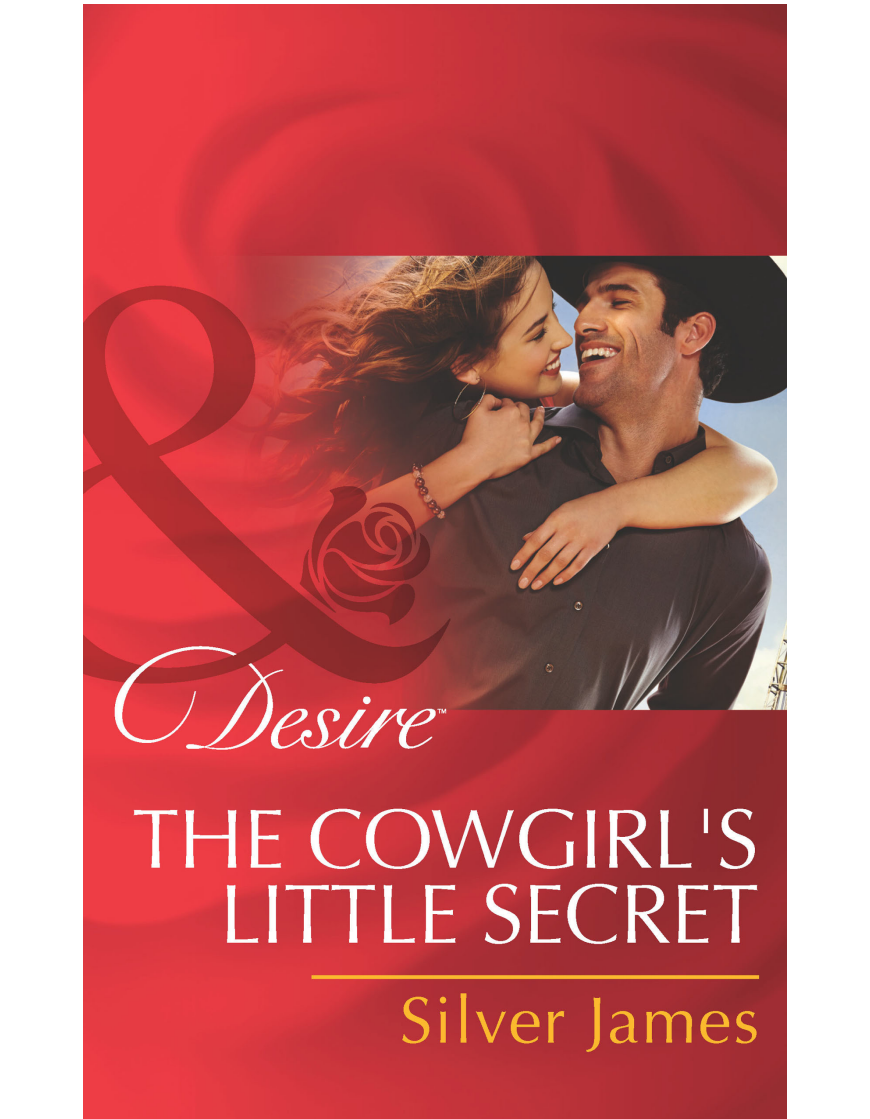


A romantic couple embracing against a red background. A large, stylized rose graphic is visible on the left side of the image. The woman is wearing a dark top and a beaded bracelet, and the man is wearing a dark shirt. They are both smiling and looking at each other.

Desire™

THE COWGIRL'S LITTLE SECRET

Silver James

Silver James

The Cowgirl's Little Secret

Аннотация

She's back at his ranch...with baby in tow When nurse Jolie Davis comes home, she knows it's only a matter of time before she runs into Cord Barron—the Barrons own this town. In fact, it was their oil business rivalry with her father that caused her break-up with Cord in the first place. But no amount of family meddling can deny the fact that she had his secret son. Now, four years later, as her ex is wheeled into the ER—while she's on duty!—it's time to come clean. Because it quickly becomes clear that Cord is determined to reclaim her...

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Cord settled the child he was pretty damn sure was his son more firmly on his lap.

“Is he mine?” He was pleased his voice remained calm and sounded reasonable. Inside he was a seething cauldron of anger.

CJ stopped squirming, as if he sensed something momentous about to happen. His eyes jittered between his mum and Cord.

“I ...” Jolie looked away. “Cord ... you don’t understand.”

“No. I guess I don’t. Since you didn’t give me a chance. Or explain. But you didn’t answer my question. He is mine, isn’t he?”

Anger swirled, cramping his gut. His eyes stayed fixed on Jolie, and even though they burned, he didn’t blink. How could she do this to him? Did she hate him that damned much?

When he’d caught her crying over him in the hospital, he’d hoped for a second chance, but she’d obviously wiped the slate clean and eradicated him completely. His heart turned to granite when he realized what Jolie had done—and had done deliberately. If he said a word, his face would crack, shattering just like his heart was doing. But he had to know.

“Were you ever going to tell me?”

* * *

The Cowgirl’s Little Secret

is part of the Red Dirt Royalty series:

These Oklahoma millionaires work hard and play harder.

The Cowgirl's Little Secret

Silver James



www.millsandboon.co.uk

SILVER JAMES likes walks on the wild side, and coffee. Okay. She *loves* coffee. Warning: her muse, Iffy, runs with scissors. A cowgirl at heart, she's also been an army officer's wife and mum and has worked in the legal field, fire service and law enforcement. Now retired from the real world, she lives in Oklahoma and spends her days writing with the assistance of her two Newfoundland dogs, the cat who rules them all and the myriad characters living in her imagination. She loves interacting with readers on her blog, Twitter and Facebook. Find her at www.silverjames.com.

To my family and friends for not laughing when I talk out loud to the characters living in my head. To my readers, who bring joy and enthusiasm into my world and keep me at the keyboard day in and day out. To the fantastic Harlequin folks who give great edits, support and covers. All y'all are the best!

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[One](#)

Cordell Barron was always in control—of his life, Barron Oil and Gas Exploration, everything that made up his world. Except for now. At the moment, Cord's world was crashing down around his ears and his life seemed to be spinning out of control.

He stared at his hands, curled so tightly around the steering wheel that his knuckles were white. *Jolie is home. Stay away from her.* The words, spoken just over a month ago by her father, were seared into Cord's memory. Like the woman.

Jolene Davis. Juliet to his Romeo—right down to their feuding families. Cord had walked away from her, not once but twice, if their hookup for “old time's sake” five years ago counted. Technically, she'd walked away the second time—before he could. Turnabout was fair play and all that crap. That was what he'd told himself at the time. He hadn't wanted to admit how much it hurt—waking up hungover to find her gone, the sheets still smelling of her sweet mimosa scent. Even now, all these years later, he hated spring when the mimosa trees bloomed.

Jerking his thoughts back to the present, he stared out the windshield of his crew-cab pickup. His fingers drummed a nervous tattoo on the console. He should call his brother Cash. Technically, they were half brothers, but Cord was head of Barron Security. He could find out everything about Jolie in an hour. Her phone number. Where she lived. Worked. Boyfriend's name. His heart thudded at the thought she might have one—or worse, a husband. He pounded the heel of his fist on the console, making his phone jump onto the passenger seat. Cord had no

right to dictate anything about Jolie's life, but the thought of her in another man's arms, accepting his kisses, sharing his bed...

What was wrong with him? He was supposedly the easygoing Barron, the good ole boy comedian. He didn't get angry. He didn't slam his fist into inanimate objects—especially when it would hurt like hell. Except when Jolie was around. He was always off balance where she was concerned, like a pinball game with lights flashing and bells clanging as a huge TILT strobed in front of his eyes. Yeah, that definitely summed up their relationship. They'd been headed for a big, fat game over from the moment he first laid eyes on her.

The tune of “Take This Job and Shove It” rang out from his phone, sending him scrambling to retrieve it. He unclenched his fist and answered with a terse “What?”

“Hey, cuz, catch you at a bad time?”

Cord clamped down on his emotions, shifting into business mode to talk to his cousin Cooper Tate, operations manager of BarEx, the Barrons' energy company. “Funny, Coop.”

“Just as I suspected, we lost the drill bit down the hole.” Annoyance and something akin to chagrin colored Cooper's voice. “The crew has to fish it out. You gonna get outta the truck and come up or what?”

Glaring through the windshield at the group of men standing around on the floor of the drilling rig, Cord replied, “Or what, smart-ass?”

“Will you just get your butt up here? We need to talk.”

A wicked dust devil of red dirt kicked up and spun across the bare expanse of the well site. Rather than cooling the air, the wind seared everything in its path like a blast from a furnace. The block and tackle attached to the crown of the derrick creaked and swung in a desultory arc, and a length of drilling pipe gripped in the hoist tongs swayed with a gust.

