

Almost Paradise
By Elizabeth Cain

13

The weather softened, and we had a few days of sunshine. The boys got busy cleaning up the yard where they could, chopping the larger trees that had fallen into firewood, plowing paths in the snow for our trucks and a wide swath on which to unroll hay rounds for the cattle and newly turned out horses. Here and there, they cut paths to the water troughs and places where the stock could walk unimpeded.

January seemed to fly by in this manner. Julian and I went out to the barn and groomed Cielo, his grey, and others whose shaggy coats were matted with straw. We'd work on the same horse so our hands could touch over their backs, and we could talk about personal things. Behind Julian's handsome face and lean, hard body was a complex man with unresolved fears and dreams for the future that he hadn't dared to dream for years. I told Julian how I had struggled growing up estranged from my parents, sleeping in odd stables, mucking stalls for the chance to ride, watching the horses being mishandled and neglected, committing myself to making a difference in their lives, how I had to shy away from unwanted touching by flirtatious men and be strong in the face of loneliness and fear. It seemed our paths had shaped us for the healing we had found in each other's nature. We felt the blessing of the priest in our daily lives, the peace and grace he had wished for us, and put Miranda out of our minds.

But that we should not have done. In the middle of February, a month before her release date, Miranda turned into our driveway, parked quickly, and pounded on the front door. We had not seen her coming, so Julian opened the door, expecting one of the wranglers or maybe FedEx with my new dressage saddle.

I heard him say, "Miranda," and I stepped back into our bedroom, leaving the door cracked slightly. "What are you doing here?" he asked in a breaking voice.

"I came to be with my husband. I'm cured. They let me out early. Where shall I put my things?" she said, barging in.

"I thought you were going to stay with your cousin in California," Julian said, still in shock.

"Why should I do that when I have a husband in Nevada?" she said, her voice rising a notch.

"Miranda, I am not your husband," Julian said, fighting for control.

"The hell you aren't!" she cried.

Julian slowly walked over to the desk in the kitchen where he did most of the ranch business. He picked up a sheaf of papers, which happened to still be on top, and handed them to her, his divorce papers.

"This is meaningless," she said. "I didn't sign anything! You're mine! No stupid papers are going to change that!"

"Miranda, are you on medication?" Julian asked tensely.

"I was, but I can't drive with that stuff. I get sleepy. I'll start again now that I'm here."

"Miranda, you can't stay here. There's another paper there. Look. You can't come within a mile of me."

"Well, I'm never going to agree to that!" She snarled like an angry cat.

I closed the door, found Julian's cell phone, and called 911. I told the dispatcher that we had a woman with a restraining order against her in our house, that we needed help as soon as possible. Of course, technically that order wasn't good until March on her original release date, but that seemed a small matter compared to the danger we were all in.

"Who is this woman?" the lady asked.

"My husband's ex-wife. She's crazy and dangerous. Please send the sheriff to Rancho Cielo Azul."

"Right away, ma'am," she said and hung up.

I opened the door again quietly and heard Julian tell her she had to leave or he would call the authorities.

"They can't touch me! Don't you remember what happened last time?" she said with barely disguised triumph in her voice.

"I'll never forget ... but that was over fifteen years ago. Things have changed," he said calmly.

But she didn't take the hint, the apparent softer way Julian was speaking to her. She grabbed a knife from Marta's counter and started ripping the curtains at the windows. Tyrone and Joe had seen the strange car come flying down the driveway, and they now rushed into the house at the sound of raised voices.

"Who *are* you?" Joe asked, while Tyrone subdued her, barely getting the knife out of her hands.

"I am Miranda Rose!" she screamed.

"You're trespassing, lady," Tyrone told her firmly, but she returned fire.

"How can I be trespassing in my own house?"

"Because there's a restraining order against you being less than a mile from Julian and ..."

He stopped, because he wasn't sure she knew anything about me, and he didn't see me in the room.

"Restraining order be damned! They can't keep me from what's mine!" She struggled against his strong hands, and then she bit his arm. He let go, yelping.

"Miranda, I beg you," Julian began. "I beg you to stop this. You're only going to be in more trouble."

"You're the one in trouble! Who does this guy think he is? I'm your wife! I don't like these curtains, so I'll take them down if I want to."

She could not be reasoned with.

Julian said, "Ty, go find Marta and have her take care of your arm."

"And who's Marta? Your whore?" she lashed out at Julian.

"She's my housekeeper, but I don't have to explain my life to you."

"I see that nice barn out there. I'll bet it's full of nice horses. I wonder how many of them could get out in a fire," she said with steel in her words.

The sound of a siren cut into Julian's fury. He just said, "I guess I won't have to find out, because you're going to be locked up!"

"The puny little jail in that town down the road isn't going to hold *me*!"

"I hope to God it does," he said.

She tried to get out the door, but Joe blocked her way. He'd put his gloves on, and she lunged and scratched to no avail. Sheriff Blake burst in and was able to handcuff the belligerent woman. She kept on yelling obscenities and threatening Julian's life.

"You owe me, you bastard! I waited fifteen years for you!"

"And I waited fifteen years for you," Julian said, shaking his head.

“I’ll have *you* or you’ll have *nothing!*” she screamed.

The sheriff warned her, dragging her away from Julian, “If you don’t shut up, I’ll tape your mouth!”

“Just try it,” she challenged.

