

STEPHANIE WILLIAMS LAVERNE THOMPSON

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The Three Sisters Series: Book One Ringside

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&

La Verne Thompson



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Ringside by Stephanie Williams & LaVerne Thompson

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Chapter One

Atlanta had been driving all day to reach Santa Rosa, New Mexico. Tired and hungry, she got off the highway and followed the main road, intending to pull over at the first place she came to. She found herself turning into a restaurant parking lot. The name of the place, Ringside Bar and Grill, caught her eye. That and the fact her stomach started grumbling at the rest of the sign: Seafood, Steak, and Cocktails.

Sounded good to her. She pulled into the graveled lot and found one of the few parking spots left. Perfect, that meant the place was popular so the food was probably good. Grabbing her purse and her new best friend, her self-help book on life, she got out of the car. The book was the reason she was there. "What Women Don't Need" by Hannah Grimes was her Holy Grail. It was also the reason she'd quit her job, one in a long line, to come in search of the woman who wrote it. The woman whose words spoke to the emptiness of her life and started her on this, she hoped, final journey of self-discovery.

At twenty-five, no one would think she had an identity crisis. But she did — a big time one.

She was the youngest of three sisters — all named after cities her military parents were stationed in. Brit and Sydney had found their way in life. Their passions. Both had great jobs and fulfilling lives. And Brit may even have found a

boyfriend. Atlanta was still stuck in the same old rut. Never finished college. Had the nerve to go to two of the most prestigious ones, Harvard and Princeton, and left after one year at each. But she hadn't been happy at either place.

Boy did her parents flip. Her sisters, to their credit, understood. They just hoped she knew what she was doing. Hell no, she still didn't know what she was doing. That's why she was sitting in the parking lot of a bar and grill in Santa Rosa, New Mexico, holding a book by a hippy granny! The back cover showed a picture of a woman with long gray hair, in bohemian clothes, right down to the beads hanging to her waist and her Birkenstock sandals. Even her eyes told a story, they looked liked they twinkled with knowledge right off the back cover.

She wanted to talk to this woman.

Every page, every paragraph, every sentence, Atlanta could relate to. Some things hit a raw nerve and made her cry. Others gave her hope and inspiration, while others made her want to throw caution to the wind.

Finally, getting out of the car, she approached the building and studied the mud colored box-shaped exterior. It reminded her of architecture she'd seen in Spain. But around here it was typically known as Southwestern style. She pushed through the double doors and the sound of sizzling steaks greeted her a scant second before the aroma, causing her stomach muscles to clench in hunger.

The lighting in the foyer was dim but gave enough illumination so she could see the place. The walls were various shades of orange, yellow and green. It had a nice cozy feel to it. There were people sitting and standing around the large foyer. She walked up to the hostess behind a stand. "How long a wait for a table for one?"

"At least forty-five minutes to an hour. But there's still room available at the bar. You can order from there. It's the same menu."

"That's fine. Thank you."

Atlanta headed in the direction the woman pointed. Sure enough, there were still a few seats left at the bar. She made her way to one at the far end, away from most of the foot traffic and the entrance. Because of the way the bar was shaped, although the stool next to hers was occupied, it wasn't too close to her and the person in it was turned away talking to his friends. She settled herself and tried to get one of the bartender's attentions. That's when she noticed the boxing gloves hanging from the ceiling in front of the mirror. She laughed. Her kind of place.

One of the two bartenders came over. "What can I get you?" the woman asked, a friendly smile on her face as she wiped the area in front of Atlanta.

"A menu please, and whatever you have that's cold and on tap, and a bottled water."

"Coming right up."

The woman pulled a menu from an area under the bar and handed it to Atlanta.

She scanned the choices. Too many to count. She turned back to the appetizer section and found her fav, calamari. A small platter of lightly fried calamari with house dipping sauce served with a salad of exotic greens to start things off, followed by a nice juicy burger. She didn't normally eat a lot of red meat, but the smell of steak in the place was calling her name.

"Are you ready to order?" the bartender asked as she put a large frosty mug in front of her along with a bottle of water. She placed her order and the woman gathered the menu and left.

Atlanta took a long sip of her beer and placed it on the napkin in front of her. Taking her book out of her bag, she began to read as she waited for her food. She was on the section, *Don't Settle for Less than you Deserve*, for the third time. Right on! Atlanta's men issues were no different than the other stuff going on in her life. She'd yet to meet one she wanted to keep.

"Welcome to Ringside. Are you finding everything to your liking?"

Atlanta moved the book from her face and looked into the light blue eyes of a striking looking man. He was tall, a little over six feet, and very well built. That was evident in the way his black shirt seemed painted on his body. His biceps screamed to get out, but it didn't look cheesy.

His face looked like it was sculpted from the finest marble; the only thing keeping it from being too perfect was a little bump in the middle of his slender nose, like it may have been broken at some point in his life. But it only added to his overall appeal. The color of his hair drew her attention next; it was blacker than anything she'd ever seen. Thick and wavy, it hung just to his collar. She wanted to run her fingers through it and see if it felt as soft and silky as it looked.

This man was a walking orgasm! She might have to keep this one for awhile. His mouth moved. God what a mouth. "Huh..." Wait, did he say something? "Oh, sorry, did you order? I can get...."

"No, I mean yes, I did order, thank you..."

"Oh, forgive me. I'm Hank Gaines. I'm the owner." He raised his hand to shake hers. As soon as her palm was encased in his, her stomach muscles clenched again, but not from hunger. At least not that kind of hunger. Something sparked between them. She would hang on to this one for a good long while.

"Ah, well, thank you. Thank you very much. So far so good, just waiting for my meal." *But I didn't see your name on the menu*. She blinked to try to get a handle on her erotic thoughts.

"What did you order?"

"The calamari, for starters, and a burger."

"Excellent choices. The batter used in the calamari is a family secret."

"Secret, huh?"

"Oh yes. Let me know how you like it."

Huh, what was he talking about? She liked the view just fine.

He smiled, showing straight white teeth. "I see you're trying to catch up on some reading." He cocked his head to get a better look at the book.

She tried to casually set it beside her. "Yeah, just a little light reading."

"Light? Her books can put the Dalai Lama to shame."

"Yo...you're familiar with her books?"

Before Hank could answer, the server came with her food. "Sir."

"Oh, of course." Hank moved aside while he watched the server place her dishes.

"Mmmm, this looks sinfully delicious."

After the server left, Atlanta thought Hank would immediately move off, but was pleased when he didn't. He turned his attention back to her. "I'll let you enjoy your meal. Let me know if you need anything else."

"Thank you and nice meeting you." Boy, was it nice meeting him. What would he have done if she'd said she'd needed him.

Chapter Two

Hank returned to the other end of the bar. He listened to one of his regulars, with only half of his mind; the other half was at the other end of the bar. His eyes kept returning time and again to the young woman there.

Can you say scrumptious?

She was definitely new in town. It was a small town and sooner or later almost everyone came to Ringside. He knew almost all of the regulars by name, and the rest from around the neighborhood. It was nice to have new scenery. He wondered if she was just passing through, or staying at the new spa and would be there for awhile. He hoped she'd be around for a little while so they could become better acquainted. It'd been a good long while since he'd been this interested in any woman.

She was short, but not petite. In fact, she had a body that wouldn't quit. He had spotted her the moment she walked past him and took her seat at the bar. He had to wait for a lull in his section before he could approach her. He signaled Kate, his other bartender to switch sides.

The woman had curves, curves, and more curves. Luscious thighs, round ass and full breasts. Yeah, she was just the right height and size to put his hands

around. He started to become hard at the thought of it. He shifted his stance, grateful he stood behind the bar protected from any eyes. Taking a deep breath, he calmed himself enough to glance at her again.

Her face was sweet and angelic. Heart shaped with a cute nose and large wide expressive eyes. They were smoky brown and framed by long natural lashes. He really noticed them when she blinked in surprise and asked him if he was familiar with the author of her book.

Yeah, he was familiar. He wrote the damn thing!

"Excuse me?"

"Huh?" Hank turned to the man. "Oh, sorry Brian, you say something?"

"Yeah, ten minutes ago." He chuckled.

"Sorry, you want another?" He pointed to Brian's empty glass.

"Үер."

"Coming up."

Hank looked over at the woman again. She was so engrossed in her book, she didn't even notice when the waitress set down her burger. Oh, his mistake. She did notice. She put the book down and put ketchup and mustard on the burger before taking a bite and picking up her book again.

He was curious. What was she doing here in Santa Rosa and reading his book? Oh God. It hit him. The new bio mentioned that the author lived in Santa

Rosa, New Mexico. Was she in search of the author? She got really excited when he mentioned he knew her work. Mmm, he would like to get her excited in other ways.

Okay, Hank, cool it. You need to think rationally. Even if she was there to find the author, she had no idea she already did. And only a few folks in the bar knew about his writing. Kate and Joe were two of those folks, but Hank knew he could trust them. No one would tell her anything if she started asking questions.

Lifting the tap, Hank handed over Brian's beer and excused himself from the bar. "Take over for me, Jimmy," he said to one of the floor waiters who had just come in. The guy nodded and took his place behind the bar.

Hank made his way over to the woman who was munching with gusto and still reading. Her calamari platter was clean, and she was almost done with her burger and fries.

"I see you like the secret recipe." He smiled, liking her appetite.

"Oh!" She jumped a bit. "Hello. Yes, it was delish, as is the burger. But the sauce was really excellent. Did I detect a hint of cilantro, lime, and ginger?"

He was surprised; most people didn't pick up on the ginger. She had a sharp palate. "Glad you like it. And I'll never tell."

She grinned. "Ginger. I bet that's the secret. But don't worry, your secret is safe with me."

"Ginger is a very good guess. One not many people pick up."

"Well, I've traveled all over the world. First with my military parents and then on my own, to countries that use it as a main spice, so I am very familiar with the flavor."

"I see." He found her more intriguing by the second. "So are you something of a gypsy?"

"Not really. Just looking for the right place."

"I can relate to that." And he could, which brought him back to what he wanted to ask her. "By the way, do you think I can take your attention away from that book a moment more to ask you something?"

"Sure."

"Uh...did you know the author lives here? In Santa Rosa?"

"Yes. That's the reason I drove from Dallas."

Damn! "You drove all the way from Dallas? By yourself?" He didn't know what bothered him most. The thought of her driving all that way just to look for him, or the thought of her driving so far all by herself. What if something had happened to her before she'd arrived safely where he could find her?

"Sure."

A woman after his own heart. Impulsive and adventurous. But it was also what he was afraid of. She was here to find the author — Hannah Grimes. The old lady with sage wisdom for women of every age and stage of their lives.

His grandmother. Whose picture and name he used because his editor was convinced that a dude writing get-in-touch-with-your-inner-self books for women would never sell to women.

"Chicks like to read this stuff from other chicks." He wanted to punch Elliott in the nose, but refrained. Not because he felt like being a gentleman or thought his editor was on point, but because his hands were declared a lethal weapon. After all, he was an ex-boxer, with a championship middleweight win under his belt.

Okay, maybe his editor did have a point. But damn it! Men go through identity crisis too. Sometimes all their lives. He could testify to that one. He had always been in one fight after another, so it was easy for him to get into boxing. But a fighter had never been who he really was. It was a job, what he did. And he had been good at it.

"Do you by any chance happen to know the author?"

Her question brought his attention back to her. How did he respond to that? Before he could she continued.

"If you do, I would so appreciate it if you could...I don't know introduce me to her. I know I just met you and have no right....but..."

"Whoa, whoa! Slow down," he said raising his hands.

"I'm so sorry." She looked a little sheepish.

"Hey, it's okay."

"Oh, I'm Atlanta Reese."

He took her hand again and held it a little longer. It was soft...and trembling. He put his other hand over it. "Atlanta from Dallas, now in Santa Rosa." He wanted to find out if she was soft all over. If her skin tone was that warm brown all over her body or if she had any tan lines. The thought was making him hard, again.

