

# **Maddy's Oasis**

*A Novella*

By Lizzy Ford

Edited by Christine LePorte

Cover art and design by Dafeenah  
<http://dafeenah-hiddentreasure.blogspot.com/>

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@LizzyFord2010

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## CHAPTER ONE

Madeleine Winters gazed out the car window at the construction site—nothing more than steel beams and concrete to her untrained eye. Her mouth fell open with a silent curse. Beams in the vertical steel frame had been forcibly bent until the building resembled a partially bloomed flower wilting in the middle of the west Texas desert and not the gleaming hotel it was supposed to be. Her field was program management, not construction, but she doubted the structure sitting in the middle of the desert was right.

"Wow!" Eric, the car's driver and her personal assistant, exclaimed. "That can't be normal."

Her gaze went to the two bright yellow bulldozers near one corner. One was still connected to a beam by a thick steel chain while the other had been tipped over. She stepped out of the car's AC into the desert's sauna-like heat and shielded her eyes despite the sunglasses.

There were more signs of intentional damage: crushed tiles, colorful graffiti, and tools and construction materials scattered everywhere.

Her black suit was meant for the temperate weather back east and her slingback heels for sidewalks. A late flight left her tired, and the sight of her pitiful project worsened her headache. She felt sorry for the building, even knowing how ridiculous that was. Given the project's bloated financials, she suspected the amount of damage done would soak up more money and time than she had.

Which was why her boss, Nigel, offered her such a pretty bonus if she could complete it on time. She'd expected a mess, but nothing like this.

“You probably should learn to fire people more politely,” Eric said. He was a wiry, small man who appeared to be no older than fifteen despite being closer to thirty than she was. In one hand was a BlackBerry; in the other, a PDA.

“I thought I was polite,” she said with a frown. “Where the hell are the security guards Alex hired before ditching this place last week?”

“Alex didn’t do a lot of things he said he did,” Eric reminded her with a glance down at the PDA. “Alex pissed off—or fired—the only four local companies capable of building this far in the west Texas desert. The last we had to bring in from ... I can’t even pronounce it. I don’t even know if they’re based in the US. It’s Javier and Sons Construction.”

Anyone who knew Alex knew he couldn't handle organizing his car let alone overseeing a mega-challenge such as The Desert Oasis. The misshapen beginnings before her were meant to be real estate tycoon Dylan Howard's latest venture: an exclusive, uber-luxury spa and hotel stranded in the middle of the Texas desert, one so exclusive that non-millionaires would not be invited to stay.

Alex was on his way out, and this had been the final push. No one had heard from him since he ditched the project a week ago. She understood why.

“That must be them.” Eric indicated the single-wide trailer off to one side. It was nestled between stacks of sandstone and hefty wooden crates. Four large white utility trucks with extended cabs were parked a short distance from the office. Several men perched on the edges of the trucks, and the door to the office was open.

Her phone rang, and she looked at the number, recognizing it as her mother's doctor's office. She motioned Eric onward and answered.

"Is this Madeleine Winters?" a prim voice asked.

"Yes."

"This is Grace from the billing department at Dr. Jordan's."

Madeleine grated her teeth, knowing what Grace was about to tell her.

"You missed your last two payments. I don't want to refer your account to collections. You'll have to find a new doctor if you're not able to bring your account up to date."

"I took out a loan that should've transferred to my account today," Madeleine replied in the same tone. "If not, I'll have it tomorrow. Either way, I'll transfer the funds by noon tomorrow."

"Very well, Ms. Winters."

Madeleine hung up and drew a deep breath. Her mother's cancer treatment and nursing home had already eaten through both their retirement savings and a second lien on her house. Her credit cards were maxed out, and the bank had been very, very hesitant to extend the latest lifeline. When Nigel offered her the six-figure bonus for finishing this project, she leapt at the opportunity, even though her gut warned her against it.

She needed the money too bad to say no.

She regained her resolve and made her way carefully toward the office, twisting her ankle only once on the rocky ground beneath her four-inch heels. She straightened and dusted her suit jacket before ascending the rickety metal stairs to the office.

The contrast of the building's dark interior blinded her. She paused inside the doorway and blinked, making out several quiet forms in a small reception area sporting two worn couches in front of a cluttered desk.

She raised her sunglasses and gazed at the three silent men standing before her. One beefy, older Mexican's white shirt labeled him as *Javier*. Another wore blue with the familiar logo, *Smithson Contracting*. The third was small and round with an oily smile.

“Good morning,” she said when no one spoke. “I’m Madeleine, assistant to Mr. Howard, and the new project manager assigned to oversee completion of the Desert Oasis.”

She offered her hand to the nearest man, Javier, whose barrel-chested frame made her feel tiny. He gave a hearty shake. His grizzled smile—as rough as his salt and pepper speckled start of a beard—widened at her direct gaze. His skin was caramel, the dominant shade in southwest Texas, his eyes bright blue.

“Javier, of Javier and Sons,” he responded in a thick, slow Spanish accent.

“Larry’s Security,” the small, oily man said, stepping forward and holding out a hand.

“Ah, Larry’s Security,” she said. “You’ve been in charge of my site for the past week.”

“Yes, ma’am,” he replied. “I received your phone call but didn’t understand. Thought I’d drop by and meet you.”

“I appreciate your visit,” she said. “However, my message was very clear. Your services are no longer needed.”

“Ma’am, I was hired by—”

“Alex. I know. And I’m releasing you. I confirmed our last payment to your company. If you would like to contest either your payment or your release, here is the number to Mr. Howard’s attorneys’ office.”

She handed him a card. Without awaiting any further objection, she turned to the man in the Smithson uniform.

“Jim Smithson,” he said, sticking out his hand.

While not impressed by any of what she had seen so far, she was the least impressed by the man before her.

“How may I help you?” she asked.

“My contract with—”

She cut him off. “Your contract has been terminated. Here, for you, is the card for Mr. Howard’s attorneys. Raise any complaint you have to them. Or you can await their call. Mr. Howard is leaving it up to me whether or not to press charges for this disaster you call a building. The local inspector already faxed us his initial inspection results indicating a great deal of negligence in your performance. Eric, escort Mr. Smithson and Mr. Larry out.”

She took a step back and folded her hands before her. Mr. Smithson's face flushed, and he sputtered while Mr. Larry just stared. The men went without a word. Eric beamed a smile and followed them.

“Coffee, Eric!” she called after him.

She glanced at her awaiting contractor, Javier, and crossed to the cluttered desk, not sure where to start. Stacks of papers, an accounting book, trash, and office supplies were piled on top. The mess was representative of the shoddy reporting and inconsistent status updates Alex sent their boss, Nigel, throughout the months he was running the project. There was no way to know what Alex had been doing, or even how far he had gotten, and she doubted the trashed desk would be of any help. She set her briefcase on top of the nearest pile of yellowed papers and popped it open.

“These are the revised blueprints based on Mr. Howard’s directions. I need an estimate today of the extent of damage, cost to repair, schedule for repairing, and an estimate on the time, materials, and manpower needed to resume and complete construction. Do you wanna write this down?”

She turned to face him, pad of paper and pen in hand.

Javier was smiling, his amusement visible in the crinkling around his eyes. He stuck the blueprints under his arm without looking at them and tucked his thumbs into the wide belt of his jeans.

“No, ma’am,” he replied.

“Are you sure?” she pressed. “You’ll need something to write down the numbers, at least.”

“It’ll get done when it’s done.”

“What does that mean?” she pushed. “It must be done immediately.”

“I suggest you prioritize what you want done soonest.”

“I told you what I want done.”

“Won’t get done today.”

She gazed at him hard.

“I’m being honest,” he said before she could pursue. “Out west, we do things a little different, a little more slow.”

“I realize that,” she said. “But if you won’t perform as I want you to, I’ll replace you.”

“Well,” he said with a pause. “Alex drove away every other construction company between here and Houston, which is a twelve-hour drive. You’re stuck with us, unless Mr. Howard wants to pay double for someone else. It’s been my experience that rich men are stingy men. It’ll get done, Ms. Madeleine, but it’ll get done when it’s done.

Good morning, ma’am.”

And he walked out. She stared at the wall before her, resisting the urge to scream and throw her shoes.

“Mr. Javier!” she called as she followed.

His long strides toward his trucks forced her to trot precariously on her toes. At her approach, Javier turned to face her. He automatically reached out to steady her with a beefy hand as she wobbled on the heels.

“I need some sort of timetable of when you intend to have my tasks done,” she insisted. “When do you intend to start, how late do you work, how many men you have at your disposal. We have much more to discuss, and I would greatly appreciate a timeline of when you plan to do what I covered on my list.”

“Where do I get coffee around here?” Eric asked, approaching from the direction of their rental car.

“This little lady doesn’t need any coffee,” Javier grumbled. “Her pretty little head’s about to spin off.”

“There’s a diner down the road, Eric. We passed it on our way here,” she told him. “Bring two cups—oh, and I’m going to need a microwave, mini-fridge, and office supplies for this little ... shack. And cleaning supplies. Maybe some food and bottled water.”

Eric jotted down her list with a quick nod. She turned to find Javier had continued toward his trucks without her.

“And call around to see what other contractors are in this area,” she said in a quieter voice.

Eric smiled before snapping his PDA in place at his hip and jogging to the rental car.

Irritated by the lack of urgency or concern about the mess behind her, Madeleine quickened her pace toward Javier. He strode by one truck and motioned to the men loitering, directing them toward the building with a few quick words in Spanish she didn’t understand. He paused to stand at the lowered tailgate of one truck, where he handed the blueprints to a man seated on the edge.

“What are your men doing now?” she asked, glancing toward the half dozen men ambling toward the structure.

“Ma’am, they plan on conducting an ancient Indian ritual to cleanse the building of evil spirits,” Javier said, reaching for a thermos.

She stared at him. He twisted the top of the thermos off and poured a cup of coffee, handing it to her.

“Maybe this’ll calm you down,” he offered.

“Just ... please, give me some indication you’ll work with me here,” she said. She sipped the coffee, expecting it to be as rough as the man before her and surprised at its smooth, mild flavor.

“You ever built a building?” Javier asked.

“No.”

“Know anything about building buildings?”

“No.”

“What’re you doing here?”

“I’m damage control,” she explained. “Our boss believes that program managers need to know how to manage programs, not be experts in any one field.”

“At least you’re honest.” Javier tilted his head toward the seated man. “My nephew, Jake.”

Madeleine glanced at the quiet man, noting the similar white T-shirt, cowboy hat, and jeans.

“Jake’ll be handling your project,” Javier continued.

“I expected this project to be given your company’s utmost support and expertise,” she said firmly.

“Jake went to one of your schools out east,” Javier stated. “He’s the best in Texas. Ask him for a *timeline*.”

Madeleine suspected she would receive nothing more concrete from a blood relative of Javier than she would the man himself. Javier, however, seemed satisfied with himself. He handed her the coffee thermos, slapped the seated man on the arm, and strode to the nearest truck.

She drew a deep breath to calm herself before turning to the man in whose hands her entire life seemed to rest.

“Jake.”

The man unfolding himself from the truck was larger than she expected. Over six feet and *solid*. He was wide of shoulder, as muscular as a linebacker. Jeans and T-shirt were snug in all the right places, revealing sculpted biceps and the outline of muscular thighs. He wore traditional cowboy boots and a thick belt with a bright buckle. Eyes were hidden behind reflective sunglasses and the rest of his face behind the blueprint in his hands. His hair was in a traditional military styled high and tight.

“Jake, can you provide me a timeline for estimating the damage and repairs?” she asked.

“Sure.” His Texan accent was less evident, his deep voice rich and quiet.

“I have paper in the office,” she said.

He trailed her as she hurried back to the trailer. The darkness blinded her once more, and she paused before crossing to her briefcase to retrieve the paper and pen. Jake seated himself on one of the couches. She crossed to sit near him on the same couch, holding out the pen and paper.

He was a handsome man, she noticed, unable to help her surprise at finding such a specimen so far from civilization. Sunglasses were perched on his head to reveal large,

dark eyes with long eyelashes, a thick and low brow, a noble, aquiline nose, chiseled jaw, tilted cheekbones, and a thick coat of caramel-shaded skin. She found herself staring openly at him, unaware of how much time passed before he finally spoke.

“These blueprints have been altered down to the foundation,” he observed, studying the colored sheets of paper.

“Meaning what exactly?”

“Meaning the foundation must be replaced.”

“No,” she said, and shook her head. “Starting over isn’t an option.”

Jake met her gaze with a raised eyebrow. She was surprised at the bloom of heat within her caused by the direct look of the hunk next to her.

“You asked for my estimate,” he pointed out, the Texan drawl slowing his speech.

“Let’s start with the damage assessment. How long will it take to repair everything?”

“You don’t know what you’re doing.”

Though agitated by his directness, she said evenly, “No, I don’t. *That...*” She motioned toward the building beyond the office door, “...looks like a mess to me.”

“It is,” he agreed. “Beyond repair.”

“No,” she said again. “I don’t have time to rebuild.”

“Repair would take just as long.”

“You’ll have to deal with what’s there,” she said. “Something must be salvageable.”

“And the changes in the blueprints?”

“What about them?”

“I can’t repair the damage according to old blueprints. The changes in this set will be done simultaneously.”

“Fine,” she said. “Make the changes as you repair. How long?”

“When it’s done,” he said, and stood. Like his uncle, he left without another word. She watched him, her gaze falling to his perfectly shaped backside as he strode out of the office.

She started after him and tripped over the concrete block used to prop open the door. She cursed and leaned against the door. Jake was waving all the awaiting men toward the building. She rubbed her stubbed toe, aware of the blisters already forming from chasing down Javier. Convinced Javier and Sons would be the death of her, she forced herself to focus on the office.

It, too, was a complete disaster, and for the second time in half an hour, she felt overwhelmed by her circumstances. She forced her mind away from the contracting situation. In truth, she needed to determine the status of the finances before being confronted with the price tag attached to the damage and changes to blueprints.

She carefully laid her suit jacket on a couch and set out to decode Alex’s chaotic filing system. As she approached the desk, she clipped her Bluetooth earpiece in place and dialed Mr. Howard’s financial department.

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Jake spent the afternoon going over the structure, his opinion of the idiots who built it growing worse. When dark fell, he remained with a flashlight to go over the outside of the building and jotted down notes. It was near midnight when he decided he’d had enough of the blooming onion of a building. He started toward his truck and saw the city-girl’s car still there. A weak light glowed from the trailer. He was annoyed rather than surprised she was still there, recalling very well the speed and urgency attached to everything back east. It was one of two reasons he left New York City and returned home. The other reason: his busted leg with its metal plates that ended his chances of an NFL career.

He didn't regret leaving. Life was not enjoyed by those consumed in meeting after meeting, phone call after phone call, and relentless overtime. He preferred to be his own master in the wide open desert of west Texas, working with his family.

He gazed up at the structure once again, taking in its dimensions and reviewing the angles, materials, and time it would take to create the vision on the blueprints before him, assuming things weren't as bad as he suspected.

The response made him grunt. Too long. He knew any amount of time would be viewed as too long by the city-girl still holed up in the trailer despite the hour. Only half of the floodlights were working due to three destroyed generators, but his men remained, cleaning up the area and reporting back with assessments of the building's structure.

Most of the assessments pointed to fast, shoddy work. The foundation was already cracked in several places. The dangerously ill-constructed workmanship in general made him shake his head. He'd heard of Smithson's work in the past; however, he'd never witnessed the brazen shoddiness of the sleazy little man.

The entire building needed to come down and be started over.

"Jake? Oh, sorry, hold on."

He recognized the soft voice without turning and rolled his eyes at Toni, his uncle and foreman, as the city-girl took yet another phone call. Then he pivoted and took in the young woman with the phone to her ear. With the expensive suit and heels, her athletic frame was stylish and out of place in the middle of the desert.

"Bring in everyone but the Reyes crew," he said to Toni. "We're done for the night."

Toni pulled free the whistle he kept around his neck and blew it twice. Jake rolled the blueprints once more and turned, knocking the ill-balanced woman back a few steps as he pushed them toward her and strode on.

“Nigel, wait ... no, I’ll call you back,” she said hurriedly in irritation. She disconnected the call and trotted after him. “Jake!”

Her small hand rested on his bicep. He turned and saw her glance down at the buzzing BlackBerry.

“Do you have numbers for me?” she asked, looking up at him.

“Yeah,” he answered, watching her.

City-girl released him to drop both hands to her BlackBerry, where she began typing with her thumbs.

“Where are they?” she asked.

“In here,” he said, and tapped his temple.

“I need them on paper.”

“Give ’em to you tomorrow.”

“I need them tonight, Jake,” she insisted. “I have to do the figures.”

“They’ll be the same whether you do them tonight or tomorrow.”

“Could you please at least stop by the office and jot down a few things?”

“Sure. Be in at six,” he said.

Had her phone not rung, she would have continued to pester him. He shook his head as Toni joined him and they moved toward the trucks. The months it would take to finish this project would certainly drag if the city-girl behind him didn’t learn to back off. He didn’t leave the City to have it follow him here.

It was a shame she was such an attractive little package. Her green eyes were large, clear, and intelligent, her body toned and shapely. She was confident and smart—a combination he liked.

And annoying as hell, a trait he didn’t.

"Javier would've taken her over his knee by now," Toni muttered. "You're the right choice for this one—no one else is as laid back as you. You spent time back east, you'll be able to relate."

"No way, Toni. I don't want anything to do with those types," Jake replied.

They climbed into Jake's truck, and he rolled down the windows. It was a warm, bright night, and he breathed deeply.

"Why you think Mr. Howard chose this place anyway?" Jake asked. "There's nothing for miles, and bringing in water and electricity is going to cost a fortune."

"Worse, this is in the middle of Cortez's drug route from Mexico," Toni said. "I can't imagine all that money didn't get Mr. Howard an assessment of the area. Either he's an idiot or he's too rich to care."

"I was thinking that, too. Cortez is all over the newspapers anymore."

Jake's gaze went to the rearview mirror as he thought of the city-girl in the trailer. He'd left a few men there to continue cleaning up. If anything bad happened, they'd call him.

"Did you hear that kid Eric say the guy they had here before just disappeared?" Toni asked.

"Yeah, I heard. Not a good sign."

Toni grunted in agreement. They rode the rest of the way into town in comfortable silence. Jake dropped off Toni then returned to the large hacienda he shared with his sisters and Javier. His uncle had tried to stay up late and was dozing in his favorite worn recliner in the living room. Jake whispered a *hello, tio* as he walked through the living room into the kitchen. His sister Kitty had left him dinner in the oven with a pink sticky note with a large frownie face on the oven's handle.

Plucking the sticky free with a snort, he turned on the oven and sat down to review his notes. He started to estimate the damage then sat back.

No one in their right mind would build a luxury resort *here*. He rubbed his face, understanding why his uncle turned down the ludicrous contract over a year ago when it was floated to every contractor in west Texas.

"It stinks," his uncle said in gravelly voice as he entered the kitchen rubbing his eyes. "And I don't mean Kitty's cooking."

"She's the best damn cook in Texas," Jake said.

"And she knows it," Javier said, sitting. "It's worse than it looks, *mi hijo*."

"You're right about that, *tio*," Jake agreed. His gaze settled on the notes on his pad. He pictured the building again then shook his head, the prospect of repairing it overwhelming.

"We can back out."

"Whatever, *tio*," Jake replied.

He looked at his uncle knowingly, well aware Javier did nothing without a great deal of thought. Many folks dismissed the large, pot-bellied Mexican, mistaking his dusty boots, thick accent, and slow speech as signs he was either uneducated or ignorant. Javier had built up the family's construction empire from scratch over thirty years, squirreled away every extra penny he earned from it, and used the money to send his nephews and nieces to elite private schools and buy them all their first houses. The rest he saved.

Jake didn't know how much his uncle had hidden away, but he knew it was more than enough for Javier to retire in luxury. Javier had no intention of retiring. Instead, he remained actively involved in the construction projects.

"Why the hell did you agree?" Jake asked, perplexed. He motioned to his notes. "This is a disaster. The building needs to come down and start over, there's probably no funding, it's in the middle of your dear cousin Carlos Cortez's smuggling route ... and the idiot they put in charge ... Damn."

"Instinct."

For once, he wanted his uncle to explain his infamous instinct. There were many projects he'd had a lukewarm feeling about that ended up as his uncle predicted—successful. Javier's instinct had never been wrong before, yet this project already gave Jake a headache.

"She didn't seem like an idiot," Javier said.

"Well, she is," Jake responded. Irritated, he rose and withdrew his dinner from the oven. "Typical city-girl, self-absorbed, controlling, no common sense or respect, demanding this and that ... I dated enough of them to know, *tio*."

"You didn't have any luck dating girls from here, either."

"Guess it's not my forte. I don't have my *tio*'s charm."

Javier chuckled. Jake sat down to wolf down his sister's latest creation: some sort of spicy meatloaf. Kitty's food was always good, even if he didn't recognize all the spices she used from the weed garden Javier built her or what kind of animal it came from.

"You're sure you want us working on this one?" he asked.

"Pretty sure," Javier said in his slow drawl. "Can't be that bad."

"All righty, then. I'll do my best," Jake said.

"Good kid. Life ain't so hard."

Jake wasn't so sure but cleaned up and made his lunch for the next day. He wondered what city-girl would say when he told her the cost.

“Five million just to get things back on track?”

He'd heard rumors from his usual financiers and suspected funding would be a problem, but seeing the assistant to a billionaire pale at the paltry number confirmed his instinct. Her striking green eyes grew larger, amplified by the dark teal suit she wore this day. He hadn't seen her on her feet yet, but he knew she'd be wearing inappropriate shoes.

The women from back east were predictable like that.

“How long will it take you to finish?” she asked.

He studied the heart-shaped face with its button nose and large eyes, smooth skin, and tanned complexion. Her gaze was steady and direct; even Javier had commented on it. Javier liked a man—or woman—unafraid to look him in the eye.

“Nine months to complete our portion of the work.”

At this, the city-girl looked ill.

“That's too long.”

“With more men and money, it'll be less,” he said with a shrug.

“More than the thirty million?”

He nodded.

“Jesus,” she murmured. “How much and how many men?”

“Another crew, maybe two, depending on when you want it done,” he responded.

“I need to—”

Her phone rang and cut her off. She looked down, muttering, “Excuse me.”

“I'll be out there,” he said as he rose. The city-girl waved a hand in confirmation without looking up.

“Good morning, Jake.” Her assistant, Eric, beamed a smile as he opened the door.

“Mornin' ,” Jake responded.

“How’s it going?”

“Fine.”

“Great, that’s great!” Eric said with fake enthusiasm.

Jake ignored his attempt to enter and pushed by him, agitated. Toni, a leathery man twenty years Jake’s senior, gave a knowing grin from his position leaning against the rickety stairs.

“They may not have to fire us,” Jake said with a shake of his head. “At this rate, I’m about two straws from walking away.”

“The money’ll be good,” Toni countered.

“*If* there’s money,” Jake replied. They started toward the building and made it a few dozen feet away before he heard the trailer door slam open.

“Jake, I’d like a tour!” she called after him.

“Christ,” he muttered without turning. “Change shoes and bring a hard hat.”

“I didn’t bring extra—hello? Nigel?”

He tried hard to tune her out, but she trailed them, talking in low, agitated tones on the phone.

“The foundation on the east and part of the northern block are pretty solid. We should only need to pour two-thirds of it over again,” Toni said as they walked toward the small work station Jake had set up.

“Yeah, we’ll definitely need to work on the foundation. Everything else needs to come down where we’ll pour. City-girl here doesn’t understand, so keep it quiet. I’ll move her office to the opposite side, so she can’t see what we’re doing. She’ll be out of the shade of the building for most the day, but I doubt she can tell one side of the site from the other,” Jake stated. “We’ll need to bring in about twenty laborers.”

They exchanged a look, and Toni grinned.

“I’ve needed some good tequila,” he remarked. “I’ll take a trip south tonight. Has she considered moving in some trailers to save on travel costs during the week?”

“Haven’t asked. It’ll make our job easier if our men can stay here instead of driving in every day. I’ll give Carla a call today,” Jake said.

They paused at his work area to pick up hard hats.

“I’d like to see the damaged area first, then—” the city-girl started. “What are they doing?”

Jake turned to look in the direction she indicated. Two of his workers were hanging out by the water tank.

“Taking a break,” he said.

“It’s only six-thirty. What are the union laws here?”

“Leave my men to me,” he warned.

“Do you intend to make them—hello?”

Jake picked up a third hard hat and turned, snagging the BlackBerry and plopping the hat on her head before she could object. He clicked the phone off and dropped it on the table.

The city-girl gazed up at him with a frown, her lovely face irritated.

“I need that, Jake.”

“Chin up,” he said, ignoring her words.

He adjusted the hat, surprised to notice how soft her skin was. He withdrew without meeting her challenging gaze and slapped her upside the head. City-girl gasped. Toni grinned.

“C’mon.” Jake turned and began walking toward the building. “We’ll start at the entrance.”

He led her through the beams, explaining the layout and how the new blueprints would adjust the current design.

“I don’t know how you can envision any of this,” she said when he paused. “I see nothing but beams and cement. These don’t look like spas, conference rooms, or anything. This looks like a pool might go here.”

Jake turned in time to see her stop beside a gaping circular hole beyond a set of beams. City-girl leaned forward for a better view, and he saw the beams to the left and right shudder.

“I wouldn’t do that,” he said, and reached out with lightning reflexes. He wrapped one arm around her warm body and pulled her back as the beam she leaned upon dropped. Her body fit well against his, and he could feel the combination of soft curves and athletic muscle beneath.

