



THREE TIMES THE COUNTRY LOVIN'



PEPPER SWAN

A WHY CHOOSE ROMANCE

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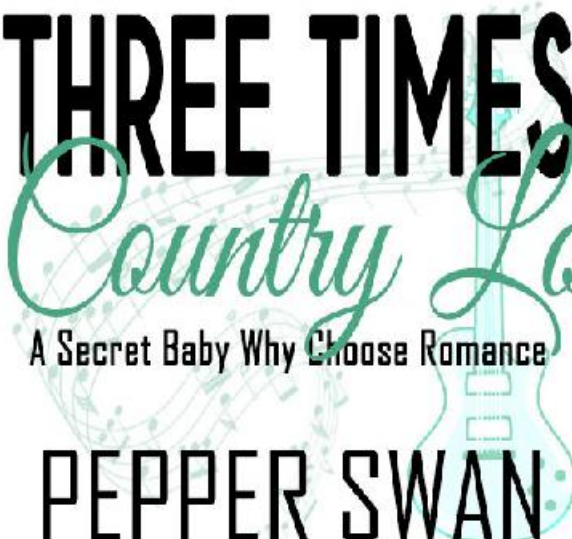
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THREE TIMES
the Country Lovin'
A Secret Baby Why Choose Romance
PEPPER SWAN

Three Times the Country Lovin'

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Colt 1

Mickey Finn threw the first punch right around two a.m.

I knew this because that was the time we usually closed Dirty Coyote.

Not tonight.

“You sonofabitch!” Daryl Geller yelled, the recipient of said punch.

At that moment, I knew Mickey’s anger management classes might not be working.

“Not again,” Tammy Jennings said, walking up to the bar, as she watched the two men go at it. “And he’d been doing so good, too.”

Tammy owned the place along with her husband Jimmy, who was already making his way across the empty dance floor to put a stop to the fight. I could tell by the look on his face, the man was spittin’ mad.

Tammy, on the other hand, never seemed to get too worked up over anything. She resembled Dolly Parton, both in her delightful temperament and the way she looked—big, white hair and curvy petite body. Tammy ran a tight ship, meaning there were rarely any physical altercations, despite how some of these good ol' boys liked to kick it up on the weekends. Dirty Coyote was a respectable country-music dance hall, and Tammy did everything in her power to keep it that way, including calling in the local sheriff if necessary.

This brawl didn't seem to require the big guns, so to speak. Just a little interruption and restraint by some of the saner good ol' boys.

“Clearly, he's not doing good enough,” I said, as I blasted past her to get to Mickey before he got hurt. Not that he probably didn't deserve whatever seventy-something Daryl Geller could throw at him, but the last time this happened, I ended up spending the night in the ER while they fixed Mickey's broken thumbs. Mickey never could throw a decent punch.

I wasn't in the mood tonight. Not after the day I'd had, but we'll get to that later.

“Stop it! Break it up!” I yelled as I approached, ready to do whatever necessary to get the two men off each other. Being one of the managers of the place, along with Tammy and Jimmy, our stand had always been that any kind of a brawl had to be frowned upon, and usually, the folks participating in the physical dispute were either suspended from the club for a specific amount of time, or if it was their second or third offense, they were tossed out with no hope of a return ticket.

Our bouncers or security guys usually walked the parking lot starting about an hour before closing, just to make sure everyone made it to their cars safely. Not that we didn't have our share of cameras out there... we did... but having an actual human hanging around, especially these ex-military guys, kept everyone safe.

Scotty Belmont, my other best friend, who worked behind the main bar four nights a week, had already inserted himself into the middle of the fight. I arrived just as he took a punch meant for Mickey right on the chin. It swept him right off his feet, and he landed flat on his ass.

Daryl had been a professional fighter in his day, winning several lightweight championships. Not exactly an easy target for Mickey's anger, nor anyone who tried to stop one of Daryl's punches mid-air.

Daryl might be getting older, but his fists remained lethal.

"Fuck, Daryl. I'm trying to help you, here," Scotty yelled, as he jumped back up and stepped between the two men once again. This time, I was there to stop this madness, and I pulled Mickey back by his arms when he tried to land another punch. At least this time, he remembered to keep his thumbs outside of his fist instead of hidden under his fingers, which caused the breaks during the last fight.

"Calm down, Mickey. Just fucking let it go. Whatever got you going, fighting with Daryl's not worth it." I knew my words fell on deaf ears when Mickey kept right on struggling to get free of my grasp. Daryl did the same to Scotty, who weighed in at one seventy-five, and with a height over six feet, he could usually stop most fights without too much trouble.

Except this one.

Daryl was a little guy comparatively, about five-six and couldn't weigh more than one-forty soaking wet, but he threw a punch, that if it landed right, could take any of us down in a heartbeat. The man was as strong as a bull and as stubborn as a self-righteous politician.

"He's saying shit that isn't true," Mickey yelled.

"You don't want to believe the truth, is all. But everything I'm saying is fact. You're just too dang full of yourself to admit the result of what you did. You're a shit-show, Mickey Finn. Always were and always will be."

Once again, Mickey started throwing punches, struggling to get closer to Daryl. "You take that back! Take it back, or I swear..."

"Okay! Okay!" Jimmy shouted, as all four of Dirty Coyote's bouncers lunged into the fray, at once stopping both angry men in their tracks. These guys were Dirty Coyote's version of the big guns. You didn't want to mess with any one of them, much less all four. They were big, strong, covered in tats, wore only black, and put the fear of God in you with just one fierce glance.

Jimmy Jennings, club owner, with his easygoing personality, had a commanding voice when he wanted to use it, and despite Mickey's anger, he knew he didn't want to piss Jimmy off too badly, or he'd not only lose his job, but Jimmy would ban him from Dirty Coyote, forever. Mickey played a mean guitar and was the resident stand-in whenever needed, which lately had been on a regular basis. However, Jimmy didn't much care. He could hire another guitar player in a

country minute if he had to. He'd already fired at least a dozen other guitar players since the place opened, for various reasons, one of which happened to be a bar fight. Jimmy was fairly tolerant, but once someone crossed his line in the sawdust, there was no going back.

Mickey had his toes resting on that line, and if he didn't back down, even Tammy, who had a soft spot in her heart for him, couldn't change Jimmy's mind.

"Fine," Mickey yelled. "But this fight wasn't my fault. Daryl's talkin' shit, and I can only take so much."

"I don't care what Daryl said or didn't say. You know not to start fighting in my establishment." Jimmy turned to Daryl. "Maybe it's time for you to head on home, Daryl. I've got a few things I want to say to Mickey. He can stay and help close up tonight. We'll see you next time, Daryl. You drive safe, now. Don't go lettin' your anger get you into trouble out on the road... Tell you what, maybe you'd be better off if someone drives you."

This is the part where I knew Jimmy wanted me to volunteer, so I did. "I'd be happy to do it. How 'bout I take you home, Daryl?"

Daryl hesitated for a few seconds, letting the situation sink in. Scotty probably served him three or four beers tonight, which was his usual for a Friday night, and I knew he was feeling the effects... could see it in his eyes.

"Fine, but next time, I won't go holdin' anything back, Mickey Finn. Next time, they're gonna have to scrape you up off this here wooden dance floor, because I mopped it with your scrawny, no good, double-timing, sorry ass."

Once again, Mickey tried his best to get at Daryl, but this time, Scotty stepped in his way and took the punch instead. He kept his footing, but both men yelled in pain, Mickey from landing the punch, and Scotty from being on the receiving end.

“What the fuck is wrong with you?” Scotty yelled. “You clocked me right in the face, you stupid asshole!”

Still, Mickey persisted in his aggression. I knew Scotty had been doing everything he could to block Jimmy from seeing Mickey’s misplaced anger. Both Scotty and I were his best friends, and we always had each other’s backs. Lately, however, having Mickey’s back seemed to be a full-time job.

“You were in my fucking way,” Mickey yelled, while he shook out his hand. This time, I didn’t care if anything was broken. He’d have to take himself to the ER.

Tammy, however, had come over to nurse Scotty’s bruised face.

“Fucking back off, Mick,” I told him, while standing right up against him. My voice was purposely harsh and low, so only he could hear me. “Cause if you don’t, Jimmy’s going to fire your ass right here, right now, and this time, I’m not fucking bailing you out.”

One thing Mickey knew for certain, if you wanted to keep your job, you did *not*, under any circumstances, annoy, bother, tease, or show even a hint of disrespect to the man who helped put a roof over your head. And in the next moments, I could see Mickey back down. He knew I was serious about my threat. There was a limit to what even I would do for him if he persisted on being a total ass-wipe.

“Let’s go, Daryl. I’m sure Donna’s home waiting for you, and she wouldn’t like it much if you had to tell her you sent Mickey to the hospital,” I told him, throwing my arm around his red-flannel-clad shoulders. I thought I’d appeal to the soft spot he had for his wife. When it came to Donna, there was nothing he wouldn’t do for her, and one thing Donna hated most of all was Daryl getting into a physical fight with a friend.

Mickey had always been a family friend... at least until tonight.

Daryl may have been a professional boxer, but he was also a solid cowboy who ran a horse ranch right alongside Dusty Lasiter’s old ranch, now home to the band, Hot Sugar.

Daryl, Dusty, and Daryl’s wife Donna were once known as the unbeatable Ds. Unbeatable, because Daryl could whoop anybody’s ass who tried to cross them, and because between the three of them, they owned more land than anyone else in Sweet Whiskey. Plus, Daryl’s livestock was some of the best this side of the Rockies. When they held their yearly colt sale, ranchers and horse breeders came from miles around to pay top dollar for one of their colts. Last year, nearly two hundred people showed up to bid for twenty-six colts, the price ranging anywhere from thirty-five hundred dollars to ten thousand. It was all about the lineage of the horse and what that horse would be trained for over the winter while it was weened from its mother. The new owner bought the horse in early summer and brought it home that following spring.

“You want to tell me about it?” I asked Daryl once we were sitting inside my truck, and I’d pulled out of the parking

spot behind Dirty Coyote.

“Nothin’ to tell. Mickey’s a bullshitter, is all,” he huffed out the words like he was still pissed that he had to even mention Mickey’s name.

“Yeah, so what else is new?” I spat out, knowing damn well he was keeping the real reason tight to his chest. “That’s not the reason you two were going at it. Has to be something else.”

“Ain’t none of your damn business,” Daryl said, like he meant it. I knew enough not to push him when he got this way, but I also knew if I didn’t get to the bottom of this argument, he and Mickey would be going at it again.

“Might not be. That’s true. Might not be any of my damn business at all. Still, it’s better to hear your side first than to hear it from Mickey. He has a way of twisting things to be in his favor, and I have a feeling this is one of those times when he’s wrong.”

“Damn straight he’s wrong... dead wrong. I thought he was a better man than this. Even though I know his reputation with women, I still thought he had some decency, but the man ain’t got one shred. Not one shred of decency. His mama would be so ashamed. I know she expected more than what he’s givin’. Loretta was a good, God-fearin’ woman, but when she died, she left him to that no-account father of his. Mickey’s got himself a selfish streak runnin’ inside him from his good-for-nothing daddy. It looks like the apple don’t fall too far from the tree, after all.”

I turned down the long dirt road that led to Daryl’s ranch house and noticed that the lights were still on inside.

“Looks like Donna’s still up waiting for you,” I told him.

“Got us some house guests.”

“Oh yeah? Anybody I know?”

“Again, it ain’t your business. Sides, all it will do is make things worse. Mickey’s gotta figure this one out on his own, and so far, he’s thinkin’ all wrong. He’s one troubled young man, and it’s a shame, is what it is. A real shame.” This time, Daryl sounded as if he felt sorry for Mickey, and after what happened tonight, I’d say that showed what a big heart Daryl had, despite whatever Mickey said to him to get him so riled up.

“Mickey’s got a good heart underneath all that bluster. You of all people should know that. It’s just that he’s always on the defense. Tell him anything he doesn’t understand or something that relates directly to him, and all his defenses come bursting out, blanketing all the good. I agree that this thing is between you and Mickey, but again, maybe if you tell me the problem, I might be able to get past all his barricades and draw out his kind heart, instead.”

I was trying my best to appeal to Daryl’s soft underbelly, that I knew he had. I’d seen it time and time again over the years with his wife and his niece and two nephews. They were like the kids he and Donna never had. They doted on those kids like they were their own, and because of it, all three of them would do anything for their aunt and uncle. Of course, they were all grown now and well into their twenties and thirties, but Donna and Daryl still doted whenever they came around.

I pulled up in front of the sprawling, two-story ranch house with its wrap-around porch dotted with enough chairs, swings, and rockers to accommodate any family and friend gathering... which he and Donna liked to do at least a couple of times a month during the summer.

And that's when I spotted her, while I focused on the porch, sitting on a long whicker sofa, strumming on a guitar while she sang something I couldn't hear, looking as pretty as a clear blue sky, CindyLou Geller, Daryl's one and only niece, with a baby pulling itself up from the porch floor while holding onto CindyLou's knees.

My pulse quickened just looking at her. I'd always had a thing for CindyLou and seeing her with a baby at her knees, I had to know more.

"Isn't that CindyLou sitting up on your porch? Is that the company you referred to? Is that her baby?"

Daryl slid out of the passenger seat, turned back around to me, held onto the door, and said, "Ain't none of your God-dang business!"

Then he slammed the door shut, and my mind exploded with the sound.

Flashing on a conversation Mickey and I had well over a year ago after his last attempt at bronc riding. If what he'd told me was true, I knew exactly why Mickey threw that first punch. His defenses were up, and he didn't want to hear anything that contradicted his own beliefs.

"Holy fucking shit!" I said, stunned over what might be a reality. "Is that Mickey's baby?"

CindyLou 2

The only thing I knew for sure about Mickey Finn's feelings for me were written on the back of a bar napkin I'd kept as evidence that we hooked up: I'm in love! Meet me in the parking lot after your shift.

We had a chance meeting at a bar in Cheyenne, WY during Frontier Days, where I worked. Unfortunately, the bar, Big Daddy's Saloon, closed down due to Big Daddy's untimely death about two months ago. We all received a severance package which consisted of a case of Big Daddy's own brew, and a twenty-five-dollar gift card to Big Mamma's Foods, a local grocery store run by... Big Daddy's mother. The beer went down far too quickly, and the gift card kept my Darci in diapers for about a week.

Despite the *generous* severance package, at least according to Big Mamma, I'd been struggling to keep a roof over my head and food on the table ever since.

I had a degree in business, but no one seemed to want to give me a chance, and whenever they did, the pay wasn't enough for rent, much less feed both Darci and me.

I could play guitar and sing harmony, but everybody knew that making money as a musician was about as common as a living unicorn.

Still, I was determined to pay my own way and take good care of my sweet daughter. I just needed someone to take a chance on me, which I felt certain would come my way if I kept trying. *You only drown when you stop swimming*, my mama would say.

Slinging drinks paid well if I could get a job, which I hadn't been able to do until just yesterday when I finally landed a part-time bartending gig at Dirty Coyote, thanks to Uncle Daryl's friendship with Tammy and Jimmy Jennings, the owners.

I'd done everything to try to find a bartending position back in Cheyenne, but interviewing while you're trying to appease a fussy baby who was on a mission to learn how to walk didn't exactly make for a successful job search no matter how understanding the potential employer might have been.

I'd learned that lesson in spades.

I was left with very few options, including having to move in with the only family members who had been consistently stable and had the means to offer me temporary shelter and babysitting duty. My aunt absolutely loved my little Darci. She'd never had children of her own, so all that love had to go somewhere. When I was growing up, it went to me, and now it was aimed directly at my sweet daughter.

My father disappeared while I was still in diapers. My fragile mother should never have raised a child on her own. She did what needed to be done but resented every minute of it. She now lived in a tiny apartment with her latest boyfriend. We chatted a few times a year, but she had no interest in meeting Darci and gave me a hard time during my pregnancy. And my best friend, who I thought of like a sister, abandoned me right in the beginning of this path when I told her I'd changed my mind about having an abortion.

Despite all of that, I knew what I wanted to do and stuck with it... and I continued to stick with it, which had paid off. I was now living in the town I'd always loved, and I had a job in a country dance hall that sponsored new country music artists. At this point, anything could be possible with the right song at the right time. No matter all the nay-sayers, I still held onto my dreams. I wouldn't have come this far without them.

I knew damn well not to trouble Mickey with any of this. He could barely take care of himself, let alone a woman and a baby... his baby. Mickey was about as stable as a green leaf in autumn. Much like my own dad, which made my decision to move to Sweet Whiskey a difficult one... but in the scheme of viable options, I didn't have much choice.

I purposely didn't want to tell him about his child because I didn't want anything from him, especially not a false sense of security. I already knew how that game was played. In my entire life, I met up with my dad maybe four times. I didn't want that kind of non-relationship for Darci.

Unfortunately, my aunt and uncle happened to live right outside Mickey's hometown, which was how I knew Mickey

in the first place. My mom and Uncle Daryl were siblings and as different as puppies and kittens. I'd spend every summer in this town and loved every minute of it.

I'd asked, or rather begged, Uncle Daryl and Auntie Donna not to tell Mickey, or any of his friends, about Darci, but when I saw the look on Colt's face from the light inside the cab of his truck, I had a feeling he suspected the truth of the situation.

At first, after Uncle Daryl exited Colt's red pickup, he backed the rig up like he had leaving on his mind. But then stopped and slowly drove up to the house once again.

"Everything okay?" I asked my uncle as he made his way up the steps to the porch. Darci didn't want to sleep, so I thought I'd play her a couple of songs. I didn't want to wake my aunt. The songs usually worked, just not tonight. Nothing seemed to be working tonight.

"No, nothin's okay," he said, gazing down at my sweet baby girl. "You were the same way as Darci. Never liked to sleep at sleepin' time. Did you try rubbin' her back? Your aunt used to rub your back when you couldn't sleep. That usually did the trick."

"I'll try it," I told him, leaning my guitar up against the wall, next to the creaky whicker sofa. "But first, come sit with me. Tell me why Colt brought you home, and why he's sitting out in his truck, pondering what to do next."

He let out a long sigh, and I knew he carried a load of trouble in his heart. "I can't account for Colt. He's got a mind of his own, and it ain't always right thinking. Still, he's a fine young man. Nothin' like Mickey Finn, but I ain't gonna talk

about him right now. Maybe tomorrow. I'm dog tired. Been a long day and an even longer night. You and that little one should be thinking of gettin' back under the covers. Donna's making her bumbleberry pancakes in the morning, and you don't want to miss that. Little Darci's gonna love 'em."

He bent over then, picked up Darci, and gave her a tight hug. She wore her monkey PJs that always made her giggle when I first put them on her. She loved monkeys and had a bed full of them in all sizes and levels of smooshyness, as I liked to describe them.

Darci gave him a big, warm smile and wrapped her little arms around Daryl's neck like she'd been waiting all day for him to come home. She'd taken to Daryl as soon as she first laid eyes on him. A match made in heaven, no doubt.

"You should be sleepin', baby girl," he cooed, rubbing her back, and sure enough, she slumped on his shoulder with the very first swipe of his big, strong hand.

I immediately noticed his knuckles were red and looked as if they'd been bleeding.

"Uncle Daryl, what happened to your hand? Were you in a fight? Auntie's going to have a fit."

My aunt hated it when he fought. She was afraid someone would press charges, and he'd end up in jail... which almost happened several times... or that he'd kill someone with one punch. Either way would be a travesty for everyone involved, and my aunt wanted no part of it.

"Never you mind," he said. "Let's get this precious girl back to bed."

Darci rubbed her eyes with her fists, and I knew sleep threatened to take her down, despite her resistance.

“You go on ahead. I got a feeling Colt’s got something to say, and he won’t be saying it in front of you.”

“Just do us all a favor and remember me and your Aunt Donna only got your best interest in mind,” he said, as Darci finally allowed sleep to take her. She let out a little sigh and went completely limp in his arms. “Love you, sweetheart.”

“I love you, too,” I told him as he opened the screen door and disappeared inside.

It was one of those warm nights, with a summer breeze that cooled everything it touched. Crickets sang their song, stars filled the black sky, and the trees rustled as Colt slipped out of his truck and headed towards the front stairs.

When the porch light hit him, his familiar swagger sent a rush of excitement through me. I’d had a crush on this tall, lean cowboy from the first time I saw him in town. It was the summer I’d turned fourteen and realized I really liked boys... especially this boy.

He sure wasn’t a boy anymore. He was a full-grown, incredibly handsome man with a sexy attitude, shoulders made of refined steel, arms that could block any of my uncle’s lethal punches, and a smile that should be declared illegal.

Colt Johnson might be only three years older than me, but with that self-confident strut, I knew he already had this adulting thing all wrapped up. Whereas Mickey and I... well, we were still trying to figure it out.

“Hey CindyLou,” he said as he approached the porch steps. “Is it all right if I come on up there for a talk?”

“It’s late, Colt. Maybe you should just go on home,” I told him, even though I wanted him to stay more than I’d like to admit.

He tossed that smile over at me like he was purposely trying to tempt me, and my skin prickled. “Is that you talking or your Uncle Daryl?”

I hesitated. Damn right it was my uncle talking. He’d tell Colt to turn that charm on somebody else, hightail it right on off the ranch, and don’t come back until he cleared all those dirty thoughts out of his head.

And me?

I wanted him to come right on up on the porch, wrap me in those strong arms of his, and kiss me, hard and filthy... which got me in this situation in the first place. Only that kiss had come from Mickey Finn, who was equally as handsome as Colt, in a softer, less rugged way.

And what he could make a girl feel... well... it was downright sinful.

“Come on up, but you can’t stay long,” I cautioned, more for me than for him. “That baby girl of mine gets me up at seven, like she’s got a clock ticking inside her.”

Using Darci for an excuse seemed reasonable under the circumstances.

He stepped up onto the porch, and I knew right away, this was a mistake. When he sat next to me on the whicker sofa

that squeaked from his weight, and I fell into those deep blue eyes of his, I wanted to once again tell him to leave...

But I didn't.

He wore black jeans, brown boots, a gray T-shirt that hugged his muscled chest, and a cream-colored cowboy hat he wore low on his head, covering thick, dark-brown hair. I'd always been attracted to a guy who wore his hat like it had a purpose... Mickey wore his hat the same way. Probably why I'd been so drawn to him as well.

"Been awhile. Can't even remember the last time you were here for a visit. Maybe right before you went off to college," he said, and that moment came rushing back to me. He'd been helping out on my uncle's ranch. Wore a cowboy hat even back then, but the shirt was gone. I could barely say hello to him, let alone have any kind of normal conversation. It had been an exceptionally hot day, and I remembered a bead of sweat slowly rolling down the middle of his hairless chest like a misguided tear. I wanted to lick it off.

"You're right. I'd forgotten all about that day," I told him, straight-out lying.

"Must've been four or five years ago. Maybe more," he offered while I tried to get his naked chest out of my mind.

"Seven," I finally said, still unable to focus on this moment. "But who's counting?"

And as soon as I said it, I felt like a complete idiot. I cleared my throat, hoping that would dismiss my stupid calculation.

"That your guitar?" he asked, nodding in its direction.

“Sure is. Been awhile, but my fingers aren’t hurting anymore, so I guess I’m finally back into it again.”

“I remember you used to play when you were a kid. Played real good and sang. You should pair up with Tammy some time over at Dirty Coyote. She’s always looking for a new, young singer.”

“I play for myself and my daughter. Nobody else,” I told him, knowing damn well Tammy wouldn’t want the likes of me up on her stage when she could get some of country music’s finest.

“Shame, ‘cause I remember you sounding real sweet. How old’s your baby girl?” he asked all friendly, grinning at me like we’d been fast friends. We knew each other, that was for certain, but our friendship had always been from afar, until tonight. Suddenly, I felt as if we’d been buddies ever since the summer when I turned fourteen. And how he knew I played guitar back then, I had no idea, but it was a small town... which explained a lot of things.

“Eleven months,” I told him, grinning right back, proud of my little girl.

“She looks just like you with that head of red hair, all pretty and happy.”

“Thanks. She’s a sweet baby. Easy, except when she can’t sleep. Then she fusses, but it’s not long lived. I guess I’m lucky.”

He nodded. “Are you here for a vacation or are you staying longer?”

“Not on vacation. Who did Daryl fight with tonight? Was it you?”

“What makes you think there was a fight?” He answered so quickly, I knew he was trying his best to cover up the truth of the matter.

“His knuckles are bruised and red.”

“That could’ve happened from almost anything.”

I leaned away from him and looked him right in those amazing eyes of his.

“If you’re going to come up on this porch to lie to me, Colt Johnson, you can turn yourself right around and drive on out of here.”

I could be downright blunt when I wanted to be. I hated lies, and I could usually spot them as the words spilled from the liar’s mouth.

“I would never lie to you, CindyLou. Never.”

And there it was, that Colt Johnson grin that warmed my body like a hot cup of cocoa on a cold day.

Colt could charm the panties off any girl he wanted, except this girl. Now that I had a baby on my own, my panties were made of steel, and it took a lot more than a killer smile, deep blue eyes, and false sincerity to get this cotton armor to slide off my bottom.

At least that had been my thought process ever since I took my first pregnancy test.

But sitting next to this beautiful man, on a warm summer’s night, surrounded by his intoxicating musky, vanilla scent,

listening to the crickets' serenade us, caused me to rethink my steel panties. Perhaps they weren't quite as impenetrable as I'd like them to be.

“Okay, then let me put it another way. Who was at the receiving end of my uncle's punch tonight?”

He gazed down at the floor for a moment, reset his hat on his head, looked back up at me and said, “That would be Mickey Finn, but in all fairness to your uncle, Mickey threw the first punch.”

“Is he crazy?” The words shot out of me so fast, I didn't think my brain had time to catch up.

He tossed me a look like I should know better than to ask. “We're talking about Mickey here. Sanity never quite took up full residency in his brain.”

He had a point, and I wished I would've thought of that when I first read his damn napkin note he'd left for me in the bar that night. Thing was, I'd been so lonely, that when I read it, I wanted to believe him. I'd only been living in Cheyenne for a couple months when my boyfriend left me for a blond-haired, big-breasted trick rider before Frontier Days ever got going. And when the rodeo left at the end of the month, Clark Williams, my two-timing boyfriend who convinced me to move to Cheyenne in the first place, left with the rodeo and his blond-haired trickster. I didn't know what to do, or where to go, so I stayed. At first, I thought the baby belonged to Clark, but when the doctor told me how far along I really was, which didn't add up for Clark, I knew the baby daddy had to be my one-night stand with Mickey Finn.

And besides, Clark always used a condom.

Mickey? Well, Mickey didn't have a condom that night, and I thought I'd be safe because of the time of the month.

Never a good idea to try to calculate your cycle when you're in the heat of the moment.

"But to start a fight with my uncle when he knows those fists are deadly. And what about Jimmy Jennings? I heard he doesn't take too kindly to fights in his dance hall."

According to my aunt, Jimmy had zero tolerance for fights of any kind, nor did he like anything that disrupted his idea of how people should act and react.

She said that Jimmy and my Uncle Daryl lived by the same roadmap.

Except when it came to me.

I was the pothole Uncle Daryl was always trying to fix.

"Jimmy gave them both a talking to, and we still don't know if that'll be enough. We all know what kind of power Daryl has but apparently, Mickey didn't like what he was saying. Is it true?"

"Is what true?"

I knew exactly what he was asking me, but I didn't want to go there just yet. Mickey should hear it from me, not Colt or my uncle.

"Do I have to come out and ask straight out? I mean, I know Mickey saw you in Cheyenne a couple summers ago, during his short-lived rodeo days."

"He may have," I didn't know whether I should tell him the truth or not. The folks in Sweet Whiskey would spread the

news like a wild fire.

His grin widened. “Now who’s doing the lying?”

“I would never lie to you, Colt Johnson. Never.” I was stalling but not technically lying. Trying to look at this confession from all sides, and none of those sides were very stable.

“Okay. Is Mickey the baby daddy?”

All sorts of other reasons why I shouldn’t tell him swirled around in my head, but I knew the best way to handle this was to rip off the bandage with one fast yank. “Fine... Yes, but I didn’t come back here to get anything from him. I intend to raise Darci on my own. I even got a job yesterday. I just... well... I just needed somewhere to... I lost my job and... I didn’t have... it’s late... it’s so fucking late.”

I couldn’t help it. The tears came pouring out like someone had turned on a spicket. I didn’t know why, exactly. All I knew was that it had been so hard and here he was trying his best to be the good guy. Hell, he even wore a white hat.

“Hey. Hey,” he said, looking all concerned, while he reached out for me. And before I knew it, he had his arms wrapped around me while he rubbed my back, and I ugly cried on his shoulder.

Oh yeah, the back rubbing... it still worked. Before I could think of what to say next, everything went black.

Colt 3

No woman had ever cried in my arms before, at least not like CindyLou had. Sure, there'd been some tears now and then, but this was downright ugly crying. At first, all I could do was hold her, but when she fell asleep on my chest, I didn't have the heart to wake her. Instead, I shifted my weight and slid down on the extra-wide sofa until I was flat on my back, and she rested alongside me with half her body on top of mine.

Fortunately, I'd grabbed the small colorful pillow before I slid down to cover us with the soft blanket that had been tossed over the sofa's arm. At some point, I managed to get my boots off and slide my hat down over my face to shield my eyes from that damn porch light that shone like a beacon in the black night.

I didn't know how long we'd be in this position, but from the way she was breathing, I figured we'd be down for at least a couple hours or more. My initial thought concerned Mickey and what he might think about this situation I'd found myself

in. Then I realized it was Mickey I'd been stewing over. He was the whole reason I'd gotten myself into this position in the first place. Yeah, we were best friends, but the man always had female problems ever since we were little kids and Melinda DeLong tossed her entire blue slurpy in his face after he'd tried to see her panties at the county fair over in Cricket, the town I'd grown up in with my parents. I figured his problems stemmed from the relationship he'd had with his own mom, which never existed. She'd died when he was still in diapers. He just never got the lesson on how to act around a girl or how to treat a woman. He grew up rough and wild with a dad who never could settle, drank too much, and didn't amount to anything but a saddle sore on a hot day.

I must've drifted off because when I felt her stir on top of me, I realized someone had turned off the porch light, and my hat had fallen to the floor. When I stretched out to get it, she wrapped her leg around me.

"Don't go," she whispered in a deep, sexy voice I hadn't expected.

"Wouldn't dream of it, darlin.' Just getting my hat," I told her, as I grabbed the stiff rim, then flung it on a chair, and rubbed her back again, hoping she'd fall back to sleep. I couldn't take it if she started bawling again.

Instead, she moved up and kissed me, right on the lips, like it was as natural as the rain.

Somewhere into the middle of the kiss, I thought about how this might not be the best idea, but when her tongue set fire to mine, I knew it was all over.

Damn if it didn't feel good to have a woman in my arms again. It had been far too long. I'd given up on meeting the right woman about six months ago, after my last break up. Not that I'd been in love with Brenda. We hadn't been dating long enough for love to take root, but I thought we were headed in that direction, until she broke it off and moved to Houston.

Then today, she called, begging me to come on over to Houston. Said she had a job set for me at one of the biggest dance halls in all of Texas. The pay was almost double what I was getting at Dirty Coyote. Plus, with the tips, it would be even more. So, yeah, I was tempted and thinking about it gave me a royal headache until this whole thing with Mickey exploded.

And now that I was kissing on CindyLou, moving to Huston to start a new life with Brenda, a woman who broke my heart, seemed like a big mistake.

"Maybe you should go to bed," I told her once we pulled out of the kiss, and I remembered whose front porch we were kissing on. "Might be the better choice."

"You're probably right," she muttered, then she kissed me again, lips crushing mine. And when her leg slid across my aroused cock, I knew stopping this would be impossible, especially with how soft and warm she felt resting on me. Like she belonged there, like we fit together and fighting it seemed useless.

When she slid her hand over my chest, then down to my swollen cock, I didn't stop her. Instead, we both quickly shed everything below our waists. I couldn't get my jeans off, so instead they stayed wrapped around my ankles.

I moved her under me, and when I glided my hand over her round breasts, then down her tummy, and slipped my fingers between her legs, I couldn't believe how soaking wet she was. Like she'd been having her own personal wet dream and had woken to the reality of it being true.

“Are you sure about this?” I asked her, giving her one more out, while secretly praying she wouldn't second-guess this perfect moment.

She looked dreamily up at me, grinning. “Absolutely. And don't worry. I can't get pregnant. You don't need a condom.”

I couldn't help my own grin. Still, I wondered if she'd said that to Mickey as well? Was that the reason for little Darci?

I had no way of knowing, and at the moment, I didn't care. Funny how libido trumped all reason.

Still, in my sleepy arousal, I thought about the safety of a condom. That no matter what she said, I should take the time to retrieve one from my wallet.

When she reached down and pumped my throbbing cock, I suddenly remembered that I'd stopped carrying condoms a few weeks ago. I'd decided I didn't want random sex anymore. Either I would date someone who might be my soulmate, or I'd go without sex until that happened.

So much for that dumb idea.

“Damn, woman, we're doing this. It's been a long time coming.”

She smiled, flicked her sleepy eyes open for a moment, then guided my cock right to her warm, wet entrance. I dipped in and out of her a couple times, wanting to make sure she

knew what she was getting herself into. When a dirty moan escaped from somewhere deep in her throat, I plunged into her, slowly at first, knowing that the size of my cock sometimes caused a woman initial pain. I sure wasn't about to cause this woman anything but pleasure tonight.

From the look on her adorable face, I didn't get the idea she had any problems at all.

"Umm, that's nice," she mumbled, confirming my suspicions, wrapping her legs around my waist.

When she lifted her hips, and I dropped deep inside her tight, slick pussy, I loved how warm she felt. I slowly pumped her, going deep, then pulling almost completely out of her again. I had a long, thick cock and if a woman could tolerate it like she seemed to be able to do, I took my time with this part. The rush of sensations wrecked my body and exploded my thoughts until all I could think of was how fucking excellent her body felt sucking up my dick.

She was perfect.

Not only did we fit together, but I could already tell what a good mama she was to Darci, and earlier, when she'd broken down in my arms, I knew she'd been trying to hold everything together for so long that she was bound to burst at some point. It felt good to know she trusted me so much that she let it all go.

And now, here we were out on Daryl's front porch, having sex like we'd been meant for this moment ever since we first met when we were kids.

I just hoped and prayed Daryl had fallen into a coma kind of sleep, or I'd be a dead man for sure.

“Everything okay?” I whispered, my voice purposely low, as my lips brushed against her ear.

She grinned, still keeping her eyes closed. “Better than okay. Everything’s amazing.”

“Then we agree on something.” I increased the rhythm, knowing Daryl’s front porch wasn’t the place to linger. If we ever did this again, which I hoped like hell we would, we could take our time then, maybe at my place instead of Daryl’s, the guy with the legally lethal fists.

She nodded, grinning, softly moaned and slid her legs up higher, drawing me in even deeper. “Oh, yeah, perfect.”

When she ran her hands up and down my sides, then across my back, while her hips moved in harmony with each thrust, I knew I wouldn’t be able to hold back for long.

I leaned forward a bit, and she said, “Umm, right there. Do it harder... faster.”

I loved when a woman told me what they wanted, so few women I’d been with ever did. Like they were scared to or held back for any number of reasons.

She completely surrendered to me, her body relaxing, and for a moment, when she opened her eyes, I swear I saw true emotion in those striking olive-green eyes of hers. Maybe too much emotion, like she cared for me. I couldn’t help returning the look. I’d always had a crush on her. When we were kids, she’d been a bit too young for me, and as we got older, I knew Daryl wouldn’t take kindly to me pursuing his niece.

Things were different now.

Real different.

If Darci was Mickey's baby, he'd come around. It might take a bit of wrangling, but the man had a big heart, bigger than he'd like to admit to. Besides, once Scotty and I talked some sense into him, he'd know what he had to do.

There wasn't anything we didn't share, even a woman we'd all fallen for.

We kissed once again, and this time, it wasn't just a kiss, it was a declaration that I'd help get her through this... whatever *this* might be. The kiss burned through us both, as the walls of her warm pussy tightened around my cock. The more I pumped the more I stretched her to fit. It was beautiful.

"Now," I told her as we parted from the wet, hot kiss.

Her grin grew wider, as she rocked her hips against mine and pulled me in tighter with her legs.

"Now... right... now." Her body jerked and bucked as she clenched so tight around my cock, I lost all control and came right along with her, spilling my seed deep inside her. My body clenched to spill every drop into this magnificent woman. We rocked and bucked together, as if we were confirming a secret contract that we would never break.

We kept our sounds down low, not wanting anyone to hear what was going on right outside their windows. I wanted to let it rip, let my voice be heard right up to the stars, but I knew better. I'd never fallen victim to one of Daryl's fists, and I wasn't about to let that happen now. I knew damn well if he

knew about this, they'd be scraping the wreckage of what remained of my sorry-ass body from this floor.

And that's after he'd already destroyed what had to be one of the more memorable moments of my life.

"I should go on up to bed, and you should probably leave," she mumbled, as I rolled on my back and pulled up my underwear and jeans. Then she scooted in tight next to me.

