

The Big Girl's Guide to Buying Lingerie



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1. ALL BRAS ARE NOT CREATED EQUAL

I watched with fleeting patience as the woman in front of me slowly unloaded her basket. *Hurry up lady. I'm gonna be late.*

I'd miss him. It was Saturday. We *always* met early on Saturday. Damnit, why did I stop at Target to begin with? I, Jade Ballard, am firmly convinced there's a huge conspiracy on the part of retailers everywhere. Why else would they add groceries to tempt us with? I can *never* stick to just the things on my list. The only place worse is Wal-Mart, where I buy at least two of everything, drag it home and then have no place to store it.

Finally!

She moved up enough that I could unload my booty onto the conveyor belt. Bra, panties, more panties, maxi pads, tampons, toilet tissue with aloe, milk chocolate Milanos, snack mix with extra peanuts, twelve pack of diet Dr Pepper, a new CD and "Independence Day" on DVD—*collector's edition*. Will Smith is a total hottie.

And one last bra. A stuck bra. I tugged and wiggled but couldn't free the tiny hanger and the checkout lane was so narrow I couldn't maneuver my wide hips to the side for better leverage.

Above me, I heard a voice say, "Here," as a large, tanned hand reached

down. "Let me help."

I looked up, clamping my sagging mouth shut. Oh God, not *him*. Rowdy Yates twice in one week was more than I could handle. He had to be at least six-feet tall and was built like a lumberjack. Solid as a rock, he made even me feel small, and that was no mean feat. Big blue eyes with long, thick lashes. And blonde. I have such a weakness for blondes.

It wasn't just his rugged good looks--even good looking men eventually got wrinkles--but the fact he *knew* being around him seemed to leave me flustered. And no matter how much I gave him the cold shoulder, he continued to try and charm me--and every other woman that crossed his path. *Redneck Casanova*. I'd decided he either took way too much pleasure in riling me or he was truly dense.

I opted for A.

It was bad enough I saw him Wednesday at the Bluebonnet Dancehall; surely he didn't shop at Target too?

I'm cursed.

I blew a lock of dark hair out of my eyes, which reminded me of just how bad I looked. No makeup, scarf covering my shaggy short hair, an old "Property of Chris Cagle" t-shirt and cut-off, homemade capris. A pair of skuzzy flip-flops completed my ensemble from hell. Normally, greeting the world dressed one step above "just rolled out of bed" gave me a perverse thrill. But the thought of God's Gift to Bluebonnet, Texas, seeing me at my very worst was enough to make me shop in New Braunfels, forty minutes away.

"I got it, thanks." I leaned into the basket again and continued to tug, unsuccessfully, at the cursed hanger, swearing under my breath.

He reached past me again and easily untangled the hanger, which had been

stuck in the thick, red, plastic basket slats.

Holding out my bra, my 42DD bra, he smiled at me, all innocence like.
“Who’s the lucky guy?”

I wanted to smack him. It was just a blue bra, for heaven’s sake.
Just then I heard a voice ring out over the intercom, “Lingerie, price check at register six.”

I was at register six. Turning, I found the cashier holding up my panties, my brand new, size 2X, blue paisley, high-cut briefs. My cheeks warm, I glanced back at Rowdy, praying he wasn’t looking.

He was, and still held the matching bra, to boot, that innocent smile still visible beneath his moustache. I could see the laughter in those damn cornflower colored eyes. It wasn’t fair. They should be shit brown, ‘cause he was full of it. No man should have eyes like that, especially that devil Rowdy Yates.

If anything, my cheeks grew hotter as I snatched my bra from his outstretched hand and threw it on the belt. Knowing my luck, it’d get jammed.

“You know, you could’a said thank you, Sugar,” he drawled.

“Thanks,” I shot over my shoulder. Behind me I heard him chuckle. *Jerk!* I *hated* being called sugar. The only man who got away with *that* was Robbie. Speaking of which...I grabbed the second set of panties off the belt and held them out to the sales clerk. “These are the same price.”

“Someone’s on their way, Jade. I have to have the exact number for inventory purposes.”

How the hell does she know my name? To make matters worse, she turned around and held up my panties again, shouting to a woman not more than six feet away, “Yeah, Norma, I need a price on these 2X, high-cut briefs. The two pack.”

If they hadn't matched the bra, I'da said forget about it. Now everyone in northwestern San Antonio knew what size panties I wore. I slipped my sunglasses down onto my nose and glanced at my watch, trying to melt into the floor.

2:00. I had one hour to get home, unload and...

"You shop here often, Sugar?"

Rowdy. I sighed, but before I could answer, the damned cashier piped up, throwing in her two cents, "She's a regular. She was in here Wednesday. Almost bought these panties then, but she was late for some meeting."

Triple shit. Just my luck I get the one freaking cashier with a photographic memory. Worse yet, the meeting I was late to had been with Rowdy's boss. By the time I reached the Bluebonnet Dancehall, she'd taken off for another appointment, leaving Rowdy to place their liquor order. I'd glibly lied, and told him I'd been delayed at an emergency dental appointment.

I was *so* busted.

"I didn't know Target did dental work. Talk about one stop shopping."

Unable to think of a snappy response, I flashed him a toothy smile.

Thankfully, "Norma" had returned with the price. As soon as the cashier finished ringing up my purchases, I paid, got extra cash back and loaded up my stuff.

"Thank you...Emma," I added, after a brief glance at her nametag. The least I could do was memorize the old witch's name since she'd done the same for me.

In the parking lot, I threw my bags into the back of my little silver Cougar.

2:30. I had forty-five minutes until I met Robbie and would use twenty of that to get home.

I slipped behind the wheel, snapped my seatbelt into place and made like

Mario Andretti, not bothering to slow down until I reached the smoothly paved streets of my townhome community. I sat in my driveway, resisting the urge to rev the engine as my garage door slowly rose. Home sweet home.

Of course, home sweet home was nothing more than an undersized, overpriced two-bedroom townhouse. I could barely afford living in such an upscale community, but the area *was* nice and I had great onsite security. It even came with a workout facility. Not that I'd ever bothered to stick my nose inside...or any other part of me either. I should, at least, give the pool a whirl, but Sea World has Shamu and one whale in San Antonio is plenty.

I carted my treasures through the laundry room into the kitchen, and set the bags on the table. On the last trip I kicked my flip-flops off, enjoying the feel of ceramic tile against my bare feet. I stashed my diet Dr Peppers in the 'fridge, then grabbed the bags with the last of my booty and headed upstairs. On my way through the living room, I paused long enough to toss my movie on the suede couch, sighing as it slid off and thumped against the coffee table.

Upstairs in my office, I tossed the bag containing my new lingerie on the madras plaid covered daybed, then collapsed in my chair with a sigh of relief and hit the computer's power button.

I'd made it.

My top of the line system had been an investment when I took the job with Svenson Imports, purveyors of fine liquor and beer.

As an outside sales representative, I only went in to the office a couple times a week, which suited my solitary lifestyle to a "T". I visited with different accounts in the area, schmoozing as it were, on a regular schedule. After years of

doing fundraising for a museum, I was a natural born sales person. Much to my mother's horror.

Then, on one rainy, Sunday afternoon I discovered e-mail loops where you can talk to people from all over the world about everything from zits to music. That clinched it for me. *I'm such a closet music groupie.* I discovered a loop for my fave--country music singer Chris Cagle--and joined. The rest, as they say, is history.

According to the computer's clock only twenty minutes left until my meeting with Robbie.

I had about eighty e-mails from the loop. Some private stuff from Chrystine. Six from Robbie. My heart fluttered as I clicked on the first one with "Kissing" in the subject line.

Skyebaby...You are a naughty woman. Kissing is great foreplay though. Maybe someday we can find out? Robbie

I spun around in the chair, struggling for a visual of my tall, blonde cowboy and trying to imagine what it might be like to kiss him. With a sigh, I clicked on the next email.

Hey Baby Girl --I giggled-- Dream of me, and I'll talk to ya tomorrow...Robbie.

I could just swoon. Lordy, that man made my heart pound. Robbie, aka ShyCowboy, and I met on the same Chris Cagle list I'd discovered right after I got my computer. At first, I'd hated his cocky, arrogant attitude. Three weeks after he joined the list we'd ended up in a fight over, of all things, ice hockey and were forced to take it private by the list owner. *For heaven's sake, San Antonio's hockey team was barely a blip on the radar!*

But taking it private was when things changed for the better. I'd discovered there was a lot more to my cocky cowboy than met the eye. Our arguing had slowly evolved into teasing and flirting, and we'd spent the last six months exchanging emails, flirting publicly on the list and talking via our instant messenger programs.

If I wasn't out on calls, we'd spend every Sunday through Wednesday chatting on and off through the afternoon and into the evening. Thursday through Saturday I got one precious hour with Robbie--from 3:00 to 4:00 PM. I have no idea what he did with his weekends, but he always got online real late and left me a note. I'd never had the nerve to ask him where he went. I suppose it was none of my business, but I couldn't help feel a tad jealous.

Robbie's my best friend with perks, and as strange as this sounds, I love him. He's sweet and funny and sensitive--but don't tell him that to his face. We'd had quite an argument about that one, but he obviously cared deeply about his friends and family.

How could I love someone I'd never met? I have no clue. How could he always tell when I'd had a bad day? Because he *always* knew!

Silly maybe, but I felt as though I knew Robbie better than anyone, and vice versa, despite the lack of photos. A subject usually tossed aside by me. Maybe our closeness had something to do with the freedom that came with not talking face-to-face, but there wasn't much I hadn't shared, and I felt as if he'd done likewise.

Okay, so, maybe not everything. He has no clue I'm fat. I just can't bring myself to tell him, to type those two tiny little words—*I'm Fat*. And trying to pretty it up with words like plump or chubby left me cringing.

But even when I'd been shopping today, I'd thought about him while picking out bras and panties, wondering if he'd like them. That thought left me feeling slightly queasy. I hadn't been naked in front of a man in three years.

Fifteen minutes. I shook it off. Leaving my messenger program on, I headed for the bag I'd thrown on the daybed behind me, yanking out the first bra—the baby blue one.

I ripped off the tags, quickly stripped and struggled into the new one. Struggled being the operative word.

I turned around and winced at the image in the cheval-glass mirror. Rumpled short hair and cut-off jeans framed a large expanse of pale flab. The bra was tangled, the straps and the band across my back twisted. Its awkward, swimsuit-like design made straightening everything difficult, but I muddled through, yanking and wriggling until I was somewhat satisfied. I blew on my sweaty bangs, then pushed them off my forehead and took a good look. My DD's pooched from the cups, and not in a sexy I've-got-cleavage sort of way either, but in a your-bra-is-too-small way. *Ugh.*

The pale blue torture device *was* my size, but it damned sure didn't fit. Cut too low, with no support, and it looked like a bikini top. *As if!*

Underwires should be a certain height and cups should be made out of thick soft material. Padding should be limited to A and B cups. Padding was not an area I needed help in. And most important of all, good support shouldn't cost twenty-five dollars a cup!

Why don't they make all bras the same? *Why* don't they have international standards like they do for weights and measures and tools? *Honestly!* Never mind that I should have tried them on before leaving the store; I'd been in a hurry!

The bra was hideous. I sighed and checked the time.

Ten minutes. And one more bra. I grimaced at the pink and maroon paisley poking out of the bag. No way. Not happening. Maybe tomorrow. Never mind. At least that one I could return. I slipped the instrument of self-abuse off and threw my t-shirt back on, sans bra. No need for more punishment, since I was alone.

‘Ding.’

He’s early. My head snapped up like a fox to the scent and I focused on the screen.

Skyebaby—blinked in the message box.

I needed my Dr Pepper and my cookies. Shit! I slipped into the chair and typed with shaking fingers.

Be right back.

I hustled out the door and down the stairs, nearly falling and busting my ass on the kitchen tile. Glass of ice. Dr Pepper. Cookies. Back upstairs I trudged, practically wheezing by the time I collapsed in my chair.

ShyCowboy: *Hurry up Skye, I only have an hour,* _waited for me when I got back.

Skyebaby: You’re early! How was your day?

My fingers flew as I worked to catch my breath. While I waited on his response, I popped open my first soda and poured it over the ice then ripped opened the cookies, jamming one between my teeth. He still hadn’t responded.

Skyebaby: I’m getting you typing lessons for Christmas.

ShyCowboy: *Not too bad. Sure glad it’s Saturday and I got to sleep in. Why don’t you come give me typing lessons, Miss Speedy Skye?*

Skyebaby: *I hear the Junior College teaches typing and that's what you get for being out partying all night.*

There was no way I could give him typing lessons. Lately, Robbie'd *really* been pushing the 'let's meet' buttons, offering me everything from breakfast in bed—don't I wish—to a night out on the town when Chris Cagle played here in November. Talk about dangling a carrot. I'd never gotten to see Chris in concert. I wobbled back and forth, tempted more and more by Robbie's ever-increasing hints to go ahead and take the plunge. I reached for another cookie, briefly wondering where the first one went, nibbled on it and letting the shortbread and chocolate melt in my mouth. *Yum.*

ShyCowboy: *Aw now. You don't wanna teach me to type? I'll let you kiss me when I'm good.*

Skyebaby: *So what exactly qualifies as good? And what if you're bad?*

I'd kiss him even if he were bad. I pressed my thighs together, almost able to hear the drawl in his voice. I dusted the crumbs from my jeans, then frowned at my denim-clad thighs. I needed my sweats! Sweats, cookies, soda...and Robbie. Couldn't have one without the others.

I darted down the hall to my bedroom and shimmied out of my jeans, ignoring the war-zone that was my bedroom. Grabbing my sweats off the chaise in the corner, I slipped them on while hopping out of my bedroom and back toward my office. God help me if I mishopped and plunged down the stairs. I could see the headlines: "*Fat Woman Dies In Freak Accident*"

Back in my office, I glanced up at the monitor.

ShyCowboy: *I suppose, if I'm bad, you have to punish me. –My*

cheeks heated up—*But the question is how?*

He'd completed the sentence with a little leering smiley face.

Skyebaby: *I could take away your favorite toy.*

ShyCowboy: *Now that is mean. You'd be punishing both of us.*

Skyebaby: *Why so?*

ShyCowboy: *Cuz you're my favorite toy, Skyebaby*

Now you know why I'm in love with him. Who wouldn't love a man who talked to you like that? I fanned myself, squirming in the chair. But no amount of squirming would relieve the ache he'd started, and sometimes he could be really bad with the teasing.

Sure, we talked about sex. We talked about damn near everything. He'd even told me his biggest fantasy once. The thought of sex on the back of a horse had left me cringing and excited all at the same time. I'd reciprocated and told him mine, stuff I'd never shared with any man.

Skyebaby: *What do you think I am? The Energizer Bunny?*

ShyCowboy: *You're better than any ole bunny, darlin'*

Oh God. I swallowed hard, unable to think of a snappy comeback.

ShyCowboy: *Soooooooooooo*

Skyebaby: *Yes, Dearest?*

ShyCowboy: *You have a birthday coming up*

Aw, shit, he remembered. I fished out another cookie and nibbled at it.

Skyebaby: *Yup*

ShyCowboy: *Got plans?*

It wasn't every day a girl turned thirty, and damn if he didn't know how to push my buttons. *Think, girl, think!*

Skyebaby: *I'm probably going home. I haven't seen the familia in a while and Dad has been bugging me to come up to Austin*

ShyCowboy: *Too bad. I was really hoping I could take you out.*

My brother-in-law told me about a great little blues place down on the Riverwalk

I fought against the incredibly strong physical urge to type “yes.” I adored my daddy, but the thought of spending my birthday—*The Big 3-0*—with my uber-successful family made me want to scream. Mommy and Daddy Perfect and Mr. and Miss Perfect—and me. The Pork Rind. That’s what my brother, Tricky Nicky called me. Nicky wasn’t *really* perfect but, as the heir apparent, he was the golden child by default.

Worse I knew damn good and well Mom would insist on the country club.
Blarh!

On the other hand, I could spend my birthday in some smoky dive on the Riverwalk, slow dancing to the blues with my hottie cowboy. I slumped in my chair and debated how to answer.

ShyCowboy: *Skye, you there?*

Skyebaby: *Yeah, I'm here. I wish there was some way I could get out of going, but Dad's really been on me*

I was *not* a liar. He *had* been dropping broad hints about me coming home. Apparently an hour and a half wasn’t quite far enough away.

ShyCowboy: *Any idea when you'll leave?*

Skyebaby: *Probably Thursday when I get off work*

ShyCowboy: *So, what about Wednesday night?*

Oh Gawd! I wracked my brains, but for the life of me, couldn’t find a

reason to say no. Before I could type a reply, anything, tease him or distract him, another message popped up.

ShyCowboy: *If you don't want to, say so. I'll understand. I just thought after six months...*

I sighed and swallowed the sudden lump in my throat. A search of the bag of Milanos revealed only two left. Some gremlins must have snuck in while I'd been talking to Robbie because I sure didn't remember eating them.

I'd hurt his feelings. I should just be honest and tell him I wasn't ready. With a sigh, I shoved the last cookie in my mouth and began typing my reply, only to be hit with the biggest coughing fit of my life as a piece flew down my windpipe.

Many minutes and many sips of diet Dr Pepper later I sat up, tears streaming from my eyes and my throat raw. I'd never forget how a cookie forever changed my life. When I refocused on the screen, I screamed.

Skyebaby: *I'd love to*

ShyCowboy: *Cool! ☺*

2. MAKE A WISH

Rowdy leaned back in his chair, locked his fingers behind his head and let out a satisfied sigh. She'd *finally* agreed to go out with him. Ten more days and she'd be all his. His little Skyebaby.

He absolutely loved spunky women and Skye had sugar and spice nailed. She knew her sports, too. He still chuckled occasionally over the ice hockey argument that brought them together.

The last six months had been amazing. He'd never dreamed he'd find someone so down-to-earth, outrageously funny and flirty, feminine and sweet who could totally charm him like she had. Of course, he'd never let a woman get as close as Skye had either. Something about not being face-to-face made talking, really talking, so much easier.

Who also wasn't from Bluebonnet, or any other small town and wanted more out of life than to be Mrs. Someone (*Anyone*).

Skye was a sweet addiction, a drug that had slowly ruined him for all others. Five months ago he'd even given up his Wife-for-a-Night routine. He'd reached the point where bringing a woman home had left him feeling like he'd cheated on Skye.

Not that he actually thought she'd sleep with him on their first date but he'd be less than honest if he didn't admit the thought intrigued him. She was the first woman to not flinch at his horse fantasy.

With a grin he typed a reply.

ShyCowboy: *I need your phone number, darlin*

Skyebaby: *Why for?*

ShyCowboy: *So I can hear your sweet voice at last ☺*

He dug in the desk's side drawer for a pen and paper while waiting for her phone number to pop up on the screen. Her personality was so vibrant, he'd always wondered what her voice sounded like. Now he'd get a chance to find out. Maybe he'd call before he had to be at the dancehall. Maybe he wouldn't tell her it was him. Maybe he'd just sit and listen.

No. That would be mean. She trusted him enough to go out with him and give him her number. He wouldn't abuse her trust.

Skyebaby: *830-555-6892*

But he could tease her. He scribbled the number down on a sticky note and stuck it to the side of his oversized monitor where it wouldn't get lost. The poor thing was beginning to look like a float in a Mardi Gras parade with the color-coded sticky-notes: yellow for business, purple for personal/family and now blue for Skye.

ShyCowboy: *Can I call you right now?*

He watched the clock, waiting on her to answer. Three minutes passed before her reply popped up. Longer even than her agreeing to go out with him.

Skyebaby: *Sure*

Whoever said you couldn't read someone's thoughts via computer was damned wrong. Skye always took a long time to answer the tough questions and she kept her responses to minimal words. If she were feeling chatty or excited about something, she'd go on and on and make tons of typos.

ShyCowboy: *I'm just teasing, baby*

He grabbed the cordless phone sitting on top of a stack of mail. His impulsiveness sent the pile sliding to the floor and uncovered a dust-coated sticky ring.

Rowdy frowned in irritation. Way past time to do some cleaning. Occasionally his computer business kept him so busy he had to let his routine slide. He quickly jotted down a note, reminding himself to clean on Monday, and stuck it at the top of the monitor where he wouldn't forget. Otherwise he'd sit and tweak that P3 computer for Rene all day. His niece's fourteenth birthday was still a couple weeks away--right after Skye's--and he had plenty of time.

Rowdy dialed and listened to the phone ring. Then smiled at the quaver in her silky voice when she answered.

"I thought you said you were kidding."

"I'm tired of huntin' and peckin', darlin'." Typing wasn't his forte, though he wasn't as bad as she probably thought.

She sighed and, for a minute, Rowdy regretted his impulsiveness. He scrambled for a way to put her at ease. He clicked on the smiley face menu in his instant messenger program and picked a goofy looking one, inserted it and clicked send. She giggled. That was better.

"So."

"That's how all this got started." Despite the slight scold in her tone, there was something incredibly feminine and soft in her voice. A purr almost.

He closed his eyes and smiled to himself, lowering his voice to match hers. "Where do you want to go eat on your birthday, Sugar?"

"Anywhere's fine."

“Aw, now.”

“Surprise me.” Just then a beep interrupted them. “Hang on.” She returned a second later, made quick excuses about it being her father and hung up.

Time was running out but she was still online. He typed quickly before she shut down her IM program.

ShyCowboy: *Email me a list of places. So at least I can surprise you with something you like. Afterwards, it's Louie's for slow dancing*

Skyebaby: *Will do. Right after I get done with Dad*

ShyCowboy: *Bye darlin'. Dream of me*

Skyebaby: *Always. Have a good night*

Rowdy signed off, shut down the computer and stood to stretch. The pile of mail caught his eye and he bent to retrieve it. He *really* did need to clean.

Sliding out from the stack of computer parts magazines and trade journals came a letter with “Inmate Mail” stamped on the envelope. Charlene Yates c/o Valley State. As if she were away at college instead of prison. *Not today, Sis.*

He buried the letter at the bottom of the stack, sure it contained all sorts of enlightening spiritual pap. Forgive. Be blessed. *Whatever.*

He had to get cleaned up, eat and be at the dancehall on time or the guys would never let him live it down. Rowdy was never late.

He dropped the stack of mail, covering up the sticky soda ring. His sister's letter landed on the bottom where it belonged. Forgotten, just like the rest.

He just didn't have time for Charlene's bullshit. Besides, he'd already paid dearly for his sins.

###

Rowdy showered and dressed, then reheated the leftover jambalaya his sister-in-law, Toni had sent home with him. Well kinda his in-law. Her fiancé, Tim, was Charlene's ex, but Rowdy still called him brother. Blood might be thicker than water but it took more than blood to earn Rowdy's loyalty.

He washed out the little plastic bowl so he could return it to Toni, and headed out the door. They started warming up at six.

Rowdy had begun playing with his bandmates, Ty and Zack after his mom had dumped him on Tim and took off. When they were old enough, Susie had let them start playing at the dancehall and, ten years later, they still were.

He cut through downtown Bluebonnet to the highway where the dancehall was located. They'd started a downtown revitalization project about five years back to bring in tourists from nearby San Antonio. Other than the barber, the obligatory "Curl Up And Dye," a drugstore and bookstore, everything had gone tourist. The false fronts had been spiffed up, and, on the weekends, you could find all manner of people wandering the sidewalks of old downtown Bluebonnet.

Twenty-two hours until he talked to Skye again.

In six months he'd never stopped to consider if her name was really Skye, though it suited her saucy personality. *Did people actually name their kid that?* Probably, but who was he to talk. His middle name was Rowdon. He snorted in disgust as he turned under the freeway and paused at the stop sign across from the Bluebonnet Dancehall. Late afternoon sunlight bounced off the neon bluebonnet sign and the corrugated tin roof.

The dancehall's huge gravel parking lot held only a few cars. Jessa's big black Chevy, a couple waitresses cars, and Toni's perfectly preserved, pink 1968 GTO. He grinned again. Tim had offered her a brand new car for her birthday

last month, but she'd said no. Rowdy had to hand it to her, the girl had style. He backed his old Bronco in beside it and climbed out.

Rowdy strode pulled open the heavy steel door, happy to get out of the early August sun. Even so late in the day the temperatures hovered well above the hundred-degree mark. The door swung shut behind him as paused to let his eyes adjusted to the dimness. Up ahead he could hear voices. Toni and Jessa, who was Zack's wife and the band's lead singer. Technically, he was no more related to Jessa than any of the other Boudreauxs or Tim, but family was about more than blood, according to Miss Jessa. Rowdy tended to agree.

At the bar, he found both women cooing over Hope, Jessa and Zack's five-month-old daughter.

"Ya'll are gonna spoil her rotten." Even as he spoke, he nudged them out of the way and lifted Hope from her seat. She squealed and lunged for him, a smile on her toothless face. Hope had her daddy's red hair and dimples and her momma's pale blue eyes and temper. And she was his first godchild.

She smiled and babbled and patted his cheeks before inspecting his moustache and lower lip for flexibility. "Wher's da ga'as?"

He nibbled on her finger and prayed she'd let go before she ripped his lower lip off.

The guys," Jessa began while prying her daughter's fingers from his lips, "are outside throwing horseshoes."

"I knew I shouldn't have been late." He nibbled on Hope's neck before handing her back to her mother.

"Hope and I will get 'em so we can warm up." She took off, baby in her

arms and disappeared through the big doors leading out to the beer garden.

Rowdy turned to head up on stage when Toni's throat clearing stopped him. He glanced back over his shoulder to where she stood beside the bar, drumming her fingers on the shiny laminated top.

"Lunch tomorrow?" She arched one eyebrow and flicked her long dark curls over her shoulder.

"I brought your bowl back. It's in the truck."

"You're such a good boy." She smiled and patted his cheek. In retaliation, he reached out and tweaked the tip of her nose.

"What's for dinner?"

She frowned and rubbed her nose. "Does it matter, you eating machine?"

"Nope." He hugged her, ignoring her growl of protest. She was just as stubborn about accepting displays of affection as his niece, Rene.

"I didn't think so."

#

The band's night went off without a hitch. As most seemed to since Jessa had joined them as their lead singer over a year ago. And darn near nine hours after he'd left the house an exhausted Rowdy showered again, washing away the smell of smoke, then sat down to leave Skye her nightly note.

Forty emails from the list. They'd been all wound up ever since Chris Cagle started the big tour, posting concert reviews and making plans to get together all over the country. Rowdy shook his head and sipped his beer. He'd planned to take Rene, but if things went well with Skye, maybe he could take her instead. He spotted a few from Skye in the bunch and smiled. At least he knew where she'd spent her evening.

For all intents and purposes, he was the only man on the list, and he stayed because of her. Occasionally, he was tempted to set himself to no-mail just to escape the daily onslaught of gushing--it got old. He scrolled through his mail and spotted some personal ones from Skye—replies to the ones he'd sent the previous night. He clicked on the one with "Kissing" in the subject line.

Robbie Baby, you just love to tease me but I think you're all talk and no action. ;-)

He chuckled at the little winking face she'd put at the end. All talk and no action, huh? He'd show her. Another was from shortly after he'd left and contained the promised list of restaurants. Good, he'd ask Tim about them tomorrow. To his surprise, the last one from her was time stamped only thirty minutes earlier.

You always say to dream about you. Sometimes I do; sometimes I don't. Tonight I did. I dreamed we were at some dark, tiny little dive and a woman in a long, red evening gown was singing the blues. I had on a little black silk dress and we were both all hot and sweaty. We just stood there, out on the dance floor, swaying to the music. Except for you, me and the band, the whole place was empty. I could smell you and feel you. The hairs brushing your collar, your cologne, sweat. I could feel the heat of your hands through my dress. Everything felt so real, when I woke up I had to tell you about it.

He blew out a deep breath and read the e-mail twice more. The picture she'd painted had left him hot and gasping for air. If it weren't nearly four in the morning, he'd call her. Instead, he opted for a cold shower and hit the hay,

plagued by dreams of blues bars and dark-haired cuties in short black dresses.

#

“What’s for dinner?” Rowdy hollered, letting himself in Tim’s house the next afternoon. His mouth immediately set to watering at the smell of Toni’s famous pork tenderloin with peach chutney glaze.

“What does your nose say?” Toni shouted a reply from the kitchen. Rowdy followed the sound of her voice and running water, and found her doing dishes. He popped the lid off the plastic bowl he’d forgotten to give her the night before and added it to the sink of soapy water.

Early afternoon sunlight poured through the huge window behind her and she had the back door propped open. She’d apparently been at it hard and heavy a while. A bag of fresh green beans and large bowl sat on the kitchen table and dirty dishes and cookware covered every inch of the butcher block countertop. Knowing Toni, she’d gotten up early and cooked breakfast, too.

He gently squeezed her shoulders and kissed the top of her head. “Aren’t you hot?”

“This kitchen’s hot whether the door is open or no.” She waved a hand, flicking soapsuds in the air, and went back to stacking rinsed dishes in the dishwasher.

“Where’s Tim?” He scooted more dishes down for her and slipped a casserole pan and a handful of silverware in the water.

“Thank you. Out back with Rene. They’re trying to get her string worked before lunch.”

Tim trained cutting horses for a living, and Rene had inherited his way with animals. After they’d returned from their spring break trip to California, Tim had

given her four yearlings of her own to train.

“Want me to set the table?”

She kept her eyes on the sink and her tone casual. “Non, no. We’re having five at the big table.”

“Toni,” he growled.

“Row-dy!” She turned and waved a soapy wooden spoon at him, and he glanced down at the suds that landed on his t-shirt. “Kellie is a nice girl. Nicer than those floozies you normally pick up.”

Toni’s best girlfriend and a waitress at the dancehall. “Kellie is very sweet,” he agreed, sidling toward the open back door while she started the dishwasher.

“So what’s the problem?” She dried her hands then sat at the kitchen table, a frown on her face. Her pale purple eyes were nearly gray. Rowdy sighed. He hated making her mad.

“You can't say boo to her without having her flinch and get all teary eyed. I like my women with a little more spice.” He grinned and waggled his eyebrows at her, hoping he could tease her back into a good mood. Hoping she’d finally admit defeat.

“Well, don’t you have any friends?” She looked up at him, a handful of green beans in one hand and a paring knife in the other.

Whew! Close call. “For Kellie? As a matter of fact.”

“Are you going to tell me or do I have to stab you?”

Hands clasped behind his back, eyebrows raised, he eyed her as he crossed the last few steps to the back door. Stepping out on the back porch, he paused and threw one word over his shoulder. “Bo.”

“Foster? Little Bo Foster?”

Bo was gonna kill him, but as he recalled, Bo and Kellie had dated in high school and the fiddle player wasn't currently seeing anyone. Rowdy ignored her shouts and kept moving, slipping his sunglasses out of his shirt pocket and shoving them on as he crossed the yard to the arena.

From his spot at the fence, Rowdy watched Tim and Rene work one last horse, a pretty buckskin filly born to Tim's prize mare just over two years back. The heat quickly warmed Rowdy's skin as he stood watching the trio, little puffs of dust rising around all eight feet. When they were through putting Layla through her paces, Rene let her out to pasture and came romping over as if she were a filly herself.

A long black ponytail bobbed back and forth from the back of her ball cap like a mini-mane. She had her mother's freckles but Tim's bright blue eyes and dark hair. He met her on the lower rung of the fence and caught her in a bearhug, planting a smacking kiss on her cheek. Even at nearly fourteen she wasn't done growing yet. She'd be tall, but then, so were Charlene and Tim.

“How ya been, stranger?” She fluttered her baby blues and grinned at him, her arms still locked around his neck.

“Pretty good. How's your toes?”

Rene punched him in the chest and leapt backward off the fence, landing against her father who'd come up behind her. She hated it when he gave her flack for “girly” stuff. Thanks to her aunt, Rene had developed a thing about doing her toenails. Which wasn't really that unusual unless you were a tomboy who spent your summer in boots working with horses and cattle. She'd even gotten Toni in on the act, and now, two Mondays a month they had Toenail Night. Toenail Night

had grown from the two of them to include all the Boudreaux women.

He couldn't resist a chuckle as she stalked away and Tim joined in.

"You just have to rile her, don't you?"

"If I didn't, she'd think there was something wrong." Rowdy grinned.

"Come to mooch dinner again?" Tim asked, wiping his sweaty brow.

"Your woman invited me, so here I am."

"Kellie—" Tim began.

He waved it off. "I already put Toni on Bo's trail. Hopefully she'll be so grateful, she'll still feed me."

"Hopefully he'll forgive you. She's just bound and determined to find someone for that gal."

Rowdy cleared his throat, unable to keep the sheepish grin off his face.

"Speaking of...someone's, I have a list of four restaurants I'm supposed to choose from."

"*You* get to choose." Tim raised his eyebrows and grinned.

"She told me to surprise her," Rowdy confessed.

Tim shook his head in apparent sympathy. "They love settin' us up for a fall."

Rowdy chuckled and nodded. There was so much truth to his brother's words. He rattled off the restaurants and waited on Tim's verdict. Most of Rowdy's "dates" had been with local girls and didn't usually last past breakfast.

"I'd go for The Bayou or Boudros. First date?"

Rowdy nodded. "Are they both close to Louie's?"

"Louie's, huh. You got a hankerin' to dance to the blues?" Tim gave him a conspiratorial wink over the top of his sunglasses. "Who is she?"

“This chick. . .this chick I met. She’s not from around here,” he added, struggling to meet Tim’s eyes. Normally Rowdy kept his women to himself, though he wasn’t shy about discussing them if he had a problem.

Up to now, he hadn’t wanted to share Skye with anyone. Until now she hadn’t felt quite real. Now he wanted someone to talk about her with and Tim wouldn’t give him *too much* grief.

“She must be more than just ‘a chick’ if you’re willing to drop a few dimes on her,” Tim said softly.

“It’s her thirtieth birthday.”

“Ohhh, I see. An older chick.”

“Four years.” He shrugged, dreading what was coming.

“Hold that thought.” Tim walked down and exited the arena via the gate. Rowdy met him halfway and they continued toward the house.

“How’d you meet her?”

“Internet.” He tried to keep his bomb as small as possible, knowing it would get a reaction, and he was right.

Tim pulled up short halfway up the porch steps and roared with laughter, leaning heavily on the rail. “What, did you pull a Zack and place a personal ad?”

Zack and Jessa had met via a personal ad he’d placed on the Internet, and they had to put up with a lot of good-natured teasing because of it.

“I, um, no. We met on a music list.”

Tim snorted. “If it doesn’t have horse in it I can’t find it on that damned Internet, nor do I want to. So you’ve lost me.”

“We’ve been talkin’ a while and I offered to take her out for her birthday.”

“When’s the last time you took a woman out for more than breakfast?”

From his position on the bottom step, Rowdy looked up at his brother.
“Never,” he said softly.

Before Tim could reply, the back door flew open and Toni stepped out, waving another wooden spoon in her hand. “You two going to stand there all afternoon or what?”

Tim grunted and leapt up the steps. “Where’s my dinner, woman?”

“It’s lunch not dinner.”

“You just like to argue.” He wrapped his arms around her and kissed her. Behind them, Rene cleared her throat.

“That is really gross, ya’ll.” Rene stood in the doorway, lips pursed and arms crossed.

“Gettin’ a little sick to your stomach, are ya?”

“Bleack!” She pointed and wrinkled her nose for emphasis.

Rowdy snorted with laughter then faked a frown. “I didn’t know people actually said ‘bleack’. Guess if you’re sick, I get your peach cheesecake for dessert.”

“There’s no stealing dessert at my table, Rowdy,” Toni announced from over Tim’s shoulder.

“Fine, then feed me before I starve to death. I’m a growing boy, Mama.”

“Hmmpf.”

3. CELLULITE = NO THONGS

I sighed into my coffee and replayed my previous night's coughing fit as if it had been the winning touchdown in the last three seconds of the Super Bowl. Slow-Mo.

As punishment I woke up early and subjected myself to another round of Pilates From Hell. Though I doubted they'd do much good after yesterday's cookie binge. My *last* cookie binge, I might add. *Never ever again would a Milano pass my lips or darken my cupboard!*

After the previous night's phone call, which had left me shaken, I'd thrown them all away and carried the trash to the curb, so I couldn't change my mind. I'd lain in bed all night nursing a sore throat and wondering what I'd gotten myself into.

I'd talked to him on the phone, for heaven's sake!

I sighed again, unable to keep a smile off my face. He sounded even yummier than his emails, but thanks to my self-imposed exile, I had no friends to talk me down from the chandelier. Except Chrystine, and I knew what she'd say: *Get some for me, while you're at it!*

No sleep hadn't helped matters. Shortly before three I'd woken up hot and sweaty, all tangled in my sheets and gasping for air. After a quick shower, I'd checked my mail, wondering if he were home yet. He wasn't, but did I go back to

bed? *No!*

I sat and typed him this long e-mail about my blues club dream. I'd expected to find a reply canceling our date when I checked in next. I should have known better. Instead I got this:

Nice to see you listen to me <grin>. You bring the black dress, I'll bring the hands. Now go back to bed and dream of me some more.

If only he knew I'd dreamed of him all night. I was still so flustered over the events of the last twelve hours and hung over from lack of sleep, I hadn't bothered to answer his e-mails. Instead, I'd headed downstairs and cooked myself breakfast.

Even eating on the back porch, surrounded by my miniature garden hadn't helped calm me down.

On exercise-weak legs, I carried my cup and plate of half-eaten scrambled eggs back inside, rinsed the plate and refilled my coffee cup.

I dragged myself upstairs to the office, wincing at every step. My stomach ached from those stupid Pilates, but more importantly, I had nothing to wear.

Nothing!

Everything from my country club, size ten days were long past zipping or buttoning or snapping. Let alone pulling up. Which left me with a huge dilemma.

Where do fat chicks buy sexy clothes?

More importantly, did they even make anything that didn't look like something my great-grandmother wouldn't be caught dead in--a problem I'd encountered more than once while shopping for work clothes. Considering my great-grandmother probably wore crinolines and pantaloons, that wasn't saying much.

I spent the morning hunting all over the internet for something local since I wasn't stupid enough to buy anything without trying it on first. The only place I found was closed on Sundays, and the clock was ticking. I could see Alice's rabbit from Wonderland tapping his foot and twitching his ears. Horror of horrors, I also saw a trip to the mall in my future.

After a trip to the grocery store, I slipped into the beauty supply place next door. Ten minutes later I emerged with five different shades of polish, files and everything else I'd need to spruce up my nails.

I couldn't type with long nails and had never seen the sense in having fake short ones. That ranked right up there with decaf coffee and non-alcoholic beer.

But somewhere between The Great Cookie Caper and the grocery store, I'd come to some sort of unconscious decision. Three years of no nail polishing and the most minimal of makeup were officially behind me. I couldn't help myself. Deep down inside my girly-girl had woken up and now cried for freedom. I couldn't lose fifty pounds in less than two weeks, but if I was going to meet Robbie, I wanted to look my best. That much I could do.

And that much I *wanted* to do. I went home, emptied my car and high tailed it to the mall.

At Dillard's I got a complete makeover at the MAC counter and bought everything from facial scrub to eyeliner, two shades of Lipglass and coordinating lipsticks. Including a woo-woo daring shade of red the sales clerk had offered up with a wicked grin.

I also found out that applying full regalia makeup was a lot like riding a bike. Either that or we women were just genetically programmed to know these

sorts of things.

After I put a huge dent in my credit card I ran downstairs to a shop I'd spotted on my way in. Which turned out to be a complete bust. Whoever said stretchy fabrics were a fat chick's friend didn't know what the hell they were talking about. Thanks to the material's cling quotient, Lycra might as well have been Saran Wrap. I stood gawking at the price tag on a particularly ugly shirt in mustard yellow and moss green when the bubbly sales clerk stopped to chat, a walking advertisement for the store. I could easily guess where all her paychecks went.

"Finding everything alright?" She blinked and smiled, showing off her dimples.

Did she wake up like that or was she medicated? "Yes, thank you." I still hadn't located the sale rack. I suppose, if you were young and fat this was the place to shop, but I wasn't eighteen. Or even twenty-one. Everything I saw was outrageous or super-plain. There was no middle ground—especially on the price tags!

No way in hell was I paying twenty-five dollars for a t-shirt because it had a few extra inches of material in it!

"We cater mostly to younger Big Beautiful Women, so let me know if you need anything."

"I will." *God I hate being labeled.* I deliberately turned my back on her and headed for a table of panties in every color under the sun, hoping she'd finally let me shop in peace.

"Oh, and today only we're having a sale on thongs--three for twenty dollars. A great bargain, huh?"

“Yeah.... Super.” *If I was shopping for slingshots.* I found nothing appealing about the visual of me in a thong. If I were one of those women who frequented clubs catering to fat people, I might have considered investing in a few.

I shuddered while quickly selected three pair of high cut briefs when it became apparent that Bubbles the Perky-Clerk would continue to hover. *Why did they feel the need to hide the sale rack?*

Christyne, my Cagle Friend from Dallas was always trying to get me to visit so we could go to the club near her, claiming it was a total riot. Women participating in a wet t-shirt contests weren't my idea of fun, and I'd scolded Christyne for it--never mind that she won--it showed a lack of self respect that had *nothing* to do with size. And set the women's movement back on it's....chest.

The Internet is a dangerous thing. In my travels through cyber-space I'd run across such terms as BHM—big handsome man—and FA's. Fat admirers? What the hell was that? Frankly, I'd much prefer a man who wanted me for *me*, *not* because I was fat.

That's right, fat, not fluffy. Cats are fluffy.

And feeders? People who fed their loved ones until they reached gargantuan proportions? Not my first choice for a fetish! Whip me, beat me, make me go jogging, but don't *feed* me!

I didn't enjoy being fat. But I'd done this to myself and it hadn't happened overnight. More like three years. At least if I'd been born with a big nose I could have had it surgically corrected. Maybe this was my payback for not even needing braces.

I gave up on locating the sales rack and checked out, high tailing tailed it out of the store before I wasted any more of my day.

In my search of the mall, everything I found was like the first store--either too young and tacky or too old and polyesterish. I finally left and drove around, stopping at a discount store that promised name brand clothes with off prices where I usually had good luck finding work clothes.

I grabbed a basket and headed toward the two long racks containing plus size clothes, passing rows and rows of junior and misses clothes along the way.

On my first pass through the Plus Size rack, I only came away with three choices. Not much of a selection if you were over a size sixteen. The first, a frilly, gray paisley peasant affair looked like I'd dug in my grandmother's rag bag for something to wear to bed. Worse, when I tried it on, the puckered bodice made my 42DD's look like G cups.

The second dress was solid red with white piping and resembled something from a 1940's spy flick. On the hanger it looked great, but on me the dress clung to every lump and bulge. You could practically see the size stamped on my panties through the back. Either the damned thing was cut small or my Milanos had done more than get me a date.

I frowned in the dressing room mirror, giving myself a critical once over. *There is no less forgiving light than the ones they install in dressing rooms.*

The enormity of what I'd done to myself, just how much I'd let myself go, hit home in a big way.

Letting myself go hadn't just been about scarfing Milanos for three years, but about me, my mother and my ex-fiancé.

I'd spent the year before my wedding growing my hair out so I could wear it piled on top of my head, envisioning long southern belle style ringlets. I'd had my long ringlets, alright, and hacked them off the next day with a pair of 12-inch

kitchen shears. I'd stood in the bathroom I shared with my sister, Emerald and hooted and hollered in the mirror with maniacal glee as I covered the pristine tile floor with an ocean of ebony hair.

Emerald came traipsing in, a frown on her perfect pale face, and screamed bloody murder. Her horror had left me doubled over and howling with laughter. I'd even wet my pants from laughing so hard. Her screams also brought Daddy and Nicky running. I hadn't been able to stop laughing until Daddy forced me to swallow two fingers of his best single malt scotch.

I'd quit my cushy job, collected the last scraps of my pride and dwindling funds and gotten the hell out of Austin before Allan returned from St. Kitts with his new wife—a stripper who came complete with the required amount of silicon in all the right places.

While I was the proud owner of a fucking double chin.

The makeup helped, but what happened to the girl who used to spend her weekends water skiing? She had turned into a blimp. A blimp who had a date with the man of her dreams and nothing to wear. I glared at myself in the mirror.

Suck it up, Chicky!

Furious with myself, I yanked the too-tight red dress over my head and put on my own clothes with tugs and jerks.

###

By the time I was through I'd gone over the Plus Size rack three time, tried on twelve dresses—even ones I didn't like--and knew the girl working the fitting rooms by name.

How could it be so hard to find something pretty, yet casual that didn't look like a reject from a muumuu factory? Pants could hide many flaws but so could a

long skirt. And pants were out. Thanks to my big mouth, Robbie expected legs.

The next long rack contained more business and casual clothes. An idea took form and I wheeled my empty basket around other Sunday shoppers, determined to walk out of that store with *something*! Again the pickings were slim, but I grabbed up anything with potential.

A red wrap around blouse in the hands of another woman caught my eye. She blinked at my snort of laughter. If she only knew I'd been debating how easily I could take her. Instead, I focused on the rack of clothes, waiting until she finally replaced the blouse and wheeled off, chattering to her friend and sneaking sidelong glances at me.

Then I snatched it up, checked to make sure it was my size and headed back to the dressing room. Despite the off-the-shoulder cut that meant I'd have to wear a strapless bra, I knew I'd found a winner, and smiled to myself in the mirror.

Now all I needed was a skirt.

#

Feeling as if my outing had been at least moderately successful, I headed home with my purchases and cooked an early dinner. I carried my grilled chicken and vegetables upstairs and ate at my desk while waiting on Robbie to show up. Then in the middle of dinner, my mom called, making all the usual noise.

Talk about an appetite suppressant.

"Jade."

"Yes, ma'am." One did not refer to The Honorable Judge Trudy Ballard, who had her perfectly coifed, honey blonde hair retouched every two weeks, Mom.

"I'm calling to confirm about next week."

As if I were a business appointment. "I told Daddy last night I was coming home, but..."

"Good, we'll make reservations at the club."

"Mom!" *Unless one wanted her immediate attention, that is.*

"Jade Skye."

Retaliation. She knew I hated my name. Who would have thought my ultra-conservative parents would come up with such an off-the-wall name. Frankly, I thought my sister's was worse—Emerald Rayne. Then what did they do? They gave my brother a normal name, Nicholas Stone Ballard. Blarh! She could have at least made his middle name Bluegrass or something.

I gritted my teeth and slipped into the role of country club debutante. "Must we go to the country club?"

"Well, where else is there to go, dear?"

As if Austin didn't have another place to eat, though technically they didn't live in Austin but Round Rock, located on the northern edge of the sprawling city. Much like Dallas and Houston, Austin had begun to spread, like a middle-aged woman. "There are some nice places downtown."

"The club is fine and so much closer."

And so what if it was my birthday. I sighed and resisted the urge to scrub at my face like a pouty three-year-old.

"When will you arrive, so I can have Claudine tidy your room?"

She needed plenty of time to clear closet space. After I'd moved out she'd confiscated my closets. Never mind that she had two walk in ones of her own. I'm sure, when Emerald moved out, she'd take hers and Tricky Nicky's, too. The judge was a shopaholic.

“Thursday around noon,” I replied after pausing to think about it a minute. I decided to hedge my bets since I had no idea how Wednesday night with Robbie would go.

“Fine, dear. Dinner at the club. Wayne will be joining us.”

With a click she was gone and I sighed, my eyes on the phone until it began to beep in my hand. With The Judge, it was easier to just keep the peace and let her have her way, and in exchange I only had to see her a few times a year.

But I hated the country club and all it entailed. Furthermore, I hated Wayne Richards, my sister's fiancé. He could have passed for my ex-fiancé, Allan's clone. Oh not in looks, Allan definitely topped him there, but Wayne was rich and a lawyer. Just what The Judge ordered.

I disconnected the phone only to have it ring in my hand before I could set it down. *What the hell could she have forgotten to harp on me about?* “Yes, ma'am.”

“I've been called a lot of things, Darlin', but never ma'am.”

I swallowed and exhaled slowly so Robbie wouldn't hear me. “Hi. I thought you were Mom calling back.”

“You two must be close.”

“Why do you say that?” I frowned, wondering where he'd gotten that impression. Mommy Dearest and I were anything but close.

“You talked to her last night, too.”

“Oh...no, that was Dad.” I'd forgotten. I did my best to put The Judge's infrequent calls out of my mind. “She called about my birthday. I think she's worried I'll chicken out or something.” It wasn't like she actually missed me. The only time she ever called was for holidays to ensure my presence for “Grand

Performances.” Out of sight; out of mind. Just the way I liked it.

“Speaking of chickening out—”

“Did you change your mind?” I cringed at the thought of all the money I’d spent on makeup and girly paraphernalia today.

“Never, you?”

“No way.” *I was a lying dog.* I’d changed my mind at least a dozen times in the last hour alone.

“See, now that I can call you, I don’t have to hunt and peck anymore.”

“So I don’t get anymore late night emails?”

His chuckle came across the phone lines as a deep rumble and I sank a little lower in the chair and sighed. But as much as I enjoyed the sound of his voice, it just wasn’t the same.

The freedom of anonymity was now gone.

“What were you doing up so late?”

“Couldn’t sleep.” I poked at my now-cold dinner with a fork.

“Should have turned on your IM, I would have talked to ya, Baby.”

“I took a warm shower.” I should have taken a cold one. Shower massagers weren’t just for a sore back, but it sure hadn’t helped last night.

“So did I.” He chuckled again, almost a sly sound, and for a second, I wondered if he’d read my mind. If he knew I’d masturbated, or maybe he had. I voted for silence and waited to see what he’d say next. “Did you decide which little black dress to wear?”

“Which?” *As if I could even find one.*

My messenger screen popped up with a little winking face in it. “Surely my Skyebaby has more than one little black dress,” he murmured.

