



Far From Montana

Penny Ash

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Chapter One

From the moment he got off the bus, Dell Blackfeather knew coming home was a mistake. Several of the old timers in the combination bus station and café glared at him when he walked in. He ignored them and called the only family he had left, his cousin Mike, to come and get him, then went back outside to wait.

Dell leaned against the streetlight pole by the café door and did his best to ignore the gawkers that slowed to stare as they passed. The crawling feeling between his shoulder blades told him the occupants of the café were also watching him. Well, he'd be out of this place as soon as he got his things from Mike.

The sound of a car stopping made him look up. He watched Sheriff Many Hats get out of the cruiser and walk toward him.

"Thought you were locked up," Many Hats said.

"They let me go," Dell answered.

"Hard to believe, boy."

"DNA proved I didn't do it. And Elsie's diary," Dell said.

"People ain't gonna take too well to you coming back here," Many Hats said, a warning note in his voice.

"Well, I'm not staying around this sorry town, so they can relax. Soon as I get my truck I'm gone." He saw Mike coming finally and stepped away from the pole.

Mike stopped the old truck, and Dell walked toward it.

"I ain't done talking to you, boy," Many Hats said.

"Yeah, well, I'm done talking to you." Dell opened the passenger door and climbed into the truck.

He and his cousin rode in silence until they'd left the town far behind.

"You plan on staying?" Mike asked.

"Not if I can help it. I'm just here long enough to get my stuff, and then I'm gone."

"Probably a good idea."

The house was pretty much like he'd last seen it, and Dell didn't waste any time collecting his things and loading the boxes into his old red truck. They couldn't pay him enough to stay in this little town full of holier-than-thou hypocrites.

* * * *

As he drove down the highway away from the town he'd grown up in and everything he'd known, Dell felt a lightness come over him. He flicked ash from his cigarette out the open window and stuck it back between his full lips before running his hand through his shaggy, collar length, jet-black hair and sighing. All he owned in the world was in the bed of the truck; he had nothing tying him to anything and the whole world at his feet.

He had learned a few lessons from the past five years. He'd be a lot less trusting in the future, especially with guys like Wilson Long. And he would definitely think twice, and maybe even three times, about hooking up with another bitch like Elsie. How he could have been fooled into thinking she had cared for anyone but herself he'd never understand.

Dell sighed. A memory of Elsie on the stand at his trial flashed through his head. She'd given an Academy Award-worthy performance, convincing the jury that he had shot his best friend when Tommy had caught Dell trying to force himself on her. When his lawyer asked about Wilson, she'd denied he even existed.

Lighting another cigarette, he relaxed even further. It felt good to put the past and prison behind him. A year of jail for the trial and four years of prison for a murder he didn't commit had given him a lot of time to think and an incentive to start a new life somewhere far away.

Two steady days of uneventful driving saw him pulling into the parking lot of a truck stop just off the highway in Flagstaff, Arizona. It was sunny and warm, and the day promised to get a lot hotter in a few hours. He stood at the pump, putting gas in his truck, the summer breeze catching the tail of his blue plaid shirt and flipping it around.

A car pulled up to the pump behind him, and he watched the driver get out and walk into the building. She wore faded blue jeans that molded to her body just right and an old gray tank top that sent a definite signal straight to his groin. Her light brown hair was pinned up with a plastic clip that sparkled in the sun.

Dell entertained a brief fantasy involving bending her over the hood of her compact car. The idea of taking that soft and shiny looking hair down and wrapping his hands in it while he drove himself into her had his jeans becoming uncomfortable. He coughed and, glancing around quickly and swallowing hard, he pulled his black felt cowboy hat down and adjusted himself.

The woman returned to her small car and started to put gas in it. He smiled and nodded. She met his eyes, and he noticed hers were green. His gas quit pumping, and he walked inside to pay and buy a pack of cigarettes. When he came back out, she was gone in her little blue car. Too bad, he wouldn't have minded a visit to the truck stop's motel. She was small, probably wouldn't come up to the middle of his chest, but the woman had a fine butt. And it had, after all, been five long, lonely years. He got in his truck and pulled back out on the highway.

* * * *

Alison stopped to get gas and watched the man at the pump ahead of her nervously from the corner of her eye. He was nice-looking, with straight, coal black hair that just brushed his collar, and his jeans and blue plaid shirt showcased his fit, hard body. Aside from his good looks, he seemed ordinary, sturdy, tall. Nothing at all like Ryan with his designer suits and carefully styled hair. She ignored the slow burn low in her stomach and didn't return the smile he gave her. She left while he was inside. Last thing she needed was another man, even one as beautiful as this one.

She watched the long, straight road and caught herself replaying her reason for being there. The steady drone of the tires on the hot asphalt and the broken dividing line put her in a light hypnotic trance, transporting her back to Los Angeles.

Tears blurred her vision as she hurried out to her car. Coming home to find her very proper and stuffy husband in bed with America's favorite TV super mom had been a nasty shock.

Ryan stood in the door of their Mission style mansion. "You leave now, Alison, and you can forget about ever coming back," he shouted.

She started the car and threw it into reverse with a bitter laugh that turned into a sob,

leaving everything behind. As if she would stay in the same house with him and *that woman*.

Sniffing, she chuckled grimly and wiped the tears from her eyes at the memory. “You sure know how to pick them,” she said to herself. One thing was certain; she was done with the prim and proper lifestyle her ex-husband had insisted on. Ryan hadn’t even let the ink dry on the divorce papers before he had jetted off to Las Vegas and married his actress.

An hour and a half out of Flagstaff, Alison’s car began to make a strange knocking sound, snapping her out of her remembrances. All the gauges and warning lights were going crazy on the dash panel.

“No, no, no,” she moaned and began pulling onto the shoulder. As soon as she began to slow down, vile-smelling black smoke began pouring into the car.

She skidded to a stop, and flames burst out from under the hood. She grabbed her purse, jumping out with her keys in her hand. For some insane reason, she popped the trunk and took the time to grab her two small suitcases just as the flames ran down the undercarriage of the car and reached the nearly full gas tank.

The explosion knocked her down as she ran from the car, bits of burning debris spattering the ground around her and peppering her back. She landed on her bags, popping one open and spilling clothes onto the dirt. Yelping, she covered her head and cringed as several large pieces of debris rained down around her.

Chapter Two

As Dell drove down Interstate Highway 40 toward Albuquerque, he noticed the column of thick black smoke and swore softly. Someone definitely had a problem. As he got closer he realized it was a car burning. Closer still and he recognized the lady running from the car as the one who had been at the truck stop gas station.

He jerked his truck off the road onto the opposite shoulder and slammed on his brakes, skidding to a stop. The car exploded and sent the woman flying. Jumping out, he ran up to where she was sprawled over her suitcases.

His eyes widened slightly at the sight of plain white cotton underwear spilling out of one case onto the dirt. They were not at all what he would have expected from a woman with her shape. With a pang, he remembered his friend Tommy once calling that type of underwear granny panties. He stopped next to her and caught hold of her arm, helping her stand up and patting down her back where the smoldering debris had scorched her shirt. His hand brushed over her ass, and his stomach clenched tightly.

"What the hell happened?" He asked. He hoped she put his breathlessness down to his running to help and not the plain animal lust it was.

She pulled away, looking first at him, then at the burning car and then back at him. "You're kidding me, right?" She stooped down to shove her clothes back in the open bag, and the view of her cleavage gave his pulse rate a kick into high gear.

Dell rolled his eyes and knelt down to help her gather up her underwear. "What made it blow up?"

"How should I know? Do I look like a mechanical genius? It made a weird knocking sound and all the warning lights went off," she said, glancing back at her car before snatching a pair of panties out of his hands. Her cheeks turned pink, and he smiled. It had been a long time since he'd seen a woman blush.

"Well, it's toast now, whatever caused it," he said with a sigh, dusting off his knees as he stood.

"Oh, you think?" she said, her voice heavy with sarcasm. She jerked out of his reach, turning to watch her burning car. Tears welled up in her eyes, and the muscles in her jaw tightened with the effort to not cry.

She crossed her arms over her chest. Her breasts shifted, deepening her cleavage and lifting her breasts in a tantalizing invitation to touch them. Dell coughed dryly and looked away, willing the warmth pooling deep in his belly to go away.

They both turned at the sound of sirens and watched the fire truck pull up, followed by a police car and a tow truck. The police car rolled to a stop near them, and a huge officer got out and ambled over to them. "What happened here?" he asked.

The woman pinched the bridge of her nose and squeezed her soft green eyes shut, looking pained. She took a deep breath and let it out slowly. "The car blew up," she said with exaggerated patience.

"Why'd it do that for?" the police officer asked.

"I don't know," she said through clenched teeth.

"Well, it's toast now," he said.

Dell turned to watch the firemen put out the fire, hiding his grin.

“Oh no, not...toast,” she said, her voice tragic. Dell shoved his hands into his pockets. He gave a stray rock a kick and took a deep breath, turning to look at the woman and the policeman. She was looking at the deputy with wide eyes, her hands clasped over her heart. It reminded him of the heroines in the old movies he’d watched as a kid. She’d probably bat her eyelashes at the poor guy next.

“Yep, ’fraid so,” the officer replied seriously.

Dell hurriedly turned his bark of laughter into a cough.

“Oh dear, what will I do?” she asked, giving Dell a glare.

“Welp, old Yancy and his boy will probably take it off your hands cheap. Y’all have a good day now,” the officer said and ambled back to his cruiser.

“Must be a man thing,” the woman said in a voice of deep disgust.

Dell snickered.

* * * *

The tow truck driver charged her fifty dollars and happily towed the ruined vehicle off to the local junkyard. Nearly as fast as they’d arrived, the emergency response team left without even offering the lady a ride into the nearest town.

Dell watched the people leave and sighed, flicking ash from his cigarette. “Where were you headed?” he asked. The thoughtlessness of the people who had responded to the fire irritated him. They, of all people, should have realized the middle of the desert was no place to leave anyone, especially a woman on her own.

“I was going to see friends in Texas,” she answered. “Looks like that won’t be happening now.”

“I planned to stop in Albuquerque for the night; you can ride with me that far.” He turned and headed for his truck.

“Thanks. I appreciate it,” she said sourly, and Dell picked up her suitcases, motioning her toward his truck. He ruthlessly repressed the warm tingly feeling he got from watching the way her tight jeans accented sway of her hips as she walked toward his truck. When she climbed up into the cab he groaned and swore softly, closing his eyes for a brief moment to calm his raging hormones.

He tossed her bags into the back and tied them down on top of his stuff while she got in. He dropped his cigarette butt and stepped on it, then got in and started the engine. Pulling out onto the highway, he smiled at her and reached over toward her. “My name’s Dell Blackfeather,” he said.

“Alison Taylor,” she said, smiling slightly and shaking his hand.

“So, where are you from, Alison?” Dell asked, trying to make a little light conversation. He looked away, focusing back on the road. He wondered if she’d felt the same zing of electricity he had when their hands touched.

“Back there,” she said and waved vaguely behind them.

He rolled his eyes. “Back there where?”

“Los Angeles,” Alison sighed, “and you are obviously from Montana.”

“How did...”

“I know? Your license tags.” Her smile sent a rush of heat through him that had nothing to do with his truck’s lack of air conditioning. “And your reaction.”

“Oh.” He smiled sheepishly.

They were quiet for awhile, the uncomfortable silence of strangers thrown together

by circumstances beyond their control settling over them. Alison dozed off in the heat, and Dell used the chance to study her, looking at her from the corner of his eye.

She wasn't movie-star pretty, but she had an air about her that turned him inside out. He puffed on another cigarette and drove east down the nearly deserted highway, the wind tousling his hair.

Her expression was vaguely troubled; she looked like a woman with heavy things on her mind. Dell wondered what she was brooding over.

"Those things are bad for you," she said, her voice soft with sleep as he reached for the half-empty pack on the dash.

He glanced over at her. The sleepy, half-lidded expression on her face made her look even prettier. "Yeah, I know, but without the habit I'd be disgustingly perfect," Dell replied, smiling and giving her a wink before dragging his eyes back to the road.

Alison yawned and chuckled, then just shook her head, her expression lightening as she turned to watch the desert landscape pass by.

Chapter Three

The sign at the turn off for the Petrified Forest and Painted Desert Visitor's Center said food and restrooms were available, so Dell took the exit. Some lunch in a cool restaurant would be nice. Glancing over at Alison, he noticed she'd fallen asleep again.

He slowed to a stop in the parking lot and took a few minutes to check her out a little more closely. She had to have the most beautiful breasts he'd seen outside of a magazine. Elsie had been nearly flat, and his other girlfriends hadn't been much bigger. He wondered if they were real and as soft as they looked, and if she'd let him touch them.

He leaned over to wake her, reaching out toward her shoulder. His hand hovered indecisively between the curve of her shoulder and the rounded slope of her breast. Her skin felt like sun-warmed velvet, or what he imagined velvet would feel like, as he touched her shoulder. She sighed in her sleep, and he was suddenly glad he'd resisted the temptation of her breast.

His groin tingled, but he ignored it. Just because he'd spent the last five years in prison didn't mean he was going to jump on the first woman he saw. Not even one who pushed all his hot buttons like this one did. "Hey, I'm ready for some lunch, how about you?" he asked, giving her a slight nudge.

Alison opened her eyes and grimaced. "Uh, yeah, yeah, lunch sounds good. Where are we?"

"The Petrified Forest and Painted Desert Visitor's Center. Come on, let's go inside."

He got out and stretched before opening the door for her. His estimation of her went up several notches when she accepted his offer of a hand out of the truck without complaining. The strength of her grip sent another tremor of lust through him, and he tried not to imagine that fine-boned hand wrapped around other, more sensitive parts of his anatomy.

She started toward the building. He caught the belt loop of her jeans, stopping and holding her there. His stomach clenched in a strange mix of anticipation and lust. He really had to stop touching her or he was going to seriously embarrass himself.

He saw the sudden fear in her eyes when she turned to look at him and chose to overlook it, even as he wondered what had made her so afraid. With his experiences in the last five years, he couldn't blame her for being wary; in fact, he had a mind to be careful himself. After all, he didn't have a clue about her either, not really.

