laughing as she remembered what Sheri had done to her brother. "Sheri, you have to tell Alicia."

"I waited for a full month after the wedding. We had just gotten back from our honeymoon in Tahiti. We were staying with Sophia and August until our house was finished, and Ted and I were in our room. I asked him if he would like to go swimming with me in the pool before dinner."

"That's not quite what you said, honey."

"I promised him loads of attention in the pool," Sheri admitted, a sexy look in her eyes. "What he didn't know was that my parents and his were having a drink before dinner in the dining room. I convinced Ted that he would be more comfortable swimming without his trunks. He took them off, and then I slipped away from him and snagged his trunks and the towels and left him in the pool. He kept calling for someone to come get him something to wear. He

finally decided to get out of the pool and sneak upstairs, but I had locked the door to the house. The only way Ted could get back into the house was to go out the outside door of the pool house.”

“The one in front of the dining room?”

Sheri’s eyes gleamed with mischievousness. “The very one. He tried to streak to the front door but both sets of parents caught a view of his very white butt as he ran in front of the window. Also, Mommo’s children were out in front of the house, and they caught sight of him running up the front stairs into the house.”

Alicia was laughing heartily as were Rhea and Sophia. August couldn’t prevent the grin that stretched across his face. The look on Sheri’s parents’ faces had been priceless as they witnessed their son-in-law fly past the open doorway of the living room and up the wide stairs completely naked.

“I was waiting in our room for him to remind him that I always get even. Needless to say, he was rather embarrassed at the dinner table.”

“At least your parents knew you hadn’t got a pig in a poke,” Ted stated with a smirk.

“Ted, I can’t believe you just said that,” Sophia chided him. Rhea and Alicia burst into laughter while Sheri blushed profusely.

“So, Alicia, do you get even?” Rhea asked as she held Alicia’s hand in her own.

“After what she did to Leann, how can you ask that question?” August grunted. “You’ll be lucky she doesn’t shoot your toes off.”

The whole room was filled with laughter as Rhea turned and hugged Alicia affectionately. Alicia sighed as her girlfriend held her tightly. She had a family, an affectionate, fun family. “I love our family.” Alicia whispered to Rhea before pulling away.

“They love you,” Rhea whispered back.

## CHAPTER 26

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The ranch ran smoothly during Sophia and August's trip to Paris. When they returned, they brought back gifts for everyone and then resettled into their day-to-day activities as if they had never been away.

The following week started out like any other, with Sophia and Alicia spending most of the day working with the horses. Sheri was designing some new jewelry at her home, and Ted and Rhea were out on the ranch moving a herd of sheep to another section. They expected to be gone for a couple of days. August was in his office completing some paperwork.

Alicia came out of the barn and saw some of the ranch hands' children playing over by the garden fountain. She knew all of them well and enjoyed visiting with them. She walked over to speak to them before she went inside to clean up before dinner. As she got closer she saw something that almost made her sick. A coiled snake was within a few feet of a barefoot child. She broke into a run, moving quickly, and snatched up the unsuspecting child while kicking at the snake to move it away from the rest of the children. Alicia was wearing cowboy boots, but somehow the snake's fangs caught her just above her boot. She moved away from the snake with the silent little boy and watched as it slithered off into the garden. The pain in her leg was already excruciating.

"Lee, run and get Mommo for me, hurry."

She placed Lee on his feet and he took off for Mommo. He had seen the snake and knew what had happened. Alicia knew better than to run. She needed to slow the venom entering her bloodstream. She sat on the ground, stripped off her belt and tied it around the lower part of her thigh. She tightened it as much as she could, fashioning it into a tourniquet.

"Alicia, what happened?" August and Mommo came bustling around the side of the house.

"I've been struck by a snake."

August picked her up and raced back into the kitchen with Mommo in his wake.

"Put her on the table," Mommo demanded, as she pulled Alicia's boot off and tore the jeans from her leg. The snakebite was already angry and red.

"I've got the anti-venom." August grabbed their first aid kit and pulled out a syringe and a vial while Mommo used a sharp knife to cut the bite larger. They kept anti-venom for just this purpose. Alicia bit her lip to keep from crying out in pain as August gave her a shot in the thigh and Mommo drained the wound.

"Go get me some ice bags." Mommo was hoping that they had stopped the venom's movement in time. As it was, Alicia was going to have a fair amount of tissue damage. The fact that she had tied off the leg so quickly was in her favor.

Alicia was getting sick to her stomach and her head was beginning to throb. "I don't feel well, Mommo."

"You'll feel better in a little while, daughter. Close your eyes and let us work." Mommo was very concerned about Alicia. She was such a tiny thing and her body would have to fight very hard to combat the poison.

"August, Mommo, the kids said Alicia was snake bit!" Sophia came flying in the back door.

"Help us with ice bags. We need to keep the venom from circulating in her blood stream."

August and Sophia covered Alicia's thigh with ice while Mommo plastered the bite with a special mixture. It was an aboriginal remedy that would suck the venom out of the leg. They wouldn't know if it worked until much later. Now, all they could do was wait and worry.

"I'm going to call Dr. Slokum and see how soon he can get here," August announced as he touched Alicia's pale cheek. She was out completely, her face beaded with sweat. It was a good thing she had fainted, because what Alicia was going to have to suffer was exceedingly painful.

"She saved Lee's life. He said she picked him up just before the snake struck, and it hit Alicia instead of him."

"Goddamn it! I've got to call Rhea. She needs to get back here." August was angry and full of dread. You never knew how well someone would recuperate from a snakebite; death often followed. He felt cold fingers clutch around his heart at the thought that Alicia might not survive. He knew what it would do

to him and Sophia, and it would destroy his daughter. They couldn't lose Alicia. He wouldn't allow it.

