

The Cowboy Plan

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McDONALD

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Big girls don't cry over a spilled chocolate milkshake—they run like crazy.

Alex Barrett's all too "real life" sentence is almost over. She's spent years being a parent to her siblings—and her flaky mother. What was her reward, other than an empty bed? Nothing. And now that she's almost free, nothing's exactly what she plans to do. Except have fun.

One minute she's one of thousands of panting female fans at hotter-than-hot Drew Hartford's concert. The next, she's all wet—and so is he. Okay, so it's only because she dumped a milkshake all over him.

Drew's meteoric rise to the top of the country charts is fueled by the swooning women who throw themselves at his feet. Alex? She's different. When their icy paths cross, she doesn't throw her panties, she beats a hasty retreat. There's only one way to keep this intriguing lady around long enough to charm her out of those panties: offer her a job she can't refuse.

Drew may be every female's definition of a fantasy man, but a paycheck and a roll in the hay do not a relationship make. Besides, Alex is tired of living 24/7 for someone else. Even a someone who's offering her dreams of happily ever after...

Warning: Hot and heavy loving; stuff country songs are made of.

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Denise Belinda McDonald

Dedication

For C.C.; inspiration extraordinaire.

To: (My BFF) Sandy Jones for always being there for me. Amie Stuart for helping with gobs of stalking, I mean, “research”. The Faulkners because y’all are so great! Felicia Beam Edward because you asked me to.

Write on, Chicas ~

Alan and the boys, thanks for being the best support team around.

To my editor, Tera Kleinfelter. You seriously rock!

Chapter One

“That man is so hot.” Alex fanned herself with the valet claim ticket. “I haven’t been to a concert like that in years. And the new song...if those weren’t real tears in his eyes...” She sighed. “The woman who would leave him is a fool.”

Her friend nudged her arm. “Look, it’s Drew’s tour bus.” A long, black coach pulled from the lot. “Let’s follow it.”

“What?” Alex had to force her mouth shut. She shook her head. “Are you nuts, Celia?”

“As a card-carrying Drewdette, isn’t it your sworn duty to fawn all over the man? What better way than following him and seeing where he goes?”

A smile curved Alex’s mouth as she shook her head again. “I don’t know...”

The valet pulled her car in front of the small group of people waiting at the stand and held the door open. The bus, once on the street, took a wide right onto Main, away from downtown Fort Worth.

“Come on.” Celia pushed Alex into the car and ran to the passenger side. “Let’s go. Let’s go. They’re getting away.”

Alex clutched the steering wheel at ten and two. She stared at her friend for a long moment then, in a fit of giggles, she floored it, cut off the car next to her and followed the bus.

After a couple of slow blocks, the two-vehicle caravan pulled up in front of a closed mini-strip mall adjacent to a burger joint Alex thought had gone out of business years before. “Well?”

“I need to pee.”

“Now?”

Celia opened the door, lifted one foot and waggled her eyebrows. “It’ll give us an excuse to go inside.”

“For?”

“Maybe they stopped to get burgers.”

“And you think after doing a concert he’s just gonna walk in and order his own food?”

“Man’s gotta eat.”

Alex paused with her hand on the keys. “Yeah, sure.” She turned off the Honda Accord and pushed open her door. “I’ll buy a drink or something.”

The valet tag still hung from the keys. She ripped it off before they entered. “A bit obvious,” she said to Celia when she nearly knocked her over trying to throw it away. Not that she thought Drew Hartford, *Country Music Monthly’s* hottie of the year, would really go into Burger Barn.

Celia headed straight for the restrooms and Alex got in line behind a huge, burly man. His forearms had muscles on top of muscles. She scanned the seating area in hopes of finding the crooner but the only guys not jailbait were two police officers and a wrinkled octogenarian.

Oh well, it was worth a try. She did wonder why the bus parked in front of a wireless phone store that didn’t open for another—she checked her watch, uh one a.m.—nine hours. She sighed and glanced up at the menu but the burly man blocked whatever they offered on the middle of the board.

Alex shifted from one foot to the other and tried to read it all. Why, she wasn’t sure. She certainly wasn’t hungry. Then the human eclipse must have realized she couldn’t see and stepped off to one side. The man in front of him, clad in a plain T, jeans and a baseball cap pulled low over his eyes, glanced back over his shoulder, but just as quick returned his attention to the teen taking his order.

When he finished, he and his shadow moved to the side and sidled up to the condiments counter piled high with napkins and straws.

“I’ll have a large chocolate shake.” And for Celia’s inexplicable need to hydrate, “And a water.”

“It’ll be just a minute.”

“Oh, sure.” Alex stepped back from the counter, avoided the hulk and stood against a wooden railing.

Her hands stung from all the clapping and slapping the table during the concert. Drew Hartford knew how to rile up a crowd. His jean-clad hips gyrated and drove the fans into a tizzy. His Texas twang set every heart to flutter, even the men, if for no other reason than their dates would be so wound up after the show they’d more than likely play a sweet melody of their own.

Alex thought to her empty bed at home.

Well, not entirely empty, Romeo would be there. Probably on his pillow—and hers. She needed to teach that boy how to share. But who was she to argue with a hundred-and-fifty-pound St. Bernard-creature unknown mix. He took up all the space he wanted and never once apologized for it.

She laughed and toyed with the silver “A” hanging from a chain around her neck.

“You at that concert tonight?”

Alex turned, puzzled as to who spoke. Baseball-cap man kept his gaze riveted to the tip of his worn western boots. She glanced up at his sidekick, his gaze locked on hers, eyebrows raised.

“Who me?” Brilliant, Alex.

“The stamp on your hand...” He motioned to the “over 21” stamp inked on the back of her right hand. The dancehall’s “we card” proof. “Thought maybe you caught the show.”

She still toyed with her pendant. “Uh, yeah. I did. Good show.”

“He writes all his own music y’know.”

“Super.”

“D’you like his new song?”

What did this guy know of Drew Hartford? A head-banging slam-jam looked more his speed. Not a country crooner who made women swoon and delivery rooms fill. The scantily clad gal tattoo on his overly brawny biceps—one she was sure would dance if he flexed his arm—made her think twice before her flippant mouth ran amuck. The little censor button—never having been activated much—stayed off, though, as she said, “Brought a tear to my eye.”

He shifted. “I’m just saying.”

Guilt washed over her. “Who knew the hottie had a sentimental heart.”

“You don’t think he’s genuine?”

This was the last conversation she imagined herself having in the middle of the night in a burger joint in downtown Fort Worth.

“Actually, I do.” Alex closed her eyes. The melodious tune had washed over her with a tinge of sadness and wanting as Drew had almost whispered the last two words. She sighed, opened her eyes and studied the large man’s curious face. What the hell, she glanced over at two of Fort Worth’s finest dining on burgers and fries in a corner booth on the other side of the restaurant. How much trouble could she get in? And it wasn’t like she had anything better to do than confab with this man. “So much emotion in two little words. Desire me.”

She shook her head and released the necklace. “Quite sad really. I hope he didn’t write it from experience. It’d be...too hard, I think. A woman walking away like that. Without so much as a good-bye.”

“Who had the chocolate shake?”

Alex pushed away from the railing. “That’s mine. Thanks.” Already, the Texas heat coated the plastic cup with condensation. She had to grip it with both hands. “Damn this is big.”

“And your water, ma’am.”

“Oh.” She pivoted to reach for the second cup. The shake slid, and slid some more until it fell from her grasp and splattered all over the tile floor and the man in the baseball cap.

All the chatter died away. Alex could feel every eye on her as the sweet aroma of spilt chocolate wafted around her.

“I am so sorry.” She pawed at the napkin dispenser and pulled several loose before she squatted—though difficult in her tight jeans—and patted at his boots and faded denim.

“Don’t worry about it, darlin’.” Large, calloused hands stilled hers as the voice sunk in.

Her gaze drifted up tight, faded denim, cupping and hugging every inch of muscular thighs to a silver belt buckle. A dark T-shirt covered flat abs with just a hint of ripple and the pecs of a well-sculpted man. She gulped. *God he was so damn fine.*

It was the mouth, though, that made her pulse skitter into overdrive... How many times had she fantasized about those lips? Her mouth dried as her vision filled with the crooning six-foot-two man of dreams and desires.

She dared not look him in the eyes, though she could remember the color from staring at his CD covers so many times. The chocolate brown orbs matched his thick hair to a yummy T. Almost the color of the mess she'd made all over his worn boots.

"I...I. My shake. All over you." Alex pulled her hands free and tried to clean the frozen mess, but the more she wiped the wider the frosty stain spread.

"Excuse me." The woman from behind the counter came over with a mop and a big goofy grin. "I'll get the floor."

Alex stood. A handful of limp, wet napkins dripped from her fingers. Her gaze darted everywhere, anywhere that wasn't Drew Hartford. "I am so sorry. It slipped."

He chuckled and patted her shoulder. "It's okay. Really. Things like that happen all the time."

She finally zeroed in on his face. A smile crooked the corner of his goateed mouth. The dark brown eyes filled with merriment glittered—yes glittered—at her.

"Women dump their drinks on you?"

"No. That's not what I... Hey, you're getting it all over you now." Drew reached over and took the soiled paper products from her and shoved them in the trash beside the Hulk. He pulled a clean wad of napkins from the dispenser. "For your hands."

"Um, thanks."

"Can I have your autograph, Mr. Hartford?" Mop tucked in the crook of her arm, the young girl in a paper Burger Barn hat stared up hopefully at the man.

"Sure." Drew took the proffered pen and paper and looked down at her. "What's your name, honey?"

"Okey dokey, ducky." Celia came up behind Alex and wrapped an arm around her shoulder. "Did you get the drinks?"

"Celia. Where have you been?"

"There was a line. The woman in front of me started talking. She got her tattoo at the same place I got the cross last year—not the big Celtic cross. That was Lester's place. The little purple one with the wings. Anyhoo, we started to compare ink." Celia waved at her hip. "She had this huge, yellow—"

"Great. That's really interesting. Grab your water, it's right there." Alex pushed Celia over to the counter. "Let's go."

Drew was signing a piece of paper for the mop girl when Alex looked his way. He glanced up and winked at her, but before he could give the young girl back her pen, Alex raised her hand in a weak good-bye. "I am so very sorry. I... Bye." She turned and hurried out the door, dragging Celia in her wake, the woman's stilettos clicking on the tiles.

“What bug flew up your butt?” Celia took a draw on her straw. “Slow down.”

“I just dumped a thirty-two ounce chocolate shake on Drew Hartford. I wanna get out of here before he has the police arrest me for assault with a frozen beverage.”

“You WHAT?” Celia whipped her gaze to the building and back to Alex. She tried to dig her heels in, but the stiletto sandals gave little traction as they crossed the parking lot to the car. “You have got to be kidding me. I wanna see.”

“Get in the car.”

“Alex. Stop.” Celia slammed her hand on the roof of the car. “Here’s your opening. Go talk to the man.” She bounced, set her cup down and clapped her long fingered hands together. “Oh, this is rich.”

Alex shook her head. “I covered the man with a shake. Get in the car.”

“Alex...”

“Please? I really need to get out of this freaking parking lot. Please just get in the *damn car*.”

Celia’s eyes widened before she gave a quick nod and lowered herself into the Honda’s bucket seat.

“Thank you,” Alex whispered and got behind the wheel and started up the car. She took a steadying breath and backed out of her spot.

Celia started to roll down the window. “My water.” She glanced at Alex. “Never mind.”

As Alex pulled from the lot toward the highway, she thought she saw Drew and his shadow run from the restaurant. That would be silly. Other than litigation, what would he want with her?

“The whole shake?”

“Yeah.” The two women burst into laughter.

“Tell them to get the bus ready,” Drew yelled at Robbie, then watched the car pull into the light traffic and head east toward the highway. He glanced at the silver chain in his hand. He’d seen the silver “A” pendant fall to the tiled floor when the two women fled the restaurant.

“Your food, sir.” Brandi-with-an-I brought his food to him. “You don’t want to forget this.”

“Thanks.” He grabbed the sack of burgers. When the Honda stopped at a light, he crossed over to the bus, but didn’t lose sight of the vehicle.

What the hell was he doing? A small voice in the back of his head all but yelled at him. If he was prone to talking to himself, he’d have to admit he really didn’t know. But something had come over him when she answered Robbie’s probing about the new song.

“Come on.” Robbie hung from the door. “It’s warmed up.”

Drew sprinted across the lot and into the bus. As the door hissed shut behind him, he looked at the driver. “Follow that car.”

“Good one.”

“I’m dead serious, Jake, now move it.”

Jake shrugged and put the bus in gear.

Drew's fingers drummed on the railing as the coach slowly pulled into traffic. Four cars separated him and his quarry. The sweet scent of raspberry and vanilla mingled with the greasy burgers and the smoky stench from the club.

"Drew, do you mind explaining what's going on?"

He looked back at his road manager, and younger brother, Nate. "I wanna catch up to that car."

"May I ask why?"

Drew rubbed the back of his neck, then looked down at his chocolate-coated jeans. "She owes me a cleaning."

"I'm tired. I just wanna go to the hotel." Nate flopped back on the five-foot sofa and stuffed half a burger in his mouth.

Muffled and mumbled agreement ran through the back of the bus from the rest the band and crew.

Nate swallowed and tilted his head at his brother. "I'll pay for your cleaning. I'm wiped."

Before Drew could argue with his brother, Robbie pointed with a half-eaten double-patty-melt toward the black Honda. "He's got a jones for the driver."

"She cute?" Nate sipped from a bottle of water. "She have a friend with her?"

"Yes. To both." Robbie slugged Drew's arm.

"Do tell." Nate wiped his mouth and sat straighter.

Drew tried to ignore them and watched the car.

Robbie shoved the rest of the burger in his mouth. With his mouth half-full, he said, "She had this short, curly blond hair. Reminds me of Wynona."

Nate chuckled. "Judd or Ryder?"

Robbie swallowed. "Sampson. From high school. You know, bada-boom-bada-bing."

Drew took his eyes off the Honda for a moment to glare at his band, as Robbie made an hourglass shape with his hands.

"And when she spilled that drink and got on all fours in those tight-assed jeans, holy shit, thought my heart would stop."

"You're a dick," Drew growled, then looked back through the windshield. Two more cars had gotten in front of them. Her red taillights faded around a curve and he cursed up a storm.

"What's the matter, bro? I've never seen you this worked up before."

"It's been a while since Cassandra walked out on him. Maybe he needs a little..." Robbie punched his fist back and forth through the air while he made a rude noise.

"You're pushing it, man." Drew smacked Robbie on the back of the head. "Can you go any faster, Jake?"

"This is a land-yacht, not an Indy car. I'm giving her all she's got, Cap'n." He did his best Scottie impression and changed lanes to pass the only car going slower than they were. "Which one is it? I can't tell any more."

"Damn. I don't know." Drew squinted and titled his head to one side then the other, but all the taillights blended together. He slammed his hand on the railing twice and shoved back, then laced his fingers behind his neck and paced two lengths of the bus. "Head to the hotel, Jake."

Drew shoved his brother's feet off the sofa and lowered himself down. "Man, I don't know what's wrong with me."

"She must have been some hottie."

He shook his head. "It wasn't that."

"Oh, but she was." Robbie tossed another balled up burger wrapper toward the trash. "She had real big..."

Drew's gaze narrowed at his friend. "You're *really* pushing it."

"I was gonna say eyes." He scratched his head. "But I didn't really catch the color. Wasn't paying that much attention to her eyes, if you know what I mean." He wagged his eyebrows at Nate.

"Blue." Drew leaned back and draped his arm over his eyes. "A real light blue."

"And her friend was even hotter."

Robbie wasn't going to let it go.

"Celia had all this red spiky hair sticking out every which way, so damn sexy and when she started talking about having tattoos. Man, I'd give just about anything to find out where they all were. But Alex pushed her out the door before she could say anything else."

Drew slowly lowered his arm. "What did you say?"

"About the tattoos?"

"How'd you know their names?"

"I'm real observant." Robbie winked at him. "They said them. When they spoke to each other. Man, where was your head?"

"Wrapped up in light blue eyes." Nate's falsetto comment earned him a punch in the arm. "Hey," he laughed. "This woman really got to you, huh?"

"I guess." Drew gave one final glance at the silver chain before he stuffed it in his pocket then pulled a bottle of water from the mini-fridge. He lifted it to his forehead and tried to let the rocking motion of the bus lull him to sleep.

"But why?" Nate wouldn't shut up.

Drew thought for a long moment. What was it that had enticed him so quickly? What had made him run to his bus after an exhausting concert and chase after her like a horny teen? Then clarity struck. "How'd I meet my ex-wife Cassandra?"

“Groupie.”

“And Darla before her.”

“Groupie.”

“And Amie before her?”

“Okay I get your point. You like the easy girls.” He shrugged.

“Exactly.” Drew nodded then shook his head. “No. I wasn’t going for ‘easy’ girls. Accessible maybe, but not easy. You’re twisting up what I’m saying.” He was tempted to tell Nate to suck it, but his brother kept talking.

“And this woman was different how?”

“She couldn’t get away from me fast enough.”

“And this is a good thing?”

“Hell yeah.”

His brother narrowed his eyes. “Why?”

“I’m not sure yet.”

Nate leaned his head back and closed his eyes. “Seems moot since we lost her.”

Drew looked up to the front of the bus and through the windshield at the black sky. “We’ll see about that. I have a funny feeling...”

Chapter Two

“Oh that’s good, Baby. Just a little to the left.” Alex raised her hand and motioned. “Little more. Ah, that’s it, Baby. Perfect. Now hold it.” She raised the camera and took several rapid-fire shots of Baby, the long-haired Chihuahua.

“Good job.” She pulled a treat from her pocket and handed it to the small dog. “Okay, Mrs. Jones. He’s all done.”

“Oh thank you, Alex.” Mrs. Jones picked up Baby and placed him in the designer doggie carrier/handbag which probably cost more than Alex’s sofa.

Not for the first time, Alex laughed at the thought of one purse that could pay bills for two months—don’t even get her started on the diamond-studded collar the dog wore on Fridays. She didn’t want to know what clad the pup’s skinny neck the rest of the week. “I’ll get the proofs done sometime Monday and you can pick which ones you like the best.” She escorted the older woman to the front door. “I’ll call you when they’re ready.”

“Such a doll,” the petite Mrs. Jones said as she slid behind the wheel of a massive SUV.

Alex wasn’t sure if the woman was talking about her or the dog. A quick snort escaped before she could stop herself. She shut the door and glanced at the overstuffed club chair in the corner. It looked too inviting. Her back and feet ached from the six hours she’d already put into her pet portrait business. She still had two rooms left to search for her lost necklace. Her father had given it to her for her fifth birthday. She was afraid she’d never see it again. The last time she remembered having it on...

Heat flooded her cheeks. She still couldn’t believe she’d made such a fool out of herself in front of Drew Hartford. The man must have thought her a complete idiot.

With no luck in the living room, she headed for the small office built onto the back of the house when she remembered a couple of proposals she needed to send.

The three-bedroom house had been her grandmother’s and left to her in the matriarch’s will. Alex had turned one bedroom into her studio and another into the dark room. When it came time to decide what to do about an office, she’d added on a separate room rather than mar her glorious twenty-five foot by twenty-five foot master bedroom. So she lost a little of the yard, no big deal—well Romeo did seem to hold a grudge from time to time.

“Romeo.” Alex settled into her desk chair. She glanced back into the hall but didn’t see him. “Romeo,” she hollered a little louder. “Aw come on. Don’t make me do this.” When she still heard no sound, she cleared her throat and said, “Romeo, Romeo wherefore art thou, Romeo?”

A thunderous echo from the front of the house followed by skittering steps on the hardwood floor.

“Oh geez.” Alex swiveled her chair around and braced one hand on the desk. The dog rounded the corner at a dead run. Alex should have waited until after she’d finished her computer work to holler for him, but it was too late to recall her words. “Slow down, Romeo.”

He didn’t listen, just plowed ahead and rammed into her, knocking her and the chair into the wall. One too many times she’d had to patch the drywall so she’d purchased a padded headboard as a necessary decoration. His tongue whipped out and coated her face with buckets of slobber.

Alex giggled and buried her face into his furry neck. “Stupid dog.” The mutt’s rear waggled and shook the pair. “Okay, enough. Go lay down.”

When the onslaught stopped, the dog released an ear-piercing bark before he sank into his bedding in the corner.

“You’re a nut.” Alex shook her head and turned her attention to the computer. She wrote up the proposals and a few invoices for the past few days, paid bills and returned a few e-mails. When she’d finished all things *Alex’s Pet Portraits*, she scrolled her mouse over the close button but got online instead. She didn’t often spend time surfing the net. No. Only one destination sparked her interest most days.

The login page played a familiar tune. Alex hummed along and typed in her handle, Romeo’s Slave. The Drew Hartford fan forum popped up. At least eight different chats were dedicated to last Saturday’s concert. Though it had been almost a week since she’d doused the man with her shake, heat crawled across her cheeks.

She clicked on the first topic and snickered at all the teeny-bopper-esque responses, though most of the gushing gals had to be over thirty like herself.

“...so totally rocked the place.”

“...mmm-hmm in those tight jeans.”

Alex had her hand poised to exit the topics when a comment caught her eye.

“We had fun after the show. Went back to his hotel room,” by a woman whose login was Angel_Baby.

“Really, now.” Alex snorted. She couldn’t help herself and typed, “That’s strange. When I dumped my shake all over him after the show, he was very much alone. Well, except for Conan watching over him.” She shook her head and glanced at the sleeping pooch. “Fans are weird.” Then she thought of the concert stub tucked away in her sock drawer along with a dozen others. She laughed and had just logged out when her front door slammed shut.

“Back here, Celia.”

“Hiddy-ho.” Celia’s stilettos clicked on the hardwood floor as she teetered her way down the hall. “I had the worst day. My boss decided the office needs more exercise. His wife put him on a diet and the rest of us have to suffer. Puh-leeze. I ate—” she shuddered, “—tofu for lunch. And we had to take the stairs. He had the elevators turned off. Can you just die?”

“Poor baby. One *whole* floor?”

“I’m serious.” Celia tucked a short lock of red hair behind her ear. She froze when Romeo came over to sniff at her. “Go away, you big brute.”

“He’s just saying hello.”

“My butt is not up for conversation, thank you very much.” The tall woman groaned and stomped her feet. “Alex.”

“Romeo. Bad dog. Leave Miss Celia alone. The big scaredy-cat.”

Celia stuck her tongue out and relaxed a tad when the dog settled back onto his fluffy pallet. “Are you coming with us tomorrow night?”

“I wish.” Alex rubbed her hand over her face.

“It’s Friday.”

“It’s the first of the month.” She rolled her eyes ceiling-ward.

“Ew. I forgot.” Celia leaned her hip against the desk. “How is your mom doing?”

“As well as can be expected. It was just a facelift. You’d think the woman donated a kidney or something the way she goes on and on.”

“Will the sibs be there?”

“Are you kidding me? You’ve met my sister.”

Celia shook her head. “She making you pick Ronnie up to see his grandma again?”

“Of course. And Scooter has some big test or something. That reminds me.” She turned to the desk and pulled her checkbook from the drawer. “I forgot to send his tuition payment for summer semester.” She didn’t want to look at her friend. She’d heard the tirade before about her paying her brother’s tuition while her mother spent her money to get lypoed, Botoxed, tucked and pulled until she could double for Joan Rivers.

“How are they ever going to grow up if you...”

“...keep doing everything for them.’ So says the woman who has me do her taxes and borrowed my brand-spanking-new sweater.”

“Whatever,” Celia said under her breath. “I need to get. Your *new* sweater is on the sofa. Thanks for letting me borrow it.”

Alex stood and enveloped her friend in a hug. “Love you, hon. Now scoot. I have another client due in half an hour.”

"I'm gone." Celia blew a kiss and hurried back up the hall. "Oh and I'm taking your silk shirt and pearls. Hot date."

Alex glanced at her computer, tempted to see if anyone had responded to her post, but didn't. Instead, she ran to the mailbox to send her brother's check before she straightened her studio for the next sitting. "I owe, I owe, it's off to work I go."

"Twelve." Drew hefted the bar over his head and lowered it. When his brother walked in, he raised it again. "Forty-eight, forty-nine, fifty." He rested the bar in its cradle. "Hey, man. Whatcha been up to?"

"This and that." Nate sat at the leg press machine. "Updated stuff on your website and the forum."

Drew grunted. A necessary evil that had to be dealt with. One which he was more than happy to let his brother manage. He twisted and turned on the bench to work out the sudden kink in his back. He did a couple of quick stomach crunches then laid back and stared at the ceiling. "I guess, I'll..."

"Lot of traffic today."

He needed to get up, get moving. He had a lot to do, but he didn't always have a chance to chat with his brother. He tilted his head in his brother's direction and linked his fingers behind his neck. "That's good. Right?"

"Always good." Nate took a long swig on his water bottle. "Ton of buzz from the Fort Worth concert."

"Hmm."

"Angel was at it again."

"Ah, yes, cyber-stalker. And what did she have to say this time?" He let out a long breath. "Let me guess. I rocked her world all night long. The woman needs to think up a new shtick."

"Yep. Pretty much." Nate pumped his legs up and back, didn't even seem to strain as he spoke. "Don't forget the sweet, sweet loving."

"At least one of us had a good time."

"I don't know." Nate pumped a few more times then paused to drink from his bottle. "Seems someone called her story out and started a whole flame war."

"Great. I feel sorry for sorry for that poor soul. I hope they run and hide." He unhooked his fingers and ran his hands over his face.

"Really? 'Cause the other night I thought you mentioned wanting to get in touch with her. Something about a cleaning bill."

Drew sat up too quickly and conked his head on the weight bar. "Damn." He rubbed the tender spot. "What? You mean Alex?"

"Not entirely sure." He flicked sweat coated fingers at Drew. "Some woman wrote into your forum and admitted dumping her drink on you. Got sixty-two replies already." He shrugged. "It could be her."

"Really?"

"Unless you've had other ladies dump drinks on you and you never told me."

"Don't be an ass."

"Shove it." Nate started his second set of reps. "Most of the Drewdettes thinks she's lying." He pumped his legs in silence.

Alex commented on his website. Why his heart pumped harder than during his workout he didn't know. "Tell me how to do all that screen name stuff."

"I thought you didn't like computers."

"Maybe I want to give it a shot."

"Great way to spend your one free weekend in months."

Drew fought back the urge to smack his brother. "Are you gonna help me or not?"

"I knew you'd come around. Didn't I say you'd be begging me for help?"

"Yeah, little brother. Thanks for not saying 'I told you so'." Drew threw a towel at him. "When can we start?"

Nathan paused in his routine. "She was that hot huh?"

"Half an hour." Drew shot his brother the single finger salute and marched from the weight room. All through his shower he couldn't help but think of the blonde-haired vixen from the Burger Barn. He cursed his instant arousal. "Man, what's wrong with me?"

He thought of the difficulty he'd have with all the computer shit. He paused for a moment as he toweled off. He could just blow off the whole thing and chalk it up to a pair of chocolate-coated denims and a necklace he didn't need... But there was something about the woman that made him want to tackle one of his biggest fears: surfing the World Wide Web. He longed to connect with her, if only through the internet. What kind of schmuck did that make him?

Hell he couldn't remember the last time one meeting with a woman turned him upside down. At least not since he was sixteen or so and his hormones had the best of him. Granted, the college freshman he'd met on spring break didn't have anything on Alex with her cool blue eyes and light blonde curls that made his fingers itch to dive in.

Drew's hands shook worse than the first time he'd performed at the Grand Ole Opry when he sat in front of the computer. Singing was something he could do. Not that he'd ever been a braggart, but the music came naturally to him. Computers, not so much. Nate had explained the ins and outs just before Drew shooed him out of the room. He wanted to be alone. Didn't want his brother to watch him struggle over it, but he was determined to get it done.

It took him half an hour to set the screen name Nate had suggested, Cowboy Andy. When he typed in his name and found the message board he was looking for, he couldn't believe all the comments posted. Nate kept him updated on the hundreds of hits a day, but until that moment he hadn't really understood the enormity of his fan base.

His chest tightened as he scrolled through all the comments.

He spotted the topic he needed and all other thought fled. Sure enough, he found "Ice Cream Dreams," the original entry by Romeo's Slave.

"Damn." He'd hoped like hell Nate was joking about her name. She had a boyfriend. Of course, she did. A woman like her didn't stay unattached. He glanced at the silver "A" on a hook next to his Super Bowl pass from two years earlier. He wondered if a boyfriend—or worse, a husband—had given it to her. He didn't think she was married. He didn't know why, but in his gut...

"Who am I kidding?" Wishful thinking was more like it.

He leaned back in his chair and rubbed his chin. *I have no business lusting after another man's girl.* He read through some of the replies. Angel was worse than ever. She needed to be stopped. He scooted his chair closer to the desk. She just bulldozed over any and everyone.

Drew chuckled and typed in his reply under his screen name, Cowboy Andy. "Sorry, Angel, ice cream shakes do make a mess when dumped down the front of a tired crooner. Poor Drew looked like a melted fudgesicle by the time his burgers came up. Wonder who you were with. An imposter? Hope you had your shots."

It took him a while to construct the entire comment—and then read through it all to check for errors—but he was pleased with what he wrote. He hit the enter button and watched his comment flash onto the cyber-bulletin board. A smile creased his lips as he imagined Angel's apoplexy at being called out—twice. The woman didn't like to be contradicted in any way, much less named as an out and out liar.

He went into the kitchen and grabbed a bottle of water. *Forgot to log off.* He traced his mouse over the exit button and almost hit it but refreshed the page instead to see if his post had gotten a nibble. "Twelve new replies, holy shit."

Drew sat back in the chair and read through the first couple. "See, Angel, I knew you were lying." And, "Whoa-ho, Ange, busted. Does that mean your Drewdette status has dive-bombed to an all new low?"

"Well, I'll be damned." Drew swiveled in the chair. "They're roasting her." He took a quick sip of his drink, leaned back and crossed one ankle over the other. Every few minutes he refreshed the screen and a new batch of posts lit the page. A couple claimed that they saw him and Angel out on the town Saturday night, but the majority blasted her for the lying, conniving crazy bitch she was.

His stomach growled. He'd been in front of his computer for hours, and on occasion, added fuel to the Angel-bashing fire. This was too fun. Before he went to get dinner, he sent a private message. "Hi, Romeo's Slave..."

Chapter Three

Alex stared at the screen. “I’ll be...” Someone named Cowboy Andy had sent her a private e-mail. She’d seen some of his comments yesterday, pretty much backing up everything she said. She tried to picture who it could be. Maybe the big burly man with Drew? Naw, why would he care one way or the other? Why would anyone for that matter? Still, Andy had been in Burger Barn, had seen what had happened enough to comment.

But who was Andy? She tapped her chin, the crowd at the restaurant flashed through her mind. He could have been sitting anywhere. The gaggle of teens had been large enough to swallow up most of the sitting area. She wouldn’t be able to pick the man from a line-up.

How weird.

Her fingers hovered over the keys. “To delete or not to delete? That is the question.” She pulled her fingers back and let her hand fall down beside the chair and brush against Romeo’s fur.

“How’d he get my address?” The velvet-soft ear slipped through her fingers. She only had to open it to find out.

When Alex opened the new mail she discovered that he’d sent it to her through the forum’s auto-forward feature. Her heart sunk a smidge. “Yeah, because having a stalker is so much better.” She laughed.

Don’t let Angel get to you. She’s just jealous of anyone who has run across Drew.

She’s stalked him for the better part of a year and she’s only actually met the man twice.

“How does he know all of this, Romeo?” Alex reached for her necklace as she had countless times before. When her fingers touched nothing she sighed. “I could ask. Then he’d have my e-mail address. Do I care? Man, I need to get out more if the highlight of my day is talking to you—” she glanced over at Romeo, “—and the computer.”

If she wasn’t mistaken, Romeo growled as if in agreement. Alex snorted and, without giving it too much more thought, hit the reply button.

What’s her deal? she typed back. *Is she psycho or something?*

Alex hit the send key and ran into the kitchen for a soda. When she came back, she found a note on her screen that Cowboy Andy wanted to know if she’d be interested in instant messaging.

He must have been sitting right there at his computer. Her stomach knotted. What to do? What to do? Alex leaned back in the chair and stared up at the crooked light fixture above. A quick glance told her the

request was still there, hadn't been a figment of her imagination. What the hell. She accepted before she second guessed herself and chickened out.

"Morning." A little box popped up at the top of the screen.

"Eager boy," Alex ruffled Romeo's fur. "Back at you."

"Did you see? They're roasting Angel?" popped up on her screen.

At least, that's what she thought it said. There were several missing letters. She imagined a kid e-mailing her, but she didn't think they allowed folks under eighteen on Drew's forum. Not to mention Alex was positive there had been no children at the Burger Barn at one in the morning. One way to find out. "A/S/L."

Nothing came back for a long moment until he replied, "What?"

"Great. He's probably twelve, Romeo. First guy to show any interest in months and I get a puberty challenged internet newbie." She shook her head and typed, "It means 'age', 'sex', and 'location'."

After a lag, thirty-five popped up on the screen followed by as often as possible and Houston.

Alex snorted. Not a child, thank goodness. Assuming he was telling the truth. Kids these days probably knew more than she did. And if it was... She took a long sip of the diet cherry cola and swallowed hard. She had to smack her chest to dislodge the fizzies. "I'm a big fat pervert. What do you think, Romeo? Houston's a bit of a drive for a concert isn't it? A kid wouldn't go that far would they?" The sleepy pooch stretched but didn't so much as give her the slightest enlightenment. "You're no help at all. I don't know why I pay so much for your kibble." At the mention of food, his head popped up. "Go back to sleep."

"Hello?" The little instant message box blinked.

"Oh sorry." He'd asked for her info. "Thirty-three, ditto," though the thought caused her a moment of pause as she tried to remember the last time she'd participated in a horizontal tango. The fact she had to count backward—on two hands, twice—depressed her. "And I'm in Fort Worth. Question. Were you at the concert here the other night?"

He didn't answer right away. "Yes."

"And really at a restaurant afterward?" Another long pause. It was like pulling teeth with this guy.

"Yes. Burger Barn off the highway."

A moment of relief rolled through her. She wasn't sure why. But knowing her Angel-bashing champion was actually there the night she'd iced Drew, he wasn't just backing her up to hit on her, made her feel better. "Man oh man. I was kinda hoping no one actually saw the shake incident."

"Why? You think Drew will need a witness to come forward?"

Again, she thought it might be what it said. Cowboy Andy had atrocious spelling skills. "Right. Like he'd take the time to track me down."

"Stranger things..."

“Sure.” As if Drew gave her a single thought once he’d changed from his chocolate jeans. “That was an awesome concert.”

“Think so?”

“Oh yeah.” Alex could still feel the vibes from the crowd, the hum of the six-foot tall speakers and the rumble in her chest as two-thousand-plus screaming fans slapped their boots on the hardwood floor in time to the beat. “And that new song, I loved it.”

“It was okay.”

“Okay? Are you kidding me?” Alex fanned herself even though Andy couldn’t see her. “I would give anything for a man to want me like that.”

“Define ‘anything’.”

“In your dreams.” She laughed.

“I have some wild dreams.”

“I bet you do.” Alex looked over at Romeo. “This guy’s too much.”

“You had a good time at the show?”

“Yeah. My friend and I always do. We see Drew every time he comes to town.” Alex cracked her knuckles and continued typing. “But I’m bummed. I lost my necklace afterward.”

“Damn.”

“Yeah. It was about the only thing my dad ever gave me.”

“Dead?”

“No, just a loser. Walked out on me when I was five. Same with the sibs. My mom knows how to pick ‘em.” She had no clue why she was telling him this. “Enough about me. Do you have parents?”

“Two.”

“Most people do.” If they are lucky, she mentally amended. “Are you close?”

“They live in Humble.”

She snorted again. “No, I don’t mean by proximity. Are you close with them?”

“Oh. Yup.”

He really knew how to lay on the details. Alex scratched her head and contemplated closing the IM. She had too many things to do and not nearly enough time, but something about Andy intrigued her. She couldn’t put her finger on what... Maybe if she could get a better feel for him. “Sibs?”

“Brother. Younger. Yours?”

“A younger sister and brother.”

“Get along?”

“You’re mocking me now? Hey wait. How’d we get to me? What do you do? For a living?”

“You first.” Spelled as *U Ist*, it took her a minute to realize he’d turned it back on her again.

"Nope. I asked *you* first." He didn't comment. His slow returns and spelling made her wonder about this guy. When he still didn't reply after a minute or so, she asked, "Are you independently wealthy and afraid to tell me in case I'm a gold digger?"

"Ha. No."

"A spy with state secrets."

"Hardly."

"The crown prince of a small country and you need a non-native gal to carry on the line?"

"Applying?"

A chill ran up Alex's spine. "Keep dreaming."

"You and dreams."

"Behave." She thrummed her fingers on the desktop. "I know. You're a famous star afraid I'll sell your story to the *Monthly Monitor*."

There was a long pause.

"Not telling 'til you do." Again the man's spelling left much to be desired. Some people didn't live and breathe on the computer as much as she did. She could understand the typos, but still.

"Have you been online long?"

"Only a few hours."

"Not today. I mean, how long have you been active on the internet?"

"Only a few hours."

He was a Newbie newbie. She frowned. Why in the world would he be hours old internet savvy and wanting to chitchat with her? A reminder popped up on her computer. "Look, I gotta bolt. I have plans out the wazoo today."

"Sounds painful."

"Hardy-har-har."

"It's been fun."

"Have a good one."

Alex logged out of her instant messenger and pushed back in her chair. "That was too weird."

"What was?"

"Jesus." She bolted from the chair. "Scooter? What the hell are you doing here?" She glared at her stellar watch dog who hadn't so much as perked an ear up at her brother's entrance into the house.

Scooter, her twenty-year-old brother, leaned a shoulder onto the doorframe and crossed his arms over his chest. "Isn't today our monthly visit to the parental unit?"

"I thought you had a final or something." She rubbed the spot just above her heart and willed the wild organ to slow.

"I lied."

She narrowed her eyes at him. “And you want to go now, why?”

“I decided I want to see what Freak Show looks like this time. I swear if they pull her face any tighter she’ll be able to blink with her ears.”

“Be nice. That’s our mother you’re talking about.”

“Right.” Scooter rolled his eyes. “What time do you pick up Ronnie?”

“What makes you think Pixie isn’t going, too?”

Scooter poked around her address file box and a stack of invoices. “What have you been smoking, Mussy?”

Alex swatted his hand away from her desk. “Quit calling me that.” The nickname he’d come up with when he was two and she’d just turned fifteen, a shortened version of mom/sissy, rubbed their mother the wrong way. It wasn’t as if it was Alex’s fault her younger brother thought she was his mother from the moment he could talk. Maybe had Carolyn Barrett mothered her children rather than pawning them off on whatever boyfriend she had at the time until Alex was old enough to care for them herself, Scooter wouldn’t call her Mussy and their mom egg donor Freak Show. At least he hadn’t said it to the woman’s face—yet.

“Ronnie?” Scooter snapped his fingers in his sister’s face.

She glanced down at her watch. “I plan on leaving in about an hour.” She pushed past him and headed down the hall. “Pixie has a job interview and wants me to pick him up at noon.”

“Which strip club is it this time?” Scooter sighed.

