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Eight Second Ride

A steamy short story

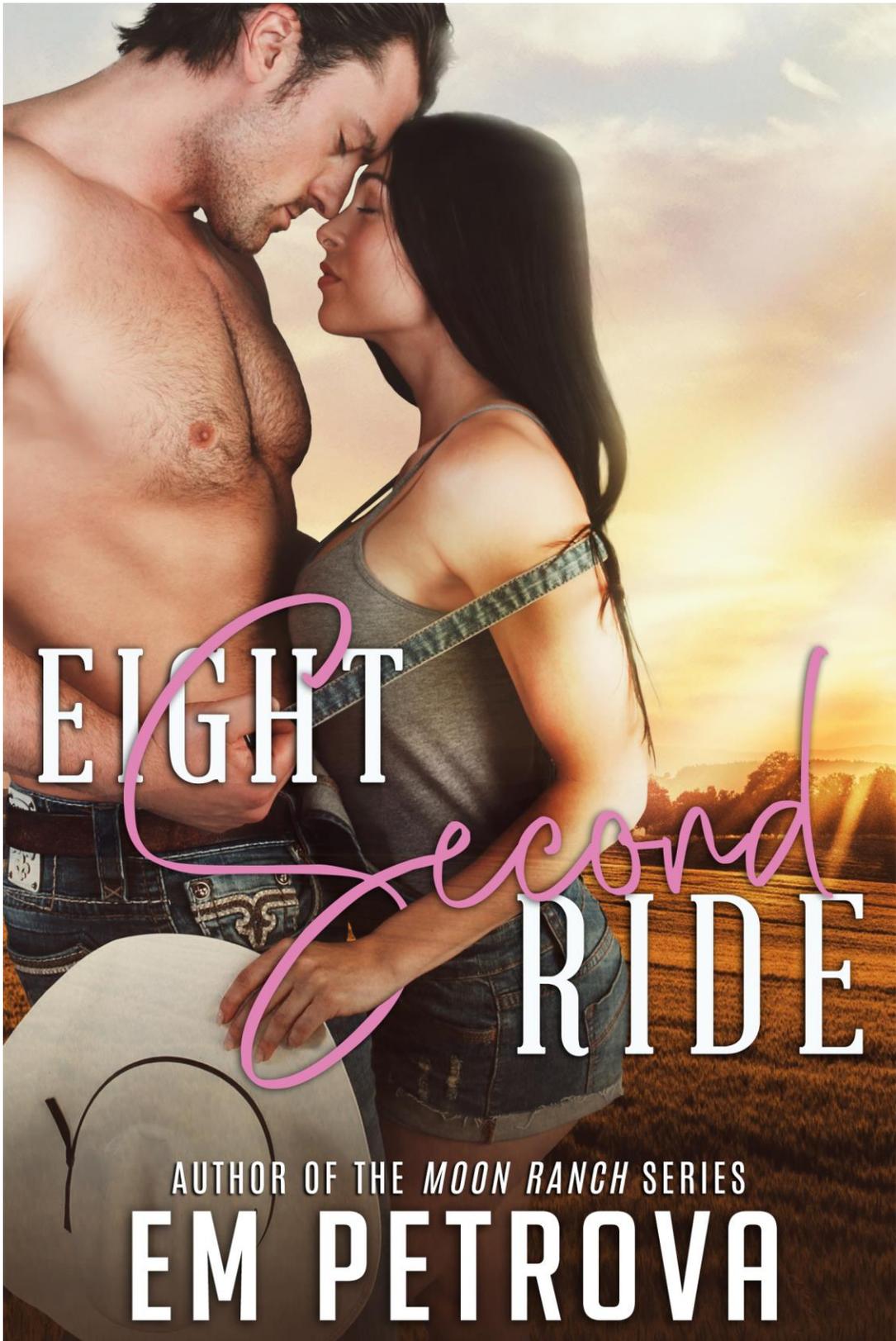
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EIGHT

Second

RIDE

AUTHOR OF THE *MOON RANCH* SERIES

EM PETROVA

When America Alverson gets a bit tipsy at a conference...

And her hunky rancher boss has one too many...

Do two wrongs make a right? They're about to find out.

You've received this free short story for subscribing to Em Petrova's Email List.

If heroes who work hard in bed and out are your thing, you won't be sorry.

Please enjoy Eight Second Ride.

~Em Petrova

Eight Second Ride

by

EM PETROVA

Chapter One

Friday.

Future Farmers and Ranchers Conference.

Nebraska.

Aka the day America Alverson lost her mind.

“He thinks the chickens get up just to hear him crow.” America felt her fingers slip down the stem of her third margarita. Before the glass tipped, she adjusted her grasp, staring at her French manicure hard in concentration.

She wasn’t drunk, because that would be unprofessional, and people accused America of being a lot of things—a controlling bitch, a know-it-all—but the word *unprofessional* had never been associated with her.

“Well he can stand outside my window and crow anytime,” Jenna said.

America burst out laughing. She and Jenna had been BFFs for a whole hour now. They had a ton in common—kiwi margaritas, their love for karaoke, and they both thought Jackson Hardy was the sexiest cowboy alive.

He was also America’s boss.

It appeared he’d found a new best buddy too, if the half-drained bottle of Jose Cuervo sitting on the table in front of him told her anything.

Jackson’s tanned fingers worked over the sleeve of his denim shirt, rolling the cuff up farther. Veins snaked down his forearms, thick and tanned from roping and wrangling cattle all day.

Jackson said something to his companion, one equally hunky Renn Marshall. The men leaned over the table, their determined gazes clashing as they gripped hands.

Oh my God. They’re going to arm wrestle. That age-old bar competition between men who drank too much.

But no! Her boss couldn’t be drunk too...could he?

America stopped caring about who was going to be the smart part of their dream team if neither had a blood-alcohol level over the legal limit as she gaped at the sight of Jackson’s long, callused fingers folding over his adversary’s.

What she wouldn’t give to have those big, rough hands all over her.

Leaning forward in her seat to watch the show, America filled her mouth with kiwi alcoholic goodness.

“Which one?” Jenna asked.

“What?” America looked at her in surprise.

“Which man’s big, rough hands do you want all over you?”

“Did I say that aloud?” She started to giggle but swallowed on a hiccup as Jackson’s dark brown eyes lit on her.

