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Undenied

Maya Banks

Dedication

To Jennifer for being so willing to help on short notice.

Chapter One

Wes Hoffman pulled into the parking lot of Zack's Bar and Grill and killed the engine. He looked around in surprise as he got out. It was awfully crowded for a Thursday night.

As he walked closer to the door, he could hear the raucous laughter from inside. When he actually stepped into the bar, he winced as a set of girly shrieks from hell pierced his eardrums.

He glanced around the room to see a hoard of females clustered in the corner. Ah hell, he'd stumbled into a girls' night out? And not just any girls' night out. These looked to be hellions.

His eyebrows lifted when one of them plunked down her drink and climbed on top of the table amidst hoots and shouts of encouragement from her friends. She proceeded to do a loud rendition of a twangy country song before being coaxed back down by one of the other girls.

Wes headed for the bar in full retreat mode. Zack slid a cold bottle down the bar as Wes plopped onto a barstool.

"Thanks," he said as he raised the bottle to his lips. Then he nodded in the direction of the chaos. "What the fuck is going on tonight?"

Zack chuckled and flipped his towel over his shoulder. "Bachelorette party."

Wes groaned. "Say no more."

"What brings you out tonight anyway?" Zack asked as he resumed pouring a round of drinks. "You're usually over at Jeremy's your nights off."

"They've all turned into a bunch of damn pussies," Wes grumbled.

Zack burst out laughing. "I assume you're talking about the female influence on the male members of your circle?"

Wes took a long chug of the beer. "Got it in one. Babies, wives..." He shook his head. "And then I come here expecting a nice quiet drink and find a bunch of screaming women."

Zach laughed again. "You sound down on the fairer sex, my friend."

Wes grinned. "Oh no, I wouldn't badmouth them. I love them far too much for that. I'm just pissed because everyone I know is at home getting laid, and I'm sitting here bitching to you like a goddamn old man."

Zack inclined his head in the direction of the ruckus. "Plenty of women over there."

Wes snorted. "I don't do about-to-become-attached women."

"Well, hell, they aren't all getting married. Just one."

"Which one?" Wes asked as he swiveled on his barstool.

"The blonde sitting by the redhead over in the corner. Ah hell, is that lingerie they're breaking out?"

"Looks like it," Wes said as his gaze swept over the group. He stopped on one and stared for a long moment, studying her profile. There was something about her.

"Who's the brunette on the end?" he asked Zack. "The one wearing the cowboy hat. I swear I've seen her somewhere before."

"Dunno. The bride-to-be said she had a lot of out-of-towners coming in for the wedding."

Wes continued to stare, the niggling growing stronger. Where had he seen her? As he sat watching her, she turned and looked in his direction. Their eyes locked and a burst of recognition hit him directly in the chest.

Her eyes widened in surprise and then she smiled. She stood and began making her way toward him.

Heat rushed up his neck as humiliation set in. *Fuck me. Oh Lord, anyone but Payton Ricci.* He stood, nearly knocking his beer over in his haste to be as far away from there as possible.

"Wes Hoffman?"

Her voice, husky and sweet, only added to his guilt.

And then she launched herself at him. One minute she was standing just a few feet away and the next she was in his arms, legs wrapped around his waist.

"It is you!" she exclaimed.

One hand clapped on top of the straw cowboy hat she wore and the other hand curled around his neck, holding on for dear life.

Then she yanked off the hat and tossed it onto the bar before she wrapped both hands around his neck and planted her lips on his.

He registered a hot, needy mouth, but his shock and embarrassment was too great for him to do anything but stand there wishing the floor could open up and swallow him.

Finally she pulled away and slid down his body until her feet hit the floor. She cocked her head to the side, her blue eyes sparkling with mischief. "Do you not remember me?"

He cleared his throat. On one hand he wanted to plead ignorance but then she'd no doubt explain just *how* they knew each other, and he really didn't need the details all over again. On the other hand, he had no desire to hurt her feelings. He'd already done enough damage to her.

"Of course I remember you, Payton." He even managed what he hoped was a sincere smile.

"I can't believe you're still here, I mean living here. I figured you'd have left right after high school. Didn't you have a scholarship to A&M to play ball?"

Her smile and enthusiasm discomfited him. Why was she being so damn nice to him? He eased awkwardly back onto the barstool and motioned for Zack.

Zack walked over, a smirk on his face that Wes really wanted to wipe off with a well-placed fist.

"Can I get you a drink?" Wes asked, not really knowing what else to say to a woman he'd never expected to see again.

She bounced onto the stool next to him and turned her dynamite smile on Zack, who promptly melted into a pile of slush. Damn fool.

"I'll take a water," she said.

She turned back to Wes, a million questions burning in her eyes. "Well? Tell me about you. What are you doing these days?"

His tongue felt thick in his mouth. Like he'd just swallowed a cup of sawdust or eaten a dozen crackers without a drink.

She looked beautiful, but then she'd always been gorgeous. The years had been good to her, how long had it been? Eleven? Twelve years? Good God, it had been twelve years. She'd been sixteen then. Sweet, innocent and so very beautiful.

She hadn't changed much. Not now when he soaked in her appearance up close and personal. She still had a sparkle about her, something that inexplicably drew him to her, just like it had twelve years ago.

"Wes? Are you all right?"

He blinked and opened his mouth to try and say something to smooth over the awkwardness of the situation, but damned if he knew what to say. Sorry? Apologize for hurting her? Apologize for being a clumsy, inexperienced dumbass?

"I'm fine," he mumbled. He looked around...for what, help? He met Zack's gaze, sure panic was etched in his features.

Zack looked curiously back at him, nodded once in silent understanding then reached for the phone under the counter. A few seconds later, Wes's cell phone rang.

Wes yanked up his phone, knowing when he answered there wouldn't be anyone on the other end, but he gripped the receiver like a lifeline.

"Yeah," he said shortly. He waited an appropriate amount of time before saying, "Okay, I'll be right in."

He closed the phone and donned an expression of regret. "That was the station. I'm a local cop. They need me to come in. I'll, uh, catch you another time."

"Oh," she said. "Well, it was nice to see you again." She flashed a smile that didn't quite reach to her eyes, eyes that reflected suspicion.

“Uh, yeah, you too,” Wes hedged. He nodded in Zack’s direction. “Thanks, man. I’ll see you later.”

He turned tail and all but ran the hell out of the bar. When he reached the outside, he sucked in several breaths, trying to rid himself of the embarrassment blazing a torch over his face.

Bless Zack for resorting to the oldest trick in their repertoire. It wasn’t something they’d done in a long time, the last when a very drunk, very married woman had come on to Wes. He definitely owed Zack for this one, and he’d be more than happy to pay up.

Payton sighed and turned her attention to Zack. She pinned him with her stare and arched one eyebrow. “Slick move if I do say so myself.”

His eyes widened in exaggerated surprise.

She snorted. “Don’t play innocent with me. Come on. That has to be one of the lamest tricks ever. You guys were so obvious, a blind man could have ratted you out.”

He chuckled but had the grace to look abashed.

“So what’s his problem?” she asked as she looked again at the doorway Wes had fled out of. “I mean it wasn’t like I threatened to rape him.”

Zack shrugged. “Honestly? I have no clue. I’ve never seen him act like that. I was kinda hoping you could clue me in. How do you two know each other anyway?”

She smiled, the soft echo of a memory, a much younger, innocent memory whispering across her mind. “I knew him in high school.”

“That’s all? I was sure by the way he was acting that you were some crazed felon he’d arrested before or something.”

“Yeah, you’d think,” she murmured.

“Can I get you something stronger than water?” he offered. “My treat to make up for the dirty trick I pulled.”

She smiled. “Thanks, but no. I’m stuck driving all these lunatics home after they’ve gotten too drunk to remember their names.”

He turned to acknowledge another customer who'd walked up to the bar but then he looked back at her again. "I don't know what was up Wes's ass tonight, but he's really a good guy. Couldn't ask for better."

"I'll remember that," she said dryly.

She swung around on her stool and leaned her back against the bar, glass of water in hand. She sipped idly as she watched her girlfriends laugh and whoop it up.

Wes Hoffman. After all these years. And lordy but he'd grown up well. As much as he sent her hormones buzzing when she was sixteen, her adult girly parts were all a-tingle from a simple glance.

When she'd driven into town, she'd wondered about him. Wondered if she'd run into him or if he'd long since left the small town they'd grown up in. But here he was, a cop, apparently still quite rooted in the community.

Had she grown up so awful? Had the idea of seeing her again been so horrible that he'd tucked tail and run at first sight? Because that's exactly what he'd done, and the expression on his face when he'd seen her... Well, it couldn't exactly be classified as priceless.

She sniffed in irritation. She might not be a playboy centerfold, but she wasn't paper bag ugly either. And she knew damn well she had a decent body. Never had a man run from her like Wes Hoffman just had.

The more she thought about it, the more pissed she got. Was that any way to react to someone you hadn't seen in twelve years? Would a "hey nice to see you!" be too much to ask for?

Jerk. Gorgeous, hunky jerk, but a jerk nonetheless. God, she was a sucker for a man with a goatee. It had bristled across her lips when she kissed him. Okay, well maybe she shouldn't have kissed him, but again, she'd never gotten any complaints before.

Face it, Payton, you were way too damned pushy and you scared him away.

She huffed again and let out a long sigh. Oh well, *c'est la vie* and all that jazz. She wasn't going to lose any sleep over it.

"Paaayyton!"

She grinned as the group of rowdy girls yelled at her from across the room. She turned, grabbed her cowboy hat and slapped it back on her head. Hell, she was here to have a good time. Piss on Wes Hoffman.

Chapter Two

“Do I suck in bed?”

Gracie Forsythe choked on her tea and coughed as she set the glass back down on the kitchen counter.

“What? Wes, are you smoking some funky weed or something?”

Wes sighed. He’d known this wouldn’t go over well. Not only was he further humiliated by airing his insecurities, but if Luke came back before he finished the conversation with Gracie, Wes would never live this down.

“Do I suck in bed?” he repeated.

“No. Now do you mind telling me what precipitated that question?”

“Okay, so I don’t suck, but am I any good?” he asked, ignoring her question.

Gracie cocked her head then circled around the island to stand in front of where he was slouched against the sink. “What’s going on with you, Wes? Where on earth would you get the idea that you were a lousy lay?”

He growled in frustration. He didn’t have all night to have this conversation with her. Maybe he shouldn’t have brought it up. His best friend’s wife probably wasn’t the best source for boosting his sexual ego even if she was in a position to judge. And well, she was as much his best friend as Luke was.

“Gracie, will you just answer the question instead of peppering me with more?”

Her eyes softened and she leaned back against the island so they faced each other. “Wes, the night we had our threesome was honestly the

best sex I've had in my life. I couldn't have asked for better lovers than you and Luke."

He shifted uncomfortably at her intense perusal.

"So you going to tell me what brought this up or are you going to make me play dirty?"

"Play dirty?" he asked, though he was afraid to find out what she meant. Gracie could be downright evil when provoked.

"Well, I'm pretty sure you don't want Luke to know about this little conversation." She arched one brow. "Otherwise you wouldn't have waited until he left to go get more beer. Nor would you have declined to go with him."

"You wouldn't."

She batted her eyelashes innocently. "Wouldn't I? I would in a heartbeat. This has got to be downright juicy, and I'll do what I have to in order to pry the goods out of you."

He snorted in disgust. "Luke so didn't know what he was getting into with you."

Her eyes twinkled and a smile hovered over full lips. "Oh, I don't think you'll hear him complaining." She crossed her arms over her chest and eyed him directly. "Okay, so spill it. Did you make it with some chick who thought you were the worst guy she'd ever fucked?"

Despite his discomfort, he couldn't help but laugh at Gracie's bluntness. It was what he liked best about her. And why he'd decided to come to her with his problem. She liked to joke, but he knew when it came down to it, she'd never rat him out. She was too loyal.

"It's kind of a long story," he said with a heavy sigh.

She made a show of checking her watch. "Well, you better abbreviate it. I figure we have ten minutes tops before Luke gets back."

Suddenly he regretted his impulsive decision to talk to Gracie about Payton. It seemed ridiculous and could only add to his embarrassment. Quite frankly, he'd be happy for no one to ever know, and he'd be even happier if Payton hadn't shown up out of the blue after twelve years.

Twelve years in which he'd put the past firmly behind him, only to have it pushed back into his face with one chance encounter.

"Wes," Gracie said softly. "Whatever it is that's bothering you, you can tell me. You know that. Hell, you saw me through one of the most awkward moments of my life. I wanted to drop dead of embarrassment when I waltzed into the kitchen at the cabin, half-naked, only to find you standing there looking at me."

He grinned at that memory. "Ahh, my first glimpse of the infamous nipple rings."

Gracie blushed, which only caused him to grin wider. She planted a fist in his gut, and he doubled over, laughing.

"Okay, okay." He straightened his body and took a deep breath. "You're going to think this is ridiculous but I went over to Zack's to get a beer. There was some wild bachelorette party going on. I was checking out the girls, and I saw someone I know. Well, knew anyway. Then she saw me."

"Run screaming in the other direction?" Gracie asked.

"No, that's the thing. She runs over to me and leaps into my arms and plants a huge kiss on me."

Gracie frowned. "Was she butt ugly?"

"No, not at all. She's...well, she's hot. Gorgeous hot. I mean one of those women a man is just drawn to."

"Okay, so what's the problem?"

"I love women. No secret there. And I haven't exactly had the sex life of a monk."

Gracie snorted indelicately.

"Shut up," he growled.

She giggled and gestured for him to carry on.

"By all rights I should have been all sorts of turned-on. I mean I had a handful of luscious woman in my arms. She's kissing me. Her breasts, gorgeous breasts by the way, were all pressed up against me. And..."

"And?" Gracie prompted.

“Nothing. Absolutely nothing. I think I may have lost an inch or two my dick shriveled so quick. I think it may have gone into permanent hiding.”

Gracie pressed her lips tight together and her body shook with silent laughter. “Uhm, Wes, you could stand to lose an inch or two and still be better off than most of the male populous.”

Again, he felt heat slide up his neck much like nails on a chalkboard.

“Okay, I’ll strive to be more serious. Hard, though, when you give me openings like that,” she cracked. “So how, pray tell, did this dick shriveling incident lead you to the conclusion that you must suck in bed?”

“Well, there’s more to the story,” he said grudgingly.

“Aha, so now we get to the good part.”

“Shut up, Gracie.”

She held her hands up in surrender. “Continue on.”

He raised a hand to his hair then slid it down the back of his head to his neck. “Do you remember Payton Ricci from high school? She was two years behind us.”

Gracie scrunched her face into a thoughtful expression. “Huh uh, doesn’t ring a bell.”

“Well, I had a major crush on her the summer after my senior year. We, uhm, well we had sex. I was her first.” He winced at the memory. “To make a long story short, it was a disaster. I hurt her. To date, it has to go down as one of the most awkward moments of my life.”

Gracie’s lip formed an “O”. “And Payton is the chick from the bar tonight?”

He nodded.

“And you can’t get past the fact that you once had disastrous sex together?”

“Evidently not,” he muttered. “I mean, don’t get me wrong. It’s not like I’ve spent the last twelve years agonizing over it, but when I saw her, all I could remember is the look on her face, her crying out and the tears

afterward. I felt like complete shit then, and I feel like complete shit now.”

A light of understanding blazed in Gracie’s eyes. “Wes, was that what all that stuff was about at the cabin? You seemed overly concerned that you’d hurt me.”

He didn’t say anything, but then he didn’t have to.

She pursed her lips and blew out a long breath. “Wow. I don’t know what to say. I can understand why you feel bad, but damn, she was a virgin. Despite what a whole host of romance books might tell you—okay, me—since I’m sure you aren’t reading them, the first time for a woman is often a combination of messy and uncomfortable. Throw in a more-endowed-than-average guy, and you get even more of messy and uncomfortable.”

“What was your first time like?” he asked, unable to resist his curiosity. And maybe he needed for her to say it had been as awful as it had to have been for Payton.

She chuckled. “Forgettable. That’s the experience in a nutshell. A few kisses, he touched my boobs, got between my legs and ten seconds later it was all over with.”

He cringed. “That sounds eerily familiar, but damn it, I’d never seen that much female flesh up close and personal. I’m not even sure I made it all the way in before I went off like a damn machine gun.”

Gracie laughed and put her hand on his arm. “Wes, you’re being way too hard on yourself. You were eighteen. Most eighteen-year-olds haven’t climbed the ranks to considerate-lover status yet. I’d say you more than made up for it in the years since.”

“I just wish A) she hadn’t popped out of nowhere and B) that she hadn’t been so nice or acted like she was so damn glad to see me. I was more than happy to keep that incident out of my mind. No guy likes to have his sexual failures shoved under his nose like that.”

“But she didn’t shove it under your nose. You said she acted genuinely glad to see you. Have you thought that maybe that experience was far more traumatic for you than it ever was for her?”

“Gracie, I hurt her. A girl’s first time shouldn’t be like that. I made her cry for God’s sake.”

“All I’m saying is that, in all likelihood, she views that experience much the same as most women do. Not great but not the end of the world.”

“Yeah, yeah, I know. I just picture all her girlfriends asking who was that? And then she says, oh that was the dumbass I gave my virginity to, the dumbass who had as much finesse as a toad.”

Gracie lost all control and started laughing. “So this boils down to your fragile male ego. You don’t want it to get out that you weren’t always a god in bed.”

“I fail to see what’s so damn funny,” he muttered.

“Let me be the first to burst your bubble, stud.” Her eyes twinkled in devilish merriment, and he knew without a doubt, she was having way too much fun at his expense. “A lot of guys suck in bed. They don’t think they do. Ask them and they’re God’s gift to women. Ask women and you get a whole different story. I know. I’ve been through enough losers. Oh, they all thought they were the world’s greatest lover, but for the most part, it was all I could do not to fall asleep during their version of foreplay, which usually consisted of ‘suck my dick’.”

He gave her a wounded look. Damn heifer wasn’t doing anything to reassure him here. “You just said that I didn’t suck in bed.”

“No, you don’t, but it doesn’t hurt for you to think you do. I daresay it’ll make you more determined to impress your next woman when it comes time to get between the sheets.”

“Bitch. You’re supposed to tell me what a great lay I am and that what happened twelve years ago was a freak incident.”

She raised an eyebrow. “Isn’t that what I’ve spent the last ten minutes telling you?”

He sighed again.

She leaned up and kissed him on the cheek, and for a moment, all he really wanted to do was take *her* to bed. They had great chemistry and if anyone could reestablish his confidence it was Gracie.

“Give yourself a break, Wes,” she murmured as she pulled away. She put a hand to his cheek and rubbed her thumb over his goatee. “Chances are you won’t even see her again.”

He reached up and put his hand over hers then turned her palm over to kiss the exposed skin. “Thanks, Gracie. You’re the best. I mean that.”

The door from the garage opened and Luke Forsythe shouldered his way in carrying a case of beer in one hand and a bag of ice in the other.

Gracie’s face lit up, and Wes let her hand fall from his.

Luke dropped the ice on the floor and heaved the beer onto the island. He bent over to kiss Gracie then looked back up at Wes. “Am I interrupting an intimate moment here?” he asked with barely suppressed amusement.

“Not unless you guys are surprising me with another threesome,” Gracie said cheekily as she winked at Wes.

Wes laughed and shook his head. God, he loved this woman. He could never ask for better friends than her and Luke. Whatever his reservations had been in the beginning about a threesome causing awkwardness in the relationship, they were gone now. Nothing had changed between them, and if anything, there was a greater closeness.

“I was just giving Wes some chick advice,” she said. “Butthead needed it.”

Luke shook his head. “Not even going to ask.” He looked back over at Wes as Gracie snuggled into his side. “Well? We gonna stand around the kitchen all night having chick talk or are we going to drink some beer and watch the fight?”

Chapter Three

Payton wrapped her fingers around the steering wheel and sat staring at Wes Hoffman's house. Why in the world she was sitting here in his driveway the day after he'd given her the most blatant brush-off was beyond her. Maybe she was a masochist. Or maybe she just wanted to know what the hell had inspired such a frantic retreat.

She certainly hadn't come to town looking for him, but now that she'd seen him again, her curiosity was eating her alive.

He'd fascinated her as a teenager, but the adult version, the gorgeous man he'd grown up to be, well, he was downright mouthwatering.

She searched her memory, remembering the day they'd driven out to the lake, picnic basket in the back of the truck. They'd spread out a blanket by the water and spent a lazy afternoon gazing up at the clouds.

When evening fell, they'd moved awkwardly closer. He'd kissed her, lightly, searching, sweetly as only a first lover can do.

She emitted a small sigh as the corners of her lips surged upward. It had been a perfect day. Not unlike today. Beautiful, sunny. Really, even as hot and humid as it got so far south, she wouldn't trade summers here for anything.

Her hands tightened on the steering wheel as she pressed back against the seat. She summoned her courage, taking in a deep, steady breath.

"Well, you can sit out here all day like a freaking loon, or you can go knock on the door and invite him to lunch."

She took in another deep breath, drew up her shoulders then let them fall before she opened the door and hauled herself out of her car.

