



— THE DOWNING BROTHERS SERIES —

# *A Rebound Affair*

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A Total-E-Bound Publication



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A Rebound Affair

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**Warning:** This book contains sexually explicit content which is only suitable for mature readers. This story has been rated *Total-e-sizzling*.

**The Downing Brothers**

**A REBOUND AFFAIR**

**Nadia Aidan**

## *Dedication*

To all my wonderful and loyal readers.

## *Trademarks Acknowledgement*

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Stetson Hats: Stetson Hat Co.

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Fortune: Time Inc.

## Chapter One

"I think I'm in love with your wife."

Jackson Downing stood ramrod straight, and steeled himself for the blow he knew would come. He deserved to be pummelled by Jacob and they both knew it. His brother had warned him that his attraction to Camille was more than *just* attraction. But he'd sworn to Jacob he was over her, that he'd accepted their marriage and was moving on, but he had lied. He was certain Jacob had known he'd lied, but his brother had said nothing at the time.

A tense silence permeated the room as they regarded each other warily. He had to admit he was a little surprised Jacob hadn't launched over the desk and beat the shit out of him as soon as the words left his mouth. Jacob had inherited the infamous Irish temper of their maternal grandfather, more so than any of the Downing brothers. So, he took it as a good sign that since Jacob hadn't resorted to violence, he still might be open to talking this out.

"I know," was all Jacob said, his already harsh face giving away nothing as he sat behind his desk, his entire body rigid.

"I figured you knew, which is why I'm leaving."

Jacob sighed. "And I had a feeling you were going to say that." He stood up from his chair and Jackson met the identical dark sapphire gaze of his brother.

"I don't want you to go, but I know this has been hard for you."

Jacob had no idea. Watching the woman he'd spent the past seven months falling in love with walk down the aisle with the brother he was closest to, was more than hard—it was excruciating.

"I know you've been itching to get back down south to oversee the drilling project on Natalie's old land in Hockley but with the wedding it had to be pushed aside..."

"And now you want to go in my place."

Jackson shrugged. "It could take a while to get the pipe in place, months even. You're a newly wed and it just doesn't make sense for you to be gone for months away from Camille

when I can go instead.” He wanted to add that he *needed* this trip more than anyone else, but he didn’t. They both knew how desperate he was to get away from Macon, Texas.

“It’s going to be a tough job and you’re going to have your hands full with a foreman who is pissed that we’re the new owners. I haven’t met him, but he hasn’t returned any of my calls and our email exchanges have been less than polite—”

“I don’t care. I’ll deal with it.” He knew Jacob wouldn’t deny him this. Besides they were well aware that with his laidback attitude and easygoing demeanour, Jackson had always been better suited than any of his brothers in dealing with business conflicts and handling negotiations.

“Alright.” Jacob nodded. “If you want to go then the job is yours.”

Jackson released a drawn out breath. Separated by just two years, Jackson knew his brother well, and could tell from the strained expression on Jacob’s face that he really didn’t want him to go, at least not like this. But, they both knew he had to.

There was no way he could remain in Macon any longer. Being away and dealing with the distraction of getting the pipeline running would hopefully give him the time he needed to get over Camille.

It had all seemed so simple. For six months Camille would serve his sexual needs and those of his three brothers, and when her time was up they would all walk away. Then, Camille would get her ranch back when it was over. But at some point along the way, Jacob and Camille had raised the stakes by falling in love. It was just unfortunate that he’d fallen in love with her too. He didn’t begrudge his brother or Camille for finding happiness with each other. But he would be lying if he didn’t admit that he hadn’t taken it so well when Camille chose his brother over him. That she’d fallen in love with his brother and not him.

One of the hardest things he’d ever had to do was to stand beside Jacob and watch as he said “I do” to Camille. Ever since that day he’d been distant and withdrawn from Jacob, and it pained him to think their relationship would never be the same ever again. That had been the deciding factor for him. He had to leave and at least *try* to move on for all their sakes. He’d lost Camille and if he didn’t learn to get over her, he would lose his brother too.

He was determined to do everything in his power to not let that happen. He would head down to Hockley for a few months, lick his wounds and try to forget about Camille, his feelings for her and the fact that he’d fallen in love with his brother’s wife.

\* \* \* \*

"Damn you, Natalie," BJ Parker muttered angrily, her gaze following the shiny black Mercedes as it made its way along the dirt road towards where she stood in front of the ranch house.

Her half-sister had some nerve selling Cottonmouth Ranch and leaving her to deal with the new owner—*alone*. They both agreed that in order to pay off their father's gambling debts they would have to sell the ranch, but that didn't mean she had to like it.

She'd been the foreman since graduating from college ten years ago and had always envisioned taking over when their dad retired. But that vision had faded when her father fell ill two years ago and she discovered he was living under a mountain of debt. She'd done all she could to keep Cottonmouth solvent, but it hadn't been enough. By the time she'd taken over, it was already too late.

After their father's death, she and Natalie quickly sold the ranch, settled with their dad's creditors and moved on. Well, at least that's how her older sister saw things. Natalie had always hated life on the ranch, and now she was pleasantly oblivious as she carried on with her lavish life in Chicago, far away from the family ranch, their small town of Hockley, and all the troubles that selling Cottonmouth hadn't erased. Troubles *she* still had to deal with—the main one being the arrogant and overbearing new owner who had just parked his gleaming, luxury car smack dab in front of her home.

His incessant emails and phone calls had rankled on her nerves, but she realised it was nothing compared to the ire she felt when he filed out of his car.

She was a tall woman, nearly six feet, and despite the distance she could tell he would tower over her. She hated that, but not quite as much as she hated how his thickly muscled frame rippled beneath his custom tailored black suit.

"Damn, pretty-boy, Jackson Downing," she found herself grumbling under her breath as he strolled towards her. She had never met him personally, but had seen the many covers of *Fortune* and *Money* with Jackson and his brothers placed front and centre. So, it was hard *not* to recognise the handsome ranch owner, even with his eyes hidden behind tinted aviator shades.

As he neared, she felt the hair on the back of her neck rise. She also knew she wore a surly frown across her face. She despised him and his brothers for buying her ranch, and the fact that she was now his employee. She wasn't a big fan of his flashy city-slicker demeanour either. Men like him didn't know a damn about hard work and the long days spent running a ranch. And if his emails were any evidence, she had no doubt he was going to bulldoze over her and the meticulous operation she ran just to assert his newfound authority and show everyone who was in charge.

"Good morning. I'm Jackson Downing, the new owner of Cottonmouth Ranch. I called last night to let the foreman know I was coming in today," he said as he came to a halt before her.

He extended his hand, flashing her a dimpled smile, but she didn't acknowledge either as she kept her arms folded across her breasts, her expression blank. She knew she was being rude, especially when he shot her a quizzical frown and let his hand fall back to his side, but she didn't care. As far as she was concerned, he was not welcome.

Several seconds ticked by, the air thick with tension, as they stood in silence. Finally, he cleared his throat in a somewhat futile attempt to ease the awkward moment.

"I wonder if you can help me. I'm looking for BJ Parker."

"And you just found her," she said stiffly, bracing herself for what she knew would come next. No matter how many times it happened, she always got a thrill watching the shock cross the faces of men expecting to meet, well—a *man*. And this time was no exception. Jackson Downing tugged his sunglasses from his face to stare down at her with questioning blue eyes, as if somehow the glasses had hidden the fact that she was, after all, a woman.

"You're BJ Parker? The foreman."

"That's me."

His brows knitted together as he frowned. "I...um was expecting—"

"A man?" she offered.

"No. I spoke with Natalie before I arrived. She told me her sister was the foreman. I knew you were a woman."

She smiled at the puzzled look on his face. He looked like a fish out of water. Most people did when they discovered her svelte, blonde sister, was in fact *her* sister.

"But I didn't expect you to be—"

"Black," she said with a slight shrug. "Natalie's my half-sister." Her lips curled into a tiny grin. "I guess you can tell which *half* we don't share."

She could say that again.

He swept his gaze over her, doing his best not to let his eyes linger. Yet even with his brief perusal of the woman known as BJ Parker he did not miss the subtle curves on her tall slender frame, carefully hidden behind a pair of well worn jeans and a baggy plaid shirt. He also didn't miss the exquisite beauty of her face, despite the Stetson that cast a dark shadow over her features. Even if she'd stood before him with a paper bag over her head he would have still been able to tell she was a natural beauty, a beauty that was rivalled only by her blatant animosity towards him.

He was surprised when a wave of heat inched across his skin, and he cleared his throat in an attempt to help clear his head. This woman was an endless parade of surprises. And from what little information he could pry out of Natalie on his drive there that morning, she was also going to be tough to win over. Whatever interest his body had in her would have to be ignored because he was there to do business, and nothing more.

"Well, I'm glad to finally meet you," he said with a curt nod. He almost extended his hand again, but then quickly remembered she hadn't been too keen on shaking his hand the first time. Apparently, she also wasn't too keen on meeting him since she didn't offer a similar reply, the lovely features of her face as stoic as a blank mask.

He let out an inward sigh. This was going to be a long trip if she didn't lose the attitude, but he didn't have the energy to deal with her or her surly disposition right now. He could confront her later. Right now all he wanted to do was unpack and settle in after the five-hour drive south.

He spun away from her, popped the trunk and dug out two large black suitcases. As soon as he moved towards her, he noticed her entire demeanour had changed. She went from being just slightly rude to openly hostile, as she stood before the two steps leading up to the house, her stance wide with her arms still folded tightly across her chest. She looked like a bouncer guarding the entrance to an exclusive nightclub in Manhattan. It would have been laughable had he not been so exhausted and eager to get to his room where he could unwind.

"What are you doing?"

"I'm taking my things inside so that I can relax before we talk business." He stepped to the side, but she shifted in that direction to block his path.

"I don't think so, Mr. Downing. This is my home and you weren't invited."

"Not according to Natalie. She said I could stay here for as long as I liked, so that's what I'm doing."

Angry red flames flared to life in her topaz gaze, and he knew instantly that those were the last words she wanted to hear.

"Well, Natalie doesn't live here. I do. And as the foreman, I decide who comes and goes on this property."

His eyes hardened, and he levelled her with a steely glare, causing her to take a tiny step back. From the wary expression on her face, she must have quickly realised he was not to be trifled with. But, just in case she wasn't too sure, his next words made it absolutely clear that he would not be pushed around by her.

"You don't get to make the decisions around here anymore, BJ, because as of right now, *you're fired.*"

"What?"

He almost pitied BJ Parker, who stood there with her mouth agape and her eyes wide. He was sure she hadn't been expecting that. And truth be told, he hadn't really wanted to throw down the gauntlet in such a high handed manner. He needed this woman because she knew the land better than anyone else. But from what he knew of her, and what he'd just witnessed, she was not used to people challenging her nor was she used to taking orders, and he couldn't stand for that. The Downing brothers were now the new owners of Cottonmouth, and she would either have to accept that and learn to work with him or she could find herself a new job.

"This is *my* home," she gritted out angrily.

Her caramel hued cheeks glowed red with fury, and despite the rage pouring off of her in waves, he still found himself feeling a twinge of guilt as he glimpsed the pain in her eyes. Unlike her sister, he could tell this place meant something to her and for some inexplicable reason he knew that tearing her from her land would be like tearing out her soul. He empathised with her, but didn't cave under the weight of her fury. This was business and if she couldn't do her job then she couldn't stay.

"You cannot kick me out of my home and off my land."

"Let's get this one thing straight—by law I *can*, but I don't *want* to and that's certainly not why I came here. I came here to get the pipeline up and running in order to funnel out oil, but if you're determined to make things difficult for me then I will have no choice but to fire you."

"You won't find oil without me," she said stiffly, her eyes as hard and cold as granite.

Something about the way she said those words had him seeing red. He was a man slow to anger so the very fact he felt heat crawling along the back of his neck was not a good sign for either of them.

Still holding his bags, he closed the distance between them so that she was forced to crane her head back in order to meet his ferocious gaze.

"I don't tend to do well with threats or blackmail so if you have plans to sabotage this operation you won't have to worry about getting fired because I'll have your ass thrown in jail."

She snorted, seemingly unmoved by his threat, which was surprising. Most people caved under the weight of his fury.

"I won't have to lift a finger to sabotage you because as soon as you send me away you'll be hard pressed to locate even a single drop of oil. And don't think Natalie can help you. She hasn't spent more than a night here since she was eighteen. You can fire me, *city-boy* but then be prepared to comb over more than a hundred acres looking for what I could find with my eyes closed."

The smug look on her face annoyed the hell out of him, but it was the way she called him a *city-boy* that really pissed him off. She probably thought because he wore a suit and drove a fancy car that he would prove himself to be a walking moron if left out in the wide open space of the Texas plains. But she was wrong. All of his brothers spent their days working out on the ranch. Even Jacob spent a fair amount of time doing ranch work, despite the fact that he was the main one who ran the business end. If this woman thought he was a spoilt and pampered rich playboy then she was in for a surprise.

"I don't care if you can find oil in your sleep. If you can't find a way to cooperate with me then I will have no choice but to let you go."

If looks could kill, he would have been dead as soon as he stepped out of his car, but the glare she shot him now was a thousand times worse. He half expected to go up in flames at any moment from the look in her eyes, which was damn near incendiary.

"I can cooperate as long as you understand that I'm in charge," she finally bit out, and he knew it must have pained her to say even that.

"I have no interest in running your ranch. My only reason for being here is to set up drilling operations. That's it," he said, although he itched to remind her that she was *not* in charge, at least not entirely, but he wasn't one to look a gift horse in the mouth. She was willing to cooperate, which meant he could finally unpack his things, and get some rest. He could deal with the semantics of their arrangement later, when he was well rested.

She continued to stand there for a long moment, still rooted in the same spot, and he wondered wearily if she was going to force him to fire her for real this time. Luckily, she just shrugged and turned away from him.

"I'll show you to the guest room," she called from over her shoulder, her long braid whipping down her back. Jackson didn't miss her less than enthused expression before turning her back to him, or the deadpan tone of her voice. Even if he had, the rigid lines of her slender back would have given her away as she disappeared inside the house on long, stiff legs.

He slipped inside to follow after her, all the while mentally preparing himself for the hard reality that the next several months were going to be hell.

It was a sad irony. BJ was as beautiful as a desert rose, but about as pleasant as a cactus, and he had no doubt she would prove to be a thorn in his side the entire time.

## Chapter Two

"What are you saying?" BJ could feel heat rising along the back of her neck. The mid-morning Texas sun beat down on her, but that had nothing to do with her skyrocketing temperature.

"I'm sorry, BJ," the man said with a shrug.

BJ glared at Dwight McDonnell. *He* was sorry? She'd show him sorry.

"You're sorry? No, I'm sorry. How the hell am I going to run this place without water?"

Dwight had the good sense to at least appear remorseful. She tried to rein in her anger. It wasn't his fault. He was only doing his job. Cottonmouth rented well water from the neighbouring ranch, McDonnell Hill, but with their debts and mounting bills, she'd put off paying the McDonnell's for three months. She knew if she didn't pay today Cottonmouth would have to find another water supply.

"Can you at least give me a few more days?"

"I'm sorry, BJ but every month you keep telling me to give you a few more days." He sighed. "I'm *really* sorry."

BJ started to beg again, but stopped when the screen door banged shut. Jackson sauntered down the front porch steps as if he owned the place. She twisted her lips into a surly frown. Well, technically he did own the place.

"Good morning. What seems to be the problem?"

"Who says there's a problem?" She shot Dwight a hard look, the expression on her face indicating she wanted him to keep his mouth shut. She didn't need Jackson Downing sweeping in there to save her family home. She could take care of this all by herself.

"Jackson Downing," he said extending his hand to Dwight for a brief shake. "I'm the new owner. Is there something I can help you with?"

Dwight glanced between her and Jackson, before apparently deciding Jackson was his ticket to getting paid. "W—well if you're the new owner then yes, there is." She glared at Dwight, but that didn't stop him from telling Jackson she was behind on the well rent.

When he was done, Jackson simply nodded his head in the direction of the house. "If you come inside I can write you a cheque."

BJ stood there fuming as they walked off, leaving her standing alone, glaring at their backs. It was so easy for him. Just write a cheque and be done with it. She worked hard to keep this place going and he simply walked right in as if nothing was too big or tough to handle.

