

Martin and Callie: Breaking Point

By Kate Simon

Martin Hardwick watched as his border collie, Jake, darted through the back field. He was probably chasing a field mouse or a rock squirrel. He glanced down at his watch and knew he'd be late to the office. He'd didn't care. He'd much rather stand here and watch Jake run. At least his dog was enjoying himself. Martin put his teeth over his lower lip and gave a loud whistle. Jake's head shot up from the tall grass. Martin would have sworn Jake was smiling as he ran towards him. He bolted towards him and sat at his feet.

"Did you catch it, boy?"

"Woof!"

He bent over and pet the dog's head. "Since I see no fur or blood around your mouth, I'll say no. Come on boy. The old man is going to be pissed I'm late." As opposed to being pissed he was still single and childless at fifty. Or pissed that he was the old man's only child. Or pissed that he didn't have "the stones" for business the old man had. Martin would take exception to the old man's stones comments if he thought it would actually matter. Martin knew what people called him behind his back, Hardass Hardwick. Ever since he'd taken over the day to day of the company, he'd been the one to implement the old man's plans. Now his father had become the elder statesman of Keene County.

Jake followed him into the kitchen of his farmhouse. Most people expected him to have a condo in town but he needed to have some place that was away from the business and his father. Besides Jake needed room to run. He reached down and scratched behind the dog's ear. "I have to go. You stay here and mind the house."

"Woof!"

"Good boy," he chuckled. He grabbed his keys and got into his Lincoln. He'd much rather drive his Corvette but he had a corporate image to uphold.

Callie Reynolds rode in from the back pasture. She dismounted and handed the reins to her groom. "Thanks, Walter."

"I got a call from Sandy at the ASPCA. She's got a massively underweight palomino and she wanted to know if we had room for her."

"We have the room, do you have the time?"

"You know I'll make time. I'll bring Annie with me if I need the help."

"How is she doing?"

"Great. She's doing really well with her grades. She's become very focused since working here has become her goal."

"Like father, like daughter," Callie smiled. Walter's daughter had been a handful for Walter and his wife, Mary. Went she wasn't skipping school, she was failing classes. During one of her many suspensions from school, he'd brought her with him to the farm. Everyone was stunned when Annie took to the hard work of caring for the many animals at the farm. Callie could see herself in the young girl. Annie had the same look of happiness mixed with determination that she'd had when she worked with her own father as a child.

Callie closed her eyes and thought of her father. Nate Reynolds was a strong and loving man, devoted to his family and his work. Callie had never doubted for one moment her entire life that her father loved her and her mother, Laura. She'd followed her father around as a child, watching with fascination as he worked with his own horses and those of various owners from around the county. Callie had known the joy of loving parents who supported her dreams. Now they were both gone. Mom had died ten years ago from a fast moving cancer. Six months ago Dad had gone to take a nap and didn't wake up. He was eighty put it still felt too soon. He'd been in perfect health. She supposed he was happy now, with Mom at his side again. But now she was alone.

"He's waiting for you," said Doris. Martin gave his father's secretary a nod as he reached for the door handle.

"Good Morning, Dad."

"You're late." His father didn't look up from his file.

"What was so urgent? I had to cancel my meeting on the South Creek project."

His father pick up a file and slid it across the desk. "I want this property. See to it."

Martin opened the and sighed. Not again. "Dad, the Reynolds ranch? You've been trying to get this for years. Nate Reynolds turned down every offer."

"Reynolds is dead. Talk to the daughter. Get me that land."

"What is so damn important about it?"

"It's two hundred acres on the Jasper river. I want it and I want you to make it happen."

"For what?!" he yelled.

"Don't raise you're voice to me, boy."

Martin flew to his feet. "I'm no boy!"

"Then stop acting like it. Now get out and get the Reynolds woman to sign. Don't come back until it's done." His father returned to his file.

He shook his head and stood. After working for his father for thirty years he knew there was no reasoning with him. It didn't matter that Martin had taken his father's small oil company into a multi million dollar conglomerate. They now did as much in real estate development as they did in oil. None of that mattered to Martin Hardwick Senior. As far as he was concerned his son was an overpaid errand boy.

The Reynolds farm was about twenty minutes outside of town. It was only a few miles from his own place and he drove past it every day on his way to work. Nate Reynolds had been one of the best horsemen in Texas. Everyone in Keene County brought their horses to Nate for training. Many who didn't have the space would board their horses in his stables. Now with Nate gone, the stable was probably empty. He should be able to make his more than reasonable offer and get back in time to salvage what was left of his day.

He pulled up the driveway and was surprised to see the activity through the open stable doors. Walter Casey was loading hay into one of the stalls. Okay, this isn't what he expected but he could deal with it. These were probably the horses of owners who'd been boarding with Reynolds for years. They would have to find a new stable once Hardwick took over the property. He had no idea what his father wanted to do with the place but he was certain he didn't want to run a stable.

Martin got out of the car and was walking toward the stable when he stopped in his tracks. He hadn't seen her in years. Callie Reynolds came around the corner of the stable riding a chestnut mare. She'd gone from a cute girl to a beautiful woman. Her long brown hair was pulled into a tight pony tail. Her plaid shirt was tucked into her fitted jeans. Her brown boots and hat made her a vision of the perfect cowgirl. She pulled up on her horse and looked him up and down. "Hello Marty."

"Hello Callie. It's been a long time."

"Yes it has." She dismounted her horse and walked toward him. "It's been a long time since high school."

"I heard you moved out of town."

"Laredo, but I've moved back now."

"I see that," he smiled.

"You didn't drive out here to catch up. What can I do for you, Marty?"

"No one calls me Marty anymore."

"Huh," Callie shrugged. "So, what do you want, Marty?"

"I have an offer on your father's property." The look on Callie's face told him he'd already lost.

"It's my property and it's not for sale."

"You haven't even seen my offer."

"I don't need to. This is my place and I'm not selling." She mounted her horse and smiled. "You shouldn't be surprised. Your father has been trying to buy our land for years. My father always turned him down. Nothing has changed. Now if you'll excuse me I have some fences to check. Unless you're about to jump on a horse in that thousand dollar suit of yours and help me, this conversation is over." She turned her horse and trotted out to the field before breaking into a gallop. He was in trouble. She'd dismissed him without even listening to his offer. His father would never accept his failure. He watched her as she disappeared over the rise.

"Aw, crap."

Callie road back to the stable and handed Harley's reins to Walter. "The fences are looking good. We should be able to let Milo and Daisy out in the back pasture. They really need to get out of the barn."

"Will do." He walked Harley into his stall for fresh water and hay. "What did Hardass want?"

"Hardass?" Callie laughed.

"That's what people call him. He's just as ruthless as his old man. Worse, if that's possible."

"Marty Hardwick? Ruthless?"

"Hell yeah. He's bought up half the farms in the county and turned them into subdivisions."

"I thought the Hardwicks were all about oil?"

"Oh, they still have that too. Rich as Croesus, the both of them."

"How nice for them but that's nothing to me. He was trying to buy the ranch, the same way his father tried from my father."

"What did you say?"

Callie smiled at Walter's worried expression. "I told him no, of course. This is my home and I'm not about to sell it to anyone, especially the Hardwicks." Walter smiled and looked enormously relieved. She understood why. He'd worked for her father for twenty years and now his daughter was working here. She could keep Walter and the occasional hand on but that was all. Some of the boarding horses were still here but some of the older clients weren't as confident in Callie's ability to keep the place going. She smiled as she started to brush down Harley. She knew the risks. She wasn't as talented with horses as her father but no one was as good as Nate Reynolds. The one thing she was certain of was people were always underestimating her. That was always fun.

Martin threw a stick for Jake and watched as the dog bolted across the back field. He would try and drain some of his dog's energy before the guests arrived. He was having a barbecue for some of his regular clients and he'd rather not listen to his father's complaints about not being able to control his dog. A border collie like Jake needed to run and chase. It was what he was built for. He was also as friendly as he was energetic. Whenever he had company Jake felt they were here to see him too and it was his duty to meet and greet. He whistled for Jake and brought him into the kitchen. He set him up with a bone and went back outside. The tent was set up and the wait staff were ready to serve his guests. He checked with the caterer and sampled some of her excellent barbecue. Jenny Valdes had been recommended by his secretary. She was a pretty thirty something with short black hair and big dark eyes. She smiled at him and he wondered what she was doing after the barbecue.

Three hours later and his father was holding court with his cronies. They'd had a shouting match when he'd first arrived. Dad didn't understand that his plan to buy Callie out would take time. Dad wanted her off the land right away.

Martin had visited with his clients and needed a break from the glad handing. He walked into the kitchen and visited with Jake. He bent down and kissed his nose. Jake was the one being he trusted completely. Jake heard it first and looked toward the kitchen door. Then he heard something tearing into his driveway. He opened the door and Jake ran out. A black pickup tore up his driveway and screeched to a halt. "What the hell?!" Callie Reynolds jumped out of her truck and ran toward him.

"Marty! What the hell is wrong with you?"

"I could ask you the same thing. What the hell are you doing tearing in here like this?" His guests started to gather and his father moved to the front.

"Call the police," said his father as he pushed Jake away.

"Dad, please. Let me handle this." His father huffed his disdain.

Callie poked him in the chest. "I've been getting calls all morning. My boarding clients are all getting calls from Cooper's Stables. They're getting offers of discounted boarding if they sign up by the end of the month."

"So? People are being offered a great deal."

"This is your doing! You're trying to drive me off my land."

"It's not my fault if you're losing your clients."

Callie poked him in the chest again. "I'm not losing anyone. My clients understand loyalty. No one is leaving me." She moved closer and spoke quietly. "In Old Texas they would have shot you for pulling this shit."

"I'm calling the police." His father pulled out his phone. Martin took it out of his hand.

"No one's calling the police." He turned back toward Callie when they heard the high pitched scream of a dog. "Jake!" Martin pushed through the guests and saw Jake trying to shake a snake loose from his cheek.

"Leave it," shouted his father. "That's a rattler."

Martin ignored him and ran towards his dog. "Jake stay. Let me help you." He tried to get close but the dog kept screaming. He was suddenly aware of the booted run behind him. It was Callie. She looked around the yard and spotted the wood pile. She ran towards it and grabbed the ax used to chop the firewood. She ran toward the dog and snake, holding the ax high. She brought it down on the body of the snake slicing it in half. She pulled the remains of the snake off Jake's face and tossed it aside. Callie scooped Jake up in her arms and set the crying dog on the porch.

"Stay with him."

"I need to get him to the vet."

Callie put her hand on his shoulder. "I am a vet. Now hold him still while I get my kit. "Move," she shouted at the crowd as she ran back to her truck. She pulled a large kit

and a blanket out of the tool box. She ran back to the dog and opened up the kit. "Hold him steady." She pulled out a vial and filled a syringe.

"What is that?"

"Anti venom. I always have it. Snake bites are more common than you think." Jake whimpered as she injected him. She grabbed her stethoscope and put it to the dog's chest.

"Call a real vet," said his father.

"Shut up, old man," she replied as she listened to the dog's heart. "Okay, wrap him up and get in the back of my truck with him. We'll take him back to my place. I can treat him there."

"My vet..." he started.

"Is twenty minutes away. Even if you can get him to come in on a Sunday Jake could be dead by the time he gets to you. It's your call, Marty." He picked up Jake and held him close as he hurried toward Callie's truck.

"You are not going off with this woman and leave your guests," his father yelled.
"It's a damn dog."

He drilled his father with a glare. "Shut up, Dad." He pushed himself to the back of the flat bed as Callie put her equipment in the toolbox. She pushed the gate closed as he made sure Jake was secure in his lap. He nodded at Callie. "We're ready." She jumped in the cab of her truck and backed out of his driveway. He knew he would have hell and Martin Senior to pay when this was over, but he didn't care. Jake looked up at him and his heart broke. "She's going to help us, boy."

Martin held tight to Jake as Callie drove to the back of the stable. She jumped out of the cab and opened the gate. He slid out and followed her into the stable. It appeared the back quarter of the stable had been converted to a small clinic.

"Put him on the table and hold him," said Callie as she gloved up. She grabbed a stethoscope and listened to his heart again. "Okay. I'm not hearing anything I don't like. I think he got the anti venom in time. I want to hook him up to fluids to prevent shock. I'm also going to give him a little something to help with the pain and keep him calm."

"Is he in pain?"

She rolled her eyes at him. "He got bitten in the face by a rattler. Of course he's in pain, probably a great deal of it."

"You're not great on bedside manner."

"The animals are fine with my manner."

"How did I not know you're a vet? I don't remember you having a practice in town."

"Well, if you took you head out of your father's ass long enough to look around you would have known."

"Damn, Callie."

"What do you expect, Marty? Just because I'm taking care of Jake doesn't mean I'm not still pissed as hell at you."

"It's just business."

"Like hell it is. This is my home."

"Since when? You haven't lived here in years."

"My practice was in Laredo but I was my father's vet for years. I came to town twice a month to take care of his horses and check on the borders." She sighed and dialed back on her aggression. "I sold my practice last year. I was only home a few months when he died."

"I didn't know he passed. What happened?"

"He laid down for a nap and didn't wake up." Her eyes watered.

