

CUTTER'S LAW



JUDITH R.  CHELLE

Cutter's Law
by Judith Rochelle

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"I'd like to start again."

A smile flirted with her lips. "I thought we did that earlier tonight."

"That was for the audience. This is different." He drew in a breath and let it out. "How long will you be here? I mean, are you leaving tomorrow or what?"

She cocked an eyebrow at him. "Well, it's Friday. Paige wants me to stay the weekend and go home after church on Sunday."

"Would you, that is, would you like to, I mean..."

"Go out with you tomorrow night?" She grinned up at him. "I'd love to."

Morgan's eyes widened as if he'd expected a different answer. "So that's a yes?"

"Absolutely. What time and what shall I wear? I only brought jeans with me, and the dress I wore from work. I planned to wear that on Sunday."

"Seven o'clock. Jeans will be fine. We're pretty casual around here. Not too fancy, you know." The last was said with a certain tightness to his voice.

"Casual's fine. I'll be ready."

He jingled his car keys, then as if wondering if he was doing the right thing, placed his hands on her shoulders, leaned down and touched his lips to hers. The heat the touch of their hands had generated was nothing compared to the bonfire this simple kiss provoked.

Allison leaned into him, grateful for his hands on her shoulders because her knees were so weak she wasn't sure

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they would hold her. He tasted like a heady elixir, one that should have "dangerous" written all over it.

Then he lifted his head, his breathing uneven, and his hands tightened once on her shoulders before he released her and stepped back.

"Tomorrow night. Seven sharp."

"Seven." She was surprised she could even talk. "Yes."

Then he was gone, leaving Allison standing in the turnaround with her blood racing through her veins at a galloping speed and her fingertips touching her lips.

Oh, Allie girl. What are you getting yourself into?

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This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents are either the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously, and any resemblance to actual persons living or dead, business establishments, events, or locales, is entirely coincidental.

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Dedication

To Pat Sager, a dear friend and great proof-reader, who stayed up way past her bedtime to help me whip this into shape. Thank you isn't nearly enough.

Chapter One

Morgan Cutter gripped the wheel of his official SUV so hard he was sure his hand would be permanently locked in place, and stole a glance at the woman sitting next to him. Since the disaster of his marriage he stuck to women like the brittle ones he dated in Austin, the ones with a jaded outlook on life and an agreeable no strings attitude. Emotions were a dangerous thing, and Allison Moore, citified as she was, tempted him with her natural warmth. When she'd helped her friend and his brother reunite he'd seen how important people were to her.

Just hours ago she'd delivered Paige Cavanaugh back to White Tail and an emotional reconciliation with Morgan's brother Ryan. Paige and Ryan had nearly split up for good, and Morgan felt guilty about the small part he'd unknowingly played in making that happen. But the people who cared about both of them—and Morgan now included himself—had jumped through hoops to get them together again.

From the moment he'd spotted Allison in Ryan's office, something about her had zinged him. Standing by the secretary's desk, her glowing face framed by a waterfall of lustrous, raven-black hair, full lips stretched in a grin, hazel eyes dancing beneath thick, sooty lashes, she hit him like a breath of fresh air in a stale room. She stood a full head shorter than his six foot four, and he'd had to suppress the urge to pick her up and tuck her under his arm.

What he really wanted to do, was taste those soft-looking lips, plunge his tongue into the warmth of her mouth, and

crush her body against his until he could feel every inch of it. He didn't ever remember—even with Amber—that instantaneous heat and desire. The reaction shocked him, and put him square in the path of danger.

When the conspirators had all trooped to the D&D Restaurant, the most popular eating place in town, to celebrate the success of the reconciliation they'd plotted, he was pleased to see that Alison joined them. If he had any sense he'd stay away from her, a dancing flame sure to burn him badly, but he was tugged to her by an invisible thread that wouldn't let go.

She seemed surprisingly at home with his friends, so relaxed and natural that the impulsive invitation just popped out of his mouth. Bitterness from his past still plagued him, and he was convinced, as one of Ryan's ranch hands was fond of saying, "Women were no damn good." But Allison's open, natural personality, her warm smile and sparkling hazel eyes had reached into the darkness of his soul. Now he was stuck with his impulse and hadn't a clue what to do next.

So here he was. Here *they* were. What now?

As soon as they left town he'd shut off the police radio and the silence in the truck was thicker than peanut butter. His so-called dates these days didn't require witty repartee, and his brain seemed permanently frozen, unable to give him a single conversational prompt.

He cleared his dry throat. "Would you like to listen to some music?"

God, could he have sounded any stiffer?

"Oh, yes, that would be great." Her smile was so warm it melted the edges of his discomfort.

"I only have country." Might as well tell her. None of that pop or classical stuff that women from the city seemed to like so much.

"I *love* country." She chuckled. "Although I'm partial to the old-timers like Waylon Jennings and Willie Nelson. Toby Keith is great but the rest of them can't hold a candle."

Morgan's eyes widened just a fraction. A slick city girl who liked country? Was Fate having a laugh at him, taunting him, only to have him wake up and find it was all dream?

"I have the CD where Waylon did only Billy Jo Shaver songs," he ventured, waiting for her reaction.

"Oh!" She clapped her hands. "That's one of my favorites. I love *Willie, the Wandering Gypsy and Me*."

Swallowing his surprise, Morgan popped the CD into the dashboard player. As Jennings' growling tones filled the air, he felt himself relax. Just a little bit. "So," he asked. "How long have you known Paige?"

"We grew up together. I guess we've been friends forever."

Her voice was a warm contralto, with a lilt like soothing music. Morgan thought he could listen to it forever. If only he could think of something to say besides the dumb questions that kept popping out of his mouth. "Did you work at the magazine with her?" There, that was another one.

"Oh, no." Allison waved her hand. "I haven't got a smidge of talent in that area. I leave all that to Paige. No, I'm the director of community relations for Alamo Bank. I get to hang

out with a lot of exciting people and give away some of the bank's money."

Morgan's hands tightened on the wheel again and his brain shifted into park. Of course. A glamorous job for a glamorous woman. What else had he expected? His glance slid sideways again.

City, he warned himself. *Pure city*.

But he couldn't stop himself from stealing glances at her.

I'm such a damn fool. Don't I ever learn anything? Just because Paige likes White Tail doesn't mean her friend will. Amber sure didn't.

The memory of his ex-wife caused the blackness in his soul to seep out from its hiding place. Every taunt she'd hurled at him in her effort to destroy him, each of the vicious words in the note she'd left him was still seared into his brain. He doubted if he'd ever forget.

Thing was, White Tail was his life and always had been. He really loved it. The whole town was like an extended family. The economy fed by the cattle and horse business thrived and the gossip at the D&D Restaurant traveled faster than the news from *The Ledger*. People took care of each other, helped each other, celebrated together. Maybe to people like Amber it was the last stop on the road to hell, as she'd so caustically written in her farewell note. But to Morgan, it was more like heaven. He couldn't imagine living anywhere else, so why was he even thinking about actually dating a woman who had "city life" written all over her?

He glanced at the dashboard clock, noticing they still had an hour before reaching San Antonio. *Come on, idiot. Don't*

sit here like moss on a log. Not if you ever want to see this woman again.

Did he? The tingling in his veins and the tight feeling in his groin were sending him unmistakable signals. But Amber had damaged him so badly he didn't know if he could take that kind of chance again. He cleared his throat again.

"I guess you really like your job." Oh, now wasn't that just a smashing statement. But he should find out where her head was at, just in case he decided to screw up his courage and ask her for a real date.

"Oh, yes," she enthused. "It gets me out in the community and I meet a lot of really great people." She shifted slightly. "But I want to hear about you. What's it like being chief of police in a small town?"

Small town. Yep, he knew right away that would be how she saw it. Substitute hick for small, only she was too polite to say so.

"Not too exciting, thank God. White Tail's not a place where you have much crime."

"Paige sure loves it. I'm so glad things worked out for her and Ryan."

"Me, too. I think they'll be happy together."

"Oh, I'm sure they will."

Silence swallowed them again.

The tires sang against the pavement in time with Waylon Jennings as the SUV gobbled up the miles. Morgan stared straight ahead, wondering what to say next. He'd never been accused of been a big talker on his best days, but since Amber, he couldn't seem to figure out what to say to a

woman. Or maybe he just wasn't ready to take a chance on being chewed up and spit out again.

Allison seemed comfortable with the silence. Rather than fidgeting or prodding him to talk, she hummed along with the CD, watching the scenery roll past them.

Well, score one for her, Morgan thought. At least she didn't seem to feel the need to fill the air with nonsense if she had nothing to say, the way most of the women he knew did. She was as comfortable with silence as he was. What a refreshing change that was.

* * * *

Now why did I give him such a Barbie Doll description of my job? And does this man ever talk for more than a minute at a time?

Allison leaned into her seat at an angle, giving herself a better view of her chauffeur.

He looks like he's sorry he offered to drive me home. So why did he? If only he'd lighten up a little and talk to her. Not that she didn't enjoy quiet, but she was dying for some clue as to what made him tick.

Driving into White Tail earlier in the day, Allison was sure her friend had taken leave of her senses to want to spend the rest of her life in a no-man's-land like this. Like Paige, all she knew of Texas were the big cities like San Antonio, Dallas, Houston, and Austin. She especially loved living in San Antonio, with its mix of Anglo and Hispanic cultures, its wealth of educational opportunities, the distinct Hispanic flavor overlaid on everything.

Tex-Mex was among her top five foods, the Riverwalk with its myriad of colorful shops and restaurants snaking along the winding San Antonio River was her favorite place to eat and shop. Fiesta San Antonio, ten days in April that celebrated the city's rich Spanish traditions, was an event she never missed. What could White Tail possibly have to compete with that?

True, she'd only spent a few hours there, but that had been more than enough time to scope out the town. One main street, with a business district not more than six blocks long lined with limestone-faced buildings. One professional center, a low-slung building that Ryan Cutter owned and where he kept his offices. The D&D Restaurant, the apparent hub of activity, its glass windows lined with announcements of social activities in the high school gymnasium. No movie theatre? No Tex-Mex restaurant?

Surrounding the tiny hamlet, stretching as far as she could see riding along the Interstate, were rolling acres of ranchland, dotted with horses and cattle. And nothing else. Allison was stunned that Paige would be content to settle down here, away from all the excitement and amenities she was so used to.

But then she'd spied Morgan Cutter, and thought, *Damn!* If his brother looked anything like he did, no wonder Paige was looney tunes over him and ready to do the Wild West bit.

God, he's gorgeous! If only I could figure out what made that wall come up so quickly.

From the top of his thick black hair down to his dusty, hand-tooled boots, the six foot plus of Morgan Cutter exuded more sex appeal than all the men she'd ever met lumped

together. His tall, lean body had the grace of a thoroughbred when he moved, not the awkwardness she'd seen in a lot of men that size. She was fascinated with the shift of lean muscle under his shirt as he handled the steering wheel, and the way the khaki material of his uniform pants stretched across his hard-muscled thighs.

His face was a lot craggier than Ryan's, but he had the same chiseled features, the same full mouth, the same square jaw. Incongruously, a tiny dimple at the left corner of his mouth flashed during one of his very rare smiles. The same electric blue eyes, only where Ryan's—at least today—were filled with a zest for life, Morgan's were shadowed by some deep pain that he obviously worked hard to keep at bay.

I'll bet he's hell in bed. Whoa! Where did that come from? She'd just met the man, for God's sake, and now he was hardly even saying two words to her. But no other male had ever made her hormones dance the way this one did, and they hadn't even touched yet.

She'd give a fat reward to know what secrets he was hiding, but she was sure it had something to do with a woman. His standoffish reaction to her light flirtation underscored this feeling. Paige had told her what a hard time he'd given her when she first came to town, and how he'd warned her away from his brother. But whatever reasons he had for mistrusting Paige in the beginning, in the end, he'd been there for her, and that was what counted.

She'd hoped this drive to San Antonio would lead to something more, but the closer they got to the city, the

further Morgan seemed to retreat behind some kind of wall. She studied him, wondering what the key was that opened his locks.

Allison was used to men with whom light, even slightly sarcastic flirting was part of the dating dance. Teasing them and then fending them off was an art she'd perfected. Morgan Cutter was a different breed altogether. Maybe it was time to poke the needle in a little, see if she could get some kind of rise out of him.

"So, cowboy, do you ranch like Ryan, or just keep the law in town?"

Morgan shook his head. "No. Sorry. Ryan's the cowboy in the family."

"Not even a little bit?" she teased.

"We grew up on a ranch," he told her, his tone sharp. "But he's the one who really loved it. I keep some horses at his place and ride whenever I can. That's all."

"I'll bet you look great on a horse." Lordy, the man was so damn stiff.

Morgan shifted in his seat, flexing his shoulders. "I guess the most important thing is I don't fall off. Ryan and I did some rodeoing when we were younger. You learn real fast how to glue yourself to the saddle."

"Rodeoing. Well. I'd love to have seen that. I'll bet the groupies hung around you like flies on honey." She reached out and squeezed the muscles of his closer arm.

He flinched as if she'd stabbed him. "We didn't do it for the females. Well," he amended with a stiff grin. "Maybe just a little bit."

"Did you win?"

"More often than not. But we quit before we did any real damage to ourselves."

She tucked those little facts away in her brain. And she'd just bet his skills were far greater than he admitted. She hummed the opening bars of *My Heroes Have Always Been Cowboys*.

Morgan gave a short laugh, a far from happy sound. "I told you, I'm no cowboy, just a small town police chief who loves what he does. Nothing very exciting, I can assure you."

"Oh, I don't know, I could see you keeping the peace from a saddle with your six guns blazing."

"Don't glamorize it," he snapped. "It's nothing like the movies. I ride around in my Expedition, and I haven't had to pull my gun in years."

Whoa! That was a reaction, all right, but not necessarily the one she wanted. Allison bit her lip. Why was she pushing his buttons this way when it obviously made him so uncomfortable? To get a reaction out of him, find out how she'd ended up in this truck with him to begin with.

He was so different from the men she dated, men who never ran out of smooth chatter, who drove expensive cars and probably wouldn't be caught dead in a pair of jeans.

When Morgan asked if he could drive her back to the city, the thought of being alone with him had made her pulse stutter just a little and her nerve endings tingle. So what had she expected? That he'd pull over to the side of the road and ravish her?

He's not even your type, you idiot. Leave the nice man alone and be done with it.

Conversation seemed to die after that, and neither of them said a word until they hit the outskirts of San Antonio. Then Allison gave him directions to her condo, watching as he skillfully negotiated rush hour traffic.

"Can I offer you a drink, cowboy? Oops," she chuckled, "I mean Chief? Or a cup of coffee? Or anything else?"

Go ahead, Allison. Act like a tart. But flirting was second nature to her.

"No, thanks. I don't think that would be a good idea."

Well, that put me in my place. *What exactly would be a good idea, cowboy? Damn! I should just thank him for the ride, shake his hand and brush him out of my mind.*

Although how that would be possible with all the contact sure to come up around Paige and Ryan's wedding she had no idea.

When he pulled to a stop at her building, she unsnapped her seat belt and got out of the SUV. Morgan was out of the driver's side and standing on the sidewalk with her in seconds.

"Thank you very much for the ride." She kept the tone of her voice formal and uninflected. "I know you must have other things to do and I appreciate it."

"No problem."

She reached out to shake his hand, but the minute their skin touched, a current of electricity shot through her, leading straight to her nipples and the heat between her thighs. Now she understood the meaning of the words, 'weak at the

knees'. Her eyes locked with his, and she saw the same startling awareness in those darkening blue irises.

She had no idea how long they would have stood there in a frozen tableau if Morgan hadn't muttered an oath and dropped her hand as if it was on fire.

He reached for his belt and grabbed the cell phone vibrating against him. Tight-lipped, he punched the Talk button and clapped the phone to his ear. "This better be damn good." He was silent while he listened. "Fine. I'm starting back now. I'll get there as soon as I can. Tape off the area and keep the gawkers away. Call everyone in to help if you need to." He clicked off.

"Trouble?" Allison cocked an eyebrow.

Morgan clenched his jaw. "Nothing happens in that town from sun-up to sun-up except maybe for a few kids with a misplaced sense of humor. *Today* a dead body has to show up sporting two bullet holes."

Allison's jaw dropped. "A murder? In White Tail?"

"Yeah, hardly seems possible right?" He shook his head. "It's probably just someone dumping their garbage." He touched the brim of his Stetson with two fingers. "Nice meeting you. Sorry to run like this."

Nice meeting you?

Alison watched, open-mouthed, as the big Expedition pulled away and merged into the flow of traffic.

Well, that went well. Way to go, kid.

She sighed and trudged into the building, sure that the next time he saw her, Morgan Cutter would give her a wide berth.

Chapter Two

"I can't believe Morgan actually offered to drive Allison home." Paige swallowed the last of her wine and grinned at Ryan.

They were sitting at the kitchen table, Paige wearing one of Ryan's shirts while he was clad only in his boxers. If anyone had measured the heat index of their reconciliation, they were sure it would have zoomed off the top of the chart. Now, relaxed and sated in the afterglow of passion and desire, they were turning to a topic other than themselves.

"I've given up predicting what my brother will do, but I have to say, this surprised me, too. I thought after Amber he was allergic to anything from what he still calls the big city."

"I didn't think he ever left White Tail," Paige commented. In the course of her rocky romance with Ryan, she'd learned about the catastrophe of Morgan's brief marriage, the bitterness and pain Amber had created in just a few short months, and how it colored his entire outlook. So she was shocked that he'd made this overture to her best friend, a city girl if there ever was one.

"Oh, don't let his act fool you. Morgan's been out in the world. He graduated from the University of Texas with a degree in criminal justice. After commencement, he worked for four years for the Bexar County Sheriff's Department."

"Morgan? I never would have believed it."

"Believe it. Then one day he chucked it, came home and joined the White Tail police force."

"You're serious?" Paige's eyebrows rose. "It seems to strange that he'd just come back here and settle down. I mean he could have gone anywhere. Not that there's anything wrong with White Tail," she added hastily.

"There better not be," he grinned. "You'll be living here a long time."

"You know I love this town," she told him. "Especially with you in it." She moved into his lap and kissed him to prove her point, a kiss that left them both breathless.

"I think maybe we should get out of the kitchen," Ryan breathed in her ear.

"Lead the way."

"One more thing," Paige murmured sleepily, after they'd exhausted themselves again.

"What's that?" Ryan wrapped his arms around her and pulled her tight against his body, drinking in her scent and reveling in the feel of her.

"The wedding."

"Mmm?" He nuzzled her ear. "What about it? We're having one. What else is there?"

"Well, Morgan's going to be your best man, right? And Allie will be my maid of honor. Soooo..."

"Let's invite them both to dinner. That ought to liven up the evening."

And then they were asleep.

* * * *

"All right, let's have it." Morgan made his way from where he'd parked the Expedition, through the crowd gathered in a

circle, ducking under the yellow crime scene tape to get to where his two officers were standing. He already knew the amount of information they'd have for him would be of little or no use. His officers were dedicated and hard-working, but it was a small force in a small town, and the last time they'd had a murder was more than a hundred years ago.

He tapped the officer on the shoulder who'd taken control. "Is it possible we know anything at all yet?"

Jace Murdock shook his head. "Nada, Chief. And look at this." He pointed to the body. "No hands."

"Shit." Sure enough, the vic's hands had been neatly severed at the wrists. "It isn't bad enough we have a dead body, it has to be mutilated too."

"They'll be talking about this for the next two years," Jace commented.

"Tell me about it." Morgan shoved his Stetson back on his head. "Well, for sure he wasn't killed here. There's no blood anywhere. He was well and truly dead by the time they dumped him."

"Identifying him will be a bitch," Jace pointed out.

"No kidding."

Morgan looked down at the body. The six foot plus male was dressed in sharply-creased dress slacks, a linen sport shirt and Gucci loafers. He might have been a good-looking man in life, but death had contorted his features into a grotesque mask. Now the only thing appealing about his head was the thick shock of slightly-long blond hair. He was lying with his legs bent under a tree in a piece of empty pastureland at the edge of town.

"If Petey Riggins and his girl friend hadn't decided to come out here after to school to make a lot of mischief," Jace commented, "this guy could have lain here until the buzzards got him."

Morgan grunted. "That's the truth. This is the far end of King Donovan's spread. If he doesn't have cattle pastured here, it's as empty as the tip jar on a Sunday at The Pig's Eye." He prodded the body with the toe of a boot.

"How the hell do you suppose he got here?" Jace asked.

"No mystery there. Someone drove up, dumped him, and beat it. The bigger question is, why here? White Tail doesn't hardly show up on anyone's radar. If they drove through here, they'd have to go through town and for damn sure someone would have spotted them."

"No kidding." Jace laughed. "Old Emory Grant knows every vehicle everyone owns for ten miles around. Hell, only a deaf person didn't know when your brother's girlfriend came back in some fancy SUV." At the look on Morgan's face he cleared his throat and backed up. "I'll just ask everyone if they happened to see something."

"Good idea. And while you're at it, you might keep in mind that gossip about the Cutter family isn't good for your health."

Jace stumbled backwards. "Gotcha, chief. No problem. Sorry."

Of course, they might as well have been talking to the three deaf, dumb and blind monkeys. The only reason the crowd had gathered at the spot was because after he called the police department Petey had broadcast the news to

everyone he could think of. Morgan spotted him now, standing to the side with another officer, his arm around a tiny redhead whose face bore equal parts of fright and fascination.

"Hey, Petey." He shook hands with the teenager. "How about you and..." He raised an eyebrow, looking at the girl.

"M-Missy F-Franklin," she stammered.

Morgan dredged up a smile. "All right. Missy, you and Petey come over here and we'll have a little chat, okay?"

"Are we in trouble?" Pete asked, tightening his arm around the girl.

"No, not at all. I'd just like you to go over the details one more time. That all right?"

"Sure, Chief. Whatever you need."

Morgan kept his tone as even as possible, trying to put the two kids as much at ease as he could. But even though he led them through what happened, there was very little they could tell him.

They had just decided to drive out here after school and—talk—for a while.

Talk? Morgan swallowed a smile. Was that what they were calling it these days?

The fence at that corner of the meadow was down so they'd driven in under the tree for a little privacy. When they'd seen the body, at first they'd thought it was a dead animal. It wasn't until Petey had gotten out to take a look at it that they'd realized what kind of a body it was.

"We didn't touch a thing, Chief," Petey told him, eyes still wide with the knowledge of discovery.

"I'm sure you didn't. All right, kids." Morgan smiled at them. "Have your folks call the station and set up a time for you to come in with them. Tonight or tomorrow. I'll need to take your official statements."

"Yes, sir," Petey said. "We'll sure take care of it. Come on, Missy. Let's get you away from here."

"All right, everyone, show's over." Morgan moved up close to the crowd. "Time to go home."

"Aw, Morgan, you spoil all our fun," someone called out good-naturedly.

"Yeah, well, if you stay any longer I'll have to charge an entertainment fee."

Much as he expected, people grumbled but began moving away from the taped area. As they moved toward their vehicles, a big crew cab pickup with the Yellow Rose Ranch logo on the door pulled up and a man about Morgan's age jumped out.

"Hear people are planting dead bodies in our fields instead of hay," he said, a wry grin splitting his face.

Tate Donovan had been running the Rose since his graduation from Texas A&M ten years earlier. His father, King, hadn't been seen much lately either at town functions or cattlemen's meetings, and word had it his health was failing. These days, when people wanted answers, hands and buyers both, it was Tate they went to, not King.

"Somebody must have decided to leave you a present," Morgan told him. He gave Tate what sparse information they had, then gestured toward the body. "Anyone you know?"

Tate gave the face careful scrutiny, then shook his head. "No, nobody I've ever seen." Then his eyes narrowed slightly. "They cut off his hands."

Morgan nodded. "They don't want us to identify him any too soon."

Tate tipped his Stetson back and rubbed his jaw. "If you get me a picture I'll show it around the ranch, but I feel pretty comfortable he has nothing to do with anyone on the Rose."

"That's what I figured." Morgan sighed. "Something else to pickle my brain."

They both turned as Dr. Miles Reiger's van pulled in. "The medical examiner is here. We'll be carting the body off in a minute. One of my officers took a full roll of photos. I'll have someone get a head shot out to you and you can show it around."

"Okay. But don't hold out any hope for that. If he had anything to do with the Rose, I'm sure I'd know about it."

The two men shook hands and Tate jumped back into his truck.

Miles Reiger was kneeling beside the body, his kit open beside him. The county was so sparsely populated and violent crime so rare that it didn't need a full-time medical examiner. The job usually went to a practicing physician who agreed to take on the extra duties in return for a small stipend. Miles was in the middle of a three-year contract.

"Chief." Miles looked up as Morgan approached and grinned. "We have to stop meeting like this."

"Anything yet on the time of death?"

"Liver temp says about four hours ago, so about two o'clock this afternoon, give or take."

About the time they were all celebrating at the D&D.

"Cutting off his hands that way was a smart move on the part of whoever did this. I'll have Hell's own merriment trying to get an identification."

"Worse than that." Miles pried open the man's lips and pointed into the mouth. "See that? These teeth were pulled out recently, and probably without the nicety of anesthesia. Even a dental chart won't be much help here."

Morgan made a face. "Nice people this guy ran around with."

"Oh, that's not the half of it." He spread open the jacket and shirt and pointed to slashes and burns on the exposed chest. "See these marks? This guy was tortured by experts before he died. No wonder he's got that expression on his face."

"And they dumped him in White Tail. I sure as hell can't figure out why. That kind of stuff never touches this place."

Miles nodded. "This is the first one we've had for as long as I can remember."

"Well, haul him down to Kernigan's Funeral Home and do your thing. Get me a report as soon as you can. We have to find a way to figure out who this guy is."

And that was another thing. There wasn't a real morgue closer than Austin. Rio Verde County was a quiet scrape of geography, populated by ranchers, farmers, and people who got drunk on Saturday night and went to church on Sunday. Without much crime, there wasn't a need to invest in facilities

like that, so the nearest funeral home provided cold storage for bodies, but only on a short-term basis.

Jace came up behind him as he finished talking. "I'll get the crime scene photos printed and the head shots enlarged. Maybe someone will recognize him."

"Good. Get one out to Tate Donovan at The Yellow Rose, too." He started back to his SUV. "I'll be in my office when you're through here."

* * * *

"So he just left you?" Paige asked.

"Standing on the sidewalk. Not even a 'can I get your number' or anything."

Allison was laying on her couch, legs stretched out in front of her, a cold drink on the table beside her. What she really wanted was a glass of wine, but she realized she'd been doing that alone much too often lately. She settled for an icy cold Diet Pepsi, trying to pretend the bubbles were actually from champagne.

It was evening, and she figured by this time Paige and Ryan would need a rest from whatever strenuous activities they'd engaged in, so she hadn't hesitated much before calling. She needed to get Paige's perspective on things before she drove herself nuts.

"Oh, Allie, Morgan's got baggage you don't even want to know about. Ryan and I were shocked when we found out he'd offered to drive you home."

"Why, does he hate women?"

Paige sighed. "As a matter of fact, you're not so far off base."

Allison sat up. And poured the rest of the contents of the Pepsi can into her glass. "You'd better explain that, kiddo."

"I'm afraid that's Morgan's story to tell, not mine. I can tell you, though, that he shies away from anything that looks like it might turn into more than one date, and if the unlucky female happens to be from the quote unquote *big city*, he gives her a wide berth."

"Gee, thanks for telling me now." Allison got up and began to pace restlessly. She'd had an edgy feeling ever since Morgan had dropped her off. Her head was filled with all the things she wished she'd said and hadn't.

"Listen, how was I to know he'd drag you off in his big Expedition? I figured we'd be lucky if he said hello in a civil manner. Morgan's a great guy, believe it or not, but he's forgotten how to play nice in the sandbox. Hey, what..."

Allison heard sounds of a scuffle, then giggling.

"Hi, Allison." Ryan's voice was tinged with laughter but firm. "Paige has to go now. Talk to you soon."

The call was disconnected and Allison stared at the phone in her hand. She was glad in the deepest part of her heart that Paige and Ryan were finally back together, but she couldn't repress the tiny teeth of envy and longing that gnawed at her. She couldn't forget the intense love and passion that had been so obvious in the couple's eyes when she'd seen them in Ryan's office.

Would she ever, ever find that? Up until now she hadn't given much thought to settling down. She loved playing the

field, and her job didn't really leave her the kind of time to devote to a lasting relationship. But at thirty she certainly wasn't getting any younger. And the excitement of her job, the constant merry-go-round, was beginning to wear a little thin. Every man she met, both for business and pleasure, always seemed to be 'on', always playing to the audience. The very few times she had actually gone to bed with someone, she expected them to hand her a scorecard and ask her to sign it. But it was not the tiny number of lovers she'd had that left her feeling unsatisfied. It was more the feeling she was missing something, a more intangible something, that her life was full on the surface but beneath it was a glaring empty space.

She'd always been able to toss things around with Paige. They understood each other. But Paige had been gone for weeks when she ran out on her disaster of a wedding, hiding out in White Tail, and now her life was wrapped around Ryan. Allison wasn't even sure how much they would see of each other, and that saddened her.

Her other outlet had been her mother. They'd always been very close. But her father had taken early retirement with a great buyout package, and they divided their time between traveling and playing golf.

Allison felt bereft, rootless, as if her whole life had shifted and left her in a pit of quicksand.

Of course, that didn't mean Marshal Dillon was her answer, either. Lord, what a stiff neck. She was so used to the flirtatious word games she played with the men she knew,

she wasn't quite sure how to proceed with a man who treated conversation as a social disease.

But lordy, he was gorgeous. Now she knew why the men of the West were so popular.

She wondered if she'd ever see him again in more than a casual situation. Of course, with the wedding coming up, they'd be thrown together sometimes. But he'd probably run from her as fast as he could.

Damn! She had no one to blame but herself. Morgan Cutter didn't play the kind of games that she did. She'd seen that at once but couldn't seem to help herself, pushing and prodding at him, probably embarrassing him.

Good going, Allie.

She stamped into her kitchen, dumped the rest of her Pepsi down the drain and pulled an open bottle of wine from the fridge. The hell with it. A glass of wine would help her sleep.

Chapter Three

Morgan was on his fourth cup of coffee when his brother strolled into his office the next morning. He raised an eyebrow as Ryan settled into a chair in front of the desk.

"To what do I owe this big honor? And how come you're here and not with your bride-to-be?"

Ryan grinned at him, leaned back in the chair and rested his booted feet on the front of the scarred desk. "Paige is meeting with Donna and Derek about the wedding reception and I had a client to take care of. I've got some time to kill before I meet her at the D&D for lunch, so I thought I'd come find out about the dead body that everyone from the nursery school to the feed store is talking about."

"Fuck." Morgan tossed down the rest of his coffee and slammed his mug down on the desk almost hard enough to break it. "Why me? I ask you, do I need this kind of aggravation?" He raked his hand through his thick head of hair. "Who did I piss off to have this fall on me?"

Ryan laughed out loud. "You might actually have to do some real police work, big brother."

"Go ahead. Laugh all you want to, but this is a real pain. I suppose you heard whoever killed him cut off his hands."

"Yeah. Weird, to say the least. Ever see anything like it before? Maybe when you were with the sheriff's department?"

Morgan nodded his head. "A couple of times. Usually with a drug kill. But what the hell would drug dealers be doing in White Tail?"

"No kidding. Half the town doesn't even smoke regular cigarettes any more." Ryan got up and poured coffee from the little pot on a side table into a Styrofoam cup. "You still making this paint thinner that nobody drinks but you? No wonder your disposition doesn't improve."

"My disposition's just fine and so is my coffee. Here's a picture of the deceased." He handed over a copy of the head shot one of the officers had taken. "I don't suppose you recognize him? It would sure save us all a lot of trouble."

Ryan studied the photo, then shook his head. "Nope. Nobody I've ever seen." He handed it back.

Morgan slid the photo back into a folder and looked up to see his brother studying him through narrowed eyes. "What? Have I suddenly grown an extra head?"

"Just trying to figure out how to get some information out of you that will satisfy Paige's curiosity."

"About what?" Morgan was instantly wary.

"About why you asked for Allison Moore's telephone number yesterday, and if you called her."

"None of your damn business." Morgan made a production out of stacking the folders in front of him and aligning them carefully.

"So did you? Call her?"

"I said it's none of your business. Now if you'll excuse me, I have work to do even if you don't." He stood up and moved toward the door.

Ryan tossed his empty cup in the wastebasket and unfolded himself from his chair. "Wow. Touchy, touchy. I don't think Paige will be quite as easy to put off as I am."

"You can tell her I said it's none of her damn business, either."

Ryan cocked an eyebrow at his brother. "Is there something here I should know about? Because we have a wedding in less than two weeks, you're my best man, Allison is Paige's maid of honor, and the two of you are going to be thrown together. As a matter of fact, I come with an invitation to dinner tomorrow night."

Morgan stopped and stood completely still. "Dinner?"

"Seven o'clock. Wedding plans. Allison's coming out to spend the night."

A muscle worked in Morgan's cheek. "I can't imagine what I can add to the conversation. Tell Paige thanks but I'm busy. Sorry."

Ryan grabbed his arm. "Busy with what? Your stupid murder investigation? Do you have a clue so hot you can't even take time out to eat?"

"Listen, Ryan..."

"No, you listen. I'm getting married to the most terrific woman in the world, and I won't have you pull one of your lone wolf deals or throw a temper tantrum and spoil things."

"Temper tantrum? We're not little kids any more."

"Then don't act like one. Jesus, if I had Amber in my sights right now I'd wring her neck. But you can't let what happened with her stop you from at least being civil to Paige's best friend."

Morgan turned away and reached for the door to the outer area, saying nothing.

"I haven't asked anything of you in a long time," Ryan said in a low voice. "Can you manage to behave like a gentleman for the next ten days?"

"Fine." Morgan spoke without looking at Ryan. "What time?"

"Time?"

"For dinner. Tomorrow night. Command performance, remember?"

"Oh, right. Seven o'clock. Wear clean clothes and your company manners." He stomped out of the office, shaking his head.

Morgan closed the door and leaned against the file cabinet. He'd known asking Paige for Allison's number would create a problem, but he felt he needed to call. He'd acted like a stiff-necked jerk, and he wanted the chance to apologize. Maybe even ask her out to dinner. But Allison had been offhanded and distant when he reached her.

"Oh." She laughed dismissively when he called. "Nothing to apologize for. I should have just ridden back with Paige's mother and left you to your work. But thanks for calling."

And she'd hung up before he could say another word. Now he'd have to face her across a dinner table, make polite conversation for who knew how long, and try to pretend they could be polite to each other.

Damn, damn, damn. Could his life possibly be more screwed up than it was?

* * * *

"What do you mean, you've changed your mind about dinner?" Paige was sitting in her favorite corner booth at the D&D when her cell phone rang. She and Donna had just finished discussing the menu for the reception and she was taking a sip from a fresh cup of coffee.

She loved this time of the morning, when the breakfast crowd had cleared out and it was still too early for lunch. Besides herself, the only other people left from the early rush were two hands from The Yellow Rose and Emory Grant who liked to sit by the window nursing his coffee and watching the road through town with curious eyes.

The air was still heavy with the tantalizing scents of Derek's cinnamon pancakes and his fresh muffins, the glass still slightly steamy from the hot fragrance of the special coffee Donna brewed. The homey diner was the town gathering spot, and Donna and Derek, the owners, had become very good friends to her.

She frowned as Allison repeated her statement.

"Exactly what I said. Something's come up and I have to cancel out." Allison's voice sounded strange.

"Is this about Morgan dumping you on the sidewalk? I wouldn't take offense at that. He's just a very abrupt person. Besides, he asked for your phone number."

"Oh, he called all right. But I blew him off, Paige. You have to know he's just not my type."

"I'm not sure I know what your type is these days," Paige told her.

"Well, in any case, my job comes first."

"Allie, I know you, and I know your job. We checked your schedule before we made plans. We're expecting you tomorrow afternoon and that's all there is to it."

Paige waved at Ryan who'd just come in the door.

"Listen, you don't really need me. You should be making these plans with your mother, anyway."

"My mother has plenty to do with this."

Allison, she mouthed at Ryan. *Being difficult.*

Ryan grabbed the phone from her. "Hey, Allie? Did Paige ever tell you the story of the time she didn't want to meet me and I threatened to come into where she was working and throw her over my shoulder?"

"You wouldn't," Allison squeaked.

"Care to try me?" When he heard only silence, he said, "Okay then. See you tomorrow." He handed the phone back to Paige.

"Are you marrying a caveman?"

Paige chuckled at Allie's indignation. "Nope, just a rancher who knows how to hog-tie steers. See you tomorrow." She disconnected the call.

"I have a feeling there's more here than anyone wants to tell us." Ryan grinned.

"Why? Have you talked to Morgan?"

Ryan shrugged, then signaled to Donna for coffee. "I'm not sure talked is the operative word. He tried to get out of dinner, too. Don't you get the feeling something's going on we don't know about?"

Paige laughed. "No kidding. Well, whatever it is, I plan to get to the bottom of it. Morgan's lived inside himself for too long and Allison needs to get off the glitz merry-go-round."

"Dinner should be very interesting." Ryan picked up his cup and winked at her over the rim.

* * * *

"Damn."

Allison leaped up from her desk and grabbed a handful of tissues from her drawer, desperately mopping at the coffee she'd spilled on her desk. Well, it served her right. She should have been paying attention to what she was doing instead of letting Morgan Cutter wander through her mind.

"Damn, damn, damn," she repeated, as she blotted the dark brown liquid and wiped it off the folders.

At least she hadn't gotten any on herself. Coffee stains were a bitch to get out of clothes.

She dropped the sodden mass of tissues into her wastebasket and dropped back into her desk chair, running her hands through her hair, tucking it behind her ears. This was ridiculous. She hadn't let thoughts of a man distract her since she'd been a senior in high school. And that was longer ago than she liked to acknowledge.

One three-hour ride in an afternoon, and she couldn't seem to get him to leave her brain alone. He was nothing at all like the men she dated. Where they were charming, he was gruff. Where they were talkative—sometimes more than she wanted—he was taciturn. Where they had slick,

sophisticated moves, he'd appeared uncomfortable in her presence, searching for words to fill the silence.

But underneath it all, Morgan Cutter seemed to be a genuinely nice guy, and she'd acted like a superficial flirt, poking at him to find his hot buttons. She'd guessed right away he didn't play the kind of games the people she socialized with did, so why hadn't she just dropped the act and tried to be natural with him? She was still embarrassed at her juvenile behavior.

And when he'd called, had she even given him a chance to say anything? No, she'd been too busy showing him he wasn't even a fly on her wall.

Allison twisted a stray lock of hair with her finger. Maybe she'd been playing games for so long she'd forgotten how to just be herself. Or maybe she didn't even know who 'herself' was any more.

But damn it! She'd jumped at his invitation thinking she could use the opportunity to get to know him better. But then he'd started acting as if he'd suddenly discovered she had measles and he couldn't wait to drop her off in a quarantine ward.

When she asked Paige about his past, something that would give her a clue to the anguished look in his eyes, her friend had been worse than close-mouthed. She'd have to find out from Morgan, who would probably never speak to her again.

And now she had this stupid dinner tomorrow night. How was she going to sit across the table from him and make polite conversation when she knew her first reaction would be

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by Judith Rochelle

to take the sheath off her tongue again?

Chapter Four

The long, black Lincoln Town Car slid to the curb in downtown San Antonio. The back door opened and the man waiting on the sidewalk jumped in. This was not a meeting he looked forward to, but one did not turn down a command performance from *el jefe*.

He eyed the man waiting for him, six feet of muscle was only now going slightly soft but the encroaching flab was carefully disguised by his three thousand dollar custom suit. The hooded silver grey eyes stared back at him with their usual icy coldness. Age had not dulled Emilio Escalante's sharpness. If anything, it had honed it. The people who worked for him were careful to remember at all times that the only people who tried to outsmart the old man were sleeping with the fishes or eating six feet of dirt.

"So?" Escalante said after a long pause. "You screwed up."

Luis Obradors leaned back against the rich leather of the interior and chose his words carefully. "Miscalculated would be a better word."

"Screwed up. However you want to dress it up, you missed the mark."

The younger man shook his head. "All of our intel told us the woman would already be in that tiny turd of a town. The body would be a warning to her, inspire her to open her mouth and answer our questions."

"There's only one question I want answered. Where is my money?"

Obradors paused again before speaking. "She may not be there yet, but she's on her way. When she gets there and hears what happened to her cohort, she'll be in a big hurry to tell us. I promise you."

Escalante shook his head. "And you still have no idea where she is at this moment." It was not framed as a question.

Obradors desperately wanted a cigarette, but the old man forbade smoking anywhere around him. A drink from the bar he knew was built into the back would have helped, too, but he had no intention of letting Escalante know how unnerved he was.

For ten years he had been *el jefe's* go-to man, and in all that time he had not made one misstep, one tiny error. But some dumb idiot had given him bad information, which had led to his first disaster.

"I have many eyes looking for her, but she's gone to ground."

Escalante grunted. "I told you she's not stupid. A stupid female would never have been able to divest me of five hundred thousand dollars." His tone of voice said quite clearly how distasteful the entire episode was to him. Obradors knew his boss prided himself on not being fooled by anyone. That was how he had managed to stay on top in the volatile, violent drug trade for so long. But somehow this polished piece of blonde femininity had wormed her way into the old man's pocket and swindled him in one of the oldest scams in the world—land development.

"And you're sure she'll show up in this place?"

"She has nowhere else to go. That much I know for sure. She'll think she's safe there."

"But the body will be long gone."

"Not so. They'll be talking it about it for the next five years. She'll get the message. I'll be sure it happens."

"Do that." Escalante reached forward and knocked on the glass that separated the front and back seats. When it rolled down, he said, "Pull over here."

The car slid smoothly to a stop.

"Goodbye, Luis," the old man said. "I'll see you tomorrow. And don't think I won't be calling you frequently between now and then. I expect results."

In a moment Obradors was back on the sidewalk. Despite the intense heat of the day, he found himself shivering.

* * * *

"I just know this is a big mistake."

Allison repeated the phrase to herself for perhaps the hundredth time. She'd hardly slept the night before, debating with herself the wisdom of coming to White Tail, knowing she'd be thrown together with Morgan Cutter. On one hand, she was sure the air around them would be frigid enough to cool even the hottest Texas brushfire. On the other, she hated the fact that she really wanted to see him.

How could a man she'd spent so little time with, a man she'd irritated beyond belief and who apparently regretted ever speaking to her, occupy so much of her thoughts?

Because he's gorgeous and sexy and my body has no connection to my brain.

From the corner of her eye she saw the red warning light flash on her gas gauge.

Swell. Just swell. How could I leave San Antonio without checking the gas? At least when Paige did it, she had a good excuse.

The familiar Valero gas station sign came into view and with a sigh of relief she pulled in to the pumps. Cursing her stupidity, she climbed out, slid her credit card into the pump and hauled the nozzle over to her car.

"Need a hand with that?"

The husky male voice startled her, and she almost dropped the gas hose. She hadn't heard anyone come up behind her, but now the owner of that voice was standing barely a foot away from her, six foot plus of Texas male in jeans, denim shirt and a sweaty black Stetson. If she hadn't been so preoccupied with thoughts of Morgan, and trying to get her head screwed on straight, his masculine good looks might have appealed to her. But right now she was developing an allergy to cowboys. Or whatever they were.

She frowned at the one standing too close to her. "Excuse me?"

"I said, would you like some help with that?"

Allison put on what she hoped was her Frozen Face Number Three. "I've been pumping gas since my father taught me to drive. Thanks anyway, but I think I can handle it."

"Hey, sorry." He grinned and backed up, holding up his hands as if to ward her off. "Didn't mean to insult you. Just

holler if it gets to be too much for you." He touched the brim of his hat and moved away.

Jerk. Did he think she was so delicate she couldn't pump a tankful of gas? She watched him amble—the only word for it—over to a big four-door pickup with a yellow rose on one of the doors. Underneath it was the legend The Yellow Rose Ranch.

She'd have to ask Paige about him.

I'm sure batting a thousand with the male population of White Tail. What is it about them that makes me act like a witch?

