

Samhalla Publishing Ltd.

BREAKING BRENT

Roped

Niki Green

When the going gets tough, the tough get busy. *Real* busy.

Roped, Book 2

In Millbrook, Texas, there are cowboys. Then there are the Kiels, every girl's idea of perfection in tight-fittin' jeans. Peyton James is no different. Only she doesn't want to admit it—because three years ago Brent Kiel ripped out her heart and handed it back in teeny little pieces.

In a twist of fate Peyton wound up engaged to Brent's best friend. The engagement might be off now, but no one needs to know, right? It keeps the questions at bay...and the temptation called Brent Kiel out of reach. Until the night he shows up at her family's bar.

The only reason Brent agrees to meet his brothers at Big Jack's is that Peyton never darkens the door on a Friday night. Except tonight. Seeing her is a painful reminder of his mistake and what it cost him—and that no other woman's lips or body will ever satisfy him like hers.

Nothing—not the past, not her legendary temper, not even the rock on her finger—will keep this cowboy from getting what he wants...

Warning: Seduction served by a brooding and standoffish cowboy who wants nothing more than his ladylove's heart and soul—her body is just icing on the cake. Hot cowboy sex in a bar, in a barn, in a bed...just about anywhere.

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Breaking Brent

Niki Green

Dedication

To my husband...who broke my heart and then made it whole again.

Prologue

“This is bullshit,” Peyton James muttered the curse under her breath and then scanned the cluttered and utterly claustrophobic confines of the office she had recently taken over. Leave it to her father and her brothers to have all the fun while she was stuck being the adult. This is what four years of college had gotten her? “I hate being a grownup.”

Giving over to a childish gesture, she flung the pencil she was holding across the room and laid her head on the scarred wooden top of the desk. It wasn’t even really a desk. It was a piece of plywood, stained a dark color, sitting on cinder blocks. Again, the work of the males in her family tree. She had only agreed to take the job at Big Jack’s Bar and Grill, her daddy’s business, because she liked being home, she could deal with the hours and she loved the money she made. It also helped that, in effect, she was her own boss. If she wanted to push paper, she could push paper. If she wanted to spend the night behind the bar watching all the action taking place, she could do just that.

Lately though, she had been shut inside the office more than she would have liked. Being shut in the cramped space only allowed her to do one of two things—paperwork and think. She had been doing too much of the latter the last few days. Her mind would drift away from her work for only a minute and end up in the place she had no desire for it to be—on him. Brent Kiel. His name would roll across her mind and then his face and then the memories. The good and the bad.

It had been nearly a month since she had talked to him. The last time they had spoken they had fought. Horribly. Her mama would have turned ten different shades of red if she could have heard the words they had thrown back and forth between them. His mama would have washed their mouths out with the nearest bar of soap.

The funny thing was, she didn’t remember what had started that fight, only that it had ended when she’d slammed the door in his face. He had given her every excuse in the book for wanting to break up. He needed time. He needed space. It wasn’t her—it was him. It was all bullshit as far as she was concerned. The truth was he just didn’t want to be with *her* anymore. She was an adult. She could handle it and she did handle it until they crossed paths in town or someone brought up his name. That was when the edges of her tough exterior started to crumble.

Since that night she had only seen him a few times, but each encounter with him was worse than the one before. He had always ignored or avoided her. She had put up with it in the beginning, but ever so

slowly and surely her mood had descended into a realm of pissed off that she had only been in a few times in her life.

Whenever her temper flared, which it did more often than not, she took it out on the walls of the office. Since she was situated in the back of the bar, far from the patrons, she called him every name in the book. Every name she had ever heard used as an insult and even some she had made up on her own. She complimented herself every so often for having such a vivid imagination and vocabulary.

The tirades never lasted long and when they were over all she was left with was an elevated blood pressure level and paperwork. She hated paperwork.

“Think about the money. Think about the money.” She muttered the mantra, picked her head up from the desk and retrieved her pencil from the floor. She had just begun scanning yet another inventory report when there was a subtle but definite knock on the door.

“Come in.” The door opened and the music, which had been muffled before, now filled the space. The band playing tonight was a few local boys, but they were decent and they could put on a show. Standing in the doorway with a towel flung over his shoulder and a toothpick stuck in the corner of his mouth was Wade Vaughn. Wade had bartended in venues from Charleston to Seattle, but was a Texas boy at heart. When he had returned to Texas a few years back her daddy had made him an offer he couldn’t refuse. Wade had been a fixture behind the bar ever since. He was a large and impressive-looking man who could be anywhere from the age of twenty-five to thirty-five, Peyton couldn’t tell.

“Can I do something for you, Wade?” She smiled at him and wasn’t surprised when she got nothing in return. She watched as he rolled the thin wooden stick from one side of his mouth to the other and wiped his hands on the pristine white towel before looking at her. “You might want to do something about your friend.”

“Is he still out there?” She rose to her feet, dropped the pencil onto the desk and hopped over the stack of papers at her feet.

“He’s still out there.” He stepped out of the way so that she could pass. As she made her way down the darkened hallway that led from the office into the main part of the bar and grill, she felt a sense of dread overcome her. He was still here. What a fucking mess. When she rounded the corner, she stopped and scanned the interior of the place, trying her best to avoid the one place she needed to be looking.

The bar was packed tonight—it was always packed on the weekends. Big Jack’s was the only bar in Millbrook, Texas. It was the only bar for over a hundred miles besides the seedy little spot known as The Rusty Spur ten miles outside of town. The only reason anyone went to The Spur was to get rip-roaring drunk, get into a fight or to get laid—the choices didn’t always occur in that order.

She surveyed the massive number of couples twirling and spinning around the dance floor to a Tim McGraw number. She saw a few pool games being played between friends at the back of the room and she prayed those games remained civil. She wasn’t in the mood to break up a fight. Her eyes drifted from left to

right and then back once again before she finally had courage enough to lay them on the man slumped at the bar.

“Shit.” The curse was barely audible, but Wade evidently heard her.

“My thoughts exactly.”

She waited as he passed in front of her, lifted the heavy divider that separated the back of the bar from the rest of the place and held it until she too walked under it.

She remained at the far end of the bar, miles away from the man she watched, as Wade went on about his bartending business. She didn’t know how long she stood there staring, but she knew how many shots he had taken from the whiskey bottle in front of him—too many.

She was in the middle of analyzing how she was going to handle this little situation when she saw Wade from the corner of her eye. The instant she met his gaze he inclined his head toward the man. Without words, he told her to get on with it. Holding up both of her hands in a move of surrender, she walked toward the corner of the bar and stood right in front of him.

He raised his dark head and she wished that he’d kept it down. His hair was disheveled, his face was in bad need of a shave and the dark eyes she had known all her life were ringed in red and glazed from booze.

“How you doin’, darlin’?” The slurred voice was still sexy as hell and the crooked smile that creased his face was one that could still make a girl drop her panties in a heartbeat. They all had that crooked, shit-eating smile.

“I’m fine, but you look like you’ve seen better days.”

Chase Kiel stared at her for only a moment before he tipped the bottle and poured himself another drink.

“Don’t you think you’ve had enough?” It was a loaded question, but it was the only one she could think of at the present.

“Nope,” he said as he brought the small glass full of amber liquid to his mouth, “I can still feel so it’s not nearly enough.” She watched him down the liquid, wince and then reach for the bottle again. *Like hell.* She snatched the bottle before he could and handed it to Wade who appeared out of nowhere and disappeared just as quickly.

The look she earned was not one she had ever wanted in her entire life. Chase clenched his hard jaw, fisted his hands and stared her down. The mask of anger on his face was more than enough to crumple a lesser opponent, but Peyton wasn’t a lesser opponent.

“Shit, Peyton.” He hissed through his clenched teeth. “I paid for that bottle and I intend to drink it.”

“Well, I think you’ve had enough for one night. When you’re ready to finish it off, it’ll be here waiting on you.” She crossed her arms over her chest and did her best to give him an I-mean-business look.

“I’m ready now.”

“The hell you are. You’ve had enough.” She grabbed the glass from the bar top and placed it out of sight. She hoped that it would soon be out of mind as well.

“What am I supposed to do now?” She saw defeat rake his body and come to rest on his shoulders. Her heart burned and ached for him, but she wasn’t about to let him drown himself any longer. He had done that enough over the past couple of months.

“Give me your keys.”

His eyes snapped to hers, and for a minute she thought she had overstepped her boundaries as far as Chase Kiel was concerned. When she saw him move to dig the keys from his pocket, she released the pent-up breath and extended her hand. “Thank you, Chase.”

“Anytime.” The grumble was less than enthusiastic, but he would thank her for this one day—if she were lucky.

“Come on, cowboy. It’s time to go.” She grabbed her purse from her hidey-hole under the counter and then hopped over the width of the bar as she had so many times before. Her booted heels landed with little more than a thud against the wooden floor and she had Chase’s arm before his sodden brain could catch up with her actions.

“Where’re we going?”

“I’m taking you home. Where you should have stayed to begin with. Do they know that you’ve snuck out?” She opened the door for him and was glad to see that he could still walk straight. When they hit the gravel of the parking lot and headed toward her car, he finally answered her.

“I’m a grown fucking man. I can come and go as I please. Everyone else can. Why shouldn’t I be able to?” She thought about answering his question, but she didn’t know what to say, and didn’t know if he really wanted her to speak or not, so she took her daddy’s advice and just kept her trap shut.

She let him climb into the car first and shut the door behind him and then made her way to the driver’s side. She was dreading the drive to the Kiel ranch. She was dreading taking him home to them. To him, but she’d do it anyway.

Twenty minutes later, she pulled onto the graveled driveway and parked her car behind one of the massive trucks all of them drove. She noticed it had a brand new dent in the side and chuckled to herself without thinking. Evidently the driving lessons weren’t going so well.

When she got out of the car, she saw that none of the lights in the main house were on, but she knew they would be shortly. She took a deep breath as she reached the passenger side door and pulled it opened. She was glad as hell Chase was still coherent enough to step out of the car and walk to the front door on his own accord. She helped a little when he stumbled on the steps and knew then that her journey with him was not at an end. If he couldn’t make it up four steps he was never going to make it up an entire flight of stairs.

When they reached the door, she fished his keys from her pocket, found the house key quickly and had the door open even quicker. Together they took the stairs—side-by-side, step by step. He only swayed

once and she was there to catch him before he took a nose dive south. She was more careful with him on the rest of the steps.

At the top of the staircase she noticed that all of the bedroom doors were closed except for one—his. She entered the room first and turned on a lamp that sat on the bedside table. The soft white light illuminated the massive bedroom and she had to admit she was impressed. The room had a woman's touch—it had his fiancée's touch. Willa Tate had left her mark behind whether she knew it or not.

As she scanned the room and what memories had been left behind, she felt an aching in her heart for Chase.

The breaking of glass and the flash of a blown bulb pulled her from her complicated race of thoughts and back to where they should have been to begin with—on the man stumbling around drunkenly on broken glass.

"Here let me get that. Just sit down before you fall." She squatted by the bedside table and gathered the remains of the lamp that had once been intact. Leave it to a drunk to destroy a seventy-dollar lamp.

"Sorry," he whispered. His apology brought her eyes to his and even in the dim light she could see the pain and remorse reflected in them.

"It's not your fault. Things happen sometimes." The lamp had broken in only a few large pieces and she laid those on the table and checked to make sure there were no shards left behind to be felt in the morning.

She stood still and silent as he sat gently on the side of the overly large bed with its abundance of throw pillows. What did a man need with that many pillows anyway? They both didn't speak for the longest and most unbearable of minutes. The moment was both heartbreaking and a little awkward. To speak or not to speak—that was the question.

"Listen," She had never been accused of being tender-hearted before, but for the moment her heart went out to him and she wanted to do all in her power to console him. If she could. "I need you to do me a favor." She waited for a response and wasn't surprised when she didn't get one. She knelt in front of him and thought about taking the hands he held clasped in between his knees, but didn't. "I need you to stop this. If I see you at the bar I don't want to worry if you're going to make it home all right. I need you to promise me you'll take care of yourself."

"Why do you care?"

"Because I love your brother, and I know he loves you and it would kill him if you went all stupid and hurt yourself after marinating in the bottom of a whiskey bottle."

"You're a good woman, Peyton. You may be too good for that idiot brother of mine." A drunken man's words were a sober man's thoughts, she had always heard. "I appreciate you bringing me home. You didn't have to, but you did anyway and I thank you for it."

"Any of you would have done it for me."

“Yeah,” He got real quiet for a minute and studied the floor beneath his booted feet, and then his eyes came back up to meet hers. She felt the air leave her body. She had forgotten—forgotten how much they all looked alike—forgotten how much he looked like Brent. Brent who avoided her. Brent who ignored her. Brent who made her cry and feel like all those girls from school she had ever laughed at for feeling as sappy and as heartsick as she did now.

“Well, I think I’ll turn in and sleep this drunk off.”

“That sounds like a plan. Do you need anything before I go?”

He shook his head and turned his back to her. That was her cue to take her leave. She had made it as far as the door before he stopped her.

“Did you bring me home for me or for him?” The mention of Brent stopped her in her tracks and made her heart skip in time.

“Maybe a little bit of both.” She told the truth—as best she could.

“He’ll come around. It hasn’t been easy for him the last few months and I’m the one to blame for that. He shouldn’t have had to manage this place and everything that goes with it by himself. I’m the oldest and it’s my responsibility, but he’s never left me hanging. I left him hanging and I’m sorry for that. I’m sorry that you two aren’t on the best of terms. I blame myself for that too.”

“You’re not to blame. You’re not the one that broke my heart. It’ll be all right though. This too shall pass. It has to, right? Goodnight, Chase.” With that, she turned, hiding the tears starting to pool in her eyes, and started to leave the bedroom, but not before he tried to have the final word.

“Just give him some time, Peyton. Just a little bit of time. He’ll come around. He wants you. That means more than his pride or his temper.”

“He only wants me when he can’t have me. He said as much along with every other breakup line ever created. So now he’ll want me for the rest of his life, because I’ll be damned if he gets the chance to hurt me again.” She left his bedroom, left their home and drove back to town, back to the bar, back to where she didn’t have to think about Brent Kiel or her broken heart.

Chapter One

Four years later.

Brent Kiel took in his surroundings and then took the shot his hand was wrapped around. The amber liquid burned a path from his mouth down his throat and into his stomach. It hurt like hell. Good. A few more of these and the entire evening would become a blur and hopefully tomorrow would be as well.

Shifting on the stool he had occupied for the better part of a few hours, he watched his brother Nick sink the eight ball into the side pocket of one of the pool tables the bar supplied. The shot ended yet another game between his brothers. Hayden, the youngest of the Kiel clan, fished a wadded up bill from his front pocket and handed it over to Nick. At this rate he would be broke before midnight.

One of the trademarked Kiel cockier-than-hell smiles crossed Nick's face as he took the money offered. Hayden looked defeated, but would get over it soon. That was one thing about the youngest Kiel, he didn't dwell on things too long.

Hayden handed his pool stick to another waiting patron and followed Nick as they took seats next to him at the bar. Brent scooted over a bit to make room for his brother's ever-growing size.

They both were tall boys, but recently Hayden had put on about twenty pounds of muscle for no apparent reason. The added weight made his T-shirts bulge and made his Saturday nights busier than they were before.

Thanks to Hayden and Jason Kiel there weren't many hearts left intact in the small town of Millbrook, Texas. After tomorrow a few more would shatter thanks to Chase's decision to marry the love of his life. Brent clenched his jaw at the thought of his brother's wedding. Damn fool didn't have a clue as to what he was getting himself into.

Willa Tate was beautiful, gorgeous if the truth be told, but in Brent's eyes she was the kryptonite to Chase's Superman. She would break him again just like she had almost done all those years ago when she decided to leave Millbrook with Chase's heart in tow.

Brent had ceased trying to convince Chase of this. The last time the subject was brought up, Brent had walked away with a bloody lip and four mad brothers. Even though his opinion still stood as it was, he kept it to himself. Things were better, but they weren't great. Brent felt bad about the strain his feelings put on his relationship with his brothers but it was his opinion and he was sticking with it.

He just had to grin and bear it until Chase realized Willa was no different now than she had been all those years ago. She had already left him once. She would do it again. It was only a matter of time. The Kiel's had had enough grief and heartache in their short lives. They didn't need any more.

As his thoughts progressed so did his thirst. Lifting his hand, he motioned for Wade, the bartender for the evening, to order another round.

Wade nodded his head once, letting Brent know he would be there in a minute and then went back to filtering shots into empty glasses. That was when Brent saw her.

Peyton James.

He felt a growl roll in his chest but forbid it from coming out of his mouth.

What was she doing here?

True, her daddy owned the bar and she did work for him, but Friday was usually her day off. That was the only reason he had accompanied his brothers out tonight—he knew she wouldn't be here.

His gaze caught hers for only the barest of seconds before he turned his eyes quickly away and focused on the bar top. From the corner of his eye, he saw one of her simple smiles cross her face before she returned to her task of persuading Lucky Davis to end his pursuit of romance as it pertained to her.

"Damn, she's a looker. They don't make many like that anymore. Especially around these parts." Hayden practically drooled as he made his comment. Brent smiled at his remark and then followed the line of his brother's eyes. They were focused directly on Peyton's ass. He could look all he wanted, but it wouldn't change anything. Peyton James was off-limits—that's all there was to it. The glittering diamond on her finger said as much. That was his fault. If he had just swallowed his pride and his fear of being hurt all those years ago, that diamond on her finger would have been his. Instead, he had acted like a supreme ass and pushed her away. He'd given her excuse after excuse, but never the real reason for his wanting to break up. He hadn't wanted his space. He hadn't wanted to date other people. He just didn't want his heart broken if their relationship went south. He had walked away before she'd had the chance to. Now she belonged to someone else—belonged to someone else forever.

"Tell me something." Hayden leaned his dark head closer to Brent's own and continued, "How is it that you can sit by twiddling your thumbs and your dick when she's planning on marrying another man? I mean look at her. She's definitely worth fighting for, in my opinion." Brent watched as Hayden's gaze, once again, roamed up one side of Peyton's body and down the other. There was plenty there to keep a man's eyes and mind busy for hours.

"I tell you what, if you're not going to do anything about the way you feel as far as Peyton is concerned, then I am. She's too much woman for that roaming cowboy wannabe son of a bitch she's thinking about marrying." Hayden started to move from his seat, but Brent stopped him. His large fist grasped the front of Hayden's shirt and pulled him back to his seat.

“Or maybe I’ll just sit here and take in the scenery with everyone else.” Hayden smiled once more his way and then did just that.

Brent couldn’t help but watch Peyton’s denim-encased ass walk away from Lucky. As she pulled the lever of the antique cash register, Brent’s eyes moved to another part of her. Her breasts. The motion made them move beneath her T-shirt. They were high and round and moved as she moved, like breasts should. Breasts like hers were hard to find. They were as real as they could be. Brent would know. Years ago, he’d had the opportunity of making those breasts and their owner his for the long haul. Shit happened though and things changed. Now she belonged to someone else. A roaming cowboy wannabe son of a bitch.

Turning from the register, she made her way over to them. The short walk gave all the patrons at the bar enough time to look their fill. Hayden was right. She was a sight. Always had been. Her golden brown hair looked like copper in the sunlight. It was held in place by a ponytail holder and bounced as she moved. The walk wasn’t practiced or contrived—it was natural and sexy as hell. Her hips swayed back and forth and the movement caught Brent’s eye more than he would have liked.

He emptied the beer bottle Wade had placed before him a few minutes before and laid the empty container back on the bar top as she arrived. As if it were second nature, she grabbed the bottle and tossed it into one of the garbage cans at her feet without even looking to see if she made it. She just knew.

“What can I get for y’all?” Her drawl was honey soaked and vibrant. The sound brought back memories, memories he had tried to forget time and time again. That voice made his dick as hard today as it had years ago. Shit. He needed to get laid and laid fast or he wouldn’t be accountable for his actions as they pertained to Peyton and her ass and her breasts.

And they were some nice breasts.

They weren’t overly big, but they fit his hands and his mouth perfectly. No touch had ever been wasted when he had touched her. It pissed him off that her comment was made to all of the Kiels, but she intentionally overlooked him just as he tried to overlook her.

“Let’s see.” Hayden said. “Another round of bottles and four more shots should do it. And a dance or two later wouldn’t break my heart.”

Brent’s jaw clenched and his hands fisted until the knuckles turned white. Damn, Hayden and his aggravating ways.

“How about another round for your brothers, a Coke for you and a hell no?” Peyton smiled as she popped the lids off the bottles and placed them in front of the brothers. Sometime during her answer Jason Kiel joined the brood. Evidently he’d lost interest in the female he’d been sweet-talking all evening.

“Hell no to what?” Jason grabbed one of the bottles and turned it up.

“Oh, nothing.” Peyton told him as she filtered liquid into the shot glasses in front of them. “Just telling this little boy here that I’m not on the menu this evening.” For good measure, she rubbed her hand through Hayden’s overly long hair and then smiled at Nick before collecting the money he offered her.

She gave ample attention to each of his brothers, but ignored him without thinking twice about doing so. She had gotten good at doing that, looking right over him, but he was just as good as she was—or so he thought.

“Boy? Hell, you’re more than welcome to feel again.”

Peyton laughed and brushed off Hayden’s advances as she always did. The sound made Brent’s cock swell more than it already was—and that was saying something. After all these years and all that had happened between them, she could still make him harder than nails in a second flat.

“So what’s the occasion?”

“Bachelor party. Of sorts,” Nick supplied before taking the shot and grimacing.

“Bachelor party, huh? So where’s the groom?” Brent watched Peyton lean against the counter and cross her arms over her chest. The action made her breasts plump and strain against the contours of her tight, white T-shirt. He wondered for a second if she knew what she was doing? Did she care that his zipper would be forever imprinted on his dick?

“With his dearly beloved wife-to-be if I had to guess.” He couldn’t hide the disdain in his voice and he felt Hayden tense beside him as he spoke his feelings.

“Your sarcasm is dually noted. Now that we know how you feel, how about another round? On me.” None of the brothers spoke as Peyton refilled their glasses. When she poured his, he glanced up to see her eyes looking into his. Her eyes said what her mouth didn’t have to. He had screwed the pooch and opened his damned mouth.

“How about one more game before we call it a night?” Nick questioned Hayden before sliding off the stool.

“Sounds good,” Hayden said as he grabbed the Coke Peyton poured for him. Brent caught the menacing look Nick flung his way as the two moved away from him and toward the pool tables. He shouldn’t have ever opened his fucking mouth. Nick had always held a soft spot for Willa. He knew better than to say anything. Things were just getting back to normal and he went and ruined it. If he were lucky someone would punch him square in the face for being such an asshole.

“Someone needs to knock your hateful ass out,” Jason said as if he’d read his mind.

Brent only grunted in reply.

“I would, but I don’t want to ruin the boys night and I sure don’t want to cause Peyton any trouble.” Jason finished off his beer and handed the empty bottle to her. She was already waiting on it.

“I appreciate it, Jason. I just got the jukebox replaced. Y’all busted it the last time you were in here.”

“Now, Peyton, you know it wasn’t my fault. Those rednecks started it.”

“Yeah, but you know as well as I do drunks don’t care if they hit on your sister or not.”

“Stepsister.” Jason supplied. He was referring to their mother’s stepdaughter, Jocelyn. Four years after their father’s death their mother had started dating Harrison Reece. He was a nice man, good to her and a hard worker.

Harrison had courted Lillian Kiel for three years before asking her to marry him. It had been time for their mother to remarry and be happy again. And she was.

When she married Harrison, he inherited five boys and their mother got the daughter she’d always wanted. Jocelyn was a force to be reckoned with. She was as pretty as the day was long with a temper to match and a mouth and body that got her into more trouble than she could handle at times. Most of the fights the Kiel’s had been in for the past few years revolved around her. At twenty-two, she refused to be her daddy’s angel anymore and had decided to break her halo into a thousand different pieces and terrorize the county.

She fit right in to the Kiel brood. That last fight at the bar had resulted in Jason’s broken nose, his bruised ribs, a kick to Nick’s groin and Peyton’s, or in fact her daddy’s, busted jukebox. It had also landed Jocelyn in some pretty hot water with her daddy. A place she didn’t like to be.

“Speaking of Jocelyn, I haven’t seen her lately. Is she up for parole yet?” Brent watched Peyton’s lips curve and lift, creating a sleek and sultry half-smile as she spoke to Jason. Evidently there were no hard feelings toward Jocelyn over the mess that was made. It didn’t surprise him. They were kindred spirits. Peyton had been Millbrook’s token wild child for years and it didn’t look like that was going to stop any time soon.

“She won’t be paroled until she’s thirty. It’s for her own good if you ask me.” Jason took the beer Peyton offered him, winked at her and sauntered his way to the pool table and the bottled blonde waiting on him.

“You feel the same way?”

Brent looked away from the female now running her nails back and across Jason’s forearm and centered his attention on Peyton. She propped her upper body on the bar across from where he sat and rested her head on her hand. The pose made her look sweet and innocent, but he knew better. He probably knew better than anyone did. Her posture also gave him a bird’s eye view of that damned ring she thought so much of.

“You still not talking to me?”

He pretended to concentrate on peeling the label from his beer bottle, but he saw her. How could he miss her? Each and every time she was near, his body went into overdrive. His palms got sweaty, his heart beat just a little faster and his temper flared. Those weren’t the only effects she had on his body though.

He didn’t know how long they stood there in silence—her staring at him and him ignoring her stare. It was Peyton who finally broke the strained silence.

“Fine.” There was an air of pissy connected to the word that only Peyton was capable of having—pissy with a ladylike quality attached to it. “Act like a two-year-old. See if I care. Just don’t say that I never tried, because I did. I tried more than you ever deserved.” Her words were uttered under her breath, but he heard them nonetheless. He looked up and her eyes locked dead on with his. “God, save me from too-stubborn-for-their-own-good cowboys.” She pushed her body from the bar and moved away from him.

He started to say something—anything. But after all these years without a word spoken her way, he didn’t know what to say. Fortunately, or unfortunately, he didn’t get a chance to speak before an arm snaked around his waist.

A flash of movement from the corner of his eye caught his attention and he turned just in time to receive the red, slick lips that pressed into his own.

He knew that lipstick.

He knew those lips. They belonged to one Kelly Cantrell. One of the notches on his bedpost he both regretted and didn’t in the same breath. Kelly had a killer figure, a killer mouth and the reputation to go along with it. Until Kelly got herself hitched or found another willing man to warm her bed at night, or during the day, he was fair game.

“Hi there,” she drawled a little too sweetly. “I haven’t heard from you in awhile. I was beginning to think you were avoiding me.” He closed his eyes so that she wouldn’t see him roll them. He may have been a lot of things—standoffish, withdrawn and difficult at times, but he wasn’t blind or stupid or bad mannered all the time—just when it came to one person.

“How you doin’, Kelly?” he asked as he wiped the left-behind cherry film from his lips. Small talk. He could do small talk.

“Just fine. How about you?”

“Fine.” That was small enough.

“I called you a few weekends ago.”

He knew she had. He’d missed the call on purpose.

“I thought maybe you and I could get together sometime.”

“I’ve been really busy here lately.” He had been. In between the ranch, his family and this damned wedding he was forced to participate in, he hadn’t time to piss, let alone date or do anything resembling it.

“To busy for me?” One of Kelly’s nails ran the length of his thigh and traveled higher and higher until it flirted with the zipper of his pants. “I’ve missed you and it looks like you might have missed me too.” He was hard, that was evident, but it had nothing to do with Kelly. It had everything to do with the hellion standing at the end of the bar.

He knew he would regret his next move come morning, but he made it anyway.

“What’d you have in mind?” He saw the slight shock register across Kelly’s face, but it was shortly replaced with lust and giddiness.

“Why don’t you follow me to my place and we can—” her hand squeezed his swollen cock as she spoke, “—figure it out there.”

“Lead the way, darlin’.”

Kelly slid from the stool and waited for Brent to follow, which he did with heavy limbs. He caught Jason’s attention and received a thumbs up from him before he turned his gaze back to Kelly.

Brent left the bar not far behind Kelly. As he moved, he could feel a pair of eyes burning into the back of his head. He knew who they belonged to. He knew if he turned he would see absolutely nothing reflected in them. He didn’t know if he wanted to see anything.

He couldn’t deal with hurting her again with his words and his actions, but she had done the same to him. They had hurt each other and kept their distance—it was for their own good.

He kept his head and his eyes straight ahead and walked until he exited the bar. He climbed into his truck and followed Kelly out of the parking lot. Away from the bar and away from Peyton James. As he drove, he wished for something he knew he could never have—he wished it were Peyton he were following home.

“Now why do you look like you could chew through a sixteen penny nail?” The voice close to her ear made Peyton jump, and when she saw whom the voice belonged to, she elbowed the speaker in the stomach.

“Ow,” he grumbled. “That hurt like hell.”

Peyton turned and stared up into her brother, Reed’s, cobalt eyes.

“Serves you right for sneaking up on me that way.” It wasn’t until she looked at him a little more closely that she noticed he was covered in a heavy layer of dust. “What the hell happened to you?”

“Got bucked,” he said with a shrug of his shoulders. He didn’t seem to care that he was filthy. He didn’t seem to care that he smelled like a horse’s ass. He simply grabbed a handful of nuts from one of the bowls lying around and jumped up on the bar as he ate his heart out.

“Lovely. You do realize you smell don’t you?” She got another shrug in reply.

“I’m supposed to smell. I’ve been working.”

“You could have showered.”

“Yeah, I guess I could’ve, but I didn’t plan on staying long. What’s the matter with you anyway? Someone jerk a knot in your tail?”

“There’s nothing wrong with me. And you were supposed to be here at six.” She put a fake smile on and went on with her business. If she planned on getting out of here at a decent time tonight she needed to get the ball rolling.

“Sorry, I got busy.” He flashed one of his boyish smiles and Peyton couldn’t help but roll her eyes. “What’s your problem anyway? If looks could kill.”

“I told you nothing, so mind your own damn business, Reed James.” Her reply brought a heady, evil laugh from his body.

“You can lie to yourself, but don’t lie to me. The looks you’re giving that front door, or better yet who just walked out of it, say plenty.”

Peyton caught herself gritting her teeth and stopped. She relaxed her jaw and felt instant relief. How long had she had her teeth clenched? She snuck a peek toward the front door and noticed that Kelly and Brent were gone. Good riddance to the both of them. They were perfect for each other.

Kelly was leggy, blonde and big boobed—everything Peyton was not. Brent was tall, dark and handsome. His skin stayed a golden color all year round from working under the hot Texas sun. He was tall, but not large and looming as some men were. His hair and his eyes were close to a dark chocolate color that reminded her of melting Hershey kisses. His body, well, a girl had to admit, his body was perfect. Or it was according to her memory.

He was still as good looking as he had always been. The least he could have done was develop a bald spot or grown a beer gut. It would have made things easier. She heard her brother clear his throat behind her and she pulled herself back to reality and back to her life.

“What are you doin’ here anyway, Reed? Daddy said you had something important to do so you were going to be a little late. That was four hours ago. That’s the reason I’m spending my Friday night here instead of where I originally planned on spending it.”

“Plans have changed, baby girl.”

Peyton hated when Reed called her that. She wasn’t the baby, Reed was by two years. Both her brothers towered over her and they thought that gave them the right to act all high and mighty when it came to her. They were reminded, quite often, that she could hold her own. What she lacked in the size department she made up for in temper. Her daddy always said she was too little to fight fair, so she didn’t—especially when it came to her two giant brothers.

There was nothing wrong with a healthy temper, in her opinion. It kept her brothers, and anyone else for that matter, from running over her. “What big plans did I keep you from?”

“It’s none of your business, but if you must know I was heading to Oklahoma City to visit Carter. He’ll be there for the rodeo and I was going to go see him.” She was going to see Carter all right, but not for the reasons most of Millbrook, or her family, thought.

It had been months since she and Carter had last seen each other. Months since they had met in a sleazy motel room off some unknown highway in Wyoming. Months since they had decided to call it quits. Carter rode in the rodeo circuit as long as it was circulating and catching up with him was like catching up with the wind—it very rarely happened if it happened at all.

His schedule had always put a damper on their quality time. That was one of the things that had come between them. Peyton longed for the comforts of her hometown and Carter never considered Millbrook

anything more than just a town, let alone his hometown. Peyton felt like she had known Carter better when they had been only friends. And Carter knew his horse better than he knew her.

“And by the way,” Peyton said as she slapped Reed once on the shoulder with a damp towel. The popping sound it made when it connected did her soul good even if it left a mark behind for him to bear for a few days. “When I got up this morning I found I had a new addition in my backyard grazing happily away. You don’t happen to know anything about that do you?”

“If you’re referring to Cinnamon Stick, then yeah, I know something about that,” Reed said as he stuffed another handful of nuts into his mouth.

“Cinnamon Stick?”

“That’s her name. Thought about changing it, but I think it fits pretty good.” Cinnamon Stick, who based on the name was a mare, was currently occupying space in Peyton’s pasture.

“Where did you find her?”

“Didn’t actually find her as much as I won her.”

“What do you mean you ‘won’ her?” Peyton didn’t like the way this was going any more than she liked that Cinnamon Stick was residing in her yard.

“Well, it’s like this. Me and Travis got into a pretty intense poker game with Lowell Britnell and his brothers. Lowell had a pair of sixes and I had three Jacks. He didn’t have any money, but he had Cinnamon, so there you go.” That explained everything. When Reed and his best friend, Travis Boyd, got together there was no telling what could happen. The goofy-ass grin he sent Peyton’s way did nothing to help her anger at him.

“You won her in a poker game. Shame, shame, Reed James. What would your daddy say?”

“He’d probably say ‘good job, Reed’.” Another smile creased Reed’s face and Peyton admitted to herself that he was probably right. Big Jack would have loved the fact that Reed had won a horse playing poker. “What’s Carter doing in Oklahoma anyway? I thought he was in San Antonio? You sure he said Oklahoma City?”

“Yeah, when I talked to him he said he would be there this weekend.”

“Well, when was the last time you talked to him?”

“A few weeks ago. Why?”

The look on Reed’s face said a mouthful. “Nothing. I think you might want to call him before you make that trip.”

“Well, I’m not making that trip now am I? I’m stuck here doing what you’re supposed to be doing. You owe me like forty shifts. This bar is supposed to be a joint effort and it seems to me that I’m pulling your weight along with Daddy’s and Murphy’s, and it’s starting to piss me off.”

“Boy, that’s a change from your usual happy-go-lucky nature.” He jumped down from the bar and proceeded to tickle her ribs until a laugh burst from her lungs.

“Stop it. I have work to do.”

“Why don’t you head on out. I’ll take it from here.”

Peyton lifted one of her eyebrows at his offer. What was he up to? “Now why would you offer to take my shift? It’s sure not out of the kindness of your heart—you’d have to have one for that. What are you up to?”

“Can’t a brother do something nice for his sister?” She lifted her eyebrow again.

“Yeah, but when have you ever done anything nice for me?”

“Right now. I’m turning over a new leaf.”

“I don’t believe you, but I’ll take you up on your offer even though I know it will come back to bite me in the ass.” Peyton quickly grabbed her purse from where it sat under the counter and slung it over her shoulder as she moved past him.

“Was that Kelly Cantrell I saw Brent leave with?”

Her jaw tightened once more without her brain telling it to do so. “I don’t know. I don’t really keep up with Brent’s comings and goings, now do I?” She spoke through clenched teeth and barely held on to her temper as Reed cocked one of his eyebrows at her and then laughed.

“Like I said, you can lie to yourself, but you can’t lie to me.”

Peyton left the bar in a huff. Damn Reed and his nosy ways. She didn’t keep up with Brent Kiel any more than he kept up with her. As a matter of fact, she couldn’t care less if he ever spoke to her again.

As she drove home, a million thoughts crossed her mind. Were Kelly and Brent an item? Were fake boobs and blondes Brent’s cup of tea now? Did he and Kelly spend all night in bed wrapped around each other like she and Brent used to? *Why do I even care?*

Because you still love him.

When the last thought rolled out, Peyton’s heart constricted to the point of pain. She didn’t love him. Not anymore. She had gotten over him years ago, with Carter’s help. Carter had been there to pick up the pieces Brent left behind. Carter was the one who had been there when Brent wasn’t. Carter was her friend, her confidant, her lifesaver in the sea of hurt she had created for herself, but it wasn’t Carter who occupied her thoughts or her soul—it never had been. It was Brent her heart raced over and it was Brent who had broken it. Peyton hated that fact. She also hated the fact that even though Carter had tried to mend her broken heart, Brent would be the only one who could ever fix it for good.

Chapter Two

Brent relaxed against the pillows of the bed and watched as Kelly knelt between his legs and worked to release the buckle on his belt. Kelly was a knockout—all blonde and tan with blue eyes and a figure that could make a man hard from across the room. He should have been more excited about the events yet to come.

He closed his eyes for only a minute and tried to clear his brain.

He shouldn't be here.

He should have stayed at the bar instead of letting Kelly, and her figure, talk him into coming home with her. The beer, his dick and the fact that he hadn't been laid in a month of Sundays were controlling his current actions. The sound of his zipper sliding down made his eyes open and focus on what was happening between his thighs.

Kelly and her big blue eyes were taking in every inch of his rigid dick. Evidently, she liked what he had to offer. Brent watched as her tongue darted across her cherry red glossed lips before it bathed his cock in one long swipe. It felt good, but it should have felt great. He hadn't felt great in a long time. *Shit*, he thought. Here he was getting a blowjob that he didn't have to work hard to receive, and all he could think about was something else. Not something else. Someone else.

"Do you like that?" The question was asked a split second before Kelly took his entire length into her mouth. The breath in Brent's lungs released with a hiss. He couldn't stop the response from his body. His heart began to race, his balls became tight beneath her teasing fingers and his dick throbbed for more of her tongue.

He watched as Kelly and her mouth worked on his cock. She had a perfect rhythm. She would take him deep and then deeper and then stop to lick the pre-come from the slit at the top. Each time she got a taste of him she would moan. The moan vibrated the endless nerves that ran the entire length of his shaft. The tips of her short blond hair caressed his thighs and all Brent could think was how he wished her hair were a different color—a deeper color.

When the image flashed before his eyes he let his head drop back and his eyes close. He accepted Kelly's tongue and her wet mouth with pleasure, but it was someone else's face and body he saw in his mind.

Dark eyes were looking up at him instead of blue ones, and when she took him into her throat he could hear the softest, sweetest moan a man could ever hear echo in his ears. Her voice crept into his dreams, into his fantasies and into bed with him and whomever he was there with.

Behind his closed eyes and inside his mind, Brent could see Peyton's small hands with her elegant fingers grasping him, cupping him, stroking him and making him burn with nothing more than her touch. Her mouth was like the sweetest fire and her pussy was the stuff dreams were made of. At least they were according to his memories. Endless questions raced through his mind. Did she still like being taken by surprise? Was she still as playful as she was demanding? Did her fiancé know she loved being taken from behind? Had he taken her as Brent had taken her?

Kelly pulled him back to reality when she climbed on top of him. Sometime during his daydreaming she had slid a condom on him and had shed the rest of her clothes. She didn't seem upset by his lack of attention or participation.

Feeling like a heel and like an ass to boot, he made his mind behave and put his focus where it belonged—on Kelly.

Brent helped her remove his T-shirt and pushed his jeans farther down his legs. With Kelly astride him, he took his hard dick in his hand, pumped it a time or two and ran it in between her wet pussy lips. She moaned. He didn't.

In sync with one another, Brent arched upward and Kelly sank down. With one move he was thrust fully inside her. He took her hips in his hands and showed her how he liked to be ridden. Kelly had other ideas. She took Brent's hands and placed them on her overly large breasts and set her own pace.

He had to admit—Kelly knew how to ride. She moved up and down and then back and forth. Each move milked his thick cock just a little more. She would sink down completely on him and then grind her pelvis against his. The motion made Brent's balls draw up and beg for release.

Kelly let her head fall back as she rode his body and hers closer to orgasm, and Brent did the same. He knew better than to close his eyes, but he couldn't stop himself. The visions hit his system like a lightning bolt.

Dark hair, a perfect mix of brunette and blond with coppery streaks, created a curtain across her body and down her back, hiding her breasts and nipples from him. His hands found what he was looking for and two of the most perfect breasts topped with wine-stained nipples, were resting in his palms. He molded them, shaped them and made them his.

Her dark, honey skin glistened and glowed under his gaze. Shapely legs hugged his body and her flared hips rocked back and forth in an unraveling cadence. And she was hot. So hot she could burn a man alive. She was tight and wet and a man could count himself lucky to have the chance to thrust himself into her. As the fantasies progressed, so did his desire.

