

Sonny and Carrie

By Kate Simon

Carolyn Ashworth walked into the club and waited to be seated. It was a relaxed, boots and jeans kind of place and it was just what she was looking for. It was known for good food and good music. The club was owned by Sonny Talbot, a singer who'd had a number of rock and country hits in the past twenty years. Five years ago he got off the road, bought a club and occasionally performed. It was a Friday and Carolyn hoped he felt like singing.

A twenty something girl came up to her wearing tight jeans and an equally tight t-shirt that read Sonny's. "Hello, ma'am." The girl looked around her. "Will someone be joining you?"

"No, it's just me." Carolyn spotted an empty booth close to the stage. "Could I get that booth over there?"

"Oh I..." she smiled when Carolyn slipped her a twenty. "Sure thing." She leaned in and whispered. "Sonny's here tonight. If he's going to sing he'll start in about an hour."

"Thank you," she smiled as the hostess sat her at her booth. Carolyn wasn't exactly a fan. She didn't go to concerts. She'd always been too busy working. But she did enjoy his music. Now that her time was her own she could do what she wanted when she wanted. Tonight she wanted a good meal and hopefully some good music.

Sonny was in his office going over the books. He had a club manager, Chip Bryant, who he trusted to do the job. But twenty years on the road taught him to never give up control. He reviewed the figures for the week and everything was in order. The club had a slow start five years ago but now it was doing well. Originally his performing was the big draw but some of his friends would stop by for a set. Then he began featuring local talent and a few of them had done very well. When they were back in town they would stop by and sit in.

"Hey Sonny."

He looked up to see Danielle, his hostess standing in the doorway. "How's the house tonight?"

“Full up.” She walked closer and smiled. “There’s a real pretty woman sitting by herself in the front booth by the stage.”

“Danielle, you know my rule about groupies.”

“Yeah, I know ‘Been there, done that’, but this is not your average fan. Trust me.”

“How much did she tip you?” he smiled.

“Twenty bucks,” Danielle grinned. “Hey, diapers are expensive.”

Sonny smiled. Danielle was a good kid. She was married to her high school sweetheart and she had a year old baby girl. “Okay, kid,” he smiled as she returned to the club.

“Hey boss,” said Chip as he came into the office. “We’re full up tonight.”

“So Danielle said.” He closed the books. “Did Johnny and Greg show?”

“Yeah, they’re in the kitchen scarfing down a bucket of wings.”

“I swear that’s the only reason they play.”

“Freddie’s wings are the best in Texas.”

“No argument here.” He stood up from the desk. “How’s Danielle doing?”

Chip smiled. “She’s great. Very dependable. Great personality. Everybody loves her but can run herd on the waitresses without pissing them off.”

“What’s say we give the girl a raise? I think she’s earned it.”

“Sure thing. Anything else?”

“No, everything looks great. I think grab some wings before the boys wipe them out.”

Sonny went into the kitchen and saw Johnny and Greg hunched over a bucket of wings with a couple of large sodas. “Hey, did you save any for me?”

Greg laughed and pushed a small plate with a few wings on it toward him. “I managed to keep a few away from ‘Jaws’ here.”

“What?” asked Johnny. “I didn’t eat that many.”

“Oh, please. I’m surprised I didn’t hear ‘da ah, da ah’” Sonny laughed as Greg imitated the theme music from the movie. Johnny Michaels was six feet tall and was about one hundred and fifty pounds soaking wet. He was also known as a bottomless pit.

“Regular set tonight, Sonny?” asked Johnny.

“Yeah. We’ll finish with “Oh Lord” before the break.”

Johnny and Greg wiped their hands and stood. “We’ll go warm up. How’s ten minutes?”

“Yeah, that’s good.”

The guys walked out to the small stage and started turning on their equipment. Sonny looked out the door from the kitchen to the small stage and looked at the crowd. It was a full crowd, which was always gratifying. He hadn’t released an album in several years but he still had a loyal following. Everyone had turned their chairs toward the stage to get the best view. It was a normal Friday night at ‘Sonny’s’, until he saw her. It was the woman Danielle said had tipped her for a good seat. He saw a beautiful blonde sitting alone at the front booth. Her hair was loose down to her shoulders. A dark blue sweater set off her bright blue eyes. Sonny guessed her age about forty five. Yeah, Danielle was right. This was no groupie.

Carolyn was enjoying the music but she was really enjoying watching Sonny Talbot. He'd gone from the long hair of the eighties to a short buzz cut on the side and a bit longer on top. She really liked the grey at his temples. He was wearing slim fit jeans and a black t-shirt that showed he was in better shape now than he had been at the start of his career. Back then he'd been a bit on the skinny side, not to Carolyn's liking. Now, he must have taken up working out because even with the club lighting and dark clothes, she could tell he was ripped. One thing hadn't changed in all those years were his eyes. They were a crystal blue that melted girls hearts and for that matter, the hearts of their mothers.

She thought he'd been glancing over at her, but that was vanity talking. There were several tables of much younger women who were drooling over him. She recognized the beginning bars of Sonny's biggest hit "Oh Lord," and he started in on the song. She couldn't help but say the words as he sang. She knew the song by heart. He looked at her and smiled. He'd caught her mouthing the words. She could feel herself blush. Sonny finished the song to thunderous applause.

"Thank you. We're going to take a break but we'll be back." Sonny smiled and waved to the audience. Then he jumped off the small stage and walked to her booth. He extended his hand. "Hello, welcome to my club."

"Thank you, Mr. Talbot. The reviews did not mislead. Great food and great music."

"I'm glad you're enjoying yourself." He indicated to the empty side of her booth. "May I?"

"Well, considering it's your booth, I guess it's alright."

"I would never presume on a lady." He smiled as he sat down.

She studied him for a moment. "No, I don't think you would."

"My name's on the door. May I know your name?"

She smiled. He was definitely not what she expected. "Carolyn Ashworth."

"It's very nice to meet you, Ms. Ashworth."

“Carolyn.”

“Okay, Carolyn. Please call me Sonny.”