"August, she'll be fine. We'll make sure of it." Sophia hugged her husband as she tried to reassure them all. Her face was pale with worry.

"I know, I know." He strode out of the kitchen to his office.

Abo, Mommo's son, stepped into the kitchen and spoke a flurry of aboriginal words before turning and heading back out. "He's going to notify the elder women about Alicia. They would want to be here to help."

"Of course." Sophia was not surprised that they would want to be there. They had adopted Alicia as one of their own. "Can we move her to some place more comfortable?"

"We can put her in the back bedroom."

"Mommo, I'll go get a bucket of ice and more plastic bags. We're going to need them to keep her temperature down."

For over three hours Mommo and Sophia took turns changing the ice bags on Alicia's leg. They had loosened the tourniquet right after moving her into the back bedroom and had removed all but her underwear from her body. Alicia had done nothing but cry out in her half sleep as the antidote worked to combat the snake venom. Her temperature had shot up, and she was dripping wet. She shook alternately with fever and then with cold. August spoke softly to her holding her hand and trying to keep her calm. He prayed as he watched the tiny woman fight to stay alive. He hoped his prayers were heard. She had to make it. He wouldn't allow her to die.

Ted and Rhea were a good five hours away from the ranch house, and he knew they were driving their horses ragged to get back. The yard had slowly begun to fill up with ranch hands and aboriginal people, as word spread that Alicia had been bitten by a snake and was fighting for her leg and maybe her life. They milled about outside quietly, some praying, some silent, while others talked among themselves wishing they could do something, anything, to help the beautiful young woman they had come to love.

Six and a half hours after the snake struck Alicia, Rhea tore into the house and down the hall to the bedroom, her eyes wild with fear and grief. She cried out when she saw how pale and lethargic Alicia looked.

"How is she?" she stammered, throwing herself down on her knees next to the bed.

"She's holding her own, Rhea. We think we prevented most of the venom from entering her blood stream and she has had two doses of anti-venom." Dr. Slokum stood next to the bed, taking Alicia's pulse.

"Then why is she so pale?" Rhea's hand shook as she pushed Alicia's hair back from her face.

"Her system is fighting the snake venom. She may have saved her own life by applying a tourniquet to her leg, preventing the poison from spreading more quickly than it did. She's in for a rough night, though, and only time will tell what the final result will be."

"Goddamn it, do something for her!" Rhea raged, as she laid her head down next to Alicia's and began to sob. "I can't lose you, I just can't."

"Rhea, we're doing everything we can to save her. Mommo and the women from her tribe are here. They're helping Alicia to fight the venom, too." Sophia knelt next to her sobbing daughter. "You need to talk to Alicia and let her know we're all here, and she needs to fight. She needs to hear your voice, honey."

Rhea's tear streaked face looked up at her mother as she registered what her mother was saying. "Alicia, honey, it's Rhea. You're going to be okay, honey. I'm here, and I love you. Just listen to my voice, honey."

August brought a chair to his heartbroken daughter and placed a hand on her shoulder in support. His eyes were full of tears. Sheri stood next to Mommo and held tightly to her hand, and Sophia stood on the other side of Rhea. Ted watched in disbelief from the door.

"Ted, can you and Sheri make us all some sandwiches and some coffee? We need to stay awake and take turns changing her ice bags and keeping her comfortable."

"Sure, Mom." Ted took his wife's hand and they headed toward the kitchen. Sheri stopped and turned into her husband as huge wracking sobs burst from her. "She has to be okay, Ted. She has to. I love her like my own sister."

"Shush, honey. She's going to be all right. You know Alicia. She's a fighter. She'll get through this, I know she will." Ted was praying very hard that he was right. It would break his heart if they lost Alicia.

For over twelve hours, they took turns changing the wet sheets and replacing the ice bags that were keeping down the swelling of her calf. Rhea left Alicia's side only to go to the bathroom. And she spoke softly to her all night long as Alicia thrashed and fought against the pain and fever. Alicia's cries of pain all but shattered Rhea's heart, but she never stopped touching Alicia nor talking to her. At four o'clock that morning, Dr. Slokum announced that her fever had broken and she was sleeping comfortably, much to the relief of everyone in the room.

"The swelling in her leg has gone down, and she seems to have fought off the worst of it. She needs to sleep, and if she wakes up we need to keep forcing

fluids into her; otherwise, she'll become dehydrated. She's going to be fairly sick to her stomach when she first wakes up, so I would have something ready for her."

"She's going to be okay?" Rhea's voice was hoarse, her eyes bloodshot as she looked up at the doctor.

"She's going to have quite a recovery period, and I'm not sure how much damage was done to the leg, but she is going to be fine. She's fought off the worst effects of the venom. Bed rest is a must, and I would watch that leg for the next twenty-four hours, but I think she's going to be fine."

Rhea started weeping again as she laid her head down on Alicia's chest that she could feel moving up and down in sleep. She couldn't stop crying. Everyone left her alone in the room with the woman who meant everything to her.

"Did you hear that honey? You're going to be okay. I knew you wouldn't leave me, I just knew it. I love you so much, Alicia. I'm so glad that you're going to be okay. I couldn't live without you. You're my heart, and I couldn't survive without your love."

"Rhea, what?" Alicia mumbled as she tried to speak, her mind in a jumble, and her body aching.

"Don't talk, honey. You're going to be okay. You've gotten through the worst of everything. God, I love you." Rhea face was awash with tears, her voice full of relief.

"I'm going to be sick," Alicia cried, as her stomach reacted to the medicine coursing through her system.

