

Patrice Michelle



Anticipation

SAMHAIN publishing, LTD.

eBooks are *not* transferable. They cannot be sold, shared or given away as it is an infringement on the copyright of this work.

This book is a work of fiction. The names, characters, places, and incidents are products of the writer's imagination or have been used fictitiously and are not to be construed as real. Any resemblance to persons, living or dead, actual events, locale or organizations is entirely coincidental.

Samhain Publishing, Ltd.
512 Forest Lake Drive
Warner Robins, Georgia 31093

Anticipation
Copyright © 2007 by Patrice Michelle

Cover by Scott Carpenter

ISBN: 1-59998-782-1

www.samhainpublishing.com

All Rights Are Reserved. No part of this book may be used or reproduced in any manner whatsoever without written permission, except in the case of brief quotations embodied in critical articles and reviews.

First Samhain Publishing, Ltd. electronic publication: October 2007

Anticipation

Patrice Michelle

Dedication

To my family, thank you for believing in me.

To my fans, thank you for your amazing support!

Acknowledgements

To my editor Linda Ingmanson, I appreciate your tenacious desire for “more”.

To my critique partner Cheyenne McCray, thank you for never holding back!

Chapter One

The man I could never have, Deidre thought as the cowboy who had haunted her fantasies for a decade drove up in his blue and white police car. Her stomach muscles flexed as he cut the engine and climbed out of the driver's seat.

Her parents told her a few years back that the Flying Wind's wrangler had become the town sheriff, but nothing could have prepared her for the devastating sight of Jonas Mendez's broad shoulders decked out in a uniform, complete with a shiny silver badge. The white shirt showed off his mixed Hispanic and Caucasian skin tone to perfection, and the gun belt strapped around his black pants only added to the steely confidence he exuded, even more now than he had ten years ago.

"Miss Nelson."

When she'd agreed to watch her parents' B&B, she'd psyched herself up for this meeting. She couldn't let herself get caught up in him again. Yet, even though she knew there couldn't be anything between them, her heart sank a little that he hadn't called her Deidre. She let her smile melt away and put her hand in his warm one, shaking it with a firm grip. "Thanks for stopping by, Sheriff. My parents appreciate you making the effort."

"My pleasure, ma'am." He released her hand and touched the rim of his hat, giving her a respectful nod.

Despite his formal tone, the brief clasp of his hand around hers had ignited a burst of tingles in her arm. *Why are all the good ones always taken?* she lamented, until her brain caught up with what she'd seen, or rather what she didn't see when he'd touched his hat.

His left hand was bare.

Her heart stuttered in shock. Was there a reason he wasn't wearing his wedding band? Deidre's gaze jerked to his dark blue one in hopes he'd volunteer an answer to the question she knew reflected in her eyes.

"It's the least I can do considering I haven't been able to stop the acts of vandalism that have occurred at the Flying Wind lately," he said as he scanned the B&B and its

surrounding property with an assessing gaze. “I’ve missed the quiet tranquility of this place.”

“I heard you’ve taken over your parents’ property now.” She tried to keep her tone casual despite her pulse’s rushing whoosh in her ears. “I understand the Mendez spread is pretty vast.”

His jaw ticked as he squinted into the sun. “My mom died six years ago and my dad followed her a couple years later. My brother wasn’t interested in running the ranch, so I took over.”

Something was bothering him. His grim tone told her there was more. She tilted her head in curiosity, wanting to ask, *What’s wrong? How have you been doing these past ten years? Is your favorite food still chili with lots of Tabasco? What made you decide to run for sheriff? And for god’s sake why aren’t you wearing your wedding ring?* “Can’t be easy being both sheriff and full-time rancher.”

Jonas’ focus shifted to her. Fine lines were more apparent around his eyes, his bearing more intense. His shoulders might be broader, but his cheekbones were leaner, projecting a harsher, less relaxed persona than she remembered from the twenty-six-year-old wrangler she’d met a decade ago.

“I have a foreman who oversees the ranch during my office hours, but I enjoy the constant hard work.”

“With very little time to relax,” she finished for him before she thought better of it. *Damn, that was stupid. New York wasn’t supposed to follow me.*

His mouth set in a firm line. “I prefer to stay busy.”

While the late summer Texas wind whipped around them and the early evening sun dipped low in the cloudless blue sky, tense silence stretched between them. Deidre lifted her hands in the air, spreading them wide as she cast her gaze from one side of the B&B’s long front porch to the other. “Well, as you can see, the Flying Wind is safe and sound, so you can head home now.”

His black eyebrows drew downward. “I don’t like you staying here by yourself.”

He sounded so serious and forceful, she couldn’t help but grin. The quiet town of Ventura, Texas was far safer than Manhattan! “Hey, no worries. I just finished my latest column for the magazine and had some free time on my hands, so I offered to housesit. My parents decided since nothing has happened at the B&B in the past three weeks, they

would take their vacation before the fall season kicks into full swing. I wanted them to enjoy their first cruise without having to worry about leaving an empty house behind.”

His frown only deepened.

Shaking her head at his stoic expression, she kept her tone upbeat. “I’ll be fine.”

He stared at her for a couple more seconds before he gave a curt nod. Reaching into his front pocket, he withdrew a business card and handed it to her. “I’ll be by tomorrow around this time. Call my cell if you need me any time. My property is adjacent to your parents’. I can be here in three minutes.”

And if my needs are of a more personal nature? She gave an inward sigh as she took the card. “Thanks, Sheriff.”

He touched the brim of his hat once more and walked back to his car. Opening the door, he paused and leaned his arm on the window frame, regarding her with a steady gaze. “I may have more responsibilities now, but I’m still the same cowboy, Deidre. Jonas will do.”

He wasn’t the same laidback cowboy she remembered, but a much older, hardworking man who managed to blow through all the mental barriers she’d spent weeks building up. And all it took was seeing him with those secrets in his eyes. Her heart raced as he drove away, gravel dust clouding over the red taillights. After ten years, hearing her name again in that sexy Texan accent caused a shiver to ripple over her body. How many times had she fantasized hearing him say her name in a passionate moment? She stared at the crisp card in her hand, wishing it were six o’clock tomorrow already.

* * *

Ten years earlier...

Jonas’ horse ambled up the wooded trail. Velvet walked behind them via the lead rope. The mare held her head low...as she should, Deidre thought with a wry smile as she turned her attention forward once more. Darn horse had scared the wits out of her, taking off like she had.

But Jonas’ firm grip around her waist distracted her from her anger and made her forget about the stinging cut she’d acquired on the cheek during the skittish horse’s mad dash down an unmarked trail. She glanced at his tan forearm wrapped tightly around her waist, noting the sprinkle of dark hair and the defined veins that spread up his muscles.

With each step his horse took, her body dipped and swayed, molding her against Jonas' hard frame.

"I'm not gonna let you fall, darlin'." Butterflies scattered in her belly at the sensation of his fingers gripping her rib cage. His chest pressed against her back, muscular and warm. She leaned into him, inhaling his woodsy, masculine scent—a scent that had driven her nuts the last several days she'd spent at her parents' brand new bed and breakfast retreat they'd named Flying Wind. She'd thought the Texan B&B would be a nice place to visit during her fall break from college. What she didn't expect was to be instantly attracted to her parents' head wrangler in the process.

She laid her head in the crook of his neck and closed her eyes...wishing.

His warm breath came close to her temple as if he were going to say something...or kiss her. Her pulse skittered in anticipation and goose bumps formed on her skin. When he did neither, a maddening mix of relief and disappointment washed over her.

His horse slowed and she opened her eyes to see they were near the end of the wooded trail. Dusk was almost upon them and sunlight filtered through the thick trees above them, making her feel warm and secure. The smell of earth and outdoors, mixed with Jonas' heavenly scent, surrounded her in a blanket of rightness she didn't want to let go.

When he placed his hand on her thigh and squeezed, her belly tightened in instant response to the heat generated by his broad palm. She bit her lip as she lowered her gaze to his tanned hand. In a month he'd be wearing a wedding band on his ring finger. *Why didn't my parents open their business a year earlier?* she mentally wailed.

Jonas slid off his horse in one graceful, fluid movement. His black Stetson tilted until his deep blue gaze collided with hers.

As he encircled her waist to lift her down, words lodged in her throat. Once her feet touched the ground, she finally forced an appropriate response, unlike the zillion other inappropriate thoughts rumbling around in her mind. "Thank you for rescuing me."

He smiled and instead of letting her go, his grip tightened around her waist. Pulling her close, he pressed his jaw against her temple. The sensation of his chest rising and falling in a deep, shuddering breath surprised her.

"In another life..." he said in a gruff tone before he released her and moved to untie Velvet.

* * *

Deidre awoke with a dull ache between her legs, her heart racing. She sat up and pushed her hair away from her face, staring at the bright morning sunlight filtering past the pale green gingham curtains in the B&B's front guest bedroom. She'd lost count of how many times she'd dreamed of the last time she'd seen Jonas Mendez—the last words he'd spoken to her before she went back to college. Since then she'd had a litany of fantasies about Jonas. Of course, in *her* dream world, the sexy cowboy hadn't been engaged.

And *why* wasn't he wearing a wedding band ten years later?

Maybe he never wore one. Or his marriage had failed.

It happens.

She'd thought she was on the "right" relationship track, twice. Her last two boyfriends turned out to be work-a-holics who spent more time at the office than with her. Tom's true love was his corporate status, and Jeremy's long hours led to *playing* with a redhead in his law firm.

Irritated with herself for dwelling on Jonas' marital status and her own past miserable experiences with men, she pushed back the covers. The goats needed to be fed and her parents had asked her to fertilize the main flowerbeds while they were gone. Fortunately it had rained hard the night before and there wasn't any rain in the forecast. Now was the best time to spread the fertilizer. *Better get started on those chores. Apparently I need a distraction from fruitless ponderings.* Shaking her head, she stood and turned toward the bathroom.

* * *

"Hey, Sheriff," the cashier called out as she swiped Deidre's credit card through the automated machine.

"Afternoon, Sally."

Deidre cast her gaze over her shoulder to see Jonas heading toward the back of the Mom-and-Pop store. His boots hit the wood floor with a heavy, purposeful stride, sending shivers down her spine. He stopped at the bottom of a ladder and spoke to the older man who was stocking extra canned goods on a top shelf.

“I’m so glad to see you back. You’ve grown into a beautiful lady.” Deidre’s attention returned to the cashier’s full cheeks, which were puffed up in a broad smile.

Heat tinged Deidre’s face at the compliment “Thanks, Sally. It’s great to be back. I really enjoyed my summer here while I was in college. I wish I’d come back sooner.”

“Pshaw!” Sally waved her hand then bagged the last of Deidre’s groceries. “You had to experience the big city rush for a while. Only then would you appreciate the relaxed lifestyle our town has to offer.”

Deidre laughed and put her hands around the bag to pick it up. “Amen to that. There’s a certain amount of comfort in knowing some things don’t change,” she commented as she glanced around the store’s solid wood floor to the barrels of fresh produce on display.

“True, but there’s one thing I wish would change.”

Deidre elevated her eyebrow. “What’s that?”

Sally’s deep green gaze cut to the two men talking in the back of the store. Jonas was holding the ladder while Sally’s husband climbed a rung higher to straighten some boxes. “It’s about time the sheriff settled down.”

The bag crumpled under Deidre’s tightened fingers. “For some reason I thought he was married.”

Sally exhaled an unladylike snort of disdain. “He never married.” She leaned forward and spoke in a lowered voice. “Two weeks before his wedding, he caught Candice with his best friend.”

Deidre’s chest constricted at the news. His fiancée had cheated on him? She resisted the urge to glance back at Jonas’ handsome profile.

“I’m so sorry to hear that,” she heard herself saying. And she was sorry...for Jonas. Sheesh, in a small town like Ventura, everyone knew everyone’s business. No wonder he appeared harder and less approachable than she remembered. Why hadn’t her parents told her? Then again, they never knew about her crush on their wrangler.

She was pissed at herself, however. Sure she’d moved to New York to prove she could be successful on her own, but damn it, she’d avoided coming back to Ventura all this time. For nothing!

She’d thought about Jonas and his sexy smile often over the years, to the point she refused to come back to visit Texas. Why torture herself? Since her parents loved to travel, she’d invited them to New York for the holidays each year. They spent quality

time together in her cozy apartment, and she always made sure her mom and dad had a grand time. She was glad her parents never pushed her to visit them at the B&B.

“Anyway, it’s been almost ten years,” Sally continued. “Bout time he moved on, in my opinion. You married?”

Deidre couldn’t help the chuckle that rumbled past her lips at the woman’s direct question and surreptitious glance at Deidre’s left hand. “You trying to play matchmaker, Sally?”

The older woman shrugged then smiled, an expectant look lighting her face. “So are you?”

“I’m sure my mom has shared my marital status or lack thereof with you.” Deidre shook her head and grinned. “You and my mother are like two peas in a pod.”

Sally let out a full-bellied laugh. “True. Dorothy and I are like long-lost sisters. I miss her company already.”

Deidre’s smile broadened. “She and Dad will be back in a couple more days. I’m sure they’ll be full of stories of their adventures from their cruise.”

Sally wagged her pudgy finger toward her. “Your mom better have taken her digital camera. I told Dot I wanted lots of photos.”

Deidre started to pick up her bag of groceries when someone came from behind her and swooped the paper bag out of her arms.

“I’ll carry ’em out for you, Deidre.”

Jonas’ serious eyes locked with hers. Without his hat shadowing his face, his eyes appeared a deeper blue than she remembered, more stormy and turbulent. No longer crew cut, his coal black hair had a wave to it that just begged to be touched. Slight changes for sure, but her pulse still raced like it had ten years ago.

“Um, thanks.” She waved to Sally as she turned to walk out of the store.

“Bye, you two,” Sally called out. As they walked away, Deidre caught the woman’s “thumbs up” signal out of the corner of her eye.

When Jonas started to turn and say goodbye to Sally, Deidre’s heart jerked. He didn’t need to know they were talking about him. She grasped his elbow and tugged him out of the store. “How’s your day been?”

“Sally been trying to set me up again?” The corners of his mouth turned up a little as he followed her outside.

Disappointment settled in her stomach at the amusement in his voice. This was a common occurrence, apparently. He didn't need to know it bothered her. She came to a halt next to her dark blue rental car and stuck out her bottom lip in an exaggerated pout. "And here I thought I was special."

He leaned close enough that she could smell his aftershave. God, he smelled good—spicy, musky and all male. His imposing frame blocked out the sun, dwarfing her own five-foot-nine-inch height. He might've gone through some rough times, but Jonas' charisma had magnified a hundredfold over the years. With a mere glance, he caused her body to heat in instant response.

Handing her the bag of groceries, he said in a low voice, "You've always been special," before he headed toward his police car. Once he reached the vehicle, he opened the door and called across the parking lot, "Do you still make those oatmeal chocolate chip cookies?"