She stomped off towards the stables, but drew up short when she heard her name.

"Why didn't you tell me about the water?"

She spun around, levelling Jackson with a stern glare. "Because I was handling it."

His expression was incredulous. "You were handling it? How? You were three months behind. What else have you forgotten to tell me?"

"I haven't *forgotten* to tell you anything."

He marched towards her, his sapphire eyes flashing with red sparks. She gasped when he gripped her by the arms, pinning her against his body.

"Let's get this straight, BJ. If I wake up tomorrow and find anything from the electricity to the cable cut off, you're fired."

What was with him and always threatening to fire her? "We don't have cable."

His eyes hardened. "This is a joke to you. You think if you keep me in the dark long enough and frustrate me to no end I will give up and walk away."

That's exactly what she'd thought, but she had the feeling that Jackson Downing wouldn't be as easy to get rid of as she hoped. He'd already lasted two weeks, and she'd been trying her damndest. But, if there was ever any doubt that Jackson was made of sterner stuff, his next words erased it.

"I'm not walking away, BJ so you can end this war right here and right now. Even if I did leave, I would only send another one of my brothers here to take my place. Either way you're stuck with a new owner, so get used to it."

"I don't want to get used to it. I want you to go away."

"You sound like a child. And besides we talked about this when I first got here. If you can't get over this then you need to leave."

She couldn't believe he had called her childish. Her temper flared again. Maybe she should quit. Maybe she should just walk away and find a job elsewhere, because she seriously doubted that she and Jackson would ever manage to see eye-to-eye on anything.

For the first time she realised he still held her by the arms, with her body pressed against his hard chest. She tried to pull free of his grasp, but he only gripped her tighter, reminding her that Jackson was a very strong, very *virile* man. A warm flush spread over her, heating her skin, and despite her best effort not to, she shivered.

She fought to mask her surprise, and deftly avoided his gaze, but she could not escape the weight of his stare. She refused to look at him, she couldn't do it—not right now, not after her body had just reacted to him. She wasn't attracted to him. Couldn't be. She could barely stand his guts.

"I need to get back to work," she said, her voice unsteady. She wondered if he noticed.

"Do you think you can push it back to this afternoon? The reason why I came out here in the first place was to invite you to lunch."

Her head snapped up, and before she could stop herself, she blurted out, "What?"

"Lunch? It's that meal humans eat in the middle of the day." His lips furled into a crooked grin, and a tiny dimple winked at her. Her stomach did a flip-flop, and she shivered again. What the hell was wrong with her?

"I know what lunch is, smart ass." She jerked against him again, and this time he let her go. "I guess my question is what for? Why are you inviting *me* to lunch?"

"Besides the fact that we both have to eat?" He shrugged. "I would like for us to sit down and talk. I'm hoping you can get me up to speed on this place, and lunch seemed as good a time as any—especially since you seem to be so busy practically every hour of the day..."

His voice trailed off, a pointed reference to how she'd been purposely dodging his attempts to talk to her about the ranch. She started to refuse, as she'd done many times before, but when he smiled again she finally understood why he'd been voted one of *People* magazine's "Sexiest Men Alive". It was that damn dimple. Women probably threw their panties at him when he walked down the street. Hell, she was thinking about tossing her own, even though she knew he wouldn't want them.

He was only trying to charm her in order to get her to go to lunch, where he would just pry information out of her, so that he could do her job for her. No, thanks.

"I have a lot of work to do."

"It's only lunch, Bria," he said softly as if he were tiptoeing around a rattle snake.

Her name on his lips made everything inside her freeze. The only person who'd ever called her Bria had been her mother. BJ had always thought it was far too pretty of a name for a girl like her, hence, BJ. But when Jackson said it, it actually sounded quite nice.

"It's just a lunch so we can talk about how to keep Cottonmouth afloat. I'm sure you want that as much as I do."

She sighed. He knew he had her. She lived for this place. She would do anything to see that it didn't fall into the red again. Besides, she couldn't avoid him forever, and it was apparent he'd caught on to her dodging act.

"Fine. Let me just grab a few things and I'll meet you back here in ten minutes."

\* \* \* \*

Lunch turned out to be quite interesting.

BJ had complained from the moment they set foot in the fine dining Italian restaurant.

*She was underdressed.*

*They should have gone to a regular place.*

*She really wasn't a big fan of Italian food.*

Jackson sat there, carefully hiding his smile. She was nervous and felt out of place, and he didn't know why, but he found that endearing. BJ wasn't as tough as she pretended to be.

It felt good to see that *Ms. Thorny Rose* was human just like everyone else.

And after she got past her nerves, lunch went smoothly. He'd been surprised. They actually had a lot in common, and the conversation flowed so easily that it wasn't until they were leaving that he realised he'd hardly asked any of the questions about the ranch that he'd wanted to.

Next time.

Next time?

He made it out to be like they'd gone out on some sort of date, and now he was actually looking forward to doing it again.

He froze.

He glanced over at her, his lips pursed into a frown. He wasn't there to get to know her. He was there to get information out of her.

Unease washed over him when he realised what was happening. He didn't want to notice her as a woman *or* be attracted to her, but that didn't erase the fact that he was. He was intrigued by her—the toughest talking woman he'd ever met, with one of the prettiest faces he'd ever seen. She was a wondrous study of contrasts and there were times when he caught himself looking at her, when she wasn't aware of his presence.

He cursed inwardly, his attraction to her catching him by surprise because she wasn't even his type. For starters, she was tall. The top of her head would touch his chin if they stood facing each other. She was too tall, too edgy, with too much attitude. There was no denying that she was all woman, but he liked his women softer, rounder, more voluptuous. She was rail thin. His eyes dipped to her chest. All right, not *that* thin, but her breasts would barely fill his palm, if that.

His cock hardened. Apparently it didn't care how big or small her breasts were. He shifted uncomfortably, trying to ease the tightness in his pants. He had no business thinking about BJ's breasts, or any other part of her anatomy for that matter.

"What's wrong with you?"

She stared at him with curious eyes, her brow furrowed. He realised then that he'd abruptly stopped in the middle of the sidewalk. She must have thought he was nuts.

"Nothing," he said, lightly grabbing her elbow. "We better get back."

He ushered her towards the parking lot, but stopped at the sound of a voice calling her name from behind them.

They spun around, at the same time the man shouting her name caught up with them.

"Lou. Hi."

Jackson frowned when she stepped away from him to embrace Lou in a hug that went on far too long for it to just be a friendly gesture.

When she finally managed to disentangle herself, she introduced them, but by then Jackson barely heard her. He couldn't even be certain he mumbled anything in return that would be considered polite.

His gaze remained glued to the young man who stood there with stars in his eyes, staring down at BJ. Jackson took an instant disliking to him. There was just something about Lou that made Jackson want to draw BJ under his arm and shield her from the guy.

"We better get going, Lou," BJ said after a few minutes. "It was nice running into you."

Jackson didn't feel the same so he simply nodded. The vibes he got from Lou didn't sit right with him. The man was eager—a little *too* eager.

"That was rude of you," BJ said as soon as he slid behind the steering wheel.

"What was rude of me?"

"The way you treated Lou. You barely said three words to him."

He'd said three. That was three more than he'd wanted to. "So? How was I rude? I spoke, didn't I?"

Her eyes widened, her golden pupils darkening to the colour of aged whisky. "Is that how you city boys treat people? You think you're so much better than the rest of us that you can just ignore everyone around you?"

"City boy?" His brows lifted. "I was raised in Macon! It's smaller than Hockley, which is basically a glorified suburb of Houston." He couldn't believe he was trading insults with her on where they'd grown up. He turned on the car, his entire body vibrating with anger.

"Besides, if you hadn't been so busy sucking up compliments from your lapdog, you would have realised Lou is nothing but a phony—"

"A phony?" She folded her arms across her chest. "How so?"

"He's a gold-digger."

He gritted his teeth at the husky laughter that floated around him. She had a beautiful laugh, but it grated on his ears at that particular moment.

"How could Lou possibly be digging for gold? If you haven't noticed, I'm practically broke, and Cottonmouth would have gone under had you not come along. He should have been sucking up to *you* if he was a smart gold-digger."

Jackson frowned. She was smart—she had to be to run a ranch like Cottonmouth on her own. So, why was she being so thick-headed?

"Trust me, Bria. He's a gold-digger. There's oil on your land, and as soon as I find it, you will be a rich woman." She had her sister, Natalie to thank for that. Natalie may have sold their land, but not future rights to oil and gold profits. Natalie and Bria would only receive a small percentage, but if his hunch was right, that small percentage was worth at least six figures.

"So the only man that would ever want me has to be after my money. Is that it?"

She turned away from him, and he realised too late that he'd stuck his foot in his mouth. He hadn't meant to hurt her feelings, but he was telling the truth. Lou had dollar signs in his eyes when he looked at her. The man was no good.

"Don't go putting words in my mouth. You know every man that wants you isn't after your money, but Lou is."

The withering look she shot him told him his last statement hadn't made things better.

She was beautiful. Men were probably beating down her door—well, if they could get past that acid tongue of hers. She had to know that most men were not after her for money, not with everything she had to offer.

He glanced over at her again. Her face was practically glued to the window, her body rigid. For her to say what she had—to immediately jump to the conclusion that a man wouldn't want her unless she came with money, made him think that maybe she didn't realise just how special she was. Maybe she had no idea how utterly captivating she was, and that even after only two weeks, and despite her animosity towards him, he found himself drawn to her, to the point that he had to tell himself—and his body to leave her alone.

He shook his head, and turned his attention back to the road. He'd taken her out to lunch to soften her up, but like the idiot he was, he'd insulted her, and now she was back to being cold as ice.

Maybe that was for the best. He found himself attracted to BJ, but he really didn't need to get entangled with a woman, especially *this* woman, not after everything he'd been through.

BJ was a complication he could ill afford.

\* \* \* \*

Just when she had started to think they could get along...

Lunch had turned out surprisingly well. He was funny, witty, charming—even nice. But as soon as they set foot in his car, the real Jackson had re-emerged yet again.

BJ should have known they weren't meant to be anything remotely resembling friends. He was a moron, an idiot, a complete asshole.

So she wasn't pretty—all right, she got it. He didn't have to rub it in by pointing out that she had to be draped in dollar bills for a man to notice her.

She took a sip of wine and closed her eyes. See, what he had done? In just two weeks, he'd driven her to drink!

Her eyelids snapped open at the sound of hushed footsteps along the staircase. He was up. She jumped out of her chair and dumped her glass of wine down the sink, trying to make a hasty exit out of the kitchen before he made it down the stairs, but she wasn't fast enough.

She collided into him, just as he was entering the kitchen. The solid wall of his chest forced the air out of her lungs and he gripped her arms to keep her from falling backwards.

Damn it. Even in the middle of the night she couldn't seem to escape him.

"What are you doing up so late?" He scowled down at her.

"I could say the same to you. I couldn't sleep."

His face softened. "Me either."

Something flashed in his gaze that made her wonder what it was that kept his nights sleepless, but she refused to ask. It was none of her business.

He leant towards her and sniffed the air. "Were you drinking?"

"Wine."

He arched a brow. "Can I have some?"

She looked at him again, seeing him clearly for the first time. He looked haggard, his eyes haunted. She felt herself softening towards him just a bit. Whatever had kept him up weighed heavily on him. If anyone needed a drink, it was him.

"Sit down. I'll get it."

She reached for the red wine under the counter, and filled two wine glasses.

Handing him one, she sat down across from him, and took a sip.

Silence stretched between them as they drank, both retreating to the dark corners of their minds. She itched to ask him why he was still up, but she tempered her curiosity. He didn't seem like he was in the mood for questions, and neither was she.

"I'm sorry about what I said earlier."

She stared at him. She hadn't been expecting him to acknowledge what had happened at lunch, let alone an apology, so she sat there speechless.

"As pretty as you are, I'm sure you get plenty of interest from men and, in turn, are interested in many of them right back. It was just that with your friend earlier, I could tell he was all wrong for you, but if you like him," he shrugged, "I don't think he's a good guy, but if you like him then that's your business, not mine. I shouldn't have interfered."

She sort of heard everything he said, but she really couldn't get past the part where he'd called her pretty. Her. Bria Jaslene 'BJ' Parker? Jackson Downing had called her pretty, and he seemed to believe it. She looked away because she didn't want him to see the disbelief in her eyes.

The only reason why he thought she was pretty was because he obviously hadn't met her sister, or seen a picture of her mother. Those two were pretty, *no* gorgeous. Now, her? Well, she was a different story. She had always been too tall, too skinny, her features too angular, her actions too rough. Next to her mother and Natalie, she'd never been girly, or feminine, or even passably pretty.

Jackson noticed the change in her the moment he started to apologise. She didn't look at him, and the entire room grew chilly, as if the temperature had dipped twenty degrees.

She abruptly shot to her feet and the chair scraped against the floor, nearly tumbling over.

"Where are you going?"

"Back to bed."

He grabbed her arm before she could scurry out of there.

"What's wrong with you? I thought you would appreciate my apology." He didn't mean to raise his voice, but he had apologised and she hadn't so much as said a word. He was trying here, but she had to at least meet him halfway.

"I do appreciate your apology. Thank you. I'm just tired. I better get to bed now."

He narrowed his gaze. She was lying. She couldn't even look him in the eye. What was up with her? One minute she was hot, the next she was cold. What had he said to set her off this time?

If there was one thing he knew, he knew women. He searched his brain, trying to piece together the mystery that was BJ Parker, but when he settled on an explanation it was so baffling he swore he had to be wrong. And yet, it was the only thing that made sense.

"So is Lou your boyfriend or something?" He asked tentatively, testing the waters. If he knew nothing else, he knew that with BJ blunt questions would get him nowhere.

"What does that have to do with me going to bed?"

"Nothing. It's just that you seemed upset when I mentioned him just now. I thought I offended you because he's your boyfriend."

Her eyes darkened and he wondered if she would even answer him. Then, she said softly, "No, Lou's not my boyfriend."

"Good. You deserve better Bria. You're far too lovely..."

She stiffened, and he knew his hunch, as absurd as it seemed, was right.

He still held her by the arm, but he reached for her with his free hand, when she tried to pull away, the look in her eyes as blank and empty as a cloudless sky.

"Bria—"

"Good night, Jackson."

She struggled to wrench herself free, but he trapped her between his body and the refrigerator.

He didn't want to embarrass her by pressing the issue, but he found it hard to believe that she didn't see herself the way he did—the way he knew other men did as well.

He pressed his lower body against her, making words unnecessary at that point, there was no need for declarations with the evidence of his arousal right there.

She gasped, her eyes wide, as if she couldn't believe that he was aroused by her, that he wanted her. Damn it, he wanted her. He'd tossed and turned practically every night thinking about her. This was undoubtedly the tenth night she'd haunted his dreams, and hell, he'd only been there two fucking weeks.

He'd been in a painful state of arousal from the moment he walked into the kitchen and found her there, dressed in a poor excuse for a night shirt. The practically sheer white cotton moulded to her subtle curves, the moonlight outlining every dip and valley.

He dipped his head to inhale her scent and she shivered against him. That was the last thing she should have done. His body grew tighter, all blood leaving his brain and flowing straight to his cock.

He leant into her and when she lifted her head, he took that as a sign. He brushed his lips against hers, giving her one last chance to push him away. When her tongue darted out to sweep across his lips, he groaned low in his throat, crushing his mouth to hers. He plundered inside with his tongue, tasting her, coaxing tiny moans of pleasure from her full lips.

He rocked against her, his cock grinding into her belly. Every inch of him was on fire and all he could think about was freeing his aching shaft and sliding into her wet heat.

Pressing his body closer, he skimmed his hand down the length of her leg. Her skin was smooth, the silky slide making his body grow harder with need. His questing hand caused her shirt to hitch higher up her thighs, and he slipped his fingers between her legs, a deep, guttural growl escaping his lips when he found nothing but the hot wet heat of her.

He lifted his head, and grinned. "No panties, Bria?" His hardnosed foreman wasn't as uptight as he'd first assumed.

Her eyes widened, her cheeks blooming red with embarrassment and he crushed his lips to hers again, claiming her sweet lips in a searing kiss. He pushed inside her with his fingers, stroking deep, the warm slide of her pussy causing violent tremors to rack him as he fought for control.