Rhea held her as she heaved violently into a pan, then gently cleaned her face and gave her some water to sip. Alicia was barely aware of her as she fell immediately back to sleep.

Mommo entered the room and began to remove the bandages from Alicia's wound. She and one of the other elder women began to chant as they removed a foul smelling poultice and washed Alicia's swollen calf clean. It was angry red and pus filled but looking much better than it had three hours earlier. When they were finished cleaning her leg, they covered it with more of the mud-like paste and wrapped more gauze around it to secure the poultice in place. Before Mommo left the room she bent over Alicia and murmured softly to her before kissing her on the cheek. Rhea knew that Mommo loved Alicia deeply and cared for her as if she were her own. It calmed Rhea considerably that Mommo and her healing arts were helping Alicia.

"Honey, I need you to go shower and then take a nap. Alicia is going to be sleeping most of the day, and you are exhausted. You won't be able to help her



when she wakes up if you don't get some sleep." Sophia spoke gently to her distraught daughter. "I can stay with her for a couple of hours, and I promise you I will wake you up if she stirs."

"Mom, I have to be with her, don't you understand? She's everything to me." Rhea's heart was in her eyes as she spoke to her mother.

"I know she is, sweetheart. At least go take a warm shower and your dad and I will watch over Alicia for you." Sophia hugged her daughter.

"You promise you'll come get me if she so much as makes a sound?"

"I promise. Now go."

Rhea took one last look at Alicia and bent to place a kiss on her forehead, her hand softly against her cheek. "I love you, Alicia. I'll be right back."

Sophia hugged her daughter again and felt a shudder run through her child's body as she held her. "I thought I was going to lose her."

"I know, baby, but you didn't. She's going to be okay. When she's better, we'll begin planning your commitment ceremony."

"Yes, we will," Rhea agreed as she stood up unsteadily. "I'll be back in a little bit."

"I'll be here, honey."

Sophia took the seat that her daughter had vacated, and she reached out and stroked Alicia's arm. "I'm so glad you're going to be okay, honey. I love you very much, and we wouldn't have recovered if we'd lost you. You just rest and heal. We'll make sure that you're well taken care of."

"How is she?" Sheri whispered from the doorway.

"She's sleeping now. She was pretty sick when she woke up a little earlier. Did you get some sleep?"

"Not much, I couldn't sleep knowing what Alicia was going through. How's Rhea?"

"She's devastated and still frightened to death. She's taking a shower and then I expect she'll be back down here."

"Ted can bring a cot in here and she can sleep next to the bed."

"That's a good idea. I don't think Rhea will leave this room until Alicia is much better."

"I'll go tell him. August wanted to know if he could come in and sit with her a while."

"Certainly. Tell him to bring another chair."

August entered the room quietly, placed a chair next to his wife's and sat down. He leaned into Sophia and kissed her gently, placing his hand on Sophia's where it lay on Alicia's arm. Nothing was said, but the bond between

Sophia and August for over forty-seven years made talking unnecessary as they sat with Alicia.

## CHAPTER 27

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The next day was one of Alicia's worst. Not only was she unable to keep anything but water down, her leg was exceedingly painful because the doctor had to remove some of the damaged and dying tissue. She cried in Rhea's arms when it became too much for her. The doctor gave her an injection that finally allowed her to sleep as the pain lessened to a dull throb. Mommo was still applying her healing balm, and the doctor swore that was why Alicia's leg was healing so well.

Rhea was beside herself as she listened to Alicia cry in pain. There was nothing she could do to help her. Finally Alicia drifted into a fretful sleep. Rhea lay down next to her on the cot trying to nap a bit though desperate with fear for her lover.

"How does the leg look, Seth?"

"Surprisingly well, August. You might want to take Alicia to Sydney to see a specialist but it doesn't appear that she's going to lose much more tissue."

"Would flying be okay for Alicia?"

"It won't hurt her, but moving might be a little painful. Her leg is extremely sore."

"We can rig up a stretcher to take her on and off the plane."

"That would work. You might wait a couple more days until she's able to keep food down."

"I'll do that. Thanks, Seth."

"No thanks needed. I'm certainly glad she's going to be okay."

"I am too." August walked Seth out.

Rhea and Alicia slept heavily for several hours until Alicia woke up with an upset stomach and a throbbing headache.

"Alicia, honey, can you try to drink some of this broth Mommo made for you? You need to get something in your stomach before I can give you any more pain pills."

"I don't know if I can keep it down."

"Just try a little, please?" Rhea pleaded with her.

"Honey, I stink."

"I'll tell you what. You drink some of this broth, and then I'll wash you up a little. You can't get out of bed for a while, doctor's orders."

"I hate going to the bathroom in a bedpan." Alicia was getting very cranky about just about everything.

"I know, but it won't be for much longer." Rhea stroked her girlfriend's hair away from her pale face.

"Rhea, I hate snakes."

"You have good reason to."

"I mean I *really* hate snakes."

Rhea watched Alicia carefully as she spoke. "Would you like to leave the ranch? We can go back to the United States. We can go anywhere you want."

"I don't want to leave the ranch. I just want you to shoot every snake you see," Alicia demanded, her eyes showing the first spark of energy.

"I can do that." Rhea almost chuckled at her girlfriend. "Now, eat so we can give you a bath."

"How's Lee? I must have scared him to death."

"Honey, you saved his life. If the snake had bitten him he wouldn't have survived. His body is too small to have fought off the venom."

"It just happened so fast."

"Alicia, you continually amaze me." Rhea bent over and kissed Alicia on the mouth. "I adore you."