Sighing, she replaced the hose at the side of the pump, pulled her receipt from the slot and climbed back into her car. What was the matter with her? Under normal circumstances she would have strung out her conversation with the cute hand from The Yellow Rose, flirted a little. But her flirting hadn't worked with Morgan Cutter. All she'd done was embarrass herself and that still stung.

Paige's directions were very clear and before long she turned into the Circle C's long caliche driveway. She didn't see Morgan's Expedition parked in the turnaround. Maybe he had decided not to attend the command performance after all.

This was her first view of the ranch and it took her breath away. Land stretched as far as she could see, and in a nearby pasture cattle munched peacefully on vegetation. A white fence circled a corral behind the limestone and adobe ranch house, and off to the left stretched a line of buildings Allison knew from Paige's description were the barns, the breeding

facility, the bunkhouse, and at the very end, the small house where the foreman, John Howell, lived with his wife, Myra.

Sycamore and oak trees rose up like graceful dancers, breaking the flatness of the landscape, and around the house itself Texas sage and crepe myrtle trees bloomed in colorful profusion. The pleasant scent of hay and new-mown grass drifted across her nostrils. The whinnying of horses from the barns was punctuated by the contented lowing of the cattle.

As she parked her car Paige came running from the house to greet her.

"Oh, Allie, I'm so glad you're here." She hugged her friend. "This will be so much fun."

"If you say so." Allison pulled her overnight bag from the back seat and looked around.

"He'll be here shortly," Paige said as if reading her mind.

"He?" Allison made her face a blank. "I have no idea who you're talking about."

"Oh, come on, Allie. This is me. I can read you like a book." Paige took the overnight bag. "Morgan will be here shortly. And just in case you're wondering, he wasn't any happier about this than you are."

"Oh, great." Allison followed Paige up onto the wide porch and into the cool interior of the ranch house. "This should make for a festive dinner. Are we drawing six guns at twenty paces?"

Paige led the way into a guest room and put the suitcase on a chest at the foot of the huge four poster bed. She turned to look at her friend, hands on hips, head cocked. "Look, I don't know what went down on that ride to San Antonio, but

Morgan was as prickly as a cactus when Ryan asked about it, and you've all but pulled out a knife. What is going on here?"

Allison shrugged. "Nothing's going on. We're just two people who rub each other the wrong way."

"Uh huh. Well, play nice at the dinner table, okay? We have a wedding to discuss."

"Yes, ma'am." Allison raised her hand in a mock salute.

"I'll leave you alone to change," Paige chuckled. "I hope you brought jeans because that's what we live in. Come on out in the back when you're ready. Ryan's out there busy with the grill."

"Okay. Just give me a couple of minutes."

When Paige left the room, closing the door behind her, Allison opened her suitcase and unpacked the few things she'd brought. The bathroom where she set out her cosmetics could have serviced a crowd, with a shower built of limestone that four people could easily fit into.

The bedroom she would have called neither masculine nor feminine, just Western. The hand stitched quilt on the massive bed had the Circle C logo in the center, as did the throw rugs on the polished hardwood floor. Two comfortable-looking arm chairs in the same blue as the comforter stood on either side of a small oak table in front of a window overlooking a rolling vista of meadows. Without being offensive about it, everything shrieked money.

Besides being drop dead gorgeous, she thought, Ryan Cutter was obviously financially well off.

The first thing she spotted when she made her way to the back patio was Morgan's rangy figure folded into a lounge

chair, a bottle of Lone Star in one hand. His Stetson rested on the patio table, and the breeze riffled his thick, dark hair. He had changed from the familiar police uniform to faded jeans that seemed molded to his body, and a plaid shirt with the sleeves rolled up, exposing tanned arms with a dusting of hair. He was looking at Ryan whose arm was loosely draped across Paige's shoulder, and laughing at something one of them had said.

It was the first time in their short acquaintance Allison had seen him relaxed. Her stomach knotted and her heart flew up into her throat.

Stop it! He's just a man.

Just a man. He has two legs, two arms, and probably a huge—Stop it!

She smoothed her suddenly sweaty palms against the legs of her jeans, opened the sliding door and stepped out onto the concrete.

"Oh, good." Paige moved out of the circle of Ryan's arm and reached toward a small tub of ice. "You're just in time for a beer." She pulled one out of the tub, popped the cap off with expertise and handed it to Allison. "Lone Star. It's all we drink. And no glass." She grinned. "Time to learn to drink from the bottle, Allie."

"Thank you." Allison took the drink and moved in a wide circle around the patio table. She sat down as far away from Morgan as she could get.

"Hi, Allison." Ryan reached out a hand, then turned back to the grill. "Glad you could make it. Paige has really been looking forward to this." He kissed his fiancée on the cheek

and the heat that flared between them was impossible to miss.

Allison looked down in her lap, unwilling to let either of them see how jealous she was of their relationship. She loved Paige. They were closer than sisters, and she was happier for Paige than she could express. She'd even been one of the conspirators to bring the couple back together. But watching them gave her a sudden wakeup call about just how empty her own life was. She didn't like the view one bit.

Trying to focus her eyes somewhere else, she glanced across the table to see Morgan watching her. Oops! That wasn't so good, either.

The smile had disappeared from his face, the stiff mask was back in place, and his blue eyes reminded her of a lake frozen over. Every bit of warmth she'd seen when he was talking to his brother and future sister-in-law had disappeared as if carried off by the breeze.

She swallowed and moistened her lips with the tip of her tongue. "Hello, Morgan. How are you?"

"Allison." He inclined his head a fraction.

So much for polite conversation.

"Well," Paige said brightly. "How nice that we're all here together."

Ryan threw back his head and laughed, a full, rich sound. "Paige, honey, you have a wonderful knack for misstatement." He set down the barbecue fork he'd been turning the steaks with.

"Okay, folks. Let's set some ground rules here. Morgan—" He pointed at his brother. "For the next couple of hours get

the stick out of your ass and try to pretend you know how to behave in polite company. Allison—" He shifted his gaze to her. "I don't know what the deal is between you and my idiot brother, but you're a guest in our home and we'll do everything we can to make your stay comfortable." He glared at Morgan.

"Please." Allison tried on a weak smile. "I think Morgan and I just got off on the wrong foot. Maybe we should start over again." She would not spoil Paige's wedding by acting like a bitch. She reached her hand across the table. "Hello, Morgan. I'm Allison Moore, Paige's best friend. Nice to meet you."

Morgan looked as if he'd swallowed a toad, but he stretched out his hand gingerly and shook hers. "Nice to meet you, too."

If a lightning bolt had shot upwards from their clasped hands, Allison couldn't have been more shocked. Whatever had filled the air in the SUV on the drive to San Antonio had reappeared a hundredfold. Heat flashed through her entire body, so intense she was surprised everyone else didn't see it. Looking at Morgan, she recognized the same reaction in his eyes—desire, need, shock. Slowly he released her hand and she picked up her half-empty bottle of beer, swallowing some of the icy liquid and hoping it would cool her down.

Paige giggled. "That's the dumbest thing I've ever seen. Okay, now let's have dinner."

Somehow after that the tension eased enough to get them through dinner and a discussion of the wedding.

"No bachelor night out," Ryan insisted. "My bride will kill me." He winked at Paige.

"You got that right, bud." Her eyes sparkled as she looked at him.

"Ad no stripper bars for the ladies," he added.

"Get real," Allison said. "Do you see any male strippers closer than San Antonio?"

"Just because you city gals tie one on the night before doesn't mean it's on *this* agenda." But he smiled to take the sting out of his words.

"You'd be amazed at what us city gals do," she teased, then noticed Morgan stiffen across the table from her. *Uh oh! I need to find out what pit this is before I keep putting my foot in it.* She quickly changed the subject. Paige brought out cheese and fruit and Ryan opened a bottle of wine.

"To the bride and groom," Allison toasted, raising her glass, and everyone joined her. "So, Morgan," she said, setting her glass down. "What happened with your dead body?"

Paige's eyes widened and she looked from Allison to Morgan and back again. "You know about that?"

"Morgan got the call just about the time he dropped me off. I can't believe someone committed a murder in White Tail."

"They didn't exactly commit it here," Morgan told her. "But they did dump the body on us."

"You're kidding! Why here? Forgive me, but it isn't as if this town is on everyone's guided tour."

"No offense taken." He shrugged. "That's the question we're all asking."

"Who is he?" Her curiosity was getting the better of her, and Morgan seemed to be more relaxed when he discussed his work.

"Another unanswered question. We can't seem to find out his name."

"Not even with his fingerprints?"

Morgan made a face. "His, uh, hands were removed."

"Removed?" Allison's mouth opened and closed. "You mean they cut off his hands?"

He nodded. "That's the deal. He must have really gotten on someone's last nerve, but why they dumped him on the Rose we still can't figure out."

Allison frowned. "The Rose?"

"King Donovan's spread," Ryan put in. "The Yellow Rose."

"Oh." Allison looked from Paige to Ryan. "I think I met him in town earlier."

"King?" Morgan's eyebrows flew up to his hairline. "Not likely. The old man's been pretty much of a recluse since he got sick."

"No, no." She shook her head. "This was a man about your age. Maybe one of the hands?"

"What did he look like?" Paige asked, curiosity dancing in her eyes. "They've got some pretty good looking cowboys out there."

Allison missed Morgan's frown. "He was about six feet, dark hair, very good looking. He offered to help me fill my gas tank."

Everyone jumped as Morgan set his wine glass down with unnecessary force. "Tate."

"Tate?"

"King's son. He pretty much runs the operation now. And let me tell you, he'd like to fill more than your gas tank." He stared at her. "So was he a big help?"

Allison felt herself redden, heat streaking across her cheeks. "I can fill my own gas tank, Morgan. I think he got the idea."

A thick silence descended. Allison concentrated fiercely on cutting a slice of cheese into minute pieces, feeling Morgan's eyes on her like twin lasers boring directly into her.

Now what?

"So how did you leave it with him?" he finally asked, his voice like gravel in a tin can.

Allison gave up on the cheese and looked up at him. "I have no idea what you mean. I didn't leave it any way with him. He made his overture, I shut him down." She placed her fork with careful precision on the edge of her plate and picked up her wine. "Although I'm sure I don't know why it's any of your business."

Morgan looked ready to cut steel with his teeth.

"More wine?" Ryan lifted the bottle, swallowing a smile.

"I think I've had enough to drink for tonight." Morgan put his napkin down beside his plate and stood up. "Can I give you a hand with this, Paige?"

"I've got it under control." She, too, was trying to keep her mouth straight. "But thanks, anyway."

"Then I guess I'll be going." He frowned, smoothed out the frown, bit the inside of his cheek while everyone watched with curiosity. Finally, in a strained voice, he said, "Allison, would you like to walk out to my car with me?"

Allison nearly dropped her wine glass. She took two deep breaths, stood up, and told Paige, "I'll be back to help you in a minute."

"Take your time," Ryan said. "If I help with the dishes I get to kiss the cook."

Paige giggled and flapped her napkin at him.

Allison followed Morgan outside to where his Expedition was parked, telling herself what an idiot she was to be doing this. What could they possibly have to say to each other?

When they got to the vehicle, he stopped and stood looking down on her. Allison was acutely aware of everything around them. The cicadas were singing their night song. In the nearest barn horses were nickering softly. Somewhere in a tree an owl hooted.

She waited, wondering what was coming next, wondering what she was doing standing out here with this man whose moods were surely going to drive her nuts.

After a long moment, he said, "It appears I've lost a lot of my social graces lately. And I don't think I was at my best the other day. I—haven't done the dating thing for a long time."

Allison simply stood there, waiting.

"I'd like to start again."

A smile flirted with her lips. "I thought we did that earlier tonight."

"That was for the audience. This is different." He drew in a breath and let it out. "How long will you be here? I mean, are you leaving tomorrow or what?"

She cocked an eyebrow at him. "Well, it's Friday. Paige wants me to stay the weekend and go home after church on Sunday."

"Would you, that is, would you like to, I mean..."

"Go out with you tomorrow night?" She grinned up at him. "I'd love to."

Morgan's eyes widened as if he'd expected a different answer. "So that's a yes?"

"Absolutely. What time and what shall I wear? I only brought jeans with me, and the dress I wore from work. I planned to wear that on Sunday."

"Seven o'clock. Jeans will be fine. We're pretty casual around here. Not too fancy, you know." The last was said with a certain tightness to his voice.

"Casual's fine. I'll be ready."

He jingled his car keys, then as if wondering if he was doing the right thing, placed his hands on her shoulders, leaned down and touched his lips to hers. The heat the touch of their hands had generated was nothing compared to the bonfire this simple kiss provoked.

Allison leaned into him, grateful for his hands on her shoulders because her knees were so weak she wasn't sure they would hold her. He tasted like a heady elixir, one that should have "dangerous" written all over it.

Cutter's Law
by Judith Rochelle

Then he lifted his head, his breathing uneven, and his hands tightened once on her shoulders before he released her and stepped back.

"Tomorrow night. Seven sharp."

"Seven." She was surprised she could even talk. "Yes."

Then he was gone, leaving Allison standing in the turnaround with her blood racing through her veins at a galloping speed and her fingertips touching her lips.

Oh, Allie girl. What are you getting yourself into?

Chapter Five

When Allison made her way down to the kitchen in the morning, it was almost ten o'clock. Paige was sitting at the kitchen table reading *The Ledger*, the White Tail weekly, and drinking a cup of coffee.

"My God, you're much too wide awake for so early in the morning. Whatever happened to sleep-late-Saturdays?"

"One thing I learned from the time Ryan and I first got together. Life at a ranch doesn't run on an alarm clock."

"Where's Ryan?" Allison yawned and stretched.

"Paige chuckled. "Long gone. Saturdays at the Circle C are work days for him."

"I thought he had a foreman who runs things for him?"

"John does a great job, especially during the week when Ryan's tied up with his law practice. But Saturdays Ryan's gone as soon as the sun is up, riding the pastures with John to make sure the cattle are where they're supposed to be, checking the breeding barns, going over growth records. And of course, during roundup he's here the whole time."

"I never realized what went into making the steaks we order at Outback." Allison took the cup of coffee Paige handed her and sipped at the hot liquid.

"It's big business," Paige agreed. "The Circle C is no small potatoes, either. We run five thousand head of cattle and that takes a lot of work."

"My God." Allison dropped into a chair opposite Paige. "You sound like you were born here." She cocked her head, studying her friend. "Tell me something. Was it a big

adjustment for you? You know, moving from the city to a peanut-sized place like this? Living on the ranch, and all?"

Paige gave her a slow smile. "First of all, I love the ranch and everything about it. Did I ever think I would? Not hardly. And then I found out there's a lot more to White Tail than you might think."

"Oh, yeah?" Allison looked at her quizzically. "Like what?"

"When I was running from Michael and the wedding from hell, this place took me in as if I'd lived here forever. We're like one big extended family. Everyone goes to the Friday night high school football games, and the men's softball games. We socialize at The Pig's Eye. We—"

"Wait a minute." Allison held up her hand. "The Pig's Eye? It sounds like a biker bar."

Paige shook her head. "Not at all. They serve hamburgers to die for, great hot wings and chili, and super nachos. Everyone goes there. It's like our own social club."

"But the name..."

"The man who owns it tried to borrow money from the bank to buy the place. The bar that had been in there before closed long ago. The banker at that time told him he'd lend him the money in a pig's eye. Ryan financed him, and the guy got his revenge with the name."

Allison raised an eyebrow. "I didn't realize Ryan had that kind of capital."

"The ranch and his practice do very well. And he doesn't invest in losing propositions."

Allison idly stirred her coffee. "What happened to the ranch they grew up on?"

"They closed it down when their father died. Ryan had already built this place. He took part of the stock for the Circle C and they sold the rest with the ranch."

"You mean him and Morgan?"

"Mm hmm. To a very nice couple. The Hammonds."

Allison continued to move the spoon around in her cup.

"So Morgan got part of the money from the sale?"

Paige narrowed her eyes. "I don't discuss Morgan's finances, Allie. If you want to know anything, you'll have to ask him, but that might not be such a smart move."

Allison finally put the spoon on the table. "I'm just being curious. No big deal."

Paige looked at her friend for a long time. "Allie, we've been friends forever and I love you to death, but let me give you some advice. Around here you're judged not by what you've got but by what you are. Both the Cutter men command a lot of respect, but not because of how much money they do or don't have. And Morgan's very touchy about the subject."

Allison raised an eyebrow. "And why is that?"

Paige shook her head. "You'd have to ask him. I'm not so sure you and Morgan would make a good pair, you know. You're used to a different kind of life. A different kind of man. I don't miss the glitz and glamour of the city at all, but what White Tail has to offer might not be for you."

"Gee, thanks for the lecture, Mom. Maybe I should just pack up and go home this morning." Allison stood up and went to stare out the sliding doors.

In a minute Paige came up beside her. "I didn't mean to hurt your feelings, kiddo. I'm just saying, maybe it's for the best you and Morgan don't exactly hit it off."

Allison was silent for a long time before she said, "I'm going out with him tonight."

"What?"

"That's what he wanted to ask me when I walked out to the car with him after dinner. Shocked the hell out of me, I can tell you."

"Wait." Paige went to get the coffee carafe, refilled their mugs and carried them to where Allison was standing. "Okay, I need another jolt of coffee for this. He actually asked you out? On a date?"

"Uh huh."

"Well." Paige was silent for a moment. "Morgan doesn't date, you know."

Allison turned to her. "Has he sworn off women?"

"In a manner of speaking. When he gets the itch, he calls one of the women he knows in Austin who doesn't expect anything more from him than an overnight visit."

Allison's eyes widened. "Sort of like a hooker but with more class?"

Paige shrugged. "I guess. At least Ryan used to make a pretense of it being a date. I think Morgan's just looking for comfort from someone who won't be demanding or cause a problem."

"But why?" Allison sat back down at the table, poured sweetener in her coffee and picked up her spoon. "I don't believe he's always been like this."

"No. All I can tell you is he had a brief, disastrous marriage. No one gossips about it because they all like him so well. But it nearly destroyed him."

"You know about it," Allison pointed out.

"Ryan told me, but only because I needed to understand the family dynamics. I never bring it up."

"Well, this evening should be very interesting. I asked him if jeans would be okay and he said fine."

"Allie, jeans will take you just about any place around here, except for church and special events. I'll bet he takes you to Squeaky Pete's."

Allison burst out laughing. "I can honestly say I've never been to a place with a name even closely resembling that. What is it?"

"Barbecue. And damn good, too. Just don't expect too much, okay?"

"If we don't end up stabbing each other with our forks, I'll be ecstatic."

No, that's not true. I want a lot more from Morgan Cutter and I'll be damned if I know why. I'd get fewer prickles from a cactus."

* * * *

"I don't believe this woman has simply disappeared off the face of the earth." Luis Obradors sat in a huge leather arm chair but he was anything but relaxed.

Neither were the two men standing in front of him. Each wore a heavy sheen of perspiration on his forehead, and they both had trouble looking their boss in the eye.

"Not one of our usual sources has had even a sniff of her," said Alex Osuna, the taller of the two.

"That's right, boss," his brother, Jorge, chimed in. "We've checked with everyone."

"*Bastante!*" Luis took a cigarette from the box on the table next to him and lit it, blowing the smoke at the two men. "I have met this woman. Very flashy, very slick, very clever. But not smart enough to hide from the old man's entire organization."

"It seems she's done it," Alex pointed out. "We've hit everyone we know, every scumbag in Texas. Any place she could get a new identity. Not a sniff. *Es verdad.*"

"We've had people look in every cubbyhole, boss. *Nada.*"

Luis took a final drag on the cigarette and crushed it in a bronze ash tray. How had God punished him like this? The two men in front of him were the sons of Emilio Escalante's sister, clowns and idiots that *el jefe* felt a personal responsibility for. But why had he given them to him, Luis, a man who had served Escalante well? Everything they did was a disaster, and now they were about to perpetrate the greatest disaster of all.

He shifted his gaze from one to the other. "Keep looking. *El jefe* is not in a mood to be placated on this one. If we don't find her, we'll all need a place to hide."

The two men nodded, tripping over each other in their haste to reach the door.

Luis pulled himself out of the deep chair and walked slowly to the built-in bar. He stared thoughtfully at the two fingers of Crown Royal he poured himself, wondering if this stupid

woman would bring down the entire structure of the life he'd built for himself with such care.

Emilio Escalante had a well-deserved reputation as the most ambitious, sharpest, most violent drug kingpin in all of Mexico and Central America. His organization rivaled the infamous Medallin cartel in size and scope of activity. Building it from the ground up had required a ruthlessness that was the stuff of legend. No one—absolutely no one—put blinders on Escalante or jerked him around. If they tried, death was the least of their worries. In fact, Luis had heard many of the old man's enemies beg to die.

But Emilio had one weakness. He hungered for the touch of class that all his money couldn't buy him. Even in his custom suits and fine silk shirts, he still had the look of a thug. This woman had possessed the patina of class that Escalante hungered for. Her blonde hair was more silver ash than the brassy bottle color they were used to, her dark brown eyes were framed by thick lashes, and her toned figure was always clothed in conservative suits that still managed to convey a latent sexuality. And she spoke with a husky voice that even when discussing business plans and financial projections promised passionate delights.

The old man had taken one look and been smitten, and she'd played him like a fish on a hook. She'd been all business, showing him the properties, walking him through the glossy brochures, handing him five-year growth projections for development. And not allowing him to get her in his bed until he'd signed the contract and handed over the check for five hundred thousand dollars.

"I'm going to make her my wife," he'd told Luis. "I will build her the finest house in San Antonio, and a huge ranch in Mexico. We will go to all the high society functions. She'll be my ticket through the door."

But Luis knew a con when he saw one. Smelled one. Yet all his digging hadn't been able to uncover one piece of history to use against her.

They'd all dined at Escalante's big home in Alamo Heights the night he had put a twelve-carat diamond on her finger. Escalante had slept the sleep of the dead, thanks to the knockout drops she'd put in his drink. The next morning she was gone. And so was the five hundred grand.

Escalante had raged. He'd screamed. He'd rained down curses. But all they'd been able to find was her partner, who hadn't been smart enough either to run when he should have or get his share of the money. The woman had screwed them all.

But the sniveling little coward had provided them with one important fact, as he screamed with agony and begged for his life. He'd given them a most important clue as to where she might seek sanctuary. And so Luis and his underlings had disposed of the partner and dumped his body where they were sure it would be seen as a warning. The problem was, the woman had yet to surface. When she did, the body would most likely be gone, and what would they do then?

Luis knocked back the liquor in one swallow and wiped his lips. If they didn't find this damned woman soon, he'd be the next one out of town. Or under it.

* * * *

Morgan walked into the police station and stopped by the desk of his detective on duty, surprised to find the man sitting there. Knox Handler had been inherited from the previous chief, but when Morgan returned to White Tail and joined the force, Knox had been his partner, and a good one. Although the detective division, if you could call it that, only had three men, Morgan had put Knox in charge and it had worked out well.

"Since when do you pull weekends?" he asked.

"Oh, well, Johnny Kincaid has the hots to give his girl a ring so I told him I'd cover for him. It's only until seven. Then I'll take the calls at home."

One of the many advantages of a small town force, especially one that saw very little crime, was the flexibility allowed in running the operation. Morgan himself had covered for his men often since Amber had flown the coop. Sitting home alone wasn't a lot of fun. Too much time to think.

"Anything back on that fax we sent out?"

Knox shook his head. "No, and I'm not sure we will. If it's someone on the hot sheet somewhere, we get an answer back within the first twenty four hours. You know that. So I'm getting the feeling this guy isn't high on anyone's list. That photo will sit in someone's in basket until they're bored and looking for something to do."

"Damn it. I'd sure like to get him identified and let him be somebody else's headache."

"I know that feeling." Knox got up to get a cold drink from the refrigerator in the corner of the big room.

"Give it until tomorrow. If nothing shows up, I'll call the state lab in Austin and give them a present. They're better equipped to search dental records."

"If they know where to start. As bad as that guy's mouth was messed up, I'm not sure they'll find a match anywhere."

"They might be able to match the manner of death with other similar bodies, though. I know it's a long shot, but I'm willing to try anything."

Knox scratched his head. "Maybe I'll make a few calls, see if I can stir someone into action. But no one seems to be looking for him at the moment."

"I'm just puzzled as all hell why anyone would choose White Tail as a spot to dump a body. They'd have to know it would stick out like a sore thumb."

"Maybe they just picked a random spot," Knox suggested. "Or dumped it out as they drove through town."

Morgan shook his head. "Doesn't track. All the signs say they drove up to the edge of the Rose, left their garbage and went back the way they came. If they drove through town, someone would have spotted them. Emery Grant, for sure. Since his wife told him he can't hang around the house all day, he lives in one of the window booths at the D&D."

"Doesn't make any sense, does it?"

"Not a lot. Well, see what you can do. I'll be out tonight, but I'll have my cell phone if you need me."

"Going out to your brother's to hang out with the lovebirds?" Knox joked.

"No." Morgan's voice sounded stiff, even to him. "I'm not. But I'll be in range." He caught Knox's look of curiosity as he walked into his office.

Other than the body with no hands, there was very little for him to do, but he wasn't yet ready to go home and get changed for the evening. He was still debating the wisdom of what he was doing. Allison Moore. She was a complete enigma. On the surface she seemed not much different than Amber—slick, sophisticated, artificial. But in the D&D Restaurant, the day she'd brought Paige back to White Tail, he'd seen a laughing, natural, open woman devoid of artifice and comfortable with people who meant a lot to him.

Then, in the truck going to San Antonio, her flirting and teasing had hit him the wrong way, reminding him of Amber's caustic style. Last night at Ryan's she had been a mixture of both, and he couldn't decide which was real and which was an act.

She made him act impulsively, something foreign to his nature. The ride back to the city, the invitation to dinner, that barest of kisses. The last time he'd given in to impulse he'd married Amber.

Yeah, and look how well that turned out.

But damn, that kiss. Touching her was like trying to bottle lightening. He'd driven home trying to ignore the pain of a throbbing hard-on.

He and Ryan had made a point of playing the field when they were younger. They'd had goals and no time for serious relationships. But when he came home from San Antonio and joined the White Tail force, he'd wanted to settle down. Make

his own nest. While Ryan was busy still dating his long-legged women in Austin with no thought of marriage at all, Morgan had been ripe for someone like Amber. Polished, sexy, sophisticated, but with what he thought was a natural warmth, she'd made him feel like a combination of Superman and Clint Eastwood.

Then it had all blown up in his face. *Pow!*

And now that Ryan had fallen ass over teakettle for Paige and was busy planning their rosy future, Morgan was left with nothing but bitter memories and a scarred heart.

Now he feared he was about to step into the same quicksand, but something about Allison Moore drew him like a magnet to steel.

He tossed the paper clip he'd been bending beyond recognition onto his desk. Maybe his luck was due to change. He could only hope.

Chapter Six

Allison folded her hands in her lap and tried to appear as relaxed as possible. She hadn't been this nervous on a date since she was sixteen years old. Getting dressed hadn't posed too much of a problem, since the wardrobe she had with her was limited. Paige had offered to let her raid her closet, but that presented too many choices.

Finally, buffed and polished, her hair hanging in dark waves around her shoulders as it had been the first day she came to White Tail, her makeup more subtle than usual, she fought off a case of the fidgets until a shiny black pickup came down the driveway and into the turnaround. She raised a questioning eyebrow at Paige and Ryan, tactfully trying to ignore her.

"That's his personal vehicle," Paige explained. "When he's on his own time he leaves the Expedition in his garage."

Allison had never even sat in a pickup, much less ridden in one. She was astonished at the luxury of the interior.

"Surprised?" Morgan's voice held just a hint of sarcasm.

"That's a loaded question," she shot back. "If I say yes, you'll think I'm a snob, if I say no, I'm condescending. Let me just comment that this is a fine vehicle."

A smile teased at the corners of his mouth but he said nothing. Now she sat watching him drive, wondering if every time she opened her mouth she'd put her foot in it.

Mistake! Mistake!

But she was determined to get to know this man better, find out what made him tick. Discover if that briefest of kisses

was only the thin surface of a wellspring of passion and sensuality.

Tonight he wore soft jeans and a western style denim shirt. The play of muscles under the material as he drove fascinated her, just as her eyes were drawn to the dark, crisp chest hairs visible at the opening of his shirt. No doubt about it. The man had definite sex appeal. But could they even hold a decent conversation?

She frowned as she realized they had left White Tail behind and were skimming along the highway. "We're not eating in town?"

"The eating choices in White Tail are limited, so when I get the chance I like to branch out. Not that the D&D doesn't feed me well."

"Paige mentioned a barbecue place you like, but she didn't say where it is."

"Actually, we're going someplace away from the spotlight."

Allison twisted her hands together. "Because you don't want to be seen with me?"

"Because I want us to have a chance to get to know each other without the whole town taking notes. Including my brother and your friend."

"Oh." She lapsed into silence again.

Morgan chuckled, a rusty sound as if he didn't make it too often. "Now who's not being talkative?"

Allison blew out the breath she didn't even now she'd been holding. "To tell you the truth, I'm not exactly sure what to say to you."

"Am I that formidable?" He kept his eyes on the road, not looking at her as he waited for her to answer him.

"No. Yes." She threw up her hands. "I don't know. I just get the feeling I keep saying all the wrong things to you, and I don't want to upset you."

A muscle jumped on his cheek. "That's my fault. I told you I haven't done this for a long time. And you might as well know I'm overly sensitive when I shouldn't be."

Allison laughed, the sound easing the tension a fraction. "That's an understatement." The smile disappeared from her face. "I'm sorry. I wasn't trying to insult you."

Morgan slid a glance at her, then reached a hand over and rested it on her clasped ones. "I'm a tough case, Allison, and I know it. But don't let me scare you. My bark is much worse than my bite. And you didn't insult me." He punched on the radio and slid a CD into the player. "How about some music? They say it soothes the savage beast."

Allison giggled. "If it doesn't I'll just throw you a hunk of raw meat."

The music easily filled the silence, and they rode listening to familiar tunes for an hour before Allison saw lights of a town ahead.

"Where are we?"

"Monroe. About fifty miles from White Tail. There's a place here I like that serves great steaks. Not too fancy," he warned.

"Fancy can get old pretty fast," she told him. *Whoops. Is that me talking? The dedicated customer at Biga on the Banks and Ruth's Chris?*

He raised an eyebrow but made no comment. In moments they had turned off the highway onto a narrow road that ended in a parking lot in front of a large, limestone building. A discreet sign on the porch read *The Cattle Company*, and through the wide picture windows Allison could see the flicker of more than a dozen hurricane lamps.

Morgan helped her out of the truck, onto the porch and through the wide double oak doors. Inside polished oak floors stretched away into half a dozen small rooms. To the left muted conversation drifted out from a narrow bar.

"Good to see you, Morgan." The hostess smiled at them. "You haven't been around much lately."

"I thought I'd take a chance on civilization tonight. Hannah, this is Allison Moore."

Hannah smiled. "Welcome to *The Cattle Company*."

"Hannah and her husband own the restaurant," Morgan explained.

"Husband and wife partnership seems to be big around here," Allison commented.

"At least one always knows what the other is doing."

Allison wasn't sure if the remark was meant as a joke or not. She was glad when the waiter took their drink orders, gladder still when the order came.

She looked around the room where they'd been seated. She counted twelve tables all filled. Some of the people smiled at Morgan, but no one approached.

"Do people stay away from you because they think you'll bite?"

"That's possible. But people come here to have quiet meals, and they don't intrude unless invited. That's another reason I picked this place."

Sipping at her drink Allison felt herself begin to relax a little more. Morgan was obviously making a tremendous effort to be pleasant, asking her about herself, telling her about his childhood. The idle chatter flowed over salads and the main course.

As they talked about themselves, engaged in light conversation, the tension of the early part of the evening—and their initial encounter the night before—slipped away like water ebbing away from the shore. One minute it was there, now it was gone.

"You're right about the steaks," she told Morgan, working her way through a tender New York strip. "I can cut this with a butter knife." She looked around. "No wonder this place is packed."

"Most of their advertising is word of mouth. Even during the week they feed a good crowd."

Their dinner plates had been cleared, dessert refused and coffee served when Morgan picked up his cup, swallowed some of the hot liquid, then set the cup down with deliberation. She waited the space of several heartbeats before he spoke again.

"Well, we got through dinner without killing each other, didn't we?"

She laughed. "Yes. And I enjoyed it."

"Allison, we really need to talk."

Her stomach clenched. Now what? "Oh oh. Is this the big speech about how we won't be seeing each other again?"

"Far from it." His eyes fastened on hers. "I know I acted like an asshole the other day. I'm sorry. But I've got some hang-ups that are hard to get around."

She made a face. "Don't we all?"

"Not like this." He picked up his cup, then put it down again. "I felt something when I met you the other day that I haven't felt in a long time. It caught me off guard." He stopped, shook his head and started again. "Allison, if we plan to see each other again, there's something I need to tell you."

Butterflies were suddenly doing a war dance in her stomach. Was this the mysterious secret that Paige refused to divulge? And how would it impact her? She wasn't too sure she wanted to hear what he had to say.

"Do you have a fatal disease?" She tried to settle the unease with a joke.

He grimaced. "Sometimes it feels like it." His eyes took on a distant look. "I know Paige has told you I was married before."

"This is another one of those questions where no matter what I answer it's wrong. Right?"

"No, it's okay. That fact isn't exactly a secret. But I don't talk about it too much. Either the marriage or the end of it."

She could hardly stand the pain in his voice. "Morgan, don't feel you have to explain anything to me. We finally seem to be doing okay. Let's not rock the boat."

He stared into his coffee cup. "No. That's no good. I can't believe I'm telling you this when we've just met. I never talk about this with anyone. Even my brother."

"Morgan..."

"But if we plan to see each other again, you need to know what makes me tick."

She raised an eyebrow. "And do we? Plan to see each other again?"

A tiny smiled teased at his mouth. "I'd like that. If you do, that is. But there are some things you need to understand first. So let me spill my guts, okay?"

She nodded.

"I guess you know I worked for the Bexar county sheriff for four years before I decided I really wanted to be home. In White Tail. The place I was born and raised. San Antonio just didn't cut it for me. I felt as if I was out of place." He looked up at her. "You understand?"

She shrugged. "Everyone has to find their own place, Morgan. You needed to be in yours."

"There was a spot on the force, I took it, and when the chief retired and moved to Arizona, the town council appointed me to take his place."

"You love your work, don't you." She made it a statement, not a question.

"I love White Tail. It's as simple as that. And when I came home, I was tired of chasing women and telling myself I was having a good time. I wanted to get married. Have children. Put down my own roots, as it were."

He took another swallow of coffee.

Allison watched and waited, forcing herself to be quiet.

"I met Amber at a rodeo," he told her. "She was beautiful, smart, sophisticated. She made a big play for me and naturally I was flattered. The male ego is a strange thing, Allison. It twists your brain."

"You could say the same thing about women, you know."

They waited while the waiter refilled their coffee cups.

"I suppose you're right. Anyway, long story short, we were married three weeks later and I thought heaven had swallowed me up."

When he stopped talking, she said, "Morgan we don't have to talk about this now."

"Yes. Yes, we do. I want you to understand what's got me so tied up in knots."

"Okay." She smiled, not sure she was ready for him to unburden himself to her, yet wanting to know what was behind the bitterness in this complex man.

"Like I was saying, I thought I'd died and gone to heaven when Amber came onto me that way, and then said she'd marry me. But apparently she decided she'd landed in hell. Things fell apart real fast. Then one day three months after we were married, I came home to find the house empty, her things gone, and a letter about me and the town that would have peeled the varnish from the furniture."

"Oh, Morgan, I'm so sorry." She started to reach across the table for his hand, then pulled back. She wasn't sure exactly what to do.

"I don't want your pity, Allison. I'm just giving you some background so you understand why I don't trust women,

especially those from the city. I learned we have different values and different views of life. I still have scars that won't heal. That's why I don't trust easily, and why I have my defense shield up with you even when I want you to break through it."

Allison stirred her coffee, choosing her words carefully. "I am so sorry that Amber was a thoughtless, heartless bitch, but I'd like to think the only thing she and I have in common is we're both female."

"Allison," he interrupted.

"No. Stop. Let me ask you a question. Why did you drive me back to San Antonio the other day? Why did you ask me out tonight? This is more than just being polite because of the wedding."

His eyes locked with hers, and the bright blue was the color of the ocean. "The other day, in the D&D, there was nothing of the city glitz about you. You were at ease with everyone, not 'on stage' or performing in any way. You didn't look down your nose at anyone. For the first time since Amber left, I thought I'd met someone I'd like to know better."

"But on the drive back you stiffened up on me. Retreated back in your shell."

"I—thought I'd made a mistake. You seemed different when we left White Tail."

"Because I like to joke and tease?" She made a face. "I realized afterwards I'm so used to playing a part with people I wasn't comfortable being myself."

"You have a life much different than mine," he pointed out. "I didn't even think I could conjure up an evening out you wouldn't laugh at."

Allison felt herself flush. "You bought yourself a pretty low opinion of me based on a few hours, cowboy." She bit her lip. "Sorry, that just slipped out."

"It's okay. I shouldn't be so sensitive." He gave her a tiny smile. "Just don't call me Wyatt Earp, okay?"

"All right. So, back to the topic at hand. All that other garbage aside, if you feel that way why did you ask me out tonight?"

"Because I knew I'd jumped to conclusions, and I wanted to find out which was the real Allison—the one in White Tail or the one in San Antonio."

She finished the last of her coffee and set her cup down, patting her lips with careful movements. "And what if you find out they're one and the same?"

He sighed. "Then ... maybe I can get used to both of them. Allison, I'm putting all my cards on the table. My head tells me there's something real there." A smile danced across his mouth. "And my body thinks you're terrific, too."

She burst out in a full-throated laugh. "Well, that's honest all right." She leaned across the table. "You're okay, Morgan. More than okay. And look, we did all right tonight, didn't we?"

"Yes, we did. I'm really out of practice but I'd like to do this again. And Paige and Ryan will probably breathe a sigh of relief that they can get married without the maid of honor and best man killing each other."

The ride back to White Tail was much like the one earlier in the evening, except this time neither of them were on edge, and Allison hummed along to the music from the CD. All too soon, as far as she was concerned, they were back at the ranch.

"Well, they left a porch light on for us, but the rest of the place is dark."

"I think they have better things to do than wait up for us. Besides, I'm kind of glad for the dark."

Morgan parked as far away from the house as he could and turned off the ignition. They sat in the truck peering at each other in the dark. The full moon cast its silver glow, outlining their bodies. Then he pressed a button and the seat slid smoothly back. He unbuckled his seat belt, reached over to unfasten Alison's, and almost before she realized it he was beside her, pulling her against him. His hand reached to cup her face and turn it toward him.

Her heart beat sped up and a corner of her mouth turned up. "Are we going to neck?"

"Sounds like a good idea to me." His deep voice was slightly shaky. "How about you?"

Her own voice none too steady, she said, "Oh, I'm definitely up for a little necking."

If the kiss the previous night had scorched them despite its brevity, this one consumed them like a raging inferno engulfing them both.

Morgan's mouth pressed down on hers, his tongue licking at the seam, his teeth nibbling her lower lip, the soft skin of her lips seared by his touch. Fire began to race through her veins and all she could think of was this man and his touch.

"Open for me." His voice was husky.

When she opened her mouth his tongue swept in like a wild marauder, invading the inner softness. Her own tongue dueled with it, tasting him, his mouth heavy with the flavors of coffee and good Kentucky bourbon. He shifted his head to give him greater access as he continued to devour her mouth, swallowing the tiny moan that bubbled up from her throat.

Desperate to feel his skin under her fingers, she pulled at his shirt, grateful it had snaps rather than buttons, vaguely hearing the popping sounds as she yanked it open. Then her hands were skimming over the smooth skin of his chest, her fingers curling in the crisp mat of hair, his flesh burning under her touch. When her fingertips found his nipples, she raked her nails over them lightly. His body jerked and his mouth bit down harder on hers, making her gasp.

"God, Allie." His voice was almost unrecognizable, his breath like a hot wind against her face. "Sweet Jesus."

They were like starving children placed at a banquet table, so hungry for each other they wanted to taste and sample everything at once. When he pulled her legs across his lap even through the heavy denim of his jeans she could feel the rock hard shaft of his erection against her thigh. It burned like a heated steel rod, sending shock waves through her.

Cradling her body against him, his hand slid beneath her sweater, smoothing up and down her back, the roughness of his skin creating delightful friction every place he touched. When she felt his knuckles barely rub against the sides of her breast, an arrow of heat shot straight through to her core and she felt instant dampness between her legs.

Everything around her faded away, leaving her suspended in space, in a cocoon alone with Morgan, his maleness surrounding her. His scent, a seductive mixture of spice and musk, drifted tantalizingly across her nostrils, setting every pulse in her body throbbing and the millions of tiny nerves in her body snapping and firing.

"Allie," he breathed, as he lifted his lips barely an inch. "My God, Allie."

"Mmmh," she hummed, unable to form a coherent thought, arching against his hand.

He fumbled with the clasp on her bra, finally shoving the fabric aside and letting the weight of her freed breast rest in his palm. His thumb teased across her nipple and her blood thundered through her veins. He pushed her sweater up around her neck and bent his head to take one nipple into his mouth, teasing it with his tongue. Allison jerked, and clasped his head tightly to her body. As he suckled lightly on the diamond-hard point, the wetness from his tongue like a burst of electricity, she vaguely felt his hand reach for her jeans, unsnapping and unzipping.

And then his hand slid inside the scrap of lace that passed for her panties, and one long, lean finger slid between her heated folds. With unerring accuracy, he curled the finger and found that very sensitive spot inside her, high up, and teased at it. Electricity shot through her.

Everything in her body was centered between her legs and that wicked finger, rubbing her, teasing at the entrance to her core, while he continued to pull at her breast with his mouth.

Passion lashed at her, turned her body into one continuous burst of flame.

Then his teeth clamped onto the nipple, his finger locked into her hot, wet sheath, his thumb pressed against her throbbing clitoris, and just that quickly spasms overtook her. The orgasm shook her from head to toe, her body jerking and impaling itself on his finger. He was relentless, stimulating both her breast and her sheath, rubbing his thumb in a circular motion over her clit, holding her to him as the convulsions wracked her.

When the storm finally passed, she lay limp in his arms. He lifted his head from her breast and took her mouth, stroking the inside with his tongue much as his finger still stroked her inside, absorbing the tiny aftershocks. When he was sure the last vestige of the orgasm had subsided, and her breathing returned to something close to normal, she felt him remove his hand, lay its warmth on her stomach for a brief moment, then zipped her up and helped her adjust her clothing.

"Morgan?" She tried to focus on his face, seeing in his expression the same stunned look she was sure was on hers.

"Got away from us, didn't it?" He grinned in the darkness, despite the unsteadiness in his voice and his uneven breathing.

She leaned against him, her hand resting on the muscular plane of his chest. "I haven't done this in a car since I graduated from high school." Her voice was still breathless and shaky.

"Me, either." His own voice was unsteady.

She looked up at him again. "But you didn't ... We didn't ... I mean..."

"Sssh." He touched a finger to her lips. "It's all right. I didn't mean for even this to happen, but my God, Allie. When I touched you I couldn't help myself."

"Does this make me a loose city woman?" She tried to ask the question in a teasing manner.

Morgan's face was serious. "I wouldn't say anything about you is loose, darlin'. And no, what it makes you is an honestly responsive woman."

"But you didn't..." She struggled with the words again.

He put his lips close to her ear, stroking the shell with the tip of his tongue. "No, I didn't. And I won't, until I'm buried deep inside you, and can feel those hot, wet muscles gripping me."

Allison felt herself go hot all over. Another minute and she'd be stripping her clothes off herself. My God, what was it about this man that made her react this way? She pushed herself away from Morgan's warmth. "I'd better go in before I lose control and ravish you."

He smiled and touched her lips with his. "There's nothing I'd like better. But not in my brother's driveway."

She giggled. "You're right. I'd better go in."

"Only one more week until the wedding. Will you be coming back again before then?"

She nodded. "Once or twice more. I'm bringing some stuff she ordered in San Antonio. Also, you know her folks are selling their house and moving out this way. Most of Paige's stuff will just get shipped to her, but there are some things

she wants right away, and she doesn't have time to drive in for them."

"We won't have too much time alone, will we?"

