



*Through*  
the **Wall**

**Keri Ford**



*Uninhibited in Apple Trail, Arkansas*

*Through The Wall*

By

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*She doesn't want wild and raunchy, just a little spice...*

Stephanie Faulkner listens to her neighbor's nightly sexcapades through her bedroom wall. What used to make her blush now has her reaching for her vibrator. But she's had enough self-fulfillment and now wants the real thing.

*He wants commitment and long-term, not a quick roll...*

The only woman Parker Madison ever wanted for long-term was Stephanie...but she's off-limits. He's tried to find a substitute but there just isn't another woman like her. Now that she's available, if he gives her time to get over her ex-husband...will he finally get his long-desired chance?

*Short-term doesn't lead to long term. Or does it...?*

But when Stephanie digs up the courage to ask Parker for something a little exciting and spicy, he nervously rejects her. Still, she sets out to get what she wants—a little sexcapade of her very own. No commitment. It's just sex, right?

Parker knows he could never be satisfied with having Stephanie temporarily. But as she continues to tempt him and he finds it harder to resist, he begins to think short-term might be better than nothing at all. Unless he can convince her into more.

## *Chapter One*

Summer in the south was like living in a sauna 24/7. You had to be part fish to breathe in the high humidity. Anybody with even a little sense wouldn't be outside in this mess, but Stephanie Faulkner was out there melting away, anyway.

And not for the sizzling burgers, that was for sure.

While the frozen margaritas were nice, it wasn't those either. The kids running around were cute, but they were sweaty and none belonged to her in any related fashion. Only one thing persuaded her to brave August in Arkansas for a backyard barbeque.

Parker Madison.

He was her friend and neighbor. Their apartments were mirror images, their headboards sharing the same wall. From the moaning, screaming, yelping, and pleading she heard through that wall at night, until women left in the wee hours of the morning, Stephanie knew the man had some stamina and skills. And damn it, she wanted her world rocked by more than her vibrator. Parker could do that, without a doubt. Not only did he apparently have god-like abilities, the man was built like one, too.

Images of his muscular body and all he could do with it provoked the drinking of four margaritas already—drinks that were more José Cuervo and less lime. Somewhere between salting the third cup and mixing up her fourth, she decided tonight was the night she was going to ask.

Yes, ask Parker Madison to rock her world.

And this wasn't like those other times where she was going to ask and then chicken out. No ma'am. This time, all the way or nothing.

She licked the last bit of salt from her now empty plastic cup and eyed the fine piece of hardened, tanned flesh prowling through the crowd. Yes, prowling. Parker took long strides, his eyes always searching and looking around; his mouth perfectly kicked up in this little grin that made the butterflies in her belly smile.

Ah, Parker Madison. How had she known the man for so long and not realized all this? Her thoughts darkened as her ex-husband's face intruded. She kicked him out of her head. She would *not* have her day ruined with thoughts of the cheating bastard.

She'd rather lust after Parker, and returned to watching the man who'd haunted her dreams—both the nighttime and daylight ones. When a woman thought sex, she thought Parker Madison. The two just went hand in hand like socks and shoes. Only less smelly when things got sweaty. She giggled. Oh, Lord, too much José if she was giggling.

She cleared her throat, threw her shoulders back, and tugged her halter top straight. Serious. She needed to be a serious-sexy-woman. Cute wedges, short ass shorts and a halter top equaled serious-sexy-woman. At the very least, Jim Nolan, the neighborhood man-whore who was rumored to be so desperate he laid a girl carrying the flu, had thought so and told her as much. Stephanie shuddered and wished for a little more to drink to permanently kick that out of her memory.

As the muscular hunk of beef shifted through the crowd, she didn't need a drink to forget about old man-whore-what's-his-name. To wet her dry throat...yeah, a drink would have been handy. And to cool her blood. Man-whore forgotten.

“What are you doing over here off to the side and waiting by the gate?”

Stephanie started and glanced over as her friend, Jessie McBride, leaned on the gate next to her. “God, I didn't hear you come up. You scared me.”

Jessie grinned. “With the way you're studying something, a snake could have bitten you and you wouldn't have noticed.”

“I'm waiting for Parker.”

“Looked like you were doing a lot more than waiting. You're going to do it, aren't you?” Jessie shifted until she faced Stephanie. “You're going to ask him out finally. I honestly don't know how you've waited this long. I mean, hell you two are in his garage all day, every day, mostly alone for how many hours?”

“Eight. And not every day.” Just six, but that seemed like too small a thing to point out. Also, they typically saw each other at some point on Sunday, too. “Customers come in too. And the phone rings off the hook. And the paperwork. Really, it would be useless to try to start anything there.”

Jessie raised her brows. “You're blabbering.”

She stared into her empty cup. Wasn't it just half full a few seconds ago? "I might be slightly drunk."

"Good. It'll make asking him out easier. What are you going to suggest? Not much here to do in town. Get him to take you to Little Rock for some fun."

True. Apple Trail was a charming little town filled with mom and pop stores and little else. Luckily, Stephanie wasn't interested in a date-date. "We already do movies and dinner all the time." She studied her friend. If there was anyone to ask for advice on being naughty, it was Jessie. "I'm going to ask for more."

Jessie flicked grains of salt off the rim and into her plastic cup. "More what?"

Just a little spice was all she needed. Nothing raunchy or overly kinky, but some spice. Was that too much for a girl to ask? She didn't think so. She crossed her fingers and hoped he wouldn't either. But man, if she couldn't even say it to her friend, however would she get it out to Parker?

She steeled her spine. "I am going to ask Parker for sex."

Jessie's mouth dropped in mock horror. "You slut."

She nudged her with her elbow. "Shut up. You're supposed to give me advice to make this easier."

"Then I suggest you make your move before that 'ho," Jessie tilted her head toward the crowd, "has him under her fingernails again."

Stephanie glanced up to see Parker's ex-of-the-week stop and whisper something in his ear. All the tequila in Stephanie's belly rolled and threatened to come back up. Oh man. She stared at the tree-line in the far distance to settle the liquor. The tops swayed in the breeze though, making her sway with them. She dropped her gaze back to the 'ho wrapping her hands around Parker.

She groaned. "I thought they broke up? I hadn't seen her in a week."

"I'm past ready for that chick to go back to college. Rumor is it her daddy's not to thrilled to have her running around either. She keeps flirting with his customers and he's losing business. Wouldn't surprise me if she was shipped off to her momma's in Louisiana for the last of the summer."

Claire—the 'ho—was a red-head made of sugar, spice and lots of silicone and doctor-tucking skill. Stephanie didn't care where the hell the woman went, so long it was away from

Parker. The pickings for new women must be getting slim for him, because she was by far the trashiest Stephanie had ever laid eyes on.

And it wasn't because of the cosmetic work the woman had undergone. Her nose, boobs and tucked up ass were not bad additions. However, there wasn't a doctor alive who could correct the woman's language. *Fuck* was as fine and dandy a word as ever. Doesn't mean it should be used every other breath. Furthermore, neither should *bitches* and *ass* and certainly not all in one sentence. Geesh.

The ex flattened her hand across his stomach, giving Stephanie a moment of panic. It wouldn't do at all if Parker took the woman home. Not only would it throw a huge, wicked kink in her plans, but she wasn't sure she could listen to another night of her screaming. She had a particularly high-pitched, gasping yelp. At first, Stephanie had thought Parker had bought one of those yippie dogs. Then his headboard started banging on the wall and the woman had managed to squeeze out Parker's name along with some of her favorite obscenities.

*Yippee*, indeed.

Parker said something, making the girl laugh. Alcohol induced jealousy churned. It was a troublesome reoccurring thing lately. With each new woman Stephanie could hear gasping Parker's name through the walls, her fingers dug deeper in her palms, and the green-eyed monster reared its ugly head.

She had no claim to Parker. They'd been friends for a long time, but they weren't friends *like that*. Being friends *like that* never even came up between them. She licked her suddenly dry lips. At least, not yet. And it never would if that woman didn't get her hand off his stomach and quit whispering things in his ear.

Parker laughed, the sun touched his slightly-too-long blond hair. She sighed. She'd had her hands in his hair before. What a waste of time as she'd shaken the golden locks and commented on him needing a haircut. A haircut. Yeah that was her. What an idiot. She should have yanked him to her while she'd had the chance. Pressed her breasts to his hard chest. Aligned her groin against his... Her gaze dropped to the place in question. She swallowed. Perhaps she should have stopped at three margaritas.

There was a fine line between sexy and trampy. Case in point, the red-head draped over him: tramp. Her standing over to the side leaned back on the fence: sexy. In her opinion anyway.



Jessie shook her cup and loosened the last of her frozen margarita from the bottom.  
“You’re going to owe me a free oil change for this.”

“For what?”

But Jessie was already walking away. “Claire! Hey, girl.”

Claire looked up from Parker and waved.

“It’s hot as heck out here and getting late. I’m headed over to Michael Bill’s place. Braves are playing and he’s got some people coming over tonight. Come with me?”

And just like that, Claire peeled her hand off his chest and the nausea in Stephanie departed. Michael Bill were magic words to having a good time. Jessie turned and winked.

Stephanie waved a two-finger thanks. “I’m throwing in a set of windshield wipers!”

She laughed. “You better!”

Parker swaggered to her looking all rugged and waiting to be tossed in sheets. Okay, maybe two drinks would have been plenty. Oh, what the heck. Two, six or none, it wouldn’t have mattered. In the past few months Parker always looked ready to wrestle naked. The alcohol went back to warming her blood. Need shuddered through, wetting her female department.

She leaned against the gate, hopefully looking cool, as Parker drew closer. He looked up. Surprise flashed on his face, but he smiled as he focused on her. Oh, the things the man was probably capable of. She didn’t know a lot about sexual variety. Her ex-husband had kept things very...civil. From what she’d heard through the sheetrock, Parker was anything but vanilla.

Sex with Parker must be like winning the Triple Crown, Super Bowl, and World Series all in one night. Things she’d been uncertain about in the past, she wanted to get down and do with Parker.

And get dirty even.

Sweaty and twisty and panting for air.

She shivered and pushed hair from her face. *Wow*. She was not supposed to be the tramp here, but man, she couldn’t help it. She thought of him at night when she could hear his grunts. In the mornings as his shower ran, she thought of getting in there with him. During the day while she balanced his books and ran the front office of his garage, she wanted to walk into the shop wearing a trench coat and get busy on a radiator.

A few times, though she'd never admit it and could barely admit it to herself, she'd used her vibrator along with his noise in the evenings. Oh yes, she had. Heat flamed through her face. Thankful for the August sun, he probably couldn't tell.

His stride was long and smooth. Sure and confident, exactly like him. "Stephanie! When did you get here?"

Parker's arm snaked around her shoulders and hugged her against his side. As usual, he looked glad to see her. She hoped he was super happy because he, too, laid awake thinking of doing the dirty with her. Then again, he could just be glad to see her because he was Parker and good to her. Either way, she leaned into him as he pulled her close.

See, this was something else about Parker. Any other man standing outside in August would be sweating and smelling like pig that had been rooting around in the mud. Not Parker. She could still smell the crispness of his soap and the spice of his deodorant.

She dropped her head against on his shoulder as she'd so often done. Only now, as she'd been doing for the past six or eight weeks, she imagined her head there while gasping for air. Pictured his big, coarse hands on her naked skin, gripping her hips. His big brown eyes stared back at her and she swallowed down her fear. It was time to get this out there and confront it.

She wanted scintillating sex.

Parker knew how to give it.

Doing it together seemed the natural choice.

Parker had always been there for her and she trusted him. When they'd walked in and caught Riley in the act, Riley had tried coming toward her with explanations rolling off his tongue. Parker had punched his childhood friend in the mouth and ever since then, he'd been beside her through thick and thin. If he said no to this sex idea, she was confident they could go back to their routine. It would be a silly request and nothing more, chalked up to the fact she hadn't been laid in over a year.