He reached for her hand. "I'm sorry, Callie."

"Thank you," she whispered. She took a breath and looked at Jake. "How are you doing, buddy?" She checked his eyes and listened to his heart. "Okay. I'm happy with how he's doing but I need to keep an eye on him for twenty four hours."

"Oh, I don't want..."

"I assume you won't want to leave him but a snake bite can go south fast. Bring him in the house and we'll put him in the guest room. He can sleep in one of Gracie's beds." She looked at Martin and gave him a curious smile. "You can stay with him."

"Stay over, in your house?"

"You've already pissed off your father. What have you got to lose?"

He couldn't help but chuckle. "Not much."

"Excuse me, Dr. Reynolds?" They turned to see a tall, thin man with a young boy. The boy was holding a small, brown puppy who was shivering.

"I'm Dr. Reynolds."

"I'm Bob Tyler. My daughter is friends with Annie Casey. She said sometimes you take strays and find them homes. We found this little guy on the side of the road. He seems really friendly. I was hoping you could find him a home." Martin could see the little boy's eyes watering as he held him tight. Callie pulled the man aside and spoke quietly to him.

"It seems like your son has bonded with the puppy. Is there a reason you need to give it up?"

"I explained to Tommy a puppy needs a lot of care, shots, getting neutered. We just can't afford that."

Callie put her hand on the man's shoulder. "I'll treat him for you. I can take care of the vaccines and the neutering."

“But the money.”

“You don’t have to worry about that. It’s more important that the puppy has a good home.”

“We don’t take charity. I teach my kids to work for what they have.”

“I respect that. How do you feel about mucking out stalls?”

“I’m good around horses,” he said.

“Okay. You can give me an afternoon and muck out some stalls and we’ll call it even.”

“Really?” Bob asked.

“Really,” Callie smiled.

“Can I tell Tommy?” he asked.

“Sure.”

“Tommy, Dr. Reynolds said she would treat him for us. That means we can keep him.”

“Really?” the boy asked.

“Really,” said his father. The boy dissolved in sobs and held his puppy tight. “I’m going to do some work for her in exchange for her work.”

The little boy looked at Callie with a determination that touched Martin. “I can help. I help Daddy at home.”

“I’m sure you can, Tommy. I can always use the help. Why don’t you let me take a look at your puppy?” Tommy handed over his puppy and Callie set him on the second table. “Glove up, Marty. You hold on to him.”

“What? Me?”

“Yes, you.”

“Jake is...”

"Down for the count. Now glove up." Martin looked at Jake and saw he was sound asleep and looked comfortable. He grabbed a pair of gloves from the box and turned to the puppy. "Hold on to him while I start my exam." He held on to the squirmy dog as she used a lighted device to look in the puppy's eyes and ears. She manipulated his belly and his joints. She looked at Tommy and smiled. "Your puppy seems very healthy."

"That's good," he smiled.

"Do you have a name for him?"

"Daddy said not to name him because we had to give him away. His new family would want to name him." He looked at his puppy then up at Callie. "He's a boy so I can't name him after you." He looked at Martin and smiled. "You seem nice. What's your name?"

"Me?" Martin gasped.

"Marty. His name is Marty," Callie laughed.

"Marty. I like it," Tommy smiled and pet his puppy. "What do you think, Marty?" The puppy woofed and gave his boy a lick. "He likes it!"

She looked at Martin and grinned. "It seems he does."

"Terrific," he grumbled.

"Let me get his first round of vaccines. Then you bring him back in two weeks for his next round." Callie opened a cabinet and pulled out a couple of vials. She filled two syringes and then injected the puppy. She patted the puppy and he gave her a kiss. "You're a good boy, Marty." She looked at Martin and grinned. He rolled his eyes and tried not to smile. "Okay, you can take Marty home now." She handed the dog to Tommy who handed him to his father.

"Hold him Daddy." He turned to Callie and indicated she should bend down. She did and he gave her a hug. "Thank you for helping Marty."

"You're very welcome, Tommy."

Then he shocked Martin when he walked toward him and indicated he should bend over. He did and the boy gave him a tight hug. “Thank you for helping Marty.”

He choked out a “You’re welcome.”

Callie hand him a business card. “Call me in two weeks and we’ll get Marty fixed and his next round of vaccines.”

“Thank you, Doctor.”

“You’re welcome, Mr. Tyler.”

“Bob.”

“Callie.”

Martin watched as Callie cleaned up her work space. “You’re doing all that work for free?”

“Not for free. Bob’s going to clean out my stalls.”

“Why?”

“What do you mean, why?”

“That work is expensive. It cost me close to a grand to get Jake all his shots and neutered.”

Callie laughed and patted his chest. “They saw you coming.” She took a look at Jake, who was still sleeping. She took the IV bag down and set it on his back. “Grab Jake and we’ll get him set up in the house.” He lifted Jake into his arms and followed Callie to her house, wondering what the hell he’d gotten himself into.

Martin followed Callie into her house. He'd seen it from the road but had never been inside, even when they were in high school. It was a comfortable ranch style home with a typical ranch kitchen. The well worn butcher block and table looked like it had been there since the house was built. A large brown mixed breed dog came into the kitchen to greet Callie but stopped dead when she saw Martin carrying Jake.

Callie put her hand on his arm. "Gracie, this is Martin and Jake."

"Did you just introduce me to your dog?"

"I introduced you to Gracie so she would know the both of you aren't strangers. She's not fond of strangers."

"Good to know." He repositioned Jake in his arms. "He's getting heavy. Where can I set him down?"

"Follow me." Callie led him to a small guest room with a view of the back pasture. He spotted the dog bed and Gracie's sideways glance at Jake.

"I don't want to steal her bed. She looks unhappy with this situation."

"Don't worry. She has beds in almost every room." Callie opened a drawer and pulled out a heating pad. She plugged it in and set it inside the sheepskin bed.

"What's that for?"

"It will help him stay warm. Shock is still a danger."

He set Jake down and Callie hooked the IV bag to a hook holding the curtain ties. "I thought he was okay now. You said he got the anti venom in time."

She turned and put her hands on his arms. "He did but this is a very serious event. I'll keep an eye on him. If something does happen I can handle it, Marty." She smiled and his heart skipped. "Despite your father's opinion, I'm a real vet, an excellent one."

He managed a smile. "Who am I to question you in the face of such confidence?"

"Exactly!" she laughed. "Now let's get some dinner. I'm hungry." She started to leave the room and Martin grabbed her arm.

"Didn't you just say you were going to keep an eye on Jake?"

"Gracie will let me know if he has a problem."

"Gracie. The dog. Your dog will let you know if my dog has a problem."

"Yup." She looked at Gracie standing in the doorway. "Gracie, protect." She pointed to Jake and Gracie came to his side. She sniffed him, licked his face and then laid on the floor with her head on the edge of the sheepskin. "See? Now let's eat."

Martin stared at Callie as she left the bedroom. He looked down at Gracie who gave him what appeared to be an indulgent look. It was if she was saying "I've got this, human. Now go away." So he did.

Callie was trying to focus on getting some dinner, trying being the operative word. Marty Hardwick was in her house, was going to sleep over, in her house. The best looking boy at Central Keene High had grown into an incredibly handsome man. She'd seen his picture in the newspaper and on the local news. She'd even seen him at a distance when she came back home for visits. But she hadn't had a conversation with him in over thirty years. They'd had a few classes together and he'd always been nice to her, but they traveled in different circles. He was the most popular boy in school and as smart as he was good looking. In fact he was salutatorian to her valedictorian. He'd even congratulated her on beating him for number one in their class. He was honestly happy for her. The Marty she knew then was happy with who he was and what he'd accomplished. The Marty she knew then smiled. This Marty was so different. He was tight, controlled and he didn't smile. Not like he used to. What slight smiles she'd seen looked liked they'd escaped him and he quickly hid them away. This was Martin Hardass Hardwick and she had no idea who he was. And she didn't think she wanted to.

"I think Gracie just threw me out of the room."

Callie looked at Marty standing in the doorway. "She has it under control."

"You realize you're talking about a dog."

She tried to keep her calm but he was taxing her patience. "Her name is Gracie and she is a highly trained dog and she will let me know if Jake has a problem." She opened the refrigerator and pulled out a dish of lasagna. "Also, just so you know, don't raise your voice around me. If you do, she'll bite first and ask questions later." She was satisfied when Marty paled. She pointed to the cabinet behind him. "Grab a couple of plates. I'll heat you up some lasagna." He grabbed the plates and she dished out two generous portions. "There's some wine glasses in the next cabinet. I don't know about you, but after today, I can use a glass." She grabbed a bottle off the counter and handed it to him with a bottle opener. "Here. Make yourself useful."

Marty took the bottle and wrestled the cork from the neck. He poured them each a glass. "Thank you for helping Jake, Callie." He gave her his first genuine smile and her heart skipped.

"You're welcome." She turned to the microwave and pulled out a plate. "Sit. Your dinner is ready." She put her plate in the microwave and took a deep sip of her wine. "You don't have any food allergies do you? I'm a vet, not an M.D."

"Not that I know of, why?" He took a bite of his dinner and smiled. "This is good."

"I'm glad you like it. Not everyone likes meat substitutes."

He dropped his fork and looked at her. "Meat substitute?"

"Hey, you said you liked it."

"Yeah, but...I mean, don't you eat real food?"

"What you're eating is real food. I eat real food. I just don't eat animals." She sat down at the table with her meal. "I've spent thirty years keeping animals healthy. I didn't do it so I could then kill them and eat them."

He shook his head and took another bite. "A vegetarian. Good Lord, Callie. I bet you go to protest marches."

She couldn't help but smile. "Every chance I get."

Marty chuckled and sipped his wine. "Why didn't you go to medical school? You had the grades for it."

"Why? Because being an M.D. is so much better than being a vet?"

"Well, you'd be helping humans and making a good living."

"I did make a good living with my practice. And believe it or not I am helping humans. If I hadn't been there to give Jake anti venom on time he'd have died, no question. Can you tell me helping Jake didn't help you? I've watched you with him. You'd have been devastated if Jake died."

"That's true, Callie. I'll give you that. But you had the skills, the grades. You were the smartest kid in school. You could have been a surgeon, a specialist."

"Marty, do you know that it's tougher to get into veterinary school than medical school? The competition is much tougher, the work is harder. An M.D. has to know one species. A vet has to know dozens."

Marty set his glass down and smiled. "You always were focused."

"I never wanted to do anything else, since I was six years old. Ever since I was old enough to ride a horse it's all I wanted to do. My parents knew that and did everything they could to make it happen." Callie saw his expression change and she knew she'd hit a nerve. "What happened to you, Marty?"

"What do you mean?"

"You were never like this. You were the star. Everyone gravitated to you. You were always smiling and happy. You were so self assured. No one would have called you "Hardass" Hardwick unless..." She pushed her wine aside. "I really shouldn't drink."

"Unless what?"

She took a fortifying sip. "You're really going to make me say it, aren't you?"

"Hell yes," he grinned.

"Unless they were actually looking at your ass. There. I said it. Are you happy now?"

"Delirious," he grinned. "So, were you looking?"

"Oh please!" She grabbed the bottle and topped off her glass. "You had every girl at Central drooling over you. Does it really matter if a geeky book nerd noticed you too?"

"So you did notice," he grinned.

"Woof!" Callie looked in the doorway and Gracie was pacing back and forth. She pushed her chair back and walked towards her.

"Show me," she said as Gracie led her to the guest room. "Well, look who's up." She knelt down and pet Jake. He was sitting up and looked much better. He looked up at Marty and barked.

"Hey, boy. You look better." He knelt down next to his dog and stroked his fur.

Callie held Jake's muzzle up and looked into his eyes. "You look good, Jake." She glanced at Marty and smiled. "Despite your questionable taste in masters." She was rewarded with a snort from Marty and a kiss from Jake. "Thank you, sweetie." She removed the IV from his leg and stood. "I'll bring him a little food and water. He can't have too much yet or he'll hurl it back up. You stay with him." She came back a few minutes later with a double bowl half filled with water and canned food. Jake took a drink of water, then finished off the food. "I'll feed Gracie and then we can get them outside."

Gracie ate her dinner and led her new friend Jake outside. "Gracie, protect Jake." Gracie looked back at Callie and then walked to Jake's side. "She'll make sure he stays out of trouble."

"How do you do that?"

"Do what?"

"Control Gracie."

"A lot of practice. She's also very bright. You could do it with Jake. He's a border collie. He was born to take commands." Gracie followed Jake back to where they were standing. "All done?" Gracie ran to the back door and Jake followed. Callie led Jake back to his bed and Gracie laid down next to him. She seemed to know he'd had enough activity.

"I think they're down for the count. You want some dessert? I have some cheesecake."

"No, I'm good. Let me help you with the dishes."

"Okay. I never turn down help." They cleared the dishes and put away the rest of the food. "It's been a long day. I'll let you get settled in with Jake."

"You never answered my question."

"What question?"

"Whether you noticed me in high school."

"Damn, you're worse than a dog with a bone. Why is that so important? Do you need me to validate you?"

