

*When two hearts are on the line, it's double or nothing.*

*A Wild Ride story.*

Levi McKenna heads to Las Vegas with one simple goal: win the rodeo and cement his place in rodeo history. Then Lady Luck throws a wild card into the deck—Sydney Hart. Time and distance haven't dulled the sharp edge of their attraction, but thanks to a long-ago promise, she will always be forbidden fruit dangling just out of reach.

Sydney wants to believe in fairy tales and happily ever after, but her past relationships leave her doubting such things exist. She's ready to give up on love...until Levi walks into her bar. The man who's always held the missing piece of her heart. Love may not be in the cards, but that doesn't mean a girl can't flirt.

Neither expected passion this hot, this fast. Yet once the cards are dealt, the only thing left to do is play them out—and see if they have a winning hand.

Warning: this book contains a sassy heroine, a scrumptious hero, blood, sweat, tears, not to mention...sex laced with Vegas heat.

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Buckling Down

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Buckling Down

Moira Keith

Dedication

In loving memory of my grandmother, whose love for life and literature continues to inspire me.

To my family for always believing me capable of far more than I ever dreamed possible, for their support and patience while I spent countless hours in front of the computer. Lastly, to my sisters Sara and Riss, thank you for coming along for the ride from word one.

Chapter One

Levi turned on the TV in the bedroom of the hotel suite and flipped to the local news. He

was thankful to be out of the noise that engulfed Las Vegas's many casinos. It gave him a chance to steal some time to unpack and settle in before the rodeo got under way. Glancing at the TV, he caught an interview with one of the many young rodeo hopefuls he'd seen at registration. The new guys made him feel old at twenty-seven. But running around as though they were the latest rock band to hit the scene wouldn't win them titles—he should know.

Experience had made him somewhat of an expert on the subject. Still, everyone had to learn in his or her own time. A fast rise to fame had caused him to lose sight of why he'd started this journey. Finding himself near the bottom of the standings had knocked him straight. This would be his turnaround year, the year he regained control of his life from his overbearing personal assistant. The year he finally claimed the Nationals title. Levi clawed his way back into contention, worked hard to qualify for Nationals and had made it by the skin of his teeth.

After he placed the last shirt in the drawer and the empty suitcase in the closet, he sank down onto the bed and closed his eyes. Listening to the reporter drone on almost lulled him to sleep, until he heard his name.

"In local news, rodeo and film heartthrob Levi McKenna arrived for the NFR this afternoon. He politely shunned reporters' questions regarding his latest breakup, but his assistant confirmed it. Levi McKenna is back on the market. The rodeo runs through..."

Levi shut off the TV. *Damn that woman and her big mouth.* Women and tabloids were just another form of publicity in Lisa's eyes, and until recently he'd never given it a second thought. However, "eye on the prize" was his new motto. A woman on his arm would only serve to distract him from the big payoff. Irritated, he threw the remote across the room. Every time he made some progress, his assistant would have some new commercial or movie deal for him to look at and he'd let the dollar signs sway him. Lord knows the woman knew her work, but Levi had one rule when he started out—the love life remained off-limits and was not fodder for the gossip hounds. He'd let it slip. Not anymore. The assistant would be gone at the end of Nationals. If he still needed one after the rodeo, he'd have to re-establish the ground rules. *Damn news.*

"Hey Levi, open up!" a husky shout carried through the door, followed by a heavy-handed knock. Levi considered ignoring the man, but thought better of it. He opened the door. Justin Trent stood in the hallway, towering over Levi's five-eight frame.

Justin peered over Levi's shoulder to the interior of the room. "Must be nice living the high life, huh?"

"You could have booked a suite if you wanted. It's all about choices. What's up?"

"Some of the guys and I are going to check out this new bar in town. It's supposed to be a pretty hot joint for the local country set. Plus, they're sponsoring the bull riding competition. Thought we should show a little support. After the news report, we figured

you might want to join us.”

“Great. Bad news travels fast.” Levi raked his fingers through his hair and thought about sitting in his room stewing. Dealing with Lisa while he was angry was never a good idea. He needed to cool off before he faced her. A few beers with the guys before the hectic rodeo schedule began might be just what the doctor ordered. “Where is this bar?”

“Just off strip, some joint called *Cowboy Up* . The band’s singer is supposed to be pretty hot.” Justin waggled his eyebrows in an awful Groucho Marx impersonation.

“Tempting.” Levi groaned. “When y’all leaving?”

“In thirty. Do what you need to do and meet us down in the lobby.” Justin walked away and called back over his shoulder, “Of course, the guys may leave without you. They figure without you there they stand a better chance with the ladies.”

“Right, so why invite me?” Levi mumbled, closing the door. A bar named *Cowboy Up* ? Probably run by some yahoo who’d never been to Texas. What would Sin City think of next? He headed for the shower. No doubt it would be a long night.

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Thirty minutes later, he sat in a limo with guys he had run the circuit with for years. The talk ran from girls to sports, wives and kids. Levi, not in a talkative mood, opted to sit back and listen as a few of the older guys entertained them with stories of their home lives. A handful of them were married or in serious relationships, something which seemed to elude Levi. As of the last breakup it could stay that way.

“You’ve got to be kidding me,” Levi muttered to himself. The limo pulled up to the bar, where a sign advertised *Cowboy Up* in typical gaudy Vegas fashion.

“Don’t be such an ass, Levi. Try to enjoy yourself, or pretend to. Remember all it would take is a call to Lisa, and your location would be dropped on the news.” Justin slapped him on the back.

“I’d prefer you didn’t.” Levi slid out of the limo, turned his attention to the driver, and slipped him a fifty. “Thanks, we’ll catch a cab back.”

“Sir, my instructions from the hotel are that I wait.”

“Suit yourself.” Levi shrugged and headed into the bar. Glancing around, a guy couldn’t help but notice the eye candy in tight jeans. He silently recited his new motto, “Eye on

the prize”. Peanut shells crunched under his feet as he moved through the bar.

“Over here, buddy.” Justin waved him over to a corner booth large enough for the group to sit comfortably. Pulling an authentic cowhide-upholstered chair from a nearby table, Levi placed it at the end of the booth and settled in.

Justin dug his hand into the bucket of peanuts on the table as he yelled, “You get first round, hotshot.”

The waitress stopped at the table, popped her gum and winked at Levi. “What’s your poison?”

With a round of beers ordered, the waitress, who seemed better suited for a fifties diner than a country bar, disappeared into the crowd. Ten minutes later, the guys all had beers in hand. Usually the slow service would have been something to complain about, but the joint was packed.

Levi raised his beer to each guy around the table. “May the bulls be kind this week.”

Justin shook his head. “The bulls are going to give you a run for your money, hotshot, but I’ll toast to that. There’s nothing like a little friendly competition to keep things interesting. Maybe you should practice on the mechanical bull over there.”

Bottles clinked together and Levi took a pull of his beer. Following Justin’s gaze, Levi looked at the piece of machinery—the bull appeared as if it hadn’t been broken in yet. “Yeah, looks like it’s getting a lot of use.”

The waitress made her way up to the stage where band members were settling in. Justin smirked. “Hope she’s not the singer.”

Levi agreed as the waitress began to speak into the microphone. “All right y’all, you know what to do.” The customers began to clap to the rhythm of Kellie Pickler’s *One of the Guys*. A sweet southern voice laced with Texas twang came through the speakers.

“Watch out, Levi’s a real sucker for a true southern girl,” Justin said. A few of the guys at the table whistled and Levi followed their stares over his shoulder towards the bar. He could not believe his eyes. The singer stood on the corner of the bar in a black tank top and low hip-hugging jeans that revealed a glimpse of her stomach. Long legs were accentuated by the fit of her jeans and red cowboy boots. Levi stared at her like a deer caught in headlights. She hopped off the bar and worked the crowd better than any entertainer he had ever seen.

“Sydney,” he whispered when those familiar light gray eyes locked on him. A smile crossed her face. The auburn haired beauty from his childhood made her way through the tables towards him. “Eye on the prize,” he reminded himself.

Damn if she wasn't getting a reaction out of him. Desperately, he tried to remember the pact he'd made ages ago. Sydney sat on his lap, plucked the cowboy hat from his head, placed it on her own and wrapped an arm around his neck as she sang. Her body pressed against his. Focusing on anything other than the feel of her ass against his lap, the curve of her breast pressing into his chest and the sweet magnolia scent wafting off her skin was impossibility. After the longest minute of his life had passed, she winked, slowly slid off of his lap and headed towards the stage. Wolf whistles filled the air as she finished the song.

"Well, that's definitely the best entertainment we've seen all evening. Seeing a woman have that kind of effect on Levi is worth a round of beers. I'm buying. Earth to Levi..." Justin nudged him. "Might want to wipe the drool from your chin and put your eyes back in your head."

"I don't believe it," Levi murmured, staring after her.

"Believe what?" Justin asked, looking puzzled. "Game face on, Levi. Fans approaching."

A few bar patrons asked for autographs. Levi never turned away fans, though he hoped to finish before Sydney disappeared from view. The band began to play again, but a male voice came through the speakers. Levi flicked his gaze up to the stage, located his hat and watched as it moved towards the bar.

"Excuse me guys, time to go fetch my Stetson." Levi rose from the chair but lost sight of her as he made his way through the crowd. As he leaned against the bar, he spotted Dusty Hart, another face from his childhood, at the opposite end.

"Syd, get your ass back here already. Did you fail to notice the people three deep around the bar?" Dusty yelled out.

"Jesus, Dusty, no need to go birthin' any cows." A familiar, feminine voice answered back. Levi chuckled. She was still full of piss and vinegar. Glancing down the length of the bar, he caught a glimpse of Sydney's long legs as she swung them over the bar, before dropping down into the trenches. Captivated by her movements, he watched as she took drink orders, tossed empty bottles over her shoulder to the trash, and made her way down the antiqued pinewood separating them. After all these years, it was harder to deny the attraction he had for her. Sydney continued towards him, exchanging drinks and money faster than he had ever seen.

"Hey angel, can I have my hat back?"

Those beautiful eyes met his and a sultry smile that promised nothing but trouble crossed her lips. "Are you kidding? I've got Levi McKenna's hat. You know I could make a pretty obscene profit off this hat."

"But you won't," he said, turning on the smile his assistant referred to as a real lady

killer.

“That smile might work on them Hollywood girls you’ve been hanging out with, but I am immune to your charms, Mr. McKenna.”

A voice called out, “Hey Sydney, how about a kiss?” Though the tone in the man’s voice was playful, Levi’s jaw tightened. A slow intake of air eased his tension.

“You’re in the wrong place, mister. A few clubs downtown might be able to give you the action you’re looking for.” Sydney looked at Levi and rolled her eyes. “Some people. So, back to the hat, what makes you think I won’t sell it?”

Trying to hide her discomfort, Sydney pushed past the remark but not before Levi saw it. “Call it a hunch.”

“I guess we’ll just have to see about that, cowboy.” She handed a few beers across to a waitress, then turned and blew him a kiss. “I might just hang on to it as a memento.”

“Fine by me,” Levi thought, looking around. Dusty was no longer in sight. “So where’d the big man run off to?”

She jerked her head towards the opposite end of the bar. “Busy, but I’ll get him. Dusty, you got a guy down here wants to talk to the owner.”

“So deal with him,” Dusty yelled back.

“He doesn’t want to talk to me.” She winked at Levi.

Dusty’s voice grew louder, laced with irritation. “Well, why the hell not? You’re nicer than I am and much better to look at. Just take care of it, Syd.”

Levi watched the ease with which Sydney switched discussing fashion or sports, depending on who she served. The woman’s love and ability to talk about both made for a combination Levi found intoxicating and damn sexy. Of course, he had always found her an enticing little package. Nothing compared to southern charm in his books, and she had it in spades. Even the curses dripped with it as they fell from her tongue.

“Dusty, get your ass down here already!”

“God damn Sydney, you’re an owner. Tell the guy to get over it or take his macho bullshit out of here.”

Levi could hear the frustration in his friend’s voice, but knew he wouldn’t leave Sydney to deal on her own. An exasperated sigh escaped her and Levi had to forcibly bite his tongue. Dusty slowly moved in their direction, stopping occasionally to refill drinks.

“So what’s the deal, guy? Too macho to deal with Sydney…” Dusty’s voice trailed off as recognition slid across his face and his good-humored personality took over. He chuckled, “When the hell did you get to town?”

Levi studied his watch. “About four hours ago.”

“Here for the rodeo or slumming?”

“Rodeo. A few of the guys are at the corner table.” Levi looked towards the stage when the band began to play again.

“So, I need a rodeo in town before I can get your ass out here for a visit?”

“Hardly. Just been busy.”

“So I gathered. I follow the news. Movies, women and bulls leave little time for much else.”

“Can’t believe everything you hear or read, man. You know that.”

“True,” Dusty looked past him with a hunger in his eyes. Only one thing in the world, so far as Levi knew, elicited such a reaction from his friend. Dusty’s wife, Becca, stepped up next to him with a tray full of empty glasses. She still looked at Dusty as though he were the only man in the room. When she leaned over the bar to give Dusty a kiss, a pang of longing for what his friends shared crept up before Levi could stop it. “Becca, you’re as beautiful as ever. When you planning on leaving this lug and running away with me?”

“Why? You plan on growing up and settling down in the near future?” she asked, hugging him. “It’s good to see you, Levi. Where is she, Dusty?”

“Follow the trail of drooling men.” His tone held irritation, but Levi didn’t blame the guy. His sister had always been eye catching. Dusty turned back to him. “We make more money the nights she hops behind the bar. Damn guys ogle her like she’s serving them naked, though. It’s disgusting and yet, it’s hardly the worst part.”

Before Levi could ask what could be worse, Justin strolled up and slapped him on the back.

“Hey, Levi.”

“Justin, this is Dusty Hart, the owner of the bar.”

Justin shook Dusty’s hand. “Hey man, the singer is hot. I bet she makes you a lot of money in this joint.” Ignorant to the expression on Dusty’s face, he turned back to Levi. “We’re thinking about checking out some of the casinos, you game?”



“Nah, I think I’ll hang here and catch up with y’all later.”

“Mind if we take the limo?”

“Go ahead. I can catch a ride or call a cab.”

Justin’s exaggerated wink before he left could only mean one thing—he suspected Levi’s reason for staying. Levi shook his head as Justin walked away. “Sorry, Justin’s mouth rarely checks with his brain first.”

Dusty shrugged. “No problem. So you’re gonna hang around?”

“Until you get sick of me or kick me out.” He settled onto the nearest cowhide barstool. “So what’s worse?”

A female voice came over the microphone and Dusty looked to the stage where Becca now stood.

“You’ll see.”

“She sings too?” The look Dusty shot him quickly shut him up. Becca began to sing. A few bars later, Sydney joined her sister-in-law on stage and their two voices melded together in perfect harmony in a heart-wrenching song Levi’d heard only a few times since it had been written. It was Syd’s mom’s song. One Charlene Hart had written about a love gone bad only a few short weeks before her new husband had ended her life. Trying not to stare at Sydney, he pulled his gaze away and peered around the bar. Considering the way the other men were gawking at both women, he could understand Dusty’s feelings. “Yeah, I can see why this is worse.”

“Would you enjoy watching your wife and baby sister being stared at by a bunch of men? Drooled over like they were a couple of perfectly cooked cuts of prime beef?” Dusty sighed. “Becca likes when Sydney sings with her band though, and I’m not such an asshole I’d stop it.”

“Could be worse. They could be dancing in a club downtown.”

“Don’t even go there.” Dusty’s glare could have frozen him to the barstool and he quickly threw his hands up in submission. The girls left the stage, smiling as they headed to the bar.

Levi took a sip of his beer. “So this is why you haven’t returned my calls?”

“Figured I babbled about it long enough. It was time to shit or get off the pot.” Dusty chuckled. “If it’s any consolation, it was on my to-dos, just never quite finished the damn list.”

“How’s Syd been? She seems happy. Ever walk down the aisle?”

“Nope. She has poor taste in men and is still a regular asshole magnet, with her last one turning out to be the worst yet.”

“What was so wrong with him?”

“Controlling, manipulative and had a jealous streak that would put my stepfather to shame about sums it up. She has that same scary wild streak our mom had.” Dusty’s voice softened as Sydney approached. His friend’s eyes held a protectiveness Levi was all too familiar with.

Sydney stopped close enough for him to touch. Sitting on his hands to avoid trouble suddenly seemed like a good idea. She elbowed his side.

“Ouch! What was that for?”

“Staying away so long.” Resting her arms on the bar, she looked to her brother. “I need a round for the guys up front.” She turned her attention back to him. “I watched you last year. You did pretty well, until Devil bucked you after two seconds and Justin walked away the winner.”

Hearing she closely followed the rodeo circuit shocked him. “Devil’s the worst bull to ride, and Justin got lucky last year.”

“Please, Justin Trent is going to give you a run for your money. He holds more titles than you and doesn’t have your distractions.”

“What distractions are you referring to?” Turning to face her more fully, the sight of her casually moistening her lips sent a wave of desire burning through him.

She didn’t seem to notice. “Take your pick, but I was referring to the buckle bunnies and media. No one seems to be interested in much else when your name comes up anymore.”

Levi tried not to let the comment bother him. “Last year—was it the brunette or blonde?”

“The blonde. She miraculously appeared on your arm whenever a camera was near. Think she had a bit part in your last movie.” Sydney scoffed. “Meant a lot to ya, huh?”

“You don’t hold anything back do you, angel?”

“No point. Life’s too short and you aren’t around that much.”

Dusty’s laughter interrupted them as he set the last shot on the tray. “Here, Syd.”

