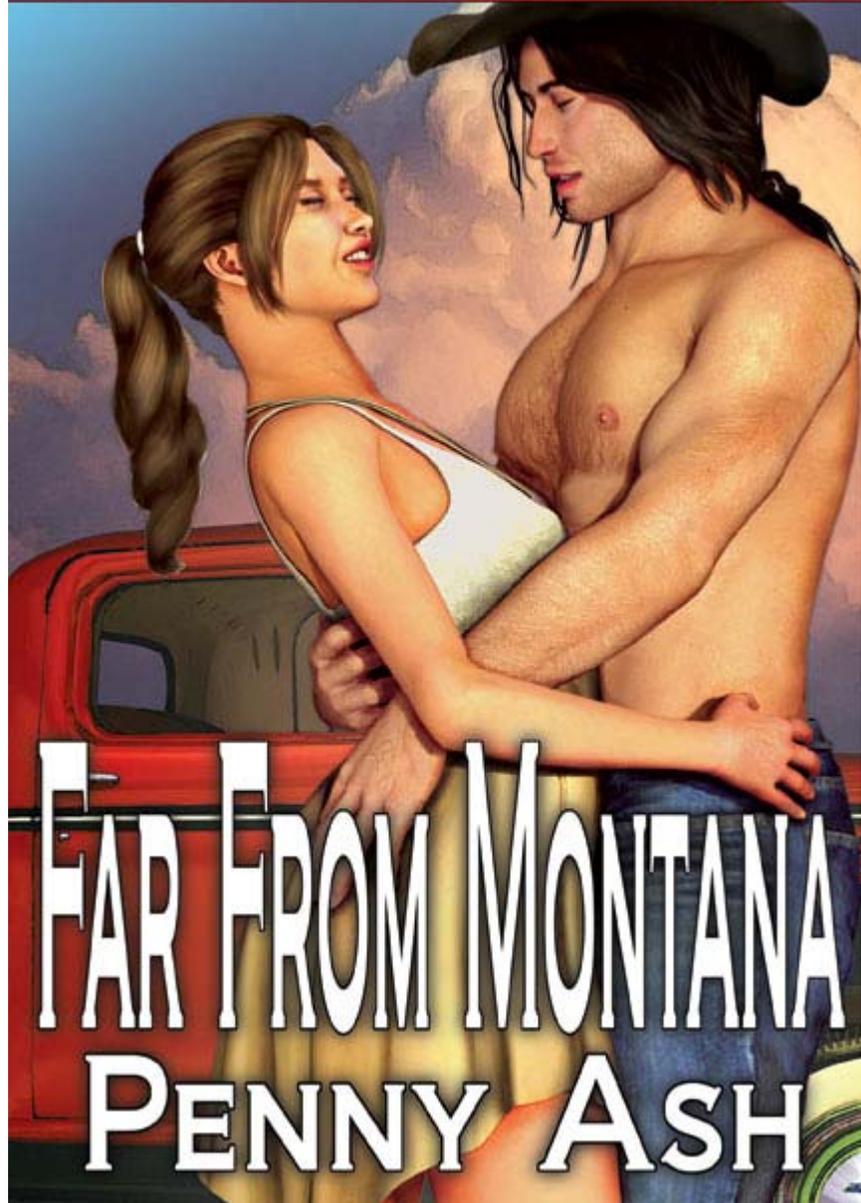


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PENNY ASH

FAR FROM MONTANA

Penny Ash

EROTIC ROMANCE



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DEDICATION

To everyone who likes action with their romance. This is for you.

FAR FROM MONTANA

PENNY ASH

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Chapter One

Dell Blackfeather lay there limp, his head hanging off the edge of the mattress, letting Elsie work his jeans down his legs. Suddenly, Tommy stood in the doorway, a stricken expression on his face. Blood covered the front of his tuxedo, dripping on the floor.

Dell jerked awake, soaked in sweat, his heart hammering in his chest. Disoriented for a few seconds, he wiped his face as he sat up. "Same damn dream," he muttered to himself. He gave a shaky sigh, swinging his legs off the cot, dropping his feet to the cold concrete floor. If only Tommy hadn't walked in on him screwing Elsie. If only he hadn't given in to Elsie's determined seduction. If only she hadn't been sleeping with that psycho Wilson, playing them all against each other. A lot of "if only's." Dell sighed again. Then came the biggest one of all, if only he hadn't lent Wilson his hunting rifle, Dell wouldn't be sitting in prison for the murder of his best friend.

* * * *

Dell Blackfeather sat on the cement, leaning against the chain link that fenced the exercise yard. He watched the other inmates through barely open eyelids while he enjoyed his hour outside. No one had managed to jump him yet. It paid to be careful.

Of all the things he missed, the heat of the sun soaking into his bones sat near the top of the list. Right before a good cup of coffee and just behind a good steak. Of course, at the top of the list sat something he would never

have again... his freedom. A woman would be nice too. The bed was optional. He tensed slightly at the sound of footsteps coming closer. The yard had gone eerily quiet.

“Blackfeather, the warden wants to see you.” The guard kicked Dell’s foot.

“Bite me,” Dell said, not moving.

Rough hands grabbed him and yanked him up off the ground. The two guards cuffed him, then half marched, half dragged him from the yard to the interview room.

Dell swore at the guards as they tossed him into a hard wooden chair across the desk from the warden. He glared at the man, waiting for the next blow to fall. He didn’t have to wait long.

The warden’s cold voice cut right through him. “Blackfeather, you’re being remanded to solitary confinement.”

“Why?” Dell felt sick. He hadn’t done anything to deserve solitary.

“Because we want to.” The warden motioned to the guards. They jerked him out of the chair, leading Dell out to the hated cell.

* * * *

The door slammed behind him, locking with a loud click. He just stood there for a long moment then walked over to the cot to sit down. Things were going from bad to worse just like they had been doing since the day Tommy caught him in bed with Elsie.

He thought back over the last five years. Hindsight illuminated every bad choice he’d made. The first big mistake had been giving in to Elsie’s advances. The second mistake had been introducing her to Wilson. Two months later, his best friend, Tommy, lay dead in the town cemetery, and Dell sat in jail, charged with his murder.

Then, Wilson disappeared before the trial. Dell had not been able to prove that Wilson had set him up.

* * * *

He looked up as the buzzer sounded. The door to his cell swung opened. He watched in silence as the guards stepped inside.

The tall one had a strange deferential attitude. “Mr. Blackfeather, if you’ll come with us please, your lawyer is here to see you.” Dell stood slowly, stepping forward without a word. *Mister*, he thought warily. That was new. “What’s this all about?” he asked.

“The warden and your lawyer will explain everything.” The second guard refused to look Dell in the eye.

Dell sighed heavily. “Fine, let’s go then. I got nothing better to do.” He’d learned early making a fuss did no good at all.

Stepping out of the cell, it startled him to see two more guards. The four guards surrounded him as they walked toward the electric doors of the guard station. After a loud buzz, the doors opened. Dell started to turn toward the visitors’ room.

“This way, Mr. Blackfeather.” The tall guard caught his arm, stopping him. “The meeting will be in the warden’s office.”

“What the hell is going on here?” Dell asked, beginning to get angry.

“Like we said, the warden and your lawyer will explain.” The guard nudged Dell down the hall.

A few minutes of walking through areas prisoners usually did not get to see brought them to a reception area. A blank-faced secretary showed Dell into the warden’s office. He glanced at the two lawyers who stood when he entered the room. Something strange was going down.

“Mr. Blackfeather, please, have a seat.” The warden motioned him toward a chair.

Dell sat down. “So, what’s the deal?”

“The deal, Mr. Blackfeather, is freedom.” His lawyer, Mr. Jackson, sat down in the chair next to him.

“Freedom? Is this some sort of sick joke?” Dell clenched the arms of the chair he sat in until his knuckles were white.

“No.” Jackson sounded neutral. “New evidence has come to light.”

“New evidence?”

“Yes, a diary written by Ms. Patterson was found in her effects—” Jackson began.

Dell cut the man off, a cold feeling washing over him. “Wait a minute. Elsie’s effects?”

“Yes, apparently she felt some degree of remorse. She wrote down what really happened the night Tommy Green died. Her grandmother read it then turned it over to authorities.”

“Wait, wait, wait. Elsie is dead?” Dell had trouble assimilating this. Elsie could be a manipulative selfish bitch, but he *had* thought he loved her once. She didn’t deserve to die.

“We aren’t sure. She was last seen in Denver with Mr. Long. However, she didn’t reappear with Mr. Long when he surfaced in Phoenix about three months ago.” The second lawyer from the state took over the explanation.

“Damn. She probably is dead then.” Dell felt ill.

“The authorities are looking into that possibility, yes. However, that case does not concern us here today. What does concern us is your case. Due to certain passages in the diary, the State reopened your case, ordering new testing on the evidence.” Jackson pulled a folder out of his briefcase. He handed it to Dell.

“The cigarette butts found at the scene contained traces of DNA.” Jackson smiled at him. “DNA that did not belong to you.”

Dell looked up from the report, giving the lawyer a hard stare. “Whose DNA was it?”

“The DNA belonged to Mr. Long. We’ve had a sample of his DNA for a very long time. But this is the first they’ve managed to get from a murder scene,” Jackson explained. “Which is why FBI Special Agents Anderson and Davis are here.”

“You lost me. What does my case have to do with the FBI?” Dell asked, turning to look at the two men seated behind him.

“The FBI has been after Wilson Long for approximately eleven years, Mr. Blackfeather.” Agent Davis sounded weary.

“Why? I mean he’s always been an annoying weird son of a bitch, but...” Dell had grown up with Wilson. He never had any idea Wilson was a criminal until he killed Tommy.

“We suspect Wilson Long is responsible for a number of murders. That’s all you really need to know.” Davis brushed his hand over his blond crew cut.

“Damn.” Dell felt the hair on the back of his neck rise up.

“Yes. Since you know him, we’d like you to call us if you should happen to see him.” Agent Anderson handed Dell a business card.

“Why can’t the sheriff or the police just pick him up?” Dell asked.

“Because his crimes are all committed on reservations, and that makes him our problem.” Anderson gave Dell a grim smile.

The two FBI men left. Dell looked back down at the paper, continuing to read the report, his hands shaking. A memory surfaced. He had tossed a half empty pack of cigarettes to Wilson before driving away from the house that night. He glanced at the date on the report. A chill swept over him.

“How long have you known about this?” he asked.

“We got the report back a week ago.”

“A week. Why the solitary confinement? I spent three weeks—”

The warden cut him off. “We did that for your own protection.” “We couldn’t take a chance on you getting hurt while in our custody.”

“Yes, we’re also prepared to offer you a settlement.” The state lawyer handed Dell another paper.

“How much?” Dell asked.

“One million, in return for you not suing the state for wrongful imprisonment.” Jackson sounded displeased.

Dell gave a bitter laugh, shaking his head. “Unbelievable.” He looked over the paper then held his hand out. “Fine. Give me a pen. I want out of here right now.”

Dell signed the paperwork, tossing it along with the pen onto the desk.

“Congratulations, Mr. Blackfeather. You’re a free man.” The warden stood, holding out his hand.

In a daze, Dell shook the man’s hand. An hour later, he walked out the front gates of the prison with Jackson and his assistant.

Chapter Two

From the moment he got off the bus, he knew coming home had been a mistake. Several of the old timers in the combination bus station and café glared at him when he walked in. He ignored them, going to the phone to call the only family he had left, his cousin Mike, to come get him. Hanging up the phone, he went back outside to wait.

Dell leaned against the street light pole, doing his best to ignore the gawkers that slowed to stare as they passed. The crawling feeling between his shoulder blades told him the occupants of the café watched him. Well, he'd be out of this place as soon as he got his things from Mike.

The sound of a car stopping made him look up. He watched Sheriff Many Hats get out of the cruiser and walk toward him.

"Thought you were locked up." Many Hats favored him with a belligerent glare.

Dell did his best to answer politely. "They let me go."

"Hard to believe, boy."

"DNA proved I didn't do it. And Elsie's diary." Dell kept his voice even, looking the lawman in the eye.

"People ain't gonna take too well to you coming back here." The sheriff adjusted his gun belt then fingered the butt of the service revolver he wore making his warning clear.

"Well, I'm not staying around this sorry town, so they can relax. Soon as I get my truck, I'm gone." Dell saw Mike coming at last. He stepped away from the pole, deliberately looking past the sheriff.

Mike stopped the old truck. Dell walked toward it.

"I ain't done talking to you boy." Many Hats made a grab for him.

"Yeah, well, I'm done talking to you." Dell sidestepped the sheriff. He opened the passenger door, climbing into the truck.

* * * *

They rode in silence until they'd left the town far behind.

"You plan on staying?" Mike asked.

"Not if I can help it. I'm just here long enough to get my stuff, then I'm gone."

"Probably a good idea."

The house looked pretty much like he last saw it. Dell didn't waste any time as he collected up his things, loading the boxes into his old red truck. They couldn't pay him enough to stay in this little town full of holier than thou hypocrites.

* * * *

Driving down the highway away from the town he'd grown up in, Dell felt a lightness coming over him. He flicked ash from his cigarette out the open window before sticking it back between his lips. He ran his hand through his shaggy, collar length hair with a sigh. All he owned in the world sat in the bed of the truck. With nothing tying him to anything he had the whole world at his feet.

He had learned a few lessons in the past five years. He'd be a lot less trusting in the future, especially with guys like Wilson Long. He would definitely think twice, maybe even three times, about hooking up with another bitch like Elsie as well. How she managed to fool him into thinking she had cared for anyone but herself he'd never understand.

Dell sighed. A memory of Elsie on the stand at his trial flashed through his head. She'd given an Academy Award-worthy performance, convincing the jury that he had shot his best friend when Tommy had caught him trying to force himself on her. When his lawyer asked about Wilson, she'd denied he even existed.

Lighting another cigarette, he relaxed even further. It felt good to put the past behind him. A year of jail for the trial and four years of prison for a murder he didn't commit had given him a lot of time to think. Now with the money from the state tucked safely away in a bank, he had an incentive to start a new life somewhere far away.

Two steady days of uneventful driving saw him pulling into the parking lot of a truck stop just off the highway in Flagstaff, Arizona. Dell loved the sun and warmth here. The day promised to get a lot hotter in a few hours. He stood at the pump putting gas in his truck, the summer breeze catching the tail of his blue plaid shirt and flipping it around.

A car pulled up to the pump behind him. Dell watched the driver get out and walk into the building. She wore faded blue jeans that molded to her body just right with an old grey tank top that sent a definite signal straight to his groin. She had her light brown hair pinned up with one of those plastic clips that sparkled in the sun.

Dell entertained a brief fantasy involving bending her over the hood of the compact car she drove. The idea of taking that soft shiny-looking hair down and wrapping his hands in it while he drove himself into her had his jeans becoming uncomfortable. He coughed, glancing around quickly. Swallowing hard, he pulled his black felt cowboy hat down as he adjusted himself.

She returned to her small car with a large drink cup. She started putting gas in her car, with a quick glance at him. He smiled, giving her a friendly nod. She met his eyes. He noticed hers were green. His gas quit pumping. He walked inside to get his change, taking the time to buy a pack of cigarettes. When he came back out, she was gone in her little blue car. Too bad. He wouldn't have minded a visit to the truck stop's motel. She looked small, probably wouldn't come up to the middle of his chest, but the woman had a fine butt. He sighed. It had, after all, been five long, lonely years. He got in his truck and pulled back out on the highway.

* * * *

Alison stopped to get gas. She watched the man at the pump ahead of her nervously from the corner of her eye. He looked nice with his straight coal black hair that just brushed the collar of his blue plaid shirt. His jeans fit well, accenting his long legs. She liked his ordinary appearance. Alison guessed he'd be at least six feet tall. Nothing at all like Ryan in his designer suits and carefully styled hair. She didn't return the smile he gave her when he went inside. Last thing she needed was another man, even one as beautiful as this one.

She watched the long, straight road. Alison caught herself replaying her reason for being there. The steady drone of the tires on the hot asphalt combined with the broken dividing line put her in a light hypnotic trance, transporting her back to Los Angeles.

The tears blurred her vision as she hurried out to her car. Ryan stood in the door of the Mission style mansion. “You leave now, Alison, and you can forget about ever coming back,” he shouted.

She started the car, throwing it into reverse with a bitter laugh that turned into a sob, leaving everything behind. As if she would stay in the same house with him and that woman.

Coming home to find her very proper, stuffy husband in bed with America’s favorite TV super mom had been a nasty shock. Sniffing, she chuckled grimly, wiping the tears from her eyes. “You sure know how to pick them.” Ryan hadn’t even let the ink dry on the divorce papers before he had jetted off to Las Vegas, marrying his actress.