"Why is so hard for you to answer a simple question? It's been over thirty years." He backed her up against the fridge. "What do you need, Callie? Do you need me to admit I noticed you all those years ago? That I hated when you left town and didn't come back? He leaned closed. "What do you want, Callie?"

Callie looked at him with tears welling in her eyes and whispered, "Oh crap." She pushed her hands to the back of his head and pulled him into a fiery kiss.

Martin couldn't believe what was happening. He'd pushed Callie to tell him the truth. To tell him if all those years ago she'd felt the same way he did. Her answer was a passion that took his breath away. He pulled back and looked into her eyes. They'd gone an even darker brown. Her face was flushed and her breathing as heavy as his. "Callie," he whispered.

"Hush. No talking," she said as she pulled him tight against her as she took possession of his mouth. She pulled away and took his hand, quickly leading him to her bedroom. She closed the door behind her as she yanked her t-shirt over her head. She pulled on his shirt running her hand down the buttons and pushing it off his shoulders. Her smile reminded him of a predator with fresh prey. She growled as she ran her hand up his chest and down his arms. He was definitely prey. He thought for a moment he shouldn't be okay with this. Then he told himself to shut up. Callie pushed him back on her bed and stripped off his boots and jeans. She grinned as she slipped off her boots and jeans. He sucked in his breath when he got a good look at her toned body and beautiful long legs. As she relieved him of his boxers he reached for her bra. She pushed his hand away motioned for him to move up on the bed. She was telling him she was in charge and he would have to go with it. Callie held his gaze as she stripped off her lingerie.

"Holy crap," he whispered.

Callie slinked up his body and gave him a passionate kiss, nipping at his lower lip. She nipped at his ear, neck, travelled down his shoulder. She moved down his body, exploring with her lips and tongue. She took him in her mouth and he lost what little control he had left. He grabbed her under her arms and flipped her on her back. She wrapped her legs around his waist as he took her hard and fast. He wrapped his hands around the back of her head and went slightly mad. Callie flew apart under him and it pushed him over a very high cliff. He cried out and collapsed on top of her shoulder.

"Oh my God, Callie," he whispered.

"Oh yeah," she sighed.

He rolled over and pulled her close. "I had no idea."

Callie snickered. "I did."

Callie stared at the ceiling as Marty slept. She'd never anticipated anything like this happening between them. She'd fantasized about Marty when she was in school, and then when she saw him in town, but she never thought once about pursuing Marty Hardwick. But somehow even in her fantasy, she knew they'd be like this.

She rolled over and looked out into the darkness. It was almost sunup. She needed to get up and check on Jake and feed him and Gracie. Then she had to check on the horses, including the new rescue from the ASPCA. Walter her warned her the mare would have serious issues. She looked over at Marty and sighed. Last night was amazing, a night she'd never forget. But it was over. This was the man who was trying to force her off her land for his father. This man wanted to take everything that mattered from her.

"Mmm...good morning," he whispered.

"I'm sorry. I didn't mean to wake you."

He pulled her close and kissed her forehead. "Waking up with you in my arms is wonderful, no matter what the time."

"Marty, I..."

"Hush," he whispered. He gave her the softest of kisses. He brushed the hair from her cheek and kissed her again. "So beautiful. You were then. You are now." He kissed her again. He took her in his arms and explored her body, carefully, gently. Callie closed her eyes and gave herself over to his touch, knowing full well he would break her heart.

Martin woke up and realized Callie was gone. He looked out the window and saw the sun had just come up. He pushed himself out of bed and pulled on his boxers and jeans. He needed to find Jake and make sure he was okay, even though he knew Callie would have already done it.

He walked into the guest room and found only an empty food and water bowl. He went into the kitchen and spotted Callie on the back porch. She was watching the dogs run as she sipped her coffee. "Good morning, again."

She gave him a light smile. "Good morning."

"I see Jake is back to himself."

"He is. He'll be fine now, although I think he'll miss Gracie when you take him home." She took a sip of her coffee. "Would you like some coffee?"

"Yeah, that would be good, thanks." He whistled for Jake and Gracie followed her new friend into the kitchen. As she poured him a mug she spilled a little on the counter.

"Damn," she cursed. She tried to wipe up the spill and knocked into the mug, spilling more on the counter. "Crap!" He pulled her hand away from the spill.

"Callie, talk to me. What's going on?"

"Nothing, I'm clumsy."

"No, you're not. What's wrong? Is it what happened between us?"

Callie turned to him and his heart dropped. He saw the panic in her eyes. "I understand last night. I understand the passion. I had the chance to be with my high school crush with none of the teenage consequences. That, I understand, but this morning, it threw me."

He knew now was not the time to talk about high school crushes. This was serious and it was going to be complicated. "What threw you? Tell me what's wrong." He put his hand to her cheek. "Did I hurt you?"

She shook her head. "No, but you will. Last night was all passion and sensation. This morning, it was so...tender." A tear slipped down her cheek. "It felt...loving, but it

can't be, not between us. You're going to do whatever you can to take everything from me, my home, my work. You can't have my heart, too!" She sobbed and ran out of the room. He followed her to her bedroom and turned her to face him.

"Callie, I don't know what to say to make this right."

"You can't. This is my problem, not yours." She straightened her shoulders and looked him in the eyes. "I have work to do and Walter will be here soon. You'll want to leave before he sees you here."

"Are you ashamed of what happened?"

She looked stunned. "No. I assumed you wouldn't want anyone to know."

He took her hands in his. "Callie, I am not ashamed of anything that happened between us. This was not some random one night stand. I've known you since we were kids. I've respected and admired you for all those years." He tipped his head down, knowing he was blushing. "You were my high school crush." He smiled when she gasped. "I never pursued you because, honestly, I was a coward."

"What?"

"I mentioned you in front of my mother. I didn't know my father was listening. He ripped me up and down. He told me your father was trouble and you'd be too. I didn't believe him but I didn't have the courage to go against him."

She looked stunned. "Oh my God, you don't know, do you?"

"Know what?"

Callie let go of his hands. "Follow me." She led him into the den and she pulled a book off a shelf. She set the book on the desk. "Keene High School Yearbook, before it was Central Keene, 1956, the year before our parents graduated." She opened the book to the Homecoming page and pointed out a picture of a Homecoming princess and her escort. "Read these names."

He looked close at the picture and realized the girl looked a lot like Callie. "Laura LaSalle and her escort...Martin Hardwick?"

"My mother and your father were high school sweethearts until the spring of 1956. That summer she started dating my father. Your father always blamed my father for their breakup but my mother told me it wasn't true. She broke up with your father months before she started dating Dad. She even told your father that but he never believed her. I was about ten years old when he started his campaign to get this land. He was relentless but so was my father. I watched him tell your father a dozen times he would never accept his offers to buy us out. Every time your father got more and more angry. Finally my father told him if he ever came back on our land he'd have him arrested for trespassing. After that it was offers from lawyers and realtors but we knew it was him."

Martin looked at the picture of his father as a young man. He was smiling and happy. It was not a look he'd ever seen on his face before. Even when his father made a successful acquisition he never looked more than satisfied. But escorting Laura LaSalle toward a Homecoming float made his old man happier than he'd ever seen him for his entire life. He sat down on the sofa and shook his head. "That bastard. He's been carrying a grudge for more than fifty years and he expects me to finish it for him."

"I thought you knew."

"You thought I knew and I would do it anyway?"

"Marty, you have a reputation in town of being just as ruthless as your father. I assumed nothing would stop you from getting what he wanted."

He sighed and tried to stay calm. He had no reason to be angry with her. She was right. He'd earned the nickname "Hardass". "Callie, you don't think I planned what happened between us, do you?"

She chuckled and sat down next to him. "No, I don't think that. I started it last night. I knew what I was doing."

He took her hand in his. "Yes, you did," he smiled. "I'm so glad you did. I wanted you so much but I was afraid to scare you off."

Callie sat back against the cushions. "Last night didn't scare me."

"This morning did." She nodded. "Callie, I'm not sure what this between us any more than you are, but one thing I will tell you is certain. I will not carry on my father's vendetta. I give you my word."

"Marty, please tell me I can trust you. I don't think I could take it if I couldn't."

He leaned close and gave her a soft kiss. "Callie Reynolds, I give you my word I will not do my father's bidding. Not anymore." He caressed her cheek and smiled. "Now why don't you show me what all you do around here? I'd really like to know."

"Walter will be here in thirty minutes. Are you sure you're okay if he finds you here? You know it will get back to your father."

"I'm sure my father already knows I didn't come home last night. I tell you what, until we figure out what this is between us, we will only say the truth, that I spent the night to keep an eye on Jake."

Callie grinned. "Half truth."

"Hey, I'm good with it if you are."

She gave him a tender kiss. "So long as you only tell me the whole truth."

"I swear."

"I'm holding you to that, Hardass."

He pulled her to her feet and slipped his arms around her waist. "I'm not such a bad guy."

Callie smiled as she slipped her hands down his back and cupped his ass. "That's not what I meant."

Martin followed her into the well maintained stable. Callie reached up and pet the mare he'd seen her ride that first day. "This is Harley. You're my sweet girl, aren't you?" The horse pushed her head forward and Callie gave her a hug and a pat. She walked to the next stall where there was a beautiful Appaloosa. "This is her buddy, Pegasus."

"He's a beauty."

"Do you ride?"

"It's been a while, but I can manage," he smiled.

"We have a few borders but I need to check on a rescue. The ASPCA brought her over yesterday. I was busy breaking up your party so I didn't get a chance then. Walter warned me she's going to need a lot of work."

"Do you take in a lot of horses?"

"The shelter knows I have the room and I donate the vet care. They send me the ones that need the most help. I get them healthy and Walter works with them to get them adoptable." Callie looked at him and smiled. "We've rehabilitated hundreds of horses over the years. My father started years ago when he confiscated an abused horse from a border. She was a beautiful Arabian but she was largely ignored by her owner. When he did come out to ride her he was abusive. Dad saw him tormenting her with illegal spurs." Callie laughed. "I still remember Dad pulling him off the horse and decking him. The man threatened to call the cops. Dad dared him to. He told him the only thing that would stop him from telling the world he abused his horse was if he signed her over to him. This is a big horse county and abusing a horse makes you a pariah. The man signed her over and we never saw him again."

"Your father sounds like he was a good man."

Callie's eyes welled. "The best. I miss him so much."

Martin put his arm around her shoulders. "I think he must have been very proud of you. You're a good woman, Callie."

"Thanks, Marty," she whispered.

"Nobody calls me that anymore," he smiled.

"Except me," she grinned. "Okay, I need to check on the new girl." They walked down the stalls, past a few stalls with the names of the horses and the owners. Callie stopped in front of a stall with the name Daisy written on a hanging file.

"Oh my God," he whispered. The horse's head hung low. Even though he didn't own his own horse, he knew enough to know the horse was massively underweight. He saw old scars and fresh wounds on the animal. "Who would do this?" he asked.

"You'd be surprised." She looked at the hanging file. "The on site vet has diagnosed her as in imminent danger and she was seized. The owner is being prosecuted."

"Good. Bastard deserves it."

She opened a box on a work table and pulled out a stethoscope. "I'm going in with her. Try to be quiet. I don't want to spook her."

"Are you sure it's safe?"

She smiled. "Marty, I've been doing this for thirty years. I know what I'm doing. I also know that even an animal in this condition can be a danger. I'm very careful." He nodded and watched as she walked into the stall. The horse backed up and snorted. He put his hand on the stall door, ready to yank it open and pull her out. He watched as she slowly lifted her hand and let the horse get her scent. "It's okay, baby," she whispered. "You're safe now. No one will hurt you. I swear." She put the stethoscope to the animal and listened to her heart and lungs. She took a look at the horse's wounds. She gave the horse a last pet and kissed her nose. She edged out of the stall and closed the door. "She'll have a long way to go but she can recover from this."

"What's he doing here?!"

They both looked up the stall aisle and saw Walter standing there with his hands on his hips. "Walter, take it easy. Marty is getting an idea of what we do here."

"At seven in the morning? Isn't that a little early for a desk jockey."

He put his hand on Callie's arm. "Normally, yes it would be. Yesterday when Callie was busy tearing me a new one my dog, Jake, was bitten by a rattler. Callie saved him. She gave him the anti venom and brought him here to monitor him. She knew I didn't want to leave him so she let me stay. I owe her. I owe her big."

"Walter, Marty didn't know what we do here. I'm showing him. You were right about Daisy. She's in bad shape but I think if we take it slow, she can come back. I'll put some meds in her chart. Treat her wounds like you have been. You know the routine."

"What's the routine?" asked Martin.

"Medically, I'll prescribe antibiotics to prevent any infection. I may prescribe a pain killer if Walter observes any unusual amounts of pain. We will feed her small amounts often. She can't have too much at once. It took at least six to eight months for her to get in this condition. It will take that much time for her to recover medically. No one in the county is better with behavior training than Walter. He will watch over her and get her ready for adoption."

"What happens if she can't be adopted?"

"Then she'll live out her life here. No animal who comes to the Reynolds Ranch is ever put down unless it's medically necessary."

"I admit I don't know much about vet care but that seems like an expensive proposition."

