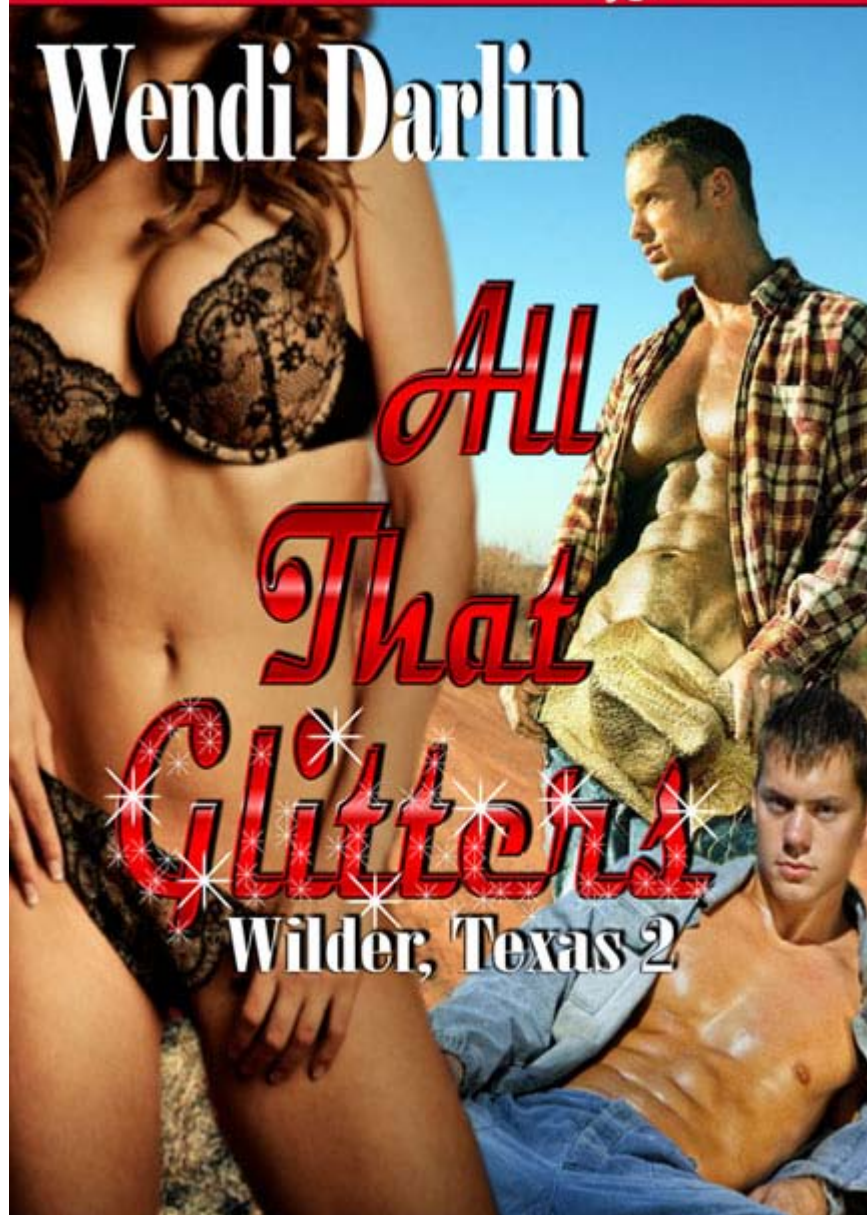


Siren Publishing

PolyAmour

Wendi Darlin

*All
That
Glitters*
Wilder, Texas 2



Wilder, Texas 2

All That Glitters

Former Vegas showgirl Dahlia Burke can't get out of Texas fast enough. She's winding her way through rural Wilder, Texas when she plows into Tanner and Scooter's work truck. Dead broke and stranded, will Dahlia find more than one reason to stay--or two more reasons to leave?

Tanner Dawson barely escaped with his life when Dahlia plowed into his truck. And once he and his best friend, Scooter, take her under wing, he's not sure if she's planning to love him to death or finish him off.

Scooter Austin can't tolerate gold diggers. When he finds out Dahlia is newly divorced from a man who has a revolving door of trophy wives, Scooter's ready to send her out of Wilder with the toe of his boot.

How will these cowboys know if Dahlia has a heart of gold or just an eye for all that glitters?

Genre: Contemporary, Multiple Partners, Western/Cowboys

Length: 28,437 words

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DEDICATION

For anyone who has ever fallen in love with an illusion. And for those who have been lucky enough to find a heart of gold.

ALL THAT GLITTERS

Wilder, Texas 2

WENDI DARLIN

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Prologue

“Ow!” The rough bark of a pine cut into Alana’s shoulder.

“I’m sorry, baby.”

Alana hooked her heel behind Dirk’s back and pulled him closer. “You’d better not be.” Her toes sank into the sandy path that wove through a patch of woods at the back of their ranch. Her clothes hung on a scrubby bush nearby, and Dirk’s jeans were pushed down to his knees.

“You want me again?” He teased her lips with his thumb as she pressed her lower abdomen against his. “Ranch work doesn’t do itself, darlin’.”

“Neither do I.” She clenched the soft flannel shirt still covering his muscular shoulders and shifted her hips to rub her wet center along his stiff cock.

Rayne laughed as he stepped onto the path and saw the two of them. “Insatiable today, ain’t she?”

She raised a brow at Rayne and slid herself over Dirk’s cock again. “Nothing the two of you can’t handle.”

Rayne joined them, skimming a hand across her stomach and shifting her away from the rough tree to brace her against the smooth

strength of his chest. He leaned in close to kiss her shoulder then trailed his hot mouth up her neck.

Alana gave in to the pleasure, letting the men support her weight and reaching back to feel the thick silk of Rayne's hair. The sound of their heavy breath filled her head. Every pulse burned like a drug injected straight into her veins. She surrendered to this addiction to her men, an addiction that consumed her body and soul.

On the road just beyond the wooded path, an engine sputtered and clunked before grinding to a halt.

"What was that?" Alana didn't open her eyes, arching to press her breasts more fully into Dirk's hands.

Dirk swore softly. "Hold that thought, darlin'." He yanked his jeans up before heading down the sandy path to check out the situation.

Rayne continued to caress her bare skin and rouse her with hot, ever-intensifying kisses. His work-weathered hands slid like leather against her skin, but his touch was tender and accented by the occasional strengthening grip of his own hunger. His fingertips trailed up her arms, teased her breasts, and traced a heated path over her collarbone.

Alana melted into him, jolted back to the present only when Dirk rounded the slight curve in the path and made his way back to them.

"Looks like your daddy's old truck broke down again," Dirk said.

"We need to help?" Rayne still cradled Alana's jaw in his hand, and his lips hovered just over hers.

"Nah. Scooter and Tanner are both in it. They can get it off the road. But I'll ride back to the barn and go pick 'em up in the truck." He tucked his shirttail. "Bring her on back to the house," he told Rayne. "If she still ain't had enough by the time I get back, we'll tie her to the bed and give what she wants 'til she falls asleep." His words were softened with a wink and a smile that didn't hide the open love they shared.

“Promise?” Alana reached for the patch of chest peeking above the buttons in his shirt. “Don’t tease me if you don’t mean it.”

“Sweetheart, you know we always mean it.” He kissed her fingertips before leaving her there with Rayne and heading back to the horse he had tethered further up the trail.

Chapter 1

Dahlia Burke tucked a strand of wind-whipped hair behind her ear and lowered her car's visor. The late afternoon sun glared through the windshield of her little German convertible. She'd been on this endless two-lane blacktop long enough to be sick of it, and she wouldn't be off it any time soon. The road curved like a snake through a wooded stretch of west Texas that went on forever. Even with as much geography as it covered, this place probably didn't even dot a map. That was fine. If there'd been any decent place to stop, she might be tempted to stretch her legs. She didn't need to feed any temptation that would slow her down. The faster she got out of Texas, the better.

Denim, leather, and hot-blooded male sent her hand back to the steering wheel and her foot straight to the brake. Temptation had entered her thoughts and the devil himself had appeared. She took in the strong build of the man walking along the shoulder of the road. Damn, there might be a reason to miss living in Texas after all.

She swerved toward the double yellow center lines to give the cowboy as much berth as possible, but she didn't tear her eyes off him for a second.

Even beneath the shade of his Stetson he looked better than a man had a right to. With every stride, muscular thighs stretched his worn jeans. His arms looked strong enough to hold her above the world, or at least toss her around properly in bed. Dahlia's breath caught. Heat shimmied through her from head to toe and then sent a zing straight between her thighs. How long had it been since she let a man touch her, love her, take her to heaven and back in his arms? Too long. Way

too damn long. And no matter how mouth-watering the temptation, she wasn't about to get caught in that trap again anytime soon.

She passed the cowboy without responding to the lazy lift of his hand. It was customary for Texans to wave to anyone they passed. The cowboy probably hadn't given the gesture a single thought. Still, her eyes rose to the rearview mirror, and her heart quickened ever so slightly. The denim fit his ass like a glove and stirred up a longing she could almost taste deep in her throat. He looked as good going as he did coming. His swagger triggered every pleasure point she had. Her body trembled, and an ache settled beneath the startled pounding in her chest. God, she needed a man. Just for one night. Only for one night. She'd be smart enough to walk away in the morning this time.

She sure as hell didn't want a man for any longer than it would take to satisfy her physical hunger. At least not now. Maybe never again. Love wasn't something she felt compelled to believe in anymore. And even if the kind of love you read about did exist, it wasn't the fairytale people tried to make it out to be. She'd learned that lesson the hard way.

The disappointment and humiliation of a marriage that had failed epically still filled her up inside. She would never believe a man's lies again, and she damn sure wouldn't fall so blindly for another one. She let her shoulders sink a little deeper into the soft leather of her car's upholstery and frowned at the obvious outline of her hardened nipples against her blouse. Love may not be on the table any longer, but her libido worked fine.

The road curved again, and she glanced back for one more look at the only piece of eye candy she'd come across all day.

She didn't see the stalled truck or the cowboy pushing it off the road ahead of her until it was too late. Her brakes locked. Tires squealed. The smell of rubber billowed up from the road and poured into the open interior of her little convertible. As the truck's tailgate rushed toward her and the cowboy dove for the ditch, she squeezed her eyes shut and braced for impact.

The car slammed to a stop with the crunch of metal and the explosion of the airbag. A buzz in her ears drowned out everything but the hiss of the engine. The seatbelt pinned her to the soft, and now worthless, leather of her seat.

The haze of shock lifted enough for her vision to clear. What she saw broke what was left of her heart. The partially deflated airbag draped over an oddly angled steering wheel. She covered her face with trembling hands and sank to a new low. Getting out of Texas wouldn't be nearly as easy as she'd planned.

A loud groan jolted her up at the same time she remembered there had been a man pushing the truck she plowed into. Ignoring the aches and pains in her arms and upper body, she scrambled to release the seatbelt and shove open the door.

"Oh my God! Are you okay? Tell me you're okay!" She ran around the back of her car, skidding in the gravel at the edge of the road and slipping in the hard packed dirt of the shoulder. A cowboy lay face down in a four-foot ditch. His head rested next to a jagged piece of cinderblock that had probably fallen off an overloaded work truck, like one of the ones she'd passed barreling down the road a few miles back.

She hurried down the ditch, lost her footing, and slid the last couple of feet on her rear end. Dirt and sharp pebbles filled her high-heeled sandals. Cuts and bruises stung her hands. Her heart pounded, and adrenaline-fueled fear dampened her blouse. She came to a stop inches from the cowboy's leg and scrambled toward him.

"Can you hear me? Talk to me. Say something! Oh God..." She touched his shoulder carefully. "Please talk to me. You can't be dead." Panic struck as soon as the words shot from her mouth. "You're not dead! Please...oh please...don't be dead." She kneeled over his still body. Tears welled in her eyes, her ears roared, and everything blurred.

Someone came skidding down the rocky shoulder of the road. She whipped her head around, completely unprepared for what she saw.

The cowboy she'd passed around the curve was hurrying toward them.

"Tanner! Aww, shit, Tanner!"

A rough hand grabbed her shoulder and moved her aside. She landed on her bottom again.

The gorgeous cowboy she'd been hard-pressed to tear her eyes off of bent over Tanner. Given the way he'd shoved her out of the way, she was a little taken aback by the gentle way he touched his friend.

"Has he said anything at all?" His voice sounded tight, and a tendon low in his jaw jumped with tension.

Dahlia swallowed the lump of fear and worry that had lodged in her throat. "He groaned."

"Shit!" The cowboy whipped his hat off his head and pushed a hand through his dark hair. His deep brown eyes swept over her and a slow frown crept across his forehead as if he'd just remembered she'd been in the accident, too. "You all right?" The softness in his eyes didn't match the rough timbre of his voice.

She nodded. Aside from the cuts and bruises she gotten from slipping down the ditch, the only other pain she registered was a burning sensation on the underside of her forearms and a dull ache across her lower chest. She lifted her arms to check them out. The airbag had given them some good abrasions, and the seatbelt probably left a nice big bruise on her chest, but nothing she had time to worry about now. "Tell me he's okay." She grabbed the man's sleeve. "Tell me."

"He damn sure better be." His eyes raked across hers with an intensity that made her squirm. "How in the hell do you hit something as big as a truck?"

"I..." She couldn't very well tell him she'd been too busy staring at his ass to see his friend. "I've got a cell phone. It's in the car. We need to get help." She scrambled to her feet, sensing a new ache in her muscles.

"I already called the ambulance."

Her knees shook and the blood rushed from her head. She eased back down to the hard ground. Her hands trembled and worry twisted her like a dishrag. “Why aren’t they here yet?”

“Darlin’, I don’t know where you come from, but around here things don’t move that fast.”

The wail of a siren in the distance seemed to contradict his words, and she prayed the ambulance driver proved him wrong. She leaned forward to push Tanner’s hair off his forehead and blood smeared her fingertips.

“Oh my God! He’s bleeding.”

The cowboy shoved her aside again and inspected Tanner’s head while she stared helplessly at the red smear across the pads of her fingers and begged God to let the man live.

“It’s not a deep cut,” he said.

Tanner groaned and tried to move, but his friend placed a large hand on his shoulder and held him still. “Easy there, buddy. Help’s on the way. Hold tight and we’ll get one of those pretty little nurses down at Wilder General to play doctor with you.”

Tanner groaned again but didn’t continue to fight.

“He’s going to be okay? Right? He’s trying to talk. That’s good, right?” Dahlia’s hands wouldn’t stop shaking and she fought down another wave of panic. “He has to be all right. He’s okay. Tell me he’s okay.”

The cowboy shot her a look. “He’d be doing a hell of a lot better if you hadn’t plowed him down.”

That final jab snapped something inside of her. Riled enough to get a slippery grip on her emotions, she narrowed her eyes. If she had to hit one of them, she couldn’t have picked a worse one. She didn’t know a single thing about Tanner, but she doubted he could be a bigger ass than his friend. “I didn’t plow him down.” She’d meant the words to bite, but guilt knocked the wallop out of them.

“What were you doing? Putting on your makeup when you came around that curve doing sixty?”

She clenched her teeth and swallowed the sick feeling building in her throat. "I was not putting on makeup."

"Damn city drivers."

"I'm a *damn good* driver, I'll have you know! I've never even gotten a speeding ticket. Okay. One. I got one, but it wasn't really my fault."

"I reckon this wasn't your fault either."

"No! If you hadn't been walking so close to the road..."

"What? You're blaming this on me?" His voice exploded around her, rising over the approaching sirens. The man was ready for a fight, and guilty or not, she'd stopped backing down from those months ago. Luckily, before she could engage him, the ambulance and two police cars came to a stop on the road behind her crumpled car. Sirens wailed, vibrating her already shattered nerves. Uniforms ran toward them, and Dahlia felt the prick of relieved tears.

The angry cowboy jumped out of the way so the EMTs could get a look at his friend.

A police officer skidded to a stop at the bottom of the ditch. "What in the hell happened here, Scooter?"

Scooter glared at her from beneath the brim of his hat. "Get Tanner to the hospital and haul her little ass to jail."

Chapter 2

At the only stoplight in town, Scooter Austin tipped his hat to Drake Grainger, the owner of the old ranch truck Tanner had been pushing out of the road. Tanner worked as Foreman on Grainger's ranch. Grainger ran a solid operation, but he should've dumped that truck at the salvage yard a year ago. The damn thing broke down more than it ran and had frozen like a Thanksgiving turkey just as they came around the curve where Dahlia plowed into it.

