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J.C. WILDER

LOVING
RANGER

Fourteen years of friendship, it all comes down to this...

A Men of S.W.A.T. story

Sissy Kolchek is a smart-mouthed waitress with a southern accent that's thicker than honey and a life that isn't nearly as exciting as some people think. As the daughter of the town tramp, she's cynical about men, relationships and anything marked one size fits all. Beneath her wisecracks is a woman who secretly longs for a family and a place where she belongs.

Jason "Ranger" Diver is an undercover cop who has seen the dark side of love and wants nothing to do with it. With his chaotic lifestyle, he hasn't the time or the inclination to become involved with only one woman—especially not his friend Sissy. He's fantasized about her since high school and when they kissed, she rocked his world. Jace is captivated by the woman she has become and, as their relationship grows, he finds himself torn between the biggest case of his career and the love of a good woman.

Warning: Copious amounts of hot lovin', random bad guys wrecking havoc, a goat named Casper, more sexy cops than you can shake your nightstick at and the deliberate destruction of the English language.

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Loving Ranger

J.C. Wilder

Dedication

For Libby

Prologue

The first time Jason “Ranger” Diver laid his eyes on Sissy Kolchek he couldn’t help but admire the unique way she made friends.

It was only two weeks into the new school year and an unscheduled fire drill had emptied both the high and middle schools leaving seven hundred students waiting in the morning sun. The unmistakable sound of flesh meeting flesh followed by a tremendous splash brought the mass of chattering kids to a halt.

Jace gaped at the sight of Brian Harding, one of his classmates, sitting in the foot-deep water of the fountain in front of the administration building across the street from the schools. Standing over him on the rim was a painfully skinny young girl. With her long white-gold hair pulled back into an uneven braid and tennis shoes held together with silver duct tape, she resembled a rag doll his little sister carried everywhere. Her big, gray eyes threw daggers at the wet sophomore, and her face was flushed with anger.

“Who ya callin’ Prissy Sissy, mama’s boy?” Her heavy southern accent sounded oddly exotic to his Midwestern ears. “You evah call me that agin, I’ll kick yer butt.”

His eyes widened. Harding was a bully and a braggart just like his father, Big Jim, a successful businessman in the town of Haven. Most of the kids had been subjected to Junior’s threats or temper at one time or another, and Jace was tickled to see that a girl had just taken him down, a feat even the senior class didn’t dare attempt. He grinned. It couldn’t have happened to a more deserving guy.

Jace’s twin brother, Jeff, nudged him with his elbow. “Who’s that?”

He shrugged.

“Miss Kolchek!” Mrs. Wolfe, the middle school librarian, hurried over to the girl. He winced when she pulled the blonde off the fountain none too gently.

“She’s gonna get it now,” someone behind him whispered.

“Young ladies do not use that kind of language, little miss. Threatening others with bodily harm is a sign of ignorance and poor breeding,” the librarian was saying. “You don’t want people thinking you’re uneducated, do you?”

The girl looked confused, her face scrunched up in concentration, then she smiled. “Well, ma’am, I doan rightly know much ’bout breedin’ an’ all an’ I hope to learn ’bout it in school.” She looked down at Brian. “What I do know is if’n he calls me prissy again, I’m gonna kick his ass.”

Five years later

As their friendship grew, Jace came to appreciate her no-nonsense style of problem solving.

CRASH!

The sound of shattering glass made Jace turn toward the bar. The crowd parted and he caught a glimpse of a man on the floor. The figure clutched his nose and his white T-shirt was splattered with blood as he glared up at the blonde women standing over him. Wearing a tight, pink polyester waitress uniform, Sissy brandished a large serving tray as if she were going to bring it down over his head.

At barely eighteen years old, the puberty gods had favored her with the figure of a 1940's pinup model. With large breasts, a tiny waist and shapely hips, Sissy figured largely in the sexual fantasies of a great many men in Haven...Jace included. She'd just started working at the 3C Bar and Grille, and the place was more popular than ever.

"You broke my nose." Brian's howl of outrage had a distinctly nasal tone.

"You grabbed my ass, again." She slammed the tray on the bar and shouted, "You're danged lucky that's the only protrudin' body part I broke. You try it again and I'll rip off that lil' thing danglin' 'tween your legs and ram it down your throat."

Ten Years later

One of Sissy's most admirable character traits was her determination. When she set a goal for herself, she let nothing deter her.

THUD!

Jace slammed into the wall with enough force to rattle the windows. It was sheer willpower that enabled him to retain his grip on one hundred and thirty pounds of ravenous female who was climbing him like a tree.

"Your house might come down around our ears tonight, Sissy," he gasped between deep, heated kisses.

The half-naked blonde laughed then nipped his lower lip. "Only if we're lucky."

His answering chuckle turned to a growl when she raked her fingernails over his chest. She swallowed the hungry sound, her tongue sliding against his in a move so carnal it made his head spin.

They'd barely made it into her bedroom before she'd jumped on him like a fat kid on the ice cream man. At the rate they were going they'd end up on the floor in the next fifteen seconds if they didn't suffocate each other first.

Gripping her firm, round ass, Jace turned then set her on the first available flat surface. The dresser. Personally, he didn't care where they ended up as long as he was inside her when they got there.

He'd fantasized about making love to her hundreds of times, but nothing could've prepared him for the meteoric rush of lust that came from fourteen years of foreplay. He felt like a one-armed firefighter battling a house fire—he couldn't be everywhere at once but he sure gave it his best.

Her inquisitive fingers slipped beneath his shoulder holster, and between kisses, she demanded its removal.

“Watch what you’re grabbing, little girl.” He nipped her lower lip. “It might go off.”

“Promises, promises.”

Moments later his weapon hit the floor followed by his shirt. His arms weren’t even down before her mouth was on his nipples. Heat slammed into his groin, and the mesmerizing slide of her tongue was doing odd things to his equilibrium. When he moved between her legs she wrapped them around him, and he was pathetically grateful for the support.

Her hands fisted in his hair, and she hauled his face down to hers. With a groan, he crushed his mouth against hers, thrusting his tongue into her warm heat. His hands stroked her back, her hips and everywhere else he could reach, memorizing the terrain of her curves and the texture of her skin. When he reached the thin elastic waist of her panties he wrenched his mouth from hers.

“These have to go.”

Her gray cat’s eyes gleamed with a slumberous light, and her wicked pink tongue moved over her lips. “Thought you’d never ask.”

Bracing her hands on the edge of the dresser, Sissy released him then arched upward. He yanked off her panties then carelessly tossed them over his shoulder. Her sexy, sleepy gaze met his, and her shy smile brought his blood to a boil. When she whipped off her tank top he promptly forgot how to breathe.

Jace had always been a breast man, and every erotic fantasy he’d ever entertained about her featured these gorgeous twins. Her honey-tinted skin was silky soft, and the tips were the color of dark pink roses. Already firm, her tight nipples begged to be touched, tasted. He wanted to bury his face in her fragrant warmth and stay there for the next twenty years.

Grabbing her knees, he pressed forward, his erection rubbing against the apex of her thighs. Her silken moan sent shivers down his back. When she leaned back on her elbows, her back arched in an invitation he had no intention of passing up. Dropping his head, he took one nipple into his mouth.

Her moan was deep, earthy, and the sound sent a bolt of lust to his groin. He licked, nibbled and sucked his way down her torso before dropping to his knees. The scent of her arousal and the sight of her glistening folds rendered him mute, and the urge to claim her blotted out all rational thought.

Silently willing his hunger to back off, he slowly kissed his way up the insides of her thighs. Inches from his goal, he teased her mercilessly, refusing to go any farther until she was sobbing his name. Her grip tightened on his hair, and he wondered if she’d snatch him bald if he didn’t give her what she wanted.

Sissy wasn’t the kind of woman who kept a man guessing. Her throaty moans were loud and plentiful as he pleased her with his mouth. Her hips bucked upward, and her cries urged him on. Moments later her body tightened around his fingers as she climaxed against his tongue.

His control shattered.

Rising, he freed his erection from the confines of his jeans then thrust inside her. The clasp of her body held him motionless and all he could do was feel her surrounding him. The heat of her flesh penetrated his, and the lingering spasms from her earlier release set his teeth on edge. The silken tremors could prove to be his undoing. It had been a while for him, and he was afraid to move for fear he'd come with the first stroke.

Taking deep, even breaths he thought he'd regained control when she wrapped her legs around him, driving him in deeper. Holding back was no longer an option.

With a growl, he pulled out then drove himself deep again and again. Sissy clung to him, and he pulled her close for a greedy kiss. Her nipples prodded his chest as her fingernails dug into his shoulders. Surrounded by the living silk of her body and the perfume of their lovemaking, he wanted the perfection of this moment to last forever.

Instead, he got another thirty seconds.

Afterward, he leaned heavily against the dresser and her soft body as he struggled to regain his breath. With Sissy's hands lazily stroking his back it was all he could do to remain conscious. What was the appeal of having sex standing up? His body felt like he'd run a marathon and his knees were shaking. After that lackluster performance he now had to face the humiliation of crumpling to the floor when she released him.

Well, if he could ever move again.

"Jeez..." Her voice was thick with satisfaction. "That was... I don't know. I'm at a loss for words. Ain't that a first?"

Chuckling, he ordered his shaky limbs to work though his legs were as sturdy as wet cardboard. It took some effort but slowly he straightened. It wasn't until he pulled out that an alarm went off in his head.

"I didn't use anything." He stared at the evidence of his lust and utter stupidity. Having sex without a condom wasn't something that had ever happened to him before. From the time they were twelve, Pops had pounded safe sex into their heads.

"Oh." Her sleepy gaze dropped to his cock. "It's all good. I'm on the pill for, well,..." Her cheeks went pink. "Female issues."

Relief washed over him, and he kissed her forehead. "That's a relief. I don't think either one of us is in the position to be a parent."

"Well." A teasing smile touched her lips. "I think we're in the perfect position."

"Good point." His smile was rueful.

"Come on Jason Jump-Start." She slid off the dresser, deliberately rubbing her gorgeous body against his. "I'll let you have a little nap before round two."

Jason Jump-Start?

"That's cold, woman." He gave her ass a little spank, and she laughed.

Hampered by his jeans down around his knees, he hobbled the short distance to the bed. Damn, he still had his boots on. Shaking his head, he shed the rest of clothes. His only thought had been to get her naked as he fast as he could. He felt the press of her generous curves against his back. At least he'd succeeded in that mission.

“What name would ya prefer?” She licked his earlobe. “Rapid-Fire Johnson or—”

Her teasing ended in a squeal when he swept her legs out from under her body, and she fell on her back. With a lecherous laugh, he kissed, licked and tickled every inch of exposed flesh. Sissy tried to evade his questing fingers, but her shrieks of laughter gave her away. Now that he had her, he wasn't about to let her go so easily.

All too soon the wiggling and squirming had an uplifting effect on his anatomy. Moving between her legs, his breath hissed between his teeth when she hooked one over his hip, and he slid himself home. When he began to move she arched upward to meet him, and her eyes went smoky with desire.

“I'm sorry, Sis.” His voice was gruff.

Her brows drew together. “For what?”

“The condom.” He burrowed his face in the fragrant curve of her neck. “I wasn't thinking straight, and I jumped on you like—”

“Mmm, silly boy.” Her hands skimmed down up his sides to curl under his arms and over his shoulders. “Am I complainin'?”

“I'm sorry, did you say something?” His lips brushed hers. “My ears are still ringing from your vocal performance a few minutes ago.” Her snort of laughter had him grinning like a fool.

“I don't 'member ya bein' all that quiet, Mr. Diver.” She wrapped her legs around him. “And ya have no idea what a turn-on it is knowin' I rocked your world.”

“Is that so? Well, maybe I should return the favor...”

While there were still some people who had little appreciation for Sissy's diverse talents, Jace figured he liked her just fine.

Chapter One

Three weeks later

From his position beneath the battered hulk of a 1971 Plymouth Barracuda, Jace had an unobstructed view of the strip joint he had under surveillance. Living Dolls was one of several clubs owned by the Arroyo-Ramirez brothers, a pair of lowlifes if ever there was. The investigation was triggered by a paid police informant's claim the brothers were soliciting prostitution.

Little did they know that tidbit would open a giant can of worms.

Like most criminals, the brothers didn't limit themselves to only one vice. Prostitution, drugs and extortion, you name it and they'd probably committed it. For years the Ramirez brothers had succeeded in skirting the law. Armed with a highly paid team of lawyers, they'd weaseled their way through and around the legal system with ease. Lieutenant Walker, his commanding officer, had described the brothers as volatile, and Jace quickly learned that was an understatement.

Volatile was LT's polite way of saying the brothers were fuck-nut crazy.

As far as criminals went the brothers weren't exactly Mensa candidates. It hadn't taken a great deal of manpower to uncover their crimes even though they did an adequate job of covering their tracks. No, the bigger issue was finding sufficient evidence against them. The brothers were well connected in the city, and they counted on the citizens being intimidated enough to remain silent.

The club was located on the heart of Oak Brook, a lower-class city with the boundaries of Cleveland, Ohio. The area consisted of thirty thousand people, none of whom ever saw anything. Someone could be shot in the middle of a crowded street but the likelihood of receiving a solid lead was slim to none. Jace had worked his fair share of complex investigations but he'd never experienced one where the citizens worked against him.

So far, he and his partner, Mateo Ortiz, had amassed a laundry list of charges against the brothers and half of their employees. Fortunately or unfortunately, depending upon how Jace felt that day, the more they dug the more crimes they'd uncovered.

The real kicker came less than twenty-four hours ago when the brothers were linked to a criminal organization known as the *Diez Hombres* or Ten Men. According to the Feds, the *Hombres* had no centralized command structure like in the movies. Less than twenty-four hours before they were scheduled to raid the club, a key player in *Diez Hombres*, a man named Manuel Serrano-Jimenez, arrived at the club

and all hell broke loose. In less time than it took to watch *The Godfather*, the F.B.I. assumed command of the investigation.

Their first act was to put the case on indefinite hold.

As it turned out, Jimenez was under close scrutiny by the Feds. Tasked with building a capital murder case against Jimenez and several members of his inner circle, they weren't happy to find the local cops pissing in their pool. They voiced concerns that the local cops would compromise their case.

Jace snorted. Compromise? They had someone on the inside of Jimenez's crew but when it came to the Ramirez brothers and the club, they didn't have squat. If it weren't for the O.B. team, the Feds would've walked into Living Dolls armed only with their dicks. For weeks the club was under constant surveillance, and everyone who came and went from the place was scrutinized. They'd amassed thousands of photographs and every square foot of the building was wired for audio. If someone so much as farted it was recorded for all posterity.

No, this had nothing to do with their investigation. All the posturing came down to one thing—the Feds never played well with others.

Special Agent-in-Charge Tom Stafford was a media whore. When an arrest was made in any high profile case, it was Stafford who received the glory and delivered succinct sound bites to the press.

Stafford was the Fed's version of a dog and pony show. The agent looked at each case as a way to advance his career, a means to an end and nothing more. He was young, ambitious and from Jace's perspective, impulsive. After spending five minutes in the man's presence, he was not impressed.

And from what he could tell, Stafford felt the same way about him.

Making quick work of gathering his scattered tools, Jace hauled himself out from under the car. Keeping an eye on the club was about as exciting as watching a chick flick. The only good thing about this case was having ample time to work on restoring his car while still getting a paycheck at the same time. Tinkering on the Barracuda was the perfect excuse to hang out with no one being the wiser.

The distinctive thump-thump of a subwoofer brought his attention back to the club. A gray BMW X6 with blackout windows pulled into a reserved parking space near the side doors. Moments later the music was cut off, and a Latino man exited the car. Dark sunglasses shaded his eyes, and Jace caught a glimpse of the shoulder holster beneath his tailored jacket. After a discreet scan of the parking lot, he headed in Jace's direction.

Mateo Ortiz was a Cleveland police detective with a few more years experience working undercover than Jace. As part of Esteban's security team, the detective had unfettered access to every corner of the man's life. It was through Ortiz that Jace was hired on part-time at the club as bouncer slash maintenance engineer slash whatever was needed done guy.

The detective was dressed in a black suit that cost more than Jace probably made in a month. He was curious about the man's background as it was obvious Ortiz was used to the finer things in life. Everything

about him, from the car, which he'd bought with cash, to his clothes, screamed wealth. If Jace didn't know the man was a straight arrow, he'd suspect the guy was on the take. What cop could afford Italian suits at a couple grand apiece?

"You're never going to get that piece of shit running, *amigo*." Ortiz was smiling.

"Care to put a wager on it?"

"¿*Parezco a un tonto?*" Ortiz braced his hands on the top of the sagging fence then jumped over it with lazy grace.

"I'd be the last person to call you a fool." Jace grimaced when he noticed the greasy smears on his shirt. Next to his partner, he looked like a bum. Then again, Ortiz probably thought the term dress down meant removing his tie.

Ortiz's easy smile turned hard. "We've got big problems."

"More than the Feds?"

"*Si.*"

Both men stared into the open engine compartment. Any onlooker would think they were discussing the car though Jace doubted Mateo knew a spark plug from a gas cap.

"Floater turned up in Griggs County last night." Ortiz moved to the side of the car, putting his back to the club. "You mentioned an altercation between Esteban and his driver last week?"

Jace swore under his breath.

"Turns out his driver, Manny, was a Fed."

Jace absorbed the information like a blow to his gut. Last Friday when he was coming back from grabbing a bite at the apartment, he saw Esteban pistol-whip his driver. Two members of his security team had picked up the dazed man and hurried him into the back seat of a dark sedan. The next day, Ramirez showed up with a new driver, and Manny hadn't been back since.

"They had an agent working undercover with one of our perps and they didn't think we might need to know this?" Fury laced his words. If they'd known about Manny then maybe Jace could've done something to prevent this. What, he didn't know.

Mateo leaned forward, his fists braced on the car. "You know how those bastards operate. They think we're local-yokels who can't find our dicks with both hands."

Jace snorted. Truer words had never been spoken.

"Bet LT blew a nut."

"Walker chewed the pretty-boy Fed a new one." His grin turned feral. "They don't want us playing in their sandbox here, but we're the only option. You know the case they're building against Jimenez?" Ortiz withdrew a small photo from an inside jacket pocket.

“Another Fed named Grace MacNeill has been missing for eight months. Last seen in upstate New York where she worked in the Jimenez household as a nanny. When she missed a routine check-in they sent agents to her apartment, and the entire place had been wiped clean. Didn’t even find a hairpin, *amigo*.”

A young, blonde woman stared up at him from the photograph. With her heart-shaped face and blonde hair, she looked a hell of a lot like his youngest sister. His gut clenched. She had a familiar look in her eye, one he’d seen in his own ten years ago. Excited and eager to make a mark in the world, the photo was probably taken on her first day with the F.B.I. He would know, as he had one just like it, taken when he was hired by the Haven Police Department.

“She looks like my little sister.” He grunted.

“MacNeill has four older brothers with some impressive credentials. A Texas Ranger, Navy SEAL, F.B.I and one is with the C.I.A. Black ops.”

Their gazes met.

“From what I hear, they’re pissing off the wrong people while they search for her.”

“Sounds like I’d enjoy having a beer with them.” His gaze dropped to the photo once more. He couldn’t help but think of his youngest sister. Jace was very close to his family and he couldn’t even imagine what the MacNeills were going through. Eight months not knowing where she was had to be hell on earth. If she were his sister he’d be losing his mind.

“LT thinks the Feds don’t have anything concrete on her disappearance. One day she was there and the next, gone like she never existed.”

“After all this time...” His words trailed off.

Ortiz nodded. “I think so too. It’s too dangerous to keep her alive for this long.”

With two federal agents, one dead and the other missing and presumed dead, it was no wonder the Feds came in with a heavy hand. Two of their own had gone down, and all of their asses were on the line.

“This case is rapidly turning into a cluster-fuck,” he muttered.

“That’s an understatement.” Ortiz glanced at his watch. “I gotta get moving. When are you in the club again?”

Jace pocketed the photo. “Tonight, then I’m off until next Thursday thanks to the Feds.”

“Lucky you.” He grinned. “Headed home then?”

“Yeah, probably. LT seems to think I need some time off.”

“No kidding, you’ve been working three weeks straight. Go home, relax, find a woman to take your mind off this mess.” His partner continued speaking as he backed away. “Me, I like to find a nice heavyset woman who loves to cook. She can take care of two hungers at once.”

Jace waved him off as the image of Sissy naked, clad only in an apron came to mind. He pushed it away. Now was not the time to think about food, sex or Sissy. He was still on the clock for another fifteen hours or so.