"It is. Fortunately I have some generous donors to our charitable foundation. It helps defray the cost of meds and food." She set her stethoscope back in the box. "Walter, I'll go get Daisy's meds while you get her feed." Callie walked to the back of the stable into her clinic, leaving him alone with Walter.

"What are you up to, Hardwick?"

"Just what I said, Walter. I want to understand what you and Callie do here."

"That's a good woman. I watched her grow up. She followed her father around and learned everything she could to carry on his vision for this ranch. Even when she had the

biggest vet practice in Laredo, she came back at least twice a month to help her father. When it was clear he couldn't handle the place on his own any more she sold her practice without a second thought and came home." He moved closer to Martin and spoke softly. "Callie Reynolds has a lot of loyal friends in this county. We'll do what is needed to protect her and her father's vision for Reynolds Ranch."

"I bet you would."

"Count on it. If you hurt her, you'll have me to answer to."

"Duly noted."

Callie walked back into the stable with a pill bottle. "I want Daisy to have one every twelve hours. You get the morning dose. I'll get her tonight. And don't forget your gloves." She looked at Martin. "This med can cause adverse reactions in humans if it's absorbed."

"Will do."

"Keep an eye on the fresh wounds. Let me know if you see any swelling."

"You got it, boss."

"Is Milo in the pasture?"

"Yeah. I put him out there first thing."

"Anyone with him?"

"Yeah. I put Bella out there with him. You know she how antsy she gets when she can't see him."

Callie looked at him and smiled. "Okay, great. I'll check them out and toss the ball around. He loves fetch. Milo is in the back pasture. You want to saddle up?"

"I'm game."

"You can take Pegasus. Nobody rides Harley but me." They walked back to her horses stalls. "I assume you know how to saddle a horse."

"I do."

She pointed to the saddles in the room facing the stalls. "Go for it, cowboy." Callie grabbed her saddle and walked into Harley's stall. Martin grabbed a saddle and walked slowly into Pegasus stall.

"Hello boy," he said as he pet the horse's neck. He saddled up and led his horse into the paddock.

"You ready?" asked Callie.

"Let's do it." They mounted their horses and road a few minutes to a fenced in pasture. He expected to see two dogs. She'd said Milo liked to play fetch. All he saw were two cows. "Where are the dogs?"

"What dogs?" she asked as she dismounted and tied Harley to the fence.

He dismounted and tied Pegasus to the fence. "The ones that want to play fetch."

She pointed at the smaller cow. "That's Milo. Bella is his mother. He was rescued from a dairy farm. They have no need for males so they either sell them to veal farms or kill them. We brought him here but he wasn't thriving." She took a breath and steadied herself. "I called the farm we got him from. It turned out Bella was mourning losing her baby. That's often the case when they separate mothers from calves. I convinced them to let me buy her." She looked out at the cows grazing. "Now they're thriving." She let out a whistle and the cows came running toward her. She climbed over the fence and pet the necks of each cow. She grabbed a large silver ball resting up against the fence. "Milo, get the ball!" She tossed the ball and Milo chased after it.

"Well, I'll be damned," he said as he watched Milo chase the ball and push it back to her as he made happy little grunts.

"Your turn," Callie smiled. She sat down in the pasture and Bella laid down next to her and put her head in Callie's lap. "Well? Go on."

Milo looked at him and snorted. "Okay, I guess I'm playing fetch with a cow." He took the ball and tossed it. Milo chased after the ball and pushed it back to him. He tossed it again and Milo chased it again. They tossed the ball back and forth for about twenty minutes before Milo came over and laid down next to his mother.

"Have you ever hugged a cow?" asked Callie.

"Ah...no."

"Have at it, cowboy. Milo likes a good cuddle."

"I don't know..."

"You just played fetch with him. Why would this be so different?"

He shrugged. "I guess you're right." He sat down next to Milo and pet his head. The cow turned and put his head in Martin's lap. "Well, I'll be." They sat quietly for about twenty minutes as they pet the cows. They finally got up and got back on their horses. "Where do you keep them? I didn't see a place for them in the stable."

"The shelter needed a place for farm animals and started sending them to us. Eventually we built a separate barn for them about five years ago. It's on the opposite end of this pasture, just past those trees. I have some facilities there for cats and dogs but I'm getting more and more rescues from neighbors and the shelters. I need to expand to accommodate them."

"How will you afford that?"

"I'll manage," she said quietly as they rode up to the stable. They got off their horses and Callie started walking her horse to the paddock. He took her hand and stopped her.

"Callie, I told you I wouldn't pursue my father's grudge and I meant it, now even more so. I think what you're doing here is extraordinary." He moved closer. "I've always admired you. You were always a remarkable girl. Now, you're a remarkable woman."

"Thank you." She gave him a smile that broke open his heart.

Martin took all of Monday off from the office, an almost unheard of event in Hardwick history. He'd spent the day with Callie, learning the scope of what she did. Once he got Jake home he did a little research on Callie's career and Reynolds Ranch. Her practice in Laredo had been so successful that when she retired from active practice it had made the news. The city of Laredo had even made a sizeable donation to the Reynolds charitable foundation in recognition of her service to the community. Apparently she'd had a reputation of never turning an animal away. He was stunned at the outpouring of support from the people of Keene County. She and her father had been honored several times by the town council and he never knew it. Callie was right. He'd spent too many years with his head up his father's ass. No more.

He nodded to his secretary, Carol, as he walked into his office Tuesday morning. "Oh Mr. Hardwick, you're father has been looking for you. He keeps calling every few minutes." He sighed and looked at her. The poor woman had put up with so much crap from him and his father over the years. He wanted to sit with a cup of coffee before he faced him but he wouldn't put Carol in the position to having to explain.

"I'll go see him." He looked at her and smiled. "Thank you, Carol."

"For what? Giving you a message?"

"For that and for everything you've done for me over the years. I don't tell you enough what an asset you are to me and the company." He resisted the urge to laugh when she gasped. Come to think of it, he probably never told her. He nodded to Doris as he walked towards his father's office.

"Mr. Hardwick your father is very upset."

"My father is always upset."

She put a hand on his arm. "No, Martin. I've never seen him like this. Be careful, please." She would have normally never been this familiar but she'd known him since he was a kid.

"Thank you, Doris." He opened the door to his father's office and feigned a smile. "Good Morning, Dad."

"Where the hell have you been, boy?"

"Dad, I'm fifty years old. I almost qualify for the senior special at Denny's. Don't you think it's about time you stop calling me boy?"

"You were with that Reynolds woman. She humiliated you in front of very important clients and then you went off with her."

"She didn't humiliate me. What she did was save Jake's life."

"I don't give a damn about your mutt. Did you get her to accept the offer?"

"You never told me about Laura LaSalle." For the first time in his life, he'd bested his old man. The old man paled and sat back in his chair.

"Whatever that bitch told you, it was a lie."

He leaned over his father's desk and all but growled. "You will never call her that again. Are we clear?"

His father chuckled. "You fucked her."

"The only thing that is saving you from me decking you is the fact that you are a pathetic old man. One punch would probably kill you and you aren't worth doing time for. I've already done enough of that for you. You've carried a grudge for more than fifty years because Callie's mother dumped you. It stops today."

"No! It was that Reynolds bastard. He stole her away. We were supposed to get married. My parents approved of her. We had an understanding."

"You married Mom. She was highly respected in town, even if you weren't. She was a wonderful woman."

"She wasn't Laura," he said quietly.

Martin suddenly realized the depth of his father's hatred for the Reynolds family. He'd turn a failed high school romance into the driving force in his life. A wasted life. Well, he would not follow in his father's footsteps. His anger left him and all he saw now was a

pitiful old man nearing the end of his life. “It’s over, Dad. Leave Callie alone or face the consequences.”

“Consequences! How dare you?! What do you think you can do to me, boy?! I am Martin Hardwick!”

He looked at his father and felt nothing for the man but pity. “So am I.”

Martin went back to his office and poured a much needed cup of coffee. If he kept liquor in his office he'd have been tempted to add a shot of whiskey. The extra caffeine would have to do. He sat down with his coffee just as Carol knocked. "Come in."

"Mr. Hardwick, are you okay?"

"Yeah, Carol, I am. Thanks."

"It's just, well, things between you and your father seem so tense."

"They always are, but you know what? Things are going to change around here." He smiled at his secretary. She'd been with him more than ten years and he knew precious little about her. He really was like his old man. If things were going to change, he'd have to start with himself. "Would you like some coffee?"

"No thanks. I'm a tea drinker."

"You've been with me all these years and I've never noticed that. Shame on me."

"Oh sir, it's no big deal."

"Yes. Yes, it is. As it has been recently and so eloquently pointed out to me, I've spent way to much time with my head up my father's ass to know what's going on around me." Carol laughed and quickly blushed.

"Sorry, sir."

"Don't be. It's the truth. Tell me what else I've missed. How are you and your husband doing?"

"We're okay," she said quietly.

"What is it?"

"Things have been a little tough since the accident."

"What? I didn't know. What happened?"

"Mike was coming home from work and got broadsided by a drunk driver. His leg was badly broken and he couldn't work for a long time. His company let him go."

"What? I'm so sorry. I didn't know. How is he now?"

"He's a lot better. When we lost his insurance he kept up with his PT on his own."

"Has he been able to find another job?"

"Not yet. It's hard at our age."

"You're not old."

"Over forty in the job market is old as dirt."

"So he doesn't have insurance now?"

"No. We can't afford to add him to my insurance."

Martin shook his head. "Yeah, well that's wrong. I call HR and take care of it."

"What?" she gasped.

"Carol, you have put up with my crap for more than ten years. This is the least I can do." He took a breath because he knew what the next few days might bring. "When is the last time you and your husband had a vacation?"

She laughed. "It's been awhile."

"What's awhile?"

"Eight years."

"Oh, hell no." He reached into his desk drawer and pulled out a key chain. "This is the key to my place on South Padre Island. It's yours for the next two weeks."

"What?" she gasped.

"I want you to clear your schedule and mine for the next two weeks. Stop by HR before you go home and they'll have the insurance papers for your husband."

"Oh Mr. Hardwick this is very nice of you but..."

"This is a paid vacation, of course." He smiled as she wiped a tear from her cheek. "Carol, I'm not giving you anything you haven't more than earned over the last ten years."

He stood and pressed the key in her hand. He smiled to himself thinking of her expression when she finally went to HR. Beside the insurance he would have them cut a sizeable bonus check for her. God knows she'd earned it. He sat back in his chair and smiled, really smiled. And damn, it felt good. He picked up his phone and pressed a picture he'd snuck of Callie on Harley. God, she was beautiful.

"Hello?" she answered.

"Hey, Callie."

"Hey yourself. What's up?"

"I wanted to tell you that Jake is doing really well. Except for the wound on his face, you'd never know anything was wrong."

"That should clear up quickly."

"I'd like to take you to dinner tonight."

"Marty, I..."

"Callie, I meant what I said about us. I'm not sure what this is between us but I sure as hell want to find out. And I don't give a damn what my father or anyone else has to say about it. I only care what you say."

"Wow," she whispered.

"Is that a yes?"

"Well, not for tonight. I'm about to start a series of surgeries. I'll be castrating several horses for the shelter."

"Ouch."

"Don't worry," she laughed. "I don't work on humans."

"Good to know."

"Yet," she added.

He laughed out loud. "Oh babe, whatever this is, it sure as hell is gonna be fun."

Callie finished up her rounds for the morning and sat down with a cup of tea. She had some work to keep her busy this afternoon but she had a date, an actual get dressed and go to dinner date, with Marty tonight. She needed to keep her mind off it or she'd freak. She hadn't had a real date in longer than she could remember. She didn't have any false modesty. She kept herself fit and she thought she looked pretty good for fifty. She'd been asked out but she had no interest. That was until she'd reconnected with Marty Hardwick. Being with Marty was like jumping into a fire tornado, all swirling heat and passion. She had no choice but to surrender to the flames. She smiled and thought about tonight when the phone rang.

"Hey, Louis, what's up?" Louis had been her father's banker for years and now he was hers.

"Callie I have something I need to discuss with you."

"What's going on?"

"It's been brought to the board's attention that you don't have the same number of borders that you've had in the past. The number of rescues you've taken in has dramatically increased while your charitable donations have remained flat." Callie's hands started to shake as she heard Louis take a deep breath. "The board has decided that they have no choice but to call your loan. You have thirty days to pay it off."

"Or you'll foreclose?"

"Yes, Callie. I'm so sorry. I have no choice."

"Yes you do, Louis! You have a choice but you've let the Hardwick's make it for you, you bastard!"

She hung up the phone and tried to steady herself. They'd taken out a loan to build the stable and kennels in the back pasture. The income from the borders and donations had allowed her to keep up on the payments but there was still a big balance. She'd already invested the proceeds from the sale of her practice in the ranch. There was no way she could come up with a quarter of a million dollars in thirty days. She didn't think anything would hurt more than losing the ranch, but she was wrong. Betrayal was worse.

Callie ran out to the stable and opened her surgical cabinet. She pushed tools aside, some flying on the floor. "Where is it!"

"Callie, what the hell?!" asked Walter. She pulled a long handed tool out of the cabinet and smiled. It had a sharp, curved edge. It looked like a pruning shears, and in a way, it was. "We don't have any surgeries scheduled."

