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# The Inn Crowd

*Denise Belinda McDonald*

## Dedication

There would be no *Inn Crowd* were it not for my own personal “Lorennna”. Miss Sandy, love you more than words can say! May we have many more Chili days.

To Mary Dickerson, I should have said so before, but your encouragement has meant the world to me.

To my fellow Chicas: Amie Stuart, Michelle Miles and Raine Weaver. Thanks for all of your support.

To Aunt Linda McMillen, I wouldn’t have had the courage to try had you not sent me looking in the right direction. And as always, to my fellow Rosebuds and TWW gang. Couldn’t do it without you all!

Mom, again, love you and thanks for believing I could.

Alan—always my own personal hero. I love you and the boys. Thanks for allowing me the crazy times when the characters demand you share your time.

And Jess, my wonderful editor, Jess Bimberg... How could I forget to thank you before? I couldn’t have done ANY of this without ***you!*** \*Thank You\* so much for taking a chance on me!

## Chapter One

“This doesn’t look like Barbie’s Country Estate on steroids.”

Jamie Crawford pulled his rental car next to a late model station wagon. He didn’t know what he expected, but when his best friend, Butch mentioned he’d booked a room at The Wild Rose Bed and Breakfast, Jamie’s mind had pictured something a tad—flashier. The huge Victorian house, restored with pristine detail made him wonder if he’d made a wrong turn off the highway from San Antonio.

But the wooden shingle that hung off the corner of the porch said otherwise.

Jamie stepped from the car, squared the ball cap on his head then grabbed his duffle bag. “Thank God Butch got stuck in New York. If I see one more camera ...”

He glanced around the secluded surroundings then closed his eyes and tilted his head back. A warm spring breeze scented heavy with roses washed over him. “Finally quiet.” He headed for the porch.

The second step creaked under his weight as he took the six steps two at a time. Jamie paused at the screen door. He heard a woman cussing up a storm.

“Damn. Oh, oh...” A thud resounded and echoed through the air. “Help me.”

Jamie pushed through the door and a derriere stared him in the face. A blue jean short clad derriere which tapered down to shapely thighs and the most perfect calves he’d ever laid eyes on. Feet several inches from the floor swung back and forth. The rest of the woman, however, draped over a registration counter, was hid from his view.

Jamie dropped his duffle beside him. “Need a hand?”

The woman stilled. “Please.”

Jamie rounded the counter to see what had caught her. A large, furry, multi-colored beast thrashed in her hands and prevented her from levering herself up on the low countertop.

“Why don’t you just let that thing go?”

“Can’t. She’s due for shots.” The woman blew a black curl off her forehead, her other features still obscured by a riot of more curls. “It took me over an hour to catch her.”

“Tell you what, let me take the... What is it?”

He thought he heard her chuckle.

“She’s a cat. A big fat cat.” She took a heavy breath. “Named Bitsy. But she’s not so bitsy any more. Can you please hurry?”

“Oh, geez sorry.” Jamie grasped the big fur-ball around the middle and hefted it to his chest with one hand then grabbed the young woman’s elbow to help her up.

Once again vertical, she smiled up at Jamie and he nearly released Bitsy. The woman, not even to his chin, about knocked the breath out of him. Mischief danced in her wide, pale blue eyes. On her ivory skin, a smattering of freckles crossed her nose and cheeks accompanied by a bright pink flush from hanging upside down. She brushed several wayward curls from her forehead and stuck an errant, disobedient strand behind her ear.

An air of familiarity swamped him but his vision shifted to her mouth and all reasonable thought fled. Pink, bowed lips curved in a smile and she opened her mouth as if to speak.

“Can’t find the damn cat anywhere, Loreнна.” A booming voice preceded a hulk of a man through the screen door.

The young woman snapped her mouth shut and she and Jamie jumped apart as if caught doing something they shouldn’t have.

A large man with an even larger scowl blocked the afternoon rays which tried to sneak through the front door. Jamie was a big man at six foot three but the other man dwarfed him, probably out weighed him by sixty pounds, too. And didn’t appear to have a problem using his size to intimidate a perfect stranger. He glared at Jamie, who held the cat in

question, then took a threatening step forward before he crossed his beefy arms over a broad chest.

At the man's raised eyebrow, the woman babbled, "I found her. Bitsy. She was in the library."

Lorennna—as the hulk called her—stepped between Jamie and the Neanderthal. Did she think she could protect him from the burly man? It had been a long time since anyone came to the aid of Jamie Crawford, much less a pint-sized savior.

Lorennna shifted from foot to foot. "I chased her out here and grabbed her as she tried to jump the counter."

"So," Jamie rubbed the cat's ear and her chest vibrated next to his, "that's how you got stuck ass over...ah—" Was that a growl he heard come from the front door? He didn't look to clarify, but watched Lorennna. "—sorry, upside down."

Her flush deepened a bit then she cleared her throat. "I'm sorry." She held out her hand. "I'm Lorennna. I own this fine establishment." Her grin broadened. Pearly white teeth sparkled and two dimples winked at him from the corners of her mouth. "The big Glowering-Gus is Luther. And you are?"

He took her hand in his, aware Luther'd moved a tad closer. "Jamie. Crawford. I called yesterday about booking a room for the week."

"Sure, we've been expecting you. Welcome." She stepped behind the reservation counter. "Crawford? You said?"

Jamie grimaced and waited for recognition to set in. But when he nodded, she merely opened a thick book and peered inside. His real name *shouldn't* trigger anything, other than from a true die-hard fan...

She looked up and smiled a thousand-watt smile then continued to search through her book. "I'm glad you called."

He just bet she was.

"We had a room open up at the last minute so it was perfect timing." She didn't inundate him with questions or comments. She acted as if...as if she didn't seem to know him from any other guest.

It was the first time in a long time he didn't have to stop and make small talk about himself. Explain what he was doing and why. That was why he needed this time to himself. And since Loreнна didn't seem to recognize him, he relaxed his shoulders and assured himself he'd made the right decision to come to Texas without informing his staff.

Or maybe she did. She would wait and waylay him with questions later when her pit-bull bodyguard wasn't ready to pounce from across the foyer. It wouldn't be the first time a woman played coy with him. He never could tell, but she didn't have that predatory look in her eye that most women did when recognition of his persona set in.

"I have you in the Green Room," she broke into his thoughts, "on the second floor." Loreнна dug in a drawer and pulled out a key with a green tassel then held it across the counter.

Jamie shifted Bitsy from one arm to the other to take it from her.

"Oh. I'm sorry." Loreнна came around the counter and slipped her hands around the four-legged, furry grouch.

Her fingers brushed his chest, his skin tingled from the brief touch. But by the bland look on her face, it had little to no effect on her as she handed the cat off to Luther. "Doc Stewart is expecting you in half an hour. Thanks, Luther."

The man grumbled and walked out the front door.

"That's a pretty good bodyguard you have there." Jamie tilted his head toward the door as he shouldered his duffle.

Loreнна waved off his comment. "Luther's just overprotective." She stepped to the stairs and moved several bouquets of roses in every color imaginable to the counter. When Jamie raised an eyebrow, she shrugged, "I'm trying different styles with the silk flowers before I cut down the real ones."

"Somebody getting married?"

"Yeah, my mother. Number five. Which is why I look like a ragamuffin today." She motioned to her cut-off jean shorts and a faded T-shirt that advertised a feed store. "I've been cleaning off chairs for the reception."



He decided not to comment that she looked just fine to him. “Your mom’s been married four times?” What kind of madness was that? He couldn’t imagine popping the question once, much less several times. Was her mother some kind of masochist? Instead of asking the question, though, he just said, “I shudder at the thought.”

“You and me both.” Loreнна’s entire body shook with an exaggerated quake.

Jamie’s eyes followed the length of her back then rested on the rear-end which met him when he came into the B&B. It shifted from side to side as she climbed the steps. He had to move his gaze, lest he stumble and make an ass out of himself. He shifted his scrutiny down the line of her perfect legs and tried to focus on her sneakered feet, but he could only imagine those feet propped up in his lap while he rubbed his hands up and down the soft, silky skin of hers.

*Mind out of the gutter*, he ordered himself. “You don’t ever want to get married?”

“Ha! Not in this lifetime.”

“Aren’t you young to be making such a rash decision?”

“The last time I checked, thirty-two wasn’t all that young.”

Jamie’s step faltered. *Thirty-two?* He barely pegged her out of high school—which had made him feel like a big louse—much less over thirty. “Well, that’s still, ah, kind of young to swear off marriage.”

“*You* didn’t sound overly keen, if I’m not mistaken.” She glanced over her shoulder at him. “Of course, I don’t blame you. An man of your...your, you know.”

“No.” I guess *I was wrong about this one*. She knew who he was and was about to drop her coy little game. “What would that be?”

“Young, good-looking. Pretty fit by the way you hefted Bitsy.” She winked at him.

A sudden rush of pride filled his chest. She thought he was good-looking.

“Don’t most men put off getting married as long as possible?” Loreнна stopped at the second floor landing and turned to face Jamie. “To play the field. Sow their oats. Wait until the last possible moment to get tied down to that old ball and chain.”

Jamie cocked his head and studied the woman. “Interesting philosophy of marriage.”

“It’s an antiquated system which shackles the woman as much as the man.”

“A rather cynical view, isn’t it?”

A blush tinted her cheeks and she clamped her full lips shut for a moment before she said, “Sorry. I tend to be very opinionated when it comes to marriage. Your room is this way.” She took him down the long hallway. “There is a couple staying in this first room and the one across the hall. But the one next to yours is empty.”

“Where do the stairs lead?” he asked when they passed a smaller staircase.

“Third floor. There are three more guest suites and another common sitting area. But they’re not booked right now.”

He wondered at her stiff shoulders and then remembered she’d made a big deal out of the cancellation, but it sounded like she’d have had plenty of room with or without Butch.

“This is a slow time of the year for me.” She sounded almost defensive, as if he might criticize her for not having every room filled to capacity.

Now he thought he understood why she was so excited to have him rent a room. She needed the guests, not a named celebrity hiding out who she could turn in to the tabloids and exploit. Gone was her easy smile, though. A polite, business smile crooked the corner of her mouth, but the light and laughter in her eyes disappeared.

Maybe she was waiting to go in for the kill when he least expected it. To drum up her slow business. Jamie did a mental head shake. He needed to be less suspicious of people. Not everyone looked out for only

number one and used him. Maybe her defensive stance was due to the lack of business. Had she been criticized one too many times?

Jamie could relate. How many times did someone critique his work? How many times did he hear someone was wholly unsatisfied with his latest project? He had grown a thick skin but it only went so far when someone attacked the core of what you did.

“So what do you do for a living, Mr. Crawford?” she asked as if reading his thoughts.

“I’m a veterinarian.” His answer came automatically. Then he realized what he said. That wasn’t his job. No, that was the part he played in the picture he just wrapped up. Since Loreнна didn’t contradict him, he decided not to correct himself. He liked it better that she didn’t seem to know who he is. It would make his stay in Texas easier if he could remain anonymous and relax. “Dog and cats.”

\* \* \*

Loreнна wondered at the odd look that crossed Jamie Crawford’s face when he said he was a vet. “Well, shoot.” She snapped her fingers. “I should have let you check Bitsy out, huh?”

A frown pulled down his tanned brow. “I, ah, I’m not licensed in Texas. To treat animals.”

“I’m just teasing, Mr. Crawford. We don’t put our guests to work.” She smiled, reached out and touched his arm. “At least not on the first day.” A warm jolt shot through her hand and she jerked back.

“Here’s your room.” She handed him the key then pushed the door open, careful not to brush against him again. First, when her fingers came in contact with his rock hard chest—who would have thought giving shots to four-legged animals could form perfect pecs—then the odd reaction from touching his arm. Jamie Crawford was definitely a man to steer clear of.

“Dinner is served at six-thirty every night for whoever is around. In the morning breakfast is laid out from seven until eight.”

His stomach growled. "And lunch?"

"Dusty Springs is five miles up the road. They have a diner and two fast food chains."

"Thanks." Jamie stepped across the threshold of his room. "Hey, where do those stairs lead?" He pointed to the back staircase.

"Those lead down into the kitchen and the private quarters."

Jamie nodded and backed into the room and shut the door. Before she could take more than a step away, the door flew back open. "There's no TV in here." His gray eyes widened.

Lorenna fought back a laugh. "I'm sorry, Mr. Crawford, the Wild Rose doesn't have televisions."

"None?"

"I haven't owned one since... It's been a long time since I've had one. I hope that's not a problem for you."

His face relaxed. "Nope. I think it will work out just fine. Oh..." A smile tilted the corners of his mouth.

A warm rush scooted through Lorenna's belly.

"And please call me Jamie. No one calls me 'Mr. Crawford'."

The heat spread to her arms and legs and threatened to color her cheeks. "Um. Sure. Okay. Don't forget, dinner's at six-thirty."

He gave her a quick nod and shut the door again.

Lorenna stood and stared at the closed door for a moment, then hurried down the stairs to the kitchen. What got into her? She couldn't remember the last time she reacted so quickly to a man. For that matter, she couldn't remember ever having a suddenly dry mouth or sweaty palms associated with *any* man.

"I'm overheated. That's all." She pulled a cup down from the cupboard and filled it from the tap. The long drink of water did little to alleviate her heated cheeks. She refilled the glass then headed for her room.

She checked the answering machine. Last week's cancellation called and wanted to re-book the room if it was still available.

“All right.” She took a long sip then ran the cool glass across her forehead. She called the man back and wrote it up in her day-planner. Now if she could just get the other three rooms booked, she’d be all set.

Jamie Crawford’s face popped in her head as she tried to plan the menu for the rest of the week. What was it about the man who made her pulse race? Could it be the blond-streaked hair tousled as if he just woke? Or his tall—well over six feet tall—firm body? No. Could it be the slate gray eyes hooded and lazy like a Sunday afternoon? No. It was the slow sexy grin which only cocked half his full, kissable lips.

How soft are his lips?

Lorennna imagined them on her and moaned.

“Stop.” She needed to get her mind off the guest in the Green Room. She couldn’t get involved with a perfect stranger. Especially a guest. She had a strict “no fraternizing” policy. At least she did from the moment she laid eyes on Mr. Crawford. She’d never before been tempted enough to warrant such a policy, but the benefits of an immediate addendum blazed before her.

“Can’t afford distractions now.” She pushed the blond beefcake from her mind and focused on the beef Wellington she planned for the Monday evening meal.

An hour later and a jog around the back of the property did little to alleviate thoughts of her handsome guest. She stood under the spray of a hot shower and forced herself to think of her mother’s wedding and the list of details she had yet to tackle.

Thoughts of cake and champagne mingled with gray eyes set off in tan skin with the slightest hint of age in a few thin wisps of lines. Boutonnieres and bags of birdseed reminded her of his strong hands that held Bitsy gently next to a rock hard chest. Oddest of all was the list of guests she had to check off for the reception that made Lorennna remember the quick peek of his outstanding butt when he walked back into his room.

Not one thing had anything to do with the other. But every thought turned back to the man upstairs.

Like she needed the distraction now. Or ever.

She shook her head, stepped from the shower and wrapped a thick terry towel around her. At the closet, she pawed through her clothes and rejected one outfit after the other until her hand lit on a seldom worn outfit. She lifted it from the bar and held it under her chin. "Perfect."

## Chapter Two

“Why are you wearing that?”

“Hi, Mom.” Loreнна didn’t even break stride as she entered the huge kitchen from her garage-converted bedroom. “It’s nice to see you, too. What brings you by tonight?”

“Don’t change the subject.” Barbara Hughes glared at her daughter.

Loreнна walked to where her mother sat at the little kitchen island shelling peas for dinner and gave her a quick peck on the cheek then patted her pink-tinted coiffure.

The back door busted open and Luther McGrew barreled through with a huge package in his arms. “Whoa. What’s the occasion?”

For once, she wanted to look nice, pretty even. Was it so out of character for her? “It’s just a summer dress. It’s hot out there today.” She turned to the cabinet above the sink and pulled down a glass mixing bowl.

“Something more than that is going on, Buttercup.”

Loreнна cringed at the name and glared at her mother over her shoulder. Barbara looked at Luther then waved a pea pod at her daughter. “I haven’t seen her wear a dress since she graduated from college.”

Luther set the package at the other end of the kitchen island then crossed his beefy arms over his chest. “Maybe it’s that new guest.”

“What new guest?” Barbara frowned. “You wore *that* dress for a man?”

“What’s wrong with my dress?” She glanced down at her aquamarine tank-dress and started to argue with her mother. She realized her

mistake when her mother raised her eyebrows with a speculative grin. "It's just a dress." Loreнна shoved her hands on her hips. "And if you keep on, it will be the *last* dress I wear."

Barbara's spine straightened. "But...but what about the dress for the wedding."

Loreнна cocked an eyebrow.

"Gotcha." Her mother's focus returned to the bowl of unshelled peas. "Consider the subject dropped."

But Luther wasn't as easily dissuaded. "When he came in, she got all breathy and..."

"I did not." Loreнна balled up a dishtowel and threw it at her old friend. Then she looked at her mother. "I'd been chasing Bitsy down that's all. I'm out of shape."

Luther snorted. "She runs two miles a day around this place and says she's out of shape."

Barbara made no comment, but asked, "Is he that good-looking?" She glanced back and forth between the pair.

Loreнна caught Luther shoot her mother a conspiring wink. "Now, he wasn't as stout and sturdy as my boys, Miss Barbara. But if Loreнна's batting eyelashes were anything to go by, then I guess he was just fine."

"I did not bat my eyelashes or get all breathy. I told you." She wagged her finger at him. "You don't know what you're talking about, Luther McGrew."

"Methinks she's complaining too much."

Loreнна rolled her eyes and hid a smile. Her mother never could quite quote anything correctly. "Whatcha got there, Luth?"

He looked down at the package, his eyes went wide and a devilish grin turned his mouth. "A wedding present from Jesse."

Jesse was Barbara's third husband and Luther's older brother. The couple married in Loreнна's pre-teen years. She and Luther met and became fast friends, he being closer to her age than that of his much older brother or Barbara.



For some unknown reason, Luther designated himself Loreнна's bodyguard. Even after he himself got married and fathered three of the best sons a man could ask for, he'd still scare the bejeezus out of any boy who came sniffing around Loreнна throughout her teen years.

Luther and his family's move to Austin to open his first dot-com business was the only reason she had a date to her senior prom. And after a night of hell—octopus arms and mealy mouth left much to be desired in a date—she longed for Luther's presence. Years later, after his wife died of breast cancer, he retired from his four lucrative companies and moved back to Dusty Springs. Sheer boredom drove him to find work and he decided to help Loreнна around the inn.

"Well, I'll be. I'd have never thought old Jesse had a sentimental bone in his body." Barbara pulled a blue braided ceramic pitcher from the box and snapped Loreнна out of her reverie.

"What is that, Mom?"

"A Longaberger pitcher. I had one in a set your grandma bought me years ago. Don't you remember it, hon? It was blue. Had a waffle print. Prettiest thing. But it busted." She turned the pitcher this way and that then held it to her breast. A wistful smile crooked her mouth. "I threw it at Jesse when he told me he was leaving."

Loreнна gasped and Luther snorted again.

"It didn't hit the old fart." Barbara frowned at the pair. "He ducked at the last minute." She scrunched her brows. "He did pack up all the knives and take them with him later that day." She shook her head. "I had to buy a whole new set."

Barbara continued to stare at the pitcher and if Loreнна wasn't mistaken, a misty film filled her mother's eyes.

"Wonder if he could find me a platter to match." She set the wedding gift back in the box. "I broke that one when my fourth husband left."

Loreнна rolled her eyes. *Nope, must have been allergies.* She busied herself making a salad for the evening meal. She released a sigh. And one Mr. Jamie Crawford wondered how she could possibly be so cynical about marriage. "Me cynical? I wonder why," she said under her breath.

Barbara paused as she washed her hands in the sink. "You say something?"

"No." Loreнна swallowed an embarrassed smile.

The woman nodded and dried her hands on the rag at her waist.

"I heard that," Luther whispered in her ear. "Gotta go, Buttercup." He gave her a quick peck on the cheek. "See you, Miss Barbara."

"Thanks for taking Bitsy to the vet," she called as he went out the back door. She laughed when she heard him grumble.

"That man needs to find himself a nice girl and settle down."

*Here we go again.* "He had a nice girl."

"Well, I know it was hard when SueEllen died. But she wouldn't want him just sittin' around all lonely."

"Luther is far from lonely. He has the guys and us. He stays pretty active. Not every one needs to be married."

"What's that supposed to mean?"

Loreнна could hear the hurt in her mother's voice.

"Nothing, Mom." She moved over to her mother and put her arm around her thin shoulders. "Thanks for coming over and helpin' me with dinner tonight."

"Aw, get on over there and finish your salad." She swatted Loreнна on the rear.

Ashley, a part-time employee, came through the swinging door which separated the kitchen from the dining room. "Got the tables all set, Loreнна."

"Great. Thanks." Loreнна divvied out the salad in five bowls.

"Five?"

"We had another check-in today. Sorry. Did I forget to tell you?"

"That's fine. I'll just set one more." She went to the cupboard and took out another place setting. "He's single, right?"

"Now how should I know that? Just because the man is good-looking doesn't mean I'm gonna ask if he's single and throw myself at him."

“Whoa.” Ashley held her hands up in mock surrender and cocked her head sideways. A smile played across her mouth. “Hold up a minute.”

“Hon, I think what Ashley meant was if he would be dining alone tonight.”

Heat crawled up Loreнна’s neck and across her cheeks. “Um, I knew that. I was, ah, just teasing.”

“Sure you were.” Barbara winked at Ashley. “Luther must have pegged this one right. I can’t wait to see what he looks like.”

“You’ll do no such thing.” Loreнна fanned herself with an oven mitt. “You have to meet Hugh in half an hour to go pick up the napkins and doilies from the printer.”

She shook her head. “We’re doing that tomorrow. They called and pushed the appointment back.” A gleam twinkled in her mother’s eyes.

“I’m sure you have some other pressing matter you have to attend to.”

“Nope. Not a thing past helpin’ my dear sweet child serve her hungry guests.” Barbara filled a pitcher with water and handed it to Ashley. “When was the last time a single man stayed here?”

Ashley rubbed her chin. “I can’t say there has been one.”

“Hmm. Interesting.” Barbara added ice to the glasses she took down from the cupboard. “And my little Buttercup is wearing a dress tonight.”

Ashley giggled. “More interesting.”

Loreнна cleared her throat. “Ashley, your dad was here today.”

“Of course he was. He’s presiding over your mom’s wedding. Stop trying to change the subject.” She shifted her attention from Loreнна to Barbara. “He must be hot if she’s trying to change the subject.”

“One single man shows up and she gets flustered and hot and bothered. This is truly an exceptional day.”

Loreнна slammed a spoon down on the counter. “Would you two quit? I’ll have you know, I have another single man coming here tomorrow to stay. So see, it’s not all that strange.”

Barbara clapped her hands together. "Things are looking up. Two single men staying here at once. That's more attention than Lorennna's had in I don't know how long."

"Mother. *Please*, would you quit?"

"I bet you she already knows what he does for a living," Barbara stage whispered to Ashley.

"He's a veterinarian," Lorennna answered without thinking.

"Ha!" Barbara clapped her hands together again. "See, I told you."

"Mother, give it a rest." Lorennna scrunched her nose. "What's that smell?"

"You're trying to change the subject again."

"No. I smell..." Smoke rose from the smaller of the two ovens. Lorennna ran over to the door, yanked it open and grabbed the pan. "Damn." She dropped the roasting pan on the floor and blackened potatoes spilled across the tile. "Oh hell."

\* \* \*

Jamie found the dining room at a quarter 'til seven. He'd gone for a walk around the back of the house and lost all track of time in the beauty of the landscape. He found the wonderful garden overflowing with the most fragrant roses in every color, more than the silk imposters he'd seen earlier on the staircase.

After the brief reminder, he'd managed to get Lorennna out of his mind for a short period of time. Long enough to take a breather and relax. Then an image of her distorted his view. He imagined her short, dark curls blowing in the breeze as she stood out at the edge of the field. A gauzy dress flowed around her and wild flowers danced at her feet.

Damn. He shook his head. He knew he needed to get laid. It had been far too long.

In the doorway of the dining room, his mind wandered back to the sprite. He imagined her next to him, pulling her to him, and his mouth

finding the spot on the back of her neck that made her giggle when his lips caressed her. He imagined...

"Good evening, Mr., er, Jamie." Loreнна stood next to an older couple seated at one of the four tables in the large dining room.

Jamie shifted his weight to lessen the tightness in his pants and hoped no one else noticed. Where was a hat, or an ice cold shower, when you needed one? "Am I late?"

"No, right on time. I'm running a tad late this evening. If you'll have a seat." She motioned to an empty table with one place setting. "I'll bring your dinner right out."

Jamie sat at the table then watched her walk through a swinging door. She wore a thinly strapped dress in a soft blue that nearly matched her pale blue eyes. The material clung to her curves and floated around her shapely calves, much as he had imagined in the field.

He averted his gaze and cleared his throat just as an older woman came through the kitchen door. With pink hair piled on top of her head and a matching pink apron, she proceeded around the room and spoke to the young couple at the far table. Next the woman greeted the septuagenarian couple he noticed when he first walked in.

Then it was his turn. He smiled up at the woman. "Good evening."

"I'm Loreнна's mother, Barbara Hughes." He saw little to no resemblance between her and her daughter. Other than her diminutive stature. Neither woman could be much over five feet tall. But her voice. She had the same cadence to her voice, the same breathy quality and a slight drawl that bespoke of Texas. "How are you doing this evening...?"

"I'm Jamie. And I'm doing real well, Ms. Hughes, thanks for asking." He expected her to turn and go back into the kitchen. But instead, she pulled out the chair next to his and sat.

"So," she propped her elbow on the table, set her chin on her palm and leaned toward him, "where ya from?"

Jamie couldn't help but smile. "California."

An odd expression crossed her face, but before he could think much of it, she smiled brightly. "Lorenna tells me you're a veterinarian. Interesting work."

Jamie's shoulders stiffened. "I suppose so."

"What made you come all the way to Texas all by your lonesome?"

"I just needed some time to myself. To relax."

She nodded. "I know just what you mean. This is a lovely place to relax. My girl does a good job at pamperin' her guests." Barbara Hughes winked. "Whatever you need, you just ask her and she'll set you up."

*Anything?* He didn't think a quickie out behind the gazebo he saw would be on the owner's list of amenities the inn provided. Jamie's face heated. When was the last time he blushed?

*Mind out of the gutter, boy. And change the subject before your zipper busts and embarrasses all these lovely people.*

"I hear congratulations are in order. Getting married soon."

A contented sigh escaped her, she gazed past his shoulder and her eyes lost focus. "Yes, sir. He is a sweetie." With a slight shake, she looked back at him. "How about you? You given much thought to marriage?"

\* \* \*

Lorenna fought not to drop the hot plate of food she held.

"Mother." She set the dish in front of Jamie. Through gritted teeth she said, "Can I see you in the kitchen please."

"Well, you enjoy your dinner now." Barbara patted Jamie's hand then stood.

Jamie, obviously the only one at the table with manners, made to stand with Barbara, but Lorenna put a hand on his shoulder. "Stay. Enjoy your dinner." She shook off the heat that radiated at the brief touch. *Imagination, that's all.*

Then Lorenna pushed in her mother's chair. "Excuse us." She grabbed her mother's sleeve and tugged until she followed into the

kitchen. When the door shut, she slammed her hands on her hips and glared at her mother. “What the hell is wrong with you?”

“Watch your mouth.” Barbara crossed her arms. “I won’t have you takin’ that tone with me, young lady.”

Lorennan ran her hand through her curls. “I’m sorry. But, Mom, why were you sittin’ down talkin’ with him? You know how I feel about that.”

“I know no such thing. Just last week I exchanged recipes with that lovely woman from Dallas. You didn’t seem so all fired upset with that. And I always visit with the Kellers when they’re here.”

“Well, Miss Barbara. What did he look like?” Ashley didn’t let the familial argument stop her from jumping in.

Barbara clasped her hands to her chest and turned to the younger girl. “Oh I swear, that boy just about made me swoon right there in front of God and the world.”

Lorennan snorted which earned her a narrowed gaze from her mother.

“I didn’t see him walk in, he was already sittin’ down, but I’ll swear he’s gotta be well over six feet tall. And he has that California bleached hair. All spiky in a just-rolled-out-of-bed tousled look.”

Lorennan gasped. “Mother.” *She didn’t need to hear this.*

Wide-eyed, Ashley cut thick slices from the freshly-baked apple pie. “Go on.”

“His eyes are a smoky blue, kind of a gray—” she turned to Lorennan, “—almost the same color as that cat you had when you were a girl. What was his name?”

“Mr. Whiskers.” The name came out way too fast. She *had* contemplated the same similarity on her jog.

Her mother smiled a knowing smile. “Go refill his water and you can see for yourself, Ashley.”

The girl snagged the water pitcher from the counter. “Oh, before I forget, my father asked that you have your vows to him by the end of the week so he can memorize them. He likes to make it look effortless when

he performs a wedding.” The girl shrugged then was out the door before Lorennna could stop her.

A moment later, she came back through the door and fanned herself. “You weren’t lying, Miss Barbara. And the woman at table two agrees with you. She’s practically falling out of her chair to watch him.”

Lorennna almost missed as she plated the first piece of pie. The woman at table two was with her fiancé. Did some women have no shame?

She set all the plates on a serving tray as well as the whipped cream and pushed through the kitchen door. “Y’all behave while I’m out there.” Barbara and Ashley both saluted but didn’t even try to contain their huge, wild grins.

The flirty woman in question was the closest to the door so Lorennna stopped at her table first.

“Here y’all go.” She had to force herself not to clank the plate in front of the stick-thin hussy. “Homemade apple pie.”

“Oh, I don’t think I could eat another bite.” Little Miss Hussy, Lorennna knew her name actually to be Olivia from when she checked in, said in a high saccharine voice as she looked over at Jamie.

All of the sudden, Lorennna found herself possessive and protective of her new guest. How could a woman openly flirt with a man with her fiancé sitting right there next to her? But instead of calling the woman out, she smiled and gave Randy, Olivia’s beau, a slice of pie and a sympathetic pat on the shoulder. Oblivious, he tore into the pie after he passed on the whipped cream.

Then onto the Kellers’ table.

“You just serve the best food, Lorennna.” The older gentleman leaned back in his chair and patted his paunch.

“Thank you, Mr. Keller.” She pinched his cheek, which elicited a tsking sound from his wife, despite the laughter in her eyes. Lorennna gave him a piece of pie and heaped on the whipped cream, just the way he liked it.



“My dear,” Mrs. Keller motioned for her to move closer, “that young man over there. He wouldn’t happen to be that actor fellow would he?”

Lorennna glanced at Jamie. He was very attractive and had one hell of a body, but an actor... She shuddered at the thought.

“No, ma’am.” She set Mrs. Keller’s plate in front of her with just a dab of whipped cream on the side. “He’s a veterinarian.”

“Well, I’d swear he’s the boy who starred in those military movies. You know which ones I’m talking about, don’t you?” She looked at her husband but his attentions were focused solely on the dessert.

Mrs. Keller shook her head and bit into her pie. “Mmm-mmm. As good as I knew it would be. You are a marvel, my girl. I told all the ladies at the club about your little place.” She reached up and patted Lorennna’s hand.

“And I thank you. I think I have two of your friends booked at the end of the summer.”

Mrs. Keller nodded and took another bite. “Heavenly.” Then her gaze moved to Jamie. “But are you certain he’s not that acting fellow?”

“Yes, ma’am. I think he just has one of those faces.” One of those faces that made a woman’s heart beat faster. One of those faces that made a woman don a gauzy floral dress. One of those faces that, coupled with an amazing body, elicited raw and primal fantasies. Lorennna resisted the urge to fan herself after her wicked imagination cranked the room temperature up a few notches. “You enjoy your dessert.”

She turned and saw Jamie studying her with such an intense gaze her mouth dried. She had to clear her throat. “Here ya go.” She set the pie on the table. “Would you like some whipped cream to go with that?”

“Is it homemade like the pie?”

“Is there any other kind?”

“Some people buy it in that little plastic tub.”

She scooped out a huge spoonful of white, fluffy ecstasy. “That’s blasphemy in these here parts.” She laid her accent on thick and got a deep belly laugh from her hunk of a guest.

Jamie took a bite of the pie, closed his eyes and moaned. "So good." He glanced up at her. "May I have more?"

"Uh, sure." Loreнна set the bowl next to his plate. "Help yourself."

Jamie heaped a mountain of whipped cream on his pie. He smoothed the confection over the top of his pie.

Heat once again crawled up Loreнна's neck when he brought the fork up to his mouth and licked it clean. She hadn't seen someone so blissfully happy since... She couldn't remember if she ever had. Maybe he was a sugar junkie. Because if not, if he reacted that way to other earthy pleasures, a person could burn up in flames just watching him enjoy himself. Before she realized it, she did fan herself with the tray.

Jamie opened his eyes. "You okay? You look a little flushed."

She flattened the tray to her chest and crossed her arms over it then waved away his question. "Kitchen's a bit hot."

Jamie's eyes narrowed and a frown tilted down his mouth. "What happened to your hand?"

Loreнна looked down at the bandage which covered most of her right hand. "Stupidity. I burned it on the potatoes."

Jamie looked at his plate. Though he'd eaten every bite, remnants of rice pilaf were stuck to his fork. She could almost read his mind when he looked back up.

"Yeah, and then I dropped them on the floor. Hence rice with dinner."

"Are you okay?" He wiped his mouth with his napkin and dropped the linen on the table before he grabbed her hand and examined it. "Did you see a doctor?"

"I thought vets only worked on the four-legged variety." A dark tint colored his cheeks as she pulled her hand free. If Loreнна wasn't mistaken, she made Jamie blush. "Sorry. I'm just teasing you. My hand is fine. I put some Aloe Vera on it and it's right as rain."

Jamie nodded.

"I want to apologize for my mother. I don't know what got into her grillin' you like that." *And embarrassing the hell out of me.*

A smile finally creased his mouth. “It’s not a problem. She seemed really nice.” He pushed back in his chair and glanced around the dining room. “So what is there to do around here at night?”

## Chapter Three

“To do? Out?”

Jamie watched Loreнна’s cheeks heat up at his question. How many women blushed these days? Not many he knew.

“Um, not a heck of a lot.” She shrugged. “There’s a bar on the outskirts of Dusty Springs. The Waterin’ Hole usually has a decent crowd with the huge dance floor. But not on Mondays.”

“That’s okay. I’m not much up for dancing and beer tonight.”

“There’s the movie theater, but it mostly has outdated movies. From what I’m told.”

Jamie tried not to cringe at the mention of a Cineplex. “No thanks.”

She shrugged. “That’s pretty much it. Unless you like miniature golf. Windmill, clown face and all.”

Jamie’s eyebrows arched. “Really?”

Loreнна nodded. “The chamber of commerce commissioned it a few years ago to keep the high school kids out of trouble.”

“Did it help?”

Loreнна snorted then covered her nose with her hand. Her cheeks burned brighter. She straightened her shoulders and shook her head. “Kids will be kids. Cows get tipped, houses toilet papered. But nothing much more than that.”

Jamie pushed his chair back farther and stood. He watched Loreнна crane her neck to look up at him. “How about you and I check out the windmill hazard?”

His hostess took several steps back and shook her head. "I...I can't. I have to finish up in the kitchen. Still have to get breakfast ready for the morning. Haven't done the linens yet today. But thanks for askin'." She ran one small hand through the tangle of curls at her temple. "You have a nice evening now, Mr. Crawford."

She turned and dashed back through the door into the kitchen.

"Damn. I blew that." He hadn't meant to move so fast, but there was just something about her that intrigued him. Something that made him want to sit and stare at her all night.

Jamie shoved his hands in his pockets and headed for the stairs, but with a foot on the bottom step, he decided he'd rather not be cooped up in his room after such a wonderful meal, despite making an ass out of himself. Or maybe in spite of it. He'd rather walk off his stupidity rather than stare at four walls.

The Kellers sat on the huge porch swing and if he wasn't mistaken, Bitsy, the most unfriendly cat he'd ever seen, had curled up in the missus's lap.

"Evenin'." Mr. Keller nodded then lit his pipe.

"Good evening." Jamie loped down the front steps and turned toward the back end of the property he'd walked earlier in the day. Dusk had barely staked its claim on the day, but crickets chirped and he saw a few blinking firefly butts.

A smile tugged at his lips. He couldn't remember the last time he'd seen a firefly. Must have been at camp when he was twelve. No, thirteen. He remembered it was the last year he and his best friend Butch had attended the Wigwam on the Lake Camp for Boys. The following fall his and Butch's fathers, who worked at the same construction company, were laid off. Money grew tight and while neither he nor Butch went hungry, luxuries like summer camp fell by the wayside.

Not for the first time, he wondered how Butch found this place. It wasn't really Butch's speed. As far as Jamie knew, his friend's idea of roughing it meant not bringing his eight-hundred dollar pillow along.

Jamie made a mental note to ask him when he checked in with his friend at the end of the week.

After a leisurely half-hour walk, Jamie sat in the ancient gazebo and let the cool evening breeze relax him. He leaned his elbows back on the rail and crossed his ankles. He was about to shut his lids when a flicker of light caught his eye. At first he thought an errant firefly found its way into the shelter, but when it didn't blink off he narrowed his gaze and realized it was a dim lantern. He saw Loreнна make her way across the yard toward him.

She swept the lantern back and forth as she took the wide wooden steps.

"Looking for something?"

"Oh!" She jumped back and clasped her empty hand to her chest. "I didn't realize anyone was out here."

"Sorry. Didn't mean to startle you."

"S'okay. I just left my sweater out here earlier." She fidgeted with the handle of the lantern. "Forecaster said it's supposed to rain tonight. I wanted to get it so it didn't ruin."

He found a dark lump next to him on the bench which he supposed could be a sweater. He lifted the garment to Loreнна. "This what you're looking for?"

She stepped closer to Jamie and took it from his hand. Lavender mixed with the apples and cinnamon from the evenings' dessert wafted around his head. She took a step back but didn't break eye contact with him. Jamie wasn't ready to be alone again, so he said the first thing that popped into his head. "So is your mom getting married here at the inn?"

"Um, yes." She set the lantern on the seat next to him. "We'll have the service and the reception out here."

"Must be hard having your mom get married so many times."

She shrugged and shifted her weight from one foot to the other.

“Why don’t you sit?” He lifted the lantern, set it up on the rail then patted the bench next to him. “Your feet have got to be killing you after such a long day.”

Jamie could see indecision on her face, but she draped the sweater over her shoulders then sat with enough space for two people between them.

“You have a really nice place out here.” He motioned around him. “It must be hard all by yourself.”

God, did it sound like he was fishing for info on her personal life? He was. But he didn’t want it to be that obvious.

She shrugged. “It’s not too bad. I have Ashley. She comes in around her school schedule. And my mom helps out when she can. Plus Luther fixes whatever I can’t take care of.”

“Luther.” Jamie nodded. “Are you and he...” God, was he pathetic or what?

Whatever reaction he’d expected from Loreнна didn’t prepare him for the unladylike snort. She covered her nose. “Excuse me.” Even in the limited light cast by the lantern, he could see a slow blush crawl across her cheeks. “No. *Uncle* Luther and I are just friends.”

A huge knot unfurled in his stomach. “Uncle, huh?”

“Well, not technically anymore. His brother, Jesse, was step-daddy number two. Despite the divorce, Jesse and my mother stayed friends, sort of.” She scrunched her nose. “He did send her a wedding gift.”

For some reason the revelation made her giggle. Her face softened with a huge smile and Jamie’s gut tightened in a way it hadn’t since he was fifteen and Ms. Flores, his Spanish teacher, accidentally brushed her ample breasts up against him.

Loreнна ran her hands through her hair and pushed the curls away from her face. “Luther and I are great friends.”

Jamie nodded. That explained Luther, but didn’t really answer the pressing question as to whether Miss Loreнна was spoken for. Not that Jamie needed to get involved with her while he was on a self-enforced sabbatical. But damned if it didn’t eat at him not having the answer.

“So, how do you like being a vet?”

Jamie’s shoulders stiffened. “Well, I...” What could he say? Did he lie and perpetuate the misconception she was under? Or did he blow his cover and confess his inadequate knowledge of veterinary science was limited to the crash course the research department had given him two days before the shoot began.

He opened his mouth even though his brain hadn’t formulated a plausible explanation. But before a sound came out, he was interrupted.

“Buttercup? You out here?”

Lorennna ducked her head and, if he wasn’t mistaken, made a rather colorful remark.

“Buttercup?” the woman called again.

“I’m here, Mom.” Lorennna stood and gripped the lantern’s handle. “Be right there.”

“Buttercup?” Jamie bit the inside of his cheek to keep from smiling.

She took the steps of the gazebo at a record pace and mumbled something.

Jamie had to practically run to keep up with her as her short legs carried her across the yard. “I beg your pardon.”

“It’s my middle name.”

He couldn’t hold back a quick chuckle. “Seriously?”

“What? It was the seventies in Southern California. Mom likes flowers. And it was her one shot at non-conformity.” She lifted the lantern closer to her face. “Thank God she wasn’t into astrology or something. I could have been Andromeda. Or Moon.”

Jamie laughed. “Or Celestial. Heaven. Sky.”

“Don’t help me here.” She gently slugged his shoulder then glared at him, even though her mouth quirked up in a tiny smile.

Jamie held up his hands in surrender. “It’s a lovely name. Just took me by surprise.”



"I'm just glad my father put his foot down and made her use it for my middle name." She shook her head. Her smile turned wistful. "I have to say, it's one of the few things I would thank my dad for."

"Your dad, huh? How does he feel about your mom getting married again?"

"None of his business. They divorced over twenty years ago so he shouldn't have a say." A frown pulled her mouth down. "But he died a few years ago, so it doesn't matter."

"That's too bad, I'm sorry."

She waved her hand at him. "I hadn't seen him since I was five. I found out about his death when a lawyer called me to settle his estate." She hugged her sweater tight around her. "Sometimes, I just wish..."

He waited for her to finish but instead she changed the subject.

"Can you imagine," she shook herself and a small smile wiped the sadness that overtook her for a minute, "hearing Buttercup Beauchamp the first day of school for twelve years?"

"Beauchamp, huh? You wouldn't happen to be related to Phillip Beauchamp would you?"

"Yep. That would be the late, not-so-great father-of-the-year."

Jamie tripped over his own feet. "Your dad was Phillip Beauchamp, the actor?"

"You know my dad?"

"I've... seen his movies." *I've been in two of them, too. Why wouldn't you have seen them?* He wanted to ask her but decided not to. "He was a really good actor."

She doused the lantern when they reached the arc of light from the back porch. "Too bad he couldn't act like a father."

Jamie didn't understand. The Phillip Beauchamp he knew doted on his daughter. Jamie couldn't remember how many stories Phil had regaled the group with while on the shoot in Nebraska. Maybe her father and that Phil were not the same. Maybe by some freak of statistics there were not one but two Phillip Beauchamps in Hollywood.

Uh, yeah and maybe he'd win an Oscar for his romantic comedy where the heroine turns into a dog for half the movie.

He studied her profile. He then saw the resemblance. That air of familiarity from their first meeting now registered. Loreнна had Phil's coloring. And the same dark curly hair. Even the crystal blue eyes. The only attribute she seemed to retain from her mother was her petite stature.

Why hadn't he realized it then?

Because he never expected to meet Phil's daughter. The way the man touted her up, Jamie expected more an angel than an actual human being.

But the bitter words didn't match Phil's excitement and pride when he spoke of her. How could that be?

"I think actors are right up there with telemarketers and IRS agents." She closed her eyes for a brief moment and shook her head. "Do you know I got audited a couple of years ago?"

"I...ah." Hell, that was an unfortunate turn of events. Now even if he wanted to confess to his duplicity, she'd hate him more for his profession than actually lying to her. "How awful. Did you... You don't like *any* actors?"

"Would you if your father, the actor, ran out on you as a child?" She paused, turned off the lantern and tucked it in a little cubby built into the railing. "That's why I don't watch movies or have any TVs."

He rubbed his hand across his chin. "I'll bet there are one or two you like?"

"There you are, Buttercup." Loreнна's mother stepped through the back door and wiped her hands on the apron around her waist. "Oh, Mr. Crawford. Lovely evening, isn't it?"

"Yes, ma'am."

"What did you need, Mom?"

"Ashley left ten minutes ago. She said to tell you she'll be a few minutes late tomorrow."

Lorenna nodded. "Okay."

"And Hugh's out front." She reached behind her, untied the apron and handed it to her daughter. "I'm headed out."

"Thanks for helping out today." Lorenna hugged Barbara in a brief embrace. "Say hi to Hugh for me."

"Will do." The woman turned to go.

Something in what the woman said niggled Jamie's brain. "Wait," he called to Barbara. "Your last name is Hughes and your fiancé is Hugh."

The older woman ducked her head with a coy smile. "Yeah. Imagine that."

He looked at Lorenna to see if her mother was joking.

Lorenna shrugged. "Odd names. It's a family thing. I have a great-great-uncle named Pope." Lorenna turned to her mother. "Bye."

"Y'all have a nice night." Barbara waved and disappeared back inside the house.

Jamie shoved his hands in his pockets. A smile still hung on his face as he called after her, "Night."

Lorenna looked back at Jamie. "Good night, Mr. Crawford. See you in the morning." Then she disappeared through the screen behind her mother.

Jamie sat in the Adirondack chair. He crossed his arms over his chest and propped up his feet on the matching stool. A smile still creased his face as he leaned his head back and gazed up at the stars until his eyelids grew heavy and fluttered shut.

"Well hello there. I hope that smile is for me."

Jamie's eyes flew open. The woman from dinner pushed his legs aside and sat beside him on the wooden deckchair. Her hands clutched the arms of the chair as she leaned forward with her breasts pressed against him and captured his arms between them.

"Excuse me, would you mind..."

"Not at all, J. Hamilton." She wiggled closer.

Jamie blew out an exasperated sigh. He knew it was too good to be true. He didn't have a swelled head about his career but you couldn't star in dozens of movies and not get recognized—even in a small town. “Opal.”

She giggled. “Olivia.”

“Whatever.” The more he moved to try to free his hands the wider her smile grew. “Would you mind getting off?”

She purred. Her eyes flashed with something akin to hunger. “Who knew you could be so kinky, Mr. Hamilton.”

“It's Mr. Crawford. And I meant for you to get off of me. What if your boyfriend comes out here?”

“Oh, don't worry about Randy. The poor dear took some Benadryl for his allergies and is sound asleep. Nothing could wake him.”

“Olivia...” What could he say to convince her to leave him alone? “What is it you want?”

“Can't you tell? Am I being too subtle?” She released one of the chair arms and ran her fingers over his neck.

“Uh, stop.” Jamie surged under her. He lifted her off him as he shot up.

“What's the matter with you?” Her lower lip jutted out. “Don't you like me?”

“I don't even know you.” But as he thought about, he really did. He knew women like her all too well. “Look, what you really want is a part in a movie, right?”

Olivia leaned up against the back of the house. “I'd never really thought about that before.” She wound a long blonde lock around her finger.

Got it in one. Butch always said he was too cynical, but as he often pointed out, he was seldom wrong.

“But now that you mention it, that sounds like fun.”

Was she for real? Jamie fought hard not to roll his eyes. “Tell you what.” He pulled out his wallet and found one of his agent's cards. “Give

her a call and tell her I referred you. But,” he held up his finger, “you have to promise to keep it a secret that I’m here. No one knows where I am. If you tell,” he shook his head, “I don’t think my agent will want to help you. Have we got a deal?” Jamie held out his hand.

Gone was the seductress and in her place was a squealing woman. She snatched the card from his hand. “Deal.”

“Thank you so much. Can we—” she had the grace, finally, to look sheepish, “—can we forget all of that.” She motioned to the chair.

Jamie nodded and waved at her in a dismissive manner. “Good night, Olga.”

“Olivia,” she called over her shoulder as she hurried into the inn.

“Right.”

