



FALLING FAST

Cerise DeLand

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*For my son, Stephen,
who understood the challenges of living with a head injury
and valiantly sought to overcome them
day by day,
minute by minute...
and succeeded.*

Chapter One

If Shana Carpenter had forgotten Kade Stapleton was eye candy, it was definitely because she'd feared for weeks now that he'd realize who she really was when they met this morning. That he'd call her callous and unethical, throw her out of his office, and slam the door to any apology she might make for how she'd ruined him.

But here he stood. Cool and business-like, he blinked at the sight of her, seeming more stunned at her appearance than angry. Good. Great, in fact.

She'd dressed for success, and if he were eating her alive with his heavy-lidded lime-green gaze, then she rivaled him for ravenous.

What a man. Every inch a hard-muscular dream machine, Kade stood maybe ten inches taller than she. He'd bulked up since last she'd seen him four years ago in the ring. Sculpted and golden, the former rodeo star stared down at her, and damn, did he make her mouth water. He even smelled good. Spicy and musky.

She'd never gotten as close to him as this—except in her dreams. Recently, they'd begun to come with stunning frequency.

But here he was, striding toward her. Meeting her for the first time. Her heart picked up a beat at the sight of his rolling gait, his lean hips, the broad-as-a-barn shoulders he'd honed from working in the saddle ten hours every day—every day, until four years ago, when he'd quit. All because of her.

She winced, fearing he might know that Shana Carpenter was really S.J. Carpenter, the reporter who'd killed his career, but he smiled at her pleasantly. In one mad rush, all Shana's nighttime fantasies of being adored by the champion bronc buster fired up like a giant heat wave.

Better yet, her pussy gushed with warm cream at his welcome, and she beamed at him, knowing she'd been right not to wear any panties today. *To feel free. Free of the past.*

"How do you do, Mr. Stapleton?" She gave him her neon smile, plunked her briefcase on the floor and put out her hand.

"Hello, Miz Carpenter," he crooned in a Texas drawl that rumbled all the way down her body to tease her swollen little clit. "Nice of you to travel all this way to meet with me," he murmured as he took a long gander into her eyes, and she hoped he saw that she admired his looks. He grasped her hand, and a sizzle sparked between them that jarred them both.

"Wow! Sorry!" he exclaimed and grabbed hold of her forearm with his other big hand.

"It's okay," she told him, but she lied. The static was similar to the one that traveled between them every time he touched her. In her dreams.

"This old building," he said and shook his head ruefully. "It began life as a trailer. Never was very well grounded."

"Ah, I see," she declared, unsteady on her feet due to the jolt and wanting to tell him that maybe this current between them was more than her wish-fulfillment.

Reaching out with two hands, he steadied her with a mighty grip that made her wish she could strip off her linen suit. Better yet, *he* could strip it off. *Like he strips me down in my bed each night as I toss and turn, making love to him and making up to him for how I ruined him.*

He threw her a polite grin now that made her yearn to taste his lips. *Come kiss me with that rugged mouth. Growl how you missed me and need to be inside me.*

But instead, he seemed to fight not to glance down her body. Most men, she knew from years of experience, liked her figure. Lithe and long-legged, she had a toned ass and pert breasts men drooled to have, but only a few had. *How I'd love to give them to you, Kade.*

He nodded toward the chair opposite his desk. "Have a seat, Miz Carpenter."

Shana stepped backward, said thank you and sat down like the top-notch PR consultant she truly was. This was an interview for her firm to do a promotion for his rodeo, not an opportunity to seduce him. *But I'm dying to reach out and lick your skin there at the hollow of your throat.*

"Ah, well, let's begin," he offered in a hoarse voice as if he had forgotten why she was here. "Hot in here, I know." He cleared his throat. "Sorry the air conditioner is broken. Again."

He grinned, fast and tight, his generous mouth making her hungry for a nibble of his lips. “Can I offer you a drink?”

That and anything else you want to give me. Like you do at night, when you climb into bed and hover over me with your thick shaft already hard and ready to take me.

She vibrated with desire, pushing away her urge to leap up and peel away his pale denim shirt and low-slung jeans. Then she’d see if his chest was as broad as she thought, and if his cock was as long as she’d dreamed.

“Miz Carpenter?” He called her from her reverie. “Drink?”

“Ah. Yes, thank you, I will.” She settled herself back into the rickety folding chair, crossed one leg over the other and smoothed her suit’s skirt to her knee. Her pussy needed petting, that was for sure, but she couldn’t say, “hey, pardon me while I show you how pink and demanding my little cat is,” could she?

She forced herself to look around and noted the nicks in the wooden furniture and the drab paint on the walls. The main office of The Hayward Rodeo was a wreck. If the town of Hayward, Texas was going to succeed at building this rodeo into an A-number-one national attraction, they would need to spruce up their offerings then their image. This office décor came in a close third. To do that, she now knew for certain, they needed one more thing badly. Her.

But when she looked back on him, he was focused on her lips. And his tongue was taking a slow journey around his open mouth.

Can I just kiss that for you? She pressed her thighs together then shifted in her chair.

He did, too.

Rearranging your cock because of me? Shana sat straighter, and her nipples beaded beneath her lacy bra. He couldn’t see them beneath her jacket, but he definitely zeroed in on her cleavage in the v of her low-cut tank top. What the heck? She’d worn it to see if she could interest the man who in her dreams took his sweet time sucking her breasts into his talented mouth, nibbling at her big nipples and running his tongue all the way around her diamond-studded belly button before he feasted on her pussy.

“Miz Carpenter? Ma’am?” Kade Stapleton raised his voice, but he definitely sounded strained, as if he were strangling.

“Hmm?” She lifted her chin and shook back her shoulder-length, platinum curls.

He swallowed, loudly. “What’ll it be? Water? Soda?” He raised a hand to buzz his assistant on the intercom. “We have coffee, too, if that’s your poison.”

“No.” *You are. My obsession. My desire. Ever since I wrote that article about you in the sports section of the Dallas paper four years ago. Ever since I printed a retraction, resigned for my foolishness and began to plan how I’d make more amends. Ever since, I began to think of how I could take you into my bed and kiss the hurt away.*

She squeezed her labia together and felt a trickle of perspiration wend its way between her breasts.

“Water. Cool water. Please.”

“Two waters, Reata,” he told his assistant as he squinted at Shana and looked for all the world like a guy who was trying to concentrate.

Shana would have laughed, but the lure of him had her wiggling forward in her chair to try to massage her pulsing cunt. Four years ago, she had been frightened by her response to his languid cowboy sexuality. She’d been young, twenty-two, in her first job at a newspaper and so naïve, both professionally and sexually. Since she’d ruined Kade, she’d corrected both lacks. Now, she thoroughly examined whatever she did before she opened her mouth or typed one word. To complement that, she also knew what she liked in men. Honest, forthright, funny. But no one held her fascination like hunky, jovial Kade Stapleton.

The man was heavenly. No man could match his bronze, god-like tan, that sun-kissed shock of yellow-gold hair hanging over grass-green eyes. Or the rock-hewn features with generous lips and a mellow bass voice that melted her into a puddle of foolish desire. No real-life lover ever compared in looks or bedroom manner. This lack in her life was her penance, she knew, for doing him wrong and declaring he was a hothead with the judges.

Once more, regret flooded her, and she yearned to use her body to heal the wounds she’d made. But how could she without looking like a horny lunatic?

Stifling a moan, she bent and dug through her briefcase for her copy of the PR proposal. All thumbs, she couldn’t find the thing.

“Problems?”

His tone was husky. Dark and suggestive. She looked up to see Kade devouring her with those wide, green eyes, his look hypnotic, his mouth parting. A vision of him using that mouth to tantalize her sensitive nipples made her yelp.

“Chair not comfortable?” he asked, suddenly solicitous.

“Oh. No. No, no. I’m fine. Chair’s fine.” *Brain’s dead, but my pussy’s on fire.*

“Here’s your water,” he said, sounding relieved when his assistant walked in, handed both to him, then shut the door behind her.

He sprang up to give Shana one of the bottles. “Would you like a glass? Ice?”

“No. Thanks.” Shana stuck out her hand. “Water’s good. Plain. Warm.”

But when he reached out to give it to her, her fingers touched his, and this time, the shock was electric. Riveting.

She reeled.

He clamped her hand to his rock-hard chest and rubbed her fingers. “Christ, sorry. You okay?”

“Sure.” She stared up at him, automatically reaching out to caress her own burning hand and, in the process, his ribs, too. “Are you all right?” she asked him, more than thunderstruck. *That shock is exactly the voltage I feel every night when you put your mouth on mine. That shock is what I crave when you put your fingers on my pussy and spread my lips for you to lick all my juices.* “Feels divine.”

He put his other hand on top of hers and stroked her from fingertips to forearm as if she were a cat in heat. “Like nothing I’ve ever felt before.”

“This has never happened to me before, either.” *I’ve never wanted a man to touch me all over like you do. Never wanted a man to eat me up. Feast on me.*

His voice was a rasp when he said, “Let me make it up to you.”

“Oh, yes,” she crooned and stood. “I’d like that.”

He stepped closer now so that their hips touched, her pussy flooded and his erection jutted up against her. His body heat washed over her like a hot river. “I’ll buy you a drink when we’re done,” he promised. “Lunch, too, if you want.”

“I want.” *I want badly.*

“A steak?” he asked, his eyes verdant with hunger. “Or maybe that’s too much for lunch.”

“No, I like steak. Hearty things.” *Like you.*

“Oh, I do, too.” He was nigh unto whispering as his eyes drifted down to her jacket where her breasts chafed to be out and swaying toward his lips. “But, uh, fact is, I’d take you to

JoeDan's Ice House across the street, but he's getting a whole new kitchen installed and the place is closed." Kade grinned, his handsome mouth widening as he added, "I do cook. Want to come home with me? For lunch, that is?"

"I do." She flowed forward to press her breasts briefly against his chest and wondered where her business manners had fled when she added, "But I'm hungry now." She struggled to look demure, for god sakes, when all she really wanted to do was move closer into those muscular arms.

"No breakfast?" he asked.

"No." She licked her lips and looked at his. "I ran out early and wanted to be on time for you. It's a three hour drive from San Antonio."

"Not good to starve," he murmured, sounding far from paternal as he braced her shoulders and pulled her so near they were flush against each other from her rock-hard nipples to his long, steely shaft. "Are you faint? In this heat, you've got to be good to yourself."

She nodded, barely breathing. "I am. I mean...I do."

"Let me help you take your jacket off." His eyes sashayed from her lips to her cleavage as his big hands gathered the fabric and slid it down her arms.

She turned to let him have her coat. But when she faced him again, he didn't move away. Couldn't, it seemed, as he bit his lower lip and took in the size of her breasts then stepped backward.

"Drink your water." He spun away from her, went back to take his chair and examined the folder on his desktop. "Let's talk about this, shall we, Miz Carpenter?"

"Shana."

"Shana," he repeated slowly, squinting at her as if he were determined to look only into her eyes. "Your proposal is a really fine one. Strong. The budget's good, too. You've been direct and honest about what you can accomplish with us way out here in no man's land of west Texas. I like direct and honest."

Direct. Honest. That's exactly how he praised her seduction of him each night before he gathered her close, caught her to him like a second skin and began to love her, pet her and please her. She pressed her cunt to the hard chair, her labia pulsing in pleasure. "Thank you."

"I want your mouth, Shana, darlin'," he would always whisper to her just before he took her lips and branded them as his own.

“I can’t get enough of you, Kade,” she’d tell him truthfully. “I never needed anyone like I need you.”

“I need you, too, baby,” he’d say while his strong hands splayed against her back and crushed her breasts against his firm chest. “We’re not talking about the past.” He’d loom above her and bend to kiss his way down her throat to tongue her nipples. He’d pull them into the warm cavern of his lush mouth and make them hard as stones. “We’re talking about now.” And he’d take her other nipple and give it the same hot blessing. “We’re talking about this.” He’d flick his tongue over her jeweled belly button ring. “This rage of mine to be *here*.” He’d groan as he sank to his elbows and, with careful fingertips, traced her seam, curled her heavy labia open and feasted on her juicy folds with tender devotion. “You are so sweet, baby.” He’d lave one lip with a slow and careful tongue. “Your cream is thick as syrup.” He’d lick the length of her other lip then slide one blunt finger up inside her cunt. “Your pussy tastes like August peaches. And you are all mine. Let me show you.” And he’d curl two more fingers up inside her greedy, little channel. “I’m gonna fuck you now. Long and slow and easy.” To prove it to her, he’d lift her hips and press up inside her in one, long glide to ecstasy. He’d set a rhythm, steady and rigid and maddening. He’d tweak her nipples. Circle his thumb over her clit. “You’re such a beautiful woman, Shana darlin’. Inside and out.”

She would cry out in delight, his words freeing her of how she’d hurt him. “You forgive me,” she’d whisper in wonder and curl into his powerful, hot body after their climax.

His green eyes became glass now, and he frowned. “Forgive you? Why should I?”

Jolted, Shana glanced around at the dilapidated room. She wasn’t in her bed with him, but here in his office. From the looks of him, he appeared shaken and wary of her while he wore an indifferent mask of a cool businessman.

“Forgive me...” She tried to repair her blunder, pushing back regret that she couldn’t really live her nighttime fantasy here with him. Searching inside her briefcase, she hoisted papers. “Forgive me for bringing only one copy of the proposal.”

“That’s okay,” he said, pursing his lips and scowling down at the open folder on his desk. “Where shall we begin, Miz Carpenter?”

Here on your desk. Me under you. You inside me.

“The name’s Shana,” she got out on a smile, scolding herself for her irrepressible dreaming. She powered up her professional forty-watt grin, trying to destroy the chill she got

from his no-nonsense efficiency. If she was going to close this deal, she needed to warm him up.
If I don't go up in flames first.

His eyes locked on hers. He was playing tough again. Was he testing her?

“Ah, yeah, right, Shana,” he agreed at last. He hitched his mouth up to one side as his sultry greens darted to her breasts where her traitorous nipples blossomed at his regard. In a millisecond, he shook his head and his gaze shot back up toward hers. “Good way to begin, with first names.” But he didn’t say, *you can call me Kade*. Instead, he said, “I’ve read your proposal through a couple of times.”

“Good.” *You should.* “To get the Hayward Rodeo into the public consciousness, a full-scale PR campaign is what you need.”

“Agreed. Starting yesterday, too.” He sat forward, folding his hands on his desk and looking her straight in the eyes.

She inhaled, overjoyed. “Absolutely.”

“Not.”

She blinked. Not understanding, not seeing.

Her gaze fell over his stern features. She’d never seen him as a negotiator before. This look was so different from the charming cowboy and the champion competitor. This man was feral, determined, and every feature from the jut of his cheekbones to the symmetry of his square jaw and the fullness of his let-me-kiss-you-all-over lips became stone barriers to her goals.

She had been ready for the congenial guy who appeared on TV interviews, not this powerhouse administrator. Years ago, the very sight of his pub shot had made her swallow hard and want bad. Now, this man in the flesh made her yearn for his strength in her bed and in her body. She wanted the ravishing man who had held her close minutes before. But that man wasn’t here now. Her heart fluttered, confused by her own wants as well as his words.

“What do you mean?”

“I like what you’ve got here.” He patted the proposal and leaned back in his chair to rock. Man in control. Power behind the desk.

“Good.” She sat forward, determined to disarm him with logic. “Tell me what you don’t like.”

His gaze mellowed, almost apologizing. “You’re too expensive.”

She hated the irony. Kade Stapleton had once been known as the country's championship bronc buster three years in a row. He'd been known to spend his winning purses on horses, cars, wine and women. All the most expensive he could afford. Yet, today, he earned a meager salary, all because of how she'd ruined his bronc busting career. And she *would* make it up to him.

"I can negotiate." Her boss had granted her that ability. "Within certain parameters."

"I doubt we can bargain. My budget constraints are very tight."

"Try me," she urged him, desperate to make this deal.

"No." He smiled sadly. "I wouldn't want to insult you with a lowball offer."

"You can't," she countered. "Five hundred a month less on the retainer. My opening offer."

He blinked. "Mighty generous. But it's still too high."

She did some quick calculations. She knew where the profit margin was on this job. "Seven-fifty less per month but for a six-month contract." She would tell Jeff she'd cut her salary for that period. Working with Kade, *for* Kade, made all of her sacrifice worthwhile.

He stared at her. "You want this job that much?"

"I do."

"I can't accept."

She scooted forward in her chair and caught another whiff of that sandalwood and sage. "But you knew your budget problems before I came here," she said, astonished.

Or do you really know who I am, and you brought me here to confront me, belittle me, berate me?

She braced herself, waiting for his tirade. "Then, why am I here?"

Go ahead and get this over with. Yell at me, for god sakes. Throw me out on my ear.

"Not my choice to bring you here."

He'd called her. Or rather, his assistant had. "Pardon me?"

He smiled sadly now, his mouth going from grim to grimace in one smooth glide. "I knew I wasn't going to give you this contract. But the board of directors wanted me to see you. Talk to you. Thank you. They liked your ideas. And I made them promise me we'd hire you if we ever had enough profit." Kade's eyes softened for half a second to sparkling pools of sympathy. "So I promised I'd see you. But there's no money. Well, to be honest, not the kind of money you asked for in this business plan. And so you see, Miz Carpenter, or rather Shana, I

asked you here to thank you personally, because I always keep my promises. To myself and to those I work with.”