She writhed against him and her breasts grazed his chest. He pumped inside her tight sheath, harder and faster. When he rubbed the tiny nub at the mouth of her cunt, she nearly came undone, her body quivering.

He waged his assault on her body with his lips, his hands, until she splintered in his arms, coming on his still thrusting fingers, her groan of pleasure flowing from her mouth to his. She was so wet, so sticky, and the sweet musk of her cum filled the room.

He pulled away from her, ending their kiss, and a small smile curled his lips at her puffy, bee stung mouth. He leant into her, a sigh escaping him. He ached to sheath himself in her pulsing heat, to hear the soft cry of his name on her lips as he fucked her to climax after climax.

He'd never been this consumed by need for a woman before, this complete obsession to claim her. The only other time he'd come close to feeling this way had been when he'd been with Camille.

He stilled, abruptly jerking away from BJ.

*Camille.*

He stared down at the woman before him. She was *nothing* like Camille, or the women he was normally attracted to, and yet, he wanted her with such a burning passion that he hadn't been able to sleep all night.

He eased away from her. No matter how much he wanted her, he couldn't make love to BJ, not tonight, not with his body and mind so conflicted. He was there to do a job, and

had come there in order to get over Camille. The last thing he needed was a rebound affair, and BJ certainly deserved better than that.

“I’m sorry. I shouldn’t have done that.” He knew it was lame, but he gave her a curt nod anyway, because he didn’t know what else to do.

“Good night,” he said weakly and walked out of there before he changed his mind and took her right there up against the refrigerator—something he knew he would only regret later.

## Chapter Three

BJ was already up and preparing to cook breakfast by the time Jackson strolled into the kitchen. She hadn't been able to sleep, their lovemaking from the night before had left her tossing and turning. It had all been so unexpected, and then ended so abruptly. She still wasn't sure how she felt about everything. There was no denying Jackson was an attractive man, but she didn't need, nor *want*, to get entangled with him. She was a small town girl, who hadn't had sex in so long that she'd stopped counting the months. He was cosmopolitan and refined. If the society pages were to be believed, international super models graced his bed on a regular basis. She looked down at her well-worn jeans and faded work shirt. Yeah, she was going to give Heidi Klum a run for her money one of these days.

Footsteps echoed along the staircase and she glanced up just as Jackson barrelled into the kitchen. She bit back a slight grimace when her stomach did a tiny flip-flop at the sight of him. Hadn't she just decided that she didn't need to get involved with him? Her body must not have heard, because it hummed to life at the sight of him dressed in a pair of snug fitting jeans and a plaid shirt that stretched across his muscled chest. The sleeves were rolled up, revealing bronzed forearms covered in a smattering of hair. He was ruggedly sexy, and she shifted on her feet, fighting to ignore the sticky wetness that gathered between her thighs.

Their gazes met, as she swallowed the hard lump in her throat at the look in his sapphire eyes. He knew she was checking him out, but there wasn't a bit of smugness on his face. Instead, a spark of desire burned in his eyes, making her hot all over.

She turned away before he could glimpse the warm blush creeping into her cheeks.

"I was just about to cook breakfast. Do you want some?" She asked nervously, trying to ease the sexual tension in the small kitchen.

"What are you making?" The deep bass of his voice vibrated from behind her, so close that she could feel the slight ripple along her back.

"Eggs, bacon and some toast." She leant away from him, as the smell of his cologne tickled her nose. When he was near, her body grew warm in places she didn't want to think about.

"You want some?" She asked again.

"Sure." He took a seat in the chair across from her, a grin on his face. "So you can cook too? What other hidden talents do you have that I don't know about?"

The question was innocent enough, but the way he said it and the twinkle in his eyes charged it with a sexual energy that made every inch of her body go from warm to scorching.

"I have many, *many* talents, Jackson Downing. You have no idea," she said teasingly, trying to lighten the mood.

"So I've noticed." She pretended not to see his gaze as it lingered on her lips and then her breasts, before inching its way back to her face.

So much for lightening the mood. She turned her attention back to the frying pan and tried to ignore the aching peaks of her nipples that pushed against her bra. She was so out of her element with Jackson. His notion of flirting was potent, lethal even.

"What's on your agenda today?" She asked, trying to steer their conversation back to neutral waters, giving her body time to recover.

"Was going to ride out and survey the land." He arched a brow. "Are you busy today?"

She knew what he was really asking of her, but she played dumb. "I'm always busy. I'm the foreman, remember?"

He stood up. "And that's why I believe you have a good idea where it is I should start looking for oil." His gaze bore into her while she busied herself with dishing eggs onto their plates. She ignored him.

He was there to find oil, and they both knew he needed her help. Even so, she still hadn't gotten over the fact that this was her land—not his. He didn't belong there.

"You've lived here all your life."

He was hedging. "So." She reached around him to set his plate of food on the table. "Orange juice is in the fridge."

He sidestepped her, blocking her path. "I'm not the enemy, Bria. If I find oil, you stand to make money too."

She pursed her lips into a tight line. "If you find oil? You shouldn't even be here. This is my father's land, my father's ranch. Any oil you find should belong to my family, not you."

"I've gone over your books dozens of times." His expression was harsh as he closed the distance between them. "And you're delusional if you think you would have ever been

able to find oil on this land without *some* outside help. Drilling operations are expensive and let's be honest, you would never have been able to raise the capital to afford that type of equipment."

She knew that much, but he just didn't get it. "I don't care about the oil. I never have. All I care about is that this ranch stays in my family."

His eyes softened, but he didn't say a word. What could he say? They both knew he wasn't giving her the ranch back, and that was all she wanted.

"Thanks for breakfast." He said with resignation in his eyes, although, she could tell he wanted to push, yet, he didn't. Instead, he gathered up his plate and started to leave the kitchen then, but she stopped him with a light touch to his arm.

"Wait." She drew in a deep breath. She didn't want to help him, but he was right. He *wasn't* the enemy. He had simply bought a ranch that her sister had sold and they never would have been in that position had it not been for their father in the first place.

Jackson could have stormed in there, fired everyone—including her—and replaced them with his own people, but he hadn't. He was there to find oil, and only oil. The ranching operation he'd left to her. Those were the actions of a good person, a good man. The least she could do was repay his sense of fairness.

"I'll have some free time in the afternoon. Why don't you meet me at the stables?"

He nodded, a small smile creeping across his face, causing her stomach to do another flip. She let out an inward groan at the adorable dimple that peeked out from his cheek. She was supposed to be maintaining a polite distance, not helping him, and certainly not melting into a mass of jelly at his feet. But here she was, softening towards him—and all for what? A cute dimple and sexy smile? She shook her head.

*That's just pathetic, BJ. You could've at least made him work for it.*

\* \* \* \*

BJ knew she'd caved in too easily that morning, but she didn't feel so bad about it when she made it to the stables and caught a glimpse of Jackson Downing trying to saddle up her prized stallion, Bolt.

She grinned as she moved towards them, nearly bursting with laughter when the skittish black stallion refused to let Jackson mount him and instead dumped him right on his ass.

"What's wrong with him? You told me he was broken in." Jackson growled at her stable boy, Riley.

"He is," BJ said with a smirk. "He just doesn't seem to like city slicker boys." She ran her hand across Bolt's shiny black coat, and he neighed softly, inching his way towards her.

"I'll take it from here, Riley," she said, dismissing him. She could mount Bolt without any help. She glanced over at Jackson who was dusting off his jeans – now he was a different story.

*He definitely needs help*, she thought, with an inward grin.

"You want to take out something more docile, maybe one of our ponies?"

"You think this is funny?"

She giggled, "I think this is hilarious. Jackson Downing can't even mount a little colt."

"He's not a colt." Jackson glared at her. "He's fully grown and despite what you and your stable boy say, he's not trained. I know you set me up on purpose."

She launched herself onto Bolt's back, all the while keeping her eyes locked with Jackson's. A smug smile crossed her face when the stallion didn't so much as move a muscle.

"Bolt's as timid as a mouse, if the rider knows what he *or she* is doing." She grabbed the reins. "I'll wait while you grab a pony."

He nailed her with his ice blue eyes. "I'm getting one of your geldings. Maybe you took the time to train one of them."

She didn't even bat an eye at his insult. "Ahhh, so we're giving up on the stallions, I see," she called after him when he disappeared into one of the stalls. "Not man enough?"

Her comment was met with silence. Minutes later, he returned sitting astride her favourite mare, Bluebell.

"Hey! That's my horse." She frowned at him, and at Bluebell—the traitor who was just as happy and content as could be. Bluebell and Bolt were siblings and shared a skittish and wild tempered nature. No one but BJ had ever been able to ride either of them—until now.

"Bluebell's yours? I didn't know."

*Liar.* He'd seen her ride Bluebell twice.

She ignored him and trotted away from the stables, stopping just at the edge of the fence to glance over her shoulder, a small smile on her face.

"Bluebell's quite a handful. Let's see if the famous Downing charm works on *any* species."

She turned around and took off on Bolt, but not before Jackson shot back. "I haven't met one female I couldn't handle—" BJ couldn't quite make out Jackson's last words over the roar of Bolt's hoof beats, but she swore she heard him say, "*including you.*"

They'd see about that.

\* \* \* \*

"This is the last spot," BJ remarked as Jackson dismounted beside her.

They'd been riding all afternoon and his shirt clung to him as sweat trickled down his chest and back. His muscles would ache in the morning, but he didn't care.

It was nice to get out and ride every now and then. He hadn't done it in awhile.

He stood beside her, surveying the land before him. Rugged, desert terrain stretched for miles and miles around him in every direction. Most people would see nothing but barren earth, but Jackson knew that rivers of oil flowed just beneath the surface—they just had to find it.

He turned to face her. "Out of all three of the places we've been to, which one do you think is the best spot?" He had a hunch, but wanted to get her input as well.

She glanced over at him, the light catching her topaz eyes, that were shadowed by the broad brim of her Stetson. He was so mesmerised by their golden depths that it took him a second to realise she was speaking.

"Truthfully, I believe all three have oil beneath them, but I think you'll have the best chance of finding oil here without having to shell out a great deal of money."

"Really? Why?"

She stared straight ahead, her gaze fixed on the sun setting in the distance. "Most of it's a hunch, but there are times when I come out here and swear I can feel the earth move beneath my feet." She turned her honey brown eyes on him. "I know there's oil down there. I can just feel it."

And he believed her. She knew this land as intimately as she would know her lover's body. BJ's heart and soul were tied to Cottonmouth, it was there in her eyes. She was passionate about her ranch, which made him wonder what else she was passionate about.

"You never told me how you ended up becoming the foreman here?"

She gave him a sideways glance. "That's because you never asked." She turned away from him and he trailed after her.

"So I'm asking now."

She stopped and stared up at the sky, her hands shoved into her pockets. "It was all I ever wanted to do. I started off as the foreman after I got back from college. Over time I took over more and more responsibilities, especially when Dad grew ill." She gave him a wry smile. "I guess I should have paid more attention to the books sooner, but Dad never let on that there was a problem, and I preferred being out here running things than stuck in an office."

Her eyes clouded over with a measure of pain and regret, before she masked her emotions. "So, what about you? How'd you end up running a multi-gazillion dollar ranching operation with your three brothers?"

He raised a brow. "A gazillion dollars?"

She grinned. "Close enough."

He shook his head, a small grin on his face. Where did she come up with this stuff? "When our father died, my older brother, Jacob, took over in his place. I guess it was just expected that after we were done with school, we would come back and help him. We all knew he couldn't do it alone."

"And that was a good thing—that you all came back to help him. Look at what the four of you have managed to accomplish together."

He shrugged. "I never really stopped to think of it like that. But I guess it is pretty cool when you do think about it. We've managed to pool our strengths into a successful business that we all love. It's hard work and long hours, but we really love what we do and that we get to do it together."

"Four workaholic bachelor brothers." A teasing glint lit up her eyes. "You think any of you will stop long enough to enjoy it, settle down and count your bazillion dollars?"

He stilled, the blood freezing in his veins. She was only joking, but her teasing words dredged up a host of unresolved feelings he'd been trying to forget.

"One of us has settled down," he said tightly, purposely avoiding her searching gaze.

She wanted to say more, *ask* more, it was right there on the tip of her tongue, but the sound of hoof beats in the distance drew her attention—thankfully—away from him.

A lone rider galloped towards them and as he drew closer, Jackson recognised him—it was the stable hand, Riley.

"What is it, Riley?" BJ asked, taking in the anxious look on his face.

"It's La Reina," he said breathlessly. "She's about to deliver her foal."

\* \* \* \*

La Reina was just that. She was the queen of Cottonmouth, their most prized mare, and she was delivering her very first foal.

BJ and Jackson raced back towards the stables, their mounts easily leaving poor Riley and his gelding in the wake of their dust—literally.

Five hours later, BJ stood just outside the stall nervously pacing back and forth.

"You should get some rest. If she has trouble, I can have someone come get you."

BJ stopped to stare up at Jackson. His beard shadowed his face. He was both rugged and sexy, as untamed and wild as the land just beyond the stables.

"No. I want to stay. I stay for all the mares, just in case." She was referring to the foaling process. Most of the time it went smoothly, and the mare delivered without any assistance, but there were a couple of instances where she'd needed to intervene.

"Is there anything I can get you then?"

"No. Why don't you go get some rest, yourself?"

He winked at her. "And miss out on this? Not a chance."

His statement made her think this was his first time witnessing a foaling, but three hours later, when they realised La Reina's foal was in breech position, she discovered he'd done this before, probably more times than she had.

By the time she returned from making a call to the veterinarian, Jackson had delivered La Reina's foal—much to her relief, and annoyance.

"Why didn't you tell me you'd done this before?" It was the first thing she said as soon as they entered the house after leaving the stable where La Reina and her new colt were resting.

"What? And let you think I wasn't the ignorant city boy you made me out to be? What would be the fun in that?"

She shot him a dark look. "You're so immature."

"You're just jealous that I delivered your mare's colt and not you." She didn't bother denying his words because he was right.

"I'm gonna grab a shower and change." He took off up the stairs, and BJ decided to do the same.

Fifteen minutes later she was back in the kitchen scrounging around in the cupboards for something to eat. She had assumed Jackson would head to bed, so she nearly jumped out of her skin when he crept up behind her.

"Shit. You scared me to death. I thought you were going to bed."

He frowned at her. "Bed? I haven't eaten in twelve hours. I'm starving." He looked over her shoulder into the pantry. "What were you thinking of making?"

"That's what I was trying to figure out when you nearly scared me half to death."

He grinned, drawing her attention to the tiny dimple in his cheek. That's when she realised he'd shaven. He was unquestionably handsome, although she found she had to squelch a twinge of disappointment that the rugged and untamed Jackson was now gone.

"Let's see what you have in here," he said reaching around her to grab for an item off the shelf. She let out a tiny gasp when his arm brushed against her right breast, her nipple instantly responding to the gentle caress.

They both stiffened, their gazes clashing. He was the first to recover, clearing his throat.

"Give me a second and I'll whip up some sandwiches." This time he was careful to avoid touching her when he reached into the pantry again.

The room was draped in tension, the awkwardness from their earlier moment still lingering around them. She sat down at the counter and watched him in silence while he threw together a late night dinner.

Finally, when she couldn't take the silence any longer she spoke. "So, you can cook, deliver foals *and* you're a millionaire? What can't you do Jackson Downing?"

He glanced up as he handed her a plate with a BLT on it. "Didn't you know? There's nothing I can't do. I'm damn near perfect."

She shook her head, hiding the grin behind her sandwich.

Perfect? *No*. But he was certainly not what she'd expected. From day one she'd misjudged him. She was just glad she hadn't let her earlier judgement of him keep her from seeing the real Jackson. They ate in silence until he noticed the slight grin on her face.

"What are you smiling about?"

She finished her sandwich and slid out of her chair to dump her empty plate into the sink. "Nothing really. Just thinking about how I didn't give you a chance when you first got here."

She turned but drew up short when she nearly collided with the solid wall of his chest.

"And that's funny?"

She shook her head. No it wasn't funny, but she couldn't say that out loud because she couldn't seem to find her voice when he was so close.