## Chapter Four

Lorennna turned out the lights downstairs after she heard Jamie in his room. But she was far from ready to sleep. Thoughts of her father brought up old insecurities. Even worse was to meet a fan of her father's. In the past, she'd been sought out by the extreme ends of the entertainment business. An obnoxious young reporter who wanted to see how Phillip Beauchamp's long lost family lived had dogged her and her mother's footsteps for over two weeks. He finally gave up after she doused him with a pail full of dishpan water—for the third time—and he caught a nasty cold.

The little runt even tried to sue Lorennna for damage to his camera and for lost work due to his illness. Thankfully, the judge sided with Lorennna and told the man he was lucky she didn't have him arrested for stalking.

But for a long time after, Lorennna was wary of anyone who mentioned her father's name.

It was bad enough her own memories of the man left a bitter taste in her mouth, but then to have someone exploit her life... It was often another log on the fire of her hatred to a man she could barely remember.

That was why she didn't own a television.

One late night, two days from her college graduation, she settled in with a bowl of popcorn to watch a movie only to have her father's face fill the screen and taunt her with his make-believe family and the angst of father-dom. Talk about adding insult to injury. The next day she sold her television lest she accidentally happen upon him again.

Her friends had questioned her sanity, disbelieving a woman of their generation could scoff at modern technology. But how could she explain to them how much it hurt seeing a man she knew to be her father on TV tell his on-screen daughter how much he loved her when she didn't have recollection of ever having the same comfort? It left her hollow. And frustrated. And jealous.

The man had died four months after that from a major coronary, so she knew she would never hear those words from him.

"Oh, Dad." Tears wet her cheeks. She hugged her pillow to her chest. "Why didn't you love me enough?"

Her eyelids fluttered as she sniffed back a new bout of tears.

\* \* \*

Head stuffy and eyes puffy, she moaned and rolled over to swat the damn alarm as the contraption rang. "Morning already?" She debated a snooze or two, but then sucked it up and eased out of bed.

She pulled on a pair of spandex shorts, an old, gray T-shirt from her alma mater, UT Austin, and thick socks, prepared for her morning run. A huge yawn escaped when she searched for her New Balance sneakers.

Five-thirty came way too early.

All night she woke in fits and starts. A picture of one Jamie Crawford and what his powerful hands might do played havoc with her thoughts. Why the image came unbidden every time she let her mind veer off the days events, she had no idea. But still, her skin tingled with her vivid imagination.

She tied her shoelace and sat upright with a groan.

Why did this man have this effect on her? Why, when she finally got her life in order, paid the last of the remodeling bills for the inn and thought she might actually turn a profit, did she have to meet a man, a guest no less, who turned her head and made her fantasies spin?

Sex, she decided as she left her bedroom and entered the kitchen. It had been far too many months since she had had sex. Her last boyfriend, Bret, left to follow his Mountain Rangers aspirations in Washington State—who would have thought a man born and reared in San Antonio, Texas would have the nerve to move so far away on a whim. On a dream.

She couldn't fathom that. Stability and security were the two most important factors in her life. She learned that lesson early on. Just look at her mother and four unhappy marriages. She couldn't count on one hand—or even two—how many times she moved before her mother settled down in Dusty Springs. Even there, Loreнна had lived in three different houses.

"Not anymore." She headed into the kitchen.

She wouldn't depend on anyone else to give her the stability she yearned for. Especially not a man. She strived to make a life for herself, by herself. Anything else was a happy byproduct, but not something she necessarily anticipated.

"Am I cynical? Maybe." She scratched her head. "But practical, you betcha."

But she had her own business, she was her own boss. She didn't need anyone.

"Except when it comes to sex," she moaned.

After he'd settled in, Bret had invited her to join him from time to time. But never offered to cement their relationship and make it a permanent situation. And she wasn't overly compelled to ask him, God forbid, to marry her. She did visit Bret in Washington once. But it screamed "booty-call".

How desperate did a woman have to be to fly over two-thousand miles to have sex? Loreнна decided a little abstinence couldn't hurt anyone. Except now she was eyeing her latest guest like a Twinkie at a fat farm. If she didn't watch herself, she might indulge in midnight snack with the beefcake in the Green Room. And where would that lead her?

Besides to an orgasm she was sure she hadn't seen the likes of before.



“God, maybe I should give old Bret a call. Better the devil you know...” Loreнна shook her head then snorted. Yeah right.

She washed her hands and set out breakfast on the tray. She carried the array of baked-goods to the buffet table in the dining room. She readied the plates, flatware and napkins, then set the coffee maker for the seven o’clock breakfast and ringed the clean mugs around it. The cooked portion of breakfast she did once the patrons came down.

With her hands on her hips, she scanned the room. “All set.” She turned on her heel and nearly tripped over Bitsy. “Good grief, girly. You know I can trip over my own shadow.” She bent and scratched Bitsy’s thick furry neck. She hefted the fat cat and carried her out to the back porch with her.

Once Loreнна shut the door, she set Bitsy on the chaise. “You stay out here ‘til I get back from my run. No snacking on the muffins for you today, missy.”

She blew a kiss and skipped down the steps. Her lungs filled with the morning air heavy with promised rain later in the day.

Daybreak lifted just beyond the trees. Loreнна walked on the path to the back pasture. Her morning run usually followed the fence-line that surrounded the east property, but today a restless urge made her turn left instead of right and head for the small pond near the garden of roses which grew untamed and in abundance.

Despite the humidity, the morning hugged her in a much-needed relief after a wasted sleep, and offered no stresses of the day to worry about. No dreamy-eyed vet to distract her thoughts. Time for Loreнна and Loreнна alone.

She stretched her legs until the tight muscles relaxed then loped down the miniscule path. For a minute, she wished she’d brought her CD player and headphones. But something about the rubber of her shoes as it slapped the hard-packed ground mixed with the rustle of leaves and waking wildlife relaxed her more than she imagined.

Fifteen minutes into the run, and at full stride, the clouds darkened, the air around her chilled at least ten degrees. She hated to cut short her

run, but the ominous clouds looked like the storm decided to settle in early. She gave herself a few more yards then turned around to go back to the Inn.

Not fifty yards from her a flash of lightning shot down from the sky followed by an ear-shattering boom. Lorennna screeched and stumbled on an exposed root. Her momentum diverted, she swerved off the path, down the five-foot embankment toward the pond.

“Shit.” Her left foot sunk into a hole, immobilized, while the rest of her propelled forward. The wrenching pain sucked the breath from her and she slammed to the ground.

With her body pressed face down in the slick bank, she laid still a moment, all but the rise and fall of her back from several deep breaths.

Algae and mud odor warred in her nostrils. The cool earth did little to stem the heat rising in her cheeks. Anger grumbled in her chest and she clenched her teeth to keep the hot tears that threatened to fall at bay.

Lorennna lifted her head. A few choice words erupted from her until she ran out of breath again. She levered herself up on her elbows and examined the scrapes across her palms. She could hear her mother’s voice ring in her ears. “You are such a clumsy girl. You’d trip over a thought if you didn’t pay attention.”

She never quite followed her mother’s failed attempt at teasing. But with mud mingled with bits of gravel from the edge of the path along with several small specks of blood, she could see why her mother said it.

“Smooth move, Buttercup.”

She pushed to her knees. “Ow, damn.” Her foot, still half in the small hole, throbbed in protest at the movement. As carefully as possible, she scooted closer to the hole and looked at her puffy ankle. Then with cautious care, Lorennna probed the skin. She didn’t think it was broken, but it had sure swollen fast. First with one tug, then another, she tried to free her foot, but it was wedged in solid.

Lorennna knew better than to take off her sneaker, but the hole didn’t give her any options. The laces unbound and worked as loose as possible, she gritted her teeth and gave a quick jerk and her foot came

out shoe-free. She banished her pain to the back of her mind. She needed to focus. With the edge of the embankment, she pushed herself to stand. Then with as little weight as possible, she took a tentative step. Searing hot pain shot through her foot and up her calf.

She grunted and sank back to the ground. "Super." She yanked a handful of grass from the only patch next to the pond and threw it. The blades of green fluttered and cartwheeled to the ground. "Can't get much worse than this."

A fat raindrop plopped on her nose. Another plunked her forehead when she looked skyward. "Famous last words." Before the phrase even dissipated on the air, the clouds opened up and drenched Loreнна and the land around her.

She bit her lower lip to keep the hysterical laughter in her throat from escaping. With the cover of rain, she let her tears fall.

"Okay. Get a grip girl." Loreнна wiggled her shoe free from the hole and again pulled herself up to stand.

Rivulets of water ran down the side of the embankment as she climbed up the side, careful not to jar her foot. She glanced at her watch, saw the shattered glass face and twisted hands. Tears anew mixed with the rain.

"Damn, damn, damn."

Up on the path, she found a large branch from a fallen tree and used it for a cane, but it was slow going with the slick ground and puddles.

As many times as she jogged in the morning, she never deviated from her usual course. So why on the one day she decided to try something new, did this have to happen? It seemed like anytime she tried anything new it bit her on the butt. Stick to what you know. No risks, no torn sneakers. Her mind flashed to Jamie Crawford again. Or no broken hearts.

Whoa, she was getting way ahead of herself.

Another lightning jag and thunderous boom interrupted her thoughts. Loreнна hunched her shoulders to the rain. "Please let me make it home in one piece." She limped along a few paces, the less than

sturdy tree branch in one hand, her muddied shoe in the other. "As much in one piece as I am now," she clarified.

\* \* \*

Jamie descended the last couple of steps. His nose followed the wonderful aroma of coffee to the dining. All the same faces sat at the same tables and all turned to smile at the last arrival for breakfast. Olivia gave a quick wave but turned quickly back to what's-his-name and snuggled as if she hadn't been straddling another man just the night before.

*Women.*

"Morning, Jamie." Mrs. Keller raised her coffee mug. "Would you care to join us?"

He smiled at the septuagenarian. "Morning, Mrs. Keller. Sure, just let me get a cup of coffee first."

After he added sugar to his coffee, he piled a plate full of the morning offering and sat across from Mrs. Keller. Her husband had his head bent in the morning paper. He grunted a hello while he perused the financial section.

Jamie offered the couple some of the muffins.

Mrs. Keller selected a blueberry. "Thank you, dear boy." She motioned to her husband. "Frank invested some of our retirement savings in a new company. He likes to keep abreast of their status."

Jamie nodded. He spied the rest of the paper and stifled a groan when he saw his picture staring up from the entertainment section. "May I?" He snagged the paper.

Mr. Keller looked up. "Certainly."

Jamie feigned reading it for a moment then tucked the section on his lap under the table.

The older man noticed the plate of baked-goods. "Oh. Breakfast." He grabbed a cranberry muffin. "Wonder where Lorennna's got off to."

Jamie frowned. "What do you mean?"

"She usually cooks up some eggs and bacon for us in the morning." Mr. Keller rubbed his slightly pooched belly at the mention of Loreнна's cooking. A move Jamie had become familiar with after just a small time in the man's presence.

"We've been stopping here twice a year for the last few years." She waved a hand between her and her husband. "Loreнна spoils us, I think. Most of these inns don't cater such a nice breakfast." She turned to look at Mr. Keller. "She probably had some errands to run this morning."

"In this weather?"

A crash of thunder echoed as if to prove the older man's point.

"She left out a lovely choice. Besides, you're supposed to cut back on all that cholesterol." She patted her husband's hand.

Jamie's chest constricted. The wistful smile on the woman's face as she looked up at her spouse reminded him of his parents. Damn, he missed them. He lifted his coffee to his mouth, blew across the top, then took a sip.

Mrs. Keller turned back to him and her smile brightened. "Have we met before, Jamie? You seem so familiar to me."

His eyes watered as he coughed. Mr. Keller pushed back in his chair and whacked him on the back once.

"I'm fine. Coffee went down the wrong pipe." His voice rasped. After several deep breaths, he cleared his throat and said, "No, I don't think we've met."

"Hmm." She shook her head. "I know I have seen you somewhere before. I just can't place my finger on it."

"I think I just have one of those faces."

"You know that's the same thing Loreнна said last night."

Loreнна was talking about him? Why did it thrill him so much?

"Don't worry. I'll figure it out sooner or later." She patted his hand much the same way she had her husband.

And although he knew the woman only had the most sincere intentions, her unknown threat shook him. He couldn't help wonder if he was playing with fire by lying to everyone. Especially now that Olivia knew. Would his promise to get her in with Stephanie work? God, he hoped so. Otherwise, word would get out where he was and no telling who all would show up.

After he finished his breakfast, he stood. "I'll see you two later on. Thanks for letting me share breakfast with you."

They nodded and smiled kindly at him.

Ashley, Loreнна's helper, came through the kitchen door with an irate cat wadded in a thick terrycloth towel.

He pushed in his chair. "What have you got there?"

Ashley slowed her pace across the room. "Someone left little old Bitsy out in the rain. Isn't that right, poor girl?"

The "little" cat growled a low warning.

"Loreнна's been putting her out when she runs in the morning because Bitsy has a major sweet tooth. She'll finish off half the pastries before we can stop her." She shrugged her shoulders and moved past Jamie.

But he grabbed her arm to stop her. "You don't think she ran today, do you?"

Lightning flashed, and after a few seconds delay, thunder boomed.

Ashley frowned and looked out the huge bay window. "I hope not."

The doubt in the girl's voice roiled the food in his gut.

"I haven't seen her this morning." Ashley bit her lower lip.

Jamie balled his fist at his side. Unease spread through him. "Neither have the Kellers."

"Her car's out front." A far away look crossed in her eyes as her gaze drifted back to the bay windows. Ashley shook off whatever she'd been thinking. "She's probably out on an errand with her mama. But..."

"But...? What's wrong?"

"She wouldn't leave Bitsy outside." She hugged the cat tighter to her chest. "Not with the rain coming."

The front door opened and a petite form came through, covered in a bright orange raincoat. Jamie relaxed until he saw the pink-tinted blonde hair, not Lorennna's curly, sable mane he'd expected.

"Hi." Barbara smiled at the pair while she hung her coat on the rack next to the registration desk. "Why the long faces?"

Jamie watched the door for a moment, hoped to see Lorennna come through behind her mother. "Have you seen Lorennna this morning?"

The older woman's brows drew down. Her smile fell as she shook her head. "No. I came to pick her up for her last dress fitting. Why?"

"No one has seen her this morning, Barbara." Ashley's voice rose an octave. "She wasn't here to fry up anything for breakfast. And I found Bitsy on the back porch. In the rain."

Barbara's face paled.

"Calm down." Jamie rubbed the woman's shoulder. "Let's check her room."

Barbara nodded, pushed past them and headed for the kitchen door.

The Kellers perked up. "We'll come with you."

Olivia and her boyfriend looked hesitant but stood and joined the small precession.

At Lorennna's door, Barbara knocked. "Buttercup, you in there?" She glanced back over her shoulder at Jamie then tried the knob. The door swung open into a precisely neat room. The comforter matched the floral curtains. The small circular rug matched the tablecloth, next to her bed. All neat, all in order, all without a trace of the woman who lived there.

"Where does she run in the morning?"

Mrs. Keller pushed to the front of the crowd. "She wouldn't go out in this, would she?" She jumped at a boom of thunder. "There was a tornado warning this morning."

Barbara waved her off. "There's always a tornado warning any time a storm comes up. Central Texas and all."

Several heads nodded as if that was all the explanation they needed, but it didn't give Jamie much confidence. "Maybe she left before it started." Jamie rubbed his hand over his face. "It's worth checking into. Where?"

"Oh, heavens I don't know. Around the back of the property I suppose."

"Okay. Let me go look for her."

Olivia pushed through the crowd of people. "Randy should go with you."

Jamie shrugged.

"Right, Randy?" Olivia persisted.

The man looked uncomfortable but didn't balk.

"Fine." Jamie nodded. He didn't give a damn who went, as long as they could get their asses moving pronto. He turned to go, but paused in front of Lorennna's mother. "Try not to worry."

Barbara hugged her arms close to her body. "Find my baby, Jamie."



## Chapter Five

“You take the path to the right. I’ll go that way.” Jamie pointed toward the pond. He turned up the collar of his shirt against the cool rain and hurried his step. He passed the gazebo and remembered the night before, remembered how Loreнна’s eyes lit when he teased her about her middle name.

And now he was compelled to search for her in a cold summer rain.

Anger burned his gut. Why would someone jog in this kind of weather? Why would someone put their life at risk and worry those around them? He couldn’t quite understand why Loreнна would be so selfish.

Jamie’s step faltered.

What he knew of Loreнна, from her mother, from the Kellers, hell just watching her, he knew her to be a very considerate person. He berated himself for his wayward thoughts.

As he sped down the path, his feet slipped on the slick mud and sparse grass. Lightning crossed overhead, the thunder’s rumble farther and farther from the strike as the storm moved eastward.

Water soaked into his shirt, his jeans, and his shoes and made his trek more difficult. He wished he’d have thought to grab an umbrella. Then he worried anew about Loreнна out here most likely without any protection from the elements. As he debated how far to go, he spotted movement up the path.

He cupped his hands around his mouth. “Loreнна!”

The blob up ahead stopped. He shouted again.

For a moment, Jamie thought he imagined it, but then the blob moved again. Arms raised, he realized, and waved.

"I'm over here." Her faint voice carried over the rain.

A pent up breath whooshed from his lungs. "Lorennna." Jamie ran up the path.

As he neared her, he took in the glorious, if drenched, sight of her. Dark curls lay smashed flat against her head from a coat or two of mud. Her soaked clothes clung to every dip and curve of her body.

"You know people pay good money for an all over mud treatment."

She smiled up at him as he ran his hands down her arms. No wounds that he could find. Then Jamie reached out to wipe the mud from the bridge of her nose. His chest tightened when he saw the small scratch which marred her ivory cheek.

Lorennna hobbled forward a step. A grimace distorted her features as she favored her left foot in a very lopsided limp.

"Come here." He scooped the petite woman in his arms. She weighed next to nothing despite wearing what had to be ten pounds of mud. He turned and headed back the way he came before he asked, "What the hell happened to you?"

"I was jogging. Lightning flashed." She shivered. "I tripped. Fell down the bank on the far side of the pond. Foot got stuck in a hole." She held up her tattered shoe as evidence. "Then it started to rain."

Jamie thought he noticed tears, but with the falling rain, it was hard to tell.

"How long have you been out here?"

"Since six."

Jamie hugged her closer. "Oh geez, Lorennna. It's well after seven."

Another shudder rocked through her. Jamie could hear her teeth chattering.

"Are you hurt anywhere else?"

Lorennna's head pressed against his shoulder. "I don't think so."

Her breath tickled his neck. He counted footsteps, recited the monologue from the last play he did, anything to keep his mind off the warmth hugged to his body. He willed his groin not to stir.

What kind of ass was he to get turned on by an injured, helpless woman?

He thought she might have nodded off until she spoke again. "I didn't think I'd ever make it back." The shivering increased. Jamie tried to lean over her to protect her from the rain, but the wind whipped it around them in all directions and it smacked them square in the face. A few distant rumbles of thunder echoed loudly above.

"My...ankle...hurts."

Her choppy words, through chattering teeth, tore at him. "Shh. We're almost there." Jamie rounded the corner as Randy came up the other path.

"You found her."

*Hello, king of the astute.*

The younger man wiped water from his face. "Is she okay?"

"Bum ankle."

"How far have you been carrying her? You want me to take her the rest of the way?"

There was no way in hell Jamie would relinquish his hold on Loreнна. "I got her."

Randy hurried in front of him and beat the pair to the porch.

"Randy, get this stick please."

He nodded and pried the stick out of her hand then dropped it next to the chaise before he opened the back door.

The huddle of folks turned around at the sound of the door. Barbara took one look at Loreнна cuddled in Jamie's arms and bolted toward them. "Oh my God. What happened?"

"She hurt her ankle."

Loreнна trembled in his arms. He wasn't sure if he hadn't joined her. Not that she was too heavy to carry, quite the contrary. But he'd thought

his heart would pound out of his chest when he'd seen her damaged cheek and bruised, swollen ankle. It took all his self-control to keep from getting hysterical. *Action heroes do not get hysterical*. Hell, they'd take his He-Man card if they found out he'd nearly wept with relief when he found her. "I'm going to take her to her room."

The crowd parted and Jamie carried her through the doorway. "Barbara," he called over his shoulder, "will you turn on the shower. Hot. We need to warm her up and get this mud off."

The older woman nodded and crossed to the bathroom door. Jamie still held Loreнна. He couldn't bear to put her down yet, not until he saw the steam from the shower. "Can you get some towels ready?"

Jamie didn't wait to see if Barbara agreed, but stepped fully clothed in the shower stall.

Loreнна's eyes popped open, her arms tightened around his neck. "What are you doing?"

"Warming you up." He smiled down at her. "Can you stand if I put you down?"

"I think so," she said but didn't look at him.

He released her legs, but kept his arm tight around her back. Jamie had to stifle a groan when she slid down the front of him, the friction threatened to send him into orbit. But again, he had to remind himself this was about Loreнна. Injured Loreнна. Not him. He couldn't be so callous as to take advantage of her weakened state. Actually he could. He realized that oh yeah, he could, but then he wasn't so sure he could look at himself again. But damn he'd have sweet memories.

He tried to reach around her but she sagged without the strength to put weight on her foot. "Hold onto my shoulders for a sec."

Loreнна shifted her stance and gripped Jamie while he bent over and snagged the shampoo.

Weak, but coherent, she asked, "What are you doing now?"

"You have mud caked over just about every inch of you. I was going to get it out of your hair."

“Oh.” She maneuvered back a smidge.

Without any further protests, she let him wash her hair. But damn, his body protested. If his zipper lasted through the shower, he’d write a letter to the maker and thank them for their durability.

*Focus*, he told himself.

It wasn’t easy. When lavender—her scent, he realized—enveloped them in the small cubbyhole of a shower, stirred every fantasy in him, he wanted to scoop her up and carry her to the bed.

He’d never showered with a woman before when he didn’t have a director and umpteen stagehands around to make sure the lighting, steam and angles provided the best shot. Nor had he ever showered with all his clothes on. Things...chafed where he hadn’t considered getting chafed before.

Not to mention the way the slightest touch from Loreнна, or the feel of her hair sliding through his fingers, set his body on fire. For some strange reason he also wondered if it was the woman more so than the action. Loreнна made him think things he didn’t know he wanted. She made him desire sex, of course, but so much more. With her, he wanted the perfect picture of domestic bliss. And the one time her gaze ventured up past his chin, he thought he saw desire replace the pain and fear he’d seen earlier.

He didn’t know how he didn’t explode.

Why did she do this to him? He couldn’t help but wonder. *How* did she do this to him?

*Focus*, he reminded himself again. *Think baseball stats*. That always worked in high school. Mind off Loreнна and on the LA Dodgers.

*Oral Hershiser won the Cy Young in nineteen eighty-eight. World Series champs nineteen eighty-eight, eighty-one, sixty-five, sixty-three, fifty-nine, fifty-five...*

When he reached for the hem of her shirt, she nearly slipped in the small shower trying to get away from him.

“It’s covered in mud.” Jamie tried to keep his voice even and emotionless. He did need to get her out of the soiled clothes. And if a side

benefit of his gallantry afforded him a view of her perfect ivory skin, then by goodness, he would suffer stoically.

“O...okay, but close your eyes.”

Jamie gawked at her. “What?”

“Close your eyes.” Her cleaned cheeks burned bright red.

Jamie nodded in concession. He did the undressing dance with his eyes shut, but his imagination fully illuminated. His fingers brushed against soft curves and mounds.

“You’re going to have to take your shirt off too.” Her breathless voice all but killed him even as she added, “Or you’ll get me all muddy again.”

“Hmm, yeah.” Eyes still closed he wiggled the wet fabric up his torso until he met her hands. “Hang on to my waist so I can get this off.”

She grasped him. And if he wasn’t mistaken, he heard a sharp intake of breath from her. He fought to keep a smile of satisfaction off his face.

Then he took a tiny peek. And realized his oversight. His imagination paled in comparison to the beauty before him.

“Uh.” He couldn’t stop a groan.

“What was that?”

“Uh, I have to take off your other shoe.” He squatted in the too-small stall. “Hold on tight to my shoulders. I’m going to have to hold you in order to get your other shoe off without you putting weight on your hurt foot, okay?”

She didn’t answer.

“Okay?”

“Um, sure.”

Her cool small hands, on his bare skin, crossed his eyes.

*Focus, focus, focus.*

He wrapped his arms around her hips, held her tight to his body.

*I’ve died and gone to horny heaven,* he thought. He could just stand there, skin to skin. Her in his arms. But Lorennna needed him to help, not molest her.

"Lift your leg up." Her hip rubbed sinfully against his chest. He sucked in a lungful of air and bent some more to reach her foot then he popped her sneaker off. *This is about her, not you.* But the reminder didn't help. His actions put his face even with the prize, at the juncture all men strive to attain. Damn but his pants grew tighter than he thought possible.

God help him. He bit the inside of his cheek to keep from saying something he might regret. Even a flippant "You come here often." Instead, he eased his teeth from the now-tender flesh of his mouth and said, "Don't let go of my shoulders."

Arms free of her soft body, he ran through a few more Dodgers stats as he popped the door open a crack and tossed the shoe in the corner. He had to clear his throat before he could say, "Shorts, next."

"I won't look. I promise," he said although he kept his eyes open mere slits, too tempted to resist.

The gray bike shorts gave way to white utilitarian undies. Coupled with the same white utilitarian bra, couldn't look better if they came from Victoria's raunchiest secret catalogue.

*Was the shower getting smaller?*

He gulped and let his gaze roam free. But the sight of scrapes on her knees dashed him better than if she'd switched the water from percolate to Antarctic.

"You hurt your knees."

"My hands too." She leaned into him as she removed her right hand from his shoulder and showed him the nasty red scratches across her palm.

Jamie fought an urge to kiss the wound away as his mom did when he was a child. Instead, he recited every player on the Dodgers roster since the 1967 season, the year he was born, and hurriedly washed the mud from her legs. He held onto her as she cleaned the top half of herself.

*...Infielders, Alex Cora, Robin Ventura...*

"I'm done." Lorenn's voice shook.

“Thank God.” He only had one year left to go in the line up. Where would that have left him? He sighed and stood. “Barbara, do you have those towels ready?”

“Yes.”

Her quick answer disturbed him to think that his mind had gone off into the wilds of lustville while the injured’s mother stood on the other side of the frosted glass door. Heat crawled up his neck and cheeks. It had been far too long since he’d been this close to a woman. Maybe he should go into town later and find that damn bar. He didn’t want to start something he couldn’t finish with the gorgeous innkeeper.

Jamie pushed the door open with his elbow as he scooped Loreнна up.

Barbara wrapped them both in huge terrycloth towels and guided them to Loreнна’s bed.

“I called the doctor,” she told Loreнна. Then to Jamie, she said, “He doesn’t live to far up the road.”

“I’m, uh...” At a loss for words, he ran the towel over his face as Barbara cooed over her daughter. “I need to run upstairs and change.” He needed to clear his head, give his body a break before he exploded. “I’ll see you later.” He turned and all but ran from the room lest he drop to his knees and ask for another look-see.

\* \* \*

“How’s your ankle?” Jamie sauntered up to Loreнна on the sofa in the den.

She wished he still wore the skin-tight, wet clothes, which showed off every cut, ripped muscle in the taut body of his.

And when he took off his shirt...

If she hadn’t been hobbled on one leg, she might have had her wicked ways with the buff beefcake.



Even in dry clothes though, she wanted to purr at the mighty masculine man. But, alas, she sighed, she was a professional and couldn't cross the line with a guest. *Shake off your errant thoughts, girl*, she told herself. *The man asked you a question*. "Um, the doctor said it was a mild sprain. Nothing too terrible."

Jamie shoved his hands in his pockets. "Oh, that's great. How does it feel?"

"Better. And twenty-four to forty-eight hours or so and it should be back to normal." She set aside her iced tea and adjusted the cold pack. "I wish I could say the same for my injured pride." Loreнна dropped her gaze, unable to meet Jamie's open stare. So embarrassed that she could be so clumsy, she hated everyone had worried about her. "I can't thank you enough for finding me. I have no idea how long it would have taken me to get back up to the inn."

"I didn't do anything special."

Loreнна's head came up and she found his gaze. "What? How can you say that?"

"Anyone would have done the same thing." From where she sat, she could see his shoulders tense. "Randy was out there looking for you, too."

"Maybe, but from what my mother tells me, you instigated the search when they couldn't find me." She watched Jamie duck his head. She half expected him to stub the toe of his shoe on the corner of the couch and say, "aw shucks".

"No one else," she continued when he said nothing, "warmed me up and got all the mud off despite getting drenched in the shower with me."

"I was already wet." He shrugged his shoulders. "No big deal."

Loreнна rolled her eyes. "Where'd you learn to do that anyway? Boy Scouts?"

"Movies." Jamie said the word quick then an odd look pulled his face and a flash of color crossed his cheeks. "I, ah, watch a lot of movies."

“Well, I guess the movies are good for something, then, huh?” She didn’t want to get in a talk about her father again. She limited herself to one emotional crisis per day.

He leaned onto the arm of the sofa and, thankfully, didn’t comment further. “What can I help you with? I am at your disposal today.”

Was this guy for real? Was there no end to his heroics? “Not a thing. You’re a guest.”

“Really, I don’t mind. I didn’t come prepared for all this solitude.” He pulled his hands from his pockets, shrugged then slapped his hands on his knees. “I’m not used to sitting around doing nothing.”

Lorenna knew she shouldn’t ask him for help. Every time he came near her, sparks ignited and if he touched her one too many times, she was afraid she would spontaneously combust.

*No fraternizing*, she reminded herself. She needed to stitch it on a sampler and hang it around his neck. That way she wouldn’t be so tempted. But she did have to get to the registration desk and the doctor specifically told her not to put weight on her foot.

“Um, if you’re sure...”

“I wouldn’t have offered otherwise.”

“Mom left for her appointments, and Ashley’s in the back washing the linens for tonight.” She looked at him for a brief moment then let her gaze drop to her lap. “I have a new guest arriving soon.” Her fingers worried the hem of her shirt. “He called a little while ago to let me know his plane was delayed because of the storm this morning.”

“What can I do for you? Do you need me to get the room ready?”

“No.” Lorenna chuckled and met his gaze again. “I just need to get to the desk.”

Jamie hesitated.

“I’m sorry.” God, he was probably embarrassed from groping all over her earlier. She wondered if she repulsed him. She was no beauty, but she wasn’t the beast-master either.

Could a person's cheek burst into flame? If hers heated any more, she knew they just might. "I shouldn't have asked."

"No." He ran his hands through his spiky hair. "I don't mind."

He lifted her from the couch and carried her to the reservation desk in the front foyer. Their bodies rubbed against each other. Rubbed, stirred and aroused. At least on her side. She heaved a sigh. Fourth of July watch out.

Jamie set her on the stool. She slid with maddening slow friction down him before he released her legs. Her brow creased when his hand remained at her waist.

*What was this?* She glanced up at him.

"I have to tell you..." he broke off.

She took the moment to study his face close up. No stubble. He'd shaved while upstairs. His blond hair made it look deceptive, but that morning when he held her, she'd seen the smattering of hairs across his square jaw and chiseled cheeks.

His Adam's apple bobbed when he swallowed. Was he nervous? That was ludicrous. What would a man like Jamie Crawford have to be nervous about?

He sucked in a deep breath and finished his statement. "You scared the hell out of me this morning."

"Getting stuck out there didn't do much for my piece of mind either."

Jamie cupped her cheek.

Lorennna tried to remind herself to breathe. It stalled for a moment as if to say, "Hello? What's this?"

Then his thumb traced the cut on her cheek with a most gentle touch. "You could have been hurt so much worse."

"But I wasn't." Their gazes locked, his pupils widened. He didn't look the least bit repulsed.

Jamie leaned down to Lorennna, his lips feather light as they touched hers.

Oh! Definitely not repulsed.

Her hand came up to Jamie's chest. She was torn between pushing him away or drawing him to her. Nearer won when she gripped his shirt in her fist, pulled him closer and deepened the kiss.

*Oh, yeah!*

## Chapter Six

Jamie's heart pounded heavily when Loreнна's lips parted, all the invitation he needed. He invaded her mouth, reveled in the taste of her, as sweet as he knew she would be. One of her hands rose to his face and teased the hair at his temples. Just to feel her touch him ignited something buried deep within him. A passion he hadn't found in ages, if ever.

One of them moaned, but Jamie wasn't sure who. It didn't matter. All that mattered was her, in his arms. But just then a car door slammed outside and the pair pulled apart.

"Um," Loreнна touched her fingers to her lips and looked anywhere but at Jamie. Then she grabbed the register on the desk and flipped through the pages. "That must be my guest."

Jamie stepped back and gave her some room. "What's his name?"

Loreнна ran her hands through her hair. She leaned closer to the desk. "Ah, it's Butch..."

"Mahay." The front door slammed shut. "In the flesh."

"No way." Jamie spun on his heels toward the newcomer. "Shit, I don't believe this." Another, more colorful, curse eased out under his breath.

"Jamie! What in the world are you doing here?" Butch—dressed head to toe in pirate attire, lacking only the eye patch and the parrot—dropped his suitcase and hurried forward. "As I live and breathe."

Jamie stammered, stuttered, but didn't manage to make a coherent sound.

Lorennna put her hand on Jamie's arm and pulled him back a step. He could see the wonder in her eyes when she looked at Butch dressed in skin-tight black leather pants a white poet's shirt and black boots. Electric blue dye liberally streaked his shaggy, light-brown hair.

She unconvincingly stifled a smile. "You two know each other?"

"Of course we do." Butch made an incredulous face. "We grew up together. We're like this." He intertwined his two fingers. "Best friends 'til the end."

Jamie rolled his eyes and shook his head with a quick laugh.

"Well, I'm pleased to meet you." Lorennna held her hand out.

Butch did an elaborate bow along with a fingertip handshake then kissed the back of Lorennna's hand. "The pleasure's all mine, my sweet," he said as he straightened.

Jamie's gaze shifted back and forth between his oldest and newest friend. He wiped his suddenly sweaty palms on his jeans. Butch was about to blow his cover. And as soon as he did, Lorennna probably wouldn't speak to him, much less kiss him again, if she didn't just kick him out of the inn.

He had to come up with something. But what? The truth? He could just come clean and be done with the whole ruse.

No. Because for whatever reason, Lorennna intrigued him more than any woman ever had before.

A smile spread across Lorennna's face. "Thank you," she said as if reading his thoughts, but in actuality just answering Butch's usually charming manner. "And who have you got there?" She pointed to the pet in crook of Butch's arm.

"Oh, this sweetie is Sarge." Butch lifted the Chinese Crested Dog's front paw and waved to Lorennna. "Say hi to the nice lady, Sarge."

The poor dog yawned which made the black leather biker's cap on his head wobble on one of the few patches of tan and black fur. Sarge scratched once at the matching vest and settled back into Butch's grasp.

Bitsy jumped up on the counter next to Loreнна and eyed the hairless, costumed canine in Butch's arms. She pawed at the hat, which garnered nothing more than a speculative sniff from Sarge.

Jamie could almost hear the cat's laughter as she bounded off the counter and ran off into the other room.

"You must be one of Jamie's clients." Loreнна shifted on the stool. She tried to prop her leg up on the desktop but couldn't quite reach.

Jamie scooped the stool closer and snagged a sweater lying on the floor and eased it under her foot. When he had Loreнна situated, he looked up in time to see Butch scratch his head, then scrunch up his face with a wry smile.

Butch leaned his elbow on the counter. "I think you have that backwards, honey."

"Oh? I just assumed you would take Sarge to Jamie."

"Jamie sees Sarge often enough. Just last month I left him up at the compound when I had to fly to New York."

Jamie continued his volleyed gaze between friends. His gaze landed back on Loreнна. Her features softened. "You have a kennel, too?"

"Among other things." Butch answered before Jamie could confess he'd lied. "This man has a regular menagerie. Collector of all things stray."

"That's so sweet." Loreнна laced her fingers in her lap. "Our local vet only has a pair of dogs. He says he doesn't want to bring work home with him."

"A vet? From which war?"

She patted Butch's arm. "You're cute."

"What did I say?" He shrugged his shoulders and looked at Jamie for explanation.

But Loreнна beat him to the punch line. "A veterinarian, like Jamie."

"Oh, that's rich." Butch's laughter threw his head so far back Jamie could count his fillings.

"I don't..." A frown creased Loreнна's forehead.

“Butch doesn’t think of me as a vet.” Jamie moved and blocked Lorennna from Butch. Then Jamie narrowed his eyes at his friend in a silent threat. Then to ensure Butch kept his mouth shut, he dropped the ultimate subject changer. “We’ve been friends for so long he still sees me as the kid who kept him from getting beat up by the girls swim team.”

Somewhere along the way from adolescence, the pair of friends had devised subtle verbal clues to let the other know when to shut the hell up until they could explain.

Butch’s eyes widened. An almost imperceptible nod moved his head and he motioned his lips zipped.

“The girls swim team?” Lorennna shoved at Jamie. “What did you do?”

“We don’t need to go into that.” Butch looked down at Sarge and straightened his vest.

“Oh, please. Tell me what happened.” Lorennna grabbed his arm. “And I’ll tell you how Jamie saved me from a horrendous rain storm this morning.”

Butch’s head popped up. “Deal.” He rounded the desk and pushed Jamie aside. “When we were in junior high, this Amazon of a girl needed some help. Six feet tall at twelve years old. Hairy knuckles and the beginnings of a mustache. And me, being who I am—” he placed his hand on his chest, “—tried to give her style points. You know how to dress to accentuate the positive and all. I tried to help.” He put his hand to his mouth and lowered his voice. “I mean is it my fault she inherited the glands from the King Kong side of her family?”

“No,” Jamie crossed his arms over his chest and leaned against the banister, “but you didn’t have to point it out to her on a regular basis.”

Butch waved him off. “That beast of a girl and two of her finny friends ambushed me outside the cafeteria one day and locked me in the huge walk-in fridge. If the principal didn’t have a thing for fudge-sicles...” His entire body shivered for effect.

“He could have opened the door from the inside—” Jamie eyed his friend, he wasn’t supposed to get so wrapped up in the ancient, albeit true, story, “—but spaz here didn’t notice the door handle.”



"Hush now. I'm telling this." Butch winked at Loreнна. "After Principal Rowe let me out, I knew I had to devise a plan of revenge." Butch handed Sarge to Jamie. Then he grabbed both of Loreнна's hands in his. "I did feel horrible to do this to all the girls. A couple of them were nice to me, but, well, I had no choice.

"So...I went to Swider's market and bought up all the food coloring and Mr. Bubble I could find."

Loreнна snorted and smiled wider.

"Jamie and I sat outside the pool for hours waiting for the afternoon practice."

Jamie pushed away from the banister. "Hey, now. I had no idea what you were up to."

"True, true. Such a friend." Butch released one of Loreнна's hands and patted Jamie's shoulder, then he sighed and turned his attention back to Loreнна. "When those girls jumped in the pool, it took a moment for them to notice how green they were. Then when they started thrashing around...I've never seen so many bubbles in my life." The trio laughed. Tears ran down Butch's face.

Loreнна snorted again and covered the lower half of her face with her hand.

Butch waved his hand feverously. "They saw us laughing and chased us all over campus. Jamie, of course, got away. But I had a stitch in my side from laughing so hard. Well, being the good guy he is, he came back and made Big Bertha..."

"Her name was Valerie."

"He made *Valerie* put me down. Said we'd only been there so he could ask her to the spring formal and we had no idea who put that stuff in the pool."

Loreнна mumbled through her fingers, "And it worked?"

"Well, it *was* Jamie Crawford."

They all laughed again. Butch bent at the waist and shook his head. Loreнна winked at Jamie over Butch's bent back.

“Who wouldn’t go to a dance with him? The most popular boy in school. The king of the theater.” Butch turned and bowed to Jamie.

Lorennna’s smile fell away and her shoulders stiffened slightly.

When Butch stood, Jamie could see the confusion in his face. Jamie shook his head.

Butch cleared his throat. “Okay,” he propped his elbow on the register and leaned toward Lorennna, “your turn. Dish. How did Jamie save you?”

Some of the stiffness left her shoulders and she told of her morning run and the shoe eating hole. “Jamie was the one to suggest they go look for me.”

Butch stood and clapped his hands together. “That sounds about like our Jamie. Always rescuing some damsel in distress. You could say he’s a regular action hero.”

Jamie kicked his friend as Lorennna scribbled something in the registry.

“Ow.” Butch frowned.

Lorennna set down her pen and looked up. “What’s that?”

Butch’s mouth rounded and his raised eyebrows disappeared under the fall of brown and blue bangs. “Ho...ow’s about I go on up to my room. I need to get Sarge settle in. It’s time for his nappy-poo.” Butch took Sarge from Jamie and rubbed their noses together.

“Oh yes, sure.” Again, a frown creased her forehead and she glanced over at the stairs.

“I’ll take him up for you.” Jamie motioned to her foot. “Which room is he in?”

“The one next to yours.” She pulled a key from the drawer with a dangly blue tassel.

“Come on, Butch.” Jamie grabbed Butch’s Louis Vuitton luggage. “Up the stairs with you.”

“Mr. Mahay?”

Butch paused with his foot on the bottom stair. “Yes, dear heart.”

“Where’d you come up with the name Sarge for your dog?”

A huge smile split the man’s face. “He’s named after my favorite movie character.”

\* \* \*

“Stop shoving me.” Butch glared at his friend. He’d never tried, but he bet he could kick the man’s ass if he needed to. Yeah, him and Governor Arnold. “Mind telling me what that was all about?”

“Shh.” Jamie shoved Butch through the bedroom door.

Butch walked in a few feet turned and narrowed his gaze. He tapped his toe as he waited for Jamie to set his luggage on the floor then close the door. He’d seen his friend act weird before but this took the cake. “Are you researching a role or something?”

“Shh.” Jamie peeked out the door then shut it again silently.

“Jamie, I’m warning you...” Butch backed away, turned and looked at the room. His breath stalled in his lungs. Had he died and gone to Laura Ashley heaven? “This is wonderful.” He rushed to the bed and ran his fingers down the damask cover. “I haven’t seen this vintage decor in years. The china blue pattern makes the cherry of the poster bed just pop. Look at that!

“And those windows. They brighten up the entire room. This girl has a good eye for detail.” Butch glanced back at his friend. Jamie lounged against the small desk with one hand on his hip and the other rubbing through his hair. “And so do I. You have a crush on her.”

“A crush?” Jamie snorted and stood up straight. “Must we revisit junior high again today?”

“You do.” Butch set Sarge on the bed. Then proceeded to hop up and down and clap his hands. “Hallelujah, the boy has finally found a hottie.”

Jamie frowned. “Would you stop?” Then his face changed. The turned down crease of his mouth evened out. His eyes widened. His stance loosened. “She is a hottie, isn’t she?”

"I love it!" Butch thought it was about damn time some woman came along and hooked Jamie by the nose. "But what's with all the lab-cloak and dagger?"

Jamie rolled his eyes. "No one seemed to recognize me and I'm not here under my stage name, so I wasn't deliberately lying. And you can't really even call it lying, it is my name, you know." He glared at Butch as if to invite him to challenge that, which he didn't.

"Well, one woman did know who I am, but when I offered her up my agent's card, she promised not to tell. So we'll see." He shrugged. "But back to Loreenna. When she asked me what I did, without thinking, I said I was a vet."

"Right, 'Dog Days'." Butch waved his hand in impatience. *And people have the nerve to say I take forever to get to the point.* "Why not come clean then?"

"Do you remember 'Dusk over Des Moines'."

Butch did a mental headshake. They were going to play trivia buff? "Yeah, that first movie you did. So?"

"Her father is Phillip Beauchamp, the lead. Apparently, he ran out on her as a child, although I can't see him doing that." Jamie's gaze lost focus.

What the hell was up with his friend? "Yoo-hoo." Butch snapped his fingers in front of Jamie's face. "And?"

"She hates actors. Compared us to the IRS auditor she had a few years back.

"Ouch." Butch agreed about the auditor. But actors...?

"Yeah. So I'm supposed to tell her I lied *and* I'm an actor?" Jamie shook his head. "I don't think so."

"Hmm, I see your dilemma." Butch paced the floor. What was Jamie to do? *The poor man barely leaves California and look at the trouble he's gotten himself...* He stopped short. "Wait a minute. What the hell are you doing here? In Texas of all places? I thought you told Stephanie you were going to some exclusive spa in the French Riviera."

Jamie looked away. "I needed some time alone." His shoulders rose and fell in a weak shrug. "When you canceled, I thought this would be the perfect place.

"To hide?"

"I'm not hiding, just keeping a low profile." Jamie narrowed his eyes at his friend. "Plus, who would look for J. Hamilton, action hero extraordinaire, in a place like this?"

"You have me there." Butch tapped his finger to his chin. "I can't believe no one else recognizes you." Jamie opened his mouth, but Butch stopped. "Other than that one woman. I guess with the card to super agent she might be controllable. Ambition, such an ugly trait."

Jamie laughed at his friend. "Yeah. Besides, the only other couple here is your parents' age." Jamie motioned around the room. "And Lorena doesn't believe in televisions as you can see. Another legacy left by her father."

Butch gasped. "No TV?" He hurried around the room. He checked in the armoire and the closet. He even checked under the bed. "This will never do. Blanche was about to tell Hunter that she was carrying his twins. How will I know if he throws her off the ranch or not?"

Jamie picked up Sarge and chuckled. "I think you'll live for a few days without Stud Muffin Ranch."

"Says you." Butch grabbed Jamie by the sleeve and turned him toward the door. "Out. Out. I need some time to collect myself." He waved vaguely toward the door. "Please see yourself out." He wrung his hands. "Who ever heard of no TV?"

Sarge jumped down to the comforter and Jamie walked to the door. "Dinner is at six-thirty. Don't be late." At the door, he paused. "Oh, and Butch..."

He threw his arms up in the air. "What now?"

"Promise you won't tell anyone who I am."

Butch shot his friend a wan smile.

"Butch."

“Oh all right. I promise not to reveal *People’s* sexiest bachelor two years running is staying here.”

Jamie smiled. “Thanks. I knew I could count on you.”

“Mmm-hmm.”

When Jamie shut the door, Butch pulled his cell from his pocket and hit three on the speed dial. “Stephanie, you will not believe who I found in the dusty hills of Texas.”

The woman laughed. “You’re kidding?”

“Nope. You better hop the first plane and get down here. The directions are in my desk at the house.” Butch peered at the closed door and lowered his voice. “And can you bring my portable TV with you?”

## Chapter Seven

Lorennna avoided Jamie.

Not difficult with one phone call after another with the florist, the seamstress and various vendors for her mother's wedding. By the time the phone stopped ringing, she was exhausted. So during the late afternoon, when the guests left for their various activities, she took the time to lounge in the privacy of her room with her leg propped up on several pillows. She'd asked Ashley to stay out front in case anyone wanted anything. She, herself, needed the time to mend her ankle as well as her sense of wellbeing.

How in the hell had she gotten into a lip lock with one of her guests?

Never in the span of the four years she'd been running the inn had she ever kissed a guest. Not on the cheek, not on the lips and, heaven knew, not a tongue-tousling, spit-swapping kiss. Oh, but what a kiss. Her lips still tingled with his touch.

She had enjoyed it far too much than to be able to stop herself from going much farther if the chance presented itself. So she couldn't let it happen again. But she did have to admit she was attracted to him. All that sinewy muscle and tanned skin, hard and rigid under her hands. That marvelous, masterful mouth could do wonders for a sex-starved body. Her mind raced over the possibilities of Jamie Crawford as a lover.

"Whoa, did the temperature just go up?" She glanced around the bed and grabbed a magazine to fan herself.

Then she wondered what could happen if she let nature take its course. She did have a fail-safe exit. He left at the end of the week to go home to California and tend to his animal practice. The notion bothered

her as much as the awkwardness that might come if they did explore their attraction only to discover it wasn't worth the effort. But...the more she thought about it, the more she wanted to get to know Jamie Crawford.

Then she worried again, what if the desire was one-sided? But that kiss...

A yawn stole through her. She stretched her arms over her head and closed her eyes. "You think too much, Buttercup."

