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ROMANCE

A Touch of Scarlet

LIZ TALLEY

Liz Talley

A Touch of Scarlet

«HarperCollins»

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Adam Hinton is a by-the-book kind of guy. And as the new chief of police in Oak Stand, Texas, he has a few mottos. Do the right thing. Obey the law. Don't get involved with bad girls—no matter how secretly irresistible they are. Those mottos are put to the test when too-tempting, too-sexy, too-everything Scarlet Rose speeds into town. Before the ink is dry on the ticket he gives her, he's hooked. Which means his efforts to create an ordinary, respectful life could be at risk. Much to his surprise, it's the woman beneath Scarlet's sultry exterior who captivates him. And it's that woman he wants a future with. Because he's decided his white-picket-fence world definitely needs a touch of Scarlet!

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“So are you going to frisk me again?”

Scarlet sank onto the chair and crossed her legs. “You’ve got good hands,” she drawled. “If you know what I mean.”

Adam felt something terrible rise inside him. He knew what it was. A crack in the surface of his calm. One that could untether his self-control and fling it to the four winds, allowing him to bounce around with no constraints, no rules, no goal. “You know damn well I never touched you inappropriately. To say any different—”

“Got you,” Scarlet said, giving a wink. “You’re so easy.”

He’d process Scarlet and put her in the holding cell until she posted bond. Then he’d give himself another lecture on pretending the blazing-hot Scarlet was just another criminal who had handcuffed herself to a lamppost in a protest. Just another woman. No one who would interest the professional, responsible leader of a police force.

No one who made him fantasize about the various ways to use a pair of red-furred handcuffs.

Dear Reader,

I’m certain I learned drama from the best. The women of my family are many things: strong-willed, hard-working and very stubborn. But most of all we are queenly. Some are queen bees, some are beauty queens, and others are queen-sized, but we are all drama queens. So I got to thinking... are drama queens good heroines?

Whether you agree or not, drama queens are certainly interesting, as is my heroine Scarlet. Scarlet lives to enter the fray, boldly and dramatically wielding the sword to slay her dragons. And who should tame this flamboyant mudraker? A straight-laced lawman, of course. Scarlet was made to color Adam’s world, no matter how much he resists the lure of the over-the-top actress.

I had such a great time writing a love story for these two characters, and I hope you will enjoy taking one last trip back to Oak Stand, Texas, with me. You’ll see some familiar faces and say goodbye to some old friends.

I love hearing from my readers so feel free to email me at www.liztalley.com and let me know what you think about A Touch of Scarlet.

Happy reading!

Liz Talley

A Touch of Scarlet

Liz Talley



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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

From devouring the Superromances on the shelf of her aunt's used bookstore to swiping her grandmother's medical romances, Liz Talley has always loved a good romance. 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 passel of animals. Liz loves watching her boys play baseball, shopping for bargains and going out for lunch. When not writing contemporary romances for Harlequin Superromance, she can be found doing laundry, feeding kids or playing on Facebook.

For my mom,
who is likely the biggest drama queen I know,
but I wouldn't want her any other way.
And also to the Ruby-Slippered Sisterhood.
Long live the drama queen!

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CHAPTER ONE

SCARLET ROSE GLANCED in the rearview mirror at the lights flashing behind her. Damn. Who got pulled over for going 75 mph in a 65-mph zone? Wasn't there a ten-mile cushion or something?

Obviously not in Texas.

The cop was taking his time emerging from the depths of the silver cruiser, so Scarlet gave her lips another swipe of the Elizabeth Arden ruby-red lip gloss resting in the cup holder. After all, her lips were her greatest weapon. Overly large and plump, they had their own fan page on Facebook. She'd always thought the attention given to them a little absurd, but if she had to use them to get out of a ticket, then she would.

After all, who in his right mind would give the vampy Veronica Collins a speeding ticket? Her luxurious red locks, gleaming white teeth and kick-ass curves clad in the trademark catsuit inspired kinky fantasies for those who followed the new drama *Deep Shadows*, which had debuted six months ago to a rabid fan following. Currently, Scarlet was on hiatus, so she looked nothing like the naughty vampire Veronica. Just plain ol' Scarlet Rose in faded jeans and a ponytail.

But she did have those lips.

She slumped against the leather seat and watched in her side mirror as the cruiser's door opened and a police officer climbed out.

He was tall with a military haircut and wore mirrored sunglasses. Good body. Stiff demeanor. She had a fifty-fifty chance of getting out of this one.

Her director's voice popped into her head.

Veronica will smile at the officer, feigning innocence. Camera One, narrow to capture the gleam in Veronica's eyes as she knowingly plays with the unsuspecting cop.

Scarlet turned and delivered a smile. "Hello there, officer. Is there a problem?"

She pulled the end of her ponytail forward so it brushed her bared collarbone while curling her shoulders forward, smooshing her boobs so the cop had a nice vista of flesh to contemplate. She couldn't tell if it worked or not. His gaze could have been on her girls...or on the steering wheel. Damned mirrored sunglasses.

"Yes, we have a problem," he said, his voice nice and melodious, like an announcer on a game show. It was definitely cultured. No Podunk, Texas accent. He wasn't from Oak Stand. "You were doing seventy-eight in a sixty-five zone, and you have a brake light out."

She smiled again before giving him a flirtatious shrug. "Surely I wasn't going that fast?"

His jaw tightened. It was a nice jaw. Cleanly shaven and tanned. He had a good mouth, too. Straight lips with a slightly sensuous curve to the bottom lip. It was the kind of mouth a girl wanted to nibble into a smile. Total challenge.

But he didn't smile. "Surely you were."

"Sorry. Look, I'm trying to get to my sister's house before she runs off with some horrible, horrible guy. No one is answering the phone, and I'm worried, you know? I guess I should have had my mind on the road, but—"

"That doesn't explain the brake light," he said.

Scarlet tamped down the annoyance at being interrupted. Syrupy sweetness worked on hardasses like this. At least it usually did. "I bought this car three weeks ago and had everything inspected. The light must have burned out without my knowledge. I'll get it replaced tomorrow. Promise."

He didn't move a muscle. She could tell he stared hard at her, even though there was mirrored glass between his gaze and hers. Seconds ticked by. Had she worked it hard enough to get out of a ticket?

"Are you asking me to overlook a violation?"

Oops. Maybe not. “Of course not. No.”

“Because that’s what it sounds like.”

Scarlet tossed her flirting ploy aside and straightened. “I don’t always agree with the laws you enforce, but I would never ask you to compromise yourself.”

She gave him the schoolmarm stare she’d perfected in her off-off Broadway debut of Mrs. Tingle’s Jingles. He didn’t wiggle the way he was supposed to. He merely stood, straighter and taller.

“Just give me the ticket so I can get on with my day. I’ve got a wedding to stop.”

At this, the officer’s mouth drew into a line. No more semimocking curve. “What wedding?”

Scarlet gave him a New Yorker smile—kind of a smart-ass smirk. “Now, that, Officer—” she looked at his nameplate “—Hinton, is none of your business, is it?”

Officer Adam Hinton jabbed a finger toward the city-limit sign that sat behind her black BMW convertible. “This is my town. Everything in it is my business.”

Scarlet pulled on the viperous persona of Veronica as easily as she shrugged into a jacket. “Now, that’s where I’m thinking you’re wrong, Officer Hinton.”

Don’t make me bite you, dude.

She loved Veronica, the alter ego she sometimes donned merely because the vampire queen could control everything about her world. So what if it were pretend? Playing the dangerous, sultry vampire allowed her to feel powerful. She showed him her teeth for good measure. It was a hard smile, sans fangs, designed to put him in his place.

“Can I have your license and registration please?”

Okay. So she had no effect on him. Fine. He probably squeaked when he walked. Even his damn badge was perfectly lined up adjacent to the button on his uniform shirt. He probably flossed three times a day and took a multivitamin. Jogged the same path, ate the same foods and cut his lawn with methodical precision.

She tugged her wallet from the oversize purse, flipped it open and pulled out the license she’d obtained last month. Her very first driver’s license procured specially for the trip to Texas. As a New Yorker, she’d never learned to drive. Subways and cabs had worked fine.

She handed her license over without a smile. “Here you go.”

“Registration?” he asked, taking the hard plastic license from her hand.

She leaned over, popped open the glove box and rooted around. Stefan had said he left everything she’d need in there. A string of condoms slithered to the floorboard along with a pack of cigarettes, a package of Zingers and a small airport bottle of rum. Nice. Her roommate had a weird-ass sense of humor. Finally she located a zippered owner’s manual and found the registration inside, along with a proof of insurance. The insurance card had her name on it. Stefan must have placed it inside for her. Okay, she’d let him live.

“Here. Everything should be inside.” She jabbed the manual at the police officer. Then she dismissed him, flipping down the visor mirror and checking her bangs, for no other reason than it pleased her to shut him out.

The sun pressed on her shoulders. The end of August was hotter than hell in East Texas, but it was her first road trip so she’d kept the top down most of the way along the East Coast and hadn’t put it up on her trek across the South. She’d stopped to see an old friend in Atlanta, putting her behind schedule in getting to Oak Stand. She’d gotten even with the city-limit sign when Officer Tight Ass had pulled her over.

She was tired, too warm and not feeling friendly at all. Texas hadn’t been on her list of vacation destinations, but saving her sister, Rayne, from the ridiculous fascination she had for Brent Hamilton topped lounging on the beach in France. Well, almost topped it.

Scarlet’s bangs looked fine, so she snapped the mirror shut and tried to look bored as the lean cop scribbled stuff onto his little notepad.

“Have you been drinking this afternoon?” His voice seemed monotone. Automated.

Crap. The stupid minibottle of rum.

“Of course not.”

“Would you mind stepping from your car, ma’am?”

“Actually, I would mind. Why do you need me to get out of the car if you’re merely giving me a speeding ticket?” She studied the teal polish on her fingernails. It was very divalike behavior—something she never did. But at this point, she knew it aggravated Officer Hinton. So it felt good.

“Out of the car,” he said, swinging the door open. “Step around to the back of the vehicle, place your hands on the trunk and wait. Please.”

He’d nearly choked on the last word. She’d ticked the cop off. Might not have been the smartest move, but that was Scarlet’s *modus operandi*—react, then regret. A car passed by on the highway, and she caught a glimpse of a curious driver. She waved.

