



Janine's Hope by Taylor Voltaire

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By

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Janine's Hope

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Dedication

To my husband who gives me hope, whose faith in me is unequalled, and whose love I couldn't live without; you make me a better person.

To Raine, thanks for being my "first". All my friends and critique partners at the Critique Team and Erotic Romance Critique Corner, I'm speechless...for once. I wouldn't be here without you.

My heartfelt gratitude to Sable Grey and Cobblestone Press for believing in Janine's story, and Melissa, whose patience with me makes her a candidate for sainthood.

Chapter One

The wheels of the airplane touched down. Hope's stomach heaved. Usually traveling didn't bother her, but today she wasn't herself. Two days ago, upon her return home from her bar exam, she'd been served with a letter. The message was burned into her memory.

We are sorry to inform you...Janine Whittaker...Hope Whittaker listed as sole beneficiary...Harrison...airport.

Janine Whittaker was dead. Funny, Hope had never thought it would affect her so much to read those words. It hadn't occurred to her that the mother who'd abandoned her nearly fifteen years ago could still hurt her.

The walls felt like they were closing in on her. The Bloody Mary for breakfast, and the tequila shot for courage, weren't enough, it seemed.

No one stood and held a sign with her name scribbled on it as she'd expected. No one stood out as if they were looking for her. Well, whomever Harrison was, he would have to find her.

The crowd thinned, and out of the corner of her eye, movement caught her attention. Masculinity exuded from every slow, commanding step the tall, lean stranger took. A worn cowboy hat capped his dark hair and hid his eyes. Hope prayed he was Harrison, because if he wasn't and offered her some candy to go for a ride, she might take him up on it.

She shook her head and sat up straighter. Being a city girl, she was well aware of the dangers if she allowed herself to be careless. In no mood

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to make a fool of herself, she remained seated. If he was Harrison, he would have to come and get her.

"Hope, I'm Harrison." His voice sounded about as sexy as a voice could get, all rough and rumble.

A twinge zinged between her legs at the sound of her name from those lips. She shivered, praying her reaction wasn't visible. With a conservative smile, she stood, looked around, and guessed he'd picked her out because she was the only one who appeared to be waiting for someone.

She nodded. "Hello."

The corners of his mouth turned up and revealed a make-your-knees-go-weak smile. Her carry-on bag slipped out of her grip and landed next to her foot with a thump.

Without missing a beat, Harrison reached for her bag.

This wasn't a pleasure trip for her to be drooling over men or letting down her defenses. She was there for the worst purpose, to bury her estranged mother. Gathering her resolve, Hope decided she didn't want help.

There was no reason she couldn't carry her own bag. "That's okay, I've got it." She held her chin high, daring him to argue.

He gave her a slight nod. "We'll claim your luggage on the first floor. If you get tired of carrying the bag, just let me know."

A curt and long-perfected polite smile was all she offered before marching off toward the escalators.

Harrison allowed her a two-step lead. Hope felt him checking her out. It disconcerted her. A quick glance over her shoulder, and she saw how she definitely affected him. Her heart beat faster, sending her blood rushing south.

What was the matter with her? Never in her life had she reacted to a man like this. Introductions had always been proper, formal and filled with vitals...where he graduated, where he worked, who his parents were and so on. It was so...civilized. Not Harrison, though. The way he held himself, with the sheer confidence of a man who knew himself and didn't hide behind propriety, made her flutter.

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She was thankful the airport in Phoenix was well laid out. Harrison affected her concentration.

They found the carousel flashing her flight number and watched in silence as bags made their way around the large, stainless steel track for luggage. One-by-one, they passed by until finally hers came into view. Hope retrieved it from the conveyer belt.

The silence between them unnerved her. It felt as if Harrison knew he had the upper hand, while Hope held all the cards.

Harrison stepped forward. "Can I help?"

It had been a very long time since she needed any help; she wasn't going to start now. She shifted her carry-on and set it on top of the large bag, grabbed the handle, pushed a button and then presto, her largest bag was on wheels.

Satisfied, she turned and looked at Harrison. "Okay, I'm ready."

Though his eyes were shadowed and she still couldn't see them, it didn't matter. She felt foolish when her cheeks heated just from his easy smile.

He led her to the elevators. The numbers lit up as they passed each floor, and she wished she were anywhere else. The silence felt awkward, but surely he would understand she wouldn't chatter on like some magpie singing from a tree.

When the elevator doors opened up to the dark parking structure, heat hit her. The captain on the plane had said it was seventy-nine degrees, and it sure felt like it. The end of February, and it was seventy-nine degrees! Maybe her having to come here wasn't so bad; at least it wasn't thirty degrees with ugly black snow everywhere.

They walked up a ramp and, about halfway to the top, Harrison pressed his remote. Taillights on a huge silver truck flickered. *Christ almighty, does anyone really need a truck that big?* Maybe Harrison suffered from little dick syndrome.

"Can I help you put your bags in the truck, or do you think you can handle it?" he mocked her.

He mocked her! He didn't even know her, and here he was making light of her independence. She slid him a sideways glance and wanted to

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snarl, but, as usual, tried to mind her manners. "I'm sure I can handle it. I've been handling things all my life."

She opened up the back door to the enormous truck and hefted the large bag in first. It landed crooked on the seat almost level with her head. Proud of her accomplishment, she couldn't help but square her shoulders. The other bag wasn't going to fit, though, unless she got up and straightened it out. *How in the hell does one actually get into this truck*, she thought.

She grabbed hold of the door handle and the side of the frame then hoisted herself up and in. A good shove with her shoulder scooted the large bag over, and then she looked down at the other. *Shit*. Sweat dripped down her brow.

Harrison leaned against the wheel well and watched. If only she could see his eyes. With as much grace as possible, she tried to get down and take care of her other bag. Just then, Harrison took a step forward, obviously taking pity on her.

Well, he could keep his pity! "I can get it. It's no problem."

He shook his head and backed away. "Sorry, darlin', I just thought I'd be polite."

She jumped down out of the truck and threw the smaller bag in, shut the door, straightened her trench coat and gave him a firm nod. "Okay then."

"You might want to take your coat off; it's a long drive." His suggestion made sense, but for some stupid reason, she couldn't bring herself to agree with anything he said.

"I'll be fine, thanks." She turned on her heels, opened the front passenger door and took a deep breath as she lifted herself into the front seat of the monster truck. When Harrison rounded the tail end of the vehicle, she quickly wiped the sweat from her brow and prayed he didn't see it. Christ, it was hot.

Harrison slid onto the seat with ease, and in a soft voice, he informed her, "I don't bite, y'know. I really think you'll be more comfortable with your coat in the back seat."

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As if a ruler lined her spine, she sat up straight and looked out at the sunny view. If she kept her coat on, she would look stupid and spiteful. If she took her coat off, he would see her C-sized breasts and assume she was a blonde bimbo as most men did, putting her at an even greater disadvantage.

He shook his head with mild impatience and turned over the engine. The truck roared to life. With a push of a button and a quick turn of a knob, he turned the air conditioning on and directed the air vents toward her.

Her shoulders relaxed immediately, and she leaned back against the leather seats.

He put the truck in reverse, gripped the back of her headrest and turned to see behind him. The truck lurched to a stop just before he lowered his hand to her shoulder and spoke softly. "I'm real sorry about your mom."

Her spine tensed again. She gave him a terse smile and whispered, "Thank you."

Hope glanced at her watch. They'd been driving for about an hour in complete silence, which was perfectly fine with her. She didn't want to have to speak to him any more than was necessary. But it was becoming very necessary; she needed a restroom.

"How much farther do we have to go?" She hoped her desperation didn't shout out at him, and tried her best to sound conversational.

Harrison turned his head to look at her. "Oh, about another hour and a half."

An hour and a half? She would never make it. *Shit.*

"I do have to stop for gas. There's a station up ahead if you'd like to...get out and stretch your legs."

His tongue-in-cheek offer didn't bother her one bit.

* * * * *

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About fifteen minutes later, Harrison drove into a gas station and pulled next to a pump. He jumped down from the cab, walked around the hood, and offered Hope a hand down.

She looked at his hand, perturbed. He stepped back and pulled the gas nozzle from its hook, thinking she was a stubborn little thing.

After landing with a rather disgraceful thud, Hope squared her shoulders and tugged down her coat.

"Can I get you something to drink or anything?" she said with as much dignity as a cat looked preening itself after falling off a sofa.

He put the gas nozzle into the tank, trying his best not smile.

"That'd be nice. A Coke would be fine."

"Okay, I'll be right back."

Damn, she had to be hot in that coat, Harrison thought. For many years, he'd watched over her from a distance and often wondered what it would be like to wrap her in his arms. He capped the tank and got into the cab to wait for her. When he watched her walk out of the gas station's store, he grew hard.

Her coat was folded over her arm, and she carried a bottle of Coke in each hand, one diet and one regular. He hoped the diet was for her. Her purse strap cut diagonally across her chest, separating two ample breasts. A black, silk, mock turtleneck hugged her pale skin. Brown wool slacks fell with a subtle flair and were punctuated with black leather high heeled boots. They weren't cowboy boots, but nobody's perfect. Damn, she'd look tasty in a pair of leather chaps.

Her blonde hair was pulled back into a tight ponytail at the nape of her neck. When it wasn't being held captive, it was shoulder length. His fingers itched. What would it be like to run them through her hair, setting free the silky strands and watching them blow wild in the wind? His dick twitched at the thought.

She opened the door as wide as it would go, stood on her tiptoes and handed him the drinks. The cab of his truck once again filled with the scent of her perfume. It was decadent, but subtle. It made him want a slice of chocolate cake.

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Before she climbed up, she threw her coat onto the seat. Harrison tossed it onto the back seat in time to appreciate the nice view he had of her ass when she turned around to reach for the door handle. Owning a big truck had its advantages. He was certain she wasn't wearing any panties under her slacks. When the door shut, she reached around for her seatbelt, showcasing her tiny waist.

He had to look away. Desperate to cure thoughts of ripping off her clothes and sinking his teeth into her breasts, he searched the gas station for a lady who looked like his mother.

The latch on the belt clicked secure, and she looked up to him and smiled, giving him the go sign.

He leaned back, tilted his hat up just enough so she could see his eyes and looked at her.

She shrunk back slightly.

It wasn't very nice to toy with her. He should feel sorry for her; after all, she'd just lost her mother. And she was engaged to an asshole with a terrible inferiority complex.

Cutting her some slack, he opened his Coke and took a long swallow. With the cap screwed back on, he set it between his legs. Her eyes shifted to his bottle, and again his dick responded. "Thanks for the drink, it hits the spot."

"You're welcome." She blushed, and her back snapped up tight again.

Hope couldn't help but notice how well he filled out his jeans when he placed his soda at the bull's eye. *Hit the spot*. Did he realize his play on words, or was he so cliché he didn't hear the accuracy to them? And those eyes, in all her life, she'd never seen such an amazing color. The blue was shocking, almost electrifying. She felt like a fool; she couldn't stop staring.

He reached out and turned on the radio. Country music filled the cab.

"Do you mind the music?"

"No. It's fine." She shook her head and stared out the window.

They were definitely out of the city. Roads with names like Bloody Basin and General Crook Trail defied the beauty of the mountains, which

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framed her view of the golden dessert. Only in movies had Hope seen such landscape. Shrubs posed as trees. Cacti stood tall and some were even offending. A soft laugh escaped her.

"What's so funny?" His voice was light.

"Hmm?" God, she wanted to crawl under the seat. He must think she was a cruel-hearted bitch. Who would laugh while being driven to their mother's funeral?

"You laughed. I was just wondering what made you laugh."

Shit. She could try to make up something funny or be honest with him. Resigned to telling the truth, she looked down at her boots and tapped the tips together. "I was just thinking those cacti look like they're flipping the bird to people."

He chuckled. "Some people have said that about the saguaro. You know, its bloom is the state flower."

His low, sexy voice made it difficult to tell if he was serious or mocking her again. She dared to take a quick look at his face. His profile told her nothing, either. A noncommittal, "hmm, really?" was all she offered.

He shifted in his seat and nodded. "Yeah, really."

She shrugged a shoulder. "Huh, who knew?"

He lifted the soda bottle from between his legs, took a sip then turned to answer her and licked a drop from his lips. "I did."

Her stomach flipped, and her mind went completely blank. "You did what?"

He stretched his neck, and she could see him do a mental knuckle crack. "I knew the saguaro cactus flower is the state flower."

With her lips pressed together to keep from laughing, she nodded and raised her eyebrows, impressed. "Yes, you did. What other gems of trivia can you fill me in on?"

"I know the cactus wren is the state bird. And by 'bird', I don't mean the kind you seem so preoccupied with. It happens to live in the very cactus that blooms with the state flower." Without taking a breath, he continued. "The state tree is the Palo Verde. And the state flag has thirteen

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red and yellow stripes to represent the thirteen colonies, and a copper star in the center because Arizona is the largest copper producer."

Hope couldn't help herself; she laughed and wondered if he'd been a tour guide in his earlier years.

"What? You asked me what other trivial tidbits I could give you." His smile was easy.

She leaned against the door and watched him drive. "I believe I asked if you had any other trivial 'gems', not tidbits. I'm pretty sure there's a difference." Something about him made her want to spar.

"You mean like the ring on your finger is one hell of a gem, and it made for a nice, juicy tidbit of gossip in your circle of friends?"

She blinked at him.

"Sh— I'm sorry, that was really uncalled for. I know you're not like that."

God, how she wished she'd taken the thing off before she left. The sunlight caught the diamond embellishing her left hand and refracted light onto the dashboard. She watched the fragments of color swirl in a sort of kaleidoscope.

Last night, she had been in bed when Paul came home late and drunk. He had shown no sympathy when she told him about Janine.

"Dying is a fact of life, like higher gas prices," he callously reminded her as he shrugged out of his shirt. "It's just a little business you have to take care of." Then he gave her a closed mouth kiss and rubbed his hand over her mound.

Repulsed, she pushed him away and wondered how her life had come to this.

He moaned, unzipped his pants and tried to mount her, but she'd already rolled off the bed. After a few shallow thrusts into his hand, he groaned and passed out.

Disgusted, she'd tossed and turned on the couch as sleep evaded her all night. Frustrated, she'd given up trying and spent the rest of the night grieving for the loss of two loveless relationships, her mother's and her fiancé's.

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An overwhelming sense of emptiness filled her now at the memory.

"You're wrong." Embarrassment crept over her. "It wasn't a juicy piece of news, for the simple reason it didn't come as a surprise to anyone." Her voice edged toward bitter. "Least of all me. My father practically handpicked him for me just before he died. But I knew the marriage would never happen. To be quite honest, the ring keeps people at bay." She shivered and crossed her arms over her chest, hiding the glimmering rainbow of colors from the pointless symbol.

She scoffed then looked at him. "I know it's pathetic. But what's really interesting is that you presume to know anything about me." Her tone snapped.

His jaw muscles tensed. Shit, she was out in the middle of fucking nowhere and had just pissed off the man taking her to her mother's house. He could be driving her to butt-fuck-Egypt for all she knew.

Well, she'd taken care of herself this far, and she planned on continuing. She could handle anything he gave her. The only thing making the awkward moment bearable was the music playing on the radio.

Harrison sighed. "All I know about you is what I've heard from your mother." He shifted in his seat. "I apologize. I didn't presume anything, really."

"Well, I certainly hope my behavior reflects a little closer to my current age instead of when Janine stopped lov...knowing me."

He gripped the steering wheel tighter. "Your behavior is just right."

She couldn't believe how he'd just given up. *Who ends an argument like that?* She wasn't letting him off so easy. "Is that it? That's all you have to say?"

He focused off in the distance and gave a quick, firm nod. "For now."

Just like that, the conversation was done? "You're serious, aren't you?"

"Yep."

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She chewed on her thumbnail and stared out the window again. Grateful for the reprieve, she took a deep breath and shook her foot to the beat of some song about there being no more Arizona. As soon as she returned to New York, she'd end it with Paul. Tired of living up to her late father's expectations, she would make some very serious changes. While she was at it, she'd quit the firm she worked for too. It had been her father's dream for them to work together, not hers. Her dream was to help people. To work pro-bono for a victim's shelter, or families who couldn't afford legal representation. But after her father died, it was so much easier to go along with what his partners wanted – and Paul.

Even now she went along with what others wanted. There was still so much she didn't know. Even the most basic things, like when the funeral was or even how Janine had died. She wished more than anything that she didn't have to attend the funeral by herself. If only her father were alive and able to support and help her.

Oh, hell, who was she trying to kid? She wanted someone, anyone else to help her do what she was going to have to do.

About thirty minutes later, when her temper subsided, she decided to bite the bullet and said, "When's the funeral?"

Oh, God, her voice broke. She wouldn't cry. She hadn't shed a tear for Janine since she was seven years old, and she wasn't going to start now. To prove it, she forced herself to look at Harrison.

He glanced at her and looked uncomfortable. "Tomorrow. Tomorrow at ten o'clock. At the chapel. I'll pick you up."

She didn't need a damn chauffeur. She needed to hurry up and get this over with so she could get on with her life. "I can drive myself. I may live in New York, but I do have a driver's license."

"You don't have a car."

Her jaw dropped. "I'm sorry? Did you mean to say Janine doesn't have a car?"

He nodded. The right corner of his mouth turned up into a slight smile.

"Super," she mumbled and rested her head against the window.

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Even though things couldn't possibly get worse, she felt a strange calm. The desert changed to pine, and deep within the purple majestic mountains, she felt peace. Somehow, she belonged here, as if the air she breathed was her life blood. She didn't understand it. But then again, it could just be the cocktails she'd had for breakfast. Some food and a nap was all she needed, and then maybe she would feel normal again. Maybe.

Chapter Two

Harrison drove his huge silver truck around the back of the R&R saloon and parked in front of a house about fifty yards away from the bar.

Hope stared at the quaint little cabin. Its wooden shingled, pitched roof looked beaten by years of harsh weather. Flower boxes, balanced along the porch rail, sat empty. Vacant windows stared back at her. Her legs were numb, and her hands shook. This was it? This was what Janine had left her for?

Harrison slid out of his seat, rounded the front of the truck and opened the door for her. "Come on, darlin', I'll get your bags." He offered his hand to her.

She didn't even care when he said he would bring in her luggage. Instead, she wiped her ice cold, clammy hands on her slacks before letting him help her down from the truck.

His strong arm around her offered support as they walked toward the door.

Her heart pounded like a wild stampede, prompting shallow, quick breaths. At the first step of the wooden porch, she stopped short like a horse spooked.

"I think I need a moment." The whispered croak sounded pitiful.

Harrison pressed the house key into her shaking hand and nodded before he retreated to the truck to get her baggage.

She sized up the rugged front door, feeling like she and the little house were gun fighters ready to draw their pistols. With a deep breath,

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she took one step up. The echo her dainty boots made resounded deep in her heart. Yet with each hesitant step, the hollow sound gave her the determination to climb the rest.

The earthy smell of wood and dust hung heavy in the air as she unlocked the door.

Her eyes slowly adjusted to the dim light over the stove in the simple kitchen she entered. Rich maroons and forest greens, with copper shining here and there in the living room, were warm and welcoming. A rustic table next to an antique potbelly fireplace, still filled with freshly burned logs, dared her to enter. A chill traveled up her spine when pictures in frames of different sizes and shapes caught her attention. She crept over the threshold, willing herself to be strong, picked up a photo and traced her own face with shaky fingertips.

Harrison set her luggage just inside the front door.

She ran her fingers along the edge of the table, unable to bring herself to look him in the eye. "Harrison?" Her voice sounded guarded despite the quiver.

He tilted his hat up.

"Thank you." She dismissed him.

With a slight tip of his hat, he shut the door quietly behind him.

The house darkened, and Hope turned and surveyed her surroundings. An overstuffed, plaid sofa casually furnished the middle of the room, facing the fireplace. A dark, knot-holed, pine coffee table sat comfortably in front of the sofa.

Her bags were neatly stacked by the front door in the kitchen, with her coat draped over the top of them. Alone and exhausted, she decided to fix herself a cup of tea then unpack.

A quick look through the cabinets, and she found what she needed. While the tea brewed, she opened the curtains on the window facing the front porch and leaned against the sill. The view was of a dirt road and the back side of the saloon with Harrison's truck parked at the back door. He was probably inside satisfying people's curiosity about her. *So let him. I have nothing to hide*, she thought.

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The kettle's whistle interrupted her thoughts. With her hot cup in hand, she went to see the view at the back of the house.

Opening the blinds on the Arcadian door, she squinted against the lowering sun in the pasture spread out before her. She slid the glass door open, stepped out into the cool air and inhaled the smell of fresh cut pine. Off in the distance, horses grazed on delicate spring grass. About half a mile down a narrow road to the right side stood stables and a barn. She wondered how much of this had belonged to Janine.

The air felt like springtime, a welcomed change from the bitter cold of New York. Hope sat on the comfortably worn, denim-covered cushions of the pine-framed patio furniture, sipped her tea and took in the breathtaking views of the majestic mountains.

The peace would have been deafening if it weren't for the breeze rustling through the trees and the birds chirping in the distance. Curled up and relaxed by the heat of the setting sun, she tried to convince herself she was in Central Park, or anywhere else. Anywhere untouched by Janine.

Just because she was Janine's only heir didn't mean she wanted anything Janine had left behind. She wanted nothing from the mother who had given nothing.

A stiff neck and growling stomach woke her. It was freezing, and she was starving. Spending time in the house where Janine had been just days before didn't hold a lot of appeal. Hope grabbed her coat and walked across the dirt road to the R&R.

The thick oak door, branded with two R's, was heavy and rugged. She gave a good tug to open it and wasn't surprised to hear country music playing in the background.

Harrison was cleaning glasses behind the long, heavily marred oak bar that ran the length of the room. A few men, sitting in a line drinking beer, stopped their conversations as soon as they saw her. The wall at the other side of the room had high-backed booths.

A booth would suit her mood and need for privacy; she felt so vulnerable and on display. All she wanted was a drink and dinner, and then she wanted to leave. Even though the thought of sleeping in Janine's

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house was creepy, meeting Janine's friends, enduring their words of sympathy and politely expressing her own to them, held much less appeal. Lying wasn't something she believed in.

Her boots, loud on the wooden floor, were sure to rouse the waitress. She scooted across the booth's padded bench and faced the bar with her back against the wall. Instruments filled a small stage just beyond a large dance floor.

Harrison worked behind the bar. No way a bartender here afforded the kind of truck he drove. She was no expert on trucks, but she was sure ones loaded like his didn't come cheap.

Her eyes followed his every move. Muscles flexed under his tight, long-sleeved T-shirt, making her hum in places she hadn't thought could. Those eyes. It was a sin to hide them beneath a cowboy hat.

She checked her watch. Nearly five minutes had passed since she'd sat down. With no one else sitting in a booth and just the few men seated at the bar, she looked behind her for the waitress, wondering what could be taking her so long.

Strong, slow steps approach her booth. Relieved, she turned around.

Harrison stopped at her table then slid onto the bench across from her. "You're probably starving."

Her expression said 'duh'. "Is there a waitress, or do we need to place our own orders?"

He grinned. "Sharon, the waitress, doesn't serve dinner during the week, only on Fridays, Saturdays, and Sundays. If you'd like dinner, I'll place your order, but if you'd like decent service, I suggest you sit at the bar, 'cause I'm it for now."

Her jaw dropped. "You? You tend bar here?"

A rush of cold air came through the opened door, and two men came in and took a seat at the bar.

"Sometimes, and in about thirty minutes, there isn't going to be an empty seat. So if you want to eat, you'd better take a stool."

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He tipped his hat then strolled over to the men who'd sat down on what she assumed were very familiar stools. Harrison shook hands with them before pouring two beers into frosted mugs.

Hope wasn't sure she'd survive her empty stomach. For tonight anyway, this was her only option if she wanted to eat.

She slid out of the booth, walked across the room, smiled tersely at the men and picked a stool at the far end of the bar. With her back straight and her hands crossed on the bar top, she waited while Harrison served beers and talked with the men as if they were old friends.

How well did they know—? Before she finished the thought, the men looked in her direction and raised their glasses. She just got her answer. She smiled back politely and prayed they wouldn't try to engage her in conversation. How Janine had made a living here was beyond Hope; the place was empty, and the prospect of there being standing room only in thirty minutes was doubtful. How hard would it be to find a manager for a bar or sell it? She figured one week, two at the maximum, then she could resume her life.

Finally, Harrison placed a menu in front of her. She glanced over it quickly and decided she really wanted the hamburger with French fries and a Coke, so...she ordered the chicken Caesar salad and a beer. She was still tired and didn't want a full stomach when she tried to go to sleep.

Harrison poured her beer then went to the kitchen. "She ordered the chicken Caesar salad." Smug victory was obvious in his voice.

Louie cackled and handed over the salad with five bucks under the plate. "Next time, I want to take a look before I make my bet."

Harrison grabbed up the salad and the five dollars. "Well, if it makes you feel any better, I really thought it was going your way. She had hamburger and French fries written all over her face, and then, my friend, she changed her mind."

Louie shook his head and mumbled something about women being typical.

Harrison served the salad to her and placed silverware rolled in a paper napkin next to it.

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"Wow! That was fast. I am absolutely starving." She took a bite and closed her eyes while she chewed. "Oh my, this is really good."

It was nice to see a glimpse of happiness from her. Harrison smiled and put out baskets of peanuts.

"A roll would be great with this. Do you have any?"

Before Harrison could answer her, the swinging door from the kitchen swung open, and Louie came out with a plate of rolls. He crossed the room and yelled at the men perched on the sturdy stools. "Y'all need to hurry up and decide whatcha gonna get for your dinner. I'm not gonna be waitin' on ya all night. I got my own things to prepare too!" He set the plate beside the salad.

Nice as could be, he turned his attention to Hope. "I thought maybe you would like some rolls with your salad."

Hope swallowed the mouthful of food. "Oh, you must read minds. Thank you so much. I'd just asked for rolls."

Damn, he'd been so close for once. Harrison rolled his eyes and reached for the five-dollar bill already warmed by the inside of his pocket. He handed it over to Louie.

Louie snatched it and put it in his own pocket. He wiped his hand on his apron and reached for Hope's. "I'm Louie. It's a real pleasure to meet you."

Hope wiped the corners of her mouth primly with her napkin then used her free hand to shake his with a firm grip.

Harrison knew she was much stronger than she appeared.

She smiled and looked puzzled over the exchange of money.

Of course, she would have no way of knowing about the running bet between him and Louie. Louie always knew what people wanted before they did. Harrison tried, but couldn't ever compare to Louie.

"I'm Hope. It's a pleasure to meet you as well. Your salad is delicious."

Louie blushed and waved a hand as if a fly buzzed in front of him. He turned and yelled over to the men. "I have one hamburger special, medium rare, no onions with French fries. Do I have any takers?"

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The two men who had just entered the bar and taken stools raised their hands in unison, both claiming victory.

Louie cackled all the way back to the kitchen.

Harrison pulled the tip of his hat down and served the men who steadily started to fill the bar.

He tried to be discreet when answering their questions about her. It was natural for them to be curious about the daughter of the bar's late owner who had touched all of them. More than once, he heard she was the spitting image of her mama.

Somehow, he figured that wouldn't go over well with Hope. Damned if it wasn't the truth, though. Janine's mouth had been quick to smile. Hope's just proved it could be, too, at least when she was served good food and didn't feel threatened. Janine had been maybe a few inches taller, but Hope carried herself so straight and sure they would have looked even. Janine's style had been vastly different than Hope's. Janine had favored blue jeans and leather. Hope looked more to be the silk and suede connoisseur. Janine had been come-as-you are; Hope was appropriate-dress-required.