Oh, and her four margaritas.

Ha! Finally having four made some sense. "Hey Parker. I came looking for you."

He stared down at her, waiting, expecting more. And...there was more to say, but it lodged in her throat. It was just sex. And it wasn't the man in question causing all these nerves, it was the act itself. The last man she had stretched horizontal with, she'd married. Said man had

since left her for her best friend and moved five hours west. But Stephanie was over that. Mostly. The sting wasn't so bad anymore. Mostly.

What hadn't dissipated was a ridiculous, nagging curiosity. This dig had started very small and hidden away. For months, the thought had remained in the back of her head. When she'd found Jake and Crystal together, he'd been doing her from behind over the arm of the couch. They'd been doing the nasty, super nasty-like. He'd had her hair fisted in his hand, forcing her spine into an uncomfortable looking arch. It had looked excessively dirty compared to their missionary sex. After the initial shock and hatred wore off a few months later, Stephanie wondered why she and Jake had never had sex like that. Had he thought she wouldn't have been open to roughing it up a little bit?

Parker squeezed her against his side, hugging her close and then loosened his grip. "Well, here I am, at your service all night long."

That was a loaded statement if she'd ever heard one. If she had ovaries worth some salt she'd yell, *okay!* But she didn't. Instead, she swallowed again and fumbled around for a polite way to ask for dirty-ish sex. She was pretty sure there wasn't one. Well, bock-bock and cluck the walk home or take a risk. She was going to do it. "Parker, I need some help."

He didn't wait a beat. "I'm all yours, doll, ask away."

She nodded and walked, drawing him away from the barbeque and the crowd, steering him toward home. Home was an apartment across the street, so it wasn't much of a walk. Which meant she better get it out before they crossed the double yellows in the middle of the road. She would never voice her question out loud once they were inside the building where all the neighbors might hear. Plus the middle of the road offered the added bonus of being able to run anywhere if he laughed. Like head-first into a car.

He hugged her against his side, gently jostling her. "Never known you to be so quiet."

Parker was right. And she needed this. She pulled in a deep breath, stopped right there in the middle of the dead Sunday afternoon road and stared right into his eyes. "I want rough...er, sex."

He looked at her for a long moment and finally he chuckled. "Funny."

There was her way out of this conversation. She could laugh with him and that'd be it. But she didn't want out. "I'm not being funny."

“Uh-huh. And how much did you have to drink?” He tugged on her hair. “Not like you to drink this much.”

“I’ve only had a few.” And she was feeling darn sober at the moment. “I’m serious.”

His mouth dropped and his arm fell away from her shoulder. His eyes drifted closed as he shook his head. “We’ve never...”

She was in deep now, she wouldn’t back away. The margaritas were a help. *Ding!* Point two for having four. She swallowed and sucked in a deep breath. “I know. I want to. To find out.”

His mouth snapped shut. His jaw tightened, giving her the first sign of just how big of a mistake this might be, but she refused to give up, so she forced onward. He had to at least think about it. “I want something more than plain vanilla. Nothing extreme like cherry blizzard blast, but maybe a little chocolate with syrup.” She rubbed her neck. “And a little squirt of whipped cream.”

*Or a big squirt.*

He wasn’t looking at her. In fact, he had turned away until his tight jeans curving along his nice ass faced her. The sun blazed down even hotter on the pavement somehow or maybe it was embarrassment burning her through and through. That scent of melting tar? That wasn’t from the hot sun on the pavement but her body catching fire from her blush.

Noise and laughter from the barbeque carried over and echoed off their apartment building and back to them. Which meant, their words could also go back to the barbeque. They weren’t quite as alone as she’d like, especially with a couple of kids coming down the sidewalk toward them.

Sweat trickled down her temple and she shifted her feet, kicking a stray rock from the road. There was no breeze or shade. She was sitting under a heat lamp while her future paced about in front of her trying to figure out if she was indeed serious or drunk off her ass.

Parker stopped and stared up at the bright blue sky. “Why me?”

Liquid courage pushed her on. “We’ve been neighbors for months now. Our beds are on the same wall.” He was turning. She could picture his slack-jawed mouth and yep, there it was, right along with big eyes. Not quite horrified, but then, he didn’t exactly look thrilled. She squared her shoulders and forged ahead. “Well, I think, from what I’ve heard, that is, you could help me.”

Before he could say anything, the hum of an engine revved. She glanced back and saw a truck headed their way. Parker put his hand to her back and steered her off the road, toward their building. So much for being in the street to put her out of her misery should this little chat get any worse. And one thing was for certain, this conversation was surely going to get worse.

Parker was shaking his head again. “No. This isn’t a good idea.”

She shrugged, trying to maintain this casual I’m-so-cool-I-can-ask-for-sex look. “It would just be a couple of... encounters.”

“Encounters,” he echoed with a shake of his head. “No. We’re going to our apartments and we’re going to forget this.”

She shook her head. “I’ve never had anything exciting. It’s always been just a rub over my hip, a stroke down my thigh and that’s it. And that was okay, but I want more. I want to be used and—”

“I don’t want to hear this.” He jabbed his key in the main door and pulled it open for her.

She stopped in front of him and held him there in the doorway. The blast of the air conditioning slapped her with a whole new sense of drive. She could do this. She could push through. Maybe if she put her chest against his, and slid her leg up his thigh, but she hadn’t drank quite enough for those kinds of moves. “What I’m saying is, it was always the same. Eighty percent of the time, I’ve been on the bottom.”

“Not listening.” He put his hand to her back and turned her in the building.

But he was listening. He wouldn’t be wiping at his brow and tugging at his shirt otherwise.

“I’m not asking for a lot, just something up against a door. Or in the shower. I don’t want to be chained up and beaten with a whip. I just want a little something more. I need this, Parker.”

He turned and faced her. His eyes were narrowed. His hands were balled into fists at his sides. “So what, you’ll call after you get out the shower, after just shaving your legs and tell me to come over?”

She squirmed. “I hadn’t really worked out the details.”

“You can’t just decide one day to have wild sex with me.”

“I didn’t.” The words snapped out harder than she wanted, but she couldn’t help it. He’d struck a nerve. It wasn’t like she’d just decided this was a good idea thirty minutes ago. She’d been dithering over it for months. Considered it on those late nights while hearing grunts, groans,

and moans from his bedroom. “Isn’t this every guy’s wet dream? To have a woman ready and willing anytime?”

“No. Not like this.” He looked downright angry.

“You’d have a woman at your beck and call. Anytime, anywhere.” She goaded him, trying to get a little laugh and the Parker she knew back, but he wasn’t smiling. It hit her then. *He already has that.*

Or maybe, worse. She sobered. “You’re not into me that way.”

“Stephanie.”

She shook her head and turned for the stairs, blinking away ridiculous tears. She knew this had been a possibility, but she had just... She sighed. She really hadn’t decided what to do if he said no. “It’s fine. I did just throw this on you all at once. I didn’t consider that you couldn’t think of me in that way.”

“I—”

Footsteps echoed through the old building silencing him, and had her looking ahead to see old Mrs. Colder rounding the white corner. The harsh overhead lights made her silvery hair look bluish and her overwhelming makeup like a kid who had colored her face with highlighters.

Thankful for the interruption, Stephanie hurried past and up the short flight of concrete stairs; the key to her apartment in her hand and ready to go. Too bad having her keys in her hand hadn’t helped her run faster. Parker was right on her heels.

“Stephanie.”

“Forget it.” His rejection pinched harder than she wanted to admit. Which was silly, because quick casual sex was all this had been about anyway. It wasn’t personal, it wasn’t a relationship he turned down, but it still felt like a rejection of her specifically. “It’s what you wanted, right? That’s what you said.”

And tomorrow, she’d play the drunk card and pretend to not remember a moment of it. Score three for the four margaritas. And hey, who knows, she had some pre-mix in the refrigerator—she just might drag the bottle out and finish it off so she *would* forget.

Parker spun her around at her door and leaned over her, around her, covered her. He was a winter coat and she the cold, lonely body beneath it. And boy, she was warming up. His gaze covered her face, seemed to linger on her mouth, but she wasn’t sure. She wasn’t doing much

breathing on her own and it was making her lightheaded. He'd never been this close before, not like this. Not with this heat between them.

Parker leaned in close. His mouth was just there. His breath, scented of beer from the party caressed her cheeks so soft it was like his lips touched hers. Her eyes dropped closed and then he went and pulled back. "You've never made a move or looked like you were interested in me that way." He shook his head. "Damn it, you can't throw something on me like that and expect me to jump."

"Fine." She dropped her gaze. And fine was right because he was right. She'd thrown it on him out of nowhere. They had been friends for a long time. He'd been a friend of Jake's, which was how they'd met. He'd been standing next to her, helping her bring in groceries, when she walked in on Jake and Crystal doing the doggie on her fifteen-hundred dollar couch. Parker had stood by her side through the good and the bad while Jake fought her for every fork, bowl, and pan out of the kitchen. Seven years of friendship and suddenly she wanted to change things. She could see his point. "So we're at a, *you'll think about it and let me know?*"

He straightened and swiped a hand down his face. "I suppose. And you need to think more on it, too. We take that step, things will never be the same."

"They—"

He lifted her chin. "Will never be the same."

Parting bit of advice offered, he pushed off the wall and walked the few feet down the hall to his own door. With him, he took his heat and his...just everything. Too bad he didn't take her pounding pulse.

She hurried inside her apartment and leaned against her front door. For the first time since he walked her home from the barbeque, she felt like she could breathe fully. A talk that was supposed to be casual and off the cuff had become intense in two-point-five seconds flat. With her blood pumping at this rate, she should be stripping.

People made stuff like this work. Friends with benefits for a while and then back to normal on down the line. They were close enough to sustain that. Honestly, she could go for more, but Parker didn't do long-term.

Despite his cut-and-dry thoughts, things between them would only change if they let it. And she wouldn't allow a wedge to form between them. She needed him by her side above anything else.

But she wouldn't lose hope yet for a little excitement. He was thinking about it. She pushed off the door, kicking off her heels and leaving them where they lay in the path to her bedroom. It was a step. Smaller than she would have liked. She had shaved after all, hoping for the full Monty with the possibility of an unfastening-buttons-while-kissing-up-the-stairs event.

While she had thought he hadn't seemed into it, looking back, disinterest wasn't the impression she got. Or maybe the four margaritas were at work here, causing a major case of desire fogging her memory. She stopped and rubbed at her head, trying to piece things together through lime sloshed thoughts and hoped she was getting it all right. There at the end, while standing at her door, he seemed more unsure than against the idea. She was fairly positive about that.

She sighed and hurried to her room where she crashed on her bed. If she was right, and she was, then she just needed something to push him over the line and convince him benefits were a good idea. But *you'll be having sex with someone anyway, why not me?* probably wouldn't be the way to win him over.

The day was over now. She'd attempted all she'd known to get her hands on Parker and there was nothing more to do about it for the night. Tomorrow was another day.

Oh, God.

Tomorrow was Monday. A work day. She'd be in the office of his tiny garage with him only steps away. His arms would be streaked with grease. A rag would be dangling from the back pocket of worn jeans. Sweat would be gathered at his lower back as he worked. That old Razorback ball cap of his would be switched around from front to back—depending on what he worked on. Somehow with all that going on and her desire for sex now out in the open, she was supposed to have a clear head to be able to bill-out piston rods and lube jobs.

Cheeks flaming hot, stomach crappie-flopping, and her thighs twitching, she sat up and ripped her shirt over head and tossed it aside. It caught on the lampshade on her nightstand and she stretched, brushing it off. The top drawer to her nightstand was cracked open, she knew what lay inside.

A grin stole her lips. Perhaps it was time to turn the tables a little. Let him hear *her* for once. She'd never been too vocal, but just maybe she should change that. She pulled Old Reliable out of the drawer and clicked it on. The plastic hummed in her hand. It tickled her palm and brought a giggle on her lips.