"You might want to get another shirt out, that one has some holes and burn marks on the back," he said in answer to her startled look.

She blushed. "Oh, right, can you hand me the blue bag?" He silently berated the unknown cause of the fear that colored her voice.

He managed to pull the bag she indicated out and handed it to her. She set it on the seat and opened it, rummaging through it and slipping an old white cotton shirt out. She closed the bag, and he glanced around the parking lot.

An old black El Camino pulled into the parking lot, and he felt the blood drain from his face. Dell caught Alison's arm, and she froze, looking at him with a startled expression on her face. He knew he must look like he'd seen a ghost.

"Get in the truck." He gave her a push toward the cab of the truck.

She didn't move fast enough, and he reached past her and shoved her bag over, then caught her up and tossed her onto the seat. He closed the door as quietly as he could, then quickly walked around the truck and got in. Watching the disturbingly familiar figure of the El Camino's driver walk into the building, he tried to tell himself there were hundreds of vehicles like the black car and lots of men who liked those tacky embroidered western shirts.

When the man disappeared inside, Dell started the truck and took the long way around the back of the building before pulling out onto the highway again. Once on the road, he accelerated and kept looking in the rearview mirror. Thinking about the phone number in his wallet, he decided it might be a very good idea to make a call from the first payphone he could find.

*

Alison sat stiffly in the passenger seat, hugging her bag to herself and keeping an eye on Dell. Something back at the visitor's center had scared him. Badly. He finally relaxed with a heavy sigh.

"Um, what..." she began

"I thought I saw someone I knew back there. Not someone I want to see again."

"Oh." She could understand that; she didn't want to see Ryan again either. But she wasn't afraid of him, not like what she'd seen in Dell's eyes.

They rode in silence again. Dell glanced over at her and she sighed. She knew she probably looked like she'd jump out of the truck at the least little thing.

"Listen, uh, Alison, I won't hurt you," he said.

"Okay," she said, humoring him.

"I thought I saw a guy back there that got me arrested for something I didn't do. If it really was him, it's not safe anywhere around here. He's a killer," he said.

"Oh." She glanced out the back window and was relieved to see the highway was empty.

"It probably wasn't him." He laughed suddenly. "I feel so stupid."

Alison looked at him for a long moment. She made up her mind; she'd trust him until he gave her reason not to. "Yeah, but better to be safe than sorry," she said, pondering the can of pepper spray in her purse.

"Good point." He smiled at her.

* * * *

They stopped at a fast food restaurant in Gallup to pick up something to eat. Dell pulled out his wallet and took out a business card and a twenty dollar bill. "If it's all right with you, we'll keep going until we get to Albuquerque," he said.

"Fine with me," Alison said.

"Take this and get lunch; I'm not picky. I need to make a phone call," he said, handing her the money.

Alison took the bill and watched him walk toward a bank of payphones. She shivered slightly and turned to go inside and order. The partial name she had seen on the card Dell held had read "Agent" something next to a very official looking seal. What was she getting involved in, she wondered, as she entered the fast food restaurant.

*

Dell picked up the receiver, dialing zero and waiting impatiently until the operator

came on. He read the number to her and waited while she put his call through. He thought about his meeting with the FBI when they'd come to release him from prison while the phone rang. He counted fifteen rings before someone finally answered and put him through to Agent Davis.

"You told me to call if I saw Wilson Long," Dell said.

"Have you made contact with him?" Davis asked. Dell heard an odd note of excitement in the agent's voice.

Dell waved away a fly. "No," he said. "And I don't plan to if I can help it. I saw him. I think. I hope he didn't see me." He kept an eye on the cars coming and going around him.

"The FBI has been after Wilson Long for approximately eleven years, Mr. Blackfeather," Agent Davis said. "We could use your help."

"Why? I mean he's always been an annoying, weird son of a bitch but..." Dell was puzzled. He'd grown up with Wilson and never had any idea he was a criminal until he killed Tommy.

"We suspect Wilson Long is responsible for a number of murders. That's all you really need to know." The FBI agent sounded tired.

"Damn." Dell felt the hair on the back of his neck rise.

"Yes. And since you know him, we'd like you to call us if you should happen to see him again."

"Why can't the sheriff or the police just pick him up?" Dell asked.

"Because his crimes are all committed on reservations, and that makes him our problem." Davis's voice was grim.

"Shit." Dell couldn't think of a thing to say.

"Just where did you see him?" Davis asked.

"Painted Desert Visitor's Center. On I-40. He was going in when we got there," Dell said.

"We? Someone is with you?"

"Yeah, I got a woman with me, there a law against that? That's why I didn't hang around."

He heard the agent sigh heavily. "No, no law against it, but it's not a very good idea."

"I thought it was an excellent idea at the time." Dell smiled to himself

"All right. Well, thank you for calling us. If you see Long again, be sure you let us know."

"Yeah, sure." Dell hung up and adjusted his old black cowboy hat. He walked across the parking lot and into the restaurant, his hands shaking. A memory surfaced. He had tossed a half empty pack of cigarettes to Wilson before driving away from the house that night. A chill swept over him when he realized he'd probably still be in prison if he hadn't given Wilson his last couple of cigarettes. They'd pulled the DNA that had freed him off one of those butts.

* * * *

Alison was waiting for their lunch order by the pickup counter when Dell walked in. She appeared to be less tense and smiled when she saw him. He walked up, and she handed him the change from his twenty, brushing her fingertips over his palm. He felt an

answering twitch in his jeans. Their order arrived, and he quickly picked up the bags.

"Ready to go?" he asked.

"Yeah, in just a minute." She started toward the restrooms.

Dell stood and watched her along with the kid behind the counter. The sway in her walk all but begged him to follow her.

"Damn, she got a fine ass," the kid said.

Dell gave him an amused look. "You know, commenting like that on somebody's woman while they're right next to you is not exactly healthy. But you're right, it is a very fine ass," he said with a chuckle. He left the kid stammering and red-faced to meet Alison at the door.

* * * *

She opened the bag from the restaurant and pulled out the food. Laying everything on the seat, she picked up one of the hamburgers, unwrapping it and handing it to him.

She watched him for a few minutes, choosing her opening. "So, what did this guy get you arrested for?"

Dell glanced at her, startled. The seriousness of his expression let her know it was probably something bad. "Murder," he answered shortly.

"Murder," she repeated. "But you didn't do it?"

"No, I didn't." He sighed.

"Oh." She waited for him to continue.

"I spent a year in jail and four years in prison because I trusted the wrong people," he said sourly.

"Oh," she said again. She finished her food and gathered up the trash. Sitting back, she watched the road.

*

He shifted in his seat. Well, that did it, she'd run off screaming the next place they stopped. *Not getting laid tonight, Dell old boy.*

"So, you want to talk about it?" Alison asked.

He glanced over at her, surprised. "Yeah," he said quietly. "Yeah, I would." Dell took a deep breath and found himself telling her about finding Tommy dead and Elsie testifying against him, covering for Wilson. He told her about the hell of prison and the relief when he was let out. Everything came pouring out, right down to the hurt at the way the town had reacted.

"This Wilson, he's the one who did all this?" Alison asked.

"Yeah. I'd still be in there if Elsie's grandmother hadn't found her diary after Elsie died," Dell said. "She wrote everything down."

"And this guy is who you thought you saw back at the visitor's center?" Alison shivered.

"Yeah, I really hope it wasn't, though," Dell said.

Chapter Four

Dell looked around for a place to stop for the night. He suddenly realized that even though she didn't speak much, he would miss Alison when she was gone. He glanced over at her, wondering what she'd say if he just asked her to spend the night with him. *Nah, she wouldn't; she's too classy, and besides, she hasn't shown the slightest bit of that sort of interest in you,* he lectured himself silently.

"You never said where you'd like me to drop you off," he said.

"I don't know. I guess I haven't thought that far ahead," she said in a quiet voice. She looked thoughtful. "Just let me out somewhere well-lit where there's a phone."

"Well, I could take you wherever you had planned to go," he said, watching the traffic and carefully not looking at her. He did his best to keep his expression neutral.

"I wouldn't want to keep you from wherever you were going," she said, her voice toneless, squashing the little bubble of hope that tried to rise inside him.

"Oh. Well. I wasn't going anywhere particular, just as far as I can get from Montana." He couldn't quite keep the disappointment out of his voice.

He heard Alison sigh and watched her from the corner of his eye as she thought for a few seconds. "Okay, let's find someplace to stop for the night. We can have dinner and discuss this."

"Sounds good to me." Dell smiled and pulled into the parking lot of a cafe on the outskirts of the city.

Dell followed Alison into the busy restaurant. In the closed area of the café's entranceway, he noticed for the first time that she smelled like sweet, musky, vanilla and spices. His mouth watered. The hostess seated them, leaving their menus. "So what made you decide to leave Los Angeles?" Dell asked as he picked up the laminated card and started to read it.

Alison was quiet for awhile, looking down at her menu. Dell began to think maybe he had overstepped and opened his mouth to apologize. She raised her eyes to meet his gaze and he stopped, waiting for what she was about to say. Laying the menu down, she took a deep breath.

"Ah, well, I just got tired of all the games," she said.

The waitress arrived just then, interrupting Alison's story. Dell gave the woman a dirty look and quickly gave their order.

"Games?" Dell asked when the waitress finally walked away, his voice curious.

"Yeah, mind games, control games, manipulation. I'm just tired of all of it," she said.

"Oh, yeah, I don't know why people just can't be honest with each other." He smiled at her and felt a little tingle when she blushed again. She returned his smile, and his heart skipped a beat.

"So, anyway, I got home from one of the social engagements Ryan insisted I go to and found him in bed with one of his Hollywood clients. The glamorous life is highly over rated." She studied her placemat and began to tear little bits of paper from it.

"I'm sorry." Dell reached across the table and stilled her hands.

The waitress arrived with their order, and Dell decided it was time to change the subject and began to chat about safely ordinary stuff. She would tell him everything later,

much later, if it mattered. They finished their dinner and sat there, neither one wanting to seem too eager to the other.

“So, where do you want to stay tonight?” he asked, finally bringing up what they both knew would happen.

Alison smiled faintly. “Anywhere with a clean bed, I’m not particular.” She looked up, straight into his black eyes, and a wave of white-hot desire crashed through him. He saw the answering need in her eyes; his stomach clenched and his mouth went dry.

“Well, there’s the motel across the parking lot,” he said, his voice growing a little deeper.

*

Alison couldn’t believe she was even remotely entertaining the idea of going to a motel room and having sex with a guy she’d known less than twenty-four hours. She felt like laughing at the freedom she felt. Suddenly, she smiled at him. “I think they’d like us to leave.”

“Yeah, so would I.” He smiled back at her and reached for the check.

Alison let him pay for their dinner and waited for him in the café entryway. When he came out, she held out her hand.

*

Dell took her hand, and his knees went weak when Alison laced her fingers through his.

The motel looked new. Dell was glad for that; he didn’t want their first night together to be spent in someplace seedy. They were silent for the short drive across the parking lot. He felt like a teenager on his first serious date as he pulled up to the breezeway entrance.

“I’ll be right back,” he said and hurried inside.

He smiled pleasantly at the desk clerk. “I’d like a room for two please,” he said.

* * * *

Dell got back in the truck and started it up, heading around to the back side of the building complex where the room he’d just rented was located. Dry mouthed and sweaty palmed, he glanced at Alison as he parked in front of the door to their room. The sunset gilded her hair, giving her an otherworldly glow that took his breath away.

He opened the door of the room and held it for her before following her inside. “You want both your bags brought in?”

She turned and smiled at him. “Yes, please.”

He brought her suitcases in, along with the one that contained his clothes. She was perched nervously on the edge of the bed. “I’m going to run across to the store; is there anything you want?” He would give her a little time alone to do whatever she needed to feel ready. A few more minutes on top of the time he’d already gone without wouldn’t make a lot of difference, not if it made her more comfortable.

“No, I’m fine,” she said, smiling.

Dell left her to get settled in the room and went to the little convenience store next to the motel. He bought a pack of cigarettes, a map of Texas, and a box of condoms, then headed back to the room. When he walked in, he heard her in the room’s small bathroom and smiled. He kicked off his boots and sat down on the bed, leaning back against the pillows she had stacked against the headboard.

Alison stepped out of the bathroom and pulled the door almost closed. He watched her walk toward him, a towel wrapped around her, and wiped his damp palms down his thighs. She stopped next to him, and he licked his lips. She was the most gorgeous woman he could ever remember seeing. Slowly, she reached up, untucked the towel, and let it fall to the floor. His chest tightened.

The dim light filtering around the closed drapes gave her skin a mysterious golden glow and turned her nipples a dusky rose. Dell rose to his knees and brushed the palms of his hands over her breasts. His gaze met her soft green eyes, and he hesitated, unable to breathe for a heartbeat. Then he dug his fingers into her thick, silky hair and covered her mouth with his. She tasted like toothpaste and fresh sweet woman, and it had to be the best thing he could remember ever tasting.

Alison slid her arms around him and clenched her fists in his blue, plaid shirt. Her body against his felt like a bonfire, her heat soaking through him. He sucked gently on her lower lip, tugging lightly, then plundering her mouth again, running the tip of his tongue over the inside of her lips before slowly twining with her tongue.

She pushed him back, gently breaking the kiss, and pulled his shirt out of his faded jeans. She unfastened each pearly snap and slid her hands slowly up over his chest. He let go of her just long enough to toss the shirt aside, then pulled her back against him, wrapping his arms around her and molding her to his body.

Alison tilted her head up, and he lowered his mouth to hers once more. The hardness of her nipples and the softness of her breasts pressed into his chest and sent a jolt straight to the burgeoning erection that throbbed against the fly of his jeans.

"It's been a while, baby, I don't know how long I'll last," he said urgently between kisses.

"It's okay, we have all night," she answered, her voice soft and thick with lust.

He reached between them with one hand, unbuttoning his jeans and lowering the zipper. She stepped back, and a soft sound of disappointment escaped him at the loss of her body against him. He groaned when she pushed his jeans and boxers down over his hips, freeing him.