Levi watched her disappear into the crowd with the drink order and turned back to find

Dusty shaking his head. "She's got your number."

"Unfortunately."

"Catch up at closing?"

"Yep." He took another drink from his beer and thought about what Sydney had said, while Dusty went back to tending the crowd. Damn if she hadn't been right, a fact that bothered him more than he wanted to admit. Just another affirmation of what he needed to do.

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Three hours and a barely touched beer later, the bar had closed. Tossing his towel to the last bartender, Dusty walked away from his post. "Come on, let's grab a table."

Levi followed Dusty to a booth in the corner. The bar, now practically vacant, seemed like a ghost town. Becca and Sydney worked diligently to move the tables, revealing the dance floor he hadn't known was there. "You really seem to be doing well for yourself."

A smile crossed Dusty's face. "I'm no Levi McKenna, but I do all right."

The grass always seemed greener. Levi shrugged. "I'd trade places with you any day of the week."

"I'm not offering up my life for trade. It took a lot of hard work to get all of this. Life is good."

"I'd call you a damn fool if you said otherwise." Levi glanced towards the bar where Sydney had disappeared. Yep, given half the chance he would trade it all.

## Chapter Two

Absent-mindedly wiping down the bar, Sydney watched as Levi talked with her brother. They fell into the old groove so easily after years of little more than a few phone calls. Becca came over with the last round of empties from the tables and tossed them in the trash. The weight of her sister-in-law's gaze made her squirm. "Why are you staring?"

"I could ask you the same thing. He's nice eye candy." Becca nudged her. "You don't plan on being a miserable old spinster surrounded by a bunch of cats do you?"

"Oh, come on." A very unladylike snort escaped her. "Need I remind you of my last

adventure in romance? Tyler didn't exactly turn out to be Rhett Butler."

"True." With a dreamy-eyed look, she stared out at Dusty. "But you can't judge all guys by Tyler."

"Okay, what about the one before him, the devil in blue jeans? Oh and we can't forget the CEO, the snowboarder, the banker, the musician or the poker player." Sydney sighed. "I'm just like my mamma after all I guess."

"Don't say that! Your mother was a lost soul who made one wrong choice that ended her life. And I doubt the Charlene Hart I knew would want you subjecting yourself to a life without love."

The truth in Becca's words stung. The woman knew her too well. "I'm hardly lining up at the door to the nearest convent, Becca." She took in a slow breath. "Just saying I might need to change my strategy a bit."

"Sweetheart, strategy's hardly your problem. It's your taste in men." Becca winked at her. "Maybe, the one you're searching for is right in front of you."

"Right, my brother has one rule—no dating his friends. Last I checked Levi's still on the friends list. Dusty would have a complete conniption."

"True, but how do you know Levi's not the man to ride you off into the sunset? You might never know if you don't test the waters." After a long appraising look, Becca sighed. "You're hopeless. I'm taking this to the office."

Register drawers in hand, Becca turned towards the office. Opportunity to punish the meddling reared its ugly head and she took the towel and whipped Becca with it.

The loud crack of the towel against blue jeans caused her sister-in-law to jump and nearly drop everything. "Damn it, Sydney!"

"Serves you right." She went back to cleaning up, ignoring the evil stare cast in her direction. Date Levi McKenna, what a laugh. Obviously marrying her brother had taken Becca's I.Q. down a notch or two. Jerry, the last of the bar staff to hang around, brought up the stock she'd asked for and they set about preparing the bar for the following evening. When they finished, she headed back to the office.

Becca had the radio on, money spread all over the desk, appearing as frazzled as Sydney'd ever seen her. The laugh threatening to escape her was quickly stifled. Her sister-in-law excelled at everything except the books, proving the woman wasn't as perfect as she believed her to be.

"So how bad did you screw it up?" Taking Levi's hat off, she set it on the corner of the desk.

“Damn it, why can’t I figure this out? I graduated top of my class, married one of the few decent men in Vegas and help run a successful business. Yet, I can’t get the damn books to balance.” Becca’s pencil sailed across the room.

Sydney moved around the desk, bringing the extra chair with her, and studied the receipt tape. They had been busy. With the rodeo in town, it would continue. “Good thing we had extra help tonight.”

“You wouldn’t have known it. Dusty still acted like we were short handed.” Becca laughed. “I’m amazed he’s actually planning on leaving the bar in Jerry’s hands for a few nights.”

“Me too, but I’ve learned to never look a gift horse in the mouth.” Staring over Becca’s shoulder at the computer screen, she looked at the numbers before studying the receipt tape again. “Where in the hell did you get this number from? Move over will ya?”

When Becca had done as she’d asked and moved her chair out of the way, she moved up to the computer and began keying in the figures.

“You know, Levi’s single again.”

The statement caught her off-guard and she cursed as she keyed in the wrong numbers—distraction at its finest. Her mind reeled at the thought of Levi and the muscles that had felt so good when she’d leaned into him earlier. No doubt about it, she was in trouble. “Stop bringing him up, he’s off limits.”

“You’ve considered him.” Her sister-in-law giggled like a school girl who’d just heard the latest gossip and Sydney shook her head in denial.

“You’re not pulling the wool over my eyes. I saw the way you drooled over him tonight.”

“I’m not blind, especially where he’s concerned, but it changes nothing.” Trying to move on from the conversation, she keyed in a few more figures and hit total. Comparing it with the register balance, she turned to show Becca.

“Wow, is that right?”

“Yep, proving yet again people love two things.” She smiled at Becca’s quizzical look. “Cowboys and beer. The only thing to top it off would be if we added some real Texas barbeque, but this is Vegas, not the Lone Star state.”

“You still miss Texas?” It was a question she’d heard many times over in recent months. A southern girl at heart, she longed to go back, but she couldn’t bring herself to leave.

“Yeah, I still miss it.”

“You plan on going back?”

“Depends. Are you trying to get rid of me?” Her brother’s constant worry for her had to wear on their marriage. She had difficulty dealing with it herself at times.

“Hardly. You’ve just never been a Sin City kind of girl.” Becca got up and walked to the couch at the back wall of the office. After finishing up the deposit and entering the totals in the ledger, Sydney grabbed Levi’s hat off the desk and joined Becca, loving the feel of the leather couch as she sank into it.

“You can take the girl out of Texas, but you can’t take Texas out of the girl.”

“Huh?” The expression on Becca’s face didn’t surprise her.

“Nothing, just something my mamma used to say. Truth is, I’d go back in a heartbeat, but what would I be going back to? My family’s here.” She ran her hands over the felt of Levi’s hat.

“You thinking about your mom?” Becca rested her head on her shoulder.

Afraid words would fail her, she simply nodded. The two of them had become close, even before Dusty had popped the question and she’d come to treasure the friendship more with her mother gone. Girls back home had been far more interested in playing the part of the southern debutante and had had no interest in getting dirty on the ranch, where she’d lived and breathed the ranch life.

“So what’s so great about the rodeo?” Becca said, obviously changing the subject.

“It’s probably easier to list what’s not great about it. I can’t believe you’ve lived here for fifteen years and have never been to the rodeo.”

“What can I say? I’ve lived a very sheltered life.”

“Well, you can’t stay married to a Texas man and not go to the rodeo. Didn’t you read the manual he came with?”

“There’s a manual?” The mock surprise in her sister-in-law’s voice made her smile.

“In fact, it should be a rite of passage for all women. Bulls, horses and cowboys’ asses in tight jeans are hardly things a girl should go a lifetime without.” Reclining deeper into the leather sofa, she let out a sigh. She knew she couldn’t pass up the opportunity to see real cowboys again.

In her twenty-four years of life, she’d seen many, but five years away from Texas had

left her suffering some serious withdrawals. Three years ago Dusty had bought rodeo tickets as a last minute surprise, which had left them sitting in nosebleed central. This year it would be Gold Buckle seats, thanks in part to the bar's generous sponsorship. Best seats in the house. Close enough to see the blood, sweat and tears. "Becca, we'll be close enough to pinch their butts if we want to."

They both fell into a fit of laughter that was interrupted when Dusty poked his head through the door. "You girls have a little more beer than you should have?"

"Nope," they both said in unison, trying to reign in their laughter. Dusty shook his head in disbelief. Sydney tried to answer him with a straight face. "We're just talking about butts."

"God help me, I don't know if I have the strength to survive another rodeo season." Dusty leaned against the door. "Syd, you did mom's song justice tonight, she would have been proud."

"Thanks. I just wish she was here to see me sing it."

"Me too," His voice went a little soft and he cleared his throat before continuing. "Do you mind driving Levi back to the hotel?"

"Not at all," she blurted out a little too eagerly, earning a look of warning from him. "What?"

"Just drive him to the hotel and go home."

Standing up, she put Levi's hat on her head, saluted her brother, followed it with a clipped, "Yes, sir," and went in search of her passenger.

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Leaning against the bar, Levi looked at ease as he talked with Jerry. His jeans were tight enough to look good, without ruining the illusion of what might lie underneath them, though sitting on his lap had given her a pretty good indication. Paired with the black T-shirt that seemed to cling to the upper part of his chest and the sandy blonde head of loose curls, it was a damn shame he was off limits. Well, she had to give Becca credit. Her taste in men remained intact.

Levi peered at her with those baby blues and winked. "Come to return my hat I see."

"Nope, came to take you back to whatever fancy ass hotel you're staying in, Mr. Rodeo

Heartthrob.”

“I’m staying at the Mirage, which was hardly my first option, angel.” Straightening up, he shook the bartender’s hand. “Thanks for keeping me company, Jerry.”

Yep, Texas knew how to make ’em and they just didn’t make men the same anywhere else, she thought as she slid into her jacket. Levi stepped up behind her and rested his hand against the small of her back. “After you.”

As they walked, the sensation of warmth spreading through her elicited thoughts of what could be. She shook them off knowing they would lead to nothing but trouble and heartache. When they stepped outside, Levi began to chuckle.

“What so funny?”

“I’m going to take a wild guess here at which car is yours.” He confidently strolled towards Becca’s convertible Mustang. She smiled and shook her head. Cocking his head slightly his eyes widened in surprise. “No?”

“Guess again, hotshot.” Walking past him, she headed towards the forest-green super duty pickup. A white folded piece of paper on the windshield stopped her. She ripped the paper out from under the wiper, opened it, then tossed it towards the trash and missed. Cursing under her breath, she picked it up and threw it in the bin before heading back to the truck.

Levi looked at her. “Problem?”

“Just an asshole who doesn’t know when to quit.” Unlocking the truck, she climbed in and settled into the leather seats. Satisfaction—the kind that came from something hard won—washed over her. This truck had been the first thing she’d bought and paid for with her own money.

“Seem to remember you having a thing for assholes.” He climbed in next to her.

She stuck the key in the ignition and pulled out of the parking lot. The gaze from her passenger weighed down on her, but she refused to look at him and hoped he would get the message.

“Okay, not something you care to discuss. So what have you been doing with yourself?”

Realizing how childish she was acting, she conceded. Outside of her family, the only other person in the world who knew much about her life now sat beside her. “I’ve been having a thing for assholes.”

“No Mr. Right yet?”



“Nope, not with the men I pick. How about you? No new flavor of the week?”

“To my assistant’s dismay.” Levi shifted in the seat. “No, there’s no new flavor of the week. Didn’t really want the flavors being offered to begin with.”

“So what do you want?”

The long look he gave made her squirm. Finally, he answered. “Something out of my reach.”

“Probably not dating the right women.” Having seen the many women he had been paired with over the last few years, along with the fact she’d practically grown up with the man, she felt it was a fair statement. Her thoughts drifted to her last failed romance with the ex who wouldn’t leave her alone. She’d been blind not to see their relationship for what it was—a reenactment of her mother’s and stepfather’s. Unlike her mother though, she’d gotten out before it was too late. “Of course, I’m a fine one to give advice considering my track record. I must be cursed,” she mumbled.

“Somehow I doubt that. You just have to stop being—how did Dusty put it? An asshole magnet.”

She sighed. Only Dusty could put it so eloquently. Her brother had a point. If there was an asshole in the room, she seemed to hone in and take him home. The city passed them by as she drove, and she found it soothing to be sitting next to Levi. She pulled the truck onto the strip and headed towards the hotel.

“Are you taking a trip down memory lane?” Levi asked, jarring her out of her moment of self-pity.

“Not much for conversation, am I?”

“We obviously aren’t talking about the right subject. Let’s see—does prom ring any bells for you?” His smile was infectious.

“Yeah, actually, it does. Some cowboy came in and saved me from a night of embarrassment. If I recall, that was a pretty fun night.” Sydney glanced over, watching the neon lights of the strip play across his face. God, he was handsome. Just a little eye candy to soothe the soul, she’d always thought so.

“Yes, it was. I don’t think I laughed or had as much fun at my own prom.”

“Somehow, I doubt doing a favor for your best friend and coming to his little sister’s rescue was entertaining for you.” The look she sent dared him to lie.

“Well, let me see if I can recall the events for you, angel. I think we were late to the prom because I had to scrounge a suit together at the last minute. I showed up without

flowers or a corsage. You walked out in a very sexy strapless gown, and I tripped over my own two feet...”

“You did look ridiculous in your uncle’s baby blue suit. Where a southern gentleman ever bought a suit like that is beyond me.”

They both laughed.

“I couldn’t tell you, angel. He left me that damn suit in his will. Needless to say, the night continues to hold the record for most fun I’ve had on a date, by far. They’ve all been downhill since then.”

Reflecting on that night and their obvious misfortunes in dating since then laid the groundwork for a bet. “I’ll try to stop dating assholes if you stay away from the blonde bimbos.” She pulled the truck into valet parking at the Mirage and stopped. She spit in her hand and held it out to him. “Deal?”

“Gross and completely unladylike, Sydney.” He chuckled, spit in his hand and shook hers. “It’s a deal, angel. Thanks for the lift.”

“You’re welcome. Thanks for the enjoyable trip down memory lane.”

“Welcome,” he said as he leaned towards her and kissed her cheek, grabbing his hat from her head. “I told you I’d get my hat back.”

He started to open the door to the truck, but hesitated. “Syd, are you and Dusty going to the sponsors’ cocktail party tomorrow night?”

She shrugged. “I thought about it, but I didn’t want to go alone and Dusty and Becca are working the bar.”

The devilish smile she’d seen so often growing up slid across his face. “Feel like keeping me out of trouble?”

“Depends. How fancy is it?”

“Requires tickets to get in, not open to the general public kind of fancy.”

“I’m not wearing the strapless.”

“I’m not wearing the baby blue suit, so I think we’re good. Meet me here at five-thirty then?” Another quick peck on the cheek and he climbed out of the truck. “Thanks, angel.”

She felt her cheeks flush as she watched him disappear into the hotel. Not for the first time, she wondered what things would have been like if he and Dusty hadn’t been

friends. Would Levi's name be another on the list of heartbreaks she'd suffered, or was Becca right? Had her Mr. Right been under her nose all along?

A relationship with him would come with its own set of problems. She couldn't be sure if the playboy image was real or fabricated. In her opinion, relationships didn't belong in the spotlight and she wouldn't be just another notch on his belt. Then there was her overprotective brother, who seemed quite partial to having her wind up the spinster with cats if it meant keeping her from guys like Tyler.

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The whole way home, she dwelled on the mistakes she'd made in her life. Becca was right. Her mother wouldn't have wanted her to give up on love. After Tyler, the option held some appeal, but she was a dreamer like her mom and as such, not quite ready to give up on finding her own happily ever after. When she pulled into her street and saw the unwanted car in her driveway, she wished the drive had lasted longer.

The never-ending debate began, get out of the car and face the ex or go to Dusty's. If she got out of the car, she would never get off the merry-go-round she was on. Nope, she'd walked away once and still bore the scars of a battered heart, but she wasn't stupid. She turned down a side street to avoid the house. Why couldn't people accept when things were over? From inside her purse, the phone began to chirp a familiar ring. She dug around for it, opening it as she pulled it from her purse. "What, Dusty?"

"You should have been home already."

Classic overprotective Dusty, she thought. It didn't surprise her anymore. "No shit, I'm on my way to your house. There's an unwanted visitor at mine."

As he hung up, she could hear his swearing. She tossed the phone up on the dashboard. If she couldn't get rid of the Mr. Wrongs in her life, how in the world would she ever find Mr. Right? And what the hell good did a restraining order do when people refused to obey it?

Fifteen minutes had passed by the time she pulled her truck into her brother's driveway. Becca, appearing a little worse for wear, waited for her on the porch swing. She felt bad because her brother had obviously gotten Becca all worked up.

As Syd climbed out of the truck, her sister-in-law stood and shook her head.

"Guess maybe you should have stayed with the cowboy in the hotel."

“Only you, Becca.”

Becca walked over, slipped her arm around her waist as they walked into the house. A raised voice came from the kitchen, where Dusty was on the phone. Relief slid into his eyes when he saw her.

“Dusty, calm down.”

“Yeah, thanks officer.” He slammed the phone down. “Don’t tell me to calm down, Syd. There’s no damn way I’m going to sit here while some asshole camps in front of your house. He shouldn’t even be there. What in the hell’s he doing there, anyway?”

“Jesus, you act like I invited him. If I wanted the man there I surely wouldn’t be standing here now, would I?” She loved her brother and understood his concern and desire to keep her safe. She was even thankful for it, but it was a little trying at times when he took his frustrations out on her.

As the family mediator, Becca took her cue. “Dusty, why don’t you go grab us all a beer.”

Soon they were all seated around the table. Silence hung heavy in the room until her brother finally broke it. “It was good to see Levi again. I mean other than during our family tragedies or in the newspapers and television.”