Harrison felt her stare as he tended to drinks and conversation. He knew she was used to preppy pretty boys sporting designer suits or khakis with golf shirts. He may be a private detective, but he still wouldn't be caught dead in slacks and polo shirts. No, his Levi's fit him just fine, even if they were a bit tight in the crotch. Damn, she made him hard, just watching her.

She swallowed the last of her beer, wiped her mouth and studied his.

"I think we should buy her a drink," Jack offered.

"Me too," George agreed.

Harrison broke his stare. "Let's see what she says." He nodded to the men then sauntered to her end of the bar and tilted up his hat.

She gulped hard and gazed into his eyes.

He grinned, savoring her stare. "Can I get you anything else, darlin'?" He took her plate and silverware then disposed of them in the bus tub under the counter.

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She looked nervous, licked her lips then ran her finger around the rim of her empty beer mug and shook her head. "I really shouldn't, but thank you."

He leaned his forearms on the bar top. "That's too bad, 'cause there are some gentlemen who'd like to buy you a drink."

Her mouth dropped open, and she squinted. "I don't know what kind of women frequent this place, but I don't go trolling for free drinks."

He took a deep, regrettable breath. "I figured you'd say something like that. But—"

"Once again, you assume you know me," Hope grabbed her purse then opened her wallet "And once again, you'd be wrong." She threw down a twenty-dollar bill, jumped off the stool then stomped out of the bar.

Harrison wanted to throw her empty mug across the room. He'd waited six long years to be able to get close enough to talk to her. Her effect on him was like a vice around his heart. Instead, he grabbed up the mug and napkin, dumped them in the tub of other dirty dishes then wiped off the counter.

"Yep, has a temper just like her mama, too." Jack laughed before he swallowed the last of his beer.

The men who lined the bar every night lifted their glasses in respect for the deceased woman.

"You would know now, wouldn't you, Jack?" Harrison answered, remembering, on more than one occasion, how Janine had lured Jack out back only to hose him down and sober him up. Being he was seventy-years-old and harmless; and his wife Theresa would send him back in the next night with his hat in hand and regret on his face, Janine would give him a big hug and a loud kiss on his blushing cheek then buy his first round.

That's how she'd treated all her customers, like family. Janine had known better than most what it would mean to have someone forgive and welcome you back with open arms. Harrison missed her already.

Tucker had sat closest to Hope before she left the bar. He took a sip of his beer with obvious amusement on his face.

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Harrison snarled at his best friend, "Don't say it, just don't."

Tucker's grin widened. He tipped his hat way back and leaned against the bar.

Tracie, the full time bartender, rushed into the dimly lit room. She snatched her apron off a brass hook. "Okay, what'd I miss?"

The men who lined the solid wood counter all grumbled about women, prerogatives and having to go out and fetch their own dinners. Usually they just came in for a drink, but tonight their wives had told them to fend for themselves; they were busy preparing food for the funeral tomorrow.

Harrison watched as she moved like a whirlwind behind the bar, refreshing baskets of peanuts, wiping up condensation rings, checking the inventory of the liquors behind her. He couldn't help his grin when she turned and stared Tucker in the face. Tucker leaned back.

Tracie leaned against the bar and spot checked the glasses. It didn't bother him that she blatantly ignored him and zeroed in on Tucker with a flirty smile and mischief in her eye. "Okay, spill it. What's she like?"

"Aw, come on, Tracie, give her a break." Tucker glanced sideways.

Harrison chuckled to himself when Tucker looked at him for help. Tucker let the stool fall forward with a thud and then whispered quickly, "She stormed out of here before I even got a good look at her."

Tracie didn't even have to ask; she reached for a shot glass and the gold tequila. She poured out the liquor then held onto the bottle. "Is she really all that bad?"

Harrison lifted the tiny glass and held it high in confirmation. He put the rim to his mouth, tossed back his head and swallowed deep. The burn did nothing to sooth him.

Tracie poured another. He just studied it.

"Okay. At least tell me, is she pretty like Janine?"

Harrison scoffed.

Tucker leaned the stool back again and nodded, showing absolute approval, and mouthed the words, "Oh yeah."

"She's got her momma's eyes," Jack chimed in.

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Their eyes were the same, faded blue like soft, well-loved jeans caressing your skin.

Harrison abruptly stood, swallowed the shot, tipped his hat to Tracie then looked up the line of men. "I'll see you all tomorrow." He left the bar without another word.

Chapter Three

Harrison jumped into the cab of his truck then stopped short. Her scent lingered in the leather. God, she smelled so good, his whole body reacted. What would she smell like if he ever got to hold her close? It would never happen. When she found out about him, she would hate him.

On the drive up from the airport, he'd wanted to tell her about the last six years. That he'd been hired by her mother to investigate her well-being. He wanted to tell her all the things he'd been a part of. Like her graduation from high school and from NYU. She deserved to know he'd seen her Christmas shopping with her dad and crying at his funeral. He knew when she'd gotten her driver's license and bought her first car. Hell, the scar across the knuckles on his right hand was proof he'd watched Paul slip that ring on her finger over lunch, and how his heart had broken when she went home alone and cried. Only his honor had stopped him from telling Hope the truth that afternoon.

"Shit," he cursed under his breath and hit the steering wheel with the heel of his hand. He would tell her the day after tomorrow. Tomorrow would be hard enough with the funeral. The thought of her hating him ripped him apart.

He threw the truck in reverse and backed up a bit, then punched it into drive. The tires spun, and dirt kicked up as he sped down the dirt road. His headlights passed over Janine's front porch, illuminating Hope on the top step, her legs pulled tight against her chest and her arms

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wrapped around them. He should leave well enough alone and keep going, but he knew he wouldn't be able to sleep with the image of her balled up and crying in his head.

He stomped on the brakes, and the truck skidded to a stop. The dust barely had settled by the time he made it to the bottom step.

"Please, just go away." Her voice was thick with tears even as she tried to sound strong.

He had two younger sisters and knew, when they were this upset, the last thing they really wanted was to be walked away from.

As though he were approaching a hurt animal, he climbed the stairs slowly, sat beside her and put his arm around her shoulder. With one arm, he tucked her in close while his free hand stroked the stray hairs from her face. She felt good against him.

Hope tried to sit straight, but he held her tighter and rocked from side to side. Her body trembled next to his. If only he could make her pain go away. "It's okay to cry. You don't lose any strength from a broken heart." He could hear Janine's voice echo his own. "Your mom used to say 'your strength comes from your soul'." He did his best to soothe and comfort her by sharing his strength.

Hope shook her head against his chest and took a deep breath. "I can't go inside. I keep trying, but I can't make myself do it." She struggled to curl up into a ball.

He rested his chin on top of her head and silently cursed himself and everyone else who thought she would want to sleep in her dead mother's home. What a bunch of asses they all were. He tightened his grip around her shoulder, looped his other arm under her legs and lifted her as he stood up. He stepped down the stairs and stomped to his truck.

She struggled to get down. "What are you doing?"

He opened his door and set her on the seat. "I'm taking you somewhere else to stay. You should've never been expected to stay here by yourself."

"But—"

He shook his head, whispered, "I need the key," and held out his hand. The key was embedded in her fisted palm. He took her hand in his

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and unfolded her fingers. Deep, purple indents from the key marred her soft skin. She was so strung up; she must not have realized the key was digging into her flesh. "Oh, darlin'." He kissed the palm of her hand then rubbed it twice with his thumb. "I'll be right back, just sit tight."

The house hadn't been disturbed since he left her. Had she spent any time in it at all? He grabbed her bags, carried them to his truck, and tossed them into the bed.

She still sat where he'd left her on the driver's seat with her legs hanging off the side.

"Hope, honey?" Tears clung to the long lashes, framing her faded blue eyes. "I don't want to argue about your driving abilities, but if you don't mind, I think I'd like to drive tonight."

Without saying a word, she moved over with a sweet smile, looking like someone's lost little girl who was being rescued.

He jumped in, drove down the dirt path and parked in front of the barn at the end of the pasture from Janine's backyard. A single light glowed over the double barn doors. Quiet filled the cab when he cut the engine and took her hand. Christ, it was ice cold and still trembled, just like her voice when she whispered, "You think a barn is a better choice?"

There was nothing wrong with it. Of course, he knew it had been converted on the inside. He liked the outside looking like a plain old rustic barn, though.

"Darlin', for tonight, it's your only choice." Still holding her hand, he opened his door and helped her out. At the bed of the truck, he stopped for her bags.

"Oh, here, let me, I can get those."

He didn't grace her stubbornness with a reply and arranged the bags so he could still hold her shaking hand. Why did she think she needed to be so strong? After a gentle squeeze of her hand, he led her to the door. He set the bags down, unlocked the door and swung it wide open.

Hope let out a tiny gasp. "This place is beautiful," she whispered. Her eyes took in the warm surroundings of pine and leather lit by a dim

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lamp in the kitchen. As if in a trance, she walked slowly into the center of the room.

Harrison smiled and brought in her luggage.

The parquet floor glimmered where the moonbeams hit as they shined through the windows of the Dutch doors centered at the back wall of the open, spacious home. The kitchen was nestled in the far left corner; a round pine table for four sat invitingly in front of its entrance. A soft, tan and dusty-rust plaid pillow topped each chair. The left wall, faux-painted to look like suede, was lined with shelves and displayed belt buckles, trophies and leather-bound books.

Across the room was a living area. Hope pictured a fire crackling in the stone hearth, warming anyone who might sit on the plush, buttery tan, leather sofa and oversized chair as their imaginary snifters of warm brandy rested on the knotted pine end and matching coffee table. The hand-knitted, chestnut-colored throw casually draped over the sofa's back completed the cozy room.

Behind the living area was the bedroom. There were no walls separating it from the living area, just three huge wooden columns supporting the loft above it. A thick, hand-carved ladder led to the loft and added rustic charm.

In awe, Hope thought this place should be in *Better Homes and Gardens: Country Style*. It was warm and welcoming and showed Harrison had a lot of heart or a magician for an interior designer.

Harrison placed her bags at the foot of his bed. "Can I get you anything? I have some tea." His voice was soft and comforting.

Nervously, she shook her head. "No. I'm fine. Really, thank you. You've done more than enough."

He crossed the small room then smiled, slowly rubbing his strong hands down her shoulder. "You're freezing and trembling still. I'll just fix you a warm cup. Why don't you go over and sit on the couch? And I'll start a fire and get your tea."

Tea didn't sound too threatening. She nodded and sat on the sofa as Harrison built the fire. He was very efficient and got the splintered wood burning in a flash.

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She watched the fire dance while she heard him work in the kitchen.

"Here you go."

Her heart skipped a beat when she saw his caring eyes. She took hold of the mug with both hands, only to have another pair wrap around them. The tenderness from this stranger was so foreign to her; she had no idea how to react. She looked at him with tired eyes. He didn't move or say anything. For a moment, all she heard was her heart pounding and the popping of the sap from the logs on the fire.

She took a sip of the tea, and a rush of brandy surprised her and heated her face as the alcohol burned on the way down her throat.

He smiled, brought his hand to her cheek, and stroked the stray strands of hair behind her ear. "I thought some brandy might warm you up and relax you a bit."

With a nod, she took another sip, hoping for either the courage to resist the temptation of him or to pass out right there. After another sip, knowing her wishes weren't bound to come true, she set her cup on the table and rubbed her arms. She tilted her head and admired his body.

"The fire is lovely." Her voice squeaked, still weak and tired.

He snapped open the blanket from the back of the sofa, brought it around to her front and pulled her to his chest as he leaned back against the arm of the sofa.

"Harrison?"

He crossed her chest with one arm while the other gently pulled the band from her hair and set it loose. "Shh, don't worry, darlin', just lay here." His hand continued to stroke her head.

It was so soothing and comforting. His chin rested on her head, and his scent scrambled her senses. Every time his hand combed through her hair, a ripple of need cascaded down her body and ended in a pool of wetness between her legs.

She should feel guilty. Technically, she was still engaged. A shudder of protest wracked her body.

Harrison held her closer. She'd never really loved Paul, and he probably never had loved her. Why they pretended, even after her father's

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death, was beyond her. He never made her feel secure, warm, comforted, or loved, like Harrison.

Loved? Like Harrison? Maybe the loved part was an over exaggeration, but it really felt the way that love should feel like. Tears stung her eyes, and her throat tightened up. She felt more love from a stranger than she'd ever had. Ever.

The pathetic reality was too much, and she decided to do something about it. She held the blanket close when she turned on her side and snuggled into Harrison's perfect chest. She tilted her head back and looked deep into his eyes. He looked haunted.

His hand continued to stroke her side, stopping just short of her breasts. She let go of the blanket's edge and ran her hand over his chest, circling his nipples. His chest rose with a sharp intake of air, and his muscles flexed under the tight cotton shirt. Heat radiated from him, warming her to the very center of her being. Her heart beat faster, and her legs squeezed together tight in a fruitless attempt to relieve the tension.

Harrison stared into the fire, breathing in her perfumed scent, and relished her heartbeat against his chest. He felt her thighs squeeze against each other, and wished he could take her. God, he wanted her hand to work its way lower and stroke his aching cock. Trying not to imagine how it would feel to have her soft, small hand close around his hardness only made him think of it more.

Sad eyes and streaks left by fallen tears lucky enough to end up on her lip, broke his heart. He would give his right arm to erase any evidence of her hurting. He wanted to take her mouth in his and drink her in. He wanted to fill his hands with her breasts resting against him. He wanted to feel her, all of her, naked under him as he buried himself deep inside her wetness.

He ran his hand up to her hair, laced his fingers through the silk strands and ever so gently pulled her head back. Her pulse beat in her neck when he lowered his lips to her cheek and kissed away the tear.

The tiniest squeak escaped her.

"Shh. God, Hope, I want you..." He placed his lips against her head and continued, filling himself with her scent. "...but not like this. Not

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when you're hurting." He sighed and pressed his lips against her head again. "Not when you're wearing another man's ring."

She nodded, shut her eyes, buried her face against him and cried. He continued to console her in silence as her hot tears seared and soaked his shirt.

Her sobs quieted to heavy breaths. Slowly, her body relaxed into his and then went still. Sleep had taken over his job of comforting her. While she slept, he lay there, still painfully hard, wishing she wasn't hurting, wishing in two days she wouldn't hate him.

Chapter Four

Safe and cozy, Hope snuggled into his warm, solid chest. *This must be what love feels like.* Strong, warm hands fondled and kneaded a blazing path to her breasts. Washboard abs paved her way to a long, thick cock. A wave of desire rushed between her legs. Her once timid hand wrapped around his silky hardness. Every confident stroke was excitement and power like she'd never known. Each drop of pre-cum made her thirsty to satisfy him. Her wanton tongue licked her lips with anticipation.

Harrison coughed and rubbed his hand up her side.

Oh, God! She held her breath. *Please, tell me I was dreaming.* Maybe he would just go away if she pretended to still be asleep. Nothing like meeting a sexy, nice guy for the first time, crying your eyes out, then falling asleep, only to wake up fondling him like a cherished lover.

She hadn't really fondled him, had she?

Afraid to face the truth, she cracked open an eye. Her hand was on his chest. Oh, thank God. She exhaled slowly, letting the relief sooth her nerves. Maybe if she didn't move, he would slide from under her and she could just hide beneath the blanket until he went away.

He patted her face, feeling it rather than caressing it.

How odd. She couldn't help herself and lifted her head to look at him with her brow creased in question.

He took a deep breath, and his mouth twisted up in a crooked smile. "Just checking for tears."

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"Ugh." She tried to hide her face. "I'm so embarrassed. Really, I'm usually not such a blubbering idiot." She took his firm pats on her behind as a sign and sat up.

He sat up beside her and rubbed his scruffy face. "Well, you usually don't fly across the country, deal with a bunch of people you've never met, then be expected to sleep in your...well, your mother's house all by yourself, either." He stood up, scratched his stomach and stretched. The muscles in his back had to be protesting, but he showed no sign of stiffness. He turned to help her up, and her face was at eye level with his zipper. Actually, he was showing impressive signs of stiffness.

Her face heated, and she lowered her head.

"I'm only human, darlin'."

She could hear the grin in his rough morning voice, and stood on her own. "Well, I'm not. At least until I have a cup of coffee."

He ran his fingers through his dark brown hair graced with just a touch of curl to it.

He looked so different. "You're not wearing your hat." It was resting on the coffee table.

He chuckled and strode to the kitchen. "You're sharp first thing in the morning, aren't you?" His bite wasn't so bad.

Two could play his game. "Well, not half as sharp as your tongue."

He stopped and pinned her with his stare from across the kitchen counter. His tongue moistened his lower lip, and he grinned really slowly. "Darlin', you have no idea."

She swallowed hard, wishing she was choking on a hot sip of coffee instead of her foot.

He chuckled with smug satisfaction and tugged open the refrigerator. "You can have first dibs on the shower while the coffee's brewing." He pulled his head out of the refrigerator, his hands full of eggs, cream, butter, cheese, and ham. "You'll have hot water if you go first."

She tried to be demure. "Well, then what'll be left over for you?"

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He cracked an egg into a copper bowl and poured some cream. Before the final drop fell, he caught it with the tip of his finger, licked it then smiled. "Honey, I never settle for leftovers."

That raised her eyebrows. She considered a snappy retort, but decided against it for once.

She slid off the stool, headed for the bathroom and made a mental note not to spar with Harrison in the morning...um...make that never.

She looked in the cabinet for a clean towel. With a smidgen of guilt, she snooped for evidence of a girlfriend, too. Thankfully, she didn't find any. Not because she was interested; she just didn't want to do a whole lot of explaining to some irate, jealous girlfriend.

She undressed, stepped into the spray of hot water and realized she'd forgotten her shampoo and soap, and her whole bag, for that matter. She'd been preoccupied, thinking about his 'leftover' comment. Well, she wasn't going to go out there now and waste the hot water. It wouldn't hurt to use his shampoo and soap, would it?

The scent of his shampoo engulfed the bathroom. It was subtle, but provocative. Thoughts of his slippery body with sexy-smelling lather sliding down his chest sent tingles to her nipples.

She grabbed the soap and worked small circles over her shoulders. Great, his soap smelled like his shampoo, too. God, it was stimulating. Paying extra attention to her breasts sent shivers between her legs. She rubbed the soap down her abdomen and between her legs over her lips. The hard, smooth bar of soap slipped across her clit, releasing a squeaky moan from her throat.

She imagined his cock instead of her hand, working her arousal, making her burn for him, his long fingers parting her, preparing her to accept him. If only it was really his mouth fluttering over her breasts instead of the water rushing over them, stroking her, reaching the perfect spot, making her knees buckle with orgasm.

Shit! The soap slipped and made a loud, chaotic racket as it bounced and slid around the shower floor. Embarrassed, she picked it up and almost dropped it again. She shut off the water, snapped the towel from the peg on the wall and patted her flushed body dry to the beat of

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her pounding heart. Now all she had to do was go out to the bedroom and get her bag with her bathroom essentials. Just great.

The thick, rust-colored towel barely covered her to mid-thigh. She took a deep breath then let it out slowly. Everyone masturbated; it was no big deal. Logic kicked in and reminded her that most people didn't fantasize and masturbate in other people's showers...before their own mother's funeral.

She slid the door open and quickly prayed Harrison was looking for something in a bottom cabinet in the kitchen, and she would go unnoticed. No such luck.

He leaned against the counter facing the bedroom and stared out into the far distance.

She gripped the towel tighter, gave a weak smile, grabbed her bag and dashed back into the bathroom, leaving a trail of water drops behind her. She almost had herself convinced he didn't even see her through his daydream. Almost.

She dressed in her conservative skirt and jacket, dried her hair, tied it back, applied moisturizer, some mascara and lipstick, and she was done. Minutes later, she came out of the little room as if she hadn't just modeled his towel.

With a calm, somber voice, he greeted her return from the bathroom. "Good timing; have a seat." He nodded toward the table set with silverware.

Guilt rattled her nerves because he'd gone to so much trouble while she was enjoying a private moment in the shower. It was Harrison's fault; if he hadn't smelled so good, she never would have fantasized about him. She sat down, poured some cream and sugar in her coffee and took a sip. Ashamed, she could barely look him in the eye.

"This looks very good." Her voice was soft and slightly shaky.

Harrison stared at her over the rim of his steaming mug. His face didn't reveal anything; he nodded in appreciation for her compliment.

She pushed the eggs around on her plate and shifted in her seat.

After eating in silence for what seemed like an eternity, he finally spoke up. "The memorial is at ten, like I told you. And then there's the

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reception at the R&R afterwards." He wiped his mouth and stood to clear his plate.

Hope jumped at the chance for something to do. Anything would be better than waiting on pins and needles. "Let me do the dishes. You go and shower."

He shook his head in protest and picked up his plate.

"I do know how to do dishes," she insisted, pulling his plate from his hands.

He gave in easily, released the plate and headed off to the bathroom.

Hope did the dishes quickly and wiped down the countertops and table. She walked into the living room, folded the knit blanket, and tossed it along the back of the couch. The room looked fit for a magazine, just as it had the night before.

The water from the shower shut off, and she figured Harrison needed privacy to get dressed. The morning sun shone through the Dutch doors at the back of the house, luring her to go out and take a look.

The backyard really wasn't a yard at all; it was a huge arena stretching all the way to Janine's, and to the right, there was what looked to be horse stables. She wondered if there were horses there, and if there were, who took care of them? She stuffed her hands in her coat pockets, huddled against the cold morning air and decided to go take a look.

The stable was dimly lit by the rising sun. Several horses to her right and left greeted her with their big heads reaching over their stall doors. Approaching them was easy; she'd taken riding lessons for years at stables in Queens. The horses appeared to be well taken care of. She breathed in deep, relishing the smell of the fresh hay and the pine-fresh scent of wood chips lining the barn's center aisle.

Friendly and curious about her, the horses nudged her shoulder, wanting attention. She paused to scratch a golden horse's cheek and rub its smooth neck.

"Do you ride?"

Startled, Hope jumped and turned to face Harrison. Backlit by the morning sun, his masculine silhouette only made her wish the fantasy in

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the shower had been a reality instead of her depraved imagination. He leaned against the door with his arms crossed over his muscular chest. A clean, black cowboy hat sat on his freshly washed hair, covering his eyes. The sun glinted off the silver beads from the hat's band.

"Yeah," she said, trying for casual, instead sounding wistful.

He walked toward her. He patted the horse she was scratching. "This here is Begochiddy." He rubbed behind the quarter horse's ear. The horse tilted its head in approval.

Hope enjoyed that he knew just how to touch the horse to give it pleasure. "She sure is beautiful."

Harrison covered the horse's ears. "Well, don't let him hear you say that."

"Oops." She shut her eyes tight, embarrassed by the mistake. "I didn't take that close of a look."

He gave Begochiddy's neck a loving pat. "The name is Navajo. It means 'golden haired child of the sun'."

Harrison moved to the next horse who watched them with big, patient eyes. "This lady is Hozho. It means 'beauty in balance'." He pulled a sugar cube from his pocket and gave it to the horse. "If you treat her well and give her sugar cubes, she's a beautiful lady. If you forget the sugar, she can be real ugly. That's just her own way of keeping the balance."

Intrigued, Hope gave the grey horse a smile and ran her hand down the long, strong neck. "Who takes care of them all?"

Harrison gave Hozho a final rub then moved to the next horse. As he loved on the little Paint, who was smaller than the others, he sighed. "Janine did mostly. All this..." He looked out at the arena. "...is hers. She loved all these horses."

Hope crossed her arms over her chest, and her throat tightened up.

"Janine took these horses in when no one else wanted them. She had hired hands to do the labor, but she cherished them, rode them and nursed them back to health in some cases. She made sure they knew they were loved. Her dream was to build this place into a ranch for kids who are sick."

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Hope turned her back and walked away. Like knives, his words cut her very soul. It wasn't easy to hear how much these horses had been loved by her mother when she never was. It stung that Janine'd had dreams of providing for other kids when she never cared about the only daughter she had.

Harrison reached out and grabbed her elbow. "Hope...your mother loved easily. She had the biggest heart I'll probably ever know. The people in this town loved her very much because she loved...so easily."

He could see the walls Hope was building around her even as he spoke. He brought his hand to her face. She tried to look away, but he held her chin with a firm grip and lifted it. "She loved you, Hope."

Hope just stared back at him with eyes hardened with doubt. It was too late. He thought about taking her thin, drawn lips and parting them with his tongue, nibbling them until they were full and pouty, wanting more. Instead, he let go gently and said with regret, "We'd better get goin'. I need to stop by my parents on the way to the chapel."

Harrison let her walk ahead of him. He figured she'd need a lot of patience from him today. Yesterday was a stroll in the prairie in comparison to what she would have to face today. They drove to his parents' house in silence.

Harrison slid out of the truck and rounded the tailgate, but before he could open the door for her, Hope already jumped out.

Uncomfortable with the forced situation of meeting Harrison's parents, she kept her expression like something she would wear to a business meeting. Not overly friendly, but not completely closed off. She was definitely holding her cards close to her chest. Harrison went to take her hand and lead her inside.

She snatched it away. "I'm a big girl. I don't need you to hold my hand."

He adjusted his hat and gave her a slight nod.

The aroma of baked beans and apple pie welcomed Hope as she followed Harrison through the front door. A beautiful girl of about eighteen, Hope guessed, walked out of a hallway.

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"Oh, you're here." She put her arms around Harrison's neck and gave him a kiss on his cheek.

He rubbed his hand up and down her back then gave it a pat.

"Jaycee, this is Hope. Hope, my sister Jaycee."

Jaycee and Hope assessed each other. After all, they were both girls.

"Glad to meet you, Hope. Oh, I love your coat. You'll have to tell me all about New York. Someday I'm going to see it, maybe even live there."

Jaycee's fresh excitement rattled Hope's already frayed nerves and left her speechless.

Harrison shook his head and took Hope's arm. "Where're Mom and Dad?"

Before Jaycee could answer, a small woman came around the corner with an apple pie in her hands, looking flustered. "Oh, good, you're here already!" She offered her cheek.

Harrison took off his hat and kissed his mother. She patted his arm with her free hand as if she'd expected and appreciated the kiss.

Her mouth turned up into a huge smile, making her bright eyes wrinkle. "Hope. You of course must be Hope. Here, take this pie, Harry." She brushed by her son.

Hope raised her brow and did an inward smirk. Harry? No way did he look like a Harry.

Maggie took Hope in her arms, gave her a hug, drew her back and gave her a good look. "Oh, you are the spitting image of your mother." Maggie wiped a small tear from her eye. "Yep, just the spittin' image."

Before Hope could say anything, a booming voice came from the back of the house. "Jenna, if you don't get a move on, you're walking!"

Jaycee rolled her eyes. "I'll go get her."

Maggie fluffed the curls of her hair, straightened the imaginary wrinkles from her skirt and bellowed, "Ben! If you don't stop your shouting, you're going to scare away our guest."

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Harrison's father came into the room, grumbling about something under the guise of clearing his throat. Hope thought it was one of the better impersonations she'd heard of the throat clearing charade.

Ben gave Harrison a hug, not a cheap sissy hug, but a huge bear hug with a lot of heart in it. The easy affection these people shared surprised her. When Ben looked at her, she feared he would squeeze the life out of her. He held her at arms' length then pulled her into his huge chest and wrapped his arms around her. His chest was so big her hands didn't meet behind his back.

"Hope, I just want you to know, your mother was one helluva lady. Damn glad I knew her, and I miss her already." He sniffled, pulled a handkerchief from his pocket and blew his nose into it. "Damn allergies."