She wasn't sure what had happened exactly. One minute he'd been sitting across the counter and now he was standing there before her. His nearness sucked the air right out of her until she was foggy and lightheaded.

"Well, since we're being honest." He ran his thumb along the seam of her lips, and her heart thudded harder in her chest. "I guess I should tell you that I didn't give you a fair shot either."

That wasn't surprising. Most people didn't, but if her recollection of their initial meeting was correct, it was she who'd been difficult—not him. He'd tried being nice.

"I don't remember that." Her voice cracked. "I remember you being professional and polite—"

He silenced her with a single finger against her lips and moved closer until only inches separated them.

"When I met you I thought you were brash and abrasive—" Well, she was, wasn't she? "—nothing but a rude tomboy." She gasped when he pressed his lower body against her, the outline of his hard cock digging into her belly.

"And, I'm not all of those things?" She managed to stammer out.

"You are." He dipped his head to the curve of her neck and she shuddered against him. "But earlier today when you talked about Cottonmouth, there was a quiet passion in your eyes. And tonight as you handled La Reina's foal, you were full of tenderness." He

pulled her closer. "There's a softness that you like to hide Bria, but it's there—deep down—it's there."

"Bria? My mother was the only person who called me that, and now you."

He lifted his head to stare into her eyes. He looked at her as if he could see straight to her soul, and an emotion she hadn't felt in a long time welled up inside her at the expression on his face. He made her feel vulnerable—in a good way—but still she was open and exposed to him, something she hadn't been with a man in some time.

"I like Bria. It's a beautiful name, and for me, it suits you better." He crooked his lips into a grin. "A beautiful name for a beautiful woman."

She averted her gaze to the floor. Every time he told her she was pretty, she felt like such a fraud. She pushed at his chest.

"Why are you doing this, Jackson?"

He looked at her as if she was dumb, as if to say, *the reason should be obvious*.

"I want you Bria. I have from the moment you cursed me out on your front porch." And just in case she had any doubt about that, he jerked his hips, pressing his cock deeper into her belly.

"I promised myself I wouldn't touch you." His voice was raspy and hoarse, and she stilled at the look in his eyes. Smouldering embers of heat leapt in his turquoise gaze, along with a storm of conflicting emotions.

"I said I would leave you alone."

After they'd nearly made love in that very same kitchen, she said she would leave him alone too. But it was hard to remember that vow with the heat of his body pressed against hers, while every inch of her burned for him.

"Don't." She wound her arms around his neck. "Don't leave me alone," she murmured as she lifted on her tip toes. This was a mistake—she knew it—but she couldn't stop herself and when Jackson dipped his head, and she met him mid-air to press her lips to his.

An explosion of pleasure and need erupted inside of her and she moaned into his mouth. He swept his tongue between her parted lips, tasting her, drinking from her and she shuddered against him.

Their bodies clashed together, their hands and lips going everywhere, searching beneath their clothing. Jackson arched into her, pressing her deeper into the sink's edge.

She didn't realise she'd winced until Jackson gathered her into his arms and laid her atop the kitchen table, sending place mats and the pepper shaker tumbling to the ground.

"Better?"

His dimpled grin was infectious and she found herself smiling back. "Much."

This time when their lips met, the kiss was gentle, slower, as they both took their time exploring each other. BJ twisted her hands in his hair, holding Jackson close, her legs encircling his hips to pull him deeper into her embrace.

His thick, hard erection was hot and heavy against her sex and she rocked against him, silently begging him to release himself from the confines of his pants and slide inside her. She'd never felt this way before—so wanton, so out of control. But with Jackson, he made her feel sexy, desirable, beautiful.

His hands slid along her legs until they reached the waistband of her pyjama bottoms. With steady hands, he undid the flimsy drawstring and pushed them over her hips, down her legs, until he had her out of them.

He stared at her with a sharp intensity that made her breath quicken in her chest, and molten heat swirl in her belly.

"You have gorgeous legs," he whispered reverently. "Long, toned, soft. They're perfect." They weren't. They were too skinny, but the way he looked at her made her think otherwise, and when his hands roamed over the bare skin of her legs, leaving tiny goose-bumps in their wake—she couldn't think, period.

He leant into her, seizing her lips, his hands curving beneath her to grab her ass. His tongue plundered her mouth, sending tingling flames of heat licking across her skin, as he gently massaged the firm globes of her ass.

She clung to him, her hands wandering over his broad shoulders, his chiselled back, before inching their way to his taut ass, where she returned the favour. Their kiss grew more urgent as he probed inside her mouth, demanding her complete surrender—and she gave it.

She arched deeper into him, her small breasts flattening against the muscled planes of his chest. She whimpered softly when he tore his lips from hers, until he dipped his head to the curve of her neck to stroke his tongue along the sensitive skin.

Jackson nibbled on her neck, his hands slipping between her legs. He slid one finger into her juicy cunt, the wet heat of her pussy surrounding him.

His deep groan mingled with her sharp cry of pleasure, her entire body shivering with need.

“Jackson.” She whispered his name, unable to keep the plea from her voice. She wanted him inside her, the hard length of his cock battering against her tight walls. He knew what she wanted, what she needed, but he denied her and instead slipped another finger inside her.

It wasn’t what she wanted, but it was more than enough. She rocked against his hand, meeting the deep stabbing strokes of his fingers, as her pussy filled with more juice. He stretched her, filled her, the pounding rhythm of his fingers brushing against her g-spot.

Her entire body vibrated around him, the tight buds of her nipples straining against her shirt. Jackson taunted and teased her, bringing her to the brink of climax before backing off again.

When he did it again, she pulled back from him, her eyes flashing with frustration.

“Just enjoy the tease,” he said with a wicked grin. She wanted to tell him that it was easy for him to say since he wasn’t the one on the verge of orgasm, but she never got the chance when he pressed his thumb against her clit, and massaged the tiny nub with just the right pressure.

She cried out his name, her back arching like a bow.

“That’s it, Bria. Just let go.”

She moaned louder. She was so close and when he slid down the length of her body and settled his head between her thighs, she knew she wouldn’t last much longer.

He stroked his tongue through her wet slit before latching his lips around her clit and sucking hard.

“Jackson,” she screamed his name, the onslaught of pleasure was so intense. Tunnelling her hands through his hair, she leant back, her thighs clamping around his head as he devoured her pussy.

His mouth consumed her, his hot tongue probing in and out of her tight hole. When he slipped two fingers inside her, the sensory overload was too much. She let out a long, low moan, her hips jerking off the table to meet his questing tongue and thrusting digits. She shuddered against him just before she erupted, the muscles of her pussy spasming from the force of her climax.

"Mmmm," he groaned against her cunt, lapping up her juices as tiny shocks of pleasure vibrated throughout her entire body.

When she finally quieted, he slid up her body and kissed her slowly and gently, leaving the taste of her juices in her mouth.

"You taste so good. I only wish I could have seen your face when you came."

She stroked her hand along his cheek. "You still can," she said with an impish smile, feeling emboldened.

He grinned down at her, but before he even said a word, she knew she wasn't going to get her ultimate wish for the night. She knew he wasn't going to make love to her.

"I wish I could." Regret filled his eyes. "But, I can't." He lifted himself off of her and helped put her pyjama bottoms back on. When she stood to her feet, she pretended to ignore the sticky wetness still lingering there.

Jackson was silent. She desperately wanted to ask what was stopping him from making love to her, what held him back, but she refused to push him. If he had his secrets, then he was free to keep them, so she was surprised when he clasped her face between his hands and said, "I want you Bria, there's no denying that."

He gave her a wry smile and gently nudged her belly with his still erect cock. Right. There was no doubt there. "But I came to Cottonmouth to get out of a sticky situation and get over a woman." He dropped his hands and stepped away from her.

"It's not fair to drag you into something when I don't know where my head or heart is right now. You deserve better."

He leant down to kiss her, the gentle kiss once again stoking the fire inside her, but before it could rage out of control, he lifted his head.

"Good night, Bria," he said, disappearing up the stairs.

She stared after him for a long while, thinking that whoever this woman was—the woman who still had Jackson's heart—was a very, very lucky woman.

A tiny pang shot through her heart as she allowed herself a foolish thought—what would it be like to be loved by Jackson Downing? To be the woman who claimed his heart?

## Chapter Four

Jackson had just been preparing to sit down and go over the geologist's report on Cottonmouth's oil prospects when the doorbell rang.

Making his way towards the front door, he glanced at his watch. It was almost six o'clock in the evening. Who could have business at this time of night?

He opened the door and was momentarily taken aback. A statuesque redhead with curves for days and attitude to match stood on the doorstep with one hand planted on her rounded hips, and some sort of dress bag in the other.

"Hey handsome. Is BJ around?" She drawled out in a soft Southern accent, her eyes taking a leisurely trip along his frame. Any other day and any other time, he would have taken this woman's interest and ran with it, but that was before he'd met a golden-eyed spitfire who haunted his nightly dreams and claimed his waking thoughts.

"Last time I checked she was still out—" He turned towards the kitchen at the sound of a door slamming shut. "She's home," he finished with a small grin, just as BJ entered the living room.

The stacked redhead pushed past him. "You've been ignoring my calls."

BJ frowned at the dress bag in the redhead's hand. "Apparently for good reason. I told you I wasn't going."

Jackson raised an eyebrow. Going? Going where? He closed the front door, but instead of heading back to the den he stood off to the side.

"You're going, BJ. You promised me—"

"I don't have a date or a dress."

"Dress taken care of," the woman said, holding up the bag. She glanced over her shoulder at Jackson. "And what about him? He could be your date."

Jackson looked at BJ. "Date for what?"

"Nothing."

The woman with the dress bag glared at BJ, before turning to him to extend her hand. "I'm sorry. I didn't introduce myself. My name is Teresa Mae West, BJ's oldest and dearest

friend —” She rolled her eyes when BJ snorted. “Twice a year I host a charity fundraiser, which BJ always donates to, but never attends.”

Jackson shook her hand. “Jackson Downing. Nice to meet you, Teresa Mae West. Interesting name.”

She gave him a wry smile. “Parents thought it was funny.”

Funny. No doubt. But from what he could tell, it definitely suited her.

“So, this fundraiser—I’m guessing it’s black tie and you want me to take Bria.”

Teresa raised her eyebrows, shooting BJ a quizzical look from over his shoulder.

“That’s what he calls me and just so you know, no matter what he says, I’m still not going.”

Jackson turned to BJ. “At least try on the dresses. She did come all this way to bring them to you.”

“She only lives two miles away.” BJ narrowed her eyes. “And why waste everyone’s time and try on dresses I’m not going to wear?”

“You promised me you would go this time. And you *never* break a promise,” Teresa said.

BJ was trapped and she knew it. And in that moment, she wanted to be anywhere else but there. Seconds ticked by while BJ and Teresa stared each other down. Finally, BJ relented with a long suffering sigh. “Fine.” She folded her arms across her chest. “I’ll go, but after this—I swear I’m severing our friendship.”

“You say that at least five times a year.” Teresa shoved the dress bag at BJ and had Jackson not caught it, it would have landed on the floor. Jackson gave her a look to let her know he thought she was being childish. The one she shot back told him she wanted him to stay out of it. He grinned. Not a chance.

“So am I invited too?” He asked Teresa.

“No.”

“Of course, BJ needs a date,” Teresa said, pointedly ignoring BJ’s outburst.

She twisted on her heels then, and walked towards the door. “I need to head home now. Nice meeting you, Jackson. Looking forward to seeing you *both* next Friday.”

BJ mumbled something under her breath that sounded an awful lot like *you’re both going to hell for this*, but Jackson couldn’t be sure.

When the door closed behind Teresa, he turned to BJ.

"She seems like a nice woman. You should feel good that you're doing something for charity. I'm sure we'll have fun."

Her eyes darkened to whisky brown pools. "Nice? Teresa's not nice. And let's be honest, you don't give a damn about that charity dinner or how much fun we could have. The only reason why you even agreed to go was because you think she's hot."

He lifted a brow. Teresa *was* hot, but she wasn't the one he wanted to see in a dress on Friday night.

"Teresa's hot? You know what, I really hadn't noticed."

She spun away from him and stomped towards the kitchen. "Liar."

"It'll be fun, and you know it," he called after her, as she disappeared into the kitchen. He smiled when she didn't respond. BJ always had a comeback, so the fact that she was speechless told him she was too mad to bother forming words.

Somewhere deep down, he felt just a bit sorry for her—but only a bit. He took the dress bag upstairs and laid it across her bed. He itched to peek inside, but he didn't want to spoil it. He would wait until he saw her on Friday—it would be that much sweeter. BJ dressed up and on his arm—he couldn't wait.

\* \* \* \*

BJ glanced at herself in the mirror, a frown on her face. She could not believe she'd actually been forced into doing something so heinous, so despicable, something that was completely beneath her. She could not believe she was wearing a *dress*. She never wore dresses. She absolutely hated them.

This was all Teresa's fault, but she couldn't forget Jackson's role in this too. She would have probably been able to brush her friend off, yet again, had it not been for Jackson's meddling.

"Damn it." She sucked her finger where the zipper pinched her skin. Yet another reason why she hated dresses, skirts, gowns—anything of that ilk. They were right up there with high heels. BJ gave her feet—which at the moment were encased in four-inch bone hued sandals—a disparaging look. She'd be lucky if she made it out of the house without tripping and breaking her neck.

"Are you ready?" Jackson called out from the other side of the door.

She groaned. *No*.

She didn't want to give Jackson the satisfaction of knowing she was so inept at this dress up thing, but there was no getting around it. She'd been trying for the last five minutes and it was clear that her zipper was stuck.

"I can't get my zipper up."

There was a pregnant pause on the other side, before Jackson said slowly, "Are you asking for help?"

She gritted her teeth. What did he think?

"Yes," she bit out.

Not more than a second ticked by before the door swung open.

"You don't have to look so smug about this," she said at the smirk on Jackson's face.

Smug? Not even close. It just happened to be the most benign expression he could seem to muster up the moment he got his first glimpse of her.

He let out a low whistle. There was no doubt BJ was a natural beauty. In faded shirts and jeans, she exuded a provocative sensuality that was impossible to ignore. But tonight, she was simply stunning.

Her hair framed her lovely face, the wiry curls straightened into a sleek style that fell to the middle of her back. The soft cream of the dress hugged her gentle curves, dipping just low enough to reveal the swells of her breasts, and falling at her knees, giving him a tantalising view of her smooth legs that seemed to go on for days.

"Wow. I'm almost speechless."

"*Almost* speechless, but still *not* speechless."

Her lovely topaz eyes flashed with fire, but hidden in their depths was a small ember of relief. She'd been afraid he wouldn't like what he saw. He swept his gaze over the bronzed beauty. Not a chance.

"Turn around," he said.

She gave him a puzzled look.

"You said you needed help with your zipper."

"Oh, right." She nodded and turned her back to him, treating him to the sight of the cutest most unexpected tattoo along the smooth skin of her back.

"An angel?" He said when he stood behind her.

"A wha—oh. My tattoo. I always forget about that."

He stared at the image of a beautiful angel, with her black wings stretched out across BJ's upper back.

"It's lovely. When did you get it?"

She stiffened, and he wondered if she would answer him, when she said in a small voice. "I had it done on the one-year anniversary of my mother's death. The face of the angel was drawn from an old photo of her."

He glanced down again. He could see the resemblance now. "She was beautiful."

He heard the smile in her voice. "She was."

Jackson zipped her up, and when he was done he settled his hands against her shoulders—he couldn't stand not touching her any longer.

"You look absolutely amazing tonight." He spun her around. "But you're beautiful in whatever you wear—jeans, a dress, a sack." He smiled.

She tucked a strand of hair behind her ear, her fingers trembling slightly. "Thanks. That's nice of you to say."

He frowned at her. "I wasn't saying it to be nice. I said it because it's the truth." And it was. Dress or jeans, she was beautiful. Although, truth be told, her best look would be in nothing at all.

Despite what he said, he could still see the denial in her eyes, and when she opened her mouth to protest he let out a short sigh of frustration.

"Just say thank you, Bria. Acknowledge that I find you beautiful, and simply accept the compliment."

Her eyes widened at the edge in his voice, but she nodded, her voice small as she said, "Thank you."