Good seeing Levi was an understatement in her opinion. She was really looking forward to going out with him. A fun night with a guy hadn’t been on her agenda in a long time and she would take her fun where she could get it, even with someone who was off-limits. *Shit*. Glancing at her brother, she quickly decided on the best course of action. “By the way, Dusty, I won’t be stopping by the bar tomorrow night. I’m going to go to the sponsor thing after all.”

His eyes fixed on hers, accusation in them. “With Levi?”

“Call it a repayment for a last minute prom night date.”

### Chapter Three

Levi sat on the bed, his back propped against the headboard, hat in his hands. The scent of magnolias clung to the felt as a reminder of Sydney. If she’d been any other girl he would have flirted, sent a sexy smile her way, probably even managed to steal more than a kiss on the cheek by the end of the night. Lord knows it was tempting. She embodied his idea of the perfect girl. He reached over and set the phone for no calls, sank further down into the bed and rested the hat over his face. For the first time in a long time, he was looking forward to a cocktail party.

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Pounding and hysterical calls from a woman on the other side of the door woke him up the next morning.

“Jesus, Lisa, give me a second,” he yelled, pulling on jeans and a T-shirt.

Levi opened the door to his red-faced assistant, who pushed her way past him with the cell phone pressed to her ear. Damn thing was like another appendage. He didn’t think she went anywhere without it, including the bathroom.

“Yeah, it’s sitting in my briefcase—I’ll run it by him.” She hit a key on the phone and tossed it, along with her purse, on the coffee table, making herself at home as she sank into the couch. “So, who’s the girl?”

“What the hell are you babbling about, woman? It’s early. I would like a shower and a meal before attending the media circus you have me participating in.” Levi pushed his hand through his hair in exasperation. The woman infuriated him.

“The girl, the truck, valet—any of this ringing a bell?” Lisa tapped her finger on the back of the couch to signal her impatience. “My phone has been ringing non-stop with papers wanting to get the scoop.”

“Yeah, it rings a bell and the girl is none of your business.”

“Hello? Remember me? I’m your assistant. You hired me to deal with this crap so therefore, anything concerning you is my business. If it can be captured on film, written about in a paper or reported on the news, I think it qualifies as my business. And you two were captured on film a few times.” She snatched the phone up, opened an email and shoved it at him. Levi hesitated before taking the phone. The tiny display held a picture of him kissing Sydney’s cheek. Damn it.

“Where did those come from?”

“Thought you’d be more interested in where they are going.” Lisa tossed the phone back on the table, waiting for a response. Levi glared at her. “They’re going to be in the local paper, television and no doubt the national news will pick them up shortly thereafter.”

“God damn it, Lisa! You will call them all back and tell them to pull the story. They will not put this girl’s picture all over the news.”

“I didn’t know you would be so upset about it. It’s great. ‘Rodeo and film heartthrob steals heart of unknown local girl’. You know how the press loves that crap.”

In his whole life, he had never wanted to wring someone's neck so badly. "She is not unknown to me, damn it. We're not talking about one of the girls you set me up with. You will call and pull her picture, or I will not do the publicity events today and you will be left standing there like an ass."

He hadn't been so blunt with her before, but Sydney hardly deserved to be thrown under the bus by money-grubbing photographers, or an assistant who thought all publicity was good for his image. Publicity was not all he cared about and it had taken him a little too long to realize it. When Lisa didn't move, Levi grabbed her cell phone and shoved it at her. "I'll go a step further. If those pictures appear *anywhere* you're out of a job."

Lisa hesitated, then took the phone and hit speed dial. "Pull the story." She hung up and let out a huge sigh. "There, are you happy? I don't understand what the big deal is. She's just another girl that will do wonders for your image, just like all the others."

"That statement is exactly why it's a big deal."

"I don't agree with this." The frustration on her face was evident. Lisa didn't like being told what to do. Knowing her as he did, there was no doubt it would be handled, regardless of whether she agreed or not. She could be conniving when it suited his career, but she was also loyal and worked hard for him. "There's a new movie deal on the table."

"Not interested. We've discussed this."

"Just hoping you might change your mind. You should have options waiting for you if you decide to hang up your chaps." She picked her purse up. "I have a date lined up for you tonight. You need to be ready by five-thirty. Why are you shaking your head?"

"I can get my own dates, so please stop trying to hook me up with every floozy you find."

The Irish blood in the woman normally had her spoiling for a good argument, but when she refrained, he knew something was off with her. Upon closer inspection, he noticed the bloodshot eyes, the messy hair and sweats.

"Something's going on with you. What is it?"

"Just stuff back home. It's fine, really." She calmly stood and headed for the door, but turned back towards him. "I'll have room service send up your usual breakfast. Get your shower. We're running a little behind schedule. I need you at the events pavilion by eleven."

Without waiting for an answer, Lisa walked out the door. When she was gone, he headed for the shower and ran things over in his mind. Relying on her to handle everything had become second nature and it worked out well for both of them in the beginning. With her

ambition and take-no-prisoners attitude, she dealt with everything he despised, like agents and the media. But his career goals no longer extended beyond the rodeo arena. Life was all about the road to the title from here on out.

Levi stepped from the shower. Focus, that's what he needed. He had allowed it to slip away from him, but it wouldn't happen again. This was going to be his do-or-die year. If he finished the Nationals without the title, it would be fate's way of telling him it was time to move on.

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Thirty minutes later he was dressed, in the car and on his way to the events center. God, he hated these media events. Other guys got to discuss their careers, while Levi got to talk about whatever had recently hit the papers regarding his love life and any recent movies he'd been in. He needed to play this right if he was going to keep focus where he wanted it.

The driver stopped in front of the media and fans awaiting his arrival. Time to put on the old game face, he thought as he stepped from the car.

Lisa got things started as Levi took his seat at the table, staring out at the throngs of fans and reporters. Media was something he could do without. They didn't have anything to do with what happened in the ring between him and the bull. A little fact he had to occasionally remind himself of. The first round of questions began as flashes went off and fans stood on the sidelines in wait.

"Levi, what happened to the last girlfriend?" A young, female reporter asked when Lisa pointed. This game he'd become quite adept at playing, despite his discomfort.

"It ended, the way many relationships do."

"What about the girl you were with last night?" another reporter chimed in. "She going to be the next on the long list of girls you have been with?"

When Lisa started to speak, he stopped her and took a deep breath. This was his show. "She's a childhood friend and I ask that you respect that. Now, if this is the direction the line of questioning is going to take, then there's no point in continuing."

"What are your plans while you are in town?"

Levi smirked. "Did y'all forget Nationals are going on? I plan on winning myself a title."

Laughter erupted from the sea of reporters. Another spoke up. “Your luck hasn’t been very good since you won your first big title. How do you plan on stealing the title from Justin Trent?”

“Stealing? You can’t steal a title. The only way to win in this game is by being better than the others you are up against. I am.”

A familiar TV reporter raised her hand. “Justin Trent has been on his game all year. How can you say you are better?”

“Darlin’, obviously I managed to qualify. Besides, I have confidence in myself. Your head has to be in the arena, if it’s not then you go down. We’re not out there riding Shetland ponies. These are creatures that could crush your bones if you aren’t careful. You can’t approach them like you’re taking them for a ride through the countryside. If your heart and head are not in what you’re doing, you can’t win. I plan on winning. Thanks for coming out.” Levi stood, signaling there would be no more questions. Stepping away from the table, he caught sight of Lisa in a heated discussion with a reporter. Considering the reporter couldn’t seem to get a word in edgewise, Levi figured he’d done something to earn the tongue lashing she was giving him.

Fans stood patiently behind the barricades, waiting for his autograph and he indulged them, only walking away when he’d finished. Sydney stood to the side, waiting. She smiled and he headed towards her.

“I think you handled the circus very well, Mr. McKenna.”

“Watch out, angel. These vultures will swoop in, snap pictures, and before you can say boo—you’ll be branded as just another one of my bimbos.” He winked at her.

“It would be a change from the blondes and wouldn’t Dusty just love that. Local bar hussy hooks up with rodeo heartthrob.” She grinned. “Just here dropping off some logos.”

“You’re really going to sponsor the bull riding competition?” Levi failed at keeping the surprise from his voice.

“Obviously you don’t pay much attention to the sponsors, so I won’t take offense. Yeah, we had planned on it when we opened the bar.” Slipping an arm through his, she walked with him towards the events center. “Why do you seem so shocked?”

“Just think it’s a lot of money to throw away.”

“You call it throwing it away. We call it a good investment in advertising.” She reached for the door, and he brushed her hand away.

“Angel, didn’t Dusty teach you anything? A southern girl never opens the door for



herself when a gentleman is present to do it for her.”

“Gentlemen are few and far between in this hellhole.” Sydney smiled and it made him feel capable of dealing with anything. Amazing the effect some things had on people, he thought as they walked through the center. This felt almost too comfortable. Levi saw Justin Trent headed their way.

“Hey Levi, I thought you handled yourself real well out there. But I am hardly going to hand the title over to you.” Justin stopped, looking Sydney over slowly from head to toe. Sydney, apparently not bothered by the once-over, looked back at him.

“Well, if it’s not the reigning champ himself, Justin Trent,” she said in that damn southern drawl, her eyes twinkling as she gazed at Justin. He had half a mind to shake some sense into her. If it were any other girl, he wouldn’t have been bothered.

“Hi there, you’re from the bar last night, right?” Justin smiled when she nodded. “You have a great voice.”

“Aw, how sweet of you to say.”

Levi grabbed hold of Sydney’s arm. “Well, I think we need to be moving along.”

“It was nice to meet you, Justin. I hope I get the chance to see you again while you’re here.”

Looking past her to Justin, he shook his head.

Justin laughed. “I’m sure you will.”

With every intention of putting as much distance between them and Justin as possible, he set a quick pace as they walked away. The expression on her face showed displeasure at being dragged away. Half-expecting a tongue lashing, he braced himself, but all Sydney did was gently pull her arm from his grasp. “It’s bad enough I have to deal with Dusty’s over protectiveness. I hardly need it from you.”

“Sorry,” was all he could manage to say. Admittedly, he was a little taken aback by his behavior.

Truth sucked. Sometimes it bit him in the ass. Other times it eluded him. He knew why he’d hauled her off like a barbaric caveman staking his claim, but he wouldn’t say it. To speak the words out loud would be a confirmation he could not afford.

Biting her bottom lip and studying him with a scrutinizing gaze, she was apparently considering the depth of his sincerity. “Well, you’ve apologized, so I guess you deserve a chance at redemption.”

Looping her arm through his again, she led him along the corridors without any further comment. Calm washed over him while they walked. The leisurely pace, as though they had all the time in the world, gave him a sense of normalcy he found comforting.

“So where are you headed?”

Sydney shook her head. “Not telling. It would ruin the surprise.”

He looked at her and she smiled. Warmth spread through him, and he wanted to wrap his arms tightly around her. God, where had his restraint gone? Sydney, his best friend’s little sister, was and always had been off-limits. Her voice pulled him from his thoughts.

“I think you need to be reminded of why you started this journey.”

“Really?” he asked as they walked through the back doors of the event center where her truck sat. His phone rang but when he went to answer it, Sydney grabbed it from him and hit the power button before sliding the phone into her back pocket. “What are you doing?”

“Saving you from yourself,” she said, handing him a piece of paper and then climbing into the truck. “Meet me there in two hours.” Before he could ask any more questions, she pulled away.

## Chapter Four

Sydney’s life had been built around guarding her heart. Risk and chance—two words with the potential to tear down her carefully constructed wall. Becca made it sound so easy. She sighed. The ghosts of failed relationships still haunted her. If she didn’t take this chance, as Becca had suggested, would she regret it? Worst case scenario—her heart would get broken. Sydney Hart would be just another name on the long list of girls who’d gambled on love with Levi McKenna and lost. Deep down, she knew she’d overcome the heartache. Each time it had become a little easier. Still, she wasn’t sure if she should take the chance. Working on Becca’s father’s small ranch usually helped her sort through things, but waiting to see if Levi would show, her mind simply ran in circles. She dispelled the thoughts and moved to the back of the trailer to unload the hay bales.

“You know, I would’ve been here sooner, but I really try to avoid manual labor.” Levi appeared on the opposite side of the trailer. “So you lured me here to do your chores?”

His teasing demeanor made it difficult to keep a straight face.

“I hardly need the help of a sissified country boy.” Lacing her fingers through the wire, she hauled another bale off the trailer. His laughter followed her, and he climbed up on the trailer to help. Her gaze lingered over him, and when it met his she felt her skin flush with embarrassment. Quickly, she set her sights back on work. When they’d finished, Levi leaned against the trailer.

“I’m not complaining, but how was that supposed to help me remember why I chase rodeo titles?”

“Oh, this isn’t why I invited you, but when you climbed up on the trailer I was hardly going to stop you. Besides, I needed the help.” Handing him a bottle of water, she smiled and jerked her head towards the barn. “Come on.”

The scent of hay, dust and horse manure always made her feel at home. Grabbing Levi’s hand, she pulled him past the open barn doors and around to the corral. She opened the gate and stepped inside, approaching the horse, who nudged his nose against her in greeting.

“I know, boy,” she said, running her hand over his muzzle. “I brought you a visitor.”

“I don’t believe it.” Levi stepped past her, pride evident on his face.

“I thought your dad told you. He drove him out here last year. Said Dante had chosen me, and it wasn’t right I left him behind.”

“No, he told me he’d sold him.” Levi ran his hands over Dante’s coat as he examined the horse he’d helped her train. “How’s she been treating you, Dante?”

In response, the horse nudged his head against Levi’s arm. Dante loved a good run and they’d ridden him double before. Taking her time, she ran her hand over his back before saddling him. She slipped her foot into the stirrup, mounted in one lithe movement and looked down at Levi. “Ready?”

Levi mounted the horse behind her, slid up close and reached his arms around her to take the reins. The stallion began to dance beneath them, but Levi quickly took charge and Dante settled. Levi whispered against her ear, “You ready?”

She nodded, and he nudged Dante’s sides slightly. The Appaloosa relished being out of the corral, and Sydney could feel him begin to loosen up underneath them. Dante was surefooted and sped across the rocky ground as they headed towards the canyons. They came to a small stream created by the recent snow that had dusted the higher elevations of the valley. Levi pulled back on the reins and halted Dante at the water’s edge. They each dismounted, and Sydney led the horse to the water to let him drink.

“Well Dante, you give a great ride, just like I remember.” Levi ran his hands over the horse’s muzzle in appreciation and then ground tied him. Sydney sat on a rock and looked out at the beauty of the canyon.

“Do you mind?” Levi asked, straddling the rock as he settled in behind her. He rested his head on her shoulder. The scent of his masculine cologne enveloped her. God, he smelled wonderful.

“Maintain control,” she reminded herself.

Levi let out a slow breath and it tickled the side of her neck. “It’s pretty here. I mean, I’ve seen pictures of the canyons, but they don’t do it justice.”

She tilted her head back to get a better view of him. Looking into his deep blue eyes, she knew drowning was a great possibility. He leaned towards her, stopping with his mouth hovering over hers. The thought of kissing him made her toes curl, but temptation and desire waged war with her more cautious side.

“Can I kiss you?” His warm breath teased her lips as he spoke, a seduction of her senses that clouded her mind and sped her pulse. Without waiting for her response, he closed the remaining distance between them and pressed his lips to hers. The kiss was gentle, his lips barely touching hers, yet it held a promise of passion and tenderness. He ran his tongue across her bottom lip, tasting, tempting, then he kissed her deeply. When she responded, Levi ran his hand up her arm to the back of her neck and held her to him. *More*. One mere touch of his lips to hers and her last thread of control threatened to unravel. The flame she had tried to douse flared through her, but she forced herself to exercise restraint. This road she could not take, no matter how right it felt. Once she did, there would be no bread crumbs to find her way back. She pulled away from him.

“Thank you,” Levi said.

Panic and irrational thoughts crept up on her. Emotional distress could be dealt with later. Right now, she just had to make it through the rest of the day.

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They arrived back at the ranch and settled the horse. The emotional battle within her forged on. She wanted to spend time with him, but prayed he’d have to leave and keep her from making a potential mistake. “So, what’s the agenda?”

“For starters, I would like my phone back.” He slipped his hand into her back jean pocket and retrieved the phone, turned it on and walked out of earshot.

Allowing him the privacy he obviously wanted, she headed off towards her truck to wait for him. The smell of cornbread and chili drifted from the house, reminding her she hadn’t eaten.

The passenger door opened and Levi hopped into the cab beside her. “Sorry to make you wait.”

“No big deal. Am I dropping you at the hotel?”

When he nodded, she headed towards the strip. On the drive to the hotel, the silence between them was awkward and she considered calling off the evening. It probably would have been the safest option for both of them, but she knew she’d regret it if she backed out.

“What are you wearing tonight?” he asked, taking in her attire. “Can’t have you showing up in those curve-hugging jeans and tank top. It wouldn’t quite be fair to me. If I have to get gussied up, so do you.”

“I’ve got something.” The question broke the tension in the cab of the truck and she caught him studying her out of the corner of his eye, a smile on his face. “It’s not the strapless, so don’t get your hopes up.”

“Oh, I anticipate every moment of the evening, especially your outfit.”

“Great, nothing like adding high expectations to make a girl nervous.” Easing the truck into the drop-off lane of the valet, she started fidgeting with her keys.

“I’ll see you at five-thirty, but call me when you get home.” He winked as he got out of the truck.

“What do you have up your sleeve, Levi McKenna?”

There was no answer. Instead, he grabbed his cell, closed the door and headed into the hotel, calling back over his shoulder, “Don’t be late.”