She nodded. "I've tweaked the recipe a half dozen times since I graduated from culinary school."

His dark eyebrow rose. "I liked the original version. I'll stop by and check on you tonight."

When he drove past, his gaze locked with hers for a brief second, causing Deidre's skin to prickle. *I liked the original version.* The way he'd looked at her when he drove past made her wonder if he was taking about cookies with that comment.

She'd never been more aware of a man and her reaction to his presence than she was of Jonas Mendez. No man had ever come close to affecting her the way he did. From his smoldering gaze to his magnetic heat, he made her breasts ache, her stomach tighten and her breath hitch whenever he came close. Did he sense it? The crinkle of the paper bag underneath her fingers pulled her out of the seductive haze Jonas had created the moment he invaded her personal space.

After she opened her car door and set the groceries in the passenger seat, Deidre sat with a heavy sigh and acknowledged that her emotional response was part of her problem. Since she'd never been with Jonas, she wondered if she'd subconsciously built him up and put him on a pedestal, leaving the other men she'd dated lacking in many ways. Could her imagination be that cruel?

After she caught Jeremy kissing his co-worker, she'd kicked his sorry ass out. He'd begged forgiveness and said he wasn't perfect—that people make mistakes. Did she

expect perfection? All she knew was she wanted the same wonderful, trusting marriage her parents had. She never planned to accept anything less for herself.

Squaring her shoulders to ward off the bitter memory, she put the key in the ignition and started her rental car with a determined twist of her wrist.

And now Jonas was a free man.

“I’ll stop by tonight to check on you,” he’d said.

Excitement coiled within her as she backed out of the parking space.

* * *

Deidre smoothed her knee-length, pale-yellow linen sundress then opened the front door, intending to let the summer breeze blow through the screen door as she fixed a batch of fresh oatmeal chocolate chip cookies. Of course Snowball chose that moment to squeeze past her legs and bolt outside.

“Snowball!” Deidre’s sandal heels clicked across the porch’s wooden floorboards and down the stairs.

The cat meowed and took off toward the barn. As Deidre made her way across the pebbled lot, her shoes turned this way and that with the rocks’ movement. Rock dust stirred over her bare toes, dulling the shine of her newly polished toenails. Annoyance surged, along with fear for the indoor cat’s safety. “My parents will kill me if anything happens to you. Come back, you silly cat! I have to start baking.”

Snowball never even looked back. Instead, his white tail disappeared through the old barn’s partially opened door.

Deidre blew out an irritated breath and trekked the rest of the way to the barn with determined steps. She knew the cat was mousing.

Sliding the creaky door fully open, she peered into the barn’s dim interior. “Snowball. Stop this nonsense.”

As she walked inside, a light, bouncing sound above her head told her Snowball had already made his way up the wooden ladder and was in the upper loft.

She approached the ladder and stared up the length, knowing full well there was only one way he was coming back down...by being carried.

Kicking off her sandals, she put her hands on the ladder and stepped on the first rung. “Mom and Dad said they wanted to keep you forever. I’m thinking taxidermy might be a great option at the moment.”

When nothing but silence greeted her, she let out a heavy sigh and began to climb.

* * *

Jonas drove up to the Flying Wind Bed and Breakfast, tense anticipation flowing through him. After he’d seen Deidre earlier, the rest of his day moved so slow he could’ve sworn the clock’s hands moved backward at a couple points. Usually he was so lost in his work he stayed late and didn’t leave until his stomach started rumbling. Today, he couldn’t wait until his watch read six o’clock. Pulling to a stop in front of the B&B, he cut the engine.

Disappointment tightened his chest when he didn’t see Deidre’s smiling face and gorgeous long blonde hair appear in the doorway. Behind the screen door he could see the front door was open. Maybe she was in the kitchen and hadn’t heard him drive up.

He opened his door and unfolded his tall frame from his car. As he walked up the steps, he wondered if he should’ve changed clothes first. No, that would make this trip appear premeditated. Yet only God and he knew his motivations for checking on the Nelsons’ house weren’t entirely altruistic. Ever since Glen and Dot Nelson told him their daughter was going to watch their home for them while they were on vacation, Deidre had invaded his thoughts.

“Deidre,” he called through the screen door as he rapped on the whitewashed wooden frame.

Nothing. The tiny hairs on the back of his neck began to stand up.

So far the vandalism at the B&B had consisted of spray painted walls, some stolen equipment and a broken window. One goat had almost died. He knew goats would eat just about anything, but...

Jonas reached for the automatic weapon clipped to his hip. As he slowly pulled open the screen door, Deidre’s frustrated voice reached him from a distance. He turned in the direction, tightening his fingers on the gun’s grip. She sounded as if she were outside somewhere. His senses on high alert, he closed the door and listened.

Deidre called out once more, sending him running in the direction of the barn. Gravel crunched and scattered under his boots as he ate up the distance in record time, his pulse racing.

Once he entered the barn and his gaze landed on the lone pair of woman's sandals sitting at the bottom of the ladder, Jonas' heart skipped several beats.

"Deidre." Deep concern made his tone harsher than he'd intended.

"I'm up here."

His tight shoulders relaxed at her casual tone. He tracked her movement above him by the bits of hay dust that fell through the space between the boards. When the floorboards over his head made an eerie creak, his sense of calm evaporated once more.

"Get down from there. There's a reason your parents built a new barn. This one's not safe."

"I have to get Snowball. Be down in a sec," she called out right before he heard a heavy thump and a triumphant, "Gotcha!"

A distinct snapping sound accompanied the thick billow of hay dust from above, causing Jonas' gut to tense. When Deidre screamed, he moved with lightning speed beneath her position on the weak wood.

The floor gave way and splintered boards rained down on his head. Jonas took Deidre's full weight with her fall, catching her in his arms. Her momentum sent them both to the barn's ground floor amid broken planks and onto an old bed of hay.

Jonas got a mouthful of cat fur before Deidre scooped up the animal and stared at him in wide-eyed shock. Gripping the cat tight to her chest, she panted. Her gaze darted between the hole in the ceiling and back to him several times before she seemed to catch her bearings. "Sheesh, my stomach went straight to my throat. That was close!"

As he pushed a broken floorboard off her lap, Jonas took shallow breaths himself. He felt as if the air had been knocked clear out of his lungs, and the sensation wasn't due to having Deidre land on him. The woman had thrown him a sucker punch with one look from her gorgeous green eyes.

Her long, light brown lashes blinked several times before she regained her composure and gave him a shaky smile. "Well, I did tell you I'd be down in a second."

He chuckled at her quick wit despite the scary fall. "Yeah, darlin', but this wasn't the way I expected you to make your entrance."

“Um, thanks for rescuing me, Sheriff.” She squirmed to get out of his arms and stood, her cheeks turning an endearing shade of crimson.

Jonas’ body had ignited in swift awareness at their brief contract. He missed her sweet pear-blossom smell and warm softness already. As he moved to a standing position, he pulled a piece of hay from her hair. “It’s Jonas, remember?”

They stared at each other. Remember? Was he asking her to remember they were on a first-name basis the last time they’d seen each other, or the unspoken attraction between them?

Her body tingled and her bra suddenly chaffed her sensitive nipples. Not to mention the persistent ache that hadn’t let up between her thighs since she woke this morning. What she felt for this man had quadrupled in intensity compared to her response to him in the past.

Life’s experiences—the good and the bad—had a funny way of instilling steadfast certainty beyond a shadow of a doubt. She knew exactly what she did and didn’t want in a man. She’d held onto that evocative memory of Jonas in the woods all these years, not just because she couldn’t forget him, but because he’d made her believe there were still a few good men left in the world. “I remember.” Her voice sounded breathless, husky.

He stepped closer and reached out to cup the back of her neck. Warm fingers massaged the sensitive curve of skin as his thumb traced along her jaw in a slow, seductive caress. “Do you?”

Chapter Two

His steady gaze bored into hers, analyzing, measuring her. He'd never stared at her in such a calculating way before...as if he were trying to decipher her very thoughts and motivations.

Deidre didn't speak. She couldn't. The man had her so caught up, all she could do was return his intense perusal.

He bent closer, his lips a mere half inch from hers.

She lifted her chin, anticipating, craving his kiss...desperate to know.

"I'm not the same person I was back then." He sounded almost apologetic.

"Is that person completely gone then?" Her insides melted at his nearness, his scent and the masculine virility he naturally exuded without any effort.

Heat flared in his eyes, then his expression shifted to a closed one and he took a step back as if needing to put distance between them. Before she could ask what was wrong, the cat began to squirm in her arms. Damn, how could she have forgotten about Snowball? The fall must've scared the cat into temporary passiveness.

Clamping her arms tight around the moving ball of fur, she knew the intense, seductive moment had shattered. She glanced down at the cat, seeking a diversion. "Come on you ornery feline. Let's get you inside."

Jonas gathered her shoes and followed her out of the barn. Pebbles poked at her feet as she stepped carefully across the driveway and up the B&B stairs to the front door.

Without looking back, she wiped her dusty feet on the doormat and entered the house. As she took her time carrying Snowball down the hall and then shutting him inside her parents' bedroom, Deidre swallowed several times to calm her raging libido. She needed to get control of her emotions. No matter their attraction in the past, Jonas had pretty much just rejected her, for Pete's sake.

But it wasn't just her attraction to him that surprised her, she admitted while heading back down the hall toward the front of the house. The lump that formed in her throat at his sudden mood change concerned her. His withdrawal hurt more than it should have.

She straightened her spine, squared her shoulders and pasted on a lighthearted smile in an effort to regain control. The Jonas of her past was an ideal she'd wanted to believe in...a fantasy she'd dreamed of exploring. Nothing more. But this Jonas had turned out to have more layers than she'd expected—layers that made her want to strip them away to find the true man lurking deep inside. She had a feeling from his shuttered expression earlier, Jonas didn't want to be seen.

"Come on in," she said through the screen door before she turned and headed to the kitchen.

Jonas' boots thudded on the wood floor behind her, but she refused to turn around. Instead, she passed the long, twelve-seater table and walked through the swinging doors into the kitchen.

Pouring flour into a measuring cup, she called out in a louder voice, "Since you've stopped by to check on me, the least I can do is offer you some fresh baked cookies." As she bent to retrieve a couple of bowls from underneath the counter, she noticed her dust covered feet and said in a lower voice, "Then I can rinse my dirty feet."

"Then the least I can do is stay for a bit."

Jonas' amused voice sounded so close, she quickly straightened and turned in surprise.

He sat at the small café table in the kitchen, his long legs stretched out in front of him.

She hadn't expected him to follow her into her "space". Deidre set the bowls down and picked up the cooking spoon. "Only cooks are allowed in the kitchen. Unless you're helping, scoot."

"Well then..." Jonas grinned and set his hat on the table.

When he began to roll up his sleeves, Deidre stared at him. "You're helping?" *Sheesh, did that really come out in a squeak?*

Jonas moved into her personal space, his broad frame making the kitchen feel very small. "You made the rules." Reaching around her, he picked up the bag of chocolate chips. "Now where's the sugar?"

Deidre rapped his hand with the spoon. “Oh, no you don’t. If you’re going to help, we’re doing this in order.”

Jonas gave her a devilish grin as he pulled open the bag of chocolate chips. “No worries, Chef Nelson. I’m just here to sample the wares,” he said before popping a handful of the chips into his mouth.

Sample the wares. Was that a double entendre? Man, she couldn’t tell. Taking the bag from him, she set it on the counter. “If you eat all the ingredients, we’ll just have oatmeal cookies, Sher—”

Before she could finish, he stepped close and popped a chocolate chip into her mouth. “Who can resist sampling?”

As she chewed that tiny piece of dark chocolate, the rich flavor burst in her mouth. With Jonas standing so close, dishing out sexy food phrases, the term “decadent dessert” took on a whole new meaning.

Deidre swallowed the chocolate and took a step back to clear her head. Grabbing an empty bowl, she shoved it into his hands. “Eggs. Yeah, we need air...er, eggs. Can you go collect a few from the coop?”

Jonas chuckled and turned to retrieve his hat. “Eggs. Coming right up,” he said as he plunked his cowboy hat on his head and walked through the swinging doors.

The moment Jonas exited the room, Deidre poured all the dry ingredients into a bowl and set it aside. Then she quickly readied the butter and sugar in another bowl so all she had to do was drop in the eggs once Jonas returned. If she let him “help” her, her nerves would be shot. The man’s presence always knocked her off-kilter. She’d be a bumbling idiot in the kitchen—the one area of her life where she’d always been very confident and successful.

As she was stirring the butter, Jonas leaned across her body to set the bowl of eggs on the counter. Her stirring hand froze and butterflies scattered in her stomach.

“What am *I* supposed to do? Looks like you’re almost done,” he whispered next to her ear.

I could give you plenty of ideas if you’d give me some indication, cowboy. Chill bumps formed on her arms, raising the tiny blonde hairs. She set the spoon down and grabbed a couple of eggs. Breaking them on the bowl, she tried to sound airy as she began to stir vigorously. “Have a seat. I’m almost done.”

Jonas placed his hands on either side of the counter, trapping her where she stood. “Why is this the first time you’ve come back to Ventura?”

Deidre’s pulse rushed in her ears, but she continued to stir as if he wasn’t affecting every single nerve ending in her body. She paused her stirring. “My work was in New York and my parents liked the chance to travel, so I invited them there on the holidays. There’s always stuff to do in the city.”

He moved closer. “You didn’t ever wish to get away from the city hustle and bustle to wide open spaces? You never craved these gorgeous views?”

I’ve craved one certain gorgeous view...too many times to count.

“I remember a young girl who loved everything ‘Texas’, who ran out in a fierce storm and had to be hauled back inside for her own good. If you’ve outgrown all that, why come back now?”

His masculine smell, combined with the sugary cookie dough aroma, turned her insides to mush.

She didn’t understand why he’d walked away from her in the barn earlier, but she wasn’t opening up herself for another round of hurt by telling him the whole reason she’d left. “My parents have always done everything for me, given me everything I’ve always wanted. I knew I had a job waiting for me here if I wanted it, but I needed to prove to myself I could be successful on my own. I did well, and becoming a food critic helped fund my parents’ trips to New York every year, but when they asked me to watch the B&B so they could go on vacation without worries, I saw this as something they needed me for. I was finally able to do something to repay them for all they’ve done for me, so I came back.”

Instead of responding to her explanation, he reached into the bowl and swiped up some of the dough with his finger. “Do they teach restraint in culinary school?”

His question caught her off guard. “Why?”

“How can you resist not taking a taste?” he replied as he lifted his finger from the bowl, ready to take a bite.

Before the batter could make it to his mouth, Deidre caught his finger with her lips and sucked the cookie dough off the tip. Once she swallowed the sweet dough, she slowly slid her lips across his finger and then began stirring once more as if she hadn’t just cock teased the man. “I just need the right incentive to take a nibble.”