Carolyn snickered. “I’m sorry. I just...Sonny is a six year old boy. You are definitely no boy. I assume Sonny is not your given name.”

He smiled. “No, I was a junior so the family called me Sonny. It stuck.”

“Is your father still living.”

“No.”

“Then you don’t need to be a Sonny. What’s your given name.”

“Joseph.”

“Joseph. Joe.” She smiled. “I like it. Strong, steady.” Then she realized she told a famous celebrity that he should change his name. “I’m so sorry. I’m being presumptuous.”

“No, that’s okay. I like a woman who speaks her mind. Now your name...”

“Yes?” she said as she sipped her tea.

“It makes you sound like a lawyer. You certainly don’t look like any lawyer I’ve ever known. You seem more like a Carrie.”

Carolyn gasped. “That’s what Mama and Daddy used to call me.”

“I’m sorry.”

“No, I think I like it when you say it. And I’m not a lawyer, anymore.”

“Anymore?”

“I sold my practice and retired.”

“Retired? You can’t be any older than...oh I’m going to get in trouble here.”

“No you won’t. I promise.”

“I put you at forty three, forty four, max.”

Carolyn laughed. "You're definitely not in trouble. I'm fifty three."

"Really? Wow. Okay. I'm surprised. You still seem so young to be retired."

"I got tired of being at everyone's beck and call. Clients, judges, associates. I'd had enough and I wanted to do what I wanted to do, even if that was absolutely nothing for awhile."

The hostess walked over to their table with a club soda. "Here you go, Sonny. Can I get you anything, Ma'am?"

"Another ice tea, please." Sonny caught her staring at his drink. She could feel herself blush.

"It's club soda and there's no need to be embarrassed. Everyone knows I tore it up back in the day but I've been clean and sober for twenty years. I like my life better that way."

"Congratulations on fighting the good fight. That's a wonderful achievement."

"Thank you. You can have a drink if you want. Don't mind me."

"It's not that. I do have the occasional glass of wine but not when I'm driving."

Sonny smiled. "So you're here alone?"

"If that's your way of asking if I'm single, I'm a widow."

He sat back against the booth. "I'm so sorry."

"Don't be. He was a bastard. He raised his hand against me once and that was the only chance he got." Carolyn smiled. "It was twenty years ago and my Daddy was still alive. When he saw my black eye, well, Daddy showed him what was what. I was in the process of divorcing him when he got drunk and drove his Camaro into a bridge abutment. Fortunately, he didn't take anyone else with him." She stopped and looked him in the eye. "I really miss that car." She saw Sonny's mouth was open and she thought she'd shocked him. Then he burst out laughing.

"Oh, I like you, Carrie."

“I like you too, Joe.”

“Is there no one who’s waiting for you at home.”

“No. I did the marriage thing a couple of times. Of course I was drinking then.”

Carolyn laughed out loud. “Yeah, I do like you, Joe. But I’m sure there are any number of women here tonight would wish me gone right now.”

“Oh I don’t...”

“Save the false modesty. That table behind me has three twenty somethings who are giving me the evil eye.”

He glanced over at them and for once, he was the one blushing. “I don’t mess with young kids,” he said quietly. She studied him again and decided he was telling the truth. “You’re staring again. Am I about to be cross examined?”

“No, it’s a leftover habit from my career. I had to analyze people and decide if they were telling the truth.”

“What’s your verdict, counselor?”

“Not guilty.”

“That’s good news,” he smiled. He looked up when he heard the musicians coming back to the stage. “I have to go back to work. Is there anything you’d like to hear?” She glanced down and took a sip of her tea. Damn, her fair skin. She could tell she was beet red. “What is it, Carrie? Tell me,” he said quietly.

“My favorite song was when you covered Willie Nelson’s ‘Crazy’”

He stood and took her hand. “Can you stay through the next set?” She smiled and nodded. He turned her hand over and kissed her palm. “Very good.” He walked back on to the stage to the applause of the club. He waved to the audience and then spoke with his keyboard player. The man looked confused when Sonny sat down at the keyboard. “We’re going to mix it up a bit tonight. This is a song I did a very long time ago, but it’s still one of my favorites.” He started playing the keyboard. Everyone recognized the opening cords and applauded. Then he began to sing softly,

*Crazy
I'm crazy for feeling so lonely
I'm crazy
Crazy for feeling so blue*

*I knew you'd love me
As long as you wanted
And then someday
You'd leave me for somebody new*

*Worry
Why do I let myself worry?
Wonderin'
What in the world did I do?*

*Crazy for thinkin
That my love could hold you
I'm crazy for tryin' and crazy for cryin'
And I'm crazy for lovin' you*

*Crazy for thinking
That my love could hold you
I'm crazy for tryin' and crazy for cryin'
And I'm crazy for lovin' you*

*Crazy
I'm crazy for feeling so lonely
I'm crazy
Crazy for feeling so blue*

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And I'm crazy for lovin' you*

*Crazy for thinking
That my love could hold you
I'm crazy for tryin' and crazy for cryin'
And I'm crazy for lovin' you*

Sonny finished the song to thunderous applause and Carolyn knew she was in big trouble.

Sonny finished the set and said good night to Johnny and Greg. "Go get her," Johnny smiled.

"I..." he knew after all these years of playing together he couldn't get past these guys. "Shut up," he smiled. "Good set." He walked off the stage and back to Carolyn's booth. "I hoped you enjoyed the set."

"I did."

Sonny waved at Danielle who brought him his club soda. "I'm glad you stayed, Carrie."

"So am I, Joe."

"Now, where were we? You must be new to Waco."

"What makes you say that?"

"Because you've never been here before and everyone comes through here sooner or later."

"Maybe I was here and you didn't notice me."

He reached across the table and took her hand, brush his thumb across the top. "I would have noticed." He smiled at her blush. She was so easy to read. "So, when did you move here?"

"A few weeks ago. I bought a ranch outside town."

"From a lawyer to a rancher?"

"No, I won't be herding cattle or anything like that. It's a beautiful farmhouse with a great view and a lot of space. I thought I could get a dog, maybe a couple of cats. There's a barn and a paddock so I was thinking of learning to ride. Maybe get my own horse."

