



L. R. WARDS

THE  
COWBOY  
AND THE  
ANGEL

# The Cowboy and the Angel

*L. R. Wards*

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## *CHAPTER ONE*

“Oh Angel, quit sulking.” Priscilla scolded

Angel plopped herself on the taupe suede sofa in the study while tucking a brunette strand of hair behind her ear that escaped her tight bun, and looked up at her sister who was pacing impatiently in the room while her slinky black calf length dress swirled about her elegant legs. Her eyes narrowed. All Priscilla ever thought of was herself, and although she loved her older sister, it got tiring after awhile. “I really didn’t want to come. I have a paper due next week.” Normally Priscilla’s antics didn’t affect her but she was irritated because she dragged her along to the gala at Bea Harrison’s ranch. Actually she told a little lie. It had nothing to do with her paper. It wasn’t because of Priscilla or because of their hostess. It was the hostess’s son that made her leery and she knew he had to come tonight because his brother was coming home after a long absence.

Her sister straightened the bust of her dress drawing her disproving gaze back to her. “How are you supposed to meet a man if you never go anywhere besides work and have your nose in a book?”

Meet a man? That was easy for her to say. Priscilla was beautiful, blonde and blue eyed. She was very popular in school and still was since she graduated four years ago, whereas, Angela who was two years younger may have had the same eyes, but her hair was mousy brown and she was shorter by at least six inches and was a little chubbier compared to her sister who had a figure fit for a runway model. It worked very well for her too. She could bat her eyelashes and have practically any man fall at her feet, except Seth Harrison, and it was driving her crazy. It seemed to give her sister that obsessive streak where he was concerned and it was no secret among her friends and probably most of the townspeople that she was crazy about him. Priscilla

was quite open about things she wanted and he was one of them. Angel on the other hand had a problem controlling her heart rate around the other one.

Alex Harrison.

Alex and Seth Harrison were their neighbors and along with their mother Bea, owned one of the biggest ranches in North Carolina with a stunning view of the Blue Ridge Mountains and raised Santa Gertrudis cattle. Their parents were good friends with the Harrisons even before Angel was born. It may not have been a secret that Priscilla wanted Seth, but Angel never told anyone how she felt about Alex. She couldn't. She wasn't much to talk about her feelings with anyone even her sister.

Angel always felt in her sister's shadow and tonight was a good example in the way they were dressed. Priscilla had on a designer label low neckline dress which showed off her best attributes whereas; she wore a drab blouse and an ankle length skirt. Again she would be invisible next to her. Not that she really cared, she was not as outgoing as her sister and preferred to remain invisible, and most times was quite clumsy. "I don't want a man." She finally mumbled.

Priscilla ignored her sister's comment and walked to the big bay window that overlooked the party on the back terrace around the pool while sweeping her fair hair off her shoulders, "It's exciting that Seth is coming home," she said flashing her sister a stunning smile, "I can't wait to see him. It seems like he's been gone forever".

*Actually he has*, thought Angel studying her sister's anxiousness. The man had left home when he was twenty to go to med school and specialize in a field. It had been eight years, except during the summer when he came home to visit. Unlike his older brother Alex, who never came home as often when he was away at Princeton which Angel found odd because she knew he loved the ranch.

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However she remembered one summer when she was sixteen, they both ended up being home, and it was one of those days she came over to use the pool during a hot spell. Bea, their mother always let the girls come visit for that purpose. She said she never had any girls of her own and doted on the both of them. Angel didn't realize that they were home or she wouldn't have been swimming in their pool, and more importantly, she wouldn't have been wearing what she was wearing.

She wore a bikini and had spent the hour swimming. When she decided she had enough she got out of the pool and there stood Alex, tall dark and sinfully gorgeous. Her mouth suddenly went dry. The sun was glistening off his bronzed skin. He wasn't wearing a shirt, just khaki shorts. He never said a word and just stared at her. She began to feel more insecure with each passing second under that potent gaze of his. For all she knew he was there the whole time watching her and she didn't know it. Even though she was slightly red from being in the sun, she was sure that the full body blush she felt was completely visible to him.

She probably would have drooled if her mouth wasn't so dry or if she didn't feel so ashamed at being caught in the slinky garment. At the time she was pulling herself out of the shallow end by use of the ladder and had one foot on the poolside slate when she stopped and froze like a stone statue when she saw him.

Normally she'd wear her once piece suit, but it was dirty from swimming in the creek the day before, so she borrowed her sister's white bikini. There was no way on God's green earth she would have done such a thing if she knew Alex was going to be there. She felt as though she was a little 'chunky' compared to Priscilla and she didn't care if Bea or Prissy saw her wearing her sisters bikini, however Alex was the last person she'd want to

expose her body too. Almost as if God was punishing her for some unknown reason, there he was. His body was dark from the sun and every inch of him was covered in thick sinewy muscle. She was so stunned, that she couldn't even lift her arms to cover herself.

Neither one of them said anything. She couldn't because her tongue suddenly became inanimate, and he just chose not to. But it didn't stop his eyes from slowly going down over her body and then back up again as if he didn't find his blatant stare the least but shameful. It felt as if all the water just evaporated off her skin and she began to heat up all over again. This time it had nothing to do with the sun or her embarrassment. He could affect her so easily even with a stare. She could no longer hold his gaze and guided her eyes to his naked chest covered with thick black hair. It was then she finally was able to move again. At least her jaw did because it fell. The man had a body built like a Greek warrior. Thick chest covered with a healthy spray of dark hair down to a flat, narrow hips and washboard abs dissected by another line of dark hair reaching below the belt of his shorts that loosely hung on his hips leaving no thought to the imagination of what it led to.

It was no wonder he carried himself with such arrogance. He was perfect! Years later, Margo, a woman she knew from work pegged him well once. She referred to Adam Harrison as a 'walking hunk of sex'. At the time she wouldn't have understood what that meant, but now that she was older, it perfectly made sense. He was that, in spades.

That day by the pool stuck in her mind because she was so embarrassed at him finding her so scantily clad and then to make things worse she heard her name while she was looking down his body and flicked her eyes back up to his gorgeous face. He was smiling! Oh God she'd been ogling him and he knew it! Quickly she found her strength to jump out of the pool and rush

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to get her towel to wrap around herself while dashing by him murmuring and apology. After she changed she found Prissy who was watching Seth lunge a horse with a dreamy look on her face, and insisted that she take her home. It wasn't hard to forget that day, not just because of the shocking glimpse of masculine perfection, but Prissy didn't speak to her for almost a week. They didn't live too far away, so the drive home was short and Angel remembered locking herself in her room for the rest of the day, too embarrassed to come out. She never told anyone about that incident, and doubted she ever would.

Her family had a wealthy spread too, but not as nice as the Harrisons. On top of the ranch, Alex had other businesses that made him rich. Although, the man was over six feet and built like he wrestled steers just for a living, you would never know when looking at him that he had some sort of degree in physics from Princeton. He retired at thirty of all things after he developed some patents in oil refinery or something like that and rumor was it had set him for life. Yet, he certainly didn't portray the geeky type because he was tall, masculine and thick with muscle from physically working the ranch as she found out first hand four years ago by the pool. However, he seemed at home here and she heard him tell her boss Jason Garrett, one of Reidsville's lawyers besides being Alex's best friend that it was where his roots were. Even though he had more money than he knew what to do with, he still got neck deep into hard work. Angel knew from living next to them for the past twenty years that he never asked any of his employees to do something he wouldn't do himself and he had the scars to prove it. Little did he know that she really respected that about him. Actually a lot of people in Reidsville respected that about him if you hear the talk around town.

His brother Seth was younger than Alex by about six years, and that was who Priscilla was waiting for tonight. He'd

just finished his specialization in Pediatrics and was planning on setting up a practice in town with another physician who was overwhelmed with his client load. She had been chasing the man as long as she could remember and as far as she knew, hadn't caught him yet, despite how beautiful she was.

If anyone ever mentioned the brothers, they would tell you that Seth was more handsome than Alex, but Angel didn't think so. Alex had a quiet magnetism about him and she couldn't help but be attracted to him even if he was almost twelve years older than her. Not once did she mention that to anyone. Unlike Priscilla, Angel was shy and nervous around men. Not only that she was sure Alex didn't know she existed even if she dyed herself purple, stripped naked, tripped and landed at his feet. However that didn't stop her from watching him when he wasn't looking. That was the only time she was brave enough. Even though he was well known around these parts, so was his temper. Having a degree in physics certainly did not suit his persona.

However, he wasn't always short tempered. Something happened to him when he was away from the Ranch. Rumor had it that it had something to do with a woman, and it was no secret that he didn't want to get married or even have much use for them. Although that didn't stop them from chasing him. Just because he wasn't as handsome as Seth, didn't mean he was ugly by any means. He just had a rough look about him, not one with a movie star smile, like Seth. Both men had jet black hair and green eyes. Although Seth's lacked the gold flecks that his brother possessed. Regardless, either one of them could bring any woman to their knees with those sloppy Harrison smiles of theirs.

Alex and Seth's father died of a heart attack four years ago, but her mother and Bea were still practically inseparable. It was ironic that it was Grant Harrison that died of a heart attack, when Bea was the one with heart problems. It was unexpected

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and the whole family was hit hard over his death. Bea grieved for quite a few years and even today if you mentioned her husband's name she would start to cry. Who could blame her, Grant was a big man, evident in the size of his sons, but he was a teddy bear and Angel missed him too. She never forgot the hugs he used to give her and Prissy all the time. Their own father wasn't as openly affectionate and Angel admitted that she liked the attention he gave them. Not that she didn't love her own father, she did, she just wished he was more affectionate. On the other hand, Grant was quite strict with his sons, but from the stories she'd heard about their hell raising days, they probably needed it.

When they were little her mother used to take them with her when she went to visit Bea. The boys were old enough so they didn't need to tag along, but even back then Angel remembered following them around. At the time, it was out of sheer idolization, now she didn't follow them anymore, but her attention was always on the oldest. Priscilla however, used to tell her as long as she could remember that she was going to marry Seth one day. However, neither one of the men noticed them, even her beautiful sister beyond the acquaintance of being neighbors.

She was drawn back to the present by her sister's voice. "Do you think Seth will notice me?" she said smoothing the skirt of her dress over her thighs.

Angela shrugged "I don't know Priscilla." She really didn't want to come to the welcome back party that the boys' mother was putting on for Seth. Half the town was there because it was no secret he was going to stay local to practice and they came to show their support. Not only that, Bea knew how to throw a party and none of the town that was invited would miss out on such a prestigious event. She hired caterers, a five string quartet, bartenders, servers, and only invited those that she considered close friends and acquaintances. Bea always went out

of her way to show people a good time and didn't cut costs. People vied to get invited to one of her social events and for Angel's family there was an open invitation for every single one of them.

Earlier, Priscilla dragged her off into Alex's study so she could freshen up after seeing all of the eligible women there to make herself more presentable using the large antique mirror over the fireplace. Angela reluctantly followed her feeling intimidated in such a large crowd. Watching her sister adjust her appearance made her absently reach up and touch her mousy brown hair that she had arranged the tight bun on her head. Their mother had blonde hair, and unfortunately she didn't inherit it like Priscilla. Their father was a brunette in his younger years, but now he was all grey.

Angela may have been self conscious about her appearance, but at least she knew herself well. She was smart, and was very self assured in that area. Her eyes guided to her sister again thinking that if she had Priscilla's physical gifts she'd be self confident in that area too. She leaned back in the luxurious cushions of the couch with her hands folded on her lap, her feet apart and her knees together. It wasn't the least bit ladylike, but it's not like she was trying to impress anyone.

What happened next made her want to retract that thought and wish she stayed in the crowd because she could have crawled in a hole if it was available.

Alex walked in and stopped at the sight of them. His large muscular form always gave off a sense of overwhelming sexual magnetism. She never was prepared for his presence, because it affected her so much. It was like the air became charged with static around her making her breath catch in her throat. He hadn't dressed up and still wore faded scuffed blue jeans and a navy blue and white striped shirt. Jeans that were sinfully tight where they should be on a cowboy like him defining

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his masculine physique, and he was all male, notably by the bulge below his belt buckle. Ashamed that she would do such a thing, she quickly lifted her eyes to his face. His strong square jaw was dusted with stubble and his black hair was ruffled, like he'd just removed his hat. Priscilla swirled at the sound of him coming in.

“Hi Alex.” She said not even affected by his scowl or his presence like she was and gave him one of her ravishing smiles. Unlike Angel, Priscilla had grown accustomed to him. “Angel and I just needed some time to freshen up before we met Seth. We knew you wouldn't mind.”

Angel wished the couch she was sitting on would just swallow her up when his eyes went to her at the mention of her name. His eyes guided over her slouched posture and frumpy pink blouse and white eyelet skirt with apparent distaste.

“Good luck with that.” He said with an edge of mockery.

Angel quickly averted her gaze flushing to the roots of her hair. *So much for not being noticed*, she thought. Then Priscilla laughed at the comment flirtatiously causing her to want to choke her. She didn't find it funny in the least. Clearly she wasn't bothered by his expression and why should she be, she was popular and likable. Her sister then said something completely flattering to him that didn't seem to have any affect by the lack of change in his expression before she swept out of there. Angel stood and went to make a move to follow her but her sister shut the door behind her cutting off her escape! She stopped abruptly just as Alex stepped in front of her. He large frame towered over her and she near planted her face in his chest causing her to gasp. She tilted her head back to meet his gaze.

“Can't wait to get away from me?” he said deeply staring down at her.

Now his expression changed. It went from disinterest to—dangerous. Frankly the change stunned her. “I—I—“

“Still got that ridiculous stutter I see.” His eyes flicked to her mouth then back up to her eyes.

She bit her bottom lip and turned her head away. Every time his hazel eyes settled on her she felt her heart skip a beat.

“Then again—“ he paused while reaching for a cigarette, lit it and took a long draw off it before he continued, “—I suppose I make you nervous. Don’t I little one?”

Her blue eyes met his light hazel gaze again, “Sometimes.” She murmured. *A lot*, she thought.

His eyes grazed over her again, “How old are you now?”

“Twenty.” She answered with confusion. Why did he want to know her age? To her complete surprise a bit of a smile tugged at his lips. “Why?”

“Don’t you know?” he managed a cagey grin as he stepped closer. “I think it’s about time you grew up, don’t you?”

Not knowing what he meant, but fully aware of his closeness, she tried to back up, but the couch was right behind her and short of falling back on it sprawling on the luxurious cushions awkwardly, she allowed him to close the distance. She tried to steady herself as best she could at her nearness, but her knees seemed to grow weaker.

“Afraid?”

“Yes.” She admitted suddenly not able to take her wide eyes off of him.

“You should be. I can be a bit of a predator when I see something I like.”

What did he just say? Angel could only find it in herself to blink twice.

“And—“ he added in the same husky tone, “You finally grew up.” He continued, staring down at her through thick lashes with those stunning pale green eyes.

She swallowed.

“do you have a boyfriend?”

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“How? I work five days a week and my spare time is spent in coursework.” *No man would even notice me*, she thought.

He perked up, “I forgot about that. Did you get your paralegal?”

“Yes now I’m working on some prelaw courses to shorten my time away from home when I leave for college.” She answered. He actually seemed interested.

“Is that what you want to do?” He inquired.

“I—my father thinks its best?”

“I never asked you what George wanted Angel. I asked you what you wanted.” He said deeply while tipping his head slightly giving her a steady gaze, “Don’t you have a backbone?”

“Have you *met* my father?” she answered.

“He was no different from mine kitten, and he wanted me to be a doctor like Seth.”

“Really,” her brows rose, “I never knew that.” She didn’t miss the fact that he called her that pet name again. And it did wondrous things to her when he said it, but she was sure it was just a friendly endearment. What she wouldn’t give for it to be a covetous term.

“There’s a lot of things you don’t know about me.” He said huskily while stepping a little closer.

She could feel the heat from his body because they were touching now, but had nowhere to back up to. Tilting her head up so she could meet his gaze she was going to tell him to back off, but the look in his eyes left her speechless. It was that same look she saw by the pool when she was sixteen.

“Alex—“

“Be quiet honey.” He said softly as his head lowered.

Even though he lowered his head, and even though he called her kitten and honey, she never even considered that he was going to kiss her. Only when their lips met did she finally get

it. Alex was way out of her league. Or at least she always thought he was, but as his mouth touched hers, she suddenly didn't think of anything else except the warmth of his mouth on hers. She'd never been kissed before, and if this is how it felt, she was completely missing out. She felt his hands on either side of her face then as he tilted her head slightly so he could capture her mouth more fully. Something in the pit of her stomach started to heat up and she moaned at the same time she gave in and relaxed against him.

Alex felt a wave of triumph at her surrender. One of his arms circled around her back while the other slid around to the back of her head. She felt so damn soft and smelled like roses. Who the hell smelled like roses? He stifled his own groan and managed to work her lips apart so he could slip his tongue inside her warm mouth. That time he did groan. She tasted like heaven! He could feel her hands on his chest, but they weren't trying to push him away, instead her hands curled into his shirt and he could feel the trail her nails made on his skin through the cloth. It gave him images of her nails raking over his flesh while they were naked. Finally he forced himself to lift his head and stare down at her. Her eyes were closed and her lips were slightly swollen and in the most delicious pout he'd ever seen. If she had any idea on how turned on he was for her, she'd probably tear out of there and never come back. Although having an inexperienced woman wasn't appealing to him, Angel was appealing in every way a woman could be to a man. He was so hard for her it was painful. It had been awhile since a woman turned him on so quickly and effectively. He knew she would taste good, never doubted it for a minute. What he didn't count on was his body rapidly reacting to hers.

Slowly her eyes fluttered open.

“Angel, you'd better get back to the party. People are going to wonder what I'm doing with you in here.” *Or he was*

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*going to start doing things to her*, he thought.

Her eyes widened when she finally realized the intimate position they were in. He still had her in a tight embrace and she could feel her breasts pushed against his chest. It was new to her, and quite frankly she liked it—a lot.

“Angel?” he grinned at the dazed expression on her face.

“Oh?” she finally lowered her hands and he released her. If someone told her that day that Alex was going to kiss her, she would have laughed in their face. He didn’t think of her that way, yet, he did kiss her, held her, caressed her and made her feel the burn of undiscovered desire. Oh, did she ever. However, she was entirely confused. Not once, had he ever indicated that he liked her that way and he had access to many beautiful women. “Alex what are you doing?”

“Any damn thing you’ll let me.” He answered deeply.

Oh dear. Her eyes widened.

“Don’t get too comfortable honey,” he said keeping the devilish grin on his face, “I’ll be seeing you later.”

“Later?”

“Yes,” he said, “I have no ambition to embarrass you in front of half the town and leave them to speculate to what I’m doing to you in here. So we’ll continue this later.”

“We—I wasn’t!” she finally came to her senses.

“Oh *you* were.” He chuckled, “However—“ he said moving his gaze over her face allowing a smile to tug at the corner of his perfectly chiseled mouth, “—I don’t have it in me to seduce a virgin on my couch while her parents are just outside.” Damn, just thinking about hit made him harder. Right now he was straining against the fabric of his jeans.

Angel’s lips parted in a gasp at his meaning and his eyes were automatically drawn to them.

“It’s too bad you weren’t more promiscuous like your sister.” He said raising his eyes back to hers. Although he loved

her strong sense of values, what he wouldn't give for her stray from them for about an hour. His eyes studied her flushed upturned face with her mouth still slightly swollen from his kiss. Maybe two hours. Hell he could take all night with her with what he had in mind. They could make a complete mess of his room with what he had flashing through his head right now. If she *was* like her sister, he wouldn't hesitate and would've had her on the couch, against the wall, on the floor, even his desk was a tempting surface considering how worked up he was. But she wasn't promiscuous. Her inexperience was evident in her response to him. He had enough experience for the both of them.

There was no way in hell he was going to get the feel of her out of his mind tonight after what they just shared, unless he took up drinking, and he wasn't a drinker. Everything he imagined about her was dead on, actually she felt better and tasted better than he thought. He itched to reach out and free that abundance of hair out of the bun she always wore it in. He never understood that about her. She was quite pretty and he already knew that she had a body that could melt butter in an ice age. Yet, like her hair, she kept it hidden.

Her eyes widened, "That's a horrible thing to say!" she said finally letting his words sink in through the haze of desire she still felt.

"For me or you're sister?" he said derisively. He shouldn't have said that, but he was getting irritable at his condition even though it was self produced. He needed a distraction and picking a fight with her seemed to be the best option at this point.

"you—You—"

His eyes roved to her flushed face and her hair that was sticking out from the tight bun on her head, and he gave her a heart stopping sly look, "I'll see you later." With that he left and shut the door behind him. He had to leave, or he'd act on his

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impulses, and Christ did he pulse! Pulsed, and throbbed and ached. He needed a cold shower.

It wasn't soon after that Seth arrived and much to her sister's anguish, with a girlfriend. It was only about twenty minutes later that she sought her out and demanded to go home. Angel was more than happy to agree after her incident with Alex. Yet she still couldn't take her eyes off him through the crowd. He'd cleaned up before his brother arrived. Now he was wearing tan slacks and a white shirt and matching striped tie and his hair was still damp after a quick shower. She knew she shouldn't be surprised that the man looked incredible in anything he wore. His poise was dripping with self confidence as he stood at ease with his hands in the pockets of his slacks. After he greeted his brother with a genuine smile, he resigned himself to a corner of the room as a quiet observer. To Angel, he didn't look like he was enjoying himself. More than likely he needed a cigarette and Bea wouldn't let him smoke anywhere in the house except for his study. She found herself smiling; it looked as though he'd rather be castrating cattle than be here. He wasn't one for social events and only went when he had to. She was actually a little disappointed that he didn't acknowledge her at all. There were times when she was younger that he used to at least ruffle her hair or nudge her shoulder with his. Apparently they were beyond those years now and she was no longer a teenager.

A young woman that Angel recognized as the Miranda Ebbings, who worked at the jeweler's in town, stopped to talk to him and he bent his dark head so he could hear her over the crowd. She furrowed her brow at the scene. How come he seemed so at ease with other woman, but always seemed to stare at her with some degree of criticism? Maybe it was because Miranda was married and obviously pregnant by the size of her belly so he didn't feel the need to keep her at bay.

Only when her sister insisted on going home, did she tear her eyes away from him. Though that was a task in itself. He was like a fine sculpture from Bernini or Michelangelo and she could have stared at him all day. For the first time since she could remember, she got to touch him as a woman touching a man and he kissed her. She let out a slow controlled breath. The way his shirt stretched over his broad shoulders and spanned down to his flat stomach reminded her of him by the pool that day and she completely forgot that Priscilla wanted to go home until she pulled on her arm and made an impatient sound.

Unknown to her Alex saw the action and grinned while watching Priscilla pull Angel out of the front door.

All the way home Priscilla was plotting on how to steal Seth from his new flame.

“Prissy,” said Angel using her nickname, “Maybe he’s serious about her.”

“Did you see her?” she said ignoring her sister’s comment and shooting her an incredulous look, “She looks mousey.”

*Like me.* “No I didn’t.” Her attention was elsewhere.

“And the way she was hanging off him—” she let out a frustrated noise and slapped her hand on the steering wheel.

“Maybe you should back off a bit. I don’t think Seth is the type that likes to be chased like that.”

Her sister shot her an angry look, “You’re one to talk, the way you pine after Alex but don’t do anything about it—don’t look so shocked, it’s very obvious! At least I make my feelings known.”

She was right about that. “Sorry.” She mumbled. Prissy seemed fine with that and began to jabber on again on how she was going to get her clutches on Seth.

Angel took a deep breath and let it out slowly switching her gaze to the passing scenery outside the car. How her sister could drive and talk non-stop was beyond her. It made the

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fifteen minute drive seem like an hour.

Angel kept reminding herself that she loved Prissy over and over again on the way home. She just could only take so much of her talking about herself. Not only that, she always got the most popular boys, had the most popular friends, and was the head cheerleader of her squad in high school. Everything she did, she was good at. Well, except her grades. On the other hand Angel was a straight 'A' student and wanted to continue a career in art. Her father was an ex military sergeant and ruled the house in the same way, so he wasn't impressed that his intelligent daughter wanted to pursue a career in art when she could be a doctor or a lawyer or some other money making career. Regardless, he did love the both of them even though he could be hard at times.

When they got home, she went to her room immediately while Prissy grabbed the phone to gossip about Seth's new girlfriend to her friends. Angel undressed and stood in front of the mirror to look at herself. She guessed her body wasn't that bad, but to her it seemed that her hips were too big and so were her breasts. No one knew that she bound them to decrease her cleavage. She was only five foot four and thought that a short girl with large breasts was very unattractive. It's not like anyone gave her that idea, but watching her sister who was five ten and long legged, made her insecure about her body.

Sighing she turned away and put on her nightgown, then went into her bathroom to brush her teeth, wash her face and comb out her long brown hair.

Even though Alex had sworn off women emotionally, there had been rumors that he had ongoing relationships with women who weren't local. She knew he didn't date local women because of the gossip and it was probably a good move on his part.

He kissed her.

She sighed out loud looking at her reflection in the mirror. What surprised her is him thinking he could take such liberty with her. Of course he did, the man was radiated sex appeal like a neon sign, but why her? She wasn't much to look at.

She knew ever since she was old enough to remember, he used to tease her, but over the past few years and when he came home permanently after his father died, he'd been more cynical about it. It was though he lost his sense of humor. Whatever happened to him while he was gone changed him. No one knew exactly what because he didn't talk about it and if his mother knew she never mentioned it either. Regardless, the statement about her being grown up set her back. Then he kissed her. Did that mean he was interested in some way? As quick as the thought came it was shoved aside with a false laugh out loud. It was an impossible ideation no matter how much she wanted to believe it.

She set down her comb pursed her lips and shook her head. There's no way on God's green earth Alex with his sinful looks would find her attractive next to having a sister like Priscilla. He could get anyone he wanted and she knew of a few women that inquired about him that were just as pretty as her sister. It didn't help that her boss was one of two lawyers in town and most of the female clients knew that she was the Harrison's neighbor. If it wasn't Alex they asked about, it was Seth because both of them were unmarried and sinfully hot, but she wasn't one to gossip and never gave anything up.

She flicked out the light of her bathroom and crawled into bed. Usually she read before bed but for some reason that man completely exhausted her. Not only that she had to work tomorrow and the book she was reading was frustrating the hell out of her. Maybe it was because the story line was all too familiar *The Fountainhead*, by Ayn Rand. It was about a man

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who was in love with a woman but never let her know, and she could really empathize with the character. She set her alarm and turned out her lamp. Soon after she was asleep.

The next day her father sent her and Prissy to the hardware store with a list of supplies. Prissy wouldn't dare set foot in the shop so it was Angel who went in. Not that she minded, she liked the owner and the people of Reidsville that she met in there.

"Hey Angel." Said Mr. Isaak with a grin, "I haven't seen you in weeks."

"Mom says I work too much." She answered returning the smile, "Dad wanted me to pick up a few things." She said handing him the list.

"Oh, yes that time of year for tagging and vaccinations."

"Dad prefers it over branding." She wrinkled her nose, "The smell bothers him."

He chuckled, "You wait here, I'll get this stuff for you."

"Thanks."

Twenty minutes later her arms were full of supplies.

"Maybe I'll help you out." Said Mr. Isaak looking at her load.

"No, it's okay," she returned glancing around the store that was beginning to fill up, "You have your hands full too. Besides, Prissy's waiting outside." Just to prove her point someone called his attention. "See?"

"All right honey, see you next time." He lifted his arm and waved goodbye before hurrying back toward the customer that called him.

Angel groaned as the curb where Prissy parked the car was empty. She stepped down on the sidewalk and looked down both sides of the street. It was really busy for Saturday and there was no sign of the car or Priscilla anywhere. Where the heck did she go?

Just then someone bumped into her knocking her over and making her drop her bags. She fell with a sharp yelp skinning her knees and sending the bags sprawling.

“What the hell!” came a familiar voice.

“Owwwww!”

She glanced up to see Alex grab a man by the collar give him a shake and drag him back toward her like a rag doll, “Tell the lady you’re sorry!” he growled shoving him forward without releasing him.

The other man blanched, “I’m sorry, I’m sorry!”

Alex muttered something to him that Angel couldn’t possibly repeat in her lifetime and he shoved the man so hard he stumbled backwards. He shoved a finger toward him, “You’re lucky I don’t bust your teeth for leaving her like that.” As soon as Alex released him, the man scrambled out of there like he was on fire. Then he turned his attention to her, “You all right honey?”