He relaxed, pleased that for once she didn't fight him. This time, however, he refused to let the issue drop. Ever since he'd discovered she had issues about her looks, he'd been waiting for a moment like this to broach the subject.

"Why is it so hard for you to accept that I think you're beautiful?"

She stiffened, her eyes dipping to the floor, but he dragged her gaze back to him with a finger under her chin. "Talk to me Bria."

She let out a jagged breath, and he wondered if she would refuse to answer him, when she finally said in a small voice, "It was never something that anyone said. I just saw how

people, men especially, reacted to my mother and Natalie when they met them and then there was how they reacted to me.”

She shrugged, her eyes taking on a faraway look. “I just always felt like the ugly duckling around them, and I guess over time I came to believe I was just that—ugly and awkward.”

He cupped her cheek, finally understanding, and his heart ached for the beautiful young girl she’d once been whose only flaw was that she’d been different. “I know you will probably think this is corny, but there is no set standard when it comes to beauty. Believe me when I tell you that I think you’re beautiful inside and out.”

He pulled her closer, his gaze boring into her. He wanted her to see the truth in his eyes so there would never be any doubts in her mind. “I thought you were beautiful from the moment I met you. Now, believe me when I say you drove me crazy, but I loved how you stood up to me.” He touched her hair, “And I think it’s beautiful how your curls catch the sun in the morning.” He stroked her cheek. “And how your skin glows at dusk.” He stroked his fingers across her entire face. “I love that your eyes turn gold when you’re emotional, but most of all I love your sass and boldness, how you’re passionate about everyone and everything around you.”

His heart clenched at the awe in her eyes. She deserved a man who would love her, cherish her, make her feel secure when she doubted herself. He ignored the lump in his throat at the thought that he could be that man, that he *wanted* to be that man—if only his life weren’t so full of complications, weren’t haunted by ghosts from the past.

He leant down to kiss her full lips, plump and glossy from her lipstick. It was supposed to be a quick peck, but the instant their lips touched he went up in flames. Heat surged through his blood, his cock growing hard as a rock in seconds. His hands dipped to her ass, pulling her close as he claimed her with his mouth.

He had no idea how long they would have stood there locked in each other’s arms or how far their kiss would have gone, but when his watch beeped at the top of the hour it snapped them both back to the present.

“We better go,” he said, reluctantly easing himself out of her arms. “It’s already seven o’clock.”

“Right. Wouldn’t want to be late.” The false chirpiness of her voice made him smile.

"Well, just remember, you're doing this for charity." He grinned down at her, ushering her from the room with his hand against her back, pointedly ignoring the dark glower on her face.

"I'm not doing this for charity because I've already donated to Teresa's cause. I'm doing this because you and my best friend conspired against me."

"It'll be fun tonight, trust me."

The expression on her face told him she didn't trust him on this at all, but she kept her thoughts to herself, as she followed him out the door.

\* \* \* \*

"So that hunk of a man managed to get you into a dress after all? I never would have believed it had I not seen it with my own eyes."

BJ glared at Teresa. "You two practically blackmailed me. It wasn't like I had much of a choice."

"Oh, you had a choice." Her green eyes twinkled. "So, are you just going to tell me what's going on with you and Jackson Downing or am I gonna have to pry it out of you?"

BJ took a sip from the glass of wine in her hand, trying to delay the inevitable. "There's really nothing going on."

"Nothing?" She glanced between BJ and Jackson, who stood a few feet away chatting with other guests, although his gaze kept straying back to BJ every few seconds. "Doesn't look like nothing. He can hardly keep his eyes off you."

"That's because for once I'm not covered in horse shit. He's probably still in shock."

"Probably. But I know there's more to it than that." Teresa pinned BJ with her green gaze, until BJ let out a long sigh and finally relented.

"You're so nosy, you know that? We just kissed and fooled around a bit, but that's it. *That's it,*" she added at the speculative look on Teresa's face.

"So are you two dating?"

"I wouldn't go that far."

"But you like him."

BJ cast a quick glance over at Jackson. She smiled. "I do."

"Oh, we're going to talk." Teresa wagged her finger in BJ's face. "I have to make my rounds, but you better believe we are going to talk about how you've been keeping secrets from your best friend—"

"I haven't been keeping secrets, just been swamped with work."

Teresa snorted. "I don't believe you. But when we catch up, we will talk all about that, and the ridiculous look you have on your face."

"What ridiculous look?"

Teresa's eyes danced with mischief. "Oh, that goofy dreamy expression you get whenever you look at Jackson."

She did not look goofy. Did she? She opened her mouth to argue but Teresa was already breezing away, floating off into the crowd where she would spend the rest of the evening mingling.

She did *not* look goofy *or* dreamy whenever she looked at Jackson. She took another sip of wine. That was just Teresa trying to goad her.

Jackson still stood off in the corner talking to a few people. As BJ made her way over to them, a hand grasped her arm and spun her around.

She paused for a beat until she recognised who it was. "Lou. Hi."

"Hey, BJ." His eyes roamed over her. "Wow, you look amazing."

"Thanks."

She was just about to tell him that most girls' eyes didn't fall at chest level, when his gaze finally snapped to her face.

"What are you doing here?" she asked, since she now had his full attention.

He lifted his hand and that's when she finally saw the tray of hors d'oeuvres. "Side job," he said with a grin. "What about you? I never thought this would be your kind of scene."

She wanted to say neither had she. "My best friend is the host. I was kind of coerced into coming."

"Well, I'm glad you did come." He leant into her. "You really do look lovely. Maybe one day you'll finally let me take you out to dinner—"

"I wouldn't hold my breath if I were you."

Lou straightened to his full height. His expression was tight as he met Jackson's stony gaze.

She placed her hand against Jackson's chest, but he wouldn't budge. Instead of moving backward, he actually inched closer to the young man. "It was nice seeing you again, Lou. Have a good night."

She was relieved when Lou tipped his head in a nod and moved on, since it was apparent that Jackson had no intention of going anywhere.

She rounded on him. "I really wish you would lighten up with Lou. He's—"

"Dance with me." He didn't wait for her response, and instead seized her arm and hauled her towards the dance floor. She glared at him when he pulled her into his arms, but didn't resist, mostly because she didn't want to make a scene.

"I want you to quit it with the warden act. Lou's a good kid. He means no harm."

Jackson leant back to peer down at her, and she noticed a small vein throbbed over one eyebrow. "He means no harm? Is that why I caught him with his eyes glued to your chest? Lou is not a kid. You would do well to realise that."

Fury shook her. She wasn't a child to be dictated to. "Alright. So he's an adult. So what? He's barely legal. I like Lou as a friend, but I'm not interested in him like that."

"But it's obvious he's interested in you or he wouldn't have invited you out to dinner."

"Is having dinner a crime now?"

His expression darkened. "With a man who wants to be more than your friend? Yes, it is."

She couldn't believe they were having this discussion. He was acting like a jealous Neanderthal for no reason. "You're being ridiculous. I had friends long before you barrelled into my life, and I have no intention of ending those friendships just because you're irrational. You have no say in who I keep company with—"

"You're wrong, Bria." His arms tightened around her, his eyes swirling with dark clouds. "When I'm eating a woman's pussy out every night, *all* night, then I think I get to have a say in who she's seeing, who she's fucking."

Her cheeks grew hot at the image of him between her legs, his mouth pressed against her sex. Although they had yet to take that final step, the past week had been filled with him in her bed as they pleased each other in every way imaginable. But, no self-respecting gentleman would have brought that up at a time like this, especially with people all around who were now staring at them.

She stopped in the middle of the dance floor. So much for not making a scene.

"We're done here." She twisted on her heels and stomped out of there before she let loose the curses she had for him on the tip of her tongue.

She made her way outside, the cool night air whipping across her face. Teresa's ranch was probably the most impressive in all of Hockley. It was one of the few with a formal ballroom, which was where Teresa held her charity events and fundraisers. BJ couldn't get away from there fast enough. She marched down the stairs, her heeled feet digging into the hard, unyielding earth.

She knew this land almost as well as she knew her own, so on instinct she found herself heading towards the stables. She was halfway there when a hand closed around her arm. She let out a tiny yelp, before she was spun around. Anger narrowed her eyes when she saw who it was.

"Damn it, you walk fast. Especially for someone who claims she never wears heels."

She wrenched her arm from his grasp, and settled her hands against her hips. "What can I say? I guess it's my long skinny legs."

She hadn't sought to draw his attention to her legs on purpose, but her comment did just that, as his gaze took a leisurely trip along the length of her legs.

"Skinny, no. Now long?" His brow arched. "Endlessly."

Her breath caught in her chest at the desire that leapt in his gaze as he inched closer.

"I'm a jealous prick. I know it. I just have this thing about not sharing what's mine."

She tipped her head to the side. "Yours?" That was news to her.

"Mine." Her heart skipped a beat, the intensity of his gaze threatening to set her on fire.

"I'm not interested in Lou." Or any other man for that matter, but she had trouble forming words when his thumb brushed across her lower lip.

"Good." Was all he said, his head dipping to crush his lips to hers.

She yielded under the forceful demand of his mouth, her tongue shooting out to tangle with his. He kissed her thoroughly, the weight of his mouth possessive. She arched into him, her arms twisting behind his neck, her breasts flattening against the solid muscles of his hard chest.

She whimpered when he pulled away from her, but he silenced her with a single finger against her lips.

"We gotta get out of the open field, but I'm not going to make it back to the ranch. Hell, I doubt I will be able to last long enough to make it to the car."

She flashed him a mischievous grin as she grabbed his hand and led the way. She had the perfect place.

"Where are you taking me?"

"Just trust me."

Seconds later they stood on the other side of a large open air structure.

His forehead wrinkled. "A barn?"

She pushed open the doors. "It doesn't have a roof, just rafters." She tugged him by the hand into the barn, and shut the door. "We can see the stars from inside."

He followed her gaze towards the sky, before turning to her with a small smile.

"I've never made love under the stars," he whispered, enfolding her into his arms.

Her eyes softened as she rested against his chest. "Well then, I'm glad I'm your first."

## Chapter Five

Jackson lowered his head to capture her lips again. He took his time tasting her, exploring every inch of her mouth with his searching tongue. It was a struggle to take it slow, but he wanted to savour every second.

Her hands plunged into his hair, holding him closer. She kissed him back with a passionate urgency that made his blood simmer with heat. He paused, drawing in a ragged breath, before lightly kissing a trail along her collarbone.

"Jackson." His name on her lips was the sweetest thing he'd ever heard.

He lifted his head. "You're absolutely breathtaking tonight." An ember of doubt flashed in her eyes, but this time she accepted the compliment. He wanted to reassure her that she was not only breathtaking but beautiful, and amazing as well, but decided to show her with actions instead of words.

He shrugged out of his tuxedo jacket and dress shirt, spreading them over the scattered hay before gently laying her on the ground. Covering her with his body, he cupped her face in his hands, and simply stared into her eyes that were now the colour of silver under the gleam of the moonlight.

His next breath caught in his chest as he held her gaze, the quiet vulnerability he glimpsed in her eyes causing a lump to form in his throat. She was remarkable to him in every way. She was tough as nails, smart as a whip and full of sass, and yet there was a gentleness to her that called to his soul and raised his instincts to cherish and protect her.

He froze when he realised what was happening—he was falling for her. It was inconceivable. Months ago he'd been battling his feelings for Camille, but he now recognised those feelings for what they were—a combination of lust and a deep, abiding friendship. They were a pale comparison to what he felt for BJ.

She touched his face. "What is it?"

He wanted to tell her, but he wasn't ready. He needed to sort a lot of things out within himself, but also with Camille and Jacob, before he revealed his feelings.

"Nothing." He cupped her cheek. "Are you uncomfortable?"

She smiled as she shook her head, her hand curling in his hair to pull him in for another kiss. All thoughts of Camille, Jacob and the past vanished the moment their lips touched.

He skimmed his hands down the length of her body, sucking in a sharp breath when he reached the bare skin of her thighs. He hiked the skirt of her dress up to her hips, his hands dipping between her legs to remove her panties. He moved down the length of her body and settled between her parted thighs, his eyes dancing with mischief just before he lowered his head to drink from her pussy.

“Jackson.” She cried out, her back arching off the makeshift bed.

He closed his eyes, the sweet musk of her arousal filling his lungs. She was wet and juicy, the taste of her like honey on his tongue. He devoured her with his mouth, sucking on the hardened nub, flicking it with his tongue until she was writhing and panting before him. Hot juices flowed from her cunt and he lapped them up as he speared her with his fingers, dragging a long, harsh moan from her lips. Her body began to tremble and vibrate all around him, her thighs trapping his head between her legs. Her moans grew louder, as her fingers dug deeper into his scalp. He knew the moment she came, her entire body stiffened as tangy, sweet wetness gushed from her pussy to fill his mouth.

“Jacksonnnnn.” She screamed out as her body shook from the tremulous force of her orgasm.

While spasms still racked her, he released his cock and covered her body, surging into her clenching heat. She screamed louder and he squeezed his eyes shut, forcing air into his lungs to keep himself from splintering apart right then and there. The tight, wet vise of her pussy gripped him as he began to move in and out of her, and he knew he wouldn’t be able to last for long.

She felt too good around him, surrounding him, drawing him deeper and deeper into her body until he wasn’t sure who was claiming who or who was taking whom?

Those long legs he’d fantasised about since the day he’d met her, extended up to his shoulders and clasped at the ankle behind his back.

“Bria,” he rasped, the new position sending him deeper. He pinned her hips, trying to still her movements. He would never last if she kept meeting him thrust for thrust.

It didn’t work. He felt his balls draw up tight to his body, just as a tingle shot up from the base of his spine.

"Bria. Oh God." He surged into her once, twice, three more times before he shattered. He swore he blacked out as he came, filling her up with his hot cum.

He collapsed atop her, his entire body jerking as he continued to ejaculate inside her. He closed his eyes, as he struggled to even his breathing. She stroked his sweat slick back, her long limbs sliding up and down his legs.

When he could finally draw in a full breath of air, he rolled off of her.

For a long time they laid there in silence, staring up at the twinkling stars.

He turned to glance at her when her breathing grew low and even. She was asleep.

He let out a long yawn, his lids growing heavy. It was the perfect night and with the perfect woman. He couldn't have imagined a more perfect moment for their first time together. He looked up at the heavens again, a smile on his face. Moments later he drifted off to sleep with BJ nestled in his arms.

\* \* \* \*

"What are you two doing here?"

"Do you answer your front door in nothing but a towel nowadays? Where are your clothes, bro?" Jason said as he pushed past Jackson, with Jeff at his heels. Jackson glowered at his two younger brothers, slamming the door behind them.

"I had to rush to get down here. You two were *leaning* on the bell."

"Yeah and what took you so lon—"

"Jackson?"

He let out an inward groan when BJ chose that moment to come down the stairs still wet from their shower, with nothing but a towel wrapped around her body. He fought the urge to strangle his brothers when he glimpsed the appreciative looks on their faces.

"It's nothing Bria. Just my younger brothers."

She stopped on the stairs, her gaze darting between the three of them. "Oh. Hi."

"I'll be back upstairs soon—"

"You know what, I'll just go change." She looked uncomfortable. "I'll only be a few minutes."

"Bria—" She was already headed back upstairs. "Damn it." He rounded on his brothers, who both wore shit eating grins. He wanted to pummel them.

"I'm going to ask one more time, what the hell are you two doing here?"

The look passed between them said it all.

Fury bubbled up inside of him. "Jacob," he said flatly.

"None of us had heard from you in awhile," Jeff offered by way of explanation.

"So what? Jacob sent you two instead because he didn't think I would pick up if he called."

Jason shrugged as if to say, *pretty much*.

"You are all ridiculous." He glared at them. He couldn't believe Jacob had sent them to check up on him. What? Did Jacob think he'd flung himself off a bridge or something absurd?

"I need to go change."

"Yeah. About that..." Jason looked towards the stairs. "So, new girlfriend?"

"Definitely a hottie," Jeff added

Jackson scowled at both of them. "Her name is Bria. She's Natalie's sister and the foreman here and we're trying to sort out what we are at the moment, which is why it would be a big help if you two left, like, *now*."

Jason raised a brow. "So you're over Camille?"

"And so soon?" Asked Jeff.