“The one outside of town. I think it’s about the only she hasn’t worked at yet.” Alex didn’t want to get into yet another discussion about their sister.

“Do you have any idea what kind of field day Doctor Phil would have with our family. I bet he could do an entire three-part series with The Freak Show alone. Don’t get me started on Pixie’s hang ups.”

“That reminds me. I talked to your dad the other day.”

“There’s part four in the series,” he mumbled under his breath as they entered the kitchen.

“He really wants you to call him. He said you’ve been avoiding his calls again.”

“I don’t have anything to say to the man.”

“It’s not his fault our mother...”

“Really? How’s your dad doing lately?”

Alex held up her hands in surrender. “Consider it dropped.” Dr. Phil indeed. She wondered what he’d say if he heard the Barrett sibs compare their absentee fathers. At least Scooter’s dad tried now. It might have taken him ten years to realize what he’d missed out on, but unlike her father, or Pixie’s father for that matter, the man truly loved Scooter and wanted to get to know him better. “Come here.” She held open her arms.

The six-foot-two man stooped to hug his sister.

“Love you, Scooter.” He mumbled something back and wiggled to arm’s length as she asked, “Have you had breakfast?”

“I can always eat.”

“I figured. Sit yourself down.” She pulled a frying pan from the drawer under the stove. “We’ll need all the strength we can get.”

Drew rubbed the ache at his temple. He’d wanted to ask more questions. But between his slow typing and just plain difficulty with the entire thing, he’d wasted too much time and she’d had to go. He hoped she’d be back on soon, though he couldn’t sit in front of the computer hour after hour waiting to see when or if she showed.

“Whacha know?” His grandmother came into the office.

“Hi, Granny.” He stood and kissed her wrinkled cheek. “Just working.”

She patted his shoulder. “You work too hard, boy. You need to get out more. When was the last time you had a date?”

“How’s your knitting club?”

“Don’t go changing the subject.”

“Granny. I’m fine. Really.”

“Not all women are like Cassandra.”

His gut churned at the mention of his ex-wife. “I know.”

“Do you? I think you use her as an excuse to keep from getting too close again.”

“Granny...”

“No.” She held up her hand. “Just think about what I said. Now go get your Granny a cold beer out of the refrigerator.”

“I thought you said I work too hard. When *do* you and mom go back home?”

“Don’t sass me.” She swatted at him with her magazine. “Get. I’m parched.”

“Yes, ma’am. One A&W coming up.”

In the kitchen he found his mother and Nate with their heads bent over a newspaper. “Something interesting?”

His mother folded the paper up and tucked it under her arm. “Nope, not a thing.”

Nate rubbed a hand over his face and didn’t look at him.

“It can’t be that bad. What? Did I get panned by a reviewer again?” He grabbed for the *Houston Chronicle*. His mother dodged him once but he pulled the paper free. It was the life section. A black and white photo of his ex stood out. He skimmed the brief article underneath. “She’s getting married. Good for her.”

Nate cleared his throat. “She’s pregnant.”

Drew glanced back at the article. "It didn't say that."

His mother snagged the newspaper from him and set it at the end of the marbled kitchen island. "I talked to her mother a few weeks ago."

"A few weeks? And you're just now telling me?"

"Honey—"

"Mom." He set his hands on his hips. "I'm happy for her. You don't have to keep this kinda stuff from me." He rubbed a hand through his hair. "Nate, Granny wants a drink. Can you get it? I have something I need to take care of."

Drew hurried from the house before his mother could say anything else. He wasn't surprised Cassandra was getting married, just surprised that it had taken her this long to hook another sucker. The ink dried on their divorce six months ago. In gold-digger terms that was a couple of lifetimes.

He didn't know why his family felt the need to always protect him like he might drink himself into oblivion or something. *Why can't they believe me when I tell them how relieved I am to be rid of her?*

Drew slid onto the leather seat of his motorcycle. His one indulgence—though he got a huge break in the price—the year after his first album went platinum. He slid on the helmet just as he caught sight of his brother from the corner of his eye. Engine revved, he pretended he hadn't heard Nate hollering for him and tore off down the driveway.

After he drove off some tension, Drew pulled into a bar parking lot and glanced at his pocket watch—too early for the evening crowd. He hoped the owner would open early for him. He tucked the helmet under his arm and headed for the door. He cupped his hand around his eyes and peered in the window but didn't see anyone.

"Hey? Anyone home?" He rapped his knuckles on the glass, waited a minute, then moved to the door. She had to be there, the woman hadn't missed a day of work in twenty years. He knocked on the large oak door. "Rusty? You in?"

"Hold your horses," Rusty called from inside the bar. The carved wooden door swung open. "Drew. What're you doing here? Ain't your mama and granny up visiting?"

Drew scratched his matted hair. "Yep."

The tall woman shook her head. "Say no more. What can I do for ya?"

"I wondered if I could..." He shrugged his shoulder toward the bar. "It's been a while and I need a fix real bad."

"Now..." Rusty leaned against the door and crossed her arms under her ample breasts. "The last time you asked for a 'fix' you were flying for hours. I had to pry your butt off the stool and call Natty to come get you."

"Please. Do you want me to beg? I will." He dropped to his knees, set his helmet down and intertwined his fingers. "Pretty pretty please, Rusty."

She snorted and rolled her eyes. “Fine, whatever. Don’t say I didn’t warn you.” She pushed the door open wider and let him in once he stood. “No tips tonight. It’s embarrassing the way you beg.”

“You know I love ya, Rusty ol’ girl. But a man’s gotta do what a man’s gotta do. Will you store this for me?” He held out his helmet.

“Sure. Keys too.” She pocketed the keys when he handed them over. “I hate you riding that bike around all the drunks when you’re so, you know...up.” She patted his cheek and sighed. “You know where everything is. Help yourself.”

Drew swatted Rusty on her perky ass as she turned to go. “Thanks, babe. I owe you one.”

“You owe me fifty. Big ones. The Astros tanked the other night.”

“I’ll get it to ya...”

“No. Just have a good time tonight and we’ll call it even.”

Drew winked at her and headed to the other side of the room. He glanced back over his shoulder once to make sure she wasn’t watching. He had a strange superstition about not wanting people to watch as he set up. When he was sure she was busy back behind the bar, he set a stool dead center stage. He picked up an acoustic guitar he kept stored behind the old velvet curtain skirting the back of the stage. He tuned the strings for a few minutes then settled himself into position.

Eyes closed, he strummed his fingers over the strings. Let the music take him away. He rehearsed new songs, practiced old ones and fiddled with a melody he’d been fooling around with—all just the music, no lyrics to pull him from the mood. He played for well over an hour. Then he played the first few chords for “Desire Me”. The usual pain that wormed its way into his chest didn’t build. Instead, the vision of a curly-haired blonde popped into his mind. He sang the first stanza and belted out the chorus. He trailed off with the last line, “*All I want you to do is, Desire me...*”

The room erupted in applause and almost jolted him off the stool. When had everyone come in?

Several cowboys approached him and slapped him on the back, told him it was a great show. He thanked them and glanced around; he couldn’t believe he’d gotten so carried away. From behind the bar, Rusty shook her head and motioned him over.

“What the hell was that all about?”

Drew cleared his throat. “Sorry?”

“That was so...different.”

He kicked the bar. “Gee thanks.” He looked over his shoulder so she didn’t see the heat on his cheeks.

She handed Drew a bottle of water. “I’ve never heard you sing like that.”

“That bad huh?”

Rusty slugged him in the arm. “It was amazing. Soulful. What got into you?”

Drew’s mind flashed again to Alex. “Not a thing.”

Chapter Four

“Grandma.” Ronnie unbuckled and ran from the car before Alex could even turn off the engine. “I lost a tooth. I lost a ...” His words trailed off as the front door slammed behind him.

“Give me strength.” Alex dabbed on pale pink lipstick and blotted her lips on a tissue.

“Why do you do that?”

“So it doesn’t run and get all over everything.”

Scooter grunted. “That’s not what I mean. Why come over here if it’s such a pain in the ass?”

Alex looked at her brother and pulled the keys from the ignition. “There’s no reason to punish Ronnie. He loves her and she is thrilled to death to see him.”

“Saint Alex. You take on the responsibility for the world.” He shoved out of the car and stalked up to the house.

“Somebody has to be the responsible one.” She took a deep breath and joined the rest of the family in the house.

As usual, her mother didn’t let up on her. Why she thought she might...

“That color lipstick is all wrong for you, Al. I wish you’d let me take you shopping sometime and give you some beauty tips.”

Alex fought not to laugh at the Joker-esque quality of her mother’s smile thanks to a knife-happy plastic surgeon. She’d take beauty tips from her mother when her sister Pixie took sex advice from her. “I’ll check my schedule and get back to you.”

“Good. Good. Oh, I meant to tell you. I ran into Gladys the other day. Her grandson is up visiting for a time and I thought...”

“No thanks, Mother. I am so busy with work I don’t know when I would have the time.”

“Besides up for a visit,” Scooter whispered in her ear, “means he lost another job and is living with her.”

“Shh.”

“I saw Daddy the other day.” Ronnie hopped up and down on his grandmother’s ottoman.

All three adults tensed.

Alex had to clear her throat before she could speak. “Really? Where was that?”

“He came over to see Mama. We had a sleepover. But I didn’t get to sleep with them, though. They said it was grown-up time and I wasn’t invited.” He rubbed his nose with the back of his hand. “Me an’ Howdy got to sleep in a fort in the living room. Daddy made it for me.”

“Wasn’t that nice of him.” Carolyn rubbed her grandson’s back, always trying to settle his over-active energy as she looked nervously at him. “Did you bring Howdy with you?”

“No, ma’am. Mama said your house was no place for turtles.” He smiled a snaggletoothed six-year-old grin. “Said you’d just as soon make jewelry out of it than pet it.”

Alex coughed to hide a laugh. Scooter snorted.

“Tell you what.” Carolyn, red cheeks and all, stood. “Why don’t you and I go in the kitchen and see if we can’t find those cookies I bought last week.”

“Woohoo. Chocolate chip?”

“Are there any other kind?” Carolyn herded Ronnie to the kitchen.

Scooter squeezed Alex’s knee. “You think she really had a job interview?”

“Doesn’t matter.” She willed back the tears that clogged her throat. She would not cry. “No big deal. Ronnie’s bound to see his dad from time to time. It’s good for him. He needs to know his father.”

“Yeah, Mussy, but...”

“Enough, Scooter. Why don’t you go get a cookie with Ronnie and Mother.”

He looked as if he wanted to say more, but got up and left Alex alone in the living room.

She took a deep breath. “I’m okay.” She rose and paced the floor in front of her mother’s huge picture window. “I’m okay.” She ran her hands through the tight curls at her temple. “Now if I can make myself believe it.”

One day, the thought of Ronald Vaughn and his betrayal might not sting. However, every time she looked at her nephew it was a new slap in the face. She loved the boy with all her heart, there were days she longed for him to be hers. Had things been a little different, he might have been. “Not true.” Things had been strained between her and Ronald for a while. His infidelity, however, was the last thing she’d expected. A bright red sports car or maybe hair implants, hell he’d even talked about getting pec implants—the idea of having a silicone-injected boyfriend had turned her stomach—but fathering her sister’s kid hadn’t even been in the realm of possibilities.

It wasn’t Ronnie’s fault he had a slut for a mother and back stabbing cheating boyfriend for a father. “Enough.” She swiped at the lone tear from her cheek. It had been years since she’d allowed herself to grieve over the time she’d wasted with Ronald.

The laughter from the kitchen shook her from the self-pitying thoughts. She followed the sounds into the kitchen and grabbed herself a cookie.

An hour and a half later, Alex drove back across town.

“‘I have a photogenic memory.’ Does that mean she looks better in her mind’s eye?” Scooter snorted.

“Be nice.” Alex glanced at Ronnie asleep in the back seat.

“Remember that time Pixie and I talked her into letting us go to Vacation Bible School and she told the preacher, ‘I knew they were done. I think I am a little psychotic.’ I thought the man might faint away on the steps of the church until we explained she thought she had ESP.”

Alex pulled to a stop at the red light. “You know, no one made you come. If you hate it so much you shoulda just stayed at your stuffy college and read your stupid books on philosophy.”

Scooter narrowed his eyes. “I’m gonna let that pass since you’re obviously still upset about Ronnie seeing his dad.”

“I don’t know what you’re talking—” A horn behind her blared and she hurried through the intersection. Neither spoke the rest of the way home or even when they parted ways.

She shouldn’t have been surprised by the ache at her temple when she walked into her house later that evening. A day of her mother and brother...not to mention a painful reminder of her past.

Once home, she debated grabbing a bottle of something eighty proof and curling up in her bed, but a tingle of anticipation skittered up her spine when she thought of her earlier conversation with Cowboy Andy.

“Wonder if he’s home tonight.” She stared at the blank computer and rubbed Romeo’s ear. What did it say about her that the moment she walked in the door, all she could think about was e-mailing a man she didn’t even know? “Who am I kidding? What guy would be home on a Friday night?”

“Maybe I shouldn’t. Save myself the disappointment.” The dog glanced up at her, licked her wrist once before he went about chewing on a bone. “You’re not much up for conversation tonight, huh, boy?”

Alex opened her instant messaging box. Her heart pounded when she saw Andy logged in too. She typed out a quick hello.

“You’re home.” She could see at the bottom of the box he was typing again so she waited. She expected to see a long comment but all it said was, “You have a good time?” It was all spelled incorrectly. Once again she wondered if he was really as old as he’d said.

“Interesting time.” She turned on her stereo. The new Drew Hartford CD came to life. The melody of the first song haunted her. After the day she’d had, the words about loss and loneliness, tugged harder than she expected. She pushed the button to skip to the next song. Enough of that.

“I took my nephew to my mom’s.”

“Fun?”

“Fun is not the word I would use. Let’s just say, I have earned my number one daughter pass.” Alex rubbed her temple. “For three lifetimes.”

“Bummer.”

"She means well." *And even if she didn't, I am probably enough of a glutton for punishment to keep on doing it.* Alex laughed. "Can I ask you a personal question?" She didn't wait for him to answer. "Are you really thirty-five?"

"Yep. Why?"

"It's just..." She didn't want to insult the man—maybe it was the afternoon with her mother that wore down her censor button. She couldn't help herself and typed. "Your typing is terrible."

For a moment, she figured he wouldn't answer, expected him to log-off. But finally the little bar at the bottom said he was typing. It was a full two minutes before his response popped up.

"I am dyslexic. It's hard to keep up on the computer."

And yet he's sitting here talking to me. Why would he do that? A warm rush ran through Alex's stomach. She glanced down at her snoozing pooch. "He can't be for real, can he?" The stupid dog still had no words of wisdom for her. She stared at the box for a long time until Andy asked, "Are you still there?"

"Yes, sorry. I am flattered you'd waste your time on me then. If it's so hard."

"Not a waste. Promise you that."

She lifted her head to her cheek. The heat in her stomach spread to her face.

Andy typed, "My turn. Question."

"Shoot." Please be a change of subject, she thought as she waited.

"Who's Romeo?"

"Who's Romeo?" Alex repeated the question aloud and snorted. The dog shoved his head in her lap when he heard his name. "A very pushy male," she typed. "Takes up the entire sofa space."

"Oh."

"Romeo—" Alex laughed and rubbed her dog's ear, "—he thinks you're a two-legged dude." On her keyboard she typed, "He's my dog."

"Oh. Do you?"

"Do I what?"

"Have a boyfriend?"

She typed quickly, "Well, Mr. Andy, getting quite personal now. No, I don't. What about you?"

"Don't like men that way."

Alex laughed out loud. "I meant do you have a girlfriend?"

"Nope. Another question."

"Go for it."

"Was your necklace silver?"

Her heart pounded. "How'd you know?"

"Found one on the floor as I was leaving Burger Barn."

"No way." Could this be some kind of trick?

He typed for a bit. "Has a real smooth chain and a curly thing on the end of an A."

"Oh my gosh. That's it. It must have fallen off when I..." She stopped typing. Her finger slipped and entered the partial comment.

"Iced Drew." Andy finished it for her.

"Yeah. Let's not rehash that."

"But it was funny."

"I'll bet Drew doesn't think so."

"I bet you'd be surprised."

"I'd almost be willing to take you up at that." Alex blinked at the screen. She couldn't believe she said that.

"Really now?"

She smiled. "I may have spoken too soon."

"Chicken."

"Oh no you didn't." Alex stared at the screen, dropped her hands to her lap. *He called me a chicken.* She went back to her keyboard. "Call me names if you like." She added a smiley with its tongue sticking out. "It's not like you can prove it one way or the other."

"Try and find out. Is it a bet?"

Alex could never turn down a bet. She had two tattoos, one piercing and three ex-boyfriends to prove it. "Fine. What'll we bet?"

"A kiss, if I am right."

Alex's pulse zipped through her. For a moment she could picture a seventeen-year-old pimple faced dork thinking he was about to get extremely lucky. Then her mind warp-spaced to a seventy-year-old man not unlike her own grandfather laughing at her from internet hell. But she wasn't related to her mother and sister for nothing. She couldn't pass up a challenge. "And if I'm right?"

"What do you want?"

"Such a loaded question."

"Only if you go for it."

Alex fanned herself with a contract from the corner of her desk. "Back to my necklace. What are we going to do about that?"

"I can send it to you." There was a pause. "Or I will be up in Fort Worth in a couple of weeks. We could meet somewhere, maybe Burger Barn? I can drop off the chain in person. And you can pay up on that bet while I am there."

That was the longest statement he'd made. Then it hit her, what he was saying. He truly wanted to see her. Could she do that? Could she meet up with a perfect stranger? Well a stranger to her. He knew what she looked like, had seen her dump a shake all over one of the hottest men in country music.

She could always get Celia to go with her, do an ugly check and if it turned out to be either scenario she had pictured earlier she could do the coward thing and bolt out the bathroom window. She might be daring but she did have limits.

But still, if she was going to ignite the genes that ruled her mother's and sister's lives, she might as well go hog wild.

"When exactly will you be in town?"

Drew stared at the screen. "Is she saying yes?"

"That's what it looks like, bro," Nate said from over his shoulder.

He'd come in just after Drew had suggested the ridiculous bet. Nate'd helped him type the last little bit. He was too excited to take it slow.

Drew'd never thought she'd agree to it. She hadn't yet, exactly, but hadn't said no either. "Tell her 6:30 that Saturday."

"Do you really want to meet up with her before your event?" Nate leaned heavy against Drew, reaching over him, hands paused on the keys.

"Why wouldn't I?"

"Oh, I don't know." He stood back up. "Rehearsal?"

"Okay, then make it 5:30, then. If I go over early enough it won't be a problem. And, I can invite her back to the club afterward."

"What is it with this woman, Drew?" Nate slapped him on the back of the head.

"I wish I knew."

Drew couldn't put his finger on it. But something about Alex made him want to know more. Most women, at least the ones he'd met since he broke into the music business, would have exhausted the fact they'd bumped into him. Alex, however, couldn't get away fast enough. Not only had she not asked for an autograph or even more brazenly his phone number, but she didn't necessarily even want to talk to him after it happened.

"You're setting yourself up for a fall here man. Mark my words." Nate patted him on the shoulder and headed out the door.

"You may be right." Drew wondered, not for the first time, what she would think if—well he could now chalk it up to when—she found out he was in fact the one chatting with her.

It wasn't like he, as Drew, repulsed her. She'd gone to his concert, all of them in her area and said she loved his new song. Maybe she's shy.

Drew shook his head. He couldn't reconcile that either. If she were shy, she wouldn't take on a bet with a strange man she met on the computer.

His computer chirped with a message from Alex, “Does this mean you don’t want to give me back my necklace?”

Drew had all but forgotten Alex had asked him a question. He glanced at the necklace still on a peg behind his computer.

“Two weeks from tonight?”

“Sounds great. I gotta go. Romeo is doing his potty dance and he can make a big mess if I don’t let him out in time.”

“See you in two weeks,” Drew typed in then signed off the computer. “And prepare to pay up on the bet.”

Chapter Five

Drew pulled up to the Burger Barn on his motorcycle. He'd ridden from Houston like a madman to get there on time and have enough of the evening to spend with Alex before rehearsals and then the show. If he'd had half the sense of a normal person, he should have brought his truck—dark clouds had followed him up the state—but he wanted to impress Alex. Luckily, it had stayed dry so far—it didn't look as luck would hold out for too much longer.

He took his helmet off, pulled the baseball cap from his back pocket and browsed the packed parking lot. What had he been thinking, picking a fast-food joint on a Friday night? Had he hit town hours earlier, he could've picked another place, but he'd gone through his closet three times like a teenage girl on her first date—if his brother had walked in he'd have castrated him. Hell even his hands sweated like a tenth grader's. You'd think he was a green teen rather than one of country music's top ten hottest bachelors two years running.

One asked to sing at charity events.

He hadn't thought of the event once on his trip to Fort Worth. Drew glanced down at his dusty leather jacket, Lynyrd Skynyrd T-shirt and jeans. Luckily, Nate had a change of clothes waiting for him at the club.

Two weeks they had "talked" online. Two weeks he'd fantasized about meeting up with her. He knew he had to fess up to her, not that the minute she saw him she wouldn't know he'd lied to her, sort of. A lie through omission.

Oh how much he'd omitted, though... he had Nate find her Drewdette form from when she had joined his fan club. He knew when her birthday was, her home phone—he'd been so damn tempted to call, to hear her voice again—and he knew her home address. Hell, he'd even checked a city map and knew what neighborhood she lived in.

"Stalker much?" His brother's words over the last few days rang in his head.

"Not a stalker. Just ... Oh hell, I don't know what I am..." Drew glanced at his watch. Twenty minutes early. He went on in, in case she'd showed early, too.

"Maybe she's as anxious as I am."

The burger joint was crowded but he didn't see Alex anywhere. He found an empty two-seat table off to the side and settled in after he ordered a large chocolate shake.

Alex wrapped her robe tighter around her waist and glared into the backyard. Her gaze jerked to the sky after a bright flash of lightning shot across. “Come on, Romeo.” Thunder rumbled the area a moment later as she looked at her watch. “I’m running late. Please, hurry up.”

Celia canceled on her at the last minute and meeting Andy all by her lonesome was the absolute last thing she wanted to do. But by the time she’d found out, he’d already left for Fort Worth.

“It’s not like I haven’t corresponded with this guy for half a month now. We’re best buds.” She snorted and nerves rocketed through her.

“Romeo.”

The big, dumb dog lifted his head from the honeysuckle bush, barked once, then plowed waist deep into the fragrant jungle.

Alex stepped off the porch. Two fat raindrops landed on her nose. “Dammit, dog.” She stomped her foot. “Arrrgh. I don’t have time for this shit.” Each word grew louder as she padded, sock-footed, across the lawn. With a smack to the dog’s rump she said, “Get in the house now, mister.”

Romeo backed out of the bush and circled Alex’s legs before he loped through the back door—and pushed it shut, with a very distinctive click of the latch catching. Several more drops peppered Alex as she heard a telltale click. “Oh please tell me I didn’t leave the knob locked.” One too many horror films in high school and a brand new stay-locked latch kept the doorknob’s lock engaged anytime she opened it—unless she remembered to unlock it.

The sky opened as she dashed across the backyard. Romeo peered at her through the large glass paned window next to the back door. “Don’t be locked. Don’t be locked.” She said a quick prayer, grasped the knob and turned. Or tried to turn. But nothing. “NO.” Already, water ran in rivulets down her face.

“Romeo, Andy is waiting for me.” The mutant mutt ran a long, wet tongue across the glass pane—twice. Another loud rumble of thunder echoed. “You locked me out.”

He woofed, poked his head out the doggie door he’d outgrown seventy-five pounds ago and licked her ankle.

Another shock of lightning jolted Alex into action. She dropped to all fours. “Move it.” She shoved Romeo’s head back through the door and poked through the small hole into the dry house. “How hard can this be?” She glanced up at Romeo. “Ronnie does it all the time.” Her nephew crawled through any chance he could get—which explained why the little door and latch to cover it could never be found.

“Scoot back.”

Romeo licked the tip of her nose but did finally give her a small space.

Head and shoulders through, she walked her hands across the cold linoleum floor. A twinge of claustrophobia stole her breath as her breasts caught on the frame, but after a wiggle this way and that she popped free. Romeo decided it would be a good time to snuggle and pressed his hairy backside against Alex’s shoulder.

“Move it, dog.”

After a whimper, he backed off her and Alex pulled herself through until her hips caught on the frame. “No big deal.” She twisted and turned, but they didn’t come free like her thirty-eight-D’s had. She rocked her hips back and forth as much as the small space would allow, but still couldn’t get through.

Cold rain had numbed her legs. “Man, I don’t believe this.” With her forehead pressed to the floor, she took a deep breath. “No big deal.”

Romeo, his head cocked to one side, watched as she swiped at the perspiration on her lip. “What?” she asked him. “It’s all your fault.”

The pooch moaned and scooted back to the corner of the kitchen.

“That’s right. You better stay over there.” Tilting her head she looked up at the knob. “If I can just reach it...” She bent her arm back as far as possible. “Damn, can’t.”

Alex levered herself up and twisted until her hips shifted in the tight doorway. Rain pelted her legs and time rolled on as she huffed, puffed and turned herself about. She lay on her back exhausted and stuck tighter. “I should’ve just gone to the neighbors and called Celia.

“Andy was probably scamming me anyway. No one goes out of their way to do something nice.” She nodded as best she could on the floor. “Yep. Dodged a bullet there.”

She lost track of time as the rain eased then stopped completely. Twice, Romeo had gotten up and tried to sit next to her but she wasn’t ready to cuddle with the culprit.

A loud rumble echoed through the house. She waited for more rain but instead, the doorbell chimed throughout the house. Romeo barked and loped off to the front of the house. “What now?”

Alex strained up toward the door knob again. She could almost reach... the tips of her fingers grazed the cold metal but she just couldn’t grasp the damned knob.

“Should I call out and have whoever find me like this? Or should I just let them walk away?” Alex couldn’t make up her mind. Before she could flip a mental coin, a knock sounded just above the doggie door and she had to stifle a scream.

“Alex? It’s Andy.”

What? Andy? “That’s not possible.” How in the hell...

“Alex, is that you?”

“No. I’m the cleaning lady. I decided to use my ass to dust the doggie door.”

She thought she heard a chuckle and then something mumbled from the other side of the door, but through the thick wood it was hard to tell.

“I can’t hear you,” she yelled. “You’re going to have to speak louder.”

“When you didn’t show up at the Burger Barn, I got worried. The rain and all.”

And he’d come to her home?

Sweat popped out on her upper lip, she groped in vain for the knob before she smacked her head on the floor in frustration. “How did you know where to find me?”

Romeo charged back into the kitchen, stepped on her hair and put his front paws on the door.

“Dammit dog, move.” She swatted at the hairy legs until the dog stopped barking and moved over to the window to shove his head through the mini-blinds.

“Are you okay?”

“Peachy.”

“What can I do?”

“Do you have a pistol? To put me out of my misery?”

A dark form blocked out the graying light as he peeked in the window, but she couldn’t make out any features on the man. “Not on me. Sorry.”

“It was too much to hope for anyway.” Alex rubbed her hands over her face. “Can you...” For a moment she tried to remember if she had on her granny panties or if she’d gone ahead on put on the silky pink ones that matched her bra. *Thank God I shaved my legs.* “Like that matters now.” She couldn’t remember ever being in a worse, or more compromising, position. Well, unless you counted the night she found her ex with her sister, but she tried never to think of that.

“Can I...?”

“I guess I am going to have to come back out the way I went in. If you can...” Her mouth dried up. “Grab a hold of my legs and pull. My hips are stuck.”

Two large, warm hands circled her ankles. “I’ve delivered calves before, but this is a first for me.” This time she was sure she heard a chuckle.

“Glad we’re all having fun,” she mumbled.

He tugged a couple of times but her hips didn’t budge. Then his hands slid up her legs and tugged at her hips. She was ashamed of the way his touch heated her. *Stuck in a friggin’ doggie door and I am getting horny. Why me?* Tears welled in her eyes. She wasn’t sure if it was from the cramp in her back or the fact that a stranger was getting the money shot and was probably going to laugh his ass off later when he told all his drinking buddies about it.

“Darlin’, I hate to say this, but you’re stuck good.”

Alex slammed her fists on the floor and said a few choice words. Romeo had the decency to stay over on his doggie mat and didn’t try to “comfort” her any more.

“Do you have a cell phone on you?”

“Yes, ma’am. Who can I call?”

“First call...” she rattled off Celia’s number. “Ask her to get her ass down here pronto.”

There was a long moment of pause before Andy said, “She said she’s on the other side of town, but on her way.”

“Damn. Okay.” Alex rubbed her hands through her hair. “Can you call 911? I think we need professional help for this.”

“Done deal.”

She heard a thud against the door. “You really don’t have to stay.”

“I don’t have anywhere pressing to be right this moment.” Andy rubbed her knee.

“You mentioned something about plans for tonight.”

“I had kind of hoped you’d be attending to those plans with me.”

“Yeah, well, we can pretty much rule that out now, I think. Aside from the doggie door burns on my back side, my bruised ego is aching like a sonofabitch and I don’t feel too up for anything.”

“We’ll see. Maybe you’ll change your mind.” His gentle caresses lulled her until the sound of sirens echoed through the house and Romeo ran around crazy, barking like a mad dog. “Cavalry’s here.”

The thought of a truck load of firemen looking down at her date undies rolled her empty stomach. “Do you have anything you can cover me up with?”

“Sure, darlin’.” Drew pulled off his wet leather jacket and removed his Lynyrd Skynyrd tee. He draped it across her legs up to the door just as three laden-in-full-fire-house-gear men appeared.

“Whoa. I thought this was some kind of joke.” The first man scratched his head and took off his coat. He squatted and examined the legs then glanced up at his buddies. “This is a first for me. Whadya think?” The three talked quietly for a few minutes.

“Oh my goodness.” A tiny elderly woman dressed in a hot pink jogging suit came around the other side of the house. “Oh dear. What happened? I saw the fire truck out front, just after that infernal contraption came roaring down the street.”

She glanced over at Drew as he shucked back into his jacket. “Do you own that crotch rocket out front?”

“It’s not a crotch rocket, ma’am. That’s an original Hartford Chopper.” He thought of what his cousin would say if he heard one of his custom Choppers called a crotch rocket.

“Where is Alex? Did you do something to her?”

“No, ma’am. Seems...”

“Oh Lordy.” Another miniscule matron came from the side of the house. This one dressed in a purple jogging suit which matched her hair almost perfectly. “Looks like the Wicked Witch of the East. Did you do that to her?” She turned her purple haze gaze onto Drew as she thrust her hands on her hips.

“No, ma’am. I mean ma’ams. She got stuck in the dog door.”

“Now why on Earth would she do a silly thing like that?”

“Gladys—” the pink poofed matron leaned into the other, “—you remember her mama. It’s a wonder this hasn’t happened sooner than now. I’ll swear if that woman didn’t have the fire department out here every other week when she lived with poor Delsie.”

Purple Haze Gladys nodded. “Yes, ma’am, Tessie. Don’t know what Wade saw in her mama.”

“Shh.” Tessie lowered her voice. “You know her mama was in the family way. That’s the only reason Delsie let her stay here as long as she did.”

Guilt tore at Drew as he listened to half the Golden Girls tear Alex’s life apart.

“That Wade was of no account neither.” Drew heard from behind him. He was afraid to turn around, afraid he’d find another septuagenarian in a polyester sport suit.

“Bernita, hush up now.” Tessie scolded the woman behind him. “You know that Alex is a good girl. Nothing like her mama or daddy. Delsie did a good job with her.”

“Mmm-hmm. That’s true.” Bernita’s affirmation spoke well of Alex, apparently, as the two other women nodded vigorously.

Finally, curiosity won out and he turned to find a triplet to the other two—from the neck up. Same nursing home curls his grandmother sported. But from the neck down, she was dressed in a fuchsia mini skirt and a gold sequined shirt.

All three women crowded closer and closer to the back door.

“Ladies, I need y’all to step back.” One of the firemen ushered the trio off the patio. “Sir, can I speak with you for a moment?”

Drew led Ace—as stitched on his shirt—away from the giddy grandmas. “You’re girlfriend’s stuck pretty good.”

“I know.” He didn’t correct the man’s assumption. “That’s why I called you.”

“It’s gonna take us a while to get her out. We are gonna have to get inside the house, cover her up and cut the door away. You wouldn’t happen to have a key would you?”

“No sir, sorry.” Drew glanced at his watch. His set started in a little over an hour and he needed to get to the club to set up. He considered calling Nate and having him cancel his appearance tonight, but he’d promised to perform with several other artists at the Premiere Country and Western club in Fort Worth. A major fund raiser was just the ticket to get Drew Hartford’s name out to folks who might not have otherwise heard of him.

“Can I have a minute with her?”

Ace nodded. “It’s gonna take us a minute to get ready.”

Drew moved closer to the door as Ace and his buddies talked over their plan. Bernita and the other ladies stood in the corner appearing to discuss the merits of Alex’s garden layout. He tapped once on the wood next to the doggie door. “Hey Alex. You doing okay?”

“Great. Just hanging out with Romeo and the dust bunnies.”

“I’m glad you can laugh at this. I’d be madder than wet rooster.”

“Oh don’t worry. I’m plenty mad, but there’s not a lot I can do about it right now.”

“I’m really sorry about all this.”

“It’s not your fault. It was my stupid idea to try and squeeze my fat ass through the Pet Portal 2000.”

He wanted to tell her, from what he’d seen over the last little bit, and from his memory which had taunted him over the past few weeks, she had a mighty fine ass. But he didn’t think she’d appreciate the appraisal at the moment. And she kept right on talking.

“You can learn a lot about pet portals lying and staring at it for an hour and a half. I never knew there was a little sticker with the manufacturer’s warranty and warning. Did you know, it says not intended for human use? I wish I had read this before now.”

Drew glanced at his watch again. “Damn. Alex. You remember those plans I have, I can’t break them tonight. I wish I could.”

“I understand. I wouldn’t want to be here either.”

“It’s not that.” He rubbed her knee. “But I’ll come back after if that’s okay.”

“Whatever.” She didn’t sound as if she believed him.

“Is it okay if I come back?”

“Sure, Andy. I’ll see you later.”

Drew patted Alex’s leg one final time. After he stretched out the kink in his bum knee, he crossed the yard to Tessie and her gang as they examined a large bush. “Miss Tessie, ma’am.”

The trio turned to look at him. “Listen to this one.” Tessie batted her eyes and gave him a wide smile. “Your mama taught you well.”

“Yes, ma’am. Thank you.” He fought off following his thanks with an “aw shucks”. “I was wondering if you could do me a huge favor.”

They all leaned closer to him.

“I have somewhere I need to be right now. And I was wondering if you could give Alex something for me.”

Their tongues clicked at him in disapproval.

“I know I should stay, but there are five other men who are counting on me and these plans were made long before I ever met Alex. If I could, I’d cancel.” And for some odd reason he would, too. He’d never been tempted to slack off from work. Even when Cassandra would try to get him to play hooky—though he always figured it was a power trip on her part to see if she could convince him to—he’d never even considered it.

He handed Tessie the little silver box he’d found after a week of looking through shops. The tiny, ornate jewelry box had a dog etched into the side. He’d thought it was perfect for Alex the moment he’d seen it. “Can you make sure she gets this?”

“I sure will.” The older woman’s eyes sparkled. He’d seen that same look in his mother’s eyes when she heard a new piece of gossip about one of the neighbors.

“Great. Thanks.” He stood staring at the ladies for a moment. “I guess I better go.” He hurried to the front of the house, saw the firemen preparing to break in. “Be careful guys. And watch out for Romeo. He may be a little skittish around strangers.”

He chuckled when he heard the roar of barks behind the door. “Damn, I wish I didn’t have to go.” He straddled his Chopper and donned his helmet just as a car sped into the driveway. He recognized Alex’s friend from the night at Burger Barn. “Celia, she’s around back.”

“Thanks.” The red-headed Amazon frowned at him for a brief moment before she ran to the door as the firemen prepared to swing a large ax. “Wait, wait. I have a key.”

Chapter Six

“Oh, my ass.” Alex mumbled, readjusted the icepack on her right hip, and looked up at the group of gawkers sitting around her table. “Tell me again what he looked like.” She couldn’t believe Andy had come all the way up to Fort Worth—granted it wasn’t solely to see her—and she never even laid eyes on the man.

She held the Lynyrd Skynyrd T-shirt up to her nose. The man smelled heavenly—a musky outdoorsy scent mingled with a tangy citrus fragrance. Almost surreal. Were it not for the black tee in her hand, she might think she’d imagined Andy showing up even though the “stuck in the doggy door to be rescued by her local fire department” nightmare was etched clearly in her memory never to be forgotten or ever—God forbid—repeated.

She inhaled the scent again to scoot the memory of the door to the background as she tried to imagine the man behind the aroma. He’d had gentle hands. And probably a gentle heart. He could have turned tail and ran the minute he saw the house giving birth to a half-clad grown woman. Instead he’d sat with her until help had arrived. Her knight in dark tee...

“He was tall.” Bernita shook her from her daydream. “Shaquille O’Neal tall. And had long dark hair. Beautiful blue eyes.” She punctuated with her cookie before she bit into it.

“You’re right on the eyes.” Tessie sipped her tea. “But he wasn’t that tall, maybe a little taller than me. And he was balding.”

“No, no, not balding.” Gladys said around a bite of cookie. “He had dark hair, but it was short and a little wavy on top, like that CSI acting fellow. Gary something or other.”

“Anything else, Gladys?” Alex shifted in the seat so she could look at the beautiful trinket box as well as Gladys.

“I’m gonna say five foot nine, like my Patrick. Wonderful green eyes. He was a looker that one.”

The septuagenarian trio all nodded.

“Celia?”

“Sorry, babe, he was sitting on a bike—a cool ass bike I might add—and already had a helmet on. There was something familiar about him, but...” She shook her head. “I don’t know. I was in a hurry to make sure they didn’t bust down the front door.”

“And again, I thank you for that.” She fingered the necklace at her throat. She hadn’t truly thought she’d ever see it again. Even when she learned Andy had it.

“Did Andy say what his plans were?” Celia bit at her thumbnail.

“No, but he did say he was hoping I could, what was it he said, ‘partake’ in it with him.”

“Like drugs?” Tessie’s perfect pink coiffure bounced.

Alex fought back a snort. “I don’t think anyone would be quite so blasé about their drug use. You know—” she rubbed her other hip, “—he never did tell me what he does for a living.”

“Maybe he’s a spy.” Gladys snagged two more cookies from the plate. “Double O and all that.”

“Did I mention his killer bike?” Celia stretched her nearly six foot frame. “A custom bike. I can’t remember where I’ve seen them before but they are ’sensitive with a capital moola.” She winked at Alex.

“No way for a man to act.” Bernita crossed her arms over her ample chest. “In my day, a man would have stayed to make sure you were okay. No plans would be so important he left you to strangers.”

Alex didn’t want to point out he was more of a stranger than anyone who had witnessed her rebirth from the door. At least the firemen lived close by and could be called upon for further scrutiny by the Granny Gang—as they liked to call themselves.

“Yes, ma’am.” Gladys nodded. Purple curls bounced around her wrinkled face. “If I were you, I’d give him a piece of your mind. Better yet, you shouldn’t see him any more.”