Oh, Lord. Not another giggle.

## *Chapter Two*

Parker crossed the narrow living room of his apartment, edged around the corner of the tile top counters and jerked open the fridge. Cool air blasted his hot body and he grabbed a chilled bottle of beer. Sex with Stephanie.

*Jesus.*

He twisted the top off and drank, pulling hard at the beer and chugged until nothing was left. He sat the empty bottle down. It clanked hard on the countertops and the sound should have served as a final 'no.' Instead, it reverberated more like a pistol firing off the start of the race and the finish line was next door. He stood there a long moment, waiting for the drink to ease through his pumping blood, for the buzz to pull him from the edge.

*Sex with Stephanie. Sex with Jake's Stephanie. He closed his eyes. No. Not Jake's Stephanie. Not anymore.*

Parker breathed and continued working at talking himself out of it. A few moments of fun. Catch a bit of ass and apparently, possibly, spank some of it, too. Not how he'd wanted Stephanie Faulkner all these years. She was supposed to be a slow and torturous unwrapping. Hours spent learning each creamy, soft inch of her skin. Time taken to see what set her off and what made her beg and ache for more.

He groaned and shook his head.

Parker refused to change what he wanted from her, no matter how easy it would be to give in to her request. He wasn't her rebound or stepping stone to begin dating again. No matter how tempting she was, he wouldn't give in and be used. He was a man with a few morals or ethics or whatever people wanted to call them.

The possibility of forever was the only way he'd take Stephanie.

He squeezed the counter, but the smooth edges did nothing to hold him there. Everything he wanted to taste and touch and hold was waiting for him next door. Beautiful, smart, sweet, luscious, and hopefully *one* day, his Stephanie.

His phone rang and he pulled it from his pocket, thankful to see Riley Hamilton's name on the screen. Riley was sensible and levelheaded and he offered just the kind of conversation Parker needed. "Hey, Riley."

"Hey, man. Sorry to call on a Sunday."

"No trouble. What's up?"

"Not my tractor. Think you can have a look at it in the morning? I need to start cutting hay."

"Sure." Tractor talk. Perfect. Nothing close to the wham-bam-thank-you-ma'am quickie with sweating and slapping bodies. His balls pulled in tight and his cock twitched at the thought of her hair damp and plastered against her neck. Her pouty lips would be parted and head thrown back. Small, perky boobs would bounce in his face and hips roll against his.

He'd seen her dance. He knew what she was capable of.

He cleared his throat. He had to get out of this apartment. "How about tonight? I can be there in fifteen minutes."

"Would love that, but the halogen light bulb in the barn blew on me yesterday. Can't see a thing out there. I won't have a replacement until mid-week."

*Shit.* "I'll be there first thing in the morning then."

"Thanks, man."

Parker clicked off his phone and dropped it on the counter. Fuck. He glanced to their shared kitchen wall. Before doing something he'd regret, he stripped off his clothes. Couldn't very well run next door if he was stark naked.

After her divorce, she became a necessary crutch in his life as they figured out things together. She was learning the callous ways of her husband and he about a man he'd know since elementary school. It was her financial whiz of a brain that saved his garage. She'd been the one to catch his former secretary robbing him blind.

They'd evolved into more. She was the one he looked for to watch a game with. Not because he wanted to see her, but because she was the first to leap off the couch and shout at the TV over a bad call.

She might believe they could remain casual and unattached. He knew better. He was already attached—they were friends, after all—and her divorce had only been final for three

months. This request was nothing but making him her rebound. He'd do anything Stephanie asked, but not that.

Not the rebound fuck.

The pile of clothes he'd just removed lay at his feet. Seconds, and he could be dressed and next door. Even faster if he skipped buttoning the jeans.

Shower. Now.

He crossed his small apartment, heading for the tiny bathroom with purpose before he turned for the front door instead. He cranked the water on and stepped into the pouring stream. It didn't take long and he was continually turning the heat down with a slight twist of the knob. The water seemed dead-set on firing his blood at lava levels. One image played after another. Thoughts constantly flashed in his head and wrapped his balls, licked his cock.

Stephanie naked.

Stephanie moaning his name.

Stephanie's pink painted fingernails biting into his skin. Sweat touched his brow even though his shower was down to nearly straight cold water.

Disappointment or need, or whatever the hell it was, dropped and rolled through his stomach.

He stepped out and toweled off, all the while thinking how much better this would be with Stephanie's tongue lapping him or her soft hands covering him. Need hung tight to his hardened cock and pulled at his balls. He lay on his bed and stared up at the rotating fan. The blades whipped around. Air coated his dampened body. A chill soaked to his bones, but he was burning up.

His hand strayed to his waist. The image of her damp lips entered as clear as if she knelt before him. He closed his eyes and firmed his grip sure and tight. He stroked up his length and thought of Stephanie there. The heat in his grasp was her warm mouth pulling him deep. His hold was her sucking him tight.

His breath quickened, his pace jerked him hard. Release bunched low, built tight and readied to explode as he stroked. Instead of the breeze from the fan, it was Stephanie's brown hair falling over his thighs, sweeping his belly, and slipping between his legs and touching his balls. His ass tightened, the vision was getting so focused in his head he could swear he heard Stephanie moan.

A husky giggle whispered through the room and he stilled. *That* he did not dream. Another moan sounded and he sat up and stroked through his hair. She was making him crazy. Except—

There it was again. A very pleasure filled sigh.

Remembering Stephanie's remarks about hearing through the walls, he sat up and turned, placing his ear against the smooth wall and listened to husky groans. Surely she hadn't found someone else. Not in that short amount of time. Jealousy fired through him. Hell no. He cursed. Someone could have come in while he'd been in the shower. He reached for his pajama pants to barge in next door, but stopped at hearing her again.

A throaty purr seeped through the thin wall. "*Parker.*"

One harshly spoken word and he was flipped upside-down. She was alone and thinking of him. Jealousy melted away and blood pounded through him. He wondered at how quick her breath had become. How pink her pale skin glowed and glistened as she climbed closer to her climax. His hand was back around his cock. He stroked as the breaths he couldn't hear, but imagined, whispered between her lush lips and panted a rhythm. His name eased out of her again, this time louder, on a strangled cry.

He tightened his grip. Pressure built around his sack, drawing him in. Stephanie gasped, a muffled moan slid from her. Release rushed through him, so intense, so pleasure filled, it numbed him. He gripped his iron head board, catching his warm seed before it dripped on his bed. He rested his cheek against the wall and just breathed and listened.

Nothing could be heard from Stephanie and after several minutes, he eased down and lay across his bed. He didn't cover up. His body was too hot. The sheets would be too confining. Would be too easy to imagine her body stretched across him.

### *Chapter Three*

Why was it harder to look like you had just woke up than it was to fix some fancy updo? Stephanie worked her hair slightly loose from her pony tail and applied a thin layer of chapstick to her lips. Her usual trip to Parker's for breakfast was going to be much different than the norm.

It occurred to her late last night that Parker's initial resistance could be as simple as he didn't see her as a woman who had sex. First she had been his best friend's wife. Then a ripped apart female in dire need of a shoulder to cry on.

Stephanie was neither of those anymore and it was high time he realized the change.

She stepped back from the mirror. By all appearances, should she pass anyone in the halls, she was dressed as usual for breakfast. Under the fluffy green cotton robe there was a different story. While she was tempted to wear something slinky, silky, and sexy, she didn't own a stitch of it anymore. When she was forced to leave her home and had been packing, she'd burned every last piece of lingerie in the fireplace. Right there in the middle of July.

Stephanie locked her door and headed downstairs for the paper as usual. She lifted it from her box, returned upstairs and let herself in Parker's apartment with her own key. While bacon was in the air, the underlying scent of Parker's space was what had her swaying on her feet. The leather furniture and his handmade pine tables filled the room. The familiar smell hugged around her and drew her in toward what she recognized and craved the most—Parker's shower fresh clean scent. Her own personal aphrodisiac.

Well, and him standing at the stove in a tight shirt showing off his muscled shoulders and trim waist. Not to mention, the worn jeans which fit his ass far better than she recalled, were slung low on his hips. Forget coffee, that sight got her blood going just fine.

"Morning," he called

"Morning." She took a deep breath and loosened her robe. "Sleep well?"

He grunted and she turned away from him, unable to hide her smile. Ah, yes, she'd made sure she'd been extra vocal last night. It hadn't been easy as she'd never done that before.

Mostly, it'd been a chore to keep from laughing, but she'd pushed through and made a whole bunch of amplified sultry sounds. Maybe tonight she'd actually use her vibrator *and* make sexy noises at the same time.

"Bacon and biscuits for breakfast this morning," he called.

"Sounds good." When she had moved in next door, he ordered her over for breakfast to make sure she ate something every day. Had he not, she likely wouldn't have for a while. Even after her depression lifted, the pattern of coming to breakfast stuck. Once she started smiling some during the day, she made supper and he'd join her if he didn't already have company. This morning though, breakfast was going to be less about eating and more about getting him to look at her in a new way.

"You all right?"

She looked over her shoulder. He had turned away again and was reaching in the oven. She pulled in a deep breath and dropped her robe. "Fine. Why do you ask?"

"You're quiet."

She moved into the kitchen and leaned against the counter. He was bent over the open oven door, turning the biscuits around on the rack inside. His butt was up in the air facing her. She considered pinching him, but then he'd likely burn the hell out of his hand and get her nowhere. So she held on to the counter and waited. "Just a little sleepy."

"Staying up too late drinking will do that to you." He closed the oven door and turned. The pot holders fell from his fingers. His eyes dropped down to her tight fitted green shirt. Her nipples, which were not packed away in a bra, perked at his attention. He held the gaze with her breasts for a long time; she didn't move and allowed him to stare. Noticing her had been the whole point, after all. Finally, his gaze lowered and when his eyes widened, she knew he saw that she wasn't wearing any pants, just yellow bikini-cut cotton panties.

She was pretty sure he saw her as a woman who had sex now. But she wasn't going to call him out on it. Nope, she was just going to pretend she hadn't noticed him staring and that his looking had not caressed all of her bits into the happy zone.

She turned and reached in the cabinet for a couple of glasses, just like normal. Only her hands shook and her body hummed. "Do you want juice or water?"

He didn't answer. She was hoping he was staring at her ass and seeing it as one he'd like to grab. Or he could be reading the, *Refresh Your Mouth*, which was written across her rear-end.

While there were lemons plastered all around the words, she had some serious doubts the phrase was hinting at a glass of lemonade.

She twisted at the waist. "Parker? Juice or water?"

He blinked and his gaze was back on her eyes. "Juice."

He stared at her a bit longer. Looked her up and down again before turning back around and manning the stove.

She hurried to fix their drinks and took them to the table. Just as she was coming back into the kitchen, he leaned onto the counter and watched the stove. She eased in next to him, purposely sliding her hip alongside his thigh. He froze. The fork for turning the bacon was in a white knuckle grip. A thick swallow moved down his throat. She wasn't certain he was breathing. She sure as heck wasn't. "Is it about ready?"

He nodded and moved just enough to set the fork aside.

Something soft brushed against her toes. She looked down and saw the pot holders. Perfect. She lifted them. "Back-up. Let me get the biscuits."

He did and she lowered the oven door, fully aware he stood at her back. She bent over and gave him the same view he'd given her, only with a little more skin. Okay, a ton more. He inhaled quickly and she grinned. "These look done."

She pulled them out and shut the door. She turned and let her gaze sweep from the floor up. There was no missing the fact that his partner was testing the limits of his jeans. Heat crawled over her and she eased closer and slid the biscuits on the counter with what she hoped was nonchalance.

Now, she had two choices here. She could grab a plate from the overhead cabinet, or go for a bowl. The bowls were in a cabinet just behind his thighs. She squatted and put her hand on his hip and pushed. "Scoot over."