"I'm going to make an exception," she growled.

He grabbed her arm. "What happened."

"Hardass Hardwick happened! He got the bank to call our loan. If I don't come up with two hundred and fifty thousand dollars in thirty days the bank will foreclose."

"That bastard!" Walter tried to take the device from her hand. "Let me. I'll deal with Hardwick."

"No Walter. This is all me. I may lose everything but he's going to live just long enough to regret it." She pulled away and darted out of the stable.

"Callie, no!"

Martin sat in his office and reviewed the South Creek development project. It was a good development and would be very profitable. And very boring. He thought he might hand this off to Andrew Logan. He heard a commotion in the hallway.

"Get out of my way!"

He opened his door and saw Callie barreling toward him holding a metal tool in her hand. "Callie, what's going on?"

Security was fast on her heels. "I'll call the police, Mr. Hardwick."

"No police." He pulled Callie into his office and closed the door. "What the hell is that?"

She held it up and showed it to him. "This is what I was using yesterday. It's called the emasculator. I'm about to demonstrate."

"Callie, talk to me. What's happened?"

"What's happened?! She yelled and tossed the tool on his desk. "You had the bank call my construction loan. I have to come up with a quarter of a million dollars in thirty days or I'll lose everything. Everything my father worked for, all I worked for my whole life, gone." She smacked him in the chest. "You bastard! You swore to me you wouldn't do this. You gave me your word! Liar!" She tried to hit his chest again but he grabbed her arms. She broke down in sobs. "You bastard," she whispered. "You promised."

"Callie you need to listen to me. I didn't do this."

"What?"

"This wasn't me."

"Louis Morgan from the bank called. He said the board decided to call the loan. I know you're on the board!"

He struggled to stay calm. "Callie, I'm not the only one on the board. I swear to you this is not my doing but I guarantee I know who did do it. I'll fix this. I swear."

"I can't trust you, not anymore," she sobbed.

He put his hands to her face. "Callie, you have no good reason to trust me. Listen to me. I'm begging you, trust me a little while longer. Give me a chance to sort this out."

"Why should I?!" she demanded.

"I can't think of any other reason but this." He pulled her into a passionate kiss. "I swore I would never betray you. I'm a bastard. I'm a giant pain in the ass. But I'm also a man of my word. Give me a chance to sort this out. Please Callie. I'm begging you."

She took a deep breath. "I swear to God, Marty. If you're lying to me I promise I'll show you how fast I can make you a soprano."

He risked a smile. "After everything that's happened I wouldn't blame you." Callie picked up her tool and turned toward the door. "I'll pick you up at seven."

She turned on her heels. "What?"

"Dinner, tonight. I've made reservations."

"Let me get this straight. I've just threatened to cut your balls off and you still want to take me to dinner."

"Hell yeah! It's a great place. Great food, great music." He smiled and touched her cheek. "Great company. I'm looking forward to it."

"You know, Marty, if I do have to make good on my threat I'm going to need a bigger tool, because damn, you sure do have big ones."

Martin walked Callie out past security before going back to his office. He took a breath and sat down at his desk. He knew damn well who did this but first things first. He picked up his phone and called Louis Morgan.

"Louis, it's Martin. What the hell is going on with the Reynolds ranch?"

"The board feels..."

"Don't give me that shit! I'm on the board. There was no meeting. No decision. This was my father's doing. He's been trying to get this land for forty years. He couldn't do it honestly so he's doing this. I'm telling you to stop it. Now!"

"Martin, I can't. He's the majority shareholder. I can't reverse this. The only one who can stop it is your father."

"Oh, there is more than one way to skin this polecat."

Twenty minutes later Martin called Doris into his office. She'd been his father's secretary for as long as he could remember. With Carol out of the office he would need her to pull off the next part of his plan.

Callie looked at herself in the mirror. She was wearing a simple blue shift dress and a thin silver necklace and earrings. She admitted to herself, she looked good despite her earlier crying jag. "Crazy, but good," she said to her reflection. She was going to let Marty Hardwick back in her house and her life despite everything. He said she could trust him, despite the fact that no one in Keene County ever had cause to trust a Hardwick. She went into the kitchen and poured herself a glass of wine. "Well, you've always been a rebel." She lifted the glass and took a sip. She sat waiting for Marty to arrive when her phone rang.

"Louis, what now? I have thirty days."

"Callie things have changed."

"What?! You can't do this. I'll sue!"

"No, Callie calm down. The mortgage has been paid."

"What?" she gasped.

"The Reynolds charitable foundation has had a donation. The mortgage has been paid off," he paused and chuckled. "And then some."

"What the hell are you talking about?"

"The mortgage has been paid in full and another two hundred and fifty thousand has been placed in the charity's operations account. It was an anonymous donation."

"Anonymous my ass."

"Callie, you're free and clear. No one can touch you."

"Thanks, Louis." She hung up the phone and polished off her wine. She was thinking about a second glass when she heard a car coming up her driveway. A sleek black Corvette pulled up to her door. Marty got out and walked up her porch. He was wearing a dark blue grey suit, a black leather vest over a bright white shirt. Around his neck was a black bolo tie and with an engraved star clasp. "Well...damn."

"What?" he smiled.

"How am I supposed to stay mad at you when you look that good."

"I might say the same thing, after all sweetheart, only a few hours ago you were threatening to cut off my balls." He put his hands on her shoulders. "My God, woman. You are so beautiful." He gave her a light kiss.

She gave him a lopsided smile. "Thanks. Come on in." Gracie walked up to greet him and then looked around him. "She's looking for Jake. You'll have to bring him over. She really misses him."

"I'll do that. I know he loved being around her."

Callie set her glass in the sink and reached for her phone. "I just got a very interesting phone call."

"Oh yeah?" he said as he patted Gracie's head.

"Yeah. Louis Morgan. He called to tell me that my quarter million dollar mortgage has been paid and another quarter million has been placed in the charity's operating account."

"Huh. Do you like jazz?"

"Excuse me?"

"Jazz. They tell me the group playing tonight is excellent."

"Yes, as a matter of fact I love jazz but I'm talking about the half a mil you just put into my accounts."

"How do you know it was me?" he grinned.

"Well, considering the only people who knew what was going on were me, Walter, Louis and you and your security guard, I'm thinking it's a safe bet it was you."

He shrugged. "I guess that's a logical assumption. Are you ready to go? I'm hungry."

She grabbed him by his lapels. "Marty, are you crazy? A half a million dollars is an awfully expensive way to get back at your father."

He covered her hands with his. "Sweetheart, I'm not getting back at my father. Really, I'm not. For once in my considerably long life I'm doing something just because it's the right thing to do. What you do here is remarkable and necessary. I mean to see nothing stands in the way of your work."

Callie sighed and her eyes welled. "Ah, damn. You were always a good guy, Marty. You just forgot for awhile." She pulled him to her for a deep kiss. "Let's eat."

Marty smiled as they drove to the restaurant. He glanced over and saw Callie texting. "Who are you talking to now?"

"Walter. He was very upset today. Actually, he wanted to confront you. I think he was really afraid I'd use the emasculator on you."

He twitched and shifted in his seat. "Is that really what it's called?"

"It sure is, cowboy," she chuckled. "I text him that everything has been resolved and I would give him the details tomorrow. I'm his full time job. He's got a wife and a daughter to support. He was looking at some really hard times if the ranch closed."

"Maybe now I won't have to walk on egg shells around him."

"What are you talking about?"

"He gave me some brotherly advice when we were alone. Basically, if I hurt you, he'll kick my ass."

"Hah! That's Walter. He would to, you know."

"I kind of figured." He pulled into Richardson's, an elegant supper club in the heart of town.

"You're bound to know people here," said Callie.

"Probably."

"You're not worried about the repercussions?"

"All I'm thinking about is if you have a nice time."

"Good answer, cowboy. Speaking of nice," she moved her hand over the dashboard of his car. "This is a sweet ride."

"You like Corvettes?" he grinned.

She leaned in and whispered. "I like to go fast, horses, cars..."

Marty sucked in his breath. "My God, woman. Where have you been all my life."

Callie grinned. "Right under your nose."

Martin walked Callie into Richardson's and greeted the host. He'd been here a number of times with clients but he'd never brought a date here.

"Mr. Hardwick, it's great to see you again."

"Hello, Hector. This is Dr. Reynolds." Hector was obviously surprised at Martin's introduction but he recovered quickly. He extended his hand to Callie.

"It's a pleasure to meet you, Dr. Reynolds. I hope you enjoy yourself tonight."

"Thank you, Hector. I'm sure I will." Hector led them to the main restaurant past a poster of the group that was playing tonight. Martin's heart skipped. It couldn't be. Not after all these years.

Hector gave them a prime table that would give them the best view when the group began to play. Martin held Callie's chair as she sat down. He may have spent his life acting like his father but he was raised by an elegant Texas socialite. His mother, Sara, taught him how to waltz, how to be a gentleman and most important, how to treat a lady. It was about damn time he remembered. He looked at Callie and marveled out how lucky he was. Callie Reynolds was the smartest and prettiest girl at Central Keene High School. She was friendly and popular but didn't date. Some people thought it was because she thought she was better than them, but even back then, Martin knew the truth. Callie was so focused on her studies that she wouldn't let anyone distract her from her goal.

"What are you staring at?" she asked.

"I'm staring at the prettiest girl I've ever known."

Callie gasped and her eyes welled. "Marty..."

He reached across the table and took her hand. "It's taken us over thirty years to get her. Let's just relax and enjoy our evening." She smiled and nodded as the waiter came to their table.

"Good evening. I'm Andrew, and I'll be serving you tonight." He handed them two leather bound menus. "We have an excellent surf and turf and the chef is known for his pecan maple salmon." He leaned closer. "That's my personal favorite."

"Well I..." he started.

"Marty, order whatever you want. I'd never tell you what you could or could not enjoy."

"Yeah, well, after playing fetch with Milo it may take me a while before I order another steak."

"Milo?" asked the confused Andrew.

"One of my cows," Callie smiled.

"You have a cow that plays fetch? Like a dog?"

"I do indeed," she smiled. "Feel free to come visit my ranch. Reynolds Ranch. We go a lot of rescue work with all types of animals."

"Callie is a brilliant vet," said Martin with a bright smile.

"Wow," said Andrew.

"Wow, indeed," Martin replied.

"This feta pasta dish looks good," said Callie.

"It's very popular with..." the waiter paused.

"Vegetarians?" Callie smiled. "It's not a dirty word, Andrew."

He leaned in and smiled. "It is in Texas."

Callie laughed. "Oh, I like you."

Martin ordered the salmon and a nice bottle of Chardonnay. They sipped their wine, enjoyed their meal. For the first time in a very long time, longer than he could remember, he felt completely at ease. He realized everything about Callie brought out the very best in him.

"Marty, I do want to talk about your donation. That was a hell of a lot of money to give away."

"Sweetheart, I understand your concern but honestly, for me, it's not a lot of money."

Callie choked on her wine. "Excuse me?"

"I usually give away two or three times that amount every year." He snickered when her mouth dropped open.

"Walter said you and your father were rich as Croesus but that's just an expression."

"Yeah, well...it's really not for me." He smiled and took a sip of his wine. He was grateful when the lights dimmed and the group came out on stage. His heart raced when he realized it was Nikki Costas. He hadn't laid eyes on her since college. She introduced herself and her group to the audience and they went into their first set. Nikki's voice had only gotten richer over the years. He glanced at Callie who seemed completely absorbed in the music.

"They're really good," she whispered.

"Yes, they are," he smiled. He applauded as the group finished their set.

Nikki smiled at the audience. "Thank you, everyone. We're going to take a short break." She walked down the short stairs and made her way through the audience, accepting appreciation as she went. Martin tried to hide behind his hand but Callie caught him.

"Marty, what are you doing?" Unfortunately she said it just as Nikki walked by their table.

"Marty? Is that you? Oh my God it is!"

He knew he couldn't hide so he stood. "Hello, Nikki. It's good to see you."

"I can't believe this!" She threw her arms around Martin and he caught Callie's none too pleased reaction. "It's been what, twenty five years?"

"Closer to thirty."

"Stop. I can't possibly be that old," she laughed. She spotted Callie and extended her hand. "I'm so sorry. I'm Nikki Costas. Marty and I went to Berklee together."

"Berklee?" she asked, then gasped. "Berklee College of Music?"

"Yes," she grinned. "Most people think of Berkley in California, not Berklee in Boston."

Martin smiled. "Callie's not most people. Callie, this is Nikki Costas, an old friend from college."

"Hey, watch who you call 'old'," she grinned.

"Nikki this is Dr. Callie Reynolds, my girl."

"Wow, a doctor. Well done, Marty."

"I'm not a physician. I'm a veterinarian."

Nikki laughed. "Even better." She waved to the drummer to join them. "Steve! Look who it is?!"

"Holy crap, Marty!" The man pulled him into a tight hug. "Dude! How the hell are you?"

"I'm good, Steve. I see Nikki is still putting up with you."

He threaded his arm around Nikki's waist and pulled her close. "She has to. I made it part of our wedding vows."

"You got her to marry you!" Martin laughed.

"He wore me down. Look, we have to get back. Our break is almost over. You have to sit in."