"I probably should," I told her, not wanting to move, feeling more comfortable than I had in months. Desperately wanting to stay right there, gazing up at a night sky so filled with stars, they threatened to blind you with their light. Plus, when you added the quiet to the mix, and the fact I could feel her heart beating against my chest, moving seemed impossible.

"Yep. Right to..." And she drifted off once again, head resting on my shoulder, arm and part of her upper body pressed against my chest, leg resting over mine, smelling like sex and jasmine. Even when we were kids, she always smelled like jasmine... not a strong scent like she'd drenched herself in the perfume. It was more like a subtle whisper you might pick up on a breeze on a warm day. I'd noticed it as soon as I walked up on the porch tonight, but I purposely ignored it. I somehow managed to get my jeans zipped up, and my belt buckled once again. Considering she had most of the blanket, I thought this was the safest thing for me to do, considering where we were.

I couldn't ignore her scent now. It blanketed us and sent me off to dreamland better than any drug ever could.

CindyLou 4

I didn't open my eyes again until I heard Darci fuss somewhere off in the distance, and Auntie Donna's soothing voice told me she'd taken care of her.

Which caused me to linger a little longer than I probably should have.

The thing about waking up in Colt's arms was that I didn't want to move, at least not right away. I felt safe, warm, and comfortable... so comfortable. I hadn't felt this way in... well... ever. Not really.

And we were lying down on the sofa, facing each other. He lay along the back of the sofa, while I cuddled up along the edge. I had no idea this rickety sofa could actually handle two people.

God, he was good looking, a strong chin, a perfect nose, and long, black eyelashes. His eyelashes were longer than mine. No wonder his eyes always looked so warm and inviting.

And no wonder I had a crush on him when I was fourteen, and damn if I still didn't have a crush on him now that I was twenty-five. And the dream I had about him... wow... way too hot.

While I was staring at him, so close to his face I could kiss him, his eyes popped open, and I jumped, nearly falling off the sofa.

“Am I that scary?” he asked, chuckling.

“No. No. Of course not. I just thought you were sleeping, is all.”

I tried to push myself up and realized that someone had covered us with a blanket.

“We should do this more often,” he said, teasing, his eyes sparkling.

“We didn't *do* anything,” I told him, trying to stand, but somehow getting tangled up in the blanket.

He rolled his eyes and made a face. “I think we kind of did.”

“No, we didn't,” I said, standing, with the blanket wrapped around me. “Nothing happened.”

“We, um, slept together,” he whispered.

“We most certainly did not! At least not that way. We just slept.”

“I think we did a little more than sleep,” he whispered again.

I started to argue with him as I unwrapped the tangled blanket and realized I was half naked. That's when our night

came roaring back like a runaway freight train.

I plopped back down next to him. “So, I didn’t dream it?”

“Not unless we had the same dream, and I don’t think that’s possible.”

“It didn’t mean anything,” I said the words, but I knew there was more to it than that. Still, I was hopeful.

He sat up as an adorable little grin tugged on his delectable lips. “I wouldn’t exactly describe it quite like that, but if that makes you feel better about what happened, go right ahead.”

I remembered a really hot kiss, but after that, my memory kind of went a bit blurry. I hadn’t actually slept in days, worrying about my future... mine and Darci’s. I guess when I finally did fall asleep, I slept so hard that whatever happened was still a bit foggy.

“I don’t remember much past some kisses. Was there... I mean... did we... you know?”

I waited for an answer that I didn’t want to hear.

“Have sex?” he smirked, and my throat tightened. “We did, until you fell asleep again. Almost immediately after.”

I flashed on his face looking down at mine... Oh God!

“I did? I mean, yes, I did. I haven’t slept in days.”

Not that my excuse made any sense at all, but I was grasping here.

“Apparently, you liked sleeping curled up around me, at least that’s what you said last night.”

I sucked in a breath for strength, which seemed impossible to get at that moment. “Okay, now I’m mortified.” I spotted my panties and PJ bottoms tucked into the end of the sofa, grabbed them, and pulled them back on, as if they would somehow save me from this humbling moment.

“Don’t be. I thought it was cute.”

His smile lit up his entire face. The guy always did have an effect on me, but I never thought it would lead to us having sex out on my aunt and uncle’s porch. I must have lost all my morals... Who am I and whatever happened to uptight CindyLou?

“Cute? We had sex, and you thought it was cute? Who has cute sex? Sex should be... well... sexy, not cute. Cute is for pink bows and frilly dresses, but never for sex.”

He had a point.

“Okay, it was wicked, dirty, filthy, and hot as sin. Is that better?”

“Much. Thanks.”

I felt the grin tugging at my lips, but I wasn’t about to let it take hold.

“Fine, but we’re essentially strangers. We shouldn’t be having any kind of... *sex*.”

“I wouldn’t say we were strangers, exactly,” he said, grinning like his mind was already reliving the moments. “We’ve known each other since we were kids.”

Like I needed reminding. This really couldn’t be happening... and with my sweet little girl only steps away.

What kind of role model am I? “Not like this. This changes everything.”

I’d slipped on my PJ bottoms, so I stood and dropped the blanket.

“It doesn’t have to. We can still go on acting like strangers if that’s what you want.” Now he was trying to placate me, and I didn’t like being... placated. As if I were a kid he had to pacify, or I’d start crying or stomping my foot or better still, kick him in the shins, which would feel so good right about now.

“We’ve barely said more than ten words to each other our entire lives. That hardly makes for any kind of friendship.”

He nods and smirks. “Well, I think we’ve made up for all that lack of communication last night.”

I paced the length of the porch, then turned around and walked back to him, trying to think this thing through like an adult, which I’d had to do more and more lately. “Look, don’t read anything into what happened. I was... I mean, I’ve been...” I sighed. I truly didn’t know what to tell him other than, “I’m a hot mess right now, so please don’t think this can go anywhere.”

“I figured as much.”

I gave him a sarcastic stare.

He continued, looking as though he misspoke. “Not the hot-mess part. I’m talking about reading anything into what happened, other than it was... hot, exceptionally hot.”

The man had my number, and as I gazed into his incredibly seductive eye, everything, down to each touch came rushing

back.

“Yes, it was indeed exceptionally... hot.”

And just when I was beginning to get a bit more comfortable with the idea of having sex with Colt, Uncle Daryl came storming out onto the porch, and he didn't look happy.

As soon as I saw my uncle's face, I knew he was ready to enter the ring once again, not for me, but for Colt. Not that Colt deserved punches, but according to my uncle's book of rules, you didn't have sex unless you were married.

And you *especially* didn't have sex under his roof. That was tantamount to throwing the first punch, right to his gut.

How he knew what happened when I could barely remember, was beyond me, but I could tell, he knew, and he was about as unhappy as a bear who'd been awakened from its winters' nap.

“Colt, while I appreciate that you've been like a son to me, I can no longer welcome you into my house. You'll have to go, and I'd appreciate it if you never come knocking on my door again,” he said, straight faced.

My stomach instantly clenched, and I felt as if I might hurl right there on my uncle's porch. I had no idea what I'd do if he started throwing punches.

He continued, voice still monotoned. “The only reason why I'm not booting your ass off my property physically, is because little Darci's in her highchair, and she can see right out to this here porch,”

I secretly thanked God for Darci and her highchair.

“Daryl, you can’t be serious,” Colt said, sounding as if he were on the edge of pleading.

“As serious as a snake bite,” my uncle told him without flinching, the look on his face, fierce. I knew Colt would try his best to tread lightly.

“Come on, Uncle Daryl, you and Colt have been friends ever since I started coming out for visits. You can’t mean this,” I countered, trying my best to talk some sense into him.

“Keep talking, CindyLou, and you’ll be leaving as well,” he told me, and my throat tightened. He knew damn well I had nowhere else to go.

Colt turned to me. “It’s okay. I’ll go. It’s not a problem.”

“Yes, it is,” I told him, upset that my uncle thought he could give me such an ultimatum when he knew how much I depended on him and my aunt. “I’m a grown woman, Uncle. You can’t dictate what I can and can’t do.”

“Did you and Colt couple last night under my roof?” he asked, and I wanted to snicker over the word couple, but I knew he’d probably blow a gasket if I did, so I held back.

“Yes, we *coupled*, but it wasn’t planned,” I argued. “It just happened, and technically, we weren’t exactly under your roof. Not in the strict sense. We were outside, on this porch, which isn’t enclosed. So, you can’t really say we were under your roof.”

“You’re splitting hairs, and I don’t split no hairs,” he began. “You were on my property, and that’s not allowed. You know the rules. We went over them again when you and Darci moved in. You agreed. Was that all a lie?”

“Of course not, but I didn’t think, well, fine. There’s no excuse, but you know I don’t have anywhere else to go right now.”

“I’m not asking you to leave. I’m telling Colt to leave.”

“And never come back,” I reminded him. A totally unacceptable rule. “I can’t abide by that. Colt and I have a connection now, and I might or rather, we might want to pursue that connection further.”

“Do you mean that, CindyLou?” Colt asked as he stood near the front steps, angling to leave.

“I do,” I told him.

“You should be thinking about Mickey, Darci’s father, and not Colt.”

He never should’ve said that, because I’ve never been one to do what other people thought I should do. “Is that why you and Mickey fought last night? Because you think he and I should be together?”

“He’s Darci’s father, so darn right you two should be together. He has a responsibility to his family.”

“That’s not why I came back here,” I told him, raising my voice a bit, trying to get my point across.

“Of course, it is,” Daryl said, trying his best to keep any emotion out of this.

“I told you right from the beginning that I didn’t want you or Auntie telling Mickey about Darci.” My anger was finally showing, and I couldn’t afford to offend him. I literally had nowhere else to go.

“Yes, you told us not to tell him, but I thought by now you would’ve corralled the sonofabitch and told him yourself. Mickey needs to man up to his responsibility to you and his daughter.”

His forehead furrowed, and his lean body stiffened. If I didn’t know better that he never got violent in front of kids or my Aunt Donna, I’d say he was about to throw punches.

“Isn’t that CindyLou’s decision?” Colt asked.

“Nobody’s talkin’ to you,” Daryl shot back. “Stay out of this.”

Colt opened his mouth to counter, but the screen door burst open, and my aunt stood in the doorway. “How about if everybody comes inside and has some breakfast. Y’all can talk over whatever’s got you all riled up once your bellies are full. Everything’s always easier on a full belly. I’ve already made a stack of pancakes, and I’m about to put a mess of eggs in a pan to scramble. Bacon’s nice and dry and crispy, Colt. Just the way you like it.”

“Colt won’t be joining us,” Daryl said, leering over at Colt.

My aunt ignored him. “Sure, he will. Nobody can resist my pancakes.”

Then she walked right over to Colt, slipped her arm through his, and escorted him into the house. “Been a while since you stopped by to see us, hon. You’re looking a bit scrawny. Muscular, but still scrawny. Let me put some calories in that belly of yours.”

And they disappeared into the kitchen, leaving my uncle and me standing outside.

“This don’t change a thing,” he told me.

“I’ll leave with Colt to look for a place. Darci and I will be out of your hair once we can get settled.”

“Settled where? With Colt? Mickey? Where you gonna go?”

“I don’t know that yet, but wherever I go, it’ll be on my terms, not on yours. I’m sorry about what happened last night, but I can’t promise it won’t happen again.”

I loved my uncle, but I wasn’t about to allow him to dictate my personal life. Besides, now that I had a real job, and with the little bit of money I still had, I might be able to rent a studio apartment somewhere in town. After last night, I didn’t want any restrictions on my personal life. Now that I was wide awake and could remember how good sex felt with Colt, I wanted more... much more. I wanted a partner in my life or maybe two. I didn’t know what that looked like yet, but I didn’t want to be alone anymore.

And I certainly didn’t want to depend on my aunt and uncle.

“You gotta do what you gotta do,” he said. “I’m sorry it has to be this way, though.”

“Same goes for you. I’m sorry, too, Uncle.”

“It’s gonna kill your aunt to lose Darci.”

I knew that would never happen. Besides, Darci loved them, and they were perfect babysitters for her.

“She won’t lose Darci. I want them to have a good relationship, and besides, Auntie already said she’d babysit

whenever I got a job. That is unless you have a problem with that.”

He rubbed his chin. “I think that’s fine, just fine. Darci is always welcome here. Same goes for you, just not... well, you know.”

“I understand, but what about Colt?”

“What about him?”

Sunshine caused my uncle to squint when he gazed at me, until he pulled his brown cowboy hat lower on his forehead. I usually wore a baseball cap, but now that I was in Sweet Whiskey, I decided I might need a Western hat of my own. They weren’t just a symbol of the Old West, they served a purpose.

Besides, a cowboy hat was sexy as hell.

“Were you serious about what you said? That you don’t want him to come around anymore? Colt’s like a son to you. Do you really want to do this?”

He hesitated for a moment, gazing down at the floor. Then he looked up at me and said, “I can’t forgive him for what he’s done. He knows my rules. He should’ve known better.”

Then he walked into the house, letting the screen door slam behind him.

“I HAVE A big house, with more bedrooms than I can use. You and Darci can have your pick,” Colt said, once our awkward breakfast was over, and he and I were in his truck.

“No strings... unless you want strings. Well, you know what I mean.”

As we drove away from the ranch, I felt as if I had finally taken a step to do what I'd wanted to do all along, live on my own terms. I didn't want to live under someone else's rules ever again. I wanted my own place more than anything, but I knew I couldn't afford that yet.

“If I did agree to this, and it's still a big if, I'd want to pay rent. I wouldn't want you to feel as though you had any say over any part of my life... especially who I date... if I date.”

“Absolutely,” he said. “Rent is good. No strings whatsoever.”

“How much would it be?”

I hoped it would be something reasonable. Something I could afford. Living with Colt sounded like a perfect temporary solution, but in the long term, Darci and I needed our own place... our own home where we could put down roots.

“How much can you afford?”

As much as I liked that offer, I had to be realistic about this.

“That's not how this works. You make the price, and I tell you whether I can afford it or not.”

“Okay, six hundred a month.”

Right off the bat, I knew I couldn't afford that. Besides, we were friends now... with benefits. That had to mean something.

“For one bedroom? That seems a little high.”

“It’s two bedrooms with your own private bathroom, that has a soaking tub. Like I said, I have a big house. How about four hundred?”

Darci never had her own bedroom. This would be a first. Part of me didn’t want her to leave my room, but I knew it was time for both of us to have our own space.

“A soaking tub?”

He nodded. “With a view of the hills. Plus, your room is already furnished, but you can change that if you wanted to. The room or rooms will be totally yours to decorate however you want.”

The deal seemed too good to be true... too good to pass up.

“You’ve got yourself a deal,” I told him, grinning. “Is there a move-in cost?”

“Yes, and it’s a doozy.”

I giggled at the word doozy. “Okay. What is it?”

“You tell Mickey about Darci.”

“Yeah, right.” I huffed out a laugh, as if that was even a possibility.

He gazed over at me, and I knew he was serious. My laughter faded as reality snapped in once again. I knew I’d eventually have to tell him, but I’d hoped I could put it off for a few more days or weeks or even months.

He continued, “He’s probably figured it out already. If Daryl didn’t out and out tell him. Mickey didn’t punch him for

nothing. He must suspect something, and even if he doesn't, he's one of my best friends. No way will I keep this from him. He deserves to know he has a kid."

I sucked in a breath, then slowly let it out. "You're right. I know you're right. It's just hard for me. I don't want anything from him, and he needs to know that upfront. I don't want him to feel obligated."

"Well, he should feel obligated, but I get it. You want it to come naturally to him and not forced."

"Exactly. I can't have him resenting Darci. That would affect her entire life, and I refuse to allow that. If he can't love her and do right by her, I don't want him anywhere near her. She's my little sweetheart, and I'll do anything and everything to protect her."

He nodded like he understood.

"Mickey might say and do things to sabotage his life, but under all that bravado, he has a good and decent heart. I think he'll step up and be a good dad. He'll surprise you, I'm sure."

I let his words settle in for a couple of beats. After all, this would be a completely new path for me. I'd been working under the assumption that I would be a single parent, and Darci would never know her father at least not until she was much older. If I went along with what Colt was saying, Mickey would be a part of our lives from now on. Was I ready for that?

And more importantly, was Mickey ready to be a daddy?

After the bar fight last night, I didn't have much confidence in Colt's words, but at this point, I also didn't have

much choice in the matter.

“You’re right. Mickey should know the truth. How he responds to the truth is up to him. I’ll tell him as soon as I can.”

I wanted to gradually build up to this. To think about what I would say and how I would say it. Then there was where I should tell him. Maybe take him out for dinner? Or a drink? Or maybe at a park during the day?

“How about now, today, on our way to my place?” Colt asked, interrupting my thoughts, causing me more anxiety than I’d felt since I first learned I was pregnant.

My throat tightened, and my mouth went completely dry. “Now?” I asked, trying to absorb the concept. “Like in right now?”

“His place is closer than mine. He’s right up the road. He lives in a small cabin on Tammy and Jimmy’s property. Might as well rip the bandage off all at once.”

“All at once,” I repeated, as those bumbleberry pancakes soured in my stomach.

He reached over and took my hand, his big, strong hand covering mine, and I knew I could and would do this.

Mickey deserved to know, and I would be the one to tell him... like right now.

“Holy crap... we’re doing this.”

“It’ll take us a few minutes to get to his house, but yes... right now.”

I sucked in a breath, grinned over at him, and said, “I think I’m going to be sick. Pull over.”

And for the next ten minutes, well, let’s just say, things got unexpectantly ugly.

Mickey 5

There were days when you opened your eyes and knew it would be a great day. When everything was going your way, and you were on fucking track with a plan for your life that could only bring you mass amounts of wealth and happiness.

This wasn't one of those days.

I woke up feeling like total fucking shit, not just from the hangover that threatened to blow off the top of my head, but from the pain in my jaw, shoulder, and hand.

My jaw hurt from where Daryl clipped me, and my shoulder hurt from me trying like hell to throw a decent punch, and my hand, well, it fucking ached from punching at anything that came my way. I don't think I ever completely connected with Daryl's face, but that wasn't the case when it came to Scotty. He had the beginnings of an epic blackeye where I finally connected while he tried to pull Daryl and me apart.

“What the fuck were you thinking trying to fight with Daryl? Do you have rocks for brains or what?” Scotty asked as

he stumbled into the kitchen, looking for his first cup of coffee. He wore light-blue PJ bottoms and a sleeveless, loose-fitting black t-shirt. Scotty was one of those guys who dressed for bed. Me? If I wore briefs, it was only because I fell into bed before I'd thought to pull them off. It wasn't as if I paraded around naked or anything like that. Before I came out here for breakfast, I'd slipped on a pair of long shorts, but I couldn't be bothered with a shirt. Besides, I couldn't find a clean one in my closet.

"I didn't like what he said," I told him, while I nursed my second cup.

"I'm right, then." He knocked on my head, as I jerked away. "You do have rocks in there. That's the only reason anyone would start a fist fight with Daryl Geller, ex prize fighter. How'd you get home? I looked for you when the dust settled but couldn't find you."

"Tammy. She wanted to make sure I was all right."

He grabbed a clean mug out of the dishwasher, poured in the coffee that he'd set up before he went to bed, using the timer option on the pot. Then he took a seat at the opposite end of the kitchen island.

"A lost cause if there ever was one," he muttered, staring down at his mug of steaming hot coffee. "You're never *all right*. That's the fucking problem."

We sometimes shared his two-bedroom cabin on Tammy's property... Tammy and Jimmy's property. There were several cabins they rented out or used as guest houses for family, friends, the talent they booked for Dirty Coyote, or for hopeless assholes like me.

Scotty owned his own place over in Cricket, a town not far from here, but lately, he'd been bunking in with me during the week. We didn't always get the Coyote closed until three or four in the morning. Scotty didn't want to get on the road and drive for an hour just to turn around and come right back a few hours later. He usually went home on his days off, if for nothing else but to get away from me for a few days. And from the way I'd been carrying on, I wondered why he'd spent the night at all.

"You don't know what he said," I told him, getting up to refill my cup.

Scotty ran a hand through his sandy-colored hair, as if that might get it off his forehead, but all it did was swish it around.

He was one of those ruggedly good-looking guys who didn't have to do much to look great. He barely worked out, yet his shoulders and abs looked as if he lived at a gym. He had thighs any surfer would envy, and a face that turned a woman's head, even if she were too old or too young to even be thinking about him.

"Fill me in, brother. Let me know what triggered you like that. Let's see if I agree with your reaction."

I poured my coffee, added milk and enough sugar to make it taste like a dessert, sat back down, and pulled in a breath. "He said I needed to man up. That I was a good-for-nothing waste of manhood, and somebody should teach me a lesson on how to treat a woman. That CindyLou deserved better than the likes of me."

Scotty took a couple of sips of his black coffee, placed the mug down in front of him, folded his arms, and leaned forward

on the island, fists holding up his head as he stared at me. “First off... what in that statement is a lie? And secondly... what the hell does CindyLou have to do with any of this?”

I hated telling him this fucking part. I knew he wouldn't like it, but it was too late now for me to try to sugar coat it.

“We might've had sex awhile back... but how he found out, and why he's coming at me after all this time is something I don't understand. That had to be almost two years ago, and it was one time. One fucking time.”

He stared at me for a moment, blinking his eyes like he was trying to absorb what I'd just said. Then he sat up straight as if he'd finally absorbed everything.

“You had sex with CindyLou?” His voice got real low, and his expression turned dark. I couldn't be sure, but he looked as if he might take a swing at me as well.

“It was one night out in my truck. It didn't mean anything.”

He leaned on the counter. “Don't tell me it didn't mean anything. It's CindyLou. It had to mean something. That's one fine woman.”

I had a choice here. I could admit that it meant more than I thought it ever would, and it was the hottest and most honest sex I'd ever had. Then there was the whole emotional component that went along with it that I ran from like an alley cat with a pitbull on its tail. I wasn't ready for those kinds of emotions, wasn't in my plan, so I ran as fast as I could and as far as I could and never looked back.

“Okay... it might’ve meant something, but it was quick. Not like we spent the whole night together or something.”

He pondered my words for a few beats, then he said, “There’s got to be more to the story than you’re telling me.”

Scotty was the exact opposite of me. He rarely shot from the hip. He had to think things over first before he reacted. Plus, he could smell bullshit a mile away.

Not that I was serving him complete bullshit. I just wasn’t telling him the whole story... which was another thing he could smell. The man wasn’t human. He had some kind of AI thing going on inside his head, I was sure of it.

“That’s all there was to it,” I told him, trying not to look him in the eye, but having some trouble with that idea.

“Now I know you’re fucking holding something back. It’s gonna come out sooner or later, so you might as well put it on the table this morning while I’m in a relatively good mood. Maybe we can figure this thing out... whatever it is. It can’t be *that* bad. I mean it’s not like you got her pregnant or anything. Not with all the girls you fuck. You always cover that thing up, right? You’re a safe dick, right?”

I didn’t answer because, honestly, I couldn’t remember.

“Oh, come on!” he said, suddenly raging over the matter. “You didn’t have bareback sex with CindyLou. That would be suicidal, and I know you value your own life... or maybe you don’t, and I’ve been deluding myself all these years. You really don’t give a fuck and have some sort of death wish.”

“There were circumstances...” I began.

He jumped up, twirled around, then sat back down. “Holy fucking shit! You did. You had raw-dog sex with CindyLou. What the fuck were you thinking?”

“You know how it is. You’re in the middle of a thing, and you ain’t got a condom. You can’t stop. It’s physically impossible to stop.”

Scotty leaned forward, staring at me like I was an idiot, which in the scheme of things, was an accurate assessment of my asshole ways. “No. I don’t know how it is. Unless you’re sixteen and stupid as to how the world works, and even then... So, did you get her pregnant? Is that what that whole fight was about? You’re not manning up to your responsibilities?”

“I don’t know. I mean, she hasn’t said a word to me about no baby.”

“You know she’s in town, right?”

“Yeah, I know.”

“And you’ve been out to see her, right?” He made it sound as if it was my responsibility to drive out to see her, which it wasn’t. At least I hadn’t thought about it that way.

Yeah, so maybe I was guilty about the whole thing. And maybe that one time meant more to me than it should have, but it didn’t mean I had any obligation to drive on over and see her. I mean, what the hell was I supposed to say? Hey, CindyLou. Sorry I haven’t contacted you in all this time. I’m a shit-head, but then you already knew that before we hooked up.

“It was one fucking night in Denver, during that summer I tried bronc riding. She was one of many. You’d be surprised

how many women will have sex with a rodeo rider.”

“CindyLou has never been and will never be just another woman. Not that any of them should be, but especially not her.”

His face softened just talking about CindyLou. I knew he’d had a crush on her ever since they kissed that first summer when she came out to visit her aunt and uncle. He was right. We all had a crush on her, even Colt who’d considered himself too old to go near her during that first summer. Then when she came out the following summers, he’d always been dating someone.

“You’re still carrying that damn torch for her, aren’t you? Ain’t it gettin’ heavy now? Maybe it’s time to put that flame out? Or maybe you should go out to Daryl’s ranch for a visit. Makes more sense than me driving out there.”

“I didn’t get her pregnant,” Scotty shot back at me. His words accusing me of something that hadn’t ever been confirmed.

“Am I going to have to give you another black eye? We don’t know anything about her having no baby, and we certainly don’t know that a one-night stand got her pregnant. I mean the odds of that happening are near impossible if that.”

“So, Daryl was talking shit, then?” He drank his coffee like he needed it.

“Maybe he was. He’d had more than his share of beers.”

Thing was, it was the exact opposite. Yeah, Daryl had a few beers, but I’d added a couple shots to my beer consumption, it being the end of the week and all.

Daryl was practically stone sober, while I was already well on my way to needing a ride home.

Scotty stared at me again, not talking, just looking, making me squirm. I hated it when he did that. Everyone who knew him hated it. He'd put you on the spot, because he knew you were flat-out lying... which I fucking was.

I was about to dig the hole deeper when somebody knocked on the front door.

"I wouldn't be surprised if that's Jimmy coming here to fire your ass for the fight," Scotty said, not moving off his stool, sipping his coffee like it was the best thing he'd ever tasted. "You deserve that and worse."

I slid off my stool. "He can't. He's family, and family stick together."

"Tammy's your family, and a distant cousin at best. Jimmy has no skin in the game. And besides, you know how much he hates bar fights. You can do almost anything else and get away with it, but fighting is like a monster sin in his book."

"Whatever! I can always go back to bronc riding," I told him, right before he laughed.

He knew damn well I'd almost killed myself trying that game and never rose up the ranks from the bottom. I had to be the worst bronc rider on the planet. The damn horses scared the shit out of me. You can't be a good rider if you're scared of the horse. That has to be rule number one. Rule number two... well, there was no rule number two if you couldn't get past rule number one.

I swung the door open and stood there for a moment like you do when you can't believe what you're seeing. I think my mouth even hung open.

"Hi, Mickey," CindyLou said, as she stood next to Colt, who looked as if he might punch me if I said anything even remotely stupid.

It was at that exact moment when I knew what a true asshole I'd been. Not only was I crazy for this beauty in jean shorts and a white top that showed off enough cleavage to cause my dick to react, but just like that night out in the parking lot, I wanted to run away again, as far and as fast as I could. I even reconsidered signing up for the rodeo circuit, knowing damn well I'd be dead by the end of the run.

Death by crazed horse seemed like the better option at the moment.

She was a sinful danger all wrapped up in the sweetest smile I'd ever seen.

Fuck me!

"Hi, CindyLou. Nice to see you again," I said, trying my best not to react to seeing her again. The woman did something to me so profound, I could barely breathe, let alone think.

"Cut the crap, Mickey. We've got some real-life stuff to talk about," Colt said, then walked in past me. CindyLou remained outside the door.

"Can I come in?" she asked, as if she needed an invitation.

"Yes, I mean, sure. You don't have to ask. Come on in." I stepped out of her way, trying like hell not to panic. "Can I get

you a cup of coffee?”

I didn't ask Colt about the coffee. He wasn't a guest. He'd crashed on my sofa enough times that this was like his second home. Even though he had his own place in town, mine was walking distance to the Coyote.

“No thanks, but if you've got some tea, that would be nice,” she said, as pleasant as could be.

Why did she have to be so fucking nice? This would go much better if she were a bitch.

Of course, if she were a bitch, I wouldn't be in this situation.

She followed me out to the kitchen, where Colt had already poured himself a cup of coffee. He pulled another black mug out of the cupboard and held it up. “Can I pour you a cup, CindyLou?”

“She wants tea,” I told him.

“All I really need is some hot water. I always carry my own tea bags,” she said. “Just fill that mug with water, and I'll pop it into the microwave. That'll do me just fine.”

“I can do that,” Colt told her.

I felt relieved that she knew exactly what she wanted. This was a coffee house. Not a tea bag or a tea kettle to be found.

“Hey, CindyLou,” Scotty said, and I could tell he was trying his best not to look shocked to see her. He ran his hand through his hair again, and once again, it just flopped back down on his forehead.

“Nice to see you, Scotty. Been awhile,” she said, grinning as she placed her mug of tap water into the microwave and set the timer. “That black eye looks painful. I thought my uncle’s fight was with Mickey?”

“It was, but I made the mistake of stepping between them when Mickey was getting ready to throw a punch,” he told her, grinning like he always did whenever she came around.

“You punched your best friend?” she asked me, looking concerned.

I suddenly felt bad for my fist connecting with Scotty’s face. All he’d wanted to do was spare me from Daryl’s lethal punch. “Yeah, collateral damage. I’ve already apologized several times.”

“Once... you apologized once,” Scotty corrected.

“You know I’m sorry about it,” I told him, trying not to come across as the asshole in all of this.

“Okay. Okay,” Colt said. “Now that all the apologies are done, along with the intros, can we get down to why we’re here?”

“Um, can I get my tea made first?” CindyLou asked, her voice causing my balls to ache. “With milk, if that’s possible.”

“Whatever you need,” Scotty told her, jumping up to grab the carton of milk. “Sugar?”

Oh man, the guy had it fucking bad for her.

She nodded. “Sure, thanks.”

I didn’t know what to do with myself or how to react. I thought I’d gotten over her, moved on, but seeing her now, I

knew that had all been total bullshit.

Fuck me!

Once the microwave sounded off, and she had a mug of hot, steaming tea in front of her, courtesy of her own teabag, Colt leaned back on the counter and said, “Daryl kicked us out of his house this morning, and the way I see it, we only have one alternative. CindyLou’s moving into my place this afternoon... into my spare bedroom.”

Normally, whatever Colt wanted us to do, I’d usually go along with it. Scotty too. He was the oldest and the more level headed of the group, but this was different.

I directed my question right to Colt, as if he and I were the only two in the room. “Wait a minute. Let’s calm down here. CindyLou’s moving in with you? Why the hell would she want to do that?”

“I’m right here,” she said. “If you have an issue with that, you need to ask me about it, not Colt.”

My gaze fell on her, on her amazing face with a smile that sent my heart into over-fucking-drive, and a body that fucked with my dreams at night. Then there was her general warmth and her ability to listen to all my shit and not judge me like everybody else did. What the fuck was that all about? And now she was moving in with Colt? How the fuck did this happen?

“Daryl’s fight is with me, not with either of you. Why’d he kick you two out? What the hell happened to piss him off?”

“We had sex last night on his porch,” Colt said, before CindyLou could say another word.

“Well, that’ll do it,” Scotty mumbled, then let out a heavy sigh.

“If you’ve got a problem with that, Mickey, we’ll have to settle it right now, cause there’s no time for any bullshit this morning. We’ve got a headliner coming in tonight at the Coyote, and none of us can afford not to be ready for it.”

I’d already learned their songbook, but there were still a couple of tunes I needed to practice today, not that I was in the mood to do much of anything but feel sorry for myself all day. Something I’d gotten very good at.

I didn’t know what the fuck to say. CindyLou could fuck anybody she wanted to, but fuck it all, wasn’t there some kind of loyalty between friends? Like between Colt and me?

“What the fuck, Colt,” was all I could get out.

“Right now, a pissing contest between you two isn’t important,” CindyLou said.

“Seems kind of important to me. Not that I should care. I mean there’s nothing between us, CindyLou. It’s not like we have any kind of connection or anything.” I was rambling, looking for a landing strip to land my plane.

She placed her mug down on the island and came over to me. “That’s where you’re wrong, Mickey.” Her gaze fell to the floor, then her sweet eyes met mine once again. “Maybe we should go somewhere to talk. Just you and me.”

“Awe, hell,” Scotty said. “This sounds serious.”

“Whatever you’ve got to tell me, Colt and Scotty are gonna find out about it anyway, so you might as well tell me right now.”

“Okay, remember when we met up in Denver a couple summers ago? You were working Nationals?”

“Yeah. Horrible experience,” I told her, then realized what I’d said. “Not meeting you... but the rodeo. That was a crazy... anyway, what about that summer?”

Her expression instantly went all sad, as my heart raced, and my palms felt clammy. Same feeling I had every time right before I rode one of those crazy bucking horses.

“What the hell, Mickey?” she asked. “Was the whole summer a horrible experience for you?”

I reached out for her and ran my hand down her arm. “Not you, CindyLou. You touched my heart. You were more than I ever imagined. The horrible experience was me trying to pretend I could last two seconds as a bronc rider.”

“Do you mean that, Mickey? That I touched your heart?”

I felt stupid using those words in front of Colt and Scotty but fuck me if they weren’t true.

“Yeah,” I told her, stepping in a bit closer. She smelled so good, I could eat her up.

“That’s sweet because, well... I... or rather we have...”

“Just say it,” I told her. “Whatever it is, I can take it.”

“You have a daughter, Mickey. Her name is Darci, and she’s eleven months old.”

For a moment or two, I stared at her like she’d just told me I had horns. Like I’d sprouted wings but couldn’t feel them. Daryl had said as much, but I didn’t believe him, and Scotty

had speculated, but now, CindyLou stood in front of me, spouting the same words.

“So, it’s true, then,” I said, finally screwing up to the courage to speak. “Fuck me.”

Then I dropped my ass onto a barstool.

CindyLou 6

I didn't stay long after I crashed the bomb on Mickey about him having a daughter. I figured he needed time to adjust to his new title... *baby daddy*.

Colt and I left shortly afterwards for his place. He wanted to make sure I understood the living arrangements he was offering me. The whole idea of living with Colt seemed like something out of a dream, rather than something I needed to consider. The reality of living in Colt's house felt so foreign to me that I had a hard time believing he actually meant it... at least until I saw what he was offering... a spectacular ranch house, with a view of the surrounding hills that made my eyes water.

"And this would be your room," he said as he walked inside the large bedroom with its own private bath. What I loved right off was the amazing view and the fact there were no fences in this neighborhood. Just lawns, trees... lots of trees... and hills. "You can move the furniture around how you

like it or move this out and put in your own. As you can see, Darci's room is right across the hall from yours."

There was a nice big bed in the room, a nightstand, a matching dresser, and a walk-in closet. There was even a small desk and a chair if I needed it. The room or rather rooms were simply perfect. All Darci's room needed was a crib, which I had enough money to buy. It even had a rocker-recliner in the corner that looked all comfy and cozy that I wanted to sit in it right now and rock my baby to sleep.

"So, what do you think?" he asked, leaning against the doorframe, looking so good I wanted to cry.

"I think it's perfect," I told him, grinning.

"Really? So, does this mean you'll be moving in? You and Darci, I mean." He walked towards me as I stood near the bed with the white down comforter. I had to admit, the bed looked really inviting, and considering I was half asleep last night when we had sex, I wondered what it would be like if we had sex now... during the day... when we were both wide awake.

"Yes, as soon as possible, if that's okay with you."

He kept walking towards me, slowly, as if he didn't want to scare me away with any sudden moves.

"How does this afternoon sound?"

I liked how this man thought. I mean, we tore off the bandage with Mickey, who was still trying to lick his wound, and now we were talking about tearing another bandage off my Uncle Daryl. Only thing was, I didn't want to hurt my aunt. She'd done a lot for me since I'd been in Sweet Whiskey, including allowing me to cry on her shoulder about my

pathetic life. She also told me about applying at Dirty Coyote. That she and Tammy had been friends for like forever, and Tammy owed her a couple of favors.

Not that I couldn't have gotten the job on my own, but it always helped when someone put in a good word for you.

“Darci needs a crib,” I told him, trying to keep focused on the reality of moving into his house. “I bought one for my aunt and uncle’s house, but I’ll need another one for here.”

“There’s a Walmart about a half hour from here.”

He’d finally reached me, and we were standing about two feet apart when he stopped walking, and instead, just stared at me with those beautiful deep-blue eyes of his. The memory of a sensation from the previous night shot through me and at once, I wanted to push him down on the bed and ravage his spectacular body. This time, I’d be wide awake.

“Then I’ll need to get all my stuff from Uncle Daryl’s place.”

The task seemed daunting, especially since I’d only in the last few days felt as if Darci and I had finally settled in.

“Scotty’s truck bed is bigger than mine. You can get more of your stuff hauled at one time if he helps out.”

“That’s useful. Saves me from having to rent something. I might need to buy a few boxes.”

“Walmart has everything you need.”

A leading question considering he stood entirely too close to me, especially since I might soon be a tenant in his house.