"None of that is any of your business."

"Does Bria know about Camille?" Jason chimed in.

Jackson closed his eyes and counted to ten. He didn't need this right now.

"No. She doesn't know," he bit out. "And I'm not planning to tell her anytime soon, and neither are you, if you wind up staying longer than the five minutes I want you to."

"Oh, we're staying." Jeff glanced towards the stairs again, and the expression on his face had Jackson seeing red.

"Don't even think about it. I'm not sharing her."

That raised some eyebrows. "Why not?" Jason questioned.

"Because I like her." *I think I love her* is what he wanted to add, but he wanted BJ to be the first person to hear those words, not his younger brothers.

"That's never stopped you before."

Jackson gave Jeff a long, hard look. "She's different." He stared Jason down to be sure the message was clear. "Stay away from her. *Both* of you."

Their mutual nods tempered his anger, but the smirks on their faces raised his ire all over again. Damn it. Why had they shown up at that very moment? He'd just broken through BJ's seemingly impenetrable wall the night before. Their lovemaking in the barn had been magical. He didn't want to run the risk of having her withdraw from him, and one slip from either of his brothers about Jacob and Camille would no doubt send her retreating from him as fast as she could.

"I need to change. Do me a favour and disappear while I'm gone."

\* \* \* \*

BJ traded her terry cloth towel for a pair of jeans and a work shirt and headed back downstairs, but stopped on the first step when she heard her name.

She hadn't planned to eavesdrop. She'd been all set to turn around, go back upstairs and wait for Jackson. But her curiosity got the best of her, especially when she heard one of Jackson's brothers ask if he was over Camille?

She stilled, her ears perking up. Neither Jackson, nor his brothers revealed much else about Camille and her relationship with Jackson, but she was able to fill in the missing pieces. He'd been involved with this woman—apparently not too long ago—and from what she could tell it must have been quite a break-up for his brothers to arrive unannounced to check up on him.

She gasped, the wave of jealousy that swamped her was so unexpected and so overpowering. Jackson had shared pieces of his story with her already. She knew he'd hesitated with her because his heart still belonged to another. Although she'd been aware of this before getting involved with him, it still didn't make it any easier to hear.

She started to turn around again, but stopped when she heard what Jackson said about *sharing* her. Sharing her? Why the hell would they want to do that? The Downing brothers were notoriously good looking and known ladies' men. They didn't need to share women—women were the ones who had to share *them*.

Her heart did a little flutter at Jackson's declaration. He liked her? Thought she was different? She wasn't against being shared by the Downing men—after all, they *were* fine. But it warmed her to know Jackson was possessive about her, although from the way he'd handled Lou, she'd already gotten a pretty good glimpse of his jealous side.

A renewed sense of hope flared inside of her. She still stood a chance. Jackson may have loved—may *still* love this Camille woman—but his words made it clear that at some point he could learn to love her too.

She tiptoed back upstairs, clinging to that thought with a smile on her face.

\* \* \* \*

Jackson knew it was too much to ask for younger brothers who actually listen to him and do what they were told.

"Didn't I tell you two to get lost?" he said fifteen minutes later as he entered the kitchen.

Jeff's gaze was glued to BJ, a silly grin plastered across his face. "Yes, but the lovely Bria told us we could stay for as loooooonng as we wanted."

His gaze snapped to the woman in question, who gave him a sheepish grin.

"They drove all this way."

He didn't give a damn. They were going to fuck this up, he knew it.

"One night." He slumped into a chair. "Tomorrow morning you two ride out of here."

His attention went back to BJ when she moved towards the door. "I need to get going," she said and he instantly shot to his feet.

"It's Saturday. Take a day off."

Her smile was wistful. "Wish I could, but you stay and enjoy your time with your brothers."

He cast a baleful glance towards them. Not likely. He wanted to enjoy his time with her, preferably twisted in his bed sheets.

"Keep your phone on. I'll meet up with you in an hour and help you finish up early."

"You don—"

He silenced her with a kiss, pointedly ignoring the loud throat clearing behind him. His brothers soon disappeared from his consciousness completely as she melted into him, her mouth fusing with his.

He could have stayed locked in her arms forever, but he needed air. He lifted his head, a smile curling his lips at the dreamy expression on her face.

"I'll see you soon," he whispered.

She nodded, still dazed. "Nice meeting you both," she called to Jason and Jeff from over his shoulder. "I'll see you soon," she said to him in a low, breathless voice and then walked out the kitchen door.

He stared at her all too tempting backside until it disappeared from sight.

"Damn, you got it bad. Almost as bad as Jacob..."

"If not worse," chirped Jason.

He grimaced. Trust his brothers to snap him back to reality.

He turned around and flopped back down into his chair. He had twenty-four hours until his brothers got lost. These were probably going to be the longest twenty-four hours of his entire life.

## Chapter Six

Wow. Whoa. There were *two* of them and they both looked like hunky Jacksons. She'd seen pictures of the Downing brothers in dozens of magazines, but now that she was face-to-face, she could safely say that the pictures didn't do them any justice. Teresa drew in a deep breath, fighting the urge to fan herself.

"Um, is BJ here?"

"No BJ here. But we are. Good evening." One of the handsome hunks stuck out his hand, a dangerously wicked smile curving his lips. "Jeff Downing."

She shook his hand, her eyes widening when a bolt of heat shot up her arm.

"Hi. I'm Jason. This idiot's brother." His eyes were softer, gentler and when she shook his hand, it was just that, a handshake. She focused on Jason. She felt safer with him than with his roguish brother.

"Do you know when BJ will be back?" She directed her question to Jason, but Jeff answered, forcing her to look at him.

"BJ? Who's BJ?"

What did he mean who was BJ? "The woman who lives here."

Their brows shot towards the sky and Jeff said, "The only woman I know who lives here is Bria."

Right. It was *Bria* now. "Same person. BJ stands for Bria Jaslene." She decided not to add, *and the only people who call her that are you and Jackson.*

"Do you know when she'll be home?"

"Oh, she's home now." Jeff thumbed towards the back. "She's out back getting it on with Jackson."

"Really?" Her lips quirked into a grin. If BJ was making out with hunky Jackson then it could be awhile. She glanced between Jason and Jeff. Jeff still scared her, not in a bad way, but in a *he's-big-trouble* way. But they were undoubtedly easy on the eyes. There could be worse ways to idle away her time.

"I'll wait for her."

She brushed between the two of them, biting back a gasp when Jeff closed the distance and leant towards her, a wolfish grin on his face.

"I was hoping you would say that."

\* \* \* \*

Making out quickly turned into making love.

"Jackson. Stop that." She swatted at his hand on her ass. "Your brothers might see us."

"They're all the way in the other room."

The noises coming from the other room told her that Jackson was right. She stopped at the sound of a throaty laugh. There was a woman with them. She listened for a beat.

"Teresa's here."

"And she's alone with my younger brothers? We may want to shout out a warning so they have enough time to put their clothes back on."

She frowned at Jackson from over her shoulder. "Are all of you Downings players?"

His answering grin was slow and sexy. "I'm a lover, not a player. But those two? Well, they're another story."

She rolled her eyes. "Whatever, Casanova," she said and marched into the living room, but came to an abrupt halt when she saw Teresa with Jason and Jeff.

"Teresa?"

She smiled at BJ from between Jeff's legs, her head upside down. "Hey, BJ." She snapped up, sending Jeff sprawling to the floor.

"What are you two doing?"

"It's Twister."

BJ gave her best friend a vexed look. "I know what it *is*. What the hell are you doing playing it in my living room?"

"Got bored waiting for you two to come inside." Teresa gave her chest a pointed look, right before she mouthed, *Fix your shirt*.

She glanced down, heat creeping into her cheeks when she noticed she'd missed a button.

She hurriedly closed her shirt. "So, what's up?" She asked, trying to ignore the embarrassment swamping over her. The knowing twinkle in Teresa's gaze made her cheeks grow hotter, but thankfully her friend let her off the hook, and pretended as if nothing had happened.

"I stopped by to find out what you were doing this weekend. Gotta take a road trip to Lehigh for business tomorrow. Wanted to see if you wanted to come."

BJ smiled. They were notorious for taking ill-fated and eventful road trips.

"Hey, that's just a half hour from Macon. Jackson, didn't you say you had to drive back for business on Tuesday? We should all drive together."

She glanced up at Jackson who looked like he wanted to kill Jeff.

"No, we shouldn't. I'm actually thinking you two should leave tonight, and let Teresa and BJ drive in peace."

BJ turned to face him. "But then you will have to drive by yourself. Doesn't make any sense if you have to be there next week too. We could all just go together."

Jackson nodded towards his brothers. "Trust me, you don't want to take a five-hour road trip with these clowns."

She wrinkled her brow. "Really, Jackson? How bad could it possibly be?"

\* \* \* \*

"I don't want to say I told you so."

Her eyes shot daggers at Jackson. "Shut it."

He looked like he had no intention of shutting anything as he leant back against his car with a smug grin on his face.

"Aren't you happy I convinced you and Teresa to take a separate car?"

She let out a long sigh. "We made it here. That's the main thing."

He chuckled. "Barely."

Barely was right. In the end Jackson had decided to drive alone and follow behind in his car, while his two brothers led the way.

"Let's see. They got us lost, even though they own a GPS. They ran out of gas. Got us kicked out of a restaurant. What else?"

Her lips thinned into a tight line. "I got it. Your brothers suck at road trips, you knew this and you tried to spare me. Happy?"

He straightened to his full height and pulled her into his arms. "Now, I am."

Her heart skipped a beat. When he said things like that, she forgot all about how aggravating he could be when he was right and how tired she was after the road trip from hell.

He lowered his mouth, and she met his lips in a searing kiss. He claimed her with hot, deep strokes of his tongue, making her melt against him. She entwined her limbs with his, as he enfolded her into his embrace. The hard, steel strength of him surrounded her, making her feel cherished and protected—something she'd never felt with a man until she'd met Jackson.

The porch door banged shut bringing an abrupt end to their blissful kiss. They sprang apart, but Jackson didn't let her go. He kept his arm draped around her waist, cuddling her close.

With her body pressed to his, she felt the instant a chill settled over him. His features became drawn, his jaw tight.

"Jacob? I thought you were out of town."

BJ immediately recognised the man towering over them from the porch as the eldest brother, Jacob Downing. He stared at her, his handsome face twisted into a scowl. Jackson must have felt her stiffen because his hand settled against the small of her back, his fingers drawing lazy circles against her skin.

"I decided to come back early. Wasn't expecting you for a couple more days."

Jackson glanced at her. "Bria's friend had business in Lehigh. Decided to drive up here with her."

"Bria?" Jacob's eyebrow lifted. "Natalie's little sister?"

"One in the same." She gave him a tentative smile. "You must be Jacob. It's nice to meet you."

"Likewise." He nodded politely, but she got the distinct impression that he was being just that—polite.

The air around them was thick with tension and her eyes darted between Jackson and Jacob. It was obvious from Jackson's rigid posture and Jacob's guarded gaze that something had transpired between them, something that left them both wary around one another.

The door opened again and a beautiful black woman breezed out, her violet dress moulding beautifully to her voluptuous curves. BJ felt like a gangly little girl, compared to the statuesque beauty.

"Jacob, honey—" The woman's almond shaped eyes fell on her before sliding to Jackson.

"Jackson. What a surprise. It's so good to see you." There was a deep regret in the woman's gaze when she looked at him that was completely at odds with her cheerful greeting.

The tension coursing through Jackson's body was so strong, BJ could feel it vibrating though her own.

"It's good to see you too, Camille." He nodded. "I would like to introduce you to Bria." He looked at her. "Bria, this is my brother's wife, Camille."

Blood rushed to her ears at the same time her throat closed up. Camille? *Camille*. It didn't even take her a second to put the pieces together. Camille was Jackson's former lover, the woman who still held his heart. She glanced between Jackson and Camille. She couldn't breathe.

Jackson's brow knitted with worry. "Bria, you okay?" He whispered.

No, she wasn't okay. She felt sick.

She backed away from him, and when Jackson reached for her, she shook her head.

"Your brother's wife? You're still in love with your brother's wife?" She rasped in a low voice, for his ears only.

The blood drained from his face. "How did you—"

"Find out? Does it really matter?"

"Just give me a chance to explain." His eyes pleaded with her.

Explain? She would have laughed in his face had they been alone. No matter what he said, it would never make any of this right.

"I'm going to get a hotel for the night." She turned towards the porch, trying her best to keep her fake, brittle smile plastered across her face. "It was nice meeting you both. Have a good night."

She didn't wait for a response. She walked away from the house as fast as her wobbly legs would carry her as she reached into her pocket for her cell phone.

Dialling the only person she knew who could help her right now, she fought back the emotions clogging her throat. Jackson had had an affair with his brother's wife. She couldn't believe she'd been so wrong about him, that she'd misjudged his character and fallen in love with a man who could betray his own brother.

The phone rang twice before a sleepy voice answered, "Hey, BJ."

"Hey. I know it's late, b— but can you come and get me?"

\* \* \* \*

Jackson watched helplessly as BJ stalked off. "Would you two excuse me?"

"Why don't you just give her a moment alone?"

Jackson glared at his brother. He knew Jacob well enough to know what he was thinking. Jacob thought BJ was a rebound, that he'd brought her back to Macon to prove to him and Camille that he was over Camille. Jacob was wrong.

Jackson twisted on his heels without saying another word. He didn't owe Jacob an explanation. This was between BJ and him.

When he caught up to BJ he found her on the phone. He knew it was Teresa on the other end when BJ called her name. On impulse he snatched the phone out of her hand.

"Teresa, stay wherever you are. BJ will be fine here for the night." He ended the call and pocketed the phone.

"You had no right to do that!"

Her eyes blazed with fire, and he could tell she wanted to rake her nails down his face. He couldn't blame her.

"I'm sorry."

She drew back, clearly unprepared for his apology.

He clasped her face between his hands. "I'm sorry," he said again, his voice emphatic.

"Sorry for what, Jackson?" Her tone was scathing. "What are you *really* sorry for?"

"For not telling you the truth sooner."

She tried to pull away, but he held fast. "And what *is* the truth?"

He let out a long, shaky breath. He knew how bad this looked.

"The truth is that I thought I loved Camille once—"

"How could you fall in love with your own brother's wife?" Her expression was incredulous.

"I know what you think. I can see it in your eyes, but it wasn't like that. I met Camille at the same time as Jacob..." A voice inside him told him to tell her the whole truth, but he couldn't. He was on the verge of losing her. He couldn't risk it right now. He would tell her later, when she was calmer. "Jacob and I both fell for her, but Camille fell in love with Jacob and married him. It hurt at the time, but I moved on and then I met you." He caressed her cheek with his thumb. "And almost as soon as I met you, I was completely taken with you."

The harsh sound of her bitter laughter grated on his ears.

"You *thought* you loved Camille, and what? Now you *think* you love me?"

He did love her. He held her tighter. "I do love you," he said softly. This was not exactly how he'd imagined declaring his undying love for her, but that didn't mean his words were any less true.

"No you don't Jackson." She shook her head, her eyes sad. "I'm just a rebound for you. In time you will realise this."

He frowned down at her. "What are you saying?"

"I'm saying that I deserve better than being someone's second choice—"

"You're not my sec—"

"Look, it's over Jackson." This time when she pulled away from him, he let her go.

His eyes narrowed with anger. "So that's it. You're just going to end things and walk away." He took a step towards her. "I told you that I loved you."

He was shouting, and his heart thumped in his chest like a steel drum. He took a deep breath, struggling to rein in his temper. "You love me too. I can see it in your eyes. You're just afraid I'm going to hurt you."

She kept her eyes downcast, refusing to look at him. Anger pumped through his veins along with a sense of helplessness. She couldn't just ignore him and walk away. She couldn't simply up and end things like this.

His hand shot out, and she yelped when he tugged her against him. He glimpsed the barn just a few feet away and he backed her towards it, not stopping until she was trapped between the wooden structure and his body.

"Stop it, Jackson," she protested, struggling against him, but she stopped abruptly when his hands slid down the length of her jean clad legs.

He spun her around, his face buried in the crook of her neck, his hands searching, groping.

"You love me, Bria. Just admit it." He breathed against her neck, and she shivered, her body pulsing with need.