Inured to the hot August weather, Cord shoved his phone into the hip pocket of his jeans, snagged his hard hat from the passenger seat and climbed out of the white truck bearing the BarEx emblem on its doors. The metal steps leading from the ground to the drilling floor rang beneath Cord's boots. Heat waves shimmering around him, Cord gripped the steel handrail during a quick flash of vertigo. His hand felt scorched as he released the rail and climbed again.

On the rig floor, Cooper introduced him to the tool pusher. "Cord, Tom Bradley, best damn rig manager we have."

Cord shook hands with the older man, who then turned to spit tobacco juice before saying, "Damn rig sure seems to be jinxed, boss. Y'all think there's somethin' to the problems we've been having?"

Taking off his hard hat for a moment to brush fingers through his hair, Cooper finally spoke. "I... Maybe. Too many injuries. Too many delays. We should be down to oil sand by now but we aren't even close. Seems as if something happens every other day."

His cousin took a long, controlled breath. Coop was rock solid,

and if he was nervous about the situation, then something was definitely wrong. Cord waited for the other man to continue.

“Remember how much trouble we had acquiring the rights to drill this one?”

“Yeah.” Cord didn’t like where Cooper was probably headed.

“We had a helluva bidding war with Davis Petroleum.” Coop inhaled again. “Do you think they might be behind our troubles?”

His gut cramped. Coop had gone right where Cord suspected. J. Rand Davis was a rabid competitor. The man had a habit of interfering in Barron family business. Not to mention he was Jolie’s father.

“No,” Cord replied after some consideration. “I don’t think so. Ah, hell, Cooper. I have no frickin’ idea if the man would stoop that low or not.” He swallowed the flood of saliva in his mouth and jerked his cousin a few steps away. Lowering his voice, he said, “Jolie’s back.”

Not everyone in the family knew about the fiasco that had been Cord and Jolie in college. That drunken night when, as a senior at the University of Oklahoma, Cord had run into her at a fraternity party and the bright-eyed freshman, well on her way to a massive hangover, had fallen into his lap, kissed him and cussed him out for never asking her out in high school. Learning she’d wanted him like he’d wanted her had felt like a kick in the gut from a twelve-hundred-pound Brahman bull.

But Cooper was Cord’s age, a fraternity brother and friend. He’d covered for them when Cord couldn’t stay away from the

daughter of his father's biggest rival. And Coop had been the one to act as designated driver the night Cord had broken up with Jolie because his father, Cyrus Barron, had dictated that his second son walk away from the one girl he'd ever loved. Coward that he was, Cord had done as his father decreed and then proceeded to get and stay drunk for a week.

"Ah, hell, cuz. That sucks."

And didn't that just sum it up in a nutshell. "Yeah. It does."

Coop turned back to the tool pusher. Tuning out the continuing discussion, Cord studied the rig with a practiced eye. The workers stood around in groups, hands shoved into jeans' pockets, hard hats pushed back on their heads, clothes covered in drilling mud and grease while they waited for orders. The derrick hand was camped out on the monkey board—the platform at the top of the derrick. His job at the moment was to trip pipe—adding or subtracting lengths during the drilling process. Cord recognized the guy and waved, getting a yell in response.

"Yo, big boss! Let's get the damn bit fished out so we can get back to work."

The man had a point. More talk wouldn't get the rig back to drilling for oil. Cord turned to the knot of men still arguing outside the doghouse.

"Billy's right. We have to get that bit out before we can do anything."

At Cord's order, the crew snapped to work. The heavy, burned-oil smell of diesel mixed with the chemical tang of

drilling mud. Cord grinned. He felt alive out here on the rig. These guys were real. Hard men in a hard industry. He'd started as a roughneck, back in college, learning the business literally from the ground up. If things had been different, he could have happily worked the oil patch and not missed the Barron lifestyle. Maybe.

He returned to the mind space he alternately avoided and spent way too much time in lately—thoughts of Jolie. Back when they were younger, he'd been short of options. Stay with her and fight to work in his chosen profession or say goodbye and have his career guaranteed and filled with perks. His father had threatened that Cord would never work in the oil business if he disobeyed him. And as kids, the Barron boys knew their old man didn't make empty threats. No rival company would hire him, according to his father, and he'd believed it. In hindsight, things might have been different, but he'd been too immature and spoiled at the time to test his father's decree.

With the workers settling into a well-rehearsed routine, Cord turned to enter the doghouse. A panicked shout halted him in his tracks.

He spun around and swore time warped into slow motion.

A chain snapped from the stand of pipe just above the drilling hole. One end whipped out, catching one of the roughnecks across his chest. The man fell to the deck as his coworkers ducked. A section of pipe swung wildly from the tongs at the top of the derrick. Up on the monkey board, Billy scrambled to

control the block and tackle. Men scattered amid the grinding clash of steel on iron and the wet smack of metal meeting flesh.

Cord tracked the arcs of both the chain and the falling pipe. Cooper stood squarely in the path of both. Acting completely on instinct, Cord lunged toward his cousin. Shoulder lowered like a linebacker, he caught Coop in the middle of the back, toppling the other man off the edge of the drilling floor. Arms flailing, Cooper hit the dirt twenty feet below. Cord had no time for regrets or to worry about how bad Cooper was hurt. The loose pipe crashed into his back, driving him to his knees, where the end of the flailing chain clipped him around the top of his rib cage. As his head smacked the steel flooring, he had time for one thought before succumbing to darkness.

Damn. This is gonna hurt when I wake up.

* * *

Jolie Davis stared at the empty whiteboard filling an entire wall of the intake section of University Hospital's Trauma One. She was bored out of her skull. And she was pulling a double shift.

When she moved back to Oklahoma City, she'd planned to get out of the ER, but then University had offered her a big salary and a humongous sign-on bonus. She'd jumped at the opportunity to prove to her dad she could take care of herself. And CJ. It was bad enough her father had bought her a house and hired a nanny. He'd take over her entire life if she didn't fight him every inch of the way. That was his *modus operandi*. The man was a type A

personality and she was his only child, which made CJ his only grandson. To say J. Rand Davis was a little overprotective was like calling the Grand Canyon a ditch.

Midweek was a slow time for the ER. Usually. But this was Oklahoma. A late-season thunderstorm could blow up and wreak havoc. Or there could be a big wreck on one of the major interstates crisscrossing the Oklahoma City metroplex. Tinker Air Force Base and Will Rogers World Airport meant airplanes. Lots of them. They could... Not that she really wished ill on anyone, but when things were slow, she had way too much time to think.

Every time the front doors slithered open, she could see the monolithic Barron Tower arrowing up into the hot blue Oklahoma sky. Cord's office was there. No. She would *not* think about him. That part of her life was over. She was better off without him.

The thought squeezed her chest as tight as Scarlett O'Hara's corset. Jolie remembered to inhale when white dots sparkled in her vision. Thoughts of Cord always did this to her. Everyone told her to live her life. How sad was it she only wanted to live that life with him? Despite everything. Because of everything. But there was a zero percent chance of that happening. The imaginary corset cinched even tighter as guilt washed over her. He'd never forgive her for what she'd done.

Jolie rolled her head from shoulder to shoulder, and then stretched. Maybe she'd go wash the empty whiteboard. Again.

Whirling the desk chair around, her legs collided with a smiling man. Dr. Perry, attending surgeon on duty and head of Trauma One. She squeaked, her heart pounding. “Dang! Don’t sneak up on me like that.”

Absently rubbing his knee where she’d banged the chair into him, Dr. Perry chuckled. “I didn’t think I was. I’m headed to the cafeteria. Want me to bring you something back? You know what it’s like in the ER. We eat when we—” The doctor tilted his head as if listening to something she couldn’t hear.

Sirens. So much for a quiet afternoon. She did her best to hide her elation at being busy.

After a couple hours, things had settled back down. A med tech had his hip propped on Jolie’s desk and was teasing her while she sipped the mocha frappuccino he’d brought to bribe her to go out with him.

“Do you like kids?” She knew how to nip his interest in the bud.

“They’re cute in the petting zoo.”

Jolie rolled her eyes. “I’m not talking about baby goats.”

“Neither am I.” His eyes twinkled, though he managed to keep a straight face. The theme song from *Pirates of the Caribbean* filled the air and he dug his cell phone out of his scrubs. With a wave and a wink, he disappeared around the corner.

Leaning back in her chair, Jolie exhaled. So far, they’d dealt with a suspect bitten by a police dog, a teenage girl who’d twisted her ankle during a fast-pitch softball game and a guy who’d tried

to amputate his thumb with a chain saw. The cops had flirted with her, the softball player's parents had been upset the girl might miss the rest of the tournament and Chain Saw Guy's wife had yelled at him for being stupid. Jolie sort of had to agree with that assessment.

Just then, the statewide emergency network radio squawked. Dr. Perry appeared out of nowhere and snagged the microphone before she could. He acknowledged the call and put it on loudspeaker without missing a beat. Jolie took triage notes while he questioned the EMT on the other end.