Brent gripped her hips and his fingertips caressed her round bottom. He cupped the flesh in his hands and increased both of their movements. He worked her clit against his body and the action brought choppy gasps from her throat. She was close and so was he.

It was a mistake to open his eyes. He blinked a few times and saw that instead of the goddess with the glowing skin riding his dick like there was no tomorrow, Kelly had taken her place. Brent's hands were on her hips. His fingertips were gripping her ass. Kelly's own hands were busy massaging her breasts and plucking and pulling at her light pink nipples.

She looked down at him and her eyes were glazed with want. Brent clenched his jaw and worked as quickly as he could to finish what he should have never started. He thrust up more than once and brought Kelly down hard against him. Instead of a soft choppy gasp, he brought a scream and then a husky moan from her mouth. She smiled down at him, lifted her fingers to her lips and licked.

Brent watched as her wet fingers trailed down the center of her body and then came to a stop on her clit. Her movements were wild and erratic. The faster her fingers moved the louder her screams became.

Brent closed his eyes, shut out what was actually going on and drifted to another place. It was perfect. She was perfect. Now their bodies were pressed against each other and her hard nipples were teasing his chest just like her pussy was teasing his dick. Her mouth was inches away and he took what she offered. Their tongues glided together in a perfectly choreographed dance. Her lips were silky and swollen and all he ever wanted. She broke their kiss only once to make a request.

"More," she asked, and Brent gave himself over completely.

With one more swift thrust upward, he settled deep within her warmth and felt her body quake around him. That was the end. Brent's breath became ragged as he came. He could feel the walls of her body clenching around him and the motion milked the life right out of him. With a sigh, he whispered her name.

"Hmmm."

The voice wasn't right. Why would it be? Opening his eyes, he studied the cracked popcorn ceiling of Kelly's apartment and tried to catch his breath. Her body was pressed against his and her fingers were making circles across his shoulders.

"What did you say?"

"What?" He ran a hand over his face and took another deep breath.

"What did you say at the end?"

"I don't know." Brent knew what he had said. He clenched his jaw over the slight and stood. In one movement, he rose to his feet and took her with him. She slid down his body in a seductive way, letting him know that whenever he was ready she was willing. He gave her a quick kiss on the mouth, pulled his jeans up to his hips and went off in search of the bathroom.

"You're more than welcome to get a shower. If you ask nicely, I just might join you." He closed the door on her voice. The bathroom was small. They all were in apartments like this. Brent was tall and his

frame was far from slim and it made maneuvering hard. Good thing he wasn't claustrophobic. A guy could go crazy in a place like this.

He grabbed a wash cloth from the basket sitting on the back of the commode, disposed of the condom and turned on the taps. When he looked up he caught his reflection in the mirror above the sink staring back at him. He looked like a man that was far from unsatisfied. His hair was in need of a trim, his face was in need of a shave and his body was in need of something he couldn't have.

"Shit," he hissed and ran the washcloth over his body. The coolness of the cloth felt like heaven against his inflamed skin. How long had his skin felt like this? Inflamed and smoldering without anything or anyone to bank the fire. Was it two years? Three? More? It was longer than any sane man could handle.

Brent shook his head at his reflection. *You're a glutton for punishment, you know that?* He knew he was. He had accused his brother Chase of being one more than once in the last few months. Maybe he was just projecting? Maybe he was just mad as hell? Maybe he was the glutton?

Chase had what and who he wanted most in the world—in his life and in his bed. What did Brent have? Nights filled with very explicit fantasies, a few memories and days filled with the knowledge that they both would never be anything more.

The knock on the door sounded louder to his ears than it actually was.

"You comin' out of there anytime soon? Or would you rather I came in?" The doorknob jiggled and Brent thanked his lucky stars he'd had the good sense to lock it behind him. He made quick work of zipping and buckling his jeans and belt, tossed the cloth in the available laundry hamper and pulled the flimsy wooden divider open.

Kelly stood just on the other side wearing nothing but a smile and her skin. *Fucking glutton for punishment*, he told himself. She laced her arms around his neck, pressed her nipples and breasts to his bare chest and kissed his mouth. With any other man it would have worked. Any other man in his right mind would have had Kelly Cantrell underneath him, on top of him or in front of him in a minute flat. But not Brent. Oh no. He was the one guy within five hundred fucking miles who would rather bed down with his thoughts than with the naked nymph grabbing his ass.

"I need to be goin'." *God, I'm an asshole.* He knew he was. But she took it in stride.

"Maybe another time." She kissed his mouth one last time and let her tongue tangle with his. *Yep, a fucking glutton for fucking punishment.*

"Another time." He placed a chaste kiss on her head and went in search of his hat and keys. He found them where he'd left them—resting discarded on Kelly's beige living-room carpet.

He pulled the soft T-shirt he took from Kelly's bedroom over his head, grabbed his keys and hat and walked, a little too swiftly, to the front door. He stopped himself and glanced back over his shoulder. Kelly had already disappeared down the hallway into her bedroom and wasn't giving him another thought. It was for the best. Brent couldn't ever be fair to her or to anybody else for that matter.

He opened the door, flipped the lock and closed it quietly. His black extended-cab Chevrolet truck sat in one of the many parking spaces in front of the complex. He pressed the button on the key chain and heard the doors unlock and saw the interior light come on. Brent pulled the door open, hopped inside and slid the key into the ignition.

The truck came to life and the pipes growled as he pressed the gas pedal. He slammed the door, looked up at Kelly's apartment one last time—all the lights were off—and shifted the gear into reverse.

The apartment complex wasn't far from his family's ranch, but it was far enough away that Brent was left alone with his thoughts. He drove through downtown Millbrook and wasn't surprised to see the still, shadowed and stark buildings that marked his path home.

Folks around here rolled up their sidewalks once dark set in. Every business shut down with the sun, except for two. The Early Bird Café stayed open late and opened early—like it always had. And of course, the doors at Big Jack's bar stayed open until the wee hours of the morning. At least they did on the weekend.

Brent started to pass the bar and noticed one of his brothers' trucks still sat out front. Jason very rarely made it in before sunrise on Saturday mornings. Brent scanned the parking lot and noticed that Peyton's car was no longer there. *Where is she?* The second the thought crossed his mind he banished it from his head. *Off-limits. She's off-limits. Let it go and move on.*

Making a quick U-turn, he swung the rig around and parked next to his brother's truck and went back in. A few more shots and a whole lot of beer would be the only way for Brent to erase the way he felt—at least for a little while.

Chapter Three

After hours of tossing and turning and moving from her bed to the couch back to her bed, Peyton finally fell into a deep sleep. A sleep that would have been a lot less fitful if it hadn't been plagued by thoughts of Brent and his lips, his tongue and everything else for that matter.

As she tossed and turned, her sleeping mind revolved around their last night together.

"Well, hello there, stranger," were the only words Brent had allowed her to speak before he'd pulled her into his arms and fastened his mouth to hers. His taste filled her instantly. He ate at her lips like a starving man at a buffet. She returned his kiss with her own urgency and eagerness. He was delicious.

He pulled his lips away from hers for only seconds, and she loved what she saw reflected in his gaze. Those glittering eyes glossed with desire. Her swollen lips and clit begged to be taken again and again.

He lowered his head and her mind was immersed in his taste and his scent once more. The hands that held her arms at one point and time now ran the length of her body, coming to rest on the curve of her ass. Brent squeezed the firmness of her backside and lifted her to caress his swelling cock.

He caught her gasp in his mouth and pushed the junction of his thighs against her stomach. The friction their clothes created between their bodies and against her clit caused a flood of pleasure.

"I can't wait much longer," he managed to say in between kisses. She smiled against his mouth and seemed to spike his hunger even more. Her hands fell to his belt buckle and teased lower. That teasing nearly brought them both to their knees. He was so hard and thick beneath the denim. Within seconds the buckle was released, the button was undone and the zipper was moving agonizingly slow over the swell in his pants. Her fingers found him rigid and ready. It was torture standing there only being able to touch, squeeze and tease his cock.

She found her back pressed against the door he'd walked through only a short time before.

He anchored her hands above her head with one of his own and opened her body to his gaze and his need. With the one hand holding her the other was left free to roam and play. His strokes started at her knee and worked their way up. Flirting. His body was flirting with hers. He flirted with the bend of her knee, the outside of her thigh and then the inside.

"Feel good?" he asked before he kissed her slack mouth. She moaned and nodded her head as he continued with his exploration. His hand took its time reaching her hips. Their movement brought her skirt to her waist. He licked his lips when the sweet softness of her pussy was uncovered. He took her mouth once more and let his tongue dip and glide to his heart's content.

“I want you wet.” His eyes caught hers. “I want you dripping when I get my dick in you.”

“I am wet. I am dripping.” He released her hands and she placed them in his hair and pulled at the strands.

He sank to his knees and looked into her eyes once more. “Not yet you aren’t. But you will be.” Before she could speak, he let his tongue reach and delve in between the slick folds of her pussy.

Wicked. That one word described Brent’s tongue. Wicked. Peyton watched as he bathed and lapped at her lips over and over. It was too much. Too much pleasure. Holding on to the silky strands of his hair wasn’t enough. She wanted more. She wanted him. Deep inside of her. Thrusting, rocking and slamming into her.

She almost forgot how his touch burned her skin and made her pussy soak with pleasure. His tongue flicked over the swollen bundle of nerves and nearly dropped her to her knees. She couldn’t take any more. She needed him. Needed him now.

“I want it. I want it now.” When he didn’t come to her, she pulled the hair that rested in her hands. With ease, he removed her hands and held them at her sides and continued his assault on her clit. He might have restrained her arms, but not her hips. Moving her hips with the rhythm his tongue created brought Peyton closer and closer to coming. Is that what he wanted? It wasn’t what she wanted. She wanted to feel him fill her. She wanted to feel the sweet stretching he caused in her body.

Her body needed to tense around his length and size. She could beg. She could plead. But she wouldn’t. She didn’t. He came to her.

She couldn’t help but lick her lips at the sight of his cock. It was an involuntary reaction. His jeans still rested on his hips, covering more than they revealed. Reaching out, she took him in her hand and stroked the hard, warm, satin flesh of his erection.

Her effort was rewarded when a pearl drop of liquid appeared from the engorged head. Swiping her finger across the tip caused his body to tense. It tensed again when Peyton placed her finger in her mouth and licked the salty sweetness of him from it.

At that moment, Peyton realized that one of the sexiest sounds in the world was his moan. It was deep and low, making his chest vibrate. Sexy was not the word for it, but it was close, and the only one that would come to her swimming mind.

She covered his cock with her hand again and moved and worked the flesh back and forth. Curling her fingers in an attempt to close around him reminded Peyton of something he had said the last time they were together. *Harder*. Smiling slightly at his earlier request, she gripped him tighter and pumped her hand up and down. Brent placed his hands on either side of her head and let his weight rest against her body. The moans coming from his chest made her body purr.

Flattening one hand on the door, he pushed his weight back from her. With the other he placed a foil packet in her free hand.

“Put it on.”

She pulled her bottom lip between her teeth, released his flesh from her hold and tore a side from the packet. While her hands were busy, his took their place. Peyton watched transfixed as Brent wrapped his large hand around his dick and stroked. Slowly and smoothly at first and then with more urgent and frantic movements. The sight of his dick in his own hand stopped her motions for a minute.

“Peyton. Put. It. On.”

She let her eyes roam the length of his body until she met his gaze. She couldn’t ignore the need and frenzy behind it. With more clumsy than cultured fingers, she placed the condom at the tip of his cock and then rolled it into place. She wanted the action to be sexy and sensual—she must have succeeded.

With one impatient thrust, Brent impaled her. The scream that tore from her throat couldn’t be helped. They fit so well. The cream dripping from her slick lips bathed and washed over his cock. The slickness of her juice allowed him to pump and thrust at his leisure, sometimes shallow and soft, others hard and deep. Throwing her head back against the door, she let it move back and forth with Brent’s strokes.

She wrapped her legs around his waist and her arms around his neck and took Brent’s mouth just as he was taking her body. Her mouth and tongue copied every thrust and plunge.

“I want you. I want you.” The words broke from her mouth each time he descended and retreated from her body.

“Look at me. Open your eyes and look at me.” When she did, he seized her mouth and took the kiss. He pulled away and locked his gaze on their grinding bodies. The sight of his cream-covered cock straining and throbbing between her wide-spread thighs brought Peyton’s orgasm crashing down. The release came in waves. Her body gripped his, milked it and sucked it deeper into her. There was no beginning to it nor was there an end.

On the final waves of her ecstasy Brent’s body moved faster and his thrusts became deeper and more shattering.

She tried to control her breathing and restore her erratic heartbeat—it took longer than she expected. Brent’s head rested in the curve of her neck and shoulder. She allowed herself a few more minutes of pleasure with him. She rubbed her cheek against the silky texture of his hair. He felt...he felt right. With lazy and hypnotic movements, he stroked her hip with a fingertip, causing her desire to mount again. But he pulled away.

Brent let her legs return to the ground and he righted the skirt held prisoner at her hips. She watched him for a minute, not knowing whether to stay or go. She finally went. Stepping around him, she took her place behind the desk and hid her shaking legs beneath it.

That was when she woke up. The dream stopped before the fall started. That night had been their last night together. The worst fight she had ever had with a person followed their last time together as a couple or as whatever they had been to each other.

Peyton could remember each and every detail of the actions that followed her beautiful dream. Their words to each other had been hateful and hurtful. They had been their undoing.

“I have other things goin’ on in my life, Peyton.” The words and his tone echoed in her still sleep-weary head.

“If you want to play house so bad, find someone who wants to play house with you.”

Play house? She still didn’t know exactly what that had meant.

“Sex is great. It’s better than great, but I’m not ready to give you what you’re wantin’. If it’s a ring you’re looking for, you’re looking in the wrong place.”

She hadn’t been looking for a ring. She had been looking for an explanation for his sudden absence in her life. Life with him without a ring on her finger was a life better than the one she had without him.

“It’s like this. I want you. I want you in bed or wherever for that matter, but anything more is out of the question. Marriage ruins everything. Diamonds equal disaster and I don’t plan on ending up like my fool of a brother. Not now. Not ever.”

He didn’t want to end up like Chase. He didn’t want a woman to be his fall. He didn’t want her—pure and simple.

Those words had stung. Her pride and feelings had been bruised and battered, and worse, her heart had been broken. Carter had helped putting the pieces of that broken heart back together.

Carter. After weeks of working herself to death, he had asked her to dinner—nothing more. A week later he had asked her to dinner and to come watch him ride in some little town she had never heard of.

He had made her laugh.

He had listened to her cry over Brent.

He had cared—when Brent hadn’t.

Looking back, she’d never intended for her and him to be any more than that. Their dating had been casual to say the least. But when he had asked her to marry him, she’d done what she thought she was supposed to do—she’d accepted.

She’d been a fool to think that a ring could ever fill the void someone else had left behind when they walked away.

She rolled to her side and took one of her pillows with her. For longer than she would like to admit that pillow had been the only thing she’d had to wrap her arms around. That thought coupled with the dream and what had happened after caused pain to well inside of her. It wasn’t the first time in her life that she had fallen asleep with tears over him in her eyes and she knew it wouldn’t be the last either.

Chapter Four

Saturday dawned bright and sunny with a touch of a breeze coming in from the west. It was the perfect day for a wedding. Brent groaned at the thought. Opening one eye slowly and the other one even slower, he came awake in stages. The light breaking through the large bay window in the dining room of the North Cabin made him curse beneath his breath and then out loud.

Rolling to his side, he dropped to his knees beside the sofa he'd called a bed for the evening and steadied himself before rising. The minute he stood at his full height, he regretted being so tall. Damn, his head hurt. His entire body hurt. Parts of his body he didn't know he had hurt.

He stretched his arms above his head and tried to conjure blood to run to his muscles. After doing so, he wished he could take it back. He cracked his eyes open once more and saw that his brothers were not in much better shape.

Jace lay sprawled face down across the other sofa in the living room. Nick was propped awkwardly in a chair with his mouth wide open and snoring loud enough to bring the roof down. The way his neck was contorted made Brent's own hurt even worse.

Brent scanned the room quickly, looking to see where Hayden had ended up for the night. There was no sign of him. Maybe he had been the lucky one and made it up the stairs to one of the beds. He was a lucky little bastard if he had.

On steadier feet than he deserved, Brent made his way to the kitchen in search of coffee—hot, strong and black-as-night coffee. It had to help. Lord knew it couldn't hurt. When he stepped across the threshold of the country-style kitchen he wasn't surprised to see a visitor sitting at the table calmly eating a bowl of cereal and reading the newspaper.

"Boy, you look like shit." She smiled and offered him the box of cereal that sat at her arm.

"Morning, Jocelyn. Nice to see you too." He took the box she offered, opened it and grabbed a handful of cereal before returning it to the tabletop. Brent turned his back on his stepsister to make a quick pot of coffee and noticed that a full pot had already brewed. "You made the coffee?"

"Nope. That was all Willa. She said she figured you guys would need it. Oh, and by the way, she also wanted me to tell you, Hayden is curled up on the front porch sleeping with the dog if you get to looking for him." So the little bastard wasn't as lucky as Brent thought.

"How'd he get out there?" Bringing the rim of the cup to his lips, he breathed in the heady aroma that would hopefully ease the alcohol-induced headache he was developing.

"I don't think he ever made it in. Y'all must have had one wild night. Want to tell me some of the more graphic details?"

"Not in this lifetime." He smiled at her pouting face as he took a seat beside her at the table. "What's with the curlers?" When he mentioned the bright pink spools that littered her auburn hair Jocelyn's hands flew to them.

"I forgot all about them. Shit," she hissed and began untangling her tresses from the binds. "I tried to tell your mama that it was a wasted effort to even try to curl this mess. It's straight as a board and that ain't gonna change. She made me sleep in them all night."

One by one the pink sponges were pulled from her scalp and flung across the kitchen toward the trash can. She missed more than she made, but Brent realized Jocelyn honestly didn't give a shit if she made the shot or not. True to her word, when all of the curlers were removed her auburn hair was as straight as it ever was.

"See, told you."

He couldn't help laughing at the face she made. Jocelyn, for all her hell-raising ways, was a good kid. A kid who was rapidly becoming a woman. Or already was one. Brent guessed her father realized that fact himself and that was the main cause of the crackdown that had been happening lately.

"So you still grounded?" Grounded wasn't the word for Jocelyn's predicament. House arrest was more like it. Taking a sip of coffee warmed his insides and the caffeine helped keep the beating in his head at bay.

"I'm not grounded. I'm just doing and going where Daddy says I can without causing you guys and him any more trouble. It's not fair. I mean, I'm twenty-two years old and he is hell bent on still treating me like a child. Do I look like a child to you?" Jocelyn spread her arms out to the sides, making Brent understand why his stepfather had put his foot down. Jocelyn was gorgeous. She was a long-legged, willowy carbon copy of her father. She had the same auburn hair and green eyes, minus the beard Harrison sported and plus a set of breasts. A father's walking nightmare was what she was. A daughter that every male for miles drooled over and wanted to drool on.

"No, you don't look like a kid. You're not a kid, but you are your daddy's little girl. That may have a lot to do with his decisions. That and the fact that you tend to wreak havoc wherever you go."

"If you're referring to that incident at Peyton's a little while back, that was not my fault. Those good ole boys should have minded their own business. And Jason should have just stayed out of it. I had it under control." Huffing and running her fingers through her hair did not help calm her temper. Brent could tell. He could see her fire boiling under the surface. Jason didn't help ease her temper either, by any means. Brent thought at times he actually helped it along.

“What did you have under control?” On cue Jason, strolled through the kitchen door, scratching his bare chest and yawning along the way. Brent watched Jocelyn slant her eyes in his direction and return to her cereal, which was surely a soggy mess by now.

“You still pleading innocent? Or have you just decided to plead the fifth and not incriminate yourself.”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

Brent watched the show unfolding before his eyes and thought a time or two about stepping in and stopping the argument that was sure to follow, then decided against it. It was too early for that.

“The hell you don’t.”

“It. Was. Not. My. Fault,” Jocelyn growled in Jason’s general direction.

“The hell it wasn’t. You can’t go out dressed like you do and dancing like you do and not expect a man to look in your direction. And you sure as hell can’t expect to ignore that man once you’ve got the attention you wanted. And you did want it. They have a name for girls like that, Joss.” Jason took a sip of the coffee he’d poured and winced as it burned his tongue on contact.

“And just what would that be?”

Brent cleared his throat, hoping that Jason would take the hint and leave it be. But in his brother’s usual form, he didn’t let it go. Instead, he sat directly across from Jocelyn at the table and stared her down.

“Well, since you asked I’ll tell you, but I’ll clean it up a bit for your young ears. Most girls who act like that are called a tease, pure and simple. You figure out the word that goes in front of that, little girl, and you’ll know exactly what you were acting like.” Brent inwardly winced and then covered his eyes, peeking like a kid between his fingers, and waited. He heard the chair Jocelyn was sitting in scrape the tiled floor and then heard it smack against it as it turned over.

“I am not a cock tease! You take that back.”

“Not goin’ to happen, doll. You act like one, you should be ready to be called one.” Brent saw Jason take another sip of his coffee before placing it back on the tabletop, scratch his chest once more, lean his chair back so it balanced on two legs and then smile Jocelyn’s way.

Silence filled the room.

The only noise Brent could hear were the long, deep breaths Jocelyn brought in and out of her body. The seconds ticked by and Brent waited for the ticking time bomb to explode.

Brent watched as she rolled her shoulders, took a deep breath and smiled sweetly in Jason’s direction. She bent at the waist, returned her chair to its original position, grabbed her bowl and spoon and walked with the dirty dishes to the sink located directly behind Jason’s chair.

She brushed invisible crumbs off her hands as she moved slowly and with purpose toward Jason. She placed her hands on the back of the reclined seat and leaned in close to his ear and then retaliated, loud enough for Brent to hear as well as Jason.

"I think you're just jealous," she said into Jason's left ear. "I think you're jealous because it's not your cock I'm teasing."

Brent saw Jason suck in a chest full of air, watched as his eyes widened and blazed. He struggled to set all four legs on the floor and grab at the little imp grinning over her short-lived victory.

He never made it.

Jason lost his balance and crashed to the kitchen floor, making every plate, bowl and glass they owned rumble and tumble along with him.

The look he gave Jocelyn told her to run and run fast. And she knew it. Before Jason could get to his feet, Jocelyn was out the door and running at her full speed toward the main house.

"No wonder Harrison has her on a leash." He growled from the floor. He pulled his body from the tile and took a seat in the chair. He was quiet for only a minute before his temper got the best of him. "Damn it. I am so sick of her...her...her temper tantrums." He took another sip from his mug, burned his tongue once more and swore a line of profanities until Brent figured the sting subsided.

"Maybe the leash is the reason she's acting out the way she is. Maybe she just needs a little bit of freedom." Brent walked to the counter and refilled his cup, all the while feeling his brother's stare burning a hole in his back. When he turned, Jason's scowl pierced into him. "What?"

"Maybe she needs a little bit of freedom? Acting out? What the hell are you talking about?"

"I don't know. Maybe she just needs a little room to spread her wings." Jocelyn wasn't a bad kid. He frowned at the moniker. He needed to quit thinking of her as a kid. She wasn't one. No more than Nick or Hayden were kids. There were only a couple of years separating Jocelyn from Hayden and even less between her and Nick. They both had turned twenty-two just months apart, leaving Hayden as the baby at nineteen, even though some days he seemed to be the ripe old age of twelve. One mark Jocelyn had against her was that she was female. A female living among a den of males, with her father being the alpha controlling her. As long as she lived in his house she went by his rules and so on and so forth.

"You have lost your mind. Telling Jocelyn to spread her wings and live a little is like telling a tornado, 'yeah, go ahead and smash my house while you're here'. You still drunk?" Brent tried to concentrate on what Jason was saying, but he just couldn't. The remaining alcohol in his system coupled with the shock of caffeine was playing games with his mind and the direction of his thoughts.

Brent ended the conversation with his brother without another word. He left the kitchen, full coffee cup in hand, and headed up the flight of stairs to his bedroom. He didn't realize Jason was on his heels until he heard his footsteps on the stairs behind him. "Why are you following me?"

"I saw you talking to Peyton last night, or better yet, I saw Peyton talking at you. I want to know what y'all talked about."

“Nothing. We didn’t talk about anything.” Brent turned the corner on the landing and headed to the far end where his bedroom was located. He tried shutting the door in Jace’s face, but that didn’t work—it never had and never would.

“You must’ve talked about something. You disappeared with Kelly and not ten minutes later Peyton lit out like hell was on her footsteps.”

“Why’d she leave so fast?” Why’d he care? She was a grown woman, someone else’s woman—she could come and go as she pleased.

“Beats me. All I know is that Reed showed up, they talked for a little while and then Peyton left. If y’all didn’t talk about anything then why’d she look madder than a wet hen when you left? What’s going on there? Is there something you’re not telling me? You messin’ around with Peyton again?”

“I wasn’t messin’ around with her in the first place.” It had been more than simply messin’ around. He had been head over heels in love with her and she had returned his feelings.

“That’s not how I remember it. As I recall you and her were pretty hot and heavy at one point in time. Hell, we all thought you were just about to go on bended knee for her, and then the next day she’s planning on marrying up with...”

The look Brent sent Jason’s way stopped his rambling. He was not about to have this conversation. It was already going to be a shitty day. He didn’t want to add to it by taking a disastrous trip down memory lane with Jason this early in the morning. Brent did the only thing he knew to do—he changed the subject.

“Jocelyn said something about Hayden being curled up with the beast we call a dog on the front porch. You might want to get him up and get some coffee in him before Mama makes her way down here. That’s the last thing we need today.”

“You’re changing the subject.”

Brent leveled Jason with his gaze. His eyes, his face and his body language all said one thing: drop it. Finally, it seemed Jace got the message loud and clear.

“Will do.” Jason saluted Brent and left him alone. Alone with his thoughts. Alone with his thoughts about Peyton, and her mouth, and her breasts and everything in between. Alone with his thoughts was not where Brent Kiel needed to be. Heading quickly to the bathroom that joined his and Jason’s bedrooms, Brent turned the faucet and then pulled the lever, releasing a spray of frigid water.

He shivered when he stepped under the showerhead, but the subzero temperature relieved him of his thoughts and of the raging hard-on that was forming. The last thing Brent wanted was to be wearing a boner the size of the state to his brother’s wedding. The tuxedo was bad enough.

Chapter Five

“He actually called you that?” Peyton curled her legs under her body as she reclined in the lounge chair on her back patio. She was sleepy and sluggish thanks to the little bit of rest she was able to get last night.

When she’d finally opened her eyes this morning her body had been covered with a thin sheen of sweat and was filled with want and desire.

Peyton had been left alone in the wee hours of the morning with only the thoughts of Brent Kiel revolving in her mind and her long-from-sated body. She still saw those soft, damp perfect lips latched to her breasts, first one then the other. Shaking her head, she concentrated, or tried to, on the young woman wearing a path in her backyard.

“Yes!” Jocelyn screamed. “Sorry.”

Peyton just shrugged her shoulders. As far as she was concerned Jocelyn could yell, scream, rant and rave as much as she wanted to. It wasn’t like anyone was going to hear her out here. Peyton’s cottage sat on the back part of her brother Murphy’s land.

Murphy wouldn’t care and Kathleen, his wife, didn’t roll over until noon anyway.

“How does a conversation like that come up this early in the morning anyway? I mean, it’s not like that’s normal breakfast-table talk.”

“I know. I wasn’t even talking to him to begin with. I was talking to Brent.”

At the mention of his name, Peyton felt her stomach contract as well as other parts of her body that would not be ignored.

“We were having a perfectly nice and normal conversation before Jason showed up and put his two cents in. Asshole.” The last word prompted Jocelyn to begin with her pacing again.

“So he called you a cock tease.” Peyton could believe it. She had known Jason most of her life and knew from firsthand experience that one thing he did not do was mince words. No matter where he was or what he was doing.

“He called me a tease. I called myself a cock tease, which was what he meant to begin with.” Her steps stopped suddenly and she turned to Peyton. “You don’t think I’m a cock tease, do you?”

“No,” Peyton said shaking her head. Jocelyn was obviously upset, which would explain why she had appeared at Peyton’s door half an hour ago barefoot and in her pajama’s, shorts and a Longhorn T-shirt. “I think he was just...just...”

“Just what? Being an asshole?”

“Probably. He might have just had a bad night.”

“Yeah, I’m sure. They got to go out and have a rip-roaring time while I stayed at the house covering everything that would stand still with magnolias and tulle. And then, just when I could see the light at the end of the tunnel of hell, Lillian jammed me into a chair and slapped a thousand sponge curlers in my hair, which I forgot about and still had in this morning.”

“Why did she put curlers in your hair?”

“I have no idea. Why does the sun shine? Why does the wind blow?” Jocelyn stopped her pacing and plopped her frame in the chair next to Peyton’s.

“Ok, let’s get back to the reason you’re here to begin with. Jason. Cock tease. Go from there.”

“That’s where it ended. How anybody can get so upset over something that is none of his business is beyond me.”

“Well, I might have let my temper get the better of me.” Peyton saw Jocelyn chew at her bottom lip and concluded she had done more than let her temper get the better of her.

“How’s that?”

“I might have accused him of being jealous.”

“Jealous? Jealous of what?”

“I might have suggested he was jealous that it wasn’t him I was teasing. Not that I was teasing to begin with—”

“Wait a minute.” Wide eyed and unbelieving, Peyton faced Jocelyn. “You accused Jason of being jealous?”

“Uh, yeah.”

“Jealous of not having his cock teased?”

“Uh huh.”

“And he got mad?” Peyton could barely contain her laughter and dismay.

“Well, that and the fact that I might have given his chair a little nudge.” She was holding something back.

“A little nudge?”

“A little nudge that caused him to flip it over and landed him on the floor.”

Peyton’s laughter filled the air. It doubled her over. The thought of Jason taken down by a slip of the girl tickled her to no end. “I would have paid money to see the look on his face.” Holding her sides, she tried her best to control the giggles coming from the pit of her soul.

“I can give you a pretty good description of it. It is the same one he always has on his face when he looks at me—like he wants to strangle the last breath from my body.”

“I thought y’all got along?”

"We do. We all do. They all treat me like an adorable little friend and stepsister who they can pat on the head and send on her way. I don't want to be treated like that."

"How do you want to be treated?"

"Like a grown-up. I want them to see me as a woman, someone who's pretty and sexy and desirable."

"Good luck. Even though y'all aren't technically brother and sister, I wouldn't bet on any of them ever looking at you that way. Their mama would kill them and your daddy probably would as well." Peyton thought on what she had just said. Jocelyn was beautiful—stunning even, but the Kiel boys would never in a million years let on that they thought that. Or at least she didn't think any of them would. But she had been proven wrong where they were concerned before, so it could happen again.

"I understand that. But they don't have to act like we're all buddy-buddy. I mean, they're overprotective as hell. All of them. Especially Jason. He acts like I'm a pain in his ass. He treats me just like Daddy does and that pisses me off more than anything. I can't even date without them sticking their noses where they don't belong." Jocelyn looked defeated. "Am I defective or something?"

"No," Peyton said with a snort. "You're not defective."

"I must be. I can't get a date, and when I do get one, they run them off soon thereafter. Jason hates me—"

"He doesn't hate you." Peyton was sure of that. Jason was acting funny where it concerned her, but he didn't hate her. If he hated her he wouldn't care what she wore, who she teased, who she dated or who she didn't.

"They all ignore me until I bring someone home, and then they play the part of dutiful stepbrothers and run him off before I even get one single kiss. I'm ignored one minute and then covered with attention the next, but it's not the attention I want."

"I find it hard to believe Nick ignores you." And Peyton did. Nicholas Kiel was as sweet as he was good looking, and as nice as he was sinfully sexy. He was the complete female dream wrapped in jeans and topped off with a Stetson—kind, sweet, caring and the owner of a great little apple tush.

"No, Nick's nice. He's always nice."

"He always has been."

"A true blue knight in shining armor?"

"Pretty much." Peyton relaxed more deeply into the chair and let the fall sun caress her face. It was too nice of a day to stay indoors. It was the perfect day for a wedding. Peyton smiled to herself. Brent would just love that—pessimistic fool that he was. Peyton knew how Brent felt about Willa. She could remember the hell Brent and all of his brothers had gone through on Chase's behalf after Willa disappeared. It had almost been their ruin. It had been her and Brent's ruin.

A pain of hurt and loss welled in her throat and nearly choked her. Peyton didn't harbor any bad feelings toward Willa Tate. What had happened wasn't her fault. What had happened had happened because it was meant to be. Enough said.

"Have they always been like this?" Cocking her head to the side, Peyton waited for Jocelyn to explain. "You know..." Jocelyn was struggling to put the right word to what the Kiel boys were. Peyton knew she could help her out.

"A little balls to the wall?"

"Yes. Exactly."

"Pretty much. But they do seem to have mellowed with age."

"You call them mellow?" The look on Jocelyn's face made Peyton laugh again.

"Compared to what they used to be. Yeah, they've mellowed. Used to be it was Chase, Brent and Jason carousing and arousing the county. Now it seems Chase has passed the ball to the younger generation."

"Where do Brent and Jason fit into that?"

Shaking her head, Peyton thought about the question. Where did they fit in? Both of them were getting older. Jason was her own age and Brent had turned twenty-eight a few months back. Where did they fit?

"I don't know. But they fit. Hell, I don't know what people would do if the Kiels weren't the Kiels. I know some people who would be pretty put out by that fact."

"What people are those?" Stretching like a cat in the sun, Peyton watched Jocelyn recline back and relax in the chair next to her own. It wasn't a bad idea. Peyton did the same before answering her question.

"Mostly females. I can't think of a single woman in town, young or old, married or not, who hasn't had a thing for one of the Kiel boys at least once in her life."

"Including you?"

"Yes, including me. But that was a long time ago and it seems I've outgrown my 'Kiel' stage." Peyton took a deep breath and closed her eyes against the sun. It was a stage she was afraid she would never grow out of. Life had been so much easier when they all had been just friends. Their families were friends. Her brother Murphy and Brent's brother Chase were the best of friends.

Friends—only friends.

That had all changed when Brent had kissed her all those years ago. There was something about his kiss she couldn't forget. Was it the way his lips barely touched hers in the beginning? Or was it how his tongue traced the outline of her mouth and then invited itself inside? It could be the way his body fit to perfection against her own. It was something, that was for sure.

"I am happy to say that I am now one of the few that is excluded from that otherwise large population." A white lie never hurt anyone. Did it?

“Sometimes I wonder...” Her voice trailed off, making Peyton turn her head, shade her eyes and watch Jocelyn toy with whatever question was in her head. She seemed to be in deep thought. That made Peyton even more curious than she was already.

“Sometimes you wonder what?” She propped herself up on her elbow so that she had a better view of Joss’s face. Her eyes were shut, her arms were extended and she looked totally and utterly relaxed. Content for the moment.

“Sometimes I wonder what it would be like to be Willa.”

“How do you mean?” Curiosity killed the cat, but at least they had nine lives.

“I wonder what it would be like to...to feel like...to be the only person in the room. To be the object of one person’s total and utter desire. To know that no matter who walks into that room, your man’s eyes would be on you and you alone.” She shrugged and covered her face with her folded arms, leaving Peyton to ponder the same things.

How would it feel? What was it like to be Willa Tate—four hours away from being Willa Kiel? To be the object of someone’s desire? Peyton wondered the same thing. But in the place of the someone Jocelyn kept referring to, she placed Brent. How would it feel to be the object of Brent Kiel’s desire once again? It had felt damn good once upon a time, but last night had told Peyton one thing—Brent hated her as much today as he had all those years ago. When she had decided to marry the one person she should have never agreed to marry—his best friend.

“Shit,” Jocelyn rolled herself from the lounge. “I have to go. Everyone has to be dressed and ready by twelve.” Peyton followed her through the house and watched her jog barefooted to the jeep she had driven over. She stopped at the door and turned and asked, “You are coming, right? Please tell me you will be there so I am not totally alone on someone else’s happiest day of their life?”

“I’ll be there. Lucas just so happens to be the ring bearer, or ring bear as he calls it. If I don’t see you before the ceremony I’ll see you after.” Peyton wondered how Brent would feel about her being at his brother’s wedding. Lucas, Murphy’s son and Peyton’s nephew, was the designated ring bearer. Peyton was attending because her sister-in-law Kathleen had refused to. Peyton figured it had something to do with the fact that all the attention would be on Willa and not on herself. Kathleen was a bitch, pure and simple, and Lucas and Murphy suffered because of it.

“I’ll save you a dance,” Jocelyn threw back as she jumped into the jeep and turned the engine over.

“You do that,” Peyton said waving goodbye as she did. Minutes after Jocelyn was out of sight, Peyton remained on the front steps. Her mind was still wondering what it would feel like to be loved by a Kiel—her Kiel. Checking her watch, Peyton returned to the house and went about getting ready for the biggest wedding Millbrook had seen since Murphy and Kathleen’s wedding. What a pretentious show that had been.

But this wedding was different. It wasn't everyday a Kiel boy got married. Peyton wondered how many broken hearts would be attending the ceremony and the reception to follow. She decided to take a mental count while she was there. That way her thoughts would be occupied by counting and not by the memory of the texture of Brent's tongue, and how it had once made promises of something more. Something she had always wanted. Something she could never have again. The rock she chose to wear on her finger made sure of that.

Chapter Six

Jocelyn tapped the toe of her cage-style high-heeled summer sandal and waited. Waiting was not her strong suit. The entire waiting thing took patience and she was in short supply at this point in time.

Any minute now.

Any minute now Chase and Brent would appear on the top and second step of the large wraparound porch, signaling for the music to begin and for Jocelyn to make her way to the front. But she wouldn't be alone. Oh no. She had the honor of being escorted to the makeshift altar by Jason Kiel himself. *Asshole*, she thought. It took all of her might not to cast the label his way.

She didn't know why she was paired with Jason to begin with. She should have been paired with Nick or Hayden—they were closer in age. She'd even asked for Hayden to escort her. But Willa and Lillian both had said that it made more sense that she and Jason be paired with each other for whatever reason. *Great*.

Casting a look over her shoulder, she watched Nick adjust his tie and then readjust it. Nick, sweetheart that he was, had the great honor of giving Willa away. He seemed so proud. Jocelyn never realized that the Kiels were already Willa's family. It was kind of sad that her own father wouldn't be walking her to Chase.

Jocelyn's father had offered to walk Willa down the aisle and give her away, but Willa had refused. She'd told him that he would get the chance one day when Jocelyn got married. Whenever that was. The way things were looking, never was a solid bet.

It's not that Jocelyn wanted to get married any time soon. She just wanted to date. One date. Was that too much to ask? But dating for Jocelyn was rather difficult with a father like Harrison Reece. And when you added each and every Kiel to that, it increased the difficulty level by ten thousand. At this rate she would die a virgin.

Cutting her eyes to the left, she saw Jason lounging lazily in one of the chairs that had been set up behind the large arbors. The chairs were supposed to be for Willa and her bridesmaids, but Jason seemed comfortable and content occupying one. She had to admit, he looked nice.

They all looked nice.

The black tuxedos gleamed, as did the crisp white shirts underneath them. Chase and his groomsmen had done away with the traditional bow tie and instead substituted a long black tie.

It looked good.

They looked good.

He looked good.

When Jason had made his way behind the tulle-draped arbors that blocked everyone's view of the bride and the bridal party, Jocelyn almost complimented him. Almost. But then he went and opened up his mouth. "You don't clean up half bad kid." It was the kid part that got her. If she didn't know better she could have sworn he did it on purpose. She was proud of herself though. Instead of retaliating, she just smiled and turned her back to him.

"When is this damn thing going to start anyway?" he grumbled. Jocelyn thought about replying but didn't. She just kept staring off into the distance and tapping her toe. "Would you quit that already? It's driving me crazy." Jason rose from his chair and took his place next to Jocelyn's right side, all the while pulling at the tie hanging around his neck.

"Ask me if I care." She'd been good long enough. At least she lowered her voice when she said it.

"You know, if you're so hell bent on being treated like an adult maybe you need to start acting like one."

"I am an adult and I should be treated like one. No matter what you or my daddy think." Their lowered voices never roused any curiosity from the others standing behind the arbor—Jocelyn made sure of that. With a quick look behind her, she saw Nick standing guard at Willa's side. Willa, who was in deep conversation with her best friend and maid of honor, Blaire, looked radiant.