He didn't budge.

"Hey." She rubbed his hip and pushed. "I need a bowl."

She didn't get a bowl.

"Damn woman." He grabbed her hand and lifted her up. His mouth was on hers before she could catch her breath, but she didn't care. In this moment, tasting his heat, she figured she could live off him alone for a long while. It was like she wasn't remotely hungry. For food anyway. Nope, not at all. She was starved for Parker Madison.



She wrapped her arms around his neck and sank into the kiss. It was so not what she ever thought it would be like. He was more than good. Excellent and claiming. His lips pressed on her mouth. His tongue swept alongside hers. On a dizzying scale, this one busted off the charts and weakened her knees.

Parker was all consuming.

His kiss enveloped her. Took her. Possessed her. Owned her. This was no meeting of lips or a gentle sweep of tongue. This was full-on body contact of smoldering heat. A kiss of desperation, excitement and a promise of more. It wasn't born out of love, but raging lust.

His hands grabbed her hips. Fingers pinched her and she squeezed her legs together hoping for just a little friction to ease the ache he'd caused there. She pressed against him. His hard cock rubbed along her belly. She lifted on her toes, allowing his length to drag along her. Oh man, oh man, nice. Real nice.

He growled in her mouth and his kiss moved down her throat and to her shoulder. This was what she'd been wanting and needing. This all consuming lust robbing her of thoughts. There were no intruding tasks of shopping lists or to-dos on her mind. Just a heated fog of Parker. Rough hands. Firm grip. Gentle touch.

All just for her.

He cupped her bottom, squeezed her in his hands and lifted. She wrapped her legs around his waist. He was just the right size for her ankles to hook at his back as if she were made just for that one purpose. It was a good thing to be made for.

He turned with her. His fingers slid under the elastic of her panties. Calloused palms stroked every nerve ending in her body. She raked her nails through his hair and turned him up to her to get her mouth back on his. He sat her on the countertop and searing pain scorched her rear.

She screamed, all pleasure forgotten as she clung to Parker, pulling herself off the counter and the hot biscuit pan she'd just placed there.

"Stephanie?" He held her tight.

She squeezed her eyes shut, fisting her hands in his shirt. "You sat me on the biscuit pan."

## *Chapter Four*

Over her shoulder, Parker saw the just-out-of-the-oven biscuit pan on the counter. He winced and clutched her to him, pulling her further away from the hot pan. "I'm so sorry."

"I'm going to say it was worth it."

God. See, no good came of thinking sex with Stephanie. Not yet. He'd been thinking of the future. Figured a year after the divorce, all right, eight months, he'd make his first move. Something slow, like grab her hand on the way home from the movies. Give her time to ease into him. This rushing was a mistake and now he'd burned her ass being careless.

He carried her into the living room. Careful of the burn, he laid her down on the couch and helped her roll over. A long strip of brilliant, swollen red curved under her ass from the round pan. Nearly like a smile under her cheeks. His sex drive was lost. "Stephanie."

"Put some ice on it and it'll be okay." Her words were clipped. Her bottom lip was held between her teeth and her eyes were squeezed shut.

He reached out to touch the mark, but pulled his hand away. "I think we should take you to the hospital."

Her jaw dropped and eyes widened. After several seconds, she managed to shake her head and push up on her hands and knees, putting her ass right in his face. He didn't think she meant to do it. Not with the high color rising on her cheeks. "No. No way. This is no different than if I'd brushed the pan with my hand."

"Except you sat on the pan and it seared you. It doesn't look good, Stephanie."

Her head turned until she faced him. She was still on her hands and knees and she blew her hair out of her face. "And when they ask, *what happened?* are you going to tell them we were about to get busy on the counter for a quickie and forgot about the biscuit pan?"

He bit down and mumbled out, "I'll get the ice."

"Uh-huh." She lay back down, but he didn't miss the wince as she was forced to stretch her legs out.

He grabbed a couple cubes, threw them in a bowl and returned to her side. The burn looked God-awful. The bright red had faded to tan already, like her thighs had been cooked as meat on a grill. He lowered to his knees alongside her and pulled out one piece of ice. He placed the cube on her leg and she jerked.

“Sorry,” he mumbled and traced the mark, blowing on it and hoping it would help. A long breath seeped out of her as he dragged the cube back and forth. “Better?”

“Much.”

“I have some stuff at the garage I can put on it to take out the sting.”

“By the time you got back, it’d be fine.”

“I think mustard is supposed to help.”

She shook her head. “Tried it. Won’t make that mistake again.”

The cube had melted and water was sliding off her thighs. Chills covered her ass and down her legs. He glanced to her face to see her eyes had dropped closed and a small smile was on her lips. The pain didn’t seem to be much of a bother anymore.

He changed cubes for a new one and couldn’t help rubbing the ice a little farther up her thighs than the burn mark. Need for her spiked again and bundled at the head of his cock. He traced the curve of her ass, and then the line of her panties cutting across each cheek. Water dripped down her hip and he caught himself leaning over to lick it up.

Her cheeks squeezed together and legs squirmed. Immediately, he stood and stepped back. This was still Stephanie here. Kissing her had been a mistake. Thinking he could have her, an even bigger one. He wanted more than to be a temporary booty call. She was worth more and he didn’t care how bad he wanted her, had always wanted her—he wanted more than just sex. Jake had treated her bad enough. Parker would not be added to her list of assholes. If she wanted to try for the whole bang and a buck, then they could talk.

Her eyes opened and watched him. “Thank you. I think tonight you could probably put some ointment on it.”

No, he didn’t miss how she suggested *he* apply the ointment. And yes, he was noticing he was having a hard time saying no to the offer.

She stretched her arms in front of her, arching her back, cocking her ass up in the air. “I’m really only worried about trying to shower this evening. It’s going to burn like crazy. I might have to just sponge off. Do you think you could help me with my back?”

“Should be able to,” he heard himself saying, even though washing her was the last thing he should do.

Stephanie had turned into a sex tease over night and he seriously doubted she'd stand in the kitchen in shorts with a shirt clutched to her chest while he wiped her back down. Suddenly, he realized the place she'd put him in. Grant her sex wish and forever be her go-to guy. Turn her down and he'd piss her off, still driving a wedge between them.

Knowing he was defeated from what he truly wanted, he headed for the kitchen and dropped the bowl of ice in the sink.

He heard her coming. Desire to walk away was strong, but he held his spot. She touched his back and it was a struggle not to wince under her touch. Or turn and take her to the floor. Instead, he straightened. “I just remembered I promised Riley Hamilton I'd have a look at his tractor this morning. I need to get that done so he can cut hay before rain next week. I need to go.”

“Is something bothering you, Parker?”

He shook his head and hid his feelings from her because he'd been pushing his feelings aside since he met her and Jake saw her first. “Nope.”

He left the kitchen. More importantly, he left her because that was something else he was good at. When things started to get too comfortable, he left. It's the only thing he'd been able to do to keep his hands off his best friend's girlfriend-turned-fiancé-turned-wife. She may not be his best friend's wife anymore and Jake was no longer a friend, but the tactic still worked.

Or it was working. Until he stepped into his bedroom and saw the bed where he'd listened to her moan his name last night. He couldn't forget how hard he'd come in his hand while listening to her, either.

He stepped to his closet and didn't even get his work shirt off the hanger before she was in the room. First he could smell the floral scent of her hair, and then felt her staring at him, wakening each pore of his body as she stood in his bedroom. Not that she hadn't ever been in there before. She'd help him paint. This time she was nearly undressed and it was making a hell of a difference. And his bed would be damn helpful for the subject at hand.

“I'm sorry, Parker.”

He turned, confused.

She stood at his dresser by the door. She toyed with the corner of a picture frame. One she'd given him of them together. He loved the picture and it wasn't just because it was the day her divorced was finalized. It was just her in the photograph. She was smiling again.

She wasn't smiling now. "I didn't realize my suggestion would make things uncomfortable. I don't want that, so can we just forget I ever asked?"

"Things aren't that simple."

"Give it a few days. You'll see. We'll be back to normal and all this will be forgotten. I don't want to lose you over this."

He shook his head and pulled on his work shirt. "It'll never work like you want. Going through with it. Me and you. Together." He glanced to the bed and didn't finish his statement.

"I know. It was awful of me to have asked or even brought it up. I thought I'd worked everything out."

"And what did you think? We could be together for a while and then just stop and things would go back to normal?"

Her shoulders stiffened. "You do it often enough with other women."

His own frustration rose and he crossed the room and stood over her. "You are not other women, Stephanie."

Her eyes flashed fire. "I'm not your sister, either."

"Sister?"

Doubt crept into her falling shoulders and dear God, he got what she was thinking. He grabbed her by the shoulders and tugged her to him. His lips crushed over hers. She hesitated for only a moment before she responded and wrapped her arms around him and brought her hips against his.

After their last kiss, he couldn't believe she'd think that, but this time, he would make sure it was clear. She'd never, at any moment, been like a sister to him. Oh, he'd protected her at times, been there all the time, but not once had *sister* entered his mind. Getting struck down for lusting over another man's wife—different story. That thought had entered his mind a hell of a lot of times.

He was careful not to touch her burn, but he reached down and squeezed her hips with both hands. A purr melted out the back of her throat. Her lips parted and he deepened the kiss, inviting himself in and swept his tongue alongside hers. He kissed her until he was hard and

throbbing, which wasn't all that long, but he kept her hips against his until she could have no doubts on what he wanted. She softened in his arms, but yet felt tense and waiting all at once. He pulled himself away from her, keeping a hand on her as she reached out and grabbed the doorframe for balance.

“I promise, when I look at you, *sister* is not what I think.” He turned and left her in his bedroom, with her still clutching the door. He glanced over his shoulder before walking out and found her staring after him from across the room. Her lips were parted. She looked lush, standing there with her nipples pointing, begging to be licked and sucked. Her knees were bent and appeared weakened. Her thighs were squeezed together.

Parker groaned and left.

## *Chapter Five*

Stephanie pulled the boiling tea off the stove and set it aside and shifted the phone at her ear. “So anyway, yeah. Burning my ass on the pan this morning was like cold water.” Not that the moment with the ice cubes had been all that bad. She shuddered.

Jessie laughed. “I can’t believe he did that. Who would have thought Parker would turn into all thumbs?”

“I know!” And she did know because Parker *didn’t* turn into all thumbs. It couldn’t be possible. From the things she’d heard through her bedroom wall, goofs like that were not made.

“How bad is the burn?”

“Stings a little, but not bad.” How could she think about pain there? After he’d done that work with the ice cubes and then kissed her. She cleared her throat. “Parker wanted to take me to the hospital.”

“Oh, to have been the doctor on that case. *So, how did we manage this accident?*”

“No kidding. It’s really not that bad anymore. It just touched me for a second. Enough about me. Did you meet anyone at Michael Bill’s last night?”

“*Pfftttt*. Yeah, right. It was Michael Bill. I got the hell out of there as fast as I could and spent the night at home with a movie and popcorn.”

Stephanie found herself smiling. “Your sacrifice was greatly appreciated. Stop by the garage in the morning and I’ll get you fixed up with those wipers and that oil change.”

“You don’t have to do that.”

A thought struck through Stephanie right there in her tiny kitchen. “I know! I’m going to find you a man for your troubles. You don’t date near enough.”

“No. That’s a...no. I’ve seen the selection in Apple Trail, that’s why you don’t see me dating. I’ll take the change and wipers.”

Noise stirred from Parker’s apartment next door and then the creak of his shower started. “I’ll figure something out for you. Parker’s going to be here in a minute. Call you tomorrow?”

“Okay. Have enough fun for the both of us!”

Stephanie clicked the phone off as she chuckled. Back to supper and this thing with Parker. She wasn't exactly sure what he wanted. And so, she didn't know what to wear or how to act. Oh, she knew the point of his parting kiss, all right. She got it loud and clear. Parker didn't see her as a sister.