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Fifteen minutes later, Sydney pulled into her driveway. A floral delivery truck sat parked at the curb, and the driver stood at her door. He turned to look at her as she climbed out of the truck and retrieved the dress and shoes from the passenger side. “Miss Sydney Hart?”

“Yes.” She eyed the driver suspiciously. Floral deliveries had not ranked high her list of favorites thanks to the ex.

“Can you sign for these?” The driver shoved a clipboard at her and she scribbled her name down. He glanced at the clipboard then back at her. “It’s quite a large arrangement.”

“Okay, give me just a sec to set this stuff down.” Sydney unlocked the door and walked in, leaving it open as she turned off the alarm. After laying the garment bag on the back of the couch, she returned to find the delivery guy stood in the doorway with an oversized arrangement of magnolias.

“Here you are, Miss.”

“Thanks,” she said, trying to balance the flowers as she closed the door. Sydney set them on the coffee table and her phone rang. She snatched it up. “Hello?”

“You didn’t call.”

She snatched the card from the flowers and sank into the couch when she heard Levi’s voice.

“Sorry, I was a little busy wrestling with flowers.” She smiled at the words on the card that simply read, “My angel.”

Levi chuckled on the other end of the line. “I couldn’t resist. See you at five-thirty. I’ll meet you at the bar downstairs.”

The line went dead and she sat staring at the flowers. He was unbelievable and full of surprises. Keeping this within the boundaries that would save them both from Dusty’s wrath would be more difficult than she had originally thought. She glanced at the clock. Damn, where did the time go? “Time to get dolled up,” she thought as she forced herself off the couch and down the hall.

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Levi fidgeted as he finished dressing. God, he hated wearing suits. They felt so restrictive. Not like the everyday jeans and T-shirts he found comfort in. Feeling as though he were about to embark on a first date, he nervously glanced at the clock and ignored Lisa’s barrage of phone calls. Foolish is what it was. He’d taken Sydney out before, even if it had been to help her out, and now she was returning the favor—coming to his rescue—though he’d be lying if he said he felt nothing for her. His cell phone rang and his nerves went into overdrive when he saw Sydney’s number.

“I’m in the lobby and making my way towards the bar, cowboy.” Her intoxicating voice came through the line before he had the chance to say hello and his gut clenched.

“You were supposed to call when you got close.”

Picking up his wallet, the tickets and the key card, he pulled the door shut behind him and stepped into the waiting elevator.

"I am..." her voice was low and sultry, "...close to the bar. You never specified how close I had to be."

"Order a drink and charge it to my room. I'll be there shortly." He hung up the phone and stepped out of the elevator. Glancing around, he was thankful there were no reporters. They were probably camped out by the banquet hall, waiting for some good shots. Knowing Lisa, she probably had it orchestrated right down to which photos they would take and when. Funny how a quick rise to fame and fortune had made him easily dismiss the important things. Not too late for a change though.

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Levi entered the bar and sought out his date. He caught sight of Sydney sitting at the opposite end, talking with the bartender and watching the game on TV. She glanced up, smiled and gracefully slid off the barstool.

"Do you like it?" she asked nervously, as she smoothed her hand down to straighten the dress.

Like was hardly the answer. Levi smiled and indicated for her to turn around. He wanted to take in the full view of the dress. Sydney obliged. Eye catching hardly described the dress that revealed a tasteful amount of cleavage, hugged her at the waist and showed off enough leg to tempt him to ditch the cocktail party.

"This is just something you had hanging around?" He managed to sound somewhat composed and was thankful.

"Not exactly. You don't like it?" She sounded irritated.

"Angel, if I couldn't appreciate a dress like that, I don't think I could call myself a man." He smiled. "Shall we?"

Placing his hand against the small of her back, he led her through the casino. Heads turned as they walked and for once, they didn't even seem to notice him.

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Levi had to concentrate on where he placed his hands. The hotel security kept the media under control, and he didn't hesitate as they walked past. Pictures were inevitable though.

The cocktail party ended up being the typical boring social event he had always hated. Thank God, Sydney had come with him. Occasionally, she would lean into him, remind him to smile, or make comments that left him biting his tongue in futile attempts to hold his laughter. Needing a break from the socializing, they headed to their table, where Justin sat with Lisa at his side. Levi held the chair out for Sydney and then took his seat beside her. He didn't bother to make introductions.

"What's your deal? Are you dating my assistant?" He asked Justin.

"Needed a date and Lisa said she would come." Justin leaned back in the chair, arm slung over the back of Lisa's and his eyes locked on Sydney like she was the ultimate prize. "What's your deal?"

Levi lifted the beer bottle to his mouth, trying to buy a bit of time, but Sydney jumped on the question.

"Levi's and mine?" A smile played across her lips. "I plan on getting him liquored up and using him for sex."

The nonchalant way the words came out of her mouth caused Levi to inhale his beer, but Justin's laughter and Lisa's bulging eyes made up for the discomfort. Levi leaned into Sydney, brushed her hair off of her shoulder and whispered, "Careful, angel, I might just hold you to that. This socializing crap is very boring."

"Pizza and movies?"

"You're on." He slid his chair back and held out a hand for her. A night with Sydney, doing something they'd often done when they were younger, seemed so normal and right up his alley. Lisa's phone rang and she held up a hand. He didn't want to wait, but stopped cold when he saw his assistant's face turn ashen and the phone slip from her hands. "Lisa?"

Moving to her side, he picked up the phone and closed it, but not before seeing the name on the caller I.D. She took the phone from him. "Just some news about my dad, but I'll be fine. You guys go enjoy your evening. I've got Justin for company."

Levi waited a moment, wanting to be sure she wasn't just being stubborn before he turned back to Sydney. "So pizza and movies it is. Shall we?"



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The hot pizza in his lap provided only minimal distraction from the woman seated next to him.

“What movie do you want to watch?” Movies had always been a topic of debate when they were younger, but they agreed on his favorites. When he gave no answer, she smiled. “You can’t be serious. *Die Hard* ? All of them?”

“You can’t watch just one. It’s against the rules.”

“Man rules maybe.”

Laughter came a lot easier the past few days thanks to Sydney and he realized how little of it he’d been doing lately. They drove up a street where every neighborhood entrance had a gate to keep people out and the houses behind them indicated money. He kept waiting for Sydney to pull up to one of the gates, and was surprised when she pulled into a neighborhood that looked inviting and modest. Levi knew Sydney could afford a more elaborate home, probably even one very similar to the gated homes they had passed.

It shouldn’t have shocked him when she parked the truck in the driveway of a small single story with a modest front porch. Light yellow siding, white trim, shutters and a porch swing reminded him of home. A southern oasis in the middle of the desert. Sydney had managed to capture her southern roots, carve out her little piece of home, and it suited her. He made a mental note to spend some time with her in the swing while he was in town.

“This is your place?”

“Yep, why do you sound surprised?” Sydney opened the front door. “It’s not much, but it’s mine. Make yourself at home.”

Setting the pizza on the small table in the dining room, he took the liberty of strolling through the living room. The walls were decorated with photos of her and her mother, Dusty and Becca’s wedding and Dusty and Levi when they were younger. The denim-upholstered couch looked inviting and he imagined her cuddled up against him while they watched movies. He sat in the oversized chair, pulled his boots off and placed them by the door next to her discarded heels.

Absent from the home were expensive art pieces or electronics. He’d become accustomed to women who wanted more than they could afford. Everything always had to be bigger and better, nothing was ever enough. Now, he sat in the home of a woman he’d known most of his life, surprised by her comfort in the simple things. No, she didn’t

fit in the same category as the other women he knew. Then again, he'd always known that. The sound of keys hitting the counter echoed through the house and he followed the noise to the kitchen. She stood on tiptoes, retrieving plates from the cabinet, the mass of auburn curls released from the up-do now trailing down her back. Longing to run his hands through the silken strands, he needed a distraction and headed to the sink to wash up.

"Beer or sweet tea?"

"Truly a tough call—sweet tea made by a true southern woman or a beer. Seeing as we are having pizza, I think I have to go with a beer." He loosened his tie and unbuttoned the collar of his shirt.

"Man after my own heart, nothing beats pizza and beer." Pulling two bottles out of the fridge, she seemed to reconsider her statement. "Well almost nothing."

She hit the play button on the answering machine and turned to lean against the counter. The light in her eyes faded and tension crept into her when the messages began to play. Anger had seeped into her eyes along with a hint of fear.

"Sydney, where in the hell are you? You're not at the bar or at home, because I checked—" Sydney reached over and hit the delete button. The same voice came through on the next three messages and Levi watched as she erased each one.

"Is that the asshole?" Common sense told him it was, and he wasn't happy about it. The guy sounded a few cards short of a full deck and hardly someone he wanted calling Sydney. She nodded but wouldn't look at him, so he tipped her face up. Staring into the depths of those haunted eyes, his career, the title, Dusty—it all meant nothing. All he wanted was to take away the fear and hurt he saw in her. "Sometimes taking back control means knowing when to take a different path," he thought to himself.

Her lips were slightly parted and her breathing became more rapid. He claimed her sweet mouth with his and took what he wanted from her. A slight moan escaped her as he slid his hands down around her waist. Leaning into her, he trapped her against the counter. With her body pressed against his, realization slapped him in the face. In all the years he'd known her, he'd never doubted his attraction to her, but he didn't truly know her. What was in her heart, or what kept her going day after day? But he wanted to know all of it, because it made Sydney who she was.

He cared about what happened to her and how things affected her. This woman did not compare to any of the others he had known in his lifetime. Deep down he had to acknowledge what he'd known since the night he took her to prom. Sydney Hart was "the one that got away" and he'd be a moron to let it happen again. Releasing her mouth, he looked down at her. "So...still thinking about assholes?"

With languid, sensuous eyes, she shook her head. "Nope."

“Good, then let’s grab a slice and go watch a Bruce marathon.”

## Chapter Five

The intoxicating smell of magnolias surrounded him when he woke. They had fallen asleep somewhere around the middle of the first movie, or was it the second? With her body cradled against his on the small couch, it was difficult to think. He tried to move without waking her, but Sydney stretched lazily and opened sultry, smoky eyes to look at him. Waking with her in his arms was nice. “Good morning, angel.”

“Good morning. Sorry, you’re probably stiff. Not going to help much today at the rodeo.” When she sat up, he quickly pulled her back against him and pressed his lips to hers.

“Thank you,” Levi said, his arms locking around her, so he could enjoy the feel of her as much as possible.

“For what?” She still had that I’m-not-fully-awake-yet look about her and he found it endearing. Even more charming was the fact that she hadn’t rushed to brush her hair, change clothes and make herself presentable the moment she woke.

“Yesterday, it was nice to just be myself. There aren’t many people I can do that around. You did exactly what you said you were going to.”

“Really?” Skepticism lined her voice. She crossed her arms on his chest and propped her chin on them. “I did?”

This was right. He knew it in his gut. The playboy image had always been just that—an image. Waking up with a woman, the intimacy of the little moments, those were things he didn’t usually allow himself. Looking into those eyes, he was confident he’d found what had been missing in his life. She slid from the top of him and headed to the kitchen. After running his hands through his hair, he smoothed his wrinkled dress shirt and followed her to where she was busy putting the coffee on.

He watched her from the doorway. “You know why I started the title chase?”

“Do you want me to give you the reason you want people to believe, or the truth?” She pulled out ingredients from the fridge and got to work making breakfast. Taking a seat on one of the stools at the breakfast bar, he watched as she moved through the small kitchen.

“Tell me both and I’ll let you know if your insight into Levi McKenna is right or wrong.” It was childish, but he taunted her, daring her to take her best shot.

“Okay, if that’s how you want to play it.” Grabbing a whisk from the container near the stove, she started mixing up a batter. “From the beginning you’ve always said you do this

to make your daddy proud. But I know Caleb McKenna, and this is not what he needs or wants from his son. The truth—deep down—is that you have something to prove to yourself.”

He smirked, but it didn’t dissuade her from continuing as she poured the batter into the muffin pan and started the gravy. “Laugh, but if you’re going to go out there, the least you can do is be honest with why you’re doing it. The only thing that keeps you from claiming the title is you.”

“Angel, you are right on both counts. I tried to convince myself and everyone else that I did this for my dad, but it is something I have to do for myself. I need to know I can do it.”

“Then do it.” She checked the biscuits and threw a few eggs in a pan.

“You make it sound so easy. How many national titles do you hold there, little lady? Stashing buckles somewhere?”

“No, I gave them to my buckle bunnies. Look, you’re making this harder than it has to be.”

“You know, Syd, I’ve never given my buckles away. To me, that was like letting a girl wear your letterman’s jacket in high school.”

“Really?” The disbelief in her voice stung.

“Yeah, there’s just something special about a girl wearing those things.”

“Aw, I never knew you were so sentimental.” She handed him a plate. The coffee pot beeped, so he got up and poured two cups as she put her plate together. Sliding onto the stool next to him, she looked at him, a crease in her brow. “Can I ask you to do something for me?”

“Sure.” The quick answer elicited a giggle from her that went straight through him.

“No matter what happens, block out everything else, just have fun. Promise me that much. There’s no point in doing it otherwise. At the end of the day if Devil bucks you, or Justin Trent walks away with the title—if you can look back and think ‘damn that was fun’ then it’s all that matters.”

“Syd, in all the years I’ve been doing this, you are the first person who has ever given me such good advice.” He sopped up the last of the gravy from the plate. “And any woman who can make biscuits and gravy like that has got to be onto something.”

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For thirty minutes, he'd flipped through channels like a madman, torture at its finest, as he'd tried to keep his mind off of her in the shower. To say he'd failed miserably would be an understatement. She walked into the room and Levi switched the TV off, his mouth gaping open. When a woman could render him speechless just by entering the room, wearing nothing special, he knew he was in trouble.

"Ready?"

Suddenly, formulating words proved a difficult task, so he sat there for a minute, and attempted to make his brain fire on all cylinders. "Hotel—cold shower," were the only words he could manage and he felt like a babbling idiot.

A deep blush rose on her cheeks, but the smile indicated her pleasure at his reaction to her. "I'll get you to the hotel for the cold shower, but we'll have to maybe work on that stuttering problem." She disappeared into the kitchen for her keys and purse. They walked out of the house and she pulled the door closed, locking it behind her.

"So our tickets are for all of next week, but I figure you can drop me at the bar and take my truck. Come by the bar later to pick me up and if you do well the beers on..." Her voice trailed off and he practically tripped over her when she stopped cold in front of him. "Son of a bitch!"

Sydney stared at the broken windows on her truck. What an asshole! Tyler knew how much she loved her truck. She moved closer to survey the damage. A folded up piece of paper on the front seat sat amongst the broken glass and she reached for it.

"Syd, you should probably just leave that and call the cops."

"Why? I know who did it." She picked up the paper by the corner and it fell open.

*"Who's your new boyfriend, Syd?"*

Levi peaked over her shoulder at the note. "How did he know you had anyone with you?"

"Tyler's made a sick hobby out of watching me." Flipping open the cell phone, she dialed the police.

"That is fucking creepy, Syd."

"Tell me about it." She waited for the dispatcher to come on the line. "I need to report vandalism."

After giving her address information to the dispatcher, she and Levi sat on the porch to wait.

“Sorry about your truck.”

“It’s just a truck.” Though she sounded calm when she spoke, she felt like she was on the verge of breaking. Her fury over her truck paled in comparison to the fear welling up inside her. Tyler had never damaged anything of hers before and this felt like a direct threat. Levi pulled her closer and she leaned her head against his shoulder, accepting the comfort he offered, but he couldn’t sit with her all day “I’ll call you a cab.”

“You can’t expect me to leave you sitting here by yourself.” Protectiveness laced his voice and it soothed her fears a bit.

“Sitting here with me is hardly going to get you the title. Besides, I have to call Dusty. If he sees you here, the busted windows on my truck will be the least of my concerns.” This was going to send her brother over the edge and she dreaded making the call, but did it anyway. Becca answered as the cop car pulled in front of the house. Giving her hand a squeeze, Levi headed out to meet them.

“Hey Syd, what’s up?”

“Can you ask Dusty to stop by the house?”

“He’s at the bar sorting out an issue with the morning delivery. Why? What’s wrong?” There was a hint of panic in her sister-in-law’s voice.

“Can you come by then? It would probably be better if you were here anyway. You could help me handle my brother. Look, I have to go. I’ll explain when you get here.” She hung up the phone and stepped towards Levi. “Becca’s on her way. With the cops here, I’m sure I’ll be fine until she arrives. Will you come by the bar later?”

Levi pressed his lips to her forehead and caressed her arms. “Count on it. You aren’t going to stay here tonight, are you?”

“No, I’m sure I’ll stay at Dusty’s.” Gain her independence only to have it taken away again. Levi called for a car and then stood by her side while she gave her report to the police.

A car pulled up to the house and she assumed it was Levi’s ride. After they had finished with the police and thanked them for their time, she walked him to the waiting car. Pulling her into his arms, he tried to reassure her. “Syd, nothing is going to happen to you. I promise.”

“I know.” Putting on a brave front was a lot harder when she wanted to fall apart. “It’s

just very intrusive and a bit unnerving.”

Becca parked in the drive and stepped out.

“I’ll see you later.” He kissed her goodbye, and when he pulled back, her gaze met his baby blues and she smiled. Glancing past him, she saw Becca’s eyes wide with shock. Devilish smile in place, he winked and disappeared into the car.

Becca walked over to her, watching as the car pulled away. “You want to tell me what the hell is going on? I pull up to find cops here, you sharing a kiss with the forbidden cowboy, and it’s only nine in the morning.”

“You failed to notice the broken windows on my truck.” Slipping her arm through her sister-in-law’s, she led her to the porch. They took a seat on the swing and Sydney tucked a leg underneath her as she settled at the opposite end.