“What an excellent way to make an entrance,” she said, climbing from the car. She was glad she’d left her flip-flops at her friend’s house, because the mile-high wedges she wore boosted her five-foot-eight frame by four inches and made her feel more powerful. It brought her eye level with the cop, who watched as she unfurled from the car.

Her tank top had tiny jewels embedded around the low neck and hugged her torso all the way down to the tight, ripped jeans. Aside from her plump lips, her body was her trademark. Scarlet had kicking curves that looked so good in a bodysuit they’d given her the part of Veronica before she even read for it. Not really. They’d made her read to make sure she could act. But still, she felt as if she’d been born for the role of Collinstown’s audacious vampire.

Her director’s voice came back.

Stroll to the rear of the car. Make sure it’s a do-me walk. Then place your hands on the trunk, feet apart, and arch your back. Slowly smile at your prey.

Scarlet stretched like a cat, then moved into position. She purposely stood far away so the pose she struck looked seductive. She didn’t know why she did it, other than she got perverse satisfaction in needling Officer Hinton. It was rapidly becoming her new favorite game to play.

Piss Off Hinton. Coming to stores near you. Oops, I dropped my license in the vodka. Is that a nightstick in your pocket or are you happy to see me? Make Officer Hinton crack, and you can win all the marbles!

He cleared his throat, snapping her out of the board-game commercial playing in her head. “Is this all the alcohol you have in the car?”

“Yes. And I have to say, your detective skills are lacking. That little bottle hasn’t been opened yet.”

Officer Hinton stared at her a good two minutes before approaching. “I’m doing my job, ma’am. Now, I’m going to briefly pat you down, Miss Rose.”

“No dinner first?” she said as she stared at the back of her bucket seat and pretended she got pulled over and frisked all the time. No big deal that a cop was about to run his hands all over her on the side of the road. She braced herself for his touch.

His hands moved beneath her arms, over her ribs, down her waist and hips to her thighs. Quickly, his hand slid inside her knee and moved down to her calves. It was quick, methodical and professional. No reason for any match to be struck. Nevertheless, Scarlet felt strange. Little pulses erupted in her belly. It shocked her. She hadn’t felt even a nudge of sexual interest since John. It made her want to get away from this small-town cop. Made her want to hide her emotions. Protect herself. Pretend she felt nothing.

The whole thing was crazy.

“Turn toward me, please.”

He’d taken off his sunglasses and it was as if a mask had been removed. He was damn gorgeous in a Robert Redford/Clint Eastwood sort of way. His eyes searched hers, presumably for signs she’d

been swigging cough syrup. But the perusal didn't feel accusatory. It felt raw. As though he was peering inside her soul. Inside to where her self-doubt hid along with her insecurities.

She pushed her sweaty bangs back and pretended she was on set.

Now Veronica portrays impatience. She needs to get rid of the cop. She can't allow the cop to see who she really is.

But it didn't work.

His green eyes were clear and searching. They unnerved, and she wanted to escape them.

"See? I haven't been drinking anything other than a Diet Coke." She looked down at the sunglasses she held. She should put them on. Protection from his all-knowing eyes.

"I'll be the judge of that," he said, sliding his hand under her chin and tipping her face so her gaze was forced to meet his. His touch sizzled. Like, seriously scorched her bare skin. He jerked his hand away and a frisson of unease crept into his eyes.

He wasn't supposed to touch her outside of the initial frisk. She knew that. Or she thought she knew it. But it had seriously felt...sexy. Almost like a caress.

Veronica will not react to the cop's touch. She must retain control. Even if she wishes to slide her hands up his shoulders, even if she wishes to taste the mouth of the man who could tame her, who could—

Please. Who got hot and bothered by a cop on the side of the road in some backwater town?

She had to be suffering from heatstroke. Or low blood sugar. Anything to explain her reaction to Mr. Tall Blond Jackass.

She needed him to give her the damn ticket so she could head toward Aunt Frances's bed-and-breakfast. Away from whatever strange thing pulsed between her and this cop. She'd driven too long without sleep and had to be partially delirious from road tripping.

"Okay, I've seen enough drunks to tell you're clean. Wait here." Officer Hinton spun on one motorcycle boot and stalked toward his cruiser. She was accustomed to following direction. Just not that of a pompous cop, so she sidled toward the open door of her car and sank onto the leather seat she'd abandoned moments before. She jabbed her sunglasses on her nose and tapped her fingernails against the steering wheel in an impatient manner.

She heard him approach. Heard the crunch of gravel beneath the boots. Heard the sound of a ticket being torn from the pad he'd carried.

"Here you go. Please note the ticket must be paid by the date on the bottom. There is also a court date listed if you wish to contest the citation."

He handed it to her. No flourish. Matter-of-fact.

"Slow down and be safe."

Bite me.

She took the ticket, slammed the door and cranked the engine of the secondhand-but-still-gorgeous convertible BMW. She also tugged the seat belt across her chest and clicked it. She didn't need another ticket, thank you very much. But the devil inside her wouldn't allow her to slink away like a meek mouse. No, the devil inside her bade her to crumple the ticket and toss it onto the floorboard.

The devil inside her usually won.

She flashed a blinding smile at Officer Adam Hinton as she pitched the wadded ticket toward the fast-food sack that held gum wrappers and gas receipts, along with the remains of her noon meal. "Thanks for the welcome home."

He blinked. He hadn't put on his mirrored glasses. "Home? Wait—" He looked at his notepad. "Summer Rose?"

She saw the dawning.

"You're Rayne's sister. But your stage name is Scarlet. The actress from the vampire show." His gaze swept her, taking her in. She wasn't wearing heavy makeup. No dramatic kohl-rimmed eyes or overly plumped red lips. No catsuit. No bra that pushed her boobs so high she could pop her chin

on them. She looked very little like the vampire queen who ran the fictional Collinstown. And very much like a regular twenty-six-year-old.

“Wow. Your powers of deduction are better than I thought. You had my name right there and everything. A real brainiac.” She gestured to the clipboard in his hand. She was being a smart-ass but didn’t care. She was pissed at him for embarrassing her with the whole DUI test and for making her react to his touch. How damn weak was she? Getting turned-on by a random cop? Pathetic. And that made her mad.

Because he had no right to make her feel anything.

She wasn’t ready to embrace any frisson of desire. Not ready to welcome that small pique of interest. Not ready to move past the ache she clung to deep, deep down in her heart. She was dead to love.

She fingered the charm on the gold chain about her neck and begrudgingly looked into the cop’s eyes.

She’d crumpled his ticket, then insulted him. The veneer of control he wore like a shield had cracked. He looked not quite so in control. “I would have let you off with a warning. I’m a friend of Rayne’s new husband. But since you seem as much of a bitch as the character you play, I’m glad I didn’t.”

Scarlet gasped. Yes. Gasp. “How dare you? I’m reporting you to the police chief. This is an outrage, a—”

“Good luck with that.” He slapped a hand against the hood of the car and turned toward his cruiser. “Have a nice day.”

Scarlet moved her hand to make the universal sign of disdain, barely an afterthought for most New Yorkers. But she stopped herself. He was an officer of the law and this was Texas. So she grabbed the steering wheel instead and pressed the accelerator.

It was totally immature, but as the gravel spun beneath her wheels, Scarlet felt a momentary flash of satisfaction. She hoped the bits of rock hit his polished boots and scuffed them. Damn him. Calling her a bitch. She wasn’t a bitch. She played one, but wasn’t one. Officer Tight Ass was wrong.

Okay, sure. She had it in her. All women did. But he’d been the one to play the power card and force her to be frisked and humiliated on the outskirts of town. So she’d been mouthy. What of it?

Bastard.

Scarlet’s car ate up the two miles of dilapidated houses, appliance-repair shops and boarded-over junk stores that dotted the highway leading into downtown Oak Stand. As she rolled, she grew even more aggravated at the cop and his stupid speeding ticket. She didn’t care how damn sexy he looked in his uniform. Or how his touch had heated her blood. A friend of Brent Hamilton? That figured. Brent was a creep extraordinaire with gorgeous baby-blue eyes and a body that would make a nun toss her habit. He’d romanced most of the women in town. In fact, the last time Scarlet had been in Oak Stand, he’d tried to hook up with her.

Ugh. She had to talk some sense into her flighty sister before Rayne got hitched to a player of epic proportion. Brent spelled heartache and she had already had enough of that in her life. Scarlet knew what was up. Brent had hoodwinked her sister with his greasy smile and hot bod in order to hitch his wagon to Rayne’s rising star. As soon as she had mentioned the M word, Scarlet knew she would have to do more than protest from afar. She needed to go to Texas. Thank goodness she was on hiatus. Small favors.

But the cop had said new husband.

Scarlet’s mind stutter-stepped. Surely, Rayne and Brent weren’t already married. Her older sister had said maybe sometime in September. It was still August. Very hot, sticky, sweltering August.

Rayne wouldn’t get married and not tell Scarlet. No matter how badly their last conversation had gone.

Would she?

The town square materialized in front of her windshield, withered green and stereotypically small. Large oak trees hunkered in the shady park that centered the town. Brick streets, tired businesses and faded signs wrapped round it, clinging to the park like a toddler. Last spring, a tornado had ripped through town, leaving many businesses damaged. The First United Methodist Church of Oak Stand still lacked a steeple and several businesses remained boarded up. But otherwise, Oak Stand looked the same.

She rounded the square, noticing it seemed busier than usual. Almost every parking spot was taken, including all the ones in front of the Dairy Barn, the hometown diner that masqueraded as haute cuisine here. Directly in front of the Oak Stand Baptist Church were several vans with Horizon Blue Production Company on the side panel. Horizon Blue was the company contracted to film Rayne Rose's *A Taste of Texas*, a cooking and travel show debuting on a food channel. But that was to be filmed at Serendipity Inn, her aunt's newly refurbished bed-and-breakfast. And production wasn't scheduled to begin until September.

Or so Scarlet thought.

She slowed her car as she approached the front of the church. Only one man stood outside the closed doors, camera held at his side. Hmm. Something was going on and she suspected it had to do with Rayne.

She searched for a parking spot, but there were none near the church. She circled the square again, looking for an empty slot, finally finding one on a side street next to the old green stamp store. She leaped out of the car, grabbed her new Marc Jacobs bag and pressed the lock on her remote key chain. She walked quickly through the shady park. Squirrels scampered out of her way and the fountain with the Rufus Tucker topper spewed tepid water. A trickle of sweat rolled between her shoulder blades and she prayed her deodorant worked as well as the ads claimed. 'Cause it was Texas hot. Beyond all degrees known.

