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ROMANCE

A Taste of Texas

LIZ TALLEY

Liz Talley
A Taste of Texas

«HarperCollins»

Talley L.

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Returning to Oak Stand, Texas, doesn't mean things haven't panned out for Rayne Rose. In fact, she's a celebrity chef so successful she desperately needs her equilibrium! Fixing up her aunt's B and B is the perfect step back. But how's Rayne supposed to get perspective with Brent Hamilton—the best friend who broke her heart—next door? Beauty in motion. That was Brent then—and now. The boy Rayne adored has become a good-time guy...and all wrong for this widowed single mom. Still, she can't resist the different version of Brent she glimpses beneath the surface. And that taste tempts her to dig a little deeper. Because maybe what they once had could still be.

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Her gaze hit his, then dipped lower to his bare chest

Rayne swallowed and redirected her gaze, but not before Brent caught the interest that flared in the warm depths of her eyes. “Hey.”

A frisson of awareness skipped up his spine. She’d looked at him as though he was the last scoop of ice cream in the tub of Rocky Road. It made his body tighten with anticipation even though he knew it wasn’t a good idea. It wouldn’t get him what he wanted. Well, it would get him something he wanted, but he wanted more than sweaty sheets and sexual satisfaction.

He wanted a piece of what he’d once had with her...and that had nothing to do with lust.

Dear Reader,

From the first time I wrote the character of Brent Hamilton, the man intrigued me. He was handsome, slightly egotistical and a bit slimy. I couldn’t stop thinking about him. Wondering about guys like him and why they don’t fall in love. Then it came to me. What if Brent had missed his chance at love? What if he hated who he was? And what if he had a secret?

So A Taste of Texas was born.

This book is basically Brent’s story of redemption, but it also touches on something many successful woman, like the heroine, Rayne, deal with—balancing career and family, and wondering how we’ll ever get it right.

For those who have been following my stories, Bubba Malone shows up and runs into a feisty feminist. And a few characters from previous books pop by, plus Oak Stand faces off against Mother Nature.

But most important, soul mates find each other...for a second time around.

I love hearing from my readers. Drop me a line or two at www.liztalleybooks.com or snail mail me at P.O. Box 5418, Bossier City, LA 71171.

Happy reading,

Liz Talley

A Taste of Texas

Liz Talley



www.millsandboon.co.uk

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

From devouring the Harlequin Superromance books on the shelves of her aunt's used bookstore to swiping her grandmother's medical romances, Liz Talley has always loved a good romance novel. So it was no surprise to anyone when she started writing a book one day while her infant napped. She soon found writing more exciting than scrubbing hardened cereal off the love seat. Underneath her baby-food-stained clothes a dream stirred. Liz followed that dream and, after a foray into historical romance and a Golden Heart final, she started her first contemporary romance on the same day she met her editor. Coincidence? She prefers to call it fate.

Currently Liz lives in north Louisiana with her high school sweetheart, two beautiful children and a menagerie of animals. Liz loves strawberries, fishing and retail therapy, and is always game for a spa day. When not writing contemporary romances for Harlequin Superromance, she can be found working in the flower bed, doing laundry or driving car pool.

To the boy who once twisted my hair
around his finger, and sang me Elvis songs,
who gave me my first kiss, two beautiful children
and the life you promised me in all those notes
we passed in the halls of Webster Junior High.
I believe in soul mates.

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CHAPTER ONE

BRENT HAMILTON HATED HIMSELF.

That was the only thought in his head as he sprawled on his parents' back porch steps watching a titmouse hopping from branch to branch in the scarred redbud tree.

The birdhouse he'd made last week already showed signs of inhabitancy, if the scruffy mat of pine straw peeking from the opening was any indication. At least that had worked.

Because nothing else in his life had.

In fact, it was one big royal suck.

He didn't hear the footsteps, only felt the long fingernails scraping his scalp as Tamara Beach tousled his hair.

"Morning," she said.

"Morning." He cradled his coffee mug between his calloused hands.

She squatted next to him and eased herself onto the step. She set her strappy-heeled sandals next to her.

"You want some coffee?" he asked, staring at the tufts of hair on his bare feet. He hadn't bothered with pants. Just wore the boxers he'd pulled on that morning when he'd rolled from his bed in the carriage house and padded across the backyard toward his parents' home to let the dog out.

Tamara's bright red toenails waggled as she stretched. "Nah."

Awkward silence reigned.

Apple, his parents' overweight Boston terrier, sniffed through a patch of Aztec grass.

Finally Tamara nudged him with her shoulder. "Hey."

He didn't say anything.

"It's no big deal. I mean, it happens to all guys."

Brent rubbed a hand over his face. It had never happened to him. Ever. He couldn't blame it on the liquor or the fact he hadn't really wanted to sleep with Tamara. Hell, before last night, he'd been able to get it up if the wind blew right. The cause of his failure to rise to the occasion was the damn dissatisfaction that had made a home in his gut.

It had settled in, unpacked its clothes and planted flowers out front. It wasn't going away. No matter how many chicks he picked up. No matter how many bars he stomped through, buying drinks and clacking pool balls. No matter how much he grinned and faked it.

Brent hated who he was.

Yet, to date he'd always lived with it. So what was different? The fact he hadn't been able to perform? The comments overheard at his former girlfriend Katie Newman's wedding last night? The idea that someone he'd thought so similar to him had fallen in love and tied the knot?

"Whatever," he said. "I'm sorry."

Tamara shrugged. "No biggie. I like being with you no matter what. You don't snore like most guys."

He managed a smile. "Good to know."

"I won't say anything to anyone. I'm not that girl, you know?" He looked at her as she tilted her face to the sun. Tamara was naturally hot. Her blond locks brushed tanned shoulders and her blue eyes were a clear color that blinked innocently right before they flashed with mischief. She was lean, tight and had a rack that, though store-bought, made men lick their lips. Oak Stand's very own Playboy bunny. And she was a nice person.

"I know you won't." He patted her thigh beneath the ruffled sundress she'd squirmed into. It was wrinkled from lying on the floor, but still looked great on her.

“Well, I’d better leave while everyone else is in church. If my grandmother sees me, I’ll get lectured in front of the whole family again. Roast beef just doesn’t taste right with a side accusation of whore.”

He frowned. “You’re not a whore.”

“Tell that to the Reverend Beach.” She rose and slid the sandals onto her feet. The small birds in the tree beside her flew away. She smiled and tilted her face again to the morning sun. “Have a good one, Brent.”

She waved as she slipped out the wooden gate that led to a side drive, leaving Brent to his heavy thoughts.

As the gate banged shut, the phone resting beside him on the step rang.

He didn’t want to answer it. He knew who it was and what she wanted. But he picked it up anyway. Ever the dutiful son.

“Happy birthday, Brent!” The greeting launched an enthusiastic round of “Happy Birthday.”

“Hey, Mom,” he said into the receiver.

“Happy birthday, my handsome boy. How’s everything at the house? Are you feeding Apple her sensitive stomach food?” His mother’s tone sounded too cheerful for a person up at such a godforsaken hour. It was 5:30 in the morning in California.

“Let me talk to him,” he heard his dad say.

His dad’s voice barked in his ear. “Talked to a guy last night. Name’s Russell Bates. His brother works in management for the Chargers organization. He said he saw you play your freshman year and might have a spot for you here in San Diego.”

“Doing what? Selling hot chocolate?” Brent closed his eyes and pretended they weren’t having this conversation again. His dad just wouldn’t give up. Would never give up. Playing football was a memory for Brent. And would stay that way. “This ain’t going to happen. You know that.”

“Horseshit.”

“Today I’m thirty-two. Thirty-two-year-olds don’t start a football career in the NFL. I’m not Brett Favre. I’m done with football.”

“Brett Favre is ten years older than you and still in the league. Besides, Hamiltons don’t give up,” his father said. His old man might as well have said, “Denny didn’t give up.” Because that’s what Brent heard when his dad talked about Hamiltons. Always Denny. Competing with the memory of a dead brother was part of what had brought Brent to this very moment. He would never win that battle.

“Okay, fine. Give me the number.”

“Ready?” his father said.

Brent closed his eyes. “Hold on. Let me grab a pencil. Okay, go ahead.”

He didn’t move from the step. Simply listened as his father rattled off a landline and cell number. Brent wouldn’t call. The hint of interest was just a friend of a friend humoring an old man with dreams too big for his son. Brent could only imagine the conversation that had taken place when his father had learned of the tenuous connection to the Chargers organization. His father was a bulldog, pushing until people rolled over and surrendered. Brent had rolled over quite a bit in his life. Another reason for his self-loathing.

“Call him tomorrow morning. His name is Bill. Bye.”

“Bye,” Brent murmured into the phone. He pressed the end button. No happy birthday from his dad. Only more direction toward a future that did not exist.

He sighed and drank the rest of his lukewarm coffee. The sun already grew warm despite the cool April breeze filtering through the trees. It was a perfect day to putter in his parents’ backyard, whittling out perches for the birdhouses he’d promised the kindergartners at Oak Stand Elementary. But, then again, he needed to complete the proposal for the next few books. His publisher wanted five more books in the lacrosse series, which was good because his job at Hamilton Construction was slow, mimicking the economy all over the nation.

During the day, he ran his father and uncle's construction company, a local contracting business that specialized in renovations and additions rather than new construction. But most nights, he became B.J. Hamm, author of award-winning sports fiction aimed at boys. No one in Oak Stand knew the complex B.J. Hamm. They only knew the rather simple Brent Hamilton.

His secret hobby had grown into a secret career— one that not even his absent parents knew about. Writing was a juicy secret he took pleasure in keeping. He didn't know why.

Donna and Ross Hamilton had taken a long overdue RV tour out West and suddenly retirement sounded good to his parents. For the past couple of weeks, his father had finally stopped mentioning tryouts for the Canadian Football League and started hinting that Brent should buy his half of the company. But now with the phantom San Diego Charger contact, Brent was certain his father would jump on the football bandwagon again, dreaming about Brent hoisting the Lombardi Trophy overhead.

How in the name of all that was holy could a pragmatic man like his father believe something so shaky as a dream of that magnitude? The old man couldn't let go. Of anything.

Brent had his chance years ago.