"You were born in Texas?"

"Houston."

“And you don’t know how to ride?”

“No. I was too busy in school.”

“I think that’s against the law in Texas.”

“I never covered that statute.”

“Well, you can come out to my place. I can teach you.”

“You have horses?”

“Yeah, it’s one of the reasons I got off the road. I wanted to be in one place for more than a couple of nights.”

“That sounds great.”

“It is. After all those years on the road it’s nice to not sleep in a bed that’s moving sixty miles an hour.” Carrie hid a snicker by sipping her tea. Oh, yeah. This was going to be fun. “How long were you a lawyer?”

Carrie shook her head. “Thirty years.”

“If you didn’t like it, why did you keep doing it?”

“Oh, don’t get me wrong. I was proud of the work I did. But I did family law, divorces, custody battles. After thirty years of that, well, it was time for a change.”

“Why did you stay in it so long?”

“I didn’t mean to. I was ten years in to my practice when my husband was killed. I took the insurance money and invested it. Mama and Daddy had worked so hard to put me through school that I didn’t want to just walk away and waste my degree. I had only started to make good money with some high profile clients. The next thing I knew it I was thirty years in and Mama and Daddy were both gone. All I had to show for it was a corner office and a constantly ringing phone.” He threaded his fingers through hers.

“You were close to your parents.”

“Very. They were such good people. They worked all their lives to give me what they never had. At least I was able to make things comfortable for them.”

“Now it’s your turn.”

Carrie smiled. “Yeah, it is.”

Danielle came over to their table. “Excuse me, Sonny it’s after 2 and we’re about to close up.”

“Oh, I didn’t realize it was so late,” said Carrie. “Let me get the bill and I’ll let you get going.” Danielle smiled at Sonny and he shook his head. She chuckled as she walked back to her station.

“That won’t be necessary,” he said.

“You at least have to let me leave her a tip. She was very good. I don’t know how much you pay waitresses but I know they don’t make that much,” she said as she left forty dollars on the table.

“Actually, Danielle isn’t a waitress, she’s my hostess. She doesn’t know it yet but she’s about to get a raise.”

She stood up, grabbed her purse and smiled. “Because she’s so good at picking out fans?”

He took her hand in his. “No because she’s a good, hardworking mother and she’s earned it.”

“I’m sorry, Joe. I didn’t mean to imply this was a setup.”

“It wasn’t. Now how about I walk you to your car?”

“Okay,” she smiled.

They stood under the lamppost next to her sedan. “This is not exactly a rancher’s vehicle.”

“No. I have to do something about that.” She looked up at him. “Care to help me with that? I know nothing about trucks.”

“I’d be happy to if you answer one question. It’s been bugging me all night.”

“What’s that?”

“Your blush. You did it a couple of times. You did it when I told you why Danielle was getting a raise. Isn’t blushing a hell of a tell for a lawyer?”

Carrie laughed. “It is. It caused me a lot of trouble in the beginning of my career. I finally learned how to switch into lawyer mode. When I’m trying a case I’m a different person.”

He stroked her cheek. “I like this person.” He leaned in and gave her a soft kiss. “This would be the point in the evening when I ask you to dinner.”

“I’d love to but I imagine if you come here someone will want you to sing.”

“Probably,” he shrugged.

“If we go anywhere else in town you’d be recognized.”

“It happens.”

“How about this? You come to my place and I’ll cook.”

“That sounds great.”

“Do you swim?”

“Yeah, why?”

“Because I spent the first few weeks in the house having the pool of my dreams built. So far I’m the only one who’s used it.”

“Sounds great.”

“When’s good for you? As we’ve established, I am free of obligations.”

“How about tomorrow?” he grinned.

“That would be great.” She pulled one of her old business cards out of her bag and wrote her number on the bag. “Call me and I’ll text you the address.” She handed him the

card and he slipped it in his pocket. "One more thing," she said as she tossed her bag in the car. She put her hands on his shoulders. "May I?"

"Whatever your asking, yes," he said with a hitch in his voice.

She ran her hands down his arms. "Damn," she whispered. "You really work out." She looked up at him and he could see she was blushing. She was being herself. She slid her hands up his chest and around his neck. "Joe," she whispered.

He didn't make her ask. He just pulled her into a passionate kiss and he knew for sure he was in big trouble.

Carolyn double checked everything in the kitchen. The salad and the sides were all ready. It would be quick enough to put steaks on the grill. She decided that if they were going to be outside, steaks were the easiest meal. Besides, what Texas boy doesn't like a steak?

She checked in the mirror and decided she looked okay. She'd put a sundress over her bathing suit. Then she applied a half a tube of sunscreen. With her fair English skin she needed the highest SP factor. The sun was still up at six and even a few minutes in the sun could turn her lobster red. She opened the slider and looked out at her pool. She couldn't help but smile. She'd dreamed about having a place like this for years. She owned everything as far as she could see. She turned on the pool's waterfall and watched. The designer had made her vision real. Beautiful stone deck, Natural rocks built the waterfall and separated the main pool from the hot tub. Surrounding everything was beautiful landscape. She'd sketched out her ideas for the pool over years of bad coffee in between clients. It was her idea of heaven.

The doorbell made her heart race. He was here and she was trying hard not to behave like a teenage groupie. She took a breath and opened the front door. He was standing there with a small package.

"Hi Carrie."

"Hi Joe. Come in."

"I brought you a little housewarming gift."

She smiled and quickly opened the gift. "Oh, a horseshoe for good luck. She set it down and gave him a kiss. "Thank you. I'll hang it right above the front door."

"You're welcome. I'm glad you like it."

"No Texas farmhouse would be complete without it."

"I was surprised when you sent me the address. I live only a mile down the road."

"Really?"

"Yeah. I didn't realize this place was up for sale."

“I wanted to be in this area and I had my broker on the lookout. I wanted someplace with a lot of land and that would be suitable for my pool. I don’t think it made it to a listing before I bought it.”

“How many acres?”