Guilt sat like a hundred pound weight on Scooter's chest. He shouldn't have been so hard on the little lady. Hell, the accident was just as much his fault as it was hers. He should've stayed and helped push the piece of shit truck off the road, but Tanner had insisted he could manage it. Scooter had been headed back to get some hands off Dirk Lowry's ranch to come give them a tow, and he figured Tanner had the truck off the road by the time the little kamikaze came barreling along in her convertible. He hadn't even motioned for her to slow down. He shook his head at the shame of his own negligence.

Bronc Vernon's name and number lit up the screen of Scooter's phone and he pulled it to his ear. "What's up, buddy?"

"Just got off the phone with Andy. That woman that 'bout killed Tanner ain't even called Andy's garage. Must be nice to total a car worth six figures and not even bother to find out if it can be salvaged. Why do you think she's hanging around Wilder?"

"I imagine she's long gone. We won't see her again unless she has to show up in court."

Give a woman an inch and she'd take a mile. He knew how that worked, and he wasn't going to make a soft spot for some pretty little

stranger. He didn't have any reason to waste time thinking about Dahlia. Or those legs of hers that went on for miles before they ended in a place he knew damn well would be even more tempting than the rest of her.

"She would've had a hell of a time getting out of town without a car and somebody seeing her leave, but nobody's seen her," Bronc said. "I been asking around, and can't figure out where she's staying either."

"Is that so?" Something Scooter didn't care to examine filled his chest and sent a little jolt of adrenaline through him. Surely she hadn't stuck around, and if she had, there wasn't any reason to get excited about it.

Bronc laughed. "You know there ain't no secrets in this town. What in the hell you reckon's going on? You don't think she could've gotten herself into any trouble do you?"

"I'll find out. Any change since you last updated me on Tanner?" Bronc had been the first EMT on the scene, and Scooter knew Tanner couldn't have been in better hands. Bronc Vernon had patched up more cowboys than bulls had run over in Wilder, and he was damn good at his job.

"Nothing new to report. He's hanging in there."

Scooter said goodbye and keyed his phone off. Bruises, a concussion, and a couple of cracked ribs wouldn't keep Tanner down for long, but the doctors were concerned with a tumor at the base of his neck they found in the MRI. Turns out the little lady might have saved his life when she nearly killed him. Scooter chuckled as he turned off the main road in town and headed out toward the hospital. Tanner would have a hell of a time admitting she'd done him a favor.

Thoughts of Dahlia didn't leave Scooter's mind as quickly as they entered. Kamikaze driver or not, she was the hottest thing he'd laid eyes on in his thirty-two years on this earth. She had legs that went straight to heaven, breasts that could keep a man from ever going hungry, and a little ass he knew he wouldn't be able to keep his hands

off of for long if she was still here in Wilder. Damn, he didn't need a distraction like that, especially not one as hard to figure out as Dahlia Burke. Who in the world drove a hundred thousand dollar car and stuck around incognito after an accident in a place that damn sure couldn't be what she was used to? He shook his head. He was surprised Wilder, Texas, had held her overnight. Despite what Bronc had reported, she had to be long gone by now.

He shifted in the seat of his truck to relieve some of the pressure in his fly. She got him hard as a rock, and she was probably a world away by now. He reached down to adjust his Johnson. Goddamn, he needed a woman more than he wanted to admit.

His phone rattled again, and Scooter pulled it up to his ear. "This is Scooter."

"Scooter! It's Raymond Burke. How's the finest boot maker in the free world?"

"Feeling a little heavier in the wallet now that you called. What can I do for you?" The slick bastard probably couldn't be trusted farther than a man could spit. But he dropped more money on boots than all Scooter's other clients combined.

Raymond laughed. "Ain't you heard? I'm celebrating another divorce."

"You haven't found a woman yet who could take you to the cleaners? That must be one helluva pre-nup your lawyer drew up." Scooter snorted a laugh. "I got some new ostrich in, silver, almost looks metallic. You won't find it anywhere else. Looks damn fine with black leather and gray stitching."

"I'll take 'em! And I'll be coming your way next week. My girlfriend wants a pair. She's got the prettiest feet you'll ever measure."

"Sounds serious. You never even brought your last wife to see me."

"Consider that a favor. See you Wednesday."

“That’ll work.” Scooter hung up the phone and draped his elbow out the window. Raymond Burke had a revolving door of women and enough money to make sure the flow never stopped. The fool could keep every one of them. Scooter would rather give his money to a prostitute than a woman like Raymond kept company with. At least the hooker would be honest about why she was in his bed.

Chapter 3

Dahlia nearly jumped out of the hospital chair she'd fallen asleep in. Scooter's big hand gripped her shoulder, and lines creased his forehead. She stared at him, momentarily confused, then whipped around to face the window outside Tanner's room. Morning sun lit the hospital courtyard. Nurses and technicians dressed in scrubs made their way along the intersecting concrete walkway. Dahlia automatically reached for her hair, taming the long curls behind her ear as best she could.

"You didn't sleep here, did you?" Scooter's voice held equal parts disbelief and irritation.

"No," she lied. "I...I was just praying." No doubt, she'd go straight to hell for that one.

Scooter snorted his disbelief and handed her the steaming cup in his hand. He still didn't seem to like her much, but at least he wasn't picking a fight this morning.

"You didn't have to bring me coffee."

"It was mine, but looks like you could use it."

She took the cup and murmured a thank you without looking at him. Ordinarily, she'd have a little more pride. Ordinarily, she wouldn't think twice about the price of a cup of coffee. Ordinarily, she wouldn't be hightailing out of Dallas trying to put miles between herself and a cruel ex-husband who thought she deserved to be broke and destitute.

"Your car's totaled." Scooter leaned his long body against the raised bedrail.

His eyes traveled over her in a way that made her squirm inside. She straightened her shoulders and tilted her chin a little higher. The coffee cupped in her hands chased away some of the chill in the hospital air but did nothing to diminish the goose bumps that had risen on her arms under Scooter's appraisal. He looked even better up close than he had walking along the roadside, and the clean, masculine scent he wore trickled over her senses. She may not be smart when it came to men, but there was no denying what turned her on. "Cream and real sugar, just the way I like it." She offered him a small smile and pressed the coffee cup to her lips again. Of course, she wasn't in any position to be choosy with the coffee. If he'd given her cheap brandy in a paper sack, she probably would've taken it.

Scooter watched her with open curiosity. The remnants of a frown still lowered his brow. "The judge set your court date this morning. May 29th. You'll get a letter."

No. She wouldn't get a letter. The address she'd given on the police report hadn't been her home in six years. She was headed back to Vegas where she'd once owned the condo at the address she'd given on the police report. By the time the letter from the judge arrived, she'd be living in a cheap motel, paying by the week, until she landed a job and a steady paycheck that would enable her to rent an inexpensive apartment. Her circumstances left her queasy - thirty years old and starting over more broke than she'd ever been in her life.

Her shoulders sagged. "How do you total a hundred thousand dollar car on the tailgate of a beat-up pickup truck?" A hundred thousand dollars. If she'd sold it for fifty thousand, she could've gotten herself settled in comfortably until she landed a part in one of the nicer shows on the strip. Showgirls were a dime a dozen in Vegas, but she still had a few contacts and her legs could stop traffic a mile away. She just needed some cash to hold her over until she landed a job. The sale of the car was going to give her that cash.

Scooter's eyes had drifted down to the expanse of slender thigh that extended from the short skirt she wore.

She slid one leg out further and shifted her hips, sending the skirt up another few inches. She hadn't risen to the top of the world and fallen flat on her ass without knowing what her assets were every step of the way. Married to Raymond Burke, her assets were tied up in the gifts he gave her to make himself look better. She'd used the honking diamond ring to pay the attorney's fees so she could finally be free of the bastard, and the hundred-thousand-dollar car wasn't worth a dime now that she'd rammed it into the back of some cowboy's piece-of-shit work truck. Everything she owned now, the Good Lord had given her—make that the Good Lord and years of dance rehearsal.

As if he sensed her thoughts, Tanner shifted in his hospital bed and groaned. Scooter leaned over him, and she edged a little closer in her seat.

Scooter gripped the bedrail. "How're you feeling, man?"

"Like I got run over by a damned woman driver." Tanner's voice cracked, and his face twisted in pain.

"I didn't hit you." Dahlia regretted jumping in the conversation as soon as the words were out.

Tanner turned his head enough to glare at her. "What in the hell are you doing here? Come to finish the job?"

Dahlia clamped her lips tight and averted her gaze.

"I'm figuring she either came to kill you so you couldn't sue her, or fuck you so you wouldn't want to," Scooter said. "Either way, you're screwed."

Dahlia jumped up from the chair. In her four-inch heels she stood almost as tall as Scooter, and he was easily over six feet. "I'm not a murderer." Her teeth clenched so hard her jaw hurt.

"So you came to fuck him then?" Scooter's eyebrows rose.

Tanner grunted. "No thank you. I ain't ever cared for getting rear-ended, and I ain't in any shape to give it back to you right now."

Scooter chuckled, but his eyes never left hers, and the challenge was carved like stone in his rough, handsome features.

“I didn’t come to fuck you.” She aimed the comment at Tanner, but stared hard into Scooter’s eyes as she said it. “What kind of name is Scooter? Having a hard time letting go of your childhood?”

He snorted. “I never figured such a big pain in the ass could come in such a tempting package.” His gaze trailed down her body, lingering just long enough to sizzle her skin.

“Keep your eyes off my ‘package.’ You’re wasting your time looking at me like that.”

“Whatever you came to do, it’s time for you to leave. Wilder ain’t your kind of town.” Scooter’s voice was gruff, but his eyes held a mixture of softness and heat that coiled her stomach and seeded a hunger between her legs.

Dahlia gave him a practiced look and fought to control the havoc he was wreaking on her. He might want to send her out of Wilder, Texas, on the toe of his boot, but he was too much of a hot-blooded man to be immune to her curves. She put an extra sway in her step as she made her way to the door then gave him a come-hither stare before stepping into the hall. “I’ll decide when I leave.” She took her time letting her gaze journey from the mess of dark waves at the top of his head, over his broad chest, to hover on the impressive bulge beneath his belt before finally taking a slow slide down his long legs to the ugliest damn boots she’d ever laid eyes on. She met the fire in his gaze with her own. “And...Scooter...I can read a man like a book. Don’t make me bring you to your knees.”

She hadn’t brought a man to his knees in years, and she doubted she could make Scooter buckle if her life depended on it. He might like looking at her, but she had a feeling that gruff cowboy didn’t fall easily and might not fall at all. It didn’t matter. She had every intention of leaving before he could call her bluff.

“You really think you could do that, honey?” In two quick strides he was at her side, grabbing her wrist, and holding the door open with

one broad shoulder. His touch struck with more force than she could've steeled herself for. Lightning couldn't have hit faster or harder, and her breath came in short heavy puffs.

His arm curled around her waist in a grip she didn't have a chance of squirming out of, and his bicep bulged as he dragged her hard up against his chest.

She gasped. The man felt like solid granite, smooth and hard. There wasn't one soft part on him. Even the fire that flamed in his eyes was sharp enough to cut her to the bone. He scooped her up in his arms like she weighed nothing and let the door swing shut behind them.

"Put me down. What are you doing?"

"I'm getting you the hell away from my friend before you do any more damage."

"Is this the culprit the whole town is talking about?"

Dahlia tore her eyes off Scooter to face the questioner. A beautiful woman and a cowboy who could melt a branding iron were walking toward them. Both had warm eyes and broad smiles as they inspected her with open curiosity. The cowboy's hand rested comfortably around the woman's waist in a proprietary posture that sent pangs of envy through Dahlia. This wasn't a man who thought he owned his woman. He was a man who had been captured and then been lucky enough to rope the woman who captured him.

Dahlia realized she had relaxed in Scooter's grip. Her body molded to his. The heat of his chest radiated through her breasts and slid like warm honey into her womb. She didn't want to move.

Scooter set her legs on the floor and turned her around, breaking the contact between them and shattering her momentary lapse of judgment. "This is Dahlia. Although I'm sure Tanner will have his own name for her when the sedatives wear off." He gripped Dahlia's hips in his big hands like he was afraid she'd try to make a run for it. "Dahlia, this is Alana and Rayne. Alana's daddy owns that damn truck Tanner was pushing out of the road."

“How’s he doing?” Rayne asked.

“He’ll be fine if we keep Killer here away from him.”

Jarred back to the reality of the situation, the haze Scooter’s touch elicited evaporated. What had she been thinking? After the lesson she’d just learned the hard way at the hands of her ex-husband, there was no excuse to forget even for a minute the danger of a man’s touch. Dahlia wriggled free of his grip, mumbled pleasantries, and ran down the hall at a pace that wouldn’t be easy to catch. She had danced in higher heels than the ones she wore, and she could give Scooter a chase if that’s what he wanted.

She heard his low chuckle mixed with Alana’s laughter resounding down the hall, and knew he wasn’t in pursuit. Just to be sure Scooter didn’t have something else up his sleeve, she took the elevator down to the lobby and circled the hospital until she found a little bench facing a lake in the far back corner of the building. She’d give them all time to leave before she made her way back inside to do what she had to do.

Chapter 4

After one of the roughest nights of her life, Dahlia rolled over on the vinyl sofa in the hospital waiting room. She realized her mistake too late and landed face first on the tightly woven carpet below. With a groan, she picked herself up from the floor, wiped her hands on her face, and twisted her hair into a ponytail. The day was off to a promising start.

She eased over to the door to sneak a peek at the nurse's station. One nurse had her back toward the waiting room and her head bent over an open file. Another nurse disappeared behind a long row of filing cabinets. For as far as she could see the halls were empty. This may be the best chance she'd have all morning.

She slipped out of her shoes, slowly pushed the door open, and hurried toward Tanner's room. After Scooter left the day before, Tanner had a steady stream of visitors and caregivers in and out of his room. And she couldn't take a chance that he or Scooter had put her on some "banned visitors" list.

Visiting hours didn't start for another two hours, and if the doctor made rounds at the same time he did yesterday, she had an hour before she had to worry about getting caught. She hadn't had time yet to figure out the nurses' schedules. She'd just have to take her chances with those.

She made it to Tanner's room without calling attention to herself and stood with her back against the door, breathing like she'd just danced a three-hour show. Tanner didn't stir when she started toward him or when she leaned over his bed and reached out to tame a lock of hair that had fallen across his forehead. He looked so peaceful and

handsome in a rugged, masculine way that twisted and warmed her belly.

Waking him seemed like a crime. He needed his rest, and she could really use a shower.

Time was of the essence, but maybe she could spare just a few minutes. She bit her lip, trying to make the best decision to get herself out of this mess she'd landed in, but her heart won the battle. She couldn't wake him. It was her fault he was lying there broken to begin with.

She stepped away from the bed. This could very well be the worst decision she'd ever made. His room had turned into Grand Central Station yesterday, and she hadn't been able to steal a minute alone with him.

Chances were she'd need more than a minute to get back in his good graces and convince him to see things her way. Even if she had a week, the chips would still be stacked against her. He had more than just the accident on his mind now. From what little she overheard, the MRI had revealed a tumor at the top of his spine that he had been unaware of. The doctors planned a quick operation that would keep him in the hospital a few more days but was minimally invasive. She had to talk to him today, or who knows how many more nights she'd have to spend on the waiting room couch. She would let him rest as long as she could, but then she had to get down to business.

She pulled her small suitcase from under the bed, hurried into his bathroom, and turned the shower on full blast.

The hot water felt like heaven. Sleeping in a hospital waiting room wasn't anything she wanted to get in the habit of. The only place she'd slept worse was next to her ex-husband. She shivered despite the hot water and quickly pushed all thoughts of Raymond Burke out of her head. She was grateful no one had kicked her out of the waiting room and onto the street. One nurse had come in and given her a pitying look before telling her how some sweet young

patient was doing. Apparently, she'd been mistaken for someone else, someone who had a right to be there.

Dahlia scrubbed the tiny little bar of soap into her hand and lathered her body as best she could. A washcloth would have been nice, but this wasn't a hotel, and apparently, no one expected Tanner to be using the shower anytime soon.

She lathered up the same soap to wash her hair and cringed, knowing her usually placid curls would stand off her head in an untamable fuzzy heap later. She bathed quickly, then stepped out onto the cold linoleum floor and pulled a handful of folded paper towels from the dispenser. She dabbed at her wet skin and twisted the excess water from her hair.