A headache threatened behind Alex’s right temple. She knew her grandmother’s friends meant well, but she had one mother who tried to micromanage her life, even if twenty or so years too late, she didn’t need three more. Not to mention receiving dating advice from women who wore their panties on their heads to keep their curls perky and soaked their teeth overnight didn’t boost her confidence.

“He said he’d be back later tonight.” Tessie set her teacup in the sink and grabbed a sponge. “But if you ask me, he was just being polite.” She took the plate of cookies and deposited them on the counter before she wiped down the table. “He could have just as easily brought the necklace with him if he really planned on coming back.”

Yep, that’s what I was thinking. For the most part, she didn’t expect to meet Andy face to face. Though, a small part of her had held out hope...

“Why don’t you come over for supper next week, Alex? My grandson said he’s looking forward to seeing you again.” Gladys zipped her sports jacket up. “I think he always had a little crush on you.”

“I, uh, let me check my schedule and I’ll get back to you.”

“We better be headed out ladies.” Tessie frowned at Gladys and tossed the sponge into her teacup. “We don’t want to be late.”

“Where are y’all headed?” Alex stood to walk them to the door.

Bernita waved her back into her chair. “We can find our way out.” She winked at Alex. “Tonight is dollar shot night at the Senior Center. Try to stay out of trouble.”

The trio waved as they left the kitchen. It wasn’t until the front door closed that Celia looked over at Alex, her eyebrow cocked. “Dollar shot night?”

“Think Canasta and little glasses of prune juice.”

Romeo snuggled his large head in Alex's lap as she flipped through the channels for the twentieth time. She lifted the collar of the worn black tee to her nose and melted at Andy's scent. A heavy sigh escaped before she could help herself. "I don't know why I stayed up."

A large rumble echoed through the air. "Not more rain. At least I'm inside this time." She patted the mutt's head. "Time to call it a night." She started to shove the dog off of her when he jumped up and ran to the door. "What is it, Romeo?"

The peal of the doorbell rocked her nearly a foot off the floor. "Who in the hell..."

Romeo bounced at the front door. The knickknacks on the shelf bumped around and threatened to crash to the floor.

"Settle down." Alex grabbed his collar and tried to get him to calm. She leaned in close to the door and cleared her throat. "Who is it?"

"Andy."

She straightened and let go of Romeo. The dog bumped into her several times and she would have fallen to the floor if her knees hadn't locked up at the guest on her doorstep. "Just a minute. I need to..." *Think girl. Think fast.* She glanced at her image in the glass front of the curio cabinet—curls stuck out every which way and dark circles mocked from under her eyes. "No time for Extreme Makeovers." After a quick rearrange of her hair, she disengaged the front lock and opened the door. "I needed to..." Her mouth dried. Whatever she'd been ready to say fled.

"Needed to?" Andy, or better yet Drew Hartford, snapped his fingers in her face. "Earth to Alex. You still in there?"

"Is this some kind of joke?" She leaned forward and peered past him. Looked to the left. Looked to the right. She didn't see camera crews or photographers.

She wanted to slam the door. But she wasn't sure which side she wanted him to be on, whether to pull him in and never let go or make sure the heavy-duty Craftsman door smacked him in his gorgeous tanned face and bruised the perfect, straight nose.

"You needed to..." he prompted her again.

She grabbed a pen from the end table. "To get this pen." *Could I be lamer?* "I have been looking for it everywhere."

Romeo pushed past her and settled his huge paws on the man's shoulders.

"Hi. You must be Romeo." Twin pairs of chocolate eyes looked at each other. "You are a big boy."

Maybe I am dreaming. Yeah. This is just a dream. If I pinch myself it won't hurt.

She didn't get a chance. Romeo decided at that moment to leave Drew alone and bolt for the back of the house. In the process his nearly twenty-pound-a-week dog food body slammed into her and sent her

sprawling to the floor. After a few ear-ringing seconds the room came back into focus and she found Drew hovering over her.

“Are you okay?”

“Why do I always wind up at your feet?”

Drew chuckled. “Because you feel it necessary to bow down to my superiority?”

“Uh, yeah, that would be a big fat no.” Despite herself she laughed. “Don’t just stand there. Help me up.”

Drew’s warm hand wrapped around hers. He lifted her with little to no effort and didn’t hesitate to pull her flush up against him. “Hi.”

“Um. Hi.” Alex battled the need to lean into him. “So. You’re Andy?”

Drew stroked her back once and released her. “About that.”

“You didn’t think it was a pertinent detail when we were chatting?”

He raked his hand through his dark hair. “I wasn’t sure how to broach it.”

Alex fought down a sudden swash of anger. “You could have mentioned it when I asked about your job. Family. Where you lived. Any of those times you could have jumped in. But you never once let on.”

“I wasn’t sure how you’d react.” He shifted the helmet under his arm. “You’re wearing my shirt.” He ran his hand over the sleeve of his, her, shirt. A tinge of red crossed his cheeks for a split second before he cleared his throat and said, “That’s sexy.”

Alex eyed him for a long moment. *What to do, what to do.* Her natural inclination was to fidget like crazy. She had to fight not to mess with her hair, tug at the hem of the T-shirt, shift from foot to foot, and look everywhere but at the man who she never imagined standing in her foyer. “Sexy?” she mumbled under her breath as she reached around him and shoved the front door closed. His cologne surrounded her and made her want to step back into his embrace and forget he’d left out several important details. She wouldn’t do that, but a horrible hostess she was not. “You might as well come in and have a seat.”

Drew released a pent-up breath. He hadn’t been sure how Alex would react. He understood yelling and screaming fans who waited outside his dressing room after shows. Quiet was a new one for him. Alex calmly and quietly escorted him to the living room and motioned him to a sofa. He could hear her mumble something about dreaming and cruel, cruel joke, but he decided not to ask for clarification.

“Uh, thanks for bringing my necklace back.”

“Sure.”

“Thanks for trying to help with the doggie door.”

“Uh-huh.”

"I, uh—" Alex broke off at the trill of a phone. She snagged the phone and nodded as soon as the receiver was to her ear. "Hi, Bernita. Yes, it's Andy." She narrowed her eyes at him. "I'll be fine, please don't call the police."

Drew laughed and shook his head.

"No. Turns out I know him better than I thought. Seems we have a mutual—" she coughed, "—friend. I'll talk to you tomorrow."

"Neighborhood watch?" he asked when she hung up.

"Not really. Seems your crotch rocket, her words not mine, woke up her cat."

"Sorry."

"Don't worry about it. It'll give her something to talk about. Not much happens around here. Between the bike and my incident—" she made quote symbols with her finger, "—she's set for a pretty long while."

Alex set her hands on her hips and looked him over. "I still can't believe... I feel like such a fool." She flopped onto the sofa.

"Why?"

"Are you kidding me? I've been going on and on about dumping the shake on him to you, or on you to him, oh hell, I don't even know anymore. And you never once let on. You were back in Houston, that's really where you live right?"

"Yes."

"You were back in Houston, laughing at me."

"I never laughed at you." Drew set his helmet down on the coffee table and perched on the edge of the sofa next to her. "I wasn't sure you'd want to talk to me if you knew."

"Are you insane? Who wouldn't talk to Drew Hartford?"

He arched an eyebrow. "Really? Would you have believed me if I told you who I was?"

"Well..."

"And if I finally managed to convince you, would you have continued to talk to me?"

"Probably not."

"See."

"Fine. You got me there." Alex closed her eyes ran her hands through her hair.

She gnawed on her bottom lip. Drew had to control every urge in his body not to pounce on her. So far, he'd managed to keep her from kicking him out. He didn't want to blow it by moving too fast.

Her left eye popped open. "The thing you had to do tonight. Wasn't it some big benefit concert for Craig's Kids?"

He nodded. The fundraiser was for former Dallas Cowboy tight end, Craig Haggerty's charity. "We went to high school together."

"And you wanted me to go with you."

“Yeah.”

“Why?”

“What do you mean? Why wouldn’t I?”

“That’s the kind of thing you take drop-dead gorgeous women with too-tight dresses and mega-high heels to.”

“And...?”

“You still wanted to take me?”

“Of course I did.”

Even in the dim light of a single lamp and the glow of the TV, he saw a blush spread across her cheeks. Her eyes closed tighter. “Man, oh man.” She picked up a magazine next to her and fanned herself.

“You okay?” Drew scooted closer to her.

“Right as rain. Just waiting to wake up from this majorly bizarro dream.”

Drew couldn’t help himself. He’d finally lost the battle. He stilled her hand. “If it is a dream, then might as well make it a good one.” He leaned forward and set his lips to hers.

For a moment she resisted, then her lips parted and the warmth of her tongue shot a thrill straight through him. Drew finally sank his hands into the blonde curls he’d fantasized about for nearly a month.

Her hand slid between them and up his chest until she pushed him away.

“Definitely a good one.” Alex cleared her throat. “But still, I might be asleep. Better to make sure.” She pulled Drew back to her, bit his lower lip and laved the spot with her tongue.

Something heavy landed on his thigh. At first he thought Alex had rested her hand there with a tad too much force but his wrist soon grew clammy. It distracted him to the point he had to pull away. He found Romeo slobbering, and if he wasn’t mistaken smirking, at his intrusion.

Drew tried to push the dog back, but when a big-as-a-car mutt wanted to be somewhere he apparently stayed there. “Romeo. Give a guy a break.”

Romeo lapped Drew’s wrist and settled his head more firmly between him and Alex.

A giggle erupted from Alex. “Better than a daddy with a shotgun any day.” She ruffled the fur and extracted herself from the sofa. “Can I get you anything? Soda? Water? House special?”

“House special sounds good,” he said with a wink.

“One mop coming up.”

Alex leaned her forehead against the kitchen cabinet. *Drew Hartford. Andy is Drew Hartford.* The words danced around her head even as her lips still tingled from his touch.

“And he friggin’ kissed me.” A smile crept its way across her mouth for a moment but she realized he’d also lied to her. Lied through omission by hiding the fact he was the thirty-two ounce frosty delight dumpee not some innocent bystander who just happened to get a bird’s eye view.

She snapped up the phone from the counter.

“Lo?”

“Celia. Sorry to wake you.”

“Buy me a new pair of shoes and we’ll call it even.”

“Ha. Don’t hold your breath.” Alex peeked around the corner of the kitchen door and hollered, “I’ll be right there. Can’t find that mop.”

She thought she heard him laugh but Celia started talking.

“Who’s there? Did Andy finally show up?”

“Yes and no.”

“What? Hold on.” Sheets rustled, then a loud thump and swearing came from the other end of the phone. “Come again. He did but he didn’t? How’s that?”

“He did show up, but he’s not exactly who I thought he was.”

“Oh geez. Big time loser huh? I wouldn’t think someone on one of those bikes could be a loser. I thought they had a hot clause in their contracts. You know, to keep their stock up and all.”

“What is with you and that stupid bike?”

“I figured out what kind it is, you know. A Hartford Chopper. As in Drew Hartford. His cousin Dusty or something makes them and like I thought, they are ’sensitive with a capital cha-ching.”

“Funny that. Seems ‘Andy’ is a nickname for Andrew.”

“Yeah and Betsy, Betty, Liza and Liz are short for Elizabeth. Your point?”

“Gawd.” Celia was not going to work with her here at all. “Drew is sitting in my living room. Andy is Drew Hartford.”

Silence. Nothing.

“Celia?”

“I’m coming over.”

“No.”

“Did the firemen conk you on the head when they cut the door away? I knew I should have taken you to the hospital. Do you know where the bump is, it’ll make talking to the doctors easier?” Celia grunted. “I’m getting dressed as we speak and I can be there in ten if I ignore all the lights and stop signs.”

“Please don’t get ticketed on my account.” Alex laughed. “Listen to me. It is really Drew. Live and in the flesh.” Lips, teeth, tongue and all, she wanted to add as her cheeks heated. “He had more than your garden variety view of the icing. He got all the details first hand. And, it explains how he found my necklace and was certain it was mine.” She fingered the silver charm. “It must have landed next to him or something.”

“Alex? You wouldn’t lie to me, now, would you?”

“On my honor as a junior Woodnymph.” The organization they started in high school had not lasted through one meeting when the girls realized three of them had a crush on the same guy and got into a huge fight. Two never spoke to each other again and neither spoke to Alex when she started dating him two months later.

“Wow. Pulling out the oath. It’s really him?”

“Yes.”

“OH MY GAWD!” Celia squealed and giggled. “I can’t wait to tell everyone.”

“No, you can’t. Please.”

“Why not? Can you see Miss Smarty Pants Sandy’s face when she finds out?”

“You can’t say anything. I may not ever see him after tonight.”

“That’s just stupid. Of course you will.”

“He lied, Celia.”

“Yeah, about being a celebrity who’s often stalked and hounded. I can’t say I blame him. He probably has the hots for you but wanted to make sure you weren’t just some kind of groupie. It can’t be easy dating women in his line of work.”

“Hmm. Maybe.”

“Damn, girl, worry about it tomorrow. Don’t just leave the man alone. He might run off.”

“Romeo’s sitting on him.”

A burst of laughter echoed through the phone. “I knew that dog was good for something. Go. Now. Call me tomorrow and give me all the juicy details.” Celia hung up before Alex could say anything else.

“Maybe.” Alex considered what Celia said. She could understand why Drew might not know if a woman was after him for himself or his onstage persona. Not that *she* was after him. *No, never.* But if she was... No hot-blooded woman would give up the chance to be in her situation right now.

“Stop over-thinking it.” Alex grabbed two cans of diet soda from the fridge and went to release her prisoner. “Seems I misplaced that mop.”

The man lay back against the sofa, eyes closed, Romeo snuggled up beside him.

“Drew?” Alex didn’t whisper loud. She took some perverse pleasure in having the man asleep under her roof. “Drew?”

He didn’t so much as twitch.

She settled herself in the chair across from Drew and watched her living breathing fantasy as his chest rose and fell. Light snores vibrated but she wasn’t sure if it was from man or beast. “I’ll give you ten more minutes then you got some ’splaining to do, cowboy.”

Chapter Seven

Drew's neck ached. He would've thought after all the years on the tour bus he'd be used to odd positions. When he cracked his eyes open though, he didn't see Nate or Robbie snoring in the opposite booth, but instead Alex and Romeo curled up on a club chair in her living room.

"Holy hell."

Romeo's head perked up.

A low rumble started just before the dog launched into a ferocious fit.

"Jesus H. Christ what is it?" Alex leapt to her feet. Her hair stood out every which way and the twisted T-shirt pulled incredibly tight up and across her breasts. A tiny patch of creamy skin peeked out beneath. "Romeo, zip it."

The dog glared at Drew and gave one final bark before he slinked to the doggie bed next to a fireplace.

"Sorry. He's not a morning person." Alex tugged her shirt back into place. She swiped at the curls around her head but only managed to give them more life. "Neither am I, for the most part. Coffee?" She stalked past him and returned a couple of minutes later with two steaming cups. "I didn't know how you like it. I take mine with three sugars and cream." She took a sip then another before she set her cup on the table and moved as if to pass him again.

"Alex?" Drew stood and grabbed her elbow before she got too far. "Wait please."

"You don't like coffee?" Her eyes never quite met his. "I have tea, milk, water, soda. You name it. I might even have some orange juice left over. But my brother was over here the other day and he tends to drink it all so it may be gone. You know how guys are. Empty bottomless pits. That's not to say that you are too, I just meant..."

Drew cupped her face and brought her gaze up to meet his. "Good morning." He gave her a quick, but hopefully memorable, kiss.

A blush tinted her cheeks when she backed away. "Morning."

Drew released her and when she didn't turn away he said, "Sorry I fell asleep on your sofa last night."

"Not a problem. I put all sorts of funny hats on you and took photos. I figured I could finance the rest of Scooter's, that's my brother, college. You know, I hear the *Monthly Monitor* pays big bucks for celeb shots."

"My publicist will be glad to know I have branched off into education endowments."

Alex snorted. Her shoulders relaxed as she fiddled with the hem of the Lynyrd Skynyrd tee.

“Andy, er, ah, Drew, I’m not real sure how to handle this.”

“Handle what?”

“You. This.” She motioned between them. “I was skeptical about meeting you when I thought you were plain ole Andy from Houston. But you’re ... you’re you. Drew Hartford. Motorcycle riding, mega celeb.”

“I wouldn’t call myself a mega celeb.”

“Which is what endears all those screaming women to your charms. You’re hot and modest.”

A smile spread across his face. “You think I’m hot?”

Alex snorted again and rolled her eyes. “And insufferable. You know you’re hot. Regular men don’t get asked to do cover spreads in *Playgirl* magazine.”

“Yeah, well.” He couldn’t fight the heat that filled his cheeks. “My publicist said it would be a good way to, um, reach out to a broader market.”

“Is that a blush, big strong cowboy?” Alex reached out and tickled him.

Drew grabbed her hands and trapped them behind her back as he wagged his eyebrows. “Turn about is fair play.” He held her still with one hand and tickled her with the other.

She threw her head back and laughed. The long creamy column of her neck beckoned to him. Without another thought, he settled his lips on the pulse point. She stilled instantly and moaned as he traced a trail up to her ear.

He debated keeping her hands tight in his own, afraid she might push him away, but more he needed to feel her. His hands slid around her and held her to him. When he thought she might balk, she turned her mouth to his and captured it with hotter intensity than the night before. Alex’s fingers timidly skipped over his shoulders, kneaded his back.

Tongues danced, hands explored. She tasted of coffee and cream. And he could *not* get enough of her. He shifted to loosen the tightness of his jeans but nothing helped. Especially when she rubbed against him.

“You’re killing me.”

“Turn about is fair play.” She threw the words back at him and shifted her hips closer.

Drew ran his hands down her back and across her tight round bottom to pull her hard against him.

“Ow. Dammit.” Alex jerked away.

“What? What’s wrong?”

“My ass, er, uh, hips.” She rubbed the spot Drew’s hands had just been. “Bruises. Doggie door.”

“Aw man, I’m sorry.” Drew fought to even out his breathing. He should have realized. You can’t stay stuck like that and have nothing to show for it. “How bad are they? Can I see?”

“I don’t...”

"I'm not trying to get fresh." A smile turned up the corner of his mouth. "Unless you want me to." He held up his hands when her gaze narrowed. "Or not. I have some experience with getting banged up."

She nodded. "Right. The rodeo days." She hiked the hem of her shirt and hooked the waist of her sweats. "Promise not to try anything funny."

He nodded and said under his breath, "I guarantee you won't be laughing if I get a hold of you."

"What was that?"

"Nothing. No funny business."

Alex pulled the material away and revealed a huge purple welt on her right hip.

"Damn. I am so sorry."

"It's not your fault. Well not entirely." She winked at him. "I have a matching set." She turned and flashed him her left hip. "For whatever reason this one is worse. Maybe the door is lopsided. You think I can file a complaint with the manufacturer? Inferior product and whatnot?"

"Doubt it. It had a sticker remember."

"You're right. Darn it all." She snapped her fingers. "And I planned to take a year-long cruise with the winnings of the lawsuit."

"Maybe next time."

"Yeah, I don't think I'm gonna try that again."

She sucked in a breath when Drew traced his fingertips across the blemished skin. "I have some ointment I used when I rode regularly. Secret family recipe and all that. It might help." He noticed an odd discoloration in the middle of the bruise but all thoughts of liniments and healing fled as he tried not to dwell on how her soft skin felt. And how he ached to use his mouth to soothe the pain away.

He should be shot for the way his mind shifted to wanting to take her right there. *So damn hot. Focus man. She's hurt, not horny.* Drew cleared his throat. "How far down does it go?"

"Another couple of inches." She tugged the sweats down farther and exposed half her beautiful ass—blemished or not.

"Damn that's ..."

"Holy smokes. I didn't see anything. I swear." A voice from across the room made Drew straighten bolt upright.

Alex yanked up her sweats. "Celia. What are you doing here?"

"I, uh, I..." Red-headed Celia, dressed in impossibly tight jeans and one of those baby T-shirts that left little to the imagination, tapped her high-heeled foot. "Give me a minute. I can think of something, I'm sure."

Alex rolled her eyes at Drew. "Let me introduce Celia Nelson, my former best friend. Celia, I think you know who this is."

“As I live and breathe. Mr. Garth Brooks.” Celia scampered over to Drew and Alex, fanned herself with her hand and batted her long eyelashes. “Sir, I have all your albums.”

“You’re a real comedian, Celia. Want some coffee? I can’t image how you’re awake at this ungodly hour.”

Drew glanced at the clock over the mantle. Half past nine did seem early. He usually crawled into bed around four after concerts, though last night’s benefit had been a tad different. And when many of the other guys were going to some club, he’d bowed out, told them he had a commitment he couldn’t break.

“You behave.” Alex wagged her finger at the pair.

“Yes, ma’am. I am always the model of sophistication.” Celia nodded her head frantically. The minute Alex disappeared around the corner, Celia grabbed his hands and dragged him to the sofa. “Okay, tell me everything.”

“About.”

“Last night, duh.” She released him and intertwined her fingers in her lap and leaned in toward him. “I’m guessing since you’re still here she didn’t kick you out. Is she still mad that you lied?”

“How’d you...”

“Duh, hello, former best friends know everything. I tried to explain you’re used to stalkings and weirdoes.”

“And I am guessing you know weirdoes?”

“Aw now...” Celia leaned back and for a minute he thought he might have gone too far. But when huge white teeth shone at him and she hooted louder than any guy in the band he relaxed.

“I knew I liked you. You have to understand, Alex has been standoffish with guys for a long time. It’s not easy after... And you say the Hartford Choppers have been around for six years?”

“Uh, yeah.” He frowned at the sudden change in topic.

“Celia, I swear, you and that bike.” Alex came from behind him and handed her friend a cup of coffee.

“Thanks, doll face.” Celia winked at him. “I would give anything to ride on one of those bad boys.”

“Oh God, those are challenge words to Drew.”

Drew narrowed his gaze at Alex. “Yuck it up, sweetheart.” He dug the keys out of his pocket and tossed them to Celia.

“Are you serious?” Celia looked at Alex. “Is this for real?”

“I think he’s trying to buy my affections through my friends.”

“Is it working?” He chuckled and tilted his head to the small table in the corner. “Helmet’s over there.”

She jumped up. “Closet.” She ran to a hallway.

“Huh?”

“She needs to properly attire herself.”

“With your clothes?” He looked Alex over. She topped out at five-foot-two maybe and couldn’t weigh over a hundred and twenty pounds curves and all. Then he thought to the bright red Amazon who’d dashed from the room. Six foot if she was an inch and busting out all over.

“I can tell what you’re thinking. Why do you think that T-shirt was so tight on her? I wore it in high school. She’s insane. And that bike...” She laughed and sipped her coffee. “You don’t know what you just did. She will forever be in your debt.”

“Is that good or bad?”

“Depends. How well stocked is you supply of chocolate chip cookies? You’ll never get rid of her.”

“Is her friend part of that deal?” He arched an eyebrow. “I can’t see that being a problem.”

The tingle in the pit of her stomach fluttered like mad. For a moment when she woke this morning she thought she might still be dreaming. She’d fantasized all night long of Drew and how that mouth of his could melt the world away. Fantasized what it would be like to wake in his arms. So okay, waking with Romeo’s rendition of dog gone mad hadn’t been her ideal. But the man was still there.

“Okey dokey folks.” Celia snatched up the helmet. “Be back later. Bwahhhhh.” A mad laugh echoed down the hall behind her.

“You have created a monster. You know that right.” Alex sipped her coffee again. Not sure what to say she asked, “Don’t you have a concert tonight?”

“Nope.”

“Publicity event.”

“Uh-uh.”

“Anything work related?”

“Nada. Are you trying to get rid of me?”

“No, but if you have somewhere better to be...”

Drew settled next to her on the sofa. “First of all, this is where I want to be. Second...” he leaned back, crossed his arms over his chest, “...seems my ride is otherwise in service at the moment. So you’re stuck with me.” He winked.

“Gotcha. Okay, then, what would you like to do. I have games, cards, my computer.” A need to be doing something, anything, other than sitting in her living room with last year’s number three on country music list of best male performers... a sudden need to fan herself overwhelmed her. “We could take the dog for a walk.”

He didn’t answer for a moment. “I’d like to see some of your work if you don’t mind.”

“The pet portraits? Why?”

“Why not?”

Alex wasn't used to sharing her work with people, well, other than the customers themselves. Men didn't typically care if she was a damn fine photographer and other than Celia and the granny gang—who had all seen her work—she didn't associate with many women. “Sure. This way.” She led him to the back of the house, paused long enough to close her bedroom door after Hurricane Celia hit. In the studio, she lugged out her old portfolio and set it on the desk. “Here it is.”

She paced the small floor as he flipped through photo after photo. “Business has been slow lately.” She didn't mean for it to come out quite so defensively. But if her house hadn't been paid off many years before by her grandmother, she wouldn't be able to make ends meet. She could stop paying for Scooter's college but she knew their mother would never pay for it and given a chance to have the money a job afforded, Scooter would spend it all on X-Box games rather than save for his education.

“You're good.”

“Thanks.”

“No. I mean it.” Drew straightened. “How booked is your month?”

“Beg pardon?”

“You said business is slow. How tight is your schedule?”

“Not very. This time of the year is always slow for me.” *This time of year being any time in the near or foreseeable future.* She opted not to add that part aloud.

“Do you think you can move some appointments around? Maybe have two, three weeks free?”

“I might. Why...?”

“I want to hire you.”

She gawked at him. “You have that many pets?”

“No.” Drew chuckled. “Well, yeah I do if you count the horses, cows and all the goats my brother just bought. But no, Fan Fair starts in a couple of weeks. My schedule is booked solid and I thought it would be a good time to get some great publicity stills in.”

“Don't you have ... I don't know... people to do that?”

“Sometimes. But I want you.”

Alex swiped her clammy hands down her sweats. For a second she wanted him to say it again, but he meant photography. Not the sexually charged innuendo her body heard.

“I, uh, I'm not real sure.”

“Hang on just a minute.” He pulled a cell phone from his pocket. “Nate, hey.” Drew moved away from her a bit and lowered his voice as he spoke.

Alex was so preoccupied with the thought of being with him for any length of time she didn't even try to eavesdrop. When he finally flipped the phone shut and turned back to her he offered her a sum.

“Are you serious?”

“Too low, I could probably get him to go up...”

“No. The amount’s fine.” It would pay for the rest of Scooter’s college and give her a little nest egg. “Why me?”

“You keep saying that. ‘Why?’ Don’t you trust anything?”

Not usually. “I’m not used to... it’s just.” She could hear Celia’s voice in the back of her head. *Don’t over analyze it. Take it, you schmuck.*

How often did she do something because she wanted to? For her and no one else? Well, remove the college tuition and savings account incentive and she should jump at the chance to be near Drew. “I’ll do it.”

A smile spread across his day-old bearded face. “Great.” Drew launched into a spiel about the week-long Fan Fair festival.

A tiny part of Alex’s excitement faded. Things would change between them the minute she started working for him. Not that anything had really happened between the pair as of yet. Sure they’d spoken via the internet for a couple of weeks, but she hadn’t really learned that much about the man—she knew a hell of a lot about Drew Hartford the performer, the way every Drewdette who sends in their \$19.95 and receives the PR packet back does—but she didn’t know the man behind the guitar.

“Can you be ready to leave a week from Thursday?”

She had to switch mental gears. Focus on work. Their relationship was client and photographer now. Nothing more. She’d learned a long time ago not to combine the two. “I thought it didn’t start for a few weeks.”

“Yeah, but I’d like to get some shots at the last couple of concerts beforehand and maybe a recording session we have set up.”

Alex narrowed her eyes. “It almost sounds like you’re making this up as you go along.”

Drew laughed and tried to make it sound as casual as possible. Damn, how’d she read him so well?

“Nope. We’ve been looking for someone to do it.” For about five seconds after the idea hit him. Nate hadn’t fought too hard when he’d called, but Drew knew he’d probably end up paying her fees out of his own pocket. Publicity was never something he dealt with or scheduled himself and as far as he knew the budget had to be approved months in advance. When the idea came to him though, he ran with it.

“Both the concerts and the recording session are down around Houston the week before, so you can come down to the ranch and then we can head to Nashville together afterward.”

Alex ran her hands through her hair. Drew was afraid she would back out when she picked up her appointment book and started shaking her head. “I don’t think—” she sucked a deep breath and released it, “—any of these will be hard to change. I might even be able to get them all in later this week if the clients’ schedules permit it. You’re sure you want me?”

His pants tightened. *Was he seventeen again?* “Absolutely.” He crossed the room toward her. “Which reminds me.” He settled his hands on her hips, careful not to touch her bruises. “I think there’s a little matter of a bet.”

Her brow scrunched. “Huh?”

“A shake shower? I found it immensely funny. But did you listen to me?”

“You mean Andy. Who I had no idea was one and the same.” Her eyes narrowed. “Isn’t that a little like cheating? Hedging the bet or something?”

“I don’t remember there being any kind of addendum of how I knew it was funny.” Drew leaned into Alex.

“Whoa, cowboy.” Alex wiggled free. “I believe you’ve collected on that already. Several times in fact.” She sat at her desk and pulled out a form from one of her desk drawers. After a minute she handed it to Drew. “If you could sign here.”

A contract.

Drew signed and handed it back. “How about a bonus? I thought it was really, *really* funny.”

All the laughter and playfulness had vanished from her face. “Wish I could.” She held out her hand. “I look forward to working with you.”

Chapter Eight

Alex shoved the suitcase in the trunk of her car. Her camera bags and purse went into the backseat.

"Is that all you're taking?"

"Mother, I am going for a photo shoot."

"Yes, but you'll be around all those redneck celebrities."

"Mother." Alex rolled her eyes. "They're country and western singers. Believe it or not some are from up north. Even as far as Canada."

"Oh, I don't believe that..."

"Alex." Celia stood from her perch on the hood of her own car. "I got you something for your trip." She leaned into the back of her sporty convertible.

"Ow." Scooter hollered as Alex smacked him for ogling Celia's ample assets. "Um, I mean h-ow long will it take you to get down there?" He made a face as he recovered.

"Four hours I think. The ranch is just north of Houston."

"I am so excited for you." Celia handed her a hot pink gift bag. "Don't open this 'til you're well outside of Fort Worth," she whispered.

"Will do." She hugged Celia and her mother. "Scooter, you better take good care of Romeo. I'm going to miss you."

"I'll miss you too sis but you're only gonna be gone a couple of weeks."

"I was talking to the dog."

"Right. Gotcha. Feed him once a week..."

"A day. Once a day."

"...and no wild parties except on days with 'a' in it."

"Maybe I shouldn't go." Her stomach had been in knots pulling tighter and tighter as this day neared.

"I'm just yanking your chain." Scooter wrapped his arm around her shoulder. "Go. You deserve a break."

"I'll be working."

"At a fair. Taking pictures."

Alex didn't want to discuss the merits of her job. "I better head off. I don't want to hit traffic."

After another round of hugs, she finally backed out of her driveway. After an hour on the road, curiosity got the better of her as to Celia's gift. She stopped at a gas station, topped off her tank, got a large

soda then tore into the package. When she pulled the huge wad of light pink tissue paper out she gasped and glanced around the parking lot to see if any of the truckers had seen the deep red bustier and matching crotchless panties. The note tucked inside read, "Hope you make music as sweet as he does."

"Dammit, Celia." Alex slammed the package in the passenger seat, peeked at it once more then tossed it into the backseat. As she pulled back onto the highway, a round of giggles erupted before she could help herself. "If only."

Drew paced the living room floor for over an hour.

"What time is she supposed to arrive?"

"Any minute."

"Dude, you need to relax. She's gonna turn right around and go home if you pounce on her." Nate tossed his magazine aside. "Can you explain this job to me one more time?"

"I want to get some publicity shots of the next few shows and all next week."

"And the photos we had done last month weren't good enough?"

"I don't know." He banged his forehead on the door frame.

"Drew she must be some piece of ass."

Drew wheeled around on his boot heels. "Don't you ever say that again. Besides it's not like we have...we haven't...I wouldn't know, okay." And with the stupid contract she made him sign, he probably wouldn't get the chance. She was in his employ, which she'd pointed out several times.

"Better keep it that way. That's all you need now after all the Cassandra press and Angel spouting off any chance she can. Just keep junior Drew in your pants and everything will be fine."

Drew said a few choice words to his brother.

"Whoa. Drew, lighten up." Nate held up his hands. "I have never seen you this worked up over a woman."

Drew slumped into the leather club chair and wiped his sweaty palms on the legs of his jeans. "I can't explain it." He shook his head. "Sure she's hot. Damn hot. But it's more than that. Just talking to her gets under my skin."

"I'll say." Nate stood and walked to the window. "Is she bringing that Amazon friend Robbie can't stop talking about?"

"I don't think so. She may meet up with us in Nashville." Drew wiped his hands again. "I haven't been this nervous since prom night junior year."

"Well, you better get over it quick. She just pulled up out front."

Drew's chest tightened, as did lower. He needed to figure out a way to control his hormones. The more he'd thought over his job offer the more he wished he hadn't concocted the ruse. Sure he wanted her as close as possible, but now things were complicated.

Nate opened the front door. "Go get her, cowboy."

"Stuff it." Drew shoved his brother's shoulder and headed out to the gravel driveway. He couldn't hide the smile that broke. He was damn glad to see her again. It had been nearly two weeks. Sure they had talked on the internet and the phone everyday since, but having her at his home... His smile widened.

"Hi, guys." Alex shut her door.

To say that Drew was disappointed she hadn't sprinted and jumped into his arms would be a gross understatement. She was there for a job not a romp in the hay. Damn, he'd screwed that up royally. He officially introduced her to Nate and pointed out which buildings were which.

"This is such a great place. I can see why you stay here so much."

Drew had told her all about his home in Nashville. It was almost a prerequisite for a singer starting out to have something there. His career had kicked off to a good start and he could afford more.. He'd kept that small house. Houston was his hometown, though, so the first chance he got to build something of his own he took it and hadn't thought twice about it since.

"Do you want me to show you around? We have a corral and the barn's around back." Drew tried not to roll his eyes. *Damn, I sound like a horny teenager trying to get the girl alone.*

Alex shook her head. "I should probably unload the car first. I don't want my cameras to get hot."

"We'll help." Drew slugged his brother in the arm. "Right, Nate?"

"Yeah, sure."

"You don't have to do that. I can manage..."

"Nonsense." Drew opened the back door as Nate popped open the trunk.

"No really." Alex scramble to the other rear passenger door and all but lunged into the back of the car. "Where is that damn thing?" She shoved a couple of bags around.

Drew saw flimsy red material on the floorboard, hidden under the driver's seat. Deep crimson dots stained Alex's cheeks when he picked up the garment. It wasn't until her reaction registered that he even noticed the bustier in his hand. He had to clear his throat twice before he could speak. "Is this what you're looking for?"

"Hee hee." Nervous laughter tittered out of her. "Yeah."

Drew's eyebrow arched. *Holy hell.* His mind raced with images of her in his bed, under him, just about anywhere with that damn thing on.

"Um, it's kind of a joke." If possible, her cheeks reddened more. "From Celia."

"What are y'all two yakking about?" Nate closed the trunk.

Alex lunged for the lingerie but Drew was quicker and shoved it under his loose T-shirt. “Not a thing.” He snagged the two large bags off the backseat. “Got everything, Alex?”

“I, uh, let me grab my purse.” She found the matching panties and stuffed them into her handbag. Her stomach pitched. “I should have thrown that sucker out the window.”

“What’s that?” Drew’s brother, Nate, hefted her suitcase as if it weighed nothing.

“Sorry. Talking to myself.” Heat suffused her cheeks. What was Drew going to do with a bustier? And could a woman die of humiliation? The way her head swirled and chest ached she didn’t think it too far-fetched. “Where...” her voice squeaked as they rounded the side of the large ranch house, “where am I staying?”

“The guest quarters in the back. Is that okay?” Drew tilted his head toward the far side of the property.

Thank God yes, she wanted to say. She couldn’t bear to look Drew in the eye and opted for, “Great, thanks.” An entirely separate house would put a good distance between herself and Drew. And major temptation.

“Is something wrong?” Nate slowed his pace and nudged his brother. “Did you crack another rib on that stupid horse?”

“No. Why?”

“You keep holding your side.”

Drew’s step faltered and Alex bit back a giggle. Teach him to steal a woman’s unmentionables.

“Drew, if you’re not feeling well, you should go lie down.” Joking she could do. “Nate and I will handle all this.” She looped her handbag on her shoulder and reached for her camera bag. “I can take that. I wouldn’t want you to strain yourself.”

“I’ve got it.” Drew dodged her hand. His eyes narrowed.

Oh she was going to pay for that, she could tell already.

The trio stopped in front of a miniature version of the main ranch house, wooden wrap-around porch, swing from the rafters and all. “Home sweet home.” Drew pushed in through the front door. “I mean, for a few days.”

Alex ignored the way her stomach fluttered at the thought of living with Drew for any length of time. She tried not to gasp at the spacious layout of the living area. If she wasn’t mistaken, this “guest house” was larger than her own home.

When she realized her mouth was hanging open she said, “Ah, it’s lovely.”

Drew gave her a quick and very impersonal tour. “We’ll let you settle in for a bit.” He smacked his brother on the back of the head. “Later tonight we have a party of sorts going on.”

“Party? You didn’t have to do that.”

Nate shook his head. "It's been planned for months. We do it every year. Invite a bunch of the neighbors over and let the guys blow off steam before we have to hunker down for Fan Fair."

"Right." *Not everything is about you, dear.* Her mother's often used refrain in life rang through her ears. "Gotcha."

"If you need anything we'll be out in the barn." Drew all but dragged Nate to the door. "Otherwise, we'll see you up at the house around eight. Sound good?"

"Yep. See you at eight."

When the brothers hottie times two—Nate was every bit as studly as Drew, though he didn't curl her toes and make her want to weep the way Drew did—left, Alex sank into a thick leather chair.

"He kept my stuff." She'd expected him to do the gentlemanly thing and give it back to her when they went on the tour of the digs, but not only did he keep it, but he rubbed his side once or twice so she wouldn't forget he had it.

She couldn't imagine what he hoped to gain by it. He was her boss now and she made sure he knew there was a firm line drawn.

So why did she feel like she shot herself in the foot? "You can't have it both ways," she said aloud in the empty room.

If she followed after her mother or sister, she would disregard her own set of rules and nail Drew the moment she had a chance. Then her mother and sister could say I told you so, Miss High and Mighty. How many times had Pixie said that Alex was human like the rest of them and the minute she realized it she could relax and have some fun?

Alex had learned to hate her sister.

She scrubbed her hands over her face and released a heavy sigh. "This job is the best thing that could have happened to me. I can't screw it up."

"You're acting even more squirrely than before she got here." Nate hadn't let up since they walked in the back door of the main house. "What's wrong with you?"

"Not a damn thing. I'll meet you out at the barn in ten, okay?" He didn't wait for his brother to answer, but took the stairs two at a time up to his room. He felt like a high schooler with a dirty magazine when he locked the door behind him and dropped onto all fours to hide the lacy red blackmail under his bed.

Contract or no, the minute he saw it he knew all bets were off. He had to get Alex in it. And he'd have to remember to thank Celia—maybe a Hartford Chopper of her very own.