After securing his tools in the trunk of the car, Jace headed upstairs to his apartment. As far as cheap rentals went, this place wasn't bad. It was relatively clean and the bedroom and living room windows overlooked the club, making surveillance a breeze.

Securing the door behind him, Jace laid the photo on the kitchen counter. The resemblance to his sister was more than a little disturbing. Like Grace, Gemma was also a blue-eyed blonde with a sweet smile. Both women were apple pie and vanilla ice cream though MacNeill had to be tougher than she looked to be an agent.

From what he'd read on Jimenez, he wouldn't hesitate to kill someone simply because they were a woman. He was the kind of guy who'd pull the wings off flies just for fun. Jace had come face to face with him last night, and the look in the other man's eyes was chilling, even to him.

From the evidence he and Ortiz had gathered, the brothers were small potatoes when compared to Jimenez and the *Diez Hombres*. So what was Manny, a federal agent, doing on Esteban's security team?

His gaze flitted to the white resin backsplash behind the sink. His secure laptop with hundreds of pages of notes was hidden behind the thin plastic. His gut was telling him that they'd yet to uncover it or they'd missed something. With ten years of police work under his belt, he listened to his instincts. On more than one occasion they'd saved his hide.

Which doesn't explain why you ignored your gut and took this damned case to begin with.

He snorted. Well, that wasn't exactly true. He'd taken the case to put some distance between himself and Sissy. The ninety miles separating them had given him time to think. After so many years of shameless flirting, both of them had known it was only a matter of time before nature took its course. And when they did, well...Sissy had lied about rocking his world.

She'd knocked it off its damned axis.

Unbidden, memories of their one night together washed over him. The sounds she'd made when he sucked her nipples, her laughter, the scent of her skin and the greedy way they kissed...

And when she whispered "I love you" when you left her bed.

Photo in hand, he lit one of the burners on the gas stove. So here he was, three weeks later and still tied up in knots because of three little words. They were good friends, and neither of them could deny their mutual fondness for each other. But love? Never had he imagined her emotions extended that deep.

Holding the photo to the open flame, the paper began to smoke then caught fire. The edge curled inward and Grace MacNeill's face faded to black. He'd stared down a crack-head holding a gun pointed at his heart but when a five-foot-something waitress whispered three words, he'd run like a coward.

What was up with that?

Dropping the smoking remains of the photo into the sink, he braced his hands on the counter. His immediate family was out of luck when it came to love. Pops had fathered five children with four different women without ever finding his happy ending. It wasn't until Sophie, Gemma's mother, had come along

that his father had given any thought to settling down. But his marriage plans were derailed when Sophie had been killed by a drunk driver. To this day, twenty years later, Pops still mourned her.

Nine years ago, Jace's twin, Jeff aka Cowboy, was involved with a piranha named Charlene Whittier. Char wiped out his bank account and humiliated him in front of the entire town. After her dramatic exit from his life, Jeff was a changed man. His laid-back brother now went through women like Halloween candy. He refused to allow any woman close enough to walk away with anything more than a handful of memories.

Even Josie and Gem had their own encounters with the curse leaving only Jace and Ryan unscathed.

Jace dated as much as his job would allow, and he stuck to one hard and fast rule. Never bed a woman more than twice. As far as he was concerned, two sexual encounters could still be considered causal while three headed into uncharted territory for him. His siblings called him a man-whore and they weren't far from the truth. His relationships, if they could be called that, were short-lived but at least his heart was intact.

Sissy was the only women who'd been his friend before becoming his lover.

Cursing under his breath, he stalked to the postage-stamp-sized bathroom, tearing off his shirt as he went. Which was why he'd ignored his gut and taken this case. Usually it was the other way around, and that was where he'd made his mistake. Many years of shared memories stood behind them, and he truly liked and respected her. They'd weathered good and bad times together. They had history.

No matter how hard he tried to put her into a box like the women before her, he couldn't. Sissy wasn't someone he'd picked up for sex and some laughs. Not only was she a close friend to him, she was also tight with his family. Many nights she'd sat beside him at the dinner table with friends and family surrounding them. He'd taught her how to drive a car, and she'd introduced him to peanut butter and dill pickle sandwiches.

It had taken only one night of amazing sex and three little words to change everything.

Chapter Two

Dying should be easier than this.

When Sissy pried open one eyelid a blast of sunlight sent a stabbing pain through her skull. The resulting groan was long and heartfelt though she was the only one around to hear.

Shading her eyes from the sun, she stared at the water-stained ceiling of her bathroom. Was there anything more pathetic than dying on the bathroom floor in a crappy trailer? What a sad way to end a totally unspectacular life. She could see the newspaper headline now.

Local waitress dies in bathroom, remains consumed by feral cats.

Um, ew?

Beautiful waitress dies ALONE, Ohio Governor declares day of mourning.

Now, that's what I'm talkin' about.

She let her eyes drift shut as she tried to concentrate on anything other than how lousy she felt. Her boss was probably pissed as hell right now. Her shift at the Grille should've started at ten, and that time had already come and gone. If the nausea and headache didn't kill her then Bitsy would finish her off.

Then again, if she put Sissy out of her misery then at least the dry heaves would stop.

Taking several deep breaths, she was grateful when the need to hurl ebbed. Until a week or so ago she felt fine. Her job was physically demanding so she made an effort to eat well and get plenty of rest. Seeing that napping was her favorite hobby, that wasn't too difficult to accomplish.

With it being summer and vacation season in full swing, she'd taken on extra shifts to fatten her anorexic savings account. But she'd always worked extra hours when they were offered and she'd never suffered any ill effects from it.

It started when she noticed feeling more tired than usual. She'd come home from work only to fall into bed face first yet still feel tired when her alarm went off. Originally she'd attributed it to the longer hours and the unseasonably hot and muggy weather, but now she wasn't convinced. Neither excuse could account for the newest symptom, nausea.

Using the wall for support, Sissy managed to sit upright. With her crap-lousy luck she'd probably picked up some disease unknown to modern medicine and the cure would be heinous. But if they named it after her she'd be famous. Her lips twitched.

And who said there was no silver lining to puking up your intestines?

Her hand trembled when she pushed her hair out of her eyes. Why did she feel so weak? When she licked her lips she noticed her mouth tasted like she'd been chewing on pencil shavings. Did she forget to brush her teeth last night?

Wearily, she rubbed her tired eyes. She could only imagine how she looked. After performing astounding feats of projectile vomiting the best she could hope for was the death-warmed-over look.

Outside, the sound of footsteps crunching across the gravel driveway caught her attention. Great. The last thing she needed was a witness to her humiliation. The unexpected metallic screech of the front door opening sent her fumbling for a bath towel to cover her ratty nightgown.

"Girl, where the hell are you?" Bitsy's voice boomed through the trailer. "You were supposed to be at work thirty minutes ago."

With every step her boss took the floor vibrated beneath Sissy's butt. Bitsy's pale blue gaze was locked on her like a laser as she thundered down the short hall. Her bright auburn curls were half-covered by a green bandana, and she wore standard Grille uniform—khaki pants and a white T-shirt with the business name silk-screened over the pocket.

"I'm dyin'," Sissy croaked.

God, she even sounded pathetic.

"Sick?" Concern replaced the annoyance on Bitsy's round face, and her mouth went slack. "Land sakes girl, you're a mess. How long you been this way?"

"Coupla days. This mornin' is the worst so far."

Bitsy touched Sissy's forehead. "No fever."

A familiar scent assaulted her nose and her nausea came rushing back. She slapped a hand over her mouth. "You been cleanin' the fryer?" Her words were muffled.

"Yeah, Butch had a family thing this—"

Sissy caught the look of alarm on her boss's face when she lunged for the toilet. Even though her stomach was empty the scent of dirty fryer grease made her give it a shot anyway. Once the storm had passed, she pushed away from the toilet.

This latest bout of nausea left her coated in sweat and shaking so hard that defying gravity was no longer an option. Pressing her cheek to the cool linoleum floor, she felt Bitsy's footsteps as she moved away.

Good, now if the room would stop spinning she'd be set.

"I swear you don't have the sense God gave a goat." The sound of cupboard doors opening and closing meant Bitsy was searching the kitchen...or tearing the place apart. "Why don't you ever have any food?"

"My boss is a real a-hole." She winced at the pain in her throat. "She's been makin' me work long hours, and I have no time to get to the store."

“Ha! Still a smartass I see. It’s good to know you aren’t dying.” Bitsy hurried back, and a sleeve of soda crackers appeared on floor in front of Sissy’s face. “Eat some of these.”

“Not hungry,” she whimpered.

“Didn’t ask if you were hungry, eat some anyway.” She pulled a few saltines from the bag and shoved them into Sissy’s hand. “It’ll settle your stomach.”

Reluctantly, Sissy bit off a corner then made a face. “They’re stale.”

“Like that’s my fault.” She headed back toward the kitchen.

“Water,” she croaked.

“Hell no, that’ll make you sicker.”

“Whisky?”

Taking Bitsy’s bark of laughter as a no, Sissy finished one cracker and was working on the second when she returned.

“Found a lemon soda in the bottom of your cabinet.” Her boss helped her sit upright then thrust a plastic cup into Sissy’s hand. “Probably been there since nineteen sixty.”

“Sorry to disappoint ya but my trailer wasn’t built until seventy-one.”

“Well, it looks much older.”

She couldn’t be annoyed with Bitsy’s sarcasm. Her friend wasn’t happy unless she could hear the sound of her own voice. Besides, her prickly personality hid a heart as cuddly as a porcupine. Yeah, Bits was a loveable old fart.

Not.

“Keep eating them crackers and don’t gulp your drink or you’ll get sick again,” she ordered.

“Anythin’ else?” Sarcasm dripped from every word.

“Yeah, you look like hell. When was the last time you took a shower?”

“Nineteen seventy-two, year after the trailer was built,” she quipped.

Hiding a grimace, Sissy took a sip of the icy liquid. For a second she thought it might require an encore but, to her relief, it settled in her belly. Four crackers and half a glass of soda later she was starting to think she might not be dying after all.

“I don’t know where I picked up this bug, but I hope ya don’t get it.” She reached for another cracker.

“If I did it would be a miracle,” Bitsy chuckled. “How are your breasts? Do they feel tender?”

Sissy’s head came around so fast her neck popped in protest. “Excuse me?”

“When did you have your last period?” Bitsy stood in the doorway with her arms crossed over her massive chest. If she had a cigar she’d look like a female version of Hellboy.

Stunned, all Sissy could do was gape at the other woman. Her breasts? What kind of a question—

She thinks I’m pregnant.

Sissy shook her head. “I know what you’re thinkin’ and that ain’t it. I just had my period in the middle of June...”

Bitsy’s fat penciled eyebrows shot skyward. “I hate to tell you this but it’s late July, Sissy.”

Three weeks...Jace...no condom...

Not only did I sneak into your bedroom and jump on you like some animal in heat—

And to think, less than an hour ago her biggest worry was about dying.

“I think ya need an eye exam, Dr. Campbell.” Sissy rubbed her damp palms on her jeans. “I just can’t be pregnant. I’ve been on the pill since...well, forever.”

“Ms. Kolchek, as I’ve explained—”

“I want another test,” she snapped. The doctor looked barely old enough to be out after dark let alone practice medicine. “Is there another doctor, an older one, here today?”

To her surprise he smiled. “If I had a dollar for every time someone hinted I was too young to be a doctor, well, I wouldn’t be working here.”

Her cheeks heated.

“I can assure you I’m old enough to practice medicine, and I have a mountain of school loans to prove it.” His smile became serious. “During the exam I noticed your cervix is bluish purple, which is a good indication of pregnancy. The test only confirmed my findings. Oral contraceptives aren’t one hundred percent effective and missed doses—”

“I ain’t missed one, I swear it.”

“There are other instances in which oral contraceptives can be compromised.” He glanced down at her medical file. “According to your chart, you were here in late May for bronchitis at which time you received a prescription for an antibiotic, correct?”

Not trusting herself to speak, she nodded.

“Did you read the instructions that came with your prescription? Specifically the part about using a secondary form of birth control while taking the medication?”

Her stomach dropped.

“The use of an antibiotic decreases the effectiveness of your birth control pills.” He removed his glasses, which only served to make him look even younger. “I’d say there are a great many Haven residents who were conceived in the same way so your mistake isn’t uncommon.”

“That doesn’t help,” she whispered.

I don’t think either one of us is in the position to be a parent right now.

Jace’s words echoed through her mind, and she winced. Obviously he was wrong about that as she was knocked up. Three weeks pregnant. She had a bun in the oven. With child. Preggers. Knocked up.

Holy crap.

Covering her face with her hands, Sissy shuddered. What was she going to do? They'd spent one night together, and she hadn't heard from him since. She'd seen him at the Grille last weekend and other than reminding him what he walked away from, she'd been too angry to speak to him. His attitude of indifference had only added fuel to the fire.

Jace was her friend, and the only man she'd ever loved. On the strength of their long friendship, she'd thought he could love her too.

Boy, was she an idiot or what? While the earth moved for her, it was obvious that he saw it differently. To him it was a one-night stand and just about as meaningful. Now that he'd bagged her, he then moved on to greener pastures. She shouldn't be surprised as that was his style. Why did she expect it would be any different with her?

"Sissy? Ms. Kolchek? Are you okay?"

The doctor's gentle voice broke through her burgeoning hysteria. She dropped her hands and met his gaze dead on. "I'm fine."

"Good. Am I correct in assuming this is an unplanned pregnancy?"

Her lips felt numb so she nodded.

"I'm going to send you home with a packet of information, and I want you to read through all of it. It covers the services that are available to you here at the clinic and, just to let you know, we do not perform abortions here—"

"That won't be necessary." Sissy laid her hands protectively over her soon-to-be-baby belly. "I won't... I can't... That's not an option."

He gave her a reassuring smile. "You'll need prenatal vitamins..." His words were soon lost in the growing white noise in her head.

What did she know about raising a child? Her own mother abandoned her only weeks after her seventeenth birthday. If she had to describe her early years in one word it would be chaos. At thirteen they'd moved to Haven, and this was the first place she'd lived for more than six months at a stretch. She'd just begun to feel comfortable here when one day she came home from school to find Paula was gone. She'd left a couple hundred dollars and a rambling note about pursuing her dreams.

Paula Kolchek's legacy of screwing anything in tight blue jeans was the only enduring thing she'd left for her daughter. It seemed like everyone in Haven knew of Paula's trashy reputation and her penchant for wealthy, married men.

Sissy learned the hard way that no one had a longer memory than a woman scorned. Because she bore a strong resemblance to her mother, they'd tarred her with the same brush. She'd barely been kissed and kids were calling her a slut and adults were whispering behind her back.

When puberty hit, the boys in school sat up and took notice.

Literally, over the summer heading into her sophomore year, she went from a B to a D-cup at barely seventeen years old. At first she'd been embarrassed by the sudden attention. Upper classmen were asking her out, leaving notes in her locker or bringing her little gifts like candy or a mix tape. For a girl longing for somewhere to fit in, the attention was a heady experience.

Then she realized they were only looking for an easy screw in the backseat of their car.

Talk about humiliating. Here she'd thought the boys actually liked her and instead they were laughing behind her back. When she refused to date any of them it was already too late. The damage had been done.

A scorned male had the second longest memory of any living creature.

That's when the stories began. A handful of her most ardent pursuers decided that if they couldn't have her, they'd simply lie about it. Once a girl had *that* kind of reputation it was almost impossible to shed. At twenty-seven years old, Sissy knew no decent man wanted anything to do with her.

So when she and Jace gave into temptation, she'd thought it would be different with him. Only it wasn't. He was no different than the boys looking for a quickie in the backseat. Well, there was a difference, a major one.

None of them had ever broken her heart.

She flattened her palm over her lower belly. And now she was pregnant. Other than Paula, and who knew where she was, Sissy had no other family. She didn't have anyone to pick up the slack for her—

Stop it!

Taking a deep breath, she forced herself back into the present. She had no idea what the doctor was talking about but damn it, she'd fake it for now. If there was one thing at which she excelled it was hiding her pain.

Twenty minutes later she was in Bitsy's car with a plastic bag filled with prenatal vitamins and a pile of pamphlets.

"I'm going to assume the test came back positive?" Bitsy gave her an assessing glance.

"How'd ya guess?" Sissy let her head fall back against the vinyl seat.

"Congratulations, Mama."

Mama. Oh, jeez. She wasn't ready for this.

"So, who's the father?" When Sissy didn't answer, she continued. "I can keep a secret."

Bitsy barely had the words out when Sissy laughed. "Like hell. In Haven we have three reliable methods of spreadin' news—telephone, telegraph and tell Bitsy."

"Vicious lies," Bitsy said without heat. Reaching into her breast pocket, she pulled out a cigarette from the pack she kept there. "Long as I've known you there's only been one boy you ever looked at more than once."

Sissy leaned over and snatched the unlit cigarette from her boss's mouth then tossed it out the window. "Ya can't smoke in here. It ain't good for the baby."

“Oh, for crying out loud.” Bitsy slapped her hand on the steering wheel. “The danged kid is the size of an aspirin so it’s not like he’d know the difference.”

Sissy gave her an evil glare.

“Barely pregnant and you’re already a pain in the ass,” she muttered.

“And doncha forget it.” Crossing her arms over her chest, she leaned into the seat.

“So, what’s the deal with you and that Diver boy? Are you dating? Is it serious?”

“That’s a good question.” One she didn’t have an answer to.

“This wasn’t some one-night quickie, was it? You know what I told you about that boy—”

“I know, Bitsy. He’s a player, I get it.” Warily, she closed her eyes. Jace did love the ladies, and no one knew that better than she.

“When are you going see him again?”

Numb, all she could do was shrug. She still fought the idea that Jace was no different than the guys who tried to cop a feel at work. It wasn’t like he was known for being monogamous. For all she knew he had gone straight from her bed and into another’s. Her throat tightened. She might not have much, but she still had some pride. There was no way in hell she’d go chasing after him like some desperate female.

“Well, never you mind.” Bitsy patted her on the arm. “Frank Diver raised those boys right. Jace will take good care of you and the baby—”

Sissy shook her head. “I don’t want him to feel he *has* to do anythin’.”

“Ookay... I hear you but that’s his baby too so half the burden is his—”

“My child will never be a burden,” she bit out. That’s all Paula had seen her own daughter as, a burden. Giving birth was the price she’d paid for having sinned with a married man.

“I’m on your side, Sissy.” Bitsy had the let’s-not-set-off-the-crazy-person tone in her voice. “All I’m saying is that it’s one thing to be strong and independent, but it’s another to let your pride cause your downfall.”

What are ya, stupid or something?

Paula’s familiar refrain echoed through her head. She’d invoked it whenever Sissy couldn’t measure up to her ever-changing standards. Her mama had only one goal in life and that was to land a rich husband. Consequently she went from man to man, always looking for *The One* who could make her dreams come true. Some lasted a few months while others not even that long. Sooner or later, they all walked away, leaving them worse off than before.

So here she was, ten and a half years later, pregnant and alone, just like her mama.

Chapter Three

Frank Diver was dead.

Those four words tumbled around in her mind like clothing in a washer. It took every ounce of courage Sissy could muster to drive over to the Crimson Sun, Jace's childhood home. She'd spent many happy hours here on the ranch, and Frank figured largely in some of her best memories. With each step all she could think of was his family and how devastated they must be.

After leaving the clinic, Bitsy had hauled her to the grocery store before heading home. They were carrying in the bags when she received the call. Her friend, Kara Whittier, was so upset it took a few moments to decipher her words. She'd grown up across the road from the ranch and Frank, or Pops as he liked to be called, had been a second father to the Whittier children.

The Sun was the first place where Sissy could remember feeling safe as a child. Whenever things got too crazy, she'd sneak over to the ranch because there was always something to do or someone to talk to. She didn't even mind mucking out the stalls when Pops or one of the boys was around. All summer long the Sun played host to a variety of impromptu events like barbeques and campouts. In the fall they hosted a rodeo to raise money to support their rescued horses.

Frank was well known and much respected in the horse world. His hard work had earned the Sun a solid reputation for training and rehabilitating horses that others had long since given up on. At any time of the day or night they could receive a call to pick up an animal anywhere in the state. Some were simply too far gone and had to be put down immediately. Those that could be rehabilitated worked with trainers to determine if and when they could be adopted into new homes.

As for the others, the animals that were older or too severely traumatized, would spend their days in peace on the vast acreage of the ranch. Pops used to say that fat, lazy and loved was the best way to leave this world.