“Twenty. Of course that’s a lot for me to maintain so I hired a local man who maintains it.” She took him by the hand. “Come I’ll show you.” They walked into a large open floor plan. The kitchen was modern and functional. It opened into a large living space with shiplap walls and a large fireplace.

“Wow, this is nice.”

“Thanks. The last owner was a decorator. It’s a little beige for my taste but I’ll make it my own, piece by piece.” She walked to the slider and opened it. “This part, this is all me.” He followed her out onto the deck and stood stock still.

“Holy shit!” he said, then looked embarrassed. “I’m sorry. It’s just so...unexpected.”

“That’s okay. I spent years figuring out exactly what I wanted. I’ve spent the last thirty years in a downtown Houston apartment. When I retired I wanted a sanctuary.”

“It’s beautiful.”

“Thank you,” she smiled and pointed to the teak wood table and chairs. The umbrella was tilted to block the sun from the table. “It’s such a nice evening I thought we could eat out here. Can I get you something to drink? Sweet tea, club soda?”

“Sweet tea would be great, thanks.”

“One question,” she pointed to the obviously new grill. “I’ve never used one of those. Do you think you could show me?”

“Sweetheart, this is Texas. Of course I’ve used one of those.”

“Great. I don’t want to ruin the steaks. I’ll be right back with the drinks.” She tried to pour the tea without shaking. She hadn’t been this nervous on a date since she was a kid. “Get it together, Carolyn.” She picked up the drinks and smiled. “Get it together,

Carrie.” Yeah. That’s better. He wasn’t Sonny Talbot, singing star. He was Joe from up the road. And she wasn’t Carolyn Ashworth, Esq. She was Carrie who had just moved in and met a nice man. Now if she could just convince her heart to stop racing she’d be good. Carrie walked back out to the and found Joe looking over the grill.

“This is a nice one. It’s easy to use.”

“Good.” She glanced over at the water. She knew she’d be more relaxed in the water. “Care to go for a swim before dinner?”

“Sounds great. I’ll get my suit out of the car.”

She pointed to the small pool house. “You can get changed in there.” As he went to the car Carrie went into the pool house and hung up her dress. She was wearing a blue one piece and walked out of the pool house just as he walked toward her. His smile said he liked her suit.

“Well, well, counselor. That’s not exactly a business suit.”

“Depends on the business.” She loved that he was the one who blushed. She tried to calm herself and dove into the deep end of the pool while Joe changed into his suit. She heard him come out of the pool house and turned around. “Holy shit!” she said without thinking. It hadn’t been a trick of the lighting. Joe was ripped. He smiled and dove into the pool. He came out of the water next to her and took her about the waist. She ran her hands down his arms and up his chest. What she hadn’t seen last night was some amazing ink. “Wow,” she whispered.

“Well, thank you, sweetheart.”

“You must work out a lot.”

“I have a gym at home.”

She shook her head and pulled back. “I’m sorry. I’m being very...groupie like.”

He pulled her close. “No you’re not,” he whispered before he gave her a kiss. “But you can tell me why you were so anxious to get me in the water. As flattered as I am by your reaction, I don’t think it was to see me in my skivvies.”

Carrie smiled and swam to the other edge of the pool where the water was shallow and there was a ledge. She sat down and Joe joined her. "You're right. It wasn't about that although I have to admit it was a very happy surprise."

"You're deflecting."

"Are you sure your not a lawyer?"

"Nope, just a crooner."

Carrie laughed and took his hand. "I was Carrie when I was a kid. Happy childhood, happy family, no real responsibilities other than to get good grades. Then I was somebody's wife, somebody's attorney and I was Carolyn. She was miserable in her marriage but great at her job. She was successful and popular and eventually hated it. I wasn't enjoying anything anymore. That's why I built this place. I intended to fill it with everything I wanted, including this pool. Whenever I'm in the water I feel so peaceful and relaxed. If I didn't burn so badly, I don't think I'd ever leave it. That's why I swim a lot at night. These past few weeks here have been the happiest I've had since my parents died."

"That's wonderful, but it still doesn't explain getting me in the pool."

She pulled on his hand. "I'm getting there. As much as I love it here I realized I could easily become a hermit. So I looked for a good place in town for dinner and that's when I saw your club. I've always enjoyed your music and I thought it would be a good place to go. Turns out I was right. Then you joined me at my table. I was pretty nervous."

"Why?"

"Why? You're Sonny Talbot, music star. I was nervous but you were so easy to talk to. And then you called me Carrie. No one's called me that in forever but with you I felt like Carrie, like me again."

"I'm very glad."

"But then you were here and I got nervous again."

"Did I make you nervous?"

“Have you seen you?” she smiled when his cheeks reddened. “I figured I’d be more comfortable in the water. It always calms me. I didn’t count on...well, she waved her hand at his chest. “All this. So now I’m back to being nervous Carrie with Sonny the singing star.”

“Okay, I think I understand a little. Last night Danielle told me you tipped her twenty bucks to sit up front. I thought you were just another, well, you know.”

“Groupie?”

“Yeah. But Danielle said no. While the boys were warming up I looked out at you. I knew she was right and I couldn’t wait to meet you. I could have talked to you all night. It felt right when you called me Joe. Natural.” He took her hands and pulled her out into the water. “So how about this. We’re just Carrie and Joe. We’re going to have a nice swim and then I grill the steaks.”

“I like that plan.” She pointed to the circular section behind them. “We can jump in the hot tub after dessert.”

He pulled her close. “This plan just keeps getting better.”

They sat at the patio table finishing their dinner just as the sun began to set. Joe was startled when lights went on in the pool and on the deck. “I have them on a timer. I like to be out here at night. I waited so many years for this, I love looking at it.” She set down her napkin and smiled. “And with my skin, night swimming is a lot safer.” He reached for her hand.

“I would imagine so.”

“You ready for another dip?”

“Shouldn’t we wait? We just ate.”

Carrie smiled. “Don’t worry. I’m a strong swimmer. I’ll protect you.”

They cleaned up the dishes and walked back to the deck. Carrie slipped off her sundress and Joe pull off his T-shirt and tossed it on a chair. "I do believe I was promised a hot tub." She took him by the hand.

"Follow me," she smiled.