Jonas’ hand landed on her hip. His fingers gripped her firmly. “Deidre, I—”

When he stopped himself, then took the bowl out of her hands and set in on the counter, murmuring, “The cookies can wait,” Deidre didn’t know what to think. Yes, she’d been brazen, teasing him like that, but Jonas was sending out very confusing signals.

Deidre let him lead her to the straight back chair next to the table. When he sat her down and turned to fill an empty bowl with water, she just stared in confusion.

She was surprised when he lowered himself to one knee and put the bowl of water on the floor next to her feet. Her pensive gaze tracked his sexy, hard-working hands as he withdrew a white handkerchief from his pants’ pocket and dipped the cloth in the water, his movements measured and precise.

The tense silence between them was killing her. “What are you doing?”

Instead of replying, his warm fingers wrapped around her left ankle and his gaze locked with hers, steady and sure.

Totally perplexed, she let him lift her foot above the bowl. When he glanced at her foot and began to wipe the warm wet cloth along her skin, bathing away the gravel dust, a lump clogged her throat at the personal, almost reverent act.

Tears formed as her emotions rushed to the surface once more. Blinking back the wetness, she swallowed hard and tried to keep her voice from shaking. “In the barn, you backed away from me. I don’t understand.”

“Let it be, Deidre.”

His voice was harsh, cold...almost angry, but his touch told a different story. While one hand gently bathed away the dirt, the other massaged her calf in a seductive caress, as if he couldn’t stop himself from touching her.

The man baffled her. She knew about his past...a past that she was certain caused a lot of hurt, but she’d endured her share of failures in relationships, too. If he didn’t want to talk, but instead wanted his hands to speak for him, then so be it. For now.

When he began to work on her other foot, her gaze scanned his crisp white shirt stretched across his broad shoulders. She acknowledged how much his sheriff’s shirt and black pants, combined with the sight of his gun strapped to his hip, turned her on. Yet there was one thing she’d wanted to do since she’d seen him yesterday. Pulling off his cowboy hat, she tossed it on the table.

He paused for a second, but he didn’t look up as he resumed his ministrations. Her heart swelled when his hands began to massage the curve of her calf. From the top of his

black-as-sin hair to the tips of his cowboy boots, he might be a sheriff now, but he was still her cowboy. Goose bumps formed on her skin as her gaze focused on his short, dark hair. Thoughts of running her fingers through the thick, slightly wavy mass flashed through her mind.

He moved the bowl out of the way and his hands slid upward, pushing her skirt past her knees. When he spread his palms across the outside of her thighs, Deidre's breath hitched. She gave in to the urge and ran her hands through his hair, enjoying the thick silk bending around her fingers.

At her touch, Jonas' fingers gripped her skin in a possessive hold. His warm breath bathed her inner thighs as he ran his hands up her hips to grip her buttocks. The moist sensation of his warm breathing brushing the top of her thighs, so close yet so distant, only made her body pound for more.

Jonas set his other knee on the floor and finally spoke, his voice gravely and low. "Let me cherish you the best way I can."

The torture and anguish in his tone burrowed deep in her heart, unlocking more than a physical response...so much more. Deidre bit back the swift desire to wish for more from him. No matter how strongly she felt for him, his words told her he wasn't capable of giving on an emotional level.

In answer, she relaxed her thighs and gripped his shoulders. Gathering him close, she kissed the top of his head.

Tension eased from his shoulders at the same time he slid her short skirt even higher. The glide of the soft material against her skin, flanked by the heat from his palms, sent tiny tremors skittering through her body. Silence echoed around them, punctuated by an occasional faint *naaaa* of the goats through the open kitchen window.

Jonas bent to place a tender kiss on her inner thigh and Deidre's pulse stuttered at the surreal moment. No amount of fantasizing had ever come close to the barrage of sensations his real-life action elicited within her. Her heart thumped and her belly tensed with skittish butterflies. Heat radiated from that one kiss and her skin tingled when the next one, wetter, hotter and more tender than the last, moved higher.

Her tense muscles began to relax, like a bowl of butter heated to its melting point. An unbidden moan rushed past her lips, so very primal it surprised her.

"Jonas," she murmured.

His mouth moved higher and he nipped at the curve where her inner thigh met her body. "Say it again, darlin', just like that. The need in your voice...damn, it makes me throb."

His fingers gripped her buttocks harder and he pulled her body forward, placing an open-mouthed kiss over her cloth-covered sex.

Deidre jerked at the deeply intimate act, keening in ecstasy. The combination of his hot, moist mouth sending heat through her underwear was the sexiest turn on she'd ever experienced. Her heart jack-hammered hard against her chest, making her pant to keep up with its erratic pace.

"I want to hear it, Deidre." He ran his teeth across her clit then let out a low moan of his own before he nipped at the fleshy top of her mound.

His love bite sent an erotic shudder of excitement jolting through her. Her fingers twisted in his hair and her head fell back against the chair as she called his name in an intense cry of need.

In answer, he ran his tongue along the underwear, softly at first and then more insistently. Finally he thrust against the thin material, slightly penetrating her entrance.

"Even through your panties your taste is driving me nuts," he rumbled. His tongue traced the side of the soft material, flicking at the elastic edges, seeking entrance.

Deidre's heavy breathing increased and her thigh muscles tensed once more. Her hips began to rock of their own accord. She wanted to tell him to tear the damn scrap of cloth off, yet her emotions warred. Something about the man using only his tongue to push the barrier away was incredibly primal, sending her libido into hyperdrive.

She waited, her body a taut bowstring. His tongue swiped past the barrier and along the moist edges of her sex, his groan reverberating against her soft folds.

Her nails dug into his scalp and her hips naturally canted toward him, her body frantic for his mouth to make contact. So close...so very close.

A loud intercom squawk caused her to jerk in surprise right before a disembodied voice said, "Sheriff Mendez, I know you just got off, but we need you down at the station ASAP!"

When Jonas raised his head and the pissed expression on his face changed to an apologetic one, she wanted to scream, "Hell no! You're not going anywhere!"

Frustrated disappointment surged through Deidre, making her stomach ache, but if she didn't make light of the situation, she'd cry. "Tell him you haven't gotten off yet, but when you're done, you'll get right back to him."

Jonas' blue eyes crinkled with laughter. He gave her sex a hard kiss before he straightened and moved to his feet. "I'm sorry, but I need to respond," he said as he grabbed his cell phone from his hip.

While he said into his phone's walkie-talkie, "Be there in five, Jeff," Deidre pushed her skirt down and stood beside him.

As he slid the cell phone back in its clip, she realized with shock that she'd almost let the man give her oral sex and she'd yet to kiss him. How had they managed to completely skip all the foreplay? She placed a shaky hand against her mouth, stunned at her wanton behavior. *God, he must be exuding some kind of pheromone or something! That has to be why I'm acting like this.*

Lowering her hand, she straightened her shoulders and composed her expression to what she hoped passed as a nonchalant, worldly one. "Well, I know you have to go—"

Before she could finish, Jonas lifted her chin.

Her heart melted under his penetrating gaze.

Cupping the back of her neck, he pulled her against his chest. His blue gaze, serious once more, searched hers before his line of sight dropped briefly to her lips.

His thumb brushed across the soft skin, the work-roughened texture making her knees wobble. "Never doubt it. I'm looking forward to exploring every part of your body in excruciating detail."

The heated look coupled with his sexy tone completely dissipated her apprehension. "How did you know what I was thinking?"

"Because you have some of the most expressive eyes I've ever seen, sweetheart."

She let out a self-depreciative laugh. "Great, I guess I know why I'm never successful with April Fools pranks."

Smiling, he kissed her on the forehead. "I have no idea how long I'll be. Can I stop by later?"

Deidre wrapped her arms around his waist and laid her head on his shoulder for a brief second. She inhaled his heady masculine scent until her lungs couldn't hold any more air. His hard, well-built body made her ache all over again. With a heavy internal sigh, she nodded her assent.

Jonas folded his muscular arms around her waist and hugged her tight. He placed a quick kiss on her hair before he released her and started to walk through the swinging kitchen doors. He paused and his gaze returned to hers, laser sharp.

“Don’t plan on getting any sleep tonight. We’ve got ten years of anticipation built up, darlin’, and I sure as hell plan to make every moment count.”

* * *

As Jonas walked away from Deidre, his gut tightened. Sure he had a hard-on from hell, but the coiled tension inside his belly made him feel lightheaded, like a teenager on his first hormonal high. This woman with her sexy smile and sultry gaze had him wound up so tight—hell she’d done so ever since he’d laid eyes on her.

When Deidre said she came back to help her parents and didn’t act as if she’d thought about him at all, he wasn’t sure what, if anything, still lingered between them. Which was probably for the best, considering he’d vowed to keep their relationship professional while she was in Ventura.

Then she went and wrapped her lips around his finger, sucking hard, and he was done. There was no doubt that what had lingered between them a decade ago, that magnetic, white-hot attraction, was still there, waiting for the first match to be struck.

Once he touched her in the kitchen, he couldn’t stop, and her avid encouragement only fueled his libido. Deidre seemed to know he’d give what he could, but touching her like he wanted after all these years...he could get so caught up in her.

He shook his head to clear the raw emotions raging in his gut.

Candice had ruined him...had taken away his belief in eternal love and the sanctity of promises made.

Despite his physical attraction to Deidre when he’d met her over ten years ago, he’d tamped down his reactions. He’d been on the verge of marrying a good woman...or so he’d thought. Little did he know Candice had been cheating on him since even before their engagement.

Had he subconsciously known about Candice’s deceitful nature all along but refused to believe it? he wondered as he got in his car and drove away. Seeing Deidre again made him question the past—to look at it with a different pair of eyes—a past he’d refused to

examine under the microscope. Until he came face to face with a pair of familiar dewy green eyes that had jerked at his soul and haunted his dreams for a decade.

Setting his jaw, he gripped the steering wheel tight. Despite his powerful feelings toward Deidre, he refused to allow himself to trust another's or his own judgment when it came to relationships. He was glad Candice and Jake had left town right after they got married so he wouldn't be constantly reminded that one failed engagement peppered his past and hurt him deeply. He should count himself lucky he never got to the point of saying, "I do". As far as he was concerned, he would never utter those two words.

Chapter Three

Deidre twisted her hair up and away from her face for the fifteenth time then finally let it fall in frustration. With just a bit of wave, her blonde locks never had the softness of perfectly straight hair or the lively bounce of curly hair. Instead it always looked as if she'd finger-combed it to death. She finally gave up and focused on her outfit. After the fall in the barn had stained her yellow dress, she'd changed clothes, picking out a soft cotton, spaghetti-strapped tank top in a sea foam green and a white crushed cotton skirt.

A commanding, heavy knock at the front door reverberated all the way down the hall and into the guest bedroom, making her heart skip several beats. Her skirt swirled around her ankles as she turned and left the bedroom, excitement causing goose bumps to form on her skin.

Biting her lip, she glanced at her watch. An hour and a half had passed since Jonas had gone back to the office. The last remnants of the day's sunlight shined on the hall's oak flooring as she made her way to the front door.

When she opened the door, her stomach dipped and spun at the mouth-watering sight before her. Jonas' old weathered brown Stetson was pulled low over his brow. He propped his forearm on the doorframe and stared down at her with his intense blue gaze, while she took in every mouth-watering detail. His heather gray T-shirt and worn jeans fit his muscular frame, and a wide silver belt buckle and scruffy brown boots rounded out his devastating, born-'n-bred cowboy personality.

Dear God, he looked every bit the man who'd stolen her heart and ruined her for all men so long ago. His uniform might've turned her on, but seeing him like this again made her entire body quake.

"Evenin', Deidre. The house smells like fresh-baked cookies." His respectful nod, combined with the seductive sweep of his gaze up and down her body in an openly frank appraisal, had an overwhelming effect she hadn't thought possible. Her knees actually gave way.

Grabbing the doorknob to keep from making a complete fool of herself, Deidre ground her teeth at the rush of embarrassed heat that crept up her cheeks. “I...um, didn’t hear you drive up.”

“You okay?”

At the concern in his tone, she straightened and released the doorknob with a quick nod. “Never better. Would you like a cookie?” *How dull was that? Sheesh, I need to sign up for conversation lessons.*

He shook his head slowly. “Maybe later.” A wide grin spread across his face as he turned to let her see his horse tied to the porch behind him. “You didn’t hear me drive up, because I brought a quieter ride. Remember Admiral?”

Admiral snorted while nodding his head.

Deidre glanced around Admiral, looking for another horse. “Where’s my mount?” She met Jonas’ steady gaze once more and her lips tilted in amusement. “I’m much more confident riding now than I was back then.”

Jonas’ jaw flexed and desire flashed in his deep blue eyes. “I’m sure you are.” He held his hand out to her. “Come ride with me.”

She didn’t miss the edge in his lowered tone, and something about the possessive look in his eyes both surprised and thrilled her. How many times had she wished to see him gaze at her just like that? She ran her hand across her skirt and took a step back. “Let me go change first.”

Jonas reached out and grasped her hand, bringing her fingers to his mouth. “You’re perfect just as you are.” When he pressed his warm lips against her skin, his stare enticing and persuasive, she lost all ability to banter. Or was it his kiss that sent a tingling sensation sliding down her arm and shooting straight to her nipples?

“I...um...I’ll lock up the house.”

His low chuckle seemed to follow her as she turned and headed for the kitchen to retrieve the house key off the counter.

Once she’d locked the door and walked down the stairs to stand beside Jonas, the air around them grew strangely quiet. He slid his hands around her waist. She relished every second of his warm palms touching the bit of skin below her tank top as he easily lifted her up on his horse.

Deidre tried to sit sidesaddle, but Jonas squeezed her waist. “You’ll have to sit astride, darlin’, or it’ll make for an uncomfortable ride.”

She squirmed nervously at the idea of sitting astride in a skirt. “I really should go change clothes—”

Before she could finish, he gripped her hip with one hand and slid his other hand up her calf, pushing her skirt up until her thigh was bared. “Lift your leg over.”

At his soft command, she did as he asked and moved her right leg over the horse’s back. Without a word, Jonas swept up on the saddle behind her.

“Comfortable?” She tilted her eyebrow, casting a quick gaze over her shoulder.

“Not quite,” he whispered in her ear. At the same time, he used his thighs and hips to slide her body forward until her bunched skirt was all that sat between her pubic bone and the saddle horn.

Molding his chest to her back and his thighs around her hips, he put his arms around her waist and unwound the reins from the top of the saddle horn. “Now I’m ready.”

The sensation of the hard horn between her thighs and the cowboy’s muscular body surrounding hers sent her heart rate soaring. Deidre gripped the top of the saddle horn and let out an edgy laugh. “Just don’t gallop, ’kay?”

