



SUPER ROMANCE



**The Reasons
to Stay**

LAURA DRAKE

Laura Drake

The Reasons to Stay

«HarperCollins»

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Where she belongs? Free spirit Priscilla Hart doesn't get tied down, to anyone or any place. Then she arrives in Widow's Grove and meets her half brother. The ten-year-old tough guy has no one else but her. So Priss stays—for now. But her sexy new landlord, Adam Preston, is interfering with her ideas. He's everything Priss normally steers clear of—committed, stable and no rebellious urges in sight. As opposite as they are, each conversation, each touch, each kiss they share feels so right. Can a little gangster-wannabe, an irresistible "nice guy" and an odd assortment of new friends make Priss want to stay for good?

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“My legendary luck is running true to form.”

Adam looked out to where the sun neared the horizon. “The most intriguing woman I've met in years, and she's on her way to somewhere else.”

Priss's small shoulder gave his a gentle bump. “It's only March. Nacho's not out of school till the end of June.”

“We'd better get going, if we want to be back by dark.” Adam stood, and reached a hand down to help her up. Her hand fit in his as if it belonged there.

She squeezed his hand. The look in her dark eyes lit the pilot flame in his chest, and the heat cranked up.

When his pâté sandwich tried to crawl up his throat, he swallowed it again. He'd just made up his mind to grab for the life he wanted....

Three months was not going to be near long enough.

Dear Reader,

I was so happy when, after *Her Road Home* (Mills & Boon Superromance, August 2013), Mills & Boon wanted more stories! I was missing the little Central Coast California tourist town of Widow's Grove and the townspeople.

The Reasons to Stay was born of my personal experience with cobbled-together families. You see, when I met my Alpha Dog twenty-eight years ago, he came with a bonus: sole custody of his two young children. Overnight, this clueless single girl became a wife and mother. Although none of this book is autobiographical, I hope I was able to convey some of the perpetual lostness I felt during that first year.

I hope you enjoy *The Reasons to Stay*, and watch for the cameo appearance of Sam and Jesse from the first book. Then watch for them all to turn up in the next book coming in 2015!

Laura Drake

P.S. I enjoy hearing from readers. You can contact me and sign up for my newsletter through my website, www.lauradrakebooks.com.

The Reasons to Stay

Laura Drake



www.millsandboon.co.uk

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Laura Drake is a city girl who never grew out of her tomboy ways, or a serious cowboy crush. She writes both women's fiction and romance stories. She rode a hundred thousand miles on the back of her husband's motorcycle, propping a book against him and reading on the boring stretches. Then she learned to ride her own motorcycle, and now owns two—Elvis, a 1985 BMW Mystic, and Sting, a 1999 BMW R1100. Since then, she's put in a hundred thousand miles riding the back roads, getting to know the small Western towns that are her books' settings. Her twenty-five-year aspirations came

true this year when she officially became a Texan! She gave up the corporate CFO gig to write full-time. In the remaining waking hours, she's a wife, grandmother and motorcycle chick.

This book is dedicated to my long-suffering resilient children, Glenn and Kimarie. In spite of my well-meant, yet fumbling efforts, you've grown to be strong, wonderful people. I couldn't be prouder if I'd given birth to you.

I learned much more from you than you ever did me. Thank you.

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[CHAPTER ONE](#)

BILLY JOEL IS full of crap. Not only the good die young.

The low gray clouds seemed to settle on Priss's shoulders as she walked between the graves, zipping her leather jacket against the chill air. Was it a sin to wear jeans to a funeral? Probably. But it was a long way from Boulder to Widow's Grove, and Mona had overheated in Phoenix. If she'd stopped to change clothes, Priss would have been alone in this graveyard.

As it was, there were only two other people in the cemetery on the right side of the winter-brown grass. They stood beside the subtly Astroturfed dirt pile.

She stopped a few feet short of the open grave. Her mother was down there. Shouldn't she feel something beyond tired? Hearing her heart thud in her ears, she listened for something else. Sadness, maybe, or loss? Regret?

A little late for that. Old wounds didn't always heal—the deepest ones festered.

By the time the hospital had tracked down Priss and called, her mother was gone. Better that way really, for them both.

“Come, Ignacio. It’s time to go.” A meager woman stood at the foot of the grave, both her face and raincoat set in similar generic authoritarian lines.

Priss recognized a social worker when she saw one. Given her past, she should.

A kid stood beside her, head down, face obscured by a black hoodie pulled out of shape by fists crammed into the pocket across the front. Crotch-sagging jeans puddled atop untied tennis shoes that might have, in a former life, been white.

The woman touched his shoulder. The kid shrugged her off. One hand appeared from his pocket, and Priss got a flash of knuckles lettered with homemade tattoos before it disappeared beneath the hood.

She heard a muffled snuffle, and the boy swiped the sleeve across his face.

Priss felt a pinch in her chest, somewhere in the vicinity of her heart.

Shit.

The hood flew back and for the first time, she stared into the defiant eyes of her half brother. She stuffed her hands in the back pockets of her jeans. “I’m Priss, your—”

“I know who you are.” Below the knit stocking cap, his almost delicate eyebrows drew together over narrowed eyes.

His hostility slapped her hard. She took a step back.

The matron spoke up. “Well, I don’t know who you are.”

Priss looked her over. “Who are you?”

She sniffed and looked Priss over. “I am Ms. Barnes, children’s social worker for Santa Barbara County. And you haven’t answered my question.” Her tone was haughty, but her glare was weak. She should ask the kid for lessons.

“I’m Priscilla Hart.” She tipped her chin at the grave. “My mother’s the one in the box.”

The Barnes woman tsk-tsked and her lip curled, as if she’d encountered a turd in a church pew. It was a response Priss was used to. She’d always been what her mother called, “outspoken,” but Priss didn’t know how else to be.

Her opinions were like a deposit of crude oil, buried shallower than most people’s. Others had regulators to control and filter to a civilized flow; hers were much more likely to spew. She never meant to hurt people’s feelings, but mostly the nuances of refined talk escaped her. Dancing around the facts to be polite made her head hurt.

She’d take her facts straight up, thank you.

The social worker reached for the kid’s shoulder again but at his glare, dropped her hand. “Come, Ignacio. We’ll get your things.”

“My name is Nacho!” His shout rolled away through the empty graveyard.

The woman pursed her lips and pink spread from her cheeks to the rest of her face. “Well, then...come with me.” She turned, took a few steps and waved her hands to encourage Nacho to follow her.

But the kid didn’t move, just stood looking at his sister. His defiant eyes had taken on a shiny cast and his bottom lip wobbled. The tough guy morphed into a scared ten-year-old.

Oh, crap.

When Priss followed the social worker away from the grave, Nacho was right behind her. “Where are you taking him?”

“To pick up his clothing at his home.”

Something old and lumbering stirred deep inside Priss. She was curious to see where her mother had lived. “I’m going with you.” She said it to Nacho, but Ms. Barnes stopped and turned.

“I’ll need some identification to prove you’re related to...” She shot a glance at Nacho. “Mr. Hart.”

The kid rolled his eyes.

Priss restrained herself from doing the same, pulled her wallet from her jacket pocket and handed over her Colorado driver's license.

The social worker inspected it like a Stop-n-Go clerk checks a twenty then handed it back. "I suppose you are also next of kin. You can follow me in your car."

Deciding the clouds were window dressing for the funeral rather than rainmakers, Priss left Mona's top down and pulled out behind the county Chevy.

When they reached the outskirts of town, Priss took in the fussy Victorians perched on manicured lawns, looking down their patrician noses at the traffic in the street.

She rolled to a four-way stop in the middle of town. A tall flagpole with a limp flag graced the middle of the intersection. Up the cross street, buildings crowded each other for space, cute wooden signs declaring them B & Bs, antique shops, art galleries, coffeehouses.

Her mother sure hadn't lived in this part of town.

Following the county car, Priss took a left. Sure enough, the posh buildings were replaced by ranch houses, and after they crossed over a creek, single-wide trailers and ramshackle cracker-box houses lined the street. The stunted, skeletal trees did nothing to soften the dingy neighborhood.

After parking behind the Chevy, Priss cut the engine and waited as Mona went through the death throes the '81 Caddy had been named for. Priss had seen past the scaly black paint and the rust-dotted chrome to the Glory of Detroit in Mona's lines and under her hood. She'd bought Mona off a university student and since then had put every penny she could spare into restoring her.

Priss finger-combed her short stand-up black hair in the rearview mirror. The painful squeal of her car door cracked the quiet.

The squat one-story wooden building was set in a C, creating a courtyard full of weeds and wind-blown trash. It had probably been a Motor Lodge, back in the '60s. But that heyday was long past. Its boards were warped and wavy, a faded barn-red. The hand-lettered wooden sign out front advertised rooms for rent by the week.

The familiar weight of poverty and want settled over Priss like a foul-smelling wool blanket. As she stepped out of the car, a shudder of *déjà vu* ran through her, helping to shake off a taint of despair. It wasn't hers any longer.

But it is his.

Nacho stood on the cracked sidewalk, his face empty of emotion. When Ms. Barnes asked him a question, he dug in his pocket and handed over a key. She led the way to a door at the end of the derelict building.

Nacho walked in first, and Ms. Barnes followed, flipping on the light. She flinched slightly, but to her credit she didn't wrinkle her nose.

Priss stepped in behind them. It wasn't the bare lightbulb hanging from the ceiling that brought it all back, or the tired room it illuminated. It was the smell. The walls exhaled ghosts of damp rot, untold cartons of her mother's cigarettes and decades of starchy food, into her face.

Oh, yeah. She knew this place.

It was her past.

Priss glanced at the tinfoil-tipped rabbit ears on the TV, the sagging, sheet-covered couch, the dime-store painting of a rapturous bleeding Christ hanging over it. His suffering-crazed eyes had always frightened her—as if his hanging on the dirty wall was somehow her fault.

She shouldn't have been curious about this place—her mom changed locations a lot, but "home" remained the same. Widow's Grove was the final stop on Cora Hart's rutted road in search of happy.

Priss had bailed off that road ten years ago, when public school set her free with an emancipation proclamation they called a diploma.

The county lady walked across the warped linoleum to the kitchen area. "Just pack a few changes of clothes. We'll deal with the rest later." She pulled open a sagging cabinet and peered in.

Head down, Nacho strode to the doorless room on the right. Priss followed. A small, rumped cot with dingy sheets took up one corner of the eight-by-eight room. Nacho pulled a backpack from under the bed and stuffed it with clothes from a stack of plastic storage bins. Priss had had that same dresser, growing up.

He glanced at the schoolbooks lying on the bed, then shot a sly look at Priss. She just shrugged. None of her concern if he left them behind. He pushed past her, stopped in the bathroom only long enough to pick up his toothbrush and jammed it in the outside pocket of the backpack.

Outside the bathroom door he reached for a small, ornate iron cross hanging on the wall beside his head. He lifted the cross off the hook, dropped it into the backpack and snapped the bag's flap closed. His eyes cut to her again. Sad, moist eyes.

She remembered that cross. According to her mother it had been passed down from her Spanish ancestors; it was her proudest possession. A gossamer wisp of nostalgia floated through Priss's chest before she could quash it.

Pushing away from the wall, she sauntered to the kitchen area feigning untouchable indifference. "What happens to all this stuff?"

Ms. Barnes handed Priss her business card. "Anything of value will be sold to reimburse the State for her medical care." Her pinched lips told Priss what she thought of that likelihood.

"Oh, I don't know. A museum might want the TV."

Nacho walked by her. "Museums don't pay for things, stupid."

She smiled. He sounded like her. "You've got a point there, kid."