An hour and a half out of Flagstaff, Alison’s car began to make a strange knocking sound, snapping her out of her remembrances. She looked at all the gauges. The warning lights were going crazy on the dash panel.

“No, no, no,” she moaned as she began pulling onto the shoulder. As soon as she began slowing down, vile smelling black smoke began pouring into the car.

She skidded to a stop. Flames burst out from under the hood. She grabbed her purse, jumping out with her keys in her hand. For some insane reason, she popped the trunk, taking the time to grab her two small suitcases before running from the car.

The flames ran down the undercarriage of the car. They reached the nearly full gas tank. The explosion knocked her to the ground. Bits of burning debris spattered the ground around her, peppering her back. She landed on her bags, popping one open, spilling clothes onto the dirt. Yelping, she covered her head with her arms, cringing as several large pieces of metal rained down around her.

Chapter Three

Dell Blackfeather drove down Interstate 40 toward Albuquerque. He noticed the column of thick black smoke and swore softly. Someone definitely had a problem. As he got closer, he realized the smoke came from a car burning on the side of the highway. He recognized the lady running from the car as the one who had been at the truck stop gas station.

He jerked his truck off the road onto the shoulder, slamming on his brakes. The truck skidded to a stop. The car exploded, sending the woman flying face first into the dirt. Jumping out, he ran up to where she lay sprawled over her suitcases.

His eyes widened slightly at the sight of plain white cotton underwear spilling out of one case onto the dirt. They were not at all what he would have expected from a woman with her shape. With a pang, he remembered his friend Tommy once calling that type of underwear granny panties. He stopped next to her. She seemed to be having trouble standing. Dell caught hold of her arm, helping her up. He patted down her back where the smoldering debris had scorched her shirt. When his hand brushed over her ass, his stomach clenched tightly.

“What the hell happened?” he asked. He hoped she put his breathlessness down to his running to help instead of the plain animal lust it was.

She pulled away, looking at him then at her burning car, then back at him. “You’re kidding me right?” She stooped down to shove her clothes back in her bag.

Dell rolled his eyes as he knelt down to help her gather up her underwear. “What made it blow up?”

“How should I know? Do I look like a mechanical genius? It made a weird knocking sound. Then all the warning lights went off.” She glanced back at her car before snatching a pair of panties out of his hands. Her

cheeks turned pink. He smiled. It had been a long time since he'd seen a woman blush.

"Well, it's toast now, whatever caused it." Dell sighed, standing and slipping his hand under her arm lifting her to her feet.

"Oh, you think?" Her voice sounded heavy with sarcasm. She jerked out of his reach, turning to watch her burning car. Dell watched her fight crying. She might want to, but damn if she'd let a stranger see do it. He was impressed.

Dell's mouth went dry when she crossed her arms over her chest. Her breasts shifted, deepening her cleavage as they lifted in a tantalizing invitation to touch them. He coughed, looking away. He willed the warmth pooling deep in his belly to go away.

They both turned at the sound of sirens. A fire truck pulled up, followed by a police car and a tow truck. The police car rolled to a stop near them and a huge officer got out. He ambled over to them. "What happened here?" he asked.

Dell bit his lip as the woman pinched the bridge of her nose, squeezing her soft green eyes shut in a pained expression. She took a deep breath, letting it out slowly. "The car blew up," she said with exaggerated patience.

"Why'd it do that for?" the police officer asked.

She spoke through clenched teeth "I don't know."

"Well, it's toast now," said the officer, sounded like he was pronouncing a great mystery of life to the girl.

Damn, she's even prettier when she's pissed off. Dell turned to watch the firemen put out the fire, hiding his grin.

"Oh no, not... toast," she moaned in a tragic voice.

"Yep, 'fraid so," the officer shook his head and patted her shoulder.

Dell hurriedly turned his bark of laughter into a cough.

"Oh dear, what will I do?" She glared at Dell.

"Wellp, old Yancy and his boy will probably take it off your hands cheap." The officer pulled out his notebook, writing down their information. "Y'all have a good day now." He snapped his book closed as he ambled back to his cruiser.

"Must be a man thing." She shook her head in disgust.

Dell snickered.

* * * *

The tow truck driver charged her fifty dollars then happily towed the ruined vehicle off to the local junk yard. Nearly as fast as they'd arrived, the emergency response team left without even offering her a ride into the nearest town.

Dell watched the people leave. He sighed, flicking ash from his cigarette. "Where were you headed?"

"I was going to see friends in Texas," she answered. "Looks like that won't be happening now."

"I planned to stop in Albuquerque for the night. You can ride with me that far." He turned, heading for his truck.

"Thanks. I appreciate it." Alison picked up her suitcases, following him to his truck. Dell ruthlessly repressed the warm tingly feeling he got from thinking about her tight-jeaned butt and those granny panties.

He took her bags, tying them down in the back of the truck on top of his stuff while she got in. He dropped his cigarette butt, stepped on it, then got in and started the engine. Pulling out onto the highway, he smiled, reaching toward her. "My name's Dell Blackfeather."

"Alison Taylor." She smiled slightly as she shook his hand.

"So, where are you from, Alison?" Dell tried to make a little light conversation. He looked away, focusing back on the road. He wondered if she'd felt the same zing of electricity he had when their hands touched.

"Back there." She waved vaguely behind them.

He rolled his eyes. "Back there where?"

"Los Angeles." Alison sighed. "And you are obviously from Montana."

"How did—"

"I know? Your license tags." She smiled. "And your reaction."

"Oh." He smiled. He gave himself a mental smack, of course she would have seen his license plates.

* * * *

They were quiet for a while as the uncomfortable silence of strangers thrown together settled over them. Being the middle of the week, the

highway was fairly deserted. Alison caught herself dozing off in the heat. She used the chance to study Dell, looking at him through her lashes.

She wondered what tribe he belonged to. He had the kind of movie star looks she didn't really trust. He puffed on another cigarette, driving with an easy grace, the wind tousling his black hair. He had an intense expression on his face. He looked like a man with heavy things on his mind. She wondered what he brooded over.

"Those things are bad for you," she said, her voice soft as he reached for the half empty pack on the dash.

"Yeah, I know, but without the habit, I'd be disgustingly perfect." Dell smiled and gave her a wink, lighting up again.

Alison chuckled, shaking her head, turning to watch the desert landscape pass by.

Chapter Four

Dell saw the turn-off for the Petrified Forest and Painted Desert visitors' center. The sign said food and restrooms were available. He took the exit. Glancing over at Alison, he noticed she'd fallen asleep.

Slowing to a stop in the parking lot, he took a few minutes to check her out. She had to have the most beautiful breasts he'd seen outside of a magazine. Elsie had been nearly flat. His other girlfriends hadn't been much bigger. He wondered if they were real or as soft as they looked. It would be nice if she'd let him touch them.

He leaned over to wake her, reaching out toward her shoulder. His hand hovered indecisively between the curve of her shoulder and the rounded slope of her breast, then touched her shoulder. Her skin felt like sun-warmed velvet, or what he imagined velvet would feel like. She sighed in her sleep. He jerked his hand away, suddenly glad he'd resisted the temptation of her breast.

"Hey, I'm ready for some lunch. How about you?" he asked, giving her a slight nudge. His groin tingled.

Alison opened her eyes. She grimaced. "Uh, yeah, yeah, lunch sounds good. Where are we?"

"The Petrified Forest and Painted Desert visitors' center. Come on. Let's go inside."

He got out, stretching before he went around to open the door for her. His estimation of her went up several notches when she accepted his offer of a hand out of the truck without complaining. The strength of her grip sent a tremor of lust through him. He tried not to imagine that fine-boned hand wrapped around other more sensitive parts of his anatomy.

She started toward the building. He caught the belt loop of her jeans, stopping her. His stomach clenched in a strange mix of anticipation and lust, like the flip-flop feeling of losing his balance and nearly sliding down. He

really had to stop touching her, or he was going to seriously embarrass himself.

Dell saw the sudden fear in her eyes when she turned to look at him. He chose to overlook it, wondering what had made her so afraid. With his experiences in the last five years, he couldn't blame her for being wary. In fact, he had a mind to be careful himself. After all, he didn't have a clue about her either, not really.

"You might want to get another shirt out. That one has some holes and burnt marks on the back." He brushed his fingers over the scorched marks in answer to her startled look.

"Oh, right. Can you hand me the blue bag?" She blushed. He silently berated the unknown cause for the note of relief that colored her voice.

He managed to pull the bag she indicated out then handed it to her. She set it on the seat, opening it, rummaging through it until she found something suitable. Alison slipped an old white cotton shirt out and closed the bag.

An old black El Camino pulled into the parking lot. Dell caught Alison's arm. She froze, looking at him with a questioning expression on her face. He felt the blood drain from his face and knew he must look like he'd seen a ghost.

"Get in the truck." He gave her a push toward the cab of the truck.

He reached past her, shoving her bag over, then he caught her up, tossing her onto the seat. He closed the door as quietly as he could. The last thing he wanted was to attract any attention. He quickly walked around the truck, keeping his eye on the other vehicle as he slid into the driver's seat. Watching the disturbingly familiar figure of the El Camino's driver walk into the building, he tried to tell himself there were hundreds of vehicles like the black car. Lots of men liked those tacky embroidered western shirts as well.

When the man disappeared inside, Dell started the truck. He took the long way around the back of the building before pulling out onto the highway again. Once on the road, he accelerated as he kept looking in the rearview mirror. Thinking about the phone number in his wallet, he decided it might be a very good idea to make a call from the first pay phone he could find.

* * * *

Alison sat stiffly in the passenger seat, hugging her bag to herself. She kept an eye on Dell. Something back at the visitor's center had scared him. Badly. He finally relaxed with a heavy sigh.

"Um, what—"

"I thought I saw someone I knew back there. Not someone I want to see again." He sounded unhappy.

"Oh." she could understand that. She didn't want to see Ryan again either. But she wasn't afraid of him, not like what she'd seen in Dell's eyes.

They rode in silence again. Dell glanced at her. She knew she looked like she'd jump out of the truck at the least little thing. She didn't care if he saw how wary she was.

"Listen, uh, Alison, I won't hurt you."

"Okay." She'd humor him for now. If he showed any sign of strangeness, she'd get away first chance she got.

"I thought I saw a guy back there that got me arrested for something I didn't do. If it really was him, it's not safe anywhere around here. He's a killer."

"Oh." She glanced back, relieved to see the highway empty of other vehicles.

"It probably wasn't him." He laughed suddenly, "I feel so stupid."

Alison looked at him for a long moment. She made up her mind. She'd trust him until he gave her reason not to. "Yeah, but better to be safe than sorry." She pondered the can of pepper spray in her purse.

"Good point." He smiled at her.

* * * *

They stopped in Gallup at a fast food restaurant to pick up something to eat. Seeing a bank of payphones, Dell pulled out his wallet, taking out the slip of paper along with a twenty dollar bill. "If it's all right with you, we'll keep going until we get to Albuquerque."

"Fine with me."

"Take this and get lunch. I'm not picky. I need to make a phone call." He handed her the money.

Alison took the bill, watching him walk toward the phones. She shivered slightly as she turned to walk inside and order. The partial name she had seen on the card Dell held had read Agent something, next to a very official looking seal. She wondered what she'd gotten herself involved in as she walked into the fast food restaurant.

* * * *

Dell picked up the receiver, jiggling the disconnect button until the operator came on. He read the number to her then waited while she put his call through. It rang several times before Agent Davis answered.

Dell got straight to the point. "You told me to call if I saw Wilson Long."

"Have you made contact with him?" Davis's voice held a note of excitement.

"I saw him. I think. I hope he didn't see me." Dell kept an eye on the cars coming and going around him.

"Where?" Davis asked.

"Painted Desert visitors' center. On I-40. He was going in when we got there."

"We? Someone is with you?"

"Yeah, I got a girl with me. Is there a law against that? That's why I didn't hang around."

He heard the agent sigh heavily.

"All right. Well, thank you for calling us. If you see Long again, be sure you let us know."

"Yeah, sure." Dell hung up. He adjusted his old black cowboy hat, then walked across the parking lot into the restaurant.

* * * *

Alison was waiting for their lunch order when Dell walked in. He appeared to be less tense, smiling when he saw her by the pickup counter. He walked over to her. She handed him the change from his twenty, brushing her fingertips over his palm. He felt an answering twitch in his jeans. Their order arrived. He quickly picked up the bags.

“Ready to go?” he asked.

“Yeah, in just a minute.” She started toward the restrooms.

Dell stood in front of the kid behind the counter, both of them watching Alison. The sway in her walk all but begged Dell to follow her.

“Damn, she’s got a fine ass.” The kid leaned over the counter to watch Alison.

Dell gave the boy an amused look. “You know commenting like that on somebody’s woman while they’re right next to you is not exactly healthy. But you’re right. It is a very fine ass.” He chuckled. Dell left the kid red-faced, stammering apologies. He went to meet Alison at the door.

* * * *

Alison opened the bag from the restaurant and pulled out the food. After laying everything on the seat between them, she picked up one of the hamburgers. She unwrapped it then handed it to him.

She watched him for a few minutes, choosing her opening. “So, what did this guy get you arrested for?”

Dell glanced at her with a startled expression. The seriousness in his eyes let her know it was probably something bad. “Murder,” he answered shortly.

“Murder,” she repeated. “But you didn’t do it?”

“No, I didn’t.” He sighed.

“Oh.” She waited for him to continue.

“I spent a year in jail and four years in prison because I trusted the wrong people.” Dell’s tone sounded bitter. She couldn’t blame him.

“Oh,” she said again. She finished her food and gathered up the trash. Sitting back, she watched the road.

He shifted in his seat. Well, that did it. She’d run off screaming the next place they stopped. Not getting laid tonight, Dell, old boy. He didn’t know what to say. The silence in the truck began to grow uncomfortable.

Alison broke the awkward silence. “So you want to talk about it?”

He glanced over at her, surprised. “Yeah.” He realized he did want to talk. He thought Alison would understand. “Yeah, I would.” Dell took a deep breath and found himself telling her about finding Tommy dead. Then the trial and the debacle of Elsie testifying against him, covering for Wilson.

He told her about the hell of prison and the relief when they let him out. Everything came pouring out, right down to the hurt at the way the town had reacted.

“This Wilson, he’s the one who did all this?” Alison asked.

“Yeah. I’d still be in there if Elsie’s grandmother hadn’t found her diary. She wrote everything down.”

“And this guy is who you thought you saw back at the visitor center?” Alison shivered.

“Yeah, I really hope it wasn’t though.”

Chapter Five

Dell looked around for a place to stop for the night. He suddenly realized that even though she didn't speak much, he would miss her when she was gone. Glancing over at her, he wondered what she'd say if he just asked her to spend the night with him. Nah, she wouldn't. *She's too classy. Besides, she hasn't shown the slightest bit of that sort of interest in you,* he lectured himself silently.

"You never said where you'd like me to drop you off."

"I don't know. I guess I haven't thought that far ahead." Her quiet voice sounded troubled. She looked thoughtful. "Just let me out somewhere well lit where there's a phone."

"Well, I could take you wherever you had planned to go." He watched the traffic, carefully not looking at her. He did his best to keep his expression neutral.

"I wouldn't want to keep you from wherever you were going." The toneless sound of her voice squashed the little bubble of hope that tried to rise inside him.

"Oh. Well. I wasn't going anywhere particular, just as far as I can get from Montana." He couldn't quite keep the disappointment out of his voice.

He heard Alison sigh. He glanced at her from the corner of his eye as she thought for a few seconds. "Okay, let's find someplace to stop for the night. We can have dinner and discuss this."

"Sounds good to me." Dell smiled as he pulled into the parking lot of a cafe on the outskirts of the city.

Dell followed Alison into the busy restaurant. In the closed area of the café's entranceway, he noticed again she smelled like sweet musky vanilla and spices. His mouth watered. The hostess seated them, leaving their menus. "So what made you decide to leave Los Angeles?" Dell asked as he picked up the laminated card to read it.

“Ah, well, I just got tired of all the games.” She thought about the Beverly Hills mansion with its closet full of expensive designer clothes and jewelry she’d left behind when she’d walked out.

“Games?” Dell asked, curious.

They paused their conversation long enough to order.

“What sort of games?” Dell picked up where he’d left off.

“Yeah, mind games, control games, manipulation. I’m just tired of all of it.”

“Oh, yeah, I don’t know why people just can’t be honest with each other.” He smiled at her, a little tingle running through him when she blushed again. She returned his smile, making his heart skipped a beat.