He intrigued her. Always had. A soft smile eased her nerves as she walked up the short walkway to the door. No, he wasn't a boy anymore. She'd figured that out about the time she hit him square in the chest last night. The possibilities his more manly physique presented were definitely appealing.

"And maybe it's been too long since you got laid," she muttered. Although it hadn't been that long. Certainly not so long that she ought to be panting after the first available male she came across. No, desperation didn't account for her reaction to Wes Hoffman. She was as attracted to him now as she'd been twelve years ago. In some ways, the attraction was heightened. She'd learned a lot more about sex since she tested the waters at sixteen. She grinned. A whole lot more.

She flipped her hair over her shoulders, smoothed her hands down her jeans and pushed the button for the doorbell. She looked from side to side and tapped her foot on the concrete porch as she waited for him to answer.

Then the door opened and Wes's startled gaze met hers.

She glanced appreciatively over his physique. He wore a pair of shorts, no shirt, and she couldn't quite rip her eyes from his well-muscled chest. Not an inch of spare flesh dotted his abdomen. He worked out, and it was obvious.

"Hi...uh, I wasn't expecting you," he said awkwardly.

She smiled. "I know. Thought I'd drop by and invite you to lunch. Catch up on old times. Stuff like that."

Was that panic in his eyes? Guys only got the deer-in-the-headlights look when they got their hand caught in the cookie jar.

"Are you married?" she demanded.

He actually looked appalled. "Why the hell would you ask that?"

She shrugged. "A reasonable assumption given the fact you act as happy to see me as you would a good case of the clap."

He choked on his laughter and a grin creased his face. "Sorry. I mean, you just caught me off guard. You're the last person I expected to see."

“So you want to grab lunch?” she asked. “I’m free until later this afternoon, then I have rehearsal dinner shit for the wedding.”

“Uh—” He broke off and shifted uncomfortably, moving his weight from one foot to another.

He really *was* giving her the brush-off. Heat bloomed across her cheeks, but she bit the inside of her lip to control the tide of embarrassment. Damn, just when she’d convinced herself that there was a perfectly good reason for his flakiness the night before.

“On second thought, I can see you’d rather endure a trip to the dentist,” she said dryly. She tucked her hair behind her ears and backed toward the edge of the porch. “It was nice seeing you again.”

She turned and navigated the two small steps to the walkway cutting across the yard when his voice stopped her.

“Payton, wait.”

She stopped and slowly turned, giving him a long, measuring stare. He stared back at her, his eyes thoughtful, a hint of regret simmering in the depths.

“Give me a minute to get dressed, okay?”

Silence fell between them. She shoved her hands into her jeans pockets and rocked back on her heels. “Okay.”

Wes watched her for a long second before he turned and walked back to his bedroom. She was here. On his doorstep. Inviting him to lunch. And he was acting like a complete chicken shit.

“Suck it up and take it like a man.” *Get this over with. She’ll leave town. It’s just like Gracie said. I’ll probably never see her again.*

He glanced down at his embarrassingly flat shorts. “A lot of help you are,” he muttered. “A drop-dead gorgeous woman throws herself at you and all you can do is lay there like a fucking pussy.”

God, now he was talking to his dick. What a pansy.

He yanked on a T-shirt then fumbled for his tennis shoes which were shoved under the bed. Turning to go, he thought better of it and hurried

to the bathroom. There, he yanked up a toothbrush and did a quicky job of brushing his teeth. Hell, she might try to kiss him again. Oddly enough, that idea wasn't as terrifying as it should be.

As he passed through the living room, he grabbed for the keys on the hook by the door and walked outside. It was hot, but he was already sweating, and he hadn't even gotten close to her yet.

He paused at the porch steps and looked at her. Really looked at her. Without all the discomfort her sudden appearance had caused, without the desire to see her vanish into thin air.

The truth was, she was beautiful. The sweet, young girl he'd known had blossomed into one hell of a gorgeous woman. She seemed confident yet relaxed, and she didn't seem like a bullshitter.

He walked toward her and she looked up, meeting his gaze. She didn't immediately smile but then the corners of her mouth turned upward and she straightened her stance, one hand on her hip as if she was waiting for him to make the next move. Fair enough, she'd made the first one. And the second.

"Want to go in my truck?" he asked.

"Sure, just let me get my purse."

He waited as she retrieved her bag from her car, then opened the passenger side door of his truck for her. She moved past him in a soft swirl of floral-scented air. He sniffed, enjoying the feminine smell.

She reached for the door handle, and he gently shut the door behind her before walking around to get in on his side.

"So where are we going again?" she asked as he backed out of his driveway.

"This was your idea," he said. "Where are you taking me?"

"What are my choices?"

"Well, you can have a burger, Mexican or barbeque. Unless you want to drive into Beaumont, in which case, you can pick your poison."

"We can do Mexican," she said.

He drummed his thumbs on the steering wheel as he stopped at the one red light in town. He glanced over to see her staring out her window, her expression one of supreme “I don’t give a fuck”.

A few minutes later, they pulled into the parking lot of the restaurant. He got out and waited for her in front of the truck then walked behind her inside where they were seated by the hostess.

A waitress dumped a basket of chips with salsa in front of them and stood waiting for their drink order. Wes waited until she’d returned and had taken their food order before relaxing in his chair and looking over at Payton.

She munched on a chip, glancing curiously around the room every once in a while. Then her gaze settled back on him, and for once he didn’t look away. He stared into her pale blue eyes, eyes that currently sparkled with challenge.

“Why are you so uptight around me?” she asked.

He blinked. Well, she definitely didn’t have any inhibitions. “Uh...”

She picked up another chip and dunked it into the salsa. “I can’t figure you out,” she continued. “I catch you looking at me, and I can see the interest, but then the next second, you’re running away so fast, you’re tripping over your feet. Am I that unappealing?”

“Good Lord no,” he muttered, still reeling over the direct line she’d taken.

She arched one eyebrow. “Then what is it? Got something against brunettes?”

“Honey, I like all women,” he drawled.

She snorted. “That’s bullshit. If that was true, you and I would have ended up in bed last night instead of you pulling a lame-ass hat trick to escape.”

He coughed as a piece of chip went down the wrong pipe. He wheezed and reached for his water. A mournful sigh escaped him, and he briefly closed his eyes. Surely this was a guy’s worst nightmare. A gorgeous, vibrant woman offering herself on a silver platter and his mind and dick weren’t in unison.

“Payton, you’re a beautiful woman—”

She held up a hand in annoyance. “Good God, if you’re going to give me that brush-off speech, save it please. I don’t need you to patronize me. Contrary to what you may think, you don’t hold my ego in your little palm. Yeah, I’m attracted to you, yeah, we have a history, but that doesn’t mean you’re the only guy in the world I’ve ever wanted to sleep with.”

He scrubbed a hand over his face and groaned. This was such a cluster fuck. “That’s just it, Payton. Our history is what’s the issue here.”

She looked at him in confusion. “What?”

He glanced around at the nearby tables, cringing at the idea that he’d be overheard by someone. Then he looked back at Payton who was still staring at him with a crinkled brow.

“Look, can we get out of here? Go somewhere else to have this conversation?”

“Uh, okay, I guess.”

He stood abruptly and reached for his wallet. He peeled off a twenty and threw it on the table, not bothering to wait for their food. If he was going to have this come-to-Jesus moment with Payton, he damn sure wasn’t going to do it in a place where he could be overheard by people he had to face on a daily basis.

He reached for her hand before he thought better of it. She hesitated a brief moment before sliding her fingers into his palm. They walked out of the restaurant, him tugging her behind him in his haste to get out.

“Where are we going?” she asked as he pulled out of the parking lot.

“Somewhere private,” he muttered.

She shrugged and focused her attention out the window as he drove through town and hit the highway north into the country. A few miles out, he turned onto a dirt road leading up to an old logging site.

“This must be pretty serious,” she said dryly. “Planning to off me and hide the body?”

He pulled off and cut the engine before turning in his seat to face her. "Very funny. I don't remember you being such a sarcastic wench."

She eyed him angelically, the baby blue eyes a fitting accompaniment for her look of innocence. Though he was fast finding out, she wasn't the sweet little sixteen-year-old he'd known.

"So why is our history such a big issue?" she asked.

With her sitting across from him, looking expectantly at him, he suddenly felt like a complete moron. It was obvious that she didn't have the same hang-ups he did.

"Payton, I hurt you. Badly. I was clumsy, inconsiderate and I ruined what should have been a terrific experience for you. It was embarrassing as hell, and it's something I would have just as soon liked to have forgotten. When I saw you again, my first instinct was to run as far as I could in the other direction."

"You *did* run in the opposite direction," she pointed out.

He huffed in irritation. Did she take nothing seriously?

She stared at him a long moment, her face scrunching up more with each passing second. "You're serious, aren't you?"

Knowing there was only one way to get his point across with the least amount of chitchat and skirting around the issue, he reached across the seat and grabbed her hand. He guided it between his legs, ignoring her expression of surprise.

"Let me put it into terms you can't possibly misunderstand. You feel that? Nothing. I may as well be a fucking eunuch. You're a gorgeous woman. I should be a walking hard-on around you, instead I'll likely have to shove my finger up my ass to push my dick back out of hiding."

She giggled. First a stifled sound like she was trying valiantly to control her mirth. Then she lost all control and began laughing uncontrollably.

"I'm glad you find this so damn amusing," he said through gritted teeth as he released her hand.

She wiped tears from her eyes then dissolved into laughter again. Wes heaved a long-suffering sigh and stared out the windshield as Payton attempted to collect herself.

She wheezed a few times then tucked her hair back behind her ear. “Wes, tell me you haven’t been worked up all these years over the first time we had sex.”

He shot her a dirty glance. “Of course I haven’t been hung up on it for the last twelve years. It’s just that, damn it, Payton, I *hurt* you.”

The laughter disappeared and her eyes softened. She reached out a hand to touch his arm. “Wes, it was my first time. Of course it hurt. But that’s not what I remember about it.”

His eyebrows went up. “It’s not? What *do* you remember then?”

Her eyes twinkled merrily and she smiled that sweet smile that made his gut ache.

“So that was what all that was about last night? You were embarrassed because of what happened between us in high school?”

“It wasn’t one of my prouder moments,” he defended. “I realize it sounds stupid, but it was pretty humiliating.” Hell, he still cringed when he thought too long about it.

“It’s not stupid. I think it’s sweet,” she said, her smile growing broader.

Sweet? Hell, he’d almost prefer humiliation.

Her face took on a dreamy look, and the smile turned wistful. “What I remember is that we were young. I was nervous and excited all at the same time, and you were so sweet and patient with me.”

Patient? Clearly they were remembering separate events. He’d acted with no finesse, and premature ejaculation didn’t even begin to cover the description of his performance.

He cleared his throat. “Uhm, Payton, are you sure you’re remembering the time you had sex with me?”

She laughed. “A girl remembers her first time, and she certainly remembers the guy who was her first.”

"I wasn't patient," he said gruffly.

"Yes, you were," she chided. "You were incredibly sweet. You said all the right things. That I was beautiful. You made sure I was with you every step of the way."

"I did?"

She nodded. "I don't know what kind of messed-up event you remember but it's obvious our perceptions of it are very different. Was it the best sex I've ever had? No. But it wasn't a disaster. In fact, for it being my first time, I don't think it could have been much better."

He swallowed the knot in his throat and went for the final humiliating factor. "It was my first time, too," he said grudgingly.

Her eyes widened in surprise. "Really? I was your first?"

"Yeah."

She smiled. "I think that's—"

"If you say sweet, I swear I'll push you out of the truck," he growled.

A peal of laughter rang out. "Okay, I think it's cool. That better?"

He smiled for the first time. "I guess you think this is completely ridiculous."

She reached over and cupped his cheek in her palm. "I think a lot of things. I think I'm flattered by the fact you were so concerned that you'd hurt me. I think you've turned into a great guy, not surprising since I always thought you were positively dreamy." She winked before continuing on. "But ridiculous? No, I don't think you're ridiculous."

Her eyes narrowed until they became half-lidded. She viewed him under a veil of thick lashes, and her tongue came out to wet her lips. She was going to kiss him again.

Not if you kiss her first.

And why not? So far she'd made all the moves. He wanted to taste her, wanted to remember how good she felt in his arms. And damn it, he wanted some kind of reaction from the lower half of his body.

He eased his head forward, meeting her halfway. She raised her other hand to cup his other cheek and pulled him closer. He slid his hands up

her shoulders, over the curve of her neck until they rested just below her ears. His lips met hers. Cautiously at first.

A soft mingling of flesh. Kiss and retreat. Kiss again. Longer this time. His tongue darted out. He wanted her taste, wanted to remember, wanted to replace the undesirable memories with better ones.

This time, the urgency of youth was absent. Instead, there was a slow, sensual exploration, a gentle seduction. This is what she should have had the first time. Not his clumsy attempts.

That thought sent a jolt of reality over him. With a ragged sigh, he pulled away and leaned back against the headrest of his seat.

“What’s wrong?” she asked.

It would seem his humiliation knew no bounds. He gestured downward with a casual flip of his hand. “Nothing. That’s what’s wrong. My mind says yes. Unfortunately, my mind and my body are on two different wavelengths.”

“I guess this is where I get the ‘it’s not you, it’s me’ speech,” she said.

He laughed. He couldn’t help it. It was either that or die a slow death from embarrassment. “I think it’s definitely safe to say it’s not you, Payton. Apparently I have more issues than *Time Magazine*. Who knew I was so fucked in the head over something that happened twelve years ago.”

She rotated her wrist up to check her watch. “Not that I don’t enjoy dampening a man’s ardor, but I really need to be getting back. I have the rehearsal supper this evening, and I have to drive back to Beaumont to the hotel to get ready.”

He saw through her flippant front. He knew he’d hurt her. Again. Not physically this time. His chest felt heavy with regret.

“Payton?”

She looked up.

“You don’t know how much I wish...how much I wish that things were different.”

She grinned, though her chin trembled just a bit as she spoke. “So what you’re saying is that you wish like hell your cock would cooperate so you could prove to me what a stud you’ve turned out to be.”

“Well, I wouldn’t have put it like that exactly,” he muttered.

She leaned over and kissed his cheek. “Maybe we’re better off just being friends and calling it good.”

As he started the engine and drove back down the dirt road, her last words echoed in his ears. Friends. Hell, he was friends with Gracie. He didn’t want to be friends with Payton. It didn’t feel like enough all of a sudden. He felt an odd sort of ache, deeper than his skin, deep in his chest. Like someone had dropped a bowling ball down his throat. And he was hard-pressed to put his finger on why.

Two days ago, he was just fine. Two days ago, he didn’t have a care in the world beyond his job and his friends. But two days ago, Payton hadn’t walked back into his life.

Chapter Four

She'd spent the entire afternoon and most of the evening thinking about him. She'd cruised through rehearsal and the dinner afterward on autopilot, smiling when appropriate, performing most of the tasks with half a brain.

Now that the shindig was winding down, Payton mulled her course of action over a glass of wine as she watched Brenda smile up at her husband-to-be as they talked with both sets of parents.

True, probably the smartest idea would be to leave this thing between her and Wes alone, go back home to Houston after the wedding and forget she'd ever seen him again. But that wasn't what she *wanted* to do, and she had this little problem called an impulsive nature. She pretty much tended to do what she wanted, regardless of the fact she might regret it afterward.

And she wanted Wes Hoffman pretty badly. But *why* did she want him? That was a harder question to answer. Was he a challenge? Maybe, but that still didn't explain the deep down flutter that started the minute she saw him in the bar.

She drummed her fingers along the side of the crystal goblet and took another sip as she contemplated her options. It wasn't as simple as showing up at his house again and asking him if he was interested in a one-night stand. While he might very well be interested (he was a guy after all), his lack of physical response to her was a rather huge stumbling block.

Yeah, that ruffled her pride, even though, she *knew* he found her attractive.

What she needed to do was get around his little psychological roadblock. A teeny-tiny smile attacked her face as an idea formed.

Ambush.

Maybe he expected her to be all sweet and innocent, goodness and light. He *did* still see her as a sixteen-year-old virgin. She nearly snorted wine out her nose at that idea.

Yeah, what she needed was a plan of attack. A way to knock him off his feet and get him to see *her*, not some little girl he felt guilty for hurting.

Or...

Not see her at all.

She looked at her watch and calculated the time she'd need to drive back to her hotel and get ready. An hour tops. She set her wineglass in the window behind her then dug out her cell phone from her purse. Hopefully his number was listed.

* * *

Wes walked through the lobby of Payton's hotel and down the hall toward the room number she'd given him. There were a thousand reasons he shouldn't be here. One, he had to work in the morning, two, he needed to just let sleeping dogs lie and three, what the hell could she want?

He'd gotten a phone call from her, surprising enough to hear her husky voice over the line, but then she'd asked him to come to her hotel. Ten o'clock. She'd been very specific.

He should have declined, just said no. But here he was, standing outside her room like a moron on his first date. Despite his initial desire for her to leave and for him to never see her again, he knew that was his embarrassment and discomfort talking. The truth was, she intrigued him. He was curious, and he knew she was equally intrigued with him.

He knocked sharply and waited. Within a few seconds the door opened, and his eyes widened. Payton was half-hidden by the door, but what he could see was downright jaw-dropping.

One long, slender leg peeked seductively around the door. Dainty lace, hip-hugging panties—could you call something that only covered an inch of flesh actual panties?—twined over her curvy hip.

His gaze followed the bare flesh from the waistband of the panties upward until it met with a matching bra. Pink. Sexy and feminine.

She smiled at him, white, perfectly straight teeth flashing as she opened the door wider. “Come in, please.”

He started forward on shaky legs, swallowing convulsively when she turned to walk in front of him. The panties rode high, giving him a tantalizing glimpse of the swell of her ass. Her hips rocked in a gentle motion and he had to catch himself as his head began mimicking those motions.

She stopped at a chair that was situated at the foot of the bed. “Sit,” she said as she gestured downward.

Dumbly he eased into the chair and looked up, his gaze riveted to her. “Payton, what’s this about?” he asked.

She leaned down and put a finger over his lips. “Shhh.” Her lips hovered provocatively over the finger pressed against his mouth. “This is my show.” She reached over and picked up a long black piece of satin from the bed. It trailed across his legs as she circled behind him.

She placed one hand on his shoulder and looped the sash around the front of his neck. Gripping it with both hands, she raised it until it brushed across his face. With gentle fingers, she positioned it over his eyes.

As the room went dark, he raised his hand in automatic protest but again she whispered in his ear. “Shhh. Trust me. You’ll like this.”

He let his hand fall as she gathered the material tight around his eyes. She tied it in the back, and he sat there, waiting for what she would do next.

He jumped when her lips met the curve of his neck. She kissed a soft line upward. Chill bumps broke out on his arms as her warm breath blew over his skin.

Then she sank her teeth into the lobe of his ear, and he nearly came off the chair. Her tongue swirled around the tender flesh before she sucked the lobe back between her teeth. With a gentle nip, she moved away again.

A slight movement of air alerted him to the fact she'd walked back around the chair. A faint rustle could be heard and then she placed both hands on his knees, slid them up his legs until she grasped his hips.

She straddled his lap, moving in close until her pussy cradled his groin. A surge of excitement shot through his system. His dick came to life after its long stint of dormancy. Okay, so it had only lain dormant for two days, but to a guy it was a fucking lifetime.

He swelled, painfully, against his jeans. He heard her light chuckle just as she curled her fingers around his hands and lifted them.

She placed his hands on her legs and kept her fingers wrapped around his wrists. Slowly, seductively, she guided his hands up her body. Over her hips, naked hips. She'd ditched the underwear. Oh hell.

Up her waist, sliding sideways over her taut belly. Finally up her ribcage until his knuckles brushed the undersides of her breasts.

Unwilling to let her control the progress any longer, he cupped her breasts in his hands and worked his thumbs over her nipples. Soft, velvety, he loved the texture and weight of her breasts in his hands. Definitely a C cup, maybe a smaller D.

She shuddered against his fingers.

"Like that?" he murmured as he continued stroking the tips.

In response, she gripped his hands, holding them tighter over her breasts.

"Touch me," she whispered.

"Show me where."

She wiggled on his lap, moving back. Then she guided his right hand from her breast, down her silken skin, lower until he felt the curls of her pussy. They brushed across his fingers, damper the closer he got to her flesh.

“Oh, you mean here.”

“Mmm hmmm.”

He coaxed the lips apart and eased one finger over the hot, moist flesh between her legs. She jerked in reaction when he stroked her clit.

“You’re wet.”

“Because I want you,” she whispered. “And I think you want me.”

“Oh, yeah, sweetheart. I want you.”

She cupped his bulging groin in her hand, gently squeezing. She laughed huskily, her mouth close to his ear again. “Yeah, I’d say your earlier problem might be a non-issue now.”

“I do love an inventive woman.”

“I’m just a woman willing to do whatever it takes to get what she wants.”

He turned his head in the direction of her voice, his lips colliding with hers. He kissed her, long, hot and hard. He reached his hands up to cup her face, holding her against him as their tongues explored new territory.

He moved his mouth down her jawline then below to the tender skin of her neck. She moaned softly as he nibbled and sucked his way down to her shoulder. Her hands gripped his shoulders, fingers digging into his skin.