"I love you." Alicia looked at the circles under Rhea's eyes and understood the emotion in her voice. "A little snake can't get rid of me. You're stuck with me for life."

Rhea started to cry as looked into her lover's eyes. "And you're stuck with me."

"Have you thought about when the commitment ceremony is going to happen? August told me he was going to plan it as soon as I was up and around."

"I know. He has some ideas already. I thought you and I might want to keep it intimate and small."

"As long as it isn't in the garden. I don't think I want to be married where I was bitten by a snake."

"I can understand that. How about we talk about it later after you've sipped some of this broth?"

"Rhea, I think Mommo and her elders saved me."

"I think they did too."

"I need to thank her." Alicia looked into her girlfriend's eyes.

"I already did. You should see the farmyard. It's packed with many people from her tribe all waiting to see you when you get better. There must be hundreds of people out there."

"You're kidding me?" Alicia couldn't believe it.

"After we clean you up, Dad thought he could carry you out on to the front porch for some fresh air and let everyone see that you're going to be okay. They won't leave until they see you."

"That's silly." Alicia blushed with embarrassment.

"Alicia, they love you and want to see you with their own eyes." Rhea touched her cheek softly. "They need to see you."

## CHAPTER 28

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Rhea had underestimated the number of people by several hundred, as bushmen and women along with ranch hands and their families from all over the ranch milled around outside waiting to see that Alicia was going to be okay. There was no shortage of help around the farm. Many friends and neighbors pitched in while August and his family concentrated on Alicia.

August carefully carried Alicia out to the front porch and sat her on a chaise lounge. Her eyes were wide as she scanned the crowds of people who waited for her. A rousing round of applause began as the people realized she would recover, and an overwrought Rhea cried silently as she stood next to Alicia. Even Leann was there, and she had unobtrusively helped Mommo in the kitchen and Sophia in the barn, after telling Rhea she was very glad Alicia was going to be okay. It was amazing how many people Alicia had touched in the short time she had lived there.

Alicia was fine until Lee and his parents showed up with a huge bouquet of flowers and thanked her profusely for saving their young son's life. Lee's mother, Anna, was very pregnant, and she hugged Alicia in thanks and promised her that her child would be named after the woman who had saved her son, *Al* if it was a boy and *Alicia* if it was a girl.

Alicia began to cry, completely overwhelmed and exhausted. Rhea saw the pain and emotion on her face and suggested that August take her back inside. She'd been up out of bed for about forty minutes, thirty minutes longer than she should have been. Many called out their blessings to Alicia as she sobbed against August's shoulder while he carried her into the room. He laid her gently on the bed.

"I can't believe how nice all those people are," she wept as she tried to dry her face of tears.

"You are part of their family, lassie. They care about you and worried with the rest of us."

"I love you, August." Her eyes were full of feeling and love for the generous man.

August's voice was rough with emotion. "Alicia, I love you and I want you to promise me that you will never scare me that much again."

"I promise."

"Good, now get some sleep. Rhea, you make sure she closes her eyes."

"I will, Dad." Rhea smiled as her father patted Alicia's arm before leaving the room. "Can you sleep for a while?"

"I can, on one condition." Alicia's face was pale, and Rhea wanted her to get some much-needed sleep.

"What is that?"

"Will you get into bed next to me? I need you to hold me, Rhea." Alicia's eyes told Rhea she was close to crying again.

"Are you sure? I don't want to take any chances with your leg."

"I'm sure."

"Okay, but I want you to close your eyes."

"I will."

Rhea stretched out under the covers and waited for Alicia to tuck up against her. Within minutes Alicia was sleeping, and ten minutes later both women had lapsed into healing rest. Alicia's hand was clasped in Rhea's and held against her heart as they slept.

"How are they?" Sophia asked, as Mommo bustled around the kitchen.

"They're still sound asleep."

"Good, it's what they both need. Mommo, I can't thank you enough for saving Alicia."

"I don't need thanks. God saved her because she saved another life."

"I believe you are right." Sophia hugged the big woman tightly. "But I still appreciate everything you did."

"She's family."

"Yes, she is. Do you know that Leann has finished all the chores in the barn? Can you believe that a couple of months ago Alicia scared her silly shooting at her, and now that woman is helping us at the ranch."

"It's because she realized that Alicia is a special woman."

"Yes, she is," Sophia agreed with a smile. "We need to feed the crew outside. I have August firing up the barbeque, and I sent Ted to the walk-in for a side of beef. Do you think that will be enough?"

"We have plenty of food. Others have brought much. No one will go without."

"Good." Sophia worked side by side with Mommo. They would thank everyone who had come and set up vigil outside their home with a mammoth feast. It was the least they could do.

That evening after everyone had been fed, many left, having waited until they knew Alicia would recover. Leann was one of the last to leave, but not until after she had spoken to August and Sophia. "Tell Alicia I'm glad she's going to be okay."

"We will, Leann. Thanks for your help."

"No problem. I think Rhea chose very well in a partner." Leann's face told the real story. She wanted someone to love her as much as Rhea loved Alicia. She was lonely and envious of what Alicia and Rhea had.

"We do too. Leann, there is someone out there for you. You just need to make sure you find the right partner." Sophia had recognized the pain in the woman's heart and understood her very well. She had helped generously without being asked, and Sophia had seen into her carefully guarded heart.

Leann smiled back at the couple before responding. "I'm going to wait until Alicia recovers and then ask her to find me a partner. She must know some wonderful women."

August chuckled, and Sophia grinned as Leann waved before climbing into her jeep with one of her ranch hands. "Good night."

"Will wonders never cease," Sophia commented to August as they turned to enter the house.