Chapter Nine

Alex hung her Hasselblad around her neck and headed for the corral she'd seen from her kitchen window. Several young men were working horses and she thought it would be a good opportunity to get in a few beginning shots. An idea for a book had rattled around her head for a while. She'd always wanted to capture men at work. She had an odd fascination with it despite her early view on men thanks to hers and Pixie's sperm donors. Her mother's last boyfriend—who unfortunately lasted only a couple of years—instilled a strong work ethic in her.

Roger took her to work with him once a week. A landscaper with an eye for design, he'd loved the outdoors and creating. He thought it a shame Alex and her sibs stayed holed up in the house all the time with nothing more than Scooby Doo and Mario for company. He'd offered all the Barrett children the chance to join him but not too surprisingly, Alex was the only one to take him up.

She always regretted not taking her camera with her when they worked. She'd discovered her love for photography at a young age, but with all the dirt and the water she didn't want to ruin the one thing she valued. Inevitably she'd always get so caught up helping Roger, she didn't remember to snap any of the times she did bring her ancient Nikon with her.

Still, a book on men like Roger, outdoors working with nature, had always niggled the back of her mind. She hadn't given it much consideration before, but with Scooter's college taken care of she could look past the next two years for once in her life. Watching the men work the horses made the idea of the book more real. A possibility.

Several feet away from the fence, she paused. She didn't want to intrude or distract the men. It looked like hard work.

It wasn't until she looked through the viewfinder that she saw Drew. He sat atop a dark brown horse and rode like he was born to be there. Her breath caught as she watched the way his thighs tightened to the horse to steer it one way or the other. He'd probably hate it if she told him how graceful he looked.

His hips rolled back and forth as the horse rode around the corral. Muscles in his arms and chest strained against the black T-shirt. Could a girl could faint away from hormone overdrive? If so, she was damn near close to swooning.

"Focus, Alex." She shook off her wayward thoughts and snapped off several pictures.

Almost an hour later the men stopped to take a break. Thank God. She was about ready to combust despite her best efforts to stay in her professional element.

Several men got back on the horses after long drinks. She noticed Nate off to the side with one of the younger guys, Sean Phillips, the drummer. The pair spotted her and waved her over.

“Hey, Alex.” Nate handed her a bottle of water. “Alex, this is Cheesy.”

“Cheesy?” She laughed.

Nate nodded. “The way he dresses in his off time. He showed up for rehearsal once in all of his golf shit. A pink polo and plaid—” he choked on the word, “—plaid pants. If he wasn’t such an awesome drummer we’d have had to kick his ass for sure.”

Alex snorted. “Gotcha.”

“Well, I gotta get back to it.” Nate climbed back over the fence and onto his horse. “See ya tonight, Alex.”

“You’ll be at the party?” Cheesy’s smile widened.

“Looks that way.” She started to call him “Cheesy” but couldn’t bring herself to do it. “Sean, right?”

“Yep.” He extended his hand. “Sean, Cheesy, call me whatever you want as long as you call,” he said, followed by a wink.

“Smooth.” Alex shook his hand. “You aren’t going back out there?”

“Bum knee. I can’t ride too long.”

“I’m sorry.”

He swatted her comment away. “No big deal. I ride when I can. But I prefer my horses with air conditioning and cruise control.” Sean leaned in a little closer, too close as far as she was concerned. “Do you ride?”

“Nope.”

She finished her water and stepped away in pretense of looking for somewhere to stash the bottle. Sean took it, threw it in a barrel and got right back in her personal space.

“Ever rode?”

Relax, she told herself, he’s just being polite, not trying to hit on the help. “I’m a bona fide city girl. The only ‘dust on my boots’—” she referenced one of Drew’s early songs “—is from my poor house-cleaning skills.”

“Don’t tell me.” He tilted his head. “Are you a Drewdette?”

She took a deep breath. “Why?”

“Not many folks know that song.”

Despite her early training with Roger, she wasn’t used to working outside. Houston was probably as hot as Fort Worth, but once you add in the humidity... Her shirt stuck to her more than she cared, but she tried to ignore it. Especially with the way Sean’s gaze dropped below her chin every little bit. “And if I am?” She hoped if she kept talking he’d raise his gaze up closer to her eyes.

“I just thought you were a nice, normal—” he exaggerated the way he said normal, “—girl.”

“One outta two ain’t bad.”

The pair laughed. A horse whinnied and she looked over to find Drew glaring at them.

Sean didn’t seem to notice, or care, as he motioned to her camera. “Get any good shots?”

“A few.” Why she felt like a pair of kids caught necking under the stairs at school, she didn’t know. “I should probably let you get back to whatever you need to do. It was nice talking to you, Sean.”

“See ya at the party.” He turned toward the wood-rail fence and hollered to some of the guys.

She caught Drew watching her again and gave him a quick wave before she headed to the north end of the property. She couldn’t let him turn her into a ball of nerves. For the hundredth time she wondered if taking the job had been the smartest thing to do. She did like him, well she had liked Andy, but she wished she hadn’t made him sign that contract. Being around the man was an unwanted temptation, one that paid her brother’s college tuition.

What did it say about her that she was more willing to date a man she thought was a stranger rather than a celebrity who she knew quite a lot about?

Alex shook her head. “I’m not my screwed-up mama’s child for nothing.” At a crop of trees, she found a trail...and shuddered. She hadn’t been joking when she told Sean she was a city girl. Roger may have taught her how to get her hands dirty, but she didn’t hike or go on nature walks. The trees, though, weren’t too dense and she didn’t think she would get lost. She wanted to get some wildlife shots. If she was honest, the wildest wildlife she hoped to encounter would be a rabbit or opossum. And while in theory they were both cute, she wasn’t sure she actually wanted to meet up face to face with either—or, God forbid, something else.

A bit further in, she snapped off several pictures and finished the roll. She sat on a fallen log and switched out the used film for a new canister. Something on a nearby tree caught her attention.

Someone had carved a heart into the bark. Closer, she realized it said “Drew and Cassandra”. His ex-wife. His cheating, back-stabbing ex-wife. Could that woman have been a bigger cliché? Together since he met her on tour his first year, she stayed with him, let him transform her from the plain store clerk to a celeb’s girlfriend then wife, until she met a richer man.

Anger burned in Alex’s throat.

“It’s nothing to me.” She shook off the proprietary feeling gnawing at her. She snapped off a few shots of the tree though. It was part of his history, part of their history. He may not want to deal with it now, but in the future...he might want to remember. As she learned the hard way herself, “People who meander through the past aren’t likely to repeat their mistakes.”

“Now, I sound like Grandma.”

When the trail ended, she was careful to keep sight of the edge of it. She ventured in a little more to snap a gorgeous red honeysuckle-looking flower. The deeper she went in, the fuller the shrubs were. After

another roll of spent film, her stomach rumbled. She still had a couple of hours before dinner, but she wanted to get back to shower and unpack the rest of her gear before the party.

Alex turned to head back to the guest house. “Was it...” Every tree looked the same. “Which way...” She made a complete circle. “Oh hell.”

Air backed in her lungs as she fought off a panic attack. “I’m fine. Just need to calm down and focus.

“Deep breath.” She exhaled slowly and glanced around at the closing in foliage.

“Dammit. Where are the friggin’ bread crumbs when you need them?”

It was hard to tell which way the sun was setting with the canopy of tree tops covering her, not that she’d really paid much attention to the position when she’d started her trek.

Underbrush scratched her legs as sweat seeped out of every pore. Her bra was soaked. Curls escaped from her stubby ponytail and stuck to her neck and temples.

Alex had no inkling of how long she’d wandered around trying to figure out her way back to the ranch. Finally, she stumbled across the heart-marked tree again.

“Which way did I go?” With her hand still on the tree she scanned the little opening. She saw some of the brush disturbed on opposite sides of the clearing. “I went that way before.” Her eyes followed the little path she’d tried to use to get out. “Which means I need to go that way.” Alex headed to the other path. “And if not—” laughter built up in her chest and she tamped it down with a hiccup “—it’s time to sit my ass down and scream like the dickens.”

It was unnecessary when a minute or two later she finally saw a peek of her little guest house through a narrow break in the woods. “Alex, you are such a dumbass.”

To say she was half-close to panic would be an understatement. Luckily she’d always left the hysterics to her mother and sister and remained as calm as she could—and if anyone asked that’s exactly what she’d tell them, true or not. She did rule out kissing the ground when she made her way out of the trees but only because Drew was headed toward her with a huge frown.

“Alex, where’ve you been? I’ve had the guys out looking for you for an hour and a half.”

She glanced at her watch. She hadn’t realized she’d been gone quite so long. “I was just getting in some shots.” She tried to skill her voice in a nonchalant way. “Did you need me for something?”

His shoulders slumped a tad. “No. I, we, I couldn’t find you.”

She thought she heard him mumble something about Sean. Was he jealous? Did he think they were in the woods together? Making out or something?

She stifled a snort.

He looked around her expectantly and when no one followed, tension around his mouth and eyes eased as he gave her a lopsided smile then rested his hand on the small of her back and led her back toward the guest house.

He did think she was with someone.

"If you want to come up to the house a little early..." His voice trailed off and he stopped her. She tried to shy away when he snagged the collar of her shirt and yanked it down.

"What the hell are you doing?"

He pinched her neck.

"Ow. Dammit. Drew what're you—"

"Tick." He held a small black spot between his thumb and forefinger. "Where there is one...there could be more."

"Ew. Yuck. Gawd." Alex flapped her arms and swatted at her shirt.

"Calm down." He grabbed her elbow and pulled her into the guest house. "You're going to have to get undressed."

"What? In front of you?" She set her camera on the coffee table before she launched into massive fidgets.

"Let me help you."

"I don't think..."

"Alex, if you don't get it all the way out..."

"Gawd." She ripped the shirt over her head and shucked her jean shorts, modesty far from consideration. "Get them off."

Drew sucked in a breath. Five-foot nothing of creamy white skin clad in her unmentionables and he had to be as dispassionate as possible. He released the air pent up in his lungs. *Focus, man. Nothing sexual.*

Yeah, right.

Tell that to his other brain.

When he spotted another parasite just under the edge of her bra, he managed to retain some sense of propriety, but he knew he had to look at her. Everywhere.

He snagged the little bugger. "You need..." his voice cracked like he was in high school, "you need to remove ... everything."

She didn't hesitate, stripped down to beautiful flesh and nothing else.

For the first time he noticed a tattoo on her ass. A little fairy with outstretched wings graced her hip where the bruise had been. His mind flashed to the morning he'd seen the welts left by the Pet Portal 2000 and the odd coloring in the middle of the bruises. "That explains it."

"Huh?"

"Your, um, bruises look better."

"That ointment worked really well." Her words broke into his thoughts. "I meant to thank you."

The mundane conversation helped Drew stay on task and check all of her back. When she turned toward him, she covered her breasts with her hands. “I need to...be able to see.” He tried not to sound so breathless.

Alex lowered her hands to her side and he spotted another tattoo on her left breast. A small dragonfly, whose body nearly matched the color of her nipple. Oh God, he was ready to explode.

“Please hurry. This is...uh...” she shuddered and looked up to the ceiling. “I *hate* bugs.”

Drew was thinking just the opposite at the moment. He could thank each and every one just before he smashed it to smithereens. Were it not for them he might not get to feast his eyes on this perfect beauty. He bit down on his lip, searched her and disposed of one other parasite. It was probably sick he was disappointed when he finished with her. He did a thorough perusal of her clothing and handed it back to her “Get dressed and I will check your hair.”

“My hair.” Her voice squeaked. “Ew. Geez. Remind me never to go in the woods again. I like nature. I do. But from a distance. With a long lens camera to boot. Maybe even just on TV. Gawd. I can’t believe this. All those nasty little...things on me. Ew.” Alex shivered and pulled her bra on. “I’m all itchy. Do you suppose it’ll leave marks? Oh, probably will. Just my luck. Five minutes in the country and I am fodder for the forest.” She stared at him for a long moment, clamped her mouth shut tight and finished dressing. It must have finally occurred to her she stood nekkid as the day she came into the world.

“You may wanna leave your shirt off so you don’t shake any loose putting it back on.”

Alex nodded and turned her back to him so he could look through. He pulled the cloth band from her hair and freed the riot of curls. His fingers slid through and he was struck again at the softness. He hadn’t forgotten the all-too-brief night at her house. Quite the contrary. He *couldn’t* forget. Even as hard as he tried.

Drew leaned down to breathe in her scent. Damn, she smelled so sweet—all raspberry and vanilla. He wanted to pull her gorgeous ass to him. Feel her flush against him. Run his hands over her round hips and her creamy belly. Tease the perfect breasts into tight peaks and run his tongue over the little dragonfly. It would be so easy to dip his hand lower until...

Alex moaned and swayed closer.

Had he not found another damn tick, he might have pulled her to the bedroom...

“You know, if you had told me this was how I’d spend my first day on the job down here I’d have asked for a larger fee.”

All thought of seduction fled.

A bucket of ice water couldn’t have been a better deterrent. He quickly finished checking her hair. “You’re all done.”

Alex slid her tee over her head. “Thanks.”

“Uh, sure. Don’t forget. Party’s at eight.”

She turned and nodded but didn't look at him. "I need to get ready."

"Right. So do I. See ya later."

Drew let himself out. "This will never work." He crossed the yard to his own home, thought of a long, cold shower. "Hell, I need to distract myself from her." He pulled out his phone and punched a number by rote. "Geri, hey. You up for a party tonight? Bring a couple of friends, too."

Chapter Ten

Alex donned the one semi-dressy outfit she'd brought. The black capri pants and pink sweater set weren't all that dressy. She hoped she wouldn't look too out of place.

Music and laughter rolled out of the main house when she opened her front door. For a minute she considered going back inside, crawling under the covers and pretending she'd fallen asleep after her shower. But lord knows after her little woodland escapades she deserved to relax and have some non-tick fun.

Again, another shiver racked her from the blood sucking freeloaders adhered to her. Thoughts quickly shifted to Drew and the gentle way he'd made sure he found all the little bastards.

Under normal circumstances, to get fully undressed in front of a man she hadn't known for a month—much less her boss—would have been traumatic to say the least. Under normal circumstances, though, it would probably never happen. At the very least not in broad daylight in the middle of the living room. Only her, Alex Barrett, could attract a handful of ticks the first day on a job and make it necessary for her boss to all but perform a full-cavity body search of her. And not just any boss, but Drew freaking Hartford himself. However, the last thing in the world she needed was to get sick from some stupid little bug. She'd have to thank him—again.

And hope she didn't beg him to pick up where they left off earlier that night. At the time, it was all she could do not to beg for more. His strong, steady hands roamed smoothly over her body. Her insides had gone to mush and cried out for more. She would have pleaded for him to stay and help her climax right there ticks and all had he not run the minute he finished his search.

Her knees weakened at the thought of looking the man in the eye.

She glanced back over her shoulder at the quiet little cottage, hers until they left for Nashville. The darkened windows and private escape beckoned to her.

But she was no coward.

"You'll be fine." She repeated her new mantra all the way across the yard to the bigger house. "It's just a party."

"Hey." Nate swung the door open before she could even knock.

A round of raucous laughter echoed through the house.

"Am I late?"

"No. A few folks showed early so we went ahead and fired up the grills."

And didn't tell me. She shook her head. She wasn't a guest, but an employee. No one owed her any special treatment, least of all Drew. Her boss.

"This way." Nate headed down a long hallway.

The noise grew louder with each step, and her nerves tightened. Nate led her into a living room that looked as if it could swallow her entire house back in Fort Worth—and the front yard...and the back. Huge vaulted ceilings made of exposed wood hung over a man's man living room. All leather and hardwood. A huge antlered head hung over a rock fireplace which looked big enough to cook the rest of the deer.

Could it get more clichéd?

Then she noticed the fifties-style jukebox in the corner—blinking lights and all. Elvis belted out a hopping ditty. She fought not to roll her eyes and thought how her sister would love it here. Alex, though, was out of her element.

She recognized most of the band seated at a green, felt-topped table playing cards. Another twenty or so people, mostly women, spread out across the spacious room. All were decked out in boots, jeans and western shirts and yes she stood out in her citified dressy-casual clothes and black heeled mules. She turned to go back to the cottage. No one would miss her, especially the host whom she hadn't set eyes on yet.

She pulled up short. There sat Drew, center court, with two ladies all but draped over him. All he lacked was a damn crown and scepter.

Drew glanced over at her. "Hey, Alex. Everybody this is Alex."

A round of cheers greeted her. Sean glanced up from his hand of cards and waved to her.

"Hey, Cheesy." She nodded at him and sat on an empty loveseat off to the side. It wasn't long before Sean left the table and joined her. "Want a beer?"

"I really don't drink..."

One of the women with Drew giggled and patted his chest. Alex narrowed her eyes. Why did she feel betrayed? Not that Alex cared. Nope, not her. She was the one who made it clear they were working together and everything else was wishful thinking. Boss and employee. Nothing more, nothing less. *She* pushed their relationship back several paces and he hadn't tried to change her mind. Not once. As a matter of fact, he hadn't been the least untoward during her de-ticking. So what if she wanted to yank that western floozy off of Drew, who incidentally didn't seem to mind all the attention he was getting from her.

Fine. She got what she wanted.

But she'd be damned if she didn't have a good time while she was stuck in tick-world. "Is there something stronger?"

Sean waggled his eyebrows. "Yes, ma'am. Just a sec." He returned a minute later with a drink in each hand. "The bar's fully stocked. I have a 7 & 7." He raised his right hand. "Or a mojito." He lifted the other.

"I'll take—" she tapped her chin, "—Eenie-meenie-minie, the mojito." He handed her the glass and she took a tentative sip. "Oh, it's fruity and minty. Not bad."

Sean smiled and scooted next to her on the small couch. “So? Did you have a good time this afternoon?”

“Why?” She choked on her drink.

Sean patted her on the back. Once she stopped coughing he kept rubbing her shoulder.

“What did you hear?”

His head tilted. “Not a thing, but now you have my curiosity piqued.”

“Oh. Well. Just went for a walk.” She downed the rest of the drink. “Could you get me another?”

Someone in the group suggested they clear the floor for some dancing. After a round of hoots and hollers the men ran around scooting everything off to the sides until the bare hardwood floor rivaled that of a honky-tonk dance floor.

A slow song started in the jukebox. Several couples headed to the floor. Alex caught Drew’s eye from across the room. He took a step toward her, but then floozy number one got between them.

“This is our song, Drew.”

He smiled and took her hand. “We don’t have a song, Tina.”

“Oh but we will when this is over.” She giggled in the insipid way floozies do.

Drew let Tina pull him to an empty spot on the floor where she proceeded to rub her body up against his in time to Marvin Gaye. Bi-atch floozy—Alex henceforth thought of her as bi-atch floozy—whispered something in his ear. His head fell back in laughter before he put his lips right next to the woman’s ear.

Alex ground her teeth. What did bi-atch floozy have that she didn’t? Besides most of her tanned, flawless skin showing. What little clothing she wore left little to the imagination the way it clung to every perfectly sculpted curve and not-an-ounce-of-body fat.

Again, Alex reminded herself of Scooter’s college needs. She couldn’t screw this up. After she finished this job she could finally take time for herself. And it wasn’t as if she and Drew had a future. He was just a guy she’d spoken to online and once she was back in Fort Worth they probably wouldn’t even find the time to do that regularly. It wasn’t as if he was love of her life and she was passing him up.

“Another mojito for the *mujer*.” Sean handed her a drink.

“Cute.” Alex took a long sip of the drink, let the cool liquid slide down her throat. Heat from the large group of dancers warmed her; specifically, heat from the anger burning her gut at the thought of bi-atch floozy with her hands all over Drew. The man was eating it up from the sound of laughter coming from the other side of the room.

It was all she could do not to look over at the pair. However, her will weakened when she heard the damn bi-atch floozy’s saccharine giggles get louder. Drew’s hand hovered just above her ass as they two-stepped around the room.

“You wanna...?” Sean motioned to the dancers.

“I don’t know how to two-step.”

“Don’t know how? Where have you been? You poor, sheltered little girl.” He took the drink from her and set it on the end table next to them and pulled her to her feet. “Let Cheesy show you how.” He winked at her.

“You’re being to kind to me. You don’t need to—”

“Aw now, I’d do anything for you, hon. C’mon.” Sean dragged her to the middle of the group. “Put this hand on my shoulder. And hold this one here.” He settled their bodies into the same position as the other dancers. “Just follow my lead. And I promise to be gentle.”

“She’s never heard that one before.” Robbie nudged Sean with his arm.

“Watch it, Robbie.”

She didn’t have to turn around to know it was Drew warning the large man.

Why did he care?

Sean rolled his eyes and moved her around the floor with a practiced ease. Only twice did she step on his toes. Not that he complained. She’d always wanted to learn how to country and western dance. Had Drew not been close by every moment she might have relaxed and enjoyed herself a little more. Sean was a decent teacher and moved well over the floor.

“Lord, you are a smooth one.”

“I do what I can.” He bent and kissed her neck.

No zip, no zing, just an immediate need to make sure Drew hadn’t seen them.

Preoccupied with the six-foot doll drooling all over him, he was oblivious to the other couples around.

An up-tempo song came on next. Sean pulled her close and spun her around and around. She couldn’t help but laugh as he danced her dizzy. When the song finally ended she was winded and hot.

“I need to take my sweater off.”

“I would hate to stop a woman from cooling off.” Sean led her back to the loveseat in the corner where she stripped out of the long-sleeved cardigan and tied it around her waist. The matching pink shell clung to her breasts a little tighter than it had when she bought it thanks to Celia’s lack of laundering skills. It was a damn good thing hadn’t been ruined. Celia would never have replaced it. With a quick, discreet tug at the chest, she turned to find Sean’s eyes glued to the spot her hands had left.

“Up here, big boy.” She snapped her fingers at him and finished off her drink. She was surprised to find another waiting for her. “All this dancing is hard work. And hot work, too.”

“Definitely hot.”

Alex ignored the innuendo and finished the next drink as well. “Now it’s my turn to show *you* how to dance.” She pulled Sean back to the dance floor. “My sister taught me this.” She thrust her knee between his thighs. She wasn’t sure she liked the smile that spread across his face, but another bout of bi-atch floozy’s giggles bolstered her nerve.

“Put your hand here.” She moved his hand to the top of her rear. She was tempted to move his hand back up to the original spot when he lowered it an inch or two even when, through the layers of clothes, his fingers tightened ever so slightly. “Don’t let go.”

“No chance of that.” He all but groaned the words.

She ground her hips into Sean. The entire time she willed him to change into Drew. But he didn’t. He remained cute as a bug Sean who seemed more than happy to be where he was.

Alex couldn’t help the furtive glances to the other side of the room. Drew’s date was equally pleased with her perch around the country crooner’s neck.

“Where’d your sister learn to dance like this?”

“One pole or another.”

“Uh-huh. Well, I’ll have to thank her for sharing her knowledge.”

Alex snorted. “Please don’t. Her head is big enough as it is.” She tilted her head. “Kinda matches her new boobs.” Alex slammed her hand over her mouth. “Oops.” She spoke through her fingers. “Did I say that out loud?”

“Fraid so, hon.”

She snickered. “Can’t take me anywhere.”

“I’ll take you any where you want to go.”

“I’ll just bet you would, too.” Alex tried to tsk like the granny gang, but she hadn’t mastered it yet. Maybe it had something to do with dentures. A mental image of wagging teeth and neon-supposed-to-be-gray hair popped into her head. “My thoughts are getting weird. And I’m thirsty again.”

“Ask and ye shall receive.” Sean guided her through the group; his hands possessively perched on her hips. “Two more, my good man.”

The bass player, Patrick, and pseudo bartender for the evening, nodded and, in a flourish of bottles and hands, whipped up another round of drinks.

“Thanks, doll. These are really so good I’ve lost count. There’s not much alcohol in them, is there?”

Sean started to answer, but Alex shoved his drink at him when Patrick finished it.

“I am so hot.” Sweat rolled down between her breasts and no amount of pulling at her sweater helped. She noticed the open patio doors. “Let’s go out there. I need to cool off.” She ran her hand through her hair, tried to get the damp curls off her forehead. “Scuse me. She bumped into three couples on the way to the patio. “My feet aren’t working so good now.”

Her heel caught the edge of the door frame. If Sean hadn’t grabbed her around the waist she might have fallen.

When they reached the seclusion of the patio Sean set their drinks on the railing and leaned into her. “Whoa there, city girl.” She flattened up against him and he peppered her neck with kisses as a cool breeze floated across her warm arms.

"I'm okay." She pushed him back. "Just a little klutz." A bout of giggles erupted from her. "Are we having fun yet?"

He lifted her off the ground and swung her around. "You are quite the little spitfire, aren't you?"

Alex's head swam with replies and thoughts. Lights spun and danced. She wanted to tell him to stop. But nothing was forthcoming. Nothing but dizziness.

Arms wrapped around his neck, she snuggled her cheek next to his, hoping to still the tilting. It wasn't until his lips touched her ear and he whispered something about the giant bed in his room that she realized what she was doing. Dizziness morphed into a queasy stomach and the beginnings of a massive headache. "Sean..."

"Yes, darling?"

"Can you stop spinning me?"

His hands tightened on her waist. "Hon, we're standing perfectly still."

"Oh. Well. Then can you make the world stop spinning?"

"You feeling okay?"

"Not really." She released him and put her hand to her stomach. "Is there a seat out here?"

"Why don't I take you upstairs?" His hand massaged her back.

She didn't want to go upstairs. Didn't want to take a chance Drew could see her like this. But she needed to leave. Soon. "I'd rather go back to the guest house."

Sean wrapped his arm around her back, his hand landed low on her rear. "No problem, hon. Let's go."

"I'll take her back."

Drew's fists clenched at his sides. He knew he should've turned around and gone back into the house, but he didn't think Alex quite knew what she was getting herself into with Sean.

He moved out onto the patio and stopped Sean before he could leave with her. "You go enjoy the party."

"Mind your own business, Drew."

"Where Alex is concerned, it is my business."

"Really? And what about Tina. Or Geri?"

"Sean." Drew all but growled.

"What do you care who she's with? Nate said you called those women over."

"I just do. And Nate doesn't know when to shut the hell up."

"If you guys are gonna argue, I'm gonna have another drink." Alex picked up a glass.

"No!" Both men shouted in unison.

Sean reached for the tumbler, but instead of taking it from her managed to spill the entire contents down her front.

She gasped and pulled at her wet sweater. “Just friggin’ great.”

“Sorry, Alex.” Sean set the emptied glass down.

Drew had to fight to keep his fists at his side. “Good going, ass.”

“Bite me, man. I was trying to stop her from drinking any more.”

Alex fanned her sweater away from her stomach and stumbled over to the steps that led to the side yard. “You two keep talking. I’ll just go it alone. I have all my life anyway.”

Drew bolted to her side and scooped her up before she made it down the first step. “Sean, Geri was asking about you earlier. Why don’t you go talk to her?”

Sean narrowed his eyes. “Fine.” He turned and went back into the house.

“That wasn’t very nice.” Alex snuggled her nose next to his neck as he descended the steps.

“What’s that?”

“Lying to him like that.”

“I didn’t lie. She did ask about him.”

“I mean about you caring about me.”

“Alex.” He pulled her closer to his chest. He rounded the back of his house and carried her to the guest house. Though he wanted nothing more than to take her up to his room. Maybe get her to model the little red number... But not like this. “Of course, I care about you.”

“Right. You just don’t want one of your employees ...” her words trailed off.

“You are not just a damn employee.”

Alex didn’t comment.

He let the silence stretch on until they reached the guest house. He tried the knob, but it wouldn’t give. “Did you lock the door?”

“Hmm?”

“Alex? Where’s the key to the door?”

“In my bra.”

Chapter Eleven

“Your bra?”

“Yeah, no pockets.” She wiggled her fingers over her hips.

Drew rolled his eyes. “I’m gonna set you down for a minute.” He lowered her to the porch swing and took a deep breath before he shoved his hand into her very tight, and very wet, pink sweater and bra. His fingers graced the rosy nipple he’d thought of all day. It budded immediately.

Alex closed her eyes and leaned her head back against the swing. “The other side.”

“Of course.” Drew repeated the search on the other breast and found the key. “Why in the hell did you lock it?”

“Safety.”

“We’re out in the middle of freaking nowhere.” He opened the door. When he tried to help her up she swatted at his hand and walked into the living room by herself, though none too steadily. “Everything you see, I own. Who the hell is going to break into this house?”

“Scuse me.” She leaned against the back of the leather club chair and rubbed her nose. “I’m not used to acres of land and bodyguards twenty-four seven.”

“I don’t have bodyguards.” Drew moved within an arm’s length of her in case she took a nosedive.

“There are fifteen large cowboys around you at all times.”

“That’s the band and the crew and a couple of friends.”

“Bodyguards, you ass. No one can get within ten feet of you without three of those big dudes tensing like someone trying to take a dog’s bone away. Give me a break.” She tilted her head to the side, and ogled him with one eye open. “And while I am at it—” she pushed her finger into his chest, though without any real heft behind it, “—why’d you stop Sean from bringing me back here? I like him. He’s nice.”

“You might not think so in the morning.”

“I am a big girl, Drew...” She paused. “What’s your middle name?”

He choked back a laugh. Alex could turn the situation around on him in a split second. But instead of being confused or angry he wanted to grab her and kiss the living tar out her. Then maybe waltz her back to that bedroom and recreate the fantasies he couldn’t keep from forming.

“Lo?” She snapped at him. “Middle name?”

“You don’t know it? I thought that was on the questionnaire for approval to join the Drewdettes.”

She stuck her tongue out at him. “What is it?”

“What’s yours?”

“Alex Barrett. No middle name.”

“Who doesn’t have a middle name?”

“Um, that would be me, Alex Barrett.” She tried to cross her arms over her chest but missed twice and finally set her hands on her hips.

“What is Alex short for?”

“Nothin.” She yanked at the cardigan tied around her waist and tossed it across the room.

“It has to be short for something.”

“No, it doesn’t. My mother thought it was cute to name a little girl with a boy name. And Pixie got Pixie. Don’t know what or why. Hmm.” She swiped at her nose. “Poor Scooter got the worst of it. Did I tell you his name was Scooter?” She cupped her mouth and said in a stage whisper.

Drew smiled. “You might have mentioned it once.”

“Scooter. Stupid name. Thought about changing it, but when he got to high school, the girls thought it was cute. ‘Oh, Scooter.’” She raised her voice an octave and batted her eyes. “No thanks to Mother.”

“You don’t like your mom much, do you?”

“Would you? By the time I was thirteen I was taking care of Pixie and Scooter. All by myself. My *mother* would lie around all day, complaining of headaches.”

“What did you do for money?”

“One step-daddy or another took care of us. Mother was never too choosy but she was good at getting a sucker. Why do you think none of us have the same daddy? Child support three times over.” She waved three fingers at him and swayed, threatening to fall, but she righted herself and continued, “Oh, she’d deny it, but... Fickle as the Texas weather, my grandma would always say. She didn’t think I heard her. But y’know, little kids hear all the talk about their mothers. The good, not that there was much for mine, the bad and the ugly, ugly truth.” Red splotches covered her cheeks.

“It was mostly about money though.” She shook her head and wobbled a bit more. When Drew went to reach for her she swatted his hand away. “I’m fine. No, I’m not fine. I am screwed up because of my freaking parents. Did you know, my dad’s payment was the lowest so I had to work off the difference? Bitch. Now she squawks that it was character building. That’s bullshit. She was taking it out on me ’cause my daddy had a better lawyer than Pixie and Scooter’s daddies.”

Guilt ripped at Drew listening to her spill her family history.

“Pixie is just like Mother. One man after another. Poor Ronnie.”

Drew thought he saw a tear in the corner of her eye.

“That poor child is gonna turn out just like me. So screwed up. Not trusting anyone. His dad...” Alex hung her head down, her chin on her chest.

“His dad...” he prompted.

“What kind of loser sleeps with his fiancée’s sister and knocks her up?”

Drew wondered if Alex would regret telling him this in the morning. But he didn’t stop her from talking. “They didn’t even tell me until right before Ronnie was born. Didn’t think I could handle the news. So they lied.”

“I know what that’s like.”

“Right, your ex.” She snorted and raised her gaze back to his. “You’re a strong, tough guy.” Alex ran her hands through her hair. “But you know what I’m talking about. The pain, the anger, hell even the freaking confusion. Like you’re waiting for someone to shout ‘just kidding’ though it’s so not a very funny joke. The worst thing, the lying. They could have told me up front. I’m not a damn baby, you know.” A low bitter rumble of laughter came out. “But they had one, didn’t they.”

Anger burned low in his gut. How could people be so cruel and callous? Her own damn sister.

“I hate lying. It tears the heart out of the person being lied to. Makes a total fool out of them. Can’t trust anyone after that.” Alex pointed at him, swayed and nearly pitched forward.

Drew scooped her up.

“Put me down.”

“You can barely stand. You need to be in bed.” He let his anger, and a slight case of guilt, be the barrier to keep his hormones in check as he carried her through the house.

“As I was saying before you rudely interrupted me, I am a big girl, Drew...what *is* your middle name? You never said.” She leaned her head against his shoulder and closed her eyes.

“Thurman.”

“Thurman what?”

“My middle name.”

She popped open one eye for just a moment. “Are you shitting me?”

“It’s my grandmother’s maiden name.”

She snickered once. “Fine. I am a big girl, Drew Thurman—” she snickered once more, “—Hartford. I can take care of myself. If I wanna flirt with the likes of Sean Mr. Cheesy I-can’t-remember-his-last-name I can if I feel like it. I don’t need your approval.”

“Whatever, darlin’.” He tossed her onto the middle of the large four poster bed. “You want me to go back and get Sean for ya? I’ll be more than happy to oblige you. But don’t come crying to me in the morning when you sober up and realize what a mistake you made.”

She didn’t move.

“Alex?”

Not a budge. She lay in a heap on the bed.

“God, did I hurt you?” He rolled her over. Soft snores echoed in the room. “Passed out cold on me. Ha.” Drew sat on the edge of the bed and ran his hands through his hair. “This is not working out, Alex.”

Of course she didn't answer, though he'd be surprised if she even remembered half their conversation in the morning. Regardless, he wanted her to be awake. To talk to him. Hell, he loved listening to her. She was so passionate about everything, whether it was her mother's shortcomings or being pissed at him for getting between her and Cheesy despite the rum-induced fire in her.

He wanted her to sit up and tell him it was working out just fine and he needed to shut up, but whether he wanted her to argue in favor of the job—or the man—he didn't know.

Now is not the time, though. Let her sleep it off and in the morning they could figure out what to do. Maybe he should send her home. He thought of that damn contract. He'd re-read the thing over several times. If he didn't hold up his end of the bargain, he still had to pay one-quarter of the fee.

It wasn't a lot of money... To him. To her it was probably months of rent or food—hell, the dog alone probably ate every other paycheck.

He stood to go.

Was it worth it? To send her packing? With that quarter of the fee, it would get her out of his hair. And off his mind, out of his every waking thought and fantasies. Probably save his hormones and weakening self-control.

He glanced back at her.

Her wet sweater clung to her breasts. He should undress her so she could sleep more comfortably. "It's not like I haven't seen it all already." It was then he realized she only had one shoe on.

"Are you kidding me?" He searched the path they had taken through the house and around the front porch. Nothing. It was too dark to look for it between this house and his.

By the time he returned to the bedroom, she hadn't so much as moved. "Alex, Alex, what am I going to do with you? First order of business is to get you out of these wet clothes." He removed her one remaining shoe and tossed it into the corner.

"Mother fu..." Drew tugged at the wet sweater, tried to get it over her breasts with as little as possible amount of touching skin or soft parts, but the damn thing wasn't cooperating. "Where's the *Monthly Monitor*? Primo photo-op here." He glanced around the room as if he expected a pain-in-the-ass paparazzo to pop out from behind the armoire.

It took him three tries to get her upright, propped up on pillows and the headboard. "I am not in damn high school. I have undressed women before." He glared at the snookered chick. "Never one passed out though. You, my dear, are total dead weight, and I am talking to myself."

Drew crawled up into the huge bed. "Sorry, darlin'." After a couple of minutes wrestling with her, he considered taking out his pocket knife and being done with the whole damn mess. The sweater would never be the same anyway, but women were funny with shit like that.

He got her arms free of the fabric and took a breath before the last obstacle. One quick yank and he should be done, but the hem of the sweater got hung on one of her earrings. "Work with me here." When he

tugged on it, the freaking gold ball flew off in God knows what direction and her hair went wild, curls sprouting this way and that.

The little dragonfly tattoo peeked at him around the edge of her lacy bra, taunted him with every breath. “Nope. I draw the line at debauchery.”

He dropped her wet clothes into the tub and was about to go, but temptation disguised as good intentions pulsed through him. “Might as well go ahead and undress you all the way. Not really debauchery. Just gonna make you comfortable. Those pants gotta be restrictive. And I am freaking talking to myself again.”

He might not be at the party, but he sure as hell was enjoying himself, maybe a little too much. Though undressing her wasn’t quite how he’d imagined it umpteen times. However, when he straddled her to remove her pants all thoughts fled. It took him all the lyrics on the new album and most of the last to keep his mind from dwelling on the curves as he performed some sort of perverted striptease.

Bra and panties gone, he was in deep trouble. He tried to focus on the little tattoo, but it was forgotten when her nipples budded at the cool night air, ready to be lavished. “God.” He wanted to lower his head and taste her. Stroke soft, sweet skin, shapely hips... He avoided looking where he desired to be most of all, but he had a remarkable memory and his mind filled in the blanks from what he’d seen that afternoon.

His crotch tightened uncomfortably. “I deserve a reward for this, Alex.”

As carefully as he could, he wiggled her around until she lay snuggled under the thick layers of bedding. Out of sight. And if he was lucky out of mind for the rest of the evening. Somehow, though, he didn’t think that would happen. For a very long time.

He shifted and his wet shirt chilled his skin. Between carrying her back to the house and playing undress up, he shouldn’t be surprised. He stripped his shirt off and laid it with hers in the tub. “Good night, darlin’.” He tidied the room, turned off the light and closed the door between them.

Drew made it to the porch before he was ready to turn around and join her. “What the hell am I going to do with her drunk and passed out?”

He slumped onto the porch swing. The parties at his house hadn’t slowed one whit since he left. Laughter and hollering echoed across the yard, but he didn’t have the strength to join them.

One of the many cats that roamed the ranch jumped up into his lap. “Looks like it’s just you and me, huh?”

He pushed off with his booted foot to set the swing in motion.

“She’ll have to give me major points for this.” The cat purred and snuggled closer. “Does she realize how stupid it is to get so drunk like that?” Anger replaced the raw emotions from earlier. “What if I hadn’t seen them leave? She’d have hated herself in the morning if she’d woken up with Sean.”

The cat rubbed against his chest once more and leaped down. "I'd have hated Sean. Hell, been damn jealous. I can admit it," he said to the retreating cat's rear. "And when I kicked his ass it would've made the next album a strain."

Drew leaned his head back. "I do need to get back up to the house. It's kind of rude for the host..."

A rooster crowed and jolted Drew. His neck ached when he tried to sit up. "Why do I always have the worst sleep when I am with that woman?" He peeled his eyes open against the early morning sun. He thought about sneaking back into the guest house to check on her, but just his luck she'd be wide awake and mad as hell.