She was patting the moisture from her face with a fresh handful of paper towels as the bathroom door swung open.

Scooter's eyes widened, then just as quickly, his brows lowered and his dark gaze raked over her from head to toe. "What in the hell are you doing?"

She glared at him. Working onstage in Vegas, she'd gotten used to everyone from prop and lighting guys to wardrobe assistants getting an occasional gander at her naked body. She could handle this cowboy.

"What does it look like I'm doing?" She continued to dry herself and realized she might have overestimated herself. She might be used to stagehands copping a peek, but Scooter looked like he could eat her alive one minute and spit her out the next. And she was almost horny enough to let him. Almost.

"Where are you staying that you'd have to shower here?" He glanced at her suitcase on the toilet and then back at her.

"None of your business."

"I reckon it is my business. You're hanging around my friend in there like flypaper, and you've already tried to kill him once."

"I didn't try to kill him." Her nipples hardened in the cold air even as a heated blush spread across her chest, but she didn't make a move

to cover herself. “Visiting hours don’t start for a while. I think you need to leave.”

She thought she caught a smile twitch at the corner of Scooter’s lips, but he didn’t give in to it. “I could be saying the same to you. What are you up to? And don’t lie to me.” He reached for her arm. His touch sent a jolt all the way down to her soaking wet toes. He pulled her close. Her bare skin brushed the soft cotton of his shirt and the rough denim on his thigh.

Dahlia struggled to breathe. Her body begged for more, but she knew better. She hadn’t had a man’s hands on her in so long, she longed to ignore everything but the heat between them. But she’d made enough bad decisions to last her a lifetime. With a determined twist of her arm, she freed herself from his grasp. The next time she shared her body with a man, he’d be one who treated her like a lady. She’d given herself to an asshole one too many times while she was married. Never again.

“I’m just checking on him. I feel bad about what happened.” Her voice barely shook, and her conscience barely flinched at all. That wasn’t a lie. She felt awful, but she also needed to make sure when Tanner came around and the drugs wore off enough for him to be reasoned with that he didn’t plan to sue her. She needed to work out a payment plan or something. Anything. Unfortunately, the car might have been legally hers, but her ex had taken her off the insurance policy and signed the car over to her free and clear. She had planned to sell the car and buy something more modest once she got to Vegas. Now she had nothing. No car to sell. No car to drive. No way to pay Tanner’s medical bills and not a spare cent to spend on a seedy hotel room here in the middle of Bum Fuck, Texas.

“I ain’t figured you out yet. But I will.” Scooter gave her a slow nod. “And you better hope to hell you ain’t hiding nothing I should know about.”

She narrowed her eyes at him. “I can’t imagine what else there is about me you think you have a right to know, Mr. *Scooter*.” She let

her gaze dip to his boots and rise slowly again, not stopping until she met the heat in his dark brown eyes square on. He rattled her, but she didn't have any intention of letting him know it.

"I have a way of finding out everything I need to know." His hand dipped down to squeeze her ass, and a flood of prickly heat swamped her inner thighs.

She gasped.

He bent slowly, angling for her mouth and pulling her closer. She stumbled on the toe of his boot and pushed herself away. Just the memory of those custom pointed toes and detailed stitching worked better than a bucket of cold water dumped over her head.

"I don't jump in bed with any man who can't buy a decent pair of boots." She knew damn well those boots had cost more than she'd make in three months once she got out to Vegas, but she was pretty sure this rugged cowboy hadn't bought them full price.

"What do you know about boots, darlin'?" Genuine curiosity creased his brow, but a challenge shone clear in his eyes.

"I know I wouldn't put Boot Scooters on a pig." She laughed, realizing then just why he liked the boots. "That's why you wear them, isn't it? They've got your name on them. Cute."

He snorted, and a muscle low in his jaw twitched. "Yeah, they've got my name on them, and they're damn fine boots."

He was ready for a fight now. Just like a cowboy to defend his boots, his truck, and his best friend even if every damn one of them was a piece of shit.

"Scooter, I don't care what you put on your feet, but those boots won't ever be sticking out from under my bed again, so you can take your hand off my ass."

"Again? Must have been one damn fine son of a bitch that broke your heart." Scooter dragged her harder against him.

Dahlia swallowed hard and did her best to ignore the attraction arcing like live wires between his chest and hers. "He was a son of a bitch all right, but wasn't one thing fine about him."

Scooter stepped even closer, backing her against the wall in the tight quarters of the bathroom. His big chest was hard against her bare breasts, and his focus on her was so intense she felt it in her bones. “Hard to trust a woman who’ll insult my boots.”

A line like that coming from anybody else and she’d know he was playing with her. Scooter sounded dead serious. He had a ridiculously sick attachment to those boots. The only other man she knew who loved Boot Scooter’s boots that much was Raymond Burke. “Any man who has as much in common with my ex-husband as you seem to wouldn’t know a good woman if he saw one. Now if you’d give me some room, I’d appreciate it.”

Scooter raised his hand slowly, one finger extended. With a touch so gentle it felt like a breath, he caressed a trail from her cheek to her jaw. Goose bumps scattered over her skin, and her body turned into heated liquid mush.

“If you watch how you insult my boots, we’ll get along a hell of a lot better.” He stepped back and a cool rush of air filled the space where he’d been.

She shivered again, but her reaction didn’t have anything to do with the hospital’s air conditioning.

At the door he turned back. “Get dressed. I’ll take you to breakfast.”

“Why would you do that?” She wanted to protest, but her stomach growled at the invitation. Last night’s vending machine dinner hadn’t come close to satisfying her appetite. She pressed her palm against her belly to muffle the grumbles, but there was no way he hadn’t heard it.

“Sounds like you could use it. But more importantly, I’ve got questions and you’re gonna answer them.”

Chapter 5

Dahlia turned around slowly on a leather barstool at Scooter's breakfast bar to take another look at his living room. His home had a warm, welcoming feel that was at odds with her impression of the man she'd met alongside the highway and then later in the hospital. The fashionable living room flowed seamlessly into the kitchen with its updated appliances, stone countertops and custom cabinetry. Whatever she had expected when she walked into his house, this wasn't it. Scooter wasn't a man who flashed his wealth, but he wasn't the penny-poor cowhand she'd first pegged him to be either.

While there was nothing grand about the old white farmhouse and the wooded rolling hills that spread out behind it, it was well cared for, understated in its masculine elegance and most surprisingly, decorated. Not anything fancy or over the top, just filled with meticulously chosen pieces of furniture and art that married strong masculine lines with comfort. This was the home of a man's man who had grown beyond his untamed youth but hadn't given control of his castle over to a woman. And without a doubt this was the home of a man who paid attention to detail. It was no wonder he loved those damn Boot Scooter boots. His home was put together just as well, the craftsmanship undeniable.

She turned back to the kitchen. Scooter had his back to her, and was working two omelet pans with the expertise of a chef. On one of the back burners, bacon sizzled, and on the cutting board near the sink, the remnants of his salsa ingredients awaited clean-up. The aroma twisted her stomach and another rumble gathered in her belly. "Are you sure I can't help?"

“You don’t touch the food and I won’t worry about you poisoning me.” He glanced over his shoulder. “Don’t think I don’t know I’m the only witness. Taking me out might make your life a little easier.”

She could swear there was a teasing glimmer in his eye, but his voice was as gruff as ever. “I’m not being charged with a crime.” She slid off the barstool. “At least let me clean up the salsa mess.”

He turned around and gave her his full attention. “You take one step around that counter, and your little ass is mine.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?” Was he planning to get physical with her or explore where the heat that had risen between them in the hospital bathroom might lead? She froze in her tracks. Neither sounded like an encounter she needed to instigate.

Seemingly satisfied that he made his point but without bothering to answer her, Scooter turned away again and took two plates from a cabinet next to the stove.

Minutes later she was shoveling the last of the best omelet she’d ever tasted into her mouth. With a strip of bacon, she scooped the spillover of the fresh salsa Scooter had spooned over the top. Not until she’d swallowed the last morsel did she realize he had stopped eating halfway through his meal and was staring at her with a look of genuine concern etched deep in his brow. “When’s the last time you ate?”

Embarrassment heated her cheeks, and she wiped her mouth with the soft cloth napkin he’d provided. “A real meal? Days.” She tried to ward off further questions with a smile and a compliment. “An omelet this good? Never.”

His expression didn’t change, and he didn’t smile back. “You’re dead broke, aren’t you?”

Shame flamed beneath her skin, dwarfing her initial embarrassment and leaving her certain her face must be as red as the tomatoes he’d used in the salsa. “I’ve got everything I need.” She avoided his eyes. “Except a car.”

“Where are you staying? I’ll give you a ride back to your room.” He didn’t make any move to leave, and something in his posture told her he was calling her bluff rather than offering her a ride.

Unfortunately she couldn’t recall passing a single hotel on the way from the hospital back to his place. And she hadn’t paid attention to anything at all when she’d first bummed a ride with Lonnie, the tow truck driver, over to the hospital.

“I’ve got a room at the Holiday Inn.” Every town had a Holiday Inn, right?

He shook his head. “Did they put one up overnight? ’Cause last I checked, the only place to get a room here in town was Millie’s Bed & Breakfast. Unless of course, you’ve been shacking up in a bunkhouse at one of the ranches.” His gaze traveled over her slowly. “I can’t imagine any of the ranchers around here throwing you to the wolves like that.”

She swallowed hard. “If you give me a ride over to Millie’s I’d appreciate it.”

“Not so fast.” He stood up and carried their dishes to the sink. “Where’d you sleep the last two nights?”

She released her breath in a heavy burst. She may as well come clean as much as she could. “I stayed at the hospital. I didn’t have a way to get into town and look for a room.” She left out the fact that she didn’t have money to pay for a room. If he gave her a ride to Millie’s, she’d somehow make her way back to the hospital until she had a chance to speak to Tanner and then figure out how to get back on her way to Vegas.

He finished rinsing the plates then stretched across the counter to pluck her purse off the barstool next to her.

“What are you doing? Give me that?” She made a grab for her bag, but he easily pulled it out of reach.

“Millie’s an old friend of mine. I’m not dropping you off on her doorstep until I know you can pay for your stay.”

“Do not go in my purse!”

To her surprise, he handed it back and leaned across the bar. When his eyes were level with hers, he spoke evenly in a voice more gentle than he'd used on her before. "You can't afford to stay at Millie's, can you?"

Something in his tone undid her. Her shoulders slumped and she tucked her chin into her chest before slowly shaking her head. "No. I'll stay at the hospital one more night. I just need to make sure Tanner's okay. I need to talk to him when he's up to it." She lifted her head again, relieved to have the burden off her chest. "And then I'll be on my way. Thank you for breakfast, and I could really use a ride back to the hospital if you don't mind."

Scooter braced the heels of his hands on the counter and once again gave her the stern, steady stare she'd gotten used to from him. "You're staying here tonight. We'll head over to see Tanner in the morning, and tomorrow you can be on your way out of town."

As much as she wanted to argue, another night spent in the hospital waiting room would be pure hell, especially knowing she could be sleeping on a real bed inside this beautiful house.

"You don't even like me. Why would you make such an offer?"

"Keep your friends close and your enemies closer, haven't you learned that yet?" He cocked a half-smile.

"So I'm a sworn enemy now?"

"Until you prove different, I don't think it would be wise to let you out of my sight." He nodded toward the hall. "Your bathroom's the first door on the right. Go on and freshen up if you want to. We need to get in to work."

"Work?"

"You need money. You can work for it."

Dahlia's hand went automatically to her hair. Just as she had feared when she washed it with the hospital bar soap, her curls had gone haywire. "Do I need to dress up?" She prayed he said no. She'd left every piece of clothing Raymond Burke had bought her hanging in the enormous walk-in closet off their master bedroom. She didn't

want anything to remind her of the life she'd had with him. She wouldn't have taken the car if she didn't need the money it would bring when she sold it. Or would have brought. Her small suitcase had the few pieces of her old wardrobe that she'd held on to over the past two years. The well-worn jeans, casual skirts, and comfortable shirts were never meant to be office attire.

"You look fine. Might have to do something about those shoes, though." Scooter's mouth quirked into a smirk that was entirely too sexy for such a hardnosed man.

She looked down at the high-heeled sandals strapped to her feet. Scooter couldn't see them from where he stood, but he obviously had taken note of them earlier. Without a lot of room to argue, she grabbed her purse and headed down the hall to touch up her makeup and tame her hair. There were a lot of things about Scooter that didn't match up. His generous protective nature couldn't be hidden beneath his growl and sometimes biting words. And even though his dislike of her was nobody's secret, instinctively, she trusted him.

She dug her makeup bag out of her purse and propped it next to the sink. As she leaned toward the mirror with an eye pencil in hand, her stomach sank. Oh God. He expected her to sleep with him. She'd been so relieved to have a place to stay and a chance to earn a few bucks, she'd painted him as some chivalrous knight, but she knew better. If the last two years had taught her anything, it was that Prince Charming didn't exist. Scooter didn't even pretend to be charming. And he probably didn't dole out favors to strangers, especially strangers he didn't even like.

She finished her makeup and swept her hair back in a loose ponytail that held most of it in place and then tried to settle her nerves. There were worse things in the world than sleeping with a hot-ass cowboy. It wasn't like he didn't turn her on or that the thought of feeling his hard naked body against hers hadn't run through her mind a hundred times.

She knew she was kidding herself. Sex for sex's sake was a myth, at least for her. She'd give anything to be one of those women who could approach sex the way a man could, but she'd never been that way. She'd never given her body without a little piece of her heart wrapped up with it. And Scooter wouldn't be any exception. As rough as he could be, his softer side prodded emotions she didn't think she owned anymore—that she didn't want to own anymore—at least not for a long time. Raymond Burke had left her penniless and emotionally bankrupt, but she'd felt more tugs on her heart in the last two days with Scooter than she'd felt in the past year. And he didn't even pretend to like her.

She lifted her face and stared hard at the reflection in the mirror. This was the old Dahlia's way of thinking, the same old Dahlia that had fallen for Raymond Burke and was now living through the hell that came with a mistake as big as that. The time to change had come.

She reached for the door. She'd made up her mind. Sleeping with Scooter was exactly what she needed to do. She could repay his kindness in a way sure to change his opinion of her, at least for a little while. And maybe she could finally satisfy the physical craving that had been eating her alive since she found out her husband didn't love her, and worse, he wasn't even attracted to her anymore.

Raymond Burke had the attention span of a gnat, and when he bored of something, he left it where it lay and never looked back. Including his wife. She couldn't count the number of girlfriends he'd had during the last year she'd lived in his house. At first she'd tried to prove she could give him what he needed. When she realized how futile her attempts were, she gave up. He didn't want her. But when she asked for a divorce, he refused for reasons known only to him.

It wasn't until she tried to hire an attorney that she realized how far out of her reach he kept his money. It took months of planning, but she finally sold off enough of the gifts he'd given her during their marriage to pay the ridiculous fees charged by the caliber of attorney

who could take on the untouchable Raymond Burke. Even with all the money spent, she still walked away with only her freedom.

So she would exchange sex with Scooter for a warm bed and a damn good omelet. Married to Raymond Burke, she had exchanged more for less.

Chapter 6

“Where are you headed when you leave our little town?” Scooter gave Dahlia a sidelong glance before turning his pickup truck onto what had to be the busiest street in Wilder.

She counted half a dozen cars in plain view, and four of them were parked along the curb.

“Vegas.” She would already be in Vegas if it hadn’t been for her little run in with Tanner, and now Nevada seemed as unreachable as the moon, but she wasn’t about to admit that to Scooter.

A smirk settled across his face. “With legs like yours, I ain’t surprised.”

His mood seemed to have perked up since breakfast, and being with him like this put her completely at ease. From the minute she met him there had been brief moments when she felt like she’d known him all her life, times she could swear the most decent man she’d ever met probably lay beneath that asshole attitude he kept copping with her. The occasional softness she caught in his eyes drew her in a lot deeper than his gruffness could push her away. Combine that with his sex appeal and she was in farther over her head than she’d ever been before. But she needed to get a grip on that way of thinking before it got her into trouble again. As cryptic as Scooter might be, there was one part of him she had figured out.

She twisted so that her back rested against the door and stretched like a cat. Her short denim skirt rode up her thigh, giving him an eyeful. “It takes more than legs to make it in Vegas, but yeah, I’m a dancer.”

“Stripper?”