Jonas urged the horse into a walk toward the trails behind the B&B. “We’ll take it nice and slow, I promise.”

As they entered the darkened woods, Deidre shivered at the change in temperature. Even though the evening sun slanted through the canopy of trees, bathing her skin in ribbons of diluted golden warmth, the forest’s shade brought an exciting coolness in contrast to Jonas’ body heat radiating against her back. She closed her eyes, enjoying the sensual combination.

“Does this trail lead to the Mendez property?” she asked.

“Mmm, hmm.” His chest rumbled against her back as he rubbed his nose along her neck. “Do you want to know how many times I’ve thought about you?”

She jerked her eyes open, surprised by his question. “How many?”

His left hand spread across her exposed thigh and his fingers tightened around the bare flesh. “I’ve lost count.”

Jonas’ sincere admission caused the butterflies in her stomach to stir in haphazard abandon. Earlier today might have been about emotional limitations, but tonight was about confessions, she realized. “I’ve never forgotten you.”

He gripped her thigh harder. “I never cheated on her.”

Deidre understood the anguish in his voice. She placed her hand over his, her heart tripping at a rabbit's pace. "I know. Your integrity was one of the things I admired so much about you."

His body tensed behind her. "I'll never say the words 'will you marry me' again."

The vehemence in his words told her just how much his ex-fiancée's betrayal had hurt him. Deidre's heart went out to this strong, self-contained man. Even though his statement tore her up inside, she admired him more for being honest with her upfront.

Running her hand across his warm one, she laced their fingers together and let out a soft sigh. "We've both had our share of disappointments in life. I just want to feel your arms around me. I don't have any expectations beyond that."

Jonas brushed her hair to the side and buried his nose against her neck. "I'm sorry, Deidre. You blew me away the moment I saw you again after all these years. There needs to be pure honesty between us."

"No expectations, Jonas....just anticipation," she said at the same time the tiny niggling voice in her mind dared to rear its ugly head. *I hope I haven't built you up in my mind to be a bigger-than-life, beyond exceptional lover.* But the throbbing ache between her legs reminded her that the man definitely knew how to leave her wanting.

"Anticipation," he said in a husky tone as he laid the reins across Admiral's neck. The horse continued to plod along without guidance as if he knew the trail well.

Deidre's pulse thrummed when he placed his hands on her legs then slid her skirt higher, exposing her thighs completely.

He cupped his fingers along the bend of her legs and began circling his thumbs on her muscles just above her knees. She bit her lip to keep from moaning at the sensations rocking through her.

As he moved his hands higher, massaging her muscles in small circles, tiny tremors started in her inner thighs and slowly wound their way to her sex. With a low growl rumbling in his chest, Jonas shifted his weight forward in the saddle, forcing her body fully flush against the saddle horn until she literally rode the hard surface.

Each dip and sway of the horse's movements caused her mound to rub and bump against the saddle horn. Agonizing friction built and ricocheted through her sex, tensing her lower muscles. Deidre tightened her thighs around the horse and swallowed a moan.

"I feel your tension. I know you're holding back. I want to hear your excitement," Jonas said at the same time he gripped her inner thighs and forced her legs open wider.

His action no longer allowed her to stop the constant pressure against her sensitive parts. Deidre began to pant then gasp each time the horse's movements made her body meet the molded surface.

Jonas moved his thighs behind hers, keeping her sex flush with the horn. The sensation of his hard cock pressing against her backside made her want to whimper.

"Your sweet ass rubbing against me is a helluva cock-tease," Jonas said in a husky tone. His hands slid up her rib cage until they covered her breasts. "Do you feel how much I want you?"

As his fingers brushed across her hard nipples, exquisite pleasure shot through her breasts and down her center. Deidre let her head fall back on his shoulder, shutting her eyes tight. The heat radiating from his hard erection seeped right through their clothes. She'd never been more stimulated.

"Yes, and it's definitely mutual," she managed to babble out while a multitude of arousing sensations battled within her. The horse had slowed, but each step became a sensual punctuation to the built-up emotions roiling inside her. Her panting turned rampant as her sex began to throb, ready for release. "Jonas... I'm..."

"I know, sweetheart. Let go. I want to hear your scream," he said at the same he slid his fingers forward and pinched her nipples hard.

Deidre barely registered his warm breath on her neck and his tender kiss grazing the sensitive spot below her ear. Her body took over and she cried out, arching her back. Sexual tension had built to a fevered pitch within her, refusing to back down.

Jonas' sexy growl preceded an aggressive thrust of his hips, which forced her to grind incessantly against the horn. Her breath hitched in eager response to his dominant action. Deidre knew his lovemaking would be this raw and primal, and just as exhilarating. Unable to move back, she rode against the hard surface, seeking release from the coiled arousal spiking within her.

Her body tensed and her heart seemed to skip several beats right before her climax spiraled within her. She gripped the back of Jonas' neck and turned slightly, burying her face against his throat and jaw as the waves of her orgasm began. Body-rocking, heart-stopping splinters of pleasure rolled through her. Her thighs clenched the horse's sides and she drank in Jonas' sexy masculine smell while reveling in each sensual quiver that flowed through her body.

Once her heart rate began to slow, Jonas cupped her breasts and pulled her back against his chest. “Damn, woman. That has to be one of the most erotic experiences...” His voice broke and he laid his forehead on her shoulder, exhaling a shuddering breath.

Now that her senses were returning, Deidre realized the horse had stopped walking. Jonas was breathing hard...harder than she was at the moment.

She glanced around her and noted they’d stopped at the very same spot Jonas had lifted her down from his horse ten years before—the same day he’d said, “In another life...”

When he lifted his head, she kissed him on the jaw and smiled. “Does this place look familiar?”

“We’re on Mendez property now,” he said in a tight voice before he lowered himself from the horse.

“I never knew that.” Deidre didn’t know what to think about the brief change in his mood when he lifted her down without a word. Once her feet touched the ground, she laid a hand on his chest, her stomach tightening in worry. “Jonas?”

His hands moved to her shoulders and then to the back of her neck, massaging the muscles. He pulled her close and his lips hovered over hers. Deidre’s heart began to hammer all over again.

“Now I can finally do something I’ve wanted for a decade,” he murmured.

The banked tension in his shoulders conveyed just how much restraint he employed. Jonas’ fingers trembled ever so slightly as he slid them into her hair. Cupping the back of her head in a firm hold, he covered her lips with his.

As his mouth slanted across hers and the dominant thrust of his tongue demanded the same instant response, Deidre fell deeper into his strong embrace. Every warm, wet nuance of their tongues’ seductive slide against each other, their bodies melding into one another while their hearts thumped in tandem staccato beats, sent a heated flush of thrilling erotic vibrations all the way to her toes.

Jonas’s kiss was so thorough and mind-numbingly sexy as hell. He blew through her expectations—he was decadent, chocolate sin. She relished every rasping movement of his mouth over hers, craving more.

She wrapped her arms around his trim waist and kissed him back with just as much fervor. From his shoulders’ bunched muscles, to his tight grip on her, to the hard press of his mouth against hers, his kiss had a possessive undertone, as if he feared she might bolt

any second. Deidre wasn't going anywhere. The man fulfilled every fantasy she'd ever had about him, ten times over. And all this before he ever slid inside her.

He lifted his head and his breathing came in heavy pants as he leaned over her shoulder to pull something from his horse's saddle bag.

Jonas' intense expression sent a shiver down her spine as he released her and held out a jean jacket. He seemed to be waiting for her to put it on. Deidre raised an eyebrow, but slipped her arms inside the material without question.

As soon as she'd pulled on the jacket, Jonas lifted her in his arms and carried her off the path to set her feet on the ground in front of a tree.

When he placed his hands on her shoulders, she felt them tremble slightly as he stared into her eyes. "I've never ached for a woman as much as I have for you."

Without even trying, this man stole her heart. He swept it right out of her chest and thrust it back, beating so rapidly she didn't know if her breathing could keep up with its thunderous pace.

Despite her best efforts to remain unemotional, tears welled. "Kiss me, cowbo—"

Jonas didn't give her a chance to finish. He yanked her hard against his chest and his lips claimed hers once more.

Deidre expected a frantic, hard kiss. Instead, the tender brush of his lips across hers only seduced her further. He suckled her bottom lip before his tongue slid inside her mouth to glide alongside hers in a leisurely, yet decadent, sensual dance. Moist heat flooded her core with each slow swipe.

Deidre responded in kind. Her hands skimmed his chest then continued upward until her fingers speared through his hair. When she knocked his hat off and began to suck on his tongue, Jonas let out a primal grunt, cinching his hands around her waist. His kiss deepened, moving more possessively across hers as he lifted her and set her back against the huge oak tree behind them.

The rough, unyielding surface of the bark behind her, coupled with the hard muscles flexing underneath her fingers made Deidre's skin prickle in fervent response.

Jonas' fingers slid her skirt up, lifting it until his warm hands connected with her thighs. "Your skin is so soft," he mumbled against her mouth, then he kissed her jaw as his fingers traced a seductive path up her inner thighs toward her sex.

A sexy smile tugged his mouth upward as his fingers touched a patch of moisture along the inside of her leg. "The fact you're so wet makes me want you even more."

Deidre's sandals crunched the dead leaves under her feet as she spread her legs wider. She licked her lips and let her eyes close slightly. "Touch me. I've waited long enough."

"My pleasure, darlin'," he said, and cupped her sex with an aggressiveness that almost sent her over the edge.

The surprised look that crossed his face when he realized she didn't have any underwear on made her smile. "Thought I'd make it easy for you."

"The better to have you whenever and wherever I want," he rasped as he stepped closer, towering over her. His expression turned impossibly sinful right before he thrust a finger deep inside her. Deidre let out a gasp at the pleasurable invasion.

When he circled his finger, touching all the right places deep inside her, then rubbed the pad on her G-spot, she gripped his shoulders. His actions caused carnal sensations to quickly build inside her.

"You make me burn, Dee. I want you so damn bad I might lose it just unbuttoning my pants."

No, she mentally screamed. Gripping his belt buckle, she yanked it open. "We certainly can't have that," she replied as she pulled on his jeans button and unzipped his pants for him.

When her fingers brushed against his erection through his fitted gray cotton briefs, Jonas shuddered. He quickly withdrew his finger from her body to grip her wrist and pull her hand away. "Darlin', I'm so primed right now, a breeze would send me over."

She chuckled at his comment while she continued to tug on his jeans and underwear until they were past his knees.

When her gaze landed on his heavily veined erection, jutting full and proud against his lower abs, she whispered, "I want to touch you," as she dug her nails into her palm to keep from doing exactly that.

Heat flared in Jonas' gaze before he closed his eyes and laid his head back, facing the darkening sky. "Then touch me, sweetheart."

Chapter Four

Deidre's heart hammered as she uncurled her fingers and surrounded his hard erection with her hand. His skin felt so silky soft she couldn't resist sliding her hand down his impressive length to the base.

"Fuck!" he barked at the sky through clenched teeth.

She noted his hands were clenched by his sides and glanced up to see the tendons on his neck standing out as if he were exerting tremendous effort not to react to her touch.

Bending over, she gave the tip of his cock a tender kiss then straightened. "My thoughts exactly."

Jonas' blue gaze lasered into hers at the same time his hands gripped her thighs. "Condom." The word came out on a low groan.

"Which pocket?" she asked as she bent and tugged at his jeans waistband.

"My right. Front."

Deidre fished around in his front pocket and grabbed the packet. Without a word, she ripped open the plastic and began to slide the protection down his engorged erection.

Jonas' hips flexed forward and his eyes closed. With each brush of her fingers along his cock, he let out harsh breaths until she'd placed the condom completely over him.

Once she'd finished, his breathing had turned shallow. With her hands on his shoulders, Jonas gripped the back of her thighs and effortlessly lifted her up until the tip of his cock rested against her entrance. The sensation of his erection barely touching her felt so erotic she squeezed her pelvic muscles to stop the achy sensation pulsing within her. God, she'd never been more ready in her life.

Jonas held her suspended above him, his cock brushing her entrance for a couple of long heart-stopping seconds. A sudden look of sheer unadulterated lust crossed his face and his fingers tightened around her thighs. "I feel how hot and wet you are through the condom."

She wound her fingers in his hair and gave the thick locks a slight yank. “Ten years is a long time to yearn.”

His arms began to quake and a look of primal possession flashed in his eyes as he took the couple steps toward the tree. Setting her back against the surface, he gripped her backside and thrust deep inside her.

She wanted to scream in fulfillment. He felt *that* good.

A shudder shook his frame and he murmured her name at the same time he withdrew and pistoned back inside her channel so hard her back slid up the tree trunk several inches.

The slick slide of his cock rubbing against her walls made a jolt of animal-like need take over her body. In the span of two heart beats, she realized exactly why Jonas made her wear his denim jacket. He was protecting her skin from the tree’s rough bark. Her respect for his thoughtfulness deepened as she dug her fingers into his shoulder muscles.

Tightening her thighs around his waist, Deidre pulled her body flush with his then ran her tongue along his neck. She nipped at his skin, satisfied at the groan that pushed past his lips. “Sex with you is exactly how I thought it would be. You’re rough yet tender in the ways that matter. I want more,” she demanded in a heavy whisper next to his ear.

Jonas’ breath escaped in a deep bellow as his fingers massaged her rear. “Deeeidra,” he said before he pressed her body against the tree and leaned into her, thrusting upward. Seated deep inside her, his entire body primed and tense, he buried his nose against her neck, and said in a ragged voice, “I want to take you so deep and hard it scares me.”

The slight tremble in his low-spoken words made her heart trip several beats. She placed her hands on his cheeks and lifted his head so he had to look at her. “It should only scare you if I didn’t want it.” Her heart pounded and small pre-climactic tremors started in her sex as she clenched her inner muscles around his cock. “I definitely want it. I want every bone-crushing, body-rocking, ram-until-I-scream thrust. Give me the fantasy I’ve masturbated to on more nights than I care to remember. I want the ride of my life and I know you’re the man to give it to me.”

Her last words caught in her throat as he began to grind his hips against hers in slow, measured circles. “The idea of you masturbating while thinking of me is the hottest turn on.”

The heavy press of his body against her clit felt so good. With each slow circle he made, her breath hitched a little higher. “Yes,” she breathed out as she closed her eyes

and hammered her fist against his shoulder. Her stomach muscles clenched while almost-there vibrations feathered her core in teasing pulses.

“Open your eyes,” he demanded at the same time he rolled his hips against her pubic bone, this time in the opposite direction. “I want you to see the man who’s deep inside you. I’m no dream man, Deidre. I’m flesh and blood and so damned jacked-up by your arousing body I can’t think straight.”

Her gaze locked with his intense one and she slid her hand into his shirt collar. She brushed her fingers teasingly against his skin before digging her nails into the warm flesh on his shoulder. “That makes two of us. Make me come, cowboy.”