She stepped onto the sidewalk on the other edge of the park as the double doors of the church swept open. Her sister, splendid in a soft ivory bridal gown, appeared like an angel on the elbow of the handsome Brent Hamilton. They were grinning from ear to ear at the cameras whirring around them. Brent caught his glowing bride in his arms and kissed her.

His timing couldn't have been better, though he was not an actor.

The happy couple clasp each other and stare into each other's eyes, blissfully happy. Cue the family around them, basking in the love the couple shares.

Everyone behind them "oohed" and "aahed."

Exactly.

Camera Two, get a close-up of angry sister's face. She's bewildered, hurt and furious. She won't stand for what has occurred.

Scarlet narrowed her eyes and stalked across the street toward her sister and Brent. The hurt that thumped in her chest was soon overshadowed by the anger rushing into her, whooshing in her ears, shooting out of her fingertips. She couldn't believe her eyes. Couldn't believe the timing. The irony beat down on her. She'd driven across the country to stop this very event.

Brent and Rayne broke apart and everyone clapped. Arm in arm, they turned and started down the steps toward the limo that pulled in behind Scarlet. She planted herself in Rayne and Brent's path.

Rayne's smile faltered when she saw Scarlet standing in front of the car, arms crossed. Rayne looked beyond beautiful. Absolutely tasteful, refined and... a little scared. Scarlet couldn't believe her older sister had gotten married and not invited her.

The pain razed across her heart again, but Scarlet ignored it. "Guess I missed the 'speak now or forever hold your peace' part of the ceremony."

"Scarlet," Rayne stammered, glancing desperately at her handsome groom. "You came!"

Cameras edged closer, but Scarlet was accustomed to being in front of them. They were an afterthought. "Yeah. I came to stop this sham of a wedding."

Rayne's eyes grew as big as the diamond on her left hand. Which was pretty damned big. Her sister looked at Brent, who glared at Scarlet.

"See? I told you not to call her," he said.

"Call me?" Scarlet looked past the elegant lace on her sister's shoulder to where her mother and father stood with Aunt Frances. They looked fairly alarmed, too. "No one called me."

One cameraman came too close. Scarlet whirled. "Back off, buddy. This is between me and my sister."

He immediately stepped back.

Amateur.

"Scarlet, you're making a scene," Brent said, taking her elbow so he could move her out of the way.

"Really?" Scarlet asked, trying like hell not to cry. Rayne had married this too-good-looking waste of skin. Scarlet was too late. All that effort to stop Rayne from making a colossal lapse in judgment, and Scarlet had arrived an hour too late.

If only that cop hadn't stopped her. She might have made it. Might have burst in and objected... on the grounds that Brent Hamilton was a man-whore and not fit to lick the soles of her sister's shoes.

"I always make a scene," Scarlet said drily, wrenching her elbow from his grasp and ignoring him. She looked at her sister instead. "Rayne?"

"Sorry, Scarlet. I love you, but I love Brent, too. We're married and we're staying that way. I don't care if he screwed half of Texas, he's my husband now. So stop the drama." Rayne pushed past Scarlet, dragging Brent with her. The limousine driver opened the door with a flourish.

Rayne turned around. "You can come to Serendipity and celebrate with us if you'd like."

Then she disappeared into the depths of the car with Brent right behind her. Henry, Rayne's son, sped by Scarlet and leaped onto Brent's lap.

"Come on, Aunt Scarlet! We're gonna party!" he yelled out the window as the limo pulled away from the curb.

Scarlet didn't say a thing. She couldn't have if she wanted. She'd failed miserably. She felt like crying into a vodka tonic, but Oak Stand was a dry town. Hell. If there was any time she needed a drink, it was now.

Her mind tripped back to the little bottle of rum lying beside the crumpled speeding ticket. It was all she had to take away the sting of failure. The sting of hurt.

Man, this day sucked.

CHAPTER TWO

HE'D LOST HIS COMPOSURE.

Not cool. He shouldn't have baited her. Shouldn't have implied she was a bitch. And he damned sure shouldn't have touched her.

Adam Hinton dusted the dirt and gravel off his boots as he watched the taillights of the BMW fade into the distance. He'd polished the black motorcycle boots last night and now they looked dusty.

Damn it.

He reached inside the cruiser for the backpack holding an assortment of necessities. First-aid kit, flashlight, extra clothes and other things he might need when away from the small house he rented in the middle of Oak Stand. He pulled a package of wet wipes from the depths. Not the best thing to use on leather, but it would do. He'd apply another coat of polish later tonight.

He needed to stop by the Hamilton reception. He'd told Brent he would, even though technically he was on duty. It could count as his lunch hour. He liked both Rayne and Brent, though he didn't know them as well as others in the small town did. He'd only been in Oak Stand for nine months. But as the newly appointed police chief, it was in his best interest to drop by the much-anticipated event. Nearly everyone in the town had been invited to the wedding and reception, which was being filmed as the premiere of *A Taste of Texas*, a new show featuring Rayne Rose, a rising chef in the culinary world. Not only was it a joyous celebration of the love shared between the couple, but also of the opportunity Rayne Rose had given Oak Stand when she'd talked the network into using Serendipity Inn as the base for filming the show. Everyone was thrilled about the potential benefit to a town still trying to get on its feet after a tornado ripped through last spring.

Everyone except obviously one smoking-hot redhead.

The image of Scarlet arching against the rear of the BMW like a naughty advertisement for porn popped into his mind. She'd had him salivating at the blatant taunt. He'd done his best to remain impassive, but inside his libido had ratcheted up several notches and revved to near out of control.

She was everything he wanted and nothing he needed.

Adam felt his groin tighten. Oh, yeah. Scarlet Rose was the type of woman he lusted after. Lush, brash and absolutely naughty. He liked the girls who wore their clothes too tight, drank Bud from a bottle and had tattoos of *La Vida Loca* on their backside. Years ago, he'd gone through a parade of women who threw things at him when they got angry, wore cheap red lace bras and drove him totally over the edge.

Why he preferred trouble to perfectly acceptable in a sweater set escaped him. He supposed it had something to do with his father and his sexcapades. That's exactly what his shrink would say. Perhaps Adam could explore that line of reasoning the next time he went to Houston and saw Dr. Fitzgerald. Maybe he could find out why coiffed blondes with monogrammed stationary turned him off. Why cute soccer moms with juice packs and empty smiles left him cold. And why women who went to Bible study and drank hot tea with lemon made him want to run for the hills.

Because those kinds of women were what a police chief needed. An acceptable lady. Not a sex kitten.

He gave himself a mental shake and pulled his thoughts from women of his past, present and future.

He was on the clock with a job to do.

He tossed the soiled wipe into the trash bag he kept on the floor of the idling cruiser and climbed inside. One pass around the town, then he'd stop at the reception. Hopefully, the redhead hadn't caused any problems. By his watch, she would have been too late. But something told him she wouldn't let Rayne and Brent get in her way.

Desire unraveled in his belly. He tamped it down.

Scarlet Rose spelled trouble. With a capital T.

And if there was one thing Adam didn't need in his life, it was that kind of Trouble.

ADAM CLIMBED THE STEPS of the century-old house that served as Oak Stand's only bed-and-breakfast. It was a gingerbread of a house, freshly painted a cool blue with bright white trim. Lush ferns greeted visitors as they made their way onto the wide porch featuring rocking chairs and a porch swing. He could hear the hum of the crowd, most of which likely filled the interior and the pristine backyards of both the inn and the Hamiltons who lived next door. No one was on the front porch.

Except Scarlet.

She sat on the porch swing, looking as if someone had kicked her. Hard.

"Hey," he said, a little too loudly.

She started. "Oh, it's you."

"Yeah," he said, for want of anything clever to say. As he stood there contemplating a feast for the eyes, his libido tapped him on the shoulder and whispered, "I want some of that." Libido was hard to ignore.

She sighed and leaned back, causing the swing to tilt and her breasts to thrust forward. A gold shoe charm hung from a chain around her neck, nestling right in the middle of her breasts. He wanted to be that little shoe. His mouth went dry at the thought. His libido resumed the incessant tapping.

"Wow. Not only are you competent in the art of detection, but you excel in the art of conversation, too. Bet the ladies in town are lining up." Sarcasm didn't drip from her mouth. It gushed enough for him to shove his libido under a rock.

"No luck in stopping the wedding?"

Her eyes narrowed. "You gave me that DUI test on purpose."

He shook his head. "No. I detained you because a bottle of liquor fell from your glove compartment. I'm entrusted with a job to protect this community."

She snorted. "Yeah. I'm a real danger. Hide your children."

"Just doing my job."

She shrugged. "I wasn't in time. Guess we bitches don't always get our way."

He winced. "I shouldn't have implied you are a bitch. It was unprofessional. I'm sorry."

She averted her eyes toward the large magnolia tree that squatted in the yard between the inn and the street. "No problem. I am a bitch. Everyone knows it."

Silence descended on the porch. He thought he heard crickets.

"I'm sure you're not, um, well, not to everyone." Damn. What was he? A tongue-tied virgin standing in front of a wet-dream fantasy girl?

Amusement twitched at her mouth and her gaze caught his. Her eyes weren't brown like her sister's. More of a hazel with flecks of gold and green. They looked like the granite on his kitchen counter. Mesmerizingly gorgeous. Of course, he couldn't see them from where he stood, but he remembered from earlier. "You're being nice to me."

He shrugged. "Not really, but I sense you need someone to give you a break today."

"Like you did earlier? You gave me a DUI test on the side of the highway a mere—" she glanced at the red leather watch on her arm "—forty minutes ago."

He glanced through the glass in the oval door. The parlor looked to be a crush of people, talking with their hands, sipping punch. It looked uncomfortable. He moved toward Scarlet. "Again, just doing—"

"Your job. Yeah, I get it," she muttered, not moving from her spot on the swing.

"So, are you in time-out or something?"

At that, she laughed. It sounded like tinkling bells and his groin tightened. "Yeah, something like that."

He gestured toward the rocker in front of the swing. "Mind if I sit?"

"It's a free country."

“Not really, if you think about it,” he replied, sinking into the flowered cushion of the rocker. “We pay taxes.”