He turned away from her and looked around the restaurant. It was busy, but his staff handled it well. He had a deep need to be alone with her. If only to find out why she was looking for Hannah Grimes. "Are you done? If not, you can take..."

"I'm done. I've been driving non-stop for a good while and was starving, but I'm pretty full now." She looked a little embarrassed.

"Hey, it's all good. Then if you don't mind, would you come with me to the back office, we can talk there. I'll make sure the waitress brings you another beer."

"O...okay. But no more beer. I'm driving. One's my limit, but I could use a tall glass of unsweetened ice tea."

He waved the waitress over and gave the order. Atlanta grabbed her purse and held her book in a tight grip. That book must really mean something to her.

He helped her up from the barstool, but he was stumped. The book was about finding out who you were and a guide to help you stop making bad choices in life. All his books were. She looked like she had it all together. Well, kinda, she seemed nervous around him. He didn't know whether to be flattered or concerned.

"It's okay, really."

He guided her to the back of his restaurant, past the kitchen entrance and to a door that led to his office. He opened the door and allowed her in first. "Have a seat." He closed the door and took a seat behind his desk.

"Wow! Someone likes boxing," Atlanta said as she looked at his walls, covered with photos of his boxing glory days and another pair of boxing gloves hung on the wall behind his desk.

"Yeah, kinda." He chuckled to himself.

"Hey!" She got up and walked over to one picture.

It was his last fight, the one that broke his nose and ended his career. No, he wasn't a wimp. Just a bit vain at the time. But it had been time to walk away. Sometimes one of the hardest lessons to learn in life was when to walk away. But he did it and never regretted it. His first book that hit the New York Times bestsellers list two weeks after its release was called "Learning to Walk Away".

"This is you! You boxed?"

Her incredulous cry broke his brief trip down memory lane. "Don't say it like that. I went a few rounds in the ring."

"Didn't like getting that handsome face of yours messed up, huh?"

Boy, did she hit the nail on the head. It should have bothered him, but it didn't. Heck, she thought he was handsome. That turned him on more. But she didn't have to do much other than just be to turn him on. "You can say that. So you want to know about the author of your book?" He wanted to change the subject. He wasn't thrilled about his career choice at the time. It was one of the reasons he got into writing self-help books, after he stopped boxing.

"Yes, yes. You know her right?"

She returned to her seat and sat forward, eyes brightening, clutching the book even tighter to her ample breast. Ah, innocent eagerness. He mentally sighed. He didn't want to lie to her, but at the same time he wanted to get to know her some more. Maybe get to know her *real* well.

No. He should go ahead and tell her the truth. Tell her why he wrote the books and why he used his grandmother's name and not his own. If he wanted to start something with her, lying to her was no way to begin. And he wanted to start something with her, something that would last a hell of a lot longer than one night. Besides, maybe the reason she read his books was because they meant

something to her. He would like to think so. He would like to think *he* meant something to her.

"Now, I know she lives here," Atlanta said. "Does she come here? If she does, then this is going to be my new hangout."

"Uh...yeah...yeah. This is the kind of place she hangs out in." Well, it was when she was alive.

So much for starting off on the right foot.

Chapter Three

Hank glanced at himself in the mirror while Atlanta used his private bathroom to freshen up. He wouldn't have been surprised to see a huge sign over his mouth that read: INSERT FOOT HERE. Damn, he can't believe he'd said that. Now what?

This woman obviously came here looking for answers in her life, and who is the first person she meets in her journey to self discovery? A low-life, lying ex-jock. Real good.

He needed to tell her. It was early enough. He could say, "Hey! Guess what?" She came out. "Okay, I have to get going. Would it be better to call first to see if she's here or can I just drop by?"

Groan. "Um, hey you're always welcome to stop by anytime. We serve breakfast too. The bacon and scrambled eggs are famous." Talk about a noncommittal response. Sheesh!

Atlanta got her stuff and headed toward the door. "Okay, maybe I'll see you for breakfast tom..."

He couldn't let her just leave without telling her the truth. Stall, he had to stall. "So are you staying in town?"

"I guess so. But I hadn't really made any arrangements. Can you recommend a place?"

"Sure can. In fact, why don't I take you there? After all, you did have one beer."

She laughed. A girlie, sexy laugh. He didn't know they still made them like this. "Oh come now, I'm not intoxicated." She rolled her eyes playfully.

"I know, but I enjoy talking to you and want to talk some more."

She smiled at him. Yes, at him. The warmth seeped all the way to his groin. This woman was going to be the death of him. He'd gotten harder in the last few hours than he'd been in a long time. "Let's go then. I'll tell the staff I'm leaving."



Wow! Atlanta hit pay-dirt! Not only did she come to the right place where Hannah Grimes hung out, but she met someone that knew her and he was fiiiinnne! And taking her to a hotel. Hmmm. Maybe not a smart move. This was her problem. Too impulsive. Not thinking. She knew what she could do.

"Would you mind very much if I called my sisters to let them know I arrived safely?" she asked as they walked to the back parking lot.

"No. Go right ahead. I'm sure they're worried about their...are you the youngest, middle..."

"Youngest."

"Ah," he threw his head back and laughed. "Yeah, you better call and let them know. I'm sure they're worried sick. By the way, did they know you were coming here?"

"Yes." She lied, but hey, she had to play it safe. Besides, this is how Ted Bundy started. At least quite a few people in the restaurant had seen him with her, so if anything were to happen, he'd be the first person the cops questioned. She took a deep breath. What the hell was she doing? She stopped.

"Wait a minute. I've changed my mind. What would I do with my car? How would I get it tomorrow?" She shook her head. "No. I think it's better if you just give me the directions."

"Or you could follow me."

"Oh. Okay, that works. My car's on the other side of the lot."

He stopped in front of a black two door Mercedes sports convertible. "I'll give you a ride around to the front so you can get your car." Using his remote he unlocked the door, holding it open for her. "You can call your sisters from your car and just let me know when you're ready to follow me."

She got in and watched as he walked around to the front of the car. Damn, watching him move was mouth watering hot. He got in the car and drove to the front of the building. "There's my rental, the red Mustang." The space next to it was empty so he pulled in. She got out and into her car. As she shut the door, she

reached for her cell in her purse.

She called Syd first. "Hello girl!"

"Hey Syd, hold on." She dialed Brit connecting them both. "Hello!"

"Hey there! Watcha up to?" Brit asked.

"I'm in Santa Rosa, New Mexico."

"What?" they cried in unison.

"Yeah, I'm on a search. I'm looking for Hannah Grimes."

"Hannah Grimes? Oh, that self-help author. Girl, what are you doing looking for her?" Syd asked.

"I want to talk to her. Her books really speak to me. They make sense. I believe she has answers that I'm looking for."

"Wow, Atlanta. I didn't realize..."

"I know, Brit. But my life seems to be all over the map. I need a little guidance. You know, something to point me in the right direction. I think I found it in her books. I just have a few questions to ask her. And guess what?"

"What?" they asked.

"I found a guy here who owns a bar and grill and he knows her! In fact, she comes in the place every now and then."

"Hey, way to go!" Syd said. "Looks like you might be on to something. Well, you know we hope nothing but the best for you, baby sis."

"That's right and if there is anything you need, we're right here. You don't have to drive for miles to find us either," Brittany reassured her.

Atlanta laughed. "Okay you two. I have to go. I'll call you after I speak with her. Hopefully that'll be in a day or so."

They disconnected. She sat there a moment and felt herself tearing up. Her sisters were always there for her. But there were times like now she wondered if her life was so messed up that even her own flesh and blood couldn't help.

For years she'd heard the same old rhetoric. "You're young. You have plenty of time to find yourself. Enjoy life." Well, that was fine when she was eighteen. Her sisters were not that much older than she but they'd already found their passions in life. Syd built planes! Brit owned a magazine and traveled for her business! All under the age of thirty, and they seemed satisfied.

She was twenty-five and she didn't have any idea what she wanted. Sighing, she put her cell away, refusing to give into a pity party. Rubbing her eyes, she stopped when she felt a pair of eyes aimed her way. She got herself together mentally and physically, and signaled to Hank. "Okay, lead the way."

He smiled and started his car. After five minutes on the road, they pulled into the driveway of what looked like a resort, more than the little hotel she had in mind. A valet came and took their keys.

Atlanta got out of her car and walked over to Hank, who had already gotten out and was talking to another man in uniform. She tapped him on the shoulder.

"Yes."

"Um...I was just going to stay at one of those cute little motels."

"Oh, like the one in *Psycho*?"

"You are kidding, right?"

"Look, nothing but the best for a woman with such determination and gumption. Besides, I have a little bit of pull here. It won't cost you anymore than a motel. And here you have room service and access to the spa amenities. Which will all be part of the grand opening package."

"Wow. So this place is new?"

"Yes. It's only been opened a month, so they're still trying to lure folks here instead of the more popular areas."

They headed toward the front desk, the porter coming behind them with her suitcase. After she registered and got her key, she turned to say good night to Hank, but he just took her key and her hand and headed to the elevators.

She had no choice but to follow; which was no hardship. They made their way to her room; after the porter left, they just stood there in the entryway looking at each other.

Atlanta had the urge to invite him to stay. She could stare at him all night and not tire of the view, besides she wanted to pump him for more information. It seemed like everyone knew him, and she felt safe with him.

"Um...would you mind if we talk?"

"That's why I brought you here." He winked. He handed her her card key, and gestured for her to walk farther into the room. She took a few steps and actually looked at the place for the first time. "Wowwee! This is niiiice." She put her purse down on a low table and walked around. It was a suite, done in traditional contemporary furnishings in earth and terracotta tones. The carpet was thick and plush, and when she glanced into the bedroom there was a crystal chandelier in the center of the room.

The king size bed had at least ten pillows with braided piping around the edges piled on it, and the rest of the bedding was just as ornate. Brown, gold and copper damask. On the wall opposite the bed was what looked like a sixty-inch plasma television.

She could live here.

"Hank, I don't know what to say. We just meet, and..."

"Shhh. There's something I need to tell you. I've been wanting to tell you since I first saw you with that book."

Okaaay. Maybe this was a mistake.

Chapter Four

Hank looked into those big brown trusting eyes. He just felt sick inside.

She drove all this way looking for a woman who no longer existed, except in his heart *and* now she trusted him enough to have him in her room, alone.

Life sucked.

Well, it was now or never. He needed to tell her before things went too far. It was still early enough. He could explain why he didn't say anything back at the restaurant.

Yeah, he could tell her his publisher insisted he remain incognito, he didn't want people to know. Yeah, that was good. And it was the truth. Although the contract didn't specifically address it as a secret, only that he use an approved alias, and his publicist only allowed written interviews. But verbally his publisher made it clear it was better if the general public didn't know Hannah Grimes was actually Hank Gaines.

"What is it Hank?" She touched his arm and his body hummed to life once again.

"Um...um...I...ahem...I was just curious. I want to know why a woman like you would read a book like that. I mean, it was written for people who are basically lost in life. Who don't know themselves?" Damn! Way to go Hank.

"Well, that's me." She moved away and sat in a chair. He grabbed its mate and slid it beside her. "You see, I have no direction in life. I'm just sort of floating around. Like I said, I'm the youngest of three sisters, and they're doing great things with their lives. In fact, they were both younger than me when they found their paths in life."

"Me? I didn't even have a road map let alone a path — until I found her books." She held up her book with the back cover facing him. His grandmother's piercing light blue eyes looked right at him. The same color as his own.

"I've had more jobs than a cat with nine lives, and lived in more places than most people see in three life times. I'm sorry for going on like this. You probably don't understand. I mean look at you. You were a champion boxer and now you've got a very popular restaurant with great calamari. You've probably always had a plan."

Hank shook his head slowly. "That's where you're wrong. I do understand. More than you know."

"Really?"

"Everyone is lost at some point and everyone is learning something new about themselves everyday. Hell, if we had the answers to everything in life, there would be no point in living."

"Wow!" Atlanta jumped up. "That's just what I read...let, me see...uh...oh! Life is a Never Ending College Course. You must have read it. Huh?"

"Well..."