As soon as she spoke, Jonas quickly withdrew and slammed into her once, twice, a third time. He was on his forth thrust when her body clenched tight and her orgasm crashed through her. “So...so good,” she stammered, her walls tightening and releasing in euphoric spasms. With every shuddering contraction within her core, her pulse soared higher while her nipples throbbed from the erotic friction of his chest rubbing against hers.

Jonas stopped his thrusts, burying himself inside her while she gyrated her hips and rode his erection through the rest of her climax.

When she came down from her high, the look of sheer willpower on his face, the hard, on-the-edge tension made her want to cry. “Aren’t you going to—” she started to ask.

“Had no idea how damned sweet you’d be,” he said softly as he withdrew and sank back inside her channel, his movements a slow, methodical, determined rhythm.

When her body began to respond to his pace, her nipples tightening and her juices gathering once more, Deidre leaned close and whispered in his ear, “Come for me, lover.”

And that was all it took. Jonas let out a low growl as his tempo quadrupled in speed. Fast and furious felt just as glorious to Deidre, but apparently the man refused to go over the edge alone.

“I want you to scream.”

“I’m fine. Let go,” she panted.

“To hell with that,” he said through clenched teeth at the same time his fingers moved closer around her rear and pulled her butt cheeks apart.

The sensation of his fingers separating and stretching her sensitive skin was a surprising turn on. Deidre gripped his shoulders and tensed her body, keening as her walls shuddered with an even more explosive, higher-pitched orgasm.

“That’s it, sweet Dee,” he grunted out, satisfaction lacing his tone. His shoulder muscles flexed under her fingers and his hips moved faster and faster until he let out an animalistic groan as his own climax rushed through him.

When Jonas’ orgasm ended and he leaned against her, breathing heavily, Deidre welcomed his weight. Wrapping her arms around his neck, she held him close. The sensation of his heart beating at a thunderous pace against her chest while he was still buried deep inside her evoked a peaceful sense of rightness within her.

She knew she didn’t have a right to feel this way. Jonas had been perfectly upfront and honest with her as to the limit of his involvement. Physically he was all there. Emotionally she’d have to look elsewhere.

Soon enough she’d have to come back down to earth, but as she kissed his jaw and breathed in his outdoorsy, all male scent, she told herself she’d bask in the brief moment of idyllic perfection for as long as he’d let her.

Or until the smell of smoke captured her attention.

Lifting her nose toward the sky, she sniffed again, deeper this time. “Do you smell that?”

Jonas withdrew from her then set her down on the ground as he inhaled deeply. Backing up a few feet, he stared past the forest’s tree line. His gaze jerked back to hers, a frown creasing his brow. “The smoke is coming from the direction of the B&B.”

“Holy shit!” Deidre quickly pushed her skirt down. As she climbed up on Admiral, Jonas disposed of the condom and zipped up, buckling his jeans in record time. Once he retrieved his hat, he pulled himself up in the saddle behind Deidre. Wrapping his arms around her waist, he said in a serious tone, “You okay with galloping back?”

In response, she kicked her heels into the horse’s side, impatient to get back to her parents’ house as fast as the horse would take them.

Jonas gripped her tight against his frame and together they moved as one with the horse’s fast gait. They reached the B&B in time to see black smoke billowing out of the old barn. As horrified as Deidre was by the sight, what frightened her most was a thin path of burning flames in the grass that led straight to the house. Her heart jerked when she saw the wood stairs were already on fire.

She pointed toward the house, her voice a few octaves higher. “The stairs—”

“I see them,” Jonas said in a calm tone as he stopped his horse. He handed her his cell phone. “Press two to call the station. Tell Jeff I want him here now. He’ll call the fire department for you.”

Before she could utter a word, he was stomping out grass that was still burning near the stairs before he headed toward the back of the house.

Deidre’s hands shook as she dialed the sheriff’s office. When Jeff answered, she barely remembered her conversation with him because she was so intent on Jonas’ disappearance. Where had he gone?

When he came around the side of the house carrying the garden hose with him, she let out a sigh of relief.

Jonas called to her to move farther away from the burning barn as he started spraying down the stairs.

Adjusting herself better in the saddle, Deidre grabbed Admiral’s reins and directed the horse to a safer spot. Once she got down, she tied his reins to the wooden fence surrounding the new barn on the other side of the B&B then ran back over to Jonas’ side.

He’d managed to put out the fire on the porch, but fear and panic for her parents’ home and livelihood caused her heart to thump and her legs to shake as if they were ready to collapse underneath her any second. The heat from the fire behind them made her sweat in his blue jean jacket. “How long do you think it’ll be before the fire trucks get here?” she asked, handing him the cell phone.

As soon as she spoke, sirens sounded in the distance. Jonas wrapped his arm around her shoulders and pulled her close while his gaze zeroed in on the burning building. “In about a minute.”

* * *

A sense of relief washed over Deidre when she walked out the screen door with a tray of plastic cups and a pitcher of water for the firefighters. The yard reeked of smoke and wet, charred wood, but at least no more flames flickered in the burned-out barn. Three-fourths of the old building had burned to the ground. The men had spent an hour putting out the flames. The firefighters were currently walking around the debris, lifting

pieces of blackened wood with their axes to make sure no more hot spots remained. Jonas and the fire inspector met halfway through the yard and approached the porch together.

Emergency vehicles littered the property, their lights highlighting Jonas' soot-marked face in a red, white and blue kaleidoscope. His gaze locked with her questioning one. "It was deliberately set."

Deidre quickly glanced at the charred stairs, guilt tightening her gut. "I should've been more careful with the fertilizer bag I used this morning. It was heavy so I dragged it out of the barn all the way to the front of the house. I didn't know it had a hole in the bottom until I'd reached the flower bed. The fire must have caught on the fertilizer trail and made its way over to the stairs."

"Don't blame yourself, Miss Nelson. As the sheriff stated, the fire was deliberately set." The fire inspector reached out his leathery hand and shook hers. "Edward Ross, ma'am." He released her hand and pushed his fireman's hat back from his sweaty, black brow. "The arsonist must've used a Molotov cocktail type igniter. We found some melted plastic among the debris. He'd apparently tried to be careful about what material he used... I'm sure he hoped it'd burn up in the fire. We've got proof, but I doubt we can get prints." He paused and glanced at Jonas with an expectant expression. "I saw your men making an impression on the ground below the window where the flames never reached."

Jonas nodded. "Good thing it rained hard last night. The imprint has distinctive markings on the shoe's sole. We're hoping the evidence might make it easier to find the person who did this."

Anger whirled inside Deidre at the near miss with her parents' home. "Who would do such a thing? I know it's the end of the summer and antsy kids get into all kinds of mischief..." She trailed off while she poured a cup of water for Edward then handed the tumbler to him. "Anyway, thank you for your help. I hope you catch the person responsible. My parents will be so relieved, and me for them, that they can put all these pranks behind them."

"We don't know for sure this is connected to the pranks yet." Jonas directed his gaze her way. "This went beyond petty vandalism. Fortunately no animals were in that barn, but what if you'd been asleep when this happened? The fire could've continued to spread to the B&B and you could've been killed."

Her chest tightened at Jonas' scary scenario, but Deidre's mind refused to focus and worry about what could've happened. Instead, as she poured him some water, her heart skipped several beats at the intensity in his tone. She knew his job was to protect, but he

almost sounded as if he cared what happened to her, not like the man who'd said he wouldn't get emotionally attached.

She handed him the cup and gave him a half smile. "I'm confident you'll catch the person responsible."

"Damn straight," he replied in a clipped tone while he took her offering. Downing the water in one swift gulp, he handed her the cup. "Which is why I'm going back with the inspector and we're jumping right on this."

He was leaving her?

As if he read her mind, Jonas jerked his head back toward the police cars in the background, their blue and white lights still flashing. "Don't worry. I'm posting an officer to sit outside until further notice."

But that wasn't what she was thinking. He was leaving her. Despite the destruction she'd witnessed tonight, she wasn't worried the person or persons would come back. They'd done their damage. Or maybe the complete sense of calm that seemed to steal over her was because Jonas was so confident he'd catch the guilty party.

All she knew was...damn it...*he* was leaving!

Before she could utter a word, Jonas waved over one of his officers. "Jeff, I want you to stay here and watch the house tonight."

"Will do." The short, stocky deputy touched his hat and acknowledged Deidre with a respectful nod.

Jonas clapped the inspector on the shoulder. "Let's go, Edward. You can give me a ride. We've got some work ahead of us."

"Thanks for the water." Edward handed her the cup then led Jonas over to his truck.

"What about Admiral?" Deidre called after Jonas.

"I've phoned my foreman, Harrison. He'll stop by and pick him up in the next half hour."

While disappointment rushed through her at the realization Jonas wouldn't be returning tonight, she worked hard to keep her expression neutral. Damn it, how had she quickly become so desperate to spend as much time as she could with the man?

Chapter Five

“Hey.” Jonas’ tired voice spoke next to her ear at the same time he pulled her back against his hard chest.

Deidre awoke with a surprised gasp, her heart pounding. But the sensation of Jonas’ hard, naked chest sliding against her back while he climbed into bed with her turned her gasp into a sigh of contentment. She gave a sleepy smile and snuggled closer to his warm frame.

After staying outside until the last fireman and police officer left, she cleaned the entire house, took a shower and crawled into bed. She’d lain there for a few hours before sheer exhaustion had finally caused her eyes to close. Glancing at the clock, she blinked at the time—three a.m.—and murmured, “I was so wired I finally fell asleep thirty minutes ago.”

When Jonas let out a heavy sigh, she glanced at him over her shoulder. “Hey, what’s wrong?”

He kissed her shoulder, but she could tell he was thinking about something. “My brother informed me today he’d made his decision to put our ranch and the property on the market.”

“What?” Deidre rolled onto her back. “But that property has been in your family for decades. You told me your parents worked so hard to leave a legacy for you and your brother.”

Jonas shrugged. “Noah’s getting married. He wants to build a house in town.”

At the frustration in Jonas’ eyes, she felt as if a weight was pushing on her chest. This had to be part of the underlying tension she’d noticed in Jonas the past couple of days. “Then buy him out.”

He ran a finger down the side of her face and gave a half smile. “I offered, but my brother wants top dollar and I can’t afford that.”

The idea that everything Jonas' parents and Jonas had worked for would be all for nothing made her stomach knot. It wasn't right. And their idyllic spot in the woods, the place they'd connected, would belong to someone else. It felt so very wrong. She placed her hand on his cheek as tears filled her eyes. "I'm so sorry."

He smiled and brushed away a tear that rolled down her temple. "No worries. Life happens."

She noticed his smile didn't quite reach his eyes, but Jonas quickly kissed the palm of her hand and changed the subject. "I do have some good news."

"Do you have a lead about tonight's fire?"

"Some. We should know more in the morning when the stores open." Regret laced his voice as his hand moved to her belly and he rolled her back to her side, pulling her body flush with his from shoulder to hip. "I know I promised to keep you up all night long, but this wasn't how I envisioned it."

She laughed softly, enjoying the low register of his voice vibrating against her back. He smelled like oatmeal chocolate chip cookies and fresh soap. Man, she could get used to this. *Better nip this wishful thinking in the bud, woman*, she berated herself.

"Mmmm, I see Jeff isn't really doing his job if you can sneak into my house and climb into bed with me undetected."

"Good thing he's on my payroll." He chuckled as he placed a tender kiss against her neck. "I sent him home once I got back. Truth is, darlin', I didn't want you staying by yourself, even if Jeff was sitting outside all night."

The man just made her want to crawl all over him. Was it his sexy Texan accent or his protective nature that grabbed her deep in the gut? Both, *and* the man underneath, she admitted to herself.

"Is that the only reason?" she said in a sultry tone. She distinctly remembered brushing against a very impressive erection a second ago. Deidre pushed closer and smiled when he growled in her ear, rubbing his cock against her buttocks.

"Don't tempt me," he warned.

"But that's exactly what I'm doing." She pressed harder, arching her body against him.

His warm hands gripped her hips and held her still. "Baby, God knows, I want your ever-lovin' sweet body, but I purposely didn't bring condoms so I wouldn't be tempted to follow my baser instincts. After a night like tonight, you need your sleep."

Both frustrated and appreciative of his thoughtfulness, Deidre said with a half laugh, “But what did you think I’d want once I got this sexy cowboy lawman in my bed?”

Before she could utter another word, he flipped her over on her back and caged her in with his hands on either side of her head. Leaning on one elbow, he let a seductive laugh escape his lips as he slid his hand down her thin T-shirt and back up the outside of her thigh. “I just said for you not to tempt me. I didn’t say I wasn’t going to pleasure you. I’ve thought of little else ever since I had a cock-teasingly brief taste of your sexy body in the kitchen.”

Deidre’s heart beat at a rabbit’s pace. In his new position, Jonas’ shoulders blocked the hall light, leaving his face in shadows. She wished she could see his expression. Her sex began to pulse and her breasts swelled at the thought of him finally tasting her, teasing her, sucking on her clit. “Well then, cowboy, I would never think to stop a man from his deepest desire.” Her hand covered his and she directed his fingers to the bottom of her T-shirt.

Her heart thumped harder as he slowly pulled off her T-shirt then tossed the cotton material on the floor, his gaze never leaving hers.

When Jonas began to massage her calves, she shook her head at the devilish look on his face.

“What’s wrong?”

The rasp of desire in his voice made goose bumps form on her skin. She glanced down at his briefs, turned on even more by the sight of his erection jutting against the fitted cotton fabric. “As sexy as I find you in your underwear, I don’t want you wearing anything at all.”

Tension filled his expression and his nostrils flared. “I’m a man with base impulses. If my cock comes anywhere near your sweet, warm body, I’m going to fill it with mine. It’s as primal and fundamental as that.”

Jonas’ frank comment made her breath catch in her throat. She *wanted* him that out-of-control.

“Take them off.” She gave him a siren’s smile as she lay back and bent her knees. Putting her feet flat on the bed, she spread her thighs wide. “I think you can hold back.”

His gaze locked on her sex as he slipped out of his underwear and tossed them on the floor. When his eyes met hers, his gaze darkened and his expression took on a provocative look. “Are you challenging me?”

The sight of his cock, long and thick, surrounded by dark hair, made her walls clench in excitement. She arched her back so her breasts rose toward him. “You bet your sexy ass I’m challenging you.”

Before the words had died from her lips, Jonas’ heavy body fell on hers, pressing her to the bed. His hands fisted in her hair and his lips hovered over hers as he laid his erection along her sex. Rubbing the outside ridge of his cock against her wet labia, he said in a husky voice, “It feels like you’re on fire, you’re so damned hot and slick.”