She nodded still stunned over his display of temper. She’d never seen him so angry before. She had heard about his temper but had never witnessed it. Now she understood why she’d heard about it. He was menacing when he was angry.

He crouched down and helped her sit up, “I could go pound on him if you like.” Then he saw her torn pantyhose and the skinned knees and began to rise while his expression darkened as he scanned the street for the man he just assaulted.

Angel grabbed his arm seeing his intent in his expression, “I’m tougher than you think and I’m sure you frightened him into diapers as it is.” She said and saw amusement replace his fierce look and she couldn’t help but smile back. Her statement got her a laugh causing her to grin. He had a wonderful deep laugh.

“Come on, I’ll help you pick this up.” He said shaking his head with a smile.

Together they picked up her supplies, but instead of her

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carrying them, he picked up her bags and looked around, "Where's your ride?" When she didn't answer he looked down at her, "Ah hell, its Prissy isn't it?" he glowered.

"She'll be back." She said embarrassed at her sister's actions. It seemed like every time he was around Priscilla pulled one of her stunts. She never did any other time, but she knew that no amount of talking was going to convince him otherwise. The evidence was too damning.

He made a rough sound, "I'll take you home, you'll be here all night waiting for her." He scowled and led her down to the truck, "Get the canopy door." She did as he asked and he put her stuff in the box and locked it up. "Wait in the truck; I need to get a few things." He said as he opened the passenger door for her.

"You're sure?"

"Get in Angel." He said with a glint in his eyes, "I have to go by your place anyway. Quit hesitating. Get in. I won't be long."

"Thanks then." She said hopping in with a smile. If Priscilla showed up she'd leave with her, so as not to give her something to rib her about, but at least she had a place to wait. Not only that, if she didn't show, she got to spend more time with Alex.

He shut the door and went back in the store. Funny thing is, Prissy didn't return the whole time she was waiting for Alex. Obviously she got caught in a boutique somewhere. Normally Angel would be irritated, but spending time with Alex erased all of that. *He looked good enough to eat*, she thought as he came out of the store shortly after and held the door open for another man he obviously knew because he nodded and began talking to him. It gave her a chance to study him, something she could easily make a hobby of. He was a big man and compared to the other person he was talking to, towered over him, yet he was

comfortable with himself. Her eyes scanned over his normal working attire and she had to admit, maybe she preferred him in the untamed manor he presented with his Stetson pulled low over his brow and black t-shirt that was tucked tightly into the waistband of his worn jeans which was looped by a black leather belt and large shiny buckle. The t-shirt stretched nicely over his form and didn't leave much to the imagination on his powerful build. If didn't know better, he'd grown a little more muscular since that day by the pool. His other arm was wrapped around the bag he carried and her eyes guided up the impressive physique of his bicep knowing that the rest of him was just as nice. Well some of it had to remain a fantasy because she didn't see anything below the belt. God, why did she always get diverted to what made him male? She would manage to blush herself permanently crimson if she didn't stop thinking about him in such a way. When he shifted to release the door after the man he was speaking to went in, she saw the muscle in his arm bulge and she nearly groaned thinking that God certainly gifted this man. Quickly she averted her eyes when his attention went to her not to let him know that she was gawking at him—again. However she craved to see him walked towards her in that sexy cowboy swagger he possessed. *I have it bad*, she thought, rubbing her forehead with her hand.

He got in and started the engine, “Did you want to use my phone to call your sister and let her know I'll take you home. Although I'd make her wait like she makes you wait.” He added grimly.

“Alex, you know I can't do that to her.” She said, “I'll borrow your phone if you don't mind. I left mine in the car.”

He dug it out of his jeans pocket and placed it in her hand. It was warm from his body heat, and Angel wasn't even sure she could dial her sister's number with steady fingers, because his hand brushed hers as he set it in her palm and she

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felt a tremor move through her body over it. Silently she chastised herself having such a small gesture rattle her so much.

“Angel?” he grinned, “It’s just a phone.”

It was then she realized that her expression must look ridiculous while she stared at his phone with awe. She flicked her eyes to him and his head was tilted with an amused look in his eyes, “Oh, yes.” And quickly flipped open the phone to call her sister trying to ignore the chuckle that came from him. Could she feel more like an idiot?

He shifted the truck into drive and pulled away from the curb just as Priscilla answered her phone. She was completely aware of him listening as her sister told her that a tire was flat on the car and she took it to the garage to get it fixed.

“You could have come and told me.” She argued.

“What? You always take forever talking to that old guy in there, I figured you wouldn’t even notice I was gone.”

She had to be kidding. “well, it doesn’t matter. Alex will take me home. I ran into him.”

“Really?”

Angel could hear her sister chuckle, and she gritted her teeth knowing what would come next and she was right.

“Don’t hurry home then Angel, a man like that will take all night to—“

Exasperated, Angel flipped the phone closed and handed it back to him. “Thanks.”

“Did she tell you why she left you.”

“The car had a flat.”

“Sure it did.” He said with annoyance, “Most likely it had to do with that new mechanic over at Al’s service station.”

Angel sunk a little lower in her seat. Would her sister really do that to her? She knew the answer to that. Of course she would. “I know her number. I would have called her, if I had to wait any longer.”

“Yeah and she would have come back as soon as you called. Need I remind you that you left your phone in the car, near got plowed over by some fool, and were left standing alone on the street.”

“Okay Alex, I get your point.” She released a heavy sigh, “Can we change the subject.”

“Sure, how about I pull off the road and let you take advantage of me?”

She darted her wide eyes to his and saw his amused expression, “Like that’s going to happen.”

“Oh, it’ll happen honey. I’m just biding my time.”

“Quit teasing me.” He had no idea what that kind of talk did to her.

“I wasn’t.” he added with a mischievous grin as he removed a cigarette from the pack on the dash in front of him, “I’m perfectly willing to let you take advantage of me.”

As if she knew how. She couldn’t look at him any more. The man was too darn potent. Turning her head she looked out the side window as the sound of a lighter flicking reached her ears.

“Okay honey, I’ll leave you be, for now.” He said after a few seconds, “but remember I told you I’d see you later, and I’m going to hold you to that.”

“go right ahead.” She heard herself say, knowing that he was just teasing her.

He chuckled at the disbelieving tone in her voice.

For the rest of the drive they didn’t talk but Alex turned on the radio to fill it. He knew he had made her uncomfortable and knew when to stop pushing. The last thing he wanted to do was frighten her about intimacy. It would set them back, and he didn’t want to risk that. He liked touching her too much.

## CHAPTER TWO

IT WAS AFTER five on Monday and she was bending over getting her purse out of the door of her desk to go home when something shaded the light of the room. Slowly she brought her head up to see Alex standing there in a sheepskin denim jacket, jeans, and a tan Stetson. *Of all people to come in last*, she thought eyeing Alex's large frame and feeling her stomach twinge.

"Jason in?" He said guiding his eyes over her body with an expression of disapproval. "honey you have to have decent clothes in your closet somewhere. Every time I see you you're dressed in something from a thrift shop."

She just stared at him. Every time he came near her it felt as if someone plugged her into a light socket. Every cell in her body seemed to come alive. Also it seemed as though he only looked at her nowadays with constant disapproval with the exception of rescuing her on Saturday. He was actually a real gentleman then. She wanted to tell him that her clothes were in no way bought at a thrift shop, but she was at work and needed to act professional. Not only that, he seemed to be resisting a smile when he said it. It was then she realized that he was goading her again. Unfortunately he was a man that was used to being answered when he asked a question and as time passed his faint amusement disappeared.

"Hell woman, don't look so stunned. Is he in or not?" he said with obvious impatience.

Quickly she nodded and pushed the intercom button, "Mr. Harrison is here to see you?" she said thankful that he didn't notice her hand tremble.

"Send him in."

“Okay.” She stood and walked toward the door all the time completely aware of his presence behind her. As big as he was, he could certainly move silently.

“At least you managed to pick something better to wear to work than my brother’s party.” Came his deep voice behind her.

She stiffened but didn’t look, or acknowledge that comment as she opened the door.

“Still scared kitten?” he drawled with apparent humor.

“He’s waiting.” She was surprised that she didn’t stutter that out, because the man made her so nervous that she could barely breathe. She swore she saw a smile tug at the corner of his mouth before he stepped past her through the door. *Why did he have to smell so darn good*, she thought to herself.

An hour later, she was still waiting for her sister to pick her up. Everyone else had already gone home, including Red Soames, the other lawyer in the office and his secretary Margo. She was a heavy set black woman that Angel adored. She was very good at her job, and managed to mother every single one of them and give her and Red dating advice weather it was warranted or not. It was her who constantly referred to Alex as that ‘walking hunk of sex’ among other things she couldn’t possibly repeat.

She glanced at her watch, it was almost six o’clock. Prissy was an hour late. Unfortunately she knew that Alex was still in the office with her boss and she really didn’t want to be the only one out front when he emerged. The way he’d been around her lately made her—uneasy. Feelings she didn’t know existed began to come to surface when he was near. *Oh Prissy, hurry up*, she thought to herself.

Angel didn’t drive and Priscilla didn’t work, so her father told her she could at least pick up her sister from work every day but sometimes she was late. Normally she didn’t mind, but how come she had to be late today of all days. Lately Alex seemed to

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be freer with his comments to her and of course, there was the way he kissed her the other night. Now she could hardly look at him without remembering and it brought back those new feelings of desire. Unfortunately he hadn't mentioned it or tried to kiss her again. Did he find it an unpleasant experience? Maybe he did and that's why he resolved to goading her instead. Glancing at her watch, then at Jason's closed door, she began to feel anxious. She would've waited outside but it was late August and the weather was a little chilly and she only had a light coat. Also, Prissy could be hours late.

She inwardly cringed as the door to her boss's office opened and out stepped Alex. They shook hands and Jason gave her a polite curt nod. She was hoping to be long gone before he came out of there. The comments he'd been making to her that past two days have unsettled her. Then there was the way her body reacted when he was around. It was like she lost complete control of her senses. Her breath would quicken along with her heart rate and it was if her sense of smell even increased. She could detect the faint odor of leather, and expensive cologne whenever he was around. Maybe her mind was playing tricks on her. *Oh what the heck*, she thought, *maybe I'm just nuts*.

"I'll see you Saturday for some fly fishing Alex."

"sure thing." He said turning away from Jason as he shut the door.

Alex began to leave but then to her surprise he stopped and turned to look at her, "Working late?"

She shrugged a slender shoulder, "Prissy is late." She said shyly averting her gaze.

he frowned. "first she abandons you at the hardware store and now she makes you wait after work?"

Prissy said she went to the garage to fix a low tire while she was in the hardware store and she told him that on Saturday

after she handed his phone back to him, but he gave a scoff of disbelief. “She didn’t actually—“

He interrupted not giving her a chance to explain, “Sure she didn’t ” His expression darkened, “Is this usual?”

She glanced at him. Except for Saturday, it seemed like the first time in a long time that he’d actually spoken to her without ridicule or contempt. Although she tried to convince him otherwise about Prissy, he was getting angrier by the second. “Sometimes.”

He stared at her for a moment and Angel thought her heart was jumping around before, now it was frantic in her chest. Every time he looked at her with those intelligent eyes of his she felt so vulnerable, so naked. Not to mention the overpowering image of masculine perfection he gave off. His stance was relaxed, yet he radiated self confidence and it was obvious to her why his men didn’t hesitate to obey him when he barked orders in their direction or women trailed after him endlessly.

“Get your purse, I’ll take you home.” He finally said in a tone that wasn’t a request or meant to be disobeyed.

“I’ll phone dad. He can come and get me. ” She said quickly trying to ignore the tingly sensation his scrutiny gave her.

He cocked a brow, “You’ll have George come forty five minutes into town to pick you up just to avoid riding in the same vehicle as me.”

“No—“ she lied, “I just don’t want to put you out.”

He gave her a sideways look that told her he didn’t believe her, “Angel, get your damn purse and coat. I’ll take you home. If you’re worried about me manhandling you like last week, my hands will be busy driving.” Then he suddenly grinned as his eyes dropped to her mouth, “Although it is tempting. Now get your things.”

“I wasn’t thinking that.” She protested blushing through to her toes.

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“Well, well, it’s good to see you have a little spunk in you.” He said letting his eyes guide over her slowly. “And sure you weren’t. You’re so jumpy, you act like a rabbit that was just discovered by a hungry mountain lion. ”

*Oh*, she thought, *that wasn’t far off*. Why is it every time he spoke or looked at her, she blushed. Reluctantly she nodded and did as he said.

Being so close to him in the car was nerve racking. Every now and then she glanced at him and could help but be mesmerized by his masculine profile. Her eyes memorized his strong square jaw, perfectly straight nose and perfect masculine lips. Once she forgot herself and stared a little too long and he caught it. Yet, he wasn’t even looking at her. It was probably because women stared at him a lot and he expected it.

“Do you see something you like?” He cast her a wry look.

“No, I mean—no.” she denied unconvincingly turning her head away completely embarrassed at being caught.

“You’re very pretty when you blush.” He said quietly.

She snapped her head back in his direction catching his gaze with hers. What did he just say? Alex Harrison just complimented her. Furthermore, he said she was pretty and she didn’t think she was at all. She felt a gush of warmth in her belly over that statement.

Then he went and ruined it.

“It’s too bad you dress like a spinster.”

“I don’t!” she protested.

“Hell yes you do.” He said glancing at her navy suit, “That thing is buttoned to the neck, it shows nothing of your figure, and you look twice as old as you are in it.”

“These are the latest fashions!” She said looking down at her clothing.

“For a spinster.” He finished not the least bit affected by her defensiveness, “Maybe if you wore decent clothes, you’d get a

date instead of shopping at the same store your mother does.”

“Th—That’s not what they’re for.” She argued. “And I don’t shop where my mother does!”

“—And where the hell do you hide your breasts?” his eyes slid to her chest, “I know you have them somewhere, I’ve seen you in a swimsuit.”

She gasped, “Do you not have a filter?”

“Not when I have something to say. I know you have a healthy chest Angel, it’s nice enough to be displayed a little better, not hidden in miles of fabric.”

she shot back, “Some things just shouldn’t be said!”

Ignoring her, he reached into his coat pocket and fished out his pack of smokes acting as if she said nothing, “Here, light one of these for me.” He said tossing it on her lap with the lighter.

She was so angry that she just did as he said, not wanting to argue with him anymore, but unfortunately she accidentally inhaled some of the smoke and ended up coughing while handing the lit cigarette back to him.

“Jesus, you are naïve.” He said taking the cigarette and casting her an amused glance with his dark brows arched. He tucked the smoke between his chiseled lips and smirked at the same time while returning his attention to the road.

“Just because I don’t smoke, doesn’t mean I’m naïve.” She said between coughing and glaring at him.

“You’re twenty and you’ve never tried smoking?” he said surprised.

“Not all girls are as adventurous as the ones you’re used to.” She said sparing him glance after another muffled cough.

“I suppose.” He agreed glancing at her again, “Still it’s surprising. I wonder what else you haven’t tried.” Her cheeks heating up was his answer and his eyes didn’t miss it. “No wonder, you dress like you’re sixty and act like you’re virginal”

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His said like it was no big deal and took a draw off his cigarette while watching the road. “No wonder you don’t date.”

“I don’t see you with a woman hanging off your arm.” She said widening her eyes. Why he kept bringing up her chastity she’ll never know. It wasn’t because she wasn’t curious. She was. However, she believed in love before sex and she hadn’t met the right man yet. The right man being him.

“He cast her a somber glance, ‘I don’t have a woman, because I choose not to, you on the other hand don’t have a man because you look like a lady who’s resigned herself to grow old with her cat.’”

She gasped, “I don’t have a cat!”

“you will.”

She flared, “You presumptuous—“

“—However, you have a nice figure under that outfit.” He continued ignoring her outburst like he’d seen a thousand of them, “You may dress like you’re washed up, but I’m experienced enough to see that there’s a young woman under there.”

“W—what! “ Now her eyes must look like saucers. No one had ever spoken to her so bluntly before in her life and to hear it from him was astonishing.

“You should dress like you’re twenty not sixty.”

“Oh God, doesn’t it bother you to be so discourteous?” she blurted out defensively.

He ignored her again, “I’d take you shopping but, I’m too much of a selfish bastard to spend time with a woman looking at clothes.”

What the hell did that mean that he’d take her shopping? Her mouth fell open, “Alex—“

“I meant,” he said as if reading her mind, “That if you actually dressed decently—“ his eyes flicked to her hair, “—and did something with that mop, you might be able to compete with your sister and get a date.”

*Mop!* “Are you quite done?” she said indignantly coming very close to leaping out of the moving vehicle if he continued to embarrass her.

He cast another glance in her direction seeing her crimson cheeks, “Yeah, I guess.”

How could that man drive her to such embarrassment, anger and nervousness at the same time? She slouched in the high back leather seat in an uncomfortable silence for the last twenty minutes while he drove her home and concentrated on the scenery. When he finally pulled up in front of their house he turned to her again.

“Tell you what. I’ll take you to the Lavender Art banquet this Saturday, but you need to do something with your appearance.” He said dipping his eyes over her clothes in distaste again.

She looked at him as a thrill shot through her. Although she didn’t deny that the man affected her besides making her too nervous to speak properly, she really wanted to go. The Lavender Banquet happened every two years and it was very prestigious. She never went but wanted too badly. Tickets were usually sold out within a few hours, and her father always refused to let her go.

*“You’re going to be a lawyer someday Angel,”* her father said, *“So get your mind off of that damn art stuff.”*

She sighed and said no more about it. Arguing with her father, would be pointless.

“So?” said Alex breaking into her thoughts.

“My father might not like it.”

“I heard.” He said.

That surprised her, “You knew?”

“I know a lot of things about you Angel.” He said taking a long draw off his smoke and flicking a gaze to her mouth, “Just like you know a lot about me. We’ve been neighbors for a long

time.”

“What do you know then?” she said with genuine curiosity. Honestly she didn’t think he knew she existed besides that incident four years ago. He managed a lopsided smile that practically caused her heart to melt in her chest.

“I know he’s got his little girl’s future planned all the way down to the university you’ll be going to and law firm you’d be working at. Your mother tells my mother things.” He smirked, “And she tells us things.” He tapped his head with a long finger, “I know you have an I.Q. that could get you into MENSA.”

She couldn’t help but find it intriguing that he knew so much about her. Also, he said it to her like a compliment. Something that was very rare with Alex. “Like you.”

“Ah,” he said lightly tilting his head in acknowledgement, “I see your mother talks too.”

Could he possibly look any more handsome? “I like art.” She finally said casting him a shy glance unable to hold those gorgeous green eyes of his.

“I know.” He straightened himself in the seat and lifted his eyes to the tight bun her hair was in. Why she wore it that way, he’ll never know. She was twenty and all her clothing, posturing, and even her hairstyle led him to believe that she wanted to be invisible, “Do you still have that hairdresser friend—martin—Marty, or something?” He asked taking another draw of his smoke before tossing it out the window.

“His name is Mathew.” She offered surprised he knew.

“Ask him to do something with your hair.”

“I like my hair.” She protested drawing her fingers to it.

“I don’t. And if you think I’m taking you in those frumpy clothes, you’re out of your tree. Go get a decent gown. I’ll put a call into my cousin who owns the *La Salle* boutique.”

“Alex, I don’t need any help with my clothing.”

“Like hell.” He said, “And if you think you’re borrowing

some of your sister's slutty clothes, think again."

"My God, quit saying things about her." She flushed.

"I call it like I see it." He leaned toward her, "If you don't want to go, I'm sure I can find someone else to take. It's not like I'm suffering for lack of women." His eyes guided to her mouth again.

Angel knew that was true beyond a doubt, "No more cracks about my sister." she said trying to ignore the way he made her skin burn when he looked at her that way.

"Fair enough." He said straightening up again, "I'll call Sherri tonight. You go see her tomorrow."

"Fine." She said getting out of the car thinking she had no intention of changing her hair. She'd get a gown, but like hell she was changing her appearance so drastically.

"I meant it about the hair Angel." He warned seeing her look of defiance.

Again he seemed to know what she was thinking. She cast him a narrowed glance before shutting the door and didn't even wait for him to drive away before she turned and went up the stairs into the house, but she'd seen him long enough to see him laugh. It just added to her mood. She was steaming that she would have to do something about her hair, or he wouldn't take her.

She paused just outside the door. Maybe it wouldn't be so bad, and she could have it done this once. Part of her completely understood him. Alex could date fashion models or even movie stars if he wanted to and to walk into such a prestigious event with a droll looking girl such as herself probably was insulting to him. Knowing she should be grateful that he invited her at all made her decide to do as he asked. *Only once*, she told herself, *that's it*. Angel didn't want to be accused of changing her looks for a man, even if it was Alex Harrison.

"Was that Alex Harrison?" Her father said as he met her

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at the door then he glanced at his watch. “Do you know what time it is?”

“Yes—and yes.” She said. Even the mention of his name had her heart changing pace.

“What’s he doing driving you home?” His blue eyes darkened and narrowed as he figured it out on his own, “Where’s your damn sister?”

“I don’t know. She never showed up.”

“Christ almighty, that girl needs some bloody discipline.”

“It’s alright dad, I’m fine.” She may have gotten frustrated with Prissy more than once, but it didn’t mean she wasn’t protective of her. Not only that she never intentionally neglected her.

“Sure you are.” He said looking down at her, “I wish you could rub off on her a little more.”

So she’d be the obedient perfect child just like me, she thought bleakly. Priscilla at least did what she wanted despite how angry her father got. At least she had that freedom. “Dad, Alex asked me to the Lavender art banquet.” The anger in his eyes quickly evaporated and his expression took on a puzzling look.

“Really?”

Honestly, she wasn’t sure how he would react being an ex-military man her father seemed to emanate that type ‘A’ personality that no one seemed to want to go against. Not once in her life could Angel remember standing up to him. He was intimidating. Although Prissy never talked back to him, she didn’t seem too affected by his authoritative demeanor as she was. You’d think she wouldn’t let Alex’s aggressiveness bother her because next to her father, he seemed like a pussy cat, especially when her father was angry. He could remove the roof of the house. However, she didn’t think about her father the way she thought about Alex and her father didn’t say the things that

Alex had been saying to her lately. Hopefully it didn't show in her expression when she asked "Can I go?"

"If Alex invited you, you certainly can, but don't get any ideas about pursuing a career in that direction." He said sternly pointing a finger at her, "No brilliant girl of mine is going to waste her talents."

She was actually surprised he let her go, knowing the Harrisons' reputation with women and the fact that it was about art, but then again, he also knew that she wasn't flirtatious and outgoing like her sister. "That was easy." She told him.

He smiled, "Honey, Alex is harmless."

Harmless, he scared the pants off of her most times and everyone else within a twenty foot radius when he was angry. Also, if her father knew half of what Alex had been saying to her on the trip home, he'd probably shoot him. Actually she wasn't sure of that, her father really respected Alex, because the man was brilliant, rich and a hard worker. For some reason her father put a lot into a prominent education and wealth.

"I meant," he said seeing her puzzled expression, "That he wouldn't disrespect you no matter what, he's known you his whole life. He probably sees you as a safe bet at this point. Like a little sister."

If her father knew how much that destroyed her he probably wouldn't have said it, but it did make perfect sense. Sighing heavily she turned and went to her room. She needed to phone Mathew and see if he could fit her in tomorrow to get her hair done before she went to the boutique for a gown. Although she was completely offended at his candor toward her, she really didn't want to miss this event. Not only that a part of her felt giddy at the prospect of walking in on his arm.

She dialed Mathew's number. He was her best friend in high school and although most male hairdressers seemed to have a stereotype of being gay. Mathew was none of that. He was

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fairly handsome, had a great sense of style and a steady girlfriend.

“Hey!”

Mathew’s enthusiastic voice made her smile. “Hi.”

“What’s new?”

“I need your help.”

“Anything for you babe.” Came his cheerful voice.

Angel relayed what she needed done, and then went into the personal aspect of it. Only telling him that Alex had asked her out.

“So you got your eyes on Alex Harrison? You be careful honey, he’ll eat you up and spit you out like yesterday’s chew.”

“He’s not that bad.”

“Sure he isn’t.” there was a pause, “I’m just saying he’s used to women, and you’re not used to men.”

“Thanks for the concern, but it’s just as friend and my dad would shoot him if he tried anything.”

“The bullets wouldn’t penetrate that thick skin of his.”

That made her laugh, he was probably right.

“So, come in at any time tomorrow morning and I’ll fit you in.” he chuckled, “I have an idea on what to do with you.”

“Don’t experiment on me.” She said trying to sound stern, but it was wasted on him.

“Never even crossed my mind.” He said in a tone that meant the opposite.

“I mean it.”

“I’ll see you tomorrow hun.” He said with laughter in his voice and hung up.

She stared at the dead receiver and shook her head before hanging it up. Mathew was an artist, she should trust him. She had actually sat next to him in her senior year of her Arts class and that’s where they became friends. He was a nice looking man but for some reason he loved women who were slightly obese.

Not that she judged him or them. She actually asked him once why he preferred that type of women when other girls practically threw themselves at him. He said it was because they had more depth and intelligence than the whole cheerleading squad. Priscilla was the captain of the cheerleading squad in her senior year, but Mathew didn't know that.

No sooner did she hang up the phone when it rang again. She answered it smiling, "I meant it, don't you dare experiment on me."

"Is that an invitation?" came the deep husky voice of Alex Harrison.

"Oh God, I thought you were someone else!" she said falling her face in her hand, "Ignore that."

"Oh, I certainly won't." He drawled, "So then what experiment were you talking about, because my mind is wild with images right now?"

Even over the phone she was blushing profusely, "W—What do you want?" she heard him chuckle and damn wasn't that the most sexiest thing she ever heard. Her skin suddenly felt very warm and tingly. She could almost see him sitting lazily at his desk in his study, leaning back in his high back leather chair looking completely relaxed and endlessly appealing. In the middle of it all she was wondering when he made that shift from friend to pushing the borders of intimate discussion. He had never spoken to her in the way he had the past few days. Although it completely unnerved her, she had to admit that she liked it. It seemed as if he noticed her after all.

"What a loaded question."

She made an exasperated sound and heard his chuckle again.

"I wanted to tell you that Sherri is expecting you at her boutique ten a.m. tomorrow."

"I have to work and I already booked a hair appointment

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that I need to take time off for.” She explained. She was already thinking that she’d just take an early lunch hour and work through her normal lunch to make up the time.

“Jason said it was fine. You have the whole morning off.”

“You called my boss?”

“I called my friend.” He corrected bluntly.

“You are very persistent at controlling everything. Does anyone ever tell you no?”

“No.” he said without hesitation. “They know better.”

She sighed, she should have known. In fact, she doubted very much she could say no to him either. “How did you get my number, it’s unlisted?”

“Mother.”

He asked his mother for her phone number? Would she question him on why he was calling her? She wondered how he asked her for it and Bea’s reaction. She probably reacted like her father did thinking that they were just friends. However, the way he’d been talking to her the past few days, made her wonder. Although she shouldn’t read too much into it, she couldn’t help it after that kiss. “I give up.” She finally said with a surrendering sigh.

“Good. I’ll pick you up Saturday at six.” He said as if he completely expected her to accept his demands.

“Okay.” He hung up and she felt like a complete moron after that conversation. How the man made her feel was indescribable. Even when he was infuriating her, she couldn’t help but appreciate how sinfully attractive he was, or how sexy she found his voice. She groaned out loud knowing that she was totally lost where Alex Harrison was concerned.

Her mother called her for supper and she quickly pushed her thoughts of the man aside and went to the dining room.

After grace her mother gave her an interested look as she handed her a bowl of whipped potatoes, “Your father says that

Alex is taking you to the Art banquet on Saturday.”

She couldn't help the color rising to her cheeks.

Her mother's brows rose, “Interesting.”

She saw the scheming look in her mother's eyes and knew she was already planning a spring wedding. “It's nothing.” She rushed out, “Like dad said, he feels comfortable with me.” This made her mother shoot her husband a disapproving look. Her father returned a look of questioning.

“Where's your sister?” George said quickly changing the subject after the stern look his wife shot him.

“I suspect—“ Catherine interrupted still glaring at her husband, “That she's in the waiting line to see the new town physician.”

Of course! Thought Angel, she forgot that Seth was starting his practice today helping out old Dr Jacobs.

Then a large discussion ensued about how proud Bea was of her sons and how wonderful it was that Seth was starting a practice in a small town even though he graduated with honors. Angel couldn't blame her because both boys were humble despite their accomplishments.

