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Cade dashed out of the barn, with George close at his heels. Annalisa hurried after them. Breathing hard from her unexpected sprint, she reached the bunkhouse only seconds after the men.

Tim sat on the sofa, with Marta kneeling in front of him. She looked up when they walked in. “Since he used the inhaler, he’s breathing much better.”

Cade strode across the room and sat down beside Tim. “Hey, Bud. You doing all right?”

“Yeah, I think so.” Tears still lingered in the little boy’s eyes, and his voice had a slightly wheezy tone. “I didn’t think I was going to have asthma since I moved here. It’s been a long time since I had an attack.”

Annalisa watched in admiration as Cade put his arm gently around Tim’s shoulders and spoke reassuringly. “That’s a really good thing, Tim. Probably the attacks are getting further and further apart, and pretty soon, they’ll stop altogether. We can handle a little one like this now and then, can’t we?”

“You’re not mad?” Tim looked up at Cade, and Annalisa’s heart broke at what the child must have gone through before becoming a ward of the state.

Cade smiled gently. “Mad? No way. Tim, if I cut my hand or banged my head, would you be mad at me?”

“No.” Tim still looked uncertain.

“I’ll never be mad at you for being sick either.” Cade looked at George, Marta, and Annalisa and nodded. “None of us will

be.”

“That’s good, because I really can’t help it.” Tim’s fears were relieved, but Annalisa sensed he still felt the need to defend his illness. Anger rose in her at his parents.

“Tim?” She stepped forward.

“Yes, Ma’am?”

“I heard something making a funny noise under the porch this morning. It almost sounded like kittens.”

“Kittens?” His eyes widened.

“Yep. If it’s okay with Mr. Cade, why don’t you go tell Juan and Matthew and meet back at the porch to see if we can figure it out.”

“Sure!” He jumped up and walked to the door. Just before he reached the threshold, he screeched to a stop. “Oops.” He turned back to Cade. “Is it okay?”

“Definitely.” Before the word was out of Cade’s mouth, Tim scampered out the door.

Cade smiled at Annalisa. “Good diversion.” His tone grew serious. “We’re all going to have to work on assuring Tim that his illness isn’t his fault.”

“It breaks my heart to see him think that,” Marta said.

George nodded. “Like Cade said, it’s up to us to change his thinking.”

“Maybe some old-fashioned puppy love will help. Well, in this case, kitten love.” Annalisa laughed. “I really did hear something that sounded like kittens under the porch, and I’ve been seeing Miss Kitty go under there a lot,” she said. “Y’all want to go out and see what we can find?”

“Sounds like a plan,” Cade agreed.

George and Marta nodded and walked out on the porch.

Cade swept his arm gallantly toward the door. “After you,” he said to Annalisa, a smile softening his chiseled features.

She stepped in front of him and hurried out, trying to ignore the undercurrents that ran between them like a raging river.

Tim ran up the path to the porch, while Juan and Matthew followed behind at a slower gait. Even the blasé teenager couldn't keep the interest from showing in his expression, and Annalisa noticed Matthew was making eye contact rather than staring at the ground.

Please, Lord, it would be so nice if there were kittens underneath the porch.

To Annalisa's surprise, Matthew was the first one to plop down on his stomach and shimmy under the porch. She looked at Cade and mouthed, "Is it safe?"

He nodded and whispered, "We added the porch right before you got here. I don't think it's been here long enough to attract any dangerous varmints." But as soon as he finished speaking, he squatted down and peered into the darkness.

"Are those kittens, Matt?"

Silence.

"Matthew?"

The boy squirmed, and it was obvious he wanted to reply. Annalisa breathed a silent prayer, but instead of a verbal answer, Matthew wiggled out into the light and held up three kittens. He cuddled a gray tiger-striped one close, but silently pushed the other two toward Tim.

Tim whooped. At the loud noise the two loose little kittens scampered back toward the porch, but the boy caught them. "Here, Juan." He extended the Siamese-looking kitten, keeping a calico for himself.

Annalisa noticed Cade was watching to see if Juan would accept the gift. When, after a moment's hesitation, the teen reached for the wriggling bundle of fur, they exchanged a

smile.

“Is it okay if we play with them awhile?” Tim asked.

“Considering they have their eyes open and are fairly agile, I’d say they’re old enough to handle a little gentle play.” Cade stressed the word gentle. “Miss Kitty’s probably still out at the barn, but I imagine she’ll be getting ready to feed them again soon. Let’s limit it to ten minutes, then they go back to their home, okay?”

His gaze scanned the three boys’ faces. They all nodded, then as if by unspoken agreement, walked away in different directions for some quality time with their new feline friends. “I’ll ring the dinner bell when time is up,” Cade called after them.

“That was amazing, seeing them so excited, wasn’t it?” George mused.

“Did you see Juan?” Marta asked. “I’m pretty sure that was a positive emotion on his face.”

“And Matthew almost talked,” Annalisa noted. “Didn’t you think so, Cade?”

“It sure looked that way.”

“Wow.” Marta grinned. “Maybe we should have taken that weekend seminar in animal therapy, George.”

