



All That Glitters

B A Tortuga

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Chapter One

“Chas? Darlin’?” Bea bustled through the door, a bouquet of deep red roses in her arms, grey hair almost dark with sweat. “Some more birthday flowers are here.”

Chastity Hopewell looked over at her housekeeper from her place on the massage table, and rolled her eyes. If they got any more, the damned house would be cloying. “More? Lord, Bea, send a load to your daughter or the women’s shelter or something. Who are these from?”

“Theresa, at the label. The card is sweet.”

“Theresa is a hare lipped bitch, Bea, and we both know it. She was the one who insisted I wouldn’t be able to make a decent record after ‘Fallen Rain’.”

Stupid woman. She’d not only been able to make a decent record; she’d made five of them. All platinum. All best sellers. After the last one Chas had proven she didn’t need her songwriter ex-husband, either. Just her trademark bright red hair, her low sultry voice and her determination to be the best.

Barry (Benny? Billy? Somebody) started rubbing harder, working out every kink, every bit of soreness. She was having a huge party tonight, celebrating the end of her latest tour, the success of the album, her thirty-second birthday, all at once. Everything was prepared, the best and brightest of Nashville society was slated to come. Chachi was washed and brushed, the Pomeranian looking like the prettiest cotton ball ever.

It was going to be the finest party.

Bea bustled around, arranging the flowers in the window of the spa. “Don’t you leave a bruise now, sonny. Miss Chas’ dress is sleeveless.”

“Did you call Jeff? Is he coming?” She hadn’t seen her ex-husband and still-manager since she left on tour back in March. He talked to her daily, but with the new baby—Samantha—and the new wife and things, he’d been stuck in Nashville playing househusband and working the phones.

Fool. Giving up the good life for a baby. Not that she didn’t make him his money, but still. Damn.

“He is. In fact, he said he had a big surprise for you. He wouldn’t say what.”

“A big surprise?” She arched an eyebrow, not trusting that wicked son of a bitch’s humor one bit. “Maybe his pretty little blonde’s knocked up again. Is Connie going to be here to do my hair in time? And did someone move the good vases up higher so those cameramen from the CWT don’t knock them over?”

She’d spent a king’s ransom on those vases; the bright pink was the only real color in the front hallway.

“Connie will be here in fifteen minutes. Yes the vases are moved. No, Elise is not pregnant again. I have no idea what Jeff wants.” Bea smiled at her and took the roses, along with two enormous vases of gladiolas, out of the room.

“Okay, you have five more minutes to melt me into goo before I hit the shower, stud. Get a move on.” God, what she wouldn’t give for Momma to see her now—staff, tour bus, manager, hairdresser, and personal trainer and masseur that made house calls. Far fucking cry from one-horse, no stoplight, small town Texas, wasn’t it? She’d left home more than fifteen years ago now, a bit away from legal, fake ID in her pocket and

thumbing her way to anywhere else. Took a little while, but she'd found Nashville.

It had taken another seven years before Nashville found her.

A sharp knock on the door told her Jeff was there. He might have settled down, but he wasn't any more patient than he had been all those years ago. Not one damned bit.

"You decent, baby?"

"That woman of yours hears you call me that and she'll cry." She smiled over as Jeff walked in, small and dark and square and looking happy as a pig in shit. They'd been shitty lovers, worse spouses, but fabulous business partners and better friends. Hell, as much as she teased about Elise, Chas actually thought the sweet thing was good for him. "How's things, Jeffy? I haven't seen you in a dog's age."

She sat up, wrapped the towel around herself, peering down at the girls, frowning. Man, she either needed better daily architectural support or a boob job. They weren't pointing south yet, but they sure as shit weren't looking north, either.

"I am about as good as a man can be. Are you all relaxed yet?" Jeff waved the masseur off, waiting until the door closed to look at her, eyes twinkling suspiciously.

"I am. I need to jump in the shower; Connie's on her way. Talk loud." She didn't have to nag, that boy couldn't keep a secret in a locked box. She opened the frosted glass of the shower stall, tossing her towel wrap over the top before turning on the hot water.

Bea had replaced the normal stuff with honeysuckle-scented soap. Oh, perfect. Enough to smell pretty, not enough to compete with all the other girls. Excellent.

"I found the best angle for your next tour. We can start it with the award show next month, do a bunch of really select dates. This is gonna drive people wild."

"Another tour? So soon?" She started washing, frowning a little. "Hand me a washcloth." She didn't mind touring, and the summer was the time to do it, so the holiday specials could be hit in the fall, but damned if she was going to work that hard to lose money. "But everybody's heard the last album, Jeffy. We doing a greatest hits or something?"

She thought she heard him mutter, "Or something," before he laughed right out loud. "We're doing something special for sure. You're co-headlining."

Sharing the stage? She hadn't had to do that since her second album. She rinsed off, careful to keep her hair dry. The up-do would hold better if it wasn't squeaky clean. "Co-headlining? With whom? Why? What mischief are you up to now?"

"Something that will take your already stellar career to a whole new level." He held a towel for her as she turned off the water and stepped out, giving her his patented appreciative look.

"You put those eyes back in your head, boy. You don't own keys to this piece of land anymore." Still, she preened a little. It felt good to know that Jeff still didn't mind looking. She worked hard to keep her body looking closer to the younger and younger competition she got every year.

She slipped into a huge terrycloth robe and headed out of the spa to the room they'd had made into a personal salon, complete with makeup and supplies and enough hairspray to burn her own personal hole in the ozone.

She looked over at Jeff as she sat, checking out her pedicure and waiting for Connie to get there and get started. "Well? Quit stalling. What have you got planned?"

A soft knock completely opposite of Jeff's came and there was Connie, popping gum and tscking at her about her hair. There was nothing like a hairdresser imported from

Houston. Nothing. Jeff waited until Connie's hands were deep in her hair and her eyes were tearing up to tell her.

"You're doing a duet tour with Josh Haley."

Chastity's world came to a screeching, burning halt, her head snapping around fast enough that Connie just missed plucking her bald. "The fuck I am. You're out of your goddamn mind!"

Josh Haley? The Josh Haley, golden boy, smarmy little prick, twangy, yodelling, smartass bastard that she had managed to avoid quite handily for the last seven and a half years? Oh, no. Not going to happen. Not in her lifetime.

It was even more infuriating when Jeff just smiled. "That's what Josh said, too. The label, however, says you two are going to do it. Remember that demo we cut of "Home in Your Eyes"? They have a copy. Think it will be smash hit."

Chas just sat and blinked for a minute. Home in Your Eyes? Christ on a crutch. They'd recorded that and nine or ten other ballads eons ago, when they were all working folk trying to break out. Jeff had been writing with Josh then, playing lead guitar and she'd been waiting tables and working the strip doing backup and bar mitzvahs. They'd all had good times back then, once upon a time.

Before Josh Haley had started himself a war, that was.

"I won't do it. Tell them no."

"I tried. They told me to go to Hell, and that they'd cut us from the label. I swear to God, baby, they want this. Bad. And I don't know why. But," and here he held up a hand to forestall her, "I think it would be the best thing you've done since the Hometown Girl tour."

"You what? Have you gone stupid? Me? On the road with that man? I'd shoot him before he finished opening for me." Chas was vibrating, as pissed off as she'd ever been, just the thought of the smarmy, boil-ridden, oily son of a carpetbagger infuriating her. She hated him worse than Brussels sprouts, worse than cold coffee.

"Not opening. Co-headlining. They want you starting the show one night, him the next. You should see the promotional budget they put out."

"I won't do it, Jeff. Will not. You go tell them unless they want me to go make money for someone else, they'd best just give it up. I'm not touring with him. He's a hateful, cheating bastard and he doesn't deserve to fly with me. Christ, Jeffy, what were you thinking? I'd rather shave my head and do punk rock." She glared at her own reflection in the mirror, Connie working silent behind her, teasing her hair into a butt-load of ringlets.

The door opened and closed quietly, and she figured Jeff had finally let it go, had decided to let her get ready in peace. Until she saw Josh Haley's face right there with hers in the mirror.

"You'll do it, just like I will. Even if I have to hogtie you and throw you on the damned bus myself."

It took a minute before she got over the shock of having that man in her house. Not just in her house, in her private suite, her own space. It couldn't be real. It just couldn't. She had security. Staff. She found herself just blinking, staring into the most hateful grey eyes on God's green Earth. "Who in the Sam Hell let this horse's ass into my house to threaten me?"

His face twisted into a sarcastic smile. "Your manager. You know, your ex? My ex

best friend?"

She turned, shoving Josh right on out of the way and glared at Jeff, shaking with it. "You let him in my house? Has becoming a father made you addlebrained? You? You are so fired. Take the tour and shove it up your ass. And *you!*" Chas got right up in Josh's face, pushing him hard against the vanity, mascaras and lipsticks going everywhere. "You have some gall, walking in here and threatening me like I'm supposed to be impressed! I told you a long time ago, you drunk, scum-sucking bottom-feeder, that I would starve before I'd so much as look on your face again willing!"

Josh looked her over, slow and easy, his relaxed amusement totally at odds with her own fierce state. "You know, you ain't getting any younger, honey. You should take this chance and run with it before those pretty, vacant blondes make old redheads like you and Reba completely obsolete. Men get older? They call us distinguished. Y'all start to wrinkle and sag? They call you finished."

She resisted the urge to pull the robe tighter, cover her poor boobs. "Finished? Well, I tell you what, you slimy, piece of shit poser, you spend your time worrying about why the critics called your last album repetitive and hackneyed and I'll worry about my skin and tits." She growled, reached behind her for the first thing she could find—oh, good old Aqua-Net, equally good for holding hair up and blinding former lovers. "Get out."

His face went stony. "Fine. But you can bet the last rhinestone you've got the label will know who turned them down. And you can think all you like that someone else will pick you up, but they won't touch you with a ten-foot pole. And that's not a threat. That's the unvarnished, sterling truth. Because that's what I heard from the head of sales this very morning."

"This morning? What the fuck?" Chas looked over at Jeff, fighting angry tears for all she was worth. "How long have you known about this?"

"Since this morning. I was in meetings all morning trying to talk them out of it for you. I knew how you'd feel about it." Jeff looked hangdog, but surely he wasn't lying. She knew him too damned well for that. He'd loved her once. "I'm sorry, baby. I know it's hard. But I still think it would be good."

Josh flinched when Jeff called her baby, but didn't say a word. Not one about anything, just kept a wary eye on her Aqua-Net.

"I'm going to find whoever gave up that demo tape and slit their throats." She pointed to the door, grabbing a brush and tearing it through her hair as Connie gasped. "Get out, all of you. Bea! Damn it, I see you hovering! Get your ass in here. You get on the horn and cancel the party. I'm leaving."

Bea gasped, went just grey as can be. "Chastity? The whole town's supposed to be here. The press. The label. Everybody... Mr. Irick? I..."

She rolled her eyes, headed for the door. They could figure it out themselves. She was going for a drive.

* * * *

Josh looked over at Jeff. It was weird. He'd not seen Jeff in... years. A lot of years. Not since... well... Just not unless it was in passing. They'd all grown up.

"Well, that went well."

Jeff chuckled, rubbing the back of his neck. "Better than I expected, actually. She didn't hit you; she only fired me the once. Nothing broke. All-in-all, I'm pleased."

He gave Jeff a much darker look. "You know as well as I do that was just because she was too stunned to get really mad. Damn it, Jeff. This is a stupid-assed idea."

Really stupid.

"Oh, get a grip, man. Uncomfortable? Yeah. Maybe even ugly. But stupid? You two pull this off and the country will eat it up with a spoon." Jeff shook his head, grinned, and damned if the look wasn't a little bittersweet. "You two sounded perfect together. Her passion, your heat? It can't lose."

Jeff watched Connie pick up the loads of makeup, and organize them into drawers. He handed Connie that damned Aqua-Net and crossed his arms over his chest. "Yeah, well we made that single when we had some passion and heat. For each other. You think we're gonna be able to sing it now, you're deluded."

Damn it. He'd gotten Chas out of his system, hadn't he? Even if it had taken him years of drinking and writing break-up songs. Why in the name of Holy Hell did the universe at large throw them together now?

"Look. You're both professionals. You're both adults. It's not like we're asking you to be friends. Just... sing together." Travel together. Do publicity together. Tour together.

Make music together.

"I already said yes, didn't I?" Of course he had. He was afraid. Damned afraid that if he said no the label would drop him. He didn't want to be a fucking has been at thirty-five. He wasn't ready to be out, not like that. God knew, his last album hadn't been a replay of his old stuff. In fact, that had seemed to be the problem. He was getting on with his life, and his fans? Didn't seem to like it. The reviewers certainly hadn't.

"Yep, and Chas will too. She's temperamental, not stupid..." Jeff's voice trailed off as a shrill, hysterical screaming sounded, Chastity's voice ringing through the big old house. "Oh, fuck a duck, that *girl*. She doesn't stop that shit, she'll ruin her voice."

Jeff took off hustling toward the sound, boots clicking on the tile floors. White tile. White walls. White carpet. White curtains. Damn.

It was like a giant, fancy, five-bedroom insane asylum, periodically spotted with bright pink frou-frou crap. He grinned. Well, it was Chas here. Hands in his pockets, Josh wandered out after Jeffy, leaving Connie or whatever her name was to clean up. He'd see what Chas was screeching about.

And hope it was at someone else for a change.

She had some poor label executive backed against the wall, red hair tied back in a ponytail, wearing a tight t-shirt and tighter pair of old jeans. She didn't look anything like the primped and posed diva that all of Nashville had fallen in love with.

"...and those goddamn songs are *old*! Old news. Old shit. Old garbage!"

Lord, the woman had some pipes.

He admired her tone and volume. Admired her boobs too, for all that he'd accused them of sagging. They were damned nice, round and full. She looked like she had, once upon a time. Just a girl, shouting at the exec like he was a patron in the bar she'd waited tables in.

Wouldn't do for him to believe she was anything like that now, though.

"Baby! Baby, please. You're going to hurt yourself." Jeff hurried over, patting her, talking quick and low. Lord, she still had the man by the balls.

"I'm going to hurt something, right enough." She turned on Jeff, eyes just snapping. "Didn't I fire you?"

"I'm here as a friend."

Jeff was soothing, trying to get her to calm down, and Josh just shook his head, looking over at the suit. "Now, I know I told someone in your office this was a bad idea."

The suit looked a little shell shocked, a little stunned. "It has to be done. The promo's in the works. The single's coming out. That damned demo tape's been bootlegged all over the internet for over a week."

Jesus. He loved how these folks just dribbled out information. Josh rolled his stiff shoulders and went over to where Jeff was still making nice. He planted himself in front of Chas. "Look. I don't like this anymore than you, but if we back out now, it's gonna look like the worst publicity ploy ever." He pleaded with her silently, eyes meeting hers. "Come on, Chas. We can do this. We can just avoid each other offstage is all."

Those bright-bright blue eyes glared over at him, shining and snapping. "They want us to sing that song. I fucking hate that song."

Jeff snorted. "I wrote that song for y'all. Be nice."

He gave Jeff another look, rolling his still stiff shoulders. He was sorry for it, he hated the whole fucking idea, but he was just too damned tired to fight. "Whatever. Y'all decide. You got any booze?"

Chas pointed to a marble bar, all gussied up for the party. Bea was fluttering there, an ice blue sparkling dress in her hands. "Chas. Lovely. You have to get dressed. I can't just cancel everything."

Lord, that woman could put the entire world into a tizzy.

He went to the bar, grabbing a bottle of something amber and pouring out a shot. Lord. You'd never know he'd quit drinking two years ago. Chas brought back all his old bad habits.

Jeff took the dress from Bea, petting and pushing Chastity along, hands all over her. "Go on, now. Get beautiful for your party. You'll be the talk of the town, baby. I promise."

"I never said I'd do it, Jeff."

"I know, baby. Go get your hair done. You're going to have a party. It's your birthday."

He set the drink aside untouched, watching as Chas was herded out. "Man, I wish my manager coddled me like that. I get that pissy? I get told to shut the fuck up and deal."

Bea puffed right up, eyes flashing like a momma hen when a fox was in the coop. "You let Miss Chas alone. She works her butt off; she pays all our salaries and then some. Hell, she paid for my granddaughter to go to Paris with her high school class. Not only that, but it's her birthday."

"It doesn't hurt that her manager adores the ground she walks on, now, does it?" The suit leaned over, poured a triple shot and knocked it back. "Rumor is that she wouldn't give him a baby, so he had to find himself another woman. 'Course rumor's also that she wouldn't have married Irick if she hadn't found you thigh deep in another singer..."

He felt something twist in his gut, something white-hot that made him want to snap the pencil neck on the guy right in two. He didn't. He just looked right at Bea instead. "I'm glad she's good to you. She's been nothing but a passel of trouble for me from day one. Now if y'all will excuse me, I'm leaving."

"Oh no, you're not." Vic walked in, his manager looking completely out of place in a dark tux, black hat pulled down. "You're staying here and being public." A suit was

pushed over at him. “And if you give me any shit, I’ll make you dance with the diva for the cameras. Evenin’, Ms. Anderson.”

Bea pinked and smiled over, nodded. “Victor. So very nice to see you here.”

Josh stared down at the suit in his hands. Some days he just wanted to chuck it all and run away. He had a good bit of money put away. Maybe he should retire. Maybe he should throw that suit back in Vic’s face and walk right out the door. He sighed. Maybe he should stop being melodramatic and just put the suit on. Giving Vic an evil look, he said, “We need to talk.” Then he went to do his damndest to look nice so he could be social.

For tonight.

Chapter Two

Chas did everything she was supposed to. She looked good. She smiled. She nodded. She gave interviews. She kissed ass. She avoided the questions about the damned duet, the tour, that man. She made nice with Josh's manager, Jeff's wife, that mealy-mouthed broad from the Country Insider show. She got insulted and complimented, passed from hand to hand, photographed and pawed.

All the while, Josh was in her house, laughing and joshing with reporters, making the head of the label laugh like the big good 'ole boy he was.

God, she missed her momma.

By the time midnight rolled around Chastity was exhausted, tense, starving and needing a cigarette like nothing else on Earth. It wasn't hard to wait for the right time—a slow song on the stereo system, a lull in the conversation and she took her chance. She slipped out of the main house, right into the little private courtyard that was her space to have a smoke, a cry, a minute of silence.

A shadow moved from one corner, scaring her, making her step back before she recognized the long, lanky shape.

Goddamn it. That man was in her garden. She couldn't go anywhere in her house tonight without bumping into him. Or outside her house for that matter.

Chas couldn't decide whether to back up, walk away or get huffy and ask him to go. She had her heels in one hand, the uncomfortable damned things dangling from her fingers, clicking together.

Josh turned to look at her, the moonlight casting shadows on his face. The man had aged well, lost the baby-faced thing. Done better than she had there, that was for sure.

God, she needed a good plastic surgeon.

"Oh." Josh stood, brushing off his fancy suit pants, not the same jeans he'd worn when he showed up. "Sorry."

She shrugged, going over to get her cigarettes from their little hidey-hole. "Just needed a minute away from the lights."

Somehow she was thinking she should have agreed to a European tour tacked on to the end of this last one.

"Yeah." He looked at her hands, snorted. "You mean Jeffy hasn't talked you out of those by now?"

"Nope." He'd tried once and she'd gained ten pounds and the label freaked, not that she was gonna share that bit of information with Mr. Gee-You're-Sagging. "So long as I'm still singing, it's none of his affair."

She lit up, took a deep draw. Oh, Hell yes. That's what she needed.

"Guess not." She looked for the whiskey bottle, expecting it to be right there in his hand just like old times. He didn't even have a beer, just a bottled water. And he was watching her right back, closely, the weirdest expression on his face.

"What?" She moved away from the lights, into the shadows a little, thumb working the stress between her eyes, while trying not to smear the powder. The jasmine smelled good—sweet and a little spicy. Christ, she was tired. "Old man Jackson looked like he was your new best friend. You manage to talk him out of the duet idea?"

"No. He's sold on it. Thinks it will win us all sorts of awards. Wants to know why I didn't come to the label with the song ages ago. I didn't have the heart to tell him I didn't even have the damned song anymore." Josh rolled his shoulders, looking as tired as she felt. "Anyway, I'll leave you alone."

She nodded, turning away a little. Whatever. She didn't want to see him anymore. She'd gotten over Josh Haley seven years ago; she wasn't giving him the time of day.

Chas had taken a half step when someone barreled right into her, stealing her breath and knocking her into Josh's arms, flash bulbs going nuts.

God *damn* it.

Josh caught her, eyes going dark with fury. She knew that look, had seen it a hundred times. The man did have a temper. He set her aside and whirled on whoever it was who had knocked her winding, looking like he was just spoiling for a fight.

"What the fuck?"

The photographer with the flash bailed, the guy left behind backing towards the house. "Sorry. Didn't see y'all. Looking good, ma'am. Happy birthday."

She growled, bent to grab a shoe to throw. Damned paparazzi. This wasn't a public venue. "Get out!"

Josh took two more steps and the guy made a run for it, leaving them both staring. And mad as Hell. "Goddamn these people."

"No shit."

Tomorrow? There were going to be pictures of her falling into Josh Haley's arms in every rag in town. Next week? They'd be nationwide.

Alone.

In the dark.

At her party.

Fuck.

"I should move back to Texas. Then I could have shot them because they needed killing."

"You should have better fucking security. Jesus, Chas. Are they letting anyone with a camera in? He wasn't even wearing a press pass."

"How the Hell should I know? I pay people to deal with all this shit for me. You ought to know I don't like having people standing over me." She'd had bad luck with personal security people hanging around her, watching her, selling her mail to the press. "I get all stressed out and we can't all be living in the back of nowhere, can we?"

Blowing out a sharp breath, Josh took off his hat and ran a hand through his hair. "Yeah. Yeah I know. I need to get out of here. I can't... I just can't."

The lines around his mouth were cut hard and deep when he got that look. Made him look much older. He brushed past her carefully, not getting close enough for another "accident".

He still smelled good. Asshole. Funny, wasn't it? Once upon a time, she'd been in love with that man and he couldn't stop touching her. Now?

Well, things sure changed, didn't they?

Chas waited until Josh was gone to slip through the back hallway up to her bedroom to change into real clothes, wrap her hair up in a bandana. A pair of sunglasses and a swimsuit in a little bag for tomorrow and she was ready, slipping into her little electric blue mustang and hitting the road, leaving the house and the press and world behind.

It was time for a mini-vacation.

* * * *

Josh avoided the bars by force of will. He was actually in the parking lot of some old out of the way honkytonk before he realized what he was doing, and turning that big dualie around and going home to his dog was the hardest thing he'd done in a day of hard things.

Nothing tied him up in knots the way she did.

Nothing.

Nothing ever had.

Which was why Josh had avoided her like a snake in the grass for years. And now this. This harebrained idea cooked up by someone so high up he couldn't say no, even when he tried. Vic was all over it. Jeff was in. And no one seemed to care what he, hell what they, wanted.

The house was dark and quiet, but as soon as he put his key in the door he heard Mokie start barking her damned fool head off. There was nothing like a mastiff to make a man feel safe. Josh bent down on one knee, rubbing her ears.

"Hey girl. Yours is the only face tonight I've been happy to see."

The kitchen yielded a glass of milk for him and a chew bone for Moke. He also checked the back door, the garden thing having made him paranoid as anything.

The ringing of the damned phone almost gave him a fucking heart attack.

"lo?"

"What did you do to her, son?" Vic's voice came on the line, pissed as a wet hen. "I got her people climbing all down my ass."

The whole damned rotten day just flooded back and he fucking boiled over. "I didn't do a goddamned thing to that tight-assed little bitch. I stood there and took her fucking calling me a has-been hack and I smiled at the fucking reporters and I even dealt with the goddamned paparazzi and I swear to God you fucker, you're supposed to be on my side and I will fire your ass if you don't leave it be."

He heard Vic's rumble, heard the man talking hard, voices muffled. "When was the last time you saw her, then? You both disappeared at the same damn time."

"Her dead body is in the bed of my truck." He waited for Vic to panic, taking a little pleasure in it.

Only a little.

"You know how lucky you are that you're not on speakerphone?" Vic sighed, the sound long-suffering. "Christ, Jeff, were these two this bad when they were fucking?"

"Worse. Of course then you couldn't find either one of them."

"I haven't seen her since I left. She was out in the garden dealie." Vic always made him feel like a scolded child.

"I'll let Jeff and them know. We have a meeting Monday morning at nine a.m. Y'all need to schedule rehearsals, sign papers. All that."

"Then that means I have tomorrow to do whatever the Hell I want. Don't call me, Vic. I'm taking the phone off the hook, and me and Moke are going out fishing. Tonight? I'm going to bed and I don't give a good goddamn where that woman is."

"You don't have to give a fuck where she is, son. You just have to pretend in public that she's your new goddamn best friend. This is a career breaker, Josh. I can't control that

pretty little thing; I expect you to be professional about it.”

He closed his eyes, throat working. Moke came over and nudged his hand, whining at him. He always had to be the goddamned professional, while that bitch could just cause a fucking uproar. “Yeah, Vic. Yeah. I hear you. I’ll see you Monday.”

The phone clacked back into the cradle and Josh went to let Mokie out. He’d take tomorrow off, just leave the cell phone and the business behind.

And Monday he’d go act like this was the best idea any fucking music rep could ever have.

Chapter Three

Chastity walked into the meeting at 9:10, smoking like a chimney, eyes hidden by huge purple framed sunglasses. She'd had a long drive, a swim, a fifth of Stoli in diet 7-Up and a fifteen-hour nap.

She might be able to do this without shooting someone.

She shot that little Theresa bitch a glare and nodded to Jeff, refusing to apologize for being late. Nine o'clock in the morning was fucking obscene.

Jeff nodded, and Josh's manager Vic nodded, and the little girl who was obviously going to do the minutes nodded. They looked like a line of those obnoxious toys. The only one who didn't look scared to death of what she might do was Josh, who sat back in his chair, one booted foot crossed over the opposite knee, his brown eyes ringed with dark circles.

She sat, ponytail bouncing, head throbbing at the motion. "So? What's the deal? Who the fuck found the demo tape?"

Jeff groaned. "That's not the way to start, baby."

"Don't you *baby* me, Jeffy. I showed up to your damn meeting. Talk." She was so not going to put up with bullshit.

"I don't know, baby. And neither does Vic, so don't give him that evil glare."

Josh chuckled, the sound low and rough. "Vic deserves it. So do you."

"Well we agree on that, at least." She pushed her glasses up. "So, all bullshit aside, what's the bare minimum y'all want and what do I get out of it?"

Jeff looked at a stack of paperwork. "They want you to perform at the CWAs together. They want the single. They want a tour—thirty cities. They're willing to postpone the tour for three months if you agree to do an album of duets."

"No." Shaking his head, Josh stabbed a finger at Jeff. "No way am I spending all that time in the studio with her too, and then having to go on tour. We do one, we do the awards show, and we tour. Thirty cities max. Then I'm done."

She was filled with ice, top to bottom. He hated her. Bastard. Cheating, lying prick bastard. "Fifteen dates, the awards. The video for the song. That's it."

Vic made a rude noise. "They've booked the dates. You'll do thirty or you'll be held liable for the venues."

"Fuck that. I haven't signed anything agreeing to this." She turned to face Jeff, glaring through the glasses. "What is this? Since when are they pushing us on the road? I just got home."

Jeff actually looked away, lips tight. "We agreed to the tour on Friday, baby. It's a moneymaker, it's a good deal."

Her lips parted for a half-minute and then she simply closed her mouth, thanking God for her sunglasses. Bastard. Lying, lousy bastard.

She'd supported Jeff for years. Years. And he did this to her. She stood, picked up her purse, focusing on being the performer she was. "Obviously my presence isn't required here. Y'all contact Bea, tell me where I'm contracted to show."

"Wait a minute." Josh was on his feet too, looking from Vic to Jeff. "You did this? You've been lying to me all this time? You rotten sons-a-bitches."

"It's not like that, man." Jeff stood too. "Y'all have competition. We're looking after your careers."

"Liar. You're looking after your own asses." She wasn't going to cry. She wasn't. Josh just looked... crushed. "Vic? What the Hell?"

"The demo surfaced last week at a handful of stations, son. Y'all are at the top of your game, but the label just signed a handful of pretty little airheads that they're throwing dollars at. This is the hook we're needing to make sure you stay visible." Vic shook his head. "You know it's the smart thing. I had to strike when the iron was hot."

Chas sort of watched, dazed. Vic was good at that. Almost as good as Jeff.

"You rotten assholes." Josh just walked right out of the room, just like that, storming past her, boot heels thumping.

"Well, congratulations, boys. You've finally got the two of us to agree on something." She wasn't going to hold it together much longer, so she made her retreat, damn near running towards the door, towards her car.

Josh was out there beside her 'stang, leaning against a big red truck, arms locked and head down. He looked like he was gonna puke.

Chas pulled a bottle of water out of her bag, tossed it over. "Here. It's still cold."