So her hope that she might work with him, build up his rodeo, build up his reputation and forgive herself for how she had done him wrong went up in smoke.

“I can’t believe this,” she murmured, lost.

He slapped both palms on his desk and stood up to tower over her. “Well, you should.”

She gazed up into those stern eyes of his and pleaded, “Let me help you.”

His expression dwindled to something akin to sorrow. “You can’t, ma’am.”

“But I must,” she declared and knew she sounded like a crazy woman. “I’ve seen the line-up you’ve got for the next season. I’ve seen your list of headliners. I’ve studied the problems, read the newspaper clips and the magazine articles. You’ve got to give me a chance.”
To prove I’m not a monster who writes lies in newspapers. “Let me.”

He straightened up, his face a grim façade, his mood unforgiving. “Why?”

“I want to.”

“I can see that.” He folded his arms, looking like a colossus she could never move. “But why?”

“I can. I’m free of major clients for the next three months and I can do it.”

Once Jeff hears what I’ve done, I might have no clients. But I’d be here with Kade, and that would be just the ticket to solving his problem and mine.

“But I can’t afford you.”

“Two grand a month for three months, plus my living expenses. You can afford that. I’ve seen the balance sheets you sent for our use to build the campaign.”

He whistled. “That’s damn low.”

And you are damn stubborn.

“I need the experience.” Her persistence in the face of his recalcitrance startled her, but then she had to find some peace for what she’d done to him. Helping him was her only out. Her only redemption.

“I’ve read your resume, Shana, so saying you need more experience,” he said biting off his words, “is a damned lie.”

The truth then. Okay. Watching his jaw muscles twitch in anger, she stood and raised her chin at him. *Maybe he does know who I am. And he hates me.* Still, she'd come here to try to wipe that mistake away.

"I want to leave my firm." That was true, even if she hadn't planned to do it for a few more years. "I want to build my own PR company, and the only way I can make it happen is to build an expertise."

"And the rodeo is your choice?" he asked as if she were nuts.

She nodded. "You are my first choice."

"How could *that* be?"

Suddenly, she was positive he knew who she was. Knew why she was here. *Really* here. If that were so, she'd better get on with her plan and her apology. Direct and honest, that was the way to start. "Because, Kade, after you quit the circuit and came here, no one thought you'd do as well as you have."

He curled out his lower lip, surly, brooding. "True. And?"

"Because, now, you need to do more to make Hayward a first class event. I can help you do that. I've got the connections in my firm to bring in country and western singers to headline Saturday nights. I know the groups to set up a western trail drive for you. I can launch children's competitions with miniature horses. And we'll start an annual chili cook-off with big prizes."

"All for the Hayward Rodeo," he said as if she did need her head examined.

Maybe she did. To hell with whether he knew she'd hurt him. She wanted this job for more than one good reason. She stepped around the rickety desk to face him. Lifting her face to his, she admired his mouth and eyes, both with stress lines she wanted to eradicate. "Yes. All for you. I'll make your new job so secure that no one will ever mess with you again. You'll become the most prosperous, most famous rodeo executive in Texas."

Stepping near her, he wrapped his huge, warm hands around her upper arms. The electrical current between them buzzed and hummed, uniting them like magnets. "Are you sure the heat wave hasn't fried your brain?"

"No, Kade. It hasn't. What's wrong with my plan? Rodeoing is a great business. Growing, too, since the sports' cable channels show the competitions."

"True. But your price is so low, I'll be taking unfair advantage of you."

Like I did of you. She stared at him, shocked at the force of her need to make her nighttime fantasy real. “Say you want me.”

He threw back his head and whistled. “Miz Carpenter. Shana,” he crooned in his darling bass and made her pussy pulse with wet demand, “how will your boss take it that you’re doing us such a favor?”

“Jeff won’t like the idea.” *In fact, he’ll hate it, jealous as he is of anything in pants that comes near me.* “But I want this.” *I want you.* “And I do live my own life.” *I haven’t accepted his marriage proposal yet.*

Kade Stapleton looked at her. Every feature. Every contour. And she felt caressed and consumed by him.

Beneath his breath, he cursed. “I’m crazy to even consider this.” He hauled her flush against his chest. And through the thin cotton of her tank top, she felt the overpowering strength of his body and the lure of his easy charm. “We need to shake on this deal.”

The urge to throw her arms around his neck was the most powerful impulse she’d had in years. And when she gave into it and felt him crush her closer, she knew she’d made the right decision.

“What if I don’t want to shake?” She grinned up into his gorgeous eyes, impatient to celebrate her victory.

He examined her as if he were going to have her for dinner. “What if I don’t want to talk?”

“What if,” her lips strayed over his, open and taking in his minty scent, “I’d agree?”

His fingers dug in to her waist and drifted lower to cup her ass. “I’d rather kiss you.”

“I’d rather you hurried.”

“Oh, lady,” he whispered as his mouth seized hers. His claim of her was nothing like she’d ever imagined him to be. He wasn’t gentle but was fierce as he swept his tongue around the inside of her mouth and ground her closer.

She could hardly breathe. She tore away, and her head fell back. “Is this lunch?”

Against her throat, he chuckled. “If you say so.”

“What’ll your assistant say?”

He whirled with her in his arms, her legs up around his waist now, as he took two steps to the door and twirled the lock.

“She’ll say nothing, darlin’.” He eyed her swollen mouth, and her disheveled hair.
“What’re you gonna say if I tell you I want you here, now, on my desk?”

“I’ll say you better have me quickly, because I’m coming soon. I want you to come with me.” She barely made a sound as she added, “Come inside me.”

He growled and stepped to his desk. With one sweep of his arm, he sent things scattering across the top and dropping to the floor. Then, he laid her back as if she were made of new-spun glass. “You sure about this, Shana?”

She let each of her high heels thud to the floor then reached for the top button of his soft denim shirt. “Let me show you how sure I am.”

He bent, and she worked at the other buttons while one of his big hands cupped one of her breasts. “I want to see these. Taste them.” His green eyes shot to hers. “Look at me. Tell me if I go too fast and gobble you up? I don’t want to scare you.” He cupped her chin. “I scare myself I want you that badly.”

She trembled. “I’m terrified, but not of you and this.” She grasped his silver belt buckle then paused to cup his erection.

His eyes darkened with to an emerald joy. “Well, then, we better get you naked, darlin’, because I’m going to enjoy loving you long and hard.”

She scooted to a partially sitting position and, in a flash, reached down to strip herself of the top and undo her bra.

But his hands covered hers. “For me to do.”

Reverent in his care, he pushed her hands away from the cups of her bra, where her breasts overflowed the edge of the lace.

“Let me see these,” he whispered and reached inside the frilly fabric to lift out her breasts. Lurid, they spilled out. “Beautiful little apples,” he growled and brushed one nipple so that they both heard the zing of electricity caused by his touch. “I have to have a bite,” he pleaded and bent to nip his teeth over her tip.

“Ah, god, Kade!” She flung back her head, seared by his heat, his talent and his attention to the nipple. “You’re going to burn me up with that tongue.”

He caught her head in his hands and pressed his mouth to hers. “You haven’t seen anything yet.” Then he arched her up so that he could suck her other nipple into his mouth with such force, he had most of her breast in his warm cavern. As he pulled away, he blew cool air on

her areola and gave her little licks on her navel. His hand fondled her diamond tummy ring. He drew back.

“All this.” His gaze swept her body. “The platinum hair. The puma eyes. The sharp cheekbones. Your lips. Your breasts. And this...” He cupped her at the apex of her thighs to make her squirm. “You are one stunning woman, darlin’.” He kissed her then, his tongue invading her while his hand, palming her cunt, squeezed her hard.

She squirmed to get closer into his hand and cried out for more of him.

“You bet. Let’s take this off, baby,” he gripped her skirt and pulled it down the length of her legs.

But when he came back up and stared at her, she watched him register shock as he saw her naked pussy.

“You don’t wear panties?” he asked, his gaze running over her pale curls.

“Not today,” she admitted.

He couldn’t take his eyes from her short blonde hair as he sank his palm against her.

“Christ, you are on fire.”

“Oh, yes,” she undulated against his caress then slid open her legs to let him feel more of her.

His fingers traced her slit, and he sank one finger inside her with such ease, he moaned.

“Shana, baby, did you get that wet just talking to me?”

“Oh, I did,” she admitted and widened her legs more. “I wanted you. Needed to have you.”

“But you don’t know me,” he said, sounding foggy. “How could you know you wanted to get naked with me?”

She leaned up and held his jaw. “I’ve read about you. Famous rodeo star. Spokesman and fundraiser for disabled competitors. Now manager of the Hayward Rodeo. I know you. Who doesn’t?” She kissed him, cuddling close, her breasts abraded by his pecs and making her liquid with want. She squeezed his fingers between her labia. “Don’t you want me, Kade?”

He pushed her back to the desktop, ran his hands over her nipples and the hollow of her belly button then over her hipbones to her pussy.

“I want this.” He spread her lips, and she wiggled as the air hit her hungry cunt. “I want to taste this.” He licked the inside of one lip then the other. “I want to tease this.” He stabbed his

tongue against her clit. "I want to suck this." He put his lips to her small bundle of nerves to pull her into the torrid cavern of his mouth, and she cried out.

Humming in delight, she pulled her labia wider for his ease. "Do you have any condoms?"

She could feel him smile against her pussy as he said, "What's your hurry, darlin'? I'm having a wonderful time sucking you."

"I know. I *know*! But I'm coming soon!" she blurted.

He chuckled against her wet flesh.

"No, really, don't you have any?"

He was busy, sending his scalding tongue deeper and deeper inside her.

She clamped a hand over her pussy to stop him.

"Ah, baby, don't do that." He kissed her fingertips. "I can't drink your cream, if you hide this pretty kitty from me."

"Condoms!" she insisted. "Here? In the office?"

He went on blithely nipping her and licking her. When she wiggled like a fish, he held her hips to the desk. "Yeah, okay, honey. Open the top drawer. On your left, baby. Christ, you're giving off more juice. No, baby. To your left. That's right. Good girl."

"Hurry," she demanded, almost whimpering, her hands opening her labia to tap her clit while he tore at the packet.

"No, baby." He stayed her hands. "I'm doing this naughty cat. Not you. Never you while I'm around. Hear me?" He snapped on the condom and leaned over her. His eyes were green pools of fire. "Want to feel my cock?"

"I do." She licked her lips and reached out her hands.

He led her to his shaft.

"Oh, god." She craned her neck to see him. Huge. Jutting from his groin like a long, pink rod. "Just like I always thought."

He snorted. "What do you mean?"

"I saw you in the saddle. You always seemed so big. Too big for an ordinary woman to handle." She ran her hand over his length. "I want you in my saddle."

"Happy to oblige." His fingers spread her juicy channel wider. "Let me make really certain you're fired up enough to have me, baby."

She pounded her fists on his desk. “Kade. I’m going to be cinders and ashes if I get any hotter.”

He laughed against her clit, and the vibrations had her groaning. “Not to worry, darlin’.” He flicked the crest of her nub with the talented tip of his tongue. “I’m going up in flames with you.”

“Like now?” she keened.

And he plunged into her with one long hard drive. “Like right now.”

She opened her mouth in a silent scream of fulfillment.

“Oh, I hear you, baby,” he growled as he gripped her hips with powerful hands, flung his head back and set a jolting rhythm for them both. “Christ, where’ve you been all these years?”

At his question, a warning bell rang in her head, but she couldn’t care, didn’t dare move as he penetrated her over and over with speed. Wanting more, she moaned and pleaded for him, “Come closer, farther.”

He rammed inside her, and she thrilled to his strength as he rocked her in a faster pulse that made her yell for more.

And he gave it. With fast sure stabs, he claimed her. She spread her legs, lifted to meet him and reveled in his ferocity. Pulses of pleasure built inside her like a hurricane, taking her up and making her keen as she came in stunning waves of release.

With a shout, he followed her up into the storm, broke and fell over her.

When he lifted his head, he examined her features. His body was tense, his expression raw with worry. He caressed her cheeks and lips with careful fingers. “That was rough. You’re good?”

“Very good,” she breathed.

He grinned, passion hooding his gaze as he took his time, caressing her nipples, sucking them into points over and over, massaging her belly and giving her minute orgasms with his touch. “You come for me so easily, darlin’.”

“I know...” She let out a giggle. “Who knew I could do that?”

“Why? Haven’t had many men?”

“No. No, not like this. Not like you.”

“Well, then, let me take my time and apply all my talents to loving you often.”

She looked Kade in the eye. “Good, because now that I’ve found you—had this with you—I’d hate to let you go.” Then she squeezed his shaft with her vaginal muscles.

He groaned. “Who says you have to go anywhere?”

“You’re going to let me stay?”

He stroked her channel with a long swath of his heavy cock. “Oh, you’re staying.”

“I’m hired?” She could barely believe her good fortune.

His eyes laughed as they delved into hers. “Seems like the best way to keep you.”

“Well,” she demurred, teasing him, “I can’t just stay in town and say I’m here to make love to the famous Kade Stapleton.”

His brows furrowed. “No, certainly can’t do that.” He caressed her stomach, lost in thought. “But if you do stay, you *are* making love to Kade Stapleton.”

“I wouldn’t stay if I couldn’t.”

He examined her then. Long and hard, he looked her over, from her swollen mouth to her pebbled nipples to her wet bush, his cock still buried deep inside her. He combed her pussy hair with two gentle fingers. “I want you often. In a bed. Down in the river. On the bank on a blanket. Everywhere. Every day.”

“At night, too,” she insisted and let him know she was adamant about it with another pulse of her powerful walls.

He hooted. “You bet. But this is a small town and folks have proprieties here, so you’ve got to have a room. We’ll set you up at Troy Mallard’s B&B.”

“You’ll visit?” she asked, eager as a teenager with a new boyfriend.

“Ha! I’m gonna be around you so much, you’re gonna get tired of me.”

She grinned, bold as brass that he could care that much. “I want to be tired *because* of you, Kade Stapleton.”

“Oh, trust me.” He pushed inside her once more, his eyes drifting closed in the move. “You’re gonna have to find ways to get your work done fast, Shana. Cuz, I’ve got a taste for you now, and it’s only gonna grow.”

She tossed him an impish grin. “Kade, just give me time, and I’ll be making you *and* the Hayward Rodeo grow a lot.”

On a shout, he pulled out of her and yanked her up into his arms. Running his palm up into her hair, he cupped her head and planted a big, hot, juicy kiss on her happy mouth. “A promise, I’m gonna see to it you keep.”

Chapter Two

“Mornin’, Troy!” Kade greeted the owner of Hayward’s only bed and breakfast as they stood in the reception hall of the huge, old Victorian house. “This is Shana Carpenter who’s going to be working for us at the rodeo.”

“Welcome, Miz Carpenter,” Kit boomed in a mighty base as he took a limping step forward and reached across his reception desk to shake her hand. In his early thirties, he rivaled Kade for tall, rugged and drop-dead gorgeous. But with his silky, black hair and chocolate-brown eyes, any resemblance ended. Appreciation for her looks, though, fired up his gaze. “I see that my buddy Kade, here, has good taste.”

“Thank you,” Shana responded with a professional smile and withdrew her hand from his.

“Shana needs a large room, Troy,” Kade announced, his gaze rising slowly from Troy and Shana’s hands. “I hope you had the biggest casita in the back available.”

“Sure do, Kade. I can fix you up.” He turned to take a key from the pigeonhole slots behind him. “The one with the kitchen, right?”

“Yep and the hot tub in the back.”

Troy took his time admiring Shana’s lips, making her wonder if he could tell what she’d been doing with them only minutes ago.

“What’s the rental fee?” she asked, careful to sound professional.

“How long will you stay?” Troy asked. “I can quote you a really good rate if you’re here for a long while.”

“Three months,” she told him before Kade could get a word out.

“Wow. That long? Terrific. Means we’ll get to know you really well.”

Kade smiled, but his expression was more rueful than pleasant. “Easy, boy. Shana’s here to help me make strides with the rodeo.”

Troy now examined Kade in fine detail. “Is that right? Well, then, you do need the biggest little house in the back.” He fastened his dark gaze on Shana and quoted her a rate per month.

“Sounds like a deal,” she told him with a grin. “Do you want me to sign an agreement for that?”

“No, but you could give me a credit card. Usual check-in practice.” He seemed more businesslike now, less predatory male. “I can bill you monthly. First month in advance.”

“Wonderful.” She searched in her briefcase for her wallet, lifted out her personal card and let him complete the registration forms. She signed and turned to Kade.

He took her arm.

Troy examined both of them with a critical eye. “If you need anything, Shana, just call us here at the desk.”

Kade stared at him and shook his head as he told her, “Troy prides himself on doing everything for the single women who take rooms in his establishment.”

“Oh,” she tried to be polite, sidestepping any words to deepen the men’s tension, “good to know. Thanks, Mr. Mallard.”

“Troy,” he corrected her with laughter in his voice and his eyes. “We don’t get many good-looking single women coming into town.”

“Troy,” she acknowledged. “Hopefully, when we get more people coming to town for the rodeo, there’ll be a bigger selection of single women.”

He laughed. “That would be great for the likes of me because I see Kade here has already staked his claim.”

She blushed.