Allison shook her head. "No, but we'll steal whatever we can. Here." She found her purse, dug into it for one of her business cards and wrote a number on the back. "This is my cell. You can always reach me on this if you want to call. I might not be home and I don't think you want to run the gamut at the office."

He gave her a wry smile. "You got it. Thanks." He slipped the card into his shirt pocket. "I will call." He pulled her close to him for one last searing kiss, then got out of the truck and came around to open her door.

"Hurry back," he whispered in her ear, then claimed her lips one more time.

Chapter Seven

"You hardly said a word Sunday, then just jumped in your car and left. Did you and Morgan have a fight or something?"

Allison shifted her cell phone to her other ear and picked up her iced tea. The building where she worked had an outdoor patio with tables and chairs, a good place to get away from things when the office closed in. She'd taken her tuna sandwich and cold drink and found a place in a corner of the courtyard, shielded from everyone else by the huge umbrella on the table. But her conversation with her friend was diminishing her appetite. She did *not* want to talk about Morgan.

Even over the staticky cell phone reception, Allison could hear the worry in Paige's voice. Her friend was right. She'd had little to say when she got up Sunday morning, but that was because she was holding the memory of the previous night so close she didn't want anything to disturb it. Her body still tingled from his touch. She could still feel the touch of his lips on her mouth and her breasts, his clever fingers sliding into her heat and driving her to orgasm. She was stunned at how quickly the fire had erupted between them, consuming them with unexpected speed.

Did Morgan regret any of it? He'd been an unselfish lover, something she was definitely not used to. What would he think of her because she'd taken so easily from him without giving anything back? Would he chalk it up to something '*city girls*' expected? Would he regret all of it? Any of it? Was he sorry he'd told her about his marriage? God, she hoped not.

She was probably the first person he'd unburdened himself to since the Amber debacle, and it emphasized the fact that something was definitely happening with them.

The hardest thing for her to get her mind around was that between teasing him on the ride to San Antonio and practically throwing herself at him in the truck, she'd fallen in love with him. Just that quick. A man with a wounded heart and a bruised ego. Hardly a winning combination.

"Allison?" Paige raised her voice. "Are you still there?"

"What?" Allison mentally shook herself. "Yes, I'm here. And I'll definitely be there tomorrow night before dinner."

"That wasn't what I asked." A pause drifted over the connection. "Did you and Morgan have another fight?"

"No. No, we didn't fight at all. Everything's fine."

"Listen, kiddo, I've known you too long. Something's going on."

Allison swallowed a sigh. "I told you. We're great."

"Allie." Paige's voice was very firm. "I told you Morgan has some issues..."

"Oh, he told me all about Amber," Allison interrupted, pulling at the bread on her sandwich.

"He *told* you?" Paige sounded shocked.

"Uh huh. He said he wanted me to know why he's—the way he is sometimes."

"He never talks about it to anyone. Not even Ryan."

"Listen, Paige." Allison shifted in her chair and pulled a bite-size piece from the sandwich. "Let it go for now, okay? Morgan and I are adults. I don't know where this is going any

more than he does. Or *if* it's going. But let us figure it out, will you?"

Paige hesitated. Then she sighed. "All right. I'll back off, but I'm always here to talk to."

"Thanks. And—ask Ryan not to bug his brother about it, okay?"

"Yes, ma'am."

Allison could hear the smile in Paige's voice. "Okay. Thank you. And tomorrow night I'll bring out the stuff from the wedding planner. The favors and cake boxes and the other things you ordered."

"Thanks. Ordinarily Mom would pick them up for me, but she's in a dither getting the house sold and everything packed up."

"No problem. Do you want me to swing by and get the stuff out of your bedroom?"

Between settling in at the ranch and planning the wedding, Paige had not been back to San Antonio since the day of what everyone was calling "The Big Kiss and Makeup." Although Georgia Cavanaugh had packed two huge suitcases for her daughter and hidden them in her car, there were a lot of things Paige still needed.

"No, thanks anyway. Mom and Dad are coming out Thursday night and they'll bring what I need."

""See you tomorrow, then."

And Morgan? Would she see him? Although she'd given him her cell number, she hadn't heard word one from him since he'd driven away from the ranch. She was chewing on a piece of her tuna sandwich and wondering if they were back

to square one again when the phone rang. She looked at the number on the readout and her heart did a tiny flip. White Tail. She'd just talked to Paige so it wasn't her.

"Hello?"

"Did I get you in the middle of something?"

The deep voice immediately sent shivers through her body. A wide smile spread across her face. "Just choking down a stale sandwich and watery iced tea."

Morgan laughed. "That must be some restaurant you eat at."

"It's close and it's cheap. Quality's an extra charge." She paused while she figured out how to word her next sentence.

"I was hoping you'd call." Okay, positive but not pushy.

"I got tied up with something yesterday or I would have."

"Don't tell me White Tail has crime on a Sunday. I thought it was against the law."

"More public relations. King Donovan wanted a report on the body we found on his ranch, and he wanted it in person. He's been good to the community and now his health is failing, so I took a run out to his place. Ended up staying longer than I expected to."

"Donovan? Wasn't that his son I met at the gas station?"

"Yes. Tate."

Allison grinned. She could almost see Morgan's face tighten up. "That's some pick up line he's got," she teased, then regretted it at once.

But Morgan didn't jump at her. "Just as long as he uses it on someone else," was all he said. "I called because Ryan

mentioned you were coming back to town tomorrow night. That right?"

"Yes. I'm picking up some things for the wedding."

Silence. She could almost hear Morgan's brain clicking its gears.

"I don't think we'll be able to steal too much time together, but I thought maybe you'd like to go riding tomorrow evening." More silence. "I guess I should have asked. You do ride, don't you?"

Allison laughed. "Yes, and I guess it's a good thing, right?"

"Yes. A very good thing." More silence. "Amber didn't ride, in case you're interested."

She sucked up the last of the iced tea through the straw. "Actually, Morgan, I think what I'm interested in is you and me. I've ridden off and on for years, and I think I still remember how to stay on a horse."

The sigh of relief came through clearly. "Good, because I'm going to ask Paige if you can borrow Bluebonnet. It's her horse and she's nice and gentle. I thought ... that is ... I mean, if it's all right with you..."

"Whatever you want to do is fine. Just name it."

"We won't have a lot of time what with you helping Paige with the wedding and me hog-tied with this dead body. I thought we could take a ride out to the creek on the ranch and have a picnic supper. I know it's not very fancy..."

"Stop it." Her voice was sharper than she intended but she was getting annoyed. "I'm not a princess in an ivory tower who has to be waited on by servants and can only eat in five star restaurants. I love picnics. I've been on a million of

them. I don't care if we have bologna sandwiches and Dr. Pepper. Whatever you plan is fine."

"Well, good. Okay. Very good."

"By the way, what's happening with your dead body?"

"Nothing, and that's the problem. We haven't had a nibble on the picture we've been circulating. With no fingerprints we can't run him through any of the systems. Right now we've got him in cold storage at the funeral home until we can dig something up."

"Who on earth would dump a body in White Tail?"

"When you find an answer to that question, darlin', be sure to let me know. I'll see you tomorrow night then?"

"Yes. I'll call you when I leave the city so you can pretty much guess when I'll get there."

"See you then."

And he was gone.

Allison stared at the phone in her hand. When she tried to look at herself through Morgan's eyes, she wasn't sure she liked what she saw. BWT—Before White Tail—she'd thought her life was pretty great. Plenty of parties, plenty of escorts, plenty of A-List events. Lunches and dinners on the Riverwalk. But looking at it from a different angle, she realized what she'd built was a façade. Without the right person, none of it meant very much.

She wondered if Morgan would ever consider coming back to San Antonio?

First things first, kiddo. You haven't even had a second date.

* * * *

If Allison had looked across the courtyard from where she was sitting to the other side of the street, she would have seen a black Lincoln Town Car inch its way to the curb, and a tall, lean man with dark hair in a black suit climb into the back seat.

Luis Obradors was beginning to hate the daily rides in this car as much as the almost hourly calls from Emilio Escalante. He cursed the damned woman and the idiots who had dumped the body with every breath. What a mess this was. He should have handled everything himself. Then he wouldn't be in the position of making excuses to the only man he feared.

"So, Luis." Escalante studied him with hooded eyes. "I can't seem to get a satisfactory answer over the telephone. I thought a little face to face might inspire you."

"Believe me, *jefe*, I am inspired." Luis was consumed with a desire to loosen his collar but forced himself to sit still. It didn't do to let the old man see he made you sweat.

"With all the resources I put at your disposal, why is it so hard to find this one female?"

"She's clever, *jefe*. Very clever."

Escalante grunted. "So I'm aware."

"We believe we've had a sighting, however."

"A sighting." The old man's voice was like a sheet of ice. "Sightings don't do me much good."

"But it gives us a clue to her location. Even now I have two men on the way to El Paso with instructions to bring her back at once."

"El Paso." Escalante studied the glass of Perrier water in his hand. "I have a hard time believing she would take refuge so close to the border."

"Maybe that's why she did it. Because we wouldn't look for her there."

Escalante shook his head. "You have to know how she thinks, and unfortunately I've become an expert on that. I don't believe she's in El Paso, but I'm confident she'll surface in the place we first expected. Be prepared."

"But..."

"You're in no position to argue with me, Luis. Your men botched this assignment from beginning to end. If I don't get my money back, I will hold you personally responsible."

Luis felt his stomach heave. His life span was grower shorter by the day.

"We'll keep a careful eye out," he promised.

"Don't be stupid again. Do this yourself, and be careful not to arouse suspicion. I know small towns. Everything is everyone's business."

"So how do you suggest I *keep an eye on things*?"

"If you like breathing, Luis, I'm sure you'll find a way."

He knocked on the diving glass and the car pulled into the curb.

Luis watched it pull away, knowing his margin for error had just shrunk to zero.

* * * *

"You look like you need more than a cup of coffee, Morgan."

Donna Young stood beside the booth in the D&D, the ever-present coffee carafe in her hand, eyeing the man sprawled on one of the bench seats.

Morgan took off his Stetson and placed it next to him on the seat. "I think a new brain would be the optimum thing." His tone was filled with disgust.

"Gotta be the dead body. There's nothing else going on here that would cost anyone a drop of sweat."

"Bingo. But this one's enough to drive me over the edge."

Donna slid into the booth opposite him. It was the middle of the afternoon and the restaurant was almost empty. "Still no idea who he is?"

"Not a clue. We sent out a fax to every police department in Texas with no results so far."

"Maybe he's not from Texas."

Morgan took a swallow of the hot coffee. "Possible, but I hope that's not the case. Damn those people anyway. Cutting off his hands bought them a lot of time." He sighed. "Well, we shipped him off to Austin. Good riddance. They said they'll see what they can do. All we've really got to use is the teeth, but without a place to start..." He shrugged.

"I heard the press was chasing you the other day."

He groaned. "Lord, getting them out of town was no picnic. They must have found out from one of the police departments we faxed to. Although these people could sniff out a stink a mile under the ground."

"Well, you'll find out who he is sooner or later. Tate Donovan must be spitting fire that they dumped the body on The Yellow Rose."

"Luckily he's taking the whole thing as a big joke. Too bad I can't do that. Life would be a lot easier. And this was supposed to be a nice easy job." He grinned but without much humor. "You don't happen to have a leftover cinnamon roll hanging around, do you?"

Derek Young did all the cooking and baking. Customers swore his pastries—especially his cinnamon rolls—beat anything they could get in the city.

"I have one I saved in the back, but I'll heat it up for you if you tell me how you're getting along with Paige's friend."

Morgan's lips set in a thin line. "Donna..."

"I know, I know." She stood up and headed for the back of the restaurant. "But I know she was here for the weekend and you took her to *The Cattle Company* for dinner."

"Did *The Ledger* put out a special edition or something? I must have missed it."

"My folks were there for dinner and saw you," she called from the back. "Listen, Chief, you'd have to go to Arizona to get out of the White Tail radar range."

"Don't remind me."

"So, doesn't an old friend deserve the scoop?"

"An old friend needs to remember to mind her business. I don't know where it's going, and I'm damn sure not opening myself up to public dissection like the last time. When there's something to say, I'll come in here and make an announcement."

"My customers will surely appreciate that. Here." She put a plate with a hot pastry in front of him. "Maybe this will sweeten your disposition."

But it wasn't just his disposition that was out of kilter. Since Saturday night he'd been in steady conflict with himself. Allison Moore had turned out to be pure liquid dynamite.

The dinner invitation had been prompted by an unreasonably jealous reaction to her casual meeting with Tate Donovan. He'd gone expecting to grit his teeth just to get through the evening.

But Allie had surprised him. She was warm, had a great sense of humor, and she'd seemed to genuinely enjoy herself. She had none of the artifice he'd come to expect in women like her.

Women like her? Did he even know what he meant by that any more?

And then, in the truck ... Sweet Jesus! He'd been like a horny teenager. He still couldn't believe how he'd been all over her. But she hadn't pushed him away. Unlike Amber, who had always seemed to be conscious of disturbing her hair or makeup, Allison threw herself into sex without restraint. Bringing her to orgasm and watching her uninhibited response had been one of the greatest pleasures of his life.

He dreamed about that interlude for two nights now. He'd put off calling her afraid she might have had a change of heart and decided not to see him again. But when he did call, she sounded as eager as he was. Tomorrow they'd see each other again.

And once they got this damn wedding out of the way, maybe they'd have a chance to see if there was anything to this relationship at all.

Chapter Eight

The horse looked a lot bigger than Allison remembered when John Howell, the Circle C foreman, led her out into the yard.

"Don't I need a step stool?" she asked Morgan, eyeing the whole project with suspicion.

Everyone laughed.

"Not a problem, darlin'," Morgan told her. He made a step for her with his hands and lifted her up into the saddle. He checked her stirrups and the saddle cinch, then swung up onto his own horse.

"He's gorgeous," Allison told him, sweeping admiring eyes over the magnificent roan stallion. "What's his name?"

"Conquistador. The conqueror."

"Well, let's hope he and Bluebonnet get along all right."

"No sweat. Just follow me." He reached down and took the canvas picnic bag from Paige, then urged the stallion forward. "We're not going far. Just work on keeping up."

"Maybe this isn't such a good idea." Allison looked at Paige and Ryan, grinning up at her.

"Better get moving," Ryan chuckled. "Don't want to get left behind and have Morgan eat all that good food."

Then Bluebonnet saw the horse in front of her move out in an easy lope and began to follow along.

"See you later," she yelled, as the horse broke into a slow canter.

Once she got used to the jouncing and remembered how to adjust her body to the rhythm of the horse, Allison settled

down to enjoy the ride. They passed the barns, John Howell's house and the bunkhouse, and a corral where half a dozen horses were ambling aimlessly. Acres of meadows and pastureland rolled away as far as the eye could see. Wire fencing stretched away from the open section they rode through, with fat brown Santa Gertrudi cattle chomping peacefully away or just staring at the riders with mild curiosity.

This was definitely a part of Texas Allison had never seen. Yet most of the land mass in the state was devoted to ranching and farming, and this was the panorama people thought of whenever the state was mentioned. She thought of Ryan, a well-respected attorney as well as a rancher. And Donna and Derek, who made the D&D the focal point of White Tail. And the verbal pictures Paige had painted of the town, its population and why she loved it so much. And she thought of herself, loving Paige like a sister but wondering how she could make up her mind to bury herself at the ass end of the earth. She'd thought the woman crazy.

I'm the one who's crazy. Out here, this is real. No wonder Morgan loves it. But I don't know if I could ever give up San Antonio the way Paige has, so what do I do now?

"Hey!" Morgan yelled back at her from several hundred yards ahead. "Come on, slow poke."

"Coming." No more time for thinking now.

The place Morgan had picked for them to stop was at the edge of a stream, a narrow ribbon of water that splashed over a bed of stones as it gurgled its way through the meadow. The early evening sky was wearing its coat of many colors,

vivid pinks and purples and golds splashed across the horizon with broad strokes. A soft breeze tickled the leaves of the oaks and sycamores and bent the tops of the mountain cedars.

Allison sat still in the saddle for a moment, drinking in the combined scents of forest and meadows, letting the seductive peace of the place wash over her.

Morgan helped her dismount, and pointed to a scene on her right. "White tail," he whispered. "There's a huge herd around here that gave the town its name."

"They're beautiful," she whispered back. "But how do they get along with the cattle?"

"Just fine. Neither bothers the other. If more people did the same thing, my job would be even more uneventful than it is."

"Except for the dead body," she reminded him.

He grimaced. "Don't bring that up. The whole thing is driving me nuts."

He took a rolled quilt from the back of his saddle and unfolded it on the ground, then opened the canvas bag with their food.

"Oh, yum." She started unwrapping the tinfoil from one of the sandwiches. "Roast beef on French bread. Does Mrs. Howell make all of the food?"

"Sure does. Although I think she and Paige have figured out how to share the kitchen."

With the sandwiches Myra Howell had packed a carton of potato salad, sliced pickles and a thermos of iced tea.

"I asked for Lone Star, but she doesn't believe you should drink and ride," Morgan said with a slight grin.

"Sort of like drinking and driving," Allison teased.

When they had eaten and packed up all the debris, Morgan stretched out on the quilt and drew Allison down with him. His face was barely an inch away from hers, and then he was kissing her, a deep, penetrating kiss.

The minute he touched her, Allison could feel her body respond, just like the other night. Liquid seeped between her legs and her nipples were so hard she thought they'd poke through her blouse. She wanted to yank down the zipper on his jeans, grab his erection and put her mouth over it. She felt little licks of fire racing through her body as his tongue swept through her mouth, his lips hard and firm, molding to hers. One large hand caressed the line of her jaw, trailing down her neck until it cupped her breasts. When she felt his thumb moving slowly back and forth across the already-hardened tips she began to shake with the need to have him inside her.

My God, what is the matter with me?

But that was her last rational thought. The kiss went on and on, drugging her, seducing her, whispering to her senses. But just as she began to move against him, he pulled away and sat up, bringing her with him. They leaned against the thick trunk of an oak tree.

Allison struggled to catch her breath. "Something wrong?"

He looked at her, his electric blue eyes blazing into hers, the muscles in his jaw line bunching as he dragged himself under control. "Wrong time, wrong place."

She frowned. "I don't understand."

"You will before too long." He was still having trouble with his breathing,

Allie placed her hand on his chest and she could feel the heavy thumping of his heart.

"The wedding's coming up," he said, when he had himself under control. "And I know you've got a lot of obligations. That's why I thought we could steal this time together. And I really wanted a chance to talk to you."

A butterfly beat its wings in her stomach. "About?"

"About the other night."

She tried to sit up but he held her too tightly. "If you're going to apologize I'm going home."

"Apologize, hell. I just wanted to tell you it was amazing, and I can't wait to do it again."

She nestled back against him. "I still say it wasn't too satisfying for you."

"Darlin', I told you. Making a woman come apart the way you did is a huge amount of satisfaction to a man." He rolled towards her and ran his tongue along the rim of her ear. "Do you remember what else I said?"

A tiny shiver raced up her spine. "Yes," she whispered. "I do."

"I meant it. I want to bury myself so deep in you I can touch the heart of you." He pulled her tight against him. "But I don't want this to be just about sex. That's available any time I want it. That's not bragging, just a fact. I want this to be something more."

"I'd like that, too," she said, her voice soft.

Morgan cleared his throat. "The other night you accused me of misjudging you. I guess you're right. I just have a lot of knee-jerk reactions. Last time I let myself get involved with someone it happened fast and nearly destroyed me. I realize now we hardly knew anything about each other, and I don't want to make that mistake again."

Allison rubbed her cheek against his shoulder. "I'd like to think there's a little more to me than what you see on the surface."

"The same for me. Conversation doesn't come easy for me. I guess you've figured that out. But I want to talk to you, Allie. I want to learn all about you, and I want to tell you about me."

"Sounds good to me."

She felt his body relax.

"Okay, then. Where shall we start."

She reached across his body for his other hand and linked her fingers through his. "Well, once upon a time..."

They had no idea how much time had passed when the thunder of hoof beats reverberated through the ground. Allison lifted her head and looked around.

"Someone's coming."

Morgan nodded. "In a minute my brother and Paige will come riding up, dying of curiosity. Which is the reason I didn't strip off every stitch of your clothing, even though I wanted to."

Her mouth formed a round O as two riders came into the clearing. She looked up to see two grinning faces.

"I told you they'd be decent," Paige teased her future husband. "Allie has too much class."

"Nah," Ryan disagreed. "My brother's too uptight, that's all."

"Don't you two have better things to do than harass us?" Morgan stood, then reached down a hand to Allison.

"As a matter of fact, yes," Ryan told him. "I'm here because your Dudley Do-Right wanted me to get a message to you."

Morgan frowned and checked his cell phone clipped to his belt. "Why didn't he just call me? My phone's not off."

"I'm sure he figured if it came from me you wouldn't chew nails. Young Murdock is into self-preservation."

"What the hell are you talking about?"

"It appears your house has been broken into."

Morgan stared at his brother. "No damn way."

"Oh, yeah. Without a doubt."

Allison had already rolled up the quilt and zipped the picnic sack shut. She handed them to Morgan to fasten to his saddle. "I'm ready when you are."

"Wait. Ryan, how did they know I had a break-in? I don't have a security system or anything. God knows in White Tail the nosy neighbors are better than any electronics."

"Your dog was in the yard barking his fool head off. Everyone knows you keep him in the house when you're gone, so your next door neighbors called the station. Jace went by himself and found the back door jimmied and Cochise in the yard going crazy."

"Let's go." He helped Allison mount, then swung up into the saddle himself. Touching his heels to the horses flanks, he urged him into a canter and headed back toward the ranch house.

* * * *

"Okay, they didn't touch the gun safe, so what did they want?"

Morgan stood in the middle of his living room with Jace Murdock and the patrolmen who'd been sent to his house. He'd settled Cochise down, let him sniff each of his officers, and now the big dog was sitting alertly at his side, every muscle in his body shrieking of protection of his master.

Over great protest Allison and Paige had remained at the Circle C, but Ryan had jumped into the truck with him and was now leaning against the wall, just watching. Morgan was actually glad to have him. His brother's keen sense of observation would catch things others might miss.

"What else *is* there?" Ryan asked now. "Not that you live in a hovel, but you don't exactly keep a lot of stuff worth stealing."

"If Cochise hadn't been out in the yard barking so loud they could hear him in Austin we'd never have known anyone was here at all," Jace told him. "I told these guys..." He waved at the patrol officers who were trying to fade into the wall. "To check all the doors. That's how we found the scratch marks on the back door lock. But they were real faint. If you hadn't been looking, you might not have seen them for a long time. If ever."

Morgan resisted the urge to slam his fist against something. "Let's go through this house room by room and see if we can find anything. I'm damned if I know what they were after."

An hour later they were even more puzzled.

"Someone accessed my laptop which I'd left in my bedroom, but they couldn't get into the files I have password-protected. Anyway, those are financial records, and I don't make enough to interest anyone."

Ryan walked back into the living room. "They've been through your desk, too. Your Rolodex is messed up and your calendar book is in a different place than you usually keep it."

"My Rolodex?" Morgan's eyebrows nearly met his hairline. "My calendar? What the hell would anyone want with those? I don't have any numbers you can't get from Information."

"If I didn't know how anal you are about your stuff I'd never have known. They were just a little sloppy putting things back."

"Chief, the guys have checked everywhere outside," Jace reported. "And there's nothing."

Morgan took off his Stetson and scratched his head. "How did they even get in without being seen? A stranger would stick out like a sore thumb here."

One of the patrolmen turned red and looked at his shoes.

"Boyd?" Morgan stared at him. "You got something you want to tell me?"

"When we were at the D&D taking a coffee break, Sheila Garrett from the real estate office was all excited because two

guys had come in asking about that old Barnes property she's had for sale forever."

"And?" Morgan prompted.

"Well, she said they sounded real interested, asking a lot of questions about the town, the people. Police protection," he blurted out.

"Police protection?" Jace frowned. "Why the hell would anyone worry about that in a town like White Tail?"

"They'd ask if they were trying to find out about you," Ryan said. "Check out where you live, what your neighbors are like. How they might gain access to your house without being seen."

"We didn't think anything of it, Chief," the other patrolmen said. "I guess we should have been suspicious. We never get strangers here, much less anybody asking about things. Especially someone interested in you."

"You're pretty isolated out here," Ryan commented. "All those trees around here make a good cover, and the only part of the yard you fenced is that section for Cochise to run in."

"I don't know how they got past him."

"If we ever find them, we can ask. Meanwhile, what do you want to do?"

Morgan shrugged, but anger simmered through him. "What *can* I do? I never thought I'd say this, but I guess I'll have to get an alarm system installed."

"You'll have to go to Austin," Ryan pointed out. "There's so little need for them here no one in White Tail even handles them."

"Damn it, I know." He shoved his hands in the pockets of his jeans. "Damn. Damn, damn."

"What do you want us to do, Chief?" Jace asked.

"Just keep your eyes open." Morgan glared at the two officers. "And tell me the minute anything happens the least bit out of the ordinary. And I mean *anything*. Come on, Ryan. I'll take you back to the ranch and make sure Allison's okay. I'm sure she's got a million questions."

* * * *

Luis Obradors looked at the two men sitting across from him, wondering how he had ever been saddled with two such incompetents. How in the hell, in an organization like Emilio Escalante's, with millions of dollars and imminent death on the line every day, did these two nut jobs manage to find a place? The old man was going to kill all three of them. He had no tolerance for incompetence.

They were in the corner booth at Domino's, a bar Luis liked to use to conduct business out of anyone's eyesight. The lighting was very dim, made even more so by the thick veil of smoke that always hung in the air. In the area where the booth was there was almost no light at all, a situation that suited Luis perfectly.

"I do not believe that the two of you could be so stupid. Imbeciles! Morons!" He sipped at the coffee in front of him. No alcohol for him tonight. He needed all his wits about him to deal with this situation. He could already hear the old man's cold voice slicing into him, asking how he could sanction something so idiotic.

The Osuna brothers were drinking ice water, afraid to order a real drink and already overdosed on coffee. If Luis's words had been acid their skin would have been peeled from their bodies. Now they sat watchfully, waiting for the next mountain of abuse to be heaped on their heads.

"Let me go over this one more time. You go to a small town where you'll stick out like a sore thumb, ask questions that will tickle someone's curiosity, and break into the home of the police chief. Have I got this straight?"

Alex nodded dumbly.

"You told us you wanted a way to find the woman," Jorge blurted. "We thought maybe he had information in his house. You know, in private."

"I want to find the woman, but I want to be alive to tell Escalante about it." Luis ground his teeth. "*El jefe* might kill all of us just as easily as the gringo we dumped on the road."

"We didn't leave any fingerprints," Alex assured him.

"Do you think at this point I'd believe anything either of you said? When I told you to find a way to locate this woman, I didn't mean breaking and entering. Certainly not the house of the chief of police."

Alex spread his hands. "So what do we do now?"

"Go home and wait." Obradors finished his coffee. "Don't go out. Don't call anyone. Don't do anything until I contact you again."

The two men scrambled out of the booth, nearly knocking each other down in their haste to leave. Obradors sat for a long time, the coffee in his cup growing cold and bitter. Like *el jefe*. A simple task was turning into a gigantic nightmare,

Cutter's Law
by Judith Rochelle

one that could easily destroy him if he didn't wake up from it.

Chapter Nine

Allison hauled her suitcase and overnight bag out of her car and was about to drag them up to the porch of the ranch house when one of the hands materialized at her side.

"Miss Paige would kill me if I let you carry your own stuff." He flashed a smile at her. "She is a very determined lady."

Allison laughed. "Don't I just know it?"

And here was Paige herself, flying out of the house to meet her, face flushed with excitement, eyes glowing. "I am so glad you finally got here." She reached for Allison's hand and tugged her along. "We have a lot to do. My folks just got here, too, and my mom's in the living room going over lists. And wait until you hear their good news."

Allison loved Georgia Cavanaugh like a second mother. Paige's parents had suffered a spate of bad luck the past few months, but Ryan had ridden to the rescue like a white knight (or the cowboy in the white hat) and things were looking up for them again.

"Tell Allie your news, Mom," Paige enthused.

"Honey, let her catch her breath first. Allie, how about some of this iced tea?"

Allison nodded. "That would be great." She swallowed some of the icy liquid. "Wow. That really hits the spot, especially after three hours on the road. Okay, Mrs. C., come on. What's going on?"

Georgia refilled her own glass. "Well, you know we had all that trouble with the Baldwins and their bank, which thanks

to Ryan we're out of. And we were able to sell the dealerships for a good price."

"Yes. Paige told me. I saw the For Sale sign in front of your house the other day, too. Where are you moving to?"

Georgia and Paige exchanged warm looks. "Ryan found a dealership for sale in Monroe, about fifty miles from White Tail. We hooked up with a real estate agent and she's looking for a place to rent until the house sells. That will give us time to look around and decide if we want to buy or build."

Allison threw her arms around Georgia in a big hug. "That is so great. Y'all can be close enough together to see each other whenever you want."

"Ryan and I told them to stay at the ranch until they find a rental," Paige put in. "Lord knows there's plenty of room here."

"Oh, I think we'll give the newlyweds some privacy for a while. But yes, it all turned out for the best."

Allison's smile wavered. "Wow, that leaves me all by my lonesome in San Antonio."

Paige lifted an eyebrow. "Not if you and Morgan get together."

Allison sighed. "I don't think I'm anything more than a distraction for him. He hates anything that has to do with the city and he isn't likely to risk a relationship again. Amber really did a number on him."

Paige waved her hand in the air. "Oh, Amber. That bitch. If I ever see her, she'll be lucky if I don't break both her legs."

"Well, broken legs or not, she'll still be the grey specter hovering over everything. That's a tough thing to wipe out."

"What's a tough thing to wipe out?" Ryan came in and went immediately to Paige, pulling her up into a hug and kissing her thoroughly enough to make the others in the room avert their eyes.

"Hey, not in front of the children," Allison teased.

"No children here." Ryan looked at Paige. "At least not yet."

She blushed and everyone laughed.

"Am I missing out on something?"

Allison looked up at the sound of Morgan's voice. "Just blatant sexual misconduct by the loving couple," she teased.

He took off his Stetson, lowered himself into one of the big leather armchairs and stretched out his legs. "If anyone offered me a beer I wouldn't turn it down."

Ryan pulled two from the refrigerator behind the bar, popped off the tops and handed one to his brother. "I'd make you get your own, but after the week you've had I think you deserve a little waiting on."

Allison looked over at Morgan, her eyes taking in the fatigue lines in his face and the circle under his eyes. He looked worried as much as exhausted. "More troubles?"

"No." He took a long pull on the bottle. "But the ones we've got won't go away. We still have no identification on the body. I've sent out faxes all over the state, but no one's responded. And I have no idea who the hell broke into my house."

"Or why they would in the first place," Ryan added. "It takes balls to hit the police chief."

"Well, let's try to put it aside and focus on fun for the weekend," Paige said. She plopped herself down on Ryan's lap. "We're having a wedding, remember?"

"As if anyone could forget," Allison kidded.

Later, when they had eaten, she followed Morgan outside to a corner of the yard. He was standing with his hands in his pockets, tension running through his body. She slipped an arm through his. "Isn't the night gorgeous?"

"You bet. Made to order."

The sky was so clear it might have been washed, and stars flickered like candles millions of miles away. A soft breeze carried the scent of fresh hay and cattle and the sycamore trees that shaded the house and the yard.

"When I was a little girl," Allison told him, "I used to think if I had a fast horse I could ride up to all the stars and pick them for a bouquet."

Morgan gave a dry chuckle. "You'd need a fast horse for that. And one that could leap pretty high."

"Oh, I know. But it was fun to dream." She leaned her head against him. "I'm sorry it's been such a bad week. This is a time to enjoy yourself, not be tied up in knots."

He moved his arm and slipped it around her shoulders. "You're right. But a body and a break-in are like a crime wave in White Tail. And we just have nowhere to turn on them."

"Maybe we can manage a little recreational diversion to help you relax." She grinned in the darkness.

Morgan put his fingers under her chin to tilt her face up. "You have no idea what kind of diversion I have in mind."

His mouth came down on hers, his tongue pressed against the seam of her lips, and she opened for him, welcoming his thrusting tongue. He kissed every inch of her mouth, inside and out, nibbling her lips, sucking on them, then sweeping his tongue over them. Every nerve inside her mouth fired as he touched it with the tip of his tongue, and she let her own tongue meet his, greedy with desire. He tasted of a heady mixture of coffee and ice cream and Lone Star beer, and she was drowning in it.

One hand slid easily from her waist up to her breast, his warm palm cupping it, his thumb teasing the nipple until its hard point pushed against the fabric of her blouse. She leaned into him, groaning softly, wanting to feel his fingers on her bare skin.

When he lifted his head, they were both breathing more than a little hard. Allison could feel her heart thumping against her ribs.

"If we were alone," he said, his voice thick with desire, "and not out here where someone could walk up any minute, I'd strip off every stitch of your clothes, lay you down and bury myself so deep in you."

"And I'd help you." She released a shaky breath.

He shifted so she was pressed full length against him, the hard ridge of his erection straining the fabric of his jeans, pressing itself against her soft flesh.

"See what you do to me? I'm like a bull in heat, Allison. I want more than just a petting session in the truck or stolen kisses in the yard. It's dangerous for me even to touch you, I want you so badly."

"Me, too," she whispered, her voice unsteady.

"If I thought we could get away with it, we could slip off to my place for a few hours. But that's not on the agenda right now."

"Not until the wedding's over," she agreed.

"Yes, the wedding."

The tone of bitterness in his voice stabbed at her. What did that say about where they could take their relationship? Could she expect anything from him besides sex? Last Saturday night she thought they'd started something good. Was she mistaken?

Morgan's lips brushed her forehead. "Tomorrow night the wedding will be over. Ryan and Paige will be gone and our obligations discharged."

"This is true." The feathery touch of his lips was sending shivers racing along her spine.

"Allison?"

"Mmmm?"

"Will you come stay with me tomorrow night?"

She felt her heart kick and a flutter of butterflies in her stomach. *If this is my one chance, I'm taking it.* Her body clenched with anticipation. "Yes, I will. I want to."

"You won't feel weird with Paige's parents here?"

His fingers were tracing a line up and down her arm. She pressed closer to him. "I'll work it out."

"All right, then."

He took her mouth once again, a little more eager, a little more greedy. And she gave back the signs of her own need.

* * * *

The wedding was everything a wedding could be. The bride glowed and the groom had eyes only for his new wife. A warm Texas sun painted the yard with golden strokes and the breeze was just enough to cool the air. More than two hundred people toasted the newlyweds with good wishes only slightly on the raunchy side.

"You are blessed," Allison told Paige, hugging her as she and Ryan got ready to leave.

"I wish the same for you, kiddo."

Allison shrugged. "Maybe it's just not in the cards for all of us."

"We'll see. Listen, stay here as long as you want. Mom and Dad are going back to the city in the morning. Maybe you can beg a couple of days off and just hang out. You'd have the place to yourself."

"I'll think about it. Anyway, go. Your husband's waiting with an eager look in his eyes."

By five o'clock almost everyone had left, the last of the champagne had been drunk, and every crumb of *hors d'oeuvres* eaten. Allison sat at one of the round tables for eight, picking at the frosting on a slice of wedding cake, watching the extra staff the D&D had hired begin the cleaning up process.

Morgan folded himself into the chair next to her, his hand stroking her arm with that motion that made her knees turn to mush. "Think we can sneak out of here without too much notice?"

"Just let me change. I've already got my overnight bag packed. I can get the rest of my stuff tomorrow."

His fingers continued their sweeping motion. "What about the Cavanaugh's? Won't they be suspicious?"

Allison shook her head. "I don't have to make excuses to them. They've known me for years. If they think I'm doing something to be happy, they'll be all for it."

He leaned forward. "And are you? Happy, that is?"

She caught her breath. "I think so."

"Let's get out of here."

She changed quickly into jeans and a tee shirt, and managed to get out without running into anyone.

"The Cavanaugh's were in their room and the Howells were supervising the cleanup," she told Morgan, climbing into the truck. "I left a note on the kitchen counter."

He leaned over and gave her a quick kiss. "Good. We're out of here, then."

* * * *

"I love your house." Allison stood in the middle of the living room, admiring the high ceiling, the cream-colored walls decorated with Texas art, and the comfortable furniture in oak and tweed. The hardwood floors shone with a high gloss softened by the multicolored rug in the center. A wide archway opened into the dining room, and beyond that, the kitchen.

They'd had a few moments of excitement when Cochise had gone into his protective mode, barking and growling at Allison. But Morgan had petted him, put his arm around

Allison to show she was a friend, and let the dog sniff her. Satisfied, he'd gone back to playing with his ball in the yard.

Then Morgan unlocked the back door and ushered her inside.

He sailed his hat onto an antique hat rack, shucked off his jacket and loosened his tie. "This was all furniture my mother had. Ryan already had his place so he moved her in with him until she passed away a couple of years later. She and my dad had picked out all this stuff just before he died, so I decided we needed to keep it in the family."

"That was a wonderful thing to do." She smoothed her hand over the back of an arm chair.

"It helps that I liked everything. Anyway, I had the house but almost no furniture, so it worked out very well." He began unbuttoning his shirt. "I don't know about you, but I could sure use a nice long shower."

The idea of showering with Morgan made her mouth go suddenly dry and she wet her lips with the tip of her tongue. She felt the familiar throb starting in her womb and pulsing through her. God, if she didn't get him inside her quick she was sure she'd go up in smoke.

She had to swallow twice before she could speak. "T-That sounds like a great idea."

"Come on, then." He smiled as he took her hand. "Wait until you see my shower."

His bedroom was large enough to accommodate a fireplace and a sitting area. Allison could hardly take her eyes off the enormous bed that was the centerpiece of the room.

Morgan chuckled when he saw her look at it. "I had it specially made. I'm a big man and I like a lot of room in bed."

Her mouth formed a round O.

"Come see my shower. I did it after Amber..." He stopped. "I did it when I needed a physical project to work off stress."

Allison caught her breath when she saw it. The shower was three times as big as any she'd ever seen. Rather than using tiles, Morgan had constructed the walls of various kinds of rock, embedding the shower heads in them. When Morgan turned on the faucets, the water cascaded out like a waterfall.

"It's beautiful. Oh my God, Morgan, this is incredible." She raised an eyebrow. "And very decadent."

"Did you think I couldn't do decadent?" His voice was like warm honey.

"I don't know," she teased. "Can you?"

"Why don't we find out?"

His hands shaking, he lifted her tee shirt and slipped it over her head, his eyes heating when he caught sight of her breasts and the lacy bra that barely covered them. He bent his head and licked the swell of each one, darting his tongue below the edge of lace, his mouth then closing over one of her nipples. Through the fabric he drew it into his mouth, biting it gently.

Allison felt as if liquid were pouring out of her, soaking the crotch of her panties, and all he'd done was tease her nipple. She moved her hands up between them and fumbled with the buttons on his shirt, clumsy in her attempt to pull it free from his trousers and pulling it down his arms. He yanked his hands free and tossed the garment into a corner, then moved

his hands around in front of her to the open the clasp of Allison's bra. In seconds it, too, was discarded. She reached for his belt buckle but he grabbed her hands, stilling them.

"Not yet."

The rasp of her zipper sliding open was suddenly the most erotic sound Allison could remember hearing, her legs went so weak she had to hold onto Morgan or she'd fall. She closed her eyes and felt him slip the denim fabric down her legs, his knuckles brushing the insides of her thighs. When she stepped out of her jeans, she was clad only in the tiny bit of lace that passed for bikini panties.

Very slowly he rolled them down her legs, lifting first one foot and then the other to step out of them. She was naked, and suddenly as nervous as a virgin. When he didn't touch her again, she opened her eyes to see his gaze raking over her body.

"Beautiful." Passion deepened his voice. "Just beautiful."

She shivered at the intense heat in his eyes as they took in every inch of her naked skin. With his glittering eyes still pinning her in place, he toed off his boots and yanked his socks from his feet. His gaze never left her as he slipped off his pants and his boxers in one movement.

He was unbelievable, lean and fit, his chest covered with curls of dark hair that arched down to his groin. Every inch of him was hard muscle from his broad shoulders to his sculptured thighs. And jutting toward her, in splendid glory, the most magnificent erection she'd ever seen. Her eyes widened and she wet her lips with the tip of her tongue, mesmerized by the sight.

Sweet Jesus!

"Don't worry," he chuckled. "You'll be more than ready for me when we get to that part." He put his hands on her waist. "I get to look, too, darlin'." He lifted her to the long vanity counter, then bent her legs at the knees, planting her feet wide apart, leaving her totally open to him.

"A woman who maintains," he said in an unsteady voice, as his gentle fingers teased the neatly trimmed curls on her mound. He separated her lips with his thumbs, eyes fastened on the exposed flesh. He ran one finger lightly down the length of her cleft, touching every inch of her. Then he picked her up and stepped into the shower, setting her down so she leaned against one wall of rock.

When he pressed his body against hers, she could feel every hard inch of him, especially the steel length of his erection against the softness of her belly. The pulse in her sheath began to throb double-time. The curls of hair on his chest created an exciting friction against the sensitive skin of her breasts, sizzling her nerve endings. Taking her wrists in his hands, he raised her arms over her head, pressed her against the rock and took her mouth.

That was the only way to describe it. Possession. He licked at the edges, teased at the seam, sucked her lower lip into his mouth and ran his tongue over it. Nibbled at her upper lip. When she opened her mouth on a sigh, his marauding tongue plunged inside and swept the hot recess. Allison danced her tongue with his, loving the taste of him, the feel of him inside her mouth as he licked every inch of the hot cavern.

She was still lost in the fog of the kiss when she felt his hands leave her wrists and in the next moment, slick and slippery, they were at her shoulders, her arms, her breasts.

"Gotta have soap when you take a shower," he said, his mouth at her ear.

The tip of his tongue traced patterns in the shell of her ear as his soap-slicked hands massaged her breasts, cupping their weight, sliding over the slope and swell to reach her nipples. He pinched them lightly with thumb and forefinger, rolling their peaked hardness and tugging on them; she felt the sensations all the way to her womb. The muscles in her inner sheath were vibrating with need, the pulse increasing in intensity. She didn't know how long either of them could stand this teasing and playing.

Foreplay later, she wanted to scream.

When his hands drifted lower over her abdomen to the crease at the top of her thighs, she almost wept with gratitude. But then he turned her body, his hands massaging her shoulders, working their way down the line of her back. He was so close to her she could feel his erection against the cheeks of her bottom and she tried to push herself against it.

"Not yet, darlin'. You're not nearly ready."

I am, I am. Hurry, hurry, hurry.

But despite his own all too obvious need, he seemed determined to take his time, tracing every inch of her from neck to waist with a gentle motion that sent sparks flying through her body. He seduced her with his mouth, sending waves of pleasure crashing over her. When his fingers slipped into the crevice of her buttocks she sucked in her breath,

feeling him probe the sensitive area, rubbing soap into every inch. The lightness of his touch was driving her crazy, a ghost touch that made her body demand more.

Then she was facing him again, the warm water pounding down on both of them as he widened her stance with his foot. He moved his hand through her curls, soaping them, combing them with his fingers. And finally, at last, two fingers moved into her cleft, trapping her hot nub between them, the friction as he soaped the skin nearly bringing her to her knees. With his legs planted inside hers to give him total access, he eased two long, hard fingers into her sheath, massaging the tender skin so slowly Allison nearly lost it.

"Please," she begged. "Oh, God, Morgan. Please."

"Ssh," he crooned, doing that wonderful tickling in her ear again. "Jesus, Allie, you feel so good. I'd like to leave my fingers in here forever." He turned his hand and curled the tips of his fingers upward, reaching the spot he knew would take her to the edge.

She couldn't stand it. The pressure on her nipples as he tugged on them, the thickness of his fingers in her throbbing channel, his thumb rubbing back and forth across the tip of her sex were all winding the coil inside her tighter and tighter. If Morgan hadn't been holding her she would have fallen to the stone floor.

She began to rock back and forth against his hand, little mewling sounds escaping her lips. The more she rocked, the greater the friction, the tighter the coil wound. She felt it start deep inside her, radiating out from her womb, until every part of her was humming, pounding, straining to reach that

elusive precipice that would give her relief. Not matter how she pushed or how she pleaded, Morgan kept the pace slow and steady. When she tried to pull his hand tighter against her, he captured her wrists with his other hand and pinned them over her head. And all the time he was crooning softly in her ear, telling her in intimate detail all the things he wanted to do to her, setting fire to her blood.