But the rest? Not a clue.

What she did know, he'd kissed her stupid this morning and then left her heaving for air against his doorframe while he strolled right out the door. And that happening a second time just wasn't cool with her. They'd begun some sort of dancing game and she wasn't totally clear on the rules, but she did know how she wanted it to end. Naked, hot, exhausted, and completely satisfied.

Maybe they'd get there this time. And because of the burn, she was already half undressed. She actually had a reason for not wearing pants tonight. The burn had settled down to a flat brown scab. Nothing near a third degree, skin peeling horror which would require a doctor. It was fine, so long as she babied it. She'd tried several times to wear pants, but no. The irritation was too much and she'd stripped them right off. She did upgrade to boy shorts and a t-shirt for more coverage in hopes he'd be more comfortable.

She sat the salad on the table and was just seeing to the meatloaf when his key slid into the lock. She added a couple spoonfuls of butter and a handful more of brown sugar to the sauce and her door opened.

Parker stepped in, his hair still damp from his recent shower. His black shirt clung to his chest, his light wash jeans to his thighs. Thighs she'd had her legs wrapped around just this morning. She tasted the sauce and it was every bit as sweet on her tongue as he was on her eyes.

He stood by the door a long moment. Good God, he wasn't going to leave, was he? He finally dropped his gaze. “How's the burn?”

She put the lid back on the pot. Right. Conversation. As in, she needed to be making some or else he really might leave. “Good enough it quit stinging, not enough that I can wear pants. Hope that's not a problem.” She watched him and waited for an answer. Waited for her heart to stop pounding.

Finally, he lowered his hand and dropped his keys onto her entry table. “I don't know why it would be.”



“Good.” Just keep it cool and smooth and all relaxed like. As long as she made the effort for things to be normal, there was a slim chance they could get over this oddball hurdle and be back to normal in record time. She frowned with longing hanging tight as her gaze stole off toward her bedroom. Or they could end up in there. She turned and kept her focus on the juicy meatloaf as she fixed their plates. “Thanks for calling me and telling me not to come in to work. Sitting all day would have been uncomfortable.”

“I’m glad.” He glanced at her and then away as he sat at the table.

He was nervous, which just made her smile. She couldn’t recall ever seeing Parker nervous. She placed their glasses of iced sweet tea on the table. As he lifted his drink, she rested her hip against the table next to him. She really wanted the bedroom with him. They would be good together, she knew they would. They were too good together now as friends to not hit it off in there. She hated to push him but, maybe just a little. This morning had been hot and that parting kiss was stacked on top of it. When he stopped thinking for a mere moment and let her in, magic happened.

Curse those damn biscuits.

What if she pushed only a little? Just to test the waters? “You could kiss it and probably make it better.”

He choked on his tea. Guilt pinched. Maybe she should have waited until he was done, but she took opportunity by the hand and rubbed circles on his back as he coughed. She stepped in a bit closer, enough that his soap overpowered the soul food scents filling her apartment. “You okay?”

He nodded as he cleared his throat. She pushed off the table, returning to the kitchen with an unstoppable smile tugging at her cheeks. Stephanie: *two points*. Parker: *zero*. Even with her winning at her own game, her smile turned. In a perfect world, she’d have him in the bedroom and here at the kitchen table for three squares meals a day. Too bad Parker didn’t do long term. He never had and she didn’t think he had any plans to any time soon.

She glanced up from spooning gravy over their mashed potatoes. He was shaking his head and seemed to be talking to himself. His fingers reached up and combed through his hair before he lifted his glass and drained the cup.

She grinned and brought in their plates then returned for the pitcher of tea. At this rate, he’d be refilling his glass often.

He grabbed his fork in that manly grasp, kind of way so that food would be scooped into his mouth. “Looks good, Stephanie.”

“Thank you. I know it’s your favorite.”

And that was it. Nothing more stimulating. It made her smile. Never would she have imagined Parker Madison could be out of his element when it came to a female.

She slowly slid into her chair. She’d learned during lunch to bend her knees up, slouch and put her heels on the edge of the chair to avoid sitting on the burn. Of course earlier, she’d not had the hotness of Parker choking on his mashed potatoes across the table from her. She would have hid her smile from him, but it wasn’t necessary.

Their plates of hearty food steamed up between them. As hot as the plate before her was, it couldn’t touch the temperature Parker lit her body to by a simple look.

He looked at his plate and nowhere else as he shoveled in food. He bit a chunk off a roll, drank tea, had a full fork of meatloaf, drank tea, mashed potatoes, drank tea. He darned near reminded her of a speed eating competition.

She picked at her plate. She didn’t really have an appetite for food. All she wanted was more of this morning. His hot kiss. His big, gripping hands. It was all she’d thought about all day. While folding clothes, she thought of his hands on her body. The weather forecast calling for more hot and humid days reminded her of his heat. Dozens of times she’d picked up the phone with excuses to call him during the day, but always hung up. She didn’t have the nerve or a reason to call other than to ask what he was doing.

Playing the whole check-in, what-are-you-doing game, seemed a little desperate, so she never even dialed. More than once she’d stared at her vibrator, but never picked it up. A simple orgasm wasn’t what she wanted. She needed the rush of passion, the flush of clawing need with a hard, hot body smelling like Parker against her. He put her in a turned-on state before leaving that morning and she hadn’t exactly come out of it. It was like being served her favorite pie but then told she couldn’t eat. Cruel, really.

She had wanted retribution but decided, screw that. She wanted fulfillment and by damn, she was going to get it. She squeezed her thighs together. Hopefully.

Knowing she couldn’t fake trying to eat, she shoved her plate away. It didn’t escape his notice she hadn’t touched her food. It was hard to miss how her gravy was still a puddle in her

potatoes, the juices under the meatloaf hadn't slid around. Of course, worry over her health would draw his attention and ease the tension hanging between them

His brow rose in the concerned way he often regarded her with. "Feeling all right?"

No, she damn well was not, but that wasn't the light, flirty-like thing to say. Bitterness was not sexy. It was clinging and relationship-y and man, oh man, *those* things were not Parker. Besides, she sat as straight as she could, it wasn't like he'd turned her down. He just hadn't said yes. Yet. He was still debating the pros and cons. As if there were any cons, but she resisted saying as much. She'd had months to think of adding temporary benefits to their friendship. He hadn't quite had twenty-four hours.

"I was thinking about my burn."

It was his turn to push his plate his away. "Stephanie, I'm sorry about that. I just got caught up in the moment. I shouldn't have kissed you and started something, I'm not sure yet—" His eyes narrowed. "You're smiling."

"I am. I was thinking about my burn and wondered if you had any aloe because I was out. But go ahead with what you were thinking." Okay, total lie there. Not what she had been thinking...unless he was going to rub on the ointment, but it worked. The tightness around his mouth eased. The bunch of his shoulders relaxed. "Why don't you tell me what's really bothering you about this whole thing."

He leaned back. She wasn't sure he'd tell her, but then he finally sighed. "You want to rebound on me. After you're done, things won't be the same between us."

Her eyes narrowed. "You are not my rebound."

"Yes, I am. You haven't had anybody that I know of since we walked in on them together."

She stood. "*That* is what's holding you back?" On his nod she shook her head. "I've had lots of men. Hundreds of them. I get laid on my lunch break and take quickies with the customers while you're filling their coolant."

He just stared at her. He didn't look angry. He didn't look amused, he merely looked and waited.

Waited for her to spill she'd just lied her ass off. "Fine. I haven't had anyone since I walked in on Jake and Chrissy."

"That would make me your rebound."

“No, it doesn’t, because I’m not looking for a relationship. I know it’s not what you want.”

Oh, boy. Apparently she said the wrong thing. He stood so fast, his chair fell over. “Don’t tell me what I want and what I don’t want.”

“I...” She was at a loss for words. “I’m sorry, Parker. You never hold onto a girl for very long. I didn’t think you wanted something more at this point in your life.”

He put his palms on the table and leaned over. “Maybe I haven’t had the one I want.”

He said it so pointedly, so direct, all she could do was breathe. And blush. She blushed hard and was thoroughly embarrassed...and warm. She fumbled around for words, trying to find the right ones. Only they wouldn’t come to her. Not fast enough.

He pushed off the table and lifted a few dishes, taking them to the kitchen. She followed suit, not talking, just trying really hard to process his words. It would help if she knew what to think. She opened her dishwasher and added in the plates and cups. He did the same. Twice she looked at him with words on her tongue but bit them back. Hadn’t known how or what to say. He’d completely blindsided her.

“You’re being quiet again.” He slid the last fork in the silverware holder and shut the dishwasher.

“I’m not sure what to say.” And she didn’t. Did he want more from a girl? Or was he still waiting for the right girl to come along? Was he forever going to fight this attraction because of the fear they’d never be friends afterward? It was a serious thing to consider, she couldn’t fault him for it. She just didn’t know where he stood.

He nodded. “I think I better go.”

“Why?” She looked up. It was out before she thought better of it. After dinner, they usually settled in around the TV for some prime-time shows. She blinked. “I mean, okay.”

But he didn’t leave. He leaned against the counter and watched her. “Things are already weird and we’ve barely done anything.”

“They’re weird because I don’t know where we stand. I don’t know what you want.”

“Have you tried asking? All I’ve heard is what you wanted.”

Her mouth snapped shut. Dear God. She hadn’t thought how selfish and self-centered she sounded. How she’d propositioned him with the intent to do nothing but use him. She blinked back tears. How could she have been callous? “I’m really sorry, Parker.”

He pushed off the counter and finally walked to her. He cupped her cheek and stroked his thumb over her lips. “You need to think really hard about what you want and be clear about it.”

He walked away and left her in the kitchen. She swallowed and finally found some courage. “What do you want, Parker? Specifically.”

The corner of his lips tipped up. “You figure out what you want first. Then we’ll talk.”

## *Chapter Six*

Parker wasn't sure if it was smart or not, but he'd done it. He'd allowed his feelings to slip out. Only by a little but it was more than he'd ever allowed to surface. He'd never had Stephanie push him so far and she'd crossed a line that shocked him.

Safe in his apartment, he stripped and crashed on his bed. He flicked on the TV, hoping for some mindless numbing. He was disappointed. He didn't know how long she'd remained in his room after he left this morning, but he could smell her and damn near feel her silky skin on his sheets.

It was all too easy to recall how her ass had sat in his hands only this morning. How she'd climbed all over him and kissed him and begged for more. God, what the hell was he even doing over here? He was being a girl. He should take the offer while he had it and go to her. Have her.

He reached for a pair of pants and stopped. No. Being used as her toy for a couple weeks wasn't what he wanted. He knew they could have more. He lay back, again. The sheets were hot against his skin. He closed his eyes. Sleep. Yeah. After last night, he could use some sleep.

*Aloe.*

Against his better judgment, he sat up and headed to the bathroom. The aloe would help. And it would relieve some of the pain. And probably make it better. Would have been better to put it on immediately, but surely now it would still provide some added benefit. And he did have some. He stepped in his bathroom when a moan through the wall stopped him and pulled him back to his bedroom.

He shuddered and lowered his head. Not again. But he breathed, listening and straining to hear more.

She moaned out again. This was different than last night. The sound was deeper, harsher. He leaned against the wall as heat filled him and stiffened his cock. God, he didn't know if he could do this another night, but he knew he couldn't leave either. He reached for his cock. He'd do it again. He'd find his own satisfaction again to get through another night.

She moaned out his name and he dropped his head on the wall. His hands hung next to his thighs.

“Parker?” she called, her voice was muffled through the thin apartment wall, but still unmistakable.

He swallowed, untrusting his voice, but spoke anyway. “Yeah.”