"What? No. I haven't played in public since, well since college."

"But you still play?"

"Only for myself."

"Well, we're going to fix that particular crime against humanity tonight." Nikki grabbed his hand and pulled. "Callie, do you mind if we steal him?"

"Oh, please do," she smiled.

Callie sat back in her chair, half in shock, half in delight. Marty was a musician. She had no idea. In high school he played football. He didn't go out for school plays or band. Her heart raced as he sat down at the baby grand.

"Hi, everyone. We're back with a special guest. I found a very old friend in the audience." Callie smiled when Marty grimaced at the 'very old' crack. "My husband and I went to college with him and it's been far too long since we all played together. Ladies and gentleman, Marty Hardwick." There was a mixture of shocked gasps and polite applause. Callie looked around and realized the people here only knew Hardass Hardwick. Nobody knew Marty.

"Umm, hi. I haven't done this in public for a long time so you'll have to bare with me." He let out a nervous chuckle and looked for her. She gave him a smile and nodded. He took a breath and started playing and everything Callie thought she knew about Marty turned on its ear. His hands started running up and down the keys, playing a jazz version of 'Fly Me to the Moon'. She saw the moment when he lost himself in the notes. Her heart raced as he looked as happy as she'd ever seen him. He finished the song and was genuinely stunned at the enthusiastic applause. "Thank you," he smiled as he got up from the piano.

"Oh no. One more, please," asked Nikki. The audience convinced him with another round of applause.

"Well, okay." He sat back down at the piano and looked straight at Callie. "This is for you, sweetheart." He started lightly on the keys and then he began to sing.

*Unforgettable that's what you are
Unforgettable though near or far
Like a song of love that clings to me
How the thought of you does things to me
Never before has someone been more*

*Unforgettable in every way
And forever more, that's how you'll stay
That's why, darling, it's incredible
That someone so unforgettable
Thinks that I am unforgettable too.*

Callie almost didn't hear the rest of the group play as they joined into the chorus. She was overwhelmed by feelings crashing together inside her. He looked at her and she could see in his eyes everything she'd ever need to know about him.

*Unforgettable in every way
And forever more, that's how you'll stay
That's why, darling, it's incredible
That someone so unforgettable
Thinks that I am unforgettable too.*

Marty finished the song with a flourish and acknowledged the crowd's standing ovation. He gave Nikki a hug and shook Steve's hand, then walked back through the crowd to her. He smiled and wiped the tears from her cheeks.

"Sweetheart, why are you crying?"

Callie kissed him and whispered in his ear, "I love you, Marty Hardwick." He pulled her tight against him.

“I love you, Callie Reynolds.”

“I need to be with you. Take me home.”

Martin smiled as Callie watched him. He understood he'd surprised her. Very few people knew about his music, at least not these days. He could tell the people in the audience who knew who he was were shocked. Callie, on the other hand, seemed delighted. She'd told him she loved him. He told her he loved her. When he thought about it he'd loved her for as long as he'd known her. Being with her was starting a new chapter in his life. But first, he'd have to close the book on this one.

"Callie, I have a very early meeting in the morning."

"How early?"

"I have to be in my office by eight a.m."

She laughed and rolled her eyes. "Early? Please. I'll be done my rounds and be working on my second cup of coffee by then." She covered his hand over the stick shift. "If you think you're getting away from me tonight, cowboy, forget it. Now, why don't you stop and pick up Jake. Then we can go back to my place."

"I don't have a back seat."

"You can change cars or he can ride in my lap."

"He weighs fifty pounds."

Carrie snorted. "That's half the size of an average foal. You really need to stop underestimating me."

He brought her hand to his lips and kissed it. "Yeah, I really need to stop doing that."

Martin opened the door to his house and Jake came bolting towards them. "Hey, buddy." He darted around him and jumped up on Callie. "No, Jake. Down."

"It's okay. Everything I own has some kind of animal hair on it." She took a look at the dog's face. "You look as handsome as ever. No wonder Gracie lost her heart."

"Woof!"

"It looks like she's not the only one," Martin chuckled.

Callie smiled and walked towards him, grabbed him by his lapels and pulled him into a fiery kiss. "Now why don't you go get what you need for tomorrow. Then I can get you to my place so I can have my wicked way with you."

"This sounds promising," he chuckled. He left her in the living room with Jake while he went to his bedroom. He pulled a fresh suit from the closet and tried not to think about what he had to do tomorrow. Tonight was all about Callie. He carried an overnight bag and his suit to the living room. "I should get Jake's stuff."

"I have plenty of food and bowls. He'll be fine."

"We better take the Lincoln. As much as I'd rather drive my Vet, the Lincoln is easier in town."

Callie gave him a sly smile and ran her hand up his chest. "Just so long as you take me out in the Vet sometime. Maybe we could find a track and open her up."

He gave her a quick but deep kiss. "Damn, woman. You are something else."

Her smile dimmed a bit as she walked toward his piano. She ran her fingers over the keys. "This is where you spend all your free time, isn't it? You play a lot, just not for anyone else. Nikki's right. That's a crime against humanity."

He walked next to her and took her hand. "How do you know I play a lot?"
"The keys, they're well worn."

"Yeah, well..."

"Why did you leave Berklee? I know about that school's reputation. It's harder to get into than Julliard. You're not just good, Marty. You're gifted. Why?"

He sat down on the bench and sighed. This is where he came to escape. He'd kept this inside himself for decades. Now, he had to tell her. He needed to. "My mother was the one who encouraged me." He smiled at the memory. "I would play for her all the time. She had teachers come to the house. I couldn't do it in public because of my father. He said it was a waste of time and money because I would be taking over the business. She

was the one who made sure I got my audition to Berklee. Once I was accepted she made sure my father paid the tuition. He may have been a miserable cuss to everyone else but he knew better than to defy my mother. She was a strong woman." His hands hit a few keys. "She got sick during my junior year. When she died, the first thing he did was pull me out of school."

"You were an adult. Couldn't you have stayed?"

"God knows I wanted to, but I couldn't. I couldn't afford the tuition even with a job and he'd cut me off."

"What about a scholarship?"

"I tried. I couldn't plead financial hardship because of my father's money. Academically I qualified, but the size of those scholarships weren't enough. I finally stopped fighting him and came home."

She sat down next to him and shook her head. " How could a parent deny their child's gifts like that. You're a brilliant musician. You should have been allowed to pursue your dream." She banged on the keys. "What a fucking bastard!"

Martin chuckled and gave her a soft kiss. "Thank you, sweetheart. But this isn't all on him. After awhile I had enough money that I could have walked away, but I didn't. Staying was easier."

"No, it wasn't. You stayed because as much of a bastard as he is, he was all you had. I would have done the same thing."

He was overwhelmed at the sensation of his eyes welling. No one had ever understood. No one had ever had his back. No one until Callie. He gave her the softest of kisses and whispered. "I love you."

Callie opened the door to and whistled for Gracie. She bounded toward them and stopped dead when she saw Jake. Then she began a high pitched squeal and jumped on Jake. They started running back and forth until Callie opened the kitchen door and let them run. She turned on the porch flood light so they could keep an eye on them. Martin came up from behind her and slipped his arms around her waist. She sighed and leaned back against his strong chest. "Umm," she whispered. "You feel so good." He placed a kiss on her neck. He stepped back and let out a high pitched whistle. Jake and Gracie came up on the porch and ran inside. She let them get some water and then took the bowls into the guest bedroom. She grabbed a second bed and set it in the room. "Gracie, bedtime." Gracie picked a bed and laid down. Jake laid down next to her and stuck his head on her back. "Good night, guys." She closed the door tight and smiled.

"Do you want to close them in all night?" Marty asked.

She grinned and pulled him close. "Oh, hell yeah, because this may get loud." She grabbed his hand and pulled him into her bedroom. She turned around and let him unzip her dress. She let it slipped to the ground and tossed it over a chair. She slipped off her panties and bra and then pressed herself against him. She thought he heard him growl as he ran his hands down her naked back. She put her hand to his cheek. "What do you need, cowboy? She kissed his neck and whispered, "Take what you need."

Marty grabbed her and tossed her on the bed. She watched as he tossed his thousand dollar suit on the floor without taking his eyes off her. He claimed her body and she was more than willing to give it to him. Marty was always in tight control of everything in his life, but not now. He was lost in her. Carrie's heart raced at the passion and overwhelming male energy. Something about them had become purely primal. She thought she cried out for him, but she wasn't quite sure. She couldn't think. She didn't care. All she could do was feel.

Martin pulled Callie close and tried to catch his breath. "What did you do to me?" he whispered.

"Ah, I think you were doing to me, cowboy."

He turned on his elbow and looked at her. "Callie, I lost it. I couldn't stop myself."

"Did you hear me ask you too?" she chuckled.

"I'm not kidding. You may be okay with what happened..."

"Okay?" she gasped. "Oh, baby I'm way more than okay with it."

He tried to smile. "Of course I'm glad about that but I've never been that crazy. I don't know if I could have stopped, even if I'd wanted to. The idea of losing it like that scares me."

She smiled and caressed his face. "I know it does. You have such control over every aspect of your life. You're Hardass Hardwick, large and in charge." He had to smile. She really had him pegged. "But with me, you can just be Marty. You don't have to be so tightly wrapped with me. And just so you know..." Callie pushed on his shoulders, flipped him, straddled him and pinned his arms to the bed. She leaned close to his lips. "I'm no fragile flower." He smiled and pushed against her but he couldn't move. Her legs held him like a vise.

"Damn, woman. You're strong."

"Don't forget that." She smiled and nipped at his shoulder. "Now it's my turn to show you just how strong I am." She started tasting him, moving back and forth between lips and teeth. He moaned and flexed against her. "Hold still or I'll hog tie you to the bed." She brushed her tongue against his lower lip. "Hell, I may do it either way."

He groaned and closed his eyes. He never thought giving up would feel so good.

Callie poured some orange juice and set it on the table. Marty walked into the kitchen looking like the epitome of a successful business man. She gave him a quick wolf whistle. "Damn, cowboy. You look mighty fine." He gave her a quick kiss.

"Thanks sweetheart," he said quietly.

"Wow, whatever you've got going on today must really suck."

He gave her a smile and wrapped his arm around her waist. "Any day with you is a great day."

She smiled and gave him a soft kiss. "You're so full of shit."

"What?" he laughed.

"You're really upset by what is going to happen today. Do you want to talk about it?" He shook head. "Okay, sit. I've made omelets."

"That's it? You aren't going to try and get me to spill my guts?"

"God no. Way too messy. Besides, I'll have my hands covered in guts today doing spays and neuters. That's enough mess for now." She set the omelets down and smiled.

He put his arms around her waist and pulled her close. "What did I ever do to deserve you?"

She gave him a soft kiss. "I will let you work that out when you get home." She backed up against the butcher block. "When you do, I'll demonstrate just how strong this butcher block is."

"Oh really?" he smiled, then hoisted her on top of the wooden block.

"Really," she grinned as she locked her legs around his waist. "And then..." she whispered in his ear things that made his eyes roll.

"Damn, woman. How am I supposed to focus today on anything but you?"

She smiled and put her hand to his cheek. "Maybe thinking about tonight will help you get through today."

He sighed and gave her a deep kiss. "I love you, Callie."

"I love you too, Marty. Now, eat your omelet before it gets cold."

Callie walked out side with Marty and their dogs. Marty whistled for Jake "Come on, boy."

"Why don't you leave him here?"

"What?"

She put her hands on his chest. "You are coming back here tonight, aren't you?"

"If you want me to."

She gave him a soft kiss. "You can always assume the answer to that will be yes."

"What the hell?!" They turned around to see Walter staring at them. "What the hell is going on?"

"Walter," Marty started. Callie put up her hand.

"Let me. You need to get to work and so do I. Leave Jake with me and Gracie and I will keep and eye on him."

He glanced at Walter and then back at Callie. "Are you sure?"

"Trust me."

Marty smiled. "Always." His kissed her and whispered, "I love you."

"I love you too. Try not to worry. I've got this."

"Yeah, you do."

Callie watched as Marty pulled out of her driveway toward whatever hell awaited him in town. She turned and looked at her very angry and confused employee. "Okay, you and I need to have a conversation."

"Ya' think?!"

"Ease up." She walked toward him. "Now listen to me. I've known Marty Hardwick most of my life, the real Marty. Not Hardass Hardwick. Marty is the man who paid off my quarter million dollar mortgage and put another quarter million in the charity's operating account."

"He did what?"

"The ranch is free and clear and we have enough operating capital to keep going for a year."

Walter paused and bit his lip. "I don't know. I don't like it. He's up to something."

"I understand your concern. I do. So does he, actually." She put his hand on Walter's shoulder. "You know I love you like a brother. I grew up with you. I would never lie to you or put you or your family's welfare at risk."

He nodded. "I know."

"You'll have to trust me. I'm in love with him. I have been all these years." She could stop herself from smiling. "And he's in love with me. He's going to be around here a lot, so I want you to give him the benefit of the doubt."

"Well, I..."

"Remember when I went flying out of here yesterday with the emasculator?"

He laughed. "You obviously didn't use it."