"With pleasure," he grinned.

They stepped down into the warm water and sat down on the ledge. "This feels great," said Joe.

Carrie smiled, "Just wait." She turned and hit a few buttons and the jets powered up.

"Very nice," he grinned as he positioned himself in front of a jet. "I can understand why you never want to get out of here."

"How do you like owning a club instead of being on the road?"

"It's good. My manager takes care of most of the details."

Carrie looked at him. "You didn't give anyone power of attorney, did you?"

Joe laughed. "No, counselor. I watched people over the years make that mistake. I review the books and sign all the checks."

She sat back and smiled. "That's good. I've seen people who made that mistake too. I really like your club. First class food without being fussy."

"Thanks. I stole Freddie from a restaurant in Austin. His talent was being wasted. He was making what they wanted and he wanted to make his own recipes. He made me a few dinners and I was sold."

Carrie swam over and sat on Joe's lap. "The choice of music is pretty good too."

"I'm glad you're a fan. Did you ever go to any of my concerts?"

"No. Honestly I not big on crowds. Plus I was either studying or working."

He hugged her tight. "Well, now you can have a private concert." He gave her a soft kiss.

"I like that idea."

"What would you like to hear?"

"You mean right now?"

"Why not?"

"Some of your music?"

"I need a bit more amperage for my music. How about some Willie Nelson?"

"I'd love it."

He held her tight and started softly,

*Maybe I didn't love you
Quite as often as I could have
Maybe I didn't treat you
Quite as good as I should have
If I made you feel second best
Girl, I'm sorry I have tried*

*You were always on my mind
You were always on my mind*

*And maybe I didn't hold you
All those lonely, lonely times
And I guess I never told you
I'm so happy that you're mine
Little things I should have said and done
I just never took the time*

*And you were always on my mind
You were always on my mind*

*Tell me, tell me that your
Sweet love hasn't died
And give me
Give me one more chance
To keep you satisfied
Keep you satisfied*

She gave him the softest of kisses. "That was beautiful," she whispered. Carrie kissed him again, this time pulling him to her, losing herself in their heat. They were both startled when the jacuzzi jets shut off. "They're on a timer," she said.

"I guess that means we should get out." He climbed out of the tub to the deck and extended his hand. She took his hand and stepped on to the deck. She slipped her arms around his neck and pulled him back into the passionate kiss. When she finally pulled apart Joe started nipping at her neck.

"Joe?"

"Hummm?" he whispered as he nibble on her ear.

"Can you stay?" He pulled back and the look in his eyes made her heart skipped. They grabbed their towels from their chairs and walked inside. Carrie locked slider and took his hand.

He brushed his hand across her cheek. "Sweetheart, are you sure? There's no pressure."

"Joe, remember how I said part of my job as an attorney to analyze people? I needed to know who I could trust. Some people took a while to figure out. Some people I knew were lying the minute they opened their mouths. Some people I could tell who they were right away."

"What did you figure out about me?" he smiled.

"I knew the minute I met you that you are exactly who you seem to be. I knew I could trust you."

He gave her a kiss. "Thank you, sweetheart."

She grinned and ran her hand up his chest. "I'm also anxious to get up close and personal with those tattoos."

Joe laughed. "Well I am a Texas gentleman and we never deny a ladies wishes."

"Good to know." She took his hand and led him upstairs.

He was startled when Carrie asked him to stay. Not that he didn't want to. He wasn't crazy. Carrie was a beautiful woman but he was leery of relationships. There was no doubt this was going to be a relationship and he didn't have a good record. He had two failed marriages and no relationships that lasted longer than a couple of months. He didn't want that with Carrie.

She led him up the stairs to her room and if he was paying attention to anything but Carrie's smile, he would not have been surprised by what he saw. There were a few good pieces of furniture but nothing too fussy. She led him into the large master bath where she started to peel off her wet suit. He was frozen as she hung her suit on a hook and turned on the multi-head shower. She stepped into the shower and let the warm water smooth out her hair. She grinned at him.

"Are you going to stand there or are you going to join me?"

He grinned and pulled off his suit. They washed the chlorine off each other in between kisses and soft touches. He shut off the water and reached for a bath towel. He carefully pat her skin dry. He wrapped the towel around her as she grabbed a towel and rubbed it down his chest. Carrie seemed to be fascinated by his tattoos. She touched each one on his chest then walked around him. She touched the eagle tattoo that stretched from shoulder to shoulder.

"It's so beautiful," she whispered.

He turned and smiled. "I'm glad you like it, but perhaps we could discuss my art later." He pulled her close and gave her a deep kiss. He led her into the bedroom and pulled down the floral comforter. He dropped his towel and pulled Carrie's off her body. "Mmmm, now, where was I?" He backed her on to the bed and pulled her feet off the floor. She giggled as she pushed herself against the pillows. He stood still for a moment and smiled. Carrie's long blonde hair was still damp and fell over shoulders. "My own mermaid." She smiled and extended her arms to him. He covered her body and gave her a deep kiss while his hands explored her warm skin.

"Joe," she whispered. He pulled back and looked into her eyes. He realized he liked being her Joe. It was his last coherent thought when he lost himself in her. Carrie

responded to each touch, each kiss, each nip. Every time he touched her there was a sound, and it was music.

Sonny sat in the office trying to go over the books, but he couldn't focus. He was smiling and thinking about Carrie. They'd had a great first date which turned into a long weekend. They watched action movies when they were too tired to swim. He barbequed dinner and Carrie made omelets for breakfast. It was so easy with her. He wasn't Sonny Talbot, singing star. He was Joe, the guy who really liked a girl named Carrie.

"Hey boss. I guess I don't have to ask how your weekend was."

He looked up and saw Chip standing in the doorway. "Jackass," he smiled. "Did Bobby confirm for this weekend?"

"Yeah he did." Chip grinned. "Worried you'll have to cover?"

"No," he tried to say in a firm boss-like tone, and failed. "We've been advertising his appearance for a month. His current album is in the top ten. I expect a full house."