As they finished up dinner somehow Priscilla's name came up again because she was a no show for the meal. Something her father had an issue with. He liked his family at home for supper every night, but it seemed as though Prissy was defying him more and more lately. She secretly wished that Priscilla would listen because she was worried for her. Although their father would never strike either one of them, when angry his voice could strip the wallpaper off the walls.

“I think you should speak with her Helen.” He made a gesture with his thumb and forefinger, “I'm this close to tossing that girl out on her ear.”

“You will do no such thing.” She said standing up and gathering the empty dishes unaffected by her husband's threat.

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“Sit down, we have help for that.” He growled.

“I’m capable” she said curtly continuing with her task.

Angel watched the exchange and couldn’t help but smile. Her mother was the only one that could get away with not listening to him. Even now with the way she chastised him, he still looked at her with complete adoration. Some day she was hoping to have a man look at her in such a way.

The next day she made sure she confirmed with her boss about her hair and boutique appointment.

“It’s all right Angel, just have Red’s secretary cover for you while you’re gone.” He said easily agreeing. “Alex already talked to me about it.” He tilted his head and gave her one of his charming smiles, “I’m glad that you’re taking some social time and going to the Banquet. Adriana and I will be sharing a table with you.”

“Really?” She felt more at ease knowing that. Although she was born to wealth, she wasn’t a socialite by any means.

“Alex said you always had a talent for art.” He said returning his attention to the file on his desk as he flipped through various papers like Alex’s confession wasn’t as earth shaking as she thought it was.

“He did?” She said trying to keep the tremor out of her voice. Alex talked about her to her boss. What else did he say? She wondered.

Jason lifted his eyes to hers again smiled and nodded, ‘He said you were really good.’

Now that was surprising, “Oh? I didn’t realize he’d seen anything of mine.”

He shrugged, “Well he obviously did somewhere.”

Despite being taken back by that statement, she felt some relief knowing that Jason and his wife will be with them seeing she became so tongue tied around Alex. Adriana was of Latin descent and a stunning long legged model type. In fact she was

certain she was modeling when she met Jason. He was still in law school at the time. As soon as he graduated he proposed marriage. Adriana and Jason had a four year old daughter that they positively adored named Mya Jean, but they usually called her MJ. She had her father's blue eyes and their mother's dark hair and complexion. Time and time again Angel warned him that he was in trouble when his daughter reached her teens, especially if she looked anything like her mother at that age. His response was, "Don't I know it." Usually followed by a grin of pride.

"I already talked to Margo about covering for me." She said keeping the conversation professional.

"Efficient as always." He said giving her a smile before returning to the file in front of him.

*Efficient and safe*, she thought to herself as she closed the door.

Mathew didn't lie when he said he'd fit her in. He actually took her himself regardless of him having four stylists working for him.

"I left my morning open just for you." He said lifting his eyes to her head, "I hope that's enough."

"Are all men so blunt?" she said exasperated.

He grinned, "If you're just finding this out, you are definitely in trouble." He spun his barber's chair toward her, "Get in."

After the first two hours, Angel realized that he wasn't making fun of her. He had trimmed her waist length hair to mid-back and now for the second time she was under the dryer with foil in her hair. He explained that he was giving her hair volume and depth with the streaking.

"Mathew, Sherri is expecting me at ten." She said glancing at the clock. "It's ten to."

"I'll call her, she's just down the street. She'll

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understand.”

For the last hour he wouldn't let her look in the mirror. He had her turned around facing him.

“I don't like the wicked smile on your face.”

“Hold on. I'm almost done.” He turned over his shoulder, “Ana, come and do something with my girl's face.”

She raised her brows, “Ana?”

“My esthetician.” He explained.

“Wow, you're killing me.” She groaned.

“Honey, you don't need much, because weather you realized it or not, you're very beautiful.”

She flushed. “Thanks for the boost of confidence.”

“No boost,” he argued while spinning her around to reveal her reflection in his large spotless mirror, “It's the truth.”

She gasped audibly looking at the wide-eyed stranger in the mirror. The stranger who had identical facial features as her, but looked completely gorgeous. Her hair was streaked with subtle auburn and blonde shades bringing out the deep colors of her brown drab ‘mop’.

“Your hair already had these colors in it, so I just exaggerated them a little. Do you see how it gives depth to the color?” He played with the silky tresses arranging them over her shoulders, “And now that I took some weight off, you can see that you have a bit of a curl.”

“I see, I see!” she said unable to help the smile that spread across her face while looking at the miracle before her.

“I told you, you're beautiful. Alex won't know what hit him. Now for Saturday, what time is he picking you up?”

“Around six, why?” she shot him a puzzled look.

“Then I'll be at your place by five to fix your hair for the night.”

“You really don't need to do that.” She faced him, “I can't possibly repay what you've done.”

“Nonsense,” he grinned showing his amazing straight white teeth, “What are friends for?”

Just then Ana showed up and Mathew told her what he wanted before he left her alone.

A half an hour later she was walking through the doors of La Salle. She met Sherri once at the Harrisons and liked her. A tall slender woman with grey streaks visible in her dark hair, she was just like the rest of the family blunt and up front. She was the daughter of Bea’s oldest sister. From what she heard Bea was the baby in the family and her older sister was fifteen years older than her. When she first saw her, she thought she was around her mother’s age and possessed an elegant grace about her that rang with sophistication. Angel guessed that Sherri was in her mid-forties. However, while most women don’t appreciate the gray hair, it made Sherri seem more attractive. When the older woman laid eyes on her, they widened.

“My Goodness, I just about didn’t recognize you. That man does wonders.” She said taking both of her hands and squeezing them.

Angel seemed to be doing a lot of blushing lately.

“Alex won’t even recognize you.”

“Its not like that.” Getting her hopes up would just result in a crushing let down.

“No?” she said in an amused undertone. “Come. I remembered those gorgeous blue eyes of yours and I found the perfect dress.”

Angel waited while Sherri went into the back and returned with probably the most beautiful gown she’d ever seen. It was royal blue, the same color as her eyes, strapless, with a basque corset type top and a long flowing skirt. “My God, that’s *beautiful!*”

“it’s silk,” said Sherri, “I’m sure this is the right size,” her eyes guided over Angel’s figure. “Alex gave me an estimate, and

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God help him, I think he was dead on. Thirty-four C, right?”

There went her cheeks again. Alex talked about her bust size to his cousin, but the real embarrassment was, that he *was* dead on.

Sherri winked, “Don’t worry honey, a man with experience always makes a terrific lover.”

Angel was too stunned to correct her on why Alex was taking her in the first place, but Sherri didn’t even notice as she ushered her into the change room. As for the lover bit, she had no idea what made a terrific lover and was too embarrassed to discuss it with Alex’s cousin. Obviously she thought that she wasn’t a twenty year old virgin.

Angel was back at work by one in the afternoon. Margo, Red’s secretary, practically leapt out of her chair and made her to a twirl like a fashion model.

“Honey, you look like a million bucks!” she smiled appreciatively, “I’m making an appointment with Mathew after seeing you. Maybe he could make me look ten years younger!” Her eyes guided to her hair, “Wow. I never knew your hair was so long. You always had it up.”

“Oh, I forgot. I’d better pin it up.” She said reaching up behind her.

“Don’t dare!” Margo jumped forward and grabbed her hands, “Leave it the way it is. You look fantastic. In fact we should put you out front of the building, you’d bring in clients.”

Angel laughed, “You’d pimp me out?”

“In a heartbeat.” She smiled

“Ietch.” She grinned while turning and going back to her desk. “Besides these two don’t need any more clients, or they’d have us here seven days a week.” She said alternating a finger back and forth between the two office doors.

Just then Red came out of his office and stopped cold staring at Angel with an expression no less than shock, “Wow.”

She glanced up at him as she took a seat behind her desk, “Stop it.”

“No really—wow.” He strode over to her and held out his hand. “Hi I’m Red, and you are?”

“Quit it.” She blushed.

“What happened to that other girl—what was her name again?” he said sitting on the corner of her desk and looking down at her.

“Leave her be Mr. Soames, you’re embarrassing her.” Came Margo’s stern voice from the other desk behind him. Margo was old enough to be his mother, and spoke to him like that for the last five years. She was the only one that could probably get away with it.

He sighed heavily, “All right, but not after I ask you who you’re doing this for. Who’s the man?”

“No one.” She said quickly.

“Liar. You forget, I am a lawyer. Now, who is he?”

“I swear” she said lifting her chin slightly, “I’m doing this because I needed a change.”

“A change? This is catastrophic.” He gestured toward her.

“If you two don’t leave me alone, I’m changing back to my old drab, boring self.” She said giving them both a mock glare.

Red held up his hands in surrender, “Okay, okay, I’ll give in.” he said with a smile standing up. “However, if you’re not doing this for anyone, I want to take you out to lunch next week.”

She blinked twice and looked at him, “I work for you.”

He shook his handsome blonde head, “Technically, you work for Jason. He signs your paychecks not me.”

“I—I—“

“Good,” he said cutting her off, “Monday then.” With that he turned on his heel and went back in his office before she could protest.

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Margo shot her a sly look.

Angel looked at her accusingly, “You started this.”

“Not me.” She stated with an expression of feigned innocence and glanced toward the closed door of Red’s office, “He’s a catch you know.”

“Not to me.” She truthfully admitted. Red was single and very nice looking, but she didn’t think of him that way, and Margo being the mothering type she was, would spare no expense on setting him up on a date.

Margo gave her a look that told her she didn’t believe her.

Angel took a deep breath, “Alex Harrison is taking me to the Lavender Banquet.” Margo’s face lit up like a Christmas tree.

“I don’t believe it!”

She shrugged.

“Alex asked you?”

“We’re friends.” She said.

“Yeah sure.” Margo grinned, “Alex doesn’t have friend-girls so don’t even go there.”

“I’ve known him forever.” She defended, “He feels safe with me.”

“Did he actually say that?”

“No—but—“

“Oh please Angel. Whoever told you that hasn’t got a clue on what attracts a man to a woman. Alex has watched you grow up, I’m sure there’s other reasons why he asked you out.” Her eyes lit on her hair, “I can only see a few, but I’m sure he’s imagining all kinds.”

“Margo!”

“Sorry honey, I forget how young you are,” she laughed and waved a dismissive hand, “Now listen to me because I’ve been around the block a few times.” Her expression became

serious, “If that cowboy stud asked you out, you be careful. He’s used to a certain kind of woman, a woman who knows her way around a man’s body.” She picked up a pencil and waved it in direction, “I know you’re not, so you be careful when he’s alone with you. A man with his kind of experience could get you in bed before you even know it.”

“I don’t think it’s like that.” She said not being able to stop the blush that hit her cheeks like a tidal wave. No one talked to her about sex before, not even her mother. She wasn’t completely naïve, she’d read a few books on the subject, but just the way Margo talked about it made it seem so much more—interesting. The thought of Alex touching her again made her tingle.

“Why’d you get your hair done?”

“He asked—told me to.” She answered.

Margo grinned slyly, and returned her attention to her computer, “You have fun tomorrow night honey.”

Now what did that mean?

As promised on Saturday Mathew showed up at five to arrange do her hair. After he was done, he grabbed her hand mirror and showed her the intricate design of the back. He’d piled most of it on top of her head weaving the strands intricately among one another and leaving a few wispy pieces to tickle her neck. There was no doubt he was an artist. When he was done, he wished her good luck with a kiss on the cheek and left shortly after.

Somehow Priscilla convinced Red to take her, and much to Angel’s delight helped her with her gown. Angel didn’t know much about fashion, but thank goodness her sister did. She even leant her a white faux fur stole that seemed to be perfect for her gown.

“I would have never recognized you if you walked down

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the street.” Priscilla gave her an exaggerated purr causing Angel to laugh. “My Goodness, no wonder Alex asked you.” She flicked a look at Angel’s breasts, “I would have never guessed that you even had breasts by the way you dress.”

“Enough already.” She blushed.

Just then Priscilla’s cell phone rang, it was Red. “I’ve got to go, I promised I’d meet him in town, he’s still at work. Good luck Angel.”

The endearments caught her by surprise because her sister was usually more focused on herself. Although she did make a few comments about how good she looked in her own crimson form fitting satin number she had, she still took time to make her feel good. It’s too bad Alex couldn’t see that side of her, then maybe he wouldn’t be so quick to criticize her.

Shortly after Priscilla left her mother’s voice floated up the stairs, ‘Angel, Alex is here!’

“Thanks mom!” she hollered back.

Her sister told her not to rush down to meet him, to take her time and make him wait so it would make her entrance seem all the more surprising, but she couldn’t help herself and grabbed her stole before she hurried out the door in a billowing of royal blue. Her heart was already hammering in her chest and when she caught sight of him she swore she stopped breathing.

If she thought he would be surprised, she was even more so. To see that handsome cattleman in a tuxedo near made her trip stumble down the steps. To her disappointment, his attention wasn’t even on her, it was on her father and they looked to be deep in discussion. About cattle no less. Ever since her father retired from the military he was obsessed with ranching. It didn’t help that he was raised on a cattle ranch either. Alex and he were always sharing discussions on the best feed, breeds, and bulls.

Feeling a little disappointed she started down the stairs.

It was then he looked at her and she felt her insides melt when he actually smiled. It was a genuine appreciative smile as his eyes roved over her body sensuously making her breath freeze in her throat but she couldn't help but smile back as she slowly descended the stairs.

George excused himself but neither one of them heard him.

He approached the bottom of the stairs and held out his hand.

"hi." She said shyly taking his hand.

"Wow." He murmured and his eyes glittered as he soaked up the sight of her. "come here." He pulled her away from the foot of the stairs and lifted her arm over her head, "Twirl around for me."

She blushed but did as he asked hesitantly. He let out a long slow whistle that she was sure felt all the way through flesh and bone. When she faced him again she gave him a shy look.

"I knew you were pretty Angel, but you outdid yourself." He said huskily.

She swung her eyes to his expecting some sort of look that told her he was teasing, but there was none. There was something she didn't recognize though, something that darkened his hazel hue and made the gold flecks stand out more than usual. Did he really mean that?

"Think I'm lying?" he said cocking a brow.

"I—I,"

He chuckled, "Fair enough. I guess I don't give you much encouragement." He turned and opened the door, "come, I told Red and Seth, I'd only be a few minutes. They're saving our seats." He paused looking at her again, "Although, I'd like to miss this whole damn thing and spend the evening alone with you after seeing the way you look." Her eyes widened in disbelief, "However," he added, "My brother would most likely

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take it out of my hide, he's expecting us. Not only that, I want to show you off."

She was still reeling from the pretty bit, and when he said those suggestive things to her, she near tripped, but he managed to steady her with his arm while releasing a soft chuckle.

He led her out to his Jaguar and opened the door, helping her in, before he got in and started the car. "So, do you think I was too harsh about your appearance?" he asked casting her an amused glance while pulling out of her drive.

She was still recovering from the shock at the barrage of compliments he fed her, and was delayed in answering. Actually he did her a world of good. In the past few days she felt a confidence that she never thought possible. Not to mention the attention that she started getting from the opposite sex. Either it came in a look, a nod, a smile of appreciation or a blatant invitation, but she only had eyes for one man. The cowboy sitting next to her in the car. The only man she knew didn't want a relationship. "Not now."

"So all this time you thought I was just being mean, didn't you?"

"I thought you were just teasing me, but lately it seems as though your teasing was more cynical." She stated honestly looking at her hands folded on her lap.

"It was." He said looking at her posturing, "you act as though you are a timid little waif, but you have the body and looks of a fashion model."

She brought her head up abruptly to look at him. "W—what did you say?"

"—and," he continued, "The only time you seem to come out of that comfortable shy little cocoon of yours is when I piss you off."

Good lord, he was right.

Then he purposely changed the subject to small talk. He

knew she could only take so much embarrassment and wanted to ease her into this whole thing slowly. She practically glowed tonight, and that dress made her look so beautiful and desirable, it was all he could do not to steer the car to his place when he pulled out of the long driveway from her house. It was a good thing that it was dark in the car, because he developed an erection just thinking about peeling the expensive material from her body.

He pulled up to the already packed parking lot in front of the hotel and helped her out of the car looping her arm in his. “Hold your chin up honey, you’re a piece of art yourself tonight.” He said as he tossed his keys to the valet.

Her eyes shot to him but he didn’t spare her a glance and his expression didn’t give her any hint that he’d meant what he said. However she was still reeling from his confession. Did he really mean what he said, or was he just playing her up? She knew he understood women, probably more than she did herself, and she was one. Nevertheless, after all of his criticism over the past few days, she couldn’t deny that he actually made her feel like a princess tonight. The man carried himself with such masculine elegance that many female heads turned in their direction when they walked in. It was obvious that he was at home in this crowd too. Most of Reidsville’s elite was here, and probably most people who were wealthy and resided in Rockingham county

The place was packed and he spotted Seth waving at them from their table through the crowd. He lifted his arm and waved back that he’d seen them. “Ah hell.” He grumbled when he saw Priscilla with Red.

“Ignore them Alex.” She said drawing her eyes to her sister. He made it no secret that he didn’t approve of Priscilla’s pursuit of his brother and he probably would tell her himself tonight. Something she wanted to prevent. Priscilla may have

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acted like a spoiled rich girl, but she was sensitive and Angel couldn't bear the thought of her being hurt.

"She pants after my brother without any conscience to what it looks like." He seethed.

"So? She likes him."

"Lusts after him."

*Like I pant after you*, she thought. She stopped causing him to turn and look down at her.

"Please be nice. She's my sister." She managed to say despite how nervous she was being here and being with him.

"I'm always nice honey." He gritted out in a tone that meant the opposite.

It was obvious he wasn't going to be. "please." She asked again.

His eyes sought out hers. Then he groaned in surrender and released a frustrated breath, "Because you've gotten yourself all dolled up I'll try and behave myself." Something he'd never done for another woman. He didn't care what people thought about him and made no secret about it. However when Angel looked at him with those big blue innocent eyes of hers and tilted that flawless beautiful face up at him and he was lost. He had thoughts of bending his head and kissing that full pouting mouth of hers, but had to remind himself he was in a room full of people and after a quick glance around the hall, they were being watched by many of them. It wasn't often that Alex took a woman out in this town and he was sure not many people recognized the stunning creature on his arm. With that thought came a surge of possessiveness. Although he knew that he wanted her from that first day he saw her half naked in his pool, he was willing to wait until she grew up. Even though she was only twenty, and maybe too young still, he couldn't wait any longer. He'd filled the last four years with fruitless meaningless physical relationships as he waited for her and like hell he was going to let another man

swoop in and snatch her away after the way she looked tonight.

She beamed, “thank you.” Although he stared down at her with a disgruntled expression, something like amusement flashed in his gold flecked eyes.

“Lets go sit.” He said directing her toward the table through the throng of people

The men at the table stood as he sat her then took a seat next to her. Adriana told her she was stunning, and the others said something along the same line as they sat down. She was too embarrassed to say much back except murmur some ‘thank you’s’. Alex put his arm across the back of her chair even when his brother engaged him in conversation, he leaned toward him to hear over the noise of the crowd but didn’t remove his arm.

Every now and then she could feel his arm brush the back of her neck sending shivers through her. She never felt so coveted. Only when Red who sat to her left started talking to her did she realize from the coolness at her nape that he removed his arm.

However it was soon forgotten as the auction started. Not only that, Priscilla was making sure all of the attention was drawn to her throughout the evening. Unfortunately she couldn’t catch Seth’s attention. He seemed engaged in conversation with his brother mostly. Later when they went to the ladies room together, Priscilla told Angel that he was just playing hard to get. Angel rolled her eyes but didn’t say anything.

When they were back at the table, Angel asked him where his girlfriend was, and he explained that she couldn’t get the evening off for him. She was a marketing director in the city.

Angel never had so much fun in her life. She felt like a queen. It turned out that it was Alex and Seth that sponsored the Auction this year and the spotlight fell on their table as they stood and acknowledge the clapping and cheers of appreciation. She never realized that he had an eye for art and she told him so.

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Unfortunately he didn't answer her, but instead pinned her with an angry look.

"What?" she said studying his expression. He looked mad for some reason and she had no idea why.

He leaned over and whispered harshly in her ear, "Don't worry your pretty little head over it." Then he turned away and proceeded to ignore her for the rest of the night without another word between them and she became more subdued in the conversation unsure why Alex was angry with her. So much for the soft side he showed her in the car.

### *CHAPTER THREE*

ALEX DROVE TO the front of her house and shifted the Jaguar into park.

"Thanks for the night." She managed and was met with another harsh look. Why he was so angry, she didn't know. Normally she would sum it up to his usual mood, but this seemed different—deeper.

Finally after a prolonged silence he turned to her, "It's not necessary to act like a trollop when you're surrounded by men."

Her mouth fell open, "I did not!"

He reached for a cigarette and lit it while looking at the house. The lights were out, "Where's your family?"

"My parents went away for the weekend after we left the house, and you know where Priscilla was, you were glaring at her all night." She shot back causing him to cast her an amused glance, with all trace of irritation gone. How he could switch moods so rapidly, was beyond her.

"Is that so?" he said roving his eyes over her face.

"It is." She said hotly, "You accuse me of throwing myself at—"

"At Red." His eyes guided to the bodice of her gown,

“Maybe it has something to do with those.”

Instinctively she lifted her hands to cover her cleavage, while glaring at him, “You make me sound so cheap.”

“I didn’t think you were until tonight.” He confirmed coldly.

“Oh for God’s sake, I was talking to old friends.” She flustered. “What is the matter with that?”

“You’re twenty, you don’t have old friends.” He nodded toward her, “And they aren’t your friends, they’re men with lusty appetites. I didn’t have you go and get all dolled up so you can throw yourself at another man.”

“Then what the hell did you want me to get dolled up for!” she flung at him.

“For me.” He said simply causing her mouth to fall open again.

“You?” she gaped at him completely dumfounded.

“Are you deaf little girl?”

“No, I—“

“What the hell do you think? I wouldn’t spend my time on some useless prospect, they’re a dime a dozen.”

What was a useless prospect? “Alex—“

“I meant” he interrupted seeing her confusion, “A woman that would know what to do with a man if she had him like you had me tonight, but instead you spent most of the evening seducing Red.”

“That’s not true!” she defended, “And what does that mean? I don’t have you.”

“Don’t you?” his gaze dropped to her chest and back up to her eyes, “You had me fifteen seconds after I spotted you this evening.” He said huskily.

“Oh.” It was an odd thing to say but it was the only thing she could squeak out of her tightening throat.

“Oh.” He repeated allowing a sensual smile to drift across

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his face with a look that told her he knew exactly how he affected her. “You really have no idea what God gave you do you honey?”

She shook her head completely stunned and suddenly aware of how small the interior of his sports car suddenly became.

His hand came up and teased the hairs at her nape, “Well, I’m not a fool and I know what I want when I see it.” He said deeply not removing his gaze from hers.

“Want?” She didn’t even know she said the word. She was completely lost in his eyes. His hand boldly brushed the stole off her shoulder and caressed the bare skin with his fingers.

“Your innocence is completely refreshing Angel. Now come here and let me kiss you.” His hand guided around to the back of her neck and gently pulled her toward him.

Her eyes widened. Now her heart was pounding in her chest as he lowered his head and brushed his mouth across hers.

“I swear that you have the most beautiful mouth I’ve ever seen. I’ve been dying to taste you again.” He murmured against her lips.

That deep husky confession made her completely lose it. Whatever resistance she had, if she had any, was gone and replaced by a warm flushing that filled every limb. She practically fell into him as she reached her arms around his neck and entangled her hands in his hair. Faintly she heard him chuckle against her mouth, but didn’t care. He was nibbling on her lower lip sensuously and it made her part hers. It was all the coaxing he needed to capture her mouth fully and probe his tongue between her parted lips. Obviously the man had loads of experience on how to make a woman respond and did she ever respond. All of her fantasies about this man couldn’t possibly touch what he was doing to her right now. She could feel his hands on her body through her clothing and wished to God they didn’t have fabric between them. She knew his hands were

calloused and rough from hard work and the thought of them on her flesh in the gentle way he caressed her now made heat throb through her. He tilted her head back and ran his mouth down her neck causing her to moan. Finally with a rough noise deep within his throat he pulled her away from him, just enough so he could lift his head and look at her.

“Jesus Angel, you’re loaded with passion.” He said huskily searching her eyes with his.

Her actions on how she reacted came to light and she flushed all the way to her toes, “Oh dear.”

“Don’t you dare be embarrassed. There’s nothing wrong with this. I love the way you react to my touch.” He gave her a drop dead heart stopping grin, “I’d better get going, or I’m coming in and I don’t think Catherine or George would appreciate finding me here in the morning.” Her eyes widened and then she did something unexpected and laughed. He shook his head at her while still grinning. She had no idea of how wonderful that sounded when she laughed freely in such a way making him grin. “Listen. Tomorrow I’m going to be busy, but on Monday, I’ll be in town. I’ll expect you to join me for lunch. Just you and me. I’m not dragging your other boyfriend along.” He added with a slight narrowing of his gaze.

Other boyfriend? What was wrong with him? She’d worked in the office with Red for two years, if she was dating him wouldn’t it seem obvious? Then she remembered her lunch date with him on Monday and paled a little knowing after this display that he wasn’t going to take it well, “I’m going to lunch with Red.” She admitted hesitantly. After what happened next, she shouldn’t have admitted anything. Alex narrowed his cool stare on her, bent over and lifted the handle of her door shoving it open with such force she feared it would pop off its hinges.

“Get out.” He gritted out angrily.

“Alex—“ she started feeling her gut drop.

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“Get the hell out Angel.” He stated angrily casting her another cold look. “If I wanted some tramp I would have asked your sister!”

Instantly she was angry, “I asked you not to say anything about her! Can’t we have one conversation without you insulting her.”

“Get out or I’ll shove you out.” He said harshly.

The tone of his voice made her scramble out of the car like she’d been scorched. She stood there in stunned silence while it tore up the gravel on the drive and disappeared out of sight. What the hell did this man expect from her? He treated her as if she was no more important than the Stetson he wore on his head, yet as soon as another man even talked to her, he acted like she was his possession. Then she started wondering while staring off down the empty drive why he kept her at arm’s length when his temper and his actions tonight began to lead her to believe that he was actually interested in her. Although her screaming instincts reminded her that he only used women, he just as much told her so at Seth’s party. For a man as steeled as he was, if she didn’t know better, it was as though she hurt him. Hurt him? Was that possible? He could have just about any woman he wanted and it was ridiculous to think that she affected him in such a way. What if she did hurt him? She never intentionally hurt anyone before in her life, and because of the way she felt about him, it hurt back. Tomorrow, she’d go and talk to him after he calmed down a bit. If he calmed down.

Sighing heavily, she turned and went into the house.

The next day she baked cinnamon buns as a peace offering. Last night had her thinking. Alex was always irritated in one way or another with her, but never as angry as he was last night. Something must be going on with him and her.

God she hoped so.

Although she was the last person to make a move, she

knew he wouldn't after that incident. Still, she didn't think she did anything wrong. After she was done she packed up the buns in a container and sought out her sister to ask for a ride over to the Harrison's ranch. It was no surprise that she practically leapt at the suggestion before bolting upstairs to get ready.

Angel realized she should have asked her sooner, because it took her over an hour to primp up.

On the way over she kept asking Angel how she looked and 'do you think Seth with notice me?' Angel just nodded fingering the container of buns nervously on her lap. The closer they got to the ranch the more she seemed to lose her nerve. While her sister babbled on about herself, Angel ended up thinking about how he would take seeing her again and worry started a prickly dread going through her. It intensified when Prissy pulled the car up in front of the house. As she watched her sister get out of the car and practically rush into the house she felt a sense of loneliness. She never had anyone to talk to about her feelings. Her father would tell her to snap out of it, her mother would dote on her way too much, and her sister would somehow turn the conversation back to herself.

She caught a glimpse of Alex at a distance. Although she couldn't make out his face, she knew his shape and long confident stride as he headed toward the barn. Likely he was going riding to check on his herds. Before she lost her nerve she quickly scrambled out of the car and headed toward the building he just entered. She tried to pick something to wear that complimented her figure more than the other clothes he'd seen her in. A soft pink camisole and a denim knee length skirt. Even though she felt practically naked, she didn't want to give him ammunition and call her a spinster or frumpy again.

With his outburst the night before still fresh in her mind, her legs began to weaken the closer she got to the barn and for the life of her she couldn't fathom what was controlling their

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movements because she wanted to turn and run back to the car, lock herself in and wait for Prissy.