The waitress arrived with their order. Dell decided it was time to change the subject so they chatted about safe, ordinary stuff. She would tell him everything later, much later, if it mattered. When they finished dinner, they sat there suddenly awkward. He didn’t want to seem too eager to her. From the way she rearranged the things on the table he thought she might be as nervous as he was.

“So, where do you want to stay tonight?” he asked, finally bringing up what they both knew would happen.

Alison smiled faintly. “Anywhere with a clean bed. I’m not particular.” She looked up, straight into his eyes. A wave of white hot desire crashed through him. He saw the answering need in her eyes. His stomach clenched, his mouth going dry.

“Well, there’s the motel across the parking lot.” His voice grew a little deeper.

“There is.” Alison reached across the table, brushing her fingers over the back of his hand.

“I’d really like to spend the night with you.”

“So would I.” She took his hand in hers.

* * * *

Alison couldn’t believe she even remotely entertained the idea of going to a motel room to have sex with a guy she’d known less than twenty-four hours. She felt like laughing at the freedom she felt. Suddenly, she smiled at him. “I think they’d like us to leave.”

“Yeah, I'd like to leave too.” He smiled and reached for the check.

Alison let him pay for their dinner. She waited for him in the café entryway. When he came out, she held out her hand. He took her hand. Her knees went weak when she laced her fingers through his once more.

* * * *

The motel next to the restaurant looked brand new, but neither one cared. They shared a nervous silence on the short drive across the parking lot. He felt like a teenager on his first serious date as he pulled up to the breezeway entrance.

Dell turned toward Alison, opening his mouth to speak. She leaned over, touching her lips to his in a soft kiss.

“I'll be right back.” He hurried inside.

He smiled pleasantly at the desk clerk. “I'd like a room for two please.”

Dell got back in the truck, starting it up then heading around to the back side of the building complex where the room was located. Dry mouthed and sweaty palmed, he glanced at Alison as he parked in front of the door to their room. The sunset gilded her hair, giving her an otherworldly glow that took his breath away.

"You're sure you want to do this?"

"I'm sure. Let's go to bed." She tucked a stray strand of hair behind his ear. He felt it all the way to his toes. With a slight smile he got out of the truck. When he got to the passenger side Alison had already gotten out. Dell put his arm around her. He licked dry lips. Tonight, he thought, would be wonderful.

Opening the door of the room, he held it open for her then followed her inside. “You want both your bags brought in?”

She turned, smiling at him. “Yes, please.”

He brought her suitcases in along with the one that contained his clothes. She sat, perched nervously on the edge of the bed. “I'm going to run across to the store. Is there anything you want?” He would give her a little time alone to do whatever she needed to feel ready. A few more minutes on top of the time he'd already gone without wouldn't make a lot of difference, not if it made her more comfortable.

“No, I’m fine.” She gave him a soft, sexy smile.

Dell left her to get settled in the room, going to the little convenience store next to the motel. He bought a pack of cigarettes, a map of Texas and a box of condoms then headed back to the room. When he walked in, he heard her in the room’s small bathroom. He kicked off his boots, then sat down on the bed, leaning back against the pillows she had stacked against the headboard.

Alison stepped out of the bathroom, pulling the door almost closed behind her. She walked toward him, a towel wrapped around her. Dell wiped his damp palms down his thighs. After five years without anything but his hand for relief, this was like a fantasy come true. She stopped next to the bed. He licked his lips. She had to be the most gorgeous woman he had seen in a long time. Slowly, she reached up, loosening the towel, and letting it fall to the floor. His chest tightened.

The dim light filtering around the closed drapes gave her skin a mysterious golden glow, turning her nipples a dusky rose. Dell rose to his knees as he brushed the palms of his hands over her breasts. His eyes met her soft green eyes. He hesitated, unable to breathe for a heartbeat. Then he dug his fingers into her thick silky hair, covering her mouth with his. She tasted like toothpaste and fresh sweet woman. It had to be the best thing he could remember ever tasting.

Alison slid her arms around him, clenching her fists in his blue plaid shirt. Her body against his felt like standing in front of a bonfire, her heat soaking through him. He sucked gently on her lower lip, tugging lightly then plundering her mouth again, running the tip of his tongue over the inside of her lips before slowly twining with her tongue.

She pushed him back, gently breaking the kiss, pulling his shirt out of his faded jeans. She unfastened each pearly snap then slid her hands slowly up over his chest. He let go of her just long enough to toss the shirt aside. He pulled her back against him wrapping his arms around her, molding her to his body.

Alison tilted her head up. He lowered his mouth to hers once more. The hardness of her nipples surrounded by the softness of her breasts pressed into his chest sent a jolt straight to his burgeoning erection. His cock throbbed against the fly of his jeans.

“It’s been awhile, baby. I don’t know how long I’ll last,” he said urgently between kisses.

“It’s okay. We have all night,” she answered, her soft voice thick with lust.

He reached between them with one hand, unbuttoning his jeans then lowering the zipper. She stepped back. A soft sound of disappointment escaped him at the loss of her body against him. He groaned when she pushed his jeans, along with his boxers, down over his hips, freeing his cock.

He kicked the clothes off as he sat back on the bed, moving his hands over her waist. He slid them up to cup her breasts. She leaned into his touch, pausing to reach for a condom from the nightstand. He moved his hands to her waist again, leaning forward to touch the tip of his tongue to one taut nipple. Dell licked it before closing his mouth over it, kneading and probing gently. She moaned. Dell chuckled with male satisfaction.

“Been awhile for you too, huh?” He moved his lips against her skin. Fuck she tasted good, he thought.

She nodded, swallowing hard. “Uh huh, too long.” She opened the condom wrapper.

Dell lay back, pulling her with him. She knelt over him. “Let me put this on,” she whispered.

“Then do it, girl.” He groaned.

Alison rolled the latex over his cock, her fingers caressing and exploring, making him ache.

“Baby, not too much.” Her hands stilled. He fought to catch his breath.

He gasped as she moved over him, lowering herself onto his erection. Skimming his hands over her hips, wrapping one arm around her waist, he pulled her down against him. Slowly arching his hips up off the bed, he pushed deeper into her. She moaned, tightening her grip on his shoulders. He whispered her name as he rolled over with her.

Dell began to move his hips in slow thrusts into her wet heat. She arched her back, answering him with her own movements. He groaned when she slid her feet up the back of his legs. She wrapped her legs around him. “Ohh girl...” Dell closed his eyes, moving harder.

Alison moaned, digging her fingers into his hips. He tried to slow down. He didn’t want to come before she did. He found her clit with his thumb. She

whimpered when he pressed it. With a breathless chuckle, he rubbed his thumb over her clit. She cried out, rippling around him as she came. Dell held her while she rode out her orgasm. Tightening her legs, she rocked against him, drawing another deep groan from him. He braced himself on his elbows looking down into her eyes. "You're beautiful when you come," he whispered when she began to relax. She pulled his full weight down on her as he slid his arms under her shoulders.

"You didn't—" He cut her off, covering her mouth with his and twining his tongue with hers.

He broke the kiss, changing his angle to plunge deeper into her. "I'm close, sweetheart. So close." He groaned. "Need...harder."

She nodded. "Harder, yes, anything."

He tangled his fingers in her hair, cradling her head in his hands. Then he buried his face in the crook of her neck. Her ragged breath sent shivers down his spine. A brief flash of memory made him smile as he began to move hard, living out some of the fantasy he'd had at the gas station when he'd first seen her.

Suddenly, he felt himself slipping over the edge into the most intense orgasm he'd ever had. She moaned his name, tightening around him again. He gasped, losing control, grinding into her, flooding her with heat and lust until they were both spent.

He caught his breath, slowly moving off of her. He leaned back against the pillows propped against the headboard, pulling her up into his arms. She sighed, laying her head on his chest, tugging the sheet over them then wrapping her arms around him. Brushing his hand over her hair, he kissed the top of her head.

Alison lay against him, her eyes closed. He was more content than he'd ever been. She raised up, looking at him when he moved, reaching for his cigarettes.

"You all right?" she asked, her voice full of concern.

"I'm better than all right," he answered, smiling at her. "Next round will last a whole lot longer."

She leaned up, kissing him.

Dell smiled, returning her soft kiss with a more demanding one of his own. He pulled back slowly, looking into her eyes, opening his mouth. His

stomach growled loudly. He blushed, embarrassed. Alison chuckled. He couldn't help the grin that spread over his face.

"I think I'll just go down to the vending machines and see what they have." She turned to get out of bed. He stopped her.

"I'll go. I don't want you out there. It's not safe."

He tossed the sheet back as he sat up. Stretching, he felt her nails as she scratched his back. Sighing, he turned to kiss her before reaching for his jeans, pulling them on and zipping them up. "I'll be back in a minute or two."

* * * *

Alison watched him leave for the machines. She leaned back against the pillows with a deep satisfied sigh, pulling the sheet up as she settled in to wait. She couldn't remember a time when she felt so relaxed or comfortable. Before she realized it, the card key rattled in the door. She looked up to see him stepping inside with two sodas, an armload of little packages of chips, cookies, candy bars, and a small bucket full of ice. She started to get up, intending to help him.

"No, stay there. I got it, baby." He kicked the door shut, setting the ice bucket on the nightstand by the bed. Then he dropped all the packages in her lap. He sat down on the bed beside her as he popped the soda cans open.

"Did you buy out the machine?" she asked, looking at the bags of chips.

"No, I just pushed the button for the chips. All these fell down with it." He grinned, picking up a package of cookies.

They sat together, enjoying the feeling of quiet companionship. She dozed off, comfortable in that world between waking and sleep, her head resting on his chest. He carefully took the soda out of her hand, setting it on the nightstand then laid her back on the pillows. He brushed his lips over hers then kissed her forehead.

* * * *

Dell turned on the TV flipping through the channels. She snuggled closer, sliding her arm around his waist. He leaned down, kissing her ear as an idea formed.

“You awake, sugar?” he whispered, licking her ear. She shivered. He blew softly, drawing a soft moan from her.

“Wake up, baby, it’s time for round two.” He sat back, reaching for a cookie.

Dell kept his eyes on her as she watched what he did. He twisted a cookie apart, then scraped the sugar crème filling off with his finger. Desire burned through his whole body as he tossed the halves of the cookie aside. He reached out, slowly painting her nipples with the thick filling, rubbing it around and over them. She sighed, catching her bottom lip in her teeth, her eyes drifting closed.

Leaning forward, he began to lick and suck her nipples clean, drawing deep moans from her. She tangled her fingers in his hair, her breathing ragged. He chuckled, raising up to look at her.

* * * *

Alison gazed up into his passion dark eyes, sliding her hands down to the waistband of his jeans. “One of us is overdressed.”

“We’ll have to do something about that, won’t we?” he whispered.

“I think I can handle it.” She unfastened the button then began to slowly unzip his faded jeans.

“Oh yeah, I think so.” His voice was breathless.

Alison slid the jeans down over his hips then pushed him down beneath her. She kissed him, slowly exploring his lips and mouth, moving down over his throat. Trailing kisses over his chest, she listened to his breathing change and smiled. He moaned softly, slipping his hands over her back as she tongued his nipples before moving down to his stomach.

“Ohh yeah,” he breathed when she pushed her tongue into his navel, swirling it around. She rose up and reached for the ice bucket, picking up a piece of ice. She popped the ice into her mouth for a few seconds as she slipped another condom onto him.

* * * *

Dell waited, not sure what Alison had planned. He didn't care. Whatever it turned out to be it would be good.

She kissed the tip of his erection. He gasped harshly and swore, groaning, the cold of her lips like an electric shock.

She picked up another piece of ice, drawing it slowly up over his belly. He dug his fingers into the bed covers, groaned again arching his hips off the bed. "Alison."

She stopped him with a finger to his lips. "Fuck me, Dell."

He pulled her up, wrapping his arms around her as he rolled over with her.

* * * *

An old black El Camino pulled into the parking lot, cruising slowly along the building. It passed Dell's red truck then stopped suddenly, backing up to stop again behind the truck. It sat there for several minutes before continuing on to park several spaces down, well away from the lights.

Chapter Six

Dell finished tying down the bags in the bed of the truck, whistling softly to himself as he thought about Alison. She came out of the room looking like an angel. He opened the truck door for her, helping her in. He shut the door then waited while she rolled the window down.

“I’ll go turn the key in, then we can go get breakfast and talk about where to go next.” He leaned into the truck, giving her a quick kiss.

“All right.” Alison tucked a wayward strand of hair behind his ear.

“Be right back.” He caught her hand, giving it a gentle squeeze. He headed for the motel office, stopping for a glance back at her before heading around the corner of the building. Did he want to spend more time with her? Yes, he thought he did. Was what he felt love? *That* he didn’t know.

His thoughts revolving around Alison and the night, he walked to the motel office. He repressed the urge to whistle. Dell couldn't remember the last time he'd been this happy.

* * * *

Alison watched Dell disappear around the building then opened her purse to check her wallet. She noticed a man in a cowboy outfit walking down the line of cars toward her. She kept her head down, acting as if she didn’t see him. He passed the truck. She sighed, relieved, and went back to checking the money in her wallet.

A voice came from just behind her “Well, hi there, little lady.”

Alison jumped, turning to look at the smiling man standing by the window. She didn’t answer him. Something about the hard glitter of his eyes reminded her of a predator.

“The name’s Wilson, Wilson Long, old friend of Dell’s.” Wilson held his hand out.

Alison hesitated for a second, her hand moving to the small can of pepper spray in her purse. She edged away from the window and this smiling shark in the singing cowboy shirt. Dell's voice echoed through her head describing this man and the things he'd done.

"Where you two headed?" Wilson leaned on the door, sticking his head in the window.

Alison retreated toward the middle of the seat. Something told her it would be a mistake to take her eyes off him even for a second. She hoped Dell hurried back soon.

Wilson shifted as his smile changed, sending a chill of fear through her. She tightened her grip on the pepper spray getting ready to pull it out of her purse. He reached for the door handle then suddenly backed up a step. Alison felt weak with relief at the sound of the driver side door opening.

* * * *

Dell lit a cigarette as he rounded the corner. When he looked up, his stomach twisted into a cold knot. Throwing down his spent match, he hurried toward the truck. All he could think of was that he'd been right at the Painted Desert visitor center. He had seen Wilson.

He got to the truck before either Alison or Wilson saw him. He jerked the door open and jumped in. Reaching across the seat, he caught Alison's arm, pulling her over toward him, away from the window. "Get away from my truck. We're leaving."

"Aren't you going to introduce your old friend Wilson to this pretty lady here? It's the least you could do after all those awful lies you told about me. And trying to set me up like that with the sheriff." Wilson smiled.

"No, and it was you who did the setting up." He started the truck, throwing it into gear, and backed out of the parking space. He barely missed hitting Wilson before jumped back.

Dell floored the gas pedal, swerving to miss a car just coming around the corner. The tires on his old truck were a bit worn. The heat of the asphalt sent them fishtailing. He swore, fighting to keep from losing control or spinning out. As they skidded around the corner, the rear fender struck the side of the large industrial dumpster at the edge of the lot. The impact

straightened them out, letting them gain traction to speed out of the parking lot.

His battered old truck with its faded red paint wasn't much to look at, but it had a good engine. His cousin Mike had taken care of it while Dell sat locked up in prison. Dell kept one eye on the rearview mirror as he sped down the freeway watching for any sign of Wilson following them. He heard Alison scrambling to fasten her seat belt, then spared her a quick glance. She looked pale and shaken.

"Hey, it's all right. I won't let him hurt you." He covered her hand with his.

"I know." Alison squeezed his hand. "Do you think he'll follow us?"

"I'm sure he'll try. He told me once he never got mad. He just got even. He'll be out for revenge." Dell glanced back to the rearview mirror, watching the motel rapidly fade from view. A movement accompanied by the flash of sunlight off a windshield caught his attention. He swore. Wilson definitely followed them.

"Damn, he's persistent. We need to lose him and find someplace to hide."

Alison shivered. "Like Ryan."

"Who's Ryan?" Dell asked.

"My ex-husband. He's the reason I carry a can of pepper spray."

"Pepper spray. Was he abusive?" Dell asked, keeping his voice neutral. If this Ryan character had done anything to hurt Alison, he'd track him down then teach him the error of his ways. He glanced in the mirror again. There were several vehicles behind them. He could see the one he thought was Wilson weaving in and out of the traffic.

"Oh no, Ryan would never do anything that might get him disbarred. He does have a lot of enemies though."

"Promise me you'll use it if Wilson catches up to us."

She nodded as she turned to look out the back window.