Her satin dress with the layered bubble hem and the rhinestone detailing fit her like a dream. She was gorgeous. So was Blaire for that matter. Even though Jocelyn and Blaire wore matching knee-length knit dresses with a chiffon overlay and a smocked illusion neckline, she felt like the ugly duckling.

The dresses were short, ending just above the knee, but Blaire's legs seemed to go on forever and a day. The patent belt that cinched the dresses emphasized her slender waistline and more-than-ample bust line. Jocelyn couldn't say the same for herself. Even though her waist was slender and her hips were slightly flared, giving her the feminine curves she needed to pull off the dress, her bust was severely lacking. She wasn't the only one that noticed Blaire. Hayden and Jason couldn't take their eyes off her. She couldn't blame them—Blaire was a stunner.

"She's beautiful, isn't she?" Jocelyn asked the question without thinking.

"Yeah, she is. They both are." Jason took a second to run his eyes over his soon-to-be sister-in-law and her goddess of a friend. The fact that he didn't say the same for her weighed heavier on her than she would have liked, but she was not about to say anything about it.

"Hey...uh...look." Jason stammered, causing Jocelyn to look at him for the first time since he'd come to stand beside her.

"I just wanted to apologize for what I said earlier."

"About me cleaning up nice?" Toying with the wildflower blooms of her bouquet kept her hands busy. She needed to be kept busy.

“No. The other,” Jason said as he cleared his throat and looked to see if anyone was listening to their conversation.

“What other? Oh, when you called me a cock tease? Is that the other you were talking about?”

“Would you keep your voice down. I didn’t call you a...a...”

“A cock—”

“Damn it,” he cursed. “Stop saying that.”

“I’ll stop saying it when you take it back.” She gave in to her temper and popped him once on the arm with her bouquet of blossoms, causing three or four to fall to her feet.

“I did not call you—”

She cocked her head, set her jaw and waited as he stuttered and stammered. “Look, I’m not going to get into this with you. I am trying to apologize. Try being a grown-up and accepting it.” She watched as he dusted away the imaginary petal from his jacket sleeve.

“I am being a grown-up. Where do you get off telling me how to act and how to dress? From what I hear the girls you like have on far less than I would ever think about wearing out in public.”

“Been askin’ around have you?”

“No, I’m just saying. Mind. Your. Own. Business.” She slapped him with the bouquet once more for good measure.

“It’s kinda of hard when you keep getting in the way.” Jason offered her his arm. She realized she was holding up the start of the ceremony and took his arm and hooked her hand in the crook of his elbow. They were supposed to walk close together at a paced speed, but Jocelyn’s temper powered her forward. The faster she was away from Jason’s side the better. She couldn’t take it anymore.

This was supposed to be a happy day.

A happy day.

Even repeating the mantra in her head did not stop the tears from forming in her eyes. Maybe everyone would think they were tears of joy instead of the frustration she felt forming in her belly.

“Slow down a bit.” Jason’s whispered tone struck home and she altered her steps, slowing down her quick gait and turning it into a timed stroll.

“That’s more like it. If I didn’t know better I would think you wanted to get away from me.” The tone of his voice was playful and even a bit flirty. Jocelyn couldn’t handle it. He was putting on a show for the audience, playing the part of dutiful escort so well.

As they walked she could see several female guests studying Jason. Some of them raised their hands in slight waves. Jocelyn noticed how they scanned his body from top to bottom and then back up. Once they had finished their appraisal of him they looked to her. One woman smiled sweetly and another set her mouth into a thin line and looked away. The last one Jocelyn could stand to look at actually giggled before turning and whispering something to her friend. The friend giggled too.

The tears threatened to fall even though Jocelyn willed them not to. She closed her eyes for a second, trying her best to stop a single one from falling. When she opened them once more she caught sight of a familiar and friendly face in the crowd. Peyton.

She sat at the far end of a row close to the front but slightly out of the way. Jocelyn saw Peyton lean her head to the side in a questioning manner and lift her shoulder at Jocelyn.

Her body language asked what was wrong. Jocelyn looked to Jason, who was concentrating on a blonde in the third row, and then looked back at Peyton.

She saw Peyton narrow her eyes in Jason's direction and then roll them. She then looked at Jocelyn, shook her head slightly and smiled. When Jocelyn didn't return the gesture, Peyton placed the small black clutch purse she was carrying under her arm and lifted her fingers to her face. Without drawing attention to herself, she placed two fingertips at the corners of her mouth and lifted it into a smile.

Jocelyn took the hint.

She smiled.

She remained that way as Jason walked her to her designated spot across from Brent's. Brent looked up at her. Those dark eyes of his hid everything from everybody. He smiled slightly her way and then returned to scanning the audience.

Jocelyn watched him look over the crowd once from left to right and then again from right to left. Was he looking for someone? She tried her best to follow his line of sight as it went back and forth. She lost track for just a second and then realized his eyes had stopped. No longer were they moving back and forth. They were set on one person and one person only. They were set on Peyton.

The smile that came to her face while watching Brent watch Peyton was extremely real. Extremely wide. And extremely filled with giddiness. Standing on the third step from the bottom, moving slightly with the music, Jocelyn watched Hayden walk Blaire down the aisle. Jocelyn barely saw them. She was too busy singing in her head, *Brent and Peyton, sitting in a tree...* This might not turn out to be such a shitty day after all.

When Brent caught sight of Peyton he felt his chest draw up as well as his balls. What the fuck was she doing here? Then he remembered. The half-pint standing at his feet had something to do with it.

Lucas James swayed back and forth from foot to foot as he balanced the white satin pillow on his hand. It was a good thing the pillow was just for looks, and that the actual wedding bands were in his pocket. Standing still was not one of the four-year-old's strong points.

Brent scanned the crowd looking for the boy's parents, but only saw Peyton and Murphy in attendance. Murphy's wife, Lucas's mother, was, big surprise, absent.

He didn't care if she was here or not to tell the truth, because Peyton was. And all of Brent's present attention was on her and her alone.

The dress she was wearing draped every soft curve of her body. Even though it covered more than it revealed, Brent could fill in the gaps. Her legs were toned and tan. Her stomach was flat and made Brent yearn to run his tongue the length of it. That brought him to her breasts. The dress she wore had a deep V dipping in between them—nice. Too nice. He felt the tell-tale beginnings of a hard-on. What the hell was the matter with him?

Last night he'd blamed the alcohol for his impaired state and throbbing cock. What was his excuse today? He didn't need to get laid. Or maybe he did. Maybe he needed it worse than he thought.

His time spent searching the crowd turned up numerous possibilities of one-night or two-night stands. Hell, some of the women in attendance probably wouldn't turn down a quick ride in the barn in the near future. But he didn't want them. He wanted Peyton. That didn't surprise him. He had wanted her for longer than he could remember.

Peyton with her thick hair. Hair that would skim and caress a man's stomach as she licked and sucked at his dick.

He couldn't see her eyes, she was too far away, but he knew that when she was aroused those dark eyes burned—burned for more.

Last night, in his inebriated sleep, he'd seen her eyes, seen them blaze as she'd ridden him fast and deep and hard. Did she still like it hard?

Or was Peyton now more of the slow, sweet type. He doubted it.

She wanted it as rough and as wild as he did. Another thing had haunted his dreams last night. He wondered if she still screamed when she came. He wondered if she still loved the thrill of almost getting caught. He wondered if she still got wet at a moment's notice.

He also wondered how long she had been staring back at him.

Breaking the connection their eyes had created, Brent returned his attention to the catastrophe unfolding before him. It was about that time. About time for Brother Jim Thomas to join the happy couple with the rings. The rings. Brent's hand went to his pocket and found Willa's ring resting safely inside. Earlier, he'd toyed with the idea of leaving in the top drawer of his dresser where it had been for the past week, but he'd decided against it. The last thing he wanted was for his brother to commit murder on his own wedding day.

Before they could get to that part, Brent risked a quick glance back at Peyton. She sat with her legs crossed, one slightly bouncing across the other. The high-heeled sandal she wore threatened to fall from her foot with every swing of her leg, but it never did. Her legs. *God*, he thought. How good they would feel wrapped around his waist, his thighs and his head. While his tongue played and teased the soft flesh of her pussy. He drew in a deep breath. *Damn*.

He placed Peyton far away from his mind for the time being. Out of the corner of his eye he saw Jason giving him an odd look. Jason, the ever-observant one that he was, turned his head casually to the left and looked right in Peyton's direction.

Brent groaned to himself. He knew the second Jason's head turned back around. He heard him laugh, and then he felt the slight pat his brother gave him on the back.

If that wasn't bad enough, he then leaned into Brent's back and whispered loud enough for only him to hear, "Don't worry about it, man. Everybody gets horny at weddings." With another pat, Jason laughed again and then leaned back to his original position.

Horny. Hell, yeah he was horny. But the wedding had nothing to do with it. The person to blame was sitting to the left, a few rows back, bouncing her sweet leg back and forth and lightly letting her tongue play with her upper lip. Brent wondered if she knew she was doing it or how much he would have liked giving her something to lick from those lips.

On cue, Brent handed the gold band over to his brother and watched as he slid it onto Willa's shaking finger. It was over. Just like that, his brother had taken his life as he knew it and flushed it straight down the toilet. He had officially given Willa permission to break his heart this time. *Oh well*, Brent thought, *better him than me*.

Chapter Seven

Peyton like weddings, she didn't love them, but she liked them. She liked having the opportunity of getting out of her usual jeans-and-T-shirt combo and trading them in for a dress. Especially this dress. She'd bought it over a year ago on a whim and until today had never had the occasion to wear it. It was short and satin with a light floral print around the hemline. The sleeves were slightly puffed and the V in the front was just deep enough for the outfit to be appropriate.

Standing away from the crowd of well-wishers, Peyton watched the blushing bride and the gorgeous groom prepare to cut the cake. Saying that Chase Kiel and Willa Tate, Willa Kiel, were a good-looking couple was an understatement. He was tall and dark and she was small and blonde, they were perfect. Peyton felt a smile cross her lips as Chase leaned in and briefly kissed his new wife's lips. She wondered if anyone besides her had noticed his tongue flick across them. Probably not.

"Why are standing by yourself, pretty lady?" Startled, Peyton jerked her body around to see the man who owned the voice so close to her ear.

"Shit." Hissing, she slapped at his broad shoulders. "Jason, don't do that."

"Sorry, I didn't mean to scare you." He chuckled and stepped up beside her, sliding his hands into the pockets of his tux and looking at the crowd before them. "Who you hiding from?"

"No one. Just trying to stay out of the way. What about you? Why aren't you out there looking for your next conquest?"

"Just trying to lay low for a minute is all."

Peyton knew the one and only reason Jason Kiel ever laid low. "Who is she?"

Jason winced. "Tessa Trapp."

Peyton rolled her eyes.

"Jason! She's engaged to be married." As a matter of fact, she and her fiancé at the present moment were speaking to the bride and groom. "You know one of these days you are going to stick your hand in the wrong cookie jar." It was the truth.

Jason's ways would catch up with him and take toll on his body—in one form or the other. He would either end up with a daddy aiming a shotgun at his back or a boyfriend, fiancé or husband aiming one at his dick. It was a tossup which one would happen first.

"It's not my hand I'm worried about." He wiggled his eyebrows at Peyton, causing her to laugh. "And just so you know, it's Tessa wantin' to mess with me, not the other way around."

“Wantin’ to? You mean you haven’t taken her up on her offer?”

“No, ma’am. Not a one.”

“Well, good. I’m proud of you, Jason.”

“Yeah, yeah. Stop braggin’ on me. You might make me blush.”

“Now that’s a sight I’d pay money to see.”

The pair was silent for a moment as they watched the married couple take the center of the dance floor that had been laid especially for the wedding. The band began playing an old George Strait song, one of Peyton’s favorites, and the groom held the bride close to his body. The love that flowed from Chase oozed over Peyton. A complete idiot could see how much they loved each other. Wanted each other. Needed each other. Speaking of complete idiots, Peyton’s eyes danced across person after person until she saw the one she was looking for.

There he stood, far away from anyone else, with that damn sullen look on his face. Peyton blew out a frustrated breath, which caused Jace to look her way. He didn’t seem to notice who she was staring at—thank heaven for small favors.

Brent had disappeared just as soon as the ceremony ended. At least he’d decided to return to the festivities. That was something. Peyton actually was a little surprised to see him here, glad that he was, but surprised nonetheless.

“Dance with me.”

“What?” Peyton’s attention was pulled away from Brent and all his animosity and focused on Jason and his outstretched hand.

“Dance with me.”

“Why?”

“God, Peyton. Just do it. Don’t ask a million questions. Just go with the flow.”

“Fine, but keep your hands to yourself, cowboy.”

“I’ll try, darlin’. I’ll try.”

Letting him pull her to the floor was probably a bad idea. Tomorrow the entire town would be gossiping about her and her dance with Jace Kiel. She wondered who would be the first to call Carter and express their concern. She wondered how Carter would respond to the concerned call. Would he let the cat out of the bag about their broken engagement? She hadn’t even gotten around to telling her parents about it yet. She was too embarrassed. She could hear the gossip now, “Poor Peyton James, she just can’t get a man to marry her”. She wasn’t ready for that. She sure didn’t want the majority of Millbrook knowing about it before she could break the news to her mama and daddy. She also wondered if Carter would answer their call when he wouldn’t answer hers.

“Relax, darlin’, let me take care of you.”

“The last time you said that I ended up in a jail cell with you as a roommate.”

“Fun, wasn’t it?” Jace pulled her closer so there was no space whatsoever between them. Peyton let him. As they danced, she couldn’t help but stare at Willa and Chase. “They look good together don’t they?”

“Yeah, they do,” Peyton whispered into Jason shoulder.

“I never thought I would see this day. It took them long enough.” And it had. A journey that had started almost six years ago ended today and another one began. Peyton had been at the beginning of the first journey and she was glad she was at the start of the second.

“Yeah.”

“Before long they’ll have a gaggle of kids running around tearing this place to hell and back. I can’t wait.”

“Speaking of kids. I need to talk to you about something.”

Jace had opened the lines of conversation as they applied to Jocelyn for all Peyton was concerned.

“Uh oh. There something you want to tell me, Peyton? You got a little one started in there or something? Good thing you and Carter will be married soon. Did you send me an invitation?” When he said “in there” Jason’s heavy hand slid around her waist to rest on the flat of her belly. She popped him on the back and made him move it.

“No. You have to be exposed for that to happen.” She hadn’t been *exposed* in a long time. Longer than she cared to mention or remember. Jason’s narrowed gaze told her that she had said too much and given him more information about her and Carter’s love life, or lack thereof, than she ever intended to. She changed the subject before he could wrangle any more information from her. “I want to talk to you about Jocelyn.”

“Jocelyn? What do you want to talk about Jocelyn for?” Never breaking his step, Jason twirled her out and then back in. When she landed solidly and gracefully against his front, he flashed her one of those famous smiles he had always possessed. Any other female would have melted at his feet, but Peyton wasn’t any other female.

“I want you to lay off her.”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

“Don’t give me that. I don’t know what is the matter with you, but you need to stop with the entire Jocelyn...thing.” She didn’t know what else to call it.

“There is no Jocelyn *thing*.”

“There is. She came by this morning and was a little upset.” Close enough.

“Upset. Upset about what?”

“About whatever went on between the two of you this morning.”

“She was upset?” Jason’s expression changed for a split second, and then he caught it, but not before Peyton noticed the change. What the hell was going on?

“Mad as hell would be a better description. I don’t know what is going on with you, but it needs to stop. This isn’t you.”

“There’s nothing going on.” He ground out the words between his teeth. “When did you and Jocelyn get so buddy-buddy anyway?”

“I like Jocelyn. I think of her as a friend.”

Jason snorted and turned his attention to the women’s ass beside them. Never missing a beat, Peyton grabbed his chin and turned it back to her. “She is my friend and she is having a hard time right now and you are not making it any better.”

“She’s just a kid—”

“She’s not.” Her raised voice drew some attention. Embarrassed, she went on in a more discrete tone of voice. “She’s not a *kid*. She is a young woman who is catching pure overprotective hell from her father right now and the last thing she needs is for you to add fuel to the fire.” Maybe some of what she said got through that thick head of his.

“What do you want me to do, Peyton?”

“I want you to try being nice to her.”

“I am nice to her!” This time it was Jason’s raised voice that brought the stares.

“You’re not. You called her a cock tease.” Peyton had never seen a face turn as many shades of red in such a short amount of time in her life.

“Would the two of you quit saying that. Look, what do you want from me? I can’t treat her like my sister, she’s not.”

“I know that. Why don’t you try treating her like a friend?”

“She’s got plenty of friends. She doesn’t need to add me to the list.”

“I don’t think she does.” And Peyton didn’t. For all of Jocelyn’s sweetness and sincerity and overall fun personality, friends were not one of her strong points. Peyton knew the feeling. That could be one reason why they got along so well. Peyton didn’t have many friends, well, many girl friends, and neither did Jocelyn.

“Sure she does. Why wouldn’t she?”

“Have you ever looked at her? Really looked at her?” At her insistence Jason found Jocelyn among the guests and looked at her for the briefest of seconds.

“What’s your point?”

“She’s gorgeous. Absolutely gorgeous. A lot of girls have a hard time being friends with someone that pretty.”

“So you’re telling me being pretty is a curse?”

“Yeah, it can be.”

“You would know.”

“What are you talking about?” Peyton questioning eyes searched Jason’s face.

“Come on, Peyton. You know what you look like.”

“Yeah, so?” Whatever his meaning was she wasn’t catching it.

“Good God, Peyton. Since we have been dancing I can count at least five guys here who have given me the evil eye. Five guys. That’s not counting the ones who are most likely hiding their throbbles as we speak.”

“That’s gross. Even for you.”

“I’m telling the truth. I know one for sure,” he said smiling. Before she could catch herself Peyton pushed him away from her and growled.

“Jeez, Jason.”

Shaking his head and smiling to himself he took her in his arms once more. “Not me, darlin’. I already made that mistake years ago and nearly lost one of my balls for it. I don’t make the same mistake twice, thank you very much. Your loss.” His joking manner relieved the knot that was ever so slowly unwinding in her stomach. “I was talking about someone else.”

Her eyes asked who before her mouth could.

“You know who.” He lifted his chin and directed her gaze over his shoulder.

There he was. Staring at her. At her and Jason dancing. Brent didn’t look happy.

“I don’t know what you’re talking about.” Lowering her eyes did nothing to stop the flames that heated her face.

“I think you do. Want to tell me about it?”

“No,” she whispered.

“I didn’t think so. Relax, sweetheart.” He leaned in and his breath tickled her ear and so did his next words, “Your secret is safe with me.”

“I don’t have a secret.”

“Sure you do. But I won’t tell.”

“Tell what, Jason Kiel? You don’t know anything.” She tried to play off her anxiety. It didn’t work.

“I know you can’t keep your eyes off my brother and he can’t keep his eyes off you. It’s just a matter of time before—”

“Before what?” Peyton broke in.

“Before the two of you decide to do something about it.”

“I’m an engaged woman, Jason. Nothing is going to happen between your brother and me.” No matter how bad her body and her heart wanted it to.

“Just because you wear the ring doesn’t make it so. If your heart’s somewhere else...what’s the point?” With that, Jason kissed her temple and led her off the dance floor. “Say hi to your dad and mom for me and your cousins too. Good to see you, Peyton.” With that he was gone.

Standing alone once more gave her the chance to rewind and review his words in her head. Just a matter of time...if your heart...what's the point?

Laughing the whole episode off, she retrieved her cell phone from her purse. Prior to the ceremony she'd set the ringer to silent. She noticed five missed calls. Never a good sign.

A hollow place formed in her bones as she walked toward the seclusion of the large barn that sat a good distance away from the house. She didn't want to draw attention. She didn't want to be stopped. She didn't want to call the number back. But, like her daddy always said, you can want in one hand and shit in the other. Peyton knew from experience which one filled up faster.

Chapter Eight

What was his brother doing?

Brent followed Peyton with his eyes the moment she took the hand his brother offered her, through her short conversation with Joss, up until the time she retrieved her cell phone from her purse. She didn't look happy.

Watching her walk from her place under the old willow tree to the seclusion of the barn and not following her instantly was hard.

Why did she need the privacy the barn held? Was her fiancé calling to check on her? He doubted it. He knew Carter. Worrying and checking up was not one of the things he did.

He bided his time and waited for his patience to pay off. Dodging as many people as he could, he walked on quick steps to the barn. Not wanting to attract attention to his destination, he made the occasional stop to talk to folks here and there. Shaking hands, slapping backs and nodding every so often allowed him to slip into the barn without anyone being the wiser.

He didn't know what compelled him to follow her. Maybe it was the look of concern and worry written across her face. Maybe it was out of pure nosiness on his part. It could be that he couldn't *not* follow her. Whatever it was, it led him to the barn, searching the dim interior for her.

It didn't take him long to find her.

She stood at the back of the barn, resting against the double doors that had been anchored open. Even through the darkness he could make out her figure. She was breathtaking in the shadowed hall.

She was great in any light, but Brent liked the moonlight the best.

Most of his visions of her over the years had her cast in moonlight. He had plenty of memories of her in the fading shadows the sun created and moonlight—he wouldn't mind making another.

He struck the thought from his head, knowing that creating a memory with Peyton, a good one, was not on the agenda. He just wanted to check on her. She had looked upset. Or at least he thought she had. That was his reasoning for following her—to check on her. Nothing more.

Altering his stride, he moved toward her without any noise. There was a fraction of space between his chest and her back before she knew he was even there.

Spinning quickly, she turned and her wide eyes met his. He saw her breath hitch and then quicken. Was she frightened? Excited? Excited was good, but he figured mad as hell was a better gauge on her mood.

“What do you want?” She cast the words his way and then gave him her back once more. Brent stopped the smile from crossing his face. Yep, mad as hell was a pretty good description.

“You okay?” He saw her body tense as he spoke. He waited for her to reply and wasn’t surprised by what he got in return.

“What do you care?”

“I care.” His admission shocked him and the shock made his jaw set and his brow furrow. Brent wasn’t big on expressing his feelings—never had been. That was one of the problems they had always had between them. He couldn’t tell her how he felt and she needed to know.

“Yeah, right.” She turned on her heel and faced him. The added inches of her shoes made her and Brent almost the same height—almost. She was still a few good inches shorter than him, but the shoes made it so that she didn’t have to crane her neck to look up at him. He didn’t know if he liked that or not.

He could think of a million good reasons for her added height and the shoes she wore. All of them revolved around sex. Sex with her. Sex with her wearing those tall, strappy shoes and nothing else but his body.

“You know I have tried to be nice to you. I have tried to be friends. I have tried everything within my power to make it so that we could still be cordial to one another. But you and your stubborn far-too-oversized pride has prevented that. So tell me why, now, at this very minute, I should give a rat’s ass if you care if I’m upset or not? You didn’t care all those years ago. Why the hell do you care now?”

“Me and my stubborn pride?” Brent couldn’t believe it. They were picking up right where they’d left off. Fighting. They used to fight, every couple did, but those fights had usually ended in a much more desirable way—him on top of her, her on top of him, him behind her.

“Yeah, you and your stubborn pride. Funny, I never thought your pride could be bigger than your ego, but I guess I was wrong.”

“My ego?”

“Yes, your ego. Is there an echo in here? Did I stutter when I spoke?”

“Darlin’, I don’t think this conversation is on the path you want it to be. If I were you, I’d stop now before you get your tender feelings hurt.” He retreated just a step. He should have known better than to follow her. He should have stayed away. It would have been better for them both.

“What the hell is that supposed to mean? My *tender* feelings?” With each step Brent took backwards, Peyton closed the distance. If she wanted a fight, he wasn’t in the mood to give her one.

“You know what I’m talking about. I hurt your feelings that night, that last night, and instead of waiting around until things cooled off, you ran as fast and as hard as you could in a different direction. That way just happened to be Carter’s.”

Brent could see her temper flaring. Her chest heaved, causing her breasts to do the same. Her nostrils flared as her breath became choppy and erratic. He wondered how long it would take her to retaliate. He didn't have to wait long.

"I'm sorry I didn't dig a hole and bury myself away from the world long enough for you decide that you wanted to *play* with me again. I waited for things to cool off and for you to realize what an ass you were being. Did you want me to wait forever? Was that what your pride needed, a little pick-me-up?" She advanced on him.

"You pushed me away," she said as she planted her hands on his chest and pushed his body. It wasn't a hard nudge, but he took a step back. "You pushed me out." She shoved at his shoulders this time. "You shut me out." She prodded again. "You shut me out of your life." She pushed him again. "You shut me out of your mind." She pushed and prodded him again and again. "And you shut me out of your heart."

Brent had had enough. He jerked the door of the tack room open and backed her into the small dark room. It smelt of leather, hay and Peyton—sugary and sweet.

It was his turn to push. He pressed her against a wall and anchored her body there with his and gripped her wrists with one of his hands just in case she decided to sink her nails into any part of his body.

His lips were a breath away from hers when he said in a low, husky voice, "I might have shut you out that night, but I never shut you out for good. You did that the minute you traded me in for my best friend." He felt her breath hitch beneath her chest.

The movement caused her breasts to rub against the material of his shirt and jacket. Even through the thick double layer of material, he felt her nipples harden and pucker. He felt the weight of her breasts resting heavily on his chest. He felt everything. The swell of them, their firmness, their heat and their state of arousal.

"Is that what bothers you so bad? That it was Carter who took your place? Or does it bother you that I didn't shut my heart and my life down just because you didn't want me anymore? I'm sorry I didn't swear off all men and life in general until you decided you were ready to want me again." She moved to break their connection, but he wouldn't let her.

She struggled a little more, but her struggles were lacking in determination. Brent wondered if she really wanted him to let her go or if she only thought she did.

"I never stopped wanting you."

Her struggles stopped. Her breath halted as she brought her eyes to his, and Brent was sure she felt the reaction his body had to hers being pressed so close.

"Yes, you did. You ignored me. You wouldn't speak two words to me. You hated me. You still hate me." Her breath hitched as the last few words crossed her lips, and Brent hated that he had ever made her feel that way. In an instant, he realized there was no time like the present to show her how differently he actually felt.

“Does it feel like I hate you?” He pressed his swollen dick into her stomach and rolled his hips once, showing her how he really felt.

“You can’t want me,” she whispered. Brent felt her body move just an inch and was surprised that instead of pulling away from him she had actually brought her body closer.

“It appears I can.” He loosened the grip he had on her wrists but he didn’t let go of them. He let his fingers play against her soft, smooth flesh and was rewarded for his efforts when he saw the tiny chill bumps form on her arms.

“You went home with Kelly last night.”

“And you go home to Carter—when he’s here.” The thought of Carter and the fact that Peyton was his should have stopped Brent. He should let her go. He should step away, but he didn’t. Instead, he did what he had been wanting to do for longer than he could remember—he kissed her. Really kissed her.

There was no playfulness attached to his kiss. It was deep and demanding. He was demanding that she let him kiss her. He was demanding that she respond. He was demanding that she remember what he had to every day of his life.

Brent’s lips crushed into hers and he didn’t wait for her to issue an invitation for his tongue to enter her mouth. When their tongues connected Peyton moaned. For a split second, Brent stalled their kiss, inched away from her face and looked into her eyes. They were wide and filled with confusion—confusion over what was taking place between them and so many other things. No way in hell was he giving her the chance to dissect this situation and stop it before it ever got good. He took her lips again.

Three things happened at once. She moaned deep within her throat, arched her body into his and wrapped her arms around his neck. Her moves both shocked and thrilled him.

He raked his lips back and forth against her open mouth. He let his tongue trace the contours of her mouth. Back and forth he went—for more. He dipped his tongue into the sweet heat of her mouth, stroked hers and then retreated. Peyton wouldn’t let him go completely. She drew his tongue back into her mouth and sucked gently on it.

Brent could feel her short, blunt nails digging into his shoulders and he wanted nothing more than to have them buried in the skin of his back as he plunged deep inside of her.

He broke their connection for only a moment to rid himself of the insufferable tuxedo jacket. In his haste his arms got caught up and his movements to remove himself from the trappings were less than graceful. He heard her laugh low in her throat and it was music to his ears. Finally, he got the damned thing off and threw it to the ground, not caring where it landed or what happened to it.

Brent placed his hands on the outside of her thighs and savored their smoothness as his fingers traveled upward. Her dress bunched and moved with his searching hands. After what seemed like forever, he encountered a thin string on her hips. Hooking his thumb under it, he pulled the string down

until the little piece of material was nothing more than a ball in his hand. Instead of tossing them to the ground, he placed them in his pocket and didn't give them another thought.

His only thoughts were of Peyton and how she felt in his arms and against his body.

His mouth found hers once more, stopping any protest she may have. She didn't feel like she had any. Her fingers were moving at his waist and he realized they were working the button and zipper of his pants.

He couldn't stop the moan that fell from his lips as her hands brushed his cock. Brent lost what little bit of sanity he had left. He lifted Peyton until her thighs rested on either side of his waist. One of his hands braced on the wall behind them, supporting his body so it wouldn't crush hers. The other traveled from the inside of her thigh until it found the spot he'd spent many a night dreaming about.

She was wet. As wet as she had ever been for him. Needy fingers slipped between her slick folds until he found her clit. He brushed once and then again and was pleased when he felt her push her body closer to his touch. He had to be inside of her.

He pushed one finger inside of her and found her snug, hot and dripping—just as he remembered. Peyton clung to his body as he moved in and out of her. When he added a second finger to the first she captured his mouth and ate greedily at his lips.

He couldn't wait any longer. He had waited all these years and he wasn't about to wait a minute longer. He pulled his fingers from her body and she whimpered at the loss. His fingers were coated in her juice and he wanted nothing more than to taste the sweetness he knew was there. But that would have to wait. His body couldn't any longer.

He pulled his cock from his pants and found that it was harder than it had been in forever. He moved between her legs so that the head rested at the entrance of her pussy. He pulled his face and his lips away from hers. A slight frown crossed her face and when she opened her eyes half-mast, Brent saw that they were glazed with desire.

"When I close my eyes I see your body against mine." The truth spilled from lips that caressed hers. "I think sometimes I can still feel your legs wrapped around me. Just like you are now. All sweet and soft." During his speech his lips grazed her jaw, her ear and just below the pulse that fluttered and raced.

With one thrust, he buried himself completely into her. He heard Peyton suck in a sharp breath. She was tight. So fucking tight. As tight as he remembered and as warm and wet. He moved just a fraction, pulling away and then connecting them fully again.

I don't want to stop. Ever. The thoughts raced through his mind as his blood raced through his veins and into his dick. He was buried inside of her—he could go no further, but he wanted to. Before he did anything stupid, like speak what was on his mind, he sealed their lips.

Hers were electric. Soft and shocking, urging his to devour, divide and conquer. He parted her lips with his tongue and slipped into her heated mouth. She tasted better than he remembered. He wondered for a second if his memory of her taste in other places needed to be refreshed.

“We can’t do this.” Breaking the kiss, she made her declaration. Once the words passed her lips she nipped his bottom lip with her teeth. He grunted and then moaned as her tongue stroked the same spot that her teeth had attacked. His knees threatened to buckle.

“We can.” His free hand worked to pull the dress down her arms, revealing those wine-stained nipples he craved.

Her nipples were hard.

Hard as ever.

They were pulled tight and they begged for attention. He rolled one between his finger and thumb and delighted in the fact that the bud puckered more.

“We shouldn’t.”

His mouth connected with her throat and she moved her head to allow him better access. He trailed his tongue down the column of her throat. He kept his thrusts even, slow and deep. He stopped his journey just before he got to her breasts and reassured her. “We should.”

“We need to stop.”

He wanted to tease and stroke her nipples with his tongue before taking them into his mouth, but he couldn’t wait. Her mouth was making excuses her body didn’t need. He growled low in his throat and drew one of the hard peaks between his lips into the inferno of his mouth. He broke their connection for only a moment to ask, “Do you want me to stop?”

He paused for a second and stared at her face. Dreamy, passion-filled eyes stared back at him. Her chest heaved, making the crest of her nipple brush against his lips. He took the other in his mouth and sucked it deep. He watched her head fall back against the wooden wall and felt her body grind against his. That told him all he needed to know. She didn’t want him to stop. He just needed her to say it. He needed to know she needed what he needed.

“No.” That one single word made what little blood he had left in his body rush to his cock. It throbbed deep inside her pussy and he felt Peyton clench around him—it was his undoing.

“Good. I couldn’t if I wanted to.” Brent’s mouth captured hers. He had intended to proceed with caution and seduction. Those intentions were shot to hell when he felt her take control of his kiss.

He grasped her waist and held her in place as his body rocked into hers. His hips bucked faster and harder, fucking her as he always had—deep, hard and fast. One of the questions he’d constantly wondered about was answered. Peyton still wanted it the same way she always had. The harder the better. The faster the better. The deeper the better. Just like Brent liked it.

She was wild in his arms. He savored her. He etched every moan, every pant and every gasp she murmured against his mouth into his memory.

He noticed how her breathing had quickened and how her pussy clenched around him and knew she was close. He wanted her to come. He wanted to make her come. He wanted her to remember—remember

how good they had been together. He wanted her to know how good they were together now and how much better it could get.

He reached around, grasped her perfect ass and tilted her just a bit so she could feel the full effect of him inside of her. She moaned as he settled his full length within her.

Their lips had been locked this entire time and Brent loved it. But he wanted to watch her. He wanted to watch her breath catch in her throat and her breasts heave just before she came around him. Brent wanted her to see who was fucking her and he wanted her to remember who had brought this orgasm from her body.

“Look at me,” he commanded. She complied. Her eyes drifted slowly open, and when they centered on his he thrust once more—deep and hard inside her.

That was all it took. Peyton came in a flood around his cock. The added heat and moisture brought about Brent’s own orgasm.

His hips rocketed against hers, plunging his dick deeper into her incredible heat. Then his body and his world exploded. His legs quivered and his hips jerked once more against her before he emptied himself inside of her.

He dropped his head forward and let it rest against the cool texture of the wooden wall. His release mixed with Peyton’s juices kept him hard deep within her. He could have stayed like this forever—her wrapped around him, covered in the aftermath of their lovemaking.

He would have done just that if the door of the tack room hadn’t been flung open, letting the evening sun drift inside.

Two seconds later, he felt a murderous rage fill his body and stifle the confines of the small room. Peyton had turned her head and Brent could see that her eyes were closed tightly.

He wondered if she thought she didn’t see who was standing at the door, they wouldn’t see her.

Brent looked toward the intruder braced against the doorway smiling sheepishly with one of his hands covering his eyes. Nick Kiel’s face was flushed in a blush and Brent could see that he was in fact blocking the entire scene from his sight instead of peeking in between his fingers.

At that moment, Brent was thinking of the best place on the Kiel ranch to bury the young man’s body.

“I hate to interrupt, but—”

“But what?” Brent growled. This was a little awkward, but it could have been worse. At least it was Nick standing there and not someone else like Chase or Jason or, heaven forbid, Hayden. At least Nick had the good sense to cover his eyes. He could have given a fellow a little notice though.

“Chase and Willa are fixin’ to leave and Mama wanted me to find you.”

“I’ll be there in just a minute. Now get.”

“Just a thought,” he hesitated.

“What’s that?” Brent didn’t really want to carry on this conversation, not when he was still buried balls deep inside of Peyton and growing harder by the second.

“You might want to leave separately. Mama is looking for you and there’s a few hundred people scattered about.”

Brent heard Peyton’s whimper and knew that she was embarrassed to no end.

“Will do, now will you please close that fucking door.”

Nick nodded his head behind the hand that shielded his eyes. “Sorry,” he stammered and moved back to close the door, nearly tripping over his feet. “Damnit, sorry.” In his hurried retreat, he kicked over a bucket and caused a hellacious sound to follow. He might as well tear down the whole fucking barn on his way out. “Sorry, I’m gone. Good to see you. I mean, I didn’t see you. I’ve got my eyes covered. I didn’t mean that I had seen anything. Just trying to be polite, is all.”

“Would you get the fuck outta here.” The whole situation would have been funny if Brent hadn’t been in such a compromising position.

“Okay, okay. See you later, Brent.”

“Shit, just go.”

“I’m gone.” Nick slammed the door and Brent could hear him literally running from the barn.

Brent pulled himself from Peyton’s body, removed the handkerchief from his pocket his mother had given him before the wedding in case of tears and proceeded to clean himself up. He watched Peyton as he wiped away the proof of their passion.

She stood with her head in her hands, back against the wall, legs slightly quivering beneath her.

When Brent had cleaned himself up the best he could, he hitched his pants back onto his hips, replaced his boxer briefs to their righted position and then zipped and buttoned the tuxedo pants.

He moved toward Peyton, but she heard his steps and eased away before he could touch her.

“Don’t,” she said with a low, shaky voice.

“Don’t what? I was just trying to...” He never got to finish. She pushed the tack-room door open and walked through it. He started to go after her, but she put up a hand to stop him.

“We don’t need to be seen together. Just stay away.” Brent followed her as she moved from the opening of the door and saw her fixing her appearance before leaving the interior of the barn. He called after her just before she exited.

“Peyton—”

“Don’t. Stay away. Just stay away.”

“Like hell. We need to talk about what just happened.”

“No, we don’t. Just leave it alone. It won’t ever happen again.”

“The hell it won’t.” His voice had gruffness attached to it.

“It can’t. Just leave it alone. It shouldn’t have happened in the first place. Forget it and stay away. You know how to do that, right? You’ve gotten pretty good at it the last few years. I’m sure it will come back to you in no time.”

With that, she was gone. Brent stood in the barn for a long enough period of time for no one to notice that they had been in there together. When he finally rejoined the rest of the wedding guests, he realized that he had almost missed Willa tossing her bouquet and her and Chase’s departure.

Standing at the back of the crowd, he searched and searched until he found Peyton. She was in the front of the group of woman, standing next to Jocelyn as they waited to catch the bouquet clutched in Willa’s hands.

He saw her face had recovered from its blush and he also noticed how her hair had a slightly tussled appearance. He felt a large swell of caveman pride overcome the inside of him. He had done that. He had made her come undone in his arms and the proof was written all over her body.

From the corner of his eye, he saw his new sister-in-law toss her bouquet, but he didn’t realize where it was heading until it landed in a pair of outstretched hands.

Peyton’s outstretched hands.

She had caught the bouquet.

According to tradition, she would be the next female in attendance to be married. But to who? Would it be Carter Nash who could never seem to stay in one place long enough to take care of what was supposed to be his? Or would today change everything?

Did he want today to change everything? The thought gave him pause. There she stood not two feet away but miles beyond his reach. He had done that. He had pushed her away.

He wanted her, the proof was still semi-hard and hidden by the damned tuxedo jacket, but he was far past the age of fighting over a woman. Wasn’t he? It was kind of hard to fight for a woman who didn’t want to be fought over.

Too many questions ran the course of his brain. Peyton was the first thing in his entire life, certainly the first woman, he couldn’t have at the drop of a hat. But he could change that.

He wanted Peyton. He wanted what he’d had to begin with, but had lost. He wanted her for however long he could get her.

The grin that crossed Brent’s face was the first genuine one that he’d had in a long time. Standing watching her as she took the congratulations from all the jealous females around her, Peyton seemed shy and a bit embarrassed. She had never liked being the center of attention even for all her rip-roaring and wild-haired times. She did things because she wanted to do them. Not because she wanted others to see or know what she was doing. She was a lot like him in that sense.

That was one of the things that had drawn him to her to begin with—Peyton was Peyton no matter who she was around. She didn’t conform. She didn’t mold herself to fit—she was just Peyton—his Peyton.

Brent watched as she smiled and spoke to his new sister-in-law and then to his brother. Chase spoke as well, but only a few words, before he whisked his bride away. Then she stood in the middle of a crowd, but all alone.

Her attention was taken from the crowd and centered on the bouquet in her hands. The wildflower bundle was a collage of color upon color. She tilted her head, closed her eyes and breathed in the aroma of one of the flowers. The look on her face, that single blissful moment, made Brent smile. He held on to that smile—until she looked his way.

Their eyes locked for more than a moment and Brent felt his heart plummet and his knees get weak. The look she gave him was the first in a long time without any pain, without any contempt, without anything at all.

The bouquet dropped from her face down to her side and she turned on her heel and walked away without faltering. Brent knew from experience that walking away wasn't as easy as it seemed. Each step was painful and awkward. You never knew whether to walk left or walk right. Whether to look back or to keep forward. He knew what he had done. He hadn't looked back—until now.

Chapter Nine

Of all the rotten-ass luck. Peyton glanced down at the beautiful bouquet sitting in her passenger seat and rolled her eyes. Catching the bouquet at Willa Tate, now Kiel's, wedding had been the cherry on top of her entire day.