He kicked them off and sat back on the bed, moving his hands over her waist and sliding them up to cup her breasts. She leaned into his touch and paused, reaching for a condom from the nightstand. He moved his hands to her waist again and leaned forward touching the tip of his tongue to one taut nipple and licking it before closing his mouth over it, kneading and probing gently. She moaned and he chuckled.

"Been awhile for you too, huh?" he asked, his lips against her skin.

She nodded and swallowed hard. "Uh huh, too long." She opened the condom wrapper.

Dell lay back, pulling her with him until she knelt above him. "Let me put this on," she said.

"Then do it, girl," he said with a groan.

Alison rolled the latex over him, her fingers caressing and exploring, making him ache.

"Baby, not too much," he said. Her hands stilled, and he fought to catch his breath.

He gasped as she moved over him and began to lower herself onto his thick erection. Skimming his hands over her hips and wrapping one arm around her waist, he pulled her down against him and slowly arched his hips up off the bed as he pushed deeper into her.

When she moaned and gripped his shoulders, he whispered her name and rolled over with her.

Tightening her legs, she rocked against him, drawing another deep groan from him. He braced himself on his elbows and looked down into her eyes. She pulled his full weight down on her, and he slid his arms under her shoulders.

He tangled his fingers in her hair, cradling her head in his hands and burying his face in the crook of her neck. Her ragged breathing sent shivers down his spine. A brief flash of memory made him smile as he began to move, living out the fantasy he'd had at the gas station when he'd first seen her.

Suddenly, he felt himself slipping over the edge into the most intense release he'd ever had. She moaned his name, tightening around him, and he gasped, losing control and grinding into her as he flooded her with heat and lust until they were both spent.

He caught his breath and moved off of her, leaning back against the pillows propped against the headboard and pulling her up into his arms. She sighed and laid her head on his chest, tugging the sheet over them and wrapping her arms around him. Brushing his hand over her hair, he kissed the top of her head.

Alison lay against him, her eyes closed. He was more content than he'd ever been. She rose up, looking at him when he reached for his cigarettes.

"You all right?" she asked, her voice full of concern.

"I'm better than all right," he answered with a smile. "Next round will last a whole lot longer."

She leaned up and kissed him.

Dell smiled again and returned her soft kiss with a more demanding one of his own. He pulled back slowly, looking into her eyes, and opened his mouth. His stomach growled loudly, and he blushed, embarrassed. Alison chuckled and he grinned.

"I think I'll just go down to the vending machines and see what they have," she said. She turned to get out of bed, and he stopped her.

"I'll go. I don't want you out there; it's not safe," he said.

He tossed the sheet back and sat up.

"That feels so good." Stretching his arms over his head and arching his back, he enjoyed the feel of her nails as she scratched his back. When she stopped, he turned and kissed her before reaching for his jeans, pulling them on, and zipping them up. "I'll be back in a minute or two."

*

Alison watched Dell leave for the machines and leaned back against the pillows with a deep, satisfied sigh, pulling the sheet up and settling in to wait. She couldn't remember a time when she felt so relaxed and comfortable. Before she realized it, the card key rattled in the door and she looked up to see him stepping inside with two sodas, an armload of little packages of chips, cookies, and candy bars, and a small bucket full of ice. She started to get up and help him.

"No, stay there, I got it, baby," he said, smiling at her. He kicked the door shut and set the ice bucket on the nightstand by the bed, then dropped all the packages in her lap. He sat down on the bed beside her and popped the soda cans open.

"Did you buy out the machine?" she asked, looking at the bags of chips.

"No, I just pushed the button for the chips and all these fell down with it." He grinned and picked up a package of cookies.

They sat together, enjoying the feeling of quiet companionship. She dozed off, comfortable in that world between waking and sleep, her head resting on his chest. He carefully took the soda out of her hand and set it on the nightstand, then laid her back on the pillows and brushed his lips over hers before kissing her forehead.

*

Dell turned on the TV and flipped through the channels. She snuggled closer and slid her arm around his waist, and he smiled. He leaned down and kissed her ear, an idea forming.

“You awake, sugar?” he whispered, licking her ear. She shivered, and he blew softly, drawing a soft moan from her.

“Wake up, baby, it’s time for round two,” he said, sitting back and reaching for a cookie.

He watched her watching him as he twisted a cookie apart and scraped the sugar crème filling off with his finger. His whole being burned with desire as he tossed the halves of the cookie aside and reached out, slowly painting her nipples with the thick filling, rubbing it around and over them. She sighed, catching her bottom lip in her teeth, and her eyes drifted closed.

Leaning forward, he began to lick and suck her nipples clean, drawing deep moans from her. She tangled her fingers in his soft hair, her breathing ragged. He chuckled and rose up to look at her.

Alison looked up, her dark emerald eyes mirroring the passion he knew must be in his own, and slid her hands down to the waistband of his jeans. “One of us is overdressed,” she said, smiling.

“We’ll have to do something about that, won’t we,” he whispered.

“I think I can handle it.” She unfastened the button and began to slowly unzip his faded jeans.

“Oh yeah, I think so,” he said breathlessly.

Alison slid the jeans down his hips and pushed him beneath her. She kissed him, slowly, exploring his lips and mouth and moving down over his throat. She trailed kisses over his chest and smiled when his breathing changed. He moaned softly and slipped his hands over her back as she tongued his nipples and moved down to his stomach.

“Oh, yeah,” he breathed, when she pushed her tongue into his navel and swirled it around. She rose up and reached out, taking a piece of ice from the bucket. She popped the ice into her mouth for few seconds and slipped another condom onto him.

She kissed the tip of his erection. He gasped harshly and swore, groaning, the cold of her lips like an electric shock.

She picked up another piece of ice and drew it slowly up over his belly. He dug his fingers into the bed covers and groaned again, arching his hips off the bed.

He pulled her up, wrapped his arms around her, and rolled over with her.

* * * *

An old, black El Camino pulled into the parking lot and cruised slowly along the building. It passed Dell’s red truck and stopped suddenly, backing up and stopping again behind the vehicle. It sat there for several minutes before continuing on to park several spaces down, well away from the lights.

Chapter Five

Dell finished tying down the bags in the bed of the truck, smiling to himself, thinking about Alison. She came out of the room, and he opened the truck door for her, helping her in. He shut the door and waited while she rolled the window down.

"I'll turn the key in, and then we can get breakfast and talk about where to go next," he said, leaning into the truck and giving her a quick kiss.

"All right." Alison smiled at him and reached up, tucking a wayward strand of silky black hair behind his ear.

"Be right back," he said, catching her hand and giving it a gentle squeeze. He headed for the motel office, stopping for a glance back at her before turning the corner of the building. *Did he want to spend more time with her*, he asked himself. *Yes*, he thought, *he did*. Was what he felt love? That he didn't know.

His thoughts revolving around Alison and the night, he smiled to himself. It was definitely dangerous to pick up strangers on the highway; he was in serious danger of losing his heart.

* * * *

Alison watched Dell disappear around the building, then opened her purse to check her wallet. She noticed a man in a cowboy outfit walking down the line of cars toward her and kept her head down, acting as if she didn't see him. He passed the truck, and she sighed in relief, going back to checking the money in her wallet.

"Well, hi there, little lady," said a voice from just behind her. Alison jumped and turned to look at the smiling man standing by the window. She didn't answer him. Something about the hard glitter of the man's eyes reminded her of a predator.

"The name's Wilson, Wilson Long, old friend of Dell's," Wilson said, holding his hand out.

Alison hesitated, her hand moving to the small can of pepper spray in her purse. She edged away from the window and this smiling shark in the singing cowboy shirt. Dell's voice echoed through her head, describing this man and the things he'd done.

"Where you two headed for?" Wilson leaned on the door and stuck his head in the window.

Alison retreated toward the middle of the seat. Something told her it would be a mistake to take her eyes off him even for a second. She hoped Dell hurried back soon.

Wilson shifted and his smile changed, sending a chill of fear through her. She tightened her grip on the pepper spray and got ready to pull it out of her purse. He reached for the door handle, then suddenly backed up a step. Alison felt weak with relief at the sound of the driver's side door opening.

* * * *

Dell lit a cigarette as he rounded the corner. He looked up, and his stomach twisted into a cold knot. Shoving his ratty old lighter into his shirt pocket, he hurried toward the truck. All he could think of was that he'd been right at the Painted Desert Visitor Center.

He *had* seen Wilson.

He got to the truck before either Alison or Wilson saw him and jerked the door open, jumping in. Reaching across the seat, he caught Alison's arm and pulled her over toward him, away from the window. "Get away from my truck, we're leaving," he said shortly.

"Aren't you going to introduce your old friend Wilson to this pretty lady here? It's the least you could do after all those awful lies you told about me, trying to set me up like that with the sheriff." Wilson smiled.

"No, and it was you did the setting up." Dell started the truck and threw it into gear, backing out of the parking space. He barely missed hitting Wilson, who jumped back.

Dell floored the gas pedal, swerving to miss a car just coming around the corner. The tires on his old truck were a bit worn, and the heat of the asphalt sent them fishtailing. He swore and fought to keep from losing control and spinning out. They skidded around the corner, and the rear fender struck the side of the large industrial dumpster at the edge of the lot. The impact straightened them out and let them gain traction and speed out of the parking lot.

His battered and faded red truck wasn't much to look at, but it had a good engine and his cousin Mike had taken care of it while he was locked up. Dell kept one eye on the rearview mirror as he sped down the freeway, watching for any sign of Wilson following them. He heard Alison scramble to fasten her seatbelt and spared her a quick glance. She was pale and looked shaken.

"Hey, it's all right, I won't let him hurt you," he said softly, covering her hand with his.

"I know." Alison smiled at him and squeezed his hand. "Do you think he'll follow us?"

"I'm sure he'll try. He told me once he never got mad he just got even. He'll be out for revenge." Dell glanced back to the rearview mirror where the motel was rapidly fading from view. A movement accompanied by the flash of sunlight off a windshield caught his attention, and he swore. Wilson was definitely following them.

"Damn, he's persistent. We need to lose him and find someplace to hide," Dell said.

Alison shivered. "Like Ryan."

"Who's Ryan?" Dell asked.

"My ex-husband and the reason I carry a can of pepper spray," she explained.

"Pepper spray. Was he abusive?" Dell kept his voice neutral. If this Ryan character had done anything to hurt Alison, he'd track him down and teach him the error of his ways. He glanced in the mirror again. There were several vehicles behind them, and he could see the one he thought was Wilson weaving in and out of the traffic.

"Oh, no, Ryan would never do anything that might get him disbarred. He does have a lot of enemies, though," she answered.

"Promise me you'll use it if Wilson catches up to us," he said.

She nodded and turned to look out the back window.

"The black El Camino still back there?" Dell asked her.

"Yes." Her voice betrayed her nervousness.

"All right, hang on, baby, we're going to lose him...right...now." He pulled onto the shoulder and made a fast turn, cutting across the median to the other side of the divided highway. He pulled back up onto the road alongside an eighteen-wheeler and stayed even with the huge truck's cab.

He watched behind them as they headed north, back toward Albuquerque. When Wilson's El Camino didn't show up after thirty minutes, Dell breathed a sigh of relief, and they both relaxed.

Chapter Six

Dell slowed and pulled off the main highway into a dirt and gravel parking lot. He parked, and they got out of the truck to go inside the little old building. The sign advertised homemade food. He met Alison at the front of the truck, reaching out and taking her hand. She laced her fingers through his, and they walked up the steps to the porch.

One of the locals nodded and smiled at them as they went inside. Dell nodded back and held the door for Alison. Something smelled wonderful, and he guided her over to a small table by the window where he could see his truck and a good distance down the highway.

A young girl in a colorful skirt and T shirt stopped at their table and set down two glasses of water. "We have grilled chicken with biscuits, mashed potatoes, and broccoli. There's salad, too, and brownies for dessert."

Dell glanced at Alison, and she nodded slightly. He looked back at the girl and smiled. "That's fine," he said.

Lunch was quiet, with Dell keeping an eye on the road outside in between eating and watching Alison. She nibbled on a brownie, taking tiny, delicate bites. He sighed and shifted in his chair, wondering if she knew how much the soft sound of her teeth sliding along the fork was turning him on.

"We need somewhere to lay low for awhile. Somewhere cheap," he said, trying to distract himself from his impure thoughts concerning the various uses of her mouth. He glanced at the waitress, who was sitting with a couple of locals, and then back at Alison. She licked the fork.

With a soft, low moan, he reached across the table, catching her hand and taking her fork away. He laid the offending utensil on the plate and gazed into her eyes. "I can't take any more," he said a bit breathlessly.

"Any more what?" Alison asked.

"Any more of the way you're driving me crazy with that fork," he said. He rubbed his thumb in a slow circle over her palm. She shivered and he smiled.

"Oh, you mean this?" She picked up the fork in her other hand and held it up. Her jade green eyes blazed with passion and mischief.

"Don't you dare," he growled softly.

Very slowly, she lifted the fork to her lips and stuck her tongue out. She licked each tine front and back, then put it in her mouth and sucked on it, never taking her eyes from his. He could barely breathe. She pulled it out of her mouth and gave him a faint smile. "Dare what?" she asked.

He let his head drop and chuckled. "You know what, you evil woman," he said.

"Ready to go?" She asked, her voice innocent.

"You know damn good and well it would be embarrassing for me to stand up right now," he answered. He clenched his teeth and smiled when he felt her hook her foot behind his leg and move it over his calf. Hardening fast, he looked away and tried to think of anything but the growing heat in his belly.

Suddenly, her foot was gone, and he heard the fork clink against the plate. He looked

up to see the waitress and one of the locals standing beside their table. *Oh, great*, he thought, *here's where we get thrown out*.

"Name's Bear, spokesman for the colony. Rain here says you folks need some help," the heavily bearded guy said.

"Dell Blackfeather. Help?" Dell asked trying to remember what they'd said that could have given these people that impression.

"Your auras have a lot of sulfur yellow and reds in them," the girl, Rain, said. "You have a lot of trouble following you."

Dell glanced at Alison. She appeared to be taking these people seriously. He looked back at the odd pair. "Well, we could use somewhere to stay for a few days," he said slowly.

"The colony has a campsite a couple miles from town. There's a fire pit and plenty of wood, and a little cabin. You're welcome to stay there long as you need to." Bear waved at someone in the back.