“Of course.” Four, and none fit.

“That’s what I thought. Wear the shortest one so I can see your pretty legs.”

“So you’re a leg man. I thought you were a breast man, Robbie honey.” I grimaced as the slightly bawdy words flew out of my mouth but his laughter filled my ear. Being myself out loud was much harder than being myself online.

“I don’t discriminate.”

I sighed. Years of water skiing and tennis had left me with well-shaped legs and I cursed myself now for all the bragging I’d done about them. I’d have to find one hell of a skirt.

How he could not sound nervous, I had no clue. But he teased and flirted and sent me smiley faces and leering faces via instant messenger. “So what was that about all talk and no action?”

Oh Gawd! I’d sent that e-mail before we’d agreed to go out. “I guess you’ll get to put your money where your mouth is soon enough, huh?”

“I can’t wait.”

If anything, I slid lower in my chair, suddenly hot and flushed. Truth be told, neither could I.

4. BLOW OUT THE CANDLES

Rowdy hung up, glad she'd seemed to finally loosened up some. Even after they got off the phone Rowdy and Skye stayed up until midnight talking on IM and bantering back and forth on the list and in private. The e-mails flew, and more than once, he found himself howling with laughter.

He could tell she was still apprehensive about going out with him and talking to him. He didn't blame her a bit. He felt a little nervous, too, but kept reminding himself that she was his Skyebaby and she knew him better than practically anyone on the planet.

He had feelings for her. Whether they were love or not, he wasn't sure. He'd never been in love. Not even high school crushes. Because he'd never let anyone get as close as Skye had.

Now, if only he could figure out what to do with her.

#

Rowdy spent Monday morning straightening up the house. He really did hate clutter, even if he wasn't the best housekeeper in the world. He even found six of Charlene's letters stashed in the kitchen drawer under some dishtowels and debated throwing them away. *Did she write Mom the same crap she wrote him?*

Considering he hadn't talked to her in nearly ten years, he'd never know. He reluctantly broke the seal on one and scanned it.

Dear Rowdy,

I send you blessings and peace.

From the dark side, maybe. Trash. He wadded the letter up and pitched it in the plastic garbage bag beside him then tore open another.

Dear Rowdy,

I know you're not a father but happy Father's Day anyway.

I'd like to spend this letter like I spent my day. Talking about

Daddy. Reverend Jennie says

Daddy wasn't worth wasting a second on, let alone a day. Trash. Five pages of drivel joined the last letter. The postmark on the third one caught his eye. It had arrived after Tim and Toni took Rene to California for spring break.

Dear Rowdy,

Happy Easter and many blessings to you. I had the most amazing visit with Tim and Rene. I can't tell you the peace that fills my mother's heart and gives me hope. I've prayed and prayed just like Reverend Jennie said to, but never imagined he'd actually bring her to see me. I'm ashamed she saw me here, like this, but she said not to be. He's done an amazing job with her.

No thanks to her. Rowdy snorted but read on.

I feel so guilty. His new girlfriend is wonderful and I can see they're very much in love. I can't tell you how much peace this too brings me, seeing him so happy. I know my time with him is over but he'll always hold a special place in my heart.

I get out of jail next summer. Tim said he'll help me move back to Bluebonnet. My life is so good!

There was nothing *good* about being in prison. No wonder she got saved, she didn't have anything better to do. At least if she conformed to God's house, she had someone to talk with.

Trash.

He didn't bother reading the other three. Instead he spent the afternoon working on Rene's computer and his evening chatting with Skye, but it wasn't the same. And he couldn't bring himself to tell her why. Sister Revered Charlene's Holy Roller pap had soured his mood so much, he called it an early night.

#

Wednesday afternoon Rowdy met the band at the bar for rehearsal. Not that they needed it, but Jessa wanted to run thorough some new songs. When he pulled into the parking lot he spotted Jade Ballard's silver Cougar near the door and grinned, thinking of last week's encounters with the chubby brunette. He'd only run up to the bar the previous Wednesday after Susie begged him to fill in at the last minute.

He'd watched Jade Ballard since she took over from the last sales rep a year ago. She'd always been very formal and standoffish, bordering on disapproving. And in honor of her visit Wednesday he'd done his best hick performance, getting a real kicked out of watching her poker up and talk all snooty.

Too bad he didn't dip, he could have kept a dip cup handy and really gotten to her delicate sensibilities. *Delicate his ass.*

Jade had hated taking the liquor order from him, hated giving him her sales pitch and going over the sales fliers. She stood there in her navy pantsuit, looking down her narrow little nose at him, her thin lips pursed as if he were a gunslinger and she some plantation owner's daughter.

Then to bust her at Target. He'd laughed about that for a good forty-five minutes and shared the experience with Susie, who'd scolded him. Susie adored Jade for some godawful reason and was convinced she was shy, but Rowdy knew better. He knew her type. She was a first class snob.

He walked into the cool, dimly lit dark building and paused before doing his best hick imitation. "Hey, hey, hey!"

Texas had to be the only state where "hey" was recognized as a formal greeting. It covered 'hi, how are you and your family' all in one simple three-letter word. But his jolly hello backfired and set off a round of crying from Hope.

"Just for that you get to take care of her." Jessa scowled at him from her spot at the bar.

Before he could harass Jade, who stood at the bar beside Susie, eyeing him, he found Hope shoved in his arms and promptly set to patting her back.

Jessa stalked past him and headed for the stage where Zack and Ty waited. Outright grumpiness wasn't normal for her. He caught Toni's eye. "What's wrong?"

He bounced up and down on his heels while patting Hope's back until she began to sag. With a heaving sigh as the tension slowly left her tiny body.

"Hope has an ear infection and Jessa was up with her most of the night," she added, eyebrows raised. "She came this close--" Toni held out her thumb and forefinger "--to canceling practice."

He turned his attention to the baby in his arms. Her cries had turned to little hiccups and she looked at him with an expression so sad he frowned and swallowed the lump in his throat. He kissed her warm forehead and gently rubbed her back until her eyelids drifted low. He had an admitted soft spot for little girls

that probably dated back to when Rene was just a sprout. He loved the two little girls in his life more than anyone and would do anything for them.

Jade studied him, as if she couldn't quite believe he was holding a baby. He expected her to slide on a lab coat and take notes. "I see your charm and charisma extend even to the younger set."

"How's that tooth doing? Had to make any more emergency visits to the dentist?" he shot back with a scowl.

Today she wore khakis, a pink t-shirt and some brown weave sandals. But in Target last weekend she'd looked like she'd been rode hard and put up wet, though the Chris Cagle t-shirt had thrown him. He'd never imagined her lowering her standards to be *anyone's* fan. Let alone publicize it.

Susie excused herself and disappeared into the office, frowning as she passed him. He gently set the now-dozing Hope in her chair and glanced at Jade, feeling unusually defensive. "Haven't you ever seen a man hold a baby before?"

"I just didn't take you for the baby type."

"Maybe if you'd lay off those cookies you wouldn't need all that dental work." She'd had four bags of cookies in her basket to go with her bras and panties. He'd never understood why people drank diet soda and ate junk. *Did they cancel each other out?*

Her cheeks turned a deep pink and she looked away.

With the flush to her face, he finally realized what was different about her. She had makeup on. And she'd obviously put a lot of effort into it. He moved closer for a better look.

She finally met his gaze head on, her notebook clutched to her 42DD's. He glanced at her chest then back up at her eyes, silently telling her as best he could

that he'd seen the size on that bra's tag last week. He couldn't suppress a smirk, and she raised her chin a notch then angrily turned away again. He'd never actually seen a pair that big up close and naked. No matter what he'd said to Skye the night before, Rowdy was a self-admitted breast man. A connoisseur even.

While she studied the empty bar, he studied Miss Snooty Pants with her regal posture. As pale as Jade's skin was, he knew her boobs would be snow white. But her dark hair made him wonder what color her nipples would be. A soft pink to match her skin or dark and rosy. She was a pretty woman, even if she could stand to lose a few pounds.

He liked it when she got angry and snapped those big green eyes at him and he got a real kick out of riling her.

"Rowdy," Toni scolded, her voice low. He frowned at her, a silent message to mind her own business, then leaned against the bar next to Jade.

"Hope is my goddaughter," he explained, then wondered why he'd bothered.

"I'm surprised anyone would trust you with the spiritual well being of their child." Her green eyes blazed as she let loose an arrow that went deeper than she could imagine.

"What the hell does that mean?"

"A godparent's primary role is to oversee the spiritual education of their godchild," she snapped, in her typical condescending tone.

As if he didn't know what a godparent's role was.

"Rowdy is a wonderful godfather," Toni threw in.

"Spirituality is in the eye of the beholder," he snapped back, thinking of Charlene's letters full of religious drivel.

“Children!” Toni scolded just as the office door slammed, announcing Susie’s return.

“I gotta get to work.” He stood and silently headed across the empty dance floor, not caring if the heels of his boots left scuff marks.

Jade was as much a preachy do-gooder as Charlene.

#

The following Tuesday night he called Skye to confirm their plans, a part of him still worried she’d back out. Especially after he’d spent all afternoon at the mall, shopping for a present. He didn’t want to overwhelm her and had spent more time walking around wracking his brains for the perfect gift than actually shopping.

He finally settled on a sterling silver anklet with a clef note dangling from it. Music, at least, was one thing they had in common. But not the only thing.

“Do you want me to pick you up?”

“Could we...is your IM on?”

He loved listening to the sound of her soft, breathy voice but clicked the little icon that launched the instant messaging program they used. “It is now.”

He noticed hers was on also, and a note popped up in his screen. No wonder she didn’t want to talk.

Skyebaby: *I’m nervous*

“Would it make you feel any better if I told you I was, too?” He leaned back in his chair and doodled on a notepad advertising a local computer parts store.

She didn’t say a word but he could hear her typing, and another message quickly appeared.

Skyebaby: *Yes it would. Do you mind just meeting me there?*

“Not at all.” He’d do whatever she wanted. It was her birthday, after all.
“What are you wearing? How will I know you?”

Skyebaby: *Red off the shoulder blouse and a black skirt with long fringe and big red poppies on it. My little black dress is at the cleaners <shrug>*

“Black hair, green eyes, red off the shoulder blouse, long skirt with flowers.” He smiled to himself, enjoying the image she’d painted. “Anything else?”

Skyebaby: *Pearls*

Classy flashed through his mind. “Nice. I’ll be the big blonde with a receding hairline and a rose jammed between his teeth.”

That got him a giggle and a big smiley face with lots of teeth. From the distinct tremor in her voice, she was beyond nervous. The sugar and spice he’d gotten so used to in the last seven months was nowhere to be found. He tried to think of something that would ease her fears. “Skyebaby, it’s just me.”

“I know,” she whispered. “I’m gonna go. I want to get done with work early tomorrow so I can come home early and start getting ready.”

“Hey.”

“Huh?”

“If you decide this is too much, call me. I’ll understand.”

“Okay. I’m gonna go do my toes.”

“Night, Baby.”

“Night, Shy.”

5. *GREAT EXPECTATIONS*

In honor of my first class case of nerves, I'd stopped on my way home and bought a bottle of wine. Otherwise, I'd be up all night. I had to work Wednesday and that meant getting some sleep. *Somehow*. I'm a cheap date. Two glasses of wine would put me out like a light.

I felt like a headless chicken. In the last ten days my routine had bit the shit. Robbie had left messages on my voice mail while I was out on calls. We'd send instant messages back and forth while I ate. Then he'd call to wish me sweet dreams on top of his normal nightly emails.

I'd managed to do just enough Pilates so that I didn't walk like a rusty robot anymore, and I'd spent every afternoon off searching for a skirt, the right pair of earrings, or getting a pedicure and manicure. I'd never get caught up on the list mail. And I'd never had this problem before.

All thanks to Robbie.

Not that I was complaining, mind you.

After hanging up with him, I shut down the computer. For the first time in a long time we wouldn't be up late talking.

And in less than twenty-four hours we'd be having dinner together.

Dancing.

I smothered a whimper and crossed the small hallway to my bedroom.

Laid out across the bed was my outfit. Black strappy sandals with red rhinestones, like something out of an old black and white dance movie, and my special find in a plus size resale shop, a sexy black skirt. One side brushed my ankle while the other was cut up to my knee. It looked absolutely fabulous.

While Chris Cagle serenaded me from the stereo on my dresser, I soaked in the tub with my wine, shaved my legs and bikini area then rinsed off. Not that he'd actually *see* my bikini area but as a matter of pride, I shaved everything and trimmed too.

Then sat on the commode lid, my feet propped on the edge of the tub, digging and filing at my toes. Ten days and two pedicures after my new leaf turning, I had tons of work to do on my poor neglected fingers and toes. Much like the rest of me, they were sadly out of shape and I found myself assuming the oddest positions and gasping for air while trying to get the polish on and not make a huge mess.

While the base coat dried, I moussed my damp hair, tossed on an oversized t-shirt, featuring some long-since-faded Disney character, and tried again to duplicate the style I'd found in a magazine. Parted on the side, smoothed down in the front and tucked behind my ears. I smiled in satisfaction at the retro asymmetrical 'do.

I turned this way and that in the oversized mirror, shutting the door to my walk-in closet so I could see my hair from every angle. Even without hairspray, it looked good. I combed it out and labored through the application of bright red polish on my toes.

While they dried, I hobbled around my bedroom on my heels, packing for my trip home on Thursday and tidying up. By the time I was done you could actually see the cinnamon colored velvet of the chaise my suitcase sat on.

Like the rest of my bedroom furniture, the chaise had been my grandmothers. I'd never known her, but bless him, Daddy had insisted I take some of her antiques when I moved south three years ago. And I found having her things rather comforting, since he also said I took after her. Even if the ornate Greek key design carved into the queen-sized bed, dresser and chaise wasn't my style. The carpet in my room was the same navy as the rest of the house but the walls were a pale sand with the half wall that made up my closet painted a shocking rust to go with the chaise--my favorite southwestern colors. It all looked so cozy. Maybe I should turn over a new leaf in regard to cleaning also.

One thing at a time.

The alcohol and activity had helped until I tossed back the last of my wine, shut out the lights and crawled under the covers. I still had one last thing hanging over my head. I hadn't told Robbie about my little problem. Okay, *big* problem. All two hundred and twelve pounds of me. I'd tried while he talked and I'd typed, but a knot had formed in my stomach and my fingers had gotten all cold and stiff. At least he'd admitted to being nervous, too, and given me an out.

Despite my nerves, I just didn't feel like copping out on him was an option. I'd thought about it a lot over the last week and copping out would mean losing him. I was convinced of that. Seeing him could very well mean the same thing, but after all, I was the daughter of Judge Trudy Ballard, and the Honorable didn't raise cowards. Most of the time.

I finally dozed, plagued by dreams of Robbie and tomorrow night. For

some reason our meeting place looked more like the Bluebonnet Dancehall than the Riverwalk.

My day started at six, when I got up to check my e-mail and drink my first cup of coffee. I sighed in frustration as mail filled my inbox. They'd had a busy night on the list--a group had just returned from seeing Chris play in Vegas.

I scanned some, feeling so far behind and out of the loop at all the chatter over how things had gone at different concerts and stuff. Tickets for the Texas shows hadn't even gone on sale yet and wouldn't for a week. I had what looked like a dozen e-mail birthday cards and a private e-mail from Chrystine wishing me good luck on my date and another from Robbie.

Remember darlin I'm just as nervous as you are. But I'm excited too. I can't wait to hug my Skyebaby and give her a birthday kiss. Meet me outside The Bayou at 6:30. I'll be wearing a navy blue shirt and khakis. I might even put a tie on for ya ☺

I giggled and kept reading.

I hope you don't mind but I got you something for your birthday. It's nothing much but I found something that made me think of you. Of course, I think of you all the time so that goes without saying

Aw! I bit my lip and kept reading.

but anyway...I just wanted to do everything I could to make your birthday as special as possible.

I hope you don't feel too pressured to meet me. I don't want to do anything that makes you unhappy or uncomfortable. So if you decide that you'd rather not meet or something comes up, call me. I'll be out working most of the day. My cell number is 830-555-4612

Happy Birthday lovergirl...Robbie

No way was I canceling now. And no matter what happened, I'd just embrace my destiny. Who couldn't love a man as considerate and caring as that? He'd even bought me a birthday present. Aw!

I sighed and read it three more times before finally rousing myself to shut down the computer and run downstairs for more coffee.

No Pilates for the birthday girl!

I dressed, slipped a pair of high-heeled sandals on and hightailed it to work.

My boss, Danny Ramirez had already given me the green light to rearrange my Friday stops and I spent the morning on the phone returning calls, rescheduling appointments or taking orders.

We had cake and wine at lunch in the office, then I took off for my afternoon calls. Wednesday consisted of four stops. Northwest San Antonio. Including the Bluebonnet Dancehall. But today was my birthday, which meant *nothing* could go wrong. No Rowdy Yates in sight at the dancehall. The gods were smiling on me. My day was beautiful, perfect, the best birthday a girl could ask for.

I'm home free!

I even found myself rambling on to Susie Boudreaux about my birthday date. How wonderful he was and what a lucky girl I was to have such an adorable and considerate boyfriend--even if he wasn't *really* my boyfriend. She didn't need to know that, right?

Who said turning thirty was rough?

After another nice long soak in the tub, I slathered Obsession lotion from head to toe and fixed my hair and makeup. Thanks to my shaking hands, it took

three tries to get my eyes made up correctly. Charcoal eyeliner and a touch of gray shadow made my eyes look huge and smoky, and I blinked, pleased with the effect. I was so pale from nerves, I opted for pink lipliner and a pale, sparkly pinkish-gold lipgloss, playing up the retro look to go with my eyes and hairdo.

New panties, no hose--with my shaking hands I would have never gotten them on right. My cute new silver toe ring twinkled up at me.

I'd spent ten minutes anxiously preening in front of the mirror and decided I looked like a really cute hippie chick. I smiled at myself and offered up a little prayer. *God, please don't let me throw up. And please don't let him freak out when he sees how big I am. I promise I'll even be nice to my mom all weekend. Yes, all!*

#

Even San Antonio rush hour traffic couldn't wipe the smile off my face.

I'd been blessed with a wonderful parking space so that I didn't have to hike too terribly far in my cute two-inch heels to meet Robbie. Off I went, swinging my hips and my little red evening bag. I even got a smile or two.

As I neared the restaurant I slowed my pace and searched for Robbie. *Tall blonde.* I giggled at the thought of his receding hairline. He was almost five years younger than me, for crying out loud. Navy blue shirt and khaki pants. Rose in teeth. I giggled again and scanned the crowd, silently chanting "tall blonde".

A hand pressed to my stomach, I took a deep breath, desperately praying the butterflies would let up their assault. I had to pee, but knew it was just nerves talking. I took another quick look around, suddenly worried. *What if he stood me up?*

Getting stood up was the least of my worries. I still feared he'd take one

look at me and head for the hills.

“My God,” came a gentle, drawn out rumble of what sounded like admiration from behind me.

I stiffened at the sound of his voice, then forced myself to breathe and turn around, encouraged by that sweet sexy drawl I'd come to love just as much as I loved everything else about him. Only it wasn't him.

Or, not him as I knew him.

I uttered a garbled whimper of angst and confusion at the sight of Rowdy...Robbie holding a peach rose and a tiny silver box.

I blinked. Then blinked again, hoping the vision before me wasn't real or that he'd say “excuse me” and pass on by. But he didn't.

The smile on his face was replaced with a scowl and the hand holding the rose fell to his side as he looked me up and down.

No way!

My life surely could *not* be this fucking bad! *It's my birthday. Nothing, and I mean nothing, is supposed to go wrong!* “You!” I squeaked.

“You!”

Redneck, hick, good 'ole boy. I rubbed my temple and smothered an attack of tears. “Shit!”

My darling ShyCowboy *could not be* Rowdy Yates! Bluebonnet's answer to the American Gigolo. The man shamelessly flirted with every woman that crossed his path.

From down the way the sound of a blues band warming up penetrated my scrambled brain. I wondered if they were the band we would have danced to later. *Would have* being the operative words.

I struggled against the urge to wail at the top of my lungs in frustration and stamp my foot like a three-year-old.

People circled around us, some openly staring. We were creating a scene. *Ballads never created scenes. Ha!*

Flies buzzed above a nearby trashcan. That damned trashcan now represented my life.

From somewhere deep in my head a voice screamed at me to leave. I finally managed to clamp my mouth shut and move. Never taking my eyes from his, I gathered up handfuls of my skirt and circled around him, praying I didn't trip. "I'm sorry."

I turned and ran as fast as my heels would allow, cursing myself for saying something as lame as "I'm sorry." In the midst of my tears and struggles to get my car key in the lock, I never heard him come up behind me and jumped when he took the keys from my hand. I hiccuped, unable to catch my breath.

"Come and have a drink with me."

I shook my head, past words, and reached for my keys.

He shook his head and held them a little higher. "I don't think you need to drive right now, Sweetheart."

"I'm not your sweetheart!" I grabbed my keys from him and wormed my way into the car, slamming the door and shutting him out. After three tries I got the keys jammed in the ignition and the engine roared to life. He stood on the sidewalk and watched as I backed out.

My stomach churning, I circled San Antonio on Loop 1604 four times, my body on automatic pilot. Finally, when the bell rang announcing I was low on gas, I exited the Loop, filled up and dialed his cell phone number. Deep down inside

some secret part of me hoped he'd answer and ask where I was. Wonder how we'd managed to miss each other. Tell me that he wasn't Rowdy Yates. I still couldn't get past my Robbie, my Shy and Rowdy Yates being one and the same.

That hick was not my angel baby!

I prayed it was some hideous mistake. That maybe Rowdy had been there to meet someone else. My brain struggled to connect the dots. I'd seen him, smelled him even when he wrapped an arm around me and took my keys.

While I waited for my car to fill, I listened to his cell phone ring and ring. A recording finally played in my ear, announcing I'd reached Bluebonnet Computer Repair and please leave a message. I didn't.

By the time I got home it was 8:30.

I was supposed to be at the Riverwalk. Tonight was supposed to have been the beginning of something wonderful. At least I'd hoped so, depending on Robbie...Rowdy's reaction, which no longer mattered.

Tossing my purse on the counter, I stepped into the darkened living room and flopped on the suede couch. Not caring, for once, if I stained the damn thing.

I stared at the ceiling and listened to the ticking of the mantle clock, lacking the strength to even drag myself upstairs. And there I slept until four in the morning when I woke up stiff and sore, with a mouth that tasted like I'd licked Susie Boudreaux's gravel parking lot.

In the kitchen I fixed myself some peanut butter on whole wheat and poured a glass of milk, carrying my dinner/breakfast upstairs. I paused at the top of the hallway and debated whether to check my e-mail or not. Maybe he'd written. Instead of going right and taking a shower, I turned left and entered my office.

While I waited for the computer to boot up, I nibbled on my toast, struggling not to choke on it. The milk I sipped could have been sour for all I cared. I sighed and clicked on the mail icon, watching more mail pour in on top of this mornings. Tons of birthday wishes and tons of e-mail from the list. Nothing from Robbie. I just couldn't bring myself to think of him as Rowdy no matter how hard I tried.

I skimmed for a bit, then deleted *everything*. Months worth of email, including every one Robbie ever sent me. I watched the little hourglass icon work as seven months of hopes and dreams slowly disappeared.

Damn Rowdy Yates to hell!

6. REDNECK BLUES

After Skye took off, nearly causing a three-car pileup in her wake, Rowdy stood on the curb, watching downtown traffic fly by, a frown on his face.

No freaking way was that snotty, snooty little witch his Skyebaby! His angel was sweet and sassy, sugar and spice, just how he liked his women. Not condescending and superior like the snooty Jade Ballard. The reality and the fantasy just didn't mesh, but even as upset as he was, he hoped she'd be okay.

His head still reeling, Rowdy walked the few blocks back to where he'd parked the Bronco and climbed in. His shirt now stuck to him and the tiny silver box had grown sweaty in his hand. He threw it and the rose onto the passenger seat, but he wasn't ready to go home. He drove up I-35 North to New Braunfels and took 41 home. The twisty, hilly, extra long drive required all his concentration and bought him some time to calm down. Once he got there, he sat in his Bronco, his shirt damp with perspiration, wondering why he should even bother climbing out. But the sickly sweet scent of the wilted rose made staying in his huge old tin can for any amount of time impossible.

With a sigh, Rowdy killed the engine before it overheated and blew up, slid out from behind the wheel and slowly walked down the driveway to the mailbox on still-shaky legs. Only to be greeted by the sight of another damned letter from

his sister, the California penal system's latest bible thumper. *Damnitalltohell, did she not give up?*

He shoved the letter and half a dozen fliers back inside and slammed it shut, then stood there scowling at the box. As if a poor mailbox were to blame for all his troubles. No, *he* was to blame. He was the one who fell for some sweet talker's internet bullshit.

He lost a fight with the gate, trying to get in the yard and finally kicked it open, stomping up the walk and through the front door. His keys and her present landed on the hall table.

Rowdy sagged against the door and slumped to the floor, not caring that his clothes might end up covered in dust.

Tonight was supposed to have been the start of something great. The rest of his life. *Maybe* some sort of future. One he'd never dreamed of. One that had previously left him with too many reservations to reach for.

Abuse, and judging from Charlene's letters, sheer stupidity ran in his family. She'd gotten pregnant at fifteen, been a mom at sixteen, run off at nineteen, leaving her husband and daughter behind, then become an eight year guest of the state of California.

He would never, ever, hurt a woman or child, but that wasn't to say he'd never committed an act of violence. A 16 year old doesn't easily shed the guilt of putting his own father in the hospital where he'd later died. Or his mother's silent accusations. Even if he'd probably saved his mother's life in the process. He stared unseeing at the little silver box on the table across from him then squeezed his eyes shut.

Rowdy didn't want to pass that sort of legacy on to a child. He'd always

been content to just be Uncle Rowdy, have a Wife-For-A-Night when needed and go on about his business. At best, he'd hoped to find some woman who had kids and wouldn't want more. At worst, he'd have remained single.

Then he met Skye. Jade. *What the hell kind of name was Jade Skye?* He'd fallen for a fantasy. An illusion. As much as he knew about her, he didn't know a thing. Oldest of three, dumped at the altar by her fiancé, worked in outside sales. Loved music. Played the piano but couldn't sing a lick. Got thrown out of ballet but loved to dance anyway. Mom wouldn't let her take tap.

Masturbated in the shower and had a secret desire to have sex in public or water or both. She loved to sleep in the nude under freshly washed and line dried sheets, loved to flirt and tease and had a sharp wit, and a slightly raunchy, down-to-earth sense of humor.

She loved most sports, used to be an avid water skier. Guess he could see why she didn't ski much anymore. He frowned.

She didn't deserve that. Jade *might*, but Skye *didn't*, and that was his problem.

There was only one person who could help him make sense of the mess he'd just made. Rowdy slowly scrambled to his feet, feeling as old as Mr. Johnson who spent his days playing checkers at the feed store, and grabbed his keys off the table.

He stopped for a six pack of beer at the little convenience store by the dancehall and pulled into the driveway of Susie's white and green two story house five minutes later.

Rowdy parked beside her dark green Explorer and sat for a minute, collecting his thoughts before climbing out. Up on the second floor curtains blew

in the open windows.

Before he'd even reached the porch, Susie stepped outside to greet him, letting the screen door slap closed behind her. Her dark blonde hair was pulled back in a ponytail and she wore jeans and a t-shirt advertising a locally brewed beer. She didn't look like a woman in her early forties. But then, she didn't act it either.

"I thought Tim said you had a big date tonight."

"I brought beer." He climbed the three steps to the porch and held up the bag.

"What happened, Sug?" She tucked his arm in hers and turned toward the door.

"You won't believe me when I tell ya," he replied, thankful for the sunglasses that shielded him from her probing blue eyes. "You alone?"

"Just me and Punkin." Punkin was a Maine Coon Cat and had been a Valentine's Day present from her boyfriend, John Kane. The damned thing was as flaky as Rowdy's sister and had an odd habit of sleeping in the bathtub.

They settled on the back porch steps, with a view of the cows settling down for the night around a nearby oak tree in the pasture that backed up to her yard. Susie stuck with iced tea but Rowdy needed a beer while he told her everything.

"So, you had a date with my liquor sales rep?"

"I didn't know until I got there, Suz!"

She'd told him, even when they were lovers, he needed to find himself some sweet young thing and make babies. He'd laughed at her and quipped about needing more practice.

Beside him, she snorted with laughter. "I lost my last bartender to my last

sales rep. Now I've got you dating Jade."

"I'm not dating her!" He angrily took a long pull off his beer.

"I can't believe after seven months you had no clue Jade and Skye were one in the same."

"I didn't even talk to Skye until last week. And the few times we spoke on the phone, she didn't sound like Miss Snooty Ass. She sounded...kinda shy," he reluctantly admitted.

"Told'ja so." Susie laughed again and sipped her tea, setting the glass between her legs.

"Thanks." He smothered a pang of regret and another of worry and took another sip of his beer, struggling to collect his thoughts. Wherever she was he hoped she was okay. He might be angry at her, but he didn't wish her ill. "You think you know someone. Someone you've never met. You think you've got such a *connection*. You've got nothing. It was all just bullshit."

"Was it?"

"Yup."

"How can you be so sure it was all BS? That she doesn't have real feelings for you? That she's not as hurt right now as you are. That she's not someone special you should try and form a real relationship with instead of that silly-ass Wife-For-A-Night routine you pulled with everyone but me."

"You were worth more than one night," he quipped, ignoring her probing observations. Their affair had been brief and quiet, ending when she'd met John. While it lasted, there hadn't been any issues about letting Susie in because he was already in. She'd known him all his life, knew him better than anyone, had left him wanting more...with someone...a connection like they'd had. He'd gotten

over her just find, it was their relationship he'd had a hard time getting over.

"Stop it. Stop flirting. That crap doesn't work with me."

He laughed but there was no humor in it.

"You need to think long and hard before you do anything stupid.

Obviously there is something between you two."

"Hmmpf. Ain't nothin' to think about, I'm thinkin'."

"Don't be a fool. It's not often you get a chance for real happiness, Rowdy honey. Grab it and hold on tight while you can. You know I love you and I wanna see you happy. So as far as Jade is concerned--"

"There is no Jade," he growled. And now there wasn't any Skye either.

"Rowdy Yates, you'll regret this."

7. CINDER-WHAT?

8:00 AM: I was up, dressed in sweats, no makeup and my bed-head hidden under a San Antonio Spurs ball cap. I headed north to Austin, stopping only long enough to get breakfast: blueberry muffins and a toffenut latte with two extra shots of espresso and whipped cream.

If this were Dante's Inferno, I was on my way down to the next level of hell. Then again, my birthday weekend couldn't get any worse. My choices were limited. Either mope around the house, mope in the car, or mope at the parental's house. At least at the parental's I could work out my frustrations on my siblings.

Not that much would faze Ms. I'm-Engaged aka Emerald. With a name like hers, Emerald should have been scarred for life, should have been a dope smoking stripper, but instead she'd chosen something worse. To follow in Her Honorable's expensively shod footsteps.

I often wondered how someone as quiet as Daddy had hooked up with someone as domineering as Mom. The most obvious conclusion being he must have knocked her up. Their wedding and our names were the two great mysteries of my life. That and if I was truly their biological child.

Mom was a planner and meticulous about the things that mattered to her, like her future in-laws or social station. And how much her children's marriages

would enhance her status. Appearances were everything to Her Honorable.

After Allan left me, she'd had the nerve to suggest I get my master's and teach, or better, try to find another husband. One who would understand me. Someone academic--like Daddy. Her words not mine. Never mind that I'd been in the process of getting into grad school when she'd thrown me the Allan Bone. Maybe that had been her way of trying to make me feel better, but I also knew she'd never let me be me on my terms.

And honestly, I still wasn't quite sure who me truly was, though three years after the fact I had better idea.

I knew who I wasn't.

Chris Cagle and then Norah Jones kept me company as I cruised north, determined to put all thoughts of Rowdy's Perfidy from my mind and mentally prepared myself for my mom.

Facing her was almost worse than last night's horrendous adventures and as far as I was concerned, my promise about being nice to her was officially null and void. *Hear that, God? Null and Void!*

Apparently, He did. Her Honorable's BMW was missing when I pulled into the curved driveway. Home was a two-story Italianate house painted a discreet shade of taupe. The open garage doors meant she was probably in court trying some incredibly important case. But Daddy, a Geology professor with full tenure, was home, his old Mercedes parked out front.

He stood in the side yard with a smile on his face. Dressed in his Ward Cleaver sweater and a pair of khakis that had seen much better days, surrounded by his prize-winning roses, a pair of pruning shears in his hands. CoralScapes.

Beautiful variegated roses in color from deep reddish orange edges to the pales of peaches and a circle of yellow in the middle.

I climbed out of the car and ran to hug him. There truly was no safer place to be than with my dad. He was the only one who ever seemed to understand me. Who had understood my need to run away three years ago.

He reached over, snipped three roses off and handed them to me with a tiny bow. The gallant gesture reminded me of Robbie. He'd brought me a rose last night, and my throat slammed shut with all the force of a steel wolf-trap. I swallowed and sniffled and burst into tears.

"Well," Daddy said, "it's good to see you, too, Sweetheart."

Hearing him call me sweetheart only made me cry harder. Robbie'd called me that. And sugar. *I hated being called sugar.* Daddy patted my back and let me cry myself out.

"Care to talk about it?"

I shook my head. "I should get my bags."

"We'll get them later." He led me though the side gate and around back to the patio and settled me at the table. "I'll be right back, Jade."

He stepped through the French doors only to reappear a few minutes later with Claudine on his heels, carrying a tray of her famous peach tea and fresh Snicker Doodle Cookies. She'd been our housekeeper since I was tiny, and while she tended to stay in the background, I'd always had a big soft spot for her.

"I made your favorite--Italian Crème Cake," she said, giving me a warm cinnamon-scented hug.

"Thanks, Claudine." Maybe this wouldn't be such a bad weekend after all.

"And Nicky just pulled up," she announced before stepping back inside.

Then again, maybe horses would fly.

I might as well give it up. There was no saving this one.

"Care to try again?" Daddy asked, his green eyes filled with concern. I leaned back in my chair and sank into the cushions with a sigh. Daddy was getting old. Or, I suppose, his age was starting to show. If it weren't for Claudine, I'd worry more about his health. Heaven knew Mom wouldn't take care of him.

His hair was thinner and whiter, too. He had more wrinkles. His glasses kept slipping down his nose. I'd always thought of him as distinguished and he was, but now he was also old. Of course, so was I. I fudged a little, not ready to talk about Robbie, especially knowing Nickie would join us any minute. "I'm just not where I thought I'd be at thirty."

"If it's any consolation, I heard recently that *she* divorced Allan and took half of everything." Daddy beamed serenely from over the top of his tea glass.

"The perils of no pre-nup." I couldn't suppress my own smile of glee at the thought she'd left him or a twinge of shock at my father's obvious pleasure. We'd never really discussed my aborted wedding. "This isn't about Allan."

Behind me came the telltale swoosh of the back door. I wrinkled my nose at Daddy who continued to grin. Tricky Nicky was just bad. *Irresponsible* and *wayward* were Her Honorable's favorite adjectives. Daddy adored him.

I suppose I wasn't the only one he "understood" and I had to respect him for that.

"Happy Birthday, Pork Rind."

"Scammed any rich old widows out of their money lately?" I scowled at the Ballard heir apparent.

Daddy barked with laughter and even I couldn't suppress a chuckle. Some

things just never changed. I sighed. There was some peace to be found in normalcy. Even if normal was a twenty-three year old brother who had a yen for older women. *Much* older.

Last year at the country club he'd been caught making out with the Widow Bryson in the back of Judge Forsythe's Rolls during the big Halloween shindig. Of course the good widow, who was all of forty-two, could make Marilyn Monroe gnash her teeth in frustration.

"Your man got dumped." Nicky sat in the chair opposite me and grinned his customary Cheshire Cat grin. A pale yellow t-shirt with baby blue piping around the collar and khaki shorts set off his deep, late-summer tan. He had the family eyes, Daddy's deep, clear, green ones, and Her Honorable's pale blonde hair. I suppose he was handsome, though he'd always been such a pain in my ass I'd never considered it.

I hadn't seen him since Christmas and eight months was a long time. I guess Daddy wasn't the only one aging.

"I dragged your bags in, Rind, and closed your car door."

"How's the widow doing?"

He grinned and poured himself a glass of tea. "Which one?"

"Whichever one you're scamming now."

"Should we call Allan and see if he wants to join us for dinner?"

Low blow. Daddy cleared his throat. "How was class, Nicholas?"

I nibbled on a cookie, tuning out their chatted about Nicholas's summer classes, and admired Daddy's garden instead. His prize roses bloomed in every color from white to blood red and Bougainvillea grew along the wrought iron fence separating the sparkling pool from the terraced yard and the patio.

I should have brought a swimsuit. At least in my own home no one but Nicky would make fun of me, and I was more than a match for him. "So what are you going to do after graduation, Nicky?" I muttered, trying to be polite

"Move in with you."

"The hell you say."

Daddy chuckled and I narrowed my eyes at him, not amused. I should have stayed home. Even as I thought it, I took another look at the huge smile on his face. I'd bite the bullet and make the best of it for his sake.

#

Our dinner reservations at the Woodhurst Country Club were for six that evening and we all met in the living room beforehand for obligatory drinks, including Emerald's fiancé. Wayne who worked in the same firm as her and specialized in Patent Law. *Zzzzzzzz.*

I'd been as polite as I could during our pre-drive cocktails, but something about him gave me the willies. Though I didn't really care for Emerald, I'd always assumed that, with her naturally vibrant personality, she'd do something more. Not be a lawyer and marry a boring lawyer and have boring, pale, lawyer children. Wayne reminded me of William Hurt on a diet. Very thin, very sparse hair, very boring, very bland and pale.

Unlike Robbie. I sighed. I'd managed to go almost all day without thinking of him--even during lunch and cake with Daddy and Nicky. *Why now?* Because unlike Wayne, Robbie was thick and solid like a football player. Despite the apparent computer business, he spent a lot of time outside. Obvious by his tan and freckles. He had laugh lines. And thickly muscled forearms.

I gulped the last of my wine and smiled at Her Honorableness, the Mother

Dictator, who so obviously approved of Wayne. She beamed at him from beneath her perfectly arched eyebrows. Everything about her, like Emerald, was perfect, and they both always left me checking my teeth for lipstick or my hair for flyaways.

She'd coolly wished me a happy birthday while giving me a once over, as if she knew I'd bought my silk pantsuit from a second-hand shop. It wasn't that I couldn't afford to pay good money for designer clothes--I could, within reason. And I was all for quality, but the cheapskate in me *loved* a bargain.

Even my townhouse, while expensive, had been an investment. At least with the small trust Daddy's mother had left me, I could pay it off and free up more money to put in my retirement fund. *How boring.* I sighed.

Maybe I should take a trip, a real vacation somewhere, but the thought of a singles resort left me cold. Disney World sounded much more fun, but not by myself. I eyed Nicky, wondering if a trip to see the mouse would be a good graduation present for him.

Emerald rode to the club with Wayne in his Range Rover and Mom and Dad rode in his old Mercedes which despite its age, shone like new, but Her Honorable hated it.

And Tricky Nicky rode with me. I didn't mind, seeing as how he was acting half human, but something must be up since normally, we barely talked. I followed Daddy down the drive and out of their old, well-manicured community. The country club was only fifteen minutes away. "Why didn't you ride with HH and Dad?"

He snorted. "I can't believe you still call her that."

Only behind her back. "Why?"

"You look nice," he said softly, changing the subject.

"How much?" I sighed.

"How much what?"

"Nicky, you barely speak to me, you don't write, you don't call, I come home and you stick to me like glue? I'm guessing you need a loan for something and don't want Mom and Dad to know. Did you knock up one of the merry widows?"

He chuckled a bit, leaning his head against the window and covering his face. "What do you think of Wayne?"

I eased to a stop at a red light and turned down the CD player. "Oatmeal," I drawled, curling my lip.

Nicky roared with laughter but quickly turned serious. "Hey? Are you okay about Allan being single again?"

Another sudden change of subject caught me off guard. The light changed and I accelerated, tossing out the first thought that came to mind. "As if I give a shit what *he* does?"

"He could be there tonight."

"What do you mean *could*?"

"HH *really* liked him," Nicky said softly.

The subtle warning in his voice set off an alarm in my head. No way in hell would she get away with setting me up again! *Not this time!* I accelerated around a pickup and whipped into the parking lot of a McDonalds, coming to a screeching halt. "She didn't?"

"I don't know, but I do know she's excited about him being available. She's

mentioned it more than once and well, she wants you back up here."

"Where she can keep a fucking eye on me? No, thanks! She's already tried to ruin my life once. She can kiss my ass!" I whipped the car around, cutting off a Lexus SUV full of little kids, who still believed happiness could be found in a box, and pulled back into the light, early-evening traffic.

Even though there was no way I could catch up with the parentals, I sped up, turning into the country club against a red arrow and cutting off a Volvo that had also been about to turn in.

"I'd like to live if you don't mind, Jade."

"What happened to Pork Rind?"

"Dad told me to be nice, since it was your birthday."

"Call me Pork Rind. I'd rather you be honest than nice." Inside I was seething. So help me if she had....

"So does it suck turning thirty?" he asked as I barreled up the tree-bordered lane toward an evening in hell. I could see the headlines now: "Respected Judge Murdered by Daughter"; "Ice Sculptures Banned at Country Clubs Nationwide".

I pulled into a parking space as close to the door as possible and killed the engine before answering.

"Thirty is the shits." I climbed out and slammed my door, waiting at the back of the car for him to join me.

He took my arm and pressed on as we walked toward the entrance, where the parentals, Wayne and Emerald stood waiting. "I guess coming home didn't help any, huh?"

"If it wasn't for Daddy, I'd have pleaded a case of small pox. So help me God, if that asslick Allan shows up, I'm leaving tonight and I'm never coming

back, Nicky."

"I don't blame you, for what it's worth."

Surprised at how well he seemed to understand, I pulled up short and stared at him. My snotty baby brother had apparently done a bit of growing up. "You okay?"

"Sometimes I really hate her." His normally good-natured expression was briefly replaced with something harder, uglier, and despite the fact it was gone in the blink of an eye, I felt a deep kinship with him.

"Let's get drunk and ruin the good family name."

"Rein it in. Don't let her see she's getting to you. Then she wins."

I nodded, tugging at his arm.

"Terribly rude of you to keep us waiting, Jade, even if it is your birthday. It's horribly hot out here, you know," HH scolded when we finally joined her.

The little girl in me wanted to apologize, the thirty-year-old woman wanted to tell her to her fuck off. The voice of reason said Nicky was right. I kept my mouth shut and plastered a cheerful smile on my face as I strode past her and through the door, Nicky at my side. "I didn't ask them to stand outside and wait," I muttered under my breath.

Nicky snorted softly. Inside the elegant foyer, my heels clicked on the marble floor and my insides quivered a bit as I caught my reflection in one of the huge gilt-edged mirrors that lined either side of the wall. At thirty, I no longer resembled the eighteen-year-old debutante who'd once traipsed through this same foyer, wondering what the world had in store for me.

Can I get a refund?

We rounded the corner and approached the hostess station. "Ballard."

"Is this your latest, Nick?" a willowy, blonde Future-Debutante-of-America-asked, a false smile pasted on her face.

"Either seat us, or point the way to the bar."

"She's my sister, Geneva." Nicky gently squeezed my shoulder, and I took a deep breath, slowly releasing it.

"Jade Skye! How dare you act like a heathen in public," HH hissed from behind me. I stiffened my spine and ignored her.

"Geneva" checked her book and looked at me. "Are you the birthday girl?" she asked sweetly, her attitude making a complete about face at the sight of my mother.

I raised my chin and assumed my haughtiest expression. I would have done HH proud, if she hadn't been standing behind me.

"Geneva's new in town," Nick mumbled.

"You don't say?"

Her eyes narrowed slightly at my cold tone before she turned and led the way into the dining room. "This way, please."

Cinderella couldn't help but wonder what time the ball ended.

My feet already hurt and my blood pressure had to be through the roof as I followed Geneva past dining patrons who sat at tables covered with snowy white linen, sparkling china and candlelit centerpieces. I kept my chin up and, unlike my mother, refused to acknowledge anyone else in the room. Through the row of French doors, closed against the summer heat, I could see people sitting outside in golf and tennis attire.

Nicky gave me another gentle squeeze as he pulled out my chair. *She would seat us in the middle of the damned dining room.*

Behind me I could hear HH slowly crossing the room as she paused to greet her subjects. "Hello, how do you do, so lovely to see you again."

Blarh! The more I heard, the madder I got, until I was ready to choke on my tongue. "Can I get a scotch and water, please? Geneva?"

"Jade, can't you wait until we're all seated," Emerald hissed as she settled in on my other side.

"It's my birthday. Amuse me."

"Make that two," Nicky threw at Geneva's retreating back.

"You could at least drink something civilized," Emerald sneered.

"Such as?" Nicky quizzed.

"What's more civilized than Scotch and water?" I threw out.

"Gin and tonic," Wayne announced from her other side with a bray of laughter. "Bombay Sapphire, of course."

"I prefer Tanqueray," Mom added, with a trill of laughter to Wayne the Pain's as she finally deigned to join us, Daddy at her side. I didn't bother telling them that both were made from barley or corn. My stomach rolled over in protest.

A waiter came by, another well-groomed college student earning summer money, and took everyone's drink order. I gave mine again just in case Geneva, Goddess of the Hostess Stand, forgot. He returned with our drinks in record time.

Ignoring the protest of my empty stomach, I drained mine while he took our orders, signaling for a refill before the poor tot got away. Our selections tonight were Beef Wellington or Chicken Cordon Bleu. Both of which I hated. I chose the chicken. At least I could give my bird to Nicky.

I saw a stop at a fast food restaurant in my near future.

"Gimme your keys, birthday girl," Nicky murmured in my ear. He really

was a dear brother. I smiled and blinked at him as the scotch zipped through my bloodstream, chasing my tension away.

"They're in my purse and they're all yours," I whispered back.

"Jade, Helen at the museum is looking for a new assistant," Her Honorable announced from across the table.

As if Helen at the museum did anything interesting. As if working in a museum would make up for not getting to play Ms. Indiana Jones.

The waiter returned with my fresh drink and I toasted my mother with it. "No thanks. I'll stick to selling booze."

Nicky snorted and Em mumbled something about me being drunk.

"Not yet, I'm not," I whispered, a genuine smile on my face for the first time that evening. I'd already ruined one night of my birthday. Might as well go for the whole she-bang. Our silent waiter reappeared with water and crusty French rolls. "Got any chips and salsa?" Even prisoners got better fare.

"No ma'am," he sputtered, "Latin night is on Tuesdays."

"I don't want to learn a dead language," I announced, not bothering to keep my voice down. "I want some Mexican food."

"I'll return with your salads shortly." His face flushed bright red and he took off for parts unknown.

"Bring me some chips," I hollered after his retreating back. "Don't horde the hot sauce, for heaven's sake. Every night should be Latin night. Who came up with that stupid rule anyway?" I frowned at Nicky, who was too busy laughing in his drink to respond. Emerald kept making little strangled sounds and poking me with her elbow while Wayne developed a case of the sniffles.

I took another sip of my drink and smiled at Her Mommyness. If she kept

frowning like that, she'd need those food poisoning shots for her wrinkles. E-coli? No. Bo...bo...Botox. I giggled at the image of a bovine in a tux that floated through my mind. Botulism, yuck. I took a deep breath, releasing the last of my tension, and fluttered my fingers at Daddy who shook his head, a smile on his sweet old face. "Hi, Daddy."

"Hello, birthday girl."

"Birthday girl? Is it your birthday, sweet nothing?"

The scotch in my stomach rebelled at the oily voice, and my light euphoria evaporated. How had I not heard him come up behind me? I needed super powers.

My mother's scowl of irritation magically turned itself upside down as she smiled at a spot just behind me. "Allan! Won't you join us? Nicholas, *move!*"

I grabbed Nick's arm and blinked back tears of fury. I'd be damned if he would.

"How have you been, sweet nothing?" Allan squeezed my shoulder, as if he had the right to touch me.

The urge to turn and snap at his fingers like a mad dog filled me, but I ignored it, forcing myself to sit perfectly still and not pull away. Instead I smiled at Nicky and asked at the top of my lungs, "How's your wife, the titty dancer?"

Titty dancer being Texas slang for stripper. Everyone stared. I gave the wide-eyed matron with the bouffant 'do at the next table a hearty wave and ignored my mother's choked growl. "Jade!"

I swallowed the last of my drink and carefully eased to my feet, smiling sweetly at my purple faced mother. Full of false courage, I spun on my heel to face down my demon.

He was just as dark and slick and handsome as I remembered and I resisted the urge to wipe my tongue with my napkin to get rid of the bad taste that filled my mouth. If anything, he was slicker looking than ever, his crystal blue eyes calculating as he looked me over. *But what did you expect from a lawyer?*

"How many lawyers does it take to sink an oil tanker?"

"All of them," said Nicky.

I giggled but Allan wasn't amused. Tall, broad shouldered and lightly tanned from playing tennis, he wore his dark hair combed back from his widow's peak and a conservative blue suit. I suppose I could see what *someone* would see in him. Especially someone like my mother, but not me. Not anymore. I liked my men a bit more solid...rugged. I smiled. *Like Robbie.*

"Surely, Darling, we can let bygones be bygones and start again." He held out his hands, oozing well-practiced charm. But my credit card of love was all maxed out. "Your mother told me--"

"Whatever Her Highness told you, she misrepresented the situation." I clutched onto the back of the chair with one hand to compensate for my wobbly legs. An overwhelming urge to sneeze as his cloying aftershave hit me and my nose twitched.