Compared to the sunny outside, the barn was dark and she couldn't see a darn thing until she stepped through the door. Like she thought he was in the middle of saddling a horse. Without turning around he spoke. How he knew that it was her, she'd never know.

"What do you want little girl?" he said tersely while tightening the cinch on his stallion, maybe a little roughly by the way the horse shifted and snorted.

She wanted to run and hide, he was still mad. "I want to apologize." She managed cautiously walking closer. She saw him pause at what he was doing, then dropped his hands and slowly turned around. His expression was unreadable and he casually reached for a cigarette and lit it.

"So, apologize." He said coolly locking his eyes on hers.

"I'm sorry." She said.

"Not good enough." He stated looking her over slowly, "What the hell is that get up?"

"What do you mean not good enough?" she said ignoring his comment on her clothing. She had half expected it.

He took a long draw off his smoke and stared at her through thick lashes, "First of all, tell me why you think you need to apologize."

"Because—" she said exasperated, "You are angry with me!"

"So you're guilty of something, but what do you think you're guilty of?" he said not giving an inch.

"I don't know!" she blurted, "You made me feel like garbage last night."

"Good." He said undeterred.

"Good? Alex, what is it you want from me?"

"Not a damn thing honey." He stated while crushing out

his cigarette with the toe of his boot and giving her another look of contempt before turning around and continued to saddle his horse.

She stood there feeling like a complete ass and found herself looking down at the pan in her hands. She'd completely forgotten about it.

"You and Red have a nice lunch tomorrow, just don't spread your legs at the first line of flattery he feeds you." He said casually not even bothering to look at her.

How could a man possibly humiliate her more than he just did? Her cheeks burned with shame. He actually made her feel as if she already slept with the man. She let go of the pan and it hit the cement floor with a crash startling his horse, but she didn't care. She just turned around and walked out of the barn hearing him curse while trying to settle his stallion. Tears burned her eyes as she strode by her sister's car and down the long drive. It was a fifteen minute drive by car, and it'll take her the better part of the day to walk home but she didn't care. Alex had crushed her.

It had taken every bit of nerve in her body to go to him like that and he spoke to her like she was no more than street trash. She furiously wiped the tears from her eyes and kept walking. Somewhere in the back of her mind she heard a vehicle approaching, but refused to turn and look. Somehow she knew it would be him. Her face was wet with tears and she was completely humiliated.

The vehicle slowed as it neared her and she heard the sound of an electric window.

"Angel get in."

She felt her heart clench at the sound of Alex's voice making her hurt all over again. "Go away! I hate you!"

"Angel get in the damn truck." He said, "Or I'll get out and throw you in it."

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She waved a dismissive hand at him still refusing to look in his direction. Hearing a string of epithets that could make a lumberjack blush, he gunned the engine and pulled in front of her cutting off her path. She stopped as he got out of the truck.

“What the hell were you thinking, walking home—“ he paused suddenly seeing her tear stained face, “Jesus Christ, you’re crying?” A wash of guilt hit him. He’d been hard on her and he should’ve known better. But the sudden shard of jealousy he felt over the mention of her going to lunch with Red, was unexpected and he took it out on her.

She released a sob and tried to go around the front of the truck but he caught her arm.

“Hold on a second missy.” He said turning her to look at him, “Why are you crying?”

“You’re a jerk.” She stated vehemently, “I came to apologize, for whatever I did to make you angry at me, and you threw it back at me. You insult my wardrobe!” she released another sob, “You call me a tramp and made me feel like trash.”

He just stared at her with a perplexed look on his face as if he never had a woman say things to him like that before.

“W—What?” she stuttered falling to pieces under his scrutiny

“Get in the truck. I’ll take you home.” He said softly.

She noticed the anger in his voice had evaporated, but she was not willing to forgive him, “I’d rather walk and take the bloody soles off my feet then get in that truck with you.” She muttered trying to turn away, but he had a strong hold on her.

“Then I guess I won’t give you the chance to walk.” He said as he bent down and scooped her up in his arms like she weighed nothing, setting her gently in the passenger side of the truck.

Even if she had the will to resist she couldn’t, he was too darn strong and the feeling of his strong arms around her nearly

made her sigh out loud. She silently chastised herself for falling for his strong-armed charm so easily. She bowed her head and focused her eyes on her hands that were folded on her lap as he shut the door and walked around to the driver's side.

He didn't say a word until he pulled up to the front of the house, "Your parents aren't home yet?" he said looking through the windshield at the vacant driveway.

"Tonight."

He cut the engine and turned to face her, "That pan that you managed to shatter all over the floor of my barn and freak the shit out of my stallion with, what was it?"

She brought her red-rimmed gaze to his. Thankfully, he no longer looked angry, "Cinnamon buns." She admitted.

"Did you bake them yourself?" his eyes studied her sorrowful expression. Maybe he was a little harsh on her. He had to watch his temper around her, she wasn't used to much experience around men, and he was used to a little too much experience around women. He should know better than to treat her in such a way, but he was so jealous at the way Red had paid attention to her he'd forgotten himself. In fact, he woke up still angry this morning and after he checked on the calves, was going to ride his horse to try and release some of his tension, but she showed up in that outfit looking entirely too desirable and his temper flared again. She had the nicest shaped legs he'd ever seen. What he wouldn't give to have those wrapped around his hips while he made love to her.

She nodded and felt the heat rise to her cheeks under his intense scrutiny.

"For me?"

She nodded again.

He sighed heavily, "They sure smelled good after the glass broke."

Her eyes brightened a little, "I have more in the house."

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“Is that an invitation?” his dark brows rose.

“It is only if you don’t call me anymore names.” She said stiffly.

“I think I can abstain.” He said with slight humor in his tone.

Angel couldn’t believe that a human being could eat so much. The buns were huge and he managed to put away three of them and two cups of coffee. Then again, he was a big man, who worked hard and was sure his appetite attested to both of those things. She had to admit that she was pleased that he enjoyed her baking. When he was done, he sat back in the chair and licked his fingers. Her eyes were automatically drawn to his mouth.

“Delicious.” He said settling his eyes on hers.

“Really?” she perked up at the compliment, knowing he didn’t give them lightly.

He nodded. “So tell me Angel,” he said slinging his arm over the back of the chair as he leaned back causing his shirt to stretch across his thick muscular chest. “Do you usually cry when someone insults you?”

It took her a moment to hear him because her eyes were riveted on his chest. Finally she brought her eyes to his and narrowed, “An insult? That was blatant humiliation.” She accused.

He stared at her for a moment, ‘I suppose that was my goal.’

“Why did you say those things?”

“Red’s a playboy I don’t want you near him.” He said derisively.

“And you aren’t?” she shot at him.

“I don’t want you going out to lunch with him either.” He said ignoring her question.

“Why not? Its only lunch.” She stood and took his plate to the sink. It was the only way she could drag her eyes away from

his body, "It's just as friends." You'd think he was sitting there naked from the way she was ogling him, but he never indicated that he noticed this time. If he could have grown more sinfully appealing than he already was, he just did with that pose.

"Because for one, he sleeps with anything, ask your sister." Came the terse remark.

She spun around and pointed her finger at him angrily, "I told you to quit making remarks about Priscilla!"

"And I told you I call them like I see them." He said unmoved.

"You don't know her." She defended, "How would you like it if I made remarks about Seth?"

"I know enough." He said contemptuously, "She's been running after Seth like she's in heat since she was out of diapers. And," He added with a drop in his tone, "Seth's sinless compared to me."

"That's a horrible accusation about Prissy!" she glared at him trying to ignore the smoldering look in his eyes.

"But true." He stood up and started toward her causing her to back up against the sink and braced her hands on the counter, "That's why he won't have anything to do with her." Her position made her chest arch toward him and he had to refrain from groaning at her provocative position. She honestly didn't know how she presented herself.

"Can we just not talk about Priscilla?" She asked aware of his closeness. God he was so tall. She had to crane her neck to look up at him.

"Sure." He drawled stepping closer and gazing down at her.

"Alex, you're making me nervous." She admitted looking up at him.

"Yeah, and you're not stuttering about it." He said softly dropping his gaze to her mouth.

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He was right, she wasn't.

"Cancel your lunch date with Soames."

"I can't, that's rude."

"So."

"Unlike you, I can't behave that way."

"Yes, that's very true." He said softly bringing his hand up to brush her hair back over her shoulder. His eyes followed the movement, "I'd have to admit, your friend Marty did an incredible job."

"M—Mathew." She corrected.

He grinned knowing exactly what the man's name was. His hand circled around to the back of her head.

"W-what are you doing?" she said breathlessly blinking.

"Staking my claim," he answered bending his head to hers.

"Your claim?" she breathed unable to ignore the heat of his body close to hers

"Yeah honey, you're a smart gal. Haven't you figured it out yet?" He didn't give her a chance to respond taking possession of her mouth with his.

All she remembered is something about a claim, but it was vaporized when his hot mouth covered hers. She opened her mouth in a gasp at the intimate contact, and he took advantage of it by delving his tongue inside her mouth and God, did that feel incredible! It was more aggressive than the last few times he kissed her, and she had to admit, it was wild. Simultaneously his hard body pushed her against the counter and she could feel his hands circling around her back. One diverted to the back of her head entangling in her hair to guide her in movement with his kiss. Somewhere in the back of her mind she heard an erotic feminine moan, and it took a few moments to register that it came from her.

"That's right baby." He murmured against her mouth,

“Let go.”

He took her mouth again, with a little more force this time and she instinctively splayed her hands over his thick chest. She'd dreamed about touching him again after that night in his study. There was no mistaking the hardness of his body under her hands and every time he moved she could feel the muscles ripple through his shirt.

“Do you want to touch me?” He said lifting his mouth from hers.

“I do.” She murmured wondering how he always seemed to know what she was thinking. Obviously he was experienced enough to know how women reacted to him. At least that's what she told herself.

With a flash of triumph in his eyes, he reached up and flicked the buttons of his shirt open.

She watched each movement as if hypnotized. Slowly, she guided her eyes to his with faltering shyness, unable to make that brave step to feel his warm skin under her hands. He still looked as magnificent as he did four years ago. Tan with a dark spray of hair over his expansive thick chest.

Sensing her hesitation he took her hand and placed it on his chest.

Her eyes filled with fascination as it explored the contours under the thick matt of ebony curls, “You're perfect.” She whispered.

“Thank you.” He grinned and kissed her again.

Now both of her hands were exploring his upper body and nearly missed the feel of his on the bare skin of her waist. He'd managed to lift the hem of her camisole and run his rough hands over her bare skin.

“Alex—“ she said placing her hands on his to still them.

“Shush Angel, I just want to touch you.” And he coaxed her again with his mouth. He felt a wash of arrogance as her

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hands relaxed and then after a moan of surrender she released them. Her skin felt like fine warm satin compared to his rough hands and as they roamed up her ribcage to the sides of her breasts he knew he wasn't wrong in what he said about her body the day before. She was perfectly shaped, even though she didn't know it or show it. What mattered is that he did. He also knew he could easily coax her into bed from the way she was reacting to him, but although he was eager to do so, he wasn't a selfish bastard in that degree. It hadn't escaped him that she was innocent. He wanted her badly, but he didn't want to break her. He wanted her to accept him willingly. She was fragile in many ways and the plans he had made in regards to her, in no way involved breaking her spirit. He'd just started pulling her out of her shell and he certainly didn't want her to go back into it or he may never get her out again.

Angel could barely breathe. The sensations flowing through her possessed every cell in her body. She could feel his fingers easily flick apart her bra and soon one of his hands covered her bare breast. She should have protested, but she didn't want to. His tongue was doing erotic things to hers, and she instinctively arched toward him. When he groaned deeply against her mouth a wave of heat flushed through her lower pelvis making her legs so weak that they wouldn't have held her if he didn't have her pinned against the counter with his body. He pushed her legs apart with one of his and pressed closer to her. She could feel his need for her on her belly through his jeans and it suddenly snapped her back to reality. "Oh God, Alex—I can't."

He stopped and lifted his head, but his hand remained on her breast, "All right honey." He didn't realize he was so consumed by desire for her until he heard it in his rough tone.

"Y—your hand—"she swallowed and tilted her head back as his thumb grazed over her nipple making her release a moan that made his skin tingle.

“—is in heaven.” He murmured lowering his head and running his mouth along her arched neck. “You have the most beautiful breasts Angel.” He whispered against her skin, “I knew you were beautiful from that day I saw you in the bikini at our house.”

She lifted her head and brought her eyes to his, “You did?”

He smiled, “Hell yes I did. I’ve never seen a woman as perfect as you.”

Despite the intimate position she was in, she couldn’t help but smile, “I didn’t think you noticed me.”

“Noticed, dreamt and obsessed.” He said taking her mouth again.

Angel knew she shouldn’t let him touch her in such a way, but God help her, she wanted him to, especially after that deeply voiced confession. She was crazy about him and he made her feel so beautiful that she near wept. It was no wonder women chased him like they did. Now he had one hand on her breast teasing her to oblivion, the other was wrapped around her lower back and he had her bent backward over the counter while his mouth did amazing things to hers.

Finally and with a tremendous amount of difficulty he lifted his head from hers, “I’ve got to stop.” He said almost to himself, “I need to go Angel.” He pulled her upright and removed his hand from her chest. For a moment they just stood staring at one another. He could see the newly discovered desire in her large sapphire gaze and quite frankly it was driving him insane with want for her. He shook his head and gave her one of his rare charming smiles, “I’ll see you later. Thanks for the treat.” He said in a tone that had nothing to do with cinnamon buns.

She blushed and nodded, still unable to speak. Then he slowly, deliberately bent and brushed his mouth across hers and gave her a final heated stare before he turned and left the house.

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She stood there with her clothes and hair in disarray, her bra undone and her emotions in a cloud. Her hand covered the breast he'd been toying with. It was left cold by the absence of his large hand and she shut her eyes at the feeling the memory brought back. She had no idea that a man could raise that kind of desire in a woman.

### *CHAPTER FOUR*

THE NEXT DAY at work she couldn't concentrate at all. Margo had asked her how her date was and she didn't even hear her.

"That good huh?" she smiled.

"Actually—" her intercom went off, interrupting her.

"Angel, can you come in here please." Came her boss's voice.

"Saved by the boss." She laughed, "Later." She said to Margo as she grabbed her notebook and pen. She knew it was dictation that he needed her for.

"I'll not let it go." Margo teased.

The rest of the morning went by in a blur and with it, her nervousness at what Red expected. Sure enough at noon he came out of his office with a smile.

"Are you ready?"

She knew she couldn't say no, but she wanted to unsure of Alex's reaction when he found out. If he was cruel to her over a few flirtations at the Banquet, lord only knows how he would handle this, especially since they'd been together. "I guess." She said nervously.

Not seeming to notice her apprehension he waited for her to grab her purse and opened the door for her smiling at her appreciatively.

"Have fun." Said Margo.

Angel wanted to kick her. Why did she feel so guilty? She certainly didn't do anything wrong and it's not like she had much of a choice. Besides many people in the work place at lunch together. However, not many people who worked together had to deal with Alex Harrison. She felt like she was walking toward a firing squad as Red happily talked beside her as he led her down the street to a popular bistro. Suddenly she stopped seeing his Jaguar sitting out front of the same bistro.

"What is it?" Red looked down the street and back at her frightened expression. "Do you see someone?"

"It's nothing." She stammered forcing herself to start walking again. She hadn't heard from him since the day before. Not that she expected to, but it still hurt seeing his car and knowing what they had shared. All she could hear despite the busy traffic of the street was the hammering of her heart. Would he be angry? He had told her to cancel the lunch with Red, and she had refused.

As if her thoughts triggered it, Alex walked out of the bistro and set his gaze directly on her, but he didn't look angry at all. In fact he looked quite relaxed. Maybe it had something with the gorgeous blonde hanging off his arm. They were carrying what looked like ice cappuccinos.

"Hi Red." He said walking past not acknowledging her besides the look.

Angel literally felt her heart tear open. It meant nothing to him! Absolutely nothing! Something in her snapped. She snatched the drink out of the blonde's hand and without a second thought threw it in his smug face. The blonde screeched and jumped back trying not to soil her designer suit.

Alex cursed and veered his ferocious expression on her. "What the hell is the matter with you!" he shouted.

"What's the matter with me?" she said incredulously and pointed at the other woman. "Who is she?"

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“God dammit woman,” he seethed taking a step toward her while ice cappuccino dripped off his thick ebony bangs, down his face and onto his tan chambray shirt.

Just then Red recovered from his initial shock and stepped between them, “Hold on Alex. She’s half your size.” He said holding up his hand.

“That makes it easier to kill her.” He gritted out pinning her with his angry gaze.

“Alex who the hell is that?” said the other woman, “And why is she throwing drinks at you?”

“Absolutely no one.” He said glaring at her before he spun around and took the woman’s arm.

After Alex helped the blonde into the car and drove off, Red turned to her with a look of surprise, “Are you crazy?”

“Probably.” She said finally letting her actions hit her, “I was just so angry.”

“Alex isn’t going to let that go.” He said shooting a thumb over his shoulder in the direction his car took off, “he’ll come see you after he regains his sanity. I don’t know him as well as Jason does, but I know he doesn’t let things go.”

“Probably.” She repeated not able to meet his eyes and not even wanting to think about the future right now.

“Angel, I thought you two were just friends. Is there something going on between you two?” he asked with an edge of disappointment.

This time she lifted her chin and looked at him, “Not anymore.”

He turned over his shoulder to see Alex’s Jag disappear around a corner with a screech from the tires before he turned his attention back to her, “Good for me then.” He held out his hand. She only took it because she was worried her knees might give out. She *was* out of her mind.

The next few days seemed as long as a few years because she neither heard nor saw Alex. She knew she should have talked to him not overreacted in such a way especially when Priscilla asked her why she threw a drink all over the Alex in front of his cousin a few days later. Her sister spent a lot of her spare time over at the Harrison's trying to catch Seth's eye since he came home.

"Cousin?"

"She's visiting her sister Sherri. I guess she's some New York model or something. Who knows. Anyway, I was over helping Bea with select swatches because she wants to redo the dining room and he came in swearing like I never seen him covered in—what was that—"

"An Ice Cappuccino" Angel groaned feeling more and more like moving out of the country.

She laughed, "Then when Bea asked him what happened," he started telling her that you flipped out and went crazy.

"I didn't!" She said with wide-eyed protest.

"Angel, why else would you throw a drink on Alex. The devil himself wouldn't dare to do such a thing!" she stated, "you *are* crazy."

"He made me mad." She muttered feeling more like a heel. Truth was, she thought he was getting back at her for going out to lunch with Red, so he went and got himself a beautiful woman to taunt her with.

"Well he *was* mad. I've heard him swear before but the things he was calling you, I've never heard.' Her eyes widened remembering.

"Oh God, I'm so stupid!" she covered her face with her hands.

Priscilla stared down at her little sister and actually felt bad for her. She'd never seen Angel lose her composure ever. She sat beside her on her bed

and put an arm around her, “Do you want to talk about it.”

“I don’t know.” She muffled through her hands.

“You got it bad for him don’t you? Like I do with Seth.”

This made her raise her eyes to her sisters because she remembered what Alex said about her. Also, she wasn’t sure if Priscilla could understand the depth on which she cared for Alex. However, if she had Priscilla’s confidence, would she act so crazy around Alex? “I do.”

“Well then,” she gave her a reassuring smile, “I think we have some fixing to do.”

“Fixing?” He’ll throw something at me the next time I see him, ‘I’m terrified.’” She said wide-eyed, “You should have seen the rage on his face.”

“Big deal. Alex would never strike a woman no matter how angry she got him. He’s got too many morals. It’s not much different from Daddy who rants and raves and threatens, but he’ll never hurt either one of us. Now, my dear sister. The only reason he gets all worked up is probably because he’s got it bad for you too.”

“I doubt it.”

“first things first.” She said ignoring her denial and leaned away from her and looked over her clothing, “From now on we go shopping together, and I’m giving you full access to my closets as of today.”

Angel barely heard her, she felt terrible. She’d had humiliated him in front of Red, his cousin, and probably half the town that was in the Bistro that day. He’ll never forgive her for this. Never in her life did she ever get so angry or possessive over something. Her behavior surprised herself.

Priscilla saw her look, “Come on, cheer up. If he likes you as much as I think he does, he’ll forgive you.” She stood up and pulled her up with her, “Let’s get you dressed up then we’ll go see him. I’m sure he would have forgiven you by now, especially

when he sees what I created.”

Angel was apprehensive because she knew how Alex felt about the way she dressed and acted around his brother, but she was too much of a coward to tell her not wanting to hurt her feelings. However, Priscilla was very conservative and dressed her in a light blue v-neck t-shirt and designer jeans. She rolled the hems up because of the height difference between the two of them, but surprisingly enough the clothes fit.

“I was sure I was bigger than you.” Angel said in awe looking at her image in her sister’s full length mirror.

“On the contrary sis, I’m only taller and you look absolutely irresistible.” She stood back and admired her work, “This is the type of gal that Alex likes. Down to earth and, “she smiled, “Intelligent.”

“You are observant.” She said casting her sister a sheepish look.

“I know men.”

If she only knew how much he disapproved of her chasing his brother she would take that statement back

“Now let’s go find him.” She said dragging her out of her room.

“Gosh, he’s still going to be mad.” She said apprehensively.

Her sister waved a dismissive hand, “No he won’t. Trust me.”

Angel chewed absently on her fingernails while Prissy drove her over to the Harrisons. Her sister told her that she promised Bea she would help her recover the cushions on the dining room chairs and there was no reason why she shouldn’t bring Angel along. However, Angel still didn’t feel as confident as her sister. Although Bea always welcomed them and the company, it seemed deceitful.

An hour later she was helping her sister cut material with

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Alex and Seth's mother, and found herself enjoying the task, until he walked in the sewing room. He was a sharp contrast to the surroundings. Sort of like a panther in a flower shop.

"What is it Alex," Bea said raising her head from her sewing machine.

He said nothing but scanned the room until his hard gaze settled on Angel.

Angel felt her breath catch in her throat. He still looked angry regardless of how appealing he was standing there in worn jeans a blue shirt and a tan leather vest.

"Alex?" Bea repeated casting a look between the two who seemed fixated on one another.

"Nothing mom." He finally answered without taking his eyes off Angel as he started to walk toward her.

She couldn't move, not sure what to expect and certainly not sure if he was going to embarrass her in front of his mother and her sister. At that moment as he approached her, his expression was unreadable, and she took a step back.

When he reached her, he took her hand and removed the scissors from it, "In case you think of using them on me." He stated with a glint of amusement in his eyes.

"I wouldn't." she protested knowing he was referring to the cappuccino episode. He completely surprised her by not being angry because of what her sister witnessed and what she knew of him herself. Actually he had every right to be furious with her.

"Sure you wouldn't." he mused setting the scissors on the table and taking her hand in his and turning to his mother, "I'm borrowing Angel." He said as he left the room while pulling her along behind him like a parent dragging a toddler around in the mall.

"Certainly." Bea said with a subtle smile. "borrow her all you want."

Angel shot a surprised look to her sister and Bea who both just sat there with odd looks on their faces before he tugged her out of the room and down the hall to the stairs that led below. “Alex--?”

“I thought you’d like to go riding.” He said over his shoulder.

Oh yes, she thought, “I’d love to.” *But what about what I did to you?* She wanted to ask.

“Good.”

Finally she couldn’t take it anymore, “Are you still mad at me?” she finally asked sheepishly.

He turned and looked at her with no trace of anger in his eyes, “You were jealous, weren’t you honey?”

She looked up at him, “I’m sorry.” He managed a sloppy smile that near made her knees give out.

“She was my cousin.” He explained.

“I never met her, I didn’t know.” She explained, “I felt terrible when Prissy told me.”

“Now you know how I felt about Red.” He said narrowing his gaze. “I had some time to think about it and I know you thought I was trying to prove a point to you. You go out with Red and I go out with another woman. However, it was my cousin Tracy.”

“I don’t feel about Red like that and it was one lunch.” She explained feeling worse by the minute.

“And you thought I was getting back at you because of it?”

Slowly she nodded.

“Honey, I don’t operate that way. I have no problem telling it like it is. Besides Seth and my mother, you know me better than anyone.”

“I *should* know better.” Her eyes lifted to his, ‘I’m really sorry.’ As for knowing him better than anyone, she was sure he was wrong. There was no way she could predict what mood he

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was going to present to her when she saw him again, or what exactly he wanted from her.

“I don’t need another woman in my life. Apparently I only have the strength for one.”

One? Was he talking about her? “Me?” she gave him a look of utter shock.

He looked at her for a moment before he finally nodded, “Yes.” There was no mistaking the humor in his eyes, “It took me twenty minutes to scrub that shit out of my hair. It was sticky as hell. And your apology is accepted.” He smiled.

She flushed, “I didn’t mean to embarrass you.”

“I wasn’t embarrassed, I was irate. No woman has ever tossed a drink on me.”

“That to.” She added more quietly.

“My cousin thinks you’re insane.” He grinned.

She groaned and looked away.

He cupped her chin and brought her eyes back to his, “I have to say, after I cooled down, that I was impressed with your temper.”

“Honestly I’ve never reacted like that before in my life.”

“I know.” He smiled, “I’ve known you your whole life, and not once have I seen you angry.”

She shook her head, “You just know how to bring out the worst in me.”

“The best Angel, not the worst, I like that you have the ability to stand up for yourself.” He slid his hand to her jaw.

“Do you?” she breathed unable to ignore the sensation that his touch gave her. He gave her a sexy smile at her tone.

“More than you know. However, the jealousy is not necessary honey.” His eyes searched hers, “There’ll be no more reasons why you need to be jealous. Let’s go for a ride and spend some time together. I’ve been dying to get you alone forever.”

“Really?”

“More than you know.” He added.

“w—what did you mean about having strength for one of me?”

“I’ll explain that to you when we go for our ride,” he nodded with a smile, “Okay?”

She smiled, “I’d like that.”

Unable to help himself, he leaned down and brushed his lips across hers.

Unknown to both of them Priscilla and Bea peeked around the corner watching the two. “Well it’s about time.” Said Bea, turning to give Priscilla a smug smile.

“I’d say.” She answered.

It didn’t take long for Alex to saddle a sound little grey mare for her besides his stallion and soon they were through the fence and on their way through one of the sprawling pastures before they came to another fence. He dismounted and opened it letter her through before he followed.

Soon they were sharing stories and laughing together. In all of the years Angel had known him, she couldn’t remember him being so relaxed and she told him so.

He slanted her a sensual look, “Maybe it’s the company.”

She reined up her horse, “Okay Alex, I can’t take this anymore. What is it you want from me?” She said bluntly. Her sister would have done it, and frankly the uncertainty was driving her insane.

“I was sure I was as plain as the sky is blue.” He said raising his brows.

“I—I—“

He chuckled, “I guess I should know better, it’s not as if you have a whole lot of experience with this.” He shifted and dismounted.

“Alex, what are you doing?”

He walked around and flipped his stallion’s reins over a

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branch. Then he turned back to her and held up his arms, “Come here.”

She tilted her head in confusion.

“Angel, I’m going crazy from not touching you. Now if you don’t come down from there, I’m going to haul you down.” He said with concrete determination.

Angel didn’t hesitate after that confession. She couldn’t resist him, she never could. She loved him. Their mouths met even before he pulled her off of the horse.

Alex was sitting at the desk in the study fingering the velvet box that he picked up at the jeweler’s well over a month before. He was supposed to be balancing the accounts, but he was distracted. Not one day went by that he didn’t take it out of the desk drawer and look at the ring, sometimes twice. He was sure she would like it and equally sure that she would say ‘yes’.

The ride him and Angel went on the day before was prickling his conscience. It didn’t take much for him to entice her to remove her clothing and make love to her. He knew she was crazy about him. He always knew. Unfortunately it had been several months since he’d had a woman, and he carried it too far. Honestly he didn’t mean too, he just wanted a sample, but then things got too hot and heavy. Hell, though, every inch of her was delicious and hot for him. He eased back in his chair and lifted his hands behind his head while remembering. It wasn’t enough, he already knew that. It probably never would be. He wanted more of her. Knowing that she never protested once, and there was only slight hesitation when he took her, but it was short lived. He knew then that he could have done absolutely anything to her and she’d let him. He took a deep breath and shut his eyes. Angel was a virgin and she let him be her first, and—her last, as far as he was concerned.

Damn she was so exquisite.