Maggie patted his arm affectionately. Hope thought it was sweet how she pacified his lie.

Hope was overwhelmed by the ease with which these people made her feel welcomed. They didn't know her, nor was she sure they'd known of her before her mother's death. And yet they were acting as if she were part of their family.

Maggie took the pie from Harrison. "Ben, you grab up the beans and let's go." She smiled at Hope again then headed out to the rust-colored pickup parked in the front yard.

"Hi, Harrison, hi, Hope," Jenna said. "Shit, Daddy's gonna leave. We gotta go!" She and Jaycee ran by and hopped into the truck just before it pulled out.

Harrison chuckled. "My dad wasn't joking when he said they would walk. They've walked before, and they'll walk again."

"You okay?" Harrison took her hand in his and started walking to his own truck.

She squared her shoulders and looked him straight in the eye. "I'm fine. Really, you don't have to worry about me."

He gave her hand a pat reminiscent of the one Maggie had comforted her husband with. "We'd better get going." He tipped his hat.

Hope felt like a bitch, but she couldn't understand why these people were being so nice to her when they'd never met her before. It was

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very different from the snobby, stiff-lipped handshake kind of relationships she had in New York.

Harrison started the truck. "You don't have to be strong for anybody here, Hope. You can be yourself, and everyone will still accept you."

She gave him a polite, dismissive smile, reached back to fasten her seat belt and sat up straight.

Harrison shifted the truck in gear and drove without another word.

Guilty of being a bitch, she broke the silence. "Your sisters are beautiful. They ran by so fast they looked like twins."

"They are twins, and they are beautiful." His voice carried a hint of regret.

"Does it bother you to have two gorgeous sisters?" Surprise colored her question.

"No." He shifted in his seat. "It bothers me that every guy in town wants to take out my two gorgeous sisters."

"Well, they are old enough to decide what they do, aren't they?" She tried to defend them.

"Nope, they're sixteen, going on twenty-one," he quipped.

Their age surprised Hope. They looked like they were twenty. "Your parents seem very nice."

"That's because they are," he agreed amicably.

It made Hope consider how she'd been raised. Her father had loved her, but more for what she accomplished rather than who she was. He'd showered her with affection when she achieved something he wanted, like scoring fifteen-hundred on her SAT's or getting accepted into NYU Law. But at least he'd loved her; her mother never had. No matter what Hope had done, it hadn't brought her mother back.

They pulled into the packed parking lot of the chapel a little after nine-thirty and parked toward the back.

Harrison opened the truck door for her. "You sure you're okay?"

Hope took in a deep breath and nodded. "I may need a moment, though."

He took her hand and squeezed it. She refused to look at him.

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"Hope, look at me." He tilted his hat back.

She looked into his eyes and wanted him to make everything okay, but why would he? He was just a nice guy being nice to the daughter of an old friend.

"Hope, you're not alone. I'm right here."

Tears stung her eyes, and her throat constricted. "What do you want from me? Why are you being so nice to me?" Her vulnerability was evident in her whisper as a single tear fell. Shit. She never cried. In the past twenty-four hours, it seemed that's all she did. One look into those sapphire blue eyes, and she wanted Harrison to pick her up and carry her away to someplace safe and happy. But the day Janine had walked out, Hope had given up on fairytales and dreams of a white knight rescuing her and whisking her away.

With his knuckle, he wiped away her tear. "Because...I know...through Janine, I feel like I know you already. I loved her...and you are a part of her." He held her hand and gave it a squeeze. "She loved you, Hope. And if it takes me being nice to you to make you understand just how much she loved you, then that's what it takes."

How could she trust or believe that a mother who had abandoned her loved her? Her defenses built up, shielding her from the pain she felt every time she remembered her mother's rejection and finally her abandonment. She tried to snatch her hand away. "I'm not a child who needs to have her hand held."

Harrison bit his lower lip and sighed. "No. You are acting like a child who needs to be paddled and reminded of her manners."

Hope gasped and tugged her hand from his grip. "How dare you?"

Harrison adjusted his hat, walked away and called over his shoulder. "Darlin', that was no dare."

Hope sat in the enormous truck by herself. She couldn't believe he would talk to her like that. Who in the hell did he think he was?

While watching the parking lot fill up with pickup trucks and SUVs, she gathered herself. *Christ, doesn't anybody drive a car around here?* People crowded into the church with somber faces, all dressed in their Sunday best. She glanced at her watch; it was just a few minutes before

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ten. Time to get in there and show Harrison she didn't need her hand to be held.

She jumped down off the seat, slammed the door shut, straightened her skirt, buttoned her coat, and held her chin high. *Avoid direct eye contact.* Especially Harrison's.

Chapter Five

Harrison heard Hope's confident steps echo against the wooden floor, purposefully making her way down the aisle. While people sang along with the church organ, he stepped to the side, offering her a seat.

She snubbed him, choosing the empty pew in front of him, stood tall and, with steady hands, cradled the hymnal.

Her head never moved throughout the service. She never even wiped away a tear. Even if she didn't know she was frozen in grief for a mother she barely knew, he knew it.

The last hymn filled the chapel, and the preacher nodded to her. With her chin held high and her back straight like royalty, she strode out of the church to his truck and climbed inside.

He ground his teeth, pissed she could be so rude. Despite his efforts to catch up with her, he was stopped by friends of Janine's. It took all his patience to make polite excuses. "...I'm sure she'll see you at the R&R. She's just probably tired from her flight..."

"Harrison, honey, is Hope okay?" Maggie patted his arm.

"I—"

"Harrison, I was wondering if I could..." the sheriff interrupted.

His mom smiled at the sheriff. "You go along, honey. I'll tell everyone to head on over to the R&R."

Harrison sighed; relieved his mother would be there. "Thanks, Mom." He and the sheriff moved out of the crowd's way.

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"You know, I'm real sorry I have to talk to you about this now. But I need you to find Jake. He needs to come home."

Harrison lifted his hat and raked his fingers through his hair. Shit. The last thing he needed was to worry about why in the hell one of his best friends wouldn't come home. He knew there was unfinished business between Janine and Jake, which was probably why the sheriff needed him to come home. "I'll see what I can do."

The sheriff wrinkled his brow. "See that you do it."

"I will. Give me a couple days? Hope is...staying with me. And I ..." He turned and looked at her alone in his truck. "Well, I don't want to leave her by herself just yet."

The strength with which the aging sheriff squeezed his shoulder surprised him. "A couple of days, Harrison. How did she...?"

Harrison shook his head. "Don't ask. Give me a couple of days." A hand shake finalized the promise.

The interruption did him some good. It gave him a moment to cool down so he wouldn't want to tan Hope's hide. He nodded to his mother who was still taking care of the line of people giving their condolences, indicating he would meet her at the R&R.

Without a word, he drove while Hope stared at the road ahead of her.

The truck lurched when he parked it behind the not-yet-crowded saloon and cut the engine. "That was real impressive at the church." He waited for her to respond.

She didn't.

"You won't be able to close yourself off here, Hope. People will give you their condolences. They'll want to talk and get to know you."

Without even the courtesy of a glance, she opened the door. "I'm not nearly as inept as you think I am. I have a backbone, as well as manners, even if they don't suit you and your need to rescue me." She gave a pointed look. "I don't need to be rescued." She dropped from the seat, slammed the door and stomped to the back entrance of the R&R.

The spicy-sweet aroma of barbequed pork instantly warmed Hope and calmed her temper.

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"I'm almost ready, Mag— Oh, Hope. I thought you were Maggie." Louie wiped his hands down the front of his apron, appearing flustered. "I'm sorry, honey. You come right on in. What can I get you?"

She leaned against the counter. The twinkling in his eyes and the wrinkles on his face made him look sort of like a smaller version of Santa Clause with a badass attitude. His white hair was messy, although clean, and his beard was about two weeks long.

"Hello, Louie." She inhaled and savored the moment. "The food smells delicious."

Louie bustled around. "I can fix you up a plate right now. You sit down and enjoy it before all hell breaks loose." With a firm nod, he reached for a plate.

"Louie, that's sweet, but I'm okay. Can I help?"

He shook his head. "Hope, honey, I just want you to know, I loved your mom. She was a jewel like no other, and I suspect you are, too. I appreciate your help, honey, but you need to get on out of here, 'cause I'm real ornery to work with. And if you're anything like your momma, I wouldn't want to get on the wrong side of you." He escorted her out the swinging door into the dining room.

In the crowded room, Hope felt suffocated; she couldn't avoid the curious, polite smiles people offered. Across the room from behind the bar, Harrison raised an eyebrow at her.

Exacerbated, she lifted her chin, took a deep breath and walked up to the closest person to her. "Hello, I'm Hope, Hope Whittaker." She extended her hand professionally.

The lady took her hand. "Oh, honey, it's so good to meet you. I'm so sorry about your mother. She was a wonderful person."

"Were you friends?" She was pulled into a hug, wondering what the lady's name was.

"Oh, you know everybody was friends with Janine. If you came into the bar once, you were a friend of hers."

Hope smiled through gritted teeth. "That's what I'm told."

"Honey, say hello to Janine's daughter, Hope."

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A tall, skinny man put his drink down on the booth's table, stood, put his arm around his wife's waist and tipped his hat to Hope. "Pleased to meet you." His voice was raspy and old.

"I'm sorry, your name is?" She wanted to be sure to report back to Harrison all the people she met. Closed off? Huh, she would prove him wrong.

"Simpson, George and Patty Simpson."

"How did you know my mother?"

Mrs. Simpson covered her mouth and shook her head. "Oh, why, I was a friend of hers at the hospital. You know, someone who would come and visit with her and she could tell me things she might not be able to tell others. When you're sick, sometimes you can't talk to family and friends like you can to survivors who have actually gone through what you're going through. Does that make sense?" She held Hope's hand and gave it a friendly, almost apologetic squeeze.

Hope pleaded with God that she looked coherent and not as if her mind was racing at a hundred miles an hour trying to comprehend what she'd just heard.

"But," Patty continued, "The amazing thing is that I actually learned more from her than she did from me. She had a true gift about the way she looked at life. She said she always had hope." Patty laughed softly. "Of course, though, I thought she was just being optimistic. But the look she got in her eyes when she spoke of the hope she had..." She paused to take a breath. "...well, now it's completely obvious what she meant and why her eyes sparkled when she talked of..." Patty gasped and put her hand over her mouth. "Hope, darling, your mother left strict wishes; we weren't supposed to talk of her illness when she passed on. She wanted to be remembered for her living, not her dying."

"Of course, I understand," she lied. "It was very nice to meet you. Please excuse me."

Country music, played by the house band, filled the room. She kept her face pleasant and kind as people stopped her to introduce themselves. She met Jack, who had been sitting at the bar last night, and his wife Theresa. Tucker, Harrison's best friend, introduced himself and

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mentioned his wife would be on her way. Sharon, the waitress, was there and made sure the food was being looked after. The attorneys from Whitefield and Holmes were there to pay their respects, too. She was relieved to see Maggie and Ben. "Hello, Mr. and Mrs. ... I'm sorry, I don't know your last name." Heat slapped her cheeks with embarrassment.

Maggie stopped fussing with the food. "Oh, well, it's Wiley. But no one ever calls us by our last names, really. They just call us Doc and Maggie."

Hope's embarrassment grew when she heard Ben was a doctor. "I see. I didn't know you were a doctor, Mr...er...um, Ben." 'Doc' seemed too personal.

Ben laughed and straightened the waistband on his slacks. "Yeah, that's what my diploma says, anyway. Really, darlin', you can call me Doc. Hell, I hardly answer to anything else anymore."

Not wanting to be standoffish, she relented. "I will, Doc." She turned to Maggie. "This is quite a...reception for a memorial."

They both looked around the room at all the people dancing, drinking and eating, all in honor of Janine. Maggie got teary eyed. "It is. It is exactly what your mother would have wanted. I know it's probably not what you're used to, but Janine was one-of-a-kind and truly wanted people to celebrate for her, not grieve."

Hope's face must have shown her complete lack of understanding and frustration, because Maggie hugged her and held her close as she spoke. "One day you will understand. Don't worry, there's time."

Hope tucked her chin, excused herself and braved the bar.

"Hi there, you must be Hope. I'm Tracie."

Tracie's smile was flirtatious and fun. Her eyes sparkled with humor, and her hair was an amazing shade of red. Not the weak red some people had the misfortune of having, but a deep, rich, wonderful red.

"Hi, it's good to meet you." Hope offered her hand to shake.

Tracie waved her off. "There's no need to be so formal with me. Hell, I barely ever mind my manners."

Hope plopped on the stool and sighed. "Thanks. I could use a little break from smiling."

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"What can I get you to drink?"

Hope figured now was her chance for a shot of tequila if she was ever going to get one. "I'd like a Coke. And if you could casually put a shot of tequila down, I'd really appreciate it."

Tracie grinned mischievously and turned to get the bottle from the shelf. She poured the shot and looked at Hope. "I wasn't sure I'd like you right away. I admit I was afraid you'd end up being the merlot type. But anyone who orders a shot of tequila is okay by me."

Hope sipped her soda politely, but it only took one quick swallow to down the golden liquor.

"You want another?" Tracie offered.

Hope chased the shot with a drink from her Coke. "No thanks. I'd better pace myself."

Tracie smiled and winked. "You know who to see when you want another. I'll be right here."

Hope stirred the ice in her soda. "Thanks." She turned and saw Harrison's beautiful sisters approaching.

"Hi, Hope. Jenna wanted to meet you." Jaycee presented her twin.

"Hi, Jenna. Nice to meet you."

Jenna's bright smile matched the sparkle in the sapphire blue eyes she had in common with her twin sister and older brother. "I'm real sorry about Janine."

Jaycee elbowed her sister.

"God, Jaycee, I was just being polite." Jenna rubbed her ribs.

Jaycee looked over her shoulder. "You know we're not supposed to talk about it."

Jenna shifted her weight to her other foot and crossed her arms. "I wasn't talking about it. I was just offering my condolences."

Hope interrupted, "So, why all the secrecy anyway?"

The girls shrugged in unison, but Jenna answered. "Janine didn't want people to be sad at her funeral. She wanted them to dance, sing and remember her here, in her bar where she was happiest."

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Hope shook her head in confusion. "Okay, I'm pretty smart, but I can't figure out why there is so much secrecy. If people want to talk about her dying, they ought to be able to."

The band struck up a new song. "Oh! I love this song. Come on, Jaycee, let's go dance." Jenna pulled Jaycee to the dance floor and stepped into the line of all the others that were dancing.

"Damn."

"Those two stick together like glue." Tracie looked apologetic as she spoke to Hope, but her voice came across loud and clear. "They won't ever break a promise, either. Trying to get them to talk about Janine today isn't worth your trouble."

"How about you? How good are you at keeping secrets?"

Tracie laughed and wiped the counter again. "That all depends on the secret."

Hope laughed. "So I suppose you won't talk about Janine, either?"

Tracie poured another shot of tequila and slid it in front of Hope. "I'll talk about what a great woman she was...how she's probably the strongest person I'll ever know. But...I won't talk about her dying."

Hope sighed and downed the shot. "Okay then, tell me this. Do you count the shots you pour for people?"

Tracie clicked her tongue and squinted. "That depends, too. Now, you start staring at my chest or trying to grab my ass, I'm gonna take note and let you know you've had enough. But if you're a lady, sitting at the bar mourning the mom you barely knew, then no, I'm not gonna keep count. That's a secret I'll keep. But if you get over your limit, I'm just gonna let Harrison know I only gave you one shot and tell him you can't hold your liquor."

Hope liked Tracie. She liked her candid honesty and her loyalty. She even liked the way she flirted with everybody. "Good to know." The second shot felt like fire going down her throat.

"Wait a second." She wiped her mouth. "Did you just say you would tell Harrison?"

Tracie lifted an eyebrow. "Hey there, Heather, meet Hope."

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Hope turned to her side and saw yet another amazing looking woman. Unlike Tracie, Heather had softer, more subtle features hinting at a gentler personality. She had light brown hair with wide ringlet curls long enough to tease the tips of her breasts. Her eyes were golden brown and shined against her flawless skin.

"Well, if it isn't Hope. I heard you gave Harrison a hard time last night."

Hope second guessed her opinion. Deciding she'd better make it clear she wasn't afraid of a few harsh words, she defended herself. "It seems to me, Harrison has a real annoying habit of assuming. I can't help it if he put the ass in assume."

Heather's head flew back and her laugh bubbled out, filling the silence between song changes. Her arm flung around Hope's shoulder, and she leaned over and gave her a big, smacking kiss on the cheek. "Tracie, have you decided to like Hope yet? 'Cause ya know what? I have. Oh! They are playin' our song, come on." She gave a hoot and grabbed Tracie's hand.

Tracie whooped and climbed over the bar. The song was something about trouble...t-r-o-u-b-l-e.

Hope looked on with envy as they were having a great time dancing and laughing. Even the guys were enjoying themselves. She could never dance like that. Everyone was doing the same steps in a line, but still, she would never have the guts to go out there.

"Do you dance?"

She jumped at Harrison's deep resounding voice. "Not like that." The envy in her voice wasn't hidden well.

Harrison smiled, leaned his arms on the counter and spoke close to her ear. "It's easy. I'll show you how."

Goose bumps ran down her spine. "If it's all the same to you, I'd rather not make a bigger fool of myself today than I already have. But thank you for asking." He tilted his head slightly and paused. He licked his lips, separating them into a sexy smile that made her knees almost buckle. "How did you make a fool of yourself today?"

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Hope decided one more shot would make the truth of her rude behavior at the church go down a little easier. "I'll tell you, but first I dare you to pour me a shot." She had no idea why she made it a dare. Maybe in case he'd counted that she'd already had two.

Without taking his eyes off of her, he reached under the bar, pulled up the bottle from where Tracie had stashed it and poured two shots. "Would you like some salt and lime?"

"No, thanks. I never could understand ruining good tequila with salt."

Harrison picked up his shot and clinked it against Hope's. "To Janine." He waited for Hope to drink hers. When she didn't, he put his glass down. "What's wrong?"

Hope shook her head and looked at him. "That's just it. Janine. You knew her and loved her." Her embarrassment was evident. "You know how she died." She cursed the tears stinging her eyes. "Do you have any idea how it feels to bury the mother you barely knew and not even know how she died? To have people tell you over and over again what a wonderful woman she was. And all you can think is...how? She left her seven-year-old daughter, and we never heard from her again." Hope slammed the shot, but gently set the glass down. "Thanks for the drink. I've said hello to the majority of the people in this room and not one of them will talk about Janine. Not really, anyway. I'm gonna get going."

Harrison grabbed her arm. "Wait, I'll come with you."

Worn out, she tugged her arm away. "Don't bother unless you're willing to talk to me about my...Janine."

He tossed back the shot and licked his lips.

God, why did he have to be so sexy? Hope cursed.

He walked around the end of the bar, got Tracie's attention and gave her the signal he was leaving.

Hope crossed her arms over her chest and made a beeline out the back of the bar. Her quick, sure steps took her past the truck toward Janine's house.

Harrison followed her. "You feel like going to your mom's?"

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Hope stopped short and looked at the house. She wasn't really sure that's where she wanted to go, but she needed to get out of the bar and away from all the people.

She hung her head and laughed quietly. Her shoulders shook, and her laugh got louder and louder until she thought she was going to become hysterical. "Harrison, I don't know where I want to go. I guess I'll know when I get there." Even in the wide open beauty of the countryside, she felt claustrophobic. She could be in the middle of Times Square at eleven-fifty-nine on New Year's Eve and not feel this closed in.

"Why don't we try out my favorite spot, then, especially since I'm the one who will be breaking a promise to a close friend?"

His arm was warm and strong, supporting her. Appreciating what it would cost him, she tucked her chin, relaxed into his shoulder and conceded, "That would be nice."

Chapter Six

"Christ. Is there really a need for a truck this big?" she grumbled.

Harrison got a perfect view of Hope's ass as she climbed in, and mumbled, "Oh yeah."

She turned to shut the door, but he held it open. "I forgot something. I'll be right back." He shut the door then ran inside the back door to the kitchen.

Louie pushed through the swinging doors from the dining room. "Harrison, you get what you need and then get goin'. Your mama is lookin' for you. She's worried about Hope."

Harrison hurried through the kitchen and gathered to-go cartons of food and a six-pack of beer, trusting Louie wouldn't rat him out.

While he placed the food in the back seat of the truck, Hope sat quietly with a tired, far away look in her eyes. Giving her the peace she looked so desperate to have, he slid behind the wheel and slowly drove away. About a mile past the barn down the dirt road, Harrison pulled over and hopped out. With the blanket tucked under his arm and the food in the other hand, he led Hope into the pines.

Following the sounds of trickling water, they strolled down a narrow trail, stopping at the stream's edge. Two large, weathered rocks sat proudly in the stream, as if they knew they were the only way to the other side. Across the babbling waters, there was a grassy spot even Monet couldn't have made more beautiful. Without hesitation, Harrison rock hopped to the other side. He did a mental groan when he saw the

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determined look on Hope's face to jump the rocks like he had. Buying some time, he snapped the blanket out flat.

If he went over to get her, she'd be pissed, because he would then have assumed she was incapable. If he did nothing; she would most likely end up in the stream. So he searched for an excuse. Her boots had about a three-inch heel. It was as good an excuse as any. "You know, it's pretty easy to jump those rocks, but if I were wearing those boots, I don't know if I'd try it myself." Shit. That sounded like a dare.

She raised her brows and blinked with attitude.

Fuck it. He crossed the stream then scooped her up.

She squealed and, through gritted teeth, defended herself. "I could make it by myself." Her swats against his chest didn't make a difference.

Harrison wanted to laugh at her stubborn determination, but good sense told him not to. "I'm sure you could. But this way I get to hold you." Without giving her the opportunity to argue, he jumped.

Relieved they'd made it safely to the other side, he carried her to the blanket and reluctantly let her go. "Welcome to my favorite place."

She sat crossed legged and rested her elbows on her knees. He watched patiently as she plucked grass and fidgeted with it.

With a sigh, Hope threw the wadded up blade of grass, rubbed her stained fingers together and asked reverently, "How did Janine die?"

The beauty of the stream and the sounds its babbling waters made were so pure and soothing that he hated to even say, but to make her wait any longer would be cruel. "Cancer." Just hearing the word made him want to hit something. "She battled cancer for a very long time."

Hope focused on something far away while she rocked back and forth in silence.

He wanted to offer comfort and make it all go away, but knew he shouldn't. To give her time, he opened the containers of food.

"How bad was it?"

With his mouth full of a bite of sandwich, he contemplated his answer. "Her goal was to live, not give up and die. Janine never wanted us to talk about her illness, because that wasn't who she was. It was something she fought. Life was precious and was celebrated by her. That's

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why no one will talk about her illness. It wasn't who she was. Janine was a fighter. She never —"

She shook her head. "A fighter, ha. A fighter wouldn't abandon a seven-year old."

He wiped away a stray hair, tucking it behind her cheek. With his fingers intertwining in her stubby ponytail, he turned her head and lost himself in her telling eyes. "Hope, she didn't give up on you." His thumb wiped away a spilled tear. He wanted to wrap himself around her, take her all in and love her the way she should be loved.

If only he could wipe away her doubt as easily as he wiped away her tears. Hope leaned into his touch. He wanted to be a salve to her broken heart. It was wrong to want to kiss her at a time like this, but her lips looked so soft and inviting.

Tipping his hat back, he said, "I see you in those soft blue eyes. No one could ever give up on you." Her breath was sweet, only a hair's width from his lips. She glanced away then plucked another piece of grass.

He lifted her chin; the need in her eyes was humbling. He traced her soft, pink bottom lip. "I won't give up on you," he whispered. "I promise."

Hope bit her lower lip as if she doubted him.

His thumb pressed down gently, releasing her lip from her teeth. A breath too far from her, he pressed his lips against hers, testing her. Never had he wanted to devour someone so much. Just one innocent kiss, and he was lost. Lost in her taste, her touch, her.... He was lost in her.

Sweet, feminine moans escaped her as he ran his hand up her blouse to find her breasts.

She arched into him and knocked his hat off before she raked her fingers through his hair, pulling him closer. Her lips parted, welcoming him.

Their tongues met with perfect rhythm. Taking and giving, offering and fulfilling. Desperate moans escaped from them both as her pebbled nipples brushed against his chest.

Hope pulled away then rested her forehead against his with her eyes shut tight.

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"Damn. I'm sorry," he whispered over her swollen lips. What was he thinking?

"No. I'm sorry —"

"Shh. It's too soon."

She shook her head and unfastened the buttons on her shirt. "No, it's not. Please. Just love me for today."

Just love me for today. If only it could be that easy. He would gladly love her forever, if she'd have him.

"Lay back," he commanded softly, easing her back onto the blanket.

Never had he seen breasts beg for attention more than Hope's. Round and full, they spilled out of her front closure bra as she lay under him with the smell of pine and running water in the air. She should be naked all the time with a body like hers. He ran his finger along the lace trim and pulled the satin down, cupping her breast. Adoringly, he fondled the handful. Waiting to bring the pink peak to his mouth, he nibbled down her neck. Sampling, reveling in her sweetness, he groaned as she arched for more, rubbing her leg against his hardness.

"Oh, please," she whimpered.

His cock ached at the sound of her desire. But the remains of salty tears clinging to her lashes tainted his kiss and broke his heart. "Shh. I've got you, darlin'." If he never saw her cry again, it would be too soon.

Determined to love her, as she deserved, he trailed butterfly kisses to her heart. Its fast, hard rhythm beat against his thankful lips. If only she knew today wouldn't be nearly long enough to prove how much he loved her.

Her nipple this close was temptation he couldn't refuse. Like a cherry on a sundae, he rolled the treat around with his tongue, lapping and sucking, savoring her smooth, rich textures.

With tenderness, he fondled her other milky white globe, pinching and rolling its nipple, offering it the same pleasure he'd lavished the first.

Her hand ran through his hair, pressing him closer against the tight stomach muscles contracting under the touch of his hand as it worked its way lower.

Janine's Hope by Taylor Voltaire

Without missing a beat, her hips rose, offering help. In one easy pull, the back zipper slid down. He knelt in front of her and slid her skirt and panties down her flat stomach, marveling at her glistening pussy.

He never wanted her to feel alone ever again. With reverence, he ran his hands up her legs, leaving a trail of goose bumps from his touch.

Helping her sit up, he reached behind her head and slid the band down, freeing her hair. Her bra slid down her arms, leaving her naked.

Looking deep into her eyes, he pulled his shirt off and cradled her cheek in his hand. "I won't give up on you, Hope. Not ever."

He made an easy job of getting his boots, belt and pants off.

She lay back on the blanket, and her eyes reflected the clouds in the sky.

Pearly drops of pre-cum dripped from his erection. A smile crept over his lips. "Aw, darlin'." He leaned over just a breath away from her mouth. "You are so sweet." He knew he would handle her with care.

Soft, smooth skin brushed his thigh as she spread her legs for him. He slid his hand between her damp, plump folds, and groaned at her wetness. Heat and pulsing muscles invited his entrance. Silky hot walls encircled his fingers. Moans and arches showed her agreement with his play. "I've got 'ya."

His hand cradled her head as he prepared her to accept him.

She bit her lower lip.

God, she was tight. Her vaginal walls hugged his thick cock head as it entered her. With excruciating care, he thrust a little deeper.

She gasped and arched.

"Oh, God, I'm sorry." He held still, afraid he had hurt her.

The heat, the intensity of her kiss, assaulted his control. The desire to pound into her with reckless abandon was beyond tempting. He inched deeper.

Hope cried out, pulling him closer. Her head tossed from side to side.