A tear slipped down Sissy's cheek, and she wiped it away. No one could've ever called Frank fat nor lazy though he was well loved. Haven was a decent sized town with small-town values. When someone passed away it was expected that close friends and family would come together for a proper send-off including an old-fashioned wake. Seeing that Pops had never met a stranger the sheer number of potential visitors was staggering. At best, they would have maybe forty-eight hours to get everything ready, too much for a grieving family to handle.

That's where she came in.

When it came to handling community events, Sissy was the go-to girl. She oversaw the catering and special events for the Grille. Every fourth Friday from March to October she was in charge of Downtown Days, a big community event that drew in as many as thirty thousand people. If she could handle that, she could certainly take care of the arrangements.

Besides, it was the least she could for the family who'd embraced her so completely.

She only hoped that when she saw Jace she didn't do something foolish like knock him upside the head with something...like her car.

A wave of heat sucked the air from her lungs when she stepped through the back door into the mudroom. A row of pegs held outerwear of every shape and size imaginable with rubber boots, cowboy boots and every other style of boot lined up neatly underneath.

Ryan and Cowboy sat at the kitchen table. Neither one seemed to know she was there, and her heart ached when she saw the raw pain etched on their faces. The house was still, too still, as if the structure held its breath waiting for the next traumatic event.

"Are ya'll tryin' to roast yourselves or are ya turnin' the kitchen into an oven? Keep this up the devil might decide hell moved has moved to Haven, Ohio."

Both men turned to look at her. Both of them seemed confused as if she'd woken them from a deep sleep. She dumped her oversized bag on the table then turned on the overhead fans. It was hotter than hell outside but a draft would help somewhat.

"Can ya'll believe I overslept this mornin'? And damned if Bitsy didn't haul her lazy carcass on over to my place to bawl me out." Taking two large glasses from the cupboard, she set about filling them with ice and water. "Damned near didn't recognize her without the bar strapped to her waist. It's been so long since I've seen her legs I almost forget she had 'em."

Setting a glass before Ryan, she gave his shoulder a gentle squeeze before putting the second drink in front of Cowboy.

"Ya'll need to make it a point to never, ever wake up lookin' at that scowl of hers. Damn near scared me into next month." Shaking her head, she turned and headed for the sink. "I'm gonna need some expensive therapy to recover from that sight."

"Sis." Ry's voice was little more than a low rumble.

Holding several dirty coffee mugs she'd just pulled out of the sink, her hands began to shake. She was afraid to turn around because she might fall apart and that would only make the situation worse. She set the cups on the counter and continued emptying the sink. "Whatcha need, hon?"

"Thank you for coming."

"That's what friends do, Ry." Her voice trembled, and her knees felt weak. Clearing her throat, she leaned over to grab the coffee pot. "I do not know how in the hell ya'll drink this stuff. It's thicker'n oil outta my car..."

Sissy didn't know how long she prattled on but she kept up a steady stream of nonsense as she washed dishes and wiped down the counters and appliances. It wasn't until she heard the front door that she let the words die away.

Hearing the sound of high heels on the polished hardwood floor, she smiled. There was only one person crazy enough to wear heels and walk on a gravel driveway, and that was Kara.

Dressed in a pink silk sheath with a single strand of pinkish ivory pearls around her slim throat, Kara looked like she'd come from a meeting with the Ladies Society. From the precise arrangement of her shining blonde hair to the tips of her strappy pink Stuart Weitzman sandals, the former beauty queen never seemed to sweat. Next to her, Sissy felt like a fat cow. If she didn't know Kara to be a warm, funny and loyal friend, she'd hate her.

Giving them a few moments alone, she busied herself with ferreting out the baking pans. It wasn't until she was on her hands and knees with her head deep in one of the bottom cabinets that Kara spoke to her.

"I swear, Sissy, if your butt gets any bigger it'll need its own zip code."

Oh, no she didn't...

Spying the muffin pans behind a big soup pot, she snatched them up then slapped them on the counter with a noisy clatter. From her position on the floor, Sissy gave the former Miss Universe finalist a pointed glance.

"Well, smell yew, Nancy Drew," she sneered. "If ya'd quit shovin' your finger down your throat after every meal then maybe your ass wouldn't look like a ten-year-old boy's."

One corner of Kara's perfectly glossed lips quirked. "That may be but at least I don't have to buy pants at Rent-A-Tent."

"Well, duh." Sissy rolled her eyes. "Everybody knows ex-beauty queens buy their stripper...I mean, pageant clothes in the Barbie aisle at Walmart."

"Oh, hell no," one of the guys muttered.

"At least I can fit into them." Kara held out her hand to Sissy. "The inventory at the Bernie's Big and Wide, don't you think? That is where those shorts came from, correct?"

Taking her hand, Sissy got up then checked out her friend's French manicure. Kara's soft, pale skin was as smooth as a baby's left butt cheek. This was not the hand of someone familiar with manual labor.

"Those ain't them cheap Pop-Off nails, are they?" Her brow rose. "Good, 'cause if I find plastic fingernails in my food I'd have to kick your ass." She dumped the muffin pans into the sink of clean dishwater. "Now get on over here and wash these pans for me, Beauty Queen."

Kara peered into the sink as if she'd never seen anything like it. "Wash them? By hand?"

"No, with your feet," Sissy snorted. "Hell, you're how old? Thirty-six—"

"Twenty-nine," she snapped.

“Now that’s just pathetic, Kara. At your age ya still haven’t learned anything useful other than baton twirling and how to convert oxygen into carbon dioxide.”

Both Ry and Cowboy burst out laughing, and it only got louder when Kara shot them a dirty look. Propping her hands on her hips, Sissy waited for the comeback she could see rattling around in her friend’s head.

“Oh, yeah?” Kara’s cheeks turned pink. “Well, well, I know what you are but what am I?”

Unable to help herself, Sissy laughed. “Ooh, now that one hurt.”

“Damn it, Sis. You get me every time.”

The front door slammed again, and Gemma, the youngest Diver, walked in. Her eyes were red and puffy in her too-pale face. “What’s going on?”

Cowboy pushed his chair back from the table. “Kara was hoisted by her own petard.”

“What?” Gemma blinked.

“Meaning, I started a war of words and Sissy just wiped me across the floor...again.” Kara groaned. “No one can out trash-talk our Sissy.”

A tall figure moved to stand behind Gem, and Sissy’s knees went weak. “You’ll find no arguments here,” he said.

Ranger.

Even from across the kitchen she felt the impact of his gaze. Goose bumps raced over her arms. For the first time his expression was closed to her and sorrow pierced her heart. She turned away.

“Come on, Beauty Queen. I’m gonna teach ya how to make bread.”

His life would never be the same.

Jace stood in front of his open bedroom window letting the night sounds surround him. He’d survived a life-threatening injury in the line of duty, had been thrown off a horse more times than he could count, and jumped out of the barn loft on several occasions, and he was still standing. He’d never imagined that a simple text message held the power to bring him to his knees.

911.

Instinctively he’d known it would be bad. His family didn’t contact him while he was undercover unless it was urgent. Even as he’d dialed Cowboy’s number he’d hoped it was something minor. An illness or maybe an accident at the ranch and his twin wanted to give him a heads up. Bracing his fists on each side of the window, he allowed his head to drop forward.

Never, ever would he have imagined that it would be Pops.

When he was away from home, Jace always made it a point to call the ranch every three days or so. Even with his children grown, that didn’t stop Pops from worrying about them. The last time they’d talked was a couple of days ago and he’d mentioned being concerned about Gemma. She was due to leave for

college in another month, and she was still fighting him about going. Even though he'd been exasperated with her bullheadedness, Jace heard the pride in his words.

I love all my children, but there isn't a one of you I didn't want to strangle at some point. Being a father was the most rewarding job I ever had. A man rests easier when he knows his legacy will continue to live on after he's gone.

It felt strange to be back home without his father around. Moisture scorched Jace's eyes as the band around his chest tightened. More than anything he wished he'd spent less time working and more time on the ranch. Over and over again he'd told himself there would be time for that later. Well, today that time ran out.

Tilting his head, he winced when his neck gave a twinge. Frank left behind some mighty big boots to fill, and he wasn't sure he would ever be up to the task. If he could be only a quarter of the man his father was then he'd be doing just fine.

A light came on in the loft of the tool shed. The converted barn earned its nickname because the mechanical equipment was stored there. It was one of Ryan's favorite places. Armed with his guitar, he often escaped to the loft when he wanted some privacy.

After the day they'd had it wasn't surprising everyone had scattered at the first opportunity. Ryan to the shed, Josie to the library with her head in a book, Cowboy shut himself in his room with his girlfriend, Pip, and Gemma was curled up in bed with a four-foot tall teddy bear she'd received when she was three.

That left only him. If he wanted to find solace, where would he look?

Sissy.

Weary, he flopped down on his bed. The chances of that door still being open to him were slim to none. She had quite the poker face, but he'd caught the flash of pain in her eyes when she saw him. For the rest of the day she'd made it a point to avoid him. He'd spoken to her, well, he'd tried to speak to her, and her responses were cool and painfully polite. But it wasn't her anger that surprised him.

It was how much he'd counted on, no, needed them to be okay again.

When he heard the news she was the first person who came to mind. She was the one he turned to when he needed an ear, but she wasn't there. Their easy rapport was gone, and their friendship reduced to that of polite strangers. He raked his hands through his hair. It was selfish and naïve to think they could ignore what happened and go back to being friends.

It wasn't until he saw her in the kitchen that he realized how much he missed her.

All day she'd worked in the kitchen, baking, cooking and assigning tasks with the efficiency of a general. Practical to a fault, she knew how to put aside her feelings and do what needed to be done. And with each passing hour she worked he felt even worse.

With her big personality and bigger sense of humor, Sissy made it easy to forget she was hurting too. She'd spent a lot of time here at the Sun, and she adored his father. Losing Pop was a devastating blow but at least Jace had his brothers and sisters to help him through.

Sissy had no one.

Rolling off the bed, Jace stalked to his dresser to get a clean shirt. She might be mad at him, but he wasn't going to give up on her now. Chances were good that she'd gone on home already so he'd have to drive over to her place. Grabbing his favorite cowboy boots, he jogged down the back staircase to the kitchen. Someone had left the light on over the stove and his eyes went wide when he saw the results of Sissy's marathon baking session.

The counters were filled with a dozen loaves of homemade bread, bags of dinner rolls, fruit pies and a mountain of fat muffins. Even Kara'd jumped in to help knead pounds of bread dough. It'd shocked the hell out of him as he never knew she had a domestic bone anywhere in her body. Her claim to culinary excellence was having every restaurant's take-out number programmed into her iPhone.

Ignoring his noisy stomach, Jace reached the door only to realize he'd yet to put on his boots. Bracing his shoulder against the wall, he saw something out of the corner of his eye that stopped him cold.

Chapter Four

For a split second he was seventeen years old again, and Pops had just caught him trying to sneak out of the house. The goal was to hook-up with a seventeen-going-on-thirty-year-old daughter of a neighbor. But his old man had known what his middle son was up to. In the darkness he'd waited patiently, seated in his favorite armchair, until Jace made his move.

Jace shook away the memory, and his gaze narrowed. The chair was rocking, and he could clearly discern the shape of his father's dark head. The familiar intensity of his gaze moved over Jace's face then he caught a flash of a smile before it faded.

Shaken, he scrambled for a logical explanation, but there was none to be had. Pops was dead. He'd seen the body with his own two eyes. Yet the chair *was* rocking, and it was his father he'd seen. Pushing away the urge to reach for his weapon, Jace's neck prickled as he moved toward the chair.

It wasn't until he was less than a foot away that he realized it was Sissy.

With her legs draped over one arm and her head propped against the back of the chair, Sissy was sound asleep. Around her waist she still wore the makeshift apron she'd fashioned from a kitchen towel and she held a pie plate cradled in her arms. Her ponytail had fallen and long golden hair cascaded over her shoulders. She looked exhausted, smelled like a cinnamon bun and he was pretty sure he'd never see anything more beautiful in his life.

Warmth stole through his body to melt the tension in his chest. For the first time since coming home he felt as if he could take a deep breath.

Jace removed the plate from her limp arms then returned it to the kitchen. When he took her into his arms he was both charmed and humbled when she sighed and snuggled deeper into his embrace. He carried her up to his bedroom, and it wasn't until he laid her on his bed that she stirred.

"Ranger?"

He loved how she said his name in that sleepy, sexy voice. Her southern accent was heavier, if that were possible, and her words slurred ever so slightly. Somehow she added at least four more syllables until it came out sounding like 'rainnnnnn-juh'.

"Yeah, babe."

"Were ya carryin' me?"

“I was.” He removed her pink flip-flops. Why hadn’t he noticed how delicate her ankles were? Her feet were long and slim with the toenails painted something dark. The moonlight caught the flash of a silver band around one toe. “You fell asleep in the chair twisted up like a human pretzel.”

“I hate it when that happens,” she mumbled. “I need a shower.”

“Later, sweetheart. You’re exhausted and need to sleep.”

Eyeing her shorts, he wondered if he could remove them without waking her fully. Deciding she would be more comfortable without them, he released the button and eased down the zipper.

“You’re not to take advantage of me.” He heard the amusement in her slurred words. “Or at least wait until I’m awake.”

“How do you take advantage of the willing?”

“I’m still mad as hell at ya.” Her yawn was deep and lusty. “I’m gonna kick your ass tomorrow, remind me?”

“Sure, I’ll remind you.” He swallowed a snort of laughter. “Go to sleep, Sis.”

Easing off her shorts, he left them folded on the corner of his dresser before stripping down to his boxers and sliding into bed beside her. When he reached for her, she melted into him like warm wax dripping off a candlestick. Her head came to rest on his shoulder bringing with it the scent of cinnamon and vanilla in her hair. It felt right, holding her in his arms.

Was this love? This sense of homecoming he felt when they were together? He didn’t know for sure. What did he know about love? He loved his family, but he’d never told a woman he wasn’t related to that he loved her.

After Sophie died they’d spent the next six months in a fog. He remembered all too well his father’s struggle to handle the ranch, a four-month-old baby and four other children. Night after night he and Cowboy would sneak downstairs to sit outside their father’s bedroom and listen to his muffled sobs—

Jace’s eyes flew open and the present came back with a rush. He’d completely forgotten about those nights he and Cowboy spent outside their father’s door. They ended when Ryan caught them and took them to his room to bed down. Damn, even now the memories of those long, dark days were still painful.

Looking back, he didn’t know if it was conscious or not when he’d decided to never fall in love. At ten years old his rationale was as long as he didn’t love then his heart could never be broken. That was before he met Sissy. Absently, he rubbed the ache in his chest located suspiciously near his heart.

What the hell did a ten-year-old kid know?

Before Sissy opened her eyes she knew there were rough seas ahead. Sweat broke out on her forehead when her stomach performed a lazy roll. Her jaw clenched as she mentally composed a list of items needed to stave off the looming storm.

Saltine crackers were in her purse.

Cold lemon soda was in the veggie bin of the refrigerator.

And the most important component was privacy to worship the porcelain god.

Sitting up, she lost precious seconds when she realized she didn't know where she was. It was only when she saw the black ballistics vest emblazoned with POLICE that she realized whose bed she was in. She barely had time to assimilate that Jace was asleep on the far side of the bed before she was on the move. Clamping one hand over her mouth, she stumbled across the room then out the door and into the bathroom next door.

A few minutes later Sissy was sprawled on yet another bathroom floor. This time she didn't wish for death though she did enjoy imagining a variety of torments raining down on Jace's sleeping head. It wasn't fair that he was still in bed while she was freezing her ass off on a cold tile floor. Men should be made to suffer alongside—

Strike that.

Who wanted to puke in front of a man they'd had sex with?

Eww, not sexy at all.

Her hands came to rest on her non-existent baby bump. Now what? She was pregnant, and Jace needed to be told, but how? Sissy was pretty sure that whacking him upside the head and yelling, "Hey, jackass, the rabbit died", wasn't going to cut it.

It was too subtle.

She needed time to think this through. Her mind still grappled with the reality that they'd created a baby. Thinking too hard about how to tell him would probably trigger a meltdown. She sighed. Maybe it was best to wait until after the funeral. With Frank's death he had to be overwhelmed—

A knock sounded on the door, and her gasp turned to a groan when her nausea returned.

"Sissy? It's Josie. Are you okay?"

"Yeah." Her voice sounded like she'd spent the night smoking cigars.

"I'm coming in."

Before she could form a reply Josie slipped into the room and closed the door. While her brothers looked distinctively Native American, Josie's origins weren't as clearly defined. Her features were finely wrought with dainty brows, a slim nose, large brown eyes and lips that put Angelina to shame. Even with her dark brown hair in a sloppy ponytail and wearing a baggy OSU T-shirt, she looked young and fresh. The last time Sissy felt fresh was in the third grade.

"What can I do for you?" Josie busied herself with wetting a washcloth, which she laid against the back of Sissy's neck.

"Crackers, saltines, in my purse," she whispered. "Soda in the veggie bin."

"Gotcha. Be right back."

After she left, Sissy pulled a large towel off of the bar overhead to cover herself. It was the second day in a row someone found her on a bathroom floor half naked. If this kept up she wouldn't have to worry about telling anyone as it would be all over town before Friday.

Josie returned a few minutes later with a cellophane sleeve of saltines and a can of 7UP complete with a straw. "Here you go."

"Thanks." She gave her a faint smile. "I don't know what hit me this mornin'. Too much runnin' around yesterday I guess."

"Who do you think you're fooling, Sis?" Josie sank to the floor beside her. "Did you forget I'm only a year away from a degree in veterinary medicine?"

"Great. So, doctor, what? Hoof and mouth disease or a little mad cow?" Her tone was bland.

"Well, you were frothing at the mouth..." Her grin was contagious. "What is it you always say? I may have been born yesterday, but that doesn't mean it was last night." She gently poked Sissy's leg. "Did I ever mention that my roommate is in her second trimester?"

Stunned, Sissy forgot she was drinking when she sucked in some air. Soda went down the wrong way, and she began coughing. Josie grabbed her arm and helped her to sit upright before pounding her on the back.

"Is your roommate human?" Sissy gasped.

"Only until she kicked caffeine, now she's the devil." Josie snorted. "So, how far along are you?"

"Three weeks." When Josie shoved a tissue box into her hands she realized tears were running down her cheeks. "You're only the second person to know." She sniffed. "Well, not countin' me."

"Aren't I lucky?" Josie leaned in close. "So, who's the daddy?"

The question stung even though Sissy knew Josie meant no harm. Once her pregnancy became public fodder the first question was bound to be the identity of the baby daddy. It would then be followed up with a rehashing of the latest lewd stories making the rounds. The fact that Jace was the only man she'd slept with in years wouldn't matter because who wanted the truth when fiction was far more interesting?

"You're not at the top of your class, are ya? I'm sittin' in your brother's bathroom, and I'm half naked, what does that tell ya?"

"Woo hoo, it's about damned time," she crowed. "Hell hath frozen over in Haven."

Sissy glared at her. "What's that supposed to mean?"

"Do you remember my twelfth birthday and the party at the pond?" A teasing light entered her eyes. "My friends came over and..."

Sissy received her very first kiss.

How could she forget it? They'd been swimming all afternoon and Jace maneuvered her into the shadows beneath the willow tree. When his arms came around her, she could hardly breathe and then he kissed her. His lips were cool, and he tasted of soda and temptation. She'd never felt anything as wonderful

as his hard body pressed against hers. It was in the heat of that lazy summer day that she fell head over heels in love with him.

“Vaguely,” she lied.

Josie rolled her eyes. “You’re full of it. I saw you two under the tree and when you came out, both of you looked like you’d been struck by lightning.”

Her cheeks burned. “Did not.”

“When Pops called everyone to eat he got mad cause Jace...would...wouldn’t get out of the w-water.” Josie was laughing so hard she was gasping for air.

Amusement bubbled up and Sissy could no longer hold her laughter in check. They’d been so young then. Jace was seventeen, almost a man already and too old for her. At fifteen, she already had a body that gave guys the wrong idea. On that particular day she’d swiped her mama’s pink bikini in the hopes of catching the eye of a certain boy...and it worked.

“Well, maybe somethin’ important came up,” she drawled.

“La la la la la.” Josie clamped her hands over her ears. “I do not need to hear about what happens in my brother’s pants.”

“Well, there was this one time...”

“Stop it, you fiend.” Josie nudged her with an elbow.

“Feels like a lifetime ago, don’t it?” Sissy murmured. “I’m not sure I’d recognize the girl I was back then.”

“I would.” Josie dropped her hand over Sissy’s. “I’d recognize her anywhere.”

Touched, she squeezed her friend’s hand.