In the darkness the blindfold brought, he found that his other senses heightened. Every touch, every taste counted. They were his only means to explore her. He wrapped his arms around her waist and lifted her.

The plump swells of her breasts rubbed over his chin, and he reached out with his tongue to lap at her nipple. He sucked it between his teeth, enjoying her sharp intake of breath.

He alternated licking and nibbling. He wanted to taste every inch.

Suddenly she pulled away, climbing off his lap. When he would have protested, she once again pressed a finger to his lips.

“My show, remember?”

He grinned and nodded.

“Good, then stand up.”

He stood like a good boy ever hopeful of receiving his reward.

“Take your shirt off,” she murmured.

Impatiently, he yanked at the T-shirt, pulled it over his head and tossed it aside.

“Oh, nice,” she purred as she pressed both hands to his skin.

He flinched when she touched her lips to the hollow of his chest. As her tongue melted over him, her hands moved lower, between them, working at the fly of his jeans. He shifted back an inch, just to give her more room to work.

He was so hard he was going to have a permanent cramp in his cock if she didn’t get his jeans down soon.

The grating sound of his zipper echoed in the room, and then she slid her hand inside his jeans, working past the band of his underwear until her warm fingers cupped his balls.

With her other hand she began to work his jeans over his hips, taking his underwear with them. Cool air rushed over his groin, a direct contrast to the aching heat her caresses wrought.

His jeans fell the rest of the way to the floor and he stepped out of one leg and then the other. Her hands gripped his hips, and he felt her body slide down his as she got on her knees in front of him.

Not seeing was torture. He imagined how she must look, kneeling in front of him, his cock inches from her mouth. She hadn’t made a single comment about his size, a fact he found enormously relieving. The last thing he wanted was to ruin the mood.

He reached out, wanting to touch her hair, coax her closer, guide his cock inside her hot, wet mouth. She chuckled and pushed his hand back down.

“Patience. I’m enjoying the view.”

Her hand circled his dick, gliding up and down his rigid length. The other hand closed around his sac, her finger rubbing up and down the seam on the backside.

He rocked forward on his toes as he felt her breath tickle over the head. Again she stayed his motion and continued her exploratory caresses.

He groaned. “You’re killing me.”

“Oh, no, I haven’t gotten to the killing part yet.”

Lord, he couldn’t wait to die then.

She grasped his dick with one hand, working it in an up-and-down motion. Then she slid her delicious mouth over the head, paused and let his cock sink to the back of her throat. He nearly came all undone.

Her tongue rasped the sensitive vein on the underside of his cock, and she moved back and forth. When he butted against the back of her throat, she swallowed, the action milking his erection. A thousand volts of electricity arced through his body like a streak of white-hot lightning.

As she pulled away, a tiny spurt of fluid spilled on her tongue. She swallowed and lapped at the head as if wanting more. He wanted to give her more.

She braced her hands on his thighs and slowly pushed herself up, allowing his cock to slip from her mouth. He stood there, waiting for her next move.

She took his hand and pulled him forward. Her hand fell away from his and he heard the chair being shoved aside. Then she returned and walked him backward until the backs of his legs came into contact with the bed.

“Lie down,” she directed.

He sat on the bed then reclined.

“Move farther up.”

He complied, scooting until his head was on one of the pillows. He reached a hand down, testing to see if she was close, wanting to touch her.

The bed dipped and she straddled his waist. She bent down to kiss him then slid her mouth over his cheek to his ear.

“Do you want to taste me as much as I want to taste you?”

“There’s not an inch of you I don’t want to taste,” he said.

He felt her smile against his ear. “I want you to lick my pussy while I suck your cock.”

“I love a woman who knows what she wants,” he said around a grin.

“Oh, I know exactly what I want. I’ve known since I saw you in that bar. And I intend to have you.”

“I never argue with a lady.”

“Smart man.”

She lifted off of him again. She rotated then straddled his face, lowering her pussy until she was just inches from his mouth. He could smell her, sweet, slightly musky. Sexy as hell.

He moved his hands to cup her ass, positioning her better so he could begin his exploration. As his tongue flicked out to circle her pussy entrance, her mouth sank over his cock, and he moaned low in his throat.

Her ass quivered against his fingers as he gently worked his mouth over her clit. One thing he had learned since his first encounter with Payton all those years ago was that a woman didn’t want to be eaten like a damn potato chip. She wanted to be teased, savored, enjoyed like a fine wine. Sipped at, not gulped.

She writhed against his mouth, squirming as he continued his exploration. Her breath came in gasps around his cock, sending sparks through his groin. He arched into her as she twisted against him.

He took his time, nudging her with his mouth, licking, nipping then soothing the delicate folds. Each time his tongue swept over her clit, it tightened and a tiny spasm quaked through her body.

“Are you close?” he whispered.

She moaned. “Yes, but not yet. Please.”

He smiled and lessened the onslaught of his mouth. “I want you to come in my mouth. I want to taste you.”

She tore her mouth away from his dick and wrapped her hand around it, moving up and down in slow, long motions. Her chest heaved against his belly.

With his fingers, he parted the soft folds of her pussy, stroking, featherlight. He wanted to see her, splayed out over his chest, her femininity bared for him, but at the same time, having to rely on touch and taste was exciting. New. A little disconcerting but in a titillating way.

Slowly, reverently, he pushed one finger inside her, feeling the way the walls of her vagina gripped him. Sweat beaded his forehead as he imagined what it would feel like for his cock to be surrounded by such sweet heat.

When he felt her begin to shudder uncontrollably against his hand, he withdrew his finger and gripped her ass again, pulling her down to his mouth once more.

His tongue found her clit, and he gently sucked the taut bud into his mouth. She moaned and rocked back as her mouth paused on his cock. “I’m going to come,” she gasped out.

He said nothing but swirled his tongue downward, plunging it into her opening. She cried out, and a surge of honey spilled onto his tongue. Her legs shook, her body shook, her hand tightened around his cock.

She cried out as she undulated her hips in his hands. He held her, coaxing her orgasm with his mouth. Several long seconds later, she slumped against his body, her breath coming in big heaves.

She eased off his body. Again he felt the bed dip as she got up. He heard the crinkle of a wrapper. Soon she returned, climbing onto the bed.

She grasped his cock and slid her mouth over the head, sucking and licking down then back up again. Then she rolled a condom on. He waited, nearly breathless with anticipation.

He flinched as her lips met the sensitive skin just above the base of his dick.

“Ready for a ride, cowboy?”

“Oh hell yeah,” he ground out.

Chapter Five

Payton applied lubricant to Wes's latex-sheathed cock, wiped her hand on one of the hotel towels then tossed it aside. Her body was still trembling from her orgasm but she couldn't wait to have him inside her.

She wanted to rip off the blindfold so she could see his eyes glazed over with passion, see him when he came, but she wasn't about to risk ruining the fantasy aspect of the scene she'd carefully cultivated. The last thing she needed was to have his erection die a slow death if he got a chance to think too much.

No, she wanted him to feel, not think. And if she had her way, he was going to feel the best damn sex of his life.

She straddled him, positioning his cock between her legs. She felt him tense as the head brushed across her entrance. She smiled and eased down, slowly, teasingly.

His hands gripped her hips but she batted them away and continued her slow downward assault.

They both moaned as she engulfed him. Tight, so tight. He filled every inch of her, and still she had more to go. Never had she felt anything quite this good.

Her hands came out and she braced herself against his chest as she rocked down on him.

"Payton...I'm not hurting you, am I?"

The concern in his voice made her smile. As she'd done so many times before, she placed a finger over his lips. "The question is, am I going to hurt you?" she teased.

His mouth quirked underneath her finger as he grinned. "Oh, I hope to hell so. I'm a big boy. Hurt me good."

His hands snuck up her hips again, and this time she allowed it. They glided over her belly and up to her breasts where he found her nipples.

As he squeezed and toyed with the erect nubs, she forewent the slow, measured ride she'd started and began a faster pace. His fingers tightened around her nipples, and he arched his body to meet her movements.

She cried out as he slipped deeper. An ache built within her, blooming, radiating through her senses. She loved his hands on her, tender, giving pleasure. She even loved his concern over hurting her, however misplaced *that* idea was.

She leaned forward, finding his lips, fusing her mouth to his as his hands gripped her hips, helping her in her ride. His fingers dug into her ass as he lifted her up and down.

"Are you with me?" he whispered into her mouth. "Because I'm close."

Was she with him? Hell, if he didn't come soon, she was going to leave him behind yet again.

She reached down, slid her fingers between their bodies until they stroked over her clit. She rolled the tight button and closed her eyes as her orgasm built.

"Oh, yeah, I'm with you," she said breathlessly.

He arched his hips and began pumping upward in short, hard thrusts. She pressed harder with her fingers, rotating in a tight circle.

As he hit a spot much deeper than he had before, she exploded. Her sharp cry echoed across the room just a split second before she felt the surge of his release ripple through his body.

Once, twice more he thrust hard into her before holding her tight against him as he trembled and jerked beneath her. She slumped forward, pulling her hand from between them.

Slowly, his hands smoothed over her body, moving from her hips up her back in a soothing motion. He rubbed up and down and then in a circular pattern, eliciting a sigh of contentment from her as she lay snuggled on top of him.

She reached up to remove the blindfold, suddenly wanting to see the sleepy contentment in his brown eyes. He blinked as the satin fell away, and what she saw reflected in his dark orbs made her stomach clench.

Nothing lazy or contented about him. He looked hungry, aroused, like he wanted more.

He reached up to cup her face in his hands. Then he pulled her down to meet his kiss. Hot. Carnal. Ravenous.

When she finally pulled away to catch her breath, she stared down at him, studying his reaction carefully. "Like what you see?" she asked.

His gaze dropped to her body, roaming over her breasts. His hand soon followed, touching, exploring.

"Oh, I like," he said softly.

He pulled her down once again, kissing her more gently this time. With his arms wrapped around her, he rolled them over so he was on top. Then he eased from between her legs.

"Let me get rid of this and I'll be right back," he murmured.

She watched as he got off the bed and slid the condom off. He walked to the trashcan and tossed it in before turning back around.

Her gaze ran appreciatively over his body. His cock, even at a state of semi-arousal was a beautiful thing to behold. She stretched, arching her body invitingly. His eyes gleamed and he moved to the bed again.

He knelt on the end and crawled back up, straddling her knees. He bent and pressed his lips to her belly. She shivered as his warm tongue swirled around her navel.

When he looked back up at her, the hungry look in his eyes had intensified.

“What do you say we start this all over again? This time I want to see every inch of you. I want to see you when I thrust into your pussy. I want to see you when you come.”

She opened her arms as he moved up her body. “Mmmm, I like the way you think.”

* * *

Wes woke with a warm, soft body curled up tight against him. One of Payton’s arms was thrown across his chest and her head was tucked underneath his chin.

He felt sated. Heavy with content. A killer kind of tired a man got from having knock-your-socks-off sex. Carefully, so as not to wake her up, he raised his right arm and looked at his watch.

Fuck. He had to get up now and get his ass on the road or he wasn’t going to make it home in time to change and get to work.

Regretfully, he eased away from Payton and sat on the edge of the bed in the dark as he looked around for his clothes and shoes. Finally he got up and turned the light on in the bathroom, leaving the door open an inch so he could see. He returned to the bed and began pulling on his jeans.

“Going so soon?” Payton asked around a lusty-sounding yawn.

He turned back to her and slid his hand over her curvy body. “I have to be at work in an hour.”

“Then you better get going,” she said.

He leaned over and kissed her on the forehead. “Any chance I’ll see you again?” He cursed himself the instant it came out of his mouth. He sounded...needy.

She leaned up on one elbow as he retreated off the bed. The low beam from the bathroom bathed her in just enough light that he could see her soft, tousled body. Her hair streamed over her shoulders, and she clutched the sheet over her breasts with her free hand.

“The wedding is early and I could be persuaded to skip the reception if you were interested in meeting me back here around nine.”

“I’ll be here,” he said as he finished pulling on his jeans.

* * *

He thought about her the whole day. His entire shift was operated on half a brain. Thank goodness it was like ninety percent of all the other days in small town Texas. Mostly boring. A few traffic stops and one domestic disturbance call that turned out to be a false alarm.

By the end of the day, he was a walking dick. He was hard-pressed to even remember the episode from twelve years ago, and he felt like a dumbass for all the angst it had caused him. He and Payton may have both been inexperienced virgins then, but she’d freaking rocked his world last night.

Quitting time came none too soon, but then he realized he’d have to face several more hours of twiddling his thumbs before he headed to Beaumont. He also needed to remember his own damn condoms this time. Thank goodness one of them had been prepared because he’d left his brain behind last night when he’d gone to her hotel.

As he was leaving the station, his cell phone rang. He looked down at the LCD and saw Jeremy’s name. Ah shit. Saturday night. They always got together over at Jeremy’s on the weekends.

Well, he could go over for a little while, pass the time until he headed for the hotel. He’d enlist Gracie’s help if he had to in order to avoid an interrogation about where he was going.

He flipped open the phone. “Hey, man.”

“Hey, you coming over or what? We have beer and a fight ordered.”

“Everyone going to be there?” Wes asked.

“Yeah, the whole gang.”

“Cool. Let me stop off by the house and I’ll be over. Need me to bring anything?”

“Nah, we got it. See you in a few.”

Wes closed the phone and turned into his driveway. He'd shower and change so he could leave straight from Jeremy's later on.

Twenty minutes later, he left his house again and drove the two miles to Jeremy's. When he pulled in, he saw Luke's and Jake's trucks already parked in the drive.

He walked in the front door without knocking and immediately heard talking and laughing. He sauntered into the living room to see Jake, Luke and Jeremy sprawled in their seats.

“Hey, what's up,” Luke called.

“Where are the ladies?” Wes asked.

“Kitchen,” Jake said, pointing around his beer.

“Ah well, not that I don't like y'all or anything, but I'd much rather go say hi to the women first.”

Jeremy chuckled. “Gee, and we wonder why he has them all wrapped around his little finger.”

Wes grinned and walked on to the kitchen where he saw the three women standing around the bar chitchatting. He wrapped an arm around Ellie first and kissed her noisily on the lips. “Hey, gorgeous.”

“Wes!” Her pretty face lit up even as a hint of a blush colored her cheeks.

He turned to Michelle next and picked her up to kiss her. “How's the munchkin doing?”

“He's fine,” she said with a smile. “Sleeping right now.”

Finally he turned to Gracie, who winked at him just as he bent down to kiss her.

“You look like a man who got laid last night,” she murmured so only he heard.

“And what does a man who got laid look like, smart ass?” he asked in her ear as he hugged her.

“That shit-eating grin is a dead giveaway.”

He pulled away, and she grinned mischievously at him. "I will find out later. Count on it."

"Find out what?" Michelle demanded.

"Nothing," he muttered, giving Gracie a hard look.

She smiled innocently back at him and mouthed "later".

Later came much sooner than he expected, but then Gracie was determined if nothing else. She cornered him in the kitchen when he'd volunteered to make a beer run.

"Okay, so spill it," she said as he rummaged in the fridge for the beer.

He gathered the cans in his arms, backed out of the fridge and nudged the door closed with his elbow.

"Demanding wench, aren't you?"

She grinned. "I just know a juicy story when I see one."

"I slept with her," he said simply.

"I'm assuming we're talking about the chick you said you couldn't get it up for?"

He laughed. "You're such a bitch."

"And you love me for it."

"True. Very true. Yes, I slept with Payton."

"Oh, do share. I guess your impotence issue didn't last too terribly long."

He winced. "Could you not use that word? It sounds so...*medical*. I don't have impotence."

She shook with laughter, her auburn curls doing a jig on her shoulders. "All right, so your dick suddenly started cooperating with you. That better?"

"Much," he said with a grin. "I wish I could claim the credit but that goes to Payton."

Gracie raised her eyebrow. "Now I know I have to hear the rest of this."

He quickly outlined the events of the night before. When he looked over at Gracie, she looked chagrined.

“What?” he asked.

“Damn, why didn’t I ever think about a blindfold? I’m so going to have to steal that idea for Luke.”

“Luke having problems getting it up?” Wes smirked.

She flipped him the bird. “Are you suggesting he wouldn’t be turned on by me anymore?”

Wes laughed. “Hell no, I know better. That man can’t be in the same room with you without getting the shakes.”

“So what now?” Gracie said, adopting a more serious expression. “You going to see her again?”

Wes nodded. “Tonight. I sort of need your help getting out of here without getting the third degree. I’d rather not answer a hundred questions.”

She nodded then laughed as Luke bellowed from the living room. “No problem. Better get that beer back into the living room. The natives are getting restless.”

They both headed back into the living room to see Thad, Jeremy and Michelle’s newborn son being passed around. Ellie sat on Jake’s lap holding the baby, and they both looked extremely gooey-eyed over the wiggling lump.

Ellie made eye contact with Wes, and he raised an eyebrow at the soft look of joy on her face. Her eyes twinkled merrily, the look of a woman with a secret she couldn’t wait to share. Wes smiled back, satisfied to see her so happy.

He sat next to Gracie and Luke on the couch, popped open a beer then looked back over at Ellie and Jake. “So, guys, got something you want to share with the rest of us?”

Jake looked suspiciously at him then glanced over at Ellie in question. She shrugged then laughed.

“I didn’t say a word.”

“You don’t have to, girlfriend,” Gracie piped in. “It’s there to see on your face. We’re all just wondering how long you’re going to leave us in suspense.”

Ellie blushed, a rosy, ecstatic glow lighting up her face. She glanced at Jake who smiled back at her with such tenderness it made Wes feel a little gooey himself. In a twisted, marshmallow kind of way.

“We’re having a baby,” she announced.

The room erupted in a chorus of congratulations, backslapping and hugs. Wes sat back and smiled, enjoying the smiles and laughter of his group of friends. They’d all found happiness and the love of a good woman, or so the country song went. And, well, the love of a good woman was hard to find, so he certainly didn’t begrudge them that. Even if they *had* all turned into pussies.

Chapter Six

So she'd skirted out of the wedding a little earlier than she should have so she could go shopping for sexy lingerie. She hadn't planned on hooking up for some wild sex while she was here, so she hadn't exactly packed for the occasion.

Payton stood in the bathroom of her hotel room, fiddling with the tie of her satin flyaway negligee. All ego aside, she knew she looked hot. The tie cinched her breasts and plumped them up to their best advantage, and the flyaway portion bared her belly and the tiny lace underwear that hardly covered her pussy at all.

She grinned at her reflection. No blindfold tonight. He was going to see it all, and she wanted it to be an experience he wouldn't soon forget.

Promptly at nine, a knock sounded at her door, and she went to answer, foregoing the coy hide-and-seek act she'd played the night before.

As soon as she opened the door, he swept in and pulled her into his arms. Their lips met, collided in a fury of heat and passion. He backed her toward the bed while she yanked at his shirt.

She fell backwards onto the mattress, staring as he tore his shirt the rest of the way off. His shoes went flying and hit the opposite wall seconds before his jeans and underwear made fast tracks down his legs.

He had that hard, lean look of a hungry male as he loomed over her, his gaze blazing a trail over her body.

"Just the underwear," he said. "Take the underwear off and leave the rest."

"You do it," she said mischievously.

With a sexy growl, he reached for her hips, snagged his fingers in the strings and ripped downward. The material gave way and he tossed the remnants over his shoulder.

His eyes gleamed, and he gave her a predatory smile as he lowered his body to hers.

“Love the outfit,” he murmured.

She sucked in her breath as he touched his lips to the swell of her breasts pushed together by the negligee. He proceeded to nibble at the plump flesh, burrowing his mouth between the mounds.

As he delved deeper, his goatee scratched against her skin, sending tiny goose bumps to her nipples until they puckered and formed taut points. As he pulled back, he caught the tie with his teeth and yanked, loosening the top until it fell away from her breasts.

Unwilling to wait for the attention she wanted, she buried her hand in his short-cropped hair, and finding little purchase, she slid her fingers to his ear to pull him toward her nipple.

She felt him smile against her skin before he lazily rolled his tongue over the sensitive bud. She moaned, voicing her approval, encouraging him to continue.

He sucked the nipple farther into his mouth and lightly grazed his teeth over the tip. She arched, feeling the shock all the way down to her pussy.

“I want you now,” she said, tugging at his shoulders.

“Do you now?” he drawled. “It would seem I have the advantage here.”

She framed his face in her hands, forcing him to look directly at her. “If you want to keep that advantage, it would be in your best interest to give me what I want.”

Laughter rumbled out of his chest, vibrating against her clit which only served to heighten her need. “I do love a bossy woman.”

“I can be very rewarding,” she purred, arching her breasts higher.

“In that case,” he said as he backed off the bed, “come down here and show me just how rewarding.”

She lifted one brow as she regarded his wide-legged stance, his cock straining upward. His hand lowered to grasp the base and he worked his hand slowly down then back up again.

She was always up for a little payback.

As he bent to dig in his jeans pocket for a condom, she slid off the bed, gliding to her knees in front of him. As she settled down, she shrugged out of the negligee, letting it fall to the floor behind her. She placed her hands behind his knees, running them up, slowly, until her fingers splayed out over his firm ass.