He stopped in front of the social worker who stood washing her hands at the sink. "I could stay here. There's food, and I know how to cook."

"I'm not sure I'd call what's in that refrigerator food. You're ten years old. You cannot live by yourself."

"She could stay with me." The thumb he threw over his shoulder pointed at Priss.

She backed away. "Oh, no. Uh-uh. I've been there and done that. Couldn't afford the T-shirt." Alarm raced along her skin, chasing the goose bumps.

It didn't matter that she was grown, had a life of her own and some money in the bank. Her first instinct was that someone was going to force her to stay here. Forever.

Claustrophobia bloomed like squid's ink in her brain. In a panic she rushed out of the apartment. Outside in the clean air, she pulled in deep, grateful lungfuls, exhaling the past.

Her ears buzzed. Exhaustion or déjà vu? Maybe both.

Nacho barreled past her, stopped in the weeds and chest heaving, looked at her, his eyes full of betrayal. "Don't you think I know nobody wants me?" His fists clenched and unclenched at his sides.

The pain and animosity on the kid's face brought it all back—a slap-in-the-face reminder of why she had never come back.

Ms. Barnes stepped out, pulling the door closed behind her. "Now, now, Ignacio. I understand that you've had an emotional day. But anger will not serve you well."

"My mom's dead. My dad's in prison. And this one—" he jerked a thumb at Priss "—is useless." He spit into the weeds. "Fine. Take me. I don't give a shit." He stalked to the car and stood with his back to them, shoulders square, head up.

Way to go, Mom. As usual, you bail and leave someone else to be responsible. Well, I didn't sign up for this. It's not my problem.

She strode to her car, got in, and peeled out, tires squealing as she made her way back to her life.

* * *

WHEN THE GUNMETAL-GRAY ocean rose in the horizon of her windshield, Priss realized she'd made a wrong turn. No surprise, since she couldn't recall the roads she'd taken to get here.

Idling at the corner of whatever and Pacific Coast Highway, she stared at the moody water until a driver honked behind her. Her mind still churning, she pulled across the road to an empty parking lot on the deserted beach.

Memories banged at the door she'd locked years ago and her head pounded with the hammering. Jesus, the smell in that apartment. She thought she'd forgotten it but when she stepped inside that hole it was all there, waiting for her.

She switched off the engine and Mona settled with a wheeze. Opening the door, she stepped into the wind. It was much colder here than inland. Her eyes watered, so she closed them and absorbed the astringent scent of timeless salt caverns at the bottom of the ocean. Zipping her leather jacket, she floundered through the loose sand to where the waves pounded the beach smooth, making walking easier. She walked, watching the little bubbles that rose with each wave's retreat.

She ached for the mindless drift of Colorado. Those days when Ryan was home and they'd make love in the long, languid mornings until her skin burned all over from passion and his beard stubble. Reading him the comics, tangled in the sheets and sunlight.

Ryan was fun-loving, and no more interested in ties than she. They fit.

She lifted her face to the wind. But Boulder hadn't really been like that in a while, had it? Certainly not the sex part, anyway. She couldn't exactly say when it happened, but things were off, somehow. Ryan was on the road more this spring, putting on skateboard tournaments, or filming them. And when they spoke over the phone he seemed distracted, distant.

Her temp office jobs felt mundane lately. And when she wandered down to the bar with her friends, the laughter there sounded forced, almost fiercely jolly—as if a sparkly facade would make happiness sink in and become real.

A bit cynical maybe, but you've been to your mother's grave today. That's bound to stir the shit on the bottom of the tank.

But Priss was the one who demanded truth above all. She couldn't lie to herself. She knew what was wrong. Her perfect, shiny gold life was flaking away, revealing a cheap dime-store bauble underneath.

And that scared the crap out of her.

What if she'd run from her mother's world—the grinding poverty and the bogus rosy future of the next man at the bar—only to settle for an upscale version of the same life?

She crammed her icy fists into the pockets of her jacket. She had made sure not to get trapped by the chains that had held her mother captive. Priscilla Hart wasn't getting tied to anything: a man, kids or a dead-end job. Better to just fly above it all. Jettison weight and take in the good things that came to her.

That philosophy had served her well for ten years. The past stayed in the past, and the present...

If Colorado had lost its shine, there were lots of other places to explore. She turned her back to the ceaseless wind and let it push her to her car. Maybe it was time to hit the road and get out of Boulder. There were plenty of other chances just waiting for her to swoop in and claim them.

The comforting thought lasted until she slid into Mona, turned the key, and hit the button to raise the top. The cold had whipped past her flimsy barrier of skin and muscle to freeze-dry her bones.

Nacho.

He was a good-looking kid with his dark eyes, soft mouth, and the same widow's peak and cowlick their mother had. The same one Priss saw in her rearview mirror.

But his tawny skin was his father's. Priss knew, because she'd met the man. Her mom's shift from losers to married losers was the gas that fueled Priss's flight from the bad side of Vegas, from the "slut spawn" taunts of her classmates, from her mother's assurances that with this man things would be better.

And her mother's record for losers stood unbroken, since it seemed he was now in prison. She rolled up the windows and cranked the heat.

Nacho wouldn't have the luxury of driving away. She wondered where they had taken him. Not your problem. He'll be fine. They'll take care of him.

Wherever they put him would be safer than being alone on the rough side of town at night, while his mother worked as a barmaid in an area likely even rougher.

"He's better off." She ignored the shiver that ran through her like ice water, and put the car in Reverse.

He'd stood there, waiting for her to make some kind of decision. A decision that told him he didn't matter any more than the trash blowing around their feet.

She knew that feeling. She'd lived that feeling.

After checking for oncoming traffic, she hit the gas and pulled onto the open road. It wasn't her job to save orphans. At eighteen, she'd left that fouled nest back in Vegas, spread her wings and flown, never looking back.

And she wasn't starting now. Her hands tightened on the steering wheel.

She drove south on PCH, planning to pick up Highway 15 out of L.A., driving on autopilot. The spectacular vistas of bluffs tumbling to meet the ocean barely registered.

Those eyes.

He'd looked right into her, seen that she knew. Knew about lying in the dark alone as your mom left for work. When she leaned over to give a kiss goodnight, he'd begged, just like Priss had begged.

Don't leave me. I'm afraid.

Yet she'd always left. And with the closing door, the shadows would shift. The space would change from something warm and safe to a place that hid bad things and held scary sounds, just on the other side of the flimsy walls. A kid's imagination was worse than reality. Most of the time.

Again she pictured him lying in the dark, alone. Night after night. For years. Waiting for Mom to come home, bringing the smell of cheap perfume and menthol "smokes" with her.

"Goddamn it!" She pulled off at a scenic overlook. Below, crashing waves drove the spray up a cliff face with the same relentless battering of her conscience.

She knew nothing about taking care of a kid. After all, her mother hadn't been a shining example. And she had no interest in learning.

But she also knew what could happen to a kid in foster care. She shuddered.

Why would you even consider this? It's not like you can save yourself retroactively.

Maybe not, but she might be able to save another kid. Her half brother.

"I am not my mother." She put the car in Park, picked up her phone and with shaking fingers, dialed.

Shouting in the background. "Damn sketchy trick but he nailed that pop shove-it, didn't he? It's gonna make epic film. Hang on. Hello?"

"Hi, Ryan. I'm—"

"Hang on, babe, I can't hear you." The background noise faded, then a door banged.

"Okay, I'm outside, but it's like ten degrees. If I stay here long they'll use my balls to chill some loser's drink. How's it going?"

"Well, Mona broke down for a couple hours in Arizona, so I missed the funeral."

"Oh, hell, I'm sorry."

"It's okay. Hey, listen, when are you coming home?"

"We're filming at one more indoor park, in Albany. I'm planning on being back by next Tuesday. You'll be back by then, right?"

"Yeah, no problem. But Ryan?"

"Damned wind is brutal. Yeah?"

"Um. I ran into my half brother. He's like ten. They're putting him in foster care."

"That sucks. What's it got to do with you?"

"Well, I was thinking...what would you think if I brought him with me?"

“To Boulder?” His voice rose higher at the end than the question warranted. “Why would you want the baggage? You always said you were a free bird.”

“I know. I am.” She pulled at the roots of her hair as memories chewed at her with wolf-size bites. “Damn, Ryan, I told you what those places are like. Believe me, I don’t want the hassle. But I’m not sure I can leave a kid to that.”

“Um, Priss, I don’t mean to sound all evil, but I didn’t sign up for that gig, you know? We got a good thing, just you and I.” She heard his teeth chatter. “Listen, I’ve gotta go, or they’re gonna find me freeze-dried like that guy in that Stephen King movie. But I gotta tell you, Priss, there’s a crowd that I’m not interested in hanging with. See what I’m saying? I mean...”

She let her head fall on the back of the seat, suddenly weary down to her DNA. “Yeah, I hear you. Listen, I’ll call you later, okay?”

He must have walked back into the bar, because Rihanna wailed in her ear. “Yeah. Later, babe.”
Click.

Talking to Ryan only solidified what she’d almost known before the call. She was done with Boulder. But of the zillions of flight paths she had, was one of them taking custody of her half brother?

She hadn’t realized until she stepped into that apartment how much the past weighted her. The fact that she hadn’t made it ten miles out of town was proof that today her wings had been clipped.

“Shitshitshitshit!”

Leaning her head on the cool plastic of the steering wheel, she waited until her breath stopped hitching. Then she sat motionless for a long time, poised between past and present, between facts and emotions, between flight and landing.

Her stomach pitched with the rapid altitude change.

Maybe doing this would be the last payment, the final stamp that said “paid in full” on the chit she owed her mother for giving Priss life.

Then she could fly off, unencumbered. Karma balanced.

But don’t think you’re forgiven, Mother, for leaving this mess for me to clean up.

She sat up, pulled the county social worker’s card out of her back pocket and after staring at it for a while, called the phone number listed.

* * *

“MOTHER, BE LOGICAL.” Adam Preston lifted a box of dishes and carried it to the hallway to add to the rest of his mother’s carefully selected household goods. “If you’d look at this unemotionally, you’d see I’m right.”

She stumped behind him, one wheel of her walker squeaking. “Don’t you ‘Mother’ me. I’m allowed to be emotional. This is the house your father and I bought when we married. Leaving it isn’t easy, you know.”

Olivia Preston wouldn’t let a little thing like recovering from a broken hip keep her from looking presentable—from her beauty-shopped silver hair to the soft loafers on her petite feet.

“That’s my point. You don’t have to leave. We could set you up in the downstairs bedroom, and have a ramp put in so you don’t have to navigate the porch steps. And I can take the bedroom upstairs.” Thank God his mother was healthy, but at seventy-nine, brittle bones and balance issues were an accident that hadn’t waited to happen.

“Ruining the facade of this cottage with an ugly, old-lady ramp would be criminal.” She straightened to all of her five feet. “And you are not moving in with me. How would it look to my potential daughters-in-law, you living with your mother?”

He wasn’t touching that one. “Your friend Lily lives in that retirement place in Santa Maria. Why don’t we look into it?”

“And leave Widow’s Grove? I’ve lived here all my life. Besides, can you see me getting on one of those odious little buses to go for a rousing night of bingo?”

Not without a partial lobotomy, he couldn't. She'd been a professor of philosophy at UC Santa Barbara for thirty years. "But, Mom, above the store?" The only reason this was remotely possible was the elevator that survived the renovation when his father bought the two-story Ben Franklin dime store, back in the '60s.

"If I can't stay in the bedroom Tom and I shared, I'd rather be in our old apartment. That way I'll still have his memories around me."