“So, what did my big he-man brother say when you told him?”

Sissy looked away.

“Oh, Sis. You haven’t told him yet, have you?” she whispered.

“I only found out yesterday.” She told her about Bitsy and their mad dash to the clinic. “We’d just walked in the door when Kara gave me the news about Pops. I haven’t even had time to let it sink in so I couldn’t just dump it on him.”

“You’re right. Maybe it’s best to wait a few days until, well, you know.” Her brown eyes filled with tears. “Pops would’ve been thrilled to pieces, Sissy.”

“Ya think so?”

She nodded. “My big, loud papa turned into goo when he held a baby in his arms,” she sniffed. “But, you want Ranger’s baby, right?”

Tears stung her eyes and she grabbed a tissue before handing the box to Josie. “More than anythin’.”

“Good.” Josie dabbed her eyes. “My niece or nephew will be the luckiest baby in the world, to have you two as parents. But—,” she gave her a mock-serious glare, “—I expect you to make an honest man out of my brother.”

“Married?” Sissy’s stomach dropped. She could barely comprehend she was pregnant let alone the M-word.

Marriage isn’t for the likes of you, Sissy Kolchek...

“I know what you’re thinking.” Josie gathered the scattered handfuls of damp tissues then tossed them into the trashcan. “My brothers have this idea in their heads that they’re *cursed*.” She rolled her eyes. “Pops never had any luck with love, and all three of my brothers have screwed up any relationship they’ve had. I can’t get it through their thick skulls that it isn’t a curse. It’s because they’re selfish buttheads.”

Sissy laughed.

“Pops told me that he loved each and every one of our mothers and not because they bore his children. Ryan’s mother refused to marry him and neither the twin’s birth mother nor mine was ready to settle down.” Her smile was both sweet and sad. “Gem’s mama was the only one interested in a happily ever after. I don’t remember much about her—I was only five when she died.”

Leaning against Josie, she whispered. “If I’d a been livin’ here then I would’ve been happy to give ya’ll, Paula.”

“And for that, I’m thankful you were living in St. Louis—”

“Bay St. Louis,” Sissy rolled her eyes.

“Louisiana.”

“Mississippi.”

“Same thing.” Josie was smiling now. “I need to promise me something, Sis. Promise me that you’ll be patient with my brother. You guys have been friends a long time so you know he’s stubborn almost to the point of stupidity and—”

An explosion of loud knocking on the bathroom door made both of them scream.

“Who’s hogging the bathroom?” It was Pip.

“Just us chickens,” Josie called out in a squeaky falsetto.

The door flew open, and Pip walked in wearing a Steelers football jersey and a sleepy smile. Her blonde streaky hair was rumped, and she sported a love bite on her neck. “What did I miss?” Her brow shot upward when she took in the Sissy’s odd apparel. “Are you wearing a towel?”

“Are ya wearin’ a hickey?” Sissy shot back.

Pip spun toward the mirror. “Oh, Lord.” She slapped her hand over the mark. “Must be a mosquito bite.”

“Mosquito bite?” Josie howled with laughter.

“Must be a mutant. Don’t think I ever saw one big enough to wear cowboy boots,” Sissy drawled. “Now ya’ll get on outta here. I need to take a shower.”

Pip looked at Josie and shrugged. “Who knew Sissy could be so modest?”

“Don’t blame me if ya’ll go blind.”

Rising to her feet, Sissy dropped the towel and presented them with her rear end. Even though she wore a thong it didn’t conceal anything. Both women shrieked when she pulled off her skimpy tank top and they climbed over each other in their haste to get out the door first.

Cowards. She couldn’t wait to scare them with a bulging baby belly.

Chapter Five

After her shower, Sissy realized she had no clothes to put on. Crossing her fingers that Jace was still asleep, she eased open the door. The last thing she wanted was a confrontation. Her shoulders slumped.

Jace stood at the foot of the bed, digging through a large military-style duffel bag. His back was turned toward her allowing for a spectacular view of his muscled back and tight ass. At fifteen she thought he was the most handsome boy she'd ever seen. Back then she'd had no idea what he'd look like at twenty-nine.

At six-foot-three inches of hard-muscled male, he was her idea of a man's man. His hands were big and calloused from working at the ranch, and his shoulders and chest were broad. With a narrow waist and legs made muscular by years of riding, Jace had the kind of body most women could only dream about. Forcing her gaze away, she adjusted the towel wrapped around her body.

Too bad she could no longer indulge in dreams.

"Why didn't ya send me home last night?" She winced at how harsh her words sounded.

"You were exhausted, and I didn't think putting you behind the wheel was the best option." He threw her a glance over his shoulder. "And seeing that you wore yourself out by helping us, it didn't seem polite to—"

"Polite? Who knew I was in the presence of a gentleman?"

Girl, don't go there...

He turned to face her. "Sis, I know you're mad—"

"Ya think?" Spying her flip-flops poking out from under the bed, she hurried over to retrieve them.

Jace ignored her. "—and you have every right to be. I was a complete jerk—"

"You're bein' too kind to yourself." Clutching her shoes, she began searching for her shorts. All she wanted was her clothes so she could get the hell out of Dodge.

His frustration showed on his face, and he dropped to the edge of the bed. "Can't you put your anger aside so we talk about this like two mature adults?"

"Oh, so *now* ya wanna be mature?" Bracing her fists on her hips, she leveled him with a glare. "Why? Didja get hit over the head or somethin'?"

"Ouch, woman." He rubbed his stomach as if she'd punched him.

His flat, ripped, washboard, eight-pack abs—

Earth to Sissy... Focus!

“In order to feel pain ya gotta have emotions.” Spying her shorts on the dresser, she heaved a sigh of relief.

“I have feelings, Sissy.”

“Yeah, two of ’em,” she muttered. “And they were used up when you were five.” Turning her back, she stepped into her shorts then pulled them up under the towel. “I don’t know if I’m more pissed at you or myself,” she muttered.

“Why would you be angry with yourself?”

“Cause I was dumb enough to fall into bed with ya, Jace,” she raged. “Ya see, I actually thought ya were a nice guy and that makin’ love would be as important to ya as it was to me.” Why wouldn’t her shorts fasten? Surely she didn’t gain twenty pounds overnight?

“It was...is important, Sissy.”

He sounded sincere but she couldn’t let herself weaken. When it came to Jace her instincts weren’t at their best.

“Yeah, it was important all right,” she sneered. “Important ’cause ya wanted to *get laid*.”

“Oh, come on, now. You know that wasn’t it.”

Damn it, what was up with her shorts...oh. A large part of the towel was wadded up in the back. After yanking it off she secured her shorts then spun around to face him.

“News flash, I don’t read minds. Maybe, if the telephone weren’t Kryptonite to your species—”

“So you’re mad that I didn’t call?” He patted the bed as if to invite her to sit with him, and she ignored him. “Sissy, I’ve been on assignment—”

“Don’t try to hand me any o’ your half-assed excuses.” She shook her head. “We both know where ya was last weekend. Here, in Haven. Seems to me that there was plenty of opportunities to talk then.”

He remained silent.

“I thought Jason Diver was a better man than those fools who grabs my ass hopin’ I’ll drop my panties.” She gave him a scathing look. “You’re not. In fact, I think you’re worse. At least when a guy grabs my ass he’s lookin’ in my face when he does it.”

His expression turned hard and anger flared in his blue eyes. She didn’t care how mad he was because she was determined to have her say.

“Ya wouldn’t even grant me the same courtesy ya’d give a stranger on the street. Tell me stud, did ya call your friends and tell ’em ya bagged Slutty Sissy Kol—”

He lurched to his feet, his face was twisted in anger. “That is enough.”

She moved forward until they stood toe to toe. “Is it?”

“You’ve gone too far, Sissy.”

“Yeah, three weeks ago I sure did.”

For a moment they stood there staring at one another, each reluctant to give in first. Staring into his cold eyes, Sissy wondered what happened to the man she'd been so proud to call friend. She was horrified when tears stung her eyes.

"Sis." His voice was curiously gentle, and there was a softness in his eyes that wasn't there earlier. "Do you remember what you said to me when I got up that morning?"

I will not cry...

"I was asleep, and I didn't say anythin'."

"Sleeping or not, you spoke to me then like you did last night." The tenderness and yearning in his voice was unmistakable.

Don't fall for it, Kolchek.

"I didn't speak to ya then or last night," she ground out.

"But you did. And that morning you told me you loved me."

In the back of her mind, something shifted. A vague memory of someone climbing over her in bed...the scent of his skin...he'd touched her face...kissed her lips...

She looked away. "I lied."

"No, you didn't." He grabbed her chin and forced her head up. "You could be unconscious, and you still couldn't lie about loving someone because you understand the power of those three words."

She slapped at his hand, and he released her. "I'm outta here."

"You scared the hell out of me that morning."

Sissy froze. Scared? Him? He was a cop, a member of the S.W.A.T. team and she'd scared him? How? She didn't realize she'd spoken out loud until he answered her.

"I know, foolish isn't it? For the past three weeks I've had exactly the same thoughts over and over again." His smile was wry. "I'd rather face a swarm of crazed men with guns than try to deal with my emotions. I'm not good at it...expressing myself." He dropped onto the bed. "All I could think of was to run."

Stunned, all she could do was stare at him.

"Come on. You've never hesitated to let me know what you were thinking, why so silent now?" His gaze skittered away. "I've never...gone to bed, er...made love with a woman that I cared about. Well, other than lust, that is. But you, you and I were friends first and I cared about you—

Why is he speaking in past tense?

"—when we made love it was like nothing I'd ever experienced."

When he raised his head, the sorrow on his face was unmistakable. Her knees began to shake.

"I've never felt that close to someone." He jumped to his feet and began to pace. "I mean, we know each other pretty well but I felt like I'd crawled inside your skin."

Me too.

“Then you told me you loved me and all I could do was to run.” He shook his head. “We Divers haven’t had much luck with love, and I didn’t want to screw it up but I panicked.” He stopped and turned toward her. “You know what I mean?”

When she opened her mouth to speak, a sob emerged instead. Sissy clamped a hand over her lips, but it was too late. Another one slipped between her fingers and the third left her throat aching. The world tilted dangerously to the right, and she saw him dart toward her. One moment she was falling and the next she was in his arms.

“I’m so sorry, baby.” Her ribs protested his fierce grip but she didn’t try to shove him away. “I never, ever wanted to hurt you, Sissy,” he whispered.

Still sobbing, her knees gave way and he picked her up. Settling on the edge of the bed, he held her in his lap, all the while softly telling her how sorry he was and asking if she could ever forgive him. When he repeated how he never wanted to hurt her for the fourth time, she slapped his chest, hard.

“Don’t matter what ya wanted,” she sobbed. “I still got hurt.”

“I know, and it kills me.” His lips brushed her cheek. Content to let her cry, he simply held her until the tears finally slowed.

“Sissy, what can I do to make it up to you?”

She sniffed. “Let me run over ya with my truck ten or twenty times.”

He chuckled and he kissed her on the forehead. “That bad, huh?”

“Worse.” She scrubbed at her damp cheeks.

“If I wasn’t adverse to physical torture I would let you do it.” His voice was a reassuring rumble against her cheek. “Is there anything else I can do to atone for my sins?”

Promise me that you’ll be patient with my brother. You guys have been friends a long time so you know he’s stubborn almost to the point of stupidity...

Josie’s words made her smile. Yes, he was stubborn and yes, she loved him...but that didn’t mean she’d let him off easy.

Raising her head, her gaze locked on his mouth. It should be a sin for a man to have such delicious lips. Bitsy told the truth when she’d said Jace was the only man Sissy ever looked at twice. She’d dated men, a lot of them, and none of them brought anything special to her life.

Not this one. Jace was the only one who made her feel safe. And, when he wasn’t breaking her heart, he treated her like she was special. Tears pricked her eyes, and she looked away. Because of him she wanted to become a better woman.

“Hey, don’t do that.” His fingers grazed her chin urging her to look at him. “Don’t ever hide from me.” His breath was warm on her skin as he kissed away her tears. “Can you give me another chance, Sissy?”

She laid her hand against his cheek. “I can’t lie—”

“I wouldn’t want you to.”

“My heart’s been bruised, and ya broke my trust,” she whispered.

He swallowed, hard.

“Right now I don’t know what it’ll take to repair, but I’d be a fool if I didn’t give ya another chance.”

He started to speak, and she hushed him by laying a finger over his lips. “Actions speak louder than words, Ranger.”

“That they do.”

His kiss, when it came, was so soft and heartbreakingly sweet. It felt like butterfly wings touching her lips, her chin, her forehead. When his fingers touched her lower belly a sense of contentment settled in her bones. After weeks of torment she was where she wanted to be. It was because she loved him that she’d give him a second chance.

But if he blew it this time, there’d be hell to pay.

Chapter Six

The rest of the day was a frantic blur of activity. The boys were holed up in the shed building Frank's coffin while Sissy played ringmaster to the circus going on around her. Friends, Roanna and Miranda White showed up around nine and Sissy was happy to put them to work. The wake would begin Monday at noon with the service scheduled for Tuesday. That only left less than twenty-four hours to complete a never-ending list of things before the first guests arrived.

All day long police officers and volunteers stopped by to help the ranch employees care for the animals. A handful of firefighters arrived in time to haul the living room furniture into another room to make space for the viewing.

Late that afternoon Bitsy showed up with a crew of busboys to set up the massive barbeque wagon. The Grille would be providing burgers, ribs and pulled pork during the wake and the luncheon after the services.

Between the constant stream of visitors and the never-ending prep work, Sissy only saw Jace for a few minutes at a stretch. By dinner time she was ready to collapse while he was still sequestered in the tool shed with his siblings.

After packing a basket with food, utensils and a gallon of lemonade, she poured a fresh pot of coffee into a waiting thermos then let herself out of the house. The air was sticky with humidity with barely a breeze to be had. The air conditioning had been turned on in the house, and Sissy felt sorry for the guys working in the heat.

She caught the faint scent of roses and it made her smile. It was so peaceful here, much more so than her place with the noisy Grille traffic and the constant scent of onion rings in the air. Her stomach tightened. Grease was not her friend these days, and she hoped she'd survive the barbeque fumes without disgracing herself.

The breezeway was a hive of activity when she walked into the shed. Supported by two sawhorses, the bottom half of the coffin gleamed beneath four bright portable lights. The heat rolling off the lamps was nothing short of astounding, and Sissy gave them a wide berth.

Cowboy leaned against one of the roof supports as he guzzled a bottle of water. Beside him was Pip who was looking at him as if she were about to tackle him and have her way with him.

Ryan and Ranger were closer to the inferno created by the lights and they were working on the coffin lid. It lay on a table, and both men were bent over it with a variety of carving tools close at hand. Her heart

gave a queer little jerk. She knew the reason she was here was Frank's death yet it hadn't felt real until she saw the coffin.

"Hey, Sis." Pip grinned. "I thought you were gone."

"Not yet. I wanted to drop off some refreshments for ya'll."

"Thanks." Cowboy gave her a weary smile.

Pip hurried over to help unload the basket. Once that was done, Sissy wanted to take a peek at the carvings Ry and Ranger were doing. Her jaw dropped. Jace had captured Frank's stallion, Cochise, in full gallop. From the intelligent gleam in his eye to his mane flying in the breeze, no one would ever mistake this for just any horse.

"It's beautiful, Jace." She touched the horse's flank with one finger. "I've never seen anythin' like it."

"Thanks, Sissy." He touched her cheek. "That means a lot."

Ry was putting the finishing touches on an inscription at the foot of the lid. She frowned over the strange lettering.

"What does this say?"

"It's a Lakota blessing for a safe journey."

She smiled into his dark eyes. "You did good, big brother."

Ryan's nod was jerky before he turned away to select another tool. The oldest Diver wasn't one for long conversations.

Jace touched her elbow. "How are you holding up?"

"I'm okay."

His mouth quirked. "You'd say that even if your arm was falling off." When he reached for her, she went to him eagerly and gave him a chaste kiss. "Is that all I get?"

"Sugar, you're dead on your feet. That little peck is all ya can handle," she teased.

"I wouldn't bet on that if I were you." His fingers dipped beneath the hem of her shirt.

"Promises, promises."

"Never let it be said I'm not a man of my word." He raised his head. "I'm going to put my girl to bed, and I'll be back in a few."

Heat rushed to her face, and she couldn't bring herself to look at her friends. She heard Cowboy laugh and Pip said something, but she was too busy trying to make a swift getaway. Jace was right on her heels, and once they were outside he took her wrist and pulled her back into his arms.

"You're something else, Sissy Kolchek," he murmured. "Everything about you fascinates me."

When his teeth grazed her earlobe, she closed her eyes. Despite her exhaustion, her hormones were ready to dance. He began moving, their steps awkward and slow since they were wrapped around each other, but she didn't care. If he led her straight to the bowels of hell she wouldn't fight him as long as his arms were still around her.

“The way you came in and got everything organized.” His kiss was hot and moist. “Thank you seems inadequate.”

How could he still be talking? They’d barely touched and the only sentence her mind could put together was, “take me now”. When his lips found hers the kiss was slow, deep and incredibly sexy. Their tongues slipped and slid against one another, tasting, teasing. The kiss turned greedy and impatient, and she moaned when he touched her breast through her shirt.

“If I don’t get inside of you—”

She didn’t give him a chance to finish the thought. Sissy shoved her way out of his arms stopping a few feet away. Her hungry gaze slid over his body as liquid pooled between her legs. Jace’s eyes were now a stormy blue, and his breathing was harsh.

“While thank ya is a lovely gesture,” her voice was a purr, “I think, with a little persuasion, ya might come up with something’ more fittin’.”

When she reached for the hem of her T-shirt, his nostrils flared. “I think we can come to an arrangement.”

Sissy laughed as she whipped the shirt off over her head. Surprise flashed across his face when she threw the garment at him before turning to run.

The element of surprise didn’t give her much of a head start. The sound of his boots close on her heels only made her speed up. The house was too far away and she’d never make it so that left the stables. At the last second, she feinted left then veered right toward the open doors.

She gave a shout of laughter when she heard his boots slide on the gravel drive. “What’s the matter, Ranger? Can’t ya keep up with a girl?”

The growl he made was evenly laced with frustration and amusement. “You’ve already lost, Sissy. You just don’t know it.”

The stables were dim but she was familiar with the layout. Someone had left a bucket in the center of the aisle, and she was forced to jump over it. When Jace booted it out of the way it hit the wall with a clang. A few horse heads appeared over the stall doors to see what the fuss was about.

When she felt his fingers touch her waist, she tried to put on a burst of speed, but it was too late. Using their forward momentum, Jace steered her into an empty stall filled with fresh straw. Tripping over her own feet, she landed on her stomach with her pursuer on top of her, his arms braced to keep from crushing her.

“What did I tell you, Sis?” He nuzzled her neck. “You lost.”

“I’m not so sure ‘bout that,” she panted.

“Admit it, you’re crazy about me.” He nipped at her shoulder.

“Nope. Not gonna.”

“I win and now you’re mine.” He kissed the back of her neck, and she shivered.

Mine.

“And now that I have you where I want you, I can perform wicked acts upon your body.” He bit her shoulder.

“Think so?”

Her mocking tone was strangled into silence when she felt his erection pressed against her butt. When he kned her legs apart a rush of liquid heat shot to her core. With one hand he unhooked her bra before moving down to the skirt she'd borrowed from Josie. His firm hands squeezed her butt cheeks before shoving the cloth up around her waist.

“Are you wearing what I think you're wearing?”

His drawers.

“Ya like 'em?” She pushed her backside upward. “I don't mind borrowin' clothes but I wasn't gonna wear you're sister's panties.”

“So you wear mine?”

“Well, yeah. Didja want to have lewd thoughts about a woman wearin' your sister's panties?”

The only response was a slight choking sound.

“Besides, I look good in your drawers.” She wiggled her hips again.

“Damn, woman,” he growled. “Every time I see your ass I just want to grab it.” His big hands landed on the part of her anatomy he was admiring. “Kiss it. Bite it. Spank it.”

His words evoked images of hot, sweaty sex. When he squeezed the globes she moaned. The scent of horses, leather and hay added to the imagery sending liquid fire cascading down her spine. He'd barely touched her and she was ready to go. How did he do that?

When his hands left her, she looked over her shoulder. His attention was focused on opening his jeans and she became more aware of how vulnerable her position was. Not that she was worried. Actually, being ravished while face down in the hay and still dressed was pretty damned hot now that she thought about it.

She heard his throaty growl of approval followed by the distinctive sound of his hand sliding over his cock. Sissy started to look over her shoulder again but he didn't give her enough time. Taking her by the waist, he hauled backward her up to sit in his lap. Facing away from him, she arched upward when she felt his thick length through the thin fabric of the boxers.