Everything receded except the warm water pounding down on them, like soft rain falling on her face, and Morgan's wickedly clever fingers driving her to a kind of insanity. Up, up, up the spiral he took her, never varying the movement of his hand, retreating any time she pushed too hard against him. Her brain had shut down and she could only feel the myriad sensations building in her body, pulling at her like a whirlpool. She was pleading and sobbing, promising anything if he would just let her find release.

"I think you're ready now, darlin'." His deep voice resonated in her ear.

"Yes. Yes. Ready." She could hardly get the words out.

"All right, then."

He intensified his movements, his hand moving faster, stroking deeper, until with a shudder that wracked her body, she came, her liquid flowing into his hand. He covered her mouth with his own, swallowing her screams, his fingers pushing her over the edge and beyond. Her entire body shook with the intensity of the orgasm, the walls of her vault grasping at the fingers inside them, every muscle tight with the spasms.

At last, when she thought she would surely break apart, the tiny aftershocks slowed and disappeared. Morgan lifted his mouth and her head fell forward onto his shoulder. Her lungs strained for air as the waterfall continued to cascade over her. Morgan held her tightly against him, pressing tiny kisses to her forehead and cheeks, his hand soothing her as he caressed her back.

She opened her eyes and looked at him. "I feel as if I was struck by lightning."

He gave her his slow smile, his eyes hot and greedy. "Oh, darlin', we've only just started."

He rinsed them both off, turned off the waterfall and reached for the big, thick bath towels on the nearby shelf. When he had her dried and wrapped in the warm terrycloth, he carried her into the bedroom, stripped back the covers and laid her down on the bed. In seconds he'd divested them both of towels and he was lying nude beside her.

As wrung out as she was from the orgasm, she still felt an unsatisfied need coiling deep inside her, spreading outward like blazing tentacles. She felt Morgan's throbbing erection rubbing against her thigh and her body responded to the invitation.

His turn this time.

She rose up on her knees and reached for him, but Morgan placed his hand over hers. "You need to rest."

She looked at him and grinned. "I can sleep when I'm by myself."

She stared at the thick shaft in her hand, studying its engorged head, the throbbing veins. A tiny pearl of moisture

beaded at the tip and she bent and licked it with the tip of her tongue. Then she opened her mouth and slid the length of him into the heated recess, lightly grazing it with her teeth as she took him inch by inch.

"Jesus." Morgan fisted his hands in her hair. "Careful. When I come, I want to be inside you."

She took her time with him, as he had with her, licking and kissing him, cupping his sac in her hand and tickling the surface with the tips of her fingers. The more she stimulated him, the more she felt her own need growing again. When she wrapped her tongue around his length he nearly jackknifed off the bed.

"Now," he told her, and flipped her onto her back.

He spread her thighs and looked at her again as if he'd never get his fill, opening her nether lips still swollen from his manipulation. He leaned down and licked the length of her cleft, and gently bit her now-sensitive clit. She screamed and tried to buck against him.

When he slid his hot erection inside her, she wrapped her legs around him and locked them together at the base of his spine. He filled her completely, the walls of her sheath gripping him and flexing against him, and he paused to let her adjust to him.

"Look at me, Allie," he commanded.

She opened her eyes to see his taut face, his forehead covered with a thin sheen of perspiration. His ocean blue eyes were dark navy, filled with desire and something else. Turbulence. All those conflicting emotions she knew he kept

locked away inside him. Then he moved, and she couldn't think any more.

He moved within her, long, gliding strokes in and out, each one more powerful than the last, the friction he created stoking the fire inside her. She matched his motion with her own, thrusting with him, arching up to him, trying to bury him as deep inside her as he could get.

He moved faster, hips pistoning, driving his body into hers, filling the room with the sound of skin against skin, raspy breathing and uncontained moans of indescribable pleasure.

"I can't wait much longer, darlin'."

"Don't wait. Please, Morgan."

He moved one hand between them and took her clit into his fingers, brushing the swollen nub. One more thrust and a firestorm swept over them, Allison screaming his name as she came and came and came. Morgan's big body shuddered convulsively, his groans filled the room.

After what seemed like forever, Morgan rolled to the side, taking her with him, the two of them still joined. He threw one long, muscular leg over hers and wrapped his arms around her.

"Allie, Allie, Allie." His voice was ragged. "You're shaking up my life."

Was that good or bad? She didn't know what to say, so she settled for running her fingers through the curled hair on his chest, feeling the warm muscles beneath. He sifted his fingers through her hair and kissed her forehead and her cheeks, and before long she felt the length of him hardening and filling her again. And once more they began their slow

Cutter's Law
by Judith Rochelle

dance.

Chapter Ten

They were sitting in Morgan's kitchen at the butcher block table. They'd made love twice more during the night. Then, when they awoke, spooned together, it had been so natural for him to slip inside her and begin a gentle rocking motion that soon had them both straining for release. When she climaxed around him, flooding him with her liquid, her entire body rippled with spasms as wave after wave of sensation rolled over her.

When Allison came out of the shower—she wanted to take the waterfall home with her—a mug of hot coffee had been waiting on the dresser. Then he surprised her with a breakfast of fresh orange juice, French toast and bacon, and more coffee.

"If you feed all your guests like this, I'm surprised they ever leave." She sipped at the chilled juice.

He was silent for a long moment. "I don't have guests."

She didn't know what to say about that, so she concentrated on her food. They ate silently, neither of them quite sure what to say. In the light of day conversation seemed to be stilted, as if they weren't quite comfortable with each other.

"I—had a good time." She felt heat climb up her cheeks as she realized what she said.

Morgan laughed, and the stiffness between them seemed to disappear. "I sure hope so, darlin', because I can tell you I did."

They finished eating in silence no longer uncomfortable, and when they finished, Allison insisted on cleaning up.

"You cooked. It's only fair."

Morgan sat at the table finishing his coffee, watching her as she worked. She felt his eyes on her as if they were tattooed to her skin.

She closed the dishwasher and turned to him. "Am I doing something wrong?"

He frowned. "No. Why do you ask?"

"You've been staring at me as if I'm in the circus sideshow."

He swallowed the last of his coffee. "I'm just surprised to see you know your way around a kitchen."

Allison swallowed every remark that threatened to burst from her lips. *I'm not Amber*, she wanted to scream. *I'm not June Cleaver, either, but I know my way around the kitchen and I'm not afraid of a little housework.* She forced herself to smile. "Someone has to do it on the maid's day off."

He scowled. "I didn't mean..."

"It's okay. I have a thick skin." But she wasn't so sure that was the truth. "Anyway, I think you'd better take me back to the ranch so I can collect my things and be on my way."

In an instant he was up from his chair and beside her, his big, warm hands on her shoulders. The thin fabric of her tee shirt wasn't enough to shield her from the instant sparks that his touch generated.

"Allison, I..." He cleared his throat and started again. "I'm not much good with words. I guess you've figured that out."

She stared up at him. "I don't expect you to say anything. We're good."

"I—uh—was thinking I might try to come up and see you in San Antonio."

Her breath caught in her throat and her heart clattered in her chest. Come to San Antonio? A city? A place he'd run home to White Tail from?

He stiffened. "Unless of course you'd rather I didn't."

She found her voice. "Oh, no. I ... That would be wonderful. Please. Um, when would you come?"

"I'm not sure. A lot depends on what happens with this stuff going on around here. Can I call you during the week?"

"Yes. Please." *Please call me. Whenever you want.*

"Well. Okay, then."

They were in the front hall, at the foot of the stairs. She turned to smile at him, he lifted his hand to cup her cheek, and bent to touch his lips to hers. His kiss was seductive. He teased at the corners of her mouth, nibbled first her upper then her lower lip, then gently tugging each one into his mouth and licking them with the tip of his tongue. When she opened to him, his tongue slipped inside with newly accustomed familiarity, seeking every corner and crevice of the wet darkness, then retreating before thrusting again.

Allison felt her heart rate kick up and her legs turn to jelly. Just his kiss could ignite the flame still simmering low in her belly and send flashes of electricity running through her body. She grabbed his wrists and hung on for dear life.

Morgan lifted his mouth and touched his forehead to hers. "If we don't stop now, darlin', we won't stop at all."

She was drowning in his eyes. "And this is bad because?"

"I can't seem to think of a reason. Can you?"

She shook her head, his mouth came down on hers again, and this time there was nothing the least bit gentle about the kiss. Fire raged over them, instantaneous and wild. There wasn't even an attempt to head for the bedroom.

"Jesus, Allison." His voice was guttural. "You make me lose all control."

He backed her up against the wall, and she reached for his belt buckle and the snap of his jeans. He pushed up her tee shirt and flicked open the front clasp of her bra. So hot she thought she had a fever, she didn't even feel the roughness of the stucco wall against her skin. All she could feel were Morgan's hands palming her breasts, his fingers tugging at her nipples, his tongue like a marauder in her mouth.

She matched him heat for heat. Yanking down his zipper, she shoved his jeans and boxers down and closed her hand around him. He was already hard and throbbing, the tiny bead of moisture wetting the tip of the head. Somehow he had her jeans and panties off, lifting her with his hands under her bottom. Already so wet and wanting she couldn't wait to feel the hot thickness of him inside her, she wrapped her legs around his waist.

Balancing her against the wall, he reached down and spread her folds wide, nudging her slickness with the tip of his erection. And just like that he was inside her, filling every inch of her. The muscles of her sheath clenched around him, gripping him, and she tore her mouth away from his.

"Oh, God." Every nerve in her body felt as if a flame was dancing on it. "Hurry, hurry, hurry." She dug her nails into his shoulders and pulled herself against him.

"Oh, yes, darlin'." A groan rumbled up from his chest.

Tightening his hold on her, he began driving into her. No long, slow strokes this time. This was raw passion, nothing held back, and Allison felt the tension spiraling through her body. She matched him thrust for thrust, desperate to reach fulfillment, every inch of her focused on climbing that spiral, reaching the precipice.

She could feel Morgan's climax building in his body and she sobbed with need. Then he moved his head and bit the tender spot under her ear, the place that sent shivers of delight through her body, and without warning a firestorm consumed them, sending them spiraling into a volcanic eruption that culminated with them shouting each other's names.

When the spasms finally subsided, Morgan released his hold on her and her legs slid down the length of his body. She clung to him, still unable to speak or catch her breath. He fastened his jeans, then brushed his fingers over her still-heated cheeks.

"I'm sorry," he whispered, as he feathered kisses over her face. "But I touch you and I lose my head. This was ... I don't know what to say."

She closed her eyes and leaned into him, still struggling for her breath. "I didn't hear me complaining, did you?"

"Allison, I don't usually do this. I want you to know that."

She managed a weak grin. "Make love in your front hall?"

He tilted her face up and caressed her lips with his mouth. "Take a woman I respect up against the wall like I was a rutting teenager. You deserve better than that."

"I'd rather consider it a compliment that you can't keep your hands off me." With one last shuddering breath, she slipped under his arms and picked up her discarded clothing. Her mouth curved in a slow smile. "I'll just be a minute. Then we can head for the ranch."

* * * *

Morgan watched Allison head up the driveway from the ranch house and turn left onto the highway. He still hadn't recovered from the explosion of passion in his front hall. He didn't ever remember doing that with any other woman. He'd christened a number of automobile rear seats when he was younger, and even a stall in his father's barn a time or two. But no one had ever made him lose control the way this woman did.

And it wasn't just this morning. Last night he hadn't been able to get enough of her. If they hadn't required even a minimum of sleep, he might have set a new record for endurance. So what was it about her that hit him this way? God knows, they came from two different worlds, and she represented everything he'd come to hate. Yet, from the first time he'd seen her in Ryan's office he'd wanted her.

And not just for sex. He had plenty of women he knew in Austin who were more than happy to provide that for him without expecting anything in return except a good time. If

he was smart, he'd drop the whole thing and save himself what was sure to be a lot of anguish.

"Planning to ride today?"

Morgan turned. He was so lost in thought he hadn't heard John Howell come up behind him. "It would probably do me some good, but I don't think so."

"Well, give a holler if you change your mind."

So what *did* he plan to do with himself today? He was restless, unsettled, his mind constantly drifting back to last night and Allison naked in his bed, moaning under him, coming apart in his arms.

Damn. He needed to do something to take his mind off his growing fascination with Allison Moore. Maybe he'd head to the office, see if anything had turned up on their John Doe. Or if his guys had gotten lucky and at least found some lead as to who broke into the house of White Tail's chief of police.

But the police station was quieter than an empty church.

"Boyd's out on patrol," the dispatcher told him, "and he says there's not so much as a loose cow anywhere. He'll probably have to slap himself in the face to stay awake."

"Nothing at all on our dead body?"

She shook her head. "Isn't that strange? It's almost like he didn't even exist."

"Well, he existed somewhere, doing something that got him killed." He flipped through the report sheets, then slapped them back in the basket. "Well, call me if something turns up. I'll have my cell on."

"Okay, but I sure wouldn't count on anything happening on Sunday."

He wasn't quite ready to go home, where Allison's scent still lingered in the air. Ryan and Paige were off on their honeymoon so he couldn't bother his brother. He realized for the first time how few friends he'd bothered to reconnect with when he returned to White Tail.

He knew the D&D was closed on Sunday, but as he drove by he saw lights on in the back. Pulling into the parking lot at the rear of the building, he unsnapped the flap on his holster and gently turned the handle of the back door. He didn't expect anyone to have the nerve to break into a town icon, and a real thief wouldn't have the lights on. But you never knew what some teenager might do on a dare.

Suddenly the door was jerked open and Derek Young was standing in front of him, grinning.

"Come to catch the sneak thief, Morgan?"

Morgan flushed, then gave a sheepish grin. "At least you know I'm out protecting your property."

"Is that Morgan out there?' Donna called. "Bring him on in."

"You heard the lady. Come in and pull up a chair. We're working in the kitchen."

Donna was standing at the long work counter, checking off items on an inventory list. The crates of china and glassware from the wedding were stacked and labeled in front of her. She looked up and smiled as the men came in.

"We don't usually see you patrolling the city on Sundays, Morgan."

He pushed his hat to the back of his head and folded himself into an empty chair. "Well, you know how it is." He grinned. "Gotta keep my hand in."

"Uh huh." She handed him a mug filled with coffee. "So how's Allison doing?"

Morgan concentrated on his coffee. "She's fine."

"Fine? Well, that covers a multitude of sins. Soooooo ... I guess you guys had a good time last night?"

Derek threw back his head and laughed. "Donna, I don't think Morgan's too happy to have us poking our noses in his business."

"Oh, bite me, sweetheart. Who better than us to go poking around in what he does?" She looked at Morgan. "You two *were* together last night, right?"

"Doesn't seem like it would do me much good to deny it." He took a swallow of coffee, leaned back and stretched out his legs. "Yes, we spent the evening together."

Donna put down her clipboard and poured coffee for herself. "The evening? Oookay. She's a great gal, Morgan. She's a lot like Paige. Our kind of people."

"You think?" He shook his head. "I'm not so sure about that. Paige made herself right at home here from the beginning. Allison's different."

"Oh?" Donna raised an eyebrow. "Exactly how? She looks pretty normal to me."

"Come on, Donna." Morgan got up and refilled his mug. "She's got a terrific job in San Antonio, has a great life. Loves everything she does. She wouldn't last a week in White Tail. Anyway, I don't know why we're talking about this. She and I

have had a couple of dates and that's it. The wedding threw us together. The wedding's over."

"Who are you trying to convince?" Derek asked. "Us or you?"

"She's not Amber, you know," Donna put in.

Morgan set down his mug. "Thanks for the coffee, guys. Think I'll go rattle a few more door knobs."

"No matter how far you run, you still can't run away from it," Donna called after him.

Morgan flapped a hand at them and let himself out the door. He didn't want to hear what the Youngs had to say. He'd been burned so badly he was afraid to get near the fire again.

Still, Allison was like a siren song, luring him. He had told her he'd call her. He'd be interested to see what her life in the city was really like. At least that way he could see if he should pursue this further or cut it off before he let himself get hurt again.

Sighing, he turned the key in the ignition. Why hadn't he had sense enough to stick with the solitary existence he'd carved for himself after Amber left? It hadn't given him a lot of personal satisfaction, but it wasn't emotionally dangerous, either.

* * * *

"Heavy weekend, Allie?"

Allison, lost in reverie in front of her computer, jerked her head up. "Damn, Jerry, you nearly gave me a heart attack,

sneaking up on me like that. And I asked you not to call me that."

Jerry Malanski lounged in the doorway to her office, leaning against the door jamb, hands thrust in the pockets of his charcoal grey suit pants. A lighter grey tie and a grey and black striped shirt rounded out his outfit. His wavy brown hair was perfectly combed, not a hair out of place. His was the perfect image for a vice president of commercial accounts.

I used to think he was incredibly handsome, but next to Morgan he looks like a Ken doll. Morgan. That's where her mind had been when Jerry interrupted her.

"I've been standing here for two minutes waiting for you to notice me. So, how about some details of the big do in Podunkville?"

"The name of the town is White Tail," she spit out between clenched teeth, then forced herself to ease off. When had he become so irritating to her?

"Yeah, whatever. Did everyone turn up for the big wedding in jeans and leather chaps?"

She put her hands flat on the desk and seared him with her gaze. "You know, just because something doesn't happen in San Antonio or Dallas doesn't mean it can't have class or be done very nicely."

"Hey." He held up his hands, palms outward. "You're the one who told me your friend Paige was planning to hide herself away at the end of the Earth. Didn't you cry in your appletini about the stupidity of her falling in love with some dumb cowboy?"

She smiled, remembering Paige and Ryan at their wedding. "That's before I saw the hunk she married. I'd let someone like that haul me away to a cave, too."

Would she? The thought startled her, as an image of Morgan materialized in her mind.

"Yeah, right." Jerry laughed, a derisive sound. "You'd last until the first morning you couldn't get a caramel mocciatedo, or find a decent place for dinner."

The memory of her dinner with Morgan at *The Cattle Company* flashed through her mind. The restaurant could match many she'd eaten at in San Antonio. And that once again brought up the image of Morgan. She clamped down on her thoughts.

"Is there something you wanted, Jerry?" Why had she ever gone out with this guy? But she knew the answer. He was part of the circle she lived and breathed, good eye candy and capable of being charming on command. AM—After Morgan—everything suddenly appeared in a different light.

"I just wanted to remind you about the Anderson Foundation dinner Saturday night. You know the boss is on the board and the bank is a big contributor."

"Lord, I'd forgotten all about it." And wasn't *that* unusual? She, the big community relations director for the largest privately owned bank in the area, never forgot an event where Alamo Bank needed to be front and center. She took every opportunity to enhance her boss's image in the community. "At the new Waterside Hotel, right?"

He nodded. "I figured we could go together. Pick you up about seven?"

Before she could answer, her phone rang. She held up a finger, motioning him to wait as she answered. "Allison Moore, community relations."

"I think I'd like to have some relations with you, Miss Moore, but I wouldn't be inviting the whole community."

Her knees turned weak and her heart fluttered at the sound of the deep voice. "Hold that thought, please." She looked up at Jerry, standing in front of her, blatant curiosity in his eyes. She arranged her mouth in what she hoped was a sweet smile. "I need to take this call. We'll talk later, okay?"

"I can wait."

"No, that's all right." She shooed him away with a wave of her hand.

He stood there until it was obvious she was going to outwait him, then ambled off down the hallway.

"I'm back," she said into the phone. "Sorry about that."

Morgan's voice took on a withdrawn tone. "Look, if you're busy I can call back later."

"No." She realized she was shouting, and lowered her voice. "No, I'm not busy. Just getting rid of a pesky co-worker."

And how Jerry would cringe if he heard that. She almost laughed at the thought.

"I—um—said I'd call."

"Yes, you did." She twirled a strand of hair in her fingers, wondering if there was some purpose to the call other than discharging an obligation.

"Listen, Allison, I'm not much good with conversational chit chat. You know that."

Her stomach clenched. Was this the big brush-off? Surely he didn't have to call her for that. Neglect would have accomplished the same thing.

"Well, that's all right." She grinned. "Maybe you could just chit and I could do the chatting."

His deep chuckle resonated over the phone line. "Maybe I could just get to the point."

She gripped the receiver. "Okay."

"I wondered if you're busy this weekend?"

"This weekend?" she squeaked.

"Uh huh. I thought I'd come to town and visit the bright lights of the big city. See how things were for you in your life there. You know, they say if you want to really understand an animal, study it in its native environment."

At that a full laugh burst from her lips. "You sound like you're on a zoological expedition."

"Well, considering the wildlife in San Antonio, that may not be so far from wrong. Anyway, I was wondering if you had time for some company this weekend. We could go out to dinner, check out some of the places I used to go." He paused. "I could get a room at a hotel if you'd feel more comfortable."

"Oh, right." She yanked on the curl. "You most certainly will *not* stay at any hotel." Then she recalled Jerry's little visit. "But I have an event on Saturday night I have to attend. It's for a foundation the bank supports heavily."

"Oh." Another pause. "Are you permitted to bring an escort? Unless you'd rather not bring me around where your friends are."

"Don't be stupid," she snapped, then drew a deep breath. "I'm sorry. But that's just ridiculous. Of course I want you to come. I just hope you won't be bored to death." *Or put me in the same class as that damn Amber.*

"I think I can handle it for one night. If not I can always hang out in the men's room." When she didn't say anything, he added, "A joke, Allison. Just a little gallows humor. Sorry."

She gave him directions to her little condo on San Antonio's north side and told him to meet her there at seven on Friday. That would give her enough time to get home, shower and change before he arrived. When she hung up, a feeling of pure bliss washed over her.

Until she remembered Jerry Malanski and their supposed date. Looking at her watch, she realized it was lunchtime. She'd stop by his office on her way out to grab a bite to eat and try to do it as briefly and casually as possible. And hope he didn't make some smart remark.

Shutting down her computer, she grabbed her purse and went to look for Jerry. She found him sitting in the lobby area shooting the breeze with a man she knew to be a friend of his.

"Hi," she tossed over her shoulder. "Can't stop to talk but just wanted to let you know you don't have to drag me to the shindig Saturday night. I've got another ride."

His mouth flopped open like a dead fish. "What?"

""You're off the hook. But thanks for the offer."

"Hey, hey, hey." He snagged her arm as she hurried past him, nearly toppling her to the floor. "What do you mean another ride? I thought we had a date."

"Oh, please." She laughed. "You know you weren't serious. The whole thing was more for convenience. Find someone you'll really have fun with, who won't have to work the room all night." She yanked her arm loose and headed for the glass doors.

"Do I smell a cowboy in your future?" he hollered. "And I do mean smell." When she kept going he added, "You're missing out on an evening with a real man."

She shook her head in disgust. *Eat shit and die. We'll see who's the real man around here.*

* * * *

Morgan replaced the receiver and leaned back in his chair, wondering if he'd just done something incredibly stupid. He hadn't loved San Antonio when he lived there before. What made him think he'd like it any better now? Spending a weekend in the city with Allison would be testy enough; going to some fancy shindig with her, filled with people just like Amber, might end their relationship before it ever got started.

For three days he tried to wash Allison Moore out of his system and his mind, but all he'd done is think about her twice as much. This trip had all the makings of a giant fiasco, but something was driving him to do it. He'd be seeing Allison on her home turf, and that would give him a pretty good idea if they had anything more in common than hot sex.

And if they did, then what? Could he even think of asking her to move to White Tail? He wondered idly how he'd feel if he ever went back to work for the Bexar County Sheriff. It

would be quite an adjustment, especially after running his own little corner of the world for a while.

He finished the coffee in the mug in front of him and swung his feet off the desk. He was getting way ahead of himself here. They had a long way to go before they ever got to that point. And Amber still hung heavy in his mind. Meanwhile he had business to attend to, so he'd better get about earning his pay.

Jimmy Boyd was the only one in the big outer room besides the dispatcher when Morgan walked out there. The young patrolman was sorting through stacks of paper, his forehead creased in concentration. He looked up as Morgan stopped in front of him.

"Hi, Chief." He put down the stack in his hand.

"New project?" Morgan grinned. Jimmy could find a million ways to make himself useful on the force. He made no secret of the fact Morgan was his idol and he wanted nothing more than to be promoted and, as he often said, "do some real police work." Morgan never had the heart to remind him that until recently the only real police work they did was chasing loose cattle and breaking up teenage beer parties. Oh, yes, there was also the occasional weekend brawl at *The Pig's Eye*, but nothing that ever got out of hand.

"Well, see, I had this kind of idea. You know, something that's been chewin' at my mind. Know what I mean, Chief?"

Morgan sighed. "Yes, Jimmy, I know about ideas. Care to share this one before it's time for dinner?"

"What? Oh, ha ha. Sure. Sorry. Well, we haven't had much luck with the faxes we sent out about that body, so I figured

I'd go through all the ones that got sent to us, and see if one matched up. You know, where they might be lookin' for someone on their Wanted list."

Morgan didn't bother to explain to Jimmy that only the FBI issued a Wanted list, but he knew what the young officer meant. "Good idea. I applaud your efforts."

Jimmy blushed beet red. "Thanks, Chief."

"So did this project of yours turn up anything?"

The young man's face fell. "No, it didn't. Darn it." Then he grinned.

Morgan swallowed a smile. "Well, don't worry. It's still a good idea, and may yet give us a lead. Keep at it."

"Oh, yes, chief. I surely will. And I still have three more piles to go through."

Morgan shook his head and walked out to his SUV. It sure was damn strange they hadn't been able to turn up one smell of an identity. Someone had gone to a lot of trouble to dump the body in what had to be an out-of-the-way place, then chop off the hands. This was no innocent bystander, but someone who hung out with some not very nice people. They'd cast the net as wide as possible, and still no response.

At the moment he wasn't sure which bothered him more—his unsolved crime wave or Allison Moore. Both of them were having a definite effect on his life, and he didn't have a solution to either of them.

Chapter Eleven

By the time Friday arrived Allison was a nervous wreck. Why had she agreed to let Morgan come for the weekend? Why was she even thinking about taking him to the Anderson Foundation party with her? He'd hate every minute of it. With some exceptions, the people there would be exactly the kind he hated, carbon copies of the infamous Amber.

No, wait, these people were her friends. Weren't they? They formed the framework of her existence. They knew all the right words, all the right moves. So why was she already feeling defensive about them?

Okay, Allie, calm down. You'll have plenty of time to feel him out tonight.

Feel him out! Feel!

She swallowed a bubble of hysteria. She wanted to feel him all right.

At five o'clock she raced out of the bank, speeding past Jerry who was hanging out in the lobby again.

"Going home to ride the cowboy?" he called.

"Bite me, Jerry." She sped out to her car.

By the time Morgan arrived, she'd taken a long bath in lavender bath salts, sprayed perfume on all the strategic points of her body, and changed her outfit four times. When the doorbell rang, she had just finished zipping up a powder blue silk sheath and fastening her grandmother's sapphires in her ears. One last quick look in the hall mirror and she threw open the door. And almost fainted.

Of course she'd seen him toggled out for the wedding, but tonight he was wearing a light grey suit with a white and grey striped shirt and dark grey patterned tie. A white dress Stetson sat on his dark hair. He looked so delicious she wanted to rip his clothes off right there in her front hall.

He laughed. "I think that's supposed to be my line."

Oh, God. Did she really say it out loud?

"Don't blush, darlin'. A man likes to know he has that kind of effect on a woman." He indicated the garment bag he had draped over his shoulder. "Okay if I bring this in, or were you planning to make me sleep on the porch?"

"Oh!" She felt her face heat even more, and stood back from the door. "I'm sorry. Of course. Come in."

Way to go, Allie. Show him what a bumbling idiot you really are.

He looked around the living room, filled with comfortable furniture in a soothing mixture of pale green and blue. "Very nice. Not quite what I expected."

She quirked an eyebrow. "Not quite as glamorous and glitzy as you thought?" *Amber again, damn it.*

"I guess I just didn't think your place would be as—homey."

She laughed at the old-fashioned word. "I work in a high pressure environment. When I come home I want to relax. When I bought the condo I chose to decorate with stuff that would make me feel comfortable, things as far from my everyday life as possible."

"You did a good job, darlin'."

She felt a rush of pleasure at his words. "Come on, you can hang up that bag. Then I thought we'd have a glass of wine before we leave for dinner." She bit her lip. "You do like wine, don't you?"

He threw back his head and laughed. "I'm not a complete savage, Allie. I haven't shed all my civilized habits yet, so they won't let me into the club."

This time the heat from the blush started at her toes and swept all the way to the top of her head. "I-I didn't mean it that way..."

"Don't sweat it, darlin'. I was just teasing. I love wine."

He looked totally at ease as she led him into her bedroom. She tried to see the furnishings through his eyes—the king-sized bed with its plump pale green comforter, the lounge chair with the little reading table next to it, the honey-colored walnut dresser and bed tables, chosen for their simplicity of design. She was not a frilly girl, never had been. She and Paige were a lot alike in that way. Even their dressiest clothes were free of frills and frou frou.

"You can just hang that in here." She opened the large walk-in closet and waved her hand at the inside.

"Very nice." He hung up the garment bag in the space she'd made. "I like your taste."

"Thank you." She wiped her palms against her thighs again. "Why don't we sit outside and have our wine? The nights are still pleasant this time of year."

He nodded. "Lead the way."

She nearly spilled the wine pouring it. Morgan took the bottle from her, set it on the counter and pulled her into his

arms. "You're not serving the president, darlin'. Just me. And I wouldn't be here if I didn't want to be." He pressed a kiss to her forehead. "So let's just relax, have some wine, then go out for a nice dinner. Okay?"

She felt the tension seeping out of her. "It's just—I know you hate the city, and..." *And I really want you to rip my clothes off and make love to me until I don't even know my own name.*

"Allie, like I said. I'm here because I want to be. I want to see where you live and work and play. All right?"

"Okay."

"Good." He filled their wine glasses and handed one to her. "Let's go out and look at the stars."

The stars weren't quite out yet, but they caught the last color wash of the sunset, and as they sat on the balcony and sipped their wine Allison let the last of the anxiety slip away. At least for tonight.

She'd made dinner reservations at a new restaurant on the Riverwalk, San Antonio's famous tourist attraction. Morgan had mentioned that he'd eaten at other Riverwalk restaurants when he lived in San Antonio, and found it to be one of the few places in the city he really enjoyed. At night the narrow, winding San Antonio River reflected the lights from the many shops and eating establishments, showing off the places at its colorful best. Tonight was pleasant enough for them to take one of the tables outside, so they sat on the porch and watched the parade of tourists. The faint strains of the mariachis drifted on the night air, and boatloads of tourists

waved as they were propelled down the waterway in the familiar Rio San Antonio river barges.

Allison chose the place because the menu was so varied, not having the faintest idea what Morgan liked to eat. If none of the European cuisine appealed to him, the place was famous for steaks, so she figured she was safe. When he ordered the veal dish, she tried not to look surprised.

Morgan chuckled as he closed the menu. "Thought I only liked steaks and burgers? Food for savages?"

She felt heat stain her cheeks and took refuge in sipping her wine.

"I like a good veal dish now and then. My palate isn't as uneducated as you might think, living away from the big city."

She could tell he was enjoying her discomfort, but not in a mean-spirited way. "I'm sorry." She put her glass down. "I'm acting like a snob and I don't mean to. I'm just so nervous I don't know what to do with myself."

He reached across the table and took one of her hands in his. "Everything's fine, Allie. I'm here because I want to be. You don't have to worry about what I eat or drink. I'm a big boy; I can take care of myself. And so far everything's terrific."

And so it was until, as they were finishing their dessert, an unpleasantly familiar voice broke the silence around them.

"Well, well, well. If it isn't the lovebirds."

Allison gritted her teeth and looked up at Jerry Malanski, weaving a little unsteadily on his feet, a buxom blonde hanging on his arm. "Had a few too many Rusty Nails tonight, Jerry?"

"Guess what? We'll be sitting at the table next to you." He teetered a little, then straightened up. "Say. Why don't we just join you? Have one big happy party?"

"We're just leaving." She threw her napkin down on the table. "Morgan, could you excuse me? I'll meet you at the door."

She stood up and started to brush past Jerry when his hand closed over her arm. "I told Tina here how lucky I was not to get stuck with you tomorrow night. I guess Mr. Cattle Shit here is a lot more your style."

Morgan had sat through the short exchange with no expression on his face, but Allison could see the anger in his eyes. She just wanted to get out of the restaurant before the little interchange erupted into a full-blown scene. But Morgan rose to his full six foot four, glowering at Jerry. "Cattle Shit, huh? Well, it seems it takes one to know one. Let go of the lady's arm."

"Ooh," Tina giggled. "Are we going to have a fight?"

"Not if I can help it," Allison muttered, yanking her arm free. "Jerry, go sit down before you get yourself in real trouble. Morgan, he's not worth it. Let's get out of here."

A muscle worked in Morgan's jaw, but he dropped a wad of bills on the table, took Allison's hand and led her away from the table.

"Coward!" Jerry yelled after them.

Allison flinched, anger and humiliation making her pulse accelerate. She didn't say a word until they were waiting for the valet to bring Morgan's car.

"I'm so sorry." She couldn't look at him. "Jerry Malanski is a jerk."

"No problem. We have jerks in White Tail, too." He waited until they were in the car before asking her, "Who is that jerk? And what did he mean about tomorrow night?"

"Jerry works for the bank, too. He suggested we go to the event tomorrow night together, like we've done before. Then you called and I told him to get a real date."

"Apparently he thought *you* were his real date."

She made a sound of disgust. "He should be so lucky. Look, I'm sorry he ruined our nice dinner, but let's just forget him. Not everyone I know is like that. I hope you know that."

Morgan reached for her hand and held it on his thigh, where she could feel the hard muscles flex as he drove. "First of all, he didn't ruin our dinner. Second, I think we're paying entirely too much attention to him. We enjoyed our meal, the setting was great, so let's just think about that."

"All right."

By the time they reached her condo and pulled into the underground guest parking, she was having another attack of nerves.

Morgan seemed to sense it, because he locked her doors for her, set his Stetson on the hall table, then picked her up and carried her to the bedroom. Still holding her against his chest, he brought his lips down to hers. A gentle touch set off an explosion, and in seconds his tongue was thrusting into her mouth, the tip of it licking at all the secret places. It seemed all they had to do was touch each other and a blaze swept over them.

Allison felt liquid heat spreading through her body, and every pulse throbbing like jungle drums. Morgan set her on her feet, slid the zipper down on the back of her dress, and pushed it down to pool at her feet. Standing there in a lacy bra, a satin thong and high heels, she shivered at the hunger in his gaze as it swept over her body.

His hands reached out and caressed the slope of her breasts just above the lace cups.

"So soft," he murmured. "Like silk." He bent his head and licked the tip of his tongue over her skin, following the path of his fingers.

Allison could feel moisture already seeping from her. There was something so erotic about standing there nearly nude while Morgan was still fully clothed. Still, she wanted him naked so she could touch him, run her fingers through the thick hair on his chest, feel the movement of hard muscle under hot skin.

"I have to force myself to take it slow, Allie." His voice sounded like gravel. "If I didn't I'd have had myself buried in you two seconds after I walked in the door."

His eyes devouring her, he reached out and unclasped her bra, sliding it off and tossing it to the side. Breath hissed through his teeth as her breasts sprang free and he held their weight in his palms. Lifting her onto the bed, he pulled off her shoes but left her thong in place. His gaze like a burning torch sweeping over her as he stripped off his own clothes with swift efficiency, tossing them to the side.

Allison wet her lips as she took in the broad chest with its dark hair, the flat stomach, and the heavy, throbbing erection

rising in magnificence from the thatch of curls at the base. A tiny bead of moisture had already formed at the tip of the rich, purple head, and she reached out with one hand and ran her finger over it, spreading it on the satin skin. When she touched him his shaft flexed and a tiny growl escaped his throat.

"Like what you see?" His voice was hoarse with desire.

Allison nodded.

"Touch me again. Take me in your hand."

She did, stroking him with a light touch, and he flexed again, closing his eyes.

When she increased the pressure of her hand, he removed it and parted her legs with his powerful thighs. Kneeling between them, he leaned down and ran his tongue along the top edge of her thong, catching it in his teeth and dragging it down to reveal the curly thatch covering her mound. He brushed across them with his tongue, making her shift and reach for his head.

He teased at the curls, at the soft skin just above them, at her navel, all the while holding her thighs apart, until she began to moan. She felt his lips on the soft skin of her inner thighs feathering light kisses that turned her bones liquid and her blood to molten fire. When he licked at her gently with his tongue shivers raced through her body. Need rose inside her, a spiral winding tighter and tighter, and he'd barely touched her yet.

"Easy, darlin'." Passion thickened his voice. "I don't plan to rush things tonight."

Taking the fabric of the thong between his teeth, he dragged it downwards, closing her legs enough for him to push it off and onto the floor. Then she felt him move up again, hands parting her thighs, tongue licking softly at her outer lips. She was sure she'd die if he didn't do more than tease her soon. When he spread her outer lips with his thumbs and flicked at her with his tongue she nearly arched off the bed. She grabbed his head and pressed downward, and she heard him chuckle as he speared his tongue into her pulsating sheath.

Slipping his hand beneath her bottom, he lifted her to his mouth and continued the movement of his tongue, his thumb circling her clit in a continuous, soft motion. She felt the spiral tightening, tensing, pulling at her body from deep in her center. Morgan was relentless with his tongue, lapping at the hot, slick walls, nipping at the lips that he parted to give him greater access, massaging her until she nearly screamed from his touch.

Just at the moment she thought she couldn't stand it one minute more, she felt the spiral snap and her orgasm rolled over her like a tidal wave, consuming her, swamping her. Morgan drove her with his clever tongue until she thought surely she'd break from the intensity of the spasms, and then finally, slowly, they began to subside.

As her body relaxed, he moved up to pull her into his arms, soothing her with soft words, brushing the damp curls from her face.

"Don't give out on me now, darlin'," he whispered. "We've only just started."

She lay in his arms, his hand soothing her body, until the aftershocks subsided and her heart rate slowed. When she could breathe without gasping, she rolled over and pushed him onto his back.

"My turn," she told him, the glittering look in his eyes heating her all over again.

Wrapping her hands around his shaft, she licked the head and teased the slit with her tongue, feeling him jump beneath her hands. When she slipped one hand down between his thighs to cup the heavy sac, he arched up into her, his magnificent body taut with passion.

When she bent her head and took him in her mouth, the groan that burst from him echoed throughout her body. His hands threaded through her hair, holding it as she moved her mouth up and down, helping her find the rhythm he needed. She felt his hot shaft grow even harder, stretching her mouth, throbbing against her tongue, her fingers tickling the soft hairs on his sac. She felt totally connected to him, loving his sweet, salty taste.

Suddenly he pulled her head away, reared up and pinned her to her back, one hand holding both wrists above her head. She was acutely aware of the ragged sound of his breathing, the coolness of the sheets against her back, the heat poring from Morgan's body and flowing onto hers.

"Let me in." His voice scraped from his throat. "I want to bury myself inside you so deep you won't know where one of us ends and the other begins."

She opened her legs for him, and guiding his erection with his hand, he entered her slick heat with one deep thrust. She

felt him inside her, thick, stretching her, filling every inch of her. She felt him draw in a deep breath, and then he began the dance, moving in and out in a rhythm that stoked the fire inside her. As he slid in and out, he used his mouth to tease her nipples, drawing them out, grazing them with his teeth, circling them with his tongue.

Her body throbbed at the assault on her senses, the whip of passion snaking through her. She thrust her hips upward, locked her ankles behind his back and began moving with him in a choreographed rhythm. The friction turned every one of her nerves into a miniature torch searing her body, and she felt the coil tightening within her again.

Morgan reached down with one hand, and adjusted his body so with each thrust he rubbed the sensitive nub. Arrows of heat shot through her and the muscles of her sheath gripped his powerful shaft. She pulled herself as tightly to him as she could, seeking the release her body demanded, but he wouldn't let her. Rocking them together in tandem, he kept her at fever pitch, every nerve screaming for release until she was nearly senseless.

"Please," she sobbed. "Please, please, please."

"Ssh." She heard his soothing tone, felt his mouth again teasing at her breasts, suckling them, nipping gently with his teeth. "This one's gonna take you right over the edge, darlin'."

When she was sure she couldn't stand it another minute, when she was so ready to come she hurt, he drove into her one last time and took her flying into space with him. She shattered, screaming his name, pieces of her falling through a

black velvet space. Her sheath pulsed around him, squeezing him, and he gave one last, hoarse shout before collapsing.

Allison was sure she'd never breathe again. All the air had left her lungs and not one muscle in her body was able to move. Her hands rested limply on Morgan's back, feeling the fine sheen of perspiration covering his skin. His body was heavy on her, but she thought she'd die if he moved.

They dozed, still holding each other, until at last Morgan roused and rolled to his side, taking her with him.

"You burn me up, darlin'." His voice was raw, his heartbeat still thudding erratically against her.

She wet her lips, barely managing to get any words out. "Same here."

He turned her around and tucked her against his body, pulling the sheet over them. "Whatever this is, Allie, it's got a chokehold on us. You know that."

"Yes." Her voice was a breath of sound.

"Let's see where we go with it, okay?"

She nodded and was asleep before she could think of anything else today.

* * * *

The tall blonde leaned back in the booth in the diner, delicately wiping a tiny smear of mustard from her lips. God, how had she gotten herself into this? This was all that damn Jared's fault. He thought he was so smart. Well, look where it had gotten them. Hiding out in crummy motels, driving around Texas like lost cattle.

How the hell had they messed up such a sweet deal? And how had they been so dumb as to think they could rip off Emilio Escalante? Jared again, that idiot. Him and his perfect mark. She should have known better. The last time she'd let him handle everything, not done the investigating herself, they'd had to drop out of sight for a few months and relocate their operation. It hadn't been a bad few months for her, either, she remembered, but she'd been itching to get back in the action. But this time Jared had screwed up big time.

For one thing, she never should have let him talk her into pulling the scam in San Antonio, Three hours wasn't far enough away from the trouble she wanted to avoid. But they did it, and stashed the money in such a way that it took both of them to get it. After that they agreed to step back until things cooled down, then split it up. They both had access to the funds, each knowing if they got greedy, the other would find them. But the last thing she expected was to be on the run from one of the biggest drug dealers in Texas.

She pulled out the throwaway cell phone she'd bought and tried Jared again. They'd bought a bunch of the phones together before they split and made a list of the numbers. She tried every one she had, but none of them answered.

Damn, damn, damn.

Where the hell had he gotten to?

Where are you, you little weasel? This is all your fault.

She had to stay in Texas until she found Jared, but she couldn't keep moving around forever. And she was sick of crummy motels and cheap food. She had money, but she just couldn't get to it. Not until she knew where Jared had

disappeared to and made sure their tracks were covered. She really needed to go to ground somewhere.

Maybe she could try the same hidey hole she'd used last time. That would take some doing to make it happen, but she was sure it was the one place Escalante's people wouldn't find her. She'd made sure no one knew about it, even Jared. That made it her only option. She paid her check and climbed into her car, a used one that called little attention to her.

* * * *

Allison stretched like a satisfied cat, surveying the wreckage of the bed. This morning when she woke up, Morgan's erection had been pressing against her thighs. She'd been amazed to find herself instantly wet, and they made slow, delicious love, taking their time, learning each other's bodies in the light of day.

After a playful shower, they'd driven to Alamo Heights and had strawberry breakfast crepes at Le Peep, then wandered along the Riverwalk like ordinary tourists. At a small jewelry store, Morgan had insisted on buying her a tiny gold deer on a thin chain and immediately placed it around her neck.

"So you won't forget White Tail while you're in your fancy office," he'd told her, then given her a gentle kiss.

They'd stopped at Charlie's fine foods and picked up a cheese tray, knowing they wouldn't be eating any too early that evening, and two more bottles of the Chablis that Allison loved. Two bottles of wine had put them in a mellow mood, which had resulted in the destruction of her carefully made bed.

She lay against his warm, masculine chest, twisting her fingers in the curling hair, more replete than she'd ever been in her life.

Morgan ran his fingers up and down her spine and chuckled. "I think I'm getting too old for this. I used to do this when I was sixteen but the body just doesn't perform the same any more." "I'd say it performs just fine. You didn't hear me complaining, did you?"