An accident on a drilling rig. Three patients. The most critical would be arriving by the MedFlight helicopter currently being dispatched. Jolie activated a second chopper to bring in the second patient, a man who'd fallen twenty feet.

Trauma One looked like an anthill that had been kicked. Scurrying people appeared from nowhere, everyone intent on preparing the ER. Jolie kept track of the trauma clock—the indefinable golden hour providing the best odds for full recovery.

The electronic exit doors whooshed open and closed but she heard it—the *whap-whap-whap* of helicopter blades. The radio crackled. She breathed—and it seemed as if Trauma One breathed with her as the pilot's voice ghosted from the speaker.

“MedFlight One to base.”

She cleared her throat before keying the microphone. “This is base. Go ahead, Med One.” Jolie wrote on the whiteboard as the flight nurse gave her the rundown on the patient's life-threatening

injuries while the chopper landed.

“Roger that, Med One.”

Medical personnel scrambled to the helipad, returning quickly with the first victim. As Jolie fell into step beside the gurney, she glanced over and saw the patient’s face. Then faltered and tripped. One of the interns bumped into her, but kept her from going down with a steadying hand under her elbow. She murmured apologies and trotted to catch up.

This wasn’t happening. That was *not* Cordell Barron on that gurney. *Oh, God, it couldn’t be.*

Two

Instinct kept her making notes as her conscious brain froze. One word kept screaming through her mind. *No. No, no, no, no, no* turned into a litany. This was so wrong. Things weren’t supposed to end this way.

The flight nurse passed Cord’s driver’s license to her and Jolie accepted it with numb fingers. “Patient’s ID says his name is Cordell Barron. Thirty-three years old. Wonder if he’s one of *the* Barrons?”

Jolie nodded mutely. Oh, yeah. Cord was definitely one of them. Her fingers shook as she tried to type in information on the computer pad.

The gurney was wheeled into the trauma bay but she stopped at the edge of the curtain. She had to call his next of kin. It was her job. That would be his father. Cyrus Barron. The man who’d ruined her life. She couldn’t do it, couldn’t speak to that man for

her life. Or Cord's.

The steady beeping of the monitors switched to a sharp alarm. He was crashing. Jolie forgot everything but saving the life of the only man she'd ever loved. Reflexes honed by five years working trauma kicked in. She passed off the pad to another nurse, pulled on latex gloves and waded into the mix.

Thirty nerve-wracking minutes later, Dr. Perry and the trauma surgical team finally stabilized Cord and whisked him off to the operating room. Jolie watched the elevator doors close behind the gurney before she turned back to the ER bay where they'd worked so feverishly to save his life. Her knees wobbled, and she had to lean against the wall to stay upright. Her night wasn't over yet. Cooper Tate was still being worked on by the orthopedic team, his compound fractures serious though not life threatening. He'd be following Cord into surgery shortly.

Trauma One looked as if a tornado had torn through it. Jolie went through the robotic motions of cleaning up and resetting the bay for the third patient coming in by ambulance from the well site. She should be back at the admitting desk filling out the paperwork on Cord and Cooper. Should be notifying their families. The clothes Cord had been wearing, along with his personal effects, had been shoved into a plastic bin for safekeeping. She tucked the tub under her arm and shuffled back to the intake desk as the janitorial staff moved in to mop and sanitize.

Sinking into her chair, Jolie felt as if she'd just run a marathon

—her arms and legs were leaden, her brain still in shock. Shivering uncontrollably, she wrapped her arms across her chest and hung on, breathing deeply until the worst of the reaction passed. There wasn't time to collapse. Not yet. She had to make notifications. No matter what. It was her job as admitting nurse. She couldn't pass it off—no matter how much she wanted to do so. Bad enough she'd all but abandoned her post to work on Cord.

The bin with Cord's belongings sat at her feet. She bent over and dug through the ripped and bloody clothes. She flipped open his wallet. Credit cards. A couple of receipts. No list of contact phone numbers. Jolie tucked the wallet and his driver's license into a plastic baggy. She did not stare at his photo. She didn't sigh over those sculpted cheekbones and that strong jaw, the golden-brown eyes. She didn't rub her thumb across the plastic pretending it was his face and she could feel his skin. Well, just once. Or twice.

Something dinged. Startled, Jolie dropped the ID and grabbed her cell phone. Its face remained dark. The strains of something country and western played from deep in the bin. She found Cord's phone in the hip pocket of his jeans. The caller ID read Cash.

Knowing she should answer, Jolie let it roll to voice mail. Cash didn't like her. Truth be told, none of Cord's brothers liked her. Well, except maybe for Chance. While he might not *like* her, he didn't hate her like the rest of the family. Chance and Cooper. They'd been the only ones to ever give her the time of day when

she'd dated Cord.

Cord's phone was password protected. Of course it was, because nothing could be easy tonight. She stared off into the distance, thinking. She tried his birth date. Nope. On a whim, she tried her own. That had been his default password for everything when they dated in college. When the screen opened, she almost dropped the phone. Jolie scrolled through his contact list, making note of pertinent numbers for the hospital's records. She had to stop dithering and make at least one call. Chance's number was at the top of the list. She dialed it on her desk phone but remembered Chance was on his honeymoon, so she hung up.

Jolie remembered the big dust up from early in the summer as she had been moving home. Seemed as if Cyrus Barron was still screwing up his sons' lives—Chance's this time. The woman he'd fallen for had led an old-fashioned cattle drive from her ranch to the stockyards to get her steers to market so she could pay off the mortgage lien Cyrus held on the place. She knew how Mr. Barron reacted to his sons thinking for themselves. He wouldn't like it one little bit, especially if Chance went against his father's dictates, siding with a woman Cyrus had declared an enemy. Jolie had heard all about that day because her dad had been waiting on Cassie Morgan to arrive so he could buy the herd. Yeah, her dad liked screwing with the Barron family.

Worrying her bottom lip with her teeth, Jolie stared at the phone numbers on her list. Chance and Cord were close, with Cooper their third musketeer. As soon as Chance heard the news,

he'd be on the next plane home anyway—honeymoon or not. Decision made, Jolie used Cord's phone to call.

After six rings, she was afraid her call would roll over to voice mail. Chance picked up on the eighth ring.

"Dude, this better be important." His voice held a teasing growl.

Using her most professional voice, Jolie said, "This is University Hospital Trauma One calling. Mr. Chance Barron?"

"What the— How? What the hell's going on?"

"I'm sorry to inform you, sir, but your brother Cord was critically injured. An accident on an oil rig."

"Is he... How bad?"

"He's—" Her voice cracked and she had to swallow around the constriction in her throat. "He's in surgery, Cha—Mr. Barron."

She almost blew it, calling him by his first name. After giving him all the information she had, she heard Chance's barely polite goodbye before he hung up on her. Jolie huddled her shoulders, shaking again. What if Cord died?

* * *

The 11:00 p.m. shift change arrived. Jolie was dead on her feet and emotionally drained. She'd finished her double shift in automatic mode. Standing in the humid air outside the ER, she stared in the direction of the parking garage. She should go home, take a long bubble bath and put everything behind her. But she couldn't.

Cord Barron had almost died today. Her stomach cramped so

hard she had to bend over from the waist. Jolie choked back a whimper. She wanted to hate him. Had tried to hate him. She'd been the one wanting to kill him—with air quotes around that sentiment. *Kill 'im dead*. Every day since he'd walked out without a word. No goodbye. No explanation. Nothing. Until she had seen him sitting at the bar in Hannigan's that long ago St. Paddy's Day. She'd recognized the hungry look in his eyes and the bulge in his jeans. And something had snapped. She'd wanted to hurt him as badly as he'd hurt her.

Oh, yeah. She'd really taught him a lesson that night—spending the night and then slipping out of the penthouse hotel room at dawn. Only she was the one with the constant reminder. Every time she looked into her son's eyes and he smiled, Cord was right there all over again.

Rubbing her temples, she breathed deeply to hold back nausea. Jolie didn't head to the parking garage. She pivoted on her heel and headed back inside the hospital. Marching to the elevator, she berated herself for her weakness with each step until it became a mantra.

This is a bad idea. A really bad idea.

Cord was out of surgery, but she had to see for herself. She needed to make sure his injuries weren't as life threatening as they'd looked when he'd stopped breathing in the ER.

Pushing through the double doors of the ICU ward, Jolie passed her hand under the automatic dispenser for hand sanitizer from force of habit. The hushed whoosh and thump of

respiratory machines were a soft counterpoint to the electronic beeps of heart monitors. Bright lights kept shadows confined to corners. Life and death battled here, with medical personnel on the front lines.

She glanced at the board to locate Cord's room number. Determined to just stick her head in to assess his condition and leave, Jolie parted the curtains of his cubicle. He looked drawn and pale amid the snaking mass of wires and tubes. She glanced at the monitor, judged his heart rate, respirations and blood pressure.