“Like that, little girl?”

Her answer was incoherent. His strong hands held her in place and all she could do was feel what he did to her. When his rough hands covered her breasts, liquid heat raced to her core. Her eyes slid closed, and she moaned when he tweaked her nipples.

“You're so beautiful.”

Without warning he lowered her into the straw once more. She felt him tearing at the boxers but when she moved to help him, she realized he wasn't taking them off. Instead, he wrenched the front opening

down between her legs until he could touch her feminine flesh. She had no time to appreciate his rough caress before his fingers left her and the head of his cock took its place.

His entry was swift and hard causing her to cry out. When he began to thrust she arched her back taking him as deeply as she could. Animalistic groans from deep in his chest added to her arousal. With every stroke he hit the G-spot dead on. Jace knew how to touch her but this the raw, animal coupling in the straw was taking it up a notch...or ten.

“You feel so good.” His teeth grazed her neck.

Her skin was on fire and the need for release burned hot throughout her body. Her cries mingled with his as their mutual hunger took control. His grip on her waist was a hair’s width from being painful, but she relished the evidence of his passion.

His left hand dipped between her legs and with the lightest of strokes she howled as she went over the edge. Her body shook with the force of her orgasm, but he didn’t stop there. If anything his thrusts became more powerful and a second orgasm came close on the heels of the first. Vaguely, she was aware of his deep moan then the pulsing of his cock as he came. With a final hoarse shout, he collapsed over her.

Sated with multiple orgasms, Sissy was pretty sure she’d won that race after all.

Chapter Seven

It was close to eleven when Jace headed over to Sissy's. He'd teased her unmercilessly about wearing his boxers so she'd decided to go home to do laundry. He chuckled. His drawers never looked as good on him as they did on her.

Ten minutes later he reached the unmarked drive just north of the 3C Bar & Grille. Driving past a small pond then over a slight rise, he saw the trailer Sissy called home. The watery moonlight was kind to the rusty hulk, softening the faded paint and banishing the air of neglect that shrouded the place. It was a nice chunk of property, five acres in all, but he didn't like her living here alone. With the Grille as her closest neighbor, the place was too isolated for a beautiful woman.

Its only saving grace was the trailer couldn't be seen from the highway. The slight incline topped by a thick line of trees and underbrush lent an air of total seclusion. Less than twenty yards behind the trailer was a fast-moving creek, the only access to her place from the west. Popular with local fishermen, the creek could be crossed on foot but only if one could swim.

He could understand why Sissy was so attached to the place but the cop in him only saw the potential weaknesses. For someone looking for a place to commit a crime, Casa de Kolchek would be ideal.

After parking his truck next to hers, he got out and walked around the side of the trailer. One set of sliding glass doors opened directly into her bedroom. Through the open blinds he saw her hand dangling over the side of the bed. She had a neon-green bandage on her index finger.

Sissy didn't have the dainty hands of a pampered princess like Pip's sister, Kara. Her nails were short and neat and her skin work-roughened. They fit her personality. Practical, capable and sturdy though he doubted she'd appreciate the comparison.

Most people made the mistake of thinking she was ignorant. They took one look at her voluptuous curves then heard the heavy accent and immediately assumed she was a hick with more boobs than brains. He felt sorry for any fool who dismissed her out of turn. Sissy loved nothing more than a spirited debate and she regularly creamed Josie at Jeopardy.

On the ranch, she'd ask questions about everything she saw. When something broke she was usually more interested in seeing how it worked than finding a quick fix. Sissy didn't let many people close to her so few ever saw this inquisitive, almost child-like side of her. Pops called her a character, but Jace longed to call her something else.

His.

He waited for the mild panic that usually followed the thought of making a commitment, but it never came. Instead he was struck with a sense of how right it felt. Even though he foolishly tried to distance himself after the first time they made love, she was still his first thought upon waking each morning. Many times it was her face he saw before he fell asleep. But it wasn't until he saw her at the ranch late Saturday afternoon that he realized what he was missing.

She completed him in ways he'd never imagined.

When he held her in his arms it was comfortable. They not only fit together physically, they also blended seamlessly into each other's lives. At the end of the day he wanted to come home to her. It was her voice he longed to hear each morning, and it was her lips he wanted to kiss every night.

Pausing only long enough to remove his boots, he reached for the door. His jaw tightened when he realized it was unlocked. Silly fool still wouldn't listen to him and keep the door secure. He'd weld it shut if she didn't start taking her safety more seriously.

Slipping into the small bedroom with barely a sound, Jace stood over the bed, watching her sleep. She was facing away from him, and the bluish moonlight leached all the color from her skin rendering warm living flesh into cold, hard marble. The sheets were tangled about her legs, and he grinned when he noticed the miniscule thong she wore.

Mine.

His groin tightened painfully. With her face scrubbed clean and relaxed in slumber, she looked as innocent as a child. He couldn't wait for the Ramirez case to be closed. He wanted to ask her out on a real date. Maybe dinner or they could go to the old movie house in the center of town. In the balcony they could make out like a couple of kids. Smiling at the thought, he reached for her.

Hell, I'm in love with her.

He froze as if every muscle had turned to stone.

"Ranger?" Her voice was heavy with sleep making her accent thicker than usual. It was the call of a siren and he could no more resist her than he could fly. A warm, sexy smile touched her lips. "I was dreamin' 'bout you. Didja just get in?"

"Yeah." His voice was little more than a croak.

"Mmm." She stretched, her body twisting toward him. The movement caused her breasts to thrust forward and he realized she wore one of his T-shirts. Her nipples were clearly visible beneath the thin cotton shirt and his IQ plummeted to that of a toadstool.

When her hand cupped the inside of his left knee the ability to speak deserted him. His tongue was glued to the top of his mouth. She gave his leg a playful tug, and a lightning bolt of sensation shot straight to his groin. Who knew the back of his knee was so sensitive?

"What are ya waitin' for, big man? Gimme some sugar."

Christ but she was beautiful. Asleep, she was poetry but awake, she was a ballad. With her 1940s pin-up girl figure, Sissy was all warm, generous curves and sweet fragrant flesh. There wasn't an inch of her body that he didn't know intimately yet still he hesitated, half afraid to reach for her. How had she worked her way into his heart without realizing it?

"Baby, is somethin' wrong?" Her smooth brow puckered.

Not waiting for an answer, she got to her knees. Her gaze was dark and solemn. In their depths he saw comfort and acceptance, two things he didn't realize he'd been looking for. She pulled him into her arms and simply held him. Tucking her head beneath his chin, her embrace wasn't remotely sexual by any means. Jace couldn't remember the last time he'd let a woman simply hold him.

Her long hair licked at his arms and the mingled scents of shampoo, lemon body lotion and laundry softener was soothing. This wasn't the first time she'd seemed to know what he needed before he did. Sometimes he wondered if she could read his mind and that was scary as hell. He felt as if he'd climbed out of a dark cellar and into the bright sunlight.

Her restless hands stroked his back then fisted in his shirt. When she lifted the hem he silently helped her remove it, letting it drop to the floor. She made an appreciative sound in the back of her throat then kissed him in the center of his chest. Her tongue flicked against his skin, and he burrowed his hands in her soft hair. He couldn't fight her, fight this, and he no longer wanted to.

His abdomen tightened when fingers moved to his belt. The rattle of the buckle was followed by the grate of metallic teeth then a whisper of worn denim ended in a silky sigh. Gently she began to stroke him, and he felt her gaze on his face measuring his response.

His blood thickened, and the only sounds were of heavy breathing and the slide of bare skin on skin. His cock lengthened and grew thick between her hands. Jace grit his teeth against the avalanche of lust that slammed into him. He struggled for control but his hips had a mind of their own, and he began to move.

The little minx was going to kill him.

Their gazes met, and he saw a certain satisfaction in her cat's eyes. She'd bewitched him. Slowly, she lowered herself to touch him with her tongue. Pleasure pulsed through his veins when she licked away the tear of fluid that emerged from the tip. With little, kittenish swipes of her tongue, she caressed him from the base to the tip.

"Every inch of your body is glorious." Her breath was hot against his skin. "I like it when ya watch me."

The most he could manage was a guttural groan. The air around them grew thick, making it harder to breathe. Taking him firmly in hand, she swirled her tongue over the crown before taking him inside. Seeing his cock disappear into her mouth was almost more than he could bear. She'd proven herself to be an eager student for she'd learned how he liked to be touched. His hips rocked in tune with her strokes and licks.

When he felt the brush of her nails over his balls, he realized she meant to take this to its inevitable end. By the time he managed to stop her, black spots danced before his eyes. Seconds later, he had her on her back, and he came down over her.

“How often do you wear my shirt to bed?”

“Most nights,” she hissed. Her body arched upward.

Lowering his head, he clamped his teeth over one hard tip and suckled her through the cloth. Her startled *yip* was all the encouragement he needed. He nibbled, sucked, plucked and teased her breasts until the cloth was saturated, and her thighs were locked around his hips.

Reaching between her legs, he pushed aside the thong to touch her slick heat. She moaned when he stroked her clit, and the sound sent every nerve in his body into overdrive. Playing with Sissy was well and good but he was done letting her set the pace.

His mouth came down on hers, and the kiss was hot, deep and hungry. He could spend days just kissing her. Sissy didn't hesitate to express her need, and she gave as good as she got. Her hands moved over his body, gripping, teasing, tugging, as her nails danced over his skin. His hips began to move when she played with his nipples sending heat to his groin.

Taking her wrists, he hauled them over her head. She moaned in frustration and began to thrash beneath him. He loved it when she went wild for him. Was there anything more exciting than a beautiful woman moaning and writhing in bed?

“Ranger,” she moaned.

“Mmm?” He nibbled on her earlobe, feeling the shivers that raced through her. “You need something?” A choked gasp brought his head up. “I'll make it good for you, baby.”

“I need...” A tear leaked from eyes.

Jace kissed her temple, tasting the salt of her skin before releasing her hands. With his upper body braced on his elbows, she reached between their bodies to guide his cock home. Her sweet flesh parted to surround him in glorious heat and they groaned in unison. Shivers raced up and down his body, and he forced himself to hold back, giving her body time to adjust.

When her hands landed on his ass, the bite of her grip told him she wasn't looking for a slow, leisurely ride. He began to move. Each stroke wrung a sigh or moan from one of them. He often dreamed of making love to her, but his fantasies couldn't do justice to this. The scent of her arousal, the slap of their flesh, the sting of her nails was raw, real. Burying his face in the crook of her neck, he felt her tighten around him.

Her cry came seconds before the first ripple of her release struck, and he lost the battle. With a roar, he exploded in a rush of wet heat and earth-shaking spasms.

Afterward, his brain felt thick and his body was spent. Even though he told himself to move, his muscles weren't listening. It wasn't until she shifted beneath him that he managed to roll onto his side. His eyes slid closed. Nothing existed outside of this room, and that was fine with him.

An unfamiliar noise woke Sissy from a deep sleep. Lying in the darkness next to Jace, her body felt boneless. The floaty, best-sex-ever feeling swiftly evaporated when the sound of a cell phone broke the near-silence. She heard Jace curse, and in the fading moonlight, she saw him roll over and fumble for his phone. When he almost fell off the bed, she snickered.

"Behave yourself, woman." He shot her a mock-angry look, which made her laugh harder.

As he held the phone, his fingers flew over the tiny keys and she felt the subtle tension returning to his body. Concerned, she covered herself with the sheet before scooting to the edge of the bed to sit beside him. Moments later he dropped the phone and reached for his clothes.

"I have to run, baby."

"What's going on?"

"I've got a call-out. Barricade situation south of town." His movements were swift as he dressed. "Guy lost his job last year, wife is divorcing him so he's decided to take her hostage rather than let him." He shook his head. "I'll never understand how people's minds get warped to the point that doing this feels rational to them."

"But aren't ya supposed to be on leave?"

He pulled on his T-shirt. "Yeah, but we have a lot of guys out right now, vacations, that kind of thing."

Tilting her head to the side, she simply watched him. Beneath the calm tone she heard the frustration in his voice. Jace hated to see any living creature, animal or human, hurting. It was one of the reasons he had become a cop, because he wanted to make a difference in the world.

"Have I told ya how much I admire what ya do?" she asked.

Jace looked startled then the smile she so adored spread across his handsome face. "I don't think you tell me that nearly enough."

Laughing, she shook her head. "You're a bad, bad man, Ranger."

"But I'm your man." He pulled her into his arms. "So deal with it."

"Oh, I'm strugglin' through it..." she teased.

Jace caught her jaw and tilted her head up. His gaze searched her face, and she held her breath. Like a sunrise, a slow smile spread across his face. "You are an amazing woman, Sissy Kolchek," he said.

Pleasure spread through her body, and her face went hot.

"'Bout time ya figured it out," she drawled.

"And you're modest." He kissed her cheek.

“Of course.”

“Sweet.” Another kiss on her forehead.

“Like sugar.”

“Passionate.” He nipped her earlobe.

“Uh huh.”

Laughter rumbled in his chest. “How is it that you always seem to know what to say?”

“If I tell ya,” she began.

“Then I’d have to kill ya,” they finished in unison.

Smiling, they joined hands and walked out the sliding glass door. Outside, the night air was heavy and a slight breeze sent the wind chimes to dancing. Before she could anticipate his move, he pulled her into his arms.

“Thank you.” His breath was hot against her cheek and she shivered.

“For what?”

“For being you.” His grip tightened. “Now go back to bed.”

“Won’t be much fun alone,” she sighed.

“I should hope not.” His grip tightened on her waist as he pulled her into his hard frame. “I’ll leave you something to remember me by.”

When his mouth swooped down on hers she was engulfed in heat. Her heart pounded in her ears, and she swayed against him to wrap her arms around his broad shoulders. She felt the sheet slip, but she didn’t care. Her lips parted, and their tongues tangled. It was a rough kiss of need and when his hand covered her breast, she arched into him. Jace teased her nipple with a thumb, and she made a soft mewling sound in the back of her throat. He broke the kiss.

“Mmm, think of me,” Jace murmured. “See you in the morning.”

She blinked, still submerged in a maelstrom of lust. It wasn’t until he was getting into his truck that his smirk finally registered. Looking down, she realized the sheet had fallen to the ground. Deliberately, she presented him with her backside as she leaned down to retrieve her makeshift toga, and she heard his truck stall.

With a saucy smile thrown over her shoulder, she sauntered into the house before she began laughing. Leaning against the dresser, she heard his truck start up then the crunch of gravel as he left.

Grinning to herself, she dove into her rumpled bed. Think of him? As if she’d do anything else...

The sound of chimes brought Kevin Nobs’s attention back to the trailer. Through the night vision goggles he saw Jace and Sissy come outside. It was about damned time that shady bastard made an appearance. He was in there getting his dick sucked while Kevin stood thigh deep in smelly river water.

He slipped his thumb beneath his belt to hit the trigger for the camera then took a couple of shots. When his cousin Rick had come to him for this special assignment, Kevin saw it as a way to leapfrog into the F.B.I. He enjoyed being a cop, but his career goals were much bigger than traffic tickets and noise complaints.

Besides, he'd do anything to get the hell out of Haven and if it meant turning on one of his own, he was okay with that. It wasn't like he was a friend of any of the Diver brothers. When he first joined the Haven police department, Ryan had written him up for insubordination because he'd overheard Kevin make a sexist comment about Lieutenant Wilson's tits.

He snorted. Like it was his fault she had a big rack.

Standing on the edge of the river that ran behind the Kolchek trailer, he was too far away to hear what they were saying, but he could certainly see what they were doing. Diver had her in a lip lock and his hand was playing with her tits. When the sheet fell to her ankles, Kevin's groin tightened painfully.

What he'd do to get his hands on that fine piece of ass. It wasn't until Jace moved away that he got his first glimpse of her nude body. He groaned. That bitch had a slamming body, and he took a few more photos, for professional use only, of course.

There were lots of rumors about Sissy, but Kevin didn't have any first-hand knowledge if they were true. When he'd asked her out she'd turned him down flat. His gaze narrowed. For a girl who screwed damn near every guy in town she could be awful uppity at times.

Across the river, Jace's truck started up, and Sissy vanished into the trailer.

Kevin was curious as to what the Feds had on the Indian. His cousin, Special Agent Rick Riker hadn't been generous with the details but they should be happy with these pictures. Rick had hinted that if Kevin did a good job then he'd see what he could do to pave the way for him to get into the F.B.I.

And if he got his hands on Sissy Kolchek, well, that would be icing on the cake.

Chapter Eight

Sissy had just settled into bed when her cell phone chirped. Barely conscious, she fumbled for the glowing pink gadget she affectionately called The Leash. The bright display made her eyes go crossed, and she was forced to squint in order to see it. Opening the message, her heart dropped as the past and present collided.

Jorge—911.

Her hands began to shake as she fought against the panic that was coming up. The last time she'd received a similar message was also in the middle of the night, but it was the dead of winter. Her thumb hovered over the Delete key.

Closing her eyes, she concentrated on her breathing. As much as she wanted to ignore his plea, she wouldn't. She owed him. Feeling marginally calmer, Sissy hit reply then started typing.

Location?

After she sent the message she grabbed Jace's pillow and buried her face in it. For the millionth time, she cursed her mother for skipping town. If Paula had stuck around until graduation then maybe, just maybe, Sissy wouldn't have made one of the worst decisions in her entire life.

If Ranger were to find out—

Her phone chirped.

Ur place 5 min

Sheer stubbornness made her get up and grab some clothes. She couldn't go on like this, and it was time to end it.

Here.

Tonight.

Her days of playing guardian angel were over. Besides, she was pregnant. She couldn't have strange men running around her place in the dead of night. It was a little too much like her screwed up childhood.

Dressed in an old pair of shorts and a tank top, she hurried to the kitchen to get something cold to drink. Standing in front of the wide windows over the table, the hairs on her arms stood up. She was being watched—

Well, of course silly. How else would he have known you were alone?

She was scooping ice into a glass when suddenly, she was no longer alone.

"You're getting soft, Sissy. If I wished you harm..." His voice was barely recognizable.

“I was hopin’ for some clarification.” She shut the freezer door. “If I were vain I’d thought ya were sayin’ I had a fat ass.”

His surprised bark of laughter startled her, but not as much as looking down at the business end of a handgun pointed at her chest. The man holding said weapon was clad in black from head to toe, his usual color, and his dark hair was shaggy. Dark eyes were hidden behind sunglasses, and he now sported a goatee. His skin glistened with sweat, and his coppery-brown complexion looked distinctly pale.

“Put that thing away.” She rolled her eyes at him. “Doncha know ya can’t show up on a lady’s doorstep and point a gun at her? It’s rude.”

When Jorge lowered the gun his hands were shaking. “Have I ever told you that I’ve never met anyone like you, Sissy Kolchek?” He shook his head. “Grown men fear me yet you chastise me with impunity. Why aren’t you afraid of me?”

“Who says I’m not?”

“If you are then you hide it well.”

“Quit flirtin’ with me.” She frowned.

He smiled. “Habit.”

She ignored him. “So, now the small talk is over. What’s goin’ on, Jorge?”

“An old friend can’t just stop by—”

“Not you.”

“That’s my girl.” He stepped toward her, and she saw something hit the floor.

“You’re bleedin’,” she blurted.

“Yeah, quite a bit actually.” He grimaced.

“Can ya walk?” She hurried forward and took his arm.

“Got myself here, didn’t I?” Sweat rolled down his face. For a man of Latino descent, he was looking a little green.

“By the skin of your teeth.” Sliding her arm around his waist, Sissy stumbled when he leaned against her.

“Pretty sure it’s just a flesh wound,” he hissed.

“I’m so glad as I’m down to my last Scooby-Doo bandage.” She guided him to the bathroom.

“Lucky me.”

Once he was seated on the closed commode, she riffled through the medicine chest. “What happened?”

“You’re better off not knowing.” His voice was raspier than before.

“Typical,” she muttered.

Armed with a pair of bandage scissors, she cut away his ruined shirt. At least it was cotton this time. The last time he'd shown up on her doorstep looking like road kill she'd had to slice a five-hundred dollar silk shirt off his body. She sucked in a noisy breath at the sight of the fresh bruises marring his ribs.

"Jeez, what hit you? A semi?"

"Feels like it."

Jorge was a very good-looking man with sculpted abs to die for. Now, he resembled a tie-dyed T-shirt. Blood coated his left side, and her stomach did a nosedive when she got her first glimpse of the injury. Following the bottom edge of his rib cage, the slit in his skin resembled a grotesque smile. Only a knife could make a wound such as this. Fresh blood oozed down his side, and she averted her gaze. Putting him back together was going to hurt.