"I expect it too and I want to talk to you about something. Remember when you said you wanted Danielle to get a raise? How about a promotion? I could really use an assistant manager. I wouldn't have to be here twenty four seven and I might actually get a few nights to spend with my kid."

"Sounds like a great idea. How is Billy?"

Chip couldn't hide his grin. "He's such a good kid. The divorce has been hard on him but I want him to know I'm still his dad. I want to be there for him." He took a chair and opened a file. "Here's what I want to offer Danielle. It's a big increase but it will be a big increase in responsibility too."

Sonny looked at the numbers and agreed. Danielle was a smart girl. She could handle the job. "Call her in ."

Chip came back in the office with Danielle. "Hi Sonny. Chip said you want to talk. Is there a problem?"

"Not at all. In fact we are very happy with your work."

She sighed, "Oh, that's a relief."

"Chip, you want to take it from here?"

“Danielle, I’d like to promote you to assistant manager.”

“What?” she gasped.

“The club is really growing. I need help with this job and I can’t think of anyone better qualified.”

“I’m flattered Chip, really I am but Kelsey’s only a year old. I need to be there for her.”

Chip looked at Sonny and smiled. “Believe me, I know exactly what you mean. I want to spend more time with Billy. I promise I’ll make a schedule we can both live with.” He handed her the file. “This is the salary and your vacation time will increase.”

“Holy crap!” she said and then blushed. “Sorry. This is such a such a surprise. Sonny?”

“Danielle you’re are an valued member of the team. I agree with Chip. There’s no one better qualified for the job.”

“Thank you. Both of you. This is going to mean some extra hours so I need to talk to Johnny. He has his own garage so he’s his own boss but I can’t make a commitment like this until I talk to him.”

“Of course,” said Sonny. “I understand.”

Danielle stood. She extended her hand then shook it off and gave Chip, then Sonny hugs. “Thank you so much.” She opened the office door and smiled. “I better get back to work. My boss is watching.”

Sonny smiled. “Do you think she’ll take it?”

“God, I hope so. She already knows how to do most of the work and everyone likes her.” He looked at Sonny and smiled. “So what’s she like?”

“Danielle? She’s a good kid,” Sonny said as he flipped through the weekend receipts.

“You know who I mean. The blonde you sat with all Friday night. Then you went off grid Saturday, Sunday and Monday. She’s not a groupie, is she? You said you’re done with that.”

Sonny closed the books and smiled. Chip was an old friend. He’d been his road manager for ten years and when Sonny decided to stay put, so did Chip. “She’s no groupie. If you must know…”

“I must,” he grinned.

“Her name is Carolyn. She retired and bought Tucker place outside of town.”

“Isn’t that near your place?”

“About a mile.”

“Convenient.”

“Shut up,” he smiled as he knew he was blushing.

“What did she retire from? It must have been good. The Tucker place is big.”

“She’s a lawyer.”

“Lawyer, huh. Beats a backup singer with delusions of stardom.”

Sonny knew Chip was talking about his ex-wife, Sherry. Sherry was singing backup for one of the acts they’d booked at the club. Chip fell hard for her big…personality. Sonny tried to warn him. He’d seen her type for years. She’d hook up with anyone she thought could advance her career. What Sherry didn’t count on was getting pregnant. They married quickly and divorced just as fast. But Chip said he didn’t regret a minute of it because he got Billy out of the deal. “What’s Sherry up to now?”

“She’s got a new boyfriend who swears he can get her a record deal.”

“Yeah, right.”

“Oh, he has the fancy car and plenty of money to buy her stuff, so she believes him. I don’t care because the more time she spends with him the more time I get with Billy.”

“Have you ever thought about going for full custody?”

“Yeah, of course, but I don’t want to put Billy through that. She may be a crappy mother, but he still loves her.” Chip stood and brushed off his jeans. “That’s enough of being a gossipy old woman. The distributor should be here any minute. Good as time as any to show Danielle what’s what.”

Sonny watched Chip close the office door behind him. Chip knew Danielle could handle the distributor as well as he could but he wanted an excuse to get out of the conversation. Sonny signed the checks that were ready for him and closed the book. Love gone wrong sucked. He’d sung a thousand songs about it. Things with Carrie were moving fast. They’d barely been apart since they met. He should slow things down. She didn’t seem to be pressing. She said she was going into town to look for some things for the house. She said all that beige and white was making her crazy. He told her he’d call her but he didn’t give her a time. She smiled, said ‘Fine’ and gave him a kiss goodbye. He should slow his roll. Definitely. He looked at his phone and there was a picture from the other night. Her blue suit disappeared against the blue water of her pool. Right after he took the shot she dove under the water and came up in front of him, spitting water. He smiled. His personal mermaid. He was startled when the phone rang.

“Hey Carrie.”

“Hi. Remember when I said I was going into town shopping?”

“Yeah?”

“I just realized I have no idea where to go. Any suggestions?”

“Well, I’m no expert but there’s Baylor Mall on the other side of town. I don’t know if it has what you want but there are a lot of stores out there.”

“That’s great. Thanks.”

“Do you want to meet for lunch?” So much for slowing his roll.

“I’d love to, but I wasn’t fishing for an invitation.”

“I know you weren’t, sweetheart. If you want something you ask.”

“Old habits. I’m pretty direct.”

“Don’t apologize. It’s one of the many your many qualities I admire.”

“Many qualities? Like what?”

Sonny laughed. “Okay, now you’re fishing. How about I meet you around one. There’s a good Mexican place there. I forget the name.”

“That’s okay. I’m clever. I’ll find it.”

“That’s another quality.”

Carrie laughed. “I think I’ll start a list. I’ll see you at one.”

Sonny hung up the phone and smiled. He looked up and saw Chip in the doorway, grinning. “Don’t say it.”

He put his hands up. “I just came in for the distributor’s check.” Sonny flipped open the checkbook and tore out the check. Chip put his hand on Sonny’s shoulder. “I’m happy for you. You deserve this.”

“Thanks, buddy.”

Carrie sat at the booth waiting for Joe. She was a little nervous about dating a celebrity. To her, he was Joe. To the world, he was Sonny Talbot. She heard the door open and she saw Joe come in, wearing shades and a ball cap. She waved at him and he came toward her.