“Jesus, Sydney, did he come here last night?” Her sister-in-law nervously ran her fingers over her car keys. There was little doubt as to who she meant.

“He left a few messages yesterday. This morning, we walked out to busted windows and a note in my truck. I never talked to him.” If she didn’t steady herself, it would be evident how scared she really was. “You want some tea?”

Becca nodded slowly and she stepped into the house, returning with the tea and a dust buster just as her sister-in-law snapped her cell phone shut. “Well, Dusty’s on his way over. Spill the beans about Levi before he gets here.”

“Come keep me company while I try to clean up some of this mess.” She headed towards the truck and her sister-in-law followed. Using the little vacuum to suck the glass out of the truck seats, she struggled to avoid looking at Becca.

“So are you going to talk or am I going to have to tell Dusty I saw you together?” Becca’s smile tempted Sydney to throw the vacuum at her.

“It’s nothing. I took him riding yesterday. After that we went to the cocktail party and came here for pizza and movies.” The attempts at keeping the girl talk about Levi limited were futile. There was no escaping this conversation.

“Dusty should be here any minute. I could always tell him you tripped and Levi caught you with his lips.”

“If you do, I will be forced to tell him I followed the sisterly advice you so generously provided.”

“Fine, keep the juicy details to yourself. Just tell me one thing—is he a good kisser?” A flush crept across Becca’s face. “Just asking.”

“Weak in the knees give you an idea?” Her sister-in-law’s laughter eased her nerves slightly. They were just cleaning up the last of the glass when Dusty pulled up. He got out of the car and hurried over to her.

“Syd, are you okay? Why didn’t you call me? Did you call the cops? If I see that asshole around I am going to kill him myself.”

“Calm down. I called the cops, then your house. You weren’t home but Becca came over. It’s done. I’m fine.”

“You’re staying with us. I don’t like the idea of you staying here by yourself. What if he decides to break in next?”

Typical of Dusty. He jumped right to a worst-case scenario. Of course, the thoughts were based in reality, but she’d tried to avoid thinking exactly what he was imagining. While Becca tried to calm him down, she went and locked up the house.

When she returned, he tossed her his car keys. “You take my truck. Becca will follow me to the dealer to drop yours off.”

She considered arguing, but it would have been pointless, so she hopped into the driver’s seat of the Ridgeline. Sitting in the sissified version of a truck felt awkward. How her brother had ever let Becca talk him into it escaped her. She started the truck and headed off towards the bar. No doubt it would be a long day.

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The Friday crowd had already begun to make their appearance. Jerry looked up from behind the bar, a worried expression on his face. Great, sympathy was not what she wanted. Forcing a smile, she put on the perky routine. “Hey Jerry, I see the usual Friday riffraff is here.”

“Yep, every last one of them, present and accounted for.” Never one to pry, he wiped down the bar. “So what’s on the playlist tonight?”

“That’s Becca’s department. I only sing if she wants me to. The rodeo will be on ESPN though.” Sitting on a barstool, remote in hand, she surfed until she got to the channel.

“Why am I not surprised?” Jerry shook his head as he poured a few beers for the customers seated beside her. “That’s what I get for working with Texas folk.”



“Oh, you love working for us or you wouldn’t be here.” When Dusty and Becca came in, she slid off the stool.

Jerry winked at her. “Actually, I’m secretly in love with you.”

“Um, you’re cute and all, but you’re old enough to be my dad.”

“Syd, stop giving Jerry a hard time and come back to the office,” Dusty said as they walked through the bar. Punching Jerry in the arm as she passed, she followed her brother, expecting a scolding or tirade.

Her brother closed the door behind them. Instead, he pulled her to him and hugged her tightly. Concern, she’d expected, but he seemed more emotional than she was used to.

“I’m glad you’re okay.”

“I’m fine, Dusty, really.” She stepped out of the hug, but he held onto her hand, giving it a light squeeze and offering her a smile before he let go. Hesitating for a moment, he walked away from her and over to the desk where two wireless microphone headsets sat on its surface. A smile crossed his face. “I thought you girls would have some fun with these.”

“I thought you hated when we sang,” Her sister-in-law’s face lit.

“I don’t hate when you sing. What I have a problem with is the men ogling you both. Actually, I quite enjoy listening to you sing.”

Sydney watched Dusty walk over with the device in hand. He hit a few buttons, and tucked the wireless pack into her jeans pocket. “There you go. When you’re ready, press this button and you are live. Jerry and I set everything up before Becca called. By the way, your truck won’t be ready until tomorrow, so just hold on to my keys.”

“Great, thanks.”

Becca looked at her. “It’s your call tonight, baby girl. Tell me what we’re singing.”

“I think I will be feeling a little Brooks and Dunn at some point tonight.” The groan her sister-in-law let fly made her laugh. “Oh come on, it’s for the rodeo boys. You know the bar will be packed with them tonight.”

## Chapter Six

The bulls were not playing nice. Of course, if they had been, the fun and excitement wouldn’t be there. Levi had a good ride, made it the eight seconds and scored well. Justin managed to get bucked, but escaped the fury of the bull unscathed. The bullfighters had their work cut out for them tonight. He ambled over to where Justin stood leaning against

the rails, watching the last rider of the evening.

Focused on the rider in the arena, Justin didn't look at him when he spoke. "Nice ride."

"I thought Spit Fire would buck me. I could have done better." His mind hadn't entirely been where it should've been.

Justin chuckled. "Are you ever happy? My ass ends up on the ground, you effectively put yourself in the lead and you're complaining?"

The last rider barely made it out of the chute before Devil bucked him. The bull, a notoriously difficult ride, had been his downfall last season. Cringing when they saw the rider's hand still wrapped in the bull rope, they both held their breath as the rider got loose and the bull charged after him.

With a slap on the back, Justin straightened and adjusted his hat. "Well partner, let's get this over with. I could use some beer and good music tonight."

As they walked through the arena, Levi absorbed the atmosphere. The smell of the animals, sweat, blood and adrenaline all still permeated the air while cowboys stood nursing their injuries. Just weren't real rodeos without those things present. Though he'd been pleased with his performance it was too early to guess the outcome. There was no room for cockiness or grandstanding and it would be hard to downplay once Lisa had him on display for the media.

"Looks like your fan club awaits." Justin indicated the media milling around the staging area. "Chin up. It's still early in the game, but if you keep it up, you just might beat me. Then there will be plenty to gloat about to the press."

"I plan on beating you, Justin. But gloating is not my style."

Limping a bit from his fall, Justin laughed. "Are you heading back to the bar tonight? The guys want to go back and catch Sydney singing again."

"Yeah, as soon as this circus leaves town." Oh, he would definitely be there, keeping a close eye on Sydney.

"The media used to be your friend. Change of heart?"

"It's a distraction. One among many."

"So duck out. I would. Never did like publicity crap anyways." Justin shrugged. "The guys have a car out back if you want."

"Sounds like a plan." He turned and walked out with Justin, with little else on his mind beyond getting to the bar as quickly as possible.

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Several minutes later, they were at the bar. They walked in and Sydney spotted him and waved. Justin shot him a look.

“Don’t say it.”

The warning did nothing to derail Justin. “We’ll be over here, Romeo, when you see fit to join us.”

Heading towards the bar, he noticed Dusty walking down the back hall. Sydney hopped up on the bar, wrapped her hands in the front of his shirt, and pulled him close. When she pressed her soft lips against his, he practically moaned.

“Nice job tonight, cowboy,” she said, taking his hat and dropping back to the floor as Justin walked up next to him.

“Well, if that’s all it takes to get a kiss from this little lady, I might have to try harder.”

“It takes more than a few belt buckles, Mr. Trent.” She lined up beers and pushed them across the bar. “First round is on me. We got something special for y’all tonight.”

Then she winked and headed towards Becca. Justin helped him take the drinks back to the table and, as he slid into the booth, he looked towards Levi and shook his head.

“What?”

“You are so done for,” Justin laughed.

“What are you talking about?” Not really wanting Justin to answer because he knew what he meant. Sydney always hit him where it mattered most, something he’d never wanted to admit.

Pulling a chair up to the same table they’d occupied before, he claimed the end of the booth as his own. Soon after, the band began to play. The guys around the table hollered and whistled as the girls began to sing the newly adopted theme song for the NFR, *CowboyTown*. He searched for Sydney, and Justin smacked his head.

“Ouch!”

“Look at the bar, numb nuts.” Justin pointed to where Becca stood on the bar. Still

looking around for Sydney, he couldn't see her through the crowd. Becca caught his eyes and tossed her head towards the opposite end of the room. She sat on the mechanical bull, her body matching every slow movement as it rocked underneath her, a seductive feast for the eyes he could not look away from. The girls finished the song and hopped behind the bar. The crowd hollered for more.

Becca still had the mike on. "Y'all haven't had nearly enough to drink for us to sing another round. How about our rodeo boys in the corner, y'all ready for another round?"

The guys around him answered with a few yelps and Becca's laugh carried over the speakers. "All right Syd, should we give them more?"

"Are you kidding? They don't want to hear me."

"Who thinks Sydney should fly this one solo?"

"What did I do to deserve torture?" The bar filled with whistles, hoots and hollers. Looking out over the crowd, he truly enjoyed watching the people react to her. Justin was right. He was down for the count and enjoying every minute of it. He yelled out, "Lay one on us, Syd!"

Weaving her way through the room with a tray of beers, she stopped at their table, handed the beers out and the band began playing. Leaving the empty tray behind, she made her way through the bar as she sang, keeping the beat with her hand against her hip. He imagined all the possibilities as he watched her move to the music. When the song had finished, he loaded up the tray with the empties on the table and carried it to the bar. Dusty took the tray from him.

"Sorry about that." Dusty handed him a beer. "Hey, congratulations on today. Obviously you got your head back where it belongs. Whatever you're doing, keep it up."

He planned on it, but wouldn't be sharing the details with Dusty. The bar had begun to empty out and Levi kept the stool warm while he waited for closing time.

"Hey, cowboy." Sydney perched herself on the stool next to him. A loud clunk drew his gaze down to where her heels had hit the wood floor. Two perfectly manicured feet rested on the rung of the bar stool. He didn't have a foot fetish, but whenever she revealed any bit of skin, it sent his mind into overdrive. He wondered if his thoughts were visible on his face. The images were difficult to shove from his mind as her brother walked over, wiping down the bar as he did.

Sydney pointed to the TV, where on screen a reporter stood in front of the events center. "Dusty, turn it up."

"There's been a change of direction here at the T and M events pavilion, with Levi McKenna shocking rodeo fans by showing he can still be the man who burst onto the

scene just five short years ago. Speculation says one of these two women is responsible.”

Levi choked on his beer when the first picture came on the screen. It showed him standing with Lisa in the valet parking, his jacket draped around her as she stood leaning into him while they waited for a cab. The next was an image of Sydney and him exchanging a kiss that was more than friendly.

The reporter continued, “It would appear that Levi McKenna is doubling down in Vegas and the odds are in his favor. All the fans can do is hope that Lady Luck continues to smile on him.”

Dusty turned off the TV and the look he sent in Levi’s direction told him to expect trouble. “Sydney, go help Becca with the books.”

“Dusty, there’s no need to overreact.” She unsuccessfully tried to diffuse the situation. “Don’t be such an ass.”

“Go to the back now!” Dusty barked at her and Levi watched as indecision played across her face. If his friend wanted to argue, she did not need to be present. Sliding off the stool, her hand rested on Levi’s thigh as she slid into her shoes. Then she turned and headed down the hallway towards the office.

“Bar’s closed folks, everyone out. You too, Jerry,” Dusty ordered.

Levi stayed put, waiting for the unavoidable fight between him and his oldest friend. Things hadn’t become too serious between him and Sydney, but he wanted more than friendship from her. So he would take whatever Dusty dealt him and try to get the man to understand his intentions. No matter what, giving up the one woman who made him feel the way she did would not be an option.

Once the last patron had left the bar, Dusty locked the door and spun around to face him. “You have your fucking nerve! Some friend you are. You breeze into town, take one look at Sydney, and forget the pact we made.”

“We made a pact when we were kids and we aren’t talking about your ten year old kid sister anymore. She is a consenting adult.” Even knowing it would come down to this, he still respected his friend’s determination to protect his sister. But he had no intention of backing down.

“You will leave her alone. If our friendship means anything to you, walk out that door and forget all about her.” Dusty came towards him and he stood up. He continued through gritted teeth, “I want you to leave.”

“Why don’t you be honest about what’s really bothering you. It’s not that I broke the pact as much as it’s what you think those pictures imply.”

“If you think I’m going to let her be with a womanizer like you, just to end up another notch on your belt—”

Levi threw a right hook before Dusty had finished. He didn’t want to fight with Dusty, but if it would enable him to be with Sydney free of guilt, so be it. Sometimes there were sacrifices worth making.

“You asked for that. I’m not seeing anyone besides her and I have no intentions of hurting her. As long as she’s interested, I am not letting her go either.” He headed for the door and hesitated. “You should know me well enough to determine fact from fiction. We’ve been friends a long time, and I’ve never regretted it. For years I’ve fought my feelings for Sydney because of our friendship. I’m not doing it anymore.”

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Sydney stood with her sister-in-law and watched Levi leave. Dusty rubbed his jaw and she couldn’t help but smile.

“Son of a bitch,” he muttered, as he leaned against the bar. “You can stop lurking, girls.”

They both stepped into the bar. Becca’s arms were crossed over her chest. She knew what it meant and never wanted to be on the receiving end of that anger.

“You are such an ass!” Becca blurted out.

“You don’t understand.” He walked behind the bar, grabbed some ice and held it against his jaw.

Becca took a deep breath. “Explain to me why this is a problem?”

“He’s not right for her.”

Grunting in frustration, Becca threw her hands up in the air. “Don’t you think it’s her choice to make? Ever since Tyler, you practically suffocate her with your protectiveness. You can’t keep her from dating.”

Recognizing the look on Becca’s face, Sydney knew the time had come for her to defend herself. Lord knew her anger surpassed her sister-in-law’s and her brother would not get off easy.

“I’m a grown woman. When are you going to stop babying me? I don’t give a shit about rules or pacts that were made when we were kids. I’m fully capable of deciding who to

date and handling my own mistakes.”

“I know you are, but your taste in men is horrible. You know Levi’s reputation. Hell, it hasn’t changed much since high school and I can’t stand idly by and watch you continue to do this to yourself.”

“So you’re saying Levi is the wrong choice for me?” She shook her head in frustration. “I love you, but you’re an idiot.”

“What do you want from me? I should stand on the sidelines while you ruin your life?”

“It’s my life and I have to have believe there’s a chance I can be as happy as I see you and Becca. Don’t I deserve that?” She walked past him, but he caught her arm.

“Don’t do this.” His eyes pleaded with her, but she yanked her arm from his grasp.

“You’re my brother and Levi isn’t some guy I met in a bar. He’s your friend. A fact you should remember the next time you want to believe what you hear about him. The girl in the picture was his assistant who’d just gotten some bad news and outside of a few kisses and spending some time together, nothing has happened between Levi and me. Your stupid rule and my refusal to take a chance...” She sighed. “I’m tired. Each time it takes a little longer for me to drop that wall and let someone in. You know what my greatest fear is? One time, the wall won’t come down.”

Tears ran down her cheeks and she paused to take a slow, calming breath. “I’ll drop your truck off in the morning.”

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He was in the parking lot, talking on his phone, kicking up gravel and leaving little clouds of dust in his wake when she walked out of the bar.

“Come on cowboy, let’s go,” she called to him.

He hung up the phone. “Dusty means well, Syd. Don’t fight with him because of me.”

“Fine. Stay in the parking lot all night.” Hopping into the truck, she instantly regretted the tone she’d taken. He climbed in the passenger side and she started the engine, speeding out of the parking lot, fishtailing a bit as she turned onto the street. “Sorry, you didn’t deserve that.”

“No apology needed. Where are we headed?” He leaned his head back against the seat.

“Going to my house is probably not the best idea and we wouldn’t be welcome at Dusty’s. That leaves your hotel.”

Levi raised his eyebrows and she laughed. “What did you expect me to say?”

“Not that.”

“I didn’t really expect you to hit my brother either, but hey,” she said and winked. “By the way, you throw a nice right hook.”

“I wish it felt as good as it looked. Are you hungry? We can stop and get something.” His unease seemed to match her own.

“Not right now. If I get hungry though, I am sure the hotel has restaurants.” If they didn’t get to the hotel soon, she was afraid she’d lose her nerve. Memories of the kisses they had shared over the last two days had her licking her lips in anticipation.

The tension in the car could have been cut with a knife, and the weight of his gaze didn’t make her nerves quiet any. She pulled into the hotel drive and spotted the news vans camped on the property.

“Keep going straight.” He instructed. “Pull around to the back parking garage.”

Parking the truck at the back of the hotel, they appeared they were in the clear. He got out and she took a deep steadying breath before following. She had never stood up to her brother or fought for what she wanted. It felt bittersweet. He took her hand as they walked towards the elevators.

“You okay?”

“Yeah,” she replied as they stepped into the waiting elevator. When the doors slid shut, she gazed up into his eyes as he leaned in and kissed her. His body pressed against hers, pinning her against the wall of the elevator and her pulse began to race.

“You smell good,” Levi whispered as he moved his lips along her neck. The elevator stopped and he stood next to her with a guilty expression on his face. Some of the people who entered the elevator recognized Levi and a few asked if she happened to be the girl mentioned on the news. When they reached the casino floor, Levi grabbed her hand and slid his hat forward on her head, leaving her line of sight obstructed. He led her quickly through the casino until a security guard stopped them.