After she had caught it she'd turned to receive Jocelyn's over-enthusiastic hug and came face to face with Brent. He was standing just at Chase's side and staring at her. She wished she could get the look on his face out of her head. It was different from his usual sullen, brooding facade. He actually looked amused with a bit of mischief mixed in. And she had slept with him. Scratch that. You actually had to be in a bed to sleep. She'd had sex with him.

Rough sex. Hard sex. Good sex. Great sex.

Mind-blowing, earth-shaking, legs-quivering sex. In a tack room. At his home. At his brother's wedding. And one of his brothers had seen them. Well, not actually seen them, thank goodness. He had kept his eyes covered—or so he said. Peyton wouldn't know. She had kept her eyes fully closed during the entire embarrassing episode. Brent had still been inside of her. He had been hard. And she had wanted him that way.

The entire ride from the Kiel ranch to her brother Murphy's home was eaten up by thoughts of what she had done.

What they had done.

Why had she let it happen?

The answer was clear as a bell to her—she had wanted it to happen for far too long.

She was an awful person. A terrible, horrible, awful person. She and Carter's engagement was barely over and she had given in to her wants and her needs and loved it. She felt a small snag of guilt develop and sit directly in the middle of her chest. She felt like she had cheated. Cheated on Carter. Was that possible? They weren't together. They hadn't been in months, but she still wore his ring.

It didn't matter that she hadn't had sex in over a year. Had it been a year? Mentally, she counted and came to the conclusion it had been more like eighteen months.

Carter rarely came home and when he did he spent most of that time sleeping—deeply. She had tried to coax him from his sleep more than once, but it hadn't worked. It had always worked with Brent. With Brent all she'd had to do was place her mouth on him and he was awake.

He loved waking up with her mouth on him. She loved waking him up that way. She loved how his dick grew and grew as it was nestled inside the warmth of her mouth. He always returned the favor. And boy, could he return the favor.

“Stop it,” she chastised her reflection in the rearview mirror. Don’t think about things that can never happen again—that should have never happened in the first place.

But they had and she couldn’t take them back. It wouldn’t change anything. It couldn’t change anything.

She pulled into Murphy’s circular drive and sat for a second and tried to collect herself. The ring on her finger twinkled with the moonlight and the sight of it made her want to breakdown. The ring was supposed to bring happiness. Joy. Elation even, but it only brought regret. Instead of Carter’s ring adorning her finger, it should have been Brent’s. She wanted it to be Brent’s.

“No, I don’t,” she told the reflection again. *Liar.*

With a frustrated sigh, she pushed the car door open and walked to the front porch steps. Murphy had called her five times before her encounter with Brent and several times since then.

He had taken Lucas home just after the ceremony and was supposed to have come back, but he had never returned. Something must have happened.

Peyton stood at the front door and knocked several times without receiving an answer. She wouldn’t have thought anything about her knock going unanswered if Murphy hadn’t called so many times. Had something happened? Was Lucas hurt?

A sense of foreboding filled her bones, but nothing could have prepared her for the hell she encountered when Murphy pulled the front door open.

Murphy stood in the open doorway, still dressed in the clothes he had worn to the wedding, minus the tie and a few buttons of his shirt, with blood streaming from the deep cuts in his face.

“What the hell happened?” Peyton’s hands flew to his face and it was then that she saw the slight bruises already starting to form on his cheekbone and near his eye. There was also a scratch on his chest identical to the ones on his face. “How did you cut yourself? What happened?”

“Lower your voice, okay.” Murphy’s voice was barely more than a whisper as he pulled her inside and shut the door.

“You need to tell me what’s going on.”

Murphy grabbed her by the elbow and pulled her further into the house. It took her a moment to register what she saw. Their house had been destroyed. Glass was scattered across the hardwood floors, pillows were shredded and lying in disarray all over the place. The furniture had been turned over and the television had been thrown to the floor without any hope of it ever working again.

“Were you robbed? You need to call Floy Taylor and get him and his officers out here.”

“No, we weren’t robbed and I’m not calling Floy. Listen, I need you to take Lucas for a couple of days. Can you do that for me?”

“Of course I can, but what about work. I have to work.”

“I’ve already talked to Reed. He is going to take your shifts. Just take Lucas. And no matter what, do not tell Dad and Mom what you saw here.”

“Murphy you need to tell me what’s going on. You’re cut to hell and back, the house is destroyed and you’re being rather cryptic about the whole thing.”

“Not now, Peyton. Not now.” Murphy’s voice and his deep brown eyes so like her own told her to drop whatever line of questioning she had swirling in her head. And Peyton would have if Murphy’s wife, Kathleen, hadn’t decided at that moment to make an appearance.

“What the fuck is she doing here?” Kathleen’s speech was slurred and her movements were swayed. Peyton’s concern turned to fury as she watched Kathleen move toward them. Her fury was replaced momentarily by a slight bit of embarrassment. Kathleen was naked except for a tiny silk robe hanging off her shoulder and loosely belted at her waist. Her breasts and everything else God had given her was there for Peyton and anyone to see.

“Kathleen, you need to go back to bed,” Murphy said. He moved in front of Peyton, blocking her from Kathleen. Peyton didn’t know who he was trying to protect—her or his wife.

“I thought I told you I didn’t want any of your fucking family here.”

“I was just leaving,” Peyton said as she sidestepped Murphy and headed toward the staircase. Kathleen’s questions followed her.

“Where are you going? Murphy! Where the hell is she going?” Peyton’s foot had taken the first step before Kathleen’s nails dug into her shoulder and spun her around. “I asked you a question? Where the fuck do you think you’re going? This is my house. Mine! You have no right to walk in here and act like it’s yours.”

“Kathleen, I think you need to just calm down and take a step back. I’m going upstairs to get Lucas and then I’ll be out of here.” Peyton took a deep breath and her thoughts were confirmed—Kathleen was drunk. Miserably, disgustingly and rottenly drunk.

“The hell you will. That is my son. Mine. He’s not yours. He’s mine. You and my fucking sister need to remember that. He’s mine.” Peyton had no idea what Kathleen’s sister had to do with this conversation, nor did she care. All she cared about was getting her nephew and getting him the hell away from his slobbery-assed mother.

Peyton turned once more and tried to take the stairs again. Once more Kathleen stopped her. She turned to tell Kathleen to remove her hands and her nails from her body, but never got the chance. As soon as she faced Kathleen a hard palm slammed against the side of her face and slid down.

The pain didn't shock Peyton. She had grown up with a house full of boys and had played rough once or twice in her life, but the sting that remained did disturb her.

Peyton brought her hand to her cheek and saw red when she removed it. Not red with rage or hate, but red with blood. Kathleen had not only slapped her—she had raked her overly long, overly manicured nails down her face in the end. Peyton no longer wondered what had happened to Murphy's face and to his chest. She also assumed Kathleen was the reason the living room and their possessions were in the state they were in.

In a split second, the James temper that Peyton had flowing through her veins came to the surface fully loaded and ready to be unleashed. She heard her brother Murphy's words, but they seemed far off, garbled and mumbled. All she heard was Kathleen's laugh and all she saw was the havoc she had wreaked. All she felt was the pain the woman had inflicted.

Peyton's fist clenched by her side and Murphy issued his warning once more.

"Peyton, don't." But it was too late. Peyton threw her punch and it landed Kathleen full on. At any other time, Kathleen would have simply bent under the force, but in her drunken state she fell to the floor with her head and back taking the most of the impact.

Before Kathleen could move, Peyton was on top of her. Kathleen was a bit taller and outweighed Peyton by a few pounds, but she couldn't do anything to unsettle Peyton's body from the top of hers.

She flung out her arms and nails and tried to catch Peyton's other cheek, her hair, anything, but Peyton could fight dirty when the circumstances called for it. This circumstance called for it.

Grabbing Kathleen's hands, Peyton forced them to the floor. Peyton settled all of her weight and her anger onto Kathleen's chest and moved her face inches away from her sister-in-law's cussing and screaming form.

"Get this straight, Kathleen, you've only got once to do it. If you ever hit, try to hit or even think about hitting my brother again, I will find out about it. When I find out, I will come back here and rip every last one of those damned false fucking nails you pay so much for from your fingers." Peyton was serious. She had never been more serious in her entire life. Kathleen must not have thought she was because she started to laugh.

"Look at you. All mad. It's cute. If your brother were more of a man he wouldn't have to have his sister fight his battles for him." Kathleen's body bucked beneath Peyton, but there was no unsettling her.

"It's because my brother is *more of a man* that I'm doing this. He would never hit you, Kathleen, no matter what you say or do, but I would. I will if I ever see, hear or think you've pulled this shit again." Peyton started to release Kathleen's arms and go about her business of collecting Lucas and his things, but she was stopped. Kathleen stopped her. Peyton had released Kathleen's hands for the briefest of seconds but it was enough for her to get one more lick in. The second slap to Peyton's face didn't hurt, it only made her temper go beyond the point of no return.

“Who the fuck do you think you are talking to me that way?”

Peyton let her temper get the better of her. One minute she had Kathleen’s arms and the next her hands were clutching the stupid robe the woman was barely wearing as she pulled her back off the floor. When Peyton had her where she wanted her, she let Kathleen have the answer to her question.

With all her strength, her might and her love for her brother, Peyton reared back and sent her fist flying. It connected with Kathleen’s face with a smack that echoed through the once-immaculate living room. Kathleen was done.

Peyton pushed herself to her feet and watched as Kathleen rolled to her side, clutched her face and rocked her body. When she was at her full height, she saw Kathleen peek up at her from behind her hands.

“I’m Peyton James, bitch.” Peyton shook her head at her mess of a sister-in-law lying curled in a ball on the floor. She shook the sting from her fist and then looked at her brother.

He looked tired. He looked defeated. He looked like death chewing on a cracker. Peyton stopped her thoughts from rolling out of her mouth and simply asked, “Is Lucas upstairs?”

Murphy nodded as he continued to stare at his wife. Peyton said nothing else as she ran up the length of the staircase and into Lucas’s room. The little blond-headed boy who looked just like his daddy sat in a miniature rocking chair with his favorite stuffed animal clutched to his chest.

Peyton shut the door and shut out the outside world. She walked slowly to him and fell to her knees. They were face to face—eye to eye. What she saw staring at her made her heart hurt and her eyes well up with tears she couldn’t shed.

Lucas’s little body was shaking slightly and his face was streaked with new and old tears. Peyton didn’t think, she just acted. She opened her arms and surrounded Lucas as he flew into them.

“Come on, buddy. You’re coming home with me.” He didn’t speak, but Peyton felt his head bob beneath her chin. She stood, taking Lucas and his threadbare animal with her. There was no need to pack a bag—he had plenty of clothes at her house.

All Peyton thought about was getting the boy out of the house and away from his mother. Peyton kept his eyes sheltered as she descended the stairs and was glad to see that only Murphy was there.

As she passed him, he reached out and ran his hands through Lucas’s hair and then ran ahead of Peyton to open the door. She walked through the doorway with steadier legs than she should have had, but she made it.

“Thanks, Peyton. I’ll come by tomorrow and check on him.” She nodded and carried Lucas farther away. When he was buckled into the booster seat she kept in the back of her car he finally spoke.

“Is my mommy mad?”

Peyton swallowed the knot she had in her throat and answered him. “No, baby. Your mommy’s not mad.” She kissed his forehead and swept the hair from his eyes before closing the door and walking toward

her own door. A little white lie never hurt, but the truth could do some serious damage. The truth was Kathleen wasn't just mad, she was the craziest bitch Millbrook had ever seen.

Chapter Ten

After three hours of battling with the most stubborn two-year-old mare he'd ever encountered, Brent decided to take a break. Letting the mare run, buck and show her temper in the round pen would hopefully calm her down and wear out her spirits a bit. Then she and he could have a nice long talk about her behavior. He climbed the fence and hopped over, landing soundly on the other side.

The sun was beating down on his back and he wished he could rid his body of the sweat-soaked shirt, but he knew better. The bitch had turned on him twice, trying to take a piece of the flesh from his shoulder. The more between her mouth and his skin the better. There was also the other reason he kept the shirt on. The twin lines of scratches down his back were a tale-tale sign of the time he'd spent with Peyton in the barn. Somehow or another her fingers had worked their way under his shirt and scratched him as he'd driven into her. Or maybe she had marked him through his clothing. Who knew? He just wanted the proof of his tryst to stay between him and Peyton—and Nick. Damn it.

Speaking of his brothers, there they were, all three of them, sitting side-by-side on the front porch, legs anchored across the railing, rocking back and forth with the wind. All three of them were watching, analyzing and throwing suggestions between them and to him while he wrestled in the pen with a mare he didn't even want to take on. Chase wanted her. Wanted her for Willa. They were off on their honeymoon and Brent was stuck here fighting a losing battle with his brother's wife's hell bitch.

"I think you've met your match with that one," Hayden said, tipping his hat and covering his laughing eyes.

Bastard, Brent thought.

"Maybe if you give her a little time she'll come around. I don't see why we have to start today," Nick stated as he rocked away.

"Tomorrow might be better. Maybe after a good night's sleep you can handle her." Jason's mocking voice reached Brent's ears just as he reached the porch and took a seat on the top step. Leaning back, he rested his upper body on his arms and stretched his legs out, letting the tense muscles relax under the denim.

"I can handle her today." Pulling the leather gloves from his hands with his teeth one finger at a time gave him a second to think.

To think about how to handle the mare.

To think about how to handle Peyton.

To think about what strategy would be best for breaking the mare.

And for breaking Peyton.

His body should be sated, eased, exhausted, but it wasn't. It was running on all cylinders. This morning he thought that he had worked her out of his system for awhile—he was wrong. She was still there, the scent of her, the feel of her body, the knowledge of what she sounded like when she came. Nope, she was definitely still in his system. Cussing and throwing the work-worn gloves aside did not improve his mood.

"Speaking of handling," Jason said, rising from his rocker and taking a seat beside Brent. "Did you happen to notice Anna McCready at the wedding?"

Shaking his head, Brent knocked the dust from his pants leg and watched it catch the breeze and fly away. He didn't notice anybody at the wedding, except for Peyton. Only Peyton.

"How could you not? Damn. She grew up in a hurry. College is doing her body good."

Brent wasn't worried about what college was or was not doing for Anna McCready's body. "Stay away from that. Her daddy's a good man and he doesn't need you sniffing around his baby girl or any of his girls for that matter. It will only cause problems. How do you know it was Anna anyway?" It was a logical question. Anna McCready was part of a pair—a pair of twins. Identical twins.

"Believe me, I can tell. Besides, Anna McCready is not on my radar. I just know a good-looking woman when I see one, and she and her sister both fall into that category. Beautifully. All them damn McCreadys do." Laughing and punching Brent's arm playfully, Jason changed the subject. "So, where'd you get off to last night? We were planning on heading into town for a drink but we couldn't find you."

"Just drove around, not that it's any of your business." Picking the discarded gloves back up, Brent went about the task of putting them back on and getting back to work.

"Until five this morning?"

Brent only nodded his head and pulled himself to his feet. Maybe Jason would take the hint and leave the subject alone.

"I'm not buying it."

He had driven around—for hours. Trying his best to work everything out in his mind. By the wee hours of the morning he had come up with plenty of reasons for him to stay away from Peyton, but none of them were good enough for his mind or his body. He wanted her, pure and simple, and he would get what he wanted.

Brent could have responded to Jason's meddling. He had a smart-ass comment all lined up, but fate intervened. In the form of one Jocelyn Reece.

"Shit," Jason muttered to the dirt at his feet. "I thought she went home. What the hell is she doing back here?" Watching Jocelyn drive up the dirt road toward the house was like watching a tornado weave its path. If it were possible, she drove worse than Jason did. Just like a bat out of hell.

Jocelyn, and all of her dust and glory, flew past them, waved a bit and nestled her jeep in between Brent's and Hayden's trucks. It was a tight fit, but considering Jocelyn had done away with the doors of her jeep at the beginning of the summer, she just climbed out. With her came three suitcases and an overnight bag and a few other articles Brent couldn't identify.

"What the hell?" the question came from Jason as he stood to take a place next to Brent.

"Hello there, boys. Long time no see." Smiling as she drew nearer lugging the cases behind her brought a thousand questions to Brent's mind. Those questions came out of Jason's mouth.

"What the hell are you doing here? And why the hell do you have luggage?" Jabbing a finger through the air in the direction of Jocelyn's luggage stopped her steps two feet away from them and the house.

"I need clothes, don't I?"

"For what?" Jason put the most menacing look on his face he could find and then placed his hands on his hips for an added intimidating affect.

"Well, I'm staying here and I like clean clothes." She picked the cases back up and walked toward the front porch.

"The hell you're not." Jason blocked her path with his body.

"The hell I am." Jocelyn countered dropping the bags, rather heavily, on one of Jason's booted feet. Cussing and bitching, he stepped away from her.

"What's going on, Jocelyn? We thought you went back to your daddy's last night after the wedding." Brent spoke over Jason's hissy fit.

"I did. This morning I decided that I was fed up with being treated like a child when I am far from it, so I moved out. I'm declaring my independence. Will you help me with these?"

"That still doesn't explain why you're here, kid."

Brent winced and rubbed a hand over his face as Jason spoke. He was looking for a fight and he knew he would get one from Jocelyn.

"It seems that my daddy doesn't think I am old enough to have a house all to myself, and I can't take another minute of his bull-headed ways, so I left. It was your mama who suggested that I stay here until Daddy comes to his senses and realizes I am not a *kid*." She threw the word Jason's way and he looked fit to be tied because of it. It didn't help that when she spoke she batted her eyelashes at him, making his fury mount.

"You can't stay here," Jason interjected as he looked to each of his brothers to back him up.

Brent saw the uncomfortable look on all of his brothers' faces. None of them knew what to say. Agreeing to the situation would bring Jason's wrath down on them and not agreeing would bring Jocelyn's. Nick and Hayden were between a rock and a hard place.

Brent had yet to figure out who was the rock and who was the hard place.

Instead of arguing further with any of them, he started his short walk back to the pen and to the hateful bitch who had her sights set on him and any flesh she could get a hold of. But Jocelyn's next sentences stopped his steps.

"I told your mama that you all would be less than enthusiastic with my being here. So I suggested I spend the next few weeks with Peyton. Do you think she would take me in? Just for a little while?" Brent's heart jumped several beats.

If Jocelyn stayed with Peyton it would put his plans for seduction on hold for who knew how long.

If she stayed at the house he would just have to put up with Jason and his foul moods for a week or two until this all blew over and Jocelyn moved back home. Jason's current mood was throwing him a little off-course. Yeah, he and Jocelyn fought like cats and dogs, but they could also coexist pretty well, or at least they should be able to.

What the hell was going on with him? What had caused this sudden anti-Jocelyn movement he was currently on? He didn't know what Jason's problem was, but he would find out. Jason could be pissy about Jocelyn and her choice of homes for the next few weeks. Brent could handle his bad moods, but not the nights away from Peyton and her body.

"You can stay here." He was the oldest so he made the decision that set the next argument in motion.

"Have you lost your mind?" Jason yelled, kicking the dirt at his feet and spewing it into the air in Brent's direction.

"Get over it, you tittie baby. Put on your big-boy panties and deal with it. You won't even know I'm here." Throwing a quick smile over her shoulder, she picked up one of her bags, while Nick took the other two, and made her way into the house, up the stairs and into her temporary room for the next few days or weeks.

"I'll know you're here all right. Wherever you are trouble seems to follow," Jason flung the insult her way. Brent had no way of knowing if Jocelyn heard him or not, or if she even cared for that matter. "Have you lost your ever-lovin' mind?"

Brent moved toward the pen once again with Jason dogging his steps. "It's just a few weeks. How much trouble can she get into in that much time? With the four of us around? Chase and Willa will be back in a week or so and by then Jocelyn will be so bored she'll head home anyway." Placing his foot on the bottom row of fencing, he boosted his body over the top of the fence and into the tiny area. Now it was time to get to work.

"I'm not a babysitter." Jason hopped the fence as well—fuming and foaming at the mouth with every passing second.

"Nobody's asking you to be." He slapped the gloves against his thigh and knocked most of the dust away for the time being.

"Well, get ready, because that is what every last one of us is about to turn into. Fucking babysitters."

“I bet we don’t even know she’s here.” Maybe they wouldn’t. Hopefully.

“Oh, bullshit. Let me ask you a question. You like worrying about that pecker of yours?” Jason asked but never gave Brent the chance to answer. “You spend a lot of time worrying about where to put it, where not to put it, and shit like that?” Brent could only shrug at his brother’s questions.

“Because let me let you in on a little secret, now that she’s here—” he jabbed a finger toward the house and indicated Jocelyn with the snide *she*, “—your dick is going to have to take the back seat. Because now that you’ve let her stay here, we’re going to have to worry not only about our own dicks but every fucking dick in this county. Congratulations. You’ve turned us all into fucking monks for who knows how long.” Frustrated and cussing up a storm, Jason hopped the fence once more and headed toward the barn.

Whatever was bothering him had come out of nowhere. A few days ago, they had all been life-long friends, kidding and cutting up together. But today was totally different.

Thinking about this decision did not change his mind. Either way Jocelyn was going to put a damper on his plans, but that would change. Brent had Peyton on the mind and all the positions he wanted her in and there was nothing, not a fucking thing, that was going to get in his way. Not this time.

He had wasted enough time where Peyton was concerned. He’d had years to sit and stew over where he had gone wrong and now he was going to do something right. He was going to give it one more shot. Yesterday in the barn was all the encouragement he needed. Peyton may have thought it was only his body that wanted her, but she was wrong. He wanted Peyton. Pure and simple. He just had to convince her of it.

Chapter Eleven

Peyton stood at the kitchen counter in a daze. The sun was shining, she could see a slight breeze catch the hanging baskets suspended from the roof of her back patio, and she heard the cling-cling sound from her wind chime. It was another beautiful day. But Peyton's mind was not locked on concentrating on the scenery. It was locked on something much more pressing.

She'd slept with Brent. Scratch that, she and Brent had had wild, naughty oh-so-good sex. Nothing more, nothing less. She'd had a couple of days to think, a few hours of sleep and plenty of time to let the realization of what she had done sink in, and boy had it ever.

The recreation of the event made Peyton's mind and body work overtime. Since the wedding and the whole barn incident, she'd had plenty of time to think about what had happened. She had thought that Lucas's presence would keep her mind occupied, but it hadn't. Instead, at every turn she saw Brent's body pressed to hers, his lips lingering in close proximity to her own, and she remembered vividly how he felt as he pounded inside of her.

There was obvious sexual attraction between them. It had been there for years, but it should have diminished long ago. It should have gone away when Carter asked her to marry him and promised her the world and everything else along with it. Those promises he had made took a backseat to all the ones Brent and his tongue had ever made. She had been a fool for ever thinking Carter and his ring could make her life complete. In the end, the ring had caused more problems than it had fixed.

With a sigh, she grabbed her keys and sunglasses and headed for the door. It was Tuesday afternoon, which meant it was Peyton's day to deal with her grandfather. Glenn Peyton James, her namesake, and the thorn in her side more often than not, lived just past her mother and father's home. They all took turns checking in on Grandpa Glenn. At seventy-two he was still spunky and spry and liked to believe he could still do all the things a man twenty years younger could do, but he couldn't.

In order to keep him in line, Murphy, Reed and herself, along with all of her McCready cousins, looked in on him from time to time. It took a group effort to keep him in check. He was still wily and cunning enough that he could pull the wool over some of the others' eyes, but not Peyton's. She knew him. She anticipated him. She could head him off before he took a step in the wrong direction.

She hadn't been able to go over on Saturday afternoon because of the wedding and then the hell that had taken place after it so her cousins had.

Since bringing Lucas home with her with the strictest of orders not to involve her mother and father in any of Murphy's goings on, she and Lucas had lived like hermits, barely leaving the confines of her house. That tended to make a kid stir crazy—it didn't do much for Peyton's nerves either.

Murphy had shown up the night before, still carrying wounds so much like Peyton's on his face, and collected Lucas. He hadn't spoken of what had transpired on Saturday afternoon and volunteered no information about the current situation at home. He had simply gotten Lucas and his things, kissed Peyton on the forehead like a good child and left. His departure left too many unanswered questions for her wondering mind.

She pulled the door closed behind her, jogged to the car, jumped in and started the engine. In three days time her life had gone from being predictable and uneventful to being filled with drama plus a naughty should-never-have-happened roll in the hay with an old flame.

That's what you get for being a smart-ass.

Her father's words echoed in her head—he was right though. Laughing at herself and sending the dust of the road flying behind her, she sped to her grandfather's house. Maybe an afternoon with him would cancel out the mess her head was making of itself.

Glenn James's house sat on the same land as her own—just on the opposite side. It was a ten-minute walk through the pasture to get there and a minute or two's drive. Peyton had spent most of her childhood and even some of her adult life running through the pastures and napping beneath the old oak tree that sat on a hill in the middle of the property. Lazy days, that's what Grandpa Glenn called them. Today might just turn out to be a lazy day. A nice nap beneath the trees would be relaxing.

Pulling into the driveway, Peyton noticed she wasn't the first James to arrive. The SUV her parents drove was there next to her grandfather's thirty-year-old pickup. There was one other truck Peyton recognized. Reed's. Reed was there. Her family, the whole lot minus Murphy. Great.

Peyton bided her time walking across the gravel toward the front porch steps. She felt like a child walking into her parents' house after doing what she knew she shouldn't have been doing. She totally expected a spanking as she entered the front door.

She swallowed the knot that had formed in her throat and pulled the screen door open. The foyer was dark and her eyes had to adjust from light to dark and then back again. When she was focused once more she didn't like what she saw. Perched on the arm of the chair, looking less than enthusiastic and a little afraid, was Reed. When he turned his head and looked at her, she stopped dead in her tracks and read his lips.

“Run.”

For a split second, she started to do just that. Her feet turned and her body followed, but before she could take a half a step her father's voice stopped her.

“Peyton.” Big Jack James had a voice that could force a yellow streak down a hero’s back. Peyton’s insides froze for a second along with all of her muscles. Maybe, just maybe, if she stood there long enough he would forget that she had arrived. Maybe she could retreat and run like she wanted to. No such luck.

“Peyton Elisabeth, I know you’re there. Come on in here, baby girl.” This wasn’t good. Her father’s voice had a tone attached to it that she had only heard a few times before in her life. Retreat was not an option. She took a quick breath, turned and walked toward the living room.

As she rounded the corner and stood next to Reed she prayed for strength. On the older-than-dirt couch that had barely any color left, sat her father and grandfather. Neither looked happy. As a matter of fact, Reed looked a little rough for wear.

For longer than she could stand her father and grandfather sat silently and looked at her and Reed. No one spoke and the silence was worse than anything. After another few moments, her father took a deep breath and started to speak.

“Incoming. Hold on to your panties.” Reed’s words made Peyton’s body jump. She jerked her gaze toward Reed and then back to her father.

“Who wants to tell me why I have been banned from my son’s house?” His stare was a thing of legends. Neither Reed nor herself uttered a word. She didn’t know if she could’ve if she had wanted to. “Why he won’t take my phone calls and why in the hell this one—” her father stabbed one of his large fingers Reed’s way, “—has been the good and dutiful son for the last few days without any questions asked. And why you look like you brawled with an alley cat? What happened to your face, Peyton?”

Peyton’s hand flew to her face and she winced when her fingertips came in contact with the bruises that lay beneath the ugly, scabbed marks Kathleen’s fingernails had caused.

She started to speak. She started to tell her father the whole truth and let the blame for everything fall at the right person’s feet, but she stopped herself. She stopped herself out of the unconditional love she had for her brother. Her strong, loyal and totally miserable brother.

Peyton looked at Reed, who seemed content to stare at his boots. Maybe he would take the lead. Maybe he would be the bigger, braver man and lie to their father for everyone’s own good.

“She knows more than I do.”

Rage replaced the slight bit of fear that lingered in her belly. Out of instinct, she balled her fist and sent it flying into Reed’s shoulder.

“Shit, Peyton! That hurt.” He scowled at her as he rubbed the sting she had placed on his flesh.

“Serves you right. Why can’t you just keep your damn mouth shut?”

“The two of you can work this out between yourselves later. Right now I need to know what’s going on with my son.” Big Jack leveled them both with another one of his guilt-causing and tortuous gazes, but neither one of them spoke. What could they say?

“Nothing? Fine. I’ll tell you what I already know and then maybe you two would be kind enough to fill in the gaps I have in this story.”

She watched as her father rose from where he sat next to his own father and walked toward her and Reed. Her father was an impressive man. In his fifties he still held on to his muscled physique and most of his hair. He could still make her heart soar with adulation over his compliments for her and plummet with guilt for not holding her tongue.

When he stood directly in front of them he began his assault on their conscience.

“I got a phone call.” He paused for dramatic effect and would have loved to know that his first sentence had the effect he wanted it to. “From a concerned friend, over my son’s, your brother’s, well-being. Seems Murphy ran into town yesterday and from the looks of him he took a whuppin’.” Shit, was the first thing that ran through her head. If it weren’t for a concerned or nosy neighbor, her father would be in the dark where he needed to be.

“So, being the father I am, I went to my son’s house to find out if he was all right. You two want to know what I found when I got there?” Peyton had a pretty good idea, but she didn’t let on that she did. “I found your brother, whupped for sure. He wouldn’t speak to me. He would even look me in the eye. He told me that he had everything under control and it was best that I left. My son asked me to leave his home. The home I helped him build for his family. Now, me being the type of person I am, I’m wonderin’ just what the hell is going on and why it’s going on and who the hell I have to beat the shit out of for beatin’ the shit out of my boy.”

Peyton’s mind kicked into overdrive. Her father didn’t need many gaps filled in. He had filled the majority himself. He just needed a name. The name of the person who had acted as harbinger of destruction on Murphy’s house and on her and Murphy’s bodies. Big Jack wanted to do what he’d always done—he wanted to protect his children even though they were all adults and could protect themselves. He was just like a mama bear with her cubs. That fact coupled with her father’s haggard appearance made her insides sway with regret—regret that she couldn’t tell him anything. She had promised.

Peyton kept her promises.

“I need to know what’s goin’ on, kids. I need to know if my son is okay. If my grandson is in danger.”

“Lucas is fine.” The truth that fell from her lips made a few of the lines of worry disappear from her father’s face.

“What about Murphy?” Silence took Peyton’s and Reed’s tongues once more.

“Jack? Son?”

Peyton lifted her gaze from her hands she couldn’t seem to stop worrying together and looked at her grandfather. Grandpa Glenn now stood by her father’s side with a comforting hand rested on his big shoulder. “Why don’t we go about this a different way.”

What was her grandfather up to? Glenn had a way of getting anything out of anybody and that fact worried Peyton. He always had a scheme. He always had a game plan. She just wondered what this one entailed.

“I want you two to know how proud I am of you both.”

Reed’s eyes looked to Peyton’s and Peyton’s looked to his. “The fact that the two of you will hold your brother’s secrets at all costs tells me that my son raised you right and that I raised him right.” Glenn James squeezed his son’s shoulder once more and then patted it.

“We all know something’s going on over there. Some know more than others, but we all need to be on the same page here. If you won’t tell, or can’t tell because you were asked not to, then don’t.” Three sets of confused eyes landed on the oldest James. “If you don’t tell, you don’t betray. Right? Why don’t we do this, you two don’t say a word until we get something wrong. If we get it wrong just say as much. Nothing more, nothing less.”

His plan made sense. They would never have to explain, to tell Murphy’s secrets, just tell them what they got wrong. It was sneaky and low, but Peyton felt they needed to know what a crazy bitch Kathleen was. She nodded and saw Reed did the same.

“All right. We all seem to have come to an understanding. Son, why don’t you tell them what you know, no questions asked, and let’s see where that gets us.”

Her father nodded his head, took a deep breath and began.

“Murphy won’t take my calls and when I go over there he won’t let me through the door. I can see through the windows. The place is a damned mess. Just like his face. Just like your face.”

Peyton felt like her scratched-up face had a flashing neon light beneath it.

“We also know that Kathleen seems to be out of town and that until yesterday Lucas was at your house. Did Kathleen have something to do with all this? Did she destroy her and Murphy’s house? Did she hurt Lucas?”

Her father’s questions were coming one after another and they were making Peyton’s head spin. She couldn’t answer them, but her father’s last questions were asked to her face directly, with him barely an inch away from it. Everything was happening so fast. Her father was barking questions. Her grandfather was trying to reel his son back in and her brother was trying to deflect the questions his way. One up for Reed in Peyton’s book—he was trying, though it did little good.

“Is my grandson hurt?”

“Son, we said no questions.”

“Peyton already told you he was fine, take her word. She would never lie to you about Lucas’s safety.”

“You two need to tell me what is goin’ on.”

“Son, just calm down and we’ll get to the bottom of this.”

“It’s not Peyton’s fault. Quit yelling at her like it is.” Reed’s protective side was in full swing as he spoke to their father.

“Then whose fault is it, Reed?” The mile-a-minute questions and booming voices stopped.

“It’s my fault.”

During the last few minutes none of them had noticed the front door open and the newest James arrive. Murphy stood in the archway leading from the foyer into the living room and stared his father down. Peyton held in the gasp she felt rise in her throat when she saw her brother. He looked awful. His face was still bruised and battered, just like her own, his golden locks were disheveled and his eyes were rimmed in red as if he hadn’t slept in days. He probably hadn’t.

“You can stop with the inquisition. I’m here now and I’ll tell you every last detail.” Murphy left his spot by the archway and walked straight to their father. Peyton watched her father’s expression speed through a million emotions. In the end he said nothing. He just opened his arms and Murphy walked into them.

Peyton felt the bite of stinging tears close her throat and then fill her eyes. She watched the two men as everyone else did. They said nothing, they never moved. Her father just held her brother and her brother let him. It was Grandpa Glenn who broke the silence.

“Why don’t the three of us take a walk. These old legs could use the exercise.” He donned his hat, walked past her father and brother and she and Reed followed closely behind. The trio didn’t stop until they were nestled in the barn, far from the house, out of sight and out of mind.

Reed made his way to the stall he had moved Cinnamon Stick to and rubbed the mare’s neck as she offered it to him. Grandpa Glenn found a chair that had seen better days and took a seat and Peyton settled for one of the lowest bales of hay stacked in the hallway to rest on.

“This is one big fucked-up mess.” Reed’s voice shattered the quiet of the hallway and Peyton was glad that it did.

“Yes, it is,” her grandfather said. “What happened to your face, Peyton?”

“I thought we said no questions?” Peyton looked at her grandfather and quirked her eyebrow.

“That rule only applied to you two and your daddy. It has no bearing on me. Now what happened to that pretty face?”

“Got in a fight.” Was all Peyton could tell him. It was the truth—most of it.

“D’you win?”

“You bet your ass I did.” Peyton smiled as her grandfather and brother chuckled at her statement.

“That’s my girl.” The talking stopped and stillness took its place.

Peyton wondered if Murphy would tell their father everything. She wondered what her father would say and what he would do. She also wondered how long it would take for her father to tell her mother what had transpired today. Lexie James would not be happy. She would cry for Murphy. She would cry for

Peyton and then she would denounce the tears and turn her attention to righting what or who had wronged her kids.

Peyton took a deep, cleansing breath and let the air and the aromas from the barn fill her nostrils and her soul. When the scents hit her system, so did furious flashbacks.

She and Brent on Chase's wedding day. She and Brent in the barn on Chase's wedding day. Brent's hands holding her hips. Brent's fingers caressing her nipples. Brent's lips loving hers and his cock invading her body. A shiver ran through her and for a split second she could sense him filling her.

Stop it, her mind willed her body with no luck. All she could see when she closed her eyes was him. All she could hear when she closed out everything else was her own moans of pleasure. All she could feel in her heart was regret—regret that she wanted nothing more than to do it again.

But she knew you could want for days, weeks and even years and there was nothing you could do about it.

Wanting was a waste of time, but what a way to waste it.

Chapter Twelve

Brent sat on the front porch of the main house and rocked slowly back and forth in one of the numerous chairs available as he stared off into space. The only noise that could be heard across the great expanse of land that was his and his brothers' was the slight noise coming from inside the house.

Brent listened as his brothers and Jocelyn laughed and carried on with one another as they finished off what was left of the beer from the wedding reception days ago.

He smiled to himself when he heard the group inside burst out laughing about whatever Hayden had said. Brent could imagine what the conversation was about. He should go inside and join them, but he didn't. Instead he sat alone with the night and his thoughts—his thoughts about Peyton and what had happened between them.

He hadn't intended for it to happen, but it had. Sex had not been his purpose for following her into the barn. Had it? He had rolled that very question around in his mind a thousand times since it had happened. Did he go there with the intent of having sex with her? No. Had he expected it? Never. Had he enjoyed it? Hell yeah. He always enjoyed it.

Sex with Peyton was always fresh, new and exciting and filled with more than just hormones that needed to be sated. Did he love her? That was the question. He used to. There was definitely something more he felt when it came to Peyton—there always had been. The past three days, not seeing her, but thinking nonstop about her, had wreaked havoc on his insides. He had gone years without her, but he felt like he couldn't stand a minute more. Lust would do that to a man, but love would too.

There had been a time in his life when he'd seen himself settling down with Peyton, creating a home and a life with her and having children. There had been a time in his life when he couldn't imagine going a day without seeing her, talking to her, kissing her.

What he felt now brewing inside of him felt a lot like he used to feel when he was around her, when he saw her, when he took her. These feelings had been around for awhile. He had tried his best to bury them. But she made that impossible.

He leaned back in the chair and retrieved the item he'd had with him every day since the wedding—her panties. He had forgotten he had put them in his pocket. He didn't realize that he'd forgotten to give them back to her until he was changing out of that damned tuxedo. He was glad he checked the pockets. He sure didn't want Evelyn at the bridal shop to find them on Monday morning. Of course, Evelyn probably

wouldn't have thought anything about it. She would have simply kept them until she saw one of them and handed the article over.

He could have imagined what would have happened if she'd handed them over to Chase or Jace or any of his brothers for that matter. It would have started a whole bunch of mess he didn't really want to deal with. Not now. Everything was still too fresh and too new—too undetermined.

But Nick knew. He had seen them—well, not really. It was hard to see from behind a hand. Brent counted himself lucky that it had been Nick who found them.

Nick was from the old league of southern gentlemen and he had a code of honor. He didn't kiss and tell and he sure as hell didn't see anyone kiss and tell about it. Brent wished he could say the same for his other two brothers.

Jace and Hayden both always wanted the nitty-gritty details. Hell, if Hayden didn't remember the details he sure found a way to make them up. And boy, could he make them up.

From the corner of his eye, Brent saw the screen door open and Nick step through it. He replaced Peyton's property inside his pocket with every intention of returning it to her—and soon. Maybe even tonight.

It was early yet, not even eight o'clock.

She didn't get off work at the bar until ten or soon after. He could very easily stop by Big Jack's and return what she had left behind—or what he had kept. But he didn't want to embarrass her any more than she already was. He also didn't want to be sitting in her driveway when she pulled up either. Sitting in someone's driveway seemed a bit stalker like to him. He could wait. But hadn't someone once said that there was no time like the present? Who knew? He sure as hell didn't.

Brent moved his legs that were resting on the railing and let Nick pass. His brother sat down and was quiet for a moment. He started to speak and then stopped himself. He did that three more times before it started to bug Brent.

"Well, spit it out. Don't just sit there when you've got something to say."

"I didn't see anything."

Brent smiled to himself and kept on rocking. "I know you didn't and I appreciate you not looking. That means a lot to me. Just don't mention what you saw or didn't see to anyone else, okay? She was embarrassed enough and I don't want to add to that embarrassment if I can help it."

"I won't say anything about what I saw...what I didn't see."

"Thanks for that." Brent watched Nick lean back in the chair and try to relax, but it wasn't working for him. He looked tense and uncomfortable and like something was on his mind. Brent took a deep breath and then let it expel. Whatever was on Nick's mind must be bothering him an awful lot. Brent knew he would regret his next question, but he asked it anyway. "What's on your mind?"

He saw Nick jump nearly out of his chair and he shook his head. Whatever was going on must be major. Nick was usually as relaxed as they came—laid back, passive to the point of irritation, but tonight something was off.

Brent started to question him again but was halted when both Jason and Hayden joined them on the porch. Neither took a seat. They both decided to lean against the railing facing him and Nick.

They all were quiet for the briefest of seconds and then Jason spoke.

“I thought you said you weren’t messin’ around with Peyton.”

Brent’s gaze flew to Nick who looked a little green around the gills and guilty as hell.

“I thought you said you didn’t see anything?” He moved to the edge of his seat about the same time Nick jumped up from his.