A lot.

"Need a drink?" Without waiting for an answer, she hustled out into the living room to retrieve a nearly full bottle of Jack Daniels. Removing the cap, she handed it to him.

"Sorry I had to bother you, Sis." He helped himself to a long drink. "As you can see, I couldn't reach it to take care of it myself."

"No kidding," she muttered. He needed a surgeon, not a pregnant waitress with a weak stomach. "What are friends for if not to help hide the bodies?"

"Is that what we are?" Jorge removed the sunglasses to expose his distinctive brown gold eyes. "Friends?"

She ignored him, turning away to dampen a washcloth with cold water. The coppery scent of fresh blood was making her queasy and breathing through her mouth didn't seem to help one bit. His breath left in a hiss when she gently dabbed the wound.

"War buddies might be a more accurate term," he whispered.

What she would give to just fall to the floor and cry like a baby. She didn't want to hurt him but she certainly didn't want him to bleed to death either.

"Damn it, Jorge, you're bleedin' like a stuck pig. You need stitches."

"How are your sewing skills?" He took another hefty drink of whiskey.

She gave him a sour look. "I flunked out of home economics. Does that tell ya anythin'?"

"Yeah, Martha Stewart's job is safe."

"This isn't funny," she snapped. Turning away, she rinsed the cloth, trying hard to not puke.

"They say chicks dig scars," he gritted.

"I don't suppose you'll let me take ya to the emergency room?"

He threw her a dark glance.

"Silly me. Who would wanna bother someone with eight years of medical trainin' when ya have me on speed dial?" Sarcasm dripped from every word. "What'll it be? Glue or duct tape?"

His eyes narrowed.

“Crazy glue it is.” She dropped the washcloth into the sink then riffled the medicine cabinet again.

“This is not an attractive side of you.”

If he weren't in so much pain she would've sworn he was laughing at her. Holding a folded hand towel beneath the wound, she smiled sweetly before dousing the wound with rubbing alcohol. Jorge's body jerked, and he bit back a curse.

“You couldn't give me a warning?” he growled.

“A doctor might've but hey, it's not anyone ever praised my bedside manner.”

Her side ached in sympathy when she rinsed the wound again. It had to be done. If the cut wasn't properly irrigated the chances were high that it'd become infected. God only knew what bacteria the knife had on it. She shook her head. What was she thinking? She was about to close a knife wound with glue so if he lived to tell the story then her work was done.

It wasn't pretty, but the injury wasn't quite as bad as she'd first thought. The first three inches were the worst and the cut grew shallower as it curved along his ribs. He probably felt the bite of the blade then turned to deflect the blow.

Once she was sure it was as clean as she could make it, she covered the wound with a handful of gauze four by fours. Covering them with a towel, she pressed his arm against the wound to hold everything in place.

“You realize doctors don't recommend usin' this kind of glue on injuries,” she said.

“I'm sure they don't recommend getting stabbed either but here we are.” His face was ghostly pale and his skin felt clammy. Chances were good that he'd pass out before she was done closing the wound.

“Come on, ya can take my bed for the night.”

To her surprise he didn't argue with her. She helped him into the bedroom then removed his bloody pants before settling him on the bed. His whispered thanks was thin, and she hurried into the bathroom for a couple of fresh towels. After digging out a bottle of crazy glue from the kitchen, she set to work repairing the wound.

It seemed to take hours to secure the worst of the damage though in reality it was only to ten to fifteen minutes. On the shallow end she used a mismatched string of Band-Aids. As the glue dried, she cut up an old bed sheet to bind his ribs. By the time she was done he was out cold.

Before leaving him she checked his pulse then covered him with the sheet before turning out the light. She made it to the couch before her legs gave out on her. Now that the emergency had passed, she felt as weak as a newborn kitten. In the stuffy darkness, she stretched out and let her mind go back in time. It was rare that she allowed herself to recall those first nightmarish years alone. The fear that paralyzed her as darkness fell, the constant struggle to keep a roof over her head and food on the table. For eighteen months

she'd dodged Children's Services attempts to place her into foster care and the moment she turned eighteen it felt as if a huge weight had been lifted from her shoulders.

Before coming to Ohio she'd ended up in foster care several times. As an adult she understood there were many good, loving homes for children in need but as a child she'd thought it was torture. Waking up in a strange house surrounded by people she didn't know, certain Paula would forget about her. It was one of the reasons they'd moved around so much, to avoid any kind social services.

The Department of Children's Services was swamped with too many cases and not enough social workers. That had worked in her favor because they didn't have time to chase her around. Sissy had spent enough time in and out of foster care to know that she'd do just about anything to avoid going back in the system.

It hadn't taken long to realize that she was in way over her head. Money went out as fast as she could bring it in. Paula neglected to pay the back property taxes as well as the inheritance taxes when she took ownership of their place. At seventeen, Sissy was looking at more than fifty thousand dollars of debt and that didn't include the day-to-day living expenses.

It was then that she met Irene Watson, an exotic dancer from Cleveland. She'd been in the laundromat and had overheard Irene talking about how much she'd earned in that weekend. Sissy had been astounded. The dancer worked only twenty-four hours a week and she made more in one weekend than Sissy did working sixty-some hours.

Irene helped her obtain a falsified driver's license that added four years to her age so she'd swallowed what little pride she had left and went to the club. At the time, her rationalization was that if the guys at home were going to make lewd suggestions and try to grope her, she might as well get paid for it. Besides, changing sheets in an economy hotel barely kept her fed.

One of the club owners, Esteban Arroyo-Ramirez, took one look at her and hired her on the spot. From day one she hated the job, but she soon came to loathe her boss. He considered himself a ladies' man and with his smarmy smile and wads of cash he had a new woman every night. She'd only been there a few weeks when he made his first pass at her, and she'd turned him down.

Needless to say, he was not pleased.

That's when she met Jorge. As Esteban's cousin and one of the managers of the club, he'd taken her under his wing and kept an eye on her. Each time she went on stage she felt humiliated and demoralized, but she danced anyway. The money was good and she worked a third of the hours she used to. Not only were the bills getting paid, but her grades were up and she got more than four hours of sleep a night.

A sob locked in her throat.

If it weren't for Jorge, she didn't know what would've happened to her that last week. Her memories were vague, and he'd helped her fill in the blanks. She'd shown up for work but when she didn't appear on

stage at her slotted time, he had come looking for her. Hours later he'd found her in the apartment over the club, unconscious. Someone had given her enough sedatives to knock her out.

He'd wasted no time in getting her out of there and brought her home then stayed with her for the rest of the night, not leaving until the worst of the effects from the drug had worn off. That afternoon her last paycheck was hand-delivered, and he'd thrown in more than enough zeroes to pay off all her bills including the taxes.

To this day she still wasn't sure exactly what happened or who'd drugged her. It didn't take a rocket scientist to know that Esteban was somehow involved. No matter how many times she asked Jorge he said he never found out anything more. She didn't believe him.

She'd never told anyone about her short-lived career on the stage. Those dark months were her private shame. It had taken years to pay back the money Jorge fronted her. Each month she'd mailed him a check until every penny had been accounted for.

Feeling depressed and utterly drained, she shifted into a more comfortable position. A decade stood between then and now but no matter how hard she tried, the memories had yet to fade.

The man in her bedroom saved her life that night, she felt sure of it. For so long she'd felt suffocated under the weight of owing him something in return.

Tonight, that debt was paid in full.

Chapter Nine

A goat named Casper?

Jace stared at the latest addition to the Crimson Sun menagerie. While Casper probably wasn't the first goat to reside on the ranch, she was the first in his memory. He wasn't sure if Gem chose the name because its coat was whitish-gray or if its chances of survival were slim to none.

She looked so tiny, lying in her bed of clean hay in one of the specially fitted medical stalls. Evidence of her ordeal was impossible to overlook. Her ribs stuck out like the rungs on a ladder and the poor creature was so weak they'd had to carry her into the stable.

Donovan Whittier, Kara's older brother, found the creature early this morning. The owners had abandoned her in a falling-down wreck of a barn with no food and limited water. She'd worn a collar that was far too tight and it had become partially embedded in her hide. Doc Raymond, the big animal vet, had already been by to administer antibiotics and a mild painkiller. The best thing they could do now was to let Casper rest and feed her at regular intervals. Only time would tell if she'd make it.

Bowser, a stray Labrador Irish Setter mix, was cuddled close to the sleeping goat. Gemma told him it was love at first sight. He smiled. Casper's head was cradled on the dog's shoulder and both were asleep. Bowser seemed to have a second sense when it came to sick animals, and she spent a lot of time hanging out in the medical stalls when someone was in residence.

His stomach growled, reminding him it had been quite a while since he'd last eaten. Grabbing his shirt from the stall door, he headed up to the house for a bite to eat. It was after nine, and the wake was scheduled to begin in a few hours so he had time to take a quick nap and get cleaned up.

Sissy had definitely outdone herself. Between her and the girls they'd taken charge of the myriad of little details that would've buried him alive. The house was spotless, the coffeemaker was primed, tables were set up, and the trays of food were ready to go. He wondered what he could snatch for breakfast—

The back door flew open and Gem came out with Ryan hard on her heels. "Gemma, we do not rescue goats," he said.

"Now we do." She spun around so fast Ry almost ran over her. "What do you want me to do, Ry? Kick her out? Let her die?"

"Don't be ridiculous. Why does everything have to be a melodrama with you? We don't have the time or resources—"

"I didn't ask you to help, Ry," she snapped. "She needed help, and I was here to answer the phone."

Watching those two argue was too good to miss. Ry towered over their little sister by a foot and outweighed her by over a hundred pounds. Both of them had their fists braced on their hips and stood toe to toe, neither willing to back down first. Gemma might not be very big, but she had a huge personality and a sharp bite when provoked.

“Sad, isn’t it?” Cowboy appeared at his side.

“What is?”

“Watching Ryan fight a losing battle.” His grin was rueful. “A grown man who still hasn’t learned that arguing with a Diver female is an exercise in futility.”

“The more he argues the harder she’ll dig in.” Jace chuckled. “By next year we’ll have a herd of goats running around the place.”

“Uh oh, she’s doing the poking thing.”

Jace couldn’t hear what Gem was saying, but she was punctuating her words by stabbing Ry in the stomach with a finger. Her blue eyes were narrowed, and her sharp little chin was thrust forward.

“And she’s leading with the chin. Oh, it’s all over now.”

“That it is.” Cowboy nodded toward the stables. “Walk with me, bro.”

Jace turned back the way he came. “What’s up?”

His brother’s smile faded. “I’m glad you’re home even if I’m sick about the reason. I just wish...”

He nudged his twin with his shoulder. “Me too.”

I should’ve been here...

The doctor said the stroke blew out Pop’s brain stem, and he was dead instantly. Even if he’d been home it wouldn’t have changed anything but that didn’t curtail the guilt and regret ate at him. Guilt for not being there when his father needed him, and regret for the time he’d squandered and would never have again.

Hindsight was a bitch.

“So tell me, bro, what’s the deal with you and Sissy?”

Jace stifled a groan. Sissy was the last subject he wanted to broach with his brother. With all that was going on he wasn’t sure he had the words to answer the question. Despite the turmoil, just having her here was helping to keep him from losing his mind.

“What’s the deal with you and Pip?” he asked.

“We’re not talking about Pip—”

“We are now.”

Cowboy shrugged. “It’s complicated.”

Jace snorted and his brother gave him a dirty look. “Not an easy question to answer, is it? Just know that if you break her heart I’m going to kick your ass.”

“Ditto. Now, about Sissy. I know you had sex with her—”

It wasn't just sex...

Jace headed into the tack room and grabbed a bottle of water from the refrigerator. Hell yeah they were having sex, every chance they got, but it wasn't the end-all-be-all of their relationship. She was giving him a second chance and, if he were being honest with himself, he was scared out of his mind that he would screw it up.

"Who are you? Dr. Phil?"

Cowboy ignored his sarcasm. "Are you serious about her?"

"Yeah," he grunted. "I am."

"Bro, that's great." Grinning, Cowboy slapped him on the shoulder. "The whole family loves her and Pip will be thrilled—"

Male laughter interrupted them. It was coming from inside the stables.

"Man, I'm telling you, the blonde waitress from the Grille is one hot piece of ass."

It was Rob, the newest Sun employee. Jace knew two things about the kid: he was a braggart, and he was good with the horses. Jace felt his brother watching him.

"I didn't know you were seeing her." Chance Rafferty's southern drawl was unmistakable. He'd been working here for a couple of years, and he seemed like decent enough guy.

"Three nights ago, not that we went out." The heh-heh-heh sound in his voice put Jace's hackles up. "Never left her place," Rob was saying. "Now, that bitch can fuck like a rabbit. Hell, I didn't have to do anything but lay back and let her do all the work. She was bobbing up down on my—"

"You're a dog, man," Chance sounded bored.

"Me? Sissy's screwed half the guys in town." Rob was laughing. "She's always looking for something to hump."

Anger churned in Jace's gut and the urge to hit something, like Rob's smug face, came to mind. Vaguely, he felt Cowboy touch his arm, but Jace shook him off.

"Rob," he barked.

The man jumped and a guilty look crossed his face before it was replaced with a cocky smile. "Morning, Jason. What can I do—"

"Do you enjoy working here?" Jace stalked toward him. His hands fisted, and he had to force them to relax.

"Yeah." Rob wasn't smiling now.

"Yes, sir," Jace bit out.

"Yes, sir," he parroted.

"Ms. Kolchek is a valued family friend so the next time I hear you say her name it had better be respectful," he growled. "Is that understood?"

Resentment flashed in the other man's eyes. "Yes, sir."

“The stock tanks need to be filled. When you’re done, come to the office and I’ll have another job for you.”

Jace knew the man was pissed. Filling the stock tanks was a grunt job better left to one of the volunteers. It involved filling the old pump wagon with water then hand-pumping it into each tank. While it wasn’t a difficult job, it was physically taxing and required several long hours in the broiling sun.

“Yes, sir.” His tone was sullen.

Before Jace could do something he’d regret, like rearrange the kid’s face, he exited the stable. His gut churned and for a moment, he thought his head would explode. Her reputation was wild and, like his, grossly exaggerated at times. Almost since the day she’d arrived in town the gossips were spreading tales about her exploits. Some of them he knew about first hand, like the time she accidentally blew up the chemistry lab in ninth grade. It was a simple accident but to hear the stories they’d made her sound like a cross between Lara Croft and Bin Laden.

He didn’t have any right to be annoyed if she did have a thing with Rob. It wasn’t like her reputation was a surprise to him. It just never occurred to him that she’d continue seeing other men while they were—

Were what?

After their first night together he’d taken off and left her alone. They didn’t have an understanding; hell, before yesterday he’d never talked about how he felt about her. He cursed under his breath. Less than twenty-four hours into his second chance and he was already in danger of blowing it.

As he walked into the kitchen, Jace’s cell phone beeped. Before he could pull it from his pocket, Ryan’s went off as well. Seconds later, he heard another one from outside then Cowboy came in behind him. When Jace saw the message, his stomach sank.

Report to 220—mandatory briefing—10:15am.

Sissy was getting out of the shower when she realized someone was pounding on her front door. After grabbing her cotton robe, she pulled it on as she hurried down the hall. Jorge was gone and if it weren’t for a wad of cash on the coffee table and a load of freshly washed towels in the washer, she would’ve thought her stint as Florence Nightingale had only been a dream.

Peering through the mini blinds, she frowned when she saw three dark blue sedans and a Haven police cruiser in her drive. Officer Johnny stood next to the cruiser while four men in dark suits were at her front door. Her eyes went wide then she heard the back door rattle.

It had to be Jorge. What other reason would they be here? Sissy’s heart was in her throat when she reached the door. She’d just unlocked it when it exploded inward and the men in suits ran into the room. The second one headed right for her, forcing her to back up until she was crowded against the wall.

“Are you Sissy Kolchek?” he demanded.

“Y-yes.”

“I have a search warrant for this residence.” He flashed a piece of paper in her face then took her arm. His grip was harsh. “You are to come with me down to the Haven police department for questioning.”

“What is this about?” Bewildered, she stared at the people who’d forced their way into her home.

The suit ignored her. Instead, he hauled her toward the door.

“I need to get dressed.” She clutched the edges of her robe together.

“No, ma’am, you’re to come as you are.” His grip only tightened, and he wrenched her arm higher, throwing her off balance.

“I will not.” She dug in her heels. “I’m damn near naked.”

“Ma’am, I will charge you with resisting arrest if you do not comply with my command.” Again he yanked her forward, her bare feet sliding on the rug. After stubbing her toe, Sissy’s eyes watered.

“You’re hurtin’ me—”

“Agent Sanders, you don’t need to manhandle her.”

Johnny’s familiar voice made her knees go weak.

“My instructions are—” the suit began.

“I know what they are,” Johnny interrupted. “She’s not under arrest.” He laid his hand on her shoulder and, if anything, the suit’s grip only tightened.

“Are ya tryin’ to break my arm?”

Both men stared hard at one another leaving her feeling like a juicy bone between two German Shepherds. When the suit released her, Sissy rubbed her red skin.

“I’ll need to stay with her while she dresses.” His cold gaze focused on her. “You’re to touch nothing other than your clothing, do you understand?”

“Yeah, I do speak English,” she snapped.

Johnny took her elbow and gently urged her back into the trailer. The place was crowded now, with suits tearing everything apart. Ducking her head, she hurried to the bedroom. When Johnny stepped into the room Sissy took great pleasure in slamming the door in the suit’s face. Spinning around, she looked up at her friend.

“What is this about?”

He looked uncomfortable. “All I know is a search warrant was issued, and you’re to come in for questioning.”

She leaned against the wall. “Do I need a lawyer?”

He shrugged. “I can’t advise you on that.”

Numbly, she nodded. It didn’t take long to gather her clothes and without asking, Johnny turned around. Quickly, she pulled on her clothing.

“Who are those guys in the suits?” She grabbed a pair of sandals from the bottom of her closet. “Cops?”

“They’re F.B.I., Sis.”

Stunned, she watched two more suits as they searched her patio. One carelessly knocked over one of her plants and the pot shattered against the brick. What had she gotten herself into?

Chapter Ten

This couldn't be good.

Jace sat in the large conference room at police headquarters watching people file into the room. Haven Police Chief Joseph Sherman was in the lead followed by Lieutenant Walker, the man in charge of the Ramirez investigation. Ryan came in next then two of the Feds, Rick Riker and another man he didn't recognize. The similarity between the two men in suits was striking.

"Do they clone these guys or what?" Cowboy hissed.

"Looks like it." He glanced at the lieutenant. Walker looked pissed, and he was glaring at the Feds. Something was definitely up.

"Gentlemen, please take a seat." Chief Sherman turned toward Jace and his brothers. "Men, you'll never know how sorry I am to have to call you in while you're on family leave." He gave the Feds an irritated look. "We have a potentially serious situation on our hands, and I felt it was important to deal with this immediately.

"It has to do with the Ramirez case, Jason, and we need you to look at a few photographs."

Where the hell was Ortiz? He was the lead investigator.

He nodded. "Yes, sir."

"Lieutenant Walker, the floor is yours."

"Thank you, Chief." Opening a leather portfolio, he withdrew two color photographs and laid them on the table in front of Jason. "Do you recognize this woman, Officer Diver?"

As a cop, Jace had seen bodies in almost every state imaginable. He'd thought himself to be hardened to such sights but this one struck him was particularly rough. The first photo was a close-up of a young woman's face and, judging from the condition, she'd been in submerged in water. Marine life had done a number on her features rendering her unrecognizable. The second photo was of a small tattoo below her left ear.

"Yes, sir. Her name was Jenny Fields, and she worked as a waitress at Living Dolls." Jace looked up at Walker, but his expression gave nothing away.

She hadn't worked there long so he'd only spoken to her a couple of times. His first impression of Jenny was that she was an intelligent woman who could be doing a hell of a lot more than waiting tables in a strip joint.

"When was the last time you saw her, Officer Diver?" The Fed he didn't recognize spoke.

“And you are?”

The man bristled.

“I’ll handle the questioning, Agent Sanders.” Walker looked irritated at the interruption. “Answer the question, Jason.”

“I’d have to look at my notes, sir. Off the top of my head I’d say it was approximately two weeks ago.”

“Were you aware that Jenny Fields was an alias?”

He frowned. Background checks had been run on the employees and nothing had come up as suspicious that he could remember.

“No, sir.”