Kade let out a laugh. “Okay, man. We’re gonna settle Shana into the back casita.”

“Call me if you need help getting the air conditioner or the whirlpool going.”

“I think I’m capable, buddy,” Kade called over his shoulder as he headed them out the front door. “I love the man. He’ll walk over hot coals for his friends, but I have to tell you, ever since he got discharged from the Guard, he’s an alley cat,” he told her as they took the sidewalk toward the back of the property.

“So was he in Afghanistan or Iraq?”

“Yeah. Anbar Province. Hell in the sand. You saw him limp, right?”

“What happened?”

“Roadside bomb. Took part of his left foot. He’s still in physical therapy. Goes twice a week into the VA Hospital in Kerrville for treatment. He’s getting better slowly. Too slowly for him. His biggest problem is not the foot.”

“It’s his head?” she speculated.

Kade didn’t respond but seemed lost in thought.

“Does he have psychological problems, or did he get a head injury from the blast?”

“Some of both,” Kade snapped. “Sorry. This is tough for me to talk about.”

She stopped, and he turned to face her. With fear, she opened the subject that could ruin the good things she had going here with him. “Because of your own disability.”

It wasn’t a question, and the expression on his face told her he was surprised and relieved she knew the truth.

“I read your bio in the press clips of the rodeo,” she admitted.

“Yeah, well, it’s true. I have head injuries from my years of bronc riding. You get thrown off once, no big deal. Twice, hey, you’re getting good at scrambling up. But three, four, fourteen times and suddenly, your body recovers but you are not acting right.” His green gaze bored into hers, and his jaw twitched. “We are not going to talk about this. Not now.”

She bit her lip.

“Come on.” He tugged at her arm. “It’s okay, baby. I’m okay. Let’s get you settled in this little house. I’ll get your car and drive it over so you can unpack your suitcase. We’ll talk about the rodeo. I’ll give you the fifty-cent tour, then,” he beamed at her, his mouth lush and generous with his grin, “I’m going to cook you lunch.”

But Kade wasn’t his same congenial self. The fact that she’d brought up his head injury had doused their easy-going relationship. He didn’t smile, didn’t tease, didn’t touch her as they rode through the giant wrought iron gates of the Hayward Rodeo.

“Built in nineteen-fifty,” he told her as they jounced along the rough macadam up to the main arena in his serviceable old four-by-four. “One hundred pens in the back, lots of road access for horse trailers and cattle cars. The arena seats five thousand. The roof was new after the

last bad hail storm in ninety-nine. The paneling on the inside and the plumbing is all brand new last year. So we look good, and we have capacity to grow in this arena.”

“The outside does look good.” She pushed up her sunglasses on her nose. She figured she’d go on with the business stats, learn something about what she had to do here, before she went back to worrying that he might not want her any more, might truly know who she really is, and not want to talk about the head injury which was the cause of his outbursts she’d witnessed four years ago. “A seating capacity of five thousand means we can alternate this with activities in the open-air ring. Which is where?” She swiveled in her seat to look around.

“Over there.” He pointed to their left, and as she came nearer, he went quiet and his glance drifted down to her lips. “What do you think?” he asked, husky and warm. “Want to go see it?”

“Absolutely.” She smiled up at him, eager to have him back inside her, needing to reassure him, to show him that she wanted to make up to him about his head injury. *And about the injury I did you by misrepresenting what your outbursts really were.*

His green eyes and his supple mouth showed her he wanted her again, too. “It’ll be a quick tour.”

“Lead on, then!” She laughed. “I need to do my research before I can suggest anything.”

He barked in laughter and shifted the gear so that they jounced forward toward the outdoor arena. “Let’s see. What other facts can I tell you?”

“Hmm. Aside from when is lunch?” she teased.

“Yeah,” he rasped. “Lunch is in five minutes.”

And he kept his word. Instead of getting out of the truck, he rode her around the arena’s circumference. Pointing to these ticket gates, he told her they were on track to be replaced next month. “The interior seats are good for another five thousand. And they’re comfortable, too. But the biggest problem is that in Texas’s summer heat, spectators can fry at one hundred degrees. This arena is better for night events.”

“What about the opening parade of color guards? Do you still do that here or over in the covered ring?”

“Here. We do it early in the morning. Nine o’clock. Early by most standards. But it works for us. For now. Until we need to find the money to build a bigger covered main ring.”

“Cost efficiency,” she agreed. “It’s what we’ll work on.”

“Good. So now, lunch?” he asked, his eyes lit with childish glee.

Breathless, she licked her lips. “I’m starving.”

He almost stripped the gears getting the truck in reverse. And he chuckled all the way down the rock-strewn drive. “I’ve got to fire up the coals. Want a salad, too?”

“Yes. I’m delighted to know one more man in the world can cook.”

“Oh?” He had his eyes on the road as they made a turn onto the highway. “How many men have you known who can cook?”

“My father. My uncle.”

“That all?” he asked, and his jaw twitched again. Not a happy sign.

“That’s all,” she told him, but she knew he was fishing for more information about men she’d known, men she’d dated, men she liked. She wasn’t going to give it to him, either. Because this, coupled with the way he had reacted to Troy Mallard’s interest in her, told her this kind of knowledge was not what she needed to offer Kade. He could get jealous. Angry.

“I have a lot of good recipes,” he told her, eyes on the road, one hand taking hers into his lap.

His playfulness had her sighing in relief as she caressed the muscles of his thigh. “Tell me.”

“Steak. Salad. Baked Potatoes. Chili that’ll curl your mother’s stockings,” he told her with a grin as he took the exit ramp. “And cereal.”

She feigned a shiver. “Cold?”

“You hate it, huh?”

“I like something hot.”

He shot her a sensual grin.

She pinched his thigh. “Eggs. Or oatmeal, hot with brown sugar and maple syrup. And if you can’t make it, I can,” she told him as he pulled off the main road and jounced down a pebbled drive to a one-storey, white-stone ranch house.

He pulled up the drive to the front door and turned off the engine. “Is that an invitation to have breakfast with you?”

She widened her eyes at him. “If you’d like.”

He curled a long, strong arm around her, hauled her across the shift and, on her mouth, vowed, “Oh, Shana Carpenter, I do like.” His kiss was searing and brief.

He pulled away, hopped out of the cab then came around to open her door and hold up his arms for her to fall into. Opportunist that she was, she took advantage of his embrace to put her own mouth to his in a claim that made them both moan.

“Come inside before we do things out here others will applaud.” He took her briefcase from the floor of the cab and put his arm around her waist to lead her to the porch.

When he opened the front door, he stood to one side to let her precede him. She stepped into the cool living room, done in rust leather and brown and red Navaho carpets. On the mantel was a large old clock and a huge contemporary iron sculpture. But on the walls, he’d mounted memorabilia of his life. Certificates, awards, a few pictures of a family of four, from maybe twenty years ago.

“I love it,” she told him as she saw him watching her reaction to his taste.

“I rent the house. Option to buy if I make enough money as rodeo manager.”

She inclined her head toward the large family picture of mother, father and two teenagers, one of whom was clearly a younger Kade. “Your family?”

He nodded, put his keys down on a side table then glanced at his wall. “Yes. All gone but me.”

His grief was almost palpable. She swallowed hard. “I’m sorry.”

He winced. “I lost my parents five years ago. My brother the next year.”

She felt sick to her stomach with the coincidence of the timing. *My god and I ruined him at the same time.*

He gazed at her while some inner conflict contorted his features in grief and anger.

“Kade,” she began, devastated by her own guilt, not knowing what in hell she could say to him now. Except the whole truth, for which she hadn’t summoned enough courage. Yet.

Suddenly, he was there, pushing his hands up through her hair, pressing her to him like a second skin and branding her lips, once, twice, three times with his.

“We’ll wait for the steaks,” he told her, then bent to gather her up into his arms and march with her, beyond the living room into a shadowed hallway toward the back of the house.

She hung on to him, shaking at his demand and thrilled, but not quite knowing this Kade who commanded her. At the end of the hall, he kicked open the door and carried her to a king-size bed covered in rust and brown silk coverlet. He laid her down and rose above her. His fingers tangled in her long hair as he plundered her mouth. His kisses, filled with languor and

nuance, caressed, brushed and crushed her lips. His tongue speared into her mouth, and she groaned, needing more of this man who was so controlling and yet so sweet.

He hauled her up to a sitting position. "I need you naked, baby."

She kicked off her shoes then reached for her tank top the same time he did. The two of them pulled up to throw it aside.

"Christ," he kissed the tops of her breasts as his hands lifted under her bra and made them plump up out of the cups, "I love these. Your big nipples. Pink, satin," he licked one tip with the edge of his tongue, "and hard. They like to be nipped." He bit each one in turn and made her buck. "And tweaked." He did each delicately and whispered against her ear, "I could play with you all day."

She writhed in excitement. "Mmm, no."

"No? What do you want then, honey?" He palmed her nipples, rubbing them.

"I want you to finger my pussy."

He grinned like a satyr. "Just finger you?"

"For now."

He cupped her mound with one big hand. "Hot already and wet. Jesus, are you soaked." Then, he reached for her waistband.

She stilled his hands with her own. "Let me do this."

Fear stood in his gaze as he searched her own. "You're not leaving me?"

"God, no!" She kissed him fast then she wriggled sideways to stand on unsteady legs. Naked from the waist up, she raised her arms and arched upward then turned to let him view her from the side.

He narrowed his eyes, his breath heavy. "You'd better hurry, darlin', because my patience is always very thin."

Oh, she knew that for certain, didn't she?

"Mmm. I hear you," she whispered and spun so that she unbutton her skirt and let the things shimmy down her hips. And with each inch the skirt dropped, so did his eyes. Better than any plan, the damn fabric caught at the jut of one hip bone and gaped open at the seam of her mons. She smelled her own fragrance and her need for him escalated to a fever pitch. Sex had been such a luscious event with this man, and she wanted to ensure it was again, so she tilted her hips up toward him and asked, "When I take this off, will you lick me again?"

He growled. "All you want." He wagged a finger at her. "Take it down, baby. Now."

Again, she couldn't have rehearsed it better so that when she shifted her hips once more, her skirt slowly slid to the floor in a sinuous whoosh. Hands still above her head, she just stood there and let him look his all.

He rose, never taking his eyes from hers, and stalked her around the bed like a mean and hungry lion. Then, just when she would have thought he'd embrace her, he sank to his knees and kissed her bush then blew small puffs of air against her slick, wanting flesh. "I'm going to eat this pussy like no one ever has."

"No one," she told him, barely making a sound, "ever has."

He smiled against her lower belly. "Just me, then." He ran one finger along her seam, lightly, so lightly she whimpered at his touch. "Only me." He traced her seam again. "Spread your legs open, darlin'."

She gulped, did as he ordered, and he buried his lips in her curls.

"Ah, you smell so good. I'm going to wear your honey scent for days after I eat you. You know that?"

"Oh, yes, please!" She put her hands to his shoulders to support herself. "I want to smell myself on you."

"Christ, what a cat you are." He hummed as he fingered her labia open. "You have the plumpest lips. I'm going to suck them hard and make them flood for me."

"Hurry!" Her legs began to buckle.

"I've got you, Shana, baby." He backed her up to the cool wall, rolled open her labia and sent his tongue inside in one sweep of her clit. "Swollen for me, isn't it?"

She quivered.

He clutched one thigh. "Open wider for me."

She complied. "I can't stand."

"Course you can, cuz I'm having you this way." And did he. With dexterous care, he held her lips open to his seeking tongue. Darting around her clit, he flicked her nub with butterfly whisks then licked the tip as she ground her teeth, her arms bracketed against the wall, her hips tilted to his ravening mouth. Then he sent one thick finger up inside her cunt. Growling, he curled it inside her as he laved one lip, sucking up her juices, and moved to bathe the other with his ministrations.

“I’m going to come, Kade. Don’t want to...without you.”

He paused and spoke against her lower belly. “Hold on, honey. There’s more to come. Feel this.”

She bit her lip and whimpered as he shot another finger up inside her and stroked a fiercely needy spot.

“Hot baby,” he crooned as he kissed her clit. “Want a piece of me?”

“Yes!” she demanded, thinking he meant to let her lie down and fuck her to her heart’s delight. But instead, he rose, his lips coated with her own essence, and kissed her as he began to tear off his clothes and toe off his shoes. She’d felt the power of his arms, and the strength of his embrace. Standing against him there, she rubbed herself across his naked torso as she helped him work at his belt buckle and jeans. “How?”

He cupped her face and spoke on her mouth. “Ever sucked a man?”

Her expression of wonder must have answered for her.

“Can I?” Her fingers found his steely cock and thrilled to his length and his heat.

“I’m yours,” he whispered.

She sank to her knees. He was beautiful. Huge. His bluish head dripping pre-cum. She wrapped her hand around him. Even in her dreams, she’d never had the imagination to plan loving him like this. God knew, she didn’t have the experience. Only instinct.

So she went with it. Sinking her mouth over his thick penis, she tasted his silken skin and smelled his desire. Her channel throbbed and her thighs became drenched in her own fluid delight. She pulled away then ran her tongue along the length of his shaft. She heard him grunt, felt him brace himself against the wall with one hand, the other to her hair.

“More, baby. Do it to me again.”

Knowing now that he loved it, she began a rhythmic caress of her tongue along his length and shifted to take the whole of him into her mouth. Listening to him growl, she wiggled closer to him and took him with sure pressure until he caught her under her arms and lifted her. “No more. You’re too good. You’re gonna make me come.”

She laughed in triumph.

He caught her to him, twirled and laid her on his bed. “Hold that pose.” He rose and went through one door, open what sounded like a cabinet and came back with a box of condoms. Tearing at the seal on the new box, he dumped them out to the floor. Bending, he grabbed one,

ripped it open and rolled it on in two deft strokes. He climbed back up to hover over her, just like in her dreams of him, and his cock nestled near her ravenous pussy. She wrapped her arms and legs around him and whispered how she needed him. “Now, Kade.”

He sank inside her in one, long, searing glide. She thrashed her head at the size of him. The way she always did whenever she dreamed of making up to him for all the ways she’d hurt him.

“You are so wonderful,” she praised him, awed that this real man was so virile yet so tender. With her.

He tipped up her chin. “You are the one who’s better than any fantasy I’ve ever had. Let me show you,” he crooned as he gripped her hips and plunged over and over again into her with a determined drive of an athletic man. She went with his possession, fingers fisted in his coverlet, hips up and rocking with his demanding thrusts, mouth open in silent screams of potent pulsing waves. Once again, like their first mating, this tumult broke fast and furious, Shana coming first and Kade tumbling close behind her.

Melting over her, he cradled her close, kissed her ear and her throat. “I don’t know if I can let you go long enough to make lunch.”

She chuckled, rolling up her hips to feel the delicious length of his cock still filling her. “Gotta have some energy to do this again.”

He propped himself on his elbows, his fingers combing her hair back from her cheeks. “I don’t take women to bed first thing after I meet them.”

“I didn’t think you did.”

“I don’t bring them home either.”

“And I haven’t had a lot of affairs.”

“I gathered that. Not knowing any guys who cook. Or any who’ve loved you well here.” His hand drifted down her tummy to her mons.

“And not knowing how to make love to a man with my mouth.” She looked away, shy to discuss intimate sex, even though today with him she had the most fulfilling orgasms of her life.

With insistent fingers to her chin, he drew her to look at him and winked at her. “You did just fine, darlin’. Better than.” He grinned.

She beamed at him. “I thought so.”

He hugged her close. "I know so." He shifted up, letting her feel how erect his penis remained. "This is what we're going to do. I get up and go to the kitchen. Make you that steak. You go in there," he indicated the bathroom, "and take a shower. I don't have anything fancy in there. No hair dryer."

She inhaled, tickled that this was some proof he really did not make it a practice to bring women home with him. "I can manage." She squeezed his penis in her swollen channel. "But I'll feel so empty."

He grunted. "Aw, honey, you're making this hell to leave you. But you can bet I'll be back. Tell me you want me back."

She met his challenge with one of her own. "I want you back *often*." *Because you are so much better than a phantom in the night.*

"Well, then, darlin', you have got yourself one hot and horny man." He pulled out of her, gave her a hand up and spun her toward the bathroom. "Help yourself to clean towels in the closet and my robe, if you want. Come out to the kitchen. We'll eat then go meet the president of the rodeo corporation."

Stunned back to the reality of dealing with business, she stepped away from him. She tried to smile and pretend she didn't have to face any of the personal and professional problems she'd created for herself this morning. *Because I care for this man. This real, live, caring, tender man.*

He didn't detect her change in mood but swept his eyes down her naked body. "Get in there before I change my mind and rope you to this bed."

Feigning impishness, she danced backwards and batted her lashes at him. "Why, Mr. Stapleton, what a swell idea!"

She had to dart inside the bathroom to escape his reach.

* * * *

Escaping herself was impossible. Her initial fear that Kade might know who she really was had morphed into a bigger one. Now that she was going to help him professionally, sleeping with him was such a bad idea. Letting him love her, letting herself fall into bed with him, she had learned there was so much to this man that she hadn't dreamed. Couldn't dream.

She looked at her reflection in his huge bathroom mirror. This afternoon, she'd been naked before him, except for her lack of courage. Her lack of honesty.

She had to tell him.

Come clean.