A touch on her shoulder caused Jolie to clap her hand over her mouth to contain a startled scream. The charge nurse offered a crooked smile.

"What brings you up here, Jolie?"

Jolie nodded toward the bed. "He's a..." A what? Friend? Lover? Ex? More? Definitely less at this point in time. "I know him." That was a generic-enough response. "I was in the ER when he was brought in. I just wanted to check on him before I head home."

The nurse studied her for a long silent minute, and then her expression softened with something akin to understanding. "Sure, hon. Take your time."

When the nurse stepped away and ducked into another room, Jolie logged into the computer station outside Cord's room and checked his chart. Things were serious but he was no longer at death's door.

She should go home, but the thought of the empty house waiting for her didn't appeal. CJ was staying with his grandfather and Mrs. Corcoran, the nanny, was off visiting her sister. Without giving her motives too much thought, she pulled up an uncomfortable-looking chair and sank gratefully into it. She'd never get this opportunity again—the chance to study Cord, to hold his hand, to pretend what might have been. Jolie curled her fingers around his and simply devoured him with her gaze.

Dark hair hung over the bandage circling his head. He still wore it shaggy, though one side had been shaved for the stitches needed to close the gash on his head. More bandages covered his abdomen, and a wound vac clicked with each draining suck. Though his eyes were closed, she knew they were the color of burned honey. His face was sculpted into stark planes. A dark shadow covered his cheeks and chin. Though bristly now, the stubble would be soft by morning. The fingers of her free hand curled and flexed with the effort not to stroke him.

Cord's bare chest—what she could see of it—and his shoulders had the raw look of a man who worked for a living. He'd always been buff. In high school, it was sports and summers working on the Crown B Ranch. In college, he worked the oil patch, getting a hands-on education supplemented by his classroom studies.

A wide yawn cracked her jaw. She glanced at the wall clock, surprised it was almost 2:00 a.m. She started to pull her hand away, but Cord's fingers tightened on hers and his eyelids

fluttered. Thrilled, her heart and lungs performed *Riverdance*, but she didn't want to examine his reaction too closely, choosing to pretend it heralded a change for the better in his condition. Not something else. As if he knew it was her.

“Don't go.”

His voice rasped across her nerves and Jolie could no longer hide from her feelings. His grip tightened around her fingers, and his respirations and heart rate kicked off alarms on the monitor.

“Please.”

Tears burned behind her eyelids. “Okay.”

Her whispered assurance eased him, evidenced by the way the monitor sounds evened out. One corner of his mouth quirked into a faint semblance of the cocky grin she'd once loved so much.

“Okay.” Darkness dragged him under again.

* * *

The sweet summer scent of mimosa filled Cord with a sense of rightness. Jolie. Jolie always smelled like mimosa. He cracked one eye open, ignoring the obnoxious sounds of his hospital room and the pain. He inhaled again but that sweet aroma was overwhelmed by the stench of antiseptic and alcohol, of sickness and death. Walls painted institutional gray surrounded him but he found his balance. Jolie. Here? He was too groggy to wonder about the how or why of it.

Slumped over, her head resting on the bed, Jolie held his hand. She puffed air softly in her sleep as a sunbeam kissed her cheek. He hadn't dreamed her. She *was* here. Touching him. He ached

to touch her chestnut hair but knew any movement would do two things: hurt like hell and startle her into letting go. Instead, he remained content to simply be with her. He'd wanted her and here she was. Sleeping in a position guaranteeing a trip to a chiropractor, holding his hand and making those cute breathing noises he still dreamed about.

Five years ago, during their brief and disastrous reunion, despite the fact both of them had had far too much to drink, he'd made love to her and she'd fallen asleep in his arms. He craved the feeling again like an addict falling out of a twelve-step program. He could admit, at least to himself, that he'd loved her since high school. Not that it did him—or her—any good. Jolie was a Davis, her father a rival of his. And Cyrus Barron always made damn sure Cord and his brothers played by his rules. He hated his old man.

A commotion out in the ward ratcheted the noise level up a notch. Speak of the devil himself. Cord slitted his eyelids. Maybe his father would go away if he thought he was still unconscious.

“What the hell is she doing here?” Cyrus Barron bellowed as he entered the room, and would have lunged for the bed if not for Cash restraining him.

* * *

Jolie jerked awake, her heart pounding from the adrenaline rush. Glancing around in an attempt to focus her sleep-fuzzy mind, she remembered. She'd fallen asleep at Cord's bedside.

The supervising nurse followed Mr. Barron and Cash into the

small room. “Keep your voice down, sir, or I’ll ask you to leave.”

Cyrus, red in the face and looking ready for battle, opened his mouth to launch into what promised to be a scathing retort. Cash cut him off.

“Enough, Dad. Cord’s still unconscious. We don’t want to disturb him.”

Lowering his voice, Cyrus issued orders. “Get her out of here. That woman is not to be anywhere near my son. Especially not with her head on his damn bed!”

Jolie bristled, but the nurse replied before she could. “Ms. Davis is doing her job, Mr. Barron. If you interfere with her or any of my personnel, I will have you not only removed right this instant but banned from this hospital.” She fisted her hands on her hips. “I don’t care who you are. This is my department and you will follow my rules. Or else.”

Jolie rolled her lips between her teeth and bit down to hide a grin. No one but no one ever talked to Cyrus Barron that way. The man was completely flummoxed and left speechless for a moment.

“What is your name?” he demanded.

“Meg Dabney, RN.” The nurse arched a brow. “I’m the day-shift supervisor.” Giving Cyrus her back, she stared at Jolie. “Do you have the patient’s vitals, Jolie?”

Meg was giving her an out—thank goodness. Jolie stood up and quickly assessed the monitor numbers, while twisting her hand to make it look as if she’d been taking Cord’s pulse

manually. She read off the statistics while the older woman made notes on her electronic pad. Jolie came close to freaking out when something tickled her palm: Cord's index finger. She peered at him and noticed his eyelids flickering. Faker! He was conscious and enjoying the show. Relief warred with irritation. This was so like the blasted man.

Dropping his hand, Jolie backed away from the bed. Head down, refusing to make eye contact with Cyrus, she slipped around Meg. The brush of a hand on her bare arm startled her and she glanced up. Cash inclined his head in a slight nod and offered a sympathetic smile, which surprised the dickens out of her. Cash hated her. Didn't he?

Before she could get away, more Barrons crowded in. Chance and a woman she recognized from the society pages as his new bride, Cassidy. Chase, the Mr. Vegas playboy brother, and even Clay, who must have come all the way from DC. All five Barron brothers in the same small space were enough to put a girl into libido overload, as evidenced by the envious looks from the other nurses.

She escaped, but not for long. Chance caught up to her in three strides.

"Jolie?"

She shoved her hands into the pockets of her rumpled scrubs and wished she'd had time to brush her teeth. With her head still down, she glanced at him from the corner of her eyes. "Hi, Chance. Uh...congratulations on your marriage. You got here

quickly.”

“Thanks. The joys of having a fleet of private jets on standby. Are you okay?”

That brought her head up and she met his concerned gaze. “Why wouldn’t I be?”

As Cord’s brother studied her, she tilted her chin and pasted a blank expression on her face.

“How is he, really?”

She’d bet this was not the real question on the tip of his tongue, but Chance had a reputation as one of the best courtroom attorneys in the state. She lifted one shoulder in a negligent shrug. “Far better than he has a right to be.”

Chance’s eyes narrowed and a frown tugged at the corners of his mouth. Realizing how that sounded, Jolie hastened to explain.

“He almost died, Chance. And probably should have.” A shiver skittered through her. “He coded in the ER last night, but he’s strong. And stubborn.” And far too aware of her presence this morning, damn him. “The doctors are worried about the liver tear and the spinal injury.”

“What about the trauma to his head?”

She choked on an involuntary giggle. “As thick as his skull is?” She sobered and exhaled. “He’ll recover fully from the concussion. The scar will be hidden once his hair grows back out.”

Disconcerted by Chance’s continued scrutiny, she turned away. “I have to go.”

He gripped her shoulder gently, halting her in her tracks. “Thank you, Jolie. Thank you for being here for him, for not leaving him alone. And for calling me.”

She twisted her head around to stare at him. While not as big a playboy as Chase, Chance had been a player and rather shallow, except where his brothers were concerned. The Barron boys were nothing if not absolutely loyal to each other. She glanced toward the blonde, who stood in the doorway of Cord’s room watching them. Cassidy Morgan had changed Chance Barron for the better.

Jolie glanced back into the cubicle where Cord was still faking unconsciousness. Too bad he appeared to be the same old Cord.

Three

Jolie tiptoed past the ICU waiting room. Even after a week and at five in the morning, at least one Barron family member was camped out there. She shouldn’t be here. Had no right to slip into his room to check his chart, to stare at him, to miss him so much she couldn’t breathe sometimes.