She jerked her gaze to his. “You’re strange.”

“I think I’d rather you call me a bitch,” he said. Did everyone think him strange? Hell, he’d heard nothing but the same from his own mother every day of his life. Along with his father. And nanny. And tutors. The list could go on and on.

She lifted her eyebrows and laughed. His libido climbed out from under the rock where he’d stuffed it and punched him in the gut. A match struck, desire flamed. He needed to get his ass off the porch, shake a few hands and choke down some wedding cake. He didn’t need to tempt himself with the woman in front of him.

Yet, he didn’t move.

“So are you a bitch?” she asked, a twinkle in her eye.

“Is that code for asking if I’m gay?” he said.

“Are only gay guys bitches?”

“I really don’t know,” he said, finally cracking a smile. It felt creaky. Unused.

For a moment they sat, measuring each other. It was a far different vibe from the one they’d engaged in earlier.

“My roommate’s gay. I’ll ask him,” she said, scuffing one heel against the painted boards. She set the swing going a bit and stared off into the distance at a stop sign at the end of the street. Or maybe it was the Weeks’s old Chrysler parked in their driveway. He couldn’t tell.

“Your roommate’s gay? Interesting.”

“Yeah. The best roommate a girl can have. He cooks things like reductions and flambé, cleans with pure vinegar and knows what sweater goes with my newest wedges. I should probably marry him. He’d love that kind of cover.” She smiled again, shifting her attention to him. It felt good having her regard. He wanted to stay there, under her gaze, under her spell. “My roommate is Stefan Horton. And I suppose I should tell you he’s not out. So…” She made a lock motion, tossing the imaginary key over her shoulder.

She said it as though he should know the name. He searched the recesses of his mind. No clue. “Stefan Horton?”

“He plays Karakas on Deep Shadows.”

“Oh.” Adam had never watched the campy drama, though plenty of people around town had buzzed about it since the day it debuted. Everyone knew the demonically sexy queen of the vampires was played by Frances’s niece, who happened to be Chef Rayne Rose’s younger sister. The Oak Stand Gazette had done a feature piece on Scarlet and had even netted a telephone interview. He’d perused the interview one night while sitting on the outskirts of town, waiting for the roughnecks at Cooley’s bar to get rowdy the way they did every ladies’ night. He’d remembered her publicity shot. The alabaster breasts threatening to topple out of the black spandex. Those red, red lips and haunting eyes.

“You don’t watch, I take it?”

He shook his head. “The existential angst that underpins the soap opera doesn’t fit my ideal viewing parameters.”

“Big words. And it’s not a soap opera,” she said, flipping her ponytail over her shoulder. Though her skin was remarkably fair, she was not freckled. Her shoulders were smooth and faintly golden from the sun, as if awaiting his kiss. “You’re not from around here.”

It was a question. “No. I’m originally from Houston.”

“You don’t sound like you’re from Houston.”

He leaned forward and clasped his hands. He was accustomed to questions. Everyone in Oak Stand wanted to know who your mama and daddy were. And where you attended church. But he

hated answering questions about his past. “I went to prep school on the East Coast. They force Texas twang out, much like I’m sure you did when you trained as an actress. You don’t sound Texan.”

“I’m not a Texan. I’m from everywhere.” The mood shifted. No more lightness. Something darker had awakened in her. For a moment she didn’t speak, seemed caught in her thoughts. Then she looked up at him. “You know, I have some wicked fantasies about prep-school boys in stuffy oxford shirts and sweater cardigans. About getting them out of those khaki pants.”

It was off-kilter. Almost sarcastic. She vamped him and his blood responded, heating like lava, making him forget who he was. Her gaze narrowed to smolder and her pink tongue appeared at the corner of her plump lips, throwing gunpowder onto the fire.

He couldn’t stop himself. He dragged his gaze over her fantasy of a body. The tank top was tight and outlined what he wanted to see. Even her blue-green nail polish looked provocative. He knew it was wrong. He knew he’d poured his own fuel onto the fire that blazed between them. “I had some pretty wicked fantasies myself. The best one involved a smart-mouthed redhead with long legs and big—”

“Are you flirting with me?”

Her words were like ice water, dousing the flickering flames within him. What in the hell had he been thinking playing with her like that?

“Are you flirting with me?” he countered with a deadpan expression.

He found his cool. No need to let her know how much he wanted to handcuff her in a very unprofessional way. No need to let her see the weakness he held when it came to women like her.

She leaped to her feet. “No.”

She walked toward the front door, not bothering to glance back at him.

His body bade him to follow her, to find out how it would feel to have her perfect white teeth nipping his earlobe, to have her abundant flesh filling his hands. To discover the way she’d feel beneath him, on top of him, around him.

But Adam didn’t move. He was no slave to desire. Not anymore. So instead of watching Scarlet walk away—which he knew had to be a great view—he focused on a moth fluttering above some flowering bushes ringing the porch.

Brother, you’ve lost your mind. Don’t forget who you are in this town. You are the law. And you are currently on duty. No indulging in witty repartee with a bold strawberry tart who broke the law less than an hour ago. Get a grip.

He rose and straightened, donning his resolve and doffing his uniform hat.

Then he traced Scarlet’s steps into the inn.

The parlor was crowded, so he didn’t see where Scarlet headed. A few familiar faces met his gaze. The hardware-store owner shook his hand, the mayor slapped his back and he was certain Betty Monk had copped a feel of his butt. It was either her or Grace Lewis. And neither of those ladies had seen their natural hair color in thirty years.

“Adam,” the bride said, pulling her dress hem from under the heavy foot of Bubba Malone. “I’m so glad you made the reception. Have you had a piece of cake yet?”

Leave it to Rayne to try and feed him the minute he stepped inside. He shook his head. “Not yet. Sorry I had to miss the ceremony, but someone had to keep thieves and murderers from crashing the wedding.”

Along with sexy sisters on a mission to destroy wedded bliss.

But he didn’t add that fact.

Bubba shoved the last of his cake into his mouth and mumbled, “I’d a liked to see ’em try to crash that wedding. Heads would have rolled, by God.”

Rayne laughed. “It’s too bad you didn’t pull my baby sister over. She almost made it in time to cause even more of a sensation than she did.”

“Actually—” Adam said, only to close his mouth when Bubba made the kill slash across his own throat.

“Actually what?” Rayne said, her brow furrowed.

He stared at Rayne for a moment, not sure how to get out of admitting he’d ticketed her sister and did what she’d suggested—held Scarlet up long enough to keep her from crashing the ceremony. He could almost visualize Scarlet blazing into the church and stalking up the aisle with her vibrant hair flaming around her. Rayne was pretty with an angelic face framed by wild red corkscrew curls. But she was nothing compared to the siren who had bent over the back of her car and dared him to frisk her. No comparison whatsoever.

“Nothing,” Adam said, looking at Bubba, who looked alarmed. Scarlet’s antics must be a touchy subject.

“Oh.” Rayne spun around and her hair nearly landed in Bubba’s punch glass. “My sister is around here somewhere. I’d like you to meet her. You might want to go ahead and introduce yourself. If she stays any longer than a day or two, you’ll run into her. She draws trouble like roadkill draws flies.” Rayne laughed as if she’d cracked a joke, but there was an edge in her voice.

As if he didn’t already know.

As if Scarlet’s naughtiness wasn’t exactly what drew him to her. That and her playground of a body.

His mouth watered at the thought of taking a ride on Scarlet.

“She done slipped out the back. Or maybe up the stairs,” Bubba said, rotating his large head like a periscope. “All I know is she ain’t feeling herself or she’d be down here regalin’ us.”

Rayne sighed. “True. She’s hurt. And angry.”

“You know, Hinton, I’ve been thinking of taking up law enforcement. You got room on that huge force for a man of my statue?”

Bubba’s intent was obvious to Adam. He wanted to change the subject. For what reason, Adam hadn’t a clue. And he wasn’t sure about Bubba being a statue. “I might indeed.”

Bubba actually brightened at his words. “Heck, I may take you up on it. Jack’s pretty sweet on me, but he may let me try my hand at knockin’ heads and cuffin’ drunks.”

Jack Darby, Bubba’s boss and a local rancher, evidently heard his words. “I’m not that damn sweet on you. Go ahead, though they better get a tent maker busy on sewing a uniform for you.”

Adam moved along as the two men jokingly sparred about Bubba’s chances at fitting in a police cruiser. Might not be a bad idea to recruit the big man as a reserve officer. The police force had been shorthanded ever since Sherwood McCann married and moved to Mesquite. Bubba Malone was an established member of the town. Everyone knew the easygoing, loyal-as-a-hound redneck. He’d be a good man to have when the chips were down.

The crowd didn’t lighten as he neared the back of the house. Left and right, people nodded at him or threw a wave of acknowledgment as he approached the porch. But he didn’t fool himself. People were friendly to him for good reason. Being Police Chief of Oak Stand may have been a lateral move for him, but it was top dog as far as law enforcement was concerned for the people of the community.

They didn’t trust him yet. Didn’t know him well enough to call him one of their own. But they respected him well enough. For the moment that was all he needed. One day he hoped to feel at home in Oak Stand, but until then, he did his best to be the man he expected himself to be. Focused, progressive and fair.

And he knew his weakness for women like Scarlet would chip away at any respectability he’d built within the hardworking, traditional-values community. He needed to stay away from her and those like her. He needed to make a date with the mayor’s daughter, the perfectly respectable one who had recently moved home to teach kindergarten at Oak Stand Elementary. What was her name? He couldn’t remember.

The back lawn was as crowded as the house, and he briefly thought about grabbing a piece of cake and returning to the vacant front porch. But there would be no sexy redhead to keep him company. He couldn't help scanning the crowd for her, even though seconds before he'd told himself to forget about her.

He didn't find Scarlet, but he did find the irascible city councilman, Harvey Primm. Unfortunately.

"Hinton, we need to talk about this upcoming hoopla at the library. We need a plan for how to handle the ruffraff that's going to show up."

"Not today, Harvey. Come by my office and we'll talk about it."

"You know they're planning a protest, don't you? Gosh danged liberals. As if we don't have bigger things to worry about in this country. Misguided fools, the whole pack of them." The councilman shook his head, disgust plainly etched across his weathered brow.