Argh! She ground her teeth at the bad analogy then she stepped into his shower and drowned herself in shampoo, soap and recriminations. She washed her hair and told herself she would call Jeff first thing after this and tell him what she'd done. He wouldn't be happy. In fact, he had a temper. A huge one. One he'd never used on her, but now, he certainly might. And to some extent, she wouldn't blame him.

She washed her body and promised herself she wouldn't make any promises on any of the big-ticket projects. Vendor costs were so unpredictable.

She laved her breasts and arched at the sensitivity of her nipples. The nubby texture of the washcloth made her moan and remember the way Kade sucked her areolas into his warm, wonderful mouth. Her hand drifted to her belly ring and simulated how he had caressed her all the way to her pussy. Her fingers delved inside, and the satin of her labia, so swollen still, made her groan. She needed Kade, this lover who had possessed her mind long before she came here and now had seized her body in a sinuous, sexual mating.

"I love how you touch yourself." His sonorous voice fell around her as he entered the shower, put two strong arms around her and pulled her back against him. "Is all that because of me?" he asked, nuzzling her ear.

"Oh, yes," she whispered as he took the cloth from her and began to wash her nipples with a deft, circular motion. "I can't get you out of my mind."

Grunting, he washed her navel and her pubic hair in soothing whirls. To give him greater access, she tilted her hips up, and he delved between her heavy labia to wash every tiny fold of her cunt and tantalize her more.

"That's torture," she told him.

"Yeah, baby, I hear you. For me, too." He turned her around, dropped the washcloth and sank to his knees. He put his mouth to her seam. "I know how to give you some sweet relief."

She braced herself, hands to his shoulders. "Kade, loving you so often is so wicked."

He rolled her open and tongued her begging little clit. "Pretty Shana. I'm gonna show you the real meaning of wicked," he spoke on her oversensitive flesh and made her cry out in rough need. Then he nibbled on her bundle of nerves, sent two fingers high up inside her channel

and pumped her so that she trembled in his arms. His other hand was on her ass cheek and his thumb caressed her small dark hole.

She gasped.

“Easy, darlin’. I’d never hurt you.” To prove it, he used water from the shower and cream from her cunt to massage her and test her tiny passage, until he inserted the tip of one finger.

She bucked.

He licked her clit. “What do you think?”

“I want more.” She pushed her mound against his mouth, the spray of water from the shower tingling her skin, his lips electrifying her cunt and his finger invading her tight, virgin ass.

“You got it, baby.” He sent his finger higher inside and pumped her in tiny strokes. “We’re gonna make you happy you let me in here.” He blew on her clit and withdrew his finger from her ass. “Come let me fuck you on the floor.”

“But, but I want more of that,” she cried, fascinated and frantic to have him plunging once more into her dark recess.

“We’re gonna go slowly there, darlin’.” He helped her step carefully from the shower then wrapped her in huge soft towel and tugged her to the floor. On top of a fluffy, white rug, he spread her out wide, knees up, feet flat to the floor. Kneeling between her legs, he gazed at her naked flesh. “Your folds are so red and slick. Man, do I love the way you cream for me. No, no. Don’t clamp your legs together. This lovely kitty is mine, isn’t it?”

She swallowed. “Yes.”

“Gonna show you such a good time, Shana, you won’t ever want another man inside this hot little cunt.”

She moaned and reached for his cock that stood up, proud and red and ready. “Give me that.”

He stretched up to the sink top and extracted a condom from a package. In a fast roll, he had the damn thing on his penis and his hands spreading her thighs wide. In one sure thrust, he was inside her. Buried to the hilt, he grunted and held his position.

She couldn’t breathe, couldn’t think of anything except being possessed by him. “Come on, baby, fuck me,” she whimpered.

And he did. If their first fuck was furious, and the second fiery, this one was a sensuous, slow ecstasy. The water on their bodies made them slip together so smoothly and their growing instinct for how the other paced the tempo made them graceful in their joining and lusty in their execution. When she cried out in a never-ending series of tiny orgasms, he rode her longer, more surely until she milked him and had him shouting and sinking over her in his own completion.

Exhaling, she wound one arm around his shoulders and ran a hand through her wet hair. Astonished at her body's languor, she thrilled to the ways she could enjoy him. Had enjoyed him. She chuckled.

He propped up on one elbow, his palm covering one breast so that his lips could suck on one grateful nipple. "How do you feel now?"

She laughed up at him, replete with sexual release and oddly testy. "Hungry. Starving. Did you manage to cook any food in the two minutes you were in the kitchen?"

He tsked. "Irritable when you're hungry, huh? I'll make a note to always feed you well. Time to eat. Come on, crabby."

* * * *

But it was Jeff who was really crabby.

"You told him you'd take two grand plus your expenses?" he yelled into his phone.

Holding her cell away from her ear, Shana winced, glad she'd decided to go out on the front lawn of Kade's house to call her boss. "Look, Jeff, you gave me permission to negotiate."

"Negotiate. Not donate!" He cursed.

She set her jaw, pushed her sunglasses up her nose and scanned the cloudless, blue sky over her head. "I'll take the cut in salary."

"You're damn right you will!"

She huffed. *No one talked to her like this. No one.*

"Are you still there?" he bellowed. "Shana? Listen to me."

She was. Just barely. Anyone yelling at her became just a roaring in her ears.

"I know you wanted this client. God knows why. But I said you could go after them. And you've landed them."

"Congratulate me, Jeff," she demanded.

"I know you can do the job," he conceded, his belligerent tone mellowing. "All those years on that cutting horse ranch and your father on the circuit means you know a lot."

“I know I can do this, too.” *Better than you. Or anyone else in the firm.*

“Do you have a signed contract yet?”

“This afternoon. Kade Stapleton is taking me over to meet the president of the rodeo corporation in a few minutes.”

“And how is Stapleton?”

She inhaled and told him what she’d learned today. “A smart business man. Kind. A gentleman.”

Jeff snorted. “Hell. The Romeo of the Rodeo now has manners?”

His use of Kade’s old nickname had her scuffing the dirt with the toe of her shoe. “Yes, he does.” *More than you.*

“You be careful, you hear me? That man has more charm than a Texas gambler and more notches on his belt than a Texas rustler. You do not want to let him persuade you to do anything you don’t want to do.”

She smiled. This morning, she had done as much of the persuading at Kade had. “Don’t worry.”

Jeff’s tendency to corral Shana, evident from the day he’d decided that he wanted to date his newest employee, had him plowing on, “I mean it, Shana. Do not get mixed up with the likes of him. He had more fancy women in his riding days than a dog has fleas. You do not want to be bitten by the Stapleton bug. It’s an itch you can’t scratch.”

Gazing toward the front door, she saw Kade emerge to stand on his porch, hitch his fingers in his jean pockets and watch her with a lopsided grin. His easy grace had the possessive look of a lover.

She quivered at the remembrance that she had made love to this man, not once, but three times in the space of as many hours.

“Shana? You there?”

“Yep. Gotta go, Jeff. Talk to you later.” She powered down her phone.

She had better things to do with her time than listen to Jeff Wentworth grouse at her.

“So your boss,” Kade asked as he drew her into the house, “is upset with our deal?”

She draped her arm around Kade’s hips and offered him the biggest grin she could muster. “Yeah, sometimes he can be really crabby.”

Chapter Three

Kade climbed into his truck, shut the door and hung his white Stetson up in his visored, overhead hat rack. He pulled out of his driveway, and they zoomed down the road. “You are gonna charm the pants off Sam Trunbridge.”

She grimaced. “Oh, dear, I hope not. One man with his pants off today is more than enough for me.”

“I’m making certain this man with his pants off is all you’ll ever need.” He grasped her hand, lifted it to his mouth and put the tip of his tongue to the center of her palm.

She yelped and pulled her hand back. “You better stop this, or I won’t have my right mind for this meeting.”

Kade grinned, eyes on the road. “Trunbridge will be easy for you to persuade. He liked your proposal. Loved it, in fact. His big problem was the retainer. And now that you’ve reduced that, he’ll be ready to sign on the dotted line—provided you kill the bit about the headliners.”

“But that’s crazy. Big names are what we need.”

“Yeah, well, you are not going to change Sam’s mind.”

“Why not?”

“Personal history.”

“Really? What?”

Kade shot her a glance. “Sam doesn’t talk about this.”

“Okay, then. Only you and I do.”

Kade nodded. “Sam is the third richest man in Texas.”

Shana shrugged. “Meaning?”

“He’s got money, land, cattle, horses, looks and a saddlebag full of charm.”

Now she was puzzled. She shook her head. “And?”

“He keeps it all for himself and his daughter.” Kade grimaced as he looked in the rear-view mirror and turned a corner onto a feeder road. The land ahead was bound by an electric, barbed wire fence. A huge white sign with a gold lone star at the entrance read, “Welcome to Trunbridge Ranch. Home to Angus and Cutting Horses since 1876.” Beneath stood the ranch’s brand, a Rocking Bar T.

Kade drove up to the electronic code box, rolled down his window, punched in a few number keys then called into the audio box. “It’s Kade Stapleton, Willa. Comin’ in to see your dad.”

As the giant iron gate swung wide to let them in, Shana fingered a wisp of hair back into her ponytail. “Tell me what else I need to know about Trunbridge before I go in here and stick my foot in my mouth.”

“You’ll have your work cut out for you on the Nashville headliners because years ago Sam Trunbridge bought into Dell-a-tone Records and met a singer who took his heart and stomped on it. Or so he tries to say now with a big dose of false objectivity. And just who is that heartthrob? Well, god. None other than Kylee Farrell.”

At the mention of the three-time Grammy award-winning singer, Shana dropped her mouth open.

“Yeah. My reaction, too.” Kade nodded at Shana with poignant humor. “Sam does not mention it to many. He told me only after we’d read your proposal and Kylee’s name was on there as a possible for the grand opening.”

Oh, boy. “But she—”

“Doesn’t have to be the opener.”

“Well—”

“You can get someone else. Kylee might not want to come anyway, if she knew Sam was involved. Plus, she’ll think we’re small potatoes and—”

“No.”

“And she won’t see any profit in coming to Hayward. So that let’s us open for—”

“Stop!” she yelled at Kade.

He jammed on the brakes. “What’s the matter?”

“You have to understand that Kylee *is* the grand opening act.”

“What? How can that be? If you and I have just agreed to work together this morning, then she’s—”

“Committed to starring in the season opener October twelfth.”

“That’s crazy.” Stunned, he shoved the gearshift to neutral.

“Tell me about it.” She nibbled on her lower lip.

“You can cancel the contract,” Kade said, waving a hand.

“Can’t.”

He scowled. “Why not?”

“She was in our office the day Jeff and I talked about our draft of our proposal.”

“How’s that?”

“She was in San Antonio because she’d done a concert at the Alamo Dome the night before. She dropped in to see Jeff who used to live next door to her in Abilene. He told her about this, that we needed a headliner. It would help sell the proposal, he told her. And she volunteered.”

“Oh, hell.” Kade stared straight ahead.

“Tell me more about their relationship,” she said, her eyes outlining the yellow-stone ranch house that rambled over the acreage in front of her.

“Honey, that’s all I know.” Kade turned to her. “You’ve got to forget you have her. You won’t get him to agree. He won’t sign your contract.”

Her heart fluttered in fear. She’d come this far to help Kade, she wasn’t going to let an old, failed love affair stop her from fixing what she’d done. “Drive on up there, Kade. Let’s do this.”

“Shana, if you have a plan I’d like to hear it.”

She faced him. Her mind was blank. His face was lined with anxiety and concern for her. She dissolved in delight and smiled at him. He was so sweet, she could eat him with a spoon. If she could meet this man and instinctively care for him so strongly, maybe, just maybe, she could employ her instinct to wipe away this last obstacle to her plan.

“Just help me with him, Kade. Help me.”

* * * *

Sam Trunbridge should have been in westerns. Tall, rawhide tan, lanky, with black hair and a devil’s shock of white at the temples and over his brow, he was the personification of a

filthy rich, movie screen, come-to-daddy cowman. With hand-tooled Lucchese brown boots, jeans that fit like his skin, and a snowy shirt starched to an inch of its life, the rancher walked and talked no-nonsense wealth and acid-tongued humor.

“You two look hungry. Had lunch?” he asked, ushering them into his living room, the walls of which were studded with one stuffed bobcat, a javelina’s head and more than a dozen whitetail deer antlers. Shana smiled to herself, knowing this kind of hard-drivin’ Texan like the back of her hand. She took one of the two brown leather chairs, while Kade sank into the other and crossed his long legs with his cowboy hat perched on his knee. Across from them, on the sofa, sat Sam’s statuesque daughter, Willa, who dissected Shana with the skill of a surgeon.

“Yes, we have eaten,” Kade told him. “Thanks.”

Sam inclined his head toward Kade as he gazed at Shana. “Did he cook for you?”

Shana tried not to blush. Did he suspect she and Kade were already lovers? “Yes, sir, he did.”

Willa looked stricken, but she tossed her hair over her shoulder and came out like a whiplash. “He cooks for only a few people. Special ones. Right, Kade?”

Shana examined the young woman openly. Probably slightly younger than she, twenty-two or so, Willa Trunbridge had all the earmarks of a Texas heiress. Proud as whiskey. Straight as a ramrod. Impeccable grooming of her straight waist-length raven hair and porcelain doll-like complexion. Designer jeans that looked as if they’d never ridden a horse. Red-lacquered nails that might never have washed a dish. And darting black eyes that focused daggers of interest in Kade Stapleton. An interest that Kade, thank you god, ignored.

“Practice,” Shana responded, as if it were quite natural for him to cook for her, “does make perfect.” Then she crossed her legs and smiled at Kade who acknowledged her praise with a grin.

Willa arched a brow. “And you two got to talk business?”

“Willa,” her father sounded rueful, “mix us a couple of drinks.”

“Margarita?” Willa asked Shana. “I know Dad will have one. You?”

“No, thank you,” Shana refused politely. “I don’t drink before sundown.”

Sam hooted. “Well, Shana, in this part of Texas, that means you’re not drinking until after nine. Too long to wait for me. Mix us up some margaritas, Wil.”

Willa turned her attention to Kade. “Lemonade, still, for you, Kade?”

“Yep, thanks, Willa.”

“Oh, come *on*, Kade.”

Her father glared at her. “Willa, you heard the man. If he doesn’t want to drink, so be it.”

Her resentment of her father and Kade hardened her fine features. “Sure.” She turned on her heel and walked toward the built-in bar that commanded the entire wall of the living room.

“First time in west Texas, Shana?” Sam sat back in his own leather chair.

“No. I was born in Marathon near Big Bend but grew up in Uvalde County, in fact.”

“Is that right?” Sam got a kick out of that.

Kade laughed. “You didn’t tell me that.”

You didn’t give me time. She grinned at him then Sam. “Yes, I went to high school there.” She was happy to break the ice talking about what had become a very happy four years. “My aunt and uncle took me in after my parents died. They raised Angus, like you.”

“I’ll be damned,” Sam laughed. “You know any of this?” he asked Kade.

“No, sir. First time I’m hearing it all. And so I would guess this means you’ve been to lots of rodeos?” Kade prodded.

She was tickled to reveal more. “Been a competitor, too.”

Kade arched both brows. “Is that right.”

Sam chuckled. “What as? Rodeo Queen, I bet.”

“Once,” she admitted. “But twice, I was the barrel-racing queen of the Uvalde Country Fair.”

The men slapped their thighs.

Willa chimed in with, “So this qualifies you to do public relations and improve our rodeo?”

Shana fought the impulse to ask this petulant child where her manners were.

“Willa,” her father scolded with a low tone, “do hurry up with those drinks, and just listen, will you?”

Shana had the need to counter Willa’s charge and establish her credibility. “I went to UT in Austin with a major in communications, worked for a newspaper for about a year then went to Wentworth and Associates more than three years ago. Yes, I am new at what I do, but I do know the rodeo. Well. My uncle competed for a few years before he quit. And my dad, too, before he

died.” She considered her hands in her lap for a moment. She hadn’t spoken of her father in years. More than a decade.

She felt Kade’s eyes on her for a long minute. Then he said, “Well, I am really pleased to hear this. Now that really helps with what you are going to do for us.”

Sam looked at him, confused. “Is she? You made her an offer?”

Kade shook his head. “No, Sam. She made me an offer I couldn’t refuse.” Then he gave him the details.

Sam’s black brows knit together as he accepted his margarita from his daughter. “That’s mighty generous, Shana. Why?”

“Thank you, Willa.” She took her lemonade from the tray then looked Sam in the eye and gave him everything in her arsenal. “I want this job. I can do it. I can do it for a sum that you can afford. There is no one who can do it for a comparable fee and bring you the kind of results I can in a limited time period.”

“Well!” Sam widened his eyes. “Guess that says it all.”

She took a sip then put her drink down on the coffee table in front of her. “Except for one thing.”

“Which is?”

Kade flinched.

Shana sat forward. “One of the reasons I’m going to be able to help you build this rodeo in less than a year is because our events department has strong relationships with three major talents who can be your headliners.”

Sam cursed beneath his breath. “I will not do this. I told you, Kade, none of this.”

“Hear me out, Sam,” Shana insisted.

“No.” Sam almost spit out the word.

“For your opening, I have Kylee Farrell.”

Sam vaulted to his feet. “But I won’t have *her*.”

Willa stared at her father’s back as he walked toward the window, bewildered at his reaction.