“No. A showgirl.” She narrowed her eyes. “And before you stick your boot in your mouth, yes, there’s a difference.”

He snorted. “I ain’t got nothing against strippers.”

“I’m sure you don’t. I don’t either, but I’m not one.”

He eased up to the only stoplight she’d seen in miles and lifted a hand to wave at an old cowboy making his way along the sidewalk in front of the shops. “When did the insurance company say they’d get your rental car to you?”

She tensed. There was no rental car. No insurance company. And Vegas would be a hell of a long walk. “I’ll probably just take a bus.” She hadn’t priced a bus ticket in years. She sure hoped they hadn’t gone up much in the last decade.

“Closest bus stop is up in Waylon. About an hour and a half north of here.”

“You don’t have anything in this sorry excuse for a town. How do you live like that?”

“We’ve got a hell of a fine boot store, rodeos every weekend, a bar you can pick a fight in anytime you feel like it, and enough ranches to keep the cowboys busy.”

“Well, what was I thinking? Unpack my suitcase. I’m not going anywhere.”

He studied her for a minute. “You’re not going anywhere, are you?”

“I told you. I’m going to Vegas.”

“Uh huh. How’re you getting to the bus stop?” The light turned, and he continued along the main corridor of the old-fashioned downtown. On each side of the street, red brick buildings with gold and black lettering on the windows were broken up by the occasional adobe façade. Some of the businesses were obviously no longer operating, but the place felt more like a step back in time than a ghost town.

She shrugged. “I’m sure I can find some decent cowboy headed to Waylon.”

“Not likely. Folks around here tend to stay put. We might head over to Dylan’s Crossing now and again, if we need something they’ve got. Otherwise we don’t venture out much.”

“I’ll find a ride.” She pumped every ounce of confidence she could muster into her voice, but she was feeling more deflated by the second.

He laughed. “All right. Where’re you staying in the meantime? I ran into Millie this morning before I went to the hospital. With the big rodeo going on this weekend, her bed and breakfast is slam full. It’s just a matter of time before the hospital puts your little ass on the street, and I don’t reckon you’re figuring on shacking up at my place longer than a night.”

“Hell no!” She pulled herself up and put both feet squarely on the floorboard in front of her. “You couldn’t have been serious about not having a hotel here in Wilder.” Surely, Millie’s wasn’t really the only place in town for a stranger to sleep.

He wrinkled his brow like she’d said something completely outlandish. “What in the world would we need a hotel for?”

She couldn’t tell if he was pulling her leg or if he was dead serious, but she wasn’t about to let him see her sweat. “All those cowboys who come through here for the rodeo, they’ve got to stay somewhere.”

“Most of ’em are local boys. But there’s a bunkhouse over by the fairgrounds for the rest of them.”

“You’re lying.”

He pulled over to the curb in front of one of the adobe buildings and shifted the truck into park. “No, ma’am. Lying’s one thing I don’t do.”

Dahlia stepped down from Scooter’s truck in front of Boot Scooter’s storefront. The ugliest boots she’d ever laid eyes on filled the display windows, and the lights inside were out. Thank God. She knew he’d brought her here just to torment her, but the place wasn’t even open yet. He still hadn’t mentioned a word about where he

worked or exactly what he expected her to do once they got there, but she wasn't in any position to be choosy. Maybe he planned to pay her for an honest day's labor. She sure wouldn't turn down the money if given the chance to earn it. She glanced up at the thick beams that supported the black awning over the boot store and propped her hands on her hips. She'd play along and let him have his fun for now.

She shifted her gaze to the display window and fought back the roll of nausea in her belly. She couldn't look at a pair of those damn custom boots with the elaborate stitching and the discreet logo at the back of the heel without being reminded of the lousiest piece of shit to ever carry a dick between his legs.

Scooter strode up to the door like he owned the place, but she kept her feet planted on the curb. "Good try, but they're not open yet."

He glanced over his shoulder and shook his head, then flipped his key ring around and inserted a key into the door.

"You work here?" No wonder he could afford the boots. He got an employee discount. That explained his fierce devotion to them, too.

"So do you."

"What?"

"You work here. I'm not going to insult that stubborn ego of yours by offering you money you didn't earn."

She stepped back, pressing her shoulder into the door of his truck. "I don't work here." She'd spotted a little diner half a block back. Maybe they would hire her to wait tables for a day or two. Lord knows she'd done her share of waitressing in her early days waiting to land a job on the strip.

Scooter looked at her like she was seriously weighing on his patience. "How much money've you got on you?"

"None of your business."

"Nope, it ain't. But I'm betting you don't have enough for bus fare if I drove you up to Waylon." He twisted the key and pushed the door open. "Might as well earn some spending money while you're waiting on the insurance company to settle up with you and get you a

rental car. I told you things don't move as fast around here as you're used to."

She glanced back at the diner and the one truck pulled up to the curb in front of it. It didn't look likely they needed to take on extra help. Her stomach sank. He was right. If this lousy town had a hotel, she wouldn't be able to afford it. And she seriously doubted she could afford bus fare to Vegas. She'd be lucky to feed herself until she figured out how to get out of Wilder.

"I used to be a cashier." She strolled through the door he held open, and averted her eyes from the display cases on either side. "It won't kill me to do it again."

"You think I'm going to trust somebody as broke as you with my cash drawer?" He snorted. "Sweetheart, you can work in the stock room."

Dahlia followed the direction of Scooter's finger and pushed her way through a swinging wood door that led to the messiest room she'd ever stepped foot in. The scent of leather and glue hit her like a brick wall. She found a light switch on the wall which only proved the place was a bigger mess than she'd originally thought. Industrial sewing machines sat on chunky chiseled wood tables. Leather hung from suspended rods like rugs in a showroom and more was stacked on tables. Cuttings of leather, ostrich hide, reptile skins, and paper littered the floor.

She'd expected shelves full of boot boxes, freshly delivered from the manufacturer, not the manufacturing facility itself. No wonder those boots cost a fortune. Each pair was individually handmade, and not by production line assembly.

She didn't hear Scooter enter the room and nearly jumped out of her skin when his arm brushed hers. "How many people work here?"

"Two. Now that you're here."

She shouldn't have been surprised. It made sense that a town the size of Wilder wouldn't need a dozen people stitching boots together. And it was hard to imagine the cowboys in these parts would spend

that kind of money on boots to begin with. “I didn’t know Boot Scooters were made onsite. Do all the stores have production rooms in the back like this?”

“Stores? This is Boot Scooters.” He spread his arms. “You’re looking at the whole company.”

Something didn’t add up. “How can that be? How would people get their hands on a pair Boot Scooters? I can’t imagine there’s a parade of boot snobs marching down Main Street, Wilder.”

“Folks come in one time for a fitting. Once I’ve got their measurements on file, they can call in an order or order them online.”

She studied him. He wasn’t lying, but maybe she’d missed something. “This is the only place you can get Boot Scooters?”

He nodded and fingered a piece of silver ostrich hide on the nearest table. She had to admit the color was exquisite, and no doubt the finest quality.

“But my ex—” She stopped herself. “They’re popular boots.”

“I reckon.”

She recognized the modesty in his voice and the spark of pride that lit his eye.

“Oh my God!” Her hand flew to her mouth. “You’re Boot Scooter! You make the boots?”

He chuckled. “You ain’t too quick on the uptake, but you’re pretty enough to get away with it.”

No wonder he’d gotten so riled when she insulted his boots. They were his craft. As much as she hated them, she couldn’t deny each pair was a piece of art. And now that she knew the artist, her scrutiny of them wasn’t as tainted by Raymond Burke’s obsession with them.

Scooter left the ostrich hide he’d been toying with on the table and crossed the room. He reached up on a shelf stacked with teetering boxes and pulled out one from the middle of a stack before walking over to the nearest table. He tossed the lid off and held out a pair of red ostrich and leather boots with flame stitching up the side and an elaborate design across the top of the foot. If they hadn’t been Boot

Scooters, she would easily admit they were the most beautiful boots she'd ever laid eyes on. Even now she couldn't truly deny they were gorgeous.

He carried them over and held them out like he expected her to take them.

"What do you want me to do with these?"

"If you work here, you're wearing my boots."

She glanced down at the four inch wedge sandals she had on. "I don't wear boots."

"You do now." He shoved them into her arms and walked away.

"You don't even know these will fit!" she yelled after him.

"They'll fit." He sounded as sure as a man could be. She watched him disappear into the front of the store. The door to the stockroom swung shut behind him, and she frowned down at the boots in her arms. They did look like the right size.

She walked over to one of the stools in front of a sewing machine and plopped down. Every fiber of her being repelled the idea, but the buttery leather was heaven beneath her fingertips and she could imagine it sliding against her calves. The longer she held the boots, the more she loved them. Loving these boots went against her grain as much as being desperate and flat broke in Wilder, Texas, did. But she couldn't deny her current predicament anymore than she could deny how much she wanted to slip Scooter's boots on her feet. She dropped her sandals to the floor but stared at the boots a long time before she could bring herself to slide one on.

Drawing in a sharp breath, she dropped one to the floor and slid her foot into the other. She gasped as her toes dipped into nirvana. The insole felt like a cloud. The leather inside the boot caressed her skin and as she stretched her leg out in front of her, she knew they looked damn good on her.

She hurried into the other boot and stood up, giving them a test run across the scrap strewn floor. Holy hell. She could walk to Vegas in them. Nothing had ever felt better on her feet. As a dancer she

might strut around public in fashionable heels, but at home she didn't slip her feet into anything but pure comfort. And these were by far the most delicious pieces of footwear she'd ever had the pleasure to sink into. She did a couple of pirouettes and pushed her way through the swinging door.

Scooter let out a low whistle as she walked out front. Her denim skirt hung to mid-thigh and the boots he'd given her reached mid-calf with just enough heel to elongate her already long legs and give her the silhouette of a pin-up girl.

"You can't be hating my boots now." His grin spread from one side of his handsome face to the other.

"You do good work." The compliment was understated to say the least, but it was hard to spin such a deep-seated opinion on a dime. She'd focused her dislike of her ex on his boots for so long, she had ceased to see him as a man. Instead, she had reduced him to an asshole in expensive boots who barked orders at everyone around him, including her, while he waltzed other women into her home like he had every right to. The world spun at his fingertips, and she'd become more of a trophy than a wife within a month after vowing to love him forever. As soon as the newness had completely worn off, he didn't even care to treat her like a trophy.

She motioned toward the stockroom. "What do you want me to do back there? I can't sew."

He looked at her like she'd lost her mind. Or like she'd just threatened to paint his tools pink. "Don't you lay a finger on my machines. You ever used a broom before?"

She propped a hand on her hip and marched back to the stock room. She hadn't bothered to ask him how much he'd be paying her. But it didn't matter much. Anything she could put in her pocket was a dollar closer to Vegas and getting on with her life.

Three hours later, the stock room floor was clean enough to see the beautiful hardwood planks that ran through the entire building. The work tables were polished to a shine, and the customer orders

she'd found strewn on one of the tables were cross-referenced by last name and order date. Scooter had no shortage of business. She didn't know how long it took him to craft a pair of boots, but he must easily have a year's worth of orders already placed and every one of the invoices had been marked PAID.

She surveyed the room looking for another task when the door swung open and Scooter stepped in.

"Tanner's being released this afternoon. Let's go get him."

She was a little taken aback by his assumption that she was going with him, but she found some comfort in that, too. If Scooter abandoned her, she'd be in more trouble than she cared to consider. "They're letting him out early?"

"I don't imagine he gave them much choice. He's an ornery bastard when he needs to be." Scooter's grin and the pride in his voice told her just how deep his friendship with Tanner ran.

"Thanks for the warning."

Scooter laughed. "Yeah, I don't imagine he's going to be really happy to see you."

Chapter 7

Dahlia walked through the door Scooter held open and shivered in the cold air of the hospital lobby. Tanner tried to stand from his wheelchair, but the nurse behind him quickly put her hands on his shoulders and eased him back down. "Hospital policy, Mr. Dawson. I have to wheel you out."

"I can walk fine."

"Yes, sir. I'm sure you can do everything just fine, but you're gonna have to wait 'til you get in your friend's truck to start proving it." She softened her words with a smile and an almost imperceptible wink.

Tanner gave a low chuckle, and Dahlia noticed again what a fine looking man he was. Built like Scooter with strong arms and broad shoulders, his lighter hair was cropped short, and a Stetson sat squarely on the knee of his faded jeans. His thighs were thick and the pointed toe of one boot stretched out in front of him in a lazy sprawl.

"You about ready?" Scooter asked.

"I've been ready. You here to pick me up, or did she run you into a ditch, too?" He turned his head toward Dahlia and gave her a slow sweeping gaze that sent heat from the top of her head to the bottom of her feet. "I reckon I know why you're keeping her around."

"She ain't half bad if you don't let her behind the wheel. And doesn't mind working her little tail off."

Dahlia narrowed her eyes at Scooter and then Tanner. "I can drive. And Tanner, you might as well get used to me. I'm not leaving this town until you and I sit down for a minute and talk about some things."

Tanner's brows shot up, and she imagined Scooter was just as surprised.

The nurse pushed Tanner toward the door and all of them made their way to Scooter's truck.

"Why in the hell have you got Killer here with you?" Tanner asked as he climbed into the truck. "There's got to be a story behind this."

"She's working at the shop," Scooter said as he pushed Tanner's door closed and put a hand on Dahlia's lower back to guide her around to the driver's side.

"You're a glutton for punishment," Tanner said.

"And a sucker for those legs and that little ass." Scooter gave her a smile that begged to be either kissed or slapped off his face.

She chose to ignore his comment. "Give me a minute alone with Tanner, and I won't be a burden on you any longer than I have to."

"Tanner'll need more than a minute. He ain't ever done anything too fast that I've heard of."

Her beautiful red Boot Scooters ground to a stop next to the door he held open for her. "What exactly are you suggesting?"

"You just about killed the man. You might want to make him feel better before you go asking any favors."

"Who said I want a favor?"

He brushed up against her and the heat between them immediately soared. "Honey, I been around the block a time or two with pretty little things like you. You want something, or you would've been long gone."

"This is business. There aren't any favors involved. I appreciate everything you've done for me, but this business I have is with Tanner. I'd rather not drag you into it."

"He's into it up to his neck." Tanner had rolled down the window and hung his right elbow outside. "Whatever you've got to discuss with me, you can say in front of Scooter. We ain't got no secrets."

Dahlia met Tanner's eyes and cringed at the distrust she saw staring back at her. He wasn't going to make this easy. Maybe Scooter had the right idea. She'd better make him feel better before she asked for any favors. And yes, she needed more than her share of favors right now.

Chapter 8

Back at Scooter's place, Tanner's mood lightened, but twice she tried to talk to him about the accident, and he made a quick change of the subject.

Helping herself to Scooter's bar, she poured a whiskey on the rocks and carried it out to the porch where Tanner sat in one of the high back rockers. "Thought you might want this."

He took it from her with hesitation. "You doctor it?"

"Believe it or not, I don't want you dead. You're much too fine a cowboy to waste." She hoped the compliment would set him at ease, but there was plenty of truth in her words. He turned her on as much as Scooter did, and he liked her even less.

"All right, little lady. What is it you do want?"

She leaned against the porch railing in front of him and took a steadying breath. "I'm not exactly up on my luck right now. I'll make good on anything I owe you, but I just need a little time to get back on my feet again."

"Scooter told me you were broker than a trick pony. If you ain't got any money, why are driving a car like the one you had? Did you steal it?"

"No. Believe me, I earned it."

He offered her the whiskey glass, and she raised it to her lips. The burn of the alcohol slid down her throat and pooled in her belly.

He watched her closely, and every once in a while she thought she caught a glimmer of interest in his eyes, but he didn't say anything.

“The car’s the only thing I had worth a dime. I planned to sell it as soon as I got out to Vegas. The money would’ve held me over until I started making a decent income again.”

Dahlia took another long drink of the whiskey and let her gaze travel over Tanner’s body. Even injured and perched in a rocking chair, he carried himself like a man in control. His muscles were lean, but defined enough they couldn’t be hidden by the faded denim of his jeans or the soft cotton of his button-down shirt.

“You’re a good-looking man, Tanner.”

“And you’re hotter than Texas asphalt, but honey, don’t go hitting on me to get yourself out of this mess. I ain’t the kind of ass that’ll take you to bed ’cause you think you owe me something. I can find plenty of other reasons to get you naked.”

Her spine stiffened. “I’m not the kind of woman who pays my debts that way.”