But he didn't want to think about failed dreams today. He didn't want to think about anything. Maybe he'd go back to his feather-stuffed bed. Or doze in the hammock strung between the two Bradford pear trees in the corner of the yard. He rarely had time to enjoy the peaceful oasis he'd helped his mother create between the carriage house he rented and his parents' small Victorian.

He whistled for Apple and she ignored him.

As he stood, a baseball came whizzing over the fence. It bounced on the path and crashed into a red clay planter, knocking it over, spraying potting soil into the air.

What the hell?

The ball rolled into a daylily clump and stopped. Apple pounced on it, slobbering all over the well-used baseball.

He walked over and pulled it from Apple's mouth. She grinned up at him as if a game of fetch was about to commence.

"Hey, that's mine." The voice came from the left.

Brent turned to find two brown eyes peeking over the wooden fence. They belonged to a boy whose leg crept over the top of the fence. The boy hoisted himself up and straddled the two yards, his eyes portrayed wariness.

Brent motioned the kid to come on over and the boy tumbled down, dropping like a sack of potatoes onto the bag of mulch his mother had left in the corner.

Apple trotted close and sniffed him.

"Hey," he said to the dog, rubbing her head before standing up and brushing himself off.

Brent felt like an alien had beamed down. But it wasn't a little green person. It was a boy who looked to be about seven or eight years old.

Brent flipped the ball to the kid. He caught it with one hand. Impressive. Apple wondered off to find more frogs and lizards to chase.

"Clean up the mess," Brent said, pointing to the dirt covering the brick path.

The boy looked at the broken pottery and spilled soil. "Oh, sorry. My hand got sweaty."

Brent nodded. "It happens."

The boy didn't say anything more. He knelt and used a finger and thumb to lift a broken shard.

"You staying at the bed-and-breakfast?" Brent asked.

The boy nodded and picked up the upended planter and started stacking the shards inside. "Yep. My mom made us come here. Right at the beginning of my baseball season. It's absurd."

Something about the boy's disgust and vocabulary made Brent smile. He knew how that felt. He'd loved baseball season. Especially in early April. The smell of the glove, the feel of the stitches

of the ball against his hand, the first good sweat worked up beneath the bill of the baseball cap. Sweet childhood.

“Well, it’s just for the weekend,” Brent said, toeing the spilled soil with his bare foot.

The boy sighed, dropped to his knees and began scooping up the dirt. He tossed it out into the grass. “I wish. She’s making us live here. I don’t even know for how long.”

“Oh,” Brent responded, watching the boy as he labored. His reddish-brown hair was cut short, almost a buzz cut. Freckles dotted his lean cheeks and for a kid his age, his shoulders were pretty broad. He’d moved with a natural grace, like an athlete. Like Brent had always moved. “What’s your name? Since we’re going to be temporary neighbors.”

“Henry.”

“Hmm... I wouldn’t have taken you for a Henry.”

The boy gave him a lopsided smile. “My mom likes Henry David Thoreau. I got my name from that dude.”

“You look more like a Hank,” Brent said offhandedly, picking up the base of the broken planter, stuffing the flower’s roots into the scant soil and setting it aside.

“Like the baseball player I saw a show on. Hank...”

“Aaron?” Brent finished for him.

“Yeah, that’s the guy. Cool. I can use that name here. No one knows me yet.”

“Well, you better ask your mom about that. You know moms.” Henry was funny. Brent liked kids better than he liked most adults.

Henry picked up the ball and rolled it around in his hand before sending it airborne. He caught it neatly. “Yeah, my mom can be crazy about stuff like that. About sports and stuff. She doesn’t think sports are important.”

Brent feigned horror. “What’s wrong with her?”

The boy shrugged. “I don’t know. I’m good at them. I play football, baseball, basketball and soccer. I even took karate before my dad died. I liked kicking boards and stuff. It’s pretty cool.”

The boy tossed the ball as easily as he’d tossed out information. He’d lost his dad. Tough for a boy like Henry. He seemed headstrong and sturdy, the kind of boy who needed a firm hand. A good mentor. A man to toss the ball with.

The boy threw the ball and caught it in one hand, slapping a rhythm Brent couldn’t resist.

“You know, I could get my glove, and we could toss the ball around,” Brent offered. “But first you better make sure it’s okay with your mother.”

The boy’s eyes lit up. “Awesome.”

“So go ask.”

Something entered Henry’s eyes. A sort of oh, crap look. “Um, it’s okay. She’s making bread or something like that.”

The boy’s gaze met Brent’s and a weird *déjà vu* hit him. The kid’s eyes were the color of cinnamon. Like eyes Brent had stared into a million times. He glanced at the gate that had been locked for over ten years. The gate that led to the Tulip Hill Bed-and-Breakfast on the other side of the fence the boy had climbed.

“Your mom, is she by any chance—”

“Henry Albright! Where the devil are you?” The woman’s voice carried on the wind into the Hamiltons’ backyard.

“Oops, that’s my mom. She’s gonna be mad. I’m not supposed to talk to strangers,” Henry said, scrambling toward the fence.

Brent closed his mouth and watched as Henry ducked beneath the redbud tree before grasping one branch and swinging himself toward the brace on the fence. His worn sneaker hit perfectly and he arched himself so the other landed beside it. But the boy hadn’t been fast enough.

The gate opened with a shove because the grass had grown over the once well-worn path.

Henry froze and so did Brent.

A woman stood in the opening. Her curly red hair streamed over a blue apron that was streaked with flour and she wore a frown. Brent allowed his eyes to feast on her, for she was sheer bounty. Her cinnamon eyes flashed, her wide mouth turned down, but the body outlined in the apron was lush and ripe from the long white throat to the trim ankles visible beneath the flowing skirt. Bare feet anchored themselves in the healthy St. Augustine.

Rayne Rose.

Brent swallowed. Hard.

“Hey, Mom,” Henry said, dropping to his feet. “This is—” Henry turned to him. “Hey, I don’t know your name.”

Brent didn’t move, just watched Rayne as she registered his presence. He could see her tightening. See her shock. See her try to recover.

“Brent,” she said.

Something tugged within him at his name on her lips. Her sweet lips. The first ones he’d ever kissed.

“Oh, you know him. Good. We were gonna play a little baseball,” Henry said, trying to slide past Rayne into the yard of Tulip Hill. She caught his shoulder.

“I don’t think so,” she said, looking at the boy. “You are not supposed to wander off. And you are not supposed to talk to strangers.”

“But you know him,” Henry said, shrugging his shoulders in that devil-may-care manner all boys had.

“But you didn’t. Pick up your glove and get in the house. You have some reading to do before we register you for school tomorrow.” Her words were firm but there was a softness in her manner, in the way she patted the boy’s shoulder.

“But, Mom, I—”

“No arguing, Henry.”

A mulish expression crossed his face. “Fine. But I don’t want to be called Henry. From now on, I’m Hank.”

Aggravation set in on Rayne’s face. He’d seen it every day on the face of his own mother. “Hank?”

“Yes,” the boy said, disappearing behind the fence. “I want to be Hank. I hate being Henry. That’s a nerdy name.”

Rayne closed her eyes. Then opened them again. She looked at Brent. “I’m sure this is your doing?”

Brent shrugged and thought about crawling under the porch. “Sorry.”

Her response was to laser him with her normally warm gaze.

“Nice to see you, Rayne,” he said.

She stared at him for almost a full minute before speaking. “Stay away from my son.”

She turned and tugged the gate closed behind her.

And that was it.

That was how he became reacquainted with the only girl he’d ever loved.

CHAPTER TWO

RAYNE SLAMMED THE GATE and stood a moment, trying to stop her insides from quivering.

Brent Hamilton had always done that to her. She'd been eleven when it had first happened. She'd spied him doing push-ups from over the fence. It was the first time she'd even noticed a boy's muscles, and she'd stared for about ten minutes before he'd caught sight of her sprawled in the tree watching him. She'd scrambled down and disappeared, much too embarrassed to confront the boy who'd been her friend from the day she'd climbed out of her parents' VW van, tripped up the front steps of her aunt's house and noticed a boy throwing acorns at wind chimes.

Brent was still a good-looking son of a bitch with a rippling body and overtly masculine aura. But the emphasis should be on the son-of-a-bitch part.

She wasn't a silly little girl, so she willed her shaking legs to obey and marched toward the peeling porch.

Henry stood there, arms crossed, brow wrinkled. He opened his mouth. "Mom, I want—"

"Don't start, Henry. You violated a big rule, buster. Haven't we talked about this before? You climbed into a stranger's backyard."

"I didn't think anyone was home. Besides, you know him. You said so," her son said, kicking the rail, causing the rooster planter to teeter.

"Stop before you make the planter fall. It's my starter of cilantro," she said, climbing the steps. She peeked into the pot. The sprouts had given birth to the fan shapes that would become the flavorful herb. "And it doesn't matter that I know the neighbor. You don't, and to do what you did is dangerous."

"You said this town is safe. That I could run around and play and stuff. Can I go back and throw ball with him? Please?"

"Absolutely not," she said, surprised her normally cautious son would want to go. It was the baseball that pulled him. But she didn't want Brent messing around with her son. Brent was a lot of things. Charming. Egotistical. Unreliable. Things she didn't want Henry to glean from a man who'd once had the town wrapped round his golden arm, and who would no doubt do the same with her impressionable son. "Every place has dangers. From now on, you consult me before you leave this yard. Got it?"

He made a face. "Okay, but can I go throw? Please. Please. Please."

"Did you hear me?" She shook her head in wonder. Were all males born with selective hearing? "No. Now up to tackle that reading. I want you to make a good impression tomorrow."

"I hate that dumb book. It's about stupid cats and mice. You know I don't want to read that stuff." He kicked at the rail again. The planter tottered. She caught it with one hand.

She gave him the evil eye. He immediately stepped away from the rail and dumped his glove on the pew that sat to one side of the porch. "The book I bought for you is on the accelerated reader list. It's a Caldecott book. They're always good."

Henry shrugged and tugged open the door of the bed-and-breakfast. "I don't see how a book about mice can win awards. Everyone knows mice can't really talk. It's absurd."

He disappeared into the house before she could say anything else. And he'd left his glove again. He kept forgetting they were not at home. They were at an inn and he couldn't leave his things lying about.

Rayne placed her hands over her face and blew out her breath. Then she picked up the glove and sank onto the old wooden pew. Round one for the day. She could only guess what round two held.