"The black El Camino still back there?" Dell asked her.

"Yes." The tremor in her voice betrayed her nervousness.

"All right. Hang on, baby. We're going to lose him... right... now." He pulled onto the shoulder, making a fast turn and cutting across the median to the other side of the divided highway. Pulling back up onto the road, he

pulled alongside an eighteen-wheeler, staying even with the huge truck's cab.

He watched behind them as they headed north, back toward Albuquerque. When Wilson's El Camino didn't show up after thirty minutes, Dell breathed a sigh of relief. They both relaxed.

Chapter Seven

Dell slowed, pulling off the main highway into a dirt and gravel lot where he parked. A sign over the covered porch proclaimed the place to be the Corn Maiden Café. They got out to go inside the little old building. The hand written sign taped to the window above the open sign advertised homemade food. He met Alison at the front of the truck, reaching out to take her hand. She laced her fingers through his as they walked up the steps to the porch.

One of the locals nodded, giving them a friendly smile Dell nodded back, holding the door for Alison as they went inside. It took a few seconds for his eyes to adjust to the dimmer light of the café. Something in the little restaurant smelled wonderful.

Glancing around he saw they were the only customers except for a couple of people at a table by the back wall. Dell hadn't seen that much beadwork on a person since the last big pow wow he'd attended. The couple watched him as if he were some sort of alien. It creeped him out some. He looked away, ignoring them.

He guided Alison over to a small table by the window. He could see his truck as well as a good distance down the highway. A young girl in a colorful skirt and tee shirt stopped at their table, setting down two glasses of water.

“We have grilled chicken with biscuits, mashed potatoes, and broccoli. There’s salad too and brownies for dessert.” The girl waited for them to decide.

Dell glanced at Alison. She nodded slightly. He looked back at the girl with a polite smile. “That’s fine.” They had a quiet lunch with Dell keeping an eye on the road outside in between eating and watching Alison. She nibbled on a brownie, taking tiny delicate bites. He sighed, shifting in his

chair. He wondered if she knew how much the soft sound of her teeth sliding along the fork turned him on.

“We need somewhere to lay low for a while. Somewhere cheap.” He tried to distract himself from his impure thoughts concerning the various uses of her mouth. He glanced at the waitress who sat with a couple of locals, then back at Alison. She licked the fork.

With a soft low moan, he reached across the table, catching her hand and taking her fork away. He laid the offending utensil on the plate then gazed into her eyes. “I can’t take any more.”

“Any more what?” Alison asked.

“Any more of the way you’re driving me crazy with that fork.” He rubbed his thumb in a slow circle over her palm. She shivered. He smiled.

“Oh, you mean this?” She picked up the fork in her other hand, holding it up. Her jade green eyes blazed with passion and mischief.

“Don’t you dare,” he growled softly.

Very slowly, she lifted the fork to her lips then stuck her tongue out. She licked each tine front and back, then put it in her mouth, sucking on it, never taking her eyes from his. He could barely breathe. She pulled it out of her mouth and gave him a faint smile. “Dare what?”

He let his head drop with a chuckle. “You know what, you evil woman.”

“Ready to go?” she asked, her voice innocent.

“You know damn good and well it would be embarrassing for me to stand up right now.” He clenched his teeth in a forced smile when he felt her hook her foot behind his leg then move it over his calf. With his cock hardening fast, he looked away, trying to think of anything but the growing heat in his belly.

She's perfect, Dell thought as her bare foot slid up the inside of his thigh. His gaze locked with hers. Alison's foot pressed against his crotch. Dell shut his eyes tight as she rocked her foot. *Ohh damn*. He gripped the edge of the table.

"Alison..." Dell wanted to bury himself deep inside her. He wanted to shove all the dishes off the table and lay her on the red and white checked tablecloth. Then he'd push her dress up...

Suddenly, her foot disappeared from between his legs. He heard the fork clink against the plate. He looked up to see the waitress, along with one of

the locals, standing beside their table. Oh great, he thought. *Here's where we get thrown out.*

"Name's Bear, spokesman for the colony. Rain here says you folks need some help." The heavily bearded guy sounded like a rock slide.

"Dell Blackfeather. Help?" Dell asked, trying to remember what they'd said that could have given these people that impression.

"Your auras have a lot of sulphur yellow and reds in them." The girl, Rain, motioned to the air around them. "You have a lot of trouble following you."

Dell glanced at Alison. She appeared to be taking these people seriously. He looked back at them. "Well, we could use somewhere to stay for a few days."

"The colony has a campsite a couple miles from town. There's a fire pit with plenty of wood and a little cabin. You're welcome to stay there long as you need to." Bear waved at someone in the back.

"Uh, thanks. We don't have much money. We can't pay a lot," Dell didn't quite know what to think about these people.

Bear frowned. "Didn't ask for money."

"Thank you." Alison smiled at them. "We appreciate the help. Is there something we can do in return for your help?"

"It's our karma. We help where we can." Bear sent Rain for paper. When she brought it to him, he drew them a map to the cabin. "It's clean, and there's even a sweat lodge we put in a few months ago. Maggie will put a basket together for you."

"Sounds like a nice place." Dell took the map, studying it.

"It's real quiet. Nobody will bother you there. You can make all the noise you want." Rain grinned, winked at Dell, then hurried off. He felt himself blushing as he shot Alison a helpless look.

A woman they hadn't seen before came out of the kitchen with a large basket. She set it on the floor beside Dell. She didn't look at them and spoke tersely. "A few things to keep you from starving out there in the woods."

"You must be Maggie. Thank you." Alison's voice was warm. The woman thawed visibly. Dell felt a burst of pride in the way Alison dealt with the taciturn woman.

“Bear will put the word out the cabin is occupied,” Maggie assured them. “Nobody will bother you. You just come on back here when you need anything.”

Chapter Eight

Dell glanced over at Alison as he pulled out of the parking lot. She waved at the little group of townspeople. “Um, you want to explain to me what just happened back there?”

“They’re hippies.” She raised her eyebrows at him. “Don’t tell me you’ve never run into any.”

“Well, no, at least not close up like that. You seemed to know your way around though.”

“Ryan is a Hollywood divorce lawyer. You’d be surprised how many entertainers are closet hippies,” she explained. “After a few parties, you learn how to blend in.”

“Yeah, but what was all that aura karma stuff? And why were those two wearing all the beadwork staring at me like I was some kind of special dessert?”

“Well, Rain apparently is able to see auras, what they believe are people’s souls. Karma is what decides what happens to you in your next life. The more good karma you build up, the better your next incarnation will be. As for the others, you are Native American, sweetheart. Some of them think you have more knowledge and wisdom than the rest of us.” She grinned at his shocked expression.

“That’s nuts. I’m not any different from any other man.”

“I don’t know. I can’t say I know any other men who get turned on by a fork.” She batted her eyes at him.

He rolled his eyes. “Yeah, well, you’re going to pay for that little performance.”

“Promises promises.” Alison laughed.

Dell sighed. “Oh well, it helped us out, so who am I to argue with it? The turn should be coming up. Help me watch for it.”

* * * *

The cabin turned out to be clean, well kept, and situated near a pretty little spring with its attendant creek. They gathered up the things the locals had given them then went inside. Dell set the basket on the table.

“It’s still pretty early. What do you want to do?” he asked. “We could take a walk or something.”

“Why don’t you relax while I put things away?” Alison walked up behind him, placing a gentle hand on his back.

“You don’t mind?” He wanted to go out, to let the peacefulness of the place soak into him. He wanted to stop everything for a while, to just enjoy being free.

“Go. I’ll be right here when you get back.” She smiled. He could see the understanding in her eyes.

Dell wandered down to the creek, listening to the water splashing over the rocks. A knot of tension he hadn’t realized he had loosened and began to unravel. He looked at the clear water of the spring, reaching out to hold his hand under the small waterfall.

Suddenly, he began taking off his yellow plaid shirt. It seemed like a lifetime ago he’d put it though it had just been that morning. He laid the shirt on a rock, quickly took off the rest of his clothes, then stepped into the water.

The cold shocked him, but he adjusted to it within a few minutes. He swam over to the waterfall and stood beneath it. He could feel all the muck and dirt of the past five years being stripped away by the pounding water.

Sometime later, he sat on the rock, letting the heat of the sun soak into him and dry his hair. For the first time, his thoughts were free of everything but the simple pleasure of a peaceful afternoon. His thoughts turned to Alison. He grinned, remembering the way she’d teased him with the fork. He didn’t bother getting dressed. Dell’s cock twitched. The picnic table he’d seen when they got to the cabin would be perfect. First I’ll bend her over, he thought, smiling to himself. *Then I’ll take her slow and easy.*

Dell stopped for a second. With a deep breath he forced himself to relax. He thought of Alison’s face as she came. The desire in his belly settled into a white hot glow. Finally ready to face anything, he gathered up his clothes heading back to the cabin and the woman who was fast becoming his refuge.

* * * *

When he walked up to the cabin, he didn't see her right away. "Alison?" he called softly, not wanting to break the quiet.

"Over here." She answered from the other side of the cabin where the picnic table sat.

He walked around the corner of the cabin and stopped, stunned at the transformation in her. Alison stood with her back to him putting something on the old table. She had changed into a white dress that made her look like some kind of unearthly creature. Like something from a fairy tale. His breath caught as he stepped closer, slipping his hands over her waist. He tossed his clothes on the bench as he pulled her back against him.

Looking over her shoulder, he could see the dark shadow of her nipples through the thin cotton of the dress. She relaxed with a soft sigh. Dell shivered with the lust rushing through him. "I want to make love to you in the sun."

This was the rest of his fantasy. Reaching out, he brushed his fingers over her nipples, rolling them, tugging them gently, making her breath catch. He moved to the line of buttons, unfastening the first one.

"You're gorgeous," he whispered, then licked her ear. She smelled like vanilla. "I'm going to finish what you started in the café. I'm going to bend you over and fuck you on the picnic table."

Dropping a kiss on her shoulder, he worked the next two buttons then slipped his fingers down between her breasts. He brushed his hands slowly over her soft skin. She felt like hot satin under his caress. He cupped her breasts for a moment, giving them a gentle squeeze before moving his hands down over her belly.

"Ohh Dell." She moaned softly as he slid his hands over her hips, gathering up the skirt of the dress and lifting it to reveal the plain white cotton panties she wore. Something about the old fashioned underwear made his cock throb. He hooked his fingers in the waistband and pulled them down.

"Hold onto the table," he instructed her, his voice husky. "I'm going to fuck you." He reached for his jeans to get one of the condoms he'd put in the

pocket. She did as he told her. Tearing open the packet with his teeth, he let go of her just long enough to put it on.

Alison arched herself back toward him. Dell brushed his hands over her bare ass, sliding his thumbs up the cleft. She shivered.

Leaning against her, he kissed the back of her neck. "So soft and warm," he whispered. He covered her hands with his free hand, lacing his fingers with hers. He took her, sinking into her hot, wet body with a low moan.

She humbled him with her acceptance of him. Dell blinked back tears. He pulled her hands away from the table, pushing her forward until she lay against the sun warmed wood. Sliding his hands over her back, he began to move until there was nothing in the world for him except her. Alison's moans as he drove himself deep into her broke down the last of his defenses. Plunging into her, he let the last of his bitterness go. Dell slipped his hand over her belly, moving down to her clit. He teased the little nub until she couldn't keep still. "Come for me, baby. Come now."

She moaned his name, tightening around his cock as she came. That he could give her such pleasure floored him. His balls drew up. He cried out his release. Shuddering, he lay against her, holding her, kissing her neck and shoulder.

Stepping away from her, he helped her stand. He lifted her into his arms, carrying her into the cabin. Not sure if what he felt was love, he didn't say anything. There would be time later. Right now, he needed her, needed to drown himself in her body, and to fill her up with himself.

Chapter Nine

Alison sat on the front porch of the Corn Maiden Cafe chatting with Maggie and Rain, while Dell helped Bear frame the new addition they were adding to the little building. She enjoyed visiting the ladies. Alison wondered if Dell thought about staying in the quiet town.

She turned to watch a large black SUV pull into the little gravel parking lot. The passenger door opened. A woman stepped out. Alison froze, her cup of herbal tea half way to her lips. She recognized the tall, artificially endowed blonde. Her teeth clenched. The last time Alison had seen the actress she had been in Alison's bed under Ryan.

Tara Zeller walked toward the steps of the porch. Dell came around the corner, his shirtless chest glistening with sweat. He slowed, waiting for the starlet to precede him up the steps. She looked at him over her sunglasses, then turned, walking up the steps with an exaggerated sway in her walk.

Dell followed her up the steps. He slipped around the actress to sit down on the porch swing with Alison. Alison didn't miss the glare Tara Zeller gave Dell. Alison handed him a glass of iced tea.

"We're closed." Rain gave the actress a sullen stare.

Tara waved dismissively at Rain. "So open. We're here for lunch."

"Sorry. Can't do that. Don't feel like cooking today," Maggie said. "Besides, we're remodeling."

Alison watched Ryan stroll up. He hadn't seen her yet and that suited her just fine. He went directly to Tara, ignoring everyone else.

"What's wrong, muffin?" he asked.

"These mean people won't open," Tara said in baby talk.

Ryan turned to look at their little group. Alison saw his eyes widen when he recognized her.

"Alison. You're behind this, aren't you?" Ryan's voice sounded harsh.

"Hello, Ryan. I'm afraid you're mistaken."

“Don’t lie to me. I know you too well, Alison.” Ryan sneered.

Beside her, Dell started to stand up. Alison caught the waistband of his jeans, stopping him. He settled back. She shifted her hand, rubbing the small of his back. Her eyes stayed fixed on Ryan.

“You don’t know me at all, Ryan. You never did,” she said sadly.

Dell reached over, resting his hand on her knee. “Well, I need to get back to work. Will you be all right?”

“I’ll be fine.” She smiled at him, taking his empty glass. He leaned over giving her a slow kiss.

Dell walked past the Hollywood beautiful people, pointedly ignoring them. Alison watched Ryan’s jaw tighten. She laughed silently. Her ex-husband could never handle competition of any kind.

“I think you need to apologize, Ryan.” Alison forced herself to stay polite.

“Apologize? For what?” Ryan laughed. “We are not the ones being unreasonable here. Now, we’ll have lunch and—”

“We’re closed. What part of that don’t you understand?” Maggie asked.

“Alison?” Ryan looked at her, raising one eyebrow.

“Why ask me? If Maggie says they’re closed, then they’re closed.”

Ryan glared at her, then turned to Tara. “Why don’t you go wait in the car, precious? We’ll go back to the hotel. You can get a nice massage and spa treatment to relax your nerves.”

“Well, all right, but I want a special treat tonight.” Tara prissed, her voice like a little girl’s.

“What kind of treat, sweet pea?” Ryan asked, his voice saccharine sweet.

Alison glanced at Maggie and Rain. She rolled her eyes. Her friends grimaced.

Tara gave Alison a malicious look. “I want the Indian boy.”

“Your wish is my command.” Ryan gave her a light swat on the butt, sending her off.

Alison took a deep breath, unclenching her teeth. A cold anger settled over her.

Everyone watched her go, not breaking the silence until the door of the SUV closed. Ryan turned back to Alison, giving her a pointed look. “May I have a word with you in private?”

Alison nodded at Maggie and Rain. "It's all right." They went into the restaurant. She stayed seated on the porch swing.

"You're looking good, Alison." Ryan gave her a once-over.

"Thank you," Alison said carefully, keeping her voice neutral.

"We're staying in Santa Fe. Tara will spend the rest of the day in the spa."

"That's nice." Alison kept her voice pleasant with effort.

"I'll be back. We can take a room in that little bed and breakfast down the street." He looked her over again. Ryan's assumption that she would hop right into bed with him infuriated her.

"Forget it, Ryan. We're divorced. Whatever we had died when you decided to start fooling around with your clients."

"You don't mean that. I'll be back in about an hour."

"Oh, but I do mean it. You don't have bed privileges anymore."

"Tell your Indian his wishes just came true. He'll be spending the night in Tara's bed." Ryan's smirk made her want to hit him.

"There won't be anyone in Tara's bed, but you," It took everything Alison had to resist the urge to shove him off the porch.

Ryan laughed. "Be sure he has a shower before I get back." He hurried off toward his vehicle.

She watched him go. When the black SUV had disappeared from sight, Alison stood then carried her cup and Dell's glass inside. A deep sadness settled over her. Now that Ryan knew she and Dell were here, he'd never leave her alone. She would have to leave. She wondered if Dell would go with her.