“Then we understand one another.” A slow smile slid across his handsome jaw. “I ain’t saying I won’t take you to bed. I’d damn sure do that, but I ain’t saying you owe me anything either.”

“I don’t have insurance.”

“That wasn’t my truck, and it wasn’t worth a damn anyway.”

“What about your hospital bills?”

“I’ve got insurance, and technically, I was on the clock. If the damn truck hadn’t broken down, you’d be in Vegas by now with that little car of yours intact and you wouldn’t be broke enough to sleep in a hospital chair.”

“You’ve talked to Scooter.”

He nodded once. “We ain’t got many secrets between us.”

“Looks like if I had to run up against a couple of cowboys, I got lucky with the two of you.”

Tanner leaned back in his chair and studied her for a minute. “How big a hurry are you in to get to Vegas?”

She stared down into the caramel colored whiskey, now barely covering the ice cubes in the glass she had intended for Tanner. “Not in as big a hurry as I was. Vegas isn’t the best town to be broke in.”

“We might have an offer for you to consider.”

The screen door groaned as Scooter stepped onto the porch. “Before we go making her any promises, why don’t we see how she handles herself tomorrow?”

Dahlia frowned. “What’s going on tomorrow?”

“I’ve got my biggest customer coming to town, and you’re going to have to show me how well you can handle him before I go making any offer of permanent employment.”

As usual, Dahlia couldn’t tell how much of Scooter’s gruffness was the real deal, and how much was just for show. Her mind started to wind around what they were saying...an offer? Permanent employment? And then another thought coiled like a snake and struck her nerves in a flash of awareness.

“Your biggest customer?” She gripped the whiskey glass tighter. If something was important to Raymond Burke, he made sure he was just as important to it. Boot Scooters were the only boots he wore, and he had too much of an ego to let anyone else in the world be Scooter’s number one customer.

Maybe she had it wrong this time. Scooter had told her he kept all his customer’s measurements on file, and never in the time she had been with Raymond had she ever known him to come to Wilder, Texas, for anything. She’d never even heard of this town until she plowed into that damn truck. Maybe there was somebody out there who loved Scooter’s boots more than Raymond did. “I thought your established customers just called in their orders or took care of them online.”

Scooter looked her over carefully. “He’s bringing his girlfriend to get fitted for the first time.”

Dahlia drained the last of the whiskey and fought the anger that boiled her blood. By now he shouldn’t be able to get to her this way.

She had divorced him. She had escaped despite everything he had done to make that hard for her. And now for him to find her here, flat on her butt in this little town, it was too much. Her arms shook, the whiskey burned her belly, and tears she refused to shed stung her eyes. "I appreciate whatever job you're planning to offer me. It's obviously no secret anymore how much I need it. But I can't work for you tomorrow."

"The hell you can't," Scooter said. "I need you to go in and open the shop. Tanner and I have some business to take care of up at the courthouse. You don't know how to measure for boots yet, but Raymond's going to want to see the leathers and skins I've got in. You organized everything in the stockroom, so you could probably do a better job of showing him than I could." He came over to lean against the porch post closest to her. "Just flash him that pretty little smile of yours and by the time I get there he'll be ready to buy a pair in every color."

Dahlia glared at him. "I'll be damned if I—" She stopped herself. It might not be in her best interest for Scooter to know she'd been married to Raymond. Scooter had been good to her, but she didn't think for a minute he'd put her before his business.

"I ain't asking you to sleep with him, just sell him some boots. The stockroom's clean. If you don't learn to sell boots, I ain't got much use for you down at the shop."

"And if I won't do it?"

"Then, sweetheart, you ain't got a job."

The porch went silent, and Dahlia realized that sometime during their conversation darkness had come. The insects were in full harmony, and the porch light glowed yellow against the screen door. Scooter's white shirt and broad shoulders bore down on her like the moon and not even the dimness of early evening could dull the flint of irritation in his dark eyes.

She slid her finger through the condensation on the whiskey glass and steeled herself to meet his stare. “Is the offer to stay here tonight still open?”

“I ain’t throwing you out on the street.”

“Thank you.” She glanced over to Tanner and then back to Scooter. “If you don’t mind, I think I’ll call it a night.”

“Not so fast.” Scooter’s rough voice stopped her in her tracks. He strode past her and held the screen door until she hurried past him.

He caught her by the wrist. A sizzle of pure hunger shot through her veins and converged like a tornado between her thighs. The flash of heat in his eyes assured her he felt it, too.

“I know my way to my room.” She tried to pull her arm away, but he held firm.

“Do you know where I keep sheets and pillowcases?” His voice dropped low, and he pulled her closer. “Or does sleeping on a bare mattress appeal to you?”

Her breath came in pants, and nerves bounced like raindrops beneath her skin. His touch pelted her whole body with heat and desire. Even angry, she couldn’t deny what he did to her.

She followed Scooter down the hall, stopping next to him as he pulled linens from a closet in the hallway. The whiskey was still warm in her veins, but standing next to Scooter sent a flash of heat through her that didn’t have anything to do with the alcohol. How could she be so attracted to a man who was as gruff as a bear one minute and as generous as a nun the next? He constantly kept her off balance, but there was no denying the lifeline he had tossed her or the chemistry between them. She was drawn to him like a magnet even when he was acting like a total prick.

She followed him into the bedroom, her skin on fire, her mind flashing back to the hospital bathroom where he’d held her against the wall, his strong hand on the cheek of her ass.

“I give in,” she said. “Let’s do this. Do it now before I change my mind.”

“Do what, darlin’?” A wicked grin tipped the corner of his mouth and a teasing spark lit his dark eyes. “You want me to make the bed faster?”

She snatched the sheets from his hand. “Forget the damn bed.”

“Now that’s kind of hard to do with you standing there horny as a two-headed toad and begging me to give you what you need.”

“I’m not begging you for anything.”

He tugged the fitted sheet back and fanned it across the bed. She pulled the corners down over one side of the mattress while he did the other side. He glanced over to the pillowcases and flat sheet she had placed on the nightstand. “Toss me the sheet.”

“I can make my own bed.”

“And you’re sure you’re not begging for anything?” He stared across the mattress with a cocky grin.

“I don’t beg.”

“My mistake. Sweet dreams.”

He patted the mattress and gave her a quick wink before starting for the door. His boots clapped against the hard wood floor, and his jean brushed his ass with every step. Her body lit like a brush fire, and she steeled herself to keep from running after him. She couldn’t let him reject her. Not tonight. Not after what she’d been through with Raymond.

“You’re not walking out of here.” She propped one hand on her hip and swallowed hard. He might play a good game, but she knew a bluff when she saw one. “And I’m not begging you. That’s an order.”

He glanced over his shoulder, but didn’t turn around. “If you need anything. Anything at all. My room’s next door. I’ll be a gentleman and leave the door unlocked for you.”

She gripped her hips and clamped her jaw down hard. If he thought she was going to chase after him, he had another thought coming. He wanted her as bad as she wanted him. Worse! And he wouldn’t be able to hold out as long as she could. He’d cave first.

“Sweet dreams yourself, hot stuff. I’ll be a lady and lock my door behind you.”

He snorted a laugh. “A lady, huh? You do that, sweetheart.”

Chapter 9

The chime over Boot Scooter's door jangled, and Dahlia's spine stiffened. She finished arranging a new display next to the full length mirror and black leather club chairs in the center of the store.

Even without turning around to see the haughty glare on his face, she felt Raymond's irritation at not being greeted like a king. She smiled and stood slowly, hands on her hips. He caught her reflection in the mirror, and surprise flashed in his icy blue eyes.

The woman on his arm was gorgeous, of course. Long blonde hair, model perfect features, legs a mile long, and admiration stamped clearly in her soft-eyed gaze at Raymond. A surge of pity hit Dahlia's belly, but it was too late to help this one. If someone had tried to warn her when she had stared at Raymond that same way, she never would have listened.

"My, how the mighty have fallen." Raymond's mouth curled into a sneer as his eyes dipped to take in her figure.

"Fallen?" Dahlia half-laughed. "If you want to keep wearing my boots, you'll watch how you speak to me."

"Your boots?"

She spread her arms and turned slowly. "You see anyone else here?"

"Where's Scooter?"

"He'll be in a little later. I tend to handle more of the financial end of our little business here, but I'm sure I can help you and your vict—" She offered the woman a smile. "I mean, your lady friend, pick out some nice leather and skin combinations."

Raymond crossed his arms over his chest. "You didn't have two dimes to rub together. And now you want me to believe you own a piece of this fine company?"

"I don't care what you believe." She crossed over to the sample table at the back where Scooter had helped her lay out several pieces of leather and various skins for Raymond to take a look at. She propped one hip on the heavy wood tabletop and smiled at Raymond's companion. "A word of advice, honey, make sure he buys you lots of presents, and hoard them like a squirrel. When the time comes to sell them all and run like hell, you'll thank me."

The woman's brow furrowed, and she turned to Raymond in surprise. "You know her?"

"Ex-wife." He glared at Dahlia. "But don't worry, sweetheart. You're the one I been waiting for."

Dahlia swallowed her gag reflex and moved around to the far side of the table. "Let's get this over with. The lady here...what was your name, honey?"

The woman smiled, "Honey is my name."

Dahlia gave her a warm smile. "Well, isn't that fitting? Honey, trust me when I tell you, you want a pair in every color. They fit like a dream, and you're not ever going to want to take them off." She lifted her leg and twisted her ankle for Honey to get a good look at the red boots Scooter had given her.

"Ray did say they were the best."

"For once, he didn't lie." Dahlia pulled out an order form and poised her pen over the top. "So one of each?"

"Sure!" Honey looked thrilled, and then realized what she'd done. "That's okay, isn't it, Ray?"

"Of course, sweetheart. Anything for you."

Dahlia hid her smirk and moved to the end of the table where Scooter had laid out his newest samples.

"Tell you what, Raymond. You and I both know money's no object, and you can't ever have too many pairs of your favorite boots.

Why don't we just let Scooter put together a half dozen combinations for you, you can leave, and you and I can get on with our lives."

"Honey needs to be measured, and I'm quite enjoying your discomfort, darlin'."

Dahlia propped her hand on her hip. "I haven't felt discomfort since I last slept in your bed." She glanced down at Honey's feet and pulled her red boots off. "Try these on, sweetie. Raymond knows what he likes, and he doesn't ever venture too far from the tried and true. Our feet just might be the same size."

Honey hesitated, then slipped Dahlia's boots on. "Oh! They fit like a dream!" She strutted around the store, stopping to pose in the mirror and then plopping down in one of the club chairs with her legs propped on one of the arms and her boots crossed at the ankle. "Do I look sexy, Ray?"

"The sexiest thing I ever put my dick in." He pulled her up and kissed her full on the mouth with enough enthusiasm Dahlia almost laughed. If he thought for a minute he could make her jealous, he was more delusional than she had given him credit for.

Flushed and beaming, Honey reluctantly slipped the boots off and handed them back to Dahlia. The bells over the door rang out and Alana, the woman Dahlia had met outside Tanner's hospital room, walked in like she owned the place. Her dark hair hung past her slender shoulders, and her perfume scented the burst of warm air that followed her in from the street.

"Hey there, Killer." Alana's warm smile and playful tone took all the sting from her words. "Where's Scooter?"

The bells over the door rang out again as Raymond and Honey made their way out.

"I'm the only one here."

Alana watched as Dahlia slid her feet back into the sumptuous leather of the boots Scooter had given her. "Wow. Scooter must trust you like his right hand. I've been trying to get that man to hire help for years, but he's never trusted anybody enough to leave them alone

with his baby.” She glanced around the store, the corners of her eyes crinkling with her smile. “He’s a good man, a hell of a boot maker, and has one of the most jaded hearts in Texas. You must be one hell of a woman to win him over so quickly.”

Dahlia’s mouth opened, but nothing came out. Scooter trusted her? She sure hadn’t given him much reason to.

The door opened again, and a cowboy wearing a pair of black Boot Scooter’s stepped into the store. “Sorry, darlin’. Didn’t mean to keep you waiting.” He pulled Alana in close and planted a brief but heated kiss on her lips.

Dahlia watched in fascination. She could have sworn Alana and Rayne were head over heels in love when she met them at the hospital. But from the way Alana returned this cowboy’s greeting, they were more than friendly.

“Killer, I’d like you to meet my husband, Dirk.”

Dahlia extended her hand. “Dahlia. Not as much of a killer as Tanner and Scooter like to make me out to be.”

Dirk laughed. “They roped you into their little stable, did they?”

Dahlia shook her head. “I’m not sure what you mean. I’m working here at the store for a few days until I leave for Vegas.”

Alana gave her arm a squeeze. “Don’t be in such a hurry, honey. You’ve got yourself two of the best men in Wilder. You’d be a fool to let them go.”

“Can I help you with something?” Dahlia couldn’t help but notice how Dirk’s touch lingered on Alana’s waist, how he stood close to her with the ease of a lover, the same way Rayne had in the hospital. And who could blame either of them. Alana was gorgeous, with a genuine smile and a body that would stop traffic for miles. She could probably have more than two men at her side if she wanted them.

“We’re here to pick up some boots,” Alana said. “Scooter should have them in the back with my name on them.”

Dahlia went to check the storeroom, confused by Alana’s implication that she herself “had” Tanner and Scooter as if “having”

two men was as normal as fried chicken on Sunday. Maybe to Alana it was. Dahlia smiled. Must be nice. She could only imagine what it would be like to be sandwiched between Scooter and Tanner. And it didn't take long for her imagination to leave her longing for a fantasy she'd never played out. Yes, Alana was a lucky woman indeed, especially if Rayne and Dirk loved her together the way they loved her alone.

Dahlia found the boots and carried them out to the front of the store with a question on the tip of her tongue. She was glad to see Alana near the display window and Dirk at the back table checking out a piece of leather she'd laid out for Raymond.

She handed Alana the boots and blurted her question in a whisper. "Do Tanner and Scooter usually share women?"

Alana narrowed her eyes slightly as if she was determining how far to trust her. "Are they sharing you?"

Dahlia shook her head.

"Do you want them to?"

"Would they?"

"I've never known one of them to get in trouble without the other." She smiled openly. "And you look like trouble enough for both of them to me."

"Ready, babe?" Dirk handed Dahlia a piece of leather as he hooked his other arm around Alana's waist. "Tell Scooter I need a pair in this, would you?"

Dahlia nodded and took the leather from his hand. She said her goodbyes to Alana and Dirk and manned the store for the next couple of hours while fantasies of being shared by Tanner and Scooter spun like a web in her mind.

By the time Scooter returned, Dahlia had Boot Scooters to herself and twenty orders sitting on Scooter's workstation. And she'd just about worked up her nerve to make it clear she wanted to follow up on their hospital bathroom encounter. If he didn't suggest Tanner join them, she'd find a way to invite him herself. The thought of both of

them at once sent a shiver down her spine. Raymond may have stripped her sexual confidence from her, but she was about to take it back in spades.

Scooter picked up the stack of papers and waved them at her with a grin. "I knew old Burke wouldn't be able to resist that smile of yours."

Dahlia planted both her feet and stared him straight in the eye. She was ready to take him to bed, but there was one thing he needed to be clear on first. "If you ever make me wait on him again, I quit. I don't care if I'm dead broke on my ass living in a cardboard box on a street corner. Are we clear?"

Heat flashed in Scooter's eyes. "That bastard didn't lay a hand on you, did he?"

"The bastard is my ex-husband. If he laid a hand on me it wouldn't still be attached to his arm."

Something darkened Scooter's features. "Why didn't you tell me?"

"It's not something I'm proud of."

"You're not proud of marrying for money, sweetheart? A lot of women would think they were hot shit if they could bag a catch like Raymond Burke."

"He's not a catch. And I didn't bag him. I thought..." Her hands fisted at her sides. Her own naïve stupidity was the hardest thing she'd tried to come to terms with through all of this. "I loved him. I thought he loved me."

"Is that so?" Scooter's eyes didn't register an ounce of belief and the scowl on his face only deepened. "You got him to marry you, but couldn't connive your way around the pre-nup. It all makes sense now. And there's one thing you need to understand. I ain't Raymond Burke, and I don't take to women with dollar signs in their eyes. I don't give a damn how gorgeous they are."

“I don’t...” She was too furious to finish. If he wanted to think she was a gold digger, he could take every one of those new boot orders she’d taken for him and shove them up his perfectly round ass.