She'd give her life for her son. She loved him with a passion that rivaled all others, but the boy was as alien to her as a Moroccan desert. Foreign. Exotic. And she didn't speak the language.

He'd been that way since he'd turned nine months old and said his first word. Had it been mama or dada? No. It had been ball.

And thus it had begun.

The boy's obsession with sports was epic.

And ever since he'd learned to throw, run, hit and kick, he'd reminded her of the boy who'd grown up next door to her aunt. The boy who'd climbed trees with her, studied stars with her, shared his dreams with her. He was near about the spitting image of Brent.

But Brent was not his father.

Rayne hadn't even seen her childhood crush in over fifteen years. Not since the day she'd shaken the dust of Oak Stand from her sandals and headed for a new life and a new dream in New York. She'd locked up the memory of Brent and told herself not to think of him. But her heart hadn't been good at following her head's directive. She still thought about him at the oddest times. Such as when a baby bird fell out of its nest at the house in Austin. Or when Henry had hit his first grand slam. Or when she lay lonely in her bed staring out at a harvest moon.

She'd always been drawn to Brent Hamilton.

Even on the day she'd kissed Phillip Albright in front of the preacher and all their friends, she'd been half in love with the boy who had once sung Elvis songs to her while twisting her hair around his forefinger. She supposed it had been horribly unfair to Phillip to harbor tender feelings for a boy who'd never been hers to begin with, but she suspected Phillip didn't mind. Their marriage had never been a head-over-heels, can't-keep-our-hands-off-of-each-other kind of thing. More of a mutual respect, burning desire to succeed, quiet love and amiable friendship kind of thing.

Maybe that had been wrong, but she'd been happy with Phillip. He'd been the right man at the right time for her. And she'd tried to be the same for him.

God, why is life so complicated?

The only answer was the banging of the screen door. It jarred her into the present.

"Reckon it's going to get warm today." Aunt Frances said, stepping onto the porch and shading her eyes as she perused the tangle of her yard. Rayne followed her gaze. The lawn boy had been let go in the fall and spring had taken advantage of the free rein.

Rayne shrugged. "It's Texas. It's always hot."

"When it's not cold." Her aunt laughed and sank onto the pew beside her. Aunt Frances had faded brown hair that fell just to her shoulders and always smelled of roses. Rayne caught the scent on the April breeze and it calmed her.

"I don't want to forget about the loaves of honey oat bread. They can't bake too long," Rayne said, wondering why she constantly "remembered" out loud. Bad habit left over from her childhood.

"Mmm."

"Avery Long's oldest boy is going to help me clear the area for the vegetable garden tomorrow. But I need to get those weeds pulled. Can you keep an eye on Henry?"

"Oh, you mean Hank?" Aunt Frances said.

Rayne sighed. "Guess I've got something new to fight, huh?"

Aunt Frances nodded. "He's a stubborn mule, that boy. Good trait to have, though. Get him far in life."

"Maybe so," Rayne said. "We've got Brent Hamilton to thank for that little gem."

Her aunt smiled. "Brent, huh? You two were thick as thieves when you were younger. Always made me smile to see you two together. Come to think of it, that man might be what the doctor ordered, Rayne. He's got medicine that's cured a lot of gals round here."

Rayne flinched. "You're talking about the man whore of Oak Stand? No, thanks."

Aunt Frances smiled. "Always been partial to man whores myself. Know what you get."

Rayne shook her head. No way in hell was she going there. "I'd rather chew glass than mess with him. He's overrated."

Her aunt cocked her head. “You know this from experience?”

She wished. Kind of. But she and Brent had never had a chance to explore anything other than sweet kisses paired with unbridled teenage lust. “Not really. But that ship sailed long ago. Disappeared into the Bermuda Triangle. Sunk by pirates. Chopped up for firewood.”

Aunt Frances gave her that look. The one that said, baloney. “Okay. But I wouldn’t mind running my flag up his mast and I’m sixty-eight.”

“And a very sick woman.”

They both laughed. And it felt good to laugh. Rayne felt as though she’d nearly lost the ability. The past few months she’d been faltering, taking a step in one direction only to doubt herself and backtrack. It wasn’t like her to doubt herself. To not have a clear vision. And that flip-flopping was something she didn’t want to dwell upon for the moment.

“Okay, I’ve got to get to work. This yard won’t clear itself, and we’re already behind on getting things planted.” Rayne stood, slipped the apron over her head and tucked it beneath her arm. “Have the painters called? We need them on the job tomorrow if we’re going to have the inn ready by the middle of May.”

Her aunt pursed her lips. “About the painters. Well, they went to Houston for some kind of dirt track race. I’m not sure we can rely on them.”

Rayne closed her eyes and counted to ten. Her aunt moved at a different speed. The whole town moved at a different speed. She had to remember she wasn’t in Austin. She was in Oak Stand. “Well, I can’t paint the house, Aunt Fran. Tell Meg to call in professionals. She has a list, I’m sure. We can’t allow Susan Lear to waltz through the door to substandard accommodations. Her article is the key to a successful launch. I pulled strings to get this feature in Oprah magazine.”

The Tulip Hill Bed-and-Breakfast, her aunt’s well-established but slightly faded business was being transformed into Serendipity Inn, a Rayne Rose exclusive getaway, part of Serendipity Enterprises. But there was much work to do before they could open the doors. Rayne had brought her assistant, Meg Lang, with her, but Meg had been bogged down with traveling back and forth from Austin overseeing the restaurant and the new project. No one else was assisting. Serendipity Inn was a family project and very much on the down-low.

Still, her aunt had insisted on using locals to spiff up the inn. The economy had been hard all over, but especially in small town America. Aunt Frances wanted to help the people of Oak Stand. Only problem was some of the people of Oak Stand didn’t want to help them.

Her aunt nodded. “No problem. I’ll take care of getting new painters. Someone will be here tomorrow morning. You take care of the garden, the kitchen and the menu. Meg will help me with the rest.”

Her aunt disappeared, entering the house the same way she’d emerged. With a bang.

Rayne slumped onto the bench. Why had she agreed to this?

Of course, re-creating the bed-and-breakfast had seemed like a brilliant idea months ago. After twelve years of slaving like a dog to build her career, the thought of reworking the bed-and-breakfast seemed exciting and restful at the same time. A sort of sabbatical with purpose. Something about her aunt’s calming touch and sitting on the front porch swing while viewing paint and fabric samples had sounded right. Rayne needed the comfort of her loving aunt, some privacy and a change for Henry.

But now she wasn’t so sure.

Maybe it was being in a place bathed in memories. Or maybe it was seeing Brent. Or perhaps it was the fact she felt so not herself sitting on a pew in her aunt’s backyard. So not like the woman she’d become.

Rayne Rose Albright was successful beyond all expectation with a New York Times bestselling cookbook, a restaurant that repeatedly made top ten lists and a possible deal on the bubble at the Food Network. She even had her own line of ruffled aprons under production with an Austin designer.

A lot of good it did her. Not when she could barely crawl out of bed some mornings. Not when her child chewed holes in his shirts for fear of being lost or left behind. Not when crazed fans penned weird letters and showed up on her front doorstep. What good was money, fame, success?

Not much if you were miserable.

Rayne opened the door and stepped into the old Victorian house. The smell of fresh bread wrapped around her, soothing her, reminding her why she was there—to recapture the simplicity of life. She took a deep breath. Then released it.

The house exuded charm from every nook and cranny. It would make a fine inn, a retreat for wealthy cosmopolitans who wished to experience a trip to trouble-free times. Most of the work they'd do over the next month was cosmetic in nature. Aunt Frances had always run a tight ship. The antiques were well-polished, the decor was country without being cliché and the house was in fairly good repair. They needed to shore up the front and back porches, repaint windows and doors, replace fabrics and purchase some new furniture. And get the backyard tamed and productive with a veggie garden, pretty herbs and edible flowers.

The highlight would not be in the surroundings, but in the smells, sensations, tastes of the bounty of the earth.

And that was Rayne's job. To create a menu of simplicity and sophistication.

She entered the kitchen and quickly set about tucking away ingredients before pulling the golden loaves of bread from the Viking ovens. They looked perfect. She set them on a cooling rack just as something brushed against her ankle.

“Ack!”

A streak of ginger raced by her. She trotted backward, banging into the baker's rack.

What the heck?

She scurried after the animal, hoping it was merely a cat and not something more menacing.

It was just a cat.

A fat ginger cat that paced at the front door.

“Rumple,” Henry called from the stairway.

She looked up at her child as he ran down the stairs. “Careful, Henry.”

Henry paid no heed. Simply tumbled down, tossing the book he'd been clapping onto the bench. He dropped to his knees and started stroking the fur of the now-purring cat. “This is Rumpelstiltskin 'cause he sleeps all day. Aunt Fran calls him Rumple. He lives next door. At that guy's house.”

The Hamiltons' cat. They'd always had one. She remembered Sweettart, the gray tabby that followed Brent around like a dog for years. He'd stroked that ragged-eared tabby the way Henry stroked the one now curling about her ankles. The purring cat rumbled as he arched against Henry's strokes.

“Well, he doesn't need to be in the house.” She swung the door open and toed the cat with her bare foot. “Out, Rumple.”

“Stop,” Henry cried. “I like to pet her. She loves me.”

“Keep it on the porch. And take your book,” she called out to the boy as he followed the cat through the oval-paned door.

Before she shut the door, she caught sight of Brent heading toward his truck. His brown hair curled over his ice-blue polo shirt collar and his jeans hugged a pretty spectacular butt. He drummed a beat against his thigh with his right hand as he'd always done. The phrase “Idle hands are the Devil's tools” popped into her mind. Yes, that man knew how to create sin with those hands. She remembered the mischief they'd stirred in her... and how much she'd liked those new feelings. But then again, lots of girls had cause to remember those hands. That thought was cold water down her back.

She stepped away from the door.

Brent had cultivated a reputation he'd been content to keep all these years. Who could blame the girls of Howard County? It would be hard for most women to resist the potent combination of

Brent's charm and physical hotness. He was the kind of guy a gal would be content to watch mow a yard or unclog a toilet. He was beauty in motion. Always had been.

Hunger struck her out of nowhere.