He looked at her, expressionless, and nodded, drinking deep. "Thanks."

"Can they do that? Sign for us?" She didn't want to seem stupid or clueless, just... Jeffy took care of the business shit. Always had. She did the work. That was how it worked.

The sun was warming up, making her glad she'd gone for light and casual and flip flops.

"If you're like me and Vic, and you gave Jeffy the power of attorney to sign for you? Yeah. This is what I get for not wanting to bother with the nitty-gritty." His hat shaded his eyes, but they still gleamed dark and unhappy at her. "I'm sorry, honey. I know the last thing in the world you want is to tour with me."

"Well, being stuck with this old broad ain't on your list either. The song's what? Four minutes long? That's only two hours together in total on the road." See her. See her look for the bright side. She'd be busy finding herself a new manager anyway. She'd heard good things about Karyn Cameron, real good things.

That smile reminded her of all those years ago; it was genuine and infectious, reaching his eyes and taking years off his face. "We'll make it. If I don't kill you first. You shoulda heard Vic and Jeffy when you disappeared. I told 'em I'd killed you and hid the body. They got right mad at me."

Chas chuckled. That she'd have liked to see. "I'll keep that in mind. Jeffy should have known I'd be back. I didn't take Chachi with me."

She even took the pup on the road with her.

"Chachi. Lord. Hell, I knew you'd be back. You're not one to run from anything. You got another smoke?"

"Always." She tried not to take the compliment to heart and dug through her bag for the pack that was in there. She offered it to Josh, then went hunting for her lighter.

He took it, let her light it, and blew out a long string of smoke before he spoke again. "We'll need some studio time. That demo was rough if I remember right. We're much better singers now, both of us."

Chas nodded, lit up. "We were real young." Young and stupid. She took a drag,

offered over a bone. "Saw you on one of the late night shows when you were promoting the new album. You made that guitar sing."

He'd always been an amazing picker. The man had great hands.

Slanting her a surprised, pleased look, Josh nodded. "Thanks. You've still got a set of pipes on you that won't quit."

Another lungful of smoke and Josh's grin went positively wicked, his gaze dropping to the girls. "And of course, no matter what I said the other night, you still have great tits."

She threw back her head and laughed, good and hard, and damn if it didn't feel just fine. Shit, he was still almost cute when he was like that. Almost. "Thanks, Asshole. They appreciate it."

"Feeling a little neglected, are they?" Oh, he was cruising for a bruising, with that look. Still, it was good to let the pissed-off-hurt-gonna-kill-Jeff go for a minute.

"Don't make me kick your butt, boy." She was still chuckling, shaking her head. "And no, not neglected. I think every suit in that damn building stands around to see if they sag more." She winked over. "Sorta like you and your jowls, old man."

His hand went automatically to his neck, but his laughter was just as heartfelt as hers. "No shit. I swear they get out the ruler to see how much vertical lift I've lost. They keep wanting me to get my eyes done, too. I keep telling them men are supposed to have smile lines and crow's feet."

Chas gave him a look, tilting her head. "I think yours work for you. Make you look real, you know? Not like some I won't mention that's gone the plastic way. Besides, that hat brim's wide enough no one could get a good look anyway."

He sobered a little, tossing the smoke aside. "That's the idea. Get tired of everyone deciding I'm having a bad day from a tabloid picture. You know what I want?"

She'd never once answered that question right, even when they were close.

"No, sir. What do you want?" She finished her own cigarette, lipstick making a perfect wine-colored circle around the butt.

"Waffles and sausage. From the Waffle House. You coming?" Josh went around, opened the passenger side door of his truck.

She almost said no, Hell no, but her stomach reminded her she hadn't had calories that weren't booze since the cottage cheese and pineapple Saturday morning and she caught a glimpse of Jeff and Vic, heading toward the glass doors of the office building. "Yeah, okay."

Boosting her up in the big truck with a hand on her fanny, Josh got her settled and headed around to the driver's side, burning rubber just as Jeffy spotted them and started over.

She damn near hooted, flipping her ex-husband and soon-to-be ex-manager off as they hit the road, big engine just purring.

She did love her a man who could handle a V8.

Chapter Four

Josh sat tuning his guitar, waiting for Chas and her crew to show up. The label always freaked out when he wanted to play on his own records, but that was what he did, and he wasn't about to give it up to some studio musician whose training came from some school and not the club circuit.

He couldn't believe he and Chas had had a civil meal a few days back. Just went to show what a common grudge would do. She was still as funny as ever, still sharp-tongued and wicked smart. Gracious to her fans, though, stopping to talk to an old granny, this little girl. It surprised him, sorta. No way was he gonna count on one meal to get them through today, though. They'd always had definite ideas about the music; they both knew what they wanted.

He'd just finished the last warm up chord when the door opened and Chas blew in like a storm out of the north. Lord Lord.

She was singing harmony on "Waltz Across Texas," held in Dan Mitchell's arms like she was a wee girl. Granted, Dan was the biggest, blackest, fiercest bass player anywhere, the man's hands looked like a giant's wrapped around Chas' hip. Didn't help that one of the highest paid ladies in Nashville was in jeans and what looked like her daddy's old white button-down, tied around her waist, gimme cap hiding all that hair.

Terry Low and Greg and Linda Owens followed, singing along, hauling equipment, grinning to beat the band.

He shook his head. Well, at least they'd have good musicians. And it looked like Chas was in a good mood, which made things that much easier. He just sat and waited for the hullabaloo to subside, the uncomfortable stool digging into his ass.

Dan put Chas down, kissed her cheek and pulled that cap off so that bright red hair came tumbling down in a huge mass. "So good to see you, Little Bit. So good. Tell old Dan now, is them rumors true? You really cuttin' that Jeff loose?"

Chas nodded. "Yeah. Yeah, Dan. I'm thinking so. Hell, I don't know..."

Terry hooted from where he was arranging the trap set. "Does that mean we get to admit all them songs are yours, finally? Let him suck it up for awhile."

"Hush up. I don't know what you're talking 'bout." Oh, ho. Look at those eyebrows draw together. There was a story there.

"Now, y'all know she'll never fire Jeff. Any more than I'd fire Vic. Hey, Dan. Terry. Linda. Greg. Y'all ready to play?"

Little Linda settled behind the steel guitar, shaking her head. "Always. You want to warm it up, Chas?"

Chas nodded to him in greeting, actually offered him a smile, slipped her shoes off and hopped onto a stool, feet swinging like a girl. "Sure, lady. Bluegrass special, yeah? In G."

"Easy as 'Come to Jesus' in whole notes, Little Bit." Dan chuckled, strapped on the bass.

Josh was rolling his eyes when Chas started a cappella with "Down to the River." Lord Lord. Pure as sunshine and steady as a good man's hand, that voice just filled the studio for a verse, stopping everyone for a bit. Dan found himself first, coming in deep

and low, then Greg's piano slid in. He just listened for a bit, the sweet mix of instruments and voice taking him back. God. He closed his eyes for a minute and could almost feel the way she used to press up against him and sing just for him, right in his ear, low and sweet and honey-dripping sexy.

Fuck. When he snapped out of it they'd all stopped and were looking at him expectantly.

"Sorry."

"No sweat. Figured you were praying." Chas' eyes were soft, seeming to slide over him. Then the look passed and she grinned, looking over at the window. "I imagine you have the demo tape in there, Bobby?"

A click sounded. "Yes ma'am. You want to hear it?"

"Yeah. Give it a whirl once or twice so it gets under our skin."

I haven't been an angel

For way too long to tell

I been skirting the edge of danger

Walking the path to Hell.

Been watching your fall, baby

Seen the way you've cried at night

Time to come home, let me love you

Let me touch you, make us right.

Been traveling down lost highways

Searching for my soul

Been getting lost on your way

You've paid a heavy toll.

But baby, when you touched me

You saw through all my lies (don't close your eyes, girl)

You healed me and you loved me

You held me when I cried. (I'll hold you, baby)

Just lay down all your burdens

Set them in my loving hands (in your strong hands)

I know how you've been hurtin'

I'm bound to be your man.

I've found home (come home)

In your eyes.

Listening to it objectively was kinda hard, but that was just what he tried to do, and after it had run a third time, he grinned over. "You know. That's a damned fine song."

Chas nodded, eyes sparkling some. "Has a hell of a hook. We need to take it down a half step. I can't pull off that breathy, gee-I'm-twelve-and-stupid-in-love thing anymore."

He just hooted. "Yeah, well I don't wear my Wranglers that tight anymore either."

He waited for the laughter to subside before playing a chord. "How about there?"

"Yeah, four intro bars, sweet as Tupelo honey." Chas hummed, got the note, then she pulled the headphones down. "Alright y'all, we make Bobby cry? I'll buy lunch."

Normally they would each do their parts separately, then some engineer would mix them, but the demo had a spontaneous quality that they needed to recapture, so Josh fell right in, singing right with her, finding the key easily. She was easier to sing with now. It worked better now, too. There was age in Chas' voice. Experience. Loss that she hadn't

known when they sang it the first time around. It took them three practice runs before they hit their stride, the fighting and bullshit between them gone, the music leading.

Too damned easy, that's what it was. Josh just sank right into her pretty blue eyes, holding them with his as they sang. They hit that groove, where all there was, for him at least, was her and the guitar and his own harmony. Everything else just went away, the sound pure and sweet and right.

When she whispered, 'your strong hands,' in the last chorus, it was enough to send chills along his spine and when the song ended, the steel guitar just fading out, the studio was silent.

"Damn, y'all. That was..." Greg's voice was stunned. "Damn."

Yeah. Damn. The next silence stretched until it was a brittle, hard thing, and Josh cleared his throat. "I thought you hated that song."

"It's got one Hell of a hook." Chastity stood, stretched a little, little wisps of hair hiding her face. "I'd forgotten."

"Yeah." Everyone was kind of shifting uncomfortably, and Josh grinned slow, looking around. "She's still got it huh? How's about we take ten, go pee, get some water. Meet back here."

Dan nodded and they all wandered out, leaving him and Chas in the room alone. "You're better than you were back then." Chas looked at his hands, shook her head. "Just something else."

"Thanks. Your voice? Honey, it used to be like cherry wine. Now it's like fine brandy. Smooth going down, with a Helluva kick. I'm damned impressed."

It wasn't nothing but the truth. He was also hard as Chinese algebra.

She pinked a little, gave him a nod of thanks. She'd been so pretty, when he'd met her—young and fierce and willing to work her little ass off, eager to learn everything anybody could teach her. Now? She was...

Shit.

There weren't even words.

He wished... well, if wishes were horses, then beggars would ride. And there wasn't any sense mooning over her. That'd just get him back to a world of hurt. "I'm gonna get some water before we go round again. You want some?"

"No, thanks. I've got some in my bag." Chas grabbed a rubber band and water from her bag, tapping on the window as she tied her hair up into a ponytail. "Play it back for me, Bobby? I got an idea for the bridge. It's sounding heavy on the bass from here."

Bobby might just get him a free lunch. "Are you sniffing back there, buddy?"

"I am not!" The lights in the control booth clicked off, Bobby clearing his throat. "Miss Hopewell? Make that big lug leave me be?"

Chas giggled, wicked brat. "Shit, Bobby. He's not that big."

Oh. She was hitting below the belt. "Big enough to do the job, honey."

Those blue eyes twinkled at him, eyes dragging over his body. "Josh? Doing the job was never your problem. You just have a tendency to moonlight."

Strings clanged as he set his guitar on its stand and hopped up. "Right. I'm gonna go get that water."

He may have strayed a few times, but he wasn't the one who ran off and married someone else. Someone he'd trusted, his best friend. He snorted as he went through the door. Well, at least his cock had gone down. Nothing like reminding a man he was

thrown over, and that he'd done a lot to deserve it in the process, to kill the hard on.

* * * *

Chas listened to the bridge, scribbling on the staff paper. Maybe if she worked hard enough she'd forget the sight of Josh Haley, looking at her, staring at her, hard and hungry and wanting.

Goddamn it. Seven years she'd loved him, slept with him. Sang with him. Then shit started to go sour. He started drinking and she started dieting and they started fighting and they all hung out together and Josh's best friend damn near lived with them and Jeff was...

Well, Jeffy.

There and solid. Honest and devoted and making all sorts of promises about her career and their life together. About writing songs for her, just her. About teaching her everything he knew.

She added a mandolin piece to the bridge, easing back on the bass line, fingers rubbing at her forehead. No wrinkles, girlfriend. No wrinkles.

The crappy part was she'd been coming back home after a long weekend with her sister, Kathy, crying and drinking vodka and smoking one pack after another until all she could do was croak. She'd decided to try and make it work, to tell Josh that Jeff needed to go and shit. Of course, then she'd walked into their messy bedroom with its Goodwill sheet curtains and big old bed. She'd walked in, blinked against the dim light and found Josh passed out and naked with Jennifer Coombs—a pretty, tall blonde backup singer that had been chasing Josh's ass for weeks—draped over him, drooling on her pillow.

That had made it easy. Chas had grabbed a bag of clothes, shoes, her little cheap-o Mexican guitar. She'd ended up at the front door of the next best thing, mascara staining her cheeks and shaking because she was still half-drunk and had damn near tilted the Honda into a culvert. She and Jeff had driven to Vegas and been married before the week was out.

Jeff had done everything he'd promised, too, and so had she. They'd made it—tours, albums, specials, photo shoots, everything. Everything until Jeffy decided he needed a family, a baby, a 'real life'.

She liked Jeff, liked him a lot, but a baby? His baby?

Right.

She'd scored the little bridge by the time everyone got back, putting her head together with Linda to make sure her little notations made sense.

"Hey." Josh came in with water and a peace offering, a little fruit tray, nothing that would clog the pipes or make her throat tight. "That sounds good. You really have passed Jeffy up, yeah?"

Terry cackled. "Shit. Jeff hasn't written a word in four years, at least. Our Chas is the brains there."

She stopped, a piece of pineapple halfway to her mouth. "Enough, man. I mean it."

She and Jeff had an arrangement. He took credit and royalties for all the writing credits; she got total control of her albums. He still wrote, just under another name and not for her. She had her own shit. The label loved it, because Jeff was the award-winning writer. Jeff loved it because he got money and credit.

"Jeffy quit writing? I never would have thought it." Josh looked like he didn't want

to let it go, but he looked at Linda and Terry and all and dropped it. She knew he'd ask later, maybe ask Jeffy instead, but he let it go.

He never would have done that back when.

The pineapple tasted good, sweet and tart and just amazing. Dan settled behind her, pulled her into his lap and looked over her shoulder. "You're killing me in the bridge, Little Bit."

"No, Dan, just backing you off, the bass line's kicking at the start, because the lyrics are darker, sorta sorrowful, but it's overwhelming in the bridge, yeah?"

Linda riffed a little, the mandolin ringing and Chas nodded. "We add Josh in there and it will open up the whole song."

Josh settled and picked up his guitar, strumming a little, sounding idle but she knew better. He'd bust loose with something damned perfect soon. He always managed to pull it out. Not that she'd admit to following his career or owning his albums because that would be deeply screwed up.

Chas closed her eyes from her perch on the floor, humming along as they played.

Yeah. There. That was the riff they needed. That was perfect. Josh seemed to know it too, catching that one bit and repeating it, expanding on it.

"What do you think, Chas?"

"That's it, J.C. Perfect." She nodded, smiled and took a deep drink of water. "Just what the bridge needed."

He looked at her a minute, just looked at her, and she felt that look all the way down to her toes. It was scorching.

Oh. Oh, sweet fuck. She went all hot, just flushed dark with it. Damn it straight to Hell! How could the man still do that? Chas took another drink, hoping to Hell her hard nipples weren't showing. Shit.

"Y'all want to run through again?"

She could feel the eyes of the others, going from her to Josh and back, but she ignored them. So did Josh. He just nodded. "Yeah. Let's do it whole now, all the way through with the new bridge."

The song, with its lyrics about a woman lost on the road, her lover there to hold her up—it hadn't meant anything ten years ago, had seemed silly and weak and goofy. Now, with her age and her life staring her in the face? Home and healing and holding—they sounded a lot more like a promise than a joke.

When they finished everyone just sort of sat, all of them a little stunned. Then Josh whooped, hopping up and setting his guitar aside, coming to twirl her around. "I think we've got us a hit, honey."

"I fucking *hate* when the label's right." She laughed, holding onto his neck, legs around his hips, as they whirled. "It's a great song."

"It is." He was laughing, holding her close, belly hard and warm against hers, the muscles under her hands tensing and releasing.

Oh, sweet Jesus, she could smell him...

"Well, well, well..." Vic's voice was a low, sarcastic drawl. "Does this mean you're not firing Jeff, Chastity?"

Josh dropped her like a one-hit wonder, her bare feet landing on the edge of the fruit plate, sending strawberries and pineapple flying.

Steadying her automatically, Josh held her arm until she righted herself, then let her

go like she had burned him. He glared at Vic as hard as she did, the old bastard. “What the fuck? You leave the studio time to me. That's always been the deal.”

“Just making sure the other team showed is all.” Vic gave her a look like she was the worst kind of leech and it just put her back up.

“Listen here, you. I've never missed a single date—studio or tour. You ask anyone. I do my job.” She bent down, grabbed the plate and slammed it in the trash. “We done, Bobby?”

“Yeah, we're done.”

“Good.” Josh gave Vic a look. “I want to talk to you.” He turned a smile on the rest, ending with her, eyes going dark. “Y'all did great. Thanks for coming. I'll see you at rehearsals, Chas?”

“Yeah. Bring your guitar so we can keep time.” She actually found a real smile for him. He was... He was all the good stuff she remembered. “Y'all have a good day.”

“Little Bit, I'm running some gospel tracks. Come sing with me?” Dan was just about her favorite musician ever. Just about.

“You know I will.” She grabbed her bag, her stuff, chuckling when Dan scooped her up. “Show off.”

“It's one Hell of an exit, Chastity.” Dan winked at her, pure mischief in his eyes.

“You know it, bass man. Let's go do some praising.”

* * * *

“What the fuck was that about, Vic? You knew she'd be here. When it comes to the music she always has been.” Josh was furious, and he really didn't want to stop too long and examine why.

“She ran off the night of the party, y'all both ran off Monday. Hell, Jeff Irick says she's not answering his phone calls. I was checking on our investment.” The old snake in the grass.

“Jeffy deserves what he gets. And I wouldn't answer yours if I didn't know you'd send cops to my house.”

There'd been that one time, when he was still going on benders, when he hadn't answered Vic for three days. Security officers had finally showed up and knocked his door down.

“It's Hell being a star, Josh.” Vic arched an eyebrow. “How did the recording go? Does it sound good?”

How could he tell Vic it was probably the best thing he'd ever done? Bobby was still in the booth so Josh just buzzed him. “Play it back for us, Bobby? Vic wants to hear.”

The opening chords filled the air, Chas' voice filled with longing, with a need that she didn't have as a girl. Then his voice joined hers, lifted it up. They blended together like aged whiskeys, the counterpoint lyrics feeding on each other.

Vic gave him a look, clapped his back as the music faded. “You'll hit number one with this, son. No question. The label's going to want an album to hang on it. I'll fight and make sure it's yours.”

Good old Vic. The guy was going to hate it when he wasn't around to badger. “Thanks, Vic. But I think it should go on hers. She's ready to put a new one together, and she can use a couple of live bits from our shows and shit. I'm the hack, remember? Better it should be on an album that sells.”

“Son? This song will sell it. I'm not giving up a platinum album to her now. If we have to? We'll make a live album.”

Now that he could do. For some reason, shafting Chas out of her share of the song's sales was just... something he might have done a few years ago, but not now. “We could do that. Songs from the tour. Who knows what we'll write between now and then.”

“Y'all bringing Jeff with you? Little diva Hopewell doesn't write.”

Doesn't write? He opened his mouth to tell Vic it was bullshit, but the look on Chastity's face when she'd told the others to drop it made him clamp it shut again. “Whatever. Look, man, I'm tired. Was there anything else?”

“Leave two days before the awards show free. The studio's hiring one of them image consultants, there'll be interviews, facials, hair cuts, rehearsals, all that shit.”

Rubbing the back of his neck, he nodded. “Yeah, yeah. Okay. Then I want two days off before that. Just to go and fish or something.”

“Works for me. I'm setting up the busses, the dates. I reckon you'll be on the road all of September, some of October, but we can talk on that later.” Vic slapped his shoulder. “You do good work, son. Real good work.”

“Thanks, Vic.”

He watched Vic walk out, sighed and rolled his neck. He loved the old man to death, but fuck he was tired. “Hey, Bobby. Anyone got this studio booked for the next hour?”

“It's y'all's all day, Josh.”

Oh, hell yeah. Josh picked up his guitar. “Good. Then I'm gonna play a bit.”

“I'll just let the tape run, then.”

He caught sight of Chas' little pad of staff paper, notes fat and round, the look of the music all girl, all Chas. Done in purple glittery ink. It made him grin, shake his head.

Diva or not, she could write rings around most folks, that was for sure. Josh opened up with a searing riff, losing himself in the music, just letting the guitar say whatever it wanted. Letting the notes take him far away.

There'd be time to worry about how much he didn't want to do this fucking tour tomorrow.

Chapter Five

By the time Dan and them were finished with her, Chas didn't have a voice left to speak of and the band had five good tracks, including "I Saw the Light" which always made her grin and think of her Granny, clapping and praying in the front pew, feet swinging and her sister warbling along with her.

She stopped by the recording studio they'd been in earlier, hunting her notebook. The room was empty, just one light on, Josh Haley's guitar sitting right there on a stand. Shit, the man could play. She had every one of his fucking albums in her house and hated and loved them all at once.

Damned funny, how a bit of wood and screws and steel strings could make something worth singing to. She reached out, just stroked the smooth grain of the neck.

"She's a beaut, isn't she?" Josh's voice made her jump like she'd been caught stealing.

"She is. I never learned to play like it was just natural." Chas sorta croaked the sounds out, hand falling. "Left my notebook. Wouldn't want to lose it."

"Nope. I was just gonna... Well, I was gonna play a bit."

"Oh. Cool. I'll leave you be then." She gathered up her little notebook, still sitting where she left it, not thinking a bit about how she'd not mind listening in.

"You, uh..." he paused, cheeks bright when she looked over. "You could sit a spell."

"Yeah? I, Uh..." She found a stool, settling, feet just swinging. "You working on anything in particular?"

"Just fiddling. I got a few ideas, but they're still in that stage where they're not really there." His eyes twinkled at her. "Got any requests?"

"Between Two Evils"—I love that one." She blinked at herself. Shut up, Chas. Let the man know you might have been listening all this time.

He chuckled low, but there wasn't mockery in it. "Well, we'll make it a deal if you sing me 'Fire in the Sky' later. 'Kay?"

Well, he could be decent at least, giving up as much ground as she had.

"That's fair, cowboy. Let 'er rip." She grinned, humming along in the back as he sang about lovin' and leavin'.

Oh, the man had a fine voice. It wasn't as strong or as pure as some; it had a low, husky note to it, too fuzzy to be perfect. But it worked. And when it came to him playing during that bridge? His hands just flew, making her smile. Some things never changed.

Christ on a crutch. She'd wanted herself some of that for too long to go teasing herself with it now. Still, there she was, patting out a beat on her thighs, coming in with a simple harmony.

He was sure something else.

He smiled at her when he finished, eyes just shining. Damn. Just damn. Then he strummed the opening of "Fire in the Sky." "Your turn, honey."

She chuckled, took a deep drink of water, and gave it up for him, the song a little less rocking, a lot more sultry one-on-one with her voice as husky as it was. He played right along with her, making the chords ring, making that guitar talk back to her. When his rough voice joined in on harmony, she had to smile because damned if he didn't know the words.

The final chord rang out and she hooted, just clapping. "Oh, man. That sounded nice. Never let those bastards say you ain't made for this, JC."

He grinned right back, eyes shining. "And don't let them tell you that you ain't got it no more, lady. You're as good as ever."

"As if. Hopefully my reputation still has most of the vultures scared to squawk." She winked, grabbed her bottle of water.

"Stop it." His brows furrowed, his eyes snapping sparks at her as he bit the words off.

She damn near jumped out of her skin and the water bottle slipped out of her fingers, he'd startled her so. "Stop what?"

"Putting yourself down. Buying into the fucking record company hype that you're too old or too fat or whatever. You're not." Damn, he could go from zero to ninety in sixty seconds. Just boom.

Heat hit her cheeks, fury following right behind. Yeah, like a week ago Josh hadn't been at the front of the Chastity Hopewell is a sagging old bitch parade leading the marching band. What the hell did he know about it? He had the luxury of sliding into 'distinguished'. She? Hell, she knew that the girl-singers didn't become women; they became has-beens. "What does it matter to you? It ain't like I'm on the list of hens you're looking to collect eggs from, cowboy."

His moods were going to give her whiplash. Josh just shut down, a damper closing down over his whole face. "You're right. None of mine."

Hopping off the stool, he snapped the guitar back into its case, his spine rigid, just vibrating. "I almost forgot to dislike you there for a minute, *honey*."

"So long as it was almost, I guess you're fine." God, she needed a smoke in the worst way. A smoke and a drink and a good long cry and she'd be back to rights.

She grabbed her purse and her notebook, slammed her sunglasses on hard enough to excuse any premature tears that might show up. As she headed for the door, she shot back. "You let that asshole manager of yours know I won't sleep in the same bus with your band. Period. I'll send my supply list to Sue Ellen. She's competent."

"You do that. And you remember that if I was starting to like you again, it was you that nipped it in the bud." Things slammed behind her, but she wasn't going to look behind her. Not even when he cursed viciously.

"I don't see how. All I did was point out that I wasn't on the list of women you were hunting. God knows, I ain't been off your shit list since you sobered up and realized Jeffy scooped up all you lost." That was the cold, hard truth, too. Chas might've married his best friend, but she'd never—never—been one to sleep around.

The studio door crashed when she yanked it open, satisfying her down deep.

The pounding of his boots behind her surprised the crap out of her, but no more than the feel of his hand on her arm, twirling her around so hard her glasses flew off.

"You got that damn straight," he snarled, just before his mouth crashed down on hers.

Oh, sweet Jesus. She might have squeaked, eyes flying to his for the two seconds it took her body to go into nuclear fucking meltdown and meet him head on. Son of a bitch! How dare he remind her how good it was, how good this could be with the perfect wrong guy?

He kissed her silly, his body hard and muscled against hers, his chest smashing her

breasts right down. Just another, yeah, just like it used to be. Just another trick to get her into the spirit of the good old days. Only it didn't feel like a trick, not when he cupped her ass and squeezed, not when Josh moaned into her mouth and licked her lips like he was drunk on her.

She might have whimpered, might have made a rough, raw sound, might have even rocked back like a barrel racer on a good run, but she sure as shit wasn't admitting it. No way.

The kiss ended as abruptly as it began, Josh letting her go so quick that she staggered and bounced off the doorframe. She might have gotten a good head of steam up to screech at him, but he just had these stunned, wounded eyes.

“Chas...”

Christ, there was nothing like that, was there? Like seeing that he didn't want to want her. She reached up and stroked his cheek, tears coming just like that. “s okay, baby. Honest.”

Chas took off before he could open his mouth, leaving glasses and notebook behind, just running like the hounds of Hell were after her. Christ. Christ.

Oh, fuck her. Of all the times in the world to be fighting with her ex. She so needed to have a talk and a long, long cry with Jeffy.

Over Josh.

Again.

Chapter Six

Chas hit the highway, Mustang burning rubber as she speed-dialed. Two days, a bottle of Jack, three massages and the kiss was still bothering her. Keeping her up at night. Damn that man straight to hell.

Finally Bea drove her out of the house, handed her a gimme cap and her keys and pointed to the front door. "Go on, Chas honey. Go. Drive. Work it out. Go see Mr. Irick."

"Come on, Jeffy. Answer your damn phone." She switched lanes, honking at the moron in the little Corolla. "Learn to fucking drive, man!"

"I know how, baby. But thanks for your concern." Jeffy sounded...well, fucking amused.

"Jackass. Where have you *been*, Jeffy? You haven't called in days." She lit another cigarette, pushed her hair out of the way. "I recorded the single with that bastard. Did you get to hear it yet?"

"I did. It's solid gold, baby. Hopefully solid platinum."

"I'm not going to survive this tour. It's going to kill me. Josh hates me, Jeffy. Still." Hated her. Kissed like a mad man. Tasted so damned good.

"Chas. Baby. Trust me, that man doesn't hate you. You can do this. It will be just the shot in the arm you need." If she'd been looking at him he'd have that placating smile on his face. She just knew it.

"What? What the hell is going on? You think I need a shot in the arm, too?" She sighed. Fuck her. "So what do we do after the tour?"

He sniggered. "Christmas with Josh and Chas?"

"Kiss my jingle bells, you motherfucker. So..." She took a deep breath, chewed on her lip, flicked the butt out the window and lit another. "You gonna let me forgive you, Jeffy? I'm not ready to play hardball with Josh and Vic."