She dozed with a smile on her lips and Jamie on her mind.

A sharp rap at the door woke her with a start. "Yeah?"

"Lorennna, I need to talk to you. Can I come in?" Ashley asked through the closed door.

Lorennna pushed herself up with her elbows. Ran her fingers through her disheveled hair. "Come in."

"You'll never believe what happened." Ashley dropped down on the bed next to Lorennna. "We had three, count them three," she held up her fingers for a visual confirmation, "separate rooms booked within the last half-hour."

"You're kidding me?"

"Nope. Three singles, all women."

How odd to have so many singles booked at one time "When will they be here?"

"Two are coming in the morning, one later in the afternoon." The younger girl's smile widened across her face. "The whole top floor is booked through the weekend."

"That's super." She motioned Ashley up then swung her legs off the side of the bed. "We have to get up there and air it out. This is so great."

Ashley's face lost some of its enthusiasm. "No 'we'. I'll go up there and do it."

"Nonsense. You can't do all that by yourself."

"But your foot. How can you get up three flights of stairs?"



Lorennna ushered the girl out of her room as she hobbled behind her with the use of the cane. “I’ll figure out...” Her gaze landed on the dumbwaiter in the corner of the kitchen. She leaned a hip against the counter and pointed the cane at the little door, three feet off the ground. “I’ll use that.”

Ashley shook her head. “Um, I don’t think it’s such a good idea.”

“Why not? I’ve been dying to ride that thing.” Lorennna limped over to the miniature elevator.

Both women paused as a skittering sound came from the back stairwell followed by an uneven thumping noise.

Sarge, dressed in some kind of multi-colored garment, tore around the corner, through the kitchen and out to the dining room. Hot on his heels, almost literally, Bitsy snapped at his puffball of a tail. Then Butch appeared. His chest rose and fell with heavy breaths. He dropped his hands to his hips clad in a plaid, biker-shorts bodysuit and bent at the waist. “Animals?”

Lorennna pointed over her shoulder to the dining room.

“Thanks,” he all but whispered. His cowboy boots clacked on the hardwood floor as he hurried after the two escaped pets.

Lorennna raised her eyebrows shrugged and burst out into a fit of laughter at the same time as Ashley. “I’ve never...seen...anything like it.” She nearly doubled over as her sides ached.

Ashley fanned her face to dry her tear-slicked cheeks. “Boots and spandex. Not something you wanna see every day on a man that skinny.”

The women laughed more then let their amusement taper up into silent giggles.

Finally, Ashley patted Lorennna on the shoulder. “Well, hop on in then.” She snickered a little more as she lifted the door.

Lorennna sobered and hesitated. “It’s smaller than I thought.”

“You don’t have to...”

“No. I will.” She thought, *what the hell*. She’d been half kidding when she suggested it, but she truly did want to ride in it since she got it

operational again. She'd only used it to lug boxes to the second and third floors. The electrician told her it would hold up to two-hundred pounds so she knew it would easily carry her weight—almost two of her. “What’s an adventure without cramped space from time to time?”

She pulled her knees up to her chest. “This won’t fit.” She lifted the cane. “There was no room for it.”

“I’ll take it.” Ashley held out her hand. When she took it, she nodded to Loreнна. “Ready?”

She took a deep breath and fought a brief wave of claustrophobia then nodded. “Okay, when you shut the door push the button. The blue one is for the third floor. Red, second.”

“Gotcha, boss.” Ashley slid the door closed. “See you up top,” she called.

The lift moved slowly. Only once did Loreнна wonder what would happen if it got stuck halfway between floors. But she couldn’t let her mind go there or she’d never make the trip back down.

“Think of something else.”

And as it had since he walked through the front door, her mind flashed to Jamie. She couldn’t help but wonder how he had occupied himself throughout the afternoon. Why would a young, good-looking man come to a bed and breakfast all alone? Was there someone at home pining away for him?

As soon as the dumbwaiter stopped, her mind switched to business.

“Here ya go.” Ashley held out the wooden cane to her once the door opened.

“Thanks.” She slid out of the contraption and scanned the common sitting room it opened to. “I think this is okay. But we definitely need to spruce up the bedrooms. “You take the Brown Room and I’ll take the Purple Room.”

Ashley saluted Loreнна with a playful twist of her fingers to her forehead.

Loreнна entered the color-coordinated suite. She remembered the ribbing she'd gotten from her family when she color-coded the different rooms. She had to have a way to tell them apart in her registry. She'd been inspired when she walked into the fabric store and found the tassels in a variety of colors.

After she opened the door to the shared patio, the breeze wiped away the closed in feel. She hadn't had a guest up there in over four months. She worried more than once that she would not make ends meet by the end of the year. But with this sudden influx of guests, she'd do just fine. Obviously, word of mouth finally passed her little inn to the right people.

Three more guests. She couldn't wait.

\* \* \*

"There you are." Jamie found Butch on the back-porch swing. Sarge, wearing a straw cowboy hat and purple bandanna, sat in his lap. "Has everyone been avoiding me today?"

"Has your new little girlfriend been playing the coy admirer?"

Before he could answer, Butch stiffened and held Sarge to his chest.

"You beat it, demon beast."

Jamie blinked and took a step back. "What?"

"That cat." He pointed his sterling silver laden hand at Bitsy doing a belly crawl across the other end of the porch. "She terrorized my poor baby this afternoon. Chased him all over the house before I could catch them. Ruined his Rio de Janeiro outfit. I have to sew on three pom-poms that got ripped off."

"Bitsy's harmless."

Butch snorted. "And do you think that girlfriend of yours lifted a finger?" He shook his head. "Her and her little helper just stood there and laughed. Sarge could have been scarred."

Jamie rolled his eyes. "She's not my girlfriend."

“But despite her demon pet,” his friend ignored him and kept talking, “I like her. She’s got a wonderful homey quality. And not in a bad way. This must be a huge change from the starlets of Holly-weird.” Butch tugged on a loose strand of blue hair hanging over his left eye. He must have caught the glint of ire in Jamie’s eyes because he hastily added, “I’m just teasing. And you know it.”

Jamie took up the other end of the swing, his long legs stretched to the edge of the porch. “You never did tell me. Why did you come down here?”

Butch’s smile faded and he bowed his head. “I didn’t want to sit around my apartment and miss Lee.”

Butch and Lee shared an apartment—actually a small guesthouse—on the back of Jamie’s five-acre ranch in Palmdale, California. His friend moved in just after he had bought the ranch six years earlier. There had been endless press about Jamie’s vanity in the Hollywood Ledger when they learned his friend, and more importantly in their minds, his *stylist* moved in. Jamie ignored the press while Butch used it to drum up business.

“What happened exactly? You never did say.”

“Lee decided we weren’t compatible any more. I’m ‘too Hollywood’. Whatever the hell that means.” Butch cocked his head and looked at his friend. “I booked this inn just so we could get away from it all, but...I guess I waited too long.”

“Butch...”

“No, don’t say it.” He shifted the dog to the seat between them. “It’s my own damn fault for not trying harder.”

Jamie raised an eyebrow and studied his friend. “What would you have done differently?”

“I don’t know.” Butch shrugged.

Jamie patted his shoulder and stood. “Don’t worry. It will work itself out somehow.”

Butch shrugged again as Jamie headed back into the house.

In his room, Jamie looked for the techno-thriller he bought at the airport. He needed to unwind, still tense from the brief kiss with Lorennna earlier in the day. He knew he should apologize, though he really wanted to thank her for the glorious lip-lock, but he hadn't seen her since Butch arrived.

He relaxed in the fat chair in the corner of his room. He was halfway through the first chapter when he heard a loud thud from the room above.

"What the..." He paused to listen for a moment, wondering if he made a mistake. Lorennna said the entire floor was empty. But a noise resounded again, so he turned down the page he was on and set the book on the floor. Once in the hall, he took the stairs to the second landing two at a time. With trained ease, he reached behind him to his waistband. When his hand lit on nothing more than jeans and jockeys, he remembered this wasn't a movie shoot. He wasn't, nor had he ever been, a real police officer.

He was just Jamie Crawford, guest.

But that didn't stop him from investigating when he heard yet another noise from one of the bedrooms. He crept along the wall to keep out of sight of the open door. With his hands fisted in front of him, he took a deep breath and counted.

"...eight, nine, ten." Jamie jumped through the open door. "Hold it right there."

"Aaaaa," a woman yelped. In the far corner, a large armoire door stood open and blocked her from view. The suite, decorated much like his own, but with purple accents, appeared to have no bathroom or any other way out. There was an open patio door and several shut windows but they were on the third floor, and it would be more than foolish for the intruder to jump.

Jamie lowered his voice to a growl. "Put your hands in the air."

Two small hands appeared over the top of the armoire door—but just barely.

"Now back up slowly."

The hands lowered.

Jamie frowned. "I said put your hands up."

The fingertips reappeared.

"Now back up."

"I-I can't." The voice shook. "Not without my cane."

"Lorennna?"

The hands disappeared and a familiar face peeked around the corner.  
"Jamie?"

"What the hell are you doing up here?"

"I had to straighten up for the guests who will be here tomorrow." She limped backwards with the aid of her cane then shut the armoire. "What are you doing up here?"

"I heard all sorts of banging around. I thought it was a prowler."

"And you came up to investigate." A smile split her face. "That's so sweet."

"Sweet?" Jamie's spine stiffened. "*Sweet?*" He shook his head and waved off her words. "Uh-uh. Nope. I am not sweet. Brave, yes. Valiant, maybe. But definitely not sweet."

"What's going on?" Ashley rushed in, cheeks pink and a bundle of linen in her arms.

"Our resident hero was trying to save us from prowlers."

Ashley smiled. "Isn't that sweet?"

Lorennna hobbled over to Jamie and gripped his forearm. "Not sweet." Her face pulled down in a mock frown. "He's strong and brave and fearless, but not sweet. I'll not have you refer to the man in such a petulant tone. Off with you, servant girl, and tidy the Orange Room."

"Aye, your ladyship." Ashley curtsied and backed out of the doorway in a bow. Out in the hall, her laughter echoed.

"I apologize, sir." She tried a curtsy but she looked like she would lose balance any moment. "I will make sure the girl receives a sound thrashing at the end of the day for the hideous thing she said to you."

Jamie laughed and settled his arm around her waist to steady her. "Careful there, Lady Loreнна, or I will have to rescue you from yourself."

For a moment, the pair stared at one another. Jamie realized he could stare at Loreнна forever and not get tired of the little navy flecks which spotted her ice blue eyes, which didn't blink, but looked back into his. Then she squinted and moisture hung in the corners of her eyes. When he would have asked her what was wrong, she pulled away from him and sneezed. And sneezed.

"You okay?" He stepped closer to her.

Loreнна waved him off and continued to sneeze in rapid succession until he wondered how she didn't pass out.

"Loreнна, do you need me to go get someone for you?"

Her head moved from side to side. He found a box of tissues on the desk and handed it to her. She pulled out a handful when she finally stopped.

"Does that happen often?"

She patted the corner of her eyes. "Only when I let it get too dusty up here." She blew her nose. "I need to air out the rooms."

Jamie glanced around at the half-dozen windows. "Let me open those for you." Jamie fumbled with the first lock for a moment.

"You have to be careful for the..."

"I got it." He slid the metal hook around. Then shoved the window and got whacked on the head. "What in the world?"

"The curtain falls off if you push the window up too high."

He chuckled. "I guess I should have listened to you, huh?"

At the next window, he slid it open without incident. Same with the third and forth. On the fifth, he slid the lock free and was raising it when he heard Loreнна shout, "Oh be careful. The pot."

"What pot?" His elbow clunked something then a moment later he heard glass break outside. He stuck his head over the sill and saw a bunch of flowers next to a busted pot. "Oh. Sorry. I'll pay for that."

“It’s okay. It was a cheap thing I picked up at a garage sale.” She limped across the room. “But I think I’ll do this last one myself.”

Jamie could feel his cheeks heat up. He ran his hand up his neck then over his forehead. Damn, he was blushing. He hadn’t stopped since he’d arrive in Texas. When was the last time he’d done that, though? He thought back and couldn’t remember ever blushing. Maybe when he was younger but not since he’d been acting.

Still confused and dismayed by his heated cheeks, he walked over to the wicker chair in the corner and plopped down. A loud creaking noise disturbed the silence. Then before he could figure out what it was, his ass hit the floor.

“Jamie!” Loreнна turned quickly and had to right herself with the cane. Her eyes crinkled at the corners and she slapped her hand over her mouth and nose. That adorable unladylike snort escaped between her fingers. “Are you okay?” she mumbled under her hand.

“They don’t build them like the used to.” He struggled into a sitting position and then to his feet.

Loreнна lowered her hand and cocked her head to the side. “I have half a mind to charge you for that. But then you may want to charge me for the afternoon entertainment.”

“Yuck it up, inn keeper.” Jamie winked at her as he dusted off his jeans even though the room had little to no grime. “What would you like me to do with this kindling?”



## Chapter Eight

Jamie dumped the broken chair in the trash heap out behind the gazebo and returned to the inn. He could hear a deep male voice followed by Lorennna's laughter as he walked into the library off to the side of the registration area. His gut tightened with a strange mixture of desire and jealousy. He wanted more than anything to be the one to make her laugh that way.

His step faltered. The new emotion rocked him to the core.

He'd been with many women before, had umpteen girlfriends and associates, but never had he been jealous to hear a woman laugh with someone else. Why now? Why Lorennna? He didn't know but the strange possessiveness spurred him forward, his steps faster.

The knot lessened a tad when he found Luther with Lorennna. But it still didn't explain the sudden obsession which overtook him for a moment.

"Whatcha got there?"

Lorennna, with a wide smile on her face, turned to Jamie. His gut tightened back to full twist and he had to swallow the lump which formed in his throat.

"Luther brought me a pair of crutches." She waved her hand toward her friend.

Jamie looked at the wooden device. His brows scrunched together. "It's a...a little large."

The wooden crutches towered Lorennna by at least an inch. She peered at him between the shoulder rest and the handhold. Laughter softened her face. "Uh, yeah."

"I knew she was little but..." Luther rubbed a hand over his bald head. "Peewee was the only one who ever used crutches."

"Peewee?"

"Luther's youngest." She leaned toward Jamie and cupped her hand to her mouth. "He's only seventeen," she said in a mock whisper, "but he's already two inches taller than his dad."

Jamie tilted his head back and looked up at the man next to him. "You're shitting me? There's one taller."

Luther's eyes narrowed and Jamie took a step back.

"Um," Jamie cleared his throat, "no disrespect."

Lorennna giggled. "Luther's the shortest one of the bunch."

Jamie crossed his arms over his chest and leaned against the bookcase. "Oh, now I know you're sh...joking."

"Nope." Lorennna picked a picture up from the table next to her and held it out to.

Jamie studied the photo of Lorennna, her mother, Luther and three very tall boys. If they weren't all dressed in khaki shorts and cartoon shirts from Disney World, he'd swear the picture was straight from *Lord of the Rings* with hobbits and elves. "Your mom was married to his brother?"

Lorennna shrugged. "Opposites attract, I guess."

Luther started to say something but the cell phone on his belt chirped. "Excuse me a minute." He unclipped the phone as he walked into the next room.

Lorennna shifted on her good foot and leaned on the five and a half foot crutch.

Jamie pushed away from the wall. "Why don't you sit down?" He took her by the elbow and helped ease her down on to the small sofa. He took the over-large stilt and leaned it against the wall beside them then lifted her foot to stuff a pillow under her still swollen ankle.

For the first time he noticed her dainty foot. Dainty was the only word he could think to describe her injured appendage. Toenails painted a

vibrant blue surprised him for some reason. Not that he'd given it any thought. But for some reason seeing the blue he realized he would have suspected her for a more subdued pale pink or another color of equal conservativeness. And why he noticed now and not in the shower earlier that day...he wasn't sure.

As he sat beside her, his hand, of its own volition he would swear, rubbed a small circuitous path over the top of her foot, careful not to put pressure on the puffy skin. When Loreнна closed her eyes and leaned her head on the back of the sofa, Jamie used his other hand to massage her calf.

Jamie tensed when a small moan eked out from her parted lips. "Oh, that feels so good," Loreнна whispered. "My leg...oh...cramping all day. That's so... Oh, right there."

Jamie shifted her foot to his lap and used both hands to massage her tense muscles. His heart pounded heavy in his chest and threatened to burst free when she spoke again in that throaty moan. "That's it. God. Ah, that feels good."

Jamie widened his massage to the length of her lower leg then over her knee. He hesitated at her thigh, stopped at the hem of her khaki shorts. Then stroked back down her leg then up again. When he reached the hem once more, he ventured under the edge, just his fingertips. Loreнна squirmed. At first, Jamie thought she wanted him to quit but she scooted closer.

He grew rock hard in that very moment.

Before he could help himself, he leaned over her. His lips barely touched hers in a compassionate yet chaste kiss. As he tried to pull back, her hand snaked around his neck and she fitted her mouth to his. Her aggressive kiss mirrored Jamie's pent up desire.

He captured her moan, exhaled it within his own. "You're so soft," he murmured against her lips. He trailed his mouth over her jaw and nuzzled her ear. "You smell so good."

Loreнна's breath tickled his neck when she giggled.

He shifted next to her to cradle her in his arms. He was struck again, at how petite she was, and how she fitted so perfectly up against him.

She tunneled her fingers through his hair. A ripple of pure lust stole down his spine, wrapped itself around him and squeezed tighter than he could ever remember.

Forgotten was the massage when his fingers found the elastic band of her panties. He teased the inside of her thigh until his fingers slid under the soft cotton and into a softer mound of silk.

He nipped the smooth column of her neck. The heat of her velvety curls tickled his palm as he dipped between the folds of warm skin. "God. You're so wet." He sank his finger deep into her. She shuddered and convulsed around him as his lips dropped to the "V" of her navy T-shirt.

Lorennna's hands pulled at his shirt until she caressed his back with a sensuous rhythm and her hips undulated at his touch. Then her touch stilled on his back. She arched closer to him. He could tell she was close, so close.

"Oh God," a raspy moan rustled his hair, "oh, oh...Jamie, you have to... Oh, there."

He nipped at her lower lip when she shook in his arms. "Your room or mine?"

"I... Oh God." She shuddered again then fell limp in his arms as her release took her.

"Which?"

"Mine's closer."

Jamie nuzzled her cheek, kissed her temple then withdrew his hand.

She lay against him with her eyes closed. Her chest rose and fell with exhausted breath.

Jamie shifted to lift her when someone cleared their throat.

Lorennna's eyes popped open. Scarlet tinted her cheeks in a nanosecond.

“Luther!” She shot away from Jamie and stood so fast she put too much weight on her bum ankle then all but crumpled to the floor. “Ow, shit.”

Luther crossed the room toward her.

Jamie reached for her. “Let me...”

“No. No, I got it. Thanks.” She didn’t look him in the eye as she levered herself up with the edge of the sofa and put more than an arms length between them. “Did...” She cleared her throat. “Did you need something, Luth?”

“Your foot okay?” His eyes narrowed at her.

“Yeah, just bumped it against the sofa. It’s feeling tons better.”

“You sure?” He volleyed a gaze from her to Jamie and back to her.

Her face lit with an over-bright smile. “Yep, right as rain.”

“Mmm-hmm.” He shoved his hands in his pockets. “I gotta run. I have a meeting with Peewee’s teacher tonight.”

Jamie tried to gage the man’s demeanor. Had he guessed what just happened—and what would have continued to happened had he been a few moments later? Hell, Jamie could barely believe it. He hadn’t let himself get so carried away since... Hell never. Since his hormones kicked in at twelve-years-old he had never let a situation put him in such tenuous control, much less in a public enough area where any one of the other guests could walk in and get an eye-full.

But Luther’s bland expression told Jamie all he needed to know. If Luther did have any idea, Jamie was sure he’d be thrown out of the house faster than a peeping Tom at a nudist colony.

“You sure you’re okay, Buttercup? You look a little flushed.”

“Yep. You scoot before Mrs. Breadley gives you a detention. I swear that woman has a crush on you.”

Luther laughed. “See you later, hon. Bye, Mr. Crawford.”

Jamie raised a hand and waved. He didn’t dare speak yet.

If Jamie wasn’t mistaken Loreнна released a sigh of relief when the front door slammed shut. Then she picked up her cane then crossed the

room and dropped into a wingback chair. She leaned forward with her elbows on her knees and dropped her head into her hands.

He wanted to tell her his offer to go to one or the other's room still stood, but he didn't think she would take him up on it. And to add rejection to the dose of cold water Luther threw on the moment was more than he could bear. "You should prop up your..."

She lifted her head and the grim set to her mouth stopped him. But after a moment, it softened. "I...I should apologize."

Jamie frowned. "For?"

"I don't normally... That is, we shouldn't have..." She ran two shaky hands through her dark curls. "It isn't professional for me...you and I to..."

He raised an eyebrow. "Be attracted to one another?"

"Yes. No." She threw up her hands. "Aw, hell. You know what I mean."

"No, I'm not quite sure I do." He had to fight back a smile.

"I don't normally fool around with the guests."

"I would hope not." Jamie couldn't help the quick laugh that sneaked out. But the daggers her eyes threw made him cross his legs.

"I shouldn't have let myself get so...carried away." She straightened in her chair. "It won't happen again. I can promise you that."

"What won't happen again, Buttercup?"

"Mom." Loreнна rolled her eyes. It went from bad to worse. "What are you doing here? I thought you and Hugh had errands to run all day for the wedding."

"Finished them." Barbara sat next to Jamie on the sofa.

Loreнна marveled at his casual pose. He couldn't possibly be comfortable. His...attraction had pressed up against her hip no more than a couple of minutes ago. He *had* untucked his shirt and draped it down the front of his jeans so it covered any...bulges.

"I can't thank you again for finding my daughter this morning, Mr. Crawford?"

"Please call me Jamie." He shifted a bit and if Loreнна hadn't been watching, she'd have missed his grimace. Then he waved a dismissive hand at Barbara. "It was the least I could do."

"Cute and modest." Barbara cupped his face in her hands.

Loreнна expected him to pull away, but no. The man smiled down at her mother.

His cheeks received a healthy squeeze then Barbara released him and patted her pink, puffed hair. "How are you enjoying your stay?"

His gaze shifted to Loreнна's as he said, "It's better than I could have imagined."

Flustered, Loreнна jumped in to change the conversation. "A friend of his booked a room today."

For some reason the statement sobered him. His smile fell and he sat straighter on the sofa.

"Oh, that's...nice." Barbara frowned.

As if she could read her mother's worried thoughts, Loreнна quickly added, "*Mr. Mahay* is in the Blue Room."

"Wonderful. Wonderful." She smiled and clasped her hands to her breast. Then her frown returned. "Did you two plan the trip together?"

Loreнна snorted. Did her mother think Jamie was gay? And that he...and Butch...? The look of horror on Jamie's face told her he'd come to the same conclusion.

"Uh, no, ma'am." Jamie ran a hand through his spiky hair. "Butch had scheduled a trip here with his...er...ah, significant other." He shrugged. "They're not married but they lived together. I don't know what the current politically correct terminology is these days. But they broke up, so he canceled. I decided to take a vacation, so I booked in his stead. I had no idea he had re-booked or would be down here. I probably wouldn't have..." He cleared his throat and shifted on the sofa. "I was surprised to see him."

Lorennna wondered at his pause. And now that she thought of it, Butch seemed to be just as surprised to see Jamie. Why would he come all this way from home without telling one of his closest friends?

Lorennna frowned. A couple of things didn't add up. But she couldn't quite place her finger on it. Before she had much time to ponder what was off, her mother interrupted her thoughts.

"Thought I'd come help out my Buttercup." Barbara smiled.

"Great." She pushed herself up and grabbed her cane. "Just in time for the dinner preparations."

Jamie jolted to his feet. "I'd like to help."

Lorennna leaned forward. "No, that's not..."

"...We'd love for you to help." Barbara laughed as the women spoke over each other.

"Mom." Lorennna shook her head in a slow sweeping motion. "We can't have a guest help out in the kitchen."

Jamie shrugged his big, broad shoulders. "I don't mind really."

"See, he doesn't mind." Barbara's gaze challenged her daughter.

"But it wouldn't be right." Lorennna steadied herself with the cane. "Besides he paid to be pampered." With her words, another rush of heat flooded her cheeks—and lower.

A huge grin spread across Jamie's face. And she couldn't mistake the carnal gleam in the man's eyes.

But Barbara, oblivious to the make-out session extraordinaire a few minutes before, continued, "So knock a few dollars off his bill." She then tucked her hand through Jamie's crooked arm and escorted him back to the kitchen.

"I'd like to knock..." Lorennna didn't finish. She wasn't sure what she would like. Maybe more time with his lithe hands and magical lips? A wave of desire wound around her. Damn but the man could kiss. Her insides still hummed with the first orgasm she'd had in months.

A mental groan echoed through her head.



How could she have let herself get so carried away? With a guest no less. A spectacular specimen of maleness with the most gorgeous eyes and taut muscles she'd seen since she and her college roommates got together in March and stopped in at the male strip club. And then, most of those men were over-done. But not Jamie. He was perfectly sculptured. Someone who really took care of his body. How she had longed to explore more of that body.

And she almost had. He'd asked her which room. That should have stopped her cold. But not sex-deprived Lorennna. Nope. She all but begged him to carry her off to her bedroom.

A shudder rippled through her. Along with the bone-melting ecstasy from Jamie's tender strokes, there was an underlying lack of completion. She was interrupted before the best part. And she couldn't imagine that Jamie was too terribly satisfied.

"Hurry up, Buttercup. You gonna make Jamie here do all the work?"

Lorennna raised an eyebrow. "Can't have that."

## Chapter Nine

“Thanks.” Jamie took the small broom from Loreнна and scooped the last of the broken dish into the dustpan. “I can’t tell you how sorry I am.”

Loreнна’s floral skirt brushed against his forearm as she moved over to the butcher-block island and leaned against it with her hands on her hips. God, how he wanted to feel the skin underneath the layers of cotton again. He didn’t think he’d be able to stand beside her in the kitchen all night after she changed into that flowing skirt and skimpy top that showed off a peek of her belly when she reached for the platter in the cabinet above the sink. But somehow he’d managed to keep his hormones in check. At least for a little while.

“And my mother wanted me to knock a few bucks off for you helping me. If you break another dish, *I’ll* be broke.” She snorted. “Not unlike the six plates you dropped.”

Jamie pushed off the floor and dumped the broken crockery in the trash. “Honestly, I’m not usually this clumsy.” He rarely even used a stuntman on his films, yet give him a dish in Loreнна’s kitchen and he was Mr. Butterfingers.

“I hope you don’t get fumbled with your patients.” Loreнна grabbed her cane and turned toward the back door. “Poor animals.”

She said it under her breath, but Jamie still heard her. Guilt washed through him. He hated lying to her. Not after all they shared.

During dinner, he sat in the kitchen with her and her mother, since Butch decided to take his dinner alone in his room. He’d had to give abbreviated tales of his life after he moved from New Jersey to California. He knew then he had to tell her the truth, tell her who he really was. He

didn't see how he could lust after the petite innkeeper and not be totally upfront with her. "Lorennna, can I talk to you for a minute?"

She turned back to him and opened her mouth to speak.

"Lorennna, Hugh's here." Barbara pushed through the kitchen door. "I'll see you tomorrow morning, first thing."

"Aw, Mom." Her face scrunched up.

"Don't give me that." Barbara enveloped her daughter in a crushing bear hug despite her own diminutive size. "We missed the fitting this morning when you had your little accident. It will be virtually painless. I promise." She kissed Lorennna's cheek. "Go get some rest, you look at little peaked tonight."

Lorennna nodded and cast a quick glance in his direction.

"Good night, Jamie. Your help tonight was...more than I could have anticipated." She tossed a quick wink then headed back out the door.

"About that talk." He needed to tell her before he lost his nerve.

"Jamie, there you are. I have been looking everywhere for you."

He scrubbed his hand through his hair. "What's the matter, Butch?"

"Lee just called." Butch held his cell out in front of him.

"And?" Jamie leaned closer to Butch.

Butch stepped closer to Jamie. "Lee called *me*. On the phone."

"And wanted what?"

"I don't know. I didn't answer. I saw the name pop up on the caller ID and freaked." He hugged the phone to his chest. "Should I have answered it?"

"That would be one way to find out what Lee wanted."

"Who's Lee?"

The two men straightened. Jamie almost forgot she was standing there. "Lee Nichols is Butch's..."

"Friend. We're just friends. That's the way Lee wants it." Butch slid the phone in his pocket.

“Gotcha.” She waved at Jamie and headed for her bedroom door. “I’ll see you guys later.”

Jamie wanted to stop her but with Butch there, he didn’t know if she’d stay. Plus he didn’t want to have this conversation under his friend’s watchful eye.

“Did I interrupt something?” Butch asked when Loreenna’s door shut.

Jamie rocked back on his heels. “Nope.”

“Oh. Because if I did, I can go right back out that door and you can go get her and...continue.”

“Nope.” Jamie ran his hands through his hair again. “Is there a message? On the phone?”

“Um. I didn’t check.” Butch pulled the cell from his red velvet jeans and shoved it at Jamie. “I can’t look. You check.”

Jamie shook his head but smiled at his friend. He punched in the memory button. Then he punched the code to Butch’s voice mail. “Why do I know your code?” He laughed, but sobered when he heard Lee’s voice. “I’m sorry we fought.” Jamie repeated the words aloud. “I didn’t mean any of it. I would never wish for you to lose your d...” Butch grabbed the phone from Jamie.

“I’ll just listen to this in private.” Butch patted Jamie’s cheek. And turned to go, but stopped, his eyes widened. “Oooh, cookies.” He helped himself to three walnut-chocolate chips cookies then pushed through the swinging door into the dining room.

Hands on hips, Jamie watched his friend leave and couldn’t help but laugh. That man and his love life.

“Speaking of love lives.” Jamie needed to have a talk with Loreenna. He stood in front of Loreenna’s door and practiced what he might say.

“You wanna talk about coincidence...?”

“Funny thing about actors...”

“I actually did work with animals, but...”

“I have a confession...” The most honest approach would be best. He swallowed hard then raised his hand and knocked on her door.

No answer.

“Lorennna?” He knocked again. “It’s Jamie. Can we talk?” He put his ear to the door and wondered if she was ignoring him, but he didn’t hear any sound come from the other side.

“She must be sound asleep.” Jamie pushed away from the door.

She did have a long, harrowing day. He didn’t think he’d ever gone through as much in one day as she had. And he’d battled guerillas, fought snakes, and then disarmed a bomb in his third Sergeant Cameron movie.

He flattened his palm on the door. “I’ll see you in the morning.”

\* \* \*

Lorennna let the breeze flow over her and cool her heated skin. She was glad for the interruption with Jamie.

“I must have lost my mind to want to ask Jamie back to my room.”

But she’d watched him strut around her kitchen—even while he broke plate after plate—which turned her on more than if he’d been shirtless and oiled up and flexed his corded muscles.

And that apron. She snorted.

When her mother tied her pink, ruffled apron around Jamie’s waist, she thought the man might change his mind and bolt. Instead, he took the garment in stride and wore it like a true champ. Her only regret was that the ridiculously long ties in the back once in a bow covered up his remarkable tush. And she’d had no camera to capture that picture of perfection.

But then he’d ask to talk to her. And she could see the regret in his eyes. She didn’t want to hear whatever he had to say. She knew. He wanted to tell her it was a mistake this evening on the sofa. He wanted to apologize to her. And that might be more than she could bear.

With a shake of her head, she grabbed her cane and crossed the wooden floor of the gazebo. She’d left the lantern on the back porch, the

full moon enough to light the path. But as she stepped forward and smashed into a warm chest, she wished she'd had some warning. More than a vague shadow. Then a warm scent tangled on the late-night breeze and immediately put her at ease. "Jamie. What are you doing out here?"

He cleared his throat and removed his hand from her arms where he helped steady her. "Wanted to clear my head."

"Tonight's a nice night to do that. If you'll excuse me, I'll give you some privacy." She tried to push past him but he caught her arm again.

"Why don't you stay with me for a while?"

"Okay." She resumed her spot against the far rail. Jamie stopped a few feet away. Not close enough to touch, she noted. He must regret earlier more than she thought.

Why disappointment spread through, she didn't know. Wasn't she thinking the same thing? Hadn't she wanted to tell him what a mistake it was for the two of them to get involved?

*Don't go there*, she told herself. If he didn't bring it up, it was better left unsaid. So instead she asked, "Did Butch get everything worked out Lee?"

"I don't know. Those two break up and get back together all the time." The moonlight glinted off his eyes as he turned to face her.

Lorena swallowed. Damn, but the man was gorgeous. Focus, she told herself. "Butch told me he's a 'stylist extraordinaire'." She did the triple snap and waved her arm like Butch showed her. "What does Lee do?"

Jamie chuckled. "Accountant."

"Oh. Hmm. I would have expected something a tad more, ah..."

"Flashy?" His eyebrow raised, illuminated in the moonlight. "Too conservative?"

She shrugged. "Well, yeah."

"Lee's not at all what you would expect. Trust me."

She thought she could hear humor in his voice. But she wasn't sure why.

"Butch and Lee are both so temperamental." He crossed his arms over his chest. "One or the other is offended while the offender has to turn back-flips with apologies. Too many games if you ask me."

"Yeah, games can get tedious." Hell, she didn't want the subject to get back around to earlier between them but it seemed to have.

He pushed away from the rail and shifted from foot to foot then dropped his hands to his sides. "Lorenna, I need to tell you something."

She shifted her gaze away, couldn't look at him any more. "I already know what you're going to say."

"You do? How'd you...?"

"It wasn't that hard to figure out." She rubbed her forehead. "And I don't blame you."

"You don't?"

"It was my fault. I didn't really give you a chance to stop."

"Lorenna, I..."

"Please don't. I don't think I could take it. Anyway, I should apologize to you. Like I said earlier, I don't make a habit of jumping my guests. I'm sorry I put you in such an awkward position."

Jamie stepped closer to her. His fingers brushed her cheek. "It wasn't awkward at all. In fact..." He gripped her chin and turned her face to him. "I was rather fond of that position." His mouth descended on hers.

Lorenna fought to keep coherent thought but the losing battle ended when his tongue pushed through her lips and invaded her mouth in a sweet dance. Her cane landed with a thud on the wooden planks as Jamie pressed his body up against hers.

Her arms encircled his neck to pull him closer. The soft hairs at the nape of his neck teased her fingers. She had to feel more. She plunged her fingers through the mess of hair on his head.

"I've wanted to do this all day," she moaned into his mouth.

“Me too.” Jamie’s hands circled her waist, hoisted her up on top of the railing. Then he wedged himself between her thighs. His hands slid beneath the edge of her skirt, caressed her bare skin. She shuddered at the onslaught of sensations from his mere touch.

But this wasn’t right. “Shouldn’t do this.” She had some objection, but what was it? She couldn’t remember.

“Yes. Definitely should.” His lips skimmed her chin then the column of her neck. “God, you’re so soft.” His mouth worked down her breast, over her thin shirt.

She arched her back to him. Gripped his shoulders.

“I want you, Lorennna.” He teased her nipples through the layers of clothing. “Mmm. So bad.” His hands caressed her legs and slid her skirt higher and higher.

“Jamie” Lorennna fought to get breath in her lungs. “We should... Someone might see us.”

He lifted his head and looked around. A seductive, wicked smile curved his mouth. “It’s dark. No one will see.”

A thrill shot through her. While she’d had an active sex life with whatever current boyfriend she’d had, she’d never been quite adventurous enough to do it outside. Okay, there was the one time in college, but they were on a boat out in the middle of Lake Travis with not a soul around.

But on a full-moon Tuesday, anyone from the inn could walk up on them and get an eyeful.

Before she could object any further, though, his hand slipped under the elastic of her panties. She moaned as he slid one finger then two inside her. She contracted instantly around him. “Aw, Jamie.”

“Shh, someone might hear you,” he whispered in her ear, then took a nibble of her lobe.

She worked her hands down his back and tried to pull the shirt from his waistband, but couldn’t seem to get around her fumbling fingers. “Take off your shirt. I need to feel you.”



He leaned away from her and, with one hand, ripped the shirt from his pants then over his head. Moonlight cast shadows over his chiseled chest. A sprinkling of blond hair covered perfect pecs and trailed down into his Levis.

Her lips skimmed his collarbone and across his shoulder. He shuddered as her tongue circled his flat nipple. But as she laved the other, her concentration waned as she neared climax. She bit his shoulder to keep from screaming out.

*Not yet.*

She wasn't ready. She didn't want to come yet. She grabbed for his belt, "Wait. I want...you in me this time." She popped the button of his jeans then dragged the zipper down. Her hand dove into the cotton briefs and circled him, while the other gripped his wrist to slow him down. "Please." She stroked him. "I need you. Now."

Jamie stepped back from her, their union broke. But only long enough for him to pull a condom from his jeans pocket, shove his pants and briefs down and sheath himself.

His hands moved back under her skirt and lifted the hem to her waist. He pulled her bottom to the edge of the railing. "We don't need these." She heard a rip and before she realized it, he'd torn her favorite pair of undies then tossed them over his shoulder.

"Hey," she half-protested, energized by the cool air which swept across her swollen sex.

"I'll buy you another pair." He slid into her with a gentle ease as he gripped her hips. "Oh, Buttercup." He didn't move for the longest time. "So good," he said then found her mouth. His fingers dug into her hips and butt as he pumped into her, slow at first. Then his rhythm increased and a wave of sensation washed over her.

"Jamie." She threw her head back and she clutched his shoulders. "So close." Climax weakened her limbs and a tremor rocketed through her. A moment later Jamie tensed, thrust twice more then lay limp against her.

Loreнна couldn't move, couldn't think. Granted it had been a while since her last sexual experience but...had it ever been like that before?

Jamie's breath ruffled the hair at her temple. "Oh. Wow," he said, echoing her thoughts.

"Yeah." Her fingers trailed down his sweat slicked back and cupped his superb naked ass. "'Wow' works for me."

His lips trailed her neck again. "Let's go back inside and do this right." His hands gentled on her hips.

A chuckle rumbled in her chest. "Did you do it wrong the first time?"

"Woman. You shouldn't tease me."

"Why's that?" She smiled against his throat.

"'Cause I'm likely to show you exactly how right it can be."

"Promises, promises."

Jamie pulled away from her. "Do you have a tissue or something?"

"It just so happens..." She pulled one from her skirt pocket and handed it to Jamie. He turned and fumbled in the dark to remove the condom and wad it in the tissue. He righted his pants, put his shirt back on. "Let's go before you get splinters in that pretty little backside of yours." He leaned into her for a long sensuous kiss.

Loreнна broke free then shifted from side to side. "Too late I think."

Jamie waggled his eyebrows. "You want me to kiss it and make it all better?" Hands on her waist, he helped her off the railing then handed her the cane.

A thought niggled in the back of Loreнна's mind. She did a mental debate whether she should ask and her over-anxious mouth won over her brain. "Do you often carry condoms in your pocket?"

"Yeah. Ever since I was in high school and had a near disaster." They left the gazebo and he draped his arm over her shoulders.

"Even on vacation?" Unease roiled in the pit of her stomach. She wasn't a prude, but she also didn't have indiscriminate sex, despite what just occurred between her and Jamie. "Even when you're traveling alone?"

"I might not have been a Boy Scout," he chuckled, "but I am always prepared."

His words sobered her. Was she one of many women he met and wham bam and on to the next adventure, ma'am? Oh God, she didn't want to be a notch in someone's belt once. Much less for an encore performance.

He helped her up the stairs of the back porch. When she reached the door, Jamie wrapped his arms around her waist and nuzzled her ear. It was all she could do not to shake under his touch, though now from disgust, disgust at herself for falling for age-old, plain and simple lust. But then what did she expect? For all he knew she really did boff all her single male guests. And if she was that undiscerning, some of the married ones. It wasn't his fault she had a major lapse in judgment—for the second time that day.

Besides, he never asked for anything more than what he got. Why she was getting all bent out of shape now, she didn't know.

Still, when he leaned down to kiss her Loreenna shied away. "Jamie," she pushed at his hands, "I think we should call it a night. I have a long day tomorrow."

His arms tightened. "Is something wrong?"

"No." She cleared her throat and shook her head. But she couldn't raise her head and look up at him. She was afraid to see the look on his face. If his expression held nothing but impulsive sex, she didn't think she could take it. And what more could it hold? Which, for some reason, disappointed her. And that frightened her more than her own wanton behavior. She faked a yawn. "Just tired."

His hold loosened and then left her completely. She immediately missed the warmth of him against her.

What did one say after such great sex? "It's been real fun." No. Not quite right, however true. "Thank you, come again?" Ew. She did a mental head shake. Absolutely not.

She opted for stander politeness. “I’ll see you in the morning.” She opened the door and stepped through without a backwards glance. “Good night, Jamie.”

## Chapter Ten

Why did it sound like she was saying good-bye? And what the hell just happened? Jamie took the stairs two at a time up to his room. He washed up in the bathroom then paced the floor around the huge green suite.

“What happened?” He ran a hand through his hair. “Was I too rough?”

No, he didn’t think so, despite his inspired panty removal. Loreнна had all but melted in his arms from the beginning. She’d even teased him afterwards, but then as they reached the house she’d done an about-face. Something had changed. But what?

Most important, why did he care?

Back in the real world, if a woman treated him like this, he’d have said to hell with her and moved on to the next. Not that he was a serial romancer. Quite the contrary. He was probably one of the more discriminating men in Hollywood. He didn’t check off the dates in a Babes-of-the-Month calendar like some of his friends did. Even some of the women were fickle with their beefcake, changing men to match their new outfit or hairstyle.

Jamie, he liked women yes, but he didn’t use them as a toy, a new adventure to conquer, then move on to the next.

And he’d always been faithful to whichever woman he’d been with. Granted, he might not stay in any relationship for long, but he was committed while in it. He’d never had that zing, that heart-stopping feeling he saw in Butch’s parents faces every time they looked at one another. Or his own parents before they died. He wanted what they had.

He remembered the way his father would smile every time his mother walked into a room. Or the way his mother giggled when his father whispered into her ear. The two of them had been inseparable in life and, he sighed, unfortunately in death as well.

Jamie toed off his shoes and laid down on top of the comforter. With his hands propped behind his head, he stared at the ceiling.

“Damn.” He hefted another sigh. He just realized he’d never gotten a chance to tell her the truth. At first, when she said she knew what he needed to say, he wanted to kick himself for her finding out. But then she’d assumed he hadn’t wanted her, that he regretted what had happened between them earlier, which couldn’t have been further from the truth.

Then he did have her. He couldn’t remember ever getting swept away with such an intensity he had to take a woman there and then.

He wanted her still. His zipper dug into him and he shifted until he could ease the pressure some. But there was only one thing that could relieve the pressure and she pushed him away before he could have her again.

He closed his eyes. “What am I gonna do?”

A sudden thud on his bedroom door shot his eyes open. He crawled from the bed and opened the door to find a more-than-chipper Butch all smiles. But the man’s smile faded as he gave his friend a once over. His nose scrunched up and he took a step back. “Did you sleep in your clothes?”

“Sleep?” He rubbed the stubble across his chin. “What time is it?”

“Seven.”

“A.M.?”

Butch laughed. “Yes, sleepyhead.”

Jamie had to squint to avoid eyestrain as he looked at Butch dressed in a Day-Glo orange T-shirt that read “Cowboys do it with their boots on”, skintight blue jeans and a pair of boots too shiny not to be brand spanking new. “What the hell are you wearing?”

Butch posed. "I picked it up at a little shop at the airport. Do you like?"

"Not particularly."

"Hush up." Butch frowned at Jamie. "Go clean yourself up and meet me for breakfast." With a quick turn on his western footwear, the man was off.

\* \* \*

"How are you this morning?"

Butch patted his mouth with his napkin and smiled up at Loreнна. She was a cutie. "Perfect. The room is wonderful. Did I tell you already?"

She laughed. "You may have mentioned it once or twice."

So, he was a man who liked to express himself. Could he help it if God gave him a gift for gab? "How's the foot this morning?"

"Much better thanks." She did a tentative swirl. "See. No cane."

"You just be careful, you don't want to overdo it. Why don't you sit for a minute?"

Loreнна looked around the room then pulled out the chair next to his. "So," she tucked a wayward curl behind her ear, "you and Jamie have known each other for a long time?"

"Yes, ma'am. Ever since our mamas plucked our pampered pa-tooties in the same playpen."

She dropped her gaze to the tablecloth and plucked at the embroidered flower with short but shiny pink nails. "Does he... I bet he has tons of girlfriends, huh?"

Aw, so the little sprite was interested. "Girlfriend? Not really. It's been months since he's seen anyone seriously, I can't remember the last date he had."

She raised her head. "Oh. Hmm."

Such relief filled her baby-blue eyes that he wondered if things had progressed beyond interest. Then he recalled Jamie in his clothes from the night before.

How very interesting.

“Jamie isn’t really the love-them-and-leave-them type.” Butch took a sip from his coffee. Jamie never let a woman get close, the will-you-marry-me close, so it hadn’t been an issue, so technically it wasn’t a lie.

“His parents were married for forever and were in as much love as the day they met. Did Jamie tell you about them?”

She shook her head.

“Hamilton and Ruth met on a cruise to the Caribbean. Love at first sight, if you can believe that. By the time the boat docked back in Miami, they were madly in love.” He winked at her. “Not bad for a day cruise.”

Her eyes widened and her mouth fell open.

“Kidding, just kidding. It was one of those month long cruises. But the day after it docked, they called down their parents and got married at the justice of peace.”

A smile tilted her lips and her eyes softened. “How romantic.” She twisted the bud vase in the center of the table.

“You never saw such an amazing couple. They were the most dedicated people I have ever met.”

“Were?”

“They died in a car accident about ten years ago.”

“How tragic.”

Butch remembered how devastated Jamie had been. He shut himself away from the world. He swore he’d never give his heart and soul to a woman, so he wouldn’t be hurt. Butch knew a man as passionate as Jamie couldn’t live like that, but all these years he’d stayed true to his word. No woman had ever gotten under his skin, or even come close. Until now.

There was something special about Loreнна. Butch could feel it, too. No wonder she affected Jamie in a way no woman ever had.



And the sadness in her eyes for a couple she'd never met, but she knew Jamie cared deeply about, spoke volumes of her character.

"It was almost blessing, I suppose, when they died together in the car accident. I don't know if one could have lasted long without the other. That's true love for you."

She sat with her face pointed away. Unshed tears hung in the edges of her eyes. Butch knew he shouldn't press his luck, but he didn't want to see Jamie lose a woman this special with a stupid lie. Surely, she wouldn't begrudge Jamie his profession. Not if true affection were there, but until the truth was out and the playing field level no one would ever know.

"Jamie told me a little about your father."

Her shoulders stiffened. Her face whipped around in his direction. Fury blazed in her eyes. "He did?"

Butch had to tread carefully here. "Just because one marriage didn't work out doesn't mean that none will. Look at Jamie's parents."

"No one here's talking about marriage but you. I just asked a simple little question."

*So defensive.*

Her feelings for Jamie must go deeper than he thought if she was this jumpy. And if they did, then she would understand about his being an actor. She couldn't really be so biased to not stay with a man just because he made a living up on the big screen. "I realize that. I'm just making an example, er ah, conversation."

Her little black eyebrow rose slowly up into the fall of her bangs. Fabulous hair she had.

Butch did a mental headshake. *Snap out of it, man, focus.*

"Jamie's a good guy. I can vouch for him." Butch covered her hand with his. "So you have to remember that when I tell you..."

"Morning."

"Jamie. Hi." Butch stood so fast the dishes on the table shook.

Lorennna steadied the table and stood, too.

Jamie thrust his hands on his hips. "Did I interrupt something?"

"No. No, of course not." Butch smiled. "Join us."

Before Jamie could answer, Loreнна stepped away from the table and plastered a wan smile on her face. "I can't stay. I have work to do." She moved farther away. "Enjoy your breakfast."

"What was that all about?" Butch asked after the door to the kitchen finished swinging shut.

"I could ask you the same thing. You two seemed pretty intense with your heads together. You didn't tell her..."

"Now would I do that?"