Harvey Primm served on the city council as he had for the past twenty-odd years. He was a self-proclaimed pillar of the community. Once a tire salesman, he now worked from home, producing a questionable piece of journalism called the Howard County Examiner, which unleashed gossip about his neighbors. Ironically, he also served as a deacon in a nondenominational church on the outskirts of Oak Stand. Adam found the man to be overbearing, insufferable and a little cracked. Supposedly, Harvey had grown increasingly obsessed with stopping evil in all forms ever since his wife had been killed by a drunk driver several years before. Harvey's feverish climb onto his soapbox had him extolling his views on everything from prohibiting the sale of alcohol to this newest cause—the removal of a children's book containing witchcraft from the county library. Adam tired of the man shadowing his doorstep nearly once a week.

"I'm aware, but this is neither the time nor the place. Come by and we'll talk," Adam said, trying to slide past Harvey.

The man's hand clamped down on his arm. "There is no better time than the present. The library board voted. It's done and all the protestors in the state of Texas can't stop us from removing that filth from the shelves of our library. Away from the hands of our innocent children."

Adam removed Harvey's hand. "Mr. Primm, if you wish to discuss potential problems that might arise as a result of the library board's vote, stop by my office."

With that, Adam turned and plowed through a small crowd of people, many of whom likely overheard the exchange if their silence was any indication.

Harvey didn't follow him, but Adam could feel the hard stare of the man burrowing into his back. A prickle of unease crept up his spine. Harvey, who had wholeheartedly supported Adam's hire as the new police chief, was turning out to be trouble. Adam supposed the man thought a younger appointment would be easier to control.

Guess he hadn't done his research.

Adam was definitely by the book, but he also wasn't a man to be pushed around by the whims of an egotistical, right-wing looney bird.

A flash of red caught his eye.

But it wasn't Scarlet. It was Betty Monk wearing a lavish red sequined dress paired with matching cowboy boots. Not quite fitting with the homespun, earthy decor of the reception. How he knew it was homespun and earthy was beyond him. Must have been something he picked up from the decorating magazine Roz had left in the john at the station.

Time to shake Brent Hamilton's hand, then get out of Dodge. Go to the station. File a report. Drink a cup of Roz Lane's bitter coffee. Forget about buxom beauties and how splendid they looked in black leather and red lipstick.

Betty raised her painted-on eyebrows and started barreling toward Adam.

He slid to the right, ducking behind a cluster of occupied tables. He didn't want to hear about how no one picked up after their dogs when they walked through the downtown park. Nor could he

tolerate her incessant touching. She flirted as if she were a twenty-year-old. And seemed absolutely convinced he was into her.

To hell with shaking Brent's hand. Adam would grab cake and head for the hills.
He was a good cop, but he wasn't a saint.

CHAPTER THREE

SCARLET LEANED HER HEAD against the fluffy pillows on the bed and studied Rayne. The last time she'd seen her had been four months ago when she'd come to New York City to meet with producers and TV execs. At that time, her older sister had looked thinner and more stressed. Scarlet had concluded the wear and tear to be caused by her career and dealing with being a single mother. She hadn't known Rayne had been seeing Oak Stand stud-muffin-extraordinaire Brent Hamilton. When Rayne mentioned she'd been seeing the man, Scarlet had nearly gone through the roof of the upscale bar they'd sat in.

It was obvious Rayne had given little credence to Scarlet's warning about how men like Brent never changed, since she sat in a ladder-backed chair, wearing an ivory wedding dress.

Scarlet had to admit. Rayne looked good. She'd gained weight and as she'd glided down the church steps, hand in hand with her new husband, she'd been glowing most radiantly. God, Scarlet hoped Rayne wasn't pregnant.

Now, as the shadows fell and the party-supply workers packed up the tents and folding chairs outside, Rayne looked...uncomfortable, like a kid who faced the dreaded flu shot.

Scarlet crossed her arms and glared at her older sister until their gazes finally met across the room.

"I called you," Rayne said. "I left two messages this past week alone."

Scarlet sniffed and tossed her hair over one shoulder.

"Summer," Rayne said, her words plainly apologetic. "I called and left a message on your answering machine. And I sent you an email. Have you checked your messages?"

"My name is not Summer. Not anymore."

Rayne frowned. "I know, but you'll always be Summer to me."

Scarlet shrugged, dismissing the mushy sentiment. She'd changed her name to Scarlet when she started acting. She preferred it over the misnomer her parents had given her. Nothing light and sweet about her. Especially now that her heart had been broken into a billion throbbing pieces. "You know my cell-phone number. Any thought I might be on the move, since we're on hiatus?" Scarlet drawled. She wasn't buying her sister's story. She had an inkling Rayne hadn't wanted her here for the wedding. Which hurt like hell.

"You never answer your cell. I called the number you gave me. I did." Rayne spread her hands apart. "You never called me back."

"That's not tr—" Scarlet snapped her mouth closed. Okay. She vaguely remembered a call from her sister several weeks ago. She'd been at a party. She'd had two gin and tonics in her attempt to have fun. She hadn't accomplished her mission. And she'd forgotten about Rayne's call. Damn.

"See." Rayne gave her the I'm-always-right older-sister nod. The one Scarlet hated beyond all others. Rayne clung to the power she wielded as the eldest.

"Fine. I remember it now. I was at a party in the Village. The cute guy from that hospital show was there. Sober, but still yummy. I, on the other hand, had a few drinks too many. I forgot about the call."

Rayne closed her eyes. "Good gravy, you are a piece of work."

Scarlet tossed her sister a smart-ass smile. "Why, thank you."

Rayne opened her eyes and leveled her gaze. "Look, I know you have reservations about Brent, but—"

"Reservations? Yeah, you could call them that," Scarlet said. "Rayne, he tried to pick me up at a bar three years ago. Slimy pick-up line and he didn't even buy me a beer. He's not the marrying kind. Guys like him don't change."

Rayne waved her left hand in front of Scarlet. The diamond on the wedding band caught the sunlight streaming into the room. “I beg to differ. He is the marrying kind.”

Scarlet shook her head. Rayne had no clue what she’d done. She’d married a veritable slut. No way would Brent be faithful. Scarlet knew his kind. They smiled, cajoled and had a gal’s ankles over her head before she could even get his digits. No way this ended well. “I’m sorry I can’t be happier, but this has heartbreak written all over it.”

Rayne laughed. “Says the girl who has never been in love. What’s your longest relationship? A month? You flit from one thing to the other. Deep Shadows is the biggest commitment you’ve made thus far, so I don’t think you’re qualified.”

Little do you know, big sis.

“I don’t have to be in love to know you just screwed the pooch,” Scarlet snipped. “And let’s not bring me into this. We’re talking about you. Wholesome, smart, accomplished Rayne. Butter wouldn’t melt in your mouth. You don’t know about the big, bad wolves in this world.”

The ones that rip out your heart and then tap-dance on it.

“So I have to live in New York City to recognize people for what they are? Jeez, I didn’t know. I suppose I should have consulted my experienced, world-weary twenty-six-year-old sister on the steps I should take on falling in love.”

“Love?” Scarlet snorted. “I don’t think you should call your desire to get into a hunk’s undies love.”

Rayne flushed. “You wouldn’t know love if it slapped you in the face.” She usually looked sweet and fragile. She wasn’t. She fought dirty and pulled hair. “This is not about sleeping with Brent. I could do that without a ring on my finger. I love him and he loves me...and Henry.”

Scarlet shook her head. “I’ve been around Oak Stand. I’ve been around him. You want to believe that because you’re lonely and Phillip is gone.”

Rayne looked as if she might physically lash out at her. “This has nothing to do with being lonely or Phillip. You can’t understand, because you’re not capable. This is my life. If I make mistakes, they’re on me. I don’t need you to save me. You have enough on your plate.”

Scarlet couldn’t disagree. Her life had been tough since she and John had split well over a year ago. What good would it do to toss her pain out for others to see? Her heart still ached, but no one would ever know how broken she truly was. She wouldn’t allow it because she couldn’t survive in her business by admitting to being vulnerable. To being dumped like last year’s fashions.

Her sister rose. “You know, I won’t be able to change your mind. That’s obvious. Maybe if you hang around for a couple of days, you might see things differently.”

“You’re not going on a honeymoon?”

“Not until October, when we go to San Antonio for the Christmas show. Brent has a deadline at the end of September and I’m a working wife and mom. Plus, every day with Brent is—”

“Don’t say it.” Scarlet knew she sounded like a snotty kid who didn’t get the last piece of candy. Her intentions had been honorable. She hadn’t wanted to see her older sister suffer through more than she’d already suffered after the death of her first husband. Didn’t want her to feel the aching emptiness Scarlet felt each time she closed her eyes. Time didn’t always heal wounds. “I’ll stick around for a few days, but don’t count on my changing my mind on lover boy anytime soon.”

Rayne opened her mouth to argue, then seemed to think better of it. She kept her hand on the doorknob for a moment, gazing hard at the Tiffany lamp on the nightstand next to Scarlet. Finally she made eye contact. “For what it’s worth, I appreciate your caring enough to try to save me from a perceived mistake.”

“You’re welcome,” Scarlet said, trying to keep her stern resolve, but a warm spot pooled in her heart at her sister’s words. She’d always craved Rayne’s approval. Probably because Rayne had been such a steadfast influence in a world that had rocked arpeggio Scarlet’s whole life. From the moment she’d been born, her artisan parents had dragged their children around the country, living in

communes, on Indian reservations and sometimes in campers in the middle of huge national forests. Scarlet's childhood had been both magical and discordant. The two little girls had needed more stability than either parent was willing to deliver in their quest for peace, love and rainbows.

Rayne had been the one to braid Scarlet's hair, teach her how to tie her shoes and make sure she had milk money in her pocket. Rayne had sung lullabies, made macaroni and cheese, and helped Scarlet learn how to write her full name on broken-line paper. She'd been Scarlet's angel right up until the day her parents had sent Rayne to live with Aunt Fran.

But they hadn't allowed Scarlet to stay in Texas. They'd chained her to them, declaring her too young to be separated from them. They had bumped from town to town. And it had made Scarlet tough. She learned to take care of herself. To punch bullies in the nose. To connive members of the commune into giving her ice-cream money. To manipulate. To blend. To pretend. Her earliest experiences had been training ground for becoming an actress.

There was little Scarlet wouldn't do for Rayne...even if it meant knocking some sense into her. But it was too late for such drastic measures, thanks to Officer Tight Ass.