She was stubborn though and refused to say what he already knew. His hands reached around to unfasten her jeans, determined to force her body to reveal what her lips would not.

"Jackson," she rasped when he pushed her jeans, her panties, past her hips leaving her ass bare before him.

He didn't speak as he pulled his hard length from his pants, nudging the tip of his cock against her moist slit.

"You're already wet and I've barely touched you," he whispered against her silky skin. When he pushed forward, deep inside her, stretching her with his length he closed his eyes and groaned, the wet heat of her almost threatening to buckle his knees.

Her gasps of pleasure were soft, feminine and the throaty purrs fuelled his lust until he was thrusting into her with deep, plunging strokes.

"Jackson," she cried out his name, her hips rocking back, her juicy cunt taking the entire pounding length of him.

He held her hips with one hand, while the other reached around to grope her breasts, his hands kneading the soft mounds.

She moaned louder and he felt her desire pulsing through her so strongly. He knew she was close and he quickened his pace, slamming his cock deep inside her, the head of his dick brushing against the mouth of her womb.

He clenched his eyes shut, his jaw tight and pummelled inside her harder, dragging a tortured cry from her lips, her entire body splintering around him as she drenched him with the heat of her climax.

He didn't hold back—couldn't hold back. He buried his ruddy shaft inside her one final time, a harsh grunt tumbling past his lips as he shot his seed to the back of her womb until he was nearly boneless, completely spent.

It was several minutes before he pulled out of her. They righted their clothes in silence, the tension that had been there before, returning once again.

"This doesn't change anything," she said finally, stepping around him.

The hell it didn't. Their lovemaking had been explosive, earth shattering even. Didn't she realise it would never be this good with anyone else?

Headlights flashed in the distance and seconds later a shiny, red convertible pulled up beside them. He cursed under his breath. Fuck. It was Teresa.

He followed after Bria who now marched towards the car. "Bria, don't go like this. We need to talk."

"We're done talking, Jackson. Good night." She slipped into the car and Jackson stood there feeling completely helpless as he watched her pull away and disappear into the darkness.

He stared after the red tail lights until they disappeared in the distance.

"She's a smart girl. She did you a favour." The deep voice, so much like his own, broke through his tumultuous thoughts, startling him.

"A favour?" Rage coursed through his veins as he rounded on Jacob.

"She knows she's a rebound," Jacob said, stepping out of the shadows. "She was smart to end things now before they got complicated. It would have been so much worse for you both had this farce continued."

"Farce?"

"I know this must be hard Jackson, but you don't get over one woman by moving on to another."

Jackson's nostrils flared. His brother was doing what he'd always done—he was trying to take care of him, protect him. Jacob thought he was doing the right thing, but Jackson didn't need protecting—never had.

"I know you mean well, but you don't know what the hell you're talking about." Jacob's eyes widened in surprise when Jackson stood toe to toe with him.

Jackson was the good-natured, easygoing brother. He wasn't often provoked to anger, and he was rarely angry with his brothers, especially Jacob, who he was closest to. But when it came to Bria, he'd take on the devil himself, if that's what it took to prove the depth of his feelings for her.

"I love her."

"You *think* you love her. Just two months ago you thought you were in love with Camille."

"You're right. I *thought* I was in love with Camille. I cared for her, still do, but what I feel for Bria is real. I know I love her."

He stared his brother in the eye until Jacob was forced to blink. It was a subtle gesture, but it drove his point home.

"You really do love this girl?" Jacob's voice was full of awe.

"Yes. I do." Jackson stepped around him and moved towards the house. "Now I just have to convince Bria."

## Chapter Seven

It was Wednesday morning and Jackson couldn't get out of Macon fast enough. He'd tried contacting BJ non-stop, but none of his calls, texts or emails were answered. He needed to get back to Cottonmouth. He needed to see her. He needed to hold her in his arms and look her in the eyes. If he could just do that, he knew he could convince her that his words weren't empty promises.

Jackson slung his suitcase into the back of his car and shut the trunk. He had half his body inside the car when he heard his name. He eased out from behind the wheel and stared up at the woman standing on the porch.

"Camille?" It was barely dawn. What was she doing up so early?

She stepped down from the porch and stopped before him. She seemed nervous and he could tell it was more *for* him than because of him. She still felt guilty—it was written all over her face and he knew what she longed to say.

"It's alright, Camille. You can't help who you fall in love with." He thought of the fiery woman with eyes the colour of a fading sunset in June. She drove him up a wall, but he loved her with his whole heart. "Believe me. I know."

Relief washed over her pretty face, her lips tilting into a small smile. "I never meant to hurt you Jackson."

"I know." He was amazed by how much had changed inside of him over the past few months. When he'd left Macon, he'd been empty and lost, but now—now he felt nothing but peace and it was all because of one woman. He'd told Jacob the truth. He still cared for Camille, he knew he always would. Camille was a special woman and she would always be an important part of his life, but as his sister-in-law, and nothing more.

"I'm happy for you, Jackson. I want you to know that. I can tell you really love this woman." She stood on her tip toes and kissed his cheek. "She's a very lucky girl."

His heart swelled as BJ's face washed before his eyes. "No. I'm the lucky one."

\* \* \* \*

"Don't you two have jobs?" BJ slammed the door behind her, her stony gaze wavering between Jeff and Jason. She'd had a long day, and her heart was battered. All she wanted to do was curl up in her bed and pretend that Jackson's scent didn't still linger on her pillow.

The last thing she felt like dealing with was his two look-alike brothers.

"We have jobs." Jason grinned. "But right now our job is guarding you."

"Guarding me?"

"Jackson sent us here to make sure you didn't run away," he added.

She closed her eyes and sighed. "The three of you are morons. This place is my home *and* my job. Where the hell would I go?"

Jeff shrugged. "Not our job to know, just our job to keep you here."

"I'm really starting to believe that Ivy League education was wasted on all of you."

Sexy grins spread across their faces as both of them took a seat on her couch and propped their designer boots on her coffee table.

"Get your feet off my furniture." She glared at them until two sets of boots hit the floor.

"You're spunky, you know that?" Jeff's heartthrob smile was lethal. It had no effect on her, except to remind her of Jackson's dimpled grin. "A real firecracker. It's a shame Jackson won't share you with us."

One eyebrow arched. This was the second time they'd mentioned sharing her. The erotic images that flashed in her head were tempting, but she imagined it was a complicated situation, far more than she was interested in dealing with. Jackson was handful enough anyway. "So it doesn't get weird, sharing each other's women?"

Jason shrugged. "Never was a problem before. It didn't get weird until Camille, but then again that was the first time Jacob was involved. Probably the reason why it got complicated—he has always been possessive."

"All of you shared Camille? At the same time?" She gulped. "All of you slept with your brother's wife?"

The look that passed between Jeff and Jason said it all. She shot out of her chair.

"What is wrong with all of you?"

"Camille wasn't Jacob's wife at the time."

Her eyes bugged out of her face. She stared at Jeff as if he was an alien. "So!"

"So maybe Jackson should explain the entire situation to you," Jeff said slowly, easing to his feet.

He looked like he couldn't get out of there fast enough. Jason looked equally riled and ready to bolt.

They were both in luck. Jackson barrelled through the front door seconds later.

Perfect. Just the man she wanted to talk to.

"So you share all of your women with your brothers, is that it? When's it my turn to be passed around?"

Jackson looked like a deer caught in the headlights. "You told her," he said to his brothers who only shrugged in response. They were smart men after all.

"Yes they told me. They told me you shared Camille. They told me you've shared other women." She was raising her voice, but she couldn't help it. With Jackson there was always something else, some little detail he neglected to tell her. "So, when's it my turn?"

His eyes narrowed. "You don't get a turn."

"Why not? Every other girl seems to get a turn on the Downing merry-go-round. Why not me?"

"Because I can't share you."

"Why not?"

He shoved a hand through his hair. "Because I love you. I don't want to see you with my brothers."

"You loved Camille. Didn't stop you then."

A muscle twitched in his jaw. "I never loved Camille. I told you that."

She snorted. "Yeah, and you don't love me either."

"Bria —"

"I kind of like the idea of being with you and your brothers." She glanced at Jeff and Jason, who both wore pensive expressions. When Jeff shook his head, his eyes warning her not to say more, she turned back to Jackson. She was too angry to heed any warnings. "A bit kinky, but I think it would be fun."

Jackson's eyes grew cloudy and she hated that she couldn't read him. "Is that what you want?" He asked in a low voice.

She shrugged. "Don't know. Never had the opportunity before. It definitely intrigues me."

"But is it something that you want to do? Would it please you, Bria? Would it make you happy to fuck Jason and Jeff while I watched? Would you enjoy being made love to by the three of us? Or would you only be doing it to hurt me?"

She froze at the tortured sound of his voice. She knew the answers to his questions and she hated herself when she faced the truth. She didn't want any other man but Jackson. The only reason why she would even do it would be to hurt him—and it *would* hurt him. The pain in his eyes tore at her heart. He loved her enough to put aside his feelings in order to make her happy, to please her, but she knew it would kill him to share her.

"You know what? We're just going to excuse ourselves."

She'd forgotten all about Jason and Jeff. Her eyes never left Jackson and his eyes never left hers. She didn't even notice the front door closing shut behind them.

"You're not a rebound," Jackson said, closing the distance between them. "You're not just any woman to me, Bria." He cupped her face. "I love you and it would destroy me to watch you with my brothers, knowing that the only reason why you're with them is because you want to hurt me."

"I know," she said softly, lifting her hand to caress his stumbled jaw. "Which is why I would never do it. I don't want any other man besides you anyway." She loved him with everything inside her. She would never want to do anything to hurt him. Her heart burst with emotion, the words she'd kept locked inside her because she'd been too afraid to risk getting hurt now spilled from her lips. "I love you, Jackson. I—"

He crushed his lips to hers, swallowing up her next words. With his mouth fused to hers, she forgot what she was going to say anyway. She clasped her hands behind his neck, her hands tangling in his hair.

Their tongues duelled, the heated urgency of their kiss causing her to grow hot all over.

He lifted his head, abruptly ending their kiss and cradled her face between his palms.

"I love you, Bria. I just want there to be no doubt in your mind that you are the *only* woman in my heart, and you always will be."

Moisture gathered in her eyes. She hadn't cried in years. Damn Jackson Downing for making her all weepy. "I know," she said with a watery smile. "Now, shut up and kiss me."

He didn't hesitate. He leant forward and in one smooth movement, he covered her mouth with his own, tasting her, claiming her. She encircled his neck, kissing him with her entire body.

Their kiss was heated—urgent—but their hands were slow, their moments measured as they gently skimmed over every intimate inch of their bodies.

His hands settled at her waist, gently prying her shirt from her jeans.

"Mmmm," she moaned when his fingernails lightly scraped against the sensitive skin of her bare belly, causing sharp tingles to fan out across her entire body.

"You like that?" He chuckled against her ear, his warm breath causing tiny goose-bumps to break out along her neck. She shivered in his arms, her pussy growing wet, her entire body throbbing with need.

He manoeuvred her around the coffee table towards the couch until her knees touched the back and her legs buckled. She gasped when her butt settled on the cushion and she realised what he was about to do.

"Jackson, we can't." She shook her head, swatting at his hands that had already unbuttoned her jeans and were now working on the zipper.

He was bent on his knees before her, and he gave her a wolfish grin from between her spread legs as he slowly worked her jeans down the length of her body.

"Why can't we?" He asked, after tossing her jeans to the floor.

She blinked, trying to fight the lust induced fog clouding her brain. "B—because your brothers could walk back here at any moment."

He leant over her, his fingers hooking beneath the elastic of her panties to wrench them off. "They won't."

She started to ask, *how can you be so sure*, but in the next moment he lowered his head and settled his lips against her aching clit. She tunnelled her fingers through his hair, sending it spiking in several directions.

Heat and desire washed over her and her womb contracted with need, her juices spilling from her pussy. She lifted her head to stare at him, her breath catching in her chest when their eyes met. He held her gaze, a wicked twinkle in his cerulean eyes as he slid his tongue through her slit.

It was as if she was in a trance, she couldn't look away. Her entire body vibrated and pulsed with the urge to climax, the need to have Jackson inside her, stretching her, filling her

with his hot cum. She tugged at his hair harder, her legs trembling as he sucked on her clit. His fingers probed inside her, pushing past the clenching muscles of her pussy to stroke deep inside her. When he curved his fingers upward, brushing against her g-spot, she arched off the couch, her head flung back and her eyes shut, screaming his name.

"Look at me," he growled against her cunt, and she snapped her gaze to his face, nearly drowning in his clear blue gaze. A rush of warmth started at the apex of her thighs and climbed higher until her cheeks were flushed with heat.

BJ couldn't tear her eyes away from him, the thrusting of his fingers inside her as he watched her while he devoured her pussy, drove her to the brink of climax. She trembled against him, her hips rocking gently as her orgasm began to peak within her. She fought the urge to look away—she was powerless to the onslaught of pleasure that claimed her.

Her thighs clamped around his head at the same time she clenched her eyes shut and cried out his name.

"Mmmmm," he moaned against her pussy, lapping up her juices as violent tremors racked her entire body. Her fingers gripped his head tighter, holding him firmly as she rode his face until she was spent, her body drained. Her breathing was shallow, sweat dotted her skin, and she settled back against the couch completely satiated.

She smiled as Jackson kissed a trail along her body, until his lips once again met hers. He pushed his tongue inside her, gifting her with the tangy taste of her own climax.

"We're not going to fit on the couch together." He said as soon as he lifted his head. In one smooth motion, he pushed aside the coffee table and she let out a small cry when he tugged her to the floor and covered her with his large frame.

"Much better," he said with a naughty smile.

She returned his wicked grin with one of her own, her hands skimming across his shoulders, before sliding towards his torso to undo his shirt.

"I'm half naked, but you're still fully clothed." She pushed his shirt off his body, and waited while he threw it aside. "Much better," she said, repeating his words.

Their lips met again, and like before their hands roamed wildly. The rest of their clothes came off in a blur until they were pressed against each other, skin to naked skin.

Somehow in their tussle of removing clothing she wound up on top. She stroked her hands across his bare chest, enjoying the slide of her fingers through the smattering of hair along his muscled torso.

Jackson groaned her name, his hands clutching her thighs when she bent to capture one of his flat nipples. She swirled her tongue around the hardened peak of one, before moving on to the other, smiling against his skin when he let out a low hiss.

She kissed her way across his chest, along each shoulder, before settling at the base of his throat. She slid her tongue across his salty skin, the taste of him bursting on her tongue.

He gripped her thighs tighter, his nails digging into her soft flesh.

"Bria," he groaned out on a hoarse pant, his chest rising and falling faster than when she'd begun her intimate exploration.

She sat up, her eyes twinkling as she stared down at his flushed face.

"You called my name. Was there something you wanted?" She asked innocently.

His eyes darkened with lust, and she knew the time for playing was about to come to a swift end.

"I need you to get on him."

She twisted around, her cunt clenching tighter when she glimpsed the hard rod of his cock jutting towards the sky.

"You mean that?" She asked with a mischievous smile.

"Bria," he growled, his hands moving to her hips. "Ride me."

His voice was thick with lust and desire and the gravelly sound wrapped around her, causing her nipples to tighten.

Fresh juice filled her sheath, and when she slid back along his belly, she left a wet trail.

She angled herself just above the tip of his cock, holding herself still as she held his gaze. Their gazes clashed, neither one able to look away as she slowly lowered herself onto his engorged shaft.

She moaned out his name, and it mingled with his own tortured groan as she took him inside her, the thick length of him stretching her, filling her.

When he was pressed to the hilt, she paused before slowly moving her hips, giving her body a moment to adjust. Her cunt poured forth more wet hot juice, making her strokes slick and slippery, and she took him deeper and harder until they both were crying out in pleasure.

"Jackson," she called his name, her hips jerking wildly atop him as her fingers dug into his shoulders.

He took over the rhythm, grasping her waist, rotating her on his cock until tingling sensations once again gathered at the centre of her sex.

He moved her harder and faster, and she dug her nails deeper until a wave of heat surged inside her and she exploded, coming all around him, drenching his cock in her wet heat.