“I swear, I didn’t.” Nick pointed a finger at Jason. “He’s the one that told me you were in the barn. I didn’t even know who you were in there with.” Nick then stretched his hands out in front of his body in an act of surrender. Who in the hell surrendered before the fight even started? Nick Kiel, that’s who.

“I thought you said you didn’t know who I was with?” Brent’s voice boomed in Nick’s direction and he watched as all three of his brother’s winced at the volume.

“I didn’t.”

Nick’s voice told Brent he was telling the truth, but that brought up another question.

“If you didn’t know who I was in there with and you didn’t look, then how in the hell did you know?”

“I told him.” This came from Hayden who stood there lazily and waited for Brent to come after him. Hayden was the polar opposite of Nick—he would fight over whether or not the sky was indeed blue. He was like Jason in that respect. Over the years, Brent had seen Jason get into more fights over the stupidest things.

“How in the hell did you know and why’d you tell *him*?” Brent indicated Jason by stabbing his finger in his direction.

Hayden only shrugged his wide shoulders and said, “You didn’t tell me not to tell anyone, so I told Jason and he told Nick and Nick, being ever the one full of chivalry, decided to come and get you. I just can’t believe he didn’t look. I would have looked. Hell, I still want to look.”

Brent’s fists clenched at the thought of Hayden seeing Peyton in any other way besides fully clothed, but there was something else bugging him.

“If you told Jason and Jason told Nick, who in the fuck told you?” They all looked from one to the other, but didn’t say anything. When had they all decided to keep things to themselves? At any other time they wouldn’t have shut up.

“I did.” Brent turned his head and looked in the direction of the voice. Standing on the porch, holding the screen door with a hip, was Jocelyn.

“Shit.” Brent threw the curse into the air and then stood from the chair in one swift movement. All of his brothers’ scattered like roaches. “Who doesn’t know that I was in the barn with Peyton during the wedding?”

“Actually it was the reception.” Hayden made his comment as he hid behind one of the columns of the porch.

“What the fuck does it matter?” Brent yelled his way.

“Just saying,” Hayden countered.

“Well, don’t say. Don’t say anything about it. None of you.” He pointed his finger at each and every person on that porch and hiding somewhere slightly off of it.

“We won’t,” they all said except for Hayden. All of the gazes that had once been focused on Brent were now focused on his too-quiet brother still standing behind the column. Brent watched as Jason reached over from where he was cowering and punched Hayden on the arm.

“Aww, shit. I won’t. Jeez, who would I tell anyway?” He whined as he rubbed his arm.

“Just make sure you don’t.” Brent walked past his family and smiled to himself as they all moved farther away from him. All of them except for Jocelyn. She remained steadfast against the Texas backdrop and leaning casually against the door.

“How did you know I was in the barn with Peyton?” Brent watched the full-on smile cross Joss’s face. After seeing that smile he wasn’t sure he wanted to know the answer to his question.

“I saw you.”

“Saw me what?”

“I saw you watching her. You watched her during the wedding, after the wedding, during the reception, the whole time.”

“Did not.”

“Did too. You looked at her like...” She paused for a moment and Brent could see she was looking for the right word or the right phrase to express what she wanted him to know.

“You looked at her like there was no one else there. Even with two hundred people around, she was the only one you saw. She was the only one in the room.” Jocelyn’s giddiness over her proclamation worried Brent for a minute and confused him as well.

“Am I supposed to know what that means?”

“No, but I do, and that’s all that counts.” She waved goodbye to him and walked back inside the house. He would never understand women. Brent took the steps leading away from the porch and headed for his truck.

He had thought to give Peyton some time before he bombarded her with his intentions as they pertained to her. But now that his whole family knew, there was no sense in waiting. Hell, if Hayden knew

then the whole county would know sooner or later. He still hadn't acquired the filter most people have between their heads and their mouths. He would say something without meaning to say something.

He had just reached his truck and was opening the door when he heard Jocelyn call after him from behind the screen door of the house.

"If you're going to see Peyton she's not at the bar."

Brent stopped. He turned to look at the four sets of eyes that were staring back at him. "Where is she?" He gave away his intended destination, but what did it matter now?

"I don't know. All I know is that when I called earlier to talk to her, Reed said she wasn't there."

"Why the hell was Reed there?" Reed James did all he could to avoid working at the bar. He had even claimed to have morning sickness before to get out of a shift. He wouldn't have been there if unless something drastic had happened.

"I don't know. I didn't ask. All I know is that Peyton isn't working tonight and Reed has her shifts until tomorrow." Something wasn't right. Something had happened.

Brent turned away from her without a wave or even a goodbye. With one flick of his wrist, he brought the engine to life and threw it into gear. He headed down the drive fast enough that he could still see the dust flying as he turned onto the paved road heading toward Peyton.

Chapter Thirteen

Peyton hated what the mirror reflected. Her cheek was red and swollen and the three sharp lines running its length were scabbed. At least they weren't oozing blood anymore. Damn Kathleen and the damned fingernails she paid a fortune for.

Disgusted with herself, her reflection and the fact that Kathleen had actually smacked her but good made this entire episode seem all the more vivid and memorable in her mind.

She took one more long look at her face in the mirror, applied a little more of the ointment that was supposed to help with the healing and then flipped the light switch off and moved from the downstairs bathroom.

Absently, she walked around her living room, picking up a discarded shirt here or a forgotten shoe there. She wasn't a messy person, by any means, but she was far from a neat freak. The truth was she barely spent enough time at home for it to get messy or dirty or disturbed in any way. The only reason she made her bed in the mornings was because she loved climbing under the unwrinkled and pristine sheets at the end of the day.

Especially a day like today.

She and Reed and her grandfather had sat in the hallway of the barn for more than two hours before Murphy and her father had come out of the house. Nothing was said about their conversation—she knew better than to ask. Her father had hugged her and then left. Murphy had hugged her and left, and her grandfather had hugged her and given her the smelly ointment to put on her face.

She wondered if her parents now both knew just how messed up the whole situation with Murphy's wife was.

Kathleen was crazy for sure. The proof was written all over Murphy's and her own face. There was only one thing worse than a crazy woman—a crazy woman with unlimited assets. Kathleen was both.

Out of habit, Peyton checked her cell phone to see if she had missed any calls. She hadn't missed a one. Murphy would call her tomorrow or come by. He'd said as much. Maybe it was a better sign that he hadn't called.

Murphy would clean up the mess like he always did. Kathleen didn't do anything. She didn't work. She didn't clean the house—she hired someone to do it.

Even with her thoughts occupied by her brother and his mess of a life, she couldn't get her mind off him—off Brent. She was a fool to let herself even think about the what-ifs and what-could-have-beens that

surrounded him. What had happened had happened—it wouldn't again. She should regret it more than she did. She should regret what she felt—not the encounter itself. Sex was sex. That was that—nothing more. What was done was done.

There was nothing she could do about it now. She couldn't take it back if she wanted to, and she wasn't entirely sure she wanted to take it back. That made her a worse person than the one who had done it against the wall of a tack room at a wedding with two hundred people not twenty feet away. To top all of that off, she had an ex-fiancé who was currently MIA. Peyton had tried to call Carter every hour on the hour for the past few days—since she had left Brent. Surprise, surprise, Carter Nash was nowhere to be found.

The fact that he was supposed to be in Oklahoma City and Reed thought he was somewhere totally different irritated her. No, she didn't keep tabs on Carter all the time. He was a grown man. He could take care of himself. But it had been weeks since she had talked to him and months since she had seen him. She had told him the last time they talked that she would meet him in Oklahoma City last weekend.

She would return the ring she couldn't seem to leave in her jewelry box and he would take it back accordingly. Wearing the ring was a lot easier than answering why she wasn't wearing it. Everything would go smoothly. There would not be fighting, no hurtful words, no blame placed—just an end.

The fact that he had been unreachable for such a long amount of time did irritate her though. Even if they weren't a couple anymore they were still friends, and friends worried about each other. Didn't they?

Was he worried about her? Obviously not. He hadn't tried to call. Did he care that she couldn't get in touch with him because his stupid phone had been disconnected once again? Probably not. When Carter was rodeoing all Carter cared about was the next town and the next prize to be won.

She should be used to it by now. They had been engaged for nearly three years and he was rarely here, rarely available and never near when she needed him.

Drained, she walked with heavy limbs to the kitchen to lock the side door. True, it was only a little after nine, but she was exhausted. All she wanted to do was curl up with her trusty, always-there, always-waiting pillow and drift into a deep sleep. A sleep that wasn't racked by dreams and images of Brent—past, present or future.

Walking through her small cottage-style house, she doused lights before heading to bed. She had just taken the first step onto the staircase when she heard a knock on the front door.

Dread filled her bones. Nothing good could come from an uninvited visitor—especially after what had happened the last few days.

The knock sounded once more and Peyton's heart matched its cadence. She turned, took a deep breath, said a silent prayer for courage and strength and walked to the door. When her hand touched the door knob she noticed that it was shaking. She silently told herself to quit being such a baby and open the door.

With swift movements full of fear, she twisted the ornate knob and pulled the door open with all her might. When she saw who was standing on the other side her shoulders relaxed, her heart slowed and her body gave in to the stress of the last few days.

Without thinking about what consequences her actions would have later, she launched herself into his arms and let the tears she couldn't shed before fall. She didn't know how long they stood there on her front porch, in the dark, him holding her, her crying her heart out into his chest. All she knew was that he was here and his strong arms held her when she didn't have the strength to hold herself. It felt good to have someone hold her—it felt good to have him hold her.

She wondered if she had the strength to ever let him go again. For her own good, and for her heart and her sanity's good, she hoped she did.

When Peyton had opened the door to his knock he had actually been a little nervous. What was he supposed to say? What was he supposed to do? The nervous feeling spinning in his belly stopped when he saw her face. His mood went from nervous and a bit elated too madder than hell in a heartbeat.

What had happened to her face? It was dark on the porch, but Peyton's swollen and scratched face could have been seen from a mile away. Brent had felt fury filter through his blood and was on the verge of demanding to know who had done that to her face. But when she'd launched herself into his arms and hung on to him for dear life, the rage had dissipated, although never fully gone away.

Brent thought a couple of times during the long length they stood there that he needed to move her inside, sit her down, make her relax. But he couldn't bring himself to let her go. The sobs tearing her body apart and racking his as well stopped him from moving an inch.

He nestled the top of her head beneath his chin and increased the hold he had on her. Both seemed to help her with whatever she was going through. Her sobs finally stopped, but he could still feel her tears soaking the front of his shirt. He didn't care. He did care that the night had turned cool and Peyton was wearing nothing more than a thin nightshirt.

That was when he really noticed the nightgown. Hasty visions of him tearing it from her body stopped as soon as his eyes connected with her face and its swollen and scabbed texture. When he felt a shiver move through her body and then into his own, he did the only thing he knew to do. With ease, Brent lifted her into his arms, stepped into the house's foyer and closed the door with his foot.

He moved past the entryway and into the living-room until he located the couch. It was in the same place it had always been. With her still tucked in his embrace, he dodged the few pieces of furniture in the room and sat on the overstuffed sofa, taking her with him.

They sat there forever it seemed like. Neither of them spoke. They didn't have to. Brent had a million questions to ask her, but he would wait until Peyton decided she was ready to talk.

When she finally spoke it was into his chest, and he could barely make out what she had said.

“Say again, darlin’? I didn’t get that the first time.” His arms squeezed her body and he felt the loss when she moved away from him so that he could see her face and hear what she said. He would have rather listened to her garbled words all night than to have her shy away. But he let her.

“I said I’m sorry. I don’t know what came over me.” She wiped her eyes with the back of her hands and Brent clenched his teeth when she winced against the pain she obviously felt when she touched her cheek.

“You don’t have to apologize to me.”

She was still wiping her tears away as she moved to the other end of the couch. Seeing her sitting there, immersed in the huge cushions with her feet drawn up under her body, her face scrubbed clean of makeup and her hair falling across her bare shoulders, Brent regretted what he had lost—more than he ever had.

“Who did that to your face?” Brent watched as her lips parted as if to speak, but she closed them just as quickly.

“I don’t want to talk about it,” she said before she stood from the couch and moved quickly to the kitchen. He watched as she flipped on the light illuminating the huge area and fiddled with this and that, trying to make herself appear busy. He knew he had one of two choices to make. He could either let it go and ignore her mangled appearance, or he could press her until she told him what had happened, who had done it and where he could find them.

He wanted to find whoever had hurt her and beat the shit out of them. He wanted them to feel as bad as he felt for Peyton. He wanted to hurt them as they had hurt her. He wanted her to see that he cared enough about her to try to protect her, try to shield her, try to do all the things he hadn’t done years before.

Brent wanted to take the place of the man who should have been here comforting her, helping her, and maiming the person who had dared hurt her.

Where was Carter Nash?

Brent could remember seeing him six months ago in town. He knew he had stayed a few days—a few days with Peyton. Those few days Carter had been in town were the first few Brent had ever spent with Kelly Cantrell and her ever-ready body. Brent had also stayed drunk and hidden, not wanting to risk meeting them both in town, on the street, hand in hand like the almost happily married couple they were. Or so he’d thought.

The events that had taken place between him and Peyton made him wonder just how happy the happy couple actually were. He knew Peyton. She didn’t cheat when she was with someone. She didn’t look another man’s way—she never had. Why had she looked his way? He and his dick were both glad that she had, but there were several questions still lingering in his mind. No time like the present.

He watched Peyton watch him as he moved into the kitchen area. He stood close—too close. He blocked her exit whichever way she wanted to go. There was no way for her not to look at him, not to

notice him. Ignoring him wouldn't do her any good. He was here and he wasn't going anywhere anytime soon.

"Peyton..." he started, but she stopped him. Her hands landed on his chest and he thought she would push him away as she had before, but she didn't. She simply stood there with her palms resting on him. His breathing was slow and even. His heartbeat was anything but. He wondered if she could feel the heavy quakes erupting beneath his sternum. "Peyton?" he whispered as her eyes met his. He saw her take a deep breath, drop her gaze from his and then let every detail of what had happened after she'd left the wedding, after she'd left him, fall from her mouth. She was talking so fast he had a hard time keeping up with the flow of information, but he caught enough of it and he wasn't happy. Not by a long shot.

"Murphy's wife did that to you?"

She nodded, but had yet to lift her head and look at him.

"Did you hit her back?" It was a reasonable question. He knew Peyton. Generally she gave as good as she got.

Hell, she had been bouncing people out of Big Jack's since she was old enough to be there, probably even before that. He also knew another little tidbit about Ms. Peyton James that few others did—she was too little to fight fair, and on more than one occasion had become downright dirty when the situation called for it. Most men wouldn't hit a woman, wouldn't hit Peyton, but some were drunk enough to try. Those few who had tried once had never done so again.

"The last time I saw her she was curled up on the living-room floor in the fetal position."

Brent held in his laughter at what she said and the way she shrugged her shoulders in a nonchalant fashion. As if that sort of thing happened a lot. He wondered if it did.

"Is this the first time something like this has ever happened?"

Slowly, Peyton nodded her head and shrugged her small shoulders once more. "I don't know. I mean, Kathleen's always been a bitch, but I never thought she was violent. Hateful, bitter, jealous as hell and a general pain in the ass, yes. Abusive? I never would have thought so. I thought she would be too worried about breaking a nail or something."

She moved around Brent and sluggishly walked back into the living room. He followed. He watched Peyton fall to her back on the couch and then rest her arms over her eyes. There was only a little space left at the end of the couch, but Brent wasn't about to sit anywhere but with her.

He lifted her small, arched feet from where they were lying crossed on the cushions and sat, bringing them to rest on his lap. To an outsider they would have looked like a couple. Brent liked that. It amazed him how in just a short amount of time she was as comfortable with him as she had been in the past. She didn't mind that he touched her leg, rested his hand on her knee and looked over the length of her body—and what a body it was.

Growing up, Peyton had been more into sports than into anything else. Her participation in athletics had left her with long, trim and firm legs, arms and everything else in between. She had never been skinny, and Brent was glad of that. Perfectly fit and round and lush was just how he liked his women—how he liked Peyton.

Brent's mind was lost in thought and his hands were lazily toying with her silky smooth skin. He didn't realize that she was watching him.

"What?"

She smiled slightly and shrugged her shoulders at his question. That was when Brent and his body noticed she was totally naked beneath the thin, white sleepwear she had on, except for a slight outline of a pair of panties. When her shoulders lifted in the shrug it brought her breasts and her nipples against the front of the material. He could see everything.

He repositioned her legs without giving himself and his response to his newfound knowledge away. He wanted Peyton. Wanted her more than he wanted his next breath, but now wasn't the time. Now was the time to show her that he was here for her—and Carter wasn't.

"Nothing. I was just thinking how messed up the last few days have been."

"How's that?" He had stopped his hands, but when she closed her eyes and scooted down farther into the couch and farther into his lap, he couldn't help but touch her.

"A week ago, everything was normal to the point of boring, and then everything is just turned upside down. You and I—"

"You and I what?" He pressed.

"If you had told me a few days ago that you would be sitting on my couch tonight, acting all concerned and interested in my wellbeing, I would have called you a liar and slammed the door in your face."

"And today?" As he asked, his fingers traveled past her knee, up her thigh and grazed the hand resting on the flat of her stomach. He smiled to himself when he felt her muscles flex and jump under his own.

"You're here, aren't you?" She never moved her hand from under his touch, but she didn't return it either. That little fact gave Brent hope and took it away at the same time.

"I'm here, but do you want me here? I can leave if it will make you feel better."

"Do you want to leave?" she questioned, but spoke to her hands instead of him directly.

"No."

Her eyes remained downcast as she posed her next question. "Do you want to stay?"

"Do you want me to stay?" It was a true game of cat and mouse, but Brent wanted to know that she wanted him here. He wanted to be here, the proof was in his presence. He just needed to hear her say the words. He hoped she would pick the right ones.

"Yes."

“Then I’ll stay.”

Those few words seemed to comfort her more than any he had said previously. Once again the two sat in silence—him watching her, her watching him. He wanted nothing more than to pull her from her position and huddle her in his arms, but he held back.

Days from now, when her world was all right as rain and everything was back in place, he didn’t want her to be able to say or think that he had made the decisions concerning their current relationship solely on his own. This was a joint effort.

After what felt like hours had passed, she finally spoke. “What are we doing?”

He narrowed his eyes as he watched her and turned her question forty directions in his mind before replying. “What do you mean?”

“I mean you and me, me and you. Sitting here having a civil conversation with each other, you trying to comfort me, you trying your best to care for me whether you want to or not. What are we doing?”

“I want to make sure you’re okay. You’ve been through hell and back the last few days, and if I’m right you walked most of the way by yourself. There’s no sense in you walking back all alone if I can help. Is there?”

“So you feel sorry for me? Pity is the reason you’re sitting here? I don’t want your pity.” Her back was starting to get up and Brent had to do whatever he could to unruffle her feathers. He didn’t pity her, not by a long shot and he told her so.

“Pity for you is the furthest thing from my mind and the furthest reason from the truth as to why I’m here.” Brent very rarely felt lost in his life, but this conversation had him turned in different directions and none of them pointed in the right way.

“What do you feel then? What do you feel for me?”

His entire life and its new direction depended on his next few words so he knew he best choose them wisely. “I know it’s not pity.”

“What is it then?” She pressed him. His instincts made him reach across her body and stop her fingers and their idle movements.

“What do you think the reason is?”

“I need to know that you don’t pity me. I need you to tell me what comes next? What comes next for me? For you? For us?”

“I can’t do that.”

“Why not?”

“Because however this ends up, this thing between you and me, I want you to be able to say that you made up your own mind without any persuasion from me. I don’t want you to ever wonder ‘what if’ about which way you decide to go. If you decide to kick me out in the next minute, I want it to be your decision

and your decision only. If you decide you want me here tonight, in whatever fashion, I want it to be of your own free will.”

There. He’d said it. Whatever happened next was totally up to her. No ifs, ands or buts about it. He just hoped her decision involved him and her wrapped around each other in the near future.

“If I asked you to do something for me, would you?” Again, she spoke to her hands and not to him.

“I’ll do what I can.” Which was the truth. He didn’t know what she wanted, but he was determined to make her see that any wish or wishes she had he would attempt to grant.

“Would you hold me?” Timid was far from what Peyton was, but the words that fell from her mouth were wrapped in shyness.

“Scoot over.” He caught the flash of surprise in her eyes just before she rolled to her side and gave him her back. Maneuvering gracefully was a difficult feat, but he managed as best he could. When his chest touched her back her body formed to his own without pause. He used one arm as a makeshift pillow and wrapped the other one around her stomach. It took all the strength and willpower he could conjure not to touch her anywhere else. It was fucking difficult to have Peyton in his arms again and not get hard, but he was proud of himself and his dick at the current moment.

“Just until I fall asleep,” she whispered into the room.

“Just until you don’t need me anymore,” he whispered into her ear. They lay there silent and snuggled for only a short while before her breaths became level and deep. The rhythm rocked Brent into drowsiness and before he could stop them his eyes fell closed.

All thoughts stopped.

All questions vanished.

The only thing left was him and her—the way it should have been all along.

Chapter Fourteen

She came awake in a flash. Her body levered away from the couch and away from the warm form wrapped so closely around her. She didn't realize it at the time, but she had brought him awake with her.

"What?" he asked with a little frantic note attached to his tone. "What is it? You okay?"

He was sincere. He was concerned. He was here.

It was now or never. Peyton could either take the bull by the horns or have the bull take her. Turning slowly, she removed her body from his and dropped her feet to the carpet. Her legs were steady as she stood and leaned in the few inches to face him where he sat. His eyes questioned her for a minute, but he didn't speak.

Swallowing the last of her reservations, she brought one knee up and placed it next to his thigh on the couch. He shifted his position just a bit to accommodate her actions. As he moved his body he gave her other knee room to take a place on the outside of his other leg.

Peyton moved her body so that her knees supported her frame. From this angle she looked straight into those eyes she dreamed about.

Moving slowly, her lips brushed over his. He seemed surprised. It made her smile. She did it again, this time adding more pressure. The second time their mouths fused his opened beneath hers. She let her tongue stroke and play over his the way she had always loved to do. She relished in its texture—smooth, strong and sexy. As her mouth and tongue dance as it pleased, her hands found his shoulders and she curled into the bulges of his biceps she felt flexing ever so lightly beneath her fingertips.

Tingles ran through her fingers. Feeling the heat radiating beneath the soft cotton material of his shirt made her yearn for more. She slid her fingers along his shoulders and they grazed the flesh of his neck. She felt the muscles contract and release accordingly. One hand made its way around his neck to glide through his hair while the other feathered his chin and jaw. One thing she didn't allow herself to do was break their kiss. Not yet. Not until all the inhibitions were gone could she look at him.

Peyton deepened their kiss, letting her tongue flirt with his. She teased the tip, stroked the sides and drew it into her mouth, sucking on it ever so slightly. That seemed to be Brent's undoing. His hips arched to meet hers as his hands gripped her waist, bringing her body down completely against the bulge in his denim.

He was hard, so amazingly hard.

The force of his movement caused a jolt of bruising pleasure to course through her body. The gown she wore offered no protection against the ridge his cock created. She could feel the length of it growing and moving underneath her. He broke their kiss to ask, "I take it you want me to stay?"

"Yes," she explained, breathless and wanting more. He gave it to her. Brent's hand fisted in her hair before he pulled her mouth back to his. Peyton couldn't have stopped the moan that flowed from her if she wanted to.

It felt too good.

Her hands found his chest and she pushed herself back. Tugging, she pulled the material of his shirt away from his body.

Brent helped.

He moved his back away from the couch so she could remove the shirt with ease. Raising his arms allowed Peyton to view his bare chest for the first time in forever.

His stomach was flat and hard. A light dusting of hair swirled across his chest and feathered into a glorious trail down his stomach that disappeared into his jeans. Peyton licked her lips at the thought of what those jeans held.

With his shirt finally discarded, she trailed her fingertips across his shoulders, down around the flat brown nipples and farther. His breath hitched, or she thought it did, as she toyed with the waist of his jeans and the trail she couldn't take her mind or her eyes off of.

She leaned forward and flattened her tongue against one of his nipples. She lapped once, then twice before moving to the second. It beaded and budded beneath her moving tongue. She heard what sounded like a moan. It encouraged her, and she sucked lightly before easing toward the middle of his chest. Her position on his lap only allowed her to go so far, so she moved. He moaned again. As gracefully and seductively as she could, she let her legs sink to the floor. Her position gave her more room to roam and play like she wanted.

She risked looking up at him and liked what she saw. Brent's back was against the couch, his head resting on the cushions, hands fisted at his sides. Peyton smiled before she could stop herself. Caution was thrown to the wind and all of her inhibitions flew away as she worked the buckle on his belt loose. It came apart easier than she thought it would have.

The button of his jeans was next.

She popped it easily and saw his stomach quiver. She licked the spot where the quiver had started and then licked the spot where the quiver had stopped. When she did, Brent sucked in a deep breath and the zipper released on its own.

Peyton realized at that moment that he wore no underwear. He was bare. There was nothing else separating his cock from her. Desire fueled her movements. With ease and care, she ran her fingers across the hardened flesh she could see. She took his jeans by the waist and pulled.

They didn't move.

Her gaze traveled the length of his body until they reached his face. When their eyes met Brent lifted his hips, letting Peyton ease his jeans down his thighs. When she looked back down, she swallowed—and almost choked.

He was huge.

Beautifully so.

His cock was long and thick and perfect in shape and size. How could she have forgotten such an intimate detail about his body? Maybe she hadn't forgotten. Maybe she had blocked it out for her own good.

Veins ran the sides leading to the bulging head that was swollen and dark. She could feel herself getting slick and slippery as she looked her fill. But she wanted to do more than look.

She wrapped her hand around him, or tried to, then slowly moved her fingers and head at the same time. When the head of his cock met her tongue she heard him hiss a curse. She didn't know what he had actually said, she didn't even know if it was English, and she really didn't care.

Peyton flicked her tongue across the bulging head of his cock more than once. She was rewarded with a salty pearl of moisture from the opening. With her free hand, she moved her hair away from her face and took him into her mouth. As she slid her mouth down, covering as much of his girth as she could, he lifted his hips.

It took Peyton a second to notice he was pumping gently into her mouth. This time she moaned. The vibrations from her throat must have felt good because Brent moaned and pumped deeper. She took as much of him as she could, but it wasn't enough. She wanted more. Her hands stroked the flesh underneath her seeking lips as she worked her mouth farther down on him.

"Harder." His muffled request brought her eyes to his. He was watching her. Watching her as she worked her mouth and tongue over his extended length. She drew him into her mouth once more, held the pressure and sucked. Her efforts were rewarded with a moan. Her own throat copied the sound.

Moving up and down, keeping a constant rhythm and a consistent amount of suction, she adored his cock with her tongue and mouth.

Peyton willed herself to keep her own hands away from her begging body, but it was easier said than done. Each time his hips moved, bringing him closer and deeper into her throat, she felt the muscles of her pussy tense.

She was so consumed by what she was doing and the sensations running through her she gasped and squealed when Brent's arms surrounded her waist and pulled her beneath him on the couch.

Those perfect lips of his seized her own and fused them together. His kiss was always domineering and demanding, but this kiss was different. It was carnal. Peyton's eyes flew open when she felt the heat of his hand against her hip slip underneath her gown.

She whimpered in the back of her throat when she felt the material pass her hip and then her waist until it rested just below her breasts. The only thing separating them now was the thin white lace thong she had pulled on after her shower. Why she'd put underwear on she didn't know. She didn't bother with wearing a bra. Why the thong?

Because the things made her feel sexy. They made her feel feminine. They made her feel wanted and desired—and Brent loved them. He always had. It seemed he still did.

Brent made quick work of disposing of her gown. It ended up in a ball next to his shirt on the floor. He pushed his body away from hers and supported his weight on his extended arms. Peyton watched as the cords of muscles played beneath his skin.

She watched as his gaze raked her body, and the look in his eyes sent shivers from the top of her head to the tips of her toes. He leaned down and kissed her once more, a quick kiss without pressure or play. He returned to his original position and said, "My turn."

Chapter Fifteen

Brent took a second to calm his breathing and control the lust driving his body. He wanted nothing more than to rid her of the little scrap of material she wore as panties. The white against her tanned flesh was intoxicating enough. When you added in her legs, her lips and her mouth she had the whole package.

When she'd sucked him into her mouth it had taken all of his control to keep from coming. He wanted to—what man wouldn't? But not yet. First he was going to see if she tasted as good as he remembered. He wanted to see if she tasted just as sweet as she did in his dreams.

Placing a hand on each of her hips, he pulled her farther down into the softness of the couch. With her back flat and her legs wide there was no stopping him from licking and tasting to his heart's content. His hands played along the lines of her legs and caused goose bumps to form beneath his fingertips.

He inched back, moving his body away from the junction of her thighs. When his fingers reached for the lacy band just below her bellybutton she stopped him. Moving his hands away, she let hers take their place. She slowly moved the material down her legs and let the lacy scrap fall to the floor beside them. While she stripped for him he was awestruck by the perfection of her body.

Toned, honey-tanned legs, lean waist, flared hips and more. Brent's eyes traveled her body until they landed where he wanted his mouth to be. Her pussy was bare, devoid of hair, and he could see her glistening softness begging for his touch. He gave the lady what she wanted.

Bending at the waist, he let his tongue travel and trail the slick line of her pussy lips. Her hips bucked against his mouth, making him smile into her flesh. His tongue glided farther and farther until he found the center of her heat. God, she tasted sweet. Honey. That's all he could think. She was just like honey.

Brent brought his hands to rest on the insides of her thighs and gently pushed them apart. The action caused her to open completely for him. His breath hitched and his cock begged to be closer. *Not yet*, he told himself. *Not yet*.

With an open mouth and utter enthusiasm, he licked and lapped at her. The grinding motion she was making with her hips brought her closer to his seeking mouth and then farther away. His thumbs rested on each side of her opening and he separated the folds and brought his tongue against her. She moaned—deep and low. Her hips thrust toward him and he let them. He savored her delectable taste.

He loved to feel her hands in his hair, pulling his face, mouth and tongue closer to her silky warmth. With one hand, he held her open for his mouth while the other made its way to her breasts. He found her

nipples with ease, especially in their hard, puckered state. He rolled one between his fingers and plucked gently. Her breath caught in her throat and then she moaned and he did as well.

He found the peak of her second nipple. It was as hard as the first, and he rolled it with precision. As he worked her nipple into a harder bud, he bathed her pussy with long, slow strokes. Her hips were becoming erratic and forceful. She pulled at his hair, scraped at his bare back, and tried pulling him to her with her legs.

He lifted his body from its bent position and watched as his fingers took his tongue's place. He flirted with her clit, rubbing the tip of his finger over it several times before descending lower. When he found her entrance, Brent slid one finger fully into her body. God, she was tight. He slid his finger back and then added a second.

It wasn't right. She couldn't be this hot, this wet, this fucking tight. He wouldn't make it a full minute inside of her. Catching sight of his cock begging and pleading to be closer, to be surrounded, he gave in to temptation. Keeping his fingers deep within her, working her, stretching her, making her pleasure mount, he reached for the billfold in his back pocket.

He flipped it open with one hand and removed the foil packet from the slot on the side. Brent increased his thrusts with his fingers while ripping the package with his teeth. With practiced patience and precision, he placed the condom on the end of his straining cock. He rolled the latex over his flesh and caused a stream of pleasure to rise in him. Nope, he wasn't going to last long.

He eased his fingers from her body and moved to place his hard thighs in between her soft ones.

Their eyes met for the briefest of seconds before both sets became fixated on the point that would soon join them. Brent took his cock in his hand, ran it up and down against her and then slowly, so fucking slowly, slid into place.

"Fuck!" He groaned. Too tight. She would squeeze him to death before this was over. He eased slowly away from her, allowing her body to stretch and soften around him. He gritted his teeth and he joined their bodies once again. Halfway to heaven.

"Look at me." Her glassy, glossy eyes met his. Perfect. "Watch me. Watch me make you come, Peyton. Watch me."

He let his gaze travel down. Seeing the picture their joined bodies created broke his control. Thrusting with force, he planted himself to the hilt inside of her. She moaned and he felt her legs trap his waist. He found his rhythm, which wasn't hard to do because Peyton was more than willing to help set their pace.

When he withdrew she arched to him. When he plunged deep she brought her hips up, meeting him in the middle.

He stiffened his arms, lifted his body and let go, taking her with full force. He pumped and thrust with all his might and felt his balls draw tight beneath his cream-covered cock. The faster he stroked, the harder he hammered, the more she moaned.

“More,” she panted, her nails dragging lines into his forearms. Brent gave her more. They went at each other with hunger. As much as Brent wanted to watch, he couldn’t. He couldn’t because he needed to kiss her. He needed to thrust his tongue deep in her mouth just as he was thrusting his dick deep inside of her.

He surrendered to his need and captured her mouth, tearing at her with his tongue and his lips.

Sweet. So sweet.

Those were his last thoughts. Peyton clenched around him, sank her nails into his shoulders and screamed and moaned and groaned as she came. And she kept coming. Brent felt her muscles jump and tremble around him. It was his undoing. Locking their mouths together, he increased his tempo, drove himself deeper until he felt the orgasm begin deep inside of his soul.

He came in heavy and long spurts and his arms, legs and whole body shook at his release.

Exhausted and satisfied, he let his body relax against hers. Even though they were finished, both of them sated, his lips still traveled across hers. She returned every other kiss. Her breathing was as labored as his was and the smile that creased her face was limp and lazy. The smile of a happy woman.

He wanted to stay as they lay forever, but that wasn’t possible. With more regret than he should have had, he pulled away from her and stood up from the couch. He hitched the jeans he still wore to his hips and covered his semi-hard flesh as much as he could. Walking toward the kitchen, he sucked in a giant breath. He let the air fill his lungs and relax his muscles. When he grasped his cock to dispose of the condom, he realized he was still more hard than not.

He couldn’t get enough.

He couldn’t get enough of her.

As he walked back to the living room he found Peyton pulling the soft cotton gown over her head. His voice must have startled her because she jumped when he spoke.

“You’re not going to need that.” Embarrassed by her nakedness she blushed a light pink color.

“I’m not?”

“We’re not finished. Not by a long shot.” His made his way over to her and wrapped her in his arms. She opened her mouth to speak but didn’t. Taking her by the hand he led her to her room.

Inside, he watched her move to the bed first while he worked to remove his boots. Toeing each of them off as he walked to the edge of the bed didn’t take a lot of effort. Once at the bed, he pushed the jeans resting against his hips to the floor along with his socks. From the corner of his eye he saw Peyton watching him from the far side of her bed. The comforter had changed as well as the wall color, but the room and its furnishing were the same as the last time he had been here.

He quirked a finger in her direction and beckoned for her to come to him. She did without pause. His lips found hers without any trouble. One kiss after another, he drank from her swollen mouth. He lifted his head briefly and saw the light from the bedside lamp reflected in her eyes.

Gorgeous.

“Now, let’s see how this bed feels.” He pushed her back onto the comforter and covered her body with his before she could speak or think. He liked her like this. Soft, sweet and willing. Of course, he kept the knowledge of who he was in bed with at the back of his mind.

“Peyton?” He lowered his voice as her name drifted from his mouth.

“Brent?”

He liked that. He liked the way her voice wrapped around his name. “I like that,” he admitted, and it earned him a smile from her.

“What?”

His teeth found that sweet spot at the side of her neck where her pulse began to beat heavily once again as she spoke. He nipped with his teeth and heard her moan once more before answering. “The way my name sounds coming from your lips.”

“Brent,” she whispered. “Brent.” With the last syllable out, he took her lips and then took her body well into the night.

Chapter Sixteen

Peyton stirred from her sleep hours before the sun even decided to come up. She tried to stretch and realized that a heavy hand rested across her stomach. That hand connected to an arm and that arm to a body—Brent's body. He lay beside her, sleeping on his side with her body pulled close to his.

He was warm and his even and slow breathing caused a drowsiness to fall over her mind, body and soul. She turned her head slowly and quietly and studied him. In his sleeping state he didn't look as harsh as he usually did. To most people, Brent was standoffish and not the easiest to get to know or to get close to, but she knew better. Brent was Brent. No, he wasn't as kind hearted as Nick, or as boyishly charming as Jace or Hayden, or as friendly as they came like Chase. Brent was something entirely different.

She used to relish in the fact that she knew him—really knew him. She knew that he liked sitting at home watching movies cuddled together on the couch as much as he liked going out and raising hell. She knew that when asleep, his body was never far from hers. She also knew that the Brent she knew was totally different from the one most everyone else knew.

She tried to resist her next move, but found it impossible. Without waking him, she turned in his arms so that they were face to face, chest to chest, thigh to thigh. She missed this. She missed waking up in his arms. She missed the ease of lying beside him for hours before he woke up, listening and feeling him breathe. She missed the morning sex. She and Carter—

The second she thought of Carter a brief morsel of guilt did rise in her bones. She and Carter had never lain in each other's arms for hours on end. She and Carter had never held each other all night long because neither one could stand to be away from the other's touch. She had been faithful to Carter the entire length of their courtship and engagement, physically, but in her heart and in her mind she had cheated a million times.

That hadn't been fair to Carter, but it hadn't been fair to her either. After being alone and left to worry and wonder longer than she liked, about Carter and his whereabouts and his doings, she needed someone to hold her. To comfort her. To show her that they cared. She should have stopped at that.

She should have never let her mind or her feelings travel any further, but they had. They had wandered to the what-ifs in life. What if Brent was around on a permanent basis? What if Brent was lying beside her every morning when she woke up? What if it was Brent she came home to? What if it were Brent she was planning to marry instead of someone else? Instead of his best friend?

Carter hadn't deserved her unfaithfulness, real or not, but she didn't deserve his disregard for her either. But still, two wrongs never made a right. Carter had been there when Brent hadn't been. Carter had been there when Brent had shut her out. He had offered her his comfort, his caring and his love. He had offered her all of the things Brent had offered her once upon a time.

Once upon a time before her life had changed in a flash. She and Brent had ended over a stupid fight and the stupid words tossed about during that stupid fight. Feelings had been hurt and ties had been broken, along with Peyton's heart. Carter had picked up the pieces—he just hadn't known how to put them back together.

Peyton had wondered more than once in the last few years if Carter had asked her to marry him out of some misplaced sense of honor. She, Brent and Carter had been friends long before there was ever a "she and Brent" and even longer before there was a "she and Carter".

Carter had taken her on her first car date. Brent had escorted her during the homecoming festivities her sophomore year, it had been his and Carter's senior.

Carter had given her her first kiss, a kiss she'd thought she would never receive thanks to Murphy and Reed and their ever-present meddling ways. It had been a silly little peck on the lips under the mistletoe one Christmas, but it was a kiss nonetheless. It had been Brent who had taken her virginity the summer before she'd gone away to college, and when she had come back they had picked up right where they'd left off. Carter had always been around as the prominent best friend and third wheel on date night or any other night.

It wasn't until years later that she ever looked at Carter in a different light. Carter was handsome—there was no doubt about that. He had that lanky cowboy build with sun-streaked blond hair and laughing blue eyes. He was lean and muscular and could hold his own against everyone, except for Brent.

Her and Carter's relationship and Carter's loyalty toward her had caused a rift between Brent and him. That rift had opened up the door to dating, and dating had led to the engagement, and that now-broken engagement had led to Peyton's present condition—wrapped in the arms of one Brent Kiel.

She didn't want this to end. She didn't want Brent to walk out of her life as easily as he had the first time. She wanted him to stay. She wanted to tell him about her and Carter and how they weren't technically together anymore. She needed to be honest with someone she loved—and she did love him. She had always loved him and always would. She wasn't shocked by her heart's true feelings. She had always known where they truly belonged—they belonged with Brent.

Brent who lay beside her.

Brent who held her so tightly in his grip.

Brent who had made love to her more than once, with the knowledge that she had a fiancé—as far as he knew. Why had he done it? Did he really want her or did he want to show her he could have her no

matter what and no matter when? Did he honest to goodness want to be in her bed or was this some fucked-up plan for revenge?

“It’s too early to be thinking so hard.”

Peyton blinked a few times, refocused her eyes and saw that Brent was awake and watching her. How long had he been awake and how long had he been watching her turn over the last few thoughts in her head?

“Good morning.” What else could she say to the man she thought might be using her for one reason or another? Silently, she prayed that was not why he was still in bed with her. Pity would have been better. She could deal with his pity, but not his need to boost his ego by using her.

“Barely. What time is it?” When he asked his question he also pulled Peyton closer to him. She realized he must have been awake for a little while judging from the erection brushing her belly and sending chills through her body—a body still exhausted and a little sore from their lovemaking the previous night. Was it lovemaking? That was the second time in a span of a few minutes where she’d thought of their actions as lovemaking or making love instead of just sex.