“I don’t know. I think we’re hobbling along pretty well on our own.”

“You don’t think Tim is allergic to cats, do you?” Annalisa hated to put a damper on the positive atmosphere, but the nagging question begged to be voiced.

Cade looked concerned, but Marta shook her head. “He’s been playing with Miss Kitty ever since he got here and no attacks until today. So, I really don’t think so.”

“We’ll keep an eye on him and see if his breathing problems worsen now that the kittens are around,” George offered.

“While I’ve got a minute to myself, I’m going to go fix that loft ladder out at the barn. If I see the proud mama out there, I’ll try to delay her so the young ’uns can play a while longer.” He whistled a cheery tune as he made his way down the pathway.

Marta smiled at Cade and Annalisa from the bunkhouse door. “I’ve got things to do, as well. I’m going to get back in here. Give me a yell if you need me.”

Annalisa suddenly found herself alone with Cade on the big porch. He pointed at the swing. “Have a seat.”

She sat down and tensed when he eased down beside her.

“You don’t have to be so uncomfortable with me. I was going to kiss you back there—not bite you.”

“Whew. That’s a relief,” she said. Her attempt at silly was falling flat, but she couldn’t seem to help it. “I was afraid I’d wandered into a bad vampire movie.”

“Annalisa—”

“Cade—”

“You go first,” Annalisa said, her resolve weakening already.

“I think I’m falling in love with you.”

Her mouth went dry. She hadn’t expected him to address the situation so directly. “I have to find Amy.” She offered the words almost matter-of-factly. “Until I do, I have no future.” She turned in the swing to face him. “I promised.”

“Annalisa. . .” His voice was as smooth as a chocolate latte. She couldn’t help but remember all the times her dad had charmed her mom with a tone much like Cade’s present one. “. . .Amy has a future already. It’s just not with you.” He leaned back in the swing and put one arm around her. She felt sure he was working at looking relaxed. “I’ve watched you with the boys.” He reached out and brushed a stray curl from her face. “You don’t have a selfish bone in your body.”

“Wanting to raise my baby sister isn’t selfish.” She refused to be swayed by his soft words.

“No, it isn’t. But taking her away from a place where she’s happy so you can have her for yourself is.”

“How do you know she’s happy? Do you know where she is?” Her pulse quickened as she realized he might.

“No.” He reached for her hand, but she jerked it away. “I’m sorry. I don’t.”

Hopes dashed, Annalisa leapt to her feet. “I’m going to find her, Cade. With or without you.”

He wouldn’t meet her gaze, but glanced instead at his watch. “I’ve got to ring the bell so the boys will bring the kittens back.”

“I’m going for a walk.”

Annalisa set off for the barn lot as the dinner bell rang. She needed some time to think. From Cade’s reaction and his confession in the barn, she surmised he’d never intended to help her find Amy. He was no different than her father. He’d needed her to cook, and so he pretended he might locate her little sister. Now that he knew she couldn’t be put off much longer, he’d tried a different tactic—claiming he was falling in love with her. No doubt hoping to make her forget about finding Amy.

Even as the bitter thoughts tumbled through her mind, Annalisa knew she was being ridiculous. Cade had never promised to help her. He’d only said they’d talk about it. And they just had.

She glanced over at the hay barn where George’s hammering resounded through the loft, then headed for the horse barn farther down the path. The Winemillers were sweet, but she knew they hoped she and Cade would get together. No matter how well-meaning, she didn’t need advice from either of

them right now.

She had a sickening feeling that Cade hadn't been manipulating her when he'd said he was falling in love with her. And an equally sickening feeling that she was way too close to returning his affection.

Just as she reached the barn, Miss Kitty sauntered out. Cade had apparently rung the bell just in time. The feline mommy wouldn't have been too happy to find no kittens under the porch.

When Annalisa entered the broad doorway, in spite of her tumultuous thoughts, she couldn't keep from chuckling at the fact that she zeroed in on Bubba. How quickly her mortal enemy had become her friend.

Once inside, she leaned against the rough boards of Bubba's stall and reached out a trembling hand to pet the horse. "What have I done, Old Boy? It wasn't supposed to be like this."

Bubba put his nose in her open palm and snorted gently against her hand.

"Yeah, I know you think things are going great. But your master is a distraction I can't afford."

Bubba didn't answer, but he turned his head away from her.

"Fine." Feeling more than a little silly, Annalisa turned to walk out of the barn.

Before she reached the doorway, a loud whinny broke the silence. She spun around to see Bubba craning his head over the top of his stall.

"Now you want to reconsider, huh, you big old galoot? Sorry for ignoring me?" She retraced her steps and patted him. "I don't blame you for thinking I'm crazy. Sometimes I wonder myself." She closed her eyes and laid her head against the horse's shoulder.

A picture of the cowboy she'd left on the bunkhouse porch

filled her mind's eye. "Cade's everything I've ever dreamed of in a man," she said softly. "But if I settle down to life here, I'm breaking a promise I've spent the last seven years trying to keep."

Annalisa drew a little comfort from the fact that this time the horse turned his head and nuzzled her. Now if only Cade could understand as easily.