"I thought maybe you were just being polite."

Allison sat upright, ready to argue, when she saw one corner of his mouth turn up. She slapped his chest playfully, then tugged on his chest hair.

"Hey! Ouch! That hurts." He covered her hand with his and pulled it away.

"That'll teach you to make jokes about a serious subject."

Every trace of humor left his face. "This is serious, isn't it, darlin'?"

She felt her stomach do flip flops. "If it is, what do we do about it? How long can it last with us practically at opposite ends of the earth?"

He resumed caressing her spine. "I don't know, but I've been doing some thinking."

"Oh? Care to share your thoughts?"

"Not at the moment, but soon." He gave her a light slap on the rear. "Meanwhile, we better get up and make ourselves presentable for your big shindig."

Her eyes flew to the clock. "Oh, God. Well, let's get to it."

They almost got sidetracked by the shower, but by seven o'clock they were ready to go. Tonight Morgan was in a navy

blue suit with matching hand-tooled boots, and Allison wore a red cocktail dress that showed off her figure despite covering her from neck to knee. She'd chosen it because she needed something professional that would still rock Morgan back on his heels.

Morgan looked at her with hunger in his eyes. "You wouldn't care to blow off this shindig tonight, would you? And make better use of our time?"

She took his arm. "I'd love to, but I'd like to have a job on Monday, too."

"I suppose Jimmy Whatshisname will be there."

Allison giggled. "Jerry. And yes, he'll be there, but I'm sure we can all behave like adults."

Morgan raised an eyebrow, then ushered her out to the car.

The event was everything Morgan had expected it to be, filled with fancy food, fancy drinks and fancy people making meaningless chit chat. Allison hung onto his arm, introducing him to people. But he finally shooed her off to do her job.

"I'm a big boy, darlin'. I can take care of myself. I'll get a drink and stay out of trouble. Do they serve bourbon at these functions?"

"You bet. Let me get you one at the bar, then I'll go earn my pay." She frowned at him. "You could table hop with me."

He threw back his head and laughed. "Allie, I can keep to myself without causing a ruckus, but if I had to listen to you butter these people up I'd shoot myself."

"Okay." She got him a drink, then stood on tiptoe to kiss him. "But I'll be keeping an eye on you, cowboy."

"I'm not a cowboy, remember? But I'll behave."

And he did for the first hour, leaning against a wall and watching Allison do her job. He took pride in the ease with which she circulated through the crowd, smiling, chatting, charming everyone. A few men even stopped by to introduce themselves to him, wondering who the stranger was holding up the wall. Some of them knew Ryan and recognized the Cutter name.

Well, he thought, getting himself another drink, this isn't too bad. He didn't know if he could do it all the time, but once in a while, for Allie, he could bite the bullet. Allie. He groaned silently. How could he ever expect her to give up all of this for a tiny West Texas town? Could he readjust to life in San Antonio?

He was mulling over the choices they might have to make, if the relationship progressed to the next level, when Jerry Malanski and two of his friends wandered by, and everything went to hell.

"Well, well, if it isn't Clint Eastwood again." A blind man could tell Malanski and his friends had refilled their glasses once too often. "I'm shocked that you own two suits."

Morgan sighed, determined not to be provoked. He owed it to Allison to behave, not that he was much of a brawler to begin with. "Move along, little boy. Don't look for trouble."

"Trouble? You think I can't handle you?" Jerry stuck out his jaw in a pathetic attempt to look menacing, then turned to his friends, who gave him a thumbs up.

"Look." Morgan made his voice as even as possible. "I don't know what your problem is, but I don't think this is the place for a confrontation, do you?"

"Maybe you're just afraid to take me on." Jerry's mouth twisted into a sneer. "Maybe you're all talk, no walk."

Morgan sipped his drink, staring at the drunken trio over the rim of the glass. "You know, I promised Allison I'd behave myself, or you'd be kissing the floor."

"Ah, yes. Allie. Sweet Allie. And what did she offer you as a reward for good behavior? A night doing the horizontal mambo? She's one hot little piece of ass, you know. Too bad you spoiled my evening. I had big plans for tonight."

That did it. Morgan put his drink down carefully and grabbed Jerry by the arm. "Let's go outside so I can tell you how to apologize for what you just said."

Jerry yanked his arm away. "I'm not going outside and I'm not apologizing. If she wants to whore around with you, it's no skin off my nose. Just shows how bad her taste in men is."

Morgan moved without even realizing. One minute he was clenching his fists, the next one of them was connecting with Jerry's face. The other man crashed into one of his friends, stumbled forward and threw a punch. Morgan realized the room had grown silent except for the sounds of the fight. He backed away from Jerry, trying to put an end to things, but Jerry came at him again, leaving him no choice but to deck him.

"Morgan?" Allison was there, her face a mask of fury. "What the hell is going on?"

Jerry lay on the floor, blood gushing from his nose, one eye already swelling shut. "Your asshole friend started it," he raged. "That's what you get for bringing low class people to a high class event."

Allison turned to Morgan. "I know Jerry's a pain in the ass, but couldn't you behave yourself for a few hours?" She waved at the crowd closing in. "These are people I work with, clients of the bank. How do think this looks?"

"Allison..."

"Don't Allison me. This was totally uncalled for. You, as an officer of the law, should know better than to brawl in a public place."

Morgan stared at her, a muscle twitching in his cheek. "Cutter's Law says you don't let someone insult a lady. Especially one that means a lot to you. But since my taking offense at the things he called you bothers you so much, you can find someone else to defend your reputation. And while you're at it, you can find another ride home."

He picked up his drink, downed it and stalked from the room. Allison stared after him, open-mouthed. Then she turned to Jerry and the two men supporting him. "Is he right? Is that what you called me?"

He opened his mouth to deny it, but the look on the faces of his friends told the story.

She felt fury erupt inside her, drew back her hand and slapped him full on his broken nose.

"Allison? What's going on here?"

She turned to see Darren Scott, her boss, standing behind her with two of his senior vice presidents.

His face wore a somber look. "Was that a friend of yours in this fracas?"

"Her no-class friend," Jerry snuffled.

Darren held up his hand. "Jerry, if you don't mind, I'd like to sort this out. Well, Allison?"

She drew in a deep breath to steady herself, and let it out slowly. "Yes, Morgan Cutter is my friend. He was only defending me after Jerry made some very unflattering remarks."

"That's a lie," Jerry denied, but he didn't put much strength into it, and his friends still looked embarrassed.

"Well, you might want to call it a night, go home and compose yourself. We'll talk about this on Monday."

She shook her head. "I'm sorry you were embarrassed tonight, but I don't think a discussion will help. You'll have my resignation on your desk first thing Monday morning when I come in to get my things."

His lips thinned in irritation. "I'm not sure that's necessary, but you do what you feel you must."

So much for her important job and being a valued employee, she thought. "I can't possibly work in a place with people like him, people who say things like he did about me. I apologize to you and the Andersons, and everyone else, You're right about one thing, though. It's time for me to go home." She found her purse on the table where she left it. Passing Jerry, she smacked him with it, taking pleasure in his cry of pain. "Take that, you—you—pencil dick."

The sound of shocked laughter followed her out into the night.

Cutter's Law
by Judith Rochelle

Waiting for the valet to find a cab for her, she felt sick to her stomach. She was sure Morgan would be gone by the time she got home, and it was no more than she deserved. Why on earth had she been so quick to assume it was his fault? She knew how Jerry was. But at the moment she'd seen her career shattering around her and it had blinded her to everything else.

Her career. She snorted. That was a laugh. Her career didn't call her darlin' or make wild, passionate love to her. Her career didn't make her feel more like a woman than she'd ever felt in her life.

She fingered the little deer on the chain around her neck, tears running unheeded down her cheeks. What the hell did she do now?

Chapter Twelve

Morgan was glad he didn't pass any sheriff's deputies or highway patrolmen on his wild ride back to White Tail. For the first hundred miles he cursed steadily, using words he hadn't thought about in years. The rest of the trip he spent mentally kicking himself in the ass.

He was old enough to know better than to brawl in public places. Certainly it was bad behavior for a police chief, and he'd done his best to hold onto his temper. But the little jackass had pushed his buttons and he reacted without thinking. He didn't care what the guy said about him, but no way could he let him insult Allison. So there he was, the knight defending her honor, and she ragged on him.

Well, he had no one to blame but himself. Hadn't he learned his lesson with Amber? These damn women from the city were all alike, not to be trusted for one minute. Why in the hell did he think Allison would take his side against her friends and co-workers? So much for seeing where the relationship took them. Now he could see how little they really had in common.

So they had great sex. Big deal. He could get great sex from any number of women in Austin. Not so, a tiny voice in his head argued. Allison was more than a roll in the hay.

"No, damn it," he shouted. He couldn't afford for her to be anything else. He'd never open himself up to that hurt again. He let his guard down and look what happened.

Well, never again. He'd had it. Allison Moore could kiss his ass before he'd give her the time of day again.

By the time he reached White Tail he'd worked up a good head of steam. Unwilling to go home and lie down in the bed where he and Allison had made spectacular love, he decided to swing by the police station. Maybe Boyd had dug up something on all those faxes he'd been going through.

Jace Murdock was the only one at the station. He sat with his feet up on his desk, reading *The Ledger*. When he saw Morgan come in, he hastily folded the paper and took down his feet.

"Hey, Chief. Thought you were in the big city for the weekend."

"Change of plans." His tone of voice warned the younger man not to ask any questions. "Pretty quiet around here."

"Yup. Thank the good Lord. Nice to have an easy weekend for a change without locking up the drunks from the Pig's Eye."

Morgan dropped into a chair at one of the other desks. "Happen to know if young Boyd, our eager beaver, found anything in all those faxes he went through?"

Jace shook his head. "Nope, not a thing. But I told him he gets A for effort."

"It's like a damned puzzle, with half the pieces missing. This looks like some kind of professional hit, so why isn't he on someone's bad list? He didn't just hatch one day and get wiped out the next."

"Don't know, Chief." Jace got up to get a soda from the refrigerator in the corner. "But I agree with you. It's not too likely he isn't wanted somewhere for something." He popped the top of the can and waited for the fizz to settle before

taking a swallow. "I'll get Boyd doing a computer search tomorrow. Maybe if we widen our parameters a little we'll find something." He scratched his head. "It just doesn't make sense, though, that someone would pick White Tail to dump a body, does it?"

"That's what I can't figure, either. Think I'll catch up on some paperwork as long as I'm here."

"On a Saturday night?" Jace's voice was heavy with disbelief.

"Same as any other night." Morgan closed the door to his office and sailed his hat onto the file cabinet. His desk was, indeed, piled with paperwork, most of it what he called "busy bullshit"—reports to the City Council, requests for speaking engagements, correspondence from the Police Chief's Association. And his annual budget would be due pretty soon.

But none of it would get touched tonight, despite what he said to Jace. His mind was too focused on one thing—the scene at the party tonight. He cradled his right hand in his left, rubbing a thumb across his bruised knuckles. The reminder of the fight would end up lasting longer than his relationship with Allison. And he sure wasn't looking forward to answering questions when Paige and Ryan got back from their honeymoon. That was an interrogation he planned to put off as long as possible. He could already imagine the things Allie would be telling Paige and he cringed.

Damn, damn, damn.

* * * *

Allison lay on the bed, hugging the pillow to her, inhaling Morgan's scent which still clung to the pillow case. She was surprised any of it remained, as soaked as the cotton was with her tears. Her eyes were sore and puffy, her chest hurt and throat was raw from crying the better part of an hour. Just as she expected, by the time she reached her building, Morgan was long gone. There wasn't a single indication he'd even been there, except for the lingering traces of his aftershave. The key which she'd given him last night was lying on the little table in the foyer. She'd run through the condo like a madwoman, screaming his name, searching every room as if, ridiculously, he was hiding in a corner somewhere. But she knew at the start it was fruitless. His car was gone, and so was he.

God, how had this happened? She'd been so excited because he wanted to see her in her own home, her job, her life. To see if there was a fit there for the two of them. Now it was all shot to hell. Because of that stupid pencil dick, Jerry Malanski, whose ego was bruised because she blew him off.

She buried her head in the pillow, feeling tears burning her eyes again. She'd thought she was all cried out. Now she knew what Paige meant when she'd told her that what she found in White Tail was real. Not that she and Ryan planned to shut themselves off from the world. Austin was a quick trip away and San Antonio an easy overnight. But the people in White Tail didn't play the kind of games she'd spent her adult life learning, clawing their way up the ladder to the A-List. They said what they meant, and when they gave you their word, you knew they'd keep it.

And outside of the infamous Sally Hughes, who'd done her best to break up Paige and Ryan, they didn't go around name-calling or insulting people.

Well, shit. She had no one to blame but herself. She thought back to the day less than a month ago when Morgan had driven her home from White Tail What a brat she'd been, baiting him, teasing him, playing the game that was a habit with her. Treating him like ... like ... like Jerry Malanski and all the Malanski clones.

She didn't know how long she lay there, burrowing into the bed she and Morgan had set on fire. Her body ached for him, her nipples tingling, the pulse between her legs throbbing with demanding need. She wanted to feel his big muscular length covering her, his hard erection filling her, his sensuous mouth devouring hers. She wanted to hear his soft, "Darlin'" and see that slow grin that drove her nuts. She thought she'd had it made with her job, her friends, her dates. She give them all up this minute if she could have Morgan back.

When the grey fingers of dawn drifted in through the open curtains at the window, she dragged herself off the bed. Her red dress that she'd put on with such high hopes she tossed into a crumpled ball in the corner. She was sure she'd never wear it again. Her pantyhose and lingerie she stuffed in the laundry hamper and stepped into the shower. Her body ached as if she'd run a marathon, but she knew exercise had nothing to do with her physical state.

She stood under the needle spray until she was waterlogged, hoping the shower would clear the cobwebs from her brain and wake up her thought processes. Lying on

that bed all night she'd focused on two things: after she turned in her letter of resignation at the bank and picked up her things, she never wanted to see the place again, and she had to find a way to make Morgan talk to her. The first would be easy enough to accomplish. For the second she needed advice. Paige was on her honeymoon, but there had to be someone else she could call, someone with a sympathetic ear.

Sitting in the kitchen in her robe, a towel wrapped around her head and a steaming mug of coffee in front of her, she looked at the number she'd programmed into her cell phone only weeks ago. Taking a deep breath, she punch it in and listened to it ring, chewing on her bottom lip. She was about to disconnect when someone answered.

"Hello?"

Hearing the warm voice Allison nearly cried. "Donna? It's Allison Moore."

"Oh! Hi, Allie. How are you?"

"Actually, not so good, which is why I'm calling you at home on a Sunday. Did I catch you at a bad time? I know it's early."

"We have church, but that's not for a couple of hours. Is this some kind of emergency?"

"In a manner of speaking."

She swallowed hard and told Donna Young her story.

* * * *

The blonde was tired of driving, the trip up from El Paso taking longer than she expected. She thought at first she could make it in one day, but a couple of times she'd spotted

the same car behind her and taken a detour to see if it followed. BY the time she cut off the highway into medium sized cities three times, winding back and forth through the maze of streets, she was sure she lost whoever it was.

She was unwilling, however, to drive through the night with the possibility of Escalante's men on her tail. She knew if they caught up with her they'd take her to *el jefe* himself, and she could imagine the kind of pain she'd face to get her to give up the money. Besides, she didn't want to arrive at her destination in the dark. She'd be quite a shock to the person she was going to see, and wanted all her senses on full alert to handle whatever came along. She needed a convincing story, and she'd have to eat some crow to get it across, but at this point she had no other choice.

For the thousandth time she cursed Jared, calling every misfortune down on his head. Why he'd picked Escalante without the real background on him was the biggest mystery in the world to her, and just another example of the man's stupidity. She'd be lucky if this didn't get her killed.

We had such a sweet thing going. How could he mess it up so badly?

Now she spent half her time looking over her shoulder, and that certainly sucked.

About a hundred miles from her destination she drove into a medium-sized town. Checking constantly in the mirror to see if the car she'd spotted was following her, when she was sure she was clear she pulled into a La Quinta Motel. Smack in the middle of town, it had an interior parking lot so her car would not be visible from the street. She asked for a corner

room, and after she double locked the door, she shoved the dresser in front of it. At last, exhausted, she dropped onto the bed and fell immediately to sleep.

* * * *

"So how was the big city last weekend?" Donna Young put a full mug of coffee in front of Morgan and studied his face.

"About like I expected." He blew on the hot liquid, then sipped at it.

"So, is that good or bad?"

"It is what it is." He frowned. "Don't you have work to do?"

Donna laughed, and slid into the booth across from him.

"My work is taking care of my friends, especially when they look as miserable as you do. Come on, give."

Morgan twisted his mouth in a gesture of distaste. "There's nothing to give. I went, I came back, that's all."

He wished Donna would take her good intentions and leave him the hell alone. He'd enjoyed his misery before. He wanted to enjoy it again. At least being perpetually miserable was a state he could cope with. For a brief moment, as he and Allison connected, he'd thought his life was on the upswing After Amber. He had to accept the fact they were on different electrical currents, and hers had zapped him but good.

"Don't tell me you've already dumped that nice Allison Moore."

"Nice?" He swallowed some coffee, nearly burning his mouth, hot liquid slopping over his wrist. "Not quite the word I'd use for her."

Donna narrowed her eyes. "Morgan Cutter, I've known you since I was in seventh grade, so don't think you can fool me. Something bad happened. What was it?"

Morgan finished blotting his hand with a paper napkin, threw the sodden mess down on the table and looked straight at Donna. "Allison and I don't move in the same circles, Donna. We have nothing in common, and it's better we found out about it now, before either of us got hurt too badly."

"Is that so? Well, it looks to me like you're not feeling any too great here." She reached across the table and touched his hand briefly. "Morgan, Derek and I are your friends. I'm sorry if I came across as prying, but we just care about you and hate to see you unhappy." She grabbed the coffee carafe and stood up

"Amber sure did a number on you. She better not ever show up in White Tail or they'll be carrying her out in a garbage sack."

Morgan caught her arm. "Thanks, Donna. I know I'm worse than a prickly cactus, but I've got to work this all out for myself."

"No problem. Just let me say one thing and then I'll leave you alone. You and Allison looked like you had good vibes together. Whatever happened, don't throw the baby out with the bathwater. Make sure you really want to turn your back on what you and she could have."

"Yeah, okay." He unfolded himself from the booth and dropped two dollar bills on the table. "Thanks for the coffee. It was great as usual. I'll be seeing you." He clapped his Stetson on his head and made his way heavily to the door.

Slouching behind the wheel of the big Expedition, he forced himself to take a somewhat objective look at the weekend fiasco. On the one hand, he and Allison had once again had the most spectacular sex he could ever remember. More than sex. What they did was a giving and sharing, a blending of their two bodies. How often did you find something like that?

And they did enjoy each other's company. They liked so many of the same things. Being with her was easy ... as long as they were alone.

Face it, Cutter. She loves San Antonio, It's where she socializes and where she does her job. She's not about to give all that up to spend the rest of her life in a place like White Tail. Hell, we even have to go to the next town to go to a movie.

And he certainly couldn't live in San Antonio with her. He had surprised himself by even considering a return to the sheriff's department. He hated the people he came in contact with then and he despised them worse now. Especially after Saturday night.

Yeah, let's look at Saturday night.

He hadn't been in a public brawl since he was in high school. But that jerk had pushed his buttons, and he sure couldn't let him get away with insulting Allison. If she'd only taken his side. Or at least listened to what he had to say. But she jumped to the defense of the people she knew a lot longer than him. That was a pretty clear sign of where her head was.

But damn, he sure did miss her. He could hardly sleep in his bedroom without remembering her naked body in his bed, her impish look as they sat across from each other at breakfast. He certainly had to stay out of the front hall.

Sighing heavily, he turned the ignition key. Maybe something would turn up about his dead body, or the curious break-in at his house, and that part of his life could settle down.

* * * *

The blonde pulled into the truck stop and parked at the side of the lot. With only fifty miles left to go, butterflies had suddenly taken up residence in her stomach. Funny. She never got nervous approaching a mark or pulling the con. The adrenaline rush she always got putting the plan together, assembling the materials, giving her spiel, watching the mark lap it up, submerged any attack of nerves she might have.

But this. This was different. She was going into something where her chance of success was marginal, yet she had to make it work. All she needed was enough time to find that asshole, Jared, split the money and hide herself away for a long time. She had to convince someone who hated her that he was her best and only choice without telling him why.

She pulled one of the throwaway cell phones from her purse and began punching in numbers. Once more she ran down the list Jared had given her. Just like all the other times, no one answered.

Where could he be? There was no way he could have gotten the money without her. Besides, he knew if he did

she'd hunt him down and skin him alive. But his continued absence worried her. He'd gone to ground many times before, but she'd always been able to find him. He'd never just fallen off the face of the earth like this before.

Inside she ordered a cheeseburger and milkshake. No coffee. She'd consumed enough of that in the past few days to keep a squadron awake for a week. When she bit into the burger she nearly moaned with pleasure. This was the real thing—rich and meaty, the cheese melting into it, the lettuce and tomato fresh and crisp—not like the fast food junk she'd been living on. And the milkshake. Lordy, it was pure heaven. She'd been afraid to go into any kind of real restaurant for fear Escalante's men would be on her tail. But she hadn't seen them since she left the motel this morning, so she hoped she'd finally shaken them.

The smart thing to do would be to give back the money, but even if they did, there was no guarantee Escalante wouldn't have them killed just as a lesson to others. Or so they could never tell anyone how he'd fallen for their scam. No, this was a problem with only one solution: go to ground until it was safe to move around, find Jared and split the money, and disappear for good. Somehow. Some way.

She paid her check, freshened up in the rest room, and climbed back into her car.

Okay, kiddo. Just think of it as another con—which it is. You can do it.

* * * *

"What do you mean, you lost her again?" Obradors could hardly contain his rage. "You had her right in your sights. We were lucky enough to have someone spot her in El Paso, and keep an eye on her until you could get there. So what happened?"

At the other end of the line Alex gripped the phone to still his trembling hand. They were in big trouble. *Mucho* trouble. He and Jorge might have to disappear themselves if they wanted to stay alive.

"We are sorry, *Senor Luis*," he began, but Obradors cut him off.

"Emilio Escalante is one of the most feared cartel leaders in trade. How do you think it looks to have two idiots like you running around like this? People will think he's lost control of his organization. Other cartels could even challenge him for power."

"We're sorry, *Senor Luis*," Alex mumbled. *Madre de Dios*, just let me get out of this and I'll go back to Mexico and never leave my hut again.

"How did you lose her?" Obradors gritted his teeth.

"She made so many detours, and we got stuck behind a red light."

"Red light? You let a traffic light stop you?"

"You didn't want us to get stopped, did you?"

Obradors knew the man was right. A traffic stop could open up a can of worms. "All right. Here is your last chance before I turn you over to *el jefe*. She must be headed to the bump in the road we expected before. Go there. Do not under any circumstances call attention to yourselves."

"But how will we do that, Senor Luis? It's such a small town. Everyone knows when strangers show up."

Obradors muttered incantations under his breath. "Try to use what passes for a brain and think of something logical. Scope out the town. Something will come to you. And Jorge?"

"Yes, *mi jefe*?"

"Don't mess this up."

"Si, *mi jefe*!"

Obradors hung up the phone and tossed back the remains of his drink. It occurred to him that he'd been drinking far too much lately. Not good. It softened the edge.

How the hell had Escalante ever thought these two stooges could handle a job like this?

"You will direct them," he told Luis. "I trust you to lead them."

Lead them? He'd need a collar and chain to do that. He banged his fist on the little table next to him. There was nothing for it—he'd have to go himself and make sure the job was done right. Finding the woman was only half the battle. Escalante wanted his money back, every dime. Then the woman could join her partner in Hell and they'd be done with it.

Chapter Thirteen

What with one thing and another, it was late morning by the time Allison left San Antonio. The scene at the bank had played out much as Allison had expected. She had been dumping things from her desk into the carton she had with her when Jerry appeared at her office door. His nose was still swollen and the bruising around his eye was beginning to turn an ugly shade of purple. Anger had flashed in his eyes.

"Running off to the cowboy? Be sure he doesn't mistake you for one of his horses." "Shut up, Jerry. You started the whole thing. Cissy Danton was only too happy to give me a blow by blow." "That bitch." He twisted his lips in a sneer. "She probably wants him for herself. I hear she likes sweaty men who stink."

Allison slammed a clock down on the desk. "For your information, the man you provoked is the chief of police in White Tail, and you're damned lucky he didn't have you arrested."

For a moment Jerry's face paled, then the arrogance returned. "Big deal. How much does it take to be chief of a town no bigger than my thumb nail."

"And where do you get off insulting me like you did? If I'd heard you, you'd be singing in high soprano this morning."

"I don't know why I ever thought I enjoyed going out with you."

Allison restrained herself from slapping his face, hitched the strap of her purse over her shoulder and picked up her carton. "Get out of my way. Why did I ever waste my time

with a jerk like you? I only wish Morgan had beaten you to a bloody pulp."

She shoved him aside as she left the office, her body shaking with rage.

Darren Scott was out of his office when she stopped there next. She handed her letter of resignation to his secretary, and turned to leave.

"Allison, he specifically said he wanted to talk to you. Just let me find him."

Allison shook her head. "It would be unproductive and a waste of both our time. I have to leave. And there's something I have to do."

She hurried out the door before the woman could try to stop her.

Sitting in her car in the parking lot, she rubbed her forehead and willed away the headache she could feel coming on. Her weekend had been spent in tear-drenched misery, and sleep had been a scarce commodity. Her eyes felt gritty, her body tense, and her heart sorely bruised. Looking at her world through Morgan's eyes had been particularly unpleasant. It wasn't so much the life itself as the people in it, people she'd once thought glamorous and exciting, very "with it."

She'd come to the startling realization that almost everyone she knew, except for Paige, was brittle, artificial, and only out to feather their own nest. They'd sell each other down the river for a bigger office, more perks or just a better seat at a Spurs game.

But could she exist in a place like White Tail, so removed from everything she knew? The people were great, but what kind of life would she have? Would she be just like Amber, one day running away? No! I am not like Amber.

Well there was only one way to find out, and she'd set the wheels in motion with her phone call yesterday morning. Now, three hours after leaving the bank, she was in White Tail, heading for the D&D. "Come here first, Donna had told her."

As she entered the diner, Donna herself came rushing up to greet her with a hug. "I was afraid you'd changed your mind."

"Don't think that wasn't an option. At least ten times after I left the bank I almost turned the car around."

"How did that go, anyway?"

Allison made a face. "About like I expected. I'm just glad to be out of there. That's all."

"Well, I'm glad you're here. Come on, sit down. Let me get you some coffee."

"Thanks." Allison sat down in the nearest booth and let her eyes drift over the restaurant. The breakfast rush was long over and it was too early for lunch, so the diner was empty. Except, of course, for Emory Grant occupying his usual place by the window.

She'd only been there the one time she'd been in White Tail, but the warmth and friendliness still hung in the air along with the lingering aromas of fresh cinnamon buns and pecan waffles that were among Derek's breakfast specialties. Booths marched along the wall of windows that looked out on

Main Street, then made a sharp right angle turn to tuck three small units against the short back wall. One window was filled with flyers advertising the high school play, a square dance, the city council meeting and other town activities. Opposite the windows was a long counter with old fashioned stools. At either end were pastry stands. In the morning they held rolls and buns, but Paige had told Allison at lunch time they were filled with the mouth-watering pies and cakes Derek baked.

"He cooks and Donna waitresses," Paige had said. "They make a great team, and everyone who comes in there is like family. If you want to find out anything or see anyone or just find out what's happening in White Tail, you'd best get yourself to the D&D. It's better than the newspaper."

Allison leaned back in the booth and let her eyes drift to the street outside. Things she hadn't noticed on previous visits swam into her vision—huge wooden tubs with colorful crepe myrtles marched along the sidewalk, with wrought iron benches in between for resting and chatting. Many of them were occupied now by men in jeans and boots, or women similarly dressed. Paige had said dress in White Tail was "ranch casual" and she was right. This was really Texas, if you got right down to it.

The luscious aroma of frying chicken and rich stew drifted out from the kitchen and Allison could already feel her mouth watering. Donna materialized beside her with two mugs and a fresh carafe of coffee, and sat down on the other side of the booth.

"Here." She filled both mugs. "A little liquid adrenaline."

"Lord knows I'll need it." Allison cupped her hands around the hot drink. "I'm just so afraid he won't talk to me—that he'll throw me out before I can speak my piece."

"Allison. Honey." Donna leaned across the table. "I've known Morgan more than twenty years. He's carrying a big hurt around with him and now his pride's involved again. But he's fair almost to the point of pain. He'll at least let you speak your piece."

"I sure hope you're right." She pushed her half-full cup away. "I guess I can't sit here hiding in the booth and hoping everything will just go away."

Donna stood up with her and gave her another hug. "Good luck, kiddo. We're rooting for you."

By the time she reached the police station, Allison was a bundle of nerves again. She had to make Morgan listen to her, whatever it took, but first she has to face him. She drew in a deep breath, let it out and pushed through the doors to the station.

"Hi." She pasted a big smile on her face as she walked up to the desk where a woman was poring over some folders.

The woman looked up. Can I help you?"

"Yes, please. I'd like to see Chief Cutter. Is he in?"

"I'll handle it, Stacy."

Allison looked up to see Morgan striding toward the front from his office.

"What are you doing here?"

His deep voice was as unfriendly as any she'd ever heard, but it was the pain in his eyes that almost floored her.

Don't panic, Allie.

"I-I came to talk to you."

He planted his feet apart and folded his arms over his chest. "Okay. Talk."

Allison looked around. "Could we go in your office? Please?"

For a moment she thought he'd refuse her, then he turned and left her to follow him.

He sat down behind his desk, rested his hands on the blotter. He clenched his jaw so tightly that a muscle jumped in his cheek. "I can't imagine what we have to say to each other, but go ahead."

Allison closed the door and took another breath. "I came to apologize and throw myself on your mercy. I behaved like the worst kind of jerk and hurt you badly. If I could take it all back, I'd do it right this minute."

He never moved a muscle. "All right. Apology accepted. Goodbye."

She all but fell into the chair in front of his desk, her knees shaking too badly to hold her any longer. "No. I'm not finished. I'm not leaving until I say it all. Then you can throw me out."

When he didn't respond, she hurried on.

"What I did was a stupid, knee-jerk reaction. Instead of appreciating the fact that you stood up for me, and realizing that of course Jerry was the one who provoked things, I turned on you. That makes me no better than all the people I thought were so wonderful."

He sat as if carved in stone. "Okay. You've said your piece. Salved your conscience. Now you can run back to your job

and tell everyone the cowboy won't be coming after them with a gun."

"I quit my job this morning." She saw the shock on his face, and his effort to conceal it. Finally he said, "Why?"

"Because I can't work in a place with people like Jerry Malanski. Because no job is worth it if you lose something important. Because everything I thought was so important to me is nothing if I don't have you." She swallowed and forced herself to continue. "I had a chance to take a good look at myself this weekend, Morgan, and I didn't much like what I saw. I've been so caught up in my job, my so-called 'career,' my lifestyle that I couldn't see things clearly. After Saturday night the blinders came off. I took a long hard look at my life and came to a very unsatisfying conclusion."

"And what would that be?"

She took a deep breath. "All of it isn't worth ten cents, if you want to know the truth. Sure I worked hard to get where I was, and I lived a sort of glamorous life. And I love San Antonio, the city. I always have. But none of it is worth five minutes with you." She gripped her hands together in her lap, the knuckles white. "I don't know what we've got, Morgan, but whatever it is, I don't want to lose it. I don't know if you can ever forgive me, but I'd really like for us to start over."

"And how would you suggest we do that?"

His voice had softened and the hard look was fading from his face, the first sign that his defenses might be slipping. The pain was still there in his eyes, but layered with it was a need to believe her. *Oh, please, God, let him be listening.*

"I packed my suitcases." The butterflies stepped up their tattoo. "There's no way you'd ever be happy living in San Antonio. You hated it the last time. So I want to see what your world is like, what life in White Tail is like. Paige loves it. She and I aren't so different, so why can't I?"

Morgan just sat and stared at her, saying nothing.

"I thought I could stay at the ranch. Paige and Ryan are still on their honeymoon but the Howells would put me up. And the newlyweds will be back before long."

She watched the muscles in his throat flex as he swallowed twice, saw the inner battle he was raging reflected in his electric eyes. Then he stood up. "That won't be necessary."

Allison felt her stomach turn over. He was throwing her out after all. Well, he could toss her out of his office but he couldn't make her leave town. And she was staying until she changed his mind. One thing she'd figured out during her long, miserable weekend. She wanted Morgan Cutter more than she'd ever wanted anything in her life.

"Morgan, I..."

But his hands were under her elbows, lifting her out of the chair. He gave her one of those penetrating stares again, as if he could look into her brain and see what she was thinking. Then he pulled her against him.

"I misread Paige and nearly messed up what she and Ryan have. Maybe I misread you, too, Allie. So, okay. It won't be easy, but I'm willing to stick my hand in the fire again." He tilted up her chin. "But forget about going to the ranch. I'm taking you home with me."

She couldn't help the tears that ran unchecked down her cheeks. The steel band that had circled her heart since Saturday night sprang open and she leaned into Morgan's warm, hard chest.

"Oh, Morgan. You won't be sorry. I promise you."

He brushed at the tears with his thumbs. "It's okay, Allie. We'll just pretend none of the ugly stuff happened.

And then he kissed her, one of those deep, scorching kisses that curled her toes and made her pulse skitter. When he lifted his head, he looked as dazed as she felt.

"Let's go home, darlin'." Leading her out through the main room, he paused at Stacy's desk. "I'll be out of pocket for a while. If anything comes up, call Jace."

"Yes, Chief." She ducked her head to hide her smile.

* * * *

The woman parked her car down the street from the house on the opposite side of the street. Now that she was here, she was suffering a mild attack of nerves. She'd thought about going right to his office, but that seemed too fraught with problems. He could refuse to see her, walk out on her, any of those things. No, the house was the best place. She still had a key. The others she'd given back to him, but she'd forgotten about this one, stashed in her car in case of emergency. Well, this was damn sure an emergency.

So. Should she sit here like a bump on a log, with the neighbors peeping out the windows and maybe calling him about the stranger lurking on their street? Let herself into the

house to wait for him? Leave and come back when she was sure he was home?

She'd been so anxious to get here and hide herself away she hadn't bothered to think this through as carefully as she usually did. Another instance where she didn't pay attention. Too many more of these and she'd be dead for sure.

The woman whose house she parked in front of peered out through the living room window curtains for what the blonde was sure was the fifth time. Okay. There weren't many places to hide in this town while she waited. Digging the key out of her purse, she was about to open the door and walk back to the house when she saw his SUV coming down the street. She slouched down in the seat, angling the rearview mirror so she could see what was going on, and watched him pull into his driveway.

Then her hand tightened convulsively on the key. Another car followed him, one that he waved to follow him to the rear parking spaces. She couldn't see the cars now, but she had a view of the rear door. When he walked up to it with a woman beside him, the blonde's stomach lurched. Had he remarried? No, this didn't look like a man and his wife coming home.

She waited until they were inside, then revised her plan of action. Nothing short of a legal wife was going to keep her from walking into that house. She'd give them a few minutes, then let herself in.

* * * *

Allison followed Morgan in her car, pulling up beside him in the wide parking space at the rear of the house.

"We'll get your suitcases later," he told her, almost pulling her from the car into his arms. "I have other things on my mind first."

"Me, too," she said breathlessly.

But Cochise had his own ideas about that. As soon as the cars pulled in he set up a frantic joyous barking, recognizing Morgan and the SUV. He ran back and forth along the fence, tail wagging, ears perked up. Morgan gritted his teeth and took a minute to calm the animal.

"It's okay, fella." He rubbed his head. "This is Allison. You'll love her, I promise." He turned and reached out to Allison. "Give me your hand, darlin'."

She put her hand in his and he held it out for Cochise to sniff. "I want him to see that you're no threat to me, and to get used to your scent."

"It's a good thing I like dogs." She let Morgan rub her hand on the dog's coat while he murmured soothing phrases.

Morgan stood up. "He'll be okay now. Come on."

"Thank God." She could barely get the words out.

By the time he unlocked the back door she was in a frenzy of desire. Her nipples were hard, the pulse in her sheath was throbbing like a wild thing and she could feel moisture seeping into her panties. Inside she threw herself against him, but he picked her up in his arms.

"The wall episode will be an interesting anecdote to tell each other when we're ninety, but for what I plan to do to you, I need a bed."

He carried her upstairs, his mouth glued to hers again with a ferocity that indicated the intensity of his hunger. When his

tongue slipped past her lips into the hot, open well, a delicious shiver raced through her. His scent wrapped itself around her, a tantalizing blend of spice and outdoors and pure male. Her breasts were crushed against the hard wall of his chest, his heat radiating through his shirt into her body. She wanted him to hold onto her and never let go. Against his lips she whispered, "I'm sorry, Morgan. I'm so sorry."

"Ssh. No more apologies. You showed up here, left everything behind you, just to make this work. That says more than any words."

Then, as if a switch had been thrown, they were ripping each other's clothes off, touching skin as their hands moved, tasting, licking, pressing kisses in stimulating patterns. Naked, they fell onto the bed, hands moving everywhere on each other's bodies. Her heart was beating so hard she could hear it and every inch of her felt as if she were on fire.

She licked the side of his neck, loving the salty taste of him, her hands threading through the soft hair on his chest, feeling the hard wall of muscle beneath. But when she reached between them for his hot shaft, stroking it, her fingers gliding on the silk over steel, he clamped a hand on her wrist.

"No." His voice sounded strangled. "I want to be inside you. I have to. Right now."

"Yes. Oh, God, Yes."

He pinned her to the bed, separating her legs with his own lean, muscular one, and slipped two fingers past her folds and into her hot, tight sheath. She was embarrassed at how wet she was, her fluid already gushing into his hand.

"I want..." His voice was husky with desire, and he struggled to get the words out. "I want to take my time and love every inch of you, but darlin', I can't wait."

"Neither can I." Her hands gripped his arms so hard her nails dug into the skin. She needed to feel his hot, hard length in her. "Now, Morgan."

He moved over her, positioned himself and slid into her with one thrust.

"Allison. Oh, God..." His big body shook with the effort at control. "Darlin'..."

She shifted, pushing her hips at him and that was all it took. He began moving in and out of her, her hips rising to meet him. Little mewling sounds escaped her lips punctuated by Morgan's heavy groans. The need built inside her, clutching at her, pulling at her, the friction of his large, powerful body setting every nerve end jumping. Everything fell away except this man inside her body, taking her higher and higher.

And then she caught the wave, riding the crest, tumbling in its rolling motion. And Morgan was right there with her, shouting her name as her body convulsed around him. The spasms gripped her from head to toe in one continuous motion as if they'd never loosen their grip on her. Until finally they collapsed together, spent, lungs bursting for air, pulses racing. She could feel Morgan's heart thudding against her breasts as it slowed to a steady rhythm.

He lifted his head and brushed his lips across her mouth in a gentle caress.

She looked up at him, smiling. "Wow."

"Oh, yes, darlin'. I second that." He rolled over and took her with him, holding her close to him. "I'm sorry about the fight."

She touched her fingers to his lips. "We're through apologizing, right? What goes for me, goes for you. Anyway, there's plenty of blame to go around, so let's just move on from there. Okay?"

"Okay with me." He brushed damp curls from her forehead. "So you really want to give life in White Tail a try?"

Allison licked her lips, wondering if she should say what was really on her mind, then thought, what the hell. "Morgan, I think I'm in love with you. Maybe I already am. I know how you feel about the city, and I realized suddenly it's just a place to live. I like the Riverwalk and certain other things, but White Tail's not the end of the world. The highway goes in both directions."

"Honey, are you sure?"

She grinned. "About loving you? What else could make me turn my world upside down? About White Tail? I guess we're about to find out."

"We'll figure it out. Okay?"

"I never argue with the chief of police."

They lay there, content just to be in each other's arms, the sweat slowly drying on their skin but neither of them wanting to break the closeness that wrapped around them. Finally Morgan leaned over her and gave her a teasing kiss. "Have you had lunch?"

"No. I was so uptight I couldn't eat at all today."

"Okay. How about if we take a shower, then I'll fix us something to eat." He made a face. "I think bacon and eggs is about all I can offer at the moment. My cupboard's pretty bare. We'll go grocery shopping later."

"Bacon and eggs sounds fine. So does the shower."

Which took much longer than they intended, what with one thing and another.

Morgan picked up his uniform and dropped it on a chair, pulling on a pair of jeans but leaving his chest bare.

Allison scrambled to gather her jeans and tee shirt and yanked them on. Putting her arms around Morgan, she grinned up at him. "If you feed me I might be able to get my energy back."

"Sold. Come on."

Morgan was placing bacon strips in a frying pan and Allison was scrambling eggs when Cochise began to bark wildly, not the friendly sound from earlier, but vicious, punctuated by harsh growls.

"I'd better see what's going on." Morgan set the frying pan aside and headed for the back door.

"Don't bother. He saw me come up to the house. That damn monster never did like me."

The voice made them both jump. Allison nearly dropped the bowl she was holding as she whirled around. She stared at the tall blonde standing in the doorway, a look of pure insolence on her face.

Morgan looked as if he'd just swallowed vinegar. "What the hell are you doing here? And how did you get in?"

She held up a key. "Had an extra one I forgot to turn in."

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He snatched it from her hand and stuffed it in the pocket of his jeans. "Now you can just march your miserable butt out of here. I'm sure you won't be surprised if I tell you I can't stand the sight of you."

"Really," she drawled. "I'd hoped you might feel a little differently by now. So, how's life, Morgan?"

"Better without you in it. You know where the door is. Use it."

Allison looked from one to the other, at the rage in Morgan's eyes and the greedy look in the woman's. "What's going on here?"

A muscle jumped in Morgan's cheek and his hands curled into fists. "Allison, meet Amber. My ex-wife."

Chapter Fourteen

Allison froze, unable to move a muscle. Now she knew what people meant by a deafening silence. The absence of sound in the room was louder than a clash of cymbals. She looked at Morgan, anger in his eyes so vivid she expected to see thunderbolts shoot out. Amber still lounged in the doorway, an expectant look on her face.

Moving to stand closer to Morgan, she took the opportunity to give his ex-wife a thorough once-over. The woman had the longest legs she'd ever seen, and a narrow waist, both emphasized by the tight slacks she wore. A soft, short-sleeved sweater fell loosely against her ample breasts and long blonde curls, like rivers of silk, fell to her shoulders. Her eyes, emerald green, blazed from under thick, long lashes.

But it was her face that drew most of Allison's attention. Amber Whatever-her-name-was-now looked like life had been very hard on her, but she'd given back as good as she got. She could see why Morgan had fallen for this woman, a practiced seductress if she'd ever seen one. But the big question was, why? What could she have possibly wanted from Morgan?

As intense as Allison's feelings were for the man, as much as her mouth watered for him and her body strained, Morgan was a small town chief of police, and Amber had big time written all over her. No wonder the marriage had lasted barely three months. The wonder was it had survived the ceremony at all.

Morgan looked at Allison. "Don't move, darlin'. I've got to see to the dog for a minute." Cochise was still barking loudly. "I'll be right back."

"All right." She forced a grin she didn't feel.

Morgan went out the back door, leaving Allison and Amber staring at each other.

"So." Amber's voice had an acid edge to it. "You and Chief Cutter are playing house. How cute. Does he restrain you with his handcuffs to add a little spice?"

"What Morgan and I do is none of your business," Allison spat. She turned and rummaged in the cupboards for a glass, then filled it from the tap at the sink. She drank it slowly, giving herself time to collect her thoughts. Of all the damn bad luck, having this piece of trash show up at exactly the wrong time.

"I'll say this for him," Amber went on. "He was damn good in bed."

Allison whirled. "I hardly think he needs your endorsement."

Amber opened her mouth to reply, but whatever she was planning to say disappeared as the back door opened and Morgan came in.

"You're right," he told Amber. "He never did like you. I should have paid more attention to his opinion. But I told him you'd be gone in a minute and he quieted down."

"That might not be exactly the situation." Amber skimmed her eyes over his face. "I'll have to change your mind about that."