She rose up on her knees until the head of his cock bobbed just an inch from her mouth. She blew softly, watching as he flinched in reaction. Her hands kneaded, moving closer to the cleft of his behind. She trailed one finger down the seam then back up again. His knees nearly buckled and she smiled.

“Tease,” he muttered. He tossed the condom on the bed then wrapped both hands in her long hair, gathering it in his palms until his knuckles brushed against her scalp. He tugged on her hair at the same time he rocked toward her.

She let her hands fall from his ass and moved them to his front. Her hand curled around the base of his cock as he strained forward. She opened her mouth the barest of inches, circling just the head with her lips. Holding him there, she ran her tongue over the small slit then underneath to the taut seam. She traced the edge of the soft skin, enjoying the velvety smoothness.

He bucked against her, trying to seat himself farther into her mouth, but she held him firmly, continuing her slow exploration.

A drop of moisture seeped onto her tongue and she lapped at the slit, spreading the small amount of pre-cum over the head.

“Payton, please,” he groaned.

She pulled away long enough to look up at him and give him her best satisfied smile. Her hands slid back down his legs. "I do so love to hear a man beg."

Her triumph was short-lived. He used the opportunity to his full advantage. Grasping the handfuls of hair, he thrust forward, burying his cock in her open mouth.

She swallowed against the intrusion, closing her eyes as he rocketed over her tongue. He bumped the softness at the back of her throat and stilled, holding her there for a long second. Then he withdrew, letting out his breath in a satisfied hiss.

Her hands came back up, and she wrapped one around his cock and slid the other underneath to his sac, massaging and rubbing as she guided him forward again. Her fingers tightened and she worked back and forth in unison with her mouth.

"Oh God, stop, baby, or I'm gonna come."

She sat back on her heels and watched as he took in several ragged breaths. He reached for her hands and pulled her up to stand in front of him.

"The condom," he said, pointing at the bed.

She turned and retrieved the little packet.

"Put it on me," he rasped.

She faced him again and tore the wrapper, sliding out the thin latex ring. She moved close, grasping him in one hand and using the other to roll the condom on.

He closed his eyes and swore. "Lubricant. Fuck, I forgot it. Please tell me you still have some."

She grinned and walked over to the desk by the TV and took out the small plastic tube of KY. Then she turned and tossed it to him. "I'm not getting my hands all sticky again."

He caught the tube and hurriedly bent to snag his T-shirt, tucking it underneath his arm. With a shaking hand, he tore the lid off the lubricant and squeezed the clear gel into his hand. Then he smoothed it

over his sheathed cock, his movements slow but jerky. He tossed the tube aside then snatched his shirt from underneath his arm and wiped his hand. Throwing that aside, he reached for her, and she went willingly.

To her surprise, he curled his hands around her waist and lifted her up. "Put your legs around my waist," he directed as he wrapped one strong arm around her.

When she'd done so, he reached between them with his free hand and positioned his cock between her legs. He arched his hips into her, sinking deep. Wrapping both arms around her waist, he held her tight against him.

He slid his hands underneath to grasp her ass. He lifted her up then allowed her to slide back down the length of his cock.

She threw back her head and closed her eyes. God, he was so deep, and she felt so vulnerable in this position. But that vulnerability only heightened the sensation of balancing on a razor's edge.

His fingers dug into her ass as he bounced her up and down on his cock. When she opened her eyes to look at him again, his head was thrown back in a similar manner as hers had been. Ragged gasps spilled from his mouth and the muscles in his shoulders bulged and flexed from the strain of holding her.

She gripped his neck harder as he began walking forward, his cock buried deep, and the motion of his hips sending it deeper still.

Her back landed against the wall with a thud, and he lowered his head to her neck, sucking and kissing, his breaths coming explosively in her ear.

He rocked her against the wall, plunging deep, holding her captive against the hard surface. The rough texture abraded her back, and while each time he thrust forward she experienced an erotic thrill deep within her core, she was distracted by the awkward position.

"The bed," she managed to gasp out. "The wall is killing me."

His head came up, a look of apology in his eyes. He immediately backed away then held her tightly against him as he maneuvered to the bed.

Gently he eased her down, slipping from her body as her back came to rest on the mattress.

"I'm sorry," he whispered as he brushed light kisses across her face.

She said nothing but reached for him, spreading her legs in invitation. He crawled onto the bed and settled between her thighs.

With less urgency than he'd displayed before, he used gentle fingers to part the slick folds. His thumb pressed to her clit and rotated in a circular motion, initiating a whole new sense of urgency in her gut.

His hips shimmied between her legs as he sought to spread her thighs wider. His fingers left her pussy and he cupped his hands around her ass, sliding them down the backs of her thighs. His cock nudged her entrance and slid forward so he was an inch or so inside her. For a moment, he flexed his hips, making short, shallow thrusts.

"Now who's the tease?" she grumbled.

He moved just a little deeper. "Is this what you want?"

She wrapped her arms around him, sliding her hands down his flanks. Her fingers dug into him, urging him on.

"Please."

"I love a woman who begs."

"Smart ass."

He grinned then closed his eyes and drove forward.

She gasped and arched into him, her cry stuck in her throat. His hands slipped from her legs and he pressed his forearms into the bed on either side of her to hold his weight off her.

He lowered his head, pressing his forehead to hers as he moved sensuously between her legs, thrusting, retreating, going deep, staying still.

His lips hovered so close to her own, and then they lightly pressed to hers, a soft smooching sound escaping as he kissed each tiny part of her lips.

Despite his deliberate, measured movements, she felt her orgasm building, not explosive, instead, a slow, warm buildup, a gradual tightening, an exquisite sensation like a cool breeze on a hot summer day. Like letting chocolate melt slowly on your tongue.

She hooked her ankles over his legs and pulled them upward until they lodged just underneath his ass cheeks.

Like tightening a screw, her body pulled tighter and tighter as her pleasure mounted, suddenly making her restless and wild.

“I need...”

Wes stroked her hair away from her cheeks with his thumbs, his elbows still planted in the mattress on either side of her. “What do you need?” he whispered.

She moaned. “I’m close, so close.”

With his right hand, he reached for her arm, letting his fingers glide past her elbow to her wrist and finally grasping her hand. He guided it between their bodies, arching up to give her room.

“Touch yourself,” he whispered. “Come for me.”

She flexed her middle finger over her clit, found the sweet spot and began rotating in tight, slow circles as he raised himself to his hands.

Hands braced near her head, he began driving into her body with hard, long strokes. Yessss. Every muscle in her body seized. She closed her eyes, shutting out everything but the pulse centered at her very core.

“Open your eyes,” he said. “I want to see you come.”

Her eyes fluttered open and met his gaze. He stared down at her, tension etched into his face, his jaw clenched tight.

“Are you close?” she managed to gasp out.

“You first,” he said behind gritted teeth.

He rammed his hips forward, and she threw back her head, her fingers strumming her clit as she hovered precariously close to the melting point. Once more, oh God, once more.

He began pumping against her in a frantic pace, and suddenly it felt as though someone had blown her up like a balloon and let go. She flew in a dozen different directions.

Her mouth opened in a soundless scream and then she found her voice and cried out as the pressure, unbearable, released in a cataclysmic burst.

She spasmed around his cock, felt a sudden rush of wetness, and still her nerves twitched and screamed as the orgasm went on and on.

She felt his lips press to her forehead before he plunged deep and stiffened around her, his muscles bulging, his body straining to get as far into her as he could.

“Yes, oh God, yes,” he said hoarsely.

He convulsed against her body, thrusting once, twice and finally a third time before he stilled. His legs trembled, his arms shook, his chest heaved as he gasped for breath into her hair.

Slowly, she took her hand away, no longer able to bear to touch her hypersensitive clit. Her arms snuck around him, and he lowered himself carefully to her body as she urged him to do. She held him tight, burrowing her face into his neck.

They trembled against each other in the aftermath. She stroked his back, enjoying the feel of his skin, of the muscles, the dips and ridges of his hard contours.

Finally, she felt him slide from her pussy, and he rolled to the side of the bed to discard the condom. When he turned back to her, she moved against him.

“Get up for just a minute, baby. Let me pull back the covers.”

She stood on shaky legs as he arranged the bedding and then he motioned for her to return. She crawled into bed, cuddling against his warm body as he pulled the blankets over them both.

They lay facing each other, their soft breathing the only sound in the room. He rubbed her back, his palms comforting, soothing.

A sigh of contentment welled deep within her chest and whispered across her lips, her body relaxing with the flow of it.

"You sound awfully contented." His chest rumbled as he spoke, vibrating against her ear.

"I am," she said. Then she smiled, a mischievous streak rising fast. "That was incredible. Just think of what we missed out on all those years ago."

"That was extremely uncharitable of you to bring up," he grumbled.

She chuckled softly against his chest. There was another comfortable silence between them and then he put a finger under her chin and tilted her head upward so she looked him in the eye.

"I don't even know where you live. If I'll see you again."

She kept her expression even, not wanting to betray any hint of reaction. "Do you want to see me again?"

His brow furrowed a moment and he seemed to grapple with his answer. Finally he took a deep breath. "Yeah, I like the idea of seeing you again."

Some of her tension eased, though why it should matter if he wanted to see her again was beyond her. She didn't come to town scoping for a relationship.

"I live in Houston," she said simply.

His eyes widened in surprise. "That's not far."

"Hour and a half," she replied.

He moved his arm up, propping his elbow on the bed and resting his head in his hand. "How did you end up there? I always wondered why you left. I mean after we... After we had sex, you disappeared."

She laughed. "You make it sound so calculated and sordid. My dad got a job transfer and so we moved to Tennessee. When I was in college, he transferred to Houston. I finished college then moved there to be close

to them. He's retired now, and they've moved down to Galveston, but I still see them often."

"So what do you do in Houston?" he asked.

"I'm a real estate agent. I actually got a degree in nursing but after six months of the hospital scene, I realized there was no way I could make a career out of sick, needy people. A friend of mine owned her own real estate agency so I got my realtor's license and went to work with her. After a year, I decided to strike out on my own. I started small, but my agency is the fourth largest in Houston now."

His eyebrows rose. "I'm impressed," he said. He laid his hand over her hip, bunching the sheet between his fingers. "That's a hell of an accomplishment."

She smiled, enjoying his touch. "I think so. Or I like to think so. It took a lot of hard work, but the effort's finally paid off."

She rose up on her elbow as well so she was on eye level with him. The sheet fell from her chest, and she reached to pull it back up. His hand stayed her motion. He grazed her nipple with the back of his hand then cupped the soft mound in his palm.

She tried to speak, cleared her throat and tried again. "What about you? Did you always want to be a cop?"

His fingers continued stroking her nipples, plucking the tips until they were taut and puckered.

"No. I wanted to play football like Jake Turner and Ray Hatcher. We all got scholarships to A&M but I messed up my shoulder my freshman year. Got a degree in criminal justice instead, and when I graduated I came home, got a job with the city. I've been there ever since."

"Any regrets?" she asked softly as she arched more fully into his hand.

He seemed to consider the question for a minute. "No," he said finally. "I love my job. I'm surrounded by my best friends. It's a good life."

She smiled and rubbed her hand over his goatee. "You make it sound so simple."

He grinned. "I'm just a country boy at heart. Don't need anything more complicated. Beer, good friends and football. Can't ask for anything better than that."

"You left good sex out of there," she pointed out.

His hand left her breast and he trailed a finger down the line of her jaw. "Oh yes, definitely good sex." He cocked his head to the side and leaned in to kiss her. "In fact, I need a lot more of good sex. A whole lot more."

"Mmmm. That can be arranged," she murmured against his mouth. "I hope you brought more than one condom."

He chuckled. "I damn near bought out the store."

"Ambitious, were we?"

"Just hopeful," he said, lightly kissing her again.

* * *

Payton yawned and opened bleary eyes. Wes was wrapped tight around her body and she craned her neck looking for the bedside clock. When she saw the time, she shook Wes's shoulder.

He stirred and snuggled tighter against her. She smiled and nudged him again. "You're going to be late for work if you don't get up," she murmured close to his ear.

His eyes flew open. "What time is it?" he asked.

"After six."

"Shit."

He palmed her cheek and kissed her before scooting out of bed. "I've got to get going."

She reclined in the bed, pulling the covers up under her arms.

"When are you going back to Houston?" he asked as he thrust one leg into his jeans.

"I'm leaving around noon," she said softly.

He paused, staring at her for a long second. She couldn't decipher the odd expression on his face, sort of a mixture between confusion and disappointment.

"Is this where you promise to call and we say goodbye?" she cracked.

"Or you could call me," he suggested.

"Hmm, how about we trade numbers and then it's on both of us."

"Deal."

He strode over to the desk where the phone and a tablet of paper sat. He came back over and shoved the pad and a pen at her.

She took the pen and scribbled her number down and handed both back to him. "That's my cell number. It's the easiest way to reach me."

He tore off the top piece of paper then scrawled his number on the second sheet before offering the paper back to her. He bent and gave her a hard kiss. Then he turned and finished dressing.

When he was done, he gave her one more long reluctant look. Then he walked to the door and opened it. On his way out, he paused and turned back to her. "Payton, I..." He shook his head and walked out, letting the door close behind him.

Chapter Seven

He was sure she'd call on Monday. When that didn't happen, he convinced himself she was playing it coy and she'd definitely call on Tuesday. Wednesday morning, he irritably decided she was playing it cool but she'd call that night. Of that he was sure.

Thursday night he was genuinely baffled. Wes paced his living room like a caged lion. If she had any intention of them getting together this weekend, she would have called by now. Thursday was the D-day for making weekend plans. How the hell was she supposed to know what his work schedule was?

Or maybe she had no intention of seeing him again. Maybe he'd scratched an itch for her and that was it.

He picked up his phone and called Gracie before he could think better of it. She'd offer some insight into the situation, and then maybe he could figure out where the hell he stood with Payton.

After he explained his annoyance, she had the audacity to laugh in his ear. He held the phone away, counted to ten and waited for her to stop howling.

"Are you finished yet?" he demanded.

She wheezed and coughed. "Sorry, but damn I always knew this was going to be funny when it happened. I just had no idea how hilarious it was going to be."

"What the fuck are you babbling about? When what happened?"

"When the mighty Wes fell hard for a woman," she said before dissolving into laughter again.

“Damn it, Gracie, you’re so not funny, and I swear if Luke is sitting there next to you and you just blabbed that shit where he could hear, I’m going to wring your pretty neck.”

She died laughing again, and he seriously contemplated hanging up. And he would have but she seemed to sense he was not very happy and quickly sobered.

“Okay, so what did you want from me?” she asked.

He sighed and counted to ten again. “I merely want a woman’s perspective on why the fuck she hasn’t called me.”

“Maybe she wants you to make the next move, Wes. A woman will only do so much chasing before she decides it’s time to see how much interest is reciprocated.”

“So, you’re saying she wants me to call her.”

“Could be. Or maybe she’s just busy. Or, perish the thought, maybe you were just great sex and she doesn’t want a relationship.”

“Well, fuck, Gracie, I don’t want to get married. Who said anything about a relationship?”

She laughed again. “I can hear the panic in your voice. Chill out and call her. You obviously want to see her again, right? Is it going to kill you to make the first move this time?”

“So I should go to her and not make her come to me.”

“Well, if I was her, I wouldn’t keep chasing after you. I’d bait the trap and wait for you to come to me.”

“You women are evil. Evellle.”

Gracie snorted. “And you men are just stupid. Get off the phone and call her.”

Wes grinned. “I love you, Gracie girl.”

She chuckled. “Love you too, knucklehead.”

He hung up and stared at his phone gripped tight in his hand. Then he fished his wallet out of his pocket with the other hand. He pulled out the piece of paper she’d written her cell phone number on and punched it in.

After three rings, her husky voice filtered over the line.

“Hello?”

“Hey Payton, it’s Wes.”

“Oh, hi, how are you?”

He hated these awkward, stilted conversations. He didn’t want to fuck around with pleasantries all goddamn night.

“I want to see you this weekend.”

There was a long pause. “I’d love to but I don’t think I can make it over. I have an open house on Sunday.”

“Actually I was thinking about coming to Houston.” Where the hell had that come from? He was impressed with how smoothly that improvisation had come off. “I’m off Saturday,” he continued. “We could have dinner Friday night and spend Saturday together if you’re interested.”

Another small pause. “I’m interested.”

He had to physically restrain himself from pumping his fist and muttering, “Yeah.”

“Okay, so I’ll call you when I get into Houston Friday evening. I can swing by and get you.”

“That sounds great. I’ll look forward to seeing you then.”

They said their goodbyes and Wes hung up, exhilarated over the idea of seeing her the next night. A perplexed feeling fell over him. His eyebrows knitted together in confusion. Was Gracie right? Was he falling for Payton?

He shook his head. It was just sex. Great sex, mind you, but just sex all the same. It wasn’t every day you got to go back and correct past mistakes, and his first encounter with Payton had certainly constituted one of his bigger fuck ups.

Now he had to find a hotel room in Houston. Oh, and he’d have to get back with Gracie for some advice. He wanted Friday night to be special. A night Payton wouldn’t forget. A night like she’d deserved twelve years ago. He wanted to do it right this time.

* * *

Wes hit the 610 loop on the tail end of rush hour traffic and was gratified that the line of cars moved at a steady pace. Beside him in the cab sat four sacks of shit Gracie had been all too happy to foist on him. Damn woman must have shopped for hours for all the shit, but when she'd outlined her idea, he had to admit, it rocked. Well, at least in theory.

He found himself looking forward to seeing Payton again. At first, he'd focused on the promise of great sex, but in reality what had stayed on his mind was the time he'd spent lying in bed, *after* the great sex, Payton curled in his arms, the time they'd spent talking.

The thought made him vaguely uncomfortable. He knew he shouldn't admit to liking cuddle time and pillow talk. For God's sake, that was shit all his married buddies got into.

Yeah, he wanted tonight to be perfect, but it just meant he was a considerate guy. It didn't mean he was going to start wearing a pussy label on his forehead.

As he neared his exit, he popped open his cell phone and dialed Payton's number.

"Hey," he said when she answered the phone. "You ready?"

A sigh echoed over the line. "Yeah, I'll be ready."

"Everything okay?" he asked.

"Oh, I'm fine. Just tired. Long day."

His brain went into overdrive. She did sound tired. A thought hit him, and he mentally applauded his genius. "Hey, I have an idea. Can you give me an hour?"

There was a long pause. "Uh, okay. What's up?"

He chuckled at her obvious confusion. "Give me an hour and I'll come pick you up. It's a surprise."

He hung up the phone and drummed his fingers on the steering wheel as he navigated to the hotel he'd made a reservation at. He'd need to hurry, but he was confident he could pull it off.

The original plan had been for them to eat out, but her fatigue gave him the perfect excuse to implement his mad seduction scheme.

He checked in then lugged the bags to his room. He took a quick inventory then hauled out the huge yellow pages phone book and scanned for potential takeout places. When he found what he wanted, he tore out the page and stuffed it into his pocket for later use.

He turned his attention to the large Jacuzzi tub that stood in the corner of the suite. Rummaging around in one of the bags, he pulled out several candles and began strategically placing them up the steps of the tub and along the ledge.

He continued his decoration and when he'd peppered the entire room with the floral-scented candles, he pulled out the two dozen roses, a mixture of pink and red. He felt a little ridiculous as he arranged each single stem amidst the candles, spreading them out for the maximum effect, but when he pictured Payton's reaction, the awkwardness fled. He wanted to see her smile, wanted to see her smile for *him*.

Next, he hauled the small table from the corner and placed it to the side of the tub and arranged the two chairs to face each other.

He tucked the remaining bag under the desk so it would be in easy reaching distance then stood and rubbed his hands together as he surveyed his handiwork. Now he just needed to light all the candles and hope to hell he didn't burn down the hotel while he went to get Payton.

Lastly, he pulled out a red satin sash, letting it glide over his fingers. Then he shoved it into his pocket and headed out of the room.

When he got back into his truck, he spent a few seconds studying the directions Payton had given him to her apartment. He'd chosen the hotel because of its proximity to it, so it shouldn't take him more than five minutes at most to get there.

* * *

Payton checked her appearance in the bathroom mirror for the fourth time since Wes had called and said he'd be there in five minutes. She'd foregone the casual, country bumpkin look and opted instead for a sexier, more sophisticated style.

She'd piled her hair atop her head, allowing a few strands to fall softly down her neck. Simple diamond studs adorned her ears, and she fidgeted with the back on one of them before taking her hand down to smooth the short silk skirt she'd chosen.

Hose and high heels. What man could resist long legs and killer shoes?

When she heard the knock at her door, she hurried out of the bathroom and down the hall. She opened the door to see Wes standing there looking sexy as sin, clothed in tight, faded blue jeans and a T-shirt that stretched across a very broad, muscled chest.

"Hi," he said softly. "You ready?"

"Let me get my purse and I'll be right out," she said as she reached to grab it off the hook.

She turned back to him and walked out, closing the door behind her. No sooner had she done so then he pulled her into his arms, tipping her chin up as his mouth slanted down over hers.