Aching need swallowed him in the silence. Heavy weight hung from him. His hand fisted against the wall. He wanted to finish it, to finish the job and have it over with. Deep inside, he knew what would happen. End it himself tonight and the desire would be back by morning. Or likely sooner. She’d opened the door to this. She was there, sitting on the edge with him in her thoughts. All he could think was, why imagine it with this wall between them when he could have the real thing?

It wasn’t how he’d wanted her, but it was a start.

He flattened his hand on the wall, his fingers curled with a need to hold her. “I’m going to be at your front door in about twenty seconds.”

He didn’t wait for a reply. He tugged a handful of condoms from the nightstand and rolled one on. Hopping on one leg, he pulled up shorts as he walked and threw on a t-shirt just before getting to his door. The ache in his balls eased as anticipation built. He ran out his apartment, sliding to a stop outside hers as the locks un-tumbled.

Her door parted. She peeked around the side. Brown hair curling at the ends swayed against a naked shoulder. He stepped in and kicked the door shut behind him. Wide blue eyes stared up at him, but he didn’t hold her gaze long as he was lost in the curves of her naked body. She was all soft and rounded edges. Of all the women he’d ever had, he couldn’t remember one ever looking so...ripe.

Her breasts, full and pink-tipped, rose and fell with her breathing. They looked heavy and, hell, he had hands and figured they could hold them up. He stepped forward and cupped them. Soft, plush weight filled his palms and he squeezed tighter, let his thumbs roll over her puckered nipples which were begging to be kissed. She gasped and arched her back, thrusting them tighter in his grasp. Closer to his mouth. He bent, the tip waited at lips when glanced up.

“We do this, there’s no going back.”

A swallow passed down the column of her throat and like never before he wanted to cover her with his mouth. Feel her movements with his tongue. “Who wants to live in the past?”

Certainly not him. He closed his mouth over the tiny peak and drew her in. Her hands threaded through his hair and clutched, pulled him tighter against her chest. Her nails raked over his scalp and he felt the tingle from her touch drop down his spine. He loved on her nipple longer. Sucked her hard and nipped at the tip until she cried out and clawed at his shirt.

She pulled it over his head and when he was cleared, he latched onto her other nipple and offered equal attention. He knew what she wanted. How she wanted it. She told him as much in the middle of the damn street yesterday. What he never expected though, was to want it the same. This was Stephanie. He'd always wanted her long and slow. Skin against skin for hours as he learned all her sensitive parts from the bottom of her feet, backs of her knees, insides of her thighs and the rest of her. He'd wanted to cover her in kisses, treat her special with focused attention and care.

But in this moment, the condom tight around his aching cock, he just wanted to bury himself and pump into her wildly until she screamed out over and over. He'd give her rough and fast, and then he'd show her rough could be slow. Agonizingly, wonderfully-slow. Years of wanting her built in this moment. He would not waste it.

Parker lowered his hands. Let them fall along the curve of her waist and then out again over the flare of her hips. He reached around, cupping her full ass and brought her against him. Her pelvis rocked on his cock and he lost his breath. His knees nearly buckled out from under him.

Her hands slipped under the band of his shorts, her nails grabbed his ass and he arched forward, rubbing against her pelvis again. The stroke went up the length of his cock and damn near pulled him off the ground, so he did it again. His fingers pinched her ass and jerked her hard against him and he rubbed. Cries escaped from her lips as she panted against his neck.

"Parker." She turned her head in the crook of his neck. Her lips closed and she sucked.

He turned and put her against the nearest wall. Teeth pinched him and a growl climbed up his throat. Smashing her between the wall and him, he kissed down her body and finally, after the thousands of times he'd thought of it, dreamed it, Rileyed off to it, he dipped his tongue between her thighs and tasted her. She slouched against the wall as he spread her legs. He wouldn't take long, but he had to know. She was sweet and sugary and he lapped her up until she gasped his name and roughly tugged the hairs at his scalp.



He gripped her hips and spun her around. Flat brown lines marked the backs of her thighs and put the brakes on his raging lust. “I’m so sorry about this.”

Chills pricked her skin. “It’s fine. I told you it was fine this morning. Just a little sore to the touch.”

Keeping that in mind, he bent forward and pressed a kiss to the plump curve of her ass, away from the mark, but close enough. “Does that hurt?”

She shook her head.

He nipped her on the hip and she jumped. “Does that hurt?”

She glanced over her shoulder, her bottom lip was held between her teeth. Eyes were wide and searching him. She shook her head.

Need fired through his blood again, her taste still on his tongue drove him into desire stronger than he’d ever known. Much as he’d like to, he couldn’t forget this was about her—not him. Remaining on his knees, he wrapped his hands around her pelvis and dipped his fingers between her thighs and into her slick opening. He rubbed her there, stroked her nub, and reached inside. He kissed her on the ass once more, sucked on the round curve of her bottom until her legs shook and hips bucked to match his stroking.

Licking her hip as he turned her back around, kissing up her flushed body, the valley of her tits, and the curve of her neck until meeting her lips again. The lingering taste of sugary iced tea was there, but there was more. With the sugar, a heavy sexual tang was on her tongue. She not only looked and breathed sex to him, she tasted of it from head to toe. Parker swallowed it up, sucked it from her mouth, pulled her in closer and drank.

Her small hands were around his waist, pulling his shorts down. Nimble fingers quickly eased the band around the swollen head of his cock. The soft cotton hit his ankles and he stepped out of them. Her hands encircled him and he bit at her lip, startling her, but he licked and sucked to soothe the mark.

“Parker.” She gasped hot air against his mouth. Her smooth thigh glided along his leg, climbed higher, opened herself wider. “I want you now.”

He grabbed her leg, pulling her higher, stretching her further. His hand slid along the hot underside of her thigh until he reached his destination. He wanted to bury himself. Wanted to lick her there again. Wanted to make her fall apart with his fingers, swallow her cries of pleasure down his throat.

Parker wanted it all.

He wanted Stephanie to be his in more ways than just for this night, but he would take what he could get.

Looping her arms around his neck, she pulled him down as he sucked on her shoulder, knowing he was leaving a mark. But it was his mark. After this was over tomorrow, she would have that looking back in the mirror at her and the best he could hope for was she'd want him again. And he'd keep marking her if it kept her coming back.

Her leg wrapped around his hip. Ankle pressed against his back and she squeezed him. She tilted her hips forward making her wet heat lick the length of him and he shuddered. Four more hands would be needed to touch her all over as fast and thoroughly as he wanted, but he did his best, keeping in mind this moment was for her, not him. Her head tossed back and breasts were thrust up. A sucker to lick could not be a better treat to devour. He kissed up her throat and pulled the lobe of her ear in his mouth. Her fingers pulled at his hair.

He released her and whispered what she wanted and what he was going to do. "I'm going to fuck you against this wall. I'm going to drive into you until you come apart and you can't hold your head up. You're going to be limp in my arms, at my mercy."

Stephanie's breath hitched and he just hoped to God she'd go off fast enough and he'd hold off long enough to deliver on his word. He wanted this for her more than himself. He needed this moment to be a clear memory so she only needed to think about it and she'd want him so he could have her.

Without giving her time to release her breath, he centered himself and drove into her in one long, hard push until he could drive into her no more.

Her head dropped against his shoulder. Nails felt like they were drawing blood along his back, but he didn't relent. Pulling back, he thrust into her sweet tight entrance. When all he wanted to do was seat himself completely and savor the feel of her stretched around him, he plunged harder. He could have that later. For now, he sought release.

Hers. His.

He pulled out and pressed in hard, fast and deep. Her thighs held his hips. Her arms around his neck as she hugged him tight, clung her whole body to his as she sought her release. She was so close, her body waited just on the edge. He braced one hand on the wall, the other

under her. He thrust, his weight hit against her, her ass knocked on the wall, but he kept going, kept feeling her squeeze around him everywhere.

His legs were giving out, but a ball of pleasure gathered deep inside him. Sweat broke his brow but he didn't stop as she came apart in his arms. Head thrown back against the wall, cries ripped from her throat, breasts arched upward. She froze. Her release sucked his cock but he held off. This was her night. He was going to make it one to remember. Leaning down, he sucked her nipple in his mouth, tasted the salty tang of her sweaty skin and listened to her whimpered cries as she began coming for him all over again. Squeezing him tighter and pulling him in, taking him deeper.

Her nails raked across his back and his pleasure couldn't be denied any longer. A haze of nothing but Stephanie rolled through his mind. The high color of her cheeks and fiery passion of her body bolted through him with a sharp intensity that drew out his orgasm. Release shuddered through, taking his strength, numbing his legs. Knees buckled and he flattened a hand on the wall to catch himself. He hugged her body to him and kneeled so not to fall over as air evaded him.

It'd had never been like that before, but he'd never been with Stephanie before either. He knew it would be electrifying and magnetic and claiming.

Her head lay on his shoulder. Her breasts pressed against his chest. "Oh my God."

"Regrets?"

"No. Never." She swallowed and took another breath.

Tingling threaded through his legs, sensation returned to his arms. He stroked along her naked side and caressed the curve of her waist and hip. "Good. You got what you wanted."

"Parker," she whispered.

He caught her mouth for a kiss before she could say anything else. He absorbed her taste, kissed deep, wanting to know more about the curves of her mouth and the feel of her lips on his. And he still wanted to feel more. "You got what you wanted."

"Parker, that was—"

"My turn."

Her eyes widened.

## *Chapter Seven*

Stephanie didn't have a clue what Parker meant. She was pretty sure he'd had a turn, as in he'd gotten off. She could bet it wasn't as good as it was for her. Certainly not as often, but she was sure he'd, well, finished. But no way would she be telling him *no* to anything after that. She nodded in agreement and anxiously waited to find out exactly what *my turn* meant.

After what just happened against the wall, she'd trust him with anything. Sex being needy had never been exactly what she'd imagined. The *hows* and the *whats* had all taken place. Fast, quick. Barely time for breathing had been her only thought. However, she'd never dreamed about how bad she wanted the *you know what* to the point it was more important than her next breath. In that moment, she would have given up her sight if only he would have given her what she'd needed. She never expected to have anything afterward but sleep. Sex at night then sleep. It had been the pattern with Jake.

Words couldn't describe how grateful she was that Parker was no Jake. Not even a little. As he picked her up, her legs naturally wrapping around his hips, arms around his neck and her lips meeting his, sleeping was the very last thing she wished for.

He lay her down on her bed. "Don't move. I need to clean up."

He disappeared into her bathroom. The moment he was out of sight, she moved just enough to flick her hair back, swipe under her eyes for any ruined mascara, and her lips for smeared lipstick.

He stepped back in the room and frowned. "You moved."

"Only a little."

He crossed the room to the bed and covered her body with his. "I've wanted this for a long time, Stephanie."

"Me, too," she whispered and pressed her lips to his forehead while he kissed down her neck.

“No, I mean a long time. Since the night you walked into the bar. My back had been to the door. Jake saw you first.”

She cupped his whiskered jaw and turned him to her. She'd always thought his eyes were playful and teasing, but right then she could see deep into his soul and it took her breath away. There was so much depth and honesty. He hid nothing. Her heart pounded and had nothing to do with his fingers caressing up and down her side.

“I never knew.” Parker was Parker. Adoring and attentive. Since that God-forsaken afternoon when he'd been with her catching Jake with Crystal, he'd been a best friend and everything she'd needed. More than once she'd wondered if there could be more between them, pondered over the idea if she wanted more from him, but he'd never indicated anything to make her believe it could be. She had snuffed her feelings out, insisting she had been lonely. But he'd been there constantly, a rock for her.

He curled her hair around his finger. “You weren't supposed to. You were with Jake from the moment he saw you. God, I remember that night. I'd fixed your car while Jake stole you away. I've never sat with my back to a door since.”

Everything inside her melted. She pulled him to her. He came willingly and she kissed him. He tasted of sex. Her sex. His mouth was hungry and needy and she gave into him and offered him everything.

He was right. Things would never be the same after this night.

Stephanie was damn fine with that.

