

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

*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.

Warning: This title contains explicit, powder-keg-hot sex, language that ain't fit for your mama's ears, and a hot cowboy with a Texas-sized heart.

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The Real Deal

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The Real Deal

Niki Green

Dedication

To my mother. For giving me the best advice in the world on writing—I didn't take it, but you know that already.

Chapter One

The Garden was located just a few miles south of Dallas, Texas and an hour and a half from the Kiel ranch. Rumor was that a hundred years ago it had been a brothel—a profitable one. But that was long ago. The Garden was now a gentlemen's club. A modern-day burlesque show reminiscent of Gypsy Rose Lee or even Dita Von Teese. It

abided by the rule that less was more. Less skin showed, more tease available, was the golden rule of The Garden. A strip club it wasn't, a haven of seduction it was, and for Nick and Hayden Kiel it was a young man's dream come to life.

Nick stood just inside the doorway of the place tapping the brochure he'd received against his leg and taking in his surroundings. The lighting was low, most of it radiating from the enormous stage that took up the center of the club.

The stage had two separate platforms separated by wide glowing stairs. Nick watched as two of the dancers on stage made their way back and forth, up and down the steps as their erotic dance captured the audience's attention. Less was more, Nick reminded himself as he watched the dancers glide along to the tempo of a recently popular rock song. The beat of the music made his insides thump just as the dancers were making his pants throb.

"Can you believe this? I'm horny already!" Nick had almost forgotten his brother's presence. Hayden Kiel had graduated high school three months ago and the trip to The Garden was a late graduation present Nick bestowed upon him. He should have given him money instead. It would have been safer that way.

At eighteen, Hayden was hell on wheels, literally. In the past two years he had wrecked and destroyed countless vehicles, spent more than one night in the county lockup for being what the Millbrook sheriff called, "a danger to himself and others", and had succeeded in breaking the heart of almost every young girl the small town of Millbrook had to offer. Hayden was a regular menace to himself and to society, and therefore needed a babysitter from time to time, which is where Nick came in.

Being the two youngest of the five "Kiel boys", as they were called, bonded them closer together. Nick glanced in his brother's direction, feeling relief that the younger man was still close by and hadn't ventured off. Venturing off in The Garden, a place they weren't supposed to be in the first place, was not a good idea. Just getting through the doors had been nerve-racking enough.

The large man guarding the gates to the club had held onto Nick and Hayden's IDs longer than Nick would have liked. The man, who could have played strong tackle for the Cowboys once upon a time, had studied the two plastic-covered rectangles and then studied the two young fellows standing before him. Nick had felt some sense of relief when the giant had started to hand the cards back and then Hayden had opened his big mouth and said, "Dammit man, you cramming for a test or something?"

Nick was a pacifist, generally, but at that moment had seriously considered doing his baby brother major bodily harm. Hayden just didn't know when to keep his fucking mouth shut. He had explained on the ride up to The Garden that they needed to keep a low profile and draw little, if no, attention to themselves. But if Hayden had heard him, he'd never acknowledged it.

Nick turned to his brother, tapped him on the shoulder and motioned him to an empty

table on the far side of the stage. Holding up a hand, he summoned one of the traveling waitresses and quickly ordered a round of beers. After doing so, he noticed Hayden already held a bottle in each hand. Just like Hayden, he thought, never wasting time.

“You know what my two favorite things in the whole world are?” Nick leaned closer to hear his brother’s question. Even though Hayden’s voice was raised the music drowned out most of the words.

Shaking his head at the question Nick asked, “What’s that?” Nick caught the flash of his brother’s straight, white teeth and then heard him say, “Hot pussy and cold beer.” Nick rolled his eyes and laughed a bit.

“Man, this place has them both. I’ve had a hard-on since we walked through the door.” Hayden’s eyes were locked on the stage and Nick noticed that the music stopped. Applause started, then ended with whistles and yells from various tables and a new act was about to begin.

Two more dancers occupied the stage now. The lights dimmed in between performances leaving The Garden in almost complete darkness. Steadily, the lights began to come up revealing two dancers sitting center stage facing each other. Separating the two was a vanity and mirror of sorts, but there was no glass. The girls were the mirror images of each other. From their cropped, glossy wigs to their knee-high boots, they were identical.

Hoots, hollers, yells and whistles again became deafening. Evidently most of the crowd knew what was about to come. Nick had to admit he couldn’t wait to see for himself.

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.

## Chapter Two

After the stage was cast in shadows, Willa Tate, or Willow Reed as she was known to the patrons of The Garden, rushed off and pressed her body to the closest wall. Her breath came in short pants, her chest heaved and her heart rate escalated. Inhaling slowly, she did all she could to restore her breathing to normal.

As soon as she could easily take a breath and expel it, she darted past the curtains and down the narrow hallway that led to the dressing rooms. On her way she passed Little Red Riding Hood, two naughty nurses, a cheerleader complete with pompoms and an overly large man called Babe.

Babe called out a greeting and a compliment and all Willa could do in reply was throw up a hand. She was on a mission. A mission to bounce two cowboys out of The Garden faster than anyone could pass the ammunition. But to do that, she needed help. She needed Raven.

Reaching her dressing room, she turned the knob and forced the door open with more momentum than she would have liked. The door bounced against the wall and threatened to come back and smack her in the face.

Raven stood at one of the two vanities and visibly jumped at Willa's entrance. Standing there in nothing more than black leather and lace was the solution to Willa's problem.

"You need to come with me." Without further explanation, she grabbed one of Raven's arms and ran back toward the stage.

"Could you slow down a little? Neither one of us can afford a broken ankle at this point in time. Loved the new set by the way, the boots too." Raven was rambling, Willa paid her no attention. The warning about the shoes stuck in her mind though. She knew that running in stilettos was a no-no but desperate times called for desperate measures. Reaching the sheer curtains that hid backstage from the audience, Willa pulled the material to the side just enough so that she and Raven could clearly see the few tables lining the side of the stage.

"You see those two cowboys sitting right there?" Pointing a finger Willa indicated the table where Nick and Hayden were. *Dammit*, she thought. When Raven didn't reply to her question, she looked at her friend to urge the response along. Raven was squinting in the direction of the table. Willa rolled her eyes then grabbed the glasses that were hanging from the bodice of Raven's black corset. "Are you ever going to get contacts?"

Raven only shrugged and put on the glasses. Willa watched her scan the audience and then heard her ask, "Who am I looking at again?"

"The two cowboys sitting down front by the stage." Turning her head in the general direction, she saw that Hayden now sat with his head flat on the tabletop. She hoped he wasn't passed out drunk. She wanted both of them to be good and sober when she laid into them. Nick looked no worse for wear, a little pale, but gorgeous nonetheless.

"You're going to have to be a little more specific. We are in Texas. Everyone thinks they're a cowboy and dresses for the part." Willa couldn't argue with her affirmation. Many men liked to wear the hat but only a handful could claim to be the honest to goodness real thing.

“The two sitting at table eight.” Jabbing her finger toward the table, she indicated a wide-eyed Nick and faceless Hayden. “As for the cowboy part, those two are the real deal. I don’t think you can get any closer to real than them.” The real deal Kiels. That is what they were called in her hometown, the “real deal”.

“Nice.” Raven said as she continued to stare at Nick’s profile and what little of Hayden’s face that was visible now from the chin up. “Friends of yours?”

“Hardly.” Willa chewed her bottom lip after she answered. Were they friends? They used to be. Gone were the boys she’d left behind and in their places were two drop-dead-sexy men. Frayed blue jeans, work-worn boots and T-shirts that molded every bump and plain of their chests reaffirmed that they were no longer the two boys who had dogged her steps and bent to her every whim. They were men, sexy men. They both looked just like their brother. From the chocolate hair to the long, muscular legs, they looked just like him. *Dammit.*

“Too bad.” Raven held the curtains now and was in the middle of drinking in the attributes the two held. After further evaluation she said, “What’s wrong with that one right there? Is he sick or something?” Hayden’s head was still more on the table than not and he looked as pale as Nick had a moment ago.

“He’s not sick. I think he may be in shock.” Willa left Raven at the curtain and paced. She needed to do something. They needed to leave. She had three more sets to do and come hell or high water, she was not doing them in front of those two.

“In shock? You don’t think they have ever seen a half-naked woman before?”

“I’m sure they have.” Willa took her place next to Raven again and stared. “But I’m sure this is the first time they have ever seen the girl who, at one point in time, was supposed to be their sister-in-law in nothing more than a couple of pasties and a nice pair of ruffled shorts.”

“Uh-oh.” The “uh-oh” was muttered with little or no feeling behind it. It seemed like an afterthought or something said for lack of a better word, then reality set in. “Uh-oh!”

Her eyes were wide when they met Willa’s. She started to say something, looked back at the table, started to speak again and then bit her bottom lip when there was nothing else to do.

“What are you going to do?”

“I’ve got to get them out of here.” Willa walked away from the curtains, leaving Raven to drool and stare a little more. She couldn’t blame her. It was a nice way to pass the time. She was halfway to the stage’s side door when Raven caught her.

“How are you going to do that?”

Willa stopped. Turing slowly on her six-inch stilettos, she smiled at her friend. “I’m not going to. You are.”

“Uh-oh.” Was all Raven could reply.

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Nick should have been impressed with the tall blonde cheerleader shaking her pompoms in his general direction. Hell, he loved cheerleaders. Long, tan legs, breasts large, full and threatening to burst from her tiny top and a bow that barely covered the tanned globes of a great ass. But impressed Nick was not.

Each and every time he closed his eyes he saw her. Her standing in front of him with nothing on but those boots. He shook his head and tried to clear the thoughts that lingered. He reminded himself time after time, “It’s Willa. Chase’s Willa. Your brother’s Willa.” No matter how many times he repeated those words, they did nothing to relieve the massive hardening he felt beneath his zipper. At this rate he would bust his fly before ever leaving The Garden.

Nick ran a shaky hand over his face, picked up one of the forgotten beer bottles from the table and took a healthy swallow. Two more long gulps and the drink was gone and Nick was in desperate need of another one. Maybe with enough alcohol the images traveling through his mind would dim and his cock would relax.

“I need a beer.” Hayden lifted his head from where it had been lying and scratched his overly long hair, causing it to shift and stand on top of his head.

“My thoughts exactly.” Raising a hand, Nick caught the eye of the cute little waitress who had been more than attentive the entire night. She caught his gesture, smiled and made her way to one of the bars that lined the club.

He watched her stroll to the bar, prop one flared hip against it and wait patiently for her order to be filled. She looked in his and Hayden’s direction and smiled. It was a warm smile, one without seduction or sensuality attached to it. Her smile had the same effect on Nick that Willa’s image had. There was something wrong with him. Every female in here was causing him to nearly bust the seams of his pants.

He squirmed a bit in his seat, smiled back at her and tried to watch the show that was going on close by. Easier said than done. Bored once again by the cheerleader, he scanned the audience hoping to see the woman who would torment his mind for days, if

not weeks to come.

Several dancers mingled with the crowd. They laughed with some of the customers, flirted with the others, but all in all seemed to enjoy what the night had to offer. A movement from the left caught Nick's eye and he twisted in his chair to get a better look.

What he saw made his mouth go dry and his Adam's apple bob uncontrollably. Walking in even, long, sultry strides was a vision decked out from head to toe in nothing more than black leather, a little bit of lace and a whole lot of skin. From her high-heeled boots that laced up her calves to the demi-mask that concealed half her face, she was a walking wet dream. If anyone could take his mind off Willa, this one could. And she was coming their way.

When Nick realized her destination his throat closed a bit and his pants tightened painfully. As she came closer, he took in more of her appearance as it became visible. A mass of ebony curls sat upon her head and draped down her narrow back. The mask hid most of her face, but the part it didn't hide revealed lush, pink lips and a smile that could drop a man to his knees.

A black corset showed off a slim waist and breasts that slightly swayed beneath the tight material as she walked. Fingerless, lace gloves ended at her wrist and emphasized her sun-kissed arms. Her shoulders were bare and Nick noticed a dusting of freckles along them. He was a sucker for freckles, he wondered where else on her body the dusting appeared.

She stopped for a brief second, spoke to one of the other girls but never took her eyes off of him. Her smile increased as she talked and watched him. She whispered something to the Indian princess she spoke to and the girl turned. She smiled at them also.

The vision in black wrapped her arm around the princess's waist and lead her away from the party of men she was entertaining. Both were now headed right in Nick and Hayden's direction. Nick popped his brother with the back of his hand, connecting with a firm, hard shoulder that made a smacking sound under the material of his shirt.

"What!" Hayden said, rubbing the sting from his flesh. Nick couldn't speak. He couldn't put two sounds together. All he could do was nod. He hoped his brother would follow the nod's direction. He did. Nick saw Hayden stiffen in his seat and heard his intake of breath. Before he could release the breath both of the beauties stood before them. The princess spoke first.

"Mind if we sit down?" Her voice was as sweet as honey and Nick wondered if she tasted as sweet as she sounded. At her request, Hayden pushed a chair from the table with his booted foot then jumped from his own offering it to Pocahontas. The vacant chair closest to Nick was now occupied by the vixen in black. He couldn't take his eyes off of her. She was giving him the same attention he was giving her. Her mouth was set in a slight grin. A knowing grin. A grin that told Nick she knew what the tablecloth hid.

“Which one of you...” The sound of her voice made Nick’s body tense. It was low and husky, a voice a man wanted to hear in bed—morning, noon or night. It didn’t matter which as long as he heard it, “...is Nick?”

If she had slapped him in the face he wouldn’t have been more surprised. He cleared his throat, prayed he could speak and then uttered, “I am.”

She smiled. “Then that makes you...” she pointed a red nail at his brother, “...Hayden.” Nick saw Hayden’s eyes widen and his throat work before he nodded his chocolate-colored head.

“Yes, ma’am.”

Nick rolled his eyes. What a time for his brother to develop manners.

“I’m Raven.” *Raven*. It suited her, almost as well as the leather did. “I have a message for you two.”