He needed to know she wasn't fragile. His body wanted to give her what she so openly craved.

Their eyes met, and emotion burst from her soft blue eyes.

Janine's Hope by Taylor Voltaire

He grew inside her, stretching her even more. With every pulse, her cunt contracted around him. Their mouths mated and drowned out their moans. Harrison teetered on the brink.

A cry ripped from Hope's throat as she wrapped her arms around his neck and buried her face in the cove between his neck and shoulder. Her body shuddered and quaked.

Her orgasm washed over Harrison's cock and pushed him over the edge. He saw the release in her eyes and wanted more. He wanted her satiated as she'd never been.

His control snapped, and his greed took over. He thrust harder, deeper, faster until she screamed again in ecstasy. Her legs wrapped around his waist, her arms tightened around his neck, and she held on as if for dear life while he filled her with his own excitement.

Exhausted, he fell back against the blanket, snuggling her head on his chest. It took a few minutes for them to catch their breath. Never expecting it to be like this, he dipped his head and kissed the top of hers while he flipped the blanket's edge to cover them.

For so long, he'd wanted to hold her in his arms and love her. Quietly, he listened to the sounds around them. The stream's steady babbling, the breeze rustling the pines around them, and the birds' singing were peaceful. But none of it could drown out her words echoing in his mind. *Just love me for today.*

The warmth from his body and the strength of his muscles had Hope wanting more. She felt desirable, cared for and safe while wrapped in his arms, but mostly she felt loved.

He couldn't possibly love her. They'd just met. But, she knew she'd never felt like this for anyone. How could she possibly feel like this for someone she'd just met? Logically, her mind told her it was the grief she was experiencing and Harrison was her release.

Hope traced figure eights through his sparse chest hair. "Harrison?" Her voice was a rough whisper.

He kissed the top of her head and squeezed her shoulder in answer.

Janine's Hope by Taylor Voltaire

Her hand stilled on his beating heart. "I don't usually..." She couldn't spit the rest of the sentence out.

His grip on her shoulder tightened, and his chest rose as if he was going to say something.

Before she lost her nerve, she cut him off. "You make me...you make me feel safe, and I...I..." She couldn't find the words to say thank you without saying 'thank you'. *Who says 'thank you' after sex? Shit.* She tried to hide her face in the crook of his shoulder, but his hand caught her chin.

"Hope, just for today, let me love you." He held her close and rolled on top of her. His eyes were laughing, and his smile said he was up to no good. His hardness was pressing against her thighs.

The same jolt, which made her want him to possess her, sent shivers to her womb again. Instantly she wanted him in her, fulfilling her desires to be held close, to be safe, to be loved. Her smile, apparently, was all the answer he needed.

Chapter Seven

Hope woke up next to Harrison, naked and sprawled out on her stomach. The weight of his hand at the small of her back felt right. For two nights, she'd slept in his arms and had never woken up feeling better. He looked strong and protective even in his sleep. Dark and sexy came to mind as a lock of his hair fell over his forehead. Even though his tenderness didn't show up on his rugged, tanned face, she knew he was. Any man who could touch a woman the way he touched her had a tender heart.

While he slept, she dared to take a look at his ass. It was near perfection, round, hard, not hairy. She hated a hairy ass. From what she remembered of the night before, his front side wasn't bad, either. In fact, looking him over, there wasn't anything about him she didn't like. Last night in the woods, when he'd touched her... Oh, just the memory of it made her crotch wet. Lost in her reverie, she jumped when his cell phone rang.

Harrison didn't flinch, but only opened one eye. Charmed, her mouth mirrored his slow smile in spite of the rude awakening. Even in his sleepy eyes, there was humor. The pocket-sized phone rang again, drowning out his mumbles.

"Harrison." A frog in his throat only made his already deep voice deeper.

Her pussy clenched.

The humor in his eyes faded. "Hold on."

Janine's Hope by Taylor Voltaire

To her surprise, instead of getting up to leave, he put the phone down and straddled her.

"Um—" Self-consciously, she looked at the phone. Before she could say much more, his mouth devoured hers. Soft probes of his tongue, strong strokes up her sides by his sure hands and his hard cock pressed against her, made her all but forget the phone.

"Mmm, darlin', I want you again..." He licked his lips. "...real bad, but I have to take this call."

"Uh—" Again she was cut off by a heated kiss. Too soon for her, he hopped off the bed, grabbed the phone, and let his hard-on lead the way to the bathroom. And what a leader it was.

Pleased with his reaction to her, she climbed out of bed and pulled on a pair of panties and the shirt he'd thrown over the bed post. His cologne lingered on the shirt. She fastened the two middle buttons on her way to the kitchen.

She started a pot of coffee, and soon the rich Arabica aroma tempted her stomach, reminding her it had been a long time since she last ate. A little riffling through his fridge and she took out eggs, cheese, and a sausage roll. An omelet would hit the spot. It was unusual for Hope to want to prepare breakfast, but she was hungry, and it was the least she could do for Harrison in case he needed to leave right away. His kindness touched her deeply and stirred feelings in her she wasn't sure she should trust. Could you really fall in love...?

Damp and only wearing a towel, Harrison stepped out of the bathroom. She became instantly distracted. Heat spread over her cheeks and between her legs. Damn, she was staring.

He grinned.

"Sorry about your shirt. It was easier than digging through my luggage to find my robe." Ugh. How lame. Chastising herself, she turned and concentrated on cooking the eggs without burning them or spilling his coffee as she poured a cup. All she could think of was his shirt? He wore a towel and a hard-on, and she worried about his shirt. She could hear the closet door open and close behind her, but she couldn't look.

Janine's Hope by Taylor Voltaire

The hem of the shirt rose and tickled the curve just beneath her butt when she reached for a plate in the high cabinet. Modesty got the best of her, and she tried to tug the hem down. Backing into Harrison's wide chest surprised her. She felt the soft denim of his jeans against the back of her thighs. Dang, he got dressed quickly. "Oh! Sorry."

"Darlin'?"

"What?" She picked up his coffee to offer it to him.

"Don't apologize for lookin' good."

Her breath hitched when his tongue ran over his lips. He hooked his finger in the V of the shirt, pulled it away from her chest and whistled long and appreciatively.

With his thigh between her legs, the kiss he leaned in for melted her heart. Thank God his thigh was there to catch her when her knees buckled. The coffee mug prevented her from grabbing a hold of him. She moaned into his mouth.

She felt petite when he pulled back and looked down at her. "I have to go out for a few hours." His deep voice went straight to her womb.

"Oh. Okay." His thigh rubbed against her clit, and all other thoughts vanished. Weakened by his massage of sorts, her head fell back against the cabinet. "Oh, God." She moaned then laughed. This was crazy. She was about to come in her panties, riding the thigh of a man she'd only met and fallen in love with over the course of two days. This couldn't be happening to her.

"Harrison..." she tried to protest, but his tongue worked hers as if it were working her sensitive little bud that his thigh was pleasuring.

His hand held her ass and kept her steady. That damn mug of coffee was still pressed between them. She wanted to pull him close, to throw him down and ride him. The need to impale her pulsing pussy on his glorious cock, the source of more pleasure in one night than she'd ever had before, was powerful beyond her imagination. Waves crashed over her, sucking her down, suffocating her. She wanted to scream, but her voice was caught in the chaos inside her vagina.

"Damn, darlin'. I'm glad you're here."

Janine's Hope by Taylor Voltaire

The deep resonance from his voice was all it took to trip her orgasm. Her eyes closed, and her moan came from her soul. Her head landed on his strong shoulder. Thankfully, he held her until her legs could support her again.

Slowly he pulled away and took the mug from her shaking hands. Still leaning against the counter, she ran her hand through her hair. "God, look what you do to me. I'm afraid any minute one of us is going to run scared."

He took a long, smug sip of the warm coffee, raised an eyebrow and swallowed. "Do you want to run, Hope?"

The question took her by surprise, and she stood up straighter. She started to waver, but Harrison whispered in her ear, "The truth. I'll give you until the time I get back to decide." He turned, grabbed a tortilla from the bread box and made a burrito to go. "The eggs look great."

Hope remained stuck to the counter with her head reeling. How had that gotten turned around on her? It didn't sound like he wanted her to run. It didn't sound like he was gearing up to run, either. God, this was moving so fast. She liked it. She was going for it. A lifetime wasted on mediocrity wasn't something she looked forward to.

He grabbed up his burrito and keys then put his hat on while walking to the door. "If you're still wearing that ring when I get back, I'll have my answer." He opened the door.

"Harrison?"

He turned with his hand still on the knob.

"I don't want to run."

A slow smile, big and wide, spread across his face.

Just when the door was about to click shut, he opened it up again.

"Hope?"

Not used to having so much nerve, her heart pounded wildly in her chest. "Hmm?"

He swallowed. "Keep the shirt." And he closed the door behind him.

Lightheaded, she put her hand over her mouth and gaped at the fact that she'd been so bold.

Janine's Hope by Taylor Voltaire

A bundle of nervous energy, she took a quick shower. While getting dressed, Paul weighed on her mind as “that ring”, as Harrison had put it, sparkled on her finger. Had he even called? Yesterday with Harrison had been so...enlightening, so freeing. She really didn't care, but she checked her cell phone anyway. No service. Damn.

Wondering if Harrison had a phone other than his cell, she searched the barn. There were only so many places in the open room she could look. Maybe there was a phone up in the loft.

Feeling a bit like she was snooping, she climbed the wooden ladder up to the loft. Much to her relief, a phone sat next to his computer on a relatively clean desk. The organized office didn't surprise her. Harrison's whole 'house' was clean and organized. She walked quickly to the desk, not wanting to intrude. When she picked up the phone, she couldn't help but notice a file folder with her name on it.

“What's this—” *Ding-dong!*

She jumped like a cat in scalding water. Her heart beat faster, and her fingers shook. God, it felt like her knees were going to give out when she climbed down the steep ladder to see who was at the door, sure that there would be a good explanation for the file.

Just as her hand reached for the doorknob, it opened slowly.

“Hope?” Tracie called out.

Hope opened up the door all the way. “Hello?” She wasn't used to people opening up her front door. Back in New York, it was double bolted and chained.

“See, I knew she was here,” Tracie snapped at Heather. They each stepped into the barn as if it was second nature. Hope didn't argue.

Tracie smiled at Hope and sat on the sofa. “We heard you'd be alone this morning and thought we'd come over and keep you company.”

Hope's eyebrows crunched together. “How did you know I would be alone?” The phone call to Paul would have to wait.

Heather sat in the big over stuffed chair. “That's easy; Tucker and Harrison went off to work.”

Hope nodded in understanding. “Oh, I didn't realize Tucker and Harrison worked together.”

Janine's Hope by Taylor Voltaire

Tracie scoffed, "Shit, those two have done everything together since they were in school."

Heather wiggled her brows. "Well...not everything."

Hope felt out of place with their easy camaraderie. "Can I get you both something to drink?"

Tracie put her boots on the coffee table and crossed her ankles. "No, thanks. We thought maybe you'd like some help over at Janine's."

Heather shifted in her seat. "Christ, Tracie, nothing like working up to something."

Tracie flicked a piece of lint from her tight, low cut, cotton knit sweater. "Well, there's no sense in beating around the bush, either."

Hope felt the need to referee. "It's okay, Heather, thanks. Tracie doesn't waste time; I'm used to that." Maybe if they did go with her to Janine's, she would be able to go through her things. "I appreciate the offer to help. Thank you."

Tracie shot Heather an 'I told you so' look with a smug smile.

Hope looked at them and envied their friendship.

"Well, I guess we should go then." Tracie jumped up off the sofa.

Hope went for the door and opened it.

Heather and Tracie didn't move.

"What? What's wrong?" Hope asked, feeling self-conscious.

Heather's smile and Tracie's wink nearly knocked her over.

Heather, trying to soften her tone, said, "Um...do you want any help moving your bags to Janine's?"

Hope was caught off guard. She never hid from the truth, and she wasn't going to start now. "No. Thanks. They've been taken care of."

Tracie and Heather shared a knowing look.

Hope just smiled and walked outside. A shiny red Jeep sat parked in front of the barn. "Oh! Whose Jeep?"

Tracie jingled the keys in her hand. "Mine."

Hope ran her hand over the hood. "I love it. I always wanted a Jeep, but in the city, there isn't a need for a car, much less a rugged one."

Heather and Tracie stopped in their tracks. "You don't have a car?" they asked in unison.

Janine's Hope by Taylor Voltaire

She shook her head. "I used to, but I sold it. Like I said, there's no reason to own a car when you live in Manhattan. You walk or take the train, a cab, or the subway."

"Huh. No wonder Janine never put the top on her Jeep."

Tracie's admission surprised Hope. "Excuse me?"

"Janine has this old Jeep that she never put the top on. It drives people crazy. But she used to say she was sick of closed and cramped transportation, and she wouldn't put that top on no matter what."

"You must mean she *had* a Jeep," Hope stressed.

"Well, she's...and the Jeep is in the shop, but..."

Hope couldn't believe Harrison lied to her. "Her Jeep is in the shop?"

"Yeah, but I'm sure Hal is done by now," Tracie answered.

Anxious not to be reliant on Harrison, Hope asked, "Do you think you could take me to get it?"

"Sure. You wanna drive?" Tracie held up the keys and dangled them in front of Hope.

"Really?"

Tracie laughed. "Sure. Janine's Jeep is kind of hard to drive. Mine will warm you up. Besides, it isn't that far."

Hope looked at Heather to see if Tracie was really going to let her drive

Heather nodded.

Hope took the keys from Tracie and jumped into the front seat behind the wheel. With the Jeep in drive, she hit the gas. Dirt kicked up as the tires spun in the loose gravel.

Heather flew back against the seat, and Tracie held on to her hat while shouting directions to the shop over the engine. Heather screamed as Hope took a corner too fast and Tracie grabbed theissy bar.

"Oh! Sorry." Hope looked at them. "Wow, this drives differently than my Accord did."

After a few more miles of speeding down the street, Tracie told her, "Turn at the next corner."

Janine's Hope by Taylor Voltaire

Hope was busy wondering why Harrison would have a file on her when Tracie yelled, "Here!"

"Oh! Shit!" She cranked the steering wheel and hit the brakes. The tires squealed into the parking lot, and Heather and Tracie lurched forward when Hope stomped on the brakes.

"Christ!" Heather laughed. "No wonder people take the train in New York. You drive as if...it's anarchy!"

Hope was shocked at her colorful opinion. "What do you mean?"

Heather put her hand over her heart. "I would explain..." She laughed a hoot from her precarious position in the back seat. "...but my ass is stuck in my throat."

Hope looked at Tracie, sure Heather was just teasing.

Tracie pried her hand from the sissy bar and took a deep breath. "Hope, I like you, but you drive like a lunatic!"

Hope grinned. These girls had never seen a cross-town cab ride during rush hour. She shook her head in amusement. "Okay, who do I see about the Jeep?"

Tracie undid her seat belt and jumped out of the Jeep. "We need to see Hal."

Heather threw her leg over the side of the opened Jeep, hopped down and put her hands on her knees as if she were winded. "Christ, that was one hell of a ride."

Tracie muttered, "If there is a God, then Janine's car won't be done."

Sure the two women who were becoming her friends were just teasing her, and positive she was a good driver, she ignored their comments. They just weren't used to her style yet.

Tracie led the way into the dismal gray shop, still shaking her head and laughing. "Hal!" She sauntered down a narrow hallway. "Hey there."

Tracie's informal greeting was met by an appreciative smile from a young man whose hair was dull and messy, but his eyes were sharp and bright. The appreciation for Tracie's tight sweater, as he wiped his hands on a greasy shop towel, was written all over his face.

"Hey there yourself, Tracie. You're lookin' real good."

Janine's Hope by Taylor Voltaire

Tracie's coy smile flashed then was gone as if it hadn't happened. "Hal, I'd like you to meet Hope. Hope is Janine's daughter."

Hope cringed a little at the introduction, but knew she would have to get used to being known as Janine's daughter instead of the daughter of James Whittaker.

Hal's expression sobered, and he cleared his throat. "It's nice to meet you." He kept looking at her hand as if he was unsure whether or not he should shake it.

His mousy shyness was endearing. She took pity on him and extended her hand. "It's nice to meet you, too."

He gave a slanted smile, dropped his hand and wiped it down his coveralls. "I'm real sorry about your mom."

Hope nodded. "Thank you. I understand you were working on her car."

Hal looked up, more at ease now that the conversation had turned to cars. "Yeah. It's back in the holding garage. I didn't know what to do after...well...I just thought I would put it there until someone came to pick it up."

Hope felt sorry for the uncomfortable position he'd been put in. "I appreciate your thoughtfulness. I can imagine how awkward it must have been for you."

"It isn't a big deal to hold it until you decide what you want to do."

"I need a car while I'm in town. And you need to be paid for your services. So—"

"I can wait to be paid. If you're going to sell the car...or something."

Hal's integrity was touching. Hope wanted to set his mind at ease and went to get her credit card. "Oh, my God! I don't have my purse." She gasped and patted her side where it usually hung.

Heather spoke up, "You didn't bring it. We were just going to Janine's."

"I'm so embarrassed. I'll come back when I have my credit card." Hope turned on her heel and rushed to the door.

"Wait."

Janine's Hope by Taylor Voltaire

Hope spun around. Tracie and Heather stood next to Hal.

"If you say you'll come back and pay for it, then I believe you. There's no sense in going all the way back to get your money. You take the car and then come back when you are over this way."

The generosity of the people in this town was overwhelming. "Are you serious?"

"Shit," he mumbled under his breath. "Come on back and take a look."

The Jeep was big and burly. It was yellow and didn't have any doors. The seats were black leather, and the roll bar had cool lights that sat on top. Hope had no idea what she would ever need them for, but she liked the way they looked. She remembered the catalogs that she ordered sweaters from, and they often had these cool looking Jeeps. She noted how you hardly ever saw an Accord in a cool ad.

Trying to sound as if she knew what she was talking about, Hope said, "So, what was wrong with it?"

Hal popped the hood of the Jeep, for all the good it did her. Clueless when it came to anything other than the color and make of a car, she had no idea what she was supposed to find under the hood.

He fiddled with a couple of caps and connections. "Oh, it just needed new brakes and new gears in the transfer case." He wiped his hands on the grease towel again and put a hand in his back pocket. "Janine was a...um...well, let's just say she enjoyed driving hard."

Tracie and Heather looked at each other and started busting up. Hope and Hal watched them hold their sides and bend at the waist as if they were going to wet themselves. Hal shook his head and looked at Hope with questioning eyes. Hope shrugged her shoulders.

Heather wiped a tear from her eye and explained through the gasps of laughter, "Hal...if Hope stays...you will still be working on this poor old Jeep."

Tracie took a deep breath and added, "Like mother, like daughter." And then the two broke out again in peals of laughter.

Hope shook her head. "I'm a good driver. I don't know what they're talking about."

Janine's Hope by Taylor Voltaire

Heather and Tracie continued laughing like hyenas.

"The keys are in it."

"Okay, who wants to ride with me?" Hope said.

Tracie held up her own keys and jingled them with a bright, huge smile on her face. Heather took in a deep breath and volunteered. "I'll ride with you, but you're buying the first round."

Hope smiled agreeably and nodded. "Okay, great. I have to go get my purse, though."

Tracie suggested over her shoulder, "Why don't we just go to the R&R?"

Heather's thankful look was noted as Tracie winked at her.

"Okay. We'll meet you there after we get my...." The keys fell from her hands. "...purse," she whispered when Janine's license plate registered. *HOPE*.

Hope swallowed down the lump in her throat, shook Hal's hand and climbed into the Jeep. "I'll come back this afternoon and take care of the bill, Hal. Thanks a lot."

Heather joked, "Hold on to your hat, Hal. It's Mr. Toad's Wild Ride."

Lost in thought, Hope wondered about Janine's license plate.

Heather waved a hand in front of her face. "Hello..."

Hope snapped out of her thoughts and spun her head to face Heather. She smiled and took a deep breath. "You ready?"

Heather smiled back. "You bet, let's roll."

The engine's roar reminded Hope of Harrison's rough and rumbly voice. The vibrations hummed between her thighs, and the power went straight to her foot. Mercifully, she found first and sped off in the same fashion as she'd left the barn.

After stopping to get her purse, she and Heather met Tracie at the R&R. Tracie had three shots waiting for them. "Here's to big engines and bigger men."

Hope laughed at the toast and wished she could just have fun with these girls instead of wondering about the license plate and Harrison's file.

Janine's Hope by Taylor Voltaire

"Hope, hello, you there?" Heather sang.

Hope nodded her head. "Yeah. Yes. I'm sorry I keep doing that."

Heather smiled softly. "It's okay. Whatcha thinking about when you wander off?"

Embarrassed and frustrated, because once again she would have to ask something about her own mother that she should have known, she said, "I was just thinking about the license plate. It's..." She shrugged her shoulders. "...it's just...shit."

She threw her napkin on the table, sighed and chewed her thumbnail.

"Your mom always had hope. That's what she would say, 'I may not be perfect, but I always have hope'." Tracie did her best impersonation of Janine, then got up and went to the bar.

Hope tried to will her tears not to fall.

Tracie brought over three more shots and set them in the middle of the table. "Come on, now, we are not going to wallow. Janine wouldn't want that." She lifted her glass. Heather and Hope did the same. Tracie smiled that devilish smile of hers and toasted again. "Here's to hope."

Hope started to swallow her shot, but saw Heather waited.

"And hoping for bigger men," Tracie finished the toast and swallowed her shot.

Hope choked. "Shit."

* * * * *

"Damn." Harrison parked his truck.

"Hey, it looks like Hope went and got Janine's Jeep from Hal," Tucker stated the obvious.

Harrison grunted.

"What's the matter? I mean, you can't expect her to wait for you to take her everywhere."

Harrison opened the door of his truck and stepped out. "You haven't ever seen her drive."

Chapter Eight

Harrison's heart beat a little faster when he heard Hope laughing. Having a good time while eating lunch with the girls was something he knew she didn't do very often.

Heather waved to him and Tucker. "Hey there, guys. How's it goin'?"

Tucker leaned down and gave his wife a kiss on her mouth.

Harrison pulled up a chair and wedged himself between Hope and Tracie. He linked his hands behind his neck, reclined and leaned the chair onto its back legs.

He didn't say anything. Instead, he concentrated on reading Hope's body language.

Defensive, she sat up straighter, but looked at him pointedly as if she was expecting him to say something. A long, slow sip of her soda made her throat bob and his cock grow hard. The way her tongue played with the piece of ice was enough to make his dick ache. He couldn't keep his eyes off her mouth. When she tapped another piece of ice into her mouth, he noticed she still wore Paul's ring.

Tucker broke the awkward silence as he filled his mouth with one of Heather's French fries. "So, what have you ladies been up to this morning?"

Hope smiled with the devil's innocence. "We went to get Janine's Jeep from the shop."

Janine's Hope by Taylor Voltaire

Harrison wanted to laugh at her attempt to egg him on as she wiped her mouth so primly with her napkin and pushed her lunch plate away. No doubt she was certain the look she shot him was supposed to intimidate him. He grinned.

Hope turned her attention back to Tucker. "I have to admit, I'm relieved Janine had a car. I hate to have to rely on anyone for rides, and I haven't seen a rental car company or anything. Funny though..." She turned to look Harrison straight on. "I thought you told me Janine didn't own a car."

Without taking his eyes off that glimmering ring, he pushed his hat back. "I didn't say Janine didn't own a car. I said you don't have a car."

Damn, her spine would snap if she tried to sit up any straighter.

"You led me to believe Janine didn't own a car," Hope said.

"Implications are vague. Being in law, you should know by now to get the facts." The front legs of the chair fell forward, punctuating his words. He snatched a fry off Tracie's plate and bit it in half.

"I asked you very plainly if you were implying Janine didn't own a car, and you nodded. That's answer enough in casual conversation. I don't care to treat people as if they are on the stand in a courtroom at all times."

The way Tracie, Heather, and Tucker watched with baited breath didn't bother Harrison a bit.

Hope grabbed her purse from under the table, stood and looked at Heather and Tracie. "Thank you for helping me this morning. I really appreciate it. I'm going to go pay Hal and see about a few things."

He wondered if that meant returning the ring.

She looked at him and huffed before she stomped out of the bar.

"Ah, hell." Harrison glared at Tucker, who mumbled beneath his breath, and hoped Heather's elbow to his ribs hurt. Long strides made it easy to catch up with Hope before she climbed into the big yellow Jeep.

Large, blue, surprised eyes were the first thing he saw when he spun her around by the elbow. Before she could protest, his mouth conquered hers.

She tried to pull away, but he was relentless and convincing. Not to mention his thigh was between her legs, bringing back vivid memories of

Janine's Hope by Taylor Voltaire

that morning. He broke his hold on her and tilted his hat back to rest his forehead against hers. "Hope, damn it, don't drive this thing."

"Why not?"

Confused by her contradictory, shaking fingers brushing her lips and her can-do attitude, he chuckled. "It's a lot of car for someone who doesn't drive an awful lot."

Obviously his words fell on deaf ears, because she turned and climbed into the seat. "Don't be silly. A car is a car. I drove it here from the shop and did just fine."

He settled his hat on his head, stepped back and gave her room.

When she started the ignition, he stepped closer and rested his hand on her knee. "I need to leave for a couple of days."

Her gaping at him was good for his pride. "What?"

He brushed a few of the stray strands of hair from her face and tucked them behind her ear. "Tucker and I have to leave tonight for a couple of days. I don't want to rush you doing your errands." Just the touch of her skin had his cock perking up. "But I'd like to see you before I need to leave."

Even though Hope knew she didn't have a hold on him, she still wished he didn't have to go. Somehow, in three days, he'd stolen a piece of her heart. She shrugged and nodded. "I'll be back shortly." She ground the gears until she found reverse then backed out like a shot.

Trying to find first gear and wave at the same time proved to be too much when the Jeep lurched forward and stalled. Before Harrison could say 'I told you so', she started the beast of a vehicle again, forced it into first, and took off. When she looked back in the rearview mirror, she saw him standing there with his hands in his pockets, shaking his head.

Why did Harrison and Tucker have to leave town? Just what did he and Tucker do? On second thought, she wasn't even sure she should want to know. *Think about it, Hope*, she chastised herself. It was probably the stress of the last couple of days allowing her to feel loved by him. They had incredible sex. Was that enough, really, to change the whole direction of your life?

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Janine's affairs still had to be sorted out. The meeting with the attorneys was scheduled for Monday. Decisions needed to be made that would take some thought and planning. She didn't have the time to pine away for some cowboy.

After paying Hal, she'd go back and pack her things she'd unpacked just this morning and talk to Harrison about her decision. Being weak was a luxury she couldn't afford. At some point, she would have to face her mother's ghost, so it might as well be now. Ashamed she'd tried to back away from this responsibility, she vowed to be strong.

Hal gave her good directions to the post office, and she made a quick chore of packaging Paul's ring to send back to him. Thinking back, she was pissed at herself for not taking care of that earlier. When had she become so passive? Here she'd thought she was this go and get 'em kind of girl, when in reality she was a weak sissy who avoided confrontation and hid behind false securities.

Well, not any more.

Insuring the ring to the hilt, she had no regrets sending it by FedEx. When she walked out of the post office, there was a bounce to her step she realized she'd only seen others walk with, but had never had herself. She breathed in the fresh, pine-scented air and felt like a whole new world had just opened up before her eyes.

The little town was quaint and friendly. The narrow streets weren't crowded and dirty like the ones she'd grown up on in New York. Instead of sky rise buildings surrounding her, she had breathtaking panoramic views of mountains that looked so close, she bet she could reach out and touch one.