Still, I couldn't resist. “Everything?”

He smirked, and a spike of heat raged through me.

“Well, everything you need for the move with Darci.”

“What about everything else?”

I couldn't resist. We were into this now.

“That depends on what you mean by *everything else*.”

He still wasn't touching me. Like he wanted to wait until I gave him the go ahead or a sign that I wanted more than a simple trip to Walmart to buy a crib... which I most certainly did.

And just when we were about to latch onto each other, Scotty's voice boomed through the house. “Where are you guys?”

Colt tilted his head and said, “We'll finish this later.”

“What?” I asked, playing dumb. “The trip to Walmart?”

He took two steps back. “Yeah, Walmart.” Then he yelled to Scotty, “Up here.”

Most of the bedrooms in Colt's house were on the second floor.

“I thought I'd stop by to offer up my truck,” Scotty said, as he walked into the room. “That's if you're moving in with this ornery cowboy.”

“You read my mind, Scotty,” Colt said, grinning. “At least part of it.”

“I am,” I told Scotty. “...moving in with Colt. Darci even gets her own room, and the price was right.”

I gazed back at Colt, grinning as wide as he was, knowing we'd both been thinking the same dirty thoughts. Maybe it was a good thing Scotty showed up when he did, or he would have caught us going at it like bunnies.

The thought gave me a full-body flush.

“You're charging her? Well, ain't you the gentleman.” Scotty looked as if he wanted to verbally tear into him, but he had it all wrong.

“I wouldn't have it any other way. It was my decision to pay him. I want to do this on my own.” And as soon as I said the words, I knew I was finally getting a handle on this adulting thing. It's one thing to decide to bring your baby into the world, but it's an even bigger hurdle to then care for and pay for that baby on your own.

That was huge, and I'd taken the first step.

“Might be even better if Mickey pays your rent,” Scotty said, trying to stick a pin in my pride balloon.

I grinned and calmly said, “As long as I'm physically able to care for myself and Darci, I don't want anything from Mickey. The only reason I told him about his child is because Colt is right. Mickey deserves to know. Other than that, whether or not he wants to participate in her life, either financially or simply by being a good dad, those are his decisions. Now that he knows, I'm sure we'll work it out... unless, of course, he doesn't want to have anything to do with her. I'll be disappointed if that happens, and Darci will grow up resenting him, but hey, that's his decision. And speaking of Darci, she needs a few things if we're going to move in here,

so yes, Scotty, I'll take you up on your generous offer. Can we go now?"

"Sure," he said, after a moment.

I could tell he wasn't prepared for my outburst of reason. He looked a bit stunned, if not completely speechless, which for Scotty was huge. The young man I knew could outtalk anyone I knew. This older version might not fit into my memory of him.

"You and Scotty can go," Colt said. "You don't need me tagging along. Besides, my presence will only get Daryl riled up all over again. He needs some time to cool down and let Donna work her magic. She has a way of getting him right-minded when nothing else will. I'll stay here and get things ready for you and your little one. Will you be moving in tonight?"

"Yes. If that's all right?" I asked him.

"That's perfect," he said, with a grin and a snigger. I got the feeling he was happy about his new living situation.

"I start working tomorrow night, and I want to know where I'm headed after my shift. I'm hoping Auntie Donna will keep Darci overnight on my work nights, and I'll pick her up in the morning. That way, I won't have to wake anybody up in the middle of the night. But tonight, she'll stay here, with me, in my room... just until my days off. I don't want to rush her into anything, and sleeping alone, in her own room might be tough for her to get used to. But I should warn you, she's a light sleeper and cries when she first wakes up. That's why I was out on the porch with her last night. She couldn't sleep."

“That’s okay. I have earplugs. You do whatever you have to do with her. Consider this your home, CindyLou.”

“Thanks,” I told him and thought about kissing him when Scotty interrupted.

“Okay then. Let’s do this,” Scotty said, and we took off to start my independence.

SPENDING THE DAY with Scotty Belmont proved to be more interesting than I had anticipated. His sense of humor charmed me right from the beginning when I was trying to decide on which crib.

“When do kids move into a real bed?” Scotty wanted to know as we stood in the middle of an aisle loaded down with an assortment of cribs.

“I don’t know. Maybe when they’re two or two and a half.”

“And how old is Darci now?”

“Eleven months.”

“And how long do you plan on staying in Sweet Whiskey?”

“It’s my new home, Scotty.”

“I’m taking that to mean you’ll be here for Darci’s second birthday.”

“That’s the plan.”

“Then shouldn’t we be looking at these beds? The ones that convert into something called a toddler bed? Isn’t that for a two-year-old?”

I went over to him and sure enough, they were perfect but double the price. “I can’t afford any of these.”

“Maybe not now, but do you have any idea how much a bartender makes at Dirty Coyote on the weekends?”

I shook my head.

“A lot. Enough so you won’t have to worry about the price of a bed for Darci.”

I had a hard time believing that. I barely made enough at my last job to cover all my expenses, and that was the best bar job I’d ever had.

“That can’t be true. There’s a bed here for six hundred dollars. I didn’t think Walmart carried anything, other than maybe some electronics, worth six hundred dollars.”

From the picture, the bed would be perfect for Darci for several years to come, so it was a great investment... if I had that kind of money... which I didn’t.

“They’ve upgraded.”

It killed me, but I wanted to tell him the truth. “Wow! I can’t even afford Walmart anymore.”

He grinned like he knew something I didn’t. I had to admit, I was attracted to this man. Always had been. Not quite as much as the Colt attraction, but enough so that I knew I’d have a hard time choosing between them, if it ever came down

to it... which it never would, so I had to stop thinking about how adorable he was.

“Yes, you can. You can buy several of these beds in just one long weekend after working at the Coyote. So, which one do you want? I’ll front you the money for a couple of days.”

He couldn’t be telling the truth. If he were, I’d just landed a dream job, and I should be taking it much more seriously.

“Please don’t bullshit me, Scotty. This is too important. Are you telling me that I’m going to make about twenty-five hundred dollars in just three days?”

His smile widened, and I had a deep desire to kiss those grinning lips of his.

“Probably more depending on who’s playing. All the bartenders share their tips. Meaning it doesn’t matter which bar you work, we all share.”

I could feel my pulse quicken. I felt as though I’d been running way too fast and needed to slow down.

“You’re serious, aren’t you?”

“As a shark attack.”

I couldn’t react for a moment. I merely stared at him. The concept of having more than enough money to live on had been a dream of mine ever since I decided to have my baby. And now, through no fault of my own, that dream would be coming true. It felt as if some sort of weight had been lifted from my heart, a weight I’d been carrying around ever since I first took that pregnancy test and started down this path. “I’ve never made that kind of money in my life.”

I decided that I needed to thank my aunt and uncle more. After all, if it weren't for them, I wouldn't have this job.

“Well, you'll be making it now. How do you think Colt bought that house he's living in? Mine isn't quite as big, but it's close. Believe me, this is only the beginning for you. You still play guitar?”

“How'd you know about that?” I barely said two words to Scotty when we were growing up. How the heck did he know I played guitar?

“I remember the summer Daryl bought you a guitar and lessons from my mom.”

Either I was the stupidest kid around, or I simply didn't pay attention to details back then.

“Miss Nancy was your mom? How didn't I know that?”

“I lived with my dad. My parents got divorced when I was thirteen.”

“Thanks for clarifying. She was the best all-around teacher I've ever had. Her students loved her.”

I remembered how patient and kind she was. I've thought of her often and wondered whatever happened to her. She was pretty, too. I remembered her thick, long, deep-brown hair and how I wanted hair like that when I grew up. I tried dying my red hair once and made a mess of it. I went back to my natural color as soon as I could. Some changes just didn't work, and that was one of them.

“Still do, and she still gives lessons if you need a refresher course. She's over in Cricket now, but it's only about an hour

away. I'm sure she'd love to see you. That's if you're still playing."

I hesitated for a moment, not wanting to tell him. Thing was, Colt already knew, and if Colt knew, everyone would soon know, so there was no point in my keeping it a secret.

"I wasn't going to tell anyone, but ever since Darci was born, I started playing again. Colt knows because he saw me playing last night, but I don't want anyone else to know. Darci seems to like the music. Puts her to sleep better than a story. Doesn't keep her asleep, though, but it gives me a few hours for myself."

I loved playing music for my baby girl. She was the best audience ever. All she did was smile at me. Nothing better.

"Tammy loves girls with guitars."

"Like the song by the Judds?"

"Yep. Before you know it, you'll be joining her up on stage."

The idea of playing in front of people caused my stomach to cinch and my throat to tighten. I certainly wasn't good enough to play in front of anyone but my daughter, and I didn't intend to ever play in front of anyone but my daughter.

"That's never going to happen," I told him, and I meant it. I hoped he'd let it go, but I knew better.

"Didn't your mamma ever teach you to never say never?"

"No, but Aunt Donna did. I must've forgotten all about that lesson. Still, it's never going to happen."

He wasn't getting it. No way would I get up on a stage. Not now anyway. When I was younger, it was all I dreamed of, but I'm older now, and I've got a responsibility to my daughter to provide for her. Yes, I dreamt about having a career in music, but I knew better. Still, I longed for exactly that, but I wouldn't admit it to Scotty or anyone... at least not yet. Not while I was still raising Darci. That kind of dream took too much work and time away from Darci. I wasn't willing to do that, especially not now when she needed her mommy.

"I wouldn't be so sure. Tammy has a way of getting you to do whatever she wants. She's a charming force. Sure as I'm standing in this crib aisle, you're gonna be up on that stage with Tammy, playing your guitar. Now pick out the bed you want for Darci and whatever else you need, and let's get out of here. We still have to stop at Daryl's ranch, and I have to go to work in a few hours, so we better get a move on. One thing that Tammy can't abide is anyone being late for their shift."

"Good to know. Did anyone ever tell you how annoying you are?" I was kidding, of course, but it felt good to be on that kind of level with him. I could tell that Scotty would be an easy friend, and I liked that... and liked him... probably more than I should.

"Almost everybody I know." He chuckled and at once, I was back to thinking dirty thoughts about him. He was simply too damn handsome for his own good.

"And you're good with that?"

"I'm good with everybody I know... including you... especially you."

There it was... his country charm. It oozed out of him like sunshine searing through cotton clouds.

“Are you flirting with me, Scotty Belmont?”

“You finally picked up on that, did you?”

“Sometimes it takes me awhile.”

I didn't want to admit the truth. It made me feel like some sort of bad girl, and I always thought of myself as a good girl... that was until I met up with Mickey Finn in that dark parking lot, in his truck, after work.

“We'll have to work on that,” he teased.

“Yes, we will,” I told him, teasing right back.

I was in for it now.

Scotty 7

“Dude, I ordered two longneck beers and one white wine,” the tall guy, wearing the black felt cowboy hat, said as he stood on the other side of the bar, trying to get his order right. “Not whatever these are.”

I’d served him two pints and one red wine—order for the blond babe at the other end of the bar.

“Sorry ‘bout that. I’ll have that up for you in a couple minutes,” I told him, totally distracted.

It was a busy Thursday night, and I had my head up my ass. Why? Because, as much as I didn’t want to admit it, especially to Colt, who worked this bar along with me, I couldn’t stop thinking about CindyLou.

Yes, she’d always been that girl I thought back on over the years, that girl who I never got over. That first-love girl I’d lost my heart to before I became jaded and protected my heart at all costs. That girl who I spent the summers watching her doing stupid shit to make those long, hot days pass us by.

That girl I was falling for all over again.

“Okay, dude, you got the beers right, but it’s a white wine, not this pink shit.” I could tell the guy was about to lose his temper if I messed up one more time.

“Got that right here for you. That’s twenty-eight even, partner,” Colt told him, saving my ass.

I took a couple of steps back and let him do his thing. As soon as the guy left, he turned to me, “What’s wrong with you, tonight? You feeling okay or what?”

No way could I admit what I was feeling. Not to Colt when I knew he wouldn’t forgive all the mistakes I’d made so far tonight.

“Distracted is all, but I’ll be okay now.” I knew if I would ever get through this night, I had to let CindyLou go until I had some free time. We’d only opened the doors an hour ago, and the place wasn’t even full yet, but I was already forgetting orders.

“Well, get undistracted. Hot Sugar’s playing tonight.”

“I thought that was next week.”

“You really are distracted, aren’t you? Get a grip and get it fast. They’re on in less than an hour, and we’re gonna get slammed.”

Hot Sugar was a local band that had their start right here at Dirty Coyote. They’d had a song in the top ten on the country charts for the better part of the last two years. Whenever they played, the place edged up to max capacity. Everybody loved them and drove in from every small town within a hundred-mile radius to catch their concert.

Tonight would be no exception.

I had to get my shit together fast, or Tammy would be all over me. There weren't many things that pissed her off like messing up orders behind the bar and causing customers any kind of grief. Customers were golden to her, and you treated them better than your own family. If you didn't, you might as well leave because she would fire your ass without warning.

"Got it," I told him, but I knew part of my brain was still off somewhere, trying to sort out my feelings for CindyLou.

It wasn't as if we hadn't shared a woman before, we had, but it hadn't worked out very well. Mickey got jealous, and everything sort of blew up after that.

We decided to never go down that path again, yet here we were. On the same damn path, only this time, the woman had taken hold of our hearts a long time ago. I couldn't see a good outcome if we chose to pursue a polyamorous relationship again.

Then there was always the fact that CindyLou might hate the idea. That would be the end of it.

Boom.

Done.

Over and out!

Over the next half hour, the dance hall got so busy, I had no choice but to focus on my job rather than a chance with CindyLou... not that it would matter, considering she was moving in with Colt. He wanted a steady relationship with a woman more than his next ride on his favorite horse. He usually did everything his latest crush expected of him and

then some. Colt talked a big game and planned for the long-term right from the get-go, but he could no more hang onto a woman than he could hang onto his heart. He'd gotten burned so many times, his heart should be cinders by now.

Still, we all knew CindyLou was different. She actually had a heart, and if I had anything to say about it, Mickey would step up to that baby daddy plate, or I would. Either way, now that CindyLou had moved into town, the three of us would make it right, even if I had to get Daryl to knock some sense into Mickey all over again.

Only this time, he wouldn't do the knocking inside Dirty Coyote, and I wouldn't get in his way.

I DIDN'T SEE her right away. As a matter of fact, Colt spotted her first. She'd been hidden under a new-looking gray cowboy hat that gave her an entirely different look. By the time I walked over to CindyLou, she already had a margarita down in front of her at the bar. Hot Sugar was on a break, and Tammy was also helping out behind the bar. Something she enjoyed doing on occasion, at least when most of her regulars showed up. It gave me a little more time to be with each of the customers who'd taken up residency on the barstools, but right now, I wanted to spend more time with CindyLou.

"Nice hat," I told her.

"Just got it today. Do you like it?" She pulled it down lower on her forehead and I wanted to die right there. I loved a

woman in a cowboy hat, especially when that hat made her look as sexy as this one did on CindyLou.

“It suites you,” I said, trying to sound casual about it.

“Thanks. I wasn’t sure.”

I changed the subject. “I thought you’d be over at Colt’s, trying to settle in,” I said, as I walked in closer, grinning like a kid. She looked beautiful, as always. Her coppery red hair surrounded her face, and she wore a smile that could bring me to my knees.

“I’m all settled in, well almost, thanks to you. Aunt Donna offered to babysit tonight, so I thought I’d stop by to see what my night will look like once I start working here,” she said, sounding a bit apprehensive about the whole thing.

“That’s tomorrow night, right?”

“Yeah,” she answered, then she took a sip of her drink, and I could tell the whole idea of stepping behind this bar was freaking her out.

“For one thing, it won’t be nearly as busy. Hot Sugar packs the place, but tomorrow night, we have a great band, but they’re not anywhere near as popular. They still bring in a crowd, but not like this. I’m surprised you were able to get a seat at the bar.”

“The only reason I got it is because some good ol’ boy offered it to me when his date showed up. They’d reserved a table upstairs. My timing was perfect.”

“As always.”

She looked so hot tonight I was sweating from just being around her. Her crimson hair surrounded her face like a halo, and her black shirt was cut low enough to give me a peek at what had to be spectacular breasts. If I chatted with her for too long, I knew I'd be wasted for the rest of the night. How I was ever going to work with her seemed impossible at the moment.

“Thanks, but we’ll see how my timing goes tomorrow night. I haven’t been pouring for months. I’m probably a little rusty.”

“No worries. You’ll be working this bar with Colt and me. We’ve got your back. Besides, more than half of what we serve comes in a long-neck bottle and the other half is a shot of something, straight up. Wine is another standard. These folks don’t usually go for anything too fancy.”

She grinned, and my world blew up. I had it bad for this sweet mama, and I hadn’t even kissed her... yet. The way I saw it, Mickey didn’t know his next step with her, and Colt was simply her landlord. Yes, they’d had sex, but so far, I didn’t see any sparks flying. If I wanted this woman, I’d have to make a play for her and fast. Plus, I could see how the other cowboys in the room were already checking her out. There was a shortage of women in these small towns, and once a single woman took up residency, the single men pounced faster than a bull could throw its rider.

“Thanks,” she said. “Is Mickey here tonight?”

My heart sank with the question. He was still reeling from what she’d told him earlier today, and he’d tried his best to back out of playing tonight, but he knew if he kept pressing it, Jimmy would fire his ass.

“Yeah, he’s playing with Hot Sugar. He knows most of their songbook, so it’s easy for him to fill in. He won’t admit it, but he loves being on that stage more than anything else.”

Mickey was one of the best musicians I knew and could have his pick of bands, but every time he went on the road, he never lasted more than one or two concerts, and he’d be on a plane, heading back to Sweet Whiskey.

“Then why isn’t he with a band, touring the country?”

“He can’t commit.”

“Why’s that?”

“He won’t say, but every time a band wants to take him on the road, Mickey won’t go. I mean, he starts off wanting to, but when the rubber hits the road, he backs out.”

I wanted her to know he had commitment issues. I felt sure he’d come around to loving his daughter, but it might take him a little time.

“Sounds like he doesn’t like to stray too far from home.”

“Something like that.” I had my own theory about Mickey and why he couldn’t commit to anything that took him away from this town, but now wasn’t the time to share those beliefs.

“And you? Why are you still here, Scotty? I thought if anyone would’ve left this small town, it would’ve been you.”

From what she knew of me, she was right. That was all I talked about when I was a kid, how I’d leave this town as soon as I turned eighteen. Go to college, get some high-paying job, move to a big city, and fly home for the holidays.

That never happened.

There were way too many reasons why I'd hung around, but I didn't want to get into them now. Not here. One of them was simply that I loved living in this area. My family lived in Cricket, and when my mom got sick... well... I just didn't care about leaving.

"I did leave," I told her, straight faced. "I don't live in Sweet Whiskey anymore."

"Moving to Cricket is hardly leaving your hometown. What is it... an hour up the road?"

"About that, yeah, but it's not Sweet Whiskey."

I tried to make light of it, but I sounded pathetic.

"You work in Sweet Whiskey. Why on earth would you live in Cricket?"

"I'm still trying to figure that one out. Can I get you another drink?"

This wasn't the time to tell her about my mom and all the health issues she'd had, or the fact that my mother's only sister couldn't seem to break away from her own family long enough to even pay our mom a visit. Or the fact that the whole thing overwhelmed our dad, and I had no choice but to step up. Not that I wouldn't have done just that on my own, but seeing him so distraught caused me to step up faster than I'd planned.

But that was a story for another time. My mom was doing a lot better now and didn't need me as much... which was why I spent most of my week living with Mickey.

"Yeah. Thanks. I'm hoping to catch a ride home with Colt. I came in with Daryl."

That stopped me cold. After that fight, Daryl needed to lay low for a few days. At least until we got this whole baby thing sorted out with Mickey. He was still in shock, and the fact that he agreed to play backup guitar tonight said a lot. He was trying to cope the only way he knew how, by playing music.

“Don’t tell me he’s here?”

“He’s not. Dropped me off and went over to meet a friend at Last Call in Cricket.”

“Smart man. Let me freshen your drink for you.”

“Thanks,” she said, and I went off to get her another drink, thinking now that my mom was well again, and my dad was back to keeping his shit together, I needed a place of my own here in Sweet Whiskey. Living with Mickey wasn’t a long-term solution.

By the time I poured CindyLou’s second margarita and delivered it, Hot Sugar was back onstage, blowing the crowd into the next stratosphere with their music. Connie Manors had to be one of the hottest singers in country right now. Everyone loved her, and not just for her music. She was a sweetheart in every sense of the word.

The thing about Hot Sugar that most of their fans didn’t know, was that they were in a relationship... all four of them, together. When I’d first heard about it, I thought for sure that couldn’t be true. What guy would want to share his woman with two other dudes? Didn’t seem possible. Then I heard about all the other folks who were in the same type of relationship. Hell, we had a few more right here in Sweet Whiskey who played here at Dirty Coyote. And over in

Cricket... there were at least four or five polyamorous relationships... successful relationships.

Which got me to thinking, why couldn't we have that kind of relationship with CindyLou? Maybe it didn't work the last time we'd tried it, but seeing Hot Sugar perform had me wondering about the possibilities in a new light.

And just like God himself sent me the answer to my question, Daryl walked up to the bar, catching my attention, trying to order a beer. No way in hell could we have any kind of relationship with CindyLou as long as Daryl still walked on this planet. He'd kill all three of us as sure as sunshine.

"Didn't think you'd show up here so soon," I said as I handed him a beer. He tossed the cash on the bar like he had no intention to hang around longer than the one beer.

"Last I heard, I ain't been banned from the place," he said. "Sides, I like this here band, so I thought I'd stop by for a listen. Any harm in that?"

"None whatsoever," I told him, but I already spotted Tammy heading our way, and she didn't look happy. I gave her a wide berth.

"I don't want any trouble," she told him as soon as she approached, the music so loud I wasn't sure Daryl could even hear her.

"I came to drink my beer and listen to some good music is all," Daryl told her, as the woman sitting on the stool in front of him gave up her seat. "Thanks," he told her, as she walked away with an older cowboy.

“Jimmy might not see it like I do, especially since CindyLou and Mickey are both here as well. Are you gonna come in every night she’s working here?” Tammy asked.

“Just the usual. Like I said, I like the band, and I wanted one more beer before I head on home. Is that okay with you, Tammy? We’ve been friends for a long time. Was never my intention to start any trouble. I didn’t throw the first punch. Things just got out of hand. Won’t happen again. You know I’m good with my word.”

“You might be, but I also know how damn stubborn you can be and how you see everything through your own moral code, which has served you, but not everybody can see through your lenses. Maybe you should give that young man a chance, and that goes for Colt as well. You and Colt been friends ever since he was a kid. Ain’t right that you should turn your back on him now, no matter what he did or didn’t do.”

“I’m just gonna say this once,” he began, and I could tell he was dead serious. I had a feeling Tammy knew his intention as well. “And I say it with all due respect, cause we’ve known each other a long time. Who I talk to or don’t talk to ain’t none of your dang business, and how I see things ain’t none of your business neither. So if you want to keep being my friend, and if you still want my business, you won’t mention it again.”

Tammy spread her arms out and placed her hands on the bar. “If that’s how you want it to be, Daryl, then I’ll respect your wishes, but listen up. You’re a pig-headed cowboy with a heart of gold, but that don’t mean shit if you push the people who love you away. I won’t mention it again, but if you ever

so much as put another hand on any of my customers or my employees ever again, whether or not they start it or not, and whether or not you're inside this establishment or out on the street, I don't ever want to see your face in here for the rest of your stubborn, angry life. Your hands are lethal weapons. If you can't figure out a way to solve the problem without throwing punches, I don't want to know you. Am I clear?"

He didn't reply. He merely stared at her, and she at him. It was the first time I'd ever seen Tammy take such a hard line. Jimmy did this kind of thing all the time, but Tammy was always a sweetheart, no matter what. Apparently, that sweetness only went so far. After that, she was as straightforward and sharp as her husband.

No wonder they'd been together for so long. Under her sweet vanilla exterior lurked one feisty woman who had a limit as to the amount of shit she would take.

If I hadn't seen it with my own eyes and heard it with my own ears, I never would have believed it.

The thing was, it sounded as if she was on our side, on Mickey's side, and Colt's and even CindyLou's, which was something I never thought I'd see. I always thought Daryl was that person. Thought he would go to the ends of the earth for all of us.

Apparently, I was wrong.

Instead, he came out punching rather than talking things over.

I got it, but that didn't make him right.

Still, there it was, right out on the table or bar in this case. I wondered if CindyLou had any idea what her showing up in Sweet Whiskey was doing to the people who loved her? It was pitting them against each other, while it bonded others of us closer to her.

And that included Colt, Mickey, and me.

“Clear as a bell,” Daryl finally said, and with that, she served him a beer, then walked away, leaving him to stew in his own mess.

CindyLou 8

I'd planned on catching a ride home with Colt, but he and Tammy stayed later so they could go over the monthly liquor order. They liked to do it after they locked up rather than before they opened because neither one of them liked to come in any earlier than they had to.

"I can always give you a ride," Scotty told me as we made our way to Colt's place. I held my hat in my lap, still happy I'd bought it. I fit right in at Dirty Coyote. Almost everyone wore a cowboy hat, even most of the women.

"Is this something Colt does on a regular basis?" I asked Scotty, wondering if I should get mentally prepared to drive myself back and forth.

"About two times a month, depending on how busy we are. And it's always on a Thursday night," he said as we sped up the deserted road, his gaze totally focused on the dark street ahead of us. I felt safe driving with him, as if he knew these roads all too well.

“I don’t mind driving myself, but on a night like tonight, when I’ve been drinking, I don’t like to go anywhere near a car unless I’m the passenger. I drank way too much and although I feel like I could drive a tractor trailer, I know I shouldn’t even be on a bike.”

I gazed over at him and grinned. If he wasn’t behind the wheel, I swear I would kiss him right on the lips. And it would be a hot kiss, too. Nothing sisterly about it. I’d stick my tongue down his throat to let him know I wasn’t kidding around. I wanted him, just like I wanted Colt, and yes, even Mickey... especially Mickey.

“None of us drink while we’re working. Way too much can go wrong, and we need to be ready for it.”

“If you mean bad in general, I’ve worked behind a bar long enough that a statement like that no longer scares me. And I never drink when I’m working. Problem is, I wasn’t working tonight, and I may have overindulged.”

“I’d never know it if you hadn’t told me. By the way, did you and Mickey ever catch up with each other tonight?” he asked, quickly glancing my way.

“Every time I saw him, or he spotted me, he turned and walked in the opposite direction. I’m getting the feeling he doesn’t want any part of me right now.”

“He’ll come around. Just give him a little time.”

“Ya know what? I don’t care if he ever comes around. Either he wants to be in my life... in Darci’s life... or he doesn’t. I’m not going to force him, nor am I going to wait around for him, like I did with my own dad.”

Scotty suddenly got all serious, looking, like I hit a sensitive nerve.

“Maybe you shouldn’t compare the two. From what little I know about your dad, and it’s very little, Mickey doesn’t seem to be anything like him. I think you caught Mickey by complete surprise, and he’s trying his best to adjust to being someone’s dad. Hell, he hasn’t even met his kid yet. I’m sure when he does, you won’t be able to pry him away from her.”

Scotty liked to see the best in people, whereas Colt saw folks for who they were. Mickey... well, Mickey... I had no idea what he saw in people, but whatever it was, he had a ton of trust issues. His dad, who was serving time behind bars for selling drugs, was due to get out in three years. At least that was what Mickey told me the last time I saw him. He also told me he hadn’t spoken to his dad in at least five years.

Oh yeah, Mickey had big trust issues.

That was the thing Mickey and I had in common, the catalyst that brought us together that night. We felt sorry for ourselves, and we sought some comfort out in that truck in the parking lot.

Which I would be forever grateful for because I was lucky enough to get Darci out of the deal. I just hoped that Mickey would come to his senses and not end up the exact same kind of dad we both grew up with.

Fifteen minutes later, Scotty pulled up in front of my new home, Colt’s place. “Well, I’ll see you tomorrow night, then. Looking forward to it.”

“Thanks,” I answered. “You want to come in?” I wanted to get to know him better before we started working together. He’d been so kind to me today, but conversations and actions were always different at night. I wanted to get to know nighttime Scotty a bit better... maybe a whole lot better. Besides, I’d just remembered he had some kind of quirky gift when it came to music. “I’ve been working on a song I’d like you to hear. Not that I have any intention of performing it myself, but maybe I can sell it to one of the local bands. There seem to be more bands per capita in this area than I’d ever imagined. Anyway, I’m having trouble getting the overall melody right. Maybe you can help if you’re up for it. I know it’s late and...”

“Love to,” he answered even before I could finish my sentence. “I just happen to have my guitar behind the seat. When I stay with Mickey, sometimes I help him practice. I’m unusual when it comes to music. I can hear it once and play it. Don’t ask me how or why, I just always could. Been playing like that ever since I can remember. It’s freaky.”

My memories of him playing as a kid swung back into my head, and I could see him sitting on a bench, playing a melody that he’d just heard, and making up chords and riffs that made the song even better.

“I seem to remember you playing like that even as a kid. Why aren’t you up on the stage, instead of working the bar?”

He smirked, and my breath caught in my throat. God, he had the kind of good looks that took my breath clean away.

“Truth?” he asked, as his eyes picked up the light from Colt’s front porch.

“Always.”

“Terrible stage fright. I freeze up, and my head goes completely blank. I forget every note I’m supposed to play, and I can’t move. It’s like someone zapped me into stone, and I can no longer even think, let alone play notes on a guitar. No thanks. I’m much more comfortable behind the bar, pouring drinks. I’m good at it, and I like people. Mickey hates people and loves the stage. He has to really stretch himself to learn all the songs in a band’s songbook, but once he does, the guy has a true stage presence. People seem to love him.”

“I’m surprised he never signed with a band. Do you know what’s up with that?”

I slipped out of the truck, then turned back to Scotty, grabbing my purse from the cab floor, then securing my hat on my head. Scotty didn’t seem to have one, which made me wonder if he ever wore one. I’d seen both Colt and Mickey wearing hats. Even my Uncle Daryl wore a hat, but not Scotty. Apparently, he hadn’t gotten the memo.

“Let’s just say Mickey has commitment issues. Signing with a band would force him to have consistency in his life, and Mickey does his best to avoid any kind of routine. I’m surprised he still works for Tammy and Jimmy, but then, he’s more or less on call. So, in that sense, the job isn’t consistent.”

“Good to know,” I said and slammed my door shut, thinking that Mickey was an even worse father material than I first thought. I knew he had a turbulent childhood, but when you were an adult, you had options.

Evidently, Mickey didn’t see any of the good options, only the bad ones.

Scotty grabbed his guitar out of a case that he kept behind the seats and joined me as we strolled up the walkway surrounded by a manicured lawn. One thing about Colt, he not only kept a neat and clean house, the front and backyard reflected his attention to detail. He even had flowers growing in large containers on the front stairs, giving it that feminine touch.

I liked that in a man. Showed he took pride in his personal world, but then I liked Colt and Scotty, apparently. My feelings for Mickey still seemed scattered around like confetti. I hoped that one way or another, Mickey would help me gather all those feelings, but so far, it wasn't looking as if that would happen anytime soon.

“So, how do you like living here in Sweet Whiskey?” Scotty asked once we were settled in the large living room, sitting across from each other on two hardback chairs, our guitars perched in our laps. I'd hung my hat on a peg near the door, along with several other cowboy hats that obviously belonged to Colt.

Colt's floors were either tile or whitewashed wood, with great, big, colorful throw rugs under steel-gray, overstuffed furniture. The rooms were extra-large with plenty of room for adding more chairs, like we were doing now.

“It's been really great, at least up until today. I already miss my girl, so I may have to figure something else out for that. Maybe hire a babysitter to come in on the nights I'm working. Still, I know my aunt will take better care of her, but it's hard for me to get used to her being in another house than

I'm in. I guess I have to force myself to get used to it. This is better for Darci, and that's the important factor."

"Maybe that's the answer, then."

"Yeah, I've gotten so used to having my sweetie around me 24/7 that this separation is killing me. I hate it."

I didn't want to admit that the real reason I invited him in was because I didn't want to enter an empty house... a house without my Darci. It was the very first time I would be sleeping without her either in my room or in the next one over. The whole idea of her so far away made me want to cry.

"I bet you and your aunt can work something out," Scotty offered. "After all, your Uncle Daryl usually spends Friday and Saturday nights at Dirty Coyote. I mean he's usually there from the time we open the doors until closing or damn near it. Doesn't seem like it would be a problem for either of them if your aunt came here to babysit."

"If that's the case, she'll probably be happy for the company. Still, I wouldn't want my aunt driving home from here that late by herself. It's only three nights a week. I'll get used to it, I'm sure, but right now... on this first night... it's tough."

I hadn't anticipated these emotions ripping me apart like this. I'd left her before for a few hours during the day, but never at night. I had to learn how to suck it up, but damn, it was killing me on the inside.

"Let's hear your song. Maybe that'll cheer you up."

Just mentioning my song instantly helped bring my spirits up, but then Scotty had a way of knowing how to put me in a

better mood.

“Okay, but just keep in mind that it’s rough. I’ve got lyrics for it as well, but those are rough, too. I only started playing again after Darci was born. Instead of reading to her, I found that she liked it better when I played music and sang. Not that I have a great voice or anything like that, but it’s passable.”

He chuckled. “Now that you’ve more or less berated not only your song, and lyrics, but also your voice, I don’t know what to expect.”

I laughed right along with him. “I guess I did, didn’t I? I’ve been trying to be more positive about my music, but it’s hard when no one else has ever heard it before to give me feedback.”

“Wait! Are you telling me you’re a music virgin? Like I’m the first to hear you sing?”

His analogy kept me laughing. The guy knew how to get me to relax, that was for damn sure.

“Technically, Darci’s the first, but I don’t know if she counts.”

“Okay, let me move my chair in closer for this honor, and this is a true honor. You have my undivided attention, but why me?”

“It’s complicated, but part of me never thought I was ready before. And because you admitted you have stage freight. That’s my problem, only worse. That’s why I’m still a virgin when it comes to singing my music in front of anyone.”

He reached out and took my hand in his for a moment, and a spark of heat raced through me. I’d been attracted to Scotty

all day, and now that I knew we shared almost the same fear, I felt even more attracted to him.

“Take a deep breath and slowly let it out,” he said, and I followed his instructions. “Now, pretend you’ve sung your songs to me many times before, and I’m your biggest fan.”

I liked the visual, so I pretended what he said was true, took another deep breath, settled my guitar in my lap, held on, and decided to just go for it.

“Here goes,” I told him and strummed the intro. Then I started in on the lyrics:

You told me I’m your Mrs.

I told you you’re my man.

Now you’re dancing with a sister,

Who don’t know who I am.

I’m sayin’ no, oh no, no, no.

Telling you no, oh no, no, no.

She’s got you talking ‘bout your leaving.

The two of us are done.

But I’ll still be here tomorrow,

When you know you’re gonna run.

I’m saying no, oh no, no no.

Telling you no, oh no, no, no.

So baby, it's time you know,

I'm done with this cheating show

You can get a new Mrs.

And I'll get a new man.

Cause cheating ain't my love story,

And I ain't you're biggest fan.

I'm saying no, oh, no, no, no.

Telling you no, oh, no, no, no.

I kept singing and playing until the song was through, trying to compensate for the bit of a mess in the middle, hoping Scotty could find a way to fix it.

When I played my last note, he sat back and applauded. I had to admit, the sound felt good. No one had ever applauded my music before because no one except my baby Darci had ever heard it before.

“That was great and not at all what I expected,” he said, surprising me with his comment. “It’s right up there with something that Miranda Lambert or Elle King might write. It has the right melody, but I would give it a bit more of an upbeat tempo, more punch during the chorus. Let me show you. I’ll use your basic melody, but I’ll speed it up a bit, with a little more edge. If you hate it, don’t be afraid to tell me.”

He took my song and gave it a touch of magic, making it sound like it was already a hit. He even sang some of the lyrics and sounded so good, I wanted to swoon. I applauded him when he played the last note.

“Oh my God! How did you do that? How did you take what I did and make it so amazing? Can you write it down? I don’t want to forget it.”

“Believe me, I won’t forget, but I can write it down for you.”

I couldn’t help being totally in awe of his talent. “Are you some kind of savant?”

“I don’t know what I am. I’m just good with music.” He spoke as if it were a well-known fact that he’d accepted a long time ago.

Nothing to see here. I’m just brilliant.

“This is a big ask, but would you consider helping me finish this song? I don’t know what I’ll do with it, but I’d like to have it be done.”

“I know exactly what you should do with it... play it, on stage, at Dirty Coyote. Tammy and some of the local talented women have an open mic every Wednesday night. Plus, they play some cover songs. The locals love it, and the place is usually packed. I know she’d love to have you up on the stage with her.”

Fear immediately bubbled in my stomach. “Oh, no. No. No. I couldn’t. I’m so rusty I could never keep up with them. I’m sure they’re all far better musicians than I am.”