"Uh, thanks. We don't have much money, we can't pay a lot." Dell didn't quite know what to think about these people.

"Didn't ask for money," Bear said.

"Thank you," Alison said, smiling at the people. "We appreciate the help. Is there something we can do in return for your help?"

"It's our karma, we help where we can." He sent Rain for paper and drew them a map to the cabin. "It's clean, and there's even a sweat lodge we put in a few months ago. Maggie will put a basket together for you."

"Sounds like a nice place." Dell took the map and studied it.

"It's real quiet, and nobody will bother you there; you can make all the noise you want." Rain grinned and winked at Dell and hurried off. He felt himself blushing and looked at Alison helplessly.

A woman they hadn't seen before came out of the kitchen with a large basket. She set it on the floor beside Dell. "A few things to keep you from starving out there in the woods," she said tersely.

"You must be Maggie. Thank you," Alison said, her voice warm. Dell watched the woman thaw visibly and felt a burst of pride in Alison.

"Bear will put the word out the cabin is occupied. Nobody will bother you, you just come on back here when you need anything," Maggie assured them.

Chapter Seven

Dell glanced over at Alison as he pulled out of the parking lot. She waved at the little group of townspeople. "Um, you want to explain to me what just happened back there?" he asked.

"They're hippies," she said, smiling at him. "Don't tell me you've never run into any."

"Well, no, at least not close up like that," he said. "You seemed to know your way around, though."

"Ryan is a Hollywood divorce lawyer. You'd be surprised how many entertainers are closet hippies," she explained. "After a few parties, you learn how to blend in."

"Yeah, but what was all that aura karma stuff? And why were those two wearing all the beadwork staring at me like I was some kind of special dessert?"

"Well, Rain apparently is able to see auras, what they believe are people's souls. And karma is what decides what happens to you in your next life. The more good karma you build up, the better your next incarnation will be," Alison said. "And you are Native American, sweetheart, some of them think you have more knowledge and wisdom than the rest of us." She grinned at his shocked expression.

"That's nuts. I'm not any different from any other man," Dell said.

"I don't know, I can't say I know any other men who get turned on by a fork." She batted her eyelashes at him.

He rolled his eyes. "Yeah, well, you're going to pay for that little performance."

"Promises, promises." Alison laughed.

Dell sighed. "Oh, well, it helped us out, so who am I to argue with it? The turn should be coming up. Help me watch for it."

* * * *

The cabin turned out to be clean and well kept, situated near a pretty little spring and creek. They gathered up the things the locals had given them and went inside. Dell set the basket he was carrying on the table.

"It's still pretty early. What do you want to do?" He asked. "We could take a walk or something."

"Why don't you relax, and I'll put things away." Alison walked up behind him and placed a gentle hand on his back.

"You don't mind?" He wanted to go out and let the peacefulness of the place soak into him. He wanted to stop and just enjoy being free.

"Go, I'll be right here when you get back." She smiled, and he could see the understanding in her eyes.

Dell wandered down to the creek and listened to the water splashing over the rocks. A knot of tension he hadn't realized he had loosened and began to unravel. He looked at the clear water of the spring and reached out to hold his hand under the small waterfall.

Suddenly, he began taking off his yellow plaid shirt. It seemed like a lifetime ago he'd put it on that morning. He laid the shirt on a rock, then quickly took off the rest of

his clothes and stepped into the water.

It was cold for the first few minutes, but he adjusted to it. He swam over to the waterfall and stood beneath it. He could feel all the muck and dirt of the past five years being stripped away by the pounding water.

Sometime later, he sat on the rock, letting the heat of the sun soak into him and dry his hair. For the first time since his release from prison, his thoughts were free of everything but the simple pleasure of a peaceful afternoon. His thoughts turned to Alison, and he grinned, remembering the way she'd teased him with the fork. He didn't bother getting dressed, and finally ready to face anything, he gathered up his clothes and headed back to the cabin and the woman who was fast becoming his refuge.

* * * *

When he walked up to the cabin he didn't see her right away. "Alison?" he called softly, not wanting to break the quiet.

"Over here," she answered from the other side of the cabin where the picnic table was.

He walked around the corner of the cabin and stopped, stunned and amazed at the transformation in her. She had changed into a white dress that made her look like some kind of unearthly creature. Like something from a fantasy. His breath caught as he stepped closer, slipping his hands over her waist and pulling her back against him. He dropped his clothes on the bench.

He looked over her shoulder and saw the dark shadow of her nipples through the thin cotton of the dress. Reaching out, he brushed his fingers over them, rolling them and tugging them gently, making her breath catch. He moved to the line of buttons and unfastened the first one.

Dropping a kiss on her shoulder, he worked the next two buttons free and slipped his fingers between her breasts. She moaned softly, and he slid his hands down to her hips, gathering up the skirt of the dress and lifting it to reveal the plain white cotton panties she wore. He hooked his fingers in the waistband and pulled them down.

"Hold onto the table," he instructed her, his voice husky. He reached for his jeans and one of the condoms he'd put in the pocket. She did as he told her, and he tore open the packet with his teeth, letting go of her just long enough to put it on.

Leaning against her, he kissed the back of her neck. "So soft and warm," he whispered. He covered her hands with his free hand, taking her with a low moan.

He pulled her hands away from the table and pushed her forward until she lay against the sun-warmed wood. Sliding his hands over her back, he began to move until there was nothing in the world for him except her.

Alison's moans as he drove himself into her broke down the last of his defenses, and he cried out his release. Shuddering, he lay against her and held her, kissing her neck and shoulder.

Stepping away from her, he helped her stand, then lifted her into his arms and carried her into the cabin.

Chapter Eight

Alison sat on the front porch of the Corn Maiden Cafe, chatting with Maggie and Rain while Dell helped Bear frame the new addition they were adding to the little building. She enjoyed visiting the ladies. The town was quiet and everyone was friendly. Dell seemed to like it well enough, and she wondered if he was thinking of staying.

She turned to watch a large black SUV pull into the little gravel parking lot. The passenger door opened, and a woman stepped out. Alison froze, her cup of herbal tea halfway to her lips. She recognized the tall, artificially-endowed blonde. The last time she'd seen the actress was under Ryan.

Tara Zeller walked toward the porch as Dell came around the corner, shirtless and glistening with sweat. He slowed and waited for the starlet to precede him up the steps. She looked at him over her sunglasses, then turned and climbed the steps with an exaggerated sway in her walk.

Dell followed her and slipped around her to sit down on the porch swing with Alison. Alison didn't miss the glare the woman Ryan had tossed her aside for gave Dell as she handed him a glass of iced tea.

"We're closed," Rain said.

"So open. We're here for lunch," Tara said.

"Sorry, can't do that, don't feel like cooking today," Maggie said. "Besides, we're remodeling."

Alison watched Ryan stroll up. He hadn't seen her yet, and that was fine with her. He went directly to Tara, ignoring everyone else.

"What's wrong, muffin?" Ryan asked.

"These mean people won't open," Tara baby-talked.

Ryan turned to look at their little group, and Alison saw his eyes widen when he recognized her.

"Alison. You're behind this, aren't you?" Ryan said, his voice harsh.

"Hello, Ryan. I'm afraid you're mistaken," she said.

"Don't lie to me, I know you too well, Alison." Ryan smirked.

Beside her, Dell started to stand up. Alison caught the waistband of his jeans, and he settled back. She shifted her hand and rubbed the small of his back, her eyes fixed on Ryan. "You don't know me at all, Ryan; you never did."

Dell reached over and rested his hand on her knee. "Well, I need to get back to work, will you be all right?"

"I'll be fine." Alison smiled at Dell and took his empty glass. He leaned over and kissed her.

Dell walked past the Hollywood beautiful people, pointedly ignoring them. Alison watched Ryan's jaw tighten and laughed silently. Her ex-husband could never handle competition of any kind.

"I think you need to apologize, Ryan," she said, her voice like ice.

Ryan laughed. "Apologize? For what? We are not the ones being unreasonable here. Now, we'll have lunch and..."

"We're closed. What part of that don't you understand?" Maggie asked, cutting him

off.

“Alison?” Ryan looked at her, raising one eyebrow.

“Why ask me? If Maggie says they’re closed, then they’re closed,” Alison said.

Ryan glared at her, then turned to Tara. “Why don’t you go wait in the car, precious? We’ll go back to the hotel, and you can get a nice massage and spa treatment to relax your nerves.”

“Well, all right, but I want a special treat tonight,” Tara said in her little girl voice.

“What kind of treat, sweet pea?” Ryan’s voice was saccharine sweet.

Alison glanced at Maggie and Rain and rolled her eyes. Her friends grimaced.

“I want the Indian boy,” Tara said, giving Alison a malicious look.

“Your wish is my command.” Ryan gave her a light swat on the butt to send her off.

Alison took a deep breath and visibly unclenched her teeth as a cold anger settled over her.

Everyone watched Tara go, not breaking the silence until the door of the SUV closed. Ryan turned back to Alison and gave her a pointed look. “May I have a word with you in private?”

Alison nodded at Maggie and Rain. “It’s all right,” she said, and they went into the restaurant.

“You’re looking good, Alison, living out here in the boonies agrees with you,” Ryan said.

“Thank you,” Alison said in a neutral tone.

“We’re staying in Santa Fe. Tara will be the rest of the day in the spa,” he said.

“That’s nice.” Alison kept her voice pleasant.

“I’ll be back. We can take a room in that little bed and breakfast down the street,” he said, giving her a lecherous once over.

“Forget it, Ryan. You just want what you can’t have anymore. Whatever we had died when you decided to start fooling around with your clients.”

“You don’t mean that. I’ll be back in about an hour.” Ryan smirked at her. “You know you could never resist me. And tell your Indian his wishes just came true—he’ll be spending the night in Tara’s bed.”

“Oh, but I do mean it, and there won’t be anyone in Tara’s bed but you,” Alison said. It took everything she had to resist the urge to shove him off the porch.

Ryan laughed. “Be sure he has a shower before I get back,” he said and hurried off toward his vehicle.

She watched him go and sighed heavily. They really didn’t need this, not with Wilson still out there somewhere. When the black SUV had disappeared from sight, Alison stood and carried her cup and Dell’s glass inside. A deep sadness settled over her. Now that Ryan knew where she was, he’d never leave her alone. He always went after what he wanted, telling him no just made him more determined. She would have to leave. It would be the only way to keep Ryan from causing trouble in town. She wondered if Dell would go with her.

Chapter Nine

They sat in the large, antique claw foot tub. A fire burned in the fireplace, and a bottle of Maggie's homemade plum wine sat on the chair they used as a makeshift table, along with two half-empty jam jars of the fragrant, pale amethyst liquid and an empty condom wrapper. The steam from the water made Alison's hair curl, and the fine sheen of sweat made her skin glow. The pink blush spreading over her breasts made Dell's erection twitch. He took a deep breath and tried to relax like Bear had told him and the book on tantric sex instructed.

Alison leaned her head back, resting it against his shoulder with a sigh. Her breathing was getting faster and he smiled. Time to distract her from their bodies joined together.

"Well, it was nice while it lasted," Dell said. He bent and nuzzled the back of her neck. "I wish you'd let me meet him when he shows up again."

"And do what?" she asked.

"Punching him out sounded like a good option to me." Dell nibbled on her ear, smiling when she shivered.

"He'd just have had you arrested."

"Good point," he whispered, sliding his hands over her shoulders.

Alison settled back against him with a quiet moan.

Dell groaned softly. "You're not supposed to move."

"Sorry," she said breathlessly.

"Ohh, girl, this feels so good," he sighed.

"Where," she gasped. "...where did you get this idea?"

"Bear gave me this book. The bath was all mine." Dell moaned and shifted his hips.

"Oh," Alison gasped and rocked against him.

He shifted until they were on their knees. Pushing her forward, he wrapped an arm around her waist. She held onto the edge of the old claw foot tub and laid her head against her arms with a low moan. Dell slid his free hand slowly up her spine.

"Don't move," he said hoarsely. "Just feel."

She nodded, and he leaned over her and began to slide into her with slow, restrained thrusts. He groaned, slipping his hands over the soapy skin of her body, moving harder until she shuddered and tightened, her release breaking over her like a sudden summer storm. His body tensed and he cried out.

* * * *

Dell took one last turn around the cabin, making sure everything was the way they'd found it. Alison had walked down to the creek while he loaded the truck. He sighed and walked up behind her, draping his arm around her shoulders. "Ready to go?"

She nodded and turned to walk toward the truck, her arms crossed tightly over her chest, her head bowed. Dell opened the door for her, then went around to the driver's side to get in. As he came around the front, he looked up to see the rising sun turning the tear tracks on her face to tiny rivulets of gold.

Panic knotted his stomach. He had never been able to handle a woman's tears. He got into the truck and sat for a moment in silence. Finally, he turned to her and caught her arm, pulling her across the seat into his arms.

"What's wrong, baby?" he asked, pressing his lips to her hair.

"I'm sorry for all this," she said softly.

"All what, baby? There's nothing to be sorry for; it's just time to move on, that's all."

"You don't have to. You could take me into Santa Fe and come back."

"Why would I want to do that?" He brushed her hair back and wiped away her tears with his thumb.

"I know how much you like it here," she said and sniffed.

"I like it here because you're here. I like it anywhere you are," he said.

"You're sure?" she asked, looking into his eyes.

"I'm sure," he answered. "Let's go say goodbye to everyone."

Chapter Ten

They drove south, passing back through Albuquerque and finally stopping at a small truck stop to have breakfast. A man watched them from the shadows of a booth in the back. An unholy smile spread across his face as he reached up and adjusted his hat to hide his face. He did not want them to see him too soon.

* * * *

The waitress handed Dell the check, and Alison took it from him. "My turn," she said with a smile. "You can pay me back later."

Dell returned her smile and chuckled. "I think I can handle that. Bear made me keep the book."

"Oh, really?" She raised one eyebrow.

"Really." He mimicked her raised eyebrow. "Pay the nice people, and I'll be right back." He slid out of the booth while Alison got her purse.

She handed the waitress the money for the bill, and the girl walked to the register. Letting her mind wander, she watched the people coming and going, wondering who they were and where they were going. The waitress came back with her change and handed it to her.