“Wow,” she muttered. “Is that supposed to happen?”

“When Smithson heads your project, yes,” he said. “You see the support beams there and there?”

She absently leaned against him, following his hand with her eyes as he pointed above her. Vanilla-scented hair tickled his chin.

“They’re held together with a single fastener.”

“And?”

“They should be held together with about a dozen.”

“A *dozen*? Maybe I’ll call and fire him again,” she murmured, stepping away from him.

“Just don’t lean on anything,” Jake advised. His gaze traveled over the hourglass form rendered blocky by the masculine suit. Dark eyes settled on her impractical shoes

once more. "You might want to check the insurance on this place before coming out here in those shoes again."

City-girl gave him an irritated glance over her shoulder. Jake joined Toni and continued on the tour. It was not until she tripped for the third time that he took pity on her and took a shortcut back to the office.

"They're still on break."

Jake looked, already aware of whom she spoke. While he made an attempt to keep his staff as qualified and motivated as possible, occasionally a lazy one or two slipped through when he needed numbers.

City-girl took a deep breath and set off for the pair. Jake snagged the collar of her suit to stop her.

"You don't mess with my men," he warned her again, this time more sharply.

City-girl tugged free and faced him. He crossed his arms to expose his roped forearms and met her gaze head on.

"First, if you don't keep your men occupied, I won't hesitate to get rid of them," she told him. "Second, keep your hands off me."

"First, you don't tell me how to deal with my men. I won't be micromanaged by someone who knows nothing about my job. Second, you don't talk to my men. You take any issues to me," he said just as firmly.

She gazed up at him, assessing him, then said, "Very well. I want those two gone."

She turned and walked away toward his work space to retrieve her BlackBerry. She flung the hard hat on the ground beside the card tables he used as desks in his work space.

"Are all the women out east like that?" Toni asked, shaking his head.

Jake watched her walk with a purely feminine sway despite the masculine business suit.

"I mean *now*, Jake!" she shouted back at him.

Toni looked at him, astonished. Jake's jaw twitched.

"They breed 'em different," Toni added.

"That they do," Jake said, reining in his temper.

"I see why you left."

Jake snorted, fed up with the reminder of his time back east already.

"We'll do our best," Toni said.

"Should know in a few days just how bad things are. I have a feeling we haven't seen the worst of this place."

## CHAPTER TWO

It was on the fourth long day, when she forced herself to the office half an hour before the workers, that she finally admitted to herself how doomed the project was. Normally, her optimism took months to wear off, but this time ... no, this time she knew upon standing in front of the project that it was only a matter of time before she would run for the hills like Alex.

The office was finally clean and the files organized. The tiny bathroom still stunk, but she couldn't quite determine where the smell came from. This day she carried a suit bag and bathroom essentials. After sleeping a mere three hours a night in the hotel an hour drive away, she had decided to spend the night at the office. Five hours of sleep was not her usual, but it was better than three.

She entered the office, flipping on the two lights. Her eyes fell to the blueprints she had laid out on the desk the night prior. She pulled two books—one a new accounting book to replace Alex's disgusting attempt to track finances, and the second a book on reading blueprints—from her bag and tossed them on top of the blueprints.

Her phone buzzed, and she tapped the Bluetooth.

"Madeleine Winters."

"Hey, baby."

"Hi, Mama. How're you feeling today?" she asked, sitting on a couch.

"Can't complain," was the chipper response. "How's your new project going?"

Madeleine looked around her and suppressed a sigh.

"It's going, Mama," she answered.

"You can always quit and come home. I'll meet you at the airport."

"No, Mama," she said. "You know that's not possible. We need the money."

"Money isn't everything, baby."

"Mama, you know we need it to make you better."

"Of course, if I keel over dead this week, I'd probably be thinking I'd rather have the time with you than know you're a million miles away for money. I'm getting old, and the doctor's almost out of options, Maddy," her mother said. "He's told me twice I've only had six months to live."

"And twice he's been wrong," Madeleine pointed out. "The cancer's on the last leg, Mama. Just a little more time and a helluva lot more money, and you'll be better."

"All right, baby, if you say so."

Madeleine chuckled at her disapproving tone, unable to quell her sense of panic at her mother's words and condition. A small part of her realized her mother was right: if

she couldn't beat the cancer, or if it came back as the doctors thought it might, the time she spent on this project would be some of the last good months her mother had alive.

Then again, if she continued paying what she was for the best cancer treatment in the world, her mother would have a better chance of making it.

"I've gotta get going, Mama," she said. "Rest well today."

"Love you, baby."

"Love you, Mama."

Madeleine hung up and sat for a long moment, her mind on her mother. She crossed to her desk at long last and opened her notebook to her list of priorities, one of many lists she made on a regular basis. Her priorities list was small and squeezed between a length to-do list from last week and her packing list for her trip out. Absently, she noticed she'd forgotten to cross off *socks* from her packing list. She crossed it out and then underlined her priorities list again.

*1. Complete Desert Oasis; 2. Pay off medical debt; 3. Ask Nigel for raise.*

She felt like a bank robber that needed the Big One in order to retire. She lowered the notebook and looked in the direction of the Desert Oasis. The disaster of a building was her Big One, and she'd do whatever it took to complete it.

She set about going to work, aware the heat of the day would soon make her too hot to sit still. She entered the numbers supplied to her by Mr. Howard's office into the accounting book and tapped her pencil with a frown.

The numbers before her and the numbers she had managed to glean from Alex's chaos did not remotely match up. According to her calculations, there were tens of millions missing. By Jake's calculations, she would need an additional \$47 million to have the work completed in half the time he quoted.

She was almost \$100 million in the hole. Alex had promised money to the people building, but paid less than ten percent of what was due. The money just ... disappeared.

Even with such an amount, she would miss her deadline of four months by at least a month. Madeleine rubbed her eyes and looked at the numbers anew.

She reached for the unopened bank statements sitting on the edge of the desk. They had come nearly two weeks ago and were marked as being from the local banks fronting the money for the construction project.

She opened the first and compared the dangerously low balance to Alex's calculations. He was twenty cents off, quite a feat given his inability to find his office supplies on a daily basis. Satisfied, she opened the second.

There was a negative balance of nearly a million dollars.

Madeleine looked again, surprised. She compared the statement to the book, which listed this account as supposed to be holding a good lump of as-yet unused money to the tune of about thirty million. She sighed. The project was nearly broke, and the money in the bank was owed to debtors. How she would weave tens of millions from thin air to pay for construction starting from today to the end, she didn't know.

She checked her watch and dialed Nigel. His phone rang straight to voicemail.

"Nigel, it's me. Give me a call. It's urgent."

The smell from the bathroom was creeping out this day, she noticed in distaste. She rose and closed the door. She rubbed her temples, which pounded from lack of sleep and coffee.

"You here this early every day?"

Jake's voice made her jerk. He opened the door wider and stepped into the office.

"Yeah," she said, and straightened. "What do you need?"

“You have the blueprints?”

“On the desk.”

He crossed to it and pulled free one of the books.

“*Blueprints for Idiots*,” he read, amused.

She snatched it. Jake gave a ghost of a smile and set down one of the two thermoses he carried as he reached forward to roll the sheets.

“Have some coffee. You can’t be getting much sleep.”

“This project takes priority,” she replied.

“That’s what I hated about back east. All the stupid shit that takes priority.”

“Priorities are important.”

“In the right order, yeah,” he agreed in a long, slow drawl, the one he used when he was irritated with her. His gaze took in her overnight bag sitting on the couch. “You aren’t thinking of staying here tonight.”

“I’ll have more visibility if I stay.”

She moved around him to sit behind the desk. She closed her accounting book before he could see all the negative balances and the dozen debtors she’d highlighted.

“I wouldn’t if I were you.”

“Why is it I feel as though I’m the only person taking this project seriously?” she demanded. “It’s been four days, and I haven’t seen any change in this mess.”

Jake planted his hands on the desk and leaned forward until his face was too close for comfort.

“I suggest you back off and let me do my job, ma'am, especially since you don’t even know what my job is. I’m the only damned man in Texas who can save your pretty little building right now.”

He rose and tossed the book before her, walking with a controlled smoothness that warned her she had yet again managed to climb under the skin of the laid-back contractor.

Her face felt hot. She glared after him and snatched the thermos before he came back to claim it. He'd been bringing her coffee every morning. She didn't know what to think about it, especially since most of their discussions ended with him stalking away, pissed. At least the coffee never disappointed her, even if everything else here did.

Her project was doomed, and these people would never understand how more was jeopardized than a stupid building. Nigel had offered her a bonus large enough to repay her mother's medical debt AND pay for Mama's next surgery. If she succeeded. She hated, *hated* being a bitch, but it shouldn't matter what these people thought of her, not when her mother's life may depend on her finishing this project.

Determined to plug on, Madeleine dug out the first stack of receipts and began going through them one by one and entering them into her accounting book.

Eric arrived promptly at seven, frowning.

"Maddy, we have a problem," he said with unusual soberness.

"What now?" she asked, accepting the massive cup of coffee he held out.

"Dotty—Nigel's assistant—called me in the middle of the night," Eric said, sitting. "She said she overheard Nigel tell someone that there is another update to the blueprint."

"Seeing as how we haven't gotten very far, I don't think it can be much of a problem," she replied. "Do they know how far off schedule we are?"

"Not at all!" Eric said. "They believe you to be ahead of schedule, so much so that Mr. Howard is already scheduled to fly down in about a week to tour the site."

"He *what?*" she exclaimed, bolting upright.

“Dotty said Nigel told Lily’s staff to prepare for his trip. He expects there—”

Her BlackBerry buzzed. Madeleine snatched it.

“Nigel,” she said tersely.

“Madeleine, love.”

“I need to discuss a couple of things with you.” She forced her voice to remain calm though her blood was bubbling.

“And I you, love. Please go on.”

“I’m afraid the construction isn’t going as well as Alex led us to believe,” she started. “The site is going to need quite a bit more money to finish on time.”

“More money?” Nigel echoed, considering. “I don’t know if that’s an option at this point. Mr. Howard’s advisors told me yesterday that there is at least twenty-three million dollars in unspent funds in the banks. He believes you to be under budget already.”

“I’ve checked both accounts, and there is a negative balance in one, and about twenty million in the other. Alex didn’t pay off most the contractors and subs he owed money to for the first half of the project, so the money in there shouldn’t be there. Is there a third account?”

“I’ll see, love, or better yet, I’ll have Dotty call you after she talks to the finance department.”

“Great.”

“I have news for you as well,” he continued. “Mr. Howard will be flying down next week to tour the site and thank you personally for taking over. He expects to see at least the finished lobby. Alex said it would be complete within the week in his last update. Mr. Howard would like to conduct his opening ceremony, though he understands there are four months remaining until completion.”

“Nigel, it can’t be ready in so short a time,” she stated. “The marble flooring for the lobby hasn’t even left Italy yet.”

“I’m sure you’ll make do.”

“Nigel, it’s not possible!”

The door opened. Eric stepped out, speaking quietly into his BlackBerry.

“He’s made arrangements, love. You know how hard it is to change his schedule once it’s set. If you’d like, I can call him personally and let him know you’re not able to keep Alex’s obligation.”

“No,” she said quickly, thoughts flying to her mother.

“Or maybe you should meet him when he comes in and let him know.”

“No,” Madeleine said again, resigned. “I’ll take care of it.”

“That’s my girl! I’m off. Will call later.”

“Yeah.”

She could already taste his triumph and felt sick at the thought of losing her job, and her mama's lifeline. She hopped to her feet and left the trailer, nearly bowling Eric over. She snagged his arm as she steered them toward Jake's work area.

“Jake!”

He and Toni, his foreman, looked up from the blueprints at his workspace.

“If you utilize all your men, can you have the lobby finished in a week?”

Jake shifted his weight to one foot and considered her. Toni, a grizzly though wiry man, smiled.

“Not a chance in hell,” Jake said.

“Mr. Howard is coming next week and expects to do the opening ceremony in the *finished* lobby.”

“Tell him it’s not feasible,” Toni advised.

“It’s not that easy.”

“Sure it is. Your phone’s in your hand. Dial and talk,” Jake said.

Madeleine drew a calming breath. Her head was pounding again, her lack of sleep frying her temper.

“Mr. Howard expects the lobby to be finished. I suggest you find a way to meet his expectation, or you will be replaced,” she said.

Jake met her gaze, challenge sparking in the dark depths of his eyes.

“Then I suggest you start looking for a replacement,” he said.

She glanced at Eric, who was frowning. Eric had called every contractor within two hundred miles and been laughed at by all of them.

“May I speak to you privately, Jake?” she asked.

“Right after I decide what to do with my crew today,” he said, returning to the blueprints. “The less you talk, the less time it’ll take me.”

Madeleine waited for five minutes. She glanced at her BlackBerry, shot off two e-mails to the finance department, and looked up. He still studied the blueprints with Toni.

Another five minutes crept by as she stood with crossed arms and a tapping toe. Unable to hold still for more than a few minutes, Eric moved away to make a phone call. Madeleine grew too hot and antsy. It was nearly 100 degrees and not yet midmorning. She paced, irritated at the feeling of sweat running between her breasts and down her back.

“Done,” Jake announced.

Toni took the scrawled notes the two had been making and moved away. Madeleine motioned for Eric to keep his distance and approached the deliberate Texan.

Jake gazed at her, waiting for her to speak. She was briefly taken in by eyes the hue of melted chocolate.

“The crux of the issue is that there are no other contractors currently willing to take this job,” she started in a quiet voice.

“I figured so,” he said. “Everyone knows the financing is falling through.”

“Everyone? How is that public knowledge?”

“People talk,” he said with a shrug.

“That’s ... that’s my concern. Your concern is to build the lobby first.”

“Won’t be done in a week.”

“It has to be.”

Jake removed his hard hat and rested it on his hip. He looked around, as if seeking some source of patience, before saying, “Your pretty little ass is up a creek.”

“Mr. Howard—”

“If the president were standing before me, I’d tell him the same thing I’m telling you: it’s not possible. Maybe back east you can parachute in an elite construction team to pick up the slack, but around here, I’m it.”

“If you need more men, more—”

“Sweetheart, you’re not listening. I can’t do what you’re asking. No one can.”

“There must be something you can do, *anything* to make this work,” she pushed, a note of desperation in her voice.

“Why do you care so much for what someone else thinks?”

“I don’t have a choice. This is my job.”

“Yeah, a *job*,” he said.

“Exactly.”

Jake shook his head, a look of irritation crossing his face. Her face grew warm at his look. If only he understood how important this was ...

“If I put all my men on the lobby work, we can have something presentable but not functional. It’ll be a haphazard mess that I’ll have to tear down when Mr. Howard leaves. I won’t guarantee it’ll even withstand a camera flash, but it might look pretty enough to keep you out of hot water,” he said at last.

“You’re serious?” she asked. “You can make this work?”

“Work, no, look pretty, yes,” he growled. “It’ll be *superficial*.”

The way he said the last word made her frown, her face growing hotter at the indirect cut.

“Whatever it takes,” she said.

Jake turned away with a shake of his head. She watched him, not sure why the thought of him considering her superficial didn’t sit well with her. He was a nice guy, the kind she hadn’t found in the city. She was pushing him hard, and he’d remained a nice guy. She knew the amount of overtime he put in, even if she didn’t see much in the way of results. There was more at stake than a job or a building, but someone like him would never understand. Their two worlds were too far apart.

She returned to the office, determined to make it through another stack of receipts before emerging again. She pulled out her list of debtors and scanned through it, once again surprised that the man listed as being the debtor owed the most hadn’t sent any emails or letters demanding repayment like the other debtors despite the outstanding five million. She’d been calling debtors to arrange payment and being chewed out for the past two days. She braced herself for the worst ass chewing of all to the creditor owed the most.

*Cortez Consulting, Ltd.*, was listed in Alex’s accounting book. She dialed the number listed next to the account information in the book and waited.

“Hola,” answered a male voice.

"Hello. My name is Madeleine Winters, and I work for Dylan Howard of Howard Enterprises. I'm the new project manager for Desert Oasis, replacing Alex Hollon, and I'm trying to confirm a debt owed to Cortez Consulting, Limited. I couldn't find the complete paperwork in Alex's files."

There was a pause, then what sounded like a chuckle.

"This is Joey Cortez. You'll have to square this with my dad. He's busy now. Could I get your number?" the male voice answered.

She provided it. The man hung up. Irritated, she flipped open her notebook to document the time. Before she could finish, the phone rang.

"Madeleine Winters."

"Ms. Winters, this is Carlos Cortez. Joey said you'd called about Alex's loan," said a male voice with a thick accent.

"Yes, Mr. Cortez, thanks for returning my call. I've been going through my colleague's accounting and confirming debts owed. I couldn't find any documentation aside from a letter Alex wrote describing your services as consulting and local brokers. He's listed the debt at five million. If you can fax me some sort of bill, I'll transfer the money to your account tomorrow," she said.

"Alex owed a lot of people money," Mr. Cortez said with an edge that made her frown. "So he was lying to us about his ... funding."

"There was a hang-up with the money," she replied, not wanting to start the rumor that the project was financially doomed. "I'm trying to fix it, but it's going a bit slower than I expected."

"Alex wasn't very dependable," Mr. Cortez said. "He promised to pay for six months."

"I apologize, Mr. Cortez. I'll do my best to fix this fast. My goal is to make things as right as I can within the financial boundaries I have. I always pay my debts, and I'm doing my best to be as fair as possible with the stack of unpaid bills I was left."

There was a pause, as if he were dwelling on her words.

"You seem like an honorable person," he said at last. "Alex was a sleazebag. He owed most the town money. I wish you luck in your project. You won't have any issues from me. My accountant will fax you an itemized bill. Did Alex leave my account info somewhere?"

She didn't understand the amusement in his voice or his odd choice of words. As an unpaid creditor, he had every right to hunt her down and demand the money Alex owed for services rendered to the project. Yet she couldn't shake the sense he wasn't entirely talking about money. She flipped open the accounting book. Despite Alex's mess of a desk, he at least had listed all his debtors in one place with contact information.

"I do," she said. "As soon as I receive the fax, I can wire the money."

"Thank you, Ms. Winters."

He hung up, and she set the phone down, unable to pinpoint what made the phone call feel so ... weird. Mr. Cortez had seemed almost surprised and then amused to hear from her. She made a note in her notebook with the date and time they talked, turned on the dusty fax machine, and pulled out the list of phone numbers with all the debtors listed. Mr. Cortez had been owed the most by far. It appeared Alex didn't pay any one debtor everything owed; instead, he seemed to spread around the bare minimum, probably because the project's bank account was so low. Which made her wonder where the rest of the money went. It hadn't gone to debtors, and it wasn't in the bank.

Almost fifty million was just ... gone.

Before she could pick up the phone to start calling other debtors, the fax machine rattled to life. The promised bill arrived. She glanced over it and set it on her pile of confirmed debts to pay.

When she emerged from the trailer near dinner time, she was surprised to find the site completely empty. No trucks were parked in the makeshift lot; not even Eric was around.

Her first thought was that Jake had taken her threat seriously and quit.

Panicked, she snatched her BlackBerry from her hip. She hurried to the desk as she dialed the area code and searched through the stacks of paper for Jake's business card.

Jake answered on the fourth ring.

"Yeah."

The sounds of people talking and laughing were loud in the background.

"Jake, it's Madeleine. You left early?"

"It's Friday," he responded in a voice that said he wasn't expecting to hear from her.

"So, what? Fridays aren't full days?"

"Fridays are limited to twelve hours."

"I need a few more numbers from you tonight," she said.

"If it's important, you're welcome to join us," he said with some hesitation. "We're at Lucky's Bar."

At his reluctant offer, she sighed. She knew she was driving the Texan crazy with her persistency.

"It can wait until the morning," she said. "I'm sorry—a bit frustrated right now."

"Why don't you come by? You could use a drink to help you relax." His voice held a note of genuine warmth.

“No, thanks. I’ve got work to do.”

“You staying out there tonight?”

“Yes,” she replied.

“Got a gun?”

“No, of course not. I’ve heard about the wild dogs and don’t plan on leaving the trailer.”

“More than wild dogs out there,” he said.

“It can’t be worth losing two hours of sleep over,” she said. “I’ll be fine and see you in the morning. Are Saturdays full days?”

“Saturday’s tequila night. We work twelve hours and quit at six. Sunday morning work starts at ten and ends at eight,” Jake said with a chuckle.

“All right. I’ll be here. Have a good night.”

“Hey, call if the vandals return.”

“Yeah, thanks,” she murmured. “Good night.”

“G’night.”

She hung up and slumped, head throbbing. She glanced at the time and the receipts and realized she needed to put in a good four more hours before she could consider sleeping. She popped some painkillers and poured a cup of coffee from the coffee pot Eric had brought that day. The stench from the bathroom seemed stronger the more tired she was.

She sat down to crunch numbers into smaller numbers, wondering where and how to cut corners without the building coming down on her head.

She wasn’t sure when she fell asleep, but the distant slam of a car door awoke her. She grimaced and straightened from her position sleeping at the desk. Her head had

rested on the blueprints book she had yet to read. The trailer was warm, dark, and quiet, an indication the generator powering the lights and AC was out of gas again.

She stretched her cramped neck and rose, exhausted. The small bathroom smelled even worse without the AC on.

The generator was one of the mysteries she'd figured out the first time the AC stopped and left her in the heated tin can of a trailer. Determined not to sleep in an uncomfortably warm trailer, she slid off her heels and padded to the door. She exited the office, pausing on the top step to take in the world around her.

The desert was beautiful at night with the moon's rays settling like magic dust atop the expanse of rocky sand. Even the hideous construction project in front of her glistened and appeared not quite as ugly in the gentle moonlight. The sky was clearer than she had ever seen it, the twinkling stars brilliant.

She relaxed, affected by the peaceful scene. She strained her neck back to see the stars directly overhead and closed her eyes. A cool breeze swept past her. City air had never tasted so fresh!

She roused herself, rejuvenated by the desert magic, and descended to the ground. Gripping the cloth-wrapped handle of the oily gas can, she held it at arm's length, away from her expensive clothing, and picked her way around the trailer to the generator.

Only upon turning the corner did she recall what awoke her.

A car door slamming.

Or possibly, several car doors slamming. There were five dark-hued trucks parked in the makeshift parking lot.

Unease slid through her, and she quickly looked around for people. Several leaned against one truck bed angled away from her. Two were smoking, evident from their glowing red cigarette tips. She glanced at her watch and saw it was just past two thirty

in the morning. Jake's crews were gone for the night, probably drinking with him at the bar. He'd said nothing about sending anyone else out.

The two smoking men shifted, and moonlight glinted off of the long barrels of guns.

Madeleine held her breath as she backed into the shadows of the trailer. Part of her argued that all Texans carried guns; this could very well be some of Jake's men, and he forgot to tell her they'd be there. Another part of her knew he would've come clean with her long before these men showed up. At the very least, he'd always been honest with her. She lowered the gas can and tiptoed around the trailer, eyes on the men at the trucks.

The sudden movement of two more armed men emerging from the direction of the heavy equipment and walking toward the building made her freeze, and she waited for them to pass a short distance away. They didn't even glance at the office but spoke in hushed tones as they walked.

Heart pounding, she darted up the stairs and into the office, closing the door as quietly as she could.

*I can't afford any more damage to the damn building!*

She stumbled over the brick used to prop open the door again and stifled a curse of pain. She leaned against her desk, toe throbbing. After snatching her phone off the far side, she shuffled around the desk and shoved the chair away. She hit the speed dial number for Eric as she crawled beneath the desk.

Eric's phone rang straight to his voicemail. Agitated, she hung up and tried again. Same response. Madeleine hesitated before flipping through to the next to last number she had dialed.

As before, Jake's phone rang a full four times before he answered.

"Yeah?" came his voice, thick with sleep.

“Jake,” she whispered.

“Hello?”

“Jake, it’s me.”

“What?”

Voices neared the trailer. She hung up and went to text messaging.

*Jake, it’s Madeleine. I’m at the site. There are men here with guns. I don’t know who they are or what they’re doing. Please call local authorities.*

She clicked send and tucked her legs in closer. Several long moments of silence passed before her phone vibrated with his response.

*On my way.*

She gritted her teeth. The man simply could not give her any answer she wanted! She started to tell him so when the sound of steps on the rickety stairs sent panic spiraling through her. She pushed the silent mode button on her phone and pressed it against her chest to hide the light. She stilled her breathing and waited.

The door opened, and the sound of two heavy-footed men filled the small office.

“I’m telling you, he’s long gone,” one voice grumbled in a thick Spanish accent.

Steps came toward her and rifled through the papers above her head. She gripped one of her shoes, well aware of how much pain a four-inch heel could cause. More than one woman had demonstrated the power of a high heel on her foot in a crowded elevator.

The second man said nothing but slung open the door to the bathroom and one of the closets.

“Nothing here,” he stated. “C’mon.”

The shifting of paper stopped, and both feet clomped toward the door.

“Howard sent a replacement for that rat?”

“Yeah, some girl.”

“Maybe we should pay her a visit. Maybe she's got our money.”

The hard tone sent chills through her. Madeleine held her breath once again, straining to hear the response. The office door slammed closed, and the conversation became indecipherable.

She waited a moment longer before looking down at her phone again. A message from Jake awaited her.

*U ok?*

Her hands trembled as she replied.

*Fine. You're slow as usual.*

She rested her head against the side of the desk, unable to hear voices or slamming doors but unwilling to look after the men's last comment.

*Better slow than foolish.*

Jake's response blinked onto the phone screen.

Voices neared once more, and she tucked the phone against her chest, waiting. Several voices lingered outside the trailer for fifteen minutes, sometimes talking, sometimes silent.