Lawdy. Jackson’s hands. She’d been crushing on her boss since the day she walked onto the Durango Ranch. Somehow she’d made it through her interview without coming off as a lovesick fangirl, and she’d been working closely with the sexy-as-sin cowboy for two years.

Together they’d taken the Durango from just a working cattle ranch to a pleasure ranch as well. The rich and famous from all over the world came to relax and experience the stunning vistas, enjoy horseback and dune buggy riding, and the zip line was a hit.

Mostly she just ran ideas by Jackson and he either gave a shivery-good nod of agreement, or intriguing furrows settled between his long, black brows while he contemplated her request.

He’d been on board with the zip line straightaway, though. The man was all adventure shoved into a six-foot-two muscled package. He’d been the first on the zip line, saying if it could hold him, it could hold anyone. America stood on the wooden platform to see him off.

At the last second, he’d reached for her. “Wanna ride along, America?”

Damn, when he said her name in that deep drawl, she wanted to climb him like a tree and get closer to his heat and his leathery, soapy scent...

She snapped back to herself just as Jackson threw his power into besting Renn. But Renn wasn’t going down that easily. Biceps bulged. Cowboy hats lowered.

“How do they get such good kiwis in Nebraska? I’ve never seen a kiwi tree.”

America threw Jenna a glance. The woman’s blonde hair was sticking up on one side after she laid her head down on the table.

“Because trucks deliver kiwis in the state, Jenna.”

Jenna started to laugh and couldn’t stop. While she giggled helplessly, America returned her attention to the spotlight. To the two striking and powerful men locked in a battle of wills.

Or under the spell of tequila.

Warmth that had nothing to do with too many margaritas the size of bathtubs slid through America. She still wore her conference attire of a pencil skirt and silk blouse. She felt too slippery. She might trip into Jackson’s arms and her skirt would fall off.

She shifted on her wooden chair to ease the constant ache between her thighs.

Jenna was on her feet, swaying. “Lessgo see if we can hepp – help.” She exaggerated her L sound like a toddler learning to speak.

Jenna was the conference planner America had worked with for weeks to make this year’s Future Farmers and Ranchers Conference a success. She’d been nothing but professional and knowledgeable.

Now she stumbled toward the men, but America couldn't move. She might be tipsy, but she was lucid enough to realize she couldn't trust herself around her boss.

She hadn't accepted his offer to go zip-lining. She was terrified of heights. But her fears might have been squelched by the feel of Jackson's broad, perfect, lightly-furred bare chest.

Her nipples pinched into tight gumdrops and she found herself on stilts. Wait – no. Stilettos. She carefully put each heel down on the wooden floor.

Jackson looked up. A bead of sweat zigzagged down his throat, and America wet her lips, hungry to catch that drop of manliness on her tongue.

She closed the gap between the tables. When she reached his, she clung to the edge, battling to stay upright. It might be the alcohol. Or it might be her knees threatening to buckle.

She toppled into his lap.

Both his arms came around her, and she stared into the depths of eyes unlike any she'd seen except on Jackson. His eyes reminded her of dark chocolate and espresso and puppies wrapped up together.

She shivered.

Vaguely she realized both his arms were around her, which meant he couldn't be wrestling.

"I'm sorry."

Those twin lines appeared between his brows. "For what?"

"Making you lose your match."

"And you're not sorry for sitting in my lap?"

Tendrils of need wove through her lower belly. "Am I in your lap?"

"Yeah." His drawl spiked her awareness. His mouth was inches away.

"I've had too many margaritas."

"I've had too many Cuervos."

A bit of her alcoholic haze burned off. Time to stop making an idiot of herself. She was always professional to a fault. Even while he'd been giving his seminar on ranching and she'd wanted to drop to her knees before the podium and lick him from bottom to top, she'd held it together. And while he'd patiently taken time to answer each question from every last young person of the 300-plus audience members, she'd stood nearby smiling and nodding – not taking off her clothes as she'd wanted.

"I need to go to my room," she blurted. To bury her fingers in her wet folds and find some relief from this beautiful torment that was Jackson Hardy. Cowboy, entrepreneur, and boss.

"I'll take you up." Jackson stood with her, and she was finally where she'd longed to be since day one on the Durango Ranch – tucked close to the pearl buttons on his big, fragrant chest.

Chapter Two

Was it still Friday?

When Jackson lost his mind too.

Did he at least win at arm wrestling?

Jackson glanced around but couldn't think what to do. He had a sumptuous little hellcat in his arms and didn't know where to set her down. The chair seemed too far away, the floor farther. No use for it—he'd have to keep holding her.

As he skirted the table with her, he bumped it. Tequila sloshed onto the surface. Renn looked up, his eyes unfocused. "You spilled my drink."

"Well you beat me at arm wrestling. We're even." Jackson made it around the table, past the drunk conference planner America had been hanging with, and started toward the exit.

"That way." America pointed, and he followed the direction of her finger. But twenty steps later they'd made it to the kitchen.

The cook looked up from the grill and waved his spatula. "No customers back here!"

Jackson felt the corner of his mouth tip upward and he staggered back out. With more determination, he set off for the opposite side of the bar.

He had to get this woman to her room. Had to get her out of his arms before he did something he'd regret. Hell, he'd only started drinking in hopes of no longer seeing her tanned, curvy legs and her round ass in her slim-fitting skirt.

His Wranglers grew uncomfortably tight in the fly as he exited the bar into the hallway of the conference center. It smelled of disinfectant and chlorine from the indoor pool, but America...

He dipped his nose to her thick brown hair and inhaled. She smelled of all things good—sunlight and fresh grass and wildflowers.

She was his little ranch helper. His business manager who'd revolutionized the way he did things. From his disorganized desk to how they handled guests on the Durango, she was his right hand.

And hell, what he wouldn't give to sneak his right hand under her skirt and see if she was as hot as he guessed.

Pressure spiked in his core as he found the elevator. She stabbed the up arrow, and the doors opened immediately. Jackson carried her inside.

The walls weren't mirrored but shiny enough to reflect a tall cowboy holding a gorgeous woman. He stared at the image for a full minute as the doors closed and the elevator lurched.

They almost fell in a heap, but he managed to set her on her feet and keep them both upright.

Getting tangled up with America was a big no-no. She was for-fucking-ever off-limits. He didn't dally with employees or guests. That was the family creed. Their family employed a resident chef, hostess, waitstaff, masseuse, and a dozen or so ranch hands. He handled the ranch end, and America had a knack for everything else.