Finally he got to see every inch of her in broad daylight,

and not once was he disappointed. Her soft skin was warmed by the Carolina sun yet goose bumps arose when he touched her. Little shy Angel was a raving passionate lover once he got her wound up. As the images flashed in his mind he felt heat enter his groin. Without even looking, he could feel his erection. Smiling he shook his head mentally. The woman completely knocked him off balance. Although in the past, if this happened with other women, he was out of there like a flash in the pan. However, when he saw her in that sexy bikini at sixteen with the water glistening on her skin, he knew then that he wanted her but she was too young then. Opening the velvet box he looked at the ring again. There wasn't once in his life that he'd ever considered marriage, not once. There hadn't been a woman that inspired that in him. However, in the past year he had been and he knew exactly who he wanted to spend the rest of his life with. He wanted children too, lots of them. Just imagining having children sent a rush of emotion through him.

There was a knock on the door and he put the box away before he told whoever it was to come in.

Maria, their housekeeper opened the door, "Mr. Harrison there's a woman here to see you."

He perked up, "Angel?"

"No senior a woman name Lucy Byers."

His face took on an expression of bewilderment. "Lucy?"

"She's said it's important." Said Maria.

"Hi Alex." Came a feminine voice as a slender dark haired woman stepped into the room ignoring the housekeeper.

Alex stood up and nodded for Maria to close the door.

Angel hadn't heard from Alex in several days and was hoping he'd call her. She had volunteered to go and get some specialty coffees from the bistro for the office staff when she saw the ranch truck parked across the road in front of the jewelers. She couldn't help but wonder if he was getting something for her.

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No of course he wouldn't. It was probably a birthday gift for his mother. Her birthday was in a few months. Either way she didn't want him to think that she was being hopeful by stalking him outside the store so she quickly hurried back to work.

All day she felt like she was floating on a cloud. Maybe he was getting her something. He practically hinted at it the last time they spent together, or did he? Alex wasn't easy to understand and every time she thought she had him figured out she was wrong. However, it kept her on her toes around him and she really liked that air of mystery around him. Regardless of that, they had lots in common. During that horseback ride they shared on the weekend. She discovered that they read the same books, liked the same operas, ballet and most importantly he loved her paintings.

Then there was what else they did. Just thinking about it made heat flush into her lower pelvis and she absently placed her hands there. He was so tender and patient, completely opposite of what she was used to with him. She shut her eyes, and the way he touched her made her feel positively on fire.

Despite her innocence, it wasn't what she expected. He may not have been as handsome as Seth, but he sure as hell knew how to make a woman moan. Oh God, she moaned, screamed and moaned some more. He was so patient and gentle with her regardless of his rough demeanor. She never knew that tenderness was present in him.

She was in love with him

It was true, and she was sure that she always was. He knew she was a virgin, he'd said so, but he also said that didn't matter and he would show her things she never dreamed of. God did he ever show her things. If it had hurt, she didn't remember, he'd had her so wild that she'd lost herself completely.

And the things he said—

She shut her eyes and tried to focus on her job, but all she

saw were images of them naked, together, in a soft field of wildflowers while the horses they rode grazed nearby. Quickly she snapped her eyes open, but couldn't wipe the smile off her face. She could remember all too well the deep groan of satisfaction he released when he entered her and the unbelievable way it felt. Then, as he moved within her, he began to tell her how much he adored her and how beautiful she was. She knew she missed a lot of it because of the noises she was making, but she remembered enough.

Absently she reached up and tucked a stray strand of hair behind her ear remembering that she was still at work. Oh, the things that man made her forget. She focused back on her computer screen and the letter she was typing for Jason.

As for not hearing from him over the past few days, she expected it this time of year. It was calving season and the men were especially busy. It seemed to suck all the social life out of them. Even Jason hadn't heard from Alex in several days, and they usually went fishing one day a week.

Fact is, she missed him. Maybe Prissy will drive her over there after work. Almost as if on cue Alex walked into the office. She stood abruptly and smiled at him, but to her surprise it wasn't returned. "Alex?" she said puzzled at his hard expression.

"Jason is expecting me." He said evenly barely sparing her a glance.

She looked past him to Margo who had a curious expression on her face, and then back to him, "Oh," she reached over and pushed the intercom letting Jason know that he was here. She tried not to let his indifference bother her, maybe he wanted to keep their relationship a secret. However, everything about his expression and his posturing bothered her. He was completely indifferent. Not once had she been around him where he didn't run his eyes over her in scrutiny, contempt or otherwise, but this time he didn't. There were no comments

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about her clothing either. It was like the last two weekends they'd spent together weren't even registering in him and more hurtfully, the last day when they made love.

The door to Jason's office opened before she had a chance to show him in. Jason's eyes went to her with clear concern registering in them before he invited Alex in the office. Alex finally did look at her then and what she saw in his eyes startled her.

It was anguish.

Did she imagine it? If she did, why would he let her see it even if it was brief? Guilt was something she was sure he wasn't capable of, and then to see it in that degree completely stunned her.

"Well, that was interesting." Said Margo while staring at the door of Jason's office, "Did you two have a fight?"

"No." said Angel, "At least none that I know of."

"I was sure you two were a couple after Red said he practically threatened his life if he saw him with you again."

"He what?" she said in astonishment.

She smiled, "You didn't know?"

Angel shook her head. "Is Red—"

"—he's fine." Margo grinned, "He found it quite amusing actually."

Angel breathed a sigh of relief. It wasn't wise to give physical threats to a lawyer.

Just then a tall shapely rather beautiful woman walked into the office. She paused and looked around.

"Can I help you?" Angel said.

"I'm looking for Alex Harrison."

Out of the corner of her eye she could see Margo's head shoot up. "Alex?"

"Yes, is he here?"

This must be another cousin that she didn't know about.

At least she hoped it was. However, the sick feeling that started in her gut told her something different. “He’s in a meeting.”

“That’s all right,” Said the woman, “He’s expecting me.”

“Oh.” Angel pushed the button on her phone again, “Mr. Garrett, there’s a—“she paused looking at the woman.

“Oh—“ she smiled, “Lucy Byers.”

“—a Lucy Byers here to see Mr. Harrison. She says that he’s expecting her.”

“Send her in.” came the terse reply.

“Right this way,” she said flicking a curious gaze at the woman.

After Lucy entered, Jason asked her to close the door. Angel was going to offer them coffee or water, but Jason repeated his request and she quickly obeyed.

“What is that about?” Margo said.

“I don’t know, but Alex told me once before that I had no reason to get jealous.” She said with faltering bravery.

“And you are?”

“Didn’t you see her?” Angel gestured toward the closed double doors of Jason’s office, “I’m dying to know what that’s about. It didn’t look like two friends in conversation when I went in there. It looked like a lawyer and his client. And that woman was absolutely beautiful.”

“She doesn’t hold a candle to you.” Said Margo honestly.

“You’re prejudiced.” Angel said slanting her a worried look.

“Honey, the way that man has been looking at you for the past few months tells me something different.”

Did she really think so?

Just then Priscilla burst into the office with a look of overwhelming joy on her face. At the same time Jason’s office door opened.

“Angel, I’m so happy for you!” she said hugging her sister.

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“W—What?”

“My God, I heard that Alex was getting married!” she grabbed her hands and examined her fingers, “Where on earth is your ring? Oh who cares!” she said grabbing her and hugging her again, “Just imagine! All this time you’ve been in love with him and he finally realized it!”

Unfortunately Prissy’s back was to Jason’s door and she couldn’t see the look of guilt that crossed Jason’s expression, the faintest hint of crimson rising to Alex’s perfectly sculpted cheekbones and the look of outrage on the gorgeous woman standing beside him with Prissy’s not so subtle statement.

“*Excuse me!*” Said the woman looping her arm through Alex’s.

This caused Prissy to turn around as the woman held up her other hand with the engagement ring. She wiggled her finger to make it sparkle under the office lights, “I think it should be me you meant to congratulate.”

Prissy froze and glanced at the ring then back at her sister, “Oh God.”

“Excuse me.” Said angel reaching for her purse surprised she was able to move and recover as quick as she did from the initial shock, ‘I need to take an early lunch.’”

“Angel.” Said Prissy

She didn’t need pity and she needed to get out of there before she burst into tears or from the nausea that started to build, throw up. She couldn’t even meet Alex’s gaze although she could feel it on her face.

“Take all the time you need.”

She heard Jason’s voice follow her out the door but she kept walking.

Prissy could practically see her sister’s heart break from the expression on her face. She turned and walked up to Alex,

“You bastard.” She slapped him hard across the face. Something flashed in his eyes, but she was too angry to read it. Surprisingly he said nothing, but he did give her a subtle nod as if to say ‘yes, I am’. Then she turned to the woman, and ran her gaze over her with open contempt, “Good luck.” She said scathingly before turning and walking out.

## CHAPTER FIVE

ANGEL SPENT MOST of the afternoon in the park crying. She was a complete fool to think that a man such as Alex, felt something for her. The noise of her cell phone ringing distracted her. It had been going off all day and she knew it was either, Jason, Margo, or her sister. It wouldn't be Alex. He didn't care about her, or how hurt she was. He just stood there with that beautiful woman on his arm and never said a word as if nothing had happened between them.

She wiped her eyes with her tissue, it had long ago been saturated, but she didn't have another one. Alex was getting *married*. It felt as though her world just shattered. She hugged herself and bent forward at the pain that shot through her at that realization and released a sob.

It was late afternoon when she finally took out her phone and called her sister for a ride. Prissy was there in record time and gave her a hug when she found her sitting on a bench in the park.

“Do you want to talk about it sis?” She said sympathetically.

Angel shook her head. The concern Priscilla was showing her made her even more miserable. She appreciated it, but it just seemed to remind her of how horrible she felt.

“I'm so sorry about that earlier. I thought it was you he proposed to. I mean he seemed to really care about you. God,

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Angel please forgive me.” She blurted out with a look of helplessness.

Angel gave her a weak smile, “It’s not your fault. I should have known better than to fall in love with a man who could have any woman he wanted.” She released a shuddering breath trying to hold back the tears that threatened to fall. She was sure she didn’t have any left and was completely dehydrated, but apparently she was wrong from the burning that prickled her eyes.

“I’d like to know where that woman came from, and why he jumped into marriage so quickly.”

“I don’t want to know anything.” Angel said standing up, “I want to go home.”

“Okay sis,” Her sister said with compassion completely unlike her, “I won’t say another thing about it.”

True to Prissy’s word, she didn’t. Angel shut herself up in her bedroom for the rest of the night stating that she had a headache, which was true. She read in a book that dehydration does that to people.

The next few weeks were horrible. She wanted to put everything behind her, but Reidsville was a small town, and news reached her constantly about Alex’s engagement. Angel didn’t realize how bad rumors could get until she began listening to them. It was people hearing stories of the woman being pregnant, love at first sight because no one had seen her before, or that he always had her somewhere and finally proposed. However, no one seemed to remember that it was Angel that he’d taken to the Lavender Banquet, and it was Angel that he’d been seen with prior to that. She decided it was because their families had known each other for so long that people just chalked it up to them being friends.

But it was more than that.

Angel had let him cross that barrier with her, and not one

day went by that she missed him so much that her gut ached, her heart hurt, and she cried herself asleep every night. Never in her life could she fathom that love could be so painful. Unfortunately it was one sided, and that's what made it worse.

Then she saw the child.

She was running an errand for Jason and saw the ranch truck outside Sherri's boutique. Then, leaning against the front fender having a cigarette, was Alex. He didn't see her yet as he took a draw off of his smoke while looking completely relaxed, and to Angel, completely jaw dropping handsome in that pose. She felt her heart tear just looking at him, knowing he never thought much of her, and was marrying someone else. She knew he cared about her from the look on his face at work that day she found out, but love was out of the question. Obviously he didn't care enough.

Steeling her courage she refused to let him see how he affected her and continued walking.

Immediately he straightened and looked at her and try as she might, she couldn't take her eyes off of him.

"Angel." He said

She shook her head and started past him but he tossed his cigarette on the sidewalk and reached out and grabbed her arm. She pulled out of his grasp, "don't touch me Alex." She shot at him.

"It isn't what you think." He told her.

"You don't know what I think." She was surprised that she didn't stutter because she was on the verge of tears.

"I didn't make you any promises." He said with an expression that revealed nothing.

"No, you didn't." she admitted as her heart tore in two. That statement made him look over her head for a moment, and she swore she saw something akin to guilt in his hazel gaze before he focused back on her.

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“We should talk.”

She shook her head, “I can’t.”

“Angel, you need to give me a chance to explain.”

“Explain—” she said gesturing with her hands trying to ignore the prick of tears that threatened to fall, “Explain why you suddenly changed your mind about me.”

“Not here.” He said looking past her for a moment.

“Why the heck not? It’s as good as any time, or—” she added, this time her voice did tremble, “—you could have told me you were engaged before we had sex—” she said in a subdued tone so a passersby wouldn’t hear.

“We made love Angel, there is a difference.” He corrected tersely, “You don’t know the difference so don’t assume that it was cheap. As for the engagement it was after we’d been together.”

“That’s why it’s just sex. The fact that you—we could do that, and you get engaged to another woman a week later. So there isn’t a difference Alex.” She turned to go but he grabbed her arm and swung her back to him. There was no mistaking the anger in his eyes this time.

“There is.” He gritted out, “Lucy was unexpected. It had been years since I seen her.”

“And your love was so strong that you jumped from my bed to hers.” She said in equal anger. Then he released her suddenly as a shrill ‘Darling’ reached her ears.

She turned to see the Lucy and a boy of about seven or eight. He had black hair and green eyes and facial features that were all too familiar. The realization hit her like a wrecking ball. Her eyes went from the child to the woman then finally to Alex. Oh God, he has a son with her! It didn’t occur to her that she was standing there with her mouth wide open until she heard her name. She swallowed hard as her eyes focused on his expression and indeed there was guilt present this time.

No wonder!

He had a son with this woman. Suddenly, she felt sick.

“Excuse me, “ said Lucy as she brushed by Angel like she didn’t exist, “Alex, your cousin was delightful!” Then she finally turned to Angel, “Aren’t you that secretary?”

“She’s a paralegal,” Alex corrected.

“Isn’t that the same thing?” she said lowering her gaze over Angel’s form then seemed to grin as if she knew Angel wasn’t a threat.

“No it isn’t,” Angel finally managed to say and sound firm.

“Oh?” she fluttered her unbelievably long lashes at Alex dismissing her again, “Anyways I’m exhausted darling, would you be a dear and take Max and I home.” She put emphasis on the word *home*.

Angel turned and walked away at that ignoring her name coming from Alex and surprised herself by doing it steadily. She felt like collapsing. All of her dreams shattered in that instant. She wanted to be the one to bear his children, now there was nothing. Whatever hope she was holding onto was gone. Every excuse of why he was marrying her disintegrated. Tears slipped from her eyes and ran down her cheeks. Just when she thought she couldn’t cry anymore she surprised herself.

When she got home from work her mother told her that Alex had called several times.

“I don’t care.” She said feeling the opposite. Why did he insist on torturing her?

“Honey, maybe you should at least give him a chance to explain. He sounded very subdued.”

“If you mean guilty, he should.” She said climbing the stairs to her room.

“Angel, you need to eat supper. I’m insisting on it tonight. Every night for the past few weeks you’ve been hiding in

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your room and moving about the house in another dimension.”

“Mom, I’m a big girl, don’t worry.” She said as she stopped turned and looked down at her. “Put some leftovers in the fridge I’ll get them later.”

“I know you are Angel, but this is your first heartbreak.” Margaret didn’t miss the puffiness around her eyes and knew she was crying again.

Oh God, why couldn’t anyone leave this alone? “I’m fine.” She said turning to go up to her room.

Later that night she heard her parents arguing and the door slamming soon after. Curious she got up to look out her window and saw her father get in the truck and tear out of there. She leaned her forehead against the window pane wondering what sparked such an argument. Her father would calm down, he always did when they argued before. He was a stubborn man, but her mother had him beat. He may have had the temper but she had staying power. Sometimes she wished she was more like her and was able to stand up to him. Angel wasn’t worried, they fought sometimes, but they loved each other and always made up in the end.

Twenty minutes later Maria opened the front door after a brisk knock, “Senior Stanford?”

“Is Alex in?”

“Si,” she said waving him in and closing the door, “I will tell him.” She said pointing to a room, “Please wait in there.”

George walked in to the sitting room and stood with his arms meeting behind his back and his legs set firmly apart. Some habits were hard to break on a military man.

“George?” Alex walked in several minutes later, “What’s wrong? Is Angel okay?”

George always liked Alex and respected him, however, seeing his baby girl hurting, made him want to knock a few of his teeth out. “No, she’s not. She’s not eating. She won’t talk to her

mother, and she hasn't been at dinner since you two had a falling out. Then," he added with anger, "I have to listen to her mother tell me constantly to fix it. So I came to the source."

Alex straightened himself to his full six foot four height and shoved his hands in the pockets of his jeans. He wasn't eating either. He was just as lovesick as poor Angel, but he'd made a promise and he had to keep it. "What do you expect me to do George? Tell her I love her? Do you want me to lie?" He just did. "Do you want me to come over there and hold her hand? I never made her any promises."

George stuck a finger toward him, "You have no idea what it's like to see your child hurting. Angel is a good girl. She doesn't deserve this heartbreak!"

"Everyone has to have a first heart break. Angel will get over it—"

"What happened between you two?" he interrupted.

"That's none of your business and you should know better than to ask." He said tersely, "she's a big girl."

George's expression grew fierce, "It is when my daughter is hurting Alex. You seem to think women are disposable, well Angel isn't. She's special and I'll be damned if I let you near her again." He seethed. "Stay away from Angel or I swear to God, I'll shoot you where you stand." He added before storming out of the house.

Alex let loose a string of curses after George left. He felt like hitting something.

## *CHAPTER SIX*

ANGEL WATCHED NERVOUSLY as Seth flipped through her chart. Her fingers twisted in the material of her

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purse. Doctor Jacobs was her regular doctor but he was away for a couple of weeks and this couldn't wait. She felt uncomfortable coming to Seth because he was Alex's brother. Finally he set down the chart and looked at her.

"I think it's just the flu." She said quickly.

He gave her a warm smile, "Diagnosing now?"

"No it just seems to fit." She said apprehensively. Actually she thought she was love sick if there was such a thing. For the past few days she'd been nauseated and this morning she had actually thrown up. It all started around the same time that she found out Alex was marrying another woman. So maybe she was so upset it made her sick. She lost her appetite, and seemed to cry all of the time.

"Actually, there are a few things that could fit honey." He stood up and walked around his desk to lean against the front of it. "I'm going to ask you a few questions and as your doctor today and your friend you can chose not to answer them. Do you understand?"

She nodded not having the slightest clue what he was about to say. Even knowing Seth all of these years, she didn't really realize how tender he could be as a professional. He looked genuinely concerned and she almost wept. The past few weeks have been hell for her and she couldn't—didn't talk to anyone.

"First of all I need to know when your last menstrual period was."

At first she was too stunned to speak at what he asked her. Then reality set in on why he was asking the question. "W-w-w-what?" oh God, oh no! She could literally feel the blood drain from her face.

Instantly he crouched down in front of her and took her hands in his with worry etched on his handsome face, "Angel, breathe for me—just breathe, you're turning white. Look at me

honey.”

She did. It seemed as though she was looking at him through a fog. She couldn't possibly be pregnant! It was one time!

Seth began to relax a little when saw some color return to her cheeks, “Are you feeling better?”

“No, yes—God no!” she started weeping, “he hates me.”

“Who?”

She shook her head rapidly and to her relief he nodded and let it go.

“Look honey, I still need to do the test so don't panic yet okay.”

“It's been six weeks.” She blurted out after mentally counting the days in her head. She had been too preoccupied and hurt to notice that she missed a cycle.

“Are you sexually active?”

How he could ask the question so casually floored her. He was her neighbor, her friend and she felt very awkward over the subject. Thankfully he recognized that.

“Angel, listen to me. Today, I'm your doctor. I know we have a history but let me assure you, nothing you can tell me is going to change my opinion of you. I know you're not promiscuous. So if something happened, I know you'd have to really care about the man. Now, if you want we can wait until Doctor Jacobs returns and—“ she rapidly shook her head.

“I don't want anyone else to know and I've already told you.” She said meeting his gaze, “I'm scared Seth.”

He gave her a smile that probably would have melted any woman's heart, but her heart belonged to another, “All right then. Let's begin again. Are you sexually active?”

“No—I mean—there was once. It was about three weeks ago.”

“It only takes once. At least that gives us a specific due

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date.” He smiled, “did you use protection?”

“There was no time—oh God, that didn’t come out right.”

“It’s fine Angel, you’re upset.” He squeezed her hands reassuringly, “Before we start planning nurseries, let’s get that blood test okay?” He stood up, and picked up her chart, “I’ll keep your name off the lab test so it won’t leak out anywhere.”

“thanks.”

She agonized for the rest of the afternoon, and then Seth called her at the office and told her to come over when she was done work.

“I am aren’t I?”

There was a pause, “I don’t like to give results over the phone but yes, and there’s some other things we need to discuss about your health and the baby’s health, so I’ll be expecting you here. Tell Priscilla I’ll give you a ride home okay?”

“Sure.”

She walked on unsteady feet over to Seth’s office. He was waiting just inside the door. Obviously the clinic was closed. “come in.” he pushed open the door.

When she took a seat in the empty waiting room, he sat beside her. “I made out a few prescriptions I wanted to go over with you.”

She nodded.

“You need to start taking prenatal vitamins for the baby or your fatigue will get worse as he grows.”

*Grows.*

“And this one is for morning sickness. We’ll stop and get them before we go home, because I want you on them immediately.” He sat back in his seat and took a deep breath, “Also I need to ask you if you intend to tell Alex.”

Her eyes shot to his.

‘It’s kind of obvious honey.’ He took her hand in his, “I’ve never seen him so raging mad when someone is foolish enough

to mention your name. Mother mentioned how much you've changed because she had seen you in town one day and he nearly took the hinges off the door on the way out of the house."

"I'm so lost." She bowed her head. "He's marrying that other woman." She sobbed

She felt his fingers under her chin as she lifted her head to meet his concerned stare, "you have family Angel that would be supportive, and as your baby's future uncle, I'll be supportive, and so will mother. I can't comment on my brother's behavior because we don't share our personal lives."

"I don't want to talk about him anyway." She shuddered and hugged herself, "I have to tell my dad." She said averting her gaze and speaking to herself.

"You have to tell Alex."

"I can't." she shot her eyes back to his.

"Angel, I know you've always had difficulty standing up for yourself but this isn't about you anymore, and that baby has a right to know his father."

"He hates me."

"No he doesn't. He's just as stubborn as hell, and I'm certain when you tell him, he'll be shocked at first, but he'll come around."

Angel shook her head, "I can't Seth, and isn't there something about client doctor privilege?"

Seth frowned, "Yes there is."

"I don't want him to know." She said raising her chin.

"Angel, be reasonable—"

"I am." She stood up, "I have enough to worry about without him demanding to be part of this child's life." A tear fell and she swiped at it. "Besides he has a son with that other woman."

"Who said that was Alex's son?" Seth asked. He might have thought so too, but Alex loved children and behaved

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differently around this one. It was true the child looked like him, but something struck him odd about the whole situation. He didn't treat the child indifferently or with disrespect, he was just cordial to him. If the child was Alex's he'd have him with him every waking moment, he was sure of it. Whether it be out on the range gathering strays, roping, or branding.

"Seth, the boy is a spitting image of him." She said perplexed. It didn't occur to her that the child wasn't his, not even for a moment.

"Angel, I know you're upset. Will you do me a favor and think about this for a few days?"

"I will but my mind is made up."

Seth had to leave her be. He knew she was hurting in ways he couldn't imagine. He already tried to speak to his brother about the other woman last week but he never gave anything away. His mind flashed back to that conversation. It wasn't often he and Alex shared harsh words, so it stuck.

It was shortly after he introduced Lucy and announced his sudden engagement. He didn't even give them time to absorb it before he turned and walked out of the room after giving instructions to Maria to ready two rooms for Lucy and Max. It seemed to Seth that the whole situation was uncomfortable for Alex, and he didn't give any explanation as to why he chose to marry Lucy. Seth and his mother exchanged a shocked look.

"Seth," she said in that tone and a speaking look he knew well, "go speak to him."

Seth didn't even consider not doing such a thing, but if his mother asked him, he would do it. It was rare when his mother pulled rank, and when she did the boys respected her too much not to listen. Alex was in his room changing his clothes when Seth found him.

"What the hell do you want?" he gritted out while doing up the buttons on his shirt.

Anger seemed to be the emotion of choice for his brother lately. “An explanation about Lucy.”

“I don’t owe you a damn thing.” He said coolly as his eyes settled on his brother.

“You do not love that girl.” Seth said, “She’s got dollar signs in her eyeballs.”

“And your girlfriend doesn’t?” he said tilting his head at him.

“I’m not marrying Melissa.” Seth argued, “You’re marrying this girl? What the hell are you thinking?” he threw up his arms, “And what about Angel.”

Alex’s face contorted in rage, “I never promised her anything! Lucy signed a prenuptial.” He said a little quieter.

That took Seth back. This just didn’t make sense. If the woman wasn’t after Alex’s fortune, what the hell did the woman want if it wasn’t Alex’s money? “Alex,” he said in a softer tone trying to reason with him, “You broke Angel’s heart.” Seth didn’t miss the flash of emotion in his brother’s eyes. “You can’t tell me that you don’t feel anything for her. I’ve seen you together.”

Alex shook his head in denial, “Alex, tell me what this girl has over you.”

“Nothing.” He gritted out, “I met her in Princeton and fell in love with her. She got pregnant and left me for another man, and now she wants me back. It’s her I want, not Angel. I’m glad that she came back into my life and stopped me from making a mistake with Angel. I was thinking of proposing to her in the beginning, but now there’s Lucy.”

He turned away from Seth so he couldn’t see his expression. Seth cursed and slammed the door behind him when he left.

“Can you please take me home?”

Angel’s voice brought him back to the present. “Sure.” He knew there was something besides the child that made Alex

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quickly jump into marriage with the other woman. She had nothing on Angel and why Alex felt like he needed to marry her caught him off guard. A child wasn't a valid reason these days. Money wasn't in the equation, so what else was there?

Seth helped Angel into the SUV before he walked around to the driver's side and as luck would have it, Alex just happened to drive by in one of the ranch trucks.

Seth groaned as the truck did a u-turn in the middle of the street and pulled in front of the Navigator bumper to bumper so he couldn't leave. He gave an apologetic look to a wide-eyed Angel before he walked over to the truck as his brother was just getting out with his attention on his frightened passenger

"Hold on." He said holding up his hand, "She doesn't want to talk to you."

Alex stopped and looked at his brother after a brief glance in her direction, "I just want to make sure she's alright Seth."

"Take my word for it. She's coping."

"Why are you driving her home? Did that damn sister forget her again?" he narrowed his eyes.

"No." Seth said drawing a narrow gaze from Alex, "She had an appointment."

"Is she sick?" his brows rose as he glanced at her again. George's words last week stuck in his head. *She's not eating. She won't talk to her mother, and she hasn't been at dinner since you two had a falling out.* He couldn't see her clearly through the windshield to judge for himself. Involuntarily he took a step forward and Seth blocked him.

Seth saw the concern in his eyes. "Just the flu." He lied. "I told her I could give her a ride home after her appointment, so don't worry, nothing's wrong." That seemed to satisfy him for the moment.

"Let me just see her for a moment." He said casting another glance at Angel who resigned to looking out the side

window so she wouldn't have to make eye contact with him. He wanted to make sure she was well. To see for himself that he didn't damage that sweet trusting nature she possessed too much. To even think that he ruined that within her made his chest hurt. He had no intention of hurting her, but Lucy was unexpected.

Seth shook his head, "You know better. Leave her be. You have made a choice Alex, let her go."

Alex looked down at his feet for a moment, and Seth could see a string of emotions play across his expression before he mumbled a curse and without another word got back in the truck and tore out of there.

Seth waited until the truck had disappeared from view before he went back to the Lincoln and got behind the wheel.

"What did he say?" she asked softly.

He started the engine and pulled away from the curb before he answered her, "He just wanted to make sure you were okay."

"Seth—you—I mean, you didn't say anything, did you?"

He shook his head and flicked her a glance before turning back to the road, "I told him you had the flu."

"I'm sorry you had to lie."

Seth glanced at her again and saw the streaks of tears on her cheeks. He felt a surge of anger at his brother.