“Almost four.” She didn’t have to move to see the time. The clock on the chest of drawers across the room could be seen from where she lay. “Did you sleep well?” It was a stupid question, but it was the only one that came to mind.

“I must have. I don’t even remember falling asleep.”

Neither did she. All she knew was that when she finally did fall into her dreamless sleep, she had been wrapped in Brent’s strong arms.

“I need to be going in a little while.”

Peyton knew he would have to leave sooner or later. He had to be at home and in the house before anyone else was up and moving and before any questions could be asked about where and with whom he had spent his night. Peyton wondered if he had devised his escape plan before coming over last night.

She started to move from her comfy spot in the bed and in his arms, but something stopped her. He stopped her. Brent’s arm had tightened on her waist the second her body had budged an inch.

“I didn’t say I was leaving yet, just in a little while.” As he spoke, he rolled until he rested in between her thighs. Peyton was shocked that her legs moved to accept his body without a thought from her.

She watched as he wrestled with the sheet that had wrapped around him as he rolled. When he had removed the only barrier blocking his skin from hers, she stifled the moan she felt rising inside of her.

“Are you sore?” he asked as he kissed one cheek then her jaw and then the other cheek.

“No.” She lied a bit, but she wasn’t about to stop what was sure to happen.

“You’re lying,” he said with a smile before he grazed her lips.

“Does it matter?” She returned his gesture with her own fleeting kiss.

“I don’t want to hurt you.”

“You won’t.” Peyton moved her thighs farther apart and moved her body so that the thick crest of his cock rested at her entrance. She was wet and she saw his breathing change when he realized it as well. She disgusted herself. Two seconds ago she was twirling the thoughts of knocking his block off for using her body for sex and now that same body and mind were melting with his touch.

“Peyton,” he groaned when her lips connected with his neck and her teeth raked the sensitive spot below his jaw.

“Hmmm?” was all she replied.

“I don’t have any more condoms.” That stopped her movements. She pulled her head and her mouth away from his body and looked into his eyes. “I used them all last night.”

What to say? They hadn’t used anything in the barn, but they had every time last night. There was no chance of her getting pregnant. She’d gone on the pill when she and Carter had started dating—not that it had mattered. She could probably count on two hands how many times she and Carter had been together the entire time they had been a couple, and he had always worn a condom as well. With Brent hard in between her legs, it was hardly the time for her to bring up her and Carter’s sex life or lack thereof. She finally said the only thing that mattered.

“I’m on the pill.” Her words seemed breathless. She knew why. He was inches—not even—away from being buried inside of her and she wanted nothing more than to feel her muscles stretch and conform to his length and width. There was nothing better in this world than that feeling. She watched as his face changed and his fear turned hard and full of concentration.

“Since when?”

“About three years.”

“Three years?” His face still held its mask of thought. She nodded and waited—it was all she could do. “That’s another change.”

“Another change? What was the first one?”

His features slowly shifted, and instead of the deep frown and furrowed brow, his mouth slipped into a small smile and his eyes softened. “You used to like to be on top.” His words shocked her almost as much as when he took one thrust and was buried to the hilt inside of her. In unison, they both moaned and stilled as their bodies shifted and accepted each other.

Slowly and with the greatest care, he began to move. Her swollen and used muscles objected at first but for only a moment. With every thrust her passage became more coated with desire, as did his dick. Her muscles still screamed, but it was in pleasure and far from pain. “So you don’t like being on top anymore?” he asked just before he took her lips and pumped harder and with more force and passion.

She couldn’t think. There were so many things going on in her mind and her body. She wanted to wrap her legs around his hips and hold on as he pumped deep inside of her. She wanted to wrap her arms around his neck and hold his lips to hers as their tongues and their bodies mated. She wanted to stop all of

the naughtiness and question his true motives for being here in the first place. She wanted so many things at this one time that she couldn't have, but all he wanted was an answer.

"I do. I just—" She broke when his rhythm and depth changed. Instead of the deep and long thrusts she had been receiving, she now was the recipient of shallow and fast pumps.

"Just what?" He embedded himself into her. Her pussy clenched and tried to hold him there for a minute, only a minute, but he refused. He pulled away slowly and then returned just as slowly.

"Just...out of practice is all." She thought that other truth would stop him dead in his tracks, or his thrusts as it were, but it didn't. With one move, Brent changed their positions, landing her on top of him. Her hands splayed against his chest as she pushed her body away from his and put herself in a completely seated position. With each inch she moved, his dick was pushed higher and deeper into her body.

When she was finally seated comfortably, and she could feel every inch of him, she moved. Her hips lifted and lowered slowly at first. She loved to surround him. He did as well. Brent's breathing had changed and each time she descended she heard a slight hiss of breath escape his body.

"You don't seem out of practice," he mentioned in between his moans of pleasure. His hands came to rest on her hips, but they didn't move her. He let her set her own pace, his pace, their pace. "Peyton," he whispered.

"I like that," she said, before increasing her speed and depth.

"What's that?" he managed to utter from behind his clenched teeth.

"My name coming out of your mouth." She brought her knees in closer to his body and took total control of their lovemaking. Her rhythm was constant and full of intent. She wanted to come. She could feel the urge building low in her belly and threatening to tear her apart from inside.

She needed that.

She needed to come.

She needed him.

Soft, broken pants escaped her mouth, and she let her head fall back and her long hair caress his thighs she sat on. From the corner of her eye, she caught their reflection in the mirror. With her head thrown back, her breasts thrust forward and her body lifting and lowering with practiced moves, they looked wanton, they looked desirable, and they looked right.

"You like to watch now?" His question made her break her gaze with herself in the mirror in order to answer.

"I always liked to watch. If I remember correctly, you did too. You used to love doing it in front of a mirror."

"Still do." She was amazed that even as they talked and carried on a short but competent conversation, their bodies took over and a move was never missed.

"Then why aren't you?" Peyton asked, a husky tone attached to her voice.

“Who says I’m not?” His hands had been idle at his sides but were now trailing their way up the side of her body and flirting with her breasts. The light tickling sensation produced from his touch caused her nipples to pucker and ache to be touched. “So sensitive.” His voice was low and husky and too damn sexy for her own good. His hands covered both breasts and he held them as she continued with her moves.

“I want more.”

“What do you want?” Brent asked before his fingers found her hard nipples and plucked them playfully.

“I want you.” Wanted. Needed. Had to have him.

“You’ve got me, darlin’.” To prove his point, his thrust up one good time, causing her to cry out from the pleasure.

“I want more.” She wanted to come. She wanted him to make her come.

“Greedy little thing, aren’t you?” His tone was playful, and Peyton didn’t know if she was supposed to respond or not. “I like that in a woman.” His hands fell to her hips once again, but instead of urging her along, he stopped her totally. “Get on your hands and knees.”

Those few words did more to Peyton than anything else ever had in her sexual life, not that it was a long life. She did as he asked, hating that in order to do so she had to lose him for a moment.

When she was on her hands and knees she felt the bed shift and Brent’s body come to rest behind her.

“Look up.” When she did, she came face to face with her and Brent’s reflection in the mirror. She could see the dark, desire-filled gleam his eyes took on. She could see the muscles of his chest and stomach flex and he moved closer. Not being able to see everything he was doing behind her, but being able to feel it, drove her crazy.

“Watch me, Peyton.”

As if she wouldn’t.

Chapter Seventeen

The instant their gazes met in the mirror, Brent thrust true and deep inside of her. He was rewarded by her satisfied moan and the clenching of her walls around him. He loved seeing her face as he took her. He loved to see her breasts sway gently as he pumped in and out of her body. The slight tinge of pink that stained her cheeks and the way her eyes looked glazed and heavy told him all he needed to know—she wanted this as much as he did.

Brent's hands rested lazily on her hips and his fingertips drew slight circles across her flesh, causing tiny chill bumps to form. He broke the contact their eyes had for only a moment, but he had to, he had to watch. He had to watch his body entering hers. He had to watch as he took her. He had to see how slick his dick was from her juices—and he was slick. He glided easily into her with each pass. When he was buried as deep as he could go, the most overwhelming warmth surrounded him.

Just the feel of her squeezing him, caressing him, teasing him, made him harder. When he caught her eyes once more in the mirror, he saw that she was watching him—watching them. He buried his cock deep within her and stilled.

He wanted to feel her flex around him. He wanted to feel the anticipation of his next move rise in her body. He wanted to see the control she held too close slip away and sway his way. He wanted her—whatever way he could get her.

“What is it? Why did you stop?” Her breath came in leaps and bounds and her words were unsteady.

“Just savoring the moment is all.” His answer must have pleased her. She cocked an eyebrow at him and he received one of those sly, sultry smiles of hers that haunted his days and nights. Brent realized that smile was one of the things he loved most about her. It was more of a frown than a smile, but still a smile in its own right. She didn't give them out freely or without thought. Her other smiles, the many different ones she had, were more carefree and thoughtless, but this one was controlled and full of intent. Its intent was to arouse and lure—she succeeded in both. He began to thrust and pump once more.

His strokes this time were fuller, harder and deeper. His hips rocked with hers and the front of his thighs rubbed the back of hers, creating a stimulating friction he hated to ever break. Every touch she bestowed upon him was heaven.

Brent gripped Peyton's hips tighter and drew her body nearer to his. He kept her close as he pounded into her. He was close. He could feel the tingle rising in his belly and lowing south. His balls became tight and the need to come and fill her was almost too much. He wanted it. He wanted to feel his seed mingle

with her juices. He wanted to know that he was a part of her. He wanted her to remember the feel of him emptying everything he had into her.

“Peyton.” The low, guttural tone got her attention. Her eyes had fallen shut as she rode the waves to an earth-shattering orgasm, but now they were focused on him. “Look at me.”

He wanted her to see. He wanted her to know who was deep inside of her. He wanted her to know who the man was behind her bringing her to yet another orgasm. He wanted her to see his face as they came in time with one another.

He wanted her to know.

Know that she could have him, all of him, mind, body and soul.

“Brent.” That one word falling from her swollen lips was Brent’s undoing. His mind no longer controlled his body. He withdrew almost completely and then slammed back onto her. Their moans mixed together and those sounds mixed with the scents of their lovemaking to make Brent’s head swim. He did his best to concentrate, to pay attention. He wanted to etch this moment in his memory, but the orgasm growing in his belly took everything away from him.

Her pussy clenched down on his cock, her perfectly rounded bottom pushed back into his thrusts and she came with a whispered moan and with his name on her lips. Brent let himself go and let nature take over. With one more deep thrust his seed erupted from his body and filled her.

With both of their bodies limp from desire, they collapsed into the scented sheets together, Brent resting slightly to the side of her and their legs still entwined. Her breathing was almost back to normal, but he could still feel the slight pulses her pussy released around his cock. He refused to pull away. He wanted to stay inside of her until it was no longer possible.

With a lover’s touch, he pushed the thick and damp locks away from her back and placed small kisses across it until he reached the curve of her neck and shoulder. Her pulse fluttered beneath his lips and he smiled into her skin. He noticed her eyes were closed and her breathing was that of a sleeping woman. That made his pride swell—and his ego as well.

With one final kiss, he pulled completely away from her. He rolled from the bed and retrieved his discarded clothing from where it lay in disarray on the floor and dressed quickly.

He hated to leave her without saying goodbye, but she needed to rest and he needed to leave unnoticed and return home in the same way. It was for the best.

With his clothes back on his body, he turned to leave. He took one quick glance at her and noticed the first few rays of morning light were starting to make their appearance. He also noticed how the light caught the edges of the ring she still wore on her finger. He didn’t like the fact that she still wore it, but it made him feel better to know she wouldn’t be wearing it for much longer. Not if he had anything to say about it.

Chapter Eighteen

At two o'clock on the dot, Peyton ushered Lucky Davis toward the front door. He was drunk, sourly so, and kept repeating her name. Over and over again.

"Peyton, Peyton, Peyton..." Lucky slurred as his body swayed from side to side.

"Lucky, Lucky, Lucky," Peyton replied as she tried to shuffle them both closer to the doors.

"When are you going to give this all up and let me take care of you?"

She opened the heavy wood and glass door and held it with her booted foot, allowing Lucky to waltz through it. Over an hour ago, Peyton had called her Uncle Mitch McCready, Lucky's current employer, and asked him to pick the man up. Mitch, being the man he was, was parked right in front of the bar waiting on Lucky.

Lucky saw Mitch, lifted his hand in a wave and then turned back to Peyton.

"I can take care of you, girl. Make you happy. A lot happier than that Nash feller ever could. At least I'm around the majority of the time." What he said was true, and she was getting tired of hearing and thinking the exact same thing. Lucky staggered once and his heavy body fell into hers. She was expecting it and caught him before they both hit the concrete.

"Lucky, you're here all the time and you can't even take care of yourself, let alone me." She helped Lucky right himself as she spoke.

"But I loves you, Peyton." Slurred speech and whiskey-sour breath didn't help Lucky's declaration.

"I understand, Lucky. But you're going home alone." The weight that was Lucky Davis lifted from Peyton as her Uncle Mitch hefted his employee toward the truck.

"Thanks for calling me, Peyton. I would have hated for him to be on the road tonight." Uncle Mitch was a bear of a man with the demeanor to go along with it, but a teddy bear's heart when you got right down to it.

"I appreciate you coming to get him. I wasn't about to let him have his keys. Speaking off..." Peyton reached into her front pocket and retrieved a set of keys and handed them over to Mitch.

Mitch took them, opened the passenger side door of his old beat-to-hell-and-back work truck, and helped Lucky in. He slammed the door once Lucky was seated, more in an attempt to make it close than in anger, and then walked around the dented hood to his own door.

When the ignition caught, Mitch waved once more to Peyton and pulled away from the bar. Lucky was already sound asleep against the glass of the window. Peyton waited until they made a left out of the parking lot before she stepped back into the bar and locked the door behind her.

Once alone, she surveyed the damage. Well, her jukebox was still intact, which was something. The tables that took up the left side of the room were littered with beer bottles and napkins and condiment holders. A few chairs had been knocked over in everyone's haste to leave at last call. Peyton set them back upright and was glad to see they were still in one piece.

Taking a break from the chore of sweeping, she slid onto one of the many stools the bar owned and rubbed the tension from her neck and shoulders. If she were lucky, within the next hour or so she would be soaking in her large sunken tub with bubbles galore. It was rare that Peyton took a bath, she preferred the convenience of a shower, but tonight she would pamper herself a bit. It did a body good.

She ran her hands from her aching back and neck up her throat, across her face and hair and then let them rest on the bar top. Glancing at the mirror behind the bar revealed what Peyton knew to be true—she looked tired. Too tired. Her eyes looked dim, her face seemed pale and her hair looked lackluster and limp. At least the bruises were fading and the smelly-as-hell ointment had done its job and the scratches could barely be seen.

"Pretty one, aren't you?" she said to the reflection. Peyton laughed at herself and pulled the ponytail holder from the heavy mass and massaged her scalp where the band had been for so many hours. She toyed with the idea of cutting the mess. It would be easier, and would put an end to the headaches she always seemed to have at the end of a long night, but she knew she wouldn't go through with it.

Peyton scanned the bar once more and dreaded the fact she had to clean the place up. Wade had left just after last call as he always did on Saturday nights, which left her alone in the place to clean up. Not that she cared. Being alone gave her time to herself and her thoughts—not that she needed any more time with them. Over the past few days she'd had more time to think than she wanted.

What to do about Brent was at the top of her list every night. They couldn't keep on like this. True, it was exciting to a point, but it was also confusing and insane and dangerous. The danger was for her and her alone. When it ended, and it would, she would be the one left with nothing—no Brent and no Carter. She needed to pick a path and follow it. She just didn't know what path to take.

In one direction there was the truth. The truth about Carter, his current status as her ex-fiancé—an ex-fiancé who was conveniently missing most of the time. The truth could do things. The truth could open the doors wide enough for Brent to enter or slam that same door in her face.

Then in the opposite direction was silence and Brent. Brent. Her heart beat his name. Brent was complicated. Her and Brent's current relationship, if one could call it that, was complicated. She hadn't seen or heard from him in four days—four very long days. After spending the entire night in her bed, wringing orgasm after orgasm from her body, he had departed with the rising sun.

What to do? That was the question. What the fuck to do?

Deciding the mess was not going to clean itself up, the mess of the bar and the mess of her life, she hopped off the barstool, grabbed a broom and dustpan and started to fix what wasn't broken.

She strolled past the jukebox, dropped a dollar's worth of quarters from her pocket into the slot and picked six selections to entertain her while she worked. Kenny, Pink, Hank and a little Paramore would make the time go by more quickly.

Kenny had just begun with his latest heartbreaker when Peyton heard a light tapping against the glass of the front door.

"We're closed," she said to the visitor without looking up from her task. The tapping turned into a knock, a persistent one. Peyton huffed a bit, placed the dustpan on a table, leaned the broom against one of the pool tables and made her way to the door to tell the late-night drinker they would open tomorrow at four, not before.

"We're closed," she said as she opened the door and ceased the knocking. The man standing at the threshold both shocked her and sent a thrill through her bones.

"Don't you know better than to open a door late at night when you don't know who is on the other side?" Brent propped an arm against the doorframe and waited on Peyton to answer him.

"I can see through the glass. What do you want?" Peyton said, leaving him and returning to her work. She heard the door close and looked over her shoulder to see him leaned against the frame, hands in his pockets, eyes boring into her. "What?"

"Do you always open the door to anyone who knocks?"

"Are you serious?" She swept the shattered remains of a bottle into a pile and tried her best to ignore him. It was a difficult feat. He was well over six feet of muscle-wrapped bone and long-legged sexiness. The worst part was he knew it.

"Hell yeah, I'm serious. I could have been anyone. What if I had been here to rob you?"

"Are you?" she countered, cocking a dark eyebrow at him.

"No." He pulled out a chair from the table closest to him, turned it around and straddled it.

"Then I have nothing to worry about." She squatted and raked the pieces of glass into the dustpan and emptied them into a trashcan before looking at him again. He was watching her. His dark chocolate eyes matched his hair, but they seemed darker and more brooding than usual. Which was saying something. "What's on your mind Brent?"

"What makes you think there's something on my mind?"

"Well, let's see. It's a little after midnight on a Saturday night and you're sitting here watching me sweep glass into a dustpan. Either you're extremely bored or something's on your mind. So, being the person that I am, I'm asking. What's on your mind?"

Peyton watched Brent remove his Stetson, run his long, tanned fingers through the thickness of his hair and then replace it. She watched him watch her.

When Brent didn't answer her question, she turned her attention away from his sullen pose and returned to what she was doing before. She made quick work of the mess, grabbed a damp rag from the counter, wiped the tables and was about to set out on a nightly garbage run when Brent appeared at her side.

"Maybe I just wanted to see you. Maybe I missed you." He moved quickly and without any noise. Of course, the jukebox was now blasting a heavy Paramore tune and noise other than that could barely be heard.

"Maybe?"

"Maybe." Brent's gaze was on her once more and once more she felt an odd and discouraging feeling rise from the bottom of her stomach.

"Don't do that," she finally said.

"Don't do what? What am I doing?" He moved a step closer, crowding her, paralyzing her with his size, his heat, his everything.

"I haven't heard one word outta you for years and then suddenly you miss me. We have sex, you disappear as soon as the sun comes up and then you just waltz in here acting all charming and damned mysterious. I don't like that."

"What do you like, Peyton? Tell me."

Her heart didn't flip or flop this time—it completely dropped to the bottom of her stomach. "If you want someone to inflate your ego tonight, Brent, you need to look further. I'm tired and I really don't feel like playing your games."

"I'm not playing a game with you, darlin'."

"You are. You run hot and cold. You ignore me for years and then out of the clear blue sky you can't stay away from me. You can't keep your hands off me."

"I can't stay away from you. I can't keep my hands off you." To prove his point, he pulled her body to his. Her chest connected with his and on contact her nipples went hard and her heart hammered. She needed to choose a path and choose one quick. Tell him the truth now and see if it changed anything—see if the only reason he wanted her was because he thought he couldn't have her. Or she needed to bite her tongue and let things fall as they may. If she kept the truth to herself then she kept Brent—even if it were just for a short while.

She knew if she didn't decide on her path her heart was at risk of breaking all over again. What really worried her was the thought of it breaking no matter which direction her heart chose to move.

Brent didn't know why he'd driven to the bar in the first place—just that he had. He'd had to.

He'd had to see her.

Had to be near her.

Had to breathe the same air she did. When he had first left the main house with his brothers questioning his destination as he went, he'd just driven and thought. He didn't plan on going to Big Jack's. He knew she closed at midnight during the week, but he'd made his way there anyway.

He'd watched as she hauled Lucky from the place and waited until Mitch had pulled away before exiting his truck and walking to the front door. The last thing he wanted was for Peyton's uncle to see him entering the bar after everyone else had left. It would create some rather interesting questions. Questions he couldn't yet answer.

All he knew was that existing without Peyton was a part of his life that was over. He thought about telling her just that, but stopped himself. She wouldn't believe him—yet. He had to show her. She had to see that he needed her and she needed him—not Carter.

Ever so gently, he brushed his fingertips over her chin and tilted her head back until her eyes met his.

“What?” she asked a split second before his lips settled against hers. The kiss smothered her words and halted her protests—if she had any. Heaven. He was in heaven. Brushing back and forth created a friction that generated waves of lightning throughout his entire body. Evidently it went through hers as well because he felt her tremble, or better yet ripple beneath his mouth.

Reassured he didn't have a kick to the groin coming, he traced his tongue along the seal her lips created. She gasped and the movement gave his tongue safe passage into the sweet warmth of her mouth. Letting his tongue tempt and tease at will, he kissed her until she responded. And boy did she respond.

Shock and elation ran through his bones when she grabbed his forearms and pulled him gently into her body. He didn't know if she realized she had done so, but he didn't care. He let her fit her body into his, loving the way her frame met his.

He took the opportunity and pulled her closer to him. He heard her moan and the sound made his cock throb harder than ever. He felt the front of his jeans caress his flesh and her hips cradle his hardness. Perfect. His hands were still and idle for the briefest of moments before they ran along her spine and around to her rib cage.

The back of his knuckles brushed the underside of her breasts and he felt the weight and the softness of them. Deepening their kiss and finding her willing and accepting, he pressed further. Leaving his left hand on her ribs, he brought his right to rest fully on her rounded breast.

He heard her moan again and he smiled into her open and wanton mouth. *Damn*, he thought. His palm itched to mold and shape the firm and heavy flesh, but he was still weary of Peyton. At any minute she could change like a storm and unman him. That was the last thing he wanted.

His eyes flew open when he felt her hand cover his. Pulling away, he looked into those eyes that had held fire for him earlier. They still held it. Only it was a different type of fire. Her eyes seemed to glow and gleam and were only halfway open and shaded by those long lashes.

His lips brushed hers once more before he caressed the breast under his and her hand. Her breath quickened and she squeezed his hand, causing him to do the same to her breast. Her head fell back a bit, but she never relinquished the hold she had on his hand.

“Damn,” he whispered, before capturing her mouth again. With quick movements, he backed her against the counter. Releasing her breast, he grasped her waist with both hands and raised her until she was seated on the bar. Before she could regain her composure or close her open thighs, Brent placed his body between them. Instantly, she clasped his body to hers.

He smiled up at her and kissed her damp, swollen lips. He meant for it to be a quick kiss, but she wasn’t having that. Her hands ran the length of his back until they rested on his shoulders. The top of her head nudged his Stetson back. Grabbing the hat from his head, he placed it on the counter beside her.

With one less obstacle in the way, he went back for more. More of Peyton. Catching sight of the fluttering pulse in her neck, Brent ran his lips along the length, letting his tongue follow suit. Tipping her head to the side, she gave him all the access he needed to devour her throat. His teeth raked the flesh, causing goose bumps to form on her arms. He could feel them beneath his fingertips. He would bet all the money he had on him that Carter had never caused goose bumps on Peyton’s flesh.

Brent made his way slowly, painfully so, back to her mouth. Before, he had been the aggressor, this time Peyton took control. Her lips sought, her tongue played and she devoured him the way he wanted to devour her.

“God, you taste good,” he said as he fused their mouths together. He could feel his dick throbbing between her open, welcoming thighs. “I want you. I want to be inside you.” Watching her eyes flare gave Brent a burst of courage. He caught the front of her T-shirt in his large hands and pulled it from the waist of her snug jeans.

The material was soft but not nearly as soft as her skin. Brent leaned back and watched as he moved the white barrier inch by inch, revealing the flat line of her stomach and then the white bra covering the twins that tempted him all night long. The bra was nothing fancy. Not seductive or sultry. Just plain and white, but it had the same effect on him as those little ones in a Victoria’s Secret catalog. He wanted her naked. Naked, wet and willing.

“Are you wet?” he asked in between kisses.

In reply, she seized his mouth and sucked his tongue deep into hers. “Maybe.”

Brent smiled into her lips once before asking his next question. He had never been vocal in bed before. But Peyton made graphic images appear in his head and he wanted her to know. Telling her what he was feeling and thinking turned him on. He hoped it had the same affect on her.

“How wet?” Lowering his head, he caressed the small amount of breast visible above the shield the cups of the bra made. He could see the deep color of her nipples beneath the almost transparent material. His mouth watered. “Your nipples are hard.” He covered them with his hands and rubbed the tight peaks between his thumbs and fingers. “So hard.”

“I’m not the only one that’s hard.” The tone of her voice was his undoing. Peyton’s voice was always low and throaty, but arousal made it even more so. Wasting no time, his lips found hers just as his hand pulled the material away from her breasts. His fingers found her nipples and he pulled and plucked until they were throbbing beneath his touch and she was pressing herself into his hand.

She was making him burn. Burn to be inside her. Deep inside her. The effects her kiss and her body had on him were making his head spin and hammer. The hammering noise continued until he couldn’t ignore it. It wasn’t until he felt Peyton pull away that he realized the knocking wasn’t in his head, but at the front door of the bar.

Looking a little guilty, she pushed him away and pulled her bra up and her shirt down. Hopping down from the bar, she made her way toward the door, tucking her shirt in as she went. Brent drew in a deep breath, readjusted the mass of hard, throbbing flesh in his jeans and replaced his Stetson.

“Shit.”

Hearing Peyton hiss the word made Brent wonder even more who the hell was at the door and why the hell they were here in the first place at this time of night. Two seconds after she opened the door he understood the reason for Peyton’s curse. He muttered a few of his own.

Standing just inside the door, duffel bag over his shoulder, Stetson pushed back carelessly on his head, was none other than the fiancé himself—Carter Nash.

In that moment, Brent felt something he hadn’t felt in a long time as far as Carter was concerned—guilt. It consumed him.

All those feelings he had felt toward Carter were now reversed. He had felt betrayed. He had felt angry and hurt at both of them for what they had done. He was no better now than the asshole he had accused Carter of being years ago. At least Carter hadn’t gone after Peyton when he had been with her. Carter had waited until Brent was out of the picture. That wasn’t the case this time. Brent had gone after Peyton because he wanted Peyton—no matter who or what was in his way. Carter was well in the picture and Peyton was his.

Brent felt like a bastard. He felt like the lowest son of a bitch ever to walk the face of the earth. He should have known better. He should have known that guilt would tag along with the other feelings he had been having. He just never thought the guilt would outweigh all those other feelings raging inside of him.

Chapter Nineteen

“Carter?” Peyton thought at first that her eyes and her mind were playing tricks on her—horrible tricks, unthinkable tricks, mean and downright nasty tricks.

“I went by the house but you weren’t there, and it seems I’ve lost my key. How you doing, girl? Brent.” Peyton watched as Carter moved in front of her and extended his hand toward Brent.

“Carter,” Brent said, tipping his hat, but not accepting his hand. Peyton waited for someone to speak—anyone. She wasn’t surprised when neither of the two men spoke. They only stared each other down. Peyton watched the two with a cautious eye. The last time they both had been in the same room for any length of time they had gone at each other, fists drawn and ready to beat each other to a pulp—they nearly had until Chase and Jason Kiel had torn them apart. Peyton didn’t think she could muster the strength she would need to pull them off each other.

She watched as Brent looked from Carter, who had stepped back to her side, and then back to her before he spoke.

“I need to be going. Good to see you, Carter.” He tipped his hat. “Peyton.” He walked past them, turned the knob on the door, opened it without pause and disappeared into the darkness.

Peyton had no earthly idea how long she stood rooted to the spot, staring at the closed doorway he had exited. It could have been a minute. It could have been an hour. She didn’t know. All she knew was that he had walked away. Again. He had left her confused, wanting and angry.

So angry.

Angry with him.

Angry with Carter.

And more than anything—angry with herself. She had done it again. She had allowed herself to feel. She had allowed herself to want him. She had allowed herself to think, to dream and to want what she couldn’t have.

Peyton didn’t remember much after Brent left. She remembered her and Carter riding to her house together. She remembered exiting the car and entering the house. She remembered unlocking her front door and then knocking Carter Nash flat on his ass. After that everything was a bit fuzzy.

Chapter Twenty

“Knock, knock.” The cheery voice made Brent wince and wish he had left the house before everyone else did.

“Am I disturbing you?”

Brent looked away from Jocelyn and her bright and happy-go-lucky smile and resumed his silent staring out the window. There was plenty to see from his hiding spot. Jace was working Willa’s new mare in one of the pens. Nick and Hayden were tossing a football back and forth between them and chasing one or two of the stray mutts that had taken up residence at the ranch when they got lucky and stole the ball. Everyone was outside doing their own thing, leaving him alone—except for one.

Jocelyn entered the room, closed the door quietly behind her and then flopped on the bed. Brent didn’t have to look at her to know that she was staring at him. He could feel it.

“Can I do something for you, Joss?” He turned and saw that he was indeed correct about her staring. Staring might have not been the best word for what Jocelyn was doing. She wasn’t just staring. She was studying. She was analyzing every inch of him. “Something on your mind?”

“I hear Carter’s back in town.”

“You heard right.”

“Seems he’s been here for a couple of days.”

“That sounds about right.” He knew it was right. If she had asked him he could have told her almost down to the minute how long Cater had been back in town. That was also the exact amount of time he had been without Peyton. True, he had stayed away from her a few days here and there to give her space, to give her time, but it was by choice. His choice had been taken away from him now thanks to Carter and his decision to show back up in town. It was his right though—she was his.

“I never took you for the stupidest of the bunch.” Jocelyn’s words caught him off-guard and he turned to glare at her—it didn’t have the effect he wanted it to. She kept on talking. “The hardest to get along with? Yes. The one I was always the most wary of? Without a doubt. But the stupidest? That possibility never entered my mind, but everyone makes mistakes right?”

“I’m not stupid.” He said in rebuttal to her short monologue concerning his attitude and faults as she saw them.

“Really? Coulda fooled me.”

“Why are you really here, Joss? Did you just decide to let me know all my faults in alphabetical order today? Because if you did, I can save you some time. I know what my faults are. I’ve known what they are for years.” He started to move from his room to another that had one less occupant, but her words stopped him.

“Was stupidity on your list too? Cause its topping mine right now.” Brent saw red. Never in the entire time Joss’s dad and his mom had been married had he been mad or even anything near upset or bothered by her, but he was beginning to understand Jace’s disdain for the imp relaxing against his pillows.

“I get it okay. You and Peyton are friends and you think that I—”

“You’re fucking everything up! Just like you did the last time.”

Brent stopped and stared and his mouth might have dropped open as well. Jocelyn had a temper, that was an understatement, but he had yet to be on the receiving end of it—until now. Her scowl and narrowed eyes made her look less angelic and more like the red-headed fireball she really was.

“You need to just stop now. You don’t know what happened between Peyton and me. On top of that, whatever happened is none of your damned business.”

“She loves you. She’s in love with you.”

He started to speak, to rebuff what she’d said, but stopped himself. Her words were wrapped in what she thought was the truth. What she thought was real.

“She loves her fiancé.”

“And you know this how? There is a big difference between *loving* someone and being *in love* with someone. There is a huge margin for interpretation between *love* and *in love*.” One of her auburn eyebrows quirked above the green of her eyes as she stared him down and held his body in place.

“She’s still wearing his ring isn’t she?”

“Yes, she is. But the last time I checked you were the one sharing her bed up until a few days ago.”

“It’s just sex, Jocelyn. Nothing more.”

“That is the one thing I hate, absolutely hate, about you men.”

Brent thought he actually saw her snarl her lip when she spat out the word *you*.

“I hate that you think sex, any and every kind of sex is just that. It’s never more. It’s never less.”

“Sometimes it’s not more.”

“And sometimes it is. Tell me something. Does Peyton strike you as the type who randomly goes around having sex with just anyone? You know as well as I do that she doesn’t. As far as I know she has been with you and with Carter and then with you again. She’s not scratching an itch or trying to work out her frustrations or doing whatever it is people seem to do when they have sex. She did it, she made love to you, because she wanted to. It could have all stopped after that little episode in the barn, but I know good and well that it didn’t. You’ve disappeared too often from here lately for you not to have been with Peyton. I know it and so does everyone else.”

"It doesn't matter what happened. It won't happen again. Carter's here now, where he should be. Things are how they should be."

"You love her."

"Maybe once."

"You're in love with her."

"Not anymore."

"Always."

"It was a long time ago, Joss. Things change. Some things...some things are just better as a memory." His hand reached for the doorknob once more, and with his back turned he never saw her approach him. He twisted the knob, but her hand covered his and stopped all movement.

"And some things aren't." She barely whispered her piece of twenty-two-year-old-never-been-in-love wisdom.

He left on that note, but her words lingered in his mind, in his body and in his soul. Jocelyn's words struck a chord in Brent's heart, a cord that hadn't been stricken in a long time. They would do little good though.

Carter Nash was back.

Back in town and back to claim what was rightfully his—Peyton.

Brent didn't waste any time. He left the house and headed toward the barn, praying none of his family would choose to follow him. He just needed some time. Time to think. Time to himself—just a little bit of time.

Once he entered the barn, he had one of the horses saddled and ready in no time at all and then he was off. He rode the gelding hard for the first few miles—harder than he should have. When they finally stopped, Brent dismounted and left the horse content and comfortable under the shelter of some trees and walked. His boots took the terrain easily. This was his land. He knew it like the back of his hand and he moved across it at will.

When his feet finally stopped, he realized he hadn't gone as far as he would have liked. In the end he was standing in front of the largest pond on the property. The largest pond with the clearest water. The pond where he and Carter and Peyton used to end up on the hottest summer days when the sun threatened to burn flesh from the bone. The cool water was always waiting with open arms. This pond had also seen a few drunken and giddy nights where all three of them would lie beneath the stars and dream about the what-ifs in life and what the future held for them.

It was also the same place they had ended up at that night—that night that changed the dynamics of their group. Brent took a deep breath, thinking it would clear his mind, but all it did was bring back memories, one memory in particular. He stood there on the banks, eyes shut against the ever-present sun and remembered.

He watched as she poked the sleeping form sprawled out in the bed of his pickup truck. Carter had passed out a good thirty minutes before and since then he and Peyton had taken turns tormenting him while he slept off the whiskey they'd consumed in honor of her eighteenth birthday.

"He's gone. You can quit poking him now," Brent said as he swatted at one of Carter's booted feet that were dangling off the end of the tailgate. Carter stirred a bit, grumbled and then went still once more. Brent laughed and watched Peyton cover her mouth with her hand in an effort to stifle the giggles threatening to roll from her. It didn't help.

"I shoulda known he'd be a lightweight on my night." She stood from her crouched position and swayed a bit on her feet, but before she could tumble and fall, Brent was there to catch her. She wrapped her arms around his neck and let him ease her down from the bed of the truck. When her feet touched the ground, Brent expected her to let go of his neck, but she didn't. Immediately, he felt a surge of lust rush through his body. He prayed like hell she was too drunk to notice the bulge in the front of his jeans.

"Can you walk?" he whispered against her mane of hair that always seemed to smell like apple blossoms.

"Well, now that all depends," she countered with a laugh attached to her voice.

"On what?"

"On just how far you plan on travelin'." She let her head fall back and Brent watched her eyes slide shut and a smile cross her face.

"Not far, darlin'. Just a few feet." He tilted his head and indicated the quilt they had laid out earlier in the evening closer to the water's edge.

"I think..." she said as she pulled away from him to stand on her own, "I can make it that far." She laughed again, grabbed the half-empty bottle of whiskey from the tailgate and made her way toward the pallet. Brent checked on Carter one more time, saw he was breathing all right, enough to snore like a bear, and followed the same path she had taken.

He stood next to the edge of the blanket and smiled as she brushed away the nonexistent blades of grass from the quilt. When she had finished, she cut her eyes toward him and patted the empty place beside her. He did as she asked.

Brent sat down and pulled his long legs up so that the heels of his boots were embedded in the earth and his arms rested on his bent knees. The two of them were quiet for a few long moments as they watched the wind make ripples on the water.

"I love it here," she said in a lazy, slurred fashion.

"So, how was your birthday? Was it everything you expected it to be?" She was silent for a second, and from the corner of his eye Brent could see her pondering his question.

"I don't feel eighteen. Aren't I supposed to feel like an adult now?"

"I guess some people do and for others it's just another day."

“What did it feel like when you turned eighteen?” As she asked her question, she scooted closer to his side until she was flush against him—hip to hip, thigh to thigh.

“I don’t remember,” he said after he cleared his throat, hoping it would clear his head as well. She felt so good pressed up against him like she was. She was so soft and so warm—so her.

“What do you mean you don’t remember? It was only a couple of years ago.” She laughed at him and he couldn’t help but join in. “As I recall, I wasn’t invited to that party. It was boys only. I only got to hear the edited version you told me days later. What did y’all do that night?”

“I don’t remember,” he lied. He remembered and remembered vividly. His brother Chase, being so much older and so much wiser at twenty had taken him to a strip club—just the boys, Chase, Brent and Carter. It had been one of the best nights of his life, but it was nothing compared tonight. He would have traded every naked woman he had seen that evening for five minutes alone with Peyton.

“You’re such a liar.” She playfully popped him on the shoulder with the flat of her hand and tiny tingles of heat rushed from the top of his skin to the middle of his bones when she did. “Carter told me Chase took you to a tittie bar in Dallas. What was it like?” Her voice was peaked with curiosity and Brent had never been more mortified in his entire life. *Fucking Carter and his damned big mouth.*

“Carter told you what we did that night?”

“He sure did,” she replied in a singsong voice. “Every last horny detail.”

“Then why’d you ask?” Heat coated his face and he swore that when Carter woke up from his peaceful drunken slumber he would knock his ass right back out.

“Because I wanted to see if you would tell me, and you didn’t and now my feelings are hurt.”

Brent stared at the toes of his boots and waited for the embarrassment to pass. It did and just as soon as his face had cooled, she laid her head against his shoulder and sighed too sweetly for her own good. “It’s okay, Brent. Everybody likes boobs and you’re no different.”

“Shit.” He would have lunged to his feet if he weren’t scared of rolling her across the ground as he did. “What the hell did Carter tell you?”

“I told you—everything. Haven’t you figured it out yet? Carter and I don’t keep secrets from each other unlike some people I know.” She poked him in the ribs with her finger.

“What the hell is that supposed to mean?”

“It means that you tell Carter everything and Carter tells you everything and I tell Carter everything and Carter tells me everything, but you tell me nothing.”

“I have no idea what you just said.”

“I don’t either.” She giggled once again and gracefully fell back onto the blanket and stared at the stars above. Brent’s embarrassment over his best friend’s admissions fled his body and desire took its place. He studied her long, tan legs that were slightly bent at the knee and wondered how the simplest thing like moonlight could make them look sexier than they did on a regular basis. On her back her breasts didn’t

look as heavy as he knew they were, but they were a welcoming sight nonetheless. Once again, his cock became full and his zipper threatened to leave a permanent reminder of his lust behind. Like he needed one more reminder of her or her body plaguing him. He had years of memories and fantasies to keep him occupied at night.

“Come lie down by me.”

“I better not.”

“Why not? We’re just star gazing.” He felt her move and when he was sure enough of himself and his actions he looked down at her. Big mistake. She lay curled on her side with one leg crossed over the other. One of her bare feet was nudging the hem of his jeans, prodding him along, and that teasing grin he loved so much was plastered on her face. He gave in to her request and slowly eased his back onto the blanket and stared at the endless sky above dotted with more than a million twinkling stars.

Looking completely satisfied with herself, she cuddled up next to his side, laid one of her legs across the both of his and rested her head against his shoulder. He felt his muscles roll and play underneath his skin and was sure she felt them as well. When she spoke, her voice sounded soft and sleepy and the tone reverberated throughout his body and soul.

“This is nice.”