She swung her legs off the bed and padded to the window. The sun sank behind the neighbor's house, thrusting brilliant fingers of light upon the deep green grass. It was peaceful and very, very different from the noisy streets normally outside her window.

Her mind flitted from her sister to the cop who had frisked her. Officer Adam Hinton.

When he'd touched her, she'd felt something that had been absent for well over a year—a stirring of desire. The flicker of feeling had rocked her. For the past few months, she'd been on a mission to feel something, anything, at a man's touch. She'd forced herself to flirt, purposefully drank too much and bore sloppy kisses from strangers in clubs, but to no avail. She'd been dead to desire. Until a few hours ago.

So why now? Why him?

Adam Hinton was not her usual type. Or maybe he was. She couldn't be certain. Until John, she'd liked young, wild and irresponsible in a guy. Now she didn't have a clue what she wanted in a man. But something had been there between her and the cop. Perhaps his refusal to fall prey to her manipulation had poked her inner psyche. Maybe his by-the-book, take-no-shit attitude had reminded her of John. Had to be that. There was no other reason she'd felt anything other than anger at the squeaky-clean Officer Hinton.

She pressed her forehead against the warmth of the windowpane and touched the gold slipper nestled between her breasts.

Her heart felt like tissue paper, so how could she even contemplate being with another man when she still hemorrhaged from the only time she'd taken a chance on love? It didn't seem right.

Still, Adam Hinton was utterly tempting.

Straight as an arrow, honest as a Boy Scout and clean as a... She couldn't think what would be as clean. Not a whistle because spit got in it. Something about Adam made her want to smudge him with her fingerprints, and that baffled the hell out of her.

Because she was still in love with John.

THE COFFEE REMAINING in the pot at the police station looked as if it might cure a bacterial infection, so Adam skipped an evening cup of java and grabbed a bottle of water from the small fridge beside Roz's desk, which she kept stocked.

"Harvey Primm called again," his on-duty officer, Jared Mullins, hollered from the desk he'd set behind a makeshift bookcase to prevent anyone from seeing the colossal amount of time he wasted on the internet.

From over the barrier, Adam saw Jared switch his computer screen from something on YouTube to the screen saver showing his dog, Winchester, holding a duck in his mouth. Jared was a decent person. Mostly. He wasn't, however, a good officer. Because he was the nephew of the mayor, he'd stayed a permanent fixture at the Oak Stand Police Department for the past five years.

“Already saw him at the Hamilton reception. He’ll be on our doorstep Monday. Bank on it.” Adam twisted the top off the water bottle. “So I’m guessing you found a suspect for the Porky case.”

Jared rolled his chair backward and faced him. “Huh?”

Adam indicated the computer screen. “Find the culprit on YouTube? Is that how they got the statue from the parking lot? On a skateboard?”

Jared wasn’t smart enough to show shame. “Well, not really. But I’ve been checking out Facebook in case any of the little punks posted something about it in their status updates.”

Adam didn’t blink. “Sounds like good detective work.”

Jared grinned. “Yeah, I thought so, too.”

“Not good with sarcasm, are you?”

“You being sarcastic?”

“Never mind,” Adam said, pulling himself from where he leaned against the filing cabinet. “If it wouldn’t be too much trouble, head out and question the neighbors next to Porky’s. See if they saw any kids hanging out around the joint last night. Whoever took Bud Henry’s pig statue didn’t waltz out without someone seeing something. It’s pretty big.”

“It won’t be no trouble. I need to grab some grub anyhow.”

“Well, don’t let actual police work stand in your way of onion rings and a fried-chicken sandwich,” Adam drawled, heading toward his small office in the rear of the station. The place had been built over fifty years ago and still smelled like cigarettes. Adam supposed the chain-smoking former chief of police had overlooked the ordinance banning lighting up in public facilities. He’d also overlooked the chest pains that had landed him over at the Overton Funeral Parlor. He’d died in the very chair Adam now sank into.

Actually, not the “very” chair. Adam had purchased an ergonomic model when he first arrived in Oak Stand. But Dan Drummond had died in the office. The greasy fries got to him before the cancer sticks did.

Roz wouldn’t even come inside the office anymore. The administrative assistant handed him messages and files when he passed her desk. She said she felt a presence in the office. She believed in ghosts and karma and crap like that.

Adam didn’t believe in poltergeists, but he did believe the former chief’s influence hung over the station to the point of being stifling. Dan had been the chief for over thirty-three years before buying the farm, and Adam discovered very quickly the other officers and Roz believed Dan’s way had been the only way. Which had become a bit of a problem.

The next time he heard another “But that’s not the way we do it,” he might dock some pay.

Of course, he would never resort to something so cruel as to take bread from the mouths of his officers’ families, but he was damned tired of having every suggestion and order questioned because it wasn’t how they’d always done it. Frankly, how they’d always done it had been ineffective. The files were antiquated, the equipment not up to standards and the procedural elements redundant. The department had needed an overhaul for a long time.

Lucky Adam. He got to fix it. Not an easy task.

“You want me to pick you up something at the Dairy Barn?” Jared asked from the open doorway. Adam glanced up and suppressed a scowl at the way the man’s shirttail hung out on one side. He’d asked his officers time and again to make sure they looked professional. Jared seemed the most challenged in this area, especially as it seemed his shirt was a magnet for barbecue sauce, mustard and other nefarious condiments. But at least he was generous enough to ask Adam if he wanted a sandwich.

“No, thanks. I’ll grab something later.”

Jared sent him a wave, and moments later the heavy metal door slammed shut. The small building fell silent.

Adam leaned back in his chair and sighed. He had plenty of paperwork awaiting him, but for some reason, he didn't feel like diving into it. He closed his eyes and was immediately assaulted by the image of Scarlet Rose.

He hated that he couldn't shake the niggling of want that had burrowed inside him and taken root. He couldn't act—

The harsh ring of the phone interrupted his self-admonishment.

Roz had clocked out. No one to answer but him. He should let the machine pick up, but it might be an emergency. He snatched the receiver off the hook. "Oak Stand Police Department. Hinton."

"Well, hello, stranger," the voice purred.

He closed his eyes. "Angi."

"Oh, you remembered what my voice sounds like."

Adam breathed a silent curse. One he'd never say aloud. "How could I forget? I heard it almost every day for the ten months we were together."

"You changed your cell-phone number," she breathed, ignoring his gibe about the length of their marriage. Her voice sounded gravelly from the cigarette smoke of the bar she had likely visited the night before. He could visualize her on the other side of the line. Tight dress, too much makeup with a glass of sweet tea cradled in one hand. She'd be sprawled across the bed on her stomach, likely barefoot, chewing a piece of spearmint gum to give her tea mint flavor. She'd likely taken a break in getting ready for round two for the weekend, where she would probably hit two or three clubs with her girlfriends. He knew her, and he knew her schedule. It hadn't changed with their marriage and it sure hadn't changed with their divorce.

"New life, new number," he said.

Angi didn't respond. A few seconds slipped by.

"That's what you want? A whole new life? You want to just forget about us? About me?" Her poor-me routine was in full force, the one she'd perfected after losing their baby. The one that stirred guilt inside him every time.

He tried to dash away the feelings of sadness, anger and bitterness her words brought forth. "Don't start, Angi. There is no us anymore." Adam rubbed his eyes with his thumb and finger. He didn't need this now. Not when he had a report to file on a certain speeder. Not when he had a giant pig statue to locate.

"You didn't think that the last time you were in Houston. It felt very much an us. In fact, it felt like old times." Angi's voice had returned to breathy and teasing. This was the voice she used on him every time she wanted something, whether it was a drink, sex or money. Usually it was all three. And damn his weak hide, he sometimes gave in.

"That night was a mistake," he muttered, wishing he hadn't answered the phone. He also wished he'd shoved her out of his Houston hotel door the last time he'd been in the city. Instead he allowed her to wheedle herself inside for a nightcap. Which had led to sex so hot the hotel manager had called the room and requested they keep it down. Which had led to his writing her a check to cover her rent for the month—money over and above the alimony he paid her on a regular basis. As he'd scribbled his name on the signature line, he'd felt dirty and used. Shame had coursed through him. Didn't matter that she had seduced him. Didn't matter that no one had forced him to write that check. Guilt reigned where Angi was concerned. As it always had.

Their disaster of a marriage had been his fault. He'd forced her into something she hadn't wanted, tried to make her into something she could never be, and they'd both paid for his mistake.

"Somehow I knew you'd say that, darlin'."

"What do you want, Angi?"

"Why do I have to want something? Can't I call my ex to find out how he's doing in his new job?"

“No,” Adam said, shuffling papers around on his desk. “I’m pretty busy here, so if you don’t need anything, I’ll have to let you—”

“Wait,” Angi chirped. “I do need one itty-bitty favor.”

He slapped down the paperwork. Of course she did. “What?”

“Well, it’s not that big of a deal, but this past Wednesday I went out with some girls from the shop. We all thought Sheryl Lynn was the designated driver. It was her turn. But she thought it was Cathy’s turn. Well, anyway, I ended up having to drive ’cause Sheryl Lynn had four belly shots and—”

“You got a DUI?”

“Well...” She hesitated, the slightest edge to her voice. “Yeah.”

“Nothing I can do about that, Ang.”

“But you know people in the department. You can call Chief Ahern and—”

He tried to remain calm. Had to. “I don’t work for HPD anymore. Besides, you—”

“But your daddy is the—”

“Do not go there,” he said, no longer able to keep the anger out of his voice. He knew who his daddy was. No one had to tell him.

“Please, Adam. I don’t want to have to deal with all this. Things have been slow at the store and—”

“No.” The anger wasn’t because Angi had called him to use him. He’d accustomed himself to her manipulations long ago. The fact she wanted him to use, no, abuse, his family’s connections to get her out of something she damn well deserved...that snapped something inside him.

“Adam, just this once, baby.”

“You deserve the citation. You’ll have to take the punishment. You could have killed someone or even killed yourself. You do a lot of stupid things, lady. But that takes the cake.”

“I can’t believe you won’t help me,” she cried, all pretense now gone. “You want to play morality police, when you have the power to make this go away. I guess I should expect that from someone like you. You throw your weight around when it benefits you, but you wouldn’t deem to spit on me. I forgot. I’m nothing but trailer trash, right? Never was good enough for you. I can’t believe you didn’t make me get an abortion in the first place. You—”

“This conversation is over. Our relationship is over. Don’t call me again.” Pain ripped across his chest at her words. They were the same words she’d battered him with every time they fought. She threw up her less than advantageous background. She threw up his wealthy family connections. And she threw up the baby who had never been born. The baby who had slipped away two weeks after they’d gotten married at the courthouse.