He scanned the ground for her shoe as he crossed the yard back to his house. He'd built the guest house far enough away so when his mother came to visit she'd have space of her own and wouldn't be kept awake if the band decided to have one of their impromptu sessions. She, however, never stayed there. Said it was too far away from her boys and it largely sat empty, though Cassandra's brother had stayed there for six months while he'd looked for a job.

Drew rubbed his stubbly chin. "Guess he's the new husband's problem now. Thank God for small favors."

He let himself into the kitchen and was surprised to see Sean, Nate and Robbie at the table.

"Morning, Bro." Nate smirked.

Robbie waved.

Sean frowned and didn't look him in the eye.

"Nice of you to join us." Nate handed him a cup of coffee.

Drew glanced at the wall clock. "What are you guys doing up so early?"

"Man, Nate and I haven't even gone to bed yet." Robbie winked at him. "Unlike Sean. And you."

Drew started to argue, but with no shirt on, walking in the door at six in the morning, he didn't think he could convince them otherwise. And maybe it would keep Sean the hell away from Alex.

Not that you have a right to decide who she is or isn't with.

The little voice in his head always managed to find the worse time to remind him things.

"Whatever. You guys need to get some rest, we have a concert tonight. Not to mention a session in a few hours." He groaned when he thought of his nice warm bed, but he didn't have any more time to sleep. He added sugar to his coffee and left the three stooges to reminisce about a concert from a year before.

On the way to the stairs he glanced in the living room and saw most of the folks from the party crashed out on just about every piece of furniture.

It was college all over again.

At the top of the staircase, his pants slipped down his hips a notch. He reached to adjust his belt and noticed the buckle was gone. "Great." He cursed himself again. He'd been meaning to get that damn thing fixed.

He was about to go into his room when the guest bedroom door opened.

"Oh. I thought you were Sean." Tina, Geri's friend and the gal he'd danced with most of the night, pulled Sean's shirt tighter around her.

"He's down in the kitchen."

"Kay. Um about last night..." red spots tinted her cheeks.

"Don't worry about it." Drew hurried to his room and shut the door. The thought of what might have happened had he left Alex alone with Sean turned his stomach. He set the coffee down and went to start the shower.

"Alex better thank me for this one."

"Damn you, Drew Hartford." Alex wasn't sure why, but the curse had laced her wild dreams.

Memories of the night before slammed her. Dancing with Sean. Drinking with Sean. Going out onto the patio with Sean. All Sean, all the time. Not Drew. No, he'd been preoccupied, with the floozy girl. That was all clear. Everything else fell in a hazy cloud of uncertainty. Sensations of Drew's hands soft and gentle. Coaxing words, kind and whispered. Too jumbled to discern anything tangible.

And still the curse for Drew lingered on her thoughts.

What had she done last night? She wasn't sure exactly what was pure fantasy spawned by too much booze and what was the reality that should embarrass her in the dawn of a new day.

Alex slammed her fist on the bed. Something metal bit into her hand. "Ow. Damn."

It took her three tries to pry her gritty eyes open in the bright morning sunlight to see what she'd hit. Even then, her eyes didn't want to focus. She lifted the metal object damn near next to her nose.

The round, silver disk had a cowboy riding a bucking horse on it. "A dude's belt buckle." She tried to remember where she'd seen this one before, but all the men at the ranch had them. Hell, her brother had one he'd picked up at the flea market last summer.

How strange, but with a fuzzy brain she didn't want to over-think it much.

Her tick bites itched. She reached for the one just in her bra line and gasped when she touched nothing but skin. She lifted up the blanket around her and gasped again at all the bare skin beneath.

"What in the hell...?" Her voice rasped. With her hand to her head, she eased herself upright and scanned the room for her clothes. She found nothing. The room was just as tidy as when she left for the party.

The party.

She had to swallow the bile that rose in her throat. "What have I done?"

Alex sat alone in the bed, cold except where she'd lain. No one else had been in it in a while. No smells. No sights. No clues, except a belt buckle.

But she was stark naked. And she didn't remember getting that way. Alex couldn't imagine stripping down to nothing to sleep. She never had before. Why would she start with a passel of men just up the way?

Or more specifically one man who had given her more than enough attention all night. She remembered him mentioning his big bed. Or at least she thought she did. So many things jumbled in her booze soaked brain.

Still, she wasn't up in his room, but in the guest house.

Would she have brought him back here with her? And then...and then...she was never one for indiscriminate sex. Hell, it had been so long since the last time she'd had a date much less had the pleasure of a horizontal tango, that it took all her fingers and toes—and then some—to count.

Wait just a minute. She pulled the blanket up tight around her. Could someone have sex and not remember? Surely not. That was just stupid. She didn't feel like she had.

But why am I naked?

Alex eased herself from the bed, the belt buckle tight in her grasp. She glanced around the room once more but found nothing to give her any clues. She padded bare assed and bare footed around the small cottage. In the living room she found her sweater balled in the corner next to the TV, but nothing else. "Where are the rest of my clothes?"

She dropped the sweater and the belt buckle on the bed and proceeded into the bathroom to start the shower. She smelled like the fruity drinks she'd been downing all night.

What did she do? Bathe in the stuff?

In the shower she hoped the hot water would wake her up and clear away some of the fuzzies. When she reached for the shampoo, something covered her foot. She recoiled and tried not to scream thinking it was some kind of animal.

"What the ...?" Alex lifted the wet fabric. A man's shirt? *Whose is...?* What was Sean wearing last night? She couldn't remember.

Her pink sleeveless shell, pants and her underwear lay soaked next to her feet. Her mind raced. Whatever was left in her stomach rose up. "Ugh." She jumped from the tub and hugged the toilet.

I am so not going to live this one down.

Alex tried for the third straight hour to get a hold of Celia but all she kept getting was voice mail. "Call me."

A sharp noise smacked the door just as the wall clock struck ten.

Hand to her head, she hurried to the door to find Sean. "Um, hi." She opened the door wider. "You want to come in."

"No thanks. That's okay." He shifted from one foot to the other. "I just wanted to drop this off." He held a black shoe. Her black shoe.

She hadn't even realized she was missing a shoe. The roly pitchy feeling returned and the toast and coffee she'd had an hour before threatened its way up.

When all she did was stare, Sean leaned in past her and set the shoe down on the shelf by the door. "About last night." He swallowed hard and looked everywhere but at her. "No hard feelings okay?"

He turned and left before she had a chance to respond. "No hard feelings? No hard feelings?" Alex slammed the door and cringed at the noise. "Wham-bam-no-thank-you-for-seconds-ma'am?"

She stalked around the living room. "I am good enough for a last-call romp, but God forbid you talk to me in the light of the day?"

She spotted the belt buckle on the table. "We'll see about that." She stuffed her feet into a pair of brown mules and snapped up the silver memento of a night gone terribly wrong.

Across the yard, Sean went into the barn. A full head of steam and hands fisted in front of her tempered the unease in her stomach as she marched after him.

Maybe we didn't do anything. Maybe he was a gentleman and took me home, helped me into bed and left.

"...and she was hot." Alex heard Sean talking before she got into the barn. "Talk about all night. Crazy."

She moved next to the barn half-door and listened.

"Man I had her screaming 'til the sun came up."

Whoever was in there with him said something and both laughed.

Alex's hands fell to her side. The buckle slid from her fingers and hit the ground next to her feet.

"There it is."

Alex whirled around and flattened herself to the side of the barn at the sound of Drew's voice. "P...pardon?"

"I was looking for that." He pointed to the piece of silver.

Her eyes widened. Sean *and* Drew... *OH MY GAWD. What did I do?*

He bent to grab it. "Where did you find it?"

Breath clogged in her lungs. "My bed."

He stepped closer. "What was that?"

She backed as close to the wall as she could. "My bed."

He frowned and nodded.

"What's all the ..." Sean came out the door. "Drew."

"Sean."

The two men stared each other down.

"I, um..." Alex's voice cracked. What could she say? *Was it good for you...both? Because really I don't remember if it was good for me. But from the frowning looks on your faces I am guessing not.* "Last night..."

Twin pairs of eyes glared at her.

She squeaked. What does one do in a ménage-can't-remember-squat moment? Run? Pop off a quick smart ass remark? Have a few ready-made compliments? Alex stood stock still, couldn't make up her mind. She volleyed her gaze between the two men.

There was no way that she...and Sean...AND Drew. No way.

"Are you feeling okay?" Drew's frown deepened. "You had a rough night."

Sean snorted and Drew struck out and punched him in the arm. "Shut it, Cheesy."

Man oh man. Alex rubbed her temple. *If someone can die from embarrassment, I might as well go pick out my plot.*

Heat pricked her cheeks and her stomach surged again. She didn't know which man to address first, but when she looked at Sean, "Don't go there," all but oozed from him.

I should probably cut my losses while I have a chance. "Drew, can I speak to you for a moment?"

He nodded and they moved several feet away from Sean.

"I think under the circumstances I should leave. Go back home."

Drew's heart pounded. "Why?"

"How can you ask me that after last night?"

Here was his opening to get her out of his home and probably out of his life. He couldn't have been more surprised when he heard himself say, "You don't have to leave. It's not that big of a deal. Sean'll get over it."

Alex blinked several times.

"In fact, I am pretty sure after last night he won't be bothering you any more."

She paled. "Was I that bad?"

"Bad?" Drew shifted his ball cap back on his head and scratched. "Naw. I hope your sweater isn't a total loss. I didn't know what to do with it so I just tossed everything in the tub."

"The tub?"

"Yeah, with my shirt. It was wet, too. If you give them both to me I can take them to the cleaners." Which would mean she would have to stay around another couple of days. Is that what he wanted?

"Your shirt?"

"Are you gonna repeat everything I say?" He frowned again. "Sorry about your shoe. I've looked everywhere for it."

Alex looked past him at Sean. She tilted her head in his direction. "He brought it by a little while ago."

"Must've fallen off right after we left the main house. You weren't real steady on your feet last night."

If possible, Alex paled more.

Drew stepped closer and latched onto her elbow. "You don't look so good. Maybe you need to go lie down."

When she didn't move, Drew steered her back toward the guest house. "What were you drinking last night?"

She straightened her shoulders. "Mo...mo...mojos?"

"You mean mojitos?"

"Yeah."

"How many did you have?"

"I don't know. Three. Four. Eight. I lost count."

"No wonder." They crossed the porch and into the house. "I'm sorry." He helped her to the sofa. "For the key thing. I hope you didn't think I was, I don't know." He shook his head. "I'm just sorry."

Alex frowned at him. "What are you talking about? I had the key in my..." Color filled her creamy cheeks.

She doesn't remember. That explained a lot. "What do you think happened last night?" Drew perched himself on the arm of the sofa.

"You, me, Sean..." Her eyes narrowed. "What do you mean 'think'?"

Drew burst out laughing. He couldn't help himself. "You think... You me...*and* Sean." His ball cap fell off when his ass hit the hardwood floor.

Chapter Twelve

Alex hovered over Drew, her hands fisted at her hips, nostrils flared and fire tinged her beautiful eyes. “What the hell are you laughing at? I am completely humiliated here and this is a freaking riot to you.”

He could tease her more; let her keep thinking the two men had had their wicked way with her, even though the idea of him and Sean gave him the willies. But the way her steam faltered, mouth pulled down and shadows that fell behind her eyes made him tell her the truth. “Darlin’ you passed out cold after I, and I alone, brought you back here. You and me. No one else.”

“But I heard Sean bragging...”

“Probably about Tina.”

“The girl you were with all night long?”

Drew shook his head. “Not all night.” He laughed harder. Alex thought the three of them had some wild night.

“That son of a... I don’t believe this.” She paced the floor. “I have been freaked out all morning for nothing.” Alex turned back on him. “It was nothing right? You didn’t...”

“Darlin’ I may be a lot of things, but I don’t take advantage of snookered women. Especially ones who make fun of my middle name.”

Alex crossed her arms over her chest. “I don’t know your middle name.”

“Thurman.”

“Are you shitting me?” She clasped a hand over her mouth and giggled. It was the first time he’d seen her smile all morning.

Drew propped himself up on his elbows. “Same reaction you gave me last night.”

“Oopsy.” He could tell she fought not to laugh. “My bad.”

Drew rolled his eyes. “You suppose you could help me up?” He held out his hand.

She waited a moment but grasped it, pulled and grunted. “You’re a big boy.”

“Really now.” He yanked hard back and pulled her atop him. “Maybe you’re just a little bit of nothing.”

Alex laughed. “Not fair.” She wiggled to try to break his hold.

Drew regretted his move. Well, not so much regretted because he really did like the way she fit snug up against him. He could remove a little bit of clothing and be right where he’d been the night before, but with a willing—and sober—partner. Still, he couldn’t take advantage. “Alex, you need to be still.”

Her eyes widened to comical proportions. Had he not been in agony, and wanting more, he might find it funny.

Before he could help himself, though, he slid his hands down her back and cupped her ass.

She sucked in a breath. "What about Tina?"

"What about Sean?"

"You were with Tina first."

"Is that why you were all over Sean?"

"I was not. Not like the way the cheap floozy draped herself all over you."

He chuckled. "You're cute when you're jealous."

"I am so not jealous."

"Good, 'cause you have nothing to be jealous over." He laced his fingers through her hair and brought her mouth down to his.

Alex didn't hesitate. She deepened the kiss as her hands slid up his chest and around his neck. "As good as I remember," she said. Her breath feathered across his lips.

"Better. I've wanted to do this from the second you stepped out of the car." Drew kissed her ear and down her neck.

"If you wanted it so bad..." Alex moaned when he bit down on her earlobe. "What was the deal with Tina last night?"

"Trying not to think of you." He ran his tongue over her collar bone as she ground her hips into his.

"That's the stupidest thing I ever... Oh, do that again."

Drew traced the column of her neck with his tongue then pulled her shirt aside to kiss her shoulder. "God, you taste so good."

A song played in the background. It took him a moment but he finally recognized the electronic ditty. "Is that Rascal Flatts?"

Alex shoved off of him. "My phone."

"You have Rascal Flatts as a ringtone?"

"I like them."

"What about my music," he started to say but she was already talking.

"Celia, where have you been? I called you for hours this morning."

Drew banged his head on the floor.

The two women talked for a couple of minutes when Alex said, "Let me call you back in a bit." She ran her hands through her hair. "Can you get up off the floor please?"

Drew stood. "Are you still planning on leaving?"

Her entire body stiffened. "Celia reminded me we have a contract."

“Right, the contract.” Drew scooped up his cap and popped it back on his head. “I will pay the quarter price and you can leave at your earliest convenience.”

“You want me to leave?”

“Hell no I don’t want you gone. You’re a damn fine photographer.” He’d found some of her work from years before. In fact, he bought several prints from a gallery owner in Dallas, but Drew wasn’t about to admit it to her. “You’re a damn fine woman.”

Alex leaned against the sofa. “Can I ask you a question?”

“You know you can.”

“If there was no contract...”

“You’re the one who wanted the boss/client relationship.” He stepped closer to her. “I have wanted you...” Should he admit it all? *What the hell, what do I have to lose at this point?* “I’ve wanted you since the night at Burger Barn.”

“Why me?”

“I told you back in Fort Worth to quit saying that.” He moved right up in front of her, put his hands on her hips and pulled her close to him. “You are smart.”

Drew kissed the tip of her nose.

“You make me laugh.”

He leaned forward and kissed her neck.

“You are one of the most selfless women I have ever met.”

He nuzzled her earlobe.

“And so damn beautiful.” He hesitated for a moment, but before he could do anything, her hand snaked up behind his neck and pulled him to her.

“God, Drew.” She eased back. “Should we do this?”

It took all his will. “I can stop if you want.”

“Not a chance in hell.” Alex leaned into Drew, kissed him fiercely and let him lift her until her legs wrapped around his waist. He carried her into the bedroom and stood at the foot of the large king-size bed. His hands massaged her back and roamed lower to cup her magnificent ass while he tried to work her shirt aside with his nose.

Alex leaned back and whipped her light green T-shirt off then released the clasp of her bra. The pale fabric fell to the floor as she went to work on the buttons of his denim shirt. She slipped what she could down his shoulders. “Damn you are so...” She licked his collar bone. “So...” Alex kissed the hollow between his neck and shoulder. “Just everything.”

The tattoo taunted him as the pair of matching rosy buds rubbed against his chest.

Drew growled. “Enough.” He tossed her onto the bed and ripped his shirt off the rest of the way and started to climb in after her but stopped when he saw her frown. “What?”

She shook her head. "I don't know. I just had a major déjà vu."

Drew stifled a laugh. "Can't imagine why." He kissed the tattoo, laved one breast then the other before he moved to help her shimmy out of her tan pants and silky panties. He left the bed long enough to kick off his boots and yank down his jeans and drawers as gracefully as possible. As he climbed in the large bed, Alex crossed her hands over her breasts.

"What are you doing?"

"It's been so long since..." She closed her eyes.

"Darlin', I hate to remind you of this but I have seen you. *All* of you. Twice now."

Red splotches colored her cheeks.

"And I can't tell you how much I like what I see." He dropped a kiss on her left hand then on her navel.

Her moan spurred him on with a smattering of nibbles then his tongue laved the spots. Her hips lifted from the mattress, but when he kissed the inside of her thigh, Alex giggled.

"This is funny?"

"Your goatee tickles. Sorry."

Her giggles fell silent when he moved higher. For a moment he couldn't believe he was making love to her. He'd imagined it so many times, fantasized what all he would do if he had her under him. It was every bit what he'd thought, better in fact. He was afraid, though, that he might explode if he didn't hurry. It took sheer will to go slow, give Alex all the pleasure she deserved.

He spread her with his fingers and delved his tongue inside.

Alex threaded her fingers through his hair. "Drew, please."

"Please what, darlin'?"

"I am so close."

Drew slipped one finger inside her then a second. He stroked her harder, faster until she cried out.

Alex tugged at his shoulders and when he stretched beside her she kissed him hard. It was his turn to gasp when she wrapped her hand around his dick and massaged him.

"I need you in me."

Drew pushed between Alex's thighs, but hesitated before he penetrated her. "Damn. No condoms."

She reached past him. "There's a ton in this drawer."

Drew growled. Damn Cassandra's brother. Or maybe he should thank him. He didn't care. It wasn't the time to worry about it. He didn't want to ruin the high from being with Alex. And the moment she rubbed her foot up and down his leg all thoughts of anyone else fled.

He sheathed himself and slid into her. "Damn, darlin', you're so tight."

"I told you... it's been a while." Hurt or embarrassment, he wasn't sure which, laced her voice.

"I'm not complaining." He kissed her as he pumped into her. "I've wanted this for so long." He couldn't believe he just admitted it again. He'd never given any woman that kind of ammunition, to know she made him weak. But with Alex he wasn't his normal self and now that she was with him, and he was making her his... All bets were off. He'd have to have her again. Hell, he still hadn't seen her in that little red number.

"You're mine now." The words slipped out before he could stop them.

Alex didn't seem to notice as she wrapped her legs around his waist and her fingers danced across his back, which drove him harder. When she cried out again, he lost it, unable to hold back any longer, and emptied himself into her.

It took him several long minutes before he had the strength to lift off of her, though he could have lain there all day all warm and snuggled up with his Alex. All his.

Drew rolled over to his side. Possessiveness had never been a problem before, but he didn't want to examine all the thoughts that were running through his mind. At the very least, he needed to take it easy so he didn't scare her off. "How are you doing, darlin'?"

"Never better." Alex smiled and stretched next to Drew.

The reminder on his phone pealed in the quiet. "Jesus. We're late."

"Late? For what?"

Drew scrambled from the bed and into the bathroom to remove the condom. "The recording session. We're scheduled to leave at eleven."

"You didn't tell me." Alex popped out of bed and scooped up her clothes and dressed quickly.

"Sure I did. Right after... damn, I forgot to tell you."

As he pulled up his boxers and stepped into his jeans someone pounded on the front door so hard the frames on the wall rattled. "Drew, you guys done yet? We've been waiting half an hour."

Drew hurried to the door and yanked it open. "Real funny, Nate."

Alex hurried out of the bedroom and snagged her camera case. She didn't look at either man as they left the guest house together and crossed the yard to the front of the house where a line of cars waited.

Nate snagged Alex by the elbow. "Shirt's inside out. You may want to switch it real quick before the other guys notice."

Alex's face flushed. It seemed like she'd spent the entire time at the Hartford ranch embarrassed. She set her camera bag down behind a large bush and switched her shirt around.

What had come over her? She'd never acted so wanton in her life, but when she thought Drew might want her gone, she decided to take a chance, to go for it as Celia would have done.

Though, knowing Celia, she'd have jumped the man the minute she saw him, would never have let that other woman touch what was hers.

Hers.

Was he?

She thought she'd heard him say something to that effect, but her ears had been ringing and her pulse racing so she hadn't cared about anything past her climax.

"Alex." Nate snapped his fingers at her and from the expectant look on his face he must have called her several times.

"Yes?"

"We're cool."

She frowned. "Meaning?"

"Drew's always late for sessions so I told him to be at the cars at eleven."

The guys came out of the house. No one seemed the wiser as to what she and Drew had been up to. No one but Nate. "Um, thanks I guess."

He nodded. "No prob." He settled his hand at the small of her back and helped her into the back seat. She sat wedged between Nate and the door all the way into Houston for the afternoon recordings, while he and Drew went over the day's run-down. Which was fine. It gave her time to steady her pulse and get her mind back into work.

Alex didn't quite know what to expect. Sure she'd seen different programs on VH1 and gobs of movies, but to sit and watch a real live recording of someone's next album... Goose bumps spread across her arms. From then on, every time she listened to the new songs, every time she heard Drew's voice on the radio, her heart would surely skip a beat as she thought of the wink that accompanied track nine and the sly wave during track four.

Hell, if she was lucky, they may want to use some of her photos for the CD jacket. What a boon for her business that would be.

Her mind flashed to some of the shots she'd already gotten in. She had a magnificent candid shot that captured Drew's amazing smile, and the little dimple on his left cheek. Not that the man took a bad photo. His charisma and charm oozed from almost every click of the camera—which made her job easy. Still, she had so much she needed to get out of the job than a great portfolio.

It would be tight, but she had her eye on a new computer. Not to mention the need to update her developing equipment if she wanted to stay current.

Current for the next job she took, the next client who sought out her services. She avoided what would happen when the job ended and she left Drew. Because she would.

A week from the day, she'd be headed back to Fort Worth and he'd be headed to Wisconsin then Montana for a couple of shows—she'd checked his schedule before she'd left home—Oklahoma after that. He was booked solid for the summer, and most of the rest of the year. He'd have little to no time to nurture

a romance with a new girlfriend. Assuming he even wanted to. Having sex in the middle of the afternoon did not a relationship make. Drew had a life of concert tours and new CDs—and groupies. He didn't have time for a gal who had yet to decide what she wanted to be when she grew up.

Alex hadn't given much to her future. A game plan was so far off it wasn't even on the horizon. Now though, so many possibilities, but until Scooter was squared away, her time was not her own. Plus she'd been putting a little aside each month for Ronnie's education. Someone had to.

She shook off her thoughts as the band broke for dinner and to get ready for the evening show at a Houston honky tonk.

"I scored you the best seat in the house for the concert."

Alex frowned. "I hope someone didn't get bumped."

"Nope. No worries. It's a seat rarely used."

"Gotcha." Though she really didn't understand, but as they headed to a rib joint with the rest of the band, she didn't think it a good time to question him.

Drew's nerves hummed. He hadn't been as psyched before a show in a very long time. Once they'd gotten to the honky tonk, he didn't have a moment to spare with Alex, but just knowing she was out there... He'd instructed Nate to put her up on stage in the corner by the club owner.

"To get good shots of the show," he'd told Nate.

His brother had mumbled something under his breath about whipped and sad, but Drew had let it pass, not wanting anything to spoil his mood.

Back stage he ran through his warm-up ritual. He said a little prayer and jumped up and down and rolled out the tightness in his neck as the first few strains of his first number one song quieted the crowd. Twice he checked the side stage to make sure Alex hadn't left. When his cue came, the rush tingled the back of his neck, down his spine and into his stomach. He ran out on stage. The audience screamed as flashes popped everywhere.

He sang four songs before "Desire Me" came in the play list. He sat on a stool, took his guitar in hand before he gave a quick sly glance to Alex. Usually, the fans who came to his show sang along, knew all the words. Tonight, they seemed to sense the difference in him when he started the first few bars, they held their silence. His voice, the only one, echoed through the packed building. His heart ran a steady, heavy tattoo as he played as he had at Rusty's bar a couple of weeks earlier.

The final chord dissipated on the air. For a heartbeat, there was nothing but silence, then the crowd erupted.

“That was AWESOME.” Alex watched half the concert with her mouth hanging open before she remembered the camera with her. Had it not been for the job, she’d have probably embarrassed herself as well as anyone in viewing range when she jumped on the man and had her wicked way right there.

The job kept her calm, cool and crazy-stalker-fan free.

She went to work, the crowd around none the wiser. Luckily, the stage had enough room for her to move around without getting in the way. She’d snapped off three rolls of film as Drew strutted around the stage, and came back on for two encores.

All the while, women screamed and men hooted. He sure knew how to put on one hell of a performance.

If she wasn’t already half in love with Drew...

She stumbled as she stepped down from the stage. *LOVE?*

“You okay, hon?” Sean grabbed Alex’s arm to help steady her.

“Yeah, my foot just ah...”

He’d already turned his attention to one of the bouncing women waiting on the other side of the rope. “That’s okay. I needed a moment by myself anyway.”

Drew and Nate had disappeared backstage to talk with the club owner before they came out and schmoozed with the crowd. Alex stood for a moment and watched the people head to various places in the large club, leaving the stage and seats an echoing cave despite the earlier madness. She couldn’t dwell on the turn her thoughts veered off toward—the dreaded “L” word, something she hadn’t said to a man in years. She still had work, enough of a distraction to put life back into perspective. Who needs love when you have bills to pay and family to watch out for?

She hurried around the club getting candid shots of the band as they spoke with the fans. After a few shots of the crew, she finished up the roll getting the emptied stage. She looped her camera over her shoulder and made her way to the restroom. She stifled a yawn as she got in line.

“...heard he has a new gal-pal,” a woman in front of her said through several slightly slurred words.

“Another buckle-bunny?”

The drunken woman shook her head. “I heard from Kelly who heard from Meghan it’s some total bitch who’s using Drew trying to launch her acting career.”

Alex held her hand over her mouth and nose to keep from snorting.

“Have you seen her?”

“No, but I bet she has tits out to here.”

Alex glanced down at her own chest. “Uh no.”

The two women frowned at her and moved forward as the line advanced. “And she’ll be gone by the end of summer.”

“Cynic.”

“Naw. I’ve seen Drew go through women. He never keeps one for very long. Not since Cassandra.”

The line moved again, but Alex stood rooted in her spot. The woman behind her cleared her throat.

“Sorry. You go ahead.” Whatever high she’d been feeling after the show plummeted.

Alex wandered around the club, not quite in the mood to do much of anything. She watched a bartender pouring drinks and contemplated a repeat performance of her mojito mishap—there are times when oblivion is a stellar companion.

Sean came and sat two seats away from her at the bar; his big-boobed shadows from the side stage stayed off to the side.

Again thoughts of her groupie status niggled the back of her brain. She turned to Sean. “Do you think I am a groupie?”

Sean stared at her for a long moment. “Will it get me in your pants?”

Alex didn’t know whether to laugh or slug him.

“Do you think I’m using Drew to advance my career?”

“Do you?”

“Stop answering my questions with a question.”

“Sorry.” He leaned back and looped his arm over the edge of the bar. “But let me ask you one more. Did you go looking for the job in the first place?”

“No. He asked me.” She frowned. “He said he liked my work.”

“Well there you go.” Sean snagged three beers, tossed a bill on the counter. “C-ya”. He left with the two bouncing women. Let the man have his groupies, the bunch of them can laugh the night away, lubricated by libation. She didn’t care.

Oblivion does have it down sides. You forget who you were with and what you may or may not have done. She shook her head and packed up her camera.

What pathetic women. Just because he’s in the band they’d throw themselves at him?

“Just like you,” a little voice taunted.

Of course, she wasn’t a groupie. She loved Drew.

“Ugh.” She smacked her forehead. “Not the L-word.”

“What was that?” The bartender leaned over the bar toward her.

“Nothing. I was just—” A pair of hands cupped her ass. “Drew?” She turned and only found a retreating back, but not Drew’s. She reached into her back pocket but no cell phone. “Hey. He took my phone.” Alex snapped up her camera bag and pushed through the crowd but the man was long gone. “Perfect.”

She waded through the rest of the folks, in desperate need of fresh air and a level head.

Little snippets of conversation caught her on the way out.

“...so hot.”

“...can rock my world.”

“Ohmygawd, I love him.”

Every damn woman in the place was half head over heels in love with Drew. What made the little bitty pitter-patter of her heart any different from theirs?

Several weeks on IM, a couple dozen phone calls and one horizontal mambo didn't necessarily put them on the path to the white trellis. Even being truly in love with him didn't guarantee any bliss one way or the other.

It didn't matter. She wasn't *really* in love with him. If she repeated it enough maybe her heart wouldn't try to beat itself out of her chest every time she remembered the way his lips fit perfectly around her...

She shook herself. Don't go there. Out in the parking lot, she settled her camera bag onto the band's bus then parked her butt on the curb.

Several loud cowboys came out of the building, Drew smack dab in the middle of the group. Alex hurried and hid between the buses. She wasn't ready to face Drew, not that he had one inkling her heart had broken all the rules and fallen for the crooner.

“Coward,” she could hear Celia's voice ringing in her ears.

“Better to be a coward than a love-sick woman with her feelings etched on her face and not reciprocated.” She sat between the buses for half an hour, until Nate came to load up the rest of the gear.

“Hey. What're you doing?”

“Catching my breath.” She stood and dusted off her ass.

“Gotcha. We're set to leave in thirty.”

Alex nodded. “Kay. I just need to go get my other bag from the dressing room.”

With her all-access pass she thankfully didn't have to wait for someone to escort her to the back of the club. Not one person gave her much notice as she weaved her way through the denim-clad crowd. Could be the frown she couldn't wipe from her face. Could be she over-thunk everything and not a single solitary thing was wrong with the world other than her overactive imagination.

Whatever it was, she needed to gather her gear and not worry about anything else.

In the room, most of the ruckus was blocked and she could focus on collecting her things. She let her mind fall thankfully empty and bent over the bag to insure everything was situated.

The noise grew as the door behind her opened briefly.

A pair of strong arms wrapped around her waist.

She flinched at first, ready to tell the person behind her she'd already been pick-pocketed once and had nothing left to give. Then Drew's musky, enticing scent enveloped her.

“If you're going to ravish me, you'll have to be quick. My boss is a real stickler on fraternization.”

“Is he now?” Drew chuckled and pulled her flush up against him. “Sounds a little overbearing.”

“A little, but he has a nice ass and man can he kiss.”

“Maybe I should give him a run for his money.” He slid his hands down the insides of her thighs.

All the thoughts of groupies and convenient sex flew out the window with the barest touch by him. No man had ever made her lose herself so completely. She rubbed her butt up against Drew. “You can try, but he has mighty big boots to fill.”

“I love a challenge.”

“You know, I heard that about you.”

“Really now.” Drew turned her in his arms. “I would hate to disappoint.” His mouth clamped down on hers before she could say anything else. He cupped her through the tight denim as he rubbed his sex up against her. Drew had the button of her jeans undone and the zipper half-way down when someone from behind cleared their throat.

“We have one last meet-up with management before we leave.”

Drew all but growled and lowered his forehead to hers. “Sorry.”

“Duty calls.” Alex gave a wan smile, the most she could offer at the moment.

“Be right there, Nate.” Drew stood away from Alex, straightened himself in his jeans and untucked his shirt. “Pick up where we left off later.”

In the back of her mind, “You’re just convenient,” screamed as doubts flooded back in, but she pasted on the best smile she could and said, “You’d better.”

Chapter Thirteen

He didn't though. The rest of the week was a blur of the recording studio and sleep. She and Drew had come to an agreement not to be alone for too long as neither could keep their hands off one another and both needed to concentrate on their jobs. Well, Alex had come to this decision, and would have clued Drew in had he asked at any point. Not that she had to worry much. Drew hadn't seemed to notice they were never alone. Luckily for her, exhaustion kept her plan going several days running.

The last night in Houston, Drew and the gang finished up laying the last track and headed back to the ranch while there was actually still some light outside. One of the men mentioned something about grilling up some steaks and an impromptu party came to be. Once at the ranch, though, Alex made an excuse of packing her gear and hurried back to the guest house. All she could think of was a long, hot bath and silence.

She hadn't even gotten comfortable on the sofa while the tub filled when there was a knock at the door.

"Now what?"

When she opened the door all she found was a red scrap of fabric. It was the bustier. Drew stood off to the side with it hooked onto his finger.

"You've been avoiding me all week."

"Have I?"

"Yes, ma'am." Drew stepped full into view. "I have a way for you to make it up to me."

"You do, huh?"

"I do." He swung the red fabric to her.

"Drew."

"Alex."

"The recording is finished." Drew waggled his eyebrows and pushed through the door.

Alex backed into the living room to let him in. "Yes, it is."

"We're leaving for Nashville in the morning."

"Yes, we are."

"And we will both be incredibly busy for the next week."

"Probably."

"We need all the downtime we can get while we can."

“Mmm-hmm.” A smile tilted her mouth despite her best effort to hide it. “Did I tell you I think the sessions went really well? Great in fact. You were awesome. Your fans will love it. Especially track three.” She looped a loose curl behind her ear. “How’d that go again?”

“You can’t distract me.” He crossed his arms over his chest. “What are my chances of seeing you in this?”

“Ugh, my bath, hang on.” Alex dashed to the bathroom and turned off the water with only inches to spare before it ran over. Drew hadn’t moved from his spot when she returned. “Don’t you need to keep your strength up for your fans?”

Drew removed his ball cap and tossed it on the end table. One handed he loosened the top button of his shirt, then another. “I can’t think of a better way for me to get in the right frame of mind than to see you in that.” He took a couple of steps closer to her. “Did I ever tell you, red is my favorite color?”

“Can’t say you did.” Her inhibitions pattered away with each button Drew released. Warmth grew in her chest and spread lower. Alex eyed him for a long moment. “If you insist.”

“I insist.” Drew chased Alex into the bedroom and onto the bed. He’d been dying to be with her for days, but one or both of them were half dead by the time they got back to the ranch. Not to mention every time he’d headed for the door his brother would call him back for one stupid ass reason or another.

He kissed Alex, his tongue tracing the edges of her lips. Her jean-clad legs wrapped around him and he ground into her. Breathless, he leaned back and said. “Far too much clothing.”

“Agreed.”

He tilted his head at her. “Did you say something about a bath?”

Alex’s right eyebrow arched. “I’d started one before you showed up.”

“I’d hate to waste water.” He slid off the bed and held out his hand to her. “C’mon.” He was worried she might say no until she finally took his hand.

In the bathroom, the pair stood facing one another next to the large tub. Both removed their clothing with lightning speed.

Drew’s hands damn near shook as he helped her into the tub. Water sloshed over the rim as he sank into the warm water and pulled her down with him, her back nestled to his chest.

“The floor.”

“Don’t worry about it. It’ll dry.” He gave them both a moment to adjust to the heat until Alex sighed and leaned heavier onto him. It was enough invitation for him to slide his hands around and cup her breasts. He kneaded her slowly as he nibbled on her earlobe.

“Ooh.” She smoothed her hands up and down his thighs. “I have missed you so much.”

“We’ve seen each other every day.” He lowered one hand under the water and massaged the very core of her.

“Not alone. Not like this.” Her hips writhed against his hand and rubbed his cock ’til it ached with need. Her smaller hands covered his and guided him to manipulate her, to slip between her folds and bring her closer to the edge.

With small nips, he bit her shoulder and neck then soothed away the mark with open mouth kisses. When he slipped one, then two fingers deep insider her, she reached between them and encircled his shaft, stroked him in rhythm to her gyrations.

“God, Drew. Oh. Harder. Please.”

Drew obliged. The harder he thrust into her the more she pulsated around him. The rocking motion sent more and more water out of the tub.

There were things Drew wanted to say, but it all stuck in the back of his throat.

“Right. There. Right...” Her head fell back against him and she released a guttural moan as she came.

Drew was not far behind with only a couple more strokes until he followed her. Both lay limp in the water for the longest time until the water was almost too cold to withstand.

“I missed you, too, by the way.”

“If that’s how you say hello, I think I might have to go away more often.”

Drew hugged her to him. He didn’t want to let her go. His chest tightened, almost belying the after glow bliss that threatened him to start gushing words that he wasn’t ready to toss out. He fumbled around for the drain to release what little water was left in the tub. “We should probably rinse off real quick.”

Drew kept the shower brief, he wasn’t finished with Alex yet. “There’s a bed in there that’s feeling a little left out.”

“Who knew you were so sensitive to your furniture’s feelings.” She chuckled and wrapped the towel tighter around her. “I’ll be right there.” Alex waited for Drew to leave the bathroom and toweled off a little more, then slipped into the red bustier.

In the bedroom, Drew stood with his back to her—naked and glistening from their shower. He was a gorgeous man and even after the best bath she’d ever had, looking at him still made her knees go weak and her nipples harden in anticipation.

“I think you forgot something.” Alex stood in the doorway between the bathroom and the bedroom in the most seductive pose she could.

“What’s that, darlin’?” Drew pivoted until he faced her.

Alex waited for half a heartbeat then strode toward him, stopping just within arm’s reach. “Seems like you mentioned red being your favorite color.”

“Have mercy.” Drew howled and pulled Alex to him. Before he could do more than work his tongue under the lace covering her nipple, someone knocked on the front door.

“They’ll go away.” Drew sat on the edge of the bed and pulled her between his legs.

The knocking grew louder.

“Drew...” Alex tried to wiggle free. “They’re not leaving.” Her breaths came in spurts.

“Give it a minute. They’ll go.” He cupped her ass and shifted them both until she straddled him. His mouth trailed across her shoulder and neck. “You are so beautiful. Red is definitely my color.”

She plunged her fingers into his thick hair. “Don’t you mean my color?”

“That’s what I said.”

The knocking morphed into pounding. “Drew?” Nate’s voice jolted Drew off the bed so fast he dumped Alex unceremoniously to the floor. He’d grabbed his boxers and pants before she could even sit up straight. He jumped awkwardly around the room getting half-dressed.

Nate continued to yell, “The charter got moved up ’cause of weather. Dude, are you in there?”

“Stay here.” He pulled his shirt on then glanced back at Alex. “Sorry, babe.” He held out his hands to her and helped her off the floor. “Never dull.” He gave her a quick peck on the forehead. “Please, stay here.”

Nate hadn’t let up on the door. He pounded until Drew yanked it open. “Chill.” He glared at his brother. “What the hell crawled up your ass?”

“Man, I have been calling you for over an hour.” Nate ran his hand through his hair making it stick up every which way. “We have to leave in less than an hour. Otherwise we’ll have to wait until late tomorrow or even the next day.”

“Calm down. Everything’s cool.”

“No. It’s not. Why didn’t you answer your phone?”

Drew’d turned his phone off before their last session. He hadn’t thought to check it since then. “I forgot.”

“He forgot.” Nate threw his hand up in the air. “The car is waiting for you. Now. Go...” Again with the hand through his hair.

Drew had never seen Nate so agitated before.