Chapter Ten

They sat in the large antique claw foot tub. A fire burned in the fireplace. A bottle of Maggie's homemade plum wine sat on the chair they used as a makeshift table. Two half-empty jam jars of the fragrant pale amethyst liquid sat with it beside an empty condom wrapper. The steam from the water made Alison's hair curl. The fine sheen of sweat from the heat made her skin glow. The pink blush spreading over her breasts made his cock twitch deep inside her. He took a deep breath, trying to relax like Bear had told him and the book on tantric sex instructed.

Alison leaned her head back, resting it against his shoulder with a sigh. Her breathing began get faster. He smiled. Time to distract her from their bodies being joined together.

"Well, it was nice while it lasted. I'm thinking we can head south. Maybe see what's around El Paso." Dell bent to nuzzle the back of her neck.

"I know you liked it here. I'm sorry—"

"Shh. I do wish you had let me stay to meet him when he showed up again though."

"And do what?"

"Punching him out sounded like a good option to me." Dell nibbled on her ear smiling when she shivered.

"He'd just have had you arrested."

"Good point," he whispered, sliding his hands over her shoulders.

Alison settled back against him with a quiet moan.

Dell groaned softly. "The book says you're not supposed to move. Just think about me inside you, how it feels."

"Sorry," she said breathlessly.

"Ohh, girl, this feels so good."

"Where," she gasped, "where did you get this idea?"

“Guy talk with Bear. He gave me the book. The bath was all my idea. Ohh fuck Alison.” Dell moaned, shifting his hips. He didn't think he'd last much longer the urge to thrust was becoming too strong.

* * * *

“Ohh baby, I'm sorry...have to...move...” Alison gasped, rocking against him. Between the wonderful full feeling of Dell's cock inside her and the heat of the water she thought her bones were melting.

She bowed her head. He ran one hand down her back then slid it over her waist to her belly. Dell told her the book instructed the woman to think only about her lover joined with her. *Like I could think of anything else with his big, beautiful cock inside me.* After this, she thought, soapy hot water is going to be a serious turn-on.

Dell's thumb pressed into her navel making slow circles around the edge then dipping inside. She groaned. She loved having her navel played with. Fire rose up inside her, she had to come, had to move.

"Dell, please, I need to come."

* * * *

"Uhn, yeah, I think it's time. Raise up slow." Dell tightened his grip on her hips, helping her.

"Please," she begged, "fuck me." The desperation in her voice made his cock throb.

"I will baby, I will." Dell

He shifted until they were on their knees. Pushing her forward, he wrapped an arm around her waist. She held onto the edge of the old claw foot tub, laying her head against her arms with a low moan. Dell slid his free hand slowly up her spine. He began to move in slow, steady strokes.

"Ohh Dell, I feel you so deep," she moaned.

“Don't move.” His voice came out hoarsely. “Just let me take care of you baby. Let me make you come.”

She nodded as he leaned over her, moving in slow, restrained movements. He groaned, moving his fingers over her clit. She shuddered, tightening, her release breaking over her like a sudden summer storm.

"You are so fucking beautiful when you come," he growled in her ear. She shook in his arms, bucking back against him, moaning. His cock ached for relief but he forced himself to wait. He loved the way she rippled around him, milking him as her body tried to pull him deeper inside.

"Ohh Alison..." Dell stroked her clit gently. She whimpered. The sound sent him racing toward his orgasm. He thrust as he pulled her against him, pressing her clit hard. She gasped and screamed.

His body tensed. His balls drew up. Then his cock spasmed as he came. He cried out.

When his breathing slowed he kissed her shoulder. "All right?" She nodded. "I'm going to pull out now."

He sat back giving her hips a tug. "Come on, let me hold you."

With a deep sigh she sank onto his lap, laying her head on his shoulder. Dell brushed her damp curls back from her face. "You are incredible Alison."

"So are you." She smiled up at him. He touched his lips to hers in a soft, gentle kiss.

* * * *

Dell took one last turn around the cabin, making sure they left everything the way they'd found it. Alison had walked down to the creek while he loaded the truck. He sighed as he walked up behind her, draping his arm around her shoulders.

"Ready to go?"

She nodded, then turned to walk toward the truck, her arms crossed tightly over her chest, her head bowed. Dell opened the door for her then went around to the driver's side to get in. As he came around the front, he looked up to see the rising sun turning the tear tracks on her face to tiny rivulets of gold.

Panic knotted up his stomach. He had never been able to handle a woman's tears. Getting in the truck, he sat for a moment in silence. Finally, he turned to her, taking her arm, and pulling her across the seat into his arms.

"What's wrong, baby?" He pressed his lips to her hair.

"I'm sorry for all this."

“All what, baby? There’s nothing to be sorry for. It’s just time to move on, that’s all.”

“You don’t have to. You could take me into Santa Fe and come back.”

“Why would I want to do that?” He brushed her hair back, wiping away her tears with his thumb.

“I know how much you like it here.” She sniffed.

“I like it here because you’re here. I like it anywhere you are.” He kissed her forehead.

“You’re sure?” She looked into his eyes.

“I’m sure,” he answered. “Let’s go say goodbye to everyone.”

Chapter Eleven

They drove south, passing back through Albuquerque before stopping at a small truck stop to have breakfast. Dell slid into the seat across from Alison. She smiled at him as she picked up the menu. The way they seemed to be two parts of a whole still amazed her.

Dell ordered biscuits and gravy when the waitress came back. Alison ordered the same. She watched him lean back with a sigh as he closed his eyes. "Tired?"

"No," he smiled without opening his eyes, "comfortable."

She chuckled. *Comfortable sums it up pretty well.*

The waitress arrived with their food. For a moment Alison contemplated teasing Dell with the way she ate. *No, I'll get him when we stop for lunch.* She turned her attention to her food.

* * * *

A man watched them from the shadows of a booth in the back. He reached up to adjust his hat making sure his face was hidden. He did not want them to see him too soon.

* * * *

The waitress handed Dell the check. Alison took it from him. "My turn," she said with a smile. "You can pay me back later."

Dell returned her smile with a chuckle. "I think I can handle that. Bear made me keep the book."

She lifted one eyebrow. "Oh really?"

"Really." He mimicked her raised eyebrow. "Pay the nice people. I'll be right back. He slid out of the booth while Alison got her purse.

She handed the waitress the money for the bill. The girl hurried off to the register. Letting her mind wander, she watched the people coming and going, wondering who they were, where they were going. The waitress came back with her change and gave it to her.

“Oh yeah, the man in the back said to give this to you.” The girl handed Alison a folded scrap of paper.

Puzzled, Alison took the note opening it. *Well, hello there, little lady,* she read. She felt the blood drain from her face and looked up. Wilson Long tipped his hat at her from the booth in the dark corner near the kitchen doors. He raised his hand and waved at her, wagging his fingers, an unholy smile spread across his face.

She closed her eyes for a second trying to get her panic under control. When she opened them again, he was gone. She wished Dell would hurry back. Pressing her hand to her chest, squeezing her eyes shut against the tears that stung her eyes, she tried to take a few deep breaths to calm herself. Wilson wasn't stupid. Surely he wouldn't try anything in a crowded restaurant.

* * * *

Dell strolled back to their table from the men's room. His peaceful relaxed feeling disappeared when he saw Alison. She was ghostly pale, obviously shaken. He quickly slid into the booth next to her, putting his arm around her shoulders. She jumped, stifling a scream as she opened her eyes. She relaxed with a deep sigh and caught his hand. Her hand shook. Alison's obvious relief at seeing him sent a chill through him.

“What is it, baby? What happened?” He glanced around the dining area for some hint of the threat. If one of the truckers had hit on Alison, he would beat the crap out of him.

She handed him a piece of paper, her hand shaking like a leaf. “Wilson is here.” Her whisper sounded tense, fearful.

“Ah, shit. Come on. We're out of here. Did you already pay?” At her nod, he got up, sweeping her along toward the door.

“Hey, you folks all right?” the waitress asked Dell in a concerned tone.

“We're fine, thanks. She's just feeling a little ill. All she needs is some fresh air.” He hurried through the door, his arm firmly around Alison.

At the truck, he opened the door for her, helping her in. "Lock it." He shut the door, waiting just long enough to see her push the lock button down before hurrying around to the driver's side.

Dell felt a cold chill when he saw the note under the windshield wiper. Grabbing it, he got in and started up the truck. He opened the note, feeling sick. *Your little lady is mine*, the note said. *It wasn't very nice to call the Feds*. Dell swore again, shoving the note into his pocket with the one Wilson had given Alison.

"Everything will be fine, baby. I told you before, I won't let him hurt you." Dell backed the truck out, heading out onto the highway.

"Promise me you won't let him hurt you either." She reached over, laying her hand on his thigh. He reached down, covering her hand with his, giving it a reassuring squeeze.

"I have no intention of letting him hurt either of us." Dell kept a wary eye on the rearview mirror. He didn't see Wilson's El Camino behind them. "Help me watch for a pay phone."

"Who are you going to call?"

"The FBI first, then I'm going to call an old friend who lives on the Mescalero Reservation. It just might be a good idea to get a gun."

They rode for a while in silence. Dell picked up his pack of cigarettes. He shook one out, getting ready to light it. Suddenly, he stopped, realizing it would be the first one he'd had since their first night together. He smiled as he flipped the lighter shut, tossing it back onto the dash. He crumpled the cigarette in the ashtray along with the rest of the pack. He chuckled at the puzzled look she gave him.

"You've been a good influence on me."

His heart felt lighter when she laughed softly.

"So it's my fault you're disgustingly perfect now?" she asked, her voice teasing.

"Yep, all your fault. You know what that means, don't you?"

"Do I really want to know?"

"Oh yeah, I think you do." He grinned.

"I'm afraid to ask."

"It means you are going to have to keep me in line." He wiggled his eyebrows, leering at her.

* * * *

The small gas station had a pay phone. Dell pulled up beside it after he filled the truck's tank up. He quickly gave the information on Wilson along with their direction of travel to a grateful Special Agent Anderson, who gave him instructions to let Wilson tail him.

"What do you mean let him tail me? I don't want him within a thousand miles of me. I sure don't want him anywhere close to Alison." Dell glanced at the woman who had stolen his heart in the few days he had known her. She saw him looking at her and waved.

"Just don't get too far ahead of him, that's all. We'd have had him last time if you hadn't dropped off the radar for nearly a week to screw around." Anderson's tone was belligerent.

Something cold settled in Dell's stomach. He felt ill. How had the feds known they had stopped to lay low? Unless they had someone following them. "Yeah, well, I see him again I'll let you know."

Hanging up, he stared thoughtfully at the phone for a moment. He had a distinct feeling he and Alison were being used to draw Wilson out. He didn't like it, not one little bit.

Dialing a new number, Dell hoped his old buddy Jeff was home and not out fishing or fooling around. Luck smiled on him. Jefferson Baldomero answered on the third ring.

"Hey, Jeff, you still in the insurance and protection business?" Dell asked.

"Dell! I heard you were in prison for murder, man. Dolly cried for three days. What did you do? Escape?"

"No, they let me out. They got some proof someone else did it. You remember Wilson?"

"Wilson... The weird guy who smiles too much?" Jefferson asked.

"Yeah, the feds have been after him for a long time so they were real pleased when they got evidence he did it." Dell turned to watch Alison. She pulled her hair up into a ponytail. His stomach gave a little lurch.

"Well, damn, man, I'm happy for you. Why you need insurance?" Jefferson asked, his voice puzzled.

"Because the feds gave me some money and tossed me out with instructions to call if I saw Wilson, like they were sure I'd see him." Briefly,

he explained things to Jeff. “So, I need some insurance, man, because damned if I’m not feeling like bait right about now.”

“Sounds like. Well, I’ll send one of the guys to meet you, probably John. He’ll have your policy. He’ll be wearing a butt ugly, buffalo puke, straw cowboy hat.”

“Good, thanks, man, I appreciate it. Tell Dolly I said hi.” Dell hung up. He got back in the truck. Alison smiled at him. He leaned over, touching his lips to hers in what he intended as a quick peck. The silky sweet flavor of her lips made his stomach clench. He deepened the kiss, slipping his tongue in to twine with hers.

Pulling away from her, he sat there in silence for a few minutes before starting the engine and pulling out onto the highway. He wasn’t quite sure what was going on with the FBI. He didn’t want to scare Alison. He’d just keep his suspicions to himself for right now.

Chapter Twelve

By the time they stopped for lunch, Alison was laughing at his silly jokes as she listened to his fishing stories. The little bar and grill in the small town they stopped in on the edge of the reservation had sawdust on the floor and the best fries in the world.

Dell watched the door. Finally, a man walked in who had to be John. He smiled slightly. Jeff had been right. The hat did look like a buffalo had puked on it. He got up, casually walking over to where the man seated himself at the bar.

“John?” Dell asked. The man looked up with a grin.

“Yeah?”

“Jefferson said you’d have something for me. Name’s Dell.”

“Yeah. Sorry I’m late. There was a rock slide on the road.” John motioned for Dell to pull up a bar stool and sit down. He leaned on the bar waving at the waitress.

“You got my package?” Dell asked.

John nodded at the bored girl who came to take his order. “Coffee, Sandy,” he told her with a wink. She rolled her eyes as she walked off. “You got the payment?” He turned back to Dell.

“Yeah.” Dell watched John reach into his scruffy denim jacket. The man pulled out a box, carefully wrapped in brown paper. He took it then passed the ten folded hundred dollar bills to John who quickly tucked them into his pocket.

The waitress delivered John's coffee. They sat there for a few minutes in silence, drinking their coffee. Dell sighed.

“Jefferson said to tell you to be careful.”

“Tell him I will. I have a good reason to be very careful,” Dell replied. He turned, gazing at Alison, who nibbled on a rather long French fry. Dell watched him turn to look over his shoulder at Alison.

“Damn,” John said, his voice reverent. “She that good on other things?”

“Better.” Dell swallowed hard then took a deep breath. He reached over, smacking John’s arm lightly. “Quit lusting after my woman.”

John laughed, taking another sip of the coffee then set the cup down in front of him. “I leave first. Give it ten minutes, then you can go.”

Dell watched John walk out of the bar. He picked up the package then went back to the booth where Alison idly drew spirals in the pool of ketchup on her plate. He sat down across from her.

“Where the hell did you learn to eat like that?” he asked her.

“Like what?” she asked innocently then sucked a drop of ketchup off her little finger. He had no doubt she knew exactly *what*. He wanted to find out what her mouth felt like, what that tongue of hers felt like licking the slit at the tip of his cock.

Dell laughed softly. “You know damn good and well like what, girl,” he said. “You got half the men in here hard.” He reached across the table, catching her hand and pulled pulling it across. Taking her fingers into his mouth one at a time, he sucked the salt and ketchup off each one. Her lips parted, her beautiful emerald eyes darkening and locking on his. He decided that second he would find a secluded place to pull off the road. He'd go down on her, he thought, and maybe she'd wrap those beautiful lips around his--

The waitress walked up, jerking him out of his fantasy when she tossed the check onto the table. “Geez, get a room, you two.”

Alison blushed. Dell chuckled. “Let’s go.”

Dell followed Alison up to the front of the bar and grill, resting his hand lightly on her back. He could feel a simmering current of desire coursing through his fingers straight to his groin, making it tingle pleasantly. *Yep, might be better to get a room after all and fuck ourselves into next week.*

“I’m going to get in the truck,” Alison said as Dell got out his wallet. He took out a twenty to pay for lunch.

“Okay, I’ll be right out.” Dell stopped at the counter to pay the bill, picking up a toothpick.

* * * *

Alison walked outside heading toward the truck. She heard someone behind her half a second before a clammy hand covered her mouth and nose, cutting off her breath. Her assailant's grip tightened, cutting off her scream. *Wilson!* She dropped her purse, struggling as he rushed her toward his black El Camino. When he shoved her into the vehicle, she coughed then sucked in air, filling her lungs to scream.

Wilson held a large Bowie knife against her side, forcing her to slide across the seat. "Don't even think of it, darlin." He grinned at her. "Buckle your seat belt. Wouldn't want you to get hurt now."

Alison did as he wanted, her hands shaking.

"Relax, little lady. I have big plans for you and me. For Dell too." He smiled at her, his eyes lit with an unholy glee.

Alison shivered, her blood running cold. "If you leave him out of this, I'll do whatever you want." She spoke slowly, trying to keep her voice calm.

"Oh I couldn't do that. I wouldn't want Dell to miss all the fun." Wilson smiled.

She shrank back against the door. Wilson laughed as he stopped the car at the edge of the parking lot. He reached over, grabbing her arm, dragging her across the seat and wrapping his arm around her.

"You're a soft one. I'm going to enjoy this." He leaned close, giving her ear a quick lick and whispered, "Do you scream?"