His dad had died six years ago but you'd never know it, hearing his mother talk. He was proud of how she'd soldiered on afterward—not that there'd been any doubt. His mother was a strong woman. Maybe too strong. Because this was a crazy idea. Adam had moved into one of the apartments over the family drugstore when he'd returned from college with his degree and pharmacist's license. "You'd be all alone up there."

"You'll be working right beneath me. Besides, if you hadn't broken that sweet little schoolteacher's heart she'd still be living in the apartment across the hall."

He dropped the box on the growing pile. "Mom, let's not start that again."

"Why else would she have left in the middle of the school year if not because of a broken heart? I hate to point it out, but you're not getting any younger and neither am I. I'd like to meet my grandchildren before I move on to whatever is next. But if you keep being so darned picky—"

"Mom. I didn't break her heart." He looked at the ceiling and blew out a breath. "She was gay, okay? She said that dating me made her sure that she wasn't interested in men. She moved to Carmel and in with her ex-girlfriend."

Mother winced. "Ouch."

"And thanks for reminding me of the lowest point in my love life, to date."

"Well, then, you need to pick yourself up and get on with your life, Adam." She patted his hand. "Jesse at the café gave me a couple of names of nice girls you can call."

He had to get out of here before his head exploded. "I've got to get to softball practice, Mom. I'll stop by on my way home with a load of my stuff." He walked out, shaking his head. His mother discussing his love life, or lack thereof, with the town matchmaker? How pathetic was he? He bounded down the stairs to his midsize sedan, the backseat loaded with bats, bases, and dirty laundry.

So maybe pharmacist wasn't on the "top ten sexiest careers" list. But he wasn't hideous looking. He was neat, led a quiet life, and—

And arguing your good points with yourself is even more pathetic.

Mom was wrong. He waved to Burt Hanks, who drove past, then unlocked the car and sank into it. But lately, the safe life he'd put on like a Teflon suit so many years ago had started to chafe—as if it were made of wet wool.

But just the same, the thought of stepping out of it made his stomach muscles clench to guard his guts.

CHAPTER TWO

A WEEK AFTER her mom's funeral, Priss walked down Hollister, Widow's Grove's main drag, trying not to sweat. It had been chilly when she left the hotel this morning, so she'd worn a turtleneck with her pencil skirt and heels. But the day had turned warm, especially downtown, where the buildings blocked the breeze.

She paused at the display window of Hollister Drugs, more to rest her feet than to window-shop. Toeing out of one shoe, she rubbed her toes on the back of the other calf while glancing at the merchandise.

It had taken some convincing but Ms. Barnes had finally agreed to a temporary custody hearing with the Family Services Court. She didn't seem to trust Priss or her intentions but didn't have much choice since Priss was Nacho's only unincarcerated kin.

The judge seemed wary as well, in spite of Priss dressing up and being on her best behavior. Though to be fair, her lack of a job and spiky hair probably had something to do with it. She hated

looking so young. People often guessed her ten years younger than her twenty-nine years and assumed her maturity level matched her youthful face. They had no way of knowing that she'd gained her street smarts at a younger age than Nacho was now.

But the judge did grant Priss temporary custody, with strings. That meant home visits and interviews, and the judge had left the timeline open-ended. Priss would have to prove herself as a parent to Ms. Barnes's satisfaction before she and Nacho could leave Widow's Grove.

Priss had agreed to their terms. This would be as good a place as any to settle, at least in the short term. If she didn't like it down the road, she'd make a different choice. What worried her more was the fact that she hadn't a clue about how to be a parent. After all, she'd never been exposed to a good one.

But the worry about screwing up Nacho's psyche had to take a backseat. They had to eat in the meantime. She needed a job.

The lady at the temp agency had no openings for office workers. Turned out tourist towns weren't big on office management. And the few jobs they did have wouldn't support Priss, much less her and Nacho. She had to find something soon. The hotel was expensive, and Ms. Barnes wouldn't release Nacho into Priss's care until she had a job, and a proper place to live in. The apartments she'd looked at on the outskirts of town were way too expensive, and too far from Nacho's school.

So here she was, footsore and sweating, walking the streets looking for work. She'd stopped in The Gift of Words bookstore, a trendy clothing store for kids and an antique boutique. She'd never been a store clerk, but if it paid enough she'd find a way to become the best damned clerk they'd ever hired. But none of the shops needed help.

God, she was thirsty. She leaned in, cupping her hand around her eyes to see past the window's glare into the drugstore, but still couldn't make out much. Surely they sold cold soda. She slipped back into her shoe, stepped to the door and opened it.

Her heels tapped hollow on the wooden floor. A wall of blessedly cool air bathed her face, bringing with it the smell of coffee, French fries and old building. Two checkout counters faced her and beyond that, several shoppers wandered aisles that led to the pharmacy counter against the back wall.

But it was the area along the left wall that snagged her attention. An old soda-fountain counter stood on a black-and-white-checkerboard tiled area with a huge mirror behind it, reflecting stacked parfait glasses and sundae boats. Several of the frilly white wrought-iron tables were occupied by early lunchers. The whole area was bathed in light streaming through the huge front window, making it look like an oasis in the desert—or heaven.

Her feet led her without conscious direction around the tables and chairs, straight to the counter where she collapsed on the red vinyl stool farthest from the sun.

A girl stood behind the counter, flipping burgers and snapping gum.

“Could I have some water?”

Snap, snap, snap. “Okay, but you gotta order something. You know, something that costs money.” She didn't move to get a glass.

Probably just out of high school, the girl wore a pink, sixties-throwback A-line dress, with a white frilled apron and a pink pillbox cap perched on hot-magenta shoulder-length hair. The rims of both ears were encrusted with stud earrings, and her lipstick and short nails were both painted black.

Rising irritation only made Priss hotter. “You're going to lecture me on manners?”

The girl rolled her eyes to the back of the store. “Hey, it's not me. I could give a crap. It's the boss's rule.”

“Okay. After you bring me water...” She glanced to the menu board on the wall to her right. “How about a BLT and a diet coke.”

“Coming up.” The girl finally moved, albeit slowly.

When the ice water arrived, Priss drank half of it at once, then winced as the brain freeze hit. Her stomach growled at the smell of grilling bacon. She tried to relax and let the AC and lunch-crowd conversation wash over her. Sipping more slowly, she noticed a bulletin board below the menu, with a sign at the top, The Grove Groove. She stood and walked over to read. Among the local real estate agents' business cards were flyers for a lost llama, babysitting services, and a "gently used" Western saddle. She flipped up and read a thank-you card from a local little-league team to the drugstore's owner, for his sponsorship. An index card at the very bottom caught her eye.

Furnished Apartment for Rent.

See Adam Preston for details.

You know you're in a small town when they don't include a phone number. She walked back and sat, just as the girl set down Priss's BLT.

"You want mustard?"

"Sure. But, can you tell me who Adam Preston is, and how I contact him about that apartment?"

The girl walked a few steps and drew a soda from a tall, old-fashioned dispenser. "He's the boss I told you about. The pharmacist." Snap, snap.

Priss craned her neck to the pharmacy counter in the back.

"He'll be back after lunch." The girl set the curvy glass in front of Priss and plunked a bottle of mustard next to it. "The apartment is upstairs." She looked at the ceiling. "He's up there now actually."

"Oh, cool." It wouldn't hurt to get some insider information. "My name is Priss, by the way. I'm moving to Widow's Grove for a while."

The girl's attention sharpened, as if Priss had just moved out of the generic customer category. "I'm Sin, as in S-I-N." Snap, snap. "Actually, it's Hyacinth. I shorten it to irritate my mother. That'll teach her for naming me after a stupid flower."

Her smile displayed further rebellion—a huge cubic zirconia was set in her front tooth.

"I can relate. My name came from my mother's massive crush on Elvis."

"That old fat guy?" Snap. Snap. Snap. "That blows."

"Tell me about it. What can you tell me about the apartment, or the pharmacist? I really need a place near town."

The girl named a modest rent amount, then considered her next words as she scooped ice cream into a banana-split boat. "Adam is okay. He's kinda hot, for an old guy."

That wasn't the kind of information she was looking for. "I mean—"

"Except he's got a major stick up his butt."

"How so?"

"He's anal. Seriously, terminally, anal. The guy needs to dispense himself a chill pill." She walked to the other end of the counter to deliver the split to a guy in a business suit, leaving Priss to try to reconcile those two facts and how to use them for leverage. If that apartment was presentable, she really needed to rent it.

* * *

ADAM TOOK THE last dish from the dishwasher and put it in the cabinet. "Mom, I've got to get back to work." He grabbed a sponge and wiped the sandwich crumbs from the counter. "You've got your phone with you in case you need anything, right?"

"Yes, dear." His mother rose from the kitchen chair, clutched her walker and squeaked her way to her favorite antique wing-back chair in the living room.

When the microwave dinged, he took out the cup of tea and carried it to her. He'd wanted to move her into the apartment that had the view of Hollister, but she insisted on saving the nicer view for a "paying customer."

"Thank you. I'll be fine, don't worry about me." She pulled a soft throw onto her lap. "When I'm off this walker and back on my own pins you won't need to coddle me anymore."

“No worries, Mom. I’m just downstairs.” He walked to the door, wondering how many prescriptions had piled up and how Sin was coping with the lunch crowd.

“Adam.”

He pulled the door open and turned back to her. “Yeah, Mom?”

“Don’t forget, if someone wants to rent the other apartment, I get final say, right?”

“Of course. But I call screening privileges. They’ll be living right across the hall and you’re too trusting.” He closed the door and walked down the stairs that ended in a vestibule; one door led into the store, one led to the alley behind it. He unlocked the door to the store and walked in.

He glanced up front, to the soda fountain. Sin lifted a thumb to let him know all was well then waved him over. Walking up the nearest aisle, he stopped to help old Mrs. Baylor with a suppository recommendation before moving on.

I’ve got to do something about Sin. She didn’t look like a ’60s soda jerk—she looked more like Cyndi Lauper at a Halloween party. But how could he approach the situation without hurting her feelings? He’d been through a string of failed hires before Sin, and in spite of her looks he’d come to rely on her. She ran the soda fountain well and he could trust her. The locals were used to her looks. Maybe just a different color uniform would help—one that complemented her hair.

Snap, snap. “Boss, this lady wants to talk to you.”

He was going to have to talk to her about chewing that gum. Again. He turned to the lady on the last stool.

Scratch that. A girl.

She had a slim build and wore a knee-length skirt that showed off long, muscled dancer’s calves, crossed at the ankle. But it was her face that caught and held him—huge green eyes set in a pretty heart-shaped face. Her brown hair was short and spiked with a widow’s peak. She sat looking at him with a small nervous smile.

Time slowed and sound faded.

God, she’s enchanting. Even though he was sure he’d never used that word before, it fit. He felt enchanted.

He extended a hand. “Adam Preston.”

She gave him a firm, no-nonsense shake. “Priscilla Hart. I’m interested in the apartment you have for rent.”

She must have read the skepticism in his expression, because she sighed. “I’m twenty-nine—plenty old enough.”

Not for what I was imagining.

“Well, all right. Why don’t you follow me? I have an application and background authorization for you to fill out.”

There was a line at the prescription counter so he sat her at the consulting window with the forms and got to work.

Fifteen minutes later he’d dealt with the line. The dropped-off scripts could wait. His prospective tenant sat tapping her fingers on the counter. He walked over and picked up the forms. “An interim office manager. Colorado, huh? I don’t see a phone number for your previous landlord. I’ll need that.”

“I need to tell him I’m leaving first.” She fussed with the strap of her purse.

She was businesslike and put-together. But after the epic fail of his last tenant, he knew that appearances were deceiving. He frowned.