Shana swallowed her trepidation, this one piece vital to their quick success. “She wants to come, Sam. I never invited her. She volunteered. In fact, she demanded that Jeff Wentworth write her in.”

“She did, eh? Well, good of her,” Sam rasped. “But I don’t want her.”

“Daddy,” Willa cooed. “Not want Kylee Farrell! How could you not? She is the hottest thing on the circuit.”

“Leave it alone, Willa,” he warned.

“Why?” Willa persisted and got no response from her father.

Shana licked her lips. “Sam. I don’t know why Kylee insisted she do this. I didn’t ask her, and I didn’t ask Jeff. I just know they grew up together in Abilene, she came to see him one day when she was in town and he happened to tell her we were bidding on this project for you. Kylee is asking for only one-tenth of the ticket price for her one performance. She’s also asking for accommodations in town for that night. We could not ask for a bigger name, Sam. Couldn’t want for a better financial split. And if you don’t want her, we won’t be able to find anyone of her caliber to fill the spot. Not on such short notice and not for such a small share of the take. Money is money, Sam.” She’d get him where he lived with that. “And I do hear you are a man who knows money.”

When he turned, his face was harder than rock, his eyes a shade of hell.

Shana continued with her biggest reason. “Kylee’s appearance would make the difference between Hayward Rodeo’s success and Hayward Rodeo’s instant *huge* success.”

Sam cursed under his breath.

The silent room seemed hollow.

“So Sam,” Kade interjected, matter-of-factly, “that means there’s only one thing left to do.”

Sam set his jaw. “Yeah? Tell me.”

Kade grinned. “Let Kylee come. Just stay away from her.”

“Easy to say.”

Kade stared at him. “What’s it worth to you to forbid her to come? Thousands of dollars you won’t earn or Kylee’s reaction to your rejection—a rejection that you will never see?”

Sam grumbled over that for long minutes. “You two caught me between my damn money and a hard place.” He gazed at Shana. “Where’s your contract?”

* * * *

“Oh, thank you for that, Kade!” Shana beamed at him as he climbed in his seat, put up his hat and slammed closed the truck door. “He never would have come along unless you’d found a way.”

“You’re welcome, honey, but what I suggested wasn’t brain surgery. I know Sam’s hardheaded, but when you’re talking money, Sam always wants a way to win. Plus this thing with Kylee, well, it’s complicated.”

She squeezed his arm, ecstatic she was hired, officially. “You’re the magician who got him to sign.”

Kade turned the ignition. “Not hard to do.” He traced a finger down her cheek as he spun to back the truck out of the driveway. “But whatever happened between him and Kylee was explosive.” He pulled out onto the main road, frowning. “As far as I can tell, it happened more than a decade ago, too, but Sam has never let it go.”

Shana didn’t want to probe. She had enough of her own history she didn’t talk about, let alone prying into someone else’s. Still, the fact that Sam could hang on to anger for ten years upset her and reminded her that Kade, if he knew who she really was, might carry a grudge bigger than Sam’s. With one difference. “Sam loved her badly.”

“Yeah, plain as the nose on his face, isn’t it? From what I can piece together, his wife had been dead quite a few years when he met Kylee. Fast love affair, so say a few folks in town. Anyway, Sam loved her more than a lot. And she walked out on him. Don’t know what or how. But she left, no explanations. Few people have ever stepped on Sam’s toes and lived to tell the tale.”

“Willa doesn’t seem to know what it was.” Shana scolded herself at the mention of the young woman, whose immature possessiveness of Kade had riled her so that she’d vowed not to bring her up.

“Willa thinks she knows more than she does—and she’s always surprised when the world doesn’t turn precisely the way she expected.”

Shana stared straight ahead, refusing to ask anything about his involvement with Willa. *Just because I’ve made love with this man three times today does not mean I have the right to ask anything about a woman who obviously cares for him.*

Kade took Shana’s hand. “Shall I tell you about Willa and me?”

“No, you don’t have to.”

“How about if I want to?”

Shana shook her head. “You don’t owe me, Kade. But yes, I’d like to hear.”

They were approaching the turnoff to his house, headed back toward Main Street and the B&B, but he pulled over into a grove of live oaks and pampas grass. In the leafy seclusion, he parked and put his arms around her shoulders. “Look at me, Shana. There. God, I love your blue eyes, honey. Don’t be sad or mad or jealous. Truth is, Willa has dreams that aren’t gonna come true. Ever since I got here, she’s set her sights on me, and I am not a man to be led. Besides, she is just not my type. She’s too bossy. She’s too spoiled. And the owner’s daughter.”

“She’s lovely.”

Kade moved closer, thumbing her lower lip. “Not as lovely as you, darlin’.”

Shana took that compliment with a tiny smile. “She’s determined.”

“She’s not sweet. Not honest.”

Shana froze. *I’m not honest.*

“What’s more, she’s never moved me like you do.”

Shana tilted her head to one side. “Why is that, I wonder?” she whispered in awe.

“Our electricity, honey. It just is what it is,” he explained against her ear. Then he pulled away and looked down at her. “What other kinds of reasons do I need to list for you, Shana?”

“No. But you must have dated other women,” she trailed off.

“Others who have tried to tie me down? Is that what you’re asking?” he persisted, chuckling under his breath. “Well, hell, yes. What of it?” He spoke on her lips and ran one of his hands up into her hair, wrecking her ponytail. “Tell me you don’t like my kisses.” He took her mouth and claimed it all with a spearing tongue. “Tell me you don’t want my hands all over you.” He cupped one breast and rubbed her nipple with one demanding thumb. “Tell me you don’t want me inside you, here, riding you long and hard.” He thrust his hand between her legs, and she felt her pussy become drenched in new desire for him.

“Oh, I do! I just need to know what to do about Willa.”

He hooted. “Ignore her. She’s such a baby.”

“I’m not much older,” she pointed out.

“But more mature. And sad, too. I want to learn how that happened. Long talks and long nights, loving you.” Kade reared back and took a gander at her through narrowed eyes. “Okay, I see I need to ask. So how old are you?”

“Twenty-six.”

“A mere child,” he feigned distress.

Ten years younger than you. She cuffed him. “And Willa?”

“Twenty-one, maybe. Hell, I don’t know. Whatever she is, she’s not for me. She’s got no soul.”

“How do you know I do?” Shana shot back, partly amused but damn frightened to hear how she differed from the rich belle of the county.

Crimson shades of afternoon turned his golden features to copper as he moved ever so near, lowered his voice to a sinful seduction and said, “Because I knew who you were from the minute you walked in my door this morning.”

She sucked in her breath. The game was up. Her cause lost. Her hopes dashed.

Cursing under his breath, he hauled her over the gearshift, then flicked open her waistband button and pushed up her skirt. Eager to claim him as her own, she wiggled, spreading her bare thighs over his, then worked at his belt and zipper. Her pussy was open, sending off the musky aroma of her need, exposed to him, cool and begging for his touch.

And he didn’t let her go hungry long. His fingers thrust up inside her wet channel with stunning urgency. “You are the one woman I do believe I cannot live without.” He caressed her. “Listen to how you want me. God, I am so blessed.” He pulled out and raised his fingers to his mouth to suck one dry. “You do taste better than honey. Want some of this?”

She bit her lip. She was so needy. Her action her answer, she put her mouth around his fingertips and licked them with delicate whisks of her tongue.

He groaned. “You are killing me, here, darlin’.” He lifted up to let her slide down his jeans, and his cock sprang free. Bright red and dripping cum, his shaft was such a lush enticement, she snuggled closer.

“Got to have you inside me,” she pleaded, one hand aiming his rod toward her oh-so-empty pussy.

“Wait, baby.” He reached down to extract a condom packet from his pocket.

She almost choked on laughter. “You brought one?”

He seemed shocked. “You bet!” He tore it open and rolled it on with a snap. “I am not going anywhere with you without a supply. Damn if one is gonna do the job here, either!”

They both chuckled, until he wound her hair around his fist and pulled her mouth to his. “In bed. Out. Day or night. I want you. In all the ways I can get you.” He kissed her then, in a ravishing assault until her mind melted and her body flooded with need for him. “Come on, sink that hot, pink pussy over me, and let’s get us both feeling better, eh?”

She sank. He rose up. Her head fell back, and he kissed her throat, rocked his hips and seized her with long strokes far up inside her. His power shoved her higher, one palm to the ceiling of the cab, one to his shoulder as he filled her with a keening fury and she rode him hard until he, too, was groaning in happiness.

She fell down to rest her head on his shoulder, caress his jaw and nuzzle his throat in contentment.

He cupped her ass with two large hands and jerked her tight. “You gonna argue with me on this, or are we going to go on from here, seeing if what we have is really real?”

Relieved he wanted her often and wild, overwhelmed he could sweet-talk her to gushing delight, she brushed her lips on his. “Take me back to the B&B,” she instructed. “I think we’re about to send the town of Hayward up in flames.”

“Hell, baby.” He snorted. “They need to get used to that, cuz we’re making love every hour of the day.”

Chapter Four

“And one more thing before I go, Kade.” Sam sounded stern as he stood, ready to leave after their most recent conference on the opening events. “I need to see both of you doing something for me.”

“Sure, Sam.” Kade got to his feet. “What did you have in mind?”

“It’s Friday night tonight, and that means there’s a big dance at The Long Horn. And tonight, you both will be there. Together. You hear me? Because from all I hear, you *are* together.” Sam picked his white Resistol hat from the wall rack and pointed it at Shana. “No problem with that. Not by me. No, sir. But people are beginning to talk, you realize?”

Shana blushed, rose from her chair and brushed her hands down her jeans. To be making love to Kade nearly every night since she’d arrived two weeks ago was one thing, but to think that the people of Hayward knew, despite their efforts to be discreet, was a disaster. Gossip in a small town could kill your reputation before you could sneeze.

“Sam, I’m sorry.”

“Don’t be sorry. Be out and about.” He glanced at Kade who frowned. “I’m not telling you how to live your lives, but if you two don’t get out in public, how do you expect folks are gonna take to this expansion? This rodeo is a business—and you two are having way too much fun.”

Shana felt her cheeks burn.

Kade’s face was a mask of concern.

Sam strolled toward the office door. “Come out. Let them see you. And if they’ll see you together because that’s the way you two want it, fine by me. But for god sakes, press a little

flesh, will you? Let 'em get to know you. Talk this up. I can't do it by myself—and as you might expect, my Willa is not helping your cause any.” He chuckled. “Can you dance, Shana?”

“Yes, sir.” She forced a smile. “Really well.”

“Good. Do it, then. And you, Kade? I know you don't like to go to The Long Horn, but get over it. Take her dancing and introduce her, you hear me?”

“Yes, sir. We'll be there.”

“Good.” Sam adjusted his hat on his head and opened the door. “We're putting a lot of effort and money into this opening, and I want you two promoting it personally. You can do whatever else you want afterward.”

He grinned at them both, winked and shut the door.

“*Oh, my god,*” Shana sank into her chair, one hand to her chest. “Were we that obvious?”

Kade blinked then walked around his desk toward hers. When he stood beside her, he reached down and drew her up to him. His hands framed her face as he kissed her lightly, chuckling. “We weren't thinking, sugar. And my apologies, I should have been. I know this town better, but I cannot get enough of you and damn, if I want to share you. Still orders are orders, and it's time to go out in the world.”

“And if Willa is bad-mouthing you and me, we have a lot of work to do.”

Kade hugged her. “Nah. We'll be fine. The men'll take one close look at you and froth at the mouth. And the women will see you belong to me and not feel threatened. Then we'll be in. You wait and see.”

* * * *

“I haven't been two-stepping in ages,” Shana told him as she took his hand to climb down out of his truck. The Long Horn Dance Hall was a classic rough wooden-clad Texas saloon and dance hall. On the hot night air, she heard the strains of a honky-tonk tune from a live country band. She shut her eyes at the sounds of the toe-tapping music and told herself she was going to enjoy it *and* her social obligations to meet the townspeople. “Lord, I am nervous.”

“Don't be,” Kade crooned and swept a hand around her waist. “In those jeans, you look good enough to eat, and heaven knows, I've got a hankerin' for that all the time!”

She elbowed him. “Come on, now. You promised to be good tonight. If we have to win friends and influence people, you cannot be complimenting me all the time.”

He stopped and turned her in his arms, his heavily muscled thighs and rigid cock nestled warmly against her torso. "I promise to be good. It's just damn hard for me to look at you and not want you naked with those pretty legs spread open so I can lick your folds."

"Kade," she warned, shivering with his ardor. "Stop, honey, just for a few hours."

He inhaled, looked up at the night sky. "I'm looking for strength."

She laughed and grabbed his hand. "Come on. Let's dance!"

"Hey, Kade," a burly cowboy in a white shirt and jeans called from across the stone parking lot. "How you doin', man?" He strode closer with a friend who was as tall and dark as he. "Introduce us."

"John Dayton, Shana Carpenter." Kade said the words mechanically then looked at the man's friend. "And I'm sorry, I don't know your name."

"Brak Henley," the other said, tipping his black gambler's hat at Shana. "Nice to meet you, ma'am." He put his hand out to Kade who shook quickly. "Stapleton. Stapleton. Aren't you the champ bronc buster from a few years back?"

"I am."

"You competing? Dayton, here, tells me you have a rodeo doing the season opener soon."

"No, I don't ride any longer," Kade told him.

John Dayton spoke up. "Kade is the town's rodeo manager."

"Is that so?" Henley examined him. "Got tired of the circuit, huh?"

"Something like that," Kade bit off.

"Kade had a bad streak of luck," Dayton told his buddy. "Bad press."

Kade nodded. "That, too."

Shana stiffened.

Kade looked down at her. "Come on, Shana. Let's go inside. See you both later."

He steered her toward the front door, but her feet were lead and her heart was in her throat. Did everyone remember what she'd done to him?

"What's the matter, honey?" He turned when she couldn't move beyond the front door.

She swallowed hard. Over the past weeks, how many times had she wanted to come clean and tell him? When he kissed her in the office? When he took her clothes off with reverent care and they made love standing up against the file cabinets? When he put his cock inside her in the hot tub at the B&B and just held. When he laid her down in his bed or hers and caressed her

nipples and filled her pussy with his sweet, hard cock. When he probed her ass and said, “We’ll stretch you a little more again tomorrow, baby, then I’ll fuck you hard there. Promise, darlin’ . Come along now and let me kiss your lovely mouth again.”

“Come along now, darlin’,” he crooned against her ear. “We’re good here, and you need to meet these people.”

She looked up at his strong handsome face. “I want you to kiss me.”

“Aw, Shana, you know if I do that, we’re goin’ home to make love.” He gave her a lop-sided grin. “I’ll lay you in my bed good and proper after we shake a few hands.”

What choice did she have? Tell him and lose him. Not tell him and take the chance he could ever forgive her. And as for caring for her, forever. Ah. Foolishness.

“You feeling okay, honey?”

She nodded, setting fear aside. “Let’s go.”

Kade headed them straight for the long bar, where the Friday night crowd was a mix of couples and singles on the make. Some were red-faced, from alcohol or dancing, and most all were boisterous and jovial.

“Hey, Kade! Shana!” A tall dark figure, hoisting a beer bottle, cut through the crowd, and Shana recognized Troy Mallard, the owner of the B&B where Shana lived.

“Oh, shit,” Kade winced. “He’s drinking.”

“That’s not good?” she asked Kade.

“Never.”

“Why?” she wanted to know but Kade had no time to answer as Troy appeared before them. And she could see what Kade meant because Troy’s brown eyes were bloodshot, half closed and his smile, beautiful as it might have been, wobbled. “Hello, Troy.”

“Glad to see you brought her around, Kade.” Troy ogled Shana’s breasts in the white shirt. “We need to see pretty ladies here.”

Kade pursed his mouth. “Yeah, well, we have got to do our public duty here, Troy.” He took Shana’s arm. “Let’s get you a drink, honey, then we can go around and say hello to folks.” He ordered a beer for Shana and a non-alcoholic beer for himself.

“Still drinking that panther piss?” Troy taunted Kade.

Shana, who had never seen her uncle drink and praised him for it, glanced up at Kade who flexed his jaw, fighting anger.

"I'm good with this, Troy." Kade stepped further down the bar and pulled Shana with him.

"Sure you are." Troy followed them. "Where you goin'? You could stay here and talk to me for awhile, Kade." He pulled himself up to his full six-foot-plus height in challenge.

But Kade still topped him in inches and sobriety. "Another time, Troy. We've got work to do."

"Is that what you've been doin'?"

The words were a taunt at the least and a slur at the most.

Kade swung to face the other man. "Don't do this, man. Do not say another word."

"Why? You want to make sure she doesn't hear what a pussy you can be?"

Kade leaned over. "That is enough, Troy. Did you come with anyone? Jack or Paul Dobson?" He was looking over the top of the crowd.

"No, I came alone. So what're you gonna do about it, huh, Kade boy? Can't even stand here and talk to me. That's cuz you rodeo boys think I'm a nobody. A cripple."

Kade considered Troy with warm compassion. "Stop this. You know I think nothing of the sort. And you shouldn't be drinking."

"Oh, yeah, sure, sure. How about if I take over for you, you teetotaler, and show Miz Shana here a good time? We know she likes to fuck."

Over the noise of the crowd and the music, those around them heard the last word and paused, looked at Troy, glanced at Kade and moved away. Shana stared at Troy, stunned that this kind man could be so insulting.