This was Parker in her arms. She loved him already, but tonight a door had opened. An extension of the man she already held dear waited there and she was finding herself right at home and needing more than a fling. He'd fulfilled all her needs, been there, ready when she reached. A pinch of guilt struck her. He'd given so much and she so little in comparison when he'd wanted more.

She broke the kiss and stroked down his cheek. “I'm sorry.”

He blinked, looking bewildered. “For what?”

“For not asking you to do this sooner. For not realizing you wanted this.”

His face darkened and he pushed against the bed. She wrapped her arms and legs around him and held tight, held him to her so he couldn't leave. Not when she'd just gotten him. He paused in his escape. “I don't just want *this*, Stephanie. I want more.”

More was tempting. It's what she wanted, but was that truly what he wanted? Before dinner, she would have thought no way, he wasn't into forever, but now she wasn't sure.

"I wasn't expecting you to look sad." He rubbed the back of his neck. "This was what I was talking about. This was why I didn't want to rush and why I resisted."

She'd never seen him look quite so hard and lost. A long lost memory tugged. The night she and Jake told him they were getting married. He'd had the same expression then.

She bit her lip, not wanting to bring up his past, but she didn't think she could move forward into something this serious this fast without asking. "I know you are enough for me, but after you've had so...so much variety, how am I going to be enough for you?"

His eyes softened and he approached her. His thumb smoothed over her cheek and eased a bit of her fears with that gentle touch. "You're all I want. In this bedroom and everywhere else, if you'll let me have you."

"Parker. I can't give you anything else. You already have it. Everything." His brows sank in concentration and she kissed the spot between them. "I love you, Parker. You know I do."

"In a friend way."

"For years, yes, in only a friend way. But it's more. I could have gone to a number of men and asked for sex, but you were the only one I would even consider."

"You just got out of a divorce." He glanced away, still trying to take care of her. "I wanted to wait a few months and ease into us."

She turned him back to her. "So maybe we'll just shack-up for a while."

"You sure this is what you want?"

"We've had each other for a long time, Parker. We're just...making additions. Adding on to us." She grinned up at him, thinking of him being a mechanic. "We're souping up our relationship. A smart mechanic once told me you could never put enough good stuff in an engine. I don't know about you, but think we make one fine engine."

The corner of his lips just barely tipped up. His eyes crinkled at the edges and gave him a teasing glint back on his face. But there was more. Emotion was deep in his eyes as he intently stared down. She wanted to call it love, *that* kind of love, but she wouldn't. They would get there.

He cupped the back of her head and angled her mouth up to his. "I think they could find a new source of fuel from what we just did together. And from what we're about to do again."

She laughed and his mouth covered hers, silencing her. She never expected to be thrilled about having sex in a bed so soon. Then again, she never dreamed she would really be having amazing passionate sex like this. He drew her nipple in his mouth, his teeth pinched the tips of her. All her insides pulled into a tight ball, aching and ready to explode again to leave her tingling.

Hovering over her on his hands and knees, he kissed down her belly. Lips feathered over her hot skin. Further he moved down, going slow until he reached her bellybutton. He drew a circle around her navel with his tongue and continued kissing lower.

She waited, hoping he'd kiss her between her legs. Anticipation for it built as he kissed the insides of each thigh. His fingers traced the natural lines of her pelvis, followed them along the bend of her thighs to her center. She clenched her insides trying to find relief, wanting to feel him, but he didn't touch her there. His fingers traced along the edge. Close enough to have her squirm, too far away to provide any relief.

She lifted her hips to encourage him to please touch there, but he didn't. He moved lower still, caressing her legs. Kissing every bend and turn of her knee until he was kneeling at the side of the bed and licking the insides of her ankles. She looked down at him. His eyes were on her and he grinned just as he grabbed her ankles and tugged.

She yelped as she effortlessly slid, the comforter coming with her to the edge of the bed. He caught her rear in his hands and had his mouth between her as she came to a stop. He licked and sucked, nibbled. Soothed. Holding her with one hand, he pressed his fingers in and she tightened around him, trying to pull enough satisfaction from him to push her over the edge, but she couldn't quite get there. He kept her held back, dangling just there.

He turned and kissed her thigh. "I want you again."

"Thank God, because I want you, too."

He smiled and kissed her once over her opening. It wasn't deep enough, wasn't long enough before he pulled back and lowered her until she sat on the floor in front of him. Need laid her bare, having her craving him even more than before. She sat forward and crawled to him, fully ready to sink herself onto him and ride him hard until nothing was left. It was her destination. Her goal.

She didn't make it before he sat back and had his hand on his cock.

Her brow rose as he squeezed and pulled his hand up the length of him. “I was doing this when I heard you through the wall.”

She glanced to her night stand where her forgotten vibrator lay. She’d never thought to be watched before. Honestly, she never expected the thing to see daylight when a man was in the room, figuring it wouldn’t be needed. But she wanted to turn it on, open herself up and show him what she’d been doing too.

She reached and caught it between her fingers. She turned to him and turned on her expensive plastic toy. “I had this.”

His eyes darkened. “And what were you doing with it?”

Her brow rose and she eagerly met his challenge. She slid it against her. The gentle hum touched her where he’d been. It wasn’t the same, wasn’t as good, but after two glides along her center, she knew she was about done for.

He watched her ride the toy, his lips parted as she moved with it. He tugged on his cock again and then sat back on his elbows. She rode along the toy with his rhythm, fully ready to let it have her.

He stopped his motion. “I want you to suck me.”

She stilled. She’d taken a man in her mouth before, semi enjoyed it to an extent, but she’d never been asked so directly, so clearly—*so needing*. Finding her mouth suddenly wet, she swallowed. Parker’s cock jutted upward, thick and long and still in his brawny hold. A pearl sized drop of liquid seeped from his slit and she craved to know his taste. Wanted to discover the silkiness of his skin sliding over her tongue. He rubbed his thumb over the tip, making the top shine. He held his finger out for her. She leaned forward and sucked the digit into her mouth, licked the salty essence of him from his thumb.

The forgotten vibrator dropped from her fingers and clattered across the floor. She sat back and fumbled for it, flipped it off, and tossed it aside. Parker tucked his hands behind his head and waited. He made quite the tasty picture. Naked man. Ripped muscles. Uninhibited and completely comfortable stretched out before her and waiting. She breathed in his confidence and straddled his legs.

He closed his hand around his base. “When my hand is here, I pretend it’s your mouth. I know you wanted more of a sex life, but how much have you thought of me?”

Still drawing on his confidence, she met his gaze. “Every day. Every night.”



His tip was soft and warm. The tang of his seed coated her tongue and she sucked the top in her mouth. He hissed and she glanced up to find his eyes on her. Meeting his heated gaze, she took more until he was at the back of her throat and she couldn't go deeper. She closed the rest of him in a tight fist, keeping the motion of her hand with her mouth. His thighs clenched and hips bucked. She accepted his thrusts.

Her name strangled out the back of his throat. He reached forward and sank his fingers in her hair. He gently pressed on her head and guided her pace, but his fingers tightened against her head as though he could just barely hang on. She squeezed her legs together, anxious to have the fullness in her mouth thrusting between her thighs again. She sucked at him hard, forcing herself to wait while she gave. He groaned, thighs shifted, his breath gasping now.

“Stephanie.” Her name sounded like a struggle.

She didn't let up and sucked at him harder, eagerly swallowing the moisture leaking from his tip as he drew closer to release.

“Christ, Stephanie, stop.” He sat forward and grabbed her by the arms, pulling her up.

Her face was close to his and she cupped his cheek. “I wanted to finish.”

He smiled. “Another time I'll be sure to let you. But not tonight.” He curled a loose strand of hair behind her ear.

He flipped her over and bent her over the side of the bed. He kissed across her shoulders. His cock was against her bottom as she arched, wanting it between her legs. He rubbed against her and left a kiss on her shoulder. “Left condoms in the living room. Don't move.”

He got up and she did too. “Got some.”

She reached in her night stand and pulled out the box she'd bought just for this. Box opened and ready to go, she pulled a packet out and faced him. Her turn for instructions. “Lean back.”

His brow rose, but he did as she said without question. She opened the packet, covered him and then sank herself just over the tip of him. Release climbed. His hands squeezed in her sides, trying to fully press her down, but she resisted, riding out the burst coming over her. Taking her pleasure raw and very much needy, she fought his attempts.

Relief flooded through and she finally gave and sank all the way down on him. She put her hands on either side of his head and rode him hard. She wanted to finally give him complete

pleasure without him having to give back. He still rose and met her thrusts, but she was able to give this to him.

She'd never been this open. This abandoned before. She'd never had the nerve to not care how her breasts swayed or how loud and sweaty she got. She groaned and cried out as another wave of relief crashed through her. Parker gave her this freedom, this chance to explore and take and give.

He provided her a reassuring confidence like she'd found nowhere else. She'd had that from him since the beginning. Had always been able to look to him, but she never really knew how much until in this moment with her sweaty hair plastered to her forehead and neck, air gasping from her and body swaying. Through all of it, as he looked at her, she felt beautiful.

Even more, she felt loved.

He thrust up hard and his grip on her sides eased. She collapsed over his chest, breath raked up her throat. His arms wrapped her in a tight hug. She lay there on the floor with him for a long silent moment just listening to his heart pound and then slow.

He rubbed her back, his fingers gently glided along her. "I love you, Stephanie. I always have."

*The End*

## *Keri Ford*

I was raised in South Arkansas on a farm surrounded by family, horses, cows, donkeys, ostriches, emus, chickens, ducks, Canadian Geese, and enough dogs one would think we were a pound. I've got loads of inspiration for stories including why I don't squirrel hunt, why you should never, EVER, tie your horse up to your momma's front porch, and why going out in the cow pasture isn't the best idea.

It was a childhood made for fertilizing the imagination. Some kids wanted to be firemen and doctors and lawyers, but not me. When I grew up, I always wanted to be, no not an author, a flying unicorn. Since I never learned to tap into my powers, I was at a loss for several years on what to do with myself.

And then I bought a *Cosmopolitan* when I was twenty-two. I don't recall what I'm sure was some fantastic sex tip, but I vividly remember reading an excerpt of Christina's Skye's *Code Name: Princess*. One elevator scene and quick thought of, *I didn't know people wrote stuff like this...* and my life would never be the same.

A few months later of inhaling every romance novel I could wrap my stubby fingers around, my husband comes home and tells me, "Ah, you need to start writing books instead of reading them. That Harry Potter lady is selling like thirteen copies a second right now."

I shrugged and decided, why not? And that's how I got here, still living on that same farm where my husband and I are raising our little boy with hopes he'll have as many adventures and more.

Visit Keri at her web site, at [www.keriford.com](http://www.keriford.com)

## *Uninhibited in Apple Trail, Arkansas*

Welcome to Apple Trail, Arkansas. Something must surely be in the water in this small town. Women are tossing their inhibitions out the window and the men are grasping at what to do about it!

Thank you for reading *Through The Wall*. Parker and Stephanie were a lot of fun, but I'm not done yet in this small town! Up next in this sexy six book series is *On The Fence*. (Available February 21, 2011)

If Shellie Chambers has to hear one more condescending comment from her mother about life or men, she might scream. She packs up and takes a trip to see her long-missed high school friend, Riley. He'll know exactly what she needs to loosen up. But instead of the girl-chasing jock she remembers from their youth, Riley's gone country, keeping up a farm of his own.

Riley Hamilton has settled down on a farm his uncle left to him. Not the life he ever envisioned, but after getting a girl pregnant in college and then watching helplessly as the baby was aborted, he learned the hard way it was time to settle down. Shellie's reentry into his life reminds him of his wild past and it's a fight to ignore the tempting woman Shellie has become.

Available April 18, 2011 is third in the **Uninhibited in Apple Trail, Arkansas** series is, *In The Hay*. There are fun things to be had between these two strangers and you don't want to miss a moment of their adventure.