“You can check. I pay my taxes, am a registered voter and don’t have so much as a moving violation.”

“But according to this, you don’t have a job in Widow’s Grove.”

“Yet. You’ll see from my credit check that I have enough money in the bank to cover a deposit, first and last month’s rent.”

“But if you can’t pay down the road, eviction is a real hassle.”

“Look.” She stood and slung the oversize purse on her shoulder. “I’m trying to rent an apartment. I am not signing up to guard the president or run the Federal Reserve. Check out my references, then let me know. My cell number is on the fifth form from the bottom.” She looked at him as if he were a juicy wad of gum on her shoe. “Do you think you could trust me enough to at least show me this apartment? I’ll give you time to hide the silver first, if you want.”

He had to smile at her, all puffed up and huffy. “Actually, you kind of would be guarding the president. Follow me.” He locked the metal door to the drug area then led the way through the door to the stairs. But instead of taking them, he inserted the key to call the elevator.

At the top, he walked to the door to the right and searched his ring for the correct key. “I used to live in the other apartment.” He nodded to the door on his left. “But my mother recently broke her hip. Her house is a two-story with a walk-up porch so it wasn’t working for her. I was going to move her in here and sell her house but she insisted I move into the house instead.”

He found the correct key, opened the door, then stepped back so she could enter. She walked across the oak floor to look through the windows to Hollister. “Great view.” Her voice echoed off the high ceilings.

He stayed by the door as she wandered into the kitchen, the bathroom and lastly, the large bedroom, her heels tap-tap-tapping across the wood floor. Generations of Preston-used furniture made the apartment feel cozy.

This apartment was the mirror image of the one across the hall. Growing up, his father had always rented them. It was a good source of additional revenue for the drugstore’s start-up, and later the rents had paid Adam’s tuition to UCSD.

“I think it’s great. I’d like to rent it. Providing, of course, I meet your requirements.”

“Okay, well, let me take you across the hall to meet my mother. My requirements take a backseat to hers.”

“What does your mother have to do with this?”

“You’d be living right across the hall from her. That means she gets first right of refusal.”

He watched her throat move as she swallowed. She squared her shoulders and walked out ahead of him. He crossed the hall and knocked on his mom’s door.

“Come in.”

He opened the door. “Mom? Do you have a minute to meet a possible tenant?”

“Certainly, bring them in.”

“This is Priscilla Hart, an office manager, most recently from Colorado.”

The girl—woman—walked past him to where his mother sat, reading a thick book. “Ms. Preston. It’s nice to meet you. Your son told me about your recent accident. I’m sorry.”

His mom put aside the book. “To hear him talk, I’m a fragile invalid. Nothing could be further from the truth.”

“You’re reading *Atlas Shrugged!*”

The delight in her voice brought his head up.

“That’s one of my favorite books of all time.”

His mother’s eyes lit up. “Oh? What is it you like about it?”

Priss may not have recognized his mom’s “professor voice,” but Adam did.

“Her theory of rational self-interest and belief in the power of an individual.” At his mother’s wave, the girl sank onto the sofa. “I’ve learned a lot from that book.”

His mother had tried for years to get him interested in philosophy, but he’d fallen asleep ten pages into that doorstop of a book. *Sports Illustrated* was more his style. “You read that stuff?”

Priss looked up, yet somehow managed to look down her nose at him. “Are you one of those men who think you have to have a college degree to be intelligent?”

“I never said that. Did I say that?”

With a smug smile, his mother watched him twist on the hook.

“Priscilla, if you have some time, I’d love to discuss this book with you.”

Priss nodded.

“Would you mind making us some tea, Priscilla?” His mother gave a small head shake when he started to move.

Priss popped up. His mother explained where to find things in the kitchen.

Once she was in the other room, his mother said, “She’s the one.”

“I haven’t run her background check. She could be a convicted felon for all I know. She might steal the silver—”

“My silver is all at the house.”

“Or murder you in your sleep. You just like her because she likes that Rand woman.”

“You’re wrong. I like her because she ruffles your oh-so-neat feathers.” Her smile held secrets.

“And frankly, son, your feathers could use a good ruffling.”

* * *

PRISS PUSHED THROUGH the door from the stairwell into Hollister Drugs, heading out for another day of job hunting. She loved her new digs. She enjoyed sitting in the overstuffed chair by the window, watching the town wake up, pedestrians shifting from a trickle to a stream as the shops opened. She liked the evenings, too. The lights winked out as the town settled in for sleep. Now if she could only get as lucky in the job market.

At least she could show that do-gooder, Ms. Barnes, that she had a decent place for Nacho to live in. Her credit check and references had come back sterling, so the uptight druggist couldn’t find an excuse not to rent to her. But she had no doubt that he’d tried.

She glanced to the prescription counter. Head down, Adam focused on something he was writing while speaking in an undertone to an ancient lady in a Sunday dress and orthopedic shoes. That first day, all Priss had seen was a double-breasted white coat and a wall of upper middle-class attitude. But the past few days she’d caught glimpses of more.

His tanned profile looked chiseled from granite. A sable curl escaped his perfectly gelled hair, falling onto his forehead. Underneath the Mr. Sphincter was a fine-looking man. That weird combination of handsome and uptight increasingly intrigued her. It seemed she kind of liked weird.

“And how is Annie doing, Ms. Talcott?” Adam looked up; his soft brown eyes held concern. “Has she gotten settled in Atlanta?”

The old lady beamed. “Oh, yes. Can you believe? She’s expecting again!” The woman set her industrial-strength purse on the counter, unclasped the catch and pulled out her wallet, flipping open a huge accordion photo holder. “Have I showed you my great-grandtwins lately?”

“How old are they now?” Adam’s fond smile displayed a killer chin dimple.

Their voices faded as she strode to the front of the store. He really appeared to care about that lady’s family. Hell, he even took the time to look at photos.

No doubt about it. Adam Preston was a Nice Guy.

And therefore, suspect.

Four hours later, Priss returned home. She pulled into her space, shut down the engine and waited for Mona to stop wheezing. She’d looked for work at every business in Widow’s Grove that her skills could possibly stretch to fit—and a few they wouldn’t.

The clock was ticking. Nacho had been in the not-so-caring hands of the county for two weeks now. Every night, a herd of sharp-hooved nightmares thundered through her sleep, all starring Nacho, with the boy being neglected, being bullied—and worse.

She shook her head, shoving her past to the back of her mind for another day.

* * *

IT WAS ONLY midmorning on Friday and she was already tired, discouraged and in need of coffee. She'd picked through the meager want ads in the local paper and had been to every business on Hollister. She was beginning to get a whiff of failure on the wind that grew stronger each day.

Today. I'm not quitting until I find a job today.

Throwing her shoulders back, she put on her interview smile, snatched her purse from the floorboard, and stepped out of the convertible. She'd abandoned her heels after that first day. Dressy flats might not show off her legs as well but they hurt less. She strode as fast as her pencil skirt allowed toward the red-and-white-trimmed building. The sign next to the door read The Farmhouse Café.

How hard could waitressing be? After all, her mother had done it for years so it had to be a piece of cake.

A cowbell clanked against the glass door when she stepped onto an oak floor, silvered with use. Empty red vinyl booths marched along the windows to a corner where a potbellied stove squatted. Grizzled men in overalls drank coffee in a booth against the back wall. The place was midmorning-deserted.

A Formica-topped bar faced her. A pale-blond woman sat sipping coffee on the only occupied stool, a motorcycle helmet and leather jacket on the stool beside her. A big-haired blonde stood on the other side of the bar, in a tightly fitted white pantsuit that advertised Monroe-like curves. She'd borrowed Marilyn's lipstick, too. Her Cupid's-bow mouth was a slash of crimson.

The waitress said something to the girl at the bar, then looked up. "Hey, sweetie. Welcome to the Farmhouse."

Priss walked over and extended a hand to Marilyn. "Hello. My name is Priss Hart. I was wondering if you needed any help with your bookkeeping. I'm—"

The blonde patron choked on her coffee. She grabbed a napkin and coughed into it while the waitress patted her back. When the biker chick could speak, she said, "You must not be from around here. Jess is the math whiz of the universe. She does the bookkeeping in her very best dreams."

"Stow it, Sam." Jess shook Priss's hand. "I'm Jesse Jurgen. That sexy hunk in the kitchen is my husband, Carl."

A Nordic giant filled the serving window, waving a spatula in greeting.

Priss nodded to him, then took a breath and pushed the reluctant words past her teeth. "Could you use a waitress, maybe?"

"Sorry, dear, it's just Carl and me."

Hope and relief whooshed out on her breath. She'd have to try Santa Maria, or Solvang. More gas, more commute time. More alone time for Nacho.

Shit.

"You look done in, hon. Have a seat." Jesse turned and lifted a metal carafe from a warming tray. "Want some coffee?"

Priss dropped onto the red vinyl-clad stool next to the biker chick. "I'd love a cup. Thanks."

Jesse poured. "You drink that. It'll buck you up. I'll be right back." She walked from behind the bar to refill the farmers' cups at the back booth.

"I'm Sam Pinelli." The slim woman next to her eyed Priss from over her coffee cup. "You don't know anything about the building trade, do you?"

"I wish."

"My husband has an auto repair and tow shop..."

Priss shook her head.

"I can't help you, then, but you came to the right place. Jess knows everything about everything in Widow's Grove—especially if you're looking for a man."

"That is exactly the last thing I want. I've already got more male in my life than I need." Priss took a sip.

Jesse swished back behind the counter and put the coffeepot on the hot plate.

Sam chuckled, “Well, if you’re not looking for love then stay away from Yenta here. And just to be sure, I’d drink only bottled water while you’re in Widow’s Grove.”

Jesse put a hand on her hip. “Samantha Pinelli, you’re full of crap. You’re so happily married that you’re iridescent, for cripes’ sakes.”

“Now, now, Jess. Climb off your high horse before you split those pants.”

“Anyway, we’re not talking about you, Pinelli. We’re trying to help this sweet thing. What do you do, hon?”

“Temp office management, and bookkeeping. But I’m up for almost anything except cleaning public toilets.” She turned her cup in her hands. “And soon, I may have to consider that.”

Jesse’s perfectly plucked eyebrows scrunched. “Well, let’s hope it doesn’t come to that.” She looked Priss up and down from across the counter. “Where are you from, sweetie?”

“Oh, all over.” Priss may not have come from a small town, but she knew a local gossip when she saw one. Well, she’d come in for an interview and it seemed she was going to get one, even if it wasn’t the type she’d hoped for.

Let the waterboarding begin.

“Are you planning to settle in Widow’s Grove?” Jesse pulled up a wooden stool and lowered herself onto it. Her nonchalance didn’t quite hide the Grand Inquisitor look in her eye.

Priss didn’t like people prying into her life but putting a sob story out on the local telegraph might help her land a job. It’s not like she’d be lying; Nacho was a sob story.

“My mother died. I’ve got a ten-year-old half brother who now has no one else but me. And I’m in Widow’s Grove until I get him settled somewhere safe.” An instinctive shudder ripped through her. She tried to disguise it by straightening her shoulders. “Social Services took him, and they won’t release him to me if I don’t find a job.”

“Jeez, that sucks,” Sam said.

Jesse looked as if Revlon had just discontinued her favorite lipstick. “Well. That just will not do.” She squinted, tapping crimson nails on the counter. “Let me think a minute.”

Sam glanced over at Priss. “You don’t know it, but you’ve just unleashed The Force, Anakin.”

“Then I came to the right place after all.” Priss leaned toward Sam’s stool and said in a stage whisper, “She sure doesn’t look like Yoda.”

Sam laughed and set her cup down too hard, spilling her coffee.