He tried to put some distance between them as the elevator rocketed up several floors.

She was pink-cheeked, avoiding his gaze.

His stomach gave a funny kick—harder than any he'd taken from a bull. His cock bulged against his fly until he swore the threads popped. "America."

When she looked up and he saw the sparks in her big blue, innocent eyes, his self-control sprouted wings and flew right the hell out of Nebraska.

The eighty-proof in his veins didn't help.

"Hell." He caught her by the upper arms, drawing her onto tiptoe. Her mouth could make a man go insane. Plump, naturally red lips called to him.

And he'd envisioned them wrapped around his shaft plenty too.

Her mouth was suddenly very close as he hovered over her. "I've been trying not to think about this, but it isn't working."

"It's...not?" She swallowed hard.

"No, dammit. I drank too much and even wrestled that peewee to keep from wanting to put my hands on you." He pushed her against the elevator wall, ignoring the doors opening and closing in favor of her soft curves glued against his.

Fuck, she felt better than he'd even imagined. Soft, pliant. Her hips were the perfect cradle for his hard cock. If he dipped his hips a little, he could nestle against her pussy.

"He didn't look like a peewee to me. You looked pretty well-matched." She sounded as if she'd raced from one end of the thousand-acre Durango Ranch to the other without stopping.

A growl built in his chest. He'd noticed her looking at Renn Marshall. Hell, Renn had flirted with her after the conference. But that wasn't happening on Jackson's watch.

What was, then? He needed to let her go. Install her in her hotel room and stop thinking about a thin bit of plaster separating them. Then he'd wrap his fingers around his cock and pump it until he was able to forget about America.

His cock had other ideas, though. He sagged at the knees and twitched his hips. When his aching shaft ground against the V of her legs, he was helpless. They tipped forward—and their lips came together in a wide, open-mouthed kiss.

Fuck, she tastes like heaven. He swiped his tongue over hers. A tiny mewl escaped from her throat, and he plowed against her. Lifting her farther onto tiptoe as he dug his cock into her tight, scorching body.

When they broke apart, they were on the sixth floor. He poked the number five and the doors shut just as he trapped her again.

She wrapped her arms around his neck, knocking his hat askew. He didn't care if his favorite hat got trampled by two-thousand pound steers. Right now he was kissing America.

Such a big name for a delicate woman. Looking at her, he'd never believe she'd won so many medals and buckles rodeo-ing. And he'd had the pleasure of watching her barrel-race once. God, she'd been poetry on the back of that bay mare and given Jackson some of the biggest blue balls of his life.

Besides now.

He plundered her mouth until the elevator stopped. "This is our floor."

Her breasts rose and fell under her dark purple blouse. The blouse was far from revealing, but he already knew what the rounded tops of her breasts looked like bulging from a Durango Ranch tank top.

Feeling his way down her arm, he grasped her wrist and tugged. She followed on unsteady legs. Was she really so drunk? He couldn't tell, but three margaritas should wear off pretty quickly. Was she lucid enough to give consent for him to take her to bed?

He used his key card and opened the door of his room. She paused, staring up at him with blue eyes darkened five shades by lust.

"Will you come inside with me, America?" His voice sounded gritty, as if he'd spent twelve hours behind a herd of cows choking on dust.

A visible shiver ran through her. "I want to... But I've had too much to drink."

"So have I." He braced a hand on the jamb and leaned closer. She tipped her face up, torturing him with those plush red lips. He wanted to make them swollen with his kisses – and more.

"Come in." He closed his hand on her waist. With a gasp, she swayed into his arms. He plucked her off her feet and spun into the room. The door slammed behind them as he kissed her. While he walked her to the bed, she knocked his hat onto the floor.

His grin spread over hers, and then she nipped his lower lip. The sting was so good, so right, so *America*. Growling, he bore her back on the bed, using one hand to shimmy up her skirt.

"What happens..." pant, pant, "in Nebraska...stays...in Nebraska?" She tore at his shirt buttons, punctuating each word with another nibble to his lips that sent him off the deep end.

"Abso-fucking-lutely."

She took his hand and guided it to her breast. When he felt the small pebble of her nipple beneath his palm, his cock lengthened to an impossible size. With a mind of their own, his hips worked, jerking into her, nudging her up the ugly green bedspread.

She somehow worked her tight skirt up enough to lock a strong thigh around his hip – and bring her wet heat against his jeans.

For a throbbing heartbeat they stared into each other's eyes.

Then attacked their clothing.

Her silk blouse was wadded up and tossed off the bed. He kicked out of one boot but the other was stuck. Her stiletto had fallen off and was digging into his shin, but he didn't care because he was too engrossed in the fascinating hook in the front of her fire-engine-red bra.

When the clasp gave way, he burrowed his face against that fragrant space he'd created, drawing in huge lungfuls of his forbidden lover while her hands moved in his hair.

He scraped his five o'clock shadow along her flesh, and she gave the most feminine groan he'd ever heard in his life. *I knew it. I knew she'd be like this in bed.* From the beginning, her laugh had enchanted him. The womanly way she tossed her hair or the sway of her hips were all branded on his brain.

As he pushed her bra cup aside with his jaw, he glanced into her eyes. Their gazes caught – and held.

She grabbed his ear and showed him where she wanted him – no needed – him most. Her nipple was a dark red swollen gumdrop, begging for his lips, teeth, tongue. She cried out as he clamped his lips on it. Then flicked the tip with his tongue. He found her other straining nipple and rolled it between his fingers as he worshipped one with his tongue.

Crying out, she arched. He suckled. She scrabbled at his bare shoulders. He was too aware that her skirt was up around her middle and his jeans and belt were still entirely intact.

They could still end this, walk away before things got out of hand.

But now that he'd had a taste...

She pinched his nipple and dragged her nails up his side. He hissed as she raised a sting with each fingertip. He wouldn't be surprised to see she'd drawn blood.

"Hellcat. Let's see if you like it." He bit her nipple lightly, and she cried out. Out of his head with need, he bit her other a little harder.

Reaching between them, she tore at his belt buckle. The big silver oval imprinted with the Durango's cattle brand gave a metallic *tink* as it opened. Breathing hard, she flicked his button. Each tooth of his zipper moving downward resonated through his entire being.