"So, you're not single?" He frowned as if he were truly confused. As if he'd really been dumb enough to think...

"No! I'm not." *Jackass!*

"Since when?" my mother demanded from behind me.

"Since the last six months," I shot over my shoulder. I smiled right in the face of Allan's troubled gaze and cheerfully lied my ass off. "I'm getting married."

"So there's no chance?" The way he said it, I felt as if I'd just stepped into

a really bad soap opera.

That Allan could believe he had a rat's ass chance in hell after humiliating me, showed just how stupid he truly was. And my mother, also. They should revoke his law license and dethrone my mother--I giggled--or whatever they do to judges. "Hell would freeze over first and I'd take over as its queen."

"My God, Jade, what's gotten into you?" HH demanded. She sounded close to stroking out and I resisted the urge to turn around and see what shade of purple she was now.

Rather than give in, I grabbed my purse off the back of the chair and headed out.

As I reached the front door someone grabbed my elbow and I spun around, afraid it was Allan ready for round two. "Nicky, you scared the shit out of me!"

"You didn't think I'd actually let you drive after that. You didn't think I'd let you leave me behind, did you? Gimme your keys, Rind."

I handed my keys over and we silently trudged across the parking lot. I glanced at my watch.

6:30 was my magic number from hell.

Twenty-four hours ago I'd been on the Riverwalk, looking for the man of my dreams. Now I'd just lied and said I found him.

"Where to?" Nicky asked once we were headed back down the tree-lined drive a few minutes later.

"Taco Cabana serves beer."

He snorted with laughter but found us a Taco Cabana. We got platters of tacos and Coronas with ice floes in them and found a shaded corner on the patio filled with a Friday night crowd celebrating the end of the week. I felt as if an

eternity had passed since we'd walked into the country club instead of less than thirty minutes, and I didn't even want to contemplate the repercussions of what I'd just done.

"So who is he? Or better yet, *is there a he?*"

I sighed, debating just how much to reveal.

"There's no man?" He bit into another taco and waited for my reply. That was his sixth, and he was thin as a rail. Life really wasn't fair. I'd probably gain ten pounds from my three.

"There's a man. Sort of." Not really. I hadn't even given much thought to a future with Rowdy. Robbie, yes, but not Rowdy.

"But no engagement."

I shook my head and sipped my beer. "No. I dunno."

"What?"

"He's...a redneck."

"So the man works for a living. I know you ain't no snob."

"Did they teach you to talk like that in college, Nicholas Stone Ballard?"

"Shut up, Mom."

"Hey, fuck you!" I threw taco shell chips at him, bouncing one off his chest. I gave him a little smile and asked the burning question. "When did you get so cool and quit being such a brat?"

He finished chewing before answering me, his expression solemn. "When that asswipe crapped on my big sister. I'm glad you gave him what for! But why'd you lie?"

"How long have you lived with our mother? I figured it was the quickest way to cut her off at the pass."

He slowly nodded and took another sip of his beer. "So, what's wrong with your man being a redneck? Do you even know what a redneck is?"

"I guess he's more of a high-tech redneck, but he's not mine! He's...I...shit." I took a deep breath and started again. "He's a womanizer, a flirt and my God, Nicky, *look at me.*"

"What's wrong with you?" He shoved the last bite of taco in his mouth and licking his fingers.

"Pork Rind?" I asked, eyebrows raised. He choked on his food. I thought we'd have to call an ambulance. It was as bad as my cookie incident.

When Nicky finally calmed down and could speak again, he did. "Do you know why I like older women?"

"Huh-uh."

"Because, for the most part, they aren't hung up on all the stupid shit girls my age are, like what their friends think or might say. At least not the ones I choose. They're past all the little things and, frankly, you should be too."

"I've gained fifty pounds in the last three years, That's not little. Hello!"

"So you think this redneck gigolo won't like you 'cause you've put on a few pounds?"

"It's not that." I hadn't missed the admiration in Robbie's voice just before I turned around.

"Then what is it?"

I shook my head and sipped my beer, remembering how Robbie'd begged me to have a drink with him and calm down. "I just left him standing there."

"Where?"

So there I sat, nursing a second Corona, nibbling chips and telling my baby

brother all about my six month love affair with The Invisible Man. Surprisingly, he never laughed. Chuckled a few times but didn't laugh at me.

"You know, that's actually kinda cool."

"It's *insane*! You should hear how those women talk about him and how he flirts with the waitresses. Even a baby, for God's sake. He's like the school's star athlete and I'm The Pork Rind, Nicky."

"Shut up," he growled with a frown. "I never should have started that. Now seriously, you got the chance to know a man totally based on internal stuff. That's pretty rare, Sis. Do you think he lied about anything?"

"No?" I shook my head and said more emphatically, "No, I don't think he did."

"Well, the you he has feelings—"

"Had."

"*Has* feelings for, is the real you. You didn't lie or anything, did you?" He pushed the wrapper filled tray aside and leaned closer.

"No! Just about my weight."

"You lied about your weight?"

"Sin of omission," I mumbled over the top of my beer bottle.

"Forgivable. Now what's the problem?"

"I can't." I sighed and tried to find a way to explain it. "I fell in love with this man, this wonderful, kind, smart man—"

"So how do you know he's not that man you fell in love with. I mean, think about it. Life's a big fuckin' show, right?"

I nodded slowly, trying to accept the fact that my baby brother might be on to something.

“So, what you see in public is all just a big act. You’ve done it yourself. Been nice to someone you don’t know at some social nightmare Mom would make you go to and put on this big happy face. Maybe what you saw at the dancehall was that show, Sis. Maybe what he shared with you on the computer is the real him. So, I want to ask you something and I want you to think long and hard about your answer. What do you know about him?”

I sat there for a while and my thinking turned to sniffles. “He’s funny, and smart, and totally not...*pretentious*. He’s down to earth. And he never really acted like a redneck online, not like he did at the dancehall.” I knew a lot but trying to sort it all out made my head hurt. “Can we go home now?”

By the time we got back to the hacienda, the beer, scotch, tacos and heat had caught up to me. Nicky poured me into bed and left me to sleep off my overindulgence.

When I woke up the next morning, the sun was just barely making its appearance in the eastern sky. I stretched and looked around the pale green, pristine bedroom. There were no posters, no dried mums pinned to the vanity mirror—no reminders a girl had grown up in my old room.

Where had my life gotten so off track? I know the world was a different place from when my parents were young, but the promise made to me as a child had yet to be fulfilled. You know the one....

Prince Charming.

Who, I was now convinced, was a fag in therapy. I mean honestly, did you see those hose?

I giggled up at the ceiling. Seriously, they never said it, but the whole

scenario was implied throughout my entire childhood. Grow up, go to college, get your MRS degree. Live happily ever after in your big white castle on the mountain, raising beautiful children.

No wonder they call it a fairy tale.

Judging from the size of my hangover and the rotten taste in my mouth, my life was far from fairytalish. I eased myself out of bed, showered and threw on clean sweats. I was out of here. I wanted to talk to Rowdy, which meant I had a date with destiny tonight, come hell or high water.

Downstairs I found Claudine busy in the kitchen and fresh muffins cooling on the counter. “You’re leaving?”

I didn’t linger, wanting to get the hell out of Dodge before Mom came wandering out, full of piss and vinegar after a round of high impact, ass-cracking aerobics. “I need to get on the road.”

“Don’t wait so long between visits next time.” She gave me a hug and a thermal cup full of coffee to go with the cranberry muffins I snatched.

“I wont, I promise.”

8. BAD BOYS

Rowdy couldn't believe his eyes. The last place he'd expected to see Skye...Jade, he corrected himself, was here at the dancehall. In the middle of playing "Sweet Home Alabama" he spotted her standing at the edge of the dance floor, a frantic looking smile on her face. He almost stopped playing just to rub his eyes.

After the way she's run off Wednesday night, he figured he'd never see or hear from her again. He'd hoped for a chance to talk it out, explain, maybe figure things out. At the very least, make sure she was okay, but she hadn't been online at all.

Apparently, she was better than okay. Dressed in Levi's and a white sleeveless sweater, she stood clutching one of the wooden poles that separated the dance floor from the tables. He could barely focus on playing the right chords and caught Jessa's frown of concern. Messing up wasn't normally in his vocabulary. Until Miss Jade Skye Ballard, that is.

After the song ended, he'd mouthed "break time," at Jessa, hoping she'd catch the hint. She had, giving him another puzzled frown. They'd only been playing an hour. *So sue him.*

Rowdy unstrapped his bass guitar and set it aside, taking a minute to collect himself. He still couldn't orient the two sides of Jade he'd been presented with.

His sweet, sassy Skyebaby and Miss Snooty Pants. He shook his head and slowly crossed the floor to where Jade stood, narrowly avoiding a collision with a couple that spun past to the Hank Junior's "All My Rowdy Friends."

To his further shock, Jade wrapped her arms around his waist and leaned in close. He wiped the scowl off his face and kept his own at his sides, waiting to see what would happen. Wondering if she'd had some amazing change of heart, or something.

"I need your help," she shouted over the music.

Or something. "My help? You left me standing on the Riverwalk. You didn't even bother to hang around for any sort of explanation or anything, you just *left*. And now you want my help?" he snapped.

She hung her head and rested it against his chest as Hank Junior segued into Tim McGraw. A slow song. And they were drawing stares. He pulled her a little further into the dance floor and took one of her hands in his, wrapping the other around her waist.

She raised her head and frowned up at him.

"We can't just stand on the dance floor yakkin' all night," he growled over the music.

"Oh," she mouthed, her eyes glued to his face.

"Well?"

"My mom is here."

He didn't miss the panic in her eyes but continued to goad her. "What's it to me?"

"She...I'm sorry, Robbie! I'm *sorry* I left you there like that, but I need your help," she pleaded. "Five minutes, that's all I'm asking."

He danced her into a corner and spun her out, tightening his grip as she stumbled a bit. *Five minutes, huh?* Did he dare? And what type of mom did Miss Snooty Pants have that could send her into such a panic. “What do I have to do?”

“Pretend to be my fiancé. She thinks we’re engaged and she wants to meet you. Five minutes, I swear.”

Engaged? Shock had him pulling up short as he forced himself to not laugh or yell at her outrageous plea. *She had a hell of a lotta nerve.* Shock turned to anger as he started dancing again, unwilling to attract any more attention.

Some perverse part of him made him want to punish her. And watch her squirm a bit. He gave her his cockiest smile. “What do I get in return?”

She studied him for a minute before replying, the fear obvious in her eyes. “Anything you want.”

He danced her to the middle of the floor and pulled her close so they could talk better. Or at least that’s what he told himself as he wrapped both arms around her waist and tugged her close, unable to suppress a smirk at the feel of her full breasts pressed to his chest. “I want a woman to let me make love to her on the back of a horse.”

She mouthed, “Oh my God,” before her head dipped and he couldn’t see her face again.

He grinned. His lips twitched as he smothered the urge to laugh. She hadn’t forgotten their discussion about sexual fantasies.

She looked back up at him. “For five minutes of your time? All you have to do is help me get rid of her.”

“And at some point you’ll have to break our ‘engagement.’ I need a beer.”

He dragged her off the dance floor toward the bar.

She'd never agree. Skye might have, but not Jade. She was too much of a straight arrow. But if she did, he'd get a kick out of teasing her in front of her mom and watching her squirm some more. Jade tugged at his hand harder and harder as they neared the bar.

He whirled around and glared at her, tired of her tugging. "What?"

"Will you do it?"

"Jade!" came a sharp voice from behind him. He turned and what he saw froze his blood. If he thought Jade looked haughty, she had nothing on the petite, well-preserved blonde bearing down on them. He resisted the urge to shiver and wrap his arms around himself. She was just the sort of person he'd never had any use for. Self-important. Someone who thought the word stopped and started with them.

"*Will you?*" he shot back, even though it was damn near too late.

Jade nodded vigorously and stepped in front of him, pulling his head down to hers. "She thinks we had an argument!"

"Got it." He brushed his lips against her cheek, for show, and stood to face her mother, ignoring the exotic scent of Jade's perfume.

Mrs. Ballard was perfect, from her sharply pressed jeans that probably cost more than everything he had on, to her pale sweater set and pearls. She had Jade's nose and the same haughty expression Jade liked to use, but otherwise he didn't see any family resemblance. She looked him over through narrowed eyes, and he got the impression she found him lacking.

Not that he gave a shit.

Two could play this game. He pulled Jade as close as possible and pasted

the most loving look he could manage on his face as he leaned over and kissed her temple. Her soft hair tickled his cheek and she smelled warm and earthy, spicy.

“Jade, I really don’t care to stay here any longer than necessary.”

“Relax, ma’am.” He held up a finger and smiled before leaning over and hollering over Mrs. Ballard’s shoulder, “Kellie honey! Bring me a beer, and bring one for my girl and her momma, too. Would you?”

He bit his lip to keep from laughing. Now all he needed was some dip. Too bad Bo wasn’t around.

Kellie, who stood over by the bar, where Jade’s mother couldn’t see her, wrinkled her nose and motioned for a brand.

He caught Jade’s eye and said, “Bud or...”

“Corona with lime.”

“Ma’am, what kind of beer would you like?” He smiled and waited to see just how much of a snob she was.

“I’ll pass.”

Off the snob-o-meter. “Bud and Corona, please ma’am.”

From her spot behind the bar, Toni frowned and pointed at Jade’s mother. All he could do was smile. He was kind of enjoying himself. “You gonna introduce us, Baby?” he asked Jade, giving her another squeeze.

“Row...Robbie Yates, the Honorable Judge Trudy Ballard.”

He tipped his battered Stetson and offered his hand, which she limply shook. Jade hadn’t even called the judge, Mom.

My God! Her mother was a judge. Probably the hangin’ kind. Thank God Kellie swung by with their beers on the way to her tables. He definitely needed his now. He lifted both from her tray with a grateful smile.

“Toni wants you,” Kellie yelled as she shifted back into high gear and cruised past, her red curls bobbing.

He caught his sister-in-law's eye and motioned for her to hang tight. She frowned at him and pointed at Jade's mother again. He nodded and repeated the gesture. All he needed was five minutes. She shrugged and moved on to her next customer, finally content to wait.

He offered an elbow to Jade's mother. Judge Ballard. And resisted the urge to shudder. She frowned up at him.

“We can talk in the beer garden,” he shouted, pointing at his ear.

“Beer garden?” Her pale blonde eyebrows rose.

You would have thought he'd suggested a hayride. He swallowed hard and smiled, tightening his grip on Jade's shoulder. To his surprise, she slipped an arm around his waist and squeezed back.

They made their way through the crowd to the beer garden, which had originally been nothing more than a large grassy area surrounded by a privacy fence. Years ago Susie had put a playground in at on one end and landscaped the rest with shrubs, hedges and flowerbeds. Huge old oaks she'd refused to tear down when she'd bought the place provided shade in the early evening heat. He led both ladies past the crowd gathered right outside the double doors and down a bricked path until they found an unoccupied bench. He gestured for The Judge to sit, and when she did, he joined her, pulling Jade down on his leg. *Might as well make it look good.*

“So, you're marrying my daughter.”

“Yes, ma'am.” He beamed at her, then frowned as if he were really worried. “Or is it Your Honor.”

“Ma’am is fine.” She crossed her legs at the ankles and sat primly on the edge of the bench, as if she were afraid to contaminate her clothes any more than necessary by sitting back.

“Who are you? And your family, who are they? Where do you come from?”

Her mother was a judge. His father had been a wife-beating alcoholic who drank up his paycheck as fast as possible.

“I told you his father was deceased.” Jade’s grip on his shoulder increased and he squeezed her waist. Rowdy could handle The Judge, even if she did leave him feeling more like white trash than a hard working redneck.

“I’m asking him.” Her frigid tone could have iced over the nearby shrubs. The Judge was *not* someone he’d ever care to face in a courtroom.

He could talk it up or talk it down. If he chose *down*, it’d be that much easier for Jade to “dump him” later on. “I’m from right here in good old Bluebonnet, ma’am. Jade’s right though, he died when I was sixteen and my mother lives down on the coast. My sister’s out west but her ex-husband’s family lives here and they claim me.”

“They *claim* you. How nice.”

“Yes, ma’am.” He gave her his friendliest smile, set his beer on the ground and rested his hand on Skye’s thigh. *Condescending bitch.*

Her eyes followed his hand then met his gaze head on, but her expression never changed. “Jade’s previous fiancé is a corporate attorney—”

“You mean the one who ran off and left her for the...entertainer?” he interrupted, biting back a snicker as she blinked in shock. Apparently she didn’t think he knew about Allan the Alien--Skye’s pet name for him.

“What exactly do you do again?”

“This ‘n that. I play here on the weekends and I help the owner out when she needs to me to. Do a little ranching. I’m just a jack of all trades, I guess you could say.” He gave Skye a little squeeze, waiting to see what Judge Ballard would throw at him next.

“Well, I suppose that explains why my daughter has no ring, doesn’t it.”

“Jade’s ring is being resized. It’ll be ready tomorrow,” he gleefully lied. She’d never know different. He gave Skye...Jade his most loving smile, still unsure *why* he was helping her. *Oh yeah, she’d asked.* He reached for his beer and took a sip, unwilling to look too closely at his motives--beyond having a little fun and his horse fantasy.

“It’s a shame you’re going home tonight, ma’am. You’ll miss it,” Jade practically whispered.

“Isn’t it. I’ve had a rather long day and would really like to leave now, Jade.”

Her Honor stood and looked down her nose at them, her regal expression pushing him on. He eased Jade off his thigh and stood up, pulling her firmly against him. “You don’t mind if we say goodbye, do you, ma’am?” He finished his request with a slightly bashful smile, head ducked just a bit—his *Aw Shucks* look.

“Not at all.” She didn’t move. Just stood there. He turned and found Jade staring at him, wide-eyed. He took her beer bottle and set it on the bench beside his, acutely conscious of her mother’s close proximity. Surely she wasn’t so dense she didn’t realize he was about to kiss her daughter. Why didn’t Judge Ballard head inside like any decent person would do so they could talk? They had a date

with a horse to plan.

“Thanks for dancing with me,” he whispered, leaning down and rubbing his nose against hers. He had to make this look good. Now he understood why Jade had been so desperate. Her mother was a royal bitch. But he’d enjoyed himself, just the same.

“Thank *you*,” she whispered back, wrapping her arms around his neck. He knew she wasn’t just thanking him for the dance but his help. He brushed his mouth over hers and caught her lips in a slow easy kiss. They were cold and surprisingly soft. She relaxed against him with a slight shiver and he deepened the kiss, tightening his grip on his soft, curvy armful. To his pleasant surprise she responded when he flicked his tongue against hers. Their tongues met tentative and testing and her arms tightened around his neck. Despite his own body’s response to her softening, he couldn’t completely forget about Judge Ballard.

Mom wanted a show, he’d give her a show. Mom thought he was trashy, he’d give her trashy. Rowdy invaded Jade's mouth, determined to get a better response from her as well. He let her come up for air only to dive back in and give her the most devastatingly erotic kiss he could. He ignoring The Judge’s throat clearing, intent on showing Jade with his mouth exactly what that horseback ride would be like.

“My God, Uncle Rowdy, get a damned room.” His niece’s snappy twang pulled him right out of what had turned into a very intense kiss. If they’d been alone he might have asked Jade home, but then again, if not for her mom, she wouldn’t be here in the first place.

In the middle of trying to show Her Judgeship just how awful he was, Rene came along and iced the cake. He nearly choked on Jade's tongue and his own

laughter.

Still laughing, he broke the kiss and looked up to discover Rene standing at an intersecting path. "Hey brat," he greeted her, keeping one arm around Jade and sneaking a glance at her mother.

"My dear Lord, where did that child learn to talk?"

"A barn, and you?"

"Rene, behave." Rowdy frowned, hoping she'd catch the hint in the rapidly dimming light. She'd served her purpose.

"You're *related* to this child?" Judge Ballard demanded.

"She's my niece." And she had the mouth of a sewer rat. For Rene, it all came down to shock value.

"Is she indeed?"

"Oh yes, ma'am, I'm really his niece. We might be country but we don't do incest. That's just gross."

Beside him, Jade was overcome with fits of laughter so bad she finally had to sink down on the bench and try to catch her breath.

"After the show you put on at the country club the other night, Jade, I can see you making a fine aunt for this little one. You two can take your act on the road." She waved a hand in Rene's direction.

"Aunt. What aunt?" Rene glared back at him. She tended to be a bit possessive of the men in her life.

He'd just have to pray she kept her mouth shut—*yeah right*—and make it okay with her tomorrow. "I'm getting married."

"The hell you say!" From her tone of voice, he might as well have told his tomboy niece, "I'm buying you a dress."

“The hell I say! Now, go back inside, find your Aunt Jessa and tell her I’ll be along shortly,” he growled, hoping she’d take the hint and leave so he could wrap this nightmare up.

Rather than turning and going back the way she’d come, Rene chose to cross in front of them. Rowdy watched her pause in front of The Judge and look her up and down. “Hmmpf,” she declared before turning and heading back toward the bar. Rene’s haughty expression rivaled the older woman’s.

“Well I never in my life! What an ill-mannered child,” she muttered so he barely heard her.

“Ma’am, just a word of warning.” Snooty was one thing, but criticizing Rene was off limits. His temper flaring, Rowdy turned to face The Judge, his hands clenched into fists at his hips. “I tend to be rather protective of my girls. From Jade to Rene, to all my sisters-in-law, all the way down to my baby goddaughter. And I don’t take kindly to anyone speakin’ ill of them, if you catch my drift.”

Rowdy picked up his beer and offered Jade his free arm. She stood and took it, and for just a minute, he thought he saw something in her eyes. Admiration? Adoration? No, just a trick of the rapidly dimming light.

They headed back the way they’d come, Jade’s mother now silent except for the click of her heels on the brick walkway. Rowdy rounded the corner only to pull up short at the sight of a Boudreaux Convention. Rene, and all the women, including Maggie, Tim’s godmother. Great. Rowdy took a long hard look at his niece who stood with her hands behind her back, eyebrows raised and lips pursed. She wasn’t pleased, but then, neither was he.

“What’s this,” hissed Jade, squeezing his arm.

“Trouble with a capital ‘W’.” He freed his arm from Jade's grip and wrapped it protectively around her shoulder, tucking her close to him, as her mother appeared on her other side. Then smothered a chuckle as long, tall Toni sauntered forward, her lavender cat eyes pale slivers in the dim light.

“What the hell’s goin’ on, Rowdy?” She crossed her arms and waited, her full lips pursed. So that’s where Rene had gotten that expression from.

Jade’s grip on his waist tightened painfully.

“I told you, he’s marrying her, Toni,” Rene announced for anyone within earshot to hear.

“The hell you say!” Susie’s jaw dropped in obvious shock.

Rowdy cringed. Two nights ago he’d told Susie there was no him and Jade.

“That’s what I said.” Rene crossed her arms, a smirk on her face.

“Glad to see I’m not the only one...shocked at the sudden engagement.”

The Judge sniffed.

Just then Betti stepped forward, full hips swinging and blonde curls bobbing. Rowdy gave Ty’s wife a wink and she winked back with her usual good-natured grin. Betti was expecting and proudly let anyone who asked rub her swollen belly. She was also a mama bear with everyone she cared about. A trait that had quickly endeared her to Rowdy.

Betti held out a long hand and wiggled her manicured fingers at him.

Rowdy took them and squeezed, giving her a grateful smile.

“We might all be surprised at the happy announcement but that doesn’t mean we’re not pleased.”

“Introduce us, honey,” Maggie Boudreaux gently ordered with a regal nod of her red head. Tim’s godmother was the benevolent Queen Mother to The

Judge's obviously iron-fisted monarchy.

Rowdy obliged with a smile. Maggie Boudreaux could be just as formidable as Jade's mom when she put her mind to it and surrounded by the rest of the clan—Rene, Jessa, Betti, Delaney, Susie and Toni—she presented quite a picture. He heaved a quiet sigh of relief.

After the how do you do's were made, Rowdy spun around at a deep rumble behind him. "And I'm his brother, Tim Caldwell."

Rowdy had never in his life been so grateful for his family's support, but he was gonna have a hell of a lot of explaining to do.

"Well you're certainly tall, aren't you." The Judge offered Tim her hand.

Jade stiffened at his side while Rowdy stifled a grin at the visual of Tim leaning over and kissing the judge's wedding ring. But he could tell by the firm set of Tim's jaw he wasn't too thrilled. Either at Rowdy or The Judge, he wasn't sure.

"Daddy, Uncle Rowdy's gettin' married."

"I heard."

"That...little girl is yours?"

"Yes, she is." Before The Judge could say anything else, a smiling Tim motioned to Jade. "This her? The one you told me about?"

He nodded and gave her a gentle push in Tim's direction. "This is Skye."

"Her name is Jade," The Judge corrected him in her haughtiest tone yet.

"Jade Skye?" Tim chuckled, then immediately turned his head away as Rene nailed The Judge to the wall.

"What the hell kinda name is that?"

Rowdy bit back a laugh while Jade ducked her head, trying to smother her

own giggles. "My sister's Emerald Rayne," Jade said, shaking Tim's hand.

"My Gawd, Uncle Rowdy, you can't marry her. Your kids'll end up with some whacked-out names like Sapphire and Zirconia!"

Tim roared with laughter, pulling Jade into a big bearhug and patting her back.

Despite his best efforts, Rowdy couldn't hold back his own laughter this time and still hadn't gotten himself sufficiently under control by the time Jade pushed away from Tim and tossed her beer in a nearby trash barrel. "I think I'd better take her home now."

"Sunday we're having a cookout," Toni threw in.

Rowdy smothered a groan at what he knew was coming next. And Toni the Matchmaker was as protective as Rene was possessive.

"You should come."

"Do you mean to tell me that in six months, you've never even met his family, Jade?"

"She knows some of us," Jessa piped up, pointing to Susie and Toni. "But it's time she met the rest of the folks."

Before Jade could respond, he gave her a tiny nod. They'd deal with that later. "I tend to keep my affairs private until I'm ready to share."

"When were you planning on sharing? *After the wedding?*"

Jade sighed and gave him an apologetic shrug, the strain visible on her face. "I'm tired, ma'am. Can we go now?"

"Absolutely."

They said their good-bye's and disappeared into the bar's thick throng of customers.

“She didn’t even call her mother, Mom.” Rene looked at him, then back toward the crowd. Rowdy snorted and shook his head.

“You call your Mom, Charlie.”

“Ya’ll better get back up on that stage before that crowd gets any more restless,” Susie noted, then pointed at him. “You and I are gonna have a long talk before the night is through, Mister.”

“Lay off, Suz. Rowdy knows what he’s doing.”

“I understand that, Tim, but it’s who he’s doing it with that has me worried.”

9. GOODBYE 36-C

Drained and still hung over by the time I'd reached San Antonio, I slept the day away, not even bothering to check my email. After a quick dinner and a long hot shower, I prepared myself for battle, putting as much energy into my hair and face as I had the night of my date with Robbie.

Now that I knew where he spent his weekends, my plan was to confront him at the dancehall. I figured he wouldn't make a public scene—unlike me.

When Her Motherness had showed up on my doorstep demanding to meet my new fiancé--and pass judgment on him--all I could think of was 'get rid of her, fast'. I'd scrambled for a plan, finally settling on taking her to the dancehall with me. The Bluebonnet wasn't her type of scene and she'd want in and out as fast as possible. *Judges and rednecks just don't mix.*

I was right. She'd been more than willing to sit at the bar to minimize contact with the natives while I tracked Rowdy down and begged him to help me.

As much as I had no right to.

I'd almost lost my nerve at the scornful expression on Rowdy's face when I wrapped my arms around his waist. And my legs had nearly buckled when he'd pulled me into his arms and slow danced me around the floor. He felt so damned good.

Why couldn't he have been the man I wanted him to be? Why did Her Honorable have to show up? *So much for hashing things out.*

I couldn't lie and say I wasn't attracted to him. *Robbie, not Rowdy*. But my brain still had trouble connecting the dots between the two. Something I'd better get over and quick. Since I'd officially agreed to horsy-sex with him, I better get over it real *real* quick. Of course, if he kept kissing me like he had out in the beer garden, I didn't foresee any problems.

I grinned in the dimness of HH's BMW, recalling the look on her face at the sight of Robbie and I together, and at Robbie hollering for a beer.

From his broken in Levi's and faded t-shirt advertising a local restaurant, to his battered, straw cowboy hat and dark blonde goatee, his whole attitude said "I didn't shave because I didn't feel like it."

Not only was he the antithesis of Allan, he wasn't the type of man my mother would ever be able to lead around by the nose, and I adored him for it. He was gorgeous in a rough and tumble, good-natured way she'd never see or appreciate.

"You picked him just to spite me, didn't you?" Her Honorableness commented as she sped up the highway.

I rest my case, Your Honor.

"I picked him because I love him," I glibly lied.

"That little girl was horrid."

Personally, I'd wanted to cheer when he'd given HH his "My Women" speech.

"And that little kissing display was disgusting. A lady doesn't act like that in public."

"Cool," I muttered, my eyes still on the passing scenery. We were only minutes from my townhouse. "Sure...whatever."

“Cool? Sure? Ballards do not act like trashy bar women, but I see now you’ll do as you please with your train wreck of a life, no matter what I say!”

The sudden jerk of the car caused my head to bang against the passenger window, snapping me from my daydreams of more Robbie kisses and nightmares of Sunday Supper Interrogations. I winced at the sudden sharp pain in my skull, thankful once I’d opened my eyes that they’d been closed and I’d missed HH’s reckless driving.

We had crossed three lanes of traffic to take the wrong exit and were now speeding up the access ramp way too fast. Being dead was a great excuse to miss Sunday supper.

I cowered in the seat and squeezed my thighs together as we crossed two more lanes of semi-busy traffic and came to a screeching halt on the other side of the traffic light. Amazingly, my pants were still dry. I think.

The only other sound was our heavy breathing and the blare of horns from a bunch of very unamused drivers.

“Get out!”

I slowly turned to look at my mother, who I was sure had just gone over the edge. She sat hunched over the steering wheel, gasping for air, her face three shades of red. And HH’s hair was mussed.

“But ...but,” I sputtered. I was facing a good two-mile walk! Not undoable, but definitely *not* fun!

“I’ve done my best for you, but I’m *through*! I even tried to get Allan, bless his heart, to give you another chance.”

Me another chance? “Holy shit!”

“Despite your...increased size,” she continued, wrinkling her nose at me,

“and newly acquired potty mouth, he was willing to give it another go until your little announcement.”

That was it!

I leaned back in the leather seat, trying to form words around the scream building in my throat, so I could tell her exactly what I thought of her and Allan. “If you want him in the family so bad, why don’t you divorce Daddy and marry him. God knows why poor Daddy keeps you around, anyway. You make the Wicked Witch of the West look like a saint. My God, Mother, has your bridge club taken up smoking crack in between games? Have you lost your fucking mind?”

I clambered out of my seatbelt and nearly fell in my haste to get out of the car. “And I’m taking you off my Christmas Card list!” Dissatisfied with the lack of noise her BMW made when I slammed the door, I shot her the bird for good measure.

I forced one foot in front of the other and never looked back while behind me tires squealed and horns blared.

I needed the exercise anyway.

By the time I limped through my front door my Timex read nearly nine and it was full dark out. My feet hurt and I was sweating like the proverbial stuck pig. The ringing phone wasn’t nearly as important as my near-to-bursting bladder. I kicked off my sandals with a sigh of relief, letting the cool tile take some of the sting from my poor abused feet, and hustled through the kitchen into the downstairs bathroom.

The phone quit ringing. My little house was dark and silent as a tomb. With a sigh I locked the front door and hobbled to the kitchen on aching feet. Two

glasses of water later, I thought I might live. Then the phone started up again. I grabbed it, praying it wasn't my mother.

"Hello," I croaked.

"Are you okay?"

"Robbie?" I sighed with relief, got myself another glass of water and slowly walked over and sank into a kitchen chair. My calves were screaming.

"Yeah, I've been trying to call..."

"I'm fine." Despite the fact I was the proud owner of a nice set of blisters--on both feet.

"How'd things go with your mom?"

"We had a fight."

"I'm sorry. Listen, don't worry about Sunday. I'll explain everything to the family, but I would like to see you. We need to talk."

And set up a time to have sex on the horse. I shivered in the cool air, sure it was from the drying sweat.

"I'm beat, Robbie." And I stunk. And the pain in my feet increased with every passing second. Walking upstairs would be ugly. "Why don't you come over for lunch tomorrow? Call me when you get up and I'll give you directions. I've really got to go, baby."

I hung up, flinching at the endearment that had slipped out and sat there near tears, the phone dangling from my hand. Robbie was the endearment person. He always had one on his lips--or fingers. For the third night in a row I went to bed without checking my email. Instead, I showered then lay staring at the ceiling, occasionally licking my lips at the memory of Rowdy's kisses. My Gawd, the things that man could do with his mouth!

Horsey sex? I groaned. My life truly was shit. I'd spent this morning's drive home from Austin thinking of Allan, my mom and Rowdy, and by the time I'd reached San Antonio, my head was spinning so much I missed my exit and had to circle back around.

My lifelong struggle for perfection--regardless of my weight--was what made my previous night's antics at the country club so out of character.

It wasn't even a broken heart that had left me in tears and caused me to retreat to San Antonio, too battle scarred and weary to try anymore, but my mother's disappointment in me. Again. I'd done my best to follow her rules, to fade into the background, to be quiet, to be good, to please her. I failed her.

And more importantly, I'd failed myself.

I'd salvaged my battered ego with food and my computer, quickly outgrowing my size tens and 36C bras—then outgrowing my size twelves. And after three years of only sporadic visits home, my tolerance level had dropped drastically--or HH had gotten worse. That she would dare to try and step in and take over the reins of my life once more nearly sent me over the edge. My life might not be what *she* wanted, but I'd come too far to let her take over. Sadly, it had been easier to lie than tell the truth. A truth that wouldn't have stopped her anyway.

And now look at the mess I was in.

10. BOXERS OR BOXER BRIEFS?

Rowdy spent his second break doing some fast talking with Tim, Susie and Jessa. At least they understood. Well, not understood, but understood why he'd sprung something so unlike him on them. Tim had laughed his ass off while the ladies glared at him from across the waitresses break room.

"I never really got a chance to tell her no. Her mom was on us like white on rice!" Thanks to him dragging Jade to the bar for a beer. But he didn't add that.

"I just don't want you hurting her. She's a very sweet girl, Robert Rowdon Yates!" Susie stood directly in front of the door, the only escape route, tapping her foot.

"Whoa. How come Aunt Susie knows your internet chick?" Tim had asked from where he sat on the other side of the rickety break room table.

"She's my liquor rep," Susie corrected.

From her spot on the ratty couch, Jessa laughed. "So you mean to tell me," she began with a dimpled grin, "all this time you two have been going back and forth like a couple of boxers, you've been sparkin' on the Internet?"

Had he been courting her? Before he knew she was her? "Yeah," he softly admitted with a nod.

"Aw, well, if that isn't just the sweetest thing I ever heard." Jessa beamed

at him, her eyes twinkling.

He hung his head, that sinking feeling back. Jessa loved to play matchmaker almost as much as Toni did, and Susie liked Skye...Jade. The quiet one.

Skye was his flirty girl.

What was left of his break was spent trying to contact Skye who ended up inviting him to lunch at her place so they could talk.

Rowdy just couldn't bring himself to think of her as Jade.

But he was real interested in finding out how they'd gone from enemies to engaged in twenty-four hours.

#

The next morning Rowdy was up at ten, catching up on some paperwork and downloading his e-mail. Nothing from Skye he noticed. He hadn't seen her posting on the Chris Cagle list in a while either. And that reminded him of something else he needed to do. He ripped a purple sticky note off and jotted down a reminder to buy concert tickets next week for the San Antonio show in November. Then dialed Skye's number from memory. When she answered on the forth ring, she sounded...asleep, her voice all soft and warm. "Lo?"

"Get up, sleepyhead."

"Robbie? What time is it?"

"Nearly noon, and you're supposed to feed me lunch and explain to me how we ended up engaged."

He smiled at the sounds of her groaning and stretching. "It's not even eleven," she grumbled.

"I'm the one who was out late last night."

“I always wondered--” She yawned right in his ear before she could finish her sentence.

“Wondered what?” He shut down the computer while waiting on her reply.

“Where you were...on the weekends. We never talked late and you always seemed to be in a hurry.”

“You never asked.”

“I was afraid. I didn’t want to.”

“You were afraid?” He frowned at the dark monitor, surprised at her confessed insecurity. Neither Jade nor Skye had ever struck him as insecure.

“Silly, huh?”

Especially since the truth turned out to be bigger than either of them had expected. He’d deal with that later. “What time’s lunch?”

Promptly at 12:30, Rowdy stood on Skye’s doorstep. Her neighborhood was made up of row upon row of pink stucco townhouses with white trim and garage doors and deep red Mexican tile roofs. They all looked alike with small patches of grass and two or three saplings. Not a full grown tree for blocks.

At her door hung a basket overflowing with Spanish Moss and nearby sat two large terra cotta pots full of yellow and orange Marigolds. His Skyebaby had a green thumb. He smiled and rang the doorbell.

His smile faded as an ugly little voice in his head reminded him their five minute engagement had been a sham, and she didn’t like “Rowdy.” He was a redneck, a good ole’ boy and she was the daughter of a high-tone judge who wore pearls to a dancehall.

Then the door swung open and he found himself greeted by the

mouthwatering smell of garlic and chicken and Skye dressed in the same faded denim capris and Chris Cagle t-shirt he'd seen her wearing at Target. She had ankle socks on her feet and very little makeup. Despite the dark circles under her eyes and mussed hair, she was smiling.

"You alright?"

"Yeah, come on in." She waved him in and stepped aside so he could pass. Skye looked so worn out Rowdy was struck with the urge to tuck her into bed and coddle her a while. Instead he paused to cup her face and plant a kiss on her cheek. To his surprise she returned the gesture. "Hungry?"

"Always." He followed her into the kitchen, taking in the darkened living room they passed through. Tasteful but *very* sparse. The room didn't even look lived-in. Her kitchen was another matter.

The floors were the same off-white tile as the entryway and a huge chili ristra hung in the corner above a small glass-topped table. Bright blue tile countertops contrasted with the pale sand colored walls and matching curtains that sported hieroglyphics along the border. This room looked much more like the Skye he knew. The one with eclectic tastes whose idea of a vacation was exploring Indian ruins in New Mexico or Central America.

"I didn't set the table yet. Do you want to eat outside on the patio or in here?"

"Sure it's not too hot out there for ya?" He resisted the urge to stick his finger in a bowl of what looked like fruit salad and scoop up a fingerful. Pineapple, strawberries and little bits of coconut teased him, making his mouth water.

"I won't melt." She chuckled, the bit of color in her cheeks relieving some

of the paleness.

“Then the patio works for me.”

With shaking hands, she poured their drinks and set out their lunch on a tray. His offer to help was refused with a smile. So he watched her bustle around, obviously too nervous to stay still for very long.

“You’re limping,” he noted when she returned from a trip outside.

“Yeah, I didn’t have my walking shoes on last night.”

“Last night?”

“Come on, before the flies eat our lunch.” She shooed him outside where she’d taken another patch of small yard and turned it into an oasis. A cement fairy holding an iridescent sphere sat off to one side, water bubbling from the top of the ball. More hanging baskets and terra cotta pots overflowing with flowers decorated each side of the patio and made things cozy.

The small table for two was made up of more Mexican tile and had been set with pale blue plates. They ate in silence a while--chicken salad filled with apples and walnuts on wheat rolls and her fruit salad, heavy on the whipped cream. Or rather, he ate.

Skye picked at her food.

“Not hungry?” Rowdy could get used to meals like this. But he wasn’t supposed to be here to talk about their future, just to let her know she was off the hook with his family. And visa versa. Why did everything have to be so messed up?

She was too far out of his reach and too complex, and he didn’t have time for complex women. They usually turned out to be high maintenance, and he was a man who liked to keep things simple. He liked girls who knew the score--*it’s all*

good fun as long as it lasts. Skye didn't know the rules, he could see that now.

But damn she was cute. "So what happened to your feet?"

"Mom made me walk home last night. I actually—"

"Walk?" He paused in the middle of heaping more fruit salad on his plate to frown at her. "Not from the dancehall?"

"No, only a couple of miles from here. On the frontage road. We had a fight and I told her I was taking her off my Christmas card list." She giggled and popped a cream covered strawberry in her mouth.

He didn't understand her amusement. Family rifts were nothing to laugh about. He should know. His own mother hadn't spoken to him in almost ten years and he didn't want to be the cause of a rift between Skye and Her Honor.

"About me?"

She shook her head and held up a finger while she finished chewing. "Not just because of you." She paused to lick a dot of whipped cream from the corner of her mouth. "Because of Allan."

An unexpected and red-hot knot of jealousy twisted his gut at the mention of her ex-fiancé.

"He had the nerve to show up at my birthday dinner. Apparently, he's divorced and HH...lemme start at the beginning."

So she told him why she called her mom HH, how she'd gotten drunk at the country club and how they came to be engaged. He laughed, but inwardly cringed. The only country club he'd ever belong to would be the dancehall. Respectable just wasn't in his vocabulary, and never would be. Not her kind anyway. They didn't belong together but that didn't stop him from wanting her.

"Don't sweat it. This has been a long time coming, Robbie."

He snorted. "You're the only one who calls me that. Even my mom never called me Robbie. I was Rowdy from the time I could walk. Daddy's Rowdy boy," he added softly.

"You don't like to talk about your dad."

"He's dead. No reason to." Rowdy scooted his chair back from the table and stretched his legs out, hoping she'd change the subject.

"I'm sorry about Wednesday night," she said softly, curling up in the chair to face him. "I was just so shocked. I-I would never deliberately hurt anybody."

"You could have knocked me over with a feather." He chuckled and smiled over at her, hoping to relieve the worry in her eyes. She really was his Skyebaby. How the hell was he going to fix this?

She sighed and smiled at him in return, her eyes brightening to a warm grass green. "I still have trouble puttin' it all together in my head. You just don't act like you."

"I could say the same." He gave her an easy smile.

"I suppose--" She waved a hand "--I can see it now, but Wednesday night Rowdy and Robbie just didn't click."

"I loved giving you a hard time when you came into the dancehall," he confessed softly, watching her from the corner of his eye. "You'd get so wound up."

She chuckled a bit. "I thought you were a redneck gigolo."

"I am," he popped back with a grin. Or he was, until he met her. Skye had ruined him for all other women for so long.

"I've seen you flirt." She sounded jealous.

"I was born to flirt, baby." He cocked an eyebrow, unable to resist a smirk.

She shook her head and frowned. "Robbie, Robbie Robbie, what am I gonna do with you?" *This* was the Skye he'd fallen for.

"Just Love Me," he quipped, throwing out the name of one of her favorite Chris Cagle songs. He shocked himself with his flip words and was thankful she looked away. "So how come you didn't want to know how I spent my weekends?"

She traced her fork through the whipped cream on her plate and spoke so soft he almost missed her reply. "I was jealous."

Rowdy couldn't hold back a smile. He pushed harder, a part of him wanting something more definite from her. A handle on what she might feel for him. An idea of how to move forward. Despite the four year age difference there was something innocent about her. Maybe wholesome was a better word. He'd never imagined wholesome could be so sexy though. Pink cheeks, pale skin, exotic, slightly almond shaped eyes and an abundance of curves. "Of?"

She glanced at him out of the corner of her eye and her cheeks flamed a deep scarlet again before she looked away. "Whoever you might be spending your weekends with."

He was flattered, pure and simple, but one last thing bugged him. "What if your mom hadn't shown up last night...wanting to meet your fiancé?"

"I'd still planned on coming to see you." Cheeks pink, she hopped up and disappeared inside with her arms full of dishes.

Still smiling at her confession, Rowdy followed, figuring the least he could do was offer to wash.

He stepped in as Skye stepped out and they ended up in each other's arms. He wrapped his arms around her to steady her, remembering just how much he'd

enjoyed kissing her in the beer garden—despite the audience.

She didn't have full lips, but they were still soft and today they were peach. Yesterday, last night, they'd been dark pink. His smile faded and, unable to resist, he leaned down and brushed his lips to hers. They were as soft as he remembered and tasted sweet, like the whipped cream from the fruit salad. He coaxed her mouth open and delved a little deeper, his tongue gently searching for hers. She shivered a bit and relaxed against him, her arms creeping around his neck.

With a low groan he tightened his grip on her and backed her into the kitchen, slamming the door behind him. The suddenly chilly air did nothing to cool him down. He hadn't planned on this happening but he wanted her. And he was gonna have her. Now.

Rowdy released Skye long enough to peel off his t-shirt and reach for hers, but she tugged the edge of her shirt from his grasp and he forced himself to slow down. Three months of celibacy had left him hungry and she was warm and sexy and sweet as sin.

He moved in close, nuzzling her neck and gently palming her breasts through her shirt. Skye sighed, her head rolling back as she thrust them further into his hands. He rubbed the tips and felt them harden beneath the soft cotton material and his cock stiffened in response, strangled by his tight jeans. She whimpered and her breathing picked up pace. Rowdy leaned in and pressed his lips to the tender spot just behind her ear and she tangled her hands in his hair. Her skin smelled like vanilla. And something else. The same deep earthy scent from last night that he'd struggled to identify.

Before he could lift her shirt up over her head a second time, she'd pushed him away, tears sparkling in her bright green eyes.

He frowned in confusion and concern. He didn't want to upset her or rush her. Maybe he'd read her signals wrong and the desire had all been on his part. "I'm sorry, I thought you wanted—"

"I do," she whispered, swiping at the tear that slid down her cheek. He breathed a tiny sigh of relief, reached up and grabbed her hand, caught off guard by her next words. "But I can't."

"Is it...the wrong time?"

With a tiny laugh, Skye shook her head and crossed her arms over her chest. "I want you so bad."

"You can have me." Rowdy gently massaged her neck and shoulders, still unsure of the reason for her hesitation. "All you have to do is lead me to your bedroom. Or the couch...or right here."

She shook her head with a sigh, her lips twisted in a wry grin. Jade licked her lips and finally explained. "Do you know what's worse than being celibate?"

Aha. She hadn't had sex in three years. "What?" he asked softly, wrapping his arms around her.

"Getting used to being celibate. It's like having to shift from fifth to first as fast as possible and you know it's gonna be rough and you'll grind the gears getting there."

"And that has what to do with us?" Until five months ago celibacy wasn't even in his vocabulary.

"If I take you upstairs, then I have to start all over again. It's like going on a diet and cheating and then having to go back to the beginning again," she babbled. "What's that kids game where if you land on the wrong space you have to start all over? "Sorry?" Like that. I'd rather not have you." She squeezed her

eyes shut for a minute and swallowed, then met his gaze head-on. The determined set of her chin didn't leave him any room for doubt. And the message was clear.

She'd rather be celibate than have a one nighter--or rather, a nooner.

Which meant he had to make a choice. Take a chance; break his rules or walk away now.

He studied her pretty face, all her doubts loud and clear in her bright green eyes, despite her stubbornness. And chose.

"So who says you have to go back on your diet tomorrow?" He reached up and ran his fingers through her dark, silky hair.

"I know. There's still the...the horse *thing*, but after that." She shrugged.

He chuckled at the horse reference. He still hadn't figured out how they'd manage that one. "Skye, I *want* you." Even so, he couldn't lie. "I...I can't make promises about how long, but I want you for longer than just today." He leaned down and caught her lips in a quick soft kiss before continuing. "And I promise you won't regret it come morning."

"Morning?"

"Yeah, morning," he replied, wiggling his eyebrows at her.

She smiled and ducked her head, and it finally dawned on him that Susie had been right. She *was* shy.

Aware of his painful erection and the need to draw her in, take his time, Rowdy pressed his lips to the fluttering pulse at the base of her neck and waited. She shivered against his lips and leaned into him, and he continued tracing kisses up her neck since he didn't hear any more protests. Instead he felt her hands on his back, then on his arms as she pulled him closer until he bit the tender spot on her shoulder and she bucked against him, growling his name from between

clenched teeth.

He planted a soft kiss on the spot he'd bitten, then smiled down at her.

"Upstairs," she gasped, one hand taking hold of his.

"Lead the way." He gave her a soft kiss and another smile. Skye led him up the stairs to her bedroom. Complete with brightly colored walls, an eclectic mix of antiques and modern western art, her unmade bed and last night's clothes strewn on the floor.

He slowly peeled her shirt off, grinning at the sight of a green and black tiger stripe bra that contrasted with her pale skin. He watched her face as he circled her waist, his hands skimming the curves of her back until he reached the hooks holding her bra closed. She watched him, too, her lower lip caught between her teeth. One by one he unhooked them and let the straps fall loose before pulling them down her arms.

Berries.

Her nipples were the color of dark overripe berries. And her breasts overflowed his hands. They were heavy and silky soft and pale against his tanned skin.

Leaning over, he covered one sensitive peak with his mouth and lightly kneaded the other with his fingers as his blood heated with anticipation. Her nipple hardened against his tongue and he suckled until she whimpered and dug her nails into his shoulders.

Rowdy released her long enough to finish undressing her.

She wore matching panties.

But he barely got a chance to admire the dark curls between her thighs or touch her before she dove under the messy bedding and rolled to face him, an

embarrassed smile on her pink face. He shucked his jeans and briefs before joining her, stretching out on the pale striped bed linens that smelled like her.

He pulled her to him and ran the fingers of his free hand down her arm, forcing her to give up her fight with the tangled sheets. They didn't need them anyway. "You feel good."

"You're huge." Her face turned three more shades of red. So she'd noticed.

"It just looks big cause you haven't had sex in three years," he teased. He felt like he was drowning in her sweet softness and the exotic earthy scent of her perfume. It was everywhere and left him feeling intoxicated.