"Baby, I really do want a break, but you know I ain't gonna leave you in the lurch. We'll find you someone, something. You're my one good thing in this messy fucking business. You know that." Yeah. Yeah, she knew that. He might be tired and heart-sore and ready for a change, but he wouldn't just completely fuck her over. Surely not.

"You've taken care of things for a long time, even if you've started lying to me. I don't want to have to break in somebody new." She flicked the tears off her eyelashes. "Besides, your wife likes me."

"And she might be the only broad outside of Sue Ellen and Bea who does. Ow! She hit me. You're not crying are you?"

"Of course not." She sniffed, zooming around a semi. "Why on God's green Earth would I be crying?"

"Well if you are, put it to good use and write me a new song, okay?" Oh! Asshole.

"You lousy little prick. You tell Elise that I'm coming to take her for supper and we can compare stories about you in bed." Bastard.

"I'll tell her, baby. Don't you worry, 'kay? We'll get you through the tour. See you at six. And stop smoking so damned much; it's bad for you."

"Good deal." She ground her cigarette out, grinned. "Oh, by-the-way, I told Vic and Josh that I won't sleep with the band. I want my own bus."

She hung up before he could say another word. If Jeffy wanted to bitch? He could do it over supper.

Or not.

* * * *

The sunlight pouring through the whiskey was damn pretty, really. Rich and soft and not quite red, but more than brown.

It had been a decent few days, she'd spent a day in her house, sleeping. Spent a day out shopping with Linda and Vikki. Spent another day out at Jeff and Elise's playing with the baby and trying to make plans after the bottom fell out of her world.

It was Hell when the man you hated most in the whole world was also the one who got away. Jeffy wasn't the most sympathetic man on the planet, either. You'd think there was history there or something. Just the thought made her chuckle, shake her head, sigh. They missed each other, had been best friends ever since they were kids. All it took to fuck up their world was her.

Figured.

Jeffy seemed pretty damned serious about wanting out—he and Elise were trying to have another baby; he'd been writing on the side for one of the younger groups that was hitting big. He was tired and worn out and didn't want to play the game anymore.

He was being a sweetie about it—staying through the tour, helping her out, even setting up today's interview, but still...

Damn.

"Ms. Hopewell? I hope I'm not too early for our meeting."

She looked up into the hardest face she'd ever seen on a woman. Black shirt, black hair, black eyes, black-rimmed glasses. Damn. "Hello, Karyn. Have a seat."

"Thank you." Karyn Cameron waved the waitress away, giving her a smile. "So, the rumor is you and Jeff broke things off."

She managed to nod and not tear up. Losing Jeff as a manager was going to be a Hell of a lot tougher than losing him as a husband. "Yeah. He's got a family now, more people to take care of."

"Well, I'll be honest with you, Chastity. May I call you Chastity?" Chas nodded and Karyn continued, looking sort of like a crocodile as she spoke. "You're not getting any younger and you've got a lot of competition. On the good side? You've got a solid fan base, an active fan club and one Hell of a voice and a single coming out, when? Day after the awards?"

Chas nodded. "Yeah. Josh Haley and me, we're doing a tour in September, going to make a live album."

"Vic's boy, huh? Rumor is you two hate each other."

"I don't have a problem with Vic. He looks after his people." Rumors or not, she wasn't giving anything up. She wasn't stupid, now. She'd been in this game longer than this broad and she wasn't on her way out.

"How do you feel about a new image?"

Chas blinked over, lit a cigarette, tried to clear her head a little as the conversation spun. "How so?"

"I'm thinking cut off the hair, maybe a bleach job. Tighten up the loose skin, boob job, slim down your hips some. Not before the tour, of course, people will be looking for

the traditional look, but Chastity, dear, it's time to make a change." Long, thin, elegant fingers pushed a sheaf of papers across to her. "We'll spruce you up, find you some new songs, a new sound, maybe do some cross-over stuff."

Chas chuckled, shook her head, didn't even look at the papers. "Have you even heard one of my songs? I'm about as far away from cross-over as they come."

Change her music? No way. They could make her look like Frankenstein's fucking monster, but she wasn't giving them that.

"Well, I think perhaps you ought to think about it. The audience you target right now is aging, and while they still listen, they don't buy records. Why don't you read the proposal and get back to me? In the meanwhile, if you have any questions or ideas, I'm entirely at your disposal." That smile had a razor edge that set her teeth.

"I'll do that, darlin'." She took the papers and slid them into her bag, giving Karyn the sweetest, sugar-wouldn't-melt-in-her-mouth smile she had. "Tell me, how can you bear wearing so much black in this heat? Doesn't it just melt you?" Clear down to your hidden fangs and claws?

The tiniest frown dented that botox forehead. "Oh, I don't even notice anymore. Black is slimming. You should really add some to your rotation." Crossing her hands on the table and leaning forward, Karyn took on a confiding tone. "Are you sure you're ready to tour with Josh Haley? I hear he can be quite temperamental. And I also hear he's on his way out."

Chas snorted, lit another cigarette. Bitch wouldn't know talent if it crawled up her leg and bit her ass. "Shit. You ever heard the man play? He's worth more than these rhinestone cowboy boy bands put together. You just wait. This tour? Will make headlines."

Karyn sat back, waving a hand in front of her face. "Yes, well. There is an audience for a man who can play and sing, I suppose. Too bad Josh Haley isn't as pretty as say, Keith Urban or Brad Paisley."

God fucking forbid the music industry have a man who could play and sing. The travesty. She smiled, took a deep drag and blew the smoke out slow. "Well, now, darlin'... There's some ladies who aren't looking for pretty. Something to be said for a man that looks like a good, hard man."

Not that this clueless twat would know about that, would she? Lord, Lord.

"It's a hard look to sell. I really admire Vic Avery for making it work as well as it has for Josh."

"Vic's a good man, down to earth and solid. Doesn't pull any punches." Christ, she missed Jeffy already. Prick.

"Yes. He's a bit old fashioned, a little too old boy network, but he has good instincts. Is there anything you'd like me to do for the tour?"

"Sue Ellen Jamison's doing the planning for it. The label hired her and she's run my last two tours." Sue Ellen could handle everything from pre-nerve jitters to torn seams. Lighting and sound, roadies and drunk bass players. Hell, one memorable night, Sue Ellen took a left hook to the jaw for her when a loony fan got past security. Chas wouldn't give for her.

"Oh-h." The condescending little catch in Karyn's voice was about the last straw. "Well, if you need me, don't hesitate to call."

"I'll definitely keep you right in mind, darlin'." Filed under 'Bitch', thank you. Go

away, child. "I've got a rehearsal to get to. The awards, you know. You have a good seat for the show?"

"Oh, yes. I always do." That razor sharp smile came again, Karyn standing as she did. "Thank you for meeting with me, Chastity."

"You're more than welcome. Have a good one." She threw a bill on the table and smiled, nodded. "Let me know what you think of the show and I'll get those papers read."

"Oh, I'm sure I'll have ideas after seeing you two live. Talk to you then."

"You do that." The fading sun felt good on her face and she put her sunglasses on with a grin. Lord have mercy on a working girl and keep her from barracuda botox women.

Chapter Seven

The stage was set with their instruments, the sound system the show was using was top notch, and the acoustics were good.

All Josh needed was Chas. He knew she'd be there, probably with entourage in tow, but damned if he wasn't nervous as Hell. Like he was a green opening act or something. It was one thing to be back in the studio with her. They'd done a lot of that in their time. It was another entirely to be on the big stage with her and not on some tiny stage in a smoky backwoods bar.

"You about ready, hoss?" His drummer, Alfie, grinned at him, wandering around in cut offs and a sleeveless muscle shirt, bare feet padding across the stage.

"Yeah. All we need is the girl."

"Ain't that always the way? Maybe you should do some warm up. We could do a couple of instrumentals."

Oh. That would break the tension for sure. "Sounds good. Hook me up, boys."

They started out with something slow and easy, worked up to a real jam session, and Josh just let the guitar go, let himself play whatever was in his head. By the time they were three songs in, his nerves were just fine.

They'd started in on a version of Rocky Top when Chas' voice joined in the music, just slid right in like honey over a hot biscuit. She stayed out of the bright lights, in her out-in-disguise dark glasses and ball cap.

Josh grinned. Why the Hell had he worried? In the music? They had always been right together. He added his own voice, singing harmony to her melody, the music just soaring.

She wandered over, moving to the music, hips swaying and filling those jeans like nothing going. And if he was admiring that ass? Well, so be it. She still put all of the little waif girls to shame. Damn.

Josh nodded at her as the last notes of the song faded. "You always could make an entrance, honey."

"It's a talent." He got a grin, a nod. "Y'all sound solid as stone. We're gonna blow their minds tomorrow night. Howdy, fellas."

"Hey, Miz Chas." Alfie grinned wide at her, and the rest of the boys nodded or said hey. A lot of them knew her. Hell, a lot of them were from the way back days. Jeffy was the only one missing, really. He wondered idly if Jeffy would come out and play with them, one more time for old time's sake. It was his song, after all.

He just opened up his mouth and asked, "You think Jeffy would come sit in with us on this one?"

Chas seemed to go a little quiet, then she smiled and nodded, eyes shuttered behind the glasses still. "I think he would if you asked, yeah. Want to use my phone?"

"If you're okay with it." He'd bet she and Jeff hadn't settled things yet. He didn't want to make her uncomfortable. "If not, just consider it my big fat yap blowing in the wind."

She pulled out a little pink phone, pushed a few buttons, and handed it over. "Call away. I'm going to chat with your boys."

He shook his head, put the phone to his ear. Jeffy answered, "Chas? Baby? How did

the interview with Karyn go? You going to sign with her?"

Interview? Karyn? Josh cleared his throat. "The day you confuse me for Chas is the day I get you glasses. Did you know her phone is pink? I feel damned unmanly."

Jeff stopped short, then laughed hard. "I know. Elise bought it for her. When it rings? It plays Hometown Girl and sparkles. The damn thing's obscene. What's up, Josh? Is Chastity okay?"

"She's fine. Now I ain't gonna ask what's going on with you two. None of mine, for sure. But I asked and she agreed, so I'm gonna ask you. You want to sit in on this award show performance?" He wanted Jeffy to. Strange but true. "It's your song."

"She didn't tell you? Oh. Man. I'd love to. I really would. I love that damned old song." Jeff chuckled. "You sure you wouldn't mind?"

"Jeffy, I asked, didn't I? And she just walked in. I imagine she'll let me know about shit if she wants, she's good that way." He looked over at Chas, charming the pants off the boys. Whatever it was, she always landed on her feet. "Come on."

"Cool. I'll be there in half an hour." Jeff stopped, took a deep breath. "Thanks, man."

"See you then."

Hanging up, Josh got up and headed over, tip-toeing on his boots to sneak up and tickle her ribs.

Chas squeaked and giggled, the sound so fucking familiar, her body soft and warm and fine beneath his fingers. "JC! Uncle!"

"That's for making me use a pink phone, lady-love. Boys, run through your warm up and tune up while Ms. Thang here and I wrangle out the staging."

God, he loved her laugh.

"But, JC, darlin', pink is your color..." Oh, Lord, that voice, happy and teasing? Shit. She turned, body brushing against him, those famous blue eyes just shining over top of those dark glasses. "What are your thoughts? If I know you, you're not wanting to move across the stage. And are you wearing jeans or a suit?"

"I'll wear a suit. But I was thinking I'd go traditional, wear the charcoal pants and the dark blue jacket with all the spangles. My gray hat. I'm feeling the need to make a statement." He grinned. They were gonna call him old fashioned? He'd live right up to it. "You're right, though. If I'm playing this bridge I'm gonna need to be pretty stationary."

Chas chuckled, nodded. "I'm wearing grey and black. My options were traditional and leather." She moved across the stage, easy as anything. "We could set you up a stool, here, that makes sure the band's sharing the light."

"Oooh, leather." He couldn't help it, had to tease her, especially as he got to watch her move. Like pure cane syrup. Sweet and fluid and just ready for him to eat all up. The image made his whole body tighten. Damn. Double damn. He thought about baseball, about ice storms in Chattanooga, and finally about how Loretta Lynn looked in her last video. That did the trick.

"That sounds good though."

"Cool." She turned to look at the stage. "I'd rather not sit, myself. Maybe I'll stand over on the other side of the band?"

"Yeah. That sounds good. Of course, you could come visit. Maybe move closer as we sing?" He grinned. Vic and Jeffy would want them to actually look at each other.

"You think I can manage to make it without tripping over the wires?" She chuckled, wandered over to the far side of the stage. "Should we run it once?"

“Yeah. I think we should. Jeffy won't be here for a half hour. He sounded real pleased to be asked, Chas. Real pleased.”

“Yeah? Good. Y'all always sounded fine together. Maybe y'all will find some projects to work on after we stun the world.” Chas moved into the shadows a little, hiding again behind the brim of that hat as she found a mic. “Okay. Whenever you're ready.”

“No. C'mere.” He jerked his head toward the back of the stage, waiting for her to follow. Something wasn't right, something was bothering the shit out of her, he could tell. And no way was she gonna be able to hit the song that way. He knew her too well.

Chas followed, a little frown creasing her forehead, her soft, sweet hand on his arm. “Everything okay?”

He reached out, eased those dark glasses off and slid them in her back pocket, just hating the unhappy lines beside her eyes.

“You tell me, lady-love. You're wound tighter than one of those old metal tops. What's up with you?” Her touch was making him sweat. Making him shiver. For the last seven years he'd had any woman he wanted. But none of them had been her.

“I... It's stupid, really. Jeffy, uh. Well. He's going back to writing full time. Going back to the music.” Oh. Damn. Chas rolled her eyes, smile just a little brittle. “Sue Ellen's handling the tour, so I'm good 'til then and there's some folks interested in this old filly. I'll manage.”

He snorted, lifting a hand to her cheek, stroking. “Jeffy's gettin' old. Like the rest of us. I bet Vic'd have someone who could take you on and maybe win a round or two.”

He was trying to sound supportive, easy, but it kinda freaked him right out, the idea of Jeffy quitting Chas.

She leaned into his touch, just for a little bit, so sweet. “Well, that Karyn Cameron, she says with some nips and tucks, some liposuction and new hair, I could manage okay. I'm not worrying on it right now. I'll save it up for November. Maybe the girls need some work.”

He growled. Actually growled. The sound kinda surprised him. “You're not gonna be one of those plastic women. No way. You're perfect the way you are.”

Bright blue eyes flashed up at him, searching his face, pretty painted lips parted. “I...”

“Now, there's a tabloid picture. You two either get on stage and sing or clear off. I'm on a fucking schedule.” The producer glared at them, pointed to the stage as Chas flipped the old man off.

“What's got you so bitchy, Todd?”

“You don't look at me like you look at him, sweetheart. On. The. Fucking. Stage.” Jesus. “Yeah, yeah. Jesus, man. We're on it.”

He shrugged, grinned down at Chas, moving her out on the stage. “This work?”

Chas laughed, the sound ringing in the rafters. “You're going to get your butt kicked, JC. Todd's a man with a plan and a clipboard.”

That clipboard popped Chas right on the ass. “Get to work, now, before I get mean.”

Just about the time they got good and set up Jeffy came in, case in hand, a silly grin on his face. “Y'all got room for one more?”

The boys hooted and hollered, went to greet Jeff like it was old home week. Jeff clapped him on the shoulder, just beaming. “You ready to do some picking, man?”

“You bet. And ready to listen to the lady sing.” Josh grinned over at Chas, trying to

get her back in the swing, knowing how awkward it was.

“Lady? There ain't no ladies here.”

Those blue eyes held his a second, just like she was drinking him in, stupid as it sounded. Chas smiled at Jeff, nodded, then got down to business. “It's a half-step lower now and the bridge is different.”

“We'll work through it once, let you hear it. Then we'll do it for real, you can play counter-time.”

Chas and Jeffy nodded and they were off, playing that damned song, and every time they did it, it got better. Stronger.

Four times through and they were tight as a boar's backside, the song just falling into place like a present from Heaven. Chas worked her way across the stage, ending up at his side, eye-to-eye with him on the stool, whispering the harmony in that throaty voice.

He let Jeffy take the last chords, held out his hand to her, drawing her close, just singing the last lines to her with everything he had. She held onto his hand, just staring straight into him. Sweet Jesus, he knew that look, knew it deep in his gut and it was just as sweet now as it ever was. He didn't even notice that the music was gone, just held right there in her eyes, right there in the moment.

Chas' lips parted and she started to speak when Alfie chuckled. “Still either fucking or fighting, aren't they? Some things never change.”

Soft laughter filled the stage.

Chas' eyes went wide, filled with sudden tears and she backed up like she'd been burned. “Okay. I'll see y'all tomorrow night. Look beautiful. Everyone's gonna love us.”

Her glasses went on, the hat did too, Chas running for the wings.

Shit. He sent Alfie a look and set his guitar aside, going after her, growling when it looked like Jeffy might be heading that way too. No way was she leaving him when she was crying. No way.

“Chas. Honey.” He caught up to her out in the back corridor, grabbed her arm. “What's the matter? You're worrying me.”

“Don't worry. I'm good. It just... It's been a long, long day, you know? A long couple days.” She pushed her glasses up with a trembling hand. “Nothing a few dozen shots of whiskey and a long bath won't fix.”

“Yeah. Yeah, okay. I'm sorry, lady-love. I should never have asked Jeffy... not after. Well, shit.” Yeah, he was doing really well.

Chas chuckled, cupped his cheek. “I'm not pissed at Jeffy. He's been good to me. I'm glad he's playing again. It's where his heart is. Where your heart is. Don't worry on me, JC. I'm good, just—maybe wishing I was eighteen again.”

“Oh, honey.” He put his hand over hers, held it to his skin even as he leaned down to press a light kiss to her painted lips. “I don't. I was mad for you then. But I *like* you now. One Hell of a lot. Even if I didn't want to.”

She rubbed the lipstick off his lips with her thumb. “Thank you. I... I needed someone to tell me that.”

“Ain't nothing but the truth. Go on home. Get some rest. That's what I figure on doing. Gonna take the dog out and do some four-wheeling or something.” He licked his lip where she'd touched him, unconsciously trying to taste her.

“Sounds like fun. Gonna be a full moon tonight; it'll be plumb pretty.” She pushed her glasses up, smiled. “You might even catch yourself some fish.”

“You wanna come?” He had no idea why he asked. She'd probably turn him down flat. But he wanted to spend time with her. Just with her.

“I...” She grinned, cheeks going pink, teeth sinking into that pretty bottom lip.

“Yeah. Yeah, JC. I do.”

“Just let me get my guitar.” He patted her arm, gave her a stay put look and headed back to get his guitar, ignoring the looks and questions from the band. He didn't want to give her time to change her mind. He wanted this time too damned bad.

He couldn't wait.

* * * *

Chas couldn't believe she'd followed Josh home, but here she was, parked behind that big red truck, looking at a big old house that couldn't have been more different than her own classic white, stark place. It looked just like JC though, rough and male, roses planted in the front to please his momma, honeysuckle on the privacy fences for his granny. It felt like home.

The last few days had been hard on her, she was feeling every year, every hard day, every time she'd had a cigarette instead of a meal, a shot of whiskey instead of a good long cry. Stupid, but there it was.

She wasn't exactly sure how she thought Josh Haley could help that, though. Still, he'd asked her to come out and play, and Lord knew she needed it.

He got out of his truck, coming on back to open the door of her Mustang for her, smiling that warm smile. His eyes were almost but not quite shaded by his hat, and he needed a shave. He looked edible. “You ready to meet the mutt?”

She could hear ‘the mutt’, as he called it, baying from inside the house. Sounded like a Hellhound.

“You know it.” She stood, her body just barely sliding up along Josh's. Oh. Damn. “He sounds like a monster.”

“She. She's a mastiff. Come on.” Taking her hand, Josh led her to the house, unlocking the door and heading in to turn off the security system. The dog barreled right out at her, wagging and drooling, looking about as mean as a Muppet on steroids.

Chas giggled. Chachi would out-aggress this pretty baby any day of the week. Evil fluffball. She got down to eye level, purring and talking, the pup pushing right in to get her ears scratched. “Oh, you're an angel baby, aren't you? Lord, Lord, somebody loves you, now, don't they?”

Josh chuckled, coming back to get his share of licks and loves. “She's a doll. Aren't you, Moke? You wanna see the house?”

“I do.” She took his hand, let him help her up. She left her stuff on a little end table, turned her phone off, leaving Diva Hopewell outside for a bit.

“Cool.” He kept hold of her hand, pulling her through the big old front room, the home theater, through the bathrooms and bedrooms. She could tell no decorator had ever set foot in the place, but she'd bet her last dime Josh's momma had. It was homey.

“Oh, JC, I'd know you lived here if I only saw it the once.” She ran her hand over the rough-hewn footboard of the big bed, a deep green and gold quilt folded up at the foot. “I bet Maggie had a ball setting this up with you. Your granny get to come out and help?”

“She did, yeah. She had her sewing circle make the quilt and all.” Looking pleased as punch, he hauled her into the master bath. “This is the one thing I had done fancy.”

Lord. Green marble whirlpool. One of those fancy three-glass-walled showers with all the different angled showerheads. He even had a separate little cubby for the throne.

“Oh, look at this!” Chas chuckled, wandering over to the tub. Big enough for two. Right pretty, really. “Now tell the truth, JC. You soak in this big old tub with your hat on?”

He hooted. “Yup. Smoking a cigar, even.”

Chastity just laughed, the image clear as day. “Oh. Oh, Lord. I'd pay damn good money to see that. Them ostrich boots sticking up on one side, cigar and Stetson on the other, tub filled with Mr. Bubble.”

He gave her a look, pure Devil in his eyes. “Hey, now. This is a classy establishment. My momma sends me Avon.”

“Oh, Maggie is a good, good woman.” Chas'd always got on with Josh's momma. The woman was a little terrifying, but loved Josh something fierce. “How's she doing? Still staying busy as a one-armed paper hanger?”

Josh opened up a window, letting the fresh air in. “She is. You should see her and her sister Lizzie. Aunt Lizzie started selling Mary Kay? And Momma just went nuts.”

“They make a good eye makeup remover.” She got the sight of Maggie giving Josh a facial and started giggling. “So did she bring you all the sample stuff to see?”

“Lord, yes.” Hand under her elbow, Josh started leading her back downstairs. “I had creams and shit coming out my ears. I drew the line at the pancake makeup. If we're gonna get mudding, we ought to get. It looks like rain. You want some of my old jeans?”

“Yeah, I'd better, and a t-shirt too, if there's one.” That way she could wash off and have clean clothes for home. Her tennies were good, 'cause her flip flops were in the 'stang. She shook her hair free, started braiding it while they walked.

“You got it.” The laundry room yielded a folded stack of old, soft t-shirts, and a pair of Levi's that looked looser than Josh wore his Wranglers. They ought to fit her hips. He left her at the powder room. “Holler when you're ready. I'll get our shit together.”

Chas nodded, slipped her own jeans off and folded them and her shirt up and put them on the toilet tank. She found a black t-shirt that looked softer than a cloud and tugged it on, tying it off around her waist. The jeans needed a few rolls at the ankle and worked okay. They hugged her hips and gaped at the belly, but all the little girls were wearing them like that and she wasn't going to a pageant. Speaking of pageants...

She took a look at herself in the mirror, frowned a little. All the makeup looked silly, overdone. Stage makeup. She wiped her mouth off, blended in the cheeks and eyes. There. She looked...

Real.

Josh came back, handed her a windbreaker and a bottle of water. “You ready, lady-love? I got the four-wheelers all ready to go.”

God help her, he just got right under her skin. She shrugged on the windbreaker, leaned up to kiss his cheek. “You bet, JC. Let's go play.”

* * * *

Josh figured maybe he'd gone nuts, but pushing aside all of the bullshit for half an hour would be worth it. Damn it. They got the ATVs out, checking them over and making sure they were filled up with gas before Josh hopped on and commenced to trying to make Chas eat his exhaust.

Damn, the girl was good, though. Fearless and strong, Chas had not a bit of hesitance as she headed down an embankment, giving him a good, long look at that pretty heart-shaped ass framed in his jeans.

That ass gave him palpitations to this day. Josh looked away just in time to avoid a low-hanging tree branch and hooted. Oh, she was gonna get it for that. He gunned up next to her before turning nice and sharp, spraying her with mud.

"You bitch." Chas laughed hard, those blue eyes dancing, standing on the accelerator and zipping past him, crap spraying all over him.

"Oh, now, who's the bitch?" That couldn't pass without her paying for it. Josh went after her, laughing like a loony as she dodged and weaved, making him feel like the old man he was.

They came to rest under a copse of oak trees as the sky clouded up, a drizzle just starting, the tiny drops catching in Chas' hair as she smiled at him, just watching him. His hands itched to touch that hair. Instead they rested on his thighs, short nails digging into his jeans. "You're still a speed demon, lady."

"Some shit never changes, JC. Never has, never will."

Watching little clods of mud drop off his boots, Josh nodded. That was the truth. After all this time, after all he'd drank and screwed and done to get her out of his mind, one or two meetings had him kissing her, then wishing he could do it again and again and again.

"You got that right, honey. You surely do."

He heard her shift, one hand sliding out of its glove to stroke over his cheek, wipe the mud away. "You got splashed, JC."

Blinking, he leaned his head into the touch without even thinking, just staring right at her.

Eye to eye. Fuck, she still took his breath. "You were out for blood."

"You know me. I play to win." She kept touching, light little strokes like she was playing his skin. "Sides, your blood wasn't what I was after."

"Wasn't?" Was that his voice, all froggy and harsh? Lord. "What was it?"

"You can't tell me you don't know." She actually pinked for him, bit her bottom lip. "Shit, JC, tell me you ain't been thinking on that kiss over and over, and I'll not say one more thing."

His head turned and his lips touched her palm without his even thinking on it. Josh kissed Chas' hand, his own cheeks heating up. "Every damned day. All day."

"Okay, then." He saw her eyes light up, that million-watt smile flashing. "You know exactly what I was after."

"That doesn't mean it's a good idea." How could he do anything but grin back, though, his hand coming up to hold her wrist.

Chas just hooted, tossing that hair 'til the water droplets flew. "Since when did we do anything that was a good idea, baby?"

"God knows I've never been all that bright. C'mere." He pulled her right to him, leaning half off his four wheeler to kiss her right on that laughing mouth, just like he'd been dreaming about for days.

She fit against him, lips open and warm and sweet for him. Shit, he could remember the first time he'd done it, her about as fish-out-of-the-water as they came and him full of piss and vinegar. This was less flash and more sure, Chas right there with him.

Her hair fell heavy over his hand as he slid it around to cup the back of her neck. The kiss went on, his lips tingling as they moved closer together, making happy damned noises.

Chas lost balance, landing in his arms with a little peep. Then the soft giggles started. “Man, you knocked me off-center.”

“Makes us even for the time you knocked my legs out from under me on that tiny little stage in Tuscaloosa. You remember that?” He kissed her throat, tasting salt and earth.

She made this sweet little noise—part laugh, part moan. “Or when you were standing on that rickety little hotel bed and playing Tarzan and caught me with your johnson? I had a black eye for days.”

“Good God.” Shit, that had been a sight, and they'd laughed and laughed. “Kiss me again, lady.”

Oh, sweet Christ, that woman could just knock his socks off, all that was sexy and soft and right about a woman in one of those kisses.

The sky opened right up on them as they sat there, rain pouring down in sheets. It plastered them together, even where they sat under the tree, their clothes clinging.

“Oh man, I'm gonna lose all glamour points with you, JC.” If she could see herself, curvy and wet, nipples hard, lips swollen.

“No pun intended, lady-love, but you're a wet dream.” He had to. Just had to bend her back and touch her with his tongue, even through the shirt and bra. Damn. Oh, damn.

“Josh...”

Fuck, steam should be rising off her skin, off the point where his tongue met her, she was that hot. Burning for him. Josh bit down gently, wanting her to feel the sting but not wanting to hurt.

“God, Chas. Honey. We need to. I dunno. Get back to the house or something.”

“Yeah. Yeah, JC. We'll play on the way back and then...” She gave him a stunned little smile, pure happy. “Then we'll do what comes natural.”

Everything in him surged, especially the parts below the belt. “You're on, lady-love. You are on.”

“Come on then.” She slipped away, thighs straddling that four-wheeler and promising pure-D heaven. “Follow me.”

Gunning his engine, Josh followed. He'd never let her know it, because God knew she'd use it against him. But he'd follow her anywhere.

Chapter Eight

Mud spattered and breathless with laughter, Josh pushed Mokie into the mudroom and pried off his boots, grinning at Chas like a fool.

“You almost had me breaking my neck on that last follow the leader, honey.”

“You were the one who made the dare and the shot about not handling what was between my legs.” Chas was lit up like a Christmas tree, cheeks pink, eyes just dancing, bright red-hair windblown. Josh reckoned no one on Earth would recognize her like this, all laughter and mud.

“Yeah, well. A man has to have bravado and pride.” He chuckled, shucking his shirt. “You’re good with the cornering though.”