Jamie's eyebrow mirrored Loreнна's, so much so, it was all Butch could do not to laugh. When it fell back into place, Butch studied his friend. Haggard lines creased his mouth and eyes.

"Did you and she have a midnight rendezvous last night? You're both wound tighter than Ed Asner's girdle." Butch finished the remainder of coffee in his cup. "If you didn't maybe you need to. To loosen up all that tension."

Jamie glared at his friend. "I'm not staying for breakfast. I'll be back in a couple of hours." Then he skedaddled out faster than Loreнна had.

Butch glanced at the empty tables. "Was it something I said?"

\* \* \*

Jamie parked in front of the tiny strip mall in Dusty Springs. He risked quite a bit being out in public. But he was a man on a mission. Baseball cap and sunglasses in place, he headed into the lingerie shop. A made-up woman in a far too tight dress came from behind the counter.

"Can I help you, sir?"

"Just need to look a minute."

"Sure thing. If there is anything I can help you with," she all but purred, "please let me know."

He nodded as he perused the different tabletops covered with silk drawers. Finally, he found what he was looking for and picked out a pair of pink panties to replace the ones he'd obliterated the night before. He started for the counter then thought better. He picked up a blue pair, then red, yellow, green, purple and the shades in between and lastly, a black pair. If he was lucky, he would get Lorennna to model them all for him.

"Find everything you needed?" the platinum-blond asked as he handed her the panties.

"Mmm-hmm."

"You have very nice taste. These are wonderful panties. So soft against the skin."

"Uh, yeah." He'd never dropped so much money on women's lingerie in his life, but it was well worth it.

"Are you sure you have the right size?" She held the panties up.

He'd found the ripped pair still out in the Gazebo this morning so he knew the correct size. As a matter of fact, they were in his pocket, but he wasn't about to admit any of that to this woman. "These are exactly what I need."

"Lucky woman." He thought he heard her say.

She rang up his purchase and told him the total. While he dug in his wallet for the cash the woman tilted her head one way then the other. "Have we met before?"

As a come-on line, it wasn't very original. But the wonder in her voice made him think she might be close to recognizing him.

"Nope, don't think so. I'm just here on vacation."

"You're not staying up at the Motor-Inn are you?"

"Nope."

She dropped the undies into a pink, paper sack. "The Wild Rose?"

"Yes."

"Oh. That's a real nice place." The disappointment in her voice obvious.

She must assume he was there with his girlfriend or wife. Before that though, who the hell did she think he was buying the underwear for? What, he liked to have a stash just in case?

“Still, I’d swear I’ve met you before. Have you been up to the Waterin’ Hole?”

“No.” He tossed a couple of bills on the counter and took the sack from her. “Thanks.”

His stomach growled as he got back in his rental. He decided to stop in at the diner and grab a bite since he’d missed breakfast and he’d just have to come back out here if he wanted lunch.

He found a booth in the back. Just as he lifted the menu, a shadow fell over him.

“Mind if I join you?”

Jamie looked up at Luther and motioned to the empty bench.

Luther slid his enormous body up against the table. “What brings you to town?”

Jamie held the menu up at Luther. “Lunch.”

The large man nodded and continued to stare at Jamie. “Don’t think I don’t know what’s going on here.”

Jamie fought to keep a neutral expression. “Which is?”

“Hi, Luther. Who’s your friend?”

Luther shifted his gaze to the young red-headed waitress. A huge smile turned up his mouth. “Hey, Tobi. This here’s Jamie Crawford.”

“Morning, Mr. Crawford.” She smiled at Jamie then pulled an order pad and pencil from her apron. “What can I get you fellows?”

They both placed their orders and sat in silence for a moment. Luther finally spoke up. “I see the looks going on between you two.” He rubbed a hand across his big bald head. “You’re only here a few days. I don’t want her hurt when you leave.”

“I have no intention on hurting Loreenna.”

“Intentions or no, if you get involved then leave, she’s gonna get hurt.”

Jamie was saved from answering when Tobi brought the food over to the table. The two men ate in silence. When they were finished, Jamie reached for the ticket, but Luther stopped him. "I got this."

Jamie shrugged, decided not to get in a pissing contest with this man, not sure he'd come out ahead.

Outside the diner, Luther popped a straw cowboy hat on his head. "Can you give me a ride up to the inn? I need to pick up Lorennna's car and take it to the mechanics."

"Something wrong with her car?"

Luther eyed him for a moment. "Nothing for you to concern yourself with."

"Sure. Whatever." Jamie popped the door locks with his key fob. "Hop in." Jamie took perverse pleasure that he'd gone with the smaller, more non-descript car from the rental company when Luther had a time folding his hulking mass into the front seat. He thought he heard the man mumble a few choice words but didn't ask, afraid he might laugh and in such a confined space with Luther, he thought it in his best interest to humor the man as much as possible.

"Looks like someone else has arrived." Luther eyed the three matching, flashy sports cars lined up next to Butch's rented Beemer.

"Lorennna has three new guests coming in today."

His hand on the door handle he paused. "She does, huh?"

Jamie cleared his throat. "She mentioned it in passing."

The men stepped from the car and as Jamie rounded the front, Luther threw him a sack. "Don't forget your purchase."

The pink sack from the lingerie shop hit him square in the chest. "Uh, thanks."

A crowd stood around the registration desk when they pushed through the front door. A tall woman in jeans, a cashmere sports coat and thick, dark hair pulled through a baseball cap had her back to him. A slightly shorter blonde twirled her finger in a lock and the third

woman, hair all tucked under a roll hat, shifted from foot to foot. Familiarity swamped him, but he was too afraid to debate the reasons.

Lorennna sat behind the desk. A flush tinted her creamy cheeks as she doled out keys and information on the meal times.

Butch, with Sarge clutched to his florescent chest, blanched when he saw Jamie. "You're back."

Five sets of eyes turned in his direction, Sarge the only one happy to see him, evident by his tail flipping frantically against Butch's arm.

He stifled a moan when he recognized his agent, publicist and assistant. "Ladies? I'm surprised to see you here."

The three women put there hands on their hips and advanced on him.

Stephanie, his agent and friend for the past ten years, stepped right up to him, nose-to-nose in her high-heeled shoes. "I could say the same to you."

"Your harem?" Luther leaned close to his ear and whispered. But by the "he wishes" glare from Stephanie, she caught it, too.

"Friends from back home."

"I hope you don't have any more *friends*—" Lorennna paused at the word and if he wasn't mistaken, he heard a world of hurt in the seven-letter word, "—coming in, I'm out of rooms for the next couple of days." She hobbled from behind the desk and cast him an even grimmer glare than his staff-slash-friends.

"No worries. I don't think anyone else will show up unexpectedly." He tried to bore a hole through Butch's forehead, but his glare only made Sarge wiggle furiously.

"Care to do introductions?" Luther shoved Jamie aside and sidled up to Stephanie.

"Not particularly," he said under his breath. Luther nudged him in the ribs. "Luther McGrew, this is Stephanie Vines, Courtney Poranski and Beth Jones, friends of mine from home." He eyed Stephanie with a warning glare. *Please follow my lead.*

An evil smirk crawled across her red-tinged lips. "Butch raved about this place when he booked his trip and we all couldn't wait to visit, too."

"But you all booked at the last minute." Loreнна tilted her head to the side with an evaluating look.

"Mmm-hmm." Stephanie spared a glance among the other ladies. "Seems we were all of a sudden able to get away from work at the same time."

"What an amazing coincidence." Loreнна's eyes narrowed but her business smile stayed in place.

"Isn't it, though? And to our delight, Butch called once he got here and said there were still some vacancies."

Jamie crossed his arms over his chest. "Interesting."

"Yes, it was. We all jumped at the chance to *relax* with our good friends Butch and Jamie." She grabbed Jamie's arm and pulled him aside. "Do you know anything about some woman staying here? She about wet herself when she heard my name, until her boyfriend dragged her off."

"I'll explain later, but please, please don't blow her off just yet or she might blow my cover."

"Cover?"

"Miss Vines, you're all set." Loreнна's smile looked forced when she got his and Stephanie's attention.

"Well, now that everyone is checked in," Butch squeezed through the fray of people and stood in the middle of the crowd, "Loreнна, can I show the girls up to their rooms. I don't want you to have to trudge up and down those stairs with your ankle."

"I'll help, too." Luther picked up the luggage at Stephanie's feet.

"Thanks, guys. I appreciate it." Her smile reached her eyes for a brief moment then the sparkle was lost again.

The group of newcomers and the two men climbed the stairs and left Jamie alone with Loreнна. She looked at him and gave a curt nod. "I have a couple of things I need to take care of in the kitchen."

“Hang on a second.” She stiffened when he grabbed her arm. He released her and held out the sack in his other hand. “For the ones I ripped last night.”



## Chapter Eleven

Lorennna's cheeks burned with embarrassment. "You didn't have to..."

He pushed the sack into her hand. "I know. I wanted to."

She couldn't help herself, curiosity got the best of her. She peeked inside the sack from Monique's Boutique in town. A riot of color lay in the bottom of the sack. She looked up at Jamie. *Could he hear her heart pound in her chest?* "There's too many."

He stepped right up next to her and lifted his hand to stroke her cheek. A smile tilted the corner of his mouth. "So you could have an assortment to choose from."

"How very...thoughtful." Did he often buy women underwear? And why did it rankle so? She closed the sack and held it out to him. "But I can't accept these."

A wash of color tinted his cheeks. The man actually blushed. "Please. It's my gift to you."

Lorennna wasn't sure what to do.

He lowered his hand to her shoulder. "Give a guy a break." His smile softened then he looked up to the ceiling. "The first time I step foot in a shop like that and she can't accept my gift."

"The first time?"

"Of course. You don't think I frequent panty shops, do you?"

"Well..." She waved her hand to the stairs where the gaggle of women departed for the top floor.

A bark of laughter shot out of him. He shoved his hands on his hips. "Those women would laugh me out the door if I ever tried to buy them something like that."

“I thought...” When did she lose the ability to complete a sentence?

“No. I told you, we’re just friends. Shoot, Courtney’s older brother went to school with me and Butch back in New Jersey. She’s like a pesky little sister.”

A beautiful, pesky sister. All three of those women were drop-dead gorgeous and at the height of fashion in their designer “grungy” clothes. Stephanie Vines with her flawless chocolate skin looked as if she’d just stepped off the pages of a magazine. Loreнна might not be up on current designers and whatnot, but she knew expensive clothes when she saw them. And Courtney and Beth, young with tight, perfect bodies, could have worn farmer Frank’s dirty overalls and still knocked out every man in the room. And these were his friends. She didn’t even want to think about what his girlfriends looked like. Whether she believed Butch that Jamie hadn’t dated much lately or not, she could surely bet they would fit in well with Jamie’s Angels.

Loreнна looked at her old, white crop pants and turquoise button-down cap-sleeved shirt, her fifty-percent-off special she’d gotten at the mall in San Antonio a few years back. She didn’t compare to the women on her third floor. She ran a hand through her curls and squared her shoulders. “Thanks, Jamie.” She shook the sack. “I’ll see you later.” She all but ran to her room.

Inside, she sank down on the end of the bed. “What could he possibly see in me?” She flopped back and counted the speckles on the ceiling, her relaxation method when she had something on her mind.

\* \* \*

“What was going on between Jamie and the inn owner?” The minute Luther ran back down the stairs to get Stephanie’s other suitcase from her car, she and Butch jumped on the end of the sleigh bed. “There were sparks flying all over the place.”

“A little crush.” Butch made no point to elaborate.

And as he figured, Stephanie mistook his comment when she said, “Well, of course she does. Every female and half the males over twelve have a crush on J. Hamilton.”

He decided not to correct her and tell her it was the other way around. That was for Jamie to tell, if he wanted to let his staff in on his love life. “She doesn’t know who he is.”

Stephanie rolled her eyes. “Right.”

“No, really.” He bounced and waved his hands with anticipation at telling her the juicy gossip. “Apparently her father was an actor and ran out on her as a child and she has done her level best to keep Hollywood from ever crossing her doorstep.”

“Until now.”

“Yep.” He grabbed her by the knee. “Steph, you can’t blow his cover. He would just die.”

“Cover’, there’s that word again.” She tilted her head to the side. “What exactly did he tell her?”

“That he was a vet, here on a vacation.”

She cocked an eyebrow. “Hmm. So, maybe I can use this to make him sign those papers now instead of at the end of the week.”

“You’d do that to him?” Butch sucked in a quick breath. “Blackmail him.”

“Damn straight, I would. You know Jamie wants this, he’s just being stubborn. And I don’t think the pot could get any sweeter if Willie Wonka himself got ahold of it.”

Luther’s steps echoed in the hallway a moment before he appeared in the doorway with her expense suitcase under his arm like it weighed nothing at all. “Door to door service, ma’am,” he said with a wink.

It looked like Jamie and Loreнна weren’t the only budding romance if the shy looks from Luther and Stephanie were any indication.

Oblivious to Butch’s mind ramblings, a smile spread across Stephanie’s face. “I think this is going to be the best vacation I’ve had in years.”

\* \* \*

"You both settled in?" Jamie dropped into the loveseat in the third floor sitting area.

Beth smiled brightly and nodded. Courtney sat in a club chair and propped her feet up on the trunk which doubled as a coffee table. "Ah, it feels so good to be away from all the stress back home. My boss is such a tyrant." She winked at him. "Mid-terms were a pain in the booty. I needed a vacation. And the best part, you're paying for it."

"Ugh. I was afraid of that." He scrubbed a hand across his chin. "Well, then you'd better enjoy the hell out of it. This is birthday, Valentines and Arbor Day all rolled into one."

"Wow, what a generous boss you are."

"Boss, huh?" Luther came from one of the rooms with Stephanie and Butch on his heels. "I thought you said they were friends."

"We are. But I'm also his assistant." Courtney turned her youthful face to the large imposing man. "And Beth's his..."

"That's okay, Court. You don't need to go into all of that." Jamie wondered how long he could keep his ruse up with all his employees under one roof.

"Who's minding the store?" Luther asked.

"Store?" Courtney frowned and turned to Jamie. She was the sweetest kid, but sometimes she didn't fire on all burners. "We don't have a store."

"He mean's who's running the business." Stephanie pushed Butch aside and sidled up next to Luther. "So, how about you show me around this place? I could see the most wonderful gardens from my window."

If Jamie wasn't mistaken, a blush tinted the larger man's face clear across his bald head. "Don't mind if I do."

The pair left and Jamie waited until he couldn't hear them in the stairs any longer before he spoke. "I need to ask you both a favor. I kind of told a little white lie and I want to make sure you back me up on this."

"He told the owner that he's a vet. For animals." Butch sat on the arm of the couch. "Failed even one mention of his illustrious career. Or the fact of his supporting actor Oscar nomination."

"Why?" A smile hung in the corner of Beth's mouth.

"It slipped out. And she doesn't really know who I am, so please don't tell her."

"Do you mean no one here recognizes you?" Beth laughed. "That's rich. I guess you may want a refund from my last bill, huh?"

"There're two couples here. The older wife actually thinks I look like 'that actor fellow', but Loreнна has convinced her I'm not." He decided not to mention Olivia to the two of them, Steph would be filled in, and past that, the less he had to think about her the better. She'd been good to her word so need to bring her up.

Courtney shook her head, her brows drew down. "Who's Loreнна?"

"The owner of the inn." When she still looked blank, he added, "The woman who checked you in and gave you the key."

"Oh," she nodded her head, "gotcha."

"And you haven't filled her in, why?" Beth, sharp as a tack, persisted.

"It's a long story. But just whatever you do, don't let on who I really am. Please."

\* \* \*

Loreнна counted the speckles for the tenth time. "One-thousand-four-hundred-twelve, thirteen. Oh hell, this is ridiculous. I'm a grown woman, for goodness sake. If I have casual sex with a man, it's not the end of the world." She sat up on her bed and fluffed the flattened curls on the back of her head.

“Now, I’m even talking to myself,” she said when she eyed her reflection in the dresser mirror. “Snap out of it, Buttercup.”

Paper rattled when she shifted on the bed and she remembered the sack from Monique’s Boutique in town. A thrill raced up her spine at the thought of Jamie shopping for panties for her. With the sack emptied on the bed, she looked at the rainbow of color. He bought every color in the store. When she’d bought her own pair, she could only splurge on the one color. At thirty dollars a pop, she couldn’t justify an overindulgence for panties. Then when he’d torn them in the gazebo, she’d had a moment of sadness, but only a moment then his magic fingers lured her past all reasonable thought. Ripples of desire burned her thighs and then some at the mere memory.

She’d gone back the next morning to make sure no one happened upon her discarded undergarment, but it was no where to be found. At first, she’d been mortified. Who could have found them? But then she realized whoever had it couldn’t possibly know who they belonged to, much less what had happened to get them that way.

Then Jamie presented her with the sack filled with silken dreams. She plucked a peach pair out of the pile and shucked her pants and cotton briefs. She slid the silk up her legs and moaned with sheer delight, she could almost imagine Jamie helping her into the garment.

“Knock it off, Loreнна, or you will be in a heap of trouble.”

Ah, but what girl doesn’t like that kind of trouble?

She replaced her pants before her imagination took her over the deep end. She slipped her feet back into her white canvas sneakers and reached for the door handle when a sharp knock startled her.

“Hey there, Buttercup.” Luther pushed through the door when she opened it.

Loreнна shoved all the panties under her pillow. A deep blush heated her cheeks, but her friend had his back to her. Hopefully he hadn’t seen the undies or the blush.

“What do you need, Luth?”

“Just wanted to know what you need help with around here.”

Lorennna controlled her embarrassment as much as possible and eyed her friend. "Since when do you work around here this much in one day?" She crossed her arms over her chest. "I usually have to bribe you with my homemade brownies."

"Not true." He faced her and chuckled her under the chin. "Just last week I fixed that old rocker of yours without any thought of recompense."

Her eyes widened. "You broke it when you backed over it with your truck."

"Minor technicality." He laced his fingers together and placed them on the back of his shiny, bald head. "So whatcha got? Did you break anything that needs fixin'?"

"Me? You...you...get. Get out of my room. This is not the inn for the lovelorn. If you want to hang around to make moon-eyes over my new guests then you make up your own excuse."

"Come on, Buttercup, help a guy out." He dropped his arms to his side.

He looked so cute and desperate, she couldn't help herself. "Tell you what, if you will run up to the store and get me some potatoes for the dinner tonight, I'll let you stay and be the official bowl licker when I make the lemon meringue pie. Deal?"

"Be back in a jiffy." He leaned down and kissed the top of her head then hurried out the door.

## Chapter Twelve

“This is excellent.” Stephanie Vines licked the remnants of the lemon meringue off her fork.

Lorennna stood back and watched Luther’s spine go rigid. What was it about the woman that made him act almost giddy? Body language alone she could almost hear him shout, “I want this woman.”

And she was happy for her friend. He needed someone in his life.

“Specialty of the inn.” Luther leaned his elbow on the table and closed the distance between himself and Stephanie. “Lorennna’s one fine cook.”

“That she is.” Stephanie crushed the remaining crumbs with her fork and wiped the tines clean with her ruby red lips. Not one of those crumbs escaped to land on her perfectly tailored outfit.

Did the woman have to look good twenty-four-seven?

Stephanie winked at Jamie and Lorennna’s fist balled at her side.

What was wrong with her? Deep down inside she knew. It wasn’t jealousy, no, what did she have to be jealous about? But there was something niggling at her. Even though Jamie said the two were just friends, Lorennna didn’t think a man and a woman could be “just friends”. Except her and Luther, but that was a different entity entirely.

“I wish I could cook like this.” Stephanie all but purred. She looked from Luther then to Jamie.

Lorennna’s gut tightened. Nope not jealous.

“Aw, anyone one can cook.” Luther’s voice took on an odd quality. If he was a woman, she’d have said wispy. “It takes true talent to know when the food is good.”



Stephanie's chocolate eyes came up to meet his gaze. "You're just teasing me." She cast a devastating smile at the man. Then she leaned over and whispered into Jamie's ear.

Zip. Pop. Loreнна's brain fired on overload.

Oh man.

Then pit of her stomach fell to the floor.

The green-eyed-monster sucker-punched Loreнна and sent her across the room where she wouldn't lose her dinner as she watched the glamorous Stephanie wrap both the men around her finger.

*Fold the napkins. Fold the napkins. Don't listen to the little giggles or think of the way the woman tosses her hair over her shoulder when she leans forward to listen to what you say.* Loreнна had to be fair. The woman had reacted the same way to Butch and the other women at the table. But when she did it to Luther, or worse, to Jamie...

"What's gotten into you?" She jumped at the sound of Luther's lowered voice in her ear.

She kept her back to him and the rest of the folks in the room. The napkins on the buffet would be the straightest napkins in all of Texas if she had anything to say about it. "Don't know what you're talking about?"

He reached around her and stilled her hands on the linens. "Sell it to someone who's buying. You get any greener, Kermit the Frog'll ask you for a date." Luther chuckled. "I don't think I've ever seen you get jealous before."

She whirled on him, poked her finger into his chest. "I am not. And don't you go spouting that drivel 'cause someone around here might get the wrong idea."

"I see the chemistry," a smile softened his chiseled features, "the sparks any time Jamie Crawford comes near you."

"No you don't. There's nothing to see. Now go finish your dinner." She shooed him away with her hands.

He took several steps back and the grin on his face grew larger. "Tell you what, I'll sacrifice myself and keep those women occupied." He leaned forward and kissed her temple. "Don't you worry your pretty little head about Stephanie."

She scrunched her face up to the best smile she could, but was afraid it came out more of a grimace. She turned on her heel and without a backwards glance, she walked into the kitchen to tidy up.

As the door started to swing shut, she heard Luther say, "Okay, ladies. Who's up for dancin' at the Waterin' Hole in town?"

Half an hour later, she walked out onto the back porch. Surprised to see Jamie, she said, "You didn't want to join the fun?" Then she leaned against the porch rail.

Jamie pushed the swing back once then twice before he looked up at her. "Sit with me, will you?"

*Uh, oh*, she thought to herself. Here comes the brush off she'd expected the night before.

She sat at the opposite end of the swing. Her feet dangled an inch above the wooden slated porch.

Jamie stretched his arm across the back of the seat and took hold of a wayward curl. "Why didn't you go with them?"

"I..." Loreнна had never gone out with guests before. She'd never been asked before. She was tempted. "I have stuff to do. The Kellers, and Olivia and Randy, are leaving tomorrow and I have to ready a picnic they asked for. Busy, busy, busy." She stood to go but Jamie caught her hand.

"We need to talk about last night."

A warm blush crawled up her face. "There's really nothing to discuss." She needed to distract him. But how? She turned sideways on the padded seat and faced him. "Was there ever anything between you and Stephanie?"

"Steph?" Jamie chuckled. "We've been friends for many years. But no. Nothing romantic has ever been between us." He ran his fingers down her face. "I hope *that's* not bothering you, too?"

Lorennna stood and walked back near the railing. "I beg your pardon?" She narrowed her eyes at the man.

"You've been acting strange ever since we left the gazebo." He stood and backed her to the slatted wall next to the back door. "Last night..." He lowered his voice and bent until his face was right before hers. "Last night was remarkable."

Her heart skipped. "Really?" she asked before she could help herself.

"Most definitely."

His mouth hovered over hers. If she pushed up on her tiptoes, she could taste him for herself. But instead, she hung back and stared into those gray eyes. His breath feathered across her face. And her mind went blank. She said the first thing that popped into her mind. "I'm wearing the peach ones."

Dark pupils narrowed and his breathing came in more shallow spurts. "Oh yeah?"

"Did I say thank you?" She finally leaned forward and up on her toes. Her mouth met his for a brief but electric kiss.

When she tried to pull back, Jamie wrapped his arms around her waist and crushed her up against him. "Why do you always smell so good?" He nibbled her ear and neck. "So sweet and irresistible."

Lorennna's hands traced the length of his firm back and hovered just over his spectacular butt. Temptation won out and she dipped both hands into the back pockets of his jeans and kneaded him. He ground his hips into hers. And moaned.

"Can we do this in a bed this time? I'm not as young as I used to be."

That thought sobered her. She couldn't take this man to bed. She pushed at his shoulders until he stepped away from her. "Um, I, ah, have to get working on the picnic."

"Lorennna?" His brow scrunched and his mouth pulled down. "What's wrong?"

"Nothing. Busy, I told you." But she found the pull of his nearness hard to overcome. His scent floated on the evening air and mixed with

the sweet roses to make a heady perfume of lust and want. A fragrance she knew would be with her long after the man returned home to California.

In three days. Three days until he left and a tiny piece of her heart disappeared. How had he gotten under her skin so fast? And it wasn't just the sex. She was enough woman to have a sexual relationship with a man and not expect a proposal at the end, but something in her flipped, some unknown switch turned on and she knew she wanted more from him than he could give.

But why him? What was it about Jamie Crawford that set her world upside down and made her fight so hard to right it?

She glanced up into those gray eyes that waited for her to explain her sudden ambivalence to him. She had to shut her eyes to block out the want on his face.

Lorennna wondered if she would ever be able to get the intoxicating feel of his hands out of her mind, far away from every waking conscious moment since they made love in the gazebo. But she had to, or risk going crazy with desire for a man she couldn't have. She needed one final taste. To tell herself this was the last time she would let Jamie Crawford invade her system. She needed finality, so she wouldn't long for him with every breath. She leaned into him for just one more kiss.

But when their lips met all will power left her body. Her arms snaked around his neck and held him as close to her as she could get. His hands skimmed down her sides and around her waist. He ground his excitement into her hips and she knew then she couldn't turn him away.

She stepped back and saw a flash of disappointment in his face. "My room. Hurry." Lorennna grabbed his hand then opened the back door.

Before she could think twice about what she was doing, she and Jamie were on her bed. He yanked open her shirt. Buttons flew in all directions. She started to protest then but he smiled a wicked grin.

And she said, "I know, you'll get me a new one."

"Smart girl." He hovered above her for a moment, took her mouth in a brief kiss as his hands deftly relieved her of her bra then laid beside her

with one hand under his head, the other cupped her breast. "Perfect." She blushed at the earnestness in his eyes more than the fact she lay bare-chested before him.

Jamie took her nipple deep in his mouth. Her back arched off the bed to meet him as her fingers weaved through his hair and held his head to her. "Oh my," she moaned and writhed under his ministrations.

Jamie kissed a trail down to her navel and dipped his tongue under the edge of her pants. "These need to go."

"Let me." She pushed at him until he leaned on one elbow beside her and watched with hooded eyelids and a wry smile. "You can't afford to keep buying me new clothes." She thought she heard him snort as she lifted her hips and wriggled out of her pants and undies. "You're hell on my wardrobe, Crawford."

For a moment, she had a twinge of apprehension. She hadn't lain completely nude in front of a man in far too many months. The last few times she and Bret had found their way to have sex, it had been more of wham-bam-I-need-to-get-going than anything slow or sensual much less full frontal nudity. And even the evening before with the exception of her ripped panties, he hadn't divested her of a single article of clothing.

Self-conscious beyond her wildest imagination, she crossed one hand over her breasts and the other across her nether region.

"Don't." Jamie grabbed her hands and raised them above her head. "I want to see all of you."

A blush started at her toes and spread upward. Heat hit all the pressure points as well as every inch between.

"You are so beautiful."

He reached for her and she held him off with one hand while she waved the other at him. "Nope. You're mighty overdressed."

He hopped from the bed and ripped his shirt over his head then shucked his pants and cute Scooby-Doo boxers. "Better?" Arms spread out he stood in all his astonishing naked glory.

Perfection was the only word that came to mind. His physique would put any male model to shame. Not too buff or too gangly, he was just

right, proportioned with Michelangelo's finesse. Her eyes trailed... Whoa. With one exception. How had she missed that the night before? Endowed would be a gross understatement.

He cleared his throat and her eyes shot back up to meet his gaze. He waggled his eyebrows. "Well?"

"Oh yeah." She laughed, but when she saw the predatory look in his eyes, a shudder of exhilaration with a pang of primal fear shot through her.

Jamie once again licked a path down her abdomen. She closed her eyes and leaned her head back, but when she thought he would stop and...graze, he continued. Jamie left wet kisses on her thighs and her calves.

"Roll over."

Did he say what she thought he did? "Um, what?"

"On your stomach, woman." He smacked her thigh with a playful pat and winked at her.

Lorennna eyed him for a long moment. She could argue, but then she'd miss out of the luscious experience of spending so much time with Jamie and his remarkable hands and mouth. She complied without any other comment. His mouth resumed the titillating onslaught starting at her ankles.

"I-I thought you were in a hurry." Her voice cracked and stuttered as she spoke.

"Mmm, this is much better." He kissed the crease of one knee then the other. His tongue caressed the sensitive skin. "Don't you agree?"

Lorennna's eyes closed and a shuddered ripped through her. "Mmm-hmm."

Gentle fingers worked up the backs of her thighs followed by open-mouthed kisses. When he reached the rounded curve of her bottom, she tensed a moment then broke out in goose bumps when he dropped feather-light kisses across her skin. A moan escaped her lips before she could stifle it.

“You like?” She thought she heard a hint of amusement in his voice.

“Mmm-hmm,” she said reduced to grunting, far too gone for syllables or words.

She rolled to her back at the push of her hip. Jamie parted her legs with ease. He kissed the inside of her thigh as his tongue slid closer and closer to her womanhood, but never quite reached the pinnacle.

She fought to speak. The first attempt fell short in an exasperated sigh. The she sucked up all the air she could get. Words huffed from her lungs. “You’re torturing me.”

“Aw, but what sweet torture.” His hot breath floated over her prickled skin as he laughed.

“Mean. You’re so...” Her words trailed off as his tongue darted over her clit. He teased her, circled his tongue around once or twice then pulled back until she squirmed to get closer, to increase the contact. Finally, he settled his mouth on her and stroked her to near climax. He replaced his mouth with his hand. He entered her with one finger and used his thumb to push her higher and higher.

His mouth returned to her nipple.

“Oh God, Jamie.” Her hands dug into his hair. “I can’t...I can’t...”

“Don’t hold back,” he mumbled against her breast. “Come for me, Lorennna.”

His soft words sent her right over the edge. Her body melted under his touch, she shook with the climax. But then cool air bathed her as he moved away from her. She started to protest but then heard the telltale sound of a condom rapper. She wanted to be mad, reminded of why she ran from him the night before, but in her aroused state she didn’t care if he scored with the entire Dallas Cowboys’ cheerleading squad as long as he finished what he’d started.

She opened to him and he slid deep inside her. “Oh God.” She thought she was spent, thought she had given all of herself to him already, but when he rocked his hips against her, she climbed again.

She hooked her feet on his calves and met him thrust for thrust. “Again.”

He kissed her temple, the movement slowed his rhythm, broke the form.

She moaned. "Don't stop."

He pounded harder and harder. Deep inside, she vibrated. Her ears rang. And she shouted his name.

Just after she crashed over her second wave of climax, Jamie shuddered and collapsed on top of her.

\* \* \*

"I can't move." Lorena's hair tickled Jamie's neck.

"Me either." His breath had returned to normal, but every ounce of strength drained from him.

"No, I meant because you're pinning me to the bed."

"Sorry." He kissed her temple and rolled off the bed. "Be right back." He went into the bathroom and removed the condom. He returned and slid next to her in the bed.

She molded her body to his and cuddled. "Much better. I wasn't quite ready to give up breathing yet."

Jamie chuckled. "Sor-ry," he repeated.

"I have to admit," she slid her leg up his, then back down, "I thought last night was a fluke."

The friction teased areas he thought too weak to respond. "I beg your pardon."

"I haven't, that is I have, but..." A blush tinted her creamy skin. She covered her face with one hand.

Jamie pried her fingers away and kissed the tips. "Don't be embarrassed. Just tell me. Have what?"

She took a deep breath, but didn't look up at him. "Had an orgasm."

"You've had an orgasm before?" He nodded and tried to figure out what she was talking about. "That's good, isn't it?"



“No. I mean, yes, I have had them before, but not like last night or,” she paused a moment, “just now. They’ve never been so...intense.”

Jamie wanted to shout to the rafters. He wanted to beat his chest and swing from the trees. No man had touched her in such a way before. But she said she had had orgasms before. A jealous knot formed in his stomach. Even though she had just told him he’d been the best, the thought of any man touching her before balled his fist. He fought thinking about after he left, after he was tucked back into his regular life in California or whatever location his shoot was in. Loreнна would be free to be with whomever she wanted, whenever she wanted.

Why did that not sit well for him?

He shook his head and chalked it up to post-coital possessiveness. It couldn’t be anything else.

“I’m mighty glad I could oblige you.”

Loreнна kissed his neck as her hand snaked down and encircled his penis. The shaft grew rigid with her touch. “You think you might be obliging again?”

He bit back a groan when she kissed her way down his chest. “You’re insatiable, you little vixen.”

She hovered over him, her breath feathered over the tip of his erection. “Sweet talker, you.” She licked away a bead of moisture. “Well?”

“I...” He had to clear his throat. “I’m up for the task.”

A smile crooked her lips then her tongue caressed him. She took him deep into her mouth.

“Loreнна.” His fingers slid through her silky black curls. “You’re killing me.”

She stroked him a few more times. Her lips gentle, her tongue wet and hot.

“Stop. No more.” He hauled her up until she straddled him. His hands on her hips to guide her, she sank down onto him. She rode him hard, her back arched, her hands behind her on his thighs.

Jamie cupped her breasts, brought his mouth to one erect nipple and bit down. She all but purred like a cat at his touch. He repeated the act on the other perfect pink point, rewarded when Lorennna moaned his name.

He couldn't believe he was so close to coming. His body couldn't get enough of this woman. And he feared that would never change.

"I can't—" she panted, "—believe...again."

Jamie found her sex and with his thumb rubbed a circuitous path until she bucked and shuddered. Jamie thrust a final time and spilled inside her. It wasn't until that moment he realized they had forgotten one important fact.

"No condom."

## Chapter Thirteen

A cold fear spread through her. She all but wilted beside him on the bed.

“Did you hear me?” His fingers tunneled through his hair. “We didn’t...”

“I heard you, yes.”

Jamie propped himself up on an elbow. “I swear to you it was completely unintentional.”

Lorennna berated herself for being so foolish. She’d had never before had unprotected sex. How had she got so caught up with this man to have been so irresponsible? Jamie was becoming increasingly more dangerous to her state of mind and now her wellbeing.

She covered her face with her hands.

“Lorennna?”

“I have a perfectly clean bill of health, if that’s what you’re worried about.”

“Yes, well. I never would have thought otherwise. And I can assure that goes double for me. But there are other matters which might...present themselves down the line.”

Heat flushed her face under her fingertips. Did he find her so repugnant to possibly carry his child—not that she had any desire to have kids anytime soon. “I’m on the pill so no worries.”

“That’s a relief.” He fell back on the bed with a huge sigh.

*Ow.* She lowered her hands and glared at him. Jamie didn’t mince words, did he? It stung. More than she could admit. She couldn’t stay

there beside him one second longer. She swung her legs over the side of the bed but before she could rise, two strong arms circled her waist.

"I didn't mean it like that, Buttercup." He kissed her neck. "You would make the most beautiful children. But an unexpected pregnancy is not something I had in mind for the near future."

"I agree wholeheartedly." She pasted on a fake smile and glanced back at him. "I'm just going to freshen up." She gave him a quick peck on the lips then padded barefooted and bare-assed to the small bathroom.

Lorennna gripped the sink with both hands and refused to meet her own gaze in the mirror. Why had his words cut her so bad? Why was she so disappointed when such relief poured from him?

She let go of the sink and ran her hands over her abdomen. How would it be to carry his child inside her? To feel a baby move and know two people created him or her?

She shook her head and dropped her hands. "You're getting way ahead of yourself." She finally met her eyes in the mirror. "You have had some of the most amazing sex of your life, but that doesn't make it more than sex."

A tear dripped down her cheek and an unnamed sadness settled in her stomach. Why then did she want it to be so much more? Lorennna hardly knew the man. She'd heard a few anecdotal stories of his childhood in New Jersey. Most of which were supplied by Butch.

She knew how he lost both his parents in his early twenties. And in a way, she could relate to that. She might have not known her father, never saw him through her formative years, but a small part of her heart, the part which held out hope through all those years broke when she learned of his death. Anger replaced the emotion. Anger that she'd missed out on so much and would never have the chance to rectify that.

So she did understand that Jamie had a hole in him that would never be filled. But look at the friends who surrounded him. It was obvious when she watched him interact with Butch and the women that they had a close bond. Jamie had managed to create a new family.

But he never spoke of his work. Any time she had tried to ask questions, he maneuvered the conversation in a different direction. She hadn't realized the first few times, but when she sat with him and his friends at dinner a tension she couldn't describe crackled all around them when she inquired about his veterinarian practice. He then peppered Luther with questions about his previous business. And while she knew Luther found it endlessly entertaining, she couldn't imagine how the rest of the table enjoyed the inner workings of a dot-com company but it kept the table occupied throughout the meal.

While she had loaded the dishwasher she realized then, he had not answered one of her questions about his job. Why was that?

Again, that brought her back to, *why did she care?* He would leave at the end of the week like every other guest who had stayed with her. And while the man intrigued her more than she cared for, she knew from Bret that a long distance relationship was hard to maintain.

"You all right in there?"

Lorennna turned on the sink and splashed cold water on her face. "Coming." She grimaced at her choice of words. "Be right there." She found Jamie lounging against the padded backboard.

"Lorennna?" Someone pounded on her bedroom door. "Lorennna, you in there?"

Her heart echoed the heavy tattoo on the door. "Luther, what's the matter?" She hollered as she grabbed the terry robe on the back of the door and wrapped it around her. Jamie jumped into his jeans.

She opened the door and stepped into water. "What the..."

Luther rubbed a hand across his head. "The dishwasher is overflowing."

"What? How did that happen?" She crossed her arms over her chest and hugged herself.

He looked her up and down, took in her state of undress. She knew the moment he saw Jamie. His shoulders stiffened and a frown pulled down his mouth.

"I told you that damn thing needed replacin'. I gotta turn the main off out back." He stalked away.

"Shit." She slammed the door and ripped off her robe. She threw open the drawers of her dresser and yanked out clean clothes and dressed without a word to Jamie. In her closet, she found her mid-calf rain boots. "You can see yourself out."

"Lorena, let me help."

She shrugged as she left her room.

Luther wiped his hands on a rag as she walked in the backdoor. He shook his head. "It got stuck in the rinse cycle and just kept going. The motor's fried. You're gonna need a new dishwasher. I'm surprised you didn't notice." His voice dripped with disapproval.

Jamie came up close behind her. He settled one hand on her shoulder. "It's not her fault, Luther."

No man, other than Luther, had ever stood up for her before. She got a squishy feeling in her stomach. And after the rollercoaster of the last little bit she wasn't entirely sure she welcomed the new emotion.

She pulled from Jamie's grip and found mops and buckets in the pantry. "I don't have time for this pissing match."

The two men stood stunned, silent.

She held two mops in the air. "Either help or get out of my kitchen."

\* \* \*

"You're lucky there wasn't any more damage than the washer itself and that old rag-basket."

"Thank you, Luther. You've pointed that out several times now." Lorena set the last chair around the table in the kitchen then pushed the sweaty curls from her forehead. The Mexican tile floor had dried quickly once they removed the furniture and swept out all the water. "Why don't you go on home and get some rest? It's been hours."

"Think I'm too old for all this manual labor?"

She snorted. “No.”

Lorennna cocked her head to the side. The sun peeked through the curtains as morning rose and reminded her of the long evening. The pain that radiated from every inch of her body did a fine job of that too, not to mention that her temples throbbed. Luther, however, looked like he’d barely broken a sweat.

Jamie’s clan all pitched in to help, too. They had all gone up to bed about an hour and a half earlier. Stephanie said something about having a meeting mid-morning, but Lorennna had been too weary to ask about it.

Luckily, the Kellers slept through the entire ordeal—thank goodness for hearing aids. Because if one more person clicked their tongue at her for not knowing the washer was overflowing, she knew she’d blow a gasket herself and order every last one of them to get the hell out of her house.

“You need to put an order in for a new washer soon.”

Did he think she didn’t know that? Did he think she hadn’t been trying to figure out all evening where to shortchange her budget so she could accommodate the cost of a new dishwasher? Could she do some fancy decimal shifting and come up with some quick cash to put in the new appliance?

“Well?”

She ignored him and tried to put a benign look on her face. It took all she had not to grit her teeth as she spoke. “I think if you want to keep your date with Stephanie tonight, you’d better get some rest.”

The big man’s cheeks turned bright red. “You heard about that?”

“Yeah.” She thrust her hands on her hips. “You’ve been giving me the silent treatment all night, either that or you bark at me and remind me how incredibly stupid I’ve been. All because you found Jamie in my room.” She narrowed her eyes and advanced on him. “Where were *you* last night? Who were *you* with?”

He held her gaze but didn’t comment.

"You think I don't know what happened with you two? She's been grinning at you like a damn fool all night long. How dare you get all high and mighty when you are doing the same damn thing, Luther McGrew?"

He groaned. "I really don't want to even consider what you might have been doing." His body shuddered. Then he crossed his beefy arms over his chest and leaned a hip on the kitchen counter. "Look, I don't own this place. It's not..."

"It's not what? You be very careful what you say here, Luther." Her voice lowered to a near whisper. "I love you and you know that, but you have no right to judge me."

He bowed his head. "I'm sorry, Buttercup. But I can't help it." His gaze ventured to hers and he held out his arms. "I love you, too."

She took several deep breaths then walked into his embrace.

"I just want to protect you from all those smarmy men out there who would take advantage of a sweet thing like you."

"What makes you think I wasn't taking advantage of him?"

"Ew. TMI, too much information." Luther kissed the top of her head, squeezed her then released his hold on her. "Do you need any more help around here?"

"Nope. I got it all under control. Thanks."

Ashley arrived half an hour later with a box of food from the diner.

"Set those up in the dining room. I made some coffee and the juice is already out there. Pull down the box of paper napkins from the pantry and take them with you, please."

"Sure thing, boss."

Lorennna loaded the portable coffee pot on a tray with cups and all the accoutrements. She backed out the swinging door.

"We missed all the fun." Mr. Keller took the tray from her and set it on the buffet. "Why didn't you wake us up?"

Lorennna smiled at the man. "I was just mopping up the kitchen. No big deal. But I appreciate the offer."



“Sit and eat. I ordered in the diner’s famous muffins for y’all.” She guided him back to the table. “Eat, you two. You said you wanted to head out first thing.” She glanced at her watch. “I think you’ll just miss all the San Antonio traffic. I got your lunch all packed up and ready to go when y’all finish.”

“When did you have time to fix all that up?”

When indeed did she do it? Between the flood and furniture removal? Or was it between the tears and the floor drying. She couldn’t remember exactly, but she knew the sacks awaited the Kellers in the fridge.

Lorennna winked at the couple. “I have my ways.”

Back in the kitchen, she leaned against the sink, closed her eyes and fought back the second round of fatigue and tears. “Don’t want to have to dry the danged floor again.” She swiped at her eyes and took a deep breath.

“There’s someone out front who needs you.”

“Oh!” Lorennna started.

“Sorry, boss.” Ashley stepped all the way through the door. “Didn’t mean to scare you.”

“S’okay.” She waved off Ashley’s apology. “I was off in la-la land. What did you say?”

“Someone’s at the front door.”

Lorennna wiped at her eyes once more and went the long way, through the formal living room and bypassed the dining room, to get to the front. “Can I help you?” she asked the man in a uniformed jumper.

“Yes, ma’am.” A smile creased his weathered face. “I’m here to deliver a dishwasher.”

She looked past him and saw two other men unload a huge box from the back of the local electronics store truck. “Huh?”

The man’s eyebrows drew down and the smile faded. “I got a rush order this morning to deliver a dishwasher to this address.” He stepped back and glanced up at the shingle with the house number on it. “This is the address on the requisite.” He flipped through some pages. “It says

this was purchased this morning by a Mr. Crawford to be delivered ASAP to this address for a Miss Beauchamp.”

Lorennna’s head rolled back and her eyes closed. Panties were one thing, but a brand new dishwasher...

“There’s been some kind of mistake. Can you take this back?”

He looked at her as if she just lost her mind. “It’s been paid for already, ma’am.”

Lorennna looked over her shoulder at the stairs and back around to the man. “Can you... I’ll be just a minute.” She left the front door wide open and dashed up the stairs. “Jamie. Jamie Crawford,” she hollered as she turned the first bend in the stairs.

“Whoa, honey.” Olivia grabbed Lorennna by the shoulders before the two crashed.

Randy stood behind his girlfriend. “What’s the matter? You’re gonna wake the dead screaming like that.”

Under her breath, she mumbled, “He’s gonna be dead when I get my hands on him.” Then she plastered on her I’m-the-owner-and-nothing-is-wrong smile. “Sorry, you two. Breakfast is self-serve this morning. Sitting out on the buffet.” She hurried past them. “Enjoy.”

All the way down the hall, she told herself to stay calm cool and collected. It wouldn’t do if she killed one of her guests. At Jamie’s door, she took a deep breath, counted to ten then to twenty, raised her hand then beat the hell out of the door. “Open up.”

Ten seconds rolled past, she knew because she counted, so she beat the door again. “Jamie, open this door.” She was turning to go get her pass-key when the door opened.

Jamie had shaving cream on half of his face. A towel hung low around his hips. Lorennna’s libido betrayed her with a quickening of her pulse and a flutter in her stomach at the gorgeous man in front of her. But her ire quickly returned. “Make them take it back.”

“What’s going on?” Butch opened his door. He rubbed his eyes, hair stuck out every which way.

“Go back to sleep.” Jamie grabbed Loreнна’s wrist, pulled her into his room and shut the door. “Are you talking about the dishwasher?”

“Did you buy anything else?”

“No.” He chuckled.

His naked torso distracted her almost as much as the knowledge of what lay under the blue terrycloth towel. She cleared her throat and willed her eyes to stay above his chin. “It’s too much. I can’t let you pay for that.”

“I just want to help.” He settled his hands on his hips, drawing her gaze. The towel slipped an inch and revealed more of the happy-trail. “You didn’t mind when I bought you the new undies.”

“You’re the one who ripped them.” Damn her fair skin and the blush that warmed her cheeks. “It’s not like you broke the dishwasher.” She softened her voice. “Will you please tell them to take it back?”

“I can. But I would much rather you accept it.” He scratched his chin. “Hang on just a minute and let me finish shaving.” He turned toward the bath, but stopped and looked back. “Please. Don’t go anywhere. I’ll be out in five.”

She nodded, then watched mesmerized at the sway of his tight ass under the towel. For a moment, she wondered why she had to have splurged for the thicker, more expensive towels. The cheap, thin ones would have molded much better to his perfect derriere.

*Stop it*, she warned herself. Ever since this man came into her life, she’d been acting like a lunatic.

She leaned back on the bed and threw her arm over her eyes.

“Just stick a fork in me. I’m done.”

## Chapter Fourteen

Jamie worried he might be stepping over the line with the dishwasher, but he'd gone ahead and bought it anyway. He'd even paid a hell of a lot extra to convince them to come deliver and install it today.

He just couldn't stand to see the worry in her eyes. And he caught a brief conversation between her and Luther. She had been worried one more expense would wipe out all the money she'd manage to profit since she opened the inn. Jamie hadn't meant to eavesdrop but he was just around the corner and, well...he couldn't help himself then either.

And it wasn't like he didn't have the money. Actors' incomes had come a long way since her father was the toast of the town.

He came out of the bathroom. "Okay, let's talk."

Lorennay lay curled up in a ball on his bed. She must be exhausted, but he knew she'd be livid if this wasn't taken care of.

He stood over her and couldn't help himself. He stroked the curls at her temple then bent forward and kissed her on the cheek. She was so beautiful. He didn't know what it was about her that stirred him in ways no other woman had ever come close. When he was with her, he didn't think about the lure of Hollywood. About the big budget films and stardom. He could be himself, let down his guard and not worry about tabloid gossip. She was untainted and unspoiled despite her Hollywood beginnings.

He'd never met a woman with a stronger resolve. She built up her business by herself. How many of the women he knew, with maybe the exception of his staff whom he hand picked for their dedication and abilities, could go out and run a business? None that he could think of.