She melted against him, loving his hardness, his strength and just how damn good he felt to hold on to. His tongue ran over the seam of her mouth, and she opened breathlessly for him as he plunged inside.

"Hey yourself," she said huskily as he pulled away.

Dark, hooded eyes stared down at her. He ran a thumb across her lip then let his hand fall to capture hers. He wrapped his fingers around her wrist and tugged her along behind him as he walked toward his truck.

"So what's the big surprise?" she asked when they'd both gotten in.

He glanced sideways at her and grinned. "Well, now, if I told you then it wouldn't be a surprise."

She smiled and settled back against the seat, briefly closing her eyes.

He reached across the space between them and curled his fingers around hers. His thumb massaged her palm in a soft, circular motion. Comforting, soothing. Her worries seem to melt away. He had that effect on her for some reason.

“Rough day?”

She turned her head to look at him and smiled again. “Not too bad. Just long. I had several showings and had a sale go bust on me. It was a big one, so I was pretty bummed about it. Seller backed out the last minute.”

He raised her hand to his mouth and kissed each fingertip. She shivered at the gentle attention, and she didn’t want the moment to end.

“I’m sorry. I hope what I have planned will make up for such a pissy day.”

“You keep doing that,” she said, nodding her head toward her hand, “and I’ll be your slave.”

“Mmm, I like the sound of that.”

So did she.

They drove the rest of the way in silence, but he never let go of her hand. He held it on his lap, the back of it pressed against his thigh and his fingers resting over her palm.

When he turned off into a hotel parking lot, she looked over in curiosity. He just grinned.

“Trust me,” he said. “Stay right there.”

He got out and came around to her door and opened it. He reached up to help her down and she met the hard contours of his body as she slid to the pavement. Then he took her hand and headed for the entrance.

Tiny butterflies danced in her stomach as she imagined what he had in store. He punched the button to the elevator and they waited as the numbers counted the downward progress until finally it dinged and the door opened.

When they were inside, he pressed the button for his floor and waited as the door shut once more. Then he reached into his pocket and pulled out a long piece of red satin.

“Turn around,” he murmured.

She hesitated a brief moment before doing his bidding. As she had done to him the weekend before, he slid the satin over her eyes. He tied it in back and then she felt his lips on the bare skin of her neck.

He kissed his way up to the sensitive spot behind her ear, causing a million tiny goose bumps to break out on her flesh. His hands smoothed up her shoulders as he sucked the lobe of her ear into his mouth, his tongue toying with the back of her earring.

She shivered uncontrollably in the dark.

The elevator halted and he slid an arm around her as she heard the door open.

“Your night awaits you,” he murmured as he led her out of the elevator.

Chapter Eight

Wes guided Payton down the hall, his arm wrapped around her shoulders. When they stopped, she heard him insert the room card and then he opened the door.

The cool air blew over her body as he walked her inside. She sniffed as a floral aroma danced across her nose. He left her for a moment, and seconds later, she heard the unmistakable rush of water. A bathtub?

He returned and ran his fingers lightly up her neck then across her jaw, stroking, teasing her with his touch. They lowered to the top button of her blouse, and she felt the slight pull of the material over her breasts as he undid it.

More cool air brushed over her as he worked his way down her shirt. He tugged it free of her skirt then pushed the blouse over her shoulders until it fell to the floor behind her.

Leaving one finger on her bare belly, he walked around behind her, letting his finger run a path around her waist to her spine. A shiver took over her body as goose bumps puckered her skin.

His fingers lowered to the zipper of her skirt. The waist loosened as he pulled the zipper downward, but he didn't let the skirt fall. Instead it slid every so slowly down her hips as he pulled. Finally it pooled around her ankles and he took her elbow and helped her step out of it.

He walked around until he faced her again, and she could sense him looking at her.

"You are so damn beautiful," he uttered. "Every man's fantasy. A gorgeous woman standing in front of him in heels and thigh-high hose. And pink lace panties and bra. How you manage to look so delectably

feminine and devilishly sexy at the same time is beyond me. I alternate between wanting to make slow, sweet love to you and fucking you hard and hot.”

His words sent a sharp bolt of arousal flooding through her body. Her legs shook and the burning between her legs intensified. Her clit swelled and ached, and anticipation fluttered deep in her belly.

He moved closer until his chest pressed against her breasts. Wrapping his arms around her, he walked her backwards until the backs of her knees bumped the bed. Now she knew how he'd felt when she'd done the same to him.

“Lay down,” he murmured.

She complied, sinking onto the soft bed. He pressed his mouth to her belly, kissing her once, the brush of his goatee tickling the sensitive skin.

He stepped back and raised one of her legs. His fingers glided down her limb, rolling underneath to brush the backside. When he reached the heel of her shoe, he tugged, pulling it free. The shoe slid off and fell with a clunk to the floor.

He repeated the same, slow tease with the other leg until both shoes had been removed.

Her fingers curled into the bedding as he began removing her hose. Each touch, each whisper across her skin sent a delicious shudder up her body. Then he bent to press his mouth against her leg, following the downward progress of her hose with his lips.

She moaned, surprised at the torturous, needy sound spilling from her throat. Unable to see his movements, not knowing where he'd touch her next heightened her anticipation to a nearly painful threshold.

He eased one leg down and then lifted her other, giving it identical treatment as he removed the stockings. She was awash in desire, her pulse beating frantically, her blood racing, and he had only just begun.

When his fingers slipped underneath the thin lace of her underwear, she arched into him, aching for him to touch her, wanting his fingers to slide between the wet folds of her pussy.

Instead, he eased the underwear down over her hips and kissed the skin just above the nest of curls. She flinched in reaction, gasping at the electric shock.

He worked her underwear down her legs until he tugged it free of her feet.

“Roll over,” he commanded.

She rolled to the left and was aided by his firm hands. Hands that caressed her back and slid down to cup the globes of her ass.

Her fingers curled tighter into the bedding and she clenched her teeth, sure she’d go nuts if he didn’t stop his sensual assault.

Her bra loosened as he freed the hooks. Then he eased her back over, pulling the bra from her body.

“Beautiful,” he breathed.

He left her again, and she heard the water turn off. A gentle splash echoed over the room and a second later, he took her hand and guided her up from the bed.

“Over here,” he said, leading her a few steps. Then he reached behind her head and untied the blindfold.

She blinked as the room came into focus. She took in dozens of flickering candles, a huge Jacuzzi filled with sudsy water. And roses. There were roses laid carelessly about the room, intermixed with the candles.

“Your bath awaits,” he said with a small smile.

She continued to gape around the room as he pulled her toward the tub. He helped her up the step and didn’t release her hand until she eased into the water, sitting down as the suds climbed higher up her body.

“Wes, this is beautiful!”

“Glad you like it,” he said.

She watched in fascination as he began undressing, unable to tear her eyes away from his muscled body. His cock was hard. Erect. His desire there for her to see in all its glory.

“Mind if I join you?” he asked.

She scooted forward in the tub, only too willing to share the slice of heaven.

He climbed in and settled behind her, stretching out his legs on either side of her. Then he pulled her back until she was cradled against his chest.

“I don’t know what to say,” she whispered. “This is all so fantastic.”

He kissed the curve of her shoulder, working his way to her neck. He stopped at her ear, nibbling and tasting the small indentation behind her lobe.

“The night is only just beginning,” he murmured.

They lay that way in the tub, her cradled in his arms, hot water lapping gently over the curves of her breasts. After several languid minutes, he reached for the bottle of body wash lying on the side and squeezed some into his hand.

He pushed her forward just enough that he could wash her back. Alternating firmness and gentleness, he massaged and worked his hands over her shoulders.

A sigh of bliss escaped barely parted lips, and she closed her eyes, enjoying his tender treatment of her. Then his hands worked around to her front, dipping down to cup her breasts in his hands.

Against the small of her back, she could feel his cock, rigid, laying flat against his stomach, pressed to her skin. It burned her skin much hotter than the water. Suddenly the water seemed tepid in comparison.

If she lifted her ass just a teeny bit... It would be so easy to have him pull her down, sinking into her pussy in one easy glide.

She squirmed at the mental image and unconsciously shifted, moving upward, inviting.

Wes chuckled in her ear. “Not yet, sweetheart. Not yet.”

She sighed and relaxed again, allowing her body to mold to his once more. Her need was making her edgy, and yet she had no desire for his seduction to be hurried. She felt pulled in a dozen different directions.

Her demand for satisfaction weighed heavy against her desire to draw out the evening as long as she could. Fortunately for her, she didn't seem to have a choice in the matter.

A knock at their door startled her, but Wes's hand covered her shoulder. "You stay right here and enjoy your bath."

He stood and a rush of water rained down his body. She turned to look at him, unable to resist. Her breath caught in her throat and stuttered out in shaky gasps.

He stepped over the side of the tub, giving her a fantastic view of his cock, still stiff and distended. She reached her hand up to cup his balls, sliding her fingers out and over his erection.

He paused in mid-stride and closed his eyes for the briefest of seconds before gently disentangling himself from her grasp. Grabbing a towel from the rack, he whipped it around his waist, tucking one of the ends in so it would stay.

Then he bent down to get his wallet out of his jeans pocket and headed for the door. She craned her head, trying to see around his big body as he opened the door, but whoever was there was firmly hidden from view.

Ah well, it didn't matter. She was enjoying all of Wes's surprises so far. She sank back into the tub, reclining so the water seeped up to her neck.

A few seconds later, Wes shut the door and she looked over to see him carrying several containers of food to the table. He glanced up and met her gaze then smiled.

"Take your time. I'm going to set up our dinner and then I'll get you out of the tub."

Just the way he said "get you out of the tub" sent a hundred different shivers and sparks down her spine and tightened the nerves between her legs until she had to force herself to relax.

She watched him from underneath half-lidded eyes as he prepared the table, still dressed in just a towel. Too bad telekinesis was only

something for the movies because she could really use some right now. With one mental push she could tear that towel right off him.

Nude food preparation. Now there was a concept. If they all looked as good as Wes, she could envision a successful catering business centered around that idea.

Wes walked toward the tub, the towel sliding precariously down one hip. Just an inch more. He tugged it back up. Damn.

He reached down, cupping her face in his hands. His lips pressed lightly to hers, kissing her with gentle regard. Then he slid his hands down her body and urged her up.

When she stood, he reached for a large towel and wrapped it around her then helped her over the side of the tub. The simple process of drying her off became deliciously erotic at his hands.

He took one end of the cloth and rubbed in small areas, light, teasing, sometimes hovering over particularly sensitive spots. He brushed the tips of her breasts. Her nipples drew tight into hard points, and he dragged the soft towel over them again.

Her limbs felt laden, warm, satisfied. A comfortable lethargy settled over her as he massaged down her body, taking care not to miss a single inch.

When his cloth-covered hand delved gently between her legs, she widened her stance to give him better access. The edge of the towel rasped over her clit, and in response, a spasm worked from her pelvis into her belly.

The towel fell to the floor in a heap, and she sighed in regret that the sensual drying was over.

Wes walked over to the closet and pulled out a bathrobe then returned and held it open for her to stick her arms in the sleeves. When it fell over her shoulders, he gathered the lapels and pulled it closed in front, securing the ties in a double knot.

He kissed her once on the lips. "Let's eat."

Chapter Nine

Payton sat across from Wes at the small table, watching him as he ate. The food was good. Chinese takeout. But she'd be lying if she said she remembered that much about the taste other than the preliminary flavor as it hit her tongue. She was way too absorbed in the moment, in wondering what he'd planned next.

He watched her, too. Chewing slowly, he held his gaze on her, his eyes dark with the promise of what was yet to come.

The towel had come loose before he sat, barely staying up on his hips. She wanted to see him, wanted to see just how far that towel had fallen, but his lower body was hidden by the table.

She bit her cheek to staunch the impish grin that threatened to take over as an idea came to her. With careful nonchalance, she raised her foot, stretching her leg until she brushed against the inside of his thigh.

He flinched as her foot traveled higher, and he leveled a baleful stare at her.

When she reached the hard line of his cock, he grabbed her foot with his hand, holding her there.

"How am I supposed to eat with you doing that?"

She grinned innocently.

He continued to hold her foot in his hand as he ate with the other. He cupped and massaged the instep, kneading with his fingers.

She all but wilted in her chair. Forgotten was the food (or anything else for that matter). She leaned back and propped her other foot between his legs.

"Like that?" he asked as his hand closed around her other foot.

"I like anything that has to do with your touch," she said softly. "My hands, my feet, my body. I'm like a cat. Pet me and I'll purr."

He set her feet gently back down on the floor then scooted his chair back and stood. The towel fell completely away, and she could see his cock, semi-erect, thick and heavy. He walked the step around the table so he was catty-corner to her and held out his hand.

"I plan to do a lot of petting tonight," he said.

She slid her hand into his and stood. He reached down with his free hand and untied the belt of her robe. When the ends dangled to the floor, he impatiently shoved it over her shoulders, bearing her naked body to his avid gaze.

She stepped forward, closing the short distance between them. His cock brushed against her belly, and she raised her hand to grasp the turgid flesh. Like iron encased in silk. Hard, rigid, strong, the epitome of all a man should be. Yet soft, silken, warm and velvet in her palm.

With her other hand, she cupped his heavy sac, running her fingers up and down the soft underside, feeling the separation of his balls when she pressed inward.

"I think I like being petted, too," he said in a strained voice.

She reached up on tiptoe to kiss him. He caught her with his hands, cupping the area of her neck underneath her jawline. His fingertips brushed the lobes of her ears as he melded his lips to hers.

His tongue met hers, warm, melting. His thumbs pressed into the hollows of her cheeks then slid to the corners of her mouth. He pulled his head away as she sucked in mouthfuls of air. His hands relaxed and slipped away for a brief moment before he grasped her hips and yanked her against his body.

With slow, deliberate movements, he walked her back toward the bed. Midway, he reached down and swept her into his arms. She hooked her arms around his neck and stared up into his eyes.

Their gazes were still locked as he lowered her to the bed. He came down with her, putting one knee on one side of her hips then finally straddling her body.

“We’re going to operate on the honor system tonight,” he said.

“Oh? This sounds interesting. Which of us is supposed to have the honor because I’m really hoping it’s not me.”

He smacked the side of her behind, sending a delicious, naughty thrill through her groin. “Smart ass.”

He slid his hands up her sides, and as they glided over her curves, she shivered and flinched.

“Ticklish?” he asked with a grin.

She gave him a dirty look.

He continued his path up her body until his fingers lodged underneath her arms. He pushed, raising her arms up and over her head.

“Yes, definitely the honor system. You’re going to leave your arms exactly where I’ve put them. No cheating. No touching. This is my show.”

An excited flutter chased circles around her stomach and into her throat as he threw her own words back at her.

“I can live with that,” she said casually, but her voice shook and betrayed the adrenaline coursing through her veins.

He let her arms go with a stern look to make sure she heeded his directive.

“Touch me,” she whispered. She ached for him, wanted him so desperately. Wanted his hands on her, his fingers, his tongue.

He cupped her breasts, plumping and kneading. His thumbs brushed across her nipples, sending currents of fire through her chest. He plucked the points until they were stiff, erect and tingling. Applying firmer pressure, he pinched each peak, then harder still.

She arched into him, crying out, begging for more, needing more.

His hands slid to her ribcage, and he lowered his head until his lips pressed against the spot between her breasts. Wet, warm, languid, his tongue swept out to taste her. The rough texture of his taste buds rasped across her belly as he moved lower. She spasmed uncontrollably.

He backed down the bed on hands and knees as his tongue swirled lower. It was becoming harder to obey his dictate and keep her arms still. She wanted to touch him, to clutch at his shoulders as he drove her mad with his lips.

One firm hand parted her thighs, and he kissed the inside of her leg tantalizingly close to her throbbing clit. He burrowed his fingers into her curls and stroked down the seam of her folds, coaxing them apart until she was bared to his touch and to his gaze.

He lowered his head, and she closed her eyes in anticipation of feeling his tongue on her most sensitive parts. He blew gently over her slit, and her groin muscles clenched in response.

She felt hot, needy, restless, like a snake ready to shed its skin. Her blood danced in her veins to a frantic rhythm in tune with the song he played with her body.

“Please,” she whispered. “I want your mouth on me.”

His tongue flicked out over her clit sending a red hot bolt of flame spearing through her abdomen. Her nipples puckered. Her breasts plumped and swelled, aching with need.

His fingers further parted her folds, and he gently sucked the sensitive nub into his mouth, holding it there while he licked it repeatedly with the tip of his tongue.

The constant state of anticipation coupled with her heightened arousal was too much. Her orgasm flashed upon her with the speed of a bullet. One moment she was poised on the precipice of a canyon. The next she was doing a swan dive over the edge, feeling the rush of exhilaration as the world raced by.

Just before she hit the ground, she slowed. The world blurred around her, and she floated like a feather, blowing with the wind, drifting down to rest in the arms of her lover.

She opened her eyes to see Wes looking at her. His hands were planted on either side of her shoulders, and he used his knees to nudge her thighs farther apart.

Had she been so insensible? How had he gotten the condom on and positioned himself between her legs so quickly?

He smiled at her obvious confusion then leaned down to kiss her. "Enjoy yourself?" he murmured.

She stretched, arching her body and allowing the deep-seated contentment to invade the rest of her body. "If I enjoyed myself any more, I'm not sure I'd survive," she whispered as she reached for him.

As she wrapped her arms around him, she realized she wasn't supposed to have moved them. She started to withdraw, but he caught her elbow in his hand and held her there.

"No, I like it when you hold on to me," he whispered back.

She let her fingers wander back over the bunched muscles above his shoulder blades then down to the small of his back as he shifted his hips in preparation.

With a gentle nudge, he was inside her. She sucked in her breath at the exquisite fullness. Slowly, patiently, he allowed her to adjust to his size then inched forward, burying himself in her body bit by bit.

A line across his forehead attested to what his patience was costing him. His jaw set in a firm position, and he took deep, steady breaths.

She withdrew one hand from his back and feathered it across his brow, wanting to ease the tension etched there.

"Ride with me," she whispered. "Come with me. Love me."

He groaned and dropped his forehead to hers. The position was tender and intimate and allowed their lips to dance back and forth in playful harmony.

Soft smooching sounds filled the air to mingle with the soft smack of his hips against the backs of her legs. Their lovemaking was unhurried, measured. Instead of feeling like she was racing down the side of a mountain, she felt as though they were lying on a warm beach, the surf lapping gently at their bodies.

Mellow, like jazz on a hot summer night. Soft, like the whisper of a spring breeze at the back of your neck. Aching, like the yearning of young love.

She floated on the waves of something truly wonderful, a feeling of completion like she'd never known lulling her, enveloping her, holding her tight.

Tears pricked the corners of her eyes, and she shut them, holding them back, not understanding their presence. All the longing of youth, of that night when she was sixteen came back on the wings of a bittersweet memory.

It was the same yet different. They were the same people yet older, mature, no longer desperate to grasp the trappings of adulthood. That they could revisit, redo, was a chance most never got.

She opened her eyes again and stroked his cheek with her hand. He closed his eyes now and nuzzled into her palm, kissing the inside.

Their bodies rocked as he moved between her legs. Her release built not as an unbearable explosion but as a gradual swirl. Like a hand dipped into a pool of water. The ripples started small then grew bigger, rolling across the surface.

Wave after wave of sweet pleasure rolled across her as he gathered her in his arms, murmuring endearments in her ear. His entire body went rigid as he thrust once more then held himself against her as a great shudder worked its way over his body.

He eased down on her, his muscles still quivering against her. The warm, comforting weight of his body was the perfect conclusion to their lovemaking. She wrapped her arms around him, hugging him closer. When he tried to pull away, she murmured her protest in his ear.

"Let me clean up," he whispered. "I'll be right back."

She reluctantly let him go, and as soon as he left her, she regretted that loss of intimacy. A few seconds later, he crawled back onto the bed and pulled her into his arms.

She snuggled closer, pillowing her head on his arm. His free hand drifted down her body, stopping to rest on her hip. He stroked her skin

for a moment then traced a path back up her side until he reached her shoulder. There, he fingered the strands of her hair, gently pulling them back.

“Get some rest,” he said as he pressed a kiss to her hair. “I want us to have fun tomorrow.”

She smiled against his chest and sighed in contentment. He reached down to retrieve the covers that lay in disarray. When he’d tucked the comforter snugly around them, he wrapped his arm around her and laid his head on the pillow beside her.

It wouldn’t take her long to fall asleep. But as her eyelids fluttered closed, her last conscious thought was that she already dreaded spending the week ahead without him. And they’d only just started the weekend.

Chapter Ten

Wes's heart did a funny little two-step in his chest as he watched Payton throw her head back and smile as a ray of sunshine hit her full in the face.

She reached for his hand, curling her fingers around his like an excited kid and hurried toward the zoo entrance.

"Do you know I've lived here for ten years and I've never been to the zoo?" she asked after he'd paid their fees.

He grinned. "I've lost count of the times I've been. I'm just a big ole kid at heart."

"Ohhh, I want to get ice cream," she said right before she let go of his hand and strode toward the vendor's hut.

Chuckling, he followed behind her.