“You mean, until you’re ready to get busy,” she said, her tone low and mean.

“That was a mistake I won’t be making again. You’re a beautiful woman, Angi, but you were right from the beginning. We don’t belong together. We never did. Don’t call back.”

He pressed the end button before he said anything more. Anger, regret and guilt twisted in his gut, and his fist itched to connect with something. He stared at the silent office before shoving his chair from his desk and grabbing the hat he’d earlier tossed onto the table beside the battle-scarred door.

He felt twitchy and restless. Only one solution for that.

Strip down and go toe-to-toe with someone.

The image of Scarlet Rose with arched back and jutting breasts flashed across his mind. Not exactly what he had in mind.

He needed a fight. Not a woman.

He punched the numbers on his cell phone. The ones that would bring him needed release. Then he’d call Jared back to the station to cover. He needed to pound the frustrations from his body and then he could do another sweep of the town.

If he got lucky, he might find that damned pig.

CHAPTER FOUR

SCARLET STARED AT HER PLATE before sliding her gaze to where her eight-year-old nephew sat chomping happily on Pop-Tarts. “What’s the white stuff in the eggs?”

Henry shrugged one shoulder. “I don’t know. Probably goat cheese. She likes to put that in everything.”

“Bluck.”

Her sister’s new husband glanced at her before redirecting his attention to the freshly squeezed orange juice sitting at his elbow. “Thought city slickers liked fancy eggs.”

“You thought wrong.” Scarlet couldn’t keep the annoyance out of her voice. She didn’t want to talk to Brent Hamilton. She edged one shoulder forward, effectively cutting him out of her world. She scooted closer to her nephew, who stuffed his frosted pastry in his mouth, though he eyed her a bit warily. Guess he thought she might go after his breakfast. She was tempted. “Are you supposed to be eating those? I thought your mom wouldn’t allow you to eat anything with chemical crap in it.”

Henry slid his gaze to Brent, who had, for the most part, ignored her after her venomous comeback. And she, too, had tried to pretend he wasn’t sitting kitty-corner from her, but that mission remained unsuccessful. For one thing, Brent was a good six-three and easily weighed two hundred and thirty pounds. For another, he was the type of guy who attracted attention as naturally as he breathed. With his dark wavy hair, icy-blue eyes and rugged good looks, he’d been popular with the ladies of Howard County for excellent reason.

She wished her parents had stayed at the inn instead of with a friend outside town. Nothing like Moon-beam—or whatever her mother was known as these days—to bring serenity to a table. Her mother preferred silent contemplation during meals.

“Pop-Tarts every now and then won’t hurt,” Brent said, meeting her gaze. He didn’t look afraid of her. More as if he didn’t want to bother with her.

“Oh, really?” Scarlet challenged, for no other reason than she was pissed she had to eat goat-cheese eggs with a man she knew was going to break her sister’s heart...if not give her VD.

He didn’t blink. “Yeah, really.”

“At it already, I see,” Rayne said as she breezed into the breakfast room. She looked gorgeous in a ruffled skirt and sleeveless lawn blouse with tiny roses embroidered along the neck. Her copper curls tumbled around her shoulders, framing her smiling face. Rayne looked...in love.

“Morning,” Rayne said, scooping an arm around her son and dropping a kiss on his head. She snagged a corner off the pastry and popped it into her mouth. “Mmm, strawberry. My favorite.”

Scarlet gaped. Her sister never ate anything that wasn’t “of the earth.” Which certainly did not include anything that came in a box or contained frosting and dyes.

Rayne moved on to her husband, grazing his scruffy cheek with a light kiss. “Morning to you, too. Again.”

A devilish light appeared in Brent’s eyes. Scarlet wanted to barf.

“Morning, baby,” he said, tugging her toward him so he could cop a cheap feel. Okay. Maybe a pat on the bottom wasn’t a cheap feel. Maybe it was a sweet display of affection. And maybe Kim Kardashian would win an Oscar.

“You, too, Scarlet,” Rayne said with a little smug smile.

Did she think the little display of family bonding would suddenly change Scarlet’s opinion on the bone-head decision her sister had made in marrying Brent? Scarlet wasn’t that easy. Even if some people thought she was.

“Morning,” Scarlet said, pushing a piece of asparagus to the top of the plate in order to make a roof over the family of disgusting eggs. Who in the world ate asparagus for breakfast anyhow?

Rayne grabbed a floral-patterned plate off the buffet and loaded it with asparagus and one piece of toast. Guess that question was answered. Yuck. Rayne sat next to Brent and buttered her whole-grain toast with fresh-churned butter from the farmer's market. She brushed her husband's hand. "So have you decided what you are going to do about the library vote?"

Brent took a sip of coffee. "I'm going to publicly oppose it. Harvey Primm is a jackass."

"Brent," Rayne warned, glancing at her son. Henry laughed behind his pastry.

"What are you talking about?" Scarlet asked, shoving her plate away. "And why the devil are you mixing goat cheese in with perfectly good eggs?"

Rayne blinked. "Huh?"

"The eggs." Scarlet waved a fork at her abandoned plate.

"They're the signature breakfast dish. Organic brown eggs with goat cheese and sautéed baby spinach. Everyone loves them."

Scarlet shrugged. "Okay. Whatever you say. Do I really need goat-cheese breath in the morning?"

Rayne glanced worriedly at Scarlet's half-eaten plate. Scarlet shouldn't have said anything. Her sister would be in the kitchen, trying out a new recipe.

"So what's Harvey up to now?" Scarlet asked. "Didn't he already get the liquor laws changed?"

Rayne nodded. "Yeah. Last year. Now we have to buy liquor outside the city limits. In fact, the inn had to obtain a special license to serve champagne and Bloody Marys on Sunday. This time it has to do with a children's book at the county library."

Scarlet's internal radar received a bleep. "A children's book?"

"Yeah, a children's book," Brent said. "He's hoodwinked the library board into removing it from the shelves."

"Why?" Scarlet asked.

"Because it deals with witchcraft. No different from Harry Potter or The Chronicles of Narnia, but he's convinced the book will 'rip the innocent veil from the children's eyes.' Ridiculous." He snorted and set his fork on the empty plate before him.

"Have you read it?" Scarlet asked Rayne.

"I have," Henry piped up. He had crumbs on his chin and looked suitably adorable. "The Magpie's Jewel. It's really good. There's this ruby that has a curse trapped in the center of it. And this one wizard dude, well, he gets this, um, scroll thing and reads about the jewel. But then this magpie steals it from the most powerful witch in the world. So these kids have to find the jewel before this crazy dude does or he'll rule the world."

Henry paused for dramatic effect. Scarlet wasn't exactly following the story plot, but he certainly seemed excited about it. "They find it, and find out this bird is really the spirit of their grandmother who was killed by the evil wizard. It's a really good book. I wish they wouldn't make them take it out of the library."

Brent smiled at Henry. It made Scarlet feel uncomfortable because she could see the love in the man's eyes. Rayne's words rang in her ears. He loves me...and Henry. Scarlet swallowed her doubt and redirected her attention to Primm and the book in question. "So what is the community saying?"

"They're split," Rayne said.

Brent nodded. "Very splintered, and with some throwing religion into the debate, it's become very polarized with neither contingency giving the other a chance to change minds. It's been frustrating as an author to see people decide the worth of a book without even bothering to read it."

Scarlet had nearly forgotten Brent was an author. When Rayne had revealed Brent's secret career as an author of middle-grade sports books, Scarlet had been as shocked as anyone else who'd met the hunky, all-American former football player. It wasn't as if she didn't think him capable. Okay, she hadn't. So it was a-baseball-bat-against-the-head shocking. "What's going to happen?"

Brent shrugged. “A few people have talked of staging a peaceful protest in front of the library. I belong to several writers’ loops online and there has been a lot of chatter about the censorship of the book, with some news networks covering it. Surprised me that a small county like ours would receive so much attention. But something about an award-winning children’s book being ripped from the shelves and unavailable to countless children has many people angry and ready to do battle over the issue. And not just in Oak Stand.”

Scarlet had loved a good protest ever since she’d watched Norma Rae on the rented VCR when she was twelve. Something about the spirit of fighting for one’s convictions, of banding together against wrong, made her blood sing. She’d participated in dozens over the past few years. The last one had been over the destruction of historic storefronts in order to build a parking garage. A picture of her, openmouthed, toting a protest sign had made the front page of the city section of the Times. John had obtained the original photo and had it framed for her. Pain struck swift and hard as it always did when she thought of John. She shoved her hurt away and focused on the task at hand.

“Has anyone tried a town-hall meeting? They’ve been pretty successful in many communities when there is serious contention on a subject.”

“I don’t think anyone has thought of it,” Rayne said.

“That’s actually a good idea, Scarlet. Not sure if we have time, though. They’re removing the book this Saturday. I’m sure Harvey will have something dramatic planned.” Brent studied Scarlet. She could sense his thoughts. Maybe this chick has a brain.

Yeah, cowboy, she did.

“I participated in one when they were going to tear down some buildings in the Bronx. Of course, it did little good. Seems parking was more important than Saturday-night bingo. We held a protest, too, but if you could arrange a town-hall meeting, it may help people in Oak Stand see another side of the issue.”

“Do you think we can make that happen? I don’t see a church wanting to get involved, and the library surely won’t encourage something like that.” Rayne shoved another piece of asparagus in her mouth and chewed thoughtfully.

“A local business place might work if there is room for people to gather,” Scarlet said, turning to the tea at her elbow for morning sustenance. She’d have to scour the kitchen later for something normal to eat.

“I’ll talk to Nellie Darby. She worked at the library several years ago and has been pretty vocal in her opposition. She just had a baby, but I bet she’ll be willing to help. She’s definitely got pull with the mayor.” Brent picked up his plate, dropped a kiss atop his wife’s head and pushed open the breakfast-room door toward the kitchen. “I’ll drop by the Darby ranch later, but first I have work to do. Deadlines don’t care about weddings or town-hall meetings. They wait for no writer.”

“See you later, honey,” Rayne said. Henry managed a wave.