"No, but I was ready to. I felt betrayed. We'd just started our relationship only to have our loan called. I was sure he'd done it, but he hadn't. It was his father."

"That old bastard."

"Exactly. Marty begged me, begged, Walter, to give him the chance to make it right. I expected him talk to his father and plead my case but he didn't. He spent a half a million dollars to make sure his father couldn't get to me. My home, the ranch are free and clear. I can continue our work. The Hardwicks have no way to get this land."

"Except through you."

“Walter!”

“I’m sorry, but I worry you’ll fall for him and he’ll pull a fast one.”

“I understand but as hard as it is, you’ll have to trust me. Marty does. Do you know that after I came at him with the tool, he still wanted to pick me up for our date. I threatened to cut his balls off and he wanted to take me to dinner.”

Walter laughed. “I would have loved to see that. Was he scared? I hope...”

“He was startled for sure. His security guard was ready to call the police. Marty stopped him.”

He bent down to pet Gracie. “Who’s your friend, girl?”

“That’s Jake, Marty’s dog.”

“He looks good for being bit by a rattler.”

“They love being together but Jake’s never been around horses. Please keep an eye out for him.”

Jake jumped up and gave Walter a kiss. “Will do.”

She looked at the dogs as they followed Walter into the stable. Gracie knew what to do and she’d protect Jake. Callie wished she was as smart as her dog. Maybe then she could find a way to protect her man.

Martin walked into his office with a second cup of coffee. He smiled at the thought of Callie already done with her rounds. She did more hard work before her second cup of coffee than most people ever did. He looked up at the sound of a knock at his door.

“Come in.”

Doris came inside. “Are you ready for this, Martin?”

“No, but it needs to be done.”

“It absolutely does.”

“Doris, I don’t want you to worry. No matter what happens, you’re safe.”

“Thank you, Martin. I really appreciate that.”

“Is he in his office?”

“Yes, he is.”

He stood and took a breath. “Let’s do this.” He walked down the hall to his father’s office and knocked on the door. He walked inside and found his father staring out the window.

“I talked to Morgan this morning. You paid off that bitch’s loan! I can’t imagine any lay being worth that much money.”

Martin lunged over his father’s desk. “The only thing that will save you now is if you shut...the fuck...up.” He saw his father’s shock and he sat back down.

“What the hell is this!?” he demanded. “Who are you to call a board meeting without my consent?”

Martin sighed. He knew it was going to be like this. “Who I am is the majority shareholder of Hardwick Industries.”

“This is my company!”

“You had Mom transfer her shares to me to avoid inheritance taxes. I’ve been the majority shareholder for years. I just always voted the way you wanted. Well, that time

has passed. I've called the board meeting so you can announce your resignation from the board and the company. You're retiring."

"You son of a bitch! You can't do this!"

"Yes, actually I can. I warned you that you'd face consequences for your actions, but you wouldn't listen."

"This is that Reynolds bitch's doing!"

He tried to stay calm. This was tough enough without letting it turn into a shouting match. "Callie had nothing to do with this. You have for too long run roughshod over what I want and the best interests of the company. Hardwick Industries reputation is crap. People are terrified of us and I don't blame them. That stops today. You will resign. You can spend your days reminiscing with your cronies at the club but you will no longer be a part of this company."

"You ungrateful bastard. I built this company!"

"Actually, I built this company. When I joined we were a five person oil operation with a one floor building in a crappy part of town. Now we own a ten story building in the heart of the city. I diversified. I got us into real estate despite you fighting me every step of the way. I made you a very wealthy man."

"You arrogant..."

"Enough, Dad. It's done. You're retiring."

"And if I refuse?"

"Then I will go in the meeting and tell them I'm terminating you from the company and the board. And before you argue, I have the authority and the votes on the board to back me up. Please don't make me do that. If you resign you'll be able to tell people it was your idea."

His father slumped and for the first time ever, he looked defeated. "You must really hate me to do this."

"Honestly Dad, I don't. You're my father, no matter what. But I can't let you continue doing what you're doing."

Martin drove down the highway to Callie's. It had been the toughest day he'd ever had except for when his mother died. His father felt he'd betrayed him and maybe he had, but he couldn't let his father continue as he had been. The board feigned surprise when his father announced his retirement. They were genuinely surprised when Martin announced he was turning over the day to day operations to Andrew Logan. He'd continue his place on the board and to have influence over the projects they took on, but from now on he'd do what he wanted. He'd stopped home and changed into jeans and a button down plaid shirt. It was early, not yet past three. He was hoping Callie had enough time for a ride.

He pulled up the driveway and parked. Jake bark and ran toward him. "Hey buddy, are you having a good day?"

"Woof!"

"I guarantee it was better than mine."

"Hello Hardwick."

He looked up and saw Walter coming toward him. "Hello Walter. Call me Martin."

"Ahh," he hesitated. "Not yet."

"Okay."

"Callie told me what you did for her. For us." Walter stopped in front of him and looked him up and down. Then he slowly extend his hand. "Thank you, Hardwick."

"You're welcome."

Walter didn't let go of his hand. "That doesn't mean I won't still kick your ass if you hurt her."

"I would expect nothing less."

He looked over as he heard Callie walk toward him. "Hi, sweetheart."

"Marty, I didn't expect you so soon."

"I'm sorry. Am I interrupting your work?"

"No, I'm done." She looked over at Walter. "Would you keep an eye on the shelter animals. They're all done. I've talked to Sherry and she'll be here to pick them up before five."

"Sure thing." He looked at Martin and nodded. "I guess I'll see you later."

"See you later."

"Wow," said Callie with a smile. "That's a hell of a turnaround."

"He's very loyal to you and I respect that."

Callie smiled and slipped her arms around his waist. "First things first, cowboy. Pucker up."

"With pleasure." He meant it to be a soft kiss but he lost himself in her. "Oh, Callie." He brushed his hand on her cheek. "How is it when I'm with you everything feels right?" Her smile went straight to his heart.

"Because it is." She took his hand and spoke softly. "Tell me what you need."

"I was hoping it was early enough to go for a ride."

She grinned. "Sure thing, cowboy. You saddle up Pegasus and I'll get Harley." She turned toward the stable but he grabbed her hand.

"You're not going to ask me, are you?"

"You'll tell me when you're ready. Let's move it, cowboy. Time's a wasting." He saddled up Pegasus as Callie saddled Harley. "Do you have a hat?" she asked.

"No."

"You are a native born Texas male with no cowboy hat." She shook her head and made a tsk, tsk noise. "That's just wrong. You can use one of mine until I get you one." She pulled one off a peg on his head. It slid low on his head and he snickered.

"What the heck?"

"I have a big head, so shut up if you plan on getting laid tonight." He laughed as he led Pegasus into the paddock. He mounted his horse and waited for Callie to take the lead. "The river is about a twenty minute ride from here. We should be able to get there and back before dark."

"Lead on."

He followed Callie down a well worn path until it opened up to a wide field. They passed by the stable and kennel that had caused so much tension between them. He road quietly beside her until the river appeared before them. He pulled up and looked around. A few trees spotted the bank. The river flowed over rocks and small falls before widening to a deeper and calm section. "My God. No wonder you never wanted to sell. How could you ever leave something so beautiful?"

She looked at him and smile. "Exactly." She dismounted Harley and tied her loosely to a tree. Martin followed suit and looked at Harley.

"Can I tie them this close?"

"Yes. They're friendly but they are both fixed. If I wanted more horses I wouldn't have to breed them. There are plenty needing to be adopted." She sat down on the ground and tossed a rock in the river. He sat down next to her and added his own rock to the stream. She reached for his hand.

"I'm ready now."

"Okay. Tell me what happened."

He took a breath and watched the water as it rolled by. "I fired my father."

"What? How?"

“I’m the majority shareholder, a fact my father has conveniently forgotten over the years. I told him he could tell the board he was resigning and retiring or I would tell them I was firing him. He chose retirement.”

“Marty, you didn’t do this for me, did you? I didn’t need this.”

“No, I needed this and my company needed this. My father has spent far to long playing with people’s lives. It’s time my company starts behaving in a manner people can respect, that I can respect.”

“I’m so sorry. This must have been so hard for you.”

He closed his eyes and listened to the river. “He thinks I betrayed him,” he whispered. He felt Callie move closer to him. He put his arm around her shoulder and kissed her forehead.

“Tell me what to do. How do I help?”

He opened his eyes and smiled. “You’re doing it. Although I am wondering if you could use a hand around here?”

“What?”

“Maybe you could show me how to help with the animals.”

“You mean like a Vet tech?”

“If that’s what it’s called.”

“Wouldn’t being the head of a big ass corporation interfere with my training you on the proper way to shave a dog’s groin?”

“Well, I’ve decided to step away from the day to day of the office. I’ve turned that over to a man I trust, Andrew Logan.”

“Why?”

“The whole truth? I’ve been unhappy, hell, I’ve been miserable with my work for years, but I didn’t have a thought of what else to do. Then, the other night, when I was playing in front of an audience, everything changed. I felt like I did thirty years ago playing

in small clubs." He saw the worried look on her face and smiled. "I'm not thinking of calling Nikki and going on tour. I was thinking of playing more, maybe get back to composition."

"Composition? You write music?"

"I did. I haven't for a long time. Nothing inspired me." He gave her a soft kiss. "Then I met you."

"But you want to work here too?"

"Yes, I really do. What you're doing is important. You and Walter are making a difference for these animals and the people who own them. I'd like to be a part of that." Callie stood up and looked around. He thought maybe he'd assumed too much about what she would want. "Sweetheart? What are you thinking?" He was surprised to see the tears in her eyes.

"I think it's wonderful but I'm worried. You've made a lot of life altering decisions in the last few days. I don't want me to be one of them."

He stood and held her by her shoulders. "I get it, sweetheart, I really do. I haven't walked away from the company completely. If I want to I can go back. At this moment I don't see that happening. I want the chance to figure out what I want to do with the rest of my life. Honestly, I don't ever have to work another day if I don't want to."

"Really?"

"Really."

"Huh, cool for you."

"Callie, I don't know what will happen in the next few weeks or months, but I can tell you with absolute certainty, I want you to be apart of what ever that happens to be."

"Marty, how can you be so sure?"

He could see the fear in her eyes and he didn't blame her. This was happening fast but he knew this was right for him. He prayed to God it was right for her. He pulled her close and gave her a soft kiss. "Do you know when I realized you were the woman for me? That you always had been?"

"No," she whispered.

"When you told me to get my head out of my father's ass."

"Oh Lord," she said as she blushed.

"I mean it. No one ever stood up to me. No one ever challenged me. I was Hardass Hardwick. I got what I wanted and no one ever argued with me."

Callie chuckled. "You know Marty, you may be certifiable."

"Quite possibly. I know it's not always going to be smooth sailing for us. We're going to argue and you will most likely threaten me again with frightening surgical tools."

"Not without cause," she smiled.

"Of course," he grinned. "But no matter what rough spots we hit, I know nothing will make me stop loving you."

"Oh, Marty."

"Now it's your turn to say something so I don't panic you're going to kick me to the curb."

Callie smiled and put her hand to his cheek. "I love you, Marty Hardwick. I've loved you for more than thirty years. I see no point in stopping now." She threaded her hands around his neck and pulled him into a deep kiss.

Marty pulled back and smiled. "Let's get the horses back to the stable. I want some alone time with my girl." As he tried to get back on his horse, Callie's hat slipped low on his forehead. "Damn," he laughed.

Callie mounted Harley and pointed at him. "Don't say it."

He laughed as he coaxed Pegasus to a gallop. "Hell no. I intended on getting laid tonight."

Callie sat on the back porch, watching Marty throw a rope toy for Jake and Gracie. The last three months had been the best of her life. Marty and his baby grand had moved in two months ago. She looked down at her hand and the engagement ring Marty had given her. It was a beautiful one carat solitaire in a beautiful diamond band setting. She told him she didn't need to be married but he adorably insisted. He said he knew they were forever and he wanted the world to know it to. They'd decided on an outdoor wedding with a relaxed feeling. It was only a few weeks away. Callie couldn't wait to see Marty's uptight country club friends sit down in a pasture with a plate of barbecue. She wouldn't mention a lot of the food they were eating would be vegetarian.

She'd watched the change in him since they'd been together. He'd gone from tightly wrapped to a contented smile. Callie took only part of the credit for his state of being. She knew a large part of this was because he was finally doing what he wanted, including his music. Callie curled up on the couch with the patient charts while Marty played the piano had become their nightly routine. Gracie and Jake bolted past her and headed for their water bowls.

"That should hold them for a few hours," Marty said as he gave her a kiss. "Will you need me in the stable today?"

"No, I've got Annie today."

"Okay. I have a few errands to run and I want to stop in at the office."

"How do they feel about their GQ boss showing up in jeans and dusty boots?"

"They seem okay with it. Actually, I think they like it. The atmosphere seems a lot better since I'm not there."

"I don't think it's that. I think you've established the new atmosphere where people are relaxed and they don't have to worry about keeping the peace. Just because you're not there all the time anymore doesn't mean you didn't make it happen."

He gave her another kiss. "Thanks, love."