“You’re just a bit rusty, like you said, but no one else has written a song like this, and I’ve heard a lot. I usually work on Wednesday nights. It’s a fun night for me, and I make a lot of money behind the bar. Women know how to tip much better than men do. I could help you go over their songbook, and I bet you can get through one set, easy. Plus, you can play your song. You’ll have almost an entire week to learn the songs. I know you can do it.”

My stomach actually quivered at the thought.

“Maybe Tammy can sing my song. That would be fun... to hear her sing it.”

“Or better still, maybe *you* can sing it.”

For a moment, he caught me by complete surprise. I’d never even considered singing the song myself. At least not now. Maybe in a few years, but not now. Now, everything was about making a home for Darci... a safe, lasting home.

“Let it go. It’s never going to happen.” I stood and leaned my guitar on the stand I’d brought out earlier. “Can I get you something to drink? Wine? Beer? Water?”

“Water. I have to drive.”

“You can stay here if you want. I’m sure Colt won’t mind. I think he’s got another guest room upstairs.”

I liked Scotty and wanted to get to know him better. The only way I could do that was if I hung around with him more often. Working with him wouldn’t do that. The place was too busy for any real interaction between employees.

“Thanks. In that case, I’ll take a beer, but why can’t you sing this song? I think Tammy would love to have you up on

the stage with her.”

I walked out of the room and headed for the kitchen. I was still getting used to the layout of the house and took the long way. When I arrived, Scotty was already pulling a Coors Lite out of the fridge.

“I’ll get better at getting around in here.”

“It’s a big house. Did you want one?” He reached for another.

“Actually, I wouldn’t mind a glass of white wine. I bought a couple of bottles this afternoon while we were at Walmart.”

Scotty found one in the fridge and opened it while I pulled out a wine glass, wanting to ignore his question, but knowing damn well he wasn’t about to let it go. He opened the bottle and gave me a generous pour.

“How about it?” he asked. “How about singing with Tammy next week?”

“Can you please let it go? I’ve already told you. It’s *never* going to happen.”

He gave me a look, and I knew it was because of my use of the word *never*.

I rolled my eyes at him.

He walked right out of the kitchen, went back into the living room, placed his beer on the nearest table, strapped on his guitar, and played the opening riff of *Girls With Guitars*. I followed him out and had no choice but to put down my wine and pick up my guitar. Before I could think about why I shouldn’t be doing this, we were playing and singing the entire

song together. Doing harmony and solos like we'd done this before. I found myself laughing over the fact he not only knew how to play the melody, but he also knew all the words. Even words I stumbled over. What the hell? Who was this guy and why hadn't I paid more attention to him during my summers with my aunt and uncle?

I sang the chorus all by myself, about girls with guitars, and daddy's angel and how mothers worry about girls with guitars.

When the song ended, we were both laughing, and dancing around the living room. It was the most fun I'd had in more time than I could remember.

He kissed me then. Like it was a natural, everyday occurrence. A soft, gentle kiss, like something you'd share with the person you loved.

When it ended, I took a step back, looked at him, curious over the fact the kiss took me by complete surprise, but I felt it down to my toes.

"I'm so sorry," he said. "I got caught up in the moment."

"So did I. Can we try that again?"

"The song or the kiss?" He smirked, and I felt my heart melt.

"The kiss."

"Love to."

He slung his guitar back, and I did the same with mine. This time, when our lips met, a spark of pure fire swept right

through me, especially when his hand came up and cupped the side of my face. Wow! Pure fucking fire.

Once again, when it ended, I took another step back. “This isn’t right.”

“I know. We hardly know each other. I mean we know each other from when we were kids, but we don’t really know each other as adults.”

“That doesn’t bother me. What I’m thinking about is how I got pregnant with Mickey, and I just had sex with Colt last night. Now, I’m thinking about having sex with you.”

“You are?” He looked so adorable I wanted to eat him up.

“I am. There must be something seriously wrong with me.”

He took a step in closer. “You mean something seriously right.” And he kissed me again, only this time, we not only got rid of our guitars, but we started peeling off our clothes, as we headed up to my bedroom. The good thing was he knew exactly where it was located; I was way too busy enjoying his kisses to think about navigating Colt’s big house.

“What about Colt?” I asked once we landed on my bed, almost completely naked.

“What about him?”

“What if he comes home and finds us?”

He pulled himself off me, stripped out of his boxers, and while he held onto his erect dick, walked over to the bedroom door, shut it, and came right back. “He’ll just have to wait his turn. Right now, you’re all mine.”

I could have dwelled on that statement and contemplated exactly what he meant, but when his mouth covered my right breast, and his tongue danced over my nipple, all rational thoughts flew right out of my head. What was left were dirty thoughts about what we could do next.

CindyLou 9

I felt dirty and wicked and not in a bad way.

I'd already had sex with Colt, and now I was having sex with Scotty. I didn't know whether I should worry about this change in my moral compass, or I should welcome it. Either way, I liked what was happening to me. Like I had come to a great awakening.

Scotty didn't seem to have any problem with having sex in Colt's house, knowing Colt and I only recently did the deed. Truth be told, he seemed totally cool with the whole idea. I didn't know how that fit into our overall budding relationship... mine and Colt's... but at the moment, I forced myself to let all those traditional thoughts go. I only wanted to enjoy this dirty moment and have it be enjoyable for Scotty as well.

As I kissed him and ran my hands over his strong shoulders, and he ran his hands... well... everywhere, I wondered if these guys had some kind of a man-pact about the

women they fucked. Did they share a woman? And did I now fall into that shared category? And if I did, would I be okay with this new concept?

He pulled down my cotton panties and took a long look at my pussy, causing me to want to giggle. And when he ran his fingers between my legs and pushed two fingers deep inside me, he looked into my eyes and said, “You’re beautiful.”

I didn’t respond, but he made me feel beautiful in that moment, despite my less-than-perfect body. Having a baby wreaks havoc on a woman’s body, and unless she works at getting her muscle tone back, which I hadn’t, my tummy was still fuller than I’d like it to be. I couldn’t seem to get rid of those last five pounds.

Up until recently, I hadn’t thought of myself as a particularly bold type of woman who liked being naked with a man. For one thing, this was only the second time in almost eighteen months that I’d been with a man. I swore off men when I got pregnant, and once Darci was born, I rarely even thought of sex.

“I just want to fuck you. Is that okay?” He asked the question as if we weren’t already naked, and he didn’t already have his fingers inside me.

I grinned at him as he laid on top of me. “I think that’s been the plan since we first kissed.”

“Yes, but what I mean is, I only want to fuck you right now, slow and hard.”

He pushed up deeper inside me and kept pumping me as he spoke, pressing my clit with his thumb, giving me a wicked

sensation that made my toes curl.

“Whatever you want.”

He moaned. “Okay. I want you to open your legs as wide as you can. I want to see that sweet pussy I’m touching.”

“I’m not very good at this,” I told him. “I get shy.”

“We’ll take it slow. You don’t have to do anything you don’t want to do, but you said whatever I want.” His grin looked deliciously hot. “That’s an invitation, sweet P, if there ever was one.”

“It was, and I meant it, but I’m still awkward and shy.”

I slowly opened my legs, as his hand ran up and down my inner thighs. I was so hot, I thought I might ignite the bed. Then where would we be? I couldn’t control my nerves. The combination was ripping me apart.

“That’s it, sweet P. Remember to breathe.”

My pussy belonged to Scotty now. My legs were wide open, and his grin looked even more deliciously wicked than even moments ago. He slowly ran his fingers over me, kneading each of my breasts, then rolling my nipples between his fingers, squeezing, and tugging on them, which caused me to grab his hands, so he’d continue for a while longer.

Then he slipped one hand down between my legs once again, lingering inside me, watching as he pushed in deeper and flicked my clit with his thumb.

“That’s it. You’re so wet right now, I can slip right in. Is that what you want me to do?”

I start to tell him to do whatever he wants, but I stop myself. “Yes. Fuck me deep and hard.”

He stares into my eyes, and I’m gone. “That’s what I want to hear.”

He leans back with his knees bent, rips open a condom with his teeth... where it came from, I don’t have a clue... rolls it on his long, thick dick, then slowly plunges deep inside me.

“Yes,” I finally said, when he bottomed out. I wanted to hold him, but instead, he cupped my ass and slowly pumped me, over and over again, with a slow, sinfully sexy motion. His eyelids fluttering with each slow thrust that sent me straight up to the stars. I felt as though I was teetering on the pointed edge of a great, big, silvery star, knowing damn well that at any moment, the star would vibrate, and I would plunge into a silvery abyss.

At least that was where my mind had gone, and no way in hell would I allow myself to fall until I was good and ready!

“Fuck, CindyLou, you feel so good,” he said in a voice as low as a bass guitar. I hardly recognized it.

“So do you,” I whispered, not wanting my star to rumble under me.

He repositioned himself over me, off to one side, and now his free hand ran over my body and down between my legs, until he stopped on my clit, making little circles that caused me to gather up all my mental strength not to start that rumble on my own.

“I’ve wanted to get you in bed ever since I first saw you at Mickey’s place. And here we are. My dream has come true.”

He ran a kiss down my neck, sucking as his wet lips slipped over my hot skin.

“I tried my best to be a good girl and only think of you as a friend, but that fell by the wayside tonight. Watching you pour drinks at the bar sent me over the edge. This is more than I’d hoped for.” I wrapped one of my legs around his waist and pulled him in tighter. His fingers still lingered on my clit.

The rumbling had begun, and I didn’t think I could stop it this time.

“You’re so fucking hot. Damn, your pussy is tight.”

At that exact moment, he flicked my clit and plunged inside me deep and hard, and that rumbling pushed me right off my star. My moan echoed around the universe as I closed my eyes and bounced off the nearby stars until my body quaked from the rush of heat that seemed to envelop both of us.

His hand left my clit, and he plunged inside me full-on, over and over, faster and faster until I felt like that guitar of his. The one he’d pulled from the back of his truck. The one he played my song on so perfectly right from the first chord. Like he knew it by heart, like he knew my body by heart, and knew exactly how to play me.

He rode my ascent into a sky of blinking stars, hard and deep. Like he was getting to the end of his favorite song, and he wanted to wow his audience with his music mastery.

I was his. He owned my body... owned this fuck. I was merely his instrument, and I loved every second while I anticipated the crescendo.

“Now,” he commanded. “Let me... let me hear that... beautiful voice of yours.”

And as if I had any control over this, I let out a perfect note and held it for what seemed like forever or at least until he'd pushed out the last of his downhome, wickedly dirty orgasm, with a final rush of a melody of crazy notes strung together to make absolute perfection.

I AWOKE HOURS later as sunshine poured in through the wooden blinds, slashing our naked bodies with horizontal lines. I remembered resting my head on his shoulder, my hand on his beautiful, muscled chest, while my leg rested across his. I remembered that one of us had pulled up a blanket, but apparently, it didn't stay because we were uncovered and naked, and ironically, I wasn't the least bit in need of that blanket. I liked lying here naked with him, and when I peeked down at his strong body, I couldn't help but notice his totally erect, perfectly perfect penis resting against his bronze skin, just begging me to... well... do some filthy things.

I reached down and carefully wrapped my hand around his dick, feeling its weight and amazed at his large size.

“If you're going to touch me like that, you're going to have to follow through to the finish line,” he said while his eyes were still closed.

Part of me wanted to stop. I knew I'd be completely on display for him, but I didn't want to give into my shyness. Not now. Not when I'd come so far.

"I was hoping to do exactly that," I said with a little chuckle.

He locked his hands up under his head, causing his biceps to bulge, his well-defined pecs reflected the morning sun, and an eight pack that I couldn't help but run my hands over. When he opened his eyes, he said, "Let the fun begin, sweet P. I'm all in."

I'd never been with a man who just leaned back and watched. It caused my stomach to clench. What if I wasn't any good at this? I mean, I'd given my share of blowjobs in my life, to be sure, but were they always great? Maybe, but usually, the guy helped. This kind of behavior had me rethinking this idea. It could turn out really bad.

Then what?

I tossed those negative thoughts out of my head and proceeded with the task at hand, so to speak.

The thought gave me a mental chuckle. Laughing aloud probably wouldn't add to Scotty's excitement.

I ran my hands over his impossibly hard chest, while I straddled his body. His gaze stuck to me like we'd been glued together. The streaks of sunshine caused our bodies to look surreal.

He seemed to dart his eyes between my breasts and my pussy, which I purposely kept on full display. Now that I'd taken on a bolder attitude, I wanted to keep that going... and

showing him my wet pussy while I ran my hands over his body, seemed like a fun thing to do.

Once I got down far enough, I pumped his dick while I swirled my tongue around his crown, teasing him until his rock-hard cock throbbed for me.

“Tell me what you want,” I demanded, while I slid my hand up and down his shaft.

“Take me deep inside your mouth,” he whispered in a voice so low and sexy chills ran over my body. When I finally wrapped my lips around him and relaxed my throat for the first deep thrust, his feral moan rocked my world, and I knew I was doing everything right.

My confidence seemed to soar and when I swirled my tongue over the tip, his moans took on a force all their own. I had a feeling this wouldn't last long, so I gave it everything I had, even massaging his heavy balls to add to his morning pleasure.

The man had a thick, heavy cock that filled my mouth and caused me to gag a few times when I opened the back of my throat. I hadn't realized his girth until now. It was one thing to have this beautiful man inside my pussy, but something else entirely now that I was sucking him off.

Once I adjusted to his size, and I felt his hands in my hair, holding it off my face so he could watch, my intensity picked up, and I pumped him even faster. As I worked him, with my ass up in the air, and my breasts swaying, I realized how powerful this made me feel. I was in control of this. I would determine the outcome. This blowjob was totally mine to give, and I gave it willingly.

“Darlin’ I’m gonna...” he tried to say, but instead, he merely came down my throat. It happened so fast and so easily, I didn’t even gag. Instead, I felt proud of myself that I was able to get him off so quickly and swallow all that he gave me. I’d been with men who took forever, and by the time they came, I’d lost interest.

Or my jaw ached.

Neither of those things happened with Scotty, and when I collapsed on top of him, and he wrapped his arms around me, I felt as though we’d officially started something way too good to toss aside. This relationship we were into wasn’t about to end. I just knew it.

And besides, that was a stellar performance, if I did say so myself.

“That’s how I like to wake up! That was fucking memorable! How long did you say you were staying?” he asked as he stroked my head, and I nestled in tighter.

“Glad you liked it... there’s more where that came from. I live here now, remember?”

“Oh, that’s right. And tonight, we’re working together.”

I couldn’t help the glow that I felt from that performance. It was like this was the first time I ever really enjoyed giving head. How was that even possible?

“We sure are,” I whispered, falling off him, then snuggling in next to him. I reached down and pulled the blanket up over us. “And I intend to remind you about this all night long.”

“Are you trying to get me fired?” he said, and I could hear the lightness in his voice. “How the hell am I supposed to

work that bar thinking about my dick in your mouth? I woke up dreaming about fucking you. Between the two memories, I'm going to be totally fucked tonight."

I thought of a delicious way for us to finish this... completely ignoring his workflow dilemma.

"There is one way I won't bug you tonight."

"And what's that?" His fingers ran over my shoulder, giving me goose bumps. I was so hot for him, I could hardly rest in his arms.

"I wouldn't bug you if you returned the favor." I looked up at him, grinning.

"Oh, you're a wicked little girl, aren't you?"

"Scotty, this is just the beginning," I told him with a chuckle.

I nodded and in the next moments, he had my legs wide open, exploring my soaking wet pussy with both his fingers and his tongue, devouring me like I was his Sunday brunch. I wrapped my legs over his shoulders, and it was all over.

Oh, man, I didn't want this ride to ever end.

Micky 10

“Ain’t no big deal,” I told Colt. We were backstage inside the talent waiting room. A large room with no windows, a couple of long tables, several hardback chairs, a small steel-gray sofa, and one large dressing table with an oversized mirror. It wasn’t much of a room, but all the bands that had played here had signed the wall behind the sofa. Carrie Underwood’s name was even on that wall, along with Brooks and Dunn and the incredible Dolly Parton, who happened to be a personal friend of Tammy’s.

I was playing lead guitar tonight with the Jess Davis Band, a local group with a huge following. Jess and her band were poised to sign with a record label any minute now. They already had three labels that wanted their signature on the dotted line, but they couldn’t seem to make up their minds yet. Kinda like me... commitment issues. Plus, they needed a good manager in the worst way. The one they had went on to manage some lone wolf guy who went viral on YouTube, and now three of his songs were not only in the top five on the

country charts, but they'd made it to every other music chart as well.

But none of that extra shit was my concern at the moment. My concern was how I'd gotten to a place where I might consider signing with them. I mean, Jess kept bugging me to join them when they start their tour next month, but if I did that, I'd be on the road for the next three months. What the fuck? Could I do that? Could I commit like that?

I never would've considered it even a few days ago, but now that I learned about having a kid, everything changed.

I had a responsibility, even though CindyLou didn't seem to care one way or the other. Well, I cared, and I hadn't even met my kid yet.

Too fucking scared. What if she hated me? I'd had enough rejection in my life, I certainly didn't need it coming from my own kid.

"This is monumental," Colt said. "Mickey Finn actually considering signing a contract with Jess Davis. Unheard of. Why not Hot Sugar?"

"They're on the road way too much."

"Don't tell me this is all because of Cindy Lou. Or was it Daryl's punch in the face that finally knocked some sense into you? Either way, this is a massive change in your character, and I'm impressed."

Colt's reaction was exactly why I didn't know if I could do this. The whole idea of being responsible or dependable gave me hives. I didn't know the first thing about what that even meant. Colt and Scotty had that shit down cold, but me... I

came from a long line of bullshit family. That kind of thing was part of my DNA. I had no idea whether I could stick to actual responsibilities or not. Hell, I never even had a dog or even a goldfish because of my issue with commitments. It was difficult enough trying to take care of myself, let alone some other living entity.

“Yeah, well, don’t be. I haven’t signed anything yet. It’s just a thought right now, and I wanted your opinion, not your praise. This is a big move for me, and I need you to be my friend, not my pimp.”

We sat on a couple of black chairs in the otherwise empty room. The band would arrive in less than a half hour, wanting a decision from me. Fuck if I knew what the right move should be.

“I don’t think I’d make a good pimp. Way too much competition... but a friend. Now that’s something I know how to do. I’m your friend, your brother if it comes right down to it. Always have been and probably, unless you do something fucking stupid... which you’ve come close to doing many times before... I’ll always be here for you. You, me, and Scotty are brothers, you know that.”

“Then help me think this through.”

“Okay. Tell me some of the shit that’s going on inside that messed up brain of yours.”

“Other than I want to fucking run as far as I can and never look back. Or that I’m not father material. You and Scotty fit that description, not me. I’ve got a gypsy soul and settling anywhere, with anyone, might be impossible for me. Especially coming from the fucked-up childhood I had.”

“We all had rough childhoods,” Colt shot back, as if he had the slightest idea of what I went through as a kid.

“Oh, give it a rest. You had the coolest parents around, and in a lot of ways, they still are.”

“They’re good people, don’t get me wrong, but Daryl was more of a father to me than my own dad. Not that I’d ever admit that to either of them, but it’s true. My dad ran a couple of businesses and was never home. I needed a male role model, and Daryl fit that to perfection.”

“Yeah, well, he’s not too happy with you right now or any of us, for that matter.” I sat back in my chair and raked my hand through my hair. I had to be on the stage tonight, and I was mentally somewhere else. Somewhere far away and safe.

“He’ll come ‘round, but that’s not what this conversation is about. It’s about you and CindyLou and your baby. You’re not running anywhere. If you do, you’ll regret it because for one thing, I don’t think I’d be able to forgive you for that. I’ll give you a pass for not talking to her last night, but I won’t be giving you one for tonight. She’s out there right now, getting prepped by Scotty. Now would be the perfect time to talk to her.”

Colt liked to take the bull by the horns, no matter how fierce that bull might be. He always confronted his fears, which made him a much better man than I could ever even dream of being.

“About what?”

“About what your plans are going forward.”

I raked my hand through my hair again and stood. The room felt stuffy, like I couldn't get in enough air. "That's just it. I don't have any fucking plans. I never know what I'm doing next week or even tomorrow, let alone what to do about a baby... my baby."

"Then that's what you have to tell her. That's what you two have to talk about."

"I don't know where to start."

I paced, not that it helped, but it gave me something to do with my wobbly legs.

"Tell her that. She's an amazing woman and has to be an amazing mom. After all, she had Darci all on her own, and now she's taking care of her all on her own. She doesn't need you to do anything, but you came to me for advice, so I'm giving it. Don't fuck this up. This is your chance to be the man I know you want to be. The man you were born to be. Step up to the plate, Mickey, and do what's right. Now's your time to shine. Don't let yourself down. You've got this."

I stopped pacing and stood there for a moment, trying to absorb all that he'd said.

"Wow, have you always been this smart, or is this a recent change? I know you can figure most things out, but this is over and above."

"It's a slight change. I've been thinking about this shit for a while. Decided it was time to be the kind of man I'd always admired. No easy task, believe me. I think my lack of clarity is why no woman would hook her wagon to mine. I just didn't have it. Now, I think I finally do."

That was the thing about Colt. Once he set his mind to something, he didn't let anything block him from achieving his goal. Nothing like me. When something got a little hard, I went on to the next idea. I could probably learn a lot from this guy if I chose to really listen. Maybe it was time that I did just that.

"I'm impressed."

"I'm glad somebody is... now grow a pair and go on out there and talk to her."

"Fuck you," I told him as I headed for the door, thinking how this would go like shit. That I might say something stupid, and she wouldn't want to have anything to do with me, much less allow me to be in Darci's life.

"That's what I want to hear!" he said, chuckling. "You're right on track."

I headed through the backstage area with my stomach in a knot, so tight it felt like it might implode, and my mouth felt drier than a burnt boot. I only had one thought: Riding an ornery bronc was a hell of a lot easier.

"Hey, Mickey," CindyLou said as I approached the main bar where she'd be working tonight. If I didn't have to be onstage tonight, I'd order up a shot and a beer just to take the edge off what I had to do, but drinking and performing didn't mix... at least not for me... so I'd given that up years ago.

"Hey CindyLou. How's it going?" She dried her hands on a bar towel and gazed over at me from the sober side of the bar. Tammy and Scotty busied themselves at the other end. Scotty was slicing fruit, while Tammy restocked some of the

bottles of liquor. Colt would be working at this bar as well, tonight. We didn't expect as many people as when Hot Sugar played, but you never knew exactly what to expect with the Jess Davis Band, and Tammy liked to be prepared.

“Learning a lot. Tammy's been a great teacher. She really knows her stuff.”

We hadn't officially opened yet, and the staff buzzed around, making sure everything was ready for the night. The dance floor had been mopped down, all the carpeting had been vacuumed, the tables and chairs wiped clean, the three bars were well stocked, and everyone knew their stations. Tammy and Jimmy ran a tight ship, and nothing escaped their scrutiny. Probably why the place did so well.

“She sure does,” I said, and my brain froze. I had no idea what to say next. I never should have listened to Colt. This was a huge mistake.

Then Colt slapped my shoulder and said, “Mickey here has something he wants to say to you. Right, Mickey?”

Fucking Colt!

“Oh yeah?” CindyLou asked, folding the bar towel and draping it over the edge of the small steel sink. “What's that?”

I opened my mouth, but nothing came out. Like one of those nightmares you have when you want to run but your feet are glued to the ground.

“Why don't you take a ten-minute break, CindyLou. I'll cover for you. There's still another half hour before we open. You've already been here for about an hour or so. It's a long

night. Maybe you and Mickey want to have a seat somewhere for a few minutes.”

Colt had somehow turned into a full-on adult, and I hadn't even noticed when it happened. I guess I'd been too busy trying to avoid my own transition to notice his. He should be Darci's father. Not me. She'd have a much better childhood with him at the helm, rather than a guy who won't even commit to a band.

“Sure,” she said, and just like that, we were sitting at a table far enough away from the bar so that no one could hear us.

I still didn't know what to say, so I blurted out the first thing that came into my muddled head. “I don't know shit about being a father.”

She sat back in her chair, and I finally noticed how good she looked. Like really fucking good. She wore a white shirt, with just the right number of buttons undone to give a guy a pretty peek at her soft cleavage, black stretch jeans with one ripped knee, and black lace-up boots. Her long, red hair was pulled up on the sides but hung down her back in long waves. I flashed on that hair falling on my face while she pumped my dick with her sweet, tight pussy... I quickly tossed that vision aside, or I'd never get through this.

“And you think I knew anything about how to be a mother?”

“It's not the same.”

“How do you figure?”

“You made her. She's part of you. It's instinct.”

“That might be true, but there were so many things I had to learn. There’s nothing easy about being a mother to an infant, and I had the worst role model ever. I had to learn everything on my own.”

Those words cut right through me. I’d forgotten all about what a lousy mom she had.

“My dad never taught me anything, either. I don’t even know how to be a good man, let alone someone’s father.”

“You can learn. Darci will help. She’s the sweetest baby I ever met.”

She actually glowed when she spoke about her daughter. As if Darci lit her up from the inside out.

“What if she hates me?”

“Impossible. She loves everybody. Does this mean you want to be in her life? Be her dad?”

Those words gave me a full fucking body shiver.

“It scares the shit out of me.” I sat forward and leaned on the table for support.

“That’s not an answer to my question. Do you want to be in her life or don’t you? Either way is fine with me.”

And there it was. The question of my life. The question that would change everything no matter how I answered it. The question that my own dad had shunned.

Was I man enough? Did I grow those balls Colt was talking about?

“Do you want me in her life?”

I'd mastered the art of turning the question back on the person asking it.

“Only if you commit to being a real dad to her. Someone who is always there for her birthdays and special events. Someone who will take her on bike rides and out for ice cream. Someone who can teach her how to tie her shoe or play a guitar or write a song. If not, if you can't be all in with your daughter, you can take yourself right out of that chair you're sitting in and get on back to where you came from. We never have to discuss this again. You're totally free to do anything you want to do, but here's the thing. Once you step into her life, make sure you're there for keeps because I won't tolerate anything less. She's my baby cub, and I'm a fierce mama bear. You'd be making a big mistake if you think otherwise. Now what's it going to be, Mickey? Are you all in because I won't accept any half-ass bullshit.”

She sat back in her chair and folded her arms across her chest. This woman was Daryl's niece, all right. I wouldn't be surprised if she had a killer punch, just like her uncle.

“That was some speech, CindyLou. Mama bear looks good on you.”

“That's only the beginning. Let's not forget who I have in my corner... uncle bear... and he'll wipe the floor with you, Mickey Finn. Make up your mind. I'm good with either way you want to go. Just pick one. But remember, there's no turning around on either road. They only go one way.”

And in that split second, I knew exactly which way I wanted to go.

“In that case, CindyLou Geller, there ain’t no way you’re getting rid of me. I’m all in, mama bear, and that little girl of ours better get her spurs on because she got herself a daddy who’s one ornery guitar-playin’ cowboy.”

She gazed down at the floor for a moment, and when she looked back up at me, her wide grin melted my heart and told me I’d made the right decision. “No backing out of it now, Mickey Finn.”

“No way. No how. You have my word.” And I slapped my hand over my heart, to give my words more power.

“Is your word worth anything?”

“It is now!”

We stood and the moment I took her in my arms and felt her beautiful body up against mine, I knew I’d never gotten over this fine woman. Never stopped wanting her or thinking about her no matter what bullshit I’d told myself. She’d always been the girl for me, but yeah, I had all those fucked-up commitment problems.

I was hell bent on working on those problems now.

All I had to do was convince her of that. Not an easy task... especially with Colt and Scotty dancing around her, but I was willing to try.

“When do you want to meet her?” she asked, as we stepped away from the embrace. At once, my stomach clenched again, but in a good way.

“That’s your call.”

“How about Sunday afternoon, say around one? We’re all off that day, so it might be easier for everyone.”

I took in a deep breath. “You moved in with Colt, right?”

“Yes.”

“I’ll be there at one on Sunday.”

“Great. Now I really need to get back. See you later,” she said and took off, leaving me breathless... but in a good way.

Colt 11

I couldn't take my eyes off Mickey and CindyLou. I needed to get my station set up behind the main bar, but I couldn't help but be curious. I prayed Mickey said the right things to her, and they came to some kind of agreement. When they first started the conversation, I didn't think it was going in the right direction, but then as it went on, I noticed how CindyLou's shoulders began to relax, and I knew the shithead had finally said the right thing.

I watched as he walked by me, nodding my way, and I knew the talk had gone well, which made me happy. I could feel the tension drain from my shoulders. Still, the question remained... would he stick to his decision, or would he fuck it all up?

Mickey had plenty of good intentions, but most of the time, he wasn't too good at making those intentions stick.

"That went better than I'd expected," CindyLou said without me having to ask. "He said he wants to be part of

Darci's life and sounded as if he meant it. What do you think?"

Scotty walked over looking curious. "What's going on? Everything okay? Mickey's not giving the rodeo another whirl or anything?"

"Mickey wants to be in Darci's life," CindyLou told him. Apparently, she trusted us. I just hoped she trusted Mickey as well, and if she did, I hoped he valued that trust.

"And did you agree to let him?" Scotty asked.

"I did. I hope I'm not making the biggest mistake of my life," she said, sounding totally apprehensive about her decision.

My stomach clenched for a moment. Apparently, I still had some of my own apprehensions. "He told me he's thinking of signing with the Jess Davis Band. That's huge."

"Life changing," Scotty told her. "If he signs with them, he'll have to make a commitment. The good thing is they're local, so no matter what kind of fame they get, this is their home."

Tammy came over. "Hey, guys. Not to break this up or anything, but are your stations ready? Those doors open in ten minutes, and the line is already down the street. We're in for a busy night."

"All set," I told her. I'd already set mine up when I first arrived about two hours ago.

"Ready," Scotty said.

"And CindyLou? How are you feeling about tonight? You ready, doll?" Tammy asked, looking great in her tight-fitting,

bright-pink jumpsuit, with a white blouse. The jumpsuit showed off her curvy body, and the blouse caressed her very full breasts. She also wore a big hair white wig and dangly earrings. And how she walked in those crazy high shoes always amazed me, but she wore them everywhere, even when she climbed ladders or performed on stage. They weren't heels, they were those cork type of platform things that some women wore. Tammy lived in them.

“All set. I've got this. No worries. It feels good to be behind a bar again.” One thing about CindyLou, she seemed to always be positive, which made it fun to be around her. In that way, she and Tammy were very similar.

“Scotty tells me you can play guitar and sing. Plus, he says you wrote a killer song. I'd love to hear it sometime. I'm always looking for girl talent to play with me onstage. Would you be interested?”

I knew CindyLou played and had a smooth voice, but I had no idea she'd written a song. How Scotty knew this was news to me.

I caught the daggers shooting out of CindyLou's eyes, heading straight for Scotty, and I got the feeling there was something about this she wasn't liking.

“Oh, thanks, but I don't think I'm ready to play in front of anyone.”

“You certainly don't have to if you don't want to, but it's not a volunteer kind of thing. I'll pay you what I pay any of the talent that gets up on that stage. Granted it's not as much as I pay my headliners, but it can be worth a few extra thousand dollars a month to you. And if I like your song, it can be worth

even more. Think about it, hon, and let me know. Love to have you join me, anytime. All I ask is that you set up a quick audition with me first. I have to know that you can actually do what Scotty says you can do. Give it some thought. And good luck tonight.”

She gave CindyLou a quick hug, then sashayed out from behind the bar and headed backstage, most likely to her office.

“I hope you don’t mind, but you’re too good not to share your talent onstage,” Scotty told her.

“I can say the same for you,” she shot back.

“I keep telling him,” I said. “But he won’t do it.”

“He told me he’d perform if I did.” She turned to Scotty. “Does that promise still hold?”

He hesitated, then he said, “It does. If you audition, and Tammy says yes, I’ll play backup.”

“And harmonize my song with me?” she asked, almost sounding as if she were pleading her case.

“It’s all girls, remember?” I reminded her. Not that I wasn’t looking forward to seeing Scotty finally on stage, but normally, Tammy was adamant about it being a girl thing.

“I’m sure Tammy will make the exception,” CindyLou said, sounding confident.

I could tell Scotty would rather have his wisdom teeth pulled... without anesthesia rather than perform on a stage. He rinsed out a glass and shoved it into the dishwasher, then turned back to CindyLou. “There must be something in the air because I’m going to say yes. I’ll do it if you do.”

She held out her hand. “Is that a promise we can shake on?”

He grabbed her hand and gave it a couple of pumps. “You have my word.”

“Holy shit!” I said, nearly yelling the words. “Pigs should fly at any moment, and it’s probably getting cold down in hell right now. What a night. First, Mickey decides to man up with his kid, and now you’ve agreed to get up on a stage and perform in front of people.”

CindyLou turned to me. “And what about you, Colt? What fear are you going to overcome tonight?”

I wanted to tell her that I was falling for her... falling hard and fast, but pure fear kept me from saying it aloud. Instead, I pulled out the condom I’d stuck in my pocket before I left home today and tossed it on the bar.

Scotty did a quick twirl and whooped. “Holy fucking shit! The man is back in... the... game. I don’t fucking believe it.”

CindyLou instantly blushed when I gazed over at her.

“Wait a minute... wait a minute... I know you two did... but are you two...?” Scotty tried to ask some kind of question, but it wasn’t coming out as cohesive as he probably would like it to.

“Doors are open!” Jimmy announced from a backstage mic, like he did every night when the doors opened. All personal conversation needed to stop once those doors opened. We needed to focus on the customers, now.

CindyLou instantly made her way over to her station, out of earshot.

“We definitely need to talk,” Scotty told me, and without a doubt, I knew from the look on his face that he was either thinking of having sex with CindyLou, or they’d already had sex. Either way, I wanted him to know the truth about my situation. I intended to have sex with CindyLou again... and again... and so on into infinity.

I rested my hand on his shoulder. “Whatever happened between you and CindyLou, I’m good with it.”

He gazed over at me just as a group of four, two guys and two women headed our way looking thirsty. Tammy placed CindyLou down at the far end of the bar. That was usually the quiet part of the bar, but this foursome was headed right for her.

“We still need to talk,” I told him.

“Come home with us tonight,” I said, hoping that even if they’d had sex, CindyLou would know that neither of us had an ego in this game. For that matter, I didn’t think Mickey had one either, but I wasn’t sure. Reading him sometimes gave me a headache, and this was absolutely one of those times.

“Will do,” Scotty said, then went about pouring a couple beers for two cowboys who saddled up to the bar in his station.

I had my own customers, but I watched CindyLou handle the foursome just to make sure she could handle it, and not only could she handle them, but when three more cowboys walked up and ordered, she handled all of them like a pro. The woman knew how to pour and knew what she was doing behind a bar. Before long, she was mixing drinks and sliding them down the bar like she was born to the profession. I’d had

a feeling she could handle herself back here, but I had no idea she would give both Scotty and me a run for our money.

Tammy found herself a true mixologist when she hired CindyLou.

After watching her for a few hours, I couldn't help but tell her my thoughts once there was a little bit of a break in demands.

“You're an incredible bartender. Where'd you learn all this? It's like you've been doing this since you were a kid.”

“That's because I have been. When other little girls were playing with dolls and learning how to bake a pie, my mother was teaching me how to mix a top-shelf margarita.”

“Are you shitting me?”

“Nope. I could pour the perfect cosmopolitan when I was twelve years old. She wanted me to have a career I could always fall back on.”

A woman nodded her way, and without missing a beat, CindyLou put another long-neck beer down in front of her and took the old one away.

We continued the conversation once her customer had been served, and she'd rung up the beer. “I would think that would be personal assistant work or something in the cooking category, not something behind a bar.”

“You never met my mother, have you?”

“I don't remember her much. I think I saw her a couple of times. Pretty woman, with long, red hair... just like yours.”

She removed the clip that held her hair up while she'd been working, and her long, red locks tumbled down over her shoulders. The vision took my breath away. And just as quickly, she rolled her hair around her fingers and pulled it back into the clip. Then she washed her hands and dried them on a towel.

“That’s about the only thing we have in common,” she said, while she dried her hands. “That, and the ability to make just about any drink there is, and to do a damn good job of it. My mother is an excellent bartender. Probably even better than Tammy, and Tammy’s incredible!”

“You must’ve been a hit at teen parties. Who teaches their little girl to be a bartender at twelve?” I had a difficult time believing any parent would teach a young child about alcohol.

She chuckled, and her face lit up with a warm memory. “A woman who should’ve never had a kid. I never told anyone my mom had taught me bartending, so no one knew. I knew deep down, even at twelve that it wasn’t right from the first drink I ever poured, but I kept it to myself. I liked all the attention my mom gave me during those teaching days. Plus, we actually had fun, which was rare between my mom and me. Probably because she drank most of the offerings. Still, there was also a lot of memorizing bartender books. That part I hated. She’d always be testing me whenever we were in the car together. Most kids would get asked about their day at school... my mom quizzed me on how to make a classic Gin Fizz or a Sidecar.”

“Hell, I don’t even know what’s in a Sidecar.”

“It’s been updated a bit... first rim a martini glass with lemon, then dip half the glass in fine sugar. Pour two ounces of cognac, one ounce of top-shelf orange liquor, and one ounce of fresh lemon into a shaker with some ice. Shake it until it’s icy cold and strain it into the martini glass. Garnish with a slice of lemon. You can use an orange slice as well, but I prefer a lemon. Suggest it sometime to your customers. They’ll love it.”