"I ache," she whimpered, rubbing her smooth legs against his. So did he.

He leaned up on one elbow and slipped one hand in the curls between her thighs to discover she was drenched. Her lashes lowered and her hips arched against his hand as she sighed.

Rowdy ignored the obvious, choosing instead to explore the rest of her. He caressed her velvety soft thighs as she rubbed them against his legs and snuggled as close as she could get. Her belly quivered under his fingertips, her eyes unfocused then slowly fluttered shut. She lightly skimmed his back with her snort nails and relaxed against him.

There, that was better.

Her nipples puckered rudely at the lightest touch, proving how sensitive they were. He smiled and taunted the tender peaks with his fingers and tongue, burying his face in her lush, heavy breasts.

"Robbie, please," she panted, rubbing against him, her fingers brushing against his erection with a tentative caress. He didn't want her to think she had to

reciprocate. Maybe next time.

“No, baby. Not yet.” Rowdy eased his hips away from her hand and kissed her, repeatedly, nibbling at her sweet lips. Exploring her soft mouth with deep, exploratory kisses full of promise. They varied from light and teasing to an erotic tongue-play that nearly pushed him over the edge.

He groaned, suddenly overwhelmed with the urge to settle between her thighs and thrust inside and make her his. He wanted to feel her tight wetness around him, working his cock. Instead he slipped one finger inside her, smiling at the feel of her milking him. His balls twitched in an automatic response to her heat. Her need.

He added another, rubbing against the sensitive walls and stretching her as best he could. She wasn't quite ready and Rowdy didn't want to hurt her, only mate with her. Whimpering softly, she shifted beside him, clutching his wrist. He groaned as the ache in his balls slowly intensified and logic left him.

Her excitement drove him on. Instead of giving in to the urge to fuck like an animal, he latched onto a nipple with his mouth and continued to stroke her with his fingers. Her legs spread wide beneath the sheet, one hand scratching at his forearm, the other in his hair or rubbing his neck and back.

“Robbie!” Skye convulsed around his fingers, tighter this time, and bucked, grinding her hips against his hand.

He looked up. Her eyes were open but still unfocused on the ceiling and her breathing heavy. *Enough!*

He positioned himself between her thighs, and with a gentle thrust, felt her close around him, warm and very tight. He groaned in satisfaction and focused on her as she arched to meet him and hissed a low “yes.”

“Easy, baby,” he whispered against her lips.

“I want it all,” she growled, digging her nails into his back.

“I want you to be able to walk tomorrow,” he quipped, throwing back the sheet and wrapping his arms beneath the pillow on either side of her head. She panted and whimpered, her walls pulsating around his cock as she squirmed against him for release.

“Robbie, please! I wanna come,” she begged long and loud, finally meeting his eyes.

“I know, Skye.” He slowly withdrew and sank back into her tight warmth in one long stroke.

“Please!” She locked her arms around his neck and thrust to meet him again.

He repeated the process and she smiled and lowered her eyelids, relaxing the tiniest bit. One stroke became two and they multiplied until they were both slick with sweat. He fucked and played, and she greedily took everything he gave her, meeting each thrust and growling and clawing at his back. For the longest time all he could hear was their heavy breathing and bodies slapping together furiously.

“Hurry!”

“Not yet. Come for me first,” he coaxed. He captured her lips and briefly delved into her mouth.

“Help me,” she begged against his lips before latching onto his tongue and dragging him down for more.

He didn't know how much longer he could hang on. But he knew one sure-fire way to make her come, and fast. He slowed his pace, then came to a halt deep

inside her with a low groan as a shiver danced down his back straight to his tight balls. She was so incredibly wet!

There was plenty of room on either side for him to roll over. "Wrap your arms around me," he ordered.

She did, and Rowdy rolled, putting her on top. They paused for a second, her warm breath tickling his neck. "Sit up."

"I need the sheet," she gasped, her head on his chest.

"Fuck the sheet! Sit up and ride me, now." God, he wanted to come inside her so bad!

She did. He squeezed his eyes shut and groaned long and loud. Damnit, she felt so good!

He caught his breath, licked two fingers and teased her clit as she tried to find her rhythm.

He knew he hit paydirt as she squealed and bucked, riding him harder, her eyes closed and breasts bouncing. Then she started screaming. His name, obscenities, for God to help her. All of it. He came with a laugh and a shout, pulling her down on top of him and thrusting beneath her until he was satisfied.

For now. It was gonna be a long night for the both of them.

11. CELIBACY IS FOR LOSERS

I couldn't catch my breath and I had a cramp in the back of my left thigh, but I didn't want to move. I was too busy enjoying the feel of Robbie buried inside me and too mellow from the aftereffects of my orgasm. I felt like I could sleep for a week. But then I've never considered rolling over and dozing off after sex an insult. For just a second I didn't care that every bare-assed naked inch of me was there for him to see or feel.

Of course, he'd already felt most of it.

Grinning, I turned my head and kissed his chest, letting the sprinkle of hairs tickle my nose.

I stretched my left leg as best I could, afraid to move too much. Afraid he'd make me get off him.

"Cramp?" he asked, his fingers playing in my hair. I nodded and Robbie reached down and kneaded my thigh. "Better?"

"A little, but I need to stretch it out." Before I could figure out how to with the least amount of mess and fuss, he rolled back over. Obviously he didn't spend all his time working on computers, if he could flip me like a pancake. I breathed a sigh of relief at being able to comfortably stretch and he continued to knead the cramp for me.

"Better now?"

I nodded, still speechless over having just had incredibly, mind-blowing sex with Robbie...Rowdy...Robbie. *What the hell was I doing?* Worse, I wanted more. Even as I lay there, the sweat drying on me, I wanted a whole lot more.

With one last kiss, he eased off me and stretched out beside me, pulling me into his arms.

Everything still felt surreal. I'd dreamed of him for so long and I'd been celibate even longer. Masturbation did have its short-comings. No puns intended. A self-induced orgasm couldn't *even* compare with a Robbie-induced one.

"You're awful quiet there."

I smiled over at him as I reached behind me and tugged the sheet up over me. As if he hadn't noticed my size, but me naked was a whole 'nother matter. "That was amazing," I giggled.

Robbie wiggled his eyebrows at me, the lips under his moustache curving into a smile as he propped himself up on one elbow. He rubbed my nipple through the sheet, laughing when it puckered and made a mini-tent. "Sorry. I love your tits."

"Here I thought you were a leg man." Maybe if I laid still he'd keep doing it, and...my belly clenched.

"I like it all." He continued to rub his thumb across my nipple and with a sigh of contentment, I leaned up and touched my lips to his, enjoying the feel of them and the soft tickle of his moustache. I moaned in his mouth as he tweaked my nipple. "Robbie."

"Like that?" He continued to roll the tender skin between his fingers. I felt the tingling results between my thighs. We'd barely caught our breaths, and already I wanted to scream at him to fuck me.

He stopped his teasing, re-covered my breast with the sheet and gently rubbed his palm across. I blew out a long slow breath of relief as the heat slowly abated. For now.

I had more urgent matters to deal with. *How to get to the bathroom with my dignity intact.* I had nothing to wear and wasn't keen on parading around in front of him naked. I struggled out of bed, dragging the sheet with me. Just as I reached the corner of the bed, I found my robe of 320-count percale ripped from my fingers. I stared at him, wide-eyed. So much for my dignity. "Why did you do that?"

"Baby, I already saw you naked. I don't know what you're tryin' to hide." Robbie lay stretched across the bed buck naked, my makeshift robe clutched in his fist, a smirk on his handsome face.

My t-shirt was somewhere on his side of the bed. The dresser mocked me from its place beside the bathroom door. My chaise, normally loaded with extra laundry, was empty. I took a deep breath and did my best to act casual and not bounce or jiggle too much as I made a beeline for my shirt. It might as well have been in India.

"Just because you've seen me naked doesn't mean I care to parade around that way."

"I like the way you parade." He lay back on the bed propped on his elbows. I couldn't help myself. I peeked, then stopped for a better look. He had a bit of a farmer's tan, his stomach a few shades lighter than his upper chest and arms, and he was stocky but not all muscle. His long legs were covered with the same shade of dark blonde hair on his well-defined chest. His semi-hard cock was surrounded by dark blonde hair, and everything about him was thick. From his

arms to his legs to ...well, his cock.

“See anything you like?”

I snorted with laughter and snatched up my shirt from the floor.

“I don’t know why you’re botherin’, baby. I’m just gonna peel it off of ya soon as you get back in this bed.”

I put it on anyway, quickly took care of business in the bathroom and came out to find him sitting on the edge of the bed. Still buck-naked.

“You have no shame at all.” Muh Gawd, my mouth actually watered. Apparently I didn’t have any shame either.

“No, baby, and I’m all yours.”

I had no willpower in the face of his mischievous grin. I shook my head and strolled across the room toward him. He grabbed the edge of my t-shirt, stood and yanked it over my head before doing just like he said and dragging me back to bed.

We came up for air—and food—a while later, polishing off the leftovers from lunch picnic-style on my bed while I did my best to ignore the fact he’d be leaving soon to play at the dancehall tonight. I wanted him to curl up in bed with me, not leave me here all alone after we’d had the most incredible afternoon together.

“You coming with me tomorrow?” he asked between bites of fruit salad.

“I thought you said I didn’t need to.” I doubted I’d be able to walk tomorrow, let alone spend the afternoon at some family barbecue.

“You don’t, but you can, if you want. Susie likes you.”

“Do *you* want me to go?” I asked, unable to meet his eyes. His statement about Susie struck me as odd and I felt like a twelve-year-old: *I will if you will.*

The thought of spending the day with Robbie sounded fun but I wasn't sure about all those women. Not after last night.

"Just think about it."

The last time he said that to me I'd choked on a cookie.

#

Robbie got cleaned up and took off for the dancehall, promising to return after they closed. I went back to bed, and watched "Independence Day" in my room. Long after midnight the phone woke me and I struggled to stay awake while he drove over from his house, after a quick stop for his toothbrush and clean clothes.

I let him in and crawled back in bed, nearly falling back to sleep while I waited for him to get out of the shower. Then he snuggled up against me, all damp and warm and hard, and we had sleepy-sex. The kind of sex you have when you're barely awake and all relaxed and everything feels so mellow and dream-like.

The next morning we started on round something or other in the shower. Apparently Robbie *did* know what those detachable showerheads were for.

How could I resist? He was so damned cute and I realized when I started thinking how cute his receding hairline was that I was in *big* trouble.

"So," he started in over a breakfast of waffles and bacon we'd cooked together, "are you game for this afternoon, or no?"

The words were so casually spoken, if I hadn't happened to glance up at him, I might have missed the intense, probing look on his face before it disappeared, hidden behind his usual flirty twinkle. He *wanted* me to go.

And maybe I wasn't quite ready to give up on my Shy yet. Somewhere

under that rough exterior was the Robbie I'd fallen in love with.

"What time do we need to leave?"

#

We took Robbie's Bronco, and to my surprise, turned off the highway at the same exit for the dancehall. Robbie flew past the dancehall and drove for a few more miles before he slowed, waiting on a battered Ford to pass by then turning in. The Bronco bounced across the cattle guard on worn shocks and we eased up the gravel road, lined with a white 3-rail fence along both sides. *My God all those cows.* They didn't look near as cute as they did on TV.

"Is this all Tim's?" I knew I had to be wrong the minute the words were out of my mouth. Tim wouldn't need this many houses. I spotted four, plus two barns. No, five houses, one with what looked like an old-fashioned detached garage beside it.

"Remember when I told your mom Tim's family claimed me?"

"Yeah."

"*This* is family." He waved a hand to indicate the land around us. In the field to my right some young horses played. I saw a couple of huge old oaks and even more cows in the field off to the left. "You plan on explaining or just leaving me wondering."

"Jerrod and Maggie Boudreaux are Tim's godparents. His land and theirs are back to back." Rowdy pulled to a stop and pointed at a white two-story with charcoal trim across from the white one. "When Tim built his house, Jerrod insisted he build there, even though technically it's Boudreaux land. He wanted Tim and Charlene."

"Your sister?" I did my best to keep it all straight in my head as he explained.

"Yeah, he wanted them close by. I don't really have any family now with mom and Charlene gone, so they sort of took me on."

"Aw, that's nice."

"They didn't do it to be nice."

I clamped my lips shut at his sharp retort. Once he pulled into Tim's driveway and killed the engine, I opened my mouth to apologize, but he was out of the truck, swinging Rene around in his arms. I followed his lead and climbed out, hit with an attack of nerves at the sight of the dancehall's imposing bartender--Toni--stepping off the porch with a frown on her face. "Get off him, Rene!"

Even in something as casual as jeans and a t-shirt she looked intimidating. She was not a soft woman.

"Bite me," the leggy teenager called out.

"How are you doing, Jade?" Toni asked, giving me a warm smile softened her angular features considerably.

I nodded and returned her smile, but before I could answer, Rene spoke up.

"What'd you bring *her* for, if you're not gonna marry her?" she asked, her arms wound around Robbie's neck.

"Rene," Toni scolded, waving a hand in her direction. "Don't mind her. She's got territorial issues."

"Thanks."

Tim joined us and there was more backslapping before he sent Rene off to get some stuff she needed to carry over to her grandmother's. "How you doin', good lookin'?"

I snorted with laughter as he arched one jet black eyebrow at me and waited for a reply. "Well?"

"Just fine, thanks, and yourself." I smiled, wishing my skin weren't so pale. I could feel a flush heating my face.

"Don't mind him, either, Jade. He likes to flirt. *A lot.*" Toni's eyebrows rose, even as she crossed her arms and shrugged. "He's harmless."

I smiled at Toni's observation, feeling oddly at ease as Rowdy slipped an arm around my shoulders. "I guess now I know where Robbie gets it from."

"And you're losin' your touch, brother, 'cause she didn't buy your half-baked attempt to flirt at all." Robbie chuckled and gave me a little squeeze. "You can call me Rowdy, you know."

"I know." I sort of liked being the only one who called him Robbie.

When Rene reappeared, we all walked across the road, cutting between the converted garage and the Boudreaux's beige and green two-story. The party, complete with a smoking BBQ pit and two picnic tables covered with checkered plastic clothes, was apparently in full swing. Even though I knew some of the family, I still found myself nervous. No one acted like anything was up or questioned me about the lie that Robbie and I had perpetrated the other night. On the contrary, they treated me like one of the family, as if I really were a future member, Robbie's real fiancé. A part of me wished I were.

Rowdy had disappeared into the nearby barn with Travis, Mr. Boudreaux's grandson, to look at a new foal. I sat at the table with Susie and Delaney, the

youngest Boudreaux child, and Ty and Betti who spent most of their time silently cooing at each other and rubbing her swollen belly. I remembered Ty from a previous visit at the dancehall, when Hope had an ear infection--he was the tall, quiet blonde who played drums--but there were more Boudreauxs than I could ever hope to keep straight.

"So, Jade--" Mr. Boudreaux smiled at me from his seat at the end of one picnic table, "--how in the world did a pretty little thing like you end up selling liquor?"

I smiled back, completely charmed. He was much more rugged than Daddy with his deeply tanned skin, Wranglers and pearl snap short sleeve shirt. But something in his dark blue eyes reminded me of my father. "I thought it might be more fun than sitting around making up creative ways to wrangle donations out of bored rich people for the museum I used to work at."

His wife, Maggie chuckled from her spot beside him. "Don't let him get to you, honey. He likes to pick and tease."

"But Dad's harmless," Delaney added with a giggle.

"If Jerrod didn't tease," Susie drawled, "you'd think there was something wrong with him. How long did you work for the museum?"

"Five years."

"You must have started young," Susie said.

"Right out of college."

"What college?" Delaney asked from her other side.

"Hook'em horns," I quipped with a grin in her direction. *Hook'em horns* was the University of Texas motto.

“Oh Lord, I can see things gettin’ real ugly around here on a Texas-A & M football weekend,” Betti quipped while Delaney cheered. “My sister’s an Aggie.” That was all she had to say. The Texas A & M Aggies-University of Texas Longhorns rivalry was old and fierce. The only thing worse was the Texas-Oklahoma rivalry.

“Delaney goes to UT San Antonio,” Susie added. We exchanged high fives behind the older woman’s back.

“What’s your major?”

“Well,” she hedged a bit, “officially it’s business but I can’t quite decide. I like everything.”

“Daddy always said no education is wasted.” I smiled over at her, understanding completely how she felt. I’d had the same problem at eighteen.

“I’d thought business, but my sister-in-law is a forensic anthropologist for the FBI. It means getting a master’s degree but...” She held out her hands and shrugged.

Her words brought home just how little I knew about Robbie’s extended family, but I was practically salivating at the words *forensic anthropology*.

“Would that not be the coolest job?” I sighed.

Delaney nodded and Susie stood up. “I’m moving so you two can compare notes.”

She settled on Betti’s other side with a smile of understanding.

“My major was archeology but I love so many aspects of anthropology.”

We chatted about different disciplines of anthropology, including forensics, for a few minutes until Betti broke in with a laugh. “Ya’ll are making my brain numb.” She stood up and nuzzled her husband’s neck before heading across the

yard toward the house. The skirt of her knee length psychedelic pink dress swirled around her very pregnant body and the sun bounced off pale blonde curls.

Ty gave me a sheepish grin and shrugged but stayed silent.

Before Delaney and I could resume our conversation, a ruckus from the barn caught everyone's attention. Robbie came bursting out, neighing like a horse with Travis on his shoulders.

In the midst of everyone's laughter Maggie excused herself, announcing we'd eat in ten minutes.

During dinner Susie continued with her mystifying third degree, focusing on my family this time. It's a wonder Delaney's sister-in-law was the only FBI agent in the family. "Tell me about your father, Jade."

"Suz," Robbie growled a little warning from his spot beside me.

"It's alright." I gave him a little smile and answered her question. "He's a professor at UT Austin. He teaches Geology."

"Brothers and sisters?"

"Emerald's a lawyer—" I rolled my eyes and she laughed, "--and engaged to another lawyer from her firm. Nicky's the baby; he graduates in December with a BS in Marine Biology."

"And your mother's a judge."

"That's enough." Robbie stood and picked up both our empty plates.

"It's alright." As he stepped over the bench, I gently patted his thigh to let him know I was fine.

"Lay off, Suz."

I watched him stalk across the yard to the trashcan, then turned back to Susie with a shrug. I was more puzzled at her probing than offended. Our engagement was a sham after all.

Hope eyed me from her perch on Delaney's shoulder, furiously waving one chubby arm in my direction.

"Wanna hold her?" Delaney asked. A green bow that matched her green gingham one-piece outfit held a tuft of Hope's bright red hair upright.

"Sure." I nodded and reached for her, caught off guard when she lunged for me.

Jessa chuckled from the seat across from me. She'd taken Betti's spot. "Ever held a baby before?"

Hope stared at me, her drool covered chin working up and down as I settled her in my arms.

"No," I replied with a soft laugh. She scrunched up her face and blew little puffy breaths out her nose.

"Support her head," Robbie gently instructed as he sat back down beside me. I cupped the back of her head and swallowed the lump in my throat as she stared up at me with the palest blue eyes I'd ever seen. Drool covered her chin and wet the bib that proclaimed her "Daddy's Angel".

If I didn't pay attention to her, she'd grunt and yank on my shirt. If I did, we'd play the smile game. I'd smile. She'd smile. I'd pretend to look away and her smile would disappear and she'd kick her legs until we'd start all over again.

"Hope likes you," Robbie murmured. His words made me feel as if holding her had been some sort of test.

Did I pass?

“She’s sweet.” About that time she tangled her hand in my bangs and jerked hard enough to bring tears to my eyes and caused me to grunt in pain.

So much for sweet.

Robbie untangled her fingers and returned her to her mother for a late afternoon snack. Jessa wasn’t at all shy about breastfeeding in front of the family. I however, excused myself and went for a walk, unable to stop myself from staring. Funny, I’d never thought of boobs having an actual purpose beyond some guy’s playtoy. And I’d never in my life seen a woman nurse a baby. I wasn’t sure that was a twinge of pain or longing I felt in my chest as I stood up with some silly excuse about using the rest room.

Then I ran smack dab into Ty and Betti, locked in a heated embrace on the side porch.

“Don’t mind us, honey, we’re newlyweds,” Betti quipped, coming up for air at the sound of my footsteps.

I tried again not to stare. She was having a boy and had to be about six months pregnant. Betti was no small thing, on the contrary, she was at least three inches taller than me, but about my size. Her dress barely covered her knees and she wore matching pink wedge flip flops with rhinestones. Her toes matched her shoes. *How in the world did she get them polished?*

She was probably one of those women who’d get noticed whether they were skinny or fat. But being overweight and pregnant made her that *much* more noticeable. The swing of her hips when she walked was almost exaggerated and she looked like she had a permanent pout on her face, though she tended to laugh quite a bit. Betti probably would have bought a pair of thongs for every day of the week, pregnant or no.

HH had always decked me out in muted and somber solids as long as I allowed her to dress me--which was far too long--and Betti was the antithesis of everything my mother had pounded into my head. She was even more daunting than Tim, and I couldn't seem to work up much to say to her. Amazing how she seemed to get along so well with Jessa and Toni, despite the drastic difference between all three women.

The couple moved around to the front porch and with a sigh, I stepped down into the yard and sat in the covered swing, letting my mind drift. What would Betti say if a bookstore clerk approached her to recommend the latest best-selling diet book? From what I could tell, Betti probably would have laughed and told them to fuck off.

"What'cha doin'?" Rowdy crossed the yard and sat beside me on the swing, draping an arm across my shoulder.

"Trying not to watch them neck," I muttered, distracted by his nearness. He leaned against me for a better view and laughed. "Taking notes, are ya?"

I frowned and wrinkled my nose. "No!"

"Now who the hell, besides family, is gonna see them out here?"

"But still." I waved a hand in their direction. They stood forehead to forehead, his hands on her belly, hers at his waist. "I don't know, she just..."

"Just what?"

"She's...so--" I waved my hand again, struggling for the right word. "*Noticeable.*"

"Noticeable?" he asked quietly, a touch of surprise in his voice.

"Blatant," I clarified with a frown, suddenly wishing I'd kept my mouth

shut.

"Blatantly what? She's in love with her husband."

"Big women shouldn't dress and act like that. And she's pregnant to boot. My God, they should get a room," I added as their intimate pose became something hotter.

The heat of the day had left me cranky, but it was more than heat bothering me. I refused to look too closely at the green-eyed monster planted on my shoulder as all my mother's strict teachings about propriety came home to roost.

"So what do you think of Jessa?"

I'd just danced all over Rowdy's extremely protective toes. "She's fine." But it was too late. I shrugged, praying he'd let it go. "She's alright."

He stood and yanked me to my feet, a scowl on his face. "You are a snob, Jade Skye Ballard!"

"I...I...I--"

"You see that woman over there, standing on that porch, making out with her husband?"

I gave a little nod, my stomach suddenly knotted with dread. "Uh-huh."

"She's loved him since the sixth grade and I can't even begin to tell you how much he deserves her," he hissed. "How happy she's made him. Nine months ago she miscarried their firstborn."

I bit my lip and winced at the word *miscarriage*. *How awful*. Robbie turned me so I could see the rest of the family sitting at the extra-long picnic tables eating homemade ice cream and chatting. "Jessa, that you think is *alright*, she's just happy to be alive after she got her ass dragged around a rodeo arena. Her left knee is fake and she's got a steel rod in her leg," he hissed angrily.

I winced, but couldn't stop myself from asking, "What about Toni?"

"Reunited with her sixteen-year-old daughter earlier this year. Thanks to Tim.... And Delaney?"

The tall, slender redhead with long curly hair and dark blue eyes. We'd sat and talked about college and anthropology. I didn't want to hear this, but nodded anyway.

"She's sweet, she's smart, she treats my niece like her baby sister. And she's not Maggie's! She lost her own mother to leukemia just over a year ago."

I blinked back hot tears, unable to look at him. Instead I focused on the field to my right where some young horses romped. Mr. and Mrs. Boudreaux didn't act like an old married couple. They sure didn't act like my parents and I tried to imagine my mother's reaction if Daddy came home and announced he had another child. Desert Storm would pale in comparison. "So Delaney is only Mr. Boudreaux's daughter?" I choked out.

"That's right, she's Jerrod's *love child*."

I winced at the sarcasm in his voice.

"I'd better take you home now before your mother finds out the type of company you've been keeping."

"Robbie, I—"

"My name's Rowdy."

12. THE ANGRY AMERICAN

Rowdy barely kept his tongue between his teeth on the twenty minute drive back to Jade's place. By the time he came to a screeching halt beside her mailbox his jaw ached.

She climbed out and stood there for a minute or two, fiddling with the sunglasses in her hand while Rowdy sat hunched over the steering wheel, drumming his fingers on the dash and waiting for her to shut the door.

“Robbie...Rowdy, I’m sorry,” she whispered shakily. “I didn’t—”

“So am I.” He didn’t want to hear whatever she had to say. She was complicated, high-maintenance and a snob to boot. His initial impression of Jade had been correct.

Skye, the fun loving, down-to-earth girl he’d fallen for was nowhere to be seen. Didn’t exist. Had been a figment of his imagination. Just as he’d suspected all along.

And he didn’t need *Jade's* kind of trouble. His grip on the steering wheel tightened and his jaw clenched again.

She gave a little nod, ducked her head and slammed the door. He hadn’t missed the tears in her eyes, but he gritted his teeth and watched her go. The gentleman in him wouldn’t allow him to leave until she stepped inside and closed the door behind her. Then he gunned it, weaving his way down smooth cement

streets and escaped her tidy, little cookie cutter community.

If she couldn't accept Betti, who was the sweetest, most loyal woman in the word, she'd *never* accept him.

Not if she knew the truth.

Rowdy spent the rest of the afternoon working in his yard, just staying busy so he didn't think too hard about Skye or his error in judgement. Dressed in nothing but an old pair of cut-offs, he cut, pruned and bagged, despite the intense heat. He felt as if a drop of water would sizzle on his bare back, it was so unbearably hot.

The sprinkler was walking a slow path around the back yard when Tim showed up. Rowdy sat on the back porch sipping a beer, strumming his old six-string guitar--the one he'd learned to play on--and contemplating a long and very cold shower.

"Was wondering where the hell you ran off to. Thought maybe you and Miss Cutie Pie found something better to do."

"Miss Cutie Pie?" Rowdy stopped picking out notes and scowled at Tim.

"Yeah, okay, whatever." Tim disappeared inside the house and returned with a cold beer in his hands.

"She's a snob," Rowdy snarled, frowning at his freshly cut grass for no reason. "If she thinks Betti's blatant, what the hell would she say about my sister, the felon?" he reasoned out loud. "I just don't need the headache."

"Blatant...huh."

They sat in silence for awhile and, from inside the house, Montgomery Gentry sang about a cold one coming on.

"Have you written Charlene?" Tim quietly asked from beside him.

"Huh? What does that have to do with Jade?" Talk about taking a day from bad to shitty.

"You said Jade wouldn't understand about Charlene, and Charlene said she hadn't heard from you."

"I just don't see the point."

"She's your *sister*. *That's* the point."

"All she does is preach!" Rowdy thought of the fistfuls of letters he continually found all over the house.

"You could at least humor her. It's not like she has a lot to do in there, Rowdy. If that's what keeps her spirits up, then more power to her."

Rowdy shook his head and sipped his beer, unable to understand Tim's defense of Charlene. "I'm swearing off women, and that includes my sister."

Rowdy could feel Tim's eyes boring into him but didn't turn his head or bother to elaborate.

"The day Rowdy Yates swears off women is the day I *know* something's not right with you, man. I saw the way Jade looked at you today. And I saw the look on her face when she was playing with Hope. Better yet, I saw the look on *your* face when she was playing with Hope and talking to the girls."

"Slumming. She just wanted to see how us down home folk lived."

"Boy!" Tim growled. "You obviously ain't in the mood for company, so I'll leave you be." Tim gave him an easy punch in the arm and stood up. "If you feel like talkin', you know where to find me."

"Her mom's a judge!" Rowdy looked up at Tim, trying to figure out how to get his point across.

"So."

He tried again. "Her dad's a professor!"

"Again, so. What's your point?" Tim shrugged and Rowdy blew out a long slow breath, struggling to figure out how to get his point across.

"My dad was a drunk and a wife-beater. He died in the hospital where I put him." Rowdy poked himself in the chest for emphasis. "It didn't matter so much when I thought Skye was just...normal, ya know. When I thought she was like me and she might understand. But her family...her sister's a lawyer and her brother's graduates from college this year. And her mom...*you saw her!* Skye spent her birthday at a country club!"

"So lemme get this straight." Tim leaned against the rail, still frowning. "Just because she comes from a nice family, you don't wanna date her?"

Rowdy paused. Put in such simple terms, it did seem stupid but this wasn't simple. "You're missing the point!"

"Which is?"

"My sister's a felon; her sister's a lawyer!" he practically shouted. *Was it that hard to understand?*

"So now who's the snob?"

After Tim left, Rowdy sat outside, grumbling into his quickly warming beer. Finally he dragged himself into the house, got a fresh beer and a couple of sandwiches. Plate and drink in hand, he wandered into his office and flipped on the computer, trying not to think about last night's chicken salad picnic with Skye. Or making love to her after he'd come in from the bar and she'd been all warm and sweet.

He scanned the onslaught of e-mail with a frown. Before he could change

his mind, he sent an e-mail to the CagleFans list owner and unsubscribed.

#

By Monday night Rowdy was completely fed up with his own company but wasn't in the mood for family. Or nagging. Not after his last talk with Tim and he sure didn't need Toni on his back too.

It was enchilada night down at Carmen's Hacienda, a local Mexican restaurant, and he was sure to find some company there.

He ended up eating dinner with Pauline Kelso and her cousin Tiffany who was visiting from Houston. With their nearly identical blonde hair and tanned, slender bodies the girls could have passed for sisters rather than cousins. He and Pauline had gone to their senior prom together.

Over beer and his second plate of enchiladas, he agreed to go back to Pauline's place and hang out a while.

Thirty minutes later he found himself sitting on her couch sipping a longneck. The window AC unit worked overtime and left the air freezing cold and slightly damp. Like being in a meat locker. Every footstep anywhere in the house reverberated up the walls of the single-wide trailer.

The girls had spent their day at the community pool attached to the trailer park and had fresh tan lines to prove it. Rowdy found himself coerced into rubbing lotion on Tiffany's sunburned back. He had a beer in one hand, his other hand up the back of her skimpy yellow top and Pauline wedged up tight against his other side, scratching his back.

They were cute, and he was a man. Rowdy was sporting a minor hard on. Life didn't get much better than this, did it?

They sat for a while, reminiscing and telling tall tales about their high

school days and all the trouble they'd gotten into.

"Remember when we nearly got caught screwing in the front seat of your pickup truck?" Pauline asked in the middle of a fit of the giggles.

Rowdy nodded and joined in. "It was the only truck in the student parking lot with fogged up windows." At Tiffany's puzzled frown he added, "At lunch."

Rowdy had passed his normal two-beer limit at dinner and was well into his fifth by the time the sun set. By the time Tiffany disappeared into a back bedroom to fight on the phone with her boyfriend, he and Pauline had moved to the faded living room carpet. She sat with her back against the couch and Rowdy sat across from her, his back propped against the black entertainment center.

Pauline tucked her knees up under her and stretched her oversized NASCAR t-shirt over them. "Remember prom?"

He ducked his head and snorted with laughter. "Yeah," he drawled. They'd gotten drunk and snuck into the hotel pool with three other couples. Skinny dipping and more plain craziness he was happy not to remember.

"You wore that tux jacket and those starched, sharp creased Wranglers with a black Stetson, and you looked good enough to eat." She shifted her shirt and stretched her long legs out on either side of him, her lower lip caught between her teeth.

Rowdy pointed his longneck bottle at her and grinned. "And as I recall, you did."

She'd given him a blowjob in the parking lot of the posh hotel their prom had been held at. Before the prom.

"I wasn't the only hungry critter out that night." Pauline crossed the foot separating them and pressed her full breasts against his jean-clad knees. She

wrinkled her nose at him and he smiled. The lipstick on her lush lips was long since gone, with only a touch of pink on the outer edges and her heavy eyeliner had smudged a bit under her eyes.

“You wore red satin. Sleeveless,” he murmured, enjoying the buzz that hummed through his blood and the admiration in her eyes. “And no panties.”

Even with most of her makeup gone, Pauline was sexy—blatantly so with her sharp cheekbones and full lips. And while his body responded to the feel of her pressed against his, something he couldn't pinpoint nagged at him.

The trailer shook with Tiffany's footsteps as she entered the kitchen.

“You still eat pussy?” Pauline licked her lips and smiled at him.

He chuckled but before he could answer, Tiffany spoke up from the kitchen. “My God, Paulie.”

Rowdy watched her cross the tiny kitchen, her tiny breasts jiggling under her yellow tank top and her pert, sharp nipples at attention. Well, tiny compared to Jade. *Where had that come from?*

“Out here talkin' 'bout eatin' pussy.” Tiffany frowned, but there was no doubt she wasn't really scolding her cousin. She just didn't want to be left out of the fun. She squatted down beside Rowdy and gave Pauline a little shove. “Slut.”

Rowdy wasn't stupid. He knew exactly what they both wanted and he was tempted. He was a free man after all. Right?

But how to avoid ending up in the middle of a catfight?

“So what did Julio want?” Pauline asked, narrowing her eyes at her cousin.

“We broke up. He's too controlling.” Tiffany leaned against Rowdy's arm and rested one manicured hand on his shoulder. “So, Rowdy, are you controlling?”

He smiled down at her, fully aware of Pauline still leaning against his legs. "Only if you ask nice."

"I bet you'd never tell your girl to come home in the middle of her vacation." Tiffany gave him a flirty little smile and squeezed his shoulder.

"Never." They locked eyes and he watched her study his face. She leaned over and kissed him. There was nothing subtle about her tongue in his mouth. It was a blatant invitation to fuck, and blood rushed to his cock.

Tiffany pushed him down on the carpet, and he relaxed and just let it happen. She tasted like beer. Once upon a time that wouldn't have bothered him, but now, something about it left him gasping for air.

He could feel hands at the waist of his jeans but they weren't hers.

Pauline. Rubbing his erection through the worn denim, then her fingers working the button-fly open. Rowdy had every man's fantasy at his fingertips, literally.

He knew he could have 'em both. He'd grown up with girls like Pauline. Small town survival of the fittest. Girls who used their bodies as bartering tools to snare a husband because that's what their mother had done, and they'd never been raised to expect more from life. At the same time, sex was as much a recreational sport as football and they knew the rules of fooling around. Who would and who wouldn't commit to something longer than one night.

So they were a little easy. So what. Girls like Pauline and Tiffany were all he'd ever known. They were his kind of girls. Weren't they?

About that time Tiffany jammed her tongue in his ear and Pauline got her hand down his jeans.

Rowdy looked up at the trailer's water-stained ceiling, suddenly queasy,

and struggled to push both women off of him. He couldn't do this.

He tried to blame it on the enchiladas and beer but knew better. Up until six months ago, a situation like this wouldn't have bothered him. But now he was filled with the same unsettling feeling he got whenever he'd been about to cheat on Skye. The same twist in his gut that had forced him to give up his Wife-For-A-Night routine.

"I can't do this," he panted harshly, pushing at Tiffany again. She finally released her grip on his ear and sat up, yanking off her tank top to reveal a set of breasts he would have taken great pleasure in enjoying six months or a year ago. He gulped in stale cold air. Then Tiffany leaned in to kiss him again, and he gently pushed her away, shaking his head and struggling to sit up.

"If you want us one at a time, I'll go wait in the bedroom," Tiffany offered with a little smile.

Her offer struck him as slightly pathetic and he winced, then stumbled to his feet and re-buttoned his jeans. Rowdy blew out a harsh breath, ran his hands through his hair and looked down at the two women at his feet.

Lucky for him, they looked more puzzled than angry. "I-I'm sorry, ladies," he apologized, retrieving his ball cap from the coffee table. His car keys and cell phone sat tucked inside it.

"You're just gonna leave us here like this?" Pauline demanded, her arms crossed beneath her unfettered breasts. He'd never even realized she took her shirt off. There was something slightly unappealing about her breasts with their little white untanned triangles.

"We have needs, too, you know," Tiffany added.

With one more apology, he quickly kissed them both goodbye and ducked

out the door. He wasn't fast enough to miss Tiffany's parting shot, but he kept moving. "I thought you said he'd put out?"

Ouch!

He knew better than to drive after all that beer which meant he had at least a one mile walk home. Hopefully the girls wouldn't be so pissed they'd do something to his truck before he could come pick it up in the morning.

And if his luck held, by the time he got home, he'd be relatively sober. Sober enough to shower with lots of hot water and not drown himself like he deserved.

He felt dissatisfied and edgy, despite all the beer. The girls had left him with a restless craving for something he couldn't identify.

Once upon a time he wouldn't have thought twice about what had almost happened, he would have just done it and enjoyed the hell out of himself. But it wasn't once upon a time anymore, and he had a lot to figure out. Rowdy secured his ballcap on his head and started walking.

13. BIG GIRLS DON'T

I dragged myself into the house, praying all the while Robbie would have a change of heart, maybe come sit and talk with me a while. But there was no mistaking the sound of his old Bronco driving away.

I trudged upstairs, unconsciously heading for my office and my computer and collapsed in the chair.

Rowdy wouldn't be playing at the dancehall tonight, but there'd be no afternoon chat. He'd probably be at home cussing me, not looking to talk to me. I couldn't believe how badly I'd blown it. Of course his loyalty to his family would run deeper than any feelings he might have for me. All he felt for me was lust, but even that was in doubt.

Maybe I'd just been convenient. Maybe I'd just been a complete idiot.

I stared at my computer, not even excited at the prospect of being online or catching up on e-mail. What had once been my only source of fun, of socialization, was now my arch nemesis.

The Joker, but I sure wasn't Catwoman.

#

There was no getting out of work the next morning. Unable to sleep in, I'd gotten up, skipped my early-morning mail check and Pilates in favor of a trip to the donut store on my way to the office. By seven I was at my desk working on last week's reports. That's how Danny Ramirez, my boss, found me two hours later.

“How was your birthday?” Danny gave me his customary mega-watt smile as he snatched a chocolate glazed donut from the box and settled in on a corner of my desk, completely uncaring of whether he got icing on his crisp white shirt. Danny reminded me of the actor from “Law and Order”, Benjamin Bratt.

I set aside some invoices and work orders and leaned back in my chair. Early on in our relationship, my good-looking, gregarious supervisor had intimidated me. A married, father of four and devoted to his wife, he was a first class flirt but completely harmless, and I’d quickly warmed to him.

“The birthday from hell.” I curled my lip for emphasis.

“Oh, now, surely turning thirty wasn’t that bad. You’ve just hit your prime.” He took two more bites of his donut and waited for an answer.

I pushed in the drawer that held my keyboard and sighed. “Being dead seems a happy alternative at this point, Danny.”

“Your mamacita on you again?” He smiled down at me and sipped his coffee, then popped the last of the donut in his mouth and licked the chocolate off his fingers.

“Her, and my entire life going to shit.”

“What life? You don’t have a life, Jade. You need to find yourself a nice man and have babies. Quit dreaming after him.”

My heart skipped a beat and I frowned up at Danny in shock. For a minute I thought he’d meant Robbie, then he picked up the framed, autographed, publicity photo of Chris Cagle that sat on my desk and shook it at me. It had come with my fan club membership.

I snatched the photo out of his hands and gently set the picture frame on the other side of my computer monitor, though all my enthusiasm for him and every

other man on the planet had gone retrograde.

“Aren’t you on a diet?” I quirked an eyebrow at him, then threw a stack of finished invoices in the “completed” basket and it slid against Danny’s hip.

“Shhhh,” he said with a wink.

“I got to get out and check on my accounts.” I shut down my computer, stood and handed him my report and the box containing four donuts. I’d only eaten one.

#

Tuesday passed much the same as Monday night, in bed. The list didn’t interest me, Chris Cagle didn’t interest me. I’d missed ticket sales for Dallas and Houston. I couldn’t get it in gear enough to care about tickets for San Antonio. And I damned sure didn’t want to read all those gushy happy e-mails.

Getting out of bed required too much effort, so I curled up with the pillow that still smelled like Robbie and watched chick movies.

By the end of the day I had indigestion and had cried along with so many scared, battered, ex-wife-of-psychopaths and Mafia kingpins I needed a bottle of Midol to pull me out of my slump. Or put me completely out of my misery. Now I remember why I hated chick movies.

I stopped for donuts again Wednesday morning and found myself flicking bits of glaze off my blouse or out of my car while making the rounds. Nerves had me eating, despite the fact I knew better. I couldn’t ignore my final stop of the day.

The Bluebonnet Dancehall.

By the time I pulled in the parking lot not long after lunch I was hot, sweaty, sticky and cranky.

But thank Heaven for small favors. Rowdy's Bronco wasn't, in the lot only Toni's old GTO and Susie's Explorer were. My stomach quaking with dread, I took one last sip of my Sprite, grabbed up my organizer and climbed out of the car. By the time I covered the twenty or so feet to the front door, my skin felt like it was on fire.

Just inside the door I stopped and jammed my sunglasses on top of my head, letting a blast of cool air wash over me.

"Well, hi there, Jade." I recognized Susie Boudreaux's voice even if I couldn't quite focus on her yet. "What a miserably hot day it is."

"Afternoon, Susie. Miserably hot would be an understatement." I blinked a few times to clear my vision and headed toward her.

Toni stood behind the bar with an extra cool smile on her face. "Hi there."

I set my organizer on the bar and pulled out the fliers with our latest sales and promos and slid them toward Susie.

They knew.

Despite my nerve-induced upset stomach, it was business as usual. She took them and tapped her fingers on the slick paper, even as Toni leaned forward. "So what's this I hear you're a snob?"

Blarh! All I could do was blink.

"I thought you liked Rowdy," Susie chimed in before I found an answer.

"You two had so much fun at the barbecue!"

"I don't think I've *ever* seen him so smitten, and I've known him since he was a sprout."

"And Tim says he's never brought a woman around before."

I felt like a ping pong ball listening to them go back and forth. The more

they talked, the more my head spun and my stomach protested. “My mom--”

“That uppity bitch who came in here with you the other night?” Toni scowled. “All she needs is a broom!”

“The one who thinks you and Rowdy are engaged?” Susie asked.

“Yeah, she’s—” I sighed, then forced myself to spit it out, “--got very rigid ideas of what’s proper and acceptable--especially for someone my size. That’s how she raised me. That’s no excuse for saying something rude about Betti, and I deserved his anger but—”

“In this case, mother *doesn’t* know best.” Toni grabbed a glass and furiously filled it with ice before slamming the cover to the ice bin. She poured lemonade from the cooler on the opposite side of the bar and returned to set it in front of me.

“Thank you,” I whispered, then drained half of it. “And yes, I know she’s bitch. She said I picked Robbie on purpose--to annoy her.”

“Did you?” Susie asked from her spot beside me.

“No,” I whispered, unable to stop the tears that filled my eyes. I missed him. His sarcasm, his wit, his flirtiness, his kisses, his body beside mine in bed. “There was no picking involved. We just sort of...happened. And now he hates me.”

“What *exactly* did you say about Bettina?” Toni cocked an eyebrow, her lips set in a grim line, and I winced.

“I said she was blatant.”

Susie’s peal of laughter startled me. Even Toni chuckled. “She may be blatant, honey, but what you see as blatant, I see as the perfect match for my nephew. With Ty, still waters run deep and a quiet woman wouldn’t have drawn

him out like Betti has. He adores her because she's his exact opposite."

"Susie's right." Toni pursed her lips again, propping her elbows in the shiny laminate bartop. "So what are you going to do about Rowdy?"

"I miss him," I whispered, eyes on the polished bartop.

"If you want him back, you're going to have to fight for him, Sweetie," Susie said.

Bring me my horse and a suit of armor.

In all my thirty years I've never had to fight for a man. I've never even been in a catfight! And I wasn't a game player and didn't understand people who were. "I don't know how."

"Fight was a bit of a strong word. What about woo?" Susie arched an eyebrow.

I shook my head. "I've never had to woo anyone, either. I've never chased a man and, until I met Robbie on the internet, I've never even been very good at flirting."

Via e-mail I'd been able to be the me I wanted. Not the tongue-tied woman who could barely string two words together around men like Rowdy and Tim. Men who obviously knew their way around women and could write a How To book about it. I wasn't a total Man-Loser, but I tended to avoid men like them.

I sipped my lemonade and looked from one woman to the other. "Will you help me?"

"What are you doing Monday night?" Toni asked.

I shrugged. I'd sworn off anymore chick movies before I ended up in therapy.

"We have *Toenail Night*."

“Pedicures?”

“We all get together at each other’s house and do our toenails,” Susie explained. “This week it’s at Betti’s”

“I do my toenails.” I frowned at both women, waiting for enlightenment.

“I think what Toni’s saying is you could come and get some flirting tips and advice on Rowdy. It’s not just about toenails; it’s the modern day equivalent to a quilting bee.”

“Okay, so what do I do in the meantime?”

“In the meantime, you’re going to The Blue Moon,” Susie ordered. “Toni, hand me the phone.”

What the hell was a blue moon? While Susie stepped toward the stage with the phone glued to her ear, Toni explained. “The Blue Moon is a hair salon and Betti owns it.”

I’m sure my shock at her suggestion to send me to the woman I’d insulted showed plainly on my face. “Relax--” she waved a dismissive hand, “--Betti’s too damned happy to hold a grudge.”

Susie returned a few minutes later, a huge smile on her face. “She says come on in.”

“B-but...but...I don’t know.” I frowned, still unsure about letting the flamboyant Betti do my hair--I didn’t have much hair to lose.

“If there’s one thing Betti knows—besides how to swing her hips and make my nephew smile—it’s female beautification. She has it down to an art form.”

###

Susie's directions in hand, I took off for The Blue Moon. I'd expected a little hole-in-the-wall shop, not the very tasteful looking salon on the corner of an upscale shopping center I pulled up in front of. To my surprise, the parking lot didn't hold a car worth less than thirty grand. Most far above that.

With a grimace, I killed the engine. Rowdy was right. I was a snob.

I popped a couple of Tums and climbed out, mentally preparing myself as I crossed the parking lot. Letting Betti mess with my hair after the not-so-nice things I'd said still didn't seem like the brightest thing I'd ever done. It ranked right up there with not trying on a bra before I bought it.

To my further amazement, the salon wasn't near as flamboyant as Betti, but the receptionist, a petite slender woman sporting the most astonishing blonde and pale pink hair, passed her by a mile. *Don't stare at the hair.*

"May I help you?"

I returned her smile while trying to take in my very posh surroundings. The mosaic floor. The midnight blue velvet couches and chairs and coordinating two-tone blue walls. Soothing new age music and the hum of blow dryers teased my ears.

Somewhere nearby, a door closed and I heard footsteps. "I'm here to see—"

I motioned to Betti who appeared behind Pinky, dressed in navy leggings and a turquoise paisley blouse. "Hey, Jade!"

"This is amazing." I felt very guilty and humble all the sudden. She might be flamboyant but she was obviously also successful. Not exactly what I'd expected from a young rancher's wife.

"I know." Smiling, she came around the desk and hugged me. I reciprocated, worried about just how much Susie had said to her and afraid I'd lose my balance after bumping into her oversized belly.

She led the way down the wide hall to a private room, pushed me down in a chair and chatted a million miles an hour, but never mentioned Saturday.

I have no clue what I ended up agreeing to, but I ended up with a glass of wine in my hand while Betti highlighted—lowlighted?—my hair. Then Cassi, Betti's best friend and resident nail technician, gave me a manicure and half a pedicure before our early dinner arrived. Just Chinese food and female bonding.

#

"Are you going to eat your eggroll?" Betti asked from the high back leather chair where she sat. We'd congregated in her office to eat.

"Might as well give it up. She'll bug you till you do or hell freezes over," Cassi said from her spot beside me on the old velvet couch.

I handed my eggroll over with a grin and watched as Betti dipped it in duck sauce, then devoured it in three bites.

"So, Jade needs to learn how to catch a man."

I paused, a bite of Pork Lo Mein halfway to my mouth, and nodded, embarrassed to have my personal failings so casually thrown out there. "Uh-huh."

"Get up and walk for me," Betti said, suddenly all business.

I set down my styrofoam dish and stood up. "Walk?"

"Yeah, just walk." She leaned back in her chair and made circular motions with her fork.

I walked around the little coffee table and strolled the length of the office a time or two. And waited. I felt as if I were auditioning for a play.

“Don’t slouch. Slouching says you have no confidence. That you don’t believe in yourself. If you don’t believe in you, no one else will, Sugar.”

I paused to look at her, took a deep breath and straightened my shoulders. Walking couldn’t be that hard. After all, I’d done it almost my entire life. I tried again. “Much better.” Betti smiled as I pulled even with her desk. “Now swing your hips. Tell everyone who wonders that you are a woman, and damned proud of it!”

I stared at the carpet, trying to recall the afternoon Rowdy had spent in my house, trying to remember how I’d felt that evening on the Riverwalk. “I need high heels.”

“No you don’t. Look at me.” Betti held her bare feet out in front of her before she stood up and wrapped her arm around my waist. We walked together, back and forth while Cassi watched. I felt like I was in an episode of “The Monkeys” and ended up with a fit of the giggles. When I told them why, Cassi and Betti got tickled, too.

“Alright, alright. Out in the hallway for a few more practice runs, then we do something with those eyebrows.” Betti led me out of the office, Cassi on our heels.

Wearing my flimsy pedicure flip flops, I paraded up and down the blue watercolor floor while Betti watched and nodded, a grin on her face. Cassi and Tara aka Pinky watched from the front desk and the occasional stylist stuck his or her head out their door to see what was going on.