It's been a White Picket Fence life for Nicolette. Charming, but tedious. She graduated high school, raring to go and find adventure...but where to? What to do? She can't settle on a career, despite her six years of college. When the chance arrives for her to house-sit, she takes opportunity by the horns for a little playtime. She would experience life. When a handsome man crosses her path in the backwoods town of Apple Trail, she risks all and goes after a whole lot more than she ever planned.

Spencer knows exactly what he wants—to run the family construction business. Too bad his dad doesn't think he's ready. They make a deal. Spencer will help his uncle put up a new fence and after he's learned hard work, the construction business is his. Spencer's not sure how learning to string fence line together will see him suitable for a career of paper pushing, but he'll do it. In the meantime, he's have a bit of much needed fun himself from an auburn beauty tempting him at every turn.

Excerpt from *On The Fence*

### *Chapter One*

There was no way around it. Catching Mr. Right was damn hard work. Shellie had worn all different styles of clothes, fluttered her eyes, sipped sophisticated looking drinks, and still, nada.

No, that wasn't entirely correct. Not nada-nada, there had been plenty of Mr. Wrongs. Lord have mercy, but there had been *plenty* of Mr. Wrongs. She shuddered. Sorry to the boyfriends and one night stands of her past, but dull and arrogant dropped her pulse to catatonic levels.

Her mother and her ridiculous ideas about flirting to catch the right kind of man—AKA, wealthy—was putting Shellie on a fast track to becoming the next weird cat lady on her block. That was a serious problem for Shellie. She didn't like cats. Honestly, she wasn't a fan of anything that pissed and shit on her carpet. There'd been only one thing she could do. Get out of town to catch a breather. She turned to the one person she knew in all the world who could revive her. Riley Hamilton.

Riley handed her a glass of iced tea and sank into the rocking chair next to her. "What are you thinking so hard about?"

She smiled. "My carpet."

"Your what?"

"Never mind."

Ah, Riley Hamilton. In elementary school he'd put grasshoppers in her Hello Kitty backpack. In Jr. High he'd constantly untied her hair ribbons. In Sr. High, he'd kissed her. Just once. She sighed as memories washed over. She'd been shocked at the moment and froze. He'd pulled away immediately, muttering sorry. Later she glowed, then she was weirded out by it. They did what any good friends would do—they ignored the moment and fell back into their routine. Looking back, she still found that kiss a bit...weird.

It'd been Riley. They had no business kissing, but still, of the handful of men who ever kissed her, Riley's was the only one who could make her toes giddy by the memory. And it had just barely been a kiss. Not even a kiss, really. A peck. A whisper of lips over one another.

She swirled the ice around in her glass and sighed. “I was thinking about my mom, I guess.”

He pulled in a slow breath, unsure likely, on how to comment. It was a common side-effect when speaking of her mom. He rocked in his chair and tapped his glass against the wooden arm rest. “Dangerous territory.”

She smiled, appreciative of his honesty. “No kidding.”

“Are you getting homesick?”

She shook her head. “No. I was thinking about dating and how I follow her advice.” A laugh, hollow to her own ears, slipped over her tongue. “I guess I don’t know what to do with myself now.”

Riley shrugged. “Do what you want. You’re better than what your mom lets you believe.”

“Thank you.” She warmed over at that. When the idea of a breather struck her, she knew Riley was the man to find. He’d been the one who’d showed her how to sneak out at night. How to spend the day on the river bank instead of the mall where her mom believed she was. Taught her how to “borrow” the car and top it back off with gas after she was finished.

Shellie was in desperate need of some of that Bad Riley Behavior. She couldn’t push her mom off forever, not if she wanted to keep her sanity. Honestly, married to some stuff shirt banging his secretary would be a hell of a lot easier than sticking it out with Mom and her never-ending list of Shellie Faults.

*Sit up, dear.*

*What are you wearing? Comfortable? No, wear the dark wash jeans and low cut red silk shirt I bought last week.*

*Why in God’s name did you tell him there was sauce on his cheek? You’re not his mother! You should have situated yourself closer and nonchalantly removed it yourself.*

Knots wound through her stomach. If she didn’t stop, she’d have to get her antacids.

She rested her head against the worn wooden back of her rocker and stared off across Riley’s property. The weathered chair squeaked against the old, paint-peeling porch, lulling her into a dazed zone. It was so different from Dallas here. Open fields and swaying grasses. They seemed to be enclosed in a circle of pines that were at least a mile away. Brown cows speckled the grounds and a small pond rippled under a gentle breeze. It was nice and peaceful, but so

unlike where she'd pictured Riley, the boy with the quickest hands to ever graduate Jones High School, to have settled down.

God, she'd missed him over the years. They'd graduated high school and been tugged in different directions with only the Internet keeping them tied together. This was the first time seeing him in some six years.

He reached across the tree trunk serving as a small table and covered her hand with his for a moment. "I'm not just saying that. You could go to college or do whatever you wanted."

If only *I don't know what to do with myself* regarded a career. No, she knew what she wanted. She wanted to be surrounded by flowers doing something. She didn't know what since she killed any plant she dared to breathe on, but still, the idea of being surrounded by that quiet beauty appealed to her. She'd never voiced that thought as her mother would likely croak by the idea of her doing anything with her hands that didn't involve flirtatious actions. Anytime she mentioned doing something other than fulfilling her mother's life long wish of marrying a rich man, the woman broke out into hives and cold sweats.

But no, what Shellie had meant was her love life. She frowned. No, not a love life. She wasn't there. Just figuring out a dating life. Since her mom was about to fling her in front of every eligible, wealthy man across the U.S. as part of some supposed vacation, she had better start puzzling some parts of dating dos and don'ts out. Nothing was worse than being flung in front of a man—boring or not—and being painfully aware she had no idea how to flirt and be herself. Her mother's words were always in her head, making her analyze every little line before she spoke, throwing off the whole conversation.

*Smile. For God's sake, at least make your smile look real.*

*Relax your shoulders. Straighten your back. Shellie, can't you even stand normal without me correcting you?*

*Would it be too hard to look like you're having fun?*

*Is that your second piece of cake?*

Shellie inhaled a deep breath that wasn't tainted with her mother's advice. That right there was what she was talking about. Her mother had directed her behavior for as long as she could remember. She didn't even know what was natural and what had been rubbed in. She glanced around, wishing an easy answer was written somewhere. Instead she caught sight of Riley next to her, watching her.



His eyes were dark. His breath came out in slow, but heavy exhales. It was then she noticed the tight grip on his tea. He looked away. Something was a bit different about him now than the guy she'd known. She'd noticed that fairly quick. Where he used to be light and fun, she now often caught him looking at her with an intensity that threw her breath and heartbeat for a loop. He was also quieter and so focused. His gaze strayed back to hers. When their eyes met, he looked away again.

She tugged the skirt of her gray sweater dress down, not recalling him ever looking at her quite like that before. "Thanks for letting me crash here for a while."

He took an intense interest in knocking dried mud off the side of his boot. "If you keep feeding me like you have been, I may never let you leave."

She chuckled, thankful for his attempt at a light-hearted remark, even if it came out strained. "If that's all it takes, you're the one being dangerous now, Riley Hamilton."

He saluted her with his Mason jar of tea. "You do get my underwear soft when you wash them, too."

"Mmm... I'll keep my secret and you'll have to keep me around then." She'd arrived that morning, saw his laundry room while he'd been out and tossed a few things in the wash. He'd been shocked and then pleased.

"Or I could just quit wearing underwear." He winked.

She laughed and then stopped as the idea of Riley stripping out of his jeans, his lean hard body, that would no doubt be sweating, filled her head. She cleared her throat and tugged at the thick turtleneck suddenly choking her. Where did that thought even come from? Riley was Riley. He used to put peanut butter in her hair and prickly things in her shoes. The kind of guy her momma would say to stay away from.

*Oh, Shellie, no, her mother had said. He'll never make something of himself. Just look at him. Look at his parents. White trash. No, stay away from him before you find yourself knocked up and then nobody will want you.*

A little brown and white speckled cow trotted around the side of Riley's house. Shellie blinked. Holy shit, there was a cow in Riley's front yard. Riley still stared at his boots and didn't seem to notice. She flicked her hand out, trying for his attention, but failing for words. Mother never schooled her on this situation. "Cow."

Riley looked up and set his tea aside with a heavy sigh. "Now where did he get out at?"

The animal moved around and munched on grass by the porch steps, like it wasn't a problem. Dear God, there was a *cow* in Riley's front yard, steps away from the porch. Should she be scared? Was the thing going to climb the porch and stampede? Stampede? Eep! She turned back to the animal to keep her eye on it just in case she needed to be making a run for it. But instead of one, there was now two.

"Riley! There's another cow."

Riley stomped down the steps and walked right past the pair chewing on the grass along the side of the house. He even patted one on the ass on his way by. Lord, but it was a wonder the thing didn't kick him.

Growing up, Riley hadn't hunted, fished, or any of those other things. He was into sports, girls, and fast cars. When she'd arrived, the last thing she'd ever expected was to find him surrounded by open fields with cows in a little town called Apple Trial, Arkansas.

"What are you going to do?"

Riley glanced over his shoulder, his brows rose. "Put them back up. They'll get hurt and ruin stuff if they run free." He stared at the horizon and she followed his gaze to dark clouds hunkering and sweeping over the tree tops. "Looks like rain will be moving in soon."

She swallowed as he walked on, completely sure of his actions and his plans. Confidence. He may have changed in some ways, but he still had that. And she was still jealous how he just always seemed to know what to do and how things would work out in the end.

He marched onward and her gaze dropped to his jeans fitting around his ass. No longer was she concerned about the cows because, Lordy, how had she never noticed the way his jeans cupped his very nice ass? She blinked and stared again. She'd never noticed because he'd worn baggier jeans in high school. Except for those football pants...she cleared her suddenly hot throat on the cool winter day.

Cows. On the loose. Right. "How?"

He spun, taking a few steps backward. "You could come with me and find out."

She glanced down at her black suede boots and frowned.

"What's the matter?" He laughed and spun again so that he walked away and around the corner he went.

She grabbed the handles of her chair, fully intending to shoot from her seat and march after, but she stopped. The little cows didn't follow, but seemed content with lazily munching on

the weeds around the house. She had to admit, that would be a handy animal to have around to help with the lawn. Which also made her admit something else, it wasn't fear of the wild cows standing right there that stopped her from following.

She walked the long porch to the edge and peered around the corner, but didn't see Riley. The side door of the wooden barn was opened. She squinted, hoping to see what all he might have hidden in there, but it was too far away and too dark to tell. She waited to see what would happen. Did they come like dogs? Though if they did, he probably would have called them already, wouldn't he? This was all so rustic and fascinating. Her only encounter with cows before this week included a table and a side dish.

Chilly wind lifted hair from her ears and coolness swept down her spine. No sign of Riley. Was he getting rope things like horses used? Not that she knew anything about horses, but she had watched a western movie or two in her day. She could follow, but what if she got a spot on her dress or shoes?

She groaned and marched toward the steps. She was so tired of living with her mother's words constantly nagging the back of her mind. She was here, in the middle of freaking nowhere and she wasn't following curiosity because she might ruin her boots. She'd come out here to get away from all that, hadn't she? To find the fun Riley had shown her in high school. Why was she hiding on this porch?

She stepped out on the narrow walk in front of the house and just like that, lighting streaked overhead. Thunder rumbled through her body all the way down to her toes in her four hundred dollar boots. She hurried toward the barn, wanting to beat the rain.

*Why are you drenched, Shellie? My God, you look like a drowned rat. I don't want you touching me looking like that, why would you think anybody else would?*

Shellie froze and fought against her mother's words. She stood still in the middle of the yard and waited for the drops to pour down. And then those damn cows ran past, bumped her side, and pushed her down into an icy cold puddle.

Thank you!

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