Cordell Barron was the man she loved to hate. And hated to love. But love him she did, God help her. She remembered the first time she’d seen him as vividly as if it had happened yesterday. Her first day of high school. Standing at the top of the stairs, she’d glimpsed the guys all the freshmen girls were talking about. The Barron brothers. Cord. Chance. And their cousins, Cooper and Boone Tate.

Rooted to the spot, she’d gazed down at him. He’d looked

up and snagged her with his gaze. That maddening smile of his had slid across his face and broadened until dimples appeared to bracket his full lips. Love at first sight. But then Boone had said something and Cord's expression had sharpened before they'd all turned and walked away. She should have seen the truth even then. That was only the first time he'd walked away from her.

As she parted the curtains of his room, the sight of him kicked her in the chest just like that first time. Unshed tears prickled the back of her nose and her throat burned. Her fingers itched to comb his thick hair off his forehead before tangling in the dark silk of it. Why did she come every morning? This was torture. Things hadn't changed. His father still hated her, still pulled all the strings. And it wasn't just herself she had to worry about now. There was CJ, too.

"You just gonna stand there or are you gonna come in and say hello?" Cord's raspy voice raised goose bumps on her arms.

"I didn't mean to wake you."

"C'mere."

"No. I mean...I have to go. My shift starts soon."

"Jolie. Please."

Oh, God, how could she ignore the pleading in those beautiful burned-honey eyes of his? Dragging her feet, she approached the bed and stood at its foot. His gaze raked over her, hot and hungry, and...yes, there was the hurt she expected to see. Well, good. Now they were even.

"Thank you."

She blinked as her jaw dropped a little. Those were not the words she'd expected to fall out of his mouth. "F-for what?"

"For being in the ER. For calling Chance. For staying with me."

"You remember?"

"Yeah. I'm sorry my old man is such an asshat." He offered a crooked grin that indented only one cheek with a dimple as he held out the hand not plugged full of needles and tubes. "C'mere, Jolie."

Her fingers curled and her hand started to reach for him of its own accord. She smoothed her palm against her scrub pants and forced her fingers to grab the cotton instead of his warm flesh. "I can't, Cord. You know that. I have to go." She turned to leave but his voice stopped her, the plaintive tone twisting her heart.

"Jolie?"

She listened to him inhale and her shoulders slumped. He sounded so...defeated. Glancing over her shoulder, she forced her feet to remain planted. Everything in her wanted to run to him, to wrap him in her arms. The pain—physical and emotional—on his face almost undid her.

"I...I can't, Cord. We can't." She fled, dashing tears from her eyes as she pushed through the ICU doors only to smack into a very solid chest. Strong arms gripped her biceps, holding her up.

"Jolie? You okay?"

Chance. Just her luck.

The timbre of his voice changed. "Jolie? Is it Cord? Is he

okay? Did something happen?"

Oh, yeah. Something happened. She'd fallen in love with a man she couldn't have, she'd seduced him to get back at him, and then she'd kept a big ole honkin' secret from him. One that would make him hate her. Breathing deeply to steady her nerves, she blinked away the tears.

"He's awake, Chance. You can talk to him. I have to go. I'm on shift in a few minutes." She tried to step around him but he didn't release her.

"He still loves you, Jolie."

Her heart ripped just a little more. "No, he doesn't. If he loved me, he would have never broken my...broken up with me."

She jerked free and stalked away. She kept her head up and shoulders stiff even though she wanted to hunch over to contain the pain ripping her apart.

* * *

Jolie didn't come back. Cord was disappointed. And pissed. Was she just teasing him again? Anger washed over him like a big ocean wave, filling him with enough bitterness to choke him. One week rolled over into two weeks, and then the third one dragged by with no sign of her. Fine. He was stupid to think they might have a chance, that she'd visited because she still cared.

He fidgeted, waiting for the doctor to arrive. After a month in the hospital, rumor had it he might be discharged today. He was more than ready to get out. To get away from any reminder of Jolie. She was just a few floors away, down in Trauma One.

He'd caught a glimpse of her once, as a physical therapist had wheeled him past the cafeteria. She'd taken one look at him in the wheelchair, blanched, turned and all but ran away.

Yeah. He knew the feeling. He hated the freaking chair. Hated that his legs still didn't work quite right, that his head felt like a watermelon splattered on hot pavement whenever he looked into a bright light, that he was crippled. Cord wanted to go home, where he no longer had to see pity on the faces surrounding him.

Chance and Cassie arrived, followed closely by the doctor and his entourage of medical students. Ah, the joys of University being a teaching hospital. *Not.*

Seeing his state of undress, his sister-in-law immediately split, offering to grab coffee from the waiting room. Cord would be damned glad when he could wear clothes again so his dangly bits didn't offend anyone.

He put up with the poking, prodding, comments and advice. The doctor used a stylus to record stuff on a touch screen tablet, frowning as he filled in blanks. Cord's heart sank. He was going to be stuck here even longer.

"Meg will bring all the paperwork and go over your therapy plan, Mr. Barron." The doctor glanced at Chance. "You've arranged for a home health aide?"

"Wait," Cord interrupted. "Does this mean I'm getting out of here?"

"That's what it means, Mr. Barron."

"Hot damn. Chance, you better have brought me a pair of

pants!”

It took three hours to get out of there. Three freaking hours to clear up all the paperwork, but Cord was finally free. Sort of. He was still stuck in the wheelchair. But he wore real clothes—jeans, boots, a T-shirt that hung a little loose on him. He’d lost weight and muscle tone in the hospital, despite the burgers, fries and pizza his brothers had sneaked in and all the physical therapy exercises. But he could go home now. Get away from the hospital, where he wondered every day if he might catch a glimpse of Jolie, wanting her to come back to see him, needing it as much as a man needed water in the desert. That was how he felt. Parched. He wanted to drink her in, knew he could drown in her presence.

Chance insisted on pushing the wheelchair while Cassie carried the bags of medical supplies, paraphernalia and other stuff he’d accumulated. They rode the elevator down to the first floor in silence. Cassie waited with him while Chance went to get his truck. Once he was settled in the front passenger seat and they were underway, Chance glanced at him.

His brother cleared his throat before saying, “I thought we’d take you to the ranch.”

As much as he wanted to go home to his condo and hide from the whole world, Chance’s suggestion made sense. They had staff at the home place, the Crown B Ranch. Miz Beth and Big John, the caretakers who’d been with the boys for as long as they could remember. And according to the doctor, a home health aide.

Cord hated being an invalid. But he'd have the place to himself. The old man, when he was in town, kept an apartment in Barron Towers. His brothers all had their own places. Only staff and Kaden Waite, the ranch manager, would be around.

"Yeah, fine. Whatever." He swallowed the snarl and added, "But I'm starved. I want a steak before we head out there."

"Cattlemen's?"

At his nod, Chance changed lanes and made a left turn to head back toward Stockyards City and the famous steak house.

Chance found a space in the parking lot behind the historic building housing Cattlemen's Cafe. After some frustrated manipulation, Cord settled into the wheelchair. Cassie insisted Chance push and Cord grimaced.

"I can push myself. I'm not helpless."

"Of course you aren't." Cassie hastened to soothe him. "But this is your chance to make Chance your minion."

Cord still wasn't happy, but the way Cassie phrased it took the sting out of the fact that he was stuck. Not for long, though. He fully planned to be rid of the freaking wheelchair as soon as possible, if not before.

They had missed the lunch rush and were too early for the dinner crowd, so they were seated immediately.

While Cord and Chance went for the large filet, Cassie opted for prime rib. Their salads were quickly followed by their entrées, and they dug in like starving people, which Cord was. Beef, for him, was its own food group.

Their meal finished, Cassie maneuvered Cord's wheelchair through the narrow aisles between seating areas while Chance stepped ahead to handle the door. The entrance to the restaurant consisted of two sets of heavy glass double doors, their handles shaped like the horns of a longhorn steer. They'd just passed through the inner doors only to stop when the exterior doors were opened by a woman wearing scrubs, holding a little boy's hand.

Jolie.

Cord watched her eyes widen to deer-in-headlights proportions as her gaze darted between him and the child beside her.

Nobody moved until Cassie elbowed Chance and whispered, "I didn't know Cord had been married."

Her voice broke the spell and both Cord and Chance stared at her.

"He hasn't."

"I haven't."

The men answered all but simultaneously.

"Why would you think he had, Cass?" Chance muttered the question.

The kid tugged at Jolie's hand. "Ow, Mommy, leggo. You're squeezin' me too hard."

Cord stared at Jolie then the boy. Mommy? She had a son? His heart shriveled like mud under a hot August sun. She'd found someone else and married him. Had his child. He relaxed his fists and smoothed damp palms along his thighs, hoping to hide

his agitation. And sitting in this damned wheelchair sure didn't help his ego.