Morgan placed a possessive hand on Allison's shoulder. "What do you want, Amber? I thought you pretty much said it all in your note."

Amber gave Morgan a predatory smile. "Maybe I found out I made a mistake, and came back to try again."

"Not gonna happen." His grip on Allison tightened. "Not even if hell froze over right now. I want no part of you. I have company, so just get out of here and go back where you came from."

Amber studied Morgan and Allison, appearing to note his proprietary hold on her, her posture as she stood next to him, and sighed. She sat down at the table. "Okay, you're right. I didn't think you'd welcome me with open arms. But I did come to ask your help."

"My help?" His voice was like tempered steel. "Why in hell would I want to help you with anything?" He moved away from Allison and clamped a hand on Amber's arm. "Let me help you out the door. You're not welcome here, Amber, and I don't know how to make it any plainer than that."

"Please listen to me." She tried to pull her arm away. "This is important." One tear tracked down her cheek.

Oh my God, Allison thought. Give me a break.

"You've got ten seconds before I throw you out."

"Someone wants to kill me."

"Kill you." Morgan repeated the words as if they were in a foreign language.

"Yes. You know, murder me."

For a moment Allison thought she saw actual fear on the woman's face, then it was gone.

"And you came here because—?"

"I have no place else to hide until I can figure out what to do."

Allison saw every inch of Morgan's body stiffen.

"Come on, Amber." His voice was edged with sarcasm.

"Can't you think of a better line than that?"

She fisted her hands in front of her. "This isn't a line. I swear to you. A man is after me, and if I can't hide I'll be dead."

Allison moved to the counter and began looking through the cupboards. "Why don't I make us some coffee?"

Morgan slid his glance toward her and she nodded, giving him a tiny smile of encouragement. *It's all right*, she telegraphed. *Just hear her out and get rid of her.*

"Fine. Good idea. I think we could all use some." He folded his arms across his bare chest, leaned his hips against the counter and pinned Amber with his gaze. "All right, give. What's going on? And don't give me some fairy tale, all right?"

Amber looked down at her hands. "I was in—Dallas—and accidentally saw something I shouldn't." "Just what was it you saw?"

Amber twisted her hands. "I ... I can't tell you."

"Jesus, Amber." Morgan exploded, and for a moment Allison thought he might kill the woman himself. "You can't tell me? First you walk out on me and leave me a letter that singed the paper. Then you show up out of the blue, bust into my house, tell me someone wants to kill you, and you can't tell me why? What the hell is this?"

Amber looked at Morgan with a plea in her eyes. "Y-You're a police chief. You'd get all uptight and try to investigate, and someone would find me." She caught her bottom lip between her teeth.

Lord save me, Allison thought. This woman should go on the stage. Can't Morgan see this is all some kind of act? How can he even stand here and listen to her after the way she treated him?

"Amber, if someone wants to kill you, the police are your best bet to stay alive."

She shook her head violently. "Not these police. They know about it and helped." "What?" Morgan put his hands on the table and leaned over her. "You're telling me the police are involved in this—whatever it is?"

"Yes." She looked down at her hands. "I know that's hard for you to believe, you being so honest and all."

What a load of crap. That woman is lying through her teeth.

Allison banged cups as she took them out of the cupboard and banged them on the counter. She slammed the spoons down so hard both Morgan and Amber jumped.

"Sorry. The coffee's almost ready." *Morgan, this woman's playing you like a violin. Whatever she's running from, she's about to get you in big trouble.*

He straightened and shoved his hands in his pockets. "So, what is it you want from me, if it's not police protection? What do you expect me to give you?"

Allison turned from the counter just in time to see Amber arrange her face in a pitiful expression. "I just need to stay

here for a few days. Not long," she hurried on, seeing the dark scowl on his face. "Just until I can make other arrangements."

Allison took milk out of the refrigerator and slammed the door. *Don't fall for it, Morgan. Remember what she did to your life.*

"You want me to let you stay here, after everything that happened?" He shook his head, disbelief in his eyes. "Lady, you have got brass balls, I'll say that for you. Give me one good reason I shouldn't just open the door and throw you out on your ass."

Amber jumped up from the table and threw her arms around him, burrowing against his chest. "Morgan, I am so, so sorry about what happened before. If you'll give me a chance, I'll just explain and apologize all over the place. But honest to God, there are people out there serious about killing me, and I know you're too decent a man to let that happen. Please?"

Decent. The right word to coerce Morgan. Allison could see it strike at him, warring with his bitterness toward the woman who had made such a mess of his life. This woman knew just which button to push.

Amber flicked a sly glance at her. "Morgan, I'm sure your little friend over there won't mind, will you, honey?"

Little friend? Little friend? That does it. If he doesn't throw her out, I will.

"Amber..."

"I promise when we're alone I'll tell you all about it."

And here came the flood of tears. The clincher, Allison thought.

Morgan grabbed Amber's arms and shoved her away from him. "Amber, this is such bullshit. Get away from me."

"I'm so scared, Morgan. I promise I'll get out of your hair as soon as I can, but you have to let me stay here. These people would cut my throat in a heartbeat."

"Coffee's ready," Allison interrupted, bile rising in her throat at the scene in front of her. She knew in her gut Morgan was going to give in. No matter what this woman had done to him, he lived by his own code of ethics that overrode everything else. Time for her to get out of Dodge. "I'll just go get my things together." She ran up the stairs before she slapped Amber. Or Morgan, the dope.

She found her purse on the floor where she'd dropped it and shoved her feet into her shoes, swearing under her breath and calling herself every kind of idiot. She was almost at the door when Morgan strode into the room.

"Where the hell do you think you're going?" He planted himself in front of her, blocking her path.

"I'm leaving. What did you think? That I was going to hang around and watch you play house with Amber? The woman who treated you like dirt?" She tried to push past him.

He refused to move, instead grabbing her by the shoulders. "It's not like that and you know it."

"Oh?" She looked up at him. "Then exactly what is it like? She waltzes into your life after all this time and you just open the door for her."

Morgan ground his teeth. "She says someone's after her. If that's true, how can I just toss her out, no matter how I feel? I wouldn't throw a dog out if someone was out to kill him."

Allison knew that about him, but it didn't help any. She was too angry to be reasonable. Just as she and Morgan were getting back on track, Miss Troublemaker had to show up. She frowned. "And by the way, don't you think there's something fishy about this whole thing?"

"I'm not saying Amber isn't—embroidering things a little, but I have to find out. Allison, please. Can you just trust me on this?"

Allison put her hands on her hips and stared at him. "And will she be staying here while you find out just what's going on?"

Morgan spread out his hands, palms up. "What am I supposed to do with her? I can't hang her out to dry, no matter how I feel about her."

"I know, I know. Cutter's Law, right?" She dragged a brush through her hair and dropped it into her purse. "Fine, but there's not room in this house for both of us. Even you can't be blind enough to think that. Call me when you get your life straightened out."

"You're not going to leave me alone with her, are you?"

"I'm not staying here. Even *you* can see how idiotic that would be." She turned toward the door, only to find Morgan blocking her path.

He bent his head and in seconds his mouth was on hers, hot, hard, his tongue forcing her lips open and sweeping inside, touching the delicate nerves.

Allison struggled in his grasp and tried to pull away, but his kiss was too potent, too consuming, and she found herself melting against him. Then her brain clicked in and she dragged her mouth away from his.

"This doesn't solve anything. Sex is just—sex."

Morgan's eyes burned into hers. "This is more than just sex and you damn well know it."

She drew in a deep breath, fighting the band that constricted her chest. "Look, Morgan. Your ex-wife's downstairs with a problem. She's not about to go away. And you're right about one thing. If she's in trouble, your conscience won't let you turn her away."

"Allison..."

She cut him off. "No. Don't say anything. Go take care of her, find someplace else to stash her, and we'll see what happens."

He reached for her again. "Stop. We need to talk about us before you go running off anywhere."

She hated the look of pain on his face, but Morgan had to clean house before they could talk about anything. "Talk? With Amber probably out in the hall listening to every word? Puhleeze. And I'm not running off, only going to the ranch. Just..." She waved her hands in the air. "Just give me a day or so to digest all this, okay? Now, please. Just let me go."

She hurried down the stairs. Amber was still sitting in the kitchen, a look of amusement on her face.

"Sorry if I chased you off." Her voice held a hint of sarcasm.

God, don't let me kill this woman and go to hell for it. "Fat chance. I'm just smart enough to stay out of the line of fire. It won't take long before Morgan sees right through you and throws you out of here."

Amber laughed. "I wouldn't bet on that. I know just how to push his buttons."

"Not this time." The deep voice startled them. Neither of them had heard Morgan come into the room. "Allison, I'll walk you to your car." He turned to Amber. "When I come back in, be prepared to have a long talk with me."

Allison walked out as nonchalantly as she could, but when she hit the back steps she ran for her car. She had the door open and was about to climb in when she felt Morgan's hands on her, turning her around.

"Don't leave like this."

She leaned her head against his chest, seeking the comfort of his strength. "Don't make this any harder on me than it is. Surely there's some place else Amber can go if she's really hiding from someone. Take care of business, then we'll talk. But as long as that woman is in your house, we have nothing to say to each other."

As he had in the bedroom, he pressed his mouth to hers in a desperate kiss, his tongue tasting every inch of her, telling her what he wanted. Then he released her. "I'm not letting you get away from me."

Allison just shook her head, climbed into her car and backed out of the driveway, tears of anger and disappointment clouding her vision.

* * * *

"What did you find out?" Obradors took a swallow of tequila and again cursed the fates that had saddled him with the two biggest idiots in the world. Again today he'd had a session with Escalante, and the man's patience was nearly at an end.

"If you can't do this, I'll take care of it myself," had been his last words to Obradors.

Luis knew exactly what that meant. He'd be saying goodbye to his position in the organization and his life. That simply was not acceptable. But he had to get a handle on the situation.

"Well?" he asked again. "What information do you have?"

"Unfortunately nothing, *jefe*." Alex Osuna's voice was placating. "But we are still on it."

"And exactly what does that mean? Remember, you can't stir up gossip in that small town."

""We're working on it, *jefe*. But this is a small town. You can't exactly walk up to people and start asking questions."

"Did you drive by the home of the police chief? Did you see a woman there?"

"Only once, Senor Luis. Everyone looks out their windows here, and Jorge and me are strangers. They would call the chief right away."

Obradors ground his teeth. "Well, you'd better come up with something. Have you had any hint of her at all?"

"*Si, jefe*. We talked to some people at the truck stop in Monroe. That's only fifty miles from White Tail. She was here, they swear to it."

"All right. If she got that close, then she's definitely headed to her ex-husband's. What is your next move?"

"Well." A pause. "Me and Jorge think it would be a good idea if we tried to get jobs on one of the ranches."

"Jobs?" Obradors nearly shouted the word over the telephone.

"Si. That way no one would think it strange if we were around and we could have an excuse for being here."

Madre de Dios. Estupido." He cursed fluently in Spanish for a full minute.

"But what is wrong with that?" Now panic had crept into Osuna's voice. "It sounds logical, no?"

"Listen to me, you idiot. That could take days, even weeks, to find out what we want. We barely have hours. Do you understand?" *Jesu Cristo!*" He smacked himself on the forehead. He could already see the end of his life approaching. He drew in a deep breath and let it out slowly. "I will have to come there myself. There's nothing else for it. Let me think a minute."

He could hear Osuna breathing heavily on the other end of the line while he cast about in his head for a plan of action.

"What is the name of the town where the truck stop is? How far is it from Flyspeck and does it have a decent motel?"

"Monroe, *jefe*. It's good size. There's a motel right next to the truck stop just outside the town. Or do you want something inside the city limits?"

"No. No that's fine." He was silent a moment. "All right. I will have to meet with Escalante and bring him up to date."

Then, if he doesn't kill me first, I'll meet you at the motel. I'll be there sometime tomorrow afternoon."

"We'll be waiting for you."

"Go nowhere except the truck stop to eat, you hear me? Stay away from the real estate agent and don't go anyplace in that little town. I'll have to look things over myself and I don't want to raise any more suspicions than you probably already have."

"*Si, jefe.*"

Obradors hung up the phone and poured himself another shot of tequila. In the morning he would call Escalante and do his best to buy himself some more time. But first he planned to get good and stinking drunk.

* * * *

The lunch rush was over when Allison landed at the D&D, although the tantalizing aromas of fried chicken and hot apple pie still hung in the air. Allison's stomach rumbled, reminding her she had yet to eat today, lunch having been interrupted by Amber. However, she was sure she couldn't make a bite of food stay down.

"Don't tell me that hard-head wouldn't kiss and make up." Donna had the ever-present coffee carafe in her hand. She poured cups for herself and Allison and sat down in the booth across from the unhappy woman.

"No, that's not it at all." Allison picked up her spoon then put it down again. "We got to make up for all of an hour."

Donna frowned. "So what happened?"

Allison picked up the spoon again and tapped it against her fingers. "Amber happened. Does that answer your question?"

"What?" Donna almost knocked over the coffee carafe. "Don't tell me. I can't believe that woman would have the nerve to show up here again."

"Oh, yeah." Allison pushed her fingers through her hair. "Not only that, she still had a key and walked right into the house."

"Now I *know* you're kidding."

"Not a bit. Morgan and I had just ... I mean, we.... that is..."

Donna grinned. "I get the picture. Don't tell me she walked into his bedroom."

"No, thank God. But when we came downstairs, there she was."

Donna shook her head. "That woman is such poison. Why on Earth would she come back here when she knows Morgan would like to shoot her on sight?"

Allison made a face. "She says she's in trouble and Morgan's the only one who can help her. She needs a place to hide for a few days where no one can find her. I'd like to hide her where no one will find her, that's for sure."

"What a line." Donna snorted. "Morgan needs a good shrink if he falls for whatever line she's feeding him." She cocked her head. "So why are you here and she's there?"

Allison shrugged and took a sip of her coffee. "There's not room in that house for both of us. Morgan needs to get rid of her. Or me, I guess. Which ever one he chooses."

"Oh, Allison." Donna threw back her head and laughed. "I'm sorry, but there's no contest there. Morgan wouldn't give Amber house room for anything."

"Yeah?" Allison blinked back tears. "Well, he's giving her plenty right now."

Donna reached out a hand to Allison. "What will you do? Go back to San Antonio?"

"Not yet." Allison reached into her purse, pulled out a tissue, and blew her nose. "Damn it. I refuse to cry over this. I could kill that man."

Donna grinned. "Better mad than sad, kiddo."

"You're right." She tucked her hair behind her ears. "I guess I'll go to the ranch. Damn, Donna. I think if I had a gun right now I'd shoot both of them."

"If he doesn't get Amber out of the house, Morgan just might do it for you."

The door to the D&D opened, and a voice called, "Hey, Donna. Customers have to wait on themselves now?"

Allison jerked her head up at the voice. Tate Donovan, the love bug from the gas station, was standing by their booth. He was slightly better dressed than the other day, but the Stetson on his thick, dark hair was still battered, and the jeans clinging to his lean hips looked like they'd seen far better days. His wide smile made the tiny dimple at the corner of his mouth flash, and his eyes were full of mischief.

I'll bet he's hell on wheels, was Allison's first thought. Her second was, *do all the good looking men in White Tail have those unforgettable blue eyes?*

Donna stood up and tugged on Tate's hat. "Behave yourself if you want good service, cowboy."

Cowboy! No wonder Morgan hates it so much when I call him that. It lumps him in with every other woman-chaser. And she had no doubt that's exactly what Tate Donovan was.

"If I behaved myself I'd never have any fun." He grinned. "When are you going to ditch that husband of yours and take up with a real man?"

Donna laughed. "You wouldn't like my answer on that. You here for lunch?"

"Yup." Without asking, he slid into the booth opposite Allison. "If the chief wouldn't have me arrested for poaching on his territory, I'd ask Miss Moore here to join me."

"Thanks, but I'm not hungry." Just what she didn't need—a horny cowboy poking into her affairs.

"Then have a cup of coffee and keep me company." He took off his Stetson and placed it on the seat next to him. "Steak and eggs, Donna, with extra grits."

Donna looked from Allison to Tate and back again. "I'll bring your food, but you better make sure the lady wants you here."

"Actually, I think I'll head on out to the ranch." She dropped some money on the table, but Donna handed it back to her. "Coffee's free. Come in any time." She gave Allison a hug. "And call me at home if you want to chat."

"Thanks." Allison gave her a wobbly smile and left.

Tate lifted an eyebrow. "Trouble in paradise?"

"None of your business. If there is, they don't need a lady-killer like you making it worse."

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Tate smiled at her. "That's the nicest thing anyone's said to me today."

Donna grunted at him and headed toward the kitchen.

Chapter Fifteen

"All right. I want the whole story and I want it now."

Morgan Cutter leaned against the kitchen counter, cradling a mug of coffee. He'd found a tee shirt in the laundry room and pulled it on over his bare chest. The last thing he wanted was to give Amber any seductive ideas. He could already see the calculating gleam in her eyes.

"I want to know about the little chicken that ran out of here with her tail feathers between her legs." She gave him one of her patented smiles. "Couldn't take the heat, huh?"

Morgan wondered if he could get away with a justifiable homicide defense if he snapped Amber's neck. "Let's leave her out of this. She's none of your business. Just tell me why you're here so I can send you on your way."

Amber pouted. "I know you must be a tiny bit angry with me, Morgan."

"Angry with you?" He set the mug down before he spilled the hot liquid on himself. "Now why would you think that? Just because you ran out on our marriage after only three months and left me a note that scorched the paper, why should I be mad at you?"

She flipped her hair in a gesture that once had made his heart hammer and now just made his stomach clench. "Yes, well, I'm sorry about that. I should have at least told you to your face. But I couldn't..."

"You couldn't hack it in, let's see if I get this right, a jerkwater town filled with hicks who probably bathe once a

week and enjoy the company of cows more than people. Did I get that right?"

"Morgan..."

"Or was it, oh, wait." He scratched his head as if thinking. "Maybe it was the 'lack of sexual activity I provided, preferring to spend time with the town drunks rather than my wife.' Yeah, I think that's the way you put it."

"Please. I know I have a lot to atone for, but I came here because I really need your help."

Morgan gritted his teeth so hard they ached. "What kind of help? You haven't told me a damned thing yet, so I don't even know what the problem is."

Amber blew on the coffee he'd poured for her and took a sip. "Still drinking the high priced brew, I see."

"Damn it!" He slammed a hand on the table and Amber jumped. "Cut out the bullshit, Amber. What's up?"

Amber rose from her chair and went to circle his waist with her arms. "Just hold me a minute, okay? I'm scared to death."

Morgan took her arms and pushed her away from his body. "Forget it, Amber. Either tell me or I'll throw your butt out of this house so fast your feet won't touch the porch."

"Okay, okay." She sat down at the table again and picked up her mug. "I, um, got in a little trouble..."

"I thought you said you saw something you shouldn't," he interrupted.

"Yes. Yes, I did. That's right."

"Amber." Morgan had to shove his hands into his pockets to keep himself from wrapping them around her neck. "What

exactly is the problem? You have to know you're not welcome here, so let's get this show on the road."

"Okay, okay. I saw something bad happen in Dallas, and two policemen were involved. I got away but they got my license plate and they're trying to find me. To kill me."

Morgan's eyebrows raised. "You mean you're still driving the same car? That's pretty damn stupid."

"No. I got rid of it. Bought another one for cash with different plates."

"For cash." Morgan drank his coffee, watching Amber over the rim of the mug. Something wasn't right here. He got what Ryan always called his hinky feeling, which made him more irritated than he already was. "Where did you get that kind of cash?"

Her eyes skittered away. "I—had a nice nest egg stashed away. I raided it to have some running money."

"And is this money you earned since you left here? Because I don't remember you having that kind of cash when we were married."

Again her eyes evaded him. She got up, rinsed her mug at the sink and put it in the dishwasher. "There are things I just can't tell you. But this is the God's honest truth. Some very bad people want to kill me, and I have no place else to go that's safe. I just need a week or two, until I can get hold of ... someone. Then I'll be out of your hair." Tears began to trickle down her cheeks again. "Please, Morgan. Just help me out this one time and you'll never see or hear from me again."

He knew the tears were fake but they got to him just the same. The thought of Amber under his roof made him sick, but if she was serious, he couldn't throw her to the wolves. His mother had raised him to be very honorable, especially where women were concerned. He was sure she didn't have Amber in mind when she was training him.

And thinking of women, a cold knot settled in his stomach at the memory of Allison flying out of here and telling him to get rid of Amber before they had anything to talk about. He sure hadn't planned to fall in love again, for sure not with someone who was city born and bred, but there it was. Sneaking up on him like a ghost. They had so much to work out between them, and here was Amber, the cause of all his reservations fucking up his life again.

Damn!

He moved Amber's car into the garage and locked his den as well as double-checking the gun safe. Not that he thought she'd try to steal a weapon, but with her he was taking no chances. Then, with her cursing him every minute, he also unplugged all the phones and threw them in his car

"What if I need to make a call?" she raged.

"They'll trace you right to my house. Then what do you think would happen?"

"So what am I supposed to do?" she pouted.

"Read a book," he told her. "Watch television. Take a nap. But don't even look out a window. Got it?"

He hurried upstairs and threw his uniform back on, buckling on his holster as he walked back into the kitchen.

"Where are you going?" Alarm streaked through her eyes.

"I have a job to do, remember?"

"You didn't seem to mind taking off for the little princess you had with you," she smirked.

"You keep your damn mouth shut about her, you hear me, Amber?"

For a moment he was afraid he'd strike her. She must have thought so, too, because she backed away from him.

"All right, all right. Jeez. When will you be back?"

"Later. There's food in the house if you get hungry." His lips twisted in a nasty grin. "I know cooking's not your thing, but it would beat starving to death."

He looked at her, seeing someone who was a stranger to him. How had he ever thought himself in love with her? If his brain was working, he'd just pitch her right back out on the highway. Well, he'd at least let her stay the night, and do some quiet checking to see what kind of mess she'd gotten herself into.

And see if he could get Allison to at least talk to him.

* * * *

Myra Howell had just turned the stew for the ranch hands down to simmer and was taking out ingredients for biscuits when Allison Moore walked into the ranch house kitchen.

"I hope it's okay that I just walked in," she told Myra. "I know Paige and Ryan are still on their honeymoon, but she told me I could come out here any time and make myself at home."

"Oh, Miss Moore. Of course it's all right. You're family. I'll have one of the hands get your things out of your car."

Allison dropped into one of the kitchen chairs. "Thanks, Myra. I just didn't know where else to go."

Myra looked at her face. "Oh, honey, what's wrong? You look like your whole world just fell apart."

"I guess you could say it did." She rested her elbows on the table and dropped her head into her hands. "And I can't seem to find any of the pieces."

Myra poured iced tea and sliced lemon pound cake and between sips and bites Allison poured out the Life and Times of Allison Moore, beginning with Morgan's trip to San Antonio and ending with Amber's arrival at Morgan's house.

"That witch," Myra spat.

Allison's eyebrows rose. Myra never had anything but a kind word to say about anyone.

"Yes, I know." Myra twisted her lips in a wry grin. "I'm one of those old-fashioned people who still believes if you can't say something good about someone, keep your mouth shut. But that woman needs a stake driven through her heart."

Allison chewed on the pound cake. "Morgan gave me the Reader's Digest version of the story, but I gather she blew into his life, then blew out leaving a train wreck behind."

"A disaster, for sure." She took a swallow of her tea. "I never liked her, not from the minute I first saw her. Too brassy for my taste, but she sure had a hook in Morgan's nose. I guess she dazzled him with all that blonde hair and her big—um—assets."

Allison gave a weak laugh. "Oh, Myra, I love you." She put her fork down, the cake suddenly like ashes in her mouth. "I just don't know what to do. I guess I should go back to San

Antonio and figure out how to put my life back together, but right now that doesn't appeal to me."

"You stay right here, Allison." Myra leaned forward. "The Cutter boys aren't stupid, Just dumb sometimes. And Morgan's got this big protector complex, which makes this whole thing worse. But you need to stay right here where you're under his nose every day."

Allison scrubbed at the angry tears that broke loose, the scene at Morgan's house striking back at her. "I don't know if I can stand seeing him and knowing Amber's sitting fat and sassy in his house, screwing up our lives."

"Sure you can. You're no wilting violet. Just strut around this town like you own it. We'll see how long Chief Cutter can stand that."

Allison, stared at the older woman for a long moment, then jumped up and hugged her. "I think I like this place more and more each day."

Myra gave her a quick squeeze. "Now, I'll get one of the hands to take your luggage upstairs. Why don't you go tell John you'd like to go for a little ride. He can saddle Bluebonnet for you and get one of the boys to ride along. They need to be checking the fence line anyway, and I'm sure they'd rather do it with a pretty woman alongside."

* * * *

Luis was beginning to hate the rides in the long black car. The minute he sat down and closed the door behind him, instant claustrophobia grabbed him. The smoke from

Escalante's thin cigar did little to help the choking atmosphere.

"So, Luis." Escalante narrowed his eyes. "My nephews are doing your research for you?"

"Si, jefe." My research. Making a bigger mess than ever, is more like it.

"I knew they would turn out to be an asset. That's why I sent them to you in the first place."

And thank you for the bad luck, jefe.

"Yes, of course. Well, I'm leaving to meet them in a place called Monroe so we can decide the best way to scope out this tiny flyspeck called White Tail. I feel it in my bones that the woman will land there if she hasn't already. But we must be careful how we do our searching."

Escalante nodded. "Of course. In small towns anything unusual stands out. Well, then. I expect regular reports, *comprende?*"

"Of course."

Escalante rapped on the privacy glass, the car slid to the curb and Luis opened the door. He was about to step out when the older man put a steel hand on his arm.

"Don't take too long, mi amigo."

Luis nodded, closed the door, and as he watched the car move away into traffic drew his first full breath.

Shit!

There was no mistaking Escalante's soft threat, and all he had as insurance was the two stooges. How the hell did a man like Escalante not know what idiots his nephews were?

Or had he, Luis, been the only one he could foist them off onto?

Shit!

* * * *

Marcy Whitlock had worked as combination dispatcher/secretary for Morgan since the day he became chief. She'd seen him in all kinds of moods, even weathered the storm when his marriage imploded, but she'd never seen him like this. Every line of his body shouted "rage" but his eyes were colder than an arctic iceberg.

"Thought you went home, Chief," she greeted him.

"There's a viper in my nest," he snapped.

Marcy blinked. "Surely Allison didn't turn out to be ... you know..."

"Another Amber? Not necessary, when the real thing shows up."

Marcy's jaw dropped. "Excuse me?"

Morgan headed toward his office. "Is Jace around?"

"Jace?" Marcy stared after him.

"Yes, Marcy." He spoke slowly, but not pleasantly. "Jace Murdock. Remember him?"

"Oh. Sure, Chief." She looked at a sheet on her desk. "He's out on the road right now riding herd on the two new officers."

"Call him in. Now."

Morgan slammed the door to his office and sat heavily at his desk. Leaning forward on his elbows, he massaged his temples, trying to ease the pounding in his head. How had

this happened? One minute he was in heaven, the next in hell. He wanted to throw something, hit someone, maybe shoot someone.

He closed his eyes, but Amber's mocking face popped up. Why had he ever thought her beautiful or desirable? He thought he was so smart, so how come he never saw the evil behind that carefully made-up face?

Because all your brains were in your pants, asshole.

And then Allison's face flashed before him, rosy and flushed with passion, beautiful without a drop of makeup, the warmth in her eyes so real it reached out and captured him.

Well, Cutter, this is another fine mess you've gotten yourself into.

A rap on the door interrupted his unpleasant reverie.

"Yeah?"

The door opened and Jace Murdock poked his head in. "Marcy said you wanted to see me?"

"Come in." Morgan motioned him to one of the chairs. "And close the door."

Murdock sat, his body tense. "Am I in trouble, Chief? Marcy said you've got blood in your eye."

"No." Morgan made a disgusted sound. "If anyone's in trouble, it's me. Did young Boyd ever come up with anything going through all those faxes the other day?"

Murdock shook his head. "Nada. It was a long shot, anyway. Austin still hasn't come up with anything, either."

"I'm not surprised, considering how little they had to work with." He exhaled a long breath. "All right. I didn't look at the

schedule. What's your shift time and can you stay off the road for a few hours?"

"No problem. I was just making sure those kids we hired don't shoot themselves by mistake. And don't worry about the shift. Mary Ellen's gone to Tulsa to a conference this week, so I've got more time than I know what to do with."

"Good. I want you to do something for me, and I don't want you to discuss it with anyone else, okay?"

Murdock cocked his head. "Sure, Chief. Whatever you want."

Morgan studied the young man. He was lucky to have Jace Murdock, who was not only excellent at his job but completely loyal to his boss. That was hard to find these days. "Check the crime sheets from Dallas. Anything in the last six months. Not the petty stuff, just anything big. And do a search on the Internet, too."

"Can you give me an idea what I'm looking for?"

Morgan scratched his head. "I wish I could. Maybe a murder, something like that. And Jace?"

"Yeah, Chief?"

"See if there's any word going around about dirty cops on the DPF."

Murdock's head popped up. "You're kidding, right?"

Morgan tilted back in his chair, rubbing his hand over his jaw. "Maybe. I just don't know."

"Chief, you want to tell me what this is all about?"

"Not yet." Morgan sat forward, the legs of his chair hitting the floor and jarring his throbbing head. "Just see what you come up with, then we'll talk."

"I'll get right on it."

When his young sergeant had left, Morgan dropped his head into his hands again. He had to see Allison. Leaving this thing to fester would only make it worse. If she gave him a hard time, he'd just plant himself at the ranch until he wore her down. What he'd thought he had with Amber was just so much fool's gold. With Allison he'd found something that was one of a kind, something many people never even came close to. He had no intention of losing it.

* * * *

Luis was dog tired. The drive from San Antonio had been anything but relaxing, particularly since he'd spent most of it cursing the two morons he was saddled with. He felt in his bones the woman was still in Texas. And if he had to put money on it, he'd bet a bundle she was hiding out with her ex-husband, the chief of police. His sources told him that's where she holed up last time she was dodging heat, marrying the man to ensure she could stay there. Now, Luis was sure she'd find a way to make amends and ask him to protect her.

So. It was simple. Go to White Tail—what a stupid name for a town—make sure the woman was there this time, and figure out a way to grab her when the chief was not around. And don't arouse suspicion while doing it.

Simple, right? Not quite!

There had to be a way to get the information they wanted without being too obvious. Time was fast running out. Escalante would not wait much longer.

At last he reached Monroe and saw the neon sign for the motel. Reaching for his cell phone, he called Alex.

"I'm here. Open the door to your room so I can find you."

He punched the End button, clipped the phone to his belt again and reached for the bottle of antacid tablets on the seat beside him. He'd be lucky not to burn a hole in his stomach before this was over.

* * * *

At the last minute, Morgan decided to stop at the D&D before heading out to the ranch. Maybe Allison had been there and talked to Donna, and he could get a sense of how bad things were.

Yeah, right, he snorted. He knew just how bad they were. The only way they could get much worse is if Allison refused to talk to him at all.

The D&D was nearly empty when he pushed through the door. Emory Grant was in his usual booth, waiting for them to throw him out. Tate Donovan was sitting two booths down, facing the door. He lifted his coffee cup to Morgan.

"Say, Morgan, that's some lady you almost had there."

Morgan felt blood roar in his ears and his heart start to bang against his ribs. This was all he needed. The horniest man in White Tail sniffing after Allison.

"Stay away from her, Donovan," he growled. "She's off limits."

Tate gave him an evil grin. "She didn't look so off limits when she was in here earlier. You'd better make sure she understands you've got a claim on her."

Morgan shoved his hands into his pockets to keep from punching Tate Donovan. He didn't think the citizens of White Tail would be too happy to see their chief of police brawling in public. Instead, he turned away from Tate, toward Donna who was wiping down the counter.

"Allison was here?"

Donna nodded. "But Tate's right. You don't seem to be taking very good care of her."

Morgan hitched a hip onto the end stool. "She told you about Amber."

"Sure did." Donna dropped the rag into a sink behind her and wiped her hands on a paper towel. "I swear, Morgan Cutter, you have to be the dumbest man I've ever met. What were you thinking of, letting that woman back into your house, never mind your life?"

"Hell, Donna, it's not exactly that I let her."

"Then what do you call it?" Donna put her hands on her hips. "Allison Moore is one of the nicest, most genuine people I've ever met. I hate to pump up your ego by telling you this but I do believe she's crazy about you. How on Earth did you manage to screw this up?"

If he thought telling Amber's story to Donna would buy him some sympathy he was singing to the wrong choir.

"She's playing you, Morgan. And you're such a straight arrow you fell for it. Toss her ass out in the street where it belongs."

Tate Donovan walked up and handed Donna some money. "I'd love to stay and listen to this fascinating conversation, but I have work to do. Better figure out what you're doing,

Cutter, because I've got my for sure." He grinned, clapped his hat on his head and walked out whistling.

"If he so much as smiles at Allison he won't be doing much whistling," Morgan growled. "Anyway, what would she want with a footloose guy like Donovan?"

Donna leaned on her elbows and studied him. "I'd say he's got a pretty good leg up if you don't straighten things out, Mister Chief of Police. I don't care if Amber's got the Russian Mafia after her, she doesn't need to be in your house." She straightened up. "Unless, of course, I've got this all wrong and this thing with Allison's just something to pass the time of day."

Morgan glared. "It is definitely *not* just something to while away my time." He ground his teeth. If he kept doing this he'd have no teeth left. "I made a big mistake with Amber, and that's hard for me to admit. But Allison's the real thing."

"Then do what you have to do."

Morgan fiddled with his keys. "What I have to do is make Allison see I couldn't live with myself if Amber was killed because of me."

Derek Young came out from the kitchen. "Morgan, you don't even know if she really *is* in danger. She could just be pulling some scam for reasons of her own."

"I've got someone checking into that right now. Listen, the reason I came by was to make sure Allie went to the ranch and not back to the city. And if you think she'll talk to me."

"She's at the ranch," Donna told him. "Whether or not she'll talk to you is anyone's guess. She's so hot right now you could fry eggs on her."

Cutter's Law
by Judith Rochelle

Morgan sighed and slid off the stool. "Well, I have to try. Wish me luck."

"Good luck," Donna called after him as he walked out the door. "You'll need it."

He climbed into the big Expedition and slammed the door. Bad enough that Amber was in his house and Allison had walked out. Now he had Tate Donovan sniffing around her like a stallion in heat. On top of that a dead body, his house had been broken into and two strangers—something unfamiliar in this tiny West Texas town—were prowling his territory.

What next?

Chapter Sixteen

Luis sat on one of the double beds in the motel room and looked at the two men who sat nervously on the other. "This is a very small town. Everyone knows everyone else. A stranger is suspicious to begin with. But where do you suppose a stranger could go and not have people wonder about him?"

They both shrugged.

"Does this place have a restaurant?"

They nodded in unison.

"And does it not make sense that in a town this size, everyone would go there to eat? To gossip? To discuss the day's business?"

Again the nods.

"So if you went there and someone was curious about you, could you not say you were driving to San Antonio from El Paso and stopped to eat? Right?"

Now the two men simply stared at him.

"You mean, just go right in there and sit down?" Jorge asked at last. "Not try to hide ourselves?"

Luis let out his breath along with a string of curses. "Where can you possibly hide in this town? You've already made so many mistakes we can't afford another one. First you failed to make sure the woman was actually here before you dumped her partner's body. You can't send a warning to someone who isn't around to receive it. *Comprende?*"

"We had word she was on her way here," Alex protested.

"Then you make matters worse by breaking into the house of the chief of police, and putting him on alert. Are you with me so far?"

Again they nodded in tandem.

"Well, there's no help for it now." Luis pulled a thin cigarillo from a pack in his shirt pocket, lit it and drew on it. He blew a thin stream of smoke into the air. "We have to confirm she's here, and in his house so we can make a plan. I don't think she'd run around in plain site, no matter how much she thinks we can't find her here, and you can't just sit in front of Morgan Cutter's house and wait to see if Amber appears."

"We could ring the doorbell." Jorge had a hopeful look on his face.

"*Estupido.*" Luis wanted to smash the man's face. "And do what, stick a gun in the woman's face with the entire neighborhood watching? No. We must scout this out and make a plan. That's why a restaurant makes such a good listening post. Or a bar. That would be even better. Yes, a local bar that draws everyone. How many can there be in a town that size? And people talk more when they're drinking. Come on. We can't waste time."

"*Si, Senor Luis,*" they chorused.

"All right. Let's take a little drive to Flyspeck or Noplace or whatever the hell the town is called."

* * * *

"Rider coming." Rusty Danforth, the ranch hand John Howell had sent out with Allison, reined in his horse and stopped.

Allison pulled up Bluebonnet and turned slightly in her saddle. She hung onto the pommel for balance, still feeling her way in this riding business. She lifted her hand to the brim of her hat, shading her eyes. "One of the other men?"

Rusty shook his head. "Nope. Looks like the chief to me."

Allison's heart thudded. Morgan Cutter was the last person she wanted to see right now, but there didn't seem to be anyplace she could get away from him. She sat waiting for him to reach them, forcing herself to take deep breaths and wondering if he had gotten rid of Amber so soon.

The big bay stallion pulled up and Morgan nodded at the ranch hand. "Rusty." He dipped his head. "Everything okay out here?"

"Yeah, Chief, sure is. I was just riding the fence line and keeping Miss Moore company on her ride."

"Good. She isn't familiar with the land this far out. Thanks. I'll take it from here."

"Oh, I don't think..." Allison began, but Rusty was already urging his horse forward.

"See you later." And he was off cantering back toward the barn.

"I'd say that was pretty presumptuous of you, Chief Morgan." Allison tried to keep her voice as cool as possible.

"I wanted to talk to you." One corner of his mouth turned up. "Nobody wants to argue with the chief of police."

"I thought I asked you to give me a couple of days to think about things."

"I've already wasted too much of my life. I don't plan on wasting any more."

"Did you come to tell me Amber's out of the house?"

Morgan leaned over and grabbed her horse's bridle. "I don't intend to have a conversation with you on horseback."

Allison tried to move away but Morgan's grip on the bridle held the horse in place. Her heart was clattering against her ribs and butterflies were doing the tango in her stomach. Lord, just being near this man made her weak, and that wasn't good. Not with things the way they were. "That's too bad, because that's where we are."

"Come on. I have a place I want to show you." He urged his horse into a trot, leading hers along beside him. "And don't fiddle with the reins, you'll give Bluebonnet a headache."

"You're giving *me* a headache." She bounced in the saddle, unfamiliar with the horse's gait. "Morgan, I don't want to do this."

"You will."

And then she couldn't speak, as he moved the horses into a slow canter and she could only hang on for dear life. About the time she was ready to scream for mercy, they crested a hill and emerged into a glade where a small cabin nestled among the trees. Morgan pulled the horses up, swung down from his saddle and in a smooth move lifted Allison from hers.

"What is this place and why are we here?"

"It's an old line shack that was here when Ryan bought the property. He fixed it up and the hands use it when they're out riding the line and want a place to get inside from the sun or the cold." He took her hand and started to lead her inside.

"Wait just a minute." She tugged back on his hand and tried to plant her feet. "You got me all the way out here, but I'm not going inside any cabin with you."

Because I know what will happen if I do. We can hardly be in the same room together without sexual tension exploding.

In response he swept her up in his arms, ignoring her protests and kicking legs, strode inside, kicking the door shut behind him.

"Let me down, right now." Allison pounded her fists against his chest. "Let go, Morgan. Right now. Oh!"

This last because his mouth came crushing down on hers, hot and sweet and tasting faintly of coffee. His lips molded to hers and when their pressure forced her to open her own, his tongue swept in with a silky glide, tasting and swirling. He held her tightly against him, giving her no room to maneuver while his mouth seduced hers and his tongue sent shivers through her body. He kissed her like a drowning man who never expected to draw another breath.

When he finally lifted his head, she struggled for breath. She wanted to pull away, to make him put her down, but she wanted the touch and taste of him more. When she opened her eyes she saw his blue ones blazing into hers, his gaze holding her prisoner. Her heart stuttered and her pulses throbbed, the nearness of him overwhelming her.

"Morgan, I..."

"Not now. Later."

She was powerless to object to anything, her brain turned to mush from the heat flooding through her. He set her down on the floor, his mouth fused to hers again, and his hands

made quick work of her clothing. His fingers whispered against her skin, sliding against her as fabric fell away, touching and caressing until every inch of her skin felt as if it were on fire. She felt the roughened calluses on his hands as they moved over her, like tiny bristles calling each nerve to life. When he pulled her back against him, the friction of his clothing against her naked flesh sent her senses reeling. There was something totally erotic about being nude while he was still fully dressed. When he sat down in the big arm chair, draping her across his lap, she couldn't find the will to move.

"Don't turn away from me, Allison. You want me as much as I want you. Please." There was no mistaking the desperation in his voice. One hand gently nudged her thighs apart and stroked upward through damp curls into her cleft. "Yes. My God, you feel so good."

She lay with her legs draped across his, her thighs parted, as he stroked through soft, trimmed curls to the damp lips with the tips of his fingers then slowly slid one into her slick channel. The moment she felt his touch inside her inner muscles clamped down on him. When his thumb moved to the tip of her clitoris, already swollen and hungry for his touch, the circular motions he made sent heat through her blood like liquid fire. Soft little moans escaped her lips.

"That's good, isn't, sweetheart?" His voice was pleading. "Come on, let yourself feel."

"Mm," was all she could say, wanting more. More of his hand, more of his touch, more of what he was doing.

She turned her face into his chest, inhaling the scent of spice and leather and horseflesh, and male. All male. When a

second finger found its way into her, then a third, she pushed her hips against him, wanting even more of his intrusion, wanting the familiar stroking. Her breasts rubbed against the fabric of his shirt, the friction stiffening and hardening her sensitized nipples and shooting arrows of need straight to her womb.

He took her mouth again and his tongue insistently explored, tracing patterns on the soft inner flesh, while his hand continued its relentless assault on her nub. He teased and tantalized it, flicking it, massaging it, inflaming the raw need that consumed her. Over and over, on and on, always holding that elusive feeling of completion just out of reach, until she was almost mindless with wanting.

When his fingers left her wetness and his hand moved away she moaned in protest. "Morgan?" She was lost in a fog of sensuality.

He lifted her up in both arms, and his breath was warm against her ear as he licked the outline with the tip of his tongue. ""Morgan?" She was lost in a fog somewhere.

"Ssh, it's all right. Allison, I have to be inside you. Now."

Then somehow she was lying on a bed and Morgan was there, his hot, naked body against hers, his mouth moving over her, suckling at her nipples, nipping the soft undersides of her breasts, his hands stroking her skin.

He moved over her, murmuring, "Let me in, sweetheart," as he levered himself between her thighs. When his hot shaft slid into her wet heat, her hips arched automatically to meet him, and she wrapped her legs around his waist. He filled her, stretching her, and the feeling was so familiar and fulfilling

she felt as if she'd come home. When he began the long, slow dance, stroking his shaft in and out of her clasp vaginal vault, she danced with him step for step. Her inner muscles clenched around him, a heated coil tightening within her.

"More." She was desperate, locking her ankles and trying to pull him deeper into her.

Her body shook with frustration as he held her just beyond completion. Then he reached between them and opened her to the friction of his sliding motion. She felt the coil unwind, unwind, unwind—and snap, as he thrust hard one final time, taking them both over the edge together. She shook in his arms, the spasms rippling through her body, her tight, wet sheath clenching around him like a glove. He held her tightly as the climax shattered both of them, until at last her breathing began to slow.

Morgan rolled to his back, taking her with him, his softening flesh still buried deep within her, his breath coming in huge, rasping sounds. His fingers wove through her hair, holding her head in place. She collapsed on his chest, feeling his heartbeat vibrate unevenly against her cheek and his abdomen move against her as he sucked in air.

As her body recovered from its intense sensual bettering, sanity returned, and Allison pushed herself up. Slowly she let Morgan's shaft slide out of her, then rolled off the bed and began searching for her clothes.

"Allison, come back here."

She hopped on one foot as she struggled with her jeans.
"No. I want to leave."

"I won't let you."

Her jaw dropped. "You won't *let* met? Is this more of Cutter's Law?"

He was next to her in a flash, his hands biting into her arms with the force of his grip. "I won't let you go until we talk."