Jesse grabbed a rag from under the counter and handed it to Sam. “I’m trying to think and you’re not helping, Pinelli.” Jesse cocked her head and looked Priss over.

Priss felt like she’d just been scanned at the airport.

“I don’t suppose you know anything about bartending?”

Well, hell, doesn’t that figure? She’d sworn never to have anything to do with her mother’s lifestyle, yet here she was, getting sucked into every dirty corner of it. She sighed. “I worked my way through two years of community college bartending.”

The crease between Jesse’s brows vanished. “Well, then, I’ve got a job for you.” She dusted her hands.

“What job?” Sam asked.

“You remember, Honey from Homestake Realty? She sold you your house, Sam.”

“Pompous in pumps. Of course I remember her.”

“Well—” Jesse leaned in “—yesterday, she skipped town with Arnie, the bartender of Bar None. Word is they eloped to the Bahamas. Floyd is pissed.”

“You’re sending this little pixie to Floyd Henley when he’s in a state?”

Priss sat up. “I can handle myself.”

Sam shook her head. “If Floyd doesn’t eat you for lunch, that crusty bunch of regulars stuck to his bar stools will. You’ll be wishing for those public toilets.”

Jesse crossed her arms and studied Priss. “Something gives me the feeling this pixie is a scrapper.”

“You’d be right.” Priss pulled a few dollars from her wallet, slapped them on the counter and stood. “This ‘Bar None.’ It’s downtown?”

“Yep. On Monterrey, off Hollister.”

“Thanks for your help.” Priss walked to the door. She had to nail that job before someone else did.

“May the Force be with you.” Sam’s voice drifted through the open door.

“You come back soon and let us know if you get the job!” Jesse called.

Priss waved a hand and kept going.

CHAPTER THREE

THE GOOD NEWS was Bar None was less than a mile from her new apartment, on a side street off Hollister’s B & Bs, antique shops and art galleries. Priss stood on the cracked sidewalk under a tree full of gossiping birds, trying to convince her feet to carry her inside.

There had to be another way. But if the Yoda of Widow’s Grove didn’t know of any other jobs, there probably weren’t any.

You could try Solvang.

But the cute Danish town was more of a tourist trap than Widow’s Grove. She’d be even less likely to find an office job there. Besides, after seeing Nacho’s tats and attitude, the closer she worked to Widow’s Grove the better. Nacho and unsupervised time probably didn’t mix.

Only an open door and one small window framing a neon Schlitz sign marred the redbrick exterior of the bar. She glanced through the branches at the cloudless sky.

I get it, God. But does it have to be this?

A bird-crap missile passed within an inch of her face and plopped at her feet.

“Okay, then. You don’t have to be rude about it.” Abandoning any hope of reprieve she straightened her skirt and crossed the sidewalk.

Odds are he’s not looking for a daytime bartender, anyway. And there’s no way I’m leaving Nacho alone nights.

She opened the front door and refrigerated air pebbled her skin, bringing with it the smell of spilled beer, old fryer grease and the ghosts of cigarettes smoked back when it was legal. It stirred memories of more than her bartending days—this scent was her mother’s signature perfume. Priss took in the smells again—mostly bitter with very little sweet.

A jukebox she couldn’t see through the gloom blared a “welcome home” tune. Booths commandeered the wall to her right; tables filled the floor space. On her left, a long bar took up the rest of the room. A television high in a corner broadcast a baseball game to patrons parked on every stool.

Priss unclenched her fists, her jaw, and her attitude. She put on her friendly bartender face and strode to the bar like she owned it.

The little man who stood behind the long dark wood barrier looked like Tweedledee. Or maybe it was Tweedledum—she always got them confused. His gray hair pulled into a messy ponytail was at serious odds with the bald dome rising above it. He was short and round, but sure didn’t look jolly. Jowls and thick features didn’t cover the pugnacious thrust of his chin. Even the butt-end unlit stogie in his mouth tilted up—like it was giving everyone the bird.

He swiped a wet rag over the bar. “You’re full of crap, Barney. The Giants are gonna wipe the floor with those losers. I got your Tigers hangin’—” His hand headed south to demonstrate but he looked up, saw Priss and froze. “The Antique Emporium is on Hollister, missy.”

She put a hand on her hip. “Fernandez has a 2.1 ERA, two saves, two quality starts and it’s only April. I’d say the Tigers have it hanging this season.”

The lunch crowd’s heads swiveled.

The man behind the counter made a growling sound—a predator’s warning. “You came in here to talk baseball?”

Only one way to handle a bully.

She laid a hand on the bar and leaned on it. “I came here to be your new bartender.”

The cigar bounced with his chuckle. “Come back when you’re twenty-one, little girl.”

She opened her wallet, pulled out her Colorado driver’s license and flipped it onto the bar.

He picked it up and squinted at it. “Humph.”

A patron spoke up. “Floyd, you should hire her. A lady would be a welcome change from seeing your ugly mug every day.”

Barney, the Tigers fan, pointed at Priss. “Yeah, we want her!”

Floyd stared them down. “You don’t even know if she can pour a beer.”

Priss waited until he turned and glared at her. “So? Try me.”

He harrumphed again, leaned against the back counter, and crossed his arms over his considerable chest. “Have at it, missy.”

She lifted the opening in the bar at the waitress station and stepped in. Glancing around the setup to get oriented, she smiled at the pale faces bathed in the light above the mirror at her back. They didn’t look quite as excited to see her on this side of the bar. A few looked like they wanted to play—like a cat plays with a cricket.

She dusted her hands. “Okay, gentlemen. Help me out and tell me your name when you order. That way I’ll get to know you faster. Now, what’ll it be?”

“A pint of Guinness,” a thin man with a slight Scottish burr said. “I’m Ian.”

She checked the beer taps—not there. She squeezed past Floyd and found a flat of mixed-brand stout bottles at the other end of the bar. She snagged a bottle, opened it, then upended a clean glass. Tilting it, she poured about half a glass, then set it down so the head wouldn’t get out of control.

She grabbed Ian’s empty glass and set it in the sink. “Who’s next?”

A bald guy with a half-empty beer, said, “I’m Porter. I’ll have a martini.”

Priss wiped the bar in front of Ian, and laid a new napkin. “Neat or dirty?”

“Always dirty, hon. It’s how I roll.”

Looking at his wrinkled shirt and fingernails, she had no doubt he spoke the truth.

She poured the rest of the Guinness and placed it in front of Ian, with a perfect thumbs-width head. “Floyd will have to collect from you all—I don’t know the prices yet.” She glanced around to locate the ingredients. “Vodka or gin, Porter?”

The man reared back on the stool as if she’d slapped him. “What kind of bartender would pollute good vermouth with strained potato offal?”

She raised her hands. “I come in peace.” She snatched the shaker from where it sat drying on a towel. “I had to ask. Some groundlings drink it that way.” She found the ice, scooped some into the shaker, then gathered the ingredients. Grasping the gin bottle by the neck, she silently counted the measurement and did the same with the vermouth; martini drinkers were notoriously picky. While she shook it, she collected a martini glass and speared two olives on the plastic sword she found next to them. She poured the drink, the last drops filling it to the rim, and set it in front of Porter.

He sipped, then sighed in bliss as his eyes rolled up.

Yes!

“I’m Barney, and I want a mojito.” The Tigers fan moved his half-full beer aside.

Another patron hooted from the other end of the bar. “Who you trying to kid? I’ve never seen you drink anything but Bud.”

Barney stuck out a two-day-whiskered chin. “Well, I saw it on a TV show and I want to try it.” His rheumy eyes held challenge as he straightened the collar of a shirt that looked dingy, even in dim light. “With two olives.”

She hid a smile and turned to Floyd. “Do you have mint leaves?”

“What the hell would I need those for? This ain’t the Holiday Inn—this is a workingman’s bar.”

“Never mind.” It was not like Barney would know the difference, anyway. She mixed the lime juice and sugar in a highball glass, stirring until it dissolved. Then she added rum and club soda and split a lime wedge on the rim. She placed it on a clean napkin in front of Barney, leaned over to whisper, “I’ll just put the olives on the side, okay?” No way she was putting olives in that supersweet drink.

He nodded, frowning at the glass.

“Well, you gonna drink it or stare at it all day?” Floyd was enjoying this too much. He’d probably sold more high-priced drinks in the last few minutes than he had in a month.

Barney took a sip. His lips twisted and his eyes got big. His Adam’s apple quivered—then he swallowed. His lips turned down and his tongue protruded, just a bit. “It’s good!” He choked out.

Floyd chuckled. “Glad you think so. That’ll be seven bucks.”

“Seven bucks!” Barney’s eyes bugged. He moved his Bud back, front and center.

A couple wandered in off the street, arm in arm. Summer people, by the looks.

A gray-haired woman in a black rayon waitress uniform with a dowager’s hump and wearing orthopedic shoes emerged from a doorway in the back to lead the pair to a table.

“Hey, we don’t even know your name.” A comparatively younger man halfway down the bar spoke up. Of course “younger” was a relative term. He appeared to be in his forties.

“I’m Priss.”

“A bartender named Priss? That’s funny!”

Barney had caught his breath from the drink and the price. “Is that like Priscilla?”

She winced. “Yeah, my mom had a crush on Elvis.”

“I had a crush on Priscilla!” Porter said.

“She was beautiful, and so sweet,” Ian said. “Didn’t deserve the crap The King dished out, messing around.”

Priss patted her hair spikes. “Well, don’t expect me to go all big-hair. Ain’t happening.”

The patrons laughed, and an argument broke out over which Elvis movie was the best.

Floyd asked, “What’s your last name?”

Priss dried her hands on the bar towel she’d tucked into the waist of her skirt. “Hart.”

His eyebrows shot up. “No relation to Cora Hart, are you?”

Her hands stilled. “My mother. Why?”

He smiled for the first time since she’d walked through the door. “Because she worked here. Until she couldn’t anymore.”

Priss shot a glance at the ceiling. Oh, very funny, God.

“Your mom was a stand-up gal.” He pushed away from the back bar. “You can start tonight.”

She swallowed. Winning the clientele over was the easy part. This was the hard part. She twisted the towel in her fist. “I can only work the day shift.”

“I work the day shift. The job is to cover nights.”

“I can’t work nights.” She was not saving Nacho from the clutches of the county only to put him back into his old life. Or her old life.

Nacho, hell, she wasn’t putting herself back in her mother’s old life.

She swallowed her fidgets and foreboding along with her spit and stood awaiting dismissal.

Floyd stared her down. “You came in here for a bartender job and you don’t work nights?”

She stared back, hoping he couldn’t see her fists shaking in the towel. “That’s right.”

“What the hell? Why’d you waste my time?”

Barney broke in. “Ah, give her the job, Floyd, you grumpy old fart.”

When Floyd shook his head, his jowls flapped. “Why did I become a barkeep? No one wants to listen to my problems.”

Ian called from the other end of the bar, “You covered nights before, Floyd.”

Porter said, “We want her.”

He ignored the peanut gallery. “No.” His cigar wasn’t lit but the fire in his eyes was. “Go home, little girl.”

A blast of disappointment blew a hole in her chest. All her air whooshed out.

This job would have been an answer to her problem. Maybe not the best answer, but she’d learned long ago that poor girls didn’t get the best. She bit the inside of her lip and checked her facial muscles to be sure they didn’t telegraph emotion. Another lesson she learned early—predators only took down the weak.

But wait. The only time he’d smiled was when he realized Cora was her mother. For some reason, the misguided dude thought a lot of her mom. A trickle of hope oozed down the edges of the hole in her chest, sealing it so she could breathe again. She wasn’t above using guilt, or her innocent looks, to manipulate.