“And your mom taught you this?”

“Mostly. I’ve picked up a lot of other mixed drinks along the way, but yeah. That was her gift to me... bartending. Ironically, she was right.”

I could tell she had some bittersweet memories, and I didn’t want to push her to tell me more. Interesting though, I never would’ve thought she had such a rough time with her mom, but then I never paid attention to that kind of stuff when I was a kid. I just assumed everyone had parents like mine... attentive and supportive... who never quizzed me.

“Well, I’m glad she gave you those lessons, or you wouldn’t be standing here today.”

“Thanks, and believe me, so am I. Bartending saved my ass so many times I can’t even count all the ways. It’s always been my fallback plan when times are tough.”

Three people walked up to my station, and I had no choice but to serve them, which put an end to our conversation for the rest of the night. We were never able to pick it up again until the doors finally closed around two thirty a.m. Between the crowd that hung around the bar, and when the Jess Davis Band

played two extra-long sets, we never stopped for five hours straight.

Then, once everything settled down, and the bar was finally cleaned up, I knew I couldn't take CindyLou home... at least not tonight. Not before I talked to the guys about how we wanted to handle this thing.

And by this thing, I meant our feelings for CindyLou.

And no way should we have that conversation in front of her. This was one of those times when we needed to figure out our feeling first, then we could present that to CindyLou. No matter what, she still had the final say in this thing... if we even had a "thing."

Scotty had just stepped away from the bar area, so now was my chance to talk to her.

"Why don't you take my truck and drive on home. I'll catch a ride from one of the guys," I told her once our two stations were cleaned up. Scotty was still restocking his.

"Everything okay?" she asked, looking concerned. "You seemed a little distant tonight. Or is that your bar face?"

We were standing at the far end of the bar, inside her station.

"The guys and me need to talk, is all," I said. She was making me a little anxious with her questions.

"If you're going to get on Mickey for not jumping up and down about Darci, please don't. I'm a big girl and can take care of myself. We're working it out."

Looking at her now, she really had no clue about what was going down between us... all four of us. It was so much more than her and Mickey working out a daddy involvement plan. We were all falling hard for her, and I wanted to see if this kind of plural relationship were even something Scotty and Mickey would even consider.

And if they did, would she?

But I was getting ahead of myself.

“It’s not about that. You and Mickey will sort it out, I’m sure. It’s about how we’re feeling about you.”

“Scotty told you?”

“He didn’t have to. I can see it on his face every time he looks your way.”

“I hope you’re not upset about it.”

I wasn’t sure about them having sex, but she just verified my gut feeling.

“Not upset at all. Who you have sex with is your business, but there are options, especially in this part of the woods.”

“What kind of options?”

“Plural relationship type of options.”

That took the wind out of her sails for a moment. She leaned in and lowered her voice. “You’ve got some of those here?”

I couldn’t help the grin popped on my face.

“Darlin’, we have so many foursomes, I’ve lost count. Here and in Cricket. They’re as normal as that beautiful red

hair of yours.”

“Are you suggesting that we... that I... Can that work?”

“Only if you want it to.”

She slid her hands in her back pockets, and my glance instantly traveled down to her beautiful, soft breasts. Couldn't help it. She'd given me an unobstructed view. I didn't linger there more than a second or two. Just enough for my cock to respond.

“With you and Scotty?”

“Don't forget Mickey.” I wasn't sure if he would go for it yet, but I couldn't very well leave him out.

“That was a one-off. He can't commit to a band, no way would he commit to something like this.”

“I wouldn't be so sure. That's why we have to talk.”

“This is crazy!” she said, gazing down at the floor.

“What's crazy?” Tammy asked, appearing out of nowhere.

“That... I'm...”

There was an awkward pause, so I said the first thing that came to me. “That CindyLou is considering joining you and the girls up onstage next Tuesday night.”

“I am? I mean, I am,” she said, trying to look as if she meant it. “I'm considering it.”

“Great. Scotty tells me you even have a song for us.” Tammy seemed delighted by the whole idea.

“I um... I do,” she said, but I could tell she was reluctant until she said, “Scotty's going to harmonize with me... if I do

it.”

“Doll... it’s only for us girls with guitars.”

“Oh, okay. It’s just that I can’t do it without him.”

Tammy hesitated for a couple of beats, and I knew she was busy weighing things out in her head. “Okay, doll, but just for your song. Getting that cowboy up on stage has been my goal ever since he started working here. If he’ll do it for you, I’ll break my rule.”

“Thanks. That’s the only way I’ll consider doing this,” CindyLou told her.

Tammy put out her hand. “Once you shake my hand, I’ll have your word that you’re serious about this. Which means I’ll need an answer one way or the other by tomorrow night. You can’t ghost me, or I won’t ever give you the chance again. That’s another one of my rules, and this one, I won’t break.”

CindyLou stared down at Tammy’s hand for a moment, as if she was about to make a deal with the devil.

I held my breath... willing her to take Tammy’s hand.

And in my next breath, CindyLou took her hand, and with that single act, I had a feeling that not only was she signing up for a gig onstage, but CindyLou was signing up for a whole new way of life.

Scotty 12

Colt only called a meeting when one of us had already fucked something up, and he wanted to give us a way to make it right. The other times he'd call a meeting usually had to do with a woman one of us wanted, and another one of us also wanted. Those situations had never gone well, no matter how we tried to talk it out. In the end, the woman would dump us both... every single time.

“Okay, we need to talk about CindyLou,” he began, and my breath caught in my throat. I knew his feelings for her were growing, but I also knew that mine were growing as well. I didn't want to end up getting dumped... not this time... not with CindyLou.

We were sitting in Mickey's kitchen, around his counter. After the long day we'd had, if we sat in the living room, we'd probably all fall asleep. This way, sitting on hard stools, with beers in our hands, we might stay awake. Still, it didn't help that it was going on three thirty in the morning.

I let out a yawn, and my eyes watered. Damn, but I felt spent. I could only hope this thing would get resolved quickly, but the fact we were going to talk about CindyLou didn't make that short conversation a certainty.

“What about her?” Mickey asked, looking a bit miffed. “She and I already had our first talk, and I told her I want to be in Darci's life. If you want details, I can't give you any. I have no idea what this is going to look like. All I know is I'm all in. Can we go to bed now? I'm wiped.”

“That's all good, but that's not why I called this meeting. How you and she handle the whole daddy thing is between you two... not us,” Colt said, looking sincere and concerned at the same time.

“Then why...” Mickey started, but Colt shut him down.

“Because we've all had sex with CindyLou, and I think it's safe to say we've all fallen for her. Some of us harder than others,” Colt declared, stunning both Mickey and me. How the hell did he know about me having sex with CindyLou. Did the man have a sixth sense or what?

“Wait a minute... you and Scotty have... when did this happen?” Mickey asked. “And was it a one-on-one or did you two have sex with her at the same time? Because if you did, you know those always end up bad for us. CindyLou is one woman I don't want to lose anytime soon. You're right about us all having feelings for her, Colt, that's for damn sure.”

If I hadn't seen Mickey say those words, I would never have believed him. I just stared at him as if he might be lying, trying my best to make him uncomfortable. I wanted to make sure he was telling us the truth.

He said, “Stop looking at me like that, Scotty. I’m being honest here, which is a whole new thing for me. Cut me a little slack.”

“That’s why I’m staring,” I told him. “I can’t believe those words came out of your mouth. So, does this mean you have honest feelings for her? Like more than just a passing emotion? Cause if that’s true, I’m stunned.”

I took another long pull on my beer, wanting to clear my dry throat. The whole discussion made me anxious. I mean, he’d said something about his feelings for her to her face, but I hadn’t put much stock in it. We could barely share a bathroom without arguing over who left the towels on the floor or toothpaste in the sink, let alone sharing CindyLou, who I was falling so hard and fast for, I didn’t want either one of these idiots to hurt her. Especially Mickey whose reputation with women deserved even more punches from Daryl. And as soon as Daryl’s name flashed in my thoughts, I knew we had a big, nasty, punching problem. “Shit... Daryl... what the hell are we going to do about Daryl?”

Colt’s eyes went wide, and Mickey nearly choked on the beer he was guzzling.

“I forgot all about that old cowboy,” Colt said. “He might be a problem in all of this.”

“Ya think?” Mickey asked, once he stopped coughing. He still had remnants of a black eye courtesy of Daryl’s left hook. My shiner wasn’t much better, but at least mine was an accident. His was a direct hit.

“One of us dating CindyLou is one thing, but all three of us? He’ll huff and puff and knock our house down,” I told

them. "He's too mighty of a force for us to reckon with."

"If we come up with a plan, I think we'll be okay," Colt said, trying to reassure us.

"Yeah, maybe a stealth plan, but anything less than that, and Daryl will be all over us," I said, meaning every word.

Mickey got up and went for another beer out of the fridge. "Anybody else want one? I'm thinking this is gonna be a long night."

Both Colt and I ordered round two. Mickey opened all three and set them down in front of us. I knocked off my first bottle and started on bottle number two, hoping I'd feel a buzz soon. This whole conversation gave me a headache, especially now that we'd added Daryl to the mix.

"Okay, so what we have here is a trifecta," Mickey began. "One, we don't know if CindyLou will go for a plural relationship with all three of us. Two, we don't know if our egos will get in the way of a plural relationship. And three..."

"We don't know if Daryl will come after us with a loaded shotgun," I said, knowing damn well the man had a gun case with at least four shotguns locked and loaded in his den. "So, what's your plan, Colt? I'd love to hear it."

"Well, I don't really have a plan-plan. Just an idea of a plan, that's if you two want to hear it."

"We all have fresh beers. Now's the time," Mickey said, but I could tell he was fading fast. Colt better make this good, or he would be losing both of us, soon.

"I think we should tell her what we're thinking about doing... meaning a relationship with all three of us at the same

time.”

“I already floated the idea to her tonight. Told her about all the plural relationships around here,” Colt said, and I just about choked on my beer.

“Holy fuck! How did she react?” Mickey asked, and I could tell he was trying his best to stay calm.

“Didn’t get an actual reaction. She asked questions, then Tammy interrupted our conversation,” he said.

“But she didn’t seem to hate it, right?” I asked.

“If you mean did she slap me or run off in disgust? No, she didn’t.” He was smiling now, one of those sly grins he wore when his mind went all wicked and dirty.

“Wow. I never would’ve thought... Like, does this plan of yours have us all in bed at the same time, because I have no idea how that works,” I admitted, being totally honest. I liked my one-on-one time with a woman. I didn’t know if I could share a woman I cared about with another guy... let alone these two nervy cowboys. I’m just not as assertive as they were, especially Colt. Would I be lost in the crowd? “I know you and Mickey have tried a threesome a few times, but I was never involved. Don’t know if I can compete with you two.”

“It’s not a competition. We’re all equal,” Colt assured me, but I knew better. Sex with a woman was always a competition.

“This is your plan?” Mickey asked, shaking his head, grinning, and I knew he was trying to imagine it.

“Only if she wants to,” Colt said. “I think the couple times Mickey and I shared a woman, the woman was never all in.

Meaning they were skeptical about the whole thing. If CindyLou isn't one-hundred percent all in, then we'll each date her separately and see how that goes for a while."

"That'll just lead to a lot of jealousy," Mickey said. "I mean, yeah, we're like brothers, but I don't know, man. That sounds a little tricky to me."

"And how would that work, exactly, considering we all work at the same place and have the same nights off... pretty much," I reminded them.

"We'd find a way to make it work, is all," Colt said, sounding confident.

I was still skeptical. "I don't know. Either she goes for all three of us at the same time or she chooses one of us and the other two have to fuck off. At least Daryl might be happier with that arrangement."

Colt hesitated for a minute or two, but I could tell he wasn't about to give up on this idea. "Here's the thing. If she picks you, that will work for both you and Mickey. Mainly because Mickey will still get to be around her because of Darci, and who knows. He might be able to wiggle his way into her heart. But I'm left holding my balls, and I'm not looking forward to that... again. Been through that shit way too many times."

"That still doesn't address the Daryl problem," Mickey said, reminding us once again about the mountain we still had to climb, even if she agreed to any of this.

Colt said, "From how he reacted when CindyLou and I did it on his front porch, I don't think his anger will be any less for

one of us or all three. Still, I agree... this is her decision... even when it comes to her uncle Daryl. She knows better than any of us how he'll react."

"So, are we good with sharing CindyLou... if she wants us to... in the bedroom at the same time? Did we at least make that decision?" I asked, wanting to settle one of the aspects of this wild relationship. Although, at the moment, I didn't see how she would go for it or how it would work.

"I'm in," Colt said.

"Count me in, as well," Mickey said.

Never in a million years would I have thought this was a viable way to have a relationship with a woman. Yet here we were not only seriously discussing it but thinking it might actually happen. It was just Daryl who we had to consider. I had no idea how my own parents would react to this unlikely situation. Then there were Colt's parents. They were even more traditional than mine. They could completely freak. Then what?

But I was probably getting way ahead of myself.

"Are you sure?" Colt asked Mickey. "This is a big commitment on your part. You're committing to both a relationship with Darci and a relationship with CindyLou. Can you handle all of that pressure at once?"

He smirked, and took another swig of his beer, then Mickey said, "And a commitment to the Jess Davis Band. I have the paperwork on my desk in my bedroom. It just needs my signature. I'm in a legitimate fucking band or I will be by tomorrow when I return all the paperwork."

Until he actually signed the paperwork, I was still skeptical. Although, this was the closest he'd ever come.

"No fucking way," Colt said, leaning back, grinning.

"Fucking way!" Mickey said. "I'm a new man!"

I shook my head and stared at him. "This is an incredible moment. If I kept a journal, I'd be writing it down. To the brand-new Mickey Finn." I held up my beer for a toast. "May he live a long and happy *committed* life."

I decided to go with it... at least for now. I hoped like hell he actually signed.

"To Mickey Finn," Colt chimed in, and we all clinked bottles.

"This is all well and good, but we still haven't really addressed the Daryl problem," I said.

"Yeah, the Daryl problem," Colt added.

"Fucking Daryl... we'll just have to talk to him," Mickey said.

"Good luck with that, Mickey," Colt said.

"I'm not talking to him," he said. "I think you should talk to him, Colt."

"He wants nothing to do with me," Colt reminded him. "Scotty, you can do it. He still likes you, and besides, he's probably guilty for punching you in the face instead of Mickey."

"He did just fine with the first punch. I didn't need a second," Mickey said, stroking his jaw.

“I’m not talking to anybody but CindyLou,” I told them. “If she wants this, she’s the one who needs to tell Daryl, and that’s only if she feels as though he needs to know. She has him wrapped around her little finger. If it comes from her, he might be more receptive to the idea.”

“Or we can just try to keep it between ourselves for as long as we can get away with it,” Colt offered, sounding as if he thought this was the more reasonable idea, at least for the near future. After all, she might not go for any of this.

“Not to throw a wrench into this whole mix, but Colt, did you ever consider how your own parents will handle this? I’ve been thinking about mine, and I’m not too sure they’re going to be too happy.”

“Wait a minute.... Hold on... it’s not like she even said yes, yet...” Mickey stopped talking and instead sucked in air and yawned like he could fall asleep right there on the counter. One thing about Mickey, he could sleep almost anywhere, and at any time. Colt and I always struggled with sleep, even when we were in our own beds. It all depended on what was going on in our lives, and right now, there were so many decisions and new steps forward that if I ever slept again, I’d be amazed.

“Mickey’s right... Plus, that’s our cue. It’s time to call it a night. The couch is yours if you want it, Colt,” I told him.

“Thanks. I don’t trust myself out on the roads. I’ll take it.”

Ten minutes later, it was lights out and we were all asleep... well kind of. I was still trying to imagine all four of us in bed and couldn’t get to sleep until I jacked-off.

Then... I fell asleep.

CindyLou 13

I drove over and picked up Darci a little earlier this morning. I wasn't nearly as drained from the second night as I was from the first. My feet still hurt, and my lower back didn't want to let go of all the hurt just yet, but with the help of a couple over-the-counter pain meds and a more positive mindset, I was up and at 'em before Colt came home.

Not wanting to bump into him this morning also propelled me to get my ass out of bed and head out to pick up Darci who always cheered me up.

"She slept right on through the night this time," Aunt Donna said, as I held my girl in my arms. She'd come crawling right for me as soon as I walked through the door, filling my heart with so much love, it wanted to burst.

"You're such a good girl," I told her as I gave her a tight hug and her little head drooped on my shoulder for a moment. I loved that little move of hers. It always made me feel as though we had a bond nothing could ever break.

“Thanks so much, Auntie. I don’t know how I could ever do this without you and uncle,” I told her as she wiped her hands on her apron. Aunt Donna always wore a clean white bib apron whenever she cooked or tidied up in her kitchen. If it wasn’t for the jeans, I’d think we’d dropped back in time. I supposed she got the habit from working as a sous chef when she was younger, before she married Uncle Daryl. She’d grown up wanting to own her own restaurant, but then she met Uncle Daryl, and his dream took preference... a horse ranch. Of course, this was after his boxing days. They both gave up on their big dreams for a simpler life.

She was still an amazing cook, however, and had penned a couple cookbooks, both geared for cooking bigger ranch meals. The money for those books got them through the tough startup years on the ranch.

Uncle Daryl’s boxing... well, he left it completely behind... for the most part. However, on occasion, such as the other night, his old habit reared its aggressive head.

“Oh, it’s our pleasure, my darling. You know how much we love having you both around. Are you all settled in at Colt’s place now?”

“Pretty much,” I told her, not really wanting to take the conversation any further. I was still reeling from sex with Scotty, and seriously contemplating that plural relationship that Colt had mentioned. “I’m heading to the local grocers after this to stock up on some of Darci’s favorite foods. Colt doesn’t have much food in his house.”

“I’ll have to stop by Colt’s place one of these days to check out your new living arrangements. You don’t have to

always come by and pick up Darci. It's no problem at all for me to drive her over there," she offered, and I immediately froze. I really didn't want her stopping by, especially if my relationship with one or both of these guys heated up.

"I... um... I'd rather pick her up if that's okay. I'll have you and uncle over one of these nights for dinner, though."

"Your uncle is still upset with Colt, so that won't be happening any time soon, but Daryl can't stay mad at Colt forever. He's like a son to us, so his anger isn't going to stick for long."

I decided now was the time to ask her about any plural relationships she might know about. For all I knew, Colt might be exaggerating or maybe he misunderstood.

Darci wanted to get down to play with her toys, so I sat her next to her blocks.

"Auntie, I overheard someone last night talking about something called plural relationships here in Sweet Whiskey and over in Cricket. Was I hearing correctly? More than two people living together in a committed relationship? Is that true?"

"It sure is. Most folks around here don't have a problem with it. Two of the bands or is it three of the bands... I can't remember. Anyway, Hot Sugar and The Austin Sentry band I know for sure are like that. Although, why any woman would want to live with more than one man is beyond me. I have enough trouble with your uncle, I can't even imagine cooking for and caring for three or even four men. Then there's the sex. What the hell that might be like I don't know, but I suppose the Mormons have been living like that for years, so this is

nothing new. Except for maybe more dicks than pussies living under one roof.”

I blushed. I literally blushed at her words. Never had my aunt muttered those words to me before.

“Auntie! I’m shocked. I’ve never...”

She swiped her hand in the air. “Oh sweetheart, we’re both adults. Your uncle might not want me to be this open with you, but now that you’re living with Colt, and he and his two friends are as thick as thieves, anything could happen. Just know, whatever you choose to do is your business and no one else’s... not even your uncle’s or mine.”

“I had no idea you felt this way,” I told her, stunned over her openness about sex, especially sex with multiple partners.

She walked over to me, rubbed my arms, and looked me squarely in the eyes. “This is your life... your one life. You get to live it however you choose. I will always have your back... no matter what... well, as long as you don’t intentionally hurt anyone. Other than that, whatever you do in the privacy of your own house or bedroom, is your business. Not mine, not your uncle’s and certainly not folks who want to make you feel bad about your choices. Now, you sit yourself right down at my table. I made some of the best sour dough waffles you’re ever gonna taste. Darci already scarfed down three squares. And I have fresh strawberries that are as sweet as candy.”

Still stunned by it all, I sat down and waited to be served, trying to absorb this new relationship I’d just formed with my aunt.

Who knew?

EVER SINCE MY talk with my aunt about living with three or four men, I haven't been able to erase those images from my mind. And not images of the other relationships, but images of me in bed with Colt, Scotty and even Mickey. To say it was a turn on was a total misconception. More like it dominated my every thought, so much so that me and my girly parts had become good friends again.

I got off in the shower before work, in my bed after that shower, while I did the laundry and Darci napped, and just now in the bathroom at Dirty Coyote, before my shift started. And most every time, not only did I rub my clit, and slide my fingers up inside my soaking wet pussy, but I'd also rub and enter that rosebud back entrance with my other hand. The combination sent me up to the stars and back. I'd imagine having two of the three guys inside me at once. A dream I'd probably never fulfill due to my shyness, but in my dreams I'm as bold as Wonder Woman on a stellar day.

"What's wrong with you?" I asked the girl in the bathroom mirror. "Pull yourself together. You have to tell Colt how you honestly feel about a plural relationship, even though you're scared shitless."

"Don't be scared," Tammy said as she entered the bathroom. "You're gonna do fine, doll. I have a hunch about you, and my hunches are usually right. You've got this audition by the balls. You want to play for me in a few minutes? I have some time. Did you bring your guitar?"

Her questions came at me so fast I felt like they were bullets shredding my cozy little world into more pieces than I could ever put together again.

“Or did you change your mind?” she asked, looking all sad and melancholy.

“Um, now? As in like when we walk out of this bathroom?” I asked, somewhat shocked by the whole thing.

“No time like the present,” she said with a lilt to her voice as if this would be fun.

There I was talking to myself about my, well, my privates, and sharing them with three men and Tammy walks in thinking I’m scared about her audition. If I had to compare the two, I’d say the audition was a walk in the barn as compared to three erect, rather large, thick cocks coming at me at the same time. It wouldn’t be so bad if they weren’t all porn star size, but they were that and more. Couldn’t one of them be normal?

Nooooo.

Nothing like that with these three.

But back to Tammy who waited for my answer.

“Um, okay.” The word slipped out and my knees buckled. I had to hold myself up by grabbing hold of the basin counter.

“Oh, doll, you just made my day. Let’s meet on stage in say... ten minutes? We still have a half hour before we open. I’ll have Colt and Scotty finish up prepping your station. Let me just pee real quick like and I’ll grab my guitar from the back. I can’t tell you how excited I am about this.”

As soon as she mentioned Scotty, I realized I hadn’t given him the rest of the song. “But what about Scotty? He doesn’t know my song yet.”

“That’s fine,” she said as she headed into a stall and closed the door. “I’ve heard him sing and play countless times when he thought no one else was around. That man is a country star just waiting to happen. Now run along and make me proud.”

And with those words I finished up washing my hands, drying them, and headed out to the parking lot for my guitar wondering how the hell I’d gotten myself into so many uncomfortable situations at one time.

Exactly twelve minutes later, I sat on a stool facing Tammy. We both had our guitars on our laps. I was a nervous wreck, while I could tell she was as calm as my little Darci when she’s about to fall fast asleep in my arms.

“Let’s see what you’ve got,” she said. “Start off with any cover song you feel comfortable with, and if I know it, I’ll join in.”

“Okay,” I said, and in the next moments I started singing the remix of Miranda Lambert’s *Tequilla Does*. I didn’t get passed the third line when she joined me without the slightest hesitation. And when it came to the refrain, not only were we harmonizing together, but she was moving to the music, causing me to shed all my fear, and just enjoy performing the hot song.

Soon, the background music filled the dance hall, and everyone who’d come in early to help set up were dancing out on the floor. Even Scotty and Colt moved with the beat of the music. Who knew Colt and Scotty had all those hot moves. When I sang about chasing a kiss with a twist of a lime I was falling in love with both Scotty and Colt. All those

apprehensions I'd had about having them both in my bed started to fade.

I looked around for Mickey, but I couldn't spot him. Either he hadn't come in yet, or he'd chosen to avoid all of this.

Either way, I couldn't blame him. This moment in time was pretty intense, and for some reason, I was loving it.

Who knew?

When I finally sang the last note, and strummed my last chord, the whole place went up in whistles and applause. It was such a rush, I nearly wet my pants. I couldn't believe how much fun I had... how much fun it was to be up on a real stage singing with such a professional like Tammy.

My eyes watered, and when I stood up, my knees felt weak again, but this time I was able to push through my nerves.

"Wow... thank you, everybody!" I said, trying to hold back more emotions.

Whistles and cheers, until Tammy shushed them. "What do y'all think? Should I give her a chance up on my stage with me and the girls with guitars?"

More cheers and whistles. This time, I couldn't hold back the tears. They poured out of me like an open faucet. I hadn't felt that much love in so long I wanted to soak it all up.

Tammy turned to me. "I guess you're in, doll. Congratulations!" Then we hugged and I gushed my appreciation.

When we parted, she said, "I'll give you our songbook before you leave tonight. I don't expect you to learn all the

songs, but please try to learn as many as you can. Hell, you probably know most of them. Oh, and if you want to sing your own song, you and Scotty can do that at the end of our first set. We usually do two sets, but they can be long. Rest up. So glad to have you, hon. You're gonna be a true asset to the group. We'll practice for an hour or two the afternoon of our performance, right here. But it'll all be written up for you. The best advice I can give you, is just relax. We've got each other's backs... yours too. Now we better get going. We open in about five minutes."

Tammy took my guitar for safe keeping, then we both went our separate ways. She headed backstage and I headed off to the main bar. My smile was so big, my cheeks hurt.

"You did it!" Scotty said once I got close enough to him behind the bar. Then he took me in his arms, gave me a twirl and a quick kiss right on the lips.

Not two seconds later, Colt pulled me in tight, and also gave me a quick kiss. Neither time did it feel strange or awkward. It felt like, well, it felt like this was my life now. All that was missing was Mickey, who I finally spotted staring at me from across the dance floor. He nodded, grinned, and nodded again. He wore a black cowboy hat, low on his forehead, and if we weren't opening those doors at any moment, I would've run into his arms as well.

I felt as though if I could get up on that stage... I could do anything. Even have a relationship with three, amazingly wonderful men at once. And it didn't hurt that each one was drop-dead gorgeous!

“You were fantastic!” Colt said. “You killed that song. I had no idea. I knew you had a nice voice, but that... well, that was incredible!”

“Thanks... thank you both.”

“I think this calls for a little celebration,” Scotty announced. “How ‘bout we do some celebrating after work tonight?”

“Sure. At Colt’s or rather our place tonight,” I told him. “That is if Colt’s all right with that idea?”

I turned to him, and his face lit up. There was something so delicious about Colt when excitement turned him on. “Darlin’ that’s perfect. We have a lot to talk about.”

“Yes, we do,” I agreed. “A lot. Will you invite Mickey? I’d like to celebrate with him as well.”

“You’ve got it,” Colt said, and that was the last time we were able to say anything personal all night long. As soon as those doors opened it felt like a tsunami of people washed in and never let up until the last person walked out sometime after two in the morning. There were times when I didn’t think I would ever catch up, and either Scotty or Colt stepped in to pick up the slack. I did the same for them, so it wasn’t as if I couldn’t handle it... none of us could. We made so much money in tips I had to count it three times to make sure I was right. It came out to just over one thousand dollars each for one freakin’ night. I could hardly believe that in the last three days, I’d made enough to not only pay all my bills, but I could afford to start a saving’s account, which was something I had never been able to do.

By the time we pulled up in front of Colt's house I was so grateful, I couldn't help the tears that rolled down my cheeks like they had a mind of their own.

"Hey, what's the matter? We're supposed to be celebrating, not crying," Colt said once we piled into the house. Scotty was just parking his truck, and Mickey had backed out. I didn't want to press him, so I let it go. He hadn't contacted me, which was fine. He'd come around at some point. At least I hoped he would.

But Mickey didn't have the best track record, so I didn't expect anything.

I'd driven my own car over to Dirty Coyote tonight because I found that it just worked better with Darci. I dropped her off with my aunt right before I had to go to work. That way, I got to keep her with me as long as I could.

Plus, I don't like having to hitch a ride from anyone.

"These are happy tears," I told him, wiping the tears away with my fingers. "I can't believe the turn my life has taken. I can pay all my bills now. I have a steady job and a roof over my head that isn't provided for me. I'm doing all of this on my own. It's an incredible feeling, that's all."

Colt walked over to me as we stood in the living room and took me in his arms. "You're an incredible woman, CindyLou Geller."

Then he kissed me, a soft sexy kiss that made my toes curl and my girl parts tingle.

"Has the celebration already started?" I heard Scotty ask from inside my sensual fog.

Colt and I moved out of the kiss.

“Not officially,” I told him.

“Coming attractions,” Colt teased.

“Is that what that was?” I asked.

“One hundred percent,” Colt said.

“Then we better get our drinks lined up because there’s some details we need to talk about first,” I told them.

“Haven’t you heard?” Scotty began. “The devil’s in the details.”

“Yes she is, and she needs to claim her space,” I told them, grinning.

“Since when is the devil a she?” Colt wanted to know.

“There’s more than one devil, and my wicked temptation has always come from a woman in a sparkly red spandex full body suit. She’s beautiful, but she has horns... big pointy horns, and long red hair, just like mine, only thicker and with streaks of blond. She’s been tempting me with sinful thoughts ever since I was a little girl.”

“She sounds sexy,” Scotty said, grinning.

“As hell,” I told him with a chuckle. “Now that she’s entered the room, let’s pour some wine and get our talk on.”

“Allow me,” Colt said, and he walked out of the room towards the kitchen. I knew we had several bottles of wine in the fridge, along with two six packs of beer.

“I don’t know if I’m ready for all of this,” Scotty said once Colt had slipped from view.

“All of what?” I asked, trying to sound innocent.

He tilted his head. “Don’t play coy. You know exactly what we’re going to talk about.”

“Could this have anything to do with the fact that I’ve had sex with both you and Colt?”

“And Mickey. Let’s not forget the father of your little girl,” he said with a snicker.

“That was a long time ago, almost two years ago. I’m talking about the more recent moves.”

Scotty went over and made himself comfortable on the sofa, next to the end table, spreading his legs like men do, and I couldn’t help taking in that fine body of his. He wore jeans, boots, a steel gray t-shirt, and a wide belt. He spread his arm out along the back of the sofa like he was inviting me in.

I resisted and took a seat on the club chair across from him trying to come up with an appropriate way to start a discussion on sharing my bed tonight with both of them.

As soon as Colt returned with wine for me and two beers for them, I couldn’t help myself. The words tumbled out of my mouth like boulders rolling down a hillside.

“I’ve been thinking about what Colt said about group sex last night, and I want you both to know I’m...”

Mickey 14

I knocked on Colt's door right around three in the morning. I didn't hesitate because the lights were all on inside the house. No way was I gonna be left out of whatever it was they were planning.

Colt had asked me to come on by tonight so we could discuss his plan with CindyLou, and I'd told him no way. It was too soon. She and I hadn't built up any kind of relationship, at least not yet. We'd had that one-off and I'd abandoned her. Not a great start.

Yeah, I'd apologized, and we were on friendly terms again, but nothing like they were. I still had to prove myself to her.

And after I saw her up on that stage, I decided I wasn't worthy of her. CindyLou was a class act, all the way. I was a guitar bum. I usually went wherever the wind blew, and right now it was blowing into Dirty Coyote. Or, if I chose to sign that contract, which I still hadn't done, I could be working with a successful band.

Either way, neither of these meant I'd still be working with either one of these groups in six months from now or two years or, if I could stand it, five years from now. Then there was always my daddy duties to my daughter, who I still hadn't even met. How could I justify fucking CindyLou again without having put out the effort to meet my own daughter.

So, okay, I spotted CindyLou and Darci at the local grocery store this afternoon and completely froze. I couldn't do it. Couldn't go over to them and meet my daughter. Thought it was stupid to finally meet her in a fucking grocery store in the toilet paper aisle. What kind of a story would that make?

Instead, I high-tailed it out of there without buying my basket of food.

Everything changed tonight when I saw both Colt and Scotty pull out of the parking lot right behind CindyLou, and Scotty headed towards Colt's house instead of mine.

I tried to just drive home, but when I pulled up to my place, I realized I was making a huge mistake, so I turned right around and headed to Colt's place.

Was I too late?

The door swung open on my second knock.

"Mickey! I thought you were heading home," Colt said, staring at me from inside his house.

"I changed my mind. Am I too late?" I asked with a knot in my stomach.

"Too late for what?" CindyLou asked.

“The discussion. The plan. The talk,” I said, walking in past Colt.

“There’s a plan?” she asked, sounding almost miffed.

“Well, yeah. Sort of,” I said, and I caught CindyLou’s eyes go wide.

“Actually, CindyLou was just about to tell us something important.”

“That’s before I knew about your plan,” she said, crossing her arms over her ample chest.

“You’re timing sucks,” Scottie said, almost like an accusation.

“Colt invited me,” I told him.

“Yeah, well, that might’ve been a mistake on his part.”

I took a seat in the other club chair next to CindyLou.

“It wasn’t a mistake,” Colt began. “We’re all here now, so maybe it’s time to have a simple discussion. Do you want to continue on with what you were going to say, CindyLou?”

She gazed at each of us, then she said, “Mickey, how about a beer?”

“Sure,” I told her, and I could hear the groans coming from the guys. Apparently, this was not what she’d planned to say.

As soon as she left the room, I got it from both Scotty and Colt.

“She was about to tell us what she thought about group sex. What the fuck, Mickey. Your timing couldn’t have been more wrong.” Scotty made it clear he wasn’t happy with me.

“You’re not doing this without me,” I said.

“Doing what?” CindyLou asked as she sashayed over to me in her tight stretch jeans and a cropped white top that showed enough of her soft breasts to make any straight guy take a second look. And those scuffed short cowgirl boots... well, I wanted to slip her right out of those and wrap those long legs of hers over my shoulders while I ate her sweet...

“Having any kind of group sex without me,” I said, getting right to the point.

“Who said that’s what we were talking about?” She sounded a little coy, and I couldn’t tell whether she was putting it on, or I was off totally off base, and she was setting me straight.

“Isn’t that why you’re all here? To talk about it?” I asked the question, but I could tell she wanted no part of this discussion.

“Maybe, but what makes you think I’m ready to take you into my bed?”

“Burn, Mickey, burn,” Scotty mouthed as my glance when his way.

Colt just made a face, while CindyLou seemed as serious as a plane crash, which was what I felt like. My plane was on a downward spiral with no chance of a soft landing.

“Okay. I can handle it. I know I’ve been a shit, but in my defense, I just heard about Darci a few days ago. Plus, I thought we had it worked out?” I decided not to back off. This was too important on a lot of levels.

“What about the grocery store today? Why didn’t you come over to us? Why did you run out of there like the place was on fire?” As she spoke, she stood to be more on my level. The act somewhat intimidated me.

“Oh, burn again,” Scotty said, only this time he said it loud enough for everyone to hear.

“You ran out of the grocery store?” Colt asked, like it was the stupidest thing I’ve ever done.

It wasn’t.

I’d done a lot of stupid things in my life. That was just one of them.

“Okay. Okay. Maybe it was stupid, but I didn’t want to meet my daughter for the first time at the local grocers. Why is that so bad?”

“Where do you want to meet her, because so far you haven’t made one attempt.” CindyLou had me now. Had me good. “Yes, we have plans for Sunday afternoon. Is that still a good time for you or have you changed your mind?”

“Maybe I should just go,” I told them standing.

“That’s up to you,” she said. “But if you do, don’t come back.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?” I asked, feeling as though she just punched me in the gut.

“It means if you don’t stand up for me, for Darci and for what you want now, you never will.” Her words cut through me and caused my eyes to fucking water like a baby. I held my

own and didn't allow my emotions to take hold, but fuck it all, she knew how to stick the knife in and turn it.

I couldn't stand losing her again. Couldn't make myself do my normal shit, and run. Not when she was calling me out on my own crap.

I did the only thing I could. I walked over to her, swept her up in my arms and crushed my lips on hers. The way I saw it, she had two choices. She could pull away and slap me across the face, or we could start on a path that I knew I wanted to take but was scared shitless.

When she didn't pull away, and instead fell into the kiss, my emotions got the best of me, and I not only kissed her, but I pulled her in so tight I knew she could feel my cock getting hard under my jeans. It didn't take much where CindyLou was concerned. I was hot for the woman at the mention of her name.

I never wanted to let her go because once I did, I knew the shit would start up again, and as long as my lips were on hers, we were good. Life was good.

Still, she broke the kiss. "What the hell, Mickey?"

"I've been in love with you ever since that night, and I'm sorry. I'm so, so sorry. I only run from what I want when I think I don't stand a chance. Do I? Do I stand a chance with you? Cause if I do, you've made my world."

"We need to talk about all of this first," Colt said while he sat on the sofa with Scotty.