He smiled down at her petite form. "Lorenna, you're one hell of a woman." He kissed her again. "Lorenna, wake up."

"Hmm?"

His mouth tweaked up in a sly smile. "Buttercup, time to get up."

"Five more minutes, Mom." She rolled away from his shaking hand.

"Buttercup Beauchamp, get your lazy butt out of bed." He smacked her pert derriere.

Lorenna sat bolt upright in the bed. "What?"

"You fell asleep."

She rubbed her eyes and yawned. "Sorry."

"Hey." He sat next to her. "Don't apologize. I could stand to have you wake up in my bed as often as you like."

Her shoulders straightened and a pink stain crossed her cheeks. "Well, um." She glanced over at him. "You're dressed."

The hint of disappointment in her voice stirred his blood. "Better to deal with the delivery men downstairs I figured."

"As to that. Why did you do it?" Some of the fight left her voice.

Jamie reached over and tucked a curl behind her ear. "I wanted to help out. Can you tell me why you object so much?" Though, with her independence, he really didn't have to ask.

"I don't like feeling like you're trying to buy me off."

He leaned back. "I would never do that."

"I know that." Her shoulders rose and fell on a sigh. "Actually, I don't know that. I barely know you at all. But still..."

That cut. He thought they were making fast headway. But when you got right down to it that was the truth. He lied to her about a major factor in his life.

"My dad used to do that."

He hadn't expected that. "What?"

"When I was younger, he thought by sending expensive gifts, it made up for him walking out on us. Once a month, like clockwork, a package

would arrive on the doorstep. It could be anything from a stuffed animal to some souvenir from his last movie. No letter. No notes. Just the gift. It made me feel cheap.”

Jamie draped his arm across her shoulder.

“When I got older, it turned to money. Then finally they stopped all together when I was fifteen. Still I hated it up until then.”

“Did you ever tell him how you felt?”

“No.” She pulled away from him and stood. “When would I have had the chance? He never called. Half the time I didn’t know where he was. With his job, he could be in the wilds of Africa or just some sound stage at Universal. But I never knew. All I ever got was a damn package with no return address.”

“But he sent the gifts.” The argument sounded weak even to his own ears.

“All I ever wanted was him. I didn’t give a damn about a plastic Eiffel tower. I wanted my father.” She covered her face. Sobs shook her shoulders.

Jamie stood and enveloped her in his arms. He kissed the top of her head and tried to say all the right soothing words, but what could he say? He couldn’t reconcile the Phillip Beauchamp he knew—a kind, generous-to-a-fault man—with the absentee father Loreнна grew up without.

Loreнна pushed back away from him and furiously swiped at her eyes. “I’m sorry. I shouldn’t have... It was kind of you to buy it. Thank you for the dishwasher. It’ll really help me out.” She shoved past him and left the room.

Before he could follow her, Butch stuck his head in the door. “What was that all about?”

Jamie shook his head. “More of the Phillip Beauchamp legacy.” He dropped to the end of the bed. “I just don’t get it, Butch.”

His friend entered the room and sat in the huge club chair in the corner. Sarge, dressed in an argyle cardigan sweater with a tan and navy

paisley ascot which matched Butch to a frighteningly accurate T, sniffed around the room, then jumped up into his master's lap and dozed.

Jamie shook off the wonder to what Butch put in the poor pup's hair to get it to lie down like that and focused on the thread of conversation.

"The man I knew, that I worked with—good-old-Phil—was the most generous guy you could ever meet. And that's saying a lot for the crowd I work with."

Butch nodded.

"I just can't see him abandoning his family. Hell, I never would have thought he had. Right around the time I met him, he told me how his daughter graduated fourth in her class. Does that sound like a man not involved in her life?"

"Maybe he made it up."

"Nope." He rubbed his hands over his tired face. "When we were cleaning up the kitchen I got her talking about high school. Sure enough, she graduated fourth. Plus, she has this scar on her stomach." he waved to his lower right abdomen. "Appendicitis. Phillip told me about that, too. She had it out when she was nineteen."

Butch raised his chin and looked down his nose at Jamie. "How do *you* know she has a scar there?"

Jamie narrowed his eyes. "Phillip's daughter went to the University of Texas to get a Bachelor's of Art degree."

"Wait, wait," Butch held up his hands, "let me guess. So did Loreenna." When Jamie nodded, Butch massaged Sarge's head. "Just ask her. I don't have a clue what else to tell you."

"But how am I going to explain how I know all this?" He leaned his elbows on his knees.

"The truth often works in a pinch."

Jamie shook his head. "I screwed up royally this time."

"I really don't see why it matters." Butch cocked his head to the side. "You leave in a couple of days. Seems to me that you let it die a natural death. It's not like you'll ever see the woman again, so why do you care?"

Jamie dropped his face in his hands.

“What’s going on, man? I’ve never seen you like this.”

“I wish I knew.” Jamie stood up. “Let’s go make sure they get that dishwasher put in.”

\* \* \*

Lorennna stood back while Ashley fussed over the new appliance.

“Look Lorennna, it’s got silent wash and booster jets.”

She’d never seen anyone so excited over a stinking machine. “It’s wonderful.” She waved her hand at the younger woman. “Yeah, yeah. Let’s get this place cleaned up.”

She regretted the harshness of her words when the girl shrank back from the new Kenmore, so Lorennna draped her arm around Ashley’s shoulder. “Sorry, too little sleep last night.”

“S’okay.” She winked at her boss and scooped up the used rags from the tiled floor.

They finished the task in no time so Lorennna told the girl to take the rest of the day off and relax. With the Kellers gone and Olivia and her beau leaving later that afternoon, she decided to make a light dinner for Jamie and his motley crew and she wouldn’t need Ashley’s help.

She still had to call her mother and tell her all what happened. She’d sworn Luther to secrecy so her mom wouldn’t worry. With her upcoming nuptials, Lorennna didn’t want to add to the burdens. Not that Barbara Hughes wouldn’t jump in and help out despite her busy schedule. But the woman could read her daughter too well and Lorennna didn’t want to reveal anything about the turn of her relationship with Jamie under her mother’s scrutiny.

As she walked across the kitchen floor, she caught sight of a rag they missed. When she bent to retrieve it, two strong arms circled her waist. Her first instinct was to scream and smash down on the booted foot with



a long ago learned defensive move. But the cologne she'd become far too accustomed to engulfed her and thoughts of running fled.

She straightened and leaned back into his warmth. "I'll have you know, sir, that accosting a woman in her kitchen carries a high penalty."

His chest rumbled with laughter against her back. "And what might that be?"

Lorennna turned in Jamie's arms and faced him. "Hmm." She twisted her mouth, cocked her head and lowered one eyelid. "I think a kiss..." A wicked voice in her head egged her to say the next thing. "...and your undying love for as long as the sun sets."

"Sounds like a just punishment," he whispered as his mouth swooped down upon hers.

A tumult of emotions whipped through her and sent her head spinning. Does he realize what he just said to her? A tiny glimmer of hope she never thought she would feel with any man sparked to life. Goose bumps broke out over her skin and she shivered in his arms.

Lorennna pulled back and looked at Jamie. He had a goofy grin on his face. But before she could screw up the courage to ask him about what he just said Butch popped his head in the door.

"We're all set and ready to go."

Jamie waved at his friend. "Be right there." He shook his head and rested his forehead up against hers. "Is it just me, or are we always getting interrupted?"

She laughed somewhat relieved by the reprieve.

"Will you go have lunch with us?" He unwrapped his arms from her waist, but held on to her hand and intertwined their fingers. With his free hand, he tucked a curl behind her ear, a moment of intimacy she had come to expect. A little thrill still shot through her every time he touched her.

"The girls want to try that Italian place in town."

“Italian place?” She scrunched her forehead. They didn’t have any nice restaurants. Only the dinner and two fast food... “You mean Pizza Hut?”

“Yeah, but shh,” a smile played at his lips, “don’t tell, Butch. He swears he hasn’t had anything but haute cuisine for years. Steph told him this place was très elegant.”

A snort squeaked out before she could stop herself. “You know this might be fun. Let me go wash up real quick and I’ll meet you guys at the reservation desk.”

## Chapter Fifteen

“...and wham.” Butch slammed a fist on the red and white checked tablecloth. “Knocked him on his butt.”

Lorennna laughed until her sides ached. She couldn’t remember the last time she had truly let loose and had an afternoon off.

After Butch squawked at the thought of eating in a restaurant with vinyl seats and paper placemats, the group pushed two huge tables together and settled in. Luther arrived a few minutes after they ordered. He gave Lorennna a quick wink though neither said more than to trade polite pleasantries. However, the unspoken truce made them both smile. She could never stay mad at her friend.

“Lorennna,” Stephanie turned toward her, “Luther was telling me you have a fax machine.”

“Yes, in my office.” She narrowed her eyes at the woman. “You ask because...?”

Stephanie laughed, a slight breathy sound meant to be coy. But knowing her relationship with Jamie was no more than friends, it didn’t grate on Lorennna’s nerves. As much.

“I was telling Luth—”

Lorennna’s eyebrow shot up, and she glanced at “Luth” who blushed straight up to his bald head.

“—I am expecting some important papers from a lawyer. I checked and the post office in town has a fax I can use, but Luth said I might be able to use yours. And save me the trouble from driving all over the place.”

"Sure. That's fine. Just go on in whenever you need to. I don't keep that door locked." Loreнна tried for a pleasant smile as she balled her napkin and tossed it atop her empty plate. "What is it exactly you do for a living? I don't think you ever said."

An odd exchange of glances flitted between Jamie and the rest of his group.

"She's an agent." Luther spoke up when Stephanie seemed to be at a loss for words.

"What kind of agent?"

"I, ah..." She cleared her throat. "I work in the entertainment industry. I represent several clients and I facilitate a symbiotic relationship conducive to a productive environment."

Butch paled, Beth and Courtney turned bright red, Jamie wouldn't look at Loreнна and Luther stared at Stephanie as if she'd just grown a second head.

Despite the industry double-speak, Loreнна knew what she meant. "In other words, you get actors jobs in movies?"

Stephanie's gaze cast down. "Yes."

Pizza sat heavy in the pit of Loreнна's stomach.

Why hadn't Jamie told her? He knew how she didn't want to have anything to do with the industry. Though she did like Stephanie and would have missed out on meeting her if he had. And he'd obviously told them all about her father. Not one of them could look her in the eyes. "Mmm-hmm. That's interesting. I bet you meet a lot of...interesting people." She tried to put as much ease in her voice as possible. A tremulous smile wavered on her mouth.

It must have worked, though. Tension eased from the table. Everyone took in a breath and ramrod straight spines slacked and relaxed.

Again, Stephanie's gaze darted to Jamie's. "I've met lots of nice, warm, wonderful people through work. Some are so down to earth, just like the guy next door."

Lorennna nodded not sure how to ask Stephanie to stop her actors-are-great recitation without hurting the woman's feelings.

"You'd be surprised how sensitive actors can be."

"You're right." Lorennna pushed back her chair, ready to bolt if she glorified men like her father for one more second. "I would be surprised."

Butch choked on his drink. Jamie whacked his friend on the back until he waved his arms in protest. "Fine. Just went down wrong."

"Y'all 'bout ready to head back to the inn?" Luther stood and pulled Lorennna's chair out the rest of the way. He shrugged at her to say he had no clue what was going on either, then he pulled Stephanie's chair out.

A chorus of agreement floated around the table and the rest stood to leave.

At the door, Lorennna waited as Jamie purchased one of their dessert pizzas to go. The others had gone ahead and loaded into Luther's SUV. While he waited at the counter in front of the register, a sheepish little girl tugged on Jamie's sleeve.

"Can you get me change for a dollar?" She held up a wrinkled dollar bill.

He took the money and then tweaked her nose, a warm smile spread across his mouth. "Sure thing, kiddo.

"Here ya go." He handed her four shiny quarters after the clerk shut the register drawer.

"Thank you." The girl waited a half a beat then rushed to the bank of vending machines. A matching tow-headed boy joined her. She split the quarters in half.

The boy immediately went to the machine filled with stickers of ugly, fierce creatures. He plopped in his quarters then pumped his fist in the air. "Aw-right. Gar-ru-ru-mon." Without a word to his sister, he ran around the corner into the dining area and disappeared.

The little girl looked at Lorennna and rolled her eyes as if to say "boys." She returned her gaze to the machines and contemplated her choices then finally chose her machine. She dropped in her quarters. When the

plastic ball plunked to the tray, her eyes lit up. "Can you open this for me?" She handed Loreнна the plastic ball.

Loreнна squatted and pried open the container then handed the little girl the shiny fake metal ring with a bright faux ruby in the center. "It's beautiful. Just like you."

The girl giggled. "Thanks." The wonder in the little girl's voice as she took the ring and slid it on her finger ripped at Loreнна's heart.

Something so simple and delicate could bring such joy into this girl's life. Tears misted in Loreнна's eyes when she stood and ruffled the little girl's hair.

"Thanks," she called over her shoulder before she ran off to join her brother.

Loreнна found Jamie watching her. She never thought such compassion could be on a person's face. And he had such an expressive face to begin with.

He shook his hand and she heard a jangling sound. Quarters. He bent down to the machine and plunked in two quarters. A quick expletive popped from his mouth before he stuck in two more quarters. Several plastic balls and four dollars and fifty cents later, he pumped his hand like the boy had earlier.

Straightening to his full height, he collected all the plastic containers and set all but one on the counter next to his order. "Pass these out to the kids here eating, would you?"

The teen behind the counter nodded with a surprised smile.

Jamie snagged the dessert box off the counter. "Ready to go?"

"S-sure." Loreнна narrowed her eyes at the man but refrained from any further comment.

They were half way back to the inn before her curiosity overcame her mouth. "So, what did you get?"

"Hmm?" Jamie's left arm sat relaxed, hooked on the windowsill as his right draped on the steering wheel at the wrist. He glanced over at her before he returned his gaze to the road in front of them.

“What did you get from the vending machine?” Loreнна turned in her seat toward Jamie. “Can I see it?” She held out her hand. “Please?”

Jamie took the exit for the Old Mason creek park. He pulled the car into the farthest space in the lot, switched off the engine then turned to face Loreнна. A smile crooked his mouth in a playful way. “What will you give me for it?”

“A pat on the back?”

“Nope.”

“A firm handshake?”

“Huh-uh?” He shook his head. His smile grew wider.

Loreнна’s eyebrows rose. “My undying thanks?”

“Not even close.”

“A kiss?” She leaned over the console between their seats.

“Deal.” He started to hand her the container but pulled back at the last moment. “Kiss first.”

She flattened both her palms on her chest. “Don’t you trust me?”

Jamie’s head swung from side to side. “Kiss first.”

On a sigh, she leaned closer to Jamie. “Oh, all right. If I have to.”

His lips met her in a tentative peck.

She settled her hand on his shoulder, slid it down the hard, corded biceps and strong forearm. Her fingers walked across the back of his larger hand. She found the plastic ball, wrapped it in her grip then snatched it from him.

Jamie sat up in his seat. “Why, you little sneak.”

She waggled her eyebrows at him then opened her prize. The gold band rolled out to her palm when she tipped the half-ball. A light blue stone sat in the center of a cluster of fake diamonds.

Jamie took the ring from her and slipped it on her hand. He’d tried to ease it up her left hand ring finger but the made-for-children jewelry wouldn’t go up any further. He moved it to her pinky finger and slid it all the way up. “It matches your eyes.”

His voice low and timid, she almost didn't hear him.

She wanted to say something. Thank him? Tell him she loved him?

That thought drew her up short. Where had it come from? Sure, she liked the man. And he was far from hard on the eyes. But love? She barely knew him.

*That's not entirely true*, she scolded herself. She knows more about him than she ever knew about Bret and they dated for over a year before he moved to Washington.

He touched her in ways no man had. Emotionally and sexually. Jamie tapped into a passion she hadn't been aware she possessed. She was beautiful, sexy, desirable even. No one had ever desired her before. With Bret and her previous boyfriends, sex had been a mere release. A mutual release, but nothing more, nothing less.

Jamie made her feel things in her soul when he touched her. Things she didn't want to feel. Emotions she didn't want to face.

She shifted in the seat and turned away lest he see the conflict warring in her. "Let's take a walk up to the creek." She pushed open the door of the sedan before he had a chance to answer. She was half across the parking lot when he caught up to her.

"What's the hurry, Buttercup?" He draped his arm across her shoulders.

"No hurry. Just like to keep movin'."

"I noticed that about you."

"You did?"

"Yeah. You can't seem to sit still. Always cleaning something or straightening something else. Moving just about every time I see you."

They stepped onto the gravel path which led down to the creek and passed the rickety sign with the dedication.

"It isn't much of a creek." She avoided his observation. "Mostly a gully carved by a long ago tornado that fills when it rains. Old man Mason, whose property it sits on, gifted it to Dusty Springs when he



passed. He thought his land needed to have some more life on it since he had no kinfolk to give to away to.

“A few years back the town counsel approved money to build the park and fix up the path.”

*Keep talking. About anything other than your personal life.* “Actually, Luther spearheaded the group. They have a community picnic and the founder’s day carnival out here. You wouldn’t believe how beautiful it is in early spring when the buds are on the trees and the grass is fresh and new. It’s great out here.”

“I can see. It’s nice.” Jamie dropped his arm, slid his hand down to hers and linked their fingers. “Why is it you can’t sit still? Either you fidget like crazy or you talk a mile a minute. It’s endearing, don’t get me wrong. But right now, tension is rolling off you. Your mind’s probably going over a hundred chores you need to do when you get home, huh?”

Relieved he’d missed why, she decided to go with that.

“I get antsy when I stay in one place too long.” She twisted the plastic ring on her finger. “I think it’s from moving around so much as a child. Four different states by the time I was twelve. Ten different houses by the time I was fifteen.” She shook her head.

“As to the talking...I like to talk.” *Especially when I’m nervous. Why can’t I shut up?* “I can talk about anything. Just ask me and I can expound like nothing you’ve ever seen.”

\* \* \*

“So tell me.” Jamie knew he was treading a fine line here. But she set it up and he had to know. His heart, already invested in this woman, couldn’t bear to think there was no possibility of a future for them. “Was that really how you felt about marriage?”

She looked up at him, her eyes wary and confused. “I beg your pardon?”

“The day I got here, you said marriage was archaic.”

“Antiquated. I said antiquated. Archaic makes it sound,” she shrugged her shoulders, “worse.”

*But how do you feel?* he wanted to scream. “You didn’t paint too pretty a picture to begin with.”

She didn’t pull her hand away, didn’t look at him or even answer but walked to the edge of the creek with him in tow.

“The back end of this touches my property.” Loreнна kept spitting out bits of trivial information. “Runs off into the pond.”

He rubbed his face with his free hand. “Where you fell in?”

“Yeah, not one of my better mornings.” Her cheeks pinkened. “But that day did get better.” Her shoulders rose and fell with a heavy breath. “Old Man Mason used to keep it stocked for his grandkids...”

Jamie couldn’t focus on her voice, the endless facts about Old Man Mason, and let her monologue tune out.

What was wrong with her? Why did she keep spouting off this information? Was she nervous around him? His insides quaked when she came near. He built a career upon coming across clear and concise, but words jumbled on his tongue. He reverted back to his early teens, a time he didn’t want to repeat for all the Academy Awards in the world.

*Do her palms sweat too? Does she long for the seconds to pass quickly so she can see him? And regret the moment he’s out of view?*

Could she possibly feel the same way about him?

Surely not. “That’s just ridiculous But just maybe...”

She tugged on his hand. “What’s that?”

“Nothing.” Jamie kissed the end of her pert little nose. His mind went in a hundred different directions. If Loreнна cared as much, possibly even loved him, Jamie didn’t think he could pass up the opportunity to know. His mother once told him that if you didn’t take risks then the rewards you gained wouldn’t be as sweet. Up until now, he hadn’t known what she meant.

Was Loreнна worth the risk? Could he wager his heart in order to find out where he stood?

He kicked a rock and watched it skid across the worn-down path. The big question he realized, was could he risk not knowing? Could he risk not taking the chance and loosing out on something more with this wonderful woman?

Lorennna continued with the facts of the area and had moved on to...weather predictions. Jamie shook his head and debated again what to do.

Then he steeled up all his confidence to interrupt her and blurted out the first thing that came to mind, "I don't know what it is about you." He dropped a feather-light kiss on her temple and kept pace. "I never expected to meet someone like you."

Her step faltered. "Someone like me?"

"Beautiful, smart." He brought her hand up to his mouth and kissed her palm. "You're so damn sure of yourself."

"No, I'm not. I'm scared every time I have to make a decision. Afraid I'll screw up and disappoint someone."

"But you do it anyway. That's the most courageous thing about you. I'm so proud of you even though I don't have the right to be." He tugged on her hand, stopped her and waited until she turned to face him. "But I want to."

Lorennna shook her head, her forehead creased and a frown pulled down the corners of her mouth. "I don't understand."

"What would you say if I told you I wanted to put a real ring on your finger?"

Lorennna stepped back, her eyes widened. "W-what did you say?"

Jamie's palms practically dripped. He wiped them across his jeans, took a step closer to Lorennna despite the tightening of his chest and cupped her face in his hands. "I'm in love with you, Buttercup." His heart threatened to pound right through his ribs with an ever-increasing tattoo.

When she didn't say anything, he took a step back, let his hands fall from her face then shoved them into his pockets. "I don't expect you to

say it back to me. It probably caught you off guard. Hell, it caught *me* off guard.”

Jamie turned to look out across the creek at the dilapidated farmhouse up the hill. His shoulders tensed when Loreнна’s two small hands worked around his waist and she leaned into him.

“I shouldn’t have said that.”

Loreнна’s hands shook. “Why? Did you not mean it?”

“No. I meant every damn word of it.”

“Good.” She pressed her face to his back. “I’m glad.”

Jamie laced his fingers through hers.

“I do, too.” She squeezed his hands. “I love you, too.”

Jamie released her and maneuvered her around until she stood in front of him. “Repeat that.”

“I love you, too.” Despite tears that glistened in the corners of her eyes, a smile bent her perfect bowed lips.

Jamie threw his head back and howled with laughter. “I can’t believe this.”

He looked down at Loreнна. Uncertainty spread over her face and she tied to pull away.

“No. That didn’t come out right. “I’ve never been in love before. I’m not entirely sure how to act.” He kissed one corner of her mouth, then the other. Then when her lips parted for him he kissed her until he was sure her toes curled in her white canvas sneakers. “I knew if I waited a moment longer to tell you,” his voice shook with a heavy breath, “I’d bust.”

Tears spilled down her cheeks.

“Let’s go back to the inn.”

“Can’t we just stay here a moment longer?” A wobbly smile tipped her mouth. “I don’t think my legs could carry me. I’ve never been in love before either.”

## Chapter Sixteen

When her mind whirled a tad less and her heartbeat lowered out of hummingbird range, Loreнна decided she could walk back to the car. She'd been tempted to knock Jamie to the ground and take him right then and there on the path. Her level head prevailed, but only after she'd heard a gaggle of kids come up from the parking lot.

Jamie grabbed her hand. "Come on. I need some privacy."

She stood up on tiptoes and kissed his cheek. "Lead the way."

When they rounded the sign for the park, they almost ran smack dab into the group of five teens. For some odd reason, all the boys, dressed in their uniform of raggedy jeans worn T-shirts and high top sneakers stood stock-still, immobile, and stared at the couple. Then the tallest of the bunch smiled, flapped his hand to his head and said, "Sergeant Cameron."

Jamie flinched as if the boy had hit him. His hand rose as if to return the salute but instead he waved. "Hi, boys. Bye, boys," he said. Then he took off at a jog and all but dragged Loreнна behind him. "Come on, Buttercup."

She glanced once over her shoulder to see the boys, mouths agape. The startled looks on their pimply pussies confirmed they didn't seem to have any more clues to Jamie's odd behavior than she did.

"Slow down," she panted. "You're gonna pull my arm out of the socket."

Jamie's pace evened out. "Sorry."

By the time they reached the car, sweat dotted Loreнна's forehead. Breath heaved from her lungs. "What's gotten into you?"

Jamie popped the locks with the key fob and he pulled open her door. He didn't wait for Loreнна to get into the car before he jogged around to the other side.

"Jamie?" She looked across the top of the sedan and raised her hands. "What?"

A smile crooked his mouth. "I need some privacy." He waggled his eyes brows. "Don't want to give those boys an early education."

Loreнна narrowed her eyes at him, but didn't comment.

Once on the way back to the inn, she couldn't let it rest. "What was that back there? With the boys."

Jamie rolled his shoulders. "Not a thing. Like I said..."

"Yeah I know, early education." Loreнна ran her fingers across her chin, unable not to fidget. "Who is Sergeant Cameron?"

The car swerved on the road. "Rabbit in the road." Jamie said through clenched teeth. "Can you believe it ran out there like that? I barely missed the damn thing." He rolled his neck then his shoulders again. He sniffed and shook his head. "I forgot we have that dessert in the back."

Only then did she smell the sweet cinnamon and sugar that permeated the air. But it did nothing to soothe her nerves after Jamie's odd behavior. She supposed it was good to know if a man mutated into an alien at in the presence of teenagers. That might have a bearing on future offspring, his ability to cope with the creatures once they entered their world.

A niggle of worry crowded her mind. She knew she couldn't take back the words she'd said earlier to him. She didn't want to take them back. But a man's mental health is an important quality in a mate or spouse. Not something she'd even seen the need to add to her list of husband-material qualities, but it just jumped to the top of her list.

He glanced over at her. Winked once then turned back to the road and said, "Need to hurry."

"Sure." Yep, she might even make it one *and* two on her list.

She gnawed her lower lip and wondered if she had any of her old psych books from college. Who knew what might come in handy where Jamie was concerned. In for a penny...

Lorennna crossed her arms over her chest and settled back into the seat. She watched the landscape whiz past the window, unsure what just happened, but damn sure not ready to let it go. She'd wait until there were no rabbits or dessert to distract the man and she had Freud and Jung's opinion on men on hand for a reference guide.

\* \* \*

Jamie pulled in front of the inn just as Luther's SUV did.

"Where've ya'll been?"

Lorennna pushed out of the car and said, "I could ask you that too."

Luther flipped his keys around on his finger. "We were in town getting ice cream. The girls thought it would go with the dessert." He motioned to the box in Jamie's hand.

"Well, we don't want it cooling off." Lorennna hurried up the steps and unlocked the front door.

Jamie tried to keep up with her, but Butch snagged his shirt sleeve. "I need to tell you something."

The grave look on the man's face gave Jamie pause as the grump trudged into the inn. But before Butch could tell Jamie what put a scowl across his face, Luther's booming voice cut in.

"Lorennna you'd never guess what happened at Thrift Way." Luther took the dessert from Jamie and carried it and the ice cream into the dining room.

"What's that, Luth?"

"Jody Mitchell's boy came in all fired up. Said he saw a real live actor in town."

Lorennna turned slow on the heel of her sneakers. "Huh?" She leaned her hip on the edge of one of the tables and crossed her arms. "What do ya know?"

Luther nodded. "Some big time fellow. J Hamilton, the boy said. Never heard of him myself."

Damn, that boy didn't waste any time did he?

He watched Lorennna for any reaction. Her gaze cut to Jamie for a second. Did she know? Could she have guessed? Air stilled in his lungs as he watched her forehead scrunch for a moment then an almost imperceptible shake moved her head. Had he not been watching for it, he'd have missed it entirely.

Lungs on fire, his breath exited when he heard her say, "Me either."

"Apparently he's done a series of military pictures. Jody's boy goes nuts over that kind of stuff."

"Hmm." Lorennna pushed off the table. "How interesting."

Jamie wondered if men could faint. He'd never done it before. Never knew a man who had, but the way his head spun he thought it was entirely possible he was about to find out. He fisted his hands until it hurt, hoping the pain would keep him grounded enough not to take a nose plant in front of the entire group.

Butch tipped his head toward his friend. "I tried to warn you." His whisper barely carried over the din of the room. "The kid was all freaked out about running into Sergeant Cameron. I thought I'd wet myself right there in the general store."

"I gotta tell her. I can't go through this again."

Butch nodded. "Let me get the girls out and you can have her all to yourself." He slapped Jamie on the back. "Hey, who wants to eat this out in the gazebo?"

A round of agreement passed through the group. Luther carried the food through the swinging kitchen door with the rest of the gang on his heels. When Lorennna tried to follow, Jamie took her hand in his. "Can we stay in here and...talk a minute?"



“Sure.” She squeezed his hand. “I’m gonna get us some tea.”

“Okay.” Jamie nodded and the moment the door closed behind her, he paced the floor. “I have to tell her. If she finds out from someone else, she’ll hate me.” He ran his hands through his hair. “She may hate me even if *I* tell her. But if I want a future with her, and I do, dammit,” he pounded his fist against the flat of his other hand, “I have to tell her.

“Think, think, think.” Jamie repeatedly slapped the palm of his hand on his forehead. “Truth? Or not? Truth? Or not?”

Jamie stopped at a chair and clenched the back. “I love her, so I can’t keep lying to her. Plain and simple. And if she loves me, truly loves me, she’ll understand why and forgive me. Right? Yes. Right.”

“Jamie?”

He whirled to see Loreнна with two glasses of iced tea in her hands and a queer look on her face.

“Are you talking to yourself?”

He shook his head, as much to clear his thoughts and answer, or rather lie about his answer. “Just singing. Got that song stuck in my head. You know...” He waved his hand at her. “Never mind.” He pulled out the chair he had a death grip on. “Here. Sit. You comfortable? Need anything?”

“Isn’t that my line? Jamie, you sit.” Loreнна paused before she sat.

“No, no” He pushed her shoulders down until her butt hit the seat.

She looked over her shoulder at him, her eyebrows raised. Could she tell he’d gone squirrely on her? Why his nerves trembled like Jell-o was beyond him. He hadn’t even been this jittery when he’d auditioned for his first professional part. But then again, he hadn’t had as much at stake as he did now. Telling the woman who held his heart that he’d lied to her from the moment he’d met her was not something he did every day. Hell giving his heart to a woman was a new one too.

Jamie sat across the table from her, afraid that if he could reach her, touch her, he’d be too distracted to speak much less confess. He took a long slow drink from his tea. And immediately regretted it.

“Ahh, brain freeze.”

Lorennna leaned across the table and set her petite hand on his forearm. He all but jolted out of his skin at her touch. “Jamie? Are you okay?”

“Yeah, just drank too much.” He wondered if that was really what she was asking about or if she wanted to know what had caused him to act like half his brain had been removed.

*Just talk to her, tell her,* the little voice in the back of his head demanded.

But he couldn’t just come right out and say, “You know about that job thing.” He had to ease her into the subject. So not to shock her.

*Right.*

*You’re a big fat coward, Sergeant Cameron.*

Even still, Jamie decided to work up to it. He wiped a bead of condensation from his glass. “So what’s the deal with Stephanie and Luther?”

“What do you mean?” An incredulous look masked Lorennna’s face. “You’re joking, right?”

Jamie raised his hands and shook his head. He didn’t know. If he did, why would he ask her? When Lorennna continued to stare at him, he picked up his glass and took another long drink of tea.

“They’re sleeping together.”

“Pssst.” Jamie sprayed a mouthful of tea all over Lorennna’s shirt front.

“Ahh.” She jumped to her feet. “Jamie!” With two fingers on the hem of the shirt, she shook the moisture from the cotton tunic.

*Idiot,* he screamed at himself.

Jamie scooped up a handful of linen napkins from the next table and dabbed at her. “I’m so sorry. I can’t believe I did that.”

“It’s okay.” She grabbed his wrist. “Jamie, stop.”

He stilled then took a step back.

“I’ll be right back.”

Lorennna rushed to the bathroom, stripped her shirt off, dropped it in the sink then ran the water. As the sink filled, she caught a glimpse of her disheveled mop of curls. With her fingers like a comb, she tried to put it back to rights. A blemish just below her ear stilled her hands.

She tsked. A love bite. And another, half under the cup of her bra.

What in the hell had happened to her? Last week she was a normal, inn-running thirty-two-year-old. She had her life on an even, if somewhat staid, keel. But one man came in and flipped her world topsy-turvy.

And so what if she was absolutely positive she heard him talking to himself when she came out of the kitchen. She talked to herself from time to time. But she sure as hell didn't lie about it.

But now that she'd fallen for him, she didn't know what to do. He was one hell of a man and the most amazing lover she'd ever had.

"Lorennna? You okay?" Jamie walked into the bathroom and their eyes met in the mirror.

"Mmm-hmm."

Without a word, Jamie came up behind her and wrapped his arms around her and buried his face in her hair. "I'm so sorry."

His apology seemed a little too intense for tea-soaked shirt. But when she tried to figure out why, he nuzzled her neck then let his hands roam over her shoulders and breasts and her mind went to mush.

Lorennna leaned back into him. She watched him in the mirror as he laved her lobe with his tongue. "You taste so sweet."

She closed her eyes and dropped her head back and onto his shoulder when his hands worked the edge of her skirt up her thighs then wadded it around her waist. His fingers snaked under the elastic of her panties and teased her until she writhed in his arms. "Open your eyes. Look at me." His breath feathered her cheek.

Lorennna's lashes fluttered open. It took a moment for her gaze to focus, drugged by the desire burning low in her.

Jamie tortured her and brought her to the edge only to withdraw his hand. A protest died on her lips when he slid his hands down her legs. The soft silk panties accompanied the gentle caress until they lay at her feet. "Step out."

She lifted one foot and then the other and melted at the kiss on the backside of her thigh. Jamie's mouth trailed a line up her leg, paused at her butt. She squirmed until she heard a breathy "beautiful" just before he stood again behind her and met her gaze once more in the vanity mirror.

The unmistakable sound of his zipper filled the air. Unclothed, he pressed his hardened erection to her and retuned his hands to her aching mound.

"Spread your legs, Lorennna."

When she did, he slipped a finger inside, then two. He worked her to a near frenzy and she fought to not lose focus.

When he removed his fingers and shifted to slip inside, a moment of panic caught in her chest. "Jamie, we can't..."

"Shh."

She tensed. "I don't think I can do it...like this."

He nuzzled her neck again. "I won't hurt you I promise."

"But we don't have anything." It was a feeble excuse. He knew she was on the pill and they'd already foregone a condom once. But the line of intimacy that he wanted to cross...scared her, despite loving the man.

"Let me love you, Lorennna." He asked as if reading her thoughts, knowing her fears. "Please."

She couldn't resist his plea laced with unmistakable desire. She nodded then arched her back for him to gain entry. He slid inside her with the assurance of a lover familiar with a body he couldn't get enough of.

Both stilled as he filled her to the hilt. "God, Lorennna." Jamie's eyes closed a moment.

Without a thought, she clenched her muscles, contracted around him. A moan escaped Jamie's tight jaw. His eyes flew open, gaze locked on her once more. His fingers found her swollen nub and circled it as he moved in and out of her slowly.

Lorennna watched his eyes dilate as he increased his rhythm, saw the desire that matched her own.

"I love you, Buttercup." He pressed a kiss her jaw.

Her breath shook with heavy pants as she said, "I love you, too."

She bucked under the ministrations of his fingers, but she held back, bit her lower lip to hold herself longer.

"Come for me, Lorennna." He took her earlobe in his mouth. "Watch."

"Can't." Her eyes slammed shut and her body shook with the force of her climax. A scream wrenched from her throat. Her limbs numbed.

Jamie drove into her twice more then cried her name with once final thrust.

## Chapter Seventeen

“Jamie!” Stephanie burst through the door of his room.

“What?” He held the towel tight around his waist.

Earlier that morning, he’d woken in Lorennna’s bed. He made love to her slower, took his time memorizing every inch of her body. He loved the way she called out his name as her climax rocked through her. After, he’d run up to his room for a quick shower and to change into clean clothes so he could help Lorennna with the morning errands and breakfast.

A huge smile split his agent’s face. “We got it.”

He shook his head. A small smile tipped his mouth, contagious from his long time friend. “Got what?”

“Ziembicki’s group is ready to negotiate.”

Jamie stilled, all but the heart that pounded in his chest. “Say again.”

“They’re ready to sit down and iron out the final negotiations. They want to make your picture.”

Jamie ran his hands through his wet hair. Laughter bubbled up inside him. He’d haggled with Ziembicki’s group for so long he never thought his picture would get made. When he’d bought the film rights for Grant Hunter’s book four years ago, he knew he’d have a hard sell, but he also knew the book would make an awesome picture. *Move over, Mel Gibson*, he’d told himself.

But then Ziembicki balked at some of the requests for actors and location. Negotiations were par for the course with contracts, but Jamie hadn’t expected the man to have a damn opinion about every little thing.

If the man didn't know his stuff, Jamie would have given up long ago, but he wanted Ziembicki to be as much a part of this film as himself.

He slapped his hands together. "I've got to tell Loreнна."

Stephanie's smile faded. "You have a lot to tell her."

Euphoria slipped little by little out of him. With his hands on his hips, he closed his eyes and tilted his head back. A new ache, that of dread, burned his chest. A chill washed over him and reminded him he stood in only a towel.

He looked back at his friend. "I gotta do it today. I can't put it off any longer."

Stephanie reached out and patted his damp arm. "Good luck." She turned to go but paused just in the doorway. "Don't screw this up. I like her."

Jamie dressed in a slow, deliberate measure. Immature, yes, as it would prolong his confession, but he couldn't help himself. He didn't want Loreнна to hate him for lying all this time.

But she said she loved him. So maybe she'd overlook the fact that he neglected to tell her he knew her father well or that he'd worked with the man on many pictures. And so what if he really didn't have a degree in veterinarian science much less have a practice in California, he could explain that away since he'd made an honest mistake spurring out his most recent film. Unconscionable, yes, but not the end of the world, right?

Then why did it take him three tries to knot the lace of his New Balance sneakers?

He took the back stairs down to the kitchen and found Loreнна at the marble-topped island. He leaned his shoulder against the wall and watched her move. Watched how she flitted about the room with an effortless grace as she mixed batter for pancakes and flipped over the bacon in the frying pan. She was in her element.

And she was beautiful. Not a done up beauty like he saw all over Hollywood, but true, natural beauty that stirred him any time she came

near. Her creamy skin begged his lips to roam over every inch. Her black curls invited his fingers to tunnel through.

He shifted as he hardened at the remembrance of her underneath him, the way her eyes darkened when he entered her. He couldn't remember ever wanting a woman as much as he did Loreнна. She'd cast a spell over him that for the life of him he didn't want to break.

He wanted to tell her about the movie, wanted to share his excitement with her, but he couldn't. Yet.

"Morning."

Jamie saw the smile cross Loreнна's face before she even turned all the way around. She moved the bacon off the burner and turned the flame down before she set a long griddle over it to warm. "Morning to you, too." She crossed the floor to him, threw her arms around his neck and planted a hearty kiss on his mouth. "I missed you."

His blood quickened. His pulse sped. "I was only gone twenty minutes."

She lowered her eyelids and her cheeks pinkened. "Twenty minutes longer than I wanted to be without you."

"Sweet talker." Jamie captured her mouth, indulged in a long slow kiss that threatened to burst his jeans' zipper.

When she pulled back, Jamie slid his hands down her arms and twined their fingers. "Can we talk...for a bit?"

Her smile dimmed.

Why was she so damn nervous? He was the one who needed to lighten his soul with a confession.

But still, her hands trembled in his as she said, "I haven't finished the breakfast yet."

"I'll help you then we can sit down?" He rubbed his thumbs over the backs of her hands. He needed to comfort her, somehow. Let her know it wasn't as bad as it seemed. He just had to convince himself that first.



She shook her head slowly. The smile faded completely. "I have two rooms booked for tomorrow afternoon and I have to get them ready. We can talk after that."

"Okay." He leaned forward and dropped a kiss on her mouth then released her hands. "What can I do to help?"

"I've got it mostly covered. I just need to set everything out."

She held up her hand to stop him when he started to offer to do that. He couldn't imagine what she thought, but he knew this wouldn't go as well as he hoped.

"Ashley will be here any minute to help. Go on out and sit with your friends. Butch was looking for you." She turned and walked back to the pitcher of batter and stirred it so hard some sloshed out the sides.

Dismissed, he pushed through the door to the dining room. Butch and the girls sat around the far table, huddled in conversation.

Courtney and Beth both beamed at him. "Congrats," they said in unison.

Butch stood and slapped his friend on the back. Sarge circled around their feet, his fuzzy pom-pom of a tail darted back and forth. "This is so great. I would say I can't believe it, but you deserve this. To think, my best friend is going to direct a movie." He clutched his hands to his chest and tilted his head back. "The power, the prestige. So much more than what you have now. This will open so many more doors for you. I can't wait. This is so awesome."

"Butch, cool it." Stephanie's sharp tone stilled them all.

"What? What did I say?" Butch dropped his hands and looked from Stephanie to Jamie and back.

"Did you tell her?" She twisted a butter knife around on the tabletop. "Is that why the long face?"

Jamie shoved his hands in his pockets and shook his head. "Not yet."

"Dammit, Jamie—" She broke off when Lorennna came out of the back with a tray piled high with pancakes and bacon.

Jamie made to help her carry it.

"I've got it." Her eyes didn't quite meet his. "Sit, you two."

Butch and Jamie took their seats as Loreнна set the tray in the middle of the table. "Since y'all are the only ones here, I'll just leave this where y'all can get at it easier." Her smile wavered. "Enjoy."

She turned and all but ran back into the kitchen.

"What the hell *did* you say to her?" Stephanie's accusation cut him to the quick.

Beth and Courtney glared at him. Butch crossed his arms and leaned back in his chair. Even Sarge glowered at him from the wooden floor.

"Whose friends are you guys anyway?"

"We're yours. That's why we don't want you to screw this up." Butch reached over and patted his arm. The others all nodded.

"I told him the same thing." Steph looked at Butch, her head bobbed back and forth in agreement. Then she turned an icy stare at Jamie. "Well?"

"I didn't say a damn thing to her. She wouldn't let me. We'll talk later when she has the rooms cleaned up for some new guests."

\* \* \*

Loreнна sniffed again. "It's from the dust," she told herself. Not from the fact that Jamie had been acting strange all morning.

Was he about to break up with her? Tell her that he'd made a mistake when he said he loved her? She had no idea, but something in him had changed.

She should have talked to him this morning, so he could get *whatever* off his chest. But she needed more time to shore up her nerves, although she doubted she'd be able to.

"Get a grip, Buttercup." She shook off her thoughts and finished tidying the two rooms then carried the dirty linens to the second floor laundry room. After that, she headed down the back stairs. She needed to add the new guests' info into her computer in the office. She could

hear someone in the dining room. Jamie and his gang went to get hamburgers at the diner. They must have come back to eat instead of staying in town.

Not ready to face Jamie yet, Loreнна snuck into the back door of her office. Inside the small wood-paneled room, she shut the door into the dining room with little more than the snick of the latch clicking into place. Ensconced in her work, she inputted the new data in the spreadsheet Luther customized to her business. She hit the print key and rolled her neck. God, she was so tense.

The fax machine beeped and spit out a message, which added it to the tray with several other sheets lying in it.

“Stephanie,” she mumbled to herself as she picked them up and tapped them on the desktop to straighten them. She tried not to look at the documents, she didn’t want to pry into the woman’s work, but a name caught her eye. *J. Hamilton*. Why did that name sound so familiar? She rubbed her forehead and squinted at the name. *J. Hamilton*.

“The actor in town yesterday.” She slapped a palm to her thigh. “That’s it. Luther said Jody Mitchell’s boy, Kyle, saw him.” Her brow scrunched and she leaned back in her chair. “How odd he didn’t say anything when Jamie and I saw him out at the park.”

Then she remembered the strange way the boys acted when they saw Jamie. They saluted him. And called him Sergeant Cameron.

Loreнна’s stomach rolled. Her hands shook.

Everything fell into place.

Mrs. Keller insisted Jamie looked like the “actor fellow”, the one in the military movies. And Olivia had constantly made mooneyes at him. Then, every time she asked about his practice, he changed topics.

God, could she have been a bigger fool? Tears pricked her eyes.

“No. I don’t believe it.” It all had to be an incredible coincidence. “Yeah, that’s it. It’s a coincidence. I’ll just make him tell me it’s not true.”

Loreнна eased out of the chair and clutched the faxes to her chest. She took a few deep breaths to calm her nerves before she pulled open the door to her office.

The voices in the next room rose and captured her attention. Her hand paused on the doorknob.

"Come on. Ziembicki offered you a huge chunk of change on this." Stephanie's voice sounded more persuasive than Loreнна had heard before. Loreнна pressed her ear to the door to hear better. Not the least bit ashamed to eavesdrop.

"Stephanie, I have put my heart and soul into getting this picture made."

Loreнна gasped. All doubt flew out the window. "Coincidence, my ass." She closed her eyes and pressed her forehead to the cool wooden door. "Dammit, Jamie." Loreнна slammed her fist on her thigh.

"If my name is on this as an actor or a director, I want the best. And I stand firm that Ziembicki let me cast Shauna even if she's an up-and-coming. I don't know why Ziembicki thinks he can pull this shit with me. He wouldn't do it to Spielberg."

Loreнна fought back tears which threatened to fall, but several persistent ones escaped and rolled down her cheek. Play her for a fool, would he? Lie to her this entire time? She rolled her shoulders to loosen the tension. Then she wiped away the tears and yanked open the door. She surprised herself when, as calm as can be, she walked to the table with Jamie, Stephanie and the rest of his entourage.

She saw Stephanie nudge Jamie's arm. He turned then shot out of his chair so fast it fell back to the floor. Butch and the girls all paled. Not one offered her so much as a hello.

"Loreнна, what are you..."

She smiled up at him. "Just putting some stuff in the computer." She patted his cheek and kept on around the table to where Stephanie sat. "These were in the tray for you." She made it to the far door before she turned back to the tableau of gaped-mouth guests. "Oh, and Jamie..."

His Adam's apple bobbed. Had she not been so pissed she might have laughed. "Yes?"

She tore her gaze away. Afraid to see his face when she knew the truth. "I think you're right. You stick to your guns." She worried the edge

of her shirt then mentally berated herself for not having the courage to face him. She raised her chin, held his gaze. "They wouldn't treat Spielberg like that. If you're half the director you are as an actor, you'll do well. I've never seen an actor as convincing as you when you told me you loved me."

She turned and ran out the front door and made a dash across the lawn to her truck. Behind the wheel, she headed for the front gate when Jamie tumbled out onto the porch flanked by his lying, scheming crew.

Trees passed by in a whirl and a blur. Tears made it impossible to see the road, so she edged the truck off to the shoulder and slammed the gearshift in park.

"Dammit!" Loreнна pounded her fist on the steering wheel. "Why did he lie?"

Sobs wracked her body and she slumped in a heap on the vinyl seat.

Men. They weren't worth the leather for the soles of their shoes. Men. You can't live with them, you can't reach the top shelf in the cabinets or kill those big, fat, hairy spiders with out them. Men. What did she need all that testosterone around her for anyway?

Too high, you get a stepladder. Big bug, you get an enormous flyswatter and squoosh the damn thing. And sex, as long as Duracell kept up their supply of "D" batteries...

She could do it without a man around. She had up to this point already.

But her mind flashed to Jamie.

Memories of his kisses, of his gentle hands as he brushed her curls back, inundated her. The echo of his words of love in her ear. His hands on her. The way his eyes darkened as he climaxed.

No. She didn't want to remember that lying jerk-off. "Jamie, you're a damn good actor."

She wiped furiously at the moisture on her cheeks with the sleeve of her sweatshirt. Then she put the truck back in gear and drove down the lane which lead into town. The Waterin' Hole sounded like an excellent

escape right about then. If she was going to drown in salty tears, she might as well add some tequila and lime to it.

## Chapter Eighteen

Butch watched Jamie pace the floor in front of the registration desk. The man's hair stuck out in every direction with as many times as he'd run his hands through it. Hell, Jamie'll probably be bald if Loreнна doesn't show up soon. She'd been gone for three hours and no one had any idea where to look for her. He'd been tempted to take Sarge, hop in his car and go look for her. But he didn't know the area and she could be halfway to Mexico by now. And he was afraid Jamie would implode if he left his friend's side.