And it wasn't for the bread she'd set out to cool. It was the same old hunger she'd first felt long ago, stirring that summer night she'd pulled on her new pink-striped nightgown, a parting gift from her parents. She'd be staying with Aunt Frances in Oak Stand for high school while her parents and sister headed north to New York State to live in a commune for artists. Rayne had tied the satin ribbons on the shoulders and moved to the window to draw the shade. Brent's shades weren't drawn and she caught sight of him across the empty darkness between the two houses. She tucked herself behind the curtain as Brent dropped his towel and ran a comb through his hair. At fifteen, his bare backside had been as intriguing a sight as she'd ever seen. A strange warmth had curled round her midsection and taken up residence in her tummy. It was the first stirring of desire, the first step she'd taken down the path of obsession with Brent.

And it was a path that had gotten her nowhere because fifteen years ago Rayne Rose had been oatmeal to Brent's French crepe with chocolate-raspberry sauce. He'd sampled her when he had nothing better to do. She'd never been important enough to acknowledge as she sat in the stands watching him play or at the dances where he hung out with the cool kids. But still, she'd loved the boy he was when he was with her. When no one else was around and he became hers alone.

She'd been such a fool.

Yet despite what she'd told Aunt Frances moments before, she still wanted a taste of Brent.

CHAPTER THREE

BRENT EYED THE BOARDS above the wide porch of the Tulip Hill Bed-and-Breakfast. “These are going to need replacing before we paint. I know they don’t appear to be rotten, but they are. Won’t take much time though.”

Frances Wallace peered up assessingly. “How much time? Rayne’s already riding me, wanting to hire people from the city to get this finished.”

Something inside him started at her name. Rayne Rose. He’d always loved her name, loved the way everyone said her first and last name together. The vision of an orangey-pink rose like the ones his mother grew appeared in his mind. Those dew-kissed flowers were almost the color of her hair. So pure and fresh, just like Rayne. He dashed the image aside to focus on the flaking paint above his head. “Two or three days at most. Then I’ll finish sanding and apply fresh paint. Two weeks on the total project.”

“Okay.” Frances nodded. “It’ll take that long for Meg to arrange hiring someone from Dallas anyway. I’d be obliged to you, Brent. I know you’re busy this time of year.”

“Not too busy for a neighbor, Mrs. Frances.” He shoved his hands in his pockets and looked around the half-sanded porch. Frances had given him gingersnaps when he was a kid and let him catch ladybugs in her garden. How could he not help her when she needed someone to do exactly what he did—restore and renovate? At that moment, he wondered what the cause of all this upheaval was. What was Rayne doing back in Oak Stand? And why had she pulled her son away from school and baseball to refurbish her aunt’s bed-and-breakfast? He had questions, but no right to ask them. So he asked what he could. “So who’s this Meg?”

Frances was about to answer when a huge rattling truck roared into the tree-lined drive. The red truck belched as the engine died. Big Bubba Malone.

The mountainous Bubba climbed from his monstrosity of a truck and doffed his cap as a tiny woman appeared at his elbow.

Everything about the woman looked severe. Straight, blunt-cut dark hair, black shirt, long gray skirt, culminating with polished combat boots. A small diamond winked in a nose that balanced Elvis Costello glasses. Her chin jutted out as Bubba graciously took her elbow.

“Hands off, Jethro,” she said, pulling her arm away and stalking up the drive.

“That’s Meg. She’s Rayne’s assistant,” Frances commented from behind him.

Brent stepped back when Meg reached the steps. He didn’t want to stand in her way. She looked as mad as a cat dunked in a creek.

Frances stepped forward. “Meg, what in the world happened?”

Meg cocked her head and crossed her arms. “Oh, you mean besides having a flat outside this godforsaken town and then having to walk almost two miles before someone stopped? I don’t know... maybe it was that man slapping me on my ass and calling me little filly!”

Brent tried not to laugh. He really did, but the sound got past his lips before he could stop it.

She whirled, her dark eyes flashing behind her glasses. “What?”

He straightened. “Nothing.”

Bubba stuck his cap on his balding head and sallied toward the porch. “Mornin’, Mrs. Frances. Brent.”

“Don’t you even step one foot near me,” Meg said, flinging out a small, white hand and pointing at Bubba. “I don’t want any of your primordial ooze to get on me.”

Bubba Malone, the slightly dim, good ol’ boy of Howard County, looked down at his shirt. “I ain’t got nothing on me.”

Meg shivered. “Dear God, he’s got the brain of a flea.”

Brent could tolerate a lot. Hell, he ribbed Bubba himself upon occasion, but he wasn't about to let a snooty slip of a feminist insult a good man. "But he has manners. After all, he picked you up."

The termagant turned her dark eyes on him. She took him in from his work boots all the way up to his faded ball cap. He saw appreciation glint in her eyes just like almost every other woman. Then she arched an eyebrow. "So swatting a stranger on the backside is good manners around here? Really? Can't wait to find out what the ill-mannered folk do."

Bubba kicked a brick lining the walk. "Heck, it was a compliment. You got a sweet a—" he glanced at Frances "—uh, behind."

Meg snapped her mouth closed as color flooded her cheeks. She stared at Bubba for a full minute before muttering, "I need to go make a call."

She rushed through the front door, nearly bowling over Rayne in the process.

"Ow," Rayne said, lifting a slender foot and rubbing her pinky toe. "You gotta ditch those combat boots, Megs. They're killing me."

Her assistant must not have answered, because Rayne shrugged and stepped onto the porch, barefoot and beautiful. Brent couldn't stop himself from taking her in. Her unruly red hair lay tamed in a braid that fell over one shoulder. The dress she wore looked as though it had been purchased in Mexico. It had looping bright thread in whimsical patterns on the hem. A bright pink apron depicting a mixer reading Whip it Good on the front pocket nipped her trim waist and hugged her breasts. The only thing marring the perfection of Rayne was the frown she wore.

"What are you doing here?" she said, looking directly at Brent. Her eyes looked puffy, slightly red, as if she'd cried recently. Or had an allergy attack. But her gaze was flinty and accusing.

He shrugged. "I'm going to replace some boards and paint the porch."

"No, you aren't." Rayne jerked her eyes to her aunt and gave her a look. He wasn't sure what it meant, but he thought it had something to do with the fact she hated him. She'd changed so much. Her words were direct and authoritarian. He could see her commanding a kitchen staff. Do this. Sauté that. Move.

"He's the only person I can find, Rayne. And he's my friend and neighbor. Besides, I take exception to your trying to micromanage every aspect of this venture. I'm perfectly capable of handling this."

Bubba clomped up the stairs. "Hey, Rayne Rose."

Rayne stopped frowning at Brent and her aunt and swiveled her head toward the large man lumbering toward her. "Oh, hey."

Bubba wiped his hand on his shirt and offered it to Rayne. Rayne ignored his hand and rose up on her toes to give Bubba a hug. "Sorry about your momma, Bubba. She was a fine lady."

Bubba nodded. He'd lost his mom a few years ago to cancer. "That she was. Everybody sure misses her."

"Especially her Seven-Up cake. She taught me how to bake my first cake, you know," Rayne said, her smile incredibly gentle. It was as if her irritation had melted away, leaving the old Rayne in its place. Brent loved her smile, the softness of it. He wanted to taste that smile against his lips.

Bubba stroked his scruffy red beard. "Yeah, she was good around the kitchen. Even taught me how to cook. Good to have you home, Rayne."

Rayne's frown returned. "Well, Oak Stand's not exactly my home."

Frances moved to Rayne's side and curled her arm about her niece's waist. "Of course, Oak Stand's your home. The place you grew up is always your hometown. And she'll be here for the next month or two. At least."

"Maybe," Rayne muttered, not quite meeting her aunt's eyes.

For a moment they all stood silent, waiting for something to break the uncomfortable moment. Luckily, Bubba knew when to make an exit.

“Shoot, guess I better get. Jack’s got plenty for me to do out at the ranch. Y’all have a good mornin’.”

“You work on a ranch?” Rayne asked.

“He works for Nellie Hughes’s husband. You remember her. She’s a Tucker. Her husband, Jack, started a ranch with his daddy raising horses for the rodeo. He raises other horses, too,” Frances said, like a tour director for the Oak Stand Chamber of Commerce.

“Oh,” Rayne replied, watching Bubba head toward his truck. The overgrown man opened the door before turning around and snapping his fingers. It sounded like the crack of a bat and Frances literally jumped.

“That girl left her computer bag in my truck.”

Frances scurried toward Bubba. “I’ll get it.”

She left Brent on the porch alone with Rayne. It felt intentional.

There had once been a time when he and Rayne were like Forrest Gump and Jenny—like peas and carrots. But that time had long passed. Brent would have thought Rayne had gotten over the hurt, but one look at her yesterday as she blazed into his parents’ yard to rescue her son from his total depravity told him she still nursed the anger and betrayal. He wasn’t sure why it still felt so raw, but it did. For him, too. So standing beside her at that moment felt like standing barefoot in a field of stickers.

“If you don’t want me to do the work, just say. I’ll find someone else.” He shoved his hands in his pockets and tried to pretend she was only another customer.

Rayne looked hard at him, making him squirm. He’d broken her heart nearly fifteen years ago. He hadn’t realized what he’d done when he hadn’t shown up at the Oak Stand High auditorium that spring night. But when he’d untangled himself from the head cheerleader, put his pants back on and uncurled the wadded paper Rayne had hurled at him, he figured out pretty quickly that he’d broken her heart and ended their friendship.

Like a dumbass, he hadn’t realized her feelings for him were of the romantic variety. Not really. Sure, they’d kissed, fooled around a little when he was first trying on girls. But he and Rayne had been best buds, friends of the heart, maybe even soul mates. One look at her eyes that night, and he’d known.

He’d been a boneheaded kid, wrapped up in trying to be his dead brother, afraid to be who he really wanted to be. But he supposed the results had worked out for the best. Rayne had wiped him from her hands and spread her wings. She’d left Oak Stand and made a new life for herself, rising like a flower among the brambles to open her face to the sun. She stood as a reminder of strength and grace. He couldn’t have been prouder of her...even if she hated his guts.

Rayne crossed her arms over her breasts. She was no longer a gangly sixteen-year-old. He noticed. Oh, did he notice. “I’d like to pretend your being here for the next couple of days won’t bother me a bit. Thing is, it will. I’d like to say what happened years ago is so far back in the past that a mature woman wouldn’t give a nickel about a boy who didn’t keep a promise, but I guess I didn’t grow up enough. I’d rather you find someone else to do the job. Because I don’t want to be around you.”