"Don't worry about that Angel, you just take care of yourself and your little one." He paused, "Did you want me to come in and help you tell your parents?"

Finally she looked at him, and he felt her hurt to the bone. He made a mental note to kick his brother's ass.

"I would really appreciate that Seth, thanks for everything."

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Three months later

Friday afternoon Angel made her way across the courtyard toting her heavy book bag. Several whistles followed her that she ignored. There were a group of young men playing football close by that stopped to watch her. She was becoming used to it. Although it didn't affect her in the least because she wasn't interested in men, or a relationship since she left Reidsville for college. She tossed her hair back over her shoulder, went up the stairs into the doors of her dorm. Once her pregnancy started to really show, the whistling would stop. Right now she looked like she gained a little weight, but it wasn't obvious. She resorted back to her frumpy wardrobe, not because she was intent on hiding it, she was more and more elated that she was going to be a mother, but she just didn't need to draw questions or unneeded attention.

She had to quickly pack a bag to go home for the week they had off between semesters. Her parents made her promise to go to Bea's birthday on Saturday, and her father was supposed to be picking her up.

She desperately needed a new start and her father pulled some strings so she could get accepted to one of the most prestigious Law schools in North Carolina. Although she knew she could only complete one semester it would be a start. Then she had plans to go live with her Aunt in Phoenix until the baby is born. She had enough money to last her a while without employment because she earned a paycheck from Jason for almost two years, and never bought anything expensive. After that she thought she would learn through correspondence. Her Aunt was retired and already said she'd help her out by babysitting if she needed it.

As for her family, they took things well. She never told them who the father was, and they never asked. Obviously they already knew or suspected. After all, it was only Alex that she'd

ever been out with. After the initial shock, her mother was beside herself with excitement and her father was more reserved but surprisingly he hugged her and told her he would help the best he could. It was him she was worried about the most especially with his temper. Apparently the thought of being a grandfather overruled it. She couldn't thank Seth enough for being there for her. Secretly she wished it was Alex that held her hand and told them together. The pain in her chest of just thinking about him made her angry. It had been three months and she still wasn't over him.

The hardest part was getting them to promise not to tell a soul. Prissy actually looked like it would be easier to kick a crack habit than not tell the world that she was going to be an aunt, but she promised even though it was reluctant.

However, it didn't fill the hole in her heart. She missed Alex terribly and just thinking about him made her chest tighten painfully. Even after all of these months reflecting on his actions, it still didn't make sense. It was so sudden and not typically in his nature to act in such a way. He told her himself once that he didn't have use for women or marriage, so what the heck brought on this sudden marriage? Was it because of the child that he finally relented? Did he know he had a son? She couldn't even fathom the possibility that he was seeing another woman the same time he was seeing her, but what if he was?

She rounded the top steps and went into the hall, then stopped cold.

Alex was standing beside the door to her dorm room looking totally relaxed and still as handsome as she remembered.

She took a deep breath and walked down the hall toward her room. Alex spotted her and stood straight and watched her.

"Angel."

"What are you doing here?" She said abruptly while opening the door to her room trying to ignore the sound of her

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name on his lips. God, he could still make her name sound like a caress when he said it.

She felt his fingers brush her nape and she flinched away from him shooting him a glare, "Don't touch me Alex." She couldn't take it. She was already on the verge of tears seeing him again. Nothing had changed, not her feelings, and not the way she reacted around him. She was still in love with him and he was marrying another woman in less than a month. Her mother told her that they were going to have a Christmas wedding. Of course it didn't help that she was pregnant and had raging hormones.

He lowered his hand and nodded. He didn't even realize he did the gesture until she jumped back. "Your father was caught up with a difficult heifer birthing a calf. Your mother was helping out my mother for her party next weekend and well, Priscilla said she didn't want to drive all the way here. So, he called and asked if Seth or I could come and get you. Seth was working, I wasn't." he explained. It was really odd actually considering that George threatened to shoot him several months ago. He was actually pleasant on the phone although his voice seemed slightly strained. Needless to say, he didn't ask for an explanation over the change. Alex doubted very much he would have reacted differently and with such restraint. He probably would have shot the man who defiled his daughter.

His eyes guided over her. Just looking at her after all of these months, made him realized that she was still able to bewitch him like no other. Following her into her room, he removed his hat and set it on her desk. Then he scanned her room, "No roommate."

"No, I lucked out," She looked up at him and made a mental note to disown her family. "Please tell me you didn't bring your other family." She saw his eyes darken in anger then he glanced away before turning back to her completely composed.

Usually he'd goad her or say something that would get her riled, but not this time. It was almost as if the anger wasn't directed at her.

"They're at home." He took a step toward her and she backed up as if she was scorched. "Stop it Angel. I'm not going to hurt you."

"It's a little late for that." She said scathingly.

He ran a hand through his hair, "You wouldn't talk to me. I wanted to explain as best as I could."

"About your affair?" She started but was interrupted. This time there was no mistaking the anger in his voice or the darkening of his expression.

"There wasn't an affair! I told you before that I don't work that way Angel and you should know me better than that. It had been a long time since I saw or heard from Lucy." He paused, "Look. What happened between us—between you and I, wasn't expected."

She hugged her middle and turned her head away unable to meet his gaze, "No it wasn't."

"I'm sorry I hurt you Angel." He said softer this time and boldly took another step toward her. "Look at me honey."

"I can't." she said in a voice that cracked with emotion.

He reached out and tilted her head up to meet his gaze, "I can't be accused of admitting that I've done wrong before in my life, but if I could take back the pain I've caused you I would."

"Don't marry Lucy." She did cry this time.

"You don't understand. I have too. Quit crying, you're breaking my heart." He said roughly as he pulled her tightly into his embrace.

*Join the club*, she thought not having the strength to resist him. He smelled heavenly and she missed him so much it alone made her ache all over again. However, she still found it in her not to touch him, not to hug him back. She near lost herself

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as his arms tightened around her, so with a final burst of resistance, she pulled away from him. “You shouldn’t do this.” She turned away and grabbed her bag while wiping at her eyes, “Just wait outside—please—I’ll find the truck myself. It’ll only take a minute for me to pack.” He never answered her but she heard him shut the door when he left.

The four hour ride home to Reidsville was done in complete silence. Even small talk was out of the question. She finally was able to control her emotions and he seemed to know that if he started speaking to her again that she would begin to cry. What the hell was wrong with her? She was sure other women didn’t weep at the drop of a hat every time they were dumped for another woman. Was she really that naïve? How long does it take to get over your first love? If this was any indication she would never fall in love again, ever.

Unfortunately there was a week break in between semesters and that would mean she would be home for a week before she left for her Aunt’s place. It was then she decided that she would stay as busy as she could. Not going to Bea’s party wasn’t an option. It would be disrespectful and she couldn’t do that to Bea because she loved her like a second mother. Not only that, she refused to look like a victim. Fortunately not many people even knew they were a couple, so it’s not like any attention would be on her.

Finally Alex pulled up to the house, and of course there wasn’t anyone home. She grimaced.

“I’ll help you with your bag.” He said tossing a long arm over the seat to retrieve it from the back street.

“No, I’m fine.” She quickly took it from him, “Thanks for the ride.” She said without looking at him.

“Angel. We can still be friends.”

She stopped and turned back to him after she got out of the truck, “I’m sorry Alex. I can’t. You may be able to deal with

this day to day while running into me every now and then, but I'm not as tough as you. I'm not coming home again for a long time after this semester."

"Why? Where are you going?" he said with piqued interest.

"I'm going to live with my Aunt in Phoenix."

His gaze darkened, "Is this just to get away from me? You're moving halfway across the country. Angel, things aren't that bad."

*Not bad!* She gaped at him. It had been three months of torture for her and seeing him brought back all those emotions that she tried desperately to control. He was marrying another woman and she loved him and gave herself to him thinking they had something between them. She straightened herself up feeling her own anger seep in, "Not for you! And—don't assume that this is about you. Like you said I'm destined to grow old with my cat. I want a change. Living here doesn't give me options."

"You lie terribly." He returned not seeming to be affected by her outburst, "You need to talk to me."

"Go to hell!" she said and slammed the truck door. He may have been calm before but he certainly wasn't now. Muffled curses reached her ears as she turned toward the house followed by the sound of a truck door opening. Knowing Alex, he was stomping mad, and she was right. His voice was loud enough to go right through her.

"God dammit Angel!"

"Go away!" she said without turning around knowing damn well he was closing the distance between them with those long legs of his especially, when rough hands grabbed her and spun her toward him.

"You need to get over this! It's not the end of the world!"

Angel faced him with her own fire and hurt, "You can say

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that as easily as going to the grocery store and picking out more fruit! I however, fell in love with someone who I thought genuinely cared for me—and—I—I—let you—oh God! Let me go!” she tore out of his grasp and ran up the steps into the house quickly slamming and locking the door before he burst in after her. Thankfully he didn’t. she leaned back against the door and took several deep gulps of air trying to calm herself. Then she sank to the floor and cried.

What she didn’t see was Alex thrusting his hands in the pockets of his jeans and looking heavenward for a moment almost as if praying for help. Then his hazel eyes lit back on the front door with an emotion that was never visible before on his handsome face. Then slowly and reluctantly he turned and went back to the truck.

Angel waited until the sound of Alex’s truck faded into nothing before she picked herself up and went up the stairs to her room. She needed a shower. For some reason the feel of warm water pouring over her made her feel better. She got undressed and stepped under the hot stream. After a moment she started to feel nauseous and reached for the tiled wall to steady herself. Then a discomfort appeared in her abdomen after the nausea began to pass. Dread began to creep in, then panic. She jumped out of the shower naked and ran to her phone.

Seth pulled the Navigator up in front of the Stanford’s, grabbed his bag and rushed into the house without knocking. He saw Angel sitting on the stairs in the foyer, hair wet, and a thin damp bathrobe on. That wasn’t what caught his attention, it was the ghastly white look on her face. She was absently chewing on her nails and visibly trembling. “Tell me everything.” He said softly setting down his bag. It only took him less than forty minutes to get to their place. He was sure he set some speed records after he’d gotten the frantic call.

“I—I—“ she started.

“Okay—“ he said in his calmest voice, “Don’t get excited Angel. Let’s find out exactly what’s going on. Are you spotting?”

She shook her head.

That was a good sign. “Did you have any sort of cramping like this before?”

She shook her head, then paused and nodded once.

“Was it as severe?”

“No.” she finally managed without stuttering, “It was a bit of pressure. Not even to the point of discomfort.”

“Okay.” He picked up his bag and held out his hand. “Let’s go to your room. I’ll examine you more carefully. I need you to lie down.”

As if in a trance, she accepted his hand and let him lead her upstairs.

A short time later, Alex was on his way home and glanced at Angel’s house as he drove by. His foot hit the brake hard and the truck slid at an angle as it came to an abrupt halt on the gravel road causing road dust to billow around it. Then he shifted the truck in reverse and backed up spotting a familiar vehicle. That was the Navigator. Seth drove it to work this morning. What the hell was Seth doing at Angel’s house? He’d barely left her a few hours ago. She didn’t look sick. Could he have upset her more than he originally thought? Or worse, maybe they had something going on. A burst of jealousy went through him. If he upset her, did she call Seth for a shoulder to cry on?

Seth removed the earpieces of the stethoscope out of his ears and covered her bare belly back up by bringing the ends of the robe together. “Baby sounds fine.” He smiled.

Her eyes widened in wonder, “You can hear his heart beat?”

“Yes, and it’s strong.” This brought a brilliant smile from her. “However, I want two days of bed rest as a precautionary

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measure. I'll speak to your parents. This is your first pregnancy and I may seem like an overbearing uncle, but I want him healthy. “

She sat up, “Is there a risk Seth?”

He placed a hand on her shoulder and pushed her gently back down with an amused smile, “There's always risks with babies. However, I'm sure it's just your body training for the baby's birth. Now, the only other thing that could have set off a reaction like that was stress. Was there any stress right before you had the cramping?”

Alex.

She shook her head too quickly and Seth's gaze narrowed, “Angel, you need to be truthful with me.”

She nodded, took a deep breath and told him the truth. “Alex picked me up from college. We said some things—oh Seth, we were horrible to one another!” she admitted in a gush, “We yelled, I got so angry at him!”

He patted her hand, “its fine Angel.” He may have said the words but inside he was raging. “I think it's better for both of you to stay away from one another for a while.” *Until I have words with my brother*, he thought to himself.

“I agree.”

He wrote something on a pad he took from his bag. Then he tore it off and handed it to her, “Here's my mobile number. I want you to call me no matter what time of day or night, if you have any more symptoms, or—“ he met her eyes, “—even if you just need to talk. Understand?”

“I can't thank you enough Seth.” She nearly choked on the words. He was so understanding and she didn't know how she could have gotten this far without him.

“Nonsense. That's what friends are for.” He gave her a reassuring smile, packed up his bag and stood up, “I'll check on you before I go to work in the morning.”

“Seth, that’s not necessary. You said so yourself, that I’m fine and—“

“It’s no bother Angel. I’ll speak to your parents about this so you don’t need to. That way you don’t feel like you’re being fussed over.”

She actually laughed for what seemed like forever, “You know me well.”

“I meant it about bed rest for the next few days. Besides, mother will have a fit, if you’re too ill to come to her birthday party. She loves you two more than Alex and I.”

She laughed again.

“Get some rest honey.” He said again before he left shutting the door behind him.

He was surprised to see the Ranch truck parked on the side of the road facing him as he pulled out of the driveway and headed for home. Obviously Alex saw the Navigator in front of the house and was waiting for him. He pulled alongside and rolled down the window. Alex was behind the wheel smoking. The engine was off, so Seth knew that he’d been there awhile. Also there were several cigarette butts on the ground outside his window.

“Seth you told me several months ago that she had the flu. Is it something bad? Is Angel ill?”

“No Alex, she’s fine.”

“then why did you feel the need to stop there.” He said suspiciously.

“We’re friends Alex.” He said abruptly. His brother’s accusations were outlandish. He didn’t see Angel that way and it was obvious that she was still in love with Alex.

His brother studied him for awhile, “That never gave you an excuse to stop by when no one else was home.”

“You of all people have no right to be jealous.” Seth let his voice rise, which is something he rarely did.

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Alex took a draw off his cigarette and tossed it on the road, “Yeah.” he said looking down the road at the house, “Is she all right.”

“She was upset. She said you guys had a fight.”

“Ah hell.” He said exasperated, then nodded.

“Stay away from her Alex. This thing isn’t easy on her and she’s too damn sweet.”

“Yeah, I know she is. You’re right.” He flicked a concerned glance at his younger brother, “Is she really okay?”

Seth took a deep breath. There was no mistaking that Alex cared about her. There was genuine worry etched in his expression and on closer inspection it looked as though he’d lost a little weight and from the dark shadows under his eyes, he was lacking sleep. “She is. I told her I’d check on her tomorrow before work.”

“I didn’t mean to yell at her. She got me riled.”

Seth just nodded, ‘I’ll see you at home.’”

“Yeah.” He started the engine as Seth drove away.

The next day Seth stopped and checked on her. He phoned her parents the evening before and told them that she’d been having some problems and not to treat her like an invalid, but she needed to remain in bed for the next few days.

“I feel better.” She said as he came in her room.

“You’re still staying in bed another day Angel.” He said with a determined look.

“Oh darn.” She gave him a mock frown.

She spent another half an hour listening to him telling her what her limits would be for the next few days after she’s allowed out of bed.

“Also, I’m setting you up for an ultrasound on Friday. I just want to make sure he’s growing normally.” He held his hand up seeing the expression on her face, “Don’t worry, it’s normal to do this in the first trimester, and since you weren’t here then,

we'll do it now. Not only that, you aren't gaining much weight."

"I haven't been eating well." She admitted.

"That needs to change."

"I know. I've been taking my vitamins."

"You still need a balanced diet."

"I've lost my appetite." She admitted finally.

"Well, I'm setting up an appointment for you to see a dietician then. Maybe she can help you with a healthier appetite."

"Okay." She gave him a slight smile.

Seth leaned over and kissed her on the forehead, "Get some rest."

"I will."

The next day she got a clean bill of health from Seth and he told her that she may get out of bed, but no heavy lifting or housework of any kind. She asked Priscilla if she could take her to town so she could visit her friends. Her first stop was at the office which she was mobbed with hugs and questions of how she was enjoying college.

"Of course you're coming back here when you're done right Angel" said Jason, "We could always use another Lawyer here. God knows Adrian has been harassing me for a holiday."

Angel laughed, "I'll put you at the top of my list. However, I warn you, my father has five prestigious law firms picked out already that he was going to stick me in."

"You leave your father to me." Jason said with a sly grin.

"I don't want to know. You'll sue him over something ludicrous so he gives in."

"Maybe," he chuckled.

"Does anyone want to get something to eat?" she asked. "I'm starved and I have to run and see Mathew this afternoon."

"I have a date with my husband." Said Margo.

"Adrian is on her way, I've been promising her today for a

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week.”

“I’m free.” Said Red, “As always.”

Jason laughed, “For the next hour anyway.”

“It’s good to be your own boss.” Said Jason. “My treat anyway.”

Angel smiled, “Great then.”

About ten minutes later, Angel realized that Reidsville was a very small town. They entered a popular restaurant and the first people they saw were Alex, and Lucy sitting at a table with their son Max.

“We can go somewhere else Angel.” Red said seeing the couple.

“No, I’m all right. It’s been several months, I should be over him.” She said turning to face him. “first heartbreak right?”

“About the same as he is over you.” He glanced over her head and saw Alex’s eyes on Angel. However he kept that to himself. After Alex threatened him he honestly thought the man was on his way to the alter with Angel. Who wouldn’t be? She was gorgeous. He wasn’t a man who wanted to settle down yet, but if he was, Angel would be on the top of his list. However, the feeling wasn’t mutual. He was fine being friends with her, besides she looked good on his arm and did wonders for his masculinity when he walked down the street drawing attention from other men. Not only that she didn’t expect anything from him and after knowing her he was glad for that.

The maitre’d came up then and led them to a table on the opposite side of the room as Alex. However that didn’t stop him from getting up and coming over. Angel groaned and Red drew his eyes to the large cowboy making his way over to them.

“I can stop him.” He spoke low with a glint of amusement.

“You can try.” She whispered back. “but a train couldn’t stop that man.”

“true.”

Alex surprised her by shaking Red's hand and saying hello as if he had frozen over and he was forced to be polite. “I was wondering if you wanted to dine together.” His eyes went to her face.

“It's up to you Angel.” Red said. Either way he didn't mind. He liked Alex, but he didn't want to make Angel uncomfortable.

Angel could feel his gaze on her and finally lifted her eyes to his. Then they guided over to the other woman waiting patiently for Alex to return. “Would she mind?”

“No.” He said without hesitation.

Could she do this? Could she sit there and pretend she didn't hate either one of them.

“Afraid kitten?”

Her eyes dashed back to his and saw the challenge there. He was so darn smug! “No, I'm not.” She started to rise and before Red could help her Alex pulled her chair out for her. She wasn't going to act like the helpless waif that he had accused her of. Not only that, she wouldn't give him the satisfaction that she was running from him. However whatever nerve she had left when she sat at the table with the beautiful other woman. Alex introduced them again.

“The paralegal right?” Lucy said guiding her eyes over.

Angel could see the look of contempt in her dark gaze but she wasn't going to let on that she was affected.

“Yes.” She directed her attention to the woman, “And what do you do.”

“I had other interests, I didn't finish school.” She said guiding her eyes to Alex with no less than a sickening flutter of her lashes.

She waved a dismissive hand, “I'm between professions.”

*I just bet you are*, thought Angel. Then she turned her

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gaze on Alex, “So, where did you two meet?”

“Princeton.” They said in unison.

Angel guided her eyes back to the other woman, “What did you major in?”

“Lots of things.” She said with a tone that held a hidden meaning and shot another smile to Alex who didn’t look the least bit moved by it.

The waiter came and took their orders just then. It was a good thing, Angel felt like throwing up. Everything about this woman didn’t make sense to her. She was primed up to the nth degree and she was sure that Alex referred to woman like her who had experience as a ‘useless prospect’. For the rest of the hour she engaged in polite conversation with all of them but she studied the other woman like a textbook. It was hard to concentrate because she was still fighting that sinking heart break feeling, but she was determined not to show it. When dinner was over she finally guided her gaze to Alex just to find his eyes on hers. It was odd the look in his eyes, and she couldn’t quite interpret it. Red and Lucy continued on a conversation that she lost track of, but it was mostly about herself anyway. She mouthed the word ‘what’ at him but he shook his head subtly and turned away.

It was later that evening when she finally figured it out. It was if he was trying to show her something instead of telling her. Not once did he voluntarily touch Lucy, yet when he and Angel were together, he was always touching her. None of this made sense? Even if it was a marriage of convenience for the child, he would at least tell her. Wouldn’t he? Alex wasn’t one to beat around the bush, but he never explained himself either. She sighed, this whole thing just didn’t make sense.

She lay in bed staring at the ceiling thinking about it. Then her phone suddenly rang and she near jumped. When something jerked anyone out of deep thoughts it sent their heart

racing. It was practically pounding in her ears when she took a deep breath trying to calm herself before she answered it. "Hello'."

"Angel."

"Alex, you shouldn't phone me." So much for calming her heart rate.

"I wanted to talk to you."

"You've had time to talk to me, but you didn't."

"I know."

It was then she realized that his voice was slurred, "Alex have you been drinking?"

"A touch." He said with some amusement.

"You don't drink." She said suddenly concerned, "Where are you?"

"At home. In my study."

It was a relief to hear him say that. At least he wasn't driving. She lifted herself up and looked at the clock. It was almost midnight, "You should be asleep it's late."

"I haven't been sleeping much."

More than likely that hot little number was keeping him up half the night. Her gut twisted at the thought, "That makes two of us."

"I miss you."

*Oh God*, she couldn't do this. "Alex I've got to go." She hung up. Thankfully he never called back. However, she was worried about him so she picked up the phone and called Seth.

Seth knocked on the door of his brother's study. Getting no answer he let himself in. Alex was passed out on the couch with an empty whisky bottle on the floor beside him and the phone on his chest. Angel was not wrong in being worried about him. Alex wasn't a drinker by far. He'd gotten raging drunk on his sixteenth birthday with his friends and was so wretchedly sick he never touched hard liquor again after that. Something was

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killing him inside, and he knew it had to do with his new fiancé. She had something on him that he couldn't talk to anyone about.

He walked over to him and pulled the afghan off the back of the couch to pull over him when he saw a piece of paper tucked in his brother's other fist. His eyes guided to Alex's unconscious face then back to the paper. If he was a man who respected his brother's privacy he would leave. He actually twisted away for a moment, but it was short lived. He easily freed the paper from his brother's hand and opened it slowly. Instantly he recognized his father's writing.

*Alex*

*I know nothing I can say can get you to forgive me.*

*Please remember that my family is dear to me, and I'm  
sorry*

*Pop.*

Seth was taken back. First of all, his father never apologized for anything. Second, what could he have done that was so terrible to merit it? He flipped over the paper. There was no other writing of any kind. The paper looked like it had been read often from the worn creases where it had been folded and unfolded many times, and it was old. He set it on his brother's chest and quietly left the room with his concern deepening. Whatever bothered Alex was enough to make him take liquor to forget. He'll have to try and talk to him again. As for now, he needed to let Angel know he was okay.

Although they never shared their personal lives, Seth always considered him and Alex close as brothers even though their father was hard on them at times and would take a switch to them when they deserved it. Being rowdy in their younger years meant they deserved it often. He smiled to himself remembering

some of the trouble they got in together. Their mother on the other hand had the patience of a saint and never disciplined them. She never had to; she had the power of that motherly look that told them they took it too far. It was hard to believe a little five foot nothing of a woman could bring both her hulking sons to their knees over it.

As for their father, Alex was like him in a lot of ways. He had that sharp quick temper whereas he had his mother's temperament. Rarely did he ever get angry about things. It worked well for him in his profession because you needed a cool head to deal with emergencies. However, this whole thing with Alex and Angel had him angry. It was obvious that Alex cared deeply for her, but the mystery about this other woman and the hold she had over his brother mystified him. Nothing could hold Alex back from what he wanted. Yet, this woman and her son waltzed in to their life and Alex's whole demeanor changed. Before that, he was positive that Alex was going to ask Angel to marry him. He'd gone in Alex's study looking for stamps one day and found the ring he kept in his desk. It wasn't the same ring that was on Lucy's finger. Seth was dealing with a lot of inner conflict over this situation. Did he confront Alex and demand the truth?

He sighed heavily. No, he couldn't. Whatever Alex was dealing with, he wouldn't tell him. If he wanted him to know he would have told him already. It was an unspoken rule to stay out of each other's personal lives even if Angel was precious to both of them. Although he couldn't fathom why, there had to be a serious reason why Alex broke her heart.

Before he left he took a final look at the scene. Although Seth thought the situation was tough on Angel, by the looks of Alex and the empty bottle of whiskey it was much worse than he thought.

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Friday morning Seth picked up Angel and took her to the clinic for an ultrasound. He stayed with her and held her hand the whole time while pointing out images on the screen.

“Can you tell me the sex?” she asked. She was surprised she found the words because she was overwhelmed with the reality that she was carrying a little person inside her.

“Actually,” said Janet the x-ray technician, “We don’t because if we’re wrong, our clients can sue us.”

“It’s a boy.” Said Seth without any hesitation glancing at the tech, “She won’t sue me, I’m like a big brother to her.”

Janet just laughed, “That’s fine Doctor Harrison.”

A boy! She was so overcome that she began to weep. Seth turned to the tech, “Janet can you give us a moment.”

“Certainly Doctor.” She gave Angel a smile before she left shutting the door behind her.

When she was gone Seth bent over and gave her a hug, “Don’t cry honey, you’ll be fine.”

“It isn’t that Seth. I just feel so happy to have a part of him. To have a little boy that I can love, it just seems so surreal.”

“To you and me both.” He smiled wishing that Alex could be a part of Angel’s joy and a part of this discovery.

## *CHAPTER SEVEN*

ON SATURDAY ANGEL found an attractive beige ankle-length skirt and a white designer blouse. It wasn’t top notch but it did show off her figure nicely and the pleats in the front hid the small mound of her belly. She went with Prissy and her mother and father took their own car. Unlike Priscilla and her, their parents weren’t as young as they were and usually retired earlier.

There were about thirty people there and she was thankful that she hadn’t run into him yet. Just as she thought it, he came in the house with that gorgeous brunette on his arm. He

spotted her and kept his eyes on her while bending over and whispering something in the woman's ear. To her chagrin, the woman shot him a stunning smile and wandered in another direction. Alex approached her and she began to get scared. Would he say something about last night when he called her? Would he remember? She knew he didn't give a damn about his reputation and probably would. Quickly she turned to leave, but he caught her arm and without saying a word hauled her forcibly into his study. She didn't want to make a scene in front of Bea's friends so she remained quiet and let him pull her along. After he kicked the door shut he turned her to face him, not releasing her. However, he didn't seem upset, just the opposite. His expression look almost tender.

"I just wanted to see how you're doing? Seth said that I had upset you last week and I wasn't able to talk to you at dinner the other day. In fact I haven't gotten you alone since that Friday."

"It's just as well." She said looking up at him trying her best not to reveal the vulnerability she felt in her expression.

"Angel I can't change things. I already apologized. I meant it when I said that I wanted to remain friends."

"Alex, I told you how I felt about you. I can't lie or ignore this." Her voice cracked and she swallowed trying to stop the tears from falling, "Can you at least tell my why?"

He ran his hand through his hair and turned away from her, "Hell, Angel, I would tell you if I could." He walked over to his desk and rummaged to the drawers until he found a pack of cigarettes.

"What is stopping you?" She walked up behind him as he unwrapped the new package and fished one out and lit it.

"I can't tell you that." He turned to her, "I can't tell you anything without hurting you more, and I won't do that." His eyes searched hers and she thought she saw a pleading in their

depths.

“Is it the child?”

“Yes.” He said without hesitation.

She had been reflecting heavily on the past week and the way he was acting. Even though he never told her anything she thought she might have it figured out. “I understand that part.” She did, knowing that she was going to have a child of her own in a few months that would be born out of wedlock. She would give anything for him to know his father. However, Max was his child first and Alex was trying to do the honorable thing. She wasn’t so stupid to know that Lucy used Max to get what she wanted from Alex. It was obvious from lunch the other day that he didn’t care about that woman like he did her, but because of the boy he was making a choice to be a father. She could see that now and she didn’t want to be like Lucy and make him responsible for it. She wanted him to want to be a father to their baby. Oh, but it hurt so much not to tell him, and it was excruciating not to have him in her life. They’d known each other forever and it felt as if she lost a part of herself letting him go.