"Oh, you don't have to be embarrassed. I think it's kinda sexy."

"You do?"

"Y...yes."

"You know what?" He leaned forward and reached for one of her hands.

Prying it away from the book.

"What?"

"I think you're sexy too. I hope whatever path you find, I'm walking beside you." Even before the words left his mouth, he knew he spoke truth.

"Hank."

Oh God. Not the misty eyes! Before he realized what happened, he'd pulled her closer until she was sitting on his lap. He released her hand and she wrapped it around his neck, pulling his head toward hers. Not that he needed any encouragement.

The moment his lips covered hers, he felt the shock in every neuron in his body. He groaned like a starving man and took the kiss even deeper. Sinking even further under her spell.

Atlanta wiggled her body, pressing against his ever growing erection. That brought him back down to earth. He pushed her off his lap with a force he didn't intend. She stood there staring at him, confusion written across her face.

"I...I am so sorry. That was way out of line." Hank stood up and ran a shaking hand through his hair. He went to the wet bar, not so much to get something to drink, but to have a distraction. He had no idea what the hell was happening to him, that he made a pass like that at a stranger. But he wasn't sorry and given half a chance he'd do it again, and then some.

"Tha...that's okay. I guess we're both impulsive people."

"That's no excuse. You're here on a very important journey. I took advantage of it."

"I wasn't actually fighting you off," she said with a smile.

His face warmed. "Thanks. I'm flattered." He actually blushed. This woman did things to him that no other had ever done. "But I don't want to rush." All true. He needed to get his bearings. He felt like a boxer in the ring again but with no bell to strike a time out. He needed to call one. "The night is still young. You wanna take a tour of the place? Unless, you want me to leave so you can rest."

"Are you kidding? I'm too excited right now to rest."

That's what he was afraid of. "Well, let's work off some of that excitement. Besides, you don't want to go to bed on a full stomach. That burger will stay with you for a while," he chuckled.

"And what a great burger it was. I'll have to buy a couple of them for my trip back home."

Back home! She couldn't go back home. He was just getting to know her. And he still had to tell her the truth. He just needed the right moment. Before they slept together. And they would sleep together. Think fast Hank.

"I've been driving all day. Let me change into something else, then we can take that tour," Atlanta said moving toward her suitcase.

"Okay, great." Hank sat down hard in his chair. Think, think.

A few minutes later, Atlanta came out of the bedroom, dressed in jeans and a tight pink sweater with beading around the neck. The outfit accentuated all her curves.

"Okay I'm ready."

Hank got up and went to the door. "Uh...you know tomorrow is Sunday. The restaurant is real busy, you know church and all of that. The author is really careful about making appearances..."

"Ahh...she likes to lay low."

That was an understatement. "Yeah, you may be able to catch up on a few 'Z's."

"Okay. But I'll still come by for breakfast and at least I can visit with you for a minute. You're the only friend I have here and it's great that you can help me out."

That last statement felt like a kick in the gut. "Yeah, okay then," he said clapping his hands to together. "Let's look this place over."

She walked out ahead of him and they made their way to the elevators. At the lobby they stopped at the front desk. "Pardon me, is there someone that can show us around? My friend here is new in town," Hank said placing his hand on the small of Atlanta's back.

"Oh, of course, Mr. Gaines. Wait right here." The man behind the counter scurried off.

"Talk about service." Atlanta smiled as she looked through one of the many brochures on the counter.

Chapter Five

Atlanta needed some space. Her body was getting way too comfortable around Hank. That kiss upstairs nearly fried her brain. What was she thinking?

Again, just being her usual impulsive self. But it was so easy.

Despite Hank being an ex-boxer with hands that were calloused and hard, they were gentle and sure on her body. He knew just were to touch — and where not to. If he had moved his hands just five inches south, he would have been apologizing for more than a kiss.

She watched him as he paced back and forth. A restless soul. She wasn't sure if that was his nature or if he was still upset about what happened, or rather almost happened. She hoped it wasn't the latter. Besides, she was kinda hoping they could take this tour alone.

"Oh, Mr. Gaines, it's so good..."

"Ah, yes, we would like a tour if it's not too much of an imposition."

"Oh, no sir. We're at a lull right now. We can start with the hot tub areas."

"Oooh, hot tubs!" All kinds of thoughts flew in her head. The main one being, what did Hank look like au naturel? He might not have been doing any sparing lately, but his body still looked like it could go a good fifteen rounds...of hard pounding sex.

Okay, she needed to stop this. She was here for one purpose and one purpose only. Find this author and ask her some questions. This was her problem in the first place. She couldn't stay focused. But it was kinda hard at the moment with someone that looked like they could be on the cover of *Sports Illustrated*, or *Playgirl*.

They followed their tour guide toward the back of the resort and came to an oversized oriental-style door. It was covered with three-dimensional carvings of dragons and Foo dogs engraved in gold on the corners. "This leads to our mudroom, hot tubs, and saunas areas." The guide opened the doors.

"As you can see, the rooms are separated by gender. To your right are the men and to the left, the women."

Atlanta looked down the women's areas. The place was empty. The walls were covered in Asian wallpaper featuring scenes of Geishas, dragons, and lotus blossoms done in reds and black against a stark white background. "Wow, I would have expected a more Southwestern theme."

"Oh, it's been done," the man said putting his hand on his hip. "We wanted to stand out from the rest. Give the guests a sense of going to a foreign land without leaving their own backyard."

"Ahhh."

They continued on their way and soon stood in front of a pair of ornate doors. This had a sign on it that said *Private*. "Now this is for couples only, there's another one at the end of the hall we can also use for couples." He looked at his watch. "They are getting things set up in there for a couple now. So we can go in and have a quick look."

They walked in and sure enough, there was the cleaning crew washing the tub, large enough for four, and getting towels and other paraphernalia together.

"Now these waters as well as the saunas and whirlpools are all from the natural springs. As you know, they have healing properties."

Atlanta barely heard him. She was too busy walking around the tub. She was imaging her and Hank sitting in there with a glass of Champagne.

When she looked up, Hank was staring at her with such intensity she wanted to melt right into the floor.

"Um...do you have to reserve these?" she asked coming over to where they stood.

"Oh, but yes. They're included in a package. You can choose the couples or if it's just you, the women's. It comes with detoxification massages, mud bath, body facials and regular facials."

"Sweet."

They moved on to another room. "This is the sauna room. We do have an extensive workout program. So when you're done with your routine, you can come here. This one is for the women, and across the hall over there," he pointed, "is the men's. Which includes a basketball court."

"This is all really nice," Atlanta said.

At the end of the tour, they were right back where they started, in the lobby.

"I really liked the tour. I will definitely check out one of these packages before I leave."

"And I hope your experience will be a good one. Now if you will excuse me."

He shook her hand. "It's been a pleasure meeting you."

"Likewise."

"Just a sec," Hank said as he caught up to the man who had already moved away. They walked off even farther and were discussing something she couldn't hear. Since she couldn't be nosy, she wondered back to the counter to look at more brochures.

After a few minutes, Hank returned. "So, what do you think? Nice huh?"

"It's really nice. And the man was right, it feels like you've left Santa Rosa and you're in a completely different country."

They headed back to her room. Once outside her door, she hesitated a bit. "Well, I guess I better go to bed. I've been up for twenty hours straight."

"Take a bath and crawl in between the sheets?" Hank said leaning against the door.

"Yeah."

"I have a better idea," he said in a raspy voice she hadn't heard since meeting him.

"Oh?" she said, trying to keep the nervousness in her voice down.

"Why don't you try the hot tub? The hot water will do those muscles good.

Your legs must hurt from all that driving. You can relax in there."

Atlanta thought a moment. Hot bubbling water would relax her muscles. And she was dying to sample the amenities. "I think I will take you up on that. Let me go in and put on the appropriate clothing. But wait, I should call first to see if they have a tub available."

"Not to worry. It's taken care of. Just come as you are, they have everything you need downstairs. Just toss your purse inside."

She did and took Hank by the arm. "Since you have had a long day, it is my job as a citizen of Santa Rosa to make your stay here as memorable and enjoyable as possible."

"Well so far you're doing great."

They headed back downstairs and went to the spa entrance. "Wait. That guy said you needed to make reservations a week in advance. How were you able to get me in?"

"Oh, I asked him to do me a favor and pass on that Santa Rosa spirit."

Atlanta remembered him talking to the guy after their tour. He more than likely asked a favor and got one of the hot tubs available.

As they walked the halls they passed the "his" and "hers" spas. "Aren't I going in there?" She pointed.

"I got you a better deal." They made their way to the couple's spa.

"Oh!"

"You don't mind, do you?"

Would a thirsty woman say no to a tall cool drink of water on a hot summer night? "N...no of course not."

Hank closed the door behind them. "Oh, so we are not disturbed..." He held up a *Do Not Disturb* sign and reopened the door to hang it outside on the doorknob.

Atlanta sat on the edge of the tub watching the water swirl and bubble. A Champagne bucket complete with Champagne, two glasses and a plate of chocolate covered cherries, sat on a tray beside her. She glanced up to see Hank staring at her through hooded eyes. "Hank I..."

"Shhh." He sat down next to her and took her hands in his. "I know I've only known you for less than a day, but I feel I have a connection with you and this isn't just a line. I would like to share a moment with you. We can play it by ear and see where it leads later."

"I do feel a connection, but we've known each other for only what? A few hours? I mean, I don't..."

"I know you don't and I won't judge you if you decide to take that leap. I'll be here to catch you."

Hmm, that wasn't a bad way to fall, at all.

Chapter Six

Atlanta sat on the edge of the tub as he began to undress. "Aren't you going to get undressed?" he asked unbuttoning his shirt.

"I wanna watch you first," she smiled.

"Ahh, a bit of a voyeur. I like." He undressed slowly in front of her, playfully doing a striptease dance. He tossed his shirt to her and she caught it with enthusiasm. Bringing it up to her nose and inhaling deeply.

She giggled when he tossed her his belt. Slowly, he pushed his pants down past his thighs. A look of hunger and desire in those now large brown eyes appeared on her face.

Leaving his briefs on, he kicked his pants aside and stepped toward her. "Would you do the honors?"

She tossed the shirt and belt in her hands on a bench. Standing toe to toe in front of him, she stuck her thumbs on both sides of his briefs. Making sure her nails scraped his sides, she lowered the cotton material, freeing his erection. He let out a low moan of relief that was met by a look of satisfaction on her face.

She continued sliding his briefs down, lowering her body as she did, but not focusing on his rising sex. When she got his underwear down to his ankles, he

stepped out of them and kicked them aside. He bent down and took her wrists. "Stand up, it's your turn."

Atlanta stood up, and he took a small step back to keep only inches between them. She started pulling off her blouse.

"Wait." Hank grabbed her hand. "I don't think I can stand a floor show right now." He finished taking off her blouse, then went to work removing her bra. Reaching around the back first, before realizing it fastened in the front.

"Hmmm, someone hasn't had enough practice at this," she said.

"Humph! I was getting to the front. I just like to start with the back first."

As he unhooked her bra, his knuckles brushed against the soft skin of her breast, causing her to arch into him. When he finally removed it, he bent down and took a dark hardened nipple in his mouth. He heard Atlanta make a feminine squeak and went to the other nipple and gave it the same attention. "Mmmm, tasty."

"Hank!"

He lifted his head and saw Atlanta pointing to her jeans. "I'm a little impatient too."

"I aim to please." He smirked and started unzipping her pants. "I promise to behave. At least until we get in the hot tub." He drew her pants down, stopping to kiss her thighs, and biting them playfully. "Sorry, I couldn't resist." She stepped out of her jeans, and took his hands. "Let me finish. You seem to have self-control issues." Laughing, she shimmied out of her panties.

"Mercy." Hank took Atlanta by the arm and brought her toward him. "I just want to feel you against me." He leaned down and kissed her shoulders, eyeing the hot tub, which was now filled with hot steaming water. "Let's get in before we start something we can't finish."