She inched out to ensure the light of her phone would not shine through a window or otherwise draw attention. The tiny windows on the office trailer were covered in cardboard to keep the sun out during the day. She eased back under the desk and opened Jake's latest message.

*Almost there. U ok?*

*Fine, she answered. Bringing police? There's a lot of them.*

*No problem.*

The voices outside fell silent, and she thought she heard the slam of car doors in the distance then the grumble of several truck engines that faded as they reached the road. All was silent for ten minutes, until she heard the approach of another truck. Several minutes later, she heard feet once again on the stairs. The door was slung open. The ray of a flashlight made her tense and move away from the far edge of the desk. A dog growled.

“Madeleine?”

She froze, too tense to recognize the voice at first.

“You here?”

She scrambled out from under the desk.

“Jake!” she exclaimed in a whisper. “They’ll see you! Turn off your flashlight! There must be a dozen of them!”

As she spoke, she hurried around the desk to cover the light.

“I brought the boys. They’ll take care of anyone,” Jake assured her, twisting the flashlight out of her grip. He did, however, flip it off.

“Are you sure? How many—”

“Enough, city-girl,” he growled, and took her arms. “You’re shaking. You all right?”

She was trembling and breathing hard and quick. Her heart tumbled around within her breast, and adrenaline made it hard for her to focus any of her scattered senses.

“I’m fine,” she murmured, surprised to find herself so close to all out panicking. “I’m fine.”

“C’mon, sit down,” he ordered with none of his usual deliberation.

She started to resist but relented as he steered her to a couch and sat with her, close enough for their sides to be pressed together. Jake released her arms but took her hands, the heat and size of his comforting. In any other circumstance, she would

have moved away from him. She was not the dependent sort; she didn't need a man to make her feel safe. Yet she rather liked the feel of his hard, large body beside hers, of his hands around hers. He was warm and solid and smelled of faded aftershave, beer, and his own distinct scent. He wasn't like the type of men she was used to dating in the city: ambitious, self-centered, deceptive.

"Did you call the police?" she asked again.

"Yeah. The nearest trooper is an hour away."

Another growl.

"What is that?" she asked, squinting into the dark.

"That," Jake said as he flipped on the flashlight, "is one of the boys. Not someone you want to run into in the middle of the night."

Jake's boy was a massive black Rottweiler seated facing the door.

"Why is he growling?"

"You're in his seat."

"He can have it," she said and, started to rise.

"Never sat by a boy on the bus, city-girl?"

"It has nothing to do with you," she assured him.

"Good. Then relax until the gallons of coffee you drank settle," he said with a familiar, irritated edge.

She sighed, her eyes seeking men hiding in the dark corners of the office.

"I think they were looking for Alex," she said in a more subdued tone. "Something to do with money."

She didn't doubt creditors would send collectors to the site; she was prepared for them. What she didn't expect was that they would come armed in the middle of the night, like common thugs. At the thought of the men coming after *her*, she pulled her

feet onto the sofa's edge and pushed herself deeper into the squishy couch back and into Jake's side. He swung one arm around her shoulders, as if sensing her disturbed thoughts.

Neither spoke. Jake's breathing was deep and steady, his body comfortable against hers. Maybe she truly had drunk too much coffee that day, or maybe she needed some decent rest. Her head still spun, and her nerves were shot.

She looked down at the BlackBerry clenched in one hand and once again tried to call Eric, ready to yell at him for abandoning her.

"He's out." Jake's low voice was close to her ear.

"He's never too out to take my call," she replied. "Unless ... did you take him drinking tonight?"

"Yeah."

"Why didn't he tell me?" she asked with a frown.

"Why would he? He can do what he wants in his off time," Jake said. "You ever go out drinking?"

"Once last year."

"You go out for any other reason?"

"If it's work related, yes," she replied.

Jake snorted. "If it's not?"

"I don't have the time," she answered.

"No drinking. No movies, bookstores, dates, girls' night out?"

"I have to work."

"Your life sucks," Jake observed.

"It doesn't suck! I have certain obligations that are not of your concern," she retorted.

"And I don't have time to be *unhappy*. I like my job and do it well."

Her words sounded flat, even to her.

“You work long hours, too,” she said. “You can’t really judge my life when yours isn’t much different.”

“I’m not judging. I’m telling you—your life sucks. Ask anyone. Even Eric says so,” he countered. “You have no life aside from work. How could it not suck? I like my job; it’s my passion, but even so, I don’t work more than twelve hours a day. I start early enough for there to be sunlight at the end of the day and happy hour on Friday and Saturday. I take one day of work off a week when I’m on a difficult project, two days off when on a normal project. When I’m on no project, which I make a point of doing three months a year, I *live*.”

“To each his own,” she said curtly.

“Whatever.”

Irritated once again at the man, she looked at the time.

“I have to be at work in an hour,” she muttered. “So much for getting extra sleep staying here.”

“Take a nap,” he suggested.

“You said you called the police about an hour ago, which means they’ll be here soon.”

“That’s Texas time, city-girl. One hour back east is about two hours here in Texas.”

Frustrated, she sighed and allowed her head to drop back against his arm and closed her eyes. Warm, safe, and fatigued, she felt a familiar sense of floating wash over her.

“I’m not going to sleep,” she told him. “I want to be awake in case they come back for me.”

“The vandals?”

“Yeah.”

“Why would they?” he asked.

“Because they said they would.”

Jake frowned at her words, about to pursue until he felt the full weight of her against him. She drifted into a deep sleep fast. Duke inched closer to sniff her once she was out, and he patted the massive Rott affectionately.

"Good boy," he murmured. "Think you can take care of this one while I take a look around?"

Duke didn't respond, but Jake knew he could count on him to keep an eye on things in the trailer. Jake waited a few more minutes until certain the woman was in a heavy enough sleep. He eased away from her and straightened her out on the couch. He left Duke in the trailer and descended into the early morning desert air.

He strode toward his truck and withdrew a shotgun before whistling loudly for the remainder of his dogs. The three dogs bolted to him, and he tossed out snacks to them with a smile. They trailed him as he walked toward the structure in the first light of morning.

He took in the hideous contraption of a building, which they'd made a great deal of progress on already regardless of what city-girl thought. He knew the financing was an issue, and part of the funds for working his men overtime was coming out of his and Javier's wallet.

Javier liked the city-girl for some reason. Jake knew his uncle well enough to know he'd do anything for someone he liked, no matter how irrational that seemed. He scoured the building for new signs of damage and checked the inventories of everything from tools to equipment to materials.

The vandals had taken nothing and destroyed nothing.

He almost wished they had. If they weren't there for the high ticket items, they were there for Alex and city-girl, which wasn't a good sign. He returned the gun to his truck and leaned against it with crossed arms, watching the sunrise as he thought.

He had half a mind to call his uncle and have his uncle call Carlos Cortez, Javier's cousin and the man in charge of the drug gang that probably was looking for extortion money—rather, protection money, according to Carlos—for not interfering with the building of the hotel.

He debated and then decided against it. Javier didn't like or talk to Carlos, and Jake didn't know enough about what Alex had or hadn't done to interfere. There were rumors all over town about Alex's gambling and whoring. He might've owed anyone money.

He wasn't sure what to do about Madeleine, though. She couldn't know how dangerous a drug trafficking gang was despite the local newspaper she brought in daily. Some of what happened between the drug gangs made it into the paper, but most were unwritten rules known by the locals. He doubted she knew anything about Alex's issues, either.

No, he'd keep an eye out for now and leave Duke as protection. No one in their right mind would mess with Duke, and maybe he could coax her to leave the site and sleep elsewhere.

Toni and a few others appeared as the sun reached the horizon. His mother's brother, Toni was lean and slender compared to Javier's large frame. Toni took in the Rotts and Jake and then frowned.

"Issues?" he asked.

"Yeah. Someone broke into the office and scared city-girl."

"Wow, did you talk to Javier?"

"Not yet. Alex owed half the town money. Didn't want to jump the gun," Jake replied.

"At least nothing's damaged. No extra work for us today."

Toni snorted and followed his gaze to the structure.

"Ugly bastard, isn't it?"

Jake snagged his hard hat from the truck and didn't answer.

"Brought you breakfast and your horoscope, compliments of Sonya," Toni said, handing him a thick breakfast burrito wrapped in tinfoil.

Jake took it, reading the small square horoscope Toni's wife, Sonya, cut out of the newspaper for him every day.

"You will find happiness where you don't expect to," he read aloud.

"Not here you won't," Toni said.

"Tell me about it," Jake said, and chuckled. "Tell her thanks. Better than the doom-and-gloom horoscope from yesterday."

Toni smiled, and they walked to their planning area, marked by three card tables standing side by side covered with plastic containers of paper and office supplies. They sat in silence to eat their breakfast before cracking one container to look at their notes from the day before.

"I wanna take another look at the damaged portion," Toni said.

"I need to throw off some angry energy before I deal with that woman again," Jake said. "I'll start with the stones."

"Have fun."

Jake rose and joined the men already working on restacking one of the massive piles of tiles while another broke down broken stones into gravel. The stones had been cut into similar sizes for use in the courtyard as decoration. The vandals went out of

their way to destroy them, and they couldn't be used in their current shape. He'd decided to salvage them for gravel rather than remove them.

Jake got to work, oblivious of how much time passed until Eric called his name.

"Jake, where's Maddy?"

He tossed the block in his hand and straightened, twisting to see a pale-faced Eric. Eric wore large sunglasses and a hat and flinched as one of the laborers nearby smashed a rock with a sledgehammer. He was dressed well despite the apparent hangover.

"G'mornin', Eric," he said. "How you doing today?"

"Great, great. Where's Maddy?" Eric asked with a grimace as another rock exploded.

"She's sleepin' in the office," Jake responded. He glanced at his watch, satisfied to see it was past eleven. The exhausted woman had drifted to sleep mid-sentence on the couch at around four-thirty. Part of him had wanted to check on her a couple times, but he'd resisted. Just because her body had felt so nice against his, he wasn't about to volunteer for more abuse from the sharp-tongued city-girl by checking up on her.

"Great," Eric murmured with less enthusiasm.

"Tonight's tequila night. You up?" Jake asked.

"I'll stay back and help Maddy," Eric replied quickly. "We're a bit behind. I appreciate the offer."

"Any time," Jake said, and returned to his pile of stones.

Toni winked at him from across the small square area they had designated the stone corral. Eric's phone rang, and he wandered toward the office. Jake continued with his stones, reviewing the night. He hadn't thought about the conversation they'd had at the bar since arriving early this morning. Toni had dragged a lot of info out of Eric, revealing

Mr. Howard's legal woes and a little bit about how long Madeleine had worked for Mr. Howard. Eric knew surprisingly little about his colleague despite their two years working side by side. Jake chalked it up to the typical eastern narcissism but couldn't help being disappointed not to learn more about her.

She annoyed the hell out of him and anyone else around her; she was too persistent, demanding, and full of complete ignorance that bred overambitious expectations of what he could accomplish. She was a micromanager, an ignorant one at that.

After yesterday, he'd been ready to write her off entirely, until Eric let something drop while drunk. Something about a sick family member who needed surgery. Jake wanted to dismiss it as no excuse for her actions, but he recalled just how much harder he'd worked when his sister Kitty was injured in a car accident several years ago. Javier had the money, but Jake drove himself near crazy working sixteen-hour days and spending the nights in the hospital.

Then there was Javier, who not only liked the fearless woman, but who still laughed long and hard describing the look on Smithson's face when she fired him.

The girl had a spine and discipline, which he could admire. The edge of urgency that punctuated her every movement and sentence would take a bottle of tequila to counter. With a few stiff drinks in her and the permanent removal of the BlackBerry, she might just be tolerable.

He watched as Eric reached the office, steadied himself against the stairs, then knocked.

### **CHAPTER THREE**

"Maddy!" Eric's voice and the sound of growling awoke her. Her eyes opened, and she jerked, surprised to see the muzzle of the massive black dog near her face. She pushed herself up.

"Okay, nice dog," she murmured.

The dog ceased growling and whined. It sat before her, taking up much of the space between the small area between the two couches. She felt rested for the first time in two weeks despite the crick in her neck. She swung her legs off the couch, her eyes straying to her watch.

Eleven-thirty. She bolted to her feet and darted to the desk, where her BlackBerry sat. The dog growled again at her, and she eyed it, circling the desk.

"Maddy?" Eric called through the door.

"I'm up!"

"Whose dog is that?" he asked, cracking the door.

The dog rose and paced forward. His snarls were far from friendly. Eric ducked out. She dialed Jake's phone, which he answered after four rings, as she expected.

"Yeah!" he shouted, sounding out of breath.

"Jake, can you retrieve your dog?" she asked. "He won't stop growling and won't let Eric in the trailer."

"Duke gets sick in the sun. He does better in the AC," Jake replied, sounding irritated already. "If Eric wants in, give Duke the friend command."

"What is the friend command?"

"Tell him to stay and say, *friend*."

"Why is he growling at me?" she demanded.

"He growls all the time. Just ignore him. Keep your hands away from his mouth, and you'll be fine."

“Jake—”

He hung up.

“Madeleine?” Eric called again.

“Um, try to come in,” she said. “Duke, stay! Friend!”

Duke sat. He growled as Eric stuck his head in but remained in place.

“Friend!” she said again. Eric eased into the trailer. Duke remained in place. “God, I overslept!” she said. “The finance department is two hours ahead and needed this information mailed four hours ago!”

“I’ll take it into the motel,” Eric offered without removing his shades.

“You okay?” She looked up at him.

“Had a few drinks.”

Madeleine waited for an explanation or at least an apology for not including her in the invite. Nothing came. Unusually hurt by the exclusion, she gathered her papers.

“I’ll take them in,” she said. “Need to get away from this place for a bit.”

“Sure, great,” Eric agreed. “I’ll watch things here.”

She glanced at him again. Eric didn't normally leave her side or volunteer to be left behind anywhere.

“Okay,” she said. “Jake’s dog likes AC. You might have a furry coworker until he takes the blasted thing home.”

Eric nodded and sat on a couch, gingerly touching his head.

“The coffee here is horrible,” she said. “I’ll bring you some good stuff. Why don't you go help Jake while I’m gone and make sure they're doing what they're supposed to be?”

He grimaced in response. Her phone rang, and she tucked her earpiece in place. She placed the papers in her briefcase, waved to him, and started out the door as she answered the phone. Duke followed, pushing by her as he trotted down the stairs.

"Ms. Winters, this is Deputy Miguel Fuentes. How are you today?"

"Great," she responded. "Is this about last night?"

"Yes, ma'am. Jake asked me to give you a call this morning."

"Thanks. I'll be by your office in precisely an hour and a half. On what street are you located?"

Call waiting beeped, and Madeleine glanced at the number. It was Dotty.

"Look, I'll call when I'm in town," she said, then switched to Dotty's call. "Talk to me, Dotty!"

Duke trotted after her. She opened the door to her rental, and the dog bolted into the car. She looked over her shoulder. Jake was not in sight, and she was late enough as it was without waiting for him to claim his dog. Duke walked around the backseat twice before settling behind the passenger's seat and rubbing his wet nose around the closed window.

Dotty was already talking. Madeleine tried to pay attention as she rolled down the rear window and started the car.

"... patch the finance department through?" Dotty asked.

"Right now?" Madeleine asked, unable to keep the dismay out of her voice. She waited for the AC to cool off, irritated by the heat. "I don't need worse news."

"Rumor has it your dear ex-fiancé Mark ordered an audit."

"Oh, dear god. I can't find what Alex did with the money—there's no way I can explain it to the finance department!"

"I'll hold them off. You sound beat already. Can you come up with some story for them in an hour or two?" Dotty asked.

"Yeah, I'd appreciate it. I gotta get going. Will take me a while to get to town," she said.

"Take care, Maddy."

She smiled, thankful to have one ally in the office. She wasn't surprised Mark was acting like the cad he was; he'd know just how to make her look bad enough in their boss's eyes to make sure she never moved up in the organization. She watched Eric make his way to Jake and pulled out with another look at the massive dog in the backseat.

\* \* \*

"This'll help my hangover?" Eric frowned.

"Yeah," Toni responded. "It'll sweat the alcohol right outta you."

Half-listening, Jake smiled as he continued to stack the scattered stones into neat piles on top of wooden pallets. He and Toni, among others, had long since stripped down to their jeans and boots under the hot sun. Jake was sweating heavily, but it felt good to get his body moving after a night of drinking.

Eric removed his suit coat and carefully folded it before placing it on a waist-high stack of stones on one of the pallets. He unbuttoned the sleeves of his shirt, rolled them, and planted his hands on his hips.

"Great, guys," he said with some of his previous enthusiasm. "What do I do?"

"You see those rocks?" Jake asked, straightening.

Several pallets of previously stacked stones had been scattered over about a hundred square yards by the vandals. They couldn't move the stones out of the way of the heavy equipment until they were on the pallets.

"Pick 'em up and stack 'em there," Jake instructed, pointing to the pallets.

Eric slapped his hands together in anticipation and started forward. He hefted the first one while Jake and Toni watched.

"Use your legs, or you'll end up with a sore back," Toni called.

Eric waved a hand but continued to lift the next two rocks incorrectly. Jake met Toni's gaze and shook his head in wry amusement.

"Never thought I'd meet a man who's never done some sort of manual labor," Toni said. "That kid is about as foreign to this type of work as I am to his suit."

"We oughta take him out tonight to get some boots," Jake said with a grunt. "Show him there's more to being a Texan than drinking."

"I saw Miguel this morning," Toni said. "Said there was some trouble last night?"

"City-girl called me about three. Guess there were some men out here looking for Alex," Jake responded.

"Lots of men looking for that idiot."

"Yeah. I'm afraid they'll make city-girl a mark."

"Howard should know better than to build a hotel in the middle of the Cortez gang's trafficking route," Tony said.

"You think he's involved?"

"Miguel said that guy Alex owed Cortez and Perez money and never repaid it."

"Didn't Alex owe half the shady characters in town money?" Jake asked.

"Yeah, but Cortez and Perez are the two you don't wanna cross."

Jake knew of Cortez's illicit activities in the area; everyone did. There would never be enough law enforcement to stop Cortez, not with his guns, men, and money. There were uneasy truces between him and local law enforcement, which meant the towns and those in them did not need to worry so long as they did not wander directly into Cortez's operations. Worse, the Oasis was nearly at the crossroads of two drug gangs: Cortez and Perez, who were competitors.

It wouldn't bode well for Madeleine if the men she saw were indeed Cortez or Perez's men there to collect Alex's debt. If either thought her and her project a threat to

their operations, they had the manpower for force her out, or if nothing else, to extort his price from her. If she failed to comply, she would end up another of the bodies occasionally found in the desert.

City-girl didn't seem like the kind who would take extortion very well.

"Maybe that's why Alex left," he said.

"Probably," Toni agreed. "Oughta warn city-girl."

"Don't think it would matter," Jake said. "She's obsessed with this project. I told her whatever we did with the lobby would have to be torn down after Mr. Howard's visit. She don't give a shit."

"Different people," Toni said with a shake of his head. "It really could've been anybody, if Alex was as stupid as folk say he was."

"This whole thing just smells bad. Thought Howard was an idiot until I saw the article in the paper about the proposed bypass to go near here. Would be a gold mine for him. This godforsaken hotel is an hour from any sort of civilization," Jake said with a grunt.

"Howard's in a position to know stuff like that. Would make more sense if he pressured the bypass into getting passed. It'd be in Cortez's interest, too, since a bypass would cut the time traveling from the border down quite a bit."

"You never know with these kinds of people. They're all shady."

They fell into silence and continued working under the hot sun. It was not long before Eric stripped down to the T-shirt under his collared shirt. Jake held off their lunch break until late, still buzzing with angry energy. Toni finally called the late break, and Eric joined them for a small picnic packed by Toni's wife.

The small man drank a quart of water before glancing around him.

"Quite a day!" he said enthusiastically.

Jake knocked back a quart of water as well and wiped his mouth. He leaned back to pour the remainder of the water bottle over his head and neck.

“Good afternoon, boys.” The honeyed voice made them all turn.

Jake chose a sandwich and began eating, ignoring the three blonds in tight shirts. One wore snug white pants, one a mini-skirt, and the third Daisy Dukes.

“Afternoon, ladies,” Eric said, and rose. “Care to join us?”

“Hi, Jake.”

“Lily,” he said.

The petite blond with manicured nails perched on a rock near him. He felt her gaze rake over him and remembered a time when such a look would have boiled his blood. The knowledge of her rampant infidelity during their years together—and the fact she hid well that she was a gold-digger—had cooled his emotions and desire for the beautiful woman. She left him for a sugar daddy three months ago, and word in town was that the sugar daddy wasn't as rich as she thought Jake's uncle was, which was why she was back.

“Haven't seen you in awhile,” she said. “Missed that cute smile of yours.”

Her honeyed voice agitated him, brought up both the memories of steamy nights and the realization of his own ignorance of her true personality.

Javier's instinct had known what she was the whole time. Jake still owed his uncle for advising him not to marry the woman when he'd considered proposing a year before she left him.

*You think too well of her, son.*

As always, Javier was right.

“Been busy,” Jake said, and wolfed down the sandwich.

“I'm in town for a few days. Saturday still tequila night?” she asked.

“Yeah.”

“Why don’t I join you tonight?”

“Free country.”

Lily appeared satisfied by his response. Jake glanced at her from the corner of his eye, part of him wondering if he dared go drinking with the woman. Their nights of drinking had always led to one thing: bed. His anger was still hot, but as he had learned the hard way, Lily was always up for a one-night stand. After three dry months, Jake wondered if a one-night stand with the deceptive woman might settle his anger and his restless hormones.

He finished eating and rose without another word. Toni and Eric remained, Eric flirting shamelessly with all three women. Jake looked back once to see Lily’s hand on Eric’s thigh and decided even if he needed to get laid, she would not be the one he chose to sleep with. Of course, drinking always had a way of lowering his standards. He didn't want to skip tequila night but suspected he wouldn't go home alone if he went.

Irritated, he set out stacking stones with renewed energy.

\* \* \*

Madeleine was in a foul mood when she returned to the site. An argument with Nigel, plea bargains with the finance department to extend her funding, and a waste of two hours at the police station all ate at her patience. While the finance department was considering a partial extension of funding in exchange for a full audit, Nigel had threatened to cut it already.

Nigel’s verbal instructions regarding the third change of the blueprints baffled her. He refused to send the blueprints but expected the changes to be incorporated for Mr. Howard’s visit, uttering excuses ranging from their final drafting status to the lack of time in his schedule to help her. To make matters worse, Eric was refusing to answer his

phone, and she needed his help in working through several of the funding and building kinks.

The hamburger and fries she fed Duke during a quick stop to eat gave the panting dog horrible gas. Madeleine left the windows of the car down and grabbed her briefcase. Duke climbed out the window and loped ahead. She stopped to orient herself, staring at the office. It was not where she left it, unless she parked elsewhere. She looked back at the common parking lot. Unwilling to waste time on the moved office, she made her way to the trailer. Duke launched himself onto a couch.

Madeleine glanced at him as she dropped her briefcase and papers on the desk.

The trailer smelled as bad as the dog. Agitated and hot, she dialed Eric's number again. He didn't answer. No one had been in the trailer for awhile; the AC was out and the generator silent. She left the office to refill and start the generator.

Her own lunch was cold. She popped it in the microwave and sat, pulling out a newspaper she'd picked up in town. The microwave dinged, and she withdrew her soggy hamburger and fries, eating quickly as she read.

*Five bodies found in desert; linked to Cortez-Perez fight for drug corridor.* She scanned the article, surprised to find what Jake said was true: there were drug trafficking gangs in the area. The article included a small map illustrating the route the thugs used.

The Desert Oasis was in the middle of the route.

Cortez. She frowned and sat up, flipping open her accounting book. Alex had owed a Cortez five million. She opened the newspaper and soon decided it was a coincidence: half the town had a Cortez in their name, if the newspaper's Community page was any indication. Graduations and marriages, small business owners, local

charity for the poor—many of them were Cortezes. Even Javier, whose full name was listed on his card as Javier Enrique Garcia Cortez.

Aware she'd taken too long of a break already, she tucked the BlackBerry into its place at her waist and left the trailer, walking to the construction project to find Eric.

Her phone buzzed. She touched the earpiece, her nose wrinkling at the smell of spilled gas on her hands.

“Madeleine Winters.”

“Madeleine, this is Judith from finance.”

She held her breath. She spotted Toni, Jake, and Eric a short distance away and was irritated to see none of them working. Instead, all of them stood around three attractive blonds, talking. Eric was stripped down to his T-shirt.

Jake's broad, muscular back drew her eyes. He wore jeans and boots and stood with his back to her. Caramel-hued skin coated a thick layer of perfectly roped muscles, and once again she wondered if he'd been a professional athlete. His arms were thick and shapely, his shoulders and back wide, toned, and gleaming with sweat. Her eyes traveled over the impressive upper body down to his tucked waist and hips. His jeans were too loose to show the shape of his behind or thighs, but she could imagine them to be as perfect as the rest of him. She had the untimely memory of being pressed against that powerful body, as she had twice within the past week, but wondered how much more delicious it would be pressed against that body with the both of them gloriously naked.

She tripped, the movement jolting her out of her stare. She forced herself to concentrate on Judith's ramblings and paused outside of earshot of the six before her.

“Approved?” she said suddenly. “You're certain?”

“*Partial* funding approval,” Judith answered with some irritation.

She almost sighed. It was nowhere near what she needed, but it would get her started! She would apply again once Mr. Howard's visit was complete. If happy with what he saw, he would be more likely to give her free rein.