“Mr. McKenna, the press has been camped by the main elevators all evening. We’ll escort you through.” The guard called on the radio and they were quickly flanked by security.



“Appreciate that.” Levi pulled her in close to him as they walked along, pushing their way through the casino. They barely made it into the hotel elevator before the press swarmed in. The guards formed a protective barrier as they waited for the doors to open.

Once they were ensconced in the safety of the elevator, she let out a huge sigh. “Is it always like that?”

“Only when they think they can get something to help ratings or sales. Not having Lisa here to intervene explains their presence.”

Tilting her head up, he forced her to look into his eyes and she forgot what they had been talking about.

## Chapter Seven

Levi fished the key card out of his wallet. Damn, he could never get the thing to work on the first try. The little red lights finally changed to green and he opened the door. Sydney moved past him and ignored everything but the large picture window that overlooked the strip. Housekeeping left the shades open at his request and the sea of lights seemed to lure her over.

“Wow.” Sydney stared out into the night as he stepped up behind her, moved her hair out of the way and resumed kissing along her neck. She moaned softly. “Well, this isn’t bad either.”

He slid her jacket from one shoulder and relished the feel of her silken skin beneath his fingertips.

“Better watch out, I may never leave,” she practically purred as he moved over her skin. He pushed the jacket from the other shoulder and let it fall to the ground between them. Levi turned her around, pressed her up against the window, laced his fingers through hers and pinned her hands over her head.

“Promise?” he asked. Sydney’s breath played over his lips and tempted him to take more.

“Uh-huh.” She moaned.

He slipped his hands under the back of her tank top and slowly glided over her skin. Pressing his mouth to hers, he kissed her until his mind clouded over and she melted into him. In a swift movement, he lifted her off the floor and carried her back to the bedroom, tripping when he hit the edge of the bed. Laughter bubbled from her as she sailed through the air and onto the mattress, but his failed attempt at being suave left his ego a bit bruised. “Glad I could entertain you.”

“Sorry.” She crawled towards him and knelt on the bed. “Condoms?”

Sticking his hand in the back pocket of his jeans he pulled two out and tossed them on the nightstand. Shooting a quick glance at the nightstand and then back to him, she asked, “Only two?”

“I wasn’t sure I’d even have a use for one, but I was hopeful.”

“Good thing.” She reached up and slowly began to undo the buttons on her tank top. Unable to resist the temptation before him, he began to help her. His hand received a stinging slap along with a glare of warning. “Mr. McKenna, you do not need to have a hand in everything.”

The slow pace was both achingly difficult to endure and a feast for the senses as she undid each button. With the tank top gaping open, revealing her smooth stomach, his eyes drifted up to discover the absence of a bra and he silently uttered thanks for having one less article of clothing to remove. The mere glimpse of her breast peeking out from behind the edge of the fabric tested his patience. He reached out, grabbed the waistband of her jeans and pulled her to him. “You can literally drive a man crazy teasing like that.”

Her eyes glinted. “There are rewards for being patient.”

“Yeah, and now I am collecting.” He undid the button on her jeans while he kissed along her smooth shoulders. She gently nudged him back and stepped off the bed. His eyes devoured every movement as she slid her jeans down her long, lean legs. “You’re beautiful.”

He captured her mouth again as her fingers threaded through his hair. Sliding his hands along the curves of her waist, he didn’t stop moving up until the tips of his fingers brushed along the outside of her breasts. With one hand, she reached down to his jeans, popped the button open, and began to ease them over his hips. A low growl escaped his mouth as her tongue danced sensually with his. God, he couldn’t get enough of this woman. He removed his jeans, scooped her up and laid her gently on the bed.

Her heart raced beneath him. Having never noticed the flecks of violet present in her eyes, he now had one more thing to commit to memory. The desire to touch her had been unquenchable for so long. Now, every caress fueled rather than satiated. Like an addict who could never get his fill, he’d never wanted someone so badly. Moving his mouth over her body, he tenderly made his way to her breast. He flicked his tongue across her nipple, driving his need for more. As he ran his hand lightly over her skin and between her legs, her breathing became more rapid. When he slid his fingers inside, her back arched and he watched as pleasure shot through her body.

“Levi...”

“Should I stop?” he asked, making no attempt to slow the rhythmic torture he was unleashing on her.

With eyes heavy with lust, she glared at him, and pleaded, “Oh—God—no!”

“Are you sure, angel? I could just...” he said playfully and began to slowly pull his hand away.

In response, she wrapped her hand around the thick hardness of him and smiled as she applied pressure. “Two can play at that game.”

He gasped. “It’s hardly fair play.”

“You started it.” She nibbled his bottom lip and then moved along the line of his jaw as she caressed him. No, he would not relinquish control. He’d waited too long for this and wanted to focus on the one woman he never thought he’d have in his bed.

Moving out of her reach, he slid down her body until he could rest his mouth against her inner thigh. He kissed her there, occasionally thrusting his tongue across her center. She writhed as he continued his torture, alternating between kisses and slight sucking. Feeling her muscles begin to contract, he knew she was close. He slid his hands under her hips, ensuring she would remain where he wanted her.

“Levi!” she screamed out.

When he moved up alongside Sydney, caressing her as he settled in beside her, a seductive smile slid across the face of his temptress.

“My turn,” she purred as she moved down his body. He let out a gasp as her hand slid over his shaft. A moan of pure pleasure soon followed as her tongue found the tip and her mouth encased him. Taking him in deeply, she slightly grazed her teeth along the length of him with each up and down movement. He moved his hips and met her halfway. With her hand preceding her mouth, she took her time and paid attention to every inch of him. He ached to be inside her, to feel the slick, wet heat between her thighs, and wasn’t sure how much longer he would be able to hold out.

“Syd,” his voice came out strained, but she continued the tantalizing movements of her mouth. He couldn’t take any more. At this rate he would be spent before he made it to the final round. He sat up enough to slide his hands under her arms and drew her up the length of his body.

“Hey, I’m not done, cowboy.” The sexy pout she wore would be his undoing.

“Don’t worry, neither am I.” With need riding him hard, he reached over to the nightstand, grabbed a condom and quickly sheathed himself. He rolled her over and pinned her beneath him. After brushing the hair from her face, he ran his hand gently along her cheek, enjoying the sight of her lying under him. Her eyes had darkened with passion. Levi slid into her slowly. With each controlled thrust, she arched her hips to

meet him, allowed him to go deeper. They fell into a sensual rhythm. Heat began to build in him. Each moan and writhing movement that escaped her threatened to send him over the edge. He closed his mouth over hers, and they greedily took from each other. His thrusts came faster as he pounded harder into her. She wrapped her legs around his waist, ground her hips against him. Each breath was labored as he sank himself into her again and again.

“Levi,” she screamed out, and he watched as orgasm claimed her. He continued his unrelenting pace, rocking inside her as he rode out her pleasure. One last forceful thrust and he let out a deep groan as he shuddered above her. Then he lowered his body to the bed, their limbs tangled together.

“I’ll untangle myself from you when I can move again, angel. I promise.” He reached up and caressed her face.

“I’m in no hurry. I couldn’t move right now if I wanted to.” She lay there, and he indulged in the sight of her nude and glistening with perspiration from their lovemaking.

As he got up from the bed, she rolled over onto her stomach. When he returned, he ran a finger over her moist skin and chuckled. “That, angel, is the sign of a job well done by both.”

He lay beside her and she curled in against him, her head tucked tightly to his chest. If he died tonight, he would go a happy man. He pulled her closer, and drifted off to sleep.

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Sydney woke the next morning with something very hard and masculine pressed against her ass. Ah, the male physique could be such a beautiful thing. Levi tightened his arm around her and pulled her back against him. A low moan reverberated along the base of her neck, and it sent a small spasm of pleasure rolling through her. She turned her body so she could face him.

He had a mischievous grin on his face. “Morning.”

She studied his face, admired the feel of his muscles under her hand as she worked her way down his side, then back up, pushing gently against his shoulder. As he rolled to his back, he pulled her with him and then propped an arm behind his head. “Are you trying to take advantage of me, Miss Hart?”

“It’s hard to take advantage of the willing.” She slid down him a bit, the length of him hard against her stomach. Laying her arms across his chest, she rested her chin on the top

of one hand while gently tracing the outline of his nipple with the other. Letting out a slow breath of air, she watched as his nipple puckered. He shuddered slightly.

“I think you might be the devil in disguise,” he moaned.

She licked his chest.

“Oh God, you are the devil.”

She lifted her head with a sigh. “And what exactly do you think you are, Mr. McKenna?”

“Famished. You are quite a workout.” He winked at her.

“I could use a shower first.” The bed creaked as she slid off and began gathering her clothes from the various spots they had ended up the night before.

“When I can muster enough energy to move, I’ll join you.”

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The desire to grab Levi and have her way with him in the shower had been overwhelming, but she managed to behave herself, confident that this would not be their only time together. He sat with his hand across hers as they ate in the small dining area of the suite.

“What’s your game plan?”

He looked up at her. “Game plan?”

“Yeah, don’t you have a plan of attack when you go out there? Or do you just fly by the seat of your pants when you’re in the ring with the bull?”

“Oh that plan—it’s called trying my damndest to make it to the next round.”

“Good plan.” She lifted the coffee mug and inhaled the rich aroma before taking a sip. She set the mug down and leaned back in the chair. Not usually one for breakfast, she couldn’t think of a better way to spend a morning.

“Is that all you’re going to eat?” He eyed her plate of fruit.

“Yeah.” Contemplating her morning, she smiled. “Hey, why don’t you ride with me to the dealership to pick up my truck? You can take my truck and just meet me at the bar

later.”

“Oh Dusty will love that.” After taking the last bites of his omelet, he reached over and stuck his fork in the last piece of fruit on her plate.

“It’s not like I’m offering his truck to you, though it’s an idea.” Dusty could be such a pain in the ass. One more hurdle she and her brother would have to overcome. Lord knew she had jumped over many in her life. Coffee cup in hand, she got up and went to the window. The glitz and glamour of the Vegas strip was non-existent during the day without the neon and didn’t have the same impact, though it remained a sight unlike any other.

“Are you going home tonight?” He came up, wrapped his arms around her waist and rested his chin on her shoulder.

“I can hardly let Tyler run me out of my own house and I refuse to live in fear because of some asshole.” She wished her confidence held the same steadiness as her words. Truth was she had no idea how far Tyler would go.

“Syd, don’t worry. I hate hotels and I think I’ll need another workout session later.”

“Come on cowboy, let’s get a move on.” When she turned and grabbed her purse, he picked up the bag sitting by the door. “Planning on running if all doesn’t go well tonight?”

“Ha-ha.” He held the door. “Just don’t want to come back if it’s not necessary.”

“Ah, a regular boy scout...” Ducking under his arm, she slipped past him. “Who knew?”

## Chapter Eight

Sydney thought they would never escape the dealership. Levi could have stood there for hours signing autographs and bullshitting with every person who happened to stop in. His patience seemed limitless compared to hers. Price of fame, or so he said. Being a man who knew the value of his fans seemed more likely. If she wanted to continue a relationship with him, she would have to get used to it.

The Mustang was absent from the driveway when she arrived at her brother’s house. Hopefully, it meant he had gone to the bar already. The front door opened and Dusty stepped out onto the porch. *Shit*. For a moment, she considered making a break for it. He didn’t appear to have gotten much sleep, and his jaw held some nice coloring. Running would only postpone the inevitable, so she got out of the truck, sucked in a deep breath and headed to face the music.

“Hey, Syd.” He held the door open for her. “I wanted to talk to you before we went to the bar.”

A fight with Dusty never ranked high on her list of things to do. He looked out for her and she couldn't hold that against him, but she was turning twenty-five soon and she needed to take control of her life. She followed him into the kitchen, poured herself a cup of coffee and perched on the counter.

"Syd, I'm sorry. I really am. You're my sister and I should be happy for you. I just can't trust Levi though. Not when it comes to you."

"We both know my taste in men usually leads me down the wrong path, but living in fear or without love is a worse fate." She knew her brother wouldn't let it go.

"Levi's a good guy. Did you eat?"

And just like that the argument was done. "Yeah, just came by to grab a change of clothes and hoped you wouldn't be here."

For the first time that morning, he smiled at her. "Guess I spoiled that plan. Go change and we'll get your truck."

"Levi has it. He'll be by later to pick me up."

Her brother cringed at the statement.

"Look Dusty, you don't have to like the fact I am going to continue seeing Levi, but you do need to realize I'm not going to let him go."

He accepted her declaration with a nod, and she headed back to the bedroom that had once been hers. She still kept a closet full of clothes there because she had nights where she couldn't stomach being alone in her house. Rifling through her clothes, she pulled out an outfit. Once dressed, she headed to the bathroom for the finishing touches and then headed back to the kitchen.

Dusty shook his head. "Why you wear tank tops in the middle of winter, I'll never know."

"It gets hot in the bar. I wear a jacket when I'm outside." She studied her brother for a moment. "Sometimes I think you forget you're not my father."

"You have a point. Let's go. I have some errands to run before we head in to work."

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By the time they'd pulled into the parking lot of the bar it was late afternoon. Jerry walked out carrying a large bouquet of flowers, and then Becca followed with another. A sick feeling welled up in the pit of Sydney's stomach as they dumped the flowers into the dumpster.

"Where'd those come from?" Dusty glanced at the flowers, then to her and finally at Becca. "You've got to be shittin' me!"

"Hardly. Wait 'til you walk through the doors. I thought the delivery guys were smoking some heavy shit when they kept bringing them in." Jerry shook his head. "Damn gutsy if you ask me."

Panic seized her as she stepped into the familiar surroundings of the bar. Bouquets of roses, sunflowers and daisies sat around the bar. The only card on them advertised the flower shop where Tyler had bought the same bouquets while they were dating. Furious and shaking, she grabbed the nearest bouquet and hurled it at the wall, inches from where Dusty had stepped through the door. "Damn it!"

Her brother backed out of the bar and a few seconds later Becca appeared. "Come on, Syd, why don't we go back to the office? The guys will clean this up."

Not wanting to risk hurling another vase, she took her sister-in-law's suggestion and once in the confines of the office, sank into the couch. Still furious, she wanted to scream, or hit something, but being a somewhat rational person knew it would do nothing to make her feel better. Throwing the bouquet only managed to make her feel guilty for letting her emotions get the best of her. Becca came into the room with two beers, shot glasses and a bottle of Gran Patron. Watching as Becca poured the shots, she scooted forward on the couch and studied the label on the tequila bottle. "Expensive medicine."

Her sister-in-law laughed. "True, but well deserved, so shut up and take the shot."

While she was a straight shooter, her sister-in-law had to go with the whole lick, salt and lime routine, followed by the face pucker. Leave it to Becca to make her feel better.

"So, how is he?"

"What?" There were times when she couldn't keep up with where her sister-in-law's mind went. This happened to be one of those times.

Becca handed her another shot and tried again. "How's Levi in bed?"

The question caught Sydney off-guard and she snorted, the tequila burning her nose in the process. Smooth going down, yet not so smooth when inhaled. "Fuck, Becca, your timing sucks."



“Sorry, but you have to admit it served as a great distraction tactic.” She handed her a beer and sank into the couch beside her. “So?”

“He rides bulls for a living, how do you think he is?” Not wanting to elaborate, she left it at that, because just thinking about it turned her insides to mush.

“Hmm, the visual is interesting.” Becca winked. Boy, the girl had a dirty mind, all the more reason she loved her so much. Observing the video screen that displayed the front of the bar, she saw patrons had begun to straggle in.

“Guess we should head out.” She downed the last of her beer and stood.

With a shrug her sister-in-law slid deeper into the couch. “I’d rather hang back here all night and get drunk.”

Pulling Becca to her feet, she gave her a hug and they headed out to the floor. Dusty had the rodeo on the big screen and smiled half-heartedly when he saw her. “Your boy’s coming up next. Pull up a stool.”

“The place is a little busy. I should get to work.”

The glare he sent her plainly said sit down and shut up, so she did. Her eyes did not leave the screen as Levi came out of the chute. Storm obviously had no intention of playing nice and she held her breath for those eight seconds, hoping Levi would hang on.

Becca leaned into her. “I can see where the bull riding skill would come in handy.”

She ignored the taunt and her brother handed her a beer. “Outside of whatever torture session Becca and the band have planned for you tonight, you’re taking the night off.”

When she opened her mouth to protest, he shook his head. Unable to endure a night of simply sitting around the bar, she turned to Becca. “Well, let’s begin the torture session then.”

“I beg your pardon,” her sister-in-law gasped. “Torture indeed.”

“Hey, I only called it as your husband did.”

“Wire yourself up then darlin’, the crowd awaits.”

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Levi managed to hold his own and stay in the game. A few more nights like this and the buckle just might be his. Thanks to Justin's evasion tactics, he ducked out on another media circus, but they would catch up to him sooner or later. For now, he would steal all the time he could. Sitting in Sydney's truck in the bar's parking lot, he hoped Dusty had calmed down. He held no desire to punch his friend again, but would if the need arose. He stepped into the bar and his eyes took a moment to adjust. Becca saw him and headed over.

"I have no issue with you and Syd as long as she doesn't get hurt." The woman was petite, but fierce as she stared him down. Knowing the only way he would convince any of them would be through actions, he bit his tongue. Becca eased off a bit. "She's at the bar."

Surprised to see her sitting at the bar, he leaned in and kissed her cheek before taking the vacant seat next to her. "Evening, angel."

She glanced at him and for a brief moment his heart constricted at the fear in them. Sydney blinked and smiled, the fear disappearing as she leaned into him. "You looked a little tired out there tonight, cowboy."