“Hey sweetheart,” he said as he leaned over and gave her a quick kiss.

“Hi. Am I pulling you away from anything?”

“No. I’d finished what I needed to get done at the club.”

“Are you singing this weekend?”

He took off his hat and sunglasses. “No, I’ve book Bobby Nicholas for the next two weekends. I may drop by and sit in one night.”

“Bobby Nicholas? Isn’t he the one who sings “My Angel”?”

“Yeah. It’s been doing really well for him. He used to open for me and band.”

“Wow. I bet you’ll have a big turnout.”

“We’re already book solid for dinner reservations.”

“That’s great.”

The waitress came over with the menu’s and froze. “Sonny Talbot,” she gasped.

“Hello” He smiled at the waitress and she all but melted into the floor. Carrie couldn’t blame her. His lopsided smile was very sexy.

The girl snapped out of it and handed them the menus. “Sorry. I’m a big fan.”

“Thank you...” he paused and looked at her nametag. “Cindy.”

“Can I start you with anything?”

“Ice tea,” he looked over Carrie. “Sweetheart?”

“Ice tea, please.” The girl looked at her like she just realized Carrie was sitting there. She left and Carrie opened the menu. “I guess I’ll have to get used to that.”

“I’m sorry, sweetheart.”

“It’s okay. I can’t fault her taste.” Cindy brought their drinks and took their orders.

“How was your shopping trip?”

“Good. I didn’t go crazy. I picked out a few things. You know what I did see on the way down here? The animal shelter. You know I want to get a dog and I have plenty of room. I’ve always wanted a dog but I never had the time when I was working. And it would be good to have a dog when I’m alone. I haven’t gotten used to the quiet.”

“I think you’d make a great pet mom.”

“Thank you,” she smiled. “I was wondering if you’d want to come along?” Cindy brought their food and Carrie took a bite of her Taco salad.

“Sure.” He looked at her blushing and damn it, he knew. No matter how hard she tried she couldn’t be hard ass Carolyn around him. “Okay, the truth is I want to make sure whatever dog I pick likes you too.”

He grinned. “Why is that?”

“You know exactly why, bugger. Because I want you and I to continue and it would be a little awkward if I chose a dog that rips your face off.”

“Not to mention detrimental to my career.” He snickered.

She saw the twinkle in his eyes and knew he was holding in a chuckle. She took her napkin and tossed it at him. “Bugger.”

He laughed and handed it back to her. “I’m just teasing, sweetheart.” He reached for her hand. “Yes. I would love to help you pick out a dog.”

They ate the rest of their meal but Carrie couldn’t think about anything but getting a dog. She felt like a kid at Christmas. Joe realized she was ready to jump out of her skin and called Cindy over for the bill. She brought back the bill and he signed for it. “Mr. Talbot, would you mind?” She pulled out her phone.

“Sure thing, Cindy. Carrie would you mind?”

“Of course not,” she smiled. She turned on the camera and aimed it. Joe put his arm around the girl and her smile all but exploded. She clicked off two shots and handed the phone back to the girl. “Here you go.”

“Oh thank you, Mr. Talbot.” Cindy remembered Carrie was standing there. “Thank you for taking the picture. My family is going to be so jealous. Especially my dad.”

“Well you make sure you tell him I wasn’t being fresh. Tell him my girlfriend took the picture. I wouldn’t want your daddy hunting me down.” Cindy giggled, took the bill and left. He put on his sunglasses and hat, then put his arm around Carrie. He walked her to her car and gave her a kiss.

“Thank you, sweetheart.”

“For what? You bought lunch.”

“For taking the picture and being nice to the girl.”

“She was fine.”

“I know what this is going to be like for you. It’s why I wear the cap and glasses. I get recognized just about everywhere. It can be rough on someone I care about.”

Carrie smiled and wrapped her arms around his waist. “You care about me?”

“You’re fishing again, counselor. I did call you my girlfriend.” He gave her a soft kiss. “And yes I do care about you,” he whispered.

“That’s good to know. I care about you too.”

“Well, since we seem to be in agreement, let’s go get us a dog.”

Carrie followed Joe to the animal shelter and pulled in next to him. She was still smiling when he said ‘get us a dog’.” She liked the idea of being apart of ‘us’. He got out of his car and took her by the hand.

“You ready?”

“I’m excited. I haven’t had a dog since I was little.” They walked inside and up to a reception desk. “Hello.”

The woman looked at her and smiled. She gave Joe a second look, but he was still wearing his large black sunglasses. “How can I help you?”

“I’m looking to adopt a dog.”

“Great. Let me get a counselor for you. In the meantime you’ll need to fill out this paperwork.” She handed her a clip board with several sheets of paper. They took seats in the waiting room and Carrie looked over the documents.

“Wow. I’ve handled adoptions that had less paperwork.” She filled in the paperwork and stopped at reference. “Can I use you as a reference?”

“Of course.”

Carrie filled in Joseph Talbot for his name and entered his phone number. “Do you think they’ll keep it private?”

“You wrote Joseph. They won’t know by looking who I am.”

A young woman came through the door into the waiting room. She wore a shelter uniform and had curly brown hair and a bright smile. “Hello, I’m Becky.”

“Hi, I’m Carrie and this is Joe.” He just smiled and nodded. She handed her the paperwork. “I hope that’s enough information. I just retired and moved to Waco.”

“What did you have in mind?”

“I’d like an older dog. Maybe one that’s less likely to get adopted.”

“Do you live in an apartment or house?” Becky asked as she flipped through the paperwork.

“I bought a farmhouse. I have twenty acres, fenced in.”

Becky’s head snapped up. “Twenty fenced in acres? Wow.” She smiled. “Okay, this is only in your name. Will this pet be for both of you?”

“Joe is my...”

He smiled. “I’m the boyfriend and she wants to make sure whoever she picks won’t rip my face off.”

Becky laughed. “Excellent precaution. Follow me and we take a look at our residents.”

Carrie took Joe’s hand and she was nervous as walked down the aisle of barking dogs. “Do the puppies find home quickly?”