“Go tell Alex to get her shit together and move it or stay behind.”

“Watch it.” Drew took a step toward his brother.

Nate backed off the porch. “We’re late.” He turned and left without saying another word. His silhouette retreated in the late afternoon light.

He’d just shut the door when a pair of arms wrapped around his waist.

“Hey, cowboy.” Alex rubbed her bare leg against his thigh. “Ready to pick up where we left off?”

Drew moaned as his shriveled cock sprang to life. “Darlin’, anywhere, anytime...” He turned in her arms, planted a hot, searing kiss on her then pushed her away. “But we have to get moving ASAP. The charter’s been moved up.”

“To?”

“Now. Car’s waiting.”

“Are you kidding?”

“Are you packed?”

“I haven’t packed anything.” Drew followed her into the bathroom. “I hadn’t even started before I was...sidetracked.” Alex snapped up her jeans and yanked them on. The last whisper of red lace disappeared as she pulled on a discarded shirt and buttoned it up.

Camera first then clothes. She chanted the mantra silently in her head as she hurried back into the bedroom. How had the room turned into such a mess? She ran, scooping up a lens here and a few rolls of film there. She found a pair of socks and stuffed them in with her hand-held light meter.

“Can I help?”

“Nope. Got it covered.” She dragged her suitcase into the living room and slammed it onto the middle of the dinette, then zigzagged around him and heaved a heavy sigh. “Scoot. Don’t you have some packing of your own to do?”

“I did it all last night.”

“Of course you did.” She shut the lid of the Samsonite case. Several wisps of clothing squooshed out the edges.

“Alex you have—”

“Hush it.” She snapped her hand at him in a closing motion. “Got. It. Covered. I’ll be ready in five minutes.” She reopened the case and shoved everything toward the middle. When she shut it again, one lone yellow swatch poked out the side. “See.”

She set her case by the door. “Go. I’m right behind you.”

Alex didn’t even bother to look up at him.

“You’d better go. Your brother will have your ass. And mine,” she said under her breath.

“Had to get a piece of ass,” Nate said under his breath.

Drew heard every word. If it had been just the two of them on the plane, Drew would have popped him in the mouth, but surrounded by the band and crew—and Alex—he didn’t feel like explaining what brought it on.

His damn jeans chafed like hell with the worse case of blue-balls he’d ever had and Alex wouldn’t stop fidgeting. He leaned over the armrest—Alex sat on the opposite side of the aisle from him—and whispered to her, “What’s wrong with you?”

Alex growled at him, then said, “Itchy.”

“What? Why?”

“The damn bustier. Itches like a son of a—”

“Drink, ma’am?”

Alex stopped glaring long enough to smile up at the flight attendant. “No, thank you.” Once the man moved on to the row behind her, Alex leaned across the aisle toward Drew. “I didn’t have time to take the damn thing off.”

She squirmed most of the flight, didn’t say two words to Drew, or anyone else for that matter. It wasn’t until the announcement of their impending arrival that she’d had about all the itching she could take.

Alex had the two adjacent seats in the front to herself, still as discreetly as possible she scratched under her breast.

If she hadn’t been watching, she wouldn’t have seen Drew’s eyes widen slightly and the huge—almost comical—gulp. He shifted in his seat as his gaze darted all around the cabin of the plane. He pulled at the collar of his oxford then he loosened the button at his throat.

An evil streak—or maybe the itchy lace and lycra—Alex wasn’t sure what the impetus, but didn’t see any harm in making Drew as miserable as herself. Only Nate sat in Drew’s row and he was nose deep in paperwork. The extra legroom the first row sported—unlike the rest of the band with the knee-knocking rows—gave Alex a place to...get comfortable. Perfect for a semi-secluded seduction. The Barrett genes didn’t run as dormant as she’d once have thought.

Alex made sure Drew was watching as she fanned herself with the in-flight exit instructions, unbuttoned the first few buttons of her shirt. “Man it’s hot.”

It took a lot to stifle a giggle when she heard the breathy, sultry quality to her own voice.

She ran her tongue slowly across her bottom lip just as Drew took a sip from his soda. He sputtered and coughed.

“You okay, man?” Nate smacked him in the middle of his back.

Drew waved him off. He narrowed his gaze at Alex and settled back into his seat, but not before he surreptitiously adjusted himself.

Being bad was fun. Her mom and her sister may be on to something. As soon as the thought entered her head, though, she banished it. The last thing she wanted to be lumped in with were relatives of hers.

Still... Drew-torture was much more appealing once Nate went back to his paperwork. Drew turned in his seat, blocking his brother’s view.

Alex leaned her head back against the seat and closed her eyes to slits—she could watch Drew watch her. With slow, circuitous motions she massaged her breasts. Again her tongue darted out and wet her lower lip.

She undid a few more buttons, then loosened the ties between her breast. Her hand easily slid between the silk and her taut nipples pressed against her palms. She teased them into tighter peaks, then slid her

hands down to her lap and pressed her sex through the denim jeans. She writhed with the friction of the motion—becoming more and more difficult to keep her hips still as a quick climax built. Heat rose from her stomach upward until it filled her cheeks and tingled every inch from head to toe.

Her eyes closed. She was no longer interested in Drew's reaction as the wave of completion overwhelmed her. Her entire body shook when the orgasm wracked through her.

She released a shuttered breath but couldn't stop the moan that eked out at the end.

A loud crash jolted her eyes open.

"Dude? What the hell?" Nate stared at Drew—whose bag lay at an awkward angle, papers on the floor in the middle of the aisle.

"I—" His voice cracked like a teenager. He cleared his throat—twice—and shoved a magazine in his lap. "Leg spasm."

"You're wound tighter than a ..."

Nate's voice was drowned out by the announcement on the intercom. "We'll be landing at the Nashville International Airport in a few minutes. The local time is..."

Alex straightened her clothing and looked away. She'd never done anything as brazen or risqué in her life. She wasn't sure if the heat in her cheeks was from exhilaration or total embarrassment.

"Where are you going?" Nate had a hold of Drew's arm.

"Uh, bathroom."

"We're landing in a few."

"Can't wait." Drew all but bolted down the aisle.

Nate looked at Alex. She shrugged. "Don't ask me."

Chapter Fourteen

The wait for the rental car at the airport was none too comfortable. Drew had never in his life jacked-off in an airplane lavatory, but after Alex's little skit it was either go relieve himself or risk the chances of coming in his pants. His elbows hurt from banging into the walls in the ever small stall. And his balls hurt like a sonofabitch—sure he'd slaked the need—a little, but he itched to get his hands on her. To embed himself deep inside her, but the folks working at the rental car kiosk may take exception.

Not to mention, he had to find a way to break the sleeping arrangement news to Alex that she wouldn't be under the same roof as him. He thought he'd have more time to talk to her than just before they got on the road to Nashville—unfortunately his house was too small for most of the band to stay so they'd also rented another house several blocks away but still in the same area. Alex however was going to be a problem.

He pulled Alex aside and whispered, "We need to talk." She blanched at his words. "We have problem with the houses."

Color flooded back into her face. "Oh."

What had she been expecting?

He didn't have time to think on it over-much as Nate finished up the paperwork. "See the thing is, we rented this house months ago, before I ever met you."

"And..." She rolled her hand at him.

"There's not room for you to stay there with the guys."

"Not me and an entire band, darn it all." She feigned disappointment. "I guess I will have to get over it."

Drew smacked her on the ass. "Cool it, darlin'."

"Sorry." Alex straightened, but a smile tilted the corner of her mouth.

"You can stay with me at the house, but..."

"It wouldn't look good to be sleeping with the help."

He huffed out a breath. "That's not what I said."

"No, but it's what you're worried about." All the playfulness left her.

"Yes and no."

Alex rolled her eyes.

“There’re going to be news magazines from everywhere not to mention the segment producer for a couple of dozen shows filming.”

“Do you expect them to be camped outside your door?”

Drew chuckled. “I wish they cared that much about me.” He ran his hand through his hair.

“I am just giving you a hard time.” Alex glanced around the rental kiosk and rows of cars as if expecting to see a shutterbug or two before she stepped into his arms. “Nate told me a couple of days ago and I booked a room at one of the hotels over by the fairgrounds. Though it took me quite a bit of finagling to talk the manager into giving me one of the last rooms he had left.”

Drew’s eyebrows arched. “Quite the little go-getter, aren’t you.”

“It was either that or sleep in a tent at the campground. And me and nature...” She shuddered. “I limit myself to one mandatory tick-check per lifetime.”

“What about an elective tick-check?” He stepped closer to her. “One can never be too careful where parasites are concerned.”

“Sorry, bud. I have a hotel to get to.” Alex waved to a man a few feet away holding a paper placard with her name printed in big bold letters. Once he collected her bags, she gave Drew a deep, long kiss. “See ya, cowboy.”

“Where’s she going?” Sean stepped next to Drew and asked.

“What do you mean?”

“Won’t it be hard to bang her if she’s not staying with you?”

“What the hell is your problem?” Drew would have shoved his band mate had Nate not just pulled to the curb with their rental. “It’s not like you weren’t ‘banging’ Tina all week.”

“Whatever.”

Sean jealous? Drew could understand how he’d feel if things had turned out different and he hadn’t stopped Sean the night of the party. He wouldn’t be able to see her and Sean together. But why did Sean give a damn about Alex?

It wasn’t like Sean had even known her before she showed up in Houston. But the man’s competitive nature wouldn’t let it rest.

“Are we going to have a problem?” Nate walked over from the Suburban. “I thought this was taken care of back in Texas.”

“Everything’s cool.” Drew glared at Sean, dared him to contradict him. The man stood still, arms crossed over his chest in a sulk and said not a word.

The guys dropped Drew and Nate off at his house—he had his own truck there—and left for their rented house.

“Look, I don’t mean to tell you how to manage your personal life,” Nate said once they got all their gear in the house. “But the last time I checked I was still the band manager.”

“Your point?”

Nate took a long breath. “I like Alex. I really do. And I can tell how you feel about her, but man, it’s Cassandra all over again.”

“The hell you say.”

“You’re letting this woman come between you and the band.”

“I’m...”

“Hear me out.” Nate held up his hand. “Stop and think when the last time you argued, and I mean to the point of almost coming to blows argued, with anyone in the band.”

When Drew didn’t say anything Nate filled it in. “When you were with Cassandra.”

“It’s not Alex’s fault.”

“But it was Cassandra’s. The problem is, either way you have the same result.” Nate shook his head. “Like I said I’m not going to tell you how to manage your personal life, but, bro, it is affecting work.”

Drew rubbed his forehead with the heel of his hand. “Damn.”

The first few minutes at the fairground and Alex was greeted by every member of the band—except Drew. He smiled from afar, sure, but it was tight and not the least bit welcoming. Even Nate seemed distant.

But he and the rest of the guys were in “band” mode so she chalked it up to that.

She stayed out of their way the rest of the day, took pictures of him and the fans. She shot the celebrity softball game, and actually got several other numbers from singers who were interested in buying some of the photos if they turned out.

It wasn’t until it was time to head back to their respective dwellings that she pulled him aside to talk to him.

“Can you come back to the hotel with me?”

“Not tonight. The guys set up a card game with a couple of other bands.”

She knew a brush-off when she heard one. It was the fourth or fifth time that day he’d given some lame excuse not to be alone with her.

Why she kept asking, she wasn’t sure.

“Oh, okay. See you tomorrow then.” She turned to go, more angered by her sudden tears than Drew’s coldness.

Still, she walked slowly, half expecting him to call her back and say he’d skip out on the group’s festivities. But he didn’t, and a little piece of her heart tore away. Her stomach did somersaults and a bell or two rang in her ears.

Why was she getting so wound up? He never promised her the next day or day after that. Quite the contrary, in fact—he never promised her anything. She'd been foolish to think a month of online chatting and a job offer would prompt him to return her feelings, profess his love on bended knee.

Alex stumbled at the thought. When had her mind warp-spun into white organza and rice? But if the pitter patter in her chest wasn't a good indicator, the fierce need to call her mother might be.

Alex crossed the fairgrounds to go back to her hotel. She didn't want to hitch a ride with any of the guys. They knew what was going on even if she didn't. She couldn't risk putting her feelings out for the world to pick apart... So confused at the thoughts swirling around her head, she cursed herself for not protecting her heart better.

She *had* fallen in love with Drew despite all her best efforts to the contrary. But when? Back in Fort Worth when she thought he was still Andy?

Who cared? It didn't really matter when it happened. The result was just the same—the pain in her chest just as bad either way. She'd go home after this week, lick her wounds, pay off Scooter's college and start all over again. That was what she had planned on doing all along, right? Some day maybe her heart would get the message.

Something hard crashed into her legs and knocked her to the ground. It wasn't until a large tongue swept across her face that her mind crawled to awareness. "Romeo? Romeo! Hey, boy. What are you doing here?"

A shadow fell across her.

"Scooter, what the hell are y'all doing here?"

"Good to see you too, Alex." He shoved the dog off of his sister and helped her to her feet. "He was going crazy nuts without you. Wouldn't eat. Wouldn't sleep."

"So you decided to come all the way to Tennessee?" She narrowed her eyes. "How did you get here?"

Scooter stubbed his toe into the ground. "Drove."

"Two days, all by yourself?"

"Not exactly." Scooter wouldn't look her in the eye and she tensed. "Romeo doesn't fit in your Honda."

"Alex, honey. There you are."

Alex closed her eyes, wanted to count to a billion, instead took a long deep breath—maybe if she held it long enough, she'd pass out.

"Alex?"

No such luck. "Mom." She turned toward the squeaky, nasally, annoyingly familiar voice—which should be far, far away in Texas. "And Celia. And Pixie." She glared at her brother before she hugged the women of the clan. "Where's Ronnie?"

“With his dad. He took the week off so he could bond with the boy.” Her mother smiled wide. The man could do no wrong in *her* eyes—which spoke volumes about them both.

Alex wanted to argue and remind everyone of the man’s character, but he deserved a chance to get to know his son.

The roly, pitchy feeling came back to her stomach. “You *all* came.”

Celia’s eyes crossed. “In your mom’s Hummer. She drove. The whole way.”

“How’s my picture-taking gal?” Her mom gave her a perfunctory pat on the shoulder and walked gingerly on the grass to keep her ungodly four-inch heels from sinking into the moist ground. “And where is that yummy man of yours?”

“I don’t have a man, Mother. I have a job.”

Celia’s eyebrow rose. When Alex hugged her she whispered, “Why didn’t you warn me?”

“Your mom wanted to surprise you.” She stepped back but didn’t let go.

Is she afraid I’ll take a swing?

“Surprise.”

Alex shook her head. “You remember that huge birthday gift you wanted...gone. Poof.”

“Don’t be like that.” Celia stuck out her lower lip. “Besides, I did call and some dude answered the phone. Said he found it. You may wanna cancel it. I believe he said something about Tanzania.” Celia stepped back and screwed up her mouth. “Or was it Transylvania. Dunno. Anyhoo. Oh honey, you look like shit. Did something happen?”

Alex schooled her face as neutral as possible. “No. Why?”

“You’re all pale and bloated.” Celia held her at arm’s length, intertwined their fingers as they had when they were twelve and looked at her sideways. “And a little pissy, too.”

“Gee.” Alex tightened her grip until Celia winced. “And here I thought I was the perfect picture of perky picture-taking gal.”

“See, pissy.” Celia jerked her hands free and backed up several steps, not even trying for subtlety. “Like I said.”

“I wasn’t expecting my entire family from Texas minus one. Where is the granny gang? Are they waiting to ambush me in the parking lot? I can’t believe they let y’all come all this way without them. Weren’t they afraid of missing out on the action?”

“We didn’t tell them.” Celia rubbed her hands together. “We snuck out of town just after sundown when their prune juice was kicking in. They never knew what happened.”

Alex laughed despite herself. “I missed you.” She rubbed her dog again. “So where are y’all staying?”

Her mother smiled. “With you, of course.”

“Where’d Alex go?” Nate loaded the last bag into their rented Suburban.

"She said she had plans tonight." Drew's gut twisted at the lie.

"Bummer. The guys were thinking of hitting some clubs and wanted her to come along."

"I thought you didn't want her around."

"That's not quite what I said and you know it. Besides, things seem better. I haven't heard you threaten Cheesy once since we had our talk."

Because I keep pushing Alex away.

Damn he was so confused. He could see the similarities in Alex and Cassandra. Not that the women were anything alike, quite the opposite. But the way he reacted to everyone around him... Love did funny things to a man.

Love.

"Holy hell."

"What's that?"

Drew rubbed his chest with his fist. "Indigestion."

Nate nodded and pulled the keys from his pocket. "You coming?"

"Um, no. I saw..." He couldn't think of anyone. He blurted out the first name that came to mind, "Toby, over by the food court. I wanna say hi."

"Right. Whatever." Nate didn't press him. They both knew Toby wasn't due at Fan Fair until the next day.

But Drew needed a moment to himself. It wasn't everyday a man realized he was in love with a woman that he'd been acting like an ass to.

He walked for over an hour, walked around the grounds, walked through the parking lot. Once or twice he stopped for autographs and pictures with fans but for the most part no one bothered him as he tried to reconcile his feelings.

He needed to talk to Alex. Instead, he went for a damn walk. "Might as well make it useful." He headed out with purpose. It would give him a little more time to think of what he would say to her. Sweat beaded his forehead and rolled down his back by the time he got to her hotel.

At the front desk he waited in line behind several people. When it was his turn the harried clerk was a little short. "Yes, sir?"

"I'd like to leave a message for Alex Barrett."

"What room, sir?"

"I'm not sure."

The clerk huffed and tapped a few keys into the computer. "Name again?"

Drew repeated it.

The man typed madly on his keyboard then shook his head. "I am sorry, sir. The occupant checked out."

“Checked out?”

“Yes, sir. Next.”

Drew got right in front of the little man. “When?”

“A little over an hour ago it looks like. Sorry sir. Next.”

“Wait a minute.” He held up his hand to the woman behind him in line. “Where did she go?”

“I have no idea. Next.”

Drew stared at the man for a long moment. He didn’t move until the woman behind him cleared her throat, twice.

“Sorry.”

Gone?

He couldn’t believe she’d checked out.

Drew wasn’t even sure how he got back to his house, but Nate waylaid him the minute he walked in. “You will never believe who’s here.”

“Alex?”

Nate frowned. “No.” He pulled Drew into the dining room. “Just be cool and everything will be okay.”

“Man, what are you talking about?”

Nate led him to the back of the house to the den. A tall brunette, who looked like she graced the pages of magazines or pop videos, stood from his sofa. “Drew, I’d like you to meet Angel.”

Holy... Drew froze as he lifted his hand in a welcoming shake.

She took his hand in hers hand shook vigorously. “How are you? I was so excited when I heard you were here for the beginning of all the fun.”

“Hi. Nice to meet you.”

“We’ve met before silly. Many times.” She winked at him.

Drew had a vague recollection this woman. You couldn’t forget a voice that high and annoying coming out of a killer body. Too bad she had to open her mouth and ruin it all, if you could get past the fact she *was* his cyber-stalker.

What did he do? Call the police? Run for the hills? What? And Nate was no help at all. He just stood in the corner with his mouth all but hanging open.

“What are you doing...” he wanted to ask in his house but he didn’t think that would be polite, “...Are you here for Fan Fair?” Stupid question, but her face lit up with a stunning smile.

“Yes, and to see you.”

Nate coughed. Drew suspected to cover a laugh. He failed to come up with anything to say. How did one converse with one’s online stalker? He wasn’t sure. But as he opened his mouth hoping something would come out, Nate jumped to his rescue.

“So, Angel, tell me about yourself.”

She narrowed her gaze. “Drew hasn’t told you?”

“I, uh, you know how brothers are, always keeping stuff to themselves.”

“Oh, sure.” She nodded at Drew. “Right now I am kinda between jobs. But that’s okay. It gives me more time to pursue other interests.” She winked at Drew again.

Drew’s brain stalled. Luckily, he could hear his mama’s voice in the background reminding him of his manners. “Why don’t you have a seat? Can I get you a drink?”

She kicked off her multi-inch high shoes, sat on the sofa, and tucked her incredibly long legs under her. “Water would be wonderful.”

“Super. One water coming up. Nate? You want to give me a hand in the kitchen?”

“Sure can, bro. You sit tight. We’ll...” Nate looked as perplexed as Drew felt. “Be right back.”

Angel winked at the pair as they exited the room as fast as politeness would allow.

When Drew pushed the door shut, he grabbed Nate by the shirt. “What the hell is she doing here?”

“I don’t know.” He shoved Drew’s hands off. “Maybe a minute after I walked in the door, the bell rang and lo and behold there she stood.”

“And you just let her in?”

“She said you were expecting her.” Nate shrugged. “I didn’t know. How many people know this is your house? And you’re never here so I figured if she knew where to find you, you must have invited her. You and Alex haven’t been...” He stopped when Drew glared at him.

“And whose fault is that?”

Nate cleared his throat. “I didn’t even know who she was at first and then she said her name. I about shit myself. She’s been here forever. God, I’ve had to listen to that...” He sat at the table, rubbed his temple with one hand and motioned to the door with the other. “My brain hurts.

“I almost had her convinced to leave and come back later when you walked in the door.”

“What am I supposed to do?”

“I have no clue.”

“Great. This is just freaking great.” Drew yanked a bottle of water from the fridge. “The cherry on top a sweet freaking day.”

“It’s not all bad. I mean if you can keep her quiet...” Nate shuddered. “I bet she’s a talker during sex. Be like screwing a squeaky toy.”

“Shove it, Nate.”

“You’d better get back out there with her water. If she comes looking for us...” He shuddered. “Go. I am not responsible for my actions if I have to listen to her for one more damn second.”

As Drew left the kitchen, Nate muttered something about justifiable homicide.

He rejoined Angel in the den and handed her a bottle. He hesitated sitting when she patted the spot next to her, but those damn manners.

“Where’s your brother?”

“He decided to have a snack.”

“Good.” She set the water on an end table and scooted closer to Drew. “We have some privacy.”

He tried to move away but there wasn’t much sofa left to go. “But he could walk in any minute.”

“Why haven’t you returned any of my letters?”

“I’ve been meaning to, but you know how it is. Busy, busy, busy.”

She nodded as if that were enough. In truth, he had his mail screened and as far as he knew the folks who collected it trashed all her letters.

“Now that we’re here, we can spend some quality time together.”

Drew swallowed hard and all but leapt from the sofa. “You know, I don’t think that would be such a good idea.”

“Why’s that?” The woman’s face morphed from amiable Amazon to pissed off predator in the blink of an eye.

He thought about telling her he’d been seeing someone. Though what he and Alex had been doing wasn’t dating by any stretch of the imagination. That was splitting hairs at this point. Still, he thought better of it. Any woman who would just show up on a man’s doorstep, a man she didn’t know but told the world otherwise, could boil your bunny and your balls in the blink of an eye.

“We’re booked solid through the week and I would, uh, I would hate for you to feel neglected.”

“I could never feel neglected with you.” Angel stroked a long, bright pink nail down his chest.

It was all Drew could do not to shudder at her touch. He didn’t like it, didn’t want it, and was really too distracted to think of it past an annoyance. He needed to be looking for Alex. He still couldn’t believe she up and left without so much as a good-bye. Instead, he was stuck with Angel, stalker from hell, as he tried to rid himself of her and not raise her ire all at the same time.

He considered having her arrested—he wouldn’t be able to press charges, she hadn’t really done anything. Not to mention, whatever irritation she might have for being ditched, incarceration would surely be worse. “Be that as it may, you have to know how hectic our schedules are.”

“Yes indeed. As the president of your fan club I pride myself in knowing your schedule at all times. Though I will say...” she frowned and played with the ends of her hair, “...I was surprised when no one had spotted you for well over a week.”

“Spotted me?”

“I have people who watch for you. Just so I know what you’re up to. Can’t be the president and not be in the know, ya know.”

The theme for *Twilight Zone* played in his head.

He feigned a surprise. “Wow, is it eight-thirty all ready? I should be getting rest.” He lowered his voice to a stage whisper. “Doc has me on strict vocal restrictions. No talking after eight. And absolutely no visitors after nine.”

Angel lowered her voice, too. “Why?”

“He said that any kind of extraneous activity could put undue stress on my vocal cords and damage them. It could alter my voice. Forever.”

He waited for her to blow up and call him a liar. But instead, she nodded solemnly then shoved her feet back into her shoes. “Right. That makes sense. I wouldn’t want to go against doctor’s orders.”

Drew walked her to the door.

“You have the spotlight tomorrow, right?”

Drew nodded. He didn’t like the fact this woman was so well versed in his schedule—granted there were show schedules, and she was the fan club pres—but it still creeped him out. He really needed to check on restraining orders and the likes for Tennessee and Texas. Could never be too careful.

“See ya later.” She leaned forward and gave him a peck on the cheek.

Drew fought not to slam the door shut, but as a precaution he locked it, threw the dead bolt and dragged a desk in front of it.

“She gone yet?” Nate came from the kitchen.

“Yes, you big ol’ coward.”

“Hey. Every man for himself. You remember high school when Dian Wood cornered me. You bolted faster than Dian after the Twinkie truck.”

Drew shoved his brother. “Still not even.” He headed for the phone.

“What are you doing? Calling the police?”

“Maybe later. I have more important things.”

“What could more important than protecting us from that weirdo?”

“Trying to find Alex.”

“I don’t believe this.”

“What?”

“Absolutely no one will tell me anything.” Drew had called airlines, car rental companies. Hell, even the bus station. He was no better off than when he started looking.

“Are you surprised? Heightened national security.”

“It’s not like I’m trying to get a list of all the flights across the country. I’m just trying to find...” What did he call her? His girlfriend? Bonk-buddy? What? Instead he settled for, “Alex.”

“They don’t care if you’re horny and can’t find your honey.”

Drew glared at his brother.

“Why did she leave anyway? You never said.”

When Nate kept pestering Drew about the calls he told him about the warm reception he’d gotten at the hotel and his MIA photographer/bed partner.

“Hell if I know.” But he did know. He hadn’t so much as talked to her alone all day. Avoided offers of lunch or snagging a quick turn around the midway. The one time she did approach him all by his lonesome, she’d asked him back to her hotel and he’d flat turned her down.

“Maybe she got a better offer.”

Drew’s heart slammed in his chest. “What?”

“Man, everyone was all over her after the softball game.”

Drew swallowed hard.

“They couldn’t wait to see the photos she’d taken.”

Drew relaxed in small degrees. Nate meant a better job offer. Jealousy wasn’t something he was good with. Cassandra had given him plenty of reason to be jealous during their three-year marriage. It had eaten him up. He hated the gnawing in his gut at the thought of Alex with anyone else.

So why’d you let her walk away?

That pesky little voice picked the damndest times to pipe up.

I didn’t let her walk away, he told himself.

True, you pushed her away.

“Shut up.”

Nate frowned. “I didn’t say anything.”

Drew ran his hands through his hair. “Sorry. Thinking out loud.”

“I’m going over to the other house now. You sure you don’t want to go with us?”

“Positive.”

“Fine. Have fun sulking. You’re getting good at it.”

“Bite me.”

Nate shook his head and shoved the desk away from the front door. “Hoping what’s-her-face doesn’t decide to come back to play nursemaid?”

Chapter Fifteen

Drew snapped at every member of the band by the time they'd set up their equipment for an early morning spotlight show. Between worry for Alex and fear that Angel might indeed show up he hadn't gotten more than two hours sleep.

After the sound check he apologized to everyone and was getting ready to open the show when he spotted Alex.

He jumped from the stage and hurried to where she stood with her camera equipment.

"Where the hell have you been?"

She frowned at him. "Good morning to you too."

"I've been going crazy."

"I'm guessing that started long before you met me."

Drew's temper flared as he ignored the sarcasm. "You left your hotel without a word. I thought you were gone."

"I'm surprised you even noticed."

"Come here." He grabbed her arm and pulled her from the crowd, who were trying to hear every word.

"Back off, Gomer." A scrawny guy, a few good inches taller than Drew, but at least fifty pounds lighter, ripped Drew's hand away from Alex.

I can take him easily, Drew thought. Instead of giving in to his desire to pummel the guy, he asked, "Who the hell do you think you are?"

"Her brother. Who the hell do you think you are?"

"Brother?" Drew unfisted his hands and volleyed his gaze between Alex and said brother. Then he saw Celia wave with a perplexed look on her face as she held tight to Romeo's leash. Two women stood with their mouths hanging open—one with features pulled tighter than his guitar strings. Drew cleared his throat and slipped his cowboy hat from his head. "Ms. Barrett. How nice to meet you."

Alex gave Drew another glaring look before she turned to her mother. "Mom, this is my boss—" she emphasized the word boss harder than she should have judging by the way Drew jerked at the sound, "—Drew Hartford. Drew this is my mother, Carolyn."

He stepped forward and took her mother's hand. "Nice to meet you, ma'am."

A sucker for manners, Carolyn blushed and smiled.

“You know Celia and Romeo.” The dog’s butt lifted off the ground at the mention of his name but thankfully he stayed at Celia’s side.

“Pixie, my sister.” The woman batted her eyelashes. Alex was ready to yank her hair out strand by strand, but it wasn’t as if she knew of Alex’s relationship—whatever it was—with Drew. So she held back. A tiny wave of relief washed through her, though, when the man seemed oblivious to the blatant come-on.

However, Alex did notice Sean perk up from the stage at the mention of her sister.

“Scooter Barrett.” Her brother stepped forward, crossed his arms over his chest in the most intimidating manner a younger brother could muster. “Is that how you treat all the women you know?”

“Back off, Scooter.” Alex set her hand on his arm. She leaned close to him and lowered her voice. “He can break you with a sneeze. And if you somehow managed to stop that, the rest of the guys on the stage would kick your ass from here to the mountains.”

His gaze flickered to the stage and he paled a notch. But he didn’t let up. “I think you owe Alex an apology.”

“You’re right. I do.”

Scooter obviously didn’t quite know how to take Drew’s earnest comment. He looked at his sister and relaxed his stance.

“Alex, I am sorry. Can I speak with you for a moment?” Drew didn’t wait for her to answer but moved over to the side of the stage.

Alex had no choice but to follow after he did apologize. “Make it fast. You have a show in less than ten minutes.”

“I don’t care. You’re more important.”

“Could have fooled me.”

“More apologies on my part.”

“Why don’t you stitch it on a shirt? It’ll save you from having to repeat it so often.”

Drew snorted and put his arms around her. “God, I’ve missed you.”

“Don’t get all nicey-nice with me, mister. You were mean to me yesterday.”

“Stupidity comes with the testosterone.”

“I’ll say.”

“Can I make it up to you?”

“Depends. What do you have in mind?”

Drew put his lips right up to her ear. “Seems I remember a little red number you have.”

“How is that *you* making it up to *me*?” She narrowed her gaze at him. “This conversation sounds familiar to me. What do I get out of it?”

“Wear it and find out.”

A thrill ran through Alex. She threw herself into his arms and planted a huge wet one him.

“Why is Alex’s boss kissing her?” Alex heard her mom ask louder than need be.

She pushed out of Drew’s arms. “I have to think about it.”

Drew nodded, but judging by the spark in his eye, she didn’t think he was going to let her say no. He headed back to the stage but paused. “Why’d you leave the hotel?”

“There wasn’t room for all of my guests.”

“They’re staying with you?”

“Yup.”

Drew had had a hard time concentrating on his performance in the first song. His mind kept flitting to images of Alex in that red bustier. By the second song he’d gotten into the groove. That was until he saw Angel in the crowd.

At one point, the bass player hollered at him to stay focused. And he tried, but with Alex and Angel on opposite sides of the stage—he didn’t know why he was surprised she’d shown up—focus was scarce. Had he been thinking this morning, he might have figured she’d show up. But with no sleep and then finding Alex was still in Nashville, Angel had slipped his mind.

It didn’t matter. He had his eyes on Alex when the band started the first few notes of “Desire Me”. “It’s interesting,” he addressed the crowd. “Sometimes when we write a song, it may come from one place, some place dark and maybe a little hurt. Then as time goes on it takes on a whole new meaning. Turns from something bad to something—” he glanced at Alex, “—to something better. Special even.”

She stilled and lowered her camera.

He remembered what she had said back at the Burger Barn, *“I hope he didn’t write that out of experience. A woman walking away like that...”* At the time he’d written it, Cassandra had just left, but now other lines in the song took on a new meaning.

He watched her face as he sang it to her, tried to recapture the feeling he’d had the night at Rusty’s bar.

The crowd sang along. Alex hadn’t moved.

The song ended and everyone applauded wildly.

As if awoken, Alex blinked a few times and resumed her photography.

From the other side of the stage, Angel edging her way across the front row. Toward Alex. Thanking the crowd for coming out, Drew waved and headed for the stairs at the side of the stage.

He cut Angel off with a few feet to spare. He maneuvered her so her back was to Alex. Alex’s brows pulled together when Angel all but launched herself into his arms and gave him a huge smack on the cheek.

“What are you doing here?”

She rolled her eyes. “You knew I’d be here.”

Alex stiffened and narrowed her eyes.

“Hey, I have an idea. Why don’t we have a picture together?”

Angel squealed. Red spots colored Alex’s cheeks. Drew swallowed hard.

He grabbed Angel’s hand and turned her toward Alex. “Miss Barrett, would you mind taking a picture of *Angel* and me?”

He thought Alex might chuck her camera at the pair until a light seemed to dawn in her eyes.

“You and Angel. Right. Gotcha.” Alex raised the camera. “Move in a little closer.” She snapped off several pictures and if he wasn’t mistaken he saw her snicker. “All done, Mr. Hartford. Is there anything else I can do for you, sir?”

“No, I think that will do it.”

Alex nodded and turned to head back to where her family stood.

He turned to Angel and feigned a last minute thought. “Oh, I need to tell her about tomorrow’s photo shoot. Wait here. I’ll be right back.”

“No problem.” Angel winked at him and he had to fight back a shudder.

He jogged over to Alex and her group. “Can I have a minute?”

Alex handed her camera to Celia. “Just. I would hate to keep you away from your number one fan.”

A smile played at the corner of her mouth.

When they were out of ear shot, she asked, “When did psycho bitch show up?”

“Last night. Stupid ass Nate let her in before I even got home.” Drew shook his head. “It was all I could do to get her to leave last night.” He removed his cowboy hat and ran his hands through his hair. “I have no clue what to do about her now.”

“Police?” Alex widened her eyes. “Better yet, the FBI. They can put you in witness protection. Naw.” She shook her head. “I bet she’d find you.” She snapped her fingers. “Have you ever thought of becoming a hermit? Maybe up in the mountains. I think if you just up and disappeared she might lose interest eventually.”

“Are you done yet?”

“Nope. You can hitch a ride with Lance Bass to the space station and you two can hang out there. That’s probably the best idea. Somehow I don’t think a woman like that would mess up her hair with a space helmet.”

Drew narrowed his gaze.

“Now I’m done, sorry.”

“What are your plans for the day?” Drew’s palms sweated.

“Celia and I are gonna check out the midway. The rest of the guys.” She shrugged. “Don’t know. Don’t care.”

“Can I see you tonight?”

"I don't know." She glanced over her shoulder at Angel. "What will the president of your fan club think?"

"Alex," he said in a gruff tone but smiled at her.

"Where? You can't come where we're staying and your house isn't exactly empty. Nate's nerves looked pretty shot. I don't think he's up for sleeping on the sofa with the guys."

"Meet me at..." he named off an area he'd found on one of his rides when he needed to let off steam. "About nine, okay?"

"Maybe."

Drew nodded and headed back to the stage. "And remember..." he hollered to her.

"Yes?"

"My favorite color is red."

Alex's cheeks turned almost the exact shade he had in mind before she turned to leave.

"I thought you favorite color was blue." Angel popped his bubble of happy thoughts. "That's what your club bio said."

"You know men. We can't make up our minds." Drew needed to think of something to do with Angel. He'd be a nervous wreck if she followed him around all day. Not to mention, it would put a serious damper on his evening plans. "You know, I had something I wanted to ask you." He shook his head. "No, I can't. It's too much."

Angel clapped her hands and squealed. "What is it? You know I'd do anything for you."

His mind raced with ideas. What would keep her busy for the rest of the week? A light bulb flashed.

"I need someone to watch *all* the other acts. Get a feel for their shows. What people are liking, what they're not. Gotta keep up with the competition y'know."

He watched her face. "I knew it was too much to ask. Thanks anyway." He turned to go and counted to four before she ran up and grabbed his arm.

"It sounds like a great idea." She smiled wide. "When can I start?"

"So Robbie's totally crushing on you." Alex looped her arms through her friend's.

"The big guy?" Celia shoved another handful of cotton candy into her mouth.

"Yeah." She wanted to talk about anything that was not Drew Hartford. "He remembers you from the Burger Barn. Been asking all sorts of questions about you."

"He's okay. Taller than me. I'll give him that." She paused. "What about the drummer?"

"Sean's a player."

Celia's grin grew. "I like to play."

"Whatever. Don't say I didn't warn you."

“So? You gonna tell me what’s been happening between you and Cowboy Andy?” Celia stopped her friend, gave her a once over and clicked her tongue like the granny gang.

“How’d you do that?”

“Don’t change the subject. I guess the better question is, what haven’t you two done?” They looked at one another for a moment and laughed like they did in junior high.

Celia sobered. “Aw, honey. I am so sorry.”

Alex cleared her throat. “For?”

“You’re in love with him.”

“I, uh…”

“Have you said it to him?”

“Not aloud.”

“Has he said it to you?”

“Not one inkling.”

Celia wrapped her arms around Alex. With the height difference, Alex’s face smooshed into Celia’s ample breast. “You want the drummer instead?” She patted her back like a child. “I think he digs you.”

“Gaw.” Alex swatted Celia away then smiled up at her. “Thanks for coming with them. I needed you.”

“I know, hon. I know.”

Drew found Alex and her family later that afternoon—her mother and sister had tired of all the “red neck stuff” and were ready to head back to their digs to change and go shopping.

“I’ve been looking for you.” He waved at the lot of them.

“I’ve been here.” She held up the bear she’d won at the ball toss—she’d pictured Angel’s face and whamo, eight straight balls clobbering those smiling clowns.

“I was wondering. Can I take y’all out for dinner?”

Caught off guard by his highly overgenerous offer Alex stood mute until she saw twin smiles beaming. “No,” Alex said as her mother and sister both shouted, “Yes.”

Alex ran her hand over the back of her neck. “Fine. Where? We’ll meet you there.”

Drew named off a restaurant and gave her quick directions.

“We’ll see you in a couple of hours?”

Drew nodded. “See ya then.”

“I need you to be a buffer between Drew and my family.”

“Nuh-uh.” Celia backed away.

“You owe me. You owe Drew.”

“Did you wear the red teddie I gave you?”

Alex’s cheeks heated.

“Oh we are so even.” Celia settled herself between two of the band members.

Everyone situated themselves at the table—somehow Drew ended up at the far end with her sister. Once dinner was on the table and folks began to fill up the seats, more and more conversation filtered around. The guys entertained their guests with stories of shows they’d performed and places they’d been able to visit.

Pixie hung on every word Drew said, thrust her breasts in his face every chance she got and had done everything to let him know she was interested—except rub her hand on his cock. But, the night was still young.

If that wasn’t bad enough her mother decided to butt her two cents in. “Groupies have come a long way since my day.”

Alex choked on her iced tea. Several dribbles ran down the sides of her mouth when she tried to speak. She wiped her chin. “And you say this why?”