They stopped to peek in on the two slumbering women, then walked slowly upstairs to their bedroom. Mommo poked her head in about ten-thirty to find Alicia's eyes open and Rhea snoring quietly next to her.

She and Alicia spoke quietly for a minute in the language of Mommo's birth. The woman bent and placed a kiss on Alicia's forehead before leaving.

"What did she say?" Rhea asked, having watched the last of the exchange. She had understood only part of the conversation.

"She told me that she knew I would save Lee's life and that she is proud of me as a daughter of her heart. She told me she loves me, and I thanked her and told her I love her. I also asked her to give me away when I marry you."

Rhea smiled in the dark as she responded. "What did she say?"



“She said she would be honored to be my mother.” Alicia’s voice began to break.

“Isn’t that perfect?” Rhea whispered, kissing Alicia.

Alicia buried her face against Rhea’s neck and closed her eyes. In spite of everything that had happened, she wouldn’t trade her life for anything. “I love you, Rhea.”

“Baby, I love you so much my heart aches with it.”

“How soon do you think it will be before we can be back in our own room? I want you to love me again.”

“I think we can move you upstairs in a couple of days.”

“Perfect.”

## CHAPTER 29

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It took more than a couple of days before Mommo let Alicia move back upstairs into her bedroom. Her leg was still too weak to put much weight on it, so she used crutches to move about. Three days later, August and Rhea bundled Alicia up and flew to Sydney where August had made appointments with a battery of doctors to look at her injury.

It took two days of exams and tests before they finally had some answers. Alicia would have to undergo surgery to repair the damaged tissue from the poisonous snake venom. They wanted to schedule it right away. August, Rhea and Alicia discussed it at the hotel and then called Sophia to relay the news. Alicia was going to have surgery the following day.

That evening, after making her decision, Alicia sat pensively looking out of the hotel room as Rhea came out of the bathroom after showering. “Baby, everything is going to be okay.”

Alicia turned and looked up at Rhea, her face full of turbulent thoughts. “I know, honey. I just hate putting your family through all of this.”

Rhea sighed loudly as she sat down next to her girlfriend. “Honey, they are your family, and you aren’t putting us *through* anything. There isn’t one of us who wouldn’t do this for you.”

“I’m scared, Rhea.” Alicia’s eyes filled and her chin trembled. “You heard the doctor. He wasn’t sure how much strength I would get back in my leg. I might have difficulty walking let alone working with the horses.”

“You’ll be fine. You’re alive, and I wouldn’t trade that for anything. I promise you, there’s nothing we can’t do together. I’ll be there every step of the way.”

Alicia’s face was marked with tears, and she leaned into Rhea and turned her face up for a kiss. “Love me, Rhea, please just love me.”

Rhea covered Alicia's mouth with a searing kiss, one they both needed. She pulled away from Alicia and stood up, before gathering Alicia up in her arms. Without a word she carried her to the bed and gently placed her on the covers. With trembling hands she slowly began to remove Alicia's clothes. Their eyes never left one another's as Rhea gently stripped her lover. Her injured leg was still completely bandaged, and Rhea bent over and placed gentle kisses all the way up to her hip and then started on her other leg. Her fingertips traced every inch of her legs before moving to her arms.

Rhea was in no hurry to love her girlfriend. She needed to immerse them both in passion and lovemaking that would heal them. Rhea's tongue traced Alicia's fingers, sucking on each one, drawing a gasp from Alicia. When her lips moved to Alicia's breasts, it was almost too much for her and she cried out in pleasure.

"Talk to me, Alicia. Tell me what you want," Rhea whispered, her tongue touching her sensitive earlobe.

"I want you. I want to feel your weight on me, your fingers inside me as we come together."

Rhea slowly stood up, her eyes running down the length of her girlfriend. She couldn't help but notice how much weight Alicia had lost over the last several weeks. Rhea shed her clothes and lay down on the bed next to her. She was afraid if she placed her weight on Alicia that she would cause pain to her leg.

"Honey, please I need to feel your body on mine." Alicia touched Rhea's cheek before kissing her.

With infinite gentleness, Rhea moved her body onto Alicia's carefully avoiding her leg. The minute she felt Alicia's skin against her own, a peaceful, warm glow spread throughout her body.

"Look at me, Rhea," Alicia demanded, her fingers gliding through Rhea's long black hair. "Can you feel it? I know you can. This is what we live for. Touching you will help me get through anything. Love me, Rhea, the way only you know how to."

Rhea reached down and parted Alicia's thighs until she was tightly cradled against her center. Her fingers cupped Alicia and found her dripping with welcoming moisture. Rhea groaned as she felt a shudder run through Alicia's body as well as her own. Rhea used her fingers to spread her own body open and sealed herself against Alicia.

"Yes, baby," Alicia's arms locked around Rhea's shoulders, their faces inches apart as Rhea rolled her hips hard against Alicia's, pressing them intimately together.

“More,” Alicia demanded as her breath caught in her throat, her eyes full of passion.

Rhea arched up forcing her hips even tighter against Alicia’s body, the muscles in her arms bulging as she levered her body in full strokes against Alicia’s. Alicia gasped once, twice, and then made the long slide into an orgasm that rolled from the center of her body, sending flames of pleasure through every part of her. “Rhea, Rhea...”

Rhea’s body reacted to her lover’s voice, her arms trembling, and the muscles of her buttocks tight as she felt her own release. She stilled her hips, sealing their bodies together as she descended. The sound that Rhea made as she slumped onto Alicia was one of emotion felt so deeply from her soul that she cried out with joy for their love and pain for what her lover had endured. It was a rebirth for them, a celebration of life and love.

“Alicia, I...”