They climbed in, sat down, and leaned back. The water felt heavenly against his skin, but Atlanta felt even better. Hank placed his arm around her shoulder. "You like?"

"Mmm-hmm," Atlanta said with her eyes shut.

"Let's not forget our little treat." He leaned over the other side and grabbed the Champagne and chocolate covered cherries. The bottle was still cold when he picked it up and poured a glass for her. Handing her a flute, he then poured one for himself and lifted it. "Here's to letting oneself go and blowing caution to the wind." They clinked glasses. He took a cherry and waved it in front of her mouth. She stuck out her tongue and guided the cherry in.

Lordy!

"Wow," she said. "You must really read her books."

"Hmm? Oh, yeah. Well..."

"I'm so glad you talked me into this and was able to get a reservation with such short notice."

"Well, I do have a confession to make."

"What?"

"I'm part owner of the spa."

Atlanta's eyes went big. "What?"

"I was trying to tell you but you were so caught up earlier."

"But you could have told me at some point."

He felt her shoulders tense, and saw the anger level rise in her eyes.

"I was going to mention it. You see, it's kinda awkward, a dude, like myself owning..."

"Ahhh, I see." He felt her relax. "Why are you so embarrassed by your accomplishments? So what? You're an ex-boxer that owns a great restaurant and a wonderful spa. I think it's real sexy." She sipped her Champagne.

"Really?"

"Yeah." She scooted closer to him. "I think it's real sexy when a guy has a sensitive side to him." She kissed his temple, then his cheek. "I think guys...like... that...make...great ...lovers."

"Th...that so? Well, I got...more...news..." When she moved to nibble at his ear, he was done. That was his weakness.

He put his glass down and took her face in his hand. Lowering his head, he devoured her mouth, splashing water out of the tub in the process.

"Mmm, you're a better kisser than you are a bra remover."

"I'm good at other things too." He stood up, bringing her with him. "I have a better place we can do this."

"Really? Where?"

He stepped out of the tub and helped her out. "In there." He cocked his head toward the far side of the room. There was a door with a sign on it that read *Private Shower*.

"Oooh!"

The shower was all beige tiled walls, with multiple showerheads, more than large enough for them to wash in. They stepped into the stall and he turned the shower controls on. "Now this is more like it." The many showerheads sprouted to life and water cascaded over Atlanta's nude form.

"How's the temperature?" he asked.

"Perfect."

"Good, cause it's about to get hotter," he said, just before he pressed her against the shower wall, and allowed the water to flow over their bodies.

Hank pressed his body up against her, so close even a sliver of paper couldn't pass between them. The only way they could be closer was for him to be

inside her. And he wanted to be. But he hadn't come prepared and he forgot to ask her. Of course, there were other fun things one could do in a shower.

There was a little shelf near the door that had a variety of body washes. He stepped away from her and grabbed one, pouring some of the liquid in his hands. "Turn around," he said. When she did, he smoothed his hands down her body, kissing and licking her scrumptious skin. After he placed a kiss on her delicious ass, he turned her around and stood. He gave her a quick kiss and then moved to her chest, all the while soaping her entire body. By the time he reached her belly button, her hands were in his hair, gripping it tightly.

At last, he made his way to her thighs and nudged her legs apart with the side of his face. She got the hint without being told and spread her them wider. When he planted a soft kiss at her opening, she jerked, almost knocking him off balance. He braced himself again and parted her damp folds, now wet from her own moisture and not the shower. With one swipe of his tongue, he licked her hardened bud.

"Oooh! Hank!"

"Shhh, you don't want the staff coming in here wondering if there's something wrong, or do you? Are you a bit of an exhibitionist too?"

"Oh...no!"

He chuckled and continued his assault.

"That's it. Ooh yees!" She raised one leg and placed it over his shoulder, opening herself up more to him, pushing her hips, making him go deeper. Much better access. Her nails dug into his shoulders, and his balls tightened to the point of being almost unbearable. But right now, this was for her. He would have his chance soon enough.

"Ahhh! Ahhh! Hank, I'm coming!"

"That's the plan, baby." He removed his lips from her clit. "You need to hang on to something baby, before you knock us both down."

Before she could get a good grip on one of the railings, Hank sank his tongue in her again and flexed it. That was her undoing — and his.

"Oh God! Yeees!" Her leg on his shoulder dropped down to the floor, as her body slid down the wall, while at the same time knocking him onto his butt. The warm water running over their bodies was a welcomed relief, refreshing and revitalizing. They were both panting heavily, trying to catch their collective breaths. It was going to be a bit of a challenge to get out of there without looking half guilty.

After sitting on the shower floor as the water cascaded over them for what seemed like hours, they got up and dried each other off.

"We need to get outta here," Hank said as he rubbed the towel over Atlanta's back.

"Aww. And we were having so much fun."

"Oh, that was only round one. We have several to go. We just need to switch rings." He gathered up their clothes and stuck them in a laundry bag. He tossed her one of the huge terrycloth robes hanging beside the door. "Come on, we can take the private elevator."

"What about our clothes?"

"The spa will launder them and return yours to you by morning."

Hank opened the door and looked to either side, making sure the hallway was clear. He pushed the door open wider motioning to Atlanta to come to him. Taking her hand, they ran down the back way to an elevator with a keypad. He punched in his code and when the elevator arrived, they stepped in.

"Ever make love on an elevator?" Atlanta asked with a mischievous gleam in her eyes.

"Yes, but that's not happening tonight. I want something soft beneath me besides that luscious body of yours."

"My soft body under your hard body."

"That's how I like it."

"I can live with that."

Chapter Seven

This man had her body humming like a fine tuned engine. That would explain why she grabbed the lapels of his robe and pulled him to her. Her tongue found its way into his mouth and met his. He backed her up against the elevator wall and grabbed one leg to wrap around his waist. Just as his hand parted her robe the elevator stopped and the doors began to open.

Atlanta dropped her leg from around his waist, straightened her robe and walked unsteadily out of the open elevator door. But he was right beside her.

"Here, this way."

He guided her to her room. "Wait!" she said. "My key card, I left it in my pants pocket."

"Not to worry." He reached into his pocket and took out a key card. "It fell out when I gathered up our stuff so I just stuck it in my pocket."

"Has anyone ever told you, you're too much?"

"No. As long as I'm just right for you."

She smiled as he opened the door, and stepped aside so she could enter before him. She walked over to the sofa and sat down. Even after everything they'd just shared, she felt a shyness creep over her. She picked her book up off the coffee table. Holding it made her feel a little more secure.

"Carpe diem," he said.

"What?"

"Seize the day. Or in this case the night."

"Oh my God!" She raised the book up to him like an offering. "That's exactly what Hannah says. Have no regrets. Carpe diem, seize the day. You have read her books."

"You could say that."

Who was this man? Was he for real? She watched as he lifted the phone and placed a call to someone, probably room service, and asked for a late night snack. He also said something else but his voice was low and she couldn't quite hear the rest of it.

"What was that about?"

"I thought you might be hungry."

To give herself time to regain some sense of control, she liked the idea of taking the time to stop and eat. "Yes. I could use something." She got an idea. "How about while we wait, I read you some of my favorite passages?"

He sat down beside her and took her legs up placing them across his lap. "Sure. But first can I ask you something?" He said this as he took off the slippers

the spa provided them with, and began massaging her feet. "Why are you really trying to find Hannah Grimes? What do you think she can tell you that's not already in one of her books?"

It took her a moment to reply because what he was doing felt so good. "It's not so much what's in her books, but the thought or even what's behind it. Reading her work at times is like reading bits and pieces of my life. Like she's lived it already and came out okay. She figured it out, ya know. I'm hoping she'll fill in some of the pieces for me."

She almost jumped out of her skin when he kissed a toe. Who knew that was an erogenous zone?

"But life's not really like that. No one can fill those pieces in for you," he said as he planted a kiss on the other foot. "That you have to do for yourself."

"Wow...oh yeah." Wait, something he said got through the sensual haze he seemed to be weaving around her. She opened the book, still clutched in her hand and flipped through the pages until she came to the section he was talking about. "And I quote" she read, "Walk in no man or woman's shadow, fill in the holes on your own.' So that's what she was saying."

"Yes. When I first started boxing that was my world. I didn't know anything else existed. I lived for two things. Women and to be the best middleweight boxer that ever lived. To take the title away from the guy who held

it. I'd already taken away his girlfriend now I wanted his title. I walked in his shadow most of my professional career. I thought if I beat him, if I won, then my life would make sense. I'd prove to myself and the world that I was the best."

"So what happened?"

"I got the girl and the title, and a broken nose for my troubles. But it wasn't enough. Those holes were still there. That's when I realized I had to do something different with my life. The girl and I realized we didn't much like each other and if I never set foot in a boxing ring again that was fine with me. It was time to move out of other people's shadows, other people's expectations, and find those missing pieces in my life."

"Hey, that's the title of a chapter in the book. *Finding the Missing Pieces*. So how did you find yours? How'd you end up here, owning a restaurant and a spa?"

"Santa Rosa, New Mexico is home. I came home. That was five years ago. My grandmother encouraged me to wr...to keep a journal, setting short-term goals. My restaurant used to be a little hole in the wall bar that I used to hang out in, and I would write in my journal. Then when the owner died, his son put it up for sale and I bought it, fixed it up and never looked back."

His story touched her. She could understand exactly how he felt. All her life had been about other people's expectations. But what were hers? "Maybe I should start keeping a journal."

"Later," he said kissing her calf. The knock at the door interrupted whatever else he was going to say or do. Hank stood up, tightening the belt around his robe before he opened the door and took a tray from the person in the hall. She heard him say thank you then step back into the room, letting the door swing shut.

"Here you are." He placed the try on the coffee table in front of the couch. There were two covered platters on the tray. "Go ahead and remove the covers. I'll see what's in the bar. What would you like?"

"Sparkling water."

"Coming right up."

Removal of the first cover revealed shelled shrimp with cocktail sauce. The second tray held an assortment of cheeses and crackers.

Hank handed her the bottled water and sat down again. She didn't think she'd really be hungry but the shrimp looked great and she told him so.

"Taste good too. Here, try this." He picked up a shrimp and dipped it in the sauce, and held it in front of her lips. "Open for me, babe."

She took a bite to the tip of his finger. "Mmm, that is good."

"Oh yeah." He popped the remainder in his mouth.

She took a sip of water from her bottle, and as she lowered it, he took the bottle out of her hand and placed it on the table. Holding onto her arms, he drew her to him and covered her lips with his. "Mmm," he moaned. Opening his mouth,

he rubbed his tongue against her full lips until she parted them, inviting him in. She didn't need to ask him twice.

He tasted of the spices from the shrimp sauce and a little of the Champagne they'd been drinking earlier, like his taste had been made just for her. She leaned closer to him on the couch, reaching for his robe. She had to feel him, touch him. He must have wanted the same thing because he parted her robe and had his hands on her breasts the same time she pushed his robe off his shoulders.

"Yes, touch me." His voice was hoarse, sexy, and she loved the sound of it.

She'd wanted to touch him from the first moment she'd laid eyes on him. He was hard. Her fingers touched nothing but steel. She got the robe off as he lay back on the couch, taking her down on top of him. Pushing her robe completely aside, he had full access to her naked body. But she also had access to his. She could feel his sex pushing against her belly button. Breaking their kiss, she sat up on him, straddling his thighs. "Now where were we?" she asked.

He reached up and brushed his thumbs over both nipples. She arched her back in response.

He groaned. "Here. We were right here."

He moved his hand to her waist, and held her while he sat up and adjusted their positions until he was sitting up, his back to the couch and his feet on the floor.

"Comfortable?"

"I will be," she said.

"Good." He fumbled in the pocket of his robe and pulled out a condom.

"Where'd that come from?"

He grinned sheepishly.

She smiled. Ah, room service. She didn't mind, not in the least. Taking it from him, she opened the packet. "I hope you got more than one."

"What do you think?"