“I’ll send Tanner for you. The longer I stay here, the uglier this is gonna get.” He left her standing in the workroom. She heard the bells over the front door jangle as he left.

Chapter 10

Dahlia sat in silence, staring out the window of Tanner's truck as he drove her back to Scooter's. He had arrived a few minutes after Scooter stormed out of the store. Tanner told her to go ahead and lock up. The meeting at the courthouse hadn't gone as well as they'd hoped, and Scooter wasn't in the best mood. That might explain his nastiness to her, but she had a feeling he'd meant what he said.

Dahlia turned to Tanner. His tanned arm stuck out from his rolled-up shirtsleeve, and broad fingers curled around the steering wheel.

"What's on your mind, Killer?"

"Any chance you'd let me stay at your place tonight? Scooter hasn't paid me yet, so I can't afford a room at Millie's even if she's got one."

Tanner's jaw tensed, and he turned his attention back to the road. "I would if I could, but I'll be at Scooter's tonight myself."

"You're not going home?"

He half laughed. "I live at the ranch. It ain't the kind of outfit where you want to show any weakness."

"What do you mean?"

"Grainger's got a habit of hiring every roughneck drifter that makes his way into town. Some of 'em would stab their own mama if they thought it'd put an extra dollar in their pockets. Just about every one of them's been ranching since they were in diapers. My job's always on the line, and I got to be in shape to defend it."

She stared at him open-mouthed. "You think someone would try to kill you while you're recovering from surgery and the accident?"

He shook his head. “Naw, there’d probably just be some sort of accident that caused me to break a leg or throw my back out, something that would put me out of commission a little while longer so one of the old boys could step up and take over for me.”

Dahlia’s mouth hung open. “Cowboys do that?”

“I told you, Grainger don’t exactly hire the cream of the crop.”

“Why do you work for him?”

“When a job opens up around these parts, you take it. But Scooter and I are working on something that might change that.”

“That’s why you had to be in court this morning?”

He nodded.

“You don’t dislike me as much as you pretend to, do you?”

Tanner grinned. “I ain’t met a woman yet I could trust, and I don’t usually get friendly with anybody who tries to take me out, but I don’t mind looking at you. And when you ain’t behind the wheel, I feel pretty safe.”

Dahlia laughed. “If you didn’t like me, you wouldn’t have come to pick me up at the store, and you wouldn’t be driving me home. And you wouldn’t be taking me to dinner.”

“Dinner? Who said anything about dinner?”

“I know you’re not going to make me starve.”

Tanner shook his head and pulled the truck off the road and into the gravel parking lot of Poke’s Pork Pit. “I hope you like barbecue, darlin’.”

“I like it as much as you like me. Now stand back and please tell me it’s a buffet.” She laughed as she jumped down from the truck, relieved to see Tanner’s easy smile. Alana was right about Scooter and Tanner. For all their piss and vinegar, it’d be hard to find two more decent men.

* * * *

The headlights of Scooter's truck shone on the trunks of towering pines, and his tires bounced and crawled over the uneven terrain. Years of rains had washed out what had once been a two rut driveway.

He maneuvered the last bend before the road opened onto the clearing. A naked concrete slab stood under the moonlight like an altar. He shook his head and threw the truck in park.

Fresh out of high school, he'd spent four years in the Army, first boot camp then countless training marches and exercises. He'd hated every minute of it, but he'd had a goal in mind. He saved every dollar he could get his fingers on, deposited the money into a savings account that he wouldn't have touched for anything short of saving his best friend's life.

He needed the money to set up his business. It was hard to build the finest boots in the world if you couldn't afford the finest materials to make them out of. He'd had a plan. He'd executed the plan. He'd put four years of sweat and sacrifice into serving his country so he could come home and build his own American dream.

He stared at the concrete slab in front of his truck and hit the heel of his hand against the steering wheel. He pulled another can off the six-pack on the seat next to him and popped the top. Until she called him up asking for money three months ago, he hadn't heard from her in two years.

He couldn't find it in his heart to hand over cash, not after the way she'd betrayed him. He'd been seventeen when he opened up his first savings account—the same account he had when he joined the Army. He never thought he'd have to worry about his mother being a joint owner. He never thought for a minute she'd drain every dime he'd saved and then run out of town with the first flashy cowboy that passed through.

But she had. Every dime he'd put away for the first four years of his adult life sat there in front of his headlights. A concrete slab. The beginnings of a house his mother decided to build for herself, and

then abandoned when she thought she found someone to be her sugar daddy. The knife of betrayal hadn't dulled a bit. He didn't like to think about it much, but he couldn't trust a pretty face to save his life. And he damn sure didn't work his ass off to watch some woman run off with his money again.

Now his mother had done it again. He and Tanner had spent half the day at the courthouse waiting for her attorney to show up with the deed to this slab in the middle of a hundred acres so they could finalize the sale and record the paperwork with the county. He thought he'd finally own the property his savings sat on. He'd sell a small portion of it to Tanner, and Tanner would lease the rest of it to house his heavy equipment business. Developers were already buying thousands of acres in the north end of the county. They'd need companies to clear the land and pave the new private roads. It was a solid business plan. A plan that would get Tanner off Grainger's ranch of delinquent cowhands and give Scooter the satisfaction of owning that damn concrete slab he'd poured four years of his life into.

But the attorney never showed up with the deed she was supposed to sign over to him. He'd put the funds for the sale in escrow. All he had to do was sign the papers she was supposed to have already signed, pay the filing fees, and walk out of the courthouse a happier man.

He tilted his head back and emptied the better half of the beer down his throat. If a man couldn't trust his own mother, who in the hell could he trust?

Chapter 11

Tanner kept his eyes closed in the early light of morning and listened to the floorboards give ever so slightly beneath Dahlia's feet as she crept into his room. Whatever the little killer had in mind, he was ready for her. He flexed his hand under the covers, ready to hold her back if he had to, and hoping like hell she didn't want him to. His morning wood sang to him, and his cock jumped.

He kept his eyes shut as her creeping feet drew closer. He probably ought to be ready in case she'd brought something to knock him in the head with. Looking at her, a man would never think to put his guard up. She looked sweeter than table sugar and hotter than a jalapeno all at the same damn time. How in the hell a woman could pull off such a blend of vixen and saint he couldn't figure out, but he'd been around the block enough times to know he'd be in a heap of trouble if he didn't stay on his toes.

He'd seen her wrangle with Scooter, but she'd been as docile as a kitten at dinner. If she hadn't apologized to him and told him again how she planned to pay him back every dime that came out of his pocket, he'd have gotten her naked as soon as they got back to Scooter's empty house.

Call him a fool, but he couldn't take a woman to bed if she didn't want to be there for the right reasons. Thinking she owed him something she couldn't repay any other way wasn't a reason to fuck him in his book. At least not the reason he'd want her to fuck him.

He hadn't figured her out yet. She had a tough skin to put up with all the shit he and Scooter had dished out, but that didn't surprise him. She hadn't made it as a showgirl in Vegas without getting knocked

down a few times. As much as he wanted to buy into that kitten quality of hers, she might have him completely snowed. His gut told him she was as genuine as she seemed to be, but he'd been wrong about women before.

His mattress sank beneath her weight, and the warmth of her hip pressed against his. He tensed, but kept his eyes closed.

"Tanner..." Her hand smoothed the sheet over his hip and slid down his thigh. "I brought you some coffee."

He grunted. "You poison it? Or you planning to pour it on me?" He should feel like an ass for giving her such a hard time, but he couldn't help himself. He loved that spark in her eye when she stood toe-to-toe with him and Scooter. Damn, she got his blood pumping, and she probably thought he didn't even like her.

The mattress shifted again, and his eyes drifted open. What he saw stopped him dead.

A steaming cup of coffee was on his night table, and Dahlia sat on the edge of the bed within easy reach. She slipped open the last button on the oversized shirt she wore, probably Scooter's. The soft curve of her exposed breasts made his mouth water. He swallowed hard. With a shrug of her shoulders, the shirt fell to the bed, and the body of an angel leaned close enough to touch.

"What are you doing, sweetheart?" His voice was gravely. A gallon of blood rocketed straight to his cock, stretching his dick to its limit.

"You." She drew her knees up and climbed over him, planting her thighs around his hips. His hands went automatically to her slender waist. God, she felt like heaven in his grip. She leaned forward slowly. Her long hair fell onto his shoulders. Her breasts teased his chest, and her dark eyes sparked pure devil when their gazes locked.

"Goddamn it. You're gonna kill me yet. And I'm going to let you do it."

"You might die a happy man."

He flipped her flat on her back, the sheet still wedged between them, but they lay skin to skin from the waist up. Their heavy breaths filled the room.

She gripped the back of his arms. "I'm glad to see you're up for this, cowboy."

Tanner yanked the sheet from between them.

Dahlia gasped. "You've been hiding this under your clothes?"

He sucked in a breath as she trailed her fingers down his abdomen, sending another surge of blood to his dick. Goddamn, he hadn't ever been this hard in his life. Maybe he'd been needing a woman to run his ass over a time or two.

She wiggled beneath him, positioning herself exactly where he wanted her and wrapped one long leg around his waist.

His cock stretched harder against the soft curls above her pussy. He pumped a long, slow stroke against her and watched her eyes flame again. If she wanted a fuck, he'd give it to her, but he wasn't fool enough to think she hadn't come for something more than an easy lay.

"I think we're clear I don't want you thinking you've got to pay your debts this way. So what's this gonna cost me, sweetheart?"

Her mouth flew open and a frown creased her forehead. "I'm not...I'm not..." Her face turned beet red.

"I ain't calling you a hooker. I'm asking what you want bad enough to get this far on my good side."

Her face darkened. She blushed crimson from the top of her head down to her gorgeous tits.

"I ain't gonna hold it against you," he said, pressing another slow stroke against her. "I just want to settle up any business before we get to the fun stuff."

She started to say something but snapped her mouth closed. Her thick bottom lip trembled slightly, and her frown deepened.

"Go on, sugar. Spit it out and we can go from there."

“I want you.” She stared him hard in the eye. “I want you to make me feel like a woman again. My ex-husband didn’t. Scooter wants to fuck me one minute and hates me the next. I sold a year’s worth of boots for him yesterday, and he stormed out like I was a rattlesnake. I need to get laid. I need a man to hold me. I want to scream your name over and over again, and if Scooter wasn’t such an ass, I’d want him for the same reasons.”

Whatever he’d expected her to say, it hadn’t been that. Unless Scooter had gotten into the habit of tiptoeing, he hadn’t come home last night. “Sugar, I don’t know a damn thing about your ex-husband, but there’s only one kind of woman Scooter can’t stand.”

“And I apparently fit that bill? What is it he hates about me?”

Suspicion crept in, and Tanner looked down at her pretty face. The last thing Scooter wanted was a trophy, especially one that loved his wallet more than she loved him. “How did you get your hands on a car like the one you were driving if you can’t even afford to insure it?”

Tanner wrestled with his own gut. As much as he wanted to be pissed that she’d half-killed him, something told him she was more of a victim than he was. She had the body of a devil and the mouth of a fighter, but her eyes were as innocent and scared as a newborn calf’s. And if that wasn’t enough to make him want to give her the benefit of the doubt, his cock, still pressed against her, was hotter and harder than a prodding iron and ready to get hotter.

“I married an asshole. An asshole with money. But I didn’t marry him for his money. I gave him every ounce of my heart.”

The screen door on the porch opened with a groan, and the front door slammed shut. Scooter was home. Tanner rose up on his elbow and turned toward the open bedroom door. “Scooter! Get in here.”

* * * *

Scooter's boots hammered out the path he took across the hardwood floors. Dahlia's heart pounded with every step, and she twisted trying to wriggle from beneath Tanner. His weight pinned her easily, and his injuries didn't diminish his strength enough for her to break free.

"Don't go anywhere, darlin'." Tanner flattened his palm against hers and pressed the back of her hand to the bed. "Let's get to the bottom of this first." He smiled down at her. "Trust me, you're a hell of a lot more forgivable in this position than any other. Let me do the talking."

She flattened her free palm against his chest. Her heart pounded. Gut instinct told her to bite her tongue, but the passion attached to the images she'd been painting in her mind since talking with Alana overrode her critical thinking. "I want you both." She bit down hard on her bottom lip. "I've never been with two men at once, but I want to."

He studied her for a minute as Scooter's footsteps drew closer. "And you're sure this doesn't have anything to do with what you feel like you owe us?"

"If I hadn't been watching Scooter's ass in the rearview, I wouldn't have sent you into the ditch. I swear if the accident costs you anything out of your own pocket, I'll pay you back every dime. I don't know how long it'll take, but my word is good." Her resolve turned to stone. "And my credit used to be."

She pushed hard against his chest and tried again to squirm out from under him. "I need to feel like a woman again, but I don't need to beg for it. Or tell you for the tenth time I'm not a hooker. Let me up."

"Awww hell, honey." Tanner pinned her down with a kiss, meeting those soft pink lips of hers was like tasting heaven. But when she opened them for him, he knew he'd landed straight in hell.

She moaned and stopped trying to escape his bed. He could feel the sexual energy racing just beneath her skin. Her desire had been

pent up too long, and right now she'd sacrifice at least a couple of her principles for physical relief.

As much as he wanted to fuck her and relieve his own built-up frustrations, he wanted to treat her like the woman she was. Hell, if she'd been neglected that long, she needed more than a wham bam thank ya, ma'am. And he had his own pride to hold to on to. He hadn't ever let a woman leave his bed who wasn't glad she'd been there. He sure as hell wasn't going to start now.

He pinned both her hands to the mattress above her head. "I'm gonna make you cum over and over again 'til you can't remember my name or yours. This body of yours has been knockin' me senseless since the first time I laid eyes on you. And that fightin' spirit of yours is a bigger turn on than those legs." She drew in a sharp breath as he nipped her neck. "You ready to have some fun with me?"

She struggled against his hands, but looked up at him with nothing but pure desire in her dark brown eyes. "I'm gonna hold you to that promise, cowboy. As long as I remember my name, you aren't done with me yet. Are we clear?"

She hooked her calf around the back of his knee and slid her smooth leg down his.

"I ain't lied to you yet, have I?"

His tongue found hers and slid against the sweetness of her mouth. His cock stretched again and throbbed against the wiry curls on her mound. He lowered himself as she spread her legs for him. The length of his shaft slid along her wet crease, and his blood pounded in his ears. "Oh, goddamn it."

He had to fight every muscle in his body not to push himself so deep in her he couldn't find his way out. Instead, he slid lower, kissing a trail down her neck, her breasts, taking a minute to suck her little red nipples into his mouth. Her back arched and she panted his name.

He knew Scooter had a bird's eye view from the door, and he must be mad as hell at her not to have already climbed in the bed with

them. Either she hadn't noticed him standing there yet, or she didn't mind him watching.

Tanner worked his way down her gorgeous body, tasting her soft skin, letting the scent of her fill his nose. He let his tongue play on the smooth rise of her hip before moving lower to kiss her inner thigh.

He held her legs open wide, pressing her to the bed, knowing the minute he went down on her she would come unglued. He gave damn good head, and he knew it. A woman who hadn't been loved in as long as she had would rocket to the moon. "Hold on, darlin'." He buried his face in her pussy. He didn't need to explore. He knew exactly where he needed to go. He loved her body, but more than that he would love bringing out the vixen in her, loving her so long and so well she wouldn't ever forget being in his arms. The only thing better than tasting Dahlia on his tongue would be hearing her cry out for more, feeling her hands twist in his hair and her body move beneath him. He'd want to make this good for her no matter what, but after all that she'd been through she needed a man to remind her all the ways she could be loved, and that gave him even more reason to prove to her she'd picked the right man for the job.

His fingers sank into the soft flesh of her inner thighs. The clean seductive scent of her skin made him heady and hornier than a three headed buck. He breathed her in, savoring that last moment of anticipation, feeling the coil of tension beneath her heated skin. And when his own hunger reached the point of no return, he sucked her clit into his mouth and bombarded it with quick soft licks. She writhed and panted, telling him everything he needed to know. A low moan built up in her chest and then escaped in short gasps and shouts. She'd been pent up too long, and he had no idea when she'd last been loved properly. She repeated his name in a breathless song, the strain of her voice growing with every movement of his tongue. Then with a buck of her hips, his chin was coated in her sweet cum. He let go of her clit just long enough to taste the fruit of his labor and to let her

catch half a breath, and then he went right back to doing what he did well.