Betti finally gave me a thumbs up and led me to the shampoo bowl, where she sat me down and ripped off half my eyebrows. Some things I just hadn’t missed in the last three years.

After she was done and my tears had dried, she led me back into her office and plopped down in her desk chair. "That was for calling me noticeable."

"I'm sorry," I muttered, settling on the couch with one last sniff.

She nodded and smiled. "We're even. Don't sweat it. Life's tough; you gotta be tough too, okay?"

"Thanks."

"I have an assignment for you, but first I'm gonna introduce you to *Betti's Cardinal Rules of Womanhood*. If you find yourself breaking the majority of these for some man, marry him. You won't regret it." She winked, and I got the distinct feeling she spoke from experience.

"First off, don't ever sleep with a boy from Bluebonnet. Have you already broken that rule, Jade?" She smirked.

I just grinned and nodded.

"Good, so did I. Second, third and fourth: *Be Discreet, Keep It Light and Have Fun*. Did you break any of these three rules?"

I thought about it for a minute. "No, not really. Maybe a little."

She nodded. "Alright. Rule Five: *Women in Love Do Stupid Things*. It's a fact of life. Have you broken this one?"

This time I gave in to my laughter. "I'm here, aren't I?"

She clamped her lips shut and looked at me. "Don't change yourself for him. Don't *just* change yourself for him. Okay?"

I nodded.

"This isn't just to help you change for him, this is to help you realize your full potential as one of the most powerful creatures on the planet. A woman. Got it?"

I nodded again, humbled at her words. She was right. All day the only thing that had run through my mind was Robbie.

"Because in the long run, it makes you a better person. A *stronger* person. Even if things don't work out between you two." She nodded. "Be true to yourself. That's not one of my rules, but it should be."

"I have to do this for me." Not Rowdy. And not while thinking of what my mother would say at Betti's outrageous rules. I doubted HH had ever done anything stupid except, of course, for the name thing. But then, who was I to talk. I'd spent my whole life trying to please everyone but myself and look what it got me.

With Robbie I'd always been myself, my real self--at least by e-mail. I'd sassed, and flirted, and told raunchy jokes and bitched and moaned and cussed about a bad day at work. If I could just push more of the real me out there, maybe I'd stand a chance.

"Next up, *Be Prepared*. For anything. Did you two use protection?"

"I get the shots. Birth control shots."

"That's not what I asked," she replied in a sing-song voice.

"No," I said, my cheeks burning.

"That's not like Rowdy at all. He *has* been bit. Alright, next: *If You Can't Go To His Place, For God's Sake Don't Let Him Sleep In Your Bed*. You don't want some drunken fool passing out and not be able to get rid of him."

"Rowdy's not a drunken fool." I frowned, wrinkling my nose.

"Quit thinking in terms of *just Rowdy*! These are rules *for life*!"

I blew out a heavy breath in frustration, but nodded. Even if being the real me didn't get Rowdy back, maybe the real me wasn't so bad. He seemed to have

liked her.

“Eight: *Never Beg, Whine Or In Any Way Cling*. Never let ‘em see ya sweat. Got it?”

“Duly noted. Should I write these down?” I added, worried I’d never remember them all.

“No, Sugar, you need to *memorize* them,” she instructed with eyebrows raised. “Did you break rule seven or eight?”

“Just seven.”

“Good girl! Okay nine: *Don’t Nag*. It’s a woman’s divine, *God given* right to be a bitch any time you feel it’s necessary, but don’t nag. State your case and move on.”

“What’s next?”

“Ten: *Don’t Ever Ask A Question You Don’t Know The Answer To.*”

“I thought that was just for lawyers.” I frowned. I knew more about lawyers than I wanted to.

“No, it applies to women, too. Next up is one of my most important rules.”

“Hmm?”

“*Your Best Girlfriend’s Worth Her Weight In Ice Cream.*” She winked at me and I smiled back. “And if Rowdy Yates is what you want, I’ll help you, but if you hurt him, you’ll bring every woman in the family down on you. Especially Susie.” She tucked a leg up under her and massaged her belly.

“Why especially Susie?” I waited on an answer, my eyes on a little lump poking out from her protruding stomach.

“Do you know the answer to that?” she snapped, raising her chin a notch.

Oops. “No.”

“Then why did you ask?”

“How can I learn anything if I don’t ask?”

“You got me there,” she said with an sheepish grin. “But it always matters. Rowdy and Susie used to be lovers.” That bombshell was accompanied by more raised eyebrows. Suddenly, the Lo Mein I’d eaten sat like a lead ball in my stomach and I couldn’t catch my breath. “Rowdy thinks no one knows.” She came over to the couch and sat beside me.

“She’s...old,” I whispered, my mind reeling. Now I knew the value of rule number ten. “She’s almost old enough to be his mother!”

“What do you know about Rowdy?”

“He. Uh, he.” I swallowed and tried to reboot my brain. “He’s a sweet talker. He tries to not act serious and he likes to flirt.”

“What else? Why?”

I hate oral exams. I sat quietly, wracking my brains for the key. “Women. He told my mother that he was protective of his girls.” My frown turned into a smile of triumph. “That’s it, isn’t it?”

She nodded and gently rubbed her belly. “They have always been close, according to Ty. Rowdy’s discreet, but he was a bit hurt when Susie broke it off, and it showed.”

“How did you find out?”

“I bribed it out of him after Susie’s boyfriend was here for Hope’s christening.”

“So, Rowdy likes older women.”

Betti chuckled and shook her head. “Rowdy likes *women*, period. Old, young, big, small, cute, ugly. You don’t even know what you’ve gotten hold of.”

I shook my head, still stuck on Rowdy sleeping with Susie Boudreaux. Though she was attractive. And easy going. Generous. Warm hearted. Affectionate. I blew out a deep breath. So why was I surprised?

“Rowdy just loves women. For what’s on the inside. He don’t care about any of that other stuff, not really, even if he has a bit of a past.”

“Besides Susie?” I asked with dread.

“He’s been around the block a few times. He’s a typical man and likes women. He’s no saint, but none of us are.”

And not once had Rowdy made any comments about my size, weight or appearance. The fact he hadn’t noticed or at least commented on it had mystified me but, if what Betti said was true, then it made sense. “Next.”

She sighed. “Doesn’t really apply in this case but *Never Mix Business With Pleasure*.”

I snorted. “You mean like being Rowdy’s ex-lover’s liquor sales rep?”

“Oh my Gawd!” She pushed her hair off her forehead and leaned against the couch cushions, giggling. “I think I need to hear the whole story from the source, not second-hand,” she said after she recovered.

So I explained how Robbie and Rowdy were the same man. And how we’d spent months flirting and getting to know one another. And how we didn’t know we knew one another. “You know, my brother, Nicky said I was lucky. That not many people get the chance to know someone without having preconceived notions to color their perspective. Guess I should have paid more attention when we had that little talk.”

“Preconceived notions how?”

“Well you know, like me ‘cause I’m fat or—“

“What does being overweight have to do with anything?”

I shrugged. “People think things, you know.”

“You mean like because you’re overweight you must be lazy, otherwise you’d be thin.”

“In a nutshell, yeah,” I replied with a sigh.

“Fuck what everyone else thinks! When all’s said and done what they think won’t keep you warm at night. And being thin isn’t gonna make you happy if you don’t change what’s on the inside.”

“I know that.”

“Do you?” She shifted to face me, tucking a leg under her.

“I wasn’t always this size,” I muttered, swallowing the lump in my throat. I slumped lower into the couch, trying to figure out just where the hell I’d taken that wrong turn on the highway of life.

Seven. With a snort of laughter I leaned back and propped my feet on the coffee table. I was at a friend’s seventh birthday party and HH refused me ice cream. My cheeks were too round, she’d said.

“Did your mother ever make you take ballet?” I hated ballet and never rose above mediocre. Unlike swimming and skiing, which I excelled at. Those, however, weren’t refined.

“My mother was a drunk.”

Ouch! I felt like the lowest, pettiest life-form as I sat there staring at her, shocked at her frankness. “I must seem like a complete brat, sitting here whining about my mean old mommy who forced me to take piano and—“ sniff, “—ballroom dancing.”

With a loud, long snort, she said, “Everybody’s got baggage; it’s all in how

you pack it, Jade.”

I still felt petty. I'd dieted constantly with and without HH's supervision despite the fact that physically there had been nothing wrong with my size ten build. But against my petite, size four mother and sister I looked like the Jolly Pale Giant. “Was it hard?”

She shrugged and crossed her legs. “In a way. I think I made it hard on myself. In Bluebonnet everyone knows everyone's business and everyone has their place.”

“What happened?”

“I got tired of dirty old men leering at me and going, ‘You're Polly Blanchard's girl, aint' cha?’” She rolled her eyes and let loose another snort, and I joined in, completely tickled.

“You had a mother you couldn't live down and I had one I couldn't live up to.”

Grinning, she quirked an eyebrow and pointed one long pink fingernail me as if to say ‘You got it!’. “Tell me.”

With a sigh, I shook my head while trying to imagine what it must have been like for her growing up. While I'd been forced to learn flower arranging. “It's not important.”

“It is to you, though. Get it out of your system--once and for all.”

I nodded in understanding while trying to figure out where to start. “That dress you had on Saturday would have given my mother a stroke.”

She winked and grinned. “My sister bought it for me. I can see if she can find one like it--but not maternity.”

“I used to be a size ten!” I shook my head, still trying to figure out where

to start. "Even that wasn't small enough. Gawd, if I had a quarter for every time she said '*You are a reflection of me!*' I could retire to a private island." My size attracted enough attention--don't attract the wrong kind. *What the fuck ever, Mom.* "If I had a quarter for every time I heard, 'You have such a pretty face,' I could hire a dozen cabana boys to wait on me hand and foot for life."

"Maybe having a drunk for a mother wasn't so bad after all," Betti said, giggling.

Now it was my turn to snort. I continued with a laugh, trying to put into words what I'd never even told Rowdy--or anyone else. Amazing how painless it was. "You know, I couldn't be some newly discovered form of nutcase, just a plain old by-the-book people-pleaser."

Just then the door opened, letting in the momentary whine of a blowdryer as Cassi joined us.

"Is it gossip-time?" She grinned, tossing her long, eggplant colored hair from side to side before plopping down on the coffee table and holding out a basket of nail polish. "Choose. You can talk while I do your toes."

I reached in and without hesitating picked out a Candy Apple Red and handed it to her.

"Nice," Betti murmured.

"Continue." Cassi waved a hand, then pulled two sets of toe wedges from the basket and worked them between my toes she'd prepped earlier.

"Go on," Betti coaxed.

I watched Cassi polish, her dark head bent over my toes and suddenly I couldn't shut up. "About five years ago--I can't believe it's been that long--I applied for grad school in New Mexico," I sighed, "I didn't tell anyone until I'd

been accepted. Two weeks later she introduced me to Allan.”

“Who’s Allan?” Cassi asked, never missing a beat.

“My ex-fiancé. He’s a lawyer.” She looked up at me and we curled our lips at each other then giggled.

“It was like something out of a gangster movie. I knew I’d been set up. I guess I’m just dumb about men. But my mom gushed all over him.” I made a bad medicine face at Betti.

“And,” Cassi coaxed.

“He waved a three karat diamond in my face and I said yes.” Despite the fact that I’d been reduced to faking orgasms, my inner child caved. “*Mom’s approval trumped good sex.*”

“Nothing *trumps* good sex!” Betti announced. “Next rule: *Good Sex Is Important!* I think that’s even in the Constitution.”

I quirked an eyebrow at her while trying not to laugh. Heaven help me if I messed Cassi up.

“It should be illegal to have bad sex,” Cassi added, snickering. “So then what happened?”

“I figured so what if he’s a little boring...and kind of...*very* arrogant. He used to give the *worst* compliments: ‘I’ll love her even after she has kids and needs liposuction.’”

“Deni, she works in room two down the hall--” Betti quirked an eyebrow at me, “--she knows people.”

I snorted then got so tickled at Betti, who got so tickled, Cassi had to stop. I knew exactly what kind of people Betti was referring to. The kind who would break Allan’s kneecaps for cheap.

“The best one was when Emerald and I beat him at tennis: ‘Sweetheart, you have great legs but maybe tennis skirts just aren’t your thing.’ Asshole. He was mean and I just let him get away with it. I’m not sure what makes me madder; how he could be so casual about it or that I let him.” I got the giggles again at what I knew was coming. “I mean, I had plenty of opportunities to take jabs at his failings in bed--but I didn’t.”

Poor Betti ended up needing an emergency bathroom break. On her way back she stopped at the refrigerator by the door and pulled out three bottles of water, tossing me one. “Alright, alright, what happened next?”

“I became Cinderella and she became the Fairy Godmother From Hell. She planned my wedding...right down to the cut of my panties.”

“You should have given her wine not water,” Cassi teased.

“I was nearly as big as the Cinderella in the Macy’s Parade in that dress--I swear to Gawd! It was the biggest, *ugliest*, dress I ever saw.” White satin with yards of tulle, a six foot train. “So help me, if I ever got the chance to do it again, I’d do it right--*and elope!*”

Cassi and I high-fived each other.

“Of course, when he stood me up at the alter—“

“Uh-uhhhhhh!” Cassi looked up at me wide-eyed and mouth hanging open, her hand poised above my foot.

I nodded, looking down in time to see a big red splotch of polish land on my toe and run. “Toe!” I pointed, nodding vigorously as Betti made to stand up. *Uh-huh!*

“Where you going?” I asked as Cassi cleaned up her mess.

“To get Deni!”

“Oh, sit down. He got his!”

“I hope he got the clap.” She sank back down and propped her feet on the table next to mine.

“Ya’ll keep it up and I’ll never get her toes finished.”

“He ran off with a stripper from his bachelor party.” I giggled, recalling how Harv, Allan’s best man and a completely nitwit, had held up his cell phone and shouted across the church that my groom was on his way to St. Kitts. “That stupid dress saved me from a nasty fall.” I nodded eyes wide.

“You passed out?” Betti asked.

“Cold!”

“Did he get the clap?” Cassi asked, blowing on my toes.

“Divorced! And she took half of everything.”

“There is a God.” She grinned and winked at me.

“And I gained weight.”

“Well honey, pack it up.” Betti lightly punched my arm. “You’re done. You survived and lived to tell the tale.”

“And you can laugh at his sorry loser ass,” Cassi added.

“You’re right, I did and I can.” I smiled over Betti and she smiled back.

“After all, I can lose weight, he can’t get back half his assets. Serves him right for thinking with his dick,” I snickered.

Betti patted my shoulder. “Now, if only you can survive the last of Cassi Girl’s pedicure.”

“Watch it, woman.”

“Alright, alright! Since I never finished my rules, I’m gonna skip to the most important one, just in case no one’s ever clued you in,” she said, suddenly all

business. *“Love Doesn’t Equal Happiness.* And let me add, marriage is hard work. Ty and I work real hard at it. We’re a lot alike on the inside but really different in how we deal with the world.”

I swallowed hard and nodded, Robbie’s words about Betti and Ty losing their first child replaying themselves in my head.

She sighed, her serious expression clearing. “Okay, this last one’s nearly as important. Ready?”

I nodded.

“Never—Ever—Say The “L” Word During Sex.”

Cassi giggled but never looked up as she finished putting polish on my last toe.

The lecture continued. We covered everything from lipstick to lingerie to high heels.

Every woman needed a black bra, no matter how big her boobs. By the time I left my hair was fluffy and swingy and had an actual style for the first time in three years. She’d trimmed the back, given me some height in the crown but the front was still chin length and swung in chunky layers every time I turned my head, which I did frequently to admire the eggplant colored highlights she’d applied.

I had strict orders to spend Thursday morning at the mall shopping for said black bra and matching panties and a sexy top. She’d given me the name of a store that carried larger sizes—Leather and Lace. And orders to practice my walking and appear at the dancehall Thursday night in my new gear, high heels and the woo-woo red lipstick I’d bought before my birthday date with Rowdy.

I was on a mission.

14. BIG GIRLS DO

Rowdy hated the mall--would rather have been covered in honey and laid out over an ant pile--but he promised Susie he'd go pick up her birthday present for Rene, and gotten up early to beat the crowds.

The party was Saturday, Susie had orders being delivered and couldn't leave the bar. He'd tried to get her to swap with him, saying he'd take care of her orders, but she'd been adamant, he needed to pick up Rene's charm bracelet from the jeweler. They'd called, it was ready and she didn't want to wait until the last minute. She'd been pretty wound up, rambling on and on about all the stuff she had to get done by Saturday.

He'd finally given in just to calm her down.

Parking at the wrong end of the mall only added to his frustrations. He scowled at the huge, nearly unreadable map inside the mall's doors and kept walking toward a coffee shop. Damn maps weren't meant for normal humans to read.

Cup of coffee in hand, he trudged to the other end of the mall and up the escalator, only to end up lost again. Susie owed him big-time for this. He found the right hallway, and his pace slowed as he passed a chain lingerie store. Leather and Lace's intriguing display of latex and leather undergarments brought the first smile of the day to his face.

Then a woman shopping caught his eye. She held up two very pretty black bras. Something about her tickled his memory and he paused to watch as she held up first one bra then the other. The first was all lace; the second smooth black satin. Both would contrast nicely with her pale skin. Hung on a rack in front of her was a sheer black blouse.

To his disappointment, she set the lacy bra down. Only to brush her hair out of her face and retrieve it but the damage was done. He'd gotten a good look at the short, curvy brunette with her creamy pale skin.

Jade. Her hair was different. And she was shopping for lingerie. Obviously, she'd moved forward, but so had he.

Hadn't he?

Monday night's fiasco with Pauline and Tiffany had only firmed up his decision to swear off women. At least until he figured out what the hell he was doing. Now he could literally feel himself wavering.

Rowdy couldn't resist. He stepped in the store, thankful they didn't have a doorbell, and moved toward a sale rack in the front corner. A mannequin decked out in black lace sat on top of the next rack, providing cover as he skimmed through bustieres—with and without cups—in everything from rhinestone studded velour to pink satin and a wide selection of thongs. A white lace one made him look twice, but his ultimate goal was watching Jade shop, and his height gave him a big advantage. She approached the counter with both bras, as well as the black shirt and talked to the clerk, a short, very buxom blonde.

The clerk, complete with studded, red dog collar and leather vest, pointed to a shelf behind her. Shoes. A pair of strappy black heels. Jade disappeared from view, then reappeared, sauntering between the counter and the middle aisle.

He stood, white lace panties in hand, and stared as she walked back and forth, obviously enjoying the shoes from the occasional giggle and the smile on her face. She disappeared from view again, then popped back up, setting the high heeled sandals on the counter.

He didn't care.

Scowling, Rowdy hung up the tiny white thong and slipped out of the store before she spotted him. He didn't care why she was buying black lace or who she was buying it for. He stalked across the wide hall to the jewelry store a few doors down from the lingerie store and finished his errand, tapping his foot impatiently as the elderly female clerk gift wrapped it for him.

#

By the time Rowdy reached the dancehall at six that evening, his day had gone from bad to worse. Nothing specific, and nothing he could put his finger on, but he refused to give Jade credit for ruining his day. Another letter from Reverend Sister Charlene pushed him from irritated to downright irate by the time he walked in. Then in the middle of warming up, Jessa decided to coddle him.

"You alright, hon?"

He stopped playing long enough to count to ten before answering. "Fine," he growled.

Lucky for him the dancehall was nearly empty but for a few hardcore regulars who always liked to get an early start on their drinking, the waitresses, and a group of women from Betti's hair salon.

7:30, a quarter of the way into the first set, he heard a ruckus from the direction of Betti's table and watched in shock as Betti, Cassi and Tara stood and hugged Jade like a long lost sister.

Jade in her sheer black blouse. Well, it was black; he assumed she was wearing the same one she'd been looking at earlier today. He was so distracted, wondering what bra she'd decided to wear, he forgot he was supposed to be singing backup. Thank God this wasn't one of the rare occasions he played lead guitar.

As the song ended and they prepared to play the next tune, Jessa snapped her fingers to catch his attention. He frowned over at her, then at Zack and finally Ty who shrugged from behind his drums, a questioning look on his face. "What?" Rowdy demanded.

Jessa motioned him near and he met her halfway between their mikes. "Do you need a break already?"

"I'm just having an off night. Is that okay? Aren't I entitled?"

She reached up and gently squeezed his arm. "Of course, hon. This just isn't like you. I was a little worried. I see your lady friend showed up," she added with a smile.

"She's not my friend," he snapped.

"Oh!" Her dark eyebrows rose to disappear under her bangs. "Well, I guess that's a good thing...considering that tall drink of water hittin' on her, huh?" She patted his arm even as he whirled around to see some dime-store cowboy leaning over Jade. If it had been later in the evening and not still so light in the bar, he never would have been able to see the tall, slick looking wanna-be lean over and whisper in her ear. And rest his hand on her shoulder.

Jessa greeted the crowd but before she could get any further, Rowdy spoke up. "*Hillbilly Shoes*. Bo Foster, you here?"

Bo shouted from the back of the bar while Jessa glared at him. She kept on

with her banter until Bo joined them and had tuned his fiddle, then they played the raucous country song, sung by Rowdy.

When they were done, Jessa started up again. "Ya'll know what? I think I'm gonna let the guys run the show tonight. I'll be back in a while, ya'll try not to tear the place up, okay."

Great, he'd pissed all over Jessa's Post Toasties.

"What's up next, boss?" Zack asked as Jessa stepped off the stage. Rowdy frowned at Zack who waved a hand as if to say "speak up." He was in an ornery mood. "Trying to Survive."

After he finished singing about how to get through when the one you want doesn't want you, Ty spoke up. "My turn. This is kinda fun."

They did a couple of Travis Tritt numbers which made Betti and her friends whoop and holler a bit. Rowdy couldn't stop himself. He had to look. Jade's cowboy companion was gone, but worse yet, Jessa now sat beside her.

Zack and Bo went back and forth for a while, doing everything from Tim McGraw to Asleep at the Wheel. Rowdy finally relaxed a bit and enjoyed playing just for the sake of playing. Which made taking a break that much harder. Zack and Ty took off for their wives, Bo disappeared into the crowd and Rowdy headed for the bar.

He was sipping a beer and watching Toni work when someone tapped on his shoulder. Jade. He stood there staring at Toni who quirked an eyebrow at him. *Should he turn around?*

"I'd like to talk to you," Jade shouted to be heard over the music.

Rowdy tipped his bottle at Toni and forced himself to turn around. Black satin. And her lips were *really* red. His eyes had immediately gone to her chest

before drifting up to her face. He felt the first prickles of sweat under his arms as his eyes drifted downward again, taking in the hands on her hips, the snug red pants and black high-heeled sandals. The sheer blouse that showed off her generous chest. “So talk.”

“I’m sorry.”

“Fine. Apology accepted.”

“What?” she shouted with a frown.

It wasn’t *that* loud in the bar. “I said, fine!”

“I can’t hear you!” She pointed to her ear for emphasis, her lips twitching in a tiny smile.

Fine, he’d play along. Rowdy took her elbow in a firm grip and started toward the beer garden doors. But no matter how much he tugged, she refused to move any faster than somewhere between a walk and a sashay, a smile curving her kiss-me red lips.

A group of partying tourists stood cluttering up the doorway to the beer garden, including the wanna-be who’d been talking to Jade earlier.

“Hey, Jade.” The sound of him greeting Jade was worse than nails down a chalkboard.

“Hi, Pete.” And her greeting, dripping Texas charm, was lighter fluid on Rowdy’s temper.

Rowdy turned in time to watch her flutter her fingers at “Pete,” and gave her elbow a little hurry-up tug. She sashayed a few more steps until she was even with Rowdy, then smiled up at him. He kissed her. Right there in front of Pete the Happy Tourist, he jerked her to him and forced her mouth open beneath his. She reciprocated, teasing his tongue and knocking his hat off as she ran her fingers

through his hair.

He didn't care.

He'd be damned if he'd spend the evening watching some other man flirt with her. After he'd marked her, only an idiot would come near her. Or a tourist. *Damnit!*

"I said, I forgive you." He wiped his mouth, scooped up his hat and walked back inside, trying to ignore the painful tightening in his jeans. As far as he was concerned, break was over. He sat up on stage tuning his old Gibson until the guys came back, then tore into "Hell Yeah" by Montgomery Gentry, another redneck-n-roll party song.

God had blessed him with twenty-twenty eyesight. He watched Jade walk back to the table and rejoin Betti, Jessa and the girls. She calmly reapplied her lipstick and commenced to sing along.

Apparently Pete the Happy Tourist was an idiot. Rowdy watched as he tapped her on the shoulder. Stupid man. Rowdy's temper kicked up another notch as Jade's escort led her to the floor. He'd forgotten Jade could dance. She could dance a jitterbug. In high heels. Zack tried to do a slow song and Rowdy nixed it cold. No way was he gonna watch her cuddle up to some stranger. Then Jessa came back, and they ended up doing something slow anyway. Jade could slow dance, too.

He was shit out of luck.

He'd always prided himself on his easygoing nature and even temper but by the time he took his second break, Rowdy was near to blowing a gasket. Betti and her friends were getting ready to leave when he sat down on the bench beside Jade. "I wanna talk to you."

Jade leaned over until her chest was pressed against his arm. “About what?”

He didn't buy that wide-eyed innocent smile for a minute. But she left him stewing while she hopped up to hug and kiss the four women goodbye. She sat back down and he leaned closer; his eyebrow twitched at the feel of her hand on his thigh as she leaned against him again, a smile on her pretty face. “What did you want to discuss?”

Another inch or so and...he gave in. Leaned forward until their lips just barely touched. One hand cupped the back of her head while his tongue traced her I-Dare-You red lips. They tasted sweet and he couldn't hold back a low moan, thankful no one would hear him over the sound of Conway Twitty. Before Rowdy could slip his tongue past her lips, she leaned back, both slender dark eyebrows arched. “For someone who wants to talk, you do an awful lot of kissin'.”

“I can't hear you,” he shouted, pointing at his ear. Two could play this game.

Her pursed lips curved into a smile as she stood up, her breasts passing mere inches from his lips. She motioned behind her with her thumb before leaning over. “Guess we better go outside then.”

He stood and guided her through the crowded bar toward the beer garden doors. The sway of her hips under his fingers made him itch to land a smack on her round ass. Instead he gave her a squeeze and pulled her closer as they stepped outside into the warm night air, escorted by the sounds of Stevie Ray Vaughn.

The sun was now long gone and orange Chinese lanterns lit the way as he led her toward one of the huge oaks in a remote corner. Hopefully it'd be unoccupied.

“So what did you have to say?”

He wracked his brains for a reason to have dragged her outside. Any reason that didn't involve the truth: *he couldn't get her off his mind*. “You still owe me--”

“--the horse thing.” She smiled, all businesslike, and stood waiting for him to continue.

“Yeah, the horse thing. Rene's birthday is Saturday and I was thinking—”

“That would be perfect,” she gushed. “I'd love to come to Rene's birthday party! And afterward, we can...the horsy thing.” She gave him another smile, this one edged in confidence. “If you want.”

“I'm game.” *What the hell was he doing?*

#

3:12 AM: Rowdy hit his front door, glad his long and sexually frustrating night was over. *How the hell had he ended up with a date for Rene's birthday party?* God, Jade would probably wear the black lace bra and a white see-through shirt just to torment him. He booted up the computer, showered and collapsed in his office chair, to wound to sleep. Then nearly ruined his keyboard with a mouthful of Sprite at the sight of two e-mails from Skyebaby aka Jade.

The first was their once long-dead “Kissing” e-mail that had bounced back and forth between them for nearly two months.

Just wanted to say, you're not all talk and no action. You've refined French kissing to an artform.

His barely cooled blood began to simmer as he clicked on the next one. It had only “Saturday” as the subject line. She'd probably chickened out and wanted to cancel now that they'd set an actual time for the event to take place.

Dear Robbie...I know you like to be called Rowdy but I'm a bit stuck on Robbie so forgive me, sweetheart. I'm trying. Just wanted to say I'm really looking forward to Saturday night and was wondering if you're reciprocate. I know you don't owe me anything but...while we're busy living out fantasies...I hope you'll help with mine. I realize I was a bit vague when I told you I wanted to have a sexual encounter in public but I think I can be more specific now, so how about killing two birds with one stone Saturday night?

The beer garden has lots of lovely little dark corners. No one will see us but the thrill of possibly getting caught will still be there. We don't have to have sex—since we'll be doing that later—you could just get me off. I'll even wear a short skirt to make things easy for you. Or would something loose be easier, yet? I'm not very good at planning these things, but the idea just struck me after being outside with you tonight.

I kept hoping you'd kiss me again but you didn't. All the way home I thought about how dark and secluded it was out there and how you could do just about anything, and, well, I had to come home and use my shower massage<g>. Maybe next time, I'll kiss you instead. ;-)

XOXOXOX

Jade

Holy smokes! She'd gone home and masturbated. Gotten off thinking about having sex with him in the beer garden! Ah, God! There was no doubt in his mind they could get away with having full-blown sex in the beer garden but...what was he thinking?

He was thinking how getting her off would only whet her appetite for more, later, on the horse. He sipped his soda, typed replies to Jade and went to take a cold shower.

15. THIS GIRL DOES

All that smiling, acting sexy and flirting was hard work but I'd never in my life enjoyed anything more than I'd enjoyed teasing Rowdy on Thursday night.

I woke up late Friday and ended up extending my deepest apologies to my first client—and a ten percent discount on their order. By the time my day ended, my eyes were crossing with exhaustion. I briefly contemplated going by the dancehall tonight just to tease him some more, but my body had other plans.

Instead I ran by La Madeline for a chicken Caesar salad and one of their fabulous desserts, then headed home. After a long, hot shower, I settled in at the computer with my dinner, anxious, excited and dreading to see whether he'd responded to my sexy e-mails.

The teasing and flirting Thursday night had been Betti's idea but the e-mails were all mine. In an e-mail I could say anything I wanted and damn the consequences. If he didn't respond, I could dismiss it as some sort of internet snafu and go about my business. But I didn't doubt for a minute he wouldn't—he knew what that shower massager was for.

After all, e-mail was what initially brought us together, so it only stood to reason they could help bring us *back* together.

He'd responded to "Kissing." I shoved a forkful of salad in my mouth and clicked on the e-mail.

Jade...you're no slouch in the kissing department yourself, darlin.

I snickered at the computer screen and fired off a one-line reply.

Wait until you see what else I can do with my lips.

Next came the one with “Saturday” in the subject line. No matter how hard I tried, I still couldn’t get a handle on how exactly we’d have sex on a horse. And Googling “Sex on a Horse” was out of the question.

Jade...It'd be my pleasure to get you off in the beer garden. And yours too.

A smiley face with it’s tongue sticking out accompanied that thought.

It'll be a great appetizer for the horse “thing” as you like to call it. Wear a thong, or better yet, no panties and a loose skirt, if you have one.

I read the e-mail again while fanning myself. *Muh Gawd, I need a cold shower.* Instead I trotted back downstairs for my dessert--Strawberry Napoleon. Whipped cream, strawberries, paper thin, flaky pastry layers and a thick layer of icing on top. Almost as good as sex. *Almost.*

And I certainly needed it after that e-mail. I chipped off a bit of the icing from the top and typed a reply to the second email.

The thought of going panty-less left me squirming in my chair. Sleeping without them was one thing but going out in public sans panties was another. I needed a distraction.

No, I needed Rowdy in my bed.

Barring that, I dug into my dessert and scanned the rest of my mail. One with “URGENT” in the subject line, caught my eye and Cagln-Chrys was listed as the sender. Chrystine. I sighed and clicked on it.

Woman ... where have you been? Are you still alive?

My God, you two go on one date and you both fall off the face of the earth. Shy left the list! Did you elope? Did you hate each other on sight? How did it go with your family for your birthday...Hello!

Remember me? Your friend, you slut wannabe! Did you get tickets for Dallas or Houston or were you too busy imitating a rabbit on fertility drugs? Caglehugs!

Chrys

Yes, I had forgotten to buy concert tickets. Which just went to show how far gone my brain was.

I'd lived and breathed Chris Cagle for nearly three years and, thanks to a cookie, my life had spun so far out of control I'd forgotten to buy concert tickets. For that matter, I couldn't remember when either show was--or the San Antonio show, other than some time in November. Hell, I wasn't even sure what day of the week it was.

Then I giggled at the thought of rabbits on fertility drugs and clicked on 'reply.' The least I could do was give her the very condensed version of the Rowdy Wars. Afterward I skimmed the rest to catch up, carried my trash downstairs and called it an early night.

I needed my beauty sleep for tomorrow.

###

The smell of coffee woke me. With a grin, I hauled myself out of bed and hustled downstairs for a latte sized cup and some peanut butter and jelly toast, settling in at the computer with my breakfast. I had a lot to do today but first, I wanted to see how Rowdy had reacted to my kissing e-mail. I smiled and sipped

my coffee as the computer finished booting up.

I'll admit it. I like giving head. For a girl who's mom had her gynecologist tell her about periods, for a girl who's mom never even mentioned the "S" word—ever--oral sex was forbidden fruit. Just downright naughty.

It wasn't the taste, or even the action but the *reaction*. *Power is the biggest aphrodisiac in the world*. And giving a man head, making him moan and beg, turning him on and driving him insane was by far the biggest power trip I knew of.

I burst out laughing at his reply.

And wait till you see what I can do with mine.

Onward and downward to the next installment of "Saturday."

No panties are fine. Preferred even. Don't feel like you have to shop for a thong. As to special requests, something black and lacy up top would be nice.

And another smiley face sticking his tongue out. I giggled into my cup.

I've got condoms covered and I'm sorry about last time. Totally unplanned, but you're the only woman I never used them with--if that helps.

Black and lacy meant I'd have to dig through my closet and see what I could scrounge up. I couldn't wear the same blouse two days in a row and another shopping trip was out!

I groaned at the sight of Chrystine's reply, but opened it anyway.

Oh Muh Gawd! You Huz! You slept with Shy? How was it? Was he big? Was he good? You know I want details, girl.

Well, apparently, shortly after your date, he left the list. Genevieve

was asking why, said she even emailed him but never got a response.

And OMG on the mom. What a bitch! Grrr but laughing at you taking her off your Christmas Card list.

I'm sure someone has an extra ticket for Dallas, if you want to go.

Let me know and we'll make sure you get it! I'd love to have you come up and stay with me! ☺

Caglehugs

Chrys

With a sigh, I set down my cup and typed off a quick reply. I'd take the ticket, since I had no idea what I was doing that weekend, but the details I fed her on Robbie were skimpy at best. She'd have to be satisfied because I wasn't up to two hundred other women finding out the gory details of my sex life, and the list could give Peyton Place a run for it's money.

I spent all afternoon getting ready for my "date" with Rowdy but didn't leave the house until late. I'd called Betti who suggested a couple of places to pick up a gift card for Rene but said she was too tired to go out another night. At Betti's advanced stage of pregnancy, I didn't blame her.

But I'd never walked into a bar myself. I quickly reminded myself it wasn't just a bar but a dancehall. People brought their kids. I knew the owner, at least half the waitresses and the head bartender.

I kept telling myself that as I pulled in the nearly full parking lot at eight straight up. *I'd be fine.*

The prude in me had insisted I not leave the house without panties. Mothers—all of them—always harped on "clean panties in case of a car wreck" and, knowing my luck, the one time I'd choose to go without, would be the one

time I had a wreck.

I could just see the headlines: “*Jaws of Life Discover Pantiless Woman*” or “*Judge’s Daughter Dies In Ten Car Pileup. Pantiless Corpse Cut from Wreckage: Film at Eleven.*” I snorted with laughter as I backed in between a huge black Chevy truck and Rowdy’s Bronco.

Her Haughtiness would never live that down.

Praying no one walked by, I sat in my car, the windows up and wriggled out of my panties. I’d dug a red bandana-print skirt out of the back of my closet and paired it with a nice red blouse. The skirt had an elastic waist and zigzag bottom with some of the points almost reaching my ankles, and the shirt was a conservative contrast to the black lace bra underneath. With a grin, I stuffed the matching panties in my purse. They might come in handy later.

Inside, I joined Delaney and the rest of the Boudreauxs at Susie’s insistence. Even Rene was nice, though still a little on the sharp side.

“What are you doing here?” she asked, accepting the envelope with the gift card I’d picked up from Bath and Body Works.

“Rene!” Tim snapped. “Lay off or I’ll make you give your present back.”

“Sorry,” she replied with a frown.

I just squeezed her shoulder and smiled at her before settling in on the other side of Delaney.

Unlike the previous night when Pete wouldn’t quit hitting on me, no one bothered me tonight, thank goodness. I’d enjoyed dancing and flirting with him but he wasn’t my style at all. Though he had come in handy for making Rowdy jealous.

On the band’s first break, Rowdy disappeared into the crowd only to tickle

my neck a few minutes later, startling the bejesus out of me.

Showtime.

At least the surprised jump I gave helped me hide my case of nerves. I took a long, slow breath and flexed my nerve-stiff fingers under the table, then tilted my head back and gave him my most confident smile. “Hi.”

He set his beer beside my Lemon Drop and leaned over to rumble a greeting in my ear before catching Rene up in a hug. Or rather, getting tackled by her. Her display of affection was interrupted by a cute boy with freckles, dark hair and braces who dragged her off to the gameroom.

I stood with a smile at his quirked eyebrow and let him lead me through the crowded bar. I got a lot of appraising looks and more than one woman stared daggers at me, including an almost matched set of blondes who looked as if they'd seen better days. If looks could kill, I'd be full of lethal blades.

But Rowdy treated me like a lady. Despite his rough, good-ole-boy exterior, his manners were absolutely flawless. He never let go of my arm, always introduced me to his friends and in return I clung to his side, doing my best to be affectionate and outgoing. My favorite was Bo, a lanky young man with chestnut hair and a perpetual blush on his face who played fiddle like he'd been born with one in his hands.

We stepped outside, and a shiver of anticipation ran up my spine as he draped his arm over my shoulder. My heart pounded, my breathing was ragged and I was already embarrassingly wet with excitement. From inside the bar drifted the sounds of country balladeer, Mark Wills.

Before we'd taken more than four steps, Rowdy spun me around and kissed me in full view of anyone willing to watch. His tongue teased mine and I gave in,

responding and wrapping my arms around his neck. *Take that, catty girls!* I'd be the one on the back of a horse with him tonight, not them.

Oh God, what had I signed on for?

He broke the kiss and peered down at me, his fingers brushing my bangs out of my eyes. "What did Betti do to your hair?"

"Does it really matter right now?" I gave Rowdy a flirty smile as someone walked by and slapped him on the shoulder.

He shouted a greeting, then focused back on me, his hands skimming from my shoulders to low on my hips. He stopped short of grabbing my ass and I bit my lip against the urge to beg for more.

"Ready?" His grin was pure mischief.

"Very." I gave up any and all pretense at *Cool Chick Flirting* as Rowdy led me to the back of the beer garden, to a corner far away from highway traffic or people traffic—or so I hoped. Knowing there were people nearby was titillating but getting caught just wasn't part of my plans. "How do we do this?"

"They're playing a slow song." He swayed against me and unbuttoned three buttons on my blouse, spreading it wide. My nipples hardened and tingled at the sudden exposure to fresh air and the feel of Rowdy's fingertips brushing across them. I swayed with him, catching my lip between my teeth.

"Rest your head on my chest," he ordered softly, shifting us so he was between me and anyone who might surprise us. I had a huge oak tree at my back.

I rested my chin on his chest, my hands on either side. His fingers continued to squeeze and roll my nipples, applying more pressure as he went. My knees shook. I moaned softly and bit my lip, my belly quivering and I resisted the urge to squirm against the ache between my thighs. I caught my breath at one

especially hard pinch I felt all the way to my clit. One hand never stopped but his other hand slipped down and grabbed up handfuls of skirt.

“You skipped the panties,” he husked, his hands skimming my bare bottom.

“They’re in my purse,” I said with a soft laugh. Then sucked in a deep breath and dug my fingers into his chest at his probing fingers. I ducked my head and let out a long soft moan.

He hushed me and continued gently kneading my outer lips, making me squirm even more. We swayed slowly to the faint sounds of some unidentifiable song, and as he spread my lips and found my clitoris, my knees nearly buckled.

“Turn around,” he ordered softly.

I did, leaned my head back against his chest and wriggled against the hands that cupped my ass.

“Prop your leg on the bench.”

I grabbed onto his arms so I didn’t lose my balance and followed his instruction. His hand was in my bra. His lips were on my neck and I rested my weight against him, trying desperately not to scream as he adjusted his fingers and stroked me from behind. I didn’t care if we got caught, I didn’t care if the whole town watched. I wanted him.

“Come on, Skye.”

“I’m trying.”

“Open your eyes.” He freed one nipple from the confining lace and pinched it for emphasis. “Feel good? Talk to me. Tell me—”

“I wanna bend over and ...”

He chuckled in my ear. “Not now, but in a while you’ll get the chance to bend over, baby. On the back of that horse. Then all we have to do is hang on.

The horse does all the work for us. Like that?" He stroked and teased, and pinched and played while he talked.

"Uh-huh. Uh-huh." I rode his fingers harder, excited at the thought of his cock in me again.

On a horse, almost naked under the big yellow moon overhead. All the sudden my world came to a screeching halt and reversed itself. Where once I'd ridden his fingers fast, now I wanted to slow down and savor the experience, the orgasm rippling through me, his fingers pinching my nipple, the thumb teasing my ass, his lips on my neck, the soft tickle of his moustache.

Instead, he released my breast and grabbed my hair, forcing my head back so he could kiss me. If he hadn't, I would have ended up face first against the tree. That would have certainly gotten us an audience. His lips sealed off the scream in the back of my throat, and as his fingers slowed, so did his mouth. From deep and almost painful to soft and gentle as he slid his fingers from inside me and planted tiny baby kisses from one corner of my lips to the other.

"Don't move," he whispered. I sagged against him, jumpy and gasping for air. I heard a soft rustling, then felt him wiping away the excess moisture.

"You think of everything."

"I try," he said with a tiny grin.

I giggled as he helped me get settled on the bench before walking over to a nearby trash barrel and getting rid of the evidence. I could have curled up in a ball and gone to sleep, I was so relaxed. I rested one arm on the back of the bench and laid my head on my arm.

"You want to sit?"

"I can't," he replied, eyebrows raised. I glanced down and giggled again at

the evidence of his hard-on encased in denim.

“Closing time’s a long way off.” I reached forward and rubbed the palm of my hand against his erection.

He grunted and backed away with a smile, blowing out a heavy breath.

“Yes it is, and I see ice water in my future.”

“I could always return the favor on your next break.”

He leaned over, resting one knee on the bench and kissed me. “Lemme think about it. I don’t want that horseback ride to last three seconds but...”

“I understand.”

He handed me another napkin. “Fix your lipstick, Skye baby. It’s a little smeared.”

Rowdy declined my offer of a blowjob on his second break. Instead, we danced. He beat Pete the tourist all to hell, too. By the time he went back for the last set, I was hot and sweaty and felt absolutely wicked after twirling around the dance floor with no panties on.

#

I’d thought by nearly three in the morning I’d be too tired for another round with Rowdy, but I was wrong. The hours since our tryst in the beer garden, the kisses and the slow dances we’d shared had been nothing more than hours and hours of foreplay.

The dancehall’s parking lot was empty but for Susie’s Explorer and a few of the waitress’ cars. We stopped in front of my Cougar and Rowdy tugged me close for another long leisurely kiss that left me hot and tingly.

“We’ll drop your car at my house then head for the ranch,” he murmured

against my lips.

“I’ll follow you.”

He held the car door for me and shut it after I climbed in. I was tired, but wide awake and very aware of what I was about to do. I parked in Robbie’s driveway and climbed in his Bronco sitting at the curb. He exited the house a few minutes later dressed in a dark t-shirt and sweats, carrying a quilt.

“Protection?” I asked as he slid behind the wheel.

“I’m armed, honey, don’t worry.”

I giggled and snapped my seatbelt on. We drove back toward the bar in easy silence, then to my surprise, drove right by the ranch entrance a few minutes later. “Uh...” I pointed over my shoulder.

“There’s a back door. Up for a midnight stroll?”

“Sure?” But I wasn’t sure and neither were the butterflies in my stomach. A few hundred yards past the ranch we pulled onto a dirt road. Rowdy killed the lights and drove by the light of an almost full moon until we were out of sight of the county road. He pulled into the driveway of a burned out shell of a house and parked, killing the engine. The view was downright spooky. “Where are we?”

“Tim’s parent’s house. The field back there holds most of his herd,” he said, pointing across the road at the moonlit field behind us. “Since it’s summer, he doesn’t stable most of them at night.”

“Oh. How, uh...how are we gonna do this?”

“Leave it to me.” He grinned, his teeth gleaming dimly in the moonlight. The sudden sound of his door opening and the overhead light coming on startled me. I blinked and smiled but was unable to hide my uneasiness.

“Co’mere,” he whispered, his expression turning serious. I leaned over the

console until our lips touched and I couldn't hold back a sigh as I reached up and ran my fingers through his hair. The fire he'd started earlier in the evening in the dance hall's beer garden suddenly burned hotter.

"Ready?"

"Past," I replied with a nod.

"Come on then." He stopped to retrieve the quilt and met me at the back of the Bronco. "Gimme your arm."

I wrapped my arm in his and we slowly walked across the road. The only sound I could hear was the occasional horse noise, and crickets. Or cicadas. I wasn't sure which. A breeze picked up and blew my hair in my face. I brushed it back and stumbled, cursing my strappy sexy shoes. The tall grasses on the side of the road tickled my bare legs.

"I should have brought you some socks," Rowdy teased as he led me to the fence, a wood affair with four slats that gleamed white in the moonlight. He draped the quilt he'd been carrying across the fence and sighed. "Somehow this isn't near as exciting as I'd thought it would be."

I giggled, glad I wasn't the only one sweating the mind-boggling logistics of how to catch and mount a saddleless horse in the dark. He let out a long low whistle and the horses moved. Some away, some trotted closer to investigate.

Rowdy straddled the fence and reached out to pet one. "This is Eve, come say hello."

I struggled out of my shoes and gingerly climbed on the lowest fence rung, then held my hand out to Eve. "Bible name or sense of humor." I kept my voice low, afraid I'd scare her off.

"Both," he chuckled softly. "Her daughter's name is Delilah. We'd take

her, but she's Tim's prize mare. Eve here is gentle as a lamb and has beautiful manners, don'tcha girl."

She nickered as if to say, "Of course," and eyed me over her shoulder.

I continued to scratch behind her ears while Rowdy hopped the fence and rubbed under her chin. "She's gentle enough she won't get spooked easy, and she has enough sense she won't get us killed if we're...too distracted."

I giggled again, trying to stifle my growing case of nerves.

"Spread the blanket in half and throw it over her back."

I did, praying I didn't lose my balance and end up in the ditch behind me.

"Did you take off your shoes?" He wrapped an arm around Eve's neck and circled around the far side.

"Of course! How do you think I got up here?"

With a chuckle he said, "Now, climb on her backward."

"Huh?" I couldn't resist my own snort of laughter.

"Tuck your skirt up so you don't get tangled and slide on backward.

"You're shittin' me?" I hissed. "No wonder you couldn't get anyone to do this with you."

"Just do it," he hissed back as he grinned up at me.

I tucked my skirt up so that my legs were exposed and gingerly climbed the fence, praying I didn't lose my balance and permanently maim myself. I couldn't resist another snort of self-conscious laughter as I teetered on the third rung. Rowdy stood with his head down and shoulders shaking. "Get on," he urged while Eve whinnied her agreement.

With a sigh, I eyed my target. Eve had a broad back which was good and bad. Stretching my short little leg across from the fence and not falling, hurting

myself or ending up under her hooves in the process had me cringing. Old cartoons of characters sliding around under the belly of a horse while they clung to the saddle flashed through my mind and I struggled with another case of nervous laughter.

“She’s as close to the fence as I can get her, Darlin’ . Now please stop laughing and get on,” he begged.

One more deep breath and a last long look at Eve before I eased myself over the fence, and turned around. With my backside facing hers all I had to do was sit down. Easier said than done—but I got it done! Now I could turn forward or backward.

If that were the hardest thing I did all night, maybe horsy sexy wouldn’t be so bad.

“Thank God!”

I giggled again and grabbed a handful of mane as she shifted beneath me. “I still need to swing my leg over.”

“Sidesaddle is great, now stay put.” Rowdy turned her, climbed the fence and slid on behind me.

“Comfy?” he asked, wrapping his arms around me and clicking his tongue at Eve. Suddenly, Eve began to move and I scrambled to get an arm around Rowdy’s waist though I felt pretty secure with him behind me. I shifted so I could see where we were going and leaned against his broad chest. When we reached the gate separating the pasture from the woods, he leaned down and unlatched it, nearly falling in the process.

“Don’t fall. I don’t feel like taking you to the ER with me wearing no panties,” I hissed, giggling as he maneuvered the gate shut behind us.

"I could just see them cutting off my sweats to find me wearing a condom."

"Oh my God! You already have it on?"

"More amazing, it stayed on after climbing over that damned fence."

We both laughed softly at the visuals we'd painted while he used Eve's mane to guide her into the sparse woods surrounding the pasture. When we fell quiet and all I could hear were the sounds of the night and the rustle of horse's hooves, my nerves returned. "Where, uh--"

"There's a field up ahead." He gave me a reassuring squeeze, his lips pressed to my hair. "When we get there, I'll give Eve her head."

I leaned back against Rowdy, relaxing a bit and enjoying the rhythm of the horse and the solid feel of him against my back until I sank hard against him. He tightened his grip on me as we hit a small incline, and I sighed when we entered the field that glowed silver in the moonlight. Rowdy pulled Eve to a halt beneath a large oak tree and peeled his t-shirt off, hanging it on a branch. "Take your shirt and bra off and I'll hang 'em with mine."