Jake was looking hard at one of the blonds, who trailed her fingertips down one bicep. He didn't seem to be happy, but he didn't move either.

Madeleine half-listened to Judith. It was five-thirty, not quite quitting time for the tequila gang. Judith finished finally, and Madeleine thanked her and hung up. She approached the group, agitated.

"Excuse me," she stated. "Eric, please join me at the office. Jake, I know you have happy hour planned for six. I'd appreciate it if you and Toni could straighten out the tool area before you leave. It looks like a tornado hit it."

To her surprise, Jake stepped away without resistance. Eric snapped to attention at her voice and was halfway to his suit jacket by the time she finished. Madeleine glanced down as Duke sat beside her, one paw on her foot. She shook her foot free.

"Ladies, this is not public property, and you are not covered under our insurance policy should any of you become injured while on Mr. Howard's property," she continued.

The women looked at her, amused.

"We'll be gone with the boys at six," one, a beautiful blond with pert features and large blue eyes, assured her.

"This is not a spectator sport. If you're not working, you don't belong here. You can meet the boys at the bar, but I don't expect to see you here again," Madeleine countered. "Eric, escort them to their vehicles and ensure they leave Mr. Howard's *private* property immediately."

She turned away and answered her buzzing phone, aware of the women's looks. One muttered something she was certain wasn't a compliment. For reasons she couldn't quite pinpoint, their presence irritated her.

Duke trailed her back to the office. Once again he commandeered one of the couches and sat, panting. The generator had kicked in and the air was cooler. Madeleine blinked until her eyes adjusted and looked around the cramped office which had become her home.

Maybe her life did suck. She certainly didn't have time to drool over shirtless men or spend more than the minimal amount of time on her nails or hair. She'd rarely had time for men and only dated when she was desperate for some sort of human interaction that extended beyond work. She hadn't dated a non-coworker in nearly a decade and her relationships since then had been much like everything else in her life: convenient, timely, minimal, purposeful, and non-interfering in her work.

She tossed her sunglasses on the table in frustration. She couldn't help the sense that everyone had a normal life but her.

There'd only been one man that she truly felt a connection with, the man who stood her up and sold her out for a promotion. She'd sworn off men since.

She looked at the panting dog and crossed to the Styrofoam cups by the coffee maker. She poured bottled water into one and set it down on the floor near the dog. Duke hopped down, knocked over the flimsy cup in two licks, and continued to eat the cup.

"No, Duke," she muttered, and pulled free a new cup. She poured in more water and squatted beside the massive dog, holding the cup for him.

He slurped, spraying her arm and the surrounding area with water.

“Good dog,” she said with a grimace, patting its large head awkwardly. She cleaned up its mess and rose just as Eric entered with his trademark smile. He was sweating but his hair neatly in place.

“I’ve been trying to call you since I left,” she told him.

“I was ... I thought I would help them a little.” He added, “I know how important the lobby work is to you.”

She eyed him, well aware of political wrangling when she heard it.

“You can help when I don’t need you,” she said. “At least keep your phone on. I tried to call back for information.”

“Great, no problem,” he agreed quickly. If Eric was one thing, he was non-confrontational. She grabbed a bottle of water, tossing it to him.

“Do we have a lot of work tonight?” he asked.

“Don’t we always?” she returned.

“Of course,” he said. “I thought you might need a break. Jake and Toni are going for burgers and tequila. It might help you relax.”

She said nothing.

“Or, you know, if you’d like to work without interference or don’t think you’ll—”

“Go,” she said curtly.

“Maddy, I’ll help if you need it,” he said. “I went out last night.”

“Yes, you did,” she said as she sat. “Go on and go. Keep your phone on.”

“Great, sure!”

She expected him to give token resistance, but Eric snatched his jacket as if believing she would just as quickly change her mind. When she looked up from the desk again, he was gone.

Her eyes fell to the dog.

“Just us, Duke.”

He panted in response, but the whiff of lunch roiling in his stomach made her nose wrinkle. She leaned forward to grab the Lysol out of the cleaning supplies bin. She sprayed and eyed the dog before her attention returned to her papers. Precisely at six, the door cracked open. She didn't bother to look up; Duke gave a cheerful yap and launched off the couch toward its master at the door.

“Heya, Duke,” Jake said warmly. “He been good today?”

“He's been fine.”

“We're taking Eric to the bar. You up for it?” he asked, crossing to the desk and placing the rolled blueprints on the edge.

“Looks like you have enough company,” she replied, and leaned back, meeting his gaze. She was somewhat disappointed and relieved to see he was fully dressed once again.

“Always room for one more,” he offered with a half-smile.

“Thank you, but I have work.”

“You're not staying here tonight.”

“I haven't decided,” she replied.

Jake crossed his arms again. The tension between them was thick. Neither budged on the issue.

“Duke'll stay with you,” Jake said. “I'll leave my phone on.”

“Thank you, but I'll be fine,” she said just as tersely. “Eric promised to answer if I call.”

Jake's jaw twitched. He said nothing but turned to leave.

“I have some changes for the blueprints,” she added.

“I'm taking tomorrow off.”

Madeleine wanted to launch something at him, anything. His thick frame disappeared through the door. She bit back a curse and rose, hurrying to the door.

“Can Toni incorporate modifications?”

“You’ll find out, won’t you?”

Jake strode toward his truck without turning back. She shielded her eyes from the sun and watched him trot to join Toni. She waited until she’d closed the door behind her in the office to release the string of curse words tickling her tongue.

She imagined them all going out to party, happy and carefree, without a second thought about anything that really mattered. She couldn’t do it. There was too much that *did* matter.

Her anger melted into frustration and then desperation. She’d never be able to complete this project on schedule, especially not all alone!

\* \* \*

Jake didn’t expect his night at the bar to go badly. He didn’t expect to flat out refuse Lily or feel jealous when she went home with Eric. He didn’t expect Madeleine’s cold refusal to annoy him beyond a shot or two of tequila. And he didn’t expect her phone call at seven in the morning the night after happy hour.

“Yeah,” he growled into the phone.

“Jake, it’s Madeleine.”

“I figured as much,” he bit off. His head pulsed. Normally on Sundays, he slept in until at least nine. Having gotten home later than usual, he’d planned on sleeping until noon.

“Toni doesn’t know anything about blueprints.”

Jake rolled onto his back and rubbed his face. Toni knew as much as he did about blueprints. He suspected his foreman was either hung over or unwilling to deal with her.

“I’ll deal with it tomorrow,” he said.

“I’m in your kitchen. I’ll wait for you to come down.”

Jake clicked the phone off and stared at the white ceiling. The persistent woman was an inch away from getting her ass spanked. He took his time getting dressed and emerged from his large room in the airy hacienda. He trotted down a set of polished wooden stairs to the main foyer and padded to the kitchen. He heard his sister’s excited tones before he stepped into the large, modern kitchen Javier had remodeled not a year before.

Even on a Sunday, city-girl was dressed for a day at the office. His sister had spread quite a few things in front of Madeleine, to include several of her newest jams, a couple of her latest culinary experiments, and about three cups of coffee. Madeleine was listening intently as his sister went on about spinach.

Despite the professional exterior, Madeleine exuded a sense of restrained exhaustion. The sight of her pale features and shadows beneath her eyes tempered some of his irritation.

“Madeleine didn’t come to talk about weeds, Kitty,” Jake grumbled with a half-smile at his sister.

“Maddy actually understands me,” Kitty shot back. “And her palate is exquisite. She can name the individual spices in my cooking!”

“Bring me some coffee, palate-girl.”

Kitty glared at him but rose. She was tall like the rest of the family and slender like their mother and Toni, her graceful figure marred by a limp caused by a car accident several years ago. Her dark hair was pulled back in a ponytail, her dark eyes outlined with heavy eyeliner.

“One day, you all will appreciate my cooking!” she vowed as she left.

Jake dragged a chair out from the worn kitchen table and sat. He met city-girl's alert gaze. Vaguely he wondered why he'd taken so long to appreciate her classic, earthy features, which were set off by her auburn hair.

"You have a nice place and interesting family," she said. "I understand both your siblings live here?"

"Just Kitty for now. Our other sister is at Texas A&M," he said.

"Kitty shows some definite talent in the culinary arts."

She eyed him, waiting. Jake avoided the trap; Kitty had apparently already laid blame for her inability to pursue her love of cooking on her overprotective brother, who forbade her from going to an elite culinary school in New York City. Kitty made sure everyone who praised her food knew it.

"It's my day off," he said.

"I understand and will be brief," Madeleine said. She nodded to the blueprints at her side, grimaced, then said, "Mr. Howard ... he wants things to be round."

"Round," he repeated. "What does that mean?"

"I'm not entirely certain," she said. "My instructions were that he wanted the lobby to be more circular than square and the outer corners of the building itself to be curved."

Jake laughed, understanding why Toni referred her to him.

"It's not funny, Jake," she said, taken aback. "Mr. Howard—"

"I get it." He held up a hand. "Do you have any idea what you're asking for?"

She gazed at him for a moment and then admitted, "No."

"So, you drag me out of bed after happy hour on a Sunday to tell me that Mr. Howard has given you new blueprints—"

"Actually, those are the old ones. I don't have new ones, just instructions."

“You drag me out of bed after happy hour on a Sunday to tell me that Mr. Howard has given verbal direction but no hard blueprints regarding his desire to make things round.”

She nodded.

“You got a lotta nerve, Madeleine,” he said. “You don’t seem to have a problem bossing everyone else around. Couldn’t you tell Mr. Howard no, just once?”

“You don’t tell someone like him no,” she said with resignation.

“You don’t tell a contractor to change a design without blueprints,” he countered. “And I expect you want this done before his visit?”

“Well—”

“The answer is no. Give me blueprints, and I’ll alter the design.”

He saw the troubled look in her green eyes but vowed not to be affected by it.

“Shouldn’t we be working as a team?” she ventured.

“Your version of team is telling me what to do and me doing it. By your definition, we’re a great team!” he said, voice rising. “Now, if you don’t want me charging today as a work day, I suggest you leave and let me eat my breakfast.”

A surprised look crossed her face before she rose.

“I didn’t mean to disturb you,” she said in a hushed tone. “Enjoy your day off.”

She left quickly. Jake didn’t realize how angry he was until he twisted his tense body to watch her go. His gaze remained on the doorway after she left.

“You’re a jackass, Jake,” Kitty said, dropping his plate of food in front of him. “I don’t know what’s gotten into you.”

She, too, stalked away, leaving him with scrambled eggs all over the table and a set of blueprints. His eyes rested on the blueprints. Madeleine was not one to leave something so important in a rush. Either he was harsher than he thought himself to be,

or she left them for him to bring in later. Judging by Kitty's reaction, the former was the case.

Jake rubbed his face again, agitated.

Jake's words affected her more than she expected. She left fast and drove back to the site, upset. Upon arriving at the office and realizing she had left without the blueprints, she sent Eric to retrieve them and sat down at the desk.

Duke panted from his position on the couch.

She tapped a pen, staring at the nearest stack of receipts.

She never thought of herself as bossy, or her version of team telling others what to do. The words hit home, and she could think of no other reason than because they were probably true. But what choice did she have? She had to get this job done! She needed the money too much.

She sat back, upset. She had someone depending on her. If the project failed, *she* failed Mama. At the moment, she had absolutely no delusions of success, but if she pushed herself and those around her, she might *not* fail.

Then why did she feel like crying? Why did Eric running off for happy hour make her feel completely isolated and alone? Why did Jake's continuous jabs into her unhappy life bother her so much? Why did she feel like the only adult burdened by a sense of responsibility while everyone else seemed ... free?

"It's just us, Duke," she said. "Unless you wanna ditch or insult me, too?"

Duke remained where he was on his couch, panting. She stared at the wall for awhile before spraying more Lysol. It was not Duke this day, but the bathroom. How long she gazed into space she didn't know, but she was still doing it when Eric returned with a smile and the blueprints.

“Jake invited us to a barbecue bonfire tonight,” he said. “It’s after the men are released at about eight-thirty.”

Madeleine said nothing and opened her accounting book.

“Maddy, you okay?”

“Just have a lot to clean up,” she replied. “You can go tonight. I have too much to do.”

Eric hesitated but didn't press.

“I brought Duke’s dog food,” he said. “Jake says to feed him about three cups a day. People food upsets his stomach.”

“Okay, thanks.”

Eric waited. Madeleine kept her eyes down.

“I’ll just go check on things,” he said.

“All right.”

Her phone buzzed, and she reached for it mechanically.

“Madeleine Winters.”

“Hey, it’s Jake.”

“Good morning, Jake,” she said in a flat tone. “How can I help you?”

“I sent Duke’s food with Eric. We’re having a barbecue tonight. Kitty is excited for you to try her homemade sauces.”

“Thank you, but I’ve got too much to do today.”

“All right,” he said with an edge. “Let me know if you change your mind.”

“I won’t. Eric will probably go.”

“Have a good one.”

“You, too.”

She frowned at the phone. Jake had sounded even more pissed at her refusal. She couldn't fathom what else might be bothering him about her; he'd already insulted her work ethic, personality, and shoes. There wasn't much else she could do to draw his scorn.

She didn't leave the site the entire day. She snacked on granola bars and left once to refill the generator. She read the book on blueprints and worked past dark until her mind froze up then sat back finally for a break, nowhere near content with what she'd done but satisfied she could see some progress. Duke crossed to the door and pawed at it. She rose to let him out and stepped into the warm night air. It was still too warm for her, but she breathed deeply and stretched her neck and back before leaning against the railing to stare into space. Even when she tried to relax, visions of empty bank accounts danced in her mind.

She rubbed her face.

"Thought you might need something."

She looked up at Jake's quiet voice, startled she hadn't heard him approach. He stood at the bottom of the rickety stairs with a large, covered plate in one hand.

"You brought me dinner?" she asked skeptically. He chuckled.

"I can take it back," he said.

"No, I didn't mean it that way. It's just ..." She drifted off.

"We're always at each other's throats, so why would I bother?" he finished.

"Something like that."

"Funny how two people trying to do the right thing can end up thinking they're working against each other."

She sighed and opened the door to the trailer, inviting him in. The scent of barbecued meat and fixin's made her stomach roar to life. She couldn't help wondering

when she'd last eaten real food; it felt like it was before she left back east for the stupid desert.

He set her plate on her desk. She sat back in the familiar chair and watched him. He made no move to sit and twirled his truck keys around his index finger.

"You need anything else?" he asked, glancing around.

"This is more than enough. I really appreciate it, Jake," she said. "Tell Kitty I'm sorry I couldn't come."

"All right," he said. He seemed ready to say something else, then stopped himself.

"Have a good night, Jake."

He nodded without another word and left. She sensed he was frustrated again and couldn't help feeling grateful for the loaded plate of food before her. She didn't know if it was an apology for earlier or if Kitty made him bring her food, but she gave him the benefit of the doubt. Their tiny truce probably wouldn't last long anyway.

She dug into the food and opened the blueprint book once again, trying to understand a little more of Jake's world.

\* \* \*

Madeleine was asleep at the desk when he arrived at six the next morning. Duke uncurled from his position atop the couch and dismounted with a full body shake. The large dog wagged his tail and padded to the door. Jake let him out to use the bathroom.

Though she didn't move at his entrance, she snapped awake when her phone rang.

"Madeleine Winters." Her voice was exhausted.

Irritated by her already, Jake let Duke back in when the dog whined and stayed only long enough to pull the blueprints off her desk. Madeleine didn't so much as look at him; instead, she was busy scribbling numbers down on a pad of paper.

He shook his head as he joined Toni outside.

Toni had begun the hard work on the lobby that day. Despite his objection, Jake gave him a sketch with measurements of what to do to make the lobby *round*. He grabbed his hard hat and moved with Toni toward the lobby area.

The beams of the lobby were already shaped and curved, most of them waiting to be secured and a few already in place. It was no easy feat to bend metal with the limited capabilities of the portable workshop Jake had brought in a few days ago. He inspected the work.

"It'll hold for a few days," he said wryly. "Though I hope it falls on Howard's head."

"We can arrange that," Toni said. "Wouldn't that stun city-girl?"

"She'd have a heart attack," Jake agreed.

"She didn't come last night."

"I know."

"Lily did."

"Yeah, I know," Jake said with a long look at Toni. "Can't stand either woman."

Toni was quiet.

"If they were the last two women on the planet, which would you choose?" he asked philosophically.

"Neither. I'd save Duke and run like hell from both," Jake responded.

"I was thinking the same thing."

"Good to hear I have fans out here." Madeleine's icy voice made them both turn.

Jake met her frigid gaze and silently cursed himself.

"I'm going to the hotel. I'll be on my phone."

She spun without another word and strode toward the cars. Duke loped ahead.

"At least she didn't fire us," Toni said with a frown.

"Not yet," Jake added, then cursed. "*That* woman drives me freakin' crazy!"

"I think she knows that now."

Jake pulled off his hard hat and flung it toward the desert. He wasn't normally so callous, impulsive, or insulting. He didn't know what it was about Madeleine that made him crazy, or what made him feel guilty about slighting her.

Toni watched him.

"Five bucks says she's calling Houston for a new contractor," Jake muttered, settling his hands on his hips.

"Yeah, and? This project is doomed anyway. If we escape before it falls on its face, we walk away without that on your uncle's reputation."

Jake drew a deep breath. "I know," he said, calming.

"*Projects* don't normally affect you like this," Toni said. "Somethin' else on your mind?"

"Let's just get started," Jake muttered, and strode to their workspace.

Toni was quiet until they had reached their area.

"I'd take Madeleine."

"What?" Jake glanced at him and set down the blueprints.

"If it were the end of the world, and I had a choice, I'd take Madeleine."

"You're welcome to her," Jake said. "Why?"

"She's bright, honest, dedicated, and probably loyal. Wouldn't sleep around like Lily."

"If you were the only two at the end of the earth, she couldn't sleep around anyway," Jake pointed out.

"Yeah, well, Madeleine has spirit. Lily couldn't think for herself if she tried, and she really doesn't have that spark."

Jake absorbed Toni's words, secretly agreeing. "We've got a few loooooong days of work ahead of us," he said.

## CHAPTER FOUR

Madeleine made an effort to remain in the trailer and away from anywhere Jake would be. He was the first man she had ever not dated to earn the title of Bastard. She sent Eric with messages for him, ignored his two attempts to call, and went so far as to rename Duke with a more fitting name: Princess.

The next few days passed as a blur. She worked harder and longer to find a way to stretch the funding, to find more funding, to organize Mr. Howard's visit, and to make things *work*. She found herself forgetting to eat and getting up from the desk only to refill the generator or let Duke out.

She pulled out of the haze after an accidental long nap on the tenth morning of their journey to the desert. Eric tapped on the door and entered wearing jeans, a *Javier and Sons Construction* T-shirt, and boots.

She glared at him from her position behind the desk. He tipped the rim of his cowboy hat and offered a smile.

"You're late," she stated in a hard tone. "And inappropriately dressed."

"Maddy, I've destroyed two pairs of very expensive dress shoes and two pairs of suit pants. Jake suggested I—"

"Fine. Princess needs to go out."

Eric beamed a smile, looking rested and relaxed in his new gear.

She felt grimy and grisly in the suit she had slept in. She was running short of suits and had neglected to pick up those at the dry cleaners for two days. She needed a decent shower after three days of the trickle in the office's bathroom, and she wanted nothing more than to sit down at a diner somewhere for a decent meal.

But it was a mere three days until Mr. Howard visited. She had toured the emerging lobby with astonishment and satisfaction; it seemed to be coming along very quickly. At the rate they were building, she wondered why it would take four months to complete the remainder of the building.

Ah, and it was the remainder of the building that bothered her. Nigel wanted the project to look as complete as possible, but there was no way to hide the fact that there was nothing but beams everywhere else. She strained to think of an alternative and was about to start pacing for the fourth time that morning when the door opened.

“Eric, my dry cleaning is—”

And she stopped, staring in surprise at the well-dressed man before her.

Nigel’s deputy, the man who dumped her and took her job, stood in the doorway. Mark Branson was tall and athletic and wore his suit like a king wore his robe. His hair was brown, his eyes bright green, and his aristocratic features as hard as granite. He looked around with distaste. A leather briefcase was tucked beneath one arm, a bottle of water in his other hand.

“Justin!”

“Madge.”

Despite how she had once fawned over the man before her, she had always hated his nickname for her.

“This is an interesting set-up,” he said, and entered. Duke bounded into the office behind him and began to snarl.

“Friend!” Madeleine and Eric cried at once.

The dog sat.

“Quite a set-up,” Mark reiterated.

Eric looked at Madeleine in surprise.

"You're three days early," she said uneasily. "Or has Mr. Howard's schedule changed?"

Mark gave a smile that had at one time wiped her off her feet.

"No, Madge. Nigel thought you might need help making preparations and sent me on ahead."

He set down the water and held out a hand. Madeleine moved forward and accepted it, leaning in for a kiss on the cheek.

A knock at the door made them both turn.

"Yo," Toni said, eyeing Justin. "Any word on those new prints?"

"I have them with me," Mark said, and popped open his briefcase. "I'm sorry if their delay caused any inconvenience."

"Yeah." Toni's gaze was less than friendly. He accepted the blueprints and left.

"How many men are here?" Mark asked.

"Forty-three, a foreman, and the site lead," Madeleine answered. "Justin, I don't really need you here. I'm handling things."

"I've heard," he said, unimpressed. "Judith called me yesterday regarding your second funding increase. You look well, Madge. I'm sorry I didn't have a chance to see you in the city."

"Thanks," she murmured. "Congrats on the promotion."

"It should have been you," he said gallantly.

"I'm too honest," she answered in the same tone.

Mark gave a faint smile, his eyes shifting to Eric.

"You're acclimating well," he said. "Nice boots."

"Jake showed me a great place to buy them north of the border," Eric answered. "I'd be happy to show you."

“I’d like that,” Mark responded. “I see Madge hasn’t adjusted yet to the Texas dress.”

His gaze fell to the accounting book on the desk.

“Eric, why don’t you show Mark around while I clean up a bit?” she said quickly.

“Justin, I believe you’ll be surprised at the rate Jake’s men work.”

“A tour sounds great,” Mark agreed. He set his briefcase on the desk and looked her over again before joining Eric at the door.

Madeleine watched them go, barely restraining herself before the door closed. She snatched up her BlackBerry and dialed one of the few people she trusted in the office.

“Dotty, it’s me.”

“Good morning, Maddy!” Dotty sang out.

“Justin’s here.”

“I thought I heard he was coming out early,” Dotty said in a quieter tone. “He’s supposed to provide Nigel with a full report of everything. There are some issues with your requests for funding, and Nigel’s concerned with the lack of progress.”

“So Mark is here to put me on course or rat me out to Nigel?” Madeleine asked.

“The latter, dear. Mark is Nigel’s right hand man for a reason, and it wasn’t because he wanted to piss you off by bringing your boyfriend into the office. Justin’s folks are loaded and influential.”

“Ex-boyfriend,” she corrected. “I bet Nigel is laughing himself silly right now.”

“Probably so.”

“Any more surprises I should know about?”

“I’ll keep my ears open. You keep your hands off Justin. You know how charming he can be when he wants,” Dotty warned.

“Not a problem,” Madeleine said. “Can’t forgive the man who left you at the altar.”

“I should hope not.”

“Thanks, Dotty.”

Madeleine eyed the reeking bathroom. With Mark there, she didn't dare leave long enough even for a shower. She tucked her accounting books away beneath the seat cushion to keep them out of immediate reach. Resigned, she held her nose and entered the tiny bathroom.

She'd barely bathed and changed when Eric brought Mark back, and she prepared herself to waste her time entertaining a man she despised.

\* \* \*

“Here come the prissy twins,” Toni warned.

Jake tossed his gear into the back of the truck and his hard hat onto the driver's seat. He slung one arm over the door frame and waited, watching the two approach. Madeleine stumbled more than once but refused Justin's arm both times, instead distancing herself more from him.

“Eric said they were engaged at one time,” Toni said in a low voice.

“Really?” Jake glanced at him. “Bet we can get the story out of him with a couple shots of tequila.”

“He's so easy it's barely a challenge,” Toni agreed. Then, looking at Justin, he remarked, “That city-boy's suit cost as much as your truck.”

“Yeah,” Jake said. He could see why any woman would be attracted to Justin. It irritated him that someone who had been so intimate with Madeleine had followed her all the way into the desert.

Madeleine stumbled again.

“I'm sending that fool a pair of boots,” Jake said with a frown.

“Bet you a beer she doesn't wear them.”

Madeline and Mark stopped before the two. Jake stuck out his hand, and he and Mark shook.

Jake was less impressed the second time he met Madeleine's new coworker than he was the first. While polished and sophisticated, Mark was the kind of self-serving politician Jake had been thrilled to leave back east. Mark oozed civility and charm, but there was no depth to the man beyond his own ambitions.

Madeleine looked more tired and drawn than the last time he saw her. She refused to meet his eye and looked perfectly in place next to the politician. Both wore expensive suits and spoke in the same educated manner.

And yet there was something between them akin to tension. Toni noticed it as well as Jake. Mark went out of his way to behave in a charming manner, but Madeleine was as civilly cold to him as she had been to Jake. In fact, he believed her to be more abrupt with Mark than she was with him.

He reaped some satisfaction out of the realization.

"Good evening, gentlemen!" Mark said with a charismatic smile. "Done for the day?"

"Yep," Toni answered. "You?"

"Yes. Madge said you're headed toward town. Thought I might catch a ride with you."

"Sure," Jake said. "Hop on in."

Madeleine turned to leave.

"We're having a barbecue tonight, if you'd like to come. Eric'll be there," Toni said.