Chas bent down, pulled off her trashed little white tennies, his old jeans sliding down along her hips. “It’s been a damned long time since I’ve been out on one. Daddy used to let us round the cattle up with them. Called us ‘new age cowboys’.”

“Well no wonder you out-maneuvered me. I just started on ‘em a few years back.” They were both down to their underwear, and it seemed natural as anything to put an arm around her waist and head for the bedroom and its big sunken tub. They’d take a shower first. Then they’d soak a bit.

He popped her in the shower as he got the hot water to start in the tub. He could see as she slipped off the little white lacy bra, the matching panties, hung them on the towel rack. Then Chas arched into the steaming water, wetting her hair.

Fuck, she was something. She’d always been the prettiest thing he’d ever seen. But now instead of a green girl, she was a woman, her breasts heavier, her belly just a little round. Oh, he could tell she kept in shape. But she wasn’t aerobicized or sculpted or whatever. His cock stirred, and Josh skinned out of his shorts, stepping right into the steamy shower behind her, reaching for her like he had every right to.

And didn’t she sigh and lean right back into his hands like a fallen angel? That sweet heart-shaped ass brushed against his thighs, the base of his cock. “Oh...”

Afraid to say anything that might break the spell, Josh just touched her. His skin looked dark next to hers, except where the sun didn’t shine, his cock flushed even darker, the almost black curls at his groin a stark contrast to her creamy-skinned ass. Muscles all over his body tensed right up at the contact, his belly rippling, his nipples going to stiff little points. She was like no one else in his whole world. Ever.

Her fingers slid over his, moving over his wrists, his forearms, just stroking like he was a six-string. Her hair was heavy and wet, catching and sliding over his skin, his nipples, the very tip of his prick.

Gasping, grunting, he touched her, hands measuring her waist, sliding down over her hips, then spanning her ribcage as he moved to touch her breasts, just lightly teasing the undersides. His cock pressed against her ass, pushing up, and he rubbed against her, the slide of her hair making him crazy.

She tilted her head back, lips and tongue sliding across his jaw, the little hungry sound almost hotter than the touch.

Almost.

The action pushed those sweet heavy breasts into his fingers, the skin soft as silk

against his palms, pink little nipples going tight as pebbles for him.

"Oh. Chas." He bent, kissed her mouth, opening it with his tongue so he could push in. He had to see if she tasted the same. If she still gave it up as good.

She did.

Chas turned, pressed up against him, hands sliding up to push into his hair, the kiss going deeper, hotter. Chas' belly rubbed him, so smooth, so soft. Josh groaned, one hand dropping to cup her ass and pull her up against him. His other hand stayed right where it was, cupped under her breast, thumb scraping her nipple.

She moaned and purred, just singing with it, the sound sliding down his spine and settling in his balls. Her eyelashes were copper colored with the paint gone and he could see the tiny freckles sprinkled across her nose.

So hot. "Sing for me, lady love." He looked down at her, her eyes so damned blue, and took another kiss, pressing against her lips, demanding her cooperation. The curve of her hip was more alluring than most women's whole bodies, the heft of her breast in his hand making him drunk.

Chas just melted, pushed up on her tiptoes and opened right up to him, tongue sliding against his and welcoming him right in.

They weren't even going to make the tub. Not the way he was feeling. The kiss went on until they both came up gasping, both too damned stubborn to give in first. He slid his hand up, between her shoulder blades and bent her back, licking and kissing down her neck, the hand playing her nipples dipping between her legs.

"Oh. Lover." She held onto his shoulders, gasping, copper curls dark and wet against his fingers. Oh, sweet fuck, she was hot for him, slick and eager. "Your hands."

"Yeah. Oh, yeah, love." He slipped his fingers between her folds, finding her wet, slippery, and not from the shower. Oh, fuck. Josh nibbled, licked, loved her, and touched her, finding her clit and stroking. Those sweet little sounds started up again, familiar and finer than anything on earth. He watched her move, just ate it up, the way her lips were parted, the way her nipples were tight and hard.

He added his harmony, low moans and hot words. Touching her was pure pleasure. Wanting her was an ache. His cock just throbbed, hungry as anything. "Want you, Chas. So bad."

"Gonna let me ride you?" Her hand dropped to his cock, pumping nice and firm, making him go up on his toes. Fuck, that was hot, the way she knew what she wanted, wasn't scared of her own passion.

"Fuck, yes, lady-love. Want that. Like now." He couldn't think of anything he wanted more. He was breathless with it, trying hard to hold back long enough to do it.

"Here? Bath? Bed? Where, JC?" Pushy, hungry thing. Fuck, it was hot.

"Bed, love." He wanted to watch, wanted to see her above him and not worry that they'd fall. He rinsed her off, turned off the water and dragged her out, drying them both quickly before yanking her right to his bed.

They landed with her straddling his waist, wet hair tumbling all around her shoulders. She was already rocking, curls rubbing against him. Her hands were sliding over his face, his shoulders, his nipples. "So fine..."

"Me?" No, she was the fine one. Her smooth skin tempted him beyond belief. The only thing keeping him from marking her was the performance tomorrow night, and he hated it for intruding that much. Instead he pulled her down for a kiss, hand tangling in

her hair, his other hand on her ass, urging her up, over him, cock pushing at her wet heat.

She arched and shifted, let him sink deep into heaven itself, a happy, low cry pushing right into his lips. Chas shivered, hips rocking, riding him like he was the prize racer at the Downs. His toes curled and his balls drew up, and Josh rocked up into her, touching her wherever he could, head tossing restlessly as she gave up the kiss and sat up to ride him good and hard. Her breasts bounced, not sagging a damn bit, and he reached for them, fascinated by her hard nipples, by the way her skin drew up.

“Oh. Oh, sweet.” Chas pushed into his touch, biting her bottom lip, body tightening around him, squeezing. “Josh. Nothing like you. Nothing on Earth.”

“I know, love. I know it. It's the same with you. I swear.” He squeezed a little, thumbs scraping.

She bucked, eyes going wide, hips pushing harder, faster. “Close. I... Close.”

Fuck yes. He was so close he could feel it crawling up his spine. Josh pushed up, slammed into her, reaching and finding the tiny bit of flesh between her legs at the same time, fingers plucking at her clit, urging her to let it go, to just come with him.

Oh, that sound, the way she bucked, the way her pale skin went all rosy—Chas coming on his cock just blew his mind. Blew his load, too. Josh jerked, whole body rising and jerking as he shot inside her, a thin cry bursting out of him, hands holding her so tight.

“Oh... Oh, JC.” Those sweet lips covered his, the kiss slow and deep and so right.

He'd been waiting for that kiss for a lot of years. Getting it was better than any of his wet dreams. Josh kissed her right back, smoothing his hands down her back.

Of course now? They really needed that bath.

He wondered if she'd share a cigar with him.

* * * *

Peach scented bubbles and green marble and iced tea and hot water and good music pouring in, tanned skin cradling every inch of her and the periodic curious look from a goofball puppy—Chastity Hopewell was in Heaven.

Pure Heaven.

She shifted, cuddling, legs sliding along Josh's. Amazing how you could go right back, remember how things fit together, worked together.

Most of their fighting had been over his drinking, her refusal to make a decision, and just the pressures of starting out. Deep down they'd always been two peas in a pod. Josh shifted under her, settling her more comfortably, if that was possible.

“Mmm. Oh, honey, I think I could get used to this.”

She leaned up, kissed his chin, his jaw. “You're something else, JC. Something special.”

He laughed, the sound deep and husky, sexy as Hell. “So are you, lady-love. So are you.”

The water lapped gently at the side of the tub, bubbles floating up around them. She might have dozed a little, fingers sliding over his chest and belly, petting and stroking, loving on him like she used to. For the first time, the idea of going on this tour was exciting, fun. She loved making music, she loved singing, loved performing.

“I'm wrinkling, Chas.” Josh squeezed her ass rhythmically. “We should go to bed, or have supper or something.”

She gave him a wide-eyed look, blinked as she fought her giggles. "You mean the label lets you eat? Food? No fair!"

Josh laughed right out loud, jiggling them. "They do. But you ought to see my workout schedule. And my trainer. Scary man."

"I hear that." She managed with an hour on the bike five nights a week and flat out not eating. Aerobics wore on the boobs. Chas managed to angle herself out of the tub, getting them both a towel.

On Josh it looked good. His chest and belly were muscled, cut, but she was glad he didn't go with the trend and wax himself to hairlessness. He looked like a man. He followed her out, grabbed her around the waist and kissed her neck. "You look amazing, honey."

She surprised herself by blushing, pleased down to her bones. Fuck, she'd had men complimenting her for years, but with Josh? It was just different. She tilted her head, letting him have more skin. "I've missed you something fierce, cowboy, and I didn't even know it."

He nodded, those brown eyes serious. "I know. I was so busy blaming us for... well... I missed you."

Such a man.

Her man.

Oh, fuck. What was she thinking? She reached up, stroked along his nose, over one eyebrow, petting those laugh lines. "Yeah."

"I'm sorry I said you sagged. You don't." Lord, the man was about as smooth as Georgia asphalt in the summer. But he tried.

She giggled, shook her head. "Gonna take you with me to talk to that woman. Show her a man that isn't wanting me liposucked."

"Sucked, yes. Lipoed, no." He grinned, pulling her close for a kiss, tweaking one nipple.

Oh, he was a bastard. She reached up, twined her arms around Josh's neck and held on. From where she stood she was in a position to tease and rub, slide their bodies together. "You saying I suck, redneck?"

He drew in a quick breath. "I sure hope you still do. I always loved the way your mouth felt on me."

Flatterer. She tugged him down, tongue sliding slow along his jaw, ending at one ear. "We were good together back then. You made me want things."

"We could be better now." Pulling her even closer, Josh took a kiss that curled her toes.

Oh, Hell yeah. There was a whole load of something to be said for experience, for knowing the truth of things. Her hands traveled over hard muscles, the dark curls soft against her palm.

Josh laughed, the sound hot, breathless. "You keep that up we're gonna need another bath."

"Isn't that why you built that amazing bathroom? So there could be lots of baths?" Her fingers found Josh's nipples, tugged them.

Those flat little male nipples went hard for her, drawing up, begging more touches. "Nah. I built it so I'd have a good place to jack off."

She cackled, tickled deep, fingers plucking, pinching just a little. "There's another

hot little visual. Only you'd have to leave the hat on..."

Chas waited for the tease to hit him and then she took off, feet sliding on the tiles, running from those hands that seemed to remember just where she was ticklish.

He tackled her somewhere around the chaise lounge in the bedroom, making sure they turned so he hit bottom, not her. "You're cruising for it, lady-love."

"Only if you're man enough to dish it out, JC." She bent to kiss him, addicted to the way he let her in, then tilted her head and sent her reeling with that mouth. Lips and tongue worked her, pressing her open in return, tongue pushing in to taste, them both working it in perfect harmony.

She remembered this deep in her bones, remembered this rhythm, this song. Part of her remembered how bad it had gone, when they stopped hitting the right notes, when it was all dissonance.

Good thing she was a better singer now.

So was he. She could tell. She'd seen the way he'd poured that drink and set it aside untouched. He was older and wiser, just like her. His hands were the same, though. Guitar callused and rough as they slid over her skin.

"Love how you play me." She straddled him, hot and aching, nipples tingling where they dragged along his chest.

"Mmm. Come on and play then." He cupped her ass in his hands, pulling her close, rough cheek rubbing hers. The man still needed to shave by six o'clock at night. He worked his way to her ear, licking and nibbling, pulling the lobe with his teeth.

Everything in her just purred, hips tilting to rub against those hard, rough hands. She petted her way down that hot belly, down into those soft-soft dark curls.

"Oh. Chas." Josh arched under her, a hot, harsh noise coming right out of him, his cock rubbing at the base of her wrist, against the back of her hand. "Oh, honey, that's good."

"It is." Chas moaned and started sliding, mouth finding one hard little nipple, fingers wrapping around Josh's heavy, hard shaft. She was so getting her some of that.

He grunted, hands squeezing, whole body moving under her touch. He was hard where she was soft, muscled, strong. It was so hot, having all of that at her disposal, heady that he let her have the lead.

There was something about this man—no one on Earth could make her so frustrated, so angry, so happy, so hot. She closed her eyes, just breathed in the scent of soap and skin and sex, tongue sliding down his belly.

"Chas." His hands slid up her back as she moved, fisted in her hair. She could see him rubbing handfuls of it over his chest. "You're killin' me, love."

"No, baby. I'm just loving you." She rubbed her cheek against his shaft, purring low at the silky heat. Oh, he smelled just fine.

"Feels... oh, damn." When she licked at the base, stopping to nuzzle his curls, he broke off, groaning, legs shifting so she had better access. Lord, it was amazing how she still remembered what he liked, what drove him crazy.

She let herself just love on him, not thinking on it. He stroked her hair, her face, her lips where they slid over him, taking him in and pulling nice and hard. Low sounds, rough and deep, fell around her, Josh just straining against her. Out of the corners of her eyes she could see his thighs and belly flex, see each muscle ripple. Hot, salty drops slid out onto her tongue, Josh needing her so badly.

She petted his thighs, his balls, his belly, head bobbing all the while, giving him what she knew he liked. Giving him all she had.

“Honey. Gonna blow if you don't stop.” His hands were on her cheeks, trying to pull her up. Chas groaned, tongue pressing once into the slit of his cock, letting him feel it.

“God! Chas.” Josh heaved, pulling her up, and they rolled right off that silly chaise and down on the floor, landing with a thump. This time she was on the bottom, and while she was still catching her breath he was spreading her, fingers slipping in to test her readiness.

“In me.” She pushed up, head rolling as his fingers pushed deep, sending lightning straight on through her. “Oh. Oh, damn. Hurry.”

“Yeah. Now.” He hurried, fingers sliding out, the broad head of his shaft pushing in, stretching her where she was already tender. So good. So damned big and hot. Josh moaned along with her, making their unique brand of music all over again.

There was nothing sweet about it—didn't have to be, Chas wasn't a trembling virgin—and she loved it, loved that Josh knew it and gave it up. She just planted her heels on the floor, met every thrust with a push of her own, her fingers digging into his shoulders.

He rode back and forth, deep and hard, pushing into her over and over. Those eyes were damn near black with need when he looked down at her, Josh's face drawn tight with effort. “Need to, love. So bad.”

“Uh-huh. Uh-huh. Fixin' to. Come on, baby.” She bucked again, heat flooding her belly, body just flying as she rippled.

“Fuck!” He just lost it, thrusting into her without any kind of rhythm, hips snapping as he came hard inside her. “Oh, honey...”

“Mmm...” She just was all purrs and snuggles, lips brushing Josh's throat.

He rested against her, sweat damp and heavy, for a long while. Kissing her cheek, he levered up on his arms and looked down at her. “Now I really am hungry. Pizza or Chinese?”

Oh man... She hadn't had pizza in a month of Sundays. “Pepperoni and mushroom?”

“You bet. We can even get the wet, canned kind of mushrooms like you like.” Now that was a man doing for his woman. She knew he liked the fresh mushrooms better.

“You're good to me, JC.” She leaned up, took another kiss. “You gonna let me borrow a robe?”

He looked her over, eyes just twinkling. “I shouldn't. But these days, you never know who's outside the window with a camera. Security notwithstanding.”

Josh rolled off her and helped her up, both of them wincing a little from the prolonged contact with the hard floor. The pizza place was obviously on speed dial, because he got through with one touch, and called the guy on the phone by name. He ordered two larges, one with pepperoni and mushroom, one with hamburger. Hamburger?

“You're really hungry.” She grinned, wrapped up on the sofa in a soft green robe, rubbing the pup's back with her toes.

“I am. But the hamburger one is for Moke.”

Mokie whined and licked her toes, letting her know she wasn't supposed to stop petting, no matter how hard she was laughing.

“I'll have to get you some of those heart-shaped doggie cookies Chachi loves so much, see if they're better than pizza.” She giggled, rubbing Moke's belly, the pup's

tongue lolling. “Oh, who's a sexy puppy?”

“She's gonna get spoiled, I tell you what.” Josh sat next to her, just cuddling right in.
“So am I.”

Chas smiled over, melting a little. “You probably deserve a little spoiling, JC.”
Maybe even a lot of it.

Chapter Nine

The only good thing about waking up before ten a.m. was coffee and fortunately Bea's was perfect. Chastity leaned over the cup, breathing in the fumes and listening to Bea flutter and fuss with Sue Ellen on the phone.

It wasn't as if Bea hadn't checked and rechecked every single costume, every box of makeup and hair crap. Boots. Spare guitar. Dog food. Hell, Bea'd made sure the on-board luggage was okay, bought enough staff paper, crossword puzzle books and cheesy novels to keep her busy. "Bea, honey. Me and Chachi'll be fine."

"Oh, darlin'. I hate thinking about you and that man on that bus..."

"Oh, I imagine we'll only try to kill each other once or twice a day." They'd not spent any time together after the concert—it had been too damned busy. Well, busy and a little bitchy, given that she'd insisted on bringing her dog and not sharing a bus with the band at all and picking the opening act for the lion's share of the concerts.

A girl had to protect her interests, after all.

Bea nodded, kissed her cheek. "Gonna miss you, honey. I've loved having you home."

Chastity beamed and hugged Bea tight. God, it was good to hear that from someone that meant it. "I'll miss you, Bea. If you want to, I'll fly you wherever for a concert, 'kay?"

The horn honked about two seconds before Jeffy breezed in. "Come on, baby. Get a move on. Josh and Vic are in the limo. That bastard brought that drooly beast with him and she won't stop whining."

Aw. Poor Moke. She grabbed a handful of treats and slipped them in her pocket. "Okay, grab Chachi and I'll get my duffle and my purse. Oh, and my sunglasses. Did we pack Granny's quilt, Bea?"

"Oh, for chrissake, baby! Move!"

Chachi set to growling and snapping as soon as Jeffy went for the carrier.

"Goddamn I hate this little beast. Why can't he be decent?" Jeffy growled right back, baring his teeth as he lifted the carrier. "Spoiled little shit."

"You leave my sweet baby alone. You fucking gave him to me." It hit her suddenly that she was fixin' to leave home. Again. For weeks. "Oh, God. Where's my guitar?"

"On the bus, honey." Bea grinned, herding her like a sheepdog. "Jeffy's turning purple."

"It's a shitty color for you, Jeffy. Stick with red." Bea got her outside, moving toward the limo, patting her all the way.

"Bitch." He said it mildly, but then he always did, trailing along and stuffing Chachi's carrier at the driver. "Be nice," he added, opening the door for her.

"Do not *jostle* my dog or I'll feed him your balls. Not only that." She slipped into the limo, reaching for a doggy biscuit for Mokie. "I'm always nice, asshole."

Vic said 'howdy', Moke whined and drooled, and Josh just sat there like a bump on a log, staring at her. His sunglasses hid his eyes, making the long look uncomfortable as hell.

Well, fine. The son of a bitch didn't have to be social. She leaned over, offered Moke

a cookie. "Hey baby girl. You look flat out miserable. You ready to be stuck on a bus?"

Mokie licked her nose. Josh chuckled. "Hey, honey. You ready for all this?"

"As ready as I'm gonna be. I sure wasn't planning to be out already, but Bea swears my Granny's quilt's on my bus."

Tilting his head down, Josh looked over his glasses at her. "Our bus."

She leaned down towards Moke, trying to hide her grin. "You're not sleeping with the band?"

Jeffy popped her hard on the ass, making her squeak as he hissed. "Will you be good?"

Hooting, Josh stroked Moke's ears, his hand meeting hers. "I'm used to it, Jeffy. If she was nice I might wonder what she was up to."

"No good at all." She twined her fingers with his for just a second. "Did you get the kitchen stocked, Jeffy? A good stereo system put in?"

Jeffy gave her a look. "Have I ever let you down?"

"No, Jeffy. You and Sue Ellen take good care of me." She sighed and sat back, closed her eyes. Sometimes she wondered if her singing was worth all this hullabaloo.

Snuffling, Mokey tried to crawl up in her lap, wanting to comfort her. Silly mutt. Josh nudged her toe with his boot, just resting it there.

She smiled, reached down to scratch Moke's ears. Lord, that puppy was soft, cuddly, reminded her of the morning she woke up in Josh's bed, little head popping up over the edge of the mattress, tongue lolling, whining to go out.

Clearing his throat, Jeffy got her to look up by poking her side. "The first two days are travel days, no dates. If there's anything you need we can ship it to you, okay?"

"How many times has she done this? Come on, Jeffy. Lighten up."

Now that was some serious alpha male shit passing there, Josh giving Jeffy a look and Jeffy scowling back at him.

Interesting. Pointless, but interesting.

"I promise to be a very good singer and not make Josh cry for at least the first thirty six hours, Jeffy."

"Or beat you." Now she was the one getting the look from those grey eyes, but it had glint in that was purely dangerous. And sexy.

Hellacious sexy.

"I only give a twenty-four hour promise on the beatings, JC." Man, her shirt better not be too tight, she was sporting some serious nipplage.

"Be *good*, baby." Oh, man. Jeffy sounded desperate.

Josh shifted in his seat, and okay, maybe he needed looser jeans too. Because that was pretty obvious. He just grinned at her, the sunglasses on permanent tilt so she could see his eyes. "Maybe we should stop at McDonald's, Vic. I'm feeling munchy."

She couldn't help the chuckle. "Two sausage biscuits, but you'll leave one half of one biscuit, a hashbrown and a large cup of coffee?"

Lord, some things never changed.

"I'll feed the other half to Moke. You want anything for Chachi?" At his name, her little baby growled and thumped against the side of his carrier up in the front seat, making Jeffy scowl and Josh laugh.

"He likes egg McMuffins." The happy little yips started up, Chachi just bouncing. Mokie's ears went up and her deep 'gee, I'm a big dog' voice filled the car, sending

Chachi into hysterics.

"Everybody shut the Hell up!" Vic had a voice like a foghorn when he wanted to, rough as a cob and loud enough to echo. Moke and Chachi went quiet right away. "We're going to the bus. We'll have your McDonald's order delivered while you get everything checked and strapped in."

"You," Vic stabbed a finger at Jeffy. "Stop getting all pissy. Josh, stop pushing, and you," Vic growled at her, "stop egging everyone on. You're making my head hurt."

"You know, I have an ass you can kiss, old man." Chas just puffed right up, rumbling right back. She wasn't a fucking background singer here; she sure as shit wasn't going to be treated like one by someone *else's* manager.

Vic snorted. "You don't pay me, darlin'. I don't have to."

An ominous rumble came from Josh. "That's enough, Vic. Only one it's bothering is you and Jeffy. Chas and I, this is how we work out pre-tour nerves. Let it be. Drop us off and go the hell away."

She found herself nodding, fingers back in Moke's fur. Sometimes that man made sense. "Y'all set this whole thing up without having the common decency to ask either one of us if we were wanting to be on the road again. Y'all both should have to suffer some."

Finally, finally, the limo slowed, pulling in at the staging area, the buses already idling, belching out nasty diesel smoke. The driver even breathed a sigh of relief. It would be funny if it wasn't so damned sad.

She pushed out of the limo, damn near crawling over Jeffy and reaching for Chachi's carrier. She wanted it over. Started. Something.

A soft warm hand cupped her elbow. "Hey now, Miss Chas. I got a pretty muscle-bound man right here to carry our little Chachi in."

Oh. Sue Ellen. She turned and gave her own personal lifesaver a hug. The woman was built like a line-backer, big and blonde and beautiful and perfectly capable of doing everything from driving a bus to cooking up gumbo to doing Chas' hair if no one else showed. Chas believed in her heart of hearts that if the band didn't show? Sue Ellen'd fix it. "Oh. Sue Ellen. Thank you."

"Pshaw. Like I'd let you go on tour without me. Mr. Haley. It's a pleasure to meet you, sir. This must be Mokie. She's a beauty. Charles? Peter? You two get the puppies walked and settled. Now. Chastity doesn't need to be out in this sun and I'm sure Mr. Haley could use some breakfast and coffee."

"I would. I didn't get any before we left." Josh threw a glare at Vic before turning a smile on Sue Ellen. "Despite me getting up at seven. It's nice to meet you too. You're legendary, ma'am."

"Just happy to have something to do, sir." Sue Ellen started walking them toward the bus, both managers trailing behind. "Now, y'all are in the blue one here. I'm up in the green with the equipment and the band'll be in the middle. There's coffee brewing already. Y'all just tell me what you want for breakfast and I'll send a car. Miss Chas, your bed's set up, quilt and all. Mr. Haley, you've got the movies you requested."

Sue Ellen was terrifying. Chas chuckled, teasing a little. "A shot of whiskey?"

Sue Ellen hooted. "Lord, you're starting early, girl! Someone must've rattled your cage in the limo. Whiskey is not breakfast food. Biscuits and honey? Fruit salad? Omelete? McD's?"

Josh didn't hoot. He swatted her ass. "No booze. Two sausage biscuits and a hashbrown for me. An egg McMuffin for Chachi. Mokie likes the McGriddle things. Coffee. Chas, you still like the hotcakes and sausage, or have you gone all Hollywood and started getting that yogurt thingee?"

"Ooh. Pancakes..." She could just not eat the sausage.

"Right. Got it. There's lunch meat and fruit and chips in there for lunch, not that Chas'll eat 'em, but they're there. We'll stop for supper tonight. Chas, honey, if you don't want to come out? Just let me know."

"She'll eat." Oh, that man was cruising for a bruising. "Well, Vic, Jeffy, thanks for the ride, holler at us if anything changes, gotta go."

Josh grabbed her wrist and hauled, whistling up the dogs, and before she knew it the bus door closed right in old Vic's face.

"Oh, man. You're good at that." She blinked up at him, lips uncertain whether they were going to be in an 'o' or a grin. "Mornin', JC."

"Morning, honey. Don't open that door for anything less than breakfast." She got an even finer hello and thank you in the form of a kiss.

"Oh." She blinked again, leaning right on into him. "If more tours started that way, I'd dread them less."

"I hear that, honey." He kissed her again, just grinning.

God, he looked happy. Almost excited. Fine as frog hair. "You ready to sing?"

"I'm ready to play. You know singing has always been a necessary evil for me. More than happy to listen to you though." He could be civil, darn it. Which made it easier for her to be.

"Yeah? Thanks. You know you pick better than anyone." She took a deep breath, looking around at their home away from home. "You gonna be able to handle bunking with me, JC?"

Laughing a little, Josh turned away, the set of his shoulders going a bit defensive.

"Sure, honey. We'll fight, but that ain't nothing new. We'll do alright."

She reached out, fingers just brushing his back. God, she hated that she put that bulldog look on that man

"Hey, come on, honey." He turned back to her, smiling again, the old shadow nearly hidden. "We've got breakfast coming, we got rid of the managers and this bus is a damned sight better than the last vehicle we shared."

"Hey! That van had built in air conditioner, vibrating seats, that little roll bar for uh..." She blushed dark, ducked her head at the memory of what she'd done there. "Swinging."

"Uh huh." No blushing for him, just a wicked, wicked smile, a real one.

"You'd best watch where those thoughts are leading, cowboy. They could get a man in trouble." Her nipples were hard and aching, cheeks permanently pink.

"You think?" He was reaching for her when the knock came, Sue Ellen's voice calling them to come get their breakfast. Damn it.

Chas met Josh's eyes, found him a smile. "We got time, yeah? To... To figure shit out?"

"We do. We got plenty of time and no one to talk to but each other. Well, and Moke and Chachi. Coming, Sue Ellen." Pecking a kiss right down on her nose, he went to get the food, leaving her blinking at his backside.

Well, she'd said it before and it looked like she'd be saying it again. At least it was a pretty, pretty view.

Lord, Lord, Lord.

Chapter Ten

The bus was quiet as a tomb. Which was just about as perfect as anything Josh could ask for. He liked the quiet. Or at least he did now, after the whirlwind of the last few weeks.

The awards show performance? Had electrified the crowd, and lit a fire under the press that still hadn't burned out, even three weeks later. Damned if it didn't seem like some picture-taking maniac had popped out of the bushes at them at every turn.

The first night of the tour had gone really well, though, sold-out, crowds screaming and singing along and Josh was pleasantly exhausted. He got Mokie settled and grabbed his guitar, heading out to the little sitting room up front so he wouldn't disturb Chas, who he figured was sleeping.

He found Chas stretched out on her belly, headphones on, sound asleep with her pencil still in her hand, notebook under her cheek. She looked about twelve, no makeup, clean hair pulled back into a tail, little t-shirt and tiny Daisy Dukes on. That fucking evil dog was all curled up in the small of her back, chin on her ass like he was going to protect it. Demonic fucking fuzzball.

The beast had scared the living shit out of Moke from the get-go. Honest to God, he thought Moke was gonna have a nervous breakdown. Who knew a Pom could outdo a mastiff?

He moved around the damned dog gingerly, tapping Chas' shoulder.

Her eyes flashed open, blinking up at him, more than a little confused. "Hey. Sorry. Fell asleep I guess."