“From who?” Hayden asked the question before Nick had a chance.

“From my friend and yours.”

“Willa?” Nick asked, hoping. Raven nodded once in acknowledgment and then continued.

“There is a diner down the road. Two miles down on the left. You can’t miss it. You two need to be there in half an hour. You may want to think about making your way out of here as soon as you can.” With her errand complete, Raven rose from the chair and took Pocahontas with her. The cryptic message only produced more questions for Nick’s already spinning head. He called out to her as she turned to leave and grabbed one of her silky arms.

She glanced down at his grip and shook his arm off as easily as she would have a drop of water.

“Is Willa going to be there?” He saw her eyes narrow then become round and slightly dreamy again. She leaned down to him, her face hovering just above his. To anyone observing the two it would look like she might kiss him. But she didn’t. She moved those swollen lips to his ear and whispered, “Why wouldn’t she be?”

Nick thought he felt the brush of velvet against his earlobe. It was there and then it was gone just as she was. Without another word or explanation, she left, the Indian princess following in her wake. He sat and stared for long moments after she had disappeared.

“What’d she say?” Hayden pressed. Nick shook his head, lifted his tall frame from the

chair and maneuvered himself around the rest of the tables toward the front entrance. He never looked to see if Hayden followed. He could feel him there.

Making their way to the large Chevrolet truck, both brothers jerked open their respective doors and slid into the cab. With a roar of pipes and a quick turn of the wheel, Nick angled the vehicle toward the diner they had seen on the way in. Neither brother spoke during the short drive. What was there to say? Nick hoped that she would be waiting when they arrived, though he highly doubted it. If he knew one thing about Willa it was that she waited on no one and everyone waited on her.

### Chapter Three

“What in the hell are you two doing here?” Willa smacked the top of the table as she asked her question. Two sets of eyes flew to hers but neither responded. They just stared. “What? Cat got your tongue?” When the two still didn’t reply, she slid into the booth next to Hayden and faced Nick.

“We could ask you the same question.”

Willa jerked her head to the “boy” who sat beside her. She used the term *boy* very loosely when referring to Hayden Kiel. She was pressed hip to hip with him in the tiny booth and she could feel that he was no longer a “boy”. That had been apparent in the club not an hour ago. Willa hated to admit it, but she had caught sight of the bulge that sat in the front of his pants. Nope, he was not a boy.

“I guess you could.” Willa propped her elbows on the table and covered her eyes. It wasn’t until her fingertips grazed the blunt tips of her bangs that she realized she still wore the black flapper style wig from her last set. With the practiced grace of a person who wore a wig regularly, she pulled the shiny bob from her head, revealing her natural blonde locks beneath it.

Her long, wheat-color hair was braided and pinned tightly to her head so that each wig would sit smoothly and look as if it were her own hair. She caught Hayden staring as she removed pin after pin from the tight mass.

“What?” She stopped momentarily to ask her question and then released the braided mass and shook it out with a hand. Long waves reached her shoulders and drifted down her back. Hayden looked stunned and a question looked to be on the tip of his tongue. “What?”

“How do you get all that under there?”

Willa set her mouth in a thin line, huffed a bit and said, “Do you really want me to go over the fundamentals of hair binding with you?”

“Have you been here the whole time?” Nick’s voice sounded haunted to Willa’s ears. It

had changed over the years, just like everything else. She thought at first that everything might have gone back to the way it had once been, but she knew better now. The look in Nick's eyes, the low voice he spoke in and the stare he penetrated her with were all awful reminders of the distance between them.

"Here? As in The Garden?" Willa watched as he nodded his head. "No. I got the job there about a year after I left."

"You mean ran away." His voice was deliberate and accusing. She couldn't blame him. Truth be told, that is what she had done. She had run away, hard and fast as she could.

"Runaway, left, took off...they're all the same." Running her hands through her hair, massaging the aching scalp, she watched him. He was looking at her the way Chase used to look at her. All knowing, all seeing. He could read her. He could anticipate her. It was time for her to change tactics.

"What the hell made you two decide to honor The Garden with a grand Kiel appearance anyway?" She knew she sounded snooty and snide but she didn't care, staying one step ahead of these two was just like just like staying one step ahead of their brother all those years before.

"We thought it would be fun?"

Willa glanced at Hayden and saw that he stared at Nick.

"Well? Did you have fun? Did I earn my paycheck?"

"Hell yeah." Hayden supplied a little too enthusiastically. It earned him a hard look and a kick under the table from his brother. "That was until you showed up." He cleared his throat and dropped his gaze to the scarred Formica.

"Until I showed up? I work there. I get paid to show up. And unlike you two, it's legal for me to be there." She crossed her arms over her breasts and leaned back into the cushion the booth held, what little was still there after forty years of truckers, dancers and late night travelers. "How did you two get in anyway? I did the math. You," she indicated Nick, "may be old enough by a day or two, but you," she jabbed Hayden in the bulky biceps with her cotton-candy fingernail, "are barely this side of jailbait."

Nick's eyes never left hers. He meant to intimidate her, but it wasn't going to work. If she'd learned anything in the past few years it was how not to be intimidated. Hayden on the other hand, couldn't look her in the face. He could however look her straight in the breasts.

"Are you going to answer my question or not?"

"You going to answer ours?"

Willa shot Nick a look telling him with her eyes that she didn't like his tone and he needed to change it. The better side of three years ago, the look would have worked. It wasn't working today though.

"I want to know how you got into The Garden. When you answer my question I'll answer yours."

"We have IDs." Hayden supplied.

"Whose IDs?" Willa replied.

"Ours."

"Liar." The comment came from her mouth in a low whisper. She mouthed the word more than she said it.

"We kind of borrowed a couple for the night." Hayden worried a place on the table as he made his confession.

"You mean stole," Willa said with a laugh behind her words.

"I mean borrowed. They'll have them back before we hit the range tomorrow." The second he spoke he looked as if he had swallowed his tongue. Willa did laugh then.

"You stole *their* driver's licenses. Oh, I'll tell you what, I didn't think you had it in you." She couldn't stop herself from laughing. It had taken guts for these two to steal or borrow anything from Brent and Jason. "If they find out they will have your balls in a vice."

"They'll never find out. Hopefully." Hayden looked nervous when he finally spoke. Evidently he knew the penalty that would be inflicted if they were caught.

"He was worried about you. We all were."

Willa heart contracted at the mention of *him*.

"You could have called and told us you were okay."

She could have but she hadn't.

"Would that have made it any better?"

"It would have helped."

"It would have been like dangling a red flag in front of a raging bull." The bull being Chase Kiel. If she had ever called or written Chase would have been on her trail quicker

than lightening, for a while anyway. Willa couldn't stop the next question from passing her lips. "How is he?" She didn't have the guts to ask the question to their faces so she spoke to her hands instead.

Moments passed while they each seemed to weigh their responses. When they came Willa wished for more.

"Good."

"Fine."

"You going to tell him you saw me?" Again, a period of silence followed her question. She cut her downcast eyes in Nick's direction and saw that he was weighing his response carefully. When he finally gave his answer, twin pains of relief and remorse filled her body.

"No."

Willa felt Hayden tense a bit and then watched him relax under his brother's glare.

"Thank you." What else could she say? Why not? How come? She didn't want him to find her, did she? The thought of seeing Chase again frightened and excited a part in Willa, as it always did. There were nights when she wished he would come for her. Times when she wished she could touch him once more. Nights that she wished she could feel his touch again. But they were only wishes, wishes that would never be granted.

"On one condition." Nick's statement pulled Willa from her thoughts of Chase. Chase's face. Chase's lips. Chase's tongue and of all the promises it had made. Her body shook a bit with the faint memory then she regained herself.

"What condition?"

"I... We want to know that you're okay. I want to hear from your mouth that you're okay and don't need anything." He was sweet. Nick had always been her protector. From the first night Chase had brought her home to meet the entire Kiel brood, until the night she slipped out of Millbrook under the cover of darkness, Nick was always ready to fight for her.

"How exactly do you plan on doing that?" Willa's mind raced. She had to be careful, or did she? Enough time had passed now that it probably didn't matter if Chase knew where she was or wasn't. But Willa, being cautious, didn't feel like testing the waters just yet.

"I want you to call."

"Not going to happen. I'm not about to call your house and risk your brother, any brother, answering that phone. No way. Try again."

“You can call my phone.” Nick leaned back in the booth and retrieved a cell phone from his pocket. “I’ll give you my number and when you get ready to call I’ll be ready to talk. I don’t care if you talk for a minute or an hour; I just want to know that everything is alright and that you’re alright.” His eyes were as sincere as his voice. Willa chewed her lip a bit and took her own phone from her pocket.

“Give me the number.” Nick gave her the digits and she entered them into her phone’s log. She closed the flip of the phone, looked at both of them once more, trying to etch the new faces into her memory and scooted from the booth. She started to leave, paused, and turned. She couldn’t stop her next action. Even if she could have stopped herself she wouldn’t have. Leaning over the table, she placed a kiss on Hayden’s cheek then on Nick’s. She then let her hand linger in Nick’s hair, loving the feel of the silky smooth texture as it glided across her fingers. “You need a haircut.”

She placed another kiss on his forehead, smiled and winked at Hayden and walked out of the diner. It was the second time in her life she had left the Kiels behind. On her way back to The Garden, she realized that the second time was just as hard as the first.

She kept her tears at bay as long as she could. Turing into her driveway, well after four the morning, feeling drained and heavy limbed, Willa Tate let her heavy head fall to the steering wheel and cried just as she had one night years ago.

Her tears came easily and heaving sobs of regret came with them. Opening the car door allowed the wind to nip at her tear-streaked face. She didn’t remember walking into her house or collapsing into bed. She didn’t know how long she cried before drifting off into a dreamless sleep. All she knew was that her heart was breaking and she didn’t know how to fix it or if it had ever been fixed before.

## Chapter Four

The dream was always the same. It hadn’t changed. He tossed and turned as the images became clearer in his sleepy mind.

*It was summer. The air was hot and carried only a whisper of wind, but that wind had caught her hair and swept it across her face. She laughed a whimsical distant laugh of youth and innocence. Then she looked at him and her eyes darkened.*

*She came willingly into his arms, pressing herself comfortably into his body and allowing him to lay her gently into the grass. They were beneath the large oak tree in the west pasture. The lake a few feet away rippled and played with the air. He brushed her face with his fingertips and she followed his movements. Her eyes closed and a soft moan passed her lips. Those lips. He saw her tongue dart across the puffy plains of her lips as she waited for him. She was always waiting for him.*

*He lowered his head and gave her mouth what it wanted. His. He was tender at first with*

*the flesh, but bit by bit his control slipped and he devoured. After a few seconds of savoring her lips, he let his tongue move past the seam they created and into the warm, sweet depths of her mouth.*

*She tempted him with her tongue. She repeated her motions time after time. She would lick his bottom lip, nip it with her teeth and then draw it into hers and suck lightly as her body arched toward his.*

*She wanted him. As badly as he wanted her. He moved his hand to her stomach, under the flimsy material of her shirt and flirted with the flesh. She moaned into his mouth and moved her lower body against his thigh. He felt the heat and the dampness even through the denim they both wore.*

*In the next instant they were skin to skin, body to body, hardness to softness. Her nipples were puckered and begged for attention. He obliged them. He let his tongue sweep the first one, coating it with moisture and then pulled it into his mouth and sucked greedily at the tip. She arched and moaned and pushed the peak deeper. He moaned.*

*With one nipple in his mouth and the other being rolled between a finger and a thumb, he teased and teased until she was writhing beneath him. Satisfied he had paid ample attention to the swollen flesh of her breasts, he made his way down her damp body.*

*Reaching his destination, he spread her long, honey-colored legs and found the spot that he fantasized about. Her taste was addictive. It lingered on the tongue and in the senses for days. It made him hard and ready. He was ready now, but he had to be patient. He had to take care. He had to make her wet. Wetter than ever so that she could take him. Take all of him.*

*He let his tongue flirt with her inner thighs, inching higher with each stroke. Her fingertips grazed the stubble on his face and he turned his head slightly and took one into his mouth. He licked the tip, lapped the length and then nipped at it as she had his lips. She gasped and her hips bucked and he returned his attention to the flesh inbetween her thighs.*

*She was wet. So wet. Her lips were coated with moisture, moisture he caused. A sense of pride and possessiveness swelled inside him. She was his. After today there would be no question of it. He blew a quick breath over her dewy flesh and saw the cream between her lips increase. He was a man possessed.*

*He lowered his head and traced his tongue along her slit. She brought her hips to meet his mouth. She moaned with encouragement. His tongue dipped, glided, plunged into the sweet nectar of her body. His fingers parted the flesh beneath his hungry mouth and found the swollen piece of flesh he hunted.*

*He took it into his mouth. On contact, her body tightened, her legs squeezed and the muscles of her pussy contracted. She was close. He backed away and kissed her thighs*

*again. She gripped his shoulders, painfully digging her short nails into muscle. He heard a word cross the barrier of her lips, "More." He smiled and caressed her flesh with his tongue. She pulled at his shoulders, drawing the length of his body against hers. They both groaned when their lips connected. This kiss was not gentle or teasing. They fed off each other.*

*"Can you taste yourself on my mouth?"*

*Her eyes, still dreaming and at half-mast, flared at his words and then she nodded.*

*"Do you like the taste?" She seemed shy for a moment and he took the opportunity to ease a finger into her slick, tight, waiting pussy. So tight, he thought. She could kill him. Squeeze him to death, milk the life out of him. What a way to go, buried balls deep inside of her.*

*She tightened around his finger. He withdrew it and thrust again. She was so small, so taut. He needed to stretch her more so that when he pressed his length deep inside as little pain as possible came along with it. But she was wet and getting wetter by the minute. He removed his finger from her opening and she whimpered.*

*He then did something that made her eyes widen and her breath quicken. He traced her lips with the wet finger. "Lick your lips."*

*She looked at him, confused, scared, aroused.*

*"Lick your lips for me, baby."*

*She did as he requested and he felt his cock jump against his stomach as she did. She traced each coated lip once, then again, removing all the traces of herself from them.*