Deidre’s pulse thrummed in her ears. She desperately wanted him inside her. Closing the small distance between their mouths, she grabbed his lower lip between her teeth and then applied suction with her lips before allowing gravity to pull her back down to the bed. “That’s exactly what I am...on fire. I know your nature. You’re always prepared. It’s what makes you a good sheriff. Tell me you left your condoms in the car.”

He gave her a sheepish grin. “Well, a man can be hopeful.”

She raised her eyebrow. “Only if they’re within reaching distance, cowboy. Just how fast can you mov—”

Jonas was gone, grabbing up his jeans before she could finish.

Deidre chuckled, her body tingling with anticipation.

She was glad she rolled over to her side to wait for him, because doing so allowed her the sexiest view she’d ever witnessed when he returned—Jonas standing in her doorway, slowly unbuttoning his jeans, an intense look on his face.

She held out her hand and gave him a knowing smile. “Want me to put it on?”

Her question made his cock throb. Jonas quickly stepped out of his jeans and handed her the condom.

She opened the package and sat up on her knees. Her gaze locked with his as her fingers touched the tip of his cock.

As pleasurable sensations slammed through him with each downward brush of her fingers, Jonas had to touch her. He slid his fingers through her hair, enjoying the soft silk. “So beautiful,” he murmured.

She finished and wrapped her hand around his erection, pulling him onto the bed.

The tugging sensation and her sultry comment made his hips move of their own accord. Their skin touched and he felt like a bull ready to break out of a rodeo chute. Jonas bit back the need to ram his cock deep into her wet heat. God knew, he wanted to

with a vengeance. He closed his eyes tight for a second, holding himself over her, trying to regain control. But when Deidre lifted her legs and wrapped them around his hips, bringing her entrance even closer to the tip of his cock, he let loose a growl of sexual frustration.

Capturing her mouth in a hard, demanding kiss, he thrust his tongue deep, intending for his kiss to be aggressive and dominant. Instead of kissing him back, Deidre began to suck on his tongue in seductive, dragging pulls, turning the tables on his dominance. He was the one caught. His sexual urges immediately focused on the sensation in his mouth and the fact there seemed to be a direct tie straight to his cock.

His balls tightened with each tug and pull, and he found himself thinking how good it would feel to have her lips around his erection...just like this...aggressive, never-ending suction. When she ran her tongue around his in one long sweeping lick, a jolt of heated lust swept to his groin like a wildfire spreading in his veins.

Having his cock against her skin but not sliding inside her became a painful, ball-busting, agonizing experience.

Gritting his teeth in order to hold back, Jonas moved his kiss down her jaw and then nibbled at her collarbone before sliding his lips to her breast.

As he circled his tongue around her taut, pink nipple, her moans of approval encouraged him more. Instead of taking the bud into his mouth, he moved to the other breast and treated it to the same attention.

“Jonas, suck them,” she begged. She arched her back and her fingernails scraped his shoulders. He fucking loved it...loved being the man to bring out this raw, uninhibited honesty. He wanted to be the man to fulfill her every sexual fantasy...and to delve into new ones together.

He captured her nipple and nipped hard at the bud before sucking the tip deep inside his mouth. Deidre’s hips rocked underneath him, a pleased moan rushing past her lips. Jonas flexed his stomach muscles and pressed the hard surface against her slick heat, giving her the friction she sought while relishing each new sound she made. Her hips undulated under him, and the faster pace told him exactly what she wanted.

He slid farther down her body, his hands worshiping her curves and soft skin.

When he placed a gentle kiss on the tuft of blonde hair on her mound, her body stopped moving even though her breathing still continued in soft, sexy gusts.

Jonas glanced up and saw she'd elevated onto her elbows. Her blonde hair was a tangled mess framing her rosy cheeks and swollen lips. Her green-eyed gaze, full of desire, collided with his as he lowered his mouth to her mound and kissed the bit of blonde hair once more.

"How can such a tender kiss make me want to scream?" she said.

The awe in her voice made him kiss her again, but this time slightly lower. The rich, sweet smell of her sex was driving him fucking nuts. "Because you know how very close I am," he replied as he slid his thumbs up her sex and pressed on the outside of her pink skin. His gaze stayed locked with hers while he ran his tongue along her folds.

When her head fell back onto the bed and her legs dropped to the bed, her body's full surrender told him she wanted more. Loving every second of her pleasure, he plunged his tongue inside her core, laving at her enticing flavor. She was a seductive combination of musky sweetness he couldn't describe if he had to. All he knew was her taste made him hard as granite and ache like a virgin teenager.

Sliding his tongue up her entrance, Jonas flicked her clit in teasing circles. "Jonas," she panted as she rocked her hips and ground her sex against his mouth. He mouthed the bit of firm flesh, pressing his lips against it before biting at it gently with his teeth.

Deidre's body jerked and her breathing changed to frantic gasps. "God, Jonas. I can't," she said sitting up slightly to tug on his head and then his shoulders.

"What's wrong? Did I hurt you?"

She continued to pull at him. "I want you inside me. Now!"

He moved to his elbows above her, setting his cock against her entrance. "Are you sure?" he teased, thrusting his hips slightly.

Pulling him down on top of her, she spoke next to his ear, "I was sure the moment you said, 'In another life'."

Jonas froze at her statement. After all these years, she remembered his last words to her. What did that say about her? *It says she's one helluva woman, you jackass, and if you keep her waiting any longer she may just tell you she'd rather wait for you in another life.*

He lifted himself slightly and captured her gaze as he pressed the head of his cock against her entrance. He didn't say a word while he slowly slid inside her, just held her beautiful green gaze. As he seated his erection fully inside her slick, wet, he'd-died-and-gone-to-heaven folds, a sighing whimper crossed her parted lips.

Jonas couldn't resist as he withdrew and sank his cock deep inside her. He nipped at her lower lip then bit it again in a teasing kiss.

Deidre was surprised by this sexy, playful side she didn't expect to see from Jonas. Her easy-going cowboy with the teasing smile had returned. Her heart soaring, she wrapped her arms tight around his shoulders and kissed him hard as she began to rock her hips in a slow, tantalizing rhythm, a sexy counter to his thrusts that sank deep every time he penetrated her.

Jonas' tongue parried with hers in a dominant thrust and pull, moving to the same building momentum of his hips rocking with hers. He was big and heavy, spreading her legs deliciously wide as he moved inside her.

Breathing deep, Deidre started to push him over on his side, but she apparently pushed too far. She let out a yelp of surprise when he went flying down to the floor, taking her with him in the process.

After the initial shock wore off, Jonas' brow furrowed in concern. "You okay, sweetheart?"

Glancing at the tangle of covers beneath them, she grinned. "Good thing you and the covers broke my fall."

Jonas' warm hands clasped her bare buttocks and a sinful smile canted his lips. "Nah, I meant to do this, darlin'." His work-roughened hands grabbed her rear tighter, and he used his hold to press her mound hard against his cock. "I've been dying to see how well you've learned to ride."

"Hmmm, that sounds like a challenge." Deidre kicked the covers off her legs and slid her hands up his chest, enjoying the flex and play of his thick pectorals and the light sprinkle of dark hair under her fingers as she straddled his hips.

Jonas captured her hands and planted a kiss on the beating pulse at each wrist. His gaze heavy with desire, he placed her hands on his shoulders. Running his hands down her sides, he palmed her thighs. "When you ride me, I want to feel every single muscle from here," he squeezed her thigh muscles then ran his hands up her thighs until his thumbs touched her sex, "to here, gripping the hell out of me."

Jonas left her completely speechless. Deidre had never felt sexier and more cherished than she did by the man lying underneath her. Lifting herself up on her knees, she slowly lowered her body down over his shaft until his cock filled her completely.

The full, stretching sensation felt so damn good, she just sat there for several seconds and closed her eyes, savoring the numerous emotions and physical responses running through her. Past yearnings, dream-filled nights, jerking awake sweating and throbbing. Lust, elation, building passion and mutual body heat merged, creating a sense of rightness and completion she couldn't put to words.

She opened her eyes when she felt Jonas' chest rising and falling at a faster pace underneath her hands.

"I'm sure I'm going to like how you ride, but damn, you're beautiful just sitting astride."

She heard the tension in his tone, felt the tightness of his skin under her palms. Jonas was holding back for her. She flexed her inner muscles and grasped his cock in a tight pelvic squeeze. "But then it wouldn't be called riding, would it?" She began to rock her hips in a steadily increasing motion. Every movement jammed him deeper inside her, sending jolts of exquisite pleasure shooting to her sex.

"No, I guess it wouldn't." His voice sounded a bit strained as his fingers dug into her buttocks.

Deidre shivered at the sexy picture he made with his wavy black hair all askew and the muscles in his tan neck flexing in and out. His eyes were half closed, watching her, and his nostrils flared as he took deeper and deeper breaths. Her gaze slid lower to his abs, flexing with each counter thrust of his hips. She decided she liked this position, if nothing else for the great view it gave her of his well-cut, hardworking body.

When he reached up and rubbed her nipples with his thumbs, then tweaked the sensitive pink tips between his fingers, he said, "I'm not planning on coming alone."

"You...you don't have to worry," she stammered as splinters of desire shot down her belly and straight to her sex with each bit of pressure he applied. She dug her fingernails into his shoulders and leaned closer as her climax approached in tighter and tighter spirals of erotic flexes.

Jonas pinched her nipples hard and said in a husky voice, "Nothing compares to the feel of your warm body clasping me tight."

She was so close. The pleasure-pain he applied to her nipples sent tiny shockwaves rippling down her spine, but when he grabbed her hips and thrust upward at the same time he pulled her closer, his cock hit just the right spot on her clit. She almost missed his roar of pleasure as he came because her own scream of ecstasy lasted throughout her orgasm.

Thunderous, unrelenting vibrations contracted her walls around him again and again. She rocked against his thick cock, riding her climax until her arms and legs shook so hard she collapsed on his chest.

As her body rose and fell with his heavy breathing, Deidre reveled in the sheen of sweat that coated both their bodies. Jonas ran his fingers across her hair, pushing the damp strands away from her face. She smiled at the tingle of excitement his slight touch evoked within her, knowing she'd never get enough of him. From his strong sense of right and wrong, to the way he made her knees threaten to give way whenever he stepped into the room, the man more than fulfilled every fantasy she'd ever had...and then some.

While his heart rate slowed to its normal pace, Jonas inhaled Deidre's alluring pear-blossom scent. He relished the feel of her weight blanketing him and the sensation of being deep inside her. He could see himself with this woman forever. The thought made his stomach knot and deep-seated mistrust rush to the forefront of his mind. Not to mention fear. He didn't want to be hurt again. He felt so strongly about Deidre, she had the power to destroy him.

He knew Deidre had done nothing to deserve his judgment, but some wounds never healed. She deserved a man who could completely give her his trust and his heart. His body tensed and his grip around her waist tightened at the thought of Deidre kissing, let alone having sex with another man.

She lifted her head, concern etching her brow. "What's wrong?"

His gaze searched hers. "Nothing. I just wish I'd met you eleven years ago."

Her fingers brushed his jaw as a half smile tilted her lips. "Our pasts are just that. Never regret it. Instead, be proud of the decisions you've made. They are the building blocks of who you are."

He gave a self-deprecating laugh. "Yeah, mistrustful, hard, unyielding."

Surprise lit her gaze. "Is that truly how you see yourself?" Shaking her head, she slid to his side and leaned on her elbow to stare at him. "I see a one-in-a-million man, a man who walked away from a magnetic attraction due to his own moral standards. I see a man whose calculated thinking landed him the well-respected role as the town sheriff."

"A man who will never trust another woman," he interrupted in a cold tone. She didn't need to know fear was the driving factor.

She raised her eyebrow at his narrowed, suspicious gaze. “Really? You wouldn’t trust a woman who ached to touch you, who felt your desire, knew you wanted her, a woman who had no personal relationship or binding commitment holding *her* back?”

She rolled away, stood and stared down at him. “Men aren’t the only ones who own the right to start a relationship, Jonas.” Pointing to her chest, she continued. “This woman walked away because of *her* moral standards.”

Before he could respond, she grabbed the shirt he’d tossed onto the chair beside the bed and walked out of the room.

Jonas sat up and rested his elbow on the bed, staring at the open doorway...speechless. Leave it to Deidre to put it all in perspective. He knew he’d fallen in love with her spunky, tell-it-like-it-is self for a reason. He no longer had to deny his attraction to her. She was right. She had walked away and never pursued their mutual attraction. Like him, she’d never forgotten. She had always cared...all these years.

Once he’d pulled on his jeans, he found her in the living room. She stood wearing his shirt, her back to him as she stared out the window. His cock hardened instantly when he mentally acknowledged she was naked beneath his shirt.

His woman.

He approached her and wrapped his arms around her waist. Gathering her close, he nuzzled her neck. “Would an apology for being a complete ass earn your forgiveness?”

She folded her arms over his and sighed. “I can’t change the past.”

He turned her in his arms and planted a kiss on her forehead, his heart thumping hard. A lump formed in his throat, but he had to ask. “Are you offering me a future?”

She grinned and snaked her arms around his neck. Standing on her tiptoes, she spoke next to his ear in a husky voice, “I know you said you’d never ask a woman to marry you again. If you plan to stick to your vow, because men do silly things sometimes, I hope that you’d at least consider the alternative of accepting a woman’s marriage proposal.”

Jonas’ heart jerked and he set her away so he could meet her gaze. He couldn’t dare hope. “Are you asking me to marry you?”

Deidre laughed and shook her head. “No. I’m not. I’m just asking you to consider the possibility that the male isn’t the only one who can propose marriage.”

Confusion settled within him. As much as her statement made his aversion to commitment and opening himself up to being hurt jump front and center in his mind, his

stomach twisted into knots. For a split second he'd experienced joyous acceptance of the idea of having Deidre to himself, 'til death did they part.

A wide grin spread across his face and his spirits lifted as he locked his fingers together at the base of her spine. "If the right woman asked me, I think my answer would be a definite 'yes'."

Grabbing his hand at the small of her back, she laced her fingers with his, a sexy smile on her face. "I'm glad to hear you're open to the possibility." She tugged him back toward the bedroom. "Now, about that soft bed calling to us..."

Jonas quickly scooped her up in his arms and chuckled at her squeal of surprise. As he carried her into the bedroom, he planted a kiss on her throat. "You really don't think you'll actually sleep in that bed as long as I'm around, do you?"

When she responded with a seductive "I'm counting on it, cowboy", he felt the tension in his chest he'd constantly carried around like a coat of armor start to give way to something akin to relaxation.

Chapter Six

A couple hours later, Jonas awoke to the sound of his cell phone ringing. Dawn's light streaked through the green and white curtains as he quickly got up and pulled his phone from his jeans back pocket.

Flipping open the phone, he glanced at the caller ID and spoke in a low voice. "What do you have, Jeff?"