Alison shook her head quickly.

"You will." Wilson's silky tone vanished as he shoved her roughly back across the seat.

* * * *

Dell stepped out into the bright afternoon sunshine and froze. Alison's purse lay on the sidewalk behind his truck, its contents spilled out. He quickly picked it up, looking around the parking lot for her.

A car horn honking jerked his attention to the black El Camino poised at the exit from the parking lot. Wilson grinned at him, tipped his hat, then pulled out onto the highway. Dell could see Alison in the vehicle sitting close to the killer. She looked at him, pleading for help with wide eyes, her expression terrified.

Dell's knees went weak. He felt like throwing up. He couldn't move for a long agonizing moment, then he ran to the truck and jumped in. He started to put the gun on the seat, but stopped. An idea began to form. If he had figured right about this, his friends from the FBI wouldn't be far away. Sighing heavily, he murmured a short prayer for Alison's safety, then got out, going back inside the bar to find a phone.

Thinking over what he would say to the FBI agents, an image of Alison's face rose up before him. Her terrified expression made his heart hurt. He picked up the receiver, quickly dialing.

"Get here now," Dell snapped when Davis answered.

"What happened?" Special Agent Davis sounded puzzled.

"You got what you wanted. I hope you're happy. He has her." Dell fought to keep his voice calm. He couldn't breathe, thinking about what might be happening to Alison while he tried to get some help.

"What *I* wanted? Mr. Blackfeather, what happened?" Davis's patient tone grated on Dell's nerves.

"Haven't you been listening to me? Wilson has Alison! Get your people you have following me in gear and arrest him, because I'm going after him in about two minutes. If *I* catch him first, he's dead." Dell clenched the receiver, his knuckles white, resisting the urge to rip the phone out of the wall.

Davis swore. "All right," he took a deep breath, "all right, relax. Stay where you are. Special Agent Matthews will be there in a few minutes."

"Matthews," Dell's anger settled into a cold knot in his stomach.

"Yeah, he'll coordinate with the local—"

"He's taking her onto the Res. I don't need the local police. It's your jurisdiction." Dell's voice shook.

"We still have to work with the locals. I know it's hard, but you need to be patient. I'll be there as soon as I can."

"What about Alison? Who's going to help her?" Dell asked. He wanted to cry. He had promised he would keep her safe. He hadn't done it. He'd let her down. Now he had to do everything he could to make it up to her. He only hoped she'd still be alive to forgive him when he got to her.

"We are. But you need to be patient. Don't go off after them by yourself. That just might get her and you killed." Davis hung up.

Dell put the receiver down then went over to sit in the booth where he'd had lunch with Alison. He watched the door for the FBI Agent, tapping his foot impatiently. The waitress set a cup of coffee down in front of him.

"Sandy, right?" he asked, catching her hand.

"Yeah," she said warily.

"You know Jefferson?" he asked, pleased when she nodded. "Do me a favor. Call him. Tell him Dell wants him to keep an eye out for Wilson." The girl nodded. "Tell him I'll be in touch." He let the girl go.

Chapter Thirteen

Agent Matthews walked into the little bar and grill. He stood out like a sore thumb in his dark grey business suit. Dell watched the sharply dressed man grimace at the sawdust working its way into his shoes as he made his way over to the booth.

“Mr. Blackfeather.” Matthews held out his hand.

Dell just stared at the young agent. Matthews dropped his hand as he sat down. “I understand there’s been an incident—”

“An incident? A crazy serial killer son of a bitch snatches my girlfriend out of the parking lot, *right out from under your nose*, and you have the nerve to call it an *incident*?” Dell fought down the urge to drag the man across the table and beat the shit out of him. His hands ached. Dell made himself let go of the table edge, leaning back in his seat.

“I had orders not to interfere with the target at this time.” Matthews had a defensive note in his voice.

“Orders from whom?” Dell wanted the name of the person he’d be going after if anything happened to Alison, anything at all.

Matthews frowned. “I’m not at liberty to discuss this case with unauthorized personnel.”

Dell sighed, bowing his head for a moment. This pompous, little by-the-rules butt made his head hurt. He sighed again then looked up at the Agent. “Okay, fine, then there’s no reason for me to sit here and babysit you.” He stood, dropping a couple of dollars on the table, nodding at Sandy. Walking toward the door, he heard the FBI man sputtering behind him. He smiled grimly. He pushed through the door stepping, out into the soft summer evening sunshine.

Opening the door of his truck, he ignored the sound of the bar door slamming, followed by urgent, hurrying footsteps coming toward him. A

hand caught his shoulder, jerking him around. Dell spun, raising his fist, ready to knock Special Agent Matthews into next week.

Matthews let go, backing up, his hand going for the gun Dell could see hidden in a shoulder holster under his jacket.

“You shoot me, you son of a bitch, you better make sure I’m dead, because if I get up, I’ll kill you with my bare hands.” Dell glared at Matthews.

“I-I’m a federal officer,” Matthews said, stammering. “I-I—”

A calm deep voice dripping with authority cut Matthews off. “Agent Matthews, I do hope you weren’t about to draw your weapon on one of the victims in this case.”

Dell glanced over to see a casually dressed Agent Davis walking toward them. Davis nodded at Dell then fixed Matthews with an icy glare.

Matthews snapped to attention. “Sir! I—”

“Keep it up, Matthews, and you’ll be headed back to Quantico for retraining as a receptionist in the gift shop.” Davis waved the younger agent away. “Now, go get your car and help Thomas with logistics. And try to stay out of trouble.”

Dell watched Davis as Matthews hurried away. Davis turned toward him. “So, Wilson took Alison.” Davis sighed. “Let’s go get her back.”

“Took you long enough to get here. She could already be dead.” Dell’s voice cracked on the last word. He looked away from Davis, gazing at the sunset that shaded the sky from orange to midnight blue. The first star twinkled just above the trees. He made a wish. She couldn’t be gone, not when he’d just found her. They hadn’t had near long enough together. He took a deep shuddering breath, trying to stay calm.

“No, he won’t have done anything to her yet. That’s not how he works.” Davis rubbed his eyes. The man looked weary.

“How can you be sure?” Dell wanted to believe the Agent, but he was afraid they were still using him, so he didn’t.

“We have his M. O. from other cases. The profilers have done a thorough workup on him. We know pretty much what he’ll do. Now, you said he was heading toward the reservation?”

“Yeah, he made sure I saw he had her.” Dell shivered at the memory.

“Fine, let’s go then. You drive.” Davis walked around to get in the truck.

Dell got in and started the truck. He noticed for the first time his hands were shaking. He clenched his fists to still them. Panic wouldn't help Alison.

"While we have an extensive profile telling us what Wilson Long will do, we don't know what Alison will do. You're the key to that. You know her. Tell me about her." Davis's steady voice calmed Dell.

Dell took a deep breath. He began telling the FBI Agent everything he could think of about Alison as he pulled out onto the highway.

His first thought was how much Alison felt like home to him but he couldn't tell Davis that. "Alison is strong. She's not the type to have hysterics or panic. She's steady, you know?"

Davis nodded. "That's good, go on."

"She's always calm, in control." *Well, not always, Davis didn't need to know the details of that.* "But she's natural, not all stuck up with it." Dell licked his lips. He suddenly realized how much he'd come to need Alison in the short time they'd been together. His eyes stung. Dell blinked back tears.

Davis must have seen how broken he felt. "Alison is not Long's usual victim type. We'll get her back."

"But will she be alive when we do?" The question hung between them for several painful seconds.

"I hope so." Davis sighed. Dell hoped so to. Dammit I need her, he thought, I hope she needs me.

* * * *

Alison sat rigid, silent, while the man holding her captive chattered on about what great friends he and Dell were. She tried to look at the beautiful mountain scenery, hoping for some sign of civilization. They were on a reservation, the houses were few and far between. She should never have gone out to the truck alone.

She wanted to scream. Wilson had not stopped chattering since they'd pulled out of the parking lot at the bar and grill. She shivered. He seemed to want her to like him. Glancing at him from the corner of her eye, she saw he'd put the knife down on the seat next to his leg. Slowly, she began to form a plan.

“Well, hell, we even share the same women, so it was quite a surprise there to see he’d found a new girl and all, and didn’t tell his old pal Wilson.” He grinned at her.

“He didn’t tell me about you either,” she lied.

“He didn’t? Well, that wasn’t very nice at all, was it? After all the things I’ve done for him...helping him get rid of Elsie and all. Ungrateful is what it is.” Wilson flashed her a bright grin. “Just as well you wanted to come with me then, isn’t it?”

“Yeah.” Alison kept her voice low, trying to sound meek and agreeable. The last thing she wanted was to make Wilson angry.

Wilson looked at her, taking his eyes off the winding mountain road. She flinched swallowing hard as she glanced away from him. He laughed, an evil sound that made her hair stand on end. She shivered.

“You act like you’re cold. Or are you just trying to get me to let you snuggle up?”

Alison smiled. She hoped she looked convincing.

“Well then.” He reached over, pulling her across the seat and wrapping his arm tightly around her.

She forced herself to lean against him. Slowly, she began to work her hand toward the knife between them.

Chapter Fourteen

Dell listened to Davis talking on his cell phone. It sounded like the FBI man arranged for small planes and maybe helicopters to be in the air at the crack of dawn to help with the search. Davis disconnected his call then looked over at Dell.

“We have road blocks on all the main roads in and out of the reservation. There are agents stationed at the resorts as well.” Davis sighed like he knew none of their preparations would do any good.

“Wilson won’t go to a resort. He’ll find some old abandoned cabin or something to... to...” Dell couldn’t bring himself to finish.

“I know.”

“How are you going to find them then? Unless you got some sort of tracking device on his car or a little bird telling you his plans.” Dell struck the steering wheel with his fist in frustration.

“We don’t need to track him. He’ll come to us.” Davis smiled slightly. “He can’t help it. His ego and his need for attention won’t let him stay away.”

Dell's mouth dropped open. He shot Davis a shocked glare. “Attention? That’s what all this is about?”

“According to our profilers, Wilson is motivated by a strong need for attention, and a hatred of the people who don’t give him that attention.” Davis adopted a clinically detached tone as he told Dell exactly what kind of predator Wilson Long was. “Our Mr. Long is a sociopath, a serial killer. Sociopaths are born the way they are Dell, they cannot be cured. This need for attention is just icing on the cake. His goal is to degrade his victim as much as possible before he destroys. Somehow violence became tangled up with his sexual urges. For someone like Wilson it’s the kill that excites him, gets him off.

“That’s sick.” Dell shuddered.

“Yes,” Davis said.

* * * *

Alison felt the handle of the knife under her fingertips. It was almost time, the houses were closer together now as well as closer to the road. She slowly teased it away from Wilson’s leg. She kept her eyes on Wilson, watching for any hint he knew what she was doing. He kept up his chatter, trying to impress her with how he had followed them.

“I know Dell thought I didn’t see you two at the Painted Desert.” He grinned. “I probably wouldn’t have, but he drove right past the gift shop windows. Dell never was the smartest one in our little group.”

She made a noncommittal sound. He ignored her, still talking. Alison eased the knife up, preparing herself. She would stab him then grab the steering wheel. Somehow, she would stop the car. She would run to one of the houses she’d seen...

“I listened outside the window of your room in Albuquerque. Dell made you moan. I’ll make you scream.” He flashed an insane grin at her.

Horried, Alison stared at him. “You’re crazy,” she whispered.

The grin slipped, letting her see through to the real Wilson. Her blood turned to ice.

Her fingers closed around the handle of the knife. She raised it. Seeing the blinking red traffic light ahead, she got ready to make her move.

Wilson slowed to a stop. He turned his head to look for oncoming traffic. Alison straightened up. She thrust the knife toward Wilson. He swore, jerking away from her. He grabbed her hand, twisting it. She dropped the knife. Alison yanked her hand away. She didn’t wait to see if she’d done any damage. She scrambled out of the car and ran.

She heard him running behind her. A burst of adrenalin shot through her. The lights of the house she could see in the distance looked impossibly far away. Then his arms closed around her. He threw her to the ground.

Wilson pinned her, straddling her. She struggled to throw him off. He slapped her. The blow made her ears ring.

His voice was toneless as he dragged her to her feet. “That wasn’t a very nice thing to do, little lady, not one little bit.”

He started to pull her back toward the car. When she resisted, he picked her up, slinging her over his shoulder and carrying her back.

At the car, he shoved her inside then reached under the seat. "I didn't want to do this just yet, but you've forced me to change my plans." He pulled out a small bag, unzipping it. He tied her hands and feet, then taped her mouth shut. She tried to kick him. He dodged.

"Now, that's not very friendly." He shoved her back across the seat. Hitting her head on the window, she saw stars. Wilson laughed at her.

* * * *

Dell let the silence between him and Davis lengthen. Something about the way the FBI Agent acted didn't quite fit with someone who would use another person as bait for a serial killer.

"Why are you doing this?" Dell asked at last.

"It's my job."

"No, there's more to it than that. Why help me now when you were using us to draw Wilson out of hiding?"

Davis sighed heavily, looking out the window. Regret colored his voice. "For the record, this whole set up was not my idea. This whole fuckup is Anderson's. Wilson was never supposed to get this close to you." "Matthews should have arrested him when he made his move."

"Matthews. When I see him again, I'm going to kick his ass into next year." Dell tightened his grip on the steering wheel.

Davis gave him a hard look. "I'd rather you didn't."

"Uh huh, I'm sure. But that still doesn't answer my question. Why help me now?" Dell sped up, pulling around a slow moving car.

"Call it sympathy." Davis chewed on a hangnail.

Dell kept his eyes on the road. He had a sinking feeling he knew what Davis would say before he broke the silence. "Who was she? Your daughter?"

"My wife." Davis's voice sounded flat, unemotional. "He took her from the parking lot of the grocery store."

* * * *

Alison watched Wilson go inside to check into the small rundown motel. She shivered, trying to work her hands loose. The rope he'd used to tie her hands and feet cut into her skin, cutting off the circulation.

He came back with an old worn key. Reaching over, he brushed her hair back from her face. She flinched, trying to jerk away. Wilson laughed, wrapping his hand in her hair and jerking her toward him.

"Don't make me angry, little lady. I want this to last a long time." He leaned closer.

Alison held her breath, trying not to gag. The clear packing tape he had over her mouth kept her from screaming as he kissed her. He let go of her then drove around to the room he'd taken for the night.

Carrying her inside, he dropped her on the bed. She blinked away tears when her head smacked the headboard. She watched him turn the TV on before he went back out to the car. When he came back inside with the knife, she shut her eyes, turning her head away.

Feeling Wilson climb onto the bed, she thought about Dell. Where was he? She hoped he would find her before it was too late. She felt Wilson's breath against her ear. She shuddered.

"Scream all you want. No one will come," he whispered, slowly peeling the tape away from her mouth. "Try to kick me again or try to hit me, and I'll just kill you right now. That would make me sad since I wouldn't get to do all the wonderful things I have planned."

He cut the rope binding her then moved to the side of the bed between her and the door. She rubbed her wrists, moving as far from him as she could.

Chapter Fifteen

Dell sat in the motel room flipping through the channels on the muted TV. He listened in as Davis sat at the little table by the window talking to his people on his satellite phone. About time I called Jefferson, Dell thought, he should have had time to find something out. Dell picked up the room phone. He punched the button for an outside line then dialed Jefferson's number.

"Jeff, you heard anything on Wilson?" he asked when his friend answered.

"Dell, yeah, man, I just heard from Dolly's cousin Lee. Wilson checked into the roach motel Lee's stepbrother runs. Got a woman with him."

"Yeah, *my* woman. I want her back before he kills her. You got an address and phone number for that place?" Dell grabbed a pencil and paper out of the nightstand, ready to write.

"Sure, don't know if all the rooms got phones though." Jefferson gave him the number. "Good luck, man."

Dell looked at Davis for a few seconds debating whether to tell him or not. He looked at the number again then back at Davis.

"Davis, what do your profilers say Wilson will do if he's being chased?" Dell fluttered the paper with the phone number on it in the air.

"Chased?" Davis asked.

"Chased, harassed, pushed." Dell smiled.

"Well, he's always in control in these situations..." Davis chewed a thumbnail thoughtfully.

"What if we take control away from him?"

"It depends on what you mean by taking control away from him."

"I know where he is."

Davis raised his eyebrows.

“Friend of mine, a guy who grew up with me and Wilson and all, married a Mescalero girl and moved down here. Jefferson is a busy body. If anything is going on within a hundred miles of him, he knows about it. He owes me since Dolly was my girl to start with,” he added with a grim smile.