*"You like that?"*

*She nodded.*

*"Good," he replied, before letting his finger pass through her lips into her mouth. She didn't hesitate. She held his wrist so that he couldn't take it away. His gaze met hers and he felt himself grow harder.*

*"I want more." Her voice passed his ears and affected his cock. She licked down the side of his finger, back up and then down the opposite side. She smiled at him. He couldn't help but smile back.*

*"You want more?" he teased.*

*She nodded and confirmed, "I. Want. More."*

*Before he knew her intent, she rose to her knees and pushed him to his back. The blanket he had laid down was soft and warm against his back and she was soft and warm against his front. She lifted her face to his and sipped at his lips.*

*“I thought you wanted more?” He traced his hands along the line of her back, down her sides and rested on the smooth contours of her ass. He squeezed the round, firm globes and pulled her closer to him.*

*She braced her hands against his chest and ran them through the light swirls of hair. The movement of her fingers across his torso caused his muscles to contract. She glided her fingertips across his collarbone and let them drift to his flat, darkened nipples.*

*“I do. I want more of you.” She lowered her mouth to his body and tasted him just as he had tasted her. She let her tongue flick against his nipple making it harden. Without pause she took it into her eager mouth. She moaned and the sound hit his insides. She gave his other nipple the same treatment as the first and then blazed a trail down his body and stopped at his navel.*

*He grabbed her shoulders and searched her eyes. “What are you doing?”*

*She smiled, flattened her tongue against his quivering lower belly and said, “You tasted me, now I want to taste you.”*

*His head fell back against the blanket as his hands guided her lower and lower until she hovered above his straining cock. He opened his eyes and watched as she took it in her hand. It wasn't the first time she had touched him, but it was the first time she had touched him with her mouth. It wasn't the first time he had thought about the possibility.*

*She moved her hand from the base to the tip, causing a pearl of fluid to appear at the opening. The next thing he knew the tip of his cock was being treated to velvety strokes. One after the other. She licked the drop away and then licked her own lips. Her eyes caught his.*

*His hands moved to the side of her face and lowered her gaping mouth to his waiting flesh. He felt it throb in her mouth as she lightly sucked. She had no rhythm to her stoke and it drove him crazy. She would take as much as she could and then deny him the warmth of her mouth as she licked around the engorged head.*

*He fisted his hands in her hair and started to release them, scared that he may be hurting her. Her moan stopped his action. He tightened his hold and felt her take him into her throat. His hips bucked. He thrust shallowly into her mouth at first, and then increased the depth as she increased the suction around him.*

*Her hands were braced on his thighs, holding her body above his. Never breaking his rhythm, he thrust into her mouth. He took one of her hands and wrapped it around the base of his erection. He then showed her how to pump. His hand covered hers and they*

*both moved his flesh more into her wanting mouth.*

*“Harder.” He moaned. Her eyes flew to his, questioning.*

*“Suck me harder.”*

*She did as he requested. She sucked harder and took him deeper with each thrust. He felt his sac tighten and knew that at any second he would release himself into her mouth. He wanted to, but he didn’t want to startle her by doing that. “Baby, you’ve got to stop.” Her only reply was to moan. The vibration caused a jolt through his body. He tried to tear himself from her mouth but she wouldn’t let him.*

*“Baby, if you don’t stop I’m going to come in that pretty, little mouth of yours.” He felt her smile against his dick. She wanted it. She wanted him to come. She wanted to make him come. Anything she wanted he gave her.*

*He let his head fall back to the blanket, his eyes drifted closed and he let her suck him off. Seconds later, he felt hot spurts of his orgasm fill her mouth. She took every drop.*

Chase Kiel came awake with a groan and with his cock in his hand. His breath was ragged and heavy. Looking around his room, he found it draped in the pre-dawn shadows. His body was covered with a thin layer of sweat, his sheets had been pushed to his knees and his hand and stomach were covered with evidence of his release.

“Shit,” he muttered. Kicking the covers further down his legs, he lifted himself from the rumpled sheets of the bed. He walked to his bathroom and flipped on the light. The intense glow caused him to squint. Making his way to the sink, he grabbed a towel that lay on the counter and turned on the faucet.

He washed away the traces of fulfillment from his hands and then rubbed the damp towel across his hard belly. He threw the used towel in the hamper, turned the light off and made his way back to bed.

It wasn’t the first time he had woken up this way. It happened more times than he liked to admit to. It was Willa. Three years later, even by way of a foggy dream, she had the same effect on him—cock-hardening.

He passed by the mirror of his dresser and looked at himself. At twenty-eight, he looked tired. His hair was still the dark hue it had been years ago. Gray had yet to overcome the tresses. His body was still hard. He hadn’t gone to flab around the middle like some of his classmates from high school. He attributed that to running the ranch. Seven days a week of riding fence lines, branding and vaccinating cattle and breaking the occasional stubborn colt kept him hard. Kept him as hard as Willa kept him at night.

He shook his head at his reflection and moved toward the inviting bed. Maybe an hour more of blissful sleep would pull her image from his mind. He doubted it, but it was

worth a try.

He heard a door slam and he moved the curtain from the window to see who had caused the noise. There they were.

Nick and Hayden made their way across the yard, toward the porch of the house. One of the dogs that had taken up residence at the ranch greeted each with a nose to the groin. Hayden paused and petted the beast before taking the steps two at a time into the house.

*Where in the hell have they been?* They had both disappeared last night early in the evening. Nick he didn't worry about. Hayden he did. Hayden was so much like his brother Jason it was hard to tell what he might get himself into. Hayden always did better with Nick dogging his steps.

Wherever they had been they were no worse for wear. He heard them both climb the stairs and shut their bedroom doors. At least they made it up the stairs. There had been times in his youth, around Nick and Hayden's ages, when he, Brent and Jason had all slept on the porch, in the barn or in the truck because they couldn't make it any further.

Chase wondered at times how they had made it home. But those days were long gone. He'd stopped the hell raising he was used to when he met Willa. Hell, he stopped them the first time he saw her.

She'd spilled coffee on him. She'd burned his hand. She'd kissed it to make it better. He could still see her face when she'd realized what she had done. Her cheeks tinted the prettiest red color, her blue eyes twinkled as she laughed at herself and Chase Kiel had fallen in love.

At the time, she was seventeen to his twenty-two. He waited for her. Waited until she was eighteen, waited until it was more respectable for them to see each other, waited until her aunt gave her consent to date him, waited for her to come to him. And she did. He spent three years courting her, wooing her, taking his time with her. He proposed, then she'd run—run faster than a scalded dog.

Three years, two months and one day later, Chase still didn't know why she'd run away. He had looked for her and every lead had ended with him coming up empty. He still thought of her, often. He still cared for her, too much, way too much. And he still loved her, against his better judgment. Loving her was the worst part of it all. How could a man hold on to someone who didn't want to be held? It was a question Chase Kiel would have given his bank account for, many times over, to find an answer to.

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“Will you snap out of it all ready?” Nick growled, trying to penetrate Hayden’s hung-over mind.

“Man, I’m trying.” He lifted a limb from the fence line and threw it on the ever-growing pile.

“What’s with you anyway?” Nick heard him grumble something and stopped. Hayden walked to the back of the truck, grabbed one of the coolers of water they had brought with them and poured it over his head.

“I can’t get her titties out of my head. Every time I close my eyes that’s all I see.” He wiped the hair hanging in his face away. “Man, if you could see the dreams I had.” He shook his head as he whistled slowly.

“Stop it, dumbass.” Nick brought the spout of the cooler to his mouth and took a healthy gulp. He hadn’t drunk as many beers as Hayden had, but he still felt the effects of the night before. In every inch of his cock. If Willa wasn’t enough to throw his hormones into a rage, Raven was. Hayden’s dreams may have been erotic, but Nick was sure his own were illegal.

Nick put the palms of his hands to his eyes and pressed. Leather, lace, stiletto heels and welcoming mouths were all he saw. He growled again.

“You gotta quit that. You sound like that old bulldog we used to have. All he did was sit on his ass and growl, remember what happened to him?”

Nick did and glared at Hayden who was now smiling.

“Are we gonna have to neuter you too?” Hayden laughed at his brother. Nick ignored him and pulled the worn, leather work gloves back on. He clenched the wrist of one in his teeth and pulled. Leather. God, Nick thought. He was so screwed. He rubbed his face again and followed Hayden back to the fence row.

“When are we going back?” Hayden said with a grunt. Nick stopped and just stared at his brother.

““Going back?” We’re not going back.” And they weren’t. For Willa sake, or for theirs, Nick hadn’t figured that part out yet.

“Why the hell not?” He dropped his end of the branch, making Nick drop his.

Nick swung around and glared at him. “Because I said so.” He attempted to pick up the fallen branch and realized that it was too heavy for just one of them to carry. “You gonna help me or what?”

“Nope.”

“Why the hell not?” He faced Hayden, hands on his hips, eyes squinted against the sun. Hayden only shrugged.

“Why can’t we go back? She didn’t say we couldn’t. I think it made her feel good that we were there.”

“If you think that you’re dumber than I thought.” He attempted to lift the limb by himself but then gave up with a frustrated sigh and kicked it instead.

“Am I?”

“Yeah. Dumb as a box of fucking rocks.” Nick made his way back to the fence and grabbed a limb he could carry.

“What makes you say that?”

“If you think for one minute that she actually enjoyed seeing us, there is something severely wrong with you.”

“I think she did. I think she liked seeing us. I know she liked seeing me. Now your ugly ass, maybe not so much.” He was baiting him. Nick knew it but it still rubbed him wrong. He didn’t want to be rubbed right now. He wanted to clear the fence row, get back to the house and close himself up in his room with nothing more than himself and his thoughts. Thoughts of leather, lace, stilettos and mouths.

“I think she put up with us to get us out of there. You saw how she ran off that stage like someone was chasing her. You really want her to have to look out in the crowd again and see the two of us sitting there staring back at her?”

Hayden thought about Nick’s question for a minute and then said, “Why don’t you call her and ask?”

“How in the hell am I supposed to do that, shit for brains? I don’t have her number. I gave her mine.” He had done that for a reason, thinking that if it were her decision, she would call. Hopefully. Maybe.

“Well, when she calls ask her if we can come back.” Hayden picked up his end of the fallen branch and waited for Nick to do the same. He did and, grunting under the weight of the branch, said, “She’s not going to call.”

“What makes you think that?”

“We haven’t heard from her in years.”

“So?” He grunted and Nick groaned as they tossed yet another branch away from the fence.

“So?”

“Yeah, so?”

Nick wiped his forehead with the back of his arm and stared at his brother who was worrying a rock with the toe of his boot. “She won’t call.” He was sure she wouldn’t but there was a chance. “What makes you think she’s going to call us?”

“Because she wants to know about Chase.” Hayden’s declaration stopped Nick in his tracks. He turned and gave his brother a look begging him to explain.

“All I’m saying is she wanted more than what she got last night from us.”

“What did she get from us?”

“Not shit. That’s why she’ll call. And if she doesn’t we can always call the club. You still have that brochure, right?” Hayden left the rock alone and went back to work.

Nick nodded. Hayden knew he still had it. Safe and sound in the glove box of his truck.

“After seeing her last night, I understand now why he had such a hard time getting over her. I mean can you image having that in your bed. I can and I like it.” Hayden laughed to himself and tossed a few willowy branches over his head.

“Fucking or lack thereof was not the reason he had the time he did.” Nick remembered. He remembered how Chase used to look at her. The way he’d patiently waited for her to turn eighteen. The way he’d paced around the house the night he proposed to her. He also remembered the nights after she left when Chase had come home drunk and cussing her. Not many men cussed a good fuck and nothing more.

“It had to be one of the reasons. You don’t remember hearing them? I do. The walls weren’t thick enough to keep out her screams and I was three doors down. Man, I worship him and envy Brent for having the bedroom next door.”

“Shut up, stupid.” Nick gave Hayden a playful shove and moved past him.

“I know you heard them. How could you not?” In a falsetto voice Hayden continued, “‘More, more. Yes, yes, more’.” He whistled and covered his heart with his hand. “A woman after my own heart.” Nick laughed.

“How’s that?”

“Any woman whose favorite words are ‘more’ and ‘yes’ is the kind I want in my bed. Of

course, Chase wasn't any better. I swear to God I have never heard a guy scream like that. Scared me to death at first. I thought she was killing him, but what a way to go." With his last thought he collapsed to the ground.

Nick laughed at the picture he made. Laid out in the dirt, one hand over his heart, the other over his eyes chanting over and over, "yes" and "more" in that damn voice of his.

"Something funny?"

Nick turned quickly to find Chase sitting astride the large sorrel gelding he called Bandit. He heard Hayden scramble to his feet and then felt him standing beside him.

Chase had a smile on his tanned face but Nick figured it would disappear if he knew what they were both laughing about. No man wanted to hear how he screamed in bed, no matter how good it had felt at the time.

"Nothing," both of them replied at the same time. Nick saw Chase's eyes narrow and his mouth set in a thin line. Nick tried his best to explain the situation without betraying their real conversation. "You know this idiot—can't ever get him to act right."

Hayden giggled that damn nervous giggle of his. If anything, that would make Chase even more curious.

If he was curious, he never let it be known. He dismounted the horse, walked him so that he could relax in the shade and turned back to his brothers and the work they were doing.

"Looks good," Chase said, inspecting what part of the fence row was clear. "We had quite a wind storm last night. Of course, you two wouldn't know, would you?"

Nick swallowed, feeling a bit of guilt well up inside of him and Hayden kicked yet another rock that lay at his feet.

"Where did you two run off to?"

Hayden raked a hand through his hair and gave Nick a shove on the shoulder.

"Out," was all Nick could say. He heard Hayden groan and looked at him as if to ask, *you got a better answer?* Hayden gave a little shrug and went and petted Bandit on the neck. The horse, enjoying the attention, pushed his giant head closer to the moving hand.

"Out, huh?"