Kade, his face blazing red, murmured his excuses to her and took Troy's arm. "Come with me."

"No!" He ripped away from Kade's hold. "I want to dance with her. You gonna stop me?" He whirled and clamped an arm around Shana's waist.

His strength caught her off-guard. "Troy, stop!" She put a hand to his chest. "I thought we were friends."

"Yeah," he got in close to whisper in her ear, "so you gonna give me a little dance and a kiss and a piece of what you're giving to Kade?"

She gasped and shrank backward. Someone stopped her from falling with hands to her shoulders.

Kade came up behind Troy and picked him up from under his armpits. “Enough. Let’s go.”

Troy whirled, his fist aiming for Kade’s jaw but connecting to his chest with a thud that made Troy howl in pain. Kade just whirled him about and frog-marched him toward the door.

John Dayton was right behind them. “I’ll take him home, Kade.”

Horried, Shana stood there as Kade handed Troy over to John and strode back to her.

“Thanks, Brak,” he told the man who still stood behind her and held her steady. “I’m good now.”

“No problem, man.” Brak stepped around to look at Shana who had walked into Kade’s arms. “Troy’s a good guy, just broken up from the war. He and I were in the same unit.”

“He was a great guy,” Kade declared. “He could be again if he’d learn to accept what he’s gotta do to outgun that head injury.”

“I hear you,” Brak agreed with a nod. “But he’s depressed about the death of one of our guys, friend of ours killed with the same IED that wounded him. Drinking doesn’t help the depression.”

“Right you are,” Kade said and stuck out his hand to Brak. “Thanks for helping.”

“You bet.” He smiled and turned away.

The band that had stopped in the midst of the fracas stirred to life again.

“Are you okay?” Kade pushed curls from her cheek as they stood at the bar and drank their beers.

“Fine.”

“He insulted you.”

“He’s got a disability. I understand. It’s not like,” she looked away then up at Kade, “not like he’s an alcoholic. He drinks to forget. All those men over there have such a tough time coming back home and re-entering society.”

“And head injuries are the craziest things to understand. Even those of us who have one don’t always know when we’re going to get a little nuts.”

“But you do,” she said with certainty. “I’ve watched you. You try not to get angry.” *The anger that I wrote about with such carelessness.* “How did you learn that restraint?”

He made patterns on the bar with the condensation from his beer bottle. “Long process. Behavior mod. Going to doctors—shrinks, really—and learning what makes me craziest most often.”

“And what is that?”

“People who insult me. Makes me see red.”

She felt as if she’d driven a stake into her own heart. *I insulted you. I hurt you.*

“I had to learn to stay cool. Not let them get to me.”

“And one way is to stay away from alcohol?”

“Definitely. The docs say it changes the brain chemistry. I know they’re right. After three years dry, I can’t say as I miss the taste. And when I see someone like Troy, who might have a chance at a decent life if he gave it up, I am never sorry I won’t take up the habit.”

The fiddler began and pretty soon, the strains of a line dance filled the hall.

“Come on, darlin’. Don’t look sad. We’re here to have a good time and meet the ones who are going to buy tickets by the truckloads.”

He grinned so broadly, she had to smile back even if her heart was broken for what she’d done to him.

“Let’s dance.” He held her close a minute. “Then I want to take you home with me and make love to you until the sun comes up.”

She laughed her way through the line dance and waltzed around the sawdust-covered floors to a few standard favorites. Kade, whom she expected might not be comfortable on the floor, was graceful and commanding. “I’ve never known a man who can dance so well.”

“You can thank my momma,” he told her as he led her into a turn. “And you?”

“My uncle.” She grinned. “He said it is the mark of a Texas lady or a Texas gentleman that they dance well. And you, my dear, are the most charming gentleman.” She leaned close so that he could hear her as they turned again. “In my bed, out of it, anywhere, Kade.”

His green eyes darkened to a wicked hue. “Compliment me all the time, and we won’t be winning friends and influencing people too long here,” he said, paraphrasing what she’d told him earlier.

“But I—” *Love you.* She froze with the realization. *I can’t say that to you ever. Not unless I have the courage to tell you everything.*

But I don't have the courage. Hating herself, she deliberately squinted past the dance floor lights toward the tables. "Who else do we need to shake hands with?"

He named three people. "One owns a big ranch, the other, the oil drilling company, and the third one is the head of the county chamber of commerce."

"Hurry, let's say hello now."

"You're in an awful rush, darlin'."

"I know." *I have to have more of you, all of you I can take. I have to give you as much as I possibly can because I can admit to myself now, I want you forever. I just don't have the courage to make that happen.*

* * * *

Her haste unnerved him. He kept glancing at her on their way home. His questions died down when she just shook her head, unable to answer any of them. If she spoke, she'd cry. Or worse, she feared she'd howl. So she just looked out her window and said nothing.

When he pulled into his driveway, she shoved open her door before he could come around to open it for her. She tugged him along the path, and he came but with apprehension in his every step.

After he put the key in the lock and pushed open the door, she charged through and pulled him after her. Running her hands up through his satin hair, she reached up and kissed him with all the desperate ardor of a woman about to lose her man.

"Baby, what are you doing?"

Tears leaked out of her eyes as she swirled away from him, toward the bedroom.

She kicked off her boots, tore at the buttons on her shirt and her jeans, dropping them, leaving them where they lay. She was naked when he appeared in the doorway. He lifted his chin, motioning her toward the bed, knowing by now, she guessed, that words weren't going to work with her. She stepped backward, the back of her calf hitting the mattress and allowing her to sink slowly down and push herself across its length.

He came to her, fully dressed, hovered over her like an animal, his green eyes limpid but fierce with anxiety in the dim moonlight streaming through the windows.

She whimpered, arching up, her sensitive nipples brushing his starched shirt, her hands going around his waist. He caught one of her wrists then the other and forced them above her head, his gaze searching hers for clues to what was happening in her brain.

Whatever he thought he saw in her expression, he reached down to unbuckle his belt. Whipping it from its loops, he circled her wrists, then lifted her and shoved her up toward the head of the bed, wrapping the other end of the belt to the iron posts and yanking tight. His body went rigid, his eyes glazed.

Then he drew away.

Shocked that he would leave her, she groaned in objection, but her fears were for nothing. He lifted one of her feet, stroked it, sole to toes, massaged her ankle and kissed her arch. His mouth thrilled and tickled then spread kisses on her knee as his splayed hand slid up the inside of her thigh.

She bowed up, thinking she would come for him then, there, but his skillful fingers seized the other foot. This one he nibbled, making her writhe and gasp as he nipped at each toe and her heel and scored her sole with his fingernails.

She bucked, craving his possession. He drifted away, and she cried out to watch him rummage in his closet. He came back with two more belts. He quickly wrapped one around one ankle and tied the other in the same way. He spread out her legs to secure her to the bottom posts. For each task, he seemed intent, his features harsh in the soft shadows. With a gentle tug, he ensured that she was bound well but not so tightly that she would be hurt.

He crawled over her again, supporting himself on his elbows, his mouth loving hers, then taking her lower lip in his teeth and biting her.

This play she loved, and with her eyes and pouting lips, she told him so.

He slid down and took an eternity while he gazed at her pussy. Finally, he touched her tender flesh, and she quivered. One finger traveled up her seam, like the touch of a butterfly. Both hands to her inner thighs, he pushed her open wider. Her head thrashed. Her cunt creamed. She swallowed in electric excitement.

He stood, while she undulated on the bed in sheer expectation, and he stripped. When he was naked, she swooned with the beauty of his abs and the corded powerful arms that held her so well, so mightily, so often when they made love. She admired his lean hips, the way the muscles bulged and pulled at his taut stomach, and pointed down to his dark thatch of hair and the long cock that stood proudly reaching for her.

He climbed over her, hunched, his shaft pointing down to her mouth, and slid a fingertip inside her lips. She knew what he wanted, though she'd never tongued him at this angle. She didn't need experience, just him. And god knew, she'd give him whatever he wanted.

She licked his length. He grunted, hands to his hips. She lifted her head and swirled her tongue on his tip, dewy with drops of cum, all for her. She sucked on him, over and over, as he gave her more and more. He held her chin as he dipped into her mouth and she swallowed as much of his length as she could. He groaned and pulled away.

Suddenly, he was parting her swollen, tender labia and pinching her clit until she gasped. Then he spread himself out on the bed between her legs and began a thorough assault on her drenched, needy pussy. He kissed her, sucked her, fingered her and pushed her lips together so that he could titillate her sensitive little nub with his talented tongue and make her scream, "More!"

In two jerks, he had a condom open and on. The moment seemed like a year until he grabbed her legs and pushed them impossibly wider. He sank into her like a long, hard pillar of steel, gripped her hips in two hands and rode her like she'd seen him ride wild horses in the ring. Indomitable and ferocious. With bared teeth and mad devotion to conquering her body with every ounce of power in his own.

She came, gasping for air, grasping for memories to take with her. Her cunt pulsed with clenching ripples of completion that blazed across her consciousness.

He muttered something and drew out of her.

She screamed her objection.

But he loosened the belts at her feet and flipped her over, sending the last air from her lungs in the impact. Her wrists twisted in the belt that tied her to the post. He swirled his hands over her buttocks, and she prayed she knew what he would do next.

Have me there. Finally.

But he kissed her on one cheek and the other. Caressed the fullness of her ass and curled one arm around her hips to lift her up and back to him. He sent his cock deep inside her pussy this way, and in the bliss, she cooed utter nonsense.

He was gone before he gave her any time to build another orgasm.

Instead, he was hauling her hips up into the air, and she trembled, expecting his caress. He spread her cheeks and massaged her asshole. She heard him reach for the gel he kept by the

bed for their forays into anal sex play, and she wiggled her ass higher for him to get on with loving her, for godssakes!

The cool lubricant he spread over her little hole and inside had her sighing with his ministrations. He inserted a thumb, as he'd often done before. And a long finger, as he'd done also. But when he withdrew this time, she heard him putting the succulent lube on his cock. She arched.

Oh, hurry, darling, please.

She felt the blunt tip of his rod at her opening, and she caught her breath. But he was a lover who was kind and generous, slow and careful, as he pushed one small iota at a time into her virgin channel and sank ever so much deeper with each moment. He drove her to a mute O of delight. Her fingernails digging up the sheets, she took the fullness of his shaft into her and held on as he took his time to let her feel his might.

The pain was pleasure, and the joy more electric than ever before, as he plunged with deliberate care in and out of her. She whimpered, and he'd pause. She groaned, and he would plunge. The ecstasy was an eternity and the climax, all too brief.

He withdrew, pulled off the condom, rolled her over and, in a few strokes, freed her arms. Limp with exertion, she reveled in his embrace, his kisses to her eyes and her lips, his caresses of her nipples and her hips.

She drifted to sleep like that. Boneless with exhaustion, she awoke once to burrow into him more, remembering his mastery of her and letting herself go back to sleep, aware in the back of her mind that something was dreadfully wrong. But when she woke again, she knew instantly what it was that stalked her.

She loved this man. Now, because of how she had so recklessly printed things about him that were false and had nothing to do with the head injury that caused his outbursts, he could never love her. She had to accept that as cruel fact.

She'd done this to herself. Carelessly, willfully, thinking that in the rightness of her youth, what she'd seen of him that day in the ring, what she'd read about him being hot-headed bore repeating. She had been wrong. On all counts.

Except for one.

She needed to get her job done for him and build him up so that no one—no one as foolish as she had been—could ever hurt him again.

Chapter Five

The next morning, she awoke to hear him making breakfast in the kitchen. The lure of coffee and his huevos rancheros were usually enough to draw her out like a magnet, but this morning, she escaped to the shower. When she *did* go out, she had her hair up, wet in a ponytail, and her clothes on from last night. She was determined to be casual, normal and their usual bantering selves. But one look at Kade and she knew today that wasn't going to work.

He put a mug of coffee in front of her then plunked the jug of milk down, too.

Her eggs came next, warm and fragrant with onions and peppers, but served by a man who was stiff, silent and cold.

"Kade, I want to explain about last night."

He loomed over her. Breathing heavily, he waited.

She looked up.

His jaw was set, his gaze weary and sad. "Go ahead."

He wasn't going to make this easy. *Okay.*

"I just got upset by Troy and his problems." Which was true.

"I could see that."

"You see, I know a lot about alcoholism."

Kade scowled. 'How's that?'

"My father drank himself to death." She stared at her hands. "I grew up seeing him drunk and demanding and silly. He was a good man, funny and kind, but he also wanted to be a bigger star on the circuit than he ever was. And liquor helped him get over the fact he wasn't going to be anything but mediocre. You know why. You've worked the circuit. Bull riding eats up your youth and your energy and your time. My mother, meanwhile, was lonely. With him gone so

often, so long, she would beg him to quit, come home. And one day, he did. He'd gotten hurt, broken his leg. He was home, and of course, there was no money coming in. My mother went to work. But he hated her doing it, and she'd come home, and they'd argue. That's when he began to drink during the day. When I came home from school, he'd already be drunk. And by the time my mother got home, he was very drunk. They'd argue. And one day, he hit her."

Kade pulled out a chair and sat down. He covered her hand with his warm one. "What happened?"

"She asked him to leave, and he did. But she didn't tell him the whole reason why."

Kade frowned.

"She had found out from her doctor that she had breast cancer. Very advanced and inoperable, you see. She just couldn't cope with his problems and her own illness. So she asked him to leave, and when he did, it killed them both."

"That's why you were brought up by your aunt and uncle," he concluded then raised her hand to his lips. "Honey, I'm sorry."

"You have nothing to apologize for. I do. I just don't like to be around people who can't control their tempers. It makes me nervous. Anxious."

"I get it. God knows, Troy is just not reliable."

"I know. That's what I want to say to you. *I know*. I shouldn't freak out when I see someone who has problems with alcohol and anger." She took her hand away from his grasp. "You see, that's where I'm so much younger than you." She smiled sadly at him. "Ten years can be a big rift." *Among other things*.

He stood and pulled her up into his arms. "I'm willing to wait around and watch while you grow older, honey."

"Jeez." She gave a laugh. "I'll never catch up to you."

"You think I'm an old man, huh?"

"No." She threw her arms around his broad shoulders. "I think you're a wonderful man."

His expression turned to stone, and he jerked her against him, raising her jaw so that she had to look him in the eye. She could see that her words had been too banal and not what he'd needed at all.

"I'm your man, baby. Last night," he voiced dropped an octave, "I made you my woman. Completely."

She stared up at him. Knowing he wanted her to affirm that she was his. His and no other's. But she couldn't now, could she? Because if she did, she'd put herself in deeper with him and never survive leaving.

She kissed his luscious lips, pushed away and ignored the way he blinked at her.

She sat down, ate her eggs and drank her coffee then helped him wash dishes.

In a few minutes, he got his hat down from the wall rack, and the two of them headed for the B&B for her to change her clothes and go to the office.

The trip was silent. The road long.

Two lovers now seemed more like unfamiliar friends.

* * * *

Time or circumstance didn't change the way they related. Five days passed then ten more, and they worked together in the same airless little office. She secured the details of Kylee Farrell's appearance for the opening, got the trail ride organizers on board, sent out press releases and reported by phone to Jeff back in San Antonio on a regular basis. With each new victory, she would rejoice and share her news with Kade. He'd grin, laugh, hug her and take her out to the drive-in movie or to the Long Horn to dance in celebration. At night though, when he took her in his arms and they made love, his tenderness brought tears to her eyes. She knew he was slowly, reverently saying goodbye to her, and she didn't argue or didn't take the lead from him to try to change the tone of their coupling.

She knew she was leaving. Had always known it. The fact that Kade now knew it, too, made her days easier and her nights in his bed bittersweet. She had never admitted to herself that she was such a coward. Instead, she worked her tail off to ensure Kade Stapleton had what she'd originally come here to give him. Not her love. Her recompense. Amends for the harm she'd done him four long years ago.

Sam noticed the difference between them.

"What gives with you two?" he asked one morning when he was in the office to review the monthly budget numbers. When he got a shrug from Kade and a startled look from Shana, he persisted. "Fighting? Whatever it is, don't you think you could settle it with a good talk?"

Kade glanced at her, his brows arching. Across the room, she felt his question and couldn't find a suitable answer for either man.

“All right then.” Sam jammed his cowboy hat on his head. “Have it your way. It’s only gonna get worse, you realize. But I want this solved before it affects our work. Good day to you both.” As he marched out the door, he said a few words to Kade’s receptionist Reata about the foolishness of men and women who care for each other.

Kade stared at the door until Shana thought he’d burn it down with his fury.

She’d seen him fight anger before but not rage. She stood up.

But he shot a glance sideways, his gaze landing at her feet, as if to warn her to step no further. Cursing, he jumped up, grabbed his Stetson from the rack and headed toward the door himself. But when he flung it open and it banged back against the wall, there in the portal stood an open-mouthed Reata hand up ready to knock. A man stood right behind her.

“Jeff!” Shana knew his appearance would only make things worse. Jeff could be very aggressive, especially with men who appeared to be interested in her. “Come in, please. Kade, let me introduce Jeff Wentworth.” She walked toward him and put a hand to his arm,

He shook it off.

Jeff noticed.

Shana didn’t try to cover her frustration as the two men sized each other up.