I didn't know where all of that came from, but it was the God's honest truth, something I'd avoided my entire life. In

my experience, the truth never went over very well, so I rarely, if ever used it. Yet there I was, baring my fucking soul to a woman who probably wanted nothing to do with me, except to be in our daughter's life. I wouldn't blame her if she turned around and kicked me to the curb, and took either Colt or Scotty, or hell, even both of them in her bed, and in her heart.

I'd always been the odd man out, even in my friendship with these two good guys. And they were the good guys. Probably why Colt got his heart stepped on so much, and why Scotty could never hook up with a woman who really loved him. I mean, the guy was dedicated to his mom, and would probably take a bullet for her.

Then there was Colt... the Good Son who never missed a birthday or a holiday. Who called his mom or his dad at least twice a week, and who took care of their house while they vacationed like it was his own.

Then there was me... the lose cannon. A dad who I rarely saw, and a mom who died while I was still in diapers. Not that I blamed her, but all those fucking drugs certainly didn't do her any good. I've tried to get my shit together before, but nothing put it all into perspective like a solid punch from Daryl. That man actually knocked some sense into me. Not that I would ever tell him that, the old goat.

"I... I... need to sit down," CindyLou said, as she slipped out of my arms and plopped back into her chair.

I returned to my chair as well, and we all waited while she knocked off her glass of wine, then poured herself another.

"Well, if that didn't change things, I don't know what has," she finally said. "Is that true, Mickey? You're in love with

me?”

Step up or step out, I told myself.

“Yes,” I told her. “Unfortunately, I can’t help it. I’m in love with you, and so are these two assholes if they ever get around to admitting the truth.”

“I can speak for myself,” Colt said. “Don’t need you, of all people, to be talking for me.”

“Me too,” Scotty said, but I could tell I stepped on his ego, and he had a lot more to say. “What I mean is, you’re not my... oh, fucking shut up, Mickey. Let CindyLou talk.”

“This is all... I had no idea...” she turned to Colt. “Just what did y’all have in mind?”

When she started guzzling her third glass of wine, I knew she was more nervous about this talk than she’d been singing onstage tonight... which she nailed! I had no idea she had so much talent going on. Not only could she play a mean guitar, but that voice sent shivers through me.

“To begin with,” Colt began, “there’s some truth to what Mickey is saying about the whole love thing... Not that I can speak for either one of them, but well, my feelings for you are off the charts. I’ve always liked you... but now that I’ve gotten to know you... but that’s not why we’re all here.”

CindyLou sat forward, crossed her legs, and rested her chin on her hand, her elbow poking into her fine thigh. “And just why are we all gathered in your living room, Colt? What’s the plan here?”

He took a deep breath then blurted out the words. “The plan is that we all care for you, and we’re hoping that we

could all date you... at once...at the same time.”

“When you say all date me at the same time, just what exactly does that entail?”

“That we’d all have sex with you... at the same time... in the same bed,” he said, and my heart took such a flip in my chest it almost hurt. My pulse raced and my hands were actually sweating, which had never happened before. Not even when I was getting ready to ride a fucking wild bronc.

“Do we have a bed big enough?” she asked without expression.

None of us answered. I don’t think we were even breathing.

“Colt just told you that we would all be in bed at the same time and all you want to know is the dimensions of the bed?” Scotty asked looking totally puzzled.

I could feel my crazy sense of humor taking hold, but I held it in... at least for now, until she said, “Pretty much, yes. I’ve never done anything like this before, and I’d want to be comfortable. And besides, if one of you falls off, or breaks the damn bed, where’s the fun in that? After almost two years, I’m just now getting reacquainted with my... I’m just going to say it... with my pussy, and I don’t want any distractions when I’m on the verge of an epic orgasm. And with you three surrounding me, touching me or inside me, my orgasms couldn’t possibly be anything but fucking epic!”

“I’ll order a bigger bed tomorrow,” Colt said without hesitation.

I couldn't help myself. I started laughing and couldn't stop. Scotty joined in as well. Not Colt, though. To him this was serious business.

"So, you're saying..." Colt began.

"I'm all in... with all three of you. Only ground rules I have is that nothing happens when Darci's here. At least not yet, and that includes kissing. She can never see more than that, but for now, kissing is off limits. Let's see how this goes first. If it has legs. If all that love talk is real. And above all, we keep this bedroom bonanza to ourselves for as long as we can. Once my uncle finds out, all hell will break loose. I'll have to be the one to tell him. My aunt has already accepted this in other couples, but I don't know for certain if she'll be okay with us. Those are my only ground rules. Oh, and no public touching or kissing at Dirty Coyote, either. I don't want to take any chances there... although, Tammy will probably figure it out on her own. The woman seems to have a sixth sense about things."

"Anything else?" Colt asked.

"Yeah, anything?" Scotty asked. "What I mean is, is there anything off limits in the bedroom?"

"Believe me, I'll let you know once we get there, but for now, anything goes as long as it doesn't hurt me or any of you. I'm not into pain, I'm into comfort... lots of comfort."

"Did you just say anything goes?" Colt asked.

She nodded. "Within reason, of course. Like I said, I don't like pain of any kind."

“Do you have any idea what those words do to a man?” I asked her, my dick already rock hard.

“I can see the affects,” she said, chuckling. Then she said, “I’m going to head on over to the bathroom and hop in the shower. Give me a few minutes, then whoever wants to join me... well, I won’t push you away.”

She got up, grabbed the bottle of wine, slid it off the table with a sexy little move, and headed up the stairs to the bedrooms and bathrooms. I had no idea which bathroom she’d be using, but I knew I could find it in a heartbeat.

“What the fuck?” I asked the guys once she disappeared.

“That’s CindyLou,” Colt said. “It’s like trying to figure out a wild horse. You never know which way she’s going to go.”

“I never in a million years expected this,” Scotty said, his head resting on the back of the sofa. He looked dazed and confused. “That she’d be so upfront and open about the whole idea, and that she’d invite us into her shower.”

It was at that moment when we heard the shower water turn on, and we all took off for the stairs.

“Wait a minute. Wait a minute,” Colt cautioned. “We won’t all fit.”

“Okay, then who gets to be first?” I asked, my dick still hard for her.

“It’s my house. I should go first.” As much as I wanted it to be me, I knew I was going to have to ease into this thing. After all, it had been a long time since I even touched her.

“That’s fine with me,” I told him. “But is there another shower in the house?”

We all kept going up the stairs, getting closer to our ultimate destination.

“Two more. One attached to my bedroom down at the end of the hall, and there’s a guest bathroom off to your left, but the shower in there’s really small, with a curtain instead of a door. But help yourselves to either one. The towels are in the hall closet.”

Colt disappeared through a door to what had to be CindyLou’s bedroom. I headed for the guest bath, after I’d grabbed a towel, and Scotty headed for the other bedroom with a bath at the end of the hall.

I didn’t know what was in store for me tonight, but whatever it was, I knew it would test all the reasons I’d ever had to just walk away. If I walked away after tonight, there would be no looking back... not ever.

CindyLou 15

I turned on the cold water first, and stepped under the shower, trying to sober up. Instead, as soon as the water hit me, for the first few seconds, it felt like liquid fire, burning through my skin. I immediately retreated away from the water, falling into Colt's arms. He stumbled back and if it wasn't for the closet door, we would've tumbled onto the floor or worse... into the soaking tub.

"Are you purposely trying to kill us or was this an afterthought?" he asked as I felt his naked body up against mine.

"I was trying for a cold shower to sober up," I told him. "But I think I turned on the hot water instead."

"It feels like ice-cold to me. Have you ever taken a cold shower before?" We were still pressed up against the closet door. His man parts pressing into my back. If he'd had an erection at any point during this evening, it was completely gone now.

“No. Never in my life.”

“And you’re taking one now because...?”

“Like I said, I hoped it would sober me up.”

And as I spoke the words, he moved around and before I could let out another word, he’d picked me up and we were both standing under the coldest water I’d ever felt.

Of course, I was screaming, or at least I thought I was... but it was more like a laughing, screaming combination.

“Are you sober yet?” he asked as the cold water engulfed us both. “Because this is not what I had in mind when I walked in here.”

He put me down and started fiddling with the knobs. I was so cold I had no interest in sex on any level. I just wanted to get warm again.

When the water started to warm up, I instantly began to relax, and stopped shivering. He held me close, and as he did, his dick finally sprung to attention, thank you very much!

“Are you sober now?” he asked once the water became hot enough to drain the chill out of my body.

“Pretty much, yes. I’ll never do that again,” I told him, still chuckling over the whole episode.

“I feel better, too,” he said, gazing down between us at his now perfectly erect dick.

I couldn’t help myself, I had to hold him, so I reached out and wrapped my hand around his rock-hard cock admiring the girth.

“So much better,” I said, right before I leaned over and took the tip into my mouth, swirling my tongue over the head. Yes, we’d already had sex, but it was dark, and I didn’t get to see anything or taste his thick shaft. This was *sooo* much better.

I moaned.

“Glad you think so,” he said, in a low voice as he moved my hair away so he could see what I was doing.

When I went to kneel in front of him, he pulled me up. “As much as I’m loving how this feels, let’s slow down a bit.”

“How much?” I wanted to know because I was all in now.

He grabbed the liquid soap, gave it two big pumps, rubbed his hands together until they were all bubbly, reached out and ran his hands over my breasts. “This much.”

“That’s nice,” I told him as his hands slipped over my body causing me to shiver once again, but not from the cold water this time... from his wickedly hot touch, combined with the look on his face. Like he was loving every second of this.

I soaped my hands and did the same to him, starting with his dick and balls.

“This is so fucking hot,” I finally told him, while I ran my hands over his firm, high ass, then down his thighs.

We kissed then, one of those hot kisses, where you want to show the other person how much you care, and oh, did I ever care.

“Is this a private party, or is there room for one more?” Scotty asked from somewhere in my hot fog.

I pulled away from Colt and caught a look in his eyes. I didn't know whether he was upset that Scotty had broken our love trance, or he was genuinely happy to share me with his best friend.

"Always room," I told him, as he stepped under the hot water.

The good thing about this shower stall was that it was bigger than most, with ample room for three people. There was even a wooden bench we could pull down, and a couple handles we could grab for support. I couldn't tell whether the shower stall had been made to accommodate someone who needed extra support in the shower or he'd added all this for sex. Either way, between the handles and the bench, we were sure to have a good time.

Scotty didn't take any time in getting right to what he wanted... me.

"Let's get her out of here, and on the bed," he told Colt.

"I didn't wash my hair, yet," I told them.

They gave each other a look, and before I could argue, they had their soapy hands running through my hair. With one of them pouring on the shampoo, while the other did the washing, and all the while, they made sure none of the soap ran into my closed eyes.

It was one of the sexiest moments of my entire life, especially when their bodies rubbed against mine.

"This is way over the top," I mumbled, as I held onto one of the handles on the wall.

Not only were they washing my hair, but they were washing my body as well... in all the most erotic places. After a while I just went with it. I kept my eyes closed, and enjoyed the sensations and the sounds, and how low they spoke to each other while they tried to make sure I was well taken care of.

“Showers will never be the same,” I told them. “Could we do this every night?”

“Darlin’,” Colt began. “We’d like nothing more.”

Then he kissed me, and I felt as though I would lose my balance, but Colt held me so close, no way could I possibly slip out of his grasp.

All the while Colt kissed me, Scotty gently rinsed my hair. Having these two gorgeous men treat me like a beautiful goddess, was more than I ever thought possible.

“Let’s get you dried off, and on the bed,” Scotty said.

“Shouldn’t we wait for Mickey?” I wanted to know.

“Mickey does things at his own pace,” Colt answered, after we broke away from the kiss. “We’ve learned that if we wait for Mickey to do what he says he’s going to do, nothing ever would get done, and tonight, we have a lot to do.”

He wore his adorable little smirk on his lips and no way did I want to argue with that. Instead, I helped dry them off, while they did the same to me. Then they wrapped me in a doublewide towel, and Scotty carried me over to Colt’s bed.

“I’ll get us a bigger bed tomorrow, per your request,” Colt said, as he stretched out next to me. Scotty stretched out on the opposite side, and suddenly I didn’t know which one to focus

on. They were both so beautiful, and so, well, squeaky clean, that I wanted to eat them up.

“Does this mean we’re officially in a relationship now?” I asked, feeling the grin down to my toes.

“Only if you want it to be.” Scotty sounded way too serious.

I gazed at them both. “I want us all to want it, even Mickey, if he ever shows up in this bedroom tonight.”

“Then let’s peel that towel off and have some fun.” Colt pushed himself up and leaned on his hand.

“Be my guest,” I told them, lying still between them.

Colt slowly opened the towel, as if he were opening a delicate package and he didn’t want anything to break. It only added to the heat that was already building in my core.

“You know, we don’t have to use condoms. I’m on the pill and have been ever since I stopped nursing Darci three months ago.”

“Darlin,’ you just made my whole year.” And with those words, the towel came completely off, and dropped to the floor.

“I don’t think I’ve ever done it without a condom. I have no idea how I’ll react to the sensations,” Scotty said.

“Well, let’s find out.” I rolled up over him and straddled his body.

Colt just stared at us, grinning. “I’m going to like watching this.” Then he ran a finger down my leg, giving me a shiver.

I sat up for a moment, as Scotty ran his hands up and down my thighs. “I love this view.”

Grabbing hold of his incredibly hard, thick cock, I slid it over my wet pussy, and found my entrance. Then I began to empale myself on him.

He reached down and grabbed my hips to slow the momentum. “Move back up for a moment. I want to watch this.”

I did what he asked, as his gaze settled between my legs. “Fuck, but that’s nice.”

Colt leaned in closer and watched as I slowly took Scotty inside my body, until my skin slapped against his. He completely filled me, and I moaned with the thrill of it as I ran my hands over his muscled, hard chest. The heat of the moment engulfing me in a bright flame I could actually see when I closed my eyes.

“Really nice,” Colt said, watching, then he crawled down on the bed, and watched from the backside, rubbing my back until I leaned forward, holding myself up with my hands, while Colt ran his hands over my ass. “Now that’s something to see.”

He kept playing with my ass and pressing his fingers on my back door. “You ever consider having both of us at once?” Colt asked. He spit on his fingers, then pressed into me, sending even more heat to my core. “I have some lube if you’re willing to give it a try. I won’t do anything that hurts. We can try it and if you don’t like it, I’ll stop.”

I didn't know how to tell him that having two dicks in me at once was one of my fantasies when I pleased myself.

I stopped rocking on Scotty's dick and decided to be honest. Now or never kind of a thing. "Lately, I've been more in tune with both my lady parts as well as my, um, back door. Let's try it."

And I didn't even hesitate. Instead, I pressed down on Colt's lubed finger as soon as he went near my ass, eager to feel them both inside me at the same time.

They both growled or moaned or maybe even yelled once they knew this thing was going to happen.

Colt moved my body into position, and in what seemed like a few moments later, he was plunging into me from behind, while Scotty drilled into my pussy. I felt so full and so loved that I couldn't help the tears that filled my eyes. And when we all rocked in unison, their fingers squeezing down on my hips and ass, I knew I'd found heaven with these two beautiful men.

I couldn't stop the freight train of emotions that shattered every part of me. I hadn't even come back down to earth when Scotty let loose inside me and not a moment later, I felt Colt go off, while all three of us groaned out and shuddered through what had to be the best orgasm any of us had had in way too long.

"CindyLou... fuck..." Scotty roared.

"Ah, fucking hell," Colt sighed, as I savored every moment. The rush of pleasure was so intense, I could hardly take a deep breath and when Colt slipped out of me, and I slid

off Scotty, we were all breathing so hard, that I didn't know if we would ever catch our breaths again.

ABOUT A HALF hour later, I woke up lying on my back, with both Scotty and Colt, on their sides, facing me, softly snoring. We'd already cleaned up right after sex, and I'd put on a cropped top and sleeping shorts. Both Colt and Scotty had pulled on their boxers. Something I told them they'd have to get used to doing if we were going to all live with a baby in the house.

I slid out of the bed and went looking for Mickey. I figured he must have left, but I wanted to be sure.

When I found him sitting in Darci's room, on the floor, his back resting on the crib and looking through the stack of photo albums I'd made for her, it took me by complete surprise.

"You're still here," I whispered.

And as soon as he gazed up at me, I could tell he'd been crying.

"Hey," I said as I went over to him, dropping down to sit next to him on the floor, rubbing his back. "What's going on?"

"She's beautiful. And I missed it. Missed everything. Her birth, your pregnancy. Her first attempt at walking. Her first real meal. Her first belly laugh. I wasn't there. I abandoned you. I had sex with you, bareback sex, then abandoned you. I even erased your text messages from my phone. I'm such an asshole. Yet you're so nice to me. Why? I don't deserve it. Don't deserve you or Darci. I'm a screw up. A fuck up who

runs at the first sign of commitment. Why the hell you would take a chance on me is... well... you really shouldn't. You should tell me to leave Sweet Whiskey and never come back."

He wasn't crying now, but I could see the sadness in his eyes. The total devastation about all he'd missed. I continued to run my hand up and down his back. I did it kind of mindlessly, like I did with Darci.

"But you're here now, and that's all that matters. We can't change the past, but we can work on having a great right now, and an even better future together. She'll get to know you... her daddy... and you'll get to know her. She's amazing, by the way. A really special little girl, who already loves country music. Every time she hears it, her little body bounces to the beat. And you should know, she already has better rhythm than I ever had. She's your daughter, all right."

He didn't say anything for a little while. Then he said, "You're too nice, CindyLou. I'm just a jerk at the bar. I'm not cut out to be anybody's father. I'm too rough around the edges... hell I'm rough through and through. I come from a long line of assholes, what makes you think I can be anything other than another asshole?"

"Because you gave me your word you wouldn't be."

"And you trust my word?"

"It's all I have. If I can't trust your word, we may as well call it quits right now, but I know you don't want to do that. Not now. Not after you've seen her pictures. All that's left is for you to meet her. You're going to love her."

“I’m sure I will, but she deserves so much more than what I can give her.”

“Nobody can give her what you have, the love of a father. She only has one bio daddy, and that’s you.”

“You make me believe I can do this.”

“Of course you can. She’s a lot like you. She has your beautiful baby blue eyes, and she’s a little scoundrel when she wants to be. But the biggest thing is that she loves to have her back rubbed, just like you do.”

He sat up straight then and turned to me. “How you talk.”

Then, right there, in Darci’s room, he crushed his lips over mine, and I melted into his embrace, just like I did that night in the parking lot in Cheyenne. His kisses worked like a soothing sexy balm that drew me into him like I belonged there, with him, forever.

And suddenly we were moving fast, trying to get at each other, to get our clothes off and to once again feel as though we belonged to each other. There was something that went deeper with Mickey and me. Something that connected us on another level, and when he entered me, there on the floor, and stared into my eyes while he plunged deep inside me over and over again, I knew he would always have my heart, no matter what he decided to do.

I was in love with Mickey Finn, and even though I didn’t know if he would stay or go, I couldn’t help what I’d felt for him that night in the front seat of his truck or what I was feeling now, on the floor of our daughter’s bedroom.

Heaven help me, but I was his.

CindyLou 16

“Are you ready?” I asked Mickey once we parked in front of my aunt and uncle’s ranch house. Mickey wore his best jeans, a pressed white shirt, and he even shined his black cowboy boots. He looked and smelled like he’d just stepped out of the shower, which he actually had right before he got dressed this morning. I’d been tempted to join him in the shower, but we were already running late, and I knew once I stepped under that hot water with him, we might never get around to picking up Darci.

And his meeting her was the whole point.

“As ready as I’ll ever be. I’m more afraid of seeing Daryl again, than meeting Darci,” he answered looking about as scared as I’d ever seen him.

“Daryl won’t do anything or say anything mean as long as Aunt Donna’s in the picture. He’s a softie when it comes to her and doesn’t like for her to get upset or worried. And besides, as long as it involves Darci, he’ll be as sweet as pie. So, relax

and enjoy it. You only get one chance to have a first meeting with your daughter. Don't let Daryl ruin it for you."

He grinned my way. "That's the smart way to look at it. Thanks. That helped."

"Darci's changed everything for me, and if I'm smarter because of her, than all the better. But believe me, this adulting thing is tough, and it's not for the weak or the timid. I've learned that a few times over in the last couple of years, that's for damn sure. Deciding to have my baby was my first step to adulthood. When I'd made that decision, I had no idea what it meant, other than going through a pregnancy. I somehow thought having a little baby to take care of was the easy part. Where I got that crazy idea, I didn't know, but raising a child has been the single most amazing and challenging event of my life. It has changed me in so many ways I've lost count months ago."

"I'm still learning," he said, sounding honest.

"We all are. So, once again... are you ready?"

He opened his passenger door. "Let's do this."

The weather had been warm, with a bit of a breeze for the last couple of days. Perfect summer days. Not too hot, and not too cold... but just right. We didn't get to the first step leading up to the house when Aunt Donna stepped out on the porch, holding Darci in her arms. My beautiful baby girl wore a billowing purple cotton dress, with a big purple bow holding her red hair off her face. For being only eleven months, Darci had some really thick red hair going on.

As soon as she saw me, her little arms went out, and she squirmed to break free from Donna. She didn't quite know how to say mama yet, but she knew how to moan and make enough noise that when she wanted something or someone, there was never any doubt.

I raced up the short staircase, grabbed my girl and twirled her around a couple times. She rested her head on my shoulder, while her little arm wrapped around my neck. It was possibly the best feeling in the whole world.

Mickey made his way up the stairs, just as Daryl emerged from the screen door.

My heart skipped a beat. For all my talk about Daryl not doing anything mean or physical in front of Donna, I still felt the apprehension for the meeting. My uncle was sort of like Mickey in certain situations. You could never be one-hundred percent certain how he would react.

“And there he is. Young man, I couldn't be happier to see you on this fine afternoon,” Daryl said, holding out his hand for Mickey.

Mickey took it, then they gave each other one of those quick man hugs, bumping chests, and I knew Daryl had forgiven him.

“Good to see you, Daryl.” Mickey sounded a bit hesitant, but genuine enough.

“Hey sweetheart,” I whispered to my darling baby girl. “This is your daddy. He's so happy to finally get to meet you.”

She didn't pick up her head or move from my shoulder. We all waited to see how she would react to him. Usually, she

liked anyone who came her way, but for some reason she seemed a bit shy with Mickey.

“Hey beautiful,” he began, then he pulled a small stuffed horse out of a fancy pink paper bag I hadn’t even noticed before. The horse was a soft pink with a baby blue mane and tail. The perfect little gift for her to wrap her hand around.

She instantly pushed back on me and reached out for the toy.

“This is a good sign,” I told him. “Normally, she’s reluctant to take anything from someone she doesn’t know... no matter how much she might like what that person was offering.”

She grabbed hold of the sweet pink horse around its neck, pulled it into her face and loved it for a moment. Then she gave Mickey the biggest smile I’d seen in days, and I caught the water filling his eyes.

And just like that, Darci had claimed his heart.

I just hoped he would be able to allow her in... us in.

“She’s even more beautiful than her pictures,” Mickey said. “Looks like her mama.”

“And her daddy,” I told him. “Look at her eyes. That color and those long, thick lashes are all you.”

“Why don’t you two come in for a spell,” Aunt Donna suggested. “Or do you have somewhere you have to be? I can fix up a lunch real quick-like if you’re hungry.”

My aunt loved to fuss over her guests. Even if she had nothing planned, she could whip up a four-course meal, with

all the trimmings in less time than it took for someone to refuse the generous offer.

“If it’s okay with you, I’d like to take Darci home. That way, I can put her down for her nap in her own bed. Plus, she and Mickey can get to know each other without any distractions.”

“That’s fine,” my aunt said, but I knew she was a bit disappointed.

“Maybe you two can stay for lunch another time,” Daryl offered. “Might be nice for all of us to come together as a family.”

I could tell from the look on Mickey’s face that the word family was so foreign to him, he didn’t know what to make of Daryl’s generous offer. Poor Mickey never really had a family, just a dad who drank too much and was barely even home.

“Sure would be,” Mickey told him. “Maybe next time.”

And with that, Mickey and I took our baby daughter home.

FOR THE REST of the day, and into the evening, Mickey never left Darci’s side. They played with her dolls, her bunnies, and her stuffed pink dragons, even her new horse. We took her to the park for a late picnic lunch and put her down on a blanket to play with her toys. Darci loved playing outside, especially on a big blanket. She wasn’t fond of the feel of grass, so she never wandered off.

“We’re like a real family, or something,” Mickey said, as we sat eating avocado and tomato sandwiches. The sky was the color of a deep blue sea, with a smattering of billowy white clouds. We were shaded by a large oak, while we listened to the sounds of kids in the small, well-equipped playground nearby. Every now and then, Darci would stop what she was doing, hold out her hand towards the kids, and giggle.

“We *are* a real family, Mickey.” He was still getting used to all of this. “It’s nice, though, right?”

“Not something I know anything about. I never had any of this. Even when I was a baby.”

He kept snapping pictures with his phone of Darci and me. Every now and then he’d take a selfie with Darci as well. I wondered why he needed so many, but it was none of my business, so I didn’t ask.

“No one would know that. You’ve slipped right into the daddy role, and she’s already comfortable with you.”

And just when I said that, Darci crawled over to him, pulling herself up on his arm and chest. “Well, look at you, baby girl. You like to stand, don’t you?”

Darci rocked and let out a little scream of delight. Mickey put his sandwich down on his paper plate, rolled on his back and held her up in the air. Darci squealed with delight, as he made her feel as though she was flying. Her laughter filled my heart, and watching the two of them felt so right, I couldn’t help but lean over and give Mickey a gentle kiss on his cheek. Then I stayed on my back and watched Darci giggle as she flew around in his big strong hands.

“You’re a natural, Mickey,” I told him. “I didn’t know what to expect, but I can tell she’s really smitten by her daddy.”

“The feeling is mutual, that’s for sure.”

“I’m glad to hear it,” I told him and snuggled in closer.

We finished our sandwiches after that, while Darci dined on smashed zucchini and carrots, a concoction I’d made before we’d left home. She was a good eater, and her little round body reflected her appetite.

Afterwards, she drank her milk from a sippy cup that she was still getting used to.

When we finally left the park, he carried her to my car, and fastened her into her seat.

“A baby is a lot of work,” he finally said, once we were driving back home, and Darci had fallen fast asleep in the back.

“This is nothing. It’s the fun part. There’s so much more to it.”

“I can’t even imagine.” He turned to me while I drove. “You’re a good mom, CindyLou. I just wish I hadn’t deserted you like I did.”

“That’s in our past, Mickey. You’re here now,” I told him.

“Yeah. I’m here now.” He said the words, but I had a feeling he was still trying his best to wrap his head around this new chapter in his life.

We didn’t talk for the rest of the drive home, and as the evening wore on, he became more and more quiet. Not so

much around Darci, but around me. Like he was trying to figure out his role in all of this.

He never left her side. He even helped me get her ready for bed, then played Rascal Flatts' *I Won't Let Go* on his guitar and sang the words with his low raspy voice. As soon as he sang the first line my eyes welled up. The song was about thinking you're on your own, and how you're not alone. And how he won't let go.

I couldn't stay in the room. I started balling, and I knew that wasn't his intention. My sweet baby girl's little eyes started closing, and I left to compose myself. That song always had a special meaning for me. I'd always wanted someone to sing it to me, and really mean it, and there was non-committal Mickey, singing it to our daughter. How could I not cry? The man was coming through for her... for both of us.

After calming myself in the bathroom, and throwing some cold water on my face, I marched back to Darci's bedroom ready to tell Mickey that I was so proud of him I could burst.

But when I opened the door, they were both asleep, Mickey on the cushy recliner, and Darci in her crib.

It had been one of the joys of my life to watch them bond all day long, and I could only imagine the tight relationship they would have as the years passed. I covered Mickey with a light blanket, turned on the baby monitor, took the screen with me, closed the door, and went downstairs.

"If he keeps this up, I'll think he really does want to hang around and be her daddy," I told Colt and Scotty as I walked into the kitchen. Something smelled so good, it caused my mouth to water. They were making dinner. I loved the fact that

they could cook. Colt had told me that Aunt Donna taught him, but I had no idea where Scotty learned. My mom wasn't a good cook, at least not like my aunt Donna. She could pour a mean Margarita, though and in the scheme of things, that had served me better than knowing how to bake a chicken.

After dinner, Scotty and I would be practicing our song. It had to be as close to perfect as we could make it. I'd changed my mind about being up on that stage with Tammy and the other women, whoever they were. I never asked. Either way, I wanted to be a part of it. Wanted it so bad, I could see and taste it. And if I was going to be there, I had to be as good as everyone else up on that stage. I refused to be seen as the rookie.

The round rustic table next to the large windows had been set for four, complete with lovely black dishes, large wine glasses and light blue linen napkins. It looked so cozy and inviting, I couldn't wait to sit down and enjoy the meal they'd prepared. The whole scene was like a dream come true. All that was missing was Mickey pouring the wine.

"I think he's smitten, and no way will he walk away this time," Scotty said, as he ladled red sauce on the large bowl of pasta already sitting on the table. A plate of vegan meatballs, made with black beans, sat next to it, that I knew Scotty had made just for me. They both knew I was serious about a mostly vegan diet, with the exception of wild caught fish or organic eggs every now and then.

How these two rough and tumble cowboys accommodated my vegan bent, only made me love them more.

“That’s exactly the problem,” Colt cautioned, as he placed a lovely green salad on the table. “Mickey believes he doesn’t deserve to be happy, and whenever he gets close to it, he’s afraid it’s all going to get pulled away from him somehow. He usually backs away before that can happen. That way he’s in control of the situation... or so he thinks.”

“We already talked about it, and I know that’s been his M.O., but he’s assured me that he’s changed. He says he wants to be Darci’s daddy, and he’s all in with me... us.”

“So, then where is he now? Isn’t he going to join us for dinner?” Scotty took the seat across from me, pulling in his chair.

“He fell asleep in Darci’s room, on the recliner.”

Scotty pushed his chair back. “I’ll get him.” And he walked out of the room.

I took a seat, and Colt sat next to me, picked up the bottle of red wine and filled our glasses. Then he picked up his glass. “A toast. To Mickey, and to us... all four of us... all five of us... and to our future.”

And as soon as we clinked, Scotty walked back in the room. “He won’t be joining us.”

My stomach clenched, but I forced myself to ignore it. Mickey had promised. Had made the connection with his daughter. Had told me he loved me. Had made love to me on Darci’s bedroom floor. He’d even met with Daryl and promised to go over for dinner one night as a family. “He’s probably exhausted. But he can’t spend the night in the

recliner. I'll wake him up after dinner and put him in one of the other guest rooms."

Scotty poured wine into his own glass, then took a couple deep gulps. "No. You don't understand. Mickey left. He told me he needs to clear his head."

I jumped up and ran out of the room when I saw the headlights from his pickup hit the window. I hurried outside, thinking I could stop him, but when I stepped out on the front porch, and caught his gaze through the windshield, I knew no one could stop him. He was leaving, and where or not he returned was something none of us could predict.

Not even Mickey.

We stared at each other for a bit, then he put the truck in reverse, turned it around and drove away, breaking my heart into a million little pieces.

Mickey 17

I thought I could sneak out before anyone would see me, but there she stood, the one person I did not want to catch my departure, CindyLou. The more I was around her, the more I knew I not only didn't deserve her, but I certainly couldn't be Darci's father... at least not her everyday father. What kind of a fucking role model could I ever be with a dad in prison and me not caring where my next gig came from?

Yet, there she stood, catching my departure, catching my gaze, and causing me to have to break her heart.

Better now than later when I made an even bigger mess of everything.

We stared at each other for a few moments, and in those moments, I briefly thought about turning the engine off, and going back inside. She looked so good. I loved her, and I loved our little girl, but I wasn't the right man for her. I'd bring her nothing but pain and sorrow.

So, I drove away.

Where the hell was I going? I didn't know, but I knew I couldn't stay in Sweet Whiskey, not while CindyLou and Darci were here.

I drove over to my cabin. Tossed a few of my things into a bag, grabbed my other guitar, slipped it into its case, and left, leaving the door unlocked behind me. I had enough money in the bank to get me all the way across this country, but for now, I headed over to Cricket for the night. I'd make solid plans in the morning.

While I drove, my phone kept dinging with text messages from Colt and Scotty.

I didn't answer.

They would just try to convince me to turn around and stay. To man up. Grow a pair.

All bullshit.

If they really knew me... if they were my brothers like we always said we were, they'd know I was a fuck up, and I'd always be a fuck up, kid or no kid.

No, I didn't sign that contract with the Jess Davis Band. Why would I? I would just disappoint them as well, only by signing on the dotted line, it would cost me a lot of effort and money to break that stupid contract. This way, I saved everybody a lot of hassle.

The road to Cricket was wide open, so it didn't take me any time at all to get there. Cricket was home to my other favorite bar, Last Call. A tavern where nobody knew my name. A tavern I could get wasted in, then lock myself in my

truck and sleep it off before I took off for... somewhere else... in the morning.

As soon as I walked inside, I knew I'd made the right decision to stop here for the night. There were some familiar faces, folks I'd gone to school with, shopkeepers I'd dealt with, and general townfolks I recognized, but most of them ignored me or just gave me a nod of recognition, then went on their merry way.

Exactly what I was looking for tonight.

"Hey, Mickey," Emma Holt, part owner of Last Call said as she approached me, slipping a white cocktail napkin in front of me on the long, antique bar. "It's been a while."

Emma was a dark-haired beauty in her mid to late twenties. She'd arrived here in Cricket a few years ago from San Francisco, if I remembered it right. She and I flirted for a while, until she met the new owners.

"Yeah," I told her, trying to remember more about her. "Been busy over at Dirty Coyote."

"I heard," she said, grinning. "I also heard congratulations are in order."

What the hell... "Yeah, well, not really. As it turns out, I'm heading up the road. Didn't sign with Jess Davis after all."

"That doesn't sound good. Sorry to hear it, but that's not what I'm congratulating you for. I hear you're a daddy! That's huge! A baby girl named Darci. Love the name, by the way. Always been a big fan of Jane Austin's books. Your first drink is on the house, Mickey. What'll it be?"

My heart literally stopped. “Long neck beer and a flight of tequila, full shots.”

“Wait! What? You didn’t sign?” Jade Whitaker asked. I hadn’t noticed her sitting to my right, after the empty stool between us. Jade was the biggest lawyer around. Not only did she understand entertainment law, but just about everything and anything else folks had going on in either Cricket or Sweet Water. “What the hell got in your way? They’re the hottest up-and-coming band in Country right now. What could possibly be your reason?”

Jade couldn’t be more than five feet tall in her bare feet, but she was a bulldog ready to tear apart anyone or anything that got in the way of her clients. She and the other lawyers in her firm were who you wanted on your side.

Apparently, I wasn’t on the right side.

“Hi Jade... it’s personal.”

That just made her slide over next to me on the empty barstool. “Personal? How personal? If you want more up-front money, I’ll see what I can do. If you want more time with your kid, we can work that out, too. You really shouldn’t pass this up.”

“Hey, Mickey! When I heard you were here, I had to come right over and congratulate you,” Mindy Marshal said. We’d met when I was in Cheyenne. Spent a little time together. Told her about Cricket and Sweet Water, and she couldn’t leave Cheyenne fast enough. Now she taught line dancing here at Last Call. We never hooked up again after she moved here. Both of us were too busy. But man, she looked good.

“Don’t be congratulating him,” Jade told her. “At least not for signing with the next big band to come out of Country Music.”

“But I thought... doesn’t matter. Congrats on your baby girl. That’s such good news,” Mindy said, running her hand down my back. And as soon as she did, I thought about CindyLou.

I was never gonna get that woman out of my head.

“Hey, man,” a guy’s voice said, next to me. And when I turned around it was Rob Williams, a black guy I went to high school with. He stood with his partner, June Maplewood, a white woman who planned most everything that needed planning in the two towns, Cricket and Sweet Water, from weddings to festivals. Her other two partners in their polyamorous relationship, Dex Hunter and Jake Doyle walked up to shake my hand as well. All folks I knew from school.

Fuck if everyone didn’t want to congratulate me for either my kid or my contract, both of which I was busy running away from. When my drinks came, I couldn’t even enjoy them and get stinking drunk like I’d planned because all of a sudden, I was the most popular person inside Last Call.

I wanted to be polite, but it went against my nature, and I found myself starting to struggle for air. I wanted to tell everyone to fuck off, but I couldn’t. They were genuinely nice folks, and were just trying to show me some kindness.

But didn’t they all know from past experiences with me that I didn’t deserve their kindness?

It was at the exact moment when I wanted to yell at everyone when Daryl showed up.

At first, I thought he was going to punch me again, which, I completely deserved. Plus, it would save me from all the bullshit I was about to blast out of my mouth. After all, I'd just abandoned his niece... again.

Only it was far worse this time and we both knew it.

Instead, he took my arm and said, "Glad you could meet me here, Mickey. Let's go someplace quiet. Like a booth or a table where we can talk private-like."

"I can have a server bring your drinks over," Emma said from behind the bar, as Daryl pulled me out of the fray.

Once Daryl took hold of my arm, there was no way I would even attempt to pull away from him. His grip felt more like a vice, rather than friendly support, and I knew to just go along with whatever he wanted.