“We tried rushing a place where he'd holed up with a victim once. He was gone, and the girl was dead. It wasn't something I'd want to see twice.” The warning note in Davis's voice chilled Dell's blood.

“Then, we flush him out. We harass him and we don't let him have enough time to start his ritual crap. When he runs we catch him in the open where he can't do anything.” Dell grinned, picking up the phone. Davis returned his grin.

He dialed the motel number. The desk clerk put him through to Wilson's room. Wilson answered on the second ring.

“Hey, Wilson. When are you going to stop playing games and face me?” Dell did his best to sound casual.

“Dell. Don't push me. I'll leave your little lady in pieces all over the Res.” Wilson's voice had ice in it.

“I know where you are, Wilson. I'm right outside your little roach motel room right now.” Dell lowered his voice to a smooth, silky, threatening tone.

Dell heard Wilson moving around. He smiled, giving a thumbs up to Davis.

“You're not out there.” Dell heard a note of uncertainty in the killer's voice.

“You just went to the window to look. It's dark. I can see you clearly, but you can't see me.”

“If you come anywhere near me, I'll kill her,” Wilson's voice held a tinge of hysteria.

Dell fought to stay calm. “No, you won't.”

“What makes you so sure I won't?” Wilson asked.

“You won't because you need to defile her first. And you can't get it up yet, can you?” Dell kept his voice low, soft, menacing. “Your limp little dick isn't even twitching yet, is it?”

“No,” Wilson said in a strangled voice. “No, you don't know anything. You can't know anything.”

“Can’t I? How can you be sure? I know you, Wilson Long. I’ve known you all your miserable, unhappy life. I know what makes you tick. Talked to your mother and sisters lately?”

“You’re lying, you’re not out there. I would have seen you...” Wilson whispered into the phone.

“Maybe, but then again, maybe not.” He hung up the phone then looked at Davis.

“How did he take it?”

“He’s worried, real worried. I’ll never forgive myself if this backfires and gets Alison hurt.” Dell ran his hands through his hair.

* * * *

Alison heard Wilson say Dell’s name. Not letting herself hope too much, she listened to Wilson’s side of the conversation. Wilson became more and more agitated. He slammed the phone down then began pacing the room. She kept still, waiting. Dell was out there somewhere looking for her. A calm settled over her.

Distraught, Wilson ignored her as he wandered around the room murmuring to himself. Alison waited, edging toward the door every time he turned his back on her.

The phone rang again. Wilson started violently, then froze, staring at it. Alison kept her eyes on him as she carefully picked up the receiver.

“Hello?”

“Alison, are you okay?” Dell’s calm, deep velvet voice sent a warm rush of relief through her.

“Yes.” She barely managed to keep from breaking down into tears. She wanted to beg him to hurry, to come get her.

“Stay calm for me. Give the phone to Wilson, baby,” Dell instructed. She held the receiver out toward her captor.

Wilson stepped toward her, slapping the phone out of her hand. She gasped, yelping when he grabbed her arm, yanking her up off the bed. He pulled her to the door, shoving her out in front of him.

* * * *

Dell's heart lurched painfully when Alison answered the phone. Weak-kneed, relief washed through him when she told him she was all right. He listened to the commotion as Wilson bolted, motioning to Davis. In the distance, he heard the sound of the engine roaring to life, then fading away. He hung the phone up, jumping to his feet.

"This is it. He's running." He snatched up his hat as he headed toward the door.

"All right, take it easy. It will take him awhile to get here," Davis cautioned as he followed Dell.

"I know, but I want to be ready when he does." Dell headed out the door toward his truck.

* * * *

Dell sipped at the coffee Davis had bought earlier. They parked in a secluded spot beside a small business and waited. With the roads blocked Wilson was trapped. They left him only one way off the reservation. To get back to his comfort zone of the main highways, Wilson would have to pass by them.

"All right, we want to get him to stop somewhere where we can get Alison away from him." Davis finished his coffee.

Dell nodded, keeping his eyes on the rearview mirror. He could just make out the lights of an oncoming vehicle of some kind. Shifting in his seat, he got ready to start the truck in case it was Wilson.

The lights drew closer. Dell made out the shape of a logging truck. He sat back with a heavy sigh.

"Relax, Dell. It's only been a little over an hour. He'll get here." Davis offered him a breakfast burrito.

"No thanks, not hungry," Dell tapped the steering wheel nervously.

Another truck passed them along with two cars before Dell finally saw another set of lights coming. This had to be Wilson. The vehicle drew closer. He could make out the shape of two people. The shape of the car got clearer, then Dell recognized the El Camino.

"There they are." Dell started the truck while Davis tossed the trash. Dell watched the black car pass by. He narrowly missed another car as he sped out of the parking lot.

Flooring the old red truck, he tried to catch up to Wilson. The black El Camino kept just far enough ahead that he couldn't see what was going on. Inside he seethed, the thoughts rushing through his head. He would kill Wilson if he got the chance. He should have gone north instead of south. He should have just stayed in the little town outside Santa Fe and made love to Alison every day until they couldn't see straight.

He glanced over at Davis when he heard paper tearing. The FBI man opened the box with the gun Dell had gotten from Jefferson.

"Nice piece. You any good with it?" Davis asked, examining the Glock 9mm pistol.

"Passable," Dell answered, not about to admit he was a crack shot to a federal officer.

"Why don't I believe that?" Davis looked at Dell. "I'm not going to ask where you got it. I don't want to know. I am going to ask that you let me do the shooting. It makes the reports easier to fill out."

Dell nodded. "Fine, you go for Wilson. All I really want is Alison safely away from him."

"But. Just in case." Davis snapped the clip home. He handed the pistol to Dell.

"Right." Dell laid the weapon on the seat where he could reach it easily.

"Don't push too hard," Davis warned Dell as he gained on the El Camino. "Let's let him get out of these mountains onto flat ground first."

Chapter Sixteen

Alison noticed the truck following them first. She looked over at Wilson, getting a better grip on the door handle. If he slowed enough, she would jump and hope for the best.

Sweat beaded on Wilson's forehead and upper lip. His fancy embroidered cowboy shirt was soaked. Alison's heart threatened to pound out of her chest. She flinched with every blind curve he took too fast. He slammed on the brakes when they came up on a slower moving logging truck, pounding on the horn. Alison took the opportunity to unlock the passenger door, praying Wilson wouldn't hear it.

"No," Wilson choked out in a strangled voice.

An icy wave of fear washed over her. He hadn't seen her unlock the door. Relieved, she saw him looking in the rearview mirror. He'd seen Dell's truck behind them.

"He won't win. He won't get you back in one piece." Wilson shot her a hate-filled glare.

He jerked the wheel over, accelerating, passing the slow truck. Horns blared at them as Wilson forced a couple of oncoming cars off the road onto the narrow shoulder.

Alison risked a look back. Dell followed them around the logger. Up ahead, she saw the road narrowing into the dark maw of a tunnel. The shoulder ran out, leaving a sheer wall of rock on Wilson's side. The cliff dropped a hundred feet or more on her side.

The darkness of the short tunnel blanked her vision for a few seconds. She blinked desperately, trying to focus on the light ahead. Forced to slow again for another truck Wilson hit the steering wheel. He swore, unable to pass this one, because the road was blocked by another logging truck and a line of cars heading up the mountain.

Up ahead, she saw the shoulder of the road widen into a parking area forming a scenic overlook. Her chance had arrived. If she waited until they were out of the mountains where the road flattened out, Dell would never catch up. Taking a deep breath, she made a grab for the steering wheel, jerking it toward the large, flat area where a couple of cars sat parked.

She struggled with Wilson for control of the vehicle. He swerved wildly, before pulling her hands loose. He shoved her away. She hit the passenger door, using her momentum to open it. With another quick, deep breath, she leapt out of the El Camino.

She did her best to roll as she hit the pavement. Trying to protect her head with her arms, she came to a stop just a few feet away from the edge of the ravine. The shouts of the tourists at the overlook barely registered through the pain. Her mind conjured up an image of Dell's face as blackness closed in.

* * * *

Dell followed as closely as he could. The road twisted crazily down the mountain, a sheer wall of rock on one side with a deep chasm on the other. His knuckles were white on the steering wheel as his thoughts raced. If Davis didn't get Wilson, he'd kill the son of a bitch himself, slowly, as painfully as he could.

He heard Davis issuing orders to his people over his cell phone. The Agent gave their location, requesting immediate backup from local law enforcement, including ambulance and fire assistance. Movement in the car caught his attention. He realized Alison fought Wilson for control of the El Camino. He saw her hit the door. It flew open, spilling her out onto the pavement.

"Oh, baby, no," he whispered, his heart in his throat. Vaguely he heard Davis ordering an ambulance as he slammed on his brakes, jerking his truck over into the overlook parking area and skidding to a stop.

* * * *

Wilson fought for control of the fishtailing vehicle. In a rage, he glared at the scene behind him, looking back over his shoulder. The sound of the

air horn jerked him around just in time to see the grill of the eighteen-wheeler that headed straight for him.

He jerked the steering wheel over hard. The huge truck clipped the tail end of the El Camino. The vehicle spun around, skidding over the edge of the chasm, and tumbling into the ravine. It impacted the bottom exploding into a big orange fireball.

* * * *

Dell leapt out of his truck. He ran toward Alison, ignoring the horns honking and screeching of brakes as other vehicles stopped. Pushing aside the people in his way, he stopped beside her. He dropped to his knees with a moan, bending forward, covering her with his body.

Gently touching her cheek, he fought the urge to gather her up into his arms. He brushed the hair from her face then touched his lips to her forehead in a soft kiss.

"I'm sorry, baby. I should have done better," he whispered, blinking back the tears stinging his eyes.

Her eyelids fluttered open. She winced at the bright sunlight. "Dell?" She reached toward him.

"I'm right here, baby. Stay still." He caught her hand.

"Where is..." she began, trying to sit up.

Dell laid his hand on her shoulder, stopping her. "He's dead. He can't hurt you."

"Oh." Alison relaxed shutting her eyes again. She stayed silent for a long moment.

"Alison, baby, talk to me," Dell smoothed her hair back. He had to reassure himself, had to touch her. Smoke from Wilson's burning car drifted over them. She wrinkled her nose with a cough.

"Hurts," she complained.

"I know it does. Help is coming." Dell smiled as he tucked a strand of hair behind her ear.

Alison grimaced. "Next time I feel the urge to jump out of a moving car, slap me."

Dell sniffed then chuckled, leaning down to kiss her again. "Never," he whispered.

The wailing of approaching sirens got louder. He heard Davis talking to the sheriff's deputies. A fire truck arrived, followed by an ambulance. Dell let the paramedics take over.

Chapter Seventeen

Dell sat next to Alison's bed in the emergency room. He listened to her telling Davis about her time with Wilson. It felt strange hearing about it from her side, realizing she had been working to get away while they had been trying to find her. He still got chills when he thought about how close he came to losing her.

"Well, I don't see any reason you can't be on your way as soon as the doctors okay it." Davis looked at Dell, holding his hand out and offering Dell the keys to his truck. "I parked your truck by the admissions entrance. Good luck."

Dell shook the FBI Agent's hand. He watched Davis leave, taking the rest of the law enforcement people with him. When he turned back to Alison, she was sitting up, trying to let the bed rail down.

"What do you think you're doing?"

"I'm getting up." Alison shook the rail that refused to budge. "What does it look like?"

"Nobody said you could get up." Dell walked over, taking her hands in his.

"I said I could get up. I want out of here." She glared at him.

He ignored her glare. "Not until the doctor says it's okay. Now lay back down."

"Dell—"

"You are a stubborn woman, Alison Taylor." He cut her off, refusing to look at her. If he did that, he just might embarrass himself by crying.

From the corner of his eyes, he saw Alison open her mouth to retort then quickly close it again. Suddenly, she pulled him closer to the hospital bed. She wrapped her arms around him. He responded to the comfort of her touch, laying his head on her shoulder and taking a deep shuddery breath.

“I almost lost you,” he whispered. Her hands rubbing his back felt so good.

“But you didn’t,” she whispered softly.

A noise at the entrance to the treatment area startled him. He looked up to see the doctor.

“The x-rays are clear, there are no broken bones, and all the other tests are normal. You’re a very lucky woman, Ms. Taylor.” The doctor looked over his glasses at her.

“Great, so I can go?” Alison smiled at the man.

“Yes, you can go. If you have any problems or feel worse, come back and see us.” He signed a paper, handing it to her.

Alison smiled at Dell. He felt his whole world turn over. He smiled back at her. “I’ll go bring you in some clothes.”

* * * *

Dell got Alison’s blue bag. He laid it on the passenger side seat. He felt a little like an intruder as he opened it. Holding up the white cotton dress, he shook it out then looked it over. Soft, with bits of lace and little ruffles down the front, it suited her. His mouth went dry when he pictured her in it.

Carefully, Dell folded the dress. Tucking it under his arm, he closed the bag then put it back in with the rest of their things. He stopped for a long moment, smiling to himself. *Their* things, he thought. He had gotten downright possessive over this little slip of a woman.

A chill went up his back. He stopped and looked around. The parking lot was silent, empty except for a few trucks and cars. He quickly got in the truck, starting it. Backing out of the spot by the door, he moved the truck to the breezeway entrance to the emergency room. Dell hesitated then leaned over, opening the glove compartment and letting out a relieved sigh when he saw the Glock resting there.

He shook his head, berating himself for having an overactive imagination. Wilson had to be dead. Nobody could have survived that crash and explosion. *Unless he managed to jump*, a tiny nagging voice in the back of his mind insisted. *Davis did say they didn’t find a body...* Dell locked up the truck, heading back toward the hospital.

He stopped, turning quickly, scanning the parking lot one more time. Nothing had changed—a red car, a blue one, and a green pickup truck parked next to a silver compact car with black windows.

* * * *

When he walked in, Alison sat on the edge of the hospital bed, swinging her feet impatiently. He stopped by the curtains to gaze at her for a few seconds. The way her light brown hair fell over her shoulders made his groin tighten.

“I found this.” Dell held out the soft white dress toward her. “I thought you might want to put on something loose.”

She took the dress from him, unfolding it. “Sweetheart, this is a nightgown.” A little bright spark of mischief shone in her emerald eyes.

“Really? How come I haven’t ever seen it?”

“How often do you let me wear anything to bed?” She rolled her eyes at him.

“Um, yeah, well,” Dell stammered ducking his head and blushing. He looked up at her with a grin. She reached around, trying to catch hold of the hospital gown ties. He hurried over to help her.

“Ow.” Alison winced.

“Here, let me.” Dell reached around her, tugging on the tie at her neck, unknotting it. The top of the hospital gown came loose. His breath caught. It slipped off her shoulder. His stomach clenched. He untied the last tie as he swallowed hard, his mouth gone dry.

“I’ll just step out here for a second, till you’re ready.” He pulled back the curtain, nearly running into the nurse bringing the wheelchair for Alison.

A few minutes later, Dell had himself under control. He walked with Alison and the nurse out to the truck. He opened the door then lifted Alison into the truck. The crawly feeling between his shoulder blades hit him again as he started to get in. He stopped, turning to look around the parking lot again.

“Ready to go, baby?” Dell started the truck, pulling out of the breezeway into the parking lot.

“Yeah.” Alison smiled at him.

Chapter Eighteen

The lights of Carlsbad lit up the night sky ahead. He pulled into the parking lot of the Desert Inn and climbed out of the truck, going inside to register. Dell asked for a room in the back at the end of the building. He carried their bags inside, then propped the door open with a chair. He walked back out to the truck. Opening the door, Dell reached in, gently touching Alison's cheek.

"Stopping for the night, baby."

Alison opened her emerald eyes, looking into his. He smiled at her, leaning a little closer and brushing his lips against hers. Sliding his arms around her, he scooped her up then carried her into the room, setting her down on the bed.

The trust in her eyes made his heart clench. He still didn't feel he deserved her trust after he'd let her down so badly.

"There's a fast food place back up the road. Will you be all right while I go get us something?" He had to get away for a while. He needed to get himself under control.

"I'll be fine." She squeezed his hand.

He left, shutting the door and locking it behind him.

* * * *

Alison sighed as she got up. He had been treating her like a doll made of china since they'd left the hospital. Yes, she was sore, bruised, and battered, but she'd survived. Right now, she needed to reaffirm that. She opened her bag, rummaging around until she found the box of condoms.

* * * *

Dell parked in front of the door to the room. He turned off the engine and lights and just sat there for a long moment. Alison had gone to sleep, he thought. The window of the room was dark. Finally, picking up the bags from the fast food restaurant, he went inside.