Her words hurt. As sharp as a knife, they drew blood. He nodded. “I’ll see if I can find someone who can come out this afternoon. Maybe Ted Bloom’s finished over at the Pattersons’ place.”

Rayne held herself stiffly as she stood staring at the daylilies emerging from the weary earth on the side of the house. Her eyes looked wistful. He wished he could do something to make things better, but he’d screwed the pooch long ago, and had done such a fine job that nothing was left between them but bittersweet memories of what was once so good.

“I’m sorry, Rayne.” Nothing else to say, he moved to pass her and leave.

Her hand touched his arm and his step stuttered. “Why?”

The soft question hurt more than her anger.

He stopped and glanced at her elegant hand on his bare arm. Then he looked into her cinnamon eyes. Damn, but he couldn't bear to stare into the depths because he saw a mirror image of what he'd seen that night. And like that night, it made his heart feel shattered.

He knew what she asked. For the first time, she asked why he had hurt her. Even he was afraid of the reason.

"Because I was a stupid boy who grew into a stupid man. You're right. It's best if I don't do this job."

Then he left, running with his tail tucked, like the damned coward he'd always been. It was easier to run than to explain he'd been trying harder to please his parents and everybody else in Oak Stand than to please himself...or Rayne. That he was a mere shadow of the brother he'd lost. Denny had been better. Had always been better, no matter what Brent had done to fill his shoes. He'd been a seventeen-year-old boy who hadn't had the guts to claim Rayne Rose and the life he really wanted.

And the thirty-two-year old Brent Hamilton wasn't any better. He still hid behind the charming persona he'd created long ago because it was easier to pretend than to get real with himself.

Because the barbers in Oak Stand still talked about how he held the state passing record. The mechanics down at the garage still talked about the touchdown he made as a redshirt freshman against Texas A&M in the last seconds of the game. The ladies down at the Curlique Salon talked about how his body made old ladies swoon and how his huge libido made women in three counties happy they'd gone home with him. His friends talked about how they wished they had a father with a construction company to hand to them.

A local legend and only he knew what a loser he really was.

Fifteen years ago, Rayne Rose had been the only person who'd "got" him. She'd been his secret, the only person who healed him and loved him for who he was. And fifteen years ago, hurting her had killed the best part of him. And ever since, he'd hated who'd he'd become. Even though on the outside, he hid it well.

So, yes, once again he ran.

RAYNE SWALLOWED WHAT FELT like ashes. She couldn't believe she'd asked him anything about that long-ago night. Why in the hell had she done that? Years had piled upon years. It shouldn't matter. It should be water under the bridge. Sluggish, foul water not worth contemplating. She'd crossed that bridge and taken a path far away. Brent shouldn't matter anymore.

But he did.

She really wished he didn't. It would be simpler if she'd felt nothing when she'd seen him again.

But to say seeing him again hadn't unleashed the hurt, hadn't set a pining in her heart for what they'd once had, would be a lie.

Aunt Frances passed Brent on the sidewalk and exchanged a few words. The sharp look her aunt shot her said it all. Aunt Frances was perturbed. Never a good thing.

For the second time that day, tears gathered in Rayne's eyes. She was a stupid ball of emotion. Watching Henry walk into that second grade classroom had nearly done her in. He had been scared, though he'd squared his shoulders and pretended walking into a new school hadn't bothered him. He'd asked her a dozen times on the way to school about when she'd pick him up, where he should stand and if he had enough money for lunch. His lack of faith in her and in the world he lived in broke her heart.

Maybe she shouldn't have pulled him out of his old school. She simply hadn't known what else to do. Her life had felt out of control and Henry had spent every night in her bed, thrashing and crying out. She stayed awake all night and slept all day, barely creeping out of bed to stop by the restaurant before picking him up from school.

She hadn't known which end was up until Aunt Frances said, "Come home for a little bit, Rayne."

And she had.

But maybe it had been a colossal mistake.

It sure seemed like one when she'd backed out of that classroom, leaving her little boy to the care of Sally Weeks, even if she were Howard County Teacher of the Year. Rayne had cried all the way to the inn as much for herself as for Henry. When had life gotten so intolerable? Had it been when Phillip died two years ago or when their dreams had started bearing fruit, spiraling out of her realm of control without someone to stand at her side? She didn't know, but she'd hoped this project in Oak Stand could ground her again, give her focus and help her find the grit she'd lost.

"Why the devil did you tell him to find someone else?" Aunt Frances said as she mounted the steps. "I thought getting the inn in tip-top shape was vital. Brent does good work, the kind we need."

Rayne shrugged. "I can't handle being around him."

"Oh, grow up. Whatever happened between you and Brent was years ago. You can't tell me you hold a grudge over puppy love gone wrong."

Rayne pressed her lips together. It hadn't been puppy love. It had been the real deal. At least on her end. "It's not about that, Aunt Fran. It's about Henry. I want him surrounded by good influences. Brent is...unreliable. Well, not unreliable, more like irresponsible and—"

"Available. We need him." Aunt Frances put her hands on her ample hips and gave Rayne that stare. The one her own mother never bothered to use for fear it might repress Rayne and her sister and keep them from finding enlightenment. "And don't tell me Brent's worse than the crew who worked here last week. I didn't know curse words could be used in such unique combinations. They made sailors look like thumb suckers."

Rayne almost smiled. She had to admit, the two Italian carpenters had seemed pleased with their newfound ability to pair Southernisms with the curse words they'd learned in Boston. They'd married New England girls and somehow ended up in East Texas. They possessed amazing carpentry skills and had constructed custom closets in each of the guest rooms. Rayne had nabbed them before they started contract jobs in Plano. It had been a coup since their work had been touted all over the South and featured in *Southern Architecture Today*. "True."

"Yes, true. Now pull on your big girl panties, get your tail end over to Brent's and make sure he starts tomorrow. Meg and I are meeting with Dawn Hart to look at fabric samples this afternoon, and I don't have time to bake Brent an apple cake to apologize for my rude niece."

Aunt Frances disappeared into the house as if her word was law. The woman had been alone for too many years to compromise. She'd meant what she said. Normally, Rayne would have dug in her heels, but this wasn't normally. It was Oak Stand.

She swiped at the mascara that had smudged beneath her eyes. Aunt Frances was right. She needed to stop acting like she was in junior high. She was a grown woman, a grown woman who'd been married, had a child and ran a successful enterprise. She hadn't gotten to where she was by being immature.

She sniffed, picked up the resolve she'd misplaced and marched down the steps, heading toward the Hamiltons' century-old house.

She could still make out the path that had been beaten into the grass between the two houses long ago. The Tulip Hill Bed-and-Breakfast had been in operation for the past twelve years, ever since her Uncle Travis had dropped dead in the grocery store with a massive coronary. Until that time, it had been Aunt Fran and Uncle Trav's house, a place full of honeysuckle and sweet gum prickly balls, a delightful place for a child to stomp and skip. Aunt Frances, heartbroken and in need of money, had turned the charming house into a place to share with others. Problem was her patrons were few and far between. Frances eked out a living, yet she seemed content doing so. Ambition had never attached itself to Frances as it had to Rayne.

A hedge of sweet olive bushes made a natural fence between the two front yards. Rayne followed the square brick pavers around to the rear of the house through the wooden gate to the charming

slate-gray carriage house that sat at back of the property. The small house was unfailingly neat and simple, with only a single planter housing a sago palm squatting to the side of the French doors.

She stood on the small porch for a moment before taking a deep breath and knocking on the glass pane.

No one answered.

She knocked again.

No one.

The ginger cat leaped onto the porch nearly scaring her to death, but she saw no trace of Brent even though she'd watched him head in this direction.

She looked around. His truck was parked out front, so he had to be home.

She raised her hand and banged on the glass pane, bruising her knuckles. Still, no one came.

Where was he?

She tried the handle. It was unlocked. She pushed the door open slightly, just a crack and stuck her head inside. The room was dark but she could make out a simple couch and two armchairs. An enormous flat-screen TV hung on the adjacent wall. Very Spartan. Very male.

"Brent?" she called against the quiet of the room.

There was no answer.

She pushed the door opened wider and stepped inside.

"Yoo-hoo," she called. "Brent?"

The house was dark and silent. She felt a little like the stupid babysitter in a slasher film. Any minute a hockey-masked boogeyman would jump out with a machete.

The door clicked shut behind her and she jumped. She took a quick step backward, knocking into an occasional table and tipping over an empty beer stein sitting on the table. She caught it with both hands before it crashed to the wood floor. She placed it next to the four remote controls on the table and stepped back, relieved she'd avoided calamity.

Something hard stopped her progress.

She whirled around to find Brent standing there naked as the day he'd been born.

"Ack!" she yelped, bumping into the table and sending the stein crashing to the floor where thankfully it didn't shatter. "Good gravy, you're naked."

The room was dim, but she could make out how nicely the man fit his skin. How many times had she imagined him naked? Too many to name. For some reason, her fingers started toward the lamp switch, maybe so she could drink him in. She caught herself before she twisted the knob and plastered her hands to her eyes.

"Yeah, Captain Obvious, it's my house. And usually you take your clothes off before you shower."

She swallowed. Mostly because visions flitted through her head. Visions of her clothes joining his on the floor. Visions of sluicing water and warm, wet skin. All of which were totally...insane.

She didn't say a word.

"So you have a reason for breaking and entering?"

"Of course not. I mean, I didn't break in. You didn't answer the door." She chanced a peek through her fingers. He made no move to cover his nakedness. Of course. He wouldn't. She re-covered her eyes. "Will you put on some clothes or cover yourself so I can talk to you?"

Silence met her plea.

"Please," she finally said, dropping her hands but squeezing her eyes closed. Or almost closed.

He moved away from her, snatching up a throw from the couch. She cracked one eye to get a brief glimpse of an ass that frankly should never be covered up. She closed her eyes again so he wouldn't know she'd peeked.

"Okay," he said.

She opened her eyes. He'd wrapped the afghan low on his hips. He switched on a lamp and grinned at her. It was a sexy, knowing grin.

"You peeked, didn't you?" he said.

"I did not," she said, crossing her arms over her chest. She hoped she didn't get struck down for lying. "And I wasn't breaking in. Just trying to...talk to you."