“Her real name was Sylvia Michaels and she was an investigative journalist for the *Cleveland Plain Dealer*.” Walker sat back in his chair and crossed his arms. “Her editor reported her missing on July tenth.”

Which meant she went missing around the same time he’d last spoken to her.

“Did her editor indicate what was she investigating, sir?”

“Ms. Michaels was working on a story about the lives of women working in the sex industry. Strippers, prostitutes, that sort of thing.” He leaned forward and scanned his open portfolio. “Her editor received a voice mail from her July eight in which Ms. Michaels said, and I quote, ‘This is a much bigger story than I originally thought. If my lead pans out we could be talking a Pulitzer.’” He sat back. “Other than the prostitution and drug trade, do you have any more information you can add?”

“Not off the top of my head. Did she leave any notes or—”

“We’re taking a second look at her apartment today but as of yet, not that we’ve found.” Walker’s gaze slid over to Riker. “She’s not the first employee of the club to come up missing is she, Officer Diver?”

“No, sir.” He looked over at Riker. “The most recent is a man we knew as Manny who worked for Esteban as his driver. It turns out he was a Fed.”

“How...” The fed’s expression went hard. “With regards to the reporter, whoever killed her never meant for her to be found. She was cut into pieces.”

Riker watched him closely, but Jace didn’t flinch.

“Officer Diver.” Walker laid another photograph on the table. “What do you know about Jorge Arroyo-Ramirez?”

Jace barely glanced at it. “Jorge is the half brother of Esteban and Juan, the owners of the club. He’s in his early thirties and worked at the club for a few years as a general manager, and he left seven, eight years ago.” He shrugged. “He makes an appearance every now and then, usually when the brothers are away, but he doesn’t appear to be involved with any of the criminal activity.”

“Is that so?” Riker smirked at him, his contempt unmistakable. “Jorge is not only involved in the business, we believe him to be one of the ringleaders. He’s been under constant surveillance for the past six months.”

Irritation stabbed through him. Whose side were these fools on because they sure weren’t helping Walker’s investigation by withholding information?

“Thanks for sharing.” Jace’s tone was dry. “Wouldn’t that have been advantageous for us to know before now?”

Triumph gleamed in the agent’s eyes. “Why, so you could tip him off?”

His gaze narrowed. Walker looked mad enough to tear off the Fed’s arms and use them for batting practice, and Jace was ready to line up behind him.

“Last night Jorge was seriously injured when someone tried to take his life. Instead of going to a hospital he paid a visit to an old friend.” Riker held out his hand as Agent Sanders handed him a manila folder. “We believe this friend could have access to some very delicate information that could compromise both of our cases and put the lives of our operatives in danger.”

Jace didn’t respond. Riker was so excited he was practically bouncing in his chair.

He opened the folder and shoved it across the table. “I’m sure you recognize this woman, Officer Diver.”

A roaring filled his head when he saw Sissy’s beautiful face looking up at him. The photo was grainy but not so much that he couldn’t recognize her. In one photo, she had her arm around a man in dark clothing and they were walking into her bedroom. The man’s head was down and his face was hidden. Another photograph showed himself and Sissy outside her back door. She was in his arms smiling up at him. He knew that look because he’d been the one to put it there.

“Can you tell us her name, Officer?”

Jace heard the challenge in the agent’s voice as did everyone in the room. He waited a beat before speaking.

“Her name is Sissy Kolchek, and she lives here in Haven. She’s a waitress at the 3C Bar & Grille.” And I’m in love with her, but he didn’t say that out loud.

Riker slid another photo toward him, this one was taken through the sliding glass door when Sissy and Jace were making love. The urge to reach across the table and bash that smirk off the Fed’s face was almost more than he could resist.

“I am concerned that the woman you’re having sex with happens to be intimately involved with the suspects in your current investigation.” His smile was mocking. “Were you aware that this woman was employed at the club at one time?”

Jace’s gut began to churn.

“No?” Riker was gloating now. “For seven months she worked there. Hired as a stripper. She used a fake ID before she was of legal age. It would appear your, uh, girlfriend, is well acquainted with the Ramirez family.”

Jace didn't realize he'd moved until Ryan grabbed his arm. He knew what the smarmy bastard was thinking. Esteban enjoyed a little half-time activity he called testing the merchandise, which was slang for banging the dancers. So if Sissy worked for the brothers...

“Looks like I struck a nerve there.” Riker looked at Sanders. “I guess Officer Diver doesn't like to share his meat—”

“That's enough.” Walker was on his feet so fast that his chair slammed into the wall. “I don't give a damn who you work for, Riker. You're conducting yourself like this is a grade school pissing contest. Officer Jason Diver is a decorated, ten-year veteran of the police force, and in no way do I think he's compromised this case.”

Riker stood and began shouting. “We have documented proof that he's screwing a woman who helped Jorge Arroyo-Ramirez elude the police last night.”

“Gentlemen,” the chief's voice cut through the tension like a sword. “This is counterproductive at this point.” He glared at Riker. “Lieutenant Walker is directing this meeting.”

Jace watched as Riker slowly backed down but he didn't retake his seat.

“We have absolutely no evidence that Ms. Kolchek was in contact with either of the brothers prior to early this morning when Jorge sent her a page.” Walker gave Riker a withering glance. “Officer Diver, were you aware that Ms. Kolchek was employed at the club?”

“No, sir.” The Fed grunted, but Jace didn't look in his direction. “Detective Ortiz and I compiled the records of everyone employed at the club in the last five years, and her name was not there.”

“Ms. Kolchek was employed there ten years ago, Officer.” Walker cleared his throat. “You've been working hard on this case. I'm sure you are aware of how delicate this situation is.” He looked distinctly uncomfortable. “Chief Sherman was kind enough to offer your services to our investigation, and your assistance has been invaluable...”

No, they couldn't be thinking of taking him off the case.

“Sir,” Jace broke in. “At no point in time have I spoken of this case to Ms. Kolchek. In fact, I haven't seen her nor had contact with her during the time I've been working in Oak Brook.”

“So you say,” Riker muttered.

“At least half of the cops in Haven are familiar with Ms. Kolchek through her job at the Grille, and she has been a family friend for many years. I'm sure I'm not alone when I say that she would never knowingly compromise a case no matter who was involved—”

“Are you willing to bet your badge on it, Officer Diver?” Riker’s fists struck the table and he leaned toward Jace. “Are you aware of the large financial payment to your girlfriend totaling more than fifty thousand dollars?”

Jesus.

His gaze dropped to the photograph of them outside her back door. A steel band across his chest tightened, and his breathing went shallow. Fifty grand was a hell of a lot of money. What did she have to do to earn that much? Before this meeting he would’ve sworn on a stack of Bibles she’d have nothing to do with any type of criminal activity, but the evidence was certainly damning.

“Not quite so sure of her now, are you?” Riker’s voice was cutting. “What do you suppose she did to make that kind of money? I mean, she was only employed there for six months—”

“You’re out of line, sir.” Ryan’s words were uttered in a low growl.

Chief Sherman began to rise. “Gentlemen...”

“I’d sure like to find out.” Riker laughed and poked Sanders with an elbow. “She’s a beautiful woman, and she probably fucks like—”

One minute Jace was sitting at the table, and the next he had Riker pinned to the wall by his throat. Jace was aware of people grabbing at him and someone was shouting, but the mayhem was drowned out by the beat of his heart. In the end it took Walker and his brothers to pull him off the Fed.

Jace shook off the restraining hands. In all his years on the force, he’d never lost his cool like he did today. If the chief didn’t fire him on the spot he’d be surprised.

“You’re off the case.” Riker’s face was beet red and his voice was raspy. “We’ll be filing charges within the next day or so, Officer Diver.” Sanders was plucking at the agent’s sleeve like a nervous old lady.

Jace crossed his arms and met the Fed’s gaze squarely.

“I’ll have your badge,” Riker hissed.

“You’re welcome to it.” Jace was pleased when he walked past the little prick he flinched. He was out in the hallway before noticing the Chief had followed him.

“Jace.”

“I know. I’m suspended.”

“I’ll see you in my office on Wednesday morning.” The chief looked him in the eye.

“Yes, sir,” he ground out.

Several officers stood in the hallway outside interrogation room number one. Johnny Stephens and Jay Barnes moved to intercept him.

Jay laid a hand on his arm. “Jace, you need to—”

“Not now, guys.”

When he tried to move past them, Picasso, a member of the S.W.A.T. team, planted himself in Jace's path. With his thick arms crossed over a chest the width of Main Street, the only way to move him was a stick of dynamite. Jace glared at him but the man didn't flinch.

He turned to Jay. "You were saying?"

Chapter Eleven

Sitting in the interrogation room, Sissy wished she'd grabbed a pair of stilettos rather than flat sandals. For the past two hours she'd envisioned attacking Kevin Nobs with the heel of her favorite shoes. It would be a pleasure to hammer one of those suckers right into his skull.

The object of her violent fantasies stood by the door, watching her like Wylie E. Coyote and she was the Road Runner.

She'd been stuck in this little gray room for more than six hours and granted only one bathroom break. It was probably a good thing they'd been stingy with a drink since they seemed to be limiting her trips to the potty.

It didn't help that she was freezing her ass off either. The thermostat was set low to ensure the officers were comfortable beneath their layers of protective gear. She could sure use a few layers herself right now. Helen Ryder, one of female officers in Haven, had given her a jacket, but it was only a windbreaker. It was about as effective as wrapping herself in a garbage bag.

Lifting her head, she glared at the two-way mirror. She could feel them watching her, waiting for her to make a mistake. They'd have a hell of a long wait because she didn't know the answers to the questions they'd asked her. Agent Sanders, the one who'd left bruises down her arm, along with another agent she'd nicknamed No-Neck, had been in several times to pepper her with the same questions over and over again though they'd yet to trip her up.

No matter how many times she told them she knew nothing about Jorge's life they came back at her from another angle. They'd also asked about the Ramirez brothers then stopped just short of calling her a liar when she told them she'd had no contact with them in ten years.

Exhausted and sick to her stomach, she let her chin drop to her chest. It was the photos that almost made her lose it. Someone had watched her during some very private moments, and it was all caught on film. Sissy rubbed her forehead. In the back of her mind she'd dreaded the day any of this came out. Her worst nightmares paled in comparison to the reality she now faced.

Did Jace know what was going on? She lifted her head. He probably did. Johnny was good friends with Ryan; surely he would've said something.

Nobs cracked his gum, and she resisted the urge to glare at him. What time was it? They took away her cell phone, and the room didn't have a clock or a window. She had to go the bathroom so badly her eyes would be floating soon.

“Oh, sorry. I forgot to pass on your request to use the bathroom,” Nobs spoke.

Judging from the smirk on his ugly mug he wasn't a damn bit sorry at all. She looked from him to the trashcan then back again. Hey, when a girl's got to go...

“Bet you're sorry now that you weren't a little nicer to me.”

So that's what this little pissing match was about. Nobs had asked her out numerous times, and she'd always turned him down. The last time he'd tried to corner her at the grocery store, and she'd shoved him into a toilet paper display just to get away from him.

“Sorry?” she forced a laugh. “You're kiddin', right?” Slamming her hands on the cold metal table she pushed out of her chair. “Only thin' I'm sorry 'bout is that ya got up after our meetin' at the grocery store.”

His face flushed, and he made a move toward her. Nobby didn't scare her. She'd dealt with bullies most of her life, and she could handle him.

“Now, listen up 'cause this is what you're gonna do.” Bracing her fists on her hips, she met his gaze squarely. “You're gonna ask someone to escort me to the bathroom then you're gonna run over to the diner and get me some food, a club sandwich with iced tea will do nicely. Then, you're gonna tell Agent Sanders and Agent No-Neck that if they're gonna arrest me they'd better get to it 'cause I'm outta here.”

“I'm not about to do anything of the sort.” He towered over, crowding her and trying to force her to back up, but she wasn't about to budge. “Now put your ass back in that chair—”

“I want a bathroom break, now.”

When he grabbed her arm, she flinched. Her arm was black and blue, and his fat fingers turned the dull ache into stabbing pains. He led her back to her chair and shoved her down.

“Yes, you will,” he spat.

When he moved away, she bounced back up like a Jack in the box. She'd just about had enough of being manhandled today.

“I've got rights,” she shouted.

“Criminals shouldn't have rights,” he gritted. “Now, you sit your ass—”

“Ya'll can't keep me here without tellin' me why.”

“I'm warning you,” he snarled. One hand moved behind her back, but she barely noticed.

“And I want a phone call and someone will take me to the bathroom or...” Her words trailed off when she realized he pointed a Taser gun at her. “Oh, for heaven's sake.” She threw up her hands. “Ya can't shoot me with that, I'm pregnant.”

When Sissy opened her eyes the first thing she saw was Ranger's face looking down at her. Then she noticed the short hair and realized it was Cowboy instead. Muffled voices surrounded her and her head threatened to split open.

“What happened?” she whispered.

“You hit your head, Sis.”

“That bastard shot me, didn’t he?” She clutched her lower stomach. “I told him, I was pregnant, and he did it anyway.”

“The ambulance is coming in right now.” His voice was soothing, so much like Ranger’s. “They’re going to take you over to the hospital and check you out.”

“Am I hurt? The baby...” She grabbed his hand.

“It’s just a precaution.” He was shaking his head. “When you fell you hit your head on a chair and you’re bleeding.”

“Well, of course I hit my head,” she grumbled. “A trigger-happy cop just shot a million volts through me.”

Two paramedics came into the room bearing a gurney. She heard raised voices coming from the hallway.

“Hey, Sissy.” Connie Brandon set a red box on the floor then donned a pair of bright purple rubber gloves. “You have a big knot on your head, girl. What kind of trouble are you in now?” Her smile was gentle.

“Bein’ mouthy I guess,” she mumbled.

The E.M.T. crouched beside her and laughed. “If that’s illegal you should’ve been arrested years ago.” She whipped out a small flashlight and started her exam.

Sissy dutifully answered all of the questions she was asked though she fussed when Connie insisted upon putting her in a neck brace. By the time they had her secured to the gurney and wrapped in a cotton blanket, she was more than ready to wheel herself out if she had to.

Once they left the room the voices were louder. Cops lined the hallway with a few suit guys sprinkled in for good measure. A number of familiar faces crowded around her, and she felt several people touch her on the leg or shoulder as she was wheeled past. They were halfway through the building before she heard Jace’s voice.

“How the hell would I know, Ryan? I learned about it the same time you did.”

He knew.

Despair washed over her. Lying flat on her back she couldn’t see anything other than the ceiling unless someone stepped in close the gurney. Tears burned her eyes.

“Is the kid yours, Detective Diver?” She recognized Agent No-Neck’s voice. “According to the rumors, she’s a very popular girl. Chances are good she doesn’t know who knocked her up.”

The air left her body in a rush, and a dull roar filled her ears. Connie leaned over looking concerned, and Sissy felt the weight of numerous gazes fixed on her. The E.M.T. was shouting and waving her arms as the overhead lights passed more quickly. She caught a quick glimpse of Jace’s face, and the only thing that registered was his anger. Over and over she heard her mother’s voice playing in her head.

Women like us don't have a chance at happily ever after, kid, you'd best get over that idea now.

He was going to be a father.

Jace stroked his thumb over Sissy's knuckles. She was sleeping now, and her color was much better than it had been. As long as he lived he'd never forget the horrible emptiness in her eyes as she was whisked down the hall. Her forehead was bruised, and a small white bandage covered the three stitches she'd received. The doctors had assured him both she and the baby would be fine.

No thanks to Nobs. He scowled. That kid better hope he had nine lives because Jace planned on beating at least five out of him. Ryan let it slip that he'd probably lose his job over this. The city attorneys went ballistic when they heard a pregnant woman had been shot with a Taser.

As for himself, the best case scenario would be a suspension without pay and mandatory anger management classes. If things didn't go his way he could possibly lose his job. Internal Affairs was already looking into the incident, and he'd find out soon enough. Being a cop was more than just a job to him, it was his identity, his passion. He'd never wanted to do anything else. His training had turned him into a predator and for the first time in his career, he'd almost taken a life with his bare hands.

You're beautiful, every inch of you.

He smiled. Sissy did have a way with words.

At least his family was still behind him. Cowboy accidentally locked Sanders and Riker in the staging area of the sally port. He swore he didn't know how the audio and video feeds came unplugged, leaving them stranded for several hours. Johnny mentioned calling the exterminators because he'd seen a few mice scurrying around just that morning.

Jace couldn't help but wonder if those same mice were wearing police uniforms.

Over the past couple of hours his initial anger had faded. Other than Jorge's late night visit, everything Riker dug up had happened years ago when Sissy was only seventeen years old. Yeah, she'd made some pretty serious mistakes, but she was a stronger woman for them. He smiled. Besides, having someone around who knew how to treat a knife wound could be pretty handy.

"Are ya laughin' at me?"

He jerked and his gaze met hers. Circles marred the pale skin beneath her eyes and there was a wariness in her beautiful cat's eyes. "You're awake. How are you feeling?"

"F-fine." And just like that she was in tears.

Growing up with Josie and Gem, he was used to the hormonal ups and downs of women but he'd never seen one dissolve into tears quite as fast as Sissy did. He lowered the side rails on the bed then gently scooted her over to make room for himself. When she threw herself into his arms she almost pushed him off the side of the bed.

"Easy, Sis." He cradled her against his chest. "It's going to be okay, I promise."

As he stroked her back she started talking. With her face buried against his chest he couldn't understand most of what she was saying, but he didn't care as he was content to hold her. It wasn't until he heard her say she was stupid that he decided enough was enough. He caught her chin and forced her head back until he could see her face.

"I don't ever want to hear you say that again, do you hear me?"

"But I was stupid to—"

"Hey, what did I just say?" He waited until she looked him in the eyes. "There is nothing stupid or foolish about you, Sissy. You were a young girl stuck in a bad situation and you did what you thought was right."

"But—"

"No buts." He shook his head. "Everyone makes mistakes that they regret."

She sniffed. "Yeah but not everyone becomes a s-stripper."

"And for that I am truly thankful." He laughed. "Can you image Maude Partridge working the pole, wearing her support hose?"

Sissy fought not to smile and he laughed even harder when she lost the battle.

"Jason Diver, you're a very bad man."

"That I am." Even with red eyes and a runny nose she was still beautiful to him.

"But, I want to explain somethin'. I paid Jorge back—"

"I already know, Sis. LT showed me some photocopies of the cancelled checks." He kissed her soft lips. "You don't owe me any explanations."

"Oh, Ranger," she whispered. Fresh tears began to fall.

"Hey now, what's that about? Why are you crying again?" He kissed them away.

"I wanted to be the one to tell ya about the baby. I'm so sorry ya found out the way ya did. And ya have every right to be mad at me."

"Yeah, that was a shock," he admitted. "I wish you'd told me when you found out, but I understand why." Jace gently tucked her hair behind her ear. "I think the best thing we can do is to start with a clean slate from right here in this luxurious bed at Haven General Hospital. You and I have made some pretty serious mistakes, and it's not good for us to keep beating ourselves up over them."

"Agreed." She snuggled close, and he laid his cheek against the crown of her head. "So, you're not mad that I'm pregnant and all?"

"Sissy, will you quit?"

She laughed. "Okay, okay. I've been thinking of names, ya know."

"Oh, yeah? Come up with anything you like?"

"How do ya feel about Henrietta?"

He snorted. "As in hippo?"

“No.” She poked him in the stomach. “I like that name.”

“Uh uh, no way. We are not naming our daughter after a big, gray animal from a children’s show.”

“Oh, for heaven’s sake,” she huffed. “How about Penelope?”

He made a game-show buzzer sound. “Another cartoon character.”

“Well, smarty, come up with one to throw in the mix.”

“Carrie.”

“Carrie? Ain’t she the one that went crazy at the prom and killed everybody?” She made a rude sound.
“Next.”

“Had a girlfriend named Monica—”

“I’m not namin’ my child after your ex-girlfriend, Ranger.” She shoved out of his arms to glare at him. “So ya just get that idea right outta your head.”

“Paula...”

“Her neither.” Sissy swung her legs over the side of the bed. “I can see I’m gonna have to do this one myself. Namin’ a baby after an old girlfriend, well, I never...ah.”

Jace hauled her back into his arms and gently tickled her until she was laughing. “Sissy Kolchek, have I ever mentioned how much I love you?”

Her gray eyes softened. “No, as a matter of fact, ya haven’t.”

“Mmm, you’ll have to remind me later—” His words were cut off when she shoved the pillow in his face. He pushed it away. “What was that for?”

“‘Cause you’re talkin’ when ya should be kissin’.”

“Now that’s an idea I agree with.”