"Talk?" She let her jeans drop and looked at him, tears of anger in her eyes. "Is Amber still at your house?" When he didn't say anything, she said, "I thought so. Then we have nothing to talk about."

"Allie, are you just going to throw away what we've got? Walk away from it like nothing happened?"

"What we've got?" She bit her lip. "It's like I told you back at your house. We have sex, Morgan. That's all. Just sex. You can't build a relationship on that."

"We have more than sex, damn it, and you know it." He kissed her roughly. "That's not sex. What we did is called making love, so don't diminish it."

"What do you call it when we can't keep our hands off each other? When two minutes after we're alone together we're naked and in bed?"

"I call it wonderful. And you know damn well we have a lot more going for us."

She wrenched herself out of his grasp. "We have nothing as long as you let a woman who lied to you and nearly destroyed you emotionally play you for a fool again." She yanked on her jeans. "So someone wants to kill her. You think I care? Let her go find some other sucker to take her in. Then have your house fumigated."

"Allison." Morgan reached out to her again, his hands on her shoulders. He didn't seem to care that he was standing there completely naked. "I'm asking you to trust me on this. Please."

She pushed his hands away and pulled on her blouse. "Trust you? When you let me walk out with Amber sitting there so smug and self-satisfied? I could have killed her myself." She brushed her hair out of her eyes and tucked it behind her ears. "I don't believe one word of her pathetic little tale, but for some reason you do. So settle it Morgan. One way or the other. And don't think you can keep seducing me until this is taken care of."

She stuffed her feet into her boots and stomped out of the cabin, leaving Morgan standing there, nude, the expression on his face a cross between anger, aggravation, and unhappiness. Clumsily boosting herself into Bluebonnet's saddle, she pressed her heels to the mare's flanks, hoping she didn't kill herself before she got back to the ranch.

* * * *

By the time Morgan got back to the police station, he was ready to kill Amber himself. He was a man who prided himself on his control, and now he was barely holding onto the raging maniac inside him. He stomped past Marcy who lifted an eyebrow but made no comment. Jace Murdock looked up from his telephone conversation, his eyes widening. The two patrolmen doing their end of shift paperwork simply stared, open-mouthed. They weren't used to seeing their chief with his clothes rumpled and his Stetson askew.

He stormed past the main area into his office and slammed the door. Throwing his hat on top of the filing cabinet he sat behind his desk and dropped his head into his hands. Somehow his marvelous plan to seduce Allison and bring her to her senses had backfired. Oh, the sex was great. She was right about that. And it was more than sex. *He* was right about *that*. But he hadn't convinced her to cut him any slack here.

He knew she was right. He had no business keeping Amber at the house, not after the way she'd treated him. And certainly not with the sketchy suspicious story she'd told him. But damn it! He had his own personal code of ethics and it didn't involve throwing even the vilest person to the wolves. Why couldn't Allison see that?

He went to the door, opened it and stuck his head out. "Jace." He roared the name like an angry lion.

"Coming, Chief." Jace hastily gathered the folders on his desk.

Morgan sat back down behind his desk and scowled at his sergeant. "I hope to hell you've got something to tell me."

Jace drew in a deep breath and let it out slowly. "I'm afraid not. I..."

"Did you check Dallas? See what's on their sheets? Check the Internet for any articles? Anything?"

"Sure did. There's not a thing."

"I know they're still having murders in Dallas, so something sure as hell had to show up."

Jace shook his head. "I ran down everything I could find, every murder, every major crime in the last six months. Even

had Austin check it out for me. They get everything up there. I couldn't find anything where there was even a hint of suspicions about cops being involved, or anything involving a woman. I'm sorry."

Morgan slammed his fist on the desk. "Damn it to hell, anyway."

Marcy opened the door a crack and stuck her head in. "Chief, you might want to hold down the cursing and keep your voice a little lower. I think you scared ten years out of these two rookies out here."

"Sorry, Marcy. You, too, Jace."

"It's okay, Chief." Marcy gave him a smile. "Seems all you've got is problems right now."

"Yeah, well I guess they come in bunches. Jace, start digging for anything that looks hinky. Anywhere in the state of Texas. God knows, I hope we don't have to go through the whole United States."

"I'm on it."

"And keep after something on that dead body. You'd think by this time someone would have missed him."

"Can you give me some kind of hint about what I'm looking for?"

"I wish I could. Just something big that smells rotten. You'll know it when you find it. Call me the minute you get your teeth into anything."

"Okay. I'll get started."

* * * *

The nerve of that man.

Allison stood under the hot shower, calling down every curse she could think of on Morgan Cutter's head. When she finished with him, she started in on Amber. She was torn between pounding her head against the tile wall and giving into tears of frustration.

Damn you, Morgan Cutter. My life was nice and neat and orderly before you came along.

But boring, if she was honest. Her job, that she'd thought was so glamorous, had turned out to mean less to her than the man she fell in love with. The people she worked with were exposed as phonies and jerks. And San Antonio without Paige lost some of its luster. The things they'd enjoyed so much together seemed flat without their friendship to spruce it up.

She hadn't wanted to fall so hard for Morgan. What did they have in common, after all? But she had, and in a burst of emotion she'd quit her job, packed her bags and run to White Tail to see if she could make a life with him work for them both. She'd even planned to call a real estate agent to list her condo. And now look what happened.

What a load of nerve, chasing after her on horseback like that, practically kidnapping her and throwing her into bed with him. Like sex could make everything better. Of course, if she was honest with herself, sex with Morgan could make almost anything better. But he had to get that damn Amber out of his house.

Neither Myra nor John Howell had said a word when she'd come back to the ranch. John didn't even comment on her disheveled appearance or the fact that she was riding holding

to the saddle for dear life. He'd just taken the reins from her and helped her down. Myra met her at the door with a tall glass of iced tea and silently watched her climb the stairs to her room.

She was too antsy to sit around the ranch, especially with the Howells watching her with ill-concealed sympathy. And she didn't particularly want to be alone with her thoughts. Morgan said he wanted to build a relationship. If she wanted the same thing, then the demands couldn't just be one way. She knew right now he needed her understanding, except she was too mad to give it. Every time she thought about him, all she saw was Amber's mocking face and that rapacious look on her face, and her blood began to boil all over again.

Finally she took out her cell phone and punched a number on speed dial.

"Hi, Donna?"

"Allison! Hi. Are you doing all right?"

"Yes. No. No, I'm not. I hate to keep bothering you at home, but..."

"Oh, honey, what happened now?"

"Morgan came to see me."

"Well, that doesn't sound so bad."

"Amber's still there. And he doesn't know for how long."

"Oh, Allison." Donna's voice was sympathetic. "It's hell to love a man with a code of ethics, isn't it? Okay, what can we do to help?"

"I don't know. I just—needed to talk, I guess. Are you and Derek busy tonight?"

"Actually, we're going to *The Pig's Eye* for burgers and beer. Why don't you come along?"

"Are you sure? I hate to intrude on your free time."

"That's what friends are for, kiddo. Listen, why don't you come to our place and we'll go together?"

"Are you sure?"

"Absolutely. Come on." Donna chuckled. "We'll have a good time and you can flirt with the ranch hands that hang out there."

"Okay. Thank you."

She wrote down the directions Donna gave her, thanked her again and went to get dressed. At least for a few hours she could try to keep her mind off the mess her life had become.

* * * *

By six o'clock Morgan's head felt like the wrong side of a jackhammer. He was sick to death of trying to make sense out of the only two crimes of any note to happen in White Tail since he took office, and wondering what the hell Amber had actually gotten herself into and if he could manage to get the truth out of her without killing her.

Looking at his watch, he realized he should pick up some food and go home. He had no appetite himself but he didn't want Amber to accuse him of trying to starve her to death.

Jace was still working at his desk, the phone tucked against one ear while he tapped away on his computer keyboard. He looked up as Morgan approached and said into the handset, "Hold on a sec."

"Anything?" Morgan asked.

Jace shrugged. "I don't know. Maybe. But I still have a lot of people to talk to."

"I'm going home. Call me on my cell phone if you get anything. Anything at all."

"Will do, Chief." He took his hand off the mouthpiece.

"Okay, sorry. Go ahead, please."

"You look like you need a drink or three, Chief," Marcy told him as he passed her desk.

"Yeah, I feel like it. Maybe a whole bottle. Too bad too much alcohol makes me sick."

"Take care of yourself, you hear?"

"Easier said than done."

He stopped at the Handy Pantry to pick up some barbecued chicken and coleslaw, two things he remembered Amber liked to eat. Although why the hell he should care was a question he couldn't answer.

When he let himself in the back door, Amber was sitting at the snack bar in the kitchen, watching the little television and making serious inroads in a bottle of good Sister Creek Muscat Canelli he'd been saving to drink with Allison.

"Nice of you to come home," she drawled, leaning back in one bar stool, her legs propped up on the other, one hand cradling her wine glass.

"Amber, you're not here for a social visit." He slammed the paper bag with the food down on the counter. "But just as soon as I change we're going to find out the exact purpose of your visit. If you're going to wreck my life again, I want to be prepared."

She slid off the bar stool and came around to where he was standing, pressing herself against his back and slipped one hand around to slide between the buttons of his shirt. "It doesn't have to be that bad, baby. We made some pretty good music together."

Morgan wrenched her hand away from his body and spun around so fast he nearly knocked her over. Wine sloshed from the glass onto his shirt and pants. "Damn it, Amber, cut it out. We're not playing house. If I thought I could get away with it, I'd murder you myself." He shoved her roughly aside and headed for the stairs. "When I come back downstairs, be prepared to answer questions."

He left Amber staring open-mouthed. The entire time he stripped off the clothes wet from the wine and pulled on jeans and a tee shirt he cursed, a steady stream of every swear word he'd ever learned. He wanted to take a pill and wake up when this nightmare was over.

Amber was putting out the food when he returned to the kitchen, and setting out plates for them on the snack bar

"Thanks for getting this, Morgan. I appreciate it."

"Don't soft soap me," he growled. "I didn't want it on my conscience that you starved to death. Otherwise I could care less."

"I know you're mad at me, and I don't blame you." Her voice was more subdued. "I appreciate you taking me in this way, but trust me, you don't want to know any details from me. You're much better off that way."

"That's my decision, not yours. Eat first. Then we'll talk. And this time you aren't avoiding me, Amber."

Morgan put some food on a plate and slid a bar stool around to the end of the counter, as far away from Amber's seat as possible. "I'm a sworn officer of the law. I can't work on this thing blind. I have enough problems with a dead body I can't identify without worrying what kind of mess you've brought with you."

Amber gave a nasty laugh. "Dead body? Here? Who'd kill anyone in White Tail? They're all such goody two shoes."

"This guy's not from around here. Matter of fact, we don't even know where he's from. Can't identify him."

"No? You mean no one remembers losing someone out here in the Texas wilderness?"

"It's kind of hard to identify anyone when their hands are cut off and most of the teeth are yanked out their mouth."

Her hand stilled midway between her plate and her mouth, a chicken wing dangling from her fingers. "Did you say they cut off his hands?"

"Yeah. It's a sure bet they didn't want us to find out who he was. Strange thing, too. We circulated his picture, but we haven't got any hits. I was sure someone who pissed off people enough to have this done to him would have a rap sheet somewhere."

"W-When did this happen? If he's not from around here, how did you get the body?"

Morgan swallowed a mouthful of cole slaw and washed it down with a swallow of beer. "Wherever he was killed, it wasn't here. There wasn't a drop of blood at the scene. Someone just dumped his body here, and I'll be damned if I

can figure out why. No one around here has the faintest idea who he is, not even any of the stray ranch hands."

"So you have no clues at all?"

Morgan looked up at her, narrowing his eyes when he spotted the sudden paleness of her face and the faint tremor in the hand holding her food. "I know I'll hate myself for asking this, but is this possibly someone you know?"

Before she could answer him, his cell phone rang. He jerked it off his belt and punched Talk. "Yeah? Oh, hi Jace. Got something?"

Amber's eyes were on him the entire time he was listening. Something shifted in her gaze, something that gave him a distinctly uneasy feeling. As he listened to Jace, that sensation grew, and the "walking over my grave" feeling crawled up his back.

"Okay. Thanks. Good work. Why don't you put all that stuff in a folder and come on over to the house? Yeah, I think it would be better for you to come here. You'll see why. Okay. In fifteen."

He disconnected the call and gave Amber a hard look. "Jace Murdock will be here shortly. He's got our body identified, and also picked up some other interesting tidbits. Is there anything you'd like to tell me before he gets here?"

Amber's hand was unsteady as she picked up her wine glass. "About?"

"This so-called crime you witnessed in Dallas, involving dirty cops, that no one seems to know anything about except you."

"Are you saying you don't believe me?" she challenged.

Cutter's Law
by Judith Rochelle

Morgan took another swallow of his beer and set the bottle down with a precise movement. "Oh, I believe someone's trying to kill you. But that's *all* I believe. I think you're in bigger trouble than you want to admit and you thought good old Morgan, the sucker, would hide you and protect you. Did you find yourself a little out of your league this time?"

When she was silent, he shrugged. "Suit yourself. But when Jace gets here it'll all be out in the open anyway."

Chapter Seventeen

Allison was shocked to see *The Pig's Eye* so crowded on a Monday night. Most of the places she was used to only got this crowded on the weekend, but Paige had told her the bar functioned as the local social club. Ranch hands especially used it as a place to hang out after a hard day's work.

She looked around the long paneled room, noting the old-fashioned bar with the mirror behind it, a pool table at one end and even a tiny dance floor.

"Wow!" She shook her head. "I didn't think places like this existed any more."

"This is a family-run place," Donna pointed out. "So it's a little different than your average neighborhood bar. The man behind the bar serving beer as fast as he can is the owner, George Battle."

"That's his daughter, Misty, waitressing," Derek added. "His wife and son run the kitchen."

Nearly every table was full, but Allison and the Youngs managed to find one in the middle of the room that a couple was just leaving. The room was redolent with the rich aromas of spicy chili, hamburgers, nachos and beer. Almost everyone seemed to be eating something.

Derek laughed. "We don't stay open for dinner unless it's a special occasion of some kind, and the only other options are The Ice Creamery that serves sandwiches and salads or Avery's Barbecue. But he doesn't have a liquor license."

"Who *are* all these people?" Allison gave a little laugh. "It looks like the whole town is here."

"Just residents," Donna told her. "Ranch hands. Whoever. People come in to watch baseball on the big screen televisions. In the fall and winter it's football. The place is just a nice hangout."

"Hey, Donna, Derek. How y'all doin'?" Misty Battle, in denim cutoffs and a tee shirt that said *Pigs Fly* materialized with a bar tray and a pad of paper.

"Fine, Misty." Donna waved a hand at Allison. "This is Allison Moore, a friend of the new Mrs. Ryan Cutter. She's come to visit a while."

"Ooh," Misty swooned. "That man is too dreamy. I wanted him to wait for me but he said Paige just captured his heart."

"His new wife is Allison's friend," Donna repeated.

"Oh, sorry." Misty giggled. "No offense, but just about every female in White Tail's been in love with that man at one time or another." She smoothed her pony tail. "'Course, there's always Morgan, if he could just get over that bitch ex-wife of his. Mm-mm. That is some handful of man."

"Uh, Misty?" Derek grinned at her. "I think Allison kind of has dibs on him."

"Oh, hell." A blush spread over her young face. "I'd better take y'all's order before I put both feet in my mouth."

Derek ordered Jack Daniels, the women ordered beer, and as Allison settled into her chair, the hot voice of Toby Keith floated into the air.

"A juke box?" She peered around. "Does this place have a real live juke box?"

"Sure does," Derek answered. "You might even see some brave souls get up to dance if they can take all the catcalls."

Misty brought their drinks, and they all clinked glasses and bottles.

"Thanks for asking me along." Allison gave them a weak smile. "I was about to go crazy."

"No problem." Donna squeezed her hand. "Although I can guarantee you Morgan's not having much fun if he's locked up in the house with his ex-wife."

Allison glanced over both shoulders. "I don't think I'm supposed to talk about that."

Derek chuckled. "Honey, you could probably shout the Pledge of Allegiance in here and no one would hear you over the music and the talking.""

Donna set her drink down and eyed Allison. "So, kiddo. Want to tell us what's up?"

Allison sighed and rubbed her forehead. "Lordy, I don't even know where to start. I thought I had a handle on things until Amber walked into the house today. Now I feel like my whole life's been turned upside down. Six weeks ago I knew who and what I was. Now I don't even know where I belong."

"You can belong to me if you're not spoken for."

They all looked up at the man standing beside their table. Not quite as tall as Morgan or Derek, he was nevertheless a hottie, with dark blond sun streaked hair, eyes that looked like hot chocolate, and interesting lines in his craggy face. His lean body was packed into soft-looking jeans and a blue chambray shirt. He had one of the nicest smiles Allison had ever seen.

"Hey, Marc. Meet Allison Moore." Derek turned to Allison. "Marc Hanson, vice president of Cattleman's Bank. He also runs the local branch."

"Nice to meet you, Allison Moore." Marc held out his hand. "Mind if I sit down next to you?" He was already pulling out a chair.

"Not as long as you scoot over and make room for me. I'll even buy the next round." Tate Donovan appeared as if from nowhere. He looked at the three Hispanic men at the next table. "Y'all mind if I steal this chair? Thanks."

"Okay, everyone." Donna was laughing. "Just remember the chief's got first dibs on Miss Moore, here."

"Not if he doesn't pick up her option pretty soon," Tate corrected her. He reached for one of Allison's hands. "Dump the chief and I'll make you queen of The Yellow Rose, darlin'."

"More like a cook for the ranch hands," Derek chuckled. "I hear you keep chasing 'em off, Tate."

"Are you visiting here?" Marc asked, edging closer to Allison.

"Yes. No. Maybe." She wrinkled her forehead. "I know that sounds pretty vague, but so are my plans right now."

"Allison just quit her job with a bank in San Antonio," Donna chimed in. "She'd sure look good in your place, Marc."

He raised an eyebrow. "Were you a teller?"

Allison shook her head. "Community relations. It was my job to pump up the bank's image in the city and attract new customers. Especially commercial accounts."

"Is that a fact?" Marc took a long pull of his beer. "You know, Cattleman's has been expanding and at our last

executive meeting we talked about hiring someone just like that. Only out here it would mean a lot of traveling between small communities. If you're serious about hanging around here and you think that might interest you, why don't you come in and talk to me tomorrow morning? We'll see if you and Cattleman's might be a good fit."

"Really?" A job? Should she even consider it? If she and Morgan didn't make a go of things, hanging around White Tail might be uncomfortable. On the other hand, it didn't hurt to be prepared. Maybe this was a sign. "I'd like that."

"You know where we are," he told her. "Right on Main Street. Parking lot's in the back."

"You cramping my style, Marc?" Tate kidded, signaling Misty to bring another round.

"What style?" the other man asked. "Since when did you have any kind of style at all?"

Derek leaned forward toward Marc and Tate. In a quiet voice, he asked, "Either of you two guys ever see those men at the next table? I thought we knew all the ranch hands around here."

They both shook their heads. "I'm pretty sure I'd know if they were," Tate told him. "This is a pretty close-knit ranching community."

"Say, Misty." Derek caught her elbow as she deposited their next round of drinks on their table. "You have any idea who those guys are at the next table?" He nodded toward the Hispanic men. "We don't get too many strangers in here."

Misty shrugged. "Just passing through. They said they were looking for a place to get a hamburger and a beer

before hitting the road again, and Frank at the gas station sent them over here."

"You think there's something wrong?" Donna leaned closer to her husband.

"No, just curious." But a tiny frown formed between his eyebrows.

The pleasant banter and joking and the warm friendship she felt from these people made Allison relax and the evening passed quickly. She hadn't thought she was hungry, but Derek ordered cheeseburgers and curly fries for all of them and the aroma alone was enough to wake up her taste buds. By the time they left, she was feeling less tense and anxious, and more optimistic that things might work out for her and Morgan.

"Give him some space," Donna advised her. "He'll get it done."

"He asked me to trust him, but how can I do that? The bitch is still in his house, working her evil magic."

Derek put his hands on her shoulders. "I would trust Morgan Cutter with my life. I'd trust him with Donna's life. He has to do things his way, not because he's demanding but because the code of ethics he lives by demands it. And I can promise you this. Amber won't be around one minute more than is absolutely necessary. If you're worried about Morgan falling into her trap again, wipe that from your mind."

"Have a little faith in him, honey." Donna smiled. "He's worth it, you know."

"Yeah, I guess." She sighed. "I'd just feel a lot better if Amber was stashed in a motel somewhere and I was the one

going to sleep in that house. And Lord knows what kind of trouble she's got trailing her, putting Morgan right in the middle."

"Come by for coffee after your meeting with Marc. You can tell me if what he's got looks interesting and maybe you'll have some news by then."

Allison climbed into her car and headed back toward the ranch, Derek's words echoing in her mind.

I'd trust Morgan Cutter with my life. I'd trust him with Donna's life.

She hadn't really given him that. He'd put himself in a terrible situation in the city coming to her defense, yet he'd opened his arms and house to her even after the horrible way she'd treated him. And all he asked was this one thing. Maybe it was time to look at the problem from his point of view.

* * * *

The Youngs and Allison hadn't been gone long before the Hispanic men in question paid their tab and quietly left the bar.

"*Senor Luis*," Jorge began, as they climbed into the car.

"Not now." Luis cut him off. "Not until we are well away from here."

"But..."

"I said no! *Silencio!* Not until we are back at the motel. I have to think."

They drove the fifty miles in a tense silence, the Osuna brothers being careful to keep their mouths shut until they were all in the motel room.

"All right." Luis looked at the two men. They were all sitting around the little table crowded into one corner. "Were you both paying attention in that place?"

The brothers nodded.

"Could better luck have dropped into our laps than to have the people who could tell us what want to know sitting right next to us? We didn't even have to ask questions of anyone."

"About the female?" Jorge's voice was tentative.

"Of course about the female. What else would we be interested in?" Luis took a calming breath. What morons. Was there anything else important at the moment? "Look what we discovered. The woman is indeed in the home of her ex-husband. And we may have something to bargain with."

"And what is that, *Senor* Luis?" Alex wrinkled his forehead in concentration.

Luis cursed softly. This was like dealing with little children. "Did you not overhear the dark-haired woman talking to the others? She is obviously the chief's woman, and makes a valuable pawn for us. Would he not give up the ex-wife he hates for the woman he loves?"

"But we don't have her," Jorge protested.

Luis glared at him. "Not yet. But we will. Correct?"

The Osuna brothers looked at him, puzzled.

Luis let loose another string of curses.

"All we have to do is pick her up." He spoke with slow deliberation. "Then we will have a bargaining chip."

The Osunas looked at each other. "But how would we do this, *jefe*? Do we even know where to find her after tonight?"

Luis took a cigarillo from his breast pocket and lit it carefully. He would have to make this as simple as possible for these idiots, and still hope they didn't screw it up.

"Did you not hear her make an appointment at the bank tomorrow morning?"

"You want us to snatch her from the bank?" Alex couldn't conceal his surprise.

"No, *stupido*. But we will follow her and select the opportune moment. Then we will call the chief and offer to make an exchange. *Comprende?*"

They both smiled and nodded.

"Fine. Then we should all get some sleep. Be ready at eight o'clock in the morning. I will have the plan all worked out by then."

And pray that they wouldn't make any of their usual mistakes. Oh, Emilio. How could you do this to me?

* * * *

The time span between Jace's phone call and his arrival seemed interminable to Morgan. He watched Amber as if he were a hawk and she the prey. She sipped wine and nibbled at her food, her face a calm mask. Every so often she would look at him and give him a tiny smile, but he knew the nonchalance was false. The faint tremor in her hand when she lifted her glass was a dead giveaway.

He had no idea what Jace was bringing, but his gut told him it was not good. When he met Amber he'd been sucked in by her looks and the way she flirted with him. Like any other dumb man, his ego had been stroked by her flattery, but that

was long gone. Now when he looked at her it was with anger and distaste, the superficiality of her as a person too glaring to ignore.

Dumbass!

Cochise's sudden loud barking followed by the sound of the doorbell jarred him out of his reverie.

"That'll be Jace. You just sit here," he ordered her.

"Morgan?"

"What?" He was halfway to the hall.

"I just—whatever Jace has to say is probably all lies. I know how stuff can be made to look."

Morgan just looked at her, his eyes dark with anger. "If you think you're setting me up to throw out whatever Jace is bringing, forget it. He does his homework." He turned back toward the door.

"Morgan, wait just..."

But he already had the door open to admit Jace.

The young sergeant had a somber look on his face. He peered over Morgan's shoulder and saw Amber in the kitchen. "Chief, you might want to do this in your den."

"No." Morgan's voice was tight. "We'll do this in front of her. I need to see her face when you tell me what you've got."

Jace shrugged. "Okay, but this could get sticky."

"Not any stickier than it already is."

He left Jace standing in uncomfortable silence with Amber while he went to settle Cochise down. When he came back inside, he and the young sergeant sat at the kitchen table.

Amber remained on the bar stool, her eyes narrowing at the folder in Jace's hands.

Jace glanced at Amber, then back at Morgan, his posture stiff. "Chief, maybe I should walk you through this. The top pages are the answers I finally got on our dead body. The rest of it, well..." His Adam's apple bobbed as he swallowed.

"Let me look it over first." He studied the top sheet.
"Where did you get this information?"

"I tracked down one of my roommates from UT. I thought he'd gone home to Louisiana, but his mom said he got a job with the Dallas PD. He's got connections everywhere and did some checking for me."

"Did he say why nobody identified this guy as Jared Wilcox from our faxes?"

They both jumped at the sound of breaking glass.

"Amber?" Morgan jumped up, nearly knocking over his chair.

Amber's eyes were wide, staring, and blood ran down her hand and wrist where the glass had cut her. Shards of crystal were scattered on the counter and the floor. Her mouth moved but she couldn't seem to get any words out.

"Shit! I'd better take care of that." Morgan grabbed a dish towel and wrapped it around her hand. "Jace, can you get the first aid kit from my bathroom upstairs?"

Jace nodded and hurried to the stairs.

Morgan took Amber's other hand and put it on the towel.
"Grip that while I get this glass out of the way."

"Did-Did you say Jared Wilcox?" Her voice was so faint he could barely hear it.

"Yes. That's the guy someone dumped on Tate Donovan's land a couple of weeks ago." His gaze raked over her face.

"You know him, don't you?"

"I—I..."

"Amber, cut out the shit. Playtime's over."

"Here, Chief." Jace handed Morgan the kit, and took the broom from his hand. "Why don't you take care of the lady and I'll sweep up this mess?"

Morgan pulled Amber off the bar stool and sat her at the table. While he cleaned her cuts with alcohol swabs, he watched her glance at the open folder, then away, her face a pasty white.

"You're lucky," he told her. "None of these need stitches. I'll put butterfly closures on and wrap gauze around it. Amber, who is this guy to you?"

"I can't ... I don't..."

"Jace, you want to give me the short version?"

Murdock finished sweeping the glass into a dustpan, dumped it in the trash, and leaned the broom against the wall. "He's a con artist, Chief. A swindler. He and his partner have worked every kind of con in the book. Land swindles seem to be their specialty."

"His partner." Morgan's voice was slow and deliberate. "Amber, you wouldn't happen to be the partner they're talking about, would you?"

"Morgan, this isn't what it looks like. I can explain."

He closed the kit, shoved it to one side and sat down next to her, crowding her against the table. His anger was turning to pure rage and he was having a hard time controlling it.

"What it looks like is someone killed your partner. He is your partner, I got that right, didn't I?" When she just kept staring at him he banged his fist on the table. "Damn it, answer me. Right now."

Amber flinched. "We were business partners. Yes."

"In a con." Morgan kept his voice as even as he could, but he wanted to roar with fury. How the hell had he gotten mixed up with this woman? *Because I let my dick do my thinking for me.*

When she didn't elaborate, he picked up the first two sheets in the folder. "Land swindles. That's mostly what the two of you ran, right?"

"It isn't what you think," she repeated, holding her bandaged hand with the uninjured one, both of them still shaking.

Morgan spoke without taking his gaze away from the woman in front of him. "Jace, this email from your friend says Wilcox is on everyone's watch list, but he's been slick enough not to get caught before, despite a number of complaints." He studied the second page. "My, my, Amber. You've certainly spread your charms over the state of Texas. Jace's friend says you've pulled this con in every major city."

"They were legitimate business deals," she protested.

"Uh uh, sweetheart. Scamming people in phony land deals isn't exactly legitimate. And you can't con me like your marks." His lips twisted. "At least not any more."

She lowered her eyes. "Some of the deals—fell through."

He slammed the table again, and Amber jumped. "All the deals fell through according to what I read. As a matter of

fact, you were selling land you didn't even own." He looked at his sergeant. "That right, Jace?"

"Yeah. Pretty slick plan, too. They'd purchase an option on a piece of land for sixty days, put up signs, make up their own brochures, hit the mark and get investment money for the so-called development. Once the checks cleared, they moved the money, took down the signs and split. They'd lay low for a while, then find another place and another mark."

Morgan gripped Amber's chin and forced her to look at him. "Was that what you were doing when I met you at the rodeo? Laying low?"

Her lack of response was an answer itself.

"Did you piss off the wrong person this time? Is that what your problem is? Did they kill Wilcox as some kind of warning to you?"

"That's my guess," Jace put in.

"But why here? Why did they expect you to show up in White Tail? Was their timing just a little off? Come on, Amber," he pressed. "I want some answers right now."

"I—I guess," she stammered.

"How in the holy hell did they even know you'd come here? Did you blab about us to someone? Is that it?"

"Uh, Chief?"

"What?" Morgan didn't take his hand away from Amber's chin, holding it like a vise.

"I—uh—think if you read the rest of this, you'll understand. My friend was a real help here."

"Why don't you just give me the short version?"

"I'd rather you—uh—read this yourself."

"Read it." Morgan bit the words off, his eyes boring into Amber's.

"Well, okay. Just don't shoot the messenger." He shuffled through the papers. "There's big scuttlebutt going around that these two scammed Emilio Escalante and made off with half a mil of his money."

Morgan's grip on Amber's chin tightened and she tried to draw away.

"Please tell me you weren't stupid enough to pull a con on one of the biggest drug dealers on two continents. A man who kills people when television bores him. Not even you could be that dumb."

She tried to tug his hand away from her face. Morgan could see real fear in her eyes now.

"I—I didn't. Jared set it up. I had no idea who he was."

"And now he wants his money back."

She nodded.

"But money is only part of it, Amber. You embarrassed *el jefe*. Nothing less than death satisfies his honor."

He was surprised by the tears that formed in her eyes, then reminded himself what a good actress she was. Allison had been right. *Allison!* Oh, God. He'd made a mess out of that because of Amber. He felt sick to his soul, and in that moment he knew how people could kill so easily. He wanted to wring Amber's neck with his bare hands. Only his own personal code kept his emotions in check.

"I didn't know. God, I never should have trusted that idiot. I swear, if you get me out of this, I'll clean up my act." She dug the heel of her uninjured hand into her eyes. "I'd give

him back his money if I thought it would get him off my back. He's chased me all over Texas."

Morgan removed his hand and snapped his fingers. "The break-in."

"W—What break-in?"

"My house was broken into a few days ago. Escalante sure as hell dug up everything about you and sent his bloodhounds here. I'd guess to see if I'd maybe left a clue around as to where you were. Don't tell me you've been using your real name?"

"Uh, Chief?"

"What is it, Jace?"

"That doesn't matter. Escalante's got enough contacts he could have figured out who she was. And you're right, that break-in had to be part of it. But who would be dumb enough to break into the house of the chief of police?"

Morgan finally removed his hand from Amber's chin and leaned back in his chair. He wanted to bite nails or chew steel. Or throttle Amber with his bare hands. Or kick himself in the ass with both feet. *Shit, shit, shit!*

"Where's the money?"

"I-In an offshore account. But I can't get it."

"Is that a fact?" Morgan leaned toward her again. "That's certainly a fish tale if I ever heard one."

"No. No it isn't." She shook her head vehemently. "We set it up, just like we always did, so it takes both of our signatures to get it out."

"Well, hell. At least now I know what scared you so much you came running to me. You're damn lucky I didn't just kick your butt out when you showed up here."

"I didn't have any place else to go and I didn't think they knew about you."

Morgan snorted. "People like Escalante can find out anything. You can be damn sure they dumped Jared's body as a warning to you."

"I wish I'd brought better news, Chief." Jace stood up to leave. "What would you like me to do?"

"Nothing, for the moment. Keep the body in cold storage and clamp a lid on all of this while I figure out what to do next."

"Okay. I'll go on back to the station and see if anything else came in."

After he left, Morgan just sat in his chair, staring at Amber. What a goat fuck this was. And all because he'd let this trashy blonde shake her tail at him. Damn!

And Allison. The sick feeling rolled over him again. What was he going to do about her in all of this?

"Morgan?" Amber's voice was tentative

"What?" He barked the word at her.

"What's going to happen to me now?"

He raked his fingers through his hair. "Damned if I know."

Chapter Eighteen

Allison had not slept well. Derek's words about trust kept repeating in her brain. That was the one thing she hadn't given Morgan. She cringed remembering her anger at the party in San Antonio. She hadn't even given him a chance to explain. And while Amber was a lot to swallow, if she hadn't had her feathers so ruffled she might have been able to deal with it better. Morgan's personal "law" wouldn't let him turn his back on anyone, and she should have supported him.

She couldn't shut out the way he'd come after her at the ranch, or the intensity of their lovemaking in the old line shack. Morgan was right. What they had was something special. If she wanted to keep it, she'd better quit acting like a spoiled brat.

The clock read six thirty. In the morning. But Morgan was an early riser, probably getting ready to go to work. If she called him now...

Before she could lose her nerve, she dug her cell phone out of her purse and punched his number.

"Yes?" *Oh oh.* He sounded anything but friendly.

"Uh, Morgan, it's me. Allison."

"I know."

Okay. I dug myself into this hole. I can climb out of it.

"I, uh, called to apologize to you. About yesterday."

"Fine. Apology excepted."

He sure wasn't making this easy.

"I know I was wrong. I was hoping maybe we could have a cup of coffee before you go to the station."

Silence. Also not good.

"I'm a little busy right now. I'll get back to you later."

"Morgan? Hello?"

But he was gone. Allison's stomach clenched, and her heart stuttered. Had she made the mistake of her life? She knew what a number Amber had done on Morgan. Had her attitude yesterday made him turn his back on her?

No. She wouldn't let that happen. She'd go to her meeting at the bank, then try again. Storm the station, if she had to.

Forcing back the tears that threatened, she headed for the shower. At least she had plenty of time to make herself presentable for Marc Hanson. Trying to dress for business as well as the environment, which was far different than San Antonio, she finally decided on linen slacks, a silk tee shirt and a cotton blazer.

White Tail chic, she thought, checking herself out in the mirror.

Taking a deep breath, she picked up her purse, dug out her car keys and told Myra she'd be back later.

Marc Hanson was standing in the lobby, talking to someone, when she entered the bank, but he broke off his conversation and came over to greet her.

"I'm glad you decided to come." He flashed a warm grin. "I was afraid you might think this a step down from what you've been doing."

"Not at all. Everyone in the state knows about Cattleman's Bank. Besides, if things work out, I'm hoping to make this my home, so how could I think it less than what I had?"

"Well, good. Come on in and let's talk about what I want and what you're looking for."

Half an hour later, she walked out of the bank, slightly dazed. The job was hers if she wanted it. He'd wait two weeks for her to make up her mind, before advertising for it. She was preoccupied enough that she didn't notice the car that pulled out of the parking lot when she did and trailed her down the street.

"Community Relations Director for the entire county," she told Donna.

The D&D was in the lull between breakfast and lunch, so Donna took a break to sit with her. "Oh, Allison, that's great. Just great." She cocked her head. "Have you told Morgan yet?"

"No." Allison shook her head. "I took your advice and tried to call him this morning, but he was very abrupt. Said he was tied up and he'd have to get back to me. He didn't even give me a chance to make my speech."

"You know he's got a lot going on right now, between Amber, the dead body and everything else. Maybe something broke open this morning." She squeezed Allison's hand. "I know he's in love with you. It's written all over his face, and for Morgan, that's something. Usually you can't tell what he's thinking or feeling at all."

"Maybe." She ran her finger around the rim of her coffee mug. "I'm halfway mad and halfway ready to burst into tears. Oh, Donna, we've just got to figure a way out of this."

"Hey, Allison?" Derek was standing by the glass front door, looking down the street.

She looked over at him. "Yes?"

"Did you notice that black sedan when you parked down the street? It's right behind your car."

"No, I didn't." She craned her neck to look through the window. "Why?"

"Oh, maybe nothing, but it's just sitting there. No one got out. Those guys at *The Pig's Eye* last night gave me a funny feeling." He shrugged. "Maybe I'm just spooked for no reason, but be careful when you leave, okay?"

"Sure." She slid out of the booth. "As a matter of fact, I'm on my way now. I think I'll go to the police station and see if I can corner Morgan for five minutes."

"Good idea." Donna hugged her. "Call us and let us know how it goes."

"I will. And thanks for everything."

As she walked down the sidewalk, she dug in her purse for her keys, forgetting already what Derek had said about the black car. As she passed it, a man opened the front passenger door, reached out to put his arm around her and pressed something hard against her side.

"Don't move, *senorita*. And not a sound. Please? I would not like to hurt you."

Allison tried to turn her head back toward the D&D, and despite the warning, opened her mouth to scream. A hand pressed a cloth saturated with a strange liquid against her face, and before she could pull away, she tumbled into darkness.

* * * *

"Derek?"

Donna Young was standing at the door of the D&D, watching Allison walk away.

"Yeah?" Derek was busy checking the soda taps behind the counter.

"I don't think I like the looks of that car, either. It's been sitting there for too long with people inside of it."

"I'll call Jace Murdock and get him to send the closest patrol car to check it out. Keep an eye on Allison until she gets past them." He wiped his hands on a towel and went to stand by his wife, dialing the number of the police station as he walked.

"Oh my God." Donna pushed open the door.

"What?" Derek followed her, still holding the phone.

"Look! They've got Allison."

They both started to run, but the door to the car slammed shut and the vehicle burned rubber pulling away from the curb.

"I got the license number," Donna told him, pulling her order pad from her pocket and writing it down. "Get Morgan."

"Yeah, Jace?" Derek pressed the phone to his ear.

"Where's the chief? Well, tell him to get his ass down here. Someone just kidnapped his girlfriend."

* * * *

At that moment Morgan was sitting across the kitchen table from Amber, fighting a growing murderous rage. The fact that he'd actually married this woman and taken her to bed—the same bed where he'd made love to Allison—sickened

him beyond belief. The glamorous blonde from the city was nothing more than a two bit grifter. Well, maybe more than two bits, but no less cheap and disgusting.

"Was that your little girlfriend?" Amber watched him clip the cell phone back onto his belt.

"Don't you say one word about her." Morgan had his teeth clenched so tightly his jaw ached. Why did Allison have to call right now? Right in the middle of getting the last of the truth from Amber? He didn't want to talk to her when he was angry at so many things and his mind was so unsettled, but he mentally kicked himself for being so abrupt. His life was falling apart around him and he didn't seem to be able to stop it.

"You think we're finally done here?" Amber fiddled with her coffee cup.

They were working their way through their third pot of coffee, having spent most of the night in a protracted interrogation. Morgan dug and pried until he had every scrap of information Amber had to give up, and none of it was pretty. From the age of eighteen, Amber Holland had been on the streets pulling one scam after another. Ten years ago she and Jared Wilcox hooked up and Amber, smart as a whip, had devised the real estate scam. They would option property for sixty days, find a mark to invest for fifty percent of the profit, take the money, drop the option and disappear.

They had stuck to Texas, the state being big enough to give them a wide operating area. It was also territory they both knew well, so they could speak with authority to the suckers they conned. How Amber had ever worked the con on

Emilio Escalante without knowing who he was still mystified Morgan, but he couldn't get an answer from her that satisfied him.

He didn't know how he would ever get past what a fool he'd been, falling for her the way he did, then spending all those miserable months when she walked out on him. He'd nearly ruined Paige and Ryan's relationship because of his twisted outlook on marriage, and now he was in danger of losing Allison because of this.

"You're damn lucky I don't throw you out in the street," he told her.

Amber looked far from the glamorous image she usually presented. Her makeup was gone, leaving a hard, shopworn look. Circles rimmed her eyes, accentuating the lines around them, and fatigue lined her face. And in her eyes was the fear she couldn't quite banish that this time the shark was hunting her and would have her for lunch.

"I don't know what to say to you." She finished the liquid in her cup, although Morgan knew it was already cold and bitter. "You're not what I thought you were, you know."

"Oh? Coming from you that might be a compliment, since I'm sure you thought I was a dumb hick pushover."

Amber pushed her hair back and tucked it behind her ears. "I never took the time to get to know you. I'm not proud now of admitting I married you to have a safe place to lay low. I knew you wouldn't take me in without that piece of paper, you being such an old-fashioned guy and all."

"Cutter's Law." He twisted his lips in disgust.

"What?"

"Nothing important." Except to me. And to Allison. He had to stash Amber someplace where she couldn't bolt, then call Allison back. He was afraid she was calling to rag on him about Amber again, but her voice had sounded different—soft at first, then hurt. Damn this mess anyway.

"I figured I could talk you into hiding me out again and not push for answers." She leaned back in her chair, rubbing her arms as if she were cold. "But you're a lot better lawyer than I thought. I guess I didn't know you at all."

"No. You didn't. If you need help I'll do what I can within the limit of the law, but I don't compromise my principles for anyone. Ever."

She sighed. "I know, I know." The fear flashed bright in her eyes for a moment. "But Morgan, you wouldn't just toss me out there, would you? I know you hate me, but for God's sake. You saw what these people did to Jared."

"The first thing you're going to do is get dressed. Then we're going down to the station where I'll make you comfortable in one of our finest cells." He grimaced. "I should have done that in the first place."

Amber's eyes widened? "You're going to put me in jail? You're kidding, right?"

"Not one bit." He stood up and pulled her with him. "Not one bit. That's where all crooks belong, anyway. Come on."

"Are you going to dress me, Morgan?" Unbelievably her voice had a hint of teasing in it.

"Yes, damn it, but not because I enjoy the view. I'm not letting you out of my sight until you're under lock and key. Then we'll see about getting Escalante off your back."

As he was towing her upstairs, his cell phone rang. "Cutter." As he listened to Donna Young, he felt the blood drain from his face and for a brief moment he was afraid he'd faint. "Stay right there. Give the license number to Jace and have him trace it. I have a stop to make at the station and then I'll be right there."

He shoved the phone in his pocket, tightening his grip on Amber.

"Ow! You're hurting me, Morgan."

"You're lucky I don't break your damn neck." He frog-marched her up the stairs and into the guest room where he'd left her suitcase. "Dress. Now." He leaned in the doorway, his face like granite.

"W-What's going on?" He saw the fear flash in her eyes again.

"I'll tell you what's going on. Some Hispanic thugs just snatched Allison off the street. Wanna bet they're Escalante's men?"

"B-But why would they want her? What's she got to do with this?"

"I'm guessing they know she's connected to me, and they've already figured out you're here. They'll probably try to use her to force my hand."

"Oh, God, you won't give me to them, will you?"

He curled his fists at his side, struggling for control. "If I had an ounce of sense I would. First I have to find out what's really going on. So get your clothes on and let's get out of here."

When they got outside to his SUV and he pulled out his handcuffs, Amber yanked her hands away from him.

"Now, that's where I draw the line. Come on, Morgan."

He was so frightened for Allison he nearly slugged Amber just to shut her up. "Not your choice." He grabbed her hands with fingers that gripped like steel, put the cuffs on her and pushed her into the truck. "Don't say another word, you hear me? Not one word."

He broke speed records getting to the police station, calling Marcy along the way to pass the word on his situation. He'd been in some dangerous situations when he was a deputy sheriff, his life threatened many times, but he's never known the kind of fear that gripped him now. *Allison!* He'd brought this on her, no two ways about it. If he hadn't been dumb enough to fall for Amber's line to begin with, she wouldn't be here now and none of this would be happening.

They won't harm her until they tell me what they want.

He repeated that over and over as he skidded around turns and raced through streets.

They have to keep her alive until they talk to someone.