She pulled the headphones off, stretched, the fuzzball growling as she moved. "Hush now, Chachi. Don't be a grump."

"That mutt is always a grump. You heading off to bed?" She was adorable. She really was.

She pouted up at him, bottom lip sticking out. "He's not a mutt. He's just grumpy about not sleeping with me." Another stretch and she got the pup down and put into his velvet lined doggie carrier. Grumpy *and* spoiled. "You gonna play?"

"Got a new melody that's niggling at me. Figured I ought to go on and work on it. Not gonna bother you, am I?" He hadn't bothered her yet, amazingly enough, but he figured it was polite to ask.

Chas shook her head, bright copper ponytail just swinging as she stretched up tall, giving him a look at a creamy little line of belly. Oh, so pretty. "Nope. You mind if I just sit and listen?"

"Don't mind a bit." He got the tuning right after a few minutes of fiddling, and got down to business, trying to pin down the melody that was just driving him crazy.

Every time he looked over those blue eyes were on him, just watching, a soft, quiet little smile on her face.

It was enough to make him a little high. God, he loved her smile. Always had. He wondered why they'd bothered spending so much time hating each other, because it had melted so damned easy once they were together again. There. There it was. Sweet and

pure, with just enough speed to be a good bet at a single. Josh played the thing through, then grinned at Chas.

“You think you got words for that?”

She pinked up so pretty, chin ducking, fingers sliding over the notepad in her lap. “I might.”

“I ain't gonna tell you no. Come on, girl.” He wanted her words, had missed writing with her and Jeffy.

She came on over, sat close enough that he could smell her soap, smell the hint of her perfume. “Okay, start again and I'll feed you the hook.”

He started playing and she started singing, throaty little voice working just for him.

Oh, yeah. Her voice was a little rough from the show and the cigarettes, and she sounded like the perfect honky tonk angel, just singing his song with her words. It was fucking magic.

She was right there, both of them working out part of the verse, her body warm and soft beside him, making music. This was what it was all about—sweet harmonies and soft glissandos, the guitar just ringing. By the time they had it right they were smiling, leaning, and it was easy as breathing to set the guitar aside and pull her into his lap for a kiss.

She came easy, eyes shining at him like he was the center of the world. “Hey.”

“Hey, lady-love. That's a great hook.”

“You think?” She leaned until their lips were just touching. “You sounded good tonight. The crowd loved you.”

Mutual admiration society. “You rocked my world, lady. And the fans' too.” He kissed her, breathing her in deep, whiskey and cigarettes. She relaxed against him, all soft curves and heat, leaning into him, hand sliding behind his head. He put his arms around her, tongue pushing full into her mouth. So damned good. Addictive.

Chas was wearing little short-shorts, the curve of her ass hot on his thighs, her inner thighs spreading as she straddled his lap.

Lord. That just shorted his brain out, and he pushed up against her, even the soft fabric of his sweats too damned harsh on his straining prick.

“Mmm... somebody's wanting.” Like she had any call to tease when he could smell her, knew if he touched her, she'd be wet for him.

“Yeah. I think both of us are.” Leaning his forehead against hers, he reached between them to see if he was right, fingers dipping into the leg of those little shorts, searching for her.

Her eyes went hot as his fingers slid across those soft little curls, lips parting on a gasp as he found her clit, teased it with the tips of his fingers. “Oh...”

“Uh huh.” Oh yeah, she was wanting as bad as he was. She was slick, hot, so good. He could just eat her up.

Now there was an idea.

“We should go to bed, honey.”

She was already shivering, starting to purr, ass sliding on his thighs. “Uh-huh. Yeah. We should.”

He would go all he man and carry her, but the bus was moving and that made for bad footing. So he set her on her feet, standing to wrap an arm around her waist to take her back to the bigger of the two bunks.

She helped him off with his t-shirt and sweats, pretty little mouth brushing his skin, each moan and purr seeming bigger in the dark.

Josh went after her little tank top and shortie shorts, peeling them off and pushing her down on her back. He wanted that taste. Now. He knelt between her legs, mouth moving down over her belly, tongue teasing her navel before her scent became impossible to resist and he bent to push his tongue against her wet folds, parting those copper curls.

“Love!” Oh, that cry was sweet, husky and almost broken, just from the one touch. She opened for him so easy, the heat just seeming to pour from her.

Gripping the undersides of her thighs, Josh spread her wide, licking and loving her, tongue touching her clit before slipping down to push inside her. She tasted so good, just like he'd known she would, and he couldn't get enough.

Man, the woman just sang for him, little cries and moans and hitching gasps. Those pale thighs trembled, hips shifting and moving right up into his touch. There was something to be said for that sort of passion, the way she responded to every touch. Damn.

He cupped her ass in one hand, holding her up, and pressed his tongue into her over and over, using his thumb to press at her clit, rubbing back and forth. He wanted to hear that high note he loved so much.

It didn't take long; she was so hot and he remembered what she needed, what pushed her over the edge. Chas arched, ass going taut in his hand, the sound of his name as she came just what he was hunting.

He licked his lips, looking up at her, chin on her belly, idly petting her thighs. God, she was pretty, all laid out for him like a feast. He wondered what he ought to do for the second course.

“You just send me whirling, JC.” She hummed, stretched a little, nipples hard and dark, legs sliding against him.

“You? Make me nuts, lady-love.” Okay, so not so romantic, but she'd understand the inability to talk. Josh moved, muscling up to press against her, giving her a kiss that tasted like her, letting her know how bad he needed.

Her legs wrapped around him, hands burying in his hair as the kiss deepened, Chas feeding him low little sounds. He took them all in, licking at her lower lip, biting down on it just a bit. Rubbing against her, Josh pushed his cock against her pussy, feeling how wet she still was, wanting inside. Too bad he was so damned clumsy with it...

Good thing he could always count on Chas, one hand wrapping around his prick and guiding him home. Oh, fuck. Yes. Hot and wet and slick around him, she took him in deep, moaning right into his lips.

Fuck. Josh surged up, pushing in, kissing her gratefully. His lady. So perfect. They moved together, rocking as the bus took a curve on an off-ramp, both of them panting, gasping. His cock opened her right up, rubbing inside, right where he wanted to be, and Josh felt his balls draw up, his belly and ass go tight.

“Yes...” She nipped his ear lobe, gasped. “Fill me up.”

“Oh, God, Chas.” That was it. That was all she wrote. His eyes rolled up and he let out a holler that made the dogs bark, hips just snapping as he came so hard he saw stars.

She kissed him, arms wrapping around him as he settled against her curves. “So good.”

“Yeah. We're good together, honey.” They were. That was that.

“Mm-hmm.” She sighed, the sound happy. “Night, love.”

“Night.” Nuzzling in, Josh settled for the night, happy to have her with him. Maybe this whole damned tour would turn out all right after all. A man could hope.

Chapter Eleven

She headed backstage after the duet and the two or three others they'd added into the rotation, leaving Josh to his fans.

They'd been on the road three weeks and things just kept rolling and rolling. They'd been writing and working—they could do an album, if they wanted. They'd managed to start selling out, the crowds wild for them, for 'Home in Your Eyes'. The single had hit on the radio and Vic was, apparently, crawling up Josh's ass for a video.

Speaking of Josh... Chas grinned as she heard the opening chords to "Man in Love," Josh's latest number one.

The man was looking good, scruffy and male, wearing white tonight, jeans painted right on. Sounding good, too. She could hear the crowd, girls just screaming for that tight little butt.

She got almost to her dressing room when she heard someone calling her name.

"Chastity! There you are." The click of heels came clear, and that inkblot, Karyn What's-er-name came toward her, smiling and coifed and dressed to the nines.

"Hey, darlin'. Are you enjoying the show?" She was a little sweaty, hair starting to droop a little. Those lights were a bitch and a half.

"It's very competent. I thought I'd drop in. You never got back to me on that paperwork."

Competent? Weirdo. "I'm sorry, hon. Life's been a whirlwind. I haven't had time to breathe."

"Of course." The black suit was smoothed down Karyn's legs as Chastity received a critical once over. "You've gained weight."

"Pardon me?" She straightened up, gave Karyn a look. God damn it. The fucking label rode her, now this person who wasn't even *working* for her was? So she was actually eating twice a day and wasn't a stick figure...

"I said you've gained weight. Are you sure that's wise? I mean, I know you'll work some of it off by the end of the tour..." Oh, the bitch.

"Well, worse comes to worse I can always make an appointment and have it vacuumed out, right?" She needed a cigarette in the worst way and she headed toward her dressing room, just managing not to wince as she passed Leona Ritchie, the reporter for the *Nashville Insider*.

Damn it.

Karyn followed her, heels clicking. "Well, yes. But it might scar."

She nodded to Rick and Mackey, tour security, then headed into the dressing room, a dozen yellow roses on the table, compliments of Jeffy. Josh had a matching set in his room from Elise. She lit her cigarette and grabbed a bottle of water. "You're not watching Josh's set?"

"Oh, no. He's really too... oh, I don't know, Pre-Nashville sounding for me." Karyn sat in the guest chair, crossing her legs and looking prim.

"So why are you courting me?" She was about as redneck as they came, without being hillbilly. She caught sight of herself in the mirror. Damn. She was looking curvy.

"Oh I think you've had a good run under Jeff. But I think I could really make you

something, get you into the hall of fame.” She looked so... smug.

One of her eyebrows climbed right on up. Oh. “You think? You got something musically Jeff didn’t?”

Chas might just have to snatch the little bitch bald.

“I work with some of the best writers in the business.” Karyn gave her a lofty smile. “But what I really have is the right tools to create your new image. Make you a brand new woman.”

“And what if I like the woman I am? You able to work with that?” Okay, she was done. She was tired and sticky and covered in stage makeup and just wanted to curl up with her headphones and rest.

That put Karyn's elegant back right up. “Well, I don't see anyone else beating down your door. To be honest, the label doesn't like you being agentless. I'm doing this as a favor for them.”

She turned, pissed off as she'd ever been. “You see that door, little girl? Don't fucking let it hit you in the ass as you go. I ain't toed the party line since I started and I sure as *shit* am not a hand-me-down.” She tore across the room, yanked the door open. “I tell you what’ the day you make Charlie Baker a platinum record or a sold out tour or anything more substantial than a blowjob under his desk and a bunch of airhead blonds to chirp out pointless fucking pop songs? You let me know. Sue Ellen! Boys! Get this woman out of here!”

The security boys came running, looking surprised as anything, but they didn't question, just waited impassively for Karyn to gather up her tiny handbag and head for the door.

“You'll be hearing from the label.”

“I look forward to it.” The vase of roses crashed against the dressing room door as it shut, glass and water going everywhere.

Fuck. Fuck.

She crumpled down onto her chair, looking over at herself in the mirror. She was getting fat. Lazy. Old.

Sue Ellen opened the door. “What can I get you, honey?”

“Whiskey and my pills, lovely. In the bus. I have a headache.”

A big Karyn Cameron shaped headache.

* * * *

God, he was *pumped*. There was nothing like a really good show to get him revved up, get him as happy as a dog with three tails. Josh worked through the crowd to the exit, smiling and touching hands, the quiet as they hit the lower level where he'd meet the car almost deafening.

Took them forty-five minutes to get to the bus, and he was winding down a bit by then, but still looking forward to seeing Chas, to talking about the ideas he had for another duet. He was a little surprised she hadn't been at the arena still, but it had been a long week, and he really couldn't blame her for wanting a bit of sleep before he attacked her. Because he would.

Josh took the bus steps in too long strides, grinning as Mokie met him at the door. “Hey, girl. Yeah, we'll go walk soon. Chas? You here?”

Nothing but silence met him, the little folding door to the spare bunk shut tight.

Sleeping hard, then, but she'd taken to sleeping with him, all warm and cuddly...

There was a knock on the bus door, then it unlocked, Sue Ellen popping her head in, bleached curls bobbing. "Hey, Mr. Haley. Just wanted to warn you, Miss Chas had a real bad night; we had to remove someone from her dressing room. Mr. Jeffy had us give her two Valium and a couple three shots. Hopefully she'll be out until tomorrow. You need anything?"

"Oh. No. I'll just take Moke for a walk before we head out. Is supper in there?"

Damn.

"All ready for you. Chas sort of... threw hers." Sue Ellen shook her head, grinned. "I left aspirin and ice packs for her in the morning."

"Don't fucking talk about me like I'm not here, Sue Ellen!" Chas stumbled from the bunk to the bathroom, swaying dangerously.

"Sorry, darlin'. I thought you were sleeping." Sue Ellen shook her head, hid a grin.

"Hey, honey." She looked awful. "You going back to bed?"

Those blue eyes looked up at him, furious and pissed and sort of... scared. "That woman said I was fat. I weighed myself—five pounds. It's ridiculous. She's calling the label. She... That reporter woman heard her too. Tomorrow it'll be everywhere!"

Oh, man... Chas could *scream*.

"Thanks, Sue Ellen. See you tomorrow." Josh waited until the door hissed shut behind her, then went to grab Chas to shut her up. She was making his head hurt. "You're not fat. I'd wager that five pounds is as much muscle as anything. You've been working too hard on stage for me to believe it's fat."

"Five pounds is five pounds. She said no one wanted me, that she was doing the label a favor. I mean, fuck, JC. How'd I go from being a headliner to being a pity case?" She swayed a little, eyes rolling. "Oh. Oh, better let me go. I'm gonna be sick."

He let her go, watching her race back to the little lavatory. Fuck. He got his cell, called Sue Ellen, who he knew would be waiting, lurking somewhere out there in the dark.

"Whatcha need, Josh?" Yep. Right there.

"We have two off days after this, right? And our next date is where?" They were in... fuck. Kansas City?

"Three days, the Omaha date got moved back and split into two shows."

Lord, sometimes things went his way. "Good. I want off this bus. Get us a hotel. Send the busses on and we'll fly to Omaha."

"Okay. Give me an hour, are you a limo person or a drive the rental car type?"

If they had three days? "I'll take the rental. Make it an SUV. Thanks, Sue Ellen."

"You got it, sir." God, the woman was amazing. A machine and vaguely terrifying, but amazing.

Chas came out of the bathroom, white as a sheet. "Sorry."

"S'okay, love." Oh, he was gonna have a talk with Jeffy. It was so not all right. But he wasn't gonna take it out on her. "How about we get off this rig?"

"Off? Where... where we going?" It made him feel damn good, the way she nodded, willing to come with him, no worries. It was good to be on the same side.

"To a hotel. With a hot tub. And massages. And big old beds." Yeah. He could so handle that.

"Oh. 'Kay. No press, huh? Just us for a couple days." She blinked over, swallowing

hard, just white as a sheet. "When? Should I pack?"

"If you want anything, you tell me or Sue Ellen now. We're leaving as soon as they get us a car. We've got two days with a third for travel."

She broke his heart, with that lost look.

"Jeans and t-shirts. Swim suit, maybe. I just want to rest with you, JC. Just you."

"Good. You can even bring the mutt." He guided her back to their closets, grabbing a bag and stuffing in jeans and t-shirts and stuff.

"Him and Moke were playing this morning, did I tell you?" She sat, watched, just sort of leaning. "It was plumb cute."

"You didn't. And I didn't see it." He grinned, moving around her, packing away, getting the leashes for the dogs. "And I'm looking forward to this, honey. Man, I want a bed that doesn't move."

"Did you tell Sue Ellen to get plane tickets for the pups?" Oh. Smart woman. Of course, he grinned when he called the tour manager, the tickets already bought. Damn. She knew Chastity.

The rental car pulled up outside just about the time he hung up. "That Sue Ellen is scary."

"Uh-huh. What I wouldn't give for her." Chas rubbed her forehead, got the fuzzball into the little bag that went on her shoulder, got the leash on Moke. "Christ, my head hurts."

"That cocktail they gave you must have been one Hell of a strong one." He left it at that. He was on the wagon, not her. He'd have to deal.

"Yeah. Jeffy sorta took care of that part. It's all legal. I should just sleep, but I got sick."

"Love, you're just stressed and shit." He put an arm around her, kissed her. "Come on, lady-love. Let's take some time off."

She nodded, cuddled into him. "Sounds like pure Heaven, lover. Pure Heaven."

Chastity and a hot tub and a few days off? Sounded like Heaven to him, too.

Jeff? Would take some Hell later.

Chapter Twelve

She woke up to a pounding head and a sick belly and promptly took some aspirin and some water and some vitamin B and headed back to curl up with Josh. When she woke up the next time, Chastity felt damn near human.

The bed was lush; the sun was just warming things up. Coffee and a cigarette and she might be able to face the day.

Josh moaned a little in his sleep, hand coming out, groping. When his fingers found her skin he smiled, relaxing back into his pillow.

Oh. Oh, that was...

She reached back for the pad on the bedside table, started scribbling.

I was dreaming that I'd lost you

Was cold and all alone

Yesterday an empty vessel

Tomorrow an unknown.

Woke up brokenhearted

Reached out without prayer

My fingers found your sweet skin

My future lying there

I saw the sunlight on your pillow.

I saw a smile cross your face.

I saw my ring upon your finger.

Sleeping beauty, let me kiss you when you wake.

She took a few notations, scribbling out a melody, eyes traveling over Josh's face.

Josh blinked, eyes opening up, so dark they were almost black. Sleep cloudy. "Hey. Y Y You went away."

"Mmm... no, JC. I'm right here." She tossed the paper aside, leaned down to lick at those warm lips.

He hummed, hand sliding up her back to pull her head down all the way, deepening the touch to a kiss. Oh... She snuggled right in, rubbing along all that warm skin. She was in a tank top and panties, but Josh slept naked. Always had. It had made for some awkwardness more than once when Jeffy had interrupted them, or that one time that the restaurant downstairs from Josh's little walk-up had caught on fire.

He pulled her close, sliding her tank top up and off, lips moving down over her neck.

Her chin lifted, letting him taste what he wanted. It sent chills through her, the scrape of his stubble, the heat of his lips, the way his teeth threatened.

"Love your skin." The words fell against her collarbone, hot and damp with Josh's breath. "Love how you feel."

"Oh..." Her eyes closed, just floating on the sensations. He made her feel beautiful, sensual, fine.

"Love the way you taste, too." His tongue dragged all the way down her sternum, his teeth taking a bite out of the top swell of her left breast.

"Oh. JC. Love you." The words left her and she bit her bottom lip. Shut up, Chastity. Christ.

"Mmm. Good. I missed you, you know. Even when you were snarling at me that first day, I was so glad to see you..." He bit her again, harder this time.

She moaned, gasped, his words, his teeth making her hot and melted, nipples aching, they were so tight. "Hungry man."

"I am." His lips closed over one nipple, sucking it into his warm, wet mouth, tongue flicking across the tip.

The cry that left her was low, needy. Her hands buried in his hair, held him close as she rubbed and rocked against his thigh, her panties irritating now, keeping them apart.

"Chas. Oh, honey." He slipped a hand between them, pushing at her underwear, trying to get to her even as his mouth kept moving, sliding across to tease her other nipple, tormenting her.

She helped to slide them off, hips raising up as she wiggled. She wanted him. All of him. Everywhere.

As soon as she settled back, he rolled them, pushing her down on her back and sliding on top of her, his cock rubbing her hip. "Want you."

"Take me then, cowboy. I'm yours." She met his eyes, hands sliding over his shoulders.

Josh smiled down at her, eyes dark, hot as he spread her thighs. The broad head of his cock probed, pushed, slid right inside her. "Fuck. Good."

"Uh-huh..." Chas hooked one leg over Josh's hip, tugging them tight together. He fit inside her just right, thick and hard, spreading her.

He rocked into her, setting a rhythm that reminded her of an old Johnny Cash song, chugga chugga. Okay, maybe she needed more coffee. Or maybe Josh made her silly. One way or the other, the laughter left the minute he bit down on her throat, and moved just right...

"Yes!" She bucked, nails digging in a little, rocking faster, aching for it.

"Love..." He pushed in so deep... so deep, hips moving in short, sharp bursts. It was almost a surprise when she came, eyes rolling, body going tight and hot.

Above her, Josh went still for a moment, then groaned deep, hips slamming her as he came deep inside her, cock jerking. He slumped on her, breathing hard, hand stroking her side.

"Mmm...mornin'." She nuzzled against his throat, licking and kissing, just breathing him right in.

"Morning." He looked up at her, grinning around a yawn. "Now that's the way to wake up."

"You know it." She kissed his nose, his forehead. "Sorry about melting down last night, JC. That woman was pure evil."

"Yeah. I'll call Vic, get him to get them to call her off. We'll figure something." He kissed her neck. "And I'm gonna ream Jeffy."

"Jeffy?" She tilted her head, confused. "What does he have to do with anything?"

"He's the one who taught Sue Ellen to give you Valium cocktails, yeah?"

"I guess. Yeah. I get sorta stressed and they usually knock me right out. Jeffy's doctor writes all the prescriptions."

Every muscle in Josh's body went tight, but he didn't say anything for a long while. Then he just shook his head and kissed her. "I've got a better way to beat stress, love."

She chuckled, thought about pointing out that that never worked for Jeffy. Of course,

Jeff never did for her what JC did. Never had. Not to mention spending two days off with a pissed off man wasn't near as fun as a happy, horny one.

"So. I say coffee, breakfast, and hot tub."

Chastity almost nodded, then stopped herself, Karyn's words coming back to her.

"Just coffee and hot tub for me, JC. I have to fit in my jeans and I've been indulging."

He gave her a look but just nodded, rolling away to pick up the phone. Oh, she knew the obstinate set of his chin too well, even after not having seen it for years. She figured he was playing dirty when he ordered pecan sticky rolls from room service along with eggs and bacon.

She lit a cigarette and called down to the concierge and had them send someone to come walk the dogs and get them some food, the beasts curled up together, nose to nose. God, they were cute.

The dog walkers and the food arrived at the same time and oh, it smelled good. Mean asshole. Chas took a long look at that bare back, ass in those old jeans. Mean, but fucking fine asshole...

Josh sat down at the table and lifted covers. "Come on, honey. We can go for a long swim in the pool later, work it off. After the booze and the pills you need something or you'll get ulcers." Damn him. He knew yelling wouldn't work, so he was going for puppy dog eyes.

"Oh, that's cheating..." She headed over, slid onto his lap when he held his arms open.

He gave her a kiss, rubbing noses with her. "Well, I got news for hoity toity manager woman. You don't look good skinny skinny. You were meant to be curvy. I love it about you." He nuzzled her neck, licking at her skin. "I don't want you to get sick, honey."

"Mmm..." Like she was going to argue with him when he was making her melt. She stroked Josh's hair, just enjoying being there and still and quiet a minute. Just enjoying Josh.

They shared a pecan roll, because he didn't give her any choice. He just fed her bites, and kissed her with sticky sugary lips, smiling at her when she would have refused another bit here and there. He made her forget why she was supposed to say no.

Of course, licking those callused fingers clean was fun, sitting and snuggling and just being with her man? Even better. She was going to have to watch that thinking, too, or she'd find herself without an edge and without her drive and her career wouldn't be worth shit.

"Chas? What? What's wrong?" Petting her suddenly stiff back, Josh turned her face to his. "What?"

She surprised herself by tearing up, blinking, looking into those warm eyes. "You make me happy, Josh. You make me feel settled in my soul."

"Oh." He blinked, a shy, pleased smile spreading. "Is that a bad thing? I love you, lady-love."

Oh.

She leaned down, took a taste of that smile, heart damn near hurting it was so big in her chest. "Oh, God help me, but I love you, JC." She grinned against his lips, holding on tight. "How am I supposed to be the queen bitch of Nashville if I'm busy being in love?"

"I'm sure you'll work out a schedule." He yelped when she pinched him, smacking her ass. "We'll figure it out, honey."

"You watch it, stud. No marks. This skin belongs to the label." She chuckled, tweaked a nipple. "This skin, on the other hand... I think I'm going to put a bid in."

Gasping a little, Josh leaned up for a kiss. "It's all yours, honey."

She framed his face with her hands, thumbs stroking his jaw as she took that kiss, tongue sliding in to kiss her man—her man, damn it and the world could just file a fucking complaint.

The ring of her cell phone sounded, distant and aggravating, even as the knock came on the door. "Dog walker returning Mokie and Chachi."

"Damn. I'll get the phone, you get the door?" She slid off Josh's lap, grabbed her purse. "Io?"

"Chastity Hopewell? What the fuck have you done?"

She blinked, frowned. "Jeffy? What do you mean?"

"There's pictures of you all over the damned tabloids this morning. Saying you and Karyn got into a fistfight. That you're pregnant. That you're a druggie. That you were seen leaving the tour."

"That *bitch*."

Josh got the dogs in, Mokie wrapping him up in the leash so bad it would have been funny if she wasn't so furious. "You tell that little whore if I so much as see her backstage again I swear to God I'll beat her to death with a roadie."

When Josh finally got untangled he came over. "What?"

"Besides that, I didn't leave the tour. We decided to spend a couple days off the road, chillin' out. Relaxing."

"So you two are a thing again?" She could see Jeffy's pout, the hurt in his eyes.

"Yeah." She looked up at Josh, searching that face. "We are."

"Son of a bitch."

"Don't go there, Jeffy. You left me. It's not like I'm cheating on your ass."

"Jeffy." Josh held his hand out. "Gimme."

"Huh?" She handed the phone over before she really thought about it. "Why?"

"Jeffy? We're taking a few days off. If there's a problem, call Vic and y'all get it straightened out." He put an arm around her, pulling her close.

Oh, he was warm. She kissed his shoulder, his jaw. She could hear Jeffy going on and on, bitching and hollering. Jackass. "We have a date with a hot tub, JC."

That twinkling smile was worth a hundred tabloid headlines. He nodded. "The diva wants to go soak in the hot tub, Jeffy. And I think that's the best idea ever. I'll talk atcha later."

She giggled as he hung up her phone. "Oh, JC. You? *So* need a pink sparkly phone of your own."

"Yeah, yeah. Don't make me hurt you, lady-love." He laughed, twirling her around.

She threw her head back, happier than she'd ever been. "Shaking in my boots, baby. Just shaking."

"Oh, I can tell. Come on, that hot tub is calling."

Even a month ago she would've been freaking out about tabloid shit. Now? She was just ready to forget it and play.

Oh, Hell. Looked like a certain, dark eyed picker was just what her soul needed. Amen. "I'm right with you, JC, with bells on."

* * * *

They had one more night.

Josh had turned off Chas' phone, had told the desk to hold their calls. All they had to do was love and swim and eat and play in their private hot tub.

They slept. They recharged. And he was feeling almost human, except that he didn't want to leave.

Josh sighed and took Mokie's bone away to throw it. It was time for the hot tub again, obviously, if he was thinking. He sure did like that tub.

He stood, taking Moke to her crate, making sure the mop with teeth was in his as well. No sense tempting fate. Then he wandered over to where Chas was scribbling in her little notebook, taking off his shirt and tossing it across her hands.

He got one of those smiles, slow and burning, sweet as honey and twice as good. "Oh, look at this... shirts just falling from the sky..."

Fuck, she looked good. Relaxed and dressed in nothing but his favorite button-down and panties, that fire-red hair loose and tousled.

He grinned huge and started on the buttons of his jeans, opening them up and pushing them down. Oh, now. She actually licked her lips, nipples going hard, thighs rubbing together. The jeans hit the floor with a soft thump, and Josh wiggled his hips a little, giving her a show. Hell, he performed all the time for thousands of strangers. Giving his own biggest fan a little private view couldn't hurt.

"Let's hit the hot tub, honey." He turned, giving his ass a little extra flex as he headed for the little hot tub patio.

Her hands were on his ass before he could step into the tub, the soft cotton of his shirt contrasting with the stiff heat of her nipples where they rubbed against his back. "You are one fine man, JC."

Fuck, he loved how forward she was, how eager. He never had to wonder if she wanted him, never had to ask. Josh rubbed back against her soft body, practically growling with how good it was. "You think?"

"Nope." Those soft, sure hands slid around his belly, down to hold his cock, his balls. Chas started licking his spine, lips parted and brushing his skin. "I know."

The long muscles in his thighs jumped, and his belly went tight. The way she touched him...

"Oh, honey. Good."

"Mm-hmm..." She started stroking and rubbing, sweet little husky voice vibrating along his skin as she started singing for him.

He spread his stance, giving them a more solid foundation. "Lady, you'd better watch that if you want some of it."

"I want." She nipped his shoulder, fingers circling the crown of his prick and tugging, so lightly. "I want all of it."

He went up on tiptoe, his cock jerking and leaking. "I want you too, lady. In the tub."

Those fingers slid through the liquid on his shaft, then disappeared, a soft moan sounding right after. Then she stepped back, and he heard the sound of fabric falling to the floor.

Turning, Josh caught her, sliding an arm around her waist to pull her close. Every soft curve of her body just plastered against his, and Josh drew in a deep breath, fighting his body's wild response. She pushed up on her tiptoes, brought their lips together. Her mouth held the barest hint of musk and salt and he knew that was him, him right on her

tongue.