I looked up at him in the moonlight and tried to read his expression. No longer unable to ignore the fact I was about to get very naked in the middle of a pasture. There were no sheet to hide under here.

"It's alright." Rowdy tucked my hair behind one ear and gave me a gentle smile.

He held me in place while I peeled my own shirt off and handed it over. "Could you--" I motioned behind me with my thumb, "--unhook my bra." No way could I reach behind me without falling off.

"In a sec," he growled, cupping one lace-covered DD and squeezing. My nipples, already slightly hard from nerves and excitement puckered, the rough lace

abrading them.

“I thought...”

“I just wanted to admire the view for a few minutes,” he whispered, planting a kiss on my shoulder.

“Oh.” My insides warmed and began to flow like lava as I relaxed against him.

“I like you in black lace.” He brushed a finger just underneath the lacy edge and rubbed his thumb across my oversensitive nipple. His other hand gently massaged my scalp as I tilted my head and smiled at him. His eyes were at half mast and I could feel his erection against my hip. Finally, he unhooked my bra--one handed. I couldn't even do that.

I shimmied out of it and handed it over, grinning at the sight of my black lacy behemoth hanging from a tree branch.

“Ready?”

I took a deep breath and nodded, trying to blow out the last of my reservations and struggling against the urge to cross my arms over my breasts.

“Swing your leg over and face me.”

He held my hands while I did as he instructed, then he gave Eve enough of a nudge to set her to walking. I reached out and grabbed handfuls of his sweat-covered thighs, my face heating in embarrassment as my breasts bounced and swayed, but Rowdy didn't seem to mind. Instead he quietly settled my legs over his. He seemed unusually quiet and serious but I chalked it up to worry over any logistical problems we might have.

The wind picked up, tickling my breasts, my skin. The swaying of the horse began to have a different effect on me. Being exposed, my legs spread wide

where I couldn't possibly close them, excited me. He'd barely touched me but already my nipples were so hard they ached, my thighs were damp and my clit was swollen and tender. I shivered and moaned softly. His thighs flexed and bunched under my fisted hands.

My embarrassment faded as I relaxed my grip on Rowdy's thighs and touched him. I followed the trail of shadows across his stomach to his moonlit chest, my fingertips glancing across his nipples. He shuddered under my hand, his breathing heavy. I leaned forward with a sigh and pressing my lips to the center of his chest, exploring every inch of his pecs, his shoulders, even his neck. He was hot and hard and smooth under my hands; the hairs on his chest tickled my palms.

I felt as if I'd been possessed by the moon as I leaned back a bit, propping my hands on Eve's wide back. My breasts were thrust upward, puckered nipples in full view. My belly clenched and I moaned again and closed my eyes.

I was nearly naked, on the back of a horse and horny.

16. A HORSE, BY ANY OTHER NAME...

Rowdy could barely contain himself when she leaned back and thrust her breasts in the air. Every inch of his skin she'd touched now burned. He sensed the change, felt it deep in his gut and her surge of sexual confidence heated his blood and drew him in.

He liked this side of her.

The horse's rhythm as she ambled across the open pasture made Jade's breasts bounce and her hips undulate beneath her skirt. He ran his hands up her thighs and smiled as she unconsciously tightened her legs draped over his. Goose bumps rose under his fingertips. He massaged her thighs and pushed her skirt higher before he leaned forward and caught one puckered nipple against his tongue and brushed his moustache against the ultra sensitive skin. "You alright?"

"Oh yeah," she said, a faint smile tickling her lips.

Rowdy teased and nibbled her taut, ripe nipples, switching from one to the other, enjoying the feel of them against his tongue and her moans above him. He wanted to lift her up and set her on his cock which was painfully hard inside his sweats. Instead he trailed his fingers up the inside of the thighs, stopping at the very edge of her damp curls and teasing her with a light massage.

"Robbie!"

He bit down hard on the distended nipple in his mouth, his eyes on her

moonlit face.

“Ow,” she squealed and winced.

“What’s my name,” he rasped, lips against her skin.

She seemed to struggle to pull herself back to the present before replying, blinking and taking a few deep breaths. “Rowdy?”

“That’s right. My name is Rowdy Yates and I’m your lover.” As he spoke, he glided one hand across the spread open wetness of her plump lips, barely brushing against her clit with his middle finger. “There is no Robbie anymore, Sweetheart. Okay?”

She let out a loud gasp and nodded vigorously, her thighs clenching up again. With one hand he lifted the damp folds of her skin away from her clitoris. With the other he caressed every silky inch of her, amazed again at how wet she was. He didn’t think she could be any wetter than the aftermath of her dancehall orgasm but she proved him wrong. He slowly slid two fingers inside her and teased her clit with his thumb, smiling at the feel of her fluttering around his fingers and tightening with need, the rocking of her hips.

The thoroughly aroused look on her face was a sight to behold. Eyes closed, head tilted back, breasts heaving, mouth open in an “O” as she panted and intermittently bit her lip. His sac tightened and his cock swelled in response to her obvious enjoyment, her low husky moans and her musky scent.

Then Eve hit enough of an incline to catch his attention and he grabbed onto Jade and checked to make sure they were okay. The movement shifted his fingers inside Skye's silky walls and she clenched his fingers even harder. With a lusty groan, she abandoned her provocative pose and threw her arms around his neck, pulling herself further onto his lap and riding his fingers a little more

aggressively.

He shivered and nuzzled her neck, his cock throbbing painfully at the feel of her teeth nipping his earlobe.

He was through playing. "Ready?"

"Yeah," she wailed.

"Hang on to me."

She tightened her arms around his neck and he freed himself from his sweats.

"Jade, can you hear me?" he ground out from between his teeth. She felt so good pressed up against him he could barely think. "Pay attention."

"I...I am. Hurry!"

"I'm gonna lift you up and you make sure you land in just the right spot. Okay?"

She nodded and reached down with her free hand, wrapping her fingers around his cock. He lifted her enough for her to guide him inside her and let her slide down the length of him with a shiver and a sigh of intense satisfaction that matched hers. Rowdy paused to focus on where they were, assuring himself they were in no imminent danger. Then nudged Eve and smiled as she picked up her pace.

She did all the work.

And he and Jade were in total sync. He kept a firm grip on her so she wouldn't hurt herself and plunge too deep, but her hips rocked against his. Her teeth sank into his shoulder and he grunted, a shiver slicing down his spine. Above him the moon was huge and nearly full. A harvest moon registered somewhere in the back of his sexually numbed brain.

He gasped for air, closed his eyes for a brief moment. He'd never in his life felt anything so incredible. Jade on his lap. Her arms around him, a light breeze cooling the sweat on his back. And the most absolutely perfect rhythm. Her thighs tightened and her fluttering turned into low level ripples, signaling her impending orgasm.

Rowdy couldn't think. All he could do was feel. Her body pressed tight against his, her lips on his shoulder biting and sucking at the tender spot at the base of his neck. The sound of his own harsh breathing, his balls occasionally brushing the quilt only to tighten, and his cock swollen and hot, buried deep inside Skye.

He'd never felt so close to heaven.

"Rowdy," she crooned her voice almost tearful.

"Huh," he gasped.

She pressed her lips to his neck and clutched a handful of his hair. "I'm dying."

"Wanna stop?" *Please God, no.* He was about to have the biggest most intense orgasm of his life. He tightened his grip on her ass, ready to lift her off if she said the word.

"No!"

"Good." He smiled and slid his fingers lower, to the juncture of her thighs, near where they were joined.

"I wanna come," she wailed softly in his ear.

"Can you?"

"I think."

"Whenever you're ready, Skyebaby." He nudged Eve again so she'd pick

up her pace but not so fast she'd break into a trot. He was in no position to pay attention to anything faster than a walk. Otherwise, he'd lose control and kill them both for sure.

The faster pace coupled with her heat nearly pushed him over the edge, and he moaned, a loud ragged sound. "Now?" he ground out from between clenched teeth.

"Oh my God!"

He kneaded the tender nerve filled area between her thighs, unsure how much longer he could hang on. He'd waited for this for hours--days. "Hurry, honey. Come for me, Skye."

"Rowdy," she wailed again. "I can feel it. Oh God."

So could he. The ripple of her mini-orgasms were pushing him closer to the edge. His balls were now painfully tight. He gave Eve another nudge. Jade bucked against him and squealed, almost unseating them both as she found her own rhythm, squeezing his cock and pumping her hips furiously as her orgasm hit her.

That was all he needed.

He let her and the horse do all the work as he came with a long hoarse shout, his head buried in her neck.

Jade's aftershocks and Eve's continued movement nearly drove him insane. He wanted to pull her off the horse and stretch out in the tall grass, using their blanket as a bed but they didn't stop. With another ragged shout he pulled Eve to a stop and turned her. She shifted uncomfortably beneath them at the antics of her two riders.

His harsh breathing filled his ears and he thought his heart would explode

in his chest. They were both slick with sweat and something else. Rowdy could feel the heat of Jade's tears on his chest as he gently lifted her off of him and adjusted his sweats. The reality had surpassed his fantasy but another ride like that just might kill him.

He wrapped an arm around Jade, who sagged against him, then grabbed a handful of mane, kicking Eve into a fast walk. They didn't speak all the way back to the oak tree where they'd left their shirts. He couldn't have spoken even if he'd wanted to. He paused long enough to grab them then guided Eve back to her pasture. Once they reached their destination, he kissed Jade's temple and gave her a firm squeeze before he climbed down. Her quiet worried him, and she looked like a stiff wind could blow her over. "Can you get off?"

She shakily nodded, then stood trembling beside him in the tall grass while he helped her dress and fed Eve some sugar cubes. Even Jade responded enough to give her a long "thank you" scratch along her neck before she whinnied and set off in the direction of her daughter and granddaughter.

Tucking Jade's bra in the pocket of his sweats, Rowdy gently helped her over the fence. He kept a firm grip on her all the way across the road and helped her into her seat, even strapping her seat belt on.

"What happened to the house?" she muttered, finally focusing on him.

Rowdy frowned in confusion at her words, not at all what he'd expected to hear. "Gas explosion," he whispered, pushing her hair back from her face.

"Oh."

"Skye, you okay?" He leaned inside and caught her eye again.

She gave a little shaky laugh and pushed her hair out of her eyes. "That was amazing."

He nodded in reply. It had been beyond amazing. “Why don’t you stay the night at my place?”

He didn’t want her driving home so late, or so he told himself.

#

The drive back to his house was quiet and thankfully short. Once they were inside, he led the way to the bathroom so she could clean up then went to get a t-shirt for her to wear. At the sound of the shower running, he stuck his head in the bathroom door. “Hey!”

She pulled the curtain back and gave him a wide-eyed look of surprise made worse by the dark shadows under her bloodshot eyes. “Sorry, but my legs itched from the grass.”

He smiled and held up the t-shirt, setting it on the counter beside the sink. “Want some company?” She stared at him, her mouth working a bit, and he added, “Just to shower. I’m too damned wiped for round two.” She hesitated a moment longer then nodded and smiled.

“Gimme a minute.” Rowdy stripped, glancing at himself in the mirror. He had two hickeys on his shoulder. He grinned. He hadn’t had one of those since high school.

In the shower they washed each other and played, he teased and kissed her until she seemed to snap out of her daze. They climbed out and fell into bed, too tired to do more than spoon. And sleep.

Around seven Rowdy woke up, cranked the air conditioning down and crawled back in bed. Jade was sound asleep on her stomach, preventing any more of snuggling. The next time he woke up the clock read eleven. He was overtired, barely able to move, and he had long unused muscles screaming in protest after

the previous night's antics. Jade snored gently beside him. *So much for round two.*

Grinning to himself, he pressed a soft kiss on her forehead before sliding from the bed. He relieved himself, brushed his teeth and threw on some clean clothes to go in search of food. His 'fridge was sadly empty. The best he could hope for was coffee with questionable milk. Even the sugar needed a pick to chip a chunk off. With a sigh, he picked up a wrinkled, stained menu from beside his phone and called Mae's Diner, ordering the Sunday Special for two--pork chops with all the fixins and two large iced teas. Mae's served good home cookin' like your mom might make—if ya had one.

Back in the bedroom Skye had rolled over on her back. He considered waking her up, but she looked so peaceful, the least he could do was let her get a few extra minutes of sleep while he went for their lunch.

Rowdy took off across town, ignoring the full church parking lots and bells ringing in favor of the ATM at his bank. Then he swung back toward the center of town. Mae's sat just off Main Street in a free-standing building between the feed store and an antique store.

He left Mae's whistling a few minutes later, a big bag of food in hand and two large sweet teas. The smell of fresh baked yeast rolls—he'd gotten extra because they were his favorite—pork chops and mashed potatoes teased him on the short drive home.

In the kitchen he found Jade standing at the counter, a cup of coffee in hand, a pile of his mail in front of her. Fliers from the looks of it. He'd gotten a whole wad of them on Saturday and thrown them there in his haste to get out the door.

“Who’s sending you inmate mail?” she asked with a puzzled smile.

Them and a letter from Charlene. *Shit.*

Rowdy was thankful he still had his sunglasses on. At least she couldn’t see the shock in his eyes but that didn’t mean she wouldn’t hear his heart beating. He swallowed, stepped further into the kitchen and closed the door behind him. “I forgot I left that laying around.”

He set the bag on the counter next to the sale ads and slid his sunglasses off, dropping them beside the food and keys.

“I wasn’t trying to be nosy. I was just flipping through the ads while I fixed my coffee and it fell out.”

“That’s okay.” The big red stamp announcing it was “Inmate Mail” glared at him accusingly, and his brain refused to work.

Finally, he forced himself to meet her eyes. What he saw there only reminded him they had no business being more than a fling, no matter how bad he wanted more. She had the soft-eyed look of a woman in love. The same look Betti got with Ty and Susie with Kane. And she stood holding a letter from his sister, the jailbird.

He opted for brazen and casual. “It’s from my sister,” he replied while pulling styrofoam containers of food from the bag.

“Oh.” She dropped the letter on top of the ads. He snatched the envelope up and flung it at the trash, but it bounced off and landed on the floor.

“You’re not gonna read it?”

He reached into the cabinet, above the coffee cups, and grabbed a paper plate, then poured the bag of yeast rolls onto one and set it on the tiny table. “I got chocolate cake for dessert.”

He turned to face her again, crossing the small space to the kitchen counter and picking up the containers full of food. "There's tea. And no, I'm not gonna read it. Silverware's in the top drawer."

He ignored the startled confusion on her face as he turned back toward the table. Behind him, he heard a drawer open and close, then she joined him. Jade silently set silverware down beside his hand and sat in the chair next to him. "You didn't want me to know your sister was in prison?"

"I didn't think it was important." He opened the container and forked up a mouthful of potatoes, nearly scalding his mouth, then with a scrape of his chair, he stood and got the margarine from the 'fridge.

"Well, I think it is...if we're going to have a relationship."

"Relationship?" He forced out a harsh bark of laughter and ripped open a roll and buttered it. Refusing to allow himself to look at her. Rowdy Yates didn't have *relationships*. His heart pounded so hard he could barely catch his breath.

"Yeah. I *thought*...I'd like to try."

"My sister's in prison." The bite of pork chop he broke off and shoved in his mouth tasted like sand.

"No shit?" She opened her own lunch and took a bite of mashed potatoes. "Does it bother you? Her being in prison? I suppose so, since you threw her letter away."

Jade's calm tone irked him. Rowdy snorted, unable to look at her. "All she does is preach, for Christ sake."

"About?"

He finally managed to swallow the bite of pork chop he'd been chewing and answered. "God, forgiveness, how she's changed, shit." He shoved another

bite between his teeth and forced himself to chew before he started ranting.

Skye studied him for a minute before standing and retrieving their tea. She set his down at his elbow but didn't sit back down. "I want to read it."

Rowdy nearly choked but somehow managed to finish chewing, swallowed and took a sip of his drink, mulling over his options. If he said no, he'd look like he had something to hide. If he said yes, he risked her finding out everything. But at this point, did it really matter? "Sure, go ahead." His attempt at sounding good-humored and unconcerned failed miserably. Even to his own ears.

He listened to her retrieve the letter from the floor and tear it open. She rejoined him and he continued to slowly eat, praying he didn't choke on his food. One of his favorite meals had taken on a death sentence.

"Well, it's short," she softly commented a few minutes later. With a sigh she laid the two white pieces of paper on the table, on the far side, away from him and began eating. They might as well have been printed on neon yellow paper. They mocked him and he struggled against the juvenile urge to snatch them up and rip them to shreds.

"What's she in for?" Jade popped a forkful of fried okra in her mouth and chewed, her green eyes crystal clear.

There was no malice, or disgust, just curiosity. Curiosity killed the cat, or in this case, the relationship. "Armed robbery and assault with a deadly weapon."

"Wow."

"Yeah." He grimaced and sipped his tea, giving up any pretense of eating.

"Sure you don't want to read it?"

She sounded so matter-of-fact. He struggled with a reply, unsure if he wanted to know what Jade had read. Worried about how much she might have

learned.

“Or I could read it to you,” she added softly, tilting her head to the side and watching him intently.

He slowly nodded. Maybe hearing her read it would make his sister's pap go down easier.

She sipped her tea and picked the letter up.

Dear Rowdy,

Peace and blessings upon you. I hope all is well and bright with you.

He sighed and bit back a snort.

I've tried for over a year to get through to you. Sometimes I think banging my head against my cell wall would be easier. You obviously aren't ready to listen but, when you are, I'll be here. I love you. Even if I am a lousy big sister.

In the meantime, I won't write you again. I would ask you to please contact Mom. She says she hasn't heard from you in a dog's age. Tim keeps me up to date about you, so at least I was able to tell her that you're okay. I hope you don't mind but she seemed so worried. Even if you won't speak to me, I hope you'll at least call her or something. I know how close you two once were, so I understand why you've shut her out.

You know, I used to be jealous of you. I always thought they loved you best because you were a boy. Now I realize Daddy could never love either of us. And Mom did love us both—but different. I guess this is a plea on her behalf as well as my last letter. I really think she needs to hear from you.

I know it must seem like I'm in a horrible place, and I am, but Rowdy I've truly found myself here. I know who I am, I can forgive myself for all the stupid mistakes I made—from getting pregnant, to running out on Tim and Rene, to the poor convenience store clerk I robbed. I was so busy wallowing in my pain I didn't realize how I'd let it consume me. It hasn't been easy. Some days are horribly hard. I still cry a lot and get frustrated but on the inside where it really counts, I'm better for all of it.

I guess I was just too eager to share with you. You know you don't have to be religious to forgive yourself or find peace or happiness. And just because you got religion doesn't mean you have peace or happiness. Ha! I made a funny. That's enough. I've rambled on again when I swore I wouldn't. I've read this four times and just think I'll leave it all and pray you know what's in my heart. Please always know that I love you, and please consider getting in touch with Mama, but I won't bother you again.
Yours in love and faith,

Charlene

“So you don't talk to your sister? Or your mother, do you?”

“No.” He didn't know whether to feel relief at knowing Charlene wouldn't write again or sadness. Suddenly, he felt incredibly off kilter. Rowdy blinked, trying to clear his head. He had no clue what he wanted. From Skye, his sister, his mother or himself.

“And your mom.” Her gentle voice made him want to shout but he couldn't bring himself to look at her again.

“I haven't seen her in nine years.”

“Since your dad died?”

“She sold the house and moved south, to Baytown.”

“And left you here all by yourself?”

“No!” He jabbed his fork in the potatoes and picked at the last half of his roll. “She left me with Tim so I wouldn’t have to change schools. Now, can I finish my lunch?” He pointed at his plate with his fork, hit with a fit of temper. His mom hadn’t even asked him what he wanted, just came home one day and told him he was moving in with Tim. So why did he feel the need to lie to Skye about her? To protect himself or Liv? To get Skye to back off.

“Sure, but I’m not hungry. I think I should go.”

That would be best. “Fine.” He shoveled in another bite of potatoes, then flinched at the scrape of Jade's chair. No way would he check on Liv--Mom If she missed him, she knew how to reach him.

Jade returned a few minutes later, wearing her own shirt but no bra. Her bra was still stuffed in the pocket of his sweats on the bathroom floor. He stood up, but she waved her hand, stopping him.

“Don’t bother. I can see myself out.” She gently squeezed his bicep, trying to catch his eye. Her gentleness, her directness shoved his temper up another notch.

Did she have to sound so fucking polite?

“I parked behind you.” Rowdy stood up anyway and headed outside with her on his heels. The day had quickly turned hot. So hot he felt as if his skin were burning in the minute it took him to walk to his truck, but the peaceful quiet of his neighborhood surprised him. Considering he didn’t feel peaceful and quiet inside.

He’d had his fantasy fulfilled, he thought as he backed the Bronco out of the drive and sat waiting at the curb. She backed out and he pulled in and parked

again, pocketing his keys.

He was heading back in the house when she pulled in behind his Bronco. He turned and waited to see what she'd do next. Maybe she wanted her bra. The contrary part of him refused to let him mention it.

She slid out from behind the wheel of her sports car and strolled across the grass, her back straight, skirt swishing around her bare feet and her heavy breasts gently bouncing. He could feel sweat beading on his forehead. When she reached him, she whipped off her sunglasses and yanked on the collar of his t-shirt, jerking his head down.

He didn't resist.

Skye didn't loosen her grip as her lips teased his. He gave in, sealing her mouth, but gave her complete control. Her tongue plundered and teased until he was ready to drag her back inside, tell the world to go to hell, and make love to her all day. She broke the kiss, both of them panting for air in the summer heat, and shoved her sunglasses back on before looking at him.

"Seems like every time we end up in bed something happens. Of course, this time we didn't technically end up in bed, huh?" She patted his chest and turned toward her car. He stood perfectly still, struggling against the urge to watch her walk away or call out to her. Beg. He didn't beg--ever.

So much for a relaxing Sunday in bed.

"If you want, you can call me," she shouted. The next sound he heard was the car door slamming.

17. AIN'T MISS BEHAVIN

And they call women sensitive? I was so distracted on the drive home I didn't even turn the radio on. I'm not sure why I retreated. Other than his anger and obvious withdrawal over his sister's letter. I couldn't say I wasn't shocked about Rowdy's sister being incarcerated, but his reaction had been more than a bit overboard.

Butthead!

Charlene's letter had sounded truly contrite and I felt sorry for her, but I'm a bleeding heart liberal. Though to be honest, I'm not quite sure what a bleeding heart liberal is. I'd grown up around politicians and judges and had learned at an early age to tune them out. Boring, pompous and fake were the words that came to mind and I always voted for the underdog, just as a matter of principle.

As I flew down the highway I briefly considered driving out to Toni's or Susie's for advice, then decided to lay low and see what *Toenail Night* at Betti's house brought. I could ask then.

I spent the rest of Sunday recuperating. Muscles screamed in places I hadn't known muscles existed, but I couldn't stop grinning as I sank into a tub of steaming hot water liberally laced with Obsession bubble bath. *I had sex on a horse.*

After my bath I settled in at the computer with a vegetable stuffed omelet.

Great, another urgent e-mail from Chrys.

Skye ...I got you a ticket for Dallas!! Better check in on the list.

People are starting to ask about you. Especially with Shy gone and you going underground all at the same time.

You're a scrooge with details, girl!!! But I'll let you slide—this time <wink>.

Caglehugs!

Chrys

I typed a quick reply, answered a few list emails and made excuses about work being busy, then sat there contemplating whether to write Rowdy an e-mail or not. Unsure of what to say, I opted for *not* and called it an early night.

#

Monday flew by and at 6:30 I stood on Betti's front porch, a small basket of nail polish accessories and two bottles of a nice Texas Riesling in my arms. Betti's husband, Ty answered the door, waving me in with a dimpled smile.

"Have a good time," Ty murmured as he slipped out the door. His reserved nature left me blinking. It was such a contrast to Betti's almost outrageous personality.

"Don't mind him, sweetie," Betti hollered from the couch as if she'd read my mind. "He's a little on the quiet side. Come on in here, you already know everyone."

Two steps led down into the living room/dining room combo done up with pale peach walls. Sheer maroon curtains hung from elaborate rods that looked like bronzed ropes. But the fuzzy white shag carpet surprised me. Betti might be a girly-girl but she was still practical, and white carpet on a ranch wasn't very

practical. Oh well.

On the denim couch and love seat were Betti, Rene whose frown I couldn't miss, Maggie, Toni, Delaney and Susie. Jessa sat in an oversized denim chair, nursing Hope.

Susie quickly explained: everyone picked a partner and exchanged pedicures while we chatted, drank wine and ate. I deliberately picked her. As Rowdy's former lover, she'd be the one to try and get some insight from.

"So how are things with you and Rowdy?" Susie murmured over the buzz of a foot bath beside us.

I grimaced up at her then returned my attention to nipping the cuticles on her toes.

"Now don't tell me after I saw you two cooin' at each other Saturday night, ya'll still can't get it together."

Getting it together was the least of our problems.

I sighed and tucked my hair behind my ears. "I feel like I'm playing tug-of-war."

"Get used to it, Sugar," Betti piped up from her position on the couch. "The tuggin' never stops."

"Well, I'm at a loss. Susie, you know him pretty well, maybe you...I dunno. Could give me some tips."

She frowned at me. I'd forgotten not everyone knew about her and Rowdy. "I've known Rowdy his whole life, honey. He's stubborn to the core, I can tell you that. But he'll never treat a woman bad."

"Then why won't he have anything to do with his sister? It just doesn't seem fair when he treats Hope almost like his own." I motioned to the car seat

where Hope lay sleeping.

Susie sighed and glanced over my head, her eyes roving around the room. I felt like I'd really put her on the spot, asked too much of her, but I plunged forward anyway. Surely one of them had to have *some* idea. "How'd you find out about Charlene?"

"I found a letter—I wasn't trying to be nosy; it was stuffed in with some sale ads—but he got all bent out of shape. I just don't understand how, if women mean so much to him, he can ignore his own mother and sister!"

"What do you know about my mom?" Rene asked from her position on the floor behind me. She'd ended up partnering with Betti.

"I know she's in prison," I said softly, turning around to give her a tiny smile. "But that seems so unlike him to cut her off, no matter what she did."

"Rowdy's an idealist," Toni threw in. "He knows how the world works, knows that it can be an ugly place but that doesn't mean he likes it."

"And with Rowdy it's always women and children first." Maggie gave me an easy smile from her spot beside Susie.

"So his sister's not the underdog? She's in prison." I frowned, trying to sort it all out.

"Mom let him down. She let everyone down."

Toni sighed. "Rene, you know as well as I do--"

"I know, I know, Toni. She was young and dumb," Rene drawled with a shake of her head.

"And his mother?"

"I'm guessing here," Susie said, "but I think he feels like she let him down also."

“Loyalty gets loyalty,” Betti softly interjected.

“Rowdy didn’t exactly have a ‘Leave it to Beaver’ childhood.” Susie wiggled her toes for emphasis.

“Now, he told me his mom moved but left him here with Tim to finish school.”

Maggie’s throat clearing caught my attention. “She did. I don’t know the particulars, but Rowdy’s dad, Big Rob was *not* a nice man. Maybe Liv took off because she couldn’t stay here with all the memories after losing her daughter and husband within months of each other.”

“Or all the talk,” Susie softly added.

Maggie nodded in agreement.

Talk? According to Betti, everyone had their ‘place’ in Bluebonnet. What had Rowdy’s been?

Welcome to the dark side? So much for my carefree Redneck Casanova. I’d hooked up with one very complicated and complex man. And his touchiness over any mention of his dad or other family members now all made sense. *Loyalty.*

“He keeps pushing me away.” And the logical part of my brain said it was a defense mechanism. I’d walked out on him yesterday and he expected me to not come back. I nodded slowly and looked up at Susie. “How do I convince him I won’t let him down? That I won’t leave him.”

“Do you want to?” Jessa spoke up for the first time. “Do you wanna stick it out? Cause if you don’t, don’t bother.”

“It’s all about the good, the bad and the ugly,” Betti added softly. “If you want him, you just have to be there through it all. Sounds simple, but sometimes

it's not."

"And ya gotta fake it," Rene threw in.

My jaw dropped as I slowly turned around and looked at her. After everyone recovered from their laughter, I asked the burning question. "What *exactly* do I need to fake?"

She smirked then giggled before replying, "How much you like him, silly. You can't act like you like a boy *too much* or you'll scare him off. Even *I* know that."

I was getting man advice from a fourteen-year-old. Worse, it was right on target.

"I hate to say it," Betti said with a laugh, "but she's right. I don't think Rowdy's someone you can push too hard. Just nudge gently, frequently."

Nudge gently, frequently, huh?

When the party broke up, Susie walked me out to my car. "I'm sorry if I put you on the spot in there by asking you specifically about Rowdy."

"You didn't. But who told you?"

"Betti." I kept my eyes on my hands.

She patted me on the shoulder. "He used to pull this routine of his. A Wife-For-A-Night."

I grimaced and waited for an explanation.

"He'd pick up a local from the dancehall and take her home. Buy her breakfast afterward. According to Tim, he hasn't in months--like three." She arched both pale blonde eyebrows for emphasis. In other words, since shortly after we "met" and long before our first date. But why?

“Be patient with him,” Susie continued. “Don’t let him push you too hard-- or bluff you too good.”

I chuckled and we smiled at each other in understanding.

“I’m trusting you with him.” She squeezed my shoulders and nodded for emphasis.

She trusted me with his heart.

And I’d do my best by her.

#

The sun was nearly gone by the time I pulled into the driveway behind Rowdy’s Bronco and parked. I trotted up to the porch in my flip-flops, walking on my heels to protect my shiny pink toes. The kitchen door stood open with the screen shut, and I heard a sprinkler nearby. Something else too. I listened harder. It was a guitar. “Shy?” *Where had that come from?* It had been ages since I thought of him as Shy, which totally didn’t fit him anyway.

“Back here.”

I found him sitting on the back porch steps dressed in frayed cut off shorts and a navy tank top. He had a baseball cap jammed backwards on his head and a guitar cradled in his arms. A beer sat at his side. “What are you doing here?”

“I came to see you, of course.” Smiling, I sashayed closer and sat beside him. Never mind that he hadn’t invited me to stay. I stretched my legs out in front of me and crossed them at the ankles.

“I see you went to *Toenail Night*.” He tipped his beer bottle at my toes before taking a sip.

Keep it light. Don’t let him know how much you like him. I wiggled my toes for his inspection while giving him another brilliant smile. “Yeah. It was

fun.”

He glanced back at my feet before meeting my eye. “And you just...decided to be sociable on the way home?”

I took his beer from his hand and sipped at it, trying not to make a face. *Blarh!* Warm beer. “I wanted to show you my toes.”

Rowdy snickered a bit and took his beer back, propping his guitar against the porch rail with his free hand.

“What? You don’t believe me?” I gave him my best wide-eyed and offended look, despite my heart slamming against my ribs. “Okay, maybe I’m horny.” I shrugged and grinned at him. He laughed and ducked his head. The almost bashful action charmed me.

Be bold. Be brave. Take charge. I made myself stand up and straddle his lap, sinking down against his crotch.

“I’m sweaty.”

“So what’s a little sweat among friends.” I set his beer aside, then pushed his ball cap off his head and studied his face. It was too dark for me to read the expression in his eyes, so I used my fingers instead. He hadn’t shaved and his stubble felt rough against my fingertips but his moustache was soft. “What do they call this?” I ran my fingertip over the upside down “U” his moustache made.

“A fu manchu.” His warm breath tickled my fingers.

“A fu man chew?” I asked, giggling.

“Pervert.” He gave me a wicked grin and slid his hands up the back of my shirt.

I gently scratched his head, unable to hold back another giggle.

“You like bald?” His hands inched higher and higher on my back.

“Oh, please. You’ve got plenty of hair left.” Surely he wasn’t that self conscious about his hair.

“I’ll probably be a cue ball by the time I’m thirty.” His fingers crept beneath my wide bra strap.

“Bald can be very sexy, you know.” I leaned back a bit and took a good look at him, trying to visualize a Rowdy with no hair. I could see the possibilities. He’d definitely be the kind of man who could pull it off with his rough and tumble attitude. “I confess I have a weakness for blondes, but I can see you bald with about three days growth on your face, lookin’ all rugged.”

He chuckled while his fingers worked at the hooks of my bra. “Rugged, huh?”

“Yeah, rugged.” I slowly rubbed against his very obvious erection and leaned in to kiss him, tracing his lips with my tongue. Despite some lingering soreness, I wanted to make love to him in the worst way. His velvety soft tongue tempted me to push a little deeper, kiss him a little harder, and I struggled to keep it light and teasing.

The last hook popped free and my nipples immediately tightened at the thought of freedom. “Satin or lace?”

“Cotton.” I smiled.

“Cotton is good.” Rowdy pushed my bra above my breasts and cupped them in his hands, gently kneading them. When his thumbs glanced across my nipples, my thighs clenched and I settled closer against his erection. I bit back a harsh moan. I wanted to bite him, strip him down and taste every sweaty inch of him right here on his back porch. I decided a kiss would just have to do and teasingly explored Rowdy’s mouth again.

He broke the kiss and stared at me. Even in the dim light I couldn't miss the intense look on his face. "Are you sure about this?"

"You have enough trees your neighbors won't see me and I'll keep it down," I quipped, being deliberately obtuse. He wasn't just asking about sex.

"I meant about being with me." His voice was low and gruff.

Bingo! "Well, I can't make you any promises about how long but, yeah, I'm sure I wanna be with you." I enjoyed throwing his own words back in his face, almost the same exact words he'd said to me last Saturday afternoon. But at the same time, I kept it light. I didn't want to come off bitchy.

Being in charge, in control had its own effect on me. I was extremely turned on, but again, I'd already decided I wasn't staying.

"I guess I'll just have to be satisfied with that then, huh?" he whispered.

Time for Phase 2. "You owe me a date," I murmured against his lips between kisses.

"Huh?" He frowned at me. At my sudden change of topic, I suppose.

I wriggled out of my bra and hung it from his guitar, then pushed his hands out from under my shirt and eased off his lap.

"You owe me a date, Honey. Pick me up at 6:00 Wednesday night." I planted a quick soft kiss on his lips.

"Where you goin'?" he demanded.

"Home." I picked my keys up from where I'd dropped them on the porch and rattled them with a little smile.

"Home?"

I pressed my lips together, fighting a grin at the shock in his voice. "Yeah. It's late and I have to work tomorrow."

"I thought you'd wanna stay the night."

We were playing by my rules now and I intended to win. I wriggled out of his tight grasp.

"I've had a long day." The sad look on his face almost made me giggle. And almost made me stay, but I stuck to my resolve. If I wanted something long-term I'd have to make him think we were playing on his terms. The rules that, up to now, he'd lived by. The ones I finally understood.

Wife-For-A-Night, my ass!

I leaned over and pressed a quick kiss to his lips, but before I could get away, he grabbed me and slipped his tongue past my lips, moaning in my mouth as his hands fisted in my hair.

"Don't be late."

Hips swinging and unfettered boobs bouncing, I took off for my car, listening to see if he'd come after me.

He didn't.

I grinned in the darkened car all the way home.

I could do this.

And when I got home I found an e-mail waiting on me.

You're amazing. Feel free to drop by anytime. See you Wednesday night...Rowdy

18. REDNECK'S GIRL

Rowdy picked up his guitar and beer bottle and headed inside, locking up after himself. He wasn't sure what had changed but there was no doubt *Toenail Night* and The Boudreaux Women had struck again.

He wasn't sure what Skye's game was either, what new tactic she might be using to get to him, but she was up to something. He opened his dresser drawer and folded the white cotton bra, preparing to tuck it in beside the black one when he caught a whiff of her perfume.

Rowdy lifted the bra to his nose and sniffed. *Obsession*. She wore Obsession. How fitting. Chuckling, he tucked her bra in his dresser drawer and decided to play along and see what happened. He could play along a little longer. He *wanted* to play along a little longer, and she did have a point. He owed her a date.

What did he have to lose? Besides his heart.

He had work to do but stopped to fire off another teasing e-mail to Skye first. With a grin, he sent it hurtling into cyberspace.

Rowdy turned the stereo on in the living room and eyed the computer parts scattered over the dining room table. He had to finish putting it together so he could deliver it...and get paid.

Just over an hour later he sat testing the computer, making sure the

operating system he'd finished installing worked while Eminem sang a cover of an old Aerosmith song.

His off-the-wall mood continued to hang over him. Rowdy finished up the computer, screwed the case on and set it in a box by the front door with a wireless keyboard and mouse. He changed the CD to Montgomery Gentry and spent the night dusting, mopping, and catching up on laundry.

Rowdy fixed himself a snack around two AM and ate while checking his e-mail, but his eyes kept drifting back to the pile of letters from Charlene sitting on the desk. He shoved them in a drawer and turned his attention back to a reply from Skye.

*You're pretty amazing, yourself, Shy. I'm looking forward to
Wednesday, so don't be late.*

*Just one question, though, baby. Where in the world did you come
up with a name like ShyCowboy? It doesn't fit you at all.*

He took a bite of his ham and Swiss and typed a quick reply, then finished off his sandwich and Kettle chips.

Still restless and nowhere near ready for bed, Rowdy organized his unused parts and mopped the floors with wood soap. It was four in the morning, when he finally fell into bed, completely exhausted.

#

The next evening, after he delivered the promised computer, Rowdy headed out to Tim's, ready to talk. Cleaning hadn't solved his problem like it usually did.

And Toni always made plenty for dinner. Rowdy had long ago given up on cooking. Anything beyond the grill or Hamburger Helper always ended up burned.

He arrived at Tim's to discover a pot luck in progress while everyone finalized plans for a Memorial Day weekend family reunion.

Rowdy kissed Delaney on her freckled cheek, took a plate from her and filled it with lasagna, grilled vegetables and Toni's spincy Creole chicken.

"Keep eating like that," Delaney teased, "and we'll have to roll you home."

"Keep eating like that--" he nodded at her own heaping plate and eyed her tall, angular frame, "--and I won't be the only one rolling home."

"Yeah, yeah." She handed him a full glass of sweet tea.

"Thanks. So what's the plan?" He nodded toward the living room where most everyone else had gathered. When things settled down he'd drag Tim outside to talk.

"Jessa's family's coming in."

"Who else?" Rowdy asked as Ty entered the kitchen and refilled his plate.

"Nikki and the twins are driving in from Louisiana, too," Ty answered between bites of chicken.

Toni's biological daughter and twin brothers. "And John Thomas?"

"Nikki says Grandperè Jean is painting," Rene muttered from where she'd been quietly eating at the table. "And we invited Granny Liv."

He'd been about to crack a joke about Rene's battered attempt at a French accent until he heard his mother's name. Then his lungs constricted as a white hot anger filled him. It was all he could not to howl or holler his next question.

"Why?"

"Because she's my grandmother and lives four hours away, and I haven't seen her in a dog's age! *Neither have you!*" She set down her fork and stared at him, her icy blue eyes unreadable. It didn't matter. He knew when he was being

scolded and he *didn't* like being scolded by his niece.

Rowdy shoved his plate and glass of tea on the cluttered table and stormed out back, slamming the door behind him. Hands jammed in his pockets, he stalked the length of the fence, around the corner and down the road past Zack and Jessa's pink house. And paced up and down a section of fence that surrounded the pasture where Eve and the other mares were kept.

The extent of his anger and his immediate need to lash out had frightened him. He'd *never* gotten so mad so fast, not even at Jade the other morning.

He was just good-natured Rowdy Yates, right?

He paced and watched the mares and yearlings until his anger had cooled to a dull orange warmth.

To his surprise, instead of Tim, it was Ty who came walking up the road to join him a few minutes later. "Relax."

He automatically blew out a heavy breath and counted to ten. "Why do I feel like I'm being set up?" *Again*. First Jade, and now his mother.

"You are. You know those Boudreaux women. They always gotta be stickin' their noses in everything," Ty said with a chuckle.

Rowdy didn't have the heart to join in. "They said something to Jade, too. This is about her."

"I know she was over last night, but there's no way in hell I'm stickin' around a house full of women. I went to Tim's." Ty laughed again. "So what's so bad about seeing your mom?"

Rowdy blew out a deep breath and shook his head. "She let him press charges against me and refused to tell the cops what the fight was about. She defended *him* over *me* and, if he hadn't died, I would have gone to jail for assault."

While he talked Rowdy moved until he was nearly nose to nose with Ty.

"Nine years is a long time," Ty said softly. "People change."

"And who gives a shit if he nearly killed her," Rowdy snarled. He'd been sixteen when he'd found his father, Big Rob, banging Liv's head on the living room floor. He'd gone after Rob with an iron skillet and they'd ended up in a brawl.

"You did."

"Yeah and look what it got me. No mom and a jailbird sister." He threw his hands up and turned away, but before he could get more than a step, Ty's next words stopped him in his tracks.

"Why are you so hard on poor Charlene? She was gone before your dad even died."

"Poor Charlene? *Poor Charlene?*" He scowled over his shoulder at Ty, the dull orange glow of temper began to burn brighter and hotter in his chest. "*Poor Charlene* ran off and left her husband and kid!"

"And you," Ty softly added.

"But first, *Stupid Charlene* got herself knocked up!" Rowdy turned to face Ty, his hands propped on his hips.

"To get away from Big Rob, you think?"

"Hell yeah!"

"And left you behind. Then left you behind again when she ran off and left Tim and Rene." Ty threw an arm around his shoulder and turned him back toward the house.

"Fuck me! She ran off and left her husband and kid." And him. Even though he'd been the one to hold a shotgun on Tim and demand he marry

Charlene.

“Like your mom left you after Big Rob died and didn’t even bother saying goodbye.”

“Jesus Christ! Are you still seein’ that fuckin’ therapist?”

“No.” Ty grinned at him and Rowdy shook his head in disgust.

“You sound like one. Talkin’ in fuckin’ circles.”

Ty gave him a friendly shake. “You know I’m right. Tim and Charlene made their peace. Why can’t you do the same?”

Rowdy growled in frustration and searched for the words to explain himself. Tim and Charlene *had* made their peace. Why couldn’t he? Because Ty was right? Because she’d up and left him?

Before he could speak up, Ty started in again. “You love Jade?”

Ty might as well have poured a bucket of water on his temper. It evaporated to nothing and Rowdy’s heart slammed against his ribs as he stared at Ty. From nowhere the word “yes” had almost flown out of Rowdy’s mouth. He shrugged instead and opted for painful honesty. “I’m not sure...I’m not sure what it is, so how can I be sure?”

“That you love her?” Ty asked softly, a frown on his sunburned face.

Rowdy solemnly nodded.

They started walking again and Ty talked.

“When you can’t stop thinkin’ about her. When you think about her and you can’t stop smilin’, when she’s all big and pregnant--” Ty chuckled, “--and grouchy and you still wanna make love to her because she’s the sexiest thing in the world. When you look at her and can’t imagine not wakin’ up next to her every day for the next hundred years or so. When you can cry in front of her and

she cries with you.”

Rowdy nodded, eyes downcast, his head still spinning while he tried to figure out if he truly loved Jade.

“Rene feels bad she pissed you off, but she really wants to see Liv. And Jessa wants the band to play at the Memorial Day party.”

“Which means I have to see my mom.” Whether he wanted to or not. Talk about being backed into a corner. He gulped and pursed his lips.

“Face your past; embrace your future.”

Rowdy snorted and shook his head. “Where the hell do you find that stupid shit?”

“Delaney’s psychology books.”

#

6:00 Wednesday evening Rowdy stood on Skye’s doorstep, her very belated birthday present in hand. She answered the door with a smile on her pretty face and dressed in the same black and red outfit she’d worn on their aborted date. The same one that had taken his breath away. The red off-the-shoulder blouse caressed every curve, and not one tan line marked her smooth, bare shoulders.

Her own smile faded as she blinked a few times. “Are you okay?”

“Huh? I’m fine. Happy birthday.” He held out the tiny box with its now wrinkled silver paper and smiled.

“Can I open it now?” she asked, taking the box from him.

“Sure.” Why were his hands clammy?

She led the way into the living room and flicked on a table lamp. He followed her, remembering the first time he’d spotted her at the Riverwalk. How cute she’d looked from behind, the fingers of one hand playing with the fringe on

her skirt, one shapely leg teasing him.

God, she had great legs!

Those same pale shoulders teased him now as she turned to face him. Just like the first time she'd turned around, Rowdy's eyes were immediately drawn to her cleavage.

Skye sat on the couch, ripping the paper off her gift while he studied how the clingy red top accented the curves of her breasts and the teasing hint of cleavage. The pearls, with a huge garnet teardrop that rested against her chest, were as classy as they'd been the first time. She smiled up at him and patted the spot beside her. "You can sit."

He'd rather pull her top down and see if the pearls could hold a candle to her breasts.

But he sat, watching her face as she snapped open the tiny jeweler's box. "Oh, Rowdy." She grabbed the collar of his shirt and dragged his head down to hers. The sweet taste of her lips and the warm exotic scent of perfume nearly did him in.

He returned her kiss, his blood warming at the feel of her pressed up against him as he wrapped his arms around her and gently explored her mouth with his tongue. Once they came up for air and she released her grip on his shirt, Rowdy freed the anklet from the box, the lamplight bouncing off the little clef note. Where before he'd felt pleased at his selection, now it didn't seem like much compared to her pearls. Maybe even a little cheesy. "Which foot?"

She leaned back and propped her right leg on his knee.

"You don't have to wear this if you don't want to."

"Of course I want to wear it. I love it."

“Sure it doesn’t clash with your pearls?” He could have bitten his tongue for that.

She stared at him for a minute before reaching up and unhooking her pearl necklace, dropping it on the sofa table behind her. “Better?”

“You didn’t have to do that...I’m sorry.”

“No need to be.”

He forced himself to concentrate on hooking the slender chain instead of the feel of her skin under his fingers. She wasn’t wearing nylons. He wanted to lean down and kiss her shapely ankle.

“And I know I didn’t.” She leaned back against the cushions and twisted her foot back and forth before standing and straddling one of his legs. He dragged her against him and studied her.

“What’s wrong?” she whispered. One fingertip glided over his eyebrow.

“What are you doing Memorial Day?” he asked, coming to a sudden decision. He wanted her to meet Liv. Even more, he wanted her there with him when he had to face Liv.

She shrugged, her fingers lightly tracing his moustache. “I don’t have anything planned.”

“There’s a big family reunion. Jessa’s family is coming from Montana and Toni’s from Louisiana. I’m sure Betti’s sister will drive up from College Station. And they invited my mom.” He swallowed the lump he’d nearly choked on and resisted the urge to close his eyes and relax at her soft touch.

Her fingers gently combed through his hair. “You...want me...to go with you?”

“I have to play, but yeah. Please. I’d like that.”

A little frown marred the pale skin between her eyebrows and her lips were pursed. He also saw what looked like understanding in her eyes.

“Mothers can be real pains in the ass sometimes, huh?” She kept smoothing his hair back from his forehead and he found himself blinking and suddenly unable to meet her eyes. Rowdy settled on a nod and a deep cleansing breath. He recognized her touch as the unspoken offer of comfort it was and pulled her closer with a sigh. He couldn’t remember the last time someone had played with his hair like that, petted him, and not wanted sex.

“We have reservations,” he whispered, then planted a kiss on her collarbone. Even he heard the regret in his voice. Rowdy wanted nothing more than to drag her upstairs and curl up in bed with her, cuddle and kiss and maybe let her play with his hair some more.

“Then I guess we better get going.” But she didn’t move and he didn’t have the heart to make her. Not for a few more minutes. Eventually he slowly pushed her off his lap and stood, watching her straighten her skirt and blouse.

###

Dinner was...nice and even that didn’t do it justice. The one thing that had always set Skye above every other woman he’d known was that she talked to him. Or maybe it was all those months they’d spent getting to know one another via e-mail where she’d never been afraid to ask questions and test his boundaries. Or tease and sass him. He saw more of that over dinner as she gently probed, pulling some of his better childhood memories out of him.

They spent the evening talking about everything but his family and hers. Food. And how she liked to cook but didn’t bother since she had no one to cook for. And how he was stuck eating sandwiches or mooching from Toni. Art. He

promised to take her to Zack's next art show. Music. She made him promise to teach her to play the guitar and in exchange she'd teach him to play the piano.

"You still play the piano much?" he asked over a dessert—a chocolate mousse they'd decided to share.

"I had to leave my piano at Mom and Dad's. I haven't played in three years."

He fought her for the last bite, won, then offered it to her.

"Sure?"

"You're the birthday girl. Now, open up." She did and he slid the spoon past her lips. She swallowed the last bite then licked her lips, completely unaware what a pretty picture she made. He leaned over and pressed his lips to the corner of her mouth, glad the booth gave them some privacy.

She looked up at him, her eyes a little sleepy and something else. Something soft and sweet that made him want to kiss her again. That same look he'd seen the morning she'd read Charlene's letter.

#

Outside, they strolled through the evening throng toward Louie's, a deep saxophone wail drawing them in. Rowdy felt restless but calm. Expectant.

Music would cure what bothered him. Always had. And maybe Jade, too? Maybe Jade could cure him.

He kissed her, wrapped her arm in his and led her into Louie's. The bar was nothing fancy. A cement floor, a black bar, dark walls and tables scattered around a dance floor. Even the front windows were darkened with black paint. Or shoe polish. Not that it mattered, people didn't come for the décor, but music, and the band was going full swing. Playing something deep and heavy with a lot of

guitar.

They stopped at the bar, beer for him and a Lemon Drop for her, then found a small table for two down front, right beside the dance floor.

He scooted his chair as close to hers as possible and draped an arm around her shoulder.