Blinding light flashed behind her closed lids and in the distance she heard the tortured rasp of her name, seconds before Jackson's body stiffened and a rush of warmth filled her pussy. He writhed beneath her, his hands clenching her waist tight until the shudders that claimed his body quieted.

She slumped forward, resting her cheek against his chest, listening to the steady rhythm of his heart beating. He stroked her back and she closed her eyes, feeling safe and cherished in Jackson's strong arms.

"I love you," he murmured against her hair.

She lifted her head and smiled. "I love you too."

She leant down to kiss his lips but stopped when the knob to the front door began to rattle.

She glared at Jackson, and began to scramble around for her clothing but stopped when he gripped her arm.

There was something in his eyes, something dark and provocative, a look she'd never seen before.

The front door opened and Jeff and Jason stumbled in, their eyes wide with surprise. Their shock soon gave way to lust, and it burned in their sapphire gazes, reminding her that she was stark naked.

She moved to cover herself, but Jackson's hand on her arm tightened and she stared at him, her eyes rounding when she realised what he was doing.

"Jackson?"

"If you're not comfortable with this, then we stop now."

She blinked, her mind scrambling to make sense of his words. There was no denying she was curious about the possibility of being made love to by all three of them, but her curiosity was not worth the pain it would cause Jackson.

"But you just said you didn't share."

Jackson smiled down into Bria's lovely face, her eyes confused.

"I don't. Not often. But I'm not against it."

"But you said..."

He kissed the tip of her nose. "I had to know that you wanted me, and only me. It was important for me to know that you were willing to set aside your desires because you didn't want to hurt me."

Her eyes flashed. "So, it was a test," she snapped, but he wasn't bothered by her irritation. Soon his lovely Bria would forget all about her anger. In a few moments the only thing in her head would be thoughts of the pleasure he and his brothers could give her.

"Not so much as a test, as it was a need to feel secure with you. I had to know that you loved me, wanted only me, that you would be happy with only me." He tangled his hand in her hair then, and tipped her head back. He dipped his head and claimed her lips, his tongue probing her sweet mouth.

Bria wasn't the only one with insecurities. After Camille, he hadn't realised how much he needed to know that the woman he loved wanted only him, that she desired only him. He could share Bria with his brothers, but that was because he knew he had her heart, her complete devotion.

He tugged his lips from hers and stepped away, a smile crossing his face when she whimpered.

Bria groaned in protest when Jackson brought an end to their kiss. She opened her eyes, expecting to meet Jackson's smiling gaze, but instead she saw Jeff standing before her, wearing a roguish smile. She gasped when she felt a hand settle against her hip and turned to see Jason at her back, wearing a handsome smile.

It just didn't seem fair that all of the Downing brothers were wickedly handsome, but she didn't have time to ponder the injustice of such a feat, when Jeff claimed her lips.

Where Jackson's lips were demanding and possessive, Jeff's were coaxing, teasing. She wrapped her arms around his neck, returning the kiss, enjoying the soft flutters of pleasure that danced in her belly.

Jeff broke their kiss and tugged her to the floor, pulling her atop his hard body. He tangled his hand in her hair, once again dragging her lips to his. She lost herself in the wondrous feel of his mouth, the heated pleasure of his kiss.

A soft moan escaped her lips when she felt Jason slide behind her, the tip of his cock nudging against her puckered anus. He didn't push inside, instead he teased her with the tips of his fingers, causing goose-bumps to break out across her heated skin.

She cried out when in one fluid motion Jeff slid her down the length of his body and lifted her hips, tugging her down on his waiting shaft. The invasion was so abrupt, so unexpected, that she fought to accommodate his thick length. Still gripping her hips, he thrust her down on his engorged flesh, her breasts bobbing before him.

Blinding pleasure sliced through her belly and she moaned, the sound hoarse and needy to her own ears. She rocked on Jeff's cock, her orgasm steadily building inside her. She was so close, so close to tumbling over the edge and falling into the wondrous rapture of her climax. But when Jason slipped inside her, his thick cock pushing past the first ring of muscle, she stiffened, her next breath lodging in her chest.

Jason stilled, his warm breath caressing the back of her neck.

"It's all right. Just relax, Bria."

She felt so full, her body stretching to accommodate the girth and length of them both. Her gaze darted around the room, searching for Jackson. When their eyes met she relaxed, as a contented warmth spreading through her at the reassurance in his eyes. That's when she noticed that he sat stretched out in a chair across the room, pumping his dick with his fist as he watched his brothers give her pleasure.

Jason pushed forward then, dragging her attention back to him and Jeff who continued to shove his cock inside her, his face twisted in pleasurable agony.

She fell forward then, bracing her hands against Jeff's shoulders when Jason buried his entire length inside her. Her rectum stretched around him, but the fit was so tight and she felt stuffed, the pressure overwhelming.

She wanted to pull away from him, but Jason held fast, his hand reaching around to strum her clit, building a maelstrom of sensations inside her that left her gasping for air.

"Oh, God," she screamed, her eyes clenched shut, her nails digging into Jeff's shoulders.

She came so quickly, so unexpectedly that she swore her heart skipped a beat. Jeff and Jason plunged inside her on hurried strokes, their cocks going deeper and harder, stretching her, filling her. She cried out at the hot blast of semen against her womb, her eyes flying open and she watched Jeff, his eyes shut tight, his lips parted as he let out a ragged groan.

She'd almost forgotten about Jason, he'd stilled as Jeff came inside her, but now he moved within her, his thrusts driving deeper, his cock filling her up. He panted against her ear, his breaths growing choppy, stilted and when he tensed behind her, his cock twitching inside her anus—she moaned. He exploded within her, his warm seed coating the walls of her rectum—his shout of completion strangled and hoarse rattling the walls.

He slumped against her, his sweat slick chest pressed against her back. She closed her eyes with a contented sigh, but when a hand gripped the back of her head she looked up, her gaze clashing with Jackson.

She didn't say a word, neither of them did, and with his brothers still nestled inside her, she leant forward, her lips parting to take Jackson's cock down her throat.

He held the back of her head tight and groaned, a deep soul stirring sound as she sucked him off, her head bobbing vigorously. She watched him beneath hooded eyes. The muscles in his bare chest were corded with tension, and his veins strained against his bronzed skin. She tightened her lips around him, moving faster, and she moaned around his cock when she felt a tiny bead of cum on her tongue.

"That's it Bria." He breathed. "Suck my cock."

She closed her eyes, taking him all the way to the back of her throat. He let out a strangled groan, his nails digging into her scalp. She cupped his balls, massaging gently and that was his undoing. He shouted out her name as he shoved his length into her mouth as far as it would go and held her head still, his warm cum shooting from his dick to the back of her throat. She worked her mouth, her lips, her throat, swallowing every drop until his balls were empty, his body completely spent.

She was exhausted, utterly satiated and she felt as if she was nothing more than a mass of boneless jelly. In the dark corners of her mind, she was vaguely aware of Jackson lifting her into his arms and carrying her upstairs. By the time he laid her down atop her bed, she was fast asleep.

\* \* \* \*

Jackson rushed into the house, his entire body vibrating with excitement.

"Bria! Bria!" He screamed at the top of his lungs.

She burst through the kitchen door, her eyes filled with concern. "Jackson, what is it?"

He pulled her into his arms and hoisted her into the air.

She gripped his shoulders. "Okay, you're really starting to scare me. What's going on?"

He set her back down, but not before he planted a long, hard kiss against her pretty lips.

He forced himself to drag his mouth from hers, a small grin curving at the edges of his lips at the desire that burned in her gaze. There would be plenty of time for that later, *after* he told her the good news.

He pulled out the map from his back pocket and spread it across the coffee table. Three large red "X's" marked the map and he pointed to each of them.

"You did it, babe."

She looked at him, puzzled. "Did what?"

"You know how we started drilling a few days ago?"

Her eyes lit up. "You found oil?"

He nodded. "In all three spots. You were right on."

Her scream pierced his ears, but he didn't care. He swung her around in his arms, and they laughed like two little kids.

"You're going to be a rich woman," he said when he finally put her down again.

"And you're going to be a rich man. No correction. A *richer* man."

Her words sobered him instantly. He'd been waiting for the perfect moment, the perfect time to ask her. His heart thumped so loudly, he could barely hear anything else.

"Speaking of riches, that reminds me." He set her down, his hands shaking slightly. "My brothers and I have always been driven to make more money, acquire more land and honestly that all used to be important to me too." He fished inside his pocket as he went down on one knee. "Until I met you." He held out a piece of paper and nodded for her to take it.

"Jackson what are you doing?" She asked in a shaky voice.

"Just read it."

She skimmed it, the paper rattling in her trembling hand. "Jackson, you don't have to do this," she said when she was done.

“You’re wrong. I do. Cottonmouth belongs to you and it belongs in your family, which is why I had the deed to the land put in your name. It’s my wedding present to you. But whether you marry me or not I still want you to have what is rightfully yours.”

“Marry you? Wedding pre—” Her eyes widened. She must have forgotten he was still down on bended knee, but comprehension dawned in her gaze when her eyes landed on the ring in his hand.

“Jackson?”

“Bria Jaslene Parker. Will you marry me?”

## Epilogue

The bride was radiant in a bone white Vera Wang gown, a gown that BJ would have probably burned had Teresa not kept it locked up at her home under watch and key until their wedding day.

"You are stunning." Jackson beamed down at his wife who floated around the dance floor in his arms.

She smiled up at him, her eyes alight with love. "How long do I have before I get to take this off?"

He rolled his eyes. "You're such a romantic. How did I get so lucky?"

"I'm still trying to figure that out."

She laughed then, and it was infectious. He pulled her in tighter, holding her close to his body.

"I love you, Bria," he whispered against her ear, his heart bursting each and every time he said the words. He may have been joking, but he really couldn't believe how lucky he was. He'd met her at a time when he'd been at his lowest and full of doubts. Nothing about them, or their initial meeting would have suggested love, but they'd found it.

He held her closer, his heart beating in time with hers. He counted himself among the luckiest men in the world that BJ now held his heart, and he held hers. She was loyal to those she loved and was as tough as any woman he'd ever met, but deep down—when they were alone and it was just them—she opened up to him, and showed him a vulnerable woman who sought love and reassurance just as eagerly as anyone. She was the other half of his heart, his soul, and when he looked into her eyes, he saw a future filled with little girls with golden eyes and plenty of sass and little boys full of the Downing charm.

She stopped on the dance floor and wrapped her arms around his neck, pulling him close.

"I love you too, Jackson Downing," she said in a quiet voice before stealing a quick kiss. When he lifted his head, her eyes were glowing with mischief.

"Now can we get out of here? I'm ready to start our honeymoon."

"Bria." He shook his head, but she was already pulling him off the dance floor and away from the crowd of guests. He glanced back. No one seemed to notice they were making a getaway.

"Bria, I think we—"

"Shhh." She placed a delicate finger against his lips. "It's our wedding night. What can they really say?"

She had a good point. He relented as he let her drag him away.

\* \* \* \*

"I cannot believe them." Teresa fumed as she stomped off in the direction BJ and Jackson had disappeared. She knew exactly where they were headed. This had to be all BJ's doing. She was going to ruin that gown if it was the last thing she did. Teresa was livid. Didn't BJ know how many strings she'd had to pull to get a Vera Wang wedding gown at the last minute?

She was halfway across the dance floor when a hand snaked around her waist.

"What the—" She found herself clinging to a set of broad shoulders until she realised who they belonged to, and dropped her hands.

"Let them go. It's their wedding night," Jeff said in a husky voice, his warm breath laced with alcohol, fanning her face. Her nipples tightened and she had to bite her lip to keep from letting out a moan. What was it with this man that sent her body into overdrive?

"You're drunk," she said in a flat voice, trying to twist out of his arms.

His eyes lit up. "Not *that* drunk. Except for driving, I can still perform any necessary duties required of me."

She glared at him. "Are you always such a gentleman?"

The intended insult had no effect on him as he held her even closer. "What can I say? I love the ladies."

"And the ladies love you, no doubt." She snorted. "You're a real charmer, a class act. I am going to shed some serious tears tonight thinking about how I missed out on ..." She looked him up and down, "...*this*." She pushed at his chest. "Let go of me."

He chuckled and then leant into her, his mouth nuzzling the crook of her neck. Despite her scathing words, she couldn't deny he turned her on and she had to fight the urge to shudder against him when her pussy clenched.

"I don't know why you keep fighting me, why you keep fighting *this* every time I see you. I can feel your nipples against my chest and I know if I slide my fingers under this teeny tiny skirt of yours, I'll find your tight pussy dripping wet. Stop trying to deny it, Teresa. I know you want me. I don't know why you keep letting our age difference stop you. It's only eight years anyway, which is nothing when you think about it."

Fury exploded inside her and she pushed at him until he was forced to release her. He had no right to talk to her like she was one of his cheap playthings.

"Look around Jeff. They're dozens of women here. If you want someone to fuck go grab one of them."

He inched closer, his blue eyes flashing a stormy grey. "But I don't want them. I want you."

"But I don't want *you*."

"You're lying."

She was in many ways, but there was a part of her that didn't want him, at least not what he was offering.

"I feel sorry for you." That got his attention as one brow peaked. "You'll never have what your older brothers have, you'll never find a woman who wants more from you than your money, great sex and a bit of fun with a good looking man. Maybe it's because you're immature or maybe you just don't want something of substance, something real. But it's a shame because I know deep down you're a good guy who's just pretending to be a dick."

She twisted on her heels and started to walk away, but stopped to glance at him from over her shoulder. His eyes were clouded over and she almost regretted her harsh words, until his lips curved into a cocky grin.

She shook her head. "You know what, Jeff? You were right about one thing. I was lying. I do want you, but I also want more, which is something you just don't have in you to give me."

She spun around and walked off, trying to be certain if she'd really seen determination flash in his gaze. She shook her head. It didn't matter if she had. Jeff

Downing was the quintessential playboy. The only thing he was determined to get was into her pants.

\* \* \* \*

BJ stretched her arms above her head and yawned. "We should probably get back now before they send out a search party."

"Now you want to get back. *Now* you care if anyone's worried about us."

"You're right. We should just stay." She flopped back down to rest her head atop his chest and snuggled against him, a smile curling her lips when he chuckled.

"I agree. We should get back, but I don't think I could move now even if I wanted to. Someone had her wicked way with me and wore me out."

She lifted her head again, her hair falling over one shoulder to brush his chest. "It's our wedding night. What can I say? I was impatient."

"Apparently too impatient to wait until we could make it back to a bed. What is it with you and barns?"

"Not any barn." Her eyes darted around the dark space, the fading sunlight bathing the area in a tawny glow. "This is where we first made love."

"I know." His voice was low, but his eyes blazed with the intensity of his love.

She gazed into Jackson's face, her throat clogging with such a deep emotion that she couldn't speak. It had been that way when she'd struggled to say her vows. Everyone thought she was having cold feet. Only Jackson knew she was simply too overwhelmed by the moment to speak, a lot like right now.

She stroked her hand down his cheek. His eyes were closed and she knew he was beginning to drift off to sleep.

"I love you," she said quietly, gently kissing his lips before once again laying her head atop his chest. She'd never imagined that there was a piece of her missing until she'd met Jackson. But now she felt whole, her heart overflowing with love for him.

She listened to the sound of his even heartbeat and gazed up into the sky until her eyelids grew heavy and she fell asleep wrapped in the arms of the man she would love forever.

## About the Author

Nadia Aidan lives, works and writes on the West Coast in the United States. Under her real name, Nadia holds a PhD in Political Science and Public Policy and by day she works as an Assistant Professor.

She is the self proclaimed NEW FACE OF INTERRACIAL AND MULTICULTURAL EROTIC ROMANCE and writes across all genres, from historical, to fantasy/sci-fi to contemporary. In addition to writing erotic romances Nadia enjoys reading other authors, playing flag football, studying muay thai, working out, listening to music, scuba diving, and target shooting.

Her other interests include collecting Top Cow comics, especially Witchblade and Tomb Raider. She loves professional football and soccer. Her favourite teams are the Washington Redskins and Manchester United, respectively.

Nadia loves watching, reading about, and writing about strong, assertive heroines which is why she is an enduring fan of Fight Girls, Xena, Buffy, American Gladiators – New and Old, and La Femme Nikita!

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