The body language changed the dynamic for sure. It made Kade wary of this gray-suited city slicker who put his hand out to Kade, but his arms around Shana and kissed her on the mouth. Stunned, she pushed away and had him sit in one of their folding chairs.

Jeff glanced around, and his assessment had him nodding and saying, “Wow, I can see why you need help here.”

Kade sucked in a breath and stalked back over to his desk. “Can I have Reata bring you something to drink? It’s hot out there, and you’ve been on the road for a few hours.”

“Coffee is great. Black,” Jeff told him, his brown gaze falling over Kade’s form-fitting western shirt and massive shoulders. “Good to meet you finally. I thought I’d come out and visit with you, maybe take Shana out to dinner and dance tonight. She hasn’t been home since she came here, and I thought she’d need company.” His gaze met Kade’s and held as if to say Jeff thought the reason she’d stayed here was Kade. “And I’ve missed her.”

Kade flexed his jaw. The rage she’d seen after Sam’s statements was a flicker compared to the inferno she saw building in him now.

She hastened to douse the fires. “You didn’t have to come all this way, Jeff. We’re doing well. I’ve told you.” *Can I sound any more lame?*

Kade punched the intercom with more force than the little phone system needed. “Reata, please bring us in a new pot of coffee. Three cups. Milk for Shana.”

Jeff glared at Kade, noticing that Kade made a point of announcing he knew and remembered what Shana liked in her coffee. Jeff brushed imaginary lint from his trousers as he crossed one leg over the other. “So tell me, how are we doing today?”

Like hell. She inhaled, accepting the fact that she wasn’t going to change Jeff’s or Kade’s attitudes so she might as well get this confrontation over with quickly. “We just had a meeting with the president of the rodeo. You might have met him on your way in. You did? Good. And we went over the month’s projects and budget. We can do that for you, if you like.”

Kade stood. Picked up his hat from his desktop. “You do that, Shana. I have an appointment.” He shoved his hand out to Jeff. “Thanks for coming. See you at the Long Horn tonight. There’s a good band, and I know Shana likes to dance.” He didn’t smile at Jeff and didn’t look at Shana as he turned and left them alone.

“Rude bastard,” Jeff muttered and turned to examine Shana’s features. “Has he been a pain in the ass to work with?”

Oh, Jeff. Ever the sly public relations man. Looking for a way to learn more. “No. He’s been a gentleman.”

“How much of a gentleman?”

Outrage bubbled over. “None of your business.”

“Oh, but it is. My business. My employee. The woman I’d like to get closer to.”

“That’s not going to happen, Jeff.”

“I haven’t even gotten started yet.” He leaned over and took her hand.

She considered his, so much smaller and cooler than Kade’s ever were.

“Shana, I missed you. I came not just to see this place, but to see if we can get back on track with our relationship.”

“We don’t have a relationship and won’t ever have one.” She glared at him.

“A stubborn woman.”

“Yes. I’ll stay that way, too.”

He spread his hand wide. “We’ll see.”

Shivering in the chilly certainty of his rhetoric, Shana knew she'd have to find a permanent solution to his unwanted attentions.

She rose. "Let me get the records for you."

* * * *

After the review of the books, she couldn't dissuade Jeff from going to the Long Horn that night. "You love to dance. What's your problem?"

But he knew. She saw it in his calculating eyes.

As a result, she took one step closer to ridding herself of him forever.

"It's okay, Shana. I just want to see what the local folks look like. Are they well-heeled enough to buy tickets to our events?"

"You know they are. I did the demographic studies months ago."

"Then let's just say I want to dance."

She wanted to stomp on his foot then. "If I'm stubborn, you're not far behind." She whirled away from him. "Dinner is at my place, but it's no grand invitation. You'll eat with me because the only diner in town isn't open and won't be for a few more weeks."

"That doesn't bode well. How will this town take care of more travelers coming through for the rodeo?"

"They're putting in an expanded kitchen and a bigger main dining room. So we'll be fine."

He lifted his brows. "*We* will be fine? Is that you buying in like a good PR person or are you planning on staying here?"

"Buying in, Jeff," she bit off. "Just buying in. Come to my rooms at five."

"Great. What's for dinner?"

Old shoe leather and a kick in the pants. "Barbeque and beans."

Both of which sat like lead in her stomach as she and Jeff walked into the Long Horn.

"Hey, Shana," Reata called to her and waved. Kade's receptionist sized up Jeff with critical gray eyes and cocked an elegant dark brow at her. "Dancing tonight?"

If I liked drinking more, I'd do that, too. "Think so, yes."

Reata slid closer and told her quietly. "Kade's in the bar."

Shana bit her lip, restrained her urge to look for him and thanked the woman who was fast becoming her friend.

“I see a table over here, Shana.” Jeff led her toward the back of the hall. When they were seated, he raised his hand to a waitress and ordered two beers.

The band was well into *The Tennessee Waltz*, and the Friday night crowd was doing more talking than dancing. So when Jeff paid for the drinks, took a swig of his and held his hand out to her to dance, she knew they’d be only the third couple on that very big floor.

“I don’t think that’s a good idea, Jeff.” He was a good dancer but not a graceful one. And a waltz, even the Texas-two-step version, required a command of the floor and precision that he had never possessed. She knew people here. Lots of them by now. And they had always seen her in the arms of a man who took to this floor like he’d been born to it. She didn’t want to embarrass Jeff, and she certainly didn’t want Kade to see how she looked in the embrace of another man. “Let’s have our drinks. Wait a bit.”

“Let’s not.” He pulled her forward and, lest she shame him and allow him to look bad in a town where he needed to become known, she went.

He must have been nervous. His timing was off and for that, try though she might, she couldn’t save him from himself. To make matters worse, from the corner of her eye, she saw an impossibly tall, buff male take up a position on the side wall, staring at them.

Kade. Kade. What are you doing? Don’t get angry. This isn’t worth it.

The tune wasn’t over quickly enough for her. She put a hand to her heart, feeling the rising tempo of her fear of confrontation.

But the next song was a Virginia reel, and Jeff insisted they do that, too. Buried in more of a crowd, she felt marginally better, but the tension riled her stomach.

As they applauded the band, she told him, “I’ve got to go home, Jeff. I’m not feeling well.”

He narrowed his gaze at her. “Really?”

She disliked him then. Oh, she had tolerated his arrogance as a businessman. She had at one time in her young life been flattered by his attention to her. But she had never found him intriguing as an employer or a man.

Huffing, she spun on her heel. “Don’t bother,” she muttered as she beelined her way through the crowd. “I can go myself.”

Jeff was right behind her, grabbing her arm and insisting she stop. “Stop, for chrissakes!” He spun her around.

“Take your hands off the lady, Wentworth.”

Kade. Kade with his barrel-deep bass warning a man to treat her right. Kade with his warm solid body heating hers as he stepped in back of her. Kade, towering over her as he always had with comfort and care. Kade, hovering over Jeff and in those few inches, making the other man drop his hold and back away.

“I’ll take you back,” Jeff declared.

“I don’t think so,” objected Kade.

Shana escaped them both by sidestepping and leaving them to face each other, two bulls in the ring.

Reata joined Shana as she beat a path to the front door. “Can I give you a ride home?”

She nodded. *Home*. “What a great idea.”

Chapter Six

Three weeks later, Shana's Aunt Mary brought the house phone to her as she sat on the back porch overlooking her aunt's south acreage. The older woman looked at Shana as sorrowfully as she had so many times when Kade had returned Shana's calls on business and she'd been brief with him. It had taken all Shana's courage to talk to him about rodeo details.

She had thought it would be easier to complete her planning if she were far away from him where she could be focused totally on the rodeo's success. She had assumed she would be more objective. To some extent that was true, except for the fact that she didn't sleep well at night and walked the floor, reliving what she'd lost, yearning for what she needed with him. So if she had more time to complete her plans here at her aunt's ranch, Shana also had more time to realize that if she was successful at building the Hayward rodeo into a first-class event, she could then work on the courage it would take her to confront the real issues that separated her from Kade.

If Kade perceived that or if he had just given up on her when she'd left him, Shana could never tell by his voice on the phone. He was distant and cool. Always. *Was this Kade calling now to once more be the efficient businessman and show her his indifference?*

"Shana, darlin'," Aunt Mary began now as she put her hand over the receiver. "This is your boss. I know you said you wanted to talk to him if he called."

Shana reached for the phone. "Hello, Jeff." She'd known she'd have to have this conversation some time, though she wished she could have waited until opening night of the rodeo. "How are you?"

"Better now that you're talking to me," he said with rare contrition in his voice. "Look, Shana, let me start off by saying I'm sorry."

“Thank you, Jeff. I appreciate it,” she told him with all honesty. He’d just been himself. If that wasn’t what she wanted in a man, in a lover, in a mate, or even in an employer, his nature wasn’t something he needed to regret. “Circumstances weren’t good that day. It all went sour because that was what was meant to be.”

“Thank you.”

“You’re welcome.” She knew it would be the last words that passed between them that held any kind of intimacy. She switched to the professional aspect that had brought them together four years ago. “I hope you’ve had an opportunity to read my latest reports.”

“I have. They’re very detailed. You’ve done a spectacular job. Hayward will reap the rewards.”

“I do believe you’re right,” she declared with more joy. “Will you go to the opening?”

“No. I think I might not want to show my face in Hayward for quite some time.”

“Don’t be like that, Jeff. They should welcome you. You came up with the plan.”

“No, Shana, you did.”

She was grateful for the acknowledgment. “And you agreed to the lower retainer.”

“Yes, and since you left Hayward and went home to Uvalde, you haven’t even charged that amount for living expenses.”

“Right. I didn’t need them.”

“I’m giving them to you, Shana.”

“You *charged them* my expenses?” Oh, she would be madder than a coyote if he had.

“No. I’m just paying you for them anyway. I know you’ll turn around and give them to your aunt. But then, you’ve probably given her quite a bit anyway.”

Shana was quiet, stunned with his perception. Maybe there was hope for him after all. “I did, yes.”

“And I’m giving you a bonus, too.”

“No.”

“Yes, ten percent on the retainer. I saw the ticket sales for the first performance on opening night, Shana. What with Kylee’s small take and the enormous ticket sales, they can well afford to give us more. I had a talk with Sam Trunbridge this morning, and they are sending it over with this month’s retainer.”

“That’s very generous of Sam.” She wondered what he’d done for Kade who had negotiated such a hard-driving bargain with her in the first place.

“He gave Stapleton a raise. Effective immediately.”

“Wonderful.” *He deserves it and more. So much more.*

“Twenty percent.”

“Amazing! Sam Trunbridge doesn’t like to part with his money unless it’s for a good cause.”

“Well, he found his man, didn’t he?”

So did I. Tears clogged her throat. She couldn’t reply.

“So then,” he drifted off, “want to tell me when you plan on coming back?”

“When I’m done here, Jeff.” *When I’m done figuring out what to do with the rest of my life.*

* * * *

Shana bought a ticket at the gate that afternoon just like any other fair-goer. To have called anyone, Kade or Sam or Reata, and let them know she was coming was not what she wanted to experience here.

She needed the full feel of what she’d created. She’d told herself these last few weeks as she worked on the opening from her aunt’s ranch house south of here, that if she could be proud of what she’d done here, she would feel stronger about revealing the truth to Kade. But the truth had come to her a few days ago. No matter the cost, she had to reveal everything to him, mature and go on with her life. If he hated her, she would, as she had planned from the start of this project, leave him with the potential for a great future. If he accepted her apology for not telling him who she was and why she had wanted to work on the rodeo development, all the better. She told herself not to hope that his reaction might be more—she had left him too quickly without any explanation—but she would walk away from here with memories of passion and romance thrilling enough to last a lifetime.

So she got out of her car, ran her hands over her white shirt and jeans and began to stroll the rodeo grounds.

And oh, god, was the feeling delicious.

From the new coat of whitewash on the barns and the new signs at the gates to the spiffily dressed ticket-takers and the look of the newly sanded main ring, the Hayward rodeo looked first class.

Strolling around, grinning like an imbecile, she bought caramel popcorn and ate every kernel. She wolfed down beef barbeque with so many jalapenos, she was certain her hair curled. She went out to the stalls and strolled along the bull pens and the bronco pens. *Oh, Kade, you must be proud of this.*

She walked along the newly paved, trailer-access lot and watched penning teams saddling up their horses for the competition. She laughed at the greased pig races, and tried the jerky from five different vendors before she held up her hand and said, "Thanks, no more!"

She walked toward the office and the parking lot where Kade's and Sam's trucks sat. She didn't want to see Kade until she was ready. So she sat across from the office trailer in the shade of a live oak on a picnic bench, her sunglasses on, to plan her words.

That's when the office door opened and Sam came out, arm in arm, with none other than Kylee Farrell. They grinned at each other like fools as they strode to his truck. Then, as he opened the door for her, she reached up on tiptoes and planted a huge smacker on his mouth. In flashpoint, Sam had her pinned against the cab and the path his mouth took down the lady's western shirt was nigh unto scintillating. *So much for staying away from temptation, Sam Trunbridge.* They broke away suddenly, laughed and looked around.

Sam waved at Shana. "I'm coming back in about an hour. Glad you're here. I need to talk to you."

She nodded. "I think you need to make sure you talk a lot to Kylee," she called.

"I have. We did. Thanks to you."

She smiled, shrugged and waved him off. "I'll be here. Get going!" She suspected she knew where they were headed, too.

Then from the other direction, Shana saw Reata approach her.

"Hey, sweetie." Reata gave her a hug and sat next to her. "I've been watching you roam around the grounds for quite a while. What do you think?"

"I'm tickled!"

"You should be." Reata took a long look at Shana, her dark brown eyes probing. "Aren't you going to see Kade?"

Shana gathered up every ounce of courage she had found in the past months. “It’s why I’m here. Do you know where I can find him?”

Reata beamed at her. “Thank god. That man is no good without you.”

“Might not be good with me, either. Not after what I did to him. Not after what I need to tell him.”

“Well, whatever it is, you need to have a talk with him. If he can’t understand, he can’t find a way to ever smile again, now can he?”

“No. Me, either. Where do I go?”

Reata pointed up into the stands, now teeming with fans settling in to watch the next performance.

“Oh, hell, Reata. I’ll never find him.” But she had to try.

Among the thousands of people, most men would be hard to find. Kade Stapleton was hard to miss.

Backed up against the wall of the tallest stadium seats, he stood, his legs spread, his arms crossed. In his standard starched, white western shirt and jeans with a silver belt buckle as big as her two fists, he was a scrumptious sight for her sore eyes. He watched the formations of the latest act in the arena, a drum and bugle corps from the local high school. His handsome face was split in the biggest grin she’d ever seen him sport.

But when she walked up to him and said hello, his features fell apart.

He inhaled, recovering himself to take in her ponytail, shirt and jeans. “Been around to see your work?”

She stood taller, scraping up all her gumption. He was still so angry. How could she ever explain? How could she survive making him angrier? “I have. It looks wonderful.”

He gave Shana her due. “You need to be proud of yourself.”

“I am.” She took the words and used them to her advantage. “I’d like to be prouder.”

He stared at her. Whether he understood what she meant or not, she couldn’t take time to learn. The noise from the crowd was rising to higher, ear-splitting decibels and she couldn’t speak to him here. “I’d like to talk to you. Privately.”

“Now?”

She nodded. “It won’t take me long, and what I want to tell you is long overdue. Can we go to your office?”

He thought that one over for long seconds. "Hurry up. I want to be back for the next event."

Shana expected him to take her arm and help her descend the steps, like the gentleman he always was, but he didn't touch her.

And as they walked across the yard toward the office, she regretted that she'd ever tried to come here and talk to him. What was she going to gain? Whatever it was, a freer conscience, a clear slate, it was her gain, wasn't it? Not his. How selfish of her.

He took out his keys and opened the main office door. Then he swung it wide to let her precede him. She strode inside to the room where she'd first met him and first seen that he was better—so much better—than any fantasy she'd had of him. Her temporary desk, all the rickety chairs, the overflowing file cabinets were gone. The only item that remained was Kade's desk, clean as a whistle, not paper or paperclip to be found.

She spun toward him. "What's happening here? Where is everything?"

Kade had taken up the same hard stance he'd assumed up on the stairs. Corded legs braced wide, massive arms folded across his chest. His position was formidable and so was his tone. "Gone. Sam's building us a new office over on the other side of the pens."

"That's terrific." She clasped her hands together. "Oh, just what you need."

His expression told her no, that was not what he needed. "What do you want, Shana?"

"I came to tell you everything."

"Why?" The word was dark with pain.

She had to keep going. "Because I should have long ago. Because I owe it to you."

He shook his head. "You owe me nothing." He extended an arm to define the room, the pens, the main rodeo. "You did all this. I owe you my thanks."

"I hear Sam gave you a raise." She stepped toward him.

"And a bonus. I'm buying my house."

"Oh, darling, that's wonderful." She realized when he winced that she'd said too much and not yet enough. She bit her lip, ran a hand back through her hair. "Look, I need to tell you how I hurt you."

"Damn, Shana, you don't need to tell me. I feel it every hour of every day."

"No!" She stomped her foot. "Before a few weeks ago, I hurt you. I was the one," she grabbed a breath, "I was the one who wrote that story about you in the Dallas paper!"

His eyes widened, and the green went from dark to light.