“Do you?” he sighed heavily, “Of course you do Angel, because you’re damn sweet.” He reached out and lifted her chin, “Any man would be lucky to have you.” He said roughly, but you shouldn’t pine after me, I’m not good enough for you.”

“You should’ve let me decide that Alex.” She said softly, “As for moving on, I have.” She near choked those last few words out because she didn’t believe any of them. An odd look entered his expression then and it looked like he wanted to say something. It was as if she’d hurt him by saying that, but that wasn’t possible. Was it? He’d easily picked Lucy and Max over her, so he couldn’t possibly feel the same about her as she did him. “I’d better get back or people are going to talk.” She said turning away.

Alex reached out and stopped her by grabbing her arm.

He put out his cigarette in an ashtray on his desk and stepped up to her, "I meant every word I said that day we made love." He could feel her tremble under his hand.

"Alex don't—"

"I still do." He added as he slid his hand around her waist.

"I—I can't do this." She murmured feeling more helpless by the second.

"I miss you something fierce baby." He drew her against his body.

"Lucy—"

"Screw Lucy." He said right before he crushed his mouth to hers.

Outside Seth scanned the crowd and saw Priscilla talking to his mother, but two people were missing. Alex and Angel. *This isn't going to go well*, he thought. Earlier he saw the way Alex was looking at her and knew what that hungry look meant. Angel was vulnerable and there was no doubt he'd gotten her alone.

Without taking his mouth from hers he turned Angel around and cupped her bottom so he could lift her up onto his desk pushing himself between her thighs. He pulled her blouse out of her skirt and undid her bra in such a smooth movement that she didn't even realize it until his hands were on her breasts. She wanted to protest, she even tried saying the words, but as soon as he started caressing her bare skin the words were lost and only a moan tore from her throat.

Alex lifted her skirt and easily disposed of her panties. Then gripping her thighs he pulled her toward him until the soft junction was against his erection causing her to release a loud gasp.

"Alex—" she finally found it within herself to protest, but God she wanted him so bad!

"I haven't touched her Angel." He murmured against her

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mouth knowing what she was going to say, “I swear.”

She pulled back and looked at him. Her wide blue eyes searching his. He was telling the truth. “Why?”

“Don’t you have this figured out yet honey?” he said huskily, “there’s only one woman I want.”

“But—“

“I’ll never touch her either, even if I don’t have you.”

She wanted to cry at that confession. All along she thought he loved the other woman, was marrying her because of some renewed love and the child they shared. The conflict within her over what she’d witnessed and what her heart told her had been tearing her apart for months, but his confession was genuine and she believed him. “You don’t love her?”

“Absolutely not!” He said right before he took her mouth again.

Angel felt hungry. Hungry for his touch, his mouth and a deep aching developed low in her pelvis. She groaned against his mouth. Faintly she heard the unbuckling of a belt and a rustle of material but the crush of his mouth and the toying of his tongue against hers were driving her wild. Finally she broke free to gasp with the sheer pleasure of it all as his mouth moved down her jaw to her neck. She was caught in the whirlwind of arousal and need and could barely think beyond it.

“Oh God Alex!” she moaned tightening her fingers on his thick shoulders. “I can’t—take this!”

“Hush baby, I’m in no hurry. I want to taste and feel every inch of you.” He whispered against her skin.

“the party—“ she started to say but he interrupted her.

“Fuck the damn party.” He said taking her mouth again and cutting off her laugh while his hands moved up the length of her thighs and pushed her skirt up higher around her waist. Then he shifted, released her for a moment and brushed the contents of his desk onto the floor with a sweep of his arm. She

didn't have a chance to respond before he moved his hand up her blouse between her breasts and flatten her out on the shiny surface. Bending over his mouth followed the path of his hand caressing the soft texture of her warm flesh. Noises were flooding from her now and God he loved that about her. Everything about her was so full of life. He took her nipple in his mouth causing her to cry out with pleasure and at the same moment he adjusted her hips and entered her with a growl of intense satisfaction.

He wanted to take his time and give her as much pleasure as possible but the noises she was making was doing amazing things to his resistance. His own noises mixed with hers as he found a rhythm that she reacted to in body and voice. "God—" he choked bending over her and taking her mouth, "I've never had a woman feel so good!"

She faintly heard him as he legs tightened around his hips and the tightening within her made her cry out. "Oh Alex!" she moaned against him.

"Again—" he rasped, "Say it again."

She did. Over and over again.

He felt the familiar tightening as he thrust deep within her and changed his rhythm to match her pleasure causing her nails to dig into his shoulders. Then with a shout he came perfectly in time with her orgasm. He thrust once more and groaned feeling himself spill within her. Angel took a deep breath and he lifted himself to relieve the pressure on her chest. Her eyes were on his and full of wonder.

"wow."

He grinned, "Yeah, I agree." They were both still breathing rapidly.

"We're in trouble Alex." She said as sadness filled her sapphire depths.

"We were a long time ago honey." He erected himself and

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pulled her up with him. Then he rebuttoned her blouse and refastened her bra while staring down at her, "I'm having a terrible attack of conscience." He admitted while moving her hair off of her face with a gentle sweep of his hand.

"You *are*." She moaned as their actions came flooding back.

"Not about that." He said meeting her gaze knowing what she was thinking, "About you." His arms tightened around her and pulled her against his chest. He was still standing between her thighs enjoying the moment of intimacy.

"you were serious when you said you didn't love her, weren't you?"

"No, I don't love her." He said while pulling up his slacks and refastening them.

"But the boy?"

"I do, in my way, as much as I can given the circumstances." He said lowering his gaze, stepping away from her and straightening her skirt.

"Something is wrong here Alex." She finally said as he helped her down off of his desk. "You're right I do know you. However, for some reason you won't tell me."

"I always knew you were perceptive." He said retrieving her underwear from the floor and dangling them on his finger giving her a sly grin.

She flushed and snatched them from him. "We shouldn't do this again." She added with sadness.

"I know." He countered, "It was wrong." He stepped up to her, "but I needed to feel you once more." He cupped her chin and made her look at him, "call it a farewell present for both of us. Especially if you're still set on leaving me."

"You left me first."

"I did." He agreed solemnly, and then he turned and looked over his shoulder at the door as music floated in from

outside, “You’d better go Angel. I’ll stay for a bit so it doesn’t look like we’ve been together.” Yet her swollen mouth and stubble rashed face gave away the evidence, “Stop in the bathroom in the hall and freshen up. It looks as though you’ve been ravished.” He delighted in her flushing cheeks.

She nodded and turned to leave, but he grabbed her and planted another devastating kiss on her before she left.

Alex watched her go wondering if he should have told her everything. It actually hurt him not to tell her and not to tell her how he really felt. For the next few minutes he silently cursed his father, hating him for having to give up someone he loved.

Priscilla made her way over to Seth’s girlfriend and introduced herself. The woman seemed kind enough, but she still wouldn’t let that steer her from her purpose.

“So how did you meet Seth?” she said casually starting a conversation.

“I worked at the flower shop on Campus part-time when he came in to order roses.”

“for his girlfriend?”

She smiled, “No, for me.”

“Oh?”

“Turns out we were in the same philosophy class.” She let loose a delightful laugh, “I never even noticed him.”

*How couldn’t you*, she thought, *he’s gorgeous*. “He’s considered quite handsome around here.”

“I see that. “ she gave her a suspicious look, “does that include your opinion.”

Prissy stared at the woman for a moment and saw something that registered odd in her gaze, “It does.”

“That’s good to know.” She said running her gaze over Priscilla, “Does he even know?”

Prissy managed a false smile, “Everyone knows.”

“Well it’s too bad honey, you don’t know how to get him.

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All I had to do was play the sweet vulnerable college girl and he fell hook line and sinker.”

Priscilla’s mouth fell open.

“Don’t play all innocent and don’t tell me you weren’t thinking the same thing. A girl that looks like you knows what a man likes. Why else would I be in this hick backwoods town. I like big city glamour, but I’m willing to endure Seth’s simple friends just to get what I want.” She paused and gave her a cold smile, “If you tell him what I told you he won’t believe you. He’s crazy about me.”

“Does he know you don’t care about him?” Priscilla tried to keep her anger out of her voice.

“I never said I didn’t care about him, but I like money more. Also the man is a machine in bed,” she rolled her eyes, “Definitely a keeper. Do you know they have a private jet?”

*No, thought Priscilla, you don’t care about him. All you care about is his money!*

“So take some advice. If you want to get out of this town, find yourself a man like Seth. Then play up to him so you can get what you want, and before you know it, they’ll be willing to give you anything to keep you.” She gave her a smile before turning and walking away.

Priscilla narrowed her gaze at the woman’s back.

Angel was standing against the house outside on the patio where the majority of people were when Alex walked out with Lucy clinging to his arm. About thirty seconds later Priscilla appeared and latched herself on to Alex’s other arm, “Alex, that girlfriend of Seth’s has a dark side. Did you know what she just said to me?”

“Leave it alone Priscilla.” He said tersely.

“You don’t understand.” She said giving him a pleading look.

“Angel, I think you’d better take your sister home before

she ruins my mother's party over her selfishness." He said over her sister's head knowing where she was standing the entire time.

Angel took Prissy's arm that had latched on to Alex's" she knew the tone in his voice. He was on the verge of exploding.

"Come on sis." She said casting Alex a scornful look, but he stood there as if he was etched in stone. He showed nothing of the man that made love to her a short time ago. Was it all just a ruse to get what he wanted from her? Instantly she felt the familiar tightening of dread in her stomach. What if it was? How could a man be built so cruelly?

Without a backward glance she led her sister out of the yard to her car. Unfortunately Angel didn't drive and Prissy started to cry. So when they left the house she was distracted by wiping her eyes constantly. While telling her about the incident.

"You're sure?" Angel said believing her. Priscilla may have been a lot of things but she certainly knew how to read the competition.

"She doesn't love him sis." She sobbed, " She pretty much told me that she was after his money and she'd stop at nothing to get it. I would never do that to Seth. She even told me to try and tell him but that he wouldn't believe me."

"she's wrong Prissy, Seth loves us."

"I don't know!" she swiped at her face again with the back of her hand.

"Alex told me once that a man has needs, maybe that's what she is to him."

Prissy looked at her sister, "I'm so selfish! I never even thought that this night would be horrible for you."

Angel didn't want to talk about her and Alex. It hurt too much, even though he let her know that he didn't love Lucy in his way and that he was marrying her for his son. Still, Lucy was beautiful and no man in their right mind would turn her away.

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Would they? “I’m fine.” She lied, then quickly changed the subject, “You aren’t like that Prissy.”

“She said I was just like her!”

“You’re not!” Angel said angrily, “Just because you’re beautiful, doesn’t mean you’re a tramp.”

Prissy swiped at her eyes again, “I would never treat him like a piece of meat!”

“I know you wouldn’t.” something brushed against the windshield drawing her attention. “Sis, I think this is the wrong road.”

“Oh darn it, I must’ve turned too soon. This is the road down to the creek. That woman got me so upset.” She sniffed. I can’t turn around up here, it’s too narrow. I’ll need to go down to the creek.”

Just they heard a loud metallic clunk and Angel felt the floor beneath her feet vibrate.

“What was that?” she turned her attention to her sister who’s face took on a look of horror. ‘Oh God Prissy!’”

It was midnight when George phoned the Harrison’s his wife was frantic. The girls weren’t home yet.

This was common of Priscilla’s behavior but not Angel. He was becoming worried himself. In fact he was so worried, he’d half hoped that Alex had Angel with him still.

“yeah,” Came the rough voice on the other end, it was obvious that they were in bed.

“Alex?”

“Seth—George?”

“Is Prissy and Angel still there?”

“They’re not home?” The last of the partygoers left just under an hour ago.

“No, Catherine’s beside herself, and I’m starting to get worried.”

“Hang on, I’ll ask Alex if he’d seen them.” He was already

troubled. He was sure the women left hours ago. Although Priscilla was a little reckless, Angel wasn't and most likely her sister would have dropped her off before she went anywhere. If not, she was responsible enough to at least phone her parents and tell them so they wouldn't worry especially since she was pregnant. The last thing she would do was risk the health of the baby.

Alex wasn't sleeping when Seth opened the door to his room after a brief knock, he was reading. The look on his face let him know that something was wrong. He quickly sat up, "Seth? Is it mom?"

He shook his head, "Is Angel with you?" he stepped into the room and looked around not missing the stunned look on his brother's face at the question.

"Of course not." He said as swung his legs over the side, "Why the hell would you think that? Mother would have my balls." He tossed his book on the nightstand. "Angel wouldn't be caught dead in any man's room."

"Because of the way you've been looking at her tonight. I thought maybe—oh never mind!" he said waving an arm.

"Ah hell." He said running his hand through his hair. He didn't think it was that obvious. Obviously he had it so bad for the girl he couldn't keep his emotions out of his expression. Something he never had a problem with in the past. It was surprising that Lucy didn't notice. Then again the woman was usually more concerned about herself and usually didn't notice anything else. "What's wrong?"

"George is on the phone. The girls aren't home yet."

"They left here hours ago." He said in surprise standing up abruptly and reaching for his jeans, "Call the sheriff and tell him that they're missing. I'll take the Navigator and start searching the side roads. Christ!" He remembered that Priscilla was upset. What if she wasn't thinking right, and she was the

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one that was driving Angel home? He felt his chest clench. Something was wrong. He could feel it through to the bone.

Angel.

“When did they leave?” Seth asked while his brother rapidly dressed. “Did you see?”

He glanced at his bedside clock, “Around nine thirty.”

“Jesus that’s three hours ago.”

“Something’s wrong, I feel it in my gut.” He said shoving his arm into his shirt and shooting his brother a worried look.

“What do I tell George?” said Seth rubbing the back of his neck, “He’ll lose it.”

“Tell him to get in his truck and come back this way slowly, looking for any signs that Priscilla’s car left the road.” He said in a subdued tone. “Wake the men too Seth, get everyone you can out there.”

“All right. Take your phone.” He said before he left.

About an hour later Alex was still driving up and down the side roads looking for any sign of the women. He knew how many were between their two houses, but they seemed endless when you need to drive up and down all of them especially with that shadow of panic that something horrible had happened to them. Some of them led to nowhere, and other’s looped back to the highway. His brother phoned him and let him know that the Sherriff and the deputies were there and they were mapping out a grid. He felt some relief but it didn’t last. He rattled off the roads he’d already searched and hung up after he told him he’d be home in few minutes so they could organize a wider search with more men. The more roads he drove up and down, the more worried he became. He couldn’t help feeling guilty. Obviously Priscilla was upset and he’d sent Angel with her.

Christ, he thought, if either woman got hurt, he’d never forgive himself. He was angry when he told Angel to get her sister because Lucy had come into his study while he was

crouching down and picking up items off the floor and placing them back on the desk. She had demanded to know what he was doing because he was suppose to escort her out to the party so she could make some grand entrance. So he told her the truth.

“I was making love to my girlfriend.” He said coolly and felt some satisfaction at the appalled look on her face.

“That-that paralegal?”

“Yes.”

“But she’s a—“

“I’m warning you Lucy, if you say anything about Angel, our deal is off!” he gritted out. “She has more class than you could ever hope to have.”

She crossed her arms across her chest and lifted her chin, “And what about your mother?”

Alex felt his face heat up as he tried to control the rage he felt, “You are one cold bitch.” His hand curled around the edge of the desk while he fought the urge to strike her. Never in his life did he ever want to hit a woman until now, “Remember, the deal goes both ways. If you talk, you get nothing.” She had robbed him of his Angel and he would never forgive her for it. The look on his face must’ve been fierce because she finally averted her gaze.

“fine then.” She said in a more subdued tone and unfolded her arms, “But you need to at least look like we are affectionate with one another after all, we are getting married.” She reminded him.

“Just remember,” he said approaching her and giving her a hateful stare, “That I tolerate your touch for my mother’s sake.” He took her arm and looped it through his.

A rock hit the undercarriage with a small clunk and brought Alex back to the purpose at hand. Finding the girls. There wasn’t even a moon out that night and it was cold. Visibility was next to nothing and his efforts to find them seemed

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fruitless. Finally he pulled the Navigator to the side of the road, shifted it into park and rubbed his forehead with his hand. He had to think and to do that he had to calm down a bit. He kept having visions of Angel bleeding and hurt, or worse, and he never told her the truth about Lucy and Max. He never told her how much that day they made love in the grass really meant to him. Worst of all, he never told her he loved her.

One hand gripped the steering wheel and the other brushed through his hair. *Get a grip Alex*, he told himself. Remembering that Priscilla had been upset over something about Seth's girlfriend, guilt washed through him because maybe if he listened she wouldn't have been so upset. Unfortunately she was driving because Angel didn't drive and if she was upset and made a wrong turn, chances were it was one of the side roads closest to her house. The only one he could think of was the one that led down to the creek that ran through both of their properties, but it had washed out several weeks ago after a rainstorm. He was sure she didn't know that. The only way he knew is from chasing a few stray cattle on horseback through a broken area in the fence last week. The road was makeshift as it was, and travelled along a steep cliff to the creek below. A lot of kids would go swimming down there in the summer. It was too cold for anyone to swim down there this time of year, not that Angel and Priscilla did that much anymore. However, it seemed like the only logical course.

Hoping he was wrong, he shifted the SUV into drive and gunned the accelerator. Ten minutes later he pulled the Navigator over again to the creek road and got out walking in front of it where his headlights shone. Fresh tire tracks were visible in the barely used gravel. He swore all the blood drained out of his body then. Pulling out his phone, he dialed home. They would need horses and supplies. He knew that he couldn't go down there with the Navigator, it wouldn't make it and even

as much as he wanted to go rushing down there by himself, it wouldn't do anyone any good to end up having to rescue him too. He needed the big dually and there wasn't enough room on the washed out road for much else. However, horses could move faster.

When Alex went back to the ranch, the men were already loading the horses in the trailer like he told them. He walked over and shook Derek Thorton's hand, the local Sheriff.

"If the women are down there Alex, we can't get the helicopter in until dawn." He said with a worried expression.

"I know." He said keeping his voice steady, but inside he was a wreck. He caught his brother's look through the crowd and could see he was thinking the same thing. "We'll take the horses down, and that way we can check the road and see if the dually will make it."

"That's a good idea." Said Derek, "Seth loaded what he thought he'd need in his saddle bags if we find them."

"We *will* find them." He corrected.

"Of course." Derek agreed. Like everyone in town, he knew that the Harrisons and the Stanfords were close friends. This couldn't be easy on them.

Alex spotted George and the man looked a wreck as he was conversing with one of the deputies. He had to give it to him. If those were his two children, he doubted very much he would be able to function.

"Boss." Said a tall lanky man named Jet. He was Alex's lead ranch hand. "We're ready."

He nodded and turned back to Derek, "Is Jack going to meet us there with his dogs?"

"That's what he said."

"Lets go then."

The dogs howled as the men mounted the horses after they were unloaded from the trailer almost a half an hour later.

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They had powerful flashlights that Adam knew would hardly give them a damn inch compared to the darkness of the night but he'd been down the road a few weeks back after it had washed out so he was a little familiar with it. What he didn't tell George and the others he left back at the ranch, was the washout had a sheer drop for about fifteen feet with several feet of water at the bottom. If Priscilla's car went off that way, it would have most likely flipped over on the roof and flooded the interior with water. He internally shuddered thinking he might find both of them dead.

In all there were about fifteen men and Jack Kester's dogs. Before they mounted up, Alex told them about the road. He could see the strain in his brother's face and knew it mirrored his own because he was thinking the same thing about Angel and Priscilla, but neither one of them wanted to say it out loud. Within a half an hour after they unloaded they headed down the road. It was over five and a half hours since the women were missing. That was hours of time that they could be suffering or since died. A horrified shudder ran through his large frame. Alex couldn't stop the overwhelming grief and guilt that struck him and he knew he had to pull himself together. It didn't do anyone any good if he fell apart. He directed one of his men Bud Hendricks to drive the dually behind them. It would help give them extra light.

Jack rode ahead following his dogs with Seth and Alex side behind him. The rest of the men followed sweeping their lights back and forth across the road. It was easy to see the tire tracks of prissy's car in the thick mud.

"Christ, this is painstaking," Seth finally said after about a half an hour of silence and slow going, "Alex, do you—"

"I'm trying not to think about it." He interrupted knowing exactly what Seth was going to say.

"What the hell would cause Priscilla to turn down here?"

Seth said sweeping the road with his light.

“Ask me that another day.” Alex answered grimly unable to feel stop the guilt. If he hadn’t been so angry at Lucy, he would’ve let Priscilla prattle on like she always did. Instead he’d sent her away with Angel.

The dogs became frenzied about twenty minutes later. Alex was suffering at how horribly slow they were going, but they couldn’t go out on a full gallop because it was too dark and they ran the risk of injuring themselves if they stumbled off the road.

“We have one!” shouted one of his men.

Alex nudged his stallion toward the side of the road and dismounted. The dogs had taken Jack off the road and about twenty yards into the brush. His nerves were a mess. He felt selfish praying that it was Angel. “Just one?”

“Yeah.”

He could hear Jack rewarding his dogs with encouraging words as he rushed over to a form caked in mud as someone flipped her over, she was face down. It was Priscilla. He would pray for forgiveness later at the disappointment he felt that it wasn’t Angel. Not only that she was deathly pale, “Jesus.”

“Let me through!” Came Seth’s voice. The men instantly moved aside. Seth knelt down on the wet ground and felt for a carotid pulse.

“Is she alive?” someone said.

After a few agonizing seconds Seth nodded, “Faint pulse, and she’s ice cold. We need some blankets and we need to get her out of here fast.” Her clothing was soaked through and she was caked in mud.

Alex’s gut was in a knot. “Is she unconscious Seth?”

“Yes. She can’t help us.” He answered Alex’s unspoken question.

Just then the howling of the dogs increased. Jack was moving back and forth with them around Priscilla trying to pick

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up the trail. “We have another scent!” he shouted.

“Alex, I have to get Priscilla back to the road so we can get her out of here.” He said giving his brother a look of helplessness.

He could hear the strain in his brother’s voice and knew that meant he would be on their own looking for Angel. If she was hurt, they wouldn’t have Seth. “You need to go with Prissy.” He said knowing Seth needed to hear that. For all they knew Angel was dead, and to take the much needed attention away from her sister, was wrong. That thought alone sent a wave of anguish through him the likes which he never felt before in his life.

“I’ll get her in the ambulance stabilize her and come back. We should be able to get the four by four close to here without it getting stuck.”

Alex told him to go, and went back up to grab his horse to follow Jack and the dogs.

Angel thought she was dreaming one of those falling dreams that make you twitch in bed and wakes you. However, the wash of pain that followed was not part of a dream. She opened her eyes and couldn’t see anything. She felt wet and her chest hurt. The car, she remembered, they were in a car and there was a loud noise. Her memory failed her at what happened after that. The baby! She instantly felt her belly and did her best to concentrate on sorting things out through the haze she was in. There was no pain, no discomfort from that area so hopefully he was fine. She swallowed and it felt as if someone just pounded nails into her head when she did it causing her to cry out. Releasing a sob she blinked and still couldn’t see. Her eyes stung. Reaching up she wiped them and felt something cool and sticky. “Prissy?” she croaked, but it wasn’t loud enough to carry, even in the car. Then she felt the seat belt, it was firmly across her chest and pulled tight. It was what was causing her a lot of pain. It was then she realized that the car was not parallel to the

ground. It was vertical and she was hanging by her seatbelt. “Prissy.” She repeated. There was no answer. She reached her other hand over to the driver’s side and it was empty. Oh God, where was her sister! She knew she wasn’t in her right mind. Her head hurt, her chest hurt, and her left leg was in agony. Reaching forward she felt the dash and the deflated airbag. Prissy’s would have went off too, wouldn’t it? Where was she? Did she go for help?

Angel released another sob, her head throbbed with every breath. She was beginning to understand her dilemma a little more. A slight breeze had picked up and although she couldn’t see, she knew there was no windshield. If she released her seatbelt, would she careen forward? She didn’t know if the car was on solid ground or hung up somewhere. She didn’t even know where they were. Besides the pain she began to get cold and started to shiver. How long was she out? Was anyone looking for them?

Tears started to fall from her eyes. Now she knew for sure she was vertical because they didn’t run down her cheeks but slipped down her lashes and fell away. “Prissy.” She tried calling again, but the only thing that answered her was the slight night breeze and the rustling of leaves. She winced at the pain her chest was in and because of it, she couldn’t speak above a croaked whisper. She could smell gasoline and the coppery scent of her own blood. What if the car caught fire? Horrible images of her being burned alive started to occupy her mind. Chastising herself, she tried her best to calm down and erase the images. This didn’t do her any good. Someone would be looking for them. She never stayed out late. Her father would get worried and call the Harrisons. At least she hoped he would.

She didn’t know how long she was trapped because she kept fading in and out of consciousness. It seemed as though hours went by. However, she was also aware of the pain, and had

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lost the ability to cry a while ago. The pain in her chest had increased and she began to wish she'd just die to end it. Not only that she began to hallucinate. She kept seeing Alex sitting beside her telling her to hang in there. Reality would come and go, and she didn't want it anymore. It was painful and cold. But her baby! She needed to stay strong for him. So she forced herself to take deep breaths regardless of the sharp pain that accompanied it. Seth told her after the ultrasound last Friday that it was a boy. A boy! She couldn't be selfish and give up. If this was the only part of Alex she could have, she wasn't going to lose it. Her hand sought out the buckle of her seatbelt. She couldn't stay here and die.

Wolves? Were those wolves she heard?

Jack's dogs were certainly going to get sirloin for a year when they spotted the back end of the car sticking out of the wash. Instantly Alex was off his horse before the rest of the men dismounted. He didn't even hesitate sliding down the slick incline to the passenger side of the car praying to God that she was still in there and alive. She could've have gone with Prissy and gotten lost.

"Oh Jesus!" he said seeing that there was a person in the passenger seat, but not moving. Alex hopped down into the knee deep water and felt his booted feet sink several inches into the soft mud. Several more splashes followed as the men began to follow him. He pulled on the passenger door roughly until it gave way under his strength. "Angel!" it came out as an anguished cry. "Angel!" he reached in just as someone shone a light on her face. "Oh Christ!" she looked like hell. Her face was covered in blood, her head was tilted forward with her hair matted around her and she was so pale she looked dead. He cupped her face in his hands, "Angel, honey stay with me! Don't you dare fucking leave me!" He could have cried when he heard her faintly say his name. He didn't even wait for anyone to help

him. He reached in and undid her seatbelt catching her before she hit the dash. Although he shouldn't have moved her in case she had a spinal injury, he knew that if he didn't get her help she would die waiting until morning for the helicopter.

Sweeping her up in his arms he handed her up to Jet who was waiting at the top of the incline. Once he was back on the road, he took her back. She felt so limp, lifeless. Someone else brought blankets and he laid her down on the road and started to cover her up to keep her warm.

"Call someone to bring the truck down!" he said kneeling next to her. Faintly he heard a 'yes boss.'

"Angel, can you hear me?" he said in an anguished tone.

Angel took a deep excruciating breath, she was hallucinating again.

"Baby, can you hear me?"

If she opened her eyes like before he would be gone. She couldn't do that. She wanted him with her. Now she knew she was out of her mind, when she felt strong hands feeling her limbs, her sides and her head. She heard herself cry out following a sharp pain when hands brushed along her ribcage followed by a muffled curse and an apology.

"Where the hell is the bloody truck!" Alex yelled. There seemed to be too much blood covering her hair, face and clothing and he couldn't stem his panic.

"It's coming boss." Said Jet who was on the phone to the driver. "Bud says they got her sister off in the ambulance ten minutes ago and Seth is in the truck with him."

*Thank God*, thought Alex. He would know what to do. He took Angels hands in his and kissed them. "Hang in there baby, we're going to get you out of here." She moaned. It near hauled his heart out of his chest because it was laced with pain. He leaned over and kissed her cheek, "I mean it honey. You stay with me. I swear to God I'll make things right between us."

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*Alex?*

If he wasn't leaning so close, he wouldn't have heard it, "Angel? Can you hear me?"

"I—I hurt so much." She whispered.

"I know, but you stay awake. Do you hear me?"

"I'm dreaming again." She murmured and her head lolled to the side.