Still smiling, she placed it on his rigid length. Rising up on her knees, she sank onto his hardness. There was a simultaneous moan. Atlanta leaned her head back and let herself relish the moment, and the man. She felt every inch of his many inside her. She squeezed him with her woman's muscles, taking them steadily higher into the nether. He pulled her closer so he could suckle at her breasts, and she wrapped her arms around his neck to hold him to her. She groaned as he raised his hips to take them further than she'd ever been before. He released his mouth from around her areole. "Look at me," he commanded.

She hadn't even realized her eyes were closed, so lost in being a part of him, sight held no meaning for her until she opened her eyes and looked into his. "Mine," he said.

"Mine," she repeated back to him and knew it was true. As soon as his mouth covered her own, she exploded. Falling. She was falling. She'd climbed up into the heavens where no one should go and now she was falling for her pleasure. But oh God! The pleasure was so great it was worth the fall, but Hank was right there with her. He held her in his arms, so if she had to fall, it was with him.

Her body leaned forward and her head rested on his shoulder. She barely felt him lift her up.

"Wrap your legs around me." Holding him around his neck, he grabbed her thighs and stood up. As he began to walk, her senses revived enough for her to know he was taking her to the bedroom, and he was still firmly inside her.

He got them on the bed without once withdrawing from her core, and as soon as her bottom hit the mattress he began to move in her. He drew her legs up so her knees were at his shoulders, spreading her open to him even more. The only sounds she could hear were the sounds of pleasure her lover breathed in her ear and the music their bodies made every time they clashed together, until even those sounds were dulled by the pressure building in her system. Building until she had no choice but to release the pleasure. On a cry of his name, she came.

And Hank was right behind her.

Chapter Eight

Atlanta sat in a booth looking over the breakfast menu. It was just as massive as the dinner one. "So many choices," she mumbled to herself.

"May I recommend the Ringside Special?"

Atlanta looked up and saw one of the waitresses smiling at her. "What would that be?"

"It's a Spanish omelet, hash browns, sausage and bacon, biscuits and gravy and your choice of coffee, juice or milk."

"Wow. Well I do have a bit of an appetite." Especially after last night, she thought to herself, grinning. "I'll have that, with coffee."

"Looks like you're going to be a regular here. My name's Kate." She stuck out her hand.

"Oh, I'm Atlanta. What makes you think I'm going to be a regular?"

"Look sweetie, you came here for dinner last night, hung out with the boss, and you're back for breakfast. Tells me you're sticking around." She winked at her.

Atlanta felt her face blush. Could she tell something happened between them? She couldn't be that transparent.

"Ahh, see. Hey, I'm not hatin on ya. All the girls love Hank. We just haven't been that lucky. Be back with your coffee."

Atlanta wanted to sink into the booth. She reached for her purse on the side of her and took out her book. She flipped to her bookmarked spot: Life Is Not Always As It Seems.

"Hey, baby."

She looked up to the baritone voice of her lover. "Hey there yourself. Care to join me? I ordered the Ringside Special."

"Excellent choice." He scooted in the booth and kissed her mouth. "I wish I could join you, but a little problem came up with one of my vendors. I have to drive over to meet with him. I should be back in an hour, and I'd like you to stay. But hey, enjoy your breakfast, and when I get back I'll show you around."

"And maybe she'll come in today?"

"Ahh... maybe. But today is busy. "

"Oh, that's right the crowds. Okay, then I'll see you when you get back."

Hank kissed her one more time and got up. "Okay, Kate, take care of my lady here." He got up and moved out of the way, while Kate poured her coffee. "By the way, everything is on the house." He moved away before she could thank him.

"Have you seen Miss Grimes?" she asked Kate after she finished.

"Uh...n...not lately. But then she could be on a book tour or something. It's about that time for her to start coming out with another book."

"Really? Oh, I can't wait. I have all her books. They speak to you. Don't you think?"

"Oh, yeah they speak to me alright." She turned to Hank and tapped him on the shoulder. "I need to see you in the back."

"I was just telling Atlanta, I need to see a..."

"In the back!"

Atlanta looked curiously at the duo, as they headed in the direction of his office and disappeared.

Atlanta shrugged her shoulders. Kate probably didn't have her cup of coffee yet. She turned her attention back to her book.

These past couple of days had been a whirlwind. She found the exact city and hangout that Miss Grimes frequents. She meets the very sexy owner of the very place she hangs out, and he's good friends with her. Then overnight, she becomes his lover. There had to be a chapter in one of her books on that!

She was flipping through the index as another server approached. "The Ringside Special." He placed two large plates down.

"Wow. I think this will be the first time I need a doggie bag for breakfast," she chuckled.

"You'll be surprised how much you can finish. This food is so good, you won't realize you're done until the last bite. And you'll be hollering for more."

"All right then, I'll take your word for it." Atlanta placed her book back in her purse.

"Say, you have one of the Life books."

"Yeah, you've read them?"

"No, just that I know they're very popular. By the way, I'm Joe."

"Atlanta." She shook his hand. "Hank told me the author comes here. He says he knows her very well."

"Han...uh...where is Hank?" Joe asked looking around the place.

"He went back to his office with Kate," she said as she took her first bite of food. "Mmm...mmm. This is heavenly. You're right, I..." She looked around, but Joe had disappeared. Well, it was busy around there. She continued eating, savoring every bite.



"I can't believe you haven't told her. Of all people, you should have told her!"

Kate screamed nearly knocking him against the wall, with that finger pointed at his chest.

"I swear I was going to. I tried."

"Yeah, right. You didn't try hard enough," she said her hands on her slim hips. "You slept with her..."

"Whoa! How do you know that?"

"She's glowing. And we all know you left with her last night."

"When has my private life become your business?" Hank said trying to walk out the door.

"Ever since you took me and Joe into your confidence."

As if on cue, Joe came bursting into the office. "You didn't tell her?"

Hank threw his hands up and walked to his desk. He could see right now that he wasn't going anywhere anytime soon. "I tried."

Kate threw her hands toward Joe. "He 'tried," she said quoting with her fingers.

Joe shook his head. "Man, this is wrong on so many levels."

"I'll tell her!"

They both stood there staring at him with their arms folded over their chests.

Hank wondered from time to time if it was a good idea letting them in on his secret. However, they'd been friends since his boxing days and they were supportive when he quit and took up writing. Even so far as to help him when he first opened the restaurant and was short handed, and since stayed on. Right now, all of that was coming back to bite him in the butt.

"I mean it. When the right time comes, I'll tell her."

They both threw their hands up. "What, when your hundredth book hits the shelves? Which will be in thirty years," Kate stated.

Hank rubbed the back of his neck. "No, no, you're right. I'll have to tell her soon."

"Good," Kate said."

"When are you going to tell her?" Joe asked.

"Right after I talk with this vendor. There was a mix up with the beef.

Besides, I want to talk to her somewhere more private."

"Okay. You know we're holding you to this," Kate said turning to leave.

"You have my word," Hank said holding up his right hand.

"Good. Let's go before the natives get restless." Joe escorted Kate out.

Hank sat back down in his chair. He really fucked up. There was no nice way to put it. He'd dug his own hole from the beginning. And it just got deeper and deeper. Every time he began to confess, something else came up. So now it seemed like there was no light in that deep hole.

They'd only just begun, but he didn't want to lose her over a stupid misunderstanding. And he knew he would. This was a woman who demanded honesty and integrity. Why else would she love his books?

Well it was time he practiced what he preached. He opened his top drawer and took out his cell, punching in Elliott's number.

"Morrison Publishing."

"Yeah, this is Hank Gaines. I need to speak with Elliott Wright."

"Oh yes Mister Gaines, one moment"

He sat there listening to the rings when the call finally switched over to voice mail.

"You have reached the office of Elliott Wright, Please leave your name and number and a detailed message, and I will return your call as soon as possible." Beep!

"Hey, Elliott, this is Hank, call me back ASAP."

He disconnected and took out his organizer. He needed to have a long meeting with Elliott about his next book, and the decision to publish under the pseudonym. He marked out a time, before getting up to leave. He was running way behind.

On his way out, he saw Atlanta. She was just finishing up her meal when she glanced up, and saw him. He couldn't stop at her table, but he blew her a kiss.

Yeah, he wanted to wipe the slate clean with her. He wanted the chance.

Chapter Nine

Too stuffed to move, Atlanta wiped her mouth with the cloth napkin. In fact, she was hoping someone would come over and roll her back to the hotel for a nice nap. It would be very embarrassing if she took one in the restaurant. She was scooting out of the booth to go to the restroom, when she heard someone yelling.

"I can't believe this! You can't do this to me!"

Atlanta saw a short blond man running from the kitchen.

"I gave you the best years of my life! Hello! Hello!"

He was screaming into a cell phone while rushing to the exit.

"Tim! Come back!" It was Kate chasing after him. But it was too late. Some customers ran to the window, Atlanta already had a clear view of the parking lot. They watched as Tim jumped into a blue Explorer and drove off.

"Aaarrgh!!" Kate stomped back to the kitchen.

Wow! Drama. Atlanta grinned. For once it had nothing to do with her. Turning back to her booth, she grabbed her purse. She headed toward Hank's office, thinking she'd wait for him there, and ran into Joe. "Hey, what was going on out there?" she asked.

"Oh that." He frowned. "The monthly break up. In fact, they're over due by two weeks."

"Oh wow."

"Oh wow is right. We don't have a head cook now. I'm tired of this, and I know Hank must be too. And we need to get ready for the lunch rush. It's Sunday and people are coming in from late service."

"What are we going to do?" Kate walked over with a spatula in her hand. "I don't know how to make his special chili. He has the recipe locked up in that pea brain of his."

Joe blew out a breath. "So not good."

"Wait, he was making chili?" Atlanta asked.

"Yeah, it's the talk of the town. And Tim is the one that makes it. No one else can duplicate it." Joe just shook his head along with Kate.

"Hmm. Tell you what. I can whip up some chili. It won't be his, but I bet it can stand up to it just as well, if not blow it out of the water."

"Really?" they both said looking hopeful.

"Yeah, let me freshen up and you can put me to work.

"Oh, no. We couldn't ask you to do that. You're a guest here and a friend of Hank's," Kate said.

"Sure she can. All the more reason. Hank will appreciate it," Joe said pushing her in the direction of the restroom. "You can drop your purse off in Hank's office. We'll have a hairnet, gloves and smock ready for you in the kitchen. Come on Kate, before she changes her mind." He grabbed Kate by the wrists and ran to the kitchen.

After Atlanta finished, she made her way to the kitchen. It was just buzzing with excitement.

"Thank God!" One of the kitchen helpers shouted.

"Okay you guys, where's the beef?" Atlanta asked.

The kitchen staff broke out in laughter and pointed to the large commercial fridge.

"We have just enough for the lunch crowd," Joe said. "That's what Hank went to the vendor for; we need it for dinner also. But this is more than enough for now."

"Okay then, let's get busy. Where do you keep all your spices?"

"Over there," one of the cooks said, pointing to the pantry.

Atlanta went over and pulled out almost every seasoning known to man. "Okay, I need onions, bell peppers, garlic..." She continued rattling off items as the cooks brought her what she needed. "Now, do you put beans in your chili?"

"We make one batch with and one without," Kate said. "It looks like you have everything under control, girlfriend. We'll get the rest of the menu together. Holla if you need anything."

"Will do."

She organized the staff to help with the cutting while she mixed and stirred the ingredients. After two and a half hours, she was finished and the entire kitchen was looking at two huge vats of chili.

"Well here you go." Atlanta grabbed some small bowls and dipped chili out and handed it to the crew. "Tell me what you think."

Everyone dug in. Silence. Then the whole kitchen erupted.

"This is fantastic!" shouted one cook.

"This is better than fantastic. It's out of this world!" yelled another.

"My God! This is great!" Kate said. "Is this a family recipe?"

"It's my own special concoction," Atlanta smiled proudly.

"You need to market this," Joe said.

"So, is this better than Tim's?" Atlanta asked.

"Tim who?" someone shouted. Everyone broke out in laughter again.

"You deserve a break. Why don't you go into Hank's office and put your feet up," Kate suggested.

"Good idea and we'll bring you anything off the menu," Joe said.