Nick just nodded. What could he say? *We went to a bar we heard about hoping to see some ass and titties and we did. They just happened to belong to the girl you wanted to marry. She looks great by the way. Hayden can't get her titties out of his head. Yeah, that would go over well.*

“Well it must have been a hell of a time. You didn’t roll in until nearly four. I never thought I would see y’all out this morning. Damned sure wouldn’t have seen me.”

Hayden gave another nervous chuckle and Nick inwardly groaned. *Idiot*, he thought.

“Anyway,” Chase said, moving away from the fence and toward where Nick stood. “How long you reckon you two will be out here?”

Nick looked at the fence and at the limbs that still lay across it. Then he took in the amount of fence that had been broken and was sagging and answered his brother, “A couple more hours at least. We need to get these fences back up so that Brent and Jason can move the herd into this pasture tomorrow morning.”

Moving cattle was part of ranching. Every so often the herd had to be moved so that they didn’t overgraze the land. Overgrazing caused too many problems and problems were something Chase didn’t want on his ranch.

“Well, I’ve gotta meet someone in town in the next twenty minutes or so, and I don’t want to be late. I need to borrow your truck. I’ll be back before you two knotheads are even close to being finished.”

Nick nodded again, walked to the bed of the truck and removed their coolers.

Chase passed him and asked, “Keys in it?”

“Yep.” Nick replied as he placed the coolers beneath the large oak tree where Hayden was standing still petting the mammoth Chase called a horse.

“I’ll see you two in a little bit.” He pulled himself into the cab and slammed the door. He turned the ignition and leaned out of the window saying “By the way, family dinner tonight, so don’t disappear. Mom wants us to be at her house at eight.” Their mother, her new husband and his daughter lived thirty miles away from the Kiel ranch. “Do you two think you can stay out of trouble long enough for us to have a family dinner?”

The younger boys both nodded.

“Good.” He drove slowly through the pasture before hitting the dirt path that led to the paved road. When he was out of sight and definitely out of ear-shot, Hayden asked, “How much do you reckon he heard?”

“I don’t know. I’m pretty sure he got here around, ‘More please, more’. Asshole.” Nick said, shoving him again.

“You don’t think he knew what we were talking about do you?”

Nick thought on it a minute, decided Chase couldn't have, and reassured his brother "No, if he had, you'd be a dead man right now and I would be digging your final resting place instead of replacing this fence."

Hayden nodded his head in agreement. Smiling again, he chased after Nick and in the same shrill falsetto voice repeated, "More, please, more."

"Stop it." Nick said, shoving Hayden away from him. Nick knew that Hayden gave it his best shot but he couldn't help himself.

The west pasture was filled with Hayden's voice shouting, "Give it to me, baby! Yes, yes, more, more."

It wasn't until much later that either one of them realized that Chase, the brochure from The Garden, complete with a vampy picture of Willa and Nick's cell phone were all in the same truck.

## Chapter Five

The Garden opened its doors at ten p.m. sharp, never a moment before, never a moment after. Willa stood backstage behind the sheer curtains and watched as the tables started to fill. There were faces she recognized and faces she didn't, it was always the same.

"Looking for someone in particular?" Raven pushed the platinum locks of the wig Willa was sporting to the side and pressed their faces close together, allowing both of them a view of the growing crowd. Raven was still wearing her glasses, Willa noticed, so she could actually see the crowd instead of a blur.

"No."

"Liar." Raven laughed a rich, throaty laugh. She was right. Willa was looking for a familiar face in the crowd, a face she thought she would never hope to see again.

"Cheer up. It's still early they could show up yet. So did you grow a pair and call him like he wanted?" Raven patted her on the head like a child and then waltzed to the full length mirror set up for last minute adjustments.

"I did. But I didn't get an answer." Willa let the curtains fall back in place and made herself leave them alone. Walking to the mirror, Willa watched as Raven adjusted the straight, shoulder-length, black wig with the pink highlights. It suited her. Most things did. Raven could make gaudy look glamorous and slutty look sensual. Black was Raven's signature color, per Lady Sadora's request.

Lady Sadora, the owner of The Garden, made a lot of requests of her girls. It was her business. She was entitled. *Everything is an illusion*. Those were the words that Lady Sadora had spoken to Willa the day she'd gotten the job. *Your life ends at the door—your*

*life ends and someone else's begins.*

It wasn't a bad way to look at things. Willa was left behind at the entrance and Willow took her place. Willa gazed into the mirror at the woman looking back at her. Thick red bangs covered the forehead she'd always thought was too big. A high ponytail let the fiery locks fall and swing down her bare back to her hips, which she'd always thought were too wide. Child-bearing hips her grandmother had called them. She smiled at the thought and then the smile faded and a slight frown crossed her face.

"Hey, what's with the sad eyes?" Raven turned from the mirror and stared at her.

"Nothing, just thinking." Smiling, Willa scooted her over and pretended to fix one of her long, false eyelashes.

"Just thinking, huh? Well we can't have that, can we?" Raven took Willa by the hand and led her through the throng of dancers that had assembled in the backstage area. It was almost introduction time. They passed a blushing bride, a geisha girl by way of Houston, one dirty cop—handcuffs and all—a very leggy Marilyn Monroe and others in different costumes, some barer than others.

Willa spoke to each of the girls as Raven pulled her along. Raven, dressed as the naughty school girl, which she probably had been once upon a time, climbed the stairs first with Willa not far behind her.

The introduction at The Garden was a big part of Lady Sadora's show. It was one of two ensemble performances at The Garden. Each and every dancer participated in the introduction and the conclusion. Willa started the show and Raven ended it.

Willa didn't mind opening the show, it got the nerves out of the way. What she hated was the short, almost nonexistent changing time. After each introduction piece, Lady Sadora would make her nightly welcome speech. It was theatrical, it was dramatic, it was ostentatious, it was everything Lady Sadora was. It was one of the things that made The Garden more than just a dance hall with dance-hall girls, as was Lady Sadora's vision.

Willa took her place close to the stage-left upper entrance and watched as Raven climbed one more set of stairs placing her in the center, Marilyn took stage right. When the music began each of the girls would enter in sync and on beat. Willa liked the introduction piece. It changed songs every so often, depending on what was popular and could make an impression. Recently, the Pussycat Dolls provided the music and vocals the girls danced to.

Raven thought the song was appropriate. She'd made the comment that they were just like the Pussycat Dolls, except with pasties. Willa tended to agree.

She adjusted the waist of her pink and white bottoms that hung low on her hips. Tonight she was playing nice next to Raven's naughty. She ran her hands to the corset that

cinched her waist and displayed her breasts. The corset was tight, but it needed to be. The outfit was completed by white boots that ended just below the knee. Willa loved the fact that these boots had a stack heel instead of the stilettos she usually wore.

Raven caught her eye and then she flashed Willa the age-old Longhorn salute, pinky and index fingers in the air and tongue hanging out of her mouth. Willa laughed and sent the salute back.

She hoped for a good show. She hoped that everything went smoother than it had the night before and she hoped, hoped, hoped, hoped, that Lady Sadora was long-winded in her speech. And she hoped that there were no surprises waiting in the wings for her.

All of her thoughts ended as the curtains rose and the sound of a siren pierced the interior of the club. The siren was the signal for Willa to disappear and Willow to take her place. It was showtime.

Twenty minutes, a dozen Rockette kicks and endless swivels of the hips later, Willa came off stage a bit winded. She smiled as she passed the next dancer getting ready to take the stage and quickly made her way down the long hallway to her dressing room. She had a half hour before her next set. Those thirty minutes were just enough time to change outfits, replace the blonde wig with the black one and cool down just a bit. Even though The Garden was kept cool and refreshing, the lights that bombarded the stage were anything but.

She fanned her face with her hands and quickened her step. Sometimes she lingered backstage and spoke to a few of the girls, but not tonight. Tonight she needed the privacy of her and Raven's dressing room. But Raven wouldn't be there. Her first set started in a little under five minutes.

Reaching the door with the two pink stars that held her and Raven's names, she twisted the knob, stepped inside and stopped dead in her tracks.

"Nick?" Her hand flew to her chest and she realized it was heaving. There he stood, all six feet of him. Willa didn't know what inclined her to make the next move, but she didn't care. She ran to him and threw her arms around his neck.

When her body collided with his she felt a familiar warmth surround her. He was warm. He was male. He was Nick. She felt him tense underneath her hold and pulled her body from his and smiled into his deep brown eyes. But Nick wasn't smiling back.

"I got your message," was all he said.

"We both did."

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Chase watched Willa's knees buckle and saw Nick slide an arm around her slender waist, helping her steady herself. Still holding onto Nick, she turned to face him. Chase watched as her caramel complexion paled a bit. He thought for a brief moment that she might faint, but the moment ended when she turned in Nick's arms and slugged him in the stomach.

She must have packed a punch. Nick sucked in a deep breath and bent at the waist a bit, releasing his hold on her. Chaos followed.

"You damn tattletale." She slapped at his shoulder which was a sight to behold since she stood nearly a foot shorter than Nick's tall frame. "I should have known better than to call you." Chase heard her say, or rather snarl, then she lit into Nick again. Nick just stood there and took it. Chase thought about saving his younger brother a time or two but decided against it. It served him right.

While Willa continued her assault on Nick, Chase took the time to look at her for the first time in years. She had changed. She was thinner in places, curvier in others, but she was still Willa.

Chase let his gaze rake over her tiny frame. White boots encased her legs. They made her look taller, but Chase knew that without them she would barely reach his chin. The pink and white striped bottoms of her outfit barely covered the well-curved ass she had. The corset she wore cinched her waist and made her breasts swell over the top. Her breasts. That was one of the major changes in her. He wondered for a second if she had had them done. The thought both intrigued and enraged him, almost as much as the sight of her on stage.

When Chase, Nick and Brent had entered the club he'd picked Willa out in a heartbeat. There was something about the way she strutted around the stage—confident, cocky and sexy. Too sexy. He was jealous. Jealous that every damn cowboy in that club was looking at what was supposed to be his and his alone. Jealous that she was showing it to them. Jealous that she'd never danced like that for him.

"Wait a damn minute." Willa's raised voice calmed and it pulled Chase from the wicked thoughts he was having about her ass.

"What the hell happened to your face?" Chase watched as she placed her small hands on the bruises that had started to form on Nick's eye and on his cheeks. In an instant, her anger at Nick had turned into concern for him and the rage was placed on someone else—him. "You hit him!"

"I didn't have to." Chase left the spot behind the door he had been occupying before and

since she entered the dressing room. He closed the space between the two of them. He saw her breathing quicken and saw the pulse in her neck beat rapidly beneath the flesh he knew was soft there. He wanted to touch that spot with his lips. Wanted to trace it with his tongue and feel it jump under his teeth. Later, he thought.

“Who did then?” Her question stopped him in his tracks.

“Who did what, darlin’?”

“Who hit him? And I’m not your darlin’.” She turned her back on him and went back to comforting Nick. The little bastard. She coddled him, just like always.

“It’s nothing.” Nick said, stopping her hand as it ran over the bruise at the top of his left cheekbone. He held her hand longer than Chase would have liked.

“Get your hands off of her,” he growled. He didn’t know where the thick jealousy or possessiveness was coming from. He shouldn’t be either, but he was both.

Chase started to step closer to the pair when the door of the dressing room flew open and nearly collided with his face. Without looking up, the tall, black-clad figure made her way to one of the vanities, rambling ninety miles an hour as she went.

“Can you believe this?”

The three occupants of the dressing room watched as the image in black propped one long, booted leg on a chair and proceeded to remove the boot from her foot. She was oblivious to the audience she had.

“I paid a fortune for these damn things and they run. Look at this!” She pointed to the long run in the silk stocking without lifting her head. “They run twenty minutes into a show. Just my luck.”

Chase watched as she rolled the stocking down her thigh, her calf and then wadded in a ball and flung it in a waste basket close to her. From the corner of his eye, he saw Willa cover her eyes with a hand and saw Nick lick his lips and swallow. He had to hand it to the boy, he had taste.

“You don’t have an extra pair do...” turning she finally saw that she had more company than she’d thought, “...you? Am I interrupting something?” Her voice was throaty and low, a bedroom voice, a good one at that. She didn’t seem embarrassed by her state of dress or undress for that matter. She removed her foot from the chair and placed it behind the one that still was cloaked. She looked at Willa and asked, “Friends of yours?”

Chase saw a small grin touch her red lips and heard Willa mutter, “Hardly.”

The lady in black chuckled. She took a seat in the chair and crossed her bare leg over the

other.

“I remember you,” she said as she pointed to Nick. She turned her back for just a second to rummage through the drawers. When she found what she was looking for, a package of new stockings, she turned her attention back to Nick.

“I remember you too.”

Chase glanced at his brother and saw Nick was watching every move the beauty was making. She was putting on a show for Nick and Nick alone, whether she knew it or not. Willa, he noticed, moved away from Nick and was slowly making her way toward the vanity where the girl sat. She kept her distance from Chase as she edged closer.

By the time Willa reached her destination the leg was clad again in stocking and boot. She stood when Willa reached her side. Willa’s friend crossed her arms over her chest, making her breasts swell more so than they had before. “Are you going to introduce me?” She still had that smirky grin on her face as she pointed in Chase’s direction.

“I’d rather not,” was Willa’s reply.

Chase took the choice out of her hands. He crossed to them both and extended his hand.

“Chase Kiel.” The girl looked at his hand, then to Willa, who rolled her eyes, and then shook his rough hand with her softer one.

“Chase Kiel?”

He nodded and she flashed him a full smile instead of a grin. “Raven.”

“Ma’am.” He tipped the brim of his Stetson as he said it.

“Is he the ‘real deal’ too?”

Chase was lost on her question but Willa wasn’t.

“Oh, yeah. He’s the ‘real deal’.” Willa supplied with a sneer in her voice.

“Nice.”

Chase smiled at her remark. He saw Willa narrow her eyes and throw a glare his way. “Well,” Raven said, pushing away from the vanity and strutting her way to the door, “I hate to leave good company, but I have a set to do and it appears as if you all have some things to sort out. Mr. Kiel...” she extended a lace-wrapped hand, “...it was a pleasure to meet you.”