"Yeah, I might need to limit my extracurricular activities." He winked. Jerry handed him a beer and Becca came over and placed a hand on Levi's back.

"I hate to break up the love fest, but the natives are getting restless. Ready for more torture, Sydney?"

"Depends on what we're singing."

"Bring the cowboy," Becca said as she headed towards the stage.

"Come on, you heard her and it's best not to tick her off." Sydney took his hand and they joined Becca on the stage. "Why am I dragging Levi up here?"

"Because, I'm making him come along for the ride."

Raising his eyebrows in disbelief he muttered, "Um, I don't sing."

"I know, but rumor has it you're quite a skilled guitar player."

Two stools were moved to the center of the stage. While Sydney propped herself on one, he settled onto the other and accepted the guitar one of the band members offered him.

Becca whispered into his ear. "*Cowboy Take me Away*—it's her favorite."

Thankfully, he knew the song quite well and Sydney began to sing while he played. When they finished, flashes erupted at the back of the bar and he spotted the

photographers. Sydney grabbed his hand and she pulled him towards the office.

Sitting on the edge of the desk, he watched as Sydney paced around the office. “Sorry, Syd. I didn’t know they followed me here.”

“Why are you apologizing to me?”

Dusty came back into the office and made no attempt to acknowledge Levi’s presence. “Syd, give me your keys. I’ll pull the truck around back. You can leave that way.”

Her purse sat beside Levi on the desk and she walked over and pulled the keys out. She tossed them to her brother, then turned and leaned into Levi, resting her head against his chest. “How can you stand them invading your life like that?”

“I can’t. It’s not easy to see all your flaws broadcast for the world to see, but it comes with the territory.” Not everyone could adjust to having the media ever present in their lives and he knew this would be one obstacle they would have to overcome.

Jerry came in and handed him the keys. “Vultures are still out front.”

So avoidance would be how Dusty handled this. Great. He took the keys from Jerry and escorted Sydney out through the back door.

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The photographers were there because of Levi. She knew that, but being with Levi McKenna meant she would either have to get accustomed to being the subject of media interest or give him up. Neither option appealed to her.

Levi unlocked her front door and walked in behind her, keeping a protective hand against the small of her back. Few things in life held comfort anymore, but she would take comfort in this.

“Can I make a request?” Before she could answer, he turned her in his arms and captured her mouth with his. Heat spread through her body instantly with the contact. Breathing became more difficult and her heart felt as if it would burst through her chest.

“Sure,” she managed.

“I want to sit in the swing tonight.”

“Entirely doable.” She walked into the kitchen and grabbed two glasses of tea. An

evening of sitting in the swing with him sounded like a pleasurable way to pass the time. While he grabbed a quilt off the back of the couch, she turned the radio on and slid the front window open. When they were settled on the swing, Levi rested his head in her lap. She let her hands play with his curls as he gazed up at her.

“You remember prom?”

“I thought we discussed this already. What’s not to remember?”

“You know why I agreed to take you?” There was a seriousness in his eyes.

“Yeah, because you are a good friend who didn’t want to see your best friend’s little sister cry.”

“Nope, I thought I should take advantage of the situation because it would be the only time I would ever get Dusty’s approval to take you out.”

“What?”

“I was no different than the rest of the guys when we were growing up. You’re beautiful, smart and you have a way of drawing people to you. But I’d stupidly made a promise to Dusty.” He sighed. “That night at prom pretty much ruined me. I dated to take my mind off you and none of the girls could even come close to the one I really wanted.”

She took in a deep breath and stared out over the front lawn. Here she sat with a man who truly wanted her. Hearing his declaration, one that mimicked her own thoughts, both delighted and scared her. When he reached up, he brushed a stray tear that she hadn’t known was there.

“Nope, haven’t found another out there like you.”

Fear hit her hard. This was all too good to be true. She should end it. Stop it all before she was in over her head and wound up hurt yet again. But it was too late for all of that, because she’d given her heart away long before now.

## Chapter Nine

The next night Sydney had to close the bar on her own. Becca hadn’t been feeling well and Dusty had bowed out and taken her home. The bar had been eerily quiet since they had left. Though it had lessened, tension remained between her and her brother. Although she hoped it wouldn’t last much longer, she knew stubbornness ran rampant in her family. She finished balancing the books and headed to the storage room to review their inventory. The front door buzzed and she looked to the security cameras. The dark Stetson made her heart leap, and she headed to unlock the door.

“Hey, babe.” Tyler pushed past her. She stared at him in disbelief and took a minute to

gather her thoughts.

“Tyler, you need to leave.”

The smell of alcohol seeped through every pore as he grabbed her arm and pulled her close to him, holding her body against his. “I can be a cowboy for you, babe.”

“Let go of me, Tyler.” Memories of her mom came rushing to the forefront of her mind and she fought to repress the fear and try to keep her wits about her. She shoved her knee up to his groin, forcing him to release his hold on her as he dropped to the ground. When she turned to run for the office, he swiped his arm out and tripped her. The wood floor came up fast and her head smacked it with a loud thud. Pain surged through her. He crawled over to her and she desperately tried to move out of his reach.

“You are an ungrateful bitch.” The back of his hand connected with her cheek. She regained her footing and made it to the office, but he was quick, moving right behind her before she could get the door open. Her head throbbed and her heart threatened to burst from her chest. Concentration eluded her. The rage in Tyler’s eyes reminded her of her stepfather when he lost control.

Latching on to a fistful of hair, he slammed her head against the heavy wooden door of the office. She slid down to the floor, struggling to maintain consciousness. He straddled her, and she prayed it would end.

“You were always the best piece of ass I ever had. It’s a shame the only way I can touch you now is by force.”

There was no need to say anything. It wouldn’t have made a difference. He tore at her clothes. Desperation took hold and she tried to focus on something other than the hell she found herself in. How stupid could she be? Her world began to swim into darkness. At least she wouldn’t be awake for it.

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Tonight, Levi had made it through by the skin of his teeth. His mind had been occupied with things that had nothing to do with the rodeo. More like one thing—his future after the rodeo. Either way, his career would end this year. Unsure of what his future held, he knew whatever decision he made, it would be meaningless without Sydney. He pulled up to the bar and saw a single car he didn’t recognize in the lot. The otherwise empty lot left him with a sudden feeling of unease.

The front door opened easily. Not a good sign. “Syd?”

No answer came, but he heard something back towards the office. Rage filled him as he spotted her lying on the floor, Tyler on top of her, tearing at her clothes. He moved quickly and pulled Tyler off. Her eyes were closed, but he didn't have the time to check on her, because Tyler rushed him. Moving purely on instinct, he threw a left hook, but the other man ducked and tackled him. He hit the floor with Tyler on top of him.

"Not so tough after all, are you, cowboy?"

Putting all he had into the movement, he sent another punch to the side of Tyler's head. It connected and knocked the bastard out cold. Shoving the man off, Levi pulled his phone out, headed over to Sydney and called the police. Then he sank to floor beside her and made the call to Dusty. Blood trickled from her head and her eyes remained closed. The rise and fall of her chest was his only indication she was still with him and he took it as a good sign. With the wail of sirens in the distance, he leaned in close, careful not to move her, and held her hand. "Hang in there, angel."

The police came through the door about the time Tyler began to come around. After explaining what he'd seen to the police, Levi stepped back enough to let the EMTs work, but refused to let her leave his sight. The media arrived, which only made matters worse. He didn't want her to see this on the news.

Dusty and Becca had to argue with the police to be let through. Her brother immediately rushed to Sydney's side. None of them wanted to part with her, but only one could ride in the ambulance with her. Levi needed to deal with the media and promised Dusty he would take Becca to the hospital. As the ambulance disappeared, he gave Becca a weak smile and then walked to the edge of the police tape.

Cameras flashed, microphones were shoved as the reporters threw questions at him. A police officer came up and advised him he did not need to speak with the press. What were his options, allow them to follow him to the hospital? He cleared his throat. "If you would give me just a minute, I'd appreciate it."

When Becca stepped up next to him and took his hand, he gave hers a slight squeeze. He greatly needed the support at the moment. The concern in her eyes surely mimicked his. With a deep breath, he looked to the reporters.

"I'm not going to answer questions. I ask that you give the Hart family and myself the space we need at this time. If Miss Hart would like for me to make a statement at a later time I will. Thank you."

A police escort led them to the hospital. When they stepped into the emergency room, they found Dusty waiting to hear from the doctor. Becca went and sat beside him. Knowing he and Dusty were still on uncertain ground, he sat across from his friend.

"After the flowers and the truck, it was stupid of me to let her close the bar tonight." The

guilt in him was evident as he hung his head.

Levi watched the torment in him. No words he could offer would take away the remorse. Especially with him being a participant in the blame game as well. He'd been late picking her up.

Dusty looked up at him. "Good thing you got there when you did."

"Unfortunately, I wasn't there soon enough."

They all looked up when the doctor headed in their direction. "Mr. and Mrs. Hart, Mr. McKenna?"

"Yeah," The three of them stood and the worry on Dusty's face deepened, if it were at all possible, and Becca looked as though she might pass out. They took a collective deep breath.

"Sydney will be okay. There was no sexual assault. She has a slight concussion, bruising and she was in quite a bit of pain when she woke up. We gave her something, so she may be out of it for awhile. We'll keep her here tonight for observation. Given Mr. McKenna's tendency to draw attention, we're moving her to a private room. Once she is settled, I will let you see her."

"Thank you." Dusty said, and they all sank back into the chairs. Silence hung between them for a long while before Dusty finally looked at him. "I worry about her being with you."

"I know," he said. It wasn't an apology, more of a statement of fact. He didn't expect to hear words of remorse, as long as Dusty could live with him and Sydney being together. The doctor came to escort them to Sydney's room and the three of them followed in silence behind him. A slight chill ran over Levi as they walked the stark white corridors that smelled of disinfectant.

When they entered the room, Levi was thankful to see a nice reclining chair and a couch. They could all be comfortable if they had any desire for sleep, though he doubted sleep appealed to any of them. He stepped up alongside the bed. Bruising had already begun to form on the side of Sydney's face. Even underneath it all, she was still beautiful.

"Dusty, I'm sorry." Now that he'd gotten a better look at her, he was kicking himself even more for not being on time.

"Hey, at least you got there when you did." The tone in his friend's voice spoke more than his words. Levi wanted to reach out to Sydney, but chose to exercise restraint in front of her brother. He allowed Dusty the time he needed with his sister, and went to sit beside Becca on the couch.

A forced smile crossed Becca's face. "Don't worry, she's a tough cookie."

"It doesn't make it any easier to see her lying there though."

The nurse came in to check on Sydney before the shift change and Dusty joined them to give her room.

"Are you going to stay with her tonight?"

"Not going back until she is comfortable somewhere I can have people wait on her hand and foot." The thought of not going back and finishing the rodeo didn't bother him as much as seeing the woman he loved lying in the hospital.

"I'm still not happy about the two of you, but I guess she could have done worse." Dusty sighed. "You know she won't let you miss the rodeo."

"Yeah, but I can be as stubborn as your sister if I need to be."

"True. Well, call me if something comes up. Otherwise, tell Syd I'll be by in the morning." Dusty stepped over to the bed and leaned in to kiss his sister's cheek. Before he escorted his wife from the room, he looked at Levi for a moment and unspoken words were shared between them.

Once the room had emptied out, he moved the chair closer to the bed. He took Sydney's hand and rested his head on the bed. Whispering to her, he talked about the rodeo and longed for her to look at him. The only thing in his life worth anything was in the bed in front of him. Titles and money couldn't change that. He drifted off to sleep with her hand in his.

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Sydney woke up to the faint sounds of breathing when the nurse came in to check on her. The nurse whispered quietly to her. "Since you're awake, I'm going to remove the monitoring equipment. We'll check on you every hour until the doctor comes to release you."

"Thanks," she said quietly. The nurse left and her eyes drifted to the man at her bedside. Levi had fallen asleep with his head on the bed. God, he would pay for it when he woke up. He smiled, his eyes still closed, when she ran her hand through his hair.

"Hi, angel."



“You stayed here all night?” Her body felt stiff when she tried to move and a slight pain caused her to wince. Slowly, she eased back to the bed. “You’ll be hurting later.”

“Probably,” he said as he sat up more. “Won’t make much difference.”

The implication in his words hurt her. “I will not be the reason you stop. You’ve worked too hard to get here.” She let her hand rest across her stomach. Levi slid onto the bed beside her, gently moving her so he could slip his arm around her and she could rest her head against his chest.

“Syd, there are some things in life worth losing. You’re not one of them. It’s just a rodeo.”

Tension crept into her body. He must have felt it too, because his hand slowly started to caress the bare skin of her arms. “Levi, I want you to go.”

“You aren’t going to get rid of me that easily.” Propping himself up on an elbow, careful not to hurt her as he moved, he sat up in the bed enough to look down at her. “You don’t really want me to go.”

“No, but I’m asking you to.”

“Why?” He turned her face and forced her to look at him.

“Please. I want this to work and I’m afraid that if you don’t go out there and finish it will eat at you. I don’t want to be the cause of regret in your life.” Tears threatened to break free of their prison and she knew it wouldn’t take much more to cause their release.

“Go home with me, Syd.”

“What?”

“Go back to Texas with me. Stay with me.” Levi waited, but when she didn’t answer he added, “I’m not leaving this bed until you say something.”

“Can I have some time to think about it?”

“Of course.” Bending down he kissed her forehead, then moved off the bed. “I really do love you more than the rodeo, Syd. In my heart I always have.”

She didn’t say anything as she watched him walk out the door. Wiping the tears from her face, she heard Dusty’s voice, followed by some murmuring.

“Syd—”

“I don’t want to talk about it, Dusty. Just get me out of here.” With help, she climbed out

of the bed and reached for the clothes Dusty had brought her. Fear kept her from blurting out an answer to Levi's proposition. The long awaited ride off into the sunset seemed within her grasp, but following the spontaneity of her heart never worked out in the past. Instead, it always ended with her broken and alone.

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Three days without seeing her or being able to touch her was beginning to wear on him. The few trips he'd made to the bar had helped to put his friendship with Dusty on the mend, but Syd was absent from the scene. The decision to move with him and make that level of commitment would be a huge leap of faith and wouldn't come easily, but the waiting was eating at him. His focus was shot. Sydney didn't realize it, but she could be the source of regret in more ways than one. Justin approached him, a bit apprehensively.

"You aren't going to turn into a girl and start crying on me now, are ya?"

"Real funny guy." He sighed. "Well, let's get this massacre over with."

"Oh, where's the positive thinking? You could still win this."

Yeah, he could, but what would be the point if he couldn't enjoy the win with Sydney. He knew he had acted irrationally at the hospital. She was right. He would have regretted not seeing this through, but it didn't seem to hold the same excitement without her there to share in the experience.

As they made their way through the arena towards the bull pen, Justin looked at him.

"Who'd you draw?"

"Hannibal."

The man beside him let out a low whistle. "That's a bitch."

"Yeah." It figured his last ride would bring him face-to-face with the one bull notorious for being worse than Devil. "You?"

"Devil." Justin slapped his back hard. "I'm sure you'll do fine. If you need some reassurance, just glance towards the Gold Buckle seats."

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Sydney's nerves were in overdrive. Both her brother and sister-in-law had listened to her spill her heart out and without saying a word, they'd allowed her to rationalize her fears and accept that love was always a gamble. This time she truly felt like the odds were in her favor. Now it was a matter of waiting. Justin had been very helpful when she'd talked to him earlier in the afternoon and he'd assured her he planned on giving Levi a run for his money. God, she hoped so. What good would it do if Levi didn't earn it?

Her plan had been set into motion, now her cowboy just had to come through to make the pieces all fall into place.

"How are you holding up?" Her brother sat beside her, Becca on his other side.

"I'm okay," she said loud enough for him to hear.

"Good, because your boyfriend's in the bucking chute."

She snapped her head up. Sure enough, Levi was in the chute. He looked up and their gazes locked. Relief seemed to wash over his face. The announcer named the bull he'd drawn, her pulse began to race and fear racked her body. Hannibal was one of the toughest rides in NFR history. Injuries sustained by him were legendary.

This could end horribly. Holding her breath, she latched onto Dusty's hand when the bull exploded out of the chute. Levi's position looked good, but the bull's violent bucking made its dissatisfaction at having a rider on his back evident. Eight seconds. He just had to hold on for eight measly seconds. Dusty leaned into her.

"You aren't going to watch?"

She hadn't even realized her eyes were closed. "Um, I'm watching."

Forcing her eyes to remain opened, she counted. Five more seconds to go—four—three—two—one. The bull rope slipped from Levi's hand as he let it go and managed to quickly get away from the bull. Relief swelled through her. Justin was up, the last rider of the evening. Then they would know if Levi had scored well enough to take the win.

Devil burst out of the chute with Justin on board. He couldn't cover the bull and when Devil bucked, he was hung up in the bull rope. He broke free, but the bull managed to hook him as he dismounted. Moving to the edge of her seat, she felt every muscle in her body tense, but she relaxed when Justin scurried out of the arena.

It was done. She made her way down to the back section of the arena. Justin hobbled his way over, holding an ice pack to his side, smiling when he saw her concern. "Just a scratch, darlin'. Don't worry."

“It looked pretty bad. May I?” Reaching for the edge of his shirt, she lifted it up enough to see the swelling and the blood.

“It looks worse than it is. He just caught the edge of my vest. Like I said, just a scratch. Come on. You might have competition for his attention. Everyone wants to talk to the new champ.” He winked at her and then led her back to where the riders were milling around. She spotted Levi talking with a reporter.