"Thanks, but I'm still stuffed from breakfast. But I can use some down time."

The kitchen began applauding and thanking her as she left.

Atlanta entered Hank's office and sat down in his chair. She reached for her purse on the desk. She figured she'd get in some reading. As she tried getting her book out of the bag, she knocked something over onto the floor. She looked down and saw an organizer.

Picking it up, she absently flipped through it trying to get it to the current date, when an entry caught her eye. Morrison Publishing was written in red. Now why did that sound so familiar? She reached for her book and turned to the front page. Morrison Publishing stood out big as day.

She scrunched her face up, trying to figure out why Hank would have that in his organizer. She flipped through more pages. There were more entries for Morrison Publishing meetings. A few had meeting dates with an Elliott Wright.

She got to today's page, and saw a note for a conference call with this Elliott from Morrison. She tried wrapping her head around what it meant, but couldn't come up with anything. Then it occurred to her. Hank did say he knew Ms. Grimes. But how well?

Okay, he said she came in here regularly and he was good friends with her.

But that didn't mean he was good friends with the publisher. Why would he be

chummy with the publisher? Maybe he was asking for a favor of some sort. Something didn't gel. But right now she was too tired to think.

She went over to his couch, kicked off her shoes and laid down. She'd talk to him when he got back.



Hank took longer than usual, but it couldn't be helped.

He walked in the restaurant as the last of the breakfast crowd was leaving and looked for Atlanta, but didn't see her. She must have gotten tired of waiting and went back to the resort. He headed for the kitchen.

"Sorry I took so long guys. Everything going okay?"

"Well Tim and Sally split," Joe said.

"Really?" Hank checked his watch. "They are about two weeks over due.

Where is he?"

"He left a few hours ago," Kate said with a bowl of something in her hand.

"What? This is our busiest time! You see that..."

"Calm down," she said putting a reassuring hand on his shoulder. "It's been taken care of. Here, taste this." She handed him the small bowl and a spoon.

"Wow! This is delicious! But this isn't Tim's chili."

"Nope, it's Atlanta's."

"Atla...what?"

"When Tim flew out of here, he was about to start the chili for the lunch crowd. Atlanta told Kate that she could make chili and volunteered to help. This is her stuff."

"This is way better than Tim's. Of course the crowd out there will notice. Hmm. Tell you what. I'm going to go in the office and make up a flyer announcing this new chili. We'll bill it as a special and see what the people think. But I have to call Atlanta first..."

"She's in your office taking a nap," Joe said smiling.

"Okay, then." He clapped his hands together. "Let's get this show on the road. We've got a hungry crowd."

Atlanta was full of surprises. That chili was gourmet caliber. But the poor thing had to be tired. He was going to ask her if he could announce the new chili and call it *Chili from Atlanta*. Then ask for the recipe. He doubted if he would get the latter, but it was worth a shot.

He arrived at his office and opened the door. There she was, sound asleep on his couch. As quietly as he could, he sat on the edge and stroked her cheek with the back of his hand. Her skin was so soft, he got a knot in his stomach. He had to tell her about those books.

Just when things were looking good, hard realities came calling.

Chapter Ten

Hank busied himself catching up on his mail while Atlanta slept. Lunch would be in full swing soon and things would get hectic. He'd also checked his voicemail to see if his editor called. Nothing. He emailed him instead. Hank stopped in mid-type when he heard Atlanta stir on the couch.

She opened one eye, and smiled. "Hello."

"Hey, baby. I hear you did some damage in the kitchen."

"Oh. I hope you don't mind," she said sitting up quickly and straightening herself out.

"Mind? Are you kidding? That's the best tasting chili I ever had."

"So you liked it?" She looked at him hopefully.

"Loved it. And that's what I would like to talk to you about."

"Oh?"

He closed his laptop and went over to the couch. Sitting next to her, he put his arms around her and kissed her fully on the mouth. It was a long kiss. A kiss, that to him meant something more than affection. It could be a kiss goodbye. Because he knew he would have to fess up sooner or later, and he could lose her.

But he needed to choose the time and place. This was neither the time nor the place.

"Wow! What a kiss. If I can get that from you for just making chili, I wonder what I'll get for making pheasant!" She giggled that cute sexy giggle he loved so much.

"Well, I'll tell you. I was wondering if you mind us putting your chili as something regular on the lunch menu. We billed it as a special today." He saw excitement in her eyes. "And we'll call it *Chili from Atlanta*."

"Chili from Atlanta," she said wistfully. "I like that."

"Great, so we can use it?"

"Sure."

"Fantastic!" He clapped his hands together and returned to his desk. He used the intercom on the phone. "Hey Joe, could you come into the office?"

"Sure."

Hank turned back to her and said, "I'll need you to write down the recipe for me."

"Not a problem."

Joe walked in, in less than a minute. "Need something boss?"

"Make some flyers real quick and stuff them into the menus before lunch.

This is what I want you to say. *Announcing a new discovery: Chili From Atlanta*. Take a

picture of a nice full bowl, put it on the flyer and we'll see what happens. Oh, we'll charge fifteen ninety-five a bowl." He winked at Joe.

Joe chuckled. "Will do boss." He left the room.

"I saw that wink. You can't possibly be charging that much," Atlanta said coming to his desk.

"No, we'll charge the regular price. Folks around here have better sense than to spend that much on a bowl of chili."

She grinned. "I can't wait to see the response."

"Hey, if it's anything like that response I gave when I tasted your concoction, we'll be in business."

She kissed him on the cheek.

He took her hand and sat her on his lap. "Say, if you don't mind I would like you to stick around for the dinner hour."

"Oh?"

"Yeah, you got any more recipes in that cute little head of yours?"

"Why, Hank. I think you just want me for my cooking prowess."

They both laughed. "And other things. You don't mind? Do you?"

"Of course not. But I don't know what I could add to the menu. It just so happened that you needed a chili maker."

"I know, but what I thought was maybe you can look over the dinner menu with me. I think it could use some revamping. If you see something you think we can add or change up and you can cook it, it would be great."

"Gee, you're serious."

"Very much so. I'm tired of Tim and his blow-ups and his same old recipes.

Besides, my crew loves you."

"How about the crew's boss?"

How about the crew's boss? Damn. He fell for her the first time he laid eyes on her. And it'd has been going down hill ever since. She was so sexy and at the same time so vulnerable. He just wanted to protect her. To tell her he'd traveled down the same path.

Did he love her? Yes. Should he tell her? He mentally sighed to himself. Why was life so difficult?

"I love everything about you. Your spirit, your sense of adventure and the whole package it's wrapped up in."

"Hmm." She placed her finger on her chin in a mocking manner. "I guess that will do."

"Now, care to see the other side of the restaurant business?"

"Sure."

"Okay, then let's get to it." He patted her on the side of her butt and she hopped off his lap. "Stay here, I'll be right back." He headed for the kitchen.

The crew was busy going in and out serving the lunch crowd. He walked past one of the vats of chili and noticed it was empty. "Hey Kate." He waved her over. "This is selling already?"

"People want to try it and look over there." Kate pointed to the "Take Out" counter. "They want to take some to go."

"Fantastic! By the way, Atlanta agreed to give us her chili recipe and use her name, *and* she's staying for the dinner crowd."

"You guys are really hitting it off," Kate said crossing her arms.

"I know what you're thinking. I said I'll tell her. I'm taking her out to dinner then back to my place. More intimate that way."

"And less embarrassing if she causes a scene, which I wouldn't blame her."

"I'll try to explain as much as possible. She seems like a reasonable person. I think she'll understand once I explain the reason behind the deception."

"Deception, being the operative word," Joe quipped from behind.

Hank turned slowly around. "Maybe I should bring you two along."

"Bye," Joe said fleeing the scene.

"Gotta go tend to table five," Kate said rushing behind him.

Cowards. But he couldn't blame them. He wasn't exactly jumping for joy.

After he looked over the kitchen and made sure everything was ready to go, he went out on the floor and did the usual mingling with his patrons. After half an hour of walking once around the room, he snatched up a menu and headed back to his office.

"Sorry I took so long." He saw Atlanta looking over more of his boxing memorabilia. "You really enjoy looking at that stuff, huh?"

"I find it fascinating," she said.

"Two testosterone hyped men beating each other to a pulp, fascinating?"

"Well, I find it fascinating that someone with your looks would go in the ring."

"One of my moments, I'm afraid. I'll tell you all about it at dinner, which I'm hoping you'll accept my invitation."

"I'd love to. You know I love the food here."

"Nah, I wanna take you some place quiet and romantic. Not a joint like this," he said tinting his head toward the door.

She chuckled, "I see. Well, I trust your judgment."

"Great. Come over here and have a seat." He pointed to the guest chair in front of his desk and he took his seat. "Here is the usual menu. Hasn't changed much in the past three years I'm afraid." He made a face.

"So what would you like me to do?" Atlanta leaned over the desk turning the menu right side up so she could see it better.

"See if you can find something we can take off the menu, or if you have any dishes you can add."

"I see something that you're missing right off the bat."

"What?"

"Chicken n' Dumplins."

"You know how to make that?"

"Know how to make it? I was born with the recipe clinched in my fist."

They laughed, and continued looking over the menu, exchanging ideas until dinner. There was no chili left to even serve to the early dinner crowd. But that was okay. The regulars had their usual and new comers were just happy to try something from the menu.

By closing time, everyone was exhausted. Hank guided Atlanta back to his office and they plopped down on the couch. "Whew!" Atlanta, said wiping her forehead. "I never realized the work you guys do." She'd helped prep dinner.

"Too much?" he asked, turning toward her and putting his arms around her shoulders.

"No, not at all. In fact, I find it invigorating. But to be honest, I could use a good soak in the tub."

"Fair enough. We'll go out tomorrow night. Joe can take over the dinner crowd. Let's get out of here."

"I'll help you lock up." Atlanta got up and began helping him straighten out his desk, just as his cell phone rang.

"Hello."

"Hey Hank, it's Elliott."

"Uhh...yeah...look. Can I call you back? Say in about an hour?"

"You made it sound like an emergency. After the call and the email..."

"Yeah, I know, but I really can't talk now."

"Okay, an hour. I'll be waiting. If I don't hear from you, the cell goes off."

"All right, all right."

He disconnected.

"Was that call important?" Atlanta asked as she stacked papers on his desk.

"Uh...no, nothing really. Just an old acquaintance. I'll call him when I get home. Right now I want to hurry up and get outta here. Between the vendor this morning and Tim running out, I could use a soak too."

"Well I'm glad I could be of some help."

Hank put the cookbooks away they had been looking at earlier and went over to her. Taking her in his arms, he kissed her passionately on the mouth. "You are more than a help. You're a Godsend."

Chapter Eleven

It was close to ten before Hank and Atlanta waved goodnight to everyone. It took so long because each member of the crew came over to Atlanta in the parking lot, thanking her for a job well done and saving their asses.

They stood there until everyone left. "Okay, I need to sit," Atlanta said rubbing her thigh.

"Restaurant biz is a little too much huh?"

"Not really. I loved it. Just not used to it."

"How would you like to come back to my place and take a nice hot bath to loosen those muscles?"

She looked at him with a bit of hesitation in her eyes.

"We'll take your car. You trust me enough to drive for you?"

"Yes, I do. I'm sorry. This is just all happening so fast."

"Well, you'll have a chance to slow down at my condo." He took her bag, which was heavy. "What's in here?"

Atlanta chuckled. "Everything, including my book."

He figured that. Just the mere mention of it had his stomach all tied up in knots. But he decided during their closing up to tell her tonight, about his duel

identity. No more putting it off, and no more distractions. This had gone far enough.

As Kate and Joe pointed out, she was already part of the Ringside family. The crew had never taken to anyone so fast. They liked her and knew something hot and heavy was going on between him and her. Probably because she was the first woman he allowed to hang around the restaurant with him, that and the way he couldn't stop touching her.

Kate and Joe had offered to come with him for support. But he turned them down, much to their relief. It was enough he had to confess to something Atlanta would view as a major deceit. He didn't need an audience to witness the blow-up.