“You too.” Chase grinned at her and then flashed Willa the same grin over the girl’s

head.

“And, Nick, come back anytime.” She opened the dressing room door and started to leave the room, but Willa caught her arm before she could make it to the hall.

“What are you doing?” Chase heard her whisper in a hasty voice.

“What’s it look like I’m doing? I’m getting the hell out of Dodge. Love ya, sugar, but you’re on your own. Have fun.” She blew a kiss in no general direction and closed the door behind her.

Once again, the three of them were alone. Chase hoped any minute that number would be reduced by one. Willa stood with her back to them both and Chase took the opportunity to motion his brother out with a nod of the head. Nick, ever perceptive, took the hint and made his way to the door and closer to Willa.

Chase watched his younger brother touch her lightly on the shoulder. She turned and peered up at him with questioning eyes. Nick looked back at him and once more Chase gave him the dismissing nod.

“I’ll see you in a little while.” He let his hand trace over her shoulder and down her arm. Chase’s head knew that it was a brotherly, comforting gesture, but that didn’t mean he liked it. That green-eyed monster was rearing its evil head.

Nick opened the door the vixen in black had closed and with a look of worry and concern did as his brother bid and left the dressing room. They were alone, at last.

It was several minutes before either one of them spoke. Chase watched her shoulders rise and fall with every breath but he couldn’t see her face. He moved toward her. She heard him drawing near and she swung around to face him. Chase knew that look. She was pissed.

“What the hell are you doing here?” Her voice was calm with an undertone of rage thrown in for good measure. She brushed past him and took a seat at the vanity. She peered into the mirror and caught his eyes. “Are you going to answer my question or just stare at me?”

Chase took a minute. He liked looking at her, he always had. She never took her eyes off of him as he approached her chair. Placing his hands on the back of it he leaned in closer. Not only did she look good, she smelled good too—subtle and smooth.

“Are you surprised?” Quirking an eyebrow, he stared back into the blue depths that were trying their damndest to burn a hole through him.

“Shocked, I think, is a better word.”

“Is it a good shock or a bad shock?” He was toying with her. He didn’t know why. In the course of the last few minutes, he had gone from insanely jealous, to raging mad, to slightly intrigued. She intrigued him.

She turned in the chair, forcing him to take a step back, and glared at him. “Is there such a thing as a ‘good’ shock?”

Again he took his time in answering her. “What are you doing here, Willa?”

“I’m working. What does it look like I’m doing here, Chase?” His name came out in a slight hiss.

“I wouldn’t call it working.”

“What would you call it then?”

Chase leaned down, bringing his body and face closer to hers. He was only a breath away from her when he said, “You don’t want to know what I would call it.”

In a flash she jumped up from her chair, backed him against the wall and held him there while her finger jabbed into his chest.

“This. Is. Just. Like. You.” To add emphasis, she poked his chest as each word passed her lips. “You think you can walk up in here and take that condescending tone with me?” She didn’t give him a chance to answer. “I’ve got news for you, Mr. big-and-bad Chase Kiel—Mr. ‘Real Deal’ himself, you might have been able to rush me into things when I was younger, but a lot has changed since then. I’m not that same little, naïve girl I once was. And furthermore—”

He’d had enough.

Grabbing the hand that was bruising his chest, he braced her back to the wall and both of her hands at the side of her head. The action brought their bodies together and Chase could feel every soft curve her body had to offer.

“That’s enough.” His chest lifted with hers as she breathed in and out. “First of all, I never pushed you around. I would never push you around.” His voice had harbored a bit of anger, but it was now back to its normal, low tone. The hands that held her wrists relaxed and stroked the skin under their hold—it was an automatic response to the silk that lay under his fingertips. Flinching at the touch, she looked at him with questioning eyes. Chase let out a ragged breath and sighed, “Dammit, Willa.”

The words passed his lips, barely, before his mouth descended onto hers. He hadn’t planned on kissing her. He had planned on talking to her, questioning her, getting answers from her, but all of those goals were pushed away when their lips met.

Slanting his mouth across hers, he planned to break the seal hers created. She struggled for a moment before Chase felt her relax against him. Then she opened her mouth. He took the invitation. Dipping his tongue inside, he tasted the sweetness she held. His tongue played a game of chase with hers for the barest moments before hers met every stroke he delivered.

*God*, he thought, she tasted good. Deeping his kiss and pushing his tongue further into her mouth unleashed emotions that had been pent up for years. Releasing her hands, he let his roam the length of her body. Her “costume” didn’t offer much protection from his seeking fingers.

Chase received a small shock when she wrapped her arms around his neck and tugged at his hair. Her fingers played at his nape, sending shock waves of pleasure down his spine, up his thighs and through his groin. He felt his cock harden against her flat belly, heard her intake of breath, but never gave her the chance to deny or accept him.

Circling her waist, he lifted her until her back was pressed harder and higher against the wall and her legs were straddling his hips. “Wrap your legs around me.” He broke the kiss for a second to make his request. She complied. He let a groan slip past his lips into hers as she tightened her legs gripping his body closer to hers.

He was lost. Memories flooded his mind—Willa underneath him, Willa on top of him, Willa with her lips sucking lightly, drawing his dick further into her hot, wet little mouth. The memories, combined with the feel of her and how her body coaxed and stirred his, caused his cock to strain and jump beneath her parted thighs. Chase realized he was not the only one affected.

She was wet. Hot and wet and growing even more so with every passing minute. She was also moving, rubbing her body across his, flexing her thighs, drawing him nearer to the heat that radiated from her pussy. His pussy. She pulled his hair, tugged at his shirt covering his shoulders and nipped at his lips with her teeth. He loved it.

Bracing his legs further apart, he held her to the wall without the aid of his hands. He needed his hands for more important pursuits. When they were free, he let the back of one rub against the barrier her underwear offered—it wasn’t much of one. Teasingly, he explored the patch of material and felt his arousal grow, if it were possible, when he came in contact with the small bud of flesh beneath the silk.

With each pass of his hand she moaned and became more willing under his kiss. He could take her here. He knew he could. He wanted to. He wanted to rip those sexy, silky little panties from her body and thrust into her. Into her wet and hot core. He wanted to feel her muscles part and beckon him deeper. He wanted to feel her clench and come around his cock the way she had time and time before.

Chase was lost. Lost in the scent of her, the taste of her and the feel of her. He was losing his mind. Nothing made sense anymore—why she left, why she was here, why, instead of

talking, they were going at each other the way they always did, or had. He was so lost he didn't hear their visitor arrive.

## Chapter Six

The heat was gone. Willa felt his lips leave hers and she felt disappointment linger where their soft silkiness had been. Her mind was racing. *Why did he stop? Why did she kiss him back? Why did he kiss her in the first place? Why was she upset he stopped?*

Willa let her head fall and rest against his muscled shoulder. He smelled so good. He smelled warm and familiar and sexy—just like always. Pressing her face to his shirt, she inhaled the familiar aroma. It was the same scent that filled her dreams and her nightmares. Letting her eyes drift open, she quickly realized that he was not looking at her.

His head was turned and from what little of his face she could make out, she saw that he was not happy. Peeking around his massive frame, she saw why. They weren't alone—not by far.

The dressing room that had been a den of seduction and delight seconds before was turning into hell on earth faster than she would have liked. Willa pushed at Chase's shoulders, forcing him to release the grip he had on her hips. He let her go, but kept her sheltered from their company with his body. She poked at his ribs, willing him to move. He didn't. She poked at him again, this time harder.

He grabbed her hand, glared at her and growled, "Stop."

"Let me go." It was meant to be a whisper but it wasn't. Every person in the room heard her request. He stared at her for a minute and then did as she asked. Stepping to the side of him, she faced their company.

"Brent." Brent Kiel glanced at her but didn't speak or even acknowledge her existence. Of all the Kiel boys, Brent had always been the hardest to like. Brent was moody at times, withdrawn at others and a long way from friendly. He was a good brother, though. Willa knew that at a drop of a hat Brent would be at any of his brother's sides without asking for an explanation or expecting one. He was here now. That said it all.

"You about ready to go?" he asked his question over Willa's head. The fact that he ignored her presence irritated her more than the fact that he'd intruded to begin with.

"I was getting there."

"You were getting somewhere." The snide tone to his voice made Willa bite her tongue. A sound erupted from behind her and she turned to see the furious look on Chase's face. That was it. She knew that the Kiel boys brawled given the opportunity, the proof was written all over Nick's face, but she wasn't about to let the opportunity present itself. She

sure wasn't about to let the two of them go at it and wreck her dressing room.

Walking on legs that could have been more stable, she moved from her spot in between them. The two didn't seem to notice her retreat, all the better. When she was a safe distance away, she said in the calmest and most authoritative voice she could muster, "I think you need to leave." She had directed the comment at both of them but Brent was the only one to reply.

"Gladly, as soon as I collect my wayward brother here." Brent propped a hip against the door he held open. "I told you this was a bad idea."

"Shut up, Brent."

"What did you think was going to come out of us showing up here? Did you actually think she was going to run into your arms and beg you to take her back? Is that what you wanted? Hasn't she caused you, us, enough grief as it is?" His words cut through Willa like a knife. Who the hell did he think he was?

"Grief?" Willa couldn't bite her tongue any longer. She charged him, actually charged him. He never retreated. "What the hell do you know about grief? I didn't ask you to come here. Did I? I didn't ask your two brothers, who are underage by the way, to show up in the middle of my set. The only grief I ever caused was to myself. Nobody else. Grief?" Willa's back was up and her courage was soaring. If it hadn't been, she would have never have done what she did next.

He watched as she drew closer, so close that he had no choice but to look at her, to acknowledge she was there and that she existed. She saw his dark eyes slant and his jaw clench at her closeness. "You don't know a fucking thing about grief, you son of a bitch." Willa brought her hand back to slap the sullen look off his handsome face—the fact that it was a fine feature made the rage heighten even more.

Before her hand could connect, Chase grabbed it and turned her into his chest.

"That's enough."

She struggled underneath the arm that anchored her to him, to no avail.

"I said that's enough from the both of you."

"Me?" She was livid.

"Yeah, you. You can mangle him later. First, you and I have some things to discuss."

The hell they did. "The hell we do." Willa wiggled until she freed herself from him. "You need to leave. The both of you." She pointed first to Chase and then to Brent, who still stood looking bored and uninterested. *Bastard*.

“I’ll leave when I get good and ready.” Chase said. Once again, she stood between a rock and a hard place—between two Kiel boys.

“You’ll leave now.” Her voice betrayed her a bit as it wavered at the end. The control she had found was slipping. “Evidently you *two* have to discuss some things yourself and I have to get ready and go back to work.”

“Like hell.” Chase roared. He roared. She had heard him raise his voice before, but this was something totally different. This was filled with rage, determination and stubborn pride.

Willa cocked her head to the side and glared at him. She’d be damned before she let him boss her around.

“Like hell, nothing. You’re leaving and you’re leaving now.” She angled herself toward her vanity, determined to rid herself of him and his irritating guard dog of a brother. Willa never made it.

Chase intercepted her and with surprising ease, flung her over his shoulder like a sack of feed.

“What?” She planted her hands on his back and pushed her body away from his. She kicked her legs and bucked her hips in her attempt to get free. She could see victory in sight and then she felt his hand connect with her backside. He spanked her. Not hard, but he spanked her like a child.

“Calm down.” Again she felt his hand connect with her rear and hated the fact that he did it and hated the fact more that she kind of enjoyed it. She was losing her mind. “Now, I’m ready to go.”

He made his remark to Brent, who grunted in reply. Chase carried her into the long hallway toward the back entrance to the club. She lifted her head and saw Brent following in that slow stride of his that drove her crazy.

“You can’t do this!”

Chase never replied nor did his step falter. He heard her, she knew it. Just to make sure, Willa did the only thing she could, given her position at the moment—she bit him. Her teeth imbedded themselves in the hard flesh just above his belt. His intake of breath told her she now had his attention.

“Do that again and I’ll turn you over my knee right here and right now.” He smacked her ass again just for good measure. Willa felt her insides clench. She had never been into spankings but the connection of Chase’s hand next to her barely covered flesh was causing conflicting thoughts to rage in her mind. This was nuts.

“This. Is. Kidnapping.” She started to plant her teeth in him again but stopped when she heard the heavy metal door creak open and the brush of air hit her exposed skin. *Shit*. “Let me go.”

“Not going to happen.” His stride was steady across the gravel, even with her weight added to his frame, he never missed a step. Willa was thinking of ways to escape when she felt them both come to a sudden stop.

The next thing she knew, she was thrown into the passenger side of a truck. Righting herself and turning toward the driver’s side door, she hoped to break free and run. That was out of the question. When she made her move to escape she collided with another hard body. Smiling sweetly and with a sour tone she said, “Jay.”

Jason looked like he was trying his best to restrain the smile that lifted his lips. He tipped the brim of his Stetson in greeting and replied, “Willa.”

“I should have known you would be driving this getaway vehicle.”

He smiled broadly at her, flashing the set of straight white teeth he had always possessed. “Didn’t know I was, but it appears I am.”

Willa blew out a frustrated breath and felt Chase slide into the seat next to her. He slammed the door of the oversized pickup and ordered his brother, “Drive.”

“You’re crazy.” She shoved his shoulders and wedged her body into his side and pushed with all her might. “Didn’t you hear me? You can’t just come into where I work and haul me off like this. It has a definition you know.”

Her strength gave out under the strain of a body that would not budge. Looking frustrated, he ran a weary hand over his face. “I heard you the first time. Kidnapping?” She nodded her head in agreement. “Don’t think of it that way, darlin’.”

“I’m not your darling, you overgrown gorilla. If it’s not kidnapping what would you call it?”

“Repossession.”

His explanation confused her to the point she barely noticed they were leaving the parking lot and heading toward the highway; back toward Millbrook and back toward all the things she’d ran from before. “Repossession?”