“Shush, I know, just hold me,” Alicia’s voice trembled, her fingers tracing Rhea’s face.

Rhea threaded her fingers into Alicia’s hair and tucked her face against hers, holding her as tightly as she could. Alicia’s hands reached around Rhea’s hips and locked their bodies together, still connected as one. They fell asleep, never moving but finding reassurance in being together. Alicia slept comfortably, but Rhea woke up two hours later and found her worries had returned.

She was so scared that she would lose Alicia. She didn’t care what condition the leg was in. She couldn’t lose her. It would kill her—her heart would just wither and die. She edged off Alicia and tucked her to her side while she lay awake trying to deny her fears. Even with an injured leg Alicia could still do her artwork and maybe even ride her horse, and she would be alive.

Flickering images of Alicia ran through her mind as she remembered watching her struggle to recover from the snakebite. It was Alicia’s will to survive and Mommo’s healing that had saved her. Rhea felt a chill pass through her body as she remembered the radio message that had almost destroyed her.

“Rhea, get home, Alicia’s snake bit. Over.” Rhea knew it took enormous effort to shake her father, and she had heard the fear in his voice over the radio. “Hurry, over.”

Ted hadn’t hesitated as he gave orders to the ranch hands that were with them. He and Rhea were moving at a full gallop before either one caught a breath. The ride had been grueling and terrifying as Rhea fought off thoughts of Alicia dying. Not one word passed between her and Ted as they rode over five hours back to the ranch. She threw herself off her horse in front of the

house, taking the stairs two at a time, bursting into the house to find Sheri in the hallway crying.

"Where is she?"

"In the back bedroom. Rhea, she's bad," Sheri sobbed.

Rhea hadn't stopped as she ran to the bedroom and entered the crowded room. Her eyes saw only one thing, Alicia, as she laid deathly white on the bed. God, please let her live, I'll promise you anything, please let her live.

She tightened her hold on her slumbering girlfriend. Thank you God, thank you. Rhea had more than most to be thankful for, but she would give up everything to make sure that Alicia would never be harmed again. Closing her eyes to the hot tears, Rhea's heart ached with love for the beautiful woman who meant everything to her.

Fingertips slid against Rhea's cheeks, wiping the tears from her face. "It's all right, Rhea. Everything's going to be fine."

Rhea opened her eyes and found Alicia staring down at her, her hand stroking her cheek. "I know. It just hurts so much when I think of you in so much pain."

"I'm not in pain anymore. I heard your voice when it was the worst. I could hear you talking to me, and I knew I had to get back to you. Your voice kept me focused, baby. I love you." Alicia soothed her with her words and her touch, as she placed kisses against her eyes, the corner of her mouth, and her chin.

Rhea felt the touch of her tongue against her lower lip, and she reached up and held Alicia's head as she kissed her. Tender softness, the taste of Alicia, and the scent of her partner filled her completely. Love so vibrant, full of color and sensation washed through the two women, renewing their pledge to each other. Alicia's hand traced the breast of her lover, lingering on her nipple as it hardened beneath her fingers. Moving lower, she ran her hand across the firm, flat stomach and met the dark curls that covered Rhea's nether lips. Placing her fingers in the moisture, she found the tightened bud that had been awakened by her touch.

"God, I love touching you," Alicia breathed the words into Rhea's mouth. Fondling her clitoris between her fingers, she made Rhea groan loudly as she teased her. Alicia's strong fingers penetrated Rhea, and the satisfaction was too great for Rhea to keep silent.

A cry emerged from Rhea's throat as Alicia nuzzled her neck, while her fingers massaged her lower body. Rhea reached down and held Alicia's hand tightly against her as Alicia stroked her closer to an orgasm.

“Oh God, oh,” Rhea’s voice trailed off as Alicia vibrated her fingertips against her hardened clitoris and drove her screaming into an orgasm, one that moved through her body in increasing waves.

“My perfect lover, that’s it, honey. Let go, and let me love you.” Alicia’s voice urged Rhea into another powerful surge of pleasure. “Shush, baby, I have you forever.”

Rhea turned her face into Alicia’s and sobbed. Her body was weakened by their lovemaking, and her heart was purged of the fear and pain she had held locked inside. Alicia held her tightly. It was a long time before Rhea finally cried herself to sleep. Alicia watched her even longer, stroking her hair and gazing at her exhausted partner. Alicia knew that Rhea suffered silently, and she was grateful that she was able to help release some of her pent up emotions. Rhea would always be strong for Alicia, but Alicia also knew that Rhea paid dearly for her strength. Alicia would do everything in her power to take care of the beautiful woman with the incredible heart. Alicia dozed, holding Rhea, and the two women drew strength from each other and their love.

## CHAPTER 30

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The surgery was performed that next afternoon, and Alicia's leg was repaired. Her whole family, including Mommo, waited anxiously in the waiting room. It took over four hours for two doctors to repair the damage done by the snake venom. A plastic surgeon and a vascular surgeon worked wonders. Alicia slept long after the surgery in her private hospital room as Rhea waited anxiously by her side. She had heard the surgeon's own words that all had gone well and that she would have full function of her leg. Now she needed Alicia to wake up so that she could believe him. She lowered her head in prayer as she sat in a chair next to Alicia's bed, her hand resting on Alicia's arm. Everyone else waited in the hall, periodically coming into the room to sit with Rhea.

She had her eyes closed and tried to be patient, realizing that it took time for Alicia to recover from the anesthesia. She didn't see the blue eyes of her lover open, nor the look of love cross Alicia's face, but she heard the quiet words that she uttered.

"Hi cowgirl."