He could only grunt in reply. Entwined together, per her doing, they both lay still and silent with the overhead blanket of light as their only cover.

“How long have we been friends?” Without thinking, he brushed a few of the fallen locks of hair away from her face and tucked them behind one of her dainty ears. When had her skin become so soft? When had she stopped being just a *friend* and turned into something so much more? A year ago? Maybe two?

“Forever. But things change. Who’s to say that when I come back for Christmas you won’t be settled down with some old skank?” The way she snarled her nose brought a laugh to his lips.

“What makes you think I’m the one that’ll end up with a skank?” He felt her shrug and watched as a whole book of emotions played across her face. If it hadn’t been for the light of the moon he wouldn’t have seen a one, but thanks to its shine he saw them all. Fear. Disappointment. Pain. What was going on with her? “Besides, who’s to say when you get to college you won’t find a boyfriend or two and forget all about Carter and me.” Forget about *me*. He was glad he’d included Carter in his statement—it was better that way.

“I might just do that.” She put on one of the fake smiles Brent had seen a thousand times before. Maybe it was the alcohol making her talk and feel the way she was. Or maybe it was her nerves talking. It was something—he just didn’t know what.

“Well, when we come to visit you at college you best tell him to hit the road while we’re in town. You know how we are about what’s ours—we’re not real big on sharing.” He tried to make his comment light, funny and friendly, but he felt he failed miserably.

“Yeah, right.” She pushed herself up from her curled position and scooted to the edge of the blanket and started again with her damned fiddling and brushing. “Carter’s already told me he’s going to be entirely too busy to drive down and see me, and you know as well as I do the two of you always travel in a pair.”

“That’s just Carter talkin’. You know he doesn’t mean half of what he says, and then you can’t believe the other half that comes out of his mouth.” Carter was a sweet talker who very rarely followed through with what he said—no matter how big or small.

“You know he’s heading off with his brother to rodeo?” That fact wasn’t news to Brent. He knew Carter was itching to get out of Millbrook. He always had been. Nothing could tie Carter down—nothing at all.

“He just wants to see some of the world before he settles down is all.” Brent tensed a bit as she moved closer and as her fingers toyed with the buttons of his shirt. Shit, at this pace he would bust the seams of his breeches in no time. He tried to think about anything besides her and her fingers and her hair and her everything.

Trees came to mind.

His mother’s chicken casserole.

His grandmother, Faith, and how she always smelled like Windsong and soap, but apple blossoms were so much better. Shit.

Brent closed his eyes and counted to ten and then to twenty. When he opened them again, feeling more calm and more in control, her face was just inches away from his.

“What about you?”

“What about me what?” He tried to make his breathing more shallow so that her breasts didn’t flirt and play as much against his chest.

“Do you want to see the world before you decide to settle down?”

“My world’s right here. It always has been—it always will be.” Once more, he tucked a few loose strands of hair behind her ear and couldn’t help but linger.

“If I asked you to do a favor for me, would you do it?” Her voice had dropped to barely more than a whisper, but he had no trouble hearing her, thanks to their close proximity.

“I always have before. I don’t see why that would change now.” Brent sent her a teasing smile and tugged on the strand of hair he couldn’t stop running his fingers through.

“Kiss me.”

“What?” To Brent’s ears he sounded as if he had swallowed a frog. He tried to move her off and away from him, but she wasn’t budging.

“Kiss me.”

Brent tried once more to put some space between her soft, sweet body and his, which seemed to be growing harder by the minute. He finally gave in, lifted his head and pecked her lips with his. When he drew away, he saw a disappointed look mar her features.

“What?” he asked as if he didn’t know.

“Not like that. I want a real kiss. I want you to kiss me like you mean it.” Again, her lips were inches from his.

“I can’t do that.”

“Why not?” The pouty look she had on her face made him want to laugh, but he resisted. Just as he resisted his natural instincts to kiss her and keep on kissing her until she forgot all the other kisses she’d ever had and any she would ever have.

“Because. If I kiss you, for real, I won’t be able to stop myself.” There was the truth. She could take it or leave it. He just wondered what she would do with it now that she had it.

“Then don’t.”

Without hesitating, Brent grasped her by the neck, pulled her face to his and took her lips just as he dreamed of doing every night when he went to sleep.

The kiss was meant to be sweet and suggestive and it did the job. Moments after her lips opened for him, he rolled her underneath him, locking them together for an eternity. When he finally stopped and pulled away, he liked what he saw. Her lips were swollen from his assault and her breathing was just as ragged as his own. Brent didn’t think his mind and body could race out of control any more than it all ready was—he was wrong.

“More.”

That was the end—or the beginning. Brent’s next kiss led into another and then another. Before dawn crept over the plains of the Kiel ranch, Brent had kissed nearly every inch of her body, clothed and unclothed, and taken what she had given him without a bit of guilt.

They’d both watched the sun break the night into a thousand pieces as they lay wrapped in each other’s arms, his body still deep within hers. The fact that she was leaving in a week’s time had left him with a bit of emptiness deep down, but he had known she would come home. She would come home to him—and he would be waiting for her.

Brent opened his eyes and the memory vanished, but the ache lingered. He had waited on her—waited on her and then pushed her out without a blink of an eye. But this time it was different. This time he hadn’t pushed her away, but he hadn’t tried to pull her away from Carter either. He had let her go—along with his heart.

Chapter Twenty-One

“We need to talk.” Peyton heard Carter’s voice before she saw his face. He was standing just outside the bathroom door, out of arm and fist’s reach.

“You still mad at me?”

Peyton lifted her head from the bathroom sink, toothbrush still stuck in her mouth, and scowled at Carter via the mirror.

“I said I was sorry.”

She shook her head, rolled her eyes and then spit the combination of toothpaste and water into the sink in a less than ladylike manner. She grabbed the towel from the towel rack, scrubbed her mouth with it and then left the bathroom and Carter staring after her.

“Peyton,” he called after her, but she ignored him. “Peyton will you stop?” Carter caught up with her as she was about to enter her bedroom—the one place he was forbidden to enter as of last night. Carter had slumbered in the guest bedroom on the bed that had mysteriously lost its sheets and blankets. They were resting safely in the bottom of Peyton’s closet and she would replace them when she didn’t see red when she looked at him.

“Where the hell have you been, Carter?” She turned quickly on her bare feet, crossed her arms over her breasts and stared him down and waited. “I have called you every day, several times a day, for the past week, and you pick two days ago, of all the fucking days, to show up.

“Sorry, darlin’. My phone got turned off and by the time I got it turned back on I had missed all of your calls.”

“You know, if you would pay the bill your phone wouldn’t get turned off and you wouldn’t miss my calls and my voice messages telling you that I hadn’t had the chance to tell anybody that our *engagement* was off. If you had paid your phone bill you would have known what a shit storm everything was around here and why I haven’t gotten around to telling anybody yet.”

“You’ve had months, Peyton. Months. Don’t blame me for coming to check on you and interfering with you and Brent and whatever the hell is going on between you two.”

“Well, there’s nothing going on between us so you don’t have to worry about *interrupting* anything.”

“Didn’t look that way from where I stood. You looked a little flustered to see me, and Kiel didn’t look much better. At least he didn’t hit me this time.” Peyton could hear the stupid smile cross his face before she saw it. She knew he was goading her and loving it at the same time.

“Don’t mess with me, Carter. I’m not in the mood.”

“You ain’t kidding. By the way, why haven’t you told anyone about us calling it off? I mean, we decided this months ago. Didn’t anyone question my absence or my lack of attention concerning my fiancée?”

“Carter, you weren’t around when we were engaged for real, and now that we aren’t here you are. You and all your glory.” She turned her back on him and moved into the confines of her bedroom. She needed to clear her head and get ready. True to his form, Reed had taken up with his old ways and asked her to take his night shift. True to hers, she’d agreed. She didn’t have anything better to do

“Did you want me to look like the bad guy, Peyton?” he spoke to her back and his soft, guilt-filled tone made her insides clench with regret. She met his eyes in the mirror above her dresser and saw that he still remained more in the hallway than not. He was still abiding by her rule that he not come anywhere near her, her room or her bed on pain of death and dismemberment.

“You’re not the bad guy in my book, Carter. You never have been and you never will be.”

“But I’m not the hero either, am I? I never was. That spot was reserved by someone else a long time ago, wasn’t it?”

“Carter—”she started, but he stopped her by holding up his hand.

“You know you and I never kept any secrets. Not a one. I told you everything and you told me everything. When did that stop, Pey?” Peyton only shook her head as if she didn’t know when that had happened, but she knew when it had. Their secret sharing had stopped when he had dropped to his knee and asked her to marry him. Everything had changed that day or soon after.

“Do you think we would have ever gone through with it? Getting married? Living in the same house or even the same town for longer than a few weeks at a time? Would you have been happy?”

“You make me happy, Peyton. You always have, but this town has never held anything for me. Never has—never will. I thought for awhile that as long as I had you here waiting for me everything would be okay. That I could make a go at it, but then I realized something.”

“What’s that?”

It was then that Carter crossed the threshold, moved behind her and turned her from the mirror so she had to look at him without the safety of the mirror separating them. He took her hands in his, ran his thumbs carefully over her fingers and the ring he had given her and then spoke.

“I realized you weren’t happy.”

“I was happy.”

“You can say it, but it doesn’t make it true. You put a smile on your face, but it was a fake one to say the least. I know you probably better than anyone. Your smile has always been so carefree and without thought. It was natural. It was one of the things I love about you, but it changed. I don’t know when, but I

know it did, and I didn't like it. I worried myself about your smile. I thought I was the reason your smile changed, that it faded, and I hated myself for that."

"I never wanted you to worry about me or hate yourself over a stupid little thing like a smile."

"A smile is never a stupid little thing, especially yours." He moved his hand to her jaw and his knuckles tipped her head from his chest to his face. "I love you too much to make you miserable."

"You don't make me miserable."

"But I don't make you happy. I tried, really I did."

"I know you did. You tried more than you should have." She took one of his hands between her own and gripped it tightly. She was relieved when he squeezed hers in return.

"When are you going to tell your folks about us?"

"I don't know. With all that's going on I just don't think that now would be a great time to pop in with my problems. We've got enough of those already."

"I'm not staying in town, Peyton." She knew that he wouldn't. She didn't expect him to. There was nothing keeping him here.

"You don't have to stick around on my account, Carter."

"Would it be easier if talked to Brent and told him what was going on instead of him hearing it from the town gossip?"

She started to speak, once, then twice, but nothing would come out. She didn't know what to say. "I got the feeling last night that he was there to see you for more than just a friendly chat and was shocked as hell to see me."

"It's nothing. I thought maybe it could have been something, but I was wrong. Again. Go figure."

"Did you want to be right?"

"Of course I wanted to be right. Who doesn't want to be right? I thought that maybe, after all this time, that things could be different. Chase and Willa are married now, all the boys are grown—well, nearly, and the ranch is flourishing. I let my heart fool my head enough to think that his words had only been words and not anything more, but like I said, I was wrong. He only wants me when he can't have me." To add momentum to her point she held up her left hand and let her ring sparkle for all it was worth.

"Why are you still wearing that?"

"Would you believe that I didn't want to lose it?"

"No. I know you better than that. What's the deal, Peyton?"

She closed her eyes so that any judgment or accusations he might throw her way would be missed and then spilled her guts.

"I just couldn't go through it again."

"Go through what, babe?" She felt Carter move his body closer to hers and the closeness helped free the emotions she had kept buried for so long.

"I couldn't go through with hearing all the whispers. All the faint voices that started as soon as I walked passed. I can't handle anyone feeling sorry for me or pitying me. I just can't do it. The last time I was the main focus of the town gossip nearly broke me, and I'm not about to go through it again."

"Was it really that bad?"

"Yes, it was that bad." She propelled herself to her feet and paced a worn spot in her carpet and ranted and raved and let everything out. "Do you know what it's like not to be able to go to the grocery because you know that someone is going to stop you, pat your hand and tell you everything's going to be okay when you know it's not?" Carter tried to speak, but she cut him off. "Do you know what it feels like to walk passed a group of women, women who are supposed to be your friends or your mama's friends or your aunt's friends and hear them whisper and wonder what went wrong behind your back instead of to your face?"

Again, Carter opened his mouth, but Peyton stopped him by holding up her hand.

"You know what the worst was? The worst was having to hear those three little words a girl never wants to hear attached to her name."

"What three words are those, babe?"

"'Bless her heart', and stop calling me babe. I know you're only trying to help, but it's really starting to wear on my nerves."

"Sorry, ba... Sorry. Bless her heart?"

"Yes, I know it's not a big deal to you, but it is to me. Everywhere I went I heard it. Bless her heart, she looks pitiful. Bless her heart, she must be heartbroken. Bless her heart, I wonder what happened? As if they really cared. All anyone wanted to know was why it happened, when it happened and where it happened. Nobody really cared what it was doing to me. They just wanted something to talk about in the church parking lot after preaching." Her tirade left her spent. She collapsed on the bed in a huff and covered her eyes with her arms, blocking everything out.

Blocking her room.

Blocking the fading daylight.

Blocking Carter—and her tears from his view.

"You done having your moment?"

Peyton didn't lower her arms from her head, but she did answer him by nodding.

"Good, now that you're finished losing your mind we can get down to business and get this whole mess worked out."

"It is worked out. We aren't engaged anymore. I have to tell my parents, my brothers, my cousins and my grandfather. What else has to be worked out?"

"This whole thing between you and Brent."

“Color me crazy, but I don’t think that my ex-fiancé needs to be helping me get back together with my ex-boyfriend. It just seems wrong on too many different levels.”

“It is wrong on too many different levels, but we were friends first and we’re friends now, and friends help each other out.”

“Why would you do that?” Peyton propped her body up on her elbows and watched Carter smile down at her.

“Because I love you.”

“I love you too.” She pushed away from the bed and hurled herself into Carter arms and gave him the hug of his life.

“I’m going to need this back.” Peyton didn’t realize what he was talking about until she felt the ring slip from her finger. “You can’t hide behind it any longer.”

“I know.”

“Good, that’s a start. Now let’s me and you figure out how you can get Kiel and his overabundant amount of pride to listen to sense long enough so that you can tell him how you feel and how you can’t live without him.”

“I never said I couldn’t live without him.”

“You didn’t have to, darlin’,” he said with a smile on his lips.

“Fine. Lead the way Obi-Wan. And don’t call me darlin’.” She made her point by poking him in the ribs with her fingers.

“Would you prefer, well, bless your heart?”

“I hate you so much right now.”

“No, you don’t. You couldn’t even if you wanted to.”

She hugged him and squeezed his shoulder tightly before letting him go for the last time.

“All right, let’s pop some popcorn, do each other’s hair and figure our way outta this mess. Sound good?”

“You’re such a girl.”

Carter pounced on her and tickled and rolled her body until she was at his mercy and begging with every breath she could catch for him to stop. Peyton couldn’t help but notice this was the closest they had been in years. She liked it—it felt right. She wished that everything in her life felt as right as it did when she laughed with Carter. Her heart wished for a thousand things a second, but she knew that only a few of those wishes would ever come true. Some of the bigger ones would never come true at all—no matter how much her heart wanted them to.

After what seemed like forever, Peyton and Carter’s laughter stopped and the emptiness in her chest was settled low once again. She needed some space. Some time to clear her head and she told Carter so.

“How long you plan on being gone?”

“Not long. I have to be on shift at eight so I won’t be going far. Why?”

“No reason. Just wondering if I could borrow your car for a spell seeing how mine is still in Amarillo.” He gave her a boyish grin and she gave in.

“Fine, just be careful, and be back here by 7:30 at the latest. I can’t be late for work.”

“Man, your boss is a bitch.”

“Carter—”

“I’ll be back before you know it. Have a nice walk.” He was down the stairs and out the door before Peyton could count to ten. Peyton didn’t linger in the house either. As soon as she heard Carter back out of the driveway, she was out the backdoor, off the patio and into the pasture. She walked straight into the sun, loving how it moved farther from her as she moved closer to it. She found it ironic in a way, beautiful in another and heartbreaking to say the least.

Chapter Twenty-Two

“Oh shit.”

“What?” Nick asked and then followed Hayden’s gaze and mimicked his brother’s sentiment. “Oh shit.”

“Hey there, boys. How’s it goin’? Been awhile.” Nick and Hayden both stared in Carter Nash’s direction, neither muttering a word.

“Is your brother around? I’d like to talk to him.”

“Which brother would that be?” Nick watched as Hayden stepped around the mare and closer to Carter. “If you’re looking for Chase, he’s on his honeymoon, I reckon you heard he got married.”

“Yeah. Sorry I couldn’t make it. Good for him though. Tell him I said so, but I’m actually looking for...” Hayden stopped him before he could go any further.

“We know who you’re looking for.” Nick watched Hayden cross his thick arms over his thicker chest and level Carter with his gaze. Being the older brother, Nick stepped in.

“I don’t think Brent wants to talk to you right now, and I’m pretty sure you don’t want to talk to him either.”

“I’m sure he doesn’t, but we need to talk. We’ve needed to talk for awhile.”

“You’re right.”

Nick’s eyes flew from Carter and landed on both Brent and Jace who stood just inside of the barn.

“Oh shit,” Nick and Hayden murmured at the same time.

“We need to talk.” Carter turned his back on Nick and Hayden and focused on Brent and Jace. Nick figured that was for the best. Carter needed to see whatever he had coming.

“I got five that says Brent takes the first swing,” Nick heard Hayden whisper into his ear.

“That’s a bullshit bet and you know it. I’d be a fool for taking it.”

“Twenty says Carter lands Brent on his ass first.”

“You’re on,” Nick said, and he and Hayden shook on it. It was probably in bad taste to bet that your brother would pummel his onetime best friend, but twenty bucks was twenty bucks.

“Say what you have to say, Carter.” Brent moved closer to Carter. Jace moved closer to Brent, and Nick and Hayden moved farther away from the entire mess. If the past had taught them anything, it was to move before being told to move.

“You’ve got to be one of the stupidest bastards I ever had the pleasure of knowing.” The barn was silent after Carter’s statement and Nick saw Hayden wince and take another step back.

“Is that what you came all the way out here to tell me?”

“That’s part of it.”

“Well, what’s the rest?”

“I’m getting to that.”

“Well, get to it then. What the hell’s taking you so long?” Brent crossed his arms over his chest and waited. Nick recognized the look he had on his face and, just for a moment, felt sorry for Carter and willed the man to leave before all hell broke loose. Carter was a decent enough fellow. His only mistake was taking what Brent considered his.

“I’m just wondering what she sees in you is all?”

“What who sees in me, Carter? If you’re going to talk in riddles I going to leave you to it and get back to what I was doing to begin with.”

“Peyton.” Carter flung her name in Brent’s direction and Nick knew it had struck a chord somewhere inside of Brent. Brent’s shoulders tensed, his fists clenched and his jaw tightened to the point that Nick thought it would break, but he never said a word.

“Whatever it is, she’s seen it forever. Made me mad as hell at first that she chose you, but then I realized it wouldn’t have worked any other way. Her heart was here with you and that’s what made her happy, then you had to go and fuck that whole thing up.” Carter said, his words soaked with the truth.

It was Nick’s turn to wince and wait for Brent to smack Carter a good one, but the punch never landed. To his and everyone else’s amazement, Brent remained still and silent listening to Carter’s detailed analysis of his stupidity as it concerned Peyton.

“Tell me something, did you think she was like every other girl you ever dated or had been with? Did you think she would lock herself in her room and wait for you to come back? Is that what you wanted? Did you need your ego boosted? You shoulda known better. You should have known Peyton wasn’t like the girls you usually surround yourself with, or used to anyway. You should have known she was better than that—better than you.”

“You about done?” The growl attached to Brent’s words echoed in Nick’s ears. He wished Carter would just shut the hell up, leave well enough alone, leave and marry Peyton so that his brother could have some closure—if there was any closure to be had.

“Hell, no. I’m just getting started.”

“Good to see you, Carter.” He tipped his hat, turned on a booted heel and walked toward the entrance to the barn.

“What the hell just happened? Did I miss something?” Hayden whispered into Nick’s ear, and he could do nothing more than shake his head in confusion. This indeed was new.

The last time Brent and Carter had been in the same proximity they both had walked away bloodied and bruised. Judging by Carter's words and his insults, that's what he expected to happen as well. He was goading Brent. He was pushing him. Nick realized why just as Carter stepped forward to follow Brent.

He was pushing Brent to know what feelings he had left for Peyton. He was pushing for a fight from Brent to see if Brent cared. Nick knew Brent cared, cared more than he let on, and knew that Carter was tiptoeing at the edge of an ass whooping. Nick figured he could help a fellow out.

"Carter," Nick said, stepping around the man and blocking him from moving closer to Brent. "Just stop man. You've made your point. Just leave it alone. There's no need trying to get blood from a turnip."

"Or an emotion other than pissed off from your jackass of a brother."

Nick glanced over his shoulder to see if Brent had stopped—he hadn't. He was going to walk away from it all. Nick turned back to Carter. "You're going to have to do better than that," he said under his breath so only Carter could hear.

The look on Carter Nash's face was priceless. It took him a minute, but Carter finally realized that Nick was indeed on his side. "You need to find a different path, my friend, because the one you're on is not accomplishing shit. Make him mad. Make him have to stay. Make it to where he can't walk away from you or how he feels about Peyton."

"I can do that, but you might want to move in a minute unless you want a piece of his attitude."

"Don't worry about me. I can handle Brent. I'm just wonderin' if you can?"

"I can hold my own."

"I hope you can. Good luck." Nick stepped to Carter's side, saw Hayden cast him a questioning look and shook it off. The shit was about to hit the fan, and Nick had a front-row seat—he wondered if he really wanted one though.

"To tell the truth, I'm kinda upset about leaving town. Now that me and Peyton have called it quits I'd love to stick around and see how many men in this town line up to have a go at her."

That was news to Nick. It was news to everyone. When the truth about Carter and Peyton fell from Carter's lips, all the Kiel's responded in turn. Hayden's mouth fell open. Brent stopped dead in his tracks and turned to stare at Carter, who only smiled back at him and nodded his head. And Jason ran flat into Brent's back when he stopped. It was a comical scene to say the least, but Nick knew the laughs were about to end.

"Peyton's something to look at all right. All curvy in just the right places, places you and I both know every man in this town would give his left nut to see. I just wonder who'll be the first to take our place? Wonder who she'll compare them to in bed? Me? Or you?"

"You've made your point, now shut your fuckin' mouth."

“My mouth? It’s not *my* mouth you should be worrying about. It’s all these other fellows in town and their mouths. I can see them licking their lips now. Waiting in the wings to get a taste of Peyton James. I have to admit, it is something worth waiting—”

Carter never got a chance to finish his thought. Everything happened so fast Nick could barely keep up. Brent’s fist connected with Carter’s mouth a second before he could deliver his last pride-pricking word. Carter recovered quickly and returned the punch. It landed just below Brent’s right eye, but it didn’t stop his charge.

Brent and Carter both took hold of each other’s shirts and let their free fists fly. Somewhere between the third and fourth blow, Jocelyn entered the barn.

“What the hell’s going on? Stop them!” She tried in vain to step around Jason, but he wouldn’t let her pass.

“Let them go. This has been building up for years. Let them get it out. It’ll do them good.”

“You’re all crazy. A bunch of grown men beating the shit out of each other in a barn seems a little severe to me.”

Nick watched as she moved left and tried to duck under Jason’s arm—she didn’t get very far. Jason grabbed her, blocked her body with his own and moved her until her back was against one of the stalls and her front was against him.

“Would you rather them sit down and have tea and discuss this *issue*?” Jason’s tone had a laugh attached to it, and Nick thought for a minute, only a minute, that he was having a much better time containing Jocelyn than watching the action taking place on the floor of the barn—which is where the fight had ended up.

Brent and Carter rolled around on the ground, each having his turn on top and each landing a punch here and there.

“They’re hurting each other.”

Nick heard Jocelyn and saw the pleading look she cast toward Jace. It tore at his heart, and if he had been Jason at that moment he would have let her go and stopped the rumble.

“They’re supposed to. It’s a fight. Not a tea party.”

“You really think this is going to solve anything?”

“Seems to be.”

“You’re the stupidest bunch of men I know.”

“Believe me, honey. There are worse out there than us.”

“Just stop them.” Her pleading voice and her wide eyes must have appealed to Jason. Nick watched him release Jocelyn, turn and motion for him and Hayden to help.

They waited for Brent and Carter to roll once more so that Carter was on top, and then they pulled the man and his fists away from Brent. Nick and Hayden held Carter under the arms and moved him away from their still-fuming brother.

“You’re not going to talk about her like that. You hear me. If I ever hear you utter another word about Peyton, I finish what we just started and bury your sorry ass in the deepest hole I can find. You got me?” Brent charged at Carter once again, but Jason was there to hold him back.

“What do you care what I say or what I do as far as Peyton is concerned? She’s nothing to you. I’m just calling it like I see it. You’d do the same if you were in my shoes.”

“The hell I would. If I had been in your shoes I never would have left for months at a time leaving her alone. I sure as hell wouldn’t have put a ring and a promise on her finger for three fuckin’ years and then not be man enough to keep it.”

“No, I guess you wouldn’t, but you never got that far did you? You tucked tail and ran before you got that far. At least I asked her to marry me.”

“Asked and doin’ are two different things.”

“What are you so upset for? Peyton’s a big girl. She can take care of herself.”

“Because I love her, you sorry son of a bitch! She needs someone to love her and to be there for her and to take care of her even if she is a big girl.”

Nick wondered if Brent knew what he had said. He loved Peyton. Then. Now. Always. It had only taken an ass whoopin’ to get him to admit it.

“You love her?” Carter asked, and all of the Kiels, including Jocelyn, looked to Brent for an answer. He clenched his jaw, jerked his arms away from Jace’s grasp and nodded.

“Good. Stop being such an ass and go tell her.”

Nick and Hayden released Carter’s arms, watched as he stepped to retrieve his once-pristine hat from the ground and place it on his head. Once it was settled, he tipped it in Brent’s direction and turned to leave.

“Good to see you boys. Make sure he takes care of her.”

Nick and Hayden nodded in turn and let him pass and be on his way. He stopped only once to speak to Jocelyn who stood where Jason had left her and stared at the males in the barn in utter confusion.

“Ma’am,” Nick heard Carter say as he passed Jocelyn. She said nothing in return. After Carter left the barn all that remained was quiet. Jocelyn was the one to break the silence and asked the question on Nick’s mind.

“Now what?”

“Now I fix what I broke.” Brent moved to leave the barn and everyone stepped to the side and let him pass. He was halfway to the house when Jocelyn asked her next question.

“That’s it? That’s all it took?” She threw her hands in the air and then placed them on her hips.

“That’s it,” Jason confirmed.

“Well, somebody should have kicked his ass a long time ago.”

No one agreed or disagreed out loud with her statement, but Nick knew that all three of them agreed with her. Chase would have as well if he had been there. He would have probably kicked Brent’s ass himself if Carter hadn’t done it first.

“What happens if Peyton doesn’t want to talk to him? What happens if she tells him to take a flying leap?”

“That won’t happen,” Jason said with the utmost certainty.

“How do you know?”

Nick was wondering that as well. How did Jason know that Peyton wouldn’t reject Brent as he had rejected her?

“Because all of you women are the same. You love it when a man fights over you and shows you the manly side of him. You can say all you like that you want a sensitive guy, but in fact you want a man that will toss you over his shoulder and carry you to his bed and not let you out for days.”

“You think you know so much about women.”

“I do, honey—and don’t you forget it.” Jason ruffled the hair on the top of her head as he glided past and barely missed the kick she sent his way.

“Do you two agree with that fool there?”

“You gonna hit us if we say yes?” Hayden asked with a smile on his face.

“Maybe.”

Nick watched her cock her head to the side and arch one of those auburn eyebrows at his younger brother.

“Then nope. I sure don’t.”

Nick smiled at that. Hayden rarely knew when to stop while he was ahead, but it looked as if he was learning. Having a woman around on a daily basis was doing him good—it was doing them all good.

Chapter Twenty-Three

Peyton's walk took forever and landed her in her grandfather's front yard. She had walked for miles searching for an answer to all of her problems and a solution that would make everything right. At the end of it though, when clarity was suppose to come, there was none to be found. That was just her luck. She just needed a little peace and quiet. She needed to forget all of the events leading up to this point.

She needed to forget Carter and their broken engagement. She needed to forget what people in Millbrook might say. She needed to forget the disappointment that would come with the news of her broken engagement. She needed to forget everything—especially him.

Some peace and quiet might be what she needed, but she didn't find it. The screen door popped open and her grandfather appeared on the porch. He narrowed his gaze at her and wiggled his finger in her direction in an I-know-what-you've-done way, causing Peyton to inwardly groan.

The noise her boots made against the steps of the porch warned her grandfather to keep his mouth shut before she ever got to him. When she sat down in the swing beside him he simply cleared his throat and laid his arm across the back of the swing, allowing her to move her back against his side.

They sat this way for an endless amount of time, his side to her back. Glenn pushed the swing at a lazy pace, lulling Peyton's mind and her insides. Closing her eyes to the setting sun that bathed them both, she let every thought of what had happened, what would happen, and what might could have happened float free from her mind. Through her sleeping daze she could feel her grandfather twitching and tensing behind her. He was getting restless. Might as well get it over with.

"Spit it out," she finally told him after they had sat in silence for what seemed like forever.

"What?" The guilty tone attached to his voice gave him away. Stopping the swing with the toe of her boot, Peyton stood and perched on the railing of the porch.

"What's on your mind, Grandpa?"

"Nothing," he said, shrugging his shoulders and reaching to pick up the whittling stick he kept next to the swing. He couldn't whittle for shit. He knew it. She knew it. He only did it to keep his fingers busy.

"You're such a bad liar. No wonder you avoid Mama and Aunt Macy like the plague. They can smell a lie at fifty paces." Peyton knew that for a fact. Even over the telephone her mama and Macy McCready could detect a liar from a truth teller.

"I was just wonderin' something." While he spoke, he raked shaving after shaving of the bark to his feet. He had been working on that piece of wood for years—it still looked just like a stick.

“Wonderin’ what?” Peyton rubbed her temples. She didn’t have time to play cat and mouse with him. She wanted to go home. To run, flee, retreat.

“Whose headlights I saw at your place the other night.”

Jerking her head to meet her grandfather’s gaze was not the best course of action. There he sat with those eyes, so like her own, looking into her soul for every secret she had. *Recover*, her mind shouted. *Recover. Recover.*

“You didn’t see anything at my place. You must have been dreaming.” Waiting for him to respond was awful. Peyton watched him turn his strategy around and around.

“I didn’t dream nothin’. I saw headlights.” He nodded his head one good time, and went back to shaving that damn stick of his.

“Tell me something, Pa. How is it that you can’t hear yourself fart, but you can see headlights from yards away? How is that possible?” Peyton watched his belly move as he laughed at her. He was evil, that was all there was to it. Evil.

“Well, it’s like this, your driveway sits perpendicular to my living room. So the other night while I was watching the news—”

“*Cops*, is not the news,” she interjected. He didn’t care.

“Like I said, I was watching the news and I saw headlights. So naturally I got up to see who it was. Couldn’t see the vehicle. Just the headlights.” Lifting his eyebrows, he threw the challenge at Peyton’s feet. She knew his game. He was giving her just enough rope to hang herself with, but she wasn’t into suicide.

“What was *Cops* about?” The statement brought a full laugh from his body.

“It was good. It was good.” He kept laughing at her and whittling away. “Funny thing though about those headlights. They got there around ten and they didn’t leave until around five that morning. Of course, by then the sun was starting to come up and I could see a little better.

“Did you stay up all night just to see who was at my house?” she regretted the words the minute they were out of her mouth. She’d hung herself.

“You messin’ around with him?”

“No.” She told the truth. She wasn’t *messin’* around with him—anymore.

“Thinking about messin’ around with him?” A few heavier pieces of wood fell to the porch. Peyton kicked them away, waiting for the scolding that was coming.

“No, I’m not thinking about doing anything.” That was the truth. Anything to do with Brent was out of the question—he had walked away, again. She wasn’t about to have her heart trampled on a third time. No, thank you.

“You want to date him?”

“Up until an hour ago I was still wearing my engagement ring. I haven’t had much time to think about dating or who I may date when I do plan on dating.”

“Never did much care for that Nash fellow if the truth be told.”

“Grandpa!” The truth was news to her. To the best of her knowledge her grandfather and Carter had always gotten along.

“I don’t mean he’s not a good fellow. He’s just not good enough for you is all.”

“He was good enough for me, just not right for me. The two are different.”

“I never really cared for the fact that he left you alone like he did. He didn’t know how to take care of you.”

“I’m a big girl. I can take care of myself.”

“Every once and awhile it’s nice to have someone to lean on, someone to take the weight off, someone to care—to take care. Back to those headlights.”

Peyton rolled her eyes and took a deep breath. His mind was like a three-year-old with the remote control—it flipped at will and with ease, always looking for what was most colorful.

“You say one word about the headlights or the vehicle that was at my house and I will tell Mama and Macy about that little squirrel cemetery you’ve got going on in the back yard.” The whittling stopped.

“You wouldn’t.”

“I would.”

“They’re eating my pecans,” he countered, pouting while pushing his argument out.

“You hate those pecans. You bitch about those pecans and you bitch about the squirrels eating your pecans.”

“They sit in the attic all night eating them. I can hear them chewing. Drives me crazy.”

Peyton cocked her head and gave him a look saying she didn’t believe him. He couldn’t hear those squirrels even if they plopped right in his lap and munched away.

“Well, whether you love them or hate them, you’re not supposed to be shooting them. I would hate to have to tattle about that shotgun you keep loaded just for your little furry friends.”

“You’d tattle on me?”

“Damned right I would.”

He huffed and puffed for a second but never said anything. “I’ll make you a deal.” Catching his attention with the deal part, Peyton continued. “You keep my visitor a secret from my mama and I won’t tell about your aversion to the squirrels you seem to have.”

“Deal.”

He spit in his palm and then offered the spitty hand to Peyton. She shook his suggestion off. She didn’t want any part of that. She lifted her form from the railing, bent down and kissed his smooth cheek before taking the steps quickly into the yard.

“Peyton.” His voice caught her before she got too far away. “Just do me a favor, all right?”

“What’s that, Grandpa?” She couldn’t refuse the ornery old man anything and he knew it.

“Just protect yourself.”

Rolling her eyes and shaking her head, she kept walking.

“I wasn’t talking about anything nasty.” His tone stopped her. “I was talking about your heart.”

Expelling a breath, she stepped between the shrubs in the flowerbed and laid her chin on the rail.

“Grandpa, my heart is under lock and key. Nothing can get to it. I won’t get hurt.”

“I hope you’re right.” He spoke to his hands and then to her.

“Grandpa, don’t worry. Because one thing you taught me was how to throw a right hook. I still remember.” Winking at him, she stepped lightly through the mulch and made her way back to her own home—her empty home. Evidently her explanation helped ease his mind. When she turned she saw him pick up his stick and begin whittling away. Laughing at his choice of hobbies made her feel better. She did whatever she could to keep his words from filling her head—*protect your heart*. That wouldn’t be a problem. Her heart was not the part Brent had wanted. She wondered now if he ever had in the first place.

Chapter Twenty-Four

Brent couldn't help but watch the little dance taking place on top of the main bar at Big Jack's. Five women he knew, ranging in ages from about twenty-one to thirty-five, were standing on top of the thick, dark wooden surface and were all doing their best to shimmy and shake whoops and hollers from the crowd at their feet.

It was hard not to watch as they dipped and swayed and showed a flash of skin here or there, but it was even harder not to watch the figure behind the bar slinging beer bottles and filtering shots.

Even though the ladies on the bar were dressed to impress, showing a little leg and a lot of breast, she was fully clothed in tight, hip-hugging jeans and a white T-shirt that hugged her form and made his mouth water—his mouth that hurt like hell. Damn Carter and that forgotten left hook he had.

He watched her work, laugh and cut up with Wade and a few of the waitresses. Her thick hair was styled in two long braids tonight that alternated from falling down her back to hanging over her shoulders. She always wore her hair like that—tied back one way or another. With her hair pulled away from her face, like it was now, she looked younger, made her look like she did that summer everything went to hell in a hand basket, made her look like the girl he'd fallen in love with and the girl who fell in love with him.

Her lips were one of her best features as far as he was concerned. They were pouty and pink, soft and pliant and always ready to receive his own—at least they used to be. Tonight would tell.

According to Carter, she still loved him.

According to Carter, she always had.

According to Carter, he was the biggest, damndest fool to ever walk the face of the earth. Carter was a pain in the ass.

With a groan of defeat, Brent centered his thoughts where they needed to be. On his next move. He had been waiting on her for hours. Her shift usually started at eight on Saturdays, but she had been late this evening. He had thought for a second she wasn't coming into work at all and that his trip into town—to see her—had been in vain. She had shown up behind the bar a little over an hour ago and since then had been bombarded by visitors.

Her brother Murphy had come by but he had only stayed a few minutes. Reed had come by. He and Peyton had talked for a minute. Peyton had slugged him a good one in the arm and he'd left. Her cousins Masa and Cada McCready had dropped in and they still held her attention and stopped him from getting close.

So here Brent was on a Saturday night, watching her like a hawk would watch its prey. It would have been a lot easier if she hadn't been behind the bar, twenty feet from him. Maybe another beer would ease the night along and get him closer to where he needed to be—next to her.

"You gonna sit here all night and stare at her or are you gonna talk to her? Lay everything out on the table." Jason had accompanied him to the bar. Nick and Hayden had also followed in line, but they at least had the good sense to stay out of his way and not keep asking him question after question and expecting answer after answer that he didn't have.

"Time's a wastin'."

"I wish you'd shut the hell up and let me think."

"You've had years and then some to think. If you had thought years ago before going off half-cocked she would have been yours already and you wouldn't be sittin' here working up the nerve. It's your own fault."

Brent watched as Jason downed the last of his beer from the bottle and then signaled for one of the waitresses to bring him another.

"I know it's my fault. I've know it for a long time." Brent cast his eyes once again in Peyton's direction, but Jason's look of disbelief over his words was not lost. He was speechless—like he needed to be.

"What's keeping you from gettin' the show on the road?" Brent heard Hayden's voice a split second before he and Nick joined him at the table.

"Is that the reason the three of you tagged along this evening? You thought you were going to see some kind of show?" Brent watched Hayden shrug and saw Nick smile before taking a sip from his beer.

"Nothin' better to do," Hayden grumbled. "Besides, I figure tagging along was better than staying at home."

"Didn't you have a date or somethin'?" Brent asked. It was rare for the boys not to have a date or at least one in the works.

"Or something," Brent heard Hayden say under his breath and then noticed his attention was on the bar just as Brent's was.

"You have some sorta plan or you just gonna play it by ear?" Jason's question was a logical one, and Brent wished like hell he had some sort of plan. He wished the answer to all of his questions would just fall from the skies right into his hands, but he knew that was a long shot. The first thing he needed to do was get close enough to talk to her. Close enough so that he could tell her he wanted to talk to her. Close enough to smell her, to touch her—just close enough.

He didn't feel like the best plan of action was to approach her while she was surrounded by her cousins. He figured she'd be more likely to listen to him, to respond to what he had to say, if the McCreadys were occupied elsewhere. A plan started to form in his head.

“I need your help,” he told his brothers before downing the last bit of liquid courage he had.

“How’d you mean?” Jason asked.

“You feel like dancing tonight?” Brent watched his brothers look from one to the other.

“I’m game.” It was Hayden who spoke up first.

Brent smiled and motioned the three closer so they could hear what he had in mind. Step one in his efforts of getting closer to Peyton was getting Peyton away from her cousins—that’s what his brothers were for. What was the sense in having three younger brothers if they didn’t do your bidding from time to time?

“You know you could have told us. You didn’t have to go through this by yourself.” Peyton felt her inside contract as her cousin Masa took her hand and squeezed it.

“I know that. I just didn’t know how to tell anyone.” That was the truth. Telling everyone she was no longer engaged was hard enough. Telling them that she hadn’t been engaged for a number of months was harder than anything.

“What did your mama say?” Cada, another one of her McCready cousins, asked and then made a face that made Peyton snort and smile.

“I haven’t gotten around to that yet so if you two can keep it under your hats for a while I would appreciate it.”

“I thought you said you told Grandpa?” Cada asked.

“I did, or rather he already knew. It’s all very confusing and a little blurred at this point.” And it was. Everything was a blur and it had been that way since she and Carter had last spoken. Things were so blurry that she had been late for work—which she never was.