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“No, this is my last rodeo. I’m retiring and going home to my ranch,” Levi said, glancing up to see Sydney walking towards him with Justin at her side. Politely excusing himself from the reporters, he walked over to her, fighting the need to wrap his arms around her. “Hi, angel.”

“That’s all you have to say to the girl you’re taking home with you? What would your father say?”

“He’d tell me to get my shit together and kiss her.”

“So what’s stopping you?” The invitation and smile were all he needed to spur him into motion. He leaned in and pressed his lips to hers. Pulling her close, he lifted her off the ground and she wrapped her legs around him. Cameras flashed all around them. Sydney smiled and he threaded his hands through her hair, keeping her face close to his.

“You know I’m gonna want more than just a live-in girlfriend.”

“I refuse to be your maid. Everything else is open for discussion.”

“I’m going to hold you to that.” He smiled. Who knew the ride would end up being so sweet.

#### About the Author

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*Tough. Taciturn. And a fool for letting her go...*

## Strong, Silent Type

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### *A Wild Ride story.*

Wyoming rancher Quinn McKay thought he'd only have to bide time until his levelheaded wife came to her senses and called a halt to this "trial separation". He never believed the marital rough patch would drag on for a coon's age.

Libby McKay knew when she married the gruff, laid-back cowboy that he wasn't prone to blathering about his feelings. But three months have passed and her stubborn-as-a-mule husband is still living by himself in the horse trailer. It seems he'd rather hold onto his pride than hold onto her.

Quinn realizes Libby is determined to move on if he doesn't loosen his tongue and he'll lose the only woman he's ever loved. In a last-ditch effort to keep her in his life, he offers her one weekend of uninterrupted sexual decadence.

Reigniting the passion is easy. The hard part comes after the sheets have cooled and they find out if what remains is strong enough to survive past mistakes.

He held the reins to her heart once—and this time he won't let go.

*Enjoy the following excerpt for Strong, Silent Type:*

"Get your goddamn hands off my wife."

Quinn McKay was in a rage. A red rage. An aneurysm-inducing rage. A going-postal rage.

And the worst part? His wife, his helpmate, his lover, his partner, his...everything—goddammit, Libby *was* his everything—didn't give two shits about his foul mood.

Not. Two. Hot. Shits.

Which enraged him further.

"Walk it off, Quinn," Libby McKay tossed over her shoulder, letting the young buck lead her deeper into the crowd on the dance floor. The last thing Quinn saw was the sassy head shake of her sassy new hairdo.

“I’m gonna fuckin’ kill him. See how goddamn happy his hands are after I break ’em off at the wrists.”

“Jesus, Q, will you sit the hell down? People are starin’ at you.”

“Let ’em look.”

His brother Ben hissed, “Screw that. Get your dumb ass back to the table or I’m leavin’ and you can hoof it home.”

“Be worth it to punch that sonuvabitch in the face.”

“I ain’t bailin’ you outta jail neither.”

Quinn scowled, reluctantly following Ben back to the booth. He drained his cup of beer and poured another from the pitcher. Mostly foam. Didn’t it just figure even the beer wasn’t cooperating with him tonight?

“You gotta stop doin’ this, man.”

“Doin’ what? Drinkin’?”

“No.”

“Oh, you mean quit comin’ to Ziggy’s to watch my wife dance with every good-for-nuthin’ loser in this place?”

“Bingo.”

“Fuck that.” Quinn slammed his empty cup down. “It’s a free country. I live in this goddamned county. I got just as much right to be here as she does.”

Ben jerked the pitcher away before Quinn dispensed a refill. “It’s been three months since you and Libby separated, Q. Face it. Maybe it’s time you moved on. Looks like she has.”

“Wrong. If Libby is so all fired up to ‘move on’ then why the hell hasn’t she hired a lawyer and filed for divorce?”

“Probably waitin’ ’til school gets out and she has more time.”

His answer resembled a growl.

“I don’t know why you’re so surprised.” Ben poured himself a cup of foam. “You guys’ve been headed down this road for a while.”

“The hell we have.”

“You tellin’ me you were just rollin’ along, mindin’ your own business and wham! Her demand of ‘I want a trial separation’ came from left field?”

Quinn hated—*hated*—talking about this kind of touchy feely crap with anyone. “All married couples hit rough patches. I thought it’d blow over. It always has before.”

“*Before?*” Ben choked on his beer. “This ain’t the first time?”

“It’s the first time she’s kicked me outta my own damn house.” Three fucking months he’d been living in tin, eating out of tin and sleeping alone in absolute misery.

“So you been goin’ to counseling and shit?”

“Nope.”

“Why not? Did she ask you to?”

Sort of. Quinn knew he and Ben weren’t talking about the same type of professional help Libby had suggested. He hedged. “Yeah.”

“What’d ya say?”

“No.”

“Jesus. You are one stubborn sonuvabitch. I can see why Libby is tired of it and booted your ass.”

Stubborn sonuvabitch. A familiar phrase. His normally sweet-tongued wife had hurled those words at him as she’d hurled a suitcase full of his dirty clothes on the front porch. “Fuckin’ great. I’m glad you’re takin’ her side, bro.”

“Quinn, man, no offense, but you suck as a husband.”

Embarrassment flared. Libby’d said that much too. “How the hell do you know? You’ve been married what, *zero* times?”

“Don’t mean I can’t see when something ain’t workin’,” Ben countered. “Obviously your marriage ain’t doin’ so hot. I’d be more’n happy to offer you red-hot tips to fire it back up.”

“Tips from the guy whose last relationship barely passed the one month mark? This oughta be interestin’.”

“No skin off my nose if you’re too proud to accept help. But even as a single guy, I’m aware bein’ a good husband is more than bein’ a good provider.”

Yep. Quinn’s spouse had also tossed that phrase at him. But the irony was that street ran both ways. Libby ought to realize there was more to being a good wife than having supper on the table, maintaining a spotless house, and cramming his dresser drawers with clean clothes. Not that he’d say that to her, knowing how much it’d hurt her feelings. Why hadn’t Libby realized how deeply it’d cut him when she’d carelessly flung those same words in his face? He sighed. “Go ahead, Ben, wow me with your golden marriage tips.”

“First of all, you have to stop takin’ Libby for granted.”

“I’ve never taken her for granted. Never.”

“Fine then. You gotta show her how much she matters to you. You gotta...woo her.”

“Woo her?” Baffled, Quinn stared at his brother. “How the hell am I supposed to do that?”

“Act like you did when you were dating. Bring her flowers, wine and dine her with candlelit dinners, take her to the movies. Spend time just makin’ out and tryin’ to cop a feel in the truck.”

Quinn leaned forward. “I’m reminding you I’ve been with Libby for fourteen years. We started dating when we were sixteen. I married her the month after she graduated from college. We’ve been man and wife for nine years. So I’m a little rusty on my *wooin’* skills.”

“Then it’s past time to brush up on ’em, Q. Because if you don’t use ’em on her, you’re gonna need to use ’em on someone else.”

Shame burned and he dropped his gaze to the table. “Then I’m doomed. I never done any of that romantic crap with her.” Or any other woman. Libby was the first girl he’d dated. The first and only woman he’d had sex with. The only woman he’d ever wanted. The only woman he’d ever loved.

*And I’m about to lose her.*

“Never?” Ben prompted.

Quinn shook his head. “Libby’s always been practical. That’s one of the reasons I fell for her. She didn’t need any of the superficial junk other girls did. She didn’t expect me to be a rodeo star or go to trade school. She knew I’d never leave here because ranchin’ is in my blood. She was fine with that. She wanted that life...or so I thought.”



Things—no, *Libby* had changed in the last year. It had started out with small modifications. New furniture, repainting a room or two, hanging new draperies, trying out new recipes from faraway places. Then she'd started dropping hints about them doing "couple" activities.

When Libby had returned to her job as the school librarian after summer hiatus, she went on a diet and lost twenty-five pounds. He'd always loved her curvy body, but she seemed happier thinner. She'd tossed out her old duds and bought new ones. Gone were the long denim skirts, loose shirts, bulky sweaters, baggy sweats and oversized T-shirts she'd worn for years. Ditto for neutral colors.

No, Libby—his Libby—began wearing tight, low-cut jeans. Clingy blouses that accentuated her ample chest. Short skirts in vivid colors. Just as he was wrapping his head around those changes, she'd trotted off to Denver for a professional makeover. She'd chopped her long, honey-brown hair into a short, trendy cut and added blondish-red highlights. She'd never worn much makeup, so it'd shocked Quinn to see her freckles covered, her lips glossy red and black eyeliner emphasizing her blue eyes.

At that point he'd begun to worry, wondering if she'd met a man she was trying to impress.

When Libby asked him how he liked the "new" her, Quinn replied honestly: He'd liked the old her just fine.

A day later he was living in the horse trailer.

"Dammit. You aren't even listenin' to me, are you?" Ben demanded.

Quinn ignored the taunt and focused on Libby sashaying off the dance floor. The smile she allotted her dance partner didn't reach her eyes like it did whenever she danced with him. Her shoulders were bunched up to her ears. Her normally graceful body movements were forced. Unnatural. She looked as if she were merely going through the motions.

Just like him.

The truth hit Quinn as viciously as a horse hoof to the head. He'd gone about dealing with this misstep in their marriage the wrong way, expecting Libby to come to him. *He* had to fix it, to man up, take the bull by the horns, grab the tiger by the tail, climb on the horse that threw him, reclaim what was rightfully his. Clichéd phrases, but truisms to lead him in the right direction—the only direction—straight back to her.

"Quinn? You okay?"

"Nah. I ain't been right since she kicked me out, Ben. Dammit. I miss her something fierce."

Ben froze. “Ah shit, Q, you ain’t gonna start with that, *I love you man*, kinda drunk talk, are you?”

“Hell no.” Quinn shoved the pitcher aside and propped his elbows on the table. “But I have been listenin’ to you yammer on, and you’re exactly right. I’ve gotta do something. And you’re gonna help me.”

“Help you do what?”

“Help me come up with a plan to win my wife back.”

*He held the reins to her heart once—and this time he won’t let go.*

The Real Deal

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*A Wild Ride story.*

Willa Tate left Millbrook, Texas, years ago—along with her future, her fiancé and her heart. Now, as one of the headlining acts at a hot burlesque club, she looks into the crowd, sees a familiar face staring up at her—and her past comes crashing back.

Chase Kiel has some hard questions for the former love of his life. He spent forever looking for her, and now he wants answers—even if he has to throw her over his shoulder and drag her back to Millbrook to get them.

He’d find it a hell of a lot easier if the chemistry weren’t still there. If they didn’t still fit together like keg of dynamite and fuse. If he didn’t want not only his answers...but her heart.

Chase is still certain he and Willa belong together—and convincing Willa of it will be his pleasure.

*Enjoy the following excerpt for The Real Deal:*

The music began roaring its way through the speakers filling the club. Nick recognized the song. It was popular and played on nearly every radio station numerous times a day. He couldn’t remember most of the words but he knew the overall theme, someone had kissed a girl and she had seemed to like it, or so he thought. He couldn’t remember. All

he could think about was the pressure his zipper was putting on his increasing erection. Never in his life was he so grateful for a table cloth.

Hayden on the other hand didn't seem to care if his arousal was evident to the rest of the patrons or not. There he sat an elbow's length away laid back in the opposite chair, beer bottle lifted halfway to his mouth, eyes roving over the eye candy moving before the crowd. Nick shook his head at his captivated brother and returned his undivided attention to the stage and to the ones who occupied it.

After the first few beats introduced the song a throaty, ultra feminine voice rang out the lyrics that propelled the dancers along. Each movement from the two was synchronized. What one did, the other mimicked.

They moved with the beat of the music, at first only watching each other through the faux mirror in front of them. Black fishnet gloves traced an eyebrow and moved seductively to the sets of cherry-red lips. Material ran gracefully and without pause over the glistening pair. Their fingertips stroked the top first, then bottom and then back to the top before blowing a kiss to one another via the mirror.

Without faltering, breaking their timing or rhythm, the pair removed the gloves slowly and let them fly into the crowd. With bare hands placed on the vanity top, the dancers rose and inched closer to each other, inspecting the reflection that should have been there. Closer and closer the pair drew to each other until only a breath separated them from each other.

When the crescendo proclaimed that the chorus had arrived the two stepped away from the prop and twirled and stomped their way around the stage. Each and every step they took was determined and full of intent—the intent being to arouse and seduce every man at their feet.

Little black pleated skirts barely reached the top of the thigh. Nick swallowed numerous times as he watched them both move closer and closer. Black garters ran the length of each leg, connecting the striped, sheer stockings under the skirt. Connected them to what, Nick wondered and then realized he didn't care.

His knowledge of lingerie ran as far as the occasional Victoria Secret catalog placed in their mailbox by mistake. Those were good months.

Stiletto boots sheathed the long, trim legs that descended the stairs in time with the music. Those black patent encasements laced all the way to the knee looked both sexy and dangerous at the same time. An image of the dancer in nothing but the boots flashed before Nick's eyes and he felt his cock jump beneath his zipper. If this was any clue as to how the rest of the night was going to continue, he was in for a few hours of heaven and hell, either one welcome.

As the two made their way to their respective side of the stage, Nick was grateful they'd

found an open seat near the stage. The long-legged, raven-haired goddess, with the fuck-me mouth, fuck-me eyes, fuck-me everything was right on top of them. Nick found that the garters connected underneath a pair of ruffled, red boy shorts that barely covered the firm little bottom peeking out from beneath the skirt.

Nick watched her transfixed. She swayed, dipped and thrust to the beat as did the dancer behind her. He noticed that even though their backs were to each other the synchronization never ended.

He held his breath as she ran her hands down the front of the tight bustier top, releasing each clasp one by one on her way back to the top. Holding the top together with both hands she teased to the right of Nick's seat and then to the left only revealing a flash of caramel torso here and a hint of round breast there.

In the next instant, both dancers crouched down balancing on the stiletto heels of their boots and exposed what the red camisole has concealed. Covering most of the breast and the entire nipple was a red pasty shaped like a pair of lips. And they were right in Nick Kiel's face. He thought at that moment he could die a happy man. And in the next second wished he was a dead man. Then the realization came that he may in fact be a dead man come morning.

"Holy shit!" The words were out of his mouth before he could stop them. Even with the music blaring, the crowd's screams and Hayden whistling, she heard him. Her midnight bob swiveled toward him and those eyes her bangs tried to hide met his. Her mouth gaped open, her hands pulled the sides of the bustier together and she repeated his sentiment, "Holy shit."

Her voice was low and strangled and jumped a little. She kept staring at him. Nick wished he could disappear, and from the look on her face she wished the same thing. He felt Hayden's hands grasp his shoulders and shake him a bit. He couldn't pay attention to his brother. He couldn't take his eyes off her.

His brother must have realized, finally, that he was the only one at the table for two who was still enjoying themselves. Out of the corner of his eye, Nick saw Hayden's face sober a bit and then turn toward where his brother gazed.

Never having much tact and lacking the filter that most people had between their brains and their mouths, Hayden's exclamation was louder and higher pitched than either brother would have liked, "Holy fucking shit!"

Nick saw the girl jerk her eyes from brother to brother. She paled more, if it was possible. She risked a quick peek back at Nick and then inch by inch rose from her crouched, exposed position on the stage to her full height. Nick would pay for his next thought soon enough, but all he could think about was her encased legs, that seemed miles and miles long, wrapped tightly around his waist, clenching her to him. Those dewy, painted lips, even though set firm and unsmiling now, held promises of deep kisses

that would run the length of a man's body over and over again. Yep, he was going to hell.

Quickly and with style, she turned on the stiletto heel and made her way, with her partner, back to where the whole thing had started. The lights dimmed once more, a cheer resounded and yells for more filled the area.

The only thing Nick heard was the sound of his own heartbeat and the rush of his blood from his jeans back to his head where it belonged. It took a minute. Hayden's words finally busted their way through Nick's frantic thoughts and he turned in his seat.

"Tell me that was not who I think it was. Tell me this is all some fucked up nightmare and we both are going to wake up any minute. Tell me. Lie to me if you have to. I can take it." Watching Hayden down the contents of the three beer bottles on the table made Nick's throat drier than it already was. He swallowed a few times and then made the decision to tell his brother, "You're right about one thing."

"What's that?" Hayden asked as he wiped his arm across his mouth.

"We're in a fucking nightmare."

"No shit." Hayden chuckled a bit but there was nothing funny about the situation. Nick knew that the wry laugh was Hayden's way of showing that he was nervous, and he had good reason to be. "What are we gonna do now?"

Nick shook his head. He didn't know what to do. She'd seen them. They'd seen her. There was no changing that.

"It was her, right? I mean," Hayden pulled his seat closer to his brother's and rested his arms on his thighs, whispering, as if anyone could hear him, "my brain didn't just make that up, did it?"

"No, that was her all right. Every last inch of her." Shit, he thought. *Shit, shit, shit, shit, shit!*

"Well shit!" Hayden said, throwing his hands over his head in frustration and what looked like defeat.

"My thoughts exactly."

"Willa?" Hayden inquired.

"Willa." Nodding his head and studying the table top, Nick Kiel gave his brother the one conformation in the world he did not want.

"Willa." As her name passed his lips, Hayden let his head drop to the table with a resounding thud. Nick glanced at him and felt the need to do the same. Who knew? Who

knew that a simple, harmless night of beer, half-naked women and good-natured fun could turn into hell on Earth? It was just their luck.

Nick rolled his eyes toward the ceiling, rolled them back to his brother, who still had not lifted his head and then rolled them back into his head and closed his eyes.

I should have stayed at home, Nick chanted silently to himself over and over again. But he hadn't, and now he was screwed like nobody's business.



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