He tugged the throw tighter around his hips. "So talk."

Rayne looked around the room. It was clean for a bachelor pad with tasteful bookshelves loaded with books. Was that Thoreau and Kafka next to...Debbie Macomber? She pulled her gaze away and took in a rich chocolate-and-navy-striped hooked rug that centered the room along with the pictures of various birds hanging evenly over the microsuede couch.

"Ahem." He cleared his throat.

"Oh, um, I came to apologize," she said, keeping her gaze on the print of a snowy egret. She didn't want to look at Brent again. He was more tempting than chocolate chip cookies, a virgin beach with no footprints and a kitchen utensil sale all rolled into one. Rayne was afraid she might do something insane, like kiss him. Or join him for a naked frolic around the living area.

What the hell was wrong with her? She was a deliberate woman. Responsible. Businesslike. Horny. Strike the last thought. She concentrated on the egret's feathers.

"Apology accepted, though I don't think you did anything wrong. You were honest. That's not a crime." His voice was emotionless. Nothing to read in the remark.

"Well, so I'm not necessarily sorry, but I did come to see if you would do the work. I shouldn't have—" She tried to recollect her thoughts. "What I'm having trouble saying is that I shouldn't have let our past interfere with the future. That's silly. We need your help." She moved her gaze to something besides the egret. This time the little blue button on the remote control.

"Rayne, look at me."

"I can't."

He sighed. "Why?"

"Because this feels like a contrived romance novel plot. Sex-starved widow encounters hot old flame," she muttered, rolling her eyes. "So don't make me look at you."

He was silent.

She sneaked a peek. Face only. "What?"

"Are you really sex-starved?" His voice was more than curious. As if maybe he was considering dropping the woven throw. She didn't want that. Or at least wasn't supposed to want that.

She swallowed her panic and laughed. "You might as well ask me what I weigh. That's something I'd never admit to."

"Then head for the door, woman, because if you stay, we might rewrite history."

Rayne rolled her eyes. Again. "Seriously? That's the kind of line you use on women?"

Brent reached out, clicked off the lamp and moved her way. "Oh, yeah, haven't you heard? I'm the master of pickup lines."

"Oh, jeez," Rayne said, moving toward the door in case he wasn't teasing, even though part of her wanted to stay and find out. His laughter dogged her steps. The son of a gun was playing with her. She flung a last look over her shoulder. He stood framed against the darkness like a naughty ad for men's cologne or close-shaving razors.

"So will you be there tomorrow?"

He smiled. "Yeah. You can count on me."

Rayne arched an eyebrow. "Okay, I'll hold you to that."

Then she turned and made her way to the inn wondering if his promise meant as much now as it had back then. And wondering why she hadn't left as soon as she'd seen he was spectacularly naked.

She didn't know the answer to one question and was very afraid of the answer to the other.

CHAPTER FOUR

THE SOUP BUBBLED MERRILY on the stove as Rayne sliced truffles for the fennel and dandelion salad she would serve atop the thinly sliced Bosc pears. The rich smell of chicken broth made her tummy growl, but she kept slicing through the earthy pungency of the delicate fungus, while ignoring the smoky Gouda cheese sitting on the wooden cutting board. She'd found the cheese at a farmer's market in Dallas last weekend. It was divine and she'd already sampled too much of it.

"Mom, can we buy some Pop-Tarts?"

Rayne recoiled as if Henry had asked to eat a booger. "Good Lord, no. Where have you eaten Pop-Tarts?"

Henry shrugged. "Back in Austin. At Kyle Warner's house. He had all kinds of them. Strawberry, cinnamon and blue—"

"Stop." Rayne threw up her hand. "Do you know what kind of ingredients are in those things?"

Henry's brown eyes didn't blink as he stared at her. "I don't care. I saw a kid eating them at school today. They had icing on the top."

Meg dropped the books she was carrying onto the counter. "Give it up, bud. You've got the same chance as a nun getting a navel ring. Not going to happen. She'd rather you eat dirt than something with all those chemicals. Be glad you didn't eat it recently or you'd be getting purged."

"What's purged?" Henry asked, flicking little pieces of the cheese with his fingers.

"Stop," Rayne said for the umpteenth time that day.

"Making yourself throw up," Meg said, making the motion of sticking her finger down her throat.

Rayne shot her assistant a glare as Henry screwed up his face and groaned, "Gross!"

Brent stomped into the kitchen and sniffed. "What's gross?"

Meg fluttered and it made Rayne roll her eyes. Her assistant said Brent Hamilton did nothing for her. That, however, wasn't the way she acted. Her slightly Gothic, slightly punk, but wholly intelligent employee actually batted her heavily made-up eyes at Brent. "Whatever you want to be gross, stud muffin."

Rayne mimicked Meg's gagging action from a moment ago, making Henry laugh. She'd tried hard to overcome her strange feelings toward Brent over the past two days, treating him as she would any other employee. Though his gorgeousness made it plainly difficult to accomplish. After all, he'd taken his shirt off this morning inspiring Meg to use the word yummy way too often. The man had to stop taking his clothes off. Had to. "Do you have Pop-Tarts, Mr. Hamilton?" Henry asked, sliding off the stool beside the kitchen island.

"I may have some cinnamon-brown sugar ones left over from the baseball sleepover," he said eyeing the tomato-basil soup on the stove.

"Wait. You have a baseball team?" Henry's eyes lit up with interest. Rayne felt her mom radar start beeping.

"I don't have one. I coach one," Brent said. Rayne could tell he wasn't paying attention to his words. He was staring at the oat-bran muffins she'd made with the stone-ground wheat. He obviously had no idea what he'd done. How he'd unleashed a monster, one Rayne would have to deal with.

"Can I be on the team? I'm good. I promise. When I played with the Bengals, I hit it over the fence two times." Henry parked himself at Brent's boots and looked at him expectantly.

Shoot.

"Henry, Mr. Hamilton already has a team. We talked about this," Rayne said, brushing her hands on her apron and preparing for battle. Meg wisely started flipping through whatever catalogs she'd lugged in. She knew the power of Henry's will.

“Henry can still play. Hunter Todd broke his arm doing cartwheels on the bleachers, so now we’re a player short. We have practice tonight at six if he wants to come along,” Brent said as he slid closer to the muffins. Rayne had sprinkled them with homemade granola so they looked even more tempting than the average oat muffin.

But she didn’t have time to offer him a sample of her testing ground muffins. Her son had taken to whooping, “Yes!” over and over again.

Rayne jabbed Brent in the arm. “You gotta fix this. He can’t play ball this year.”

Brent finally ripped his attention from the food. “Fix what? Why not?”

Henry whooped once more, performing several fist pumps, before tearing out of the kitchen and pounding up the stairs. Rayne knew where he was heading. He’d dig his glove from the drawer she’d relegated it to yesterday. Then he’d pull all his shorts from the bottom drawer to look for his baseball pants. Then he’d bring her the cleats to untie because they were double-knotted and he couldn’t pull them loose with the stubby nails he habitually bit to the quick. Hurricane Henry had set his path, but he’d forgotten that landfall wouldn’t happen without her permission.

And she wasn’t giving it.

Rayne glared at the daft man before her. She tried not to notice how damn good he looked in his tight jeans and the T-shirt he’d finally pulled on. How his shaggy hair looked salon-tousled. How he hadn’t bothered to shave that morning which gave him a bed-rumpled, lazy movie star look. Hell, no. She wasn’t noticing because he’d created a big problem and he had no clue.

“Henry can’t play ball. He’s behind in his reading at school. He’s not up to grade level and struggling to acclimate in the classroom.”

“Oh. Sorry. I knew he loved sports. I’ve tripped over four balls today already. I figured being on the team would help him make friends and feel a part of the community.”

Rayne blinked. She’d never thought of it from that perspective. She knew Henry was lonely. She knew he’d had a hard time the past few days adapting to school. The classes were small and the kids all knew one another. He felt like the odd man out. And if anyone knew that feeling, she did. But she couldn’t allow him to neglect something as important as school. It was already such a chore to get him to sit still and focus on the homework he’d been assigned that afternoon. “That’s true, but he can’t play.”

Henry roared into the kitchen, cleats dangling in his hand. “Hey, Mr. Hamilton, where’s practice?”

The boy hopped onto the stool and started trying to untie the cleats. He ignored the bits of red clay that fell from the bottoms of the shoes and confettied the floor beneath him.

“Um, sport, I can’t really add you to the team without your mom’s permission.” Brent slapped her son on the back and cast a furtive look at Meg. Like he thought she would help him.

“Let’s leave Rayne and Henry to sort this out,” Meg said, jerking her head toward the dining room. Rayne wanted to kick her for helping the enemy. But was Brent really her enemy? Or was being a mom simply too tough sometimes? Either way, she wanted to blame someone for the heart she was about to break. Henry hated school and hated reading. Not a good combination for a kid in second grade. He still had a long row to hoe where academics were concerned even if he were passing at grade level.

Brent moved faster than Meg. He beat her out the door by a good yard.

Henry turned sweet brown eyes on her. “I can’t play?”

Rayne sighed before slipping onto the stool next to her son. His cowlick stuck straight up and she wanted to kiss the freckles that sprinkled his little upturned nose, but she didn’t. She caught his hands, stilling them. “Honey, we’ve already talked about sports. School comes first, and you’re a little behind the kids in your class. Once you show me you’re doing better then you can play baseball or football.”

“But—”

“No buts.”

“But—”

“Henry!” Rayne crossed her arms and prepared for battle. “I said no.”

His eyes filled with tears. “You’re so mean. You don’t care about me. You took me off my team and brought me here. I thought it would be okay, but I don’t like the stupid school here, either. School sucks.”

“All right, where did you hear that language?”

His lips pressed together and he glared at her even as big tears spilled down his cheeks. He rubbed his eyes but said nothing.

“Henry? I asked you a question.”

“Nowhere,” he muttered, propping his arms on the granite counter. His elbows had dirt on them and his shirt had barbecue stains from the sloppy joe he’d had for lunch. Rayne would have to start packing his lunch. No telling what had been in that meat in the school cafeteria.

Rayne set her elbows on the counter next to her son’s and settled her chin onto her hands. She blew out her breath. “I don’t want you using that language again. It doesn’t sound nice.”