Cassie hissed, "If that little boy isn't a Barron, then I'm deaf and blind."

All the color drained from Jolie's face. Her gaze jerked to the child beside her before returning to meet Cord's stare. She swallowed convulsively and guilt radiated from her. Cord couldn't speak for a minute as Cassie's words sank in.

"Jolie?" Her name rasped across his tongue, which felt like sandpaper.

"Cord." She blinked several times and her grip on the boy's hand tightened even more.

People knotted up behind them, wanting out. Cord pushed the chair forward, and Jolie had no place to go but backward onto the sidewalk. Chance and Cassie followed a step behind.

Brown eyes as curious as a chipmunk's stared at Cord. This time, he was the one who swallowed convulsively. "What's going on, Jolie?"

"Who're you?" The boy's lips pursed and his brows knitted together.

Tilting his head so he could watch both Jolie and the boy, Cord replied, "I'm Cord Barron. Who're you?"

"I'm CJ. Do you know my mommy?"

"I thought I did." Cord was pretty sure his voice dripped icicles. Cassie was right. Everything about the kid screamed Barron. His aggressive stance, his expression. Looking at CJ was

like seeing a picture of himself as a kid.

“Cord...I...I can explain.”

Jolie looked terrified as he pushed the wheelchair toward her, only to be brought up short by his brother’s hand on his shoulder.

“Easy, Cord. Let me handle this.”

Chance was using his lawyer voice. Rather than shaking off his hand, Cord inhaled deeply. It wouldn’t do to lose his temper. Not here in the middle of the sidewalk. Was it possible CJ was his? He knew nothing about kids, or how to judge their ages, but the boy couldn’t be more than four, five at the oldest. He stopped breathing for a minute. St. Patrick’s Day. Five years ago. The Bricktown Street Party. Hannigan’s Pub. He felt the color drain from his face and now he surged forward, jerking away from his brother.

“Why didn’t you tell me?”

Jolie backed up several steps, dragging the boy with her. CJ pulled free and charged. His little fists hammered Cord’s thighs as Cord jerked the chair to a stop to avoid running over the kid.

“You leave my mommy alone.”

Cord picked him up, hiding the twinge of pain in his ribs, and placed him in his lap, one arm corralling the kid’s legs so he couldn’t kick. Oh, yeah. CJ was all Barron. He had no doubt.

“Cord? Please...”

He glanced around CJ to stare at Jolie. She had her hand raised, reaching toward her son, her eyes pleading with him. Folding the kid in his arms, he settled the child he was pretty

damn sure was his son more firmly on his lap. “Is he mine?” He was pleased his voice remained calm and sounded reasonable. Inside he was a seething cauldron of anger.

CJ stopped squirming, as if he sensed something momentous about to happen. His eyes jittered between his mom and Cord.

“I...” Jolie looked away. “Cord... You don’t understand.”

“No. I guess I don’t. Since you didn’t give me a chance. Or explain. But you didn’t answer my question. He is mine, isn’t he?”

Anger cramped his gut, but his touch remained gentle as he held the boy in his lap. His eyes stayed fixed on Jolie, and even though they burned, he didn’t blink. How could she do this to him? Did she hate him that damned much? When he’d caught her crying over him in the ICU, he’d hoped for a second chance, but she’d obviously wiped the slate clean and eradicated him completely. His heart turned to granite when he realized what Jolie had done—and had done deliberately. If he said a word, his face would crack, shattering just like his heart was doing. But he had to know.

“Were you ever going to tell me?”

Jolie flushed and her chin rose to a stubborn angle. The anger in her green eyes flashed like emeralds lit by firelight. “No, Cord. No, I wasn’t.”

Four

“Let go of my son, Cord.” Jolie reached for CJ, but the boy shook her off, curling in closer to Cord’s shoulder.

CJ ignored his mother and cupped his hands on Cord’s cheeks.

The boy pulled his head around to draw his attention.

“Do you have a little boy?”

Where the dickens had that question come from? Cord studied CJ’s face, noting the similarities.

“Yeah, it seems like maybe I do.”

“Oh.” The kid’s expression shuttered as he tucked his chin against his chest. He squirmed a little, as if to get away.

With a touch of his index finger, Cord got him to look up. None of this was CJ’s fault. But he had to know. *Was* there another man in Jolie’s life?

“Do you have a dad?”

“No.” The boy lifted his shoulders up around his ears and shot his mother a guilty look as he whispered, “I kinda wish I did.”

The kid’s voice did something to Cord’s chest. He remembered wishing the same thing, but his old man was always too busy. At the same time, relief washed over him. There didn’t seem to be a father figure in the boy’s life.

“Dads are important.” He offered CJ a hesitant smile.

“Cord...” Again Chance’s voice, brimming with unspoken legal advice, intruded. “We need to step back from the emotions here, talk about this someplace else.”

“Like your office?”

“Or home.” Chance sounded diplomatic.

Cord focused on CJ. “Have you ever met your dad?”

The kid shook his head, a little smile beginning to tweak the corner of his mouth. Then he glanced around at the serious faces

of the adults, and his budding smile wilted when he fixed his attention on Jolie. “Mommy? Are you cryin’?” He squirmed to get off Cord’s lap.

“Don’t do this, Cord. Please. Not like this.”

Cord swallowed around the fist-size lump in his throat and ignored the tears shining on Jolie’s cheeks and the plea in her voice. Her anger had leached out, leaving only sadness. “There’s something you should know, CJ. I’m your—”

“Cord, no!” Jolie’s anger was back, and it prickled his skin like dozens of needle pricks.

“Dammit, Jolie—”

“Uh-oh. You aren’t s’posed to say that word.”

Cord absently rubbed CJ’s back as he controlled his own anger. “Yeah. I know, bubba. I’ll have to start a swear jar for when I forget and say words like that in front of you.”

“A swear jar?”

“Yup. Whenever you or I say a bad word, we’ll have to put money in the jar. To remind us not to say them.”

CJ cut his eyes to his mom and lowered his voice to a loud whisper. “Am I gonna see you again?”

“We have to go, CJ.”

Jolie stood rooted about four feet away, as if afraid to approach. Probably a good idea. Not that Cord would physically harm her. He didn’t hit women. But damn if he didn’t want to hurt her as badly as she’d hurt him. She’d eviscerated him, spilling his heart and guts right there on the sidewalk for everyone to see.

“No.”

She blinked at his cold command and opened her mouth to argue.

“I’m his father. CJ’s coming with us.”

CJ whipped his head around to stare, his brow crinkled. He mouthed the word *father* but Cord mostly ignored the boy, his gaze fixed on Jolie.

“The hell you say.” She bore down on him now, a tiger mama ready to rip his head off.

“Bad mommy. You aren’t s’posed to say those words, either!” CJ chortled and clapped his hands, oblivious to the tension among the adults. “She has to put money in the swear jar, too, right?” He blinked, long dark lashes shadowing brown eyes so reminiscent of Cord’s own. Looking shy, he gazed up. “Right? Uh...” He patted Cord’s cheek again to get his attention. “Are you my daddy?”

Cord felt the word deep in his chest as CJ uttered it and something shifted—something both fierce and tender.

“Absolutely, pardner.” He glared at Jolie, daring her to continue the fight.

She wasn’t about to back down. “C’mon, CJ.”

“But, Mommy,” he whined, digging in his heels by wrapping his legs around one of Cord’s legs and pulling against her grip. “I want strawberry shortcake.”

“Not today. We’re going home.”

“You’re not going anywhere, Jolie. Not until this is settled.”

Her gaze whipped to meet Cord's, and then skittered away from the seething anger in his expression.

"Cord, let them go. Cassie can drop me at the office and take you home. I'll get a writ of *habeas corpus* drawn up along with a request for a paternity test and file them this afternoon."

"You wouldn't dare!" Jolie barely managed to utter her outraged words.

Chance's mouth thinned into a disapproving grimace. "Damn straight I would." He ruffled CJ's hair after Cassie glared and elbowed him. "And I'll put my dollar in the swear jar, too, bubba."

"Everyone should step back a little and take a deep breath," Cassie urged. "And Chance is right. We need to take this someplace more private." Her hands lifted in a fluttery gesture to indicate the curious stares from people passing by.

Cord didn't care if they were being filmed for a segment on the ten o'clock news, but his sister-in-law had a point. "Yeah, good idea, Cass."

Chance glanced at Cassie. "Darlin', would you get them to pack up a strawberry shortcake to go?" He winked at CJ as Cass ducked back inside the restaurant. "Are you sure we can't move this to my office?"

Jolie bowed up like a half-broke mustang, and Cord worked to school his expression. She always did run toward hot tempered.

"And give you Barrons home court advantage? I don't think so. I'll tell ya what. Let's go to my dad's office. We can talk there."

She folded her arms just under her breasts, plumping them under the misshapen scrubs she wore.