The music washed over him. Washed him clean. Made him forget everything but Skye. No Mom, no Judge, no Boudreauxs. Just the two of them. The sax and guitars sang along in harmony with each other and an older woman in a red dress who occasionally joined in.

He tucked her head under his chin, rubbing his lips in her hair and she snuggled close, one hand on his thigh. Half a beer and half an hour later he'd decompressed. Rowdy finally reached the point he could feel his blood flowing in time to the music. He stood and pulled her to her feet. Out on the tiny dance floor, he pulled her into his arms and cupped her hips. She snuggled closer and they swayed to an old Etta James tune—"At Last". He leaned over, his lips against her ear. "You feel so good."

Her only response was a tiny purr he felt more than heard as she snuggled closer.

They swayed in harmony. His hands on her hips, her body tucked against his, his nose buried in her silky hair, her fingers stroking the hairs at his nape. That moment was as perfect as the dream she'd shared with him. The only thing that would have been more intimate would have been making love to her, being buried deep inside her. And despite his slight erection, that would have to wait.

Their slow song ended and the band segued into something faster. He reminded himself Skye could dance.

They twirled and dipped and shimmied their way around the tiny dance floor. She smiled up at him, her green eyes shining and her dark hair flying this way and that.

They danced and drank and chatted with an older couple at the table beside them who were celebrating their fiftieth anniversary. They even swapped partners and he gently danced the spry, white-haired lady around the floor while her husband danced with Skye.

The four of them closed the place down, finally leaving at last call.

Rowdy and Skye ambled along the still crowded Riverwalk back to where he'd left the Bronco. He helped her in with a smile, leaning down to kiss her. "Have a good time?"

She cupped his face and leaned up to kiss him back. "The best. That old couple was cute."

During the evening, when they'd struck up the conversation with the older couple who cooed like newlyweds, Ty's words had come back to haunt him. He wanted that. Fifty years. "Yeah, they were."

The drive back to Jade's was quiet, and he steered with one hand while holding her hand with the other.

There was never any question about whether he'd stay the night or not. They'd reached some sort of quiet understanding some time during the evening. Maybe even before they'd left her house.

#

Rowdy smiled at the sight of her bedroom--it was just as messy as the last time he'd been there, with clothes and shoes everywhere.

She stopped in the middle of the room, and he moved up behind her until he

could see her cleavage and the warmth of her body seeped through to his.

“I wanna make love to you, Jade,” he whispered as he lightly ran his fingertips across her bare shoulders.

He didn't wanna fuck, he didn't wanna mate, he wanted to touch every inch of her satiny skin and feel her respond. Listen to her pant and moan and feel her wriggle underneath him. Watch her eyes turn black with want.

His cock swelled and his skin hummed. “Did you hear me?”

“Huh,” she breathed, her head rolling back.

“I wanna make love to you, Jade Skye.” As he spoke he worked her blouse loose from her skirt and lifted it over her head. Next went the strapless bra that had left deep gouges in her skin. He gently kneaded her back, working the marks out and smiling when she moaned and curved her back into his hands. He pressed his lips to her neck, nuzzling the vulnerable pulse point.

She moaned again. Her fists found the extra material at the thighs of his pants and she grabbed on while he ground his erection against her and growled with the primal urge to relieve the building pressure. Instead he worked his way down her spine with his lips, pushing her skirt off her hips as he went.

The sight of her standing above him in only her high heels and a pair of black lacy panties made his blood flow a little faster. The sight of her a minute later in only her heels left him gasping for air.

He rested his head against her generous ass and let his fingers trail up and down her smooth, shapely legs, enjoying the feel and smell of her. The way her body reacted to his touch when he planted soft kisses on her rump while his thumbs gently worked at her damp, nerve-filled outer lips.

“Rowdy!” Skye arched her hips and bent over the tiniest bit and he smiled

at her automatic response. The scent of her arousal only made him want to taste her more. He parted her lips and blew softly. Her thighs shook and her lips quivered under his fingers.

With a smile of anticipation, Rowdy stood and stripped while she kicked off her shoes and turned to help, her eyes sleepy and dark, her breathing shallow as she peeled his shirt off and pressed her lips to his chest.

Before he could get his pants off, Jade reached down to help, then gave him a sweet, hot kiss, her tongue exploring his mouth in a provocative play that left him feeling as if his skin were burning and he was trying to breathe underwater.

He reached for her, but she backed away and he watched her through lowered eyes, his limbs suddenly too heavy to move. Jade planted a soft kiss on his chest before dropping to her knees and taking his cock in her mouth in one swift motion.

“Oh my God!”

Jade liked oral sex, flashed through his mind. He smiled, despite his burning skin, and allowed himself to enjoy the feel of her hands massaging his balls. The gentle pressure of her warm mouth sucking his cock. Her velvety tongue teasing the head.

With his legs splayed wide on either side of her, Rowdy cupped her head, pushed her hair back and watched, his eyes locked with hers. The erotic view combined with the feel of her warm, skilled mouth and the mounting pressure nearly did him in as he whispered soft encouragements.

When her thumb gently probed beneath his sac, he grunted and his hips lifted off the mattress at the sharp pleasure. It was too much and way too soon. “No.”

He gently tugged at her hair and shook his head. "Not yet, not like this."

Rowdy helped her up on her feet, his head nearly level with her breasts. He cupped one in each hand and tweaked her pouty nipples, smiling at her soft squeal of pleasure. He caressed her belly and delved between her thighs. She panted and wiggled against his fingers, her eyes locked with his.

"It's my turn. I wanna taste you, Skye."

"What's my name?" She straddled his lap and rubbed against his erection. He grabbed a handful of her bottom with one hand and caressed every inch of her plump lips with the other, her growl of arousal vibrating low in his belly. Everything felt so sensual and surreal. They kissed, hot and deep while she rode his fingers.

"Your name is Jade Skye."

Rowdy leaned back on the bed and brought her with him, pushing her to one side and crouching between her thighs. She tucked a pillow behind her head and watched him through half-lowered lids, a smile on her face. He pressed a kiss to her abdomen and dredged up everything he could remember.

All her secrets; all her fantasies.

"Touch yourself," he gently ordered. Her eyes widened slightly as he pushed her thighs upward and outward. "Do it." He blew on her damp curls for emphasis, smiling up at her as she shivered. He wanted her desire to override any embarrassment she might feel at touching herself in front of him.

Lower lip caught between her teeth, she reached between her thighs and found her clit with her middle finger. He heard her breath hitch and smiled again. He spread her outer lips wide so she was totally exposed and the scent of her sex tickled his senses.

He planned to do more than watch.

Rowdy leaned down and flicked his tongue across her damp fingers. She let out a long loud groan and he chuckled. He continued licking her fingers while she stroked herself, delving lower to rewet her fingers and back up again. He helped, kissing, sucking and fondling her with his free hand. Completely turned on at the sight of her fingers and his.

Jade's excitement drove him on and it took everything he had not to shove his aching cock inside her when her orgasm hit and her hips arched high off the bed. Instead he latched onto her swollen clit. She grabbed a fistful of his hair and screamed, grinding against his face and he pushed deeper, sucked harder.

He tasted and teased with his tongue until she shoved him away and growled his name, begging him to stop. Then he kissed his way up her belly, stopping to rest his head on her breasts and catch his breath.

"Jade...Skye...my Skyebaby." His.

She wore the barest hint of a smile; her fingers left a shiver-inducing trail down his back. "There's condoms in the nightstand drawer," she whispered, her voice low and thick.

He reached over to get one, ripping the packet open and quickly rolling the condom on. "Get on your knees."

"Huh?"

"Trust me. Get on your knees."

Despite the misgivings he saw in her eyes, she did, curling her arms around a pillow and watching him over her shoulder. Rowdy tucked a pillow under her belly and spread her legs so she was almost in a crouch. He closed his eyes and slowly exhaled, mentally pulling himself back the tiniest bit. God, he ached. But

he wanted to take his time. Savor every last ounce of what was to come.

He curled over her, covering her body with his and thrust inside. Skye thrust back with a short, hoarse cry.

She was as warm and slick as he remembered. He'd thought the two previous encounters had been a fluke. The first time because of her lengthy celibacy, the second over the excitement of having sex on a horse. Surely no woman could feel this good. Every time. But he'd been wrong. "You okay?"

"Yes," she gasped.

"Trust me?"

"Always."

He rode her from behind, his hips playing in small circles and intermittent thrusts. One part of him wanted to rut uncontrollably. The sane side wanted to tease her until she lost control again, then follow.

She arched her hips and shook beneath him as he continued to stroke her, his cock caressing every hot silky inch of her. Jade pursed her lips, her head turned toward him so he could see every expression that crossed her face. Her smile of pleasure slowly faded and was replaced with a silent open-mouthed cry as she tensed up beneath him.

Rowdy groaned in pleasure as her walls fluttered around his cock in slow deep ripples, making him ache. Making him want to slam into her until he came. He held back and continued to dance inside her. She wriggled against him, her hips moving against his until he found that one sweet, tender spot that made her scream.

"Rowdy!"

He clenched his teeth and thrust a little harder, concentrating on hitting the

same spot again. She bucked against him and screamed again, all semblance of stride or control gone.

“You ready to co—”

“Yes! Yes...yes,” she wailed, her hips taut beneath his.

He slipped one hand beneath her and found her clit, lightly stroking while his hips continued to make deep plunging circles.

She howled and swore just like the first time. He gave himself a few sweet seconds to enjoy her orgasm before his own climax hit him with breath-stealing, heart-stopping force.

A few thrusts later, he collapsed against her back, sweaty and shaken, and wrapped his arms around her.

Somewhere nearby he could hear Jade sobbing and laughing.

#

Shortly before dawn, he made sweet slow love to her again, allowing himself to enjoy every aspect of actually loving her. And making love to her.

The next time he woke up, he felt hung over from lack of sleep as he fumbled for the ringing phone. He growled a hello after finally punching the right button.

It hadn't answered like his phone and he didn't recognize the voice on the other end. “Hello! Who's this?”

Sounded like an old man but not Jerrod. Maybe a customer. “Rowdy, what can I do ya for?”

He rolled onto his back and scrubbed at his face. That's when it dawned on him he wasn't at home and had just answered Jade's phone. *Damnitalltohell!*

“This is Dr Ballard. Why are you answering my daughter's phone?”

Rowdy took another deep breath, forced his eyes open and made himself focus. The shower was running. "Jade's in the shower."

"I wasn't aware you were...residing with my daughter. I'm not sure I approve." Unlike Her Honor, the professor's voice was more of a gentle scold.

"I-I'm not, sir." *Not yet, anyway.* And there was no playing the hick this time either. Jade was already in deep shit with her mother. In part, thanks to him.

"I...see." The professor sighed. "The reason I'm calling is to invite you two up for the long weekend. So you can meet the family."

The engagement. *Shit!* "I'm afraid I have plans most of the weekend, sir. A family reunion."

"Do you think you two could make dinner Friday night then? That would leave you time to drive home afterward or stay over and get up early. I'm very concerned about this rift between Trudy and Jade."

Trudy? Rowdy frowned at the ceiling at the sound of the judge's name. He didn't like being the cause of problems between Jade and her mom. Even if her mom was a first class bitch. Even if their engagement was a fraud. A thought that made him frown again. "What time, sir?"

"You could meet us at the club about seven. Jade knows where it is."

He should have known. Rowdy sighed and blinked at the ceiling. Great, an evening at the country club. Looked like he'd just have to take one for the home team--him and Jade that is. "We'll be there."

"I look forward to meeting you, Rowdy. Interesting name." Rowdy relaxed a bit at the smile in the old man's voice.

"It's a nickname. Thank you, sir. I look forward to meeting you also."

So much for morning sex.

Jade was gonna kill him. He hung up and went in search of coffee.

Rowdy was hunched over the kitchen sink, waiting on the coffee to finish when he heard Jade's footsteps on the stairs a few minutes later. He turned, ready to fess up when she entered the kitchen.

“And here I was thinkin’ you weren’t the type of girl to put out on a first date,” he teased, kissing her good morning.

He couldn’t resist. She looked so cute with a towel turban and an old fuzzy purple robe belted at her waist. He wouldn’t let himself give in to the urge to check and see if she was naked underneath.

They had more important matters to deal with.

19. DEBUTANTES DO WEAR FLIPFLOPS

I just couldn't seem to wipe the grin off my face as I stepped into the kitchen. Last night with Rowdy had been the most absolutely amazing night of my life. From dinner to dancing to our incredible lovemaking session. "Morning," I shyly whispered, hoping he'd kiss me again. He looked so cute with stubble on his cheeks, leaning up against the sink, dressed in only his pants.

"I uh, did something."

"I see that, thank you." I pointed at the perking coffee and reached up in the cabinet for cups. I also took full advantage of the opportunity to wrap an arm around his neck and press a good morning kiss against his jaw. He caught me around the waist and kissed me back and I shivered at the tickle of whiskers on my neck.

"Not that. I answered the phone earlier...while you were in the shower."

"Huh? That's fine, honey. Did you take a message?" I rattled on while turning to dig in the 'fridge for creamer.

"It was your dad."

"Oh, I'll call him back later." I set the creamer beside the cups and smiled up at him. *Was it took late for morning sex?*

"He wants us to come up for dinner Friday night."

Apparently so.

I felt my jaw sag open, then clicked my teeth shut as he continued. "He

thinks it's time your fiancé met the family.”

My face went numb at Rowdy's announcement. I couldn't seem to suck in enough air. He'd agreed to dinner with my family? Something I only endured under extreme duress--like Christmas.

Ho'shit!

I'd nearly forgotten about our fake engagement. After the fight with HH I'd assumed it'd be Thanksgiving or the year after never before I saw my family again.

I swallowed and blinked a few times.

“Your dad sounds really nice.”

“He's the bestest,” I gasped.

“I'm sorry, Skye baby, I...I was half asleep and--”

“It's alright.” I wrapped my arms around his waist and hugged him, burying my head in his chest so he wouldn't see the horrified look I'm sure I wore.

This had to be my worst nightmare come true--another trip to the club. Woodhurst was a private country club--membership by invite of a member in good standing only. And as such, the epitome of everything Her Honorable was. *Just a regular old jewel of the Texas Hill Country.*

Despite my queasy stomach, I busied myself pouring us both coffee and adding sugar and creamer to mine.

He gently sandwiched me between the counter and himself, his hands kneading my shoulders. “Do you have to work today?”

I'd completely forgotten it was the middle of the week. “No. And only a couple hours tomorrow.”

“I have to play tonight. Wanna come up to the dancehall?” He picked up

the spoon I'd set on the counter and added sugar to his own coffee.

What I wanted was to go back to bed and try to think up some excuse to give my father. "Sure, but don't you have to work today?"

"I'm all caught up and no one's called. Once school is in full swing and the holidays get a little closer, I'll get really busy."

#

Over a breakfast of French toast, he apologized again, a frown on his face. "If I hadn't answered the phone you could have just told them we called the engagement off."

My big mouth had put us in quite a bind.

"I guess I can handle another night at the club if you can." I smiled at him and popped another bite of butter and powdered-sugar covered French toast in my mouth. I needed a chocolate chaser.

After last night's incredible lovemaking I'd almost come to believe that we could have something long-term. Even if neither of us were ready for a *real* engagement. But he'd called me a snob once before. Would dinner at--*gag*--the club scare him off for good?

"Do I need a suit?"

"A jacket and tie would work." I also didn't want him having to shell out any extra money on my account. I'd already put him to enough trouble. Speaking of which... "I'll run up to Wal Mart or Target this afternoon for a ring."

He looked up at me, the fork halfway to his mouth. "A ring?"

"An engagement ring," I explained. "We told Mom mine was being resized."

"Shit...sorry. I didn't mean to swear."

"It's okay. And about the ring, too. I'll take care of it." I waved it off as casually as I could.

"No. This is my fault for shooting off my mouth to your mom in the first place. I know where I can get a ring."

"Are you sure? It's no trouble for me to—"

"I *said* I'd take care of it." His sharp tone made me blink in surprise.

Fine! I held up my hands in surrender. We were both obviously pretty uptight, and if he wanted to take care of a ring, then so be it.

"I'm sorry," he sighed, dropping his fork on his plate. "I didn't mean to snap." He carried his plate to the sink and rinsed it off. But he seemed a million miles away all of the sudden.

"If you want to save some time, take a shower before you leave?" Not much of a peace offering but it was all I had.

"I think I will." He gave me a tiny, tight smile and kissed my cheek. Neither the laid-back Rowdy Yates I'd fallen in love with nor my intensely sensual lover of the night before were anywhere to be seen.

I'd just started the dishwasher when he reappeared in the kitchen, showered and dressed, his hair still a bit damp.

"I'll see you tonight? About six-thirty?"

"I thought ya'll didn't start playing until seven?" I dried my hands and tossed the dishtowel on the counter, forcing my stiff lips into another smile.

"Come early so I can give you the ring. I don't wanna carry it around on me all night." He held out a hand and I took it, still wondering at his suddenly edgy and distracted mood.

Why had he agreed to dinner if he didn't want to go?

“Sure you don’t want me to call Daddy and cancel?” I blurted out as we neared the front door. “I don’t mind.” *Matter of fact, it’d be my pleasure.*

He turned to face me, his expression unreadable. “No.”

“Alright.” I squeezed his fingers and silently let him lead me out onto the front stoop. I could feel myself relax against his solidness as he gave me a slow, deep, toe-curling kiss.

“I’ll see you later, and no see-through blouses, Missy.”

“Trying to dress me now?” I gave him a flirty wink, hoping he’d lighten up some, relax.

“Please don’t wear that black see-through blouse up to the dancehall again. I could barely play.”

“I thought you played just fine.” I smirked.

“I’m going now.” He shook a finger at me, then shook his head and grinned. “Six-thirty.”

“Six-thirty.” I watched him walk to his truck and waved goodbye, my smirk fading.

After Rowdy left I spent the morning gardening and just thinking.

Rowdy was so damned charming I didn’t doubt for a minute he could handle himself at the country club, even if it wasn’t his scene. *Hell it wasn’t my scene.*

Every time I walked through those hallowed doors I felt like one of those misfit toys from that children’s holiday cartoon. The ones that lived on their own island—but even misfit toys served some purpose. And after that last fight with my mother, the thought of seeing her again left me as excited as going for my yearly pap smear.

Maybe I could worm out of it.

I headed for the phone in my office and dialed Daddy's direct line.

"Jade! I'd hoped you'd call back after I forgot to tell your young man to have you call me."

"Hi, Daddy." I propped my feet on the desk.

"I'm looking forward to seeing you both tomorrow night, Sweetheart."

I took the opening and ran with it. "That's why I'm calling."

"There's not a problem, is there?"

"Well...." I searched for the right words to explain my hesitation about coming.

"Jade, your mother loves you."

"She has a funny way of showing it, throwing Allan at me and just appearing on my doorstep demanding to meet Rowdy." I'd always tried to fight my own battles, not drag Daddy in between HH and I, but not this time.

"She just wants what's best for you." Daddy's low soothing voice didn't work on me this time.

"No, Daddy, she wants what *she thinks* is best for me."

I heard a long drawn out sigh from the other end of the phone and tried to rein in my own anger. None of this was his fault.

"You know Jade, your mother means well, but she's worried about you. She knows well what an ugly place the world can be."

"Just because she's a judge, that doesn't give her the right to try and control my life. She said I picked Rowdy to spite her, Daddy!"

"I know," he sighed. "She told me. She also told me what you said about Allan. And how you couldn't imagine why I stayed married to her. I know your

mother is difficult at times, but I do love her. You just don't throw thirty-odd years of marriage aside because someone changes. Marriage is for better or worse."

"Marriage is hard work," I said softly. Almost word for word what Betti had said to me last week.

"Exactly! However, your mother overstepped herself, and I've taken her to task for her part in all of that. And I know we've never discussed Allan, but I'm glad he stood you up at the altar. I think he's a complete idiot and I think you moving south was the best thing you could have done for yourself, even if you have alienated yourself from us the last few years. I wanted you to have time to heal, but I've missed you, Jade."

"I missed you too." I took a deep breath and blinked back the sudden prick of tears, listening to the silence on the other end of the phone. "And I am sorry about what happened...at the country club. I'm sorry I made such a scene."

"*I'm* sorry your birthday was ruined. I was so looking forward to spending some time with you. But for what it's worth, I laughed all the way home. Hell froze over and you took over as queen, Jade?"

I giggled. "I was horrible."

"You were the breath of fresh air you've *always* been. I'm glad Nicholas took good care of you and got you home."

"He's alright."

Daddy chuckled. "Yes, he is. So, tell me about this man you're marrying-- Rowdy."

I sighed, hating myself for perpetuating a lie. At least I didn't have to lie *about* him. "He's gentle and sweet. He loves music. He's good with his hands."

A picture of Rowdy holding Hope flashed through my mind. "He loves children. He's nobody important or big or pretentious. He'd probably laugh at Her Honorable's country club friends, or charm them," I added with a small laugh. "He's a good man, I think."

"That's the important thing. He treats you well? He's respectful?"

"Very."

"Well, while she might think Rowdy is an unsuitable mate for you because he doesn't live the same lifestyle or move in the same circles as your mother and I do, all *I* want is for you to be happy. As long as *you* know what makes you happy. When you were home a few weeks ago you said something about not being where you thought you'd be, and I must admit hearing you announce an engagement the same night, caught me completely off guard."

Busted. But rather than make things worse, I kept my mouth shut.

"Is he someone you think you can spend the rest of your life with? Grow old with? Because if not, I don't want you marrying him."

"Yes, he's someone I can imagine growing old with. He's someone I *want* to grow old with."

"Despite the obvious differences of class?"

"Class is in the eye of the beholder, Daddy," I scoffed. "So my daughters will never be debutantes. I can't think that's a bad thing." The knowledge that my own daughters wouldn't have to "make their bow" made me smile.

His chuckle encouraged me to push on. "I'm *different*, Daddy! I've never been like her and Emerald. Hell, even Nicky can schmooze and charm his way through. But me, I don't belong there, and I hated living under that fake social microscope."

“And Rowdy?”

“He’d hate it, too.”

20. QUEST OF A REDNECK KNIGHT

Rowdy practically ran down the sidewalk to his Bronco. He wanted to get this done before he changed his mind. Only a ring for Jade could get him to Baytown to see his mother. More specifically, one Jade's mother couldn't turn her nose up at.

His mom's mom, his Nona had a ring. A really nice ring, even if it wasn't exactly an engagement ring. His grandfather had given the ring to his grandmother when Liv was born--the first live birth after three miscarriages--and it had been Nona's favorite. Nona used to love to tell that story, and after she died, Mom said the ring would go to his wife when he had his first child.

But she owed him.

Rowdy ran home long enough to change, then headed back out before he lost his nerve and hit a pawn shop instead.

The drive to the coast flew by, his mind too busy for him to worry about time passing.

Jade had become more important than his anger at Liv, at Charlene, at the almost ten years that had passed since he'd last seen either of them. But that didn't prevent his stomach from quaking a bit or his hands from becoming clammy as he turned onto the street where his mom lived. Yeah, he knew where she lived. Always had. That didn't mean he'd wanted to see her.

He still didn't, but he'd be damned if Judge Trudy would get the chance to look down her nose at Jade. He wanted Jade to be able to hold her head up tomorrow night at dinner. And he wanted her to have his Nona's ring.

Rowdy parked in front of the tiny two-tone blue bungalow located just a couple of blocks from the beach and sat listening to the ticking of the engine. Little white curtains hung in the windows on either side of the door. A dark blue Monte Carlo sat in the driveway. The whole street was quiet, the noon hour too hot for anyone to be outside, even with the Gulf Coast breezes.

He needed the ring.

He'd driven over three hours for it.

Rowdy climbed out and slammed the door, wincing at how loud it sounded in the still air. There was no movement behind the white curtains or anywhere up and down the street. He took a deep breath and strode up the walk. If she--Liv--were watching from inside, he didn't want her thinking he was scared. But deep down inside, he was.

He walked up the sidewalk that cut her tidy little yard in two and stepped up on to her porch.

Rowdy didn't give himself time to think. To hesitate. He punched the doorbell before he could chicken out.

He wanted the ring.

While he stood waiting for someone to answer he looked around. The curtains at the window reminded him of the ones from when he was a kid. The lacy white ones that had hung in his mother's dining room. Two white plastic chairs sat on the front porch, and he wondered who she might visit with in the evenings. If any of the neighbors came around.

Liv was a stranger to him.

Sounds at the door caught his attention. A chain rattled, a deadbolt clicked and the door swung open. Not that much could penetrate the sound of blood in his ears. Blood that stopped flowing at the sight of a man behind the screen door. "Who the hell are you?" he demanded before he realized he had no right to ask.

"I could ask you the same thing," replied a gray haired man with an easy smile on a face creased by laugh lines. He was shorter than Rowdy and slender with wire rim glasses and wore a pale striped dress shirt, sharply creased navy pants and his tie was loose. He opened the screen door and looked Rowdy up and down, but not in a rude way. "You look exactly like your father, young man. She'll be tickled pink to see you."

The older man held the door open, his smile never wavering, but Rowdy wasn't buying and he scowled at the reference to how much he resembled Big Rob. His mother's friend wasn't the first to notice or comment. "Who are you?" he asked softly.

"Joseph Carmichael." He held out a hand, his smile never wavering. "I'm your mother's...gentleman friend," he finished with a chuckle.

"I guess Liv's a little old for a boyfriend." Rowdy stepped inside the crackerbox house, clutching his keys and sunglasses in one hand while trying to take in as much of the cozy house as he could. The little living area to his left sported an abundance of doilies and well oiled wood, and the smell of Old English furniture polish brought back its own set of memories--those last few holidays with his Nona.

"Liv's in the kitchen, washing up from lunch. Liv!"

Rowdy followed Joseph down the hallway that led to the kitchen. Tuna

fish and toasted bread teased his nose, distracting him.

The hallway's walls were covered with old photos of him and Charlene, but Rowdy didn't give them more than a glance, too intent on the sound of running water coming from the kitchen.

"Liv!" Something about the way Mr. Carmichael spoke his mother's name made Rowdy think they'd been "friends" a while.

The water stopped and he heard light footsteps. Before Rowdy could catch his breath, there she was, dressed in jeans and a pink blouse.

She looked like his mother but different. The mother he remembered wore her long, faded brown hair in a ponytail and *didn't* wear makeup. She was always too thin and always looked worn down and nervous, not pretty, like this woman with short, stylish chestnut hair that probably came from a bottle.

"Look who's come to visit." Joseph stepped through the arched doorway into the kitchen before turning to face Rowdy, a gentle smile on his face.

Rowdy struggled for air. His anger stalled at the sight of his mother. What the hell had he done, coming here like this? "H...hi, Liv."

She dropped the apron she'd been using to dry her hands and slowly walked toward him, her mouth hanging open. "Rowdy. Oh honey. My God, you're the spitting image of your daddy."

He felt his brows crease into another frown at the second comparison to Big Rob. "Gee thanks, Liv," he snapped in a sudden burst of temper. "After nine years the first thing you do is compare me to *him*?"

"I'm sorry. I'd just...forgotten." She rested her hands on his chest and he looked down, stared at her small hands and tried to find words. His brain slowed to a crawl. He swallowed hard and took a deep breath, refusing to release all the

bitter, angry words that sizzled on his tongue.

Rowdy wanted that ring.

He could do this. That thought kick-started his heart back to a normal rhythm and he tried again. "Hi, Liv."

"Wha...what brings you here? Is Rene okay? Charlene?" Her voice quavered on the last question.

He nodded. "I need Nona's ring."

She gasped, her watery smile firming into something more definite. "You're married? You're having a baby? Charlene didn't say a word in her last letter. Oh, but, maybe she didn't know?"

Rowdy let his nervously chattering mother drag him into the kitchen and push him into a ladder back chair, then watched her bustle around.

"Tell me everything. When did you get married? Who is she? Would I know her?" Finally she set a glass of tea in front of him and sat beside him at the small kitchen table. Joseph sat on her other side.

"My God, you're going to be a daddy? I'm gonna be a grandmother again."

Tears filled her eyes and Joseph produced a handkerchief from his pocket, handed it over and patted her hand. Her tears and happy surprise filled Rowdy with equal amounts of skepticism and guilt, and he struggled against the urge to squirm like a six-year-old in his chair.

No matter what else happened, he could see his mother had found someone who treated her good, and Liv's taste in men had definitely improved. Rowdy already liked Joseph. Something about the older man's kindness and Liv's soft smile, her happiness at seeing him, Rowdy, made it impossible for him to just ask

for the ring and leave. Not ask the bigger question. He was still angry, but a part of him realized that his trip south had been a way to avoid a public confrontation at the family reunion.

He couldn't deny he had deep feelings for Jade but marriage was something else all together. Was he ready for that sort of commitment? After last night Rowdy now accepted that he was, but he regretted not sorting out what to tell Liv before he took off for Baytown this morning. Of course, he couldn't just demand Nona's ring and not offer some sort of explanation. Which meant lying--as little as possible. *And now he'd be perpetrating one on her as well as Jade's family.*

And Liv looked so damned happy, too. "I'm not married."

"Oh?" She frowned at him like a confused puppy. "I thought--"

"Yet." He took a deep shaky breath and continued, "Her name is Jade--"

"How pretty," she interrupted. She looked so anxious and hopeful, the same small smile, the worry in her eyes, that he remembered as a kid. *That* she couldn't hide behind her newly stylish appearance. Or rather, new to him. "Tell me everything."

"She's originally from Austin. She's real sweet."

"Will she be at the Boudreaux cookout?"

"Yeah, she'll be there." What the hell kind of mess had he gotten himself into? Between Jade's family and his, they'd never get this straightened out.

"Maggie Boudreaux has invited us to stay with her."

"Maggie knew about Joseph?" he asked, frowning in shock. *They could have told him!*

"Yes," she said softly. Her cheeks turned pink. "Tell me about Jade. I want to know everything." She patted his hand. "It's been so long," she added

softly.

Too long. He tried to keep it brief, sticking to just the basics.

“She works for a liquor distributor--”

“How did you meet?”

Great, he’d never considered the sticky logistics of explaining that. “On the internet. We uh, we met on an e-mail list for music...stuff.”

“Do you still play? I used to love to listen to you play.”

Her words brought him up short. He never knew she’d listened. Or cared. Rowdy nodded. “I play with Ty and Zack and Zack’s wife.”

“Is Jade musical?”

“She plays the piano. I promised her I’d teach her how to play the guitar.”

Where had that come from?

“Imagine all the musical children you two could have. What does she look like?”

He chuckled, suddenly embarrassed at talking about Jade to his Mom, as if he were a kid and this was high school, not the rest of his life. Of course, most of his high school years he didn’t have a mom to confide in, just Tim. “She’s um...beautiful.” He gave Liv a sheepish grin and swallowed the sudden lump in his throat. “She’s got this pretty dark hair, it’s short, but sorta long in the front, and she’s got these--” he dug for the right word, “--green cat’s eyes and um she’s kinda short and real...” *Could you say curvy to your mom and not sound like a pervert?* “Curvy.” His lips twitched and he tried to ignore the heat in his face. No way was he blushing. Men didn’t blush.

“You must really love her.”

“I...I do.” He couldn’t even say the words but he’d admitted to Liv he

loved Jade? Rowdy nodded, wishing he could leave. He wanted this wrapped up soon.

But still one question hung over his head. A question he needed an answer to as much as he needed Nona's ring. "You left me. Why?"

He struggled to keep his breathing slow and steady while he waited for her response. Liv drew away, unable to meet his eyes and he resisted the urge to wipe his sweaty, clammy hands on his jeans.

Joseph stood with a scrape of his chair. "I should go and leave you two to talk now."

"No, sit," Rowdy barked, then started at the harsh tone he'd unintentionally used.

"I think you should talk to your mother alone."

"Stay," Liv said. Joseph slowly sat back down.

Her fingers plucked at Rowdy's hand again and he resisted the urge to jerk his hand back. "I wasn't a very good mother."

Rowdy stayed silent. He wouldn't--couldn't argue with the truth. She hadn't been a very good mother.

"I failed you. And Charlene." She squeezed his fingers and continued, her words painfully slow. "Fear...is a *powerful* motivator."

"Is that why you wouldn't tell the cops the truth?" He frowned at Liv, doing his best not to yell. He'd lived with Big Rob for sixteen years. He knew all about fear, and she'd left him hanging with his ass in the wind. "Why you let him press charges against me? Because you were afraid?" Rowdy angrily demanded. Now he did pull his hand away and shoved his chair away from the table until it bumped the wall.

Her response was more of a twitch than a nod. "Deathly afraid." Then in a stronger voice she added, "At times being dead would have been a relief."

Her frankness took him by surprise and he stayed quiet.

"But I had hoped I could talk him out of pressing charges. That's why, at first, I kept my mouth shut. We even had an argument about it the night before he died. Big Rob got so riled, the nurses made me leave."

The thought of his mother arguing with Big Rob surprised him, too. She'd never, to his knowledge, stood up to his dad. Argued, sassed, or even crossed--*ever!* "You argued about *me?*"

"I wanted him to drop those charges, Rowdy. He knew it was unfair. Sheriff Townsend knew it, too, and talked to him about it earlier that day also."

"So it wasn't my fault? The heart attack?" he asked softly. Rowdy recognized the relief that filled him and slumped heavily in his chair.

"Of course not! Your father was always wound so tight it's a wonder he hadn't stroked out or had a heart attack much sooner."

"But then he died and you left me...and left me feeling like I was responsible...." He let his words trail off, let her fill in the blank and ticked off each slow second until she responded.

"Is that what you thought? That your daddy's death was your fault?"

"That's how *you* made me feel, Liv." Rowdy clamped his mouth shut before he said too much but otherwise, he didn't bother hiding how he felt. Angry and hurt. And he knew she couldn't miss it.

Her face crumpled a bit but instead of tears, she seemed to pull herself together. "I'm sorry. I was ashamed. For so many reasons. Not the least of which was the fact that I was too weak to leave your daddy. I'd done such a poor

job of raising you, I felt like Tim and the Boudreauxs could take better care of you than I could. You were practically grown anyway and I knew Tim would do right by you. You two were always so close.”

“You were ashamed?”

“At what a bad mother I’d been.” She leaned back in the chair, tears in her eyes.

“But you were my *mother!*”

“And I failed you. More than once. I can see how much that bothers you. If it’s any consolation, it bothers me a whole lot more. I’ll never forgive myself for letting you down.”

“I thought he was gonna kill you,” Rowdy explained, referring to the night of the fight.

“So did I, baby. So did I.”

21. DANCEHALLS ARE COUNTRY CLUBS TOO

I spent the rest of the afternoon straightening up. Cleaning was a necessary evil I suffered through and as long as the downstairs was clean, I usually didn't care what my room or office looked like. But with Rowdy coming around so often, and intimately, the least I could do was try.

Then I cooked to burn off nervous tension over tomorrow night. It didn't help much but.... While my chicken cacciatore simmered, I got Rowdy on his cell phone.

"Speak," he barked.

"I cooked." From the background noise, I could tell he was driving, but where in the world was he?

"What's for dinner?"

"Chicken Cacciatore sound good? I was thinking I could bring you some, if you haven't eaten."

"Sounds great. I'm on I-10, about forty minutes out. I should be at the dancehall around quarter to six. Meet me, I got the ring." He sounded gruff and distant and I frowned into the pasta I was stirring. Didn't sound like his mood had improved any since he left this morning.

"Rowdy, where in the world did you go to get a ring?"

"Baytown. I'll see you in a while."

He hung up before I could say another word.

My God, he must have gone to see his mother. No wonder he sounded so bent out of shape! All I needed was a ring.

The timer going off pulled me from my reverie enough to drain the pasta but my mind continued to turn it all over while I ate and showered. I did the full makeup and put on a pair of Levi's and a two-tone purple gingham blouse, grinning in the mirror at myself as I buttoned it up over my new black satin bra.

I packed up Rowdy's dinner--the cacciatore over fussili, steamed broccoli with lemon-pepper butter and a fruit salad of frozen berries, whipped cream and sour cream--and headed out. When I got to the dancehall the parking lot was sparsely populated, but Rowdy's Bronco was there, parked beside a newer model Nissan Xterra.

Inside I found a Boudreaux women's convention in full swing. Everyone I'd seen Monday night was there--except for Mrs. Boudreaux. At Betti's raised eyebrow I held up my canvas tote bag. "I brought Rowdy dinner."

"Did you bring enough for everyone?" she teased from her spot behind the bar. Toni snickered and arched an eyebrow at me.

I paused a second, then shot back with a grin, "Of course not."

She and Toni both laughed and Susie joined in.

"Where is he?"

Susie pointed to an oversized wooden door behind the bar. "Waitresses lounge."

She let me in, then motioned to a door halfway down the dimly lit hallway. "On the right."

The heavy door clicked shut behind me. The wood paneled hallway had the same cement floor as the entryway and was lit by only one bulb. The door

Susie had indicated was cracked open. I gave it a nudge with my foot and found Rowdy dressed in his usual broken in jeans and a plaid pearl-snap shirt. He sat on a ratty green couch, his feet propped on a coffee table that was probably as old as me. A small refrigerator hummed in the corner and against the wall, a small dinette table held an overflowing ashtray centerpiece.

“What’d you bring me?”

“What did you bring me?” I teased back while setting his dinner on the rickety table beside his feet. He sat up, his shoulders bowed. He looked...tired, worn. As if he’d walked from Baytown, not driven.

I reminded myself not to let him push me away or bullshit me as he reached in the bag for the cacciatore and popped the lid off. “Damn this smells good. Want some?”

“It’s all yours. I ate before I left the house.” I pulled out utensils and the rest of his dinner and handed him a fork.

“And didn’t wear a see through shirt. Nice to know you listen to me.” Rowdy took the fork I offered, his eyes never leaving mine, and sat watching me for a minute. I smiled at his teasing and at the slightly proprietary edge to his voice.

“I wore black satin instead.” I wiggled my eyebrows and sat beside him, hoping I could get a smile out of him.

He damn near hummed with tension. I reached up and rubbed his back and he leaned into my fingers. “Eat, baby.”

“Baby?” Rowdy glanced at me over his shoulder, then snapped the lid off the fruit salad. He jabbed the spoon in the dish, paused for a second and turned to me, pulling me to him. I met him half way and wrapped my arms around his neck.

He held my head in his hands and kissed me, deep and hot, borderline painful.

Then rubbed my nose with his. He was breathing as hard as a marathon runner.

I gently pushed his hair back and rubbed his nose again, forcing myself to keep my tone light. "Yeah...*baby*."

I gently scratched his back until some of the tension finally eased from his shoulders and back, and he sagged against me.

"I got your ring," his muffled voice came from my shoulder.

I scrambled for the easiest opening I could find. "You went to see...Liv?"

"Yeah," he groaned. He pushed himself up and looked at me, then pulled a velvet pouch from his shirt pocket. "This was my grandmother's."

Rowdy pulled the ring out of the bag and took my hand, gently pushing it on my finger. A large emerald-cut sapphire with diamond baguettes on either side in what looked like a white gold setting. I was still stuck on grandmother.

"Rowdy, you didn't have to go to so much trouble. My God, it's beautiful."

"Yes, I did. I didn't want you to have anything less than the best for tomorrow night." He kissed my hand, my usually flirty Rowdy nowhere to be seen. He was more serious than I'd ever seen him and I couldn't do anything but lean up and kiss him. The ring was even a near-perfect fit.

The rest we'd sort out.

"Care to talk about it?"

His only reply was a heavy sigh. "Not really; not yet. I should be out there warming up."

"Then eat."

I sat and scratched his back while he ate but we didn't talk. Not really. He told me about his mom's boyfriend and how the three of them had spent a couple

of hours talking but otherwise, he didn't have much to say. I don't think he wanted to look too deeply at what he'd done.

And every once in a while a waitress would wander in, chat for a few minutes, and leave. Obviously, this wasn't the time or place.

Finally he dropped his spoon into the now empty dish that had once held the fruit salad and leaned back against the couch cushions. "You should make that salad for the barbecue."

I snorted with laughter at what hit me as such an off the wall comment after talking about the mother he hadn't seen in nearly a decade.

With one last kiss Rowdy left me to go warm up. In the middle of clearing away our mess, I looked up at the sound of the door opening.

"Hey, Betti."

She sashayed in, as much as she could sashay with her baby belly and shut the door behind her. She was all business with her arms crossed and a grim set to her full lips. "Did you and Rowdy have another fight?"

"No, huh-uh, why?" I wrapped up all the used utensils and stuffed them in the bag on top of the empty dishes.

"He's not himself at all and everyone noticed."

I stood up and looked at her. "So everyone assumed we had a fight and sent you to find out?"

"Yeah," she said softly. "I'd sit, but that couch is just nasty."

"I think it's older than my mother." We both giggled and I scrambled for what to tell her. "Rowdy went to see his mom today."

"My God, how in the hell did you convince him?" She crossed the room and settled on the edge of a dinette chair, her green eyes wide with shock.

"I *didn't*! I feel really bad, too. Everything I've done and everything you taught me has worked. But this whole engagement lie has gotten way out of hand. When my mom was up here, he told her my ring was being resized. It wasn't-- *obviously*. But my dad called this morning and Rowdy accidentally answered the phone." I collapsed in the chair beside hers.

"Uh-oh."

The door squeaked open and Susie came in, shutting it behind her. "Ya'll gossipin' without me?"

We giggled and she joined us at the table. "So what's going on?"

"He went to see his mom." I grimaced at her from across the table.

"My God, girl, you're a miracle worker. You did what none of us could do. Tim's gonna be tickled pink when he finds out."

I shook my head and briefly explained again about my father's phone call. "I didn't do anything, Susie. *Rowdy did!*"

"You might not realize it, but you did. There's no way in hell he would have gone to see Liv without some *strong* motivation. She's gonna be here tomorrow, why should he?" Susie leaned back in the chair, a smile on her face.

Tomorrow night was the family dinner from hell. "Rowdy won't be here tomorrow night to play!"

"I already booked another local band for the weekend. Jessa wanted to be able to spend some time with her family. They haven't seen Hope since her christening."

I blew out a breath of relief and explained about our dinner date with my family. "*That's* why he went to see her."

"Lemme see." Betti held out her hand and I rested mine in it. "That's an

awful damned nice ring. Why not just go to a pawn shop, buy one and return it when you're done?"

"He may not be able to say the words—still waters run deep—but ya done good, girl. You won," Susie added.

"Then why do I feel so crappy?" I pulled my hand from Betti's and curled both in my lap. I'd pushed Rowdy into doing something that had brought him low. So what if he'd insisted, it was my lie that started all this.

"Honey, don't feel crappy." Susie's reassuring squeeze on my fingers didn't make me feel any better. "Rowdy cares about you so much, he slayed his own personal dragon."

"Give him some time," Betti said softly. "Maybe Rowdy's like Ty. When he's a little bent out of shape, he needs some alone time to kinda sort his thoughts out. He'll be alright." Betti lumbered to her feet and patted me on the shoulder.

"Thanks...both of you. I think I'll head home, too."

"Stay for a while," Susie coaxed. "What's your hurry?"

###

I sat at the bar, nursing a Lemon Drop and chatting with Toni. I got to meet her daughter, an absolutely gorgeous brunette who looked just like her. And Toni's twin brothers, handsome, charming blondes but a bit too smooth for my taste. Too refined.

On the band's first break, Rowdy walked me out to my car. "Feeling better?" I squeezed his waist and smiled up at him.

"Yeah, I'll be alright." He opened the car door, but I wasn't quite ready to leave. I hugged him tight and rested my chin on his chest.

"Come snuggle with me later," I offered, hoping I didn't sound like I was

begging.

“Mmm s’tempting.” He pressed a soft kiss to my forehead.

“Rowdy, I promise I won't bug you about today, we don't even have to make love, just sleep. Besides--” I pushed him away with a grin, “--I have to work tomorrow.”

“Alright. And thanks.”

“Hush. And call me when you get close so I can unlock the front door.” I also made a mental note to myself to give him the extra garage door opener. I didn't want Rowdy to think I was pushing, it was just a matter of convenience. Traipsing downstairs at nearly three in morning to let him in wasn't my idea of fun, especially if I had to get up for work a few hours later.

Just after 2:30 the phone rang, waking me. I let Rowdy in and, as promised, didn't say a word after he showered and curled up in bed with me, but I could barely breathe with him plastered firmly against my backside all night.

The next morning I left him sleeping, propping a note by the coffee pot with the extra garage door opener and left for work.

#

“I see your hips have a new rhythm, Chica,” Danny teased, following me down the hall to my office.

“What's it to you?” I grinned, pushing open the door and flipping on the light.

“What's his name?” Danny countered with a chuckle.

I tossed my purse in the extra chair and pulled a sheaf of invoices from my briefcase while my computer booted up. “Who?”

“The man who made you forget to bring me donuts. It's Friday. I need my

fix.”

“Your wife will thank me,” I quipped.

“It’s nice to see you happy.”

“Thanks.”

With a pat on the doorframe, he was gone.

The day flew by and I was never so glad to pull into my driveway. I found a note from Rowdy on the kitchen counter. He’d gone to visit with the relatives and change his clothes for tonight. He’d be back by five. Would I drive, since I knew the way?

I raced upstairs but came to a screeching halt at the sight of my bed...made...with all the little throw pillows in place and everything. *Holy shit!* I couldn’t remember the last time I made my bed *and* put all the pillows on it.

“Hmmpf.” I threw my purse and briefcase in the chaise, then crossed my tidy bedroom to the closet. *What to wear?*

I blew out a heavy breath and spun in a circle, eyeing two racks crammed full of clothes, including the hangars full of tens, twelves, and other assorted sizes that I couldn’t wear anymore. I bypassed a maroon turtleneck dress, a black pantsuit and my red bandana skirt. A lilac silk dress caught my eye but it was short, hitting me just at the knee. I’d bought it on impulse about five months ago, shortly after I’d “met” Rowdy. Only to get home and discover it was too tight, but I’d never bothered to take it back.

HH would have a fit. I lifted the hangar off the bar, stripped and quickly shimmied into it, pulling the back together with my hands. *Perfect.*

The dress looked like a mini-sarong, and left my shoulders bare, catching in a banded collar around my neck.

With a grin I hung it back up and headed for the shower.

I'd just finished fixing my hair when the door slammed.

"Jade!"

"I'm up here!" I threw a t-shirt on over my bra and nylons and went back to work on my makeup while listening to Rowdy's footsteps on the stairs.

I smelled his aftershave before I saw him. I must admit one thing I'd missed the last couple of years was the smell of a man--cologne, aftershave, shaving cream or even honest sweat.

He leaned against the wall separating the vanity/dressing area from my bedroom. "You going like that?"

"Yeah, I thought I might," I quipped, giggling and turning to face him, hands out in a model's pose.

"Nice!" He wiggled his eyebrows at me for emphasis.

"You're a perv, Rowdy Yates." I shook my finger at him but couldn't hide my smile. He was obviously in a better frame of mind. And he looked great too, in a black jacket, light green shirt with matching paisley tie and charcoal slacks.

"You didn't seem to mind last night."

I gave him a couple of once-overs and blatantly sniffed the air.

"Do I pass inspection?"

"Absolutely and you smell good enough to eat."

"Maybe later."

I giggled and gently tugged him down by his lapels for a quick kiss. "You smell so good," I purred, repeating myself. Then pulled him down for a slow kiss too.

"I'm gonna have to wear aftershave more often."

"Chaps?"

He grinned and shook his head. "No, Aspen."

"Sorry." I patted his chest and unhooked my dress from the closet door.

"Where you goin'?" he asked as I stepped into the bathroom.

"To get dressed?" I wiggled my dress at him.

"But I wanted to watch."

I gave him my most pained look.

"What?"

I opened my mouth to speak. Naked in bed I'd finally gotten used to but this.... Words went on strike.

"Dare ya," he whispered, looking me up and down.

I suppose, even if I couldn't say it, my reasoning was pretty obvious. I was still the same woman I'd been when all this started. But Rowdy didn't care.

He held out his hand and I gave him the dress. I reached for the edges of my t-shirt but stopped at the sound of his voice. "You don't have anything to be afraid of. It's just me. Shy."

I smiled, despite the heat in my face, and pulled the shirt over my head, dropping it on the floor at my feet. Then refused to let myself suck in my gut while I kept my breathing slow and steady.

He frowned at my chest. Not exactly the reaction I'd expected. "Why do you wear that damned bra? Is that the same one that leaves those marks in your back?"

"Yea, it's a convertible torture device, and I need it to wear that," I said, pointing to the dress in his hands. The convertible bra could be worn four ways,

including strapless and halter-style. Tonight's choice was halter-style.

I unzipped my dress from the hanger and stepped in, pulling it over my hips. Then shivered a bit as the cool silk tickled my legs.

"Zip me?" I asked, spinning around and presenting Rowdy with my back.

"Guess I won't be bitchin' about my tie, huh?"

22. A REDNECK KNIGHT'S TALE

Rowdy zipped Jade's dress and planted a kiss just beneath her ear. Her unexpected show of shyness made him smile. She'd have to stop it. The idea of spending many of his future Sundays naked in bed with her held a lot of appeal.

"Does my butt look big?" He frowned at her question until he saw the twinkle in her eyes, then grinned and gave one plump cheek of her ass a squeeze.

"Yeah," he drawled. She giggled at his lecherous smile. "You almost ready?"

"I just need to finish my makeup and put my earrings in." She patted his chest and smiled up at him. "Nervous?"

"A little. I know it's all show but..." Rowdy searched for the right words and watched her slip what looked like diamond studs in her ears.

"But?" Jade took a big fluffy brush and added some color to her cheeks, then used another to apply powder to her face.

He watched her, every little movement, unable to keep a smile off his face. It wasn't all show. Her gentleness and quiet understanding the previous night had been just what he'd needed after his afternoon with Liv. Yeah, he was a little nervous, but damn she looked so pretty. "Jade."