When she flattened her soft little palm against his distended boxers, he surged upward. "Sweetheart, you'd better stop. I won't last if you even touch me. It's been so long."

Her eyes softened and for a second he knew she wasn't too drunk to say yes. She knew damn well what she was doing with him – and so did he. Cuervo wasn't that kind of master.

But Jackson damn well was.

He leaned up on his knees and caught her skirt, searching for a zipper under her.

She dug her heels into the bed and pushed up to give him better access. When her pink tongue licked over her pink, straining bud, he almost lost it. Last summer's ice cream incident was wiped from his mind, replaced by America licking her own nipple. And he'd thought nothing could be more erotic than her eating a vanilla cone.

Gripping her skirt, he ripped. The seam popped, and he yanked it off her full hips, exposing a matching fire-engine red thong.

"Jesus God," he said on a prayer. And dived between her thighs.

* * * * *

America's inner muscles jumped at the sight of Jackson removing her panties with his teeth. Pearly whites against the red strings. Her inner muscles spasmed and her arousal flooded the scrap of silk a split second before he tore them off her.

As he drew the cloth off her heel, he folded them in his fist and brought them to his nose. Desire spiked in her when he inhaled deeply. Then licked them.

Lawd have mercy. She was going to die — death by cowboy. Who knew sniffing panties could be so erotic? He tossed them and threw himself flat on the bed with his lips targeted at her slick folds.

His dark eyes were sin. His crooked smile a promise.

She held her breath as he dropped a tender kiss to her plump outer lips. Then sank deeper, parting her with his lips and tongue.

A cry left her, and she locked her hands around his nape, dragging him closer. She was aching, burning to reach that unseen peak. But Jackson Hardy did things on his own schedule.

Teasing her outer lips with his tongue then slowly circling deeper. Her clit was a hard pearl begging for his attention, but he moved downward to lap at her opening.

"Oh fffffuck," she groaned. He tickled her with his tongue. Five times...six. Then speared her. Her inner walls clutched at his invasion. One thing was certain — he was as good with his tongue as he was rope.

When he lifted his head and pierced her with his dark stare, a sobbing breath left her. "I'm going to make you scream my name, sweetheart. Over and over again before I'll give you what you really need."

"Wh-what's that?" Juices ran down her thigh.

"You need to ride my cock, cowgirl. You need me pounding into this tight pussy." To illustrate his point, he thrust two fingers into her. Extreme pleasure hit her system. She bucked, trying to ride his hand.

But he pulled them out and sucked them clean before tonguing her from bottom to top. Lingering on her clit, barely touching it. She writhed for more and let her eyes close for a moment. Watching him eat her out was too good, though. She opened her eyes just in time to see him make a lazy figure-eight over her clit.

She felt it to the marrow of her bones. Need flowed through her veins, and she spread her legs wider.

“That’s it, sweetheart. Open wide for me. Let me taste all of you.” He kissed across her pussy and to the crease of her thigh – a spot she couldn’t ever remember someone touching before. She cried out.

“You’re pent up. You need to come.”

God, yes. His talk was shoving her upward so fast she could hardly see straight.

He captured her clit under his tongue and ground her core into her body. Her belly muscles jumped. Long, rough moans filled the room, shocking her to realize they came from her.

He lapped her back and forth, up and down, around and around.

“Oh my God...” She was there, pulsating, flying.

He rumbled his pleasure against her nubbin, and she soared.

Hot throbs of ecstasy stole her mind for several seconds. When the burst of light left her vision, she saw the handsome cowboy with squint lines mapping satisfaction across his face. Without a word, he went back to his job. Cupping her ass and lifting her hips to feast on her juices. He cleaned her with soft, light strokes. Then grew bolder and plunged his tongue into her cavern again.

Her mind floated. In the morning she’d probably regret every swish of his tongue but right now, she was all about fantasy fulfillment.

Raising his head, he pinned her gaze with his. She couldn’t look away if she wanted to. But staring into Jackson’s eyes was a pleasure all its own.

She rested her heels on his back and pushed upward. Electric heat spread through her, and suddenly she was panting again.

* * * * *

He’d promised her several orgasms but after only two, he couldn’t hold back. He needed inside her – now.

Rolling to his feet, he dropped his Wranglers. His boxers followed, and with his cock in hand, he approached her. Had he ever been this hard? Hell no. He hadn’t had sex in months and little time to go looking for it. He was damn good at self-relief, but lately orgasms had become a way to relax after a hard day on the ranch.

Not tonight.

He lowered himself between America’s legs, and she gathered him close. When her sweet mouth found his, he turned into her with a grunt of surrender. She kissed him long and deep until she tasted like her own juices from his mouth.

Then he did something he’d been dying to do for months – hell, years. He sank his fingers into her thick hair, angled his hips, and filled her with one shove.

Scalding heat surrounded him, and his balls clenched tight. He rocked into her, and they shared a ragged sound. She was already shuddering – on the heels of her last release, his invasion had spurred another.

With his eyes shut to memorize every contraction of her tight body around his cock, he kissed the noises right out of her. Before she'd come down from her high, he was tunneling deep again, splitting her. Taking what he needed and giving her what he'd promised.

Their bodies slapped. Stars burst behind his eyes, and he swore he saw fireworks just like the Fourth of July. *My country 'tis of theeeeeee*. The song lyrics of "America" leaped into his head as he pistoned his hips.

With a roar, he pumped into her. Angling so deep he swore his cock head bumped her womb as spurt after spurt of hot come filled her sweet, sated body.

Wait...

His mind struggled to the surface, but he couldn't figure out why.

Until she stiffened. "Jackson." The hitch in her voice added to his certainty something was wrong.

He looked into her eyes and understanding hit. He'd forgotten something, all right. A condom.

Chapter Three

Durango Ranch

Two months later

America gazed at the vista before her. After a morning rain, everything on the ranch seemed brighter, sharper. The terra cottas, warm browns and greens had never appeared so vivid, as if a master painter mixed exactly the right colors.

She always loved this view, even if lately she found herself romanticizing her life on the ranch.

She focused on her day ahead and a long to-do list that would take up most of her time. At least her work kept her mind off her boss – until the moment she collapsed into bed.

First, she had to make a few phone calls and arrange travel for their next group of visitors. The rockstar and his social influencer girlfriend arriving soon to the Durango Ranch required top security. A strict no reporters, no paparazzi rule was already in place at the ranch, but they required extra this week. Especially, since this was their secret wedding destination.