"Thanks, but I had a long flight. Think I'll change and bring Madge some dinner," Mark said with a wink.

Madeleine stopped mid-turn and straightened to face them.

"Actually, I'm planning on attending the barbecue," she said.

Jake glanced at her, surprised.

“Oh, are you?” Mark faced her. “I understood from Eric you stayed in the office for dinner.”

The two exchanged a look. Mark raised an eyebrow with an inviting smile while Madeleine gave him a warning look.

“Jake’s sister is a fledgling cook. I’m supposed to try her homemade sauces tonight,” Madeleine said.

“We’re leaving now,” Toni said. “Why don’t you ride with me, Justin? Jake’s AC doesn’t work.”

Mark paused only for a moment before smiling.

“Thank you, *señor*,” he said. Toni rolled his eyes.

Jake opened the door wider and motioned for Duke to enter the cab. Madeleine said nothing to him but circled the truck and climbed in. Their tense silence was broken only by the roar of the engine and the panting dog. Jake rolled up both windows and blasted the AC. Madeleine looked at him.

“Your AC does work.”

“Yes, it does,” he said. “Can’t stand Justin.”

She gave a faint smile and turned her gaze out the window. Encouraged, Jake asked, “Why would you date someone like that?”

He expected some sort of hesitation or even a bitter remark of how there was nothing redeeming about Justin.

“He’s handsome, wealthy, comes from a good family, intelligent, witty, and ambitious,” she responded.

“So he’s perfect,” Jake said, gripping the steering wheel tight enough for his knuckles to turn white.

She said nothing to counter. He floored the truck, and its tires spun in place before kicking up a small sandstorm and propelling them forward. She gave him a sidelong glance and gripped the door handle.

“If you’re going to kill us over this ... he’s not perfect. He’s an ass like you, Jake,” she said.

Jake didn’t care to be ranked at the bottom of the barrel, but as long as Mark was there, too, he was content.

“Thank ya, ma’am,” he said with a wink.

“Drop me off at my hotel,” she ordered.

“No can do. We’re going to a barbecue.”

“I don’t care to go, Jake. Just tell Mark I felt sick.”

“Nope,” he said.

Silence.

“You need a good meal in you and a night of rest,” he added. “You’re looking like a ghost.” He waited for her to argue, but the fool knew he was right.

“You all are doing well with the lobby,” she said.

“It’ll look nice, but Mr. Howard will have to tread carefully.”

“Why?”

“We’re sacrificing quality for time,” he stated. “As I said, it’ll be a superficial fix only.”

“I’ll need to go back after dinner.”

“You can’t afford one night of sleep?”

“Maybe after Mr. Howard’s visit,” she said.

“You really shouldn’t stay out there overnight. The thugs who have been there twice might come back.”

“It’s easier for me,” she said. “They don’t have a reason to come back if Alex’s gone.”

“There’s a drug trafficking gang that regularly comes through these parts. I think that’s who came by to find Alex,” he said.

“Why? I don’t think he does drugs or ships them or anything,” she said, turning her attention to him.

“No, but they tax the locals for passing through their territories. Or he might’ve owed one of them money.”

“Tax?” she asked blankly. “Is that legal?”

“No, but neither is a drug cartel,” he said with a laugh. “The law here is a little different, *Madge*.”

“Don’t call me that! I hate that nickname!”

Jake smiled, satisfied to get a rise out of the woman.

They rode in agitated silence the remainder of the way. She said nothing to him even when they arrived at the hacienda. Madeleine took *his* dog by the collar and left him sitting alone in the truck. He watched as she wound her way through the crowd of people until she found Eric.

Jake didn’t know why he felt so damn angry. He stayed by the truck until his chest loosened enough for him to breathe normally. Toni joined him as he walked toward the massive barbecue pit and the tables Kitty had filled with food.

“Mark knows a lot about construction,” Toni said. “In fact, I think he might know what a building is.”

Jake smiled and glanced at his uncle and longtime friend.

“The man’s a slick one. Belongs in the city,” Toni continued.

“At least he didn’t give you the silent treatment for the ride,” Jake said.

“Maybe we can swap on the way back.”

“That woman hates me, Toni.”

“Kitty says you yelled at her and kicked her out the other day, and Madeleine overheard your comment about the end of the world,” Toni teased. “I’d probably hate you, too.”

Jake grunted and made an effort to shake the tension from his shoulders. Kitty waved him over and handed him a plate piled high with food. He walked to the barrel filled with ice and beer, intent on eating and leaving.

“Mind if I join you?” Mark Branson, the slick city-boy, asked.

Jake shrugged, hoping to dissuade him with silence. Mark didn't take the hint, and Jake hunkered down over his food, irritated.

\* \* \*

Madeleine wanted to avoid both Mark and Jake. Hanging out with Eric was the logical alternative, until she saw Eric was happily absorbed with two pretty blonds. She paused a short distance from him, looked his Texas gear over with a frown, and moved away.

Duke followed and nudged her hand when she grabbed a plate.

Kitty stood proudly behind one of the tables displaying an array of barbecued meat, several pots of chili, and all the fixings. She saw Madeleine and hurried over, grinning.

“Maddy!” she exclaimed. “You *must* try my sauces!”

Madeleine smiled, appreciative of a real meal and space from the boys. Kitty claimed her time for an hour as she excitedly explained her processes and rationale behind her choices of spices for different dips, barbecue sauces, and pots of chili. Madeleine listened, amused and interested in the lively woman. She couldn't help but feel out of place among the cheerful picnickers and their casual dress. Kitty glowed with

health and happiness, and Madeleine felt all the more isolated and detached from her surroundings. She was fatigued, exhausted, grimy after only half a day of working AC, and desperately in need of a good, hot bath and solid night of sleep.

It would be nice to have nothing more than spices to worry about, she mused with yearning. The laid-back lifestyle was foreign to her but appealing, though she doubted she could adjust well after years of deadlines, schedules, and obsessive attention to detail. How would it be to drop all those things and simply live?

The idea alone made her anxious. How did one pay the bills when unconcerned with work? How did one actually have a life outside of work? Where did friends come from?

“Who’s that?” Kitty interrupted her own soliloquy on cinnamon.

Madeleine turned to see Mark and Jake deep in conversation.

“Justin,” she said. “Sent to spy on me by my lovely boss.”

“Really?” Kitty’s eyes widened. “He’s really handsome.”

Madeleine studied the two men. Both were wonderful eye candy. Jake was taller and thicker than Justin, but both were toned, muscular, and athletic. Jake had size but didn't strike Madeleine as being as competitive, sly, and ambitious as Mark could be.

“Your brother’s more handsome,” she assessed. “Though I wonder who would win in a brawl.”

“Jake, easily,” Kitty said. “Mark looks like a good match, but Jake always wins.”

“He’s in brawls often?” Madeleine asked with a smile. “It doesn’t seem like much affects him.”

“Oh, he’s been in a few,” Kitty said. “It’s hard to rile him up, but he’s got a fierce temper when it’s lit.”

“They seem to be getting along right now,” Madeleine observed. “Figures.”

“How so?”

Madeleine shook her head. Kitty suddenly uttered a small sound of disgust, and Madeleine glanced up from her plate to see the same petite blond from earlier once again hanging around Jake.

“She has a lotta nerve showing up,” Kitty grumbled. “If Jake invited her back after all she did to him, I’ll kick his ass!”

Madeleine debated against asking, but curiosity won out.

“Ex-girlfriend?”

“Yeah. Lily. Absolutely no shame or sense.”

Lily sidled up to Jake and issued Mark a dazzling smile as she wrapped one arm around Jake’s waist and leaned into him. Jake didn't move away; neither did he acknowledge her. Mark smiled in return, but the two men were once again quickly in discussion.

Abruptly Madeleine wanted to leave. A perfect little doll, Lily was more than Madeleine could stomach after her rattling run-ins with Jake. How could he think *her* superficial when the petite ex-girlfriend was smiling invitingly at every man she crossed?

She knew the answer. Lily was beautiful. Beautiful women didn't have to work at life like non-beautiful women.

“Men are so stupid,” she muttered.

“I know!” Kitty exclaimed, her attention on reorganizing the cheese tray.

Madeleine turned her back on the scene, soured once more. She watched a humming Kitty move dishes around and add more spices to her chilis.

“Hey, Kitty,” Jake called as he and Mark approached. “I think you need some more dirt in this sauce. There's not enough flavor.”

While he made an attempt to make his words light, his voice carried a tight note.

“It’s not dirt!” Kitty retorted.

“Madge, I thought we’d go do dinner tomorrow.” Justin’s voice was smooth and warm. “Around six?”

Before she could respond, Jake did.

“*Madeleine* works until midnight at least.”

“We have some *upper* management issues to discuss,” Mark continued.

“You’ll have to do it at the site,” Jake said, elongating his Texan drawl in a way she recognized as being a sign of agitation.

“Kitty, can you make me a plate?” Madeleine asked the attentive sister. “I think it’s time for me to leave.”

“Yeah, sure.”

“Management is funny like that. The higher you get, the less you do,” Jake said.

“There’s much to be said for planning, strategy, and decision-making. I don’t expect the grunts on the ground to understand or have the mental capacity to participate,” Mark said with a smile.

She almost sighed. Something had gotten into both of the men, and she truly didn’t care what. It was probably nothing more than a severe affliction of testosterone.

“We dumb hicks work for a living,” Jake said in an exaggerated accent.

“Madge, I’ll pick you up from the site at six tomorrow,” Mark said, ignoring him.

“You’ll have to bring dinner with you. *Madeleine* doesn’t leave the site,” Jake repeated. “Why don’t you bring some work clothes with you, and I’ll show you what real men do out west? It’ll be a nice story for your wine-sippin’, gym member, hippie brethren back east.”

Kitty looked startled, and Madeleine knew a challenge between two such men would not be pleasant. She accepted her plate from Kitty with a mouthed *thank you*.

“Why don’t we do this.” Justin’s voice had hardened. “Why don’t I bring a team of my assistants, and we can have a little competition. Your guys against mine.”

“Christ,” Madeleine muttered, and started away.

“Madge, dinner tomorrow?” Mark called after her.

“I have work to do,” she replied, then yelled to a nearby Eric, “Eric, give me your keys! Princess, come!”

She wanted nothing to do with either of the bickering men. For the first time in ten days, she wanted to return to the safety of the stench-filled trailer and stare at mismatched numbers until she fell asleep.

Justin’s arrival was nothing but a twist of the knife in her back. She was losing control of more than the entire project, and she couldn’t exactly understand how money and time were sliding so quickly through her fingers while she did her damndest to keep them both in line.

No sooner had she settled into Eric’s rental and unfolded a map when her BlackBerry buzzed. Madeleine touched the earpiece without looking at the caller ID.

“Madeleine Winters.”

“Hey, it’s Jake. There’s something I didn’t want to mention in front of the others.”

“Go ahead.”

He paused, and when he spoke again, his voice held a familiar, unidentifiable edge.

“My banker called and said there was a glitch in the funding deposit. We can’t continue until the payment is straightened out.”

“I’ll take care of it first thing in the morning,” she said in a more subdued tone. “I apologize, Jake.”

“Don’t,” he said. “I know you were thrown into a screwed-up situation. If you were running things from the start, there would never be a problem with anything.”

Pleased by the compliment, Madeleine smiled for the first time that day.

“I’ll keep the men busy at the site in the morning until this mess is fixed,” he continued. “You might as well stay at the hotel tonight.”

“I will. I’ll keep Princess with me.”

“You don’t rename a man’s dog,” he growled.

“Good night, Jake.”

She hung up and started the car, somewhat relieved that she would have a chance for a hot bath after all.

## CHAPTER FIVE

What started out as a friendly competition at the site soon turned fierce. The “games”—as Mark called them—involved site clean-up, and Jake realized Madeleine was getting double her money’s worth as the two teams rushed to finish their tasks.

By ten in the morning, they had managed to stack all the scattered stones, finish the placement of beams in the lobby, and drag the polished marble walkway into place.

Jake stood beneath the hot mid-morning sun and met Justin’s gaze, pleased with his team. Justin’s staff consisted of half a dozen athletic men from Mr. Howard’s staff in matching designer gym pants in dark blue, white T-shirts, and tennis shoes.

In comparison, Jake’s team consisted of himself, Toni, two big Mexicans who spoke no English, and two other members of his crew, stringy white guys with cigarettes permanently attached to their lower lips. They were mismatched with half of them in jeans, two in shorts, and one in sweatpants. All wore cowboy boots, and all but one were shirtless.

Eric, wearing his newly adopted uniform of jeans, *Javier and Sons* T-shirt, and cowboy hat, was the official referee.

"I designed this one. It's great, really great," Eric said, motioning the two team leaders closer.

He knelt and pulled out a piece of folded paper. Using rocks as weights, he unfolded it and pinned it to the ground. The two men met, one on either side of Eric. Jake eyed Justin, sensing the man didn't care for the close competition. The pretty boy from out east was no longer smiling. He alone had disposed of his shirt about the same time Jake did.

"It isn't all about construction, Jake, so I hope it's okay," Eric started. "It's a relay race, too."

"By all means." Jake offered a smile. "Make the city-boy feel more at home. Might help him win the next round."

Mark ignored the barb.

"It's a relay race around the site," Eric explained. "All six team members are positioned around the site. The first team member starts here with one of the new door frames. He runs to this second guy, who has the tools. They run to the third guy, who has the door, and they assemble it here. Then the three carry the door over to the fourth guy, who is positioned at one of the entranceways to the lobby. Guy four has power tools and helps them install the door. Then they all run to the marble entryway, where guy five is, and lay the wood for cement pouring. And then they all run here, to the office, and tag guy six, who races the other team's guy six to the finish line."

"Wow, that's some work," Jake said, and patted Eric on the shoulder. "Great job."

"Thanks. I had help." Eric beamed.

"Enough, loverboys. Set up your team, Jake," Mark snapped.

“Know what a door is, Justin?” Toni called as the athletic man left the group.

Mark flipped him off, and Toni chuckled. Jake watched him go.

“Toni, you know the men better. Who should be where?” he asked.

Toni waved the others over. The rest of the construction team loitered and watched, sometimes cheering for one team and sometimes the other. Jake’s eyes moved to Mark as Toni explained the relay race. Mark held up six fingers to indicate his position, and Jake smiled in anticipation.

“I’ll take sixth,” he told Toni.

The foreman nodded, and the six broke up. Jake joined Mark to trot over to the office. In the distance Eric gave the sign to begin, and both men watched their team members race to the first task.

“Don’t take it so seriously,” Jake advised, relaxing against the office trailer. “You won’t have any energy left.”

“Worry about your own energy,” Mark returned. “Where’s Madge?”

“You know she hates that nickname, don’t you?”

Mark glanced at him.

“She won’t give you the time of day,” Jake said in amusement, eyes on his men.

“And she’ll give you the time of day?” Mark challenged.

“Didn’t say that.”

“Who do you think has a better chance? Someone like me, or someone like *you*?”

Jake said nothing.

“Besides, I’ve already had her. I doubt you can say the same,” Mark added.

Jake’s dark gaze slid to him. Anger stirred within him. He pushed himself away from the side of the trailer.

“You ditch her or she ditch you?” he asked casually.

“I ditched her.”

“And now you’re ... what? Here for the Texas sun?”

“I’m here for work.”

“Right,” Jake said with a snort. “You’re working hard at *one* thing.”

“So you do want her,” Mark said.

“Does it matter if I did?” Jake asked.

“Madge would never go for white trash,” Mark said with scorn.

“I’m Mexican trash. My chances look better than yours,” Jake said with ease he didn’t feel.

“She’ll be back in the city in a week when the boss sees how bad this place is and fires her. You don’t stand a chance, bro,” Mark muttered.

“We’ll see.”

They fell into a tense silence. Both watched with growing apprehension as the fifth members of their teams sprinted from the lobby toward them. Jake couldn’t imagine a good person like Madeleine with the snake beside him. She was annoying, but she always tried to do what was right. Mark had no sense of honor at all.

“She’s a good lay,” Mark added.

Jake tensed further.

“She tastes as sweet as honey, and the way she says your name—”

“Christ!” Jake muttered, tuning him out.

“But you’ll never know. She’ll be mine again before the week’s out. Maybe I’ll send you a video.”

Their teammates reached them just as Jake’s restraint burst. He forced himself to focus on running rather than choking the hell out of the city-boy. Mark got a head start, his athletic form bounding over small bushes and rocks.

Jake pumped his arms and pursued, fueled by pure anger and adrenaline. They raced around the side of the building to the sounds of voracious cheers. Mark stumbled on the rocky terrain, and Jake leapt ahead. He rounded the corner and breezed past Eric, smacking one outstretched hand a split second before Mark did so.

The two stopped and bent, chests heaving. Toni slapped Jake hard on the back, congratulating him. Jake, focused on Justin, didn't hear his words.

Mark met his gaze with a challenge and held up a finger, mouthing the words, *one week*. Jake snapped. He launched himself at the self-absorbed city boy.

She knew they had some sort of competition going from an email from Eric, but she didn't expect to find *none* of her men working. She'd left a message for Jake about the financing after two unsuccessful attempts to call him. She wore the cowboy boots that had mysteriously appeared for her at the front desk of the hotel that morning. She suspected Jake had dropped them off as an apology for any number of his stupid comments. Her feet were already happier than they had been since hitting the Texas desert.

A good night of sleep left her rested, and she had become distracted by a clothing store beside the bank as she awaited approval for the loan and transfer to Jake's account.

She'd shopped while she waited. Now, dressed more suitably in a pair of designer jeans, her boots, and a lightweight, long-sleeved cream blouse tucked into her jeans, she walked with her usual quick stride toward the ring of men cheering. Duke loped ahead, tongue lolling.

She tucked her earpiece in place as she walked. With only two days until Mr. Howard's arrival, she'd been fielding calls from local and national press, the caterers,

and Nigel regarding the preparations. Her head spun with the additional details, and she reminded herself again to take a tour of the lobby before the day was out. Mr. Howard's security detail would arrive the next day, as would more of his staff.

Her step slowed as she neared the group, and she stopped in complete astonishment. Visible in one of the dry drainage ditches was a scene she'd never expected.

Jake and Justin, both stripped to the waist, *fighting*. Blood, sweat, and dirt streaked both of the men as they fought. Bystanders cheered, and she saw Eric to the side, looking lost.

Madeleine strode forward and pushed several men aside to reach Toni. She snatched the whistle always at his neck and blew hard once, twice, three times.

Silence fell. Mark was in a choke hold, with Jake on top of him.

"What the hell is going on?" she demanded, bewildered.

Jake released Mark at her voice and rolled off him, bounding to his feet. He faced her, breathing hard. Mark rose more slowly, his hand going to a bleeding nose.

Anger sizzled through her. She crossed her arms and glared at both.

"Would either of you care to explain this?"

At their silence, she turned to Toni.

"Toni, get your men to work. Their twelve hours starts now," she ordered. "Eric, come with me. Jake, Justin, you're both off my site!"

"Whoa, there, Madeleine," Jake spoke. "I need to give some direction before you toss me off the site."

"You have a phone. Use it," she tossed over her shoulder. "Leave, or I'll have you removed. You, too, Justin."

She stalked over to the office and slammed the door open, on the verge of flinging Duke's water dish across the room. Did no one understand how dire their circumstances were? Mr. Howard himself was coming to town in less than two days!

Eric eased in around her and removed his hat while Toni waited on the step outside the door.

"We have two days until Mr. Howard arrives," she reminded Eric. "Signs, caterers, hotel arrangements for the additional members of his staff. I sent you an email on it. Go."

She handed him the phone book from her desk. He took it and fled. Toni entered and closed the door.

"Do *you* have anything to say about that spectacle?" she demanded, facing him.

"Not really, ma'am," Toni said. "Boys will be boys."

"So this came out of nowhere."

"No, ma'am," he admitted. "I think you might be stirring up a bit of a rivalry between the two."

"That's ridiculous."

"Nice boots," he said. "Expensive."

"I wouldn't know," she said icily. "I'm extremely angry with Javier and Sons right now, Toni. Today is more than enough grounds for dismissal. I've never seen anything so barbaric or unprofessional!"

"Yes, ma'am."

"I'll be calling Javier to discuss alternatives."

"Alternatives to what, ma'am?" Toni asked with a frown.

"Alternatives to Jake being on site. A site lead needs to be more responsible."

"Jake is the best there is, ma'am. If this project succeeds, it will be because of him."

“Go back to work, Toni. Leave your cell on,” she instructed. “Your funding was transferred this morning. You can call and verify if needed.”

Toni moved deliberately to the door. Light spilled into the office as he opened it.

“Ma’am, I was serious about what I said. Men get real stupid fighting over a woman.”

She couldn't fathom either of the men fighting over her. Mark had dumped her at the altar. Jake barely managed one non-insult for every five comments.

“I don't have time to deal with it, Toni,” she told him, and picked up her phone.

Toni left, slamming the door behind him. She jumped and stared after him. There was entirely too much testosterone in the air.

Justin's motives she discounted quickly, but Jake's ...

Her eyes fell to the boots. They were a perfect fit.

How would it be to have a man like Jake interested in her? She doubted he treated his women as dismissively as Mark did. With his laid-back manner, honesty, and quiet intensity, he couldn't possibly be as superficial as Justin. He had, after all, rescued her the night the thugs came. He pestered her about staying alone at the trailer after dark, brought her coffee in the morning, and left her Duke. He answered her phone calls despite his apparent hate for cell phones.

On the other hand, he'd practically kicked her out of his house. It was not the sign of a man interested in a woman.

She glared at her boots.

Even if he did like her, she had nothing to give him. She couldn't leave her mother back east and wouldn't burden anyone with her financial issues. Jake hated all things city, and she was a walking reminder of the life he ditched. For the first time since meeting him, she wondered which school he had attended and what drove him back to Texas.

She dug out a business card from the pile and dialed.

“Javier and Sons,” answered the gruff voice.

“Javier, this is Madeleine,” she started. “I banned Jake from the site today.”

“Something we need to discuss?” Javier asked.

“Yes, I believe so.”

“Come by for dinner.”

“No, I’m afraid I can’t. Mr. Howard comes in—”

“It’ll just take a few minutes. We eat at seven,” Javier prodded.

She hesitated, sensing Javier was as stubborn as his nephew.

“Thank you. I’ll see you then.”

She hurried to review all the itineraries of Mr. Howard's staff and double-check their flight and hotel arrangements. She'd hired the only taxi company in town to cart people from the airport. The expenses were adding up again. The time crept close to six. She sent Eric another email with more tasks, then closed her notebook and left for Jake's, prepared for another confrontation.

Precisely at seven, she arrived at the siblings' large hacienda. The contemporary adobe dwelling was three stories tall and sprawling, its white front smooth and simple. Their land stretched for several hundred acres and included cattle, horses, and Kitty's favorite: a massive greenhouse for her herbs and spices.

Madeleine parked and walked across the dusty road to a shaded porch. Javier sat in a wicker chair reading a newspaper. He folded it at her approach and stood, offering his hand. She shook and accepted the seat beside him, waiting for him to shift his own to face her better before beginning. His eyes crinkled at the corners, as if were already amused.

“I hope I’m not keeping you from anything,” she started when he'd settled.

“No, ma’am. Dinner’s a bit late. Kitty’s making last-minute adjustments. She heard you were coming.”

“She’s a fantastic cook.”

“That she is,” Javier agreed. He gazed at her expectantly.

“I’m sure Jake told you what happened,” she began.

“Haven’t seen him,” Javier said. “Brawlin’?”

“Yes. He hasn’t been back?”

“Probably cooling off. He’ll be back when he’s ready,” he replied. “Nice boots. Expensive.”

She glanced down.

“Thanks,” she said. “I’m afraid I don’t know anything about boots.”

“Those are the good ones,” he told her. “Fancy, like the city folk in Dallas buy.”

Madeleine looked from his dusty, worn boots to hers. She didn’t think hers overly fancy; they were black leather with white stitching. The designs were simple and the boots comfortable.

“How expensive?” she asked.

“Expensive enough.”

“As in, expensive enough to apologize for kicking me out of the house and insulting me several times over?”

“I’m sure he didn’t say anything that wasn’t deserved. He rarely does,” Javier said.

Her face felt warm. “I take it you won’t entertain my request to remove him from the project.”

“I’d be a bad businessman to ignore a dissatisfied customer.”

“I’m not exactly dissatisfied,” she said. “His work seems to be going well.”

“His men like him,” Javier added.

“He motivates them well. He made the adjustments to the design without new blueprints and has worked late a few nights.”

Javier nodded thoughtfully before saying, “So, he improvises well, directs his men well, and is generally meeting your expectations.”

Madeleine sighed.

“I see why you want to get rid of him,” Javier added with a small smile.

“There is the issue of today,” she hurried on. “He was fighting in front of his men, during work hours.”

“Did he win?”

“Does it really matter?” she asked, surprised.

“Yes, ma’am.”

“I suppose he did.”

Javier nodded again but said nothing.

“So, this doesn’t bother you?” she prodded.

“Jake picks his fights well.”

“But on my time and in front of his men?”

“It seems to me like Jake isn’t the problem,” he said.

She hadn’t expected resistance of any kind to her request. Back east, Jake would have been gone before she reached the hacienda.

“Javier—” she started to object.

“Seems to me like everyone out there likes him but you.”

“This isn’t personal! I don’t have to like him, but I do want him to behave more professionally.”

“I’ll let him know,” Javier said.

“Dinner!” Kitty sang from just inside the door.

“I’m glad you don’t *dislike* him,” Javier stated as he rose. “A man doesn’t send a woman boots like that unless he has his eye on her.”

“Javier—”

“C’mon. You win. I already told you I’d tell him to behave more professionally.”