Scarlet said nothing, but she had good reason. She was caught in her thoughts.

“I think I’ll stick around for a while.” She pushed her chair back from the table.

“Cool,” Henry said, swatting at the milk moustache above his wide smile. Darn, he was charming...and growing up. How long had it been since she’d spent quality time with her nephew? Too long. “You can come to my football game. We’re playing the Horned Frogs this Saturday. Horned Frogs is a funny name, ain’t it?”

“Isn’t it,” Rayne corrected, before leveling her gaze at Scarlet. “And you’re not fooling me. You’re staying because of the potential protest. You love the drama.”

Scarlet ignored her sister’s barb and looked at Henry. “I’d love to see y’all whip up on the Horned Frogs this Saturday. And it is a funny name. Ain’t it?”

Rayne punched an asparagus-laden fork toward her sister. “Watch it.”

Scarlet slid her gaze to her sister. “And for the record, I’m sticking around to visit with my family, who I haven’t seen in a while. I can stay away from trouble.”

“Yeah, right. I know you. You missed out on disrupting my wedding. You’re itching for a fight. And then you’ll be gone like the wind.”

Scarlet snorted. Rayne loved to play upon the name Scarlet had chosen as her stage name. So she liked drama. She was an actress. Besides, she knew her sister’s words were partially true. She did hate injustice and was quick to jump in where she felt she was needed. Case in point, she’d gotten a driver’s license, bought a car and drove over eight hundred miles to stop her sister from making a mistake. Hadn’t worked out, of course, but she would never admit to thinking with her heart above thinking with her head. Even if it were true.

The fact was she needed to spend some time with her family. Thanks to Rayne’s wedding, both her parents, along with Aunt Frances, Henry and assorted other relatives, were all staying for the next several days within a ten-mile radius. No time like the present for cramming in hot tea on the porch, sifting through old family photos and playing UNO into the wee hours of the morning. She had several weeks’ vacation and Aunt Frances had told her the inn was closed for the next few months while they filmed *A Taste of Texas*. Scarlet had a new car, a room in which to sleep and time on her hands.

The French Riviera would have to wait.

“Whatever,” Scarlet said, grabbing the plate and following the path Brent had just taken.

“Hey, Sum—Scarlet,” Rayne called.

“Yeah?”

“I’m glad you’re staying. I’ve missed you.”

Scarlet turned and glared. “Stop doing that.”

“What?”

“Saying things that make me less pissed at you.”

Rayne’s soft laughter lingered in Scarlet’s ears as she entered the kitchen.

Brent stood at the sink, drinking from a coffee mug. Damn. She didn’t want to have to make nice with him. Not when she didn’t trust him. No matter how in love with her sister he looked, she remembered his advances three years ago. He’d been classically smooth, intimately knowledgeable about what it took to get a gal in the sack. His kiss had told her all she needed to know about him... and now he was married to her sister.

She glanced at him as she set her plate beside the farmhouse sink. “Waiting to show me what a woman like me wants?”

“Don’t do this, Scarlet.”

“What?” Scarlet spun on him and parked her fists on her hips. “Don’t remember your words to me that night? The sweet nothings you whispered into my ear while trying to get into my pants?”

“I was a different man.”

“Yeah, right.”

Brent set his mug on the tile counter. Loudly. She could feel his anger. “Look, I get it. I was an asshole. But I’m not that guy. I never was that guy. I’m no more a man-whore than you are a vampire-queen bitch. Just an act.”

“What do you mean by that?”

“I mean that my life was damned empty. I was a shell of a man, but I’m not anymore. I love Rayne. I always have. She and Henry, along with claiming my writing career, have made me whole. Have filled me up. So don’t hold my past against me. It’s not fair.”

Oddly enough, she liked him better pissed than smarmy. “I’ll judge what’s fair. I don’t want you making her believe in love and then leaving her behind when new pastures call. I’ve seen it before.”

I’ve experienced it before.

Broken hearts were no stroll through a park. She’d be damned if poor Rayne had to endure what she had over the past year. Only now did she feel as though she could creep around and function, no matter what face she wore in public.

“There are no other pastures. I’ve found my sanctuary.” Brent shoved past her to the back door that would lead to the carriage house he leased from his parents. “I don’t have to convince you, Scarlet. Don’t make Rayne choose. You’ll lose, because I’m her family now.”

Ouch. His words filleted her heart. She lifted a hand and tugged on the slipper that pressed heavy against her chest as if it could stop the hemorrhaging. It didn’t help. She knew there was truth to his words, and that scared her. She couldn’t protect Rayne or Henry. Not from the hurt that would come when Brent Hamilton moved on. And she knew he would, no matter what he said. He was too much like John, chasing shiny new things when he tired of the familiar.

She pushed a hand through her hair, allowing the tresses to fall forward and give her a whiff of the coconut shampoo she’d used earlier. For some reason, the beachy smell soothed her.

“He’s right, you know.” A voice came from behind her, causing Scarlet to jump.

“Jeez, Aunt Fran, you could sneak up on a CIA operative,” Scarlet said, shoving her hands into her back pockets so she wouldn’t fiddle with the necklace she wore like a personal albatross.

“How did you find out I was in the CIA?” Aunt Frances grabbed a ceramic mug with a picture of a Boston terrier on it and filled it to the tip-top with coffee.

Scarlet laughed. “Wouldn’t surprise me a bit if you were.”

She took in the aunt who had taught her how to swing by pointing her toes at God and how to look for blackberry vines along ranch fence posts. Her aunt had aged well. Her gray-streaked brown bob framed a lined face that bore a cheerful countenance and wide blue eyes. She smelled of roses and freshly baked pound cake. She smelled like coming home, though Scarlet would be stretching it calling Oak Stand home. She had no home. Rolling stone and all that. Living in New York City for the past four years was as close as she’d gotten to calling a place home.

“Why did she marry him, Aunt Fran? He’s a player and I don’t see anyone taming a man like him.”

Aunt Frances raised the mug to her lips and regarded Scarlet over the rim. Her stare was wiggle-worthy, but Scarlet refrained from squirming. Never could hide much from Aunt Frances.

“Perhaps, you are only seeing what you want to see. Allowing your experiences to color your perspective.”

Scarlet shook her head. “You know how he is. You’ve lived in this town and you know what everyone says about him. How all you need is a ticket and you can stand in line for a ride on Brent. He’s—”

“Your sister’s husband and a part of this family. You need to remember that and not make her choose between the two of you. Because as much as she adores you, Summer, she loves her husband. And, honestly, he loves her.”

“Scarlet,” she reminded her aunt.

“Fine. Scarlet. Summer. Whoever you are.” Aunt Frances waved a hand. “Your name doesn’t change the fact those two have always had a connection.”

“How? She didn’t live here long enough to fall in love. She was a kid.”

“Love doesn’t happen when it’s convenient, honey. It happens when it’s meant to be. Rayne and Brent were meant to be from the first time he pegged her with an acorn to get her attention. He truly loves her...way more than he loves himself.”

Scarlet didn’t respond. What could she say? No sense in arguing. Not with Aunt Fran, who had obviously had her boots charmed off by the dashing boy next door. “Maybe.”

“No maybe about it. If you stick around for a while, you might see for yourself and feel better about things.”

How she wished those words could be true. Not only for Rayne, but for her, too. How long had it been since she felt truly happy? She knew the answer, of course. It had been a Wednesday and John had taken her to dinner and then a concert in Central Park. They had danced beneath the stars and she’d outlined all the things they would do in Italy when the film wrapped. They would shop

for heirloom silver in the piazza shops, hike the trails above deep blue lakes and eat at the trattorias hidden down meandering alleys. It had been the last night they'd made love. The last night he'd kissed her and whispered he loved her.

The next afternoon, it had been over. Nothing but smoldering ashes in what was once her heart. Scarlet caught the tiny charm John had given her between her fingers and directed her thoughts from the pain echoing in her empty heart. She couldn't save Rayne, but she could help the town by speaking up against Harvey Primm and the misguided library board. She ignored the voice in her head telling her she searched to save others because she couldn't save herself. That wasn't true. She was okay and getting better every day.

Hadn't the sexy police chief jump-started her with his touch, with his warm—okay, sizzling—regard?

Still, a town meeting and a protest would be just what she needed to make her feel productive. Useful. Powerful.

She had less than a week to help organize opposition to the censorship of *The Magpie's Jewel*. Her blood roared with purpose. She'd fight the good fight.

No man could stand in her way.

Not even the memory of the man she loved still.

CHAPTER FIVE

SIX DAYS LATER, Scarlet wiped her brow with the damp cloth she'd stored in the ice cooler at her feet and lifted her sign with purpose.

“Children have rights!” she shouted, circling the flagpole and World War II memorial centered in the front of the Oak Stand branch of the Howard County Library. Other protestors joined her in her cries for justice. There were more than twenty of them. All from different walks of life, all gathered with purpose—to protest the library board's removal of *The Magpie's Jewel* from the shelves of the children's sections of the seven library branches.

“It's hotter than hell today,” Meg Lang grumbled, tugging her long skirt up so air circulated around her pale legs. “Wish I'd worn something cooler. Thought the black emo look would stage well for the cameras. I'm paying for my stupidity.”

Scarlet smiled. Rayne's assistant had likely let vanity get in the way of practicality. The Texas sun played no favorites as it bore down upon the shoulders of the protestors. Meg wore a tight T-shirt that declared *Protest This!* with a not-so-polite gesture below it, along with a long, tight black skirt and combat boots. Her short hair stuck to her head, making her look as if she were a silent-screen goddess. Well, it would have if not for the silver ring piercing her nose.

“Yeah, I don't think I could wear any less without getting arrested.” Kate Mendez groaned, fanning herself with a now pudgy hand. She was way too pregnant to be out in the sun. A fact her husband, Rick, complained about every five minutes on the dot. Currently, her husband stood on the sidewalk with the yummy Oak Stand Police Chief.

Scarlet eyed Adam as he watched attentively from the sidelines. He stood with several townspeople who had gathered as news cameras whirred, capturing the sweating but determined protestors. “Bet he'd do it, too.”

“Who? Adam?” Kate brushed away a trickle of sweat. “Maybe. He's a by-the-book kind of guy, but he hasn't taken our signs away and made us leave even though technically we don't have a permit. Although, I think I might let him cuff me if it means spending some time in the AC.”

Scarlet thought she might let him cuff her with or without air-conditioning.

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