Annie Casey stood at the foot of the porch stairs. Callie was thrilled with the progress she'd made since she started working at the ranch with her father. She'd gone

from restless, troubled schoolgirl to a focused reliable young woman. “Excuse me, Dr. Reynolds, Mr. Hardwick, can I talk to you for a minute?”

“Of course,” said Callie. “Please, have a seat.” Annie sat on the bench next to her. “Is there a problem?”

“Yes, sort of. You know Mr. Tyler”

“He does some volunteer work for us. He’s been a big help. And his son Tommy loves playing catch with Milo.”

“I’m friends with his daughter, Janie. The place where Mr. Tyler worked shut down and he lost his job. Now they’re getting evicted from their apartment. Janie’s really scared. I told her she could stay in my room but she doesn’t want to leave her parents or Tommy. I don’t know what to do.”

Callie looked up at Marty. “What do you think?”

“You know, I need a caretaker for my place. We decided not to sell it because we might want it if we expand the operation. Going back and forth to check on it place is a real drain on my time.”

Annie gasped. “You mean they could have a place to live?”

“Well, yeah. I’d want him there in case there were any problems or trespassers.”

“You know, Marty, I could use some help here too. Between you and your generous friends we have the means to expand our work. We could hire him on.”

“Oh my God, Dr. Reynolds, Mr. Hardwick, that would be so great. They’re good people, they really are.”

“I know they are, Annie. Speaking of good people I know the summer break is coming up for you. You’ve been doing such a great job. I would like to hire you full time during your break.”

“What?” she smiled.

"You would do what you've done after school but do it full time. Also, your father would be your boss."

Her smile faltered a bit, but not for long. "Oh Dr. Reynolds, this is great. I love it here."

"I know you do. You've been working hard and your father has told me how much your grades have improved. You are very gifted for this kind of work. Not everyone can do it. I'm very proud of you." Callie smiled as Annie wiped a tear from her cheek.

"Thank you, Dr. Reynolds. That means a lot to me."

"When you're ready to pick a school after graduation I would be very happy to write you a recommendation."

Annie gave her a tight hug. "Thank you, Dr. Reynolds. Can I go tell my father?"

"Of course. But don't mention Mr. Tyler. We have to talk to him first."

Annie nodded and jumped to her feet. She threw her arms around Marty. "Thank you Mr. Hardwick."

"You're welcome, Annie. Thank you for telling us about Mr. Tyler."

Annie ran down the steps and yelled for her father. He came out of the barn and they watched as Annie told him her good news. Walter looked up at them and mouthed "Thank you."

Marty sat down next to her and took her hand. "I understand why you do what you do."

"What do you mean?"

"You help animals and people because it's the right thing to do, but you never mentioned how good it feels."

"Yeah, amazing isn't it?"

"It sure is." He took a breath and looked away. Callie knew his tell. "What is it."

"I need to tell you about something I did."

She squeezed his hand. "Okay."

He pulled a card out of his shirt pocket. Callie recognized it as their wedding invitation. "I sent a wedding invitation to my father. I don't know why, but I did."

"Okay."

"You're not mad I sent it to him?"

"Of course not. He's your father."

"I thought I should. I would want to put him in the position of people telling him about our wedding if he hadn't been invited." He sighed and handed her the card. "We don't have to worry about him spoiling our day."

Callie looked at the card and the old man had scrawled across it in big black letters, "Hell, no!" She shook her head. "That bastard."

Marty stood and brushed off his jeans. "I just want you to know about it in case you heard about it. I'm going to get going." Carrie stood and slipped her arms around his waist. Her heart broke at the tears he was blinking back.

"I'll see you later," she said.

He gave her a kiss. "I'll be home for dinner."

She watched as he got into his car and drove off.

Callie banged on the front door. "Open up!" She banged on the door again until a frightened housekeeper opened up. "Where is he?"

"Miss, you can't come in. I'll call the police."

"Go ahead." She walked down the hallway. "Old man! Where the hell are you?"

"What the hell is going on?!" Marty's father came out of his office.

"You and I need to have a conversation!"

He stopped dead in his tracks. "Laura," he whispered.

"Should I call the police, Mr. Hardwick?"

"No, Sophie. I'll handle this."

"Mr. Hardwick, she has a weapon!"

Callie smiled as she held up her surgical tool. "It's a tool of my trade."

"It's okay. She wouldn't do anything." He turned and walked back into his office.

Callie followed him. "Don't count on it, old man." She held up a syringe. "This is ketamine, an animal tranquilizer." She held up the steel tool. "This is an emasculator. It's what I use to deal troublesome bulls." Then she pulled out the refused invitation. "I'm marrying your son in three weeks. You didn't just turn down your son's invitation, you wrote this!" She yelled and pointed at the big black letters. "Do you have any idea how much you hurt him! Do you even care?!"

"He threw me out of my own company!"

"No, he gave you a way to retire and save face."

"He doesn't want me there. He's just doing it to rub my face in it."

"You are a real piece of work. You think everything is about you. Well, news flash, old man, it's not. He could have not invited you. He knew he was taking a risk, that you would probably say no. Oh, but that wasn't good enough. You didn't just say no. You said hell no!"

"You sure as hell don't want me there."

Callie got close enough for him to have to lean back against his desk. "It's important to him that you be there so that means it important to me. So come, don't come, but let me be crystal clear, old man. You hurt the man I love again," she paused and picked up her tool. "I'll use this on you." Then she picked up the syringe. "And I won't bother with this first. Are we clear?!" Callie took a breath, thinking maybe she'd gone to far, but she was so angry. Then the old man did something she never expected. He laughed. Not just a snicker but a full on belly laugh. "What's so funny?"

"My God, you're just like her."

"Who?"

"Your mother."

If he'd have said the Queen of England, she wouldn't have been more surprised.
"My mother?"

"She was a spitfire, just like you. She caught me with another girl once and she threatened me with the same fate, only she said she'd use a kitchen knife, not a fancy tool."

"Well, damn it, old man! How do you expect me to keep up a head of steam with you laughing like that." It only made him laugh harder. "I'm leaving. Heed my words, old man."

"Oh, I will. I have no doubt you are a woman of your word."

"Count on it." She reached for the door when she heard him whisper.

"Callie."

She turned and saw a different man than the one she saw when she came in. "You might understand."

"Understand what?"

"If you love him half as much as I loved your mother, you could understand what losing her did to me."

She sighed and thought about the picture in the yearbook. Young love, broken promises. "I do understand, Martin. But I won't forget how much your son is hurt."

"I don't expect you would."

Martin sat on the porch, looking out on a beautiful summer day. It couldn't be more perfect. Today was the day he'd marry Callie. The tent was up, the flowers were set and the guests would start arriving soon.

The last four months of his life had been the happiest he'd ever known. Living with Callie was fun and passionate and even a little contentious. They'd both lived alone for so long that they had to learn how to share living space. To make that a bit easier they'd decided to expand the farmhouse, adding a bigger den and a music room. He had found his music again. Playing for Callie had reminded him of the joy he felt when his talent made others happy. He'd also been able to help out around the ranch and through fundraising efforts with some generous clients he'd been able to take the worry of covering expenses off Callie's shoulders. He loved the way she smiled when she helped an animal or its family when they couldn't afford treatment. He even loved the way she cried during the few times that there was nothing she could do to help.

Everything was perfect. Bull. No it wasn't. He couldn't help it. He was finally getting married and his father wouldn't be there. Damn his hide for taking away what should have been a perfect day.

"Hey there, cowboy. You ready to make an honest woman of me?"

Martin turned around and gasped. "Oh my God." He walked toward her and took her hands. Her dress was a beautiful lace creation over a strapless gown. Her long hair had been twisted into elaborate braids with small flowers entwined. "You're so beautiful."

"You clean up pretty good too, cowboy." He had a new jet black suit for which he did not disclose the price in fear of never hearing the end of it. He wore an elegantly tooled leather vest and a bolero. "Please tell me there's a cowboy hat to go along with this."

"Of course, but a gentleman always removes his hat indoors."

"Of course," she giggled. "Oh Marty, I can't believe this is happening."

"Believe it sweetheart. In about an hour we will be all kinds of legal," he laughed.

"Are you sure you don't mind my keeping my name?"

"No, sweetheart. I don't. You're Dr. Reynolds. You run Reynolds Ranch. You made your reputation with your name." He pulled her hands to his lips and kissed them. "When the preacher says 'I now pronounce' you'll be my wife, no matter what your last name."

"And you will be my husband. I'm not above kicking socialite ass if they have any doubts."

Martin laughed. "Oh I have no doubt about that."

"Excuse me, Mr. Hardwick, Dr. Reynolds. Oh Dr. Reynolds you look so beautiful."

"Thank you, Annie. You look lovely too."

"Thanks," she blushed. "There is some here to see you. Actually, he insisted."

"Who?"

"Me."

Martin gasped at the sight of his father. He was dressed up in a proper suit, with a cowboy hat in his hand. "Dad."

"Can you talk to me for a few minutes?"

"Of course."

His father looked at Callie and nodded. "Your girl came to see me a few weeks ago."

"She did?"

"Brought some big tool she threatened use on me to cut off my balls."

Martin looked at her in shock. "Callie."

"I was really mad. You know how I get."

He tried not to smile. "Yeah, I do. She threatened to do the same thing to me."

"She's got some spunk, your girl. She wasn't afraid to face me and tell me if I ever hurt you again, she'd use them on me." He chuckled. "I believe her."

"I would if I were you, Dad."

"Listen, son. I'm still mad about what happened with the company but as Callie pointed out, your my son. She said it was important to you that I be here, so that made it important to her." He looked at Callie and he could swear the old man's eyes teared. "She's so much like her mother." He looked back at Martin and forced back his tears. "I understand how much you love her. Even thought I was just a stupid teenager, I loved her mother that much. I was stupid and foolish and I lost her. Maybe because of Callie you can understand what that did to me."

"I can, Dad." He reached for Callie's hand.

"Alright, then." He could see his father trying to collect himself. "If the invitation still stands, I would like to attend your wedding."

"Of course it does, Dad." In the first time since he was a little boy, Martin hugged his father. "Thank you, Dad. This means the world to me, to us."

His father tried to collect himself as he patted his son's back. "Good, good." He reached into his pocket and pulled out and envelope. "A wedding guest should come with a gift." He accepted the envelope and gasped.

"Marty, what is it?" asked Callie. He showed her the envelope and she steadied herself on Marty's arm. "Oh, my God." It was a check made out to the Reynolds Ranch foundation for one million dollars.

"Dad?"

His father tried to assume a firm posture. "I asked around, looked into the public financials of the charity." Callie smiled when he emphasized the word 'public'. "You do good work here. You've earned the respect of the people in the county. It sure looks it anyway from the number of cars in the parking lot."

Callie wiped a tear from her check. "Okay, old man, like it or not, I need to hug you now." She pulled him into a hug and Martin saw his father close his eyes. He thought maybe for a minute his father was back in high school, remembering his Laura. Callie

pulled back and smiled. "I would like to ask you something, and it hasn't anything to do with the wonderful gift you've given us."

"You can ask," said his father and Martin snickered. Typical old man.

"All my family is gone now. In a little while you and Marty will be my official, legal family."

"I guess that's so."

"Mr. Hardwick, will you please walk me down the aisle?"

Martin could see his father struggling to maintain his composure. He managed a genuine smile. "Only if you call me Dad."

Callie pulled him back into a hug. "Thank you, Dad," she whispered. "Thank you for making us both so happy. We couldn't ask for a better gift." She stood back and smiled. "But a million dollars to keep the ranch running is pretty damn close."

His father howled with laughter. "Oh, I like her!"

Martin put his arm around Callie's shoulder. "So do I."

"Well, I'll get out there." He stopped and walked to Callie. He took her hand and kissed her cheek. "I'll be waiting for you, Callie."

"Thank you, Dad."

Callie looked embarrassed as she started to speak. "I'm sorry I didn't tell..." He silence her with a passionate kiss.

"You are so amazing. I don't have the words." He walked over to the piano and picked up some sheet music. "But I do have this." Her eyes welled when she saw the title, "Callie's Song."

"Oh my God, Marty. You wrote this for me?"

"I spent years trying to write but I couldn't find the inspiration. Nothing would come out. You can't know how frustrating that is. It was like a part of me was missing. Then I found you, my muse." He chuckled, "My badass muse." He sat down at the piano and

lifted the lid. He'd played this so often that he didn't need the music. "This is my wedding gift to you." He began to play and the emotion poured out of him. It was jazzy and upbeat, then moody, then passionate. He played the notes but he could feel them too. This said everything he wanted to say. He hoped she could hear it too. He finished her song and then looked up. The tears were flowing down her cheeks and running to her smile. She sat down next to him and gave him a deep kiss.

"I could hear it," she said.

"Hear what? The song?"

"I could hear how much you love me."

He caressed her cheek and gave her a kiss. She understood. He wiped her cheek and pulled away with a black smudge. "You're going to kill me for ruining your makeup, aren't you."

"Count on it," she smiled. "But you'll pay later. Right now I need to find that makeup artist for a touch up. I'm supposed to marry a hot cowboy in a few minutes." She turned to him and winked. "If he shows up, let him in."

Martin laughed as the love of his life was running down the hall shouting about her makeup emergency. It really was a perfect day.