He walked into the house. She followed, confused.

“But about him being at the site at all, I—”

“We already agreed he does good work and is an asset to you,” Javier said. “You don’t hate him, his men like him, he likes you. I see no need to prevent him from working.”

She didn’t know when she lost control of the conversation; it wasn’t a normal occurrence for her.

“Siddown, city-girl,” Javier ordered. “Kitty made something just for you.”

Kitty beamed a smile at his words and darted out of the room. Javier leaned forward to whisper, “Don’t eat the beans. Don’t know what she does to ’em, but they’ll tear up your stomach.”

Madeleine smiled despite herself, genuinely glad to be sitting down to a real meal. She liked both Kitty and Javier and could imagine a simpler life sitting down on weekends with them eating Kitty’s creations. The thought made her ache to be with her mother, who deserved so much more than she was getting with all her surgeries and the nursing home.

She sighed, exhausted, and sat back to watch. From the moment Kitty put the beans on the table, she and Javier began their tug-of-war. Kitty pushed hard for the older man to eat her beans while Javier tried even harder to avoid them. Madeleine listened to their sparring, entertained. She fed her own beans to one of the several dogs that

looked like Duke when Kitty left the room. Javier gave her a thumbs up. It was not long before she realized his *few minutes* for dinner turned into two hours.

She was about to excuse herself to leave at around nine when Jake strode into the dining room. He snagged a roll from the bread basket and was at the kitchen entrance before he stopped and turned. He pinned her with a glare and leaned against the doorway, crossing his arms.

“Here to fire me?” he challenged.

“Whoa, *mi hijo*. Heard you were in a fight today,” Javier said.

“Yeah,” Jake agreed.

“Heard you won.”

“Yeah.”

Madeleine held his gaze. She assessed him assessing her and wondered what it was about their relationship that held them at each other’s throats.

“Madeleine wants you to behave more professional-like,” Javier said. “Take your fights elsewhere.”

Jake’s eyes slid to his uncle.

“All right,” he agreed.

“That was easy,” Javier said in satisfaction as he stood. “Kit, help me clear the table.”

Madeleine rose as well, about to excuse herself once more. Jake remained in the doorway, waiting.

“Go for a walk?” he asked as the two left the room.

“Where?”

“Does everything need a purpose?”

She sensed the anger beneath his calm surface. His voice was soft and low, his arms still crossed. He pushed himself away from the door frame and opened the door, holding it open for her. She obliged and waited for him on the porch. He pushed his hands in his pockets and trotted down the stairs. They walked toward a fence line behind the main house. She cleared her throat, seeking a safe subject to break the awkward quiet.

“Thank you for the boots,” she said. He glanced at her.

“What makes you think it was me?”

“It’s not that hard to figure out, Jake,” she said, amused. “I’ve been told they’re nice boots. I’m sorry I don’t know more about them, but I do appreciate you buying them.”

“No problem.”

They lapsed into silence again, and her thoughts strayed to the fight and the assertion of Jake's family there was more to it than two idiots brawling.

“Good to see you wearin’ normal clothes,” Jake said as they reached the fence. “You look rested today.”

“I slept in. Shouldn’t have. Will have to work late tonight, but it felt good.”

“If you ever take a day off, you can come out here and go riding or play in the weed garden with Kitty,” he offered.

She wanted to decline under the guise of work but suspected Jake would take offense. But agreeing with so much at stake was out of the question.

“Thanks,” she said.

The sound of puppy yaps drew her attention, and she leaned against the fence, peering into the night. The land was rolling, the rocky ground scattered with small bushes. She saw movement in the near distance and squinted.

Duke whined.

“Stay, Duke,” Jake ordered. “He likes the coyote gals.”

“Coyote?” Madeleine asked. “Is that what that is?”

“She had a litter of pups about a month ago.”

She raised on her toes to see.

“You can see better down there,” Jake stated, motioning a short distance down the fence line.

He led her a good dozen feet before stopping and peering into the well-lit night.

Madeleine waited, glancing toward the movement and yaps.

“Right here,” Jake murmured. He waved her toward him and rested his hands on her hips as she neared, moving her in front of him.

Her blood began to hum. His large hands were hot even through her jeans. Their size and heat, coupled with the ease at which he shifted her, made her feel more delicate than she had in a long, long time. His presence at her back was as warm and solid as his hands. He'd touched her before, but this felt ... different, more intimate.

“You see?”

She blinked, aware she had been too affected by his touch to know what she was looking at. Her face felt hot—her entire body felt afire. She hadn't had such an intense reaction to any man she dated, even Justin.

“Yeah,” she answered.

Three small pups danced around a seated coyote, their fur sprinkled with silver moon dust.

Watching, she and Jake stood silently for a long moment. She held as still as possible, uncertain of whether she wanted to feel his body against hers and terrified she actually *might*. She had too much to lose if she allowed her feelings to distract her.

“Why are you fighting with Justin?” she asked to break the growing tension between them.

Instead of the rigid or angry response she expected, Jake said simply, “Doesn’t really matter right now.”

She twisted out of his grip to face him. “Why not?”

The Texas desert seemed too small to contain the heat between them. Jake’s hands rested at his sides, and he gazed at her intently enough to make her more aware of the blooming attraction between them.

“Because I’m here, and he’s not,” he said.

She blinked, her throat tightening as she swallowed her response.

*Toni and Javier were right*, her traitorous mind whispered.

Unnerved by his intensity, she looked away. Her hands trembled. She felt as awkward as a high schooler with a crush.

“Madeleine, would you let me kiss you?”

The words floored her. She met his dark gaze again, her quick breathing uneven.

*God, yes!*

Alarmed by her body’s response, she eased away, a heartbeat away from all out panicking. There was too much at stake, as much as she wanted to say yes. She didn’t belong here with him under the magical moonlight, pretending like the rest of the world was okay.

“I have to go, Jake,” she whispered. “I’m sorry.”

She said no more but turned and walked quickly to the car, her pulse and heart somersaulting within her. By the time she reached the car, she knew she was a coward and a fool. Out of breath and completely off guard, she, Madeleine Winters, had just turned heel and fled from a *kiss* from the sexiest man she’d ever met.

## CHAPTER SIX

Her day of reckoning was finally here. His had already passed. He hadn't wanted anything to do with her since she walked away from him. He'd avoided her and thrown himself into the lobby work with effort even she would deem acceptable.

One kiss. That's it. He wasn't asking her for her hand in marriage. He wasn't even asking her for more than a few minutes of her time.

Was he that wrong in reading her? She'd been interested, he felt it. Her breathing changed, her face glowed, even her eyes lit up. And then she'd turned yellow and ran. He drew a deep breath and entered the office, trailed by Toni.

"Are you satisfied with everything?" His tone was emotionless.

Madeleine looked at him from behind her desk. She wore city-girl clothes again in anticipation of Mr. Howard's visit. Judging by the blue circles beneath her eyes, she hadn't slept since fleeing his kiss two days ago.

He took no pity on her. After her blatant rejection, he refused to think of her as anything but what she was: a typical, self-absorbed city-girl worthy of a typical, self-absorbed city-boy like Justin. She'd been in the trailer since before he arrived at six. Twice she had toured the site and the lobby. Toni had trailed her and Eric while Jake remained as far from her as he could.

"Yes, thank you," she said, and rose. "Mr. Howard's staff is setting up right now. You're not obligated to stay, though I'd appreciate if you did, just in case there are questions I can't answer."

She searched his face. He remained coldly professional. He felt the familiar tension between them that had plagued their relationship since meeting.

“We wouldn't miss the show,” Toni said from the doorway. “Is that Duke that smells so bad?”

Her phone rang. Jake turned and crossed to the door.

“Come, Duke,” he ordered as he stepped into the hot mid-morning sun.

Mr. Howard's security detail and staff, reporters, and caterers already swarmed over the site. Jake watched them approach the roped-off areas of the lobby and construction site, tense for more reasons than one. Madeleine was forefront on his mind despite his attempt to dismiss her. Just as insistent was the knowledge of how stupid people could be around a plainly marked construction site, and how disastrous one misstep into the roped areas could be.

The small parking lot was filled, the freshly graveled road leading to the site broken in by catering trucks and the hurried steps of city-folk preparing for the infamous Mr. Howard. The reporters loitered between a tent and their seats in the lobby while caterers worked within two massive, white air-conditioned tents. Mr. Howard even had an emergency EMT crew on stand-by.

Mark was there, running between all the major parties and relaying phone calls. Jake watched him for a long while, unable to shake his anger.

“You wanna watch or not?” Toni prodded.

“Yeah. Have a feeling things won't go well.”

“Eric already caught two reporters in restricted areas,” Toni said. “If Mr. Howard steps too far to the left up there, the whole stage'll go.”

“She knows and doesn't care, so long as it looks pretty,” Jake said. Toni glanced at him at his tone.

“Something happen? You've been prickly for a couple days.”

“No.”

Toni didn't pry further. They made their way to the lobby area and off to the side, beyond one of the ropes. Dressed in jeans and *Javier and Sons* T-shirts, they could be mistaken for none other than the construction crew.

Jake watched the activities in silence, from the movement of food and people to the placing of signs and red carpet. No expense was spared in the welcoming of the site's benefactor; even ice sculptures were carried in from refrigerated trucks to one of the two air-conditioned tents. Madeleine had thought of everything down to the fuel for the sparkling new generators delivered early in the morning.

He forced himself to admit: she'd nearly pulled off the impossible. He'd never thought her able to arrange everything as she had.

She was damned good.

Two black Lincolns with tinted windows arrived, and Eric emerged from the office. Jake watched him hurry toward the Lincolns and greet the six well-dressed men that emerged from the cars. A movement from the office caught his attention as Madeleine exited more slowly, clipboard and phone in hand. She signaled Mark as she strode toward the newcomers, and the athletic man jogged to join her.

Jake turned away.

"Mr. Howard has enough staff members to build this place," Toni said, surprise in his voice. "Never knew a man who needed so many *personal assistants*. Bet that's the Nigel Eric was talking about. He looks like a weasel."

Jake turned, his gaze lingering on Madeleine. She looked even more unhappy. Walking beside her was a tall, slender man of about forty speaking privately to her. The others trailed with Eric and Mark addressing them.

"They're all the same," Jake muttered.

"Eric and Madeleine seem all right," Toni said. "They can keep Justin."

“Eric, maybe,” Jake responded. “Not Madeleine.”

“You have to pity her somewhat, Jake. She’s been set up for failure, and she knows it.”

She looked toward them, and Jake met her gaze. He knew as much, but his pride couldn't excuse her blunt rejections.

“I think she’s doing well,” Toni continued. “Even if we have to tear down the lobby. She’s annoying at times, but she doesn’t tell you how to do your job. Remember Old Willy?”

“That man was hell to work for,” Jake agreed with a nod.

“Maybe after Mr. Howard’s visit, you can try again,” Toni said.

“Looks like I’ll be lonely at the end of the world,” Jake replied.

“Hey, she wore your boots. You don’t think that means something, no matter how small?”

Jake returned his gaze to Madeleine. He'd been too angry at her to look at her feet. He took in her shapely form in its stark black suit, his gaze resting on the black boots peeking from beneath wide pant legs.

“She did,” he said with a small frown. With her, he wasn’t sure what that meant.

He recalled how it had felt to stand with her under the magical moonlight two nights prior. She was affected by him; her breathing changed when he touched her and she grew nervous, an unusual reaction for one accustomed to giving orders. He remembered how clear her green eyes had been in the moonlight, how turmoiled she appeared, and how she had completely walked away from him. He had never seen anything as beautiful or enticing as she appeared that moment before she turned her back to him.

Angered by the memory, he looked at the boots in a new light.

“Those are expensive boots,” he muttered.

“Yes, they are,” Toni said with a chuckle.

They fell into silence and returned to observing the scene before them.

Soon after the arrival of the black Lincolns, the distant sound of a helicopter filled the air. Jake and Toni turned, watching as a white helicopter landed in a newly poured concrete helipad a short distance away. Two all-terrain Land Rovers met the helicopter.

Madeleine, Justin, and Nigel assembled their party near the entrance of the lobby. Madeleine was pale but calm. Eric rounded up several roaming reporters before the Land Rovers reached the lobby area.

Jake and Toni watched as a tall, grey-haired man near sixty emerged from one of the Land Rovers. Immediately, photographer bulbs began flashing. A security detail of four men surrounded Mr. Howard, blocking him from Jake’s view until he proceeded down the red carpet and arrived at the lobby entrance.

Jake and Toni leaned forward on the wooden fence dividing the remainder of the site from the lobby. They watched Mr. Howard greet each of those in Madeleine’s party before he stepped into the lobby, followed by Nigel. Madeleine remained behind and signaled Eric, who darted to the catering tent.

Jake shifted to watch. Toni noticed the ill-placed reporter chairs first. Jake glanced at him at the hard nudge and followed Toni’s gaze with his own.

The floor was sinking already on one side of the lobby.

“Christ.” Jake stiffened and started around the grizzled foreman. “Did they double the amount of chairs we told them was safe?”

“Leave it. You can’t do anything, and if you make a scene, Madeleine will never forgive you,” Toni said, placing a hand on his arm.

Mr. Howard took pictures with local politicians before walking the length of the lobby to stand behind a red ribbon stretched before a lectern. He pulled out his notes and began his speech.

Jake's attention was caught by something far more interesting: the crack in one of the faux finished floors lining either side of the marble entrance. The crack crept into the lobby. Jake counted the number of chairs set up for staff and reporters, grimly realizing Mr. Howard's staff hadn't just doubled the numbers Toni supplied Madeleine as being safe—they'd tripled them, as if daring fate to destroy what they'd built.

Jake could only watch as the worst possible scenario unfolded too quickly to stop. The crack reached the back wall, and with a sickening sound of wood splintering, the floor on the right side of the marble walkway dropped, cracked, and popped much like an ice-coated pond thawing. People were pitched off their chairs.

The crack crept up the back wall and down the seam of where the marble walkway separated from the surrounding flooring. Mr. Howard was ushered by an alert bodyguard onto the walkway as the floor beneath the rest of his staff snapped. The back wall shuddered; the lights flashed; the ceiling split in several directions.

Following a long, stunned pause, people dashed out of the building. Jake and Toni stared.

"Never seen that before," Toni managed.

"Wow," Jake breathed.

Jake hurried through the construction to the front of the lobby. While plainly ruffled, Mr. Howard tried to appear calm and took a few more pictures before his bodyguards shepherded him toward the waiting cars. The crowd milled out in the open. Caterers and their staff exited the tents to witness the commotion and waved those displaced by the crumbling lobby into the tents.

Jake's gaze found a furious-looking Eric glaring down a satisfied Justin. Farther in the distance, he made out Madeleine being pulled hastily toward the parking lot by the man Nigel. They were followed at a distance by a few others and paused just before the parking lot.

Jake clenched his jaw and stepped on top of a small pile of bricks to watch.

She'd been set up, no doubt by Justin.

Nigel's face flamed with anger. He faced the smaller woman, his voice nearly audible even at Jake's distance. Madeleine, silent, looked from him to the ground as he shouted.

"Jake, we need to stop this before it falls down completely!" Toni called.

Jake reined in the instincts urging him to assist Madeleine rather than the building. Toni tapped his arm, and he went. It took two grueling hours to stabilize the crumbling structure so nothing damaged the expensive marble flooring. Jake worked his men hard and was pleased when Eric joined in to assist in preventing the ceiling from caving in. By the time they finished, all but the catering tents and one black Lincoln had gone.

Jake joined Toni and Eric beside a stack of water bottles presumably left by the caterers. He accepted a bottle and poured water over his head before drinking another.

"That'll do until tomorrow," he said, turning to admire the haphazard work.

"Incredible."

"I didn't know that could happen to a building," Eric said with a frown. "What happened?"

"Someone on y'all's staff put twice as many chairs as the structure could hold," Jake said. "That just happened to be the one spot that could bring down the whole thing."

"Who knew about the capacity?" Eric asked.

"I told Madeleine and Justin," Toni responded.

"Justin," Eric repeated, red creeping up his face once more.

"Where's Madeleine?" Jake asked. All three looked toward the office.

"Probably pleading for her job right now," Eric said. "She's still being yelled at by Mr. Howard's staff."

Jake looked at his watch. "Christ." He waved at several of the workers headed toward their trucks and wiped his face.

"Thank god it's tequila night," Eric whispered.

"Starting early tonight," Toni grunted. "You gonna rescue your boss?"

Eric ducked his head and hesitated. He turned, half-heartedly heading for the office.

"We'll go with you," Jake offered, plagued by a sense of guilt for Madeleine's predicament. The three walked toward the office. Toni glanced at his watch and then at Jake.

"Bar opens in about an hour. You want to go directly over?"

"I'll drive you guys over from here," Eric volunteered.

"Definitely staying 'til close," Jake said. "I'll be in tomorrow. Maybe take Monday off instead."

"We've got a lot to do," Toni said. "Eric, why don't you occupy Madeleine away from the site for a day? Take her mind off things?"

Jake almost objected; if anyone spent a day with Madeleine away from work, it should be him. He held his tongue. Eric was delayed answering by the emergence of two of Mr. Howard's staff from the office. Eric relaxed as the two departed toward the waiting Lincoln.

"We can go now," he said.

"I need something out of the office," Jake said, his gaze lingering on the window nearest the desk. "Come, Duke."

He entered the darkened office and nudged his sunglasses up, eyes seeking Madeleine. He paused just inside the door and closed it behind Duke.

Her head was bent, her forehead supported by her palms. Her frame was tense, her appearance one of utter defeat. Jake considered leaving in silence until she looked his way with red-rimmed eyes.

“You all right?” he asked.

She wiped her eyes and cheeks hastily but met his gaze. Her nose was red, her face flushed. His instinctive reaction would've been to take the fragile woman in his arms. He clenched his jaw instead, aware his actions would probably equate to an act of war with the difficult woman.

“Thought you might like Duke to stay. We're headed to Lucky's,” he said.

She looked to the dog, her face softening. She nodded without speaking. Unable to handle the sight of her suffering without doing *something*, Jake crossed to the small, rank bathroom and tugged free a few tissues from the box. He strode back to her desk and handed them to her.

“Thank you,” she said in a tight voice.

He braced himself for yet another rejection before saying, “You're welcome to come.”

She looked away.

“Thank you,” she repeated.

Jake forced himself not to respond as he wanted to. The woman was already upset. She'd seemed interested in him sometimes and even worn his boots on the day that mattered most. Yet she continued to refuse him. He didn't understand it.

“Yeah,” he drawled. “Have a good night.”

He left, angry once again at her, but also at himself. As much as he tried to tell himself it'd never work between them, he found himself falling for her.

\* \* \*

She waited until everyone was gone then left the site alone with Duke. She'd cried all she could; her mouth and eyes were both annoyingly dry. She returned to her hotel, hiding out in the hot bath for a couple of hours, until the hot water forced her body to relax. She refilled the bath with hot water three times, watching out the hotel window as it grew dark. She wrapped a towel around her and flipped on two lights as she paced to the bed. A bag of junk food—candy bars, cookies, and pastries—awaited her. She'd worked her way through half of her normally off-limits food and found them to be as comforting as her bath.

She flung herself on the bed and stared at the ceiling. As fatigued as she was, she didn't want to sleep, didn't want to end the worst day of her life crying next to a bag of chocolate.

She rolled and flipped open the phonebook to the restaurant entries. She read through the different types of restaurants, finding all unappealing. She had no appetite, but she needed something decent to eat. Her last hot meal had been at Jake's.

At the thought of the man, her gaze fell to the small advertisement for Lucky's Bar.

If she'd known Mr. Howard's visit would be the end of her career ... well, she couldn't say she wouldn't have taken this job. Despite the disastrous ending, she didn't feel nearly as devastated as she expected. She was doomed. Her career was over. She'd have to find a way to pay off Mama's medical debts.

She'd failed.

Maybe there was some sort of release in knowing none of it mattered anymore. Or maybe she realized the rest of the world hadn't stopped despite her day. It was still

Lucky's Bar night, and everyone normal in the world was doing what they always did. For once, she wanted to be one of them. She debated for another tired moment, wondering if that was good or bad.

At least she was given one small reprieve: she would finish the project before being pushed onto the street. Nigel said Mark had begged for her job on her behalf, and of course, he'd decided to listen.

She wanted to kill Justin, but she had better things to do. She needed to take the time Nigel allowed her and find another job, not sit here looking for restaurants. She sighed.

Her phone rang. She debated not answering until she saw the number was from her mother's nursing home.

"Hey baby," her mother's warm tone said as she answered.

Madeleine felt like melting out of shame. Her eyes blurred with tears.

"Hey, Mama. How are you doing?" she asked.

"Very good. The food here is great, the other sickies fun, and the nurses sweet," her mother said. Her voice was strained but cheerful, as always.

"I'm glad you're doing okay," Madeleine said with relief. "The doc says you have another surgery scheduled."

"Should be an easy one. Removing another tumor. How're you doing, baby?"

"Good, really good," Madeleine lied. "The project is interesting. I should be done here in a few months. I'm thinking of switching jobs."

"I thought you liked it there."

"Well, I kind of need to grow a little, I guess."

"It's your ex, isn't it?" her mama asked, voice hardening. "I told you he was a weasel."

"And you were right, as always," Madeleine said with a chuckle. "Yeah, he's making life at the office a little difficult. I need a change anyway, Mama."

"You work too hard. Your eyes will wrinkle up and your hair turn silver by the time you're thirty."

"Gee, thanks, Mama."

"I'm serious! I know I'm as much of a burden as your job."

"No, never, Mama," Madeleine said quickly. "I want you to be healthy, and I can make that happen. When you're better, maybe we can move someplace else."

"Like Texas!" her mother said eagerly. "You know I've always wanted to live in the southwest."

"Eh, not sure you'd like it here, Mama," Madeleine replied. "It's nothing but desert and some hills."

"But lots of room. No cement stretching for miles, and I bet you can see all the stars!"

"Yes, you can."

"When I'm better, we'll move to the southwest."

Madeleine's heart ached at the words. The doctors weren't sure if her mother would ever be well enough to live an unassisted life. With her seizures and cancer, she needed constant medical attention, and Madeleine hadn't seen a hospital anywhere near where her hotel was.

"Ok, Mama," she said softly. "We can do that."

"I'll do some online research and tell you where we're moving."

"Sounds good, Mama," she said. "I've gotta get back to work."

"Love you, baby."

"Love you, too."

She hung up, both heartened and tormented by her conversation with her mother. She wasn't sure how to tell her she'd completely failed, that the next operation was the last she could pay for. Once Nigel fired her, she'd have to declare bankruptcy and pray there was another way to pay for her mother's medical issues. She pushed the ugly thoughts away. She had time to figure out something—and she would, even if it meant working multiple jobs.

Duke whined from his position resting on the small hotel couch. Madeleine looked at him and smiled, pleased the dog was back. She hadn't noticed how much she enjoyed not being completely alone until Jake reclaimed his dog two days prior. Duke's return was a small token that reminded her Jake was at least somewhat concerned, or he wouldn't leave his dog with her.

Her gaze fell to the boots, and she pushed herself up.

She'd never been to a real bar, never been drinking with anyone. She'd drunk plenty during business socials but never just to do it. She debated which she wanted more: a good night's rest or not to be alone with her depressive thoughts.

"What do you think, Princess?" she asked, hesitating.

The dog didn't answer. She stood and dressed, seeking some excuse not to go but feeling as if she needed a drink. In jeans and short-sleeved blouse, she paused once again before pulling on her boots. Duke stretched and hopped from the couch as she started toward the door.

"Stay, Duke," she ordered. He sat and panted. "You're the only man worth knowing anymore. If Mark comes by, eat him."

She left him with the television on to keep him company and walked to her rental car. A short ten-minute drive later, she pulled into a crowded parking lot. Lucky's Bar was what she imagined it would be: crowded, smoky, and large. The bottom floor was

split between an indoor bar area and an outdoor deck with a barbecue pit surrounded by tables, chairs, and even some sagging couches.

She felt out of place in the bar. It was loud, boisterous, and *packed*. A sign marked “Pool” pointed toward the second floor while another marked “Beer” pointed toward a large bar. She maneuvered through the crowd, seeking any faces she recognized. There was standing room only at the bar. She made her way to it and assumed the spot of a large man leaving.

“Vodka cranberry!” she shouted at one of four bartenders. A smile indicated he heard as he deftly exchanged money and drinks with the people beside her.

“Tab or cash?” he shouted back at her.

“Cash!”

She reached into her pocket and pulled free a few bills, then twisted to look around behind her again. She saw no one she knew. Her eyes drifted to the second floor, whose balcony overlooked the fire pit. It appeared to be less crowded.

“Five!”

She turned at the bartender’s shout and passed him a ten, waving to refuse the offered change. He tipped his hat and moved on. She turned her back to the bar and leaned back, sipping her drink.

She watched the crowd. Despite the raucous environment, she felt herself relax. The people distracted her dark thoughts while the alcohol warmed her from the inside out. She finished her first drink within a few minutes, and twisted around to the bar again. Bartenders bustled to and fro as she waited patiently before one stopped to take her order. Her gaze went from him to the buzzing BlackBerry. Nigel's number flashed. She sighed but answered.

“Madeleine Winters.”

“Madeleine, it’s Nigel.”

She slumped.

“Hello, Nigel.”

“Listen, Madeleine, we need to—”

The phone was plucked from her ear. Startled, she turned face the interloper, ready to deck whoever stole her phone. She went still as she realized it was Jake. He gave the phone a look of complete disgust and turned it off, tucking it into his back jeans pocket. He lifted her pink-tinted drink.

“This yours?” he yelled above the crowd.