She stopped and thought about the smile on her face, in spite of having just sent off a two-carat diamond engagement ring she'd worn for two and half years, along with the passing of Janine. She shouldn't be smiling, but couldn't stop herself.

For the first time, it felt as if true happiness was waiting for her. Days of hiding and pretending to like what she was doing were over. Hiding behind someone or something was not a part of her future plans.

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Looking at the license plate on the Jeep, she smiled even bigger. If Janine could have hope, so could she.

Renewed by her fresh outlook, she reasoned with herself. Moving into Janine's didn't mean they couldn't have a relationship or sex. No, what she meant by doing things on her own was that she would do them on her terms. If she felt like going to see Harrison and have her way with him, then she could, so long as it was her decision. Just thinking of him released butterflies in her stomach. God, here she'd just been giving herself a great pep talk about being on her own, and she was gushing at the thought of his touch. Not wanting to waste another minute, she sped through the quiet little town.

The Jeep skidded to a stop in front of the barn next to his enormous truck, and she climbed out. At the front door, she paused. Should she just walk in? Although Harrison had made it clear she was staying there, she didn't want to barge in if she wasn't going to be living there, either.

Just as her knuckles were about to rap on the door, it swung open. Harrison came rushing out and knocked her over. "Oh, shit! Darlin', are you okay?" He dropped his bag and held out his hand to help her up.

She got up and brushed off her ass. "I'm fine. That's the last time I stand in front of a door without ringing the bell, though." She laughed. "Are you leaving already?"

He picked up his bag and shook his head. "No, just getting a jump on things."

Hope nodded, still rubbing her ass. "Oh."

He threw the bag into the bed of his truck then went back inside the barn.

She followed him to the kitchen, not knowing exactly how to start the conversation she had in mind.

Hope sat on the barstool and watched him prepare a snack.

"Want something to eat?" he offered.

"No thanks."

The voracious bite Harrison took of his sandwich sent her nerves into overtime, imagining his mouth devouring her in the same manner.

"Want a drink?" he said as he pulled a beer out of the refrigerator.

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Suddenly, she found her mouth was dry and a drink would go down nicely. "Yes, please. A Coke is fine."

She rubbed her moist hands down her slacks. The view she had of his butt when he turned and reached for a glass made her heart beat faster. The pop and sizzle of the soda were loud in the otherwise silent kitchen while he poured her drink.

The effervescent bubbles of the cool soda tickled her nose and soothed her throat, but did nothing to calm her nerves. His intense stare wasn't helping, either.

Thankfully, he moved to the sofa. She took advantage of the moment and gathered herself before she joined him in the living room.

"So, how'd it go with Hal?"

Mediocre small talk wasn't what she wanted. She'd had mediocre her whole life. No way was she missing this opportunity for 'wow'. The way his muscles bunched and stretched when he pulled off his boots only made her want him even more. He propped his feet on the table and stretched out.

"Well?" he tried again to get an answer.

Hope tapped a piece of ice into her mouth, sucked, paused then spit it back into the glass. Her grin got the better of her when she noticed a growing bulge in his pants. "It went fine. He said he fixed whatever was wrong, and that was that." A hint of teasing accentuated her answer, although she wasn't really meaning to be a tease. Teases were stupid, and she wasn't. No, she would admit what she wanted and go for it.

Harrison raised his brows. "I see you took his ring off."

She set her drink on the table and sat back. "I told you I don't want to run..."

"But..." he prompted her to continue.

Being forward when you weren't used to it was harder than she'd thought it would be. "But I don't know if I want to jump from one frying pan into another."

He nodded then surprised her when he said, "Don't you think it's a little late for that?"

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A little late? Probably. Should that stop her? Giving herself a minute to gather up some courage, she took a drink of her soda and caught another ice cube in her mouth.

Harrison stood and pulled her up from her seat. "I do." His kiss stifled her gasp, and his smile spread across her lips. Hot and cold confused her senses.

His tongue captured the ice cube and drew it into his own mouth as he kissed down her jaw and over to her neck until the ice melted.

He bent down, scooped her up and carried her to the edge of his bed. "Yesterday you asked me to love you for the day." The mattress was soft when he let her down. "Now, I'm afraid I'm hooked."

Stunned, a soft sigh escaped her lips just before they parted for his. She pressed her body into his, encouraging him.

Harrison's tongue was like velvet as it soothed the love bites he tortured her with. Her hands worked frantically as they fumbled together with the buttons of his pants. His hot breath sent goose bumps over her neck as he helped her quickly pull the button fly apart. It was like the bell sounding the beginning of the races. She was frantic to get him out of his jeans. He held the sides of her sweater and lifted it over the top of her head as she sank to her knees before him, yanking down his jeans as she went.

His long, glorious cock sprang to life in front of her.

She flicked the pearl of pre-cum from the tip of the red, engorged head with her tongue. Not just the tip of her tongue, though; she used the whole of it. He groaned and grasped her head in his strong, large hands. Savoring his taste, she slowly fisted and stroked his shaft, swallowing him inch by huge inch. She loved the way the head of his dick was satiny smooth against the roof of her mouth.

"Oh, darlin', you're..."

When she looked up to him, she saw his electric blue eyes practically explode with desire. She smiled then, without warning, swallowed as much of him as she could. His delight was obvious by the length to which his dick grew and the currents of vibration against her tongue as it stroked his erection up and down. Her pussy pulsed, and

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juices soaked her panties in anticipation of his cock thrusting deep inside her. First, though, she wanted to suck him and swallow his cum. She wanted to taste him, drink him in. A desperate moan escaped her before she stroked harder and swallowed deeper.

His grip on her head tightened, and he thrust his shaft farther down her throat. Her head bobbed up and down, matching his rhythm. A deep, guttural growl came first, then his cum shot down her throat in hot spurts. She swallowed and swallowed as if she hadn't had a drink in days.

Harrison bent down then lifted her. Reverently, he laid her on the bed and ran his hands up her legs. His thumbs pressed against her crotch before he unfastened her pants. With tantalizing care, he pulled her slacks and panties off completely, spread her legs wide then sucked in a deep breath.

"Damn, darlin', you are so..." He buried his tongue deep inside her.

Eagerly, he lapped at her folds while his teeth softly nibbled. Her cunt contract as he fucked her with his tongue. Goose bumps covered her thighs as he caressed up her legs then cupped her ass. He circled her puckered tender flesh with gentle fingers.

"Oh, my God!" She bucked against his nibbling teeth. As she lowered her hips, Harrison slid two fingers deep inside her. That was it. She exploded with a silent scream.

Stars danced in her vision while her body felt like it was on fire. Her chest was heaving, and her breath was raspy. He didn't wait for her to come down from her ride. He slipped the head of his cock into her entrance and held it there.

"Harrison!" she cried out. His ass flexed in her hands as she pulled him to her.

He nibbled her neck and ears, but his dick still teased her entrance. "Darlin', you are delicious. I believe I could survive on you alone."

Thrashing her head from side to side, she held onto his strong shoulders. "Oh, my God, Harrison, please."

His muscles flexed and he gave her another inch and then stilled again. "Damn, Hope, your mouth swallowing me was amazing." Another inch of his steel hard cock sunk into her. "But feeling your pussy grasping

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me, trying to get me in deeper..." He groaned and plunged in to the hilt. "Damn, darlin'."

Her back arched, and she cried out as her orgasm nearly tore her apart. Harrison thrust his hardness in and out repeatedly. Her pussy seemed to beg for more. Her body wrapped itself around him as if it had no other purpose.

Hope gasped for air. Her eyes stared open, but she couldn't see. She could only feel. Feel his hot spurts shoot against her inner walls, which were contracting so hard she thought for sure she would break him in two. God, he felt so good, she didn't want him to stop, but if he continued, she was sure she wouldn't survive the overwhelming feeling of complete ecstasy.

He was right. Here she lay sizzling in his frying pan, satiated and well done. Shit. The back of her hand rested over her eyes as she sprawled out, trying to think. Unfortunately, his firm, muscular body, hot and sweaty on top of her, was too much of a distraction. Not to mention his dick was still pulsing inside her. *Think, Hope, think.*

Harrison pulled her hand from her eyes and, with his smooth lips and just the tip of his tongue peeking through, kissed it. God, that was so sensual. She'd had men kiss her hand before, but it had never sent shivers all the way down to her womb. Of course, they'd never used their tongue, either.

"Were you trying to tell me something?" He ran his fingers over her collarbone and up her neck.

She couldn't think, especially with his fingers outlining her lips. "Shit." She laughed and tried to sit up.

Harrison wouldn't move.

In spite of the smile he had on his face, when she tried pushing on his broad chest, he wouldn't move. "Harrison, I can't talk like this."

Without moving a muscle, he answered, "You're gonna have to. Because I'm not moving until you tell me what's on your mind."

Too spent to argue, she relented. "I'm not exactly sure I'm completely comfortable with how fast we're going. I mean, I just met you, and you make me feel like no one else ever has. I'm thinking that has to

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scare you as much as it's scaring me. So maybe it would be better if I stayed at Janine's."

The twinkle in his eyes and his gentle smile were comforting. "Hope, not everything has to be planned. Sometimes something great happens just because."

His whispered words made a lump form in her throat. "Yeah, but..."

He stopped her with a finger over her lips. "I'm not scared, as you so lightly put it. I loved waking up to you in my bed this morning. It feels right. I'm not analyzing it, I'm enjoying it."

"But—"

"But nothing." He popped up off of her and started for the shower. "I'm going to get in the shower. Want to join me?"

Was he serious? How could he be so nonchalant? Her life had always had a plan. Looking up at the cowboy hats lining the beam above her head, she realized her plan hadn't included coming to podunk and falling for a man she barely knew. Her plan hadn't included sending an engagement ring through the mail to break up with Paul. Her plans apparently were...shot to Hell.

Hope got up off the bed and decided a shower wasn't such a bad idea. Would it be so wrong if she decided to stay and things really did work out for her and Harrison? She realized there was a lot more she needed to find out about him, of course. But the important thing was...she wanted to find them out.

Chapter Nine

Harrison was covered in soap lather when she slinked into the shower. The small, tile stall forced her to stand tantalizingly close to him. Close enough that his erection bumped her when he turned around. God, was he ever satisfied? She hoped not. She stood in front of him, feeling rather conspicuous even though his face was covered with soap.

Hell, she may not be versed in shower etiquette, but she knew what to do with a hard-on. She took his rigid, slippery shaft in her hand and stroked him real slow.

Harrison didn't open his eyes until the soap was all washed away. "Darlin', I hope you have come to terms with your conscience, because to tell the truth, I could get used to this kind of treatment real fast."

He pinned her against the shower wall. He nipped her shoulder lightly and worked his way up her neck.

Water pounded his back, and misty spray splashed her face. Harrison bent his knees and entered her easily, lifting her up and wrapping her legs around his waist.

Her pussy was so sensitive, she couldn't catch her breath. His dick felt like a rod of pleasure as he pumped her. After the vigorous sex they'd just enjoyed, Hope was surprised he had any strength left in him.

When he nibbled on the muscle strung between her shoulder and jaw, she was more concerned with keeping herself from screaming in his ear as one of his hands grabbed her breast and the other slid a finger into her slippery asshole. She failed and screamed in such ecstasy, for sure the

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horses outside were probably spooked. "Oh yeah, darlin', I want to hear you scream for me for a long, long time." He groaned and filled her with his own excitement.

She laid her head on his shoulder and rested her hands on his chest. His heart pounded furiously against her palm. Hope prayed he wouldn't set her down right away. He felt like everything she'd ever wanted.

"Trust yourself, Hope. You have only just begun to see your happiness. Don't give up on it."

Her toes touched the shower floor as he lowered her and gently slipped his finger from her anus. She felt exposed like she never had before, and it had nothing to do with the fact that she was bare ass naked in a shower. "How do you know?" Her voice betrayed her as it broke. How could he possibly know how confused she felt?

Shivers ran down her wet body from the rush of cool air while she patiently waited for him as he shut off the water and grabbed a towel.

He patted her face tenderly and ran the soft terry cloth down her arms. He came back up and cupped her breasts, squeezing gently. His eyes showed understanding, while his hands were comforting and strong. She didn't want him to leave. She wanted to crawl into his soft, warm bed and cuddle with him for the rest of the afternoon and into the night. She wanted to feel his strength, his heat and his love.

Harrison's lips tilted up into a slow grin. "Your eyes give you away." He sighed softly and brushed her lips with his. "I know because of your eyes."

She gulped and closed her eyes.

He chuckled, rubbed her cheek with his thumb and stepped out of the shower. In front of the sink, he grabbed up his razor and turned on the water.

She stepped from the shower, grabbed his shirt, the same one she'd worn that morning, and put it on. It was so intimate to watch him shave. It felt right, though, as if she belonged there.

"Mmm, darlin', I see you dressed like that, and Tucker is gonna have to work solo."

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Her nipples pebbled against the soft material that still smelled like him. He wrapped one arm around her lower back and dipped her. She gasped and laughed.

Harrison let out a frustrated moan. "I've got two minutes to get out of here. Lord knows I don't want to, but I gotta. You drive me crazy, and I've got a job to do." He hurried out of the bathroom to his closet.

She followed him, sat on the bed and watched him step into a pair of jeans. "What do you do anyway?"

He paused; for the briefest moment, she saw his jaw tense just before he broke a smile as he tugged a shirt from a hanger and pulled it over his head. "Hmm, that might take some explaining." He looked at his watch. "Can I tell you all about it when I get back?"

Before she had the chance to agree, he had his boots on and was nearly halfway to the front door.

"How complicated can it be?"

A look of strained patience spread across his face as he walked back to the bed and stood in front of her.

"I promise to answer all of your questions when I get back." He held her hands, his eyes boring into hers.

Shockwaves ran up her arm when his lips kissed her knuckles. "Okay." Christ, she could barely speak, and then she remembered, she actually had people she needed to talk to as well. "While you're away, would it be all right if I used your computer to check my mail?"

"As far as I'm concerned, if you can wear my shirt, you can use my computer."

Shivers raced down her spine as his thumb caressed her knuckles just before he leaned down and gave her a final kiss.

A faint, whispered "thank you" was all she could muster.

"You're welcome." The heels of his boots echoed on the floor and in her chest as he strode across the room and out the front door.

Hope's heart sank with the click of the door closing. She missed him already. The contemporary barn seemed empty now. Just as she was getting used to being fulfilled, emptiness shadowed her. She'd never felt

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so attached to anyone before. When Paul left for work, she never missed him. Paul...she really should call him.

A heavy feeling squeezed her heart when she walked to the ladder. Just thinking of New York and Paul was depressing. Though with every step up the rustic wood rungs, the feeling subsided.

Once at the top, determination and strength flooded through her. Four steps to the desktop phone, and she'd be on her way to a new life.

While dialing, she rehearsed what she would say. Simple and to the point would be best. No sense in dragging things out and beating around the bush.

One ring.

She turned, leaned against the desk and crossed her ankles.

Two rings.

She wound the cord around her finger.

Three rings.

"Hello?" a woman's voice answered.

"Oh, I'm sorry." She tugged her finger free. "I must have dialed the wrong number." She hung up and looked at the phone, doubtful.

Wrong number? No way. She'd been dialing Paul's cell phone number for years. "Just to be sure." She mumbled as she pressed the redial button.

One ring.

"Hello?"

Bastard. She knew it. "Who just answered your phone, Paul?"

"Hope?"

Unbelievable. Her mouth dropped open.

"Hi, sweetheart..."

She could almost see his balls shrivel just by the sound of his pathetic voice. "Are you kidding me?"

"Look, I can explain—"

"No. Allow me. I sent your ring by FedEx about three hours ago. You'll get it tomorrow."

"But—"

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"I'm not finished. You'll need to pack what's yours and get out by the end of the week. I've decided to—"

"Come on, sweetheart, you're being unreasonable."

"Ha! Unreasonable? You're being..." Unwilling to stoop to name calling, she stopped herself. "You know what? You're not even worth an excuse. Now hang up and start packing."

"Hold—"

Click.

Just like that, it was over. Done. She was free of a burden she'd carried for far too long. Hope plopped down into the chair and sat back; the aged leather smelled like Harrison. It was almost like he was there holding her. Warm and tender, yet strong and able.

With a push of the button, she turned on the computer. The desk had been straightened since the last time she was there. The file with her name on it was gone. "Hmm?"

A slight rush of adrenaline pumped her heart faster as she tried the file drawer of the desk. Locked. Damn. She shouldn't be snooping anyway; it's an invasion of privacy. But on the other hand, it was her name on the folder, so...she had the right to see what was in it. "When he gets back, no matter how distracted I am, I have to find out."

With little to do while Harrison was away, she decided to go to the R&R, eat dinner and hang out. Maybe she would even get behind the bar and pour a few drinks. Tracie made it look like fun, and if she was going to own the place, she sure as hell better know how to run it.

The weight of that thought settled on her chest. She was planning on owning and running the R&R. What happened to finding a manager and getting the hell out of this podunk little town?

But as it turned out, Pinedale wasn't all that bad. With a smile, she hummed while pulling on a rust-colored cable knit sweater, a pair of olive green suede slacks, and brown leather boots. After securing her hair back in a ponytail, she applied a couple of swipes of mascara and some lipstick.

The cold air hit her when she walked out the front door, reminding her that, despite the warm days, it was still winter and she would need a coat for the evenings.

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She felt a little silly when the rush of excitement washed over her as she started up the huge yellow Jeep. But she couldn't resist it. The walk would do her good, but the drive would be more exciting. She laughed out loud when she thought of what Paul would think of her if he could see her now.

* * * * *

The R&R's kitchen was warm and felt like family.

"Well, shoot, if it isn't Hope."

"Hi, Louie." Before she knew it, she was hugging the funny old man. Usually she wasn't the hugging type, but he brought it out of her easily. "What's for dinner tonight?" The smell of soup or chili made her stomach growl.

Louie laughed. "You go on out, and I'll have your dinner to you in a minute."

She noticed the muscles in his back were still strong when he stooped over a gigantic pot. "I can get my own dinner. It's okay, you don't have to wait on me. You're busy."

Louie grumbled something under his breath and turned to look at her. He wiped his hand on a towel he'd draped over the apron string. "Hope, never once did your momma come into my kitchen and fix herself a plate." He continued to stir the pots. "I served her every meal she had here, and I plan on going on about my business the same as always."

Her eyes squinted while she considered him. A crooked smile softened her tone. "You know, Louie, I'm not Janine. You don't have to treat me like you did her. I don't mind, really, this place is more yours than it is mine." The poor guy had to be exhausted working so hard; he certainly didn't have to wait on her.

He brushed by her and chopped some vegetables. "Now, don't you go talkin' like that. Janine loved this place. So..." He tossed celery into the huge pot simmering with chili. "...that makes it yours."

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His stubbornness amused her, and her eyebrows shot up. She casually crossed her arms and leaned against the stainless steel counter. "Louie, let me ask, what time do you come in to work?"

He picked up the cutting board and shoved the rest of the vegetables into the pot of soup with his knife. His voice was full of indignation as he sprinkled some spices into his pot and gave it a stir. "I get here at about eleven in the morning."

Sorry he was defensive, she reached out and patted his arm. "I would like to have a...meeting. I need to know how this place works."

He nodded and wiped his nose with a handkerchief from his pocket. "Ten o'clock tomorrow morning okay with you?"

Relieved she had his support, she sighed and smiled. "Ten is great. I'll be here. Is there a list of numbers I can call and let everyone know?"

Louie shook his head. "I'll let them all know. If they aren't working tonight, they'll be in here for dancing." He laughed. "It's Friday night. Everybody comes in on Fridays."

"Thanks. I really appreciate your help." She gave him another hug.

He grunted and tossed his head in the direction of the door. "Now go on out there, and I'll bring you your dinner."

"Ha, and people think I'm stubborn." She chuckled and shook her head as she left the kitchen.

"Hi, Tracie." Hope shrugged off her coat and hung it on the wooden hook by the front door.

"Hi, there. How's it goin'?"

"Fine." She sighed and slid onto a bar stool.

Tracie glared at her. "That didn't sound so fine to me."

Hope grabbed a menu, looked it over, and quickly decided on a hamburger with onion rings. She might as well; she wasn't going to be kissing anyone tonight. With the menu back in its pile, she put her elbow on the bar, rested her chin in the palm of her hand, took a deep breath and let it out slowly. When she looked up, she saw Tracie watching her every move.

She laughed. "It's not all that bad."

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Tracie slapped the bar with her towel, grabbed a glass and poured a beer. "Well, then I'd put on a happy face if I were you. You look like your dog died." She gasped and covered her mouth for a second. "Fuck. I'm sorry. I really didn't mean..."

Hope held up her hand to end the unnecessary apology. "It's okay. Really. I know you didn't mean anything."

Tracie set the beer in front of her. "Whatcha gonna have for dinner?"

Relieved she didn't have to further reassure Tracie she wasn't offended, she smiled. "A hamburger with onion rings."

"Good thing Harrison's out of town." Tracie winked.

"Where did he and Tucker go, anyway?"

Before Tracie could answer, Louie placed a hamburger with onion rings in front of her, grunted and then returned to his kitchen.

She shook her head in amazement. "How does he do that? I just ordered. I just came from the kitchen, and he was preparing chili and soup. He wasn't preparing a burger, and yet here it is."

Tracie gave her rolled silverware in a napkin and grinned. "It's his special talent. We don't know how he does it. Harrison tries, but somehow Louie is always right."

Hope took a bite of an onion ring, closed her eyes and sighed. "Mmm, he makes good food."

Tracie nodded and stole a ring from Hope's plate. "Why do you think Janine kept him on?"

"Was she ever planning on him retiring?"

Tracie shook her head and polished the glasses beneath the bar. "Hell, he's a retired sergeant major. He learned to cook in the army and loves it, and he hardly ever sleeps, so he does what he wants. She couldn't argue with that kind of chemistry."

"Does he have an assistant?"

Tracie shook her head and narrowed her eyes. "Nope. Just a dish washer, for all the good it does him."

"What do you mean?"

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Tracie leaned her forearms on the bar and placed one foot on the shelf below. "Billy hasn't been all that reliable since Janine got real sick at the end." She had a far off look to her eye.

"What do you mean? He doesn't show up or what?"

Tracie cracked open a peanut and popped it in her mouth. "Yep."

Hope gasped. "Yep? That's it? Why doesn't someone talk to him or fire him?"

Tracie lifted her brows and tilted her head with a slight shake. "We have talked to him. But ever since Janine, he seems to think no one is in charge So he comes and goes as he pleases."

"There's gonna be a meeting here tomorrow at ten. Louie said he would tell everyone tonight. He said they all come in here anyway."

"Okay, sure." Her voice held a hint of hesitancy.

Hope leaned on the bar and looked her square in the eye. "Tracie, I don't know what the hell I'm doing here." She took a deep breath, threw her napkin down on the bar and sighed. "Shit."

Tracie shrugged her shoulder, threw out the napkin, took her plate and dumped it in the bus tub. "Everyone is curious about what you're planning on doing. Hopefully, by tomorrow, you'll know what the hell that is."

There was a definite edge to her tone that Hope didn't like. "I'm staying. The R&R will remain as it has been for as long as Janine owned it. That I know for sure." She got up, rounded the bar and grabbed an apron from the hook like she'd seen Tracie do just a couple of nights before. "What I don't know, unfortunately, is the first thing about running a bar, let alone owning one."

Tracie shook her head and laughed. "You can't be serious. You think you are going to work the bar? Tonight?"

Hope shrugged her shoulders and nodded. "Sure. There's no time like the present, and I've got nothing waiting for me at home."

Tracie continued to laugh. "So, if Harrison were here, we'd be spared?"

"You think I can't pour drinks?" She gasped in lighthearted shock.

Tracie shook her head and bit her tongue.

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"I'll have you know I've done everything I've ever wanted to do. I don't think tending bar is beyond my abilities."

Tracie's tongue was obviously in her cheek as she nodded her head in agreement.

Defending herself more, she argued, "I went to bars when I was a freshman in college. I've seen how it's done."

The placating nod Tracie kept offering was comically condescending.

The door opened, and Hope goodheartedly scoffed at Tracie. "I'll take this one."

She tied her apron and tried to look serious when she turned to see who walked in. It was Jack; she remembered him from her first night in the bar and from Janine's memorial. He sat on the first stool and tipped his hat to her when he sat.

With a smile and a nod, she said, "What can I get you tonight, Jack?" She wished she already knew. That would impress Tracie.

Jack's old eyes twinkled. "Oh...well, just a beer." His voice was low and gravely like John Wayne's.

"You know what, Jack? I'm gonna buy your first drink tonight." She gave a firm nod with a crooked smile. "I owe you an apology for my rude behavior the other night, and I would like to make it up to you."

It was endearing how his plump little face blushed. "Aw, hell, you don't have to do that."

Hope leaned against the bar, as she'd seen Tracie do, and looked him in the eye. "I may not have to, but I'd like to, so...what'll it be?"

He patted her hand. "Like mother, like daughter."

Hope flinched slightly at the cliché, but held her smile. "Well, what can I get you?"

He held her hand and gave it a squeeze. "I'd like a Jim Beam on the rocks."

Hope gave another nod and turned to find the bourbon. She could feel Tracie watching her. No way would she ask where it was, though. Finally, after only a minute, she found it and poured him two fingers' worth.

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He held the glass high. "Here's to Janine's Hope."

She felt her face flush, and smiled back with a slight nod.

As the bar slowly began to fill, she poured beer and filled the peanut bowls at her leisure.

"How're you doin'?" Tracie sashayed behind her.

Feeling self-conscious, she lowered her eyes and slumped her shoulders. "Why? Am I doing a terrible job?"

Tracie flicked her on the arm with the bar towel and tisked her tongue. "No, you're not doing a terrible job." Then she turned to the people at the bar. "So, what do you all think? Can Hope here pull this off?"

Their friendly faces lit up as glasses and bottles were held high and words of encouragement were offered. Tracie turned to her and leaned against the bar. "See, you really should have more confidence if you want to be the owner of this joint."

Hope twisted her mouth in a sideways smile and prayed that everyone looking at her couldn't tell her eyes were welling up. Tracie turned up the music and started singing to the bawdy song.

Hope grabbed up the bus tub and went to empty it in the kitchen. Louie was busy cooking and singing to himself.

Hope put the tub at the dish station. Remembering what Tracie had said, she asked, "Where's Billy?"

Casually, he shook his head. "He isn't going to be in tonight."

"Oh?"

He shrugged a shoulder. "He called and said he wouldn't be in."

Louie may be a great cook, but Hope could get information out of almost anybody. "When did he call? I don't recall the phone ringing."

"He called the phone in the kitchen." Hope could feel her pulse kick up. She wasn't sure if it was because she was mad that Billy didn't show or if it was because Louie wasn't angry. She decided to just bite her tongue and not say anything. Instead, she turned, unloaded the bus tub and started washing dishes. That got Louie's attention.

"Damn it, girl, what are you doing?" He stalked over to the dishwasher.

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"Washing dishes." She shrugged her shoulder, mocking him. Two could play at this game.

Louie shook his head and rounded the dish station to get to the other side.

She didn't budge.

"Not in my kitchen, no sir. No one pretty as you is gonna be doin' dishes in my kitchen." He gathered up dishes and stacked them.

Hope kept a pleasant face and continued washing. She was pretty much blocking the sink and knew Louie wouldn't shove past her. "I think something on the grill needs your attention."

Louie sniffed, set the stack of dishes down and mumbled, "Damn women, thinkin' they're..." His mumbling subsided as he shuffled farther away from her.