He nodded.

“What the hell are you repossessing?”

“What’s mine.”

## Chapter Seven

The two-hour drive to Millbrook, Texas, took an hour and twenty minutes, thanks to Jay’s driving. He never did have the good sense God gave a goat. Willa thought the speed on the highway was bad, but it only got worse the closer they came to their destination.

A time or two she dug her fingernails into Chase’s thigh. One of those times, she squeezed so hard, she thought she might have drawn blood. She saw Chase wince against the pain she caused. He took her hand and tucked it in between his. The size difference between her hand and the ones holding her’s was amazing. Chase’s hands were strong, hard and roughly arousing.

When the subtle strokes of his thumb across her open palm became too much to bear she pulled her hand away, or tried to. He wasn’t letting go. The silence in the extended cab was tension filled.

Every once in a while she would hear a grunt from the backseat that held not only Brent and Nick but Hayden as well. She figured the grunting was due to one of the numerous bumps Jay refused to miss. The jarring was causing Hayden pain evidently. Willa had looked at him only once and noticed that his eye was also black and the fact that he was sporting a swollen nose that had tissue wadded up and shoved inside each nostril made her grin. It was more than likely broken.

The Kiel boys did like to brawl. Evidently Nick and Hayden had gone a round shortly before showing up at The Garden and ruining her entire night. The evidence was written all over their bruised, and Hayden’s bloody, faces. He was in pain. Good, Willa thought with a smile. Why should she be the only one uncomfortable?

The uncomfortable feeling didn’t diminish during the ride. It grew and grew. She recognized the terrain and knew without a doubt that any minute Jay would make a left turn onto the gravel road that led to the main house on the Kiel ranch.

Willa shut her eyes and willed herself not to think about it. Easier said than done. What would happen when they got there? Would they all pile into the house together for a powwow? She hoped not. She wondered if Chase would banish his brothers to one of the other cabins that sat on the property. Probably.

By doing that, he would ensure that he and Willa were alone. Being alone with Chase Kiel was the last thing she wanted, especially after crawling all over his body just a few hours before. It was a nice body though—too nice. She groaned. The noise broke the silence in the cab and caused every brother, except Brent, to look in her direction.

“Uncomfortable?” Jason asked.

“You have no idea.” Willa let herself sink further into the seat and into its warmth, not that being warm was her problem. She was warm. She was hot and it was all his fault. She looked at the man who sat to her right and studied his profile. His eyes were focused forward but every so often he would cut them at her. “Could you scoot over just a bit?” she asked nicely.

“I don’t see that happening.” He squeezed the hand he held and smiled down at her. She hated him. Willa noticed that the truck turned, and praise the Lord, slowed down. Peering over the dash, she saw the house in the distance. It was breathtaking.

The Kiel ranch sat on thousands of acres of land. The driveway leading up to the main house was flanked by stone pillars with flagpoles placed in the middle. The flags flew every day, rain or shine, one American and one Texan. That hadn’t changed over time.

The main house sat at the end of the drive and was majestic and quaint in the same breath. It was a simple farm house, a large one, but still a farm house. A porch filled with rocking chairs and tables, wrapped around all four sides and was accessible from every room on the main floor. The second floor held six bedrooms and four baths, enough to accommodate Chase, his parents and all of his siblings. Well, it had in Chase’s childhood. Chase’s father had built the house to please his wife. It stood strong and steadfast against the Texas backdrop, even though he did not. Bayer Kiel, the strong patriarchal figure Chase resembled so much, had fallen to a heart attack years before.

Willa couldn’t remember exactly when, only that she had been young when she and her aunt had attended the funeral. At nineteen, Chase had taken the reins as head of the Kiel household and still held them today. It didn’t surprise her. Chase had controlled every situation life ever threw his way, all except one. And now it looked like he was trying to right that wrong.

The truck came to a stop easily, surprisingly enough. Willa kept her eyes shut even though she heard all four doors open and felt the cab shift as its passengers exited the vehicle. All except one. She could feel him watching her—she didn’t have to open her eyes to know.

“You plan on sitting here all night?” The rumble of his voice vibrated through her body.

“The idea has merit.”

He laughed in reply. “Come on.” He took her hand and tried to pull her from the cab, but she didn’t budge. “I think you will be more comfortable inside.”

Willa knew he was right but she couldn’t force her body to move. Sighing, he put his hands on his hips and narrowed his dark eyes at her. Standing that way emphasized the size and even the shape of his cock under the worn denim of his jeans. Willa turned her head away from the package that made her mouth water and her inner muscles clench.

“You can either come out or I’m coming in. Which would you prefer, darlin’?”

Then he smiled. The smile made his tanned face look less hard and severe. His whiskey-hued orbs crinkled at the corners just a bit, but the lines didn’t alter the perfection of his features. A girl had to admit, he wasn’t hard on the eyes.

“Willa?”

“Huh?” Sounding like an idiot and feeling more like one, she was pulled from her thoughts and risked glancing in his direction.

“Out or in?” He propped an arm on the open doorframe and extended a hand. It was an invitation, “*‘Come into my lair,’ said the spider to the fly.*” Willa shook the ridiculous thought from her head and scooted closer to the driver-side door. The way she figured it, she could have it open and make a run for it before he even got around the truck. Of course, he could probably leap the truck in a single bound. It wouldn’t surprise her if he did just that.

“Willa,” Chase warned, “don’t even think about it.”

Too late. Faster than she thought possible, Willa bounded from the door and took off into the night. Running as fast as her legs could carry her in her platform heels, half-naked, she eluded Chase and saw victory in sight. That victory was short-lived.

Glancing over her shoulder, she saw Chase launch himself toward her and then all she saw was the thick green grass that covered the Kiel front yard. He tackled her. Actually tackled her, in the front yard with all his brothers watching from whatever window they could find.

When he caught her, he rolled to protect the majority of her body from the force of the fall. She struggled against his hold for the briefest of minutes before he rolled again, placing her squarely beneath his body. He anchored her arms to the ground with his own and placed his thighs on top of hers, giving her no choice but to lie there—trapped underneath him. Willa thought for a moment that there were at least twenty other girls in Millbrook alone that would trade places with her in a heartbeat. She would willingly let them have it, well maybe.

“You about finished?” he asked, breathing a little deeply.

“Finished what?”

“Finished acting like the little fool you’ve turned into? Dammit, Willa! You could have been hurt running out there like that. Twisted your ankle, broken a bone, run through barbed wire. God, that was a stupid thing for you to do.”

“Almost as stupid as you hauling me out of The Garden like a sack of potatoes?” While

she was hissing at him, she also tried to uproot his body from hers. It wasn't happening.

"Now that's where you're wrong, darlin'. What I did at The Garden was necessary, not stupid."

"Necessary, my ass! And if you call me darlin' or 'Dammit, Willa' me one more time I'll..."

"You'll what, *darlin'*?" Drawing the last word out made her see red.

"I'll knock you over that big, fat, conceited head of yours. Now. Get. Off. Of. Me!" With each word she bucked her body beneath his.

"You really want me to get off?" Her movements stopped when she heard his tone—deep, sultry, alluring. "If memory serves, you used to like me on top, or on bottom, or even from behind." Whispering the last words in her ear made her shiver. "If I remember correctly you used to love me from behind."

"You've got a dirty mouth and an even dirtier mind, Chase Kiel." Half-heartedly she pushed his chest away from her own.

"You used to like my dirty mind and my dirty mouth."

"Did not!"

"Did too. As a matter of fact, you had a dirtier mouth and mind than I ever could hope to have. Not that I'm complaining. I did love it." His fingers were tracing circles over the skin of her wrists. The circles were making her head and her body spin.

"Stop."

He chuckled when the words passed her lips in a rasp.

"Now if you really want me to stop you're going to have to be more believable than that. I dream about you. I bet you didn't know that." Her eyes widened at his admission. "I dream about that mouth of yours licking me, sucking me. I also dream about that time in the front seat of my truck. Remember that?"

She did, but she wasn't about to admit it.

Admitting that she too still had dreams, vivid dreams, about being with him would not help her situation or the amount of moisture collecting in between her thighs. Opening her mouth to protest again, she found them covered with his.

The struggle went out of her completely. It didn't matter that they were in the middle of the front yard, it didn't matter that they had been apart, it didn't matter why she had

left—it just didn't matter. All that mattered was that she was back in Chase's arms. Back where she belonged. Where she should have been all along.

## Chapter Eight

He was dying. Dying to sink his cock as deep as it would go inside of her. Dying to feel those lips and that tongue wrapped around his cock just one more time. But he didn't want just one more time—he wanted a lifetime of it.

A lifetime of waking up beside her and slipping into her hot pussy. A lifetime of late-night blowjobs as they watched a movie or even a good old-fashioned roll in the hay. Hell, he had a barn and it was, at the present moment, full of hay. Soft, sweet-smelling hay that stuck to the skin and clung to the hair, if you did it right. Rolling in the hay was a hell of a lot better than rolling around in the damp grass of the front yard. She deserved better than that. They both did.

He pulled his lips away from hers, regretting the move as he did it. Those lush, wet, pink lips were heaven for sure, but he had other ideas.

“Don't stop.” Uttering the words and trying her best to pull him back to his original position made Chase give a second thought to a better location. In the end, he stuck to his guns.

“I don't want to take you in the grass.” Taking her hand and kissing the fingers lightly he explained his plan to her. “When I take you it will be in a nice, soft bed. Preferably the one with my name on it upstairs.” He kissed her forehead and then rolled himself to his feet. When he stood she came with him. As he lifted her from the ground, he cradled her in his arms and began his journey toward the house and toward the threshold that called to him. He should have carried her across it years ago, but late was better than never in his book.

“What about your brothers?”

“If they have any sense at all they will hightail it out of there before I reach the door.”

“Chase, wait.”

He stopped in his tracks.

“We need to talk about some things first. We can't just fall into bed like old times. That's what got us into this mess to begin with. We never talked about things.” He kissed her lips, let his tongue trace them and took his time before saying, “We will talk.”

“Before or after?”

“Before, during, after or all of the above. I don't care. The only thing I care about is

getting you into that house and into my bed where you belong. Where you have always belonged.”

Taking him by surprise, she wrapped her arms tightly around his neck and kissed him deeper than she’d ever kissed him before. He faltered for a moment, felt his knees go weak for a bit and then quickened his steps. The sooner he got to the house the better. If he waited any longer, he would have her naked and under him on the front porch swing. It wouldn’t have been the first time, but this time was different. This time was important.

Chase reached the front door not remembering the steps he took to get there. One of his brothers, the one apparently raised in a barn, had left the door wide open. Chase wasn’t going to complain though. Not having to put her down to turn the knob worked to his advantage. He wasn’t about to give her the chance to run again.

Kicking the door shut behind him, he thought about taking the stairs two at a time and then thought against it. He didn’t want her thinking he was in a rush, even though he was. The sooner he got her in the bedroom the better. The better for both of them. Just feeling her body pressed against his was making him crazy with need.

His door was the first one to the left on the landing. He crossed the threshold, closed the door with his booted foot and placed her gently on her feet just inside. The curtains had been pushed aside and the moonlight had an unobstructed path into the room. It was cast in shadows and dim light, creating a mood for seduction. Would he have to seduce her? He wanted to, but he figured they were way beyond seducing. They had already crossed the line way into want. The want for each other.

He rested his back against the door, took a few cleansing breaths and allowed her to take in the room at her leisure. If she was looking for changes she wouldn’t find many. The furniture was old and sturdy. Handed down from generation to generation. The rug that covered the butterscotch hardwood floors was new, new to her. The last time she had been in this room she had mentioned the need for one. And here it was.

The biggest change in the room was the bed. It was large and tempting. The bedspread was a deep chocolate color and his mother had placed tons of pillows, both caramel and cream, on top of it. Chase didn’t know why he needed all of the pillows, but he had to admit the bed was inviting. He hoped Willa thought so. He had purchased it just for her.

“This is my bed,” she said with wonder in her voice.

“Yeah.” He smiled at her expression. She seemed confused and delighted all at the same time.

“Why did you...?”

Wrapping his arms around from behind and placing his hands on her waist, he whispered lovingly into her ear. “I remembered you said that you wanted it. You went on and on

about it for months. So I bought it. It was supposed to be an engagement present, but we never got that far, did we?" She shook her head, bumping his chin as she did so.

"We messed everything up, didn't we?"

He barely heard what she said. "We didn't mess anything up. You're here now and I'm here with you. That's all that matters." Rubbing his lips against her neck, his cheek came into contact with the wig she still wore. Blonde was her color, but not this blonde, not this style. "Hey, can you do me a favor?"

"What?" She nodded first and asked second.

"Can we get rid of this?" Tugging one of the locks of the wig, he continued, "Although I think it's sexy as hell, I think the real thing is much sexier." Feeling her smile made him smile as well. Slowly and seductively, she raised her arms above her head and pulled pin after pin from beneath the platinum wig. After what seemed like forever, she pulled the wig away from her head by the bangs and flipped her head over, shaking out the mass of wheat-colored strands he knew she still had. The action caused the roundness of her behind to rub against his erection, bringing it back to life instantly.

Lifting her head and running a hand through the curtain her hair created, she smiled at him once more, "Disappointed?"

"Never." Moving his hand through grain-colored hair, he massaged her scalp and let the silky texture caress his fingers. She pressed her head into his hand and moaned at his touch. "You keep making noises like that and we won't make it to the bed. I'll end up fucking you on the floor, and even though the rug looks soft enough, it could be hell on a man's knees."

"Or a woman's." Almost laughing, she spun away from him and placed herself in front of the open bedroom window. She made such a pretty picture—hand gently caressing the sheer curtains, head slightly inclined, body relaxed and at ease. "I love this place."

Her voice was full of memories. He heard it in her tone.

"I think I could sit at this window for the rest of my life and never get bored with the view."

"Do you really believe that?" He stepped behind her and they watched the clouds roll across the moon and place patterns onto the grass below. It was an amazing view, almost as amazing as the woman standing in front of him.