She chose chocolate, and he got vanilla. As they started to walk away from the little shop, he reached out and took her hand, sliding his fingers over her palm and downward until they intertwined with hers.

She looked over at him and smiled then tightened her fingers around his. She licked at her cone, her tongue swirling around the ice-cold treat. It was an exercise in torture because he could too easily imagine that delectable pink tongue circling his cock just like it circled the tip of the ice cream.

He thrust the cone toward his mouth, hoping the cold would put a stop to his hot, lusty thoughts.

"Let's go see the monkeys first," she piped up. "They're always the most entertaining. I'd just as soon skip the reptiles." She gave a delicate shudder.

“Snakes don’t do it for you?” he teased.

“The only good snake is a dead snake,” she muttered.

He laughed. “Well, on that we agree. I once shot a water moccasin out of the backseat of my patrol car. Got wrote up for destruction of city property.”

She gaped at him. “You’re kidding!”

He shook his head. “Nope. No idea how it got in there, but I damn near flipped the car when I looked in my rearview mirror and saw it slithering across the backseat.”

An all-over shudder wracked her body. “I think I’d need therapy after that.”

“Some might argue I needed therapy long before the snake incident,” he said with a grin.

She rolled her eyes but laughed and shoved an elbow into his side.

They acted like goofy teenagers out on their first date. They held hands, traded ice cream and laughed at the antics of the zoo animals.

By the time they made their way back out to his truck, they were flushed from the heat, but Payton glowed from head to toe.

“Have a good time?” he asked as he started the engine and turned the air conditioning on full blast.

“The best!”

“Want to go back to the hotel, grab a shower then get something to eat?”

“Mmm, only if I get to choose the place,” she said, flashing him a sideways look.

“Bear in mind the fanciest thing I brought was a pair of unfaded jeans and a newer T-shirt,” he warned.

“Oh, I think you’ll be fine. There’s a casual place a few blocks from my apartment. It’s small, intimate, a little dark, and they have the best jazz band on the weekends.”

Small, dark and intimate sounded real good to him right now. He wanted to be closer to her. Wanted to touch her and enjoy the feel of her in his arms.

He couldn't ever remember enjoying himself as much as he had the past two weekends. He was at a loss to explain why, but nothing in his past compared to the reality of Payton.

Being with her made him feel happy. Carefree. In a way no one else made him feel. He was comfortable. At ease. He loved the way she lit up, the way she expressed delight over the smallest things. He found himself wanting to do things to make her smile, because God, she had a gorgeous smile.

He watched her from the corner of his eye as he drove out of the zoo parking lot. Then he eased his hand over to take hers. She turned to him and smiled, and he swore he went positively weak. Their palms brushed and she clutched his fingers with hers.

They made a quick run by Payton's apartment to get a change of clothes for her and then they headed for the hotel.

There they showered together, and he made love to her against the shower wall, the warm water cascading over their bodies. Afterward, he dried them both off and they dressed for dinner.

It only took a few minutes to drive to the club, and as Payton had warned, it was small, housed in the very end of a tiny strip mall.

They walked into the darkened interior, and Wes looked around appreciatively at the wooden tables adorned with flickering candles. There were at most, ten, spaced out in front of a diminutive platform that must serve as the stage.

To the right a bar with three stools lined the wall, and a waitress wearing a slinky black dress stood arranging drinks on a tray.

Payton looked down at her watch. "We have about fifteen minutes before the band will start. Time enough to sit down and get our food."

He nodded and let her lead them to a table on the far right of the room. She chose a table that afforded them the most privacy while still able to view the stage.

When they sat, another waitress in a similar dress as the other server he'd seen walked up with a broad smile.

"Payton! It's good to see you again," the waitress exclaimed.

Payton smiled back. "Hey, Laura, how are you?"

"I'm great. Did you go to Brenda's wedding last weekend?"

Payton nodded. "Laura, I want you to meet someone. This is Wes Hoffman. He and I knew each other from high school."

Wes fidgeted in his chair, bothered by the introduction. Why, he wasn't sure, but it made him seem like nothing more than a passing acquaintance, a catch-up session with an old friend.

And maybe that *was* what it was.

"Hi, Wes," Laura said brightly, a warm smile lighting her face.

He gave her his best killer smile. "Very nice to meet you, Laura."

Her eyes widened appreciatively before she cleared her throat and turned back to Payton. "You guys going to eat?"

Payton nodded.

"What'll you have to drink then?"

"I'll take a glass of the house wine," she said then looked over at him expectantly.

"I'll take whatever beer you have on tap."

"Okay, I'll get your drinks right out," Laura said before she walked off at a brisk pace.

Wes looked at Payton in confusion. "But we didn't order food. Or get a menu even."

She laughed, the rich, husky sound floating over him. "They only serve one thing here. Prime rib, medium rare, with a house salad and baked potato. For dessert they serve pecan pie."

His mouth watered. "They're speaking my language."

"Somehow I imagined you wouldn't object to steak," she teased.

"I need the protein," he protested. "You've worn me out. No telling how much muscle I've lost."

Her cheeks looked decidedly pink in the soft candlelight, but she only smiled and winked. "There are worse ways to get your exercise."

He burst into laughter. "You got that right."

A minute later, Laura returned with their drinks and a few minutes after that, the band began setting up. By the time they got their food, the first strains of music filled the room.

He stared at Payton as they ate, watched how she focused in on the musicians, how she seemed to enjoy every aspect of the experience. She was obviously a person who derived pleasure from even the simplest things. Their trip to the zoo had delighted her, and she'd spent the entire afternoon with an exuberant smile on her face.

He'd found himself wanting to do more, using any excuse to make her light up.

"Let's dance," she said, looking over at him, her blue eyes glowing in the dim light.

And here again, he wanted to do whatever would put a smile on her lips. He wasn't a dancer by any stretch of the imagination. Two left feet didn't exactly cover his lack of grace. But if she wanted to dance, then he'd dance. He'd use any excuse to get close to her, press her body to his.

Wes stood and held out his hand to her. She took it and stood in front of him. Without a word, he pulled her into his arms right there by the table.

The haunting sounds of the slow melody worked its magic as they melted in to each other. Payton closed her eyes and leaned her cheek against his hard chest as he rested his chin atop her head.

Their own little corner of the universe. No one watched them, not that she cared. They swayed and moved in a tight circle. Had there ever been such a perfect day? Not even last night when he'd gone to such lengths to give her a perfect evening. The sex was good, no, make that fantastic, but it was today that squeezed her heart. Two people laughing and

carefree, comfortable with each other. Was this what it felt like to be in love?

Her body went tense for a moment. He sensed the change in her because he pulled away to look down at her, confusion registering in his expression.

She forced herself to relax and give him a reassuring smile. But her heart beat with a resounding thud, hammering against the inside of her chest like a prisoner trying to escape.

Love. Did she love him? Could she be in love with someone she'd for all practical purposes only met a little over a week ago?

Or did the feelings they'd once had for each other come into play? She frowned against his chest. No, they didn't count. Yeah, she'd had a major crush on Wes at sixteen, but they'd only gotten together the one weekend when they'd had sex. No boyfriend/girlfriend stuff as teenagers are wont to do.

Yes, she'd had tender feelings for him then. But love? What the hell had she known about love then? And she certainly hadn't spent the last twelve years pining for him. Hell, she hadn't even thought about him except when conversations with her girlfriends came up about old boyfriends/lovers.

That could only mean that whatever connection they had *now* accounted for the warm, fuzzy feeling inside her.

The song ended and Wes returned her to her chair just as Laura brought dessert and refilled their drinks. They ate in silence, and she knew she was being unnaturally quiet, but she couldn't wrap her brain around her almost epiphany. Because really, she wasn't about to admit to herself that she could very well be in love with him yet.

"You're quiet," Wes murmured as he pushed aside his saucer.

She smiled, just a little shakily. "Just enjoying the night. The day. The weekend. It's been fantastic."

He leaned forward, taking her hands in his. "It's not over yet. I plan to take you back to the hotel..." He raised her hand to his lips, inserting

the tip of her index finger in his mouth, laving his tongue over it. "...and make love to you all night."

She sucked in a mouthful of air and tried to calm her frazzled nerves. Nerves? She wasn't nervous. She was anxious. Anxious to get the hell back to the hotel.

"I thought you needed to leave tonight? Don't you work tomorrow?"

He nodded. "I do. Have to work, that is. But I thought I'd get up early and drive in tomorrow morning. Which gives us tonight." He paused and gave her a sexy grin. "That is, if you're interested."

She met his gaze head-on. "I'm interested."

"Then what are we waiting for?" he asked as he stood.

What indeed.

Chapter Eleven

Consumed. There was really no other word for it. His entire thought process was a study in a curvy brunette with blue eyes and a killer smile.

Wes sat at his desk filing his latest report, cursing the fact that it was only Monday. Did it make him a pussy that he was counting the hours until he could see Payton again?

With a disgusted sigh, he acknowledged that it probably did, and furthermore, he could give a flying fuck about that.

He checked his cell phone for the hundredth time, just in case she'd called and it hadn't rang. She probably wouldn't call until after work anyway.

"Hey, man, we're all going to Jake and Ellie's after work," Jeremy said from the door. "You gonna come?"

Wes stared up at his friend lounging against the doorframe. "Yeah, sounds good. I'll be there."

"Good. You haven't been around much lately. We were starting to wonder if you'd found better company."

Wes snorted. He wasn't going to walk into that trap. "I'll be there," he repeated.

"Jake wanted me to ask you to get a case of beer on your way over. The girls are taking care of the food."

"Yeah, sure, no problem. I'll go home and change then head on over."

Jeremy nodded and ducked out. Wes sat there a long time pondering Jeremy's innocent statement about better company. The more he thought on it, the more bothered he was.

He hadn't lied when he'd told Payton that he enjoyed a simple life. Beer, good times, a job he loved, a town he loved and good friends. His friends had found happy relationships, but things hadn't changed. They were still hanging out together, living a few miles apart. Payton didn't live here, wasn't a part of his circle. A relationship with her beyond sex would entail change for at least one, if not both of them.

The thought of his life changing made him uneasy. He'd always imagined that when he got ready to settle down, he'd do so with a local girl. Just like Jake, Luke and Jeremy had done. Then life would go on as usual only he wouldn't go home alone anymore.

Payton... Well, she didn't seem like the kind of girl willing to give everything up to move to a Podunk town for a guy on a city cop's salary.

Nor are you asking her to, dumbass. Way to get ahead of yourself.

But the fact remained. She had a successful business. One she'd built herself. She'd put a lot of time and sweat into her agency. There was absolutely nothing he could offer her that she didn't already have. There wasn't anything his *town* could offer her. As convinced as he was that he didn't want his life to change, didn't want to leave the niche he'd created, he knew she had to be equally determined not to give up her life either.

It shouldn't bother him, them being at opposite ends. But it left a hollow ache in his chest. A morose feeling he couldn't get rid of no matter how hard he tried to convince himself that he should be looking at this as a temporary relationship. Sex. Good times. A little fun. Nothing more.

He had to get a grip. Being this tied up in knots over a girl... Well, it sucked. It was no way to live.

His cell phone rang, and he yanked it up to stare at the LCD. He was annoyed it wasn't Payton, but even more pissed that he'd reacted like a lovesick moron.

Cool it, dude. Seriously.

"Hey, Gracie," he said as he put the phone to his ear.

"Hey, Wes, how was the weekend? I thought you'd call today and let me know. Did she like it?"

Apparently he wasn't the only one waiting around on a call then.

"Sorry," he mumbled. "Been busy."

"Uh huh. Jeremy told me just how busy you guys have been today."

He sighed at her disbelieving tone. Busted. Hell. He couldn't help the surge of annoyance. He felt hot and itchy, like anyone looking at him the wrong way would set him off.

"She liked it. Weekend was great. Look, can we hash this out later? I'm coming over to Jake's. I assume you and Luke will be there."

He cringed at his snotty tone, but he couldn't call it back now.

Dead silence met his response. Finally she responded in a tight voice. "Uh, okay, sorry to bother you then. Yeah, I'll talk to you later."

The soft click in his ear told him she'd hung up. He closed his phone and dropped it on his desk. Fuck, fuck, fuck. When had he become such an ass? And to Gracie for God's sake. Gracie who'd done nothing but be the best friend in the entire world to him, not to mention all the time she'd spent shopping for all the candles and shit he'd taken to Houston.

He scrubbed a hand over his face. He was losing it. Absolutely losing his freaking mind.

* * *

Payton let herself into her apartment, kicking off her shoes as soon as she was in the door. Her feet ached, her head ached, and she needed a long hot bath.

She tossed aside her briefcase and glanced over at her answering machine. Not that it would be blinking. Everyone called her cell phone if they couldn't get her at home. She didn't even think she'd ever given Wes her home number.

She trudged toward the bedroom, stripping as she went. Yeah, a hot bath sounded good. She could relax and call Wes while she soaked. Already, she missed him and they hadn't been apart a whole day yet.

The weekend seemed an eternity away, and she was assuming that he'd want or be able to see her again so soon. The problem was, she had no clear idea of this thing between her and Wes. What had started out as simple sex had quickly become a whole lot more. What, she wasn't sure of yet, but she knew she was in deep trouble where he was concerned.

You love him, idiot. That's the whole lot more you've been yammering about. If it was just sex, you wouldn't be thinking about him every second of the day.

God, she hated when she made sense. Hated it even more when she resorted to snarky internal monologue.

"At least say that shit out loud," she muttered. "Then it has more validity, and maybe I can admit that I'm in way over my head."

She started the bathwater and laid her cell phone on the side of the tub. Then she slipped out of her bra and panties and groped around on the counter for a scrunchie to pull her hair back with.

The sound of the phone startled her, and she whirled around. Her heart sped up, and a knot settled in her stomach. Was it him?

She yanked up the phone, not even bothering with the LCD screen. "Hello?"

"Payton, honey, I'm so glad I caught you." Her mother's shaky voice filled Payton's ears, and her heart plummeted.

"Mom? Is everything okay?"

A low sob echoed across the line. Was her mom *crying*?

"Honey, it's your dad. We think he's had a heart attack. I'm at the hospital here in Galveston."

"Oh my God. Mom, is he...is he alive?"

"I don't know anything yet, Payton. They're still working on him. I just don't know."

Payton struggled to stay calm. She didn't want to freak her mother out more than she was already, but the fact was Payton wanted to cry herself. She wasn't ready to lose her father. Not her daddy.

Tears pricked her eyelids as she took in several steadying breaths. “I’ll be down as soon as I can, Mom. If there’s any change, call me on my cell. I’m leaving in just a few minutes.”

“Okay, honey, and be careful please. Don’t kill yourself getting down here.”

“I will. I love you, Mom.”

“I love you, too, baby,” her mother choked out.

Payton hung up, numb. The sound of water filling the bathtub broke through her shocked silence, and she quickly turned off the flow. Not bothering to let the water out, she raced into the bedroom to dress and pack a suitcase. Traffic on I-45 would be a bitch this time of day, but she had to get on the road and to the hospital as quickly as possible.

* * *

Wes pulled onto Jake’s street, drove down and parked at the curb behind Luke’s truck. The truth was, he didn’t want to be here. He’d rather go home and go to bed, figure out the muddled mass he called a brain. But he owed Gracie an apology in a big way. Besides, being here beat waiting around for a phone call he may or may not get from Payton.

He got out of the truck and walked around to let the tailgate down. He grasped the case of beer and hauled it out of the back. Then he kicked the tailgate back up with his knee and nudged it closed with his hip.

He headed up the walkway to the front door, feeling more dread by the minute. It was some fucked up, twisted ass shit when he viewed a night with his friends with the same enthusiasm as a trip to the dentist.

At the door, he propped the beer on his knee and rang the bell. A few seconds later, Ellie opened the door and smiled welcomingly at him.

He followed her inside and to the kitchen to dump the beer. “Where is everyone?” he asked.

“Out back getting the grill started. Jeremy and Michelle haven’t made it yet. They called and said Thad wasn’t feeling well, so if I had to guess they’ll either be late or they won’t come.”

“How are you feeling?” he asked, as he folded her in his arms for a hug. At least he could try not to ruin his friendship with everyone.

He dropped a kiss on her cheek as he pulled away.

“I’m fine,” she said with a sweet smile. “Mornings aren’t exactly a walk in the park, but Jake’s been taking good care of me.”

Wes grinned. “Oh, I bet he is.”

She blushed and looked away, which only made Wes chuckle. “Go on outside,” she said, shoving him out of the kitchen. “I’m going to make some tea and then I’ll be out.” She stopped at the cooler and picked up several beers then held them out to him. “Take these while you’re at it.”

He kissed her again on the forehead, took the beer and headed toward the back patio. At the glass door, he paused, looking outside where Jake stood by the grill and Luke and Gracie stood to the side talking and laughing about God knows what.

He took a deep breath, tucked the beers against his stomach with one arm and opened the French door with his free hand. The others looked up when they heard the door. Wes zoomed in on Gracie, though, and at the hurt in her eyes.

“Hey,” Jake said. “Beer guy is here.”

Wes grinned and stepped outside, closing the door with his hip. “Glad I’m good for something.”

He passed out the beers to Jake and Luke first then turned to Gracie. They stared at each other for a long moment, and he held out a beer. “Peace offering,” he said.

Her eyes narrowed and she took the beer. She would have turned away, but Wes caught her arm. He didn’t want to do this in front of everyone, but it would only look weird if he dragged her off to privately apologize. Besides, their group had never kept secrets.

“I’m sorry, Gracie girl. I was an ass.”

“Yes, you were,” she huffed, but her expression softened.

Luke walked over to stand by Gracie and pinned Wes with a questioning stare. “You pissed Gracie off? I didn’t think it was possible.”

“Still friends?” Wes asked. He ignored Luke’s question and held his arms out to Gracie.

She rolled her eyes and walked into his hug. Wes folded his arms around her and enjoyed the feel of something warm and feminine in his arms. Of unconditional friendship. It was a nice feeling.

She kissed him on the cheek. “You’re forgiven. Now if you guys will excuse me, I’m going to go see if Ellie needs any help.”

The men watched as she walked back into the house, and when she shut the door behind her, Jake and Luke both turned to stare at Wes.

He shoved his hands in his pockets and met their stares head-on.

“What the fuck happened between you and Gracie?” Luke demanded.

Wes raised an eyebrow. It wasn’t like Luke to get all pissy and possessive. “I was short with her on the phone. Bit her head off. In short, I was an ass, and she didn’t deserve it.”

“You haven’t been yourself lately,” Jake observed. “Something bothering you?”

“Definitely not like you to act like a dick to Gracie,” Luke added.

Wes rubbed the back of his neck. He hated these conversations, probably because they never had them. Any deep, personal shit usually seemed to revolve around the women, such as when Ellie or Gracie had problems. They never stood around and got all mushy over male shit.

“Things are fine,” he muttered. “I just had a bad day and took it out on Gracie. She knows I love her to death.”

Jake and Luke didn’t press, something Wes was supremely grateful for. He already dreaded the confrontation with Gracie enough, because he knew it was coming. No way she was going to let him get away with blowing her off about how the weekend had gone with Payton. And then he’d have to tell her how fantastic it was, at which point she’d want to know what the fuck his problem was if it was so freaking terrific. Then

he'd have to explain his real problem. Gracie wouldn't just laugh. She'd get all smug and say I told you so. No thanks.

The women walked back outside, and Wes watched Jake get all gooey over Ellie. The only difference was this time he could understand that gooey feeling. He rather thought he might be getting the same doe-eyed expression if Payton walked out that same door.

He concentrated on his beer, squeezing the can with his hand. Realistically his relationship, if you could call it that, was already causing problems within his circle of friends. Most were at his instigation, but they were there all the same.

He didn't want this awkward alienation. He wanted the same easygoing camaraderie they'd always shared. Pissing on Gracie was inexcusable, and it sure as hell wouldn't have happened if he had his head on straight where Payton was concerned.

It's just sex. Treat it for what it is.

But that thought was as distasteful as shitting on Gracie.

He took a long chug of the beer and admitted to himself that no amount of salvaging could keep the evening from the toilet. He'd ruined it before it ever began. The sooner he carried his sorry carcass home the better because he clearly wasn't fit for public consumption.

Chapter Twelve

By the end of the week, Wes was glad he hadn't given in to the urge to call Payton. He was annoyed, peeved and a whole host of other synonyms for pissed. He didn't know if she really wasn't interested in seeing him for anything besides sex, or if she was just enjoying yanking him around by the balls on a very short leash.

Neither option was particularly appealing.

Hell, if he hadn't called her the last week they wouldn't have gotten together the previous weekend, and now, again, she hadn't gotten in touch.

While he could understand her preliminary reluctance to make all the moves, after what he'd pulled out of the bag last weekend, it was definitely her move. He wasn't about to act like a desperate lapdog, panting after her every move.

Friday nights were always a get-together night, usually at Jeremy's, but tonight everyone was going to congregate at Luke and Gracie's because Thad was sick and both Jeremy and Michelle were wiped out.

Wes was determined to have fun and not let thoughts of Payton interfere in his time with his friends. Beer, good food, a UFC fight and the company of the greatest people on earth should set his spirits to rights.