The only light came from the slightly cracked bathroom door. His breath stopped when he didn't see her right away. "Alison?" He put the food down on the table beside the window.

The door of the bathroom opened slowly. Her arm reached out. She beckoned him to come to her. Not quite sure what was going on, he walked toward the little room. A cloud of steam wafted out. His eyes widened. What on earth could she be up to? She wasn't in any shape for any sort of fooling around.

"Alison, what—" She caught the front of his shirt then pulled him into the room. "Whoa," Dell gasped. "Ali—" She cut him off, covering his mouth with hers, drawing him down into a deep kiss.

The strength left his knees. He returned her kiss, twining his tongue with hers. Her fingers made short work of the buttons on his faded chambray shirt then moved to the button on his old jeans.

Dell pulled away, breathless. "Alison, we can't do this." He tried to get himself under control.

"We can." She pulled him close again.

"I don't want to hurt you," Dell sighed, his voice husky.

"You won't. I trust you." Her hand slipped down inside his jeans. Dell moaned.

"I don't deserve—" he whispered against her lips.

"Oh, but you do." Alison pushed his jeans down over his hips.

"But..." Dell tried to argue. Her hands moving over his skin were making it difficult to think.

"I need you, Dell." She lay her head against his chest. His cock stood to attention at her simple statement.

"I'm here, baby. I'm right here." He toed off his boots. The jeans quickly followed, and he kicked them aside. He gathered her up into his arms and kissed her.

She opened the condom wrapper and worked it onto his aching cock. He moaned and felt his eyes cross as she smoothed the latex over him. When he was sheathed, Alison pulled him into the hot shower with her. Taking the

washcloth and soap, she handed them to him. A tremor of desire swept over him as he lathered up the cloth.

Beginning with her shoulders, he carefully worked the cloth over her skin. Moving in slow, small circles, he gently avoided the scrapes and bruises until he reached her breasts. He brought the soapy cloth over her breasts, slipping closer and closer to her hard nipples. She moaned and shuddered at the touch of the rough cotton cloth.

Alison leaned her head back. *What did I do to deserve a woman as beautiful as she is. Especially when she's lost in what I'm doing to her.* Dell loved her expression. He bent his head, touching his lips to her throat as he teased at first one nipple then the other. She tasted like clean sweet woman.

Dell moved the cloth farther down over her stomach as he knelt. She'd tunneled her fingers into his hair. On his knees, he dropped the washcloth. He slid his fingers down to her waist as he kissed and licked his way down to her belly. Taking a deep breath he moved his hands from her waist to her back as he thrust his tongue into her navel.

Alison moaned. Dell covered the small indentation with his mouth, swirling his tongue. He grazed his teeth over her silky skin kissing her navel the way he kissed her lips. She moaned, clenching her fists in his hair.

Gently he urged her back against the wall. He sat back, just looking at her for a long moment. Breathing hard she rested one hand on her belly. He caught the scent of her arousal and smiled. She gasped when he touched her, slipping a finger into her. Then he parted her folds. He pressed his lips to her, open mouthed, plunging his tongue into her as far as he could.

She cried out. The flavor of her, the scent, aroused him more than anything else. He wanted her to come. Dell thrust his tongue into her over and over drawing deep moans from her. When she broke he pulled away. He held her until she stopped trembling, his arms around her hips while he rested his head against her belly.

"Baby," she whispered, smoothing his hair.

He pulled her down. She settled onto his lap, and with a groan, he was inside her. She moved, rocking against him until he couldn't keep still. He stood, lifting her in his arms, and she wrapped her legs around his waist.

Carrying her to the bed, he managed to get most of the way onto the mattress before falling with her. He rolled over, arching his hips up with a

moan. She pushed him back down and caught his hands, pinning them over his head and covering his mouth in a deep kiss.

She rode him, grinding against him. Her lips brushed against his throat, sliding over his collarbone to his shoulder. He bucked against her and moaned her name as everything shattered.

* * * *

The room was dark when he woke. Alison curled up against him, breathing slow, easy in sleep. He didn't hear the water running. Alison must have turned it off after he had fallen asleep.

Careful not to wake her, he got out of bed. He found his jeans, pulling them on. He looked at the food he'd bought earlier then back at Alison, weighing the idea of going out to get something else. She sighed and shifted, reaching for him.

"Dell?" She sat up looking around.

"Right here, baby." He smiled at her yawn. "You hungry?"

"Um, yeah, a little." She yawned again as she rubbed her eyes.

"Well, the hamburgers I got earlier are a little cold."

"That's okay. I don't mind. Unless you want something else?"

"No, I'm cool. The drinks are nasty though. All the ice has melted. I'll just go down to the machines and get us something to drink." Dell dug in his pocket, pulling out a handful of change. He stepped out and pulled the door shut behind him.

The soda machines were just a few feet from their room. He put his change in then pushed the button. The machine made a horrendous thumping and clatter as it dropped the soda bottles. That crawly, being-watched feeling hit him in the center of his back again. He turned to look over the parking lot. It appeared quiet. A silver compact car with dark windows caught his eye. It looked eerily similar to the one he'd seen in the hospital parking lot.

Dell picked up the soda bottles and headed back to the room.

Chapter Nineteen

Dinner wrappers littered the table by the window. His jeans were draped over the back of a chair. Dell leaned against the pillows propped against the headboard. Alison sat between his legs, leaning against him, her hands on his knees. He sighed as he looked over her shoulder at the New Mexico and Texas map he held.

“Where did you say your friends lived?” He dropped a kiss on her shoulder.

“San Antonio, but we don’t have to go there. We can go anywhere you want to go.” She ran her fingers along the crease at the back of his knees, sending a shiver of pleasure through him. He felt his cock getting hard again and reached for another condom.

“San Antonio is fine.” He tossed the map onto the floor and slid his hands up over her breasts. She moaned softly and tilted her head to one side, allowing him to kiss her ear, tracing over it with his tongue.

He shifted until he was on his knees behind her and sat back, pulling her back against him. Lifting her hips, he guided her down, sliding into her with a gasp and a deep moan.

"I love being inside you."

"I love you inside me." Alison leaned forward, bracing herself on the bed.

Dell gave a breathless chuckle as he followed her down onto the rumpled sheets. He drove his cock into her until they both shattered.

* * * *

Dell woke to find Alison sitting on the side of the bed beside him.

“You’re dressed.” He gave a disappointed huff.

“I am,” she agreed, rubbing his shoulders.

“Dressed is bad,” Dell moaned.

“Dressed is good. We overslept. It’s time to check out,” Alison whispered. Then she kissed his ear.

He groaned, sitting up.

“Come on, sweetheart, I’ve already chased the maid away once. She’ll be back any minute.” Alison got up, evading his grab for her.

Dell sighed. He got out of bed to get ready to go. Ten minutes later, he picked up their bags and followed her out of the room to the truck. He felt a pang of remorse when he noticed her limping more than she had the night before when they’d arrived.

“How are you feeling this morning?” Dell quickly tossed the bags into the back then caught her, sliding his arm around her waist then lifting her onto the seat.

“I’m fine, just a little stiff, and hungry.” She hugged him.

* * * *

When they came out of the little café they’d stopped at for breakfast, Alison seemed to be moving a bit better. Dell relaxed until he noticed the little silver car parked toward the back of the restaurant’s parking lot.

They settled into a comfortable silence as they drove south, heading for Interstate 10 which would take them into San Antonio. Dell kept an eye out for the silver compact car for the first few hours. When he didn’t see it, he relaxed, allowing it to slip from his mind along with any thoughts of Wilson.

He watched Alison when she wasn’t looking at him, enjoying the pleasant warm feeling just being close to her gave him. Staying with her sounded more attractive to him all the time. Idly, he wondered what she would say if he asked her to marry him. *Not that I’m really ready to settle down and get married*, he thought, *but Alison Blackfeather does have a nice ring to it.*

“So, what do you plan to do once we get to San Antonio?” He hoped he sounded neutral.

“I don’t know.” The tension returned to Alison’s face. “I guess I’ll see if my friends will let me stay with them long enough to find a job and a place of my own.”

“Oh. You don’t sound too sure.”

“What about you? What do you plan to do?” He didn’t miss the fearful note in her voice.

“I thought I might hang around San Antonio for a while. There are certain attractions I’d like to see.” He watched her from the corner of his eye. She went very still. Her head bowed. She clutched at her purse on her lap. He saw her fingers clenched tightly around the strap.

Her voice barely rose above a whisper. “There are some nice things to see there.”

“That’s what I hear.” Dell took a deep breath, letting it out slowly. His stomach fluttered, and he swallowed nervously. Alison hadn’t moved.

“Um, actually, I thought I’d go on to the Gulf and see the ocean. I’ve never been to a beach.”

“The beach is nice.” Alison’s voice sounded fragile.

“The thing is it won’t be any fun alone.” He looked over at her. “Alison, I’m not ready for this to end. I need you to come with me. Will you?”

She nodded, wiping the tears from her eyes. “Yes, I’ll come with you.”

Chapter Twenty

Three loud bangs jolted the back of the truck. A tremendous cracking sound followed. The back window exploded into millions of tiny shards of glass. Alison screamed, raising her arms to cover her head. Dell swore, speeding up.

“What the hell was that?” He looked in the rearview mirror to see a familiar small silver car following them. The car flashed its lights at them as it began to pull over into the other lane. The morning sun glared off the windshield of the compact vehicle, obscuring the driver.

“I don’t know, but don’t stop.”

“I’m not. Hold on.” Dell floored the accelerator. He watched the silver car falling back, its four cylinder engine no match for the eight cylinder engine in his truck.

He kept his speed up until he could be sure he’d left the strange vehicle behind. They were both shaken and covered in glass slivers. Dell couldn’t remember ever being this angry. *Why can't people just leave us the fuck alone?* He saw an exit sign advertising gas and food. He took the exit, heading down the two lane road leading to the little gas station and cafe.

“Baby, I’m getting really tired of this.” Dell pulled off the road into the parking lot. He stopped with a spray of gravel. Getting out of the truck, he left the door open as he hurried around to look at the back.

Three bullet holes marred the tailgate. Dell looked up to see Alison walking toward him. He pulled out the handkerchief he kept in his back pocket, motioning her over to him.

“You’re covered in glass.” He used the cloth to dust the glittering slivers off of her shoulders, back, and out of her hair.

“So are you.” Alison tried to take the cloth from him.

“I can wait. I want you to go inside. Stay away from the windows.” Dell finished dusting her off.

“What are you going to do?” Her voice was filled with concern.

“I don’t know yet. Come on. Whoever shot at us will probably be by here in a few minutes. I want you inside where it’s safer.” He turned her, giving her a nudge toward the door.

“Dell...” Alison stopped, refusing to go.

“Please, for me, baby.”

She opened her mouth to argue, then shut it with a nod, hurrying to the door. He followed her inside, stopping at the front cash register. The clerk looked at Alison, obviously noticing her bruises. He eyed Dell coldly.

Dell returned the man’s cold stare. “Can you call the police? Somebody just shot at us back up the road.” The man looked at Alison who spoke to the lady at the small lunch counter then back at Dell again.

“Yeah, sure, I’ll call them.” The man reached for the phone beside the cash register.

Dell answered the man’s unspoken accusation. “Car accident.” “Convenient,” the clerk retorted.

“No, damn scary. Look, you going to call or not? Whoever they are they’re driving a little silver car with dark tinted windows. They’ll probably be by here in any minute now.” Something brushed Dell’s back. He turned to find Alison dusting glass off him with an ancient dish towel.

“You need a new shirt, and I need to go get my purse.”

“No! Stay here. I’ll get it.” Dell stepped around her, heading back out to the truck.

* * * *

Dell opened the passenger door, reaching for Alison’s purse. At the sound of screeching tires, he jerked around. The driver’s side door of the little silver car flew open as it stopped. Dell’s stomach clenched. He felt sick.

Wilson, leapt at him, Bowie knife raised. Dell dropped the purse, grabbing hold of Wilson’s arm. They struggled, Dell’s feet slipping on the oil slick hot asphalt.

The insane look in Wilson’s eyes sent a chill through Dell. He swore, remembering the Glock tucked under the driver’s side seat just out of reach. It took both hands to keep Wilson from plunging the hunting knife into him.

Wilson forced Dell back against the seat, inching the knife closer to his throat. "I'll kill you, then I'll kill her and everyone else inside," Wilson ground out.

The sound of sirens in the background drawing closer gave Dell a burst of energy. "I don't think so." Dell kicked out. He heard Wilson hiss when he connected with something. He hit Wilson's arm against the truck until the knife clattered to the ground.

Shoving Wilson away, Dell made a dash for the gun under the seat. His hand closed around something smooth and cool. Wilson tackled him again. Wilson stabbed the knife into the seat beside Dell's head. He elbowed Wilson as he turned. He realized what he held in his hand. Alison's little can of pepper spray.

He heard the police cars skidding to a stop, followed by the shouts of the police officers. Ducking under Wilson's outstretched arms, Dell slid down, banging his knee painfully on the curb. He turned as he fell, aiming the spray at Wilson. Dell pressed the nozzle down.

The stream of burning chemical caught Wilson across the eyes, running into the scrapes and cuts from the accident in the mountains. Blinded, Wilson screamed as he slashed wildly. He stumbled, tripping on the curb. Wilson fell, his arms outstretched, still holding the knife.

Dell rolled out of the way with the can of pepper spray ready. Wilson lay face down, unmoving. Slowly Dell climbed to his feet. Hands caught him as someone helped him stand. He looked around to see several police officers taking charge of the scene.

"You all right, man? What happened here?" an older grey-haired officer asked him.

"Yeah." Dell nodded, trying to catch his breath. "Yeah, I think so." He winced, knowing he should take a look at his knee. He couldn't pull his eyes away from Wilson or the spreading pool of blood. Wilson had fallen on the knife. A policeman reached down, checking for a pulse.

A wave of relief mingled with a strange feeling of guilt washed through Dell when the officer looked up, shaking his head slightly. He was grateful to see another officer go inside and lead an ashen-faced Alison away from the window of the little convenience store. The officer said something to her. Dell saw her nod.

“Okay, you want to tell me about it?” The officer took out a small note pad.

“Yeah.” Dell began to explain everything. He gave the officer the card with Special Agent Davis’s phone number on it then sat down on the curb to wait. The officer walked off. Dell watched the ambulance attendants loading Wilson’s body into the back of their vehicle. He felt a moment of sadness for Wilson’s family.

The grey-haired officer walked back toward him, holding out the FBI card. “Your story checks out. As soon as we finish up, you and your girlfriend will be free to go.”

“Thanks. Is it all right if I go in and see how Alison is doing now?” Dell asked.

“Yeah, go ahead.” The officer walked off to supervise the tow truck picking up the car Wilson had stolen.

Dell got up, walking into the store. He stopped for a few seconds gazing at Alison. She picked up a mug, holding it with both hands, bringing it up to her lips and blowing on whatever it held. The steam from the cup made the hair around her face curl.

She looked up, and their eyes met. She put the mug down then stood, walking toward him. He couldn’t move his feet. He felt like he might crack, shattering into millions of pieces.

She held out her arms. He could see the tears spilling over and running down her face. He reached for her, folding her into his arms.

“It’s over,” Dell whispered.

* * * *

The darkness surrounded them. The road was deserted except for the occasional truck. They passed rest stops full of eighteen-wheelers lit up like small towns. The glow from the city lights beckoned, promising rest and the beginning of a new life.

Dell checked them into the motel then came back to the truck. He started the engine and put it into drive, pulling around to the room he’d taken. Parking, he stopped to look at Alison for a moment. She returned his look, raising one eyebrow.

“I wonder if they have any of those crème filled cookies in the vending machine.” Even battered and bruised she was the sexiest woman he'd ever seen. He wiggled his eyebrows at her.

She smiled as she got out of the truck, turning back to look at him before she shut the door. “Just how far did you read in that book Bear gave you?”

Dell shivered. He jumped out of the truck, following her to the door of the room. He stopped her, gazing into her deep green eyes for a second before going inside.

“I love you, Alison Taylor.” He pulled her into a deep kiss as he shut the door behind them.

THE END

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Born of Irish and Fae descent in the desert of west Texas, Penny Ash traveled far and wide before settling in the wilds of south Texas where she farms plot bunnies and has art attacks in her spare time. She began writing when she couldn't find the kind stories she wanted to read anywhere else and draws on her years of experience with the paranormal, the unusual, and the just plain weird. A big fan of Fantasy and Science Fiction as well as History and the world around her, everything is inspiration for her stories. She writes about the places she's lived and the people she's seen. Penny spends a lot of time online and loves to hear from her readers.



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