"Oh, yeah, the man in the back said give this to you," the girl said and handed Alison a folded scrap of paper.

Puzzled, Alison took the note and opened it. *Well, hello there, little lady*, she read. She felt the blood drain from her face and looked up. Wilson Long tipped his hat and smiled at her from the booth in the dark corner near the kitchen doors. He raised his hand and waved at her, wagging his fingers.

She closed her eyes for a second, trying to get her panic under control. When she opened them again, he was gone. She wished Dell would hurry back. Pressing her hand to her chest and squeezing her eyes shut against the tears that stung her eyes, she tried to take a few deep breaths and calm herself. Wilson wasn't stupid; surely he wouldn't try anything in a crowded restaurant.

*

Dell strolled back to their table from the men's room. His peaceful, relaxed feeling disappeared when he saw Alison. She was ghostly pale and obviously shaken. He quickly slid into the booth next to her and put his arm around her shoulders. She jumped, stifling a scream, and opened her eyes. The relief in her expression when she saw him sent a chill through him.

"What is it, baby, what happened?" he asked, glancing around the dining area for some hint of the threat. If one of these truckers had hit on Alison, he was going to beat the crap out of him.

She handed him a piece of paper, her hand shaking like a leaf. "Wilson is here," she said in a tense whisper.

"Ah, shit. Come on, we're out of here. Did you already pay?" At her nod, he got up and swept her along toward the door.

“Hey, you folks all right?” the waitress asked, concerned.

“We’re fine, thanks. She’s just feeling a little ill; all she needs is some fresh air.” He smiled and hurried through the door, his arm firmly around Alison.

At the truck, he opened the door for her and helped her in. “Lock it,” he said shortly and shut the door, waiting just long enough to see her push the lock button down before hurrying around to the driver’s side.

Dell felt a cold chill when he saw the note under the windshield wiper. Grabbing it, he got in and started up the truck. He opened the note and felt sick. *Your little lady is mine*, the note said. *It wasn’t very nice to leave me in the parking lot like that.* Dell swore again and shoved the note into his pocket along with the one Wilson had given Alison.

“Everything will be fine, baby. I told you before I won’t let him hurt you,” Dell said as he backed out and headed onto the highway.

“Promise me you won’t let him hurt you either,” Alison said. She reached over and laid her hand on his thigh. He reached down and covered her hand with his, giving it a reassuring squeeze.

“I have no intention of letting him hurt either of us,” he said. “Help me watch for a payphone.”

“Who are you going to call?”

“The FBI first, then I’m going to call an old friend that lives on the Mescalero Reservation. It just might be a good idea to get a gun.”

They rode for awhile in silence, and Dell picked up his pack of cigarettes. He shook one out and got ready to light it. Suddenly, he stopped, realizing it was the first one he’d had since their first night together. He smiled and flipped the lighter shut, tossing it back onto the dash. He crumpled the cigarette in the ashtray along with the rest of the pack and chuckled at the puzzled look she gave him.

“You’ve been a good influence on me,” he said.

His heart felt lighter when she smiled and laughed softly.

“So it’s my fault you’re disgustingly perfect now?” she asked, her voice teasing.

“Yep, all your fault. You know what that means, don’t you?”

“Do I really want to know?”

“Oh, yeah, I think you do.” He grinned.

“I’m afraid to ask,” she said.

“It means you are going to have to keep me in line.” He wiggled his eyebrows and leered at her.

* * * *

The small gas station had a payphone, and Dell pulled up beside it after he filled the truck’s tank up. He quickly gave the information on Wilson along with their direction of travel to a grateful Special Agent Anderson, who gave him instructions to let Wilson tail him.

“What do you mean, let him tail me? I don’t want him within a thousand miles of me, and I sure don’t want him anywhere close to Alison,” Dell said with a glance at the woman who had stolen his heart in the few days he had known her. She saw him looking at her and waved.

“Just don’t get too far ahead of him, that’s all. We’d have had him last time, if you hadn’t dropped off the radar for nearly a week to screw around,” Anderson said sourly.

Something cold settled in Dell's stomach, and he felt ill. How had the feds known he and Alison had stopped to lay low? Unless they had someone following them. "Yeah, well, I see him again, I'll let you know."

Hanging up, he stared thoughtfully at the phone for a moment. He had a distinct feeling he and Alison were being used to draw Wilson out, and he didn't like it, not one little bit.

Dialing a new number, Dell hoped his old buddy Jeff was home and not out fishing or fooling around. Luck was with him, and Jefferson Baldomero answered on the third ring.

"Hey, Jeff, you still in the insurance and protection business?" Dell asked.

"Dell! I heard you were in prison for murder, man. Dolly cried for three days. What did you do, escape?" Jeff answered.

"No, they let me out. They got some proof someone else did it. You remember Wilson?"

"Wilson... The weird guy who smiles too much?" Jefferson asked.

"Yeah, the feds have been after him for a long time, so they were real pleased when they got evidence he did it." Dell turned to watch Alison. She was pulling her hair up into a ponytail, and his stomach gave a little lurch.

"Well, damn, man, I'm happy for you. Why you need insurance?" Jefferson asked, his voice puzzled.

"Because the feds gave me some money and tossed me out with instructions to call if I saw Wilson, like they were sure I'd see him," he said. Briefly, he explained things to Jeff. "So, I need some insurance, man, because damned if I'm not feeling like bait right about now."

"Sounds like. Well, I'll send one of the guys to meet you, probably John. He'll have your policy. He'll be wearing a butt-ugly, buffalo puke, straw, cowboy hat," Jeff said.

"Good, thanks, man, I appreciate it. And tell Dolly I said hi." Dell hung up and got back in the truck. Alison smiled at him, and he leaned over, touching his lips to hers in what he intended as just a quick peck. The silky sweet flavor of her made his stomach clench, and he deepened the kiss, slipping his tongue in to twine with hers.

Pulling away from her, he sat in silence for a few minutes before starting the engine and pulling out onto the highway. He wasn't quite sure what was going on with the FBI and he didn't want to scare Alison, so he'd just keep his suspicions to himself for right now.

Chapter Eleven

By the time they stopped for dinner, the sun was beginning to set, and Alison was laughing at his silly jokes and listening to his fishing stories. The little bar and grill in the small town on the edge of the reservation had sawdust on the floor and the best fries in the world.

Dell watched the door. Finally, a man walked in who had to be John. Dell smiled slightly. Jeff had been right; the hat did look like a buffalo had puked on it. He got up and walked over to where the man had seated himself at the bar.

"John?" Dell asked, sitting down. The man looked up and grinned.

"Yeah?" John said.

"Jefferson said you'd have something for me, name's Dell."

"Yeah. Sorry I'm late. There was a rock slide on the road." John motioned for Dell to pull up a barstool and sit down. He smiled and leaned on the bar, waving at the waitress.

"You got my package?" Dell asked.

John nodded and smiled at the bored girl who came to take his order. "Coffee, Sandy," he told her and winked. She rolled her eyes and walked off. He turned back to Dell. "You got the payment?"

"Yeah." Dell watched John reach into his scruffy denim jacket. The man pulled out a box that had been carefully wrapped in brown paper. He took it and passed the ten folded one hundred dollar bills to John, who quickly tucked them into his pocket.

"Jefferson said to tell you to be careful," John said.

"Tell him I will; I have a good reason to be very careful," Dell replied. He turned and gazed at Alison, who was nibbling on a rather long French fry. Dell watched John turn and look over his shoulder at Alison.

"Damn," John said, his voice reverent. "She that good on other things?"

"Better." Dell swallowed hard and took a deep breath. He reached over and smacked John's arm lightly. "Quit lusting after my woman."

John laughed and took a sip of the coffee Sandy set in front of him. "I leave first," he said. "Give it ten minutes, and then you can go."

John got up and walked out of the bar. Dell picked up the package and went back to the booth where Alison was drawing spirals in the pool of ketchup on her plate with her fry. He sat down across from her.

"Where the hell did you learn to eat like that?" he asked her.

"Like what?" she asked innocently and sucked a drop of ketchup off her little finger.

Dell laughed softly. "You know damn good and well like what, girl," he said. "You got half the men in here hard." He reached across the table and caught her hand, pulling it across the table and taking her fingers into his mouth one at a time to suck the salt and ketchup off each one. Her lips parted, and her beautiful emerald eyes darkened, locked on his.

The waitress walked up and tossed the check onto the table. "Geez, get a room, you two."

Alison blushed and Dell chuckled. "Let's go," he said.

Dell followed Alison up to the front of the bar and grill, resting his hand lightly on

her back. He could feel the simmering current of desire coursing through his fingers straight to his groin, making it tingle pleasantly.

"I'm going to go ahead and get in the truck," Alison said as Dell got out his wallet and took out a twenty to pay for dinner.

"Okay, I'll be right out." Dell paid the bill and picked up a toothpick.

*

Alison walked outside and headed toward the truck. Suddenly, she was caught in a viselike grip. A clammy hand covered her mouth and nose, cutting off her breath and stopping her scream. She dropped her purse as she was rushed toward a black El Camino and shoved into the vehicle. She started to scream when her kidnapper uncovered her mouth.

Wilson held a large Bowie knife against her side, forcing her to slide across the seat. "Don't even think of it, darlin'," he said, grinning at her. "Buckle your seat belt—wouldn't want you to get hurt now."

Alison started to do as she was told, her hands shaking.

"Relax, little lady, I have big plans for you and me. And Dell, too." He smiled at her, his eyes lit with an unholy glee.

Alison shivered as her blood ran cold. "If you leave him out of this, I'll do whatever you want," she said slowly, trying to keep her voice calm.

"Oh, I couldn't do that. I wouldn't want Dell to miss all the fun." Wilson smiled again.

She shrank back against the door. Wilson laughed and stopped the car at the edge of the parking lot. He reached over and caught her arm, dragging her across the seat and wrapping his arm around her.

"You're a soft one; I'm going to enjoy this." He leaned close and whispered in her ear, giving it a quick lick. "Do you scream?"

Alison shook her head quickly.

"You will." Wilson's voice was silky as he shoved her roughly back across the seat.

* * * *

Dell stepped out into the gathering twilight and froze. Alison's purse lay on the sidewalk behind his truck, its contents spilled out. He quickly picked it up and looked around the parking lot for her.

A car horn's honk jerked his attention to the black El Camino poised at the parking lot's exit. Wilson grinned at him, tipped his hat, and pulled out onto the highway. Dell could see Alison in the vehicle, sitting close to the killer.

Dell's knees went weak, and he felt like throwing up. He couldn't move for a long, agonizing moment, then he ran to the truck and jumped in. Starting to put the gun he'd just bought from Jefferson on the seat, he stopped. An idea began to form. If he was right about this, his friends from the FBI wouldn't be far away. He sighed heavily and said a short prayer for Alison's safety, then got out and went back inside the bar to find a phone.

He thought over what he was going to say for a moment, and Alison's face as he'd last seen her rose up before him. The terrified look on her face made his heart hurt. He picked up the receiver and dialed.

"Get here, now," Dell said shortly when Davis answered.

"What happened?"

“You got what you wanted. I hope you’re happy. He has her,” Dell fought to keep his voice calm. He couldn’t breathe, thinking about what might be happening to Alison while he tried to get some help.

“What I wanted? Mr. Blackfeather, what happened?” Davis said patiently.

“Haven’t you been listening to me? Wilson has Alison! Get your people you have following me in gear and arrest him, because I’m going after him in about two minutes, and if I catch him first, he’s dead.” Dell clenched the receiver, his knuckles white, and resisted the urge to rip the phone out of the wall.

Davis swore. “All right.” He took a deep breath. “All right, relax. Stay where you are. Special Agent Matthews will be there in a few minutes.”

“Matthews,” Dell’s voice was flat.

“Yeah, he’ll coordinate with the local...” Davis began.

“He’s taking her onto the res—you don’t need the local police, and it’s your jurisdiction.” Dell’s voice shook.

“We still have to work with the locals. I know it’s hard, but you need to be patient. I’ll be there as soon as I can,” Davis said.

“And what about Alison? Who’s going to help her?” Dell wanted to cry. He had promised he would keep Alison safe, and he hadn’t done it. He’d let her down, and now he had to do everything he could to make it up to her. He only hoped she’d still be alive to forgive him when he got to her.

“We are. But you need to be patient and don’t go off after them by yourself. That just might get her and you killed.” Davis hung up.

Dell put the receiver down and went over to sit in the booth where he’d had dinner with Alison. He watched the door for the FBI Agent, tapping his foot impatiently. The waitress, Sandy, brought over a cup of coffee and set it down in front of him.

“Sandy, right?” he asked, catching her hand.

“Yeah,” she said warily.

“You know Jefferson?” He was pleased when she nodded. “Do me a favor and call Jefferson. Tell him Dell wants him to keep an eye out for Wilson.” The girl nodded. “Tell him I’ll be in touch.” He let the girl go.

Chapter Twelve

Agent Matthews stood out like a sore thumb in his dark gray business suit when he walked into the little bar and grill. Dell watched the sharp dressed man grimace at the sawdust working its way into his shoes as he made his way over to the booth.

"Mr. Blackfeather," Matthews said, holding his hand out.

Dell just stared at the young agent. Matthews dropped his hand and sat down. "I understand there's been an incident..." the agent began.

"An incident? A crazy, serial killer, son-of-a-bitch snatches my girlfriend out of the parking lot, *right out from under your nose*, and you have the nerve to call it an *incident*?" Dell kept his voice low and hard, letting all his anger show.

"I had orders not to interfere with the target at this time," Matthews said, a defensive note in his voice.

"Orders? From who?" Dell wanted the name of the person he'd be going after if anything, anything at all, happened to Alison.

"I'm not at liberty to discuss this case with unauthorized personnel," Matthews said.

Dell sighed and bowed his head for a moment. This pompous little by-the-rules butt made his head hurt. He sighed again and looked up at the agent. "Okay, fine, then there's no reason for me to sit here and babysit you." He stood and dropped a couple of dollars on the table, nodding at Sandy. As he walked toward the door, he heard the FBI man sputtering behind him and smiled grimly. He pushed through the door and stepped out into the soft summer evening.