"Heya, boss. I roused Jamie at Kicks Footwear and got him to check his records. Good thing for us this particular style of shoe was recently released in the market. Because the manufacturer offers a lifetime warranty, the store keeps track of sales. Only three people have bought the boys' tennis shoes that match both the size and the shoe tread we lifted near the barn."

Jonas straightened his spine as he shifted to sheriff mode. "Give them to me."

"Joey Randall, Chaz Blackstone and Aaron Shomar." Jeff paused for a second and continued. "Motive and connection come to mind. Know what I'm thinking, sir?"

Jonas' gaze narrowed. The Blackstones owned the Blackstone B&B that had opened in town a little over a year ago. He knew the Blackstones were friendly with Deidre's parents, but their son Chaz was a bit of a hothead. There was only one way to find out if He was responsible for the vandalism and destruction on the Flying Wind property. "I think we're both on the same page. I'll stop by and pick you up on the way to the Blackstone B&B."

"Think Chaz'll be up that early?"

Anger festered within him at the thought Deidre could've been hurt because of a teenager's stunt. "I don't give a rat's ass if he's up that early or not," he shot back before he closed the cell phone with a determined snap.

"You have to go."

Deidre's sleepy voice drew his attention. She looked so sexy sitting up on her elbow, her tangled, wavy blonde hair framing her face. Understanding reflected in her green gaze as she held the sheet around her breasts and stared at him intently.

Jonas nodded while pulling on his underwear. "We're chasing down a lead in yesterday's fire."

Deidre sat up, her expression alert. "I hope you find who did this. I really don't want to leave my parents behind with someone still lurking out there who's elevated his pranks to deadly activities."

Jonas' heart constricted at her casual mention of leaving. "Your parents will be back today?" Damn, he'd been so caught up in Deidre, he'd lost track of time.

She nodded.

Mixed emotions shifted within him like a sandcastle being eaten by the ebb and flow of an inevitable incoming tide. While he shrugged into his jeans and shirt, his gut told him to ask her to stay, but old wounds kept the words locked deep inside.

Setting his jaw, he gave her a curt nod. "I'll have a report to them by the end of the day."

A half smile curved her lips. Sexual tension and unspoken words flowed between them while they stared at each other for several seconds.

She tilted her head as if she sensed the internal battle going on in his head. "You'd better get going."

Snapping to attention, Jonas squared his shoulders and pulled on his socks before stepping into his boots. He turned to go, but cast his gaze back her way. Before he could speak, she made a shooing motion with her hand. "Go."

Jonas grabbed his Stetson from the dresser and set it firmly on his head. As he walked out of the room, she called after him, "The sheriff always gets his man."

And his woman, he finished mentally. As he made his way out of the house, a broad smile spread across his face. And it felt damn good.

* * *

"Can you believe he's up at this hour?" Jeff sounded surprised as Jonas drove down the Blackstones' asphalt drive toward the bed and breakfast ranch house.

Chaz Blackstone tugged his baggy jeans back up his lanky form as he stood up from a crouched position at the edge of the drive. He dipped his paintbrush into a can of white paint then applied a new coat to one of the wrought iron spindles on the fence that curved in a semicircle around the entrance to the B&B.

When Jonas turned into the drive, Chaz glanced their way. Adjusting his navy blue baseball hat, he squinted against the bright morning sun.

Once he turned off the car engine, Jonas handed Jeff the folder that was on the seat between them and got out of the car.

“Mornin’, Sheriff.” Chaz touched his hat’s bill and stared at his visitors, paintbrush paused in midair next to the fence. “My parents are inside preparing the morning meal for their guests.”

“Being punished?” Jonas asked as he glanced at the gallon can of paint next to Chaz’s tennis shoes. While his gaze was averted, he surreptitiously examined the teenager’s athletic shoes. Sure enough, they matched the picture of the brand the Kick Footwear’s manager said was in high demand with the lifetime warranty.

“Nah, just making the place look nice.” Chaz returned to his work, swiping his brush along the thin wrought-iron post.

Jonas caught Jeff’s nod toward Chaz’s shoes. He raised his eyebrow to let the deputy know he saw them. Now, to get the kid to willingly show him the bottom of his right shoe. “You been working hard around here this weekend?”

Chaz paused his brush strokes for a second. “Yeah, helping my parents with the upkeep,” he commented before he bent and wiped more paint on his brush from the can.

A few drops of white paint landed on the black asphalt as he returned the brush to the fence, giving Jonas an idea.

He stepped right beside Chaz and kicked the nearly full can of paint as he pretended to inspect the boy’s handiwork. “Nice job, son.” Satisfied that enough of the white paint had sloshed over the side of the can and onto the pavement, he asked in a casual tone, “You didn’t go out at all yesterday?”

“Huh?” Chaz stopped painting and glanced at him, wrinkling his freckled nose.

Jonas was determined to draw the kid out. “Did you go anywhere yesterday?”

Chaz shrugged then dipped his paintbrush once more. “I went to the store for my mom to pick up some bacon, milk and eggs.” Straightening, he stepped around Jonas and began working on another part of the fence.

Jonas glanced down at the asphalt and a heavy dose of anger washed over him at the sight of Chaz's shoeprint perfectly stamped in white wet paint against the black drive.

"You should really be more careful," Jonas said as he reached over and pulled the manila folder out from under Jeff's arm.

"What are you talking about—" Chaz cut himself off when his gaze landed on the perfect white shoeprints he'd made on the pavement. Lifting his shoe, he stared at the paint now coating the bottom. "Shit, my parents are going to freak at this mess."

Jonas pulled out a photo of the impression they'd taken and tossed it on the ground next to the print on the asphalt. A kind of sad satisfaction swept through him that the photo was an exact match, all the way down to the nicked outer edge of the sole. "There's one thing you're definitely right about. Your parents are going to freak."

Pointing to the photo, Jonas continued. "This impression was taken at the scene of a crime last night, next to an old barn on the Flying Wind's property. The barn almost burned to the ground, Chaz. The fire spread to the house, engulfing the stairs. Had we not caught it in time, it probably would've burned the entire B&B, too. Bet you don't know anything about that, do you?"

"I don't know what you're talking about." Despite his denial, when Chaz's anxious gaze met his, Jonas noted how pale the teenager's skin suddenly looked underneath the heavy sprinkle of freckles across his nose.

Retrieving the photo, Jonas slid it back inside the folder and handed the package to Jeff at the same time he pulled his handcuffs from the leather snap on his gun belt. He took a step forward and gripped Chaz's wrist, slapping the handcuff on him.

"You have the right to remain silent."

The kid's strawberry-blond eyebrows rose and his eyes widened in fear as Jonas took the paintbrush out of his free hand and gave it to his deputy. Locking the second cuff on the boy's other wrist, he said, "Jeff, please go get the Blackstones."

As Jeff walked toward the house, Jonas continued with his Miranda warning. "Anything you say can and will be used against you—"

"Wait!" Chaz jerked around, his expression panicked. "You can't arrest me. I didn't mean to burn the house, just that old ratty barn they planned to tear down anyway." He hung his head and continued in a lower voice, "I thought if the Flying Wind had lots of problems... I just wanted people to come to our B&B."

Disappointment tensed Jonas' shoulders and he shook his head at the kid's illogical thinking. "You could've killed someone, Chaz." Gripping the boy's upper arm in a firm hold, he glanced up to see Roger and Joyce Blackstone running down the porch stairs toward them.

"Why in the world are you arresting our son?" Chaz's father asked while his mother clung to her husband's arm.

Jonas met their concerned gazes. "Let's all head to the office and discuss it there."

* * *

Jonas drove up to the Flying Wind B&B as the sun slid lower in the sky. He'd spent the entire day at the office filling out paperwork. Once he talked to the Nelsons, he could wrap up the Blackstone case completely.

Deidre's mother and father came out on their front porch as he got out of his car.

Jonas walked up to the stairs and brushed the rim of his hat. "Evening, Glen and Dot. How was your trip?"

"Wonderful." Dot's skin was a little darker than when they'd left and there was a definite spark in her deep blue eyes.

Glen stepped down the stairs and shook Jonas' hand. "We just got off the phone with the Blackstones. They were very shocked and apologetic about their son's behavior. I wanted to talk to you about Chaz's punishment, Sheriff."

"I'm not done with my report—" Jonas cut himself off with a sigh, knowing small town ways of ignoring protocol were ingrained and the hardest to get past when it came to his job. Releasing Glen's hand, he put his booted foot up on the burned bottom step and prepared to negotiate with the older couple. "He needs a good lickin', in my opinion."

Glen walked back up to stand beside his wife. Folding his arms, he set his mouth in a determined line. "I seem to remember a certain young cowboy who came to work at this B&B a little over ten years ago. From what I remember, his daddy said he was headstrong and had a wild streak. He hoped that by working for us, we'd straighten his son out."

Jonas mirrored Glen's pose, crossing his arms over his chest as he stared the older man down. Glen had been more than an employer. He'd been a mentor in many ways.

“Are you telling me you don’t plan to press charges? Deidre could’ve been killed if the fire had continued to spread.”

Regret softened Glen’s stern features for a brief second. “No, we’re not pressing charges on the condition that Chaz makes up for what he’s done. We’re thankful you held up to your word and kept watch after the B&B and our daughter.”

Jonas could tell Glen wasn’t going to back down from his stance on the Chaz issue. Preparing himself to push for the harshest punishment he could get the Nelsons to agree to, he met Glen’s steady gaze. “I’m thinking community hours. Lots of community hours.” He glanced at the burned out barn and then shifted his line of sight to the step under his foot. “After he helps clean up this mess.”

“Agreed.” Glen nodded then added, “And we think he should have to help out at the station as well.”

Jonas stiffened. “The station?”

“That way you can keep an eye on him and point him in the right direction. I’m sure you could use an extra worker around the office,” Dot added, her short dark hair bobbing as she nodded her agreement.

The Nelsons had effectively backed him into a corner he saw no way around. Jonas rolled his head from shoulder to shoulder in frustration.

“What do you say, Jonas?”

When Glen called him by his first name instead of “sheriff”, the older man was definitely playing upon their longstanding friendship. Inclining his head in grudging approval, Jonas lowered his arms and relaxed his shoulders now that they’d come to an agreement.

Glen gave a big smile. “Good, glad we got that out of the way. I wanted to talk to you about purchasing a portion of your property to expand the B&B trails and possibly add a couple guest cabins in the future. My Deidre said there’s some fine land back there.”

If Glen bought some of his property, he should be able to afford to give Noah the price he wanted. His brother might not want the work of owning a ranch, but he’d want to bring his future children to visit the family ranch later in life. Jonas’s spirits soared.

Jonas nodded, but kept his expression neutral. “Let me talk to Noah and see if he’s agreeable.”

“Sounds good.” The older man crossed his arms, looking very proud of himself.

This was Deidre's doin'. Jonas cast his gaze through the screen door. Why hadn't she come out with her parents? "Can I speak to Deidre for a few minutes?"

"She left a half hour ago," Dot said.

Surprise shot through him. Was helping him her parting gift? "Did she leave a note?"

Dot's eyes lit up. "She did say, 'Tell Jonas I'll see him'."

Dejection hit him hard, making him feel sick to his stomach. Deidre's parents must've noticed his tanking mood because both Glen and Dot stared at him as if waiting for him to say something.

Jonas cleared his throat and touched his hat once more. "I'll be in touch with you once I talk to Noah, and to set up a work schedule for Chaz."

Glen smiled and wrapped his arm around his wife's shoulders. "We're here when you're ready. Have a great evening."

* * *

Jonas headed up the long drive leading to his ranch, feeling as if a two hundred pound weight had fallen on his chest. When his gaze landed on a familiar blue compact rental car sitting in his driveway, his spirits rose. Deidre hadn't left. Enjoying the euphoric feeling, he parked his car and turned off the engine.

Deidre sat on the top step of his porch, one leg crossed over the other as she leaned back on her arms. Her pink tank top pulled tight against her breasts while her sandaled foot swung casually underneath a long prairie skirt. She smiled and stood as he got out of the car and shut the door.

"Evening, Sheriff."

Jonas didn't say a word. Instead, he mounted the stairs two at a time until he stood in front of his woman. She'd tried to help him save his ranch. He could get used to the sight of her sitting on the stairs waiting for him to get home, the last remnants of sun casting a golden glow across her bare shoulders. When he stared down at her upturned face and her smile broadened, he realized just how much she'd come to mean to him, how much she'd always meant to him.

"Your dad offered to buy some of my land," he said.

She tilted her head to the side. "He did, did he?"

Jonas nodded, his heart beating double-time as he waited for her to admit she'd had a part in it.

Instead, she stayed quiet and they just stared at one another for several seconds until she finally stood and brushed off her skirt. "I couldn't leave without saying goodbye."

Jonas' stomach pitched. She was really leaving? Instead of saying what was in his heart, his self-preservation defenses kicked in, lodging the words in his throat. Stepping into her personal space, he rubbed a strand of her hair between his fingers. "I'd say our reunion warranted a personal goodbye." The floral scent that rose from the silky strands made his groin jump to instant attention, rekindling memories of their night together. Jonas swallowed the lump that formed in his throat at the thought of her driving away, the idea he'd never see her, touch her or make love to her again.

Sliding his hand under her hair, he cupped the back of her neck and pulled her toward him until her chest touched his. Her lips drew his like a magnet. "I'm going to miss this sexy mouth."

Deidre's heart pounded against his chest and her smile faltered. When her gaze dropped to his mouth and her tongue darted out to wet her own lips, Jonas couldn't resist her nonverbal invitation. "Dee, I—" His hand tightened around her waist and his mouth covered hers. He kissed her with all the love he felt but couldn't put into words.

The passionate intensity of Jonas' kiss thrilled Deidre. But she knew in her heart he was holding back.

Her heart also ached at the knowledge he couldn't see beyond his past to tell her how he felt. She knew deep inside, hurt drove him. The fact he'd let her go instead of taking a chance on them, felt as if someone had just ripped her chest open. Placing her hand on his jaw, she broke their kiss and searched his hooded gaze.

Her stomach flip-flopped at the sensation of his evening whiskers brushing against her fingers. A pleasant burn remained on her lips from the recent contact. She wanted to beg him to ask her to stay, to trust his heart to her. She wanted to tell him she'd been in love with him for ten years, but the words wouldn't come.

As if he knew she wanted more than he could ever give, Jonas' dark, hungry eyes drank in her features. Was he trying to memorize them to keep them with him forever? He didn't say a word, just lowered his head toward hers once more.

Before she blurted her feelings for him in an embarrassing emotional outburst, she stepped out of his embrace. "I'll see you, Jonas."

Deidre started to walk down the first stair, her legs shaking.

A strong hand encircled her upper arm. Jonas turned her around and hauled her against his chest. "You're just going to walk away?" Anger reflected in his voice while bewilderment filled his deep blue gaze.

Deidre's heart thumped at his adamant question. The man needed to let go of his past if they ever had a chance of a future together. She was willing to gamble. The question was...was he?