Sissy could care less if people didn’t like her outspoken personality because she’d found everything she’d ever need in Ranger’s arms.

Epilogue

Ahna Hart fingered the heavy white envelope. It had arrived via Fed Ex two days ago though she'd yet to open it. Her half-sister, Pip, forwarded it to her rather than give the lawyer her mailing address. She was grateful for that as the less people knew about her the safer she'd be. Of course the million-dollar question was, why was a lawyer from Haven, Ohio looking for her?

It wasn't like she'd ever lived there. Her biological mother and half-siblings still resided in the small town, but she had limited contact with Pip, one of her half-sisters. If it weren't for her grandmother's photos, Ahna would've thought she'd never been there before. But Granny Hart had been a meticulous woman. She'd recorded the dates and locations on the back of each one along with the identities of the subjects. Those faded images evoked no more emotion in Ahna than a random picture in a magazine.

She had been in Haven, several times in fact, but she had no memory of it. Then again, whole chunks of her life were missing. Somewhere, locked in the depths of her broken mind, thirteen years of memories were hidden. Images came back to her in her dreams, and they'd only served to convince her that those years were not worth remembering.

Intellectually, she knew what had gone on during that time but her relationship to those years was no more real to her than a movie she'd once watched. Ahna knew she'd much rather have a black hole in her mind than to recall the nightmare she'd lived. Her therapist called it retrograde amnesia though Ahna had another name for it.

Survival.

About the Author

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Men of SWAT: Kissing Cowboy

Their first kiss melted her resistance, their second one melted his heart.

Kissing Cowboy

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She's a woman with a plan...

From childhood, Payton 'Pip' Whittier has loved Jeff 'Cowboy' Diver. Even after he publicly humiliated her and forced her to leave town, he's the one man she can't erase from her heart.

Nine years have passed and Pip has returned to the scene of the crime, her hometown of Haven, Ohio. This time, she's determined to rid her system of Cowboy, once and for all. He's a man determined to thwart her every move...

When Cowboy sees Pip at the local bar, he's floored by the changes in his one-time best friend. The shy, sweet girl has been replaced with a sexy-as-hell woman in red stilettos. Years ago they'd shared a tender moment, one that changed irrevocably their lives.

This is his one chance to convince her to give him one more—even if it means his heart could be crushed under her lethal high heels.

Enjoy the following excerpt for Kissing Cowboy:

Police Officer Suffocated by Mini Skirt.

Not exactly the way he wanted to end his career.

His gaze traced the length of her long, shapely legs. Wincing, Jeff shifted in his chair trying to find a more comfortable position. Payton Whittier aroused quite a few feelings in him, and none of them was remotely brotherly.

Forcing himself to look away, he stifled a groan. If her tiny skirt wasn't up to finishing him off, he'd just discovered what would.

Cherry red.

Four-inch high.

Fuck-me heels.

Death by Stiletto, what a way to go...

Jace jerked him back to reality by punching him in the arm. "You're doing it again."

"Damn it, bro." Frustrated, Jeff ran his hand through his hair. "I have no business looking at Pip that way."

"Why not? She's smoking hot."

"She's practically our little sister, and it just isn—"

“Who are you trying to fool, Cowboy?” Jace gave him a cutting look. “You were the one who got caught playing doctor with her.” He shrugged. “We’re grown up now and, let’s face it, she’s a hottie with a naughty body.”

“Watch it.”

Jace grinned, totally unrepentant. “What can I say? I like the ladies.”

“Well, you just watch which *lady* you’re going to like next,” Jeff growled. “If I catch you looking at the wrong one I’ll kick your ass.”

Feeling someone’s gaze on him, he looked up to see it was Ryan. Having spent the first nine years of his life on a reservation with his shaman grandfather, Ryan had a high level of spook factor. Jeff was pretty sure he could read minds, or at least it felt like it sometimes.

“What, Ry?”

Something dark flashed in Ryan’s black eyes then it was gone. Without a word, he rose and stalked away.

“What was that about?” Jace spoke to no one in particular.

The sound of Pip’s laughter sent a blaze of heat straight to his groin. Kent was practically wrapped around her again, staring at her breasts as if they were on the menu. Pushing him away, more forcefully this time, she spun around on one slender heel. Watching that damned skirt lift then resettle again, he exhaled. He could only hope she was wearing underwear.

His cock grew harder.

Great big, full-coverage granny panties.

Were his jeans shrinking?

Industrial grade, white with no trim.

Frustrated, he rubbed his jaw. His cock didn’t care if she wore ballistic undergarments. Putting Pip and underwear in the same sentence was enough to kick-start his libido. He glared at his crotch.

Damned fine time for you decide to come out and play.

With his crotch on fire and the overwhelming urge to punch every guy who’d spoken to her, he realized that he might have picked the wrong Whittier after all.

Cowboy was still watching her.

Picking up her cocktail, Pip drained the glass. Four years of college and five years working her way up the food chain in Chicago had done nothing to kill her unrequited lust for him. Not that she’d let him know that.

Picking up her cue, she moved into position. Miranda mentioned he seemed to have a thing for her legs. Whatever body part it was, she definitely had his attention so she might as well use it to her advantage. Pretending to concentrate on the table, she reached for the cue ball on the opposite side. Holding

her breath, she prayed her skirt didn't give up the ghost and expose her ass. Her goal accomplished, she turned away and felt a faint rumble beneath her feet.

Hopefully it was his jaw.

Moving to the head of the table, she noticed Cowboy was now standing. Damn, he seemed so much bigger...upright. Her palms grew damp. He'd always been a good-looking kid but, as a man, he was sex on a stick. With his broad shoulders and heavily muscled chest, she couldn't help but wonder what he'd look like naked. Did he have a six-pack? Twelve-pack?

Your sister would know in spades.

Pip winced. Hell, even her inner monologue was against her.

Their gazes clashed, and she felt it all the way down to her toes. Those pale blue eyes of his, so startling against his dark skin, pierced her flesh. She experienced the oddest sensation of him stripping her bare, exposing every little secret she struggled to keep hidden from the world.

She looked away, then almost immediately looked back. What she would give to know what was going on behind those unearthly eyes of his. Licking her lips, the light shifted and his eyes darkened to a fierce, stormy blue. While she'd never seen that particular look directed at her before, her body recognized its meaning.

Lust.

The muscles in her lower body loosened, lengthened, and the flesh between her thighs grew damp. Struck by the inexorable urge to go to him, Pip flexed her hand and dug her nails into her palm. The sharp little pain jerked her out of the spell he'd cast upon her. Turning away, feminine power, unlike anything she'd ever experienced, exploded in her gut.

Had a man ever watched her with such naked hunger?

Not even close.

With shaky hands she could barely focus on the layout of the table. She heard Kent say something behind her, but she didn't care what it was. The jerk was probably looking at her ass again. She'd never liked him when he and her brother, Rand, had hung out together in school, and she liked him even less as an adult.

With a satisfying crack, the cue ball struck its target sending it into the corner pocket. Talk about luck. With Jeff watching her she couldn't concentrate let alone play a proper game.

Coming around the table to stand directly in front of Cowboy, her body vibrated with tension. Pretending to consider the best plan of attack, she bent slightly and her rear end came into contact with something warm, hard and definitely male. She didn't have to look to know it was him. She recognized his scent. Soap, warm skin and something musky tugged at her senses.

Turning, she noted the tightness of his jaw and his hooded gaze. With his arms crossed over his chest, he literally towered over her. Up close his eyes were darker and they burned with a heat that sent shivers straight to the apex of her thighs.

Ro was right. This wasn't the same man she'd left. Both physically and emotionally he was harder, more remote than she'd ever seen him. Her gaze dropped to his crotch.

Make that much harder.

And, if she wasn't mistaken, he was angry...with her.

Narrowing her eyes, she glared up at him. If anyone had the right to get pissy it certainly wasn't him. Summoning her mother's heavy southern accent, she drawled, "Are you lost, stranger?"

A muscle in his jaw flexed.

Boy, he didn't like that much.

"We need to talk." He glanced in the direction of Ro, Miranda and Sissy who watched them with unabashed interest. "Alone."

"I'm so sorry, sugar." Fluttering her hand, a move her mother had perfected while still in the cradle, her fingertips came to rest between her breasts. "Do I know you?"

He rocked back on his heels, and she smiled harder.

"You see, Mama wouldn't like it if she heard I was talking to some *random* stranger in a *bar* of all places." Slowly, she walked around him, sizing him up as if he were a side of meat. "You know, you do remind me of someone I knew long ago."

He turned his head as if to speak, but she cut him off.

"Then again I could be mistaken."

"For old time's sake?"

Cowboy's tone was so soft that only she heard him. Her stomach clenched, and her knees went weak.

Move away. Get away from him...

Then he laid his hand on her arm.

Electricity shot through her nervous system and short-circuited her brain. Every cell in her body leapt to awareness as if she'd been asleep and he was the only one who could awaken her. Shaken, all she could do was stand there and stare at where their flesh joined.

His fingers tightened on her arm. The scar across his first knuckle—she'd been there when he'd cut himself. Barely ten, she was so panicked at the sight of so much blood that she'd screamed her head off. Ryan had come running only to slap electrical tape over it and tell Jeff to get back to work. The pale scar on his wrist was her fault. While repairing the fence she'd distracted him, and the wire snapped back and caught him. He'd bawled her out only to apologize minutes later.

She'd spent countless lazy summer days watching him work with the horses. He had a limitless supply of patience with even the wildest of animals. These were the hands of a man who worked hard and played even harder. And they belonged to a man who, once upon a time, made her feel safe.

Special.

"All right," she croaked.

At night, she comes alive...but a madman's fantasies could kill her.

Fantasy Girl

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By day, Lynn Broadmore leads a boring life as a mild-mannered bookkeeper, enduring one blind date after another. But by night, she's "Hush," webmistress extraordinaire, writing naughty stories for her adoring legion of Buffy the Vampire Slayer fan fiction minions.

Now that there's a new guy working in the next cubicle, though, real life is getting interesting. All Jack has to do is smile, and her insides turn to goo. To her complete surprise, she might even stand a chance against the office bimbo.

Undercover FBI agent Jack Edwards is on the hunt for a serial killer who trolls the Internet for victims. The trail has led to Lynn's virtual doorstep, and he's ready to do whatever is necessary to bring the killer down—including using two secret identities to gain her trust. Things get complicated, however, as the goofy fan fiction writer gets under his skin and starts staining his brain—and his heart.

Distractions are something he can't afford right now...not if he's going to keep her from getting hurt in what she thinks is a safe, on-line hideaway. Because between the pixels lurks a murderer.

And he's chosen Hush, his fantasy girl, as his next target.

Enjoy the following excerpt for Fantasy Girl:

"You have got to be kidding me." I cried out as I kicked my rear driver's-side tire. The thing was flatter than a pancake. A slew of cuss words slipped out of my mouth, rivaling the best sailors.

"Lynn?" came a voice from behind me.

I spun around. "What?" I snapped, realizing I was spinning around to glare at the one and only Jack Edwards.

Damn my luck. And didn't it beat all, that a week after meeting him, I was still getting all gooey inside just looking at him.

I seriously needed some help. Professional help.

"Uh, need some help?" he asked with a brow raised, framing his rather amused expression.

"No, thank you," I snapped, glaring down at the terrible tire. Anything to keep from looking at Jack. "I am perfectly capable of changing my own tire." I opened the trunk, and tried to pull my tire out. Which really, it wasn't that heavy. It was a spare...

And it landed with a thud, flat as well.

"Shit."

Jack hid a smirk behind his hand. "Sure you don't need anything?"

"I'm fine," I said a bit too loudly.

“Sure you are,” Jack replied. He sashayed up next to me, and yes, it was a sashay, he was far too damn smug for his good looks. Damn me for getting all girly inside at the sight of him coming over to rescue my damsel in distress.

Then he became the ultimate man.

He picked up the flat spare, looked at it, and said “Yep, it’s flat.”

“What are you, a rocket scientist in your spare time?” I muttered.

“Only on the weekends,” Jack said with a grin.

I stuck my tongue out at him. Yep, I’m mature. Really.

Then Jack started rooting around in my trunk, pulling out the jack.

“What are you doing? I can’t put that flat spare on.” I put my hands on my hips and glared at him.

Jack positioned the lift under my car, and started raising the poor old Mazda that I drove. “But I can take you to get this tire fixed,” he said as he popped off the hubcap and started on the bolts.

What an arrogant ass! What am I? Incapable of taking care of myself? I mean I can very easily change a tire. It’s not like it’s hard. ’Course, truth be told, I would call my dad, and have him come do it for me, because, well, he’s my dad, and he lives for this stuff.

“What if I don’t want you to? I’m perfectly capable,” I started to argue, but with amazing pit crew speed, Jack had the flat tire off my car before I could finish my sentence. I threw my arms up in the air in frustration.

“What?” Jack asked. “You know where there’s a place that can fix this?”

I shrugged. “There’s a Pep Boys or something like that around the corner,” I said letting out a sigh.

’Course, I really couldn’t help the part of me that was excited that the new guy was helping me get my tire fixed. He led me to a huge black Chevy Tahoe, immaculate inside and out. I couldn’t help whistling at the perfection of it and feeling like crap that Jack had to see my Mazda that seriously needed to be traded in for something else.

The stars must have aligned just right, because as Jack and I were climbing in, Tina Smith and several of her minions were leaving the building. Instantly her gaze locked on mine, and she shot daggers at me.

It took all my strength not to stick my tongue out at her.

Pep Boys wasn’t horribly busy, and they managed to get me right in to fix my tire. While I was waiting, Jack and I roamed the aisles to see if there was anything that we couldn’t live without.

’Course, they don’t sell whole new cars at Pep Boys, so I was out of luck there.

I stared at some of the racks of cleaning wipes for the dashboard. And sprays. And rags. My God, did people really need all this stuff to keep their car clean?

“It’s no wonder my car’s a mess,” I muttered.

“Why?” Jack asked.

“If I knew I had to buy all this stuff,” I said gesturing to the shelves, “I might have given up on buying a car in the first place.”

Jack grinned, flashing a bright mouth full of pearly white teeth at me.

Be still my beating heart.

I spied one of my favorite car accessories. “Oh, look, air fresheners,” I said, darting down the aisle.

Nope, not one single one with Buffy on it. Darn it.

Jack smirked and came after me. “So who do you want to be when you grow up, Lynn?” he asked as we sniffed the different fresheners. He grimaced at a fruity one and hung it back up.

“I am grown up. I just don’t have to act like it,” I said. “Who do you want to be?”

“I want to save the world,” Jack said.

I raised my eyebrow. “Like a superhero or something?”

“Sure,” he said hanging up another one, straightening the row out as he did. “Why not?”

“Because you’re going to have to be better on the computer to be Super Jack—the Accountant.”

Jack laughed.

They called my name over the intercom and Jack and I headed up to the front. The guy behind the counter, smelling of grease rags and motor oil, stood there waiting for us. A smear of black goo covered part of his name patch, concealing the “J” in John.

“We got it fixed,” John said. “Looks almost like your tire got stabbed.”

“Stabbed?” I asked staring at him. “You’ve gotta be kidding.”

“Well, usually, if something’s been driven over, there’s a nail or what have you stuck in the tire. You didn’t have anything like that.”

I glanced at Jack. “Has that been going on lately?”

The guy shrugged. “Sometimes kids do it. You live somewhere around here?”

“I work down the way,” I said pointing over my shoulder toward the office.

“Probably just kids. I wouldn’t worry about it much,” said John. He handed me the bill, and Jack promptly yanked it from my hand.

“Hey,” I said, “I was going to pay for that.”

Jack shrugged. “I’ll pay, and you can buy dinner.”

I crossed my hands over my chest. “Oh, so you just assume that I’ll buy you dinner now?”
Presumptuous ass.

“I’m fixing your tire, you should,” Jack said.

John couldn’t help adding his thoughts. “Sounds only fair to me,” he replied.

I gritted my teeth. Great, now I have to buy dinner for Jack.

Then my brain kicked in. Whoa, this would kinda count as a date, wouldn’t it? Dinner with Jack?
Even if I just get Burger King?

Oh the possibilities.

With ghosts like these, who needs TAPS?

Marshall's Law

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If Dana Cummings was inclined to list the best ways to meet men, having one arrest her for burglary—during a tornado, no less—wouldn't be in the top ten. Dating isn't high on her agenda, period. She's sworn to never again fall for know-it-all men with fiery gazes and devastating smiles.

Besides, she's only in Wyoming to help her eccentric aunt find out if horny ghosts really do haunt the family bed. And hopefully bust a hellacious case of writer's block. Extracurricular activity with a gruff, hunky lawman is off limits, even if he does fire her libido.

Witnessing too much of life's seedy side led Brennan Marshall to live by three simple rules: work hard, play hard, and never fall for a sweet-faced female with a witty tongue and snappy comebacks. Especially the ones with a dollop of vulnerability—like Dana. But their razor-sharp sexual tension cuts right through his defenses and leads them on a dangerous journey.

One that will test the limits of their beliefs—and could cost their lives.

Enjoy the following excerpt for Marshall's Law:

"What did Lucille tell you about these strange occurrences plaguing her?" he asked, leaning his arms on the desk.

"She called my mother a few weeks back. Mom said Aunt Lucille had this trembling voice, like she was scared. That's not normal for Aunt Lucille. She bends under pressure but never gives in. She's one tough lady. Anyway, Aunt Lucille said that she'd heard noises in the attic and in the basement. Especially the basement."

"What kind of noises?"

Dana wished she hadn't opened her mouth and mentioned the basement. "Uh...well..." She glanced up and saw he waited, twiddling his thumbs like he had all day. "You're not going to believe this but—"

"Trust me, I've heard just about everything at least once."

"Not this you haven't."

He tossed her a smile. "Humor me."

"Okay. You asked for it. You know that big...uh...heart-shaped bed downstairs?"

"Yeah."

"Well, she started hearing people having..." She squirmed in her chair and made a face.

"Go ahead. People what?"

"People having sex. She heard people having sex on the bed. But when she went downstairs there was no one there."

Marshall never twitched. Yet Dana saw the suspicious twinkle in his eyes before he managed to smother it. Instead, he did something much more disturbing.

Rising from his chair, he came around the side of the desk and paced the broad area behind her chair. She craned around to watch him.

“What kind of sounds exactly?” he asked.

Her chair made an obnoxious protest as she turned it so she could observe his purposeful stride. Eight big steps one way, eight big steps back. Eight big steps one way, eight big steps back.

“I’m going to get hypnotized watching you do that. Would you mind taking a seat?”

He increased his pace. “I think better this way.” He came to an abrupt halt, leaned against the wall, cocked one booted foot across his ankle and hooked his thumbs in his belt loops.

She gulped. Good thing he wore that flannel shirt. If he’d stood there in that tight T-shirt—

“What kinds of sounds?” he asked, jerking her back to the real world.

She couldn’t say it. Come on, Dana. You aren’t a blushing teen talking to a boy in high school. Spit it out.

When she didn’t answer fast enough, he walked toward her and rested his hands on the arms of her chair. She leaned back, inhaling a quick, startled breath.

“What are you trying to hide from me? Maybe you know something about the sounds?” The query came filled with subtle, sensual nuances that caused his voice to vibrate in his chest and made her tingle in places that shouldn’t be tingling.

In defense she crossed her arms. “Of course I’m not hiding anything.” When he glared, she took the plunge and elaborated. “You have heard people having sex before, haven’t you, Marshall? Gasps. Sighs.” She shrugged. “Grunts. Moans. She said it’s like people having sex, and they never get to...you know.”

A thunderstorm seemed to build in his eyes, but not the kind that promised rage. The type that guaranteed sinful, daring pleasures. She’d never seen a man look at her this way. Predatory and intense all at once, ready to eat her alive. No mistaking that look.

His lips parted and she stared at his mouth.

“No, I don’t know,” he said. “Why don’t you tell me?”

A tiny, rebellious corner of her almost refused to speak. What could he do to her anyway? Spank her?

A hot blush swept into her face. Oh boy, oh boy, oh boy. Marshall’s devouring gaze cruised over her face. His attention landed on her lips.

Crazy arousal spiraled through her, and she leaned forward until they almost touched noses. Dana couldn’t remember the last time she’d felt so out of control and so turned on all at once. Hell, she’d never felt this way before. “These...these horny ghosts or whoever they are never get to finish—”

“Coming?”

Her entire body felt like it might go up in flames. Oh man! Why couldn't he have said something like climaxing? Did he have to use a word that described the nitty gritty?

"Yeah. That's it," she said, licking her lips and swallowing hard. She slumped in the chair.

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