She leaned against a log porch support and sipped her coffee. In the distance, cattle thundered across the land with a few riders herding them.

Jackson. He'd been up for hours, most likely. He left the house before the sun kissed the earth. Hell, he probably slept in his boots and spurs.

Her body prickled at the memory of their wild night together. A professional slip-up, and she hadn't yet decided if she had regrets or wanted it to happen again.

No eight-second ride there. No sir.

The day after, they'd been back to a business relationship. They'd gotten up, packed, and left the conference with nothing more than polite noises. Sequestered together on the plane, they'd passed the newspaper and a bottle of painkillers back and forth. Not one word had been uttered about what they'd shared or their oversight in using a condom.

If she didn't now see him cast in a new light of familiarity, she'd believe the whole encounter had been wiped out by alcohol. But when he looked at her as if he remembered her flavors and the sounds she made in the throes of bliss, her silly mind started connecting dots that were really craters.

One rider broke from the herd and started toward the house. She didn't need binoculars to know it was Jackson. The way he owned the saddle – shoulders squared, swaying with the animal – was true Jackson style.

He did everything with ease. Well, later today she'd put that to the test.

As he neared the house, she glanced at her watch. They had a ten o'clock meeting about the upcoming wedding taking place on the ranch, but that wasn't for hours. Why was he coming in so soon?

She abandoned her favorite vantage point and walked back inside. As she navigated the open spaces of the resort that she'd helped to plan from the inception, she tried not to choke up. So much around here had her touch. She'd chosen the muted paint colors and the rugged buffalo hide chairs flanking the stone fireplace.

In her office, she sank behind her desk and took a moment to gather herself. If she didn't get a grip on her rioting emotions today, she'd surely alert Jackson that something was up. And she wasn't ready to reveal her intentions until the end of the day.

With a deep breath, she picked up the phone.

She heard his boots stomping her direction before she even dialed. Holding her breath, she stared at her door. When the opening filled with muscle and a battered brown hat, she fought for air. Her sundress shrank two sizes.

She stood and circled her desk to face him.

"Howdy," he said with a tip of his hat.

America's smitten mind clung to his every word and action. For two months she'd been turning everything he did into new meaning, but she'd never been so wrong.

"Hi, Jackson." Her tone was cool and calm – a win.

"Did you hear about the weddin'?" His drawl made her nipples harden.

Score one for him.

He moved into the room.

Confusion settled over her. "No, why?"

"It's all over the news. I thought you would have seen it this morning." He flicked his gaze over her red sundress, lingering somewhere around the ruffled hem, down to her boots, and then back up to her face.

"I got up late this morning. What's going on?"

"Their plane crashed."

She sucked in a harsh breath and plastered her hand to her chest. "Katrina and Lane?"

"Yeah. They're alive, but it's serious. Lane's in a coma, and it seems Katrina had been pregnant. The press is all over that."

"Pregnant," she echoed. "And the baby?"

"She lost it. They're lucky to be alive, but nobody knows for how long. The weddin's off."

"Of course." Shock spiraled through her. She'd worked closely with the musician and social influencer for months. All her hard work to give them the best start to their happily ever after was now twisted wreckage and heartache. "I'm so sorry to hear this news. I'd better start making some calls."

"Yeah, I thought I'd tell you myself." He lingered near her desk. Picked up a pen and fiddled with it.

"Thank you." There was nothing left to say.

Still, he didn't go back to his ranch chores.

"Is there something else you needed?"

"Uh, no. I'll be separating the herd in the west pasture till lunchtime if you need me."

She blinked. This day was getting off track, and that wouldn't work for her. She wasn't normally so OCD about her schedule, but... "I thought we had a ten o'clock."

"What did you need to go over? I thought the ten o'clock was mostly the wedding plans." He hitched a hip onto her desk, drawing the denim tight over his muscular thigh.

Suddenly her panties were a soggy scrap. She wanted to pop his fly with her teeth and drag those jeans right off his fine body.

To cover her discomposure, she rustled some files. "Yes, the wedding. And that bigwig photographer is coming to take photos for the new brochure tomorrow."

"Okay. I'll deal with him tomorrow."

Yes, but I won't.

Her chest burned with the secret she was so close to revealing. Tomorrow she wouldn't have that breathtaking view from the porch or the job she loved.

Or Jackson.

Somehow she managed a nod that might have looked normal. "I'll just write down some thoughts about what we want to showcase in the brochure."

"The cattle." The herd was always foremost in his mind. He'd only expanded on the pleasure ranch idea because their operation was bankrupt. The other end of their business let him keep working the land he loved plus some.

"Absolutely. And the pool and hot tub."

"The zip line." The way he drawled those words fed into the wellspring of desire inside her. She squeezed her thighs together. When he doffed his hat and she saw all that thick, dark hair curling on his nape, she folded her hands into fists to keep from lunging at him.

Staying on the ranch was impossible. She'd been aching for two months, and moments such as these reinforced her decision.

She bobbed her head. "We must photograph the zip line. I think it'd be nice if you were in the photo."

He cocked a brow, which was hard enough on her libido. Add the smoldering eyes beneath and she was a puddle. "I've proven myself when it comes to the zip line. I think it's your turn. Why not have our business manager in the brochure?"

She shook her head, ignoring the heat dropping lower in her belly. "You know me and heights." Besides, she wasn't going to be the business manager any longer.

"I'll get you up there yet, America." He stood, smacked his hat off his thigh, and settled it back on his head. The action was so manly that all the air was sucked from her again. "You good for a few hours here? I've got work to do."

"I do too."

He strode to the door and threw her a searing wink. The motion had an invisible string connected to her nipples and pussy. The tug nearly pulled a noise from her.

"See ya at lunch," he said.

I'll be in my room with a case of batteries.

"Sure. See you later, Jackson."

As soon as he left her office, she lowered her face into her hands. How was she going to get through today? It was hard enough recovering from his rugged beauty and panty-scorching looks. But what she had to tell him would wrench out part of her soul. She belonged on the Durango. It was home.

She glanced at her watch. "My home for a few more hours."

Returning to her desk chair, she took some deep breaths to calm herself. She was so distracted that she didn't hear his boots until she looked up to find him standing beside her.

"You all right?" Concern etched between his brows. For a moment, her hope was a geyser shooting rainbow dreams into the air.