The second orgasm just about sent them both off the bed. She was strong as hell, and he had a time holding her down. Her hands fisted in his hair, her legs scissored against his hands, and her back came off the mattress completely.

She bent over him, panting heavy breaths. “Oh my God! What are you doing to me?”

He pushed himself up on his elbows, but before he could say a word, she grabbed the sides of his face and took his mouth in a kiss that made his dick heavier than lead.

“I need you inside me now.” Her voice was barely more than a whisper and trembled with need.

Tanner didn’t make her ask twice. He dipped down to taste her breast, running his tongue over the soft slope and taking her already hardened nipple in between his teeth. She arched for him. A gasp shot from her lungs, and her fingers raked his hair. Her whole body trembled beneath him, and he was just getting started.

He sucked the rigid little peak of her breast hard and slid his hand under her ass as she squirmed beneath him.

“Please. Please don’t make me wait.” Her words were heavy with breath. Her soft body pressed closer to his, and her hips fought to move beneath him.

He reached under the curve of her bottom and grabbed hold of her thigh, spreading her legs further and giving himself access to the slick heat between her legs.

He slid his fingertips over her weeping entrance, dipped them between her swollen folds, and then eased his hand back to tease her rear hole with his wet fingertips. At the same time he pumped his hips, letting his dick slide over her pussy. The second he brushed her clit she came off the bed. He leaned in close to her ear. “Settle down now, darlin’. I promise I’ll take good care of you.”

She swallowed hard, and her lips moved against his jaw. She kissed her way back to his mouth and moaned as he stroked her clit with his dick again. His own shoulders shook with restraint. She moved like she was a coil, wound so tight, she'd spring off the bed the minute he let her loose. Goddamn, if she responded like this to a little toying around, fucking her would be an experience he wouldn't forget any time soon. He lowered himself and pushed his cock into the soft, warm flesh of her inner thigh.

She bit down on her bottom lip. Her eyes flared, and her voice was fierce. "If you don't put yourself inside me now, I'm going to put you there myself."

Tanner couldn't hold back his grin, and he couldn't deny the little woman what she wanted either. But just to tease her, he slid one finger around the rim of her ass slowly. She nearly came undone in his arms. Her face and neck blushed. Her hands dug into his back. He inserted the tip of his dick and nearly came undone himself. She went off like a rodeo bull, screaming, bucking, biting down hard on his shoulder. Her pussy clamped around his cock in velvety spasms that tightened his neck and made his balls ache. He couldn't stand it another second. He spread her legs with his thigh and slid his cock deep inside her with a stroke so fast and hard he yelled himself.

If any of his injuries still bothered him, he couldn't feel them. He couldn't feel anything but the grip of her inner walls around his dick and the sting of her fingernails on his skin. They moved together like one of them might get away before the other was done. And he wasn't planning on being done for a while. The first surge of warning hit his gut a split second before it shot down his cock. He slowed his strokes and fought to catch his breath.

"Don't you dare stop," she warned him between pants. A bead of sweat dropped from his chest and pooled in the valley of her throat.

"Don't worry, honey. I don't think I'm ever letting you out of this bed."

A smile curled her lips, and then her eyes widened in surprise as he drove deep again. Her mouth moved like she wanted to say something, and her eyes followed some movement near the door and she stilled. From the surprise that registered in her eyes, he figured she must have completely forgotten about Scooter. He looked over his shoulder. Scooter stood there with his hands on his hips and a shit-eating grin on his face.

“You gonna stand there and watch, or are you gonna see if the lady wants more company?”

* * * *

Dahlia couldn't catch her breath. She licked the dryness from her lips and enjoyed one wave of sensation after another as Tanner continued to move in and out of her like he had this conversation with Scooter every day.

He leaned close to her ear. “You want me to throw his ass out, or are you gonna invite him in? If he was that mad at you, you wouldn't still be in his house.” Tanner pushed his cock deep inside her. “It'll be a hell of a lot more fun with him in here.”

Dahlia fought to keep her eyes from rolling up into her head. My God, she hadn't ever had a more perfect dick inside her. She found her voice, and somehow managed to form words. “I don't know how it's gonna get much better than this.” She bit down on her bottom lip and threw her head back as Tanner sank deep into her again.

The scent of Tanner's skin, the feel of his body in hers, his easy acceptance, even encouragement, of such a naughty idea, all of it came together and gave her more nerve than she would have ever had on her own. “I want him, too,” she whispered.

Tanner chuckled low in his throat and pumped his cock into her again sending pleasure rocketing through her core. “You better tell him then.”

Dahlia's heart pounded. Tanner didn't stop moving. Another orgasm was building deep in her belly. Warmth and sensation spread over her thighs, circled her clit, sang against the walls of her pussy as he continued to stroke deep inside her. She locked eyes with Scooter. His passion-darkened gaze burned a hole through her. The huge bulge in the front of his jeans made her mouth water. She had never felt such intense sensations and still wanted so much more in her life.

"Come here." Her voice cracked. She swallowed against the dryness of her throat and said it again. "Come here, Scooter. Hurry."

Scooter didn't budge. "I think I'll just watch, darlin'."

Dahlia wanted to argue, but just as she opened her mouth, Tanner angled his hips upward, pushing his cock against her G-spot, and sent her shooting off like a rocket. She slammed her eyes shut and cried out, releasing a year's worth of pent-up sexual need.

She didn't know how much time had passed when she opened her eyes to see Tanner staring down at her with a look of bemusement and lust on his face. He rolled her over, letting her straddle him, but held her hips still when she started to move.

"Hold on a minute, honey. I have a feeling I know what's going on here." He eased his grip on her hips. "Why don't you tell Scooter why you're naked in my bed?"

She stared into Tanner's passion-darkened eyes when she answered. "Because I haven't had sex in a year, and staying here with the two of you has me crawling out of my skin."

"How long you planning to stay here with us?"

"Until I earn enough to buy a bus ticket to Vegas or Scooter kicks me out." She spoke quickly, ready to get back to sex and out of this conversation. My God, what was wrong with him? She'd never met a man who'd rather talk than have her ride his cock.

"And what are you planning to do once you get to Vegas?"

"The same thing I've always done when I was flat on my ass, get a job and make some money. I sure as hell don't expect to get it any other way."

She heard Scooter reposition himself in the doorway, but she didn't look at him. Whatever she had done to piss him off was beyond her. She'd sold every pair of boots she could. She'd taken money out of Raymond Burke's pocket and put it in his, and she'd swallowed a hell of a lot of pride to do it.

She closed her eyes and balanced her hands on Tanner's shoulders, moving her hips in a slow grind. His hard cock filled her up, reached deep inside her, and made her want more and more. He lifted his hips, changing the angle in a way that sent her head back and a heavy breath rushing from her lungs. Aside from his stellar oral performance, Tanner hadn't done anything any other lover wouldn't do, but there was something about the way he did it. The way he fit inside her, the way he moved, and even the confident restraint that said he wasn't in any hurry. He planned to be fucking her for a while.

She could feel the heat of Scooter's body behind her, and she kept her eyes closed, silently begging for his touch even though he was acting like more of an ass than she wanted to tangle with.

His deep voice landed close to her ear. "Why would a woman built like you have to go a year without getting laid?"

She turned to look him in the eye. "Because I married a man who got tired of me, and would rather fuck his girlfriends than his wife." The confession didn't hurt her or make her nearly as angry as it once had. She had come to terms with her mistake months ago, and now she was just relieved to be free of the jerk.

Scooter's fingertips swept the hair off her shoulder and came to rest at the back of her neck. "And what would make you marry a man like Burke to begin with?"

She could hear the edge in his voice and her back tensed. It was one thing to make a mistake. It was another to be completely naïve. She hated how stupid she had been more than she hated her ex-husband.

"I believed his lies, and I fell in love. Why else would I marry him?" Embarrassed heat flooded her, and she fought back tears she

swore she'd never shed again. She moved against Tanner, wishing he would take her breath away again, make her forget everything Scooter was making her remember. Couldn't these two just have sex? Did they have to investigate her like a criminal? She'd wrecked a car, not robbed a bank.

Scooter lifted his hand from her, and she automatically leaned back, longing for his touch again. "Maybe you'd marry him for money."

She turned around to glare at him, pissed he'd interrupted the best sex she'd ever had to accuse her of being a gold digger. "If I was going to marry for money, I'd have married long before I met Raymond. Do you have any idea how many rich assholes would love to throw a ring on a showgirl and prance her around town?"

Scooter got up off the bed and walked out. Tanner groaned and rolled her over. "Time to make you forget your name," he whispered.

She glanced toward the door, feeling the sting of Scooter's rejection deep in her chest.

"He'll be back," Tanner said. "This ain't about you, darlin'." Tanner lifted her thigh to his shoulder and entered her deep enough to erase Scooter and every other thought from her mind.

* * * *

Tanner stepped out on the porch and stretched in the early afternoon sun. Scooter took one look at him and laughed. Tanner hadn't bothered to put a shirt or boots on, and he walked like he didn't have a solid bone in his body. She must be a hell of a lay. A twinge of envy hit Scooter, but he pushed it down. He knew better than to let a vixen in the bedroom make him forget all the lessons he'd learned. Red lines from Dahlia's fingernails hadn't yet faded off Tanner's shoulders and chest. If the front of him looked like that, his back probably looked like he'd taken a hundred lashes with a whip. And

the son of a bitch had probably loved every second of her digging into his skin like that.

Tanner grinned. "I ain't ever been so glad to be run over in my life." He leaned against the rail and gave Scooter a once over. "How much longer you gonna make her pay for marrying a rich guy?"

"She earned enough in commission yesterday for a ticket to Vegas and back. I'll give her the money, and I bet you damn good and well she's gonna try and stick around to see how much longer she can ride the gravy train." He tossed a toothpick into the grass. "Don't worry, this won't be your last chance to fuck her."

Scooter's chest tightened, but he swallowed down the guilt that rose up inside him. He felt like an ass, but at least he wasn't a dumbass. He'd almost fallen for her and her vulnerable feistiness. He'd almost gotten wrapped up in those long legs and forgotten everything he'd ever learned about women.

"I ain't sure you're right about her," Tanner said.

"That's 'cause she just fucked you senseless." Scooter started down the steps. "When the afterglow wears off and you ain't thinking with your dick anymore, you'll know I'm right."

Scooter pulled open his truck door. "The cash on the counter is the money she earned. Tell her it's there, would you?"

* * * *

Dahlia towel dried her hair and stared hard into the bathroom mirror. Since climbing out of Tanner's bed, she felt like every knot in her muscles had been untied, but she also knew it was time to get the hell out of Dodge. She'd never been one to have sex for sex's sake. Her emotions didn't know how to stay out of the mix. She'd liked Tanner before she slept with him. Now she felt the crushing excitement and stirrings of new love. The way he'd touched her. The tenderness and unhurried passion. Everything about the way he'd made love to her catapulted her out of the arena of casual sex. He was

a good man with a good heart beneath his prickly exterior, and she hadn't ever experienced a physical connection with anyone like the one she'd shared with him. Her heart was begging to follow where her body had led, but she didn't trust her heart anymore.

Tanner and Scooter were two of a kind. They hid their generosity and innate gentleness beneath a hide tougher than the soles on Scooter's boots. Tanner might have let her in sexually, and Scooter had been a knight in shining armor, but Scooter had made it clear what he thought of her being married to Raymond, and she didn't expect Tanner to fall in love just because she'd slept with him. It was time for her to get to Vegas, back to a world she knew how to navigate.

Dahlia twisted her hair onto her head and dressed quickly. The scent of coffee wafting down the hall was calling her name, and the sooner she figured out how to get away from Wilder, Texas, the better.

Tanner sat at the kitchen counter, a cup of steaming coffee between his talented hands. He gave her a warm smile. "You remembered your name yet?"

"I think it's all coming back to me." She kissed his cheek before making her way to the coffee pot.

"Scooter left your paycheck."

Dahlia averted her gaze from the envelope he held out to her. She hated walking away from Tanner when things were just getting started between them, but he might not want anything more than a one-time romp or an occasional lay. And she just didn't have it in her to stick around to find out.

"Do you think you could drive me into town today? I feel like stretching my legs and seeing what's around here."

"I've got to meet Scooter at the courthouse in about an hour. Looks like our paperwork's gonna be there this time. I can drop you off downtown and pick you up when we're done."

“That’d be great. Thanks.” She hated lying to him, but he and Scooter had done her enough favors. She wasn’t going to ask him to drive her to the bus station, and she didn’t even know if Scooter had paid her enough for bus fare to Vegas if Tanner did drive her all the way to Waylon. She would feel better handling this on her own without any more of their charity, and the sooner she got herself out of Scooter’s hair, the happier he’d be. He’d made it clear she’d worn out her welcome.

Tanner carried his cup over to the sink and drained the last of his coffee before rinsing it out and putting it in the dishwasher. “I’ll shower up, and we can grab a late lunch before I have to meet Scooter, if you’re up for it.” He cradled her neck in his palm and stroked his thumb along her jaw. She leaned in for a kiss like it was the most natural thing in the world. Heat flamed between them. He cradled her hip in his hand and pulled her to him. She sank into the kiss and his body surrendering to the lust and tide of emotion that rushed through her.

Tanner pulled back with a low groan. “If we get started again, I won’t make my meeting with Scooter.” He gave her another quick kiss and smiled. “If all the papers are in order, I won’t be going back to work for Grainger. If the meeting wasn’t that important, I’d drag you back to bed right now.”

Relief flooded Dahlia. “Good. I don’t like the idea of you working with those men he hires.”

Tanner grinned. “Sweet of you to worry about me, darlin’, but I can hold my own.” He winked. “Especially when I ain’t getting run over by damned—”

She cut him off with another kiss, let her tongue savor the sweet taste of his mouth, and then stepped back. “I just saved you a fight, cowboy. You can thank me later.”

She left him standing there and hurried to her room. She was going to miss him, and she knew she’d never forget the way he’d

made her feel. She pulled her suitcase from the closet and re-packed everything she'd taken out of it.

The shower was running when she wheeled her luggage down the hall and carried it out to Tanner's truck. She slid the suitcase under the toolbox in the truck bed and dragged a couple of thick ropes up close enough to keep it from being overly noticeable. Once he disappeared inside the courthouse, she'd get it out and hitch the first ride to Waylon she could find.

Chapter 12

Scooter carried the mail in from the mailbox and sorted through the bills and the junk. A hand addressed envelope stopped him. He flipped it over and ran his finger under the flap. He pulled out a folded note and glanced at the money order tucked inside it.

I called Millie. She rents her rooms for \$80 a night, and while I'm sure your place is much nicer than hers and I can't put a price tag on the hospitality you showed me before you found out who I divorced, I don't have any other way of determining a fair rate for inconveniencing you. I don't believe in carrying debt, so please accept this as payment for my room and board. If you and Tanner ever make it to Vegas, I'm starring in a show at Beau Trésor on the strip. Please stop in to say hello. I'm still pretty sure two finer men would be hard to find.

Dahlia

Scooter stared down at the note and shook his head. He'd been wrong about her. He knew he was wrong the minute Lonnie Cartwright told him she'd climbed into a truck with Earnest Holley so she could catch a ride up to Waylon. He'd known before that. He just didn't want to admit it. Nothing in his chest had felt right since she left. She'd hollowed out a space for herself without him realizing it, and the ache of her absence would slip up on him when he least expected it. He couldn't imagine the number she would have worked on him if he'd climbed into bed with her and Tanner, or taken her into

his own bed every time he thought about her body would feel next to his.

Being stubborn with women had served him well, but he'd never felt the punch of regret when one walked away like he'd felt with Dahlia. She didn't take a dime more than she'd earned from him. She was busted flat on her ass, and didn't stick around for free handouts a second longer than she needed to, and now she'd paid him back for the small favors he'd extended to her—favors he'd wanted to extend, and never felt she owed him for.

And Tanner had been downright pissed. No woman had ever come close to wedging a gap between them before. Tanner didn't fall in love easily, but when he did, he jumped in with both boots. Scooter knew Tanner had been ready to take the leap with Dahlia, and he knew whose fault it was that she didn't stick around long enough to give him the chance. Scooter had blamed himself plenty for running off the one woman they both wanted, but his damn pride and the lousy excuse of not knowing how to find her had kept him from doing anything about it.