He took his eyes off the road long enough to glance over at Atlanta in the passenger seat. She stared out the window. "What's got your attention?" he asked.

"The night sky. I love a clear night. You can see the stars. This was such a beautiful day. It only seems appropriate that it's a beautiful night."

Groan.

They arrived at his place in no time. He only lived ten minutes away from his restaurant. "Me casa es su casa. Welcome to my pad." He shut off the engine and grabbed her stuff as well as his.

"This is nice," Atlanta said looking up at the building as she got out of the car.

"The best is yet to come."

They walked into the lobby and were greeted by the night security. After an exchange of good evenings, they got on the elevator and Hank used an electronic key before he touched the button that said *PH1*.

"Wow. Penthouse. I didn't think Santa Rosa had places like this."

"Oh?"

"Don't get me wrong. I just thought everything would be adobe architecture, fewer floors, more casual, less city like."

He shrugged. "It's true, there are not many like this here." When they reached his floor, the elevator opened directly into the entryway of his penthouse. Straight ahead was a huge mural with a western theme, complete with cowboys on horses.

"Very cool." She ran to the first chair she saw, "Ahhh." She sat down, kicked off her shoes and rubbed her foot. "Sorry about that. Didn't mean to be so rude."

"It's all right, no need to apologize." He put their stuff down on a heavy marble coffee table. "You wanna know a secret?"

"Ooh, what?"

"When I first opened the grill, I was standing all day and my legs were killing me the next morning. You would think I would have been in better shape

from boxing. But in boxing, I moved all the time. So, standing in one spot for any period of time wreaked havoc on my calves and thighs, for the first few days."

"Good, I don't feel so bad now."

"Come on, let's get that bath going."

He helped her up and led her to his bedroom. "You can have a seat on the bed. I need to run your bath, then get your towels and things."

"Huge bed!" she exclaimed.

"Hey, no whippy furniture for me," he said stepping into the bathroom. He got the water started first then picked up the mess he'd left this morning. He didn't want Atlanta to see what a slob he was.

After he was done, he shut off the water and returned to his bedroom. "Okay lady, I..." She was stretched out on his bed, her eyes were closed, and her chest rose and fell softly in slumber.

He stood beside the bed looking down at her form. Yeah, she was beat.

Holding her around the waist, he tried to move her slowly up on the bed, so her head would be on the pillows, without waking her. "Mmm," she moaned.

He stopped.

"Hank?"

"Sorry, baby, I didn't mean to wake you."

"That's okay." She sat up on her elbows and patted the space beside her.

"Come sit down."

He did — cautiously.

She wrapped her arms around him and laid them both down on the bed. "I just want to tell you what a wonderful man you are."

"Huh?"

"You have made my journey such a pleasurable one. And, I might add, a great learning experience. You reminded me how much I enjoyed cooking. You know coming here was the best...no I take that back. Meeting you was the best thing that happened. Here I was looking for Miss Grimes and as luck would have it, I met someone who knows her and has read her books. This trip turned out to be terrific!" She began kissing him all over his face.

"Hey, what about your bath?"

"I can take that after."

"After what?"

"After this." She kissed his neck, and unbuttoned his shirt at the same time. When she had it off, she rubbed her hands down his bared chest.

Aww hell.



Hank got lost in all the kissing. Atlanta was acting very frisky. Even though she was complaining about how tired she was, it seemed she'd gotten a second wind.

He took her tightly in his arms, feeling her nipples harden against his chest. His hands traveled down her back and settled on her ass, cupping and squeezing, and pushing her against his harden cock.

"I want you to know that I care about you more than I've cared for anyone in a long, long time." He paused. "No matter what happens with us, I want you to know that."

"I care about you too, Hank."

He devoured her lips, taking and giving her air. He guided her farther up on the bed until her head rested against the headboard. He released his hold on her to reach in his end table and pull out a foil pack. Atlanta used the time to remove her top and bra, and help him out of his shirt before moving to unsnap her pants. But he was in a hurry, and moved her hands aside to finish the job for her. No more slow striptease act tonight. He felt a desperation the like he'd never known. By the time the last piece of clothing hit the floor, he was in her.

"Oh Hank!" He could feel her nails digging into his skin, like she held on for dear life, urging him on while he plunged in and out of her. He lifted her legs and slung them over each shoulder, pounding into her like a man going to the gallows.

Much to her credit she took all that he gave and then some.

After an eternity of him ravishing her, he felt her clench around him. The pleasure nearly brought tears to his eyes.

He moved her legs to the bed and bent down to touch his lips to hers, moving faster and deeper, until he sank so deeply into her, they both screamed their release and he collapsed in her arms.

After a few moments to catch their breaths, he placed his hands on the sides of her face and kissed her eyelids as she closed them. Her head turned, she relaxed back into the pillow and her breathing slowed. "I could love you," he whispered too low for her to hear as he watched her drift into sleep. So sweet, innocent and trusting.

She didn't deserve a louse like him.

Chapter Twelve

Atlanta woke up to the chirping of a very loud bird. Opening one eye, she peeked around the room, searching for the source of the noise. A very colorful feathered friend perched on the windowsill. She found it amazing, how so much racket could come out of a body so small.

She pushed herself up in the bed, yawned and stretched. If she thought she was sore before, she was downright raw now. She swung her legs over the side of the bed, wincing at the movement, and saw her bag and other clothes on the chair in the corner. As she carefully walked over to them, she noticed a note on the end table.

Baby- Hope you don't mind, but went to your hotel early this morning and grabbed a few items I thought you might need. By the way, you have new bath water since you didn't get a chance to use it last night. XXOO.

Atlanta smiled to herself. Last night was something. Not much was said through words, but boy! The man was a love machine.

She went straight to the bathroom and jumped in the tub. God! She needed this yesterday. She slid down some more and got a good soak.

After all the heat left the water, she got out and dressed in the clothes Hank left out for her before heading downstairs. When she reached the living area she heard Hank's voice, coming from another room off to the side. He seemed to be talking in hushed tones, at least hushed by his standards because his voice was so deep. And even though she couldn't make out what he was saying, she could tell it was a heated conversation, probably another vendor.

To give him privacy and kill time, she decided to take a tour of the place. She'd had no time for it last night.

As she wandered around, she got a hint of his design style. It was modern, minimalism. Very clean and simple. Not a lot of color, mostly steel gray, black and white with a touch of red. She finally made her way to what she believed, judging by the wall-to-wall books, to be the library. The library however was a different story.

It was like walking into the library at Princeton. The room was done in dark wood. The little wallpaper she could see was a deep forest green. The two couches where dark brown leather and tufted. In the back corner of the room sat two matching wingback chairs. The desk looked heavy, like something Rockefeller would have.

As she stood in the middle of the room, she looked around at all the bookcases and books. One bookshelf held more boxing memorabilia than the

others—and his championship belts! She headed straight for them; she'd never seen boxing belts up close and in person. They were beautiful—in a gaudy sort of way.

She moved on, paying attention to his reading material. You can really tell something about a guy from what he reads—or doesn't.

Wow! He had all of Miss Grimes' books. He had more than one copy of some. She scanned the shelves and noticed other books. *The Art Of Writing. Grammar* 101. Writers Block—How To Keep From Drinking When It Happens.

She cocked her head at something else that looked strange, about half a dozen plain brown covered books. She pulled one out. The cover had a familiar title but it said unedited copy, and the author was Hannah Grimes.

Did he know her that well that she gave these to him? But what about those writing books. She got a sour feeling in her stomach. She flipped through the pages and found hand written notes in the margins, and crossed out paragraphs initialed HG.

After seeing those initials, a logical conclusion would have been, HG—Hannah Grimes. However, Atlanta has seen Hank's handwriting on some invoices in his office at the grill. His scrawl was so bad no two people could have it.

Hank Gaines/Hannah Grimes. They were one in the same.

Atlanta's body began to shake. *No!* Her heart screamed. Not him. It couldn't be. But her mind said otherwise. This was beyond a lie. This was total deception. And worse yet, he used her. From the beginning when he saw her with *his* book, he played on that! Was he laughing at how easy it was to pick her up, using lines from his own book, *on her*?

She snatched several copies of the unedited versions of the books and stormed into the living area.

"Good morning, Atlanta," Hank said as he hung up the phone. "Did you have a nice soak in the tub? I was just ab...."

She threw all but one of the copies at him. "Can you explain those?"

Hank looked down at the books at his feet, then back up at her. He shook his head. "I...I don't know if I can explain, but I'll try." He took a step toward her; she backed away.

"Don't come near me! I can't believe this! I...I don't know what to say. You bastard! You used me. I slept with you, you had me cook and give you recipes for your grill! You made me think I finally found a direction for my life, that I was going to meet this woman!" She still held one of the books in her hand and shook it at him.

"I bet she doesn't even exist, probably some picture you pulled off the Internet."

"She did exist," he said quietly. "She was my grandmother."

"Your...I don't believe that. I can't believe anything you say!" She ran upstairs.

As soon as she reached his bedroom, she began gathering her things. Thank God, they drove her car.

"Atlanta wait!" Hank grabbed her by the arm. She turned around and socked him in the eye.

"Oww!"

"Don't touch me! I don't want those filthy hands on me. I never want to see or hear from you again. In fact, all those books I have, I'm burning them. Nothing but a bunch of crap and I'll go to the press about you too. It's all crap like you. That will teach you. Playing with people's emotions and using them when they're most vulnerable! For what? Just to sell books. You won't get a chance to hurt anyone else."

She grabbed all her bags and ran out the room. She heard him yell behind her but she didn't care. She kept running until she was out the front door and got in the already opened elevator.

Once she got through the lobby and outside, she ran to her car and threw her belongings in. As she started it up, she heard Hank's voice in the background pleading for her to wait, to listen. Listen to what? More lies?

She drove off as fast as she could. She would immediately check out of the hotel. *His* hotel. She would call her sisters and tell them what a fool she'd been. She needed them now; they'd understand. She could always count on them. This was a mistake, just another mistake in a long line of them. She was going back to Dallas.

Chapter Thirteen

"I fucked up man, there's no other way to put it," Hank managed to say his heart heavy, his throat barely able to get the words out.

"This isn't the time for blame," Joe said on the other end of the phone.

"What you need to do is go after her, sit her down and explain everything from the beginning."

"I tried..."

"Yeah, while in the heat of the moment, she wasn't feeling you then man. Give her a day. From what you told us, she's very close to her sisters. She's probably with them now cursing you every which way from Sunday."

"And I deserve it."

"Yes, but you've been punished enough. I know this is your time off, but come in anyway and maybe Kate and I can help you with a plan."

"Thanks, man."

"Hey, we kinda liked her too."

When Hank arrived at the grill, he barely acknowledged his patrons. His thoughts focused on all the things he'd done wrong as he headed straight for his office. Kate and Joe were waiting for him—with hugs.

"Do you know what area of Dallas she lives in?" Kate asked pulling away from him. "Did she mention anything else about herself and her family during your talks?"

"Oh shit! No...wait! She did say she lived in a new condo development near this hotel called...Mansion on Turtle Creek!"

"Why don't you check online and see if you can locate an address for her?" Kate said.

"That's not a bad idea." Hank booted up his computer and did an address search in the Dallas area for an Atlanta Reese. He found two that were promising, and both were near the hotel.

"I'm booking a flight." Hank reached for the phone and made flight and hotel reservations. He hung up and looked at Kate and Joe's expectant faces. "You two are in charge. If I can explain what happened and she calms down, I'll mention your roll in all of this."

"When do you leave?" Joe asked.

"In two hours. I'm gonna have just enough time to go home and pack before driving to the airport."

They nodded. He was glad for their support, but he needed to do this alone.

And he'd never felt so alone.



On the plane, Hank had an aisle seat with plenty of leg room but still couldn't relax. The flight was a little under two hours, but he may as well have been flying all the way to Japan. He had too much time to think about what he'd say to Atlanta, and it wasn't enough.