But she was wrong—there wasn't anything between them and she had to go. Especially now.

"Yes, I'm fine. Did you forget something?"

"Yeah." That muscle in his jaw ticked furiously as he hesitated. Then he wrapped his fingers around her wrist and pulled her to her feet. "Come with me. I want to tell you about an idea I had."

With his warm, rough hand on her, she'd follow him into a patch of quicksand. "Should I bring my notepad?"

"Good idea. Let's go."

On the way out of her office she grabbed her notepad and cowgirl hat. Taking two steps to his one, she tried to weasel information from him. "Is this about the new horse paddock?"

"Nope." He kept walking. When they got outside, she saw he'd hitched his horse to the post of the long porch—and hers was there as well.

A grin spread over her face as she saw her animal already saddled. He was pretty highhanded, saddling her horse under the assumption she'd ride out with him.

But she was his employee. Her time belonged to him.

And other parts too.

No matter how she felt about him or her decision, she loved to ride. Heedless of her dress, she swung into the saddle. She took a second to arrange her skirt so her crotch and most of her thighs were covered. When she glanced up, she caught him looking.

That old familiarity brushed her senses, and she swallowed a sigh.

Jackson wheeled his mare around. "Yaw!" He spurred his horse and took off. She did the same, and they galloped across the field to where a deep gorge cut through the ranch. It was one of the things she'd miss most. On hot days everyone came down here to swim in the deep, green pool. And sometimes when she needed a moment alone, she'd sit here and enjoy the quiet.

Jackson reined up, and she did the same, circling back to stop at his side.

She'd been with him long enough to know he took a while to gather his thoughts. They sat with only the sound of the breeze and the rustle of the horses.

"I was thinking about expanding the ranch."

"Oh?" All at once, she envisioned a pavilion here for big events. She opened her mouth to say so, but he cut across her.

"I want to build my house here."

She blinked. The breeze captured a tendril of her hair and blew it across her face. She hooked it with a finger and brought it behind her ear as she considered his words and tone. If his dark eyes didn't reveal his seriousness, his quiet inflection did.

"But you live in the ranch house. Has something changed?"

He scuffed a gloved hand over his jaw, creating a rasping noise that made her nerves ping. "The ranch is feeling a bit small, and I figure I have the money."

"It's a beautiful place for a house, Jackson."

"I knew you'd approve." He turned his gaze on her full force. Her heart skipped like a stone across those deep, green waters in the gorge below them.

"So, when would you break ground?"

"As soon as I can get permits." With all the strings he could pull, that could be next week.

She laughed. "That soon?"

"It's time. I've been sleeping in the barn for the past two months."

"You— Why?" The ranch had eleven bedrooms. He had one wing all to himself, while she and the paying guests had the opposite end. She'd had no idea Jackson wasn't sleeping in the house.

He lifted a shoulder and let it fall. "I'd like some distance from the resort end of the business."

"I see."

"Will you help me with the planning?"

A lump formed in her throat, and she could barely force out her lie. "Yes."

The flash of his grin eclipsed all the beauty surrounding them. God, how was she going to survive the pain of leaving the Durango, the employees who'd all become her friends...and him?

"I knew I could count on you."

A call came from along the ridge, followed by a long whistle.

Jackson turned his horse in that direction before the sound stopped carrying. "They're ready for my help. You can go on back to the house, America. See you at lunch."

In a cloud of dust Jackson was gone, leaving her alone to imagine the house he'd build and the family he'd inevitably put inside.

With a desperate ache in her heart, she kicked her horse and took off, galloping fast and hard, driven to escape.

* * *

"After a long day behind a herd, a man needs a drink. Tequila, Jackson?" Hopewell, the foreman for the Durango Ranch, went to the wet bar and lifted a bottle.

Jackson sat up straighter in the leather wing chair. He hadn't drunk tequila since that night of the conference. Since he'd screwed up so badly with America. Not that the sex was bad – no, that was the stuff of fantasies.

But she was strained with him now. All her easygoing chatter had fled. And while a brilliant, white-toothed smile came with everything she did, she wasn't herself around him.

"Yeah, give me a Cuervo."

"That's the man I know," Hopewell drawled.

"What's that supposed to mean?" Jackson got up to get his drink – the least he could do if Hopewell was pouring.

His friend met his gaze. "You've been off lately."

He curled his fingers around the heavy glass and knocked the tequila back. It burned his tongue, tonsils, and all the way down to his stomach. There it sat scorching him from the inside out. Maybe it would burn away his memories of having America's supple body beneath his.

Great—now his body remembered tequila and America combined. A lethal interaction.

"What's weighing on you, Jacks?"

"I've been thinkin' about that plane crash today." With a tragedy like that involving people he knew, it was difficult not to let it drag him down. But he wasn't being truthful with his foreman either.

"Yeah, tough times for Katrina and Lane. Hope everything works out."

Jackson got up and poured himself another drink while Hopewell nursed a whiskey.

"We should be getting a calf in the next day or two," Hopewell was saying.

Jackson grunted. Usually he lived for calving season. Seeing all the mothers and their young delivered safe always excited him. He loved the responsibility, the near chaos of running on adrenaline, coffee and little sleep.

But lately, things he normally adored such as hard work wasn't giving him a spark. He sipped.

"Gotta get the first crop of hay in soon too," Hopewell interrupted his musings.

"There's always hay to get in." What they needed were a few more ranch hands to make quicker work of it so Jackson could focus on the cattle. Beef was the Durango's prime industry—at least it was starting to be. For a while the ranch had struggled to support itself. Then Jackson had seen a brochure for a dude ranch.

The wheels started turning in his head, and pretty soon he was hiring America to make it happen. In two years, she'd made the Durango one of the top destinations for the rich and famous. And some of her ideas—dune buggies the guests could use to explore the ranch and the zip line—were nothing short of brilliant.

America. There she was again. A bright spot in his mind.

The tequila was starting to awaken more than his cock. *This is why I can't drink tequila.*

He wanted to grab all her glorious hair and kiss her until she didn't remember her own name. Just before—

"What the hell's wrong with you, Jackson?"

He looked up sharply to see Hopewell staring at him. "You wanna know what's wrong with me lately?"

Hopewell nodded.

Jackson sighed. "At the Nebraska conference, I drank too much and took America to bed."