His own moan echoed loud in the room, and Josh lifted her, staggered the few steps it took to press her against the wall, and started rubbing against her, his cock just searching for her soft pussy. She hummed right into his lips, legs wrapping around his waist. His hands stayed put on her tight little ass as she reached down, rocked and tilted and guided him right home. Damn. Damn.

Hot, wet, she just opened up so he could slide right in, seat deep within her. Josh gritted his teeth, squeezed her ass, and pulled her up, letting her drop back down again right after, teasing them both.

“Oh. Shit. Baby. Do it again.” She was flushed, nipples tight as stones. Those eyes were fastened on him, blue as a summer sky.

“Yeah.” Arm muscles straining, Josh lifted, dropped, lifted, dropped. Fuck, that was good. He kissed her, so hard, needing to feel her. She pushed right into the kiss, so fucking hot, shaking all around him and squeezing him like a vise. They pushed, rocked, rough moans coming out of his chest. “Love. Love, please.”

Chas nodded, eyes just rolling. “Gonna. Close. Josh...”

Fuck, those sounds could make a eunuch come. With his cock buried deep inside her and his balls full to bursting? He wasn't that for sure. Josh just lost it, coming so hard his vision shorted out, calling Chastity's name.

“Missed. Missed the hot tub.” Chas was moaning, head rolling as she panted against him.

He laughed, sagging as he held them up. “Think how good it's gonna feel now.”

Chas laughed, the motion squeezing him. “Almost as good as you.”

She untangled from him, took her own weight, swaying just a little. He put an arm around her, hauling her to the hot tub. His legs were just shaking. They sank in, and he groaned.

Then he hooted. “What would Vic say if I said we wanted one of these on the bus?”

“Wanted, my ass. Need. We need one of these, JC.” Chas chuckled, toes wiggling. “Hell, I was stupid and had mine done in the spa. Your bathtub at home? Heaven.”

“Yeah. Whirlpool bath. We'll demand it from our next promoter.”

“You know it. Whirlpool bath and a better sound system.” She winked, snuggled close. “I'd like to write an album with you, JC. We're good together.”

“We are. I love the way we fit. I'll play and write on your album any time, lady-love.” He could make a living on it, he'd bet.

“Well that's not hardly fair to you, JC. Vic wouldn't go there anyway. We'll have to split it up. Half yours, half mine.”

He'd thought on it and thought on it, and the last few weeks had really made it come to the fore. Maybe he should see what she thought. “I... well, honey, I'm thinking of retiring.”

“Retiring?” Her eyes went wide. “You're young, yet. Hot. One of the finest pickers I know.”

He searched her eyes, seeing pure panic. Shit. “Well, I'm not gonna quit music. Writing. Playing. But I'm tired, Chas.”

“That seems to be going around.” She reached out, stroked his face. “How can I make it better, JC?”

“Oh, honey.” He pulled her close, kissed her cheek. “You make it better every day.”

You got no idea how close I was to throwing it in after that last album reviewed so poor. You've been keeping me going."

"I liked it." She ducked her head, turned a pretty pink.

"Yeah?" Oh, that was... "Thanks, love."

"Well... I... Oh, shit, Josh. You've never come out from under my skin."

"I hear you." Even when he wanted to hate her, he couldn't. He could act like it, had acted like it. But he couldn't. "Maybe we can be a duet for a while."

"Jeffy'll have a stroke. Silly bastard. Did I tell you Chachi was a divorce present from him?" Chas shook her head, grinned. "That man is a loon. Elise is real nice though."

"I reckon. I've not talked to Jeffy much in years." He missed the way they used to be sometimes, but he was different now, older. Hopefully wiser.

"He's still the same as always. Hell, if it hadn't been for the urge to have a baby, I'd be in real moral danger right now." She shrugged a little. "Never was fire and need between me and Jeffy. Never was going to be, but he's a good friend and everyone says he's a saint for putting up with me."

Josh snorted. "He ain't no more of a saint than I am."

Chas giggled, goosed him. "Well, God knows I'm a pure angel..."

She fluttered those eyelashes, all chuckles and grins. Little shit. Pretty, pretty little shit.

"Honky Tonk angel, maybe." God it felt good to be with her, low down in his belly. "And all mine."

Chapter Thirteen

The pure bliss from their vacation lasted for about two days back on the road. That was about how long it took the first roadie to sell out and start snapping pictures of their bus, of the mussed bed, of a stolen kiss in the wings, of Chastity half dressed getting her hair done.

Sue Ellen was running herself ragged, trying to go-between the constant phone calls from the label and Vic and Jeffy. Josh was getting plumb growly and making noise about wanting to go home. Mokie was whining all the time and Chachi was losing his hair.

Chastity sat on the little sofa, watching the lights go by, smoking one after another, head just pounding.

How did things get so good and so bad all at once? She was with the man she loved, singing the music she loved. How did doing that make such a fucking mess?

Josh was sleeping, or maybe just pretending to, curled up in the little couch with his guitar in his hands.

Beautiful fucking man...

Her phone rang and she almost let it go, but it was a familiar number—her sister Kathy—and she picked it up. “Hey, love.”

“Chastity Jo! Tell me everything!” Her sister was all laughter and excitement. “Did you really hit a suit?”

“I did *not*.” She giggled, lit up another and headed to where she wouldn’t wake Josh up. “But some of the rest is true...”

“You’re pregnant?”

“Bitch. Am not.”

“Josh, then?”

“Uh-huh...” She laughed as the squealing started up again, Kathy just hooting.

“You *slut*. You’ve always loved him. Admit it.”

Chas slid on top of the little, fold-up dining table, legs crossed. “So what if I did... It’s better now, Kath. Better than it ever was.”

“So did y’all work out the whole ‘gee, he slept around and you married his best friend’ thing?”

She snorted, shook her head. “Shit. What good would that do? Doesn’t matter now if he liked that little slut or not. God knows she’s not working in Nashville now.”

She and Jeffy’d made sure of that. Whore.

“Well, if nothing else this sure has stirred up a lot of press about y’all.”

“Yeah. I need to find a new manager. One of us needs an album to carry the duet. I need to... Did you think I looked pregnant?”

“Well, you look more... round. But it’s a good look for you, sweetie.” Well, at least that wasn’t a “you’re getting fat.” But it was close.

“Round.” She closed her eyes, rubbing the bridge of her nose. She’d call that doctor of Jeff’s tomorrow. Have him call her in something to help. “How’re the girls doing? Enjoying kindergarten?”

“Yeah. They’re independent women now, just like their Aunt Chas. Honey, is everything okay, really?”

“Oh, shit, Kathy. I don't know. I've never been happier or more scared in my whole goddamned life. Part of me wants to curl up in Josh's arms and just stay. Part of me is screaming that I'm going to get stupid and happy and fat and satisfied and lose my career.” She lit another cigarette with shaking hands. “Part of me wants to beat that Karyn bitch to death for putting the plastic surgery-fat bug in my brain.”

“Chas honey, skinny frigid bitches like her are just jealous. Don't you listen. If you're happy, you can work it out.” Kathy was always so optimistic.

“Yeah? I love you, Kath. It feels like forever since I've been home.” It had been two years on Thanksgiving. “Hell, I don't even know where I am.”

Kathy chuckled. “On your way to Oklahoma City or Denver...”

She laughed out loud, tickled.

Behind her, Josh snorted, guitar strings twanging. “Chas?”

She jumped, sliding, damn near falling off the table. “Yeah, JC?”

“Izzat the phone?” Oh, bless his heart he sounded all of five. She'd bet he looked rumpled and worried.

“My sister, Kathy. She says hi.” She put out her cigarette and scooted off the table. “You want some water?”

“You tell that man we expect him to bring you home for Christmas.”

“S okay. I'll get us something.” Josh moved around, opening the little fridge, getting them both bottles of water.

She wandered over, just needing to touch, to feel him. “We'll talk about it, Kathy. I need to let you go.”

“Okay, honey. You keep in touch.”

Kathy hung up after a few more goodbyes, and Josh smiled at her, handing over a water. “So how's Kathy?”

“She's good. The twins are in kindergarten. She's following the press.” She drank deep. Damn, she was thirsty.

Josh's frown was fierce. “Fucking leeches.”

“Yeah. They make us and then feed on our asses forever.” She reached up, stroked his lips, sighing a little.

He kissed her fingers, licked them a little. “What, honey? Something's got a burr under your saddle.”

“I'm just thinking too hard. It's evil work, being an independent woman.” Hard as Hell, too.

“Yeah. I hear you. But we'll figure it.”

We. She liked the sound of that. “Yeah, we will.”

“You're not fat.” He'd been saying that to her a lot, ever since the one tabloid had really manipulated a photo of her on stage so she looked enormous.

“Kathy said I was just a little round.” She stepped closer. “You going to get mad if I call Dr. Jenkins and get some diet pills?”

That was not just a frown; it was a glare. “Yes. Lord, woman, you hardly eat.”

“I eat twice as much with you around as I did before, JC.”

He tweaked one nipple through her shirt. “Well, we work twice the food off as you did by yourself too.”

Her nipple went hard and tight and she gasped, grinned. “And how do you know that, JC? What if I had a deep, active relationship with a vibrator?”

"It's a scientific fact that two bodies generate more heat, burn more calories." Josh tilted his head, a considering look on his face. "But I'd pay to watch that."

"Josh Haley!" She held the outraged look for a minute before she giggled, popped him on the butt. "Like I'd make you pay."

"So you'd do that for me?" He was laughing, rubbing his butt, just looking as fine as a man could. Looking worth all the trouble.

She must've turned forty-seven shades of red, ducked behind her hair. "I... Would you really want to see me do that?"

Damn, cowboy.

His cheeks went red, his eyes hot. "I would watch you shave your legs and get fucking hard."

"I can remember a night, a long, long time ago, where you watched me shave something in the tub..." She winked, pressed close, flirting like mad.

This? Way more fun than worrying.

"Oh." Those eyes just burned. "Yeah. Jesus."

Chastity brushed their lips together, shivering a little, tingles and heat building in the pit of her belly, familiar and welcome and so good. "Or when we fucked up in the projection room when you worked in that little theater?"

"Or you giving me head in that little place you waitressed at your first year in town?" Josh panted a little, hands sliding on her.

"Mmm... You bent me over that back booth more than once after closing..."

"God." He grabbed her, kissed her. "I could do that now."

She nodded—fuck, he made her hot, wet, the look in his eyes burning into her. "You could."

The balance between teasing and serious shifted, just like that. Josh stood, grabbing her and pulling her up, kissing her hard before turning to bend her over the little dining table booth they had. "Like this?"

Her nipples dragged along the table, shirt rubbing. Her thighs spread, ass tilting up. "Oh..."

"God, you look hot." His hands slid under the shirt, grabbing her panties and pulling them down, pushing them down her legs, cheek rubbing against the small of her back.

She shuddered, electricity zipping right up her spine at the zing of that stubble against her skin. The brush of air against her wet lips made her buck a little, moan low. "Oh. Oh, damn. You make me need."

"Good." There was a wealth of satisfaction in that simple word. Josh nibbled her skin, sending shivers up and down her back, giving her goosebumps. He stroked her thighs, pushing them open, thumbs pressing against the tender insides.

A low sound poured out of Chas, her teeth sinking into her bottom lip. Her thighs were shaking a little, anticipating Josh's touch, his cock.

He spread her wide, telling her, "Stay right there." She could hear him working the button and zipper on his ancient jeans, could feel his heat, just before the head of his cock pushed against her wet pussy.

"Oh. Damn." She went up on her toes, hands grabbing the edge of the table. He filled her right up, like he was meant to love her, meant to fuck her and drive her crazy.

Josh slid right in, his hips against her ass, his breath hot on her neck as he leaned over her back. "You feel so fucking fine, Chas."

That rough, raw sound made her shiver, made goosebumps rise all over her. “Josh. Made for you, huh? Nothing like you.”

“Me. Mine.” He rocked into her, hips just banging against her, hands hard on her to pull her back. He bit her lightly, nuzzling under her hair, licking under her ear.

“Uh-huh.” Her eyes went wide, a gasp escaping her. She’d kick his ass, he gave her a hickey.

Kick his ass or come. Either way worked.

He bit her instead, teeth sinking in deep, and he was surely gonna leave a bruise. Her hips snapped, his name ringing through the bus, want sparking into need just like that. Her body shifted, trying to push him, make him fuck her harder, faster, push her over the edge.

“Yeah, honey. Yeah.” He reached around, slid his fingers against her as he moved harder and harder, teeth just scraping.

“Oh. Oh, Josh. I...” Her eyes rolled, entire body tightening up, breath gasping from her, cries just pouring out of her.

Josh grunted, smacking against her once, twice more before shooting deep inside her, his voice rough and deep as he hollered her name. “Chas. Love.”

Oh. Wow. And damn, too, just for good measure. She fought to catch her breath, just feeling so good.

She felt Josh struggling for breath, felt his arms shaking as he tried not to collapse on her.

“Damn, honey.” He chuckled. “Good thing we’re nowhere near a photographer, huh?”

The laughter just bubbled out of her. “Can’t you see the headlines now? Sexy guitar player uses duet partner to buff table, more inside!”

“Oh, I’m sure they’d rather see your pretty round ass before they would my old skinny thing.” Josh eased up, pulled her with him, both of them collapsing on the padded bench.

“Shit. You’re fine, JC. Always have been.” She snuggled close, let him hold her. “Always.”

“So are you, lady-love. Promise me no diet drugs.” He held her close, cheek against her hair, sorta humming a melody. A new melody. Oh, it was good.

She got lost in the sound, let it wrap her all up and make things easy. “Don’t stop, baby. That’s fine.”

“I need my guitar.” Grinning, he shifted her over, grabbed his guitar and started playing it out. Oh, yeah. That had a fine sound. There had to be a lyrical hook for it. She grabbed a quilt and her notebook and suddenly they were working again, both of them doing their thing, all the bullshit and press and such just...

Nothing.

Nothing at all.

* * * *

“Chas?” She frowned at the cell phone, growling as she tried to wake up. What the fuck? “Chastity Jo, wake up and talk to me.”

“Jeffy?” She sat up, stretched. “What?”

“We need to talk, baby. You’re getting dragged through the tabloids. You have to

tighten it up a little honey. Not much. Five pounds. Ten. On your frame it shows.”

Well, hell. Good morning to her.

“Ten pounds? Jeffy, I’ve only gained six.” She slid out of bed, away from Josh’s warm arms. Christ. “You saying I’m fat too?”

“Of course not, baby. You’re beautiful. Those cameras just are evil to a woman and they’re riding you hard.”

“It’s damn early in the morning to be hearing this shit, Jeffy. For real.”

“You need to do it. That Karyn woman knows people. You want me to fly in a personal trainer? A nutritionist? Some diet pills? What?”

“No. No, I don’t need anything. I’ll lose it.” She looked in the mirror, fingers tugging up at the corners of her eyes. “I’ll lose it. See the plastic surgeon over the holidays. Nip and tuck and what-have-you.”

“You sure? I can get you something for energy.”

“It’s okay, Jeffy.” She’d made promises to Josh she wasn’t about to break. “I’ll lose it. I promise.”

She would.

“Good girl. I know it’s tough, but it’s almost over and y’all are doing good.” Jeffy chuckled and she could hear dishes rattling in the background, the baby laughing. “You getting enough rest?”

“When you don’t call, yeah.” She crawled onto the sofa, lit a cigarette. “I do. You sound perky.”

“I got good news yesterday. Elise is having another baby. We’re all real excited.”

“Tell her congrats from me. Look Jeffy, I gotta go. I need a shower.”

“kay, baby. Call me if you need me.”

She hung up, sat there for a minute and had a good, long cry before she hauled her ass to the shower.

Chapter Fourteen

They'd made it through a whole lotta setup and breakdown. Through playing and singing until his fingers hurt and her voice sounded like raw hamburger when she tried to talk. They'd made it through Chachi having the runs so bad they'd papered every surface of the bus and through Mokie losing all of the hair on one ear from nervous scratching. They'd made it through Chastity eating nothing but fat-free cottage cheese and spending hours sitting up instead of sleeping, fighting some phantom five pounds.

They'd even made it through some girl throwing herself at Josh on stage and humping him like a horny puppy. While she was naked.

Well, they'd mostly made it through that.

Chas was furious, ready to tear someone's hair out, and he thought for sure it would be his, as he was the close one. Except Sue Ellen had hustled Chas off while he was still signing autographs, and by the time he got back to the bus, she was halfway through her third lowball glass.

Josh saw red. "Where's Sue Ellen?"

"Hmm? Outside managing shit. 'S what she does." Chas swayed just a little, subdued, quiet.

"I'm gonna kick her ass. And then Jeffy's. And then maybe yours." Goddamn it.

"You leave her be. She's the best fucking tour manager on Earth." Chas frowned.

"Wha's wrong?"

"You. Honey, look at you." Blinky, slow, slurring her words. Fuck if it wasn't the saddest thing ever. And it made him mad. Furious.

"What?" She looked utterly confused, lost. Christ, did she even know what they did? Did she ever even ask?

"Lady, they're feeding you a drug cocktail whenever you get pissed. Come on, that's not right." His gut felt like it was all tied in knots he was so fucking angry.

"It's not illegal, JC. Jeffy handles it. There's a doctor and everything. It's just... I get so tied up."

Sue Ellen's knock sounded at the door, "Y'all need anything before we hit the road?"

"Yes. Yeah, I do." He went to the door, yanking it open and stepping out, closing it behind him. "We need to talk. Somewhere no one is likely to take pictures or something."

"You okay, Josh? Is Chas alright?" She led him over and back into the equipment van, shut the door. "She should be heading to bed soon enough."

"What the Hell are y'all doing to her? That can't be good for her, Sue. I'm going to wring Jeffy's neck."

"Two valium, three shots of whiskey. Half a flexeril if it's real bad. It's enough to calm her down, make her sleep through the night. Jeff's always been real clear. It don't hurt her."

He wanted to fucking scream, but Sue Ellen was just another dupe. Doesn't hurt her. Jesus. No, Valium could just be fucking addictive. And mixing it with booze?

"No more, sweetheart. Okay? She needs to be allowed to feel. She's...Jesus, she can't even write. She can't think. It's bad enough she doesn't eat, now y'all just make her a zombie."

"You... You'll take it up with Jeff if he gets pissy?" Sue Ellen nodded, maybe even looked relieved. "I've worked hard to get where I am, Josh. I don't need to get a reputation."

He put a hand on her shoulder, squeezing. "I'll take on Jeffy any day. You just...ease off. Hell, give her a sugar pill or something if she asks. You're not gonna be hurting on this."

If there was anything he understood it was the need for security.

Sue Ellen nodded. "I didn't mean any harm. She just gets so... Rattled. Restless." He got a little chuckle. "Loud. Jeffy didn't want to deal with it. Didn't want anyone to hear her throwing a hissy fit because she was bored and lonely."

"Uh huh. That's why they broke up too. Come on, sweetheart. I need to get on that bus and you need a good night's sleep."

Sue Ellen chuckled, nodded. "They broke up because Miss Chas is too much filly for that rider to saddle. Always has been."

"Yeah." Jeff was a good guy, but the business had soured him somehow. Josh sighed, running his fingers through his hair before hopping out of the van. "You have a good night, Sue."

"You too. There's apple juice in there for her. I tried to find the low-calorie stuff, but I couldn't. Maybe she could dilute it?"

"Thanks." Dilute juice. Christ. Rubbing the back of his neck, he headed back for the bus, deflated a little, but still ready to rumble.

The music was on when he walked in, the water running in the back, the glasses left behind on the table, whiskey bottle gone.

Oh no. She'd drown herself. Josh flew back there, pounding on the door. "Open up, honey."

He heard her, heard a quiet murmuring, a splash.

"Come on, Chas-lady. Let me in." Damn it. Come on, come on.

The door opened and there she stood, naked and wet, blinking at him. "Damn it, JC. I was all comfy. You okay? You sorta... Disappeared on me."

Stifle it, he thought. Just let it go. "I went to talk to Sue Ellen. Come on, let's finish your bath."

"Ev'rything okay?" She drew him into the little bathroom, the scent of berries heavy in the air. "Christ, I'm tired."

"It will be." Josh helped her ease back down in the water, still amazed at the shit they could fit on buses now. There was a little spongey thing, so he grabbed it and started washing her. "I'm just having a fit is all."

"Anything I can do to help?" She smiled up at him, traced his face. "Did I do something wrong? I didn't even beat that woman to death for touching my man."

He grinned back, lips moving under her fingers. "I admire your restraint, lady-love. All we'd need is you in the jailhouse for assault."

"Well, I hear you can't get a good manicure in the pen, JC. Still," He got a serious, long look. "I still don't share. Not even a little."

Lord knew he knew that, from before. This time though he was ready to settle. "I know. I don't want anyone but you, Chas. I swear. This time I know what I got."

"Oh." Those pretty eyes just filled up with tears, hands fluttering. "Oh, damn it. I. You got me flitterpated."

No, that was the drugs and the tired and the booze. He scrubbed her back slowly. “S okay, honey. ’S alright.”

She leaned against him, tears flowing a little, just wore plumb out. “Yeah. Yeah. Two days ’til the next show, huh? A little time?”

“Uh huh. We can sit. And eat something not off the catering cart. And nap and play catch with the mutts.” God, it killed him to see her this way. But he knew how she felt. He was tired to the bone.

“You know it. Maybe do some picking and playing, just us. That was as close to heaven as I’ve been, Josh.”

Oh. He gave her a kiss for that, lips lingering on hers. “Yeah. Oh, honey. Just to putter around with that, maybe note down a few of the riffs I’ve got in my head.”

“Yeah. Yeah. You ready for bed yet? I’m feeling a little swimmy.”

“I bet.” He helped her up, worried she’d slip and fall. Wrapping her in a huge towel, he led her out to the bunk. “Better?”

She nodded, swayed, eyes already closed. “Yeah. Yeah, love. Better.”

“Good. Come on to bed, honey. Let’s sleep it off. We’ll worry about everything tomorrow.”

He’d call Jeffy and blister his ears.

“Tomorrow is another day.” She giggled, crawling into the bunk and holding her arms open for him.

“It is.” Josh stripped down and snuggled in with her, the fantastic air conditioning on the bus making goosebumps rise up. They’d work it out; he wouldn’t accept anything else. “Love you. The rest is just so much bullshit.”

She nodded, cuddled. “Love. Night. No more worrying.”

“Nope. Just sleep.” Yeah, like he wouldn’t worry. Sure he would, until he got it through to all of them to leave off the better living through chemistry. But he’d do it. Tomorrow.

* * * *

Oh, damn.

That set had *rocked*! The audience was right there, the band tight, everything just perfect. Just fucking perfect.

Then she got flowers in her dressing room and a huge basket of apples and walnuts and the local president of her fan club was a sweet little pregnant girl that managed to be interesting and excited without being irritating.

Chastity bounced down toward the bus, bundled up in a sweater, the night air crisp and cool and autumny. Luscious.

“Man, that was a great set.” She wandered in, giving Moke and Chachi scratches. “All I need is a cigarette and a drink. You sounded dead-on perfect, JC.”

He lit two smokes and handed one over, giving her that sideways look that said ‘hi’ and ‘hoo yeah’ and ‘you look good honey’. “You were right out there, honey, rocking my world.”

Chas just beamed, took a drag and chuckled. “Man, nights like tonight remind me why I do this.”

“Hell yes.” Bouncing on the toes of his boots, Josh sucked down half of his cigarette, his eyes squinting against the smoke and showing off his laugh lines. “Fucking A, lady-

love. That was good.”

“It was.” She stood and grabbed a couple of glasses, humming around the butt in her mouth. “You want something, JC?”

“No. And neither do you.”

“What?” She arched an eyebrow, looked over her shoulder, sure she hadn’t heard him right.

Looking just shifty as hell, Josh grabbed a bottled water. “You know I don’t drink much anymore. How about you do me a favor and not wave it under my nose?”

Oh. She blushed dark, embarrassed down to her bones. Christ, Chas. Way to be an insensitive bitch. “Fuck, Josh, I’m sorry.”

She grabbed Chachi’s leash, “I’m going to take the little one out to run around right quick.”

Around to the band’s bus for a quick one.

The water bottle smacked down on the little table by the couch, hard enough that water sloshed out. “Fine. You go do that. Tell the boys hi for me.” Josh snarled it at her.

It was like getting dunked in ice water after the good heat of the concert, of the singing, the shock of it making her a little sick to her stomach. “What the *fuck* is wrong with you? What did I do?”

“Not a goddamned thing. It’s just lowering to know you like your whiskey more than you want to hang around with me, is all. You think I don’t know Chachi gets a walk every night at nine-thirty?” His back told her as much as his words, stiff and tall, turned square on her.

“You son of a bitch.” First he accused her of flaunting it, then fucking loving the booze. “You self-righteous little prick! Getting pissed at me because I wanted a fucking drink. Not to get fucking drunk. Not to get shitfaced! One motherfucking drink!”

He turned on her, face set in hard lines. “Until Sue Ellen gives you the next Valium and Jack cocktail. Jesus, you think I don’t know what it’s like? Fuck, Chas.”

And that? Hurt. Yeah, God for-fucking-bid she take something to help her sleep. God knows she didn’t get to eat. Didn’t matter that the doctor knew, that she didn’t even *know* where the fucking pills were. Rage just filled her up, white-hot and as real and huge as the pleasure of singing, of hearing those folks sing her songs. “Know what what’s like? I watched you drinking yourself under the fucking table for *years*. Watched you go balls-up for every fucking little hussy you saw. Watched you prove that I wasn’t worth more than another back-up whore and you think one fucking drink’s anything like that?”

She made it over to the liquor cabinet and tore the doors open, wrapping her fingers around the first bottle she found and sending it flying, the crash satisfying as all get out. The sound of the second bottle hitting the top of the little fridge was even better.

“I think you think it’s one fucking little drink, but I’ve seen you, Chas. You can’t even focus your eyes!” Glass crunched as he rushed her, trying to get her away from the ammunition.

“You’d better fucking pray...”

CRASH.

“...that I can’t focus...”

SLAM.

“...or that I’ve lost my aim from all those years of softball!”

THUD.

Damn, the last one before she had to scramble and retreat hit the little sofa thing, not breaking a bit.

Growling, he got an arm around her waist, grappling for her hands. "You surely missed with that one."

Oh he was *not* laughing at her.

"Wasn't fucking aiming for your hard head!" She slapped at him, twisting and fighting him for all she was worth. "Bastard!"

"You know it. When it comes to you I'm an overprotective, double-standard dealing bastard. Chas!" His breath went out as her elbow connected with his middle, and he dropped her like a ton of bricks, staggering back.

She landed on her ass in the midst of the mess, breathing hard, damn near sobbing. "I'm not a fucking drunk."

"I know that, honey. I just don't want you to be, either." Eyes closing, Josh leaned back against the couch, rubbing his neck.

"Don't want me to be? Fuck a duck. You've never seen me drunk-drunk. You've seen me take the pills the doctor gave me what? Twice? So I have a drink. Shit. A girl needs something in her stomach."

"So eat a cheeseburger." Looking old-old, Josh hauled himself to his feet. "They're trying to make you not you, honey. Just so they don't have to deal with you. And I hate that. You go ahead and have your drink. I'll see you in the morning."

"Fuck you." She drew her knees up, put her cheek on them. She should have known better. Nothing as good as tonight could stay up; it had to come crashing down.

She heard him sigh, felt his knees brush her arms as he knelt in front of her. "I'm sorry, lady. I should have just kept my mouth shut. I won't bother you with it anymore. Promise."

"I'm not a drunk. All these years, all the shit I've been called..." The tears started, hot and wet. Oh, hell's bells. Come on, Chastity Jo! You are *so* not sitting here crying over this man. Not. She slammed her hand down on the floor, crying out as a piece of glass got her.

"Shit! Oh, shit, honey. Don't do that. Come on. Get up and let me clean this up. You can cuss me out all you want, but no hurting yourself."

That man ran hot and cold faster than a shower in a fleabag motel. Always had. Damn him anyway. He was lifting her now, half carrying her away from the glass. "I know you're not, honey. I know. Okay? I just...here. You sit. I'll clean."

"What the fuck do you want with me? What do you want me to do?" She stumbled, glass falling off her jeans. "What is going on here?"

Josh lit up another cigarette, searching through the tiny cabinets and cussing. "Where the hell is the broom? I want you to. Hell, I don't know. I just get scared. Fuck. Goddamnit! What do they think, we're helpless?" The last cabinet door slammed so hard it bounced back, the latch shattering. "Why the fuck don't we have a broom?"

"I don't know." She stripped off her jeans and started scooping chunks of glass into the trash with them so the pups wouldn't get hurt.

"Stop. You're gonna cut yourself again. I'll get Sue Ellen to get us something, okay?"

"Better me than you, jackass. My hands aren't worth a thing to anybody." She was a singer. He's the one made the guitar sing.

"They are to me." He grabbed her, hauling her up to look him right in the eye, like

she was some kind of rag doll. "All of you is. Don't you get that?"

"I don't get *anything*. What is it? What's wrong that you're bouncing like a fucking kangaroo rat on speed?" Did he not want to be with her? What? This whole thing was just crazy-making.