Once the plan landed, he immediately went to the rent-a-car counter and picked up a car. He drove to the very hotel Atlanta mentioned. He prayed he'd find her. He had no choice. Once he was settled in his suite, he planned his next move, but first he needed to call his editor.

"Hello Elliott, it's Hank."

"You told her didn't you?"

He was almost sorry he'd told Elliott about Atlanta. It was Elliott who'd advised caution. "Yeah and it blew up in my face. I'm here in Dallas looking for her. Now this is what I need you to do. She was very pissed. Pissed to the point of threatening to go to the press and expose me."

"What! Isn't it bad enough that you now have three people..."

"I don't care about that now. In fact, I want you to run interference."

"What do you mean?"

"Get my publicist and go to the press and make an announcement. It's time I came out of the closet."

"Are you mad?"

"No," he sighed. "I'm in love."



Atlanta was channel surfing and crying as she talked to her sister Syd on the phone. "I...I can't believe he did that to me."

"You poor thing. The jerk!"

"I mean, he had me thinking because I love to cook, it might be something I could help him with. I basically bared my soul and spilled my guts out to him and he used that against me!"

"I still can't believe he did that. But you are an awesome cook, we've always told you that. But what did he say when you busted him?"

"Oh he said he could explain. Please!"

"I'm sorry. I can't seem to get Brit on the line. Being in Finland sometimes the connection is funky. But I know I can speak for the both of us when I say good riddance!"

"I feel so foolish. Here I thought I was going to find the path to my life, find and talk to the person that I felt faced the same challenges I did and found the answers. And it was all a big lie!"

As Atlanta reached for a tissue a special report on television caught her eye. "Something's happening, there's a special report."

"Oh, what about?" Syd asked.

"Don't know yet...wait. Oh for Pete's sake! It's him!"

"Him who? What channel?"

"It's on Fox here."

"Let me turn on the television right quick."

Atlanta sat there looking at the anchorman with a picture of Hank in the background.

"Girl, they said Hank Gaines. Is that him? He's fine and you know those news shots aren't the most flattering."

"Yeah, that's him. Maybe with luck they're reporting he got run over by a bus."

"Shh, be quiet and see what they're saying."

"Today's news is coming out of Morrison Publishing that the author of the self-help books for women by Hannah Grimes, known as life books to her fans because of their life lessons, were actually written by her grandson Hank Gains. In fact, Miss Grimes died six years ago.

"That's right Al. This revelation about the identity and sex of the real author is coming two weeks before the release of the latest book: Talk The Talk Walk The Walk."

"Very appropriate I would say Gail."

"Very, in other news..."

Atlanta turned the sound down. "Wow. They beat me to it."

"Beat you to what?"

"I told Hank before I left I was going to go to the media."

"Oooh girl! Well, if you didn't do it who did?"

"I have no idea." Atlanta sat there and thought a moment. "Maybe he did."

"What? Why?

"Since he thought I was going to do it, maybe he wants to put his own spin on things." She turned the sound back up when his picture appeared again on TV.

"And we're getting word that there will be a news conference with Hank Gains and his editor this evening. Time to be announced shortly."

"See," Atlanta said pointing with the remote at the television.

"You read him like a book, no pun intended. I'm going to try to reach Brit again. You get some rest; you had a rough week. Call me if you need me."

"Thanks for listening."

After disconnecting, Atlanta reached for more tissues. She didn't know what to make of Hank and this so called news conference. And she sure as hell hoped he didn't think this was going to get her to come back to him. If that was the case, he was wasting his time and he could keep the charade going until the end of time.

Chapter Fourteen

Once Hank arrived in Dallas, he immediately made plans to hunt Atlanta down, and he would find her if he had to take up permanent residency to do so. He'd heard on the radio the cat was finally out of the bag. The announcement was all over the news. He hoped Atlanta saw it. Of course, he wouldn't be surprised if she did see his face on the screen and threw something at it.

But there was a reason he wanted to have a press conference and he wanted Atlanta by his side when he gave it. And he didn't want to put the spotlight on her by professing his love for her on national television, but he would do whatever lengths he had to, to win her back.

Yeah, he had a long way to go. He first needed her to listen to his explanation, let alone tell her and convince her he loved her.

From the hotel he called both numbers in the area he thought were promising. One was listed to an A Reese and the other to Atlanta Reese. No one was home at either number. One had a system recording; the other was a man's voice. Hank left messages at both numbers, he put his head back on the sofa and rested his eyes when the phone rang.

"Hello?"

"Is this Hank Gaines?"

"Yes," Hank sat up.

"This is Channel Ten news, we would like..."

"No!" he slammed the phone down. That was the third call in twenty minutes. Somehow word got out that the famous elusive author Hannah Grimes, really Hank Gaines, was in town.

Hank thought a moment. Maybe this was a good thing. Maybe, just maybe Atlanta would be watching television and see that he was not far from her. But what would that do? She would probably bolt the doors and never leave her house.

Damn he fucked up!

He leaned against the headboard. The hell with this! He was going to get Atlanta if he had to use the media to do it.

He reached for the phone and called those numbers again. The machine came on for both and he left the same message. "Hello. I'm not sure if this is the right number or not, but if you're Atlanta, it's Hank. If it's the wrong number, I'm apologizing in advance, but if you're my Atlanta, I don't know what I can say to you to get you to understand. But I do know this. I do love you. I've loved you since the first time I laid eyes on you. Yes, I was a jerk for not telling you about myself from the beginning and I have no excuse for that."

"So it's up to you. You can come see me in private and we can talk face to face. I'm here at the Mansion on Turtle Creek. Or you can come to the news conference I'm about to have in the Grand Conference room at the hotel in two hours and we can talk afterwards. It's up to you. But I am not leaving Dallas until I see you."

He disconnected, and glanced at his watch. He'd better get ready. He didn't have anything written down to say to the press. He planned to wing it. There'd probably be a barrage of questions and he'd just have to answer them with the truth.

He may have kept secret his writing identity from Atlanta and the world, but one thing he wasn't going to deny; he wasn't leaving Dallas without Atlanta.



Atlanta listened to the baritone voice on the answering machine for the umpteenth time. So he followed her. She didn't know whether to be overjoyed or pissed that he had the audacity to fly here—and stay at the hotel blocks from her home.

He mentioned that damn news conference. So what? He had no choice but to fess up. He'd been outted for his deceit to the public. Well one thing was for sure, she wasn't going to meet him alone at the hotel. Now, she was curious about this news conference. Humph! That should be entertaining. He'll probably be booed off the stage.

That might be worth seeing.

Atlanta got up from the couch and stretched. She just might make that news conference after all. She went to her bathroom and changed. She was going to that conference — incognito of course. She was going to get a private thrill at seeing the rest of his adoring public turn on him.

The crowd was ginormous! A lot of media vans took up the street parking space. Once in the hotel, she squeezed her way through the crowded lobby until she made her way to the Grand Conference room. She kept squeezing, until she was about ten people deep from the front. And they were made up mostly of people from the media.

"Can you believe that that hunk, a former middle-weight champion, was the real author of the life books?" A woman asked Atlanta as she tried to get comfortable surrounded by the wall-to-wall people.

"I can't believe he lied to his fans," someone spat out from behind her.

"Writers are always using pen names. Look at that man that writes those romances," another shouted in Hank's defense.

Those were all valid points. But why did he lie to her? The woman he made love to and claimed to care for.

"Someone is coming to the podium!" The woman in front of her shouted.

The crowd got silent as a portly man made his way to the mike.

"May I have everyone's attention please? My name is Elliott Wilson and I am Mr. Gaines' editor at Morrison Publishing. As you all already know Hank Gaines is the author of the life books. I was the one that suggested Mr. Gaines use a woman's name as his pen name. He fought me on it at first, but I convinced him. In the writing business, it is common practice for authors to use pen names. It helps to maintain their privacy. In this instance, I also felt it would be better given our target audience that the pen name and image of the author be that of an older woman. So please, please, save all your questions for Mr. Gaines. He can explain the rest better than I can." With that he left the podium and Hank approached right behind him.

There were a mixture of boos and applause from the audience. Hank held his hands up to quiet the crowd. Finally it got silent.

"As most of you know I'm Hank Gaines. I also wrote the life books under the pseudonym Hannah Grimes. I see quite a few of you holding those books now."

"Hannah Grimes was actually my grandmother and she taught me a lot. She is my inspiration. So while I wrote the books under her name, the words and experiences are hers as well as mine."

"As many of you know, I used to be a boxer years ago. And although I was making good money, my life was spiraling out of control and empty. My grandmother had passed by then, but it was her remembered wisdom that helped me find my way. And after I left the boxing world, I thought maybe her wisdom and my experiences could help others."

"The problem was how to get people to listen. I allowed my editor to convince me that no one would buy a self-help book written by an ex-boxer named Hank."

The audience laughed.

"My life is good now. I have a successful restaurant and spa, good friends and hopefully an understanding fan base."

The audience cheered now, waving his book.

"But what I don't have is the love of my life. You see, I deceived someone very dear to me, because once I realized how much she meant to me, how much my books meant to her, I didn't tell her all about myself. I don't know why I didn't come out and tell her I wrote the books she loves so much. I guess it's that male DNA that keeps you from doing and saying the right things." A few women nodded in the audience. And one yelled out, "Did you want to tell her?"

"Yes, I wanted to tell her, and there were times that I was about to, but something always interrupted us."

The woman in front of Atlanta shouted, "Maybe you don't really love her."

"Oh, I do love this woman. There's no doubt in my mind. She's the best thing that has happened to me. If you notice in all my books, I never talk about love as in loving another person and giving yourself to them. It was always about taking care of and loving yourself. Well, that's because I've never loved anyone else—until now. But now I think I've lost her. So that book, about loving someone else more than yourself, will never come out without her."

Atlanta stood in the middle of the crowd and suddenly felt alone. She barely heard the mumblings of agreement and sympathy for Hank's plight from the people around her. Her sole focus was on the man who just declared his love for her on national television and perhaps the world.

While she had gone quiet, no one else had. The crowd erupted in applause, and the media began shooting off questions to Hank. Atlanta squeezed her way through the bodies toward the podium. She didn't have too much trouble, since the crowd behind her gave her momentum. When she reached the foot of the stage, she stood there for a moment looking up.

Was she willing to risk her heart getting broken? He was right. The books never talked about falling in love or being in love. But they did talk about taking risks. And even if things don't work out, you get up and brush yourself off.

She was finally willing to do that.

She yelled Hank's name.



Hank was overwhelmed by the reception he received. People where applauding him. He heard one fan yell, if his girlfriend didn't want him she did. His fans understood and forgave him. That was evident when they began chanting his name. Books were being waved at him and the hotel security was having trouble controlling the crowd.

Despite all the pandemonium, Hank's attention was caught by one lone voice. The cry of his name sounded different than the adoring chants. He had been looking out past the reporters over the crowd, but the sound was near. He looked down near the edge of the stage, saw a beloved face, and stepped in that direction. He bent down and took Atlanta by the wrists, pulling her up on stage with him.

He wrapped his arms around her waist. "I'm sorry," he said. "Forgive me. I love you. I want you in my life; please don't leave me again. I know it's too soon, but I can't risk losing you again. Marry me."

Atlanta placed her head against his forehead, and hung on to his arms like she wasn't letting go. "I do forgive you. I love you too."

When his lips covered hers Atlanta saw flashes of light all around them from the cameras that took the shot.

Hank broke the kiss, uncaring of the questions and shouts around them from the crowd going wild. "But will you marry me?"

Atlanta looked over the crowd and heard the room yell a unanimous, Yes! "I think they just answered for me." She turned to look into his eyes. "Yes, I'll marry you."

Their lips touched once more and everything else disappeared.

The End

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LaVerne Thompson is a wife, mother and former intellectual property attorney. An avid reader and multi-published author, she writes about what she loves to read most contemporary, fantasy, and sci/fi romances. To learn more about her work visit her website at lavernethompson.webs.com or check out her blog at isisindcblog.blogspot.com to learn more about her.

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Stephanie Williams:

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Promises

Hold On