Alex framed her face in his hands and touched his forehead to hers, "No honey you're not dreaming. I'm here and I'm never leaving you again. I promise."

"Promise?" she managed.

"Promise." She coughed then and a spurt of blood flew from her mouth. "Oh Jesus!" He erected himself, "Dammit Jet—The truck!"

"I can hear it!" Jet called back. "It's not far!"

Alex didn't wait, he scooped Angel's body up and ran through the mud up the road. The truck was just turning around in a wider area of the road. It was slick so the tires were sliding. Seth hopped out when he saw them and opened the back door so Alex could put her in. Seth got in the back with Angel and Alex got in the front.

"Aw hell," Seth said taking a brief look at Angel, "You'd better hurry Bud. I think we have a punctured lung."

"You keep her alive Seth," Said Alex, "Or I swear to God, brother or not, I'll kill you."

"I hear you Alex." He said quickly going to work.

"Is she still awake?"

"No." Seth answered, knowing that she was probably in a tremendous amount of pain, and it was better this way. Her pulse was weak and her breathing was shallow and gurgled. He knew there was fluid in her lungs and he was pretty sure he knew what it was.

"Seth is she—"

“Alex—“ he interrupted raising his voice, “Shut the fuck up, I’m doing my best!” He’d never lost his temper in an emergency, but he had trouble concentrating as it was because it was Angel and on top of it all, she was pregnant. It would kill any of them to lose Angel and the baby and the worst part was Alex didn’t know about his child. The truck snaked and jumped sideways and Alex cursed. Seth wanted to tell Bud to take it easy but they were on a time crunch here. Pretty soon she wouldn’t be able to breathe and there would be nothing he could do.

## *CHAPTER EIGHT*

Bea, George and Catherine rushed through the emergency entrance of the hospital. Bea spotted Alex first, talking to one of the nurses with a clipboard, obviously giving information. He was covered in mud that was beginning to dry except for below the knees, his jeans were still wet and caked with clay. He spotted them and waved them over just as the nurse left.

“How are the girls?” said his mother studying his expression. He looked horrible. George and Catherine were both pale and etched with worry, but Alex looked worse, if that was possible.

“Alive.” He said watching color slowly return to their faces, “But Angel’s in surgery right now. Seth’s assisting. He said he’ll let us know as soon as he can.”

“do they know anything.” Bea said wringing her hands.

“Priscilla is awake, and the nurse said you can go see her. She said that she was trying to go back to the road for help because she couldn’t wake Angel. She said the airbags were delayed in opening and both of them hit the dash.” He paused and swallowed hard, “She has a concussion and quite a few scrapes and bruises. Including the gash on her forehead where

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her head hit the steering wheel.”

George stepped forward and shook Alex’s hand, “Thanks for saving my daughters Alex, we would have lost them both if it weren’t for you, Seth and the men.”

He hoped he saved them both.

One of the nurses came up and told them they could go see Priscilla and led them off. Bea stayed with Alex.

“Are you okay son?” she said looking up at him. He looked terrible. It wasn’t just his haggard filthy clothing, it was written into the expression on his face. Although he looked strong and stable, she knew her son well enough to know he was dealing with something that was wearing on him. He was tired and worn looking before the girls went missing and after the close call with Angel she was certain he was feeling every passing second through to the bone until they found out something new. She saw the way he looked at her, had been seeing it for several years now and when Alex finally made his move she couldn’t be any more elated over the match. She loved Angel and Priscilla and either one of them was a welcome addition to her family. Then this other woman appeared and everything changed. She didn’t like this woman, and although Alex was able to keep his thoughts to himself over it all, he didn’t look at Lucy like he looked at Angel. So none of this made sense.

“Honestly mom, no.”

She looped her arm in his, “Did you want to talk about it.”

He shook his dark head while settling his eyes on hers.

“I know that you’ve been dealing with something difficult that you won’t talk about with anyone. I also know you love Angel, but you’re marrying another woman. Now I may be an old fool, but there’s nothing that would stop you from taking something you want, so for the past few months I’ve done a lot of thinking. I think you’re protecting someone. Is it the boy?”

“Partly.” He said reluctantly. He should have known his

mother would figure something out. After all, his brain wasn't inherited from his father. The only thing he did inherit from him besides his looks was the temper. However, both he and Seth had their mother's IQ.

Just then Seth came down the hall wearing OR scrubs. He waved them to one of unoccupied exam rooms and shut the door. His eyes guided from his mother to Alex, knowing there was no way to sugar coat anything, "Angel lost a lot of blood into her chest. The impact was hard enough for the seat belt to break several ribs and puncture a lung". His mother gasped and covered her mouth. "She also has a fractured skull and a broken leg—" he paused while Alex reached for a chair to sit down. Then he pointedly looked at his brother, "—Alex, the next few days are hit and miss. The surgeon feels if she—" he swallowed, "—gets through these two days, she'll make it." Then he looked at his mother, "Mom, I need to talk to Alex alone." He knew what he promised Angel, but circumstances have changed, and he loved the both of them enough to know what he was doing was right.

Bea glanced back and forth at the two men. Alex's gaze centered on his brother's with an expression of anguish mixed with confusion. Obviously this wasn't her business, "I'll go see how Priscilla is doing." She said giving them both a reassuring smile while wiping her eyes with a tissue she took from her purse.

"Tell them Angel is out of surgery and I'll be there to fill in the rest in a minute."

"All right son." She said before she left.

"Seth, what are you not telling me?" Alex said after the door closed. His fears were evident in his expression, "Is Angel—" he choked unable to finish.

Seth shook his head and lifted his hand to let him know it wasn't that. "I think she'll pull through Alex. I hope she's young and strong enough not to prove me wrong. However, you should

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know Angel is pregnant.” Seth waited until his words sunk in. And did they ever. Alex paled and placed his elbows on his knees burying his face in his hands while a wretched cry tore from his throat.

“The baby is fine Alex.” He took a deep breath, “for now. Sometimes when something so traumatic happens to a woman’s body, it might reject the pregnancy.”

Without looking up he spoke. “Why didn’t you tell me?” He said quietly. Everything made sense now. Seth visiting her regularly, the protectiveness he was showing around her, and the hesitation over answering his questions.

Seth heard the crack in his voice, “She didn’t want you to know. I have to uphold the wishes of my patient, brother or not. I have a legal responsibility to her, but in light of things now, I’m breaking that confidence. If your son survives—“

“Son?” Alex choked thoroughly devastated. He always wanted to be a father and for some reason knowing the sex of the child just made a greater impact that this was as real as it gets.

Seth nodded, “Her family is supportive, but she never seemed close to them. You are the closest person to her Alex and if she loses this baby she’s going to need you.”

“She should have told me—I would have stood by her.”

You were marrying another woman.” When Alex finally lifted his head, the raw anguish in his expression made Seth wish he never doubted his brother’s feelings for Angel.

“I didn’t have a choice.”

“She wanted you to have a life with Max. She figured you didn’t love Lucy, but you were doing this for your son.”

Alex leaned back in the chair and cast his gaze toward the ceiling while releasing a long slow breath, “Max isn’t my son.”

Seth suspected that was true, but it still didn’t explain why he was marrying a woman like Lucy, “I think you’d better

tell me exactly what's going on.”

“I should go see Angel.” He said avoiding the subject and starting to rise out of the chair.

“She won't be out of post op recovery for another half hour at least, so you have time before they move her to ICU. Alex you need to tell me what this is about.”

Alex stared at him then gave a curt nod and sat down again, “I think this whole episode has shown me how wrong I've been.” He ran his hand through his hair.

“do you love Lucy?”

“Definitely not.” he said giving his brother an expression that said, *how could you even think that?*

“Angel?”

He managed a small smile, “More than my life.”

“then what the hell is going on Alex?”

He hesitated one last time then nodded, “Max isn't mine Seth, he's dad's.”

After the words were said, it took a minute for them to sink in. It was Seth's turn to sit down. He couldn't say anything but just stare at Alex in disbelief. Then he remembered the note in Alex's hand that night he passed out in his study after consuming a bottle of Whiskey. “How—?”

“It was eight years ago. Dad used to come see me at Princeton sometimes. We had a coed dorm.” Alex shrugged as if he had nothing to lose. “Lucy was beautiful and saw our father as a means to an end. She was poor, he wasn't. She didn't care if he was married or not.”

“You're saying dad had an affair with this woman and Max is our half-brother?” he repeated, unsure if he was hearing him right.

He nodded, “I didn't know she got pregnant, but I knew

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about the affair. I confronted dad, and he told me the truth. Dad paid her off and she withdrew from Princeton, but not after she let everyone know about their relationship. I was humiliated. I went to her to tell her to keep her mouth shut and she reported me for assault. I never laid a hand on her Seth, but it was her word against mine. I nearly got expelled, but during the appeal she retracted her statement and I think that's when dad gave her money. The money ran out recently and she came back for more threatening to expose the affair to mother. She said she wanted marriage and for Max to have our name probably for some claim to the estate, sooner or later I'm sure a divorce would ensue, because I wouldn't touch her if my life depended on it. So I had her sign a prenuptial that gave her a stipend to live off of, and her terms were a gag order that I couldn't talk about this to anyone. Now, I'm not going through with it, so the contract is void. At the time, I couldn't let her tell mom, it would destroy her and with her heart condition—

“—Jesus almighty!” Seth swore, “You kept this in all of those years. Why the hell didn't you tell me?”

“You saw our father as someone that you could look up to. I didn't want to destroy that.” He took a long deep breath, “He made me promise.”

“Just the same Alex, he's a man. We're not perfect!” He swore again and stood up running his hand through his own hair. Then he turned and faced him sticking a finger toward him, “You shouldn't have kept this in! You had no right! Who gave you the right to be mother and I's savior?” Seth was angry. He was angry that his father could have done such a thing and now he was dead and he couldn't confront him over it. He was equally angry at him for putting it all on Alex's shoulders. All these years there was this secret and Alex was still trying to protect them, giving up his own happiness. “Why? He's gone now Alex.”

“Mom couldn't take it. I know she can't. If she were to

find out—“

“That woman is in our house Alex, and she had an affair with our father! How do you think Mom will take it? She’ll drag the woman out of her house by her hair and toss her off the step.”

Yeah, she probably would.

“This is wrong in so many ways.” He said while shaking his head.

“I’m not going to marry her. Like I said, this whole incident has put things into perspective for me. If I marry anyone it’ll be Angel.” *If she lives*, he thought feeling himself shudder while trying to push that out of his mind. It was a painful thing to have something so tragic happen to make him realize his mistake, and knowing that he may never make this right if she dies, would be the end of him.

“Are you going to tell mom?”

“No, I’m going to do what dad did years ago and pay her off.” He admitted. When Lucy seduced his father, she was no innocent, and although she had social graces, she wasn’t what Alex wanted in a wife. She was a smart woman, though, he had to give her that, because she came from a poor family but was able to make her into his type of crowd by studying and mimicking the wealthy. Now she had a son, and actually had to think about someone other than herself.

When she came into his study that day, he didn’t know what to expect. He was set on proposing to Angel that Saturday. He had it all planned out. He was going to take her back to that spot that they made love and pop the question. Then Lucy showed up, and threatened to tell their mother that Max was their father’s unless he married her. Alex knew his mother couldn’t handle the truth. She loved their father and such betrayal would be devastating to her. Alex loved her too much to do that to her.

Discovering he had a brother was shocking enough. Both

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of them would have welcomed Max into their family. Now, he was to give up Angel to protect his family from a scandal and his mother from heartbreak. It felt as if someone ripped his heart out of his chest to see her hurt that day in Jason's office. It was all he could do not to go after her and tell her the truth and beg her forgiveness. However, in exchange for the prenuptial that they signed, Lucy insisted on a gag order. She didn't want anyone to know what she'd done. She wanted to be married into the upper class, and have support for Max. If he told anyone, she would get a fortune in lieu of breaking the gag order and she would tell Bea.

At first Alex didn't believe her and was getting set to have her thrown off his property, then he saw Max. The boy was identical to him when he was eight. There was no doubt he was a Harrison. He was a good kid too. Despite Lucy's selfishness, she obviously loved Max and did her best to raise him. Apparently she'd tried on several occasions to marry into money, but as soon as her potential beau knew she was a mother, the relationship was over. Lucy may have been beautiful, but even that couldn't remove the stigma of having a child out of wedlock.

Even though he was angry at her and his father for their actions, he almost felt sorry for her. She never really had much of a life. She was smart enough to get a scholarship to Princeton, but ended up pregnant and dropping out to be a single mother. Alex wondered if his father knew about the child. If he did, then paid Lucy off to get rid of her, it made him angrier. Max should have been in their lives. The child shouldn't have suffered for the sins of his parents. Seth's angry voice brought him back to the present.

"Jesus Alex, she'll be back when the money's gone and do it again!" he said gesturing with his hands angrily, "I think you should tell mom."

"No." it was said in a way that was finite. "She doesn't

need to know, it'll kill her. I know it will."

"Dad's been gone for four years Alex, she's not as fragile as we think."

"I won't be responsible for putting her in that situation.

"You didn't! Our bloody father did. It's about time you stop protecting him." He said with uncharacteristic ferocity.

"I'm not protecting him, I'm protecting our mother." He gritted out, "I hated him for what he did. He knew that. To this day I haven't forgiven him for doing this to me. Why do you think I never came home in the summer? I wanted nothing to do with him anymore. I only moved back home after his death."

"Regardless, mother would want to know. There's no way she would want you to give up your happiness to protect her. She always taught us to be truthful and honest, this isn't right Alex." Seth countered, "Tell her."

"I'll get rid of Lucy, but we still have to think of what to do for Max." Alex said ignoring Seth's argument.

Seth sighed knowing that he wasn't going to convince his brother of anything and he also knew he couldn't betray his brother's confidence and tell his mother the truth, that was up to Alex. "She doesn't want him?"

"I'm sure she loves him, but she doesn't want to be a mother. She told me so. I don't have a problem with raising our brother, and that's another reason we can't tell mom. I don't know how she'll react to this, having another child from our father under our roof."

"I don't like this Alex. At all." Although he did agree about Max. Family meant a lot to them and knowing they had a half brother actually felt good despite the circumstances. However, their mother would keep thinking that the boy is Alex's. "Does Max know?"

"He knows I'm not his father. He doesn't know who his real father is. No one told him. Despite the way Lucy is, she did

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a good job on raising him. I know he'll need to know the truth someday, but not while mother is alive. I'm sticking to that Seth, don't try and change my mind."

Seth swore again while pondering his brother's words, "I disagree with you Alex, I think you should tell mother and kick that woman out on her ear."

"I would rather give that woman my fortune to get rid of her than lose Angel." He said seriously, "That's how much money means to me right now."

After another pause Seth slowly nodded, "Well, I'll draw the line at that. You may want to keep this from mom, but you're not giving your hard earned money to that woman. I'll talk to Jason and see what kind of agreement—" Seth held up his hand as Alex was about to protest, "—don't argue, you're going to be busy with Angel for the next while and I think it's about time you shared some of that burden that you've shouldered for so long. I'm not fragile Alex, I had a right to know. Although I understand why you did this because of what dad had asked of you, and like I said we're men, and he had a moment of weakness. I don't doubt for a moment that he didn't love mom, because I remember how he looked at her. Now you are firm in your decision and I'm going to be firm in mine. Let me help Alex."

Alex pondered his brother's words for a moment before he nodded, "I suppose I owe you that much for saving Angel's life."

Seth smiled but it wasn't from humor, "We'll see."

## *CHAPTER NINE*

Angel hurt. Everything hurt. She was uncomfortable and wanted to shift herself, but when she took a deep breath she winced. It hurt to breathe. She lifted her hand that felt

surprisingly heavy and searched out the source of pain in her side. It was something cool and pliable and tracing it with her fingers as it led off the bed she realized that it was some sort of a tube. Unable to hold her arm up any more she dropped it with a moan.

“Angel?” Said a deep voice beside her. The tone was one of surprised relief.

Alex.

She tried opening her eyes to focus on the source of the voice but that hurt too.

“Angel?” He said more certainly.

There was scraping like the sound of a chair on the floor and his voice was closer this time. Then she felt a warm calloused hand on her face as another gripped her hand. Again she tried to open her eyes and managed to pry them open to slits. It *was* Alex, and gosh, he looked like hell. Despite that he smiled when she looked at him and her chest tightened. She loved him so much and waking to see him was as if the clouds cleared and a bright sun shone. There wasn't anyone else she could have asked to wake up to.

“Do you need a drink?” He reached for a glass of water.

His voice sounded strained. She nodded. Everything else hurt so much she was afraid to talk. She felt the straw probing her lips and took it in her mouth. The water was heaven! After a few sips she felt as though she could talk. “Where am I?” it was a hoarse whisper, but it was something and it didn't hurt as much as she thought after that drink.

“The hospital.” He bent down and kissed her lightly on the mouth hovering for a moment before he lifted his head savoring the intimate touch, “I was worried sick.”

Then she remembered bits and pieces. Suddenly as if shocked, her hand automatically released his and went to her belly.

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“Our baby’s fine honey.”

Her eyes went to his. He knew. Unable to help herself she released a sob that was even louder than her forced whisper.

“Hush, don’t get yourself upset. I’ve done enough of that for both of us.” He said bending over and kissing her again, “I’ll take care of you until you’re better. Then we have some plans to discuss.”

Plans? Did he want custody? Just thinking that made her sob again. Then she had images of Lucy and Alex raising their son together without her. He would win in court over custody because she was a single mother, and he would be married by then.

“Are you in pain?” he said misinterpreting the look on her face.

She nodded. He had no idea. However, she was in pain and exhausted despite her turmoil over their baby and his ‘plans’. Her eyelids felt heavy and she couldn’t keep them open.

He reached over and pushed the call bell. The nurse came in a few seconds later.

Angel’s eyes fluttered closed again while hearing the comforting tone of Alex’s voice talk to the nurse. Soon she was asleep again.

When she awoke later her father was bending over her.

“Hi.” He said smiling.

“Where’s Alex?” she was sure he was there earlier, but nothing seemed real anymore. It was so hard to distinguish reality from her hallucinations.

“He had some things to take care of. He’ll be back. How are you doing Honey?”

“I can talk better.” She tried to smile but her forehead hurt causing her to raise her hand to a large bandage there. She gave her father a questioning look.

“You hit your head. But you’re fine Angel.” He said with

the relief evident in his expression, “We thought we were going to lose you.”

“You look worried.”

“I was worried. Not anymore. It was a close call for a few days.”

“—a few days?” she looked to the window that the daylight shone through, “How long have I been here?”

“Four days.”

“Oh dear.” Her eyes shot back to him, “Mom—?”

“—Is fine,” he chuckled, “After she calmed down.”

“Where’s Prissy?”

“She’s at home. She didn’t get hurt as bad as you. She remembers that she turned down the creek road thinking she was turning onto the road to our house. Then she ran over something and lost the steering. The car went off the edge of a washout but the airbags didn’t deploy.” He swallowed, “Honey you have a skull fracture, some broken ribs and a broken leg.”

Her eyes widened, “Well, that explains the pain I’m in.” she shifted in bed and winced, “And why it hurts to breathe, move, talk—.”

“Seth said that you might be upset at all the tubes coming out of you, but just to tell you that they’ll be out in a few days.”

She lifted her arm and saw the intravenous tubing, “What other tubes.”

“there’s one in your chest to help your lung heal. He says that when you hit the bottom of the washout the seatbelt busted two of your ribs and put them through your lung. You scared the hell out of Alex when he found you.”

“Alex found me?” did she remember that? She remembered his voice through the haze and when she drifted in and out she heard him. At one point she recalled some sort of an argument between him and Seth. Alex had a temper, but he and Seth never fought. Then she remembered another conversation,

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“Dad, does Alex know?”

“About the baby?” He nodded, “Seth told him.”

“So it wasn’t a dream,” she said to herself. “Oh god, he must hate me.” She became frightened, “I think he wants custody.” Tears started to fall, “I remember something about plans.”

“On the contrary. He sat with you for hours—days Angel. We couldn’t get him to go home and shower even though was caked in mud because he hauled you out of the car himself. I’ve never seen a man look as haggard as he did.” He smoothed his hand over hers, “Don’t you worry about custody. Alex would never do that to you. He’s too damn honorable to take a child from his mother.”

“Are you sure?”

“Very.” He gave her a reassuring smile.

Angel couldn’t believe he sat with her. She was certain Lucy wouldn’t have been so impressed about it. She didn’t strike angel as the type of woman that liked to share. However, she still couldn’t forget the bits and pieces of him being there when she woke up. He was so tender and he looked genuinely worried. She actually brightened. Did he care about her?

“I’ll let him talk to you himself. Seth finally dragged him out of here this morning after a few choice words and a threat to inject him with something volatile.” he chuckled, “They had some things to do together.” He stood up, “The doctor told me not to tire you out too much, so I’m going to leave you be for a bit. Mom will be in later, she’s taking care of Priscilla and your sister is milking it for all it’s worth.”

This made Angel laugh, then cough from the sharp pain that followed.

“Sorry honey.” He winced an apology as if feeling her discomfort, “I’ll see you later.”

She nodded. “Thanks dad.”

Two days later Seth pulled the chest tube and they discontinued the IV and her leg was fitted with a walking cast. Although her rib cage felt as if someone was twisting a knife it, she managed to walk with one crutch and do fairly well the first day she was allowed out of bed. She had asked Seth where Alex was, but he quickly changed the subject. Whatever hope she had, was crushed. He hadn't phoned her, or had come to see her and although he seemed to care, there was no other indication that it was beyond the concern of a friend now.

Unfortunately being up exhausted her beyond belief. When she went back to bed she fell asleep immediately.

When she awoke in the middle of the night in pain. A noise nearby made her turn her head toward the sound. Alex was back. She was sure her heart was trying to beat its way out of her chest when her eyes set on him. He was as striking to her as always. He was leaning lazily back in a chair reading a book. His long jean clad legs were crossed at the ankles and she soaked up the sight of him. His Stetson and a Styrofoam cup were on a table beside him, and his sheepskin denim jacket was casually tossed over the back of the chair he was sitting in. Just watching him as he was unaware of the scrutiny made him look twice as handsome. He seemed relaxed as he casually turned the page and took a sip from the Styrofoam cup on the table next to him. Involuntarily a tear slipped down her cheek. She knew he cared about her, worried about her, but he was marrying another woman. She'd never know him again like she did that day their child was conceived. Her chest tightened painfully at the thought.

At that moment, he saw that she was awake and put the book down he was reading, got up and came beside the bed to bend over her seeing her tears his brows rose in question, "Are you hurting Angel?" Without waiting for her to answer he

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reached over and pushed the call bell to alert the nurse again.

“Have you been here long?” she managed with a crack in her voice.

He smiled, “A few hours. You look better.”

“I—I haven’t seen you for a few days. I wasn’t sure if you’d come back.”

“Mr. Harrison?” the nurse said when she opened the door interrupting her.

“Angel needs something for pain.” He said abruptly. He didn’t like to see her in pain. It hurt him almost as much.

She smiled and looked at Angel who nodded, “I’ll be back in a few minutes then.” She said before she left.

He looked down at her, “To answer your question, wild horses couldn’t keep me away.” He teased, then looked at her forehead, “That bruise looks like hell.”

“Seth said I had a cracked noggin.” She said pulling up the corner of her mouth in an attempt at humor, but he’d also said how close she’d come to losing her life, and didn’t feel any humor around the subject.

“Among other things.”

She reached up and touched the bandage again. Something flashed in the dim light of the room, “What is this?” she pulled her hand back and saw the most beautiful ring she’d ever laid eyes on. Her eyes darted to Alex, “What—“

“I know I owe you an explanation Angel.” Tension appeared in his expression, “God knows you deserve it. When I found you—“ He shuddered because remembering how she looked haunted him “I knew then that I loved you more than anything in this life. More than anything I could ever hope to get.”

Angel started crying again unable to stop the tears. She must be dreaming.

He leaned over and kissed them away, “I’m so sorry for

hurting you. Truthfully, I was going to propose to you that weekend that Lucy showed up. I had already bought your ring months ago.”

“Months!” she choked, “You—What? Did I just hear the word propose?”

“Honey I meant what I said. Can’t you put things together? For a gal with your IQ you sure can be naïve.” He chuckled, “When I saw you at sixteen, so beautiful, innocent and sweet, coming out of my pool, I found myself watching you more and more. Up until then , I saw you more along the lines of a little sister, but damn that changed as instantly as a flash that day. I knew I wanted you. You were smart, yet humble—hell you were perfect,” he added with a grin, “but you were too young. I thought I could wait until you were older before I began to court you. However, twenty was a strain.” He chuckled, “I didn’t think I’d make it through that nineteenth year. I know you downplayed your appearance to stay hidden, but it was too late, I already knew how good you looked and how sweet you were.”

She couldn’t help but smile at his flattery.

“Angel, if you could put aside all the things that I’ve put you through these past four months, I would like you to become my wife. Marry me Angel.”

She was shocked, “What about Lucy?”

He shook his head, “Lucy was nothing to me. As of this morning she’s gone. I’ll let you know right now as God as my witness that I never touched that woman.”

“But the little boy--?”

“I know he looks like me Angel, but he’s not mine.” His eyes warmed, “The only child I have is the one you carry in you. The only children I want are with you. I’ll tell you everything, but right now I need an answer.”

She was too choked up to speak.

He bent over and kissed the side of her face, “Just nod

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baby. Tell me yes. I love you.” He repeated.

She released another sob and nodded at the same time.

He circled his arms around her and gave her a tight embrace causing her to release a whimper of pain. Instantly he released her, “sorry.” He gave her a guilty look.

Just then the nurse came back with a couple of pills for her to take.

She gave her a glass of water for her to take them with while Alex patiently waited. Angel noticed the Nurse give a long hard look at Alex while she was taking a drink of water. Did every woman think he was attractive? God! She wanted to throw the rest of the water in the woman’s face, but she really couldn’t blame her. He was a dish. Also when her eyes guided back to him, her heart soared, he was looking at her

After the nurse left she shifted her eyes back to Alex, who was still holding her other hand, “do you mean it?”

“Yes, all of it.” He bent over her placing an arm on either side of her so his face was inches above hers, “The day you get out of here, I’ll have the church ready, the priest ready, and the honeymoon booked. I want to be a family.” He said guiding his hand down to her slightly swollen abdomen while keeping his eyes on hers. “Honey you have no idea how happy you made me. I always wanted to be a father and I’ve always wanted you to bear my children.” Then he bent down and kissed her. It wasn’t a light peck or an affectionate brush of his mouth. It was hard, tongue delving and oh lord, she couldn’t think anymore.

## EPILOGUE

SIX WEEKS LATER the day Angel had her cast removed, they were married. Alex had told her everything and Angel completely understood why he did what he did. All along he was protecting his mother. Although she never saw Alex as being a

selfish man, the fact that he was giving up his happiness for the love of his mother was astonishing. Especially since he'd professed his love to her over and over again since that day in the hospital when she woke up with the ring on her finger.

Neither one of the brothers told her what had gotten rid of Lucy, but she figured it had to do with a large sum of money. As for Max, he was a good kid, and despite her feelings for his mother, Angel really liked him. Although Bea doted on him like a grandchild, Alex made her swear never to tell his mother the truth because of her health. Angel agreed because Max soaked up the attention and Bea seemed to enjoy doting on him.

For their honeymoon, he'd taken her to Europe for a month so she could live out her fantasy at seeing the great artworks there. Her father was so grateful for her survival that he dropped the subject of her being a lawyer, and Alex constructed a studio in one of the spare rooms just for her so she could spend her expecting days doing something she loved.

All the pain she had gone through in the past months, emotional and physical were definitely worth it for she could never have hoped for such happiness. Her husband was attentive and she loved him more than she thought possible.

She was sitting on a chair in front of her easel painting when Alex walked in bearing one of those organ melting grins she loved.

"I knew I'd find you here." He said circling around behind her to bend down and kiss her on the neck while running his hands over her swollen belly, "How's my son?"

"Active." She smiled setting down her brush.

"Good. He'll be riding before he's walking."

She turned to him, "I shouldn't expect anything different."

He kissed her, "Why don't you take a break and come and show your husband how much you love him?"

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She laughed, "I did, this morning."

"Hmm, I must've forgotten."

"You cad." She giggled.

He bent down and scooped her up in his arms causing her to squeal, "God Alex, you'll break you back!"

"You weigh nothing." He said taking her mouth while walking out of the room toward their bedroom, "The house is empty, and I want to hear you make some noise." He growled sexily.

Her response was another laugh smothered by his mouth.



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