"Oh, lady. Tonight you were on like I haven't seen you this whole tour. Just boom. Made me hard, right there on stage. And all I could think was how they've changed you, all of them. The damned photographers and reporters and all. Jeffy. Tonight it was like none of them existed."

"The business changes us all, baby. Balls to bones. I can't stop that. I don't know how. The business..." She sighed, shook her head. "We work and we work and sometimes there's a night where it's right. You trying to tell me it's different for you?"

"No. It's just that I missed seeing you like you were tonight. Without even knowing it." Josh blew out a breath, shaking his head. "I'm not making any sense. I'm sorry honey. I didn't mean to. Well. I'm sorry."

"Go take the dogs out, yeah? I'll get Sue Ellen in here and then..." She held up one hand, little cut bleeding on the base of her thumb. "Then I'll either kick your ass or let you kiss it and make it better."

"Okay. Okay, yeah. I'll be back, honey." He got Chachi, carrying her little baby over the glass, and hauled Moke out from under the little driver's chair, taking the dogs out. He never said another word, but she could see it all written on his face.

By the time he came back in, she was done cleaning and done crying, the little spare bits of glass washing down the shower.

There had to be a fucking song in this shit.

There had to be.

Chapter Fifteen

Chas had been... well, understandably distant.

Jesus, he didn't know what had come over him about that stupid bottle of Jack, but he'd gone nuts. Something about the way she'd sung that night lit a fire under his ass, and he just made a jerk of himself.

'Course watching her throw bottles had been better than watching her drain them.

Still, four nights later she was hardly coming near him, even on stage, and he'd read the Nashville News online, he could see the wind blowing.

So Josh pulled out the big guns. He told the band to change up the rotation during the finale, tossing in one of their old, old songs, "Fever For You." Unusual as Hell, he knew, but their band were fucking troopers, and probably as sick of the tension as he was.

The opening bars had her mouth falling open, and oh, what a look. She'd probably kill him when the show was over, but it was worth it. Worth every second.

To give his lady credit, she stepped up to plate, moving around Jimmy and into the spotlight, giving up the harmony as they slid into the chorus. They'd written the song together, way back when, lying bare-naked in a tiny little cheap-assed bed.

He sang his heart out, played his ass off, just putting everything he felt into it.

Her eyes were fastened on him, huge and sparkling, shining like he was the only person on Earth, the only person she saw. Fuck, it made him feel ten feet tall and hard as a rock. He hoped to God no one could see the stiffy. Thank the sweet Lord for guitars. He played the chorus one more time, walking over to her, seeing only her. Seeing her just like he had when they wrote it, all red hair and pale, naked skin.

She looked up at him, glitter on her face catching the lights, husky voice almost moaning out the last words as she sparkled. Shone. For him.

The band held the last note for an endless moment and the screaming crowd rose to a fever pitch that matched the song lyrics and Josh went for it. He pushed his guitar to his back and let it hang by the strap, grabbing Chas and planting one on her, kissing her breathless.

Chas gasped and then just melted against him, those pretty, painted lips just giving it up before the lights fell, the crowd wild around them, pressing. "Oh, God. JC. Offstage. Now."

"We're supposed to have one more song." But the crowd didn't know that, since they'd broken the pattern, and he gave the band the hand circle that meant wrap it up, hauling Chas with him. They'd come back out for a bow. In a minute.

She stayed plastered beside him, close enough he could feel her heart beating, could smell her, all woman and warmth. She just panted, little sounds just brushing his jaw.

As soon as they were out of sight he grabbed her ass and lifted her against him, kissing her again, tongue pushing in. Just throwing good sense to the wind.

Chas didn't seem to mind one little bit, soft curves pressing right where they belonged as she let him in and in and in. The kiss went on and on; she tasted like cigarettes and mint, and like that last song. Like fever. Josh moaned, his hips rolling uncontrollably. Her fingers were in his hair, pulling him closer, little cries fed right into his mouth. Her nipples were rubbing against him, one leg wrapped around his hip.

“Chas. God.” All he wanted to do was push her down on the floor and have at her, but the stage manager was waving at them, mouthing words. Josh groaned.

“A bow, a wave, then you take my ass somewhere and give me what you're promising.” Her eyes snapped and sparkled, hips grinding against him.

“Mmm. Okay. The bus is a good place.”

He could do that. Maybe. If he thumped himself. “Come on, honey. Let's do this and go. I need you.”

“Uh-huh. Bow. Wave. Run. No autographs. No interviews. No making nice.” She tossed her head, laughed. So fucking beautiful. “Let the fucking press wonder.”

The way he was panting for it, he figured he'd snarl at anyone who tried to stop them, so that sounded fine as frog hair to him. He dragged her back out on the stage, waving to the crowd, holding her hand, not about to let go.

Chas waved and then threw kisses, muttering under her breath. “Come on. Come on, cowboy. You started this, finish it.”

He grumbled, “They paid their ticket...” Finally they got the nod from the stage manager and Josh hauled Chas right back off again, storming the crowd down the back walkway and heading for the limo that would take them to their bus.

She landed sprawled in the limo, black leather pants hugging those curves, glittery top cut all the way down to there. Sex on a stick.

Josh pushed in and sort of flopped on top of her, so not sexy, but he needed too damned bad for finesse. “Oh, honey. Yeah.”

She pushed his hat off, one heel pressing into the back of his thigh. “You know how to get a girl's attention.”

“That was the idea, lady-love. Just to get you to look at me. But that song. Oh, honey we still got it.” He kissed her throat, the perfume and sweat going to his head, making it spin.

“Some things never change. Oh. Some things a woman needs.” Her fingers curled, nails scratching as she shifted beneath him. “Some things I need.”

“Love.” Pressing down, he rubbed against her, needing. Some things he needed too. Damn.

The limo stopped and she laughed, sliding out from under him, standing. Oh, man. His eyes were at that low-slung waistband, lips right where they'd need to be to make her scream, make her hold his head and beg for his tongue. “Come get me.”

She led him on a hell of a chase, stopping only to give the puppers some love, but he tackled her back at the bunk end of the bus, hauling her to his bed. It was bigger. “Gotcha, lady.”

“What're you gonna do with me?” She laughed, head tossing, thighs parted sweet as a Sunday pie supper.

Josh rubbed, right there, his denim and her leather making the hottest squeak. “I'm gonna love you into a puddle. Been thinking about this. Dreaming about it.”

“Oh...” She moaned and arched right up into him, curves molding to him and making offers. “I like how you dream, JC. C'mon. Touch me.”

“Mmmhmm.” He started with her stubborn jaw, the skin velvet smooth under his lips, even with the stage make-up half there, half sweated off. Her throat came next, even as his hand slid up and down her body. Waist to hip and thigh, then back up to pull at that little top.

She moaned low, then pulled away and sat up, tugging at some of the criss-crossed ties holding the shimmering little thing together. Oh. Oh, damn. It started sliding as she untied, the fabric clinging to her breasts, then exposing a little more and a little more and a little more.

“Tease.” A mighty tug revealed the rest to him, and Josh moaned, reaching out to touch. God, her skin. It sounded corny, but it really was like cream and honey.

She leaned forward to work his buckle open, dark, hard nipples pushing into his hands. “Damn. Damn, love your hands, baby. How you play me.”

“You remember that old flat top you got me back in the lean days? Still have it. After, well, the whole mess I would take it out and play and think of you.” His thumbs worked in circles, rubbing the stiff little peaks until she cried out for him, even as he lifted his hips so she could slide his jeans down.

She sobbed a little, one hand circling his prick, the other sliding down to cup his balls. “Just tell me we’re solid. That I’m where I belong with you, yeah? I lost my place once, spent too long searching for it again.”

Fuck, he was an idiot. Josh spread, straddling her good, letting her at him. “We’re good, honey. So good. I was just being an ass. Oh. Feels right.”

Those hands knew him, pulling and tugging, drawing out sensations that sent him flying. “Just looking out for what’s yours, yeah?”

“Hell, yes. Mine.” Lifting her with both hands, Josh bent to lick and suck at her breasts, starting with the tops where they plumped up, the tender skin there bruising so easily. Then her nipples got his attention, each one giving under his tongue before springing back even harder. All the while he fucked her hand, hips just pumping.

Chas just sang for him, nipples swollen and ripe against his tongue. Her fingers pressed hard into the slit of his cock, the burn making him hiss, making his teeth drag against her and she shuddered. “Again!”

If it got him that noise he’d do it until doomsday. Josh licked and sucked before scratching his teeth across the sensitive skin again. His cock just leapt every time her thumb moved, every time her hand squeezed.

She shifted, her pussy hot as blazes, even through leather and denim where she ground against his thigh, riding him in time with her touch.

What the hell was he doing, not getting them all the way naked? Josh reared back, kneeling up over her. God, she looked hot, spread like that under him, tits all rosy. He struggled with his shirt. “Want. All of it, honey.”

“Uh-huh.” She worked the buttons, fingers fumbling, clumsy. “Fuck, why didn’t I pick easy access?”

Throwing his head back on a laugh, Josh got rid of the shirt and stood up to shuck his jeans and boots, damned near killing himself in his hurry. Then he moved to help her. “We haven’t been... Well... Talking, honey.”

“You want to talk? Now?” He peeled the leather off her, the scent of wanting woman hitting him square.

“We can jaw later. Right now I want to taste...” He started just under her breasts, the scent there musky, performance sweat and her perfume mingling. Then he worked down her belly, loving how it swelled just a bit, despite the ruthless dieting.

“JC...” She spread for him, head tossing, those pretty lips parted and wet. “You’re going to melt me deep.”

“Good. Then you'll be soft and hot and ready for me.” Her soft red curls brushed his chin as he moved ever lower. A man could live a lifetime on that sound, that pretty little cry that meant 'yes' and 'please' and 'love' all rolled up into one.

Josh spread her, fingers pushing against her until she was open and bare for him. Then he bent to taste her, his lips and tongue sliding against her wetness.

“Love!” Chas tossed, thighs shuddering and shaking for him. She reached down, fingers tangling in his hair, tugging him closer.

Wild. She tasted wild and rich, his mouth wet with her as he pushed his tongue inside her. His fingers kept moving, searching out her clit and playing it. He could feel her, tensing and relaxing, body responding to his touch like any good guitar. Addictive. She was addictive. Josh licked, loved, his hips humping air.

“Oh, God. Fuck me. Josh, come on, please? I need you, baby. Please.” Chas' fingers hurt as she tugged at him, breath panting from her. Eyes watering as his scalp was pulled, he nodded, taking one last swipe before pushing up over her, his hips spreading her thighs ruthlessly. His cock nudged her, pushing against her folds, seeking.

She bucked up, fucking herself on his cock, another of those cries given up. Oh, hell yeah. Just like that. His fine lady. Nothing slowed her down, and she took what she wanted. Surging forward, Josh rocked his hips, letting their bodies slap together, their skin wet with sweat and her moisture. He moaned, the sound like a song, a fucking love song to his Chas.

“Yes.” They rolled, those thighs straddling him as she rode, dancing on his prick. Oh. Oh, hell yes. What a view.

Bouncing, jiggling...damn. Josh cupped one heavy breast in his hand, the other hand on her hip, pushing her on, faster and faster. “So pretty, honey. So sweet. Gonna blow soon.”

She nodded, head tossing, that gorgeous red hair tumbling everywhere. “Yeah. Yeah. Close. So close.”

He pinched that pink nipple, knowing how she liked some pressure. Head falling back, Josh snapped his hips, his back and ass straining as his balls drew up tight and hard. “Chas. Lady. Please.”

Her hips snapped, grinding down, a flush covering that pale skin and turning it rose. Oh, hell yes. Right there. Holding it as long as he could, Josh watched, saw her face go tight and her eyes cloudy. Then he lost it, his cock throbbing inside her as he shot, his ears ringing with the force of it.

She just slumped down onto him, panting. “Never going to wear those pants again without getting wet.”

His body gave one last feeble twitch. “Then you'll have to wear 'em a lot. We can't end on that song too often, though.”

“No.” Oh, God. He could feel her ripple around him, squeeze his cock. “No, we'll get a reputation.”

She was gonna kill him. Josh laughed. “We've got that, honey. For sure.” Stroking her back, he settled in, listening to Mokie whine outside the little door. “We'll just have to keep them guessing.”

Chapter Sixteen

The road had been... brutal at the end. Chas was the one good thing in a string of bad, from the damned second bus breaking down to the fucking photographers that never gave up. Just never gave up.

Josh felt hunted. He was tired. Exhausted, in fact, so much so that he'd lost almost ten pounds and had dark circles under his eyes that wouldn't quit. Chas gave him a raft of shit about it, in fact, because to her it seemed like every pound he lost, she gained. Josh knew it wasn't true, but Lord, who could blame the girl after the increasingly snide tabloid stories about her weight? Those people were vicious. She'd finally stopped eating, stopped sleeping good, just got more and more faded.

After the tour finished up Josh had fully intended on sitting down with Vic and talking retirement. He'd intended on bringing Chastity to his house, love her again in his bed after they'd both slept some. Intended a lot of things. Somehow instead they had a live duet album at the presses and Vic had roped him into his least favorite thing in the world.

Doing a video shoot.

So here he was sitting in a chair with some chick trying to cover his dark circles with makeup, and he finally snarled at her, coming up out of the chair and going for a smoke break. Figured Chas would beat him to it, 'cause there she was.

"You know, I really don't see why they couldn't use live footage from the damned tour."

Chas shrugged, eyes covered by huge dark glasses. She looked exhausted, pinched sort of, grey and gaunt, wearing all black. "I think they're talking about bringing in actors, just having us sing. I don't know."

He wanted to put his arms around her, hold her, but the place was too public. That was the other thing getting to him. With all of the assholes just waiting with their camera phones, they had to be careful. "That'd be better. I'm pooped."

"I hear that. How's Mokie? Glad to be home?" She lit another cigarette, visibly wincing as the director hollered her name. "Guess it's time to work."

She shouldn't have to look like that. Not ever. Josh sighed, hot boxed his cigarette and tossed the filter away, cursing his burnt fingers. He went back in, watching as the music cued up, as Chas started moving about the sound stage.

The director was yammering, Chas just quiet, watching, nodding.

A hand fell on his shoulder, Vic standing beside him. "Y'all look tired. How goes it?"

He almost snarled, 'We are tired,' or even, 'fuck off,' but this was Vic, so Josh just snorted. "Exhausted."

Vic nodded. "Press has been on y'all like white on rice." He looked across at Chas, eyes calculating. "She don't look that bad."

His hands clenched into fists. "She looks good, damn it. Why the fuck does everyone want to starve her to death? You know how awful it is to live on cigarettes and coffee, Vic?"

"No one made her choose this life, son. It's a hard one for the girls. She makes her

money on her body as much as her voice, you know that. Great singers make good backup singers for stars.” Vic just shrugged. “She needs to get herself solid management. Jeff set her up okay and is hanging on, but the label’ll take her for what they can and that Cameron woman’s dragging her through the dirt.”

Josh nodded, eyeing Vic. “You know anyone?”

“I might.” Vic was a mercenary son of a bitch, but he knew the business. “Jeff spoiled the shit out of her, but she can sure deliver a song.” Those crafty eyes slid over to look at him. “Rumor has it maybe she can do more than sing...”

“What the fuck does that mean?” Josh wheeled on Vic. “You’re as bad as the fucking papers. I’m sick to death of it. You got something to say about us, you say it, Vic. I ain’t dancing with you or anyone else about this. Means too much to me to have her back, finally.”

“Pardon me, son?” Vic gave him one of those pissed looks that could bring men to tears. “I was talking about the rumors that she’s a damn good lyricist, asshole. That maybe she’s more than a pretty singer. I don’t much care who she fucks. Hell, y’all get married? It’s great press for the both of you.”

“Oh.” His cheeks heated painfully. “Sorry, Vic. So many folks are just making cracks... yeah. We’ve got half an album written.”

“No shit? Good stuff?” At his nod, Vic hooted. “That’s news I like to hear.”

The director’s voice snapped out and Josh heard one of Chastity’s high-heeled boots slam into the stage. “I will *not*.”

Vic grinned. “You want me to wade in?”

“Would you, buddy? I just... I can’t hack that man.” Josh rubbed his neck, stopped himself just in time from spitting on the floor like the redneck he was.

“My pleasure. I love playing with these Hollywood types.” Vic winked and started roaring. “What the hell are you doing to my singers, boy? Can’t you see Miss Chastity is getting upset? You know how much pain you’re in you make her holler and screw up those pipes?”

The guy just looked stunned as Vic ripped into him, and Josh went to Chas, feeling better than he had all day. “Sometimes I remember why I keep him around.”

“He’s very good at that.” He got a smile—a real smile, Chas stepping close. “I miss you. I’m tired, JC. Real tired of all this shit.”

Hell, yes. “So am I, honey. What do you say we go to Mexico?” He was only about half joking. As soon as it came out of his mouth he thought it was a good idea.

“Oh, man, I wish... That sounds like heaven. Days and days of sunshine and sand and quiet and you and me and a couple of guitars...”

“Oh.” Man. They’d finish the video; he didn’t back out on anything. But then they had some unscheduled time. They were supposed to meet with the label. Josh would just have a word with Vic. He smiled hugely. “Can you pack up quiet-like? Just enough to get there? We’ll shop for tourist clothes.”

Those pretty blue eyes went wide, then that smile went white and bright, his lady-love just shining through all the tired. “No shit? Honest?”

“No shit, lady. I want you, for more than a few nights in a hotel.” He wanted to get to know her again, felt like he had to every time they moved from one career nightmare to another.

She nodded, cheeks pinking, and how could anyone say she looked bad, looked less

than pure sexy? “Yeah. I can be quiet. You tell me where to meet you; I’ll be there.”

Vic’s hollering started winding down. “Now you treat my people like the stars they are or I’ll rip off your arm and beat you to death with it.”

One red eyebrow went up, Chas chuckling. “His people?”

Josh nodded. “He’s worried with that woman what’s-her-name crucifying you, you’ll be hurtin’ without up-front management. He said he might know someone.”

“Yeah? He... I mean...” She blushed dark. “I haven’t ever had anyone but Jeffy. I don’t even know what all he did.”

“I know, honey. But Vic knows. And he’s on good terms with Jeffy. He can work with him.” He turned as Vic walked up. “Right, buddy?”

“You know it.” Vic smiled at Chastity, held one hand out. “You don’t let those guys bully you, honey. You worry about singing and playing and I’ll bluster and holler.”

Chastity chuckled, took Vic’s hand. “You will, huh? Thank you. It’s been a long few days.”

“So I hear.” Vic looked from her to him. “All right, boy. What’s got you grinning like a dog with two tails?”

The man knew him too damned well. Josh looked around carefully. “I want you to do us a favor, Vic. When we’re done here I want you to cover for us. We’re taking a vacation.”

“You just let me know where and Miss Chastity, I’ll need you to tell Jeffy it’s good to come talk with me so I can do some business. Y’all are owed a few weeks.” Vic nodded, smiled. “And I want you to seriously think about giving up the smokes, honey. They’ll kill you and I just got Josh down to one a day.”

Chastity chuckled, shook her head. “I don’t know about the smokes. The rest I can do.”

“I’m working on her, Vic.” God, he was feeling better already. “Thanks, Vic. I mean it.”

“Yeah, yeah. Go on, now. Make money and sing for the cameras.” Vic winked. “You need arrangements made or are you doing it?”

“I’ll do it. I’ll let you know where we are, but no calls unless it’s absolutely necessary.” He clapped Vic on the shoulder, put a hand on his lady’s ass. “Let’s go, honey. We got a video to make.”

“You think?” She stepped right up, kissed him in front of God and everybody. “Let’s go, JC.”

“Yeah. Yeah, let’s go.” God, they needed to get this video over. He had a vacation to plan.

Chapter Seventeen

Oh. Wow.

Salt.

Sand.

Sun.

Wow.

Chas leaned back on the lounge chair, just baking away weeks of stress and shit. They'd arrived in the middle of the night, taken a car out away from the tourist's traps and to a sweet little, super-private bungalow on the beach. They'd curled together, exhausted and alone and free for the first time in weeks, just crashing on the big old bed.

She'd crawled out into the sun around ten in the morning, fell promptly back to sleep, waking only to untie and retie her bikini top when she turned.

Bliss.

A shadow fell over her who knew how much later, and she blinked up against the sun. Hoo yeah. Josh in a pair of low slung trunks. "Brought you some water. And some lotion. Last thing I want is for you to burn. I got *plans* for you, love."

"Mmm... gonna slick me up, JC?" She turned over again, untied her top, before reaching out, fingers sliding against Josh's thigh, tickling the dark, curly hairs.

"Hell, yes. You know I like you all slick." The man sounded about as self-satisfied as any man could.

She stretched out, grinning like the Cheshire cat. "This? Was the best idea you've ever had. Well, this and "Lost Cowboy Waltz"."

She loved that song.

"Yeah?" Oh, that word sounded even more pleased. She could ride that with him for not just sunblock, but massage. He rubbed oil into her back, stroking, petting, lingering on her skin.

"Oh... I been wasting my time with that Bennie... Barry... Buddy... That big Swede Bea hired to rub me down..."

His fingers dug in just above her ass, and Josh growled. "No big Swedes. You need a massage, I'm your man."

The growl made her shift, the touch made her wet. "You know it, JC. Mine, and I aim to keep you."

As long as she could, God willing.

"Good." He pushed the heels of his hands into her asscheeks, massaging the muscles there before moving to her thighs, thumbs pressing the insides, opening her. "I'm just jealous enough to get mad over a Swede."

She spread for him, toes curling. "His hands never made me wet, JC. Never made me need."

"Do mine, lady-love?" His thumbs slipped down a little more, brushing against the seams of her bikini, lifting it just enough to play along the edge of her curls.

"More than damn near anything..." She spread a little, giving him room. Damn, what he did to her. Always had, from the night he'd walked into the cafe she was working in, the two of them ending in the back booth of a bar, playing tonsil hockey, her riding his

fingers like a barrel racer.

Oh. Damn. That was a fine, fine memory...

"You're so hot, honey. So ready for me. Makes me fucking hard every time." Yeah, yeah, he was hard all right. She could see the bulge in his trunks out of the corner of her eye, making a tent right at the placket.

Chas reached out, fingers just ghosting over that heat, tapping the tip just a little. "Nothing like being with you. 'S like nothing else."

Josh moaned, hands stuttering on her skin. "Oh, Chas. Love it when you touch me. Never was anyone like you. Not before, not after."

She sat up, left her top behind, cheek sliding on the hardness hidden by those trunks. Her hands slid up his thighs, up to pet those velvet-soft balls.

"Jesus God, Chas." Josh immediately reached down to touch her, slick hands sliding on her shoulders as deep, rough sounds came out of him. Her favorite song.

"My cowboy. My man." Her lips brushed over his lower belly, tongue slipping and sliding against the salty skin. "Need you."

"Oh..." Josh just shook for her, his thighs trembling, the muscles in his belly jumping. He made her feel beautiful, made her feel like the center of the world.

"Yeah." She slid the waistband down, tongue slipping over the tip of that hard cock, tasting Josh's salt and heat. Her lips wrapped around the crown, tongue sliding around the ridge. Oh, yeah.

He just made that sound, the one that said she was hitting the perfect spot, and pushed against her, hips rolling. Oh, the sun, the wind, Josh—it was all so good, so right and she sucked harder, wanting Josh to know, to feel as good as she did.

He knew. She could tell he did by the way he touched her hair, her throat. His thighs shook, his hips moved, and she could feel the restraint he used not thrusting into her mouth. She just let herself touch and taste, relaxed and easy, her hips rocking in time with her mouth, fingers sliding over Josh's hips.

Before long they were moving faster, Josh panting, sweat beading up on him, just making his skin glow. Damn. Reaching up, Chastity rolled one hard, dark little nipple, squeezing it some.

"Oh. Love. Yeah. There..." He trailed off, but she felt the leap in his pulse, tasted the wet drops it caused, so she did it again. Josh just hollered, hips snapping, cock jerking in her throat as he shot.

She took him in, loving the soft noises pouring down over her, loving the way she could make him need, make him come.

"Chas. Shit, girl. You're something else." He swayed, hands clenching and unclenching in her hair.

She let his cock slip free, nuzzled the soft curls of his belly. She was humming, sort of purring, so wet she could feel it. "Just yours, yeah?"

"Just mine." He sank down next to her chair, hitting his knees and kissing her. "Love."

Her nipples brushed his chest and she groaned, pushing closer, lips clinging to his. "Yeah. Yeah, JC."

He touched her everywhere, hands sliding on her, fingers finding her nipples as his hand slipped between them. He rolled them, played them. His kiss just left her breathless.

He pulled sounds from her, made her sing—body and soul—like no one else, ever.

She held on, shaking. "Need. Oh, sweet fuck, you make me need."

Nodding, he dipped his head to take one nipple in his mouth, sucking it strongly as his fingers dipped into her bikini bottom, searching for the wet center of her. He slid one finger against her clit, low moans just vibrating against her skin. She arched a little, crying out, caught between mouth and hand, rocking, pushing, letting him drive her higher.

"Oh, lady-love. So wet for me." Another finger, then another slid against her as his mouth worked. His voice went sandpaper rough, husky, so good. He finally pushed a finger deep inside her, thumb pressing her clit, using her own wetness to slide back and forth on it.

"Yeah. Yeah. Josh. Don't stop. Need it." She moved with him, riding that touch, head thrown back as she tightened, squeezed. Needed.

He wasn't stopping, wasn't even slowing down, pressing another finger into her, teeth scraping on her breast. His breath was hot on her, his eyes hotter as he looked up at her.

"Come on, honey. So damned pretty. Wanna see you go crazy."

"Love you. Oh, sweet..." Her eyes rolled and she keened, Josh sending her over the edge, making her shake and fly and shiver.

"You blow me away, love. Just make me so damned happy." He looked happy, eyes all hot, cheeks flushed.

She leaned into him, snuggled close for a long, deep kiss. "Happy vacation, JC."

"You know it, love. I'm liking this already." They shifted around until both of them could fit in the lounge chair, like two peas in a pod.

"Oh, yeah." She cuddled in head on his shoulder. "This is just right, JC. Just what I needed."

"Hell, yes. We were both getting burnt out."

They'd gotten downright haunted around the eyes, that was for sure. She'd taken the biggest hit in the tabloids, but she knew Josh better than anyone, had seen the wildness around his eyes and mouth, like he was a horse about to break out and flat run.

She petted his belly, fingers drawing lazy circles and hearts and stars. "Don't think. Just need to be here with you, JC. Just need to feel for a while."

"Yeah." He shivered under her touch, stretched. "Just you and me, lady-love. That's the good stuff."

"You know it."

Sun. Salt. Sand. Her man holding her and loving her.

Just... wow.

* * * *

Time was getting short. Josh had enjoyed their vacation so damned much he could hardly stand the thought of going back. Chas was brown as a nut and looking happy and healthy, the hard lines around her mouth softened, the gaunt look gone. His own constant headache and gut ache was gone, too, and he felt... good. Right. Whole for the first time in a long time.

Vic would tell him he was a whiner. Tell him he had a life most folks would kill for. Hell, it was true, to a certain extent. And when he'd been young and hungry it was exactly the life he'd wanted. Now, though. Well, making music was still about the best thing in the world, but Josh was thinking there were a lot of ways to do it that didn't include

grueling tour schedules and music video directors.

He looked over to where Chas was all laid out, gleaming with oil and wearing just a pair of bikini bottoms.

She was going to freak out if he told her he was going to retire. She just was.

They'd had more fun than he could say—shopping and swimming, wandering through one little town after another. Chas was more fun now than she had been so long ago, smart and clever and interesting, going from in motion and awake and laughing and singing to melted and still and lazy in a heartbeat.

Those pretty eyes opened, sparkled at him. “Penny for your thoughts.”

She could still read him like no one else. Even just by the vibration in the air. “I was just thinking how good you look, honey.”

“Yeah? I'm feeling pretty damn good.” She pinked up right pretty, his tough woman such a girl in unexpected ways, from that pink phone to the chocolate bars at that time of the month.

“Good.” Maybe now was the time. She'd blow a gasket, but she was relaxed, happy. She might take it better. And it wasn't like he'd made a solid decision. “You know how I said I might retire?”

She tilted her head, nodded. “Yeah. I remember. You still thinking on it?”

“I am yeah. Just doing songwriting and playing for other folks sometimes. Maybe doing semi-retirement like those guys in ‘Alabama’, just touring a little bit once in awhile...”

Not that he was *that* big. But he just... he liked the time off so much.

“You're awful hot, JC. You able to afford to do that? Just let it go?” Those blue eyes watched him, curious, a little disbelieving. “You've worked real hard to quit now.”

“I don't know, lady. I just... I'm tired. I've never been so happy as I have been these last few weeks, just you and me... And I dread the thought of going back.”

That had to mean something, something he should listen to.