You utilized whatever skills you were given to survive in a jungle.

She’d grown up being tucked in a corner booth of bars, sipping free endless sodas and doing homework. Surely Nacho had, too. She let the corners of her mouth drop and lowered her eyelids in a slow blink—once, then again. “You must have met my half brother, Nacho.”

“Yeah.” Floyd’s cigar tilted higher. He wasn’t dumb. She’d have to be careful.

“Well, I’m trying to spring him from Social Services.” She let out a sigh, carefully moderated to just short of theatrical. “If I don’t have a job, they won’t release him to me.” She lowered her eyes, tortured the towel in her fists and waited.

And waited. Conversation died. The bar held its breath.

“Oh, what the hell.” Floyd grunted in disgust. “I’ll take the night shift—for now. You’re not gonna last more than a week, anyway.”

The old barmaid walked up to the waitress station. “Floyd, I’ll get their BLTs. I need a strawberry margarita with sugar, no salt, and a Coors. With a lime.” Her eyes flicked toward Priss.

The animosity in the woman’s laser stare practically singed the skin off Priss’s face. Then she turned and shuffled back through the door she’d emerged from.

What the hell?

Floyd pointed a finger at Priss. “You. We open at ten. Be here at nine tomorrow. I’ll show you around. Now, scram. I’ve got work to do.”

She gave a cheery wave to the patrons, and walked out. Happy, yet unsettled at the same time.

Had her mother just helped her get a job?

* * *

ADAM LEANED HIS elbows on the outfield chain-link fence, watching the T-ballers. He’d been on his way home but couldn’t resist watching the next generation learn America’s game.

He pushed his heels into the grass and felt the muscles in his calves tighten. Being in charge of the senior softball league meant he was the first to arrive on game day and the last to leave, but fitting players onto teams, teams into schedules, schedules into play-offs—he loved it.

Pitching with the Widow’s Grove Winos wasn’t what he’d hoped for in college. Even if he’d made the majors, he’d be retired by now anyway. He rested his chin on his forearms and sighed.

The bantam batter pushed his too-big helmet back and, tongue between his teeth, frowned at the ball on the tee.

The infielders started the chant, “Hey, batter-batter...”

The kid hefted the oversize bat on his shoulder and swung. The whiffle ball sailed off the tee and over the infielders’ heads, into the grass of the outfield. The yells of his teammates woke the batter from amazement and he took off, little legs pumping for first.

The entire outfield, plus the shortstop and second baseman, swarmed for the ball, all yelling, “I got it!”

Despite all the waving gloves, the ball landed in the grass.

The coach stood at home plate, face fligid, yelling the batter around the bases. The parents in the stands cheered loud enough to raise a flock of mourning doves from the power lines.

The little kid jumped onto home plate with both feet. The dugout emptied and the coach swung him high.

Carley Beauchamp walked up, hands cupped around her mouth, yelling, “Way to go, batter!” She rested her forearms on the fence and gave Adam a shoulder bump. “Better watch it. You’re looking at those kids like you want one.”

“Not me. Kids are like puppies—adorable, but also unsafe, uncontrollable and messy. When I have the urge, I’ll just come borrow yours. I’ll get my cute fix, and a solid reminder of why I’m never having any.” He leaned over and bumped her shoulder.

He and his best friend Daryl had double-dated back in high school. Adam brought whoever, but the other half had always been Daryl and Carley. Still was.

Her brown eyes held concern, and a few milligrams of pity. “You are a sad case, Preston.”

“What are you talking about? Life is good.”

“Oh, please. I’ve known you since second grade so I feel obligated to point out a few things.” She lifted her hand, and started ticking points on her fingers. “You live in your mother’s house, alone. You dispense corn plasters and Viagra to the over-sixty set during the day, then fill your off-hours running a softball league for potbellied wannabes.” She took a breath.

God, he hated when she counted on her fingers. She had so many.

“Your last girlfriend just came out of the closet, and you’re down to DatesRUs.com, or recommendations from Jesse, at the Café.”

He winced as the darts hit home. They were small but Carley always had dead aim. “Why don’t you just fillet me, and have it over with?”

Her fingers encircled his biceps. “Roger’s gone, Adam. But you’re still here.” He’d seen eyes like that behind chain-link fences at the pound. His jaw locked. “We are not discussing that.”

“Okay, okay.” Her fingers slid off his arm. “Only because I’m such a good friend, I’m here to save you from a long, lonely future.”

“Why am I afraid?”

“A big, strong guy like you, afraid of a date?”

“What date?”

“Well, working in the office at the school does have its advantages. The replacement for your—um—the teacher who left—”

“No.” The chain-link twists dug in his forearms when he pushed off and straightened.

“Adam, just listen. Her name is June Sellers, and she’s just your type.”

“And what, exactly, is my type?”

She rolled her eyes and unholstered those fingers. “Blonde and classy, quiet and ladylike. The type a guy could take home to his mother. You know, a good girl.”

The air quotes stung. “Why do you say that like it’s bad?”

“It’s not. If that’s what makes you happy.” She dug through her purse a moment and came up with a crumpled Post-it note in hot pink. “I told her about you and she gave me her phone number.” She handed it over. “She’s expecting your call.”

He avoided what looked like peanut butter on the edge and squinted at the smeared writing.

“I just think you deserve more than what you want.” She held up a hand to ward off his protest. “I’m only trying to wake your ass up. Life isn’t safe, or neat and tidy. I’d think you’d have figured that out after what you lived through.” The pity was back in her stare. “When are you going to take off the gloves and live life out loud, Preston?”

“I’m happy as is, thanks, Carley.”

* * *

THE NEXT DAY, Adam unlocked the glass front door of Hollister Drugs, stepped in, locking it behind him. He followed the scent of freshly brewed coffee to the soda fountain, where Sin stood in her uniform, reading the Widow's Grove Telegraph, and sipping coffee from a mug that suggested doing something to oneself that was physically impossible.

With effort, he pulled his eyes from the multi-colored tattoos that twined, full-sleeve, down both her slim arms. "You need to cover those tattoos, and I asked you to take that mug home."

"Well, Happy Monday, Sin." She put down the paper. "We're not open yet. I'll put on the arm warmers when we are, and I don't drink coffee in front of customers, you know that." She set a clean stoneware mug on the counter and poured him a cup. "Aren't you just a ray of sunshine this morning?"

"Good morning, Sin." He reached for the coffee, noticing again how badly her hot pink hair clashed with the uniform. "You sure I can't talk you into a different hair color? Blue? A nice lavender?"

When she smiled, the crystal set in her tooth flashed. "Nah, but thanks, boss."

He saluted her with his cup. "Thanks for the coffee." He noticed his new tenant sat at one of the tables, reading the Widow's Grove Telegraph. The paper rustled when she turned a page. He raised an eyebrow at Sin.

She shrugged. "If you trust her enough to live across the hall from your mother, I thought it was safe to invite her in for a cup of coffee before we opened."

He nodded. I should have thought to do that myself.

Priss wore a closely fitted pink button-down shirt and dress pants. Her short dark hair had that just-fell-out-of-bed look that had him imagining things he shouldn't.

Her too-big green eyes held a warning that he'd been staring.

He slapped on his "trusted pharmacist" smile to cover his gaffe and carried his coffee to her table. "Morning. Mind if I join you?"

She put down the paper, pulled a phone from her large tapestry purse on the floor and checked the time. "Okay, but I only have a few minutes."

He slid into the fancy wrought-iron chair. "I just wanted to officially welcome you to Widow's Grove. I realized I hadn't done that yet. Are you finding your way around?"

"So far, so good. I'm enjoying the apartment, but I wondered what passes for fun around here."

"Well, the tourists go on wine tours, and there's shopping—"

She waved a hand. "I mean the locals. What do you do for fun?"

"Baseball."

A spark of interest flared in her eyes. "Tell me about that."

"We have little league for the kids and a senior league for adults."

"Women allowed on the teams?"

"They're not banned. But only one team has a woman. It's pretty competitive." He leaned his elbows on the edge of the table. "Do you play?"

She nodded. "High school. And I played first base in a summer league in Boulder."

Enchanting and she played baseball? Too good to be true. "Slow-pitch?"

She made a pfft sound of dismissal. "I said I played." She leaned an arm over the back of her chair and flashed him a card shark's smile. "Hard ball, baby."

He could talk smack. He just never had, with a woman. He narrowed his eyes. "You any good?"

She held her hand up and blew on her nails. "Point nine two fielding percentage, no errors."

"How many games?"

"Fifteen."

"Nice." A woman on the Winos? Why not? Pete Gilmour sucked at first base. Plus it would give Adam the opportunity to get to know Priss better.

On the other hand... He studied her stand-up hair and the stubborn line of her chin. She was hardly his type. And about as far from safe as it was possible to be.

Still, he'd sure love to see this little dynamo run bases. "You interested in playing?"

"Maybe. Who would I talk to if I was?"

"I run the league, and pitch on one of the teams. I might have a slot. If you can hit."

"Two seven five average."

"Not bad for a girl." He didn't let his lips quirk. But he wanted to. She stuck out her chin.

"Pretty good for an infielder. Even a guy."

Cute, competitive, and the stats to back it up. This could be love.

She folded the paper and slipped it in her purse. "Well, thanks for the tips, and the conversation."

He wanted to keep her here, talking. This lady tugged at his attention and he wanted to understand why. "You never said what brought you to Widow's Grove."

He couldn't say exactly what changed. She didn't move, but she changed, lightning-fast, from a pretty, young woman to a jungle cat—motionless, crouched, wary.

Her fingers tightened on her cup. "Does it matter?"

"It doesn't." He took a slow sip of coffee. "I would guess you're not from a small town."

"Nooo." She said the word as if he'd pulled it from her. When she shrugged, her shoulders lost their firing-squad tension. "I got tired of the big city and decided to slow down for a while."

"Well, you'll find people here friendly. They'll want to get to know you." He raised a hand in a universal gesture of peace. "In a good way. We watch out for our own."

"I've been watching out for myself for years." She stared into her mug long enough to divine the future in the dregs. "I'm from Vegas, originally."

"Not much small town there."

"You'd be surprised. Off the strip, it's a lot like a small town." Her pert nose wrinkled. "People get way up in each other's business. It's part of why I got out of there as soon as I could."

He wanted to keep her talking. "Um, before you go, could give me some advice? You know, as a woman?" He leaned in to whisper.

She backed up.

"What color uniform should I order for Sin?"

Her face went blank a microsecond, then she laughed. It wasn't the delighted tinkle he'd expected from a tiny thing like her. It was an all-in belly laugh, and he glimpsed for the first time, what she'd look like unguarded. Her smile outshone the sun pouring in the window. But what hit harder was her...he fumbled for a word to describe it.

Life force.

A vibrant woman lived inside that wary jungle cat. Her laughter echoed in his bones, making him want to reach out and catch her hand where it lay on the table. He stopped himself in time. What kind of background made a woman that young so wary?

She leaned in, her lips quirking. "A different color is not going to fix that problem."

"I was afraid you would say that."

She chuckled. "I wouldn't worry about it. I like her just the way she is and I'll bet your customers would say the same."

He broke eye contact before it could become another stare. "Yes, but she's just so...out there."

The twinkle in her eye winked out. The jungle cat was back. "Oh, and conformity tops honesty, efficiency and competence in your book?"

"No. But I can dream, can't I?"

A shade of a smile crossed her lips. "Dream on, dude." She lifted her phone, and snapped to attention. "I've got to go."

"Where you off to?"

"I've got to go...to work." She slipped her phone in her purse.

"Great, you found a job. Doing what?"