“Okay.” The gray tape appeared in his hand, and he slapped a large piece over her mouth. “This stuff sure comes in handy,” Blake said with a skewed smile. “Sorry for your trouble, Mr. Rose,” he continued. “Can you come down to the station later and fill out a complaint?”

“Does it have to be today?” Julian asked.

“That would be best,” the sheriff replied.

“I’ll call in a while. I’m not feeling too well right now.” His face was white.

“I understand, Mr. Rose,” he said and jerked Miranda out the door. “I’ll send someone back for her car.”

“Thanks,” was all Julian could say.

I was beside him the instant the door closed. I said, “Julian, I’ll kill her before I let her hurt you!”

“You’ll never get the chance. She’s too smart.”

“How could they let her go without telling you?”

“Maybe they tried. The phone lines were down in January, remember, and I changed my cell phone number. I was afraid Miranda would get it. Apparently she didn’t need that to find the ranch. She seems to bypass the usual means of communication, so you don’t know she’s there until it’s too late,” he said, stumbling on the words.

“Julian, will you let me call the institution and find out what happened, what we’re supposed to do? I couldn’t really *kill* her, you know.”

“I know, Serena. Neither could I. But somebody has to see what a danger she is. Somebody has to listen to me.”

He wasn’t a man to cry, but through real tears he described the day Miranda had burned up two of his finest horses trapped in his horse trailer. She didn’t deny it. She said he cared more about them than he did her. “I guess it was pretty true at the time,” Julian admitted, “but no matter, it was the end for us. I didn’t buy any more horses for a long time.”

Marta was taking down the ruined curtains. The sound of Miranda’s voice lingered in the air.

Julian went on, “Soon after she went to the medical center for evaluation, she came back to kill me. She had been hiding all her pills and faked a miraculous recovery. The staff of that place was glad to see her go, never mind she had committed a horrendous criminal act.”

He closed his eyes, either to see or not see what happened next. He spoke the words in a rush.

“I was in my bedroom. It was dark, and so the bullet missed me. She had my gun, and she was a good shot. I had taught her well. We struggled with the weapon, and I overpowered her. I tied her to the bedpost, and she had chewed halfway through the rope by the time the police arrived.”

Julian seemed to breathe easier, being able to tell the story at last. Some color had come back into his face. But he put his hands against his chest and bent over slightly, saying, “It’s double the pain now, because she could hurt *you*.”

“She doesn’t know about me,” I said, putting my arms around him.

“She’ll hear about you, in town, somewhere. You’re not exactly a secret.”

“If only I could bear this pain for you.”

“Serena, your love has no bounds.”

“You could say that.”

He straightened up, but he was still trembling from the confrontation and the dark possibilities we faced.

“I’ll go with you to town,” I said.

“Maybe . . . we’ll see.”

The phone rang. Sheriff Blake pleaded with Julian to come file charges. They could only hold her for twenty-four hours for the original complaint.

“How many charges would you need to keep her locked up forever?” Julian asked.

“How many charges we talkin’ about here, Mr. Rose?”

“Oh, well, trespassing, property damage, illegal possession of a weapon, defying a court-ordered restraint, threatening me and my livestock, let’s see, there must be more.”

“I get the picture,” the sheriff said. “Just get down here as soon as you can.”

“Do you have to go now?” I asked.

“Pretty soon, love.”

“Will you let me drive you in?”

“That would put you right in the middle of it,” he answered.

“I’m already in the middle of it. I vowed to guard you with my life.”

“I thought that was a bit extreme at the time,” he said with a brief smile.

Just then, Marta stood by us with two glasses of the *fever cocktail*. “I thought this help,” she said.

“I guess Serena and I need our meds too,” he said. “Thanks, Marta. I don’t know what I’d do without you.”

“I not as old as Miss Serena when I help bring you into the world. I not let crazy woman hurt you!”

We sat at the kitchen table and sipped the tranquilizing juice. The ripped curtains were gone, and Marta was busy looking through her collection of material for something suitable to replace them. “Oh, look!” she cried out. “Here is print with horses, greys and blacks!”

“That’s the one,” Julian said.

I took one of his hands and kissed his cool fingertips, marveling at how I loved every part of his body. “I think I know a way out of this, Julian. Will you trust me?” I said.

“With my life,” he answered.

For weeks I had been trying to figure ways to subdue Miranda and shift her out of our lives, ever since Julian’s stressful time in California. My best idea was probably going to be the hardest. My chance came before I was really ready—about an hour after Sheriff Blake’s first call. Miranda had slipped out a bathroom window with the gun she had taken from the female officer, whom she left tied to a pipe behind the toilet with the woman’s belt.

Julian had pressed the speaker button when the second call came so we could hear the news together.

“Piece of work, that one,” Blake said. “She found her car. We hadn’t removed the keys after takin’ the car from your place. She’s prob’ly headed your way . . . wait a minute . . . what the . . .” He sputtered to a stop. We could hear faint radio noise. Julian leaned against the counter and closed his eyes. The sheriff spoke again suddenly, excitement rising in his voice. “She ran out of gas at the crossroads! An officer on his way back in from patrol says he saw her get out of the car. He chased her on foot, but she fired on him and the bullet lodged in his shoulder! Drove himself to the hospital and just called in. I’m sending some guys out!”

“You’ll never find her,” Julian said. “I’ll have to go on horseback.”

“I don’t think I can allow that, Mr. Rose.”

“What did you say, sheriff? You’re breaking up.” Julian ended the conversation and looked at me grimly. “Get ready for the ride of your life,” he said.