“You... You'll have spoiled me for touring on my own.” She sighed, shook her head. “You'll still play, right? Still make music with me sometimes? I just got that back with you...”

“Hell yes.” No way was he losing that now. No way. “Honey, I would tour with you the rest of my life. I just... it's too much, the way they want us to just go and go and go. I ain't getting any younger.”

“You're still the finest fucking thing I've ever seen.” Oh, sweet Jesus. When she said stuff like that, so sure, so serious, it just killed him.

He was up and reaching for her before he even *thought* on it, hands sliding on her exposed skin, savoring the sun-warmed expanse of her back. “You blow me away, Chas.”

“Josh...” She melted right into him, all wanting and easy, like she was made for his hands, his lips.

“Mmm-hmm.” He stroked her, explored her, feeling each bump of her spine, each rib, the hollows where her hips met her waist. “So fine.”

“Yeah? Still looking okay?” Those pretty eyes shone at him, teasing on the surface but worried down deep.

“Oh, Chas.” He knew it wasn't her. It was the media'd done it to her, made her doubt. Sometimes, though, he missed the sassy girl she'd been when they first started, who wore painted on jeans and never worried about eating brisket. “You're still the prettiest thing

I've ever seen. I think better now, you've grown into your looks."

"I..." She shook her head and grinned sheepishly. "Sorry, JC. I just am so used to everybody looking and judging and measuring every wrinkle like I'm a damn show pony and well, it matters to me that you like what you're seeing."

He turned her to him completely, kissed her hard. "I love it. I love you, honey. All of you."

Hell, he knew what she meant. He was that way about his songs. After a while you could only be called a hack so much before you believed it.

"Mmm... all of me, now? You sure?" He was in love with the freckles across her nose, almost invisible. "I've been told I'm a hard ass, got a sharp tongue."

That tongue slid over his lips, sweet as molasses. He opened, sucked her tongue in, loving the taste of her. She had a sharp tongue sometimes, but right now it was soft and sweet, and so was her ass where he gripped it, squeezing.

She shifted, slid right against him and started rubbing. "Getting used to doing this whenever, wherever. Under the sunshine."

"Yeah, love it. This has been the best... oh." Oh, God, he could feel her, her tiny bikini bottoms offering no protection at all between his skin and hers. Her hair curled around his arms as she tilted her head back, adding one more layer of sensation.

"Mm-hmm..." Her nipples were drawn up tight, dragging along his chest as they moved. He could smell her, all honey and musk and coconut oil, her skin just gleaming. He could smell himself, too, all heat and salt. God, they were good together. He reached down, wiggling just enough to get out of his shorts, working her bikini bottom down.

"You know... people'd say we're too old to want this much..." She chuckled, low and husky, and spread for him, legs sliding against his own, hot and smooth.

He just hooted. "We got a lot of time to make up for, honey."

"Yeah. Years." Her laugh tickled his jaw, fingers tickling down his back. "Should have beat that Jennifer woman out of my bed and stayed home like I'd planned."

Josh rubbed against Chas' lower belly, his cock straining. He hadn't even remembered that girl's name. He'd just been... scared. "You should have beat me too."

"Mmm..." She arched up against him, gasping a little as they moved together. Chas was wet, slick against the base of his cock. "Yeah. Hindsight. Got you now 's what matters."

"All yours, honey. I promise. No matter what else." He didn't care what happened, he wasn't giving her up. Josh moved, pulled, got them settled with her right there so he could push into her, his cock straining, the wet heat just closing so tight around him. Best thing in the world, his Chas.

She moved against him like pure fucking magic, her song floating up in the air. Every damned cry sounded like his name. He tasted her mouth, the skin on her throat, and his hands worked her, playing her like his favorite guitar. He touched her everywhere, from her thighs to her hips to her breasts, memorizing every line.

"Love you." The words were soft, whispered against his jaw, serious as a heart attack. He could feel her, squeezing and tight around his cock, muscles rippling.

Groaning, Josh thrust heavily into her, his cock jumping. "Love you, lady. So much."

Chas gasped for him, nails digging into his shoulders as she jerked, hips riding him. Breath coming short, Josh grunted, pushed up, his eyes rolling as he came, calling her name like it was the only song worth singing.

“Oh...” She just purred for him, close and clinging, lips brushing his jaw. “I could do this forever, JC. Just forever.”

“Marry me.” It just popped out, but he didn't panic, didn't try to take it back. Fuck. He meant it. Jesus.

Those blue-blue eyes went wide, searching his face. “For real? I mean, like 'til death do us part in front of God and everybody, for real?”

He nodded, clutching her like she might bolt. “God's honest. Let's get married, Chas. You and me. I want... I want that with you. I was scared back then. I'm not now.”

Her eyes got all sparkly and bright like she was fixin' to cry and his heart clenched, but then she nodded, arms sliding around his neck and holding on. “Yeah. Yeah, Josh. I will.”

“Oh. Fuck yeah.” He hauled her right up and kissed her, just about to bust. Shit. He couldn't believe they were doing this, but damn. Yeah. He broke the kiss, grinning like a fool.

“We could fly your momma and granny and Kathy to Vegas. Do it there. Nice and simple. Or back home, with the dogs. Or, Hell, here, now, on the beach.” She reached up, traced his lips. “I love you, JC. Don't matter much how we do it, so long as you're with me.”

“Let's do it here. We can spring it on Vic when we get back, give you and my momma a big, girly wedding in a few months. But let's do it now.” Josh wanted that. It wasn't so much a possessive thing as it was... just wanting it. Wanting her to know.

“You have to let me go into town and buy a dress. A girl deserves to have a new dress when she gets married to the man she's in love with.”

“And flowers.” Tracing her cheek, loving the flush blooming there, Josh grinned. “You should have flowers.”

Oh, that smile...

Men had gone to war for less than the look on his lady's face.

He kissed her, patting her ass and laughing. “How long will it take you to get ready to go shopping?”

“Half hour.” He got a wicked, wicked smile. “Forty-five minutes if you interrupt me in the shower.”

Hoo yeah. “Well I do have all this sand and oil...” He hopped up, pulled her up to. “Come on, honey. We got some marrying to get to.”

He hauled her in, got them in the shower and got lost in the feel of her skin, happier than he'd ever been in his life.

* * * *

The last day and a half had been completely insane—a mad dash of arrangements and shopping and making love and laughing. Now the sun was setting and she was standing barefooted in the sand, a dozen red roses held in her hand. They'd found the dress together—Josh had picked it out in a tiny boutique window, insisted it was perfect. She'd gone in, slipped the creamy satin dress on, and known JC was right.

It fit every curve, then flared below her hips, the heavy satin panels interspersed with tulle. It was a princess' dress, a little girl's dream and when she was finished with her hair—down and loose and simple, just like Josh liked it—she felt more beautiful than she ever had.

The sky was rosy and purple and champagne colored, the ocean moving behind the preacher. She reached out with her free hand, smiling over at Josh, so in love it was scary. Josh looked damned dapper in his dark coat and pants, shirt open at the neck. He took her hand, smiling back, those dark eyes just shining with everything he was thinking.

The ceremony itself was so simple—nothing flowery, nothing drawn out. Just love and forever and ‘will you’ and ‘can you’ and then JC was sliding a ring on her finger, making promises and meaning them.

He kissed her like he meant it, too, practically lifting her off her feet with it, eyes shining as he smiled down at her after. “We’re married, lady-love.”

“Yeah, JC.” She reached up, stroked the laugh lines beside his eyes. Her man. Her husband. Her life. God, she loved him. “Been wanting to be yours forever.”

He laughed right out loud, sappy as you please and looking like he was fixin’ to burst with happiness. “We were kinda dumb, all that fighting.”

“Yeah. You don’t tell anyone, I won’t either.” She pushed right into his arms, laughing as he picked her up. “You’re gonna horrify the preacher, JC.”

“Nah. They’re much more emotional down here, yeah? So what do you want to do for the honeymoon? We got a day and a half.”

He kissed her nose, started walking off with her, nodding and smiling at the two wizened old folks they’d gotten to be witnesses.

She fit just right in the crook of his arm, one hand at his waist. “A day and a half, huh? I imagine you and I can think of a couple three things. Should we go have supper? Maybe go dance a little?”

“Oh, yeah. We don’t dance enough, love.”

“Haven’t danced for real in... Lord, Lord.” She giggled, winked up. “Roy Beckett’s New Year’s Eve party way back when. Remember? We waltzed and two-stepped and by midnight we’d worn the soles off our boots and the shine off your belt buckle.”

“I remember I was so proud I thought I would bust, having the prettiest girl there.” They’d had the ceremony on the beach right off their bungalow and he swept her over the threshold, just like it was supposed to be, kissing her deep and hard.

She gasped, smiling as he stole her breath away, her hands wrapped around his broad shoulders, holding on tight. “Love you. Love you, Mr. Haley.”

Oh, his eyes just glowed for her, everything right there in them. “Love you, Mrs. Haley.”

Oh.

Oh, yeah. Mrs. Haley.

Chas didn’t think she’d ever stop grinning. Ever.

Josh put her down and swung her in a wide circle, dancing her across the room. “God, that sounds good.”

“You like that, do you?” She leaned in, singing something soft in time with their dance, her dress swaying around their legs.

“Oh, I like that. Sing it some more, lady-love.”

Chas kept dancing, kept singing, just wrapping them both up together in the pure pleasure of the day. When Josh started kissing the words right off her lips she didn’t want him to stop, just giddy with it, dizzy from the circles they were going in. Tingles were moving beneath her skin, her breath gasping from her.

“JC. You make my head spin.” His eyes were almost black. “Don't stop.”

“Not going to, honey. Not ever.” His hands on her back pulled her close, and his kisses just kept on, his hips plastered to hers, his belt buckle pressing into her belly. “Not ever.”

“Good.” Josh smelled so good, felt so good against her. Her fingers stroked through his hair, down along his jawline. “My husband.”

“Yep. Yours. Damn, lady.”

Okay, they were basking like lizards, but who cared? This was their day. Of course, then she got the whole tongue thing in her head and started giggling and had to explain to Josh what had her tickled—lizards, basking, tongues and all.

“As long as nobody's tail falls off.” He was just cackling at her, swinging her around and around.

She held on tight, dizzy and drunk on Josh and his eyes and his laugh. “I'm fond of your... tail.”

Patting her butt, he nodded and kissed her. “And I like yours too. Be careful, I might show you how much.”

“Oh, damn. I might not be able to deal with that...” She wiggled, laughed low as she teased him.

“I think you might. You're a resourceful lady.” He went from patting to feeling her up, hands squeezing.

“Is that what we're calling gals like me these days? Resourceful?” She stretched up along him, fabric sliding.

“Uh huh. Inventive. Creative.” Josh moaned against her lips. “Blow my mind.”

“All yours.” Her tongue slid in and slid over his teeth, slow and easy, just tasting him. He tasted her right back, tongue fighting hers the way they used to fight with words, aggressive and needy. His hands slid against her, the slick material of her dress no barrier against the rough guitar picker's fingers as he traced every line and curve.

Her nipples went tight, rubbing against the satin, making her shift a little, groan. She was hot, just starting to ache. “You want to make love to your wife?”

“I do, lady. I do.” He lifted her again, unexpectedly, hauling her right to the bed, his muscles shifting under her hands. So strong. Josh laid her down carefully, petting her through the dress. “You know what this dress did to me out there?”

“No. Tell me.” She loved his voice, loved what she heard in it.

“The sun on it and the way it looked with your hair all down? Oh, Chas. I could barely hear what the good man was saying.” He looked at it, sounded it, it was all right there for her.

“He was sayin' that I'll love you forever and always and that nothing else matters a bit.” Or something like that. Hell, the man was speaking Spanish, but she'd bet she was close.

The slinky skirt started sliding up her legs, Josh working it up and up. “Yeah. And he was saying I was yours, good or bad.” She got a kiss, sweet and deep, Josh's hand sliding up her thigh.

“Oh, Hell yes. Mine.” His fingers were hot, pushing her legs apart, stroking her inner thigh.

He pushed her satiny dress up even higher, pushing the lacy thong she wore to keep from getting a nasty panty line aside and stroking her even more intimately, those rough

guitar fingers pushing her open, pressing against her clit.

“Oh...” She arched, rubbing against his fingers, riding that touch. “Josh. Love. Oh, Lord.”

“Softer than the satin, lady love. God, I love the way you feel, the way you smell.” He nuzzled her neck, worked down to close his mouth over the flesh of her breast through her dress, the wet fabric clinging.

“You make me ache for it, so bad.” Her nipple drew up tight-tight, begging for more as her thighs began to shake.

“That's only fair. You make me hard enough to pound nails.” He let her feel it, pushed right up against her thigh, opening his pants so his heat seared her. All the while she stayed trapped between his hand and mouth, both of them moving, making her crazy.

“Hot.” She started moving faster, those hands playing her like she was made for picking, the callused fingers driving her higher, making her keen.

“So hot.” His fingers slid, one of them slipping right inside her, using her own wetness to ease the way. He kept moving, biting at her, pushing her, his cock so hard against her.

“More. Josh. Please. More.” Her shoulders left the mattress, dress bodice slipping down, trapping her breasts, rasping against her hard nipples.

“Mmmhmmm.” He wasn't saying no, thank God. He was just giving her more and more, fingers working at the core of her, mouth moving to her other breast, teeth threatening. She nodded, entire body going tight, hips snapping up against Josh's hand.

“Oh, God, love. Fuck...” Josh was just groaning, his whole body shaking against her, his hips rolling. She could smell him.

She nodded, heat flooding her, every single nerve firing. Josh stared at her, eyes dazed, lips swollen from their kisses, his heart beating hard. He looked stunned.

“Love you.” Chas smiled up, heart pounding. “Mr. Haley.”

Stroking her hair back off her cheek, he grinned, eyes reflecting back her own joy.

“Love you, Mrs. Haley. Let's go have that honeymoon night.”

They tumbled into bed together, just laughing and touching, and she figured she was the luckiest woman in the world.

Who said you couldn't have it all?

Chapter Eighteen

They got back into town in the middle of the night, hoping to avoid the media, the hoopla. They'd called his parents and her sister and daddy before they left Mexico, just in case the story got leaked. Chas grinned as the plane taxied. Josh's momma was pretty damned tickled and Kathy? Squealed. Best of all was her daddy. Lord, Lord, Lord.

They were going to have to have themselves a church wedding so Daddy got himself a chance to give her away.

Chas couldn't decide if she was happy to be home or not. There was something about the sun and sand that did it for her, still, Chachi was waiting, her own bed, her life, her little massage table and good coffee and...

Oh.

She looked over, Josh half-awake, hat pulled down over his face and casting harsh shadows. "JC? Love? Are we going to live together?"

"Well, I'm thinking that might be a good idea." His teeth flashed white under the hat. That teasing smile hadn't changed, not one bit.

Chas giggled, she couldn't help it. Bastard. She reached up, tweaked a nipple good and hard. "You think? You thought on where?"

She had the fancier place right in town and the gardens, but Josh had the bathroom...

"Well, I got the yard for the dogs. And the bathroom." Right, so they agreed on the bathroom. "And I got that huge sun porch I'm not even using. You could make that your white space."

"Yeah, Moke might not like the wee baby yard, huh?" She shook her head. It was the logical thing to do, really, and she loved Josh's house whereas the man always looked nervy as fuck in hers, like he was looking to break things. "Where am I supposed to find a masseur who's gonna drive out to the boondocks, though?"

Oh, that look. Purely wicked. "We got oil. I can do that for you, honey."

That sent a shiver through her, nipples going tight just like that. She leaned in close-close. "Somehow I think you and oil would end up in a different situation than my current masseur and oil, JC."

The plane pulled into the gate, lights coming on.

Josh sighed and sat up, pushing his hat back. "Home again, huh? And yeah, I should hope to hell it would be different."

He winked at her, but she could tell his heart wasn't in it anymore. Looked like she wasn't the only one having mixed feelings about being back in Music City.

"Yeah." Chas stood and grabbed the guitars out of the overhead bin, glaring at the asshole who commented on her height and how she was going to bean someone in the head with the case.

They managed to grab her purse and the big bag of randomness from under the seats, heading down the hallway to the gate. Christ, how many times had she made this walk? It was getting old. She flipped on her cell phone for the first time since they'd left, the messages and missed calls just lighting it on up. "You want to just come over to my place tonight? It's closer."

Good thing Josh's truck was in long-term parking; she wasn't up to renting a car.

“Not gonna sleep without you, so yeah. Moke can wait to see me until tomorrow.” He was right behind her, bootheels clumping. “Fuck, that was a flight and a half.”

“Yeah. Worth going, though...” She blinked as she heard her name snapped out, Jeff standing out by the security gates. “Well, what the hell is he doing here?”

God knew the man should be in bed with his wife.

“Oh, for...” Josh put an arm around her as they got through the doors, glaring Jeffy down. “What do you want, Jeff?”

“Well, I was wanting to know why my singer up and left the country in the middle of the night without a word to anyone.” Jeff shook his head—the man looked old and flustered. “Christ, baby. You scared me. You just disappeared.”

She arched an eyebrow. “Your singer? Since when?”

“Since the beginning. You and I have a contract, still.”

“Oh, you bastard. You said you wanted me to find somebody else. You didn't even handle the tour, really. Vic did.”

“Well, Vic's not handling the next one.”

“What next one?” Josh's arm tightened around her even more. “The last one was exhausting, Jeffy. Jesus, give the woman some time off.”

“Yeah, well, she's just had a long vacation.” Jeff's eyes landed on her, looking more than half-pissed off. “You and me? We need to talk.”

“Fine, call me tomorrow. We'll have a meeting. I'm going home to relax.” Fuck this. The jealousy thing just pissed her right the hell off.

“You've been relaxing a good while, baby.”

God, it was going to be a testosterone battle if the way Josh puffed up was any indication. Men. Any excuse to fight. Especially these two men.

Well, they could fucking fight tomorrow. She had a hot tub calling her name. “Come on, JC. Baggage check. Home. Hot tub. Jeffy? Get a fucking grip or I will beat you to death with a shovel. You haven't intimidated me in fifteen years; I'm sure as fuck not going to suddenly start jumping at orders now. Call tomorrow.”

Jeffy blinked, and Josh grinned, and off they went, just sweeping past Jeffy like they would a press photographer. Damn it felt good.

She was damn near bouncy as they headed toward the baggage claim. She caught sight of herself in one of the windows and grinned. Oh, baby. Tan. Sexy. Happy.

Fuck, she looked *good*.

She laughed, then turned and pushed into Josh's arms, kissing him right there in front of God and everybody. “Love you, JC.”

His eyes just twinkled, and he kissed her right back, not holding anything from her. “Love you, lady.”

“Good. Now, take me home and prove it.” She rubbed their noses together and winked. “You've made an honest woman of me; you're gonna have to keep me well-loved.”

“You can count on that, lady-love.” He dropped another quick kiss on her mouth before steering her out toward the parking lot. “I have plans.”

“Oooh... plans?” Her laughter got picked up by the wind, carried right off. Fuck, she loved him. “You think I'll like your plans, Mr. Haley?”

Goosing her ass, he nodded, laughing right along. “Oh, I bet you will. I figure once you reunite with Chachi? We'll lock ourselves in your bedroom and turn off the phones.”

“Fuck that. We're gonna go get my pup and my clothes and I'm coming home with you. Jeffy's still got keys to my place.” She wrapped one arm around his waist, just flying. “I got you and my guitar, JC. Let's get Chachi and I'm just fine.”

“Hot damn. Then the plan has changed to locking us in the bathroom. I want you and some bubbles.”

Sensual, beautiful man.

Her man. All hers.

“I'm all about the bubbles, JC. Let's ride.”

* * * *

Josh woke up the next morning blinking, trying to figure out why he wasn't in Mexico.

Oh, yeah. They'd come home.

Chas was in his bed, though, and that made a world of difference. Jesus, fuck she looked amazing sprawled next to him, that crazy hair all floating around them, her pale gold skin shining against the dark green sheets. She was a sight to behold, for sure.

As bad as he wanted to wake her up and start something, he also wanted to feed Moke and Chachi before they came thundering in together. And he wanted to talk to Jeffy. Like now. He had a few choice words for the man.

So Josh slipped out of bed, leaving a soft kiss on Chas' lax mouth, and headed downstairs, grabbing the portable and dialing Jeffy as he went.

Moke and Chachi were still curled together at the foot of the stairs, Chachi growling at him as the phone rang.

“Lo?” He could hear dishes rattling in the background. “That you, baby?”

“Oh, honey darlin', I didn't know you cared. This is Josh, Jeff. We need to talk.” That baby thing so had to go. Now.

“Kiss my ass, Josh. I'm listening.”

“Well, first of all, Chas isn't your wife anymore. She's mine. So the baby shit? Got to stop before I get pissy and punch your face in.” No sense mincing words.

“What? Your wife? Fuck. When? What was she thinking? Let me talk to her.” Shit, the man got shrill when he was pissed.

“No. She's upstairs, sleeping the sleep of the truly deserving. Now, tell me about this next tour horseshit.” The coffee went into the filter, filter into pot, water into carafe. Mokie nudged his leg, and he rubbed the big lug's ears.

“The label's talking about getting her to do Asia. Six weeks, thirty cities. Forty shows.” Jeff took a deep drink of something. “She needs to quit jacking around and remember she's got a career.”

Tapping his fingers on the counter, Josh snorted. “She's had nothin' but a career for years. She has to have a life too. I tell you, Jeffy, I never thought you'd turn into a vulture like the others.”

“She had me for fucking years and look where it got me. She's a user, man, and all about the money.” Hello, pot. Talk about kettle.

“You ever think that's because y'all pushed her to be?” Not that he didn't have some guilt there, okay a huge load, because he wondered how different both their lives might have been if he hadn't hit the bottle and then the sheets with some bimbo. “Look, let's stop with the personal digs, all right? That last tour liked to kill us, Jeffy. She just

finished two in a row. Tell the fucking label they drop her, they lose both of us.”

It went all quiet for a second and then Jeffy sighed. “I’ll see what I can do, man, but they want her out there. They want her visible and the Japanese think she hung the moon. Hell, this might get her another agent; God knows she pissed that Karen girl off.”

“That Karen girl was a shark who wanted her to lose fifty pounds and dye her hair blonde. There’s nothing wrong with her the way she is.” Fuck, he was tired again already.

Just worn down by the shallowness of this business.

“Oh, fuck that. She’s beautiful. She doesn’t need to lose that much” Jeff got a little growly, a little pissed. Damn near gave him hope. “Besides, that hair’s her trademark.”

“That’s what I said, man. They’ve got her thinking she’s over the hill, that she ain’t got anything left in her.” He rubbed the back of his neck. “We need time, Jeffy. We both do.”

“She needs a fifth of JB and a swift kick to the ass.”

“She fucking well does not. Goddamn it, you not hearing me? No booze. No bullshit. No more!”

He clanged a frying pan down on the range, looking to make something that spit and hissed. Bacon or sausage. They had to have some in the freezer.

“You’re getting protective in your old age, man. You remember when the three of us did a circuit in that ancient old van, no air, nothing but sleeping bags and beer cooler?”

Oh, excellent. Bacon. Frozen biscuits.

“A body gets tired, Jeffy.” He hacked at the bacon, getting the packaging off and tossing it in the microwave to thaw before slapping some biscuits in the toaster oven. Twenty minutes at 350 degrees, la la la. “And we were what? Nineteen then?”

“Maybe twenty.” Jeff chuckled. “Man, the three of us had fun. I can’t believe you fucking married her.”

“I should’ve done it years ago...” He paused, fighting down the good old pissed off feeling. “You did it. You know how irresistible she is.”

“Yeah. Yeah, I do.” Jeff laughed, and if the sound was a little bitter, he ignored it. “Ellie’s wanting to throw her a party, squeal and make frou-frou punch and have flowers.”

“Oh, that’d be nice.” Chachi suddenly rose into view in his peripheral vision, and Josh looked at the little nutball as he jumped three feet into the air, trying to get to the microwave, apparently. And the bacon. Lord, Lord. “She’d actually like that. So would I, you think you can keep from pushing the business shit?”

Sproing. Sproing. The little shit had springs installed while they were in Mexico.

“Is that bacon?” Chas came in, wearing his bathrobe, just barely tied, all blinky and soft and rumped. “Who’s on the phone, JC?”

“In the mic. I’ll fry it in a minute.” He gave her a kiss, sliding one arm around her waist, dislodging the robe. Hoo yeah. “And it’s Jeff. I called him, though, so don’t get upset. He says the label wants you to do another tour, in Japan.”

“Too early for upset. Tell him to go fuck his wife for a while and call back after lunch.” Lord, Lord, look at the wicked light in those eyes.

“You tell that foul-mouthed ex-wife of mine...”

“What? That she’s mine now? Think on what I said, Jeffy. And let us know when the little woman wants to party. Bye.” He hung up, turning to take a real kiss, just loving how she got up and kept fighting, his Chas.

She melted into him, all heat and soft and happy and husky laughter. “Yours, JC? You sure?”

“Sure as God made little green apples.” Warm, soft and sweet against him, Chas just felt good as gold. He rubbed a little, laughing as Chachi got ahold of her robe.

“Somebody wants bacon, Mr. Haley.” He got a good look at one pretty nipple, all dark and pink.

“Including me, Mrs. Haley.” Smacking her butt, he tweaked that nipple before turning away to get the bacon out. “Biscuits are in the oven, so no playing temptress until we’ve had breakfast. Want some coffee?”

“Yeah. I’ll make it.” At his look, Chas tossed her hair, hands on her hips. “Hey! Bea doesn’t do *everything* for me!” Chas stopped, face falling. “Oh, man. What am I gonna do about Bea, Josh? I mean, you’re not set up for a live-in assistant.”

“I know.” Hell, he hadn’t even thought of Bea. “But we’ll find something for her. Hell, we can always turn one of the outbuildings into a mother-in-law and she can still work with you during the day.”

“Oh.” The sound was off and he turned to look at her, just to get an armful of smiling, kissing, snuggling woman. “Oh, I love you, JC. So goddamn much.”

Oof. Josh grinned down at her, nuzzling her cheek. “You said before she was family. Ain’t gonna put her out.”

“Yeah. She’s gonna love it out here, JC, even if she just comes to work.” She kissed the corner of his mouth, all smiles. “Don’t burn the bacon, stud.”

“I got it. I got it.” He turned the bacon. “About going to Japan...”

“JC?” Chas hopped up on the counter, shook her head. “I don’t care what Jeffy says. There ain’t gonna be another tour. Not for six months, a year maybe. You and me? We got shit to do.”

“Yeah?” He just sort of stood there, blinking.

“Yep. Music. Christmas. Important shit.” Her feet dangled. “I’ve never been your wife before. I need months of intense rehearsal.”

Oh. Oh, damn.

He must have been quiet longer than he thought, because her eyes got quiet, worried, teeth working that full bottom lip. “Is that... I mean, if you don’t want...”

“Fuck, yes I want that. Sorry, honey, you just...I’m a little awed. And a lot out of breath.” Horny as a toad somewhere in west Texas.

“Oh.” There was his smile, wicked and happy and sexy and bright as starlight in Big Bend. “The bacon’s done, JC.”

“Huh?” Oh, bacon. Right. Chachi and Moke knew it, standing there looking hungry. Josh took it up, not wanting it to burn, because a man would need to eat to keep up his strength around Chas. “Mmm. Bacon. So really? No tour?”

“Yeah. I mean... No. I mean, no tour. They don’t like it, they can release me from my contract.” She hopped down, poured coffee, looking tanned and happy, mind made up. “We’ve got enough songs for an album, late next year. I need time, just to be here, to get us settled.”

Pushing the paper towel lined bacon plate back from the counter so the pups couldn’t reach, Josh waited for her to set her mug down to add cream and shit before grabbing her and twirling her around, whooping. “Sounds like a plan, lady. Thank God.”

“Yeah? Because we deserve a Christmas. A long break.” Her eyes twinkled. “A

chance for me to move in and put girly shit in that amazing damn bathroom.”

He hooted.

“Nothing pink.” Oh, she looked so good, smiling for him like all of her cares were off her shoulders, not caring a bit about the lines it might make on her face. His own face hurt from his big toothy grin. “We’ll negotiate on everything else.”

“Now, now. Pink is my trademark color.” Her lips brushed against him, little soft kisses. “Love you, JC. We did good.”

“We did. I love you, honey. I finally figured out what I got.” He kissed her back, harder, deeper, showing her he meant it.

Her laugh was a little breathless, a little husky, enough to drive a man to madness. “Yeah, just what you deserved.”

The End

About the Author:

B. A. Tortuga enjoys indulging in the shallow side of life, with hobbies that include collecting margarita recipes, hot tub dips, and ogling hot guys at the beach. A connoisseur of the perverse and esoteric, BA’s days are spent among dusty tomes of ancient knowledge, or, conversely, surfing porn sites in the name of research. Mixing the natural born Southern propensity for sarcasm and the environmental western straight-shooting sensibility, BA manages to produce mainstream fiction, literary erotica, and fine works of pure, unadulterated smut.

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