Henry rubbed at his eyes again. “Please, Mom. Please say I can play. Let me at least go to practice with them. I’ll read that book. I promise. And I’ll make good grades, too. You’ll see. I can do it.”

Her heart squeezed in her chest. She wanted to say yes. She wanted nothing more than for her baby to be happy. He’d gone through so much. He’d lost his father, had to move and suffered from separation anxiety and nightmares so severe that she cried herself to sleep for him. She wanted to watch him hit that ball and run those bases, but that was not what he needed. Sometimes it sucked being a mom. “I’ll make you a deal. You bring home signed papers that show me you are improving, and I’ll consider letting you play.”

“But I won’t get signed papers till next week. Can I just read the book? Come on, Mom, let’s make a deal. Please. I promise I will do better.”

Rayne felt the tears prick the back of her eyes. She thought about his face as he’d entered the classroom on Monday. About the way he’d fisted one hand in the fabric of her skirt. And she felt herself waver. Didn’t Henry deserve something to make him happy? God, she was such a sucker. “Okay, you can practice with them. But no game until papers come home. And you have to read, starting now. One chapter before you even look at a baseball.”

Henry wrapped his arms around her arm and hugged it. “Thank you, Mom, thank you. I love you.”

She turned and wrapped her arms around him and pulled him to her, inhaling his little-boy scent, dropping a kiss on the back of his sweaty neck. “I love you, Hank.”

He jerked back. “You called me Hank.”

“I don’t think it’s such a bad nickname, but I’ll still call you Henry most days.”

“Like when I’m in trouble? Like when you call me Henry David?” His eyes laughed and he grinned like a deranged cartoon character. Something inside her bloomed at making him so happy, even as a little voice niggled, telling her she should have stuck to her guns.

Rayne clunked that annoying told-you-so voice over the head with an imaginary mallet. Then she drank in the sight of her son from his cowlick to his knotted cleats. He was all boy. Never in a million years would she have expected her and Phillip to create something like Henry. When she’d been pregnant with him, she’d dream of a cerebral child with blond hair and a preference for violin rather than baseball. She saw herself popping in videotapes that taught foreign languages and music. She saw herself reading books and demonstrating how to paint with watercolors.

Funny how life had played a joke on her with a rough, rowdy ball of fire. A sweet, silly Brent-like child. Well, except for the cerebral part. Rayne knew what many did not. Brent was highly

intelligent. And Brent loved to read. And write. And create. And so did Henry. He simply just didn't know it yet.

"Okay, so off you go. I've got to finish my soup, and you've got a book to start on."

Henry's shoulders slumped slightly. "Okay, but can I toss the ball with Mr. Hamilton before I start on the book?"

At her look, he muttered, "Nevermind," and hopped off the stool.

She smiled and cast a glance toward the bubbling soup. She didn't want to overcook it.

"Hey, sport. I got you something."

Brent's deep voice came from behind her. She spun on the stool to see him standing before Henry holding a book aloft.

"A book?" Henry sounded a bit disappointed, but wasn't rude enough to let it show too much.

"Yeah," Brent said, squatting down and thumping the book. She could make out a boy holding a bat on the front. "This one is about a boy named Charlie who finds out he's really good at pitching, and, get this, he only has one arm."

Henry took the book and studied the cover. "How's he do that with one arm?"

"Guess you'll have to read and find out," Brent said, standing and looking at her. "All right with you, Mom? Maybe a sports book might be better than, what was the one you were reading? A talking mouse?"

Henry's eyes never left the book. "Yeah, a dumb talking mouse."

Rayne shook her head and smiled. "Well, what do you say, Henry?"

"Hank," Henry said before grinning up at Brent. "Thank you, Mr. Hamilton. I mean, Coach."

"You're welcome," Brent said, tousling her son's hair.

Seeing Brent touch her son in such a warm, almost fatherly manner did funny things to Rayne's heart. She wished Henry still had a father to play ball with, to receive books from, to grin up at. She missed that for him. "Now, get to reading. You've got practice in an hour. Can he catch a ride with you, Brent? I've got to finish a few things here."

Henry waited for Brent's nod before hauling out of the room like the devil was on his heels, clutching the book and tripping over his untied shoelace.

Rayne looked at Brent. Her heart still harbored the resentment, but she felt the block of ice around it melt a bit. Nothing like being nice to her boy to move her toward a better place. "Thanks. That was nice of you."

"No problem." Then he smiled, causing her heart to do little flippy things. Damn it. She had to stop thinking about his smile, his naked chest, the thought of being literally tangled up in him. The man had hurt her. Remember the Alamo. Or rather, the Oak Stand Literary Night circa 1994.

She moved toward the stove, picked up a wooden spoon and her control over her hormones. The soup looked perfect, nice and tomatoey. Rich and creamy. Her taste buds rioted for a little nip. She ignored them and instead added the chopped basil sitting on a cutting board beside the range. "So you happened to have a kid's book lying around?"

She saw his hand move toward one of the muffins and smiled. Men. Boys. They all were alike. Hungry. "Well, I like all kinds of books."

"Yeah, I saw the Debbie Macomber on the shelf. And, yes, you can have a muffin."

"Thanks," he said, cramming it into his mouth. "Mmm. I like these. Oh, and that was my mom's book. Don't know how it got on my shelf."

"But a kid's book?"

He licked his fingers and made her think of things other than food. "Well, I coach kids. The lessons in those books relate to kids. Or something like that."

"Oh. Well, thanks for letting Henry borrow one."

"He can keep that copy. I have a few others, so if he likes that one, he can borrow another."

She stirred the soup, scooping enough to taste, and slipped the spoon in her mouth. It needed a pinch more sea salt and then she could dish it up for Meg and Aunt Fran to sample. “That’s nice of you.”

“I can be a nice guy. Sometimes.”

Rayne looked over her shoulder. “I remember.”

“Yeah,” he said, grabbing a paper towel and wiping his hands. “I gotta run. Tell your aunt I’ll be back in the morning. Early this time because I got some work to do at the Harpers’ in the afternoon. Send Hank over in about thirty, okay?”

Then he stepped out the back door before she could say anything else. Before she could remember how nice he’d been once. How sweet and vulnerable. So different than what others thought about him. And at one time so absolutely perfect for her.

She washed her hands and allowed the memories to follow the water right down the drain. It was easier that way.

BRENT JOGGED TO HIS PARENTS’ house to let Apple out and realized he’d forgotten and left her asleep on his bed. After grabbing their mail and stacking it on the counter and riffling through the too-thin Oak Stand Gazette, he hurried across the backyard, thinking about the repercussions of handing Henry one of his earlier books. He hadn’t thought about it seeming strange that he’d have copies of a children’s book lying about his house. He’d thought only of finding something Henry would actually enjoy reading, something that would hook him and have him turning pages.

Lucky he could think fast on his feet. It was a good ability to have.

Apple trotted up to him, carrying a decorative pillow she’d capriciously ripped apart. Fluffy white clouds covered his rug. Damn it.

“Apple, you dumbass dog. I ought to punt you to Houston, you stupid mutt.”

The Boston terrier dropped the pillow his mother had painstakingly cross-stitched with his initials at his feet and smiled up at him. Then she barked.

He nudged her with his work boot and picked up the half-flattened pillow. “Damn it.”

Apple barked again before clamping her mouth onto the torn pillow for a game of tug-of-war.

“Stop it,” he said, pulling the pillow. Apple growled and shook her head.

“Talking to the dog again?”

Brent dropped the pillow and propped his hands on his hips. “Hey, Tamara. Yeah, stupid dog tore up that pillow Mom gave me when I moved in here.”

Tam stepped inside, shut the door and propped her bottom on the armchair. He could smell her perfume as it wafted toward him, curling into his nostrils. He glanced at her. She looked fine sitting there, with her golden hair tumbling down her back and her glossy lips ready to be plundered. She wore an itty-bitty dress that tied under her breasts and high-heeled sandals that made her legs look long and tanned.

“I see,” she drawled, and he could tell she had more on her mind than a cross-stitched pillow or a dog. “You wanna go over to the Dairy Barn for a burger tonight then maybe head out to Cooley’s? It’s two-for-Tuesday.”

He picked up the stuffing and reprimed the pillow from Apple’s mouth. “Nah, I got baseball practice.”

“Oh, yeah,” she said, rising and smoothing the flimsy cotton against her upper thighs. “I forgot you coach a team.”

He opened the door and whistled. Apple trotted outside, then spied a squirrel and gave chase. He closed the door as Tamara’s arms curled round his stomach.

“I thought maybe we could try to fix that problem you had the other night,” she whispered against his back. Her fingers smoothed themselves across his stomach. Unwillingly, he felt himself harden, but he grabbed her hands and disengaged them.

He turned. "I don't think we have time for that kind of therapy, Tam. Though I do thank you for the offer."

She smiled. Her two canines were slightly longer than her other teeth, giving her a vampy, cute smile. Two dimples appeared in her cheeks. "Well, you know, I do work for agriculture extension. It's my job to make things grow."

He chuckled, before bringing her hands to his lips. "And I appreciate the dedication you bring to your work."

"Oh, heck, Brent. I had to go somewhere. Liv's with Mark. They've been driving me crazy with all their talk of the upcoming wedding. I'm sick of tripping over bridal magazines and all the damned invitation sample books. I can't believe she's taking the plunge."

Liv Wheeler was Tamara's roommate. He'd dated her once upon a time. She was a sweet girl, not much of a conversationalist, but then again, they hadn't talked much. The relationship had lasted about a month. She came from a good family and had a sweet disposition so he'd hoped it would evolve into something serious. But it turned out they had little in common. Liv only watched reality television, and the only books she'd ever read were The Baby-sitters Club series when she was twelve. No conversation, only action, which had been fine for a while, but really, he was more than a piece of meat, no matter what everyone liked to say.

"Mark's a good guy. You need to find a guy like that."

She tugged at his waistband. "Maybe you. You're a good guy."

"No, I'm not." He removed her hands again and grabbed the remote control. He'd left the station on ESPN and the opening day baseball scores scrolled along the bottom of the screen. He clicked it off.

"What's wrong, Brent? You're always good for a quickie," Tamara teased, propping her hand on one hip. "Or at least you were."