By the time he got to Luke's house, he already felt a great deal better. Jake and Ellie were already there, and Luke was manning the grill. Gracie greeted him with a big hug and a sloppy kiss on the cheek, and he tousled her hair, glad that things were back to normal between them.

She looked as though she wanted to ask him a hundred questions, but she refrained, for which he was grateful. She could be pushy and bossy, two things he loved about her, but she always seemed to know when not to push.

He pressed a kiss to her forehead. "Thank you," he whispered.

She drew away and cocked an eyebrow. "What for?"

He smiled. "Just thank you."

She shook her head and smiled back. "Want a beer?"

"Am I breathing?"

Her soft melodic laughter rang out. "I'll take that as a yes since I haven't killed you yet."

She tossed him a can and jerked her head in the direction of the back patio. "Go on out. Guys are back there. So is Ellie. Poor girl was as green as the shit growing in my fridge. I sent her out for some fresh air."

Wes chuckled. "Sure you don't need any help?"

"Nah, I'm coming out just as soon as I call the cable company and figure out why the fuck I can't order the pay-per-view fight."

"Ah shit, no fight?"

"Not if I can help it," she muttered.

He smacked her playfully on the ass then headed out to join the others. As he stepped onto the cobblestone patio, he felt lighter. A warm breeze rippled his T-shirt, and across the back lawn, lightning bugs were starting to appear in the dusky twilight.

He inhaled deeply, letting the scent of honeysuckle drift across his nostrils. Man, did he love it here in his small town with his friends, his life and his job. Living in a place like Houston? Definitely not for him.

"Hey, Wes," Ellie said as she walked over.

To his surprise she hugged him, tucking her head underneath his chin and squeezing tight. Any hugging that went on between them was always at his instigation and not without a lot of blushing on her part.

"Hey, what was that for?" he asked as she pulled away.

She smiled sweetly up at him. "You just looked like you needed it."

His heart soared a bit higher. He knew it took a lot for Ellie to instigate any kind of intimacy with anyone except Jake. It made him pull her into his arms and give her another big hug. He dropped a kiss on the top of her head and gently squeezed her.

"Thanks, sweetness. As a matter of fact, I always need a hug from a beautiful woman."

She blushed and ducked her head.

"Get the hell away from him," Jake grumbled. "His charm is highly overrated."

"Says you," Ellie said with a wink in Wes's direction. "You're a man. You wouldn't understand."

"Lord I hope not," Jake said with a laugh. "The day I start understanding the sex appeal of another man, well, that's the day to put me in a pine box and call it good. I much prefer to concentrate on the sex appeal of a certain sexy little brunette."

Ellie's cheeks turned a darker shade of pink, but her eyes lit up with such joy and happiness that Wes couldn't help but smile. It reminded him too much of the way Payton had looked at him.

Gracie walked back outside with a pile of plates and a handful of utensils. Wes moved to help her, and she happily unloaded them on him.

They worked together to set the patio table and Gracie hurried back in for glasses and the tea pitcher. Five minutes later, they were all kicked back watching the deepening twilight and enjoying amiable conversation.

The sounds of crickets and tree frogs filled the air. In short, it was a perfect evening. The first stars were starting to pop in the sky, and in the distance an almost full moon peeked over the horizon.

Luke dished up the steaks while Gracie poured tea and replenished beer cans. When they all sat, Gracie raised her tea glass.

"To a perfect evening with good friends, those here, and those who couldn't be with us."

"Hear, hear," Luke said as he raised his beer.

Wes raised his tea glass in salute as Jake and Ellie raised theirs as well.

This was what he didn't want to change. Ever. The idea positively depressed him. But then so did the idea of not seeing Payton again. She'd blown him off, not the other way around. And he damn sure wasn't going to go chasing after her ass.

His cell phone rang, interrupting a bite of steak on its way to his mouth. With a sigh, he set his fork down. He hoped to hell it wasn't a call in to work.

When he looked at the LCD, his heart stepped up a few beats. Payton. But why call now? Friday night, when they had no hope of weekend plans.

He flipped it open and slapped the phone to his ear. "Hello," he said curtly.

"Wes, hi, it's Payton."

When he didn't respond, she continued on.

"I, uh, thought I'd drive up tomorrow. I'd like to see you if you're free."

"I'm not."

"Oh. I see."

"Sorry, I have to work," he said, mentally cursing himself for A) lying and B) feeling the need to soften the refusal with an excuse. It should have been enough to just simply refuse.

"Too bad," she said with a sigh. Was that regret he heard in her voice? The thought of that irritated him further. She had all damn week to line out weekend plans with him if she was so damn set on seeing him. "I had some unexpected—"

"Look, this isn't a good time," he cut in before she could continue. It sounded rude, but he damn sure wasn't going to pretend he wasn't annoyed as hell.

"Sorry to have bothered you," she said softly before a click sounded in his ear.

He closed the phone and let it slide down his chest before he shoved it back into his jeans pocket. He avoided the stares of the others and resumed eating.

He heard Gracie curse softly under her breath but he refused to look up. The steak that had tasted so damn good just moments before now tasted like a giant turd.

They ate in silence. No one seemed willing to break it with conversation. When they'd finished, Gracie stood and began clearing the plates. When Wes stood and offered to help, Ellie stuck a hand out. "We'll get it. You guys enjoy the evening and a beer."

He sank into his chair and leaned back, staring up at the sky. He heard the girls go in and shut the door. Then he mentally counted to three. Sure enough, about the time he said three, Luke cleared his throat.

Wes righted his head and looked over at Luke. "Gracie ratted me out, didn't she."

Luke's body jerked with muffled laughter. "Yeah, she did. I held out on her until she caved."

"Bastard," Wes muttered.

"It doesn't take a fucking genius to see you're miserable," Jake pointed out. "The question is what are you going to do about it?"

Wes sighed. "It's complicated."

Luke arched an eyebrow. "Judging by the brush-off you just gave her, I'd say it's not too complicated now. She'd have to be awfully thick not to get it after that conversation."

Wes closed his eyes. "It's twisted, I know."

"Try me," Jake said dryly. "I know a thing or two about twisted. Twisted described every aspect of my feelings for Ellie until the time we got together. Hell, the woman still manages to tie me in knots."

"That's me," Wes said morosely. "Tied up in one big fucking knot. I don't know my head from my ass anymore."

"So why the brush-off?" Luke asked.

"It sounds stupid. I don't want my life to change. I want to be with her but I only want it on my terms. And she doesn't seem to have any interest in me beyond a good fuck."

Luke and Jake exchanged amused glances.

"Cut that shit out," Wes growled. "Last thing I need is you two smug bastards gloating."

"Well, to address your first issue, I hate to tell you this but any time you get involved with a woman, your life is going to change. Suck it up and deal with it like a big boy," Jake said with no trace of sympathy in his voice.

"Yeah, but you and Luke didn't have to change your lives. You married women who fit into the life you already had. We all still get together. We still share good times."

Luke burst out laughing and Jake choked on his beer.

"Jesus are you deluded," Luke said around his wheezes. "Not change? Okay, I think I know where you're headed with this. From what I've been able to learn from Gracie, this chick you're involved with lives in Houston. You want the girl. You like the girl. But you don't want to give up any part of your life here. You want to keep your friends close, carry on like always, only have the woman you want."

Wes nodded. "Basically."

Jake shook his head. "First of all, get the notion that our lives didn't change when we got married right out of that tiny brain of yours. Marriage is all about change. It's about compromise. It's about wanting to make the woman you love happy. Hell, I gave up my damn colored, blinking Christmas lights because Ellie wanted the plain ass, boring white ones. I'd do anything to make that woman smile. My first priority is her happiness. Don't think I don't love you guys, enjoy the time we spend together, but you and the others? Not my priority. Ellie is. Always will be. She comes first."

Luke nodded in agreement. He met Wes's gaze. "I understand where you're coming from, buddy. I do. But you're going about it all wrong. What's the worst that happens? You move to Houston and only see us

every other weekend? We're not going anywhere. We'd visit your ass, you'd come visit ours." He shrugged. "Besides that, Gracie would have a kitten if she didn't see you on a regular basis. Believe me when I say, the girls are way more attached to our get-togethers than we are. They'd work around the obstacles. I'm willing to bet they'd have us getting together regardless of where you ended up."

Wes grinned. "I love those women."

"Not nearly as much as we do," Jake said, cracking a smile. "And it's only because we love them so much that we tolerate your outrageous flirting. I swear if you don't keep your lips off my wife, I'm going to have to rearrange them for you."

Luke snorted then dissolved into laughter. "I'm guessing a threesome with Ellie is out then."

Jake shot him a glare that would have melted lead. "You're a twisted motherfucker. There is no doubt about that. There ain't another man who'll ever touch Ellie."

Wes held his hands up, knowing that if he didn't stop Luke, he'd egg Jake on to infinity.

"So you think I'm being unreasonable," he said, directing the conversation back to his issue.

"Look, I don't know the whole situation. Just the bits and pieces I've gleaned from Gracie. I do know you sounded pissed on the phone a while ago."

"That's putting it lightly," Jake said.

Wes sighed. "I think she's playing a fucking game with me. I don't know for sure. When I'm with her, she acts like I'm the only man in the world but as soon as we part, I don't hear from her. It's like I don't exist. She made all the initial moves. I'll give her that. But I wagged my ass down to Houston last weekend and spent the weekend making her feel like the only woman in the damn world. And I don't hear a word from her all week except for Friday night when it's too late to make any weekend plans."

Jake pinched his lips together in a tight line and shook his head. "Dude, I hate to tell you this, but if you're keeping score, you're doomed to disappointment. Relationships don't work on an equal opportunity basis. They're solely what you make of them. Sometimes it's you going the extra mile. Sometimes it's her. The beauty is in not noticing when who is doing more than the other."

"So you think I'm being an unreasonable dickhead."

Luke snickered. "Uh yeah, basically."

"Great. Just fucking great." Wes closed his eyes and massaged the bridge of his nose between his fingers. "Honest to God, I don't know what to fucking do. I've only known her for two weeks. Way too fucking soon to feel this kind of angst."

"Do you love her?" Luke asked.

Wes blinked in surprise at the directness of Luke's question.

"Forget how long you've known her. It's a simple question. Do you love her?"

Wes glared over at Luke. "That's not a fucking simple question and you know it."

"Actually it is," Jake said casually. "You have to ask yourself why you're sidestepping the question. If you don't love her, your reaction should be automatic. A simple no. But you haven't denied it. Which tells me you're fighting it tooth and nail but you're already a goner."

"Fuck you," Wes growled.

"I'll take that as a yes," Jake said with a snicker.

"I—yes, I love her. Or at least I think I do. I don't really know. The idea strikes bloody terror in my heart. I don't understand it, but there it is."

"Yeah, well, join the club," Luke said. "We're guys. We're not supposed to understand why we suddenly can't live without a woman. Why the idea of being without her gives us cold sweats."

"Fucking pussy. God. I've turned into you," Wes said mournfully.

Jake chuckled. "The only pussy I see around here is you. I'm man enough to admit my downfall. I have *one*. A petite brunette with blue eyes and the sweetest smile this side of the Mississippi."

"I was an ass," Wes said morosely. "I seem to have developed the habit lately of hurting the women I most love."

"Yeah, well, Gracie has already forgiven your ass. Now you just have to get Payton to."

"I don't suppose you'd loan me your wife for lunch tomorrow?" Wes asked hopefully. "If anyone can kick my ass back on track it's her. I'm sure she can tell me exactly how much groveling it's going to take me to get back into Payton's good graces after tonight."

Luke rolled his eyes. "Yeah, you can have Gracie for lunch. But then, Wes? Get your own damn woman. I'm tired of sharing mine with you."

Wes grinned. "You're just pissed because she loves me."

"I love her, but I never said she had good taste," Luke said sourly.

Chapter Thirteen

Payton rubbed tired eyes as she turned onto 59 out of Beaumont. She hadn't slept much the night before. Hell, she hadn't slept a wink all damn week. But she wanted to see Wes. She needed to see him. After spending the week at the hospital, praying for her dad to recover, she wanted nothing more than the comfort of Wes's arms.

Her hands gripped the steering wheel tighter as traffic zipped by her in the left-hand lane. Monday night had been a sleepless, tense night, holding onto her mother as they waited to hear some word of her dad's condition.

He'd spent Tuesday and Wednesday in critical condition but by Wednesday night had shone signs of improvement after the bypass operation he'd undergone.

Thursday, he'd been awake and alert, much to Payton and her mother's relief. She'd stayed the afternoon with her father, telling him how much she loved him.

Friday, her mother had all but kicked her out of the hospital with strict instructions not to return until the next week. She'd been reluctant to go, but the thought of seeing Wes again after her harrowing week was a strong incentive.

Now she was but a few miles from town. Wes had said he had to work, but she could wait around until he got off. She'd stop to get something to eat and then call him to see when his shift ended.

Remembering the choices he'd offered her before, she mulled over whether she wanted barbeque, Mexican or a burger. None of it sounded

good, but she was hungry and needed to eat. Zack's offered a few grill items and it was as good a place as any to sit back and relax.

Decision made, she rolled her shoulders and stretched her neck as she drove into town. A few minutes later, she parked outside Zack's and wearily got out of her car.

She opened the door and headed straight for the bar. She slid onto a barstool and caught the eye of the young bartender. After placing an order for tea and a grilled cheese sandwich, she sat back and looked around the interior.

When she got to the far corner, she froze, blinked and refocused on the table. No, she wasn't mistaken. Wes was sitting with a redhead who was smiling up at him. He clasped her hand across the table, and she laughed at something he said.

Working? The asshole had said he had to work. That was his excuse for not seeing her today. Unbelievable. Why lie? Why not just save them both the trouble and tell her he wasn't interested in seeing her anymore. Or maybe she was just sex on the side while he made time with the auburn floozie.

She seethed while she considered her options. Part of her wanted to disappear out of the bar, go home and wipe Wes Hoffman from her existence. But damn it, she hadn't done anything wrong. She wasn't the one spitting out lies. No way in hell she was slinking off like some shrinking violet. Maybe that was the kind of woman he was attracted to, but fuck that.

She slid off the barstool and stalked over toward the table. Halfway there, the redhead looked up and blinked. Probably saw the kill look in Payton's eyes. The woman nudged Wes's hand and nodded her head in Payton's direction.

By the time Wes looked up, Payton was standing over the table like an avenging angel come to kick some demon ass.

"Payton!" Wes said, his eyes widening.

The redhead's eyes also widened. Then she smiled. "Oh you're Payton. I've been dying to meet you. I'm Gracie Forsythe."

"And I don't care," Payton said through gritted teeth. She summarily dismissed the redhead and turned her ire on Wes. "You cock-sucking bastard. You lied to me. If you would have just told the fucking truth, you would have saved me a trip over here, not to mention the embarrassment I'm about to cause you."

Wes stood, holding his hand out to cup her elbow. She yanked her arm away. "Don't you fucking touch me." She turned to storm off but he caught her arm.

"Payton, please. Let me explain."

Tears burned her eyelids but she was determined not to cry in front of him. "There's nothing to explain, Wes. You made yourself perfectly clear last night. I was just too thick to get it. But why the lie? Why not just tell me you didn't want to see me? I've been straight up with you from the beginning. You owe me the same, damn it."

"Straight up?" he echoed. "How can you say you've been straight up? I don't have a fucking clue where I stand with you. You haven't once called me. I called the week before. I instigated the weekend in Houston. I thought it was time for you to call me." He shifted his feet and looked uneasily away before continuing, "I didn't want to come across as a desperate loser."

She gaped at him. "You want to know why I didn't call you, Wes? I was at the hospital all fucking week because my dad had a near-fatal heart attack. I didn't have *time* to call you. I was too worried about losing my father. I spent the week worried sick and at the end of it all, I just wanted to see *you*. Be with *you*. No games. No scorecard."

A tear trickled down her cheek, and she swiped angrily at it with her sleeve. "You know what? Fuck you, Wes Hoffman. I don't need your shit."

She stomped across the floor and flung the door open. Wes caught up to her as she wrenched open the door to her car. He caught her wrist, preventing her from getting in.

"Payton, no. You can't leave like this. You're too upset to drive. Please, just stay and talk to me."

“Why, so you can feel less like a desperate loser? Drop dead,” she said in an acid voice. She slid into her car and slammed the door.

Her hands shook as she jammed her key in the ignition. Finally, she got the engine started and she turned her head to look behind her as she backed out of her space. When she got turned around, she spared one last glance at Wes who stood watching as she peeled out of the parking lot.

Wes watched her go, a relentless ache snaking through his chest. His fingers curled into fists at his sides as he sought to control the shaking.

Everything in the last two weeks came down to this. Payton was walking out of his life, much like she’d walked back in. In a whirlwind. Only he had no desire to see her go.

She was furious and he deserved every bit of her anger. He closed his eyes, willing the sick feeling in the pit of his stomach to go away.

He didn’t want to *lose* her.

“I like her,” Gracie announced from behind him.

He turned and looked questioningly at her.

Gracie grinned. “She was ready to kick my ass. She seems a little possessive of you.”

“She just told me to fuck off,” Wes said grimly.

Gracie shook her head and held out her hand to grasp his arm. She tugged him back into the bar and shoved him onto a barstool.

“I’ve fucked up, Gracie.”

She made a sound of exasperation. “You make it sound like you’ve already lost her.”

He looked bleakly at her. “Haven’t I? I lied to her. Now she thinks I’m screwing around with you behind her back.”

Gracie cupped his cheek with her hand. “Men are so stupid when it comes to women, I swear. Do you think that little show was because she wanted nothing to do with you? Hell, she was ready to scratch my eyes out. A woman who doesn’t care doesn’t go to that kind of trouble, Wes.”

“I’ve got to talk to her.”

Gracie nodded. “Yes, you do, but before you do, you need to figure out what it is exactly you’re going to say to her once you make her stop to listen.”

He opened his mouth to speak but nothing came out. What did he want to say to Payton?

“You’ll only get one chance,” Gracie said softly. “Make it count. Don’t be afraid to lay it on the line. If you don’t, you risk losing the best thing that’s ever happened to you.”

His hands trembled and the knot in his stomach grew. “How did you get so damn smart?” he muttered.

“I’ve been in your shoes, honey. Or don’t you remember my little hissy fit I threw at the cabin before running off like an idiot? Once I settled down, I knew I only had one chance to make things right with Luke, and it was too important for me to screw up. The idea of being without him...”

Wes saw the flash of pain cross her face as she contemplated her own words.

“And you know you’re going to have to explain about us,” Gracie added. “All of it. You don’t want to chance her finding out from someone else.”

He groaned. “I’ll be lucky to get her to understand my fucked up way of saying I’ve fallen in love with her, but when I tell her you’re only my best friend, but that I happened to have sex with you a few months ago... I don’t see that going over too well.”

“Are you holding her accountable for everyone she’s slept with in the past?” Gracie asked as she crossed her arms in front of her.

He gave her a sharp look. “Of course not.”

“And she won’t either. Or at least she shouldn’t. But if she finds out later, she’ll wonder *why* you didn’t tell her. It’ll seem like you have something to hide. Never a good thing.”

“You’re right.” Wes sighed.

“I’m always right,” she said cheekily. “Glad I can get someone to admit it. Now. You need to get your ass on the road. Track down your girl. I need to get back to my husband.”

Wes leaned down and kissed her hard on the cheek. “Thank you, Gracie. I hope you know how much I love you.”

She gave him a fierce hug. “I do. Now go.”

Chapter Fourteen

Wes pulled up at Payton's apartment complex and heaved a huge sigh of relief when he saw her car parked in her slot. He'd called her at least a dozen times but she'd refused to answer. After the third time, his calls went straight to voice mail so he knew she'd turned it off.

He sat for a moment collecting himself, preparing for the biggest fight of his life. Not an argument, but a fight to keep her. To make her understand.

This was important. He hadn't been sure just how important until he'd seen the tears she'd tried so hard to hide. And listened to her tell him to get the hell out of her life.

His heart pounding relentlessly, he got out and walked down the sidewalk to her unit. Once there, he rested one arm on her door for a long moment before finally knocking. He leaned forward, pressing his forehead to his arm while he waited for her to answer.

He knocked harder then stood back, thumbs shoved into his pockets. A lifetime later, the door opened to reveal a very pissed Payton. His chest tightened when he saw the red streaks around her eyes.

"Can I come in?" he asked quietly. "There's a lot I need to say to you."

She hesitated and her fingers gripped the edge of the door until they were bloodless. Then she shrugged and backed away before turning to walk inside, leaving him to follow.

Once inside, he shut the door behind him and looked over to where Payton stood, arms crossed defensively over her chest. She looked tired. She looked small and vulnerable. His chest ached at the hurt he'd caused her.

He moved closer to her. "First, I'm very sorry about your dad. Is he going to be okay?"

"He's going to live," she said shortly.

He turned away for a moment and paced across the living room, hands behind his back. Then he swiveled again and stared at her.

Payton watched as a multitude of emotions crawled across Wes's face. He looked uncomfortable, like he had a lot to say but no way to say it.

She emitted a tired sigh. She wished he hadn't come all this way just to end things. She'd done a perfectly satisfactory job of that at the bar. If he had anything further to say, he could have left her a voice mail.