Everyone bid me farewell, except for Jade Whitaker who made sure I had her card before she allowed us to disappear. I hadn't been the source of that much support, well, ever. Even when they carted my dad off to prison, no one came around to check on me. Of course, it didn't help that I'd alienated most everyone over the years.

Yet, there they were wishing me well, when I didn't deserve any of it.

I slid into the bench seat of the booth, and got as close to the wall as I possibly could, thinking the wall might save me if Daryl started throwing punches. I could duck and he'd hit the wall instead of my face.

That was the plan, anyway.

Daryl was about to say something when a waitress I didn't know brought over our drinks.

Daryl looked at my flight of tequila. "You gonna drink all that by yourself?"

"That's the plan. Then order another round, and maybe another until everything mellows out."

"Your plan is to get stinking drunk?"

"Yep."

"That's not a plan. That's avoidance."

"Whatever works."

There were three types of flights: full shots, half shots or quarter shots. For the full shots, the bartender poured three different tequilas. For the half shots, the bartender poured four different tequilas, and for the quarter shots, eight different tequilas. That flight was more for a group of folks who wanted to find their perfect tequila. I didn't fucking care what type Emma poured, just that I had three full shots in front of me and a tall cool beer to wash them down.

"And just how long do you think you can keep this-here avoidance up?"

I threw back the first shot. Smooth as silk. No burn. Then I took a few hits off my beer.

"As long as I need to."

"Seems like you're mighty young to be throwing your life away."

Daryl had to be in his late fifties or maybe in his early sixties, but I could tell he must've been a real charmer with good looks when he was young. He still looked good. Tall, and thin with just the right amount of muscle. My jaw still ached from that right amount of muscle.

“My life... It ain't been worth nothin' so far, so what's the difference?”

“The difference is you have a little girl to think of now, my great-niece and she needs a sober, working daddy. Not some drunk, no-account loser.”

“She's better off without me,” I told him, then threw back the second shot. Now we were getting somewhere.

“Does this behavior have anything to do with your own dad?”

He hit me where it hurt, but I wasn't about to admit it. Instead, I laughed. “My dad is a total fuck up and if he'd left me alone when I was growing up, I would've been much better off for it.”

“Here's the thing about that. He promised your mama that he'd take care of you, so he couldn't leave you, even when Donna and I tried to convince him to let us raise you.”

I had to let that sink in for a bit. “You and Donna?”

“Yeah, but he kicked me out of his house and told me if I ever tried to take you away, he'd shoot off my hand. He was just ornery enough that I believed him. But the man who married your mama, and who she left you with, was a lot different than the man he became after she died. That man died right along with your mama, and the man that took over his

body and mind, was somebody who didn't give one lick about nobody or nothin'. Exactly where you're going, if you stick to your plan."

"And just who was he when he married my mama? A lawyer? A doctor? What? He wasn't nothin' when he married her. Nothin' but a rodeo rat who never amounted to nothing but a thief."

Just talking about my father gave me a stomach ache. He was such a disappointment to me that I hated even thinking about him, let alone knowing that my mom's death changed him. It only made me angry.

"Maybe so, but that rodeo rat loved your mama like there was no tomorrow. And when you were born, I ain't never seen a man so proud of his child. We were best friends, me and your papa. Did you know that?"

"What? No."

I could hardly believe that I was just learning this news.

"Yep... he pushed me away. Pushed everybody away who loved him, even you. Is that what you're doing to CindyLou and Darci? Pushing them away?"

"This is different."

"How?"

I threw back my final shot and ordered another flight from the waitress who happened to be passing by our table. She looked as if she liked her job, which took me by surprise. I didn't understand people who liked what they did for a living. I liked playing guitar. I loved it, actually, especially when I was up on stage, but I hated the fact that I played for a living.

It didn't seem right. It confused me. How could I get paid for doing something I loved when so many people hated their jobs. It made no sense to me.

“You're not your father. You're you,” Daryl said, sounding confident in his words. As if he'd practiced them. “And we all know you. You got a big, kind heart and we know you deserve to be in the Jess Davis band. You shine when you're up on that stage, when you're playing alongside them. And you deserve to have that beautiful little girl run into your arms when you come home, calling you daddy. But most of all, you deserve to have CindyLou love you, no matter what that looks like. Because I know, deep down inside, you're a good man with a kind heart who loves his little girl, his ability to make music, and my beautiful niece, CindyLou. Now, the way I see it, you can either come on home with me and get yourself straightened out for the next few days, or you can finish this round and order two or three more, and break not only your own heart, and your mama's, who sure as hell is watchin' over you, but also everybody else's heart, too. Including that there lawyer Ms. Whitaker, who gave you her card. She's been one of your biggest fans ever since she first saw you up on that stage at Dirty Coyote. We're all your biggest fans... everybody who congratulated you tonight, and that's only a fraction of the folks who want to see you succeed. You just gotta let everybody into your heart, is all. Now, I'll be outside, waitin' in my truck. But I won't wait long. Maybe fifteen minutes, tops. It's all up to you, but remember, your mama's watchin'.”

The waitress showed up with the next round, just as Daryl slid out of the booth. He looked about as sad as an old hound

dog watching a puppy with a bone.

“Your decision, and this time, either way, we’ll do this without any punches. You have my word.” He turned to the waitress and handed her two twenties and a ten. “This ought to cover his drinks so far, and a little something for you. Y’all, have a good night now.”

She grinned up at him. “Thanks.”

Then she walked to the next booth and delivered another flight and two more beers.

Daryl settled his worn brown-felt cowboy hat on his head, tapped his index finger on the tip of his brim, looked me in the eye one more time, and left.

“What the fuck am I supposed to do now?” I said out loud, but there was nobody around to answer.

CindyLou 18

The girls with guitars night finally rolled around and I was so nervous I could barely talk let alone be expected to sing. Scotty and I had practiced my song so many times I'd become sick of my own music and lyrics. Colt, on the other hand, never seemed to get enough. And little Darci absolutely loved it. Her body moved and grooved to the beat, while she giggled and laughed which always caused me to giggle and laugh just watching her.

As if all that wasn't enough to turn my insides to mush, the girls with guitars this week were Connie Manors from Hot Sugar, Liberty Gallagher, from the Austin Sentry Band, and Tammy's niece, Emily Jennings who got her start with Wilder and Days. We'd practiced that afternoon singing some of their songs, along with a few cover songs. And when it came time for Scotty and I to sing our song, I had to run to the bathroom first to vomit.

I'd had no idea the "girls" would be those "girls."

Holy shit!

The good thing was, they were all total dolls, as Dolly liked to refer to them. They welcomed me in and made me feel like their equal, which I was not in any way on their level... but still it felt good.

Now, as I waited backstage, my guitar slung from a new red strap over my shoulder, to walk out on that stage once again, in front of a jampacked house, I didn't want to vomit. Instead, I wanted to run as far as I could for as long as my body would let me.

"This was all your idea," I told Scotty as he stood next to me, his own guitar slung over his shoulder from a thick black strap. Tammy had decided to change things around and bring us out first. Sort of like an opening act at a concert. I just hoped we wouldn't end up being the bad opening act.

We'd sing my song, then the other women would step out with a full band behind them. And when I said full band, I meant an entire band complete with a slide guitar and a keyboard. The band was mostly guys with one woman who played that keyboard. Tammy made an exception to her rule tonight of no men onstage in honor of the three amazing women who had agreed to join.

They wanted to celebrate Tammy's birthday. I'd had no idea, but everyone else knew. Plus, everyone else also knew about the three killer talents that would be joining us as well... but did anyone tell me?

Oh no. Scotty said they didn't tell me because they didn't want me to get intimidated and back out.

Okay, I probably would have, but still.

“Any word from Mickey?” I asked Scotty once again. Mickey wasn’t answering any of my text messages, but he did tell Colt, a few days ago, that he was fine and not to worry.

Still, we didn’t know where he was or if he would ever return. He simply wouldn’t answer those questions.

I decided not to think about him until he said for sure what he was going to do. He’d even cancelled all of his gigs with various bands for the rest of the week. Still, the biggest issue was that he never signed that contract with the Jess Davis Band, which didn’t bode well for his returning. The whole thing saddened me to no end, especially when it came to Darci who had really taken to him. Why he would want to give that up made absolutely no sense.

“No, but now isn’t the time to think about Mickey. Now is the time to enjoy this moment. No matter where this goes, this is your official first time on stage. You’ll want to remember it.”

“You can just turn that advice right back at yourself as well, Mister. This is your first time as well. Or are you trying to forget that?”

“Doing my best not to think about it, thank you very much.”

I could see those inner nerves on his strained face, so I kissed him, long and hard. We both needed a kiss. At first, his lips felt about as soft as a piece of burnt toast, but the more I lingered, and pressed my body to his, the more those lips

began to soften until our tongues touched and that familiar fire swept over us.

When we finally broke the kiss, he said, “I thought we couldn’t kiss here.”

“That was before we both knew how nervous this whole stage thing would make us. Besides, didn’t your mom ever teach you to never say never?”

We both chuckled then, and just when we were feeling our best, Tammy announced us.

“Here we go,” Scotty said, taking my hand as we walked out onstage. My first instinct was to let go of his hand, but then, I’d fallen in love with this man, so instead, I held on tight until I needed to start playing.

The band played the intro to my song, and it sounded so good, I had to turn around for a moment to let them know how fabulous they made my melody sound.

I spotted him then... standing a few feet behind Scotty... staring down at his guitar.

“Mickey?” I whispered, but everyone heard me, even Scotty who whirled around to face him.

“What the f—” Scotty said, stopping himself right before he said the whole word onstage.

Mickey looked up, grinned like a sly cat, then nodded our way and continued to play.

Fine, so now not only was I nervous about singing, but my throat had closed over all the emotion I felt just knowing he’d returned.

The guys in the band must have known this would happen, because they played the intro once again.

I turned back around to stare at the audience, and spotted Colt right there in the front, mouthing, “You’ve got this!”

He stood next to Daryl, who wore a big wide toothy grin, like he did whenever Darci ran into his arms. I couldn’t believe it. Colt and Daryl, together. Did this mean they were friends again? I didn’t know, but whatever happened, my heart was so full, it wanted to burst. And next to Daryl... Miss Nancy... Scotty’s mother. I could hardly believe it. I loved her, and there she was only a few feet away to cheer on her son, and me, I hoped. She looked positively beautiful in her blue jeans, and blue shirt. Her blond hair dusting her shoulders and her makeup perfect. I was so happy to see her, I nearly jumped off the stage to give her a hug... but Scotty stopped me.

“Afterwards,” he said, so I blew her a kiss instead.

Then there was the massive audience that stretched all the way from the stage to the front doors, and when I glanced up, they were even lining the railings of the two balconies.

Talk about an incredible opening night! We were having one. When I glanced over at Scotty, thinking he might be frozen with stage fright, I was pleasantly surprised to see him so into playing the music and enjoying the audience, that he seemed not to have a care in the world.

And this time, when the band played the intro, I joined right in and sang out, loud and clear, with Scotty doing some light harmony.

You told me I'm your Mrs.

I told you you're my man.

Now you're dancing with a sister,

Who don't know who I am.

I'm sayin' no, oh no, no, no.

Telling you no, oh no, no, no...

For the next two hours, a much longer set than we'd practiced for, short and petite Connie sang a bluesy original and wowed the audience, then Liberty, with her white-blond hair and red signature lips played that mean fiddle of hers until I could see sparks flying, while Emily, who looked amazing wearing a short black leather skirt and red shirt that highlighted her gold-spun long hair, did a couple solos then a harmony number with Tammy. We all sang song after song, with the four of us joining in whenever we could.

Oh, and my song with Scotty... well, it was a mega hit, with folks asking if they could stream it on their favorite service.

What the hell?

When it came time for all of us to sing *Girls with Guitars*, we'd become such good stage buddies that we chuckled out way through the song, with both Scotty and Mickey doing the long instrumental in the middle on their own. It was magical and everyone applauded and whistled when they were done.

When we broke after our first set, I knew this was where I belonged. Where my heart wanted to go. And where I could no longer ignore.

But first, I had to talk to Mickey.

“Hi babe,” he began once we were alone backstage, standing in the long hallway. “Before you say anything, I didn’t sign with the Jess Davis Band. Even though it was a great opportunity, it required way too much traveling. I don’t want to do that. Not now, anyway. Instead, I put together my own band. They backed you and the other girls tonight. I’ve been jamming with them on and off for a couple years. I thought it was time we made it legal. Jade Witaker took care of the paperwork. Also, I’ve given up my cabin on Tammy’s property to move in with you and Colt. I think Scotty’s doing the same, or at least he’s in the process. You should know that your uncle turned me around on my stupid thinking.”

I could hardly believe his words. It seemed as though he was finally taking his life seriously... like it mattered... like *we* mattered. My heart swelled with love.

“And just how did he do that? Another punch to the face?”

Not exactly. He and your aunt did it with kindness and love. Something I’m not used to getting. They convinced me that I deserve those things.”

“Didn’t you already know that? You deserve those things and more. You’re a great guy under all that bravado. I saw it the other day when you were with Darci. She’s a good judge of character, and she fell for you from the very first moment you two met.”

“How is she? I miss her so much, and I miss you, too. Like crazy. I couldn’t stop thinking of you the entire time I stayed with your aunt and uncle.”

“You stayed with them and they didn’t tell me?”

“I didn’t want anyone to know... in case I didn’t make it. This head of mine throws me curve balls all the time. You wanna know the biggest thing I did?”

“What?”

“I’m in therapy. Real, honest to God, therapy. And I like it.”

“Wow, all because Uncle Daryl punched your lights out?”

He reached for his jaw like it still hurt, when I knew that it didn’t.

“I guess so. Plus, I met the love of my life.”

I couldn’t help but tease him. “And who might that be... this love of your life?”

He smirked and my entire body shuddered.

“It’s you. I love you so much.”

His eyes teared up and I held him close for a moment. Then I said, “I love you, too. I love you so much, Mickey Finn.”

“That must mean you forgive me for acting like such a jerk.”

“It’s okay. You’re here now, and that’s all that matters.”

I didn’t want to tell him that yes... he was a true jerk. I’d save that confession for some other time when we were in a

more private setting. Right now, I just wanted to enjoy the fact that he'd come back... for good this time.

“Are you sure you don't mind sharing the love of your life?” I wanted to make sure he knew I was in love with all three of them, and I had no intention of choosing just one.

“As long as I'm sharing you with my two brothers, I couldn't be happier.” His face lit up when he spoke, so I knew he was telling the truth. We were all in for it now... for better or worse.

“So, does this mean I can believe that napkin you left me in the bar in Cheyenne?”

“Refresh me. What did it say?” I pulled it out of my back pocket of my black jeans and unfolded it. “You actually have it with you?”

“I was hoping you'd show up tonight. It was my sort of good luck charm that you would and that I wouldn't pass out onstage.” I opened the napkin and read it to him. “I'm in love! Meet me in the parking lot after your shift.”

“The offer still goes,” he told me.

“And the love part?”

He leaned down and kissed me, while I stood on my toes. The kiss said everything I'd been wishing for. I could feel it this time. He was all in this time, and nothing would ever change that.

“Get a room,” I heard Tammy say.

We broke the kiss and stared at her.

“Just not now,” Emily said.

“We’re on in five,” Liberty chided. “But that kiss was so hot!”

“Yeah, almost way too hot,” Colt said, then he took me in his arms and competition kissed me until my knees went weak.

“Wait a minute. Wait a minute,” I heard Scotty say from somewhere in my kissing fog.

I didn’t get time to even catch my breath before his lips crushed mine.

“Okay. Okay. So we’ve got yet one more polyamorous relationship going on in this town,” I heard Tammy say. “Pretty soon us one-on-one folks will be outnumbered. Now, let’s get a move on. Those paying customers out there are getting’ mighty restless.”

With those words we broke the kiss, but not before I managed to tell each of my guys how much I loved them. And you know what? They managed to tell me the same thing.

“Love you,” Colt whispered.

“With all my heart,” Scotty said in a low raspy voice as we walked back onstage, holding hands once again.

And as I gazed out at everyone waiting to hear us sing, I knew for certain my baby girl was responsible for all of this... her and Mickey... who I had every intention of meeting out in the parking lot after my shift.

“Now, let’s do this...” And the room filled with cheers and whistles as the girls with guitars, and one fiddle, entertained the crowd inside this magical place known as Dirty Coyote, a country music dance hall like none other.

Colt – Epilogue

Christmas Eve

Mickey Finn threw the first punch right around 10 p. m.

I knew this because that was the time our Christmas Eve party was winding down, and CindyLou had gone off to get Darci ready for bed. We'd decided to have a small gathering for our first Christmas Eve. While Christmas would be spent with our parents, significant relatives and a scattering of friends, tonight was more intimate, and exactly the way we'd planned it.

Besides, it was also Mickey's birthday.

He'd turned twenty-eight, and all he'd wanted was a small party with his best friends, his favorite girls... which included Darci, CindyLou, Tammy and Donna... and his two male role models, Jimmy Jennings and Daryl Geller. Both men had

taken Mickey under their wings and Mickey had become an actual adult because of it.

Who knew?

This time it wasn't Daryl who was on the receiving end of the punch. It was a black punching bag hanging from a metal contraption made specifically for the punching bag. We were out in our three-car garage that Mickey had converted into a gym, complete with a couple punching bags, and a speed bag. Plus, Scotty and I had added weight machines and free weights to the mix. We now had our own private gym that even CindyLou used on a regular basis.

Mickey had wanted to add a boxing ring, but CindyLou and Donna had put their collective feet down so hard to squash the idea that Mickey was still sending them weekly flowers to make up for even mentioning the "*irresponsible*" idea.

Tonight, Mickey wore red boxing gloves, while Daryl, now Mickey's private trainer, wore a black set. Both sets of gloves looked lethal, and I was glad this little demonstration only consisted of two people. I knew for certain that Scotty and I wanted no part of it.

Yes, we punched the bags, and yes, Scotty was the master when it came to the speed bag, but when it came to demonstrating punching anything in front of folks, neither of us wanted to participate. Especially with Daryl around.

Who knew where one of his lethal punches might land?

"Don't punch with your arm," Daryl warned Mickey. "Punch with your whole body. That's what you've been doing wrong, son. You're punching with your arm. The strength is in

your body, not your arm. Let me show you.” Mickey stepped out of the way, and allowed Daryl to demonstrate.

Daryl threw a punch that moved the entire bag and the contraption holding it about three feet from where it had been standing. Everyone gave a collective sigh. A punch like that would take someone double Daryl’s size right down on their ass.

“Holy shit, Daryl!” Mickey said. “No wonder you won so many fights in the ring.”

Neither Scotty or I said a word. We merely gazed at each other, happy we weren’t in the line of fire.

“I won all of ‘em. I was undefeated when I retired,” Daryl shot back. “Could’a won the title if I’d stayed in the ring, but Miss Donna stole my heart, and boxin’ wasn’t something she could tolerate. So, I stepped away, bought the ranch, and never looked back.”

“You ever miss it?” I asked, wondering how anyone could miss getting pummeled for a living. Still, I secretly knew Daryl had loved the sport. Probably why he was still fit as any twenty-year-old and could throw a punch that would knock that twenty-year-old right on his ass.

All eyes were on Daryl. He was our living legend, and living legends could never live up to their reputations. However, Daryl was a cowboy of a different breed.

“Never really gave it up. At least not everything. I still work the bag, and ranchin’ keeps me in shape. But every now and then, I get up to Cricket and get into the ring at Rocky’s

Boxing Gym with some of the younger fighters. That's what keeps me fit."

"That explains it then," Scotty said. "I always wondered how you did it."

"Now you know," Daryl said, punching the bag once again with the same results.

The fact that at Daryl's age, he could still keep up with the new young guns in boxing was so impressive, it just reminded me of why I was glad Daryl had finally come around to accepting CindyLou's choice of lifestyle. The change in him seemed miraculous, at best. As if he'd had some sort of divine intervention.

But it wasn't CindyLou who had convinced him.

It was Mickey.

He and Mickey had become so close over the last few months, they were like father and son. Daryl had essentially saved Mickey's life, and he did it with kindness and an endless amount of support.

Truth be told, we were all like Daryl's sons now, and we were better off for it. Turned out, the man had so much wisdom to shed on us, that we couldn't seem to get enough of him.

He was instrumental in Mickey's decision not to sign with the Jess Davis Band. As it turned out, Mickey picked the better path and kept that band together that had played behind the girls with guitars on that very first night that CindyLou and Scotty had performed. Mickey named the band Sweet Darci, and we couldn't talk him out of it. They were now regulars at

Dirty Coyote with Scotty and CindyLou doing most of the vocals... at least on the days they weren't backing Tammy and her "girls."

For now, while Darci was still so young, both CindyLou and Mickey loved the arrangement. Plus, it gave CindyLou and Scotty time to improve on their performance style. They just kept getting better and better, with a following that was reaching levels of any other popular country band.

And as far as the boxing lessons for Mickey... about damn time.

"I'm fading, hon," Donna said to her man, right before she yawned. "Can we go home now? I've got a big day of cooking tomorrow, and I don't want to be dragging."

"Sure, my love. We can go whenever you're ready," Daryl told her, slipping his hands out of the gloves.

"We better be getting back as well," Tammy said. "Thank you so much for a lovely evening... despite the boxing lessons."

Tammy and Donna were all decked out in Christmas sparkle, wearing shiny outfits, long dangling earrings, and red heels, as if they'd planned it.

"As long as there's no more fist fights going on inside Dirty Coyote you guys can do anything you want," Jimmy said. "Oh, and Daryl, next time you head off for that boxing gym in Cricket, let me know. I used to do a little boxing in college and I'd like to get back into it."

Then he bent from the waist and punched the air, looking good for a guy who hadn't boxed in thirty years or more.

“Might be fun.”

“You bet,” Daryl told him. “I’ll send you a text the day before with all the information or I can just pick you up and take you on over, at least the first time.”

“I’d like that. Just can’t be on a Friday or Saturday night. Way too busy at the dancehall,” Jimmy told him.

“Never on a Friday or Saturday. Those are my nights to do a little drinkin’ and funnin’.” Daryl told him, as he removed his gloves, then patted Jimmy on the shoulder.

“Never liked the sport,” Tammy said. “Way too much violence for me. But then I’m more into the comfortable things in life. Not the brutal.”

“I like to cook, and cooking’s what I do,” Donna announced. “I’m expecting y’all over at the ranch around ten tomorrow? I’ll be cooking up way too much food, so y’all better come on over and bring a hearty appetite.”

“Wouldn’t miss it, doll,” Tammy said, giving her a hug and a kiss on each cheek. Merry Christmas.”

Everyone trailed back into the house to grab their coats, and head on out. We passed the pile of toys we were still putting together for Darci. Some of them were meant for a kid a bit older, but we figured she’d grow into them. Among other toys, we’d bought a buggy for her dolls, a short wooden slide for her playroom, and a train set that she’d wanted as soon as she heard the engine toot inside the upscale toy store over in Cricket.

Plus, she was smarter than most kids her age. She was already saying two syllable words, so the toys might just be

fine for her right now.

CindyLou and Darci met everyone at the door to say goodbye.

“Bye bye,” Darci said, grinning as she opened and closed her little hand to wave goodbye.

Turned out she was a lefty, just like her dad.

Yet, another reason why Mickey could never throw a decent punch.

Once everyone had said their good-byes and Darci had hugged everyone at least two times, it was time for bed for the little munchkin.

Of course, she wanted nothing to do with it.

I went with CindyLou to try and get Darci into her bed, while Scotty and Mickey once again tried to assemble the mountain of toys.

But so far, we weren't having any luck.

“It's time to go to sleep, munchkin,” I told her, trying my best to get her to stay down.

An impossible task, to be sure.

“Daddy,” Darci cooed as she once again stood in her crib wearing bright red P.J.'s, her chubby little arms outstretched.

Mickey had just walked into the room to say goodnight, and as soon as he did, Darci stood up like she'd been placed down on a spring.

“Sweetheart, it's time for bed,” he told her, walking over to give her a hug. Of course, as soon as he held her, she wouldn't

let go, so up she came into his arms.

“So much for getting her to bed so we can finish her toys,” CindyLou told him. “We still have a lot to do before morning, and I wanted everything to be ready for her when she first woke up.”

“Everything is almost put together,” Scotty announced as he walked into the room. “Surprisingly, I was able to get several of the toys together in only a couple minutes each. They just looked hard to do, but they were easy.”

Like music, Scotty had a knack with puzzles and directions. He was just smart like that.

And as soon as Darci saw him, her little arms went out, wanting him to come closer.

When he did, she instantly leaned over to be held and hugged by him.

So much for daddy loyalty.

“Hey, little girl. Santa won’t come if your still awake. You have to be sleeping in order for him to slide down the chimney,” Scotty told her as Mickey rolled his eyes.

“Like she’s going to understand you,” Mickey said.

“Santa,” Darci said, looking around. “Santa.”

Scotty looked at Mickey. “You were saying something about her not understanding.”

“Fine,” Mickey said, defeated.

We’d already taken her to see Santa inside the overly decorated gazebo at the main park. It was love at first sight. Of course, it was probably due to the fact that Uncle Daryl was

hidden under that red suit and white beard, with padding everywhere to give him the right sized belly. We all thought she knew exactly whose lap she was sitting on for the pictures. Especially when he began rubbing her back and she collapsed into him. The parents in line with their children thought it was the cutest thing ever, but she knew exactly who tried to hide under all that red velvet.

Her very favorite uncle in all the world.

“Yes, Santa. He’ll be here in the morning,” Scotty told her. “Now, it’s off to bed.”

But she wanted nothing to do with her bed. Instead, she held out her arms for me calling for “Colty!”

She couldn’t seem to say Colt yet.

She had all three of us wrapped around her little finger. We would do anything for her, and couldn’t seem to say no, even staying up way past her bedtime... like she’d done tonight.

“Okay. Okay. That’s enough. It’s time sweetheart,” CindyLou said, carrying her guitar back into the room. We all knew what we had to do. The only thing that would get Darci to lie down and sleep.

We had to play and sing something.

Both Mickey and Scotty left, while CindyLou made sure her guitar was properly tuned.

Then, while Darci finally sat in her crib and began pulling her stuffed dragons to surround her, CindyLou played the cords for *White Christmas*.

It didn't take long before we were all singing, and harmonizing the song. At first, Darci's eyes went wide, but she knew it was time to lie down. Eventually she closed her eyes, giving each of us a rush of pure joy.

When we ended the song with, "*And may all your Christmases be white,*" I could swear I heard Mickey pull in a ragged breath. Ever since he'd come back to us, he cried for just about anything and everything.

We walked out of the room then, CindyLou carrying both her guitar and a baby monitor. We placed our instruments back in their stands and headed downstairs where we still had a roaring fire and the Christmas tree was still lit.

"Maybe a hot toddy before we all drift off for the night?" CindyLou offered as we entered the living room. It was so cozy and so beautiful it didn't look like my house anymore. It looked more like something out of a magazine.

That was when I noticed the large fuzzy blanket stretched out in front of the fireplace.

"Sounds perfect," I told her, slipping my arm around her waist and pulling her in tight for a kiss. "Is that for us? To go with our hot toddies?"

"Yes," she said, placing the baby monitor on an end table, then turning up the volume. "Actually, I was thinking that our hot toddy, wouldn't actually be something to drink. It would be more of the delectable erotic variety... in front of the fire... with a glass of wine for you boys. Would that work?"

"That would work even better," Mickey said, then he kissed her. A long sexy kiss where she wrapped her leg around

his.

“I’ll get the wine,” Scotty said, when the kiss finally ended as Mickey and I stretched out with our girl lying between us in front of the fire. Before he left for the wine, Scotty tossed another log on the fire causing all the ash to stir and the flames to lick higher. He slid the ornate screen in front of the hearth, and left for the kitchen.

Scotty liked to take care of things himself, while I liked to hire it out. Mickey, well, Mickey liked to entertain Darci, which took up most of his time.

“I have something to tell you, tonight. It’s my Christmas gift to all three of you,” CindyLou purred, grinning, as she gazed up at us.

“What is it?” I asked, as I pulled a few of the decorator pillows down from the sofa and we shoved them under our heads. The fire felt warm and caused her skin to shine with a soft orange glow. She looked good enough to eat, which I intended to do before this night ended.

“I’ll wait for Scottie,” she said, moments before he walked back into the room with an open bottle of Prosecco, her favorite. He poured the wine and handed each of us a glass.

She didn’t take one. Instead, he poured her a glass of sparkling water, causing me to wonder if she wasn’t feeling well after that massive meal we all ate.

“Wait... do you two know something that we don’t?” I asked, gazing at their faces. I’d found that CindyLou couldn’t hold onto a secret no matter how hard she tried. Scotty could go forever, but not CindyLou. “Tell us!”

Both Mickey and I sat up, along with CindyLou who held her pillow on her lap. Scotty sat with his back to the fire, the bottle of wine in an ice bucket off to the side. He liked to be prepared.

“Okay... okay...” she began, a smile blooming on her lovely face. “Yes. Scotty knows my secret because I wanted to get his opinion before I said anything. And before I knew for sure.”

“You sold your song,” Mickey guessed.

“No,” she said, but that would be nice.

“You and Scotty finished off the rest of the songs for your album,” I said, trying to think of what the hell would she have told Scotty and not Mickey and I.

“Not exactly, but we’re close to finishing up.”

“Are we on the right track,” Mickey wanted to know.

She shook her head. “Completely cold.”

“What the fuck!” Mickey said.

It came to me then, like a bolt of lightning. Like when I saw her with Darci for the first time.

“You’re pregnant,” I said, as calmly as if I was guessing how many jelly beans were in a jar. Only these weren’t jelly beans. This was a baby. Our baby. And just like that, my pulse quickened while we waited for the answer.

“That’s not possible,” Mickey assured us. “She’s been on the pill the entire time.”

“Not exactly,” she whispered, and this time my stomach clenched.

“Just say it,” Mickey ordered.

She pulled in a breath, then let it out with a woosh of information. “I’m almost three months pregnant, with twin girls. Scotty took me for the appointment. I wasn’t going to tell anyone until I knew for certain, but he’d found the little pee wand, and well...”

For a brief moment, I couldn’t react. Then, a surge of true joy blew through me and I had to yell out how I felt.

“Woo-hoo!” I yelled, then grabbed her and couldn’t stop kissing her.

Mickey just sat there, looking shocked. “Do we know who... which one of us is the father?”

“We can’t know that until the baby or rather babies are born,” CindyLou said. “But it could be any one of you. Are you upset, Mickey? Do you want to punch something, because if you do, there are two punching bags out in the garage just waiting for you.”

He stood, taking her up with him. Once they were staring at each other, he said, “You’ve made me the happiest man on this planet... with maybe the exception of these two cowboys who I know are over the moon.”

“Over the moon?” Scotty asked.

“Something Daryl might say.”

“And speaking of Daryl, does he know?” I asked.

She shook her head. “I just wanted to keep it between us for a while.”

“How do you think he’ll react?” I asked CindyLou.

“If Aunt Donna has anything to do with it, he’ll be over the moon, exactly like you said, Mickey.”

“Wow, twin girls!”

“The boys are now officially outnumbered in this family,” I said.

“And better for it, if you ask me,” Scotty said. “It’s the girls that hold us together, and that includes Aunt Donna.”

I guzzled my wine, then reached over and poured another. “Twins!”

Mickey did the same, along with Scotty, who found another bottle to open.

“Twins,” Mickey said, drinking down his wine.

“Two baby girls,” I said, refilling the glasses all around, even CindyLou’s sparkling water.

“Twin babies... all at once,” she said, rubbing her bare belly after she pulled up her top.

We all encircled her then, stroking her hair, kissing her lips, and generally loving on her.

“I can’t believe this is happening to me. I don’t...” Mickey began and we all reached out to touch him. He took a breath... “I deserve to be happy. We all do.”

And with that, we made love, real love to the woman who dropped in from heaven and changed all our lives, forever.

~***~

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Sneak Peek at
[A Little Sinful](#)
Small Town Lovers, Book 1

Jess 1

All cylinders popped when I strutted back into my corner office on Chicago's Miracle Mile, inside the historic Tribune Tower, feeling as though I could bust any man's balls with just one glance.

I was hot.

I was in charge.

I was the CEO of my own multimillion-dollar company, and I'd recently—last night—signed a deal that would secure my future in this cutthroat business world of commercial interior designs.

I'd accomplished this extraordinary financial feat all on my own, thank you very much. Okay, my trusted staff helped, especially my business partner Melissa, but every single one of them had been handpicked by yours truly for being the best in their field, and what a field we had.

The deal or contract we'd landed would redesign the interior of Broadsmith's flagship department store here on

Michigan Ave. It was the biggest and one of the oldest department stores in downtown Chicago. Maybe even older than Marshal Field's was on State Street, until Macy's bought it in 2005, a fact that some native Chicagoans still lamented.

I was hoping to save Broadsmith's from the same fate by modernizing it, giving it something extra that Broadsmith's customer base had grown to expect and appreciate, while attracting new customers with the same loyalty. I had the absolute best team to accomplish that goal. We'd worked nonstop on this project for the past six months, and yesterday, at exactly ten fifty-eight p.m. we finally closed the deal.

I, of course, barely slept in my own bed during all that time, and even last night, I slept on the sofa in my office. Now, after downing the three cups of coffee I'd made down in the breakroom, and washing my face in the ladies room then forgoing any real makeup, I was ready to return to my condo and stay put for a few days until we had to begin the actual physical part of the new design. The work wasn't scheduled to begin for at least three weeks, but it would continue for at least another six months if everything went well, which it never did, so I intended to take a few days to decompress before we started down that sure to be hectic path.

Absolutely nothing would get in my way of total rest and pampering, and I required a shit ton of pampering; a mani and pedi had already been lined up, along with some touchups to my extra-long hair, and a possible trim, a facial, a wax, and an hour-long massage by Nathan, who had the absolute best hands in the entire city. Apparently, he was also well versed in the art of Yoni Massage, which I'd never tried but desperately wanted to.

If I couldn't fuck a man, at least I could pay for some professional stimulation. My completely ignored pussy or yoni could use a little attention by a skilled expert like Nathan. Mellissa scheduled her massage once a month, even if she was dating someone. She said it helped her to enjoy an orgasm more than she ever thought possible. It had something to do with all that extra stimulation without full release... at least that was the preferred outcome. Even Mellissa admitted there were times when she couldn't stop the freight train orgasm if she wanted to. I craved the release, the orgasm, the mind-bending moment when my body convulsed with rapture much more than the prolonged stimulation part, but hey, I was willing to try anything that wouldn't hurt or kill me, at least once.

Also, she swore it helped to release any sexual hang-ups I might carry from childhood. With the kind of upbringing I had, I could use some heavy-duty yoni releases. I wasn't sure what kind of hang-ups I'd been holding onto, but the fact that I had such a wasteland of sexual encounters could only mean my hang-ups were buried so deep inside me, I couldn't even imagine what they all were.

I had everything lined up for the next few days with the delicious yoni culmination happening at the end of my pampering ride.

I couldn't wait.

Nathan was about as close as I could come to having a man touch me, and I intended to take full advantage of the situation by enjoying a leisurely glass of wine first, and then imagining all sorts of dirty deeds while his strong hands

worked out any of those nasty kinks that had made a home in my neck, shoulders, and my utterly forgotten yoni.

Just thinking about Nathan, who I hadn't even seen yet, was enough to get me aroused, and if I didn't go home soon, I'd be pleasuring myself on my office sofa.

"What are you doing here?" Mellissa asked as she passed by the open doorway to my office, startling me out of my imagined arousal.

"I um..." Words escaped me.

I should've known better. Nothing was very private in this office suite. The front of our offices were all glass. "And don't tell me you just arrived because you're wearing the same royal-blue outfit you wore all day yesterday and last night when we celebrated at Russo's."

Mellissa Grace wasn't exactly my equal partner, but close to it. She was second in charge and had put up a significant amount of money and time for us to get where we were today. She'd worked her ass off in the last three years making Dragonfly Designs into a crazy success story and was my absolute rock.

She was closer to my mom's age than mine. I was barely thirty. Mellissa was forty-nine. She and my mom were as opposite as corn and watermelons. Mellissa had a head for numbers, was a total optimist, could talk to anyone for less than ten minutes and know exactly how to decorate their house for maximum style and comfort, not to mention how much they would love whatever she threw together. She was a decorating genius and had been born into the business. Her dad had run the biggest interior decorating company in the

Midwest, and her mom had been the CFO. They were a team from the moment they met, until they retired and sold their company.

Mellissa had worked for them, but when it came time to take over the reins, she resisted the temptation. Instead, she decided to branch out and work with the new kid on the block... me. It was a win-win-win situation for everyone, especially for me. I couldn't have pulled it off without her, no matter how much I tried to blow my own horn.

I'd learned a few things from my mom about running a business. She and my dad had run their own business since before I was born.

My mom, Francine Lee Hall, a fifty-four year old small business owner who only wore jeans, boots, and some sort of unassuming top, had lived in Cricket, California her entire life, never traveled farther than Las Vegas with her sister Barbara, and had never spoken of anything sexual in front of me in my entire life. It was as if I'd been found in a cabbage patch rather than been created during sex.