“I saw this interesting show on VMT or something.”

“VH1.”

“Sure, sure. That’s it.” Carolyn patted her mouth all dainty and ladylike. Not that she’d eaten more than a bite or two.

“Tell us more.” Sean leaned forward, his elbows straddling his empty plate.

“I don’t think...” Alex started to say but stopped as the rest of the band chimed in.

Two hours later, Alex’s left temple throbbed. “Okay. Gotta go.” The guys grumbled. “You all have a full day tomorrow.” She went in search of Drew, wanting to tell him good night.

She hurried down the hall to the restrooms. Sean called to her, needed to say something, but Alex held up her hand. “Hang on while I grab...” She all but tripped as Pixie and Drew pulled apart.

“It’s not what it looks like.” Drew crossed the room in three huge steps.

“Oh, it’s exactly what it looks like.” Alex glared at her sister. “Can I have a word with you?”

Pixie studied her nails. “I don’t particularly feel like talking right now.

“Tough.” She grabbed her sister’s arm and dragged her along behind her. “Move it.”

“Let go. You’re hurting me, bi...” Pixie tried to tug free, but Alex dug her fingers in harder. “It really hurts.”

“Not half as much as I’d like to.”

“What’d you say?”

“Go.” Alex stopped outside an open closet door. Pixie balked, but only for a minute then hurried in.

“Why do you always do this to me? What did I ever do to you?”

“Little miss perfect? You’ve never done a thing wrong in your entire life.” Pixie leaned against a stack of towels. “You. Are. Perfect. Who can live up to that?”

Alex stared at her sister. “Are you shitting me?” She shoved her hands on her hips to keep from hitting her sister. “You slept with my fiancé and it’s my fault for being... perfect?”

“Bingo.”

“You are...” Thoughts jumbled and spun through her head. Their mother was a train wreck with a revolving door of men. Their fathers were louses who didn’t deserve a single Hallmark memento. Her sister was screwed up because Alex had been a good girl growing up, not wanting in any way to resemble their mom. Any number of things popped into her head ready to lash out at Pixie with. But in the end, she grew weary and only said, “Get a life.”

Chapter Sixteen

“I didn’t do anything to invite—”

“I know. It’s not the first time.” Alex sat on the bench outside the restaurant, Drew standing in front of her looking a little waxen. “I mentioned my nephew, Ronnie.” Drew nodded. “I was dating his father, Ron, up until about a month before he was born. They’d been together at least half of my five-year relationship with Ron. Never thought to clue me in. Never thought it mattered.

“When he knocked up Pixie, it still wasn’t enough to tell me.”

“Aw hell, Alex.” Drew reached out to smooth his hand down her head. She shied away from him.

“I have to say, though, Pixie got a raw deal too. He walked out on her when Ronnie was two weeks old. But the bastard that he is, he always came sniffing back. And she let him.” She shrugged. “Maybe he’s changed. Maybe Ronnie will get a chance to grow up with a father who cares, unlike Pixie and I.

“Anyway, that is just the way things have been with my sister. There were one or two other boyfriends in high school. That I know of anyway. I should have warned you but never thought you’d ever come within spitting distance of her much less cornered. Don’t take it personal.”

Drew rolled his neck and said a few choice words under his breath.

“Don’t go working yourself up about it. I have been dealing with this all my life.” She stood and wrapped her arms around his chest. She wanted to push the distaste for her sister as far out of her mind as possible. “Don’t you have a date tonight?”

“I don’t think...”

“Don’t go renegeing on me. Now’s the perfect time. To take my mind off of things.”

“Are you sure?”

“Positive.” She stood up on her tiptoes and kissed his chin. See you soon.”

Drew got to the cabin about twenty minutes before he’d told Alex to meet him. Part of him was afraid she wouldn’t show—after all she had laid on him, it was a wonder she still spoke to her sister at all. She was so strong. Stronger than any woman he’d ever known.

The other part of him was afraid if she did show he would chicken out about telling her what he needed to. He’d thought about it the rest of the day and realized things couldn’t go on the way they were. It just wasn’t working out for him and he didn’t think Alex was happy either, and that alone was killing him.

He flinched as headlights cut through the darkness. A massive vehicle pulled up next to his truck and parked.

“Over here,” he called to Alex.

She walked over to him but stayed a few feet away. “You know, I almost didn’t come.”

Drew’s heart pounded. “Why?”

“You’d have to be nuts if you thought that coming out into the wilderness was something I wanted to do willingly.”

He cursed himself for forgetting about the tick incident. “I wasn’t thinking.”

“It’s okay.” She said the words but he could see her rubbing her arms and shifting from foot to foot.

“Tell ya what. Follow me and it won’t be so bad.” He held out his hand to her. “I promise.”

She hesitated but finally took his hand.

Drew led her up a short path to a hunting cabin. He didn’t really hunt, but he liked the idea of having a place that no one knew anything about. Nate didn’t even know about it. Whenever he needed his time alone, he came out here.

He guided her up the porch steps.

“Is this a good idea?” She shivered. “I don’t feel like getting busted for B & E tonight.”

“Good thing I own the place then.”

“You do?”

Drew unlocked and pushed open the door. He flicked the switch to the lights. He’d paid a pretty penny to get it wired for electricity all the way out here, but looking at Alex’s face as she glanced around was worth it all.

“This place is great.” Her gaze landed on the huge bed on the other side of the room.

It had been a while since they had been together, and he was dying to get her in bed, but the look of unease on her face forced him to be patient. Though he was a little disappointed when she removed her jacket to reveal a black T-shirt and those mid-calf pants women wore.

“Why don’t we sit?” He motioned to the two large chairs by the fireplace. He didn’t have much more furniture since he didn’t entertain out here.

Alex nodded and sat.

“I really need to apologize for the way I’ve acted the last little bit. You don’t deserve it.”

Alex didn’t comment.

Drew took off his baseball cap and tossed it toward the table, though he didn’t look to see if it made it or not. “I need to tell you something.”

“I need to tell you something too.”

“Let me go first, please.”

Alex nodded.

"I've been having a hard time trying to figure out how to say this. You'd think for someone who writes songs, I'd be able to find the words, but amazingly nothing has come. So I will just spit it out." Drew stood and paced the floor in front of the fireplace. "Damn, this is so much harder than I thought it would be."

She swallowed hard. He was blowing this. He ran his hands over his face. "The thing is..." He squatted in front of her. "Things are not working out like I had planned. I'm not sure exactly what I *had* planned, but the fact that I feel the way I do, and hadn't counted on it, it was not planned. I'm rambling now aren't I?"

"Pretty much. Just say it. It's like a band-aid. It's easiest if you rip it off fast."

"I love you. There I said it."

Alex's mouth fell open and she stared at him.

"Okay. Not exactly the response that I expected." He stood and leaned against the cold fireplace. "I've obviously surprised you. What were you going to tell me?"

Alex's heart pounded, and pounded some more. Had he really said what she thought he said?

She didn't think it was the time to mention she was planning on going back to Texas with her family the day after next. It was too hard to be around him, not having him, all of him.

"Alex?"

Her mind still blank, she couldn't quite get her mouth to work. Instead she stood and crossed the room to Drew.

"Are you going to say anything?"

Alex shook her head and kicked off her shoes.

Drew started to speak again but stopped. She'd popped open the clasp on her capris. His Adam's apple bobbed when she stripped her top over her head and revealed the cherry red bustier he'd asked her to wear.

"Damn, woman. You have no idea what you do to me." He grabbed her waist, pulled her to him and captured her mouth before she could say anything. His lips skimmed her neck. "You are so beautiful."

She broke the kiss and leaned back in his arms. For the longest time she just looked into his eyes. When she thought her heart would beat out of her chest, she said, "Make love to me, Drew."

He knelt in front of her and kissed the slick red fabric covering her abdomen. His breath heated her belly button and she had to fight off a giggle. When his hands slipped into the open front of her pants though all laughter fled, replaced by lust and want. He slid his hands around to cup her butt and slid his tongue down just inside the matching red panties.

Alex had to grab his shoulders to keep from falling.

As if sensing her instability, Drew pulled her tighter to him for a moment before he slipped the pants down. He kissed a trail in their wake, stopped to lick behind her knee.

“GAWD.” Alex did all she could not to faint away.

Drew pushed back slightly. “Here. Step out.” He held out one hand for her to steady herself as he guided the capris over one foot then the other. He did a double-take and swallowed before he looked up at her.

She forgot to mention the red panties were crotchless. She’d considered not wearing them, but the fierce lust that crossed his face made it worth any embarrassment she might have felt donning them.

“Do you know what you do to me?”

If it was having as much power as he had over her, she could almost feel sorry for the guy. Until he touched her, then she was ever so grateful.

Drew tossed the pants aside and placed her hand on his shoulder again. “You’re gonna need to steady yourself.”

Alex started to ask why when he lifted one of her legs and placed it on his other shoulder. Before she could do more than release a little squeak, he delved into her.

Heat and an ungodly fantabulous sensation washed through her. She dug her fingers into his shoulder while the other hand wove through his hair.

“Jesus, Drew.” Alex gnawed on her lower lip, tightened every muscle in her body and tried to prolong the stirring through every pore.

“Don’t hold back, darlin’.” Drew nipped the inside of her thigh. “Come for me.”

Alex was strung tighter than he’d ever seen her. And he needed her loose and relaxed so he could drive her as wild as she had him the second his eyes had lit on the red silky number she was sporting.

“So beautiful,” he said before he tasted her again. “So sweet.” His tongue tempted her, his teeth teased. He eased a finger inside her. Her hand tightened in his hair. “Relax.”

Alex moaned and he could feel her come undone with his ministrations. By degrees she relaxed. He teased her faster and harder with his mouth. He added a second finger and pumped into her, simulated what he had wanted to do for days—it had been too long since he’d been with her. He thought he might have to stop and pull her to the floor when she finally tensed around him and cried out his name. She came in a glorious rush.

“Drew. Please.”

He slid his hand free and hugged her to him, rose up on his knees. He loosened the ties on the front of the garment until it fell away enough for him to rest his lips on one round breast. “Please what?”

“I need more.”

He flicked her nipple through the material with his tongue. “More what?”

“Drew.”

“Tell me what you want, darlin’. I’ll be more than happy to oblige you.” He worked her breast free and wrapped his lips around the rosy red peak. He skimmed his teeth across it, tugged at it, laved, suckled. Alex swayed in his arms when a tiny shudder ran through her.

“I want to feel you in me, Drew. Please. I need you. All of you.” Alex slipped her hand under his chin and lifted his face to hers. She kissed him fiercely, almost made him come right there in his pants.

Luckily, he managed to stave the strong urge and stood. Before he could undress, Alex was on her knees and pulling at his belt. “Change of plans.” She popped the shiny buckle free and opened the button.

Drew wanted her so bad the need to hurry her warred with the carnal pull in his gut to let her do with him what she pleased. He thanked the Gods carnal won out when she lowered his zipper and pulled the pants as well as his drawers down far enough to allow her access. First she wrapped her hand around his stiff penis, then she licked just the tip.

“Damn, darlin’.” He tried to still her but she pushed his hands away.

“Turn about.” She stroked him once then twice then took him full in her mouth. Her tongue slid up his shaft while she cupped his balls.

He was so incredibly hard it hurt, not to mention so close. “Stop. God don’t stop.”

She giggled with her mouth still around him

“Stop.” He stilled her hands. “I need to be in you.” He lowered himself to the floor and laid her on the rug in front of the fireplace. He didn’t wait to undress either of them, just pushed open the red swatch of fabric and plunged himself deep inside her.

Her heat surrounded him, all but engulfed him. It took very little pumping until he was all but ready to climax. “I love you so much.” He said it again as he emptied himself into her.

After a quick respite, Drew lifted her to the bed and made love to her all night long.

Bright sunlight streamed into the cabin. Drew had lain awake for hours with Alex’s blonde curls pressed up under his chin. It was the first time morning had arrived with Alex in his arms. But not the last if he had anything to do with it. He would convince her to move her pet portrait business to Houston. Hell, she’d never have to work again if she didn’t want to.

That thought gave him pause.

Sure he loved her. But commitment, even marriage had never really been something on the forefront of his mind. As a matter of fact, when Cassandra had left he swore he’d never make that mistake again with any woman. He planned to stick to it.

Alex stretched. Her creamy breasts slid across his side. She arched into him, rubbed her leg against his.

“You’re killing me, darlin’,” Drew whispered into her hair and cupped her breast.

Her eyes flew open. “Oh my gosh. What time is it?” She sat bolt upright.

“Early.”

“I gotta go.” Alex jumped from the bed and hurried around the room to pick up her discarded clothing.

Drew frowned and had to fight back the sudden unease in his chest. “What’s your hurry?”

“I didn’t tell anyone I was gonna be gone all night.”

He didn’t know why it bothered him. Why it felt like they were sneaking around. Granted they had tried to keep their dalliances back at the ranch secret—and failed miserably. “You’re a grown woman, Alex. I doubt they’ll be too worried.”

“Are you kidding me? My mother asked a hundred questions about where I was going and when I’d be back before she would let me borrow the keys to her Hummer.” She pulled her shirt over her head. “She’s making up for all the years that she didn’t give a damn.”

“Still...”

Alex dressed and slipped her feet into her shoes before she leaned on the bed and gave him a long searing kiss. “Bye.” She left without a backward glance.

Drew fell back to the bed when he heard the Hummer pull away. It wasn’t until then he realized she had never said if she loved him or not.

Alex slipped into the three-bedroom cottage she was sharing with her family. She had her shoes off and was about to lay on the sofa when her mother’s door creaked open.

“Just getting in?” Pixie whispered when she came out.

Alex frowned and plopped down on the sofa. “Uh, no. I slept out here last night. Celia snores.”

“Uh-huh. Sure. Whatever.” Pixie sat beside Alex. “So what’s the deal?”

This was the first time the two women had been alone since the group’s arrival the day before—unless you counted the linen closet at the restaurant and her sister acted as if it never happened.

“Deal? No deal?”

“You’re sleeping with him aren’t you?”

“Who?”

“Gaw. Are you kidding me?”

“Pixie. This is really none of your business.”

“A non-answer in ninety-nine times outta a hundred means yes.”

Alex eyed her sister but made no further comment.

“He’s hot, I’ll give you that. Explains why he didn’t come around right away.”

Because of course a man, any man, would jump at a chance with Pixie. Alex fisted her hands at her sides.

“How’d you meet him?”

“I dumped a shake on him at Burger Barn.”

“Jeez.” Pixie crossed her arms in a pout. “If you don’t want to tell me.”

Alex rolled her eyes and held back a snort. Fine, if she wasn’t going to believe her. “I won a date with him through his fan club. I had to mail in four hundred box tops to get my name in the drawing.”

“See. Was it so hard to tell me?” Pixie yawned and scratched her head. “Though that’s kinda pathetic. Can’t you date like normal people and meet men at work?”

Alex bit back a retort about the kind of men Pixie came in contact with at her job, but she didn’t think her sister would like her oh-so-friendly observations.

Then Pixie frowned. “Do you meet men at your job? I mean the pup pictures and all.”

“Not usually.”

“Explains a lot.” Pixie shook her head and tsked. “I need a shower.” She stood and started back for her room but paused at the door. “What kinda box tops?”

Alex buried her face in the sofa cushions and screamed.

Alex wasn’t sure how she’d convinced her mother, Pixie and Scooter to go shopping at the nearby mall without her. The women she could understand, but her brother... He’d been a little too eager to agree to whatever she wanted. But she didn’t have time to worry about it. She was due at the fairgrounds any minute and she still didn’t know what to say to Drew when she saw him.

“...and after I have Scooter’s baby.” Celia examined her nails when Alex’s gaze swung over to her. “I think we’ll live with Auntie Alex.”

Alex all but dropped her coffee. “What? Come again.”

“You haven’t been listening to a word I’ve said all morning.”

“Sure I have. You and Scooter are—” she swallowed hard. “—having a kid?”

“I love ya, hon. Your brother, too, but you couldn’t pay me to dip into your gene pool.”

Alex released a sigh. “That’s the sweetest thing you’ve ever said to me.”

“You have it bad, huh?” Celia wrapped her arm around Alex’s shoulders. “Have you told him?”

“You know... Scooter’s not so bad. He has that really cute cowlick on the back of his head. Some day he’ll even probably grow into those ears.”

“Come on, Alex. Have you?”

“No.”

“Why not?”

Alex shrugged off her friend’s support. “Not sure.”

“You’ll never know if he feels the same way if you don’t tell him.”

“Oh, I know how he feels.”

Celia frowned.

“He told me last night.”

“I am so sorry. I was hoping it could work out for the two of you. He seems like a really nice guy. And I am not just saying that 'cause he let me ride his bike. You know though, as far as I am concerned, that makes him golden. He seems to genuinely care about his friends from what I've heard and he works so hard to build a rapport with the fans. I even heard that he...”

“He told me he loves me.”

Celia's eyes bugged out like a cartoon character and her mouth fell open.

“Yeah. I was shocked too.”

“I'm shocked you made me think he didn't. I'm not shocked he told you he loves you. What's not to love?” She squooshed Alex's cheek between her hands. “You are a sweetie if I ever met one, and what do you mean that you haven't told him too?”

“You're hurting my face.” Alex rolled her jaw around when Celia finally let go. “I couldn't say it back.”

“Why the hell not?”

“I don't know.” Alex ran her hands through her hair and walked to look out the window to the poorly kept lawn. Romeo nudged her hip until she petted his head. “I felt it. Feel it. As a matter of fact I was ready to leave Tennessee and go home with you guys tomorrow because it was just too hard to be around him and feel the way I do.”

“Which is how? You haven't said exactly.”

“I love him.” She turned to look at her friend. “So much my chest hurts. So much I've thought about the happily ever after, minivan and kids. Two dogs and a picket damn fence. And that scares the hell out of me.”

Celia started toward her until she flinched.

“I swore when Ron left I would not let another man take me down that road again.”

“Drew is not Ron.”

“I know that. But that doesn't mean it doesn't scare the hell out of me any less.”

“I realize what Ron did was reprehensible. And you can see the bad that came out of it all. But—” Celia grabbed Alex by the shoulders when she tried to go into the other room, “—were it not for being the shit that he is, there would be no Ronnie. And you love him more than anything right?”

“You know I do.”

“Okay, see? Ron is an asshole. Plain and simple. And your sister is no peach. But you're missing a couple of key points here. One, Drew would not, and I say this with certainty, go for a woman like Pixie. Not after his ex-witch did pretty much the same thing to him that your sis did, er, uh, to Ron.”

“Maybe.”

“Two, has he ever lied to you?”

“Hello? Andy?”

“I thought we went over that. That’s not exactly lying. He didn’t want some sycophant falling on his every word. He wanted you to like him for him the man, not *the* Drew Hartford, hottie country singer.”

“Okay.”

“Three. This is the most important. Are you listening up?”

Alex smiled despite herself. “Um-hmm.”

“Three, the man is crazy about you.”

“I never said he was crazy for me.”

“I’ve seen the way he looks at you. Crazy in love. That’s major bonus points as far as I am concerned.”

“Gee, thanks.”

“That’s not what I mean. He had his heart ripped out too ya know. Publicly. That can’t be fun. Yet, he took a chance and fell in love again. With you. A beautiful, wonderful woman.”

“Keep going. I’m starting to like this talk.”

“Brat.” Celia snorted and swatted at Alex’s rear. “Think about what I’ve said.”

“I will.” Alex’s heart felt lighter than it had in many years. And when the thought of telling Drew she loved him too didn’t make her want to run for the hills, she decided she might want to do it before she lost her nerve.

The phone rang. “Miss Barrett. The car you rented is here.”

“Thank you.” She hung up but couldn’t bring herself to look back at her friend. “Car’s here. We need to get moving so I’m not late. At least I have this job. It’s not like I’m here as a girlfriend or anything.”

Chapter Seventeen

Drew had gotten an update here and there from Angel but for the most part she was taking her role as super spy seriously and had “lists” of people to watch. He’d have felt bad for heaping her on one of them, but he couldn’t.

He still hadn’t seen Alex since she’d dashed out of his cabin just after six. He’d been tempted to hop in his truck and chase after her, but considering the wild look in her eyes when she’d run out, he decided better to give her a chance to think about what he’d said. Still, he needed to get her alone, have a chance to talk to her. Since he still had no idea where the hell she was staying, though, he had to wait for her get to the grounds to do that.

He and the band had an autograph session planned for most of the morning, but after that he was free for the rest of the day and he was determined to spend it with the woman he loved.

He saw Romeo first. Loping across the field toward him. And then he saw her. Alex. His woman. Walking toward him. Behind her he thought he saw Celia wink at him but before he had a chance to look again, Romeo had planted both his feet on Drew’s shoulders.

“Hey, boy.” He rubbed the dog’s neck and managed to get him to sit when Alex walked up. “Hey, beautiful.” Damn but she *was* beautiful. Dressed in a navy tee and tan pants, as she was, or in a red lacey bustier, she was quite a looker. And all his.

“Hi. I, um, was hoping I could talk to you before the autographing.” Pink tinted her cheeks.

Heart in a heavy tattoo in his chest, all he could do was nod.

“Drew, I need you for a sec.” Nate called from a bit away.

“In a minute.” He and Alex moved to a slightly more secluded spot in the middle of hundreds of folks arriving for the day’s festivities.

“I...last night...” Her cheeks reddened more.

Alex leaned up on tiptoes and kissed him. Deep. Searing. When she settled back he wasn’t sure which one of them was panting heavier.

She gnawed on her lower lip then she sucked in a deep breath.

Perspiration broke out across Drew’s forehead. He wanted to hurry her up, but unsure of what she might say—though he had hopes—he didn’t want to hear bad news too quickly.

“I—” She looked past him. “Scooter, what are you doing here?” About the same time Nate called to Drew again.

Dammit. What is going on? Was the world conspiring against him? “One minute, Nate.”

“I needed to talk to you.” Alex’s brother had an odd expression on his face. Drew didn’t know him at all, but the look didn’t bode well for someone.

“Hang on, Scooter. I need to tell Drew something.”

The youngest Barrett didn’t look ready to back off. Drew waved him off. “Cool your heels, Junior.”

Scooter backed up a few paces.

“I love you, too.”

The words whooshed out of the woman before him so fast he wasn’t sure he’d heard her. “Repeat that please.”

“I love you.” A smile creased her face. “I think I have from the minute you and I started talking online.”

Drew stood for a minute and did nothing more than blink. Then he howled and swooped her up into his arms. “She loves me. Did you hear that?”

“Drew...” Nate yelled.

“Alex...” Scooter almost talked over Drew’s brother.

“What?” the couple said in unison.

Each sibling pulled their kin to the side. “Scooter, hang on just a second.”

Nate said something and Drew swung his gaze toward the table set up for the signing. Two guys with cameras and press credentials around their necks stood watching the group.

“Alex, I really need to tell you something.”

“What could be so important you can’t wait five minutes?” she said to Scooter then she turned to Drew and asked, “Who are they?”

His cheeks turned a brilliant red. “Photographers.”

Alex frowned. “For?”

“The autographing.”

“I thought that I...” Alex’s stomach rolled.

“Hey, Drew.” One of the other photographers called over to him. “I brought the prints from the photo shoot. Hillary wants you to take a peek and see which ones you like best for the CD.”

Numbness spread through her. “Drew, what the hell...”

Scooter stepped in front of her and grabbed her shoulders. “Alex, I got kicked out of school.”

She blinked several times. “Is the world spinning? It suddenly feels like the world is spinning.” Alex shook her head once to clear away the ringing in her ears.

“I can explain,” Drew and Scooter both said at once.

The two men looked at each other. Both narrowed their gaze at the other. The level of both of their words must have sunk in at the same time.

Hysterical laughter built up in Alex's chest. She glanced over at Celia. "Where are the cameras?"

Celia shook her head. "Hon, I don't know what you're..."

"This is a gag right? Some kinda practical joke, reality shit. Camera's stashed behind the trees?" She walked around a large oak. "Is there a crew set up somewhere to jump out and surprise me any minute? I'm surprised. It worked. Ha ha. Come out, come out wherever you are. Olly, olly oxen free. The fun's over now." Her voice rose with each word. "Because if it's not, I'm not sure I can take much more."

Drew came up beside her. "Alex."

She jerked her arm out of his grip. "Talk."

"The PR firm set it up."

"And my photos?" *He used me.* She didn't want to look at him, at the pitifully-sorrowful look of a man who just blew her pride to pieces but wanted a chance to push aside her feelings and *explain*.

"I wanted to be near you."

And that is supposed to make me feel better. That is supposed to make up for the pain in my chest. She wanted to shout at him, to pound his chest with her fists. But she couldn't. She was take-it-all-in-stride Alex. She had to remain calm, had to keep her composure as this man made a fool out of her. "Mine? Are useless?"

"I wouldn't say that. I can use some. The fan club..." he trailed off when she rolled her eyes.

"Let me get this straight. You hired me supposedly to take pictures for you but really all you wanted was an excuse to get me close."

"Um, yeah."

"In bed."

"You're making it sound...polluted."

"Isn't that what it is? You basically paid me for sex. Since you don't need nor ever really wanted my pictures." She lowered her voice. "You turned me into a whore."

"Alex that is not at all what happened."

Bile rose in the back of her throat. "I don't see it that way."

"You're blowing this out of proportion." Drew wiped his hands on his jeans. "Considering all the shit you just learned about your brother..."

"I haven't learned anything yet." Her hands shook.

Drew stepped toward her and tried to put his hand on her shoulder but she backed away. "Once you have had a chance to calm down, you'll see what I was trying to do."

"Who all knew?" Why it mattered she wasn't sure.

He glanced down to his boots. "I don't think..."

“Who!” He flinched when she yelled. A glance at Nate confirmed her question with a slight nod of his head. She turned to the rest of the band a few feet away and received a few more affirmations. “Sean? You too?”

He shrugged. “Yeah.”

Anger burned her gut so hot she was afraid to say anything else to the Drew. She narrowed her eyes at her brother. “You.” She pointed her finger at him. “I want an explanation right now.”

“Here?”

She thrust her hands on her hips. “Now. You didn’t have any problem letting it out here.”

Scooter’s Adam’s apple bobbed with a huge swallow. “I, uh, got kicked out.”

“I got that.” Her fingers bit into her hips to keep from hurling herself at him. “For how long?”

He mumbled something.

Alex cupped her ear. “Come again?”

“They said they’d be mailing you a check for a portion of the summer session, so you’ll get some money back.” His weak smile wobbled.

“For. How. Long?” Alex gritted her teeth.

“Forever. I can’t come back.”

Celia closed into the fray. “What did you do?”

“Cheated.”

“You what?” Alex felt the color drain from her face. Buzzing in her ears grew.

“It was a killer mid-term. Me and some of the guys got a copy of the test from a girl who took the course last year. She said the prof never varied any questions. Great time for her to be wrong.”

“Shhhht.” Alex snapped her fingers at Scooter. “Let me guess, all the kids were doing it.” She advanced on her brother who took several quick steps backward. “You are not twelve, Scooter. You are a grown man. An adult. Two-and-a-half years of college down the drain because you didn’t want to study.”

“It was hard.”

“Life is hard, dammit.” She ran her hands through her hair. “Don’t you think it was hard when my sister slept with my fiancé and got pregnant? You didn’t see me cheating anywhere. I stayed with the bastard for months afterward. I didn’t take shortcuts.”

“No, but you dropped his sorry ass.”

“Wrong-o. He left me.” She had never admitted that to anyone before. Everyone had assumed she’d kicked him out after the betrayal. She hadn’t. She’d been stupid enough to think she needed to fight for their relationship. And when she did nothing more than give him a strong lecture several months after the rabbit died, he told her couldn’t live with perfection and left in her car with most of her bank account.

“W-well...w-well,” Scooter stuttered and wrung his hands in front of him. “We’re not all like you, Alex.”

“Are you freaking kidding me? Is he kidding me?” She looked at Celia who had the good grace not to comment. “Were it not for me, he’d be asking, ‘Do you want fries with that’.”

“No. Because you’re Saint Alex. Bearer of everyone else’s sins.” Scooter threw his hands up. “No one asked you to, you know. No one. Well, Mom probably did.” He gave a quick glance to their mother who might have an expression on her face had Botox not been invented. “But not me. Not Pixie.”

Ingrate. Selfish little ingrate. “I’m supposed to watch you guys screw up your lives because you don’t have enough sense to take care of yourselves? And what about Ronnie? He didn’t ask to be born into this freak show of a family.”

“You’re right about Ronnie. Fine. But you are not in charge of us. We have to make mistakes. We have to fail.”

“And you have succeeded at that brilliantly, haven’t you?”

“Screw you, Alex.”

Celia held onto her arm when she would have charged her brother and knocked him on his self-righteous ass.

“Watch it, little brother.” Drew crossed his arms over his chest and moved closer to the trio.

“You stay out of this.” Alex didn’t need anyone to fight her battles. She didn’t need help, dammit. “All I’ve ever done is try to protect you. Lord knows she never would.” She pointed at their mother. “And I know *I* raised you better than this, Scooter. You can’t take the easy way out of life. Sometimes you have to work for what you want, make tough decisions.”

“Is this where you tell me how disappointed you are in me and I haven’t lived up to my potential? No one could live up to the lofty standards you set. Hell, even you can’t. You take pictures of over-privileged people’s fucking pets for a living. How is that any better than burgers and fries? Is that your life’s work? What happened to changing the world with your photographs? What happened to your dreams?”

“Not everyone can go out and accomplish their greatest feats as soon as they start. Look at Drew. It took him years to make the big time. He wasn’t an overnight success. He overcame obstacles. Did he let his dyslexia slow him down? No.”

The large crowd of onlookers gasped.

Alex had forgotten where they were and immediately wanted to call back all the words out of her mouth, especially when she saw Drew. His face drained of color and his fists balled at his sides. She hurried over to him. “I didn’t mean that. It slipped out.”

He glared at her for a moment before he was swallowed up by a mob of people asking if it was true.

“Just great, Alex.” Nate yanked her back. “Why’d you do that?”

Romeo growled from his perch a few feet away.

Nate gave the large dog a sideward glance. A moment of indecision crossed his face but he didn’t loosen his grip.

“Let go of my sister, asshole.” Scooter shoved himself between the two.

The irony of Scooter protecting her wasn’t lost.

“You’d better back off, man.”

Nate shook his head and turned to push into the crowd. To his brother. To help protect his brother.

“Looks like that halo just slipped.” Pixie’s smug smile was the last straw.

“Oh no she didn’t.” Celia came forward but Alex stilled her with a hand on her arm.

“I’ve got this.” She reared back and popped her sister right in the mouth. Drama queen that she was, Pixie spun around and flopped to the ground.

“You and Ron deserve each other.”

“Kids. Please.” Carolyn fanned herself with her hand like some antebellum damsel.

“You’re a little late to give a damn, Mom.” Alex ran her hands through her hair. “That’s it. I’m through. Do you hear me? You people are on your own.”

She paused and looked at her brother for a long moment.

“I don’t care if you ever go back to college. Do what you want, screw up your life. I don’t care.” She pulled out her checkbook. “Here.” She wrote a check for the amount Drew had paid her so far. She tossed the check at her brother. “Sorry if it’s not enough, but I still had three days to go on my...contract.” Her throat tightened.

“Pixie.” She leaned over her sister still huddled on the ground; deep red stains from her nose dotted the front of her barely there tank. “I will tell you this once. You straighten your act up or I will fight you for custody of Ronnie. No judge in his right mind will give you or Ron that boy over me. Got that?”

“Mother.” The woman stood off to the side. Just as she had most of Alex’s life. “I have nothing left to say.”

The need to comfort Drew, beg for forgiveness, or kick his ass for making a fool out of her warred in her. She opted instead to simply walk away. She could not have gotten near him if she tried.

Celia and Romeo had stayed with her for several yards as she left the fairgrounds. “Are you okay?”

“Peachy.” She didn’t so much as break her determined stride.

“Alex, talk to me.”

“Celia. I love you. You know I do. So when I say this please keep it in mind.” Alex glanced at her friend to make sure she was paying attention. “Leave me the hell alone.”

Celia stopped. “I know you’re hurting. When you need to talk...”

Alex nodded but kept walking. Almost to her rented car, she heard someone calling. “Miss, miss.” A thirty-ish woman, decked out in an unbelievably tight top and skirt waved at her. “What’s your name?”

“Alex Barrett. Why?” She didn’t want to talk. Couldn’t this woman tell she was having a bad damn day?

"I'm Brenda Ditwood with *Cowboy Weekly*. I wanted to get your name right on the quote for the article about Drew's dyslexia."

"You can't print that." Panic seized her chest. "Please."

"Are you kidding? That is the biggest news all week, hell, all month."

"Well, then..." her brain leapt and jumped for ideas. "I don't give you permission to use my name."

"You're sure? It's a way to get your name in the magazine. Fifteen minutes of fame and all that."

"No. You can't use my name." A wave of relief washed over her.

"Fine. 'An unnamed source at Fan Fair said Drew Hartford'..."

The wave crashed and pulled her into the undertow.

Drew finally managed to get away from the fairgrounds.

One hour. Folks hounded him for one hour.

The signing had to be postponed when the crowd grew beyond manageable.

How could she have done that? Have could she have let something so secret slip in a damn argument. More than let it slip, she'd used it as an example of a man's fortitude.

"Give me a break." All his life he'd been considered stupid because he had trouble reading. His parents had even tried to talk him out of becoming a musician when he'd told them he'd formed a band. But he could play music. Pretty much any tune he'd heard he could play it back on his guitar or piano. But ask him to write music...or read it...

Thank God he'd had his brother.

Nate had helped him write every song he'd composed. They'd actually been touted as a dynamic writing team. But it was a secret. His secret. He'd never even told Cassandra.

"God dammit, Alex." Drew smashed his fist into the wall, and then did it again. When it stung like a sonofabitch he made his way to the kitchen to get an icepack.

The entire band had come back to his house to work on PR spin for the fiasco and he could hear them talking.

"Man, I wish I could find a job where someone paid to keep me around." A bust of laughter echoed through the rented house. "I'd screw twenty-four seven."

Drew thundered down the hallway.

"Man, Sean, you'd do it for free."

His fists—pain or no—balled at his sides.

"Ah, too true." Sean snorted. "But she'd be worth paying. Hell, maybe I can make her an offer for later in the month if she isn't busy."

Drew burst into the kitchen. "What the hell was that?"

“Oh, hey. We were just wondering...” Sean set his drink down and rounded the end of the table. “Did you get your money’s worth? I’m guessing someone like Alex should get a huge bonus for services rendered above and beyond the job description.”

Drew’s temper rocketed and he charged the drummer. “You keep your damn mouth shut. Do you hear me?” He tackled him low. Once the taller man was on the tiled floor, Drew swung at him with both fists. Took a couple to the jaw himself before the other band members managed to pry them apart.

“What the fuck is your problem? Are you gonna try and tell me you didn’t pay her so you could screw her at your leisure? Everyone knows it was a bogus job.” Sean spit blood. “Well, everyone except Alex apparently.” He shook his head. “I thought she knew. That explains a lot.” He wiped his mouth on his sleeve. “Still, that was a pretty shitty thing to do. I wouldn’t blame her one bit if she sells your story to *Cowboy Weekly*.” Sean stood with his fists balled, as if ready for another assault.

“Whatever. You know, it didn’t seem to stop *you* when you were trying to get into her pants at the party.”

“It’s every man for himself. You didn’t seem to want her. How was I supposed to know you were playing all those freaking mind games with her?”

Drew’s gut clenched. He’d never thought of it that way. He should have been up front with Alex. He had lied to her from the beginning and once she knew who he was he did it over and over again. Lying was the one thing she couldn’t tolerate in anyone. But he hadn’t meant for it to turn out like that. He’d never intentionally hurt the woman he loved.

His mind whirled. He did love her and he’d just let her walk away. After she blew up his entire world.

“What? Now you have nothing to say?” Sean shoved at him.

Nate stepped between the pair and gripped the drummer by the arm. “Sean, why don’t you and the rest of the guys head on back to the house? I don’t think we’re gonna get anything done today.”

“Fine. Anywhere has to be better than here.” Sean shrugged off Nate’s hand and left.

Drew couldn’t look any of the men in the eye when they followed Sean out.

Chapter Eighteen

“I’ll be the poster boy for dyslexia now.” Drew tossed his cowboy hat onto his desk. A week flew by fielding phone call after phone call. One interview request after another. He hadn’t had time to stop and take a breath. He thought of Alex but didn’t know quite how to handle things between them. Not that he knew where she was if he’d wanted to. In one day she dropped a bomb in his world, checked out of the cottage and hightailed it for parts unknown. If Celia knew where she was she wasn’t telling and he’d be damned before he contacted her screwed up family, though after the scene at the fairgrounds—all captured on video thanks to some tourist and an iPhone, which ran on every local news program—he didn’t think she would turn to her mother or sibs for support.

“Could be worse.” Nate crossed the room and dropped the mail atop the ever-growing pile.

“Could be better.” On the upside, Angel thought a country crooner with dyslexia was far too much trouble. Last he’d heard, she was headed out west to follow an up-and-coming band. He’d also heard she’d been whisked away to L.A. to start production of a movie-of-the-week and hired to help write a tell-all for her part as the fan club president. More power to her.

“Despite how it happened, you’ve had more publicity over the past week than you’ve had over the past two years. Sales have all but tripled.”

“Well then, let me release a few more secrets and the next album will go platinum the first day.”

“You have more secrets? I better sit down.” Nate flopped into a chair and propped his feet up on the table. “Hit me with it and we can figure out how to spin it in your favor, too.”

“You’re an ass. Mom should have let me trade you for that football when I had the chance.”

Nate snorted. Then his smile fell away. “What do you want to do next?”

Drew frowned. “Huh?”

“I can hire a detective.”

Drew laughed. “I don’t have any more secrets.” He stretched out on the brown leather sofa and covered his eyes with his arm.

“For Alex. Even if she’s not still in town, I bet we can find her.”

Drew’s heart pounded against his ribs at the mention of her name. He didn’t dare look at his brother, afraid Nate would see the depths of the pain he was in. The cell phone in his hip pocket vibrated before he had to come up with an answer.

His booking agent, Regina—they'd had to hire a firm to field their calls when Nathan couldn't keep up—started right in. "*Wake Up Dallas* wants to have you on the show."

"Aw, Regina..."

"This is huge. It's syndicated, runs in almost every major market. We're talking *everywhere*."

He'd come to know Regina quite well in only a week. He'd never seen her flustered and she was all but giggling on her end of the phone. He rubbed his hand across his face. "When?"

Alex knew she was acting like a baby. But she couldn't help herself. She just wanted to be left the hell alone to lick her wounds. When she'd driven past the Welcome To and You're Leaving Nashville signs for the fourth time, she stopped to rent a cheesy Motel room, unsure of what else to do. She hadn't expected to stay for more than a couple of hours—just long enough for her head to clear and for her to get a clear idea of what she needed to do next. When dawn broke the next morning, and several more after that, she'd had to make some serious decisions.

She sure as hell wasn't in any hurry to get home to see her family. And she didn't have any clients to hurry home to; she'd cleared her schedule for several more weeks.