She nodded.

“Jim, tab!” he bellowed to the bartender, and turned without awaiting a response.

“C’mon!”

The moment he stepped away, he was swallowed by the crowd. She waded through the mass of people until she reached the empty stairwell where Jake awaited her. He flashed her a small smile, one that made her pulse quicken, and started up the stairs.

“It’s crowded!” she shouted.

“Tequila sells for a quarter a shot tonight!” Jake said. “You drink tequila?”

“Not really.”

Her eyes took in the chiseled body ascending the stairs before her. He wore dark jeans, a worn though fitted dark T-shirt, and boots. They reached the second floor, where half a dozen pool tables were spaced across the floor with the wall edged in tall, round bar tables and stools. Jake led her to the table at the far end, where she recognized Toni, Eric, two blonds, and a couple of others from the site.

She almost sighed at the sight of Jake's ex-girlfriend. For a woman he was supposed to have broken up with, she was around more than Madeleine cared to see her.

Jake handed her back the pink drink and accepted a pool cue from Toni, who winked at her.

"You play?" he asked as Jake stepped to the table.

"Not very well," she replied.

"Eric here's a demon," Toni said as the smaller man in the large cowboy hat approached. Eric grinned.

"You play pool?" she asked, aware of how little she knew of Eric's life outside the office.

"I was my college's champion," Eric said. "I'm glad you came!"

She raised her drink in response and took a sip.

"Eric's played every round so far," Toni said, then studied her. "Go sit down—you look beat!"

She did as he suggested and sat heavily in one of the bar stools at the nearby table. She relaxed, ignoring the two blonds at her right, and watched the three men play.

Eric was a demon at pool. He played against both Toni and Jake with an ease and sociable manner she'd never seen in him elsewhere. She studied his youthful features, troubled that she had worked with him for two years without knowing even where he was from or what college he attended. Their fast-paced office didn't give either of them the time for personal chats. Watching him, she realized how little she knew about the man she'd worked so closely with.

The Eric she thought she knew would never have worn jeans.

She stirred her drink absently, her eyes following the beautiful, petite blond—Lily—as she sauntered up to Jake with a suggestive smile. She rested a hand on Jake’s arm, maneuvering in front of him to stand as closely as possible while she gazed up at him with her large, doll-like blue eyes.

Madeleine rolled her eyes and looked away in agitation. Toni’s smile widened from across the table as he caught her eye. Eric’s gaze, too, fell on the blond, but he frowned with unusual grimness.

“Jake, you’re up!” Toni bellowed.

Jake moved away from the blond, and Madeleine caught the twitch of his jaw. The man was hard to read, but she had begun to understand the exaggerated drawl and twitching jaw were signs of annoyance. Both occurred regularly around her.

Jake missed his ball, and Eric sprang forward, ending their match.

“I’ll buy the next round!” Eric called.

“The losers’re supposed to buy!” Jake said with a smile.

“It’s an honor! What’re you having?”

He took their orders and moved through the pool area to the stairs. She watched him go and looked at Jake as the large Texan shifted toward her. He rested his cue on the table and leaned against the wall beside her, sipping a beer. Dark eyes moved lazily over the room. His frame radiated heat, the woodsy scent of his aftershave tickling her nose.

Toni and Lily stepped to the table for a match.

“I need your help, sweetie,” Lily called in her honeyed voice, eyes on Jake.

“You can manage,” he said without looking at her.

Madeleine almost smiled. Lily batted her long eyelashes and gave another smile before turning away and making a scene of bending over the table until the miniskirt

nearly revealed everything beneath. Jake ignored her, turning to face Madeleine. He boxed her in, his left hand on the table and his large, heated body before her. She leaned her head back to meet his gaze.

“Sorry about today,” he started.

“Too late to change things now,” she said. “Thank you for trying.”

“Just doing my job,” he said. “Can I expect to see you leave the site more often?”

“Probably not. Mr. Howard still wants the building complete in far shorter time than is feasible. It’ll be harder for me to push for funding after—sorry. I shouldn’t have mentioned that.”

She searched his face, waiting for him to jump all over the financial aspect like a normal businessman should. It was Jake’s turn to shrug.

“We’ve known there was a funding issue,” he replied, unconcerned.

“That doesn’t bother you?” she prodded. “Back east, you’d have cancelled the contract by now.”

“We’re not back east,” he said with an edge, raising an eyebrow.

“You really hated it there, didn’t you?”

“Not my kinda place. Too rushed, too many people concerned about things that don’t really matter,” he said.

“People like me.”

“Yeah.”

“You don’t *always* act like you despise me,” she said, resting her head against the wall behind her. His gaze fell to her mouth.

“I’ve never despised you, Madeleine.”

“So that whole, last person on the face of the earth ...”

“I didn’t say you don’t drive me crazy.”

“You know, you—” she started, straightening in her chair. Her face grew hot.

“There’s the spark. Haven’t seen it in a few days.” Jake cut her off with a small smile. “Yes, Madeleine, you drive me crazy. Your priorities are damn screwed up, but you’re a solid, honest person, so I can’t truly despise you.”

“*My* priorities are screwed up?” she echoed. “You know nothing about me, Jake. Coming from a typical ego-driven man, I’d say that means you think I pay too much attention to things other than *you!*”

“Bingo.”

She stared at him, unwilling to read more into his words but her heart quickening nonetheless. He continued to gaze at her with a directness that made her uncomfortable. She felt trapped by her own attraction to him once again. He planted his booted foot on the bottom rung of the barstool and rested his knee against the wooden seat between her legs, preventing her from rising.

“Going somewhere?” he asked with deliberate casualness.

There was a challenge in his gaze that made her body heat and pulse double. She wanted to wiggle away from him, get the hell away, and regain herself and control of the situation.

“To the bathroom,” she shot back in a voice she hoped sounded cool.

He leaned closer to her until their faces were inches apart. She heard and felt his breath and could only gaze at him. Dark eyes the color of melted chocolate captured her with their intensity, and she felt heat bloom and spread through her.

“You, Madeleine Winters, are a coward.”

His voice was low and silky, the tension between them brittle. He dropped his foot from the stool and turned away without moving far. She stood for a quick escape, her

face and body hot. Lightheadedness made her reach for the table to steady herself. She drew a deep breath, surprised to find herself breathing fast.

As she stepped away, she sought to convince herself it was the alcohol affecting her and not the six feet of solid male who had just told her in his own weird way that he was interested in her. She spent fifteen minutes in the bathroom trying to convince herself he didn't mean it, and even if he did, it didn't matter. When she felt settled, she returned to the pool room to find all five of them huddled around the small table. A tray of shot glasses filled with a warm golden liquid were in the center of the table with empty shot glasses around it.

Jake and Eric each took a shot as she walked in. Eric choked, but Jake gave a satisfied growl as he slapped the glass down on the table.

"C'mere, city-girl," Toni said, gripping her arm as she approached.

"No, I'm not—"

"I dare you."

At Jake's words, she stopped mid-sentence. Fifteen minutes in the bathroom couldn't take away the desire bubbling within her. It did nothing to diminish the sexy Texan's chiseled features, hard body, or the look of pure challenge in his eye that made her want to prove to him she wasn't the coward he claimed she was.

"Fine. What do I do?" she demanded.

"Drink!" Toni exclaimed, and pushed two shots of tequila toward her.

"Cheers!" Jake raised his shot glass.

Madeleine glared at him but clinked her glass to his and tossed back her head. Fire slid down her throat. She forced back a gag and dropped the shot glass to the table.

"That all you got?" she retorted. Jake smiled, his eyes taking in her face and resting on her mouth once more.

“City-girl can drink,” Toni yelled.

“Let’s see what you can do,” Jake said. “Three shots. First one done wins. You up?”

“Yes!”

He set three shot glasses before her and glanced at Toni.

“Ready, set, go!”

Toni’s cry would be one of the last memories she had of the night.

## CHAPTER SEVEN

The harsh buzz of Jake's alarm clock tore through the heavy slumber of a drunkard. Before even awaking fully he felt the pulse of a tequila headache. He rolled and slapped the nightstand once, twice, three times without reaching the annoying clock.

He opened his eyes and focused on the blurry red numbers. The morning light was too bright already. A well-placed blow silenced the buzzing demon, and he rolled onto his back, slinging an arm over his eyes.

Almost immediately he became aware of the sounds of movement and rustling within his room. Curious, irritated, he peeked from beneath his arm. He pushed himself onto his elbows and gazed at Madeleine, who paced his room.

“Madeleine?” He forced the words through a cotton mouth. “Am I that late for work?”

She faced him, an astonished look crossing her face before it flamed red. Green eyes were even more beautiful sparkling with anger. He'd never seen her hair down before, and the halo of auburn curls surprised him. She was stunning when she wasn't so concerned about keeping every little thing about her in perfect control.

“Don’t play games with me, Jake!” she snapped. “I guess now you’ll feign memory loss?”

He stared at her, baffled. She sat heavily on the rocking chair in the corner and pulled on her socks. He looked down at his naked form covered by a sheet and sat up with sudden interest.

“You’re not here because I’m late,” he said.

His eyes went to the clock, which read seven-thirty, then to the pretty pink panties bunched next to the clock.

“So, we slept together?” he asked.

He heard her movement stop and felt her fiery gaze.

“God, I wish I hadn’t drunk so much,” he groaned.

“You don’t remember at all!”

“Do you?” he challenged.

She made no answer, and he faced her again, watching her search the room. She was pale and unsteady on her feet.

“What have I done?” she muttered to herself.

“Damned if I know,” he said, entertained.

“I’m not talking to you!”

“What are you doing?”

“Looking for my ... my things,” she said, growing redder.

“Like these?”

He reached over and plucked up the underwear, dangling them in front of his face with a smile. She gave him a long look.

“What’ll we do?” she asked in a hushed tone.

Jake understood the question but faked ignorance. He balled up the panties and tucked them under the pillow behind him.

“I say you take your clothes off and we do something we’ll both remember.”

Madeleine's face blazed again.

"If anyone finds out, if Mr. Howard or Nigel finds out ..."

"So you slept with someone," he said. "Why should they give a damn?"

She snatched her purse off the floor.

"This didn't happen, Jake," she said, turning to him. "We'll just ... be like nothing happened."

"I think it was meant to happen and *is* meant to happen again," he said in annoyance.

"No, it can't."

The woman had a way of pissing him off without trying. He rose and wrapped the sheet around his waist.

"If a man and a woman are attracted to each other, there's no reason not to," he said. "Try to tell me you're not attracted to me, and I'll call bullshit before you finish."

"Would you deny being attracted to me?" she asked.

"Not at all. I've wanted you for a long, long time, and I still want you now," he replied. "If you decide to pull your head out of your ass anytime soon, give me a call, and we'll go out."

She stared at him in surprise. Angry at her once more, he strode past her into the bathroom and slammed the door.

She dropped by the hotel to pick up Duke then went straight to the site, humiliated and angry. Her head *hurt*. Everything was going wrong! She was doomed, even if she finished the project on time, which would never happen. She couldn't ask for a transfer off the project; Nigel had been clear it was her last project as Mr. Howard's employee. She needed to find a job before this one was over.

Queasiness at her unsettled stomach made her reach for a stack of crackers. What would she do if it did fail? Yet, as dire as her situation was with her mother's financial issues, she couldn't take her mind off what had happened the night before.

She'd never, *ever* had a one-night stand in her life! She'd never accepted a tequila shot challenge, never awoken some place she could not remember arriving at, never been as overwhelmed by a single day in her life.

The sensation that plagued her most was what it felt like awakening with her body in Jake's arms. She'd been snuggled in the crook of his body with his arms around her.

Her face flamed as her body ignited at the memory of his hot skin, solid muscles, and his thick manhood, which was awake even if he was not. Never had she felt so comfortable, so safe, so whole pressed against any man. In his arms, she'd had the brief sense of invincibility: she could do anything with him supporting her.

She straightened in her chair. She remembered nothing of the night, but her inner thighs, abs, and *down there* were as sore as her head. Both ashamed and aroused by the idea of a night with Jake, she stared at the closed bathroom door of the office.

The office felt cramped. It was gloomy and smelly, though the AC was working full power. Duke was stretched on his couch. Her eyes lingered on him.

She was falling for the difficult man. She felt once again alone and isolated. Relationships were too complex for one as involved in work as she was. Jake knew that already. It would not take long for his eye to be drawn elsewhere to a woman capable of paying attention to him, perhaps back to the beautiful Lily.

She didn't like the thought of Jake wanting anyone but her. Oddly enough, it made her want to cry, which only confused her more.

She'd screwed up in too many ways to fix this time. Yesterday was officially the worst day of her life. Ever.

She tapped her pen on the desk, needing to keep her thoughts off her personal problems. She glanced at the clock, relieved to see it was near three. With any luck, she wouldn't see Jake at all!

Once again, her eyes fell to the bathroom, from where the stench came. She rose, grabbed her cleaning supplies, and crossed to it. She couldn't solve her own issues, but she could solve the mystery of the stench. Determined not to waste the day moping, she pulled her shirt over her nose and entered the smelly bathroom.

It was growing ranker daily, like the rest of her life, she realized in irritation. She spread a towel on the floor and began to look around for the source of the smell. She'd been waiting for the sewage tank below the trailer to spill over or overflow, but it hadn't. The smell was not from the sink, the tiny shower, the toilet, or the closet, yet it permeated the air.

She cleaned despite the smell. She scrubbed the floor, the walls, the porcelain, and the shower and closets for the second time in a week. There was not so much as a fleck of dust within the bathroom, but she cleaned it all again. She threw out the two magazines she had brought in, switched rolls of toilet paper, and even let the water run in the sink and shower for five minutes to see if the pipes themselves were rank.

In the end, she sat back on her heels and gazed around with a frown. Adjusting the shirt further over her nose, she tossed her cleaning supplies and dirty rags in the small cleaning bin.

Duke panted from the doorway, watching.

She climbed to her feet. She wiped down the window sill again and knelt to pick up a can of Lysol. Her gaze fell to the single air vent in the bathroom beside the spray, and she paused.

Kneeling, she pried off the rusted vent. The opening was narrow, less than the width of her hand, and too dark to penetrate visually. She snagged a flashlight and shined it into the dusty vent. Too far down for her to make out was what looked like a trash bag.

She stood and took the flashlight. Exiting the trailer caused her head to pulse angrily at the brilliant Texas sun. Before she made it down the stairs, she was sweating and smelling like tequila. Disgusted, she muttered a few curses as she walked, followed by Duke.

She moved to the head of the trailer, where the bathroom was located, then knelt to peer beneath. She made out cinder blocks, wheels, the lines to the sewer tank and water, and several sagging tarps attached to the trailer.

With a sigh, she crawled part way beneath the trailer, shining the flashlight up under the bathroom. The entire area was covered in black plastic tarp that had begun to sag in the middle. It stunk as badly as the office. She estimated where the vent would be and shined the light up, frowning to see the entire area covered by the plastic tarp.

She scooted forward and drew her knees up. She nudged something and glanced down, surprised to see a wallet beneath her right knee. She left her flashlight to mark her place and crawled out from under the office to open the wallet.

Part of her hoped it was Jake's, thereby giving her an excuse to see him. Another part of her panicked at the thought. She hesitated and then opened it.

To her surprise, none other than Alex Hollon's face peered back at her from the blue and white driver's license. She flipped through the wallet, wondering how he could ditch the project *and* his wallet without so much as a phone call to the office. Of course, by this time, he would have called Nigel begging for money.

Alex was predictable like that.

She scooted forward and rose to place the wallet out of Duke's reach on top of a stack of wrapped cement blocks. She patted the dog as she returned to the office for scissors. There was no way around cutting the black plastic tarp; she was sick of the smell. She imagined some small animal getting trapped in the vent and suffocating in the tarp.

Retrieving a pair of scissors, Madeleine looked around for her phone to call Mr. Howard's office and let them know she had Alex's wallet. She gritted her teeth as she remembered Jake had taken her phone the previous night. She'd been in too much of a rush to leave in the morning to search his clothing for it.

With a grimace, she returned to the painful Texas sunlight and crouched once more at the side of the trailer. Her headache was worse, and she promised herself she'd leave as soon as the workers did this day. No part of her wanted to remain when she wanted nothing more than to lie in bed.

She crawled beneath the trailer again and paused beside her flashlight. She shoved the scissors through a taut part of the tarp and began to cut.

Duke growled but remained in place. She concentrated hard on maneuvering scissors and the stubborn tarp. She cut with her right hand until it started to cramp before switching to her left.

Suddenly, the tarp split of its own accord. The familiar smell washed over her anew, far more powerful, as something thudded to the ground before her, kicking up dust. She coughed and covered her nose and mouth, gagging. The dust settled once more to reveal the source of the smell.

For the first time in her adult life, Madeleine screamed.

Jake and Toni were close enough to hear the piercing scream. It jarred both, and Jake's gaze flew toward the office. He sprang forward before the older man and slowed as he reached the trailer, circling it.

Madeleine paced madly, muttering and wringing her hands while Eric stood slack-jawed to the side, phone in hand. A snarling Duke had cornered Mark and forced the pretty boy from back east onto a stack of bricks.

"Eric!" Jake called, jogging toward the pale man. "What happened?"

As he neared, he realized Madeleine was having some sort of breakdown. Her breathing was panicked enough for her to hyperventilate soon, her eyes wild and face blanched.

"I don't know. I heard her scream ... " Eric said.

"Duke, heel!" Jake bellowed. He strode forward and caught Madeleine's arms, stopping her mid-pace. "Madeleine!"

She looked up at him, green eyes glazed and unfocused.

"I found Alex. I found Alex," she whispered.

"Sweetheart, what's wrong?" he demanded, alarmed. He gave her a mild shake, and she blinked.

"I found Alex," she said again.

"Found Alex?" Toni repeated as he paused beside them. "Here?"

Her eyes watered, and she nodded. "I found Alex."

"What the hell does that mean?" Toni asked of Jake. Jake focused on the distraught woman before him. Her body trembled, and she was growing paler.

"Let's get you inside," he said, steering her toward the trailer door.

"No!" The single word was accompanied by a sharp jerk as she pulled away.

Jake was beginning to think the woman had completely lost it. Her face flashed red as anger pulled her out of the odd madness. She lifted a trembling hand toward front of the trailer and pointed.

“I found Alex.”

Dread slid through him. She met his gaze. Toni moved away, trailed by Eric, to the edge of the trailer. Toni bent and looked. Madeleine turned away. Jake watched as Toni started to crawl beneath the trailer, stopped suddenly, and darted back out. The older man met his gaze with a look of horror and disgust.

“C’mere, sweetheart. I think you’re done for the day,” Jake said as gently as possible. He took her by one arm and started in the direction of the trucks parked a short distance away.

“Duke,” she murmured.

He glanced at her, upset to see the normally self-controlled woman so shaken.

“Duke, come!” he called over his shoulder.

The dog bounded past them, stopping beside the truck. Jake opened the passenger door to allow woman and dog in. He turned, his gaze lingering on the trailer. Eric was on the phone and pacing, while a pale Mark stood near him. Toni jogged toward the truck, and Jake waited for him.

“I’d say he’s been there awhile,” Toni said quietly. “That’d explain that god-awful smell. If we’d left the office in the shade of the building, it would’ve taken a few more weeks for that smell to get so bad.”

“Damn,” Jake murmured. “You call the police?”

“Yeah, but you know how they are. They’ll be here when they’re here,” Toni said.

“Where you taking her? I’ll send them your way.”

“Home with me,” Jake said. “Just call when they’re on their way. I’ll see if I can’t get her to calm down. Maybe some of Kitty’s cooking will help.”

“Warn her against eating the beans,” Toni advised. “They’ll make her more miserable.”

“Send the men home. We’ll close the site until the police can take care of Alex,” he said.

“Will do.” Toni hesitated and stepped closer. “You think this has anything to do with Cortez?”

Jake had considered the same with an uneasiness that made him alarmed for Madeleine’s safety.

“I don’t know,” he answered just as quietly. “I’ll see what I can get from her once she’s calm. Javier might have some insight.”

“Police won’t do any good if it is Cortez,” Toni warned. “Watch your back, *mi hijo*.”

He slapped Jake’s arm, turned, and trotted back to the office. Jake watched him with a frown. The idea of Madeleine being coerced or in danger was not something he expected to enrage him. He drew a deep breath and walked to the truck.

She was hugging Duke when he climbed in. For the first time ever, he wished the damn dog hadn’t come along at all. If Duke were out of the way, she might be hugging *him*.

He looked her over. She still trembled but was regaining some color. Her breathing had steadied, and she was aware enough to pull on her seatbelt. Satisfied that she was not about to flip out even worse, Jake started the car and blasted the AC. He waited until they reached the smooth highway before addressing her.

“You okay?”

She took awhile to respond. Her face was pressed against Duke's neck, her arms slung around him.

"Yes," she said in a small voice. "I'm sorry, Jake."

"For what?"

"I thought I was good at taking care of myself, but you always have to rescue me."

He almost smiled at the frustration in her voice.

"No problem. Makes a man feel useful," he returned.

He reached out to touch her. Her soft hair was tied in its normal bun at the base of her neck, and he stroked it before touching her face. Though he could not see it, her cheek was wet.

"Ah, sweetheart, you kill me with your tears," he murmured.

"I'm not crying," she said stubbornly.

Jake chuckled.

"You're not taking the right way to the hotel," she said.

"Not going to the hotel."

"Where are we going? I don't really ... I want to clean up before talking to the police."

He heard the tremor in her voice; it only reinforced his fierce need to take her somewhere safe and protect her from the mountain of events the weekend had inflicted upon her.

"Kitty's got something cooking for you," he said.

She was silent another long moment. He braced himself, expecting an argument or a command to return her to her hotel.

"Okay," she whispered.

She leaned away from Duke against the window and was soon dozing. He patted the panting dog, appreciative of the beast despite its ability to charm Madeleine in a way he could not.

He wanted nothing more than to stop the truck and take her in his arms until she calmed. Instead, Jake tightened his grip on the steering wheel until his knuckles were white.

Everything about the project was doomed, he brooded.

They reached the hacienda and drove slowly down the dirt driveway to the whitewashed adobe house. Madeleine's eyes were dry but rimmed with red. Black shadows smudged the delicate skin beneath them.

Jake stopped in front of the quiet house and hopped out of the car, followed by a panting Duke. She exited more slowly, her exhausted face turned up to the sun's warmth.

He closed the door to the truck and drew her into his arms. He expected resistance and relaxed when she leaned into him. Tension melted from her body as his arms circled her. He nuzzled her hair with his cheek.

"My head hurts. I need to lie down," she said.

"I think you know the way to my room."

"You son of a bitch!" she muttered, pulling away from him.

"What'd you do now, Jake?" Kitty accused as she opened the door.

"Kitty, do you have a guest room where I could lie down?" Madeleine asked, turning to her.

"No, but you can have Jake's room. I'll keep him out."

Madeleine glared at him before walking into the house. Kitty winked at him, the only indication she was rooting for him, and followed her in. Jake watched them ascend the

stairs and retreated to the kitchen. Kitty had made oatmeal chocolate chip cookies earlier; the house still smelled of them. He helped himself to two and sat at the kitchen table.

The phone in his pocket vibrated. He shifted to pull Madeleine's BlackBerry free and looked at the number, hesitating only a second before answering.

"Madeleine's phone."

"Does she have another personal assistant?" came the voice of an amused woman.

"No, ma'am. She's had a rough day. I'm just helping out."

"She has a lot of rough days lately," the woman said with a sigh. "And I don't help her. And who is the man kind enough to help my baby?"

"Jake. I'm working with her on a project in Texas."

"I've always wanted to live in the southwest."

Jake smiled. Madeleine's mom had a voice similar to hers, only slightly worn and deeper.

"You can come visit," he offered. "Might cheer her up."

"Maybe," she said. "I have surgery soon, but maybe after."

"Are you very sick, ma'am?" he asked.

"Sometimes. I've been battling cancer for a few years now. Thought I was winning, but I'm not so sure anymore," she said with a chuckle. "My poor baby is stuck taking care of me. She's paid for everything so far and does it working for that buffoon Nigel. Would like to give him a piece of my mind for all the stuff he puts her through. She's all I got."

Jake was quiet, beginning to understand a little more why Madeleine was so damn driven.

"I'm sorry to hear that, ma'am. Madeleine's a good girl."

"The best. She's got the biggest heart of anyone I know. And who are you, Jake?" she laughed. "Someone Maddy would approve of me talking to?"

"Probably not," he admitted. "We have a love-hate relationship right now."

"Sounds like a good start. Just don't back down, son. She needs someone to take care of her but is too stubborn to admit it."

Jake chuckled.

"I'm off to a doctor's appointment. Tell Maddy I love her."

"I will, ma'am," he replied. "Take care."

"You take care, too, Jake."

He set down the phone and nibbled on a cookie, dwelling as much on the discovery of Alex's body as on the discussion with Maddy's mom. His thoughts turned to Justin, whom he was pretty sure set up the lobby scene for failure. Madeleine wouldn't have risked too many chairs, not after he explained the whole building would fall down if she ignored him. Mark was the only other one who knew.

Anger lit his insides. What kind of man would set a woman like Madeleine up for failure? Mark dated her; he had to know about her mother and how that was Madeleine's motivation for driving herself into the ground as she did.

And then there was Alex, who probably got what he deserved. Jake didn't like to think ill of anyone, but he'd heard nothing good about Alex and saw the mess he left Madeleine in.

Jake wiped his face and rose, seeking out his uncle. Javier was in the greenhouse, dutifully spraying water on Kitty's plants by hand, as she insisted.

"Kit's got you slaving away for her today?" he asked with a smile.