Hopewell sputtered his whiskey. For a minute solid he hacked up a lung. With eyes streaming, he gaped at Jackson. "You boned our business manager?"

"I wouldn't use your choice of words, but yeah."

"Fuck, bro." He dropped to the other leather chair. "You actually got her into bed?"

"That was pretty easy. She was drunk too."

Hopewell released a low whistle. "I'd like to see her unraveled just once. She's always such a hard-ass. God, I bet it was purdy. Does she remember it?"

Jackson slammed back the rest of his drink and got up to place the glass on the bar. "Dunno. We haven't talked about it."

"Wait." Hopewell followed him. "You fucked and you haven't even discussed it?"

"What's to say? It was a mistake."

"But she isn't acting any different. I never would have been able to tell if you hadn't just told me."

I can. He wanted the old America back, the woman who was his partner in so many ways. He missed sitting with her on the long porch and talking clients and cattle. He

wanted her coming to him with excitement on her beautiful face and a new idea to make the ranch more profitable.

He swallowed hard. "Don't mention this to anybody, Hopey."

Hopewell lifted his glass to his lips. "I won't say a word. You know that."

"Thanks. I've got some work to wrap up. See ya at dawn." Jackson didn't have more work, but the thoughts of going to his meager pallet in the barn didn't set well. On the other hand, sleeping in the same house as America was pure torture. Hell, he'd take thumbscrews or waterboarding rather than know she was a few doors away.

All the way to his office, he couldn't shake the gut instinct that his day wasn't over. He opened the door, switched on the light, and found America sitting in the chair before his desk.

His heart flipped and galloped off, double-time. "America."

"Jackson. I'm glad you came. I was trying to work up the nerve to come find you."

The skin on his forearms prickled. "What's wrong? Did Lane die?"

Her face blanked and then grew so red it was painful to look at her. Almost – she was too pretty to look away from.

"N-no. As far as I know, Lane's okay. Holding his own. At least that's what his publicist shared with me after lunch. I sent flowers, by the way."

Relaxing a bit, Jackson pushed away from the doorway, closing it behind him. When he settled in his chair, he studied America across his desk. She still wore that little red sundress with the ruffle hitting across her tanned thighs. Seeing her straddle a horse in that dress had almost knocked him off his own.

He fought to keep from letting his gaze roam all over her. "Did you have something to talk to me about?"

"Actually...yes." She lifted her gaze, giving him those eyes the deep blue of a Texas sky after a rain.

Drawing a deep breath, he nodded. "I'm listening."

She fiddled with something in her lap. Leaning forward a bit, he saw her holding a rectangle of paper folded in thirds business-style. "I'm not sure how to say this, so I brought this."

She shoved the letter across the desk. His heart did another tuck and roll, thumping hard in his ears. This couldn't be good. She was never so cryptic. Her straightforwardness was what he admired about her.

Placing a hand over the letter, he held her gaze. "I'm not going to like this, am I?"

"I...can't speak for you."

Son of a bitch. With a flick, he opened the letter and started reading. The words blurred in a haze of red-hot anger.

"You're resigning? Leaving me and the Durango in the lurch?"

Her throat worked, a blush climbing her neck and face once more. "I am," she said quietly.

He made a fist and pounded the letter. "I'm not reading the rest of it. You tell me why you're doing this, America."

"I-I've got another offer."

"A job offer?" His eyeballs felt too big for the sockets.

"Yes."

"Am I allowed to know where at least?"

She let her gaze slide away to her hands fiddling with the pleats of fabric of her skirt. "The Triple R."

He exploded to his feet, sending his chair spinning across the room to strike the bookcase. "Renn Marshall's place? You're leaving the Durango—*leaving me*—for Renn Marshall?"

She nodded, a sudden look of calm replacing her hectic color on her face. "I can't refuse it. I'm sorry, Jackson. I've learned so much working with you—"

"And now you're going to go share it with our competition?" He paced three steps, swung around and stomped back.

She got to her feet. Damn her little red dress and her resignation letter. He couldn't believe she felt no loyalty for the Durango—that she could be sold to the highest bidder.

"I'd never share anything I've done here. All will remain confidential." When she lifted her stubborn little jaw like that, he wanted to pinch it and kiss her hard enough to give her swollen lips.

His heart was skewered by betrayal. He shoved his fingers through his hair, realizing he'd left his hat by the fireplace. Without it he felt naked.

"What's he offering you?"

"I can't share that information."

Dammit, he wanted to shake the figures from her and force away that business-like mask she wore. "You mean you won't. Because that half-wit cowboy loves to brag about money."

She gave a light shake of her head, pulling her shoulders back. He knew America well enough to recognize her stubborn streak was alive and well. Front and center. The curtain was falling too fast, though, and he couldn't let her walk away without a last bow.

He spread his hand open. "I counteroffer."

Her eyes fluttered shut, and she seemed to rock on her boots. "Jackson."

Jesus, the way she said his name, all throaty, gave him an instant erection. His cock bulged against his fly. In three steps he could circle the desk and throw her down on it. Less if he lunged across it.

He ground his teeth against white-hot need and a sharper pain that had everything to do with her leaving the ranch. Dammit, there had to be a way to resolve this.

Chapter Four

Jackson's office

After America's resignation

The truth comes out

America's chest worked as she fought to control her breathing. The look on his face when he'd read the first lines of her letter...it would haunt her forever. Add his almost-black stare and she didn't know if she could go through with this.

She had no choice, though. If she stayed, he'd know how difficult it was for her to work with him every day. And he'd know her secret too, especially in a few months when her pregnancy began to show.

It wasn't classified information that Jackson didn't want a family right now. He'd talked about it a lot with America. How he wanted to get the ranch to a certain level before he even considered settling down. That was if he could find a woman who'd put up with him working eighteen-hour days.

And here she was nine weeks gone. Nearly through her first trimester. Her jeans were already getting a little uncomfortable, which was why she'd chosen the looser sundress today.

The one he couldn't seem to take his eyes off. If only he'd give her some sign that he wanted more with her...

She steeled her spine. *I'm being delusional. He doesn't want me and if I tell him, he'll just try to pay me off.*

She placed a protective hand across her belly. From the moment she'd seen those twin blue lines on the pregnancy stick, her maternal instincts had kicked in. She was already taking all the prenatal precautions and eating healthy. She'd even cut back to one caffeinated drink a day. That really hurt—sipping coffee on the porch of the Durango Ranch was the best thing in the world.