Her words ruffled him. He didn't have to prove anything to anyone. He was a man. Hell, he'd gotten hard staring at Rayne lick the spoon out of the soup earlier, so he knew there wasn't anything wrong with the equipment. It was something else altogether that had him stepping away from Tamara. Something new and different wriggled inside him. A desire to be taken seriously. A wish to give up the fabled, carefree, eye candy image he'd fallen into long ago...and stayed in. He was tired of that life. And the woman before him was another piece in the puzzle of dissatisfaction.

But Tamara wasn't the sort of girl who took no for an answer. Her tenacity had served her well in the past. Usually she got her man. But the digital clock on the microwave beyond her shoulder told him it was six-thirteen. It took ten minutes to get to the ball field. He still needed to gather up the catching equipment and fill up the watercooler.

"No time," Brent said, giving Tamara a quick, hard kiss on the forehead, before unwrapping her from around his legs. "Got boys waiting on me, Tam."

Tamara narrowed her eyes. "And I have some waiting on me at Cooley's."

Brent smiled at her attempt to stir jealousy. It was an emotion he was unfamiliar with. Except for when it stirred last weekend when Kate Newman had kissed Rick Mendez beneath the flowered arbor. And it wasn't jealousy over Kate. It was jealousy for what they'd found together. Utter joy. Utter happiness. Utter love.

The only utter he held was utter contempt for his life. And for some reason, something inside him burned for a piece of what Kate and Rick had found last weekend.

He wasn't sure why he wanted more now, but he knew he did.

A flash of color caught his eye and broke his thoughts. He stepped from the warmth of Tamara's embrace and moved toward the French doors. Henry stood, nose pressed against the windowpane.

"Who's that?" Tamara asked from over his shoulder.

Brent didn't answer. Just pulled the door open. "Hey, Hank. Where's your mom?"

The boy shrugged. “She was right behind me. She said she’d pick me up at seven-thirty. She knows where, right?”

Brent nodded as he saw the back end of Rayne disappear behind a hedge that needed clipping. An apron tie snagged on a limb and a slender hand tugged it loose. Brent had no doubt Rayne had seen Tamara twined round him like ivy on an oak. He wished she hadn’t. She already thought him the town gigolo and he’d cemented that impression in her mind, no doubt.

“Come on in, Hank. I’ve got to grab my equipment and then we can go.” The boy stepped inside and eyed the woman studying her manicure. “Oh, this is a friend. Tamara Beach.”

Henry ducked his head and rubbed the toe of his cleat in the rug. “Hi.”

Tamara bent down. “Hey, Hank. You gonna be on Brent’s team, huh? It’s the best team to be on because Brent is the best coach.”

Henry peered up at her beneath the brim of his stained baseball cap. “Um, yeah.”

Brent placed a hand on Henry’s shoulder. It surprised him Henry would be so shy. He hadn’t displayed any unease several days ago when he’d climbed over the fence. In fact, the boy had seemed in his element.

Tamara stood and smiled at Brent, her disgruntled feelings at not getting a roll in the hay gone. “Okay, you guys have fun. Will I see you later at Cooley’s, Brent?”

Brent shook his head. “Not tonight. Got a full day tomorrow. Have some fun for me.”

A small furrow appeared between her eyebrows before she nodded and flicked the bill of Henry’s cap. “Later, gators.”

Tamara picked up the keys she’d abandoned on the end table and slipped out the door.

Henry watched. “She’s pretty. Is she your girlfriend?”

Brent walked into the kitchen and started filling up the cooler with water from the faucet. Then he grabbed the equipment bag from the alcove beside the pantry. “No. Just a friend.”

Henry followed him. “Do you have a girlfriend?”

“Nope. No girlfriend,” he said, slinging the bag on his shoulder and grabbing two sports drinks from the fridge. It wasn’t too hot yet, but Henry might need some extra electrolytes.

“So are you funny?”

Brent shut the fridge door. “Huh?”

“You know. Funny. Like this one guy who works for my mom. He likes other guys and stuff.” Henry’s brown eyes were so matter-of-fact. Brent had no clue kids his age knew about homosexuality. He was knocked for a loop.

“Um, no. I’m not funny...in that way. But I know some good knock-knock jokes.”

“Me, too.” Henry smiled and Brent noticed he was missing his two lower teeth. It made him look even cuter. “Hey, I read one whole chapter of that book all by myself.”

Brent motioned him toward the door. “That’s great. Chapter books can be hard. Only big kids read those.”

Henry nodded. “I feel bad for that kid in the book. He didn’t get born with a whole arm. That’s gotta stink.”

Brent felt a flash of satisfaction. Just what he had thought when he’d met a college teammate’s son who’d been born with a congenital heart defect which resulted in an underdeveloped limb. He’d intentionally written that book to celebrate the fact his friend’s son Reese hadn’t allowed his handicap to keep him from playing sports. It was one of his favorite books.

“Yeah, but the kid doesn’t let his disability hold him back. You’ll see that he’s pretty brave, especially when some kids make fun of him. Even his own teammates.”

Brent unlocked his truck, tossed the equipment bag and cooler in the bed and helped Henry climb into the cab.

“Well, I’m only on chapter two, but I guess it’ll make me mad if they’re mean to Charlie. It doesn’t seem fair to not be like other kids. It probably makes him cry at night when no one is around.”

Brent opened his mouth, then shut it as he cranked the engine. He wondered if Henry knew firsthand about crying in the privacy of his room. It seemed unfathomable that a strong, funny kid like Henry could suffer humiliation at the hands of others. He seemed so cool. So talented. So innocent and wonderful.

“Maybe,” Brent commented, reversing out of the driveway. “You’ll have to read and find out.”

Henry propped his chin on his elbow and watched the passing scenery of Oak Stand. They rounded the town square, braked for a squirrel and headed south toward the Oak Stand Athletic fields. “Do you think my mom will be early to pick me up?”

Brent shifted his gaze from the road to the boy looking way too contemplative for a seven-year-old.

“Sure. If not, we’ll call her. Or you can ride back with me.”

“Oh,” Henry said, fiddling with the glove he held in his lap. “Okay. I think she’ll probably be early.”

Brent waved at his friend Margo, who swept the steps of Tucker House, then saluted the new police chief, Adam Bent, before swinging toward the highway that would take them to the sports complex outside the city limits.

“So you like books, huh?”

Brent grabbed a dusty ball cap from the dash and crammed it on his head. “Sure. I love books.”

Henry studied him. “Really?”

Brent nodded. “Really. Books take me to new places. Places I can’t go—pirate ships or secret rain forests. Besides, I learn about people who are like me and people who aren’t. It’s like taking a trip, but you don’t have to pack.”

Henry frowned. “I don’t really like books. I’d rather be doing something. Playing ball or watching TV. My mom reads stuff all the time. Sometimes she cries when she reads books. I hate when my mom cries.”

The boy turned and looked out the window as if he knew he’d said too much.

Brent wasn’t sure if he should respond. So he let a few moments go by. Nothing but Miranda Lambert on the radio crooning about love gone wrong.

They drove into the parking lot adjacent to the ball field. A few of the kids on his team already tossed the ball, warming up.

“You know, there’s nothing wrong with crying, Hank.”

Henry’s head whipped around. He met the Brent’s gaze. “Do you cry?”

Brent shrugged. “If I need to.”

Henry’s brow knotted. “Oh.”

Brent didn’t want to tell Henry the last time he’d cried had been when he read in the Oak Stand Gazette that Rayne Rose had married Phillip Albright. That when he’d read those words and saw her smiling face staring out from the page something had crumbled inside him and the world faded several shades dimmer. Because up until seeing Rayne’s and Phillip’s names linked together in holy matrimony, Brent hadn’t realized how much he’d believed in a second chance with Rayne...until that chance had disappeared. The dream of somehow finding himself in her good graces again had been blown out like a candle, leaving the recesses of his heart dark. And that knowledge had caused tears to prick the back of his eyes and sadness to burn deep inside his gut.

But over the past day or two, he’d been looking for matches, contemplating a way to light the candle of hope again. If he could move past her anger and disappointment in him, then maybe, just maybe, he had a shot with Rayne. As crazy as the idea seemed.

And it seemed crazy.

Rayne was going to leave Oak Stand. Her life was too grand for the simplicity of the town. Besides, their past was a hopeless tangle of fierce emotions, emotions born of angsty teenage lust and love.

But he couldn't stop the thought that had anchored itself inside him. Fate wasn't a fickle lady. She knew her mind. The cards had been dealt the moment he'd sat on that porch step days ago, hating himself and his life. Then a ball had landed in the backyard and things had changed. Maybe Fate was on his side this time, even if she wasn't ready to show her cards yet.

He turned to Henry. "Game on. Let's play some baseball."

CHAPTER FIVE

RAYNE PULLED INTO THE parking lot of the baseball field and girded herself against stepping into “real” Oak Stand. Nothing like a pack of former schoolmates to make her feel like a gauche little nobody. She knew it was asinine to feel vulnerable again, but that didn’t help. Thinking and feeling were two different things. She cracked the windows in her Volvo SUV before sliding on sunglasses and climbing out.

Remember. You’re not the pathetic, awkward Rayne Rose. You’re the successful, intelligent owner of Serendipity. You have products with your name on them. You have the power now. No one can take it from you.

Why was she giving herself a rah-rah pep talk just to pick up her son? The word nutty came to mind as she scanned the area.

The ballpark had seen improvements since the last time she’d been here. The stands had coverings and the concession had been painted a bright blue highlighting a mural of a baseball sprouting arms and legs. The park looked neat and well-tended, not a scraggly weed in sight.

“Rayne Rose!” said a voice to her left.

Rayne turned and saw a plump woman wearing a visor and tugging a toddler heading her way. She paused on the curb and tried to figure out who the woman was.

“My gosh, it’s been years. I use your recipe for guacamole all the time. I saw you on Good Morning America.”

Rayne nodded, but had no clue who the woman was. She had apple cheeks and brown eyes the color of rich chocolate ganache.

“You remember me, don’t you? Stacy Darling. Well, Harp now. I was a year ahead of you.”

Rayne took a step back.

Stacy Darling had been one of the meanest girls in all of Oak Stand High. She’d been lithe, trim and amazing with a basketball. She’d also reduced many a girl to tears, and Rayne had been a favored target. Come on, retard, can’t you catch a ball? What did your hippy mamma eat when she was pregnant with you, Knobby? Grass? ’Cause you’re about as ugly as a goat’s ass.

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