"Alicia," Rhea couldn't speak, she could only stare at her girlfriend, her shaking hands touching her face. "How are you?"

"I'm a little fuzzy, and I can't feel a thing in my leg."

Rhea knew what she was asking, and she immediately reassured her. "It's fine, honey. Your leg is going to be as good as new."

Alicia's carefully composed face crumpled, and she began to cry. Rhea stood up and bent over gathering Alicia into her arms and soothed her. "Hush, honey. It's all over, and as soon as we can we'll get you back home."

"Rhea, I want to leave now. I want to go back to the ranch. Mommo can take care of me."

"I promise you, as soon as the doctors release you, we'll take you home."

"Promise?" Alicia tear stained face made Rhea cry.

"I promise. There are a few people who would like to see you. They've been waiting for several hours." Rhea smiled at her before standing up and going to the door. Ted and Sheri crowded through the doorway, followed by Sophia and August. Bringing up the rear was Mommo.

Sheri bent over and hugged Alicia tightly, and then Ted placed a kiss on her cheek. "Good to see you, sister," he said as he patted her arm.

"Hi guys, it's good to see you."

"Hey, lassie, it's about time you woke up. You almost gave this old guy a heart attack." August's voice was gruff but his eyes were glassy with tears.

"Alicia, we're so glad the surgery went well. I expect to see you out with your horses in no time." Sophia smiled and squeezed her tightly before kissing her.

Mommo bent to embrace her, and her rapid native speech was lost to everyone but Alicia. Alicia wept silently and allowed Mommo to comfort her. Rhea stood at the foot of the bed and watched. There was something special that linked Alicia to Mommo. Sophia slid her hand into her daughter's and squeezed it, and August threw his arm around her shoulders. There wasn't a dry eye in the room.

Two hours later Alicia was in too much pain to be company to anyone, and the nurse increased her pain medication. All but Mommo and Rhea returned to the hotel for the night. Ted and Sheri were going to go back to the ranch with Sophia. August planned to bring Alicia, Rhea, and Mommo back at the end of the week. It had been a long day for everyone, and in the end all had gone well.

"Mommo, what is it that makes Alicia so special to you?" Rhea asked in the stillness of the hospital room as she watched Mommo washing Alicia's sleeping face clean of tears.

"She is a woman of power that I understand and respect."

"What do you mean power?"

"She has the ability to make people around her grow in strength and wisdom by her love for them. She brings out the best in everyone around her because she taps into their hearts. But, daughter of my heart, she is no more special than you are. When you were younger and you got involved with Leann, I knew she would break your young heart, but do you remember what I told you?"

"You said it was meant to be, because the woman that would match me was still looking for me." Rhea remembered how Mommo had comforted her as



she grieved from a broken heart and a splintered family. “Did you know it was Alicia?”

“Not until you brought her home. It is the matching of hearts and souls that gives Alicia her power and you yours.”

“I don’t have any power.” Rhea looked at Mommo in disbelief.

“How do you think you brought Alicia back from near death?”

“You did that with your healing, and Alicia didn’t want to die.”

“Rhea, your strength is in your love for Alicia and your family. You keep people safe and protected with your love. You can do anything you put your mind to, daughter.”

Rhea’s eyes filled with tears as she listened to the very wise woman. “I love you, Mommo.”

“As I love you, daughter of my heart.”

The two women sat in the dark, guarding their loved one as she slept through the night undisturbed.

## CHAPTER 31

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“Rhea, where’s Alicia?” August asked as he paced the hall inside his home. It’s time for the ceremony to begin.”

“Relax, Dad. She and Mommo are upstairs finishing her hair. They’ll be here in a minute.” Rhea was amused at her father’s nervousness, and Sophia shook her head at her husband. You would think the ceremony was his he fretted so much. He had been like that for almost a month as he stormed around the ranch like a whirlwind arranging Rhea and Alicia’s commitment ceremony.

It had taken Alicia over three months of hard work and physical therapy to gain back the strength in her leg and heal from her surgery. And then August had gone to work planning their wedding, much to the delight of his daughter and her lover. It couldn’t happen soon enough for them. Rhea saw her dad stop pacing as he gazed up the stairs at Alicia and Mommo walking slowly down them. Alicia still had a pronounced limp, especially when she was extremely tired. But considering what she had endured, he was enormously proud of her. She had worked diligently to learn to walk again. She was able to walk to her lover during the ceremony without help of any kind.

Rhea stepped up to the bottom of the stairs, her eyes focused on Alicia as she walked down. “You look beautiful.”

Alicia’s eyes sparkled as she looked at Rhea. “So do you, cowgirl. Are you ready to marry me?”

Rhea couldn’t help but grin as she shook her head yes. “Wild horses couldn’t keep me from you.”

“Let’s go then,” August requested impatiently. Sophia turned to him and placed a hand on his chest, her wise eyes looking up at him. “Relax, Grandpa.”

Her request made August relax, as he grinned back at her. One month earlier Sheri had delivered a healthy baby boy, Theodore August Cameron, and Grandpa couldn't have been prouder. The new family was waiting with the rest of the guests for the ceremony to begin.

"Mommo, come on. Let's get this show on the road." Alicia laughed with delight. "Don't be late, cowgirl."

Rhea laughed with her as she watched Mommo and Alicia move slowly down the front stairs of the house and cross a short distance to a rose arbor that August had put up especially for the ceremony. Mommo and Alicia stood in front of the minister and turned to wait for Rhea and her parents. Sophia and August each took one of her arms and walked with Rhea until she stood next to Alicia. Both women were wearing long dresses, and they stood gazing at each other in quiet elegance, their hands clasped together.