Hope laughed to herself as she traded her black apron for a white one like Louie's, listening to his grumblings. She finished washing what was there then went out into the dining room, carrying clean bus tubs with her.

The music playing on the jukebox was turned up loud, drowning out the band setting up. Hope smiled at the customers as she made her way behind the bar.

Tracie's eyebrows shot up, and her mouth dropped open. "Now what the hell are you wearing?"

Hope slipped by her and filled the tub again from under the bar with glasses and plates. She stood up, wiped some sweat from her cheek and batted her eyelashes. "You like it?" She spun a quick circle. "I thought maybe I would try a white one on for size."

Tracie squinted. "That little twerp; Billy didn't show up."

Hope gave her a knowing look and continued filling the tub she still held in her hands. Along her way back to the kitchen, Hope made eye contact with everyone sitting at the bar, and smiled and nodded. She knew eventually she would be able to have easy conversations with them like Tracie and Harrison.

"Jack, you okay?"

He sipped the amber blend. "Pretty good here, Hope."

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She beamed as if he'd paid her a high compliment, and then a burst of cold air hit her as the front door opened. "Hi, Sharon."

"Hi. What are you doing?"

"Dishes." That didn't sound too bad if you were the owner.

Sharon reached for an apron. "So, I take it Billy didn't show up again."

"Right."

"Great."

The look Tracie and Sharon shared only made her wonder all the more about Billy.

Another gust of wind preceded Doc and Maggie.

"Hi, Maggie...Doc." It would take her a while to get used to the informal name. The few doctors she knew in New York were far too formal to be called 'Doc'. "How are you?" She shifted the heavy bus tub on her hip.

"We're fine. Just fine. How about you?" Maggie said, giving a questioning look to her apron and bus tub while walking toward the booth closest to the kitchen.

"I'm good. Thanks. If you will excuse me for a minute." The instant she backed into the kitchen, Louie's protests were loud and clear.

"Hope, I mean it. You put that tub down and change out of that apron. Billy is my concern."

Doc and Maggie looked like they were trying to stifle a laugh.

Happily ignoring his protests, she went on doing the dishes, surprised at how good it felt to do honest labor. Enjoying the rise she got out of Louie, she sailed across the kitchen to make another round.

She stopped at Maggie and Doc's booth just after Sharon delivered their drinks. "Hi. Sorry about that."

Maggie's face lit up, and she swallowed her sip of beer. "Are you okay, honey?" Her brows were creased, and she looked sympathetic as her eyes shot to the kitchen door.

Hope understood she was asking about the work rather than her bereavement. She propped the tub against her hip and looked at the door also, as if there was a wild animal behind it. "You know, Maggie, if I can

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survive the mob at Macy's the day after Thanksgiving, I think I can survive Louie on a Friday night."

Maggie's head fell back as she let out a great big laugh.

Doc nodded in agreement. "Don't you let Louie run you over."

"Oh, don't worry, Doc. I won't." Hope started to turn to tend to the tables, but Maggie reached out and touched her arm.

"Since Harrison's out of town, we thought maybe you'd like to come have dinner with us tomorrow night."

She looked at her and then at Doc. They were both so nice, and it would be good to talk to them and get to know more about her mother. "I would like that very much, thank you."

Maggie smiled in return. "Good then. Do you..." She smiled at the tub resting against her hip "...have to work tomorrow night?"

She looked at the kitchen door again, her mouth tilted to one side, and sucked in air through the lifted corner. "Yep, I'm working tomorrow night, and every other night until I can find Billy's replacement."

Doc took a sip of his beer then set the mug down on the thick table. "That's fair. Why don't you come over at about three. We'll have an early dinner, and you can still make it on time for work. We'll write down the directions before we leave tonight and give them to you. It's easy enough to find."

Hope felt warmth envelop her and smiled sweetly. "Thank you, I really look forward to it."

The night wore on, and the band continued to play while the dance floor was a blur of men and women having a great time. Tracie moved non-stop behind the bar, and Sharon hustled tables as quick as she could. Hope marveled at how easy they made it look.

Heather came in and danced with Tracie, Sharon and a lot of other women in a line dance. The crowd enjoyed it when the girls danced, and shouted their appreciation. Hope couldn't help but laugh and shake her head at the sight. If the people in New York knew she was bussing tables and laughing at men catcalling women, they would have her head examined.

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Another song started, and Heather grabbed her hand this time. "Come on. There's no time like the present. I love this song!"

Hope didn't have the strength to argue, so she climbed over the bar again and took the dance floor with Heather.

Tracie hooted and hollered encouragement. Hope didn't do much better her second time, but by the time Heather had her dancing her fourth dance, she was getting the hang of it.

It was late and the crowd started to thin out. Heather hung out at the bar as usual, and Hope continued to bus the tables. She washed the mugs and glasses at the bar's little washer and put them away. She wiped down the tables and flipped the chairs over to rest on the tabletops.

"Well, Hope, I think you put in a good day's work." Tracie swung her arm over Hope's shoulders.

Hope huffed and stretched her back. "Does that surprise you?"

"Face it, sweetie, you don't look like the type to bus tables and bust her hump in a country bar."

Hope sighed and returned Tracie's embrace by wrapping her arm around her waist. "No, I guess I don't, but then, didn't anyone tell you, you shouldn't judge a book by its cover? Just wait until tomorrow and see how I am if Billy doesn't show up for that meeting."

Chapter Ten

Soft morning sunrays peeked through the Dutch doors and spread across Hope's face. She wished it was Harrison's warm, hard body and soft, intoxicating lips waking her as she ran her hands up her sides and stretched her arms overhead. "Ahg, this isn't getting anything done, Hope," she grumbled and rolled out of bed.

As she padded to the kitchen to make a pot of coffee, her muscles reminded her of her hard night's work. "Don't worry, they say what doesn't kill you, only makes you stronger," she moaned while she arched and stretched her back. A hot shower would loosen her up while the coffee brewed, and then she'd be good as new.

Even though the barn was spacious and large, the little bathroom didn't seem out of place. She turned the water on just short of scalding and watched as the steam quickly billowed. Smelling the musky scent of Harrison's soap sent shivers over her body and brought back memories of yesterday.

The water worked miracles as it beat against her sore muscles, although she'd bet Harrison would do better. She shampooed her hair and, while the conditioner worked, she massaged slow circles over her breasts with the smooth, slippery soap. Her nipples perked up and reminded her of pleasures she could have by herself. A slow, erotic pinch sent a bite of pleasure between her legs. Mindful of the hot water's tendency to run short, she ran her fingers between her silky smooth folds.

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Leaning back to allow the water spray to pulse against her engorged bud, she cried out as she slid her middle finger deep inside herself.

Fantasizing it was Harrison's long, hard cock filling her up, she thrust with two fingers. In her mind's eye, his tongue lapped at her clit as her thumb rubbed circles over it. Oh, God! Her thighs shook, and her breath came in short, hard pants. Lost in the rush, she continued to thrust her fingers deep inside her. Hot water ran between her swollen lips, sluicing over her sensitive nub. She stroked and thrust quickly, achieving her peak just as the water cooled to warm. Lightheaded, she rode the waves of her orgasm. Her knees weakened and her hands shook as the waves subsided and she floated back down to reality.

God, she missed Harrison and couldn't wait to have his long, hard, hot cock deep inside her for real. She snapped the tepid water off and wrung out her hair. Sapped of energy, she leaned against the tile wall and caught her breath; the cooling air felt invigorating against her skin still tingling from her orgasm.

Wrapped in a towel, she padded to the kitchen and poured a mug of coffee then snuggled into the large chair in the living area. Thinking about Harrison, she pulled her knees to her chest and tucked them under her. Even though he wasn't there, he was all around her. He was in the cowboy hats hanging from the pine beam above the bedroom. His smile was as bright as the shine of the belt buckles showcased on the shelves.

She gazed into the empty fireplace and remembered how gentle and caring he'd been her first night there. The fire he'd built was so warm, and the way he'd held her was a comfort she hadn't felt in a very long time.

Oh, how she wanted his strong hands wrapped around her and his hard body pressed against her. How could a man be so sensitive and yet so masculine at the same time? She looked forward to spending time with his family and the chance for some more insight into the man who had captivated her in only a few short days. She finished her coffee and put the mug in the dishwasher.

While getting dressed in a pair of hound's-tooth print slacks and a red, cable knit sweater, she realized she was going to have to go shopping

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for some jeans to wear to work. Her wardrobe wasn't cut out for washing dishes or bussing tables.

She swiped on some mascara and lipstick, dried her hair, tied it back into a ponytail and nodded into the mirror. Even though she felt completely vulnerable, she looked like someone who had a reasonable amount of knowledge. The last thing she needed was for the employees of the bar to think she was an absolute idiot and run circles around her. She took a final deep breath and left for the R&R.

* * * * *

The office was tidy with an industrial metal desk shoved against a wall and a couple of file cabinets next to it. An older computer and a blot pad calendar, along with some pictures, sat on top of the desk. Pictures. Janine sure had a lot of them. Hope picked one up and studied Janine with the beautiful golden quarter horse, Begochiddy. Her smile was bright, and her eyes were full of life. The thin wrinkles at the corners of her eyes were telltale signs she'd smiled often.

The picture next to it was of four young teenagers. She could pick out Harrison, Tracie and Tucker, but there was a boy she couldn't place. They all had a leg bent with a boot heel resting against the steel horizontal fence. Tracie and the boy she didn't recognize were linked by their arms stretched behind one another, each holding ribbons in their free hands. The smiles they had across their sun-kissed faces showed absolute bliss and complete friendship. Had Janine taken the photo or someone else?

She set the leather frame down in the dust free print it left and wondered about another photo. It was of her. Her hand shook and her mouth and throat went dry when she picked up the silver frame and took a closer look. It was a candid shot of her in her favorite summer dress. That dress would never be forgotten; she'd worn it the day her dad died. Hope remembered the pictures she'd seen in Janine's home the first day she arrived. How had Janine gotten all the pictures of her? A chill shimmied up her spine, and tears burned her eyes.

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Janine had left all those years ago and never looked back. Never once had Hope received a phone call or a letter. Nothing. As far as she'd been concerned, Janine had forgotten her altogether. Apparently she was wrong. But who had sent her the pictures?

It was highly doubtful it was her father. After Janine had left, James had never spoken of her. He'd just showered Hope with all his attention and made sure she wanted for nothing, except of course a mom. She'd never talked to her father about Janine leaving because she sensed, even at a young age, the subject had been off limits. A tear fell and splashed on the reflection from the overhead lights across the glass. Hope swallowed hard and placed the frame back on the desk just as it had been.

She shook her head and wiped away the tears. The past was past. There was no time for wallowing. The future was hers.

Studying a few of the current invoices sitting on top of a file cabinet informed her where they ordered their dry goods and meats, along with produce and a few miscellaneous items. A quick look in the file drawer proved they'd been kept in good order. She found the payroll receipts file and noted what everyone was paid and how many employees worked at the R&R. It really wasn't hard to figure it out, as the records were impeccably kept.

Again her thoughts shifted to the pictures adorning Janine's desk. She wondered who she would be today if she'd been able to know her mother. What if Janine had never moved away? What if she'd stayed in New York? If she had, then she wouldn't have ever known Harrison and Tracie. If she'd met Harrison all those years ago, would they have been just a summer love, or would they have been married with children by now? The answers to these questions were not for her to know, but she knew the more she was around Janine's things, the more at ease she felt. And the more she wanted the lifestyle Janine had seemed to live.

"Hope!" The kitchen door slammed. Tracie bellowed as her boots stomped across the kitchen, getting closer to the office, "I hope you had the good sense to start coffee."

"Shit," she whispered.

"Okay, this is bad. I don't smell coffee."

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Hope wiped under her eyes and prayed it wasn't obvious she'd been crying.

"What's up?" Tracie leaned against the door jamb. "You nervous about the meeting?" Her voice held concern.

Hope blinked a couple of times and slowly smiled. "No...not really, it feels right for some reason." Hope shook her head and looked at Tracie with questioning eyes. "You know? It feels like this is where I'm supposed to be. I know it sounds crazy, but it does."

Tracie yawned and stretched her arms high over her head. "No. It doesn't sound crazy. When something's right, people know it. Besides, it was right for Janine, and you're her daughter, so it would only make sense that it would feel right. Like mother, like daughter."

Hope looked at the pictures again. "Yeah, maybe."

"Maybe nothing." She waved her hand in front of her dismissively. "And don't think you can get away without making the coffee, either. That is damn near inexcusable."

Hope gulped, straightened the papers on Janine's desk and cleared her throat. "Sorry. I had my one cup at Harrison's and then got to work right away."

Tracie gasped. "Are you kidding? One cup of coffee? That's it?"

"Yes, one cup. Is that so strange?"

Tracie nodded and walked to the coffee maker. "Yeah, it is."

Hope laughed and followed her to learn how to make the coffee.

Tracie took a tray of cups to a table in the dining room and sat down. She looked up and saw Hope standing at the kitchen door. "Are you going to come in and sit down?"

"I'm going into the office to finish up a few things before everyone else gets here."

Tracie waited for the coffee to brew and sighed. "Suit yourself."

Hope nodded and returned to the office to make sure she had all the papers she needed and questions to ask all organized. A few minutes later, she heard Louie come in, then Sharon and someone she assumed was Mindy. She wondered if Billy would show up.

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She took a deep breath, gathered her folder and headed toward the dining room. When she pushed through the door, the room fell silent.

She smiled and joined them at the table. "I'm really—" A frog got stuck in her throat. She cleared it and tried again. "I'm really glad you all could make it here this morning, and I appreciate you coming." She looked everyone in the eye and stopped at a young woman with light brown hair styled in a simple, preppy bob cut. "You must be Mindy. I'm Hope." She extended her hand.

Mindy was about eighteen with an ice-cold hand. "It's good to meet you." She shifted in her seat and cleared her throat. "I'm real sorry about your mom, and that I was out of town and couldn't make it to her services."

Hope nodded and smiled. "Thank you. I'm glad to know you and look forward to working with you."

Her smile widened as she looked at everyone sitting around the table. "I look forward to working with all of you, actually. I worked here last night and saw how well this place runs, and that's because of you guys, not because of the owner."

"I know you all loved Janine. As you also know, I did not grow up with her, and I'm sure we will do things a little differently from each other. I would hope that if any of you have an issue with any of my decisions concerning the R&R, you would approach me and we can see what we can work out."

"I don't plan on making any huge changes. As I see it, there really isn't a need for them. If you have suggestions, I'm open to them, as I'm sure you would be open to any I have to make. Are there any questions so far?" Heads shook in unison around the table, so Hope took a deep breath and continued. "I'm going to be real honest with you. I don't know how to own a bar, but I like to think that I'm smart and it shouldn't take me long to learn. I don't plan to sit on my duff and watch you guys. I'll work here too, the same as you, and as I've been told, the same as Janine did. However, I do think that my tolerance for..." Hope stopped as she saw all eyes stare behind her, and she heard the kitchen door swing open.

Billy.

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She looked at her watch. Ten-fifteen, too late. Her spine straightened, and she folded her hands over her papers.

Billy pulled up a chair and sat behind everyone. The tension that filled the room was almost suffocating.

Hope kept her eyes level and bland. "You must be Billy." She didn't like him.

His pale gold eyes were squinty, and his uncombed hair was a terrible mousy kind of orange. The grunt he offered for an answer was obnoxious and didn't make him any more endearing. He leaned back in the chair until it rested on the back legs and folded his arms across his chest.

She kept her calm and turned on her court room voice and said, "Did you know you were supposed to work last night?"

He looked her up and down, licked his lips then smiled slowly. "Yeah."

An involuntary shiver ran up her spine until her jaw twitched. "I see Well..." She reached into her folder, pulled out an envelope and held it out for him. "When you are scheduled for work, typically people are counting on you to be there." She could tell his punk ass wasn't in the mood for a lecture, but if he cared to stick around and hear it, then she would give it. "I looked over your schedule last night and found you call in sick more than you actually show up to work. Because of your appalling work ethics, I have decided to let you go."

Billy's eyes were like ice. He let the chair fall forward and shrugged his shoulders. "You're firing me?"

Hope didn't break eye contact and met his glare with her own. "Yes." She lifted the envelope for him to take. "This is your final paycheck. Thank you for coming in this morning. You may take your leave now."

Billy jumped up. The chair tumbled behind him. "You can't fire me. You bitch—"

"Actually, Billy," she didn't give him the opportunity to finish, "I can. Arizona has an at-will employment doctrine, which states I can fire you whenever I want, just as you can quit whenever you want. What I

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can't do is fire you in a way that discriminates or violates any public policy or implied promises concerning your employment and its length." She watched the gold flecks in his eyes flare with anger. "Because you have proven that you are unreliable, I find it is in the best interest of the R&R to terminate your employment." Without lowering her eyes, she lifted the envelope slightly higher. Silence hung in the room.

Billy snatched the envelope from her hand. "This is bullshit."

Hope smiled. "You may think it's bullshit, but it doesn't change the fact this is your last paycheck."

He kicked the fallen chair as he turned to leave.

Louie started to stand, but Hope reached over, put her hand on top of his and shook her head. No one said anything. They heard the back door slam. Louie took his hand from Hope's and left the room with his head hung and his shoulders slumped.

Hope let out a sigh and straightened her papers. "I'm sorry you all had to witness that. Anyway...I have these questionnaires that I would like you all to fill out for me." She handed the papers around the table. "I'll give you two days to fill them out. When you're finished, just leave them on Janine's desk." They just stared at her. She swallowed and smiled. "Do you have any questions or concerns you'd like to discuss now?"

Their heads shook in unison. "Well then, I have some for you."

Hope asked them all questions concerning every aspect of the bar. Who did the ordering? When? Who accepted the orders? Who worked when? What holidays did they have off? Did they think they had enough help? Lastly, did they know of anyone who wanted to be a dishwasher?

"Okay, guys, I really do appreciate your patience and time. If there's nothing else, I think we can wrap this up." She straightened her papers in her folder.

Sharon smiled and arched her back. "I'll have the information to you soon, Hope." Then she stood and left. Mindy smiled and followed Sharon to the kitchen.

Tracie remained seated in her chair, looking relaxed.

Hope took a deep breath and felt self-conscious. "What?"

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Tracie gathered up the coffee cups and stood. "Nothing." Her voice was light as she shrugged a shoulder.

Hope wasn't going to let her get away with that. "Oh, no, you don't. Something's on your mind."

Tracie stopped, rested her hip against the edge of the table, and her mischievous smile broke through. "Remember yesterday when you said you weren't sure what you were doing?"

Hope tucked her chin and lowered her voice. "Yeah."

Tracie nodded and pushed off the table. "Well, I think you're gonna do just fine." However, there was something in her voice that was slightly misplaced and leading.

Hope sat up straight and questioned her. "But...?"

Tracie headed off toward the kitchen, backed through the swinging door and gave a look that said "shut up and follow me".

Shit. She followed.

Tracie set the tray at the dishwasher while she kept walking out the back door.

"See ya tonight, Louie," Tracie called out.

Hope climbed into the Jeep and waited for Tracie to come out and talk to her.

She jumped into the Jeep and sat in the big leather seat. Hope looked at her expectantly. "Well, are you going to explain what you meant, or are you just going to go shopping with me and pray I forget?"

Tracie's eyes lit up, and she clapped her hands. "You're going shopping?"

Hope laughed. "Yeah, I can't work in wool and suede pants if I'm going to be a dishwasher."

Tracie tilted her head and pursed her lips as her eyebrows lifted. "True, very true. We need to get you some tight fittin' Levi's and a sassy little shirt to show off your cleavage." Tracie slapped Hope's knee and reached back for the seatbelt. "Let's go." She looked like a dog ready to gnaw a bone.

"Not so fast. First you're going to tell me what's up." Hope made no attempt to start the engine.

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"Okay, but let's go someplace and get something to eat. I drank too much coffee, and I'm going to throw up if I don't."

Hope squinted and twisted her mouth to one side. "Okay, but only 'cause I don't want you throwing up in Janine's Jeep." Hope started the engine and sped off. "So where are we going?" She had to shout to be heard over the engine's roar.

Tracie grasped the sissy bar. "There's a little shop—" She screamed as Hope turned the corner, then checked her seatbelt. "Off Main, a little past the post office."

The Jeep came to a screeching stop in front of the quaint little shop.

"Thank God," Tracie exclaimed.

"For what?"

Tracie just shook her head and brushed the dust off her pants. "I'm starving."

The waitress greeted them right away. Tracie ordered a muffin with a side of bacon, and Hope ordered hot tea.

"What is it that you want to tell me, but couldn't at the R&R?" Hope said.

Tracie leaned forward on the table and lowered her voice. "Billy is Louie's grandson."

Shit. Hope could feel the color drain from her face.

Tracie leaned back in her chair and tinkered with her napkin, folding it into smaller squares.

The waitress brought their orders then left without saying anything. Even she could feel the tension, Hope thought as she sat up straighter, lifted her chin and reached for the sugar. "Is that why Janine never fired him?"

Tracie sighed and broke a piece of bacon in half before she took a bite. "I honestly don't know why she didn't shit-can him, to tell you the truth. If you ask me, he deserved it a long time ago."

Hope held the cup of tea between her two hands to warm them. A cold front was moving through, and there was a strong chill in the air. "I stand by my actions. If Louie wants to quit because of it, then that's a chance I'll have to take."

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Tracie broke a bite off her muffin and chewed thoughtfully. "You know, Hope, you've got balls. I like that. Billy can be spoiled, and he'll try to get his way. Watch your back."

Her mouth fell open, stunned. "Are you telling me I should be afraid of Billy? Do you think he would do something to me?"

Tracie shrugged as she took another bite of her bacon. "I don't think so. I don't think his balls are nearly as big as yours, so probably not."

Tracie's comparison didn't offer much comfort. Hope finished her tea and looked at her watch. "We've gotta get a move on. I need to buy pants and shoes and be at Maggie and Doc's at three o'clock."

Tracie finished up her muffin and bacon and stood up. "Then let's hit the shops."

They went to the little shop next door and spent two hours and a lot of money. Hope bought new pants, new boots and a few new shirts. She considered a cowboy hat, but decided to pace herself. Her style really wasn't denim and cotton, but she figured so much was changing in her life, why not her wardrobe too?

"Shit, look at the time. I'd better hurry. Where can I buy flowers?" Hope said.

"There's a florist around the corner and up the street a ways," Tracie replied.

Hope sighed, relieved there was one nearby. She was so used to having everything she could possibly want within walking distance. Having to drive everywhere, although it was fun, was strange and surprisingly took up more time. She dashed into the flower shop, bought a pretty bouquet then sped home to the barn.

No matter how much she tried, she couldn't stop thinking about Billy. He looked pissed, and Tracie's words echoed in her mind. *Watch your back.*

Chapter Eleven

Anxious to spend the afternoon with Harrison's family, Hope dressed in her new, skin-tight Levi's and a snug, long-sleeved, low cut Henley. She wasn't too sure about it, but Tracie had assured her she looked great. Not to mention the tips she'd make if she delivered a couple of drinks to the tables and bent over at the waist to give a quick little peek. Hope assured Tracie she wouldn't be giving anyone a quick peek of anything.

Deciding the busty image may not be the one she wanted to put forward to Harrison's parents, she threw a sweater on over it and felt a lot more comfortable. She dabbed on some lipstick and grabbed her keys and jacket. She thought her long, soft, wool trench coat was overdressing for jeans, but it was the only jacket she had, so it would have to do. Maybe she would get a cool leather coat to look all rugged in her Jeep on her next shopping trip.

Jenna and Jaycee walked up the driveway as she pulled up to Doc and Maggie's. Hope jumped down from the Jeep. "Hi, Jaycee. Hi, Jenna."

Shyness came over her. It was foreign to her; she was usually a confident person, but there was something about the wholesomeness of the people in this community that made her feel just slightly off kilter.

"Hi," the girls answered in unison.

Jenna put a hand in the back pocket of her jeans and dug the toe of her boot in the gravel. "We heard you fired Billy."

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Hope was surprised they'd heard so soon. She figured word would travel fast, but didn't think it would be that expeditious. These girls were good. "I did." She shifted the bouquet into the other hand. "How did you hear about it?"

"We were down at his house talking to his sister when he came home." Jaycee sounded almost apologetic.

Jenna wasn't sorry at all. Her eyes lit up, and she put her other hand in a back pocket. "He was pissed and punched a hole in their garage wall while calling you a few choice names."

The high school drama was amusing, but Hope refrained from laughing. "Really? What did he call me?"

Just then, the front door opened and Maggie came outside.

She mouthed to the twins, "Tell me later."

The girls agreed with a barely perceptible nod.

"Girls, you should have been home awhile ago. I told you Hope was coming for dinner," Maggie chastised.

Feeling like she had a hand in their being late, Hope stepped forward and handed Maggie the flowers. After all, if the girls didn't have so much to gossip about, they might have been home on time. "I'm sure they have a good excuse."

She walked toward the house in the hopes that Maggie wouldn't be too hard on them. Her senses took over, and her mouth watered. "Oh! Wow, it smells amazing."

"Oh, for sure they have an excuse. They are never short of those." Maggie laughed. "The flowers are beautiful, thank you. Come on in and make yourself comfortable. Doc is outside with the ribs on the grill. Girls, you can take care of the table. Hope, what can I get you to drink?"

"Can I help? I'd really like to."

Maggie's bright smile set her at ease, but the way she wrapped an arm around her shoulder and gave a maternal squeeze while she led her to the kitchen warmed her to the soul.

While in the kitchen, they all prepared drinks and the other food they were ready to enjoy. Conversation was easy and light, and Maggie

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made Hope, Jenna and Jaycee laugh with stories of past dinners and guests.

Doc stomped into the kitchen through the back door, rubbing his arms. "Damn, it's getting cold out there with clouds moving in."

"Clouds?" Hope said, stunned. "It was a little cold, but clear as a bell on my way over here."

Doc gave Maggie a little pat on her butt as he reached across her for a platter. "A storm here is like nowhere else. It could rain on one side of a street and not the other." He gave his sagging waistband a quick little tug and scratched his head. "Strangest damn thing you'll ever see."

Hope looked at Jaycee and Jenna to make sure he wasn't trying to pull her leg.

They both nodded.

"I'll be right back with the ribs, and then I can tell you some other interesting things, too."

Hope chuckled. "Like the state bird is the cactus wren?"

Doc smiled at her, and his eyes twinkled at her humor. "You sound pretty sure of yourself."

Hope leaned against the counter, crossed her arms over her chest and smiled back at him. "Thanks to Harrison."

Doc's boisterous laugh filled the kitchen before he shut the door.

Maggie shook her head and laughed with Hope. "So Harrison filled you in on all of what's what in Arizona?"

Hope sucked in air through lips that tilted to one side in a half smile. "He did. It was really rather amusing."

Maggie lifted her eyebrows in question.

Hope shrugged her shoulders and wiped her hands on the towel she was wringing. "He told me after I mentioned I thought saguaros look like they are flipping people the bird."

Maggie threw her head back and laughed. She looped her arm through Hope's and led her to the table.

Doc came in with a mound of baby back ribs slathered in barbeque sauce and set it in the middle of the table. The smell was heavenly.

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Everyone served themselves then talked while they ate. They particularly recalled stories of Harrison growing up.

Jaycee swallowed hard, trying to catch her breath. "Remember when Harrison, Tucker and Jake sank the car in the lake?"

Hope nearly choked on her mouth full of corn before she swallowed it.

Doc looked over at Jaycee while Maggie wiped a laugh-induced tear from her cheek and Jenna held her side.

Hope shut her mouth, remembering her good manners, and composed herself. "Harrison sank a car?"