“Well, if *he* knows, you can pretty much bet that your mama and daddy know as well. I swear he’s like an old woman sometimes—he’s worse than one every now and again.” Peyton knew what Cada was talking about. Grandpa kept a secret if you told him to, if you didn’t all bets were off.

“I’m not gonna worry too much about it. By the way, thanks for coming by tonight. I really appreciate it.” And she did. As soon as she’d walked into the bar and seen the crowd she’d felt like she needed a few friends in her corner.

“Anytime, love. Anytime.” Masa smiled at her and squeezed her hand once more. She was always doing that even though they were only a year apart in age, Peyton being the oldest. Masa’s motherly side tended to come out when she knew they needed it.

“Evenin’, ladies.” The voice stopped Peyton’s heart and her actions. When she looked up to see the owner of the voice, she was both relieved and not in the same breath. Hayden stood behind Masa with Jason to his side behind Cada. She watched as Cada turned and graced the two with one of her famous full-faced smiles and at the same time saw Masa tense in her seat.

“Well, if it isn’t a couple of the Kiel boys. What can we do for you?” Cada asked, her perfect smile set in place.

“Just wonderin’ if you ladies would do us the honor of dancin’ with us.”

Peyton narrowed her eyes at Jason as he spoke, but it did little to stop his actions. She looked from Hayden to Jason and watched the younger of the two shift on his heels a couple of times and saw the nervous energy teaming inside of him. What were they up too?

“I don’t see why not,” Cada said as she slid from the stool and took Jason’s hand that was offered.

“Masa?”

Peyton looked from Hayden to Masa, who sat rooted to her seat. Hayden’s lowered voice had taken on a seductive tone.

“I don’t think that’s such a good idea.”

“It’s just a dance, darlin’,” Hayden said in the voice that had made more than one Millbrook female melt over the years. Peyton couldn’t help but smile a little to herself. Masa should know better than try to refuse. Hayden Kiel rarely took no for an answer, especially when he had his mind set on something—and it seemed he had his mind set on dancing with one Masa McCready.

In the end, Masa slid her hand into Hayden’s and Peyton watched both of her cousins take the dance floor with the Kiels. She wondered if it was a coincidence that the band started in a slow subtle tune just as the couples took to the floor. It didn’t really matter. She needed to quit putting off the inevitable and retreat to the walls of the office and finish the paperwork that had been piling up for days on end.

She moved from her resting spot behind the bar and walked toward Wade, who was inspecting the crowd and watching for any problem that might arise.

“Hey, think you can handle this for awhile?”

“I don’t see why not.” He never looked at her as he spoke. He kept studying the crowd and rolling his always-present toothpick from one side of his mouth to the other.

“Just holler if you need me,” she said as she walked around him and ducked under the divider.

“Will do,” he called as she started her descent down the darkened hall that held the restrooms, stockrooms and her office. She moved to the side when a group of women exited the bathroom and made their way back to the main room. They giggled and talked among themselves and never seemed to notice her presence. Typical. She was invisible.

Chapter Twenty-Five

The music was loud, the crowd even louder, but Brent paid no attention to either. His attention was focused on one thing and one thing only—finding Peyton. Scanning the area behind the bar revealed Wade and a young frazzled-looking blonde who seemed to be in over her head, but no Peyton. Brent felt bad for the little blond. It was hard to tend the bar at Big Jack's on a Saturday, especially during the summer. Everyone wanted a cold drink, a cool place and plenty of excitement. Big Jack's offered just that.

Brent kicked himself for losing sight of her. He had watched Jace and Hayden waltz Masa and Cada onto the dance floor. Seen Masa give Hayden more than one warning about his hands and where they belonged and where they didn't, and then looked up to see Peyton talking to Wade. After that he had lost her. He walked steadily across the dance floor, slid smoothly onto the leather barstool and brought his chest against the wooden bar. He clasped his hands and waited for either Wade or the little blond to come his way.

He silently wished Wade would stop and say hello and then take his order. Making small talk with Wade for a minute would give him the chance to casually ask about Peyton's whereabouts.

"Evenin', Brent," Wade said as he popped the top on Brent's preferred bottle of beer.

"How you doin', Wade?"

"Can't complain." One thing Brent had forgotten about Wade Vaughn—he wasn't into small talk.

"Is Peyton around?" He waited for a questioning or intrigued look from Wade—he didn't get either one.

"She's in the office. Paperwork." Lifting his thumb, he motioned to the back of the bar. Brent knew the office was back that way. Past the restrooms and the storage room was a red door marked *Private* and behind that door he would find what he was looking for.

"Thanks."

Wade lifted his hand in a wave, almost, and grunted a goodbye. Brent took his time. He measured his steps and avoided almost everyone he knew there. It was a small town with only one watering hole so it wasn't hard to run into someone you knew or someone who knew you.

His feet grew heavier the closer he got closer to the red door. The door to the ladies' room flew open and two giggling females emerged. Each one of them more drunk than the other. One smiled shyly his way and the other blew him a kiss. He smiled and continued on. The slight boost to his ego unburdened his steps considerably. He raised his fist to knock and then lowered it. *What the hell am I going to say?* He didn't

actually have a game plan. Plans never went as expected so he usually just went with his gut, which at the present moment was tied in knots.

Better just to bite the bullet and get it over with. Quick and dirty. He groaned a little at the thought and knocked on the door, hoping that the noise of the wood rapping would cover the muffled sound from his throat.

“Come in.”

He turned the knob and entered the office. He noticed her instantly. Among the clutter of paperwork, some in files and some not, some on the floor and some on the desk, Peyton reclined in a battered green chair that may or may not have been from the early seventies. The nicest thing he could say about it was she looked good sitting in it.

“Hi.” He probably should have said more but nothing came to mind.

“Hi.” She smiled, almost, but it was full of questioning confusion.

“Uh...I’m not interrupting am I?” He pointed to the stacks of paperwork in front of her.

“No. I was just trying to catch up.”

“Oh, well, I can do this another time if you’re busy.”

“What are you doing here, Brent?”

“I need to talk to you.” While he spoke, he closed the door behind him, shutting them both inside, and rested his frame against it.

“About what? I think we said all we had to say to each other years ago. In this very office if memory serves.”

Memory served all right. This was the scene of the original crime. He hadn’t forgotten that fact—he just didn’t want to remember it. “Carter came by to see me today.” That was the best way—lay everything out on the table.

“Did he?”

“Yeah, he told me the two of you had called it quits.” They both stared at each other and Brent could tell Peyton was working her next sentence over and over in her mind.

“So that’s why you’re here? To see if he was telling the truth? Well, he was. We called the engagement off. We’re friends now it would seem.” She tossed the pencil to the desk, relaxed further into the beaten chair and focused all of her attention on him. “Did you come by to gloat? Did you come by to see who was the next in line? Did you want to throw your hat in the ring? Oh, wait a minute...you’ve already had your turn, repeatedly. While you thought I was still engaged.” Her cynical tone and hard stare told Brent he needed to get to the point and get to it fast before Peyton’s temper took over her rational side—if she even had one at this point.

“I don’t want to be the next in line.”

“Well, thanks for telling me. Now I really have a lot of work to do.” She stood and moved to the door and started to turn the knob and push him out—just as he had done to her.

“I want to be the only one in line.” That was the truth. No holds bar. No stepping around it. He wanted Peyton for his own. Brent saw her take a deep breath, close her eyes and start to speak.

“Sorry. You were saying?”

“I don’t want to date you.” Stunned. She looked stunned. Brent figured the look on his face matched the one on hers. Then she laughed.

“I tell you what, today has been the day for everybody to just let whatever they have rolling across the front of their brains come straight out of their mouths. It must be something in the water, I don’t know.”

“I didn’t mean for it to come out that way. It just came out.” Rubbing his hands over his face did nothing to relieve the heat he felt pouring from it.

“That happen a lot?”

“No. I’m usually much better at this.”

“At what? Insulting me? Lowering my self-esteem? This? This what?” He could see her temper flaring. He could see it in her eyes, in her body. Hell, he understood. He would probably be pissed at him too.

“I’m sorry. Shit. I’m not good at this kind of thing. I never was. You know that.” Again with the blurting. Oh well, it couldn’t get any worse than it already was.

“What do you want? I’ve had a rough enough week already and I don’t need you to make it worse by telling me you don’t want to play house with me or that you only want me when you can’t have me.”

“What? What are you talking about?” Brent moved to take her in his arms, where she needed to be, but she side-stepped him.

“That’s what you said to me. That night. In this office. Right after you fucked me against that damned door.”

“I never just *fucked* you and that’s a terrible way to describe what went on between us.”

“It’s the truth though. Tell me something, all those times you told me you loved me and that you wanted me, were those just the words you chose to use while you were doing whatever it was you were doing? What is it? When your dick goes hard does your brain goes soft and the only words that come to your mind are sweet nothings you don’t mean?”

“I meant everything I ever said to you and then some.”

“Oh, I believe that. Tell me something, did you start messin’ around with me again because I was engaged, or so you thought? Was it all about the conquest? Were you trying to get back at Carter?”

“Carter had nothing to do with what happened between me and you. And I wasn’t messin’ around with you.”

“But that was part of it, right? Part of the appeal? To see if you could still have me.”

“Stop with that, okay. I said that a long time ago and I didn’t mean it to begin with. I don’t even remember saying it.”

“Well, I remember it. I remember everything you said to me that night. You broke my heart. Does that do your ego any good?”

Brent saw the tears form and glisten in her deep eyes. He knew that as soon as she realized the tears were about to fall she would retreat because she didn’t want to be seen as weak, as vulnerable—as a sappy girl. He crossed the room and, despite her protests, took her in his arms.

She didn’t sob. She didn’t really cry. She stood there in his arms and let the tears fall as they may.

“I never used to cry.” Her voice vibrated his chest—as well as other parts. He shut his eyes against the feel of her body against his own. This was neither the place nor the time, but he couldn’t help it. His body controlled itself when he was around her. That was one of the reasons why he chose to stay away for so long—he couldn’t control himself when it came to her.

“There’s nothing wrong with a few tears now and then.” He pulled her closer to him and tucked her head beneath his chin. He loved the way her body fit his—thigh to thigh, chest to chest and heart to heart.

“A few tears? I could deal with a few random tears. I’ve turned into a regular sprinkler system.”

“This last week or so has been rough on you. It’s normal to cry.”

“I’ve cried over you a thousand times.” She pulled her body from his grasp and stared into his eyes. “I’m no better than those girls I used to make fun of.”

“You’re not like any of those girls.”

“Yes, I am. More than you know. I wanted you to miss me.”

“I did.”

“I wanted you to want me back.”

“I did.”

“I wanted to make you jealous. I wanted you to hurt like I did.”

“I was and I did. Look, I don’t remember what I said that night four years ago. I know I hurt you because I didn’t want to get hurt. I watched Willa take Chase to his knees because he loved her so much. I knew, knew, that I loved you a thousand times more than Chase loved Willa, and if she could bring that much grief to him when she left I couldn’t imagine what would happen to me if you ever walked away.”

“So you walked away first.”

“I did and I’m sorry for that.”

“You wasted four years we could have had together because of a what-if.”

“I wasted four years with you. I don’t plan on wastin’ four more.”

“What?”

Brent looked into her dark, wide eyes and saw all her questions swirling in their depths. He had an answer for them all. “I meant what I said when I said I didn’t want to date you. I’ve dated you. I’m through

with dating you. I'm through with the getting-to-know-you part. I know you, Peyton. I'm done with the going home at night alone and getting into an empty bed."

"You haven't been going to bed alone. You went home with Kelly Cantrell a week ago." She sniffed a bit and wiped her eyes with the back of her hand. It shouldn't have made him smile but it did.

"You noticed, did you?" He was rewarded with a scowl and a chuckle fell from his throat before he knew it did. "We've already discussed this, as I recall. I may have gone home with her last week, but I'm going home with you tonight and tomorrow night and the night after that."

"You're awful sure of yourself, cowboy."

"Yes, ma'am, I am." He tucked a wayward strand of hair behind one of her delicate ears and let his hands linger.

"You think I'll just let you waltz back into my life after what you did to me?"

"No, but I know you'll give me a chance to prove I'll never let you down or break your heart again." He rested his palm on her cheek and tipped her face up toward his own.

"Now why would I do that?"

"Because you love me." He bent down and took her mouth. He was gentle and kind and caring with her lips—something he hadn't been with her feelings all that time ago. His lips brushed over her once, then twice before he felt her open for him. He could have taken the kiss then and there, but he waited. He wanted her to know something first.

"I love you, Peyton. I always have and I always will."

"If you hurt me again—"

"Not going to happen, sweetheart. I'm tired of only the memory of you keeping me warm at night." He kissed her once more for good measure.

"People are going to talk," she said before he could kiss her again.

"Let them." He deepened their kiss and tried to push all of her misgivings away. Their bodies melted into one another's and Brent could see a repeat against the door of her office in the future, but Peyton deserved better than that—she always had. He broke the kiss.

"What?" she asked, her voice and face all dreaming and far away.

"Come on." He gave her one more quick kiss on the lips before he took her hand and pulled the office door open.

"Where are we going?"

"Home." She didn't ask any questions. She just followed. Brent thought he could make a clean getaway without running into anyone on their way out. He was wrong. Just as they were about to exit the hallway and make a clean break, he saw Jason propped against the wall with a look of agony creasing his features.

“What the hell happened to you?” Brent asked. Jason just smiled, or tried to, and readjusted his damaged goods.

“Nothin’,” Jason said with a groan. “Just stuck my hand in the wrong cookie jar it seems.”

Brent heard Peyton giggle behind him. He wished like hell he knew what Jason’s little cryptic message meant, but that would come later. He had better things to do—and they all revolved around Peyton.

“It doesn’t look like it’s your hand giving you the problem,” Peyton said as she stifled another giggle, and Jason let out another groan.

“It’s not. Evenin’, Peyton.”

“Evenin’, Jason.”

“You need me to drive you home or anything?” Brent prayed like hell that his brother understood he was just being nice and didn’t take him up on the offer.

“Nope, just need some ice for my ego and my balls. I’ll see you two later.”

They both watched as Jason hobbled away and then Brent pulled Peyton along and didn’t stop as they maneuvered through the bar. Once outside in the parking lot, he didn’t give her the choice of where she was riding—she was with him. Today. Tomorrow. Always.

Chapter Twenty-Six

Sleep eluded him. Among the rumpled and crumpled sheets of Peyton's bed, Brent lay nestled and sated, tucked against her back. They'd been that way forever. The sleek, soft line of her back caressed the front of his chest and stomach without Peyton ever knowing it. The curvy bottom that had haunted his days and nights rested comfortably against his groin. Every so often she would moan in her sleepy state and rub her bottom across the flesh of his cock. The reaction was immediate.

Without fail or fuss, his cock rose and returned her touch. Lying as they were, Brent lingered in the scent of her sheets, her shampoo and her skin—each unique and erotic in a subtle, sensual way. In the dim light of morning Brent could make out the line of her back, hips and thighs under the clingy sheets. When she moved, they moved. When she breathed, they rose and fell in turn.

His fingertips moved and played against the exposed skin of her arm and those little goose bumps he loved so much formed on her flesh. Sleep couldn't keep her body from responding to him. Brent moved his body and pulled her closer to him. She fit. Perfectly. No one in his entire life ever fit him the way Peyton did.

She was great in bed. The proof of that fact was throbbing and moving even without Brent's permission. She could laugh and giggle at herself and him, causing him to do the same. Their lovemaking was both intense and playful in turn. He even looked forward to the words and sentences that fell from her mouth. They made him smile. Really smile. Not just one of those forced, pretend jobs he invented years ago to appease his mother and stop her worrying. The smiles he gave Peyton and the memories she had created long ago and would continue to create were real and true.

His chest tightened. The same way it always had when his heart beat her name. He loved her. He had loved her then, he loved her now and he would love her for years to come. He had told her plenty of times, now he just needed to show her.

"Peyton," he whispered into the darkened room.

"What is it?"

His thoughts and his lips froze for the moment and he couldn't speak. He ended up simply pulling her deeper into his embrace and placing a small kiss on the top of her shoulder.

"Nothing. Just like saying your name is all." After the first kiss to her shoulder came a second and then a third. She arched her body into his touch, causing her backside to flirt with his groin. She wrapped her arm around his neck, but never fully rolled over.

Pulling him closer, she whispered, "I like it when you say my name."

The angle of her body made her breasts jut out and her nipples peak when they met the cool air of the room. He gave in to temptation and let his fingertips graze and roll a wine-stained bud into an even harder state. Beautiful nipples. Perfectly shaped, hard and ambrosia to a man's tongue. And sensitive. The lightest brush or lap of the tongue drew them tighter. Beautiful. Every last inch of her was beautiful.

Through her sleep, she muttered once more, "Just keep talking to me until I fall asleep."

He smiled into her hair and then reminded her, "You are asleep, darlin'."

The endearment stopped his hands and his wanting body cold. Darlin'. The word he'd wanted to use a hundred times a day when talking to her or about her dripped from his tongue with ease. It wasn't the sweetest endearment or the most original, but he loved how he felt when he said it to her. Each time it passed from his lips a slight bubbling occurred deep within his chest.

He repeated it again and again in whispered tones, and moved his hands so that they could dance across her breasts once more.

"No, not asleep. Just dreaming." Her voice was lazy and smooth, full of sleep and tempting promises. Curiosity got the better of him.

"What are you dreaming about?" Casually, he let his fingers roam from her breast, down her flat stomach and to the spot that called his name. She was wet. Slippery with moisture and yearning. When his fingertip brushed her clit, her legs moved and allowed him access.

"You," she moaned. "I was dreaming about you."

Moving his hips slightly, Brent let his cock stroke the small of her back. Her touch was a necessity.

"Oh, yeah? What am I doing?" He slipped his fingers through the slick folds and found her opening and slid one finger deep inside of her with ease. She gasped and tried to turn in to his touch, but he held her still. "Tell me. Tell what I'm doing." In and out, he drove her passion, sinking his finger as deep as it would go and then withdrawing just to enter again.

"You're kissing me."

Brent's tongue found the beating pulse at her neck and he laved it before adding suction to his mouth's caress.

"Where am I kissing you?" A second finger joined the first after his question was posed.

"Everywhere." Her hips thrust down, imbedding him fully inside of her. Hot. So hot. She could burn a man alive.

"Everywhere, huh. That's a little too general. Am I kissing your nipples?" His hand moved faster and with more force. Letting his thumb settle on her clit brought a breath of hissing air from her lungs.

"Yes."

“Where else?” He demanded with his fingers. “Where else?” He was close to bursting but he held the beast at bay. Not yet. He wanted her closer. Wanted to drive her closer with his fingers, his touch and nothing more.

“My mouth. Down my body to my...to my...” The arm holding his neck and head prisoner pulled at his hair, bringing him closer. There was only one way Brent could get any closer to her. But not yet.

“To your what?”

She tried to turn in his arms but he stopped her. He anchored her legs with his and her body with his weight. “Say it, Peyton. Tell me where my mouth is?”

“On my pussy.”

Holy shit, his body called.

“Your tongue is all over me, licking and sucking.”

Brent increased the speed of his fingers, wanting badly to replace them with his cock, but still he held back.

“Are you going to come, Peyton? Are you going to come all over my mouth and tongue?”

“Yes. Yes!” Her hips bucked against his plunging fingers and he added intensity and speed and brought her orgasm. He felt her clench and grip his fingers, felt the flood of cream coat his hand. That was the breaking point.

He removed his fingers from her convulsing muscles, rolled her to her stomach, pushed her knees beneath her body and gripped her hip with one of his hands. With the other he guided himself into her passage. For several seconds the head of his dick was treated to the most wonderful spasms she pushed out. When her body calmed, Brent pressed forward, parting her folds and feeling her stretch and move to accommodate his size. Then she screamed and moaned. Both noises were music to his ears.

With both of his hands holding her hips in place, Brent moved Peyton’s body back and forth across his flesh. He showed her what he wanted and what he liked and it didn’t take long for Peyton to copy his rhythm.

The harder the better.

The deeper the better.

Peyton caught on quickly.

Her hips took up the rhythm like it was second nature. Brent watched her fingers close and grasp the spindles of the headboard. The action opened her body so he could watch the shift and sway of her breasts as he pumped and glided in and out of her. The little pants from her throat made him jump and throb inside of her. He was almost there. Almost. Then he heard her voice.

“Brent?” The breathlessness to her voice was his undoing. His hips pistoned faster and harder, sending his cock deeper inside of her. “Brent.” The tone had changed but the desire was still there.

“Yeah?” The word was barely audible, but he did his best to release it from his mouth.

“Just like...saying...your...name.”

He liked it too. He felt a tingle rise from his tightened sac and he let his head fall back and his eyes close against the pleasure.

“Brent?”

“Yeah?” This time the word wasn’t audible at all. He was lucky his mind could even conjure enough sense to speak.

“I love you.”

He smiled into the dark over her words.

“I love you too.” He brushed his lips across her so that she could feel his smile if she couldn’t see it clearly.

“I want...”

“What? What do you want?” He pumped harder. He pumped faster.

“I want...”

“I know you do.”

“I want you.” Her words stopped his movements.

“You’ve got me, darlin’. You don’t have to beg.” His smart-ass remark was rewarded by tight-lipped hard stare from her, which he returned with a deep, hard thrust of his own. She moaned and he joined in. This was perfect. She was perfect. They were perfect—and come hell or high water, he was going to do everything to ensure that it stayed that way. No more memories. No more fantasies. Just this. Him and her—forever.

Epilogue

Jason Kiel pulled into the driveway of his home a little before midnight. It was an early night for him to say the least, but thanks to Cada McCready and her knee, his balls stung—and his pride did as well.

He was fed up with women and their need to make men jealous by using another man. He had been more than happy to play along with Cada's ruse to get Travis Boyd to look her way. It wasn't his fault that she hadn't explained the parameters better. So he had kissed her and kissed her good. What was the big deal? The big deal was that Cada McCready had damned good blind aim—and a hard knee. A knee that had imprinted itself on his balls for the better part of a week, give or take a few days.

Jason was tired of the whole jealousy game. If you wanted something or someone you had to put yourself out there or get over it. Those were the few simple rules he followed as far as the female population went. If a woman didn't return your attraction or attention there were plenty more waiting who would.

He opened the door to the main house and took the stairs two at a time. For the last month or so he had gotten into the habit of sleeping in the North Cabin, but tonight he wanted his bed—not the substitute that the cabin offered. When he reached the landing he heard the light sound of music coming from the room that used to be Brent's. It wasn't anymore. Now Jocelyn was making it her own—for the time being. That would end soon enough. She would return home to her daddy's house when she got tired of being the spoiled brat she was. *Save me from spoiled brats and jealousy-seeking women*, he thought.

He turned the knob on his bedroom door and went to the bed to grab his pillow. If Jocelyn was staying in the house he would have to make do with one of the beds in the cabin, but the pillow was going with him.

He grabbed the pillow from the bed and turned to leave. That was when he saw the adjoining bathroom door cracked. That was when he saw the reflection in the mirror above the sinks. That was when he saw Jocelyn standing at one of the sinks naked as the day she was born. He stopped dead in his tracks.

Her auburn hair was piled on top of her head and several tendrils had worked themselves free. Her skin was a light pink color, probably from the heat of the bath or shower she had recently taken because her skin still held a light sheen of moisture. He felt his mouth go dry. What was she doing? Standing there that way. Looking at herself in the mirror. Looking at her naked self there in the mirror.

Jason started to retreat. He had seen enough, but he couldn't move farther than a couple of steps. She didn't know he was there—and that he was watching.

She lifted her arms above her head and pulled the pins that held her mass of hair. The tresses cascaded free and fell to her breasts. Her breasts. Holy shit and then some. Her breasts were perfect. Full, high and round, topped off with the pinkest nipples. Pink. Hard. Nipples. Those breasts could have been any man's downfall.

Shit, he cursed himself silently. That kick to his cock Cada had delivered must have fucked with his brain. This was Jocelyn. The spoiled brat who gave him fits and tested his patience. Jocelyn who was a pain in the ass—but what an ass. Round and firm and perfect for a man's hands. His hands.

Before his body overtook his mind, Jason retreated the rest of the way from his bedroom. He took the steps faster going down than he had going up, but with little to no noise at all. As he made his way across the yard, his pillow under his arm, his heart beating a million miles a second and his dick pressing against the zipper of his jeans, he repeated to himself over and over again.

“Wrong cookie jar. Wrong cookie jar. Wrong fucking cookie jar.” It didn't matter how many times he repeated and tried to implant it into his brain. All Jason Kiel could think about was Jocelyn and how those nipples of hers would taste in his mouth. He was so screwed—him and his dick.

About the Author

Niki Green knew at the tender age of four, when she created her first tall, dark and handsome hero (in the form of an imaginary husband named James) that the make-believe world was just too hard to ignore.

Now every day is an adventure for her and the heroes and heroines she creates. On any given day she can be found relaxing under the hot southern sun with a book in one hand and her laptop nearby. When she is not reading or writing, which is hardly ever, she loves to spend time with her husband (a great sport—even though he does blush quite often) and her darling daughter (whose creativity knows no bounds).

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Look for these titles by Niki Green

Now Available:

The Real Deal

He held the reins to her heart once—and this time he won't let go.

The Real Deal

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A Wild Ride Story

Willa Tate left Millbrook, Texas, years ago—along with her future, her fiancé and her heart. Now, as one of the headlining acts at a hot burlesque club, she looks into the crowd, sees a familiar face staring up at her—and her past comes crashing back.

Chase Kiel has some hard questions for the former love of his life. He spent forever looking for her, and now he wants answers—even if he has to throw her over his shoulder and drag her back to Millbrook to get them.

He'd find it a hell of a lot easier if the chemistry weren't still there. If they didn't still fit together like keg of dynamite and fuse. If he didn't want not only his answers...but her heart.

Chase is still certain he and Willa belong together—and convincing Willa of it will be his pleasure.

Warning: This title contains explicit, powder-keg-hot sex, language that ain't fit for your mama's ears, and a hot cowboy with a Texas-sized heart.

Enjoy the following excerpt for The Real Deal:

The music began roaring its way through the speakers filling the club. Nick recognized the song. It was popular and played on nearly every radio station numerous times a day. He couldn't remember most of the words but he knew the overall theme, someone had kissed a girl and she had seemed to like it, or so he thought. He couldn't remember. All he could think about was the pressure his zipper was putting on his increasing erection. Never in his life was he so grateful for a table cloth.

Hayden on the other hand didn't seem to care if his arousal was evident to the rest of the patrons or not. There he sat an elbow's length away laid back in the opposite chair, beer bottle lifted halfway to his mouth, eyes roving over the eye candy moving before the crowd. Nick shook his head at his captivated brother and returned his undivided attention to the stage and to the ones who occupied it.

After the first few beats introduced the song a throaty, ultra feminine voice rang out the lyrics that propelled the dancers along. Each movement from the two was synchronized. What one did, the other mimicked.

They moved with the beat of the music, at first only watching each other through the faux mirror in front of them. Black fishnet gloves traced an eyebrow and moved seductively to the sets of cherry-red lips. Material ran gracefully and without pause over the glistening pair. Their fingertips stroked the top first, then bottom and then back to the top before blowing a kiss to one another via the mirror.

Without faltering, breaking their timing or rhythm, the pair removed the gloves slowly and let them fly into the crowd. With bare hands placed on the vanity top, the dancers rose and inched closer to each other, inspecting the reflection that should have been there. Closer and closer the pair drew to each other until only a breath separated them from each other.

When the crescendo proclaimed that the chorus had arrived the two stepped away from the prop and twirled and stomped their way around the stage. Each and every step they took was determined and full of intent—the intent being to arouse and seduce every man at their feet.

Little black pleated skirts barely reached the top of the thigh. Nick swallowed numerous times as he watched them both move closer and closer. Black garters ran the length of each leg, connecting the striped, sheer stockings under the skirt. Connected them to what, Nick wondered and then realized he didn't care.

His knowledge of lingerie ran as far as the occasional Victoria Secret catalog placed in their mailbox by mistake. Those were good months.

Stiletto boots sheathed the long, trim legs that descended the stairs in time with the music. Those black patent encasements laced all the way to the knee looked both sexy and dangerous at the same time. An image of the dancer in nothing but the boots flashed before Nick's eyes and he felt his cock jump beneath his zipper. If this was any clue as to how the rest of the night was going to continue, he was in for a few hours of heaven and hell, either one welcome.

As the two made their way to their respective side of the stage, Nick was grateful they'd found an open seat near the stage. The long-legged, raven-haired goddess, with the fuck-me mouth, fuck-me eyes, fuck-me everything was right on top of them. Nick found that the garters connected underneath a pair of ruffled, red boy shorts that barely covered the firm little bottom peeking out from beneath the skirt.

Nick watched her transfixed. She swayed, dipped and thrust to the beat as did the dancer behind her. He noticed that even though their backs were to each other the synchronization never ended.

He held his breath as she ran her hands down the front of the tight bustier top, releasing each clasp one by one on her way back to the top. Holding the top together with both hands she teased to the right of Nick's seat and then to the left only revealing a flash of caramel torso here and a hint of round breast there.

In the next instant, both dancers crouched down balancing on the stiletto heels of their boots and exposed what the red camisole has concealed. Covering most of the breast and the entire nipple was a red pasty shaped like a pair of lips. And they were right in Nick Kiel's face. He thought at that moment he could die a happy man. And in the next second wished he was a dead man. Then the realization came that he may in fact be a dead man come morning.

"Holy shit!" The words were out of his mouth before he could stop them. Even with the music blaring, the crowd's screams and Hayden whistling, she heard him. Her midnight bob swiveled toward him and those eyes her bangs tried to hide met his. Her mouth gaped open, her hands pulled the sides of the bustier together and she repeated his sentiment, "Holy shit."

Her voice was low and strangled and jumped a little. She kept staring at him. Nick wished he could disappear, and from the look on her face she wished the same thing. He felt Hayden's hands grasp his shoulders and shake him a bit. He couldn't pay attention to his brother. He couldn't take his eyes off her.

His brother must have realized, finally, that he was the only one at the table for two who was still enjoying themselves. Out of the corner of his eye, Nick saw Hayden's face sober a bit and then turn toward where his brother gazed.

Never having much tact and lacking the filter that most people had between their brains and their mouths, Hayden's exclamation was louder and higher pitched than either brother would have liked, "Holy fucking shit!"

Nick saw the girl jerk her eyes from brother to brother. She paled more, if it was possible. She risked a quick peek back at Nick and then inch by inch rose from her crouched, exposed position on the stage to her full height. Nick would pay for his next thought soon enough, but all he could think about was her encased legs, that seemed miles and miles long, wrapped tightly around his waist, clenching her to him. Those dewy, painted lips, even though set firm and unsmiling now, held promises of deep kisses that would run the length of a man's body over and over again. Yep, he was going to hell.

Quickly and with style, she turned on the stiletto heel and made her way, with her partner, back to where the whole thing had started. The lights dimmed once more, a cheer resounded and yells for more filled the area.

The only thing Nick heard was the sound of his own heartbeat and the rush of his blood from his jeans back to his head where it belonged. It took a minute. Hayden's words finally busted their way through Nick's frantic thoughts and he turned in his seat.

"Tell me that was not who I think it was. Tell me this is all some fucked up nightmare and we both are going to wake up any minute. Tell me. Lie to me if you have to. I can take it." Watching Hayden down the contents of the three beer bottles on the table made Nick's throat drier than it already was. He swallowed a few times and then made the decision to tell his brother, "You're right about one thing."

"What's that?" Hayden asked as he wiped his arm across his mouth.

"We're in a fucking nightmare."

"No shit." Hayden chuckled a bit but there was nothing funny about the situation. Nick knew that the wry laugh was Hayden's way of showing that he was nervous, and he had good reason to be. "What are we gonna do now?"

Nick shook his head. He didn't know what to do. She'd seen them. They'd seen her. There was no changing that.

"It was her, right? I mean," Hayden pulled his seat closer to his brother's and rested his arms on his thighs, whispering, as if anyone could hear him, "my brain didn't just make that up, did it?"

"No, that was her all right. Every last inch of her." Shit, he thought. *Shit, shit, shit, shit, shit!*

“Well shit!” Hayden said, throwing his hands over his head in frustration and what looked like defeat.

“My thoughts exactly.”

“Willa?” Hayden inquired.

“Willa.” Nodding his head and studying the table top, Nick Kiel gave his brother the one conformation in the world he did not want.

“Willa.” As her name passed his lips, Hayden let his head drop to the table with a resounding thud. Nick glanced at him and felt the need to do the same. Who knew? Who knew that a simple, harmless night of beer, half-naked women and good-natured fun could turn into hell on Earth? It was just their luck.

Nick rolled his eyes toward the ceiling, rolled them back to his brother, who still had not lifted his head and then rolled them back into his head and closed his eyes.

I should have stayed at home, Nick chanted silently to himself over and over again. But he hadn’t, and now he was screwed like nobody’s business.

All she wants is his name on the dotted line. He's got other ideas...

Sold to the Highest Bidder

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For Ella, marrying Devin had seemed like a good idea at the time. Friends since childhood and in love with him for as long as she could remember, marriage had been the next logical step. Then the real world called, and Ella's feet had itched to get out of Backwards Gulch, Colorado.

Now, with a new opportunity on the East Coast beckoning, it's time to put her past behind her once and for all. When she sees Devin standing on a charity auction block, she decides it's the perfect opportunity to finally get his signature on the divorce papers he never signed.

Devin's certain about one thing when he sees Ella for the first time in twelve years—she's not the girl he married. The way she left him still stings, and if she wants him to sign on the dotted line he's going to make her work for it...for the full forty-eight hours she paid for.

When the old attraction flares between them, the years apart disappear and resolve melts faster than high-country snow in summer. But when Ella awakens with the same determination to get back to Denver, divorce papers in hand, she has a problem...

Devin still hasn't signed them.

Warning: Bourbon shooters, shirtless cowboys, and a hot rendezvous or two...

Enjoy the following excerpt for Sold to the Highest Bidder:

Ella scrambled to write her check and hurry outside, her heels clicking furiously on the scratched wood floor. The article had slipped to a corner of her mind. She knew Ruby Shoes and its patrons well enough to fudge that part of the article. She ignored the calls from old neighbors and long-ago acquaintances. What she really wanted to know was where Dev had gone. And how on earth she could convince him to sign the papers so she could leave this backwoods town behind her forever. He *owed* her now. She had just made sure of it by buying him off the stage. He was at her beck and call for forty-eight hours. All she wanted would take a few seconds.

The air outside had cooled and it kissed her skin, damp from the close atmosphere inside the bar. Her feet halted abruptly. Dev was leaning against the tailgate of his pickup truck, the same two-tone brown Lariat he'd driven to the courthouse on their wedding day. It had several more dents and rust spots now. He'd put his shirt back on. Thank God. Because seeing all those planes and angles while he'd flashed that knowing dimple at her had been torture. It had brought back memories she'd rather stayed buried.

She didn't want to be married to him any more. That had nothing to do with the fact that seeing him strip off his shirt had made her want to touch him. Taste him. Make love to him. It was plumb crazy, but her libido had spoken loud and clear—it was listening to her memory, not her head.

A small grin curled up the side of his mouth and her breasts tightened. She needed him to sign the decree. Now. So she'd never have to see him and his sexy grin again. So she could finally move on.

"What are you doing here, Ella?"

His voice was a little soft, a little rough, and it rode the endings of her nerves, sending shivers up her spine. She straightened her shoulders. There was no way on God's green earth she would let him know he got to her in any way. And he sure didn't want to spend two days with her. Not once in twelve years had he made any effort to see her whatsoever. She'd let him off the hook all for the price of his name beside the X.

She lifted her chin, tucked her notebook more firmly into her handbag. "Does it matter?"

He nodded, slowly. "You bet your designer bag it does. And I'm pretty sure paying two thousand dollars for two days with me wasn't the reason. Though we could have a lot of fun in two days, don't you think? For old times' sake?"

Memories of bygone days swirled around her, seducing. "Shut up, Dev," she murmured.

He boosted himself away from the truck and came closer. She could smell his woodsy aftershave, feel his body invade her personal space and hated herself for liking it. Craving it.

He leaned into her ear while the hairs on her neck stood up from the close contact of his breath on her skin.

"You could have had me for free."

She planted her hands on his shoulders and pushed, skittering away on her heels. "I...I was sent on a story. It had nothing to do with you, you egomaniac."

He snorted, looking at the ground and scuffing it with the toe of a sorry looking boot. "A story. Of course. Makes sense to send a big-city reporter to a dive like Ruby's for some trumped-up charity event."

He wouldn't understand. He never had. This was why she'd sent him divorce papers several times, even back when the legal fees to do so meant she had to eat peanut butter for a few weeks. "There's something bigger at work than Betty Tucker's illness, you know." She straightened her blouse and raised an eyebrow at him. Damn straight. There was corruption from the top down, and Betty Tucker was only one victim. Bringing an exposé against Betty's insurance company would guarantee Ella her choice of assignment.

"I bet Betty Tucker wouldn't think so. Do you think a woman who might be dying cares at all about how many newspapers get sold in Denver?"

Damn him. He'd always had a way of making her feel small when that wasn't what she'd meant at all. Couldn't he see it was a greater-good issue? But Dev had never been one to see the big picture. He'd had the most annoying tunnel vision of anyone she ever met. Right and wrong. Black and white.

"I don't expect you to understand," she huffed, lifting her nose and moving to walk past him to her car. Forty-eight hours. Hmph. If he'd sign by the X right now, he'd be off the hook and she'd consider it two thousand dollars well spent. They could end this farce of a marriage and get on to their respective lives.

He reached out and grabbed her arm.

“You never expected me to understand, Ell.” The words were laced with unexpected venom. “I understand a hell of a lot more than you think.”

His fingers burned holes in her sleeve and she fought back the thrill of excitement thrumming through her just by having his hands on her again. It shouldn’t happen after all this time, but he’d always had that effect on her. She pasted on the brightest smile she could muster. “Brilliant. So why don’t you tell me what I’m thinking right now?”

He still had a firm grip on her biceps and she tilted her chin way up to look at him. Even with her heels on, he was taller than her. Over six feet of manly sexiness. Her gaze caught on his lips. Those lips had known every inch of her when they’d been little more than kids. She blinked. Back then he’d been the solution, not the problem. The savior, not the devil.

“You’re thinking, how am I going to get Dev to sign those papers I’ve got sitting in my car?”

She twisted out of his grip and stomped to the car as his knowing laughter echoed behind her. She *had* been thinking exactly that. Along with wondering how his mouth would feel over hers when she wanted nothing more than to be free of him. For good. How was it possible to think both at the same time?

“Well. You’re smarter than you look,” she answered, determined he not know the effect he was having on her. If ever she’d needed confirmation that she’d done the right thing by not looking back, here it was staring her in the face. She couldn’t even manage a simple conversation with him without losing perspective.

“Yep. So where to now, Ell? Because according to your terms of purchase, we’ve got forty-eight whole hours.”

A shiver went through her at the possibilities. But possibilities got a girl absolutely nowhere. “You sign these now, and we’ll call it even. Both of us free as a bird.”

He came towards her, walking with that lazy long stride she remembered. His T-shirt was untucked and had a line of dust across it from the floor inside. She wanted to reach up and brush it off. But she didn’t. She couldn’t touch him. Not after the way her body had reacted when he’d whispered in her ear.

She backed up against the door of her car, her breath hardly moving her chest.

“I’m in no rush, Ella McQuade.”

“You never were.” She said it with a snarky twist so he’d be sure to get the insult. “And don’t call me that.”

His body was warm as they hovered only inches apart. If she leaned forward the slightest bit they’d be touching in several places. Her body strained against her clothing while her head warned her to stay put.

“Why not? It’s your name.”

“Not anymore.”

He lifted his hand and traced a finger down her sleeve. She shivered. He'd always been that way. He'd always known what a simple touch could do to her. They'd learned together, discovering all the special spots. Only now it was worse. Now they were older, wiser. Knowing he still had that effect on her hurt. She should have moved on by now. Moving on was the entire reason she'd brought those papers to begin with.

"It is until I sign those."

"Please, just sign them then. Sign them and I'll be out of your hair for good."

His finger went up her sleeve and down again. "Not yet. Come back to the house. I still have some things of yours anyway. You can pick them up."

"Devin." She looked up at him, censoring him with her eyes. "You know that's not a good idea."

Dammit, saying it did nothing more than give credence to the attraction shimmering between them.

"When have you and I ever had good ideas?"

The door to Ruby's opened and shut again and she sighed. Did she really want to argue this in a public place?

"Almost never," she admitted.

"Forty-eight hours. That's my deal, Ell. You spend the weekend with me, and at the end of it I'll sign your precious papers. You'll be free as a bird, as you said."



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