Cord sucked in a breath. This woman had always had power over him. From the first moment he'd laid eyes on her standing at the top of the stairs in high school.

"I don't care where the he—" He glanced down at CJ and bit off the word. "The *heck* we go. I want this settled, and settled now."

"Now? After all these years you're in an all-fired hurry to settle it now?"

"Since I just learned I had a son less than ten minutes ago, yeah, Jolie. I'm in a big hurry to settle it now."

Jolie jammed her fists against her hips. Cord had to remember to breathe. Her cheeks were flushed and her green eyes sparked. The best sex they'd had was makeup sex after their fights. There'd been many. He'd forgotten that. The passage of time had smoothed over those memories so only the good ones stood out. But man, those particular bad times were so *good*!

Gesturing down the street toward the bank on the next corner, Chance suggested adjourning to the conference room there. Cord had to stifle a laugh. His brother was being such a sneaky lawyer; the bank belonged to Barron Enterprises. Not exactly neutral territory. He could live with that. He needed every advantage, especially since he felt as if his world had tilted on its axis. At Jolie's nod, Chance pulled out his cell and made a call.

Cassie appeared with a foam box and winked at CJ. "So what's

the plan?”

“We’re going to the bank to use the conference room.” Chance gripped the handles of Cord’s wheelchair and started pushing.

Giggling, CJ squirmed so he was sitting facing forward. “Make it go fast?”

“No,” all four adults answered simultaneously.

Once they were inside the bank, Cassie disappeared into the break room with CJ in tow. When Jolie followed, ready to argue, Cassie showed some of her own temper.

“Good grief. The kid is going to eat his strawberry shortcake in here. Do you seriously want him listening to the two of you slinging mud at each other? Really?”

There was a reason Cord loved his sister-in-law. She didn’t take crap from anyone. Not his brothers, not Chance and definitely not his father. As he watched, some of the starch wilted out of Jolie, especially when Cass reached over to touch her arm.

“Look, Jolie, I get why you’re nervous. I promise I’m just going to sit with him. We’ll both be here when y’all get through talking. Okay?”

Jolie blinked several times, inhaled deeply and relaxed. “Okay.”

And that was that. Jolie pivoted and marched toward the conference room door, where Chance and Cord were waiting. She brushed past them and a wisp of sweet mimosa scent followed in her wake. Cord had to shift in the chair to ease the fullness pressing against his zipper. He inhaled shallowly, but her

scent still perfumed the air. He needed his head clear to deal with this situation.

On one level, he was so angry he wanted to punch something. But on another, the twisty, bendy parts of his psyche were plotting ways to use the fact they had a son together to his advantage. He wanted Jolie. He always had. Now he had leverage.

"I need some space." Cord stared at Chance.

"That's not a good idea."

"Get out, Chance. I want to talk to Jolie. Alone."

His brother wasn't very happy, as evidenced by the tense set of his shoulders and grim expression, but Chance did as he asked and vacated the conference room. Once they were alone and he was positive Chance didn't linger at the door to eavesdrop, Cord studied Jolie. She looked nervous. Defensive. And, oh, yeah, there was a healthy dose of guilt, too. That was good.

"What do you want, Cord?"

"I think it's pretty obvious."

"Well, it's not."

"I want to work things out. Between us. And I want something else, Jolie. Space."

* * *

Jolie watched Cord closely, waiting for the rest of his demands, but air escaped from her lungs in a soft whoosh of relief regardless. She could handle space between them. "Okay. Yeah. I guess that's a good thing."

When she'd first run into Cord at the restaurant, Jolie

had never been so angry in her life. Despite moving back to Oklahoma City, despite harboring some romantic notion that Cord might have changed and that they might grab a second chance, she knew it to be the pipe dream of a naive girl. She no longer had stars in her eyes. She was a mother. And a darned good one. She'd brought CJ into this world all by herself and she'd taken care of him. All. By. Herself. She didn't need Cord Barron. And she didn't want him to have a place in CJ's life.

Then she felt fear. Seeing her son sitting there in Cord's lap had panicked her. The Barrons were just as powerful as her father. Why had she been stupid enough to come home? It was inevitable that this would happen, and she'd been an idiot to believe otherwise.

But now it looked as if Cord was willing to give her some breathing room.

"I don't think you understand." Something hard glinted in Cord's eyes, a flash as bright and inevitable as lightning in a summer thunderstorm. "I want time, Jolie. Time with CJ. And the space to get to know him on my terms."

Was it possible to sweat icicles? To be so hot and cold at the same time? Jolie stared at him, the word *no* already forming on her lips.

"Do you really want to drag him through the court system?"

She sputtered and had to breathe through the surge of anger. "You'd do that to him?"

"To see my son? To spend time with him? To be

acknowledged as his father? Damn straight I would. You've already cheated me out of so much, Jolie. You don't want to deny me this."

She forced her fingers to loosen from the fists they'd formed without her knowledge as she considered Cord's threat. The planes of his face looked as if they'd been carved from the alabaster stone that formed amid the red dirt of Western Oklahoma.

"I want to get to know my son. To make up for the parts of his life you stole from me."

Her eyes burned with a hot flush of tears, but she blinked them away. Straightening her shoulders, she pasted on her best poker face. "No."

Cord did nothing except raise one eyebrow as if to say, "Really, Jolie? You truly want to do this?" He wore the mask well but he looked so pale, so...wounded. He'd almost died from his injuries, but now she knew without a doubt that she'd ripped out his heart. Just as he'd ripped out hers.

Five

Cord didn't argue with Jolie. He rolled to the door, opened it and maneuvered his wheelchair out. Chance was leaning against the wall nearby but straightened immediately.

"What's the plan?"

Cord lifted his chin to indicate Jolie was right behind him and Chance offered an almost imperceptible nod. They'd talk later, and Cord would lay out his plan then. His brother knew him well

and didn't press for an answer to his question.

Jolie huffed to a stop behind him, unable to squeeze around the chair without bumping into him. He stifled the smile threatening to reveal his thoughts. She'd thrown down the gauntlet, and he'd picked it up without hesitation.

Giggles drew his attention as his sister-in-law and CJ appeared at the end of the hall. The boy stomped toward them, stopping in front of Chance.

Rearing his head back, hands fisted on his hips, CJ stared up. "Who're you?"

"My name is Chance. I'm your—" He glanced at Cord before shifting his gaze to Jolie. "Your dad and I are brothers."

"What's that mean, Mommy?"

Jolie's eyes narrowed and her lips pursed. "I don't want to talk about this right now."

"But, Mommy—"

"He's your uncle, CJ. Okay?"

"Okay. Do I have more?"

"You do." Cord replied before Jolie could. "Besides Chance, there's Clay, Cash and Chase."

"Are they all grown-ups?"

"Yup."

CJ sighed and offered puppy-dog eyes. "Are there any other kids?"

Jolie choked, and Cord wondered if he'd have to perform the Heimlich maneuver, but then remembered he couldn't stand up

to administer it. Instead, he grinned at the boy but watched Jolie's face. "Just you, CJ, but maybe your mom and I could work on that for you. Maybe a little sister." Oh, yeah, that got a rise out of her. He glanced back at his son.

His son—and wasn't that a kick in the pants—screwed up his face as if he'd just taken a swig of lemon juice. "No girls. Girls are yucky." CJ had the good graces to glance up at his mother and then over at Cassie. "Well...some girls are okay. Like Mommy and Miss Cassie."

Jolie's face turned red, and had they been in the cartoons, steam would be hissing from her ears. He'd forgotten how much fun it was to push her buttons.

Without pausing for breath or giving his mother a chance to respond, CJ launched into his next subject. "Miss Cassie has horses. Do you have horses...uh...?" At a loss for what to call him, CJ's voice trailed off.

"I do have horses, bubba. And you can ride them whenever you want." He reached for the boy and tugged him a little closer. "Not sure what to call me, right?" Big eyed, CJ nodded. "Well, *Dad* works. Or *Daddy*. Whatever you'd like."

"*Daddy*. I like that."

Jolie made a strangled noise and reached for CJ, but Cord ignored her. "I like that too, bubba."

"We have to go, CJ." Jolie was about to snap, judging by her tone of voice and expression.

"No. I wanna stay with Daddy."

Shoving the wheelchair out of her way, she took CJ's arm. "No. Not today." She glared at Cord, her expression promising retribution with a big dose of "not now, not ever."

Cord figured he had to be the most perverse man who ever lived, because fighting with Jolie had been something he missed. A lot. Forget the makeup sex that came after. There was something...exhilarating about seeing her color rise, her fists tighten and her stubborn chin jut toward him as her eyes flashed like broken glass under a hot summer sun.

"No. Not today," he agreed easily. "Tomorrow." He smiled at her but caught Chance rolling his eyes. His brother was extremely familiar with his expression and the tone of voice.