"I told you. Did I not tell you?" Butch paced in opposite directions from Jamie. They'd meet in the middle and he'd chant his new mantra.

Jamie glared at his friend. "Thanks for not saying 'I told you so'."

Butch shrugged.

Luther stalked into the front room. "What the hell is going on?" He thrust his hands on his hips and crowded Jamie's personal space.

"I, ah...what do you mean?"

"Stephanie called all upset and said to get over here 'cause Loreнна's missing." The man's teeth ground and a muscle in his jaw jumped.

"She kinda got mad at me. And left."

Luther grabbed Jamie's collar and hauled him to his tiptoes. "What did you do to her?"

"Hey now, big fellow." Butch pulled at Luther's arm. *Great, this is all we needed.* He pushed and pulled at Luther's forearm but the body by Bowflex didn't budge. "This won't solve a darn thing."

"Maybe not." Luther's lips curled into a snarl. "But it would make me feel a hell of a lot better."

"Look, let me go." Jamie pushed at Luther's chest. "And I'll explain everything."

Luther didn't so much as bat an eye.

"If you want to kick my ass, get in line. Behind me. And Butch and Steph."

"Luther McGrew, unhand that boy right now." Butch saw Barbara Hughes come through the screen door. She carried a lacey veil and a wedding cake topper, which she set on the registration desk. "What's crawled up your backside?"

After a minute of contemplation, Luther shook Jamie then shoved him back into Butch.

*Brute*, Butch wanted to say, but thought better of it when the man flexed a bicep that was larger than his head.

"Mind telling me what's going on here?" Barbara elbowed her way into the middle of the fray.

"That's what I was trying to figure out."

"Hush now, Luther."

All five-foot-and-not-an-extra-inch of her stood up to the ogre. And oddly enough, the man backed off until he leaned up against the wall, his meaty arms crossed over his chest, a scowl on his face. Then the cotton candy-haired sprite turned her gaze on Butch then to Jamie.

Butch was proud when Jamie straightened his shoulders and took a step forward.

"Now, Jamie, tell me why Luther looked like he was about to waltz you all over Georgia."

What? Butch stared at her a moment and tried to figure out what the hell she was talking about, then decided one more thing might make his brain explode so he let it go.

"I, ah," Jamie, one of the more articulate actors in Hollywood, stumbled and stuttered. "Lorenna found something out and left here kinda upset. She's been gone for a few hours."



Barbara wrung her hands in front of her. "What could have upset her that much?"

"I'm afraid it was me." Jamie ducked his head and ran his hands through his hair again. "I sorta lied to her and she found out before I had a chance to tell her the truth." Then he said in a rush of words, "Which I was going to do this afternoon." He raised his hands in a defensive position when Luther balled his fists and pushed off the wall.

Butch puffed out his chest and moved next to Jamie.

"I see." Barbara's solemn nod shook her fuzzy coiffure. "Can you tell me what it was you lied to her about?"

*Here we go*, Butch thought as Sarge scampered down the stairs. He picked up his little buddy. The poor thing shook like no tomorrow, upset by the raised voices. "There, there now Sarge-ee-kins."

Jamie glanced over at his friend with a look that said, "You're not helping." Then turned back to Barbara and said, "My job."

"I don't see why that would make her disappear like that."

"I'm an actor."

*One of the best actors*, Butch added. *Nominated for two best supporting actors' roles before the age thirty. Box office blockbuster in his last four pictures. Soon-to-be-director.* But under the circumstances, he didn't think it prudent to offer up Jamie's resume.

"Oh. Oh." Barbara closed her eyes and rubbed her forehead.

"Let me guess, Sergeant Cameron?" Luther didn't hide the disgust in his voice.

"I'm sorry, Barbara. I never meant to hurt her." Jamie clasped Barbara's small hand in his own. "I love your daughter. Truly."

Luther snorted.

*I'm really beginning to dislike that man.*

"It's not your fault." She patted their joined hands. "It's mine."

*What?*

Jamie looked down at her. "What?"

"What?" Luther moved closer.

Butch had to fight the urge to take several steps backward, like to Louisiana.

“Let’s find my baby, and then I’ll explain it all to you.”

Why was she letting Jamie off the hook so easily? Butch rubbed Sarge’s head and glanced over at Steph huddled in the corner next to the girls. She shrugged and shook her head.

Jamie, too, shook his head. “I don’t...”

“Shh, now.” She reached up and stroked his cheek. “Luther, you get on the phone to Sheriff Biggs. Butch.”

He came to attention next to Jamie. “Yes, ma’am?”

“You take one of those girls with you and go into town, see if you can locate Loreнна’s truck.”

He nodded and waved Courtney over, handed her Sarge. “I’ll drive.”

Light chatter filled the room.

“Jamie, I need you to...” The phone at the desk rang and everyone held their collective breath.

*Ohpleaseohpleaseohplease.* Butch crossed his fingers, his toes and even his eyes.

“I’ll get it, Miss Barbara.” Luther lifted the receiver to his ear. “Yes? Hi, hon.” He ducked his head and closed his eyes. “Okay. We’ll be right there.” He set the phone back and looked at Barbara. “That was Ginny at The Waterin’ Hole. Loreнна’s been belly up to the bar for a couple of hours. Drunk off her ass and refuses to leave.”

“I’ll go get her.” Jamie dug in his pocket then pulled out his car keys.

“I don’t think that’s such...” Luther’s frown pulled down his face.

“I’ll go with him. Jamie and I have some stuff to discuss. Then Loreнна and I will have a long talk.”

\* \* \*

“I never meant to hurt her.”

"I know, dear. Neither did I, but it seems even the best intentions can hurt the ones you love."

Jamie spared the woman a glance as he sped down the main road into town. One unexpected turn after another left him unable to read any situation. When Lorennna walked out of her office that afternoon, he'd known, just known, in the pit of his stomach she'd overheard despite the calm look on her face. Then when Barbara said it was her fault... Well that just couldn't be. He couldn't let her take the blame for his own stupidity and cowardice.

"It's kind that you're trying to let me off the hook—"

"When her father and I split, I screwed up," she interrupted him. She kept her gaze pinned to her folded hands in her lap. "I didn't want Phil to have anything to do with her. I was mad at him for not being there for me so I was punishing him. And I was jealous of the glamorous life he led. I was afraid he'd take her away from me some day because he had so much more to offer her than I did."

"I thought if I told Lorennna that he didn't want to see her, she wouldn't want to go with him on their visits. And it worked. She'd kick and scream when he came to pick her up. I convinced him he needed to give her time. Eventually he stopped coming all together. For Lorennna's sake." Barbara shook her head. "She never saw the hundreds of letters and cards he sent her. But Phil loved her as much as I do."

"I know."

The woman's head swung around to look at him. "You do?"

"I met Phil when I started out in the business. My first two pictures were with him. He used to dote on his daughter, Ren."

"Ren. I forgot he called her that." A bitter laugh eked out then she sniffed. "I have a box of letters from him sittin' up in the top of my closet."

"Don't be so hard on yourself."

"How can I not? She hated her father, and I *knew* that, and now because I lied, she might lose you."

Jamie chuckled. "I'm not that easy to get rid of. Can I ask you one thing?" He waited for her to nod. "Phil saw her, knew how she did in school, her dance recitals and other things. How did he know if you shut him out?"

"Private detectives."

"Really?"

"Oh, I didn't know at the time. I found out at the reading of his will. Loreнна refused to go. I guess if she had, we wouldn't be going through all this because she'd know he'd spent half his fortune on hiring people to keep track of his daughter.

"He left the rest of his money to her. That's how she opened the inn. She didn't want to take it at first. I had to practically force her to. But finding out all he went through to keep tabs on his baby, I knew convincing her to use the money instead of struggling to work hard enough to *someday* buy the house was the least I could do for him."

She sniffled into a handkerchief again. "You know he never did remarry or have any more children. Of course, the press had a field day with that. Likened him to Rock Hudson if you know what I mean. But Phil had had his family and when we left, he said he didn't want another one.

"Loreнна's gonna hate me." Barbara pounded the arm rest on the door.

"No, she's not." Jamie tried to comfort her, but he didn't know for sure how Loreнна would react. This was bigger than he could have ever imagined.

"Look at how mad she is and you only lied about your job. I lied about her entire life."

Jamie reached over and took her hand. "It'll be all right. She might need some time to adjust. That's all."

"You're a special person, Jamie Crawford."

"Let's hope your daughter thinks so too." He squeezed her hand and pulled into the parking lot of the bar.

Jamie followed the pink bob of hair through a decent sized crowd toward the back to a long saloon-style bar. A tall lean woman stood behind the bar with a carafe of coffee in one hand and a phone in the other. "Drink this. Or I'll call your mama to come pick you up," she said to a lump at the end of the bar. It wasn't until then Jamie noticed Loreнна—the lump.

Her hair stuck out every which way. Her head lolled to one side held up by her hand with an elbow smack dab in the middle of the bar. "Call my mom, see if I care."

"Loreнна Buttercup Beauchamp." Barbara slapped her hands onto the bar. Loreнна just about jumped two feet in the air off her stool. "Just what in the hell has gotten into you?"

"Aw, Mom, not the name again." She white-knuckled the edge of the bar. "Why did you have to give me such a stupid name?" Her words slurred. Her lids sat half-mast.

She turned from her mother. He knew the instant she saw him. Her eyes narrowed to little slits. "You. Get the hell out of here." She slammed her fist on the bar. "Ginny. Call the sheriff. This man—" she swung her hand around, toward Jamie, "—is 'personating a human being. I'll call him myself." She lunged at the phone in Ginny's hand.

"Back off, girl." Ginny took a step back. "I like you, but I'll knock you on your ass if I have to."

"I'm so sorry, Ginny. We'll get her right out of here."

"M not goin' with you." Loreнна crossed her arms over her chest and tried to sit but she missed the stool.

Jamie jumped forward and grabbed her before she hit her head on the bar. "Let's go."

"You can't make me."

"Oh yeah?" Jamie chuckled. "Wanna bet?" He tossed her over his shoulder in a fireman's carry.

"Hey!" She wiggled and struggled against him.

"I hope this covers it." Barbara reached into her purse then handed Ginny a couple of bills.

Ginny accepted the money, slipped it in her pocket then waved them off. "Take care of her."

"I want the sheriff. You can't manhandle me like this. Who do you think you are?"

Her fists pounded his back with little force and she tried to kick Jamie but he pinned her feet to his chest with his free hand.

"Do you even know who you are, Mr. Actor? Whatever the hell your real name is."

"My name is Jamie Hamilton Crawford."

"Sure it is." She settled as they stepped through the doors to the cool night air.

Jamie'd gotten a few steps when Loreнна stiffened.

"I'm gonna be sick."

Jamie hurried her over to the bushes and dropped her to her feet where she swayed. He gripped her waist as she emptied her stomach onto the gravel parking lot. Barbara patted her daughters back. "There now. Don't you feel better?"

"Not really." Loreнна moaned and stood.

"Can you walk or do you want me to carry you?"

"Walk, please."

The trio stumbled their way back to Jamie's car. Barbara sat in the backseat with her daughter and cradled her like a child.

Soft sobs echoed in the car and Jamie wasn't entirely sure which of the two cried, but he kept his mouth shut and his eyes on the road. It took less than ten minutes to get back to the inn, where every light in the place blazed into the night.

Luther, Butch and the girls filed out onto the porch when he pulled in.

"She okay?" Butch asked when Jamie made his way across the yard and up the wooden steps.

Jamie shrugged. "She'll have one hell of a hangover in the morning."

"That's not what I meant."

"I don't know. I didn't have a chance to talk to her. But she and her mother have a lot to talk about first."

Butch nodded. He patted his friend's shoulder. "Hang in there. She's worth it." He turned and ushered the girls back in the house.

Luther eyed Jamie from across the porch. "I can see how much she means to you man. But I'm telling you now, I will break you in half if you hurt her again."

Jamie didn't doubt that for a nanosecond. "That is the furthest thing in my mind."

"Keep it that way." With that, he loped off the porch to where Barbara and Lorennna still stood next to the car. They exchanged a few words then he hugged Lorennna, kissed Barbara's cheek and headed for his truck. He honked once and Jamie's mouth about hit his chest when he saw Stephanie come from the back of the house with a small bag looped over her shoulder. She gave Jamie a quick wave then hopped in the truck with Luther.

"Power to you, my friend," he said and rubbed his hand over his face. "Barbara, I'm gonna head up. Please don't hesitate if you need me for anything."

She nodded and waved.

"Good night, Lorennna. Despite what you think, I do love you."

The older woman smiled, but Lorennna acted as if she hadn't heard a single word.

"Good night." Jamie wondered why his chest constricted so, like he lost something he never knew he wanted.

## Chapter Nineteen

Fuzzy tongue. Head full of jackhammers. Stomach on spin cycle. And she now could say, without a doubt, she knew what gum stuck to the bottom of a shoe went through.

A cool hand covered her cheek.

“Just kill me now, Mom. Put me out of my misery.” She’d downed two aspirin, drank a gallon of water, brushed her teeth six times and took *two* long, hot showers, still she fought to keep down the meager contents in her stomach.

She swallowed hard. “What time is it?”

“Eight.”

“A.M. or P.M.?”

Her mother chuckled. “In the morning. You slept for about ten hours.”

“Uhh. I swear I’ll never drink again as long as I live.” Loreнна moaned and looked at her mother.

Barbara chuckled again. “It’ll get better, I promise.” She hugged her daughter and filled a glass with water. “Drink this.”

“I don’t know if I can.”

“Drink.”

“Yes, ma’am.”

Loreнна slept like the dead the night before. No dreams. Few memories of what happened at the bar. “Did I puke all over Jamie last night?”

“No.” Barbara smoothed Loreнна’s hair off her forehead.



“Too bad,” she mumbled under her breath.

“He got you to the bushes first.”

“Uh.” That was worse. He’d seen her retch and slobber like the fool drunk she’d been. What more could a woman ask of a man? She sipped the water and eyed the toast her mother set on the nightstand. *Food, no, anything but that.*

“When you can,” Barbara said and patted her hand as if she read Loreнна’s mind. Then she sat in the club chair in the corner. “I have a confession to make.”

Loreнна gripped the glass with both hands. Her head pounded with every increased beat of her heart. She didn’t like the tone of her mother’s voice.

Instead of saying anything, Barbara pulled a large shoebox out from under the chair then stood and handed it to Loreнна. “These are from your dad.”

Tears clogged the back of her throat and her stomach rolled harder. “I don’t understand, Mom.”

“When your father and I divorced, he wanted you. Wanted joint custody at the very least.” Barbara’s lower lip trembled.

“But I thought...” Her head swam. Tears blurred her vision.

“I know and that’s my fault.” She sat next to Loreнна and cupped her cheek. “I loved you so much I was afraid he’d take you away from me. You know he’d always be away ‘on location’ somewhere. I couldn’t bear to be away from you like. God, you in another country.” Barbara shivered.

“Once your father stopped coming around, I thought what I had done was for the best.” She sniffled and pulled a handkerchief from her pocket. “I wanted you to have as normal a childhood as possible, not jaunting all over the world with your dad.”

“So instead, you married every man you met and moved me all over the United States.” When her mother’s face fell, Loreнна sat up straighter. “I’m sorry. I didn’t mean for that to sound so harsh.”

"No, no, I needed to hear that. And it's true. I truly just wanted what was best for you and unfortunately the men who I chose weren't what was best for me. I do regret that. I..." Barbara waved off whatever she was about to say. "But back to your father, at first I didn't want you to see the letters. I got into the habit of just throwing them in a box. Later I didn't know how to tell you about them."

Lorennna's chest hurt. Pain like she'd never known vibrated through every inch of her. And she knew damn well it had nothing to do with the tequila from the night before.

"Please don't hate me."

"I could never hate you, Mom. I just..." Tears streaked down her cheeks. "I just don't understand."

Barbara shrugged and wiped her nose. "A major lapse in judgment which I can't take back. Please read the letters. Let your dad speak for himself. He did love you." She rose off the bed and kissed Lorennna on the top of her head.

At the door, she looked back. "Please consider giving Jamie another chance, too. He loves you too." She blew Lorennna a kiss and shut the door behind her.

Jamie.

She couldn't think about him at the moment.

She stared at the box as if it might jump out and bite her.

"All these years. All these damn years." She swiped at the tears on her cheeks, took a deep breath and ripped the top off the box.

"So many." She scooped up a handful. Noted the postmarks. "Japan. Australia. England." She could almost understand her mother's reason. He traveled so many places for his work. She'd been to Ireland and France as a child once for a vacation the other a film shoot.

She opened the first letter. Air stalled in her chest.

*Hi, Ren...* Tears spilled again. She'd forgotten his nickname for her. He thought Buttercup was too silly.

*It's Daddy. How are you doing? We saw Stonehenge today. Can't see why everyone's so worked up by a couple of rocks. Good luck at the spelling bee next week. I know you'll knock 'em dead. I love you.*

Spelling bee? In sixth grade? The only one she'd participated in?

How did he know?

She hadn't talked to him in years at that point. How *did* he know?

She looked back at the paper. *P.S. I picked up the stuffed sheep in Ireland. Hope you enjoy it.*

She wracked her brain. And yes, the sheep came just before the spelling bee. Why she could pinpoint it, she wasn't sure.

She read through several missives, each tore her heart more than the last. She finally had to stop when she got to a birthday card with a short note inside.

*Hi Ren, I miss you so much. I wish you could come with me to Australia, but I understand what your mom says about you needing to settle into the new school. I love you, my sweet, sweet girl. Happy twelfth birthday. Dad.*

Lorenna shoved the box aside.

Her dad loved her, truly loved her. A part of her heart which she'd closed off pried itself open. Warmth spread through her and tears filled her eyes. "Oh, Dad. I never knew. I've hated you all these years and it was all based on lies." She swiped at her nose and sucked in a deep breath. "I do understand what Mom did, but I wish...I wish... I miss you."

Lorenna curled into a ball on her bed and sobbed like a child.

Some time later, she started from a knock on the door. "Come in."

"Your mom said you needed to eat something." Jamie peeked his head around the edge of the door.

She knew she'd have to face him sooner or later. What a better distraction from her father than her ruined love life. "Come on in."

He shouldered open the door and carried a tray heaped with croissants, strawberries, cantaloupe, thinly sliced ham, a small pot of tea

and a bowl of something... “Are those lemon cookies?” Her stomach growled.

“Yeah. She said these were all your favorites.”

Lorennna pushed the box to the other side of the bed and patted the empty space in front of her. “Set it right here.”

His musky scent warred with the food’s heavenly aroma as he did. Without another word, he turned to go.

But she couldn’t bear to see him walk out the door. “Would you like to have some?”

Jamie swiveled on his heel. Hope flared in his eyes.

Anger subsided bit by bit. Her arms ached to reach for him, but she couldn’t yet. So she offered an olive branch instead. “I can’t eat all this.” She shook her head and scanned the tray. “My mother...” She trailed off and looked back up at him. “I can’t eat half of this.” She laughed for the first time in almost twenty-four hours. “Will you stay?”

“You sure?”

“Yes. Sit. Please.”

Jamie grabbed the club chair from the corner and dragged it to the side of the bed. “How are you feeling?” He reached out for her cheek but pulled away before he touched her. “You look like hell.”

“Always the sweet talker.” She tossed one of the linen napkins at him—her mother had provided two. *Hmm, imagine that.*

“Are you okay?”

“I’m getting there.” She took a sip of hot tea and let the warm liquid smooth her sore throat. She rubbed her temple. “Captain Morgan will have to look for a new first mate. That ship has sailed without me.”

Jamie chuckled. He didn’t eat or comment, just watched her.

That was okay, she wasn’t necessarily in the mood for intelligent conversation at that moment. So to pass the time, Lorennna picked up a croissant and broke off the corner. Her stomach didn’t revolt when she chewed it slowly or when she swallowed. She took a few, more tentative bites then braved a piece of fruit.

"I can't believe how stupid I was." She set her fork on the corner of the tray. "I'm so embarrassed." She covered her face with her hands. "Ginny called my mom. Sheesh."

"Better than to let you drive. Although, I doubt you'd have it made across the parking lot."

"Thanks for trying to cheer me up." She shot him a wan smile. "And thanks for coming to get me with mom last night. I'm sorry you had to see me like that."

"Oh God, don't you apologize." He leaned forward. Put his elbows on his knees. "I'm the one that really needs to apologize. I knew I shouldn't have lied to you." He held up his hand. "No, please let me get all this out."

"I had no intention on lying, but when you asked me what I did, my last picture job popped out of my mouth. And when you didn't know who I was, I thought it would be nice to have anonymity for a while. That never happens." He shook his head. "But I didn't set out to lie to you. Then things heated up between us and the deeper we got, the harder it was to tell you."

He shoved his hands through his hair. "Then my damn staff showed up."

"Staff? So they really do work for you?"

"Yeah. Courtney's my assistant. Beth works for the PR firm who I hired years ago. She has other clients but we're friends and she hangs around a lot."

"And Stephanie's *your* agent then?"

"Yes. But she does have other clients, too."

"And Butch? What does he do?"

Jamie shook his head. "Butch is my friend. He's a stylist by trade but everything else he or I told you was the truth."

"Except..."

Jamie blushed. "Yeah, with that one little exception."

"Why'd they all come down here if you wanted anonymity?"

He rubbed his chin and leaned back in the chair. "I kind of left in the middle of negotiations without telling anyone. When Butch and Lee broke up and canceled their reservations, I knew no one would think to look for me here." He laced his fingers together and draped them on his stomach. He shook his head as a smile tipped the corners of his mouth. "Who knew Butch would decide to come down here alone. Then he called Stephanie and boom, the whole gang."

"And here I thought it was the remarkable accommodations that brought you all here."

Jamie grimace when she didn't quite hide the bitterness in her voice.

"Butch originally booked it because of that. I've learned more about drapes and bedspreads than I ever thought I would. He says this place is spectacular."

Lorennna rolled her eyes.

"Like the owner."

She sighed. "Please. Flattery will get you absolutely nowhere right now."

"Sorry." Jamie shifted the tray to the floor and sat in its place.

Lorennna's shoulders stiffened, but she didn't move back.

Hands cupped on Lorennna's face, he leaned into her. "I will do anything you ask as long as you promise to try to forgive me."

Lorennna's heart pounded faster.

His musky cologne wrapped around her, overpowered her. He dropped a feather light kiss on her lips. "I never meant to hurt you."

Her eyelids grew heavy and then fell completely when his breath tickled her skin.

Two more kisses landed on the corners of her mouth. "I do love you."

He kissed her square on the mouth. Not too much force. Not too insistent. But waves of desire ribboned through her all the same.

Even as pissed as she was at him, he still had such influence over her. Made her want him with just a kiss. She sighed.

"I meant ever word I said out by the creek." He kissed her closed eyes lids. "Every single word."

Jamie kissed one cheek and the other. Then trailed his mouth from one corner of her mouth to the other in little butterfly kisses. Back and forth. He increased the pressure by small increments until her blood roared with desire.

She circled his neck with her arms and pulled him down atop her. "Don't...ever," she said between kisses, "lie to...me again."

"Never."

"I love you, Jamie."

He shuddered in her arms.

Who had the power?

She didn't have time to think about it when his tongue slipped between her parted lips. "Mmm," she moaned and wiggled up against him. His erection pressed into her thigh.

Then her stomach grumbled, empty for too long.

Jamie laughed and tapered off the glorious kisses. He pulled back and looked down at her. "You need to eat."

"Sounds good to me." Loreнна wiggled until she could push Jamie to his back then she straddled his hips and nibbled on his neck. "Bon appétit."

\* \* \*

"Did you get enough to eat, honey?"

Loreнна's cheeks burned bright red and she dipped her head at her mother's question. Jamie fought hard not to laugh out loud.

"Yeah, Mom, I'm good." She pushed her plate away. When Barbara reached for it, Jamie stood with his own plate in his hand and grabbed it. "I'll get it, Miss Barbara." He placed the dishes in the sink. "I'll be back in a sec, need to run upstairs."

Barbara had hovered around her daughter since they emerged from the bedroom. Clear pain hung in the older woman's eyes

And to Lorennna's credit, though she tensed every so often, she never shooed her mother away and made every attempt to put her mother at ease.

Another reason he loved her so much. "I just hope they can work it out," he said as he ran up the stairs.

"Jamie!" Stephanie rounded the corner into his chest. "It's done." A huge smile split her face. "They agreed to everything. Every last change."

He shook his head. "What?"

"Ziembicki. They signed the papers. And all we need is your signature and it's a done deal. They're going to fax them later today." She hugged a stack of papers to her chest and all but bounced up and down.

"Oh, that's..." He rubbed his hand over a tightness in his chest. Damn. This movie contract put him in New Zealand for the next year at least to film. And postproduction in California for another couple of months. Nowhere near Lorennna. But that was okay. She said she loved him and surely she'd come with him. Now that he found her, he sure as hell didn't want to be away from her. And neither would she.

"Jamie?"

He swiped at his chest again. "What? Sorry, no that's great." For the first time since the idea birthed in his brain, his heart didn't pummel his ribs with excitement. But he forced a smile and said, "I can't wait."

"What is it, Jamie?"

He turned up his smile. He wasn't an actor for naught. "Nothing. Honest." He reached over and patted her shoulder. "I just ran up here to get a picture of Phil I remembered I had with me. Lorennna's waiting for me downstairs."

"Sure. But remember, you'll need to look over those contracts and sign them when Ziembicki faxes them back with the final draft."

"Just let me know when they come through." He ducked past her into his room.



He stood for the longest time in the middle of the green room with his hands on his hips, head titled back and eyes closed. Deep, deep breaths rolled in and out of his nostrils as he fought to remain calm.

*Damn. Why is this happening now?*

Why did it feel like if he chose Loreнна or the movie he'd lose the other?

And worse, before he'd met Loreнна there wouldn't have been the slightest hesitation when the movie deal came to fruition. But now with an easy lay and he was ready to chuck the entire deal, the sweetest deal of his lifetime.

A growl bubbled in his chest and he balled his hands into a fist. If someone else had said that to him, he'd have been obligated to kick the shit out of them. But as it was virtually impossible and he paid astronomical fees to insure his damn face, he didn't think it a wise action to pursue.

"Mom, help me out here." He opened his eyes. He gazed unseeing heavenward as he imagined his mom and pop together high up above. "You once told me I'd know the one when I met her. And I swear this 'bout dropped me to my knees.

"I need help. Words of wisdom. Anything." He rubbed his hand down his face. "I'd ask Pop, but the sage that he was would probably tell me to throw her over my shoulder and carry her straight to the Justice of the Peace." A smile stretched his mouth. "Sorry, Pop, I know you'd mean well but a romancer you weren't. You're just lucky you tripped Mom on that cruise ship and had to pull *her* out of the pool instead of some beefy guy named Earl.

An image of Loreнна in his arms when he woke that morning flashed through his head. The way her pale blue eyes darkened just before she shattered under him. Then he tried to imagine not waking to her morning after morning. Not having her shudder around him as he plunged into her. Hell, just not having her smile up at him when he told a stupid joke, and a loneliness he'd never known before settled into his

chest. He had to be with her. Had to stay with her one way or the other. She was already his and he'd keep it that way.

"Damn straight." He clapped his hands together as a calm raked over him. "She's mine and I love her."

With a jaunty kick to his step, he moved about the room. At the foot of his bed, he stopped and surveyed the area. Where had he put his portfolio? Despite the sabbatical, despite wanting anonymity, he had gotten into the habit of carrying the damn thing around no matter where he went. In his suitcase in the corner, he spotted the black leather binder poking out of the front pocket.

Folder tucked under his arm, he clomped back down the steps and found Loreнна and her mother in a teary embrace. He backed out of the room and gave the two women and moment to themselves. He was glad Loreнна didn't hold a grudge against her mother. He didn't think she could go too long without the older woman in her life.

After a few minutes, he cleared his throat and treaded heavy across the wooden floor. "Found it."

"What's that, Jamie?" Barbara slipped her arm around her daughter's shoulders.

"My portfolio." He motioned for them to join him at the closest table. "I have a few shots from the first couple of movies I did and Phil is in them."

"Oh, well, then. I'll just leave you two alone to look over that."

"No, Mom." Loreнна grabbed the older woman's hand. "Stay please."

Barbara smiled and sat next to her daughter. Jamie laid the folder on the table and flipped to the third page.

"This was the first movie I did with your dad." Jamie tried to gage the emotion on her face when her eyes lit on her father. "This was almost fifteen years ago."

Loreнна traced her finger over her father's face. Her shoulders shook with a sniffle but she didn't say a word.

“Look at how young you are.” Barbara glanced up at him. “Just a baby.”

Heat infused his cheeks.

“Speaking of babies, the two of you would make wonderful babies.”

## Chapter Twenty

“Mother!” Loreнна tensed. She glanced over at Jamie who looked like he swallowed a big hairy bug. “I...I...Mother.”

Barbara snickered. “What? I might be old but I’m not blind. I’m happy you’ve found someone.” She patted Jamie on his ashen cheek.

“Yes, but Mom, you’re jumping way ahead of us here.” But Loreнна wanted to agree with her mother. She had caught herself more than once trying to imagine what—if they ever had children—they might look like. If a little girl with Jamie’s blond hair and her blue eyes would capture the attention of every male around. Or if a fair-skinned little boy with black hair and his dad’s gray eyes would run her ragged as he tried to help, but broke her favorite pitcher.

Jamie’d commented about what beautiful children she’d make, so why the sudden aversion towards them. Of course, he’d never mentioned he wanted children. She’d kind of assumed he would. *But you know what they say when you assume...*

Loreнна wanted to correct her mother, set the record straight, if not to keep Barbara from saying something like that again, but also to assure Jamie she didn’t have mommy-pangs emanating out the wazoo. But Jamie stared down at his hands and Barbara had returned her attention back to the portfolio. “Oh my, you’ve worked with some of the best, haven’t you?” She proceeded to rattle off names of actors.

Some Loreнна knew, some she hadn’t a clue. But by the sheer magnitude of them, her head spun.

“I’ll admit my movie watching days have been lax over the years but I have seen a couple of these movies.” She volleyed her gaze between

Jamie and the glossy eight-by-tens. "I can't believe I hadn't recognized you before."

"The wonders of make-up and costumes."

"Yes, indeed," Barbara agreed. "I remember those days. I dabbled in acting myself."

Lorennna sat straighter. "I didn't know that."

"Nothing much." She patted her pink do. "Just a couple of parts as a background filler in Phil's early pictures."

"Hmm." Lorennna rubbed her chin then scooted the book closer to her mother when the older woman asked about the buffalo in the shot with Jamie dressed in a western getup.

Lorennna took the moment to sit back from the pair as Jamie told her mother about a particularly grueling shoot in Montana in the winter of ninety-two.

From her mother and Jamie's conversation she realized he was more than just an actor. He had a huge career which had already spanned one decade and most of another. A knot formed in the pit of her stomach. But she tried to shake off the unease, tried to tell herself that it didn't matter. Jamie said he loved her and she knew she was crazy about him. Everything else would fall into place.

But would it? If she were so fortunate to marry a Hollywood jet-setter, would she learn to cope?

"Now who's getting ahead of herself?"

"What was that, dear?"

"Nothing, Mom." She pushed her chair back. "I need to finish a couple of last minute things before the new guests arrive. No, no," she said when her mom and Jamie rose from the table. "You two sit and enjoy. It won't take me long."

She took the back steps up to the second floor. Nothing needed to be cleaned. She and Ashley had done a thorough job the day before. But she needed to think. And she couldn't do that with Jamie around.

She sat on the bottom step which led to the third floor and dropped her head in her hands. Damn but she'd had an interesting week. More had happened to her physically and emotionally in six days than had over the last few years. But she was sure she didn't want to change a second of it, because if she did, she wouldn't have met Jamie.

That also made her realize, Jamie only had a day and a half left on his stay with her.

"Damn, damn, damn. Why couldn't he really be a vet a not a globe-trotting actor?"

\* \* \*

"Welcome, welcome." Loreнна held the door open for the second couple that afternoon. "Mr. and Mrs. Jordan?"

"Yes." The pretty woman nodded. "Ana and Cliff."

Loreнна wrote their names in the old-fashioned registry book. "I hope your trip from Dallas was good."

"No complaints." Cliff looped his arm over his wife's shoulder.

"Wonderful." Loreнна pulled the keychain from the drawer. "If you'll follow me, I'll show you up to your room."

She preceded them up the stairs. At the top, she ran smack dab into Jamie. "Sorry."

"You okay?" He gripped her arms and steadied her.

Before she could nod, the woman behind her shrieked then made little high-pitched panting noises.

Jamie leaned around Loreнна and looked at the other woman. "I guess I should ask if you're okay."

"I...I...I. You're J. Hamilton. Oh my God, Cliff. It's J. Hamilton." Ana Jordan popped up and down on the balls of her feet and rubbed her hands together in front of her. "Where's the camera? Cliff, do you have the camera?"

She grabbed on to Jamie's arm and almost knocked Loreнна back down the stairs.

"You are my favorite actor. I have seen every single movie you've done. What are you doing out here in the middle of nowhere?"

"I'm on vacation." He poured on a hundred-watt smile even though Loreнна knew he was none too happy.

"I just can't believe this. I would never have thought I'd run into Sergeant Cameron out in the Hill country of Texas."

"That was the plan," Loreнна heard Jamie say under his breath.

"This is so exciting." Ana threw her arm around Jamie's waist. "Come get in here too, hon." Ana waved at Cliff.

"Can you take our picture?" Cliff offered the camera to Loreнна.

"Sure." Loreнна's hands shook but she held the digital camera in front of her and framed the trio then snapped off two quick shots.

"Thanks." Cliff retrieved the camera.

"Um, your room is right here." Loreнна pushed through the group and opened the door to the largest room on the second floor. She went through her spiel of food times and whatnot, pretty sure Ana hadn't heard a word she said as she fawned over Jamie and batted her long eyelashes at him.

"Great, thank you." Cliff gave her a quick nod. "Let the man get back to his vacation." He grabbed his wife's shoulders and steered her into the room. "Appreciate the picture."

"But, but, but..." Ana stuttered until the door closed.

When the sturdy wood separated the two couples Loreнна could still hear her. "Me and J. Hamilton. I can't believe it. Where's the cell? I gotta call Marcy."

Loreнна shook her head. "Is it always like that?"

"Naw," Jamie rubbed his hand over his spiky hair, "sometimes fans are excited to see me."

"Ha, ha." She slugged his shoulder.

“Ooo. Just for that,” He snagged her hand and pulled her down the hall. “I’m going to drag you back to my lair and have my wicked way with you.”

“Are you now?” She dug her heels into the rug, but it did little to keep Jamie from getting her halfway down the hall. Loreнна’s sides ached with laughter.

“Too slow,” he mumbled.

“What?”

Instead of answering her, Jamie picked her up and threw her over his shoulder. “Much better.” He stalked down the hall to his door. He smacked her butt once with his large hand. “Be still, woman.”

“Jamie Crawford. What will your fans down the hall think?”

She heard him chuckle then say, “That I’m lucky.”

The scenery changed from the hall rug to the one in Jamie’s room. Next thing she knew Jamie tossed her on his bed. He hopped up, too, and straddled her hips.

“Now. What to do with my prize?” He tapped his finger on his chin then leaned down and dropped a kiss on her mouth. “I guess I’ll just have to love you forever.”

Loreнна stiffened and dodged the next kiss.

“What’s wrong?” Jamie scooted off of her.

“Tomorrow,” she sat up against the headboard, “you go home.” She fought off the tears which stung her eyes. “Back to California.”

Jamie moved up beside her. He picked up her hand and laced their fingers together. “Hey.” He turned her hand over. “Where’s the ring?”

“Here.” She pulled a gold chain from under her shirt and showed him the ring that dangled from it. “I didn’t want to break it when I did the dishes earlier.”

“I love you, Loreнна.” He kissed her fingers and tightened his grip. His gaze moved to a point across the room. “I want you to come with me. When I leave tomorrow. I want you there by my side. Will you move in with me?”



Breath stalled. *He wants me* was the first thing her head chanted. But then her stomach rolled. "I can't, Jamie."

"Why not?"

"This is my home, where I work. *This* is where I live."

"You won't have to work again. I have enough money to support both of us. I want you to come with me. I can't stand the thought of leaving you behind."

She noticed the omission of marriage. Did that mean he just wanted her to move to California without a legal binding tie? Almost like a kept woman. Why did that rankle?

She did a mental headshake. Jamie probably hadn't meant to insult her. His kind heart just wanted to offer her all he had to give. All but what mattered most. "I don't care about your money."

He chuckled. "I never thought you did. I'm just saying you won't ever have to want for anything."

"You don't understand."

He shook his head and interrupted her, "You've done a great job here." He cupped her cheek in his hand. "Hell, just listen to Butch go on and on about the inn."

"This isn't a joke. I worked damn hard to get this inn up and running. I went without a lot of stuff so the inn could prosper. And it finally is."

"Yes, and..." He shook his head. "I don't see why *you* have to be here to run it."

"You want me to give all this up?"

"Not give it up, just... Oh hell, yes, I guess I do. I don't want you to sell it or anything, Can't you hire someone to watch over the place?"

"No. I...I can't Jamie." She crawled off the bed and went to the window. Lorennna looked out over her acreage, her land. "I built my own security here."

Jamie came up behind her and laced his arms around her waist.

“When I thought my father didn’t want me, then when my mother jumped from one man to another, I told myself I would never depend on anyone to take care of me. This place is the security I never had growing up. I can’t just walk away, Jamie. I love you but I can’t give this up.”

He rested his chin atop her head. Heavy breaths feathered her curly bangs.

“I know you can’t possibly understand. And it’s not that I don’t trust you...” Fear wracked her body. Jamie’s arms tightened around her.

“I think I do.” He kissed her temple. “I shouldn’t have asked you to uproot your entire life.”

He stood behind her, quiet, still, for so long she might have wondered if he had fallen asleep if it weren’t physically impossible for him to stay like that. Then he heaved a heavy sigh with such a forlorn resonance her heart ripped for some unknown reason.

“I have to go back home tomorrow, I have some ADR to finish up on my last picture.”

“ADR?”

“Automatic Dialogue Replacement.”

“Oh, gotcha.”

His chest shook against her back with his laughter and he kissed her temple again. “After that, I will come back here. I don’t have another project coming up—” his voice caught but she wasn’t sure why, “—until the beginning of next year. And that’s only a short stint in Florida. Maybe you can come with me, as a sort of vacation.”

“A compromise?”

“Yes.”

“Are you sure? I feel like you’re uprooting *your* life, that you’re giving up more than me.”

“I’m not giving up anything I can’t live without. But you,” he turned her in his arms until she faced him, “you, I don’t think I can breathe without.” His mouth covered hers, his lips soft and tender. “I love you

Lorennna. More than I thought I'd ever find," he whispered against her mouth. Then his tongue nudged her lower lip until she opened for him.

A tingle worked from her toes up until her head swam with desire. Lorennna pulled back. "Hey, what about Spielberg?"

"What?"

"That man that wouldn't treat Spielberg like that, what was that all about?"

He looked into her eyes for the longest time. "It's nothing. Something we were working on. No big deal."

## Chapter Twenty-One

"I'll be right there, Mom." Loreнна crossed the dining room to her office. "Let me put this in the file." She pulled at the curl at her temple. One week until her mother's wedding and so far, everything seemed to be falling into place.

*Famous last words*, a tiny voice said in the back of her head.

"Na-na-na-na. I'm not listening," she warned the voice.

All the arrangements were made and ready for the big day. A few last minute details remained but Luther and Ashley had them under control. "Delegation is a wonderful tool." She murmured as she rubbed the crease in her forehead.

The inn, as always, ran smoothly. Both new couples settled into their rooms with no problem despite the original fanfare when they met Jamie.

The downside, she only had one night left with Jamie before he went back to California for a couple of weeks. But then he'd be back. And hell, if he didn't ask her to marry him, she might just pop the question herself. She was a modern woman and she knew he loved her.

"Yeah, that's what I'm going to do." A smile broke across her face. She'd never asked a man to marry her before. Lightness and excitement surrounded her. She clapped her hands together and hurried through the Inn.

In her office, the whir of the fax machine sounded when she closed the file cabinet drawer. "Probably for Stephanie." She scooped up the papers when they fell into the tray.

At first, she didn't know what she was looking at. But at the mention of the man she'd heard them speak of the other night, Ziembicki, she read the page with slow deliberation.

"It's a contract." She ran her finger half way down. "To shoot a movie for..." She gasped and the contract fluttered to the floor. Her hands trembled, but she picked it back up. "Twenty-million dollars. That can't be right." She reread the paragraph four times.

"Ho-ly shit."

Papers held tight to her chest, Loreнна left her office.

"Buttercup, hon, what's wrong?"

"Uh, nothing, Mom. I'll be back in a minute. Stephanie got some, uh, papers that I need to give her." A tremulous smile moved her mouth. "I'll be right back down to go over the seating chart."

Her mother narrowed her eyes but didn't comment any further.

Her feet barely touched the stairs as she raced up the two floors. A deep breath and a push of her curls at the nape of her neck readied her. She knocked on the wooden door.

"Oh. Luther." She took a step back. "I didn't...I need to speak with Stephanie real quick."

Luther opened the door wider and let her pass. "I've gotta run. I'll be back at eight to pick you up." He winked at Stephanie then patted Loreнна on the head. "See ya, girlie."

Loreнна waited several beats after the door shut then looked at Stephanie. "This came through just a minute ago for you."

Stephanie surveyed the papers and a huge smile spread across her face. "Great. Thanks."

Loreнна stood by the closed door and worried the hem of her shirt. "Can I ask you a question?"

"Mmm-hmm." Stephanie kept scanning the sheets of paper, picked up a pen and made a note or two on it. Then she looked up and smiled at Loreнна. "Sorry. Come have a seat." She motioned to the chaise at the end of the bed.

“Is this a pretty big deal?”

“A ‘big deal’ would be a *major* understatement. This is huge.”

Her heart sank. A lump clogged her throat. She fought to speak with a clear emotionless voice. “What would happen if Jamie decided not to do it?”

“Besides career suicide?” Stephanie’s long brown hair floated around her shoulders when she shook her head. “He would never do that, though.”

It was all Loreнна could do not to scream. She should have known nothing came free and nothing was ever easy. “But let’s just say something came up and he decided not to do it.”

“Uh-uh. Would never happen. He’s tried for several years to get this movie made. If Ziembicki, the producer, hadn’t come through, Jamie would have funded it himself. This is his crown and glory. And he is determined to make this picture one way or the other.”

“Oh.” Why would Jamie sacrifice so much for her? How could he give all that up when she couldn’t even leave the inn? But maybe she was wrong. Maybe this is far down the road so it really had no bearing on his decision to stay in Texas for the near future. The weight which had pressed down on her when she walked up the stairs lightened. “Okay. I just wondered what it was. That’s a lot of zeros there.” She motioned to the contract.

“That there is.” Stephanie put the contract on the top of another pile, leaned back and stretched like a cat. “And he’s worth every last penny and then some.”

She smiled at Stephanie’s faith in Jamie. “Well, I’ll leave you alone, my mother is waiting downstairs. Wedding stuff.” She stood, crossed the room and reached for the door.

Stephanie gave a quick laugh. “Jamie can’t wait to go to New Zealand. The girls and I hope we can talk him in to letting us come out for a bit, too. A working vacation.”

The woman’s giddy smile dismayed Loreнна. Her hand paused on the knob. “New Zealand?”

“Yes, he wants the shoot to start as soon as possible once the contract is signed. He’ll be there for about a year. It’s so cool.” Stephanie’s animated face reminded Lorennna more of a high schooler than a top-notch agent. “It’s about time someone gave Jamie his due. He’s going to be a great director.”

\* \* \*

“Lorennna are you listening to me?”

The buzz of her mother’s voice intruded on her thoughts. “Hmm? What did you say?”

“I suggested,” Barbara eyed her daughter with an upraised brow and her arms crossed over her chest, “we put your Aunt Ruth and Aunt Marti next to each other.”

*What?* She sat straighter in her chair and looked at her mother. “Have you lost your mind? You can’t do that. They’d pull each other’s hair out.”

“Yes, I know.” Her mother’s face softened. “So when you said, ‘Splendid, let’s do it’ I knew you weren’t paying attention.” Barbara shoved the clipboarded list aside. “Would you like to tell me what’s wrong. You and Jamie can’t be having a lovers spat already, can you?”

*If only it were that simple.*

“Oh, Mother.” Tears floated to the edges of her eyes.

Barbara scooted her chair until the two women’s knees touched then she scooped up her daughter’s hands into her own. “What is it, Buttercup?”

“Jamie...I...and he...” She rubbed the ache in her chest and sniffed as several fat tears rolled down her cheeks. He was giving up so much. “I can’t let him do that.”

“Do what, honey?” Lines creased Barbara’s forehead. “I don’t understand what you’re talking about.”

“He’s giving up a huge movie deal for me. He didn’t tell me about it. I found out by accident and he said that he only had to go to Florida, but didn’t mention New Zealand. Stephanie said career suicide. But I can’t go with him. I need to stay here. This is my home. I’ve worked damn hard for this place.” Loreнна ran out of steam.

“Yes, you have, dear.” Barbara’s mouth pulled down in a fuzzy line as more tears blurred Loreнна’s vision.

“But I love him. So much,” Loreнна tried to smile, “so I can’t let him do that. I have to make him go. He needs to do that movie.”

“Yes. Sure he does.” Her mother half nodded, half shook her head. “If it is as big as you say, he should do it.”

Loreнна breathed in a deep breath. “I knew you’d agree with me.”

“But I didn’t...” her mother’s mouth gaped like a fish out of water.

Loreнна stood and swiped at her nose with the back of her hand. “Thanks so much. I’ve got to go figure out a way to make him go. I love you, you’ve been a big help.”

\* \* \*

Loreнна heard the front door open and hurried to the registration desk. A beautiful, tall, blonde in a simple—albeit expensive—dove gray pants suit, stood at the counter and drummed her fingers.

“May I help you?”

“Yes, I’m looking for my boyfriend.” She narrowed her eyes in an almost accusatory manner. “I understand he’s staying here.”

“I, uh...” This woman’s boyfriend? Her heart pounded in her chest. *Oh Jamie, how could you have done this?* She knew he was too good to be true. Loreнна closed her eyes and rubbed her temple for a brief moment. Then she pasted on her most professional smile and said, “Who might that be?”

“Jamie!”



Before Loreнна's brain could explode, Jamie came down the last few steps from the second floor.

"Hey." A smiled crooked the corners of his mouth. "What are you doing here?" He hurried over to the woman and hugged her.

"She came to see her boyfriend." Loreнна's smile threatened to crack but it held fast.

"That's great. I'm so glad you decided to come after all." He hugged the woman again. "Oh, where are my manners?" He circled his arm around her shoulder and turned her to Loreнна.

A cold sweat broke out all over Loreнна.

"Lee Nichols, I'd like you to meet the woman I told you about yesterday on the phone. Loreнна Beauchamp."

*He mentioned me? Yesterday? On the phone? What kind of weirdo-wacko shit was he into?*

Lee smiled for the first time and alleviated the harshness of her face. God, she was beautiful.

Loreнна lifted her chin and squared her shoulders. If Jamie thought she would go for kinky stuff... Forget it, no matter how beautiful Lee what's-her-name was.

"Jamie, I think I..." Loreнна paused. "What the hell did you say her name was?"

Jamie and Lee both frowned at Loreнна. "Lee Nichols."

"Butch's...Butch's..." She slapped her hand to her chest and laughed. She laughed until her sides hurt, laughed until tears ran down her face in a steady stream. "Oh God, I thought...you and she...and then me..." She laughed until she hiccupped.

The pair stared at her. Lee with slight bewildered amusement and Jamie with concern, which made her laugh more.

When the massive fit of the giggles tapered, she said, "I think I'm losing my mind. First I had that end-all of conversation with my mother and I'm sure *she* thinks I'm nuts. Then when you introduced me to Lee I thought..." She waved her hand, then cleared her throat. "Never mind."

She held out her hand to Lee. "It's so nice to meet you."

Lee hesitated, but finally grasped Loreenna's. "Charmed." She gave Loreenna a queer look then turned all her attention back to Jamie. "When you called and told me what Butch said, I decided to fly out." She crossed her arms over her chest, took a step away from Jamie and looked around at the foyer. "I can't believe he picked this place."