My dad Hank Hall wasn't much better. Although, he did warn me when I turned twelve that I shouldn't sit in the backseat of a car with a boy because he might try to get me pregnant. When I asked him what that meant exactly, he told me to ask my mother, which caused her to get embarrassed and yell at my dad for putting the idea in my innocent head... and I was indeed innocent. I had never even been allowed to wear a dress to school. After a while, that fit me fine. I hated dresses due to the fact my mom would constantly be telling me to *sit like a lady*.

I wasn't completely ignorant about how sex worked, but I'd never experienced even a kiss until that summer when Beau Hutton came to live with my Aunt Barbara, my mother's older, more adventurous sister. Barbara's second husband Jimmy brought along Beau. He was Jimmy's son from his first marriage. He tried like hell to get me into that backseat, if only to show him my girly parts, but I would never do it, thinking the mere act of showing him my girly parts might lead to us doing something that might get me pregnant. Not that we didn't fool around a couple of times in the barn when we were a little older, but we never actually took off our clothes. We kissed, and I showed him my pink panties, and that was about it. Anything else was completely off limits.

I was barely thirteen.

The other stuff didn't happen until Aunt Barbara married her third husband Lorenzo Diaz, a Cuban minister she could barely understand until she became somewhat proficient in the Cuban or *Cubano* language, a form of Spanish. His son Anton, who spoke both languages fluently, not only wooed me out of my clothes, at least my bra and shirt, but he also wooed me into the backseat of Lorenzo's Buick, where I first learned how big a penis could grow when aroused, a sight that thoroughly intrigued me.

By then, I was sixteen and knew how body parts worked, I'd just never seen an aroused penis before, and the idea of it scared the shit out of me.

But Anton's growing penis had never been a topic of conversation with my mother. She remained totally oblivious to all my misadventures with my pseudo cousins.

I kind of remembered an incident or two with another step-cousin, but his stay was so brief, I could hardly remember what we did, exactly.

Mom was more into reading and acquiring children's books, had no math skills to speak of. My dad took care of all the money for the bookstore, and they still lived in the mobile home I grew up in, despite the fact I'd purchased them the biggest house in Cricket over a year ago. The house boasted six bedrooms, five bathrooms, a guesthouse, and a three-car garage. It sat on two acres and had a view of Cricket River. If I remembered correctly, it even had a boat dock, but none of that seemed to matter to my parents. They preferred their two-bedroom trailer up in the hills that surrounded the town.

Fine.

I bought the house because I remembered how the Millers traveled a lot and always looked as though they were a happy family. Not that Mom, Dad and I weren't happy. We were, kind of. Mom and Dad had gotten married right out of high school, never cared about leaving Cricket, and never wanted more than what they already had.

I wanted so much more than what Cricket had to offer, and the thought of getting married right after high school seemed like total madness to me. Even now, I wasn't ready for any kind of personal commitment. My company was just taking off, and if I wanted to propel it into this next decade, love, family, and commitment would have to wait until I hit a comfortable cruising altitude.

I longed for a real relationship, for real love, but I just didn't want it now, and right now, that damn Miller house

represented what I didn't have.

When it seemed like the right time in the economy, I'd sell the damn place. Until then, the old Miller house would remain empty except for a few relatives who stayed there while visiting my parents. I'd purchased furniture for a few of the rooms, so if someone wanted to stay there, they'd be comfortable. Still, I hadn't had a chance to see it yet. I'd bought it off my childhood daydreams of what the house would be like to live in, imagining all the happiness that surrounded anyone who lived there. So, when it came on the market, I didn't think twice about buying it, sight unseen. Up until now, I'd been too busy to take the time to fly home and walk inside.

Plus, I'd completely outgrown Cricket.

I'd barely fit in when I was growing up there, so I knew I would never fit in now. Most of the folks who lived in Cricket thought I was a rebel, a wild child, but I never did anything that would get me into any kind of real trouble.

I looked like trouble, but it was all an illusion.

I was the classic rebel without a cause if there ever was one.

Still, I promised myself to set aside a few days for Aunt Barbara's wedding... depending on my workload situation.

"I was just leaving," I told Mellissa, putting the cup down on my desk and pulling my bag out of the bottom drawer. My flat wasn't far from my office, less than a mile, and on a warm spring day like today, I thought I might walk home.

“I’m here to escort you out the door,” she said, sticking a perfectly manicured hand to her hip. She wore bright-green ankle boots with a stacked heel, black loose-fitting pants rolled at the ankle, a leopard shirt, and dangling large bronze earrings. Her long, blond hair was pulled back with a floral hair band, and her heavy black eyeliner and mascara accentuated her lime-green eyes that meant business.

“Okay. Okay. I’m going, and I’m actually thinking of walking to get some exercise,” I told her as I breezed by, hoping that would give me some points for effort. “I don’t think I actually walked somewhere for weeks. This will be good exercise.”

I’d slipped on red, stacked, heeled booties this morning and tossed my three-inch don’t-fuck-with-me heels into the bottom desk drawer, along with two other pairs of don’t-fuck-with-me heels.

I was ready for a leisurely walk in one of Chicago’s more upscale neighborhoods, one I’d worked hard to afford and rarely had time to enjoy. I was sure things would ease up once work began on Broadsmith’s. Of course, there was that restaurant inside the Hancock Center that was seriously considering our offer for a complete makeover, but I wouldn’t think about that now. If and when it came through, we’d handle it exactly like we handled everything else that came our way... with professional expertise.

“Yes, you should walk and stop to eat something. I bet you didn’t have dinner last night. I know how you forget to eat. Who forgets to eat? No normal human being forgets to eat. We’re set up so our stomachs growl, we feel faint, or we lose

our will to live without food. But not you. You forget. Those mechanisms don't register. Which can only mean you're not human. You're something other than human. I don't exactly know what that is yet, but when I find out maybe I'll be better equipped to deal with you. Until then: Go and eat something. I don't care if it's a candy bar or one of those horrible corn dogs you seem to love and pack enough chemicals to take down an elephant. Whatever makes you happy and gives you some calories. Eat it! You didn't touch anything at Russo's last night other than those two martinis."

"They each had three olives. That's got to count for something."

She rolled her eyes. "Olives are a garnish, not a meal. I want you to eat real food, then go home and go directly to bed... alone... for now. You need your sleep first. Sex can come later... way later, with whatever guy you choose. Every straight guy you meet wants to fuck you. Pick one. I mean, look at you! You're gorgeous, babe. Even Markus our doorman who has to be two hundred years old wants to fuck you."

"He told you that?"

I couldn't imagine anyone fucking Markus. For one thing, the man would probably die on the spot from the excitement of it.

"No, but I've seen the way he drools every time you walk by. Pure hunger."

"Maybe he just needs a corndog."

“He has six kids, ten grandkids, and six great-grandkids. I don’t think corndogs were part of his daily diet.”

I smirked. “I was referring to the food, not a body part.”

“So was I,” she said, straight faced, but her mind always went to sex, so I knew she was lying.

“You know there hasn’t been anyone in my bed in... well... I don’t even remember the last time there was a man in my bed. It must’ve been another lifetime, before I discovered the wonders of a clit stimulator.”

Mellissa ’s eyes went wide. “Okay, that confirms it. You need real sex. You need a real dick. We both need a real dick, but you probably need it more than I do. When you get to be my age, the urge is less urgent. It’s still there, but that flaming-hot desire is more like smoldering embers. Still, the thought of the weight of a man hovering over me, a gorgeous, rich, hunk with beautiful graying hair and a muscled chest or even two rich hunks to wrap around me from either side, still sends my lady parts into a rinse cycle. I’ve got a date tonight that I’m hoping to bring home. We’ve been teasing each other for weeks, and it’s time now to do the deed.”

“Who’s the lucky guy or guys?”

I knew of Mellissa’s various affairs in a crowded bed. I didn’t know if that was for me, but it sure always intrigued me. Still, it would have to be with the right guys, whatever that meant.

“One guy tonight, and I can’t tell you more than that. He was part of the Broadsmith’s deal, and you might pop a vein if you know who it is.”

“I’m glad you waited or that would’ve been...”

“Unethical? Like we both didn’t know that? Believe me, it was torture, but we made it through and tonight, we’re not holding back... at least I’m not. Who knows if this guy’s for real or not? You can’t tell with these C-suite guys. They come on like a wildfire in a dry forest, and believe me, this forest has been bone dry for months and *wham!* They punch ya in the gut and walk off with a wife you never knew existed no matter how much research you do.”

“You researched this guy?”

She grinned like I should know better. “You bet your sweet ass I did. I’m not getting my heart ripped out by some hotshot with a dress and dinner waiting at home for him, no matter how many times I swooned over his adorable smile or those baby blues.”

“You going to tell me who it is, or do I have to wait for the credits to roll?”

“You’re going have to wait, doll. I don’t want you going behind my back with any phone calls to put in a good word. I fuck by my own rules, and on my own terms. Either he and I are a match, or I move onto the next encounter. Don’t forget, I was the one who bought you that clit stimulator for your last birthday. I’m well prepared for any kind of dick downturn. That’s not the only weapon in my toy box.”

“I never thought it was,” I told her. “Someday you’ll have to tell me about some of the other toys.”

“Anytime, babe, but for now, go eat a meal and get some sleep. I’ll take care of everything in this office today.”

She took my arm and walked me to the elevators, pushed the button, waited for the elevator doors to open, then deposited me inside.

As soon as I stepped inside, the male voice on my phone told me my mother was calling.

Jess 2

“Don’t answer that,” Mellissa warned, wagging her finger at me, but the doors closed, and I was left alone with my phone yelling, “*Mom... Mom... Mom.*”

Normally, I wouldn’t take the call and instead, listen to the message to determine if it were important or not. Most of the time, my mom called to share some town gossip or to remind me that I hadn’t been home for more than a day or two in several years. It wasn’t as if we hadn’t spent time with each other. I’d brought my parents to Chicago on many occasions, not that they ever enjoyed themselves. Although, they did insist that we visit a Chicago-style pizza place on more than one occasion. And on their day of departure, we always had to stop at Gino’s. My mom would pack four frozen pizzas in her luggage. At least I knew they liked something about Chicago.

“*Mom... Mom... Mom!*”

Being food and sleep deprived, I didn’t have the willpower to ignore her call this time, couldn’t think of a reason I could

text her later.

I sighed and pressed *Accept*.

“Hi Mom,” I said. “Everything okay?”

“Everything’s fine, darling. You?”

“Great, actually. Closed with a big client yesterday. Really excited about it.”

“Fabulous! Does that mean you’re really busy now?”

I didn’t know if I should answer that. It could mean she wanted me to do something for her, and depending on the want, I could be in deep shit. I loved my parents and would do anything for them within reason. Sometimes that reason got a little blurry.

“It means I have some downtime. Why? What’s up?”

A leading question if there ever was one.

The elevator doors pinged open, and I stepped out into the lobby of glass, modern design mixed with historic elements and where Markus stood watch just inside our front door. From now on, I would never think of him as that sweet, older man, but rather that horny man who lusted over me. I tossed him a dubious grin as I walked out through the door he held open, while he grinned and wished me a *good day*.

“I have a big favor to ask,” Mom said in my ear.

Whenever my mom had a *favor to ask*, it usually meant trouble. She didn’t ask very often, but when she did, her favors could mean anything from wanting me to show up for some distant relative’s funeral, a relative I’d never even met, or

she'd like me to entertain one of those distant relatives while they visited Chicago.

Of course, there were the easy favors, like giving her and Dad an extra couple hundred dollars to buy a bread machine or an ice-cream maker. Somehow, however, I had a feeling this would be more than a bread maker.

“You know I'm always here for you, Mom. What's this about?”

Traffic rushed by me as I walked up the sparsely populated sidewalk. Colorful tulips ran along the curbside of the sidewalks surrounded by foot-high black metal fencing and some of the trees still carried white blossoms. North Michigan Avenue in spring was truly lovely.

“Your Aunt Barbara's wedding.”

I knew she was getting married again, sometime soon. I hadn't made flight reservations yet, but I intended to, soon. I made a mental note to look up the actual date on my calendar and make the reservations as soon as I got home. Anything other than her wedding, and I would've tried to avoid going, but short of death or a horrible injury, neither of which I was willing to entertain, there was no getting out of this one. I had every intention of attending and staying for two full days. More than that, and I'd break out in hives or something worse.

“What about it? I promised I would come out, and I will. You don't have to worry.”

“It's in three weeks.”

My stomach flipped at the thought, or I was simply finally feeling a hunger pang, I couldn't tell.

“No, it’s not. It’s at least a couple of months away,” I countered.

It couldn’t be that soon. I wasn’t mentally prepared to return to Cricket in three weeks... way too stressful to even think about it happening that soon. Yes, I’d been making mental plans to return, but I thought the wedding was further away.

“This is the last week of May. June is fast approaching. She’s getting married the second Saturday in June, which is three weeks from tomorrow. Anyway, the point is, she wants to know if she can use your place for the wedding?”

“My place?” I forced out of a throat that suddenly closed.

“Yes, your place,” she repeated.

The thought made my blood run cold.

My stomach clenched this time, and I knew it wasn’t hunger; it was pure fear of what this could potentially mean.

Yes, my condo was big and had a gorgeous view of the lake, but it wasn’t nearly big enough for an entire wedding, especially not one of my aunt’s weddings. They grew in attendance every time she had one, and this was wedding number five. I couldn’t even imagine how many people she would invite.

“My condo is way too small,” I told her. “I couldn’t possibly hold one of Aunt Barbara’s weddings inside my tiny condo.”

My mom had never seen it, so telling her it was small wasn’t exactly a lie. It was more of an understatement about Aunt Barbara’s party list.

“Not your condo, darling,” she sniggered, as if the idea were totally absurd. “She would never travel all the way to Chicago to get married. No. She wants to use your house and the property surrounding it... or rather the house you bought for your father and me. It’s way too big for us, and we still haven’t gotten around to moving in, which, in retrospect, had been a prudent decision. Did you know it’s in the path of Cricket River when it overflows? The last time it spilled over its banks, flood waters roared through our town, doing all sorts of damage. The first floor of your house was completely drenched. It’s unlivable at the moment.”

She’d told me about the flood, and I’d kept track of it online, just to make sure it wasn’t anything that might cause my parents any real harm. Plus, I’d been in constant contact with them. Never once did they mention damage to the house. I could only imagine the state it was in and how much money it would cost to repair it. Yes, I had a hearty bank account, but I also knew how these flood repairs could drain you in no time.

I felt a bit miffed that she hadn’t told me sooner. The repairs probably would’ve gone easier and been less costly if we hadn’t waited so long.

“And you’re just telling me this now? Wasn’t that flood a month ago? I would’ve sent in a team to take care of the damage right away. How bad is it?”

My mom was one of those people who let much-needed tasks overwhelm her. My dad took care of all the bills and grocery shopping precisely for this reason. I wondered why he

hadn't taken charge of the water damage? It sounded like something he would have jumped on.

“The flood was only two weeks ago, but there wasn't any reason to check on the house until your aunt wanted to use it for her wedding. We assumed it had weathered the flood unscathed. After all, this town has flooded at least three times in the last hundred years, and that house has been standing ever since old man Miller's grandfather built it in 1880.”

I didn't want to have this argument. “Mom. The town had a major flood, and you never checked on the house?”

“I've been busy. We were lucky the bookstore didn't flood, but the bookstore is on Frog Street, and that's on higher ground than Moon Street. Anything below Frog Street flooded, and your house is below Frog Street, so it flooded.”

My parents owned a children's bookstore, Tales on Frog Street. They'd owned it ever since I could remember, and while I was happy the store didn't have any flood damage, I wasn't happy about the house.

“If the house has flood damage, how can Aunt Barbara have her wedding there? I thought she'd already booked Moon Street Hall? That place must hold five hundred people.”

It was an old warehouse the city converted into an events hall. It looked good inside when it was decorated for various weddings, graduation parties, or a local country-dance.

“Four hundred and twenty six, and it has worse damage than your house.”

“Your house, Mom. It's your house, yours and Dad's. I bought it for you.”

“And we’re thankful, darling. Anyway, she looked at several other venues, and none of them will do. She loves the house and the grounds surrounding it, once it’s all fixed and back to normal of course. Plus, if she’s going to have the wedding at your... my house, we thought how nice it would be if you did the decorating as well.”

The favor kept growing.

“Doesn’t she have a wedding planner for all of that?”

“She did. June’s Events Planning, but June can’t do it. Her shop was destroyed, and they had to cancel everything for the next three months. Of course, they returned her deposit, but that left her with no one to decorate. She can’t change the date because Andrew’s relatives are flying in from England. He’s British, you know.”

“I know,” I told her, but I’d forgotten that detail. Andrew was one of many in a long list of husbands, boyfriends and fiancés that my aunt had fallen in love with over the years. Andrew was younger, had never been married, and didn’t have any children, nor did he want any, according to my mother. He was also the mayor of Cricket, a detail that put everything into perspective. The wedding had to be perfect.

“This wedding isn’t that big,” she continued. “Only a hundred and fifty guests, give or take, which the house can easily handle. The empty living room and dining room combination will more than handle that amount. Anyway, according to Anton, the damage in the house is nothing that can’t be fixed. The flooring may even be salvageable.”

“Wait... what? Anton is in town?”

I didn't want anything to do with Anton.

“Yes, darling. The walls may need a little bit of work, and paint, and well, you'll have to talk to Anton about all of that. Those kinds of things aren't your concern. All you have to do is use your decorating magic to create a magical wedding for your favorite aunt, which I know you love to do, or why else would you own a decorating company in Chicago?”

Just hearing Anton's name brought back a tsunami of memories, some of which I'd rather leave out in the ocean.

“I thought Anton lived in Boise, had married a kindergarten teacher and was some kind of carpenter or something?”

“He married a college professor, but they're divorced. He's a homebuilder, darling. And yes, he essentially lives in Boise. He builds housing communities. Like you, he's a big deal now, but he's willing to take on this repair, with Galen's help, of course.”

This was getting way too deep for me. I couldn't possibly go home now, not if I had to work with my two step-cousins. This would never work.

“Galen's there, too?”

“He's a contractor for historic homes, which the old Miller house most certainly is. He also built our gardening shed out back and whenever I need a repair in the bookstore, he never charges us. He's a good man. Barbara raised him right.”

“She was his step-mother for less than a year,” I reminded her.

“Yes, but it was his formative year,” she assured me.

I'd known I'd probably have to deal with one or all my aunt's stepsons at the wedding, since they had remained close to her, but I was hoping I could ignore them for most of the night. Besides, I'd thought Anton was still married, and Galen was on the road restoring houses, and Beau was never much of a problem. He and I had remained somewhat friendly. Besides, he made possibly the best damn barbeque ribs I'd ever tasted, and I intended to indulge when I returned to Cricket.

Still, I didn't want to spend any significant time with any of my pseudo cousins, and preparing the house for the wedding would put me in a situation I wasn't prepared to tackle. This would never work out.

Never.

Way too many uncomfortable childhood memories.

“Look at it this way, darling, instead of buying your aunt a wedding gift that she won't need, she'd rather you took care of the wedding itself, if that's not too much to ask. She has a few ideas, and we both feel as though you would be the perfect person to interpret everything she wants. This would mean a lot to her, and to me. She's family. We have to take care of each other.”

My mother didn't understand what she was asking for. The scope of this was unreasonable, especially in the time allotted and I didn't even know what condition the house was in. The repairs alone could take up all the time, not to mention the cost of getting it all done so quickly.

“Mom, do you even know everything this would entail?”

“Of course not. That's your job.”

“What you’re asking is impossible.”

“Haven’t I always taught you that nothing worth doing is ever impossible?”

“How is this worth doing?”

“She’s my sister. Your aunt. And she’s done a lot for you.”

“Like what?”

As with all good mothers, she knew exactly what to say from her how-to-get-your-kids-to-cooperate toolbox. Her main tool had always been guilt.

“Too many things to list.”

“How about one?” I insisted. After all, if she were going to bribe me, she could at least give me one thing to feel grateful for.

Silence.

“Well?”

“I’m thinking.”

More silence.

“Mom...”

I could hear her whispering, and I assumed she was talking to my dad who hated to talk on the phone.

She finally came back on. “She rescued little Sprinkles when she accidentally fell down that empty well on Barbara’s property. That’s got to be worth something. You loved that little dog. She grounded her boys for a month after that, even though they denied ever having touched Sprinkles.”

Beau and Anton were always tormenting me when I was in my mid-teen years. The three of us would torment each other. When Anton came into the family, the pestering and bullying took on monumental proportions. Beau hadn't been that bad. I could usually handle whatever he tossed my way, but Anton was older and much more adept at the art of bullying and tormenting me. Galen had done his share while he was there, but Anton had been in a class of his own.

Mom hit pay dirt with this save. It was the biggest single save my aunt ever made, and the only time I ever remembered her taking my side against her "boys."

I was sure one of them had pushed Sprinkles down into that well to get even with me for something. They never liked my dog, and even though I never caught them teasing her or doing anything mean to her, that didn't mean they hadn't been doing it behind my back. Sprinkles had somehow gotten out that day, and somehow ended up down the well. Beau found her, so he said, and Barbara called in one of her many favors from the local sheriff's department, and after several hours, they managed to get her out with only a few scratches and a sprained foot.

I thought of a bargaining tool.

"I'll do all of this with conditions."

"Oh, here we go," she sighed. "Can't you simply do something for me and your aunt out of the kindness of your heart?"

"That's not how I'm going to drive this big favor. I'll take on decorating for this entire wedding, plus I'll oversee everything concerning it, and that includes the repairs to the

house. I may not want to work with Anton or Galen. I'll make that decision when I get there, but it's my call."

"Fine," my mother immediately said.

"And the other condition is that once the house is repaired and the wedding is over, you and Dad move in for an entire month to try it out. If at the end of the month, you don't like living there, you can move back into your trailer."

"Mobile home," she corrected.

"Whatever," I said. "Those are my terms."

She covered the phone then while I listened to muffled voices. After a few minutes, she came back on. "Fine. I agree."

"Who's there with you?"

"Your aunt, your cousin, Anton, and your dad."

I couldn't believe Anton and my aunt were in on the call. He'd been the main bully when I was in my mid-to-late teens, and the one I blamed for the scary Sprinkles incident. I hadn't seen him since I'd left for college, and had hoped that our goodbye had been somewhat final. I mean, I knew I'd have to see him from time to time at family gatherings, but so far, I hadn't gathered with the family. This would be the first time.

Yet, there he was on the other end of this phone call. What was that all about?

"They've been there the whole time? Including Anton."

"Yes. Why?"

"Shouldn't someone have at least said hello?"

I heard my aunt and my dad yell *hello*. I couldn't make out if Anton had said anything, but then, I probably would never recognize his voice after all this time.

"I'm on speaker?"

I hated when she put me on speaker. She did it without telling me and inevitably I'd say something I wish I hadn't.

"Of course you are, my darling. I would never put this horrible radiated phone up to my ear. I'm not stupid."

I couldn't help sighing. I was dog tired, and now my brain felt totally fried.

"When can you be here?" she asked. "Barbara wants to get started ASAP. We don't have much time. She'll email the floral arrangements she wants and the type of food."

"I have to hire the caterers as well?"

A wave of nausea swept over me.

"Of course you do, darling. The guests have to eat."

"And what about the cake?" I asked, hoping she'd already ordered one. At this late date, it would be next to impossible to get one.

"What about it?"

I sighed again, realizing this entire wedding, including the restoration of the house, was now on my shoulders.

Tremendous fatigue suddenly overtook me, and I couldn't possibly walk one more step, let alone four more blocks to get home. I needed a cab or an Uber. "I'll let you know when I book my flight."

“Great. Love you, darling. See you soon.”

“Love you, see you...”

But she’d already disconnected.

Anton 3

I’d kept in touch with my stepmother Barbara, over the years because she’d been the only real mother I’d ever known. My own mother abandoned my father and me when I was about seven to move to Paris and learn the fine art of making the perfect croissant. At one point, she’d even opened her own bakery with some French dude named Maxime, who was an arrogant prick and treated me like an annoyance.

I’d traveled to Paris for a few visits, but my mom and I could never seem to pick up where we left off. At one point, when I was in my teens, she’d wanted me to stay, but I knew I’d be in the way with Maxime still in the picture. I never felt as if she wanted me to stay. Not really. It was more of a guilt thing about being a bad mother. By then, none of that mattered. I was almost seventeen, lived with Barbara and my dad inside a small parsonage provided by the congregation of the Church of the Lighted Window, and was busy daydreaming about getting into Jess Hall’s pants. Yeah, she was now my cousin, but technically, we were about as related as a bear and a lion. I thought of nothing else on that last trip

to Paris. The possibility at least gave me something positive to focus on. I had absolutely no use for a city where I didn't understand the language, couldn't get a good burger, and felt completely alone.

But the number one factor was that Jess lived thousands of miles away, and I was planning on wooing her into my arms, or at least the backseat of my dad's car.

Yeah, I tormented her, always setting her up for a fall, and even bullied her on occasion, but damn if I didn't secretly like her. At one point, while I was living with Barbara, Jess was all I thought about. Unfortunately, being a minister's son, and Jess being my kind-of cousin, my dad let me know early on that she was completely and utterly off limits.

To better deal with the sting of that statement, and to keep her away, I purposely tormented her.

Still, there were those times we ended up in the back of my dad's car, and she let me touch her naked breasts and even taste her sweet nipples, but it was only because she wanted money to buy a set of books or something. Jess was always keeping stuff from her parents who were even stricter with her than my dad was with me.

I always thought I'd run into her on my many visits with Barbara in Cricket. As luck would have it, once that girl left for college, she never looked back. By the time she'd left, I'd already been in the service for a while and was headed for my first tour in Afghanistan. Whenever I had an extended leave, I'd return to Cricket, but Jess never came home again, at least not while I was there.

Beau had stayed in Cricket, making up for my absence. He left for a few years trying to find the perfect rib sauce, and Galen left for a few years to live with his mom, then to learn a trade, but they both returned.

Beau never really left Barbara, even after his dad and Barb were divorced. His dad didn't seem to care one way or the other about him, so Barbara took up the slack. His dad was a long-haul trucker who lived in a one-bedroom apartment that barely accommodated him, let alone his growing son.

Barbara loved having Beau around. She always liked kids and gave each of us a stable environment to flourish. No matter how many husbands she had, Galen, Beau, and I always considered her our other mom and cared about her more than our real moms. One of the many things the three of us had in common, our moms should never have had kids. Collectively, they didn't hold a candle to Barbara, and we all knew it.

Our general connection and affection for Jess, however, was something entirely different. The three of us tormented her in our own ways, not because we hated her or any of that adolescent crap. Just the opposite. All three of us thought she was beyond cool, a true rebel, and we each wished we weren't related, albeit in a tangential way.

She ended up hating us and hating the town.

A side effect we hadn't planned on.

But who could blame her?

My brothers and I, we always considered ourselves brothers, even though there was no actual blood between us, had taunted her relentlessly when we were kids, which

probably caused her to be more masculine than feminine. She had a competition going with each of us ever since the first day we'd all met. Because Jess and Beau were more the same age, and they'd known each other the longest, they'd come to a level of acceptance, still contentious, but much more tolerant of each other.

She and Galen were also around the same age, but he didn't stick around long enough to get under her skin.

Still, that didn't stop her from leaving.

Because she'd grown up fighting for her ego, she never quite fit in at school. I'd seen a few pictures of her over the years, and seen her website, so I knew she'd grown out of that rough and tumble phase, but I still didn't know how she would react to me or for that matter, how she would react to any of us. Even her own parents never understood her.

Jess was always her own person and from what I could tell, had become successful in Chicago where she'd lived for almost a decade.

I could hardly believe she'd agreed to return to Cricket for my stepmom's fifth wedding. And not only had she agreed to attend, but she'd agreed to be responsible for the entire wedding and oversee the repairs.

I wasn't about to allow her to oversee the repairs. That was my job. Not hers. As soon as she arrived, I intended to make that part clear. No way would I abide her hanging around the house, giving bullshit orders to my crew all day.

Never going to happen, and I intended to make sure it didn't.

“She doesn’t know what’s in store for her, does she?” I asked Francine as we stood just inside the front door, assessing the damage.

The Miller house was exactly the type of historic house I loved, from the fanlights on the windows to the Inglenook just off the kitchen. It was big, imposing, and full of sophisticated charm.

I’d tried to buy the place when it went up for sale, thinking that moving back to Cricket with my wife might save our marriage, but Jess’ bid won out. She got the house, and shortly after that, my wife left me for an exchange student from Manchester, England where they now lived.

Was I resentful that Jess bought the house with no intention of ever living in it herself, as a showoff, showpiece home for her parents who were content in their mobile home and wanted nothing to do with it?

Damn straight I was, and now she thought she would oversee the repairs when she knew nothing about a historic home other than it might be impressive to own one.

Yeah, right... in her dreams.

“No. I never showed her the pictures,” Francine said, smiling.

Barbara had joined us for a tour of the damage to the property, while Hank had remained behind at the bookstore. He didn’t like getting too involved in whatever scheme his wife and her sister had going on, and he especially didn’t want anything to do with this house.

A damn waste of good money, he'd said several times during the phone call with Jess, and then afterwards, just in case we hadn't heard him the first twenty times.

This rushed overhaul of a house he and Francine never intended to live in, had all the markings of a scheme to get Jess to return home... and so far, it seemed to be working.

"If anyone can put this house back together again, it's you, Anton," Barbara cooed, knowing damn well compliments would get her everywhere. "You've never failed me before, and I'm sure you won't fail me now."

Barbara's strategy with kids and people in general was to always acknowledge their good points, even if she'd only recently met them and could only see that they'd combed their hair that morning or wore a clean shirt. If she knew them at all, she would toss compliments around like pocket change, no matter what they said, or how they acted. This strategy caused kids to open up to her, adults wanted to do things for her, and men wanted to marry her, or at the very least, be her sex toy.

Her favorite movie was *Auntie Mame*, which my brothers and I knew almost by heart. We must have watched it thirty times, if not more... all with Barbara's encouragement, of course.

"I've looked, and the entire first floor is gone. Normally, I'd say it would take at least a month to have it livable again," I told them, as I gazed across at a buckling wooden floor and water-stained walls. The house was built over a hundred and forty years ago, therefore, no drywall. We were talking lath-and-plaster, which would require a plaster expert to restore it properly.

Fortunately, my brother Galen was that expert. He prided himself in the art, and it was in fact a true expert. There were men and women who called themselves experts and charged accordingly, but did shoddy work. Not Galen. He was all about matching the plaster that was already there and doing it right. His work was top-shelf all the way. Fortunately, the house was built before asbestos became part of the overall construction, so no worries there.

The flooring, on the other hand, was my specialty, and I had a few ideas on how to salvage some of it in the smaller rooms where the water hadn't pooled as much. I was also in contact with salvaged wood distributors all over the country and could probably find a match somewhere. The only problem would be in getting it shipped here on time.

“But because this is where your stepmom, the woman you love like your own mom, is planning her wedding in three weeks?” Francine asked, then waited for me to say what I knew they both wanted to hear.

Francine was a woman who rarely wore any kind of makeup, allowed her hair to go gray, wore half of it pulled back in a clip off her face with a few bangs, and always dressed as if she were spending the day in her backyard where no one would see her. She was a product of the seventies and never wore a bra, so her large breasts always jiggled when she moved, and she rarely, if ever, wore a skirt or dress. She liked everything natural and therefore, most of her clothes were a wrinkled mess.

None of that seemed to matter to anyone in town; the kids loved her. Absolutely no one could read a kid's book with all

the animation and fun that Francine could. And absolutely no one knew exactly what book went with what child. She could tell what a child would love in about five minutes flat.

I always loved that about her. Francine gave me some of my favorite books of my life, and she gave them to me when I needed them most.

I owed her, big time.

“I’ve already put a local crew together that can get it done in about two weeks. They’re anxious for the work. Even bringing in a couple of my own guys from Boise, but they’ll be in and out in a few days. We should make it if we don’t find anything that can stop us cold.”

“Like what?”

One thing about Francine, which Jess picked up on as well, details mattered. It had always been the bane of Jess’ teen years that her mom demanded details whenever Jess would try to get away with something a little sinful. Francine would press her and eventually, Jess would have to come clean. Something that always got her into trouble.

“Like any kind of pipe that’s damaged, or if we find black mold or a hundred different other things that can go wrong with a house when it’s been soaked by more than two feet of water.”

“If it doesn’t work out, we’ll move the wedding outside,” Barbara said as if that was a perfectly reasonable alternative. Apparently, she hadn’t taken a tour of the grounds.

Barbara was the opposite of Francine. There were times when I wondered if they were in fact blood sisters. Sure, there

was some facial resemblance, but it ended there.

Francine carried a few extra pounds, whereas Barbara worked out and stayed slim. Barbara never opened her front door without all her makeup. Her hairdresser made certain there was never any gray on that shoulder-length, thick hair, and her clothes were whatever was in style at the moment. Plus, whenever she could wear heels, she would.

Today she wore stylish black boots, stretch jeans, and a long low-cut, bright pink top. Unlike Francine, Barbara wore a bra and loved to show off her deep cleavage.

“Have you taken a close look at the surrounding grounds lately?” I asked her. “I believe there’s part of a small boat sitting in the middle of the backyard.”

“All I know is, this has to work out,” Barbara announced in that firm, deep voice of hers. “There’s nowhere else in this entire town that even comes close to this place. I know how you work, sweetheart. Once you start a project, nothing gets in your way. I have complete faith that you’ll have the house completely restored in time. And sweet Jessica will handle everything else.”

You could call Jess almost anything, but *sweet* wasn’t a word that ever came to mind when someone referred to Jess Hall.

“Hank can help if you need him to,” Francine said, offering up her husband. “He used to be good at pounding in a nail or two in his day.”

“Thanks, Francine,” I told her. “We’re going to need all the help we can get.”

Barbara sighed, as a sly grin stretched her slightly chapped lips. “She’s finally coming home.”

And there it was. This desperate plan had been conjured up to get Jess home, at my expense, I might add. I’d somehow knew it all along.

“Tell me this whole restoration and wedding thing isn’t about getting Jess back in Cricket. You guys don’t know all the trouble I went through to get my crew in Boise stable enough to continue without me. We’re in the middle of building fifty-six new homes.”

“You work too much, hon,” Barbara said as she glanced over at Francine. “And of course this isn’t about getting Jess to come home... okay, maybe a little, but the girl hasn’t been back here for any length of time in over six years. That’s way too long for my poor sister to have to go without a real visit from her darling daughter. Something needed to be done, so I stepped up to resolve the issue. It was my duty as her sister.”

“Another word that didn’t fit Jess Hall, *darling*. I’m sure Jess isn’t anyone’s darling,” I mumbled, remembering when she climbed up to the top of the old water tower and flashed the town her breasts when she’d turned seventeen. As soon as her parents learned about it, they grounded her for an entire month. That was the month I would help her sneak out and in return, she let me touch and taste those soft, full breasts of hers. Unfortunately, we’d never gotten further than her breasts. Her pussy had always been off limits, no matter how much I’d offer. Had to give her credit for setting limits, but holy shit, did I ever suffer.

I also remembered having to pay her for that honor of being the first to see those mangiest breasts, but that was Jess. Everything she did had a calculated purpose behind it.

I couldn't imagine anything different for this little visit.

"That's only because you don't know her now. You only know the rebellious teen Jess," Francine argued. "That girl's been replaced. She's completely different."

"So she's mellowed?" I asked, knowing damn well that couldn't be true.

"I wouldn't say that she's mellowed, exactly," Barbara said.

"She's more agreeable now?" I asked, hoping I was wrong.

"Oh no. That's not how I would describe her at all," Francine shot back.

"Okay, then what? How is she completely different?"

No one could tame Jess, and I'd be disappointed if they had. I liked to think of her as the hellion, the nonconformist, the girl who wouldn't let anyone get the upper hand, ever.

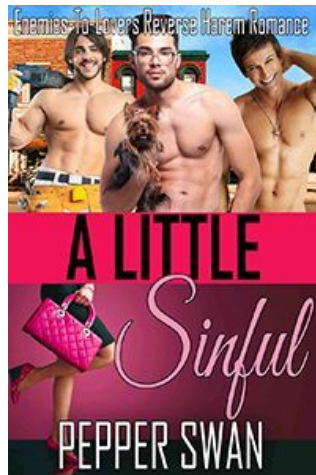
The girl who could put my brothers and me in our place and walk away smiling.

The girl with all the stamina, but most of all, the girl who didn't need any of us to get what she wanted.

Then, Barbara gazed over at me, smirked, and said, "She's a woman now."

Nothing more needed to be said.

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About the Author

Pepper Swan is a city girl who loves killer shoes, gorgeous clothes and anything extravagant. She's all about luxury, excess and the occasional fling with a downhome country boy... or three... to tame her wild ways. She's sometimes haughty, irreverent and downright plucky. She's not afraid to speak up if someone slights her or when a friend is in need. Pepper loves to write sinfully sexy books that set your toes on fire. During her down time, Pepper loves to curl up with a red-hot Reverse Harem Romance, a box of luscious chocolates and the latest Michael Bublé album.

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