“Um. Customer service.” In one fluid movement, she was on her feet. “Nice talking to you.” He stood. “You have a good day.”

She turned and waved to Sin, who came from behind the counter with the keys in her hand. Though he couldn’t hear their words, they talked all the way to the door. Sin unlocked it, let out Priss and let in Susie, his checkout girl.

He grabbed his cup to leave but his gaze followed Priss until she passed the edge of the window.

* * *

“IGNACIO HART. Report to the office.”

The voice on the dorm loudspeaker was soft but Nacho still jumped. He shot a look around to be sure no one saw. Nope. The prisoners were all at breakfast.

They’d told him his half sister would be here to take him today. He’d been shocked, since it was pretty clear that day at the apartment that she didn’t give a shit. Besides, she sure didn’t look like the motherly type. That was okay by him. He’d already had a mother—didn’t need another.

He crammed the last of his T-shirts into his backpack and looked around. The sun hit the floor, crosshatched by the wire in the glass. They said it was there to keep the kids safe.

Yeah, tell me another bedtime story.

Neatly made cots stretched the length of the high-ceilinged room. His was the only rumpiled one. Screw ’em. He was so out of here.

He tossed the backpack over his shoulder, his hands fisted so they wouldn’t shake. He couldn’t wait to escape this kid warehouse, with their rules, bad food and the wimps sniffing after lights out. The only good thing about this place was that a bus picked him up so he could keep going to the same school. Not that he cared about learning, but all his homies were there.

He walked to the door, wondering if he was heading from a pile of dog crap into an over-his-head shit pile. His mom was dead, his dad was in prison. They were handing him off to a chick he didn’t even know, just because half her blood was his mom’s. What did that have to do with him?

But the county didn’t care. They were happy to have one less body in the warehouse. No one bothered asking the only guy who might care—and he hated that.

He used to feel empty inside when his mom went to work at night. Now he felt empty all the time. He wished he had a big family, like his friend Joe. They were loud and yelled a lot but you had to care if you yelled, right?

He took a last quick glance around to be sure he hadn’t left anything. The extra weight of the iron cross felt just right in the bottom of the backpack. His teacher talked about how knights in old days had a family coat of arms on their shields when they went into battle. The cross was his. Maybe his mom was full of shit. Maybe all those dead guys back in Spain weren’t royalty. But the weight felt right, just the same.

His stomach rumbled, empty, but full of ice. He practiced a badass superhero scowl.

His shoelaces slapped the floor, but he imagined a pair of Avenger’s boots, thumping down the stairs. He was tough. His skin was leather. Ice was in his veins, not in his stomach. He was—

His sister stood at the bottom of the stairs, looking up at him. She was little for a grown-up—only a couple inches taller than him. Trying to look cool with her spiked hair and hipster pants, but she was scared. He knew scared when he saw it.

Cool—that made them equal.

He slouched down the last couple of stairs.

“Hi, Nacho. I signed you out of here for good. Have you got all your stuff?”

He glared hard and walked past her. No reason to make it easy.

“Hey, wait.” She trotted to catch up, and pushed the door open for him. “It’s not really warm enough yet, but I thought you’d like to ride with the top down.” She waved her arm at a huge beater Caddy parked at the curb. The paint was sunburnt and it looked like the white leather interior was split in places, but his stomach took a happy dive anyway. He’d look cool pulling up to school in a drop-top.

He followed her, scuffing his feet to act like he didn't want to. The tall brick building loomed at his back, watching to see if he'd get in the car. Whether or not this worked out, there was no way he was going back to that place. He'd run away first.

She patted the door, then swooshed it open like it was a limo. "This is Mona. Mona, this is Nacho."

He snorted and got in. Crazy ran in his family.

She walked to the driver's side and got in but she didn't crank the engine; she just looked at him.

"What?"

"I got us an apartment—a nice one, over Hollister Drugs. You know where that is?"

What, did she think he was an idiot? He nodded.

"I already talked to your school. I've got to work so the bus will drop you off about two blocks from the drugstore. I should be home about the time you get there, but if I'm not..."

When she didn't say more, he had to look at her.

"You're to wait for me outside, on the sidewalk. Got that?"

"Yeah."

"I'll have to take you in and introduce you to the landlord and his mother when I get home from work today. They don't exactly know about you yet, so..." She chewed her lip. "Just wait for me when you get home from school, okay?"

He rolled his eyes. "I'm not retarded."

When she smiled she looked a little like his mom and a little like one of those elf queens in the Lord of the Rings. "Noted. Buckle your seat belt." After he did, she handed him a bag from the floorboard then cranked the engine. "I figured you didn't get breakfast."

He opened it. A McMuffin. Sweet. "Thanks." He ignored the foil-covered cup of orange juice and dug in.

"What do you think of this town?" She talked loud, over the wind.

"It blows."

"Don't talk with your mouth full."

"Then don't ask me a question after I take a bite."

She looked over at him. "So you're not tied to this place?"

He snorted. "I want to go to a city. Like a real city—like L.A. or something." They had real gangs there. He could take his pick.

She smiled. "Then you're going to like living with me. I move around."

It might be cool, getting to see places. "I can hang with that."

"Great. Then when you get out of school in June, we'll hit the road, okay?"

"Cool." Actually, it was cold but he didn't care. The wind whipped by, making it feel like they were going a hundred instead of thirty-five. People in other cars stared. He rested his arm on the door and squinted at them. This part might not be too bad.

Ten minutes later, Priss pulled into the circle in front of his school. Cars ahead and behind them dropped off kids. More kids hopped off the buses parked at the curb. Others milled on the sidewalk, yelling, running. A typical day.

He spotted Diego and almost waved like a butt-wipe second grader. He stopped himself in time. But Diego saw him, and elbowed Joe. Nacho took his time gathering his backpack so they could get a good look at his wheels. It was a beater, but it was a drop-top. With raised shocks and some painted flames—

"We're clear, right, Nacho? You're going to wait for me in front of the store after school?" She looked worried.

"I got it." He hopped out and slammed the door, hard, to show her what he thought of her rules.

"Okay, you have a good day, Nacho. See you this afternoon."

He crossed the sidewalk to his real family. The one he got to choose.

CHAPTER FOUR

PRISS WATCHED NACHO stride to the sidewalk and slap hands with two Hispanic boys. Well, that went about as well as I could expect.

When a horn bleated behind her, she moved up ten inches.

A tingle of consequence shivered down her spine and she shifted on the seat. She felt as if today she'd stepped through a door, a demarcation that would separate her life into before and after. She shook it off. Widow's Grove was a way station, a branch to rest on before she flew off to the next adventure.

She wondered how she'd look back on this time. What kind of mother—no, guardian—would she be? She inched Mona forward a few feet. Well, she'd be a better one than her mother, that was for sure. Nacho would never have to lie awake, afraid in the dark. She would be what she'd wished her mother had been: attentive, understanding and present. She'd also make sure that Nacho felt comfortable talking to her about anything.

In fact, because she wasn't his mother, maybe they could just be friends. Sure, she'd be the one setting down the rules, but somebody had to. He'd understand that.

Good friends. Yeah, that's what I want.

They could take day trips on the weekends, exploring the area. Maybe they'd learn to parasail—or even surf! With happy thoughts she inched her way to the exit, hung a right and headed back to town.

Her shift at the bar didn't start for an hour and a half, and she had one more chore to complete. Ms. Barnes had turned over the papers for Nacho, along with the key to her mother's apartment. Apparently the state had decided Cora Hart's belongings wouldn't help them out of their fiscal crisis. Now Priss had to clear out the rest of the stuff, or pay rent for another week. As much as she was dreading going back there, she didn't have a choice.

And that made her feel trapped. Again.

She rested her arm on Mona's door. The sun winked through the morning cloud cover, then disappeared.

A scene flashed in her mind. One of the last scenes of a long and depressing movie.

Her mom stood at the stove smoking a cigarette, stirring potatoes frying in a cast-iron skillet. "You're going to like him, Priss. He's sweet, employed, and—"

"He's married, Ma."

"Well, he's had a tough go of it. The marriage is not good. He's going to file for a divorce. Soon."

"So, in the meantime, he's going to move in here? Do you realize I go to school with his kids, Ma?"

It was hopeless. All a guy had to do was ask and if Cora Hart wasn't involved with someone else, she was his. She'd done stupid stuff before, like when she hooked up with that sleaze who had cleaned them out two years earlier. But this was a new low. She'd never messed with a married man before. "Do you know what's going to happen when this gets around school?"

Her mother tapped the cigarette on the ashtray, put it back in her mouth and turned the greasy potatoes with the spatula. "You'll like him. We'll make a great family. You'll see."

Priss pulled Mona to the cracked curb in front of the so-called apartments. The tired paint and robust weeds didn't look any better today. She sat a moment, staring at her memory that had slipped into the present. Something inside her firmed, like clay hardening in the sun.

It's not going to be like that for Nacho. I'm going to listen to him. He's going to know he has a say in what happens. It's going to be him and me first, then everything and everyone else second.

At least for as long as she was here.

She slid the strap of her bag over her shoulder, checked the side mirror for traffic, then stepped out of her car. She strode to the back alley where she'd spied Dumpsters on the way by. Luckily one

was empty. She muscled it across the alley and pushed it under the back window of her mother's apartment.

Piece of cake. You can do this.

Today she didn't need the scent of underprivileged that enveloped her when she walked in the door to take her back to those dark days. The ghost of her mother stood in the kitchen, stirring potatoes.

She ignored the vision and stepped into the tiny bedroom where Nacho had slept. Might as well start there. She opened the window, stripped the bed, and tossed the sheets out. She opened a plastic bin that had held his clothes, and filled it with anything that looked personal. There wasn't much: a few Lego pieces, a G.I. Joe figure he'd probably outgrown and a couple of dime-store jigsaw puzzles.

Next, the closet. Her mother's few clothes hung from hangers in limp accusation. She didn't even examine them—straight out the window.

Keeping her head down to avoid ghosts, Priss dragged the trash can from the kitchen into the living room. Everything not belonging to the landlords got dumped in, including ashtrays and the rumpled threadbare sheets on the couch—her mother's last bed. She pulled off the sheets and rolled them into a ball. But before she let them go, she lowered her nose and took a deep lungful of the desperation, hope and sadness that had been her mother.

A barnacled shell, buried so deep in the silt of her psyche that she'd forgotten it, suddenly burst open, spitting out a misshapen pitted, black pearl of guilt.

A strangled sob slipped out before her throat closed.

I should have at least stayed in touch. The pain of learning about her mother's death from a stranger rose in her, fetid and slimy. Had her mother lain in a county hospital bed, breathing like a landed fish, wishing she could see her daughter one last time?

It isn't the child's job to rescue an adult. It's supposed to be the other way around.

Shaking her head at her sentimental foolishness, Priss dropped the sheets in the trash, then walked to the kitchen. The sooner she got out of these backwaters, the better.

A half hour later, the apartment was empty. She took one last quick tour to be sure she hadn't missed anything. She glanced in the bathroom and pulled the door to close it when something brushed her hand. Hanging from a hook on the back of the door was an apron. She remembered it. Her mother's barmaid apron.

The pocket gapped. Priss reached in and pulled out a roll of money, held together with a rubber band. No evening's tips, these—twenties and tens, more than an inch thick. When she slid the band off and unfurled the bills, a piece of paper fell out. She unfolded it to find a list of states, with a line through Nevada, Florida, Michigan and Ohio. What, was she trying for a man in every state? Priss flipped through the bills, counting, stunned by the tally. What had she been saving for? Bail money for Nacho's father before the trial? A deposit on a decent place to live in? Nah. Cora Hart had lived in places like this her entire life, and she'd been way too old a leopard to change her spots.