Jaycee caught her breath. "Yeah. Well, no. He, Tucker and Jake were out at the lake with their girlfriends." She wiggled her eyebrows. "Jake and this girl were making use of the back seat, and it popped out of gear and started rolling. They didn't know what was happening, and neither did Tucker or Harrison because they were in opposite directions with their own girlfriends. If you know what I mean?"

Maggie wiped her eye again. "Yes, Jaycee. I'm quite sure Hope and everybody else knows what you mean."

Jaycee ignored her mother's interruption. "Well, anyway, they, that is, Jake and what's her name, had no idea until the car was already half sunk."

Hope softly laughed at the absurdity of it. "Oh, my God, did they make it out?"

Jenna cracked a whole new level of laughter and added to her sister's tale. "Oh, they made it...all right."

Hope laughed at the double meaning.

Jaycee's laughter softened. "They were okay, and Janine didn't press charges. But after that, Jake moved away and he hasn't been back since."

"Janine? Why would she press charges?" Hope said, confused.

Doc cleared his throat and set his fork down. "Because..." Maggie and the girls looked guilty as sin and stopped laughing. "It was her car."

Hope gasped. "Her car?"

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Doc leaned back in his chair and sucked a piece of corn from his teeth. "The boys stole Janine's car and took it out to the lake to impress their girlfriends."

Maggie placed her hand over Doc's to calm him down. The simple gesture seemed to work. "Janine didn't press charges, because she figured they didn't mean to sink her car. They just wanted to get to the lake."

"And make out," Jaycee interjected.

Hope laughed in awe. "She wasn't angry?"

Maggie gave Doc's hand another squeeze and smiled sweetly. "Janine had a saintly tolerance for the kids in this town. She figured if she were tolerant of others, then people would be tolerant of hers. Like karma."

Karma? Hope's mind reeled at the fact that Janine had believed in karma. Karma! Shit. "You're not serious."

Maggie's twinkling eyes made her look as young as her daughters. "Mmm hmm. Janine believed very much in what comes around goes around. She couldn't be near you...so...she sort of took other kids under her wing and made sure they knew they could always come to her if they needed anything."

Was that supposed to make her feel better? Hope wiped her mouth and took a sip of her beer. The air became thick, and she swallowed again to make sure it wasn't choking her.

Doc cleared his throat. "Whenever you're ready to hear about your mother..." He propped his elbows on the table and folded his hands together. "...all you need to do is ask. Our door is always open."

She tried to speak, but her throat was too tight.

Maggie eyed the dishes on the table and bobbed her head toward the kitchen. Jaycee and Jenna took the hint and cleared the table.

Anxious to do anything that would take the spotlight off her, Hope grabbed up her plate and stood. "Oh, I can help."

Very much in the same manner she'd done to her husband, Maggie rested her hand on Hope's and gently shook her head no.

Chagrined, Hope sat back down.

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"Hope," Maggie's voice was as soothing as her hand. "We know you have questions about your mom."

The air was so thick and her throat was so tight, there was no way she could ask anything right now.

"Janine confided in us a lot." Maggie smiled at Doc. "We were very close friends. There are things...you have no way of knowing. Things that happened many years ago that changed the paths of your lives forever. I know it was Janine's hope that your roads would once again cross."

Tears stung her eyes and threatened to fall. She prayed they wouldn't. One look into the comforting eyes of her mother's friend, and the tears won and broke loose. "Damn." She swiped them off her face and swallowed hard.

Maggie held her hand and squeezed it gently. "It's all right, sweetie. You just take your time. Lord knows we're not going anywhere."

Hope nodded, tucked her chin against her chest and wiped the tears with her napkin from her lap. She sat up, breathed in deep then smiled when she looked back up. "I'm sorry." She shook her head to clear it, frustrated with her tears. "It seems every time someone brings up Janine in a serious manner, I cry. It's silly really."

She tried to sound detached, but it hurt. "I mean, she left when I was seven, and I never heard from her again. Then I come here, and I see pictures of myself in her home...and in her office. Pictures she shouldn't have. I have no idea how she got them." She scoffed and took a breath. "In a way, it's comforting to know she cared enough to want them, but why didn't she ever try to see me in person? Why didn't she ever try to get in touch with me? Oh!" Shocked and frustrated, she covered her lips with her shaking fingers. She hadn't meant to expose her vulnerability.

Maggie answered. "When your mother left New York, she was sick. She had cancer. There were treatments out here that weren't recognized in mainstream medicine. Your father didn't want to move you to a small town and take away the opportunities New York afforded you. He wouldn't go with Janine, and she was too sick to take you by herself."

Hope felt her heart being ripped to shreds. It was painful and embarrassing. It angered her to be having this conversation with

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strangers, no matter how kind they were. "She apparently survived for years. She could have tried to get in touch with me. I mean, I never even got a birthday card from her. By the time I was ten, I'd stopped wishing for one." The defenses she'd built over the years resonated in her voice.

Maggie and Doc shared a knowing look.

"But...it doesn't really matter now." She shrugged her shoulders. "She's gone. I'll just have to get to know her through her friends." Her chin came up, and her eyes were dry.

Maggie pushed her chair back and stood. "Well, it's always been my philosophy that if tears can't cure the blues, good ol' blueberry cobbler can."

Doc licked his lips and tested the tension around his girth. He looked at Hope and grinned. "Thank God there's still room for her cobbler. You're in for a real treat."

Maggie, Jenna, and Jaycee returned to the table carrying cobbler, ice cream and bowls.

How did they all keep such slim figures?

Maggie spooned the cobbler, Jenna scooped the ice cream, and Jaycee handed out the servings.

Hope waited for everyone to sit, then she took a bite and moaned. "Oh man, I haven't ever had blueberry cobbler this good. Maggie, this is sinful." She was grateful to be able to talk about something else.

Maggie blushed. "Thank you. I'm sure you're exaggerating, but thank you."

"You're welcome. So whatever happened to Jake? Why didn't he come back?"

Jaycee and Jenna looked at each other, and Maggie and Doc looked at them. It was almost as if they were waiting to see who was going to be brave enough to break the news.

Jenna gossiped in a hushed tone, "He was supposed to have been with Tracie that night. But he wasn't."

"Tracie?" Hope couldn't believe it.

Jenna nodded. "Yeah, you see, she and Jake were going together, but Jake told her he couldn't see her that night—"

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"Yeah, because he had plans to go out with that other girl...wasn't her name Linda?" Jaycee looked at Jenna.

Jenna nodded her head and continued. "Yeah! That's it, Linda. Well, anyway, Jake, Harrison and Tucker had to work off the damage by working at the R&R or around the ranch. Jake couldn't do it. He felt so bad for sinking Janine's car, he could hardly look at her, let alone work for her."

Jenna licked her spoon, set her bowl off to the side and leaned her forearms on the table. "Not to mention Tracie. Rumor has it—"

"It's practically modern day legend," Jaycee added for her sister.

Jenna raised her eye brows and gave a 'you know it' look. "Right. So anyway, the rumor goes that Jake left town because he and Linda had seen each other a couple times before that night, and it's been said she was pregnant."

Doc cleared his throat, and Jenna sat up straight. "You're only adding to that rumor mill by perpetuating the story, Jenna."

Jenna shrugged, fluttered her eyelashes and smiled mischievously. "Daddy, you know as well as I do that rumors tend to be true." She glanced at Hope with a quick grin.

Hope was intrigued. "Whatever happened to Linda?"

Jaycee took over for her sister. "She took off. No one knows where. After that night, she was never heard from again."

A chill ran down her spine at the creepiness of the whole story. "Oh, my gosh." She shook her head in disbelief. "No way, that has to be an urban legend and you're pulling my leg. I can't see Tracie with a guy who would be of that kind of character."

Maggie shook her head sorrowfully. "Nope, unfortunately it's true."

Hope slumped in her seat. "That is an amazing story." Then it occurred to her that she never had found a time card for Harrison at the R&R, but he bartended there. "Is that why Harrison works at the R&R sometimes?"

Maggie chuckled. "Yeah, that's why."

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"That's also why he's been looking after you all these years," Jenna blurted out.

"What do you mean?" Hope tried to sound casual, but her stomach had a sinking feeling she couldn't deny.

Jenna's mouth dropped open.

A chair scraped against the floor. "Damn it, Jenna!"

Hope jumped at Doc's booming voice, and there was movement all around her, but she couldn't make any sense of it. Maggie's hand felt cold and soft against hers as she clutched a napkin under the table. Her mind reeled from all the thoughts running through it that began to make sense.

The pictures. That's how Janine had gotten the pictures. Harrison. Harrison had known who she was the instant she got off the plane. She thought he'd seemed a bit too sure; he hadn't hesitated when he approached her. She wouldn't ever forget how his voice had sounded when he said her name the first time. It had definitely been said knowingly.

She heard crying and was sure it wasn't her. Her blood was flowing with too much anger for tears. With her focus returned, she saw Doc and Maggie staring at her as if she was a piece of fine crystal starting to shatter. She squared her shoulders and smiled politely. "Thank you very much for dinner, Maggie." She nodded at Doc as well. "Doc, the ribs were delicious."

A deafening clap of thunder shook the windows.

Maggie pleaded, "Hope there's a storm coming, please don't go now. Wait until it passes. We can talk about this, and then you can go when it's safe."

All the things she'd said to Harrison, the way she'd opened herself and asked him to love her. Ha! She must seem like a joke. An eerie calm soothed her bruised dignity. "Maggie, I'm all right. I really need to get to the R&R and help." She spun around, and her boots echoed against the floor, only stopping at the front door when she felt a hand on her arm. She turned. Jenna was crying.

"Hope, I'm sorry." Jenna's tears were so sincere. "I thought you knew. I thought...he would have told you by now."

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"Jenna, don't worry." Hope smiled, trying to put her at ease. "It's not your fault your brother's an ass."

Jenna choked on a gasp, laughed and then cried again.

Hope snapped her jacket off the coat tree and left. Cold, hard raindrops pelted her all the way to the Jeep. She could feel Maggie and Doc watching her as she started it up and pulled down the driveway.

By the time she parked behind the bar, her jacket was soaked and her hair was sopping, but she didn't care. All she could think about was how much she loved Harrison and how much her heart was breaking because of his omission. Why hadn't he just told her? Why couldn't he have trusted her? Oh, what she would give to scream at him and shake him. She would just have to wait until he got back. Right now she had a bar to run, and by God, she was going to do it.

She jumped down from the Jeep and landed in a puddle. "Shit!"

On her way to her office through the kitchen, she grabbed a towel and ignored Louie's mumbling about water getting all over his kitchen.

She slammed the office door shut. "Damn it!" Frustration made her want to cry, but she refused to give it the satisfaction. There would be no more tears!

She shrugged out of her jacket and flung it over the chair, then tugged off the sweater she was now thankful she wore and heaved a sigh as it fell heavy and wet on top of the jacket. Icy cold droplets of water from her ponytail dripped down her spine, soaking the damp Henley clinging to her chilled skin.

"Ugh! God, I feel like a drowned rat." She looked in the mirror. "Great, I look like one too."

The hair band pulled tangled wet strands from her head when she yanked it out. "Ow." She ran her fingers through her hair. After a few hard shakes, stringy locks of curls framed her face. "Damn curls."

Wishing she had a hairbrush, she dug in her purse. All that was inside, aside from her wallet and keys, was a tube of old lipstick, a stick of gum and two Tic-tacs stuck to a perfume sample.

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"First Paul, and then Harrison. Men are lying pigs," she mumbled to herself and spit on a tissue. The smeared mascara was stubborn under her eyes. A fresh layer of lipstick brightened her fake, forced smile.

"Well, I'm as good as I'm gonna be." A smart tug on her shirt over the low, damp waist of her soggy jeans revealed the lacy top of her bra. Perfect, maybe that would prevent people from noticing her red eyes and muddled makeup.

"Oh, hell. Who am I kidding? I may look like hell, but..." She dabbed some perfume behind her ears. "...I don't have to smell like it." Daring even more, she dabbed the expensive sample down her cleavage, which all of a sudden seemed like a very good asset.

With sassy confidence, she whipped open the door, took a deep breath and smiled at Louie, who looked flustered.

"Hope, would you mind delivering these plates for Tracie? We're gonna be busy tonight with the rain."

She gave Louie a huge smile as she swayed across the kitchen to pick up the orders. Her voice bounced with sarcastic enthusiasm. "Sure, Louie, I'd be glad to. After all, I am the owner." She picked up the plates of food and pushed her way through the kitchen door. Catching Tracie's eye, she held the plates of food. Tracie nodded to a table where a couple sat.

With a confident stride and a toothy smile, she delivered the orders like she was the owner of the bar. "Here you are. Please be sure to let me know if you need anything else." She turned to the table next to them where Sharon was taking orders.

"Hi, everyone. How's everything goin'?" She smiled big and made small talk before she excused herself and made a beeline for the bar.

"Hi there, Jack." As usual, he was sipping a beer. "You need another?"

"No. Tracie took care of me." He nodded thanks.

Hope smiled sweetly even though she felt cocky with Tracie in her sights.

"How'd dinner go?" Tracie said as she poured shots of whisky and set them on Shannon's tray.

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Hope scoffed, grabbed up the tequila bottle and poured herself a shot. She drank it, poured another, and drank it, too.

Shannon whistled and left to deliver the drinks, and Tracie took a half step back in mock defense. "Wow! That good?"

Hope squinted, set the shot glass down and poured another. "You know, don't you?"

Tracie looked at her with hesitation. "Know what?"

"Come on." Hope laughed. "There's no reason to pretend anymore."

Defensive, Tracie folded her arms across her chest and leaned against the bar. "Hope, if you have something to say, just say it."

"Okay, I think I will." She took a step forward. "I know all about Harrison spying on me and giving reports to Janine."

"I thought he told you."

Hope scoffed again. "Please!" She lifted the shot to her mouth.

Tracie took in a sharp breath and grabbed Hope's wrist. "Don't." Tracie glared at two men. "Watch my back."

Before Hope could ask what for, Tracie strode to a table where the two men had just taken a seat. She would have known Tracie didn't like them just by the look on her face, even without the warning. After only a minute, Tracie returned to the bar and poured two beers.

"What was that all about?" Hope said.

"Those two guys are trouble. They have been for years."

"Do they come here often?"

"Nope. They usually hang out at the Bent Spur, a dive bar closer to town."

Shannon set her tray on the bar. "Did you see Peter and Willy are here?"

Tracie took the shot Hope hadn't drunk and swallowed it down.

Hope looked over her shoulder at the two men. One guy, with his back to her, was wearing a camouflaged baseball cap. The other, who sat facing her, wore a grungy cowboy hat and winked at her.

"Yeah, I saw. They say they got rained out while hunting."

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Hope cringed. Hunting was barbaric and unnecessary. But maybe that was just the city girl in her. "Hunting?"

Shannon answered, "Javalina."

"Like the pigs they are." Tracie glared at them.

Shannon picked up a mug. "I'll take their drinks."

"No." Tracie shook her head. "You tell Louie he should run pork as his special. I'll take care of the drinks."

"Will do." Shannon picked up her empty tray and went to the kitchen.

Hope took another quick look over her shoulder and cringed. "So what's their story?"

White froth slid down the side of a beer mug as Tracie set it on a tray she'd pulled out from beneath the bar. "I'll tell you their story. They're punks. Always have been. I wonder if they even have a license to hunt. They sure as hell didn't when they killed my goat."

Hope gasped. "Oh, my God. You had a goat?"

"Yeah. Me and this guy Jake...well, we used to be in 4-H—"

"What's 4-H?" Hope said.

Tracie's jaw dropped as if she was surprised she didn't know, but then realization spread across her face. "It's a project-minded club. The H's stand for Head, Heart, Hands, and Health. It's co-ed, so Jake, Harrison, Tucker and I all joined. You see, the barn Harrison now lives in used to be a real barn with real farm animals in it. When Janine bought this property, she loved the animals, but couldn't take care of them all herself, and plus she needed to learn a lot. So she called the local 4-H chapter to see if they had any kids willing to take on her animals as their project. So, that is how we all came to know Janine so well." She took a deep breath and waved her hand in front of her face, dismissing the explanation. "Anyway, Janine had a goat she let me take care of, and those two shot it."

Hope covered her mouth in shock for a brief moment. "That's awful. Were there charges brought against them?"

Tracie shrugged and set the other two mugs of beer on the tray. "No one could prove it. But we all know they did it."

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"There are ways of proving things," Hope pressed the issue.

"There are also ways of handling things outside the law. I'd say Jake, Harrison and Tucker took care of them."

Harrison. Just hearing his name again made her blood boil. "Great. A backwoods beating. I'll bet that took care of it." Hope rolled her eyes.

"No, but we all felt better."

Hope shook her head. "You know, why don't you let me serve the drinks? I'm neutral and you're not." She picked up the tray and, with Jose Cuervo's help, she sashayed like a model on a tight rope to the two men.

"Here you go." Hope set the drinks in front of them.

"Who are you?" the cowboy wiggled his eyebrows and stared at her chest.

Instinctively, she stepped back. "Hope. Let me know if you need anything else." She turned until a dirty hand reached out and stopped her.

"Wait, what's your hurry, honey?"

Hope looked at the hand and held her breath for a second. This guy was no different than the ones she saw all the time in the court rooms in New York. *Just remain calm, show some respect and everything will be all right.*

"I have a bar to run. But if you need anything, please, just let me know." She prayed her excuse would be good enough.

The guy in the baseball cap leaned back in his chair and made very little effort to hide the fact he was checking out her ass.

"I'm Willy, and this here is Peter."

Peter leaned forward and smiled. Hope wanted to flinch, but held her ground.

"Pleased to meet you. Now if you will excuse me."

Willie's gaze slithered up her body, pausing at her cleavage. "I'd like a dance." He stood, grabbed her arm, put his hat on her head and twirled her into his chest.

His laugh echoed in her head, and he smelled like three-day-old beer. Her stomach roiled.

Chapter Twelve

The windshield wipers worked furiously to clear the rain splattered windshield. They almost kept up with the thoughts of Hope running through Harrison's mind. The way her eyes lit up when she got defensive, and the way she blushed when he turned her on. He loved her and wanted her in his life every day from here on out. If he concentrated, he could smell her perfume. His dick grew hard, thinking about how sweet her body felt under his in the mornings.

"Trying to find a weapon so you can escape, or so you can defend yourself against Tracie?" Tucker interrupted Harrison's thoughts and goaded Jake.

Jake scoffed and zipped up his duffel bag on the floor between his feet. "Very funny."

Tucker stretched out on the back seat. "Aw, come on, Jake. Tracie won't really kill you. She'll just make sure no woman will ever want you again."

Harrison laughed. "And then she'll kill you."

Jake took a deep breath and leaned his head against the window. "Fuck."

Harrison caught Tucker in the rearview mirror, tipping his hat over his face to hide his smile undoubtedly. "Shit. Now you sound like a big ol' sissy."

Jake turned around in his seat and punched Tucker in the gut. "Fuck off."

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"Oof!" Tucker jerked up and laughed. "Harrison, pull the truck over. I'm gonna kick his sissy ass."

Harrison shook his head at his friends behaving just like they had when they were kids. Always giving each other shit. But no matter what, they were closer than brothers. Jake and Tucker each flew forward when Harrison stepped hard on the brakes. "Hey, Tucker, your wife just pulled up to the R&R."

"Probably hoping to find herself a real man," Jake sneered.

Tucker grabbed his crotch. "I've got what she wants right here, and don't you forget it."

Harrison honked his horn and parked the truck at the end of the line of cars.

With a "yee-haw", Tucker jumped out the back door and ran to his wife. Heather jumped into his arms, and he swung her around while kissing her, clearly oblivious to the rain.

Harrison envied their exuberant show of affection and wondered if Hope would rush into his arms. "Come on." He shoved Jake's shoulder. "Maybe it's better to see her in public first. There'll be witnesses."

"Shit."

He and Jake jumped out of the front cab and met Tucker and Heather on the sidewalk.

"Oh, my God! Jake!" Heather squealed in Tucker's ear.

He set her down and gave his ear a tug. "Oh, damn, baby."

Harrison chuckled at Tucker.

"God, we've missed you." She wrapped her arms around Jake and gave him a kiss.

Jake was obviously shocked, but returned her hug and kissed her. "I missed you too."

Heather looked between Harrison and Tucker, and then back to Jake. "Where have you been all this time?"

Jake sucked in a breath and squinted against the relentless rain.

Tucker put his arm around his wife. "Honey, why don't we go inside and get out of the rain to catch up?"

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Relief flooded Jake's face. If he hadn't figured out Tucker was anxious to see Tracie's reaction, that was his own problem.

Heather laughed. "Oh, yeah, that would be a good idea. Hey, I missed you too!" She grinned at Tucker and kissed him, long and slow.

Harrison and Jake looked at each other with raised brows at her long French kiss, shook their head and then led the way inside the crowded bar.

Instead of Hope rushing into his arms like he'd wanted so badly, she was twisting out of Will's grasp and wearing his hat!

"Ohh shit," Tucker said in slow motion and grabbed Harrison's arm. Tucker's strength was no match for Harrison's anger. He pulled out of his grasp easily and shoved his way onto the dance floor. Ladies' shrills and glass breaking drowned out the music. Peanut shells dusting the floor did nothing to stifle the sound of chairs tumbling over. Chaos broke out all around him. Why? He hadn't even hit the son of a bitch yet!

Someone knocked his shoulder hard, and he twisted back just in time to see Tracie's fist land in Jake's face. Damn. That had to hurt. She could punch. Oh, well, Jake was a big boy; he could handle her.

Through all the commotion, he heard Hope gasp. In two more steps, he was in front of her.

From his left, Peter grabbed him. Without a care or thought, Harrison turned, swinging. His fist pounded into a diaphragm. There was little satisfaction as he felt the breath rush out of the sorry asshole who was dumb enough to try and interfere.

Hope's scream shattered his ears. Out of the corner of his eye, he saw Willy shove her out of his way. She stumbled forward just in time for him to break the bastard's nose.

"What the hell are you doing?" she screamed as he picked her up off the floor and threw her over his shoulder.

"Put me down right now!" Her little fists pounding against his ass made him want to laugh. "Put me down!"

He would just as soon as he could find a place. Tucker and Jake were taking the beaten trash out the front door, so he headed for the kitchen. God damn, he'd been pissed, seeing that bastard with his hands

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on her. But she was in his arms now, albeit kicking in screaming. At least she was with him and not that piece of shit Will.

"Harrison, what the hell's going on?" Hope demanded, still kicking and screaming.

Louie held his trusty Louisville Slugger just outside the kitchen and gave him a terse smile when he passed. He didn't stop until he got outside.

Cold, hard raindrops didn't do anything to calm her down or drown out her cussing like he'd hoped it would. "God damn it, Harrison! You put me down this instant!" She squirmed, twisted and hit his backside, still unable to do any harm.

Good thing for him Janine's Jeep was there. Bad for the Jeep. Like mother, like daughter, he thought.

"Okay, okay." He dumped her into the passenger seat of her Jeep.

Before he took even one step, she jumped out. "I don't know—"

"Damn it," he mumbled and picked her up again, easily dodging her flailing fists. "I'll put you down, but just stay there." It took all of his self-control not to yell at her.

"Just who the hell do you think you are, Harrison? You can't talk to me like that!" The pounding rain was no match for her shouted defense.

"Darlin', right now I can do whatever I want; you hit like a girl." He pressed on her shoulder. "Don't get out again."

Damn, she was cute all pissed off and huffy with her arms crossed over her chest. Keeping an eye on her, he reached under the driver's seat and tried to find the spare key he knew Janine had hidden there.

"I can't leave. Tracie hit some guy! Didn't you see how busy we are?"

"Don't worry about Tracie, she'll be fine." He knew Jake wouldn't ever physically hurt her. "Yes! Found it." He smiled at the old key and started up the engine.

"I'm not leaving!" she said and tried to get out of the Jeep.

Oh, yes, you are! "Sit down!"

She fell back onto the seat with a squeal when he pulled away. He turned his head to hide his grin.

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Thank God, it only took a minute to get to the barn. He jumped out of the Jeep and ran for the front door. When he realized Hope wasn't following him, he rolled his eyes and cursed. "Figures she would pick now for me to play the gentleman." He sloshed to her side of the Jeep and held his hand out for her. "I'd open your door, but there isn't one."

She slapped his hand away and pushed against his chest. "I'm not waiting for you to open my door, you egotistical ass! I'm waiting for the lightning to strike you down!"

Unwilling to argue in the downpour, he shook his head, leaned in, picked her up again, and trudged through the mud like it was sunny and bright.

"You big liar. Put me down!"

The warmth of his cozy barn didn't stop his blood from running cold. She'd found out before he'd the chance to explain to her. He set her down carefully, but didn't want to let go.

She wriggled out of his embrace. "You son of a bitch! What gives you the right to come into my bar and haul me out like that?"

He was breathless. Not because of any physical excursion, but because he knew this was the moment he'd been dreading. The moment that would essentially decide his future. He couldn't hear her ranting and raving. All he could hear was his heart pounding.

Angry breaths made her chest heave. The cold, wet shirt made her nipples pebble. A pretty, pink, willowy blush colored her skin. Soaked curls dripped water while her eyes raged with fire in spite of the raindrops clinging to her lashes.

"Well?" she nearly spit.

He took a step forward and reached to hold her cheek. "God, you are beautiful."

She pushed him back. "I asked you a question."

He tried to sort out everything that had just happened, and then he remembered. "I saw you were struggling to get away from that bastard Will. He put his hat on you!"

She looked at him like he had horns growing out the sides of his head. "So what? That doesn't give you the right to hit him! He asked me

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to dance. I was going to say no, but he didn't give me much of a choice. I could have handled it, though, without beating him!" She turned to walk away and said over her shoulder, "Not to mention, I can choose to dance with whomever I want."

"That may be..." He reached out and turned her around to see her face. "But while you're sleeping with me, I think that gives me a say."

Her muscle flexed in his firm hold when she tried to jerk her arm away. "Who said anything about sleeping with anybody?"

"He put his hat on your head, and in these parts, that's permission!"

"That's ridiculous!"

"Not—"

"I think the more important issue we have is you. What gave you the right to spy on me?"

For a second, the world stopped spinning, and he thought he could hear the water drops splash on his hardwood floors. He wiped his dripping wet face. "Hope, this is complicated. I can't talk about it like this. Please, darlin', let's get out of our wet clothes and then we'll talk."

"I'm a smart woman, Harrison. I don't think anything you have to tell me is too complicated to hear, no matter what I'm wearing."

What she wore clung to her freezing body so seductively. The urge to take her stiff, cold nipples and warm them in his mouth, making them hard from desire rather than the chill in the air, was powerful. He wanted to feel her stomach muscles quiver under his touch as he undid the buttons on her jeans to peel them off. Damn, his cock strained against the wet denim he wore.

"Hope, you have to understand things from the very beginning."

She jerked her arm back and rubbed where he'd held her. "No. What I have to understand is why you spied on me...for years, and then didn't even have the decency to tell me! Do you have any idea how it feels to know the man you just fell in love with has been keeping tabs on you? How much do you know about me?" She took a deep breath and didn't give him a chance to answer. "God, I feel like my life is like a snow globe. You've put me on a shelf for six years, and then Janine dies and shakes it

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all up. And there you are, looking in at my turmoil with perfect clarity...because you know everything."

His heart broke, watching her hands shake when she pulled a wet curl from her face.

"You pick me up at the airport and then comfort me like some fucking hero, and it was all planned. God, I can be so stupid!"

'Guarded' was closer to how he would have described her that day at the airport. A deep breath helped him remain calm despite her accusations. "Hope, your dad wouldn't let Janine know anything about you. She sent you cards—"

"That isn't—"

"It's true!" God, how he wished she knew what a bastard her father was. "She sent you cards and gifts at first, and they were all returned."