"Hmmm?"

"You look beautiful."

She paused, a lip lining pencil halfway to her mouth, and smiled at him through the mirror. "Thank you."

Thank you, be damned. "You're supposed to say 'I know, Rowdy'."

Jade chuckled softly and turned her attention back to her lip liner. He moved up behind her, watching her through the mirror, his hands gently kneading her shoulders. She stood up straight and leaned back against his chest. Rowdy smiled at her, almost laughing at the urge to say 'I Love You.'

"Do you have any idea how beautiful you are?"

Her lips twitched and finally curved into a smile before she ducked her head.

"Look at me, Jade Skye Ballard."

She did, from under her lashes, that shyness he rarely saw anymore now back full force.

"You're perfect," he whispered, smiling at her. "You remind me of a china doll with that pretty skin and those big green eyes."

"I'm not perfect, Rowdy, and I never will be." Some of the light faded from her eyes. "I'm just *me*."

He could see the uncertainty, the sudden unease in the tense lines of her face and spun her around to face him, wrapping his arms around her. He'd developed a weakness for her hugs. She made him feel needy but he didn't mind anymore. "You're perfect for me, Sassy Skye. Just the way you are."

#

Once they got on the highway and were headed north in Jade's Cougar, she pinned him down about lunch and his mom and Joseph.

"Guess I can't avoid your questions now, huh?" He wasn't used to sharing

this part of himself *with* himself, let alone anyone else. But he wanted to with her.

She turned down Sheryl Crow and glanced at him out of the corner of her eye. "So, tell me everything."

"You sound like Liv."

"How come you call your mom Liv?"

"How come you call your mom HH?" he countered with a grin.

"Alright, I'll give you that one." She smiled and squeezed his fingers with her free hand. "Come on, this is about her leaving you with Tim, right? After your dad died?"

"There's a lot more to it than that," he said huskily.

She glanced over at him and touched the brake as a semi changed lanes in front of them. They kept hitting pockets of early evening traffic and he watched her maneuver in and around it a few minutes before he answered.

"Dad was a drunk. A real mean one, and after Charlene ran off, things got worse. One night I found him choking Liv on the living room floor and I went after him."

Rowdy took comfort in the slight tightening of her grip on his fingers. Telling her wasn't quite as bad as he'd feared.

"My God," she whispered. "How old were you?"

"Sixteen."

Her grip on his fingers tightened again. "Poor baby—"

"I'm not a poor baby, Jade." Rowdy swallowed the lump in his throat and focused on the scenery passing by his window until the slowing of the car caught his attention. Jade pulled over onto the shoulder of the road, put the car in park and took off her sunglasses.

He hadn't expected to see tears.

"You're so damned *touchy*!" She scowled briefly then sniffed and kneaded his fingers. "I didn't mean to imply you were. But I can't imagine..." She sniffed again and wiped away a tear.

Rowdy leaned closer. "It's just the way things were. Don't cry. And I didn't mean to get all touchy. It's still hard to talk about."

"Nobody helped ya'll?" Jade ducked her head and he let her cry for just a minute, then continued, gently fingering her hair.

"Not until that last time. Someone finally called the cops."

"And now? How's your mom now? Is everything okay between you two?"

"Everything's okay, I think," he whispered. "And now, Mom doesn't look like Mom but she acts like her. I think that was almost a bigger shock than finding out she had a boyfriend." He laughed and leaned over to kiss her. "She's changed a lot."

"You didn't actually think about her changing, too," Jade said softly once he was done smearing her lipstick.

"No, I didn't," he said, regret filling his voice. "Shit...Sorry."

"Why do you always apologize for swearing?"

"Mr. Boudreaux used to give us extra chores if we swore in front of the ladies." He waited for her giggles to die down, then added, "She thinks we're getting married."

"We'll deal with that later. I wanna ask you something."

"Huh?"

"If your mom's changed, doesn't it stand to reason your sister's really

changed, too?"

She'd thought of the one thing he hadn't. Or maybe the one thing he'd ignored. He slowly nodded. "Yeah, but I'll deal with that after we get done with the prospective in-laws."

"Prospective?" She quirked one slender eyebrow at him.

"Yeah." He snorted. "Okay, would you prefer bogus?"

"That sounds worse. And I feel awful dragging you into all of this."

"Jade."

"Hmmm?" He didn't miss *that look* in her eyes. There was no doubt she felt everything he did. Now if they could just get through dinner with her mother.

"If you don't get this car back on the road, we'll overheat and not make dinner."

"Fine, I can take a hint."

After an onslaught of vehicles passed by, they pulled back on to the highway.

"CD's?" Rowdy redid his seat belt and settled in the bucket seat.

Jade reached behind him into the back seat and pulled out a CD holder.

"Take your pick."

He unzipped the holder and flipped through, looking for something to listen to. "Chris Cagle, Chris Cagle, Chris Cagle," he mumbled.

"Oh please, he's not the only singer I own every CD of."

"Why ya gettin' all het up?" He couldn't hold back a snicker at her frown and her slightly irate tone. As he swapped Sheryl Crow for Chris Cagle and hit play, an idea began to form in his mind. Tomorrow at the barbecue, he'd sing for her.

"I'm not. So, you never answered my e-mail about ShyCowboy."

"That was a nice change of subject."

"Well?" She changed lanes and he could feel the car accelerating as she blew past an oversize SUV.

"I did answer your e-mail."

"Amazingly, I've been so busy lately I haven't had a chance to check," she quipped. He recognized the slightly haughty tone from their run-in's at the dancehall, before he'd known she was his.

"Alright, I'll bite. Would you have talked to a man named ShyRedneck?"

Her laughter filled the car and he joined in.

"Why didn't you pick a musical nickname?"

"Blues Man sounded old. It made me think of B. B. King. And before you ask, all the Cagle related nicknames were taken."

They both laughed again and she swatted him on the arm for that one.

"Okay, smartass, how'd you end up on that Chris Cagle list?"

"I was trolling for chicks." He smiled out the passenger window, waiting for an indignant explosion.

"Robert Rowdon Yates!"

He howled with laughter, then sang along with the CD for a few minutes before picking at her a bit more. "Unlike you, his wasn't the only music list I'm on. Besides is it a crime to like a person's music?"

"I suppose not."

"He doesn't just sing...ballads, ya know," he goaded again, watching for her reaction.

"I know what he sings, thank you very much. And you say that like singing

ballads is a crime.”

“It’s not. I just like givin’ you a hard time.” He tucked her free hand in his and watched her while she drove.

#

Rowdy felt strangely calm as they pulled through the gates of the country club. Unlike Jade, who’d begun to fidget and squirm in her seat. He eyed the passing scenery, the perfectly trimmed hedges and perfect grass. The tennis courts they passed as they rounded the last curve and the drive opened into a parking lot. Rowdy snorted at the sight of a gold Cadillac Escalade.

“What was that for?”

He didn’t miss the edge to her voice. “The Escalade. Breathe, baby.”

“What about the Escalade?” she snapped as she whipped her car into a parking space next to an older Mercedes.

“It’s not a real truck. There isn’t one real truck in the parking lot.” He unsnapped his seat belt and studied her. Jade’s lips were pursed and she was clutching the steering wheel despite the fact that the car was in park.

“This isn’t the Bluebonnet Dancehall,” she shot back.

“We ain’t in Kansas anymore? Is that what you’re saying?” He climbed out, not bothering to wait for a response. Jade was wound tighter than a nun in a whore house. Rowdy circled around to the driver’s side and opened her door.

She clutched his hand, swung her legs out and stood up. Her palm was sweaty and she looked up at him with a frown on her face. “We ain’t anywhere near Kansas, Honey!”

“I can hack it if you can. I know which fork to use. Promise.”

How she managed to laugh and cry he had no idea but she chuckled and her

face crumpled. Her quivering bottom lip nearly did him in. "I know you do. It's me."

"You start with the fork on the outside," he whispered, pulling her near. This time her chuckles turned to giggles.

"I know that." She took a deep breath and clutched at his lapels.

"You're beautiful." And she was, even with the tip of her nose turning a nice shade of pink beneath her makeup.

Jade sighed and shook her head. "I know, Rowdy."

"That's my girl." Rowdy chuckled and leaned down to nuzzle her neck. "Now, what about you?"

"She--" Jade heaved another deep sigh and licked her lips, "--she makes me....I know--"

"Stop it, Jade." He wiped the tears that began to pool beneath her eyes. "She's not worth this! She's just a woman, same as you."

"I *know*...you're right." She paused to wipe the last of her tears away and pulled herself together. "I know I shouldn't care so much, Rowdy, but she *is* my mother." With a watery giggle, she added, "I said some really awful stuff to her last time I saw her."

"Mothers can be real pains in the ass sometimes." That one earned him a real smile.

"And I don't trust her not to pull *something*!"

"You got me. We'll be fine."

"I don't know what to say."

He pulled her tight against him and tucked a few stray hairs behind her ear. "Don't say anything. Tomorrow you get to pay me back when I take you to meet

Liv.”

With a nod, she pushed herself away and blew out a long breath. “Let’s get this over with.”

“Not until you kiss me. For luck.” He pulled her back against him and covered her mouth with his. Her silky dress was soft under his hands as he reached down to cup her bottom and pull her closer.

His blood warmed and he reminded himself they probably had an audience, they had to be somewhere real soon. She moaned in his mouth as he reluctantly broke the kiss. “This isn’t the time or the place for foolin’ around. Be a good girl, don’t crack jokes about your Christmas card list to Her Holiness, and we’ll see,” he said, wiggling his eyebrows for emphasis.

Jade giggled. “Her Holiness? Now that’s carrying things a bit further than she deserves.”

“I’ll say,” came a voice from behind him. Jade’s face lit up as she leaned around his arm.

“Tricky Nicky!”

With his arm wrapped around Jade, Rowdy turned to face the newcomer. Tall, but not as tall as Rowdy, and slender, he was clean shaven and clean cut with his summer tan and streaked hair. Nicky *looked* like money.

As they approached he spoke up. “Introduce us, Pork Rind.”

Rowdy poked up at the insult but Jade’s grip on his arm tightened so he stayed silent--for now--while she introduced him to her little brother. Good natured and a bit spoiled were the impressions Rowdy got. Not spoiled as in bratty but in the way of someone things naturally came easy for. Funny, he’d never picked up that same vibe from Jade.

The trio approached the entrance to the country club, which reminded Rowdy of nothing more than an oversized restaurant with fancy architecture on the outside and lots of landscaping.

"I hope you wore your big girl panties, Pork Rind, because here she comes," Nicky quipped.

That was enough. Rowdy pulled Jade to a screeching halt and stepped in front of Nicky so they were nearly chest to chest. He looked down at the younger man with narrowed eyes. In return, Nicky grinned up at him.

"Rowdy," hissed Jade.

"Don't call her that again."

"Rowdy, it's okay. It's just a nickname."

Rowdy ignored her harsh whispers and repeated himself since Nicky was slow to respond. "Don't call her that again. Ever."

Nicky's smile never faltered. "Welcome to the family."

"Nicky!"

Nicky chuckled. "You two can act like this is a sham engagement all you want. I know better."

Rowdy couldn't hold back his own chuckle as Nicky patted him on the arm and walked toward the front door. Rowdy turned and offered Jade his arm, and they followed just a few steps behind.

"Oh, Gawd. It's just an hour or two, right?"

"Right! You're beautiful, Jade, now walk the walk. Where's that sashay I saw the other night at the dancehall when you were teasing me," he whispered, hoping her brother didn't hear him.

"Thank you, I know," she shakily replied. Her hip bumped him and her

pace slowed just a bit. She blew out another deep breath as they reached Nicky who held the door open for them to pass through first.

But Jade stiffened right back up again once they stepped inside the air conditioned entryway. The walls were pale yellow and the floor was white and gold marble. A huge marble topped table holding an equally large flower arrangement sat smack dab in the middle of the mirror lined entryway.

To one side stood Her Honor, an older man who looked to have a firm grip on her arm and a younger couple. The young woman reminded him more of Nicky than Jade. Despite the slight upward tilt to her nose, Rowdy could see the family resemblance. He smothered a grin, remembering the tart observations Jade had made about her sister and her odd name. Emerald. An attractive younger version of Her Honor, she clung to the arm of a pasty looking man with a beaked nose and even less hair than Rowdy.

Jade's mother greeted them and coolly performed the introductions.
"Robert—"

"His name's Rowdy," Jade blurted out, before he could voice his own hot protest. In all his 26 years, no one had *ever* called him Robert and he wasn't about to start now.

"I beg your pardon?" Trudy demanded with a frown while a smiling Dr. Ballard held out his hand and greeted Rowdy. Thinking of her as Trudy made her less intimidating.

"Rowdy's a nickname, Trudy," the doctor said, giving him another smile.

"Nice to meet you, Dr. Ballard."

"Please, call me Aaron. Emerald, come say hello to your sister's fiancé."

If Emerald's cool expression and limp handshake were any indication, he

didn't pass inspection. Wayne, on the other hand, gave him a firm handshake. Almost *too* firm. Rowdy bit back another chuckle. The lawyer was intimidated by the computer repair man. Irony.

Dr. Ballard...Aaron tried to lead him away from the group but Rowdy paused and snagged a very quiet Jade's arm. He wasn't letting her out of his sight. The trio walked around a corner to a hostess station.

"It's the birthday girl. Back for round two?" quipped a young blonde who could have passed for Emerald's little sister. Perfect was the word that came to mind. They were all perfect. No wonder Jade had been in tears at the thought of coming here.

"Insulting my sister won't get me to take you out, brat," said Nicky from behind them.

"Geneva, could you please seat us?" Aaron quietly asked.

"Certainly, Dr. Ballard." She smiled and led them into the crowded dining room.

As they wound their way among tables, Rowdy glanced at Jade to see how she was doing.

She had that haughty-snotty expression on her face—chin up, lips pursed, eyelashes lowered so you couldn't see her eyes. It reminded him of Emerald and Rowdy decided he had no use for perfect at all. "Hey."

She glanced up at him, the expression in her eyes bordering on arctic.

"Don't make me kiss you right here in front of all these people," he softly threatened.

Her eyes widened and her lips twitched in the tiniest hint of a smile.

"That's better."

From behind him, Rowdy heard a snicker. Nicky. Rowdy got the feeling he might have found a kindred spirit in Jade's brother--as long as he didn't call her that damned name again. *Pork Rind*.

At the table Rowdy seated Jade beside her father then sat on her other side. Nicky took the chair beside him while Trudy sat on the doctor's other side. Emerald and Wayne took the two remaining chairs, leaving one vacant.

"Is someone else joining us?" Jade angrily demanded.

Rowdy draped an arm across the back of her chair, hoping a squeeze of her shoulder would bring her down from the ceiling. He didn't miss how Trudy's frown deepened at the placement of his arm either. He smiled at her and winked. Her lips were pursed so tight, you could barely see her lipstick. Rowdy hadn't expected her to be so silent after their last vocal meeting.

"I have it on the best authority that it's only family tonight," Aaron replied with a slight nod.

A young waiter showed up, announcing that tonight's selections were Chicken Marsala or Beef Wellington and took their drink orders. Gin and tonic seemed to be the drink of the evening, though he and Nicky chose beer and Jade had her usual Lemon Drop. He gently squeezed her shoulder again when she asked the waiter to make it a double.

"So...Rowdy," Wayne began, "what do you do for a living again?"

"A little of this and that, right?" Her Honor asked, eyeing him coolly.

"Yes, ma'am. Computers--"

"Really," Wayne interrupted. "Do you do IT work?"

"I prefer being my own boss. And since I've lived in Bluebonnet all my life, I have a built-in clientele. I build and repair computers."

"I thought you were a musician," Trudy demanded.

"Oh, I do that, too. Three nights a week, and I help Susie out at the dancehall whenever she needs me," he explained, feeling as if he were being cross examined. "During calving and foaling seasons or if we have flooding, I help my brother-in-law with his ranch stock."

"That tall, dark haired young man I met with the ...daughter?"

Rowdy bit his lip to keep from laughing. Rene had apparently left quite an impression on the judge. "Yes, ma'am."

"He trains horses--Tim?" Trudy's eyes flickered from him to Jade and back again. "And his ex-wife, your sister, is in prison for armed robbery and assault with a deadly weapon."

Jade's shocked plea for her mother to stop got mixed up with what sounded like a low warning from Aaron Ballard. But the Judge's expression never wavered, and Rowdy struggled against the low boiling anger in his gut. That and fear. He had a good idea what was coming, even if Jade didn't. Judge Trudy had been a busy little bee.

The waiter returned with their drinks and took their orders before disappearing again. Rowdy spent that few minutes getting himself under control so he didn't lash out and make things worse for Jade--and himself. After all, she'd be his mother-in-law some day. Even so, he doubted they'd ever see much of one another.

"Yes, ma'am, my sister's in prison, but you already know that, since you've obviously done your homework."

"And you, yourself, were arrested for assaulting your own father. It must run in the family," she softly added with a narrow-eyed look in Jade's direction.

Jade scowled at her mother. Beneath the table he felt her hand gently rubbing his thigh. Rowdy curled his fingers around hers, grateful for the comforting gesture. Any sign of weakness and Trudy would be all over him.

“I was booked but released to Tim. I never actually *went* to jail.”

“Only because he died before you could stand trial,” Trudy countered, her voice whiplash sharp.

“That’s right, he did. And I’m sure the devil threw one hell of a party to welcome him home, ma’am.” Rowdy didn’t miss Emerald’s shocked gasp, or Nicky’s smothered laughter or Wayne’s indignant sounding mutterings.

And he didn’t miss the fact that Jade was dying right then and there. “Those charges were bull. Dad knew it, and Mom and the sheriff did too!” *Damn, he’d let the bitch get to him!* Rowdy stood, struggling to keep his tone calm. “Let’s go. Let’s go home.”

Jade’s head drooped for just a minute. She blew out a short, harsh breath then tilted her head back to look up at him. Her green eyes glittered and her expression was surprisingly calm. “Sit, Rowdy.”

23. CONFESSIONS OF A FAILED DEBUTANTE

“Sit!” I tugged at the leg of Rowdy’s pants. Despite the knots in my stomach, it was time I took control of things.

Past time.

Unfortunately for me, getting mad often meant crying. I couldn’t help what amounted to an automatic reaction. Some people get the giggles when they’re nervous. Me, I bawl.

He finally lowered himself into his chair. Despite the tension that vibrated off him, I took comfort in the possessive arm he again draped across my shoulders. I was still working through everything I’d heard in the last few minutes. Obviously Big Rob had more than his fair share of faults.

And so did my mother. *How dare she go digging around in Rowdy’s past!* Though, from what I knew and what I’d just heard, I doubted she had the *whole* story.

No wonder his trip to Baytown had been so difficult. I saw another talk in our very near future. But Rowdy had spent the last fifteen minutes defending us both against everything, shielding me, protecting me, physically and verbally. Now everything finally fell into place.

I was his.

He’d protect me against all enemies--*even my own mother*. Even if he hadn’t said it, even if he couldn’t say it, I knew he cared about me. Susie was

right.

And I'd be damned if I'd sit by and let Her Honorable, The Queen Bitch, run him into the ground.

"Jade, I can't condone you marrying a man who assaulted his own father and put him in the hospital where he later died. My God, his sister's a felon."

"His sister's a felon because she screwed up. She made a mistake. *That's life!* Though of course, you know nothing about making mistakes, do you, Your Honorableness?" I struggled to walk a fine line between anger and not making a scene. I'd be damned if I'd give her more ammunition.

HH's pursed lips opened, but I charged ahead before the building tears hit. "I'm sorry...No, on second thought, I'm damned well *not!* I'm *not* sorry. For anything. For not being *perfect*," I spat out the word as if it were a bite of raw liver—"like you and Emerald. For wanting to live my own life, on my terms. For wanting more than this...this shit!" I waved my hands to indicate the club's posh dining room and well dressed guests.

"Leave me out of your mess, Jade." Emerald's haughty tone came straight from HH's bag of tricks. Beside her, Wayne looked constipated.

"Clone," I tossed back. Two could play that game. I could match her haughty word for word. "I will never be what you want me to be. And you know what? I'm glad! You know what else? I wanna live, I wanna laugh, I want him!" I jerked my head in Rowdy's direction and barely paused for air. "I love him!"

Nicky chuckled.

"Stifle it," I said, pointed a finger in his direction before turning back to my mother. "And what the hell gives you the right to go digging in his past? Who the hell do you think you are?"

“Jade, you have no idea what you’re saying. My God, you don’t even know what love is,” HH hissed, an ugly frown on her face. The brief crack in her façade disappeared as she schooled her features into something sufficiently bland.

From between my grinding molars, I let loose a zinger. “I might not know what love is, but thanks to you, I know what it isn’t.”

She sat bolt upright, her cheeks blazing red as if I’d slapped her. I was so angry and nerved up, I shook. *God please don’t let me cry now.*

At the same time I felt exhilarated. I was lightheaded. Or maybe riding a high from my first--albeit minor--victory. I stood up to her and lived to tell about it.

“And for what it’s worth, Trudy,” Rowdy added. “I love your daughter. She’s the best thing to ever happen to me.”

He called my mother Trudy! I didn’t dare laugh. I’m not sure what surprised me more, that or hearing him publicly announce he loved me. Rowdy might bullshit but he wouldn’t tell an out and out lie. Not about something so important. I took a deep breath and leaned into him, smiling at my mother as my insides turned all warm and mushy.

He loved me.

“Love isn’t about control, or making someone into what *you* want them to be, but about appreciating them for who and what *they* are. I’ll never be thin,” I spat, watching HH flinch. “I’ll never be blonde. I’ll never marry a man like Allan, who, by the way, is a pig and if you can’t see that, I seriously question your abilities as a judge, Mother. I like my *unimportant* job, I like my *tiny* townhouse, I *like* Rowdy’s huge, close-knit family and I can’t wait to meet his mother tomorrow at that family reunion. That’s right, his *mother!*”

By the time I was through, HH was as pale as flour paste.

“Well,” Daddy interrupted, clearing his throat. “You both have my most sincere blessings. And if this is what living away from home has done for you, Jade, maybe we should send Emerald away for a while before her wedding.”

“Dad-dy!” Emerald whined.

I almost burst out laughing at the look of horror on my sister's face. I settled on giving Daddy a grateful smile and a squeeze of his fingers. “Thank you, Daddy.”

“You're welcome, Dear. Trudy, she's made her choice and he's a good, solid, hard-working young man who loves her. You're not the only one who's done their homework. Now leave her be. I want my girls to be happy. And my son, too,” he added with a wink.

“You checked up on Rowdy too, Daddy?”

“Only after he answered your phone the other morning.”

That point I couldn't argue, especially knowing how red my cheeks were right then.

“I promise to take good care of her, sir.”

I patted Rowdy's leg under the table and he covered my fingers with his.

“And I promise to take good care of him.”

“I'll hold you both to that, and one more thing.”

“What's that, Dr. Ballard?” Rowdy asked, his voice gentle.

“Aaron, remember...and grandkids. I want grandkids. *Lots* of them.”

I swallowed and blinked in surprise, caught off guard at my father's request for grandchildren. Rowdy, however, was completely calm. “As long as you don't ask me to name one Forest, we're fine.”

I frowned up at him. "Forest?"

"Green," Rowdy solemnly announced. "We already have a Forest in the family." Everyone but HH and Emerald chuckled at that.

"What about Kelly?" Nicky quipped.

"Very funny. Quit naming my babies." The thought of babies like Hope to cuddle with made me smile but I didn't miss my mother's flinch. I'd won the battle but our personal war would probably rage for years. She'd never accept that I needed to be my own person.

After dinner was served and our waiter disappeared again, Daddy spoke up. "You do know where Jade and Emerald came from?" My father sat back in his chair and fairly preened.

"Aaron, I'm not sure this is the place for a talk on reproduction." Rowdy's calm tone matched Daddy's and that made it all the funnier.

My fork halfway to my mouth, I paused to snort. But when Wayne spewed gin and tonic in his Beef Wellington, I gave it up and howled with laughter, not caring who heard me. Beside me, Rowdy chuckled.

"Oh, dear God," HH mumbled. "Jade, stop laughing." I'm not sure whose face was redder, hers or Emerald's. "Please don't tell that story, Aaron."

The sound of my mother practically begging stifled my giggles. *Spill it, Daddy-O!*

"Oh come now, Dear, it's past time they heard this," Daddy replied, cutting off a piece of his Beef Wellington and forking it up. I ignored my own dinner and waited for him to finish chewing and continue. "You know, in her younger days, your mother wasn't near as uptight as she is now."

Yeah right! I practically bit my tongue in order to not say the words out loud.

“Aaron!”

“Well you are, Dear,” he replied. “Anyway, your grandmother, Pearl had a sister—”

“Ruby?” Rowdy asked with a grin.

Daddy chuckled. “No, son, Opal. Two stones that are similar but different. Both white but beautiful in their own right. Unless it’s a freshwater pearl, which has an iridescence similar to an opal, pearls are smooth, creamy perfection.”

“Classy,” Rowdy said softly while squeezing my shoulder.

“Right, where opals are full of fire and a rainbow of colors. Trudy’s favorite color is green, and when the girls were born, she wanted to name them after different green gemstones to honor her mother and aunt.”

“Why haven’t we ever heard this story before?” Emerald demanded.

“Because your mother thinks it’s silly.”

“So why didn’t I get a green name?” Nick asked.

“Because I named you,” Daddy said with the tiniest smirk.

“Daddy named you after a rock, Nicholas Stone Ballard,” I teased, forking a bite of chicken in my mouth.

Daddy and Rowdy chuckled while HH rolled her eyes and did her best to apparently tune us out, her eyes focused on something or nothing behind me.

I’d nearly finished chewing a bite of my Chicken Marsala when a voice behind me had me gagging.

“Evening, Sweet Nothing.”

Allan! I glared at my mother, happily surprised to watch her eyes widen in

shock.

“Trudy!” Daddy admonished

“I didn’t invite him, Dear. It’s a free country and he’s a member of the club, too.” She looked truly worried. This one she apparently hadn’t planned.

No one spoke. I struggled not to spit out the chicken in my mouth as Rowdy stood up. Visions of him brawling in the club danced through my head.

I forced down the dry lump down, then coughed and sputtered on a gulp of water as I struggled to my feet against the force of Rowdy’s hand on my shoulder. The palm of my hand itched to wipe the condescending smirk off Allan’s face as he looked Rowdy up and down.

“Is this the best you could do, Jade?”

My lip curled and I sneered up at him. “At least with him I don’t have to fake it,” I said softly.

Allan’s smirk disappeared when Rowdy chuckled.

“Don’t talk to her,” Rowdy growled before he could speak. Only an idiot would miss the warning in his voice. The same warning growl he’d used earlier with Nicky. I got all warm and fuzzy again.

Allan’s scowl turned cool and assessing as he focused his attention fully on Rowdy.

“You’re not worthy, you fucking bottom feeder.”

I nearly choked on my heart at Rowdy’s hot menacing tone.

“I will talk to whomever I please.” Allan’s voice held the same tone I heard so often in my mother’s. The divine right of the rich and powerful. Or in this case, a rich, spoiled man.

“How many lawyer jokes are there?” I did my best to control the internal

tremors left over from my run-in with HH.

“Not enough,” Nicky replied. “Waiter!”

I smirked at Allan as Nicky appeared on Rowdy's other side.

The overlarge and nearly full dining room had gone suspiciously quiet as two waiters, a college student and an older man with a touch of gray at his temples, slowly approached. There were probably few people present who didn't know my history with Allan.

“You're not even fit to look at her. You ever look at her, you ever talk to her again, and I'll rip you to shreds.” As he spoke, Rowdy moved closer and closer until the only way Allan could get away was to back up.

“Is there a problem?” one of the waiters softly asked.

“He's interrupted our dinner,” Nicky announced in a tone that would have made HH proud.

“I'm going. I'm going. But before I do, let me just say I hope you have a good job. Because liposuction is expensive and she'll need plenty. I always knew she'd end up big as a house.”

He turned away, Rowdy tapped him on the shoulder, and I flinched and squealed as Rowdy's fist landed a blow that laid Allan out on the floor.

Rowdy mouthed an “I'm sorry” while shaking the sting out of his fist.

“Blood will out,” my mother snidely quipped, her eyes on me. The war truly would never end.

“Oh, hush up!”

“I told you, ma'am. I protect my girls. Dr. and Judge Ballard, I think we'll be going now,” he said, scooting in his chair. I lifted my purse from where I'd hung it on the back of mine.

“Nonsense, sit!” Daddy insisted, standing and motioning to Rowdy’s chair and mine.

Rowdy and I looked at each other and nodded simultaneously.

“Yeah,” Nicky added. “I’d like to hear about this family reunion. Any single women?”

I could have kissed my daddy. And Nicky too.

“I’m sure Rowdy doesn’t want you dating his elderly in-laws,” Wayne spoke up for the first time in a while, and as usual his wit fell short of its mark.

“You’re more than welcome to come.” Rowdy pulled out my chair and I sat while he resigned us to purgatory. “Between the family and friends, I’m sure we’ll find you a good ole girl to hook up with.”

I smothered a giggle at the sound of my mother choking on her tongue and picked at my rapidly cooling dinner. The visual of HH on the Boudreaux ranch nearly did me in. Lucky for her our engagement was a fraud. That thought sobered me rather quickly. He loved me, and that was enough for now.

The rest of our meal passed quietly, thank God, if not comfortably. Her Honorable retired to the bar with Wayne and Emerald for an after dinner drink while Daddy and Nicky walked Rowdy and I outside. I held onto Nicky’s arm while Daddy and Rowdy walked ahead of us, Rowdy giving him direction to Bluebonnet.

At my car Daddy hugged and kissed me. “If nothing else, you very well could see Nicky and I this weekend. I’d like to meet your future in-laws. They sound like quite a bunch.”

Guilt burned my gut. *Hell!*

“We’ll look forward to seeing you, sir.”

#

We both stayed quiet until I hit I-35 and we were headed south again.

“Rowdy?” I traced my fingers down his arm to his hand and wrapped them in his.

“Hmmm?”

“That was the other reason you went to see your mom, wasn’t it? Because he had you arrested?”

“I thought he was gonna kill her,” Rowdy said softly.

“So you stepped in, tried to protect your mom?” *Protecting his mother would have been such a Rowdy thing to do.* I eased up on the gas and set the cruise control at sixty-five. “And then she left you.”

“Yeah,” he softly growled, his thumb gently stroking mine. “I knew if I went to get the ring, I couldn’t leave without asking her why. So I did, and she said she was ashamed. For not being a better mother. And all this time I thought...she blamed me.”

No wonder today’s lunch with his mother had meant so much to him. Emotionally, I was exhausted. Today had been...educational to say the least, and we still had tomorrow to get through. I slowly blew out a heavy breath. “Why did you invite my dad when your family knows we’re not engaged.”

“I like your dad.” He sighed and I felt his eyes on me.

I chuckled and squeezed his fingers. “We’re quite a pair, huh?”

“We make a pretty good team.”

And he loved me. The rest of the drive passed in relative silence. A comfortable warm silence with us holding hands nearly the entire trip and Rowdy serenading me with the CD Player. No man had ever sung to me. I found myself aroused in a way I’d never been before. I wanted to pull the car over onto the side

of the highway and neck with him. I felt all achy and warm, as if I were drowning. I was in heat. A cat. I practically purred every time he touched me.

"You staying the night?" I asked as I pulled into my driveway and the garage door slowly rose.

Despite the evening's...revelations...I was still hesitant about pushing too hard.

"I'd like that," he drawled, his voice low and husky.

"What time do we have to be at the Boudreaux's?" I eased the car into the garage and killed the engine.

"Whenever." There was no hiding the gruffness of his voice in the sudden silence of the car. I recognized it as almost the same gruff tone he'd had when he returned from Baytown with the ring. "Some time late morning."

I unsnapped my seat belt and turned to face him. "You've been awful quiet."

"So have you." He unsnapped his and leaned toward me, his fingers gently tracing my hairline and tucking my hair behind my ear.

"Rowdy Yates, what am I gonna do with you?"

"Just love me. That's all I've ever wanted," he whispered against my lips.

"I do. You know I do." I flicked my tongue out and licked his lips, inhaling deeply. I wanted to memorize his cologne and the musky male scent that was all Rowdy.

"Jade," he hissed against my lips, opening his mouth under mine. I moaned at the feel of his smooth tongue sliding against mine. The kiss was surprisingly gentle and seductively erotic, light but deep. No teeth, no expressions of deep hunger, just a soft exploration that left me wanting so much more. That same

warm wanting feeling I'd had all the way home. Only more intense.

"Race you inside."

I chuckled against his lips and opened my car door. The light and the door's dinging motivated me—us—to head inside, through the darkened townhouse and upstairs.

By the time I reached the top of the stairs I was out of breath and barely able to walk from laughing so hard. Rowdy had pinched my bottom, teased me and goosed me all the way up the stairs. I was lucky I hadn't twisted an ankle in my heels.

I stopped just inside the bedroom door and shook my finger at him, gasping for air. "Paybacks are a bitch."

He caught my index finger in his hand and walked me backward toward the bed. "What are you gonna do, little Skye Baby?" he panted, his blue eyes full of laughter and challenge.

Rowdy's eyes locked with mine as he drew my finger in his mouth. His warm rough tongue heated me inside and out. The laughter on his face disappeared, replaced with something dark and hot. I pulled my finger free and replaced it with my lips.

"I wanna make love to you," I whispered against his mouth.

"Co'mere." He wrapped his arms around my waist and pulled me tight against him.

"Huh?" I whispered against his lips.

"We want the same thing."

###

"Nervous?" Rowdy asked as he turned into the private road leading to the

Boudreaux ranch.

“No. Should I be? It’s not like meeting my mom.”

Rowdy chuckled. “If anything, Liv’ll question you to death, and of course, Maggie’ll feed ya till you burst. Which would make our engagement null and void, I suppose.”

I giggled as he pulled in Tim’s driveway and parked. “We never did figure out what to do about that.”

“About what.”

“The...uh engagement? Hello!”

“You know I love you--”

“Hush.” I reached out and squeezed his hand that rested on the gear shift. I certainly didn’t want him to feel like he *had* to propose just because he’d said he loved me. “I can deal. And for the record, I know marriage to you would be the best thing I ever did, but we don’t have to make this decision right now, Rowdy. It’s the lying that bothers me.” But there was no doubt in my mind that Rowdy was my soul mate, the man I would spend the rest of my life laughing and loving and probably arguing with.

He patted the console, inviting me to sit beside him, but a knock on the Bronco’s back window interrupted us. We both sighed and laughed as he rolled down the window and greeted Tim. Rowdy’s family’s interference was nothing like Her Honorable’s.

“Liv’s askin’ for you two. Someone told her ya’ll were here.”

“We were talking,” Rowdy growled.

“It’s all right.” I squeezed his shoulder and smiled at Tim. “We can finish this later.”

We both climbed out and Rowdy grabbed the fruit salad from the back seat. At the crack of dawn he'd begged me to make it, then dragged me back to bed and made love to me again to say thank you.

Tim took the oversized ceramic bowl from him, stuck his finger under the plastic wrap and scooped up a fingerful. "Damn girl, that's some good shit," he said, licking any remains off his lips.

"It's not *shit*, it's *fruit salad*." I wrapped an arm around Rowdy's waist and stuck my nose in the air while they both laughed.

"Alright, fine. I'll take this inside. Liv's around back." Tim took off for the Boudreaux's front door.

Before we'd taken two steps Rowdy came to a screeching halt in the middle of the dirt road.

"What's the matter?" I frowned up at him, worried he'd been hit with a sudden attack of nerves and decided to turn chicken.

"My guitar." He pulled his keys from his pocket and got his acoustic guitar from the back of the truck. "I promised Liv."

Hand in hand we crossed the road and circled around to the back of the house.

"We never did finish our talk," I said softly. The yard was full of people. More than I could ever hope to keep straight. And at one end they'd erected a small stage complete with a tarp awning for shade.

"You worry too much, woman." Rowdy never stopped, just continued to thread his way through the crowded back yard a step ahead of me, my hand safely tucked in his.

"Woman?" Before I could tell him how much I didn't appreciate being

called woman, Rowdy turned around. And before I could crash into him, he snaked an arm around my waist and pulled me near. He smiled down at me over the edge of his sunglasses.

“Relax, Skyebaby. I got it covered.”

24. JUST LOVE ME

If not for his brother, Rowdy could have introduced Jade to Liv as his real fiancé. And wouldn't Susie just have a fit. He couldn't hold back a grin. Jade had no idea what she was in for. He wound his way through the crowd, greeting old friends and family--tons and tons of family. If Jade's dad wanted kids to practice being a granddaddy to, this was the place.

"Kei?" He pulled Jade to a halt in front of Keilana Boudreaux, Zander's wife. The forensic anthropologist.

"Rowdy!" She threw an arm around his neck, forcing him to drop Jade's hand and his guitar. He kissed and hugged her then lifted two-year-old Darach from her arms.

"Mind if I borrow him?"

"Only if you introduce me." She smiled and nodded in Jade's direction while Darach wrapped his arms around Rowdy's neck and smiled at him. With his daddy's blue eyes and his momma's dark curls, Darach was a lady-killer in the making. Rowdy blew raspberries on his neck until he squirmed and screamed with laughter.

Then he introduced the two ladies, smiling at the excitement on Jade's face over meeting a real forensic anthropologist. And introduced Darach. "Honey, this is Forest."

"Rowdy!" Kei scolded.

He laughed at Kei's frown and Jade's questioning smile. "His middle name is Nahele...that's Hawaiian for forest."

"Only you." Jade sighed and shook her head, then fussed over Darach before they handed him back to his mother and moved on.

Rowdy wrapped an arm around Jade's shoulder and guided her to where Liv stood under the porch talking to Toni. "Nervous?"

"There's so many of them," Jade replied with a soft giggle.

He stopped again and leaned down to whisper in her ear, to reassure her, but never got the chance. Someone slapped him on the back. He turned around to see one of Jessa's brothers grin and wave and waved back. And someone else called his name.

"Row-dy! Over here."

"I tried," he whispered, kissing her earlobe. A big crowded back yard wasn't the place for what he had in mind anyway. Liv, Toni and Toni's daughter, Nicholette, stood watching him, and he didn't miss the nudge Toni gave his mom. Or the way her face lit up.

Rowdy set down his guitar case again and Liv caught him in a hug and practically smothered him in kisses. He and Mom needed to have a heart-to-heart soon about her public displays of affection. He grinned and hugged her back, letting her smother him--a little.

"Liv, let the boy catch his breath," came a voice from nearby.

Rowdy forced her to let him come up for air and turned to find Jade and Joseph shaking hands.

"Liv!" Tim laughingly shouted from the porch above them, pointing in Jade's direction. "There's the one you want."

Jade blinked and giggled at Tim's announcement and Liv refused to let go of him as she closed the short distance between herself and Jade.

"Well, Liv, what do you think of your future daughter-in-law?" Joseph beamed from beside Jade.

Jade's jaw tightened. Rowdy could see her working to keep her smile in place and struggled against the urge to laugh. Lucky he still had his sunglasses on. He got even more tickled when his mom hugged Jade, then held her at arm's length for inspection. "I'm so happy for you!" Liv gushed with a big sappy sigh, then hugged him again and continued chattering away. "She's just as wonderful as you said. Have you two set a date?"

"M-Mrs.--" Jade stammered.

"Liv, honey. You can call me Liv just like Rowdy does."

Did he put her out of her misery now or tease her? "We were thinking early next summer." Rowdy didn't miss the slight widening of Jade's eyes.

"Oh, a June wedding would be so sweet." Liv squeezed his side and smiled from him to Jade.

"No!" Jade shouted, causing a few people to turn and stare.

"No?" Liv quizzed.

Rowdy looked at Joseph and shrugged as if to say "women". "We don't have to get married in June, honey."

"June's bad. My last wedding--almost wedding was in June."

"How about late May then?" he suggested. From over the top of his mother's head, he gave her his most innocent smile.

"You could always get married on the Fourth of July," Toni suggested joining them again.

“Which just happens to be your birthday.” Before Rowdy could protest or ride to the rescue, Liv dragged Jade off, peppering her with questions.

Jade was gonna kill him.

With a smile on his face, Rowdy joined Tim on the porch, Toni on his heels. “Row-dy! How could you let your Mama think you two are getting married,” she angrily hissed.

Rowdy stayed silent, his smile never wavering as he looked from Toni, to Tim, Zander, Zack and Ty. “What time do we eat?”

#

After the band played a set and everyone ate lunch Jade dragged Rowdy out to the front porch. “Rowdy! What are we going to do?” she hissed as they rounded the corner.

“Relax,” he murmured, sitting in an oversized rocker and pulling her down on his lap. “I got it covered.”

“That’s all well and good, but your mother is planning our wedding!”

He pulled her close so she had no choice but to put her arms around him or prop herself up against his chest. “You sure are pretty when you get all het up.”

“Rowdy Yates, what am I gonna do with you?” she whispered, her lips inches from his. He didn’t miss the concern in her eyes and found himself sorely tempted to put her out of her misery. Instead he kissed her, lightly tracing her lips with his tongue before slipping deeper. He explored every inch of her mouth, enjoying their few minutes of privacy. And the feel of her cuddled against him.

“I already answered that. A couple of times. Having a good time?” he whispered as another car pulled into the drive. A slightly dusty dark blue Mercedes. Similar to the one they’d parked next to the previous night.

“Oh my God, Rowdy, it’s Daddy and Nicky! What are we going to do?”

“No one has said a word about the engagement, have they?” Rowdy did his best to hold back a snicker. Not only were her dad and brother here, someone was walking the porch headed their way. He smiled at Susie as she rounded the corner, sans Kane.

“Rowdy, I need to speak with you.”

He patted Jade’s leg, signaling for her to stand up. “Could you go tell your dad hey while I talk to Susie?”

Jade glanced from Susie to him and back again before nodding. Rowdy stood and draped an arm around Susie’s shoulder, watching Jade greet her dad and Nicky.

“I oughta have Jerrod take you to the barn and whup your ass, young man!”

“What did I do?” he muttered, waving at his future in-laws. *Thank God they hadn’t brought Judge Trudy.*

“I’m thrilled you’ve made up with Liv, I’m beside myself you’ve worked things out so happily with Jade but Liv’s talked about nothing but your wedding all day to anyone who will listen!” She tightened her grip on his upper arm as she talked. “You’re going to break her heart when she finds out--”

“Wanna meet Jade’s daddy?” He led her across the porch and down the steps, doing his best to ignore her indignant sputterings.

Susie was on her best behavior during the introductions, then Rowdy pulled Nicky aside and led him toward the backyard. “Sus, would you introduce Dr. Ballard around? Nicky and I have business to take care of.”

With a low, self-satisfied chuckle, he led Nicky away.

“So, what’s this all about?”

"I got someone I want you to meet," Rowdy replied, winding his way toward a picnic table situated in a far corner.

"Which one of those pretty girls sitting at that table are you going to introduce me to? And have you and my sister come to some sort of permanent decision?"

"Kellie, the redhead. And, yes I do believe we have."

"Oh, man...that's good. That's good you have. Oh, man, she's pretty."

They stopped a few steps from the table where Kei, Toni, her best friend Kellie, Nicholette and Rene sat chatting. "See the dark haired woman sitting next to Kellie?"

"Uh-huh."

"That's Toni. If you hurt Kel, Toni will hurt you," he muttered with a nod.

"She's a doll."

"Your mom'll hate her," Rowdy warned with a smile.

"How come?"

"She's a waitress at the dancehall." Rowdy led Nicky to the table and introduced him to Kellie, smirking at the blush on her face and the frown on Toni's. With one last small salute he took off to find Jade. He found her standing at the bottom of the back porch steps with her father and Jessa's, listening while they discussed Montana—from a geological aspect. Maybe now would be a good time to steal her away for a few. They could go for a walk...

"Rowdy!" Jessa hollered from the stage. "Time to play!"

Then again maybe not. "Be right there!"

"Jade, would you like to hold Hope?" Jason Stratton offered, patting his first granddaughter's diapered bottom.

“Of course, she would. She needs the practice, right Baby?” Rowdy grinned and pressed a kiss to her temple. He didn’t miss her muttered threat to do him bodily harm if he didn’t stop.

With one last kiss he took off for the stage and stayed there, but for the occasional break to kiss and pick at Jade. While he played, Rowdy watched his mom and the woman he loved sit and chat like old friends, despite Jade's distress over their lie. And he’d watched Aaron and Nicky Ballard spend some time getting to know his family--and Kellie too.

He stayed put, enjoying a good old fashioned jam session with anyone musically inclined to join in. Everybody who could, had sung or played something. Everybody but him. He was exhausted but today had been one of the best he could remember.

The sun had begun to sink, though it’d be hours before it actually set. People were slowing down, exhausted after a day of beer and good food, and he sat on Jessa’s stool picking out random notes with just Bo Foster for company.

“What’cha gonna play,” Bo muttered.

“Just thinkin’.” He sat and continued to pick. Jessa sat in a nearby chair, nursing Hope. Her older brother Travis had crashed out on Maggie’s couch after spending the day playing with his cousins. And up on the porch Ty and Betti sat cuddled up on a swing.

Jade finally crossed his line of vision, little Darach Boudreaux on her hip. She handed him back to his mother, who sat in front of Rowdy chatting with Jessa. Errand done, Jade turned and smiled up at him, settling on the bench beside Kei.

Bo pulled up a stool and sat beside him, resting his fiddle on his leg, his bow clutched in the other. “You gonna sing something, or what?”

Rowdy whispered in Bo's ear, then smiled down at Jade. "I'm gonna sing something, I think. Any special requests, Honey?"

Jessa burst out laughing but Rowdy shushed her before she could say anything. "Well?"

Jade's grin would have done the Cheshire Cat proud. "Surprise me."

"Come help me." He softly strummed his guitar and smirked down at her, waiting to see if she'd rise to the challenge.

"I can't sing," Jade insisted, vigorously shaking her head while Kei and Jessa cheered her on. She frowned up at him, panic written all over her face. Jessa stood and gave her a little shove toward the stage. "I can't sing!" Jade protested.

"Then come inspire me. Come on," he coaxed, doing his best not to laugh. "Come stand up here next to me."

"I'm waitin' on you, boss," Bo murmured, giving Jade a hand up.

Rowdy nodded and strummed a few bars, watching Jade to see if she'd catch on. She didn't. But she jumped ten feet when Bo set a mike stand in front of her.

She backed away and waved her hands in protest. "*I don't sing!*"

"Scars heal, glory fades," Rowdy softly sang in between fits of laughter.

"*Chicks Dig It?* You're gonna serenade me with *Chicks Dig It?*" she asked with a frown on her face. More than one person in the crowd laughed but he caught a puzzled frown on Kei's face.

"I guess I should explain. For those of you that don't know, Jade and I met on an e-mail list for Chris Cagle fans. So, I thought, maybe I could sing her...a Chris Cagle song. Of course. How about *Night on the Country*," he asked with a

wicked grin, thinking of their late night horseback ride. Apparently she did too. Her face turned bright red.

“How about *Ton of Love*?” she practically demanded from between gritted teeth.

“I got your ton of love, Honey.” He winked and nodded at Ty who joined them, drumsticks in hands.

“Muh Gawd,” Jade muttered, hanging her head.

Ty stopped laughing long enough to shake his drumsticks at him. “You’re gonna get yourself in big trouble, bubba!”

Jessa sat in the front row, howling with laughter.

“Alright, alright, alright, I guess I’m gonna play something now, since you won’t choose.” He nodded in Bo’s direction and they played the opening notes again. Jade’s mouth slowly sagged open and her eyes widened.

And he sang, “I’ll never be anybody’s hero...No wait stop! Stop!”

Bo and Ty came to a screeching halt—literally in Bo’s case—and Jade frowned. Rowdy sighed. “I’ve waited all day for my turn to sing, and I have to get this right, k?”

“Kay,” she whispered in the microphone, her huge eyes glued to his face.

“You’ve asked me repeatedly what to do with me.”

She wasn’t the only one to laugh, despite the shine of tears in her eyes, and he held up his hand for silence. “And I keep givin’ you the same answer. *Just Love Me*, honey.”

Her lower lip started to quiver.

Rowdy ignored it and plowed on, “I don’t think there’s any other song...I don’t even know if I could come up with the *words* to tell you how I feel as well as

that song says it. I'm no poet. I-I'm just a simple man, like the song says. But I'll always do my best by you. I'll be the best husband and father that I can, if you'll let me. All I have ever wanted from you, Jade Skye Ballard, was for you to just love me. But now I want something else. Are you up for the challenge? Will you be my life? My wife?"

"Yes."

EPILOGUE
TWO WEEKS LATER

“Finished?” I asked softly from the door of Rowdy’s office. I’d stood there for the last five minutes listening to him type, afraid to interrupt.

“Wanna read it?” Rowdy spun around in his chair and pulled a piece of paper off the printer.

“Do you want me to?” I slowly crossed the room and waited to see what he’d say. The two weeks since our *real* engagement had been a beehive of activity--and explanations. Lucky for us Daddy and Liv had been able to see the humor in our whole charade. And Susie hadn’t stopped smirking. But then, neither had I.

I’d found everything I wanted in my Redneck Casanova.

“Yeah,” he said, his voice all gruff. He held out his arm and I sat in his lap. I took the letter from him and read it.

Dear Charlene,

You’re right. You were a lousy sister, but then, I’ve been a pretty lousy brother. Guess that makes us even, huh? You could have told me mom had a boyfriend. Or maybe I’m telling you--his name’s Joseph and he’s pretty cool.

I don’t really know what to say except I’m sorry for being such an

ass. And I hope you're home for my wedding in May, but if not, that's okay. I know we'll see you soon.

I'm sorry about before. I missed you. Write soon.

Love,

Rowdy