"Yes, nothing is ever the same here and yet it is." Giving a short grunt of laughter, she moved away from the window and perched on the side of the bed, not fully relaxing into the soft depths.

“If you liked the view so much why did you leave in the first place?”

“You know why I left.”

“I don’t. I never did and I never will unless you tell me.” Moving forward, he came to rest on his knees in front of her. At this angle he could look straight into her eyes and she had to look into his. Trying to resist touching her was a wasted effort. His hand traced her delicate cheekbone, the gentle and stubborn line of her chin and the full, pouty plains of those lips he fantasized about so often.

When he touched her, her breath quickened and caught in her throat. He could see the pulse beneath her warm skin beat faster and faster. The simplest touch excited her—it always had. He wondered how many other men over the years had realized that it only took the lightest touch to turn her to putty in their hands.

“How many men have there been?”

She arched an eyebrow at his question.

“How many men have there been since me?” It was a simple question and one that was driving him crazy. Seeing all of those men at The Garden drool all over her hadn’t helped matters. He just wanted to know it wouldn’t change how he felt about her. He just wanted to know.

“Are you kidding me?” She pushed his hand away from her face as she asked her question.

“What?” He saw her nostrils flare, her eyes narrow and caught sight of her fist as it connected with his chin and knocked him to the floor. He felt sorry for Nick now—she did pack quite a punch. He lay back on the rug and stared up at her from the floor. Her hands were still fisted and the look in her eyes called for his blood.

“You are the most arrogant, conceited, egotistical, sorry...*humph!*” The wind whooshed from her lungs as her back connected with the floor.

## Chapter Nine

He did it again. For the second time in one evening, Willa found herself trapped beneath Chase’s body. Fighting tooth and nail to free herself from his hold was making her winded and more tired than she was already. Giving in was not an option. Beating at his chest and aiming for his crotch were her only defenses against the massive form on top of her.

“Would you calm down?” he said as he dodged a fist that was aimed at his perfect nose.

“Calm down? Calm down! Are you serious?” His defenses were down and she hit him

again for good measure.

“What is your deal? I just asked a question.” Wrestling her hands to her sides, he held them there until the fight went out of her.

“No, you just called me a whore!” She aimed her knee at his crotch and would have connected, but he was ready for her assault this time.

“Did not!”

“Did too! ‘So, Willa, tell me, since we have been *broken* up, how many men have you fucked?’”

“I didn’t say it like that. I was only asking because it was on my mind, that’s all.” He rolled away from her and sat up, placing his back against the frame of the bed and waiting for her to do the same. Willa was tired. She was tired of fighting, tired of arguing, tired of everything. She didn’t move. She lay on the rug, which was very soft, and stared at the ceiling and tried to wrangle her breathing and her temper.

“Tell me something, Chase. Do you always ask every question that crosses your mind?” Titling her head the slightest bit gave her the ability to see his face from her position. Sitting with his knees drawn up, booted heels on the floor and one hand raking the hair on top of his head, he looked mouth-watering. Willa closed her eyes and tried to ignore the fluttering sensation in her heart and in her stomach.

“I’ve found that the only stupid question is the question that is never asked.”

“Do you really want me to answer your question? What if you don’t like what you hear?”

“Whatever the answer is, it won’t matter. My feelings for you won’t change. They haven’t in the years you’ve been gone and they won’t just because you might have been with a few people while we were apart.”

“What if it’s more than a few? What if it’s ten? Twenty? A hundred different men since you and I were together, huh? Could you handle that?” Studying his face, she found him studying her as well. He didn’t look shocked, he didn’t look horrified and he didn’t look mad. He looked like he was deciding on the best way to answer.

“Were there a hundred men?”

She could lie to him. She could lie and say yes and pick a hundred names out of the air and fling them at his overinflated ego, but she didn’t. In truth, there hadn’t been anyone. Not a soul. Only him, always him.

“No. There weren’t a hundred men.” Finding the energy, she rolled from her back and

onto her feet. Pacing the floor and rolling the tension from her shoulders helped ease her mind and the fury that boiled in her belly. "This is one of the reasons we broke up."

"What reason would that be?" He moved from the floor and took her place on the edge of the bed.

"We fight. We always fight. Always have, always will." That was the truth.

"Yeah, we used to fight, but we also made up. That is the part I remember, the making up. We were always really good at making up." Crossing to her, he pulled her into his arms. "Do you remember that? Making up?" His fingers lifted her chin so that once again she was staring him in the face.

"Yes. But that's not the point. A relationship cannot be based on the 'making up' part. What happens when the making up stops and the fighting keeps going?"

"That won't happen to us."

"It happened to my parents. Do you remember that?" When the words passed her lips, Willa wished she could take them back. She'd already made one trip down memory lane this evening and she wasn't ready for another. Especially a trip that passed by her absent parents.

"Is that why you left? Because of what went on between your mom and dad? Willa, I would never leave you."

"You can't say that. You can't say that and mean it. You don't know what could happen between us. Do you think my father ever thought, in the beginning, that he would up and leave my mother? Do you think that my mother ever thought about my father leaving? Leaving her, walking out on her and his kid." Tearing up at the thought, Willa swiped her hands over her eyes. Tears did no good. They didn't solve anything. They sure as hell didn't make things better or different.

"I would never leave you. I would never in a million years, no matter what, walk out on my wife or my children." At the first sight of her tears, Chase pulled her into his arms once more. She felt them supporting her body and his hands caressing her back. Even in her state his stroke could still make her shiver.

"It's not just that." She pushed away from him. "What if I'm just like her? What if I'm not strong enough to handle you leaving and I walk out on our kids? What happens to them then? Will your mother be left to raise them like my aunt raised me? Would Brent raise them? Jay? What would happen to them?"

Willa stopped herself from sobbing. The thought of leaving him killed her, but the thoughts of not being able to raise her children were worse. Men left. Willa's father did. Walked out without a word, leaving her mother young, broke and full of heartache. Willa

decided long ago that leaving Chase, who was strong by all accounts, was better than leaving any children she might have.

It had broken her mother, left her a shell of a woman. That was when her mother's sister had stepped in and raised Willa. Her mother had grieved herself into an early grave. Willa wouldn't go through that. She wouldn't put any children of hers through that. She hurt the one she knew could survive—Chase.

"Just stop." He pulled her back to him, making her body collide and collapse into his. "Just stop. That won't happen. You are not your mother and I am not your father. I will love you for the rest of my life and I would never even think about leaving any of my kids in the care of my brothers. Can you imagine? Jason would have nipples on beer bottles and I don't even want to think about Hayden getting a hold of them." He smiled through his speech—the gesture and the remark made her smile too. He was good at that. Making her smile. Almost as good as he was at making up.

"You do realize we are talking about kids who don't even exist?" She tried to laugh but the sound was muffled against his chest.

"They could. If you quit talking and let me get you into this bed."

"You were always good at that. Getting me into bed. I remember that."

"What else do you remember, huh?" He asked as he placed kisses along her chin and down the side of her neck. His tongue came to rest on her pumping pulse in her neck. He flicked and played along the point until her knees became weak and her pussy clenched inside her panties.

"Do you remember the first time I ate that sweet pussy of yours?"

She moaned at his words and nodded. She did remember the first time she'd felt his lips against her clit. He'd nibbled at the bundle of nerves and then sucked it into his mouth. She'd come instantly all over his mouth.

Embarrassment had followed the orgasm, but he'd given her little time to fully feel any of the humiliation. Seconds after her first orgasm, he'd brought another one down on her with his fingers. She could still feel the pressure they'd created inside of her small, tight passage. The memory was almost enough to make her come, standing there with only his lips and fingers on her neck.

"You tasted so good. So sweet. Sometimes I think I can still taste you. I want to taste you again. I want to lay you down, rip those panties away from that pussy, spread your legs and taste you. All of you. I want to lick and suck and devour every bit of you. Can I? Will you let me, Willa? I'll beg if I have to but I don't think I can stand here another minute without my tongue being inside of you. Will you let me, let me lick you, let me make you come?" he moaned the question into her slick mouth.

Willa answered his moan with one of her own and allowed him to move her to the bed. His mouth was fire on top of hers and she couldn't wait to feel that hot, wet tongue between her legs.

She kissed him again, the way he'd taught her—open mouth against open mouth, tongue against tongue. He groaned as her tongue made contact with his, the vibrations made her nipples ache and her clit throb.

She pressed her lower body closer to his, feeling the hard outline of his cock beneath the denim jeans. She whimpered. She kissed her way across his mouth and down the side of his neck. She saw his pulse beating beneath the flesh and couldn't stop herself from licking the throbbing spot and nipping it with her teeth.

She heard his sharp intake of breath, thought she'd hurt him and pulled back. He wouldn't let her. He pulled her down against his lap, bruising her with the force. She liked it. Grinding her hips slowly, she showed him how much she liked it.

“Are you wet for me?”

Blushing, she nodded her head.

“Let me feel.” Leaning back on his lap gave him better access into the scrap of material she called underwear. He let his hands roam her body, rubbing her breasts, her arms and the top of her thighs. She tried to resist teasing him but couldn't. She hooked her thumbs in the sides of the panties and pulled just the slightest bit, lowering them on her hips, exposing just the barest bit of flesh beneath them. He watched every move. He licked his lips. He waited.

The pink fabric of her bikini panties was visible against her flesh. He sat up straighter on the bed. One hand grabbed her waist and he let the other slip between the material and her flesh. He touched her, caressed her and tempted her.

Even after all these years, he found no problem parting the lips of her pussy and thrusting a finger deep inside. Moaning, she moved to give him more access. He pressed his finger in and out of her body while his other hand instructed her how to move on him.

“Ride it for me, baby.” He thrust the digit deeper, causing her to cry out. “Are you going to come for me? He groaned. “Are you?” Replacing one finger with two, he stretched her, making her small entrance burn with the assault. The blend of pleasure and pain made her crave more.

“I want you. I want you now.”

Jerking his hands from her body, he moved them to the button of his pants. The task was done quickly. Buttons undone, zipper lowered, he removed his hard cock from his jeans.

Willa's eyes flared at the sight of it. It wasn't the first time she had seen it, touched it or sucked it—but it was the first time in quite a while. She'd forgotten how big it was.

Not only was it massive in length but also in thickness. She remembered now that she couldn't close her fingers around it. The thought made her wiggle to get closer to him and to that gorgeous cock her mouth wanted desperately. She watched as he stroked the flesh. Base to tip. His hand was tight, that was how he liked it. His movements became quicker and his grip became tighter.

"Willa?" his voice pleaded. "Willa, I can't take much more." His breathing hitched and he stilled his hands. Creamy drops of fluid appeared at the head and she ached to take it in her mouth. She licked her lips.

"Oh, no you don't." His hand grabbed hers and clamped it around his dick. "You can't use your mouth. I come every time you put your mouth on me." He did and she loved it. Here was this shy, timid girl who could make the man beneath her come minutes, even seconds, after sucking him into her throat.

"I want to be inside you. I want to feel you all wet, hot and slick around me. I want to come inside you—deep inside you. I want to make you come around my cock. Can I Willa? Can I fuck you?"

Before she could answer, his lips took hers. The kisses that had started out innocent and sweet were now carnal and destructive. Willa rubbed her body against his and stroked the heavy cock she held in her hand.

"Don't," she heard him say, but she couldn't stop. Tightening her grip, she pumped faster and faster. She could feel his pulse beating beneath her moving hand. He groaned a ragged curse. Willa felt his legs tighten beneath her and saw his head fall back. He was close, so close.

Moving quickly, she removed herself from his lap and knelt in front of him. With one hand still jerking him off, she moved her hair away from her face. Then she swallowed as much of his erection as she could. He tasted so warm and male. A salty, sweet mix flowed across her tongue and she tightened the hold she had on him with both her hand and her mouth. Taking him deeper than she had ever taken him, she let the head stroke the back of her throat.

His hands fisted in her hair and knowing he was close, she took the decision away from him. Chase's cock pressed to the back of her throat, her hand working rapidly up and down the length still exposed, Willa swallowed. The motion of her throat muscles contracting caused him to shudder and come. Hot waves of the salty, sweet mixture coated her tongue and glided easily down her throat.

His breathing was hard and shallow. His eyes were still closed and his member jumped

as she let it ease its way from her mouth. She saw him smile and he pulled her close to him.

She'd satisfied him, or so she'd thought. Without missing a beat, Chase rolled Willa beneath him and captured her mouth. She couldn't get enough of him, and she remembered something else about Chase Kiel she had forgotten. He was nearly insatiable when it came to sex. He would match orgasm for orgasm, favor for favor and touch for touch.

Leaving her flat on her back, chest heaving, and pussy contracting and begging to be touched again he stood above her and gazed down at her. His jeans were still unbuckled and Willa could see that his hard cock was back to full form. The head peeked out at her from the opening in his jeans. Chase followed her gaze and stroked the member slowly and with purpose. He was ready again and she was ready for him.

With ease and practice she popped the buttons on the bustier without taking her eyes from his face. She saw his cock jump each time a button was released. It was the one time in their entire relationship Willa was in control. She took her time. Each button revealed just a hint of skin. When the buttons were completely undone all she had to do was part the sides and let the material fall away, exposing her breasts. They were bigger now—better she thought. What would he think? Would he think they were too big? They had grown in the years apart.

“Let me.”

Willa still clutched the sides of the garment in her hands and watched as he moved her hands away and parted the material with his own. Sucking in his breath and moaning, Chase stared at her breasts longer than she would have liked. She started to grab the material and cover herself but he wouldn't let her.

“God, you're beautiful.”

He lowered his body to meet hers. His torso rested between her parted thighs and he let his mouth connect with the nipple of her right breast. Her reaction was involuntary. Her back bowed off the bed, a groan erupted from her throat and her hands held him to her.

Lapping at one nipple then the other, at her request, he bathed them both before taking one plump peak between his lips and sucking greedily. The suction caused Willa's insides to clench and made her body writhe beneath his.

“You like that?” He asked, before taking the second nipple into his mouth and nipping it with his teeth.