Defensively, she shook her head. "That can't be true. My father would never do anything like that." She backed away and looked at him like he was the monster.

"He did and worse!" His control wavered. "Your mother went to Tucson for treatment. While she was there, your father..." He sneered. "...wrote to her, or rather his attorneys did, telling her not to bother coming back."

"No way—"

"Yes. Janine had a trust fund he held over her head. Your grandfather hated your dad. He knew what a user he was, but your mom wouldn't listen. She was in love. Ha!" The irony was laughable. "And the fact she chose to go to school in New York instead of his alma mater, Notre Dame, pissed him off. So he stipulated in his will that if she were to ever divorce, his fortune, that will become yours when you turn twenty-three, would go to his fraternity. He'd told her that if his only child wouldn't go and continue his legacy, then his money would."

She looked so dazed and alone, so little and fragile at the words that stung with truth. "Come here, darlin'." He held his arms open for her.

"You're lying! Why would I believe you? Believe any of this? Janine was a drunk who abandoned me when I was seven years old! That is the

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fact of the matter! I never heard a word from her!" She turned away with tears in her eyes.

Damn, he hated hurting her like this. "Your mother tried to reason with your dad. She needed to go to Tucson. She wanted you to move there, to be with her, once her treatments were finished, but he wouldn't hear of it. He said you couldn't afford distractions, especially one like a sick mother." He spit. Just saying those words was like swallowing poison. "Your father threatened divorce every time she tried to contact you. He practically made sure she couldn't come within the state of New York. So I did it for her."

Hope held out her hand. "Stop. It isn't true. Why are you trying to hurt me? Why? Janine left, and that's all there was to it."

He gave her a moment and remembered, even though it was many years ago, the heartbreak Janine had suffered when he'd overheard her tell his parents the whole convoluted story.

He'd pretended growing up that she was his mother. Not that his own parents weren't great, but Janine had just been different. She'd been so...eccentric, but down to earth and new age while traditional. She could make the worst chore seem like the best time of your life and remind you that sometimes the worst of times could turn out for the best.

"I...um..." She ran toward the back doors.

He caught her just as her hand fumbled with the lock. He turned her and cradled her face. "Hope, I told you I wouldn't give up on you, and I won't, but you..." More than the need for air, he wanted to comfort her and soothe away her pain. He leaned down and inhaled the scent of her shampoo so fragrant from her wet, curly hair.

Just as his lips brushed the top of her head, she shoved him back. "Don't." She wiped angrily at the tear running down her cheek. "Don't touch me."

Reflexively, he covered and protected his shattered heart. "Hope, look around you." He took a step closer. "Think of all the people around here who love and accept you because of Janine. Look at how she never gave up." Damn, his anger was almost getting the best of him. "She always thought of you, always!"

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Never had he felt such despair as he watched the woman he loved shake and turn from him. "Think of the people in New York."

She tried the door again.

He stepped in front of her, took her by the shoulders and gave her a quick shake. She was so small, her trembling wracked her body. "Think about how they treated you." The defensive walls she'd built were so thick, he was afraid he wouldn't be able to penetrate them. "Christ! The fucking fiancé your father handpicked for you wouldn't even come to your mother's funeral. Don't you see who really loved you? Can't you see? Your father needed her money, your money. She wanted to tell you when your dad died, but you were doing so well in school. She thought she'd have enough time to wait until you passed your bar." He was out of breath and felt too bad looking into such sad eyes to torture her any longer. "She couldn't hold on anymore. She was too late."

"Stop it!" She looked as if a slap just snapped her out of a daze.

"Just stop."

Before he knew it, she was out the door and running.

"God damn it," he muttered under his breath before he ran after her. "Hope!"

She ignored him and sprinted through the mud toward Janine's house.

A light was on in the window. Jake.

"Hope! Stop!" Damn, she could run.

Thunder shook the ground, and lightening lit the sky. Finally, he caught up to her. "Where are you going?"

She might as well have speared him with the look she gave him.

"Janine's. I want proof. If what you say is true, then prove it."

She tugged out of his arm and took off at a run again.

"Aw, hell."

Hope's muddy shoeprints left a sloppy trail across Janine's porch. She shoved the door open with her shoulder and nearly fell inside.

Her scream pierced through the storm.

"Fuck." Harrison took the steps two at a time.

Tracie was half naked on the floor with Jake.

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"Oh, my God! Hope?" Tracie squealed and covered herself. If looks could speak, a novel would have been written by the look on her face. Hurt, angry, wet, cold, embarrassed, pissed off and on a mission would pretty much sum her up.

Jake sat up.

Hope shot out her hand. "Don't get up. I obviously am interrupting, so I'll make this fast." Her recovery time was quick. She turned on her heel. "Where are the letters, Harrison? If what you say is true, I want to see the letters."

"They're at my place."

Her determined, long strides past him were no match for his, and he caught up with her easily.

"Hope, please, calm down. There is time to figure this all out."

She slid to a stop and wiped the hair from her face. "Let me advise you as I would a client. Don't speak unless you are asked a direct question. And if you think you are going to incriminate yourself, you should shut up, take the fifth and let the evidence speak for itself."

Thunder and rain spoke volumes on their way back to his house. This time she had no qualms about opening the door and going inside with him. If they were speaking in a lake, they couldn't be wetter. "Why don't we change, and then I'll show you everything I have."

"No," she chattered. Her chest heaved.

Right, let the evidence speak for itself. Damn, she would catch pneumonia. He grabbed the throw blanket from the back of the sofa and draped it over her shoulders. It was the least he could do before he climbed the ladder to the loft. If anyone doubted Hope was Janine's daughter, they would be certain after witnessing their identical stubborn natures.

The box Janine had given him was a topic of frequent arguments between them, especially toward the end. He and his dad had tried to reason with Janine. If only she would have listened. But instead, Janine had died without reconciling with her daughter, and Hope was left in a world shattered by pride and deceit.

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Hope stood on the same spot he left her at. Water pooled at her feet and dripped from her nose. The blanket hung off her shoulders. She had to be in shock.

Lightening flashed from the back door. She didn't flinch. The faster he got her out of her wet clothes, the better she would be. His boots made a soft thud against the floor as he slowly approached her. Without a word, he set the box at her feet.

Hope blinked twice. It was hard to tell a difference between the tears and rain dripping down her face. She sat on the floor, and her hand trembled and faltered while opening the box.

"Here." He knelt down. "Let me help."

She slapped his hand away. "Don't."

He couldn't blame her and gave her the space she needed. In the kitchen, he put on a kettle of tea and prayed. The shuffling of envelopes behind him made him cringe. There were so many.

"May I use your phone?"

"Sure, it's up..." She was already halfway up the ladder before he even finished. "...stairs." How anyone could bargain with their daughter's life was beyond him. He wished James was still alive. He'd like nothing better than to put him back under. The bastard. And Janine. What a waste of a wonderful mother. She'd had so much love just waiting for Hope. Ha! Waiting. Damn her. Is this what Janine had hoped for? For her daughter to make a crazed phone call to her father's partner? He couldn't imagine what it would be like to have to hear confirmation from someone who didn't have balls enough to tell your conniving father to burn in hell.

He turned around and watched Hope climb down the ladder.

She kicked the box and threw the letters, then buried her head in her hands and cried.

The break in her defense was exactly what he needed. In two seconds, he sat beside her, bundled her in his arms and held her tight. Her pounding fists were no match for his strength.

She buried her head against his chest and sobbed. "Oh, my God. It's true." Her fists clung to his shirt like a lifeline, and her breath was warm over his heart. "It's true, it's true."

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Harrison laced his fingers through her wet hair and held her head still. Her hair was cold against his lips. "I wish it weren't true, Hope. I wish for Janine and you that things could be different, but they're not. I'm so sorry I didn't tell you the day I picked you up, but you—"

"Don't put that on me." She shoved off his chest and cut him off. "I came here not knowing a single soul, which was perfectly fine with me. And then..." She made a wide, sweeping motion with her hands. "...all of you were so nice, it threw me off. I wasn't expecting that. And you! Most of all, you..." She wiped her nose on her sleeve. "I fell in love with you..." She hung her head low.

She loved him. Weren't those the words he wanted to hear? But instead, they were laced with hate he was certain to find.

"I fell in love, only to find out you've been spying on me." Her last few words came out chattering. She looked so pitiful and small.

He preferred her kicking and screaming. "Darlin', please, let's get out of these clothes and warm up."

She nodded. "I'm going to take a shower. By myself." She turned on her heel and fell.

His heart stopped.

Chapter Thirteen

The fear in his eyes when he picked her up from the slick floor was brimming with genuine concern.

"I'm all right. I only slipped," Hope reassured Harrison as he set her on the bathroom countertop.

He turned on the shower and tugged off her boots, then his. "I'm sure you are, but just the same."

The care he took with her was kind and loving. Loving...that he was for certain. Who else would put up with this drama if it weren't out of love? His soft touch reached more than just her cheek when he wiped away her tears; it soothed her very soul. Being pampered by Harrison was something she could get used to.

He lifted her off the bathroom counter and placed her in the shower, then stepped in after her. Warm water penetrated her clothes. It felt good. "I remember one time, just before Janine left, she was so sick she couldn't stand. I just stood there. I didn't know why...I didn't know what to do. And then my dad came in, and yelled at her for getting sick in front of me, and carried me to my room." The scene burned into her memory now had such a different slant. If she'd only known her mom had cancer.

"Oh, darlin', I'm so sorry."

He peeled her wet shirt up over her head and let it drop to the floor. Shivers ran up her spine. "He set me on my bed and brushed my hair."

Harrison poured shampoo into the palm of his hand.

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"He told me she was drunk." If Janine had told her even once she had cancer, maybe she would have remembered and held on to that instead of believing the filthy lies her father had told her. A sob broke through the control she thought she'd gained. No. She wouldn't give him the satisfaction of another tear. He'd robbed her of her mother, stealing two lives. Well, she wouldn't let him have any more. "He told me I could grow up and be whoever I wanted. But really, he manipulated me to be what he wanted." The sad reality set in. "What kind of monster would do that?"

Harrison rubbed the shampoo into her hair and massaged her scalp.

She closed her eyes as he tilted her head back and helped the water rinse the lather away. Thoughts of her dad flashed behind her closed lids. It all made sense now. It was clear why he'd kept her so close to him, so focused on a dream that he'd wanted after she lost the will to achieve it. He'd been afraid if she found out about the trust, she'd quit school.

Being a lawyer was never about money. Money wasn't what drove her to be a lawyer; it was helping people. It was about making a wrong right. It was about justice.

Harrison pulled her against his chest and held her. Soaking wet and fully clothed, he held her in the shower.

The storm raged outside. Thunder shook the walls. Unwavering, he held her.

This was what she wanted. This life. With this man. It was no sooner his fault things were the way they were, than it was hers. The water began to cool.

Harrison's grip loosened, and he shut off the water. Steam still warmed the air. He reached out of the curtain and grabbed a towel for her. His eyes sparkled, but his mouth was set with worry. "Just give me one minute, and I'll let you have some privacy." With purpose, he shed his shirt and peeled off his pants. There was no doubt of his desire for her. He stepped from the shower, leaving her to herself.

She peeled off her pants and unhooked her bra. Naked, she dried off and wrapped her hair in the towel. His shirt hung on the back of the

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door. She looked at the mirror and wiped it clean. Although she looked the same, she knew she was a very different person from the one who had gotten on a plane only a few days earlier. Lightening flashed, and thunder boomed outside. She liked the shirt, but more, she loved the man. Janine had chosen well when she put her faith in Harrison. With each button she fastened, her resolve strengthened while her heart softened. She shook the towel off her head and finger combed her hair. Just a few minutes with the hairdryer, and she'd be fit for company again.

Thunder drowned out the sound of the sliding bathroom door. Harrison sat shirtless on the sofa, staring into the fire. Her stomach flipped when he turned and she saw the love in his eyes.

"Would you like some coffee? I put on a fresh pot," he offered softly.

"Yeah, that sounds great." Wondering if he would spike the coffee like he had the tea the first night, she curled up on the sofa. A different blanket was on the arm of the sofa now. The soft fabric was warm and cozy against her thighs. He thought of everything. She watched him as he slowly approached her with two cups of coffee in his hands.

He held a mug out to her with a slightly apologetic smile. In her heart, he was already forgiven. The warm mug felt good in her hands, and the strong coffee woke her up after just one sip. "I know we still have so much to talk about, but what about the bar?" She watched the steam float from her cup.

Harrison sat beside her and placed his cup on the table in front of him. "I think they can handle things."

Hope shook her head, took another sip of her coffee then set it aside on the table. "Tracie is ...well, you saw, and you and I are here, so that just leaves Louie, Sharron, and Mindy."

Harrison shook his head in disgust. "Billy didn't show up again?"

Proud of herself for firing the punk, she smiled. "No, I fired him."

Shock was plastered all over his face. "You fired Billy?"

"Yep. I fired him this morning, actually."

Harrison leaned back against the soft sofa and laughed lightly.

"Tucker and Heather will fill in. They've done it before."

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Should she insist? She took a few seconds and stared into the fire.

He didn't say anything when he turned to face her, but slowly ran his hand up her arm and cupped her cheek. "I know you've had a hard night and may still have doubts. But believe me when I say I love you." His eyes studied a lock of her hair before he wound it around his finger, reeling her in closer.

She leaned her head deeper into the palm of his hand. "I didn't come here expecting this. I came to settle my mother's affairs and get back to New York just as quickly as I could. I didn't expect to stay in Pinedale, and I certainly didn't expect to fall in love." She held his hand resting on her thigh.

He gave her hand a gentle squeeze before he spoke. "Hope, I never intended to deceive you. I've watched you for the last six years. It was only supposed to be once. Janine did me a favor." He unwound the lock of hair from his finger, rubbed her cheek with his thumb and held her other hand. "She knew my dad was coming down hard on me. I wanted to be a P.I., and he thought it was a waste of time. So, she hired me as a test. I found out all I could for her. Turned out I was pretty good. So she hired me to take quarterly trips, spread the word to a few of her friends, and my business took off. Tucker and I became partners, and we make a decent living. But what happened with you I had no control over. I slowly fell in love. While watching you, I saw you were lost, but didn't know it. You hardly ever smiled, and most of the time, when you did, it was to be polite. When you smiled for real, though, it took my breath away. Deep in my gut, I knew you didn't belong in New York, and I wanted to tell you, to confess and let you make your choice.

"But I couldn't and still remain loyal to Janine. Every time I came back, she'd let out a breath she'd been holding the whole time I was gone. And then she'd hold out her hand..." He chuckled "...just waiting for the roll of film. I wish you could have seen her face every time she put your picture in a frame. When you got off that plane, all I could think about was how in the hell I was going to get you to fall in love with me."

Tears stung her eyes.

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"When you asked me to love you for a day, you might as well have sucker punched me. I have waited to love you forever."

If he asked right now, she'd give him forever.

Staring into her eyes, he stood and pulled her up with him.

Without a word, he held her close and pressed their tangled hands against his chest.

"I don't want to waste another minute hiding from you." His heart beat fast against their hands.

She held her breath as he lowered his head.

Just a hair's width away from her mouth, he paused. Slowly, he slid his hands from hers and undid the top button of her shirt, sparking a flame deep inside her womb.

All it took was a deep breath to taste his lips. So soft and smooth. Now that this spark was ignited, there was nothing to extinguish the flame. His lips parted easily for her tongue, inviting her in. His touch nearly scalded her skin as she burned from the inside. It was like a dance over hot coals.

In a swift move, she jumped and wrapped her legs around his hips as he held her against him.

In just a handful of quick steps, he made it to the bed. Wanting to be naked and under him, she unwrapped her legs from his waist and stood on her toes.

Their fingers worked in unison to unfasten buttons, while their eyes never lost sight of each other.

When he pulled open her shirt and admired her breasts, her breath hitched and her heart jumped and hung between her collar bones. As if on cue, her nipples hardened and peaked proudly at his appreciative stare. She pulled the shirt off her shoulders and let it fall softly to the floor.

"I'll love you for today." Reverently, he ran his fingers down her arms, ending with their hands entwined. He placed them over her breasts and paused. "I'm going to love you for tomorrow." He gently squeezed her breasts with their hands, evoking a low, carnal moan.

Unclasping their hands, she smoothed her palms up the strong muscles of his arms to his neck. His jaw muscles flexed under her thumbs.

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"Just love me," Hope said in a passionate whisper.

Those three little words were the permission he'd been waiting for. He kissed her sweetly, almost innocently. "Lay back."

The baritone of his gentle command sent shards of desire between her legs. A loud clap of thunder startled her and punctuated his quiet order. Slowly, she lowered herself to the edge of the bed, only to see his obvious desire for her. She licked her lips and reached out to undo his pants.

His grin was just this side of evil as he backed away and pulled the button fly loose in one firm tug. A patch of hair teased her when he slid the jeans over his lean hips. His hard cock sprang free with promise.

Again she tried to reach out to touch his beautiful erection.

"Lay back," he ordered again.

Feeling like a scolded little girl, she wanted to pout, but then something came over her. Empowerment. She could tease back if that's how he wanted to play. Her stomach muscles flexed as she lay back excruciatingly slow. Seductively, she ran her hands up her sides.

He stroked his erection.

She lightly pinched her nipples and moaned.

"Yeah, darlin'. Touch yourself," Harrison rumbled when he stroked harder, milking a drop of pre-cum from his cock.

More than anything, Hope wanted him in her mouth. Her pussy ached with desire, and her mouth watered. "Harrison, please."

"You are everything to me, darlin'. Now that I can watch you up close, I don't want to stop."

She wanted them to possess each other in thought, word and deed. Fine, then, she'd give him a show he wouldn't soon forget. Wishing it were his dick she was circling, she ran her tongue around her lips and squeezed her breasts together. Her body burned for his touch. Desperate to make him give in and touch her, she arched her back in offering, slowly released a breast and ran her finger down her body.

The intensity in his eyes and his firm, fast strokes over his hard-on encouraged her. A short gasp of quick pleasure echoed the thunder at the teasing attention she paid to her clit. Unable to stand another minute of

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being empty, she plunged her finger deep inside her. Long, deliberate, exaggerated strokes brought her close to her peak. No way was she going to orgasm herself with him standing right there. She knew what she wanted and wasn't going to take no for an answer. Slowly, she drew in a deep breath, withdrew her finger from her inner core and rolled over onto her hands and knees, teasing him with a view of her ass he'd had an interest in before.

"Be careful, Hope. You don't know yet what you're asking for."

She tossed her hair over her shoulder and smiled seductively.

He reached out and grabbed her ass, preventing her from turning around.

Her heart jumped to her throat, but she swallowed it and held her smile. Maybe now wasn't the time to tempt him too much. Unabashed, she turned and ended up a hair's width from his cock. Finally, after what seemed like forever; she wrapped her hot, wet mouth around his throbbing erection.

He moaned and tangled his fingers in her hair.

She took his erection into her mouth only a couple of inches before she felt like she could swallow him. Sucking him hard and then releasing the tension as she rode up, got his juices flowing. He was creamy and sweet, two things she loved.

Her jaw muscles relaxed, and she took a deep breath and swallowed.

"Aw, damn, darlin'." Harrison's voice was gravely and weak, but the grip he had on her hair was firm.

Hope smiled inwardly at a job well done and decided to take a chance and fondle his balls, wondering what kind of response that would evoke.

Hot jets of sweet cream exploded against the back of her throat before sliding down.

Enjoying his release almost as much, she cried out after him. Making sure there was nothing more to swallow, she looked up into his eyes and released his firm cock from her mouth.

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His jaw was set tight, muscles still coiled. All that raw power sent shivers up her spine. He didn't say anything. There was no need. His cock said it all.

Slowly, she sat up and tried to look somewhat innocent instead of like a whore who had just sucked the chrome off his trailer hitch.

He chuckled and held her face between his warm, strong hands. "I've let you have your fun." He kissed her and looked deep into her eyes. "Now it's my turn." He pulled her away and outlined her lips with his thumbs.

She couldn't resist capturing them with her tongue and teeth.

He sucked in deep, and she released him, licking quickly, teasingly.

Lowering her to her back in the middle of the bed, he spoke softly, "I have waited so long for you." His whisper was intense, like the heat his hands trailed down to her trimmed mound.

He lowered his mouth to suckle from her breasts. Hope ran her fingers through his hair to hold him there. Heat and desire flooded her. She arched, desperate for him to fill her.

Obligingly, he spread her intimate lips and dipped his strong, thick finger deep inside her.

Shards of excitement rushed through her as she thought of his cock filling her next. To her delight, two more fingers entered her, stretching her inner walls. Slow, long strokes of his fingers matched those of his tongue lapping at her aching breast.

"Oh, God!" she cried out. Heat and pressure fought for release against the glorious stimulation.

"Oh, yeah, darlin'. I want to hear you scream." His thumb caressed her clit in rhythm with his thrusting fingers.

"Oh!"

His hot breath left a sizzling trail down her torso. Before she could take another breath, his tongue licked up her folds. It was like hot, wet velvet against her sensitive flesh. Finally, mercifully, he captured her clit with his mouth and sucked softly. Oh so softly. Ripples of glory flooded her. "Oh, God. I can't...I can't take it."

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Unable to withstand the fire, her inner muscles flexed and shook. Her thighs quivered, and her nipples hardened beyond comfort.

With a gentle "pop", he released her bud. "I want to see you come. Hope, I want to see you pleased. Let me see you."

Pressure against her lower, tighter hole pushed her over the edge. At his bidding, her inner muscles pulled his fingers in deeper, greedy for what he was offering, desperate for relief. "Harrison!" She arched, forcing him deeper inside her anus. Waves of wet heat rolled through her body in rhythm with her panting breaths. Her flesh tingled with orgasmic pleasure.

Harrison held his fingers still deep inside her.

She rocked softly against his hand, getting used to being filled so completely.

He whispered encouragement, "that's it...relax, feel how good it is," while he kissed her abdomen lightly, softly, seductively.

Caught up in the sensual mixture of pleasure, she continued to rock her hips, maneuvering his finger inside her forbidden hole. The carnal delight excited her. "Please, Harrison, please," she begged him with her gasps and her body.

With gentle ease, he removed his fingers and kneeled between her legs. His erection jerked with his own excitement.

She watched him stroke his engorged cock and rub up and down her sensitive folds.

"Oh, damn, darlin', you're gonna burn me up." His cock entered her, just up to the thick ring that encircled its head. Inch by inch, he stretched and filled her.

Burning desire once again ran rampant over her nerves. With each short thrust, she wanted more. It was near torture to be so teased. She rolled her head from side to side, trying to find some sort of stability in the chaos of ecstasy. One final thrust, and he was seated deep inside her.

"Oh, my God!" she screamed. The difference between his fingers and his cock couldn't be measured.

Without allowing her a chance to catch her breath, in a swift, smooth move, he grabbed her legs and held her thighs high and wide,

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exposing her. Relentlessly, he plunged in and out, fast and then so slow; she was afraid to breath, not used to such erotic pleasure. Friction built into an inferno, every thrust increasing its fire.

The hunger within her turned ravenous, and she arched, reaching up and around his hips to grasp him, to pull him closer, needing more. Sweat dripped from his forehead and splashed against her cleavage, but the drop was like spitting on a forest ablaze, useless in dousing their flame.

"Yes. Let me see you touch yourself."

Beyond modest, she trailed her fingers up to her breasts and fondled them. Hard nipples were easy to capture and roll between her thumb and forefinger, sending vibrations to her womb. Another cry filled the room, echoed by thunder outside. On the provocative edge, she dared to run her hands to meet his slick cock still inside her.

He sucked in a sharp breath, groaned then slowed down and leaned back to allow her better access. While he held still, she felt the pulse in his dick. Their juices glistened on his exposed shaft.

She knew he couldn't wait much longer; neither could she. One slow circle around her over stimulated clit by his tender finger propelled her into a spiral of release, pulling him with her.

Together they exploded.

Her body contracted and jackknifed. She clutched his arms with strength from muscles strung too tight. Liquid heat filled her, and magnificent colors exploded behind her eyes squeezed shut. After what seemed like an eternity, her muscles relaxed and she flopped back to the mattress.

"You're forgiven," she said with a sigh, breathless.

Thoughts ran through Harrison's mind so fast they were a blur. The few he could understand were prayers of thanks. He'd dreamt of this day for so long. And here it was. It had almost blown up and crumbled around him, but by the grace of God, Janine's hope prevailed. Hope saw through the deception and understood the reasons behind them. The love she had deep inside her was so much like that of her mother's. He prayed one day she would see that and embrace it. No longer would he have to

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watch her from afar. He wouldn't have to wonder what it would be like to hold her all night, to smell her freshly washed hair, or to admit his love for her openly and honestly. No more secrets. Harrison chuckled, kissed her forehead and gently pulled out, only to gather her beside him.

Their heavy breaths, panted in unison along with the rain pounding against the cozy barn, filled the air.

Hope snuggled against his chest and closed her eyes with a soft, satisfied sigh. A loud clap of thunder woke her with a start.

Harrison snuggled her closer. "This is one hell of a storm we're having."

"Is it unusual?" she said, running figure eights around his pecks.

"Not the rain, but the thunder and lightening are unusual."

"Harrison?"

"Mmm?"

"Who is Tracie with? And why are they at Janine's?"

"Jake. He's an old friend of mine, and I told him he could stay there tonight. I...was going to talk to you about it, but when we got here, things weren't...well, they didn't go as planned," Harrison confessed.

She leaned up on her elbow. "The same Jake who cheated on her and sunk my mother's car?"

The surprise on his face was comical.

"What?"

"You actually referred to Janine as your mother."

She tweaked his nipple. "I've referred to Janine as my mother before. You probably just haven't noticed. Besides, I think you're just trying to avoid explaining your version of the sunken car story."

Harrison laughed and rolled her on her back.

She squealed.

He ran his thumb over her bottom lip then kissed it. "Just where did you hear such a story, anyway?"

"Your mother. So you'd better 'fess up to everything, because I'll know if you're leaving out any of the good parts."

Harrison kissed her neck and chuckled. "Darlin', I assure you, my mother doesn't know any of the good parts." Slowly, deliberately, he

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spread her thighs. "Just like I know my mother will never know what I'm about to do to you right now."

"Harrison," She looked deep into his eyes and wound up finding herself. "Love me forever?"

His hand stopped, and he looked into her eyes that searched his for truth.

There was no need for him to answer.

"Forever" was in his kiss.

Author Bio

"Taylor Voltaire" is my pen name, derived from one of the many "How to Find Your Porn Name" games. No, I'm not a porn star, well...except in my husband's fantasies, lol!

Suzy Homemaker is my real daytime persona. I'm celebrating sixteen years of marriage to my high school sweetheart this year. We have two sons, two hamsters, one cat and a small house in Arizona. Between the kids' and church activities, my life is best described as "controlled chaos". Writing erotic romance is an interesting and wonderful escape from the day-to-day demands of the stay at home mom.

Writing wasn't a childhood dream of mine, but a passion I stumbled upon as an adult. Reading great books, by some of the best erotic authors today, is often the highlight of my day. On a whim, I wrote a book for my husband. It is only because of his encouragement and the help of many others that I am published today.

Alfred Lord Tennyson wrote in his poem Ulysses, "I am a part of all that I have met." I agree. I believe every person who ever made an impression on me, has made me who I am today.

Thank you for choosing to read my book, and I invite you to stop by my website at www.taylorvoltaire.com and see what is new and exciting in my life.

Cheers!

Taylor Voltaire