"I'm drawn to you, Payton."

She snorted. "You have a damn funny way of showing it."

He continued on as if she hadn't popped off.

"And it scares the hell out of me. I shouldn't need you like this so soon. But when I'm not with you, I'm thinking about you, looking forward to when I see you again. I can't explain this thing between us. God knows I've tried, but I do know I don't want it to end."

Her heart did a funny little flip-flop in her chest.

"It didn't have to end," she said softly. "I didn't want it to end either. There was no reason we couldn't have seen where it could have taken us. I wasn't the one keeping score. I wasn't the one hiding behind some bullshit exterior, afraid that I'd be seen as too desperate or needy."

He crossed the distance between them and took her shoulders in his hands. He looked down at her, his gaze searing holes in her face.

"I lied to you, Payton. Not the best way to start a relationship. And I do want a relationship. With you. I told myself I didn't. The idea scared me shitless because I liked my life just fine before you swept back in and turned my world upside down. I knew that things would change, that I'd have to make concessions, meet you halfway. And the selfish part of me wanted to have my cake and eat it too."

“But I’m here because, Payton, I don’t want to be without you. Is it too soon to feel this way? I don’t know, but I can’t change that fact. I’m as sure of that as anything in my life.”

He looked away for a moment as if grappling with the emotion she saw so clearly in his eyes just seconds before. When he looked back at her, his eyes were suspiciously wet.

“Payton...I think...I think I might just love you.”

She smiled. A watery, pitiful smile that only grew larger with every passing second. “I think I might just love you, too, Wes,” she whispered.

He framed her face with shaky hands. She could hear the harsh exhalation of his breath. He closed his eyes, and when he opened them again, there was such love and relief, and a hunger that fed her hopes and dreams.

He kissed her. Lightly, reverently. Then he slowly pulled away to stare down at her. “What do we do now?” he asked hoarsely. “I’m so tied up in knots I can’t even see straight. I’ve never...I’ve never felt this way about another woman. It’s kind of like being drawn on by a suspect and realizing I don’t have a weapon.”

She laughed, a choked, husky sound. “I scare you that badly?”

“You terrify me,” he whispered. “I’m terrified of losing you. I’m terrified of not being with you, of not being able to touch you, to make love to you. In such a short time, you’ve become so very precious to me. I don’t understand it. I don’t care.”

Tears spilled from her lids and streaked down her cheeks. She went into his arms, wrapping hers around him. She buried her cheek against his chest, feeling the erratic beat of his heart.

“I don’t want to be without you either,” she said.

He held her, stroking her hair with his hand. He kissed the top of her head.

“I need to explain about Gracie.”

She stiffened and pulled away to look at him. “Who is she?”

Wes looked down at her and slid his fingers up and down her cheek. "She's my best friend. One of them. She's married to my other best friend, Luke."

Payton relaxed and smiled, nuzzling her cheek into his hand. "I guess I was rude to her."

He chuckled but then sobered. "There's something more. I wanted you to hear it from me."

She cocked her head and stared inquisitively at the strain on his face. A bead of dread trickled down her spine.

"Damn, this is hard to explain," he muttered. "It's going to sound worse than it is."

She sighed impatiently. "Just say it, Wes. No bullshit. No games. Just be up front."

"I've slept with Gracie. I had sex with her a few months ago."

Payton blinked in surprise, and her chest tightened at the unexpected shock. "But you said she's married."

"She wasn't then. And it's not because we were together. It's a long story, but Luke and I were fulfilling a fantasy for Gracie. She wanted a threesome."

She took several long, measured breaths as she absorbed his explanation. She had no right to be jealous, but damn it, she was. "That's some friendship you have there," she muttered.

"I just wanted you to know because if I get my way, you're going to be spending a lot of time around my friends, and we don't have secrets. I didn't want you finding out from anyone but me, and I didn't want you to think I had anything to hide."

She smiled and put her finger to his lips. "Shhh. I'm glad you told me."

"You're not upset?"

"Should I be?" she asked. "If this is going to work between us, we have to trust each other. You told me she's only a friend. I believe you. Just in the future, I'd appreciate you being a little *less* of a good friend."

Wes's shoulders sagged, and he pulled her into his arms. His fingers tangled in her hair as he clutched her tighter to him. "I thought I'd lost you, Payton. You don't want to know what that did to me."

She smiled against his chest and closed her eyes.

"I'm sorry for being such an ass," he continued. "I'm so sorry about your father. I wish you would have called me. I would have come and stayed with you."

She pulled away and gazed up at him, blinking away the tears. "You're here now. That's all that counts."

"I'll always be here, Payton. We'll figure out a way."

She smiled, feeling the pull all the way from her heart. "I know we will. I figure we have a lot to learn. There's still so much I don't know about you, but together... We'll learn together."

Epilogue

“Ellie, come on, you can’t decorate the entire house in white lights,” Jake grumbled as she handed him another strand of twinkling white bulbs. “Let me at least do the mantle in colored lights.”

Wes grinned as she ignored Jake’s outburst and calmly handed him yet another strand of the boring-ass white lights she loved so much.

Her hand cupped her swollen belly, and she smiled as she looked down. The baby must have moved again.

“If you’re going to get this done before everyone else shows up, you better get a move on,” Wes drawled.

Jake flipped him the bird. “I don’t see you doing much, Hoffman. Weren’t you supposed to come over and *help*?”

“I helped. I told Ellie what lovely taste she had in Christmas decorations. And I helped her decorate the tree.”

Jake muttered something unintelligible under his breath. A few seconds later, he climbed down the ladder. “All done.”

Ellie smiled up at him, and Wes watched as Jake melted into a puddle of mush.

The doorbell rang, and Ellie turned toward the door.

“I’ll get it,” Wes said. “You two continue on with whatever it is you were doing.”

Wes opened the door, and a rush of unseasonably cool air blew in. Gracie shoved by him and made a beeline for the fireplace. He chuckled as she stuck her hands out, teeth chattering a steady staccato.

Luke walked in at a much slower pace and removed his coat.

"Merry Christmas, Gracie," Wes called over to her.

"Come over here and I'll hug you," she replied. "But my ass isn't moving from in front of the fire."

He and Luke exchanged amused glances and both moved over to where Gracie stood. Wes held his arms out to her, and she curled herself around him, shaking like a leaf the entire time.

"Damn, girl, it's not that cold out there."

She shot him a dark glance as she moved from his arms to Luke's in her effort to get warm.

Ellie and Jake walked over and exchanged hugs with Gracie. Luke smiled at Ellie and gave her a quick hug. "How's the little one doing?"

Ellie smiled. "Active. Keeps me up a lot at night."

The doorbell rang and Luke turned in the direction of the door. "That'll be Jeremy and Michelle. They were leaving the same time we were."

A few seconds later, Jeremy walked in holding a baby carrier, Michelle right behind him.

Lively chatter ensued as they gathered around the tree to ooh and aah over Ellie's handiwork. Presents were dropped on the floor and shoved underneath.

Amidst all the laughing and good cheer, a soft knock sounded at the door. Wes slipped away and went to open it. His knees went weak when he saw Payton standing there in the doorway.

He pulled her inside, into his arms and kissed her long and hard. "I missed you," he whispered.

She smiled and kissed him again.

"Close the door!" Gracie exclaimed.

Payton laughed and turned to slam the door shut. Wes took her hand, tucked it into his and pulled her into the living room where the others were gathered.

She received hugs from all around before Gracie promptly confiscated her, dragging her over to the fire to chat.

He smiled. He'd gotten better about sharing her with his friends. Now it gave him a surge of satisfaction to see her accepted by the people so important to him.

Things had been a wee bit awkward between Payton and Gracie the first time they all got together, but Gracie, in her usual, straightforward manner, addressed the issue head-on, cleared the air and the two had been at ease with each other ever since.

After a while, Payton made her way back to him, just as she always did. She slipped her arm around his waist and stood beside him as he talked with Luke and Jeremy. Automatically, his hand came up to stroke her hair, his need to touch her ever present.

"Let's eat," Ellie said from the doorway of the dining room.

They all filed into the formal dining room, and murmurs of appreciation filled the air as everyone saw how beautifully Ellie had decorated the table.

When everyone was seated, Jake cleared his throat and rose from his chair. He reached for the wineglass in front of him. He looked vaguely uncomfortable but then he looked down at Ellie, and a soft smile lit up his face. She reached up and squeezed his hand, returning his smile.

Jake kept her hand in his and raised his wineglass with the other.

"This past year has seen a lot of changes. All of which have been good." He glanced down at Ellie again. "The woman I love more than anything put me out of my misery and married me, and now we're looking forward to the birth of our first child."

A tear rolled down Ellie's cheek and she wiped at it self-consciously. As Wes stared around at the others gathered, he saw a mixture of emotion on all their faces.

Did it get any better? His chest was about to expand to bursting. Mushy? Yeah. Did he give a fuck? No.

Jake raised his glass in Luke and Gracie's direction. "And our good friends finally saw the light, decided they couldn't live without each other."

Luke folded his hand over Gracie's on the table and leaned over to kiss her. She gave him a dazzling smile then raised her glass toward Jake and blew him a kiss.

Jake lowered the glass to his right where Jeremy and Michelle sat with Thad in Michelle's lap. "We got to see the first baby born to our group. A precious little boy sure to grow up with many doting aunts and uncles."

Then he raised his glass higher and stared down the length of the table to where Wes and Payton sat. "And we gained a new friend. Payton, you're a welcome addition to our group. You make that ornery bastard happy, and that's all we can ask."

Payton curled her fingers into his under the table as she smiled broadly back at Jake. She and Wes raised their glasses to Jake.

"May we always be as happy as we are right here, right now," Jake said, encompassing the entire table with a sweep of his glass.

They all raised their glasses in a toast. As silence descended, Wes lessened his grip on Payton's hand, looked over at her and nodded. She smiled and let him go. He stood, holding his glass with him.

"A word if you don't mind," he said in Jake's direction.

All eyes turned in his direction, and Gracie looked like she might burst into tears at any moment. Wes grinned and shook his head. The hormonal lunatic.

He looked once more at Payton then held his hand out to her. She slid her hand into his and stood beside him. He wrapped an arm around her shoulders, pulling her tightly against him.

"We have something we want to tell you."

Everyone leaned forward in anticipation.

Wes took a deep breath. "I've asked Payton to marry me."

He held his hand up as an outburst of congratulations and whoops made it around the table. Beside him, Payton wrapped an arm around his waist and squeezed reassuringly.

“We’re moving to Liberty County. I’m going to be taking a job with the sheriff’s department there. Payton will be close enough that she can commute to Houston, and we’ll still be within an hour’s driving distance of you guys.”

Gracie, bless her heart, promptly burst into tears. Luke did his best to console her until she smacked him on the head and informed him they were happy tears.

The entire group crowded around, hugging, shaking hands, congratulating him and Payton. His fears of leaving everything that was familiar to him slowly dissipated. He still had his friends, people who meant more than anything to him, but better yet, he had *Payton*.

She looked up at him as the others returned to their seats. Her blue eyes shined with such love and understanding. Unable to resist, he lowered his head to kiss her.

“I love you,” he whispered.

“I love you, too.”

“And he calls us pussies,” Luke said in disgust.

Payton laughed and pulled away, but Wes kept a firm grip on her hand.

He shot Luke a cocky grin. “If having the love of a good woman makes a man a pussy then I guess we’re all pretty much screwed.”

That got him the smiles of every woman seated.

About the Author

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Understood

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Jake Turner committed the ultimate mistake of falling in love with his best friend's wife. The distance he puts between them costs both him and Ellie Matthews dearly. Jake will never forgive himself for not seeing what a bastard his friend was. Now that Ellie is free from her nightmare, Jake waits, needing and wanting. He'll be there when Ellie is ready to spread her wings.

Enjoy the following excerpt for *Understood*:

Jake Turner glanced around at the gaudy Christmas decorations adorning the interior of Zach's Bar and Grill and suppressed a grimace.

He motioned for another beer and ignored what his buddy next to him was yammering about. Things were always lively at Zach's close to Christmas. Jake could never figure out if people were getting out to celebrate the season or if they were all just lonely and looking for another human being to connect to.

"Earth to Jake. Come on, man, you're in another world over there."

Jake blinked then scowled at his friend, Colin. "What the hell do you want?"

Colin nodded toward the door. "Isn't that Ray's ex coming in?"

Jake's pulse quickened, and he yanked his gaze toward the entrance. All his breath left his body in one hard rush. What the hell?

His gaze came to rest on Ellie Matthews as she stood just inside the doorway. Only it wasn't Ellie as he was used to seeing her.

She took a hesitant step forward then stopped and scanned the room, her eyes wide. Her bottom lip worked between her teeth, a sure sign of her nervousness.

Long soft curls spilled over her shoulders, hair that a man would itch to thrust his fingers into as he thrust into other parts of her body.

But what had his blood pressure soaring was her get-up. Despite it being the middle of December, she wore a top barely held up by the spaghetti strings over her shoulders. The neckline plunged, and the material cupped her breasts in all the right places.

Her mini skirt, if you could call the scrap of denim barely covering her ass a skirt, rode so high up on her thighs that Jake knew if she moved wrong, the entire bar would get a glimpse of her pussy.

She had a “fuck me” ensemble going on complete with “ride me hard” shoes. He’d never seen her in high heels once, and yet she teetered unsteadily toward the bar in three-inch, fire-engine red heels.

“Jesus, I had no idea she was so damn hot,” Colin muttered.

Jake rounded on Colin with a ferocious glare. “Shut the hell up,” he growled.

Colin raised an eyebrow in surprise but remained silent.

Jake turned his attention back to Ellie, who stood at the bar. The bartender plunked down a shot which she promptly drained before motioning for another.

There wasn’t a single male eye that wasn’t riveted on her. Two men sauntered up to the bar and stood close to Ellie. She smiled at them flirtatiously, and Jake was struck with a sudden realization.

She was taking the plunge.

A surge of red hot jealousy spilled over into his gut. She was finally breaking free of the hold Ray had on her, only this wasn’t the way it was supposed to happen. Jake had waited a long time for her. He’d thought she needed more space. He was supposed to be the one she came to when she was ready to take that leap.

He gripped his beer bottle until his knuckles went white. What the hell did she think she was doing? His eyes narrowed when she downed another shot. When she turned her attention back to the crowd of admirers at her elbow, he saw the fear in her eyes.

It was then he understood what it was costing her. This whole “take me home and fuck me” was all a brave act. She was scared to death, and the only way she had a hope of carrying through with it was by getting thoroughly drunk.

Over his dead body.

He was striding across the room even before he realized he’d gotten up from his table. In two seconds flat, he shoved by the group of men all panting over Ellie and stood beside her at the bar.

She turned unfocused blue eyes up at him, the fear that shadowed her gaze disappearing as she realized who he was.

“What the hell do you think you’re doing, Ellie?” he demanded.

Panic flitted across her face, and the fear returned.

Without waiting to hear what she had to say, he bent slightly, pushing his shoulder into her belly. He stood back up, slinging her over his shoulder. His hand rested possessively on her ass.

He turned to glare at the men who’d surrounded Ellie. “She’s mine,” he said in his most menacing voice.

They backed off quickly.

He started for the door, Ellie’s upper body swinging against his back.

“Jake?” she said in a small voice. “Where are we going?”

God, he hated that sound. The fear in her voice. The uncertainty. It made him want to put his fist through the wall.

“Home,” he bit out.

In a heated Valentine weekend, Caleb and Jacqueline explore just how far their friendship can go.

Be Mine

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Caleb and Jacqueline have been friends for nearly two years since he was engaged to her best friend. But now the engagement is over and Jack wonders where they stand. Jacqueline wants to maintain their friendship, but would prefer so much more.

Caleb invites her to spend Valentine weekend with him at a bed & breakfast since he had made the reservations long before he and Claire broke up. Though the breakup with Claire was only a month ago, the relationship between them had been over long before that. Caleb wants Jacqueline and is prepared to do anything to get her.

And he doesn't just want her for the weekend, he wants her forever. Caleb uses every strategy in his erotic arsenal to convince her she is more than just his friend—she is the woman he loves.

Enjoy the following excerpt for *Be Mine*:

"I did have a reason for stopping by without calling." He turned to look at her. "What are you doing next weekend for Valentine's Day?"

"Well, Hugh Jackman called me and wants me to fly to New York to be with him," Jack joked. "I told him I would have to get back with him because I might have something important to do like get my nails done or wash my hair." At his look, she smiled. "Not a damn thing. I'm off on Friday because it's a professional development day. Thankfully, since I've already been developed professionally this year, I have the day off. I'll probably spend the weekend getting caught up on grading and complete my lesson plans for the following week. Why? What are you doing?"

"I was hoping you would go with me."

“Go with you? Where?”

“There’s this bed and breakfast Claire went on and on about. It has this small cottage behind the main house, and she was all excited. I made reservation at the end of the summer, you know, as a surprise. Now, I have the place reserved from Thursday evening to Sunday...” He trailed off.

“And what?” Jacqueline asked, unsure of where the conversation was headed. “I don’t understand.”

“Yeah, I’m not making myself real clear.” He leaned forward to place his hand on her knee. “I want you to go with me.”

“Me?” She was stunned. What the hell? Why would he ask her?

“Yeah, you. Jacqueline, you and I have been friends for going on two years now. Just because Claire and I broke up doesn’t mean we need to do the same. I think this might be a nice way to build our own relationship. We can spend some time together without the day-to-day shit.” He reached in his pocket and pulled out a brochure. “Why don’t you look this over and let me know. The town it’s in is small, but the place sits right on a lake. They even serve tea, which I know you’re into. Think about it. If you agree, we can leave as soon as you get out of school on Thursday. It only takes a couple hours so we should be there around six.”

Jacqueline took the brochure from him. The picture on the front showed a beautiful home with the name Willow Creek underneath. She knew this place. She and Claire discovered the website for it and instantly fell in love. Claire must have mentioned the place to Caleb, hoping he would take the hint. Obviously, he had. Only now, Claire wouldn’t be the one going, Jacqueline would. If she agreed.

“I’d like to think about it, okay?” She finally looked up to find him watching her.

“Call me on my cell.” He stood and took his cup into the kitchen. “I’d better go. I told Jason I’d meet him to go over a bid we’re working on for an office building.”

Jack walked him to the door and opened it to the still falling snow. "Be careful. The weather guy says the snow's going to stop, but he missed the ten inches at Christmas too."

"I will." He leaned over to brush his lips against her cheek. "Call me."

Jacqueline closed and locked the door behind him. She sagged against it in disbelief. Oh my gosh, Caleb had asked her to go away with him for the weekend. Shivers ran up her spine before she could clamp down on her emotions. As friends, she told herself. They were going because he had the reservations and didn't want to waste them. *Why not give them to someone else*, a little voice whispered.

"Because everyone probably already had plans," she spoke aloud. She walked over to the couch and picked up the brochure. Sitting, she began to look through it. The cottage, where he had the reservations, looked to be a house in miniature. It had a living room, bedroom, large bath and tiny kitchen. More than enough room for the two of them to stay there comfortably. The brochure even made mention of the couch rolling out to a bed. Each of them would have someplace to sleep without bothering the other.

Bothering? The tiny voice was back. *You'd love if he bothered you. Bothered you right out of your clothes and right into bed.* Jacqueline shoved those thoughts aside and began to reason as she always did.

"Caleb is a handsome man, at least I think he is. He's got an amazing body and even better personality. Of course, you would be attracted to him. You'd have to be dead not to. But he's a friend."

But why, the voice asked. *He's not engaged to Claire anymore. Why does he have to be only a friend? Why can't he be the kind of friend you take your clothes off with? The kind of friend who licks your —*

"No!" She stood up and hurried to the kitchen, pretending to clean up. "Besides what would he want with me? I mean, hells bells, I'm not tiny, cute and blonde. That's what he goes for. If you need any better example look at Claire. Look at the girls he's dated since breaking up with Claire. All of them have been petite, blond and cute as hell."

She looked at herself in the mirror to find tall, dark and wouldn't be petite if you paid someone. She laughed out loud. Now that the Friday night tequila insanity was over, she would sit and grade. It did no good to create fantasies around Caleb Sinclair. He was a friend. Tucking the thoughts away, Jack went back into the living room and pulled out her grade book. Way less fun, but definitely safer.

Caleb sat in his car staring at the dimly lit house. Fuck, his life was a mess. First, his engagement to Claire had been broken, which he didn't feel as bad about as he felt he should. Now he was inviting a friend to spend the weekend at a bed and breakfast. If he were smart, he would invite Stephie or whatever the hell her name was. But no, he had to go and ask Jacqueline. What the fuck had he been thinking? There was only one answer. He hadn't been. Or at least not with his mind. His cock twitched in his jeans. He wanted her. The breakup with Claire had only made it more obvious. Did she want him? He shook his head; he knew he was going to try to find out. No matter what he told himself, he would. He wanted Jacqueline spread out before him. Naked and submissive, open to his every whim. He shook the thought away. He had to get a hold of himself. What if she didn't agree? He clenched his teeth. She would, she had too. If she didn't, he knew he could convince her. Or die trying. Either way she would be going with him to the fucking bed and breakfast one way or the other.

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