Despite her self-pity lethargy, she wanted to jump right back into her work. But she didn't know if she'd get another client. She didn't think she was being overly-morose and pessimistic, but when not one, not two but three major entertainment news programs picked up the story about Drew... Her name flashed on the screen every few segments as the worst kind of betrayer... Yeah, she needed to lay low for a bit.

She'd called Celia once to let her know she was alive and kicking. Her friend informed her she and Alex's so-called family hopped in the gas-guzzler and hit the road, none too happy to stay in a town where they'd made the evening news two stories out of six—though Alex suspected her mother and sister adored the attention.

Past the one phone call, she'd had no contact with anyone she knew. Were it not for the woman at the diner, she didn't think she'd have spoken to another living soul since the fateful day in the park. Not that she would complain to anyone. Despite the unexpected life-hiatus, the time to herself let her think, let her decide what she wanted to do with her life.

She enjoyed doing pet portraits. It wouldn't save the world, but it kept food on her table. Though she never thought she would do it forever.

She couldn't stay gone too much longer. She truly missed her dog. Celia swore she would take care of the gargantuan creature—her words—until Alex decided to return. How long could her friend hold out before she called in reinforcements, though? She might have laughed when she thought of the dog, who outweighed her friend by a good ten pounds, dragging Celia's ass all over the neighborhood. But it hurt too much to think of normalcy.

Heartsick and lonely, Alex trekked down the block to the convenience store on the corner to buy enormous amounts of ice cream. Her room didn't have a refrigerator—the rooms less than forty dollars a night rarely did—but she didn't think it would be a problem. After several pints, she chased the cold treat down with a couple of lukewarm hot dogs.

An hour later, hands and face sticky with Chunky Monkey and Cherry Garcia, Alex lay staring at the ceiling. Her stomach rumbled as the feast any teen would envy threatened to come back up.

Tears burned her eyes. She loved Drew and wished she could tell him again, but those dummies with *Cowboy Weekly* magazine had wasted no time printing her outburst. Every person with a camera—shoot, even cell phones—set to record one moment she wished she could take back. Hell, she'd bet their online magazine was burning up folks' hard drives with country music gossip.

She tried not to think back over the day bitterly, but it was all she did 24/7, since her misspeak. She wished she could forget it, but Drew haunted even her sleep.

"Alex, you're pathetic!" The inner voice screamed at her.

She'd ignored it long enough. "Time to shower and get on with life."

Alex booked the first flight back to Texas that she could get and gathered up her belongings strewn all over the rented room.

Later, she picked up the phone, put it down and picked it back up again to dial a number by rote. When Celia answered on the second ring Alex dispensed with any preamble. "My flight lands tonight at ten. Can you pick me up?"

"Sure. What about your car?"

"I'll bet you five new sweaters it's already sitting in my driveway. He wouldn't want to take the chance of running into me."

"Hon—"

"I'm headed out the door now," she cut her friend off and glanced at her watch. She had just enough time. "See you at ten."

She had one stop before she headed to the airport.

Alex shuddered as she stepped from her car and into the copse of trees surrounding Drew's cabin.

She held her camera level to her eye and snapped a small furry creature under the lowest branches to her right. When she didn't move, the rabbit ventured a smidge closer and Alex captured it—on film. The shutter clicked and the rabbit darted back into the brush. Two more shots of the flora and she turned the lens to the sun setting just above the outline of trees and a peek of a stone chimney.

She wished she'd been here, had her camera ready, when Drew fixed up the house, added the cedar shutters and the awning off to the side to protect the woodpile. Once again, she thought to the book she once dreamed of creating, men working with their hands. It wasn't so far out of the realm, and she had little

to keep her occupied. It was time for her to do something with her life for her and no one else. She had many options still open to her. She had enough photos for a decent start. She made a mental note to go through what she had and see how much she was lacking.

Tightness lifted from her chest and she managed a deep breath then headed for the small log cabin. Palms sweaty, she dug through the bushes for the fake rock where Drew had said he hid an extra key, then she let herself in.

It took a moment for her eyes to adjust to the dim light. “I don’t know why I am here.” She turned and started to go but couldn’t help herself from picking up Drew’s jacket by the front door. She held the denim up to her nose and breathed in the leather and musk scent mingled with a little bit of pine.

Tears pricked her eyes for the hundredth time, but she willed them back. Alex glanced around the small one room cabin. The large bed stood in the corner, almost taunting her. With the covers smooth across the top she might convince herself the time she’d spent with Drew had been a figment of her imagination, could almost convince herself he hadn’t professed his love and she hadn’t run like the coward she was. She could almost convince herself she hadn’t withheld her own feelings for him.

If she’d told him then, that moment, the two may have lain in bed for hours, made love again and again and her world wouldn’t have dissolved around her feet.

Not true. Scooter would still have lied to her and been kicked out of school. Drew’s job offer would still have been a bogus attempt to have a handy piece of ass.

Alex tucked the jacket under her arm. She snapped off picture after picture, captured the small room. In her mind’s eye she envisioned it as a spread in a home decorating magazine—all manly and rugged, charm that epitomized the owner—though the photos would never see the light of day outside her studio. She needed to have something to remind her of Drew, as if the ache in her chest wasn’t enough.

She stepped out into the bright sunlight and shifted her shades to cover her eyes before she locked the door and hid the key back in the fake rock.

“I’m so sorry, Drew.”

Drew pulled his truck off the road. He’d told Nate he’d be up at the house first thing in the morning for their trip to back to Texas for the interview with *Wake Up Dallas*. But he need some time to himself. To his brother’s credit, he didn’t try to stop him or even ask where he was headed.

He wasn’t sure if his brother was just relieved not to hear him bitching and moaning. Probably. He shook his head and lumbered up the small worn path to the front door.

The calm that usually came over him when he stepped into his cabin didn’t occur. Instead, he would swear he could smell Alex. Smell the damn fruity shampoo she used. It surrounded his senses and tightened his chest.

I’m a sucker. Plain and simple.

He shook his head when he thought of him and Sean almost coming to blows. The man's words taunted him still. "You really played her."

No, I let my dick lead me around. Drew ran his hands through his hair and fell back onto the bed.

Again, raspberry and vanilla surrounded him. He stood and ripped the covers from the bed—he'd donate them to a local charity.

As he tossed the linens onto his front porch, an idea for a song came to him. He sat at the small dinette table in the nook off to the side of the kitchen and took pen to paper. He cursed himself for not bringing his guitar with him, but he hadn't been in a creative frame of mind.

The words flowed—in his broken snippets of phrases and ideas. He had to stop twice to work a cramp out in his hand. After an hour, he called Nate. "See if you can book some studio time. And gather the guys."

"I thought...where are you?"

"On my way back to town. Can you call everyone?"

"Sure."

He knew they'd be none too happy to have a quick session, but the minute the song came to him, he knew he had to get it done. It would be a risky career move—part of his interview on *Wake Up Dallas* was one song—to play an untried song. But if he ever had a shot of making it up to Alex, he'd have to go for it.

Chapter Nineteen

Alex woke with her arms pinned to the bed. “Romeo, I know you missed me, but this is just silly.”

The huge dog swiped his tongue across her cheek and jumped from the bed. Her flight had been delayed two hours. Celia had waited outside the terminal for her—Romeo in tow—and the dog hadn’t let her get more than an arm’s length away since.

As predicted, her car had been in her driveway when Celia dropped her at home. No note. No signs of who drove it or how it had arrived—which was especially interesting since the keys had sat in the bottom of her purse since she’d left the ranch. He’d really been ready to get rid of any reminder of her.

Romeo’s nose pushed against her ear. “I know. Potty break calls.” Before Alex could even sit up, her phone rang as the doorbell pealed. “Welcome home,” she mumbled and grabbed the receiver.

“Ten a.m. Channel eight.”

She was used to cryptic from Celia, but at seven a.m. her brain didn’t function before coffee. “What?” The doorbell rang again. She rolled herself off the mattress and padded barefooted to the front door.

“Just saying. Ten a.m. Glad you’re home.” Celia disconnected.

She started to reach for the knob when a key rattled the lock. “...shouldn’t just go barging in. The girl has had a rough time of it.”

“Ladies.”

Three dyed colors-not-found-in-a-natural-world-for-hair septuagenarians grabbed their chests and squealed.

Alex couldn’t stop the smile which spread across her mouth. “Coffee?”

Tessie pushed her way through the group. “I brought coffee cake.”

Bernita huffed. “I’ll get the cups.”

Gladys, not to be outdone, held up a huge platter of chocolate brownies. “I thought you might want some later.”

“The hell with later.” Alex ushered the ladies in and toward the kitchen. “There’s always time for brownies. With chocolate chips?”

“Are there any other kind?” Gladys patted her cheek and disappeared into the kitchen.

“How you holding up, girl?” Bernita eyed her up and down. “Lost a little weight.”

“As a diet, having a man break your heart...” Words caught in her throat. “I finally squeezed my butt in those black pants Grandma bought me when I was twenty.”

“Wear them to his next concert and make him eat his own heart out.” The woman squeezed her shoulder. “You’re a good girl.”

Alex pulled her neighbor into a bear hug. “You always were Grandma’s favorite.”

“Peshaw. She only said that so I’d give her my potato salad recipe.”

Alex snorted. “What will it get me?”

Bernita scooted back. “A date with my grandson?”

“Ha. I always did favor Miss Gladys’ brownies over potato salad anyway.” She winked at Bernita.

The older woman swatted her behind as she hurried past.

At the table, armed with chocolate and coffee, she gave the granny gang a condensed—slightly less painful, and yards less X-rated—version of her time away.

“Yep,” Tessie shook her head, “That Amazon friend of yours told us as much. Though she giggled every now and again when she mentioned a red teddy bear. Not sure why that’s so funny. Did it have a silly hat or something? I saw some cute teddy bears up at the mall once, but none that made me laugh over-much.” She bit into a brownie and leaned back in her chair.

Bernita and Gladys shook their heads but no one corrected Tessie.

“Have you heard from your mama?”

Alex sighed. “Yeah. After she scolded me for making a scene, she said she forgave me.” She took a long sip of her coffee. “My sister not so much. She informs me, through Scooter I might add, that I am to stay the hell away from her. And when I want to see my nephew I have to go through our mother.” She raked her hand over her face. “I screwed that all up royally.”

“Now, hon, don’t go fretting over it.” Gladys patted her hand. “Your sister is just upset she isn’t getting by with all the crap she pulls. Next time she needs you she’ll come knocking on the door like nothing ever happened.”

Bernita nodded. “But she’ll be thinking on the threats you gave her. Let’s just hope it’s enough to do right by that boy. What about Scooter?”

“His college days at the university here are over, but you know what. He’s all grown up and can take care of himself. I think I may have been the crutch he was using not to make decisions.”

“You did it all out of love. None of them can ask for anything more, hon.” Gladys gave her a quick nod and the other ladies agreed.

Alex didn’t know why she’d holed up alone so long licking her wounds. She should have been with her friends—with her hand-picked family. The birth-dictated family would come around and if nothing else there would be no more pent-up emotions to taint every family occasion.

“So what are your plans now?” Bernita leaned forward.

“That’s the sixty-four thousand dollar question.” Alex dusted the brownie crumbs from the table into her palm and tossed them into the sink. “I guess Alex’s Pet Portraits has a rebirth.”

“Oh, honey, you have so many options open to you. You could do absolutely anything.” Tessie set her elbows on the table.

“Definitely.” Gladys’ bouffant bobbed in agreement.

“I’m sure whatever you decide to do, you will be fabulous at it.” Bernita patted her on the shoulder. “We’re off.”

“Where are you ladies headed?”

“After we run by Gladys’s house to get the tickets she left—”

“I could have sworn I stuck them in my safe place.” She patted her chest and shrugged.

Bernita shook her head. “We’re going to the new exhibit up at the museum.”

Tessie clapped her hands. “The history of the quilt.”

Gladys paused as she headed for the door. “It’s next door to a bar Bernita’s new beau frequents. We’re checking up on him.”

“Hush now.” Bernita swatted at Gladys with her purse as she waved.

“Bye, ladies. Have a good time.” Alex laughed and locked the door behind them. “Come on Romeo.” The dog followed her to the living room. “I can start figuring out what I wanna do later.”

She flopped on the sofa and channel surfed for an hour and a half. She stopped on channel eight when Drew’s latest CD cover flashed on the screen. It was a teaser for the upcoming interview.

“He’s here in town.” A half sob, half sigh shook her chest. “And he hasn’t even called.”

She rubbed Romeo’s neck. “Not that I have tried to call him either. What’s he thinking?”

When Romeo did little more than snuggle closer to her and lick her wrist, she continued, “I guess I could always ask him. Do you think he’d speak to me if I called? Naw, he’d probably just hang up me.” She sat up. “If I go to the studio and talk to him in person he wouldn’t have a choice.”

Alex clapped her hands together. “That’s perfect. The show doesn’t air for forty-five minutes. I have plenty of time.” She glanced down at her sleep-tee and worn sweats. “Yikes. Can’t see Drew dressed like this.”

Drew pulled up in front of Alex’s house. His palms sweated more than the first time he’d come to her house. “You can do this.” The little pep talk did little more than to send a foolish wave through him.

He snagged the huge bouquet of daisies off the seat next to him, took a deep breath, and went to lay his heart out for the woman he loved. After the third ring of the bell—and Romeo’s persistent barking—his confidence slipped a tad. “Alex?”

“Come on, Romeo. Give a guy a break. Even if she’s home she can’t hear me over you.”

The dog continued his woof guard.

Drew dropped the flowers to his side. The dog treat he'd bought fell to the porch beside him. He bent to pick up the bone shaped biscuit. "I bet you'd shut up if..." Drew flipped the bone in his hand. "I just bet you would."

He hurried to the back of the house. Romeo stuck his head out the newly installed doggie door but didn't venture through.

"Here, boy." Drew whistled a short burst and waggled the treat. "I know you can fit through the door now."

Romeo still didn't budge. At least he had stopped barking.

"Alex?" Drew moved closer to the back door and the dog started the ruckus again. He stepped back. "You're killing me, Romeo."

The dog backed out of the door. The little flap flopped shut.

"I'm not giving up." Drew set the flowers on an empty planter. Bone in hand, he moved up to the door. Romeo again stuck his head out but didn't come through.

"Tell you what. I'll give this to ya if you move outta the way. We have a deal?"

Romeo licked his chops.

Drew held the biscuit an inch away from the dog's nose. "You gonna let me talk to her?"

The dog's head cocked from one side to the next then he snagged the biscuit and came through the door. His tail wagged furiously before he headed across the yard to the back corner.

Drew hurried to the doggie door and lifted it. "Alex? Please talk to me."

No sound came from anywhere in the house.

He frowned. Her car was still in the driveway. "Come on, hon. I want to apologize."

Still no answer.

On his knees, Drew lifted the door higher and glanced around the kitchen. The light was on and the coffee pot indicator showed it was still warm. "If you can hear me, I want to tell you how much I love you. I'm sorry for the things I said. I was mad and hurt." He sighed. "Please talk to me."

He edged a little further through the opening. Romeo's cold wet nose nestled into his neck then the mutt gave a slobbery lick.

Drew released the door flap to push the dog back. "Now you want to be friendly?" He shoved, but the dog wouldn't budge. Romeo took it as play and butted Drew. On the third hit from the dog, Drew's hand slipped. He fell through the small opening. Luckily his face broke the fall. "Man." He shook his head and tried to shoo away the stars floating around.

Once his ears stopped ringing he tried to get up, but his shoulders were wedged in the pet door. "You have got to be kidding me."

A weight landed in the middle of his back. "Romeo, get off of me."

The more he struggled the less feeling he had in his arms. And with nearly two hundred pounds of dog atop him he was pretty stuck. He laid his head down on the cold linoleum. “I thought the Pet Portal 4000 was supposed to be roomier.”

“Romeo, get off me.” Alex pushed the dog back. “I’m not in the mood right now.” She’d never even made it off the block. Once she’d changed, she’d dashed out of the house so fast she’d forgotten her keys. And locked the door behind her.

She tried all three houses of the granny gang, hoping to catch them and get one of her spare keys, but they had already gone to the museum. She’d even stopped at one of the other neighbors to borrow the phone, hoping Celia could run over and let her in the house but she’d been out of the office on a sales call.

Unfortunately, the neighbor was in a chatty mood and kept Alex for well over thirty minutes, so even if she called a cab—not that she had the money to pay for it, with her damn purse on the kitchen counter—she wouldn’t have made it to the studio in time. If it weren’t almost comical she might have cried.

Romeo jumped at her again and did a couple of yipping circles.

“What’s gotten into you?” Romeo twirled and barked again. Alex squatted in front of the dog and petted his neck. “We need to get you one of those little doggie computers to help you talk. I am tired up holding up all the conversation.”

The dog licked the tip of her nose. “I don’t mind that much.” She stood and worked out the cramp in her leg. “I could always try the new doggie door. If you can get your big old behind through, mine should be a piece of cake.” She rubbed Romeo’s neck and turned to half-heartedly consider shoving through the new Pet Portal. “What the...”

A pair of blue jean clad legs poked out through the opening next to a bouquet of daisies.

Alex was about to run back to the neighbors thinking a burglar had tried to use Romeo’s entrance, but there was something about that butt. She edged a little closer. “Drew?”

The legs wiggled followed by a muffled, “Alex?”

Alex squatted next to the door. “Oh my gawd.” She fought back laughter. She picked up the flowers and buried her nose into the white petals. “You brought me flowers?”

“Yeah.”

“Are you okay?”

“Not really. My nose itches.”

Laughter erupted. “I’m sorry.” She fought to keep any more giggles at bay. “What can I do for you?”

“Can you run around to the front? It’s itching pretty bad.”

“Um, well, I don’t exactly have a key at this moment.”

“You locked yourself out?”

"I was in a hurry." Mental images of the cover of *Cowboy Weekly* popped into her head: Drew half sticking out a door. A caption something akin to, "Doggone it—Can Hartford wriggle out of the dog house this time?"

She sobered.

"What are you doing here?"

"Looking for you."

"I didn't figure you came to have face time with Romeo."

At the sound of his name, the dog smacked Alex and knocked her on top of Drew. "Sorry."

"I wanted to do this face to face."

"Do?"

"Apologize."

Alex stilled in the process of righting herself. "You don't owe me an apology. If anyone owes one it's me. I had no right to blurt out something that was none of my business."

"Alex, honey..."

She waited for him to accept her apology, but he took several deep breaths. *Didn't he forgive her?*

When she thought he may not speak again, he finally said, "Can you call someone? This is really starting to hurt like hell."

She didn't want to leave him, she wanted to keep at him until he accepted her apology, but talking to his ass—however beautiful it was to look at—wasn't the way to beg someone for forgiveness. "Hang on. I have to run over to the neighbor's house. I'll be right back."

"I'm not going anywhere."

It seemed like an eternity for the fire station to send the men with the jaws of life. A little less than an hour later, the need for another new door and many, many comments on "didn't think we'd get two bodies in one doggie door in a season," and Drew was free if a little sore.

Once all the hubbub died down, she led Drew into the living room, ice packs in hand.

"I think we might have some quiet for a bit." Alex held her fingers up to his mouth as he tried to speak. "I am the one who needs to apologize. I had no right to interfere in your life."

Drew snagged her wrist. He kissed her palm. "I hope that you always want to interfere." He frowned. "That didn't sound right." He shifted and settled an icepack on his shoulder. "I don't want you to think you're interfering."

Drew sighed. "I love you."

Alex saw spots. He said it—again. She'd lain awake night after night since the fair and worried that she may never ever hear him say the words to her again.

She wanted to savor the words as he continued to speak.

“From day one, you intrigued me to distraction. Then we started chatting. I got to know the gal behind the icy disposition.” He smiled at her. “You shared yourself with me. Good, bad and family dysfunction.

“And you got to know the ‘me’ on the inside, not the promo and publicity persona who takes the stage. Me. And I got the impression you liked me.”

Alex smiled. “I did. I do.”

“I didn’t set out to lie to you per se. It’s hard to know when someone wants you for the inside.” He laid her hand over his heart. “Then once you found out who I was, I could almost feel you shy away. You had no problem with Andy, but Drew—“

“Scared the crap outta me.”

“Right.”

“I still think I need to apologize. I had my life mapped out.” She frowned. “Rather, I had my family’s life mapped out and once they were done, I was done.”

Drew’s heart beat heavy under her hand.

“I had plans to have no plans.” She dropped her gaze from his eyes. The intensity warmed places that, if she continued to stare, would end any conversation and clothes would start flying. “The last thing I needed was a man to interfere with my non-plans.”

The staccato heartbeat sped.

“But I learned two things. First, I am not responsible for my family. Other than Ronnie, they are all grown and they make their choices and have to live with them.”

“The second?”

“You can’t plan who, when or where you fall in love.” She glanced up. “When it comes, it’s a blessing. And if you’re lucky enough that the person loves you back as intensely, it’s not something to give up on.” She leaned forward and kissed him gently. “Can I ask you something?”

“Absolutely anything.” He toyed with a loose curl at her neck.

Her heart hammered, hands shook. “Will you marry me?”

Drew’s eyes widened slightly. “You’re asking *me* to marry *you*?”

“Yes.” She bit her lower lip. *Please say yes, please say yes.*

One brown eyebrow crooked up. “How does that fit into your plans?”

“Perfectly.”

Drew stared at her for a long moment. “Good, because I plan on loving you for the rest of our lives.”

About the Author

Denise McDonald started her writing career at the tender age of eight. Her stories have changed over the years, but not her love for telling tales. An overactive imagination and a propensity to embellish have kept her books rich with lovable characters and interesting twists. A member of RWA, she belongs to several chapters.

Denise lives in Texas with her husband, four young boys and two dogs where she juggles her time between writing, carpool, Cub Scouts, sports galore and a multitude of crafts.

If you would like to learn more about Denise, please visit her web site: www.denisebelindamcdonald.com or you can e-mail her at denise@denisebelindamcdonald.com

And for a Chica good time, visit her blog with Authors Amie Stuart, Melissa Blue and Tanya Holmes as well as fellow Samhain Authors Vanessa Jaye and Raine Weaver at: www.southernfriedchicas.com

Look for these titles by Denise McDonald

Now Available:

Her Passion
Deadly Mistakes
The Inn Crowd
Trading Faces
Second Chances

Be careful what you ask for. It might come with spurs—and baggage.

Second Chances

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The *Paintbrush* series

After catching her boyfriend with his pants around his knees while a walking, talking cliché takes “dictation”, Suzanne Walters quits her job, quits her man, quits Texas and moves to Wyoming to find the woman she used to be. Unfortunately, her first five minutes in Paintbrush finds her facing down the town bully in the local diner—and running smack into the one thing she’s not looking for: a wet dream in cowboy boots, Jacob Bowman.

Jacob excels at two things—flying under the radar, and saving his pennies in hopes of running his own ranch someday. He can’t stop thinking about the fantasy in tight Wranglers who nearly mowed him down exiting the diner. The curvy, vivacious spitfire makes his mouth go dry. She’s got her eye on him, as well, but her determination to prove her independence is just as strong as the sexual pull between them.

Life’s knocks have given them both strong hearts, and even stronger wills. As danger looms, that stubborn pride could cost their one chance to discover if there’s something more between them than great sex.

Will they swallow their pride, or will they lose it all?

Warning: Cowboys and horses and bullies OH MY! Sweet, sweet loving and a little rowdy behavior.

Enjoy the following excerpt for Second Chances:

“So what brought you to Wyoming?” Marti Cates asked as she passed a bowl of steaming mashed potatoes to Zan.

“Just a change of pace, I guess. My aunt made it sound so wonderful that when I was ready to move, this was the first place I thought of.”

Mr. Cates shook his head. “I still can’t believe Bonnie moved to Sheridan. I never would have pegged her for a city girl.”

Zan tried not to snort. Sheridan made her aunt a city girl? Had Zan just crossed into an alternate universe, not just over a few state lines?

“Love will make you do strange things.” Marti looked at her husband with a gleam in her eye.

“I guess,” Zan said, swirling the potatoes around on her plate. Her idea of love was unfortunately tainted by her three-year relationship with Charles Stratford. She honestly didn’t think true love existed—but if it did, it came at a price.

Zan looked up to find all eyes on her.

"Gene's a great guy." She really did like the man, and he obviously made her aunt happy. She just couldn't buy into happily ever after.

"So, I hear you stood up to Dale Holstrom." Lisa practically bounced off her seat.

Zan choked on her tea as the cool liquid turned instantly bitter at the mention of Holstrom. Covering her mouth, she coughed. Jacob jumped from his chair and started pounding on her back.

"I'm...okay. Went down...the wrong pipe." She tried to take in a deep breath, but Jacob continued to pound. "You can...stop hitting me...now. I'm fine."

"Oh, sorry."

A tint of color splashed across his cheeks. A grown man blushing? She couldn't get over how cute he looked. Whoa. She needed to keep her thoughts in check.

She cleared her throat.

"I wouldn't say I stood up to him." Everyone was looking at her again, waiting for her to explain further. "I just asked him to leave me alone and he didn't, so I asked him again."

"You're being far too modest," Jacob spoke up. He had been fairly silent since they sat at the Cates' table. One glance at him though, and his eyes drew her in, made her forget the other people at the table. "The man was fit to be tied when you left. Not many, especially a woman, have ever bested him before."

"Well, someone should. The man's a jackass." The room snapped back into focus at the sound of Lisa giggling. "Oops, sorry." Zan fixed her gaze on her plate.

"Don't worry about it. I'm sure she's heard worse. And the boy is a jackass," Willard Cates said with a smile when Zan looked at him. "Aside from Dale, how are you liking Paintbrush?"

"Oh, I love it. Back in Fort Worth, you can go days without running into someone you know. Here, every face you see is someone you've talked to or seen recently. It's great."

Lisa snorted. "I can't wait to get out of here when I turn eighteen. The anonymity of a big city."

Zan couldn't help but notice the sad look that passed between Willard and Marti. Must be hard to know your child wanted to leave. She thought of her own parents and made a mental note to call them later.

After dinner, she offered to help with the dishes, but Imogene wouldn't hear of it. The woman shooed Zan out of her kitchen. With nothing to do, and not ready to head home to her empty house, she wanted to take a peek in on Lisa's pup.

"Knock, knock." Zan pushed open the teen's door. "How's the patient?"

"Doing better." Lisa patted the bed beside her. "Sit."

Zan settled at the other end of the polka-dot comforter. The room looked almost identical to Zan's niece's back in Fort Worth with all the band and movie posters littering the walls.

"Jacob's a hottie, huh."

Where in the world had that come from? Zan tried not to fall off the bed. "I guess."

"Don't tell me you didn't notice."

“I, uh...boy, you’re blunt.”

“Ha. I just call it like I see it.” Lisa smiled and leaned back on a pile of plush pillows. “He’s single, you know.”

“That’s nice.”

“Don’t you want—”

“I just got to town. Dating is the absolute last thing on my mind right now.” Though she didn’t think she could go wrong with “hottie” Jacob. She’d noticed the way his muscles strained against his shirt as he’d reached across the table at dinner. How his denims molded to his wonderfully defined backside when he’d bent to pick up the fork Lisa had knocked off the table after dinner. *Why that little...*

It didn’t matter. Hottie or not, she didn’t need the hassle, would not let herself fall into the same trap again. She hadn’t moved over a thousand miles away to get stuck with another man telling her how to live her life. It might have taken until her thirty-second birthday, but she had finally found herself and wasn’t willing to lose that gal again.

Zan noticed Lisa watching her closely. She shook off her thoughts and picked up a CD off the nightstand. “I saw them in concert a couple of months ago.”

Lisa’s smile widened. “Really. Ohmygawd. They are so hot. I have all their stuff.” She reached over the side of the bed and dragged out a huge box. “Have you ever heard this one...”

Half an hour later, Zan managed to pry herself away from Lisa and headed back downstairs. She had to admit it’d been fun talking to someone about anything not Wyoming related—and it made her miss her family all over.

“Oh, hey,” Zan found Jacob alone in the living room. For a long, awkward moment, they stood, silent, both staring away from the other.

“I’m glad—” he started, as she said, “I should—”

“Go on, ladies first.”

“I was going to say, I should be going now. It’s getting late.”

“Yeah, sure,” Jacob said, but she detected a hint of disappointment. “I’ll walk you out to your car,” he offered.

“No, that’s okay. We’re out in the middle of nowhere. I’m not worried about getting mugged.”

“True. But have you ever come across a hungry coyote?”

Her eyes widened and she shivered. “Uh, no.”

“Come on then.” Jacob took her by the elbow like he had earlier that evening. The same little zing ran through her. She tried hard to ignore it as he guided her through the house to say her goodbyes and grab his coat.

The minute Zan stepped out the door she regretted not buying the heavy down parka her mother had tried to talk her into ordering from the Land's End catalog. The cool autumn air chilled her down to her sock-covered toes. She wrapped her arms around her chest and shivered.

"You need to carry a coat with you at all times here," Jacob said, his lips right next to her ear. The warmth of his breath and the nearness of his body stoked her internal flames a notch, making the wind not quite as biting. "The weather's fickle and can get downright cold."

"I'll keep that in mind."

They strode casually to her car. Even after a couple of weeks of staring up into the heavens, Zan still couldn't get over the night sky in Wyoming. The clear air somehow made the stars shine brighter, illuminating the land and casting everything in a pale light.

Zan glanced at the man walking beside her. He was a beautiful specimen. His strong cheekbones and jaw gave him a rugged look, but his soft, puppy dog brown eyes and full lips rounded out his features. She'd bet women were knocking down his door, if for nothing else than to just stare at him.

A stirring in the pit of her stomach warmed her more. It had been so long since a man had excited her. Despite her three-year relationship with Charles, they hadn't been intimate in a long, long time. She'd convinced him, or so he'd led her to believe, that they should wait until marriage.

She couldn't remember the last time a man had touched her other than in a casual way or, for that matter, the last time she *wanted* a man to touch her in a way that made her toes curl and eyelids droop.

He must have noticed her scrutiny because he stopped walking. "Would you like me to fix that for you?"

Huh? He couldn't have possibly read her thoughts. "Wha...what?"

One night of anonymous sex. Zero consequences. At least, that was the plan.

Sexy by Design

© 2009 Avery Beck

Dumped for another woman, Bree Jamison buries her white-picket-fence dreams—and her naturally shy demeanor—for a contract job behind the scenes of an erotic cyberstore. Her new life comes with a sexy public persona, and a driving ambition to earn a permanent position with the company.

On the day she's prepared to present her best work, she's shocked to discover her future depends on impressing her only one-night stand. The one man who could blow her cover and ruin everything.

Evan climbed out of poverty with sarcasm on his tongue and a ring in his eyebrow. He can't believe the vixen in front of him is the same woman who fumbled her way through their single botched encounter. Her offer for a do-over is an opportunity he can't pass up, not only to secure his reputation, but to satisfy his curiosity about the one woman he couldn't please.

In a bedroom full of the company's products, fiery arguments lead to experimentation—and then to a passion that strips away their masks. In that vulnerable place, their troubled pasts collide, baring secrets that force Evan into a hard decision. And Bree back on the road to heartbreak...

Warning: This title contains hot sex complete with four-letter words and battery-operated devices, as well as a kinky to-do list and the world's most entertaining office job.

Enjoy the following excerpt for Sexy by Design:

Bree couldn't take the honest approach, not yet. They were barely treading friendly waters, and she couldn't lose the upper hand until she'd convinced him that his original impression of her had been way off-base.

"I can see I'll have to prove you wrong." Her fingers wrapped around the handle of her bottom drawer and pulled it out so hard the entire desk rattled. Inside lay a hefty collection of vibrators in different colors, textures, and sizes.

Evan looked down at the array of fake penises and threw his head back in amusement. Chuckling, he managed to say, "I'm afraid work-related devices don't count."

"You didn't say that. You said I'd never seen one."

"I amend my earlier statement. So you've seen one. But you've never *used* one."

He drew that word out like a long, slow lick on an ice cream cone. Bree-flavored ice cream. From behind those sultry eyelashes he watched her, daring her to be turned on by his proposition.

She wasn't merely turned on. She was a hungry lioness circling her cage, waiting for the door to open so she could burst out and devour a succulent piece of meat.

Yum.

She glanced at her office door to make sure it was closed. Time to put her seduction plan into action.

Swallowing hard, she reached into the drawer and retrieved a sizable blue cylinder. Her hand shook with nerves, so she squeezed her fingers around the thing more tightly. If she were going to refute his assumptions, she couldn't be afraid of a vibrator. She needed to act like she'd used one every day of her adult life. Like having a man watch her touch herself with one came as naturally as breathing.

A smile played on her lips. Letting a man watch *and* using a sex toy? She could knock two things off the list with this one simple act.

Simple. Right.

Her smile fading, she blew out a shaky breath and brushed the tip over her exposed shoulder, seeing Evan's mouth open just enough to let her know she had his interest. With excruciating slowness, she dragged the toy down her arm, making a U-turn at her wrist before bringing it back up and across her collarbone. She shivered at the cool, tingly trail it left on her skin and closed her eyes, wondering how she'd follow through with this show when she'd never even done it privately.

Before she got that far, Evan rolled his chair closer. Her eyes snapped open. His penetrating gaze fixed on her, he removed the device from her skin and held it tantalizingly in front of her face.

"What are you doing?" she objected.

He didn't answer, just turned it on with a single flick of his thumb. The purr of the tiny motor made her jump.

The way he stared at her made her feel naked even though she remained fully clothed. The room was nearly silent, the buzz of the fluorescent lights drowned out by the beat of her racing heart. She should have bashed his hand, should have bolted from the chair.

But she didn't.

"Don't touch me with that," she rasped. "Don't you dare."

Yet still she couldn't move. What was wrong with her? Evan's attempt to take control of the situation wasn't surprising, given his sky-high confidence level. But *enjoying* his power trip was not part of the plan.

"So." His breath caressed her neck as he dipped the pulsating tip into the top of her dress, grazing the cleft between her breasts. "Would you like a demonstration of what this thing is really used for?"

He looked down, and she knew he'd spotted her rigid nipples poking through the thin fabric of her outfit. Lovely. As cavalier as he was to begin with, she didn't want to reveal that, at the moment, her attraction to him was fueling her quest for sexual experience. Much as she hated to admit that, it was entirely, irrevocably true.

Her mind begged her to move away from him. *Your terms, remember?* But her body refused to listen. One more moment of his dizzying nearness, one more second of his warm breath grazing her skin just the way it had when he'd been inside her, and she would lose this battle. She'd be taking lessons from him instead of showing him what she could do.

So why did it feel so good?

An inkling of smugness in his smile, he moved the device down to her knee and began sliding it up the inside of her thigh. "I'll take that as a yes."

No, no, no!

"Evan—"

"Happy birthday!" The door flew open and the entire staff burst in, cake in tow. Snapping to attention, Bree watched in horror as the vibrator dropped from Evan's fingers and rolled underneath her desk. For once, he looked stunned as well. Thank God it was one of the quietest designs.

Her computer monitor hid their frolicking from view just long enough for them to compose themselves. Evan ran a hand through his dark hair, doing his best to appear casual. "Wow, you guys didn't have to do this."

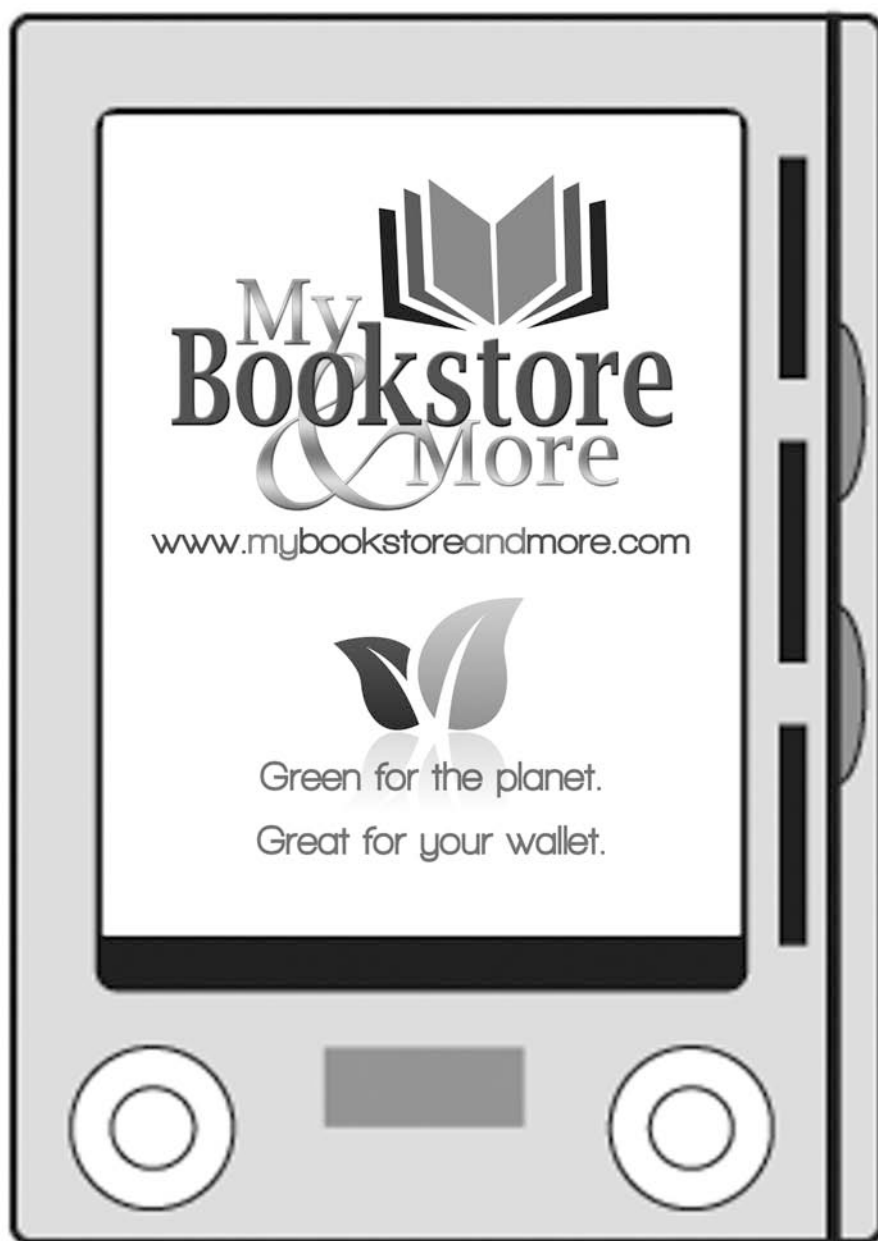
Paula stepped up and hugged him. "Well, it's Friday afternoon and we could all use a break. Didn't want to ignore your big three-one." She turned to Bree. "Sorry I didn't warn you, but you two have been locked in here all day working on the site. I didn't want to interrupt and make anything look suspicious."

Bree smiled weakly. "No problem." If Paula only knew that *she* should have been the suspicious one.

They moved the party to the conference room, and Bree excused herself. The throbbing between her legs made it difficult to play social butterfly. She practically ran to the restroom. When she got there, she washed her hands under cold water and dabbed at her moist forehead with a paper towel.

What the hell was that? She glowered into the mirror. The idea was to prove she could be an assertive, sensual woman, not a submissive girl who'd let him do whatever he felt like doing to her. He already believed that, and she had just wiped away any progress they might have made on the path to understanding each other beyond their one-night stand.

Now she'd have to start over. You hate him, she insisted to her reflection. *You hate him.*



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