“Yes!” She gasped. Her nails dug into his shoulders and she realized he still had the majority of his clothes on, which wasn't working. Levering herself into a sitting position, she broke the connection he had with her breasts.

“What?” he asked, confusion thick in his tone.

“I want you naked. And I want it now.” Sliding her hands up his sides, she took the shirt with them. He aided her in the removal when the material reached his head. As Chase pulled the shirt from his head, Willa took the opportunity to return a bit of the favor. She flattened her tongue against one of the flat, brown male nipples that hid beneath the swirls of hair on his chest.

She heard his breathing change and felt his hands play with the lines of her back. He held her close as she worshipped his chest with her tongue. While she let her tongue play its tune against his flat stomach, she pushed his jeans down his hips with her hands.

“Willa?” Chase tilted her head back, stopping her actions.

“What?” Was he stopping her? No, they couldn’t stop, they hadn’t even started. “What?” she asked, haste and anxiety pushing her voice.

“You’ll never get past my boots.” He smiled at her and kissed her lips. He took a seat beside her on the edge of the bed and removed his boots, socks, jeans and boxers in almost one fluid motion. Willa started to do the same, but stopped when he grabbed the hand lowering the zipper of her boot. “Your boots stay on, but those panties have to go.”

Willa let him push her back against the bed and watched as he raised her hips and slid the panties down her thighs and past the white boots that encased her legs. Throwing the wad of material over his shoulder, he spread her legs and placed his body between them.

“Now it’s my turn.”

Willa let her eyes close as his tongue made its first pass over the smooth flesh of her pussy. She wondered for a second if he liked the waxed flesh beneath his lips and decided he did. He did if his moaning was any indication.

She couldn’t stop herself from watching him. Pushing her hands beneath her body, she relaxed as she watched Chase devour her clit. He was so good. He licked her, sucked her clit into his mouth and then licked it while it was there. Willa didn’t think her pleasure could mount any more until he eased a finger into her pussy. Her breath caught in her throat and she began to move against his mouth and against his finger. She wanted more. The single digit felt thick inside of her body but she needed much, much more. She needed him. She needed his body on top of hers, his cock buried deep inside of her, and she needed it now.

“I need you.” Her breath was choppy, making her words the same. He smiled against her pussy and kept licking at her clit as he added a second finger inside of her. He pumped them in and out, over and over again, making her frantic and wild.

“I need you inside of me.”

“I am inside of you. See?” He pushed his fingers further into her pussy and her muscles clenched around them, not wanting them to retreat, but they did. “You’re so tight, so soft, so wet.”

“I want *you* inside me.” His fingers thrust in and out of her body as she made her statement. She was getting close. She could feel it and she could hear the sucking, wet sounds her pussy was making against his seeking fingers. She loved the noises. Flesh against flesh.

“What part of me do you want inside of you? Fingers?” He pumped once more into her, making her cry out.

“No.” She shook her head as she said the word, making her hair fly and go wild just as her body was.

“Tongue?” He removed his fingers from her body and replaced them with his probing tongue.

“No.” Willa’s head fell back against the mound of pillows on the bed. Why did a man need so many pillows? Who cared?

“What part do you want?” His tongue entered her body again, making her body arch against it.

“*You*. I want you.” Pulling at his shoulders did no good. His body wouldn’t budge from its resting place.

“Just tell me what you want and I’ll give it to you. Just say the words and I’m yours.”

He wanted the words. He always did. Chase was always very vocal in bed. The words seemed to turn him on as much as the actions. Truth be told, they did the same for Willa. In bed, actions spoke just as loudly as words.

“I want you. I want you to...”

“To what?” He slid his body along the length of hers until he was face-to-face, chest-to-chest, cock-to-pussy with her.

“I want you to—”

He silenced her with his mouth, then asked. “You want me to what?”

“I want you to fuck me.” She grabbed his hair and pulled his face to hers, seizing his lips and winding her legs around his hips. Chase gave her what she wanted. In one fluid

motion, he joined their bodies together. Willa saw bursts of light behind her eyelids when he filled her completely. It had been so long. Years since they'd been together. The years had changed a lot of things, but it didn't change how he felt inside of her. Right, he felt right. He belonged with her. She belonged with him. They belonged together. Willa smiled at the thought and flexed the muscles inside of her body, pulling Chase closer to her—mind, body and soul.

## Chapter Ten

Chase was in Heaven. She was so tight. Even tighter than he remembered. He tried to control his movements. He was doing a pretty good job of it too until he felt her tighten around him. He was a goner.

Chase settled his mouth on top of hers, slid his tongue inside to meet hers and thrust and pumped his body into hers. He felt her rake her nails against the muscles of his back. He then felt those same nails sink into his ass and hold him close. She wanted more. She wanted faster, deeper and harder and so did he. Bracing his weight on his forearms, he looked down into her flushed expression. Her eyes were dreamy and at half-mast. Her breasts swayed and moved with each thrust he gave her and the lines her legs created around him made him harder than he was already.

“Look at me.” He watched her eyes open and saw those beautiful blues travel the length of their bodies, finally coming to rest where they were joined. “Watch me fuck you.” He withdrew his cock from her body and saw that her pussy had coated it in her thick juices. He watched her face as he withdrew and then plunged back inside. So tight.

“Do you like that?” he asked, placing a kiss on her parted lips.

“Yes.” She kissed him back, letting her tongue duel with his and trace his lips.

“Do you want more?” He pumped in and out as they talked.

“Yes.”

“Tell me. Tell me what you want, baby. Whatever you want I'll give it to you.” Kissing her again, he waited for her to answer him.

“More, I want more.”

“I can do that.” He pumped faster. The action made his balls tighten and his dick ache for release, but he waited. Waited on her. He wanted to feel her come around his cock. Wanted to feel her sweet cream coat his body and hers.

“I want you to make me come.” She grabbed his shoulders and gripped his body to hers. “Make me come, Chase. Make me come all over you.” Then she started to move. Chase felt her grind her clit against his body, felt her pussy grip his dick and felt her nails bite

into his back, holding him still as she rode him. Chase heard her panting begin and knew it wouldn't be long. He increased his speed and drove into her body time after time, kissing her lips, her cheeks, her nose, her neck, any part of her he could reach.

"Chase!" She gasped as she wrapped her arms around his neck.

"Yeah, baby? You about ready to come all over me?" He pounded harder into her as he asked.

"Yes, yes. More, please, more."

He gave her what she wanted. Thrusting his body as hard and as far as it would go into her, Chase felt her pussy twitch around him and then felt a flood of juice surround him. That was all it took. One more plunge sent him straight into release. He felt the hot spurts of his come fill her already dripping pussy. He loved feeling the mix of him and her coating each other's bodies.

"Chase?"

"Yeah, baby?" He pushed the few strands of hair away from her face and kissed her lush lips.

"I love you." Her eyes pooled with liquid as she spilled her heart into his hands, and then she said it again, "I love you."

"I love you too, Willa. I always have, always will." Hugging her body to his, he rolled them once, bringing her body to rest on top of his. "I never wanted you to leave."

"I don't want to leave. I want to stay here. Right here for the rest of my life. Can I?"

Chase pulled her to him and surrounded her small frame with his arms. Pulling her close, he slid them both beneath the covers and into the comfort the bed offered. He'd wanted for so long to lie next to her in this bed, their bed. It was better than he could have ever imagined.

"Willa, if you want to stay here, you know you can. I think you might find it hard to leave with me attached to you anyway. If I have any thing to say about it, I would keep you here forever. Hopefully wedded, bedded and bred as soon as possible."

She laughed at his statement and slapped his shoulders lightly and with a little bit of flirt attached to it. "Wedded, bedded and bred. Gee whiz, Mr. Kiel, you sure know how to make a girl feel good."

"I'll make you feel any way you want to feel as long as you're happy. When you stop being happy is when we need to sit down and talk. Talk. No more running off and letting things stay as they lie. You're right we need to talk more."

“I thought we talked enough.” She said as she adjusted herself to a sitting position on top of him. Chase watched her take his cock in her hands and bring it back to life. God, she was good at that.

“Maybe we could talk a little more,” he said between clenched teeth. “Or maybe not.” She laughed at him, ran her tongue over the head of his dick. “Willa?”

“Yes?” Rising on her knees she placed the head of his cock against the entrance of her pussy and moved it back and forth repeatedly until it was wet with her.

“Please.”

“Please, what?” Barely, she slid him into her body.

“Fuck me.” Grabbing her hips, he impaled her body with his.

“You want me to ride you?” she asked as she moved slowly up and down.

“Yes.” He lifted his hips and arched his back, bringing them closer together.

“You want me to make you come?” Lowering her chest to his, she let her nipples graze his and let her lips nip and tempt his.

“Yes.” He fisted his hand in her hair and pulled her to him.

“What else do you want?” Her tongue traced the outlines of his lips and then dipped inside for a taste.

“I want you. I want you forever.”

She stopped and looked deep into his eyes.

“Well, you’ve got me.” She kissed him and smiled into his mouth.

“Now,” he said pushing her back into her seated position. “I believe you have a little riding to do.” And she did. Up and down, she moved faster and faster. Harder and harder, grinding and rubbing her clit against him until her orgasms ran into one another. Chase lost count of how many times she came on top of him. All he recalled was screaming her name and his oath to love her for life as he spilled his come inside of her.

They fell asleep that way—her on top of him, their bodies connected. Chase fell asleep for the first time in a long time without any dreams of the woman who tormented him. Instead, that woman was resting peacefully with him. Where she belonged and where she would stay if Chase had anything to say about it.

## Chapter Eleven

When Willa woke, she was startled for a minute but then she felt the warm arms embracing her and she relaxed. She was in bed. In bed with Chase.

Trying her best not to disturb her partner, she rolled away slowly and quietly. The clock on the bedside table read 4:03 a.m. Perfect, she thought. Knowing that her cell phone was resting safely in her purse back at The Garden, she reached for Chase's.

Flipping the phone open illuminated the room more than the moonlight already did. She dialed the number she knew by heart and listened as a song began to play in her ear. After the first verse and a chorus the call connected.

"Hello?" The low voice on the other end sounded sleepy and confused.

"Hey. It's me." Those were the only words Willa got out of her mouth before the caller on the other end started ranting and raving at her.

"Where the hell are you? Are you okay? I tried calling you and all I got was your damn voicemail. God, you scared me to death."

"I'm fine. Better than fine if you want to know the truth." Willa peeked at Chase's face to make sure he was still asleep. She couldn't stop her fingers from running down the middle of his chest and toying with the thin line of hair that ran beneath the sheet.

"Well, where are you? Do you need me to come and get you?"

"No, I'm in Millbrook."

"Millbrook?" There was a pause and then silence on the other end and then, "Oh my God! You're with him aren't you? You are. Don't even answer that. So, what's going on? What's happening? Tell me everything."

Willa covered her mouth with her hand to stifle the giggle that was forcing its way up her throat. If the sound came out of her mouth she would wake Chase and even though the idea had merit, she really needed to finish this conversation.

"I don't have time to tell you everything. I just wanted to call and let you know that I'm fine."

"So...are there wedding bells in the future?"

Willa thought about the question for a minute. Were there? Maybe, but not anytime soon.

"I think I'm going to try and take things slower this time. Let us get to know each other

again.”

“Right. Lie to yourself, but don’t lie to me. Just remember something.”

“What’s that?”

“I look great in black and I don’t do ruffles. I do lace, delightfully well, though.”

Willa couldn’t stop the giggle this time. The sound made Chase move and he pulled her closer to his body. Willa felt his awakening erection caress the small of her back and thought it best to end the call and give all of her attention to it.

“I know. Listen, I will give you a call later. Do you have to work tomorrow?”

“Yeah, but I don’t go in until late. You know that.”

Willa did. But there would be no more late nights for her unless they involved Chase, her and a bed.

“I’ll call you later. Sweet dreams.”

“You too. You know you deserve them.”

“So do you.” Willa heard a snort on the other end and then heard. “Maybe, we’ll see. Talk to you later.”

“Yeah, later.” Willa closed the phone and put it back where she had found it. Rolling once, she brought her body against his and rubbed slowly back and forth. Chase and his erection were wide awake and ready for her. Willa took what he gave her—body, heart and soul.

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Underneath the Texas sky spotted with stars, Nick and Hayden Kiel sat in two of the rocking chairs on the front porch and waited for the muted sounds from the bedroom upstairs to cease. It had been ages since either one had spoken.

Brent had retired to the north cabin hours ago, mumbling something about Chase being a glutton for punishment. Jason had followed a few minutes later, after retrieving several beers from the refrigerator inside the main house.

This left Nick and Hayden alone, sitting on the front porch, waiting until it was safe to

take to their beds. Even though the north cabin was furnished, it only had two beds and no couch, as of yet. Nick figured that would change shortly. Willa was back. And his brother was whole again.

“I told you so,” Hayden muttered into the dark night.

Nick glanced his way and saw that Hayden’s eyes were closed even though he wasn’t asleep.

“Told me what?”

“I told you her favorite words were ‘yes’ and ‘more’.”

Nick watched the smile cross his brother’s face and felt his own appear moments later. “So you did.”

“Looks like we are going to have to find a new place to sleep here soon. I can’t handle hearing that all night. Especially now that I know what she looks like half-naked. I’ll turn into a walking hard-on.”

“I thought you already were.”

Smiling, Hayden nodded his head and replied, “Guess I am.”

Minutes passed in silence and then Hayden broke the barrier again.

“You think it’s safe to go in? I mean, surely they’re finished by now.” Nick considered making his way up the stairs to his room and thought against it. Chase and Willa needed their time alone.

“I think we best find alternate places to lay down for the night. It’s a nice night. We could just sleep under the stars.” It wouldn’t be the first time they had. Some nights there was nothing better than sleeping beneath the stars and letting the morning light act as an alarm clock. They were cowboys after all. The real deal.

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

Strong, Silent Type

*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.”

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

Buckling Down

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*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.

*Enjoy the following excerpt for* Buckling Down:

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.”



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