Opening the door of his truck, he ignored the sound of the bar door slamming and the urgent, hurried footsteps coming toward him. A hand caught his shoulder and jerked him around. Dell spun and raised his fist, ready to knock Special Agent Matthews into next week.

Matthews let go and backed up, his hand going for the gun Dell could see hidden in a shoulder holster under his jacket.

"You shoot me, you son of a bitch, you better make sure I'm dead, because if I get up, I'll kill you with my bare hands," Dell said, glaring at Matthews.

"I'm a federal officer..." Matthews began, stammering.

"Agent Matthews, I do hope you weren't about to draw your weapon on one of the victims in this case," a calm, deep voice dripping with authority cut Matthews off.

Dell glanced over to see a casually dressed Agent Davis walking toward them. Davis nodded at Dell and fixed Matthews with an icy glare.

"Sir! I..." Matthews snapped to attention.

"Keep it up, Matthews, and you'll be headed back to Quantico for retraining as a receptionist in the gift shop," Davis said. "Now, go get your car and help Thomas, and try to stay out of trouble."

Dell watched Davis as Matthews hurried away. Davis turned toward him. "So, Wilson took Alison," Davis sighed. "Let's go get her back."

"Took you long enough to get here. She could already be dead," Dell said, his voice cracking on the last word. He looked away from Davis and gazed at the sunset sky that was turning from orange to midnight blue. She couldn't be gone, not when he'd just

found her. They hadn't had near long enough together. He took a deep, shuddering breath and tried to stay calm.

"No, he won't have done anything to her yet. That's not how he works," Davis said.

"How can you be sure?" Dell asked. He wanted to believe the agent, but he was afraid to, afraid he was still being used.

"We have his M.O. from other cases, and the profilers have done a thorough work up on him. We know pretty much what he'll do. Now, you said he was heading toward the reservation?" Davis asked.

"Yeah, he made sure I saw he had her," Dell answered.

"Fine, let's go then. You drive." Matthews walked around and got in the truck.

Dell got in and started the truck. He noticed for the first time that his hands were shaking and clenched his fists.

"While we have an extensive profile telling us what Wilson Long will do, we don't know what Alison will do. You're the key to that—you know her. Tell me about her," Davis said, his tone of his voice calming Dell's nerves.

Dell took a deep breath and began telling the FBI Agent everything about Alison he could think of as he pulled out onto the highway.

* * * *

Alison sat, rigid and silent, while the man holding her captive chattered on about what great friends he and Dell were. She tried to look at the beautiful mountain scenery, but it didn't really register. All she could think of was that she should never have gone out to the truck alone.

Wilson's constant chatter made her want to scream. He hadn't stopped since they'd pulled out of the parking lot of the bar and grill. She shivered; it was almost like he wanted her to like him. Glancing at him from the corner of her eye, she saw he'd put the knife down on the seat next to his leg. Slowly, she began to form a plan.

"Well, hell, we even share the same women, so it was quite a surprise there to see he'd found a new girl and all and didn't tell his old pal Wilson." He grinned at her.

"He didn't tell me about you, either," she lied.

"He didn't? Well, that wasn't very nice at all, was it? And after all the things I've done for him, helping him get rid of Tommy and then killing Elsie and all. She was more trouble than she was worth, just like all women. Ungrateful is what it is," Wilson said. "Just as well you wanted to come with me then, isn't it?"

"Yeah." Alison's voice was quiet. She didn't know what to think hearing him talk about murdering someone with no more feeling than one had swatting a fly.

Wilson looked at her, taking his eyes off the winding mountain road. She swallowed hard and glanced away from him, flinching. He laughed, an evil sound that made her hair stand on end. She shivered.

"You act like you're cold," he said. "Or are you just trying to get me to let you snuggle up?"

Alison smiled and hoped it looked convincing.

"Well, then." He reached over and pulled her across the seat, wrapping his arm tightly around her.

She forced herself to lean against him and began to work her hand toward the knife between them.

Chapter Thirteen

Dell listened to Davis talking on his cell phone. It sounded like the FBI man was arranging for small planes and maybe helicopters to help with the search. Davis disconnected his call and looked over at Dell.

"We have roadblocks on all the main roads in and out of the reservation, and there are agents stationed at the resorts," he said. "Unfortunately, the air search won't be able to start until dawn. It's too remote and dangerous to try it at night. He'd hear engines."

"Wilson won't go to a resort. He'll find some old abandoned cabin or something to—to..." Dell couldn't bring himself to finish.

"I know," Davis said.

"How are you going to find them, then? Unless you got some sort of tracking device on his car or a little bird is telling you his plans." Dell let his frustration show.

"We don't need to track him; he'll come to us." Davis smiled slightly, "He can't help it—his ego and his need for attention won't let him stay away."

"Attention? That's what all this is about?" Dell asked, incredulous.

"According to our profilers, Wilson is motivated by a strong need for attention and a hatred of the people who don't give him that attention." Davis studied his shoes as he told Dell exactly what kind of predator Wilson Long was.

"That's sick." Dell shuddered.

"Yes," Davis said.

* * * *

Alison felt the handle of the knife under her fingertips and slowly teased it away from Wilson's leg. She wrapped her hand around it, keeping her eyes on Wilson, watching for any hint he knew what she was doing. He kept up his chatter, trying to impress her with how he had followed them.

"I know Dell thought I didn't see you two at the Painted Desert," he said, grinning. "And I probably wouldn't have, but he drove right past the gift shop windows. Dell never was the smartest one in our little group."

She made a noncommittal sound. He ignored her and kept talking. Alison eased the knife up and prepared herself. She would stab him and grab the steering wheel. Somehow she would stop the car and run to one of the houses she'd seen.

"I stood outside the window of your room in Albuquerque and listened. Dell made you moan. I'll make you scream," he said.

Horried, Alison stared at him. "You're crazy," she whispered.

The grin slipped, and she saw through to the real Wilson. Her blood turned to ice in her veins.

Her fingers closed around the handle of the knife, and she raised it. Seeing the lonely little blinking red traffic light at the crossroad ahead, she got ready to make her move.

Wilson slowed to a stop and turned his head to look for oncoming traffic. Alison straightened up and thrust the knife toward Wilson. He yelled and swore, jerking away from her as he grabbed her hand and twisted it, forcing her to drop the knife. She yanked

her hand away, and not waiting to see if she'd done any major damage, she scrambled out of the car and ran.

She heard the sound of him running behind her and felt a burst of adrenalin shoot through her. The lights of the house she could see in the distance looked impossibly far away. Then his arms closed around her and he knocked her to the ground.

Wilson pinned her down and straddled her. She struggled to throw him off of her, and he raised his hand and slapped her, the blow making her ears ring.

"That wasn't a very nice thing to do, little lady, not one little bit." His voice was toneless as he dragged her to her feet and started to pull her back toward the car. When she resisted, he picked her up, slung her over his shoulder, and carried her back.

At the car, he shoved her inside and reached under the seat. "I didn't want to do this just yet, but you've forced me to change my plans." He pulled out a small carry-all bag and unzipped it. He tied her hands and feet, then taped her mouth shut. He dodged when she tried to kick him.

"Now, that's not very friendly." He shoved her back across the seat. She hit her head on the window and saw stars. In a daze, she heard Wilson laughing.

* * * *

Dell let the silence between him and Davis lengthen. There was something about the way the FBI agent acted that didn't quite fit with someone who would use another person as bait for a serial killer.

"Why are you doing this?" Dell asked finally.

"It's my job," Davis said shortly.

"No, there's more to it than that. Why help me now when you were using us to draw Wilson out of hiding?"

Davis sighed heavily and looked out the window. "For the record, this whole set up was not my idea. It was Anderson's, and Wilson was never supposed to get this close to you," he said, his voice quiet. "Matthews was supposed to arrest him when he made his move."

"Matthews. When I see him again, I'm going to kick his ass into next year." Dell tightened his grip on the steering wheel.

"I'd rather you didn't." Davis gave him a hard look.

"Uh huh, I'm sure. But that still doesn't answer my question. Why help me now?" Dell sped up and pulled around a slow-moving car.

"Call it sympathy." Davis chewed on a hangnail.

Dell kept his eyes on the road. He had a sinking feeling he knew what Davis was going to say before he asked. "Who was she, your daughter?" he asked, breaking the silence.

"My wife." Davis's voice was flat and unemotional. "He took her from the parking lot of the grocery store."

* * * *

Alison watched Wilson go inside to check into the small, run-down motel. She shivered and tried to work her hands loose. The rope he'd used to tie her hands and feet dug into her skin and cut off the circulation.

He came back with an old, worn key and reached over, brushing her hair back from her face. She flinched and tried to pull away. Wilson laughed and wrapped his hand in her hair, jerking her toward him.

“Don’t make me angry, little lady. I want this to last a long time.” He leaned closer.

Alison held her breath, trying not to gag in disgust when he ran his tongue over her lips. The clear packing tape he had over her mouth kept her from screaming as he kissed her. He let go of her and drove around to the room he’d taken for the night.

He carried her inside and dropped her on the bed, and she blinked away tears when her head smacked the headboard. She watched him turn the TV on and go back out to the car. When he came back inside with the knife, she shut her eyes and turned her head away.

She felt him climb onto the bed and thought about Dell, wondering where he was. She hoped he would find her, but she was afraid he would be too late. She felt Wilson’s breath against her ear and shuddered. A cold knot of fear sat like a lump of lead in her stomach.

“Scream all you want. No one will come,” he whispered as he slowly peeled the tape away from her mouth. “Try to kick me again or try and hit me, and I’ll just kill you right now. And that would make me sad since I wouldn’t get to do all the wonderful things I have planned.”

He cut the rope binding her and moved to the side of the bed between her and the door. She rubbed her wrists and ankles and moved as far from him as she could.

Chapter Fourteen

Dell sat in the motel room and flipped through the channels on the muted TV. He listened in as Davis sat at the little table by the window, talking to his people on his satellite phone. Dell picked up the room phone and punched the button for an outside line, then dialed Jefferson's number.

"Jeff, you heard anything on Wilson?" he asked when his friend answered.

"Dell, yeah, man, I just heard from Dolly's cousin, Lee. Wilson checked into the old roach motel Lee's stepbrother runs. Got a woman with him," Jefferson said.

"Yeah, my woman, and I want her back before he kills her. Give me directions..."

"Won't do no good, man," Jefferson cut him off, his voice flat.

"Why not?" He stared at the show on the TV, but nothing registered.

"Can't get up there, not without giving Wilson plenty of warning. Sound from the road echoes up the wash. That's why the kids use the place to fool around," Jefferson said.

"Okay, then, you got a number for that place?" Dell grabbed a pencil and paper out of the nightstand and got ready to write.

"Sure, don't know if all the rooms got phones, though," Jefferson gave him the number. "Good luck, man," he said and hung up.

Dell looked at Davis for a few seconds, debating whether to tell him or not. He looked at the number again, then back at Davis.

"Davis, what do your profilers say Wilson will do if he's being chased?" Dell fluttered the paper with the phone number on it in the air.

"Chased?" Davis asked, looking interested.

"Chased, harassed, pushed," Dell smiled.

"Well, he's always in control in these situations..." Davis said thoughtfully.

"What if we take control away from him?" Dell asked.

"It depends on what you mean by taking control away from him," Davis answered.

"I know where he is," Dell said.

Davis raised his eyebrows.

"Friend of mine, a guy who grew up with me and Wilson and all, married a Mescalero girl and moved down here," Dell answered Davis's unspoken question. "Jefferson is a busybody. If anything is going on within a hundred miles of him, he knows about it, and he owes me since his wife Dolly was my girl to start with," he added with a grim smile.

"We tried rushing a place where he was with a victim once. He was gone and the girl was dead. It wasn't something I'd want to see twice." The warning note in Davis's voice chilled Dell's blood.

"Then we flush him out and catch him in the open." Dell grinned and picked up the phone. Davis returned his grin.

He dialed the motel number. The desk clerk was more than happy to put him through to the room Wilson had rented. Wilson answered on the second ring.

"Hey, Wilson. When are you going to stop playing games and face me?" Dell said.

"Dell. Don't push me. I'll leave your little lady in pieces all over the res," Wilson

said in a cold voice.

Dell lowered his voice to a smooth, silky, threatening tone. "I know where you are, Wilson. I'm right outside your little roach motel room right now."

Dell heard Wilson moving around and smiled, giving a thumbs-up to Davis.

"You're not out there," Wilson said. Dell heard a note of uncertainty in the killer's voice.

"You just went to the window and looked. It's dark; I can see you clearly, but you can't see me," Dell said.

"If you come anywhere near me, I'll kill her." Wilson's voice was tinged with hysteria.

"No you won't," Dell replied calmly.

"What makes you so sure I won't?"

"You won't because you need to defile her first, and you can't get it up yet, can you?" Dell said, his voice low and soft. "Your limp, little dick isn't even twitching yet, is it?"

"No," Wilson said in a strangled voice. "No, you don't know anything—you can't know anything."

"Can't I?" Dell said quietly. "How can you be sure? I know you, Wilson Long. I've known you all your miserable, unhappy life. I even know your mother and your sisters."

"You're lying," Wilson whispered into the phone.

"Maybe," Dell said cheerfully. "But then again, maybe not." He hung up the phone and looked at Davis.

"How did he take it?" Davis asked.

"He's worried, real worried. I'll never forgive myself if this backfires and gets Alison hurt." Dell ran his hands through his hair.

* * * *

Alison heard Wilson say Dell's name and listened to Wilson's side of the conversation. She watched as Wilson became more and more agitated. He finally slammed the phone down and began pacing the room. She kept still and waited. Knowing Dell was out there somewhere looking for her calmed her.

Obviously distraught, Wilson ignored her, wandering around and around the room, murmuring to himself. Alison waited and edged toward the door every time he turned his back on her.

The phone rang again, and Wilson started violently, then froze, staring at it. Alison kept her eyes on him as she carefully picked up the receiver.

"Hello?" she said quietly.

"Alison, are you okay?" Dell's calm, deep velvet voice sent a warm rush of relief through her.

"Yes." She barely managed to keep from breaking down into tears and begging him to hurry and come get her.

"Stay calm for me and give the phone to Wilson, baby," Dell instructed. She held the receiver out toward her captor.