Priss fingered the rough, dingy white cotton rectangle with its long, dangling ties. Her mother had owned it forever. When it began whispering memories, Priss lifted it off the peg and tossed it over her shoulder to silence it.

Hell, she was back in her mother's world—why not use her old apron? Priss told herself she wasn't being sentimental, just practical; she needed an apron anyway.

The alarm on her phone blatted "Reveille." Time to get to work. She slipped the map and the money into her purse, and took the few steps to the living room.

Snatching up the half-full plastic bin, she walked out, locked the door to the past once more and slipped the key under the door.

* * *

ADAM STOOD IN front of his narcotics shelf taking inventory, when a woman's voice screeched in his pocket. Dang it, Sin must've reprogrammed his phone again. He pulled it from his

jacket pocket and answered. “Sin, this is not funny. I work with octogenarians and a Lady Gaga ringtone is going to give someone a heart attack.”

“That’s Eat Your Dead, by the way. Lady Gaga is pop.” She spit the word like it was spoiled meat. “Special cleanup on aisle four, boss,” she whispered, and hung up.

He craned his neck, but couldn’t see the aisle from where he stood. He slipped his phone back in his pocket, walked past the cash register, and unlocked the door that kept the drugs secure.

He saw the kid the minute he pulled the door closed behind him. A Hispanic boy with sloppy, too-big clothes stood at the magazine rack with the casual “I’m not doing anything” demeanor of a shoplifter. Sin was an expert at spotting them but this one was more obvious than most. The kid stopped leafing through a muscle-car magazine, shot a glance up the aisle, then slipped the magazine in the waistband of his saggy jeans.

Damn it, these kids never gave up. Where were their parents? He was tired of little delinquents pilfering his stock. It was time to set an example that would deter other kids. The twerp’s luck had just run out because Adam was flat sick of this. He tipped his chin at Joyce, the cashier—it was the signal to let the kid go.

He followed the boy and once the door closed behind them, Adam grabbed the thief’s shirt collar.

“Hey, lemme go!” The punk twisted to see who had a hold of him.

Adam tightened his grip. “Go? The only place you’re going is jail.” He retrieved his cell from his pocket and scrolled his contacts while the kid struggled.

“I didn’t do anything. What’re you—a pervert? Lemme go!”

The kid was stronger than Adam would have guessed. He had to twist the boy’s T-shirt collar around his fist. “Settle. You’ll only make it worse.”

“Help!” The kid pulled at his collar, frantic. “Somebody help—he’s trying to kidnap me!”

Tourists strolling by slowed, uncertain.

A little old lady in orange Bermuda shorts stopped and glared at him. “What are you doing with that child?”

Oh, hell.

* * *

PRISS GUNNED THE engine, running ten miles over the posted twenty-five in the downtown area, checking the rearview mirror for cop strobes. She’d meant to be home a half hour ago, but Floyd had shown up late for work. She couldn’t very well walk away from a bar full of patrons.

But damn, it was Nacho’s first day with her, and now she’d left him cooling his heels on the sidewalk.

Great way to make a kid feel secure, Hart.

That wasn’t the way she’d wanted to start.

Something about the knot of people gathered in front of the drugstore made her heart bang like Mona’s engine on a bad day. There was no reason to believe this had anything to do with Nacho, but her shit-meter redlined just the same. Her stomach muscles snapped taut, clicking into defense mode. When she squealed to a stop at the curb, heads swiveled in her direction. She shut off Mona and stood on the seat to see over the small crowd.

“Help me, somebody!” Nacho strained like a dog at the end of a leash, the collar of his T-shirt choking him. Her landlord stood behind him, his fist knotted in cotton, his face redder than Nacho’s, fiddling with a phone.

“You let him go!” Priss yelled, vaulting over the passenger-side door.

Bystanders backed away as she charged in like a Pamplona bull.

She grabbed Adam’s forearm and squeezed. The muscle, like braided wire, didn’t give. “What are you doing? Can’t you see you’re choking him?” When he ignored her, she gave up on the arm,

and grabbed Nacho's shoulders instead and looked him in the eyes. "Stop fighting. You're making it worse."

"You'll want to stay out of this." Adam's dark eyes were cool. "He's a shoplifter. I'm calling the cops." He hit a button on the phone and raised it to his ear.

"You. Let. Him. Go." The steely, blood-tipped threat in her voice almost frightened her.

Adam let go.

Instinctively, her arms went around the boy's shoulders. "He's my brother."

Nacho struggled in her embrace, then froze. So did Adam.

He hit a button and slowly lowered the phone. "He's what?"

She stuck out her chest and tightened her grip on Nacho's shoulders. Righteously indignant was a strong offense. "He's my brother. He wouldn't steal."

God, please, he wouldn't do that, would he?

She had to know. Her eyes traveled down to Nacho. Chin stuck out, lips a tight thin line, eyebrows matching commas of anger over eyes that...were larcenous.

Shit.

There was no doubt in her mind. He'd done it. A flush of heat spread up from her chest. Sweat popped at her hairline, but then freeze-dried in the chill rolling off her landlord.

"Really." He dropped his phone into his pocket, then lifted the hem of Nacho's shirt. He pulled out a magazine with a souped-up hot rod on the cover, garish flames painted on the hood. "You undoubtedly have a receipt for this, then."

Nacho studied his sneakers. Priss squirmed inside as if she were the guilty party.

Apparently—and thankfully—public shaming wasn't entertaining because the crowd broke up, wandering away in ones and twos.

"Look." Priss swallowed, having no idea of what she'd say next. This very morning she'd rescued the kid from Social Services. Now he was facing juvie.

Two government institutions in one day? That has to be some kind of record.

Arguments, pleas and downright supplications whirled through her mind. She tested and discarded each in nanoseconds.

Adam glared at Nacho. Then at her. She could almost see him connecting dots that would lead to the holes in her story.

This was going to take a delicate blend of the truth and every bit of the manipulation she'd learned on the street. She relaxed her face into her "waif" look and raised her rounded eyes. "Could I talk to you for a second? Alone?"

"I'm not taking my eye off him, and no matter what you say, I'm calling the cops."

"I understand." She dug her fingers in the hollows next to Nacho's collarbone. "You. Wait here. If you move—"

He scrunched his shoulders and winced. "I won't. I promise."

Adam's huff made it clear what he thought of a criminal's promises.

"Just over here." She walked five steps, until she stood under the drugstore's green awning.

Adam followed, keeping a wary eye on Nacho.

"I'll pay you for the magazine. And you can keep it."

"That's not the point."

"I know it isn't." She lowered her voice to a whisper, so Adam would have to lean in to hear. "But I just got him out of a group home today. His mom died—our mom died—two weeks ago." She set her face in grieving lines, and looked at him from under her lashes. Tears? No, better not push it. "Just this once, could you give him a break? He's only ten, and he's been in that group home since the day we buried our mom. That's bound to have messed him up, you know?"

Adam shook his head. "I'm sorry for your loss. Really. But I've had a rash of petty thefts, and if it weren't for Sin, he'd have gotten away with it. I have to make an example of him."

She touched his forearm. “I’ll vouch for him. I’ll make him come in through the back door...”

He jerked his arm away as if she’d pinched it. “He is not living here.”

His distaste sparked tinder—the dried remnants of every slight that lay scattered in her memory. The behind-the-hand giggles, the “slut spawn” taunts, the smug smile of a blonde girl with a pig nose—they all caught fire in a whoosh.

Her hands fisted. “Oh, yes. He is.” It came out as the growled warning of a junkyard dog.

A muscle worked at the side of Adam’s jaw. When he leaned in, Priss was suddenly aware of his size. She felt the brush of his fury on her face. “Oh, no. He isn’t.”

“Read your lease. It bans pets, not kids.”

The spasm in his hands told her just when he realized he’d been had. His eyes narrowed to slits. “You lied to me!”

“You never asked.”

“It never occurred to me to ask a young woman—”

“Well, that’s not my fault.” When the storm in his eyes worsened, tornado sirens went off in her mind. She’d pushed too far. Her deep, cleansing breath doused the last flickering flames of her anger. “Look. This is not going to be a problem. I’m home from the bar a half hour after he gets home from school, and—”

“The bar?”

“My job. I’m a bartender at Bar None.”

Fists clenched, he looked up to the inside of the awning. Priss knew it was a prayer on his part, asking for strength.

“You have a problem with how I earn your rent money, dude?” She tightened the muscles of her chest and core, attempting to smother the anger flare-up that she couldn’t afford. The battle wouldn’t matter if she lost the war.

He took a step back, eyes narrowed. “Yes, I have many problems actually. You told me you were in customer service.”

Ouch. A rare attack of conscience slipped like a shiv between her ribs. “A bartender is a customer service job.”

He crossed his arms over his chest.

“Look, I promise you that my brother is not going to be a problem.” She crooked a finger at Nacho who, in spite of his casual perusal of the street, was listening to every word.

He walked over to Priss immediately.

She pointed a finger at Adam. “You tell this man that you’re sorry. And that this is never going to happen again.”

Maybe the kid did have some survival instinct, because he looked up at the pissed-off pharmacist with tears in his eyes. “I’m really sorry, sir. It won’t happen again.”

“Damned right it won’t. I may not be able to evict you but I’m going to be watching.” He studied Nacho as if he were a small, venomous snake. “The only reason I’m not having you arrested is because you just lost your mother.” He shot a glance at Priss, and then back. “But you are not allowed in my store. Understood?”

“Yes, sir.” Nacho’s voice shook.

Is this an act? He was either very good or very sorry. Priss intended to find out which, as soon as she got him upstairs.

“I am not happy about this. But it appears I have no choice.” Adam turned to look down on her. “For the moment.” He turned on his heel, strode to the door, pulled it open, and with one backward glare, walked in.

Priss felt a wasp-sting of regret for having misled him. But she hadn’t had a choice; the county had put her back against the wall.

Screw it. He didn’t matter. Nacho did.

She took a firm hold of his upper arm and pulled. “You and me, dude. We need to talk.” She led him around the building to the back entrance. The entrance she’d been relegated to as a kid. The one she’d worked her ass off to avoid since.

Until today.

CHAPTER FIVE

YOU ARE NOT GOING TO YELL. In spite of the anger singing in her veins, Priss managed to close the apartment door gently.

Nacho crossed to the window that looked down on Hollister. “This is cool.”

The setting sun highlighted the soft planes of his face, reminding her that he was still a boy. One who had just lost his old life, such as it was. And she planned to show him that life could be better than he’d known so far—after she killed him. “What the hell were you thinking? Do you know how close you just came to going to juvie?”

He walked past the kitchen, to the bedroom. “Where do I sleep?”

“The big couch in the living room opens to a bed.”

“Okay.” His voice echoed from the bathroom.

“Get your butt out here. We’re not done.”

He slouched back in the room, and leaned against the doorjamb, thumbs in his low-rider jeans pockets. She pointed to the table for two between the kitchen and the living area. He walked over, sat and crossed his arms over his chest.

Priss took a deep breath and tamped down the urge to throttle him. “I’m going to ignore the fact that you disregarded my instruction to wait outside the pharmacy until I got there.” She took a deep breath. Kinder and gentler. “But explain to me what possessed you to try to shoplift in this store, of all places? Don’t you have any sense of self-preservation?”

He pursed his lips so hard his bottom lip juttet out.

“Why did you do it?” She could play this game. She crossed her arms and waited.

He lasted about thirty seconds. “You’re not my mother.”

“True thing. Because if I had a kid, he’d know better than to pull a bonehead stunt like this. Why did you do it?”

“I don’t have to tell you.” He moved, just a bit in the seat.

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.

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