Loreenna bristled.

"This is exactly the type of place I told him I wanted to go to. Right down to the gingham tablecloth." The woman's voice hitched with emotion.

Jamie put his arm back around her and she rested her head on his shoulder.

Damn, the man was even tender with his friend's girlfriend. A part of Loreenna's heart burst wide open while she built her resolve to make him leave, make him take the job in New Zealand. If she didn't, he could lose the family he'd built for himself. What need would he have for his entourage if he cut his career back and moved to Texas part-time? Where would that leave them without a client to tend to, a friend to live and travel with? Nowhere as far as she could see.

And there was no way in hell she would be the person responsible for that.

"Um, I'll run and get him for you." She ran past the pair and up the stairs before they could comment. "Butch?" She wrapped her knuckles on the door.

Butch whipped the door open. "Where's the fire?" A smile creased his face when he saw her. Sarge yawned in the man's arms as if the yellow tutu around the pooch's belly was an everyday occurrence—which with Butch, she guessed, it just might be. "Hey, doll-face. What do you need?"

"There's someone downstairs to see you."

"Here? Who?" The smile fell from his face and he peered past her into the hallway.

"Lee."

He paled. Then his eyes sparkled. His hand rose to the lopsided ponytail atop his head. Then he glanced down at his tie-died kimono. And he let out the most theatrical gasp.

Lorennna clamped her lips together to keep from laughing.

"Here." He shoved Sarge into her hands. "Must..." he patted down his body, "...clothes."

He dashed back into his room and she heard drawers open and close in rapid succession. A curse or two floated out the door and Lorennna decided the poor little dog was far too innocent for such language. "I'll see you downstairs."

A mumbled response, whether affirmative or negative she had no clue, came from behind the door.

"Slow and steady so you don't hurt yourself, Butch," she called over her shoulder at the top of landing. "What a silly man," she whispered to the pup as she descended.

The moment Sarge saw Lee next to Jamie, he wiggled and wagged until Lorennna could barely hold him.

"Oh, my baby." Lee held out her hands. "I haven't seen you in so long."

Lorennna relinquished the captive canine and giggled at the sloppy reunion then worried that when Butch arrived, it might not improve much. She didn't think her stomach could take much more.

"I'll just..." She pointed over her shoulder with her thumb. She turned and made it several steps before a hand on her elbow stopped her.

"Slow down, speedy," Jamie whispered in her ear. "What's the rush?"

"I've gotta get dinner going. I'm behind schedule."

"Let me help you." He wrapped his arm around her waist. "I should probably get used to the way things are run around here."

"What? Why?" She fought to keep a look of horror off her face.

"I won't break anything tonight, I swear." His wide smile twitched.

“Sure, okay.” She didn’t have the heart to contradict anything he said right then, their time was so limited. “I mean that’s great. Thanks. I’d appreciate the help.”

Jamie kissed her temple, his fingers tickled her side. “So what was with the fit of giggles back there?”

*Think fast. I’m not ready to give him the old heave ho, yet. I want as much time with him as possible before he leaves. Forever, but that’s just not possible.*

*Keep it as close to the truth.* She’d read that somewhere in some book. As long as there was as much truth as possible, you wouldn’t get tripped up. “Honestly. I thought Butch was...”

Jamie chuckled. “Gay?”

“Well, yeah. So when I saw Lee—which by the way could be a man’s name—I had no idea. I thought she might be here for you.”

Jamie stopped her at the swinging kitchen door. He turned her to face him and lifted her chin with his fingers. “Why would you think that?”

She shrugged.

“Lorena, I love you. I would never do anything to hurt you. Never.” His mouth dropped to hers.

Heat pooled in her abdomen. It had to be illegal for one man to have that much power with a single kiss. When his lips touched hers she could forget the rest of the world and block out reality.

But she had to keep her wits about her. She pushed Jamie to arms length. “Dinner. Must feed the guests.”

Jamie groaned.

Lorena couldn’t help herself. She cupped his face. How would she give this up? She shuddered. Maybe one last time wouldn’t hurt anything. Her way to tell him how much she loved him and good-bye at the same time. One final memory for her to cherish for the rest of her life.

“Tell you what.” She kissed his throat. “If you can be a real good boy during dinner, I might have a surprise or two for dessert.”

“Oh yeah?” His teeth clamped around her earlobe. “What might that be?”

She pushed him back again. “Uh-uh-uh. Not until after dinner. And only if you can behave.”

“I can’t wait.”

She looked into his eyes. “Neither can I.” Her heart ached already.  
*Neither can I.*

## Chapter Twenty-Two

Lorennna cleared her throat. “Are you ready? For your surprise.”

Jamie put the last dish in the cupboard. He walked over to Lorennna, waggled his eyebrows and wrapped his arms around her waist. “Oh yeah. And what might that be?”

She giggled, pulled free and took his hand. “Follow me.” She walked out the back door.

Not in the direction he’d hoped for, the bedroom.

“Where are we going?” He lifted her hand to his mouth and kissed her fingers.

“Shh, it’s a secret.” She led him down the path he’d taken the day she’d injured her ankle. Then into a clearing laid out with Chinese lanterns which surrounded a plaid quilt.

Lorennna released his hand and walked to the middle of the blanket then sat. “Dessert?”

A sweet rosy scent, laced with whiffs of chocolate, permeated the air.

Jamie toed off his shoes and sat next to Lorennna. “You didn’t have to go to all this trouble.”

She picked up a strawberry and dipped it into a bowl of chocolate then held it up to his lips. “I wanted to.”

He closed his eyes as he bit into the juicy fruit. He wanted to tell her she didn’t need to try so hard at the seduction routine, because he would and could take her anywhere any way with little to no foreplay. But he’d be damned if he’d mess up this fabulous late-night picnic. “Mmm. Sweet.” He licked the last of the chocolate off his lower lip and grabbed

her hand before she could pull away. "But not as sweet as you." He captured her lips, tunneled his free hand into her midnight curls.

Lorennna moaned and curled her hands into his shirtfront. But then she pulled back. "Slow down. We have all night." With a flick of her wrist, soft music surrounded them. Then she pushed up on her knees and motioned for Jamie to do the same.

Her lithe fingers undid the buttons of his shirt then slid it from his shoulders as her mouth made a circuitous path over his neck. Jamie couldn't swallow the groan that escaped when her lips pressed against his shoulder and her hands trailed up and down his back. On sensory overload, he could do little more than quiver at her touch.

When Lorennna unhooked his jeans, slid her hand in and grasped his erection, Jamie moaned her name. He tried to pull her hands free, afraid that her gentle touch would send him over the edge too soon, but then she whispered, "Please. Let me." And he was at her mercy. She stroked him once then twice, her tongue glided over the column of his neck then down to the flat of his nipple. And he shuddered.

"Lorennna, I'm getting...too close."

"And that's a bad thing?" Her whispered laughter sent a thrill over Jamie's skin.

"Sweet torment." He stilled her hands. "My turn."

He repeated her gestures and helped her out of the cream-colored silk shirt she'd worn to dinner. Then her bra. He cupped her bare breast in his hands. "Mmm. Perfect." He replaced his hands with his mouth and continued until she squirmed under his touch. Then he leaned back so he could see her, see the flush of excitement that covered her body.

A warm summer's breeze tickled his skin. He wondered if the night air teased Lorennna's bare nipples, made her ache with desire for him. He kissed each perfect pink tip once more then let the breeze remove the traces of him.

Jamie pulled the drawstring of her dark, cotton skirt until the material pooled around her knees. Underneath, she wore the bright red silk panties he'd bought her earlier in the week. And despite his

ravenous need to take her then and there, he gritted his teeth and willed patience through him, he needed not to rip more of her clothing.

He wrapped his arm around her waist. "Lie back." He guided her to the quilt, then he gently slid the skirt and panties all the way off.

With his mouth at her navel, he kissed his way down to her hip. His tongue traced swirls in the crease of her thigh. Loreнна lifted herself off the quilt, thrust herself closer to him. Jamie chuckled, he wasn't ready to let her reach completion yet. Turn about...

One finger dipped into the moist folds of her sex.

God, she was so wet and warm.

His tongue continued to tease then finally joined his finger and stroked her to a climax that had her screaming out his name into the night. When the tremors ceased, Jamie eased up atop her and slid inside her. He had never been so thankful for birth control pills in his life. Not because it protected him and Loreнна from an untimely pregnancy—because truly the more and more he considered it he couldn't wait for Loreнна to get huge with his child, to see his baby grow inside her—but condoms impeded all she had to offer him. He loved the feel of her, damp with her excitement and desire, as she surrounded him.

He took her mouth as he rocked into her time and time again. Loreнна pinned her legs on his hips and met him thrust for thrust until they both cried out in repletion.

Spent, he lay beside her, their bodies still joined. He kissed her sweat-slicked temple. "I love you, Buttercup."

"I love you, Jamie," she whispered back. "More than you'll ever know."

The last words trailed off and he wondered at first if he'd even heard them. Such an odd thing to say. It seemed so...final. So...finite.

No. He shook the thought from his head, decided he'd imagine it all.

But he didn't have time to think on it much more as Loreнна's hand caressed his butt. All thoughts fled, except making love to the woman he intended to spend the remainder of his days with.



\* \* \*

“Have you ever seen a more perfect sunrise?” Loreнна leaned back into Jamie and pulled the quilt tighter around their shoulders.

“Everything’s perfect when you’re with me,” Jamie whispered into her ear.

“Uh.” Loreнна burst into a fit of laughter. “Did anyone ever tell you how corny you are?”

“My dear sweet silly girl.” Jamie kissed her neck then tickled her sides with his fingers. “Laugh at me, will you?”

Jamie tickled Loreнна until she could barely breathe and her peals of laughter chased birds from the nearby trees. Her only way to combat his fiendish fingers was through retreat. The pair rolled on the quilt until Loreнна had Jamie pinned beneath her. “Victorious.” She grinned down at the man who held her heart.

For a moment, for a truly selfish moment, she wanted to let him give up the biggest movie deal of his career and stay with her here at her inn. She wallowed in thoughts of long summer walks by the pond and long winter nights wrapped up in front of the fireplace. But she couldn’t do that. Too much was at stake and not just for Jamie. Every time she thought of his self-built family with Butch and the girls, she knew she had to devise a plan and soon.

“Why the serious look?” Jamie twined their fingers.

Loreнна tilted her head up to the sky, angry at herself for letting him see the torment on her face. “The sky,” she said when she looked back down.

“What?”

“The sky is getting dark over that-a-way.” She motioned at the dark clouds to the west with her shoulder. “We need to get headed back to the inn before they get here.”

When she tried to move Jamie grabbed her hips and held her in place. "Lorennna?"

"Hmm?"

"I love you."

She smiled despite the pain that ripped through her chest. "I love you too, Jamie." She leaned forward and kissed him hard on the mouth. When she leaned back, she winked at him. "Now get your butt moving mister or we'll get soaked."

"Yes, ma'am." Jamie released her and gave her a mock salute then hurried to get dressed and gather up all the overnight provisions.

Once they were back up at the inn and changed Jamie kissed Lorennna's cheek and reached for the door. "I need to run into town for a bit. Do you need anything?"

"No, thank you." She smiled, then wondered that her face didn't crack with the hypocrisy.

\* \* \*

Jamie slapped his hands together and eyed the huge glass case. He'd rather go to Tiffany's or Cartier's, but he'd make due with Gold Dust, Dusty Springs' one and only jewelry store.

"That one." He pointed to a huge pear shaped diamond set in eighteen-carat gold.

"Excellent choice, sir," the store manager, Artie, said.

He'd said that to every ring Jamie picked. And the bigger the diamond the more enthusiasm he had.

"Man, I wish Butch were here." Jamie eyed the huge rock and tried to picture it on Lorennna's hand, but truthfully, though it was beautiful, he thought it might look cartoonish on her petite appendage. He handed it back to Artie and scratched his chin.

As he blew out a heavy breath, his gaze landed on a lone ring in the back corner of the case. The glare from the overhead light made it

difficult to see. Jamie shifted his head this way and that, but couldn't get a good look. "May I see that one?"

"Yes, sir." Artie set the ring on a velvet board and pushed it across the counter to Jamie.

"Perfect," Jamie said as he lifted the square cut center diamond with several small rectangular stones on either side set in platinum. The ring had an antique feel and at the same time a very sophisticated style. "I'll take it."

"Yes, sir." Artie smiled at him

## Chapter Twenty-Three

A car drew her attention away from her worries. Until she saw Jamie pull up out front. Then the butterflies in her stomach beat their wings double-time.

"You can do this. You can." She chanted words she wasn't sure if she believed.

She knew she had to tell him as soon as possible. But when his spiky, blonde head popped out of the rental car, followed by his broad shoulders and tapered waist, her hormones shot sky high and her resolve faltered. Then her mind constructed a picture of Jamie in a worn pair of overalls, a beer gut from here to San Antonio and his front tooth missing on the cover of *Celebrity Watchers* with the caption, "Oh how the mighty have fallen." She knew she couldn't be responsible for that.

"But what am I gonna tell him?" She paced the entryway but stopped when the phone jarred her. "Wild Rose B & B."

"Hey, Buttercup, how's my prettiest girl?"

"Bret?"

"Yeah," he chuckled. "The one and only."

She pulled at one of her curls and let it bounce back into place. "I haven't heard from you in a while. How have you been?"

"No complaints." He paused. "I was wondering when you might make it out for another...visit."

Lorena's eyebrow rose. A frown pulled her mouth down. A week ago, she would have considered his offer, hell she probably would have jumped at the chance to get away if only for a day or two, but now his offer seemed sordid and...dammit, she deserved better than that. Even if

she couldn't have Jamie, she wanted to be more than a piece of accessible ass to a man.

"I can't, Bret. I've met..." An idea popped into her head. But could she do it? She gnawed her lower lip, could she not do it. She knew there was a sure-fire way to make sure Jamie left without a backwards glance. "I've met a man."

"Oh," he hesitated a bit, "well. That's great. Anyone I know?"

Lorennna heard the creak of the screen door. "Of course you know who he is. Who wouldn't know? He's an actor."

"Hmm."

"Ever heard of J. Hamilton?"

Bret snorted. "Who hasn't?"

*Apparently only me.* "I know. Imagine my surprise when he checked in the first day. But he's a cool one. Didn't want anyone to know he was here, so I played along."

She heard a sharp inhale of breath behind her but didn't dare turn around. She couldn't yet. "He's such a doll and he's gotta be worth a fortune."

"Since when did you care about that?"

"Things changed."

"I guess."

"Listen Bret..." She closed her eyes and silently prayed for forgiveness. "Things like this don't always work out, so maybe once I'm done playing and whatnot, I could come out there and..."

"Look Lorennna, I don't know what's gotten into you..."

*This coming from a man that wants me to fly two-thousand miles to "hook up"? Sheesh, men!*

"...But you're not the woman you used to be. I think I better get going. I'm sorry that 'things changed'." He threw her words back at her then hung up with out so much as a good-bye.

“Oh, Bret!” She giggled to the dial tone. She wanted to prolong the inevitable for infinity, but she couldn’t. “Sounds great. I’ll talk to you soon.” She paused for effect. “Yeah. Me too.”

Lorennna clicked the off button and replaced the handset on the base. She took a deep breath and turned. “Oh, Jamie.” She didn’t have to feign uneasiness. Her stomach rolled with it. “I didn’t, ah, hear you come in.”

“Obviously.” He stood with his hands thrust in his pockets, his shoulders stiff and a face devoid of any emotion.

She motioned to the phone. “That’s not what you...”

“Have you known all along?” Red patches colored his cheeks.

“Jamie, I...”

“Have you!” Spit flew from the corner of his mouth.

She flinched and looked down at her hands clasped together in front of her, better there than at Jamie. “Yes.” She hated to hurt him, it tore her up inside. But she really had to sell this. “Do you really think that I wouldn’t have heard of you?”

She shouldered her courage and looked him direct in the eye. “My father was an actor. Do you honestly think I wouldn’t have followed his career or that of the people in his movies?” She proceeded to name off several of her father’s bigger hits, then some of Jamie’s first few movies. She’d looked all that up on the Internet after she found out who he really was. But he didn’t need to know when she came into this knowledge.

Jamie took a step back as if she’d hit him.

She ached to reach out to him.

“Why?”

She rolled her eyes and assumed a casual pose. She must have more of her father’s genes in her than she knew. “Why not? It gets dull around here. You’re the best opportunity that’s come along in months.”

*You’re laying it on thick, girl.* Now her conscious decided to speak up? She shoved the little voice aside and laid out her last blow. “Besides you had fun too, so what’s the harm?”

Jamie narrowed his eyes. Then without a word, he turned on his heel and went up the stairs.

Lorennna collapsed against the registration desk. Tears streamed down her cheeks. "I'm sorry, Jamie. I love you."

\* \* \*

He threw his suitcases onto the bed and piled clothes in haphazardly, then stopped to pace the room. "Damn. How could I have misjudged her?" He fisted his hands in his hair and threw his head back. Tears stung the backs of his eyelids. But there was no way in hell he'd cry for that woman.

He paced more, like a damned, caged animal. He couldn't breath. Out to the hall and up the stairs to the third floor he ran. At Courtney's room, he pounded on the door.

"Jamie? Where's the fire?"

"I need you to cancel my ticket for later this evening."

"Okay." A coy smile played on her mouth.

"Find the nearest airport and charter a flight out. I don't care how much it costs. I'm loaded, you know."

She shook her head in a slow, deliberate motion. "Jamie, I don't understand."

"I don't give a damn what you understand. I want you to cancel everyone's tickets, make sure they know we are leaving today, now, as soon as you can get us booked out of this hellhole. Tell the others. Have them all packed up and ready to go. We're *all* leaving. You got that?"

"Yes, sir," she snapped at him, flipped her hand in a mock salute then slammed the door.

Jamie rested his head on the cool wooden doorframe. "Damn, damn, damn." He fisted his hand and pounded it lightly on the wall beside him, then turned and trundled back down the stairs to his room.

A calico tail stuck out from under his bed, and he almost stepped on it. "Damn it, Bitsy. Get out of here." He squatted and reached under the bed to grab at the cat. His hand came away a few stripes less of skin and a splotch of blood. He made one final swipe under the bed then gave up. "Damn cat."

He sat in the club chair and held his hand in the other. The pain didn't compare to the ache in his chest. The small velvet box in his pocket cut into his hip, but he didn't dare touch it. God, if he had to look at the damn engagement ring he'd purchased a couple of hours earlier, he didn't think he'd be able to get through the next few minutes, much less the days and weeks that would remind him what a fool he'd been.

"Ask her to marry you. Ha." His bitter laugh echoed in the room. "The acting gene doesn't fall too far from the tree apparently. She had me going all week with her little Miss Innocent act."

He leaned his head back on the chair and closed his eye. A slight weight landed in his lap then Bitsy rubbed her fluffy head against his stomach.

Without lifting his head, he scratched her behind the ears. "I'm sorry I yelled at you." A single tear leaked out his eye and rolled down his cheek. "But not to worry, cat, you won't see me around here anymore."

"So it's true?"

Jamie lifted one eye lid, then the other and found Stephanie, hands on hips, foot in a steady beat against the floor. Uh-oh, she was pissed. "What's that?"

"You giving orders that we're all leaving ASAP."

"Yep. That 'bout sums it up." He shoved the feline fur-ball from his lap and stood. "You all packed?"

"No. And I'm not getting packed until you tell me what's going on."

Jamie regarded her for a long moment as he decided how much of his humiliation he wanted to share with her. Instead, he dug in his pocket, extracted the tiny box and flipped it to his friend. "I won't be needing this. Return it, hawk it, throw it away. I don't care what you do with it as long as I never have to see it again. Does that about sum it up?"



He rolled his shoulders back to work loose some of the tension. It didn't help. He didn't think he'd be able to relax until he was as far away from Texas as possible.

When Stephanie continued to stare mutely at him, he said, "I will apologize to Courtney. But I do want you all packed and ready to go. We have a business to run, namely me, as I was reminded today. No point in hanging out here wasting time and money."

"Is it true?" Butch, with Lee in tow, came in behind Stephanie. Sarge and Bitsy jumped up to the middle of his bed and circled each other several times before they both settled, side by side and stared at the group of people.

"If, by true, you mean, are we leaving, then yes, we are."

"What's going on?"

"I have ADR's in three days. It's time to go."

"So why fly out of here like a bat out of hell?"

Jamie stood, eyed each one of his friends then sighed. "She knew all along."

"Knew? What?" Stephanie clutched the box to her chest and although she asked, Jamie could see on her face she knew what he was talking about.

"Lorena knew who I was the whole time." He thrust his hand through his hair. "She played me."

"I don't believe that for one second." Butch crossed his arms over his chest.

"I heard it with my own ears. Or overheard it, I should say." He turned his back on his the doubting trio and hung his head. "She was on the phone with some guy. She knew."

"It won't take us long to pack." Butch patted Jamie's shoulder then the trio left the room in a quiet retreat.

\* \* \*

"I can't find Sarge." Butch threw his hands up in the air. He checked the kitchen pantry one final time. He'd looked for his dog for over an hour and seen neither hide, nor hair-puff tail of the little fellow.

"We can't leave without him." Lee popped her knuckles. An annoying habit he'd yet to break her of.

"Should I tell Jamie or do you want to?"

She backed away from Butch. "No way in this world will I tell him. When Courtney told him she'd managed to get the private jet and have the rental car place pick up all the cars, he growled at her like he hadn't eaten in a month. I want to stay as far away from him as humanly possible." She pointed at him. "He's your best friend."

"Fine." He gave her a quick peck on the lips and crossed the floor to the dining room. "Chicken," he called over his shoulder as the door swung shut.

Lee cackled and cracked him up.

He was still laughing when he approached Jamie's door, but he smoothed out his features to reflect his friend's dour mood.

"Knock, knock." He pushed through the door.

"You and Lee ready to go?"

"Yes—" he cleared his throat, "—and no." Butch tilted his head and observed his friend. In the last couple of hours, dark circles had situated themselves under Jamie's eyes. His five o'clock shadow raced for a new record for growth.

"Why 'no'?"

"We can't find Sarge anywhere. The pup has hidden better than Jimmy Hoffa from Geraldo Rivera." He sat next to his friend on the end of the four-poster bed. "Lee and I will stay here and keep looking for him. You guys go on home without us and we'll catch the first plane as soon as we can."

"We'll wait for you."

"No, that's okay. I don't want you to hang around here longer than you have to."

Jamie released a heavy breath. "Thanks."

\* \* \*

On the plane, the girls all buckled in as Jamie shifted this way and that and tried to get comfortable. A feat he didn't think possible.

"Jamie?" Stephanie switched seats to the one next to him. "I debated when or if to give this to you, but..." She held her hand out. A plastic ring hung from a chain.

"Where'd you get that?"

"Lorena asked me to give it to you."

That damn ring. Why had he'd gotten all worked up, gone soft and fucking romantic, over some woman? He should have listened to his head instead of his libido. And his heart, as it turned out. More the fool he to take that monumental risk. *The rewards, may be sweeter, Ma, but the grief is also ten times more raw.* He eyed the plastic on the end of the gold chain. "Keep it. I don't want it."

She looked at him for a long moment then nodded and moved back to her original seat. He thought he heard her mumble, "I'm not a damn jewelry store." If it wouldn't hurt too much to smile, he might have.

"Stephanie? Where's the contract from Ziembicki."

"In my briefcase."

"Can you get it out? I want to sign it."

"Right now?"

"No time like the present."

## Chapter Twenty-Four

“What the hell happened? Why’d they leave in such an all-fired hurry yesterday?”

“Luther, come in. Make yourself comfortable.” Loreнна narrowed her eyes at her friend. Then returned her attention to the bed and stripped the last of the linens from the mattress. She’d spent a sleepless night with nothing but Jamie’s scent to keep her company.

She wanted to fire up the sheets in the barbecue pit but with the summer burn restriction, she decided not to tempt fate any more than she had over the last week. A heavy dose, or three, of bleach and lavender detergent should get his scent out. If not Good Will would receive more than just the sheets from the upstairs room.

Luther came up behind her and wrapped his arms around her. “Would you stop?”

Loreнна dropped the laundry.

“I didn’t even know they were gone until Stephanie called from California to tell me she’d gotten home okay.” He rested his chin atop her head. “What happened? I thought everything was great between you and Jamie.”

“I made him leave.” Loreнна hung her head. Sobs wracked through her shoulders and shook her to her toes. “I didn’t know what else to do.”

“Tell me.”

“I can’t, Luther.” She broke from his hold and crossed the room. “I’m sorry that Jamie’s leaving messed up things for you and Stephanie.” She swiped at her eyes and dried her fingers on her jeans.

"You didn't mess up a single thing. Stephanie and I knew where we stood when this started. She lives in California and I live here in Texas. We knew there'd be some accommodating if we wanted to keep this going."

"Are you gonna keep seeing her?"

"Yeah. I'm planning on heading out that way at the end of the month."

"Good. I'm glad. She's a real nice lady."

"Lorena," What ever he was going to say died when the phone rang. "You better get that. I'll see you later."

He headed out the door as she picked up the receiver. "Wild Rose..."

"Oh Miss Lorena, we have a huge problem."

She sighed when she heard the minister's voice. Why she thought it might be Jamie on the other end she didn't know. "What's wrong, Pastor Hudson?"

"The weather."

Lorena rubbed the ache in the middle of her forehead. "I beg your pardon?"

"Bad weather's coming for the end of the week."

Lorena almost laughed. He called her in hysterics for a weather report? "Don't worry. If it's raining, we can have the ceremony in the front living room. We don't use it much. Most of the inn will be set up for the reception so we'll be all set either way."

"Oh, okay. I don't know why I was so worried. Just something feels twitchy about this." He laughed in a quick short burst. "You always have everything under control, Lorena."

*Yeah, everything but my own life*, she wanted to say. "Thank you for your concern. Everything will go off without a hitch."

\* \* \*

"Lee, I just don't know where else he could be." Butch threw his hands up in frustration.

"We can't leave without him."

"I know that," he snapped at Lee. Then he encircled her with his arms. "I'm sorry. I didn't mean to yell at you."

"You don't think that *she* would have hid him, do you?" She motioned to the inn.

"Lorena?" He chuckled. "No. That is absolutely one thing I am certain of."

"You didn't know she could hurt Jamie."

"True." He released Lee and led her to the gazebo. Heavy clouds cloaked the sky.

They sat at the railing and Butch rubbed a hand over his chin. "I don't get it, Lee. I was certain she was 'the one'. I've never seen Jamie so happy. And *she* absolutely glowed." He held up his hand when his girlfriend tried to speak. "Granted, I didn't know her before, but you could just tell she'd held herself back for so long. Jamie opened something inside her.

"I spoke with her mother many times over the past week and she as much as told me I was right. She couldn't believe the change in her daughter. I don't think someone can fake that kind of love."

"So then why did she tell him she'd played him along? That doesn't make sense."

"Only one person can answer that and since she's avoided us the last two days, there's no telling if we'll get a straight answer or not." But as Butch said that, he thought he knew the answer, he just didn't know why.

The two times he'd bumped into her since Jamie and the girls left, he'd been floored at how drained and desolate she looked. She sported a pair of matching bags under those crystal, clear-blue eyes. Her usually buoyant curls lay limp against her skull. Defeated and deflated would best describe the little innkeeper. Not the attitude of someone who deliberately set out to get her hands on a richy-rich Hollywood celeb.

“Speak of the devil.” Lee nudged his elbow.

Lorennna came from the back of the property dressed in a ratty pair of jeans and a well-worn T-shirt. A huge bouquet of roses sat in the wicker basket that hung from her arm.

“Lorennna.”

Surprise and weariness clouded her face when her head popped up.

He waved her over. “Come join us a moment.”

Lee gripped his arm. “What are you doing?” she whispered.

“Patience, my darling.” He kissed the tip of her nose. “Patience.”

“Have you found Sarge yet?”

“No. I can’t imagine where he’s gotten off to.” Butch crossed his arms over his chest. “So. I wanted to tell you, no hard feelings. With the way things ended with Jamie, I mean.”

“Oh.” Lorennna stiffened, but a shy smile played the corners of her mouth. “I’m glad.”

“I can understand how you’d get all wrapped up in the thrill of being around a celebrity.”

“I, uh...”

He didn’t give her a chance to worm away. “I don’t blame you one bit.”

“Thanks.” Her forehead scrunched. “I think.”

“No really. I remember the first time I ran into Brad Pitt. I thought I’d fall all over myself. I was so excited when he married Carmen Electra.” In his periphery, he could see Lee’s eyes widen but he kept his attention focused on Lorennna. “Wasn’t that the wedding of the century?”

“Um, sure.” She shifted from foot to foot.

“So tell me, which one of the famous J. Hamilton’s movies is your favorite? *Titanic*, *The Matrix* or I know, I bet it was *X-men*.”

Lorennna shrugged. “They were all good. Who could pick just one? Look I really need to head...”

“Gotcha!” He pushed away from the rail and grabbed her by the elbow then turned to face Lee. “I knew it.”

Lee’s mouth hung open. He wasn’t sure if it was from Lorenn’s blatant ignorance for pop-movie culture or his sudden outburst.

“You’d never heard of Jamie before he walked in your front door.”

“That’s not true.”

“Really?” He volleyed a gaze between her and Lee, who had composed herself enough to close her gaping mouth. “Then how is it then that you don’t know that he never starred in any one of those movies? Movies that I might add, grossed bukoo bucks at the box office. Everyone’s heard of them. Except you.”

“I...I” She swallowed hard. A spot of color tinted her pale cheeks. Then he saw her transform. She lifted her chin, squared her shoulders and looked him straight in the eye. “Your point?”

“You deliberately lied to make Jamie leave. Why?”

She set down the basket of flowers on the bench, turned her back on him and walked to the edge of the gazebo. “He was going to give up that movie.”

His breath caught in his lungs. “What movie?”

“I don’t know what it’s called. It’s that one set to film in New Zealand.”

Butch’s self-satisfaction faded. “Uh-uh, I don’t believe you.”

She pivoted on her heel and pierced him with her gaze. “He wanted me to go with him when he left, and I... can’t.” More color crawled across her face. “Then he said that he had to tie up a few loose ends and he’d be back here permanently except a small part he had in February with nothing else on the horizon. He never even told me about the directing job. He was going to give it up for me. I couldn’t let him do that.”

He cleared his throat. “If he never told you, how did you find out about it?”

“Faxes. Stephanie and the producer, Z something, were sending the contracts back and forth. I accidentally read it.”



Butch sat heavy on the bench. Jamie was farther gone about this woman than he thought if he was willing to give up his directing gig. He looked up at her and, for the first time, understood the love she had for Jamie, too. She sacrificed her heart so he wouldn't loose out on an opportunity of a lifetime.

But what had he lost out on instead? "Why didn't you just go with him?"

"I couldn't, Butch. This is my whole life. I have put my heart and soul into this inn." She waved her arm around. "I can't risk losing all this."

"Not even for Jamie?"

She shook her head. "He never promised me forever. He said he loved me yes, but what happens in six months, a year, when he gets tired of me?"

"You know that wouldn't happen."

"No, I don't. My mother has been through so many men. Never satisfied. Never complete. She tried to find security in marriage and it didn't work. This inn is all I have to protect myself." She paced back and forth between him and the edge. Then she stopped, ran her hands over her face and tilted her head back. "But even if I was willing to risk it all, there was still no guarantee. He wanted a girlfriend. Not a wife."

Butch closed his eyes and lowered his head. "There's where you're wrong."

"What?"

"Jamie was going to propose." He raised his head and found her intense gaze. "He had a ring in his pocket when you dropped your bombshell act on him."

Lorennna blanched then rocked back on her heels, and swayed to one side. Butch jumped up from the bench just as Lee grabbed Lorennna by the shoulders. "You okay?"

"No." She shook her head slowly. Tears filled her eyes, though none fell. "But what's done is done."

He didn't know where she found the strength, but she picked up the huge basket of flowers. Walked over to the steps and turned as if to say something but just shook her head and hurried to the inn.

"What a mess." Tears did roll down Lee's cheeks. She walked into his outstretched arms and buried her head in the crook of his neck.

"How can I fix this?" *Can I fix it?* he wondered.

## Chapter Twenty-Five

“This is bullshit.” Loreenna rolled off her bed and hung up the phone. Jamie refused to take any of her calls. It had taken her half a day to work up the nerve to ask Butch for Jamie’s private line. Then another half day to actually call it. Then the man hung up as soon as he heard her voice. Three times.

“I have to apologize. Tell him I was wrong.” Why had she thought she could live without him? Why did she think it was noble to make him go away to pursue his career, when hers had no joy in it with him out of her life? He’d only been back in California for five days, but she missed him as if he’d been gone months, years.

“What can I do?” She headed into her office to pick up the file she’d left there. Her mother’s wedding was a day and a half away and as far as she could tell everything, down to the rented doves, were right on schedule.

When she spotted the fax machine an idea came to her. She scribbled a quick note.

*Stephanie, please tell Jamie how sorry I am. And how wrong I was. I made up all that on the phone. I can explain, if he’ll just give me a chance.*

*I do love him and I would do anything to take back what I said. I’d even sell this place and follow him all over the world. One more chance. That’s all. Please tell him for me.*

She pulled out Stephanie’s business card—somehow left behind on the dresser in the room she’d used with a “call if you need anything” note scribbled in the back—and punched in the fax number.

Her chest lighter, like a weight was lifted off, she hurried to the front and grabbed her purse. "Ashley, I have to go into town for a bit."

"Sure thing, boss," Ashley called from the back of the inn. With all her guests, with the exception of Butch and Lee, gone and the inn closed until after her mother's wedding, there wasn't much to do. But she noticed that her family and friends hung around a little more, stayed a little closer to her. And in her needy state, she wasn't about to discourage them.

"Lorennna!" Lee came running from around the back of the house. "We found him."

"Sarge?" She tossed her purse on the front seat.

"Yeah. He's a little scraggly looking but not much worse for the wear."

"That's great. Where was he?"

"I have no idea. We were sitting out on the back porch and there he comes along like any old day."

Lorennna hugged the woman. "I'm so happy he's finally back." Sadness pulled at her stomach. "I guess you'll be leaving now."

"Well..." Lee hesitated. "Your mom asked us to stay for the wedding tomorrow night, if that's all right with you."

"I'd love for you two to come." She squeezed Lee's hand. And she meant that. Despite what happened with Jamie, she knew she found friends in Butch and Lee. "I have some errands to run. Tell Butch to grab something out of the fridge for Sarge. A little treat."

"Will do." Lee pulled her sweater tighter around her then hurried up the front steps as the wind picked up.

Lorennna whistled as she drove down the dusty lane into town. She parked in the visitor's spot at the newspaper office. Wind whipped her curls around her head on the short dash inside. "Good morning, Hollis. Wacky weather out there, huh?"

"Morning, Lorennna. Major storm coming through. Hope you have room inside for that big shindig you're throwing."

“Don’t worry, we have plenty of room. You and Maricarol still coming?”

“Wouldn’t miss it for the world.” He smiled at her across the wooden countertop. “What can I do for you today?”

“I need to place an ad.” She clapped her hands together. “I’m gonna hire a full-time manager so I can take some time off.”

“About danged time, girly. You work too hard.” He slid the form to place an ad to her. “When are you wantin’ this to go in?”

“As soon as possible.”

“You betcha.”

Lorennna finished the wording and pulled out some cash to pay for it and handed it all back to Hollis.

“Did you see the picture of that ol’ actor boy that was here in town?” Hollis rubbed his chin.

“What? No.” Her jovial mood teetered.

Then evaporated all together when Hollis handed yesterday’s entertainment section across the counter to her. A black and white photo of Jamie, with his arms slug casually around a tall leggy woman, smiled out at her from the front page. Her heart stilled and her hands shook.

“Gotcha all set up. It’ll go out in tomorrow’s addition.” Hollis handed her a receipt.

“Great. Thanks.” She stuffed the slip in her pocket as she read the caption, “Sergeant Cameron to break out in a whole new direction.”

\* \* \*

“I’m glad you found Sarge.” Jamie twisted a pen around in his hand.

“Yeah, I can’t tell you how relieved we are. Jamie, Barbara asked us to stay for the wedding so we’ll be home day after tomorrow.” Butch paused. “I need to tell you something.”

Jamie groaned inwardly. “Go ahead.”

“You were wrong,” Butch said. “We all were. Lorennna...”

"Oops. Look at the time. Gotta go." He flipped his phone shut and tossed the pen onto the desk.

Why must everyone bring up her name every damn time he turned around? And why were they all willing to champion the woman's cause when they knew what she'd done to him?

*If you'd listen to what they had to say for once rather than cut them off...*

That littler voice in his head was damn annoying, and it was hard to hold onto his indignation when it constantly whispered to him.

Of course, he'd hung on Loreнна too. She called twice, catching him at his desk, too distracted to pay attention to the caller ID. Both times, he'd hung up on her without waiting to see what she wanted. Then the third time, he flipped the phone on and right back off before he shut it off completely and shoved it in his pocket. Damn, a man could only take so much.

Then she'd left several messages on his machine and he hit the erase key as soon as he recognized her voice.

Maybe he should just have his numbers changed so she couldn't reach him any more. He shook his head. He couldn't. He hated to admit it but he still got a thrill when he heard her voice.

What kind of masochist was he?

"Jamie?" Courtney peeked her head around the door.

"Come on in."

"Stephanie sent over some faxes and stuff to sign." An odd look crossed her face when she handed him the pile of papers.

"Thank you."

"Sure." She headed back for the door but hesitated. "Can I tell you something?"

"Not you, too," he mumbled, then pushed back his chair and propped his feet up on the corner of his desk. "As long as it has nothing to do with anyone in the state of Texas."

She gnawed her lower lip. Examined her nails. And sighed. “Never mind.”

“That’s what I thought.” He ran his hands through his hair, stretched his arms over his head and closed his eyes.

*Lorennna.*

He could still smell her on his clothes. He’d kept one white T-shirt from the laundry and whenever a super-masochistic streak ran through, he would breathe in her scent. He must have known today would be a particularly bad day. He’d put the tee on under his crew shirt. All day long, every time air entered his lungs, she entered his mind.

If there had been any doubt in his mind how much he loved her, needed and wanted her still, the depth of how much she could hurt him was enough reassurance. And if the pain in his chest was any indication, he would not soon forget.

Jamie shook his head and stuffed the papers in his briefcase. He’d get to them eventually. But right now he wanted to push Lorennna Beauchamp as far from his mind as possible.

## Chapter Twenty-Six

Fat raindrops splattered the windshield as Loreнна pulled in front of the inn. Trees swayed, bent to a near breaking point and a plastic birdfeeder rolled across the yard. Before she opened the door, she heard a thunk, thunk, thunk on the car.

“Shit, it’s hailing.”

With her purse over her head, she made a mad dash for the house.

“There you are.” Lee came running from the dining room. “We were watching TV...”

“TV?”

Lee blushed. “Butch had Stephanie stash it in her bag and bring it down when she came. He’s addicted to the soaps.” She waved away the words. “They just broke in and said if you live in the vicinity of Dusty Springs to take immediate shelter. It’s a tornado. God, what are we going to do?”

Loreнна grabbed the other woman’s shoulders. “First calm down. It’ll be okay.” Then she shoved the woman toward the front door. “Ashley!” She waited a beat then screamed again.

The younger woman came down the stairs just as a siren wailed in the distance.

“We have to get to the storm shelter. Take Lee and go.” Ashley blanched and trembled but nodded and grabbed Lee by the wrist and dragged her to the front door.

Just then, Butch came from the dining room. “It’s coming in fast they said.” He held a hand-sized television, his face as white as Ashley’s.



"All right, let's move it." Loreнна pushed the trio through the door. Wet ice pelted the group all the way across the yard. The black clouds dimmed the day like night. Rain came in sideways and drenched them. They were at the storm cellar, and Ashley yanked the door open when Butch yelped.

"I left Sarge in the bedroom." He heaved the TV at Lee. "I shut the door so he and Bitsy wouldn't play. He's up there alone."

"I'll get him." Loreнна forced the folks into the shelter. "Ashley, get your ass in there."

The young woman jumped to attention and pulled Lee down the wooden steps with her despite the woman's protests.

"Butch, go." He nodded and followed them.

Loreнна trekked back to the house as the wind pulled at her clothes. The screen door nearly flew off its hinges when she grabbed the handle. Her odd sense of humor manifested itself in a song from *The Wizard of Oz*. *The wind began to switch, the house to pitch then suddenly the hinges started to unhitch.*

"Stop it," she scolded herself. But the next line popped into her head.

*Just then, the Witch, came riding on her broomstick thumbing for a hitch.*

"Get the dog. Get the dog." Her mantra carried her up the first few stairs two at a time, but her short legs were no match for the wooden steps and she slowed. At the second floor landing, she ran down the hall to Butch's room.

In front of the door, Bitsy mewed, a gruesome sound, and pawed at the wood. "Thank God." Loreнна hadn't even thought of her poor kitty in all this. She scooped her up just as Sarge howled on the other side.

Loreнна threw open the door.

The dog leapt into her arms just as the house moaned and creaked. "I'm here, you two."

She dropped a quick kiss on both animals' heads and turned when a noise similar to a train echoed throughout. "Oh God, it's here." Tears pricked Lorennna's eyes. She didn't know what to do.

She thought she heard her name on top of the wind. But that couldn't be. Then she heard it again as Butch appeared at the end of the hall and ran toward her and the pets. "Hurry!"

"Why aren't you in the shelter?" Several tears dripped down her cheek.

Butch set his hand on her shoulder. "I couldn't leave you in here alone."

"You should have stayed," she yelled. Her vision blurred. "It's too late."

"Don't say that." He shook her. "We gotta get downstairs fast."

A tree limb crashed through the window at the far end of the hall and blocked the front stairs.

"The dumbwaiter?" Lorennna reached for the little wooden elevator.

"Are you crazy? If the power goes out..." and as if on cue, the lights dimmed, flickered then faded completely. "...we would be stuck in there." Butch frowned.

The wind increased and Lorennna could hear her house come apart piece by piece. "Down the back stairs then."

Butch grabbed her elbow and they raced down to the first floor. They made it into the kitchen when the back door disappeared into the darkened sky.

"Jesus." She wasn't sure how she heard him or if she just knew what he said, as the noise reached a deafening crescendo.

*The pantry*, she mouthed to Butch. They had little time to get into the thick cedar room with no windows. He nodded and dragged her across the tile floor and threw her into the open doorway and up to the back wall.

Butch pawed at the handle, tried to shut the door, but his fingers slipped on the latch and he couldn't hook it.

Loreнна motioned for him to quit trying and come to where she and the animals huddled in the far corner. He draped his lanky body over her, Bitsy and Sarge just as cans and boxes flew from the shelves.

\* \* \*

Jamie and the gang settled around his huge dining room table. "What's the schedule for the week, Courtney?"

"After you finish the ADRs Monday, you have an interview with *Celebrity Watchers* magazine."

Jamie grimaced. "A necessary evil," he said as the cell phone at his hip vibrated. "Crawford."

"Jamie. It's Lee. Listen Loreнна and..."

"I am not in the mood for anymore of this. I know you all care about me, but it's over and I am okay with it. I'll talk to you soon." He flipped the phone shut and looked up to find his staff with angry eyes and pulled down mouths.

"You know, you're really being an ass about this." Stephanie threw her pen across the table. "If you'd listen to one of *us* for once..."

His phone vibrated again. "Hold that thought. Crawford."

"Don't you fucking hang up on me again, Jamie Crawford, or so help me God..." Lee broke off and Jamie could hear her sobbing.

He sat straighter in his chair. "Lee, what's wrong?" He glanced at the girls who were stilled by his end of the conversation.

"There was..." She took a deep breath, sobbed again, then took another deep breath. "...a tornado."

"Jesus Christ." He snapped his fingers at Courtney. "Turn on the TV. Find a news station. There was a tornado at the inn." He got up and paced the floor next to the table. Then sat again and tapped his hand like crazy on the folder in front of him. "Lee, tell me what happened."

"The inn, it's gone."

"Gone? I don't... Oh Jesus."

She sobbed more. "Sarge was inside."

As much as Jamie loved that damn dog, he didn't give a rat's ass what happened to him at the moment. "Butch, Loreenna, are they okay?" His heart pounded in his chest, his pulse thrummed his skull.

"The inn is gone, Jamie." Her voice turned to a whisper. "Ashley and I were in the storm cellar."

"Lee, dammit." He fisted his hand. He stood so fast the chair skidded across the floor. "Where are Loreenna and Butch?"

"Loreenna ran back in to get Sarge."

He stopped. "No." Pain welled in his chest, grew and grew until he could no longer breathe then it blinded him. "That's not true. Tell me you're lying. She can't be..."

"And, and...Butch ran in after her." She paused. "I'm so sorry, Jamie. There wasn't anything we could do. It all happened so fast." Lee's sobs turned to wails, and her words to almost incomprehensible mutterings. "Oh God, Jamie. It's all gone. Just piles of wood."

"No!" His legs gave out. If someone hadn't wrapped an arm around his chest and leaned him against the wall he would have fallen. Instead he slid down until his butt hit the cold, unforgiving tile floor.

The tears he'd kept at bay for the past week sprang. "It can't be. It just can't."

"Jamie, Barbara just arrived," Lee whispered to him. "What am I going to... Sarge. Oh my God, Sarge," Lee screamed then the line went dead.

"Lee. Lee!" Jamie fumbled with the phone. He swiped furiously at his eyes, tried to clear the tears. "Can't see, dammit."

It took him several minutes to find the right menu to call back the number she called from, but when he did, he got a message which told him the cell phone he was trying to call was either turned off or out of range. "Dammit." He threw his phone across the room and watched it shatter into hundreds of pieces against the wall.

With his elbows on his knees, he buried his face in his hands and cried like he'd never cried before.

"Jamie." Stephanie slid her hands around his shoulders.

"Butch, Lorenna...gone." He hesitated, wasn't ready for her comfort. "Dammit, why!"

Then he wrapped his arms around her and held on until the shudders in his body slowed and finally stopped all together.

He took a deep breath and squeezed her one final time then pushed himself up. His staff, his friends, were no better for the wear. Beth's mascara streaked down her cheeks. Courtney held a tissue to the lower half of her face, but he could still see her red-rimmed eyes. He didn't dare look at Stephanie. He knew she must be worried about Luther, but he didn't know what to tell her.

"I have to, ah, get out there." He rubbed his hand across his head. "I need to find a plane..."

"Done." Courtney's voice cracked. "I took care of it already. We leave in an hour."

"We?"

"Do you think we'd let you go out there without us?" Courtney tried to smile.

"I love you guys." Jamie held out his arms. Beth and Courtney all but fell into his embrace. "Thank you," he whispered.

His mind numbed and turned to autopilot. He wouldn't, couldn't, think of anything for the moment. "Okay, girls. Get what you absolutely have to take with you and meet me at the car in five minutes."

Beth and Courtney hurried to their rooms. Stephanie stood at the sliding glass door that looked out to the huge pool in the backyard.

"The sun's out. Not a cloud in the sky." She rubbed her hands up and down her bare arms. "How can something like that be happening when the fucking sun is out here?"

Jamie draped his arms around her. "He's okay, Stephanie. Don't worry, Luther is a strong man." Able to comfort her, his pain receded at

tad, not much, but enough to breathe and get through the next few hours. "Let's get moving."

She nodded. "I need to run and get something out of my overnight bag. I'll see you at the car in two."

\* \* \*

Jamie had no idea how they got to the airport, he hadn't paid a lick of attention as Beth drove. His body moved by rote, numbed. It wasn't until they were over New Mexico that he made a mental checklist of what needed to be taken care of. He knew Barbara wouldn't be in any frame of mind to see to such matters. And easing Barbara's pain was the last thing he could do for Lorennna.

And he had to think about Butch.

They'd been friends for so many years he couldn't fathom the man not being there. A friendship he wondered now if he'd taken for granted. But he didn't think so. Even if he didn't say it in words, Butch knew that he loved him.

"Thank God he reconciled with Lee," he mumbled to himself, then grimaced, because a spiteful Mother Nature cut their reunion short.