Wilson stepped toward her and slapped the phone out of her hand. She gasped and yelped when he grabbed her arm and yanked her up off the bed. He pulled her to the door and shoved her out in front of him.

* * * *

Dell's heart lurched painfully when Alison answered the phone. Weak kneed relief washed through him when she told him she was all right. He heard the commotion as Wilson bolted and motioned to Davis. Listening closely, he heard the sound of the engine roaring to life and then fading into the distance. He hung the phone up and jumped to his feet.

"This is it, he's running." He snatched up his hat and headed toward the door.

"All right, take it easy. This is the only way out of the area. He has to go past us, but it will take him awhile to get here," Davis said.

"I know, but I want to be ready when he does." Dell headed out the door toward his truck.

* * * *

Dell sipped at the coffee Davis had bought earlier. They had found a secluded spot in the parking lot of a small business and waited. To get back to his comfort zone of the main highways, Wilson would have to leave the cover of the heavily forested mountains and pass by them.

"All right, we want to get him to stop somewhere in the open where we can get Alison away from him," Davis said.

Dell nodded and kept his eyes on the rearview mirror. The sky was light, but the trees kept the road in heavy shadow. He could just make out the lights of an oncoming vehicle. Shifting in his seat, he got ready to start the truck in case it was Wilson.

The lights drew closer, and Dell could make out a logging truck. He sat back with a heavy sigh.

"Relax, Dell, he'll get here." Davis offered him a breakfast burrito.

"No thanks, not hungry," Dell said, tapping the steering wheel nervously.

Another truck passed them along with two cars before Dell finally saw lights coming that he was sure had to be Wilson. The vehicle drew closer, and he could make out the silhouette of two people. The shape of the car got clearer, and Dell recognized the El Camino.

"This is it." He started the truck while Davis tossed the trash. Dell watched the black car pass by and narrowly missed another car as he sped out of the parking lot.

Flooring the old red truck, he tried to catch up to Wilson. The black El Camino kept just far enough ahead that he couldn't see what was going on. Inside, he seethed, the thoughts rushing through his head. He would kill Wilson if he got the chance, should have gone north instead of south, should have just stayed in the little town outside Santa Fe and made love to Alison every day until they couldn't see straight.

He glanced over at Davis when he heard paper tearing. The FBI man was opening the box with the gun Dell had bought from Jefferson in it.

"Nice piece. You any good with it?" Davis asked, examining the Glock 9mm pistol.

"Passable," Dell answered, not about to admit he was a crack shot to a federal officer.

"Why don't I believe that?" Davis looked at Dell. "I'm not going to ask where you got it—I don't want to know. I am going to ask that you let me do the shooting. It makes the reports easier to fill out."

“Fine, you go for Wilson. All I really want is Alison safely away from him.” Dell nodded.

“But, just in case...” Davis snapped the clip home and handed the pistol to Dell.

“Right.” Dell laid the weapon on the dash where he could reach it easily.

“Don’t push too hard,” Davis warned Dell as he gained on the El Camino. “Let’s let him get out of these mountains onto flat ground first.”

Chapter Fifteen

Alison noticed the truck in the passenger side-view mirror first in the growing light of the morning. She looked over at Wilson and got a better grip on the door handle. If he slowed enough, she would jump and hope for the best.

Sweat beaded on Wilson's forehead and upper lip, and his fancy embroidered cowboy shirt was soaked. Alison's heart threatened to pound out of her chest, and she flinched with every blind curve he took too fast. He slammed on the brakes and laid on the horn when they came up on a slower moving logging truck. Alison took the opportunity to unlock the passenger door, praying Wilson wouldn't hear it.

"No," Wilson choked out in a strangled voice.

An icy wave of fear washed over her, but she saw him looking in the mirror and realized he'd seen Dell's truck behind them.

"He won't win, he won't get you back in one piece," he said, shooting her a hate-filled glare.

He jerked the wheel over and accelerated, passing the slow truck. Horns blared at them as Wilson forced a couple of oncoming cars off the road onto the narrow shoulder.

Alison risked a look back and saw Dell follow them around the logger. She saw the road narrowing and the dark maw of a tunnel. The shoulder ran out, leaving a sheer wall of rock on Wilson's side and a steep drop of a hundred feet or more on her side.

The darkness of the short tunnel blanked Alison's vision for a few seconds, and she blinked desperately, trying to focus on the light ahead. Wilson was forced to slow again for another truck. He swore, unable to pass this one, blocked by another logging truck and a line of cars heading up the mountain.

Up ahead, the shoulder of the road widened into a parking area forming a scenic overlook. This was her chance. If she waited until they were out of the mountains where the road was flat, Dell would never catch up. Taking a deep breath, she made a grab for the steering wheel, jerking it toward the large flat area where a couple of cars were parked.

She struggled with Wilson for control of the vehicle, and they swerved wildly before he pulled her hands loose and shoved her away. She hit the passenger door, using her momentum to open it. Another quick deep breath and she leapt out of the El Camino.

She did her best to roll as she hit the pavement. Trying to protect her head with her arms, she came to a stop just a few feet away from the edge of the ravine. Through the pain, the shouts of the tourists at the overlook and the horns honking barely registered. Her last thought was an image of Dell's face as blackness closed in and she fainted.

* * * *

Dell followed as closely as he could. The road twisted crazily down the mountain, a sheer wall of rock on one side and a deep chasm on the other. His knuckles were white on the steering wheel and his thoughts raced. If Davis didn't get Wilson, he'd kill the son of a bitch himself, as slowly and painfully as he could.

He heard Davis issuing orders to his people over his cell phone, calling for

roadblocks and helicopters and requesting back up from local law enforcement. Movement in the car ahead caught his attention, and he realized Alison was struggling, fighting Wilson for control of the El Camino. He saw the door fly open as she hit it, spilling her out onto the pavement.

“Oh, baby, no,” he whispered, his heart in his throat. Vaguely, he heard Davis ordering an ambulance as he slammed on his brakes and jerked his truck into the overlook parking area, skidding to a stop.

* * * *

Wilson fought for control of the fishtailing vehicle. In a rage, he glared at the scene behind him, looking back over his shoulder. The sound of an air horn jerked him around just in time to see the grill of an eighteen-wheeler headed straight for him.

He jerked the steering wheel over hard, and the huge truck clipped the tail end of the El Camino. The vehicle spun around, skidding over the edge of the chasm and tumbling into the ravine where it impacted the bottom and exploded.

* * * *

Dell leapt out of his truck and ran toward Alison, ignoring the honking horns and screeching brakes as other vehicles stopped. Pushing aside the people in his way, he stopped beside her and dropped to his knees with a moan, bending forward and shielding her with his body.

Gently touching her cheek, he fought the urge to gather her into his arms. He brushed the hair from her face and touched his lips to her forehead in a soft kiss.

“I’m sorry, baby, I should have done better,” he whispered, blinking back the tears that stung his eyes.

Her eyelids fluttered, and she opened her eyes, wincing at the bright sunlight.

“Dell?” she asked, reaching toward him.

“I’m right here, baby. Stay still.” He caught her hand.

“Where is...” she began, trying to sit up.

Dell laid his hand on her shoulder and stopped her. “He’s dead; he can’t hurt you.”

“Oh.” Alison relaxed and shut her eyes again. She was silent for a long moment.

“Alison, baby, talk to me,” Dell said, concerned. Smoke from Wilson’s burning car drifted over them, and she wrinkled her nose and coughed.

“Hurts,” she complained.

“I know it does. Help is coming.” Dell smiled and tucked a strand of hair behind her ear.

“Next time I feel the urge to jump out of a moving car, slap me,” Alison said with a grimace.

Dell sniffed and chuckled, leaning down to kiss her again. “Never,” he whispered.

The wail of approaching sirens got louder, and he heard Davis talking to the sheriff’s deputies. A fire truck arrived, followed by an ambulance, and Dell let the paramedics take over.

Chapter Sixteen

Dell sat next to Alison's bed in the emergency room and listened to her tell Davis about her time with Wilson. It felt strange, hearing about it from her side and realizing she had been working to get away while they had been trying to find her. He still got chills when he thought about how close he'd come to losing her.

"Well, I don't see any reason you can't be on your way as soon as the doctors okay it," Davis said. He looked at Dell and held his hand out, offering Dell the keys to his truck. "I parked your truck by the admissions' entrance. Good luck."

Dell shook the FBI Agent's hand and watched him leave, taking the rest of the law enforcement people with him. When he turned back to Alison, she was sitting up, trying to let the bed rail down.

"What do you think you're doing?" he asked.

"I'm getting up," she said. "What does it look like?"

"Nobody said you could get up." Dell walked over and caught her hands.

"I said I could get up. I want out of here." She glared at him.

"Not until the doctor says it's okay. Now lie back down," he said, ignoring her glare.

"Dell..."

"You are a stubborn woman, Alison Taylor," he cut her off, refusing to look at her. If he did that, he just might embarrass himself and cry.

He saw Alison open her mouth to retort and quickly close it again from the corner of his eye. Suddenly, she pulled him closer to the hospital bed and wrapped her arms around him. He responded to the comfort of her touch and laid his head on her shoulder, taking a deep, shuddering breath.

"I almost lost you," he whispered. Her hands rubbing his back felt so good.

"But you didn't," she said softly.

A noise at the entrance to the treatment area startled him, and he looked up to see the doctor.

"The x-rays are clear; there are no broken bones, and all the other tests are normal. You're a very lucky woman, Ms. Taylor," the doctor said.

Alison smiled at the man. "Great, so I can go?"

"Yes, you can go. If you have any problems or feel worse, come back and see us," he said.

Alison smiled at Dell, and he felt his whole world turn over. He smiled back at her. "I'll go bring you in some clothes," he said.

* * * *

Dell got Alison's blue bag and laid it on the passenger's seat. He opened it, feeling a little like an intruder, and picked up a white cotton dress. Holding it up, he shook it out and looked it over; it was soft and had bits of lace and little ruffles down the front. His mouth went dry when he pictured her in it.

Carefully folding the dress and tucking it under his arm, he closed the bag and put it back in with the rest of their things. He stopped for a long moment, smiling to himself.

Their things, he thought. He was getting downright possessive over this little slip of a woman.

A chill went up his back, and he looked around. The parking lot was silent, empty except for a few trucks and cars. He quickly got in the truck and started it, backing out of the spot by the door and moving his truck to the breezeway entrance to the emergency room. Hesitantly, he leaned over and opened the glove compartment, letting out a relieved sigh when he saw the Glock resting there. He started to close the glove compartment. He stopped, unsure why he felt the need to move the gun, but he did it anyway, stashing it under the seat where he could get to it fast if he needed to.

He shook his head, berating himself for having an overactive imagination. Wilson had to be dead. Nobody could have survived that crash and explosion. Dell locked up the truck and headed back into the hospital. *Unless he managed to jump*, a tiny nagging voice said in the back of his mind. *Davis did say they didn't find any remains...*

He stopped and turned quickly, scanning the parking lot one more time. Nothing had changed; a red car, a blue one, and a green pickup truck parked next to a silver compact car with black windows.

* * * *

Alison sat on the edge of the hospital bed, swinging her feet impatiently when he walked in. He stopped by the curtains and watched her for a few seconds. The way her light brown hair fell over her shoulders made his groin tighten.

"I found this." Dell held out the soft white dress toward her. "I thought you might want to put on something loose."

She took the dress from him and unfolded it. "Sweetheart, this is a nightgown," she said, a little bright spark of mischief in her emerald eyes.

"Really? How come I haven't ever seen it?"

"How often do you let me wear anything to bed?" She rolled her eyes at him.

"Um, yeah, well," Dell stammered and ducked his head, blushing. He looked up at her and grinned. She was reaching around, trying to catch hold of the hospital gown ties. He hurried over to help her.

"Ow." Alison winced.

"Here, let me." Dell reached around her and tugged on the tie at her neck, unknotting it. The top of the hospital gown came loose, and his breath caught. It slipped off her shoulder and his stomach clenched. He untied the last tie and swallowed hard, his mouth dry.

"I'll just step out here for a second, 'til you're ready." He pulled back the curtain and nearly ran into the nurse bringing the wheelchair for Alison.

A few minutes later, Dell had himself under control and was walking with Alison and the nurse out to the truck. He opened the door and then lifted Alison into the truck. He got a crawly feeling between his shoulder blades as he started to get in and stopped, turning to look around the parking lot again.

"Ready to go, baby?" Dell started the truck and pulled out of the breezeway into the parking lot.

"Yeah." Alison smiled at him.

Chapter Seventeen

The lights of Carlsbad, New Mexico lit up the night sky ahead. He pulled into the parking lot of the Desert Inn and climbed out of the truck, going inside to register. The room was in the back at the end of the building. He carried their bags inside, then propped the door open with a chair and walked back out to the truck. He opened the door and reached in, gently touching Alison's cheek.

"Stopping for the night, baby," he said.

Alison opened her emerald eyes and returned Dell's gaze. He smiled at her and leaned a little closer, brushing his lips against hers. Sliding his arms around her, he scooped her up and carried her into the room, setting her down on the bed.

The trust in her eyes made his heart clench. He still didn't feel he deserved her trust after he'd let her down so badly.

"There's a fast food place back up the road. Will you be all right while I go get us something?" He asked. He had to get away for awhile and get himself under control.

"I'll be fine." She squeezed his hand.

He left, shutting the door and locking it behind him.

*

Alison sighed and got up. He had been treating her like she was made of china since they'd left the hospital. Yes, she was sore, bruised, and battered, but she was alive. And right now, she needed to reaffirm that. She opened her bag and rummaged around.

* * * *

Dell parked in front of the door to the room. He turned off the engine and lights and sat there for a long moment. The room looked dark. Finally, picking up the bags from the fast food restaurant, he got out and went inside.

The only light came from the slightly cracked bathroom door. His breath stopped when he didn't see Alison right away. "Alison?" He put the food down on the table beside the window.

The bathroom door opened slowly, and her arm reached out. She beckoned him to come to her. Not quite sure what was going on, he walked toward the little room. A cloud of steam wafted out, and his eyes widened. *What on earth was she up to? She wasn't in any shape for any sort of fooling around.*

"Alison, what..." She caught the front of his shirt and pulled him into the room. "Whoa," Dell gasped. "Ali..." She cut him off, drawing him down into a deep kiss, covering his mouth with hers.