"It was a trade-off for the cookies," Javier said. "It's worth it."

Jake watched him for a long moment, until Javier turned to him.

"I saw Madeleine come in with you," he said. "What happened? Building fall down yet?"

"Not yet," Jake said with a grunt. "We found Alex, the guy she replaced as the project manager."

"Found?"

"Killed and hung in a tarp under the office."

Javier lowered the spray bottle, his dark eyes sharpening. He studied Jake.

"You wanna make the phone call, or should I, *tio*?" Jake asked.

"*Jesus Cristo*."

"Hope your cousin wasn't involved in this one. Rather high profile, not the kind of thing that dies down fast."

"Give me your phone, son," Javier said, holding out his beefy hand. "Give me a few minutes."

Jake obliged on both counts and left the greenhouse, waiting patiently for his uncle to call his cousin, the infamous Carlos Cortez who ran drugs through the area. The whole family splintered when the cousins were young, and Jake asked once, long ago, if Javier were involved in the criminal side of his family. Javier swore to Jake his money came from construction and not drugs. Jake believed him; he saw how hard his uncle worked and how good his heart was.

"Wasn't him," Javier said, appearing after a few brief minutes.

"Would he tell you if it was?" Jake challenged. "He's not known for his charity work."

"He won't lie to his family, even if we disagree on basically everything the other does," Javier replied. "Said Alex owed money to everyone, including Perez, whose goons dropped by the other night. Your girl paid Alex's debt to Cortez; he likes her, same as I do. Won't give her any issues."

"He *likes* her?" Jake echoed. "She paid him bribe money?"

"Alex borrowed money from him. Carlos found out about a bypass they're building, a superhighway from the border that'll put the Oasis in a profitable position. Carlos went straight to Howard with the demand for a shit-ton of protection money. Howard's paying him millions. Carlos didn't need to talk to Howard's lackeys, but Alex sought him out for a loan. Guess he had a gambling issue or something."

"What an idiot," Jake said, anger stirring.

"Your girl's in the middle, but Carlos swears he didn't do anything to Alex and won't do anything to her."

"How kind of the murdering bastard!" Jake snapped. "If he's to be trusted, then that leaves Perez's gang."

"I told him about Alex," Javier said. "You know how this works. You pay the piso, you get the protection. Carlos was pissed Perez has been sneaking around. Could sever his income from Howard."

"Whoa, *tío*, there's not gonna be some kind of showdown over the Oasis, is there?" Jake asked, alarmed.

"Carlos can outgun Perez any day of the week. For once, I think my cousin will take care of the business he should," Javier said, anger in his voice. "Besides, you can't have your girl in that mess."

Jake studied him, uncertain of what to think. Javier was the noblest man he knew; if he hadn't lived with him for so long, he might find himself wondering how Javier could even talk to Carlos. At the end of the day, Jake understood how strong family bonds were, especially among his uncle's generation, and dismissed his suspicion. Javier had always done things by the book. He'd never hurt anyone, never even lied to anyone.

"Don't think she's my girl anyway. Thanks, *tío*, I think," he said at last.

"She's lucky she paid Carlos," Javier said. "Whether or not she meant to, she chose an important ally."

"I doubt she knew. She was trying to do what's right, like she always does," Jake said, his thoughts going to the woman's ill mother.

Nearly caught in the crossfire between two drug gangs with a mother fighting cancer and soon, no job. He shook his head, pitying the woman.

"If Howard's anything like the idiots working for him, he's just another scumbag." He bit off the words. "She doesn't deserve to get fired."

"Might be the best thing going for her," Javier offered.

Jake laughed.

"Might save her skin. She's a good project manager, *mi hijo*, resourceful and smart. We could use one in the family business."

"Like she'd leave the big city to stay here," Jake said. As soon as the words left his mouth, he couldn't help wondering if she would. Her mother would in a heartbeat. His gaze went to the house.

"You both have things to think about," Javier said wisely, and squeezed his shoulder. He set out spraying more herbs with calm Jake envied.

Jake said nothing and retreated to the kitchen for more cookies. He stared at the ceiling until certain he'd do something stupid—like bother the woman in his room. Instead, he went out to the small gym Javier built him when he returned from New York and worked out, his mind on getting the Desert Oasis project out of his hair once and for all.

When he'd calmed his nerves and bathed, he returned to the house, surprised to find Madeleine sitting in the bay window holding a fragrant cup of Kitty's super special spiced wine. He hesitated to intrude and then stepped into the formal living room.

Madeleine looked from the fence line behind the house to him.

"You okay?" he asked.

"Yeah, thanks. Been a rough week."

"Yeah."

He waited for her to dismiss him as she was wont to do. When she continued to look at him, he sat near her.

"You need anything?"

"I think I need a new job," she said slowly.

Jake laughed.

"I'm serious, Jake."

"I think you're right, Madge."

"Oh, that idiot!" she grated.

"Not to bring up bad memories, but did you see the look on Nigel's face when the lobby snapped in two?"

She looked at him, a small smile tugging free. Jake made a horrified face, and she covered her mouth to keep from laughing.

"Mr. Howard had too much Botox to look surprised, but I think one of his eyebrows got stuck up like this," he continued, making another face.

At this, Madeleine laughed out loud.

"I shouldn't laugh at my bosses!" she said, covering her mouth again.

"Yeah, you should. They set you up for failure and made your life a living hell."

"Jake," she said thoughtfully. "I'm glad you beat up Justin. I shouldn't say it, but I am."

"Me, too. I can kick his ass again, if you want," he offered.

She shook her head.

"I think Eric might," he added.

"Eric? He's non-confrontational."

"He was pretty pissed about the lobby. Mark wanted to make sure it failed."

A troubled look crossed her pretty features. She frowned and sighed.

"I should finish the Oasis and find a new job," she said. "But I can't stand the idea of setting foot in that trailer after ... after Alex."

Her voice trembled. He leaned forward and took her hands as he had once before, after the vandals broke in.

"Walk away," he said. "Don't go back. Javier will hire you to manage his construction company."

"Jake, don't be ridiculous," she said. "You know I can't do that."

"Why not? It can't be out of some misplaced sense of loyalty to a bunch of idiots who have done nothing but abuse you."

She looked down at her hands clasped in his, her jaw tightening. He recognized the sign she was about to wall him out again and squeezed her hands with one of his, then handed her the BlackBerry.

"Your mama called earlier," he said. "I answered in case it was important. She's a nice lady."

She looked at him, troubled, then took the phone.

"Seems like you got a lot on your shoulders. Whatever it is, I can help, if you let me," he whispered. "I mean that, Madeleine."

He rose, unwilling to stay for either a rejection or an excuse, and left her in peace to think.

She watched him, drained yet touched by his concern. Her gaze dropped to her phone, and she flipped to the last caller, her mama. Of all the thoughts running through her mind, one kept returning.

*Alex died for money.*

The memory of Alex's mummified corpse made her shudder. She couldn't help seeing her own face on his body. It was where she was headed. They'd needed money for different reasons, but at the end of the day, he'd ended up dead, and she didn't feel too far off. She'd never thought she could identify with Alex, but she found herself commiserating with him. He'd borrowed money foolishly, yet he ended up staggering under the same weight of the world and his debt as she did.

She wanted nothing to do with the Desert Oasis project. She wanted to call Nigel and tell him what ring of hell to go to, then punch Justin. She wanted to burn her accounting book and leave them where they'd left her: guessing how the hell they were going to fix things.

If she stayed, she'd at least have a paycheck long enough to get Mama through more surgery.

If she stayed, she'd end up like Alex, running herself into her own grave.

She'd be no use to Mama as a mummy. And Mama was right: if the cancer didn't clear up soon, she'd spend the last good months Mama had all the way across the country working for self-serving people who used her and who she was now close to hating.

She couldn't escape the memory of Alex's body.

She fiddled with her phone, terrified she was making the wrong choice, then dialed her mama.

"Hey baby," came her mother's worn but chipper voice. "You doing okay?"

"I should be asking you that," she replied. "Jake said you called."

"He's a nice man. Handsome?"

Madeleine's gaze went toward the kitchen, where Jake and Javier's low voices came from.

"Not at all," she said with a faint smile. "Ugly as sin."

"Good. Mark was a pretty boy and knew it. You're better off with an ugly man, Maddy," her mother said wisely. Madeleine chuckled. She was quiet for a long moment, her heart flopping in her chest.

"Mama, I'm thinking about coming home," she said.

"For a visit or leaving the project?"

"Leaving the project. And Howard Enterprises."

"I think that's a good thing for you to do."

"Do you? We might have some money issues," she said.

"Baby, you've got the best head on your shoulders of anyone I know. If you feel it's time to go, then go. We can spend some time together. Maybe I can get out of the home and stay with you," her mama said. "And we can finally go on vacation somewhere."

"After your surgery," Madeleine said sternly.

"It'll be an easy one. Not too worried. Then you can show me Texas, and I'll meet Jake."

"Not so sure about that one."

"He called me ma'am. Had half a mind to tell him I'm not that old."

Madeleine smiled. Her mother sounded tired again.

"I'll call you tomorrow, Mama. I'm going to try to fly out in the next day or so," she said.

"Will be awesome to see you, baby."

"You, too, Mama."

She hung up and looked at her BlackBerry, her leash to Howard Enterprises. For the first time in days, she felt furious at someone other than Jake. She opened the email application and sent a simple email to Nigel and Justin.

*Consider this my resignation. I'll be on a plane home tomorrow.*

She had twenty emails awaiting her, and the blinking red reminder made her even angrier. She calmly set down her tea, shrugged off the blanket Kitty gave her, and then strode to the kitchen.

Javier and Jake fell silent as she entered. She ignored them and withdrew a bowl from the sink Kitty had been using to rinse berries. She filled it with water, pulled the battery out of her BlackBerry, and dropped the pieces in.

Now she felt a little better. When she turned, Jake and Javier were staring at her.

"Jake, I need your phone."

He hesitated, gaze going to the bowl, before handing it to her.

"Thank you."

She took it and left. She dialed Eric and left him a message asking him to book her a flight. She retreated to Jake's room, somewhat comforted by his scent in the air, and sat down with paper and pen to figure out how far her last check would stretch.

The end result wasn't pretty. She'd be filing for bankruptcy by the end of the month.

She wiped her face, the image of Alex's body in her mind again. She'd find a different way—she always found a way.

## CHAPTER EIGHT

She holed herself up in his room the rest of the day. Kitty took her food once, and Jake spoke to Deputy Miguel when he dropped by. He didn't expect Madeleine to come out of his room until the next morning, but she emerged when Kitty announced dinner.

Toni and Eric came for dinner, and the five of them talked while Madeleine ate quietly. Rather than look broken, as Jake half-expected she would, she appeared alert and thoughtful. Kitty stuffed her full of food. Eric seemed somewhat subdued, his normally open features cloudy.

After dinner, Madeleine and Eric moved to the bay window where she sat earlier to talk. Javier and Toni sat on the porch smoking cigars. Jake joined them, giving the two coworkers their privacy.

"Did Howard's folks miss another payment?" Javier asked casually.

"Yeah," Jake answered. "Should've posted yesterday and hasn't yet."

"I don't know, Javier, but I think this project is doomed," Toni said.

"How much we out?" Javier asked.

"Not much. Madeleine cut some corners and saved us some. We're out of pocket only about a hundred thousand," Jake said.

"Much better than the three million we were out last week," Toni said with a chuckle.

"Javier, you're a brilliant businessman, but I have to tell you, I think this one's over."

"Looks like it."

"You're thinking of pulling out, *tio*?" Jake asked, surprised Javier would admit to making a mistake about a project.

"Looks like it," Javier said again. "Think you were right about this one, *mi hijo*."

"It'd be the first time," Jake said ruefully.

"Not so. You practically run the company."

"We run the company," Jake said.

"Could use someone with Maddy's business sense, though," Toni said. "Jake can build you a palace out of a stack of sand, but none of us has that money background like she does."

"No one can fire a man like she can, either," Javier agreed. "Poor Smithson ..."

Jake smiled.

"Jake knows the offer's open," Javier said. "Right, *mi hijo*?"

"Not my choice, *tios*," he said. "If she wants to stay, she knows she can."

"Good boy," Toni said.

They fell into quiet, his uncles puffing on cigars while he wondered what she'd end up doing. If she decided to stay to finish the project and nothing changed ... well, he'd decided to give up on her.

He hoped it didn't come to that.

"Hey, guys," Eric said, stepping onto the porch.

"Eric," Toni said as he blew out a puff of smoke. "You ever try a cigar?"

"No, no, not my thing."

Javier reached into his pocket for another and clipped the end off. He handed it to Eric, who hesitated before taking it.

"Puff and I'll light."

Eric obeyed and coughed a few times. Jake watched, amused. Eric beat his chest and plopped into the chair between Javier and Toni.

"We'll make a man of you yet," Toni said.

"Great, thanks," Eric managed.

"Jake, do you have a minute?"

He twisted, surprised at her voice. Madeleine stood in the doorway, her hair tied back in a loose ponytail. She wore one of his T-shirts, which hung on her smaller frame, and her jeans.

He rose and walked into the house. She led him to the door leading out from the kitchen toward the fence line and out into the warm night. She didn't go far, instead pausing beside the fence and facing him. He resisted the urge to move closer. She still seemed vulnerable and too appealing with her hair loose. He'd learned the hard way against making the first move and waited for her to speak first.

"Jake, I wanted to apologize to you for my behavior. You've been a gentleman, for the most part, and I've been a bear," she said softly. "You were right about priorities and mine being somewhat misguided."

"You had good intentions, and you've got a good heart," he said, taking a step closer. "I understand why you did what you did."

"Doesn't make it right."

He held out his hand, not sure what she'd do. She hesitated then took it. He drew her into his body and hugged her tight.

"When I saw Alex's body, I thought—you know, that's me. In over my head, delusional about making it when the deck was already stacked against me," she whispered. "And I realized I don't want to end up like him, even if that means I lose everything."

He was quiet, sensing the heaviness of her thoughts. He nuzzled her hair with his chin.

"I quit, Jake."

"Seriously?" he asked, his hope rising.

"Yeah. Told Nigel and Mark I'm done. Eric booked me a flight home tomorrow."

"Home to ... "

"New York."

The words fell harder than he expected.

"For once, I want to be with Mama when she goes into surgery. You know I've never been there? I've always been at work when she was at the doctor's," she said, guilt in her voice.

"She understands, Madeleine," he said.

She withdrew from him and wrapped her arms around her, stepping away. Her gaze turned to the area where they'd seen the coyote pups several nights before. Jake gritted his teeth, debating saying what he wanted to when she was already so beat down.

"Madeleine, I know you're leaving, and I know this won't mean much, but I really do care about you. If Mama ever decides to tour the southwest, or you decide to come back for any reason, I'd really like to see you again and be something more than what we are now."

She gazed up at him intently. He wanted neither another rejection nor to pressure her and took a step back, holding up his hands.

"Just putting that out there. You've got a lot on your mind, but I couldn't let you go without telling you that."

She said nothing, and he turned to leave, feeling angry for a different reason.

"Jake."

He stopped.

"You asked me something the other night, and I ran out on you. I wanted to say, if the offer's still open, then yes."

The pulse of desire that lit his blood at her words made him clench his hands to keep from grabbing her and heading for his bed. He turned with restraint. Her gaze was clear,

though her words were hesitant. She didn't look ready to run this time. He stayed where he was and held out his hand, waiting again for her to come to him.

She took it, and he drew her against him, wrapping one arm around her and touching her face with his free hand. Her face was flushed with what he knew to be desire, her pupils dilated and her breasts pressing against his chest with each quick breath.

He took her in, tracing his fingers against her chest, enjoying the feel of her skin. He brushed her lips gently with his thumb and lowered his head to kiss her. Her lips were warm and soft, her kiss hesitant. He savored the sensations, wondering if this would be the only kiss he'd ever get from her.

He deepened the kiss and pulled her more tightly against him. She responded, and heat bloomed fast between them. He wasn't aware how lost he was in the feel of her body and mouth until Duke bounded by with a loud bark that jarred them both. Jake withdrew, listening to her unsteady breathing. His heart beat fast within his chest, and he couldn't help feeling as if he'd never needed anyone before this night.

The dog was headed toward the coyote's den.

"Duke, heel!" he called.

She chuckled huskily, and he rested his forehead against hers. They stood quietly, breathing each other's breath.

"You wanna stay with me tonight?" he whispered. She hesitated, and he prepared himself mentally to slam on the brakes.

"Jake, I don't know what I'm doing yet. I've totally changed my life in the course of a day."

"Can't hurt anything."

"What kind of logic is that?" she asked with a laugh.

"Just you and me. Happy for the night. We'll deal with tomorrow together when it gets here. Trust me. Things'll work themselves out."

She met his gaze, troubled.

"I do trust you, Jake," she said.

"Stay with me."

He kissed her forehead and cheeks. She closed her eyes, and he kissed her eyelids.

"Yes, Jake, I'll stay with you."

He squeezed her closer, breathing her scent in deeply. He wasn't sure what the morning would bring, but he was thrilled he'd find out with her in his arms.

\* \* \*

Before dawn, Madeleine gathered her few belongings under the cover of darkness and stepped into the hallway. She lingered in the doorway, gazing at Jake's wide, strong back. He lay on his stomach, sprawled across his bed. She smiled at the sight and closed the door.

She still wasn't sure what she was doing, only that whatever snapped in her yesterday—after she found Alex's body—felt permanent. She felt decent despite what awaited her, the sense of certain financial failure giving her both a sense of clarity and calm. She'd made her decision—whatever happened, happened.

Her gaze went back to Jake's door, and she couldn't help the heavy regret settling into her gut. Life would be so much easier with a man like this, one strong enough to help her and who truly cared for her!

With Jake, she'd be happy. She'd never thought that way of Mark or any other guy she dated. He accepted her as she was, and she couldn't help admiring his intelligence and kindness. She'd never met a man half as good as this one, and she'd blown off every attempt he'd made at being her friend!

She had a lot to fix, if she were ever to deserve a man like Jake. She descended the stairs, and Javier awoke from his doze in the recliner. He sat up and squinted at her through sleep-filled eyes. His gaze fell to her small bag and briefcase.

"Leavin'?" he grunted.

"I have to, Javier," she said. "My flight leaves in a couple of hours."

"Comin' back?"

"I don't know."

"I can fire Jake. You can have his job."

She chuckled. Javier rose and walked with her to the door. He opened it, and they stepped onto the front porch. It was still dark.

"I've got a lot to take care of, Javier," she said, sensing he was waiting for her to say something.

"Less of a burden when you've got someone who cares about you."

"It's just not that easy."

"The offer's always open. You'll always have a home and a job with the family."

His words touched her and made her throat tighten. She nodded, hugged him, and stopped to pet Duke before crossing to her rental car. Eric had brought over all her bags from the hotel. She thanked him silently, sure she'd never appreciated him as much as he deserved.

She drove away from the hacienda, her gaze turning toward the west, where the Desert Oasis lay wilting in the desert. With some hesitation, she drove in its direction, apprehensive about what she'd feel when she saw the disaster that resembled her life.

She didn't park in the gravel lot; it was too close for comfort to the office now sectioned off with police tape. Instead, she stopped alongside the road and sat on the hood of her car.

The Desert Oasis gleamed in the first light of day. The generators were all off, the scene before her silent and sad. While Jake's men had done a great deal in the two weeks they'd been working, the skeleton didn't look any more complete. Part of her thought she could live up to the challenge, that maybe if she repaired the building, she'd repair whatever it was inside her that hurt.

The rest of her wanted the structure torn down and buried, the reminder of years of decisions she'd made thinking she was doing the right thing. Mama and Jake were right: the time she wasted on the building and overtime was better spent with those she loved. The thought of Alex made her shudder.

No, repairing the building wouldn't help her. It hadn't helped Alex. If anything, the two had gone down together, and she wasn't about to be the third victim of the Oasis.

She roused herself and withdrew her notebook from the car, flipping to the familiar priorities list.

*1. Complete Desert Oasis; 2. Pay off medical debt; 3. Ask Nigel for raise.*

With a spurt of anger, Madeleine tore the page free and shredded it. She tossed the pieces to the desert, wishing she could burn them. She pulled out a pen and sat pensively, then wrote her new priorities list.

*1. Mama; 2. Jake (if the bastard will have me); 3. Everything else.*

She wasn't sure she liked it. With a glance at her watch, she realized she'd have time to think on her way home. She drove herself to the airport, mind already working on a to-do list for the next week or two. She wasn't sure what would happen after that. For the first time in years, since Mama's cancer appeared, she almost felt like she'd shaken off some of the burden she'd been carrying.

The indirect flights back to New York were long, and she reached the city just after dark. After lugging her baggage through the airport and hailing a taxi, she finally arrived home to her tiny apartment in Manhattan.

She didn't remember it being so small. At barely 700 square feet, it was the size of her hotel room in Texas. Her answering machine displayed two dozen messages, most of which she assumed came from Nigel or Mark within the past twenty-four hours. She ignored it and tugged her suitcases into the bedroom before sitting down at her computer.

She dozed off researching hospitals in Texas and bankruptcy proceedings, visions of Alex's body disturbing her sleep. Her phone ringing awoke her around eight, and she snatched it out of habit before realizing she was better off screening her calls.

"Hey, baby," her mother said. "You made it back okay?"

"Hi, Mama," she said, stretching back. "Yeah, I'm good. Got in late and didn't want to wake you. Surgery still scheduled for eleven?"

"Yep, it is. Knock me out, cut me up, out by two."

Madeleine grimaced at the imagery and couldn't help but to calculate the amount of money per hour this one would cost. Almost seven thousand an hour for three hours. Her gaze drifted to the numbers she'd been scribbling down when she dozed off. She'd added this one to the column of debts she couldn't afford and would submit to the bankruptcy court.

"I'll be there," she said.

"That's sweet of you, baby. It's an easy one, though, so don't worry if you can't make it."

"I kinda quit my job so I could refocus life, Mama," she half-joked. "I'll be there."

"I go in for prep at ten. See you soon!"

Madeleine clicked the phone off and wiped her face. She made herself a quick breakfast and took a shower, snagging her notebook on the way down to the street. She felt naked without the BlackBerry and touched her hip twice out of instinct. She joined the morning bustle and merged into the crowd headed toward the subway, where she snagged a seat and cracked her notebook open.

*1. Mama; 2. Jake (if the bastard will have me); 3. Everything else.*

She toyed with what she'd written, created her daily to-do list, then went back to the priorities list. After a few minutes, she put her pen away and stared at it. There wasn't anything she wanted to change, as odd as the list seemed. She'd never had a list without some sort of plan behind it. There was no concrete plan here, except to pay attention to those things in life she should've been paying attention to all along.

An hour later, she emerged near the hospital. She looked at her watch in irritation, realizing she was already ten minutes late. Mama would be in surgery prep. She made her way through the familiar corridors of the Sloan-Kettering Medical Center to the waiting area in the surgery wing. She glanced around the room before starting to the receptionist desk to check in and ask about Mama.

And stopped in place. She turned to face the two figures seated in the waiting room.

"We're all wearing boots!" Eric said, lifting his foot.

She stared at him, unaware of what she'd thrown on in her hurry to leave. Her gaze went to Jake, who sat beside him. He studied her without speaking. Her heart flipped in her breast, but she didn't dare let herself imagine what would make Jake fly to the city he hated.

"I quit, too," Eric said. "Javier offered me a job in Texas."

"So what're you doing *here*?" she asked.

"Priorities," Jake said.

She met his gaze, her throat tightening.

"Eric, could you grab that bag from the car?" Jake asked.

"Great!" Eric said, standing. He offered her a quick hug before leaving.

Madeleine didn't know what to say and couldn't read Jake's stoic features. He patted the seat beside him, his large frame displaying ease she didn't feel. She sat beside him, her blood flaring at his familiar scent and nearness. She wasn't sure what to say in the awkward silence between them.

"Your mama looked good before she went in," he said.

"Good. I didn't intend to be late."

"Considering you had a head start ... "

Her face grew warm. She hadn't meant to slight him by leaving without saying good-bye. She'd meant to figure out what the hell was going through her head.

"Truce?" he asked, holding out a hand.

"Truce," she agreed, and took it. He squeezed her hand, and she forced herself to look at him.

"I meant what I said. We'd figure things out together," he said.

"You hate New York, and I can't just leave."

"Priorities, sweetheart. I decided you're mine. Besides," he added, "I think Javier is thinking of buying a helicopter. He's getting old and lazy. Might also cut down the distance to UT Anderson Cancer Center."

She stared at him, stunned. His face softened, and he touched her cheek with his index finger.

"There's something wrong with you, Jake," she said, shaking her head. "You're crazy."

"I just know what I want. I can be just as stubborn as you."

"I know that. But I'm not going to burden anyone with my issues. I've really got to deal with some things, Jake."

"We'll figure it out. Life's easier with family."

She gazed at him, torn between running away one last time and sinking into Jake's arms and letting someone else help her for once. She didn't want to run. She wanted to stay.

"What d'ya say?" he asked quietly. "We in this together?"

She leaned forward, closing her eyes as his strength circled her. For the first time in years, she felt she could deal with whatever awaited her tomorrow, as long as he was with her. She couldn't shake her uncertainty, but she knew he wasn't the kind of man who'd leave her alone to face it.

"Thank you, Jake."

"Don't thank me—thank Kitty. She swore never to feed me again if I came back without you."

She tugged free her notebook and flipped it open to the new list she'd made. Jake took it.

"Priorities." He read the rest of the words silently, a smile spreading across his face.

"I still get to boss you around," she said with a small smile. He met her gaze, took her face in his hands, and kissed her gently.

"We both know we make a good team," he said.



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