He should call Butch's parents. He patted his hip for his phone then remembered it lay in pieces all over his kitchen floor. "I'll wait 'til we get there." He might be putting off the inevitable, but he needed the reprieve, if only a couple of hours.

He laced his fingers together and stretched to loosen his tense muscles but it helped very little. "Beth..." He repeated the checklist aloud as she took notes. "I want to make sure to get as much done as soon as possible."

Beth nodded.

"I want to tell you all again, before we get there, how much I appreciate this." He was granted watery smiles and bowed heads.

"I need a distraction." *If only for a few minutes*, he thought. He set his briefcase on his lap and pulled the papers Steph had sent him earlier then shuffled through them. Bills, bills, a letter from a director he worked with three years ago, two more contracts for movies once his gig in New Zealand ended and one final page.

His eyes lingered on the heading. *Wild Rose Bed and Breakfast—Dusty Springs, Texas.*

Lines scribbled sideways filled most of the page, but his mind refused to focus on the words. He couldn't. Tears again stung the backs of his eyes.

"Got to." He hissed a heavy breath through his clenched teeth and read. A bitter laugh escaped from him. The girls all turned and looked at him as if he'd lost his mind. And at that moment, he thought it entirely possible.

"I am such an ass." He shook his head.

Stephanie motioned for the paper. When she looked at it, she blanched and slowly closed her eyes. "I'm sorry. I forgot all about it."

"No. It's not your fault." Jamie rubbed his tired eyes with the palms of his hands. "She lied to make me leave." He shook his head. "But why?"

"All I can figure," Stephanie cleared her throat and look at Jamie, "is she was afraid of your career."

"What? Why?"

She shrugged. "I don't know, but she started questioning me about the Ziembicki movie and then she kind of acted," she paused, "weird. Kind of distant."

"She asked you about that?" The pounding in his head started again. Nausea rolled his stomach. "What did you tell her?"

"That it was the most important career opportunity you'd ever had." She pointed her finger at him. "Probably would have."

Jamie groaned. "I decided not to do it."

All three women swiveled in their seats to face him. “I beg your pardon?” Stephanie’s whispered voice barely contained her incredulousness.

“Lorena was too scared to come with me, to give up the inn, so I decided to put the project on hold—”

“You can’t just put a project like that on hold.” Stephanie gripped the armrests of her chair. “Anyone could come in and snap it up.

—until she was more comfortable with everything,” he continued as if she hadn’t interrupted him.

Stephanie swallowed. “And what if she never was?”

“Then I guess I wouldn’t have done it.”

She opened her mouth to speak again, but Jamie held his hand up to stop her. “It’s moot now, don’t you think?”

She lowered her eyes and nodded.

“I am such a fool. I should have seen what she was doing. I should have trusted her more.” He leaned his head against the headrest. “She couldn’t have faked all that.” He remembered how devastated she was when she learned about her father. The pain in her eyes, no matter how good an actor, could not have been feigned. “She gave me an out and I jumped at it.”

“Don’t beat yourself up. It doesn’t do any good.”

“We’ll be landing in half an hour,” the captain said over the loud speaker.

The cabin quieted for the remainder of the flight. Silence continued as they disembarked down the narrow stairs. A chauffer, fifty feet away, held a cardboard sign with Jamie’s name printed in all caps. Jamie waved at the man and tapped Steph on the shoulder and pointed. She nodded and descended the metal steps.

Once on the tarmac, Jamie saw the girls all turn their cell phones on. He reached for his, again reminded it was gone. At once, all three phones shrilled. All with puzzled looks, they answered.



“No way!” Beth shrieked at the same time Courtney yelled, “Hallelujah.”

Tears streamed down Stephanie’s face, but over a smile bigger than he thought possible, as she put her hand on Jamie’s arm. “Yes. He’s right here. I’ll let you tell him.” She handed Jamie the phone.

His hands shook as he lifted the phone to his ear. “What’s going on?”

“Jamie, damn glad to finally get a hold of you.”

“Luther?”

“Yeah, man, we’ve been trying to reach you for hours.”

## Chapter Twenty-Seven

Jamie pushed through the heavy door and stepped into the darkened hospital room. Cold recycled air pricked his skin. Anxiety rooted him in place. He couldn't move another inch. He could barely breathe as his heart beat a wild tattoo in his chest.

Then Barbara Hughes looked up and saw him. She rose from a thick chair with the help of a pair of metal crutches while she kept her bandaged leg in front of her.

He should go help, but he still couldn't move. He hoped she understood. Then when a smile crossed her face, he relaxed a fraction. But no more than a fraction.

The older woman hobbled her way to him then stopped. "I'm so happy to see you." Barbara patted his arm.

Jamie covered her hand with his then cleared his throat. "Is your leg okay?"

She pulled her hand free and waved off his words. "My own stupidity for barreling through piles of wood and debris. The doctor said it'll be good as new in a few weeks."

The pair stood in silence for a long moment. Such dread and anticipation built that Jamie thought it might blind him. "I'm so sorry for your loss." The words clogged his throat. Too much raw pain to speak more.

Tears pooled in Barbara's eyes. "The house, we can rebuild it, but Lorennna..." She leaned on her crutches and covered her face with one trembling hand. "Oh my poor baby. I have never seen such a mess in my life. The entire house in one heap. All on top of her. I..."

Jamie wrapped the woman in an embrace.

Her small body shook with sobs.

Tears ran down Jamie's cheeks. He didn't think he had any left after he received the phone call from Lee several hours earlier.

When Barbara finally calmed, she pulled away from Jamie. "I'm sorry."

"No, please, don't apologize." He pulled a tissue from his pocket and handed it to her. He looked past her to the rest of the room. The drawn curtain hid most of the bed. Jamie took a deep breath and steeled his nerves. He had stalled long enough. "May I?" He motioned to the curtain.

Barbara nodded.

One more deep breath as he reached for the curtain, then he pulled it back to reveal a sight that nearly stopped his heart all together.

He thought he'd been prepared when Luther called and told him that Loreнна and Butch had survived the collapse of the house. Thought he'd been prepared when he said she was alive but still hadn't regained consciousness. But he was far from it.

Loreнна looked so small and helpless. A bandage covered her forehead. Scratches lined her pale cheeks and arms. Jamie's knees buckled and he sat heavy in a plastic chair pulled up to the side of the bed.

"Oh, Buttercup." As gentle as possible, Jamie caressed her cheek with the tips of his fingers. He had to feel her, touch her. Then he slipped his hand under hers careful not to jostle the tiny tubes.

Jamie bent his head to the bed. "Please wake up, Loreнна. Please."

"She loves you so much." Barbara cupped Jamie's shoulder.

"I know." How could he ever have doubted that? How could he believe she'd played him for a fool? He knew her heart, knew her to be one of the kindest people, but when he'd heard her on the phone...

He'd jumped to all the wrong conclusions. Once he realized what she'd done, once he realized that she'd set him up to make him leave, he

wondered at his own motives. Had he been too scared to see what was really happening? Had he jumped at the chance to regain his freedom?

He might have. But he'd give anything to go back and change it all.

When he thought she had died, he finally understood how much she'd meant to him, how much he needed her in his life. But by then it was too late. How much irony could one man take? How could life be so cruel?

It might still be too late.

"What if she doesn't wake up?" His whispered words echoed in the small room.

"You can't think like that." Loreнна's mother squeezed his shoulder. "You love her."

"More than I ever told her." He sat up and turned to look at Barbara. "I told her I loved her, but until this... I didn't really know how much." He shook his head. "I was so stupid."

"Hush, now." She hobbled across the room and sat back down in the huge leather chair. "You're here now and that's all that matters."

Jamie wished he could be as confident as Barbara.

Someone tapped a soft knock on the door. "I heard you were here." Lee smiled at Jamie and gave a quick wave to Barbara. "How is she doing?"

"The doctors won't know until she wakes up." Barbara picked up a can of soda and took a drink. "Time will tell."

Jamie gazed at Loreнна for a long moment then released her hand. He stood and enveloped Lee in a hug. "Thank you for calling me. Sorry I hung up on you."

"No problem." She pulled out of the embrace. "Just don't let it happen again."

Jamie smiled despite himself. "Where's Butch?"

"Down the hall." She smiled. "I'm surprised you can't hear him bitching up a storm." She frowned. "Oh, bad pun."

Jamie wrinkled his nose. "He doesn't deal well with hospitals."

“Too damn bad.” Her words grew quieter and she glanced over at Barbara. “I tried to remind him of the alternative here.”

\* \* \*

“I want to see my dog.”

“I’m sorry, sir, no pets are allowed in the hospital.”

“But he’s more than a pet, he’s like my child.” Butch pushed the table and tray of food to the end of the bed and waggled his arm so she couldn’t remove the blood-pressure cuff. “Can’t you make an exception this once?” Butch clasped his hands together in front of him. “I can get you all sorts of celebrities’ autographs. You name them and I’ll get it.”

The young woman rolled her eyes.

Butch heard the door open. He peeked around the woman and waved. “I can get you J. Hamilton’s right now. Jamie, come sign something for this nice nurse.”

“What are you up to now?” Jamie came to the end of the bed.

“I want my Sarge.” Butch leaned back on the raised mattress and eyeballed his friend. Dark circles rimmed Jamie’s eyes. Stubble covered his face and his clothes could use an iron two times over. “You look like shit.”

“Ditto.” Jamie stood next to the bed then reached for Butch and hugged him in an awkward male bonding ritual.

The nurse took advantage of Butch’s constriction and pulled the Velcro apart. “Only a few minutes. Mr. Mahay needs his rest.” She righted the blood pressure cuff, gave Butch a stern look, then turned and left the two men alone.

Jamie’s voice rasped when he said, “I have never been so damn glad to see you.”

“I’m damn glad to be seen.” When Jamie sat across the room from him, Butch screwed up the courage to ask, “Have you seen her yet?”

"I just came from there. She's still unconscious." He ran his hands through his hair and made it stand out every which way. "I can't believe this." He leaned forward with his elbows on his knees and buried his head in his hands.

What a hellacious day they'd all been through. He knew that Lee had called Jamie right after she and Ashley came out of the storm cellar. It tore Butch's heart when he thought how frightened and heartsick she'd been when she thought he and Loreнна were dead. Of his three broken ribs, he thought she broke two of them when she locked her arms around him after Luther had pulled him from the rubble.

Then no one could get ahold of Jamie or any of the girls. At the time, they hadn't known they were on a plane from California. Finally after a few hours of calls, Luther, Barbara and Lee got through to let them all know that he and Loreнна were both still alive. And in his case relatively unharmed. But poor Loreнна...

He needed to tell Jamie what happened. Butch's hands shook as he said, "She saved me."

Jamie's head popped up. "What?"

"Did Lee tell you anything about the storm when she called?"

"Not much. I know it demolished the inn with you and Loreнна inside."

He nodded. "She ran back in to save Sarge. I couldn't believe it. I just stood there for the longest time and watched her go, too stunned to move. I have no idea why. Shit was flying all around us. And I couldn't move." He shook his head. "I should have stopped her somehow."

"Don't beat yourself up. That's the way she is, she gets it done."

"That's true. When the sirens blared, none of us knew what to do." He rubbed around the bandage on his forehead. The stitches itched like a son-of-a-bitch. "As soon as I got my wits about me, I ran in after her. I found her with the animals on the second floor. We made it back down into the kitchen when the whole place cracked up."

Jamie grimaced.

“You want me to quit?” Lord knew he didn’t really want to recall everything, but he thought his friend might need to know.

“No.” He heaved a thick breath. “Please go on.”

“We made it into that huge cedar pantry and all the food started flying off the shelves. The noise, God, the noise was so loud.” He covered his ears and shut his eyes. If he gave himself a mental moment, it all came rushing back. *Don’t think about it, just tell the story.* He would, but he decided to spare Jamie most of the details like how the hair on his arm stood on end or how he could taste the debris that floated around him. And even the antiseptic cloud around the hospital couldn’t get the earthy smell from his head.

He opened his eyes and reached for his cup. After a long sip of water, Butch continued, “The whole place shook worse than that earthquake a few years ago. I couldn’t help but wonder what took it so damn long to fall on us. I swear I thought we were complete goners. Poor Loreenna was holding onto Bitsy and Sarge while I tried to cover them all, but it came at us from everywhere. I thought if I took Sarge, it might help. But as she handed him over the roof tore away.

“Two floors on top of us already gone. Then she gets this look on her face. I know it must have been a nanosecond but I can see it in slow motion. So clichéd, but so true.” Butch waved off his last words. “Sorry I digress. Loreenna’s face got all contorted and she lunged at me. One of the ceiling beams came tumbling down. She pushed me out of the way but...”

Butch’s throat closed up, eyes watered at the memory.

Jamie balled his fists in his lap but didn’t look away.

Butch spoke barely over a whisper, “It hit her—” he waved his hand next to his left ear, “—right here. Her eyes rolled up in her head and she crumpled just like that.” He snapped his fingers.

A tear rolled down Jamie’s cheek as his jaw clenched.

“I don’t know much else after that. The wall fell on top of us and I couldn’t see a damn thing until someone moved it and Luther’s ugly head popped in front of me.” His wan smile met nothing on Jamie’s stoic

face. "But I didn't let her go, Jamie. I could reach out just enough to grab her hand. We talked and talked. Well, I did all the talking, but when has that ever deterred me?"

Jamie stood and walked to the window. With his back to Butch, he shoved his hands in his pockets. "Did you know she made up that shit with that guy on the phone so I'd leave and do the movie?"

Butch shifted in the bed. Muscles ached, his head ached, but none of it compared to the pain in his chest as he watched his friend suffer. "Yes."

"How did you figure it out? I mean, it took me over a week to. I realize now if I had stopped long enough to think about it, I'd have known Loreнна was smart enough to put two and two together with the Ziembicki film." Jamie's bitter laugh sent chills up Butch's spine. "And she loved me enough to make sure I didn't miss that opportunity. But I was so damn angry that I didn't listen to what I knew deep in my heart. How did you figure it out?"

"Jamie, don't do this to yourself."

His friend's shoulders tensed and he turned around.

Butch shook his head. "Even if you'd been here, the tornado still would have come and still hit the inn. There was nothing you could have done to stop that."

"I could have protected her."

"How, Jamie?" Anger shook his hands. "How could you have prevented the winds that ripped the place apart? How exactly would you have stopped the inn from collapsing like pixie sticks falling?" Butch fisted his hand in the blanket to control the tremors. "I know how you feel. I *was* there. I was powerless, Jamie. I couldn't do a damn thing but watch it fall around us and pray to God that Loreнна didn't die before someone got to us. Die because...because she pushed me out of the way."

Butch's throat closed around tears again. He leaned his head back and shut his eyes.

The bed beside him sagged. "Thank you."



Butch peeked open one eye. "For?"

"For being with her. For talking to her even though you didn't know if she could hear you or not." Jamie grasped Butch's hand. "I know I haven't said it much over the years, but I love you, man."

Butch snorted. "We sound like a freaking beer commercial."

For the first time since he entered the room, Jamie smiled. Then he stood. "I better let you rest."

"Okay. Oh hey, if you can figure a way to sneak Sarge in, I'd much appreciate it."

Jamie laughed. "I'll see what I can do."

## Chapter Twenty-Eight

When Loreнна tried to pry her eyes open, pain shot through her temple. “Oh, my head.” She wanted to lift her hand to rub the pain away, but it was too heavy, almost as if weighted down. Her entire body was. She couldn’t move at all.

“Am I dead?” She thought she asked the words aloud, but wasn’t certain.

She couldn’t hear anything. It was quiet. Too damn quiet.

*There can’t be this much pain in death, can there?*

Panic welled in her chest.

Why would she think she was dead? What had happened?

*Can’t think straight.*

She fought to remember, but only a fuzzy image of her pantry closet torn all to hell came.

*Why can’t I remember?*

Another image of Butch and Sarge formed. The two huddled next to her and Bitsy. There had been so much noise.

A tornado. The inn.

Loreнна fought off more panic. She needed to open her eyes. She needed to see where she was.

*Concentrate.*

Her heavy lids didn’t cooperate at first then finally they slid apart a scant degree. But it did little to orient her. A darkened grayish ceiling and nothing more hung above her head. She knew she was at least in a room, but other than that...

*One thing at a time.*

"Hello?"

Again, she didn't think she spoke aloud. She heard nothing more than breathing now. And with the pounding in her head, she wasn't even certain if it was her own.

She tried once more. "Hello?"

Something moved. A rustle of clothing? A creak of a chair? She definitely heard something.

"Lorennna?" A face hovered above her.

The voice, as if out of a dream triggered emotion that ran the spectrum.

*Jamie.*

A sigh, followed by a short sob, almost a hiccup, wracked her body. "Uh," she groaned and her heart sank. Because she wasn't entirely sure if Jamie was really there or if her brain was playing tricks on her. He'd left Texas so angry. He hated her. And swore he'd never see her again. So her brain must have conjured him up. "I'm still asleep." That was the only explanation.

"No you're not, sweetheart."

Then it was much worse. There was no way he'd be there in front of her unless... "I *am* dead." She had to be. Why else was he standing next to her? And why was there so much pain in death?

But again the not-real Jamie spoke again, "No. You're banged up. Bruised. But very much alive."

She didn't believe the image. Cruel mind games. Do dead people think? They must because her mind whirled.

With a deliberate breath, she fought to keep her thoughts straight. But it was so hard. "This is my penance. To see your face forever."

A wobbly smile creased his hairy face. "I'm not sure I like being someone's penance." So much emotion crackled in his voice.

Lorennna blinked, tried to get the fuzzy image to clear. "I don't understand." Her throat rasped as she spoke. "Where am I?"

"The hospital." He stroked her cheek.

She wanted to close her eyes and melt into his touch, but she was afraid she might not open them again.

"I'll be right back. I need to let the nurse know you're awake."

"No." Her arm moved, finally, and she searched for Jamie's hand. "Please don't leave me."

He nodded. "Sure."

She was in the hospital? "How long have I been here?"

"Two days."

"Two?" Her foggy mind couldn't comprehend the time she lost. She could remember the storm. And the animals and... "Butch?" Her hand tightened around Jamie's.

"He's fine. Cuts and bruises. Nothing major." The rhythm of his fingers on her cheek soothed her while his other hand still held hers. "Lee and Ashley are fine, too."

She nodded and regretted the movement. Her eyes closed on a moan. Dizziness washed over her and rolled her stomach. Pain radiated from the tip of her skull, throbbed in her teeth and tensed all her muscles.

"Lorenn?" Jamie's voice creaked. His hand slipped from hers. Then a moment later returned. "The doctor will be here in a sec."

Lorenn started to nod again but stopped herself before she jarred her aching head. "Jamie?"

A warm breeze feathered her face just before a soft kiss touched her temple. "Yes?"

"My mom? Luther?"

"They're both fine. The tornado tore down your mom's fence but other than that her place was just fine. She did hurt her knee at your place." His voice caught, but he continued, "She got her some crutches. Ones that actually fit." He smiled down at her. "Luther had little more than a strong wind."

"Thank God." She didn't know what she'd have done if anything had happened to them. "You weren't here during...were you?" Even though

Jamie hated her when he'd left Texas, her heart would have broke if he'd have gone through that damn storm.

His hand stilled. "No, I didn't come down until after."

"Why?" She managed to open her eyes again. So much sadness crowded Jamie's face. "Why did you come?"

He shifted next to her, released her hand and rubbed a hand over his face. "I..."

"My patient's awake." A gruff voice interrupted Jamie. The old, gray-headed man stepped next to the side of the bed.

"Dr. Jenkins?"

"Well, look at that," all his teeth gleamed when he smiled, "she knows me."

"Of course I do." Her mouth turned up at the corners. She groaned as her dry lips cracked.

"How many fingers am I holding up?" Dr. Russ Jenkins went through a battery of tests. Just as he finished the door opened.

"Oh, my baby." Her mother swooped in and all but pushed the doctor aside. She scooped Loreнна up in a fierce hug. "My baby."

"Mom." Her breath caught. "Pain."

"I'm so sorry, I just had to touch you, hug you." Tears welled in the older woman's eyes when she settled beside Loreнна on the bed. "Dr. Jenkins, did I hurt her?"

He shook his head. "She should be okay. She has a concussion and minor bruises, but she should be good to go in a few days or so." With that, he left the room and shut the door behind him.

"Don't you ever worry your mother like that again." Barbara patted Loreнна's hand. One lone tear escaped and ran down her cheek. "I love you so much, Buttercup."

"I love you too." Loreнна sniffled.

A flurry of people paraded in and out of Loreнна's room for the rest of the day. She barely had a moment to herself until just after eight the nurse made everyone leave.

Ten minutes later, a soft knock came. Jamie walked in with a huge teddy bear and a handful of balloons with messages ranging from “get well” to “congratulations”.

“It’s a girl?” She eyed the mix of helium salutations.

“I bought everything they had. I didn’t even stop to read them.”

“Obviously.” Loreenna looked up at the smiley face on crutches next to the blue “It’s a boy balloon.” “Thank you. I don’t think I’ve ever had that many balloons in my entire life.”

Jamie set the bundle in the corner of the room. He hugged the bear to his side and eased down next to her on the bed. “How are you feeling?”

“Much better actually. I ate a little lunch and took a stroll around my fabulous accommodations.” She waved her hand at the bland walls. “Hey, wait a minute.” She scrunched her brow. “The nurse just threw everyone out, said visiting hours were over. How’d you get in?”

Jamie’s cheeks pinkened and a smile turned up the corner of his mouth. “The doctor and I asked her to.”

A rush of heat built in her stomach. “Really?” Her body ached, the bandage on her forehead itched, but with that simple gesture, she wanted to jump out of the bed, throw her arms around his neck and hug him.

“For you.” He handed her his furry companion. “Since they won’t let Bitsy or Sarge in.”

She rubbed the tan bear against her cheek, then set it in her lap. “You are just full of surprises today, aren’t you?” She cupped Jamie’s cheek. “I didn’t expect to ever see you again.” *Ever* hung on the tip of her lips but she refrained from saying it.

Jamie’s smile faded. He lifted her hand from his face and brought it down, clasped between both of his. “God, Loreenna. I thought you were gone. When they called...” He bent his head then pressed his mouth to her palm. “I’m so sorry that I walked out on you,” he mumbled against her skin.

A sob caught in her chest but she fought to hold it together. “You didn’t walk out. I made you leave.”

He looked up at her. "But why?"

"I wasn't ready, I guess." She pulled her hand from his, looked away. "I don't know. I got scared and I couldn't ask you to stay."

"I would have."

"I know." She picked at the adhesive at her temple. "That's why I had to make sure you'd leave. I couldn't ask you to give up the movie for me."

Jamie stilled her hand and tilted her chin until he held her gaze. "I wouldn't be giving it up for you." Tears hung in her eyes and she tried to look away but he wouldn't let her and continued to speak. "But for us. And I would have gladly. There's a big difference."

Lorenn's heart swelled. More tears clogged her throat. Before she could comment, *think* of anything to say, Jamie spoke again.

"I should have stayed. Maybe..." He shook his head and glanced over to the windows across the room.

"There's nothing you could have done, Jamie. The inn would have come down whether you were there or not."

"That's what Butch said, too." The bed shook when Jamie stood. He turned and paced the floor up and back twice then focused his gaze at her. "I wish I would have realized sooner why you made me leave." His eyes narrowed to little slits. "Who were you talking to on the phone that day?"

She hesitated. How much did she want to tell him? The absolute truth, otherwise they were doomed to repeat the same mistakes. "An ex. He called to see if I would come out to Washington and see him."

"And you didn't mean any of it? Right?"

"Not a word. He thought I had lost my mind. He actually hung up on me, said I had changed too much from the woman he knew."

"Well, he was quicker on that than me." Jamie shook his head. "I should have known."

Hope flared in her chest. Maybe she still had a chance with him. Maybe she could make him really understand why she made him leave. And if he did, if he could forgive her... "I'm sorry, Jamie."

“Oh God, please don’t apologize.” Jamie flattened his hands on the mattress and leaned in toward Loreнна. “You didn’t do anything wrong other than love me. I should have known.” He said that more to himself than her.

“And I love you, too Loreнна. I love you more than I thought possible. When I thought...” he cleared his throat, “...when I thought you were gone, a part of me died inside. There is no way in hell I can go through that again.”

Was he breaking up with her? Here? In the hospital? “I don’t understand.”

“There you are.”

Loreнна’s head jerked toward the intruder, but then her face broke into a huge smile. “Butch!” She wetted her lips to keep them from cracking more. “Look at you. You look great.”

“I live for fashion.” He tugged at his paisley ascot tucked into a red velvet dinner jacket.

Lee stood beside him, her blonde hair floated loose around her shoulders. The epitome of conservative with the exception of a huge army-green tote bag at her side which clashed with her pale pink sweater set and black slacks.

Jamie pushed away from the bed. “Whatcha got there, Lee?” He motioned to the tote.

“This old thing?” A wicked smile tipped her mouth. “I brought Loreнна a surprise.”

“Me? I don’t know if I can take too many more surprises.”

“Oh, you’ll like this one.” Before Lee could do anything, the bag shifted and shuddered.

“What...?” Jamie backed up a step as Lee handed the offending canvas to Butch then checked out in the hall before she shut the door.

Butch pulled the zipper back and a tuft of tan and black hair poked out.



“Sarge.” Loreнна sat up straighter in the bed and held out her arms for the little dog.

The pup crawled all over her, licked her face and whined.

“I would have snuck in Bitsy too, but she didn’t like it in there.” Lee motioned to the empty canvas bag.

“That’s okay, just seeing this little face,” Loreнна cupped the pup’s face and kissed the tip of his nose, “is enough for me. I’m so glad he made it.” She looked over at Butch. “I’m so glad we all made it.”

“Oh, don’t get all mushy on me, you’ll make me cry and I make it a point not to cry in front of the dog.” He ruffled the pup’s hair. “It gives him a complex.”

“We better get out of here before the night nurse gets back.” Lee leaned down and kissed Loreнна’s cheek. “We’ll see you tomorrow.” She situated Sarge back in the tote and hooked it on her shoulder. “Bye, Jamie.”

“Bye, you two.” He laughed as he shut the door behind them. “Now where were we?”

“Uh.” Loreнна’s skin heated at the gleam in Jamie’s eyes. “I don’t know.”

“I think I was about to ask you something.”

“You were?”

“Oh definitely.” He lifted her hand and kissed it. “I love you so much Loreнна. More than I think I wanted to admit. And as I was saying before, when I thought you were gone...”

She lifted her other hand and laid her fingers across his lips. “Please don’t.”

He gripped both her hands. “I have to. When I thought you were gone, a piece of me was gone. A piece I never knew I needed or wanted until I met you, Loreнна. And I need that piece to be whole.” He knelt beside the bed. “Marry me. I’ll move wherever you need, wherever you want as long as I am with you.”

“The inn is gone.”

"We'll rebuild it then."

"Jamie." Loreнна tugged her hands free then pulled at the curl behind her ear. "I put an ad in the paper, the day of the storm."

Jamie eased off the floor up onto the bed again. "Why?" He tucked the curl she'd worked loose back behind her ear.

"I needed a full-time manager." She swallowed hard. She wanted to look away but held his gaze. "I planned to be away for a while."

"Woo-hoo!" Jamie jumped up then clamped his hand over his mouth as the nurse peeked her head in.

"Everything okay in here?"

"Perfect. Wonderful." He scooped up the bespectacled woman. "Can you stay with her a moment? I don't want her to sneak out."

The woman swatted his arm. "Hurry up."

"Don't go anywhere." He blew a kiss to Loreнна.

"Not a chance."

\* \* \*

"Where'd Stephanie go?"

Butch and Lee looked up from where they huddled on the inclined bed. "What are you doing in here? You should be with your girl."

"I plan to. But I need to find Stephanie. Do you know where she's staying?"

Lee stood. "She was down in the cafeteria just a bit ago. You want me to go get her?"

"No. I'll find her." He hugged Lee and gave her a huge smack on her cheek. "It's a great damn day."

"It's eight-thirty at night. What's he talking about?" Jamie heard Lee ask Butch before the door shut.

He laughed and had to steel himself not to have another outburst and draw the attention of everyone on the floor.

In the cafeteria, he found Stephanie and Luther hunched over a pile of papers.

“You can’t possibly have that much work to do right now.”

Stephanie’s head came up. “Jamie. What are you doing?”

“I need something. What’s all that?”

“Barbara’s wedding stuff. Luther and I are rescheduling everything for day after tomorrow. I checked with Loreнна’s doctor and he said it would be okay.” She stood and pecked Jamie on the cheek. “Barbara wanted to wait but when I told Loreнна, she urged her mother to go ahead and do it, so... What did you need?”

Jamie took Stephanie by the arm and pulled her away from the table where Luther tried not to look too interested but failed miserably.

“Do you still have the ring?”

She scrunched up her face. “The ring...yes.” She lifted her purse off the chair and dug around then paused. “Which one?”

“What do you mean?”

Stephanie handed him the velvet box and then a silk bag he hadn’t seen before. When he peeked inside his smile—that he didn’t think could get broader—grew tenfold. “Perfect. I’ll see you tomorrow.” Jamie all but ran back to Loreнна’s room.

When he went back in, the nurse had just removed the blood pressure cuff from Loreнна’s arm. “You’re making a remarkable recovery.”

“I have major incentive to get better.”

The nurse then saw Jamie. “Yes, you do.” She straightened the cuff and turned to go. “You both have a good night.”

“Oh, I plan to.” Jamie waited for the door to shut. “Okay. Let’s see here. I think I asked you a question. And I don’t remember that you answered me.”

A flush crossed Loreнна’s cheek. The color was a welcome to the pale skin which greeted him when he first saw her in the hospital bed. He watched her tug at the curl behind her hair in that self-conscious way

that she had. "What..." She cleared her throat. "What was that question again?"

"I believe that I asked you to marry me. But..."

Her eyes widened and she gnawed on her lower lip.

"I think I need to withdraw that question."

She fidgeted. "You do?"

"Yes. I wasn't ready to ask you yet."

"Oh, I see." Her gaze darted away from his. The color in her cheeks darkened.

"I am ready now, though."

Eyes wider, she glanced at him briefly then looked down at her hands folded in her lap. "You are?"

God, he loved this woman. "Yes. Lorennna." He cupped her chin and made her look up at him. "May I?" He held out his hand for hers.

She hesitated, but then slipped her hand into his.

"I love you, Lorennna. I would go back to college and get that veterinarian degree if I thought that would make you trust me more."

"You don't have to do..."

"Shh." He lowered his mouth to hers and gave her a soft, sweet kiss. He wanted so bad to deepen the kiss but he couldn't until he finished his question—and got her to say yes. "Lorennna, will you marry me?" Jamie pulled the velvet box from his pocket, opened it for her to see then set it aside. He kissed her scrunched brow then pulled the satin bag out and slid the blue-stoned, gumball ring into his palm. "I believe this is yours."

"You kept it?" Tears coated her voice and wet her cheeks.

He nodded and slipped the ring onto her right hand. "Because it was yours and it was from the first time I told you that I loved you. This ring..." He pried the platinum band from the other box and slid the three carat ring on to her left hand. "This ring is to remember that I will always love you."

Lorennna gasped. "It's beautiful." She held up her hand and glanced back and forth between him and the ring. "I can't believe... Butch said... But I didn't believe..."

His smile faltered, mood threatened to wane. "That I loved you enough to marry you?"

She nodded. "I'm sor..."

"No. I told you, don't apologize." He cupped her face. "I love you. You love me." He pulled back and eyed her. "Right? You do love me?"

"Of course I do!" She leaned into him and kissed him. "I love you, Jamie Hamilton Crawford," she said against his mouth. "And, yes, I'll marry you."

"It's about damn time." Jamie and Lorennna turned to find Luther and Stephanie in the door. Just as they came in, Butch and Lee joined them followed by Barbara, Hugh, Beth and Courtney.

"Oh, we can have a double wedding." Barbara bounced on the balls of her feet.

"Thanks, but I don't want to intrude on yours and Hugh's time."

"But..."

"No, Mom. This is my one and only wedding, no offense." The pink returned to her cheeks. "I want to do this right. I want it all, all the trappings. If that's okay with you, Jamie?"

"Is it okay?" Jamie's chest threatened to burst with happiness. "More than okay! Woo-hoo. She said yes."

As expected the nurse came rushing in. "Now, Mr. Crawford. Oh my, you can't have this many people in here. This is too big of a crowd."

Jamie wanted to pound his fists on his chest. Instead he looked over at Lorennna, winked and said, "But this isn't a crowd, it's our family."

## Epilogue

“You ready?” Barbara straightened Jamie’s tie.

He chuckled and winked at the pink-haired pixie. “Shouldn’t I be asking you that?”

“Why, I’m not the least bit nervous. A wedding is a wonderful thing. It enriches a family, let’s it grow.”

“Then what are the tears for?” He wiped at her cheek.

“They’re happy tears.” She smiled up at Jamie as the organ hummed to life. “They’re playing our song, Mr. Crawford.”

“Shall we?” He held his elbow to her which she graciously took. The pair crossed the church foyer and walked up the isle. Faces smiled at them and a few tears rolled. Luther and his new bride Stephanie, Butch and the rest of the ladies took up the front row.

Despite his protestations to the contrary, nerves skittered up and down Jamie’s spine. His palms sweated and his tie tightened just a tad. Stage fright? At this point in his career, his life? Couldn’t be. But even if it were, this was one performance he wouldn’t miss for the world.

When he and Barbara reached the alter, she raised up on tiptoes and kissed his cheek. “You are one special man. Thank you for making my baby happy.”

“She’s made me happy, Barb.” He bowed and brought her hand up to her lips for a quick peck. “Now sit down please so we can start the show.”

Barbara giggled—yes, giggled—then went and sat next to her husband of just over a year.

Jamie glanced at the two attendants at the altar, both on padded stools. Sarge in his tux and Bitsy in a satin gown looked bored but

luckily they stayed put. He still couldn't understand why he agreed to have the four legged-creatures stand up for him, but whatever Loreнна wanted he would get for her if humanly possible.

Then the wedding march struck up. Every eye in the room shifted to the back. God, she was beautiful in the cream-colored silk. The strapless dress made his mouth water and long to taste those gorgeous shoulders and skim his lips down to...

*Not now Jamie*, he shifted as he scolded himself. *Patience.*

*I love you*, he mouthed to his bride-to-be as she slowly made her way down the carpeted isle to him.

\* \* \*

*I love you, too*, Loreнна mouthed back. Her man stood at the front of the church next to Ashley's father, who was ready to preside over the afternoon.

Jamie's black suit fit him so well, showed off his broad shoulders and wide chest. His light brown hair bore no blonde streaks due to a part he'd just wrapped up for a television drama series he guest-starred in when they returned from New Zealand last month.

The inn rebuild hadn't, unfortunately, gone as smoothly as Jamie's film-shoot. They'd spent the last two weeks with a hammer and nails and aided the construction workers and got the inn ready the day before so Loreнна wouldn't have to worry about it while they traveled to the mountains of Colorado for their two-week honeymoon. Loreнна found an exceptional manager to run the inn full-time and all she had to do was look at the staff she already had. She was surprised, to say the least, when Ashley applied for the position. She'd told Loreнна that, while she'd been undecided in her studies at first in college, she knew she wanted to learn hotel management. And Loreнна thought she couldn't have found a better employee if she'd interviewed a hundred different people and it had relieved her to keep it in the family—even if metaphorically speaking.

Her family.

She never thought she'd ever have such a large family either the two-legged or four-legged variety.

And look at her cute maid-of-honor and best man all dolled up in their finery. Sarge yawned and settled onto the stool, but Bitsy looked as if she didn't know whether to bolt or faint away, still wary of the wardrobe of clothes Butch gave her last Christmas.

Lorennna had to admit, she could sympathize with the feline.

Despite all the preparation, facilitated by her mother and Jamie's remarkable staff, she'd had a mini panic attack. She realized she'd always fantasized about her wedding day and every time it had included her father. Even after all the years past his death, she'd never really envisioned the day without him. It had taken her aback, stunned her into immobility when Ashley and Lee tried to help her into her gown.

But then she realized, he was there, in her heart and in her mind. And even better in Jamie's. That was an unexpected gift she never would have thought possible. And it made her smile wider as she strolled toward her love.

A sobbing noise, though, slowed her. She found Butch with a handkerchief pressed to his face and tears spilled in a steady stream down. Lee patted him on the back and cooed in his ear. When she caught Lorennna's eye, she shrugged.

Lorennna fought off a snort that threatened to sneak out then hurried the remainder of the way down the isle and to Jamie's side.

"You look breathtaking," he whispered into her ear just before he grazed her cheek with his lips.

She grasped his hand. "Ditto."

Then Lorennna took a deep breath and looked up at the rafters. In a silent prayer, she said, "I hope you're watching, Dad, I love you."

Then Pastor Hudson began, "We are gathered here today to join..."



## About the Author

Denise Belinda McDonald started her writing career at the tender age of eight. Her stories have changed over the years, but not her love for telling tales. An overactive imagination and a propensity to embellish have kept her books rich with lovable characters and interesting twists. She belongs to several writers groups, several of which she serves on the board.

Denise lives in Fort Worth with her husband, four young boys and two dogs where she juggles her time between writing, carpool, Cub Scouts, sports galore and a multitude of crafts.

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And for a *Chica-good-time*, visit her blog with Author Amie Stuart and fellow Samhain Authors Michelle Miles and Raine Weaver at: [www.southernfriedchicas.com](http://www.southernfriedchicas.com)

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Her Passion  
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*Did you ever want to live a different life? Or actually have a life?*

## Ellie's Dream

© 2007 Margaret Wilson

The last thing Ellie Newman expected to see was her husband wrapped in the arms of a blonde. Talk about a wake-up call.

With her son almost grown, her job a bore and a husband whose hobbies don't include her, she is ready for a change.

Out of the blue, Ellie gets a chance to live another life when she goes to New York City for the summer to escape her problems. She gets a job of sorts, pet-sitting for her friend's cousin.

She loves New York. The parks, the food, the museums, the clubs all beckon. The only annoyance is Seth, the beast who unexpectedly shares the apartment.

Seth wants her to leave. Women are trouble and he needs to focus on his music. But she is hard to ignore, especially after they discover a mutual love of jazz. Ellie is up for a fling. After all, who can resist such a bad boy?

Ellie's Dream is about finding your heart, finding your passion and letting go.

Enjoy the following excerpt for *Ellie's Dream*:

Seth and Marshall pushed their way through the crowd to the edge of the dance floor. They looked around for Ellie and Jamie. Marshall spotted them and pointed them out to Seth. Their bright red heads made them stand out in the crowd. As the couples moved, Seth caught glimpses of Ellie's milky white thighs playing peek-a-boo with that ridiculous excuse for a dress. Then he noticed Jamie's hands firmly gripped her sweet little bottom. And worse, Ellie hung on to his ass for dear life. Their hips moved together like a well-oiled machine.

"I had no idea Ellie danced so well," Marshall shouted in Seth's ear. "They look amazing together."

Just then the song ended and Jamie dipped Ellie back, her long white arm arched over her head as one shapely leg wrapped itself around Jamie's hip. Jamie ran his lips down Ellie's neck, over her chest and stopped at her waist. Seth's hands clenched. Jamie righted Ellie and caressed the leg still wrapped around his hip.

"What's the matter?" Marshall shook Seth's arm. "You look like you're ready to explode."

"It's hot in here," Seth said through clenched teeth. Jesus, Jamie still had his hand on Ellie's ass. Seth wanted to punch him out, gay or not. He was hot and hard. All he wanted to do was throw Ellie over his shoulder and get her out of here. Get her alone, rip that dress off and see what lay underneath. He shook his head to clear it and took a deep breath.

As they returned to the table, Ellie saw Marshall at the edge of the dance floor. She pointed him out to Jamie. "I think he came to see you." Then she noticed Seth behind Marshall. "Do you think they're checking up on us?"

"Looks like it. Seth seems quite smitten." Jamie steered her toward the two men. "This could be our lucky night."

"Maybe for you. I've been talking you up to Marshall." Ellie clutched Jamie's arm. "He really likes you."

"He doesn't even know me," Jamie shot back.

Ellie whispered in his ear. "He could get to know you."

"What's up?" Ellie asked. They stopped in front of Marshall and Seth.

"We wanted to get out of the apartment, get a drink." Marshall held up a bottle of water.

"I love Latin music," Seth added.

"But it's not live," Ellie protested. She pointed to the DJ. "I thought you'd prefer live music?"

“Did you see us dance?” Jamie put his arm around Ellie. “Ellie is a terrific partner.” He placed his hands on her hips. “She really moves these.”

Ellie wiggled her hips. “I need to find the ladies room. Get me some water, Jamie?”

“Sure, I’ll meet you back here.” Jamie kissed Ellie’s cheek.

When Ellie left the ladies room a few minutes later, Seth was standing outside the door with a bottle of water in his hand.

“Thanks.” Ellie took the water. “Where is everybody?”

“They seemed to have a lot to say to each other, so I left them alone.” Seth pointed to a dark corner where Ellie could barely see her friends. They were huddled together, heads close.

“It looks like I’ve been dumped,” Ellie said with a smile.

They made their way to the edge of the dance floor. Ellie sipped her water and looked around. The club was getting very crowded. A tall man with dark hair appeared at Ellie’s side and asked her to dance.

“My wife is taking a break right now.” Seth drew Ellie to his side. “Thanks for asking.”

The man held up his hands and moved away.

“Wife,” Ellie sputtered. She shook off Seth’s arm. “I don’t need a chaperone.”

“He’s a creep and that dress of yours is bound to give him the wrong idea.” Seth drew her close again. “It’s giving me a lot of ideas.” His fingers brushed her thighs.

“It’s the perfect dress for salsa.” Ellie pushed his hands away.

“So let’s dance.” Seth held out his arms.

“You can dance?” Ellie looked at him uncertainly.

“I was raised by a gay Hispanic musician who hung out with drag queens.” He looked her up and down. “You may not be able to keep up with me.”

“I bet I can.” Ellie put her empty bottle on a table and grabbed his hands. “Ready?”

Dancing with Seth was very different than dancing with Jamie or even Sergio. It was sexual, very physical, with Seth completely in command. After a minor test of wills, Ellie gave in and let Seth take charge. His body was strong and fluid and he stared into her eyes as they moved to the frenetic beat. Ellie had the time of her life. After two energetic mambos, the DJ slowed the tempo down to a samba. Seth pulled Ellie close.

“Maybe we should sit this one out,” Ellie whispered.

“Not a chance. This is the most sensual music there is.” He dipped Ellie.

Ellie sighed and let Seth take over again. She remembered the dance classes she and Patti took together because their husbands were too busy. She tried to show Charlie the steps but he never seemed able to spare the time. She wanted to call Patti and describe the club and how much fun she was having.

She was startled out of her daydream when Seth kissed her neck, sending a shiver right down to her toes. She pushed away from him.

“You have to stop this.” Ellie fought to catch her breath. “I like you, but we can’t be lovers. I’m married.”

Without a word, he led her off the dance floor to a dark corner. He pressed her against the wall and braced his hands on either side of her.

“If you were my wife, I would come after you wherever you tried to hide. I’d take you home and do whatever it took to make you want to stay.” He lowered his eyes and looked at her body. “And I’d take you dancing so other men could see how lucky I was, but then I’d have to take you home early because I’d need to make love to you.” He closed his eyes and took a deep breath. “But that’s just me.” He started to back off.

“One more thing.” He lowered his mouth and kissed her deeply, passionately, using his lips and tongue to excite her. He broke away leaving Ellie’s head spinning. “I’d kiss you like that every day, so it’s clear where you belong.” With that he grabbed her hand and marched her over to the table where Jamie and Marshall sat.

“See that Ellie gets home safely,” Seth said to the two men.

*They walk away from the wreckage of an airplane, but their hearts and lives will never be the same.*

## Never the Same

© 2007 Diane Craver

When fashion buyer Kimberly Collins and high school senior Tori Moorhead escape a burning plane, both women make radical decisions that intertwine their lives forever.

Kim's priorities change, especially in the bedroom. She's thankful to be taken to another world—one of love and romance, not of smoke and death. When she decides she wants another child, her husband reveals his own shocking plans for their family.

Pregnant teenager Tori is on her way to get a secret abortion when the plane crashes. The baby's teen father wants to get married. Her dad pushes for adoption. Caught between the two men she loves, Tori struggles to make the right decisions for her baby and the future she dreamed of.

Enjoy the following excerpt for *Never the Same*:

Victoria Moorhead stood in front of her full-length mirror. She looked the same. She placed her hand over her stomach. It felt the same.

But it wasn't the same. Her baby was growing inside her. Why had she and Ryan celebrated their victories so intimately that fateful night? As co-captain of the football team, he was excited when his team won the league championship. Her soccer team had also won their league, so they'd drunk a little too much beer and lost all control.

She glanced in the mirror a last time before climbing into bed. She was wearing the University of North Carolina T-shirt her dad had bought for her on their last campus visit.

"Well, golden girl, you did it," he'd said, using the expression he'd begun to use after the accident that killed her mother and paralyzed him. At first she'd thought he called her that because of her blonde hair.

Later, she realized she was his golden girl because the accident had left her uninjured. "God has something special in mind for you," he reminded her often.

Her cell phone rang and she answered it.

"Tori, I can't sleep," Ryan said. "I keep thinking about tomorrow."

She sat on her oversized blue-and-white striped beanbag chair. "I don't think I'll be able to sleep, either. I'm scared."

"Does your dad suspect anything?" Ryan asked.

"No, he thinks I'm going to New York so Blair can help me find a dress for the sweetheart dance." Her half-sister Blair worked for the airlines and she'd booked the flight for her. She felt guilty about lying to her dad, but she couldn't tell him about the baby.

"I don't want you to have an abortion. I've been thinking we can get married. I'll still go to college, and after I graduate and get a job, I'll pay for you to go."

"We're too young to get married now and..." She hesitated because what she'd just said troubled her. How could she be too young to be a wife, but old enough to kill her baby? "I can't lose my scholarship. My dad would be heartbroken. He's lived for the day I go to college and make something of myself."

"I know I'm asking a lot, but please don't go through with it."

"If I stay pregnant, I won't get to go to UNC." Tori sighed. "It's not fair. You won't have to give up anything. Guys never suffer when they get girls pregnant."

"Honey, I'm sorry about everything. I know how much your scholarship means to you. You did get an academic scholarship at Loyola. You could go there and live at home. We could hire a babysitter while you're in class."

"My dad and I always dreamed I'd play on the women's soccer team at the Olympics someday."

"Whatever you do, I love you."

Her eyes teared. "I love you, too."



"I'll drive you to the airport."

"Maybe the plane will crash, and I won't survive. Everything will be out of my hands and I won't have to go through with the abortion."

"Don't say that. Flying to New York is dumb anyhow. Since you're determined to have the abortion, you should just go to a clinic in Chicago."

"I can't take a chance that my dad or anyone learns I'm pregnant." A thought occurred to her. "You didn't tell anyone, did you?"

"I promised you I wouldn't and I didn't. It's been hard not telling my parents, because I think they should know."

"I wish you could tell them, but I'm afraid if they know, they'll try to stop me."

"I'm not sure what they would do."

Weighted down with adult responsibilities, they became quiet. Creating a new life when both of them were kids had been a stupid thing to do.

The only thing left to discuss was when to leave for the airport in the morning. Ryan sounded so sad, Tori was relieved to say good-bye.

After crawling into bed, she held her beige teddy bear next to her chest. She'd slept with this bear for years. Before her mother had died, they'd made a hat and dress out of blue and red material for the bear. The finishing touch was a little heart necklace.

If only she could talk to her mom. What would Mom tell her to do?

She didn't have to think long. Her mother had often told her how thankful she'd been to have Tori. Her mother's physician had told her she might never have a child.

Clutching her bear, she could almost hear her mother's gentle voice saying, Victoria, having you was a miracle. A child is such a precious gift.

She would tell her to have the baby. The realization startled her and she trembled. But her mother was dead and couldn't help. Tori didn't have a choice but to have an abortion.

Maybe after the abortion, God would somehow see to it that her mother could welcome the baby into heaven.

Her tears fell on the bear.

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