"You made it very clear you have little to give." She stood on her toes and kissed him on the cheek then pulled free of his hold. "I'll always remember our time together with a smile on my face."

Jonas' jaw ticked as he grasped her upper arms in a firm hold. "Don't you want to find out where this goes?"

Deidre met his intense gaze, her heart racing in a full gallop. "Don't you know that having a relationship means you take risks? That you open up your heart, fully knowing it could be broken?"

His grip on her arms tightened and an incredulous expression crossed his face as realization dawned. "Are you going to walk away from us?"

She just stared at him, letting him believe what he wanted. It took all her internal willpower not to throw herself into his arms, to make her body do what her mind demanded, while her heart screamed the opposite, but Deidre was fighting for her man...for a strong future together.

Emotions ranging from hurt to anger stormed in his gaze. Jonas shook her gently. "Don't you know that I love you, Dee? I've always loved you. I want to spend more time together and see where this takes us."

Her heart soared with happiness at his words. Tears filled her eyes, spilling down her cheeks. "Are you willing to take the risk and open up your heart again?"

He yanked her to his chest and cupped the back of her head, pressing her cheek against his neck. "God, yes. I'm asking you to stay. I don't think I'd be a complete man without you, sweetheart."

Deidre wrapped her arms around his waist and hugged him tight as she sobbed with happiness against his neck. "I've always loved you, and I always will."

Stepping back, she wiped her tears and pulled out a piece of paper from a pocket in her skirt. "Here's my schedule. Can you pick me up?"

Jonas took the paper and read over the flight itinerary, then jerked his gaze to hers. "This is a round trip ticket."

She nodded. "It is. I'm going home to close up my apartment through the winter. My parents have decided they want to do a lot more traveling, and they want to spend their Christmas in Texas." She smiled. "They can't do this without me, so I told them I'd help out and even spruce up their menu during my stay."

His gaze narrowed. "You weren't really leaving?"

"My return to Ventura will only be temporary."

Jonas' dark eyebrows drew down in a stern look. "Unless someone convinces you to stay, right?"

Deidre shook her head slowly. "No, unless someone gives me a *reason* to stay."

Jonas stepped close. Unrestrained love welled in his chest. "I'll spend the rest of our lives together making up for all the lost years."

She laughed and brushed her lips softly against his. "Don't make promises unless you plan to keep them, cowboy. Then again," she unsnapped his handcuffs from his belt, and stepped away, continuing in a light tone. "There's something to be said for anticipation."

Jonas watched in surprise as she pulled a baggie of cookie dough out of her pocket and waved the handcuffs and the sweet treat suggestively in front of him.

He reached for her, but she evaded his grasp and took off down the stairs, casting a flirty, come-hither look over her shoulder. In a swirl of a chambray prairie skirt, she disappeared around the corner of his home.

He glanced at the flight itinerary in his hand. Deidre had a couple hours before she had to be at the airport.

"And when I convince you to say 'I do', I'm going to enjoy chasing and catching you for the rest of my days," he said with a wicked grin as he took off after his woman.

Anticipation... Hell yeah!

About the Author

Born and raised in the Southeast, award-winning author Patrice Michelle gave up her financial calculator for a keyboard and never looked back. Thanks to an open-minded family who taught her that life isn't as black and white as we're conditioned to believe, she pens her novels with the belief that various shades of gray are a lot more interesting. She's a natural with a point-and-shoot camera, likes to fiddle with graphic design and, to the relief of her family, strums her guitar to an audience of one.

To learn more about Patrice, please visit www.patricemichelle.net.

Look for these titles by Patrice Michelle

Now Available:

Susanna's Seduction

A bad marriage is like a fierce thunderstorm on a fragile field of wheat. Will a proud Texas cowboy and a stubborn Boston-bred lawyer find shelter from a real summer storm long enough to rebuild their love?

Second Wind

© 2007 Dee S. Knight

Available now at Samhain Publishing

Cocky cowboy Rafe Walker doesn't plan to meet a beautiful woman in designer jeans and ostrich boots at the rodeo, but the beauty catches his gaze just before the gate opens for his bull ride. Talk about losing focus! With one glance, his thoughts are of sex-scented sheets, not hard, sawdust-covered dirt.

A city girl like her would never fit in on his ranch, but a weekend in Dallas? Yes, Ma'am, she'll do just fine. Little does he expect a ride wilder than with any bull. She grabs hold of his heart and his hottest fantasies and holds on tight.

Cathy Fitzgerald, raised in a wealthy eastern family, half falls in love with the rakish cowboy after one impulsive weekend of wild sex. She returns to Boston, breaks off her near engagement and waits to hear from Rafe. After months of silence, he surprises Cathy with a proposal. It's a shock to both of them when she accepts, and moves to his ranch in nowhere, Texas.

They soon find that passion alone can't sustain a marriage. Rafe's pride and Cathy's long hours at work breed distrust and broken hearts. Giving their marriage its second wind will take an act of nature.

Warning, this title contains the following: explicit sex and graphic language.

Enjoy the following excerpt for *Second Wind*:

"I'm going to kiss you, Miss Catherine Fitzgerald. Is that all right?"

He stepped closer before she had a chance to say yes. She set her cup on a stack of boxes. He tossed his into a nearby trash can, never having taken a sip. Her hands walked up the front of his shirt and over his shoulders to meet at his nape. His hands fit neatly at the small of her back. He pulled her to him.

He was tall, but on tiptoe her body meshed with his in all the right places. Firm, warm lips met hers. When his tongue demanded she open to him, she did. His flavor burst in her mouth, spearmint and heat, as he boldly explored.

Raising his head, he looked around with heavy-lidded eyes. He walked across the yard, dragging her beside him. After a quick glance, he threw open a stall door and slipped inside. Moments after closing the gate, he lifted her, fitting her over his erection, scraping her breasts against his chest. She dug tunnels through his hair with her fingers, knocking his hat on the straw where he'd dropped her Stetson. Hungrily, she pulled his lips back to hers.

She whimpered. He moaned, licking the inside of her mouth as though she were the sweetest treat he'd ever had. The grind of his hips suggested what he wanted and she wrapped her legs around his waist. He took two steps to back her up to the inside wall. She twisted, rubbing her crotch into the bulge that seemed ready to burst through zipper and button and double stitching the jeans ads bragged about.

Rafe tore his mouth away even while they dry humped against the stables. She buried her face in his neck, oblivious to anything around them, ignoring all but the rising tide of incredible sensations spiraling outward from low in her belly. Her hips had a life of their own, slamming into his, grinding, rubbing, stroking, denim to denim, heat to heat.

His breath bellowed against her ear, sending tendrils of hair flying. "God, I want you."

He smelled of dirt and animal and raw masculinity. His neck was gritty with dust. She didn't care. Her tongue streaked a path up the cords of straining muscle to his earlobe. She nipped it.

"Yes." One word escaped, all she could manage as he shifted slightly and hit the right spot to send her over the edge. She gasped and held her breath, her head thrown back. Pinpricks of light flew across the blackness inside her lids.

Her nipples, sensitive and erect, pushed against the confines of her chambray shirt. The softness she'd admired when she bought the shirt that morning now seemed rough as sandpaper on her breasts. She should have worn a bra, but her small breasts rarely needed the support. Now the additional sensitivity helped prolong what had been an intense orgasm all on its own.

Finally, she came back to herself. Rafe's labored breathing matched hers, though the bulge in his jeans hadn't diminished. He let her slide down his body and then rested his

forehead on her head. The sounds of people walking by penetrated her hearing and bright flames of mortification heated her cheeks.

“You’re hot, Catherine Fitzgerald. I think I was in high school the last time I did what we just did. And unlike you, Becky Thomson didn’t get off on it back then, though I shot off like a firecracker.” He grinned down at her. “Guess turnabout is fair play, though I sure would like to feel a little relief too.”

She’d never done anything like that before, *never*. Not with her high school boyfriend to whom she’d lost her virginity, and not with the society lawyer to whom she was practically engaged back home. She’d had orgasms before, sure, but not with the primal passion she’d just experienced with this man she’d known about fifteen minutes. A piercing blaze had ripped through their clothing, without any touching or foreplay.

“I hardly know what to say, Mr. Walker. This should be so embarrassing.”

He stroked her hair, twirling a strand between calloused fingers and staring at it in awe. “Call me Rafe. I think it’s accepted etiquette for two people who humped like rabbits to use each other’s first names.”

“Humped...?”

“Umm-hmmm.” He held her hair to his nose and breathed in. “Like rabbits. Though I think usually Mr. Rabbit isn’t still hard and aching when they finish. Jesus, you smell good. Really good.”

“You smell like bull, Rafe.”

He burst out laughing and stared down at her, his dimples like shining beacons, calling to her. “You are all dusty and mussed. And so pretty I can hardly stand it. Come back to the hotel with me?”

“I don’t even know you.”

“I think we knew each other the minute you smiled at me across the ring just before the gate opened.”

“I did not smile at you.” She fingered his collar, thinking how much she’d like to be touching him instead of his shirt.

“Oh yes you did. I never flirt with strange women.” She cast him a doubtful look so he added, “Not when I’m about to bull ride. But you...you were different. I knew right away we’d get together.” He leaned down to her ear. “And I’ve never done this before. My partner’s pleasure has never been so important. Come back to the room with me. Let’s do it again only right this time. Let me make you feel good, Catherine Fitzgerald.”

Will Clay's lack of loving words bring back painful memories of Bobbie's childhood or can she put her fears aside and finally find love with her California Cowboy?

California Cowboy

© 2007 Maggie Casper

Clay Bodine has lived on the Lazy B Ranch since birth. He works the land with loving hands while ruling it with an iron fist. When his younger brother mentions hiring a new kid, Clay doesn't think much about it...until they meet.

Sparks fly when sassy and independent Bobbie Carlington meets her new boss for the first time. Used to answering only to herself, Bobbie quickly learns that things don't quite work out that way on the Lazy B.

When Clay takes Bobbie's virginity his old-fashioned ways demand he marry her. Will his lack of loving words bring back painful memories of her childhood or can Bobbie put her fears aside and finally find love with her California Cowboy?

Enjoy the following excerpt for *California Cowboy*:

Clay was lying on his bed with his back against the headboard, enjoying a jerk session to its fullest extent, when the door connecting his room to the one beside it swung open. In its wake stood a green-eyed vixen, the exact same one he'd been fantasizing about.

He'd thought of nothing but her beautifully large breasts for most of the evening and whacking off to thoughts of sliding his cock between those pale globes had seemed the best option. Getting caught at it wasn't on the agenda. The damned woman was a menace, he thought, as he reached for the sheet to cover his now flaccid shaft.

"Don't you know how to knock, woman!" he thundered at a pink-cheeked Bobbie.

"Uh, well...umm, I..." she stuttered in way of an explanation, her face crimson with embarrassment. She cleared her throat and tried again. "I just wanted to see where this door led."

"Well now you know. So if you wouldn't mind, could you..." He motioned with his hand for her to turn around and leave the way she'd come.

She did as asked but quickly turned back around, once again catching him off guard. “Oh, but I was wondering...” was all she got out before he lost what was left of his temper.

“Out dammit, now!” When she scurried to the door, he took a deep breath in hopes of calming his temper. “After I get dressed, I’ll meet you downstairs.”

It was all he could manage when what he really wanted to do was wring her sexy little neck and pound Chance into a bloody pulp. The dumb son of a bitch was too stupid for his own good. Why the hell would he put Bobbie in the master bedroom next to his but not bother to say a word about it to either of them?

“Whatever the reason, it had better be a good one,” Clay growled as he zipped the fly of his jeans.

The loud bang of the door reverberating off of the walls accomplished exactly what he wanted. A bleary-eyed Chance, dressed in only a pair of white boxer briefs, came stumbling out of his room.

“What in the hell are you slamming doors for, Clay? I just fell asleep,” Chance grumbled.

“Come on, you’ll see,” Clay answered. He was looking forward to his brother’s embarrassment.

When the two of them reached the living room, Bobbie looked up from her spot on the couch. Her cheeks were still flushed, almost the color of her hair, which was now flowing around her shoulders in a disarray of curls. The fiery mass complemented her pale skin and the freckles dotting her nose gave her an impish look, making Clay want her all over again.

“This really isn’t necessary, Mr. Bodine,” Bobbie said, clearly not wanting him to relay to Chance what had transpired between them. “Just do something to block the doorway and I promise I won’t bother you again.”

“Yes, darlin’, I think it is necessary and I’ll take care of the door first thing tomorrow.” Turning to Chase, Clay demanded, “Why in the hell didn’t you say something to either of us when you showed Bobbie to the master bedroom?”

Clay watched as Chance’s eyes widened, his gaze moving between the two of them. “I didn’t think about it. Why?”

Clay looked to Bobbie, interested to see what she would say. She didn’t disappoint him when she opened her mouth, nothing more than a strangled sound of embarrassment

making its way out, before she quickly snapped it shut. She looked completely scandalized by the thought of telling Chance anything. If he wasn't so pissed off about being caught masturbating, he'd be laughing his ass off at the look on her face.

"What she's trying to say is that in her nosiness, she walked through the connecting door and caught me in a rather compromising position, all by myself."

Clay had trouble holding back his laughter when Chance turned to Bobbie. "You mean you caught him..." Chance couldn't say the words but had no trouble making a close-fisted pumping motion with his hand, which only made Bobbie's face turn a brighter shade of red.

"I think I'll be going to bed now." Her voice was quiet as she obviously struggled for dignity.

When she was safely out of the room Chance, unable to hold back any more, put his face in his hands and started laughing. "I can't believe she walked in on you jacking off. Oh man, that is too funny," his brother said as his laughter subsided.

"Yeah, and if that wasn't bad enough, Chance, you replayed the motion for her, and in your underwear to boot." Clay had his turn to laugh when Chance immediately got quiet. His brother looked down, taking in his state of undress.

"Well hell, Clay, you could have said something."

"Why, Chance? You didn't bother to say anything when you stuck her in the room next to me." It felt good to get the final word in the matter, but didn't help much when he thought about the fact that Bobbie Carlington would soon be sleeping all snug in the four-poster, king-sized bed only a few feet away from him. That thought was enough to set him back a bit.

He wondered with more than a little fascination what she slept in. Would she wear something that covered her every curve from head to toe or would she sleep in one of those little baby-doll nighties that barely covered her treasures? Clay couldn't help but wonder which he would like more. Being completely nude would serve a better purpose, but tiny scraps of satin and lace covering her strategically would be purely erotic.

SAMHAIN PUBLISHING, LTD.

It's all about the story...

Action/Adventure

Fantasy

Historical

Horror

Mainstream

Mystery/Suspense

Non-Fiction

Paranormal

Red Hots!

Romance

Science Fiction

Western

Young Adult

www.samhainpublishing.com