"I've left everything labeled on my desk. And I've filled in Cynthia."

His eyes bulged out. "Cynthia? You told my cousin you're leaving before you told me?"

"No. I just showed her everything so she'd know if I was ever off sick."

He raked his gaze over her, shooting awareness to the far corners of her body. North, south, east, west—Jackson owned them all. She was in love with him, had been long before Nebraska.

"You're not sick, are you?"

"No, I'm fine."

He looked mighty mistrustful with his hard lips screwed up and those dual lines cut between his brows. Finally, he gave a short nod. "But you're really going?"

Her heart drummed and for the first time since finding out she was carrying Jackson's baby, nausea set in. She drank in a deep breath and instantly regretted it as she caught a whiff of pure male. Leather, soap, and hard work. An underlying note of tequila, just like Nebraska...

"I'm really going. I wish you and your family the best of luck. If you need anything while you adjust to my absence, you can call my cell."

His mouth hardened and his eyes adopted a flatness she'd never seen before. "I understand, America. I'm mighty disappointed to find you aren't who I believed you were. But I wish you the best." He reached across the desk and she took his hand in a firm handshake.

"Thank you, Jackson. Best of luck." Her voice wobbled. Before she was a fool throwing herself at him and begging for him to love her and this baby they'd made in an alcoholic fit of lust, she turned and walked out of the office.

Out of his life. But she'd always have a tie to him, and she'd keep it close. She stretched her hand over her lower stomach and choked back her tears.

She kept her head bowed as she moved down the corridor to her own room. When she reached the end of the hall, a bellow of anguish, like a wounded animal, rang through the ranch house.

She twisted just in time to see Jackson stumbled from his office like a crazed beast. Seeing her, he stopped. Their gazes met across what felt like a mile of hardwood floor.

He clenched his fists at his sides. Then he started for her.

America's insides leaped. She took a step backward and realized she couldn't run from this man. Even though her gut instincts were to leave the ranch and keep her secret from him, she couldn't really do that.

He was the father of her baby.

And she was in love with him.

He deserved to know that much before she left – or he sent her packing.

With each rolling step he took, his boots thumped the floor. At ten paces, his stare burned through her like a match to kindling. At five, her whole body shook.

He drew up sharply a mere step away. "Why are you doing this really? Because I know you don't give a shit about the money."

Opening her mouth and then closing it, she battled with herself. She didn't want Jackson to want her for the baby's sake. And she hadn't earned his love in the past two months, proving their encounter had been nothing more than lust and alcohol.

When she didn't immediately answer, he issued a rough growl. Using his crooked forefinger, he raised her head to meet his stare. "America," he said slowly, "tell me the truth."

She swallowed against the lump constricting her throat. Pregnancy hormones were killing her on a daily basis, but now those tears she was constantly warding off jumped to her eyes.

“Hell, America. What is it?”

She caught his hand still holding up her chin and lowered it to rest over her thickening waist. Looking him directly in the eyes, she told him the truth. “I’m carrying your baby.”

His eyes closed, and he bowed his head. Her tears started to fall faster as he hovered over her, his warm hand locked to her belly.

“My God.” He snapped his eyes open. The depths were an unreadable blur. “You were gonna leave and not tell me? Not even give me a chance to claim my child? Or the woman...” he swayed closer, “the woman I’m in love with?”

A gasp started to escape her and turned into a hitching cry. “Love? Jackson, this is exactly why I didn’t want to tell you! I never meant to trap you. I don’t want you to form a family out of obligation!”

His eyes narrowed. “You think I’d ever do something like that? You know me, America, probably better than anybody ever has. You’ve been driving me crazy for two years. Sleeping with you in Nebraska was the best night of my life.” He curled his hand around her lower belly, cradling his growing child and warming her hopeful heart at the same time.

“You know why I’ve been sleeping in the barn?”

She shook her head.

“I couldn’t trust myself not to come to you in the night. I lie awake, aching for you in my arms.”

A stuttering cry burst from her. “Jackson, tell me you’re not just saying these things. I’m prepared to raise this baby alone. You don’t have to —”

“But I want to.” His voice grated over her senses.

She swiped at her tear-wet cheeks. “Let’s think about this logically.”

“I’m not makin’ a business deal, woman. I’m makin’ a family.” He caught her face in his hands and drew her lips to his. The soft, seeking kiss stole some of her fight. She wanted this so bad, but not at the price of Jackson’s soul.

When he pulled back, he searched her eyes. “I’m makin’ a family, America. With you. So let me have my way in this, you stubborn woman.”

A laugh tore from her, mingling with her tears. “I can’t believe this is real. I’ve...” She dragged in a full breath. “I’ve loved you for so long.”

He dropped his head back to stare up at the ceiling. His lips moved as if he spoke a prayer. Focusing on her again, he dragged her against his hard body. She threw her arms around his neck, and he swept her up, twisting for his bedroom door not far away.

“Jackson —”

“Shh.” He kissed her as he carried her into his room and then kicked the door shut. With her cradled in his arms, he offered her the first sign of a real smile she’d seen in months.

“You didn’t cancel the weddin’ plans for this weekend, did you?” he asked.

Her mind sputtered. “I placed calls to the pastor and the caterers. The wedding cake’s already partially baked and the deposit’s nonrefundable.”

“Good. We’ll need a cake.”

She stared at him, jaw dropped.

“We’re halfway to the alter, sweetheart. You’re gonna be my wife. All we need’s the license – and you to say I do.”

“I... Set me down, Jackson. I can’t think straight.”

He took a few steps and laid her on his bed instead of letting her slip to the floor. Braced over her, he gazed down into her eyes. “Marry me, America. Make me the happiest man in the West. Help me continue building this ranch while we build a life together. Let me have the chance to be a father.”

Her throat constricted on her emotions. But the one flapping around her soul requiring the most attention was her love for her cowboy.

Cupping his angled jaw, she nodded. “Yes. I’ll marry you!”

A grin spread over his rugged features, stealing her breath and heart in one instant. He gave her the cocky nod that might have started this entire love affair.

“You make me happy.”

“Don’t sleep in the barn tonight.”

“From now on we share this bed. You, me and Jr. here.” Eyes flashing with all the love she never expected but couldn’t wait to bask in, her boss, her partner...soon to be her husband...ducked his head to capture her lips.

THE END

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