The ceremony was short and sweet. Alicia and Rhea pledged to love each other for the rest of their lives. Mommo, Sophia, and August were by their sides in front of God and a crowd of over two hundred well-wishers. August and Sheri cried at the conclusion of the ceremony; Sophia and Mommo watched proudly. Ted wiped happy tears away as he held his sleeping son in his arms. It was truly a magical moment.

The party following the ceremony was a rollicking good time. The food was plentiful and the dancing fast and furious. Rhea and Alicia started the dancing off with a slow two-step, much to Rhea's surprise and everyone's pleasure. Alicia had been practicing with Ted for weeks in order to do it without faltering, as the steps put pressure on her healing leg.

"I love you, Rhea," Alicia whispered when she saw the emotion in Rhea's eyes as she stared down at her while they danced.

"I love you, honey. I will always treasure this memory."

And Rhea meant it. She knew how hard it had been for Alicia to recover after her surgery. Like everything Alicia did, she worked at it without complaint. It had taken months of painful therapy to regain the strength in and use of her leg. Not once had Alicia thought of giving up, even when cramps had her doubled over in pain. Rhea was so proud of her.

Two hours later both women were seated at a table, holding hands and enjoying watching the dancers as the hour grew late. Leann and another woman appeared next to Alicia and Rhea. "Can we join you?"

"Of course you can."

To everyone's surprise, Leann had come over to the ranch a week after Alicia returned from surgery and volunteered to help with the horses. She and Alicia

had gradually become friends, and it was Leann as well as Rhea that had cheered Alicia on with her therapy. It was Alicia who introduced Leann to her gay physical therapist. Much to everyone's astonishment, Leann had fallen madly in love with the older woman, who brooked no nonsense from her, but loved her dearly.

"You both look beautiful," Stevie commented as she and Leann sat down across from them.

"Thanks, Stevie, you both look pretty nice yourselves." Leann blushed and Stevie just grinned. Stevie had moved in with Leann after Alicia's physical therapy ended. She currently worked as a nurse's aid traveling around the country but never too far away from her partner, Leann.

"It was a beautiful ceremony," Leann remarked, smiling at the happy couple.

"When are you going to have one of your own?" Alicia teased as she squeezed Rhea's hand.

"We've been talking about it," Stevie admitted, flashing a mischievous grin at her girlfriend. Rhea and Alicia looked at each other with amusement. It was startling, the transformation of Leann. She'd become soft, loving, and downright likeable. Alicia chalked it up to love, and Rhea, ever the skeptic, said it was just good sex. Whatever the reason, Leann had settled down and become the rancher her father had always wanted.

"Aunt Rhea and Aunt Alicia, could you please hold your nephew while I dance with his mother?" Ever the proud parent, Ted handed his sleeping son to Rhea and gathered his wife in his arms, hustling her off to the dance floor. Rhea tucked the sleeping infant against her shoulder and felt Alicia snuggle up against the other side of her body, her arm inching around her waist.

Alicia and Rhea loved little Theo and watched him for Sheri and Ted whenever the new parents needed an evening to themselves. That is, as long as Grandma and Grandpa weren't around.

It was late before the celebration wound down and Alicia and Rhea started back to the ranch house. Alicia had tired, her limp now pronounced as she and Rhea entered their home and slowly climbed the stairs. They held hands all the way up to the bedroom. Alone at last, they turned to each other and shared a kiss.

Rhea lifted Alicia's left hand and kissed the glistening gold band reverently. "You and I are married."

Alicia heard the wonder in Rhea's voice and her heart pounded. She picked up Rhea's left hand and placed a kiss on her ring. "Yes, we are, forever and ever."

"I feel so lucky, just to be with you." Rhea hugged Alicia to her, staring down into her loving eyes.

"You should feel lucky, cowgirl, because if you hadn't shown up for the wedding, I would have had to shoot you," Alicia promised, pressing her body to Rhea's.

Rhea laughed as she picked up her petite wife and happily spun her around. "I wouldn't have missed our wedding for the world. Besides, I know how well you can shoot."

Both women laughed as Rhea slowly released Alicia down her body, still tightly held in her arms. Rhea's fingers began to work free the buttons on Alicia's dress, as Alicia's found the zipper on Rhea's. They were both out of their clothes and naked on the bed in minutes. They were going to take their time making love for the first time after formally committing themselves to one another. It was going to be a special night for both of them.

"Rhea, before we make love, I have something for you," Alicia's voice was soft and a little nervous.

"You do?"

Alicia moved off the bed and went to her closet, pulling a framed picture from behind her clothes. She went back to Rhea who watched her from their bed. Alicia handed it to her without a word, and Rhea stared at the piece of art. It was one of Alicia's illustrations. She had captured Rhea on her horse, a big smile on her face, her cowboy hat lying on her back, her black hair streaming behind her. She was wearing her usual jeans, tee shirt, and her duster. It was one of those perfect moments that depicted Rhea as a joyful rancher, and it also portrayed her beauty as only Alicia could interpret it. Rhea's eyes filled with tears as she looked up at her nervous partner.

"This is perfect, so very perfect." Rhea couldn't stop the tears from spilling.

"I'm glad you like it." Alicia leaned over, her face inches from Rhea, a smile lighting her eyes. "I called it '*Cowgirl*'."

Rhea laughed as she placed the picture alongside the bed and pulled Alicia down on top of her. "Come here, I need to make love with you."

Alicia lay on top of Rhea, their hands locked together as they stared into each other's eyes. There was no need to speak as they slowly moved closer until

their lips met and they shared a kiss, one that made them both tremble. Their life was complete, full of family, passion, and love, honest-to-God *real* love.

**The End**