“I am S.J. Carpenter, and I wrote the piece that the TV reporters and the national association used to run you out of competition.”

He hadn’t moved, and she wasn’t sure he’d heard her, so she walked forward, pointing to her chest.

“Don’t you see, *I* ruined you. And it was because all that afternoon I saw you yelling at the judges, arguing with your competitors and acting like a wild man!”

“I was drunk.”

He said it so softly she had to pause. “What?”

“I was drunk. Had been for two days. Didn’t know enough not to compete.”

“I didn’t know,” she whispered. “But...but that doesn’t matter. I still wrote that. I couldn’t believe how the media used it and made it into this huge story. God! On all the channels! They said you were a hothead. Then someone else came along and talked about the way bronco busting was so dangerous. Caused so much brain damage. And I felt like a fool. An idiot. I had ruined you and all the while you were disabled!”

“I should have quit long before you wrote that piece.”

“Maybe so,” she allowed, but she was on a roll and went back to her revelations. “But I didn’t know, and I should have done my research on you before I gave it to my editor. I was a terrible journalist. Not dedicated to writing the facts but bent on writing what I thought was true.”

A tender smile played around his mouth. “Clearly, you are a better event planner and PR person.”

“Yeah. Wonders never cease,” she muttered.

“I hope Jeff Wentworth has shown you he’s proud of what you’ve done here.”

“He has.”

“Oh?” A mask fell over his features. “Giving you a promotion? To wife?”

“No.” She stepped forward. Because Kade had jealousy written on every line of his face, she felt empowered, and she used every ounce of it. “He gave me a bonus. And my expenses.”

“Kind of him. I’m sure there’s more to come from good ol’ Wentworth.”

“Stop it!” she shouted and stomped her foot again. “Oh, you make me see red!”

“*I make you see red?*” He took two steps forward and gripped her shoulders. “Lady, you walk in here after two months off in the wilderness—”

“Uvalde.”

“Uvalde? Here, there, wherever! You were gone and now you come back and you tell me Jeff has rewarded you, and you wonder *why I’m mad?*”

She smarted at his reprimand. “You are not listening to me! I am telling you I wrote that article!”

“*So what?*” He gave her a small shake.

“I’m ashamed of myself! I hated myself.”

“Welcome to the real world, baby. We all do things we wish we hadn’t.”

“But I ruined your career!”

“*I,*” he roared at her, “ruined *my own* damn career! That’s what I tried to tell you all along! I told you about the head injuries and alcohol. I thought once we got through all that, you’d see it didn’t mean a hill of beans to me that you were the reporter!”

All the air left her body. She groped for logic. “You *knew?*”

He stared into her eyes, hauling her closer. “I knew.”

She grabbed handfuls of his shirt. “Since *when?*”

“Since you sent me the proposal with your name on it.”

Her mouth couldn’t drop open any wider. “You knew! You knew I was the reporter.” She pushed away from him, her mind frantically trying to connect the dots. “I wondered but could never quite see. I guess because I was tearing myself up inside to try to make it all up to you.”

“You did, baby.” He walked toward her.

She stepped backward.

“Look around, honey. All this, you made.”

Her gaze fluttered over the bare office, and all she saw, all she felt, was the heartache she’d created for herself and him. “I could never find the courage to tell you. That first day, I walked in here I just wanted the job so that I could build something good for you and make it all up to you. Then...then I took one look at you up close, and suddenly, I wanted you so much more. I couldn’t think beyond having you. I got caught up in needing you to want me and love me.”

“And I wasn’t any help, was I?” He pushed tendrils of her hair back over her ear. “I took one look at S.J. Carpenter and knew I was falling so hard, I’d never hit bottom. I wanted you, baby, just as much as you wanted me. Once we got started, there was no going back.”

“Not for apologies?”

“I was ready to wait for them until you were ready to give them. I didn’t want to rush you. I wanted you to come to me in your own time. I saw how you needed a man who was kind and thoughtful. Not a hothead.” He smiled tenderly. “I wanted to be that man. I tried, honey. I tried to be patient and knew you’d really come here to apologize, make it all up to me. You did. Even by just being sweet you. Then you got scared that night at the Long Horn.”

“I felt like such a sniveling kid. I hated that you might fight with Jeff, and I couldn’t tell you why. Not all of it.”

“I was ready to fight that night. But I won’t be any more.”

“When someone does you wrong. Insults you then—”

He grasped her shoulders again. “Maybe you did me a favor writing that article, huh? Kicked me over the edge with it. Made me see I had to change my ways.”

Tears dribbled down her cheeks. “I wanted to tell you, but my pride wouldn’t let me admit I was wrong. Oh, Kade,” she sank against him, her face to his warm throat, “so wrong.”

She sobbed for a bit, and he let her, just holding her and caressing her back. It felt so wonderful to be embraced by him again, she curled her arms around him and let him absorb her.

“I was wrong, too,” he told her softly, “not to tell you how much I cared about you. I tried to show you instead. But I could see you were afraid if you told me, I’d get angry at you. And you didn’t want to risk that, did you?”

“No, I wanted you to think the best about me.”

“Darlin’, don’t you know? I think the world of you and more.” He kissed her ear and hugged her closer. “I’m gonna get better at telling you and showing you that every day, every hour. I promise. If we talk as much as we make love, we won’t quarrel and you won’t become afraid we’re going to argue.”

“Oh, Kade, it’s true. I would rather talk our heads off and make love than fight.”

“Well, we don’t have to fight, do we? In fact, I think we just did. And now I can hold you, and you can tell me anything, darlin’. I should have said that the day you told me about your parents, but I was so bone-headed. I was hurt you were leaving me—I could feel it. And I wanted

to keep you for myself. I should have told you that morning.” He reached in one of his pockets and gave her a white handkerchief.

She blew her nose, hiccupped and looked up at him. “You did, and I didn’t meet you halfway. Oh, Kade, I should have.”

He gave her a lopsided grin. “Promise you will from now on?”

“Absolutely.” She hiccupped again.

He set her away from him and walked over to his desk then hitched a hip on the edge. “So then, here’s the next part.”

She hiccupped. “What part?”

“You promise to meet me halfway in any argument? Anything we have to decide?”

“Yes,” she agreed, though she didn’t understand where he was headed.

“Good. Then promise me two more things.”

“Anything.”

“That you’ll never leave me.”

It took her a minute to feel the sweet impact of that promise. “Never.”

“That you’ll never hurt me again.”

“No. Never.” She fought back more tears.

“Because if you ever go anywhere again without me, Shana, I think I’ll die.” His face was blank with desolation.

“Oh, Kade. How could I leave you? I love you!”

She began to fall apart again as he came over and caught her up in his arms, tears brightening his own eyes. “Say that again.”

And when she did, he kissed her once more. “Say you’ll marry me.”

“Oh, you’ll have me?” she asked like it was the one thing she could never hope for.

“Aw, honey. I will have you all the days of my life.”

“And you forgive me?”

“I love you. I would forgive anything you do, darlin’.”

She flung her arms around his neck, suddenly saucy with the prospect of having him for a husband. “So then, can we get married soon?”

“Soon as I can get a license.”

“That’s good.”

Her objective tone made him look down and blink. “Yeah? Why’s that?”

“Because I need a place to live.”

He raised his brows.

“I let go of my apartment in San Antonio. My aunt’s ranch in Uvalde is two hours away, and I have no accommodations here in Hayward.”

“Hmm, I do see that.” He played along.

She fiddled with one of his shirt buttons. “And I’m also really proud of you for getting a raise and a bonus...”

“Okay,” he chuckled. “I’m ready, baby, tell me why.”

“Because I quit my job yesterday, and I have no money, and no place to hang my hat.”

He threw back his head to laugh now and caught her up to swing her around. “You come home with me, darlin’, and you won’t need a hat.”

“Nor any other clothes?” She brushed his blond hair back from his brow.

“You got that right. I’m gonna put you in my bed and keep you naked for at least the next eighty years.”

“Can we start now with that, Kade? I need to show you how much I love you.”

“You show me every time you look at me, Shana.” He took her hand to lead her out the door. “Let’s go home, honey.”

The best words she’d heard in all her life.

About the Author

Cerise DeLand believes great romances match feisty women with one—or more—men who cannot live without them. And Cerise knows men—all types of them from living in Italy, England, Japan, New York, Washington—and wild west Texas! She blends that intimate knowledge with a passion for European and Chinese art and travel to delightful lands she loves to write about.

An award-winning author, Cerise has also penned 18 print romances and mysteries (under another name), many of which have been selections of The Doubleday Book Club and The Mystery Guild. And what does this prolific author do when she's not writing? Ah. She is an excellent cook. To taste and prepare a few of her delicacies, do come to her blog, especially on Thursdays for her Afternoon Delights, elegant simple refreshments to serve after your rendezvous! <http://cerisedeland.blogspot.com>

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Carnal Reunions

***Smokin' Ace* by Regina Carlisle**

A college reunion and seeing her best 'gal pals' is just the thing widow and single mom, Chloe Wells needs to put a little oomph back into her boring, routine life. For her, those carefree years and the friendships she made with six other women in the old Victorian were unforgettable and, hey, what's wrong with revisiting a past that was fun and full of laughter? But when she bumps into Michael "Ace" Banner other memories surface. Memories of hot nights and rumpled bed sheets. Memories of the loss of the one man who burned her to ash.

Former college tennis star, Ace Banner, now a renowned sports photographer, has just one chance to regain the love of pretty, sweet, very sexy Chloe. Yeah, he blew it years ago by walking away but he's a man now and not about to let her get away again. Ace is prepared to pull out all the stops in reclaiming what he lost all those years ago. It'll take a slow hand and an easy touch but he's up for the challenge.

***First and Ten* by Fran Lee**

What Fran Jamison and Jack Gerrard have in common, you could balance on the head of a pin. And to make things worse, Jack blew his chances to hell back in High School with the BBW.

Neither goes to their 10th college reunion expecting sparks to fly, but when they collide in the airport, painful old memories quickly evaporate to make way for two people desperately needing to scratch 12-year-old itches.

Jack royally blew it when he let other people's opinions stop him from pursuing the 5'11" bombshell so many years back, and by the time he realized he was a jackass and tried to apologize, a traumatized and hurt Fran had shredded his ego in public, leaving him to lick his wounds and move on.

She thought she would hate him on sight. She didn't. She thought she could walk away. She couldn't. She certainly didn't expect to find herself making out like a madwoman on the hood of a borrowed car in the airport parking ramp. But she did expect one thing...she was not going to walk away again. Not when he was so damn good at scratching those itches...

***Training Randi* by Tessie Bradford**

Miranda Ellson graduated from college with a degree in design in one hand and a ticket to London in the other. Ten years, five job changes and three boring, unfulfilling relationships later she's back at WIU to re-connect with old friends, enjoy the campus activities and take a break from...oh who the hell is she kidding?

Jeff Briggs, former college neighbor and best bud, now successful gym owner, lives in town. He's the only guy she has ever known who could set her panties on fire by simply walking into a room and Randi is sick and tired of only hooking up with him in her dreams. This may be her only chance to discover exactly what kind of personal training he has to offer.

Nailed by Cindy Spencer Pape

When shy scientist Karen Sikorski meets up with her college crush, Warner Beckett, sparks fly, but she knows the handsome contractor would never fall for a plain nerd like her. Warner, though, has other ideas. Smart, voluptuous Karen is everything he's ever wanted in a woman, and this time around, he's enough of a grown up to appreciate it. Now all he has to do is convince the lady he really does want her—in every way possible.

IOU by Paris Brandon

The morning after her final exams, Bliss Harper woke up in her own bed wearing only her underwear. She's never remembered how she got there or why she found an I.O.U. tucked into her panties for one night of "Bad Boy Sex," signed by her favorite pizza delivery guy, Nick Santucci. But she had a ten-year plan that didn't include any more bad decisions and handsome men. But all work and no play make for a dull life and she's headed to her ten-year college reunion with every intention of collecting on a debt that's long overdue.

Ten years ago, bad boy Nick hadn't usually looked twice at shy, thrift-store fashion reject Bliss Harper. He just hadn't been able to avoid it when she'd started doing a tabletop, drunken striptease at a frat party the police were raiding. These days Nick's not delivering pizza, he's delivering deals and he's headed to his ten-year college reunion determined to negotiate one night into many with the woman who holds the marker on his heart.

Prisoner of the Heart by Anny Cook

When Rebecca Iversen graduated from college, she headed home with nothing on her mind but wedding plans. Less than a month later, her plans were in ruins when she discovered she was pregnant the same week her fiancé was arrested for selling drugs. Anxious to provide legitimacy for her child, she married Tom while he was still in jail. Years later, Becky finally divorced him, resolved to make a peaceful life for her children and herself.

When the reunion invitation from Karen arrived in her e-mail, her Aunt Mary urged her to take the time to enjoy a little adult time at the reunion.

Young Joe Harris lived across the street from the old Victorian where Becky lived during college. He spent those years secretly yearning for the “older woman”. Now that Becky is back and single, Joe plans to do everything in his power to convince her that he’s exactly the man she needs.

***G-Spot* by Taylor Tryst**

Lily Sutherland—no—Detective Lily Sutherland, a title she worked her ass off to earn, has returned to Heartwood Indiana for her ten-year college reunion. An ex-Lady Hawk, and a star athlete on the volleyball team, Lily used her competitive edge to win on the court. She dove into the male dominated world of law enforcement where she once again rocked the foundation and shot up the ranks to homicide detective in record time. As far as Lily is concerned, she’s just one of the boys until she reunites with Dakota Reese, the love of her life.

Special Agent Dakota Reese has always been too smart for his own damn good. Specializing in serial cases, Dakota attends his college reunion at Western Indiana University for what he believes will be a reprieve, only to discover that his life just became much harder...literally, when he see’s Lily Sutherland at the grand old Victorian down the street. Dakota and Lily had split amicably ten years prior, each of them marrying for all of the right reasons. Unfortunately, they married someone else, and were now both divorced. There’s a natural animosity between the cops and the feebies, but can Lily put their differences aside long enough for her ‘G Man’ to find her g spot and rock her world, forever?

Handcuffs and Lace

Resplendence Publishing's Erotic Romance Line of Law Enforcement Themed Stories

***Search Me Baby, One More Time* by Melinda Barron**

Wren Thornberry's life isn't going according to plan. She let her father talk her out of marrying Bryan Stockard, the man she loves, and moved halfway around the world. Now she's back home in Texas, babysitting her grandmother while grandma and her boy-toy work through their list of sexual exploits, making themselves the talk of the town.

But what Wren doesn't know is that things in her hometown are about to heat up even more, and it will have nothing to do with her grandmother. It seems that Bryan Stockard is still around, he wants to get back into Wren's life—by any means necessary, and now he has just the tools to do it: a police uniform, handcuffs, and the authority to make Wren *assume the position*.

***Stripped* by Celia Kyle**

Sometimes life just required tequila...and vodka...and a shot or two of whiskey for good measure. Jasmine Wright, Jazz to her friends, has reached that point. And now all that liquor is making her clothes fall off—in the middle of the street. Good thing a friendly neighborhood police officer stops to help.

Sheriff Ian Blackwell has loved Jazz since high school and then some. When their relationship burned out so many years ago, he wasn't sure he would recover. Now he's getting a second chance, and he won't Jazz slip away from him this time. He has her naked and at his mercy, and he's going to keep her that way. Forever.

***Going Commando* by Catherine Chernow**

Bounty hunter Shyra Lawrence listens to her favorite radio station one morning where the DJ's are discussing "going commando" —*a.k.a.* wearing no undies. Captivated by their conversation, she decides to shed her panties in favor of the freedom that wearing no underwear brings.

Enthusiastic, Shyra sends an email to her best friend, Donna, detailing the delights of panty-freedom, but unbeknownst to Shyra, she's hit the send key...to the wrong email addy!

When Derek Grayson opens his emails that morning, he discovers that his #1 employee and top bounty hunter has sent him an erotic, enticing message about going commando. Derek has always been polite, professional, and so damned attracted to Shyra, it's almost painful. Working day in and day out with voluptuous woman has sent Derek's hormones into overdrive on more than one occasion.

Now, Shyra's shed her panties and Derek's got all he can do to contain his lust when she announces that she's... GOING COMMANDO.

***Ticket Me More* by Tia Fanning**

Hailed by the bridal flower world as an artistic genius, Meli works long nights making bouquets for women lucky enough to find love, while she herself lives a life of solitude. She yearns to share her heart and body with someone other than Bob, her *Battery Operated Boyfriend*, but acute shyness keeps her from engaging the "living" world.

However, Meli's quiet and predictable existence takes an unexpected turn when she is pulled over and ticketed by the most gorgeous cop she has ever encountered—Officer Michael Johnson. Though he doesn't seem to notice her as anything more than a traffic violation, Meli makes plans to overcome her timid nature and seize the police officer's attention...using any speed necessary.

***Handcuffs and Lies* by Bronwyn Green**

Sometimes promises to friends are the hardest to keep. Undercover police officer, Michael Tanner, promised his dying partner that he'd take care of the man's little sister. Trouble is, after her brother's death, Doctor Tori Spinelli wants nothing to do with Michael—or any other cop for that matter.

Tori has always fought against overprotective men and deception. Forced into protective custody with Michael, she's now faced with both in the same package. Despite their differences, Tori falls in love with him, but how can she trust a man who lies for a living?

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