The letter brought back every minute she'd spent with them like a flash of legs, attitude, spirit, and heart all wrapped up in the prettiest package he'd ever held in his hands. He could still feel the curve of her bare ass in his palm, her skin wet from the shower and hot from the fire that burned them both. The wheels in his rusty old heart ground in his chest. She had excited him on every level, had him hornier than a bull every minute she'd spent in Wilder, and every time he thought about her since she left. He couldn't believe it had been two months since she hitched a ride out of town without saying goodbye. Old Earnest Holley said she had tears in her eyes when she climbed out of his truck at the bus station, and she reminded him so much of his granddaughter he wanted to drive straight back to Wilder and punch the son of a bitch who hurt her and made her ever want to leave in the first place.

With her letter in his hand, Scooter felt like he had been punched, a solid hook right to the gut. He turned to the sound of tires on the driveway and watched as Tanner pulled up. Magnetic signs with the logo for Austin & Dawson Paving covered the doors of his truck. He climbed out of the cab and waved a set of rolled up blueprints over his head.

Tanner grinned from ear to ear. "Hank outdid himself. I'm gonna be living like a king."

Hank Daughtry had drawn up the plans for the house Tanner was going to build. Ten acres of the property Scooter had bought back from his mother would be Tanner's homestead. The rest of it would house their paving company. Everything was finally falling into place, but he didn't feel as good about it all as he thought he would. Something was still missing. Something he didn't want to live without. He looked down at the letter dangling from his fingers.

He handed Dahlia's letter to Tanner. Tanner read it and looked at him with a sparkle in his eye. "When are we leaving?"

"What in the hell are you talking about?"

"We just got an invitation to Vegas. I don't know about you, but I'm taking her up on it."

* * * *

Dahlia applied the last of her lash extensions and gave herself a once over before sitting back in the chair at her makeup station. Less than half an hour to show time. Another night on the stage beneath the heat of the lights. In two hours she'd be taking a bow. And in three hours she'd be back in her lonely apartment, curled up on the couch in a comfortable pair of sweats.

"Hey, chica." Eva Lourdes leaned over Dahlia's shoulder and waved her iPhone in Dahlia's face. "You're going out with me tonight."

"I can't."

Eva huffed. “Right, you need to hurry home and feed that dog you don’t have.” She motioned with her phone again. “Look at this man and tell me you don’t want to eat him with a spoon.”

Dahlia glanced down at the photo on her phone’s screen. “He’s hot, but they all are. I’d rather sit at home alone than play games with players.”

Eva swatted her shoulder. “Bite your tongue. This is my brother. He’s in town for the weekend, and you have to meet him.”

Dahlia took the phone from her hand and studied the handsome face staring back at her. “Okay. Okay. I’ll go out with you, but make sure he knows it’s not a date.”

Eva puffed an exaggerated breath and gave her a who-are-you-kidding stare. “Honey, this man will be the best date you’ve ever had. And tomorrow you’ll be thanking your best friend in this whole crazy world for hooking you up with him.”

“Show time.” Dahlia stood up and checked herself in the mirror before walking toward the stage. She tried to swallow back the sinking feeling in the pit of her stomach. There were worse things than going out with the handsome brother of a good friend. But at the moment she couldn’t think of any. There were only two men in the world she wanted to go out with, and they were a world away. She took her place in line and prepared for her entrance.

Two hours later she took her final bow. She smiled under the blinding lights, unable to see the faces of the crowd that had risen to their feet and continued to applaud. There had been a time in her life when the applause and the glittery costumes had given her a false sense of importance. The spotlight told her she was special, and she believed it. That time seemed a lifetime ago. Nothing had ever made her feel more special than lying in Tanner’s arms or knowing that Scooter was looking out for her when he had no reason to. She had told herself a million times she had gotten lost in a fantasy. Tanner was a one-night stand, a great roll in the hay, and Scooter didn’t even

like her. But no matter how many times her head sorted out the reality from the fantasy, her heart refused to believe the truth.

Dahlia exited the stage and made her way back to the dressing room. A slinky black dress hung on her door. She took it down and smiled. Eva wasn't going to take no for an answer tonight. And maybe her friend was right. Maybe she should get out. Maybe that's what it would take to finally erase the fantasy of her two cowboys from her head, and to start living in the real world again.

A half hour later, Dahlia had toned down the stage makeup and slipped into the dress Eva had hung outside her door. She looked like she was ready for a night out on the town, Vegas style.

"Ummmm...he is going to drop to his knees!" Eva grinned at her. "But, girl, I swear if you tear my brother's heart out, I'm gonna have to hurt you. Don't take it personal, it's a family thing."

Dahlia laughed. "His heart is safe. I'll be lucky to make it through dinner and a couple of drinks. Let's just have an easy night, okay? No pressure."

"You got it, girl." Eva hooked her arm through Dahlia's, and together they made their way toward the hotel lobby.

* * * *

Beau Trésor was the newest of the luxury hotel casinos on the strip. Marble floors, soaring ceilings, blown glass art, a fountain that rivaled the Trevi, and shimmering chandeliers adorned the massive lobby.

Scooter hadn't been to Vegas in years. He worked too hard for his money to piss it away, and he preferred the smell of leather to French perfume and cigarette smoke. Vegas was about as far out of his comfort zone as Iceland.

Tanner let out a low whistle. "You think we've got a chance in hell of draggin' her away from this?"

Scooter wasn't even sure they'd be able to find her in the sea of tourists. The performers probably used some back entrance. She had looked like a goddess on stage. She could knock a man out from fifty yards without the glittery makeup and skintight costumes, and he'd never seen a more beautiful sight in his life than Dahlia dancing beneath the bright lights. During the show, he heard Tanner mutter under his breath several times and couldn't fight the wave of jealousy that coursed through his veins. Tanner had felt every inch of that body of hers. He had tasted those lips and been held in her arms. Scooter couldn't kick himself enough for letting her get out of Wilder without experiencing that same heaven for himself. He never should have let her get out of Wilder at all. And he'd been a fool not to admit it sooner.

She hadn't seen them sitting in the audience, and the security guards wouldn't let them anywhere near backstage. If she didn't leave through the lobby, he didn't know how they'd ever find her.

Two women emerged from the wide hallway that led from the auditorium and opened onto the hotel lobby. One was beautiful, with golden hair covering her shoulders and the legs of a dancer. The other wore a black dress that stole the breath from Scooter's lungs. His heart hammered in his chest. He had never reacted to the sight of a woman the way he was reacting to Dahlia right now. How had he ever been fool enough to let her walk out of his life?

He started for her. Tanner's long strides matched his. They had covered half the distance to her when two men greeted Dahlia and her friend. One wrapped his arms around her friend and planted a kiss on her lips, the other greeted Dahlia. Dahlia smiled up at him and took the arm he offered.

Scooter's boots pounded the marble floor. His blood pumped through his veins and roared in his ears. Goddamn it, he hadn't come all the way to Vegas to see the woman he loved with another man.

He stopped cold in his tracks. Loved?

Tanner rushed past him, leaving him standing there as dumb as a stump. When had he fallen in love with Dahlia?

Scooter watched as Tanner strode up to her. Her eyes widened in surprise. Her beautiful mouth fell open, and she threw her arms around his neck. Once again Tanner had taken what he didn't have the balls to claim for himself. Tanner held the woman he loved in his arms, and Scooter'd had just about all of this bullshit he could handle.

Dahlia's eyes glittered, and her grin spread across her face when she saw him. "Scooter? You came, too?"

He took her in his arms and let her soft body mold to his. Every curve awakened something deep inside him that he had buried a long time ago. "Baby, I owe you an apology." He whispered the words, knowing he owed her more than he could ever say.

Dahlia gave him a squeeze and then pulled back to look into his eyes. "And I'm going to make you earn every ounce of my forgiveness, Scooter Austin. You can be as mean as a rattlesnake."

He laughed. He should've known better than to expect the little fighter to roll over like a puppy for him. "How do you want me to make it up to you?"

"You are going to show me how you really treat a lady. I know you've got it in you."

Scooter reached down and grabbed one of her perfect ass cheeks in his hand. "I'll treat you like a lady every day of the week, darlin', but tonight I'm gonna take care of some business I should've settled back in Wilder."

Dahlia laughed. "Any other man would have gotten slapped for that move." She ground her hips into his. "But you're lucky I want to take care of some business myself."

The man who had greeted Dahlia cleared his throat. She stepped back with an apologetic smile. "Mario, I'm sorry. These are..." She looked from Tanner to Scooter and then back again. Uncertainty played across her features.

Mario shook his head. "These are two lucky men." He smiled and shook Tanner's hand then Scooter's. He turned to Dahlia's friend. "Another bust, sis. You're about the worst matchmaker on the planet."

Dahlia turned to her friend. "I'm sorry, Eva. I'm going to spend the evening with Tanner and Scooter. They're..."

Eva winked. "They're the reason you've holed up like a hermit since you got back to Sin City." She hugged Dahlia and mouthed over Dahlia's shoulder to Scooter.

He read her lips. "If you hurt her, I will kill you."

Eva stood back. "Go have fun, girlfriend. And you let me know if either one of these cowboys needs a visit from me tomorrow." She gave Tanner and Scooter a warning look for good measure and then strode off with Mario and the other man.

Scooter pulled Dahlia back into his arms. "I'll take you anywhere you want to go, sweetheart. Or we can go back to my room."

* * * *

"Dahlia, honey, if you don't cock that little ass of yours up right now, I'm going to let Tanner sleep in his own bed tonight." From Scooter's position against the headboard, he grabbed her hips, positioning her within a breath of his cock.

Dahlia wiggled, teasing him with her wet center. The mattress shifted as Tanner climbed onto the foot of the bed. He reached for her, cupping her face between his hands. His lips were as soft and strong as she remembered. He took control of the kiss, and her mind flew back to the hours she'd spent in his bed.

Tanner released her, and she straightened herself, reaching back to wrap her arm around Scooter's neck and draw him in for a kiss. She expected all the anger and frustration he'd directed at her in Wilder or more of the frenzied hunger of the kisses he'd planted on her when they'd first entered the room to take vengeance on her lips. Instead,

his mouth met hers with a tenderness that took her breath away. His lips were the softest she ever tasted, and just as his tongue met hers, Tanner's mouth circled her clit. Scooter's hands covered her breasts, and Dahlia almost came undone.

With Tanner working his magic between her thighs and Scooter's tongue sliding against hers, she lost every thought in her head. She could only feel the slide of her skin against theirs, the heat of their bodies, the hunger deep in her soul that they fed and amplified at the same time.

The first orgasm hit her quickly, pouring through her body like electric honey. She had to tear her mouth from Scooter's to scream her release. And she knew Tanner wasn't finished. He would stay down there until she begged him to stop. As much as she loved the oral pleasure Tanner gave her, she needed to have Scooter inside her. She needed to feel his big body on hers. She needed to feel him unleash all the power and strength he held just below the surface.

Scooter's chest was hot against her shoulders. His hands slid down from her breasts to her hips, and Tanner sat back on his knees. He gave her a kiss before lying back on the bed. His big cock stood rigid against his belly, and his muscled thighs spread to give her knees plenty of room.

She leaned forward and ran her tongue up the length of his shaft before taking his dick in hand and sucking it into her mouth. Tanner's breath came out in a huff, and Scooter's hands dug into her hips. The wide head of his cock nudged her nether lips and slid between the slick folds once before drawing back to press against her tight entrance. She arched her back, offering him an easy angle. Tanner's satin skin caressed her tongue, and her breath burned in her lungs in anticipation of having Scooter inside her.

Just as she thought she was about to get what she wanted, Scooter pulled away. He grabbed her shoulder and flipped her onto her back.

Tanner laughed. "I was wondering how long you were going to be able to take it."

Scooter hovered over her, his broad shoulders blocking almost everything else from her view. “I need you to myself for a minute, sugar, and then you can have both of us for the rest of the night.”

Dahlia grinned.

Scooter spread her legs with his knee. The wiry hair on his thigh brushed against her skin, and the rigid muscles and hard lines of his physique sang to her on a primal level. He was all man, and lying beneath him, letting him take complete control, she felt safer than she’d ever felt in life. Scooter took care of people, and she had no doubt he was about to do a hell of a job taking care of her.

He shifted his hips, and his cock slid between her thighs. He entered her without warning. She gasped, gripping the sheets and bringing her knees up to his ribs so she wouldn’t miss a single inch of his long, perfect cock.

Scooter’s tongue found hers, feeding her with every stroke. His muscles tensed and shook as he entered her in a series of long slow strokes that took her breath away and set off a slow swirl of bliss deep in her belly. Every movement brought her closer to the heaven she’d found in Tanner’s arms. And as the orgasm built and spread through her body, she felt herself take flight. The bright lights of Vegas passed like a blur beneath her as she soared somewhere beyond the upscale room Scooter had rented. She felt it the second her soul met his. She clung to Scooter’s smooth muscled arms, holding on for dear life, knowing if she let go even for a minute, she would never find her way back to him. She screamed his name, begging him to never let her go. She could barely make out the words he whispered in her ear, words so soft and tender they erased every bit of the gruffness that always sharpened his voice. She tilted her hips and ground into him, wanting to feel his release deep inside her, wanting to know she gave him exactly what he needed.

“Come for me,” she told him. “I want you to come so hard.”

Scooter roared as he pressed himself deep inside her, and hot liquid spilled from his body. She felt something inside him unlock as

his muscles relaxed, and he took her mouth in a kiss that rushed through her veins like a drug.

Tanner lifted her limp hand and brought her palm to his lips. This night was just getting started. Dahlia opened her eyes and locked her gaze with Tanner's. "You're going to make me fall in love with you, you know that, right?"

"We sure as hell hope so."

Scooter grunted his agreement against her head.

Dahlia's heart filled, and her body hungered for everything they could give her. As the sun rose up over the strip, Dahlia lay between the two cowboys who'd taken her in when she'd been so far down on her luck she couldn't take care of herself. Could these really be the same men who had once wanted to skin her alive? Once again, her life had spun on a dime. She rehashed the past several hours in her mind, wanting to relive every moment, to always be able to feel such contentment in her body and her heart that she felt at this very second.

Next to her, Tanner's deep laugh rumbled in his chest. "Damn, little lady. You get better every time."

Dahlia's shoulder brushed the coarse hair of his chest. Scooter reached back to grab her thigh. The smooth skin of his back was just inches from her face, and the muscles that rippled when he shifted his arm revved her up again.

She reached back to encircle Tanner's big dick with her hand. She didn't want to let them go. "How long are you staying in Vegas?"

"Gotta head back today." Scooter massaged her thigh as he spoke. "A new business doesn't give you time off."

"So I guess what happens in Vegas stays in Vegas?" Dahlia let the sadness envelop her heart. She'd never regret the night she'd just spent with the two finest men she'd ever met. But she didn't expect it to mean to them what it had meant to her.

Scooter rolled over to face her. He wrapped an arm around her hip and dragged her up against his hard chest. His thighs pressed into hers, and his dark eyes glittered with something she'd never seen in

them before. "I'm an ass." He cleared his throat. "Probably the biggest ass you ever meet. I'm stubborn and crabby as hell. But I ain't stupid enough to let the best thing that ever walked into my life walk out of it a second time."

She stared up at him, not sure what he was saying, but her heart grabbed hold of the insinuations and hammered a crazy beat against her chest.

He tightened his grip on her. "Come back to Wilder with us and don't ever run off and leave us again."

She looked over her shoulder at Tanner.

"You heard the man. You think I'm gonna argue with an idea as good as that?"

Dahlia rolled onto her back and stared up at the ceiling. For most people Wilder, Texas, might not hold a candle to the lights of Vegas, but Dahlia wasn't most people. And she'd discovered the lights of Vegas didn't shine nearly as bright when her heart and mind refused to leave her cowboys behind. "If you boys want me to give up my glitter for a Podunk town like Wilder, you better do a little more convincing." She couldn't hide her smile, and when Scooter's hand slid between her legs and Tanner's mouth found hers, she couldn't do anything at all but love the two finest men she'd ever met.

"All that glitters ain't gold, baby." Scooter's breath warmed her ear.

A man had never been more right about anything. She didn't know exactly how things would work out when they went back to Wilder, but as long as she got to spend every night with her men, she didn't care. She'd found gold. It was solid and warm and worth its weight whether it glittered or not.

THE END

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Wendi Darlin grew up twenty miles from the nearest stoplight, minutes from the Gulf of Mexico, and steps from an open pasture. A country girl with saltwater in her blood, she's equally at ease with grass or sand beneath her toes.

These days, she writes from her city home that she shares with her husband, son, their sheltie, Lappy, and Sparky, the little wiener dog.

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