The strength left his knees, and he returned her kiss, twining his tongue with hers. Her fingers made short work of the buttons on his faded chambray shirt and moved to the fly of his old jeans.

Dell pulled away, breathless. "Alison, we can't do this." He tried to get himself under control.

"We can." She pulled him close again.

"I don't want to hurt you," Dell said, his voice husky.

“You won’t, I trust you.” Her hand slipped inside his jeans, and Dell moaned.

“I don’t deserve...” he whispered against her lips.

“Oh, but you do.” Alison pushed his jeans down over his hips.

Dell tried to argue. “But...” Her hands moving over his skin made it difficult to think.

“I need you, Dell,” she said, laying her head against his chest.

“I’m here, baby. I’m right here.” He toed his boots off. The jeans quickly followed, and he kicked them aside as he gathered her up into his arms and kissed her.

She took the condom from his hand, opened the wrapper, and worked it onto him. He moaned and felt his eyes cross. When he was sheathed, Alison pulled him into the hot shower with her. She handed the washcloth and soap to him, and a tremor of desire swept over him as he lathered up the cloth.

Beginning with her shoulders, he carefully worked the cloth over her skin. Moving in slow, small circles, he gently avoided the scrapes and bruises until he reached her breasts. He slid the soapy cloth over her skin, slipping closer and closer to her hard nipples. She moaned and shuddered at the touch of the rough cotton.

Dell moved the cloth further down over her stomach and knelt, dropping it. He pulled her down, and with a groan he was inside her. She moved, rocking against him until he couldn’t keep still. He lifted her in his arms, and she wrapped her legs around his waist.

Carrying her to the bed, he managed to get most of the way onto the mattress before falling with her. He rolled over and arched his hips up with a moan. She pushed him back down and caught his hands, pinning them over his head and covering his mouth in a deep kiss.

She moved over him, her lips sliding against his throat and over his collarbone to his shoulder. He bucked against her and moaned her name as everything shattered.

* * * *

The room was dark when he woke, and Alison was curled up against him, her breathing slow and easy. He didn’t hear the water running. Alison must have turned it off after he had fallen asleep.

Carefully, he got out of bed, found his jeans, and pulled them on. He looked at the food he’d bought earlier and then back at Alison, weighing the idea of going out and getting something else. She sighed and shifted, reaching for him.

“Dell?” she asked, sitting up and looking around.

“Right here, baby.” He smiled at her yawn. “You hungry?”

“Um, yeah, a little.” She yawned again and rubbed her eyes.

“Well, the hamburgers I got earlier are a little cold,” he said.

“That’s okay, I don’t mind. Unless you want something else?”

“No, I’m cool. I’ll just go down to the machines and get us something to drink.” Dell dug in his pocket and pulled out a handful of change as he stepped out of the room and pulled the door shut behind him.

The soda machines were just a few feet from their room. He put his change in and pushed the button. The machine made a horrendous thumping clatter as it dropped the soda bottles. That crawly feeling of being watched hit him in the center of his back again, and he turned to look over the parking lot. It was quiet, and the only thing that caught his

eye was a silver compact car with dark windows. It was eerily similar to the one he'd seen in the hospital parking lot.

Dell picked up the soda bottles and shrugged off the creepy feeling. There were probably hundreds of those little silver cars around. He pushed the car out of his mind and thought about Alison waiting for him back in their room.

Chapter Eighteen

Dinner wrappers littered the table by the window, and his jeans were draped over the back of a chair. Dell leaned against the pillows, propped against the headboard, and Alison leaned against him, her hands on his knees. He sighed and looked at the New Mexico and Texas map he held.

"Where did you say your friends lived?" He asked, dropping a kiss on her shoulder.

"San Antonio, but we don't have to go there. We can go anywhere you want to go." She ran her fingers along the crease at the back of his knees, sending a shiver of pleasure through him. He felt himself getting hard again and reached for another condom.

"San Antonio is fine." He tossed the map onto the floor and slid his hands up over her breasts. She moaned softly and tilted her head to one side, allowing him to kiss her ear and trace over it with his tongue.

He shifted until he was on his knees behind her and sat back, pulling her against him. Lifting her hips, he guided her down, sliding into her with a gasp and a deep moan.

* * * *

Dell woke to find Alison sitting on the side of the bed next to him.

"You're dressed," he said, disappointed.

"I am," she agreed, rubbing his shoulders.

"Dressed is bad," Dell moaned.

"Dressed is good. We overslept, and it's time to check out." Alison kissed his ear.

He groaned and sat up.

"Come on, sweetheart, I've already chased the maid away once; she'll be back any minute." Alison got up, evading his grab for her.

Dell sighed and got out of bed.

Ten minutes later, he picked up their bags and followed her out of the room to the truck. He felt a pang of remorse when he noticed her limping more than she had the night before when they'd arrived.

"How are you feeling this morning?" Dell quickly tossed the bags into the back and caught her, sliding his arm around her waist and lifting her onto the seat.

"I'm fine, just a little stiff and hungry," she said.

* * * *

When they came out of the little café they'd stopped at for breakfast, Alison was moving a bit better. They settled into a comfortable silence as they drove south, heading for Interstate 10, which would take them into San Antonio.

He watched Alison when she wasn't looking at him and enjoyed the pleasant, warm feeling just being close to her gave him. Staying with her was sounding more attractive to him all the time. Idly, he wondered what she would say if he asked her to marry him. *Not that I'm really ready to settle down and get married*, he thought, *but Alison Blackfeather does have a nice ring to it.*

"So, what do you plan to do once we get to San Antonio?" He asked, hoping he

sounded neutral.

"I don't know," Alison said, the tension returning to her face. "I guess I'll see if my friends will let me stay with them long enough to find a job and a place of my own."

"Oh. You don't sound too sure."

"What about you, what do you plan to do?" she asked. He didn't miss the fearful note in her voice.

"I thought I might hang around San Antonio for awhile. There are certain attractions I'd like to see." He watched her from the corner of his eye. She went very still, her head bowed and her purse on her lap. He saw her fingers clench tightly around the strap.

"There are some nice things to see there." Her voice was barely a whisper.

"That's what I hear." Dell took a deep breath and let it out. His stomach fluttered, and he swallowed nervously. Alison hadn't moved.

"Um, actually, I thought I'd go on to the Gulf and see the ocean," he said. "I've never been to a beach."

"The beach is nice." Alison's voice sounded fragile.

"The thing is, it won't be any fun alone." He looked over at her. "Alison, I'm not ready for this to end, I need you to come with me. Will you?"

She nodded and wiped the tears from her eyes. "Yes, I'll come with you."

Chapter Nineteen

Three loud bangs at the back of the truck were followed by a tremendous crack and the back window exploding into millions of tiny shards of glass. Alison screamed and raised her arms to cover her head. Dell swore and sped up.

“What the hell was that?” He yelled. He looked back in the rearview mirror to see a familiar small silver car following them. The car flashed its lights at them and began to pull over into the other lane. The morning sun glared off the windshield of the compact vehicle, obscuring the driver.

“I don’t know, but don’t stop,” Alison said.

“I’m not, hold on.” Dell floored the accelerator and watched the silver car fall back, its four-cylinder engine no match for his truck.

He kept his speed up until he was sure he’d left the strange vehicle behind. They were both covered in glass and shaken. Dell was angry. He saw a sign advertising gas and food and took the exit, heading down the two lane road that led to the little gas station and cafe.

“Baby, I’m getting really tired of this,” Dell said. He pulled off the road into the parking lot and stopped. Getting out of the truck, he left the door open and walked around to look at the back.

Three bullet holes marred the tailgate. Dell looked up to see Alison walking toward him. He pulled out the handkerchief he kept in his back pocket and motioned her over to him.

“You’re covered in glass.” He used the cloth to dust the glittering slivers off of her shoulders and back and out of her hair.

“So are you,” Alison said.

“I can wait. I want you to go inside and stay away from the windows.” Dell finished dusting her off.

“What are you going to do?” She asked, her voice full of concern.

“I don’t know yet. Come on, whoever shot at us will probably be by here in a few minutes, and I want you inside where it’s safer.” He turned her and gave her a nudge toward the door.

“Dell.” Alison stopped, refusing to go.

“Please, for me, baby,” Dell said softly.

She opened her mouth to argue, then shut it and nodded, hurrying inside. He followed her inside and stopped at the front cash register. The clerk looked at Alison, obviously noticing her bruises, and then eyed Dell coldly.

“Can you call the police? Somebody just shot at us back up the road.” Dell returned the man’s cold stare. The man looked at Alison, who was speaking to the lady at the small lunch counter, and back at Dell again.

“Yeah, sure, I’ll call them,” the man said, reaching for the phone beside the cash register.

“Car accident,” Dell answered the man’s unspoken accusation.

“Convenient,” the clerk retorted.

“No, damn scary. Look, you going to call or not? Whoever it was is driving a little

silver car with black windows. They'll probably be by here any minute now." Something brushed Dell's back, and he turned to find Alison dusting glass off him with an ancient dish towel.

"You need a new shirt—I'll go get my purse," she said.

"No! Stay here, I'll get it." Dell stepped around her and headed back out to the truck.

* * * *

Dell opened the passenger door and reached for Alison's purse. At the sound of screeching tires, he jerked around. The driver's side door of the little silver car flew open, and Dell's stomach clenched as fear flooded through him.

Wilson leapt at him, Bowie knife raised. Dell dropped the purse and caught hold of Wilson's arm. They struggled, Dell's feet slipping on the oil-slick, hot asphalt.

The insane look in Wilson's eyes sent a chill through Dell. He swore, remembering the Glock tucked under the driver's side seat just out of reach. It took both hands to keep Wilson from plunging the hunting knife into him.

Wilson forced Dell back against the seat and inched the knife closer to his throat. "I'll kill you, then I'll kill her and everyone else inside," Wilson ground out.

The sound of sirens in the background drew closer and gave Dell a burst of energy. "I don't think so." Dell kicked out and heard Wilson hiss when he connected with something. He hit Wilson's arm against the truck until the knife clattered to the ground.

Shoving Wilson away, Dell made a dash for the gun under the seat. His hand closed around something smooth and cool just as Wilson tackled him again after recovering the knife. He elbowed Wilson and turned, realizing what he held in his hand. Alison's little can of pepper spray.

He heard the police cars skidding to a stop and the shouts of the police officers. Ducking under Wilson's outstretched arms, Dell slid down, banging his knee painfully on the curb. He turned as he fell, aiming the spray at Wilson and pressing the nozzle down.

The stream of burning chemical caught Wilson across the eyes and ran into the scrapes and cuts from the accident in the mountains. Blinded, Wilson screamed and slashed wildly, stumbling and tripping on the curb.

Dell heard the shouts of the police ordering Wilson to drop the knife and lie on the ground. Wilson made an inarticulate noise of pure rage and turned toward the officers. At the sound of gunfire, Dell hugged the asphalt, grateful for the shielding of the truck.

Wilson staggered back, catching his heel on Dell's leg and falling over him. Dell rolled out of the way, the can of pepper spray ready. Wilson lay face down, unmoving. Slowly, Dell climbed to his feet as hands caught him and helped him stand. He looked around to see several police officers taking charge of the scene.

"You all right, man? What happened here?" An older, gray-haired officer asked him.

"Yeah." Dell nodded and tried to catch his breath. "Yeah, I think so." He winced, knowing he should take a look at his knee, but he couldn't pull his eyes away from Wilson lying in a pool of blood. A policeman reached down and checked for a pulse.

A wave of relief mingled with a strange feeling of guilt washed through Dell when the officer looked up and shook his head slightly. He was grateful to see another officer go inside and lead an ashen-faced Alison away from the front of the little convenience store. The officer said something, and Dell saw her nod.

"Okay, you want to tell me about it?" The officer took out a small notepad.

“Yeah,” Dell said, and began to explain everything. He gave the officer the card with Special Agent Davis’s phone number on it and sat down on the curb to wait. The officer walked off, and Dell watched the paramedics load Wilson’s body into the back of an ambulance. He felt a moment of sadness for Wilson’s family.

The gray-haired officer walked back toward him and held out the FBI card. “Your story checks out. As soon as we finish up, you and your girlfriend will be free to go.”

“Thanks. Is it all right if I go in and see how Alison is doing now?” Dell asked.

“Yeah, go ahead.” The officer walked off to supervise the tow truck picking up the car Wilson had stolen.

Dell got up and walked into the store. He stopped for a few seconds and just gazed at Alison. She picked up a mug, holding it with both hands, and brought it up to her lips, sipping at whatever was inside. The steam from the cup made the hair around her face curl.

She looked up, and their eyes met. She put the mug down and stood, walking toward him. He couldn’t move his feet; he felt like he might crack and shatter into millions of pieces.

She held out her arms, and he could see the tears spilling over and running down her face. He reached for her, folding her into his arms.

“It’s over,” Dell whispered.

* * * *

It was dark, and the road was deserted, except for the occasional truck. They passed rest stops full of eighteen-wheelers lit up like small towns. The glow from the city lights beckoned, promising rest and the beginning of a new life.

Dell checked them into the motel and came back to the truck. He started the engine and put it into drive, pulling around to the room he’d taken. Parking, he stopped to look at Alison for a moment. She returned his look, raising one eyebrow.

“I wonder if they have any of those crème-filled cookies in the vending machine.” He eyed her speculatively.

She smiled and got out of the truck, turning back to look at him before she shut the door. “Just how far did you read in that book Bear gave you?”

Dell shivered and jumped out of the truck, following her to the door of the room. He stopped her and just looked into her deep green eyes for a second before going inside.

“I love you, Alison Taylor.” He pulled her into a deep kiss and shut the door behind them.

The End

About the Author:

Penny Ash began writing seriously when she couldn't find the kind stories she wanted to read anywhere else. She brings a wealth of strange experiences to her work along with a deep interest in the paranormal. A big fan of Fantasy and Science Fiction as well as History and the world around her, she currently lives in the magical land of Texas

where she spends her time writing, dabbling in computer graphics, and arguing with friends online.

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