"Cord." She clenched CJ's hand.

"Jolie."

"We're leaving."

"I'm not stopping you, Jolie. But I will see CJ tomorrow. I'll send Chance to pick him up, bring him out to the ranch."

"No."

Cord shrugged as if her resistance meant nothing. It stung, but that didn't matter. Not in the long run. "You know what the alternative is."

"You're bluffing."

A rolling gasp of laughter escaped from his chest and exploded out of his mouth. "Then, you don't know me at all, Jolene. Have him ready by nine. If he's not, Chance's next stop will be the courthouse."

“Which it’ll also be if the two of you aren’t home, Jolene.” Chance just had to butt in, but Cord had known he would and had counted on it.

He tuned out Jolie’s blustering and smiled at CJ. “Wish I wasn’t in this chair, bubba, but I’ll still show you some of our horses, and if you want to ride, our foreman, Kaden, will help you.” He tousled the boy’s hair. “Okay?”

“Okay!” CJ launched into his arms and Cord had to blink back the sting of tears. Barrons didn’t cry, but damned if he didn’t want to. He had a son. And he had the woman he loved, even though she didn’t realize she was his. Yet.

* * *

Jolie seethed and just barely managed to contain her anger. She wanted to beat her fists against the steering wheel but CJ was strapped into his car seat behind her and could see her face in the rearview mirror.

How dare Cordell Barron swoop into her life and steal her son away? There was no way on God’s green earth she would let the Barrons sink their claws into CJ. She needed to call her dad. He had a whole firm of high-priced lawyers at his beck and call. They could file an injunction or something. Make sure Cord wasn’t allowed anywhere near her or CJ.

She suddenly went cold, as if a bucket of rainwater had been dumped over her head. Was her reaction about CJ? Or her? Not long ago, she’d fantasized about rekindling a relationship with Cord. Some fantasy! The reality of the man—the truth of what

it would mean to share her son with him—hit her square in the heart. She couldn't do it. But the alternative meant hurting CJ. She'd have to figure out some way to deal with the situation without getting her heart—or her son's—broken.

She glanced in the rearview mirror and recognized the stubborn tilt of her son's chin. It was about the only thing he'd inherited from her. "How about we stop and buy a movie on the way home?"

"No."

Yes, her son's temperament hit a little too close to home. "But you want to see that new—"

"No. I'm mad at you, Mommy."

"Fine." Oh, great. Now she was getting snippy with a four-year-old.

"Fine," he snipped back.

When they got home, dinner and bath time were a battle. CJ refused to watch TV with her, holing up in his room instead. When she went in to offer a bedtime story, he crawled into bed, turned his back and ignored her.

Out of sorts, she sprawled on the overstuffed couch in the area her Realtor called a media room. Some inane romantic comedy laugh tracked its way across the giant TV screen affixed to the wall. The thing had come with the house and there were times she enjoyed it. Tonight, not so much. Pushing off the couch, Jolie paced around the room, her thoughts as chaotic as the storm clouds gathering outside. Deep down, she knew she didn't have

a legal leg to stand on. She couldn't prove Cord meant to harm CJ. She couldn't ding him for lack of child support because he hadn't known he was a father.

Her earlier conversation with her father as she was preparing dinner had been short, to the point and disappointing. And now she was mad at him because he seemed to be taking Cord's side. Then again, he'd always gotten biblical with her.

"You reap what you sow," he'd told her on numerous occasions, quickly followed up with his belief that she was wrong for not telling Cord about CJ. Tonight, he'd told her he'd hire an attorney to represent her in the paternity suit they were both sure Cord would file.

Could she really do that to CJ? Drag him through the newspapers, because they darn sure would glom onto the story—the legitimate press *and* the tabloids. Possible headlines flashed across her thoughts and none of them were pretty.

"Argh!" She wanted to hit something. Or throw something against the wall—something that would crash and break into a million pieces. She had no choice. She needed an attorney so the Barrons couldn't run roughshod over her, but she would have to let Cord see her son. *Her* son. Not his. She'd dealt with the three months of morning sickness. She'd brought CJ into the world with no help from the Barrons. She'd dealt with his colic, teething, earaches and everything else. All by herself.

And whose fault is that? No matter what she did, she couldn't muffle the sound of her conscience.

“Okay!” She yelled the admission. “My fault. It’s all my freaking fault! Are you happy now?”

No, she wasn’t happy at all. But she had to face the consequences. She had to allow Cord to spend time with CJ. She blinked and a wry smile crinkled her cheeks. Cord was a Barron. Barrons never stuck with anything that even hinted at personal responsibility. They got bored too easily. And hated having to make an effort. They expected to snap their fingers and everybody would line up to do their bidding. Well, Cord had a lot to learn about being a father. Especially since his own father was such a lousy example.

Jolie did a short happy dance. That was the ticket. Cord would get bored with being a father, and once he had his fill, he’d ignore CJ. Her heart contracted, knowing CJ would more than likely get hurt. But better he discovered now what a jerk his father was than later, when he’d have a harder time getting over it. She shoved those uncomfortable feelings away. She never wanted to hurt CJ, but ever since Cordell Barron entered the picture, hurt was inevitable. For both of them.

She trudged to her room, doing her best to ignore her feelings about—and for—Cord. The man drove her to distraction. He always had. All he had to do was smile, and her knees went all wobbly while her heart raced and goose bumps prickled her skin. And when he touched her? Her pulse—and other places—throbbed with the thought. She needed a cold shower stat, and headed to the master bath.

Jolie had dated postbreakup with Cord, in an I'll-show-him way, and most often with disastrous results. Nursing school had convinced her she didn't have time for men. And then CJ. Men didn't want a woman with the baggage of another man's child. Not just *another man*. Cord. She balled her fists on the granite vanity top and stared at her reflection.

"Get over him, girl!"

Her brain could list all the reasons why she should tell him to take a flying leap, but her body was up in arms and rebelling. She *wanted* him in that hot, skin-to-skin seductive way a woman wants the man who inflames her inside and out. And darn if her heart wasn't standing there on the edge of the cliff ready to take the leap with her girlie bits.

She crawled into bed, hit the remote control and found a program guaranteed to bore her into sleep. Her dreams, however, were far from boring. Tangles of arms and legs, deep kisses until her lips were swollen and she couldn't catch her breath. Flushed, she pushed off the linen duvet coverlet and flopped onto her back, arms wide. The ceiling fan washed a desultory breeze over her that did nothing to dissipate the heat. The digital clock on her bedside table blinked an accusatory three-thirty in her direction.

The TV droned in the background, casting flickering shadows around the room. For a brief moment, Jolie wondered what Cord was doing. Focusing on the program, she thrust thoughts of the man out of her mind—at least until her brain processed what she was seeing on the screen. She'd gone to sleep to a documentary

and awakened to a man and woman writhing in ecstatic, no-holds-barred, down-and-dirty sex on a dining room table.

“Really?” She didn’t know whether to laugh, cry or get out the vibrator. She didn’t believe in signs, but if ever there might be one, this would be her luck. Giving up on any chance of sleep, she shoved out of bed and padded into the bathroom.

* * *

Cord twisted his hips, first right then left. He followed up with some of the other exercises his physical therapist insisted he do. Sometimes his insides still felt like scrambled eggs, though at the moment, it was his thoughts that more closely resembled food. Spaghetti. A big ole knot of it, twisted and tangled.

“I have a son.” He tested the words by saying them aloud. “I’m a father.” That one didn’t settle, as well. He wasn’t a father. Thanks to Jolie. She’d made sure he missed out on those all-important early years with CJ. CJ. He wondered what the initials stood for. Surely she hadn’t named the boy after him. He made a mental note to ask CJ when he saw him.

Tomorrow. Cord glanced at the clock. Today, he amended. He’d have the day to spend with his son. He glared at the insectile shadow looming against the far wall of his childhood bedroom. He hated that wheelchair with a passion bordering on rabid. He would be rid of it as soon as possible.

Despite the sweat beading on his forehead, he redoubled his efforts, lifting his legs, holding them elevated until his abdominal muscles screamed and he couldn’t breathe. Lowering them to the

bed, he panted until the pain passed.

As he rested, his thoughts turned to Jolie. A different kind of pain washed over him, one that was both physical and emotional. His body hardened as he remembered all too well the feel of her curves, the sound of her soft, panting breaths as they made love. There'd been girls before her and women after, but none of them ever stirred him like Jolie. Now that she was back, he seriously doubted there'd ever be another. But at the same time, she'd done the unthinkable. Had she gotten pregnant on purpose? He got mad just thinking about it.

His anger simmered just beneath the surface. He had every right to be furious with her, but he hadn't exactly been a knight in shining armor where she was concerned. He'd acquiesced to his father's demand that he break it off without a backward look. Well, maybe a few glances and a very heavy heart, but he'd been a coward. He could own up to the label now, especially in light of what his younger brother had done.

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