When he pulled into the parking lot behind the police station, he slammed the gearshift into park and dragged Amber out of her seat, hustling her inside the building. Two patrolmen were waiting for him, slightly anxious but ready to follow orders for their chief.

Morgan handed Amber to the nearest one. "Put her in one of the cells and don't take the handcuffs off until she's safely tucked away." He looked at the other officer. "You go with him. I don't trust her."

"Yes, sir," they chorused, nodding their heads and practically snapping to attention.

"Damn you, Morgan," Amber raged.

Morgan gripped her upper arm. "Listen to me, Amber. You keep a civil tongue in your head and do whatever these officers tell you to. Otherwise I'll take off the cuffs and throw you out in the street, where Escalante's men can find you with no trouble at all."

He watched her skin turn pale and her mouth tighten. "You'd better get this thing wrapped up real quick."

He stared at her with eyes blazing with anger. "Let me tell you something. You'd better pray that nothing happens to Allison Moore, or what Escalante would do to you is a walk in the park compared to what you'll get from me." He motioned to his two officers. "Take her away."

Marcy Walker was watching him with a worried look on her face. "Jace called in and told me everything, Chief." She handed him a slip of paper. "Here's the info on the license plate. I put out an APB on it, and called the county sheriff, too. He's got it on the Hot Watch list so his deputies will be trolling for it. Is there anything else I can do?"

Morgan grabbed the paper from her as he ran toward the door. "Yeah, Marcy. You can pray."

Donna, Derek and Jace were still standing outside the D&D when he skidded in to the curb. The sign on the restaurant door had been turned to read "closed."

"Okay, let's have it. Everything. Every detail, no matter how small."

Derek explained about the men in the bar the night before, and noticing the car just sitting at the curb this morning. Donna gave him everything she could remember about Allison being snatched.

"It happened so fast." She blinked back the threat of tears. "She was just walking to her car, digging in her purse for her keys. I was watching her because Derek made me nervous about the black car. And Morgan, I swear, it happened in seconds. One man popped out of the car, put something over her face before she could even struggle and off they went with her."

"Damn it!" Morgan banged his fist against the concrete wall, oblivious to the pain it caused.

"She was going to see you." Donna spoke softly.

"Me? What for?"

"She was really upset last night about handling this whole thing all wrong. You asked her to trust you and she realized if she loves you, trust should be automatic. She was sorry she gave you a hard time in a complicated situation, and she wanted you to know whenever you got the thing with Amber straightened out, she'd be waiting at the ranch for you."

Morgan closed his eyes. His heart felt as if a cold stone had been dropped into it and the familiar sick feeling rolled over him. All he could remember was how abrupt he'd been when she called. The fact that he was in the middle of trying to get a better handle on the Amber situation was no excuse. He'd just cut her off without hearing what she had to say. Now, because he was not only stupid but stubborn, she was in great danger.

All my fault. Damn Amber. Damn me for the idiot I am.

He turned to Jace. "Here's what we got on that license plate. The car belongs to some company in San Antonio called E Z Credit. I'm betting it's one of Escalante's fronts. I'm calling Marcy to have her prod the sheriff a little."

But as he reached for his cell phone, it rang in his hand.
"Cutter."

"Chief, it's Marcy." Her voice sounded strange. "I'm patching a call through to you."

"Chief Morgan?" The voice had a soft Spanish accent.

Morgan's gut clenched. "Yes. Who's this?"

"This is the man who has something very valuable to you. I think we need to talk some business, no?"

* * * *

Allison opened her eyes, then slammed them shut again. Her head throbbed and she felt a wave of nausea creeping over her. She tried again, this time more slowly. The pain wasn't quite as bad, and by sheer force of will she fought back the feeling of sickness.

She had no idea where she was, except it looked like a motel room. She frowned. What would she be doing at a motel? She was staying at the ranch.

Her body felt weird, almost disconnected from her. When she tried to push herself up from the bed, two things happened: dizziness swamped her and she realized her hands were tied tightly together in front of her.

Now her eyes popped wide open. The first thing they spotted was two Hispanic men sitting in chairs next to the

bed, looking enough alike to be brothers. She forced herself to stay upright.

"W-Who are you? And where am I?"

"You are awake, *senorita*." One of them flashed her a smile. "You feel okay? You don't be sick?"

Allison started to shake her head, decided that was a very bad idea, and settled for simply saying, "No." Then she changed her mind. "Yes. Who are you? Where am I?"

"We're sorry, we can't tell you that," they chorused.

She closed her eyes again for a moment. Had she fallen asleep and woken up in a bad movie? "I demand you tell me where I am."

"You are with us," the darker one told her. "I am Alex and this is Jorge. But that is all we can tell you."

"*Stupido!*" Jorge nudged his brother. "No names, remember?"

Alex shrugged. "Only first names. Not so bad. We want her to feel at home, don't we?"

At home? What the hell was going on?

"I demand to know where I am and why I'm here." Yeah, like she was in a position to demand anything. "And I want you to untie my hands."

"Oh, *senorita*." Jorge looked very sad. "I'm sorry. We cannot do that." His face brightened. "But would you like a cold drink?"

A cold drink? She wanted to get out of here. She needed to call Morgan—Morgan!

The thought of him made her heart pinch. Now she remembered. She'd been on her way to see him, to make him

listen to her. To tell him she trusted him and he should do whatever he had to and she'd be waiting for him.

The scene down the street from the D&D flashed into her brain.

"You kidnapped me!" Dear God. "You stuck a gun in my ribs and a cloth over my face." She frowned. "Only—only it wasn't you."

"No, *senorita*," they chorused, shaking their heads in unison.

"We are very sorry for this," Alex said. "But we are in big trouble and you are going to help us out."

"Yes, help us," Jorge echoed.

"Help you." She wet her lips. "Help you with what?"

"With the exchange..." Jorge started to say, when Alex jabbed him in the ribs.

"No questions." Alex stood up from his chair and opened a sack on the table, taking out a six-pack of cola. "You should drink some of this, *senorita*. He said the stuff would make you sick to your stomach a little bit, and this would help."

"He? He who?" When she moved slightly, the nausea rose again and she fought it back with determination. "Maybe I will have a one of those soft drinks. Just a little bit, though."

"Oh, *si*! Good, good."

Alex reached to separate one can from the others just as Jorge did the same thing, and the cans of Coke fell to the floor. Cursing, they both bent down to pick it up and knocked their heads together.

Allison suppressed a hysterical laugh. She had to be a victim of the most inept kidnappers in the world.

Finally they managed to get the six-pack back on the table and Jorge yanked one free.

"Don't open it yet," Alex yelled, just as Jorge pulled the tab and the shaken soda exploded through the opening, drenching his hand and arm.

"Ay! Ay! Ay!" he hollered, wiping his hand on his pant legs.

"Here. Give it to me." Alex yanked the sticky can from his brother and offered it to Allison.

She held up her bound hands. "How am I supposed to drink? And do you think you could find a glass?" She was trying to make her drugged mind work. There had to be a way out of here, especially with morons like this. If she could only get hold of Morgan.

"Oh, sorry, *senorita*." Jorge bowed. "I'll get you a glass."

He poured some of the Coke into the plastic glass he retrieved from the bathroom and held it to her lips.

Allison drank two or three swallows, steadying the glass with her bound hands. Then, moving slowly, she swung her legs over the side of the bed. "I have to—um—use the facilities."

The brothers looked at each other, frowning.

"The facilities?" she repeated. "You know, the bathroom?"

They looked at each other again, still frowning.

"But *senorita*, it's right over there." Alex pointed.

"And how am I supposed to manage with my hands tied like this?"

They turned away, whispering. When they looked at her, they both had stern looks on their faces.

"We will untie you to use the facilities," Jorge told her. "But then we will have to tie your hands again. And no—um—how you say—no funny stuff."

"Of course not." She tried to slow her accelerated heartbeat. Somehow she'd have to find a way to make a break for it.

With her hands free, she made her way on unsteady legs to the bathroom, and closed and locked the door. She took care of business, then ran the water while she tried to think. Once she left the bathroom and was back in the motel room, her hands would be tied up again. They still tingled from being restricted and she rubbed them hard to stimulate circulation.

The door to the room was in a direct line with the bathroom. If she could just distract them, maybe she could make it outside and run like hell. She reached to pull a towel from the chrome rack, and the bar came loose in her hands. She stared at it. Okay. She could come out swinging. Maybe that would work.

Grasping the bar in one hand and the door knob in the other, bracing herself for what she had to do, she yanked the door open.

And stopped, facing a broad, muscular male chest.

She raised her eyes to a face with the darkest eyes she'd ever seen, and a mouth both sensuous and cruel. Her heart nearly stopped beating.

"So, *Senorita* Moore." The voice was harsh. "You are awake. Good, good. I have plans for you."

Chapter Nineteen

"Damn it, damn it, damn it!"

Morgan and Jace had just arrived back at the station, and Morgan had been cursing steadily since the call from Luis Obradors. What an absolute nightmare this had turned into.

"Decided how you want to handle this, Chief?" Jace was sitting in the chair in front of the desk. He'd tried to be as unobtrusive as possible since learning Escalante's men had Allison and wanted to trade her for Amber.

"Yes. No. I have to think a minute." He banged his fist on the desk. "If those bastards hurt her..."

"She'll be fine. Miss Moore's a gutsy lady. And they need her in good shape for the exchange."

"That's the only thing that keeps me from losing it." He rose from behind the desk. "I need to talk to Amber."

"Everyone will be glad of that. She's been raising holy hell since you brought her in here."

"Well, that's just too bad."

Amber was indeed making a fuss, hollering at the top of her voice for Morgan and for someone to come let her out.

"It's about time," she spat when she spotted Morgan striding toward the cell.

"Unlock this stupid door and get me out of here. Right now."

Morgan gripped the bars until his knuckles turned white. "If I had a damn bit of sense, that's exactly what I'd do. Escalante's men are waiting for you and I'd be happy to give them directions."

Her face paled. "W-What do you mean?"

"I mean they've got Allison and they want to trade her for you."

Amber dropped onto the cell bunk and stared at Morgan, real fear on her face. "You can't do it. Morgan, they'll kill me for sure."

His eyes glittered. "Do you think I'd rather let them kill Allison? I must have lost my mind the day I married you, and God's punishing me for my stupidity."

"Please." Her voice was unsteady. "I'm begging you. Don't do this. You have to find another way."

"And then what? I just let you wander off into the sunset? I don't think so."

"So what are you going to do?"

Not even her palpable fear could dilute his anger, but he also knew he couldn't just carelessly toss her out there to a pack of killers.

"I have an idea that might work. When Marcy comes back here she'll give you jail coveralls to put on. You give her your clothes."

"Why? What for?"

"Damn you," he exploded. "Just shut up and do what you're told. Okay? And when this is over, the white collar crime unit of the district attorney's office will be happy to have you as their guest."

"Morgan..."

But he was already heading back to his office.

"Marcy?" He shouted to her from the doorway. "Have you got that call through yet?"

"Yes, chief. He's waiting on line two."

"Thanks. Take Amber a set of coveralls and bring me her clothes."

"W-What..."

"Just do it." He dropped into his desk chair and picked up his phone. "Steve?"

Steve Michaels was with the San Antonio office of the FBI. When Morgan was a deputy sheriff they'd connected on a few cases and become, if not friends, at least good acquaintances. He was sure Steve would do him a favor, especially if it meant a noteworthy arrest.

"Hey, Morgan. How's life back on the ranch? Lose any cows you need us to find?" Steve chuckled.

"Not quite. But I do need a big favor from you."

In short, tight sentences, Morgan told the man Amber's story, including the dumping of Jared's body, and ending with Allison's kidnapping.

Steve whistled. "You don't mean to tell me she was dumb enough to con Emilio Escalante? He'll make chopped liver out of her."

"Yeah, well, he's planning to make chopped liver out of the woman I love if I can't get her out of this."

"Sounds like you wouldn't mind handing Amber over to them."

"Not a bit, but you know that's not my style."

"Yeah, yeah." Steve sighed. "Cutter's Law, right? Okay, what do you need from me?"

"I don't know how much time I've got. He said he'd call back, but the bastard didn't say when. Also, I need your

promise that you won't take over jurisdiction in this case until I have Allison back safe and sound."

"Listen, Morgan..."

Morgan cut him off. "I don't want to get into a turf war here, but you know I did you a big favor when you needed one. Now I'm calling it in."

Steve cleared his throat. "Okay. I'll square it with my boss. What do you really need?"

"A look alike, some backup, and in return the chance to nab Escalante's men and maybe *el jefe* himself on kidnap charges."

"Well, we haven't been able to pin the drug dealing on him, so we'll take what we can get. Okay, how do you want to do this?"

By the time Morgan hung up, he was assured a stand-in would arrive shortly for Amber. Steve just happened to be in Austin with another agent who had the right physical appearance. They would leave at once, with some additional manpower, if Morgan could stall until they got there.

"Jace," Morgan hollered, and young Murdock appeared at once, just as Marcy brought in Amber's clothes.

"Right here."

"Obradors is supposed to call back, only he didn't say when. The asshole's trying to play on my nerves to make me do what he wants. I'm going to try setting up the exchange on Anderson Road, the one that runs along side The Yellow Rose. It's secluded out there, we've got plenty of trees for Steve Michaels to hide his men, and if we park facing the highway they'll have the sun in their eyes."

"You think this will work?" Jace looked worried.
Morgan deliberately pushed away his rising fear.. "It has to."

* * * *

"So, *senorita*." Luis lit one of his cigarillos. "I hope my men have made you comfortable."

"I'll be comfortable when I can get out of here." Allison was sitting on the bed again, her hands bound once more. She lifted her jaw in a gesture of defiance. This man scared the hell out of her but she knew it would be unwise to let him know that. "When Morgan Cutter finds out about this he'll eat you for lunch."

Luis smiled, but it was not an expression of warmth. "I think you will be seeing your precious Chief Cutter before too long. He seems to be a man of great reasonableness."

"What do you mean?"

He blew out a thin stream of smoke. "I mean, he has something we want and he is willing to exchange it for your safety."

"*Senor* Luis?" Alex's voice was tentative. "There is a sign in the room that says No Smoking. I meant to tell you yesterday."

"Shut up, idiot." Luis twisted his lips in disgust. "Do you think I care about something so insignificant when we have far more important things to worry about?"

"What could he possibly have that you want?" Allison asked.

Luis smiled again. "His ex-wife, of course."

"Amber?" Her eyes widened. "What could you possibly want with that bimbo?"

The man gave her that insidious smile again. "Aha. So you share our opinion. Only a bimbo would be foolish enough to steal money from Emilio Escalante."

Allison felt the blood drain from her face. Escalante was a man of immense wealth with reputed influence in the drug trade. Two years ago a reporter had written an article about him for the *San Antonio Express-News*. A week after the story ran, the reporter was found dead in an alley in South Tampa. No one was ever caught but the rumors flew fast and thick. If Amber was foolish enough to tick this man off, she was even stupider than Allison thought.

Allison thought her capacity to hate had reached its limit, but at that moment she felt more venom for Amber than she'd ever felt for anyone in her life. The woman had not only screwed up Morgan's life, but now she'd brought life-threatening danger into it. If Escalante didn't kill her, Allison was ready to.

"But what does that have to do with me?"

"*Senor* Escalante would like the pleasure of her company, and Chief Cutter is anxious to have you returned to him. So we are going to arrange an exchange."

"An exchange."

"*Si*. Simple like that." He snapped his fingers.

But not so simple, Allison realized. Morgan, with his code of ethics, would be reluctant to turn even Amber over to what was certain death. She shivered at the thought of what would

happen to her if that didn't happen. She would have to trust Morgan to find a way to do this.

Trust. There was that word again. If ever there was a time to trust him, this was it.

"You don't look so confident, *senorita*." Luis opened one of the Coke cans and poured some into the glass of ice on the table. "Do you not think this man would do anything to have his heart of hearts back?"

Heart of hearts? Allison hoped that was what she was to Morgan. She guessed she was about to find out.

"I will be calling him," Luis continued. "He sounded anxious, your police chief, but I'm going to make him wait. A little anxiety will help him do the right thing, don't you think? Give him time to think about what he would be losing if he does not agree to my terms."

Allison's stomach clenched. The Two Stooges were one thing, but this man would eliminate her without blinking if things went wrong.

Morgan. Please help me. I want the chance to tell you I love you.

"He's not going to hand her over to you." Allison felt sick saying it, but she knew it was true.

"Then, *senorita*, you will not be seeing the sun come up again. But first..." He leaned forward and reached his hand out to caress her face. "...we will have ourselves a little amusement, you and I. A little something for my troubles, no?"

Allison shuddered and drew back.

Luis Obradors' laugh was a chilling sound.

* * * *

They were all in the room at the station where Morgan held his briefing—he, Jace, Steve Michaels, Denise Starrett and four other FBI agents. They had arrived in record time in a helicopter from Austin, landing at the Circle C, and Morgan had fetched them all to his office. Marcy had produced coffee for everyone, and they were seated around the large table. All except Morgan, who paced a narrow path from one end of the room to the other and back again. Every minute he checked his watch.

"I know this is hard to do," Steve told him. "But you have to keep your cool here. It won't do Allison any good if you lose it."

"I know, I know." He ground his teeth. *Call, call, call.*

"He's doing it just to rile you," one of the other agents pointed out. "I know it's easy to give advice when I'm not in your shoes, but Steve's right. Obradors is doing what he thinks will give him the upper hand. Put you off balance."

Morgan turned to the woman. "Denise, are you all set?"

She nodded. "Yes, Chief." She lifted her denim shirt and smiled. "I even have my Kevlar on."

"Good." He nodded. "I'm not taking chances with someone's life."

"Morgan." Steve's voice was low and calm. "We put our lives out there every day. We hope we come home in one piece at night, but it's all part of the job."

"All right. We're still agreed this is my ball game until I have Allison back safely?"

Everyone nodded.

Morgan picked up a paper cup and drained the last of the coffee. "Let's go over this one more time, then you all should get going. You need to be in place before I even talk to him."

"What if he doesn't like the meeting place?" one of the other agents asked.

"I'll call Steve's cell phone. We should still have time to get all of you in place if we have to move."

They reviewed their plan once more, then the men all rose from the table.

"One more thing."

They turned.

Morgan cleared his throat. "Thank you."

Each of the men nodded and shook his hand as they filed out of the room, and Morgan found himself alone with Denise Starrett.

She gave him an encouraging smile. "Well, Chief, it's just you and me. Why don't you sit down and tell me about this woman we're going to bring home safe to you."

He was halfway through his story about Allison when his cell phone rang.

* * * *

"Ah, *senor*, but how do I know this is not a trap for me?" Luis pressed the cell phone to his ear.

Morgan's voice was low and harsh. "Because I'm telling you it isn't. If you want Amber, I guess you'll have to trust me on that."

Luis nodded. "You should be aware I will have other men with me. We don't want what you call in Texas a shootout, right?"

"I want to speak to her. Now. Or there's no deal."

"Yes, yes. Of course. She is right here."

He held the phone to Allison's head. "He wishes to speak to you."

"Allison?"

She nearly wept at the sound of his voice, but she forced a steadiness she didn't feel. Whatever they'd used to knock her out was still in her system, making her sick, and she wanted to be safe in Morgan's arms more than anything in the world. But she knew if she broke down on the phone he'd lose it, and she needed him to be able to do whatever he had planned. "Hi, Morgan."

"Allie, are you all right?"

She nodded, then thought, *how stupid. He can't see me.* "I'm fine." Luis was already pulling the phone away from her. "Morgan?" she shouted. "I love you."

"I love you, too, Allie."

"How sweet," Luis said into the phone. "That should give you additional inspiration to make this go off like clockwork."

"It shouldn't take you more than thirty minutes to get there. Start now."

"*Adios, Senor Cutter.*" Luis turned to Allison. "Well, my sweet, we are about to take a little trip. If all goes well, you will be safe in the arms of your lover. If not?" He shrugged.

Allison did her best to keep from throwing up.

* * * *

"Steve?" Morgan was parked at the end of Anderson Road, leaning against his SUV and speaking into a walkie talkie. Denis Starrett, in Amber's clothes, was sitting inside.

"All set, Morgan. Everyone's in place. We haven't seen anyone scoping it out."

"Okay. They should be here any minute."

"We're all set."

Morgan stuffed the small unit in his pocket and stared at the road, willing Obradors' car to appear. And then it did, turning onto the asphalt and easing toward the police truck.

"Come on," Morgan muttered. "A little bit more. Come to papa."

Finally the vehicle stopped about fifty yards away. Nothing happened for the space of a minute, and Morgan was conscious of the sun shining on the car, reflecting off its windshield. Was Allison in there? Had Obradors pulled a double cross?

Then the front passenger door opened, and the man himself emerged and walked to the front of the vehicle?

"You have my package for me?" he called.

Morgan nodded. "We should make a simultaneous exchange. Take Allison out of the car and I'll do the same with Amber."

Luis twisted his lips in a caricature of a smile. "You first, *Senor Chief*."

Morgan shook his head. "Together."

The two men stared at each other while seconds ticked by. Then Luis shrugged, turned and motioned toward the car. A

man climbed out of the back seat and dragged Allison with him. Morgan's eyes took in every detail. Her hands were bound and she looked disheveled, but other than that she seemed to be all right.

"Your move," Luis called.

Morgan backed up, not taking his eyes off the tableau, opened his passenger door and helped Denise out.

"Walk very slow," he reminded her. "When you and Allison meet in the middle, grab her and hit the ground."

"Will do."

He took her arm and led her forward. "Time for them to start walking, Obradors."

For a moment he thought the man would refuse, but then the man with him released his hold on Allison and gave her a little shove. Amber began to move down the road.

Morgan thought his heart had stopped beating as he watched the two women walk toward each other, hoping to God Steve Michaels was right and his men were set and ready.

Almost there.

Two more steps. One more step.

Then they were together, and Denise grabbed Allison and dragged her to the ground. At the same moment Morgan yanked his revolver from the small of his back and snapped off a shot that whizzed past Obradors' head. As the man reached for his own gun, Morgan heard Steve's voice holler, "FBI. Don't move a muscle."

Four men emerged from where they were concealed in the thick underbrush and surrounded the car. One of them

yanked open the driver's door and pulled out the man behind the wheel. Obradors was cursing steadily in Spanish, and the two men with him looked ready to cry.

Morgan raced to where Allison lay, lifted her up and cradled her in his arms. He ran his eyes over her as if reassuring himself she was, indeed, all right, then pressed his mouth to hers in a hot, possessive kiss.

"God," he said when he raised his head. "I thought I'd lost you."

"Not a chance." She gave him a shaky smile. "But do you think you could untie me? My hands are getting numb."

"Oh, my God, I'm sorry. Of course." He set her down and yanked at the ropes until they came loose, then he pulled her back into his arms.

"I take it this is the young lady who's got you tied in knots?"

Neither of them had noticed Steve Michaels come up to them. Morgan made the introductions and the agent smiled.

"It's a real pleasure to meet you, Miss Moore."

"Allison. Please."

"Steve, I can't ever thank you enough for this."

"Glad to help a friend. We'll just go by and collect Amber on our way out of town."

"But..." Allison wrinkled her brow. "I thought that was Amber. And why did she knock me down?"

Steve laughed, and reached out to motion Denise toward them. "Meet Special Agent Denise Starrett."

"I hope I didn't hurt you, Miss Moore. My sole objective was to get you out of the line of fire."

Allison looked at her, dazed. "Without those huge sunglasses, you're almost a dead ringer for Amber."

"That was the idea." Denise grinned. "Glad it worked."

"Me, too."

Morgan looked at Steve. "It's your ball game now. Marcy's got the release forms ready for you when you pick Amber up. If I never lay eyes on that bitch again it will be too soon."

Steve chuckled. "I have a hunch it will be a long time before Miss Amber lays eyes on anyone in the outside world again."

He and Denise climbed into one of the cars and the caravan, with Obradors and the Osuna brothers safely manacled and each in a separate vehicle, headed out toward the highway.

Allison leaned against Morgan, reveling in his strength. His arms wrapped around her, and all the tension of the past few days bubbled up and burst forth in a torrent of tears. Morgan held her, rubbing her back, while she sobbed against his chest. His own emotions were none too steady.

When the storm subsided, Allison raised her face to his. "Can we go home now?"

"You bet." He lifted her up and carried her to the waiting SUV.

* * * *

Morgan barely closed the door behind them before they were in each other's arms again. He took her mouth in a scorching kiss, his tongue sweeping across her lips then sliding into her silken mouth to capture the familiar taste of

her. He crushed her body to his, feeling the softness of her breasts pressing against his chest. When she slid her arms up under his, trying to draw him closer, he reached down and pulled her tight against him. He was so hard he hurt, and he pressed his throbbing erection against the softness of her belly.

"I have to have you," he whispered, his voice cracking. "I have to..."

"I know, I know."

They tore at each other's clothes as they headed for the stairs, dropping articles of clothing in their wake. They barely made it to the bedroom, tumbling onto the bed in an explosion of passion.

Allison ran her hands over his chest, feeling the familiar solid muscle, running her fingers through the thick mat of hair. When her fingertips grazed his nipples they hardened and he sucked in his breath. She pressed her face against his skin, inhaling the spicy fragrance mixed with the incredible maleness of him, and lightly ran her tongue across his salty tasting skin. She wanted to lick every inch of him, fill her nostrils with scent of him.

His thick erection pressed against her abdomen and she thrust herself against him.

His hands caressed her back, her shoulders, slid down her rib cage and swept around to her breasts. When he took a nipple between his thumb and forefinger and squeezed, an arrow of lust shot straight to her womb and she felt liquid seeping in her hot, throbbing canal.

"Allie, Allie, Allie," he breathed into her ear, then his tongue traced the line of the pink shell.

She shivered and pressed her lips to one rigid male nipple. He groaned as she flicked a tongue against the hardened tip, and bent his own mouth to a similar task. He bit her nipple gently, then licked it with his tongue, soothing it, before pulling her breast into his mouth.

"More," she whispered. "I want more."

Working one hand between them, she found his hot erection and circled it with her fingers. She felt him jerk at her touch, and the pace of his breathing increased. A shudder ripped through him as her thumb caressed the tip, spreading the tiny drop of moisture over the satin-soft skin. But when she began to slide her hand up and down he grabbed her wrists.

"Next time," he rasped. "I want to be inside you when I come."

He moved her hand away and slid down her body, his warm hands covering her thighs as he moved them apart. His breath was soft on her overheated skin as he blew light puffs of air on the insides of her thighs, up, up, until he reach her quivering cleft. With hands taut from the strain of control. He separated her swollen lips and licked the length of her wetness, She nearly arched off the bed, every nerve firing, her skin on fire, her nipples aching.

When he placed his mouth on her and sucked she pressed hard against him, little moans escaping her mouth.

"More," she whimpered, but even the fingers he slid easily inside her weren't enough. She wanted his rock-hard shaft

filling her, stretching her, pushing into her. "Please. Please, please." Her voice was pleading, begging.

He moved over her pressing her thighs back against her body to open her completely to him, and thrust slowly inside her. She felt the tip of him touch her womb and she felt the familiar fireworks begin to explode in her veins.

Morgan put his face close to hers. "Open your eyes, Allie. Let me look at you."

She dragged them open, lost in a fog of passion.

His blue eyes, now darkened to navy, blazed at her. "I love you. I am so crazy about you, Allie." He held her with his electric gaze as he began the rhythmic thrust in and out of her body, her tight walls clenching at him like wet gloves. He clenched his jaw as he strained to retain control.

The room was silent now except for the sounds of their breathing and little cries of passion punctuating the stillness. They moved in perfect rhythm together, Morgan's hands clutching her bottom to pull her up tight, Allison locking her ankles around his back to hold him deep inside her. She felt the coolness of the sheets against her burning skin, the friction of his hair-roughened chest against her aching, sore breasts, the firm grasp of his hands holding her.

Each time he withdrew she protested, each time he thrust back sparks shot through her. His eyes darkened almost to black and the pace of the rhythm quickened. She felt that hot spiral of need coiling inside her, tightening, tightening. She clamped herself around his hot shaft and rocked her pelvis against him as heat consumed her. Completion danced

tantalizingly just out of her reach, *Now*, she thought, *oh, please, now*, and didn't realized she had shouted it.

"Yes," he hissed. "Now."

He reached his hand between them to find her aching clitoris, pinched it lightly as he thrust again and she came, screaming his name, spinning through space, free-falling, clutching him as she fell off the mountaintop. And he was right there with her, big body shaking as his spasms overtook him.

"Allie, Allie, Allie," he shouted, and in a last convulsion, filled her with every ounce of his heart and soul.

Afterwards they lay entwined for a long time, not moving, dragging air into their lungs, awed by the intensity of their climax. Finally Morgan rolled to the side, taking her with him and cradling her in his arms.

She relaxed against his big body, letting the feeling of total satisfaction wrap around them like a comforter. Allie was sure she'd been to heaven and she didn't want to leave.

Morgan tightened his arm around her. "I almost lost you today. You don't know how scared I was."

She snuggled into him. "But you saved me. That's the important part, right?"

"When Obradors called and wanted to set up the exchange, I cursed myself seven ways from Sunday for ever getting involved with Amber in the first place."

"What's going to happen to her, anyway?"

"She'll be a guest of the federal government until long after she's able to con anyone again. Steve Michaels is

digging into her past and filing a charge against her for every con she pulled that he can identify."

"Good." Allison splayed her hand on his chest and rubbed the soft mat of hair. "I only wish they had a dungeon they could throw her into."

"Allison, I am so sorry I brought this on you."

She traced his navel with the tip of her finger. "I think there's enough blame for enough things to go around here, Morgan. *I'm* sorry I didn't trust you to begin with. Including about the fiasco in San Antonio."

"Listen. About that..."

"Uh uh uh. Over and done with. Besides..." She grinned. "How many women have someone defending their honor?"

She moved her hand further down his body, but just as she reached his shaft, which was taking on a life of its own again, he grabbed her wrist.

"I have something else to say first." He drew in a deep breath and let it out. "I don't know what I have to offer you. White Tail is a small town, I'm a small town police chief. That's all I ever want to be. But I love you beyond belief, and if you marry me I'll do my best to make you happy every day for the rest of your life."

When she didn't answer, his body stiffened. "Allison?"

She burst out into joyous laughter. "I thought you'd never get around to asking me." She threw herself on him and rained kisses all over his face. "The answer is yes, yes, yes!"

"And you won't get bored here?"

"Are you kidding? With the terrific job Marc Hanson offered me?"

Cutter's Law
by Judith Rochelle

So then she told him all about that, and how it happened.
"I have two weeks to give him an answer."

"But you have to tell him you can't start until after we get back from our honeymoon."

"I love you, Morgan Cutter. And I want to spend every day of the rest of my life with you."

He leaned over her, capturing her mouth in a kiss that curled her toes, and there was no more talking for a very long time.

Epilogue

"I can't imagine what your brother wanted to see us about."

Paige Cavanaugh Cutter placed the huge pitcher of sweet tea and a tray of glasses on the patio table. The sun was just setting, her favorite time of day at the Circle C. She and Ryan had been home from their honeymoon less than twenty-four hours and were really looking forward to some time to decompress before jumping back into things again.

"Maybe he's murdered Allison and wants my help to hide the body." Ryan grinned.

"Not funny." Paige frowned. "I'd really hoped that they'd buried the hatchet by this time. They seemed to get along okay at the wedding. My folks said Allison disappeared with him and still hadn't come back to the ranch by the time they left the next day."

Ryan shrugged. "You know my brother. He still thinks all women were created by the devil."

"And Allison thinks if a guy doesn't live in San Antonio he isn't worth thinking about."

"Well, I guess we'll find out soon enough." Ryan craned his neck toward the driveway. "I heard a car door slam."

But it was Donna and Derek Young who came around the side of the house, not Morgan. The two men shook hands, the women hugged, and Derek kissed Paige on the cheek.

"Sorry we're late but Tate Donovan waylaid us as we were leaving the D&D," Donna apologized.

"How's his Dad doing?" Ryan asked. "I need to go and see him. He was one of my first clients when I opened the law office."

"Not too well," Derek told him. "And Tate's madder than shit because Abby Culhane came to visit him when he was in the hospital for a few days."

Ryan frowned. "I didn't know she still kept in touch with him since he divorced her mother."

"Oh, yeah." Donna grinned. "She was always the old man's favorite. Tate used to make sure everyone knew he and Abby were not blood relatives, he was so jealous of the attention King gave her."

Ryan shook his head. "There's one spitfire I wouldn't want to tangle with."

"Listen, can someone tell me what we're all doing here?" Donna asked.

Ryan shook his head. "All I know is Morgan called and woke us up this morning, told me he had to go to Austin and when he came back this afternoon he had to see me. Have either of you talked to him?"

Derek frowned. "Not since ... Ow!" He rubbed his ribs where Donna had poked him. "Um, not since day before yesterday."

Paige looked from Derek to Donna and back again. "Okay. What's going on here? What aren't you telling me?"

The Youngs looked at each other, but before either of them could speak another car door slammed and the sound of laughter floated out to them.

Ryan raised his eyebrows. "Is that my brother I hear laughing? Is he sick?"

And then they all stared at Allison and Morgan, walking around to the patio with their arms around each other, laughing at some private joke.

"I think we're going to need something stronger to drink than tea," Paige said weakly.

"Hi, everyone," Allison called, and hugged first Paige, then Ryan and then the Youngs.

Morgan shook hands with both men, his mouth crooked in a foolish grin.

"Okay, enough." Paige slammed her hand down on the table. "Someone tell me what's going on."

Morgan and Allison looked at each other, then sat down at the patio table.

"We want to..."

"Could we..."

They both spoke at the same time, then laughed again.

"You first," Morgan told her.

Allison looked at Paige. "We want to ask you a favor." Her voice was breathless.

"Anything, if you'll tell me how you two have survived without killing each other."

Allison put her left hand on the table and everyone's eyes popped at the diamond and emerald ring sparkling on her finger. "We want to be married at the ranch, if you'll let us." She turned to the Youngs. "And we want you to cater it, like you did for Paige and Ryan."

For a long moment nobody spoke, shock freezing their faces.

Finally Ryan cleared his throat. "Did I end up in another dimension coming back from the honeymoon? Is this really Allison Moore and my ugly brother talking to me?"

Morgan put his arm around Allison and drew her close to him. "We've had an exciting time while you two were lazing around all day combining your DNA."

And with Donna and Derek's help, they told Paige and Ryan about everything that had transpired during the past two weeks.

"I can't leave you alone for a minute, can I?" Ryan teased his brother.

Then everyone was hugging everyone again, Ryan was bringing out his favorite bourbon and they were all drinking toasts to the future.

"My God," Paige said. "Just like in the movies, where the cowboy gets the girl."

"Only this time," Allison said. "It won't be the horse he's kissing."

She lifted her face as Morgan's mouth came down on hers.

A long moment passed before he lifted his head and smiled at everyone. "But we will ride off into the sunset together."

Coming Soon...

One Hot Texas Night

Abby drove her rental car slowly up the winding driveway of Sycamore Grove and stopped at the circular turnaround in front of the long, wide porch. Shutting off the engine, she leaned back in her seat and just stared at the huge house that had been her sanctuary during the angst of her teenage years.

Throughout the ups and downs of Elinor's marriage to King Donovan, Cy and Rachel Donovan had treated Abby and her mother as if they were blood relatives. Whenever Tate made her life unbearable, she could always come here, to his grandparents, for comfort and chocolate cookies. Even in high school, where she had few friends and a lonely adolescence, a warm treat from Sarah made the tears less painful.

Tate was four years out of college when she hit her freshman year in high school. He'd come back to the ranch where he'd continued to do everything in his power to make her feel like an outsider. Whenever she had her few friends visiting, he made life so uncomfortable that she stopped asking them to come. Instead, she brought them to Sycamore Grove, where Cy and Sarah made them warmly welcome. High school would have been torture for her without those two people.

And now King, for whatever reason, wanted her to have this property. Had he known what a haven it had been for

her? And did he also know what a slap in the face it would be to Tate? Abby wondered what their relationship had been like those last few years. She'd been shocked out of her panty hose when King called and asked her to come to the hospital in San Antonio and see him. And shattered to see the wasted form of what had been a strong, powerful man.

Remembering that reminded her of the awful confrontation with Tate outside King's room. This was not going to be fun, no matter how it turned out. A smart cookie would have signed everything over and taken the first plane out. But at the moment she was more mad than smart, so here she sat, contemplating what to do next.

I wish you were here now to help me, Sarah.

Her cell phone rang, jolting her out of her reverie. She looked at the incoming number. Sam. Another challenge to deal with.

"Abby? How's it going? Did you teach those Texas hicks a thing or two?"

Sam's voice was so arrogant Abby clenched her teeth. Had it always been like that or was he just upset about her trip? Sam Forrester's family owned the huge hotel chain she worked for, and lately Sam had taken her on as his personal project. She was halfway between flattered at his attention and irritated at his proprietary air.

"I don't think I have much to teach them," she said, a smile edging into her voice.

"Whatever. What time does your plane arrive tomorrow? I'll meet you."

"I, um, don't remember." She was waffling, her brain still trying to decode the conversation in Ryan Cutter's office.

"Well, look in your purse, for God's sake," he huffed with impatience. "What's the matter with you? Are you sick or something? You sound weird."

"I'm fine, Sam." She cleared her throat. "The thing is, I may need a day or two longer here, to wrap things ups."

"You're kidding, right?" Sam barked a laugh. "Yesterday you didn't even want to go."

Abby pinched the bridge of her nose between her thumb and forefinger. "Things are a little more complicated than I expected. I probably need to be here through the weekend."

Six more days. Was she crazy? She rubbed her forehead.

"Abby, that's ridiculous." Sam's voice shifted into officious, authoritarian mode. "If you need an extra day, take it. But that's it."

"Or what? You'll fire me?" The anger she had felt for Tate was now moving in Sam's direction. He was the vice president she reported to at Forester, but he'd also become a frequent date. And maybe more, if she'd let him.

"You need to remember that you have a very responsible position with the corporation."

God, he sounded just like his father. Where was the relaxed, easy-going Sam that she felt so good with? Not alive and well in the Forester offices, that was for sure.

"Yes, Sam. I'm well aware of that. But this is my life and I have important business here that affects it."

Silence. Abby could almost hear Sam counting backwards in his head and rolling a pencil on his desk, two little tricks he used to maintain self-control.

"We have some important meetings coming up next week and I'll expect you here for them. Let me know when you make your return reservations. And Abby, keep your cell phone on so I can reach you at all times."

The click echoed in her ear. That was it. Sam was finished with the conversation. Abby resisted an urge to throw the phone out of the window.

She was so absorbed in her own thoughts she didn't hear a car pull up behind her, or the man get out until he was knocking on her window. She jumped hard enough to hit her head. What now?

Enough like Ryan cutter to be an older version, he was tall and lean, dressed in khaki slacks and a police blouse with a badge. Okay, she wasn't about to be raped. She swallowed to get her heart rate under control, and opened the window.

"Yes?" She frowned at him. What had she done wrong?

"Morgan Cutter," he introduced himself. So she was right. They were related. "White Tail's police chief. You're on private property."

"Oh! I'm sorry. I have the keys with me." She dug in her purse.

Cutter frowned. "And you are...?"

"Abby Culhane." She took out her wallet and showed it to him.

He gave her a stiff smile. "I believe my brother mentioned you were coming to town. Haven't seen you around here in years. All grown up, right?"

All grown up? What an ass. Was he going to pat her on the head, too? She searched her mind for a memory. She barely knew Ryan, and Morgan was obviously older. How did he even remember her?

"It's been a while," she nodded, keeping a pleasant smile on her face. No use antagonizing the local law. Certainly not Ryan Cutter's brother. "I think I just inherited this property and I came by to take a look at it."

Morgan studied her face.

Abby tried to sit calmly, waiting for the next move, but the day was hot. With the air conditioner off in the car, her dress was beginning to stick to her and she could feel sweat running down her back. She opened the car door and got out. "I was just going in to take a look."

"I'll walk along with you. Just to make sure you don't have any unwelcome guests."

"Excuse me?" She hurried to keep up with him.

"We don't have much crime to speak of in White Tail, but one in a while someone wanders through here. A big empty place like this looks very inviting to them. Hand me your keys."

Abby fished them out of her purse and handed them to him.

The inside of the huge house still had the faint musty odor that denoted long absence of human habitation, but overriding it was the slight tang of furniture polish and

cleaning solutions. The high ceilings gave every room an extra look of spaciousness, and the curtains, once pulled back, would let the light in through the myriad floor-to-ceiling windows. Abby remembers how sunshine had always flooded the house, making it warm and inviting.

"Wait here," Morgan ordered, leaving her in the wide foyer as he slowly and quietly made his way through the house. In minutes he was back at her house, handing her keys back to her.

"Everything's fine. You can go on and do whatever you were planning on."

"Thanks." She sighed. "right now I just want to see it after all this time and figure out what I'm going to do with it."

Morgan raised an eyebrow. "You aren't planning to stay, are you? I heard you had a great job in New York and loved the lifestyle."

Abby shrugged. "Yes, that's true. I'm an operations manager for the Forrester hotel chain. I've got a great place to live in New York, too, and White Tail doesn't exactly fill me with warm memories."

"I can see where this would be quite a letdown for you." His tone of voice left no doubt about what he thought of women and big cities. His voice was so taut and pain-filled Abby wondered what had caused that attitude.

"Well, I'll be here until the end of the week, tying up all the loose ends."

Morgan watched her through narrowed eyes. "I don't imagine Tate Donovan is too thrilled with the turn of events."

Abby laughed, but there wasn't much mirth in the sound. "That's the understatement of the year. Thank you for everything, Chief Cutter. I'll try not to break any laws while I'm here."

He nodded abruptly and tipped his Stetson at her. "Just holler if you need the long arm of the law."

And he was gone, leaving Abby alone in the house she hadn't seen since another lifetime.

She took her time wandering from room to room, familiarizing herself with things all over again. She could have sworn the large, cheery kitchen, with its yellow cupboards and Saltillo tile still held the enticing aroma of chocolate chip cookies and fresh yeast rolls. Everything was still there—dishes, pots, pans, anything one would need to cook for two or two hundred.

Throwing open the bolt on the back door, she let herself out on the oversized screened-in porch. The wide yard stretched away from it into the thickening acres of trees. Long ago shouts of laughter still floated on the war, summer air, redolent with the sweet scent of the flowers in the beds hugging the porch. Someone had been taking good care of then, and she recalled Ryan's comment about maintenance crews.

Walking back inside she heard the distant ringing of her cell phone, and hurried to dig it out of her purse. She looked at the incoming readout.

Sam again!

"Hi!" She forced cheerfulness into her voice.

"Hello, Abby." His voice was less strident this time. "I realized I might have come on a little strong before and I'm sorry. I just miss not having you here."

Two days ago hearing those words were have sent little thrills racing along her spine. Why didn't it now?

"That's okay, Sam. I know you're under a lot of pressure right now."

"You don't know the half of it," he commented ruefully. "Anyway, I really called to ask if you'd like me to come out there and help you with anything?"

Abby was stunned. Sam seldom volunteered for anything. "No, thanks, Sam, I've got it under control. I just have ... some things to do in connection with the will. I expect to be done by the weekend."

"All right. But just say so and I'll be on the next plane out of here."

She placed the phone back in her purse and sighed. Would she really be ready to leave by then? What was keeping her here, anyway, except the unwillingness to let Tate Donovan push her around. God, he yanked her chain. Even after all these years. She scowled, thinking of all the unpleasant incidents with him, especially that ill-fated prom night.

"You're not looking too happy," a deep voice drawled behind her. "If this place makes you feel that way, maybe you should just give up and sell it to me. I'll pay you a fair price."

She hadn't even heard the door open. Damn! At this rate the whole town could sneak up on her before she knew it. But it wasn't the whole town that worried her. It was Tate Donovan, leaning in her doorway, looking casual but with his

Cutter's Law
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blue eyes blazing and his jaw thrust forward, ready to do battle.

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A word about the author...

It seems all my life I've been making up stories in my head, waiting for the time I could write them down. All my life experiences have added to the cartons of ideas stored in my head. I was the first female sports reporter on a college newspaper, managed rock bands and country singers, worked in retail, worked for newspapers, worked in public relations for two universities. Now I live in the beautiful Texas Hill Country with my husband and our three cats. Our children are all grown and are my biggest supporters.

Visit Judith at www.judithrochelle.com

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