“Oh yeah. We never have a problem homing puppies. It’s the older dogs that have problems. Some have been here a long time.” They turned the corner to older dogs and they walked by a German Shepherd with black and white markings. He was standing up against the Plexiglas and seems to be smiling. “This is Max.”

“Aren’t you a handsome boy?” said Carrie. The dog barked in agreement. “Joe, what do you think?”

“Isn’t he a purebred? I’m surprised he’s in a shelter,” asked Joe.

“He’s a bit older, four years old. They were surrendered by their owner when they moved. They’ve been here for six months.”

Carrie gasped. “They just dumped him after four years? Who does that?”

“Them?” asked Joe.

Becky pointed to a cinnamon colored terrier mix in the back. “That’s Gracie. She’s eight. She hasn’t done so well since being surrendered.

“Have they always been together?” asked Carrie.

“Since Major was a puppy.”

“Then they’re bonded.” She looked at Joe. “We can’t separate them.”

“It’s not like you don’t have the room.”

“Could we meet them?”

“We have an area out back. Major can stretch his legs and Gracie should be okay. But I will warn you, she’s skittish. She may not be very affectionate.”

“Can you blame her? Her people dumped her.” Becky walked them to the outdoor run. It a long plot of grass, fenced in, with a couple of benches. “I hope they like us.”

“We’ll take it slow, not force anything. When I get a new horse I let them approach me. I try and project some calm energy.”

She held his hand tight. “I’ll try.” Becky came out with Major on a leash. She was followed by another girl in uniform with Gracie.

“This is Carol,” said Becky. They both greeted Carol and extended their hands to the dogs. Major came close for a sniff at Carrie, then Joe. He tilted his head like he was studying them.

“Hello, Major. You are such a beautiful boy,” said Carrie. With that Major put his paws on her lap and gave her a kiss.

“Hey fella, get your own girl. This one’s mine,” Joe smiled. To which Major replied by giving him a big kiss.

“So much for being worried he’d rip your face off,” said Carrie.

“I brought a ball,” said Becky. “There’s nothing he loves more than a game of fetch.”

Joe stood and took the ball while Becky unhooked the leash. He tossed the ball to the end of the run and Major took off like a rocket. “Oh, he’s gonna love your place.”

Carrie watched Gracie as she sat back next to Carol. She pushed herself off the bench and sat on the grass. “Hello Gracie,” she said in a quiet voice. “I see Major is having fun. Would you like to have some fun?” She extended her hand just far enough for Gracie to sniff. If she wanted a pet she’d have to come to her. “That wasn’t very nice of your people to leave you. At least you have Major.” The dog glanced over at Major dropping the ball at Joe’s feet. She obviously knew her mate’s name. “Well aren’t you the clever girl?” Carrie met the dog’s gaze. “Gracie, if you come home with me I promise to keep you and Major together. I would never separate you.” Gracie inched closer and touched

her hand. "There's a good girl, Gracie." Carrie looked into her eyes and knew. Apparently so did Gracie because she chose that moment to climb into Carrie's lap.

"Wow," said Becky. "She's never done that. Not even with us."

Carrie braved a soft pet on her side. Gracie looked up at her and she could have sworn she was smiling. "Do you like that, Gracie?" Major heard Carrie talking to Gracie and came nose to nose with her. He looked at her and she could see Becky tense. "Major, would you like a pet too?" He looked down at Gracie and gave her a few licks. Gracie returned the licks and Major sat down in front of her. He leaned forward and gave Carrie a lick as she pet his side. "Joe, I think they like me."

"I would say so," he replied.

"Can we take them home?"

"We usually wait three days. We need to check your references."

"But they've been here so long."

Joe walked over to the girls and took off his shades. "I can vouch for her. The dogs will have nothing but the best."

Becky gasped. "Sonny Talbot!" She looked at Carrie. "You said his name is Joe."

"That's my real name. Sonny is a nickname."

"It's not procedure," said Carol as she tried to retrieve Gracie. Try was the operative word. She pulled on the lease but she wouldn't vacate Carrie's lap. She let loose a small growl.

Becky laughed. "Ma'am, I think you've been adopted."

Carrie beamed. "I think I have."

It took a bit longer than expected to get Major and Gracie out of the shelter. The shelter director wanted to meet Sonny and he agreed to pose with the dogs so they could post it on their social media.

“It might get some more dogs adopted,” he explained to Carrie.

They sat down on a bench with Major sitting in front of him and Gracie on Carrie’s lap. Apparently Gracie had decided she’d found her human and she wasn’t letting her go.

“You realize this means we’re going public,” Carrie whispered.

“I’m fine with that. Are you?”

Carrie gave him a look that melted his bones. “Yeah, I’m good with that.”

Joe followed Carrie to the pet store and parked. “Do you think they’ll be okay in the store?” asked Carrie.

He helped get the dogs out of her car. “I think so. If they’re not we’ll take them back to the car.”

“We do need a lot of supplies. We should get a cart.” Gracie walked by Carrie’s side and Major stayed closed to Joe. They first picked out a supply of the food they had been on at the shelter. Then they moved on to beds. Joe pulled down a large sheepskin bed. Gracie immediately walked over to it and laid down. He pulled a smaller size down that would fit Gracie. They could sort that out themselves. “Do you think I should get crates?”

“I think it would be a good idea. Even if you don’t have to lock them in, it will give them their own space. Where are you going to put them?”

“I don’t intend to restrict them to a part of the house but I thought the mud room would be a good place to feed them and put the crates. It’s big enough. The last owner had a bunch of kids and it has a place I can wash them down if I need to.”

Joe waved over a sales associate. He still had sunglasses on hoped he wouldn’t be recognized. He didn’t want the dogs worked up. “Excuse me. We’ve just adopted these

two and we'll need some crates. Could you pull them down and bring them up front. We still need a few more things." They went down the aisles as the dogs went into full hunting mode. They could smell all the treats and were getting very excited. Carrie picked out treats in two different sizes and then took them down the aisle with toys. "Look at this. It's a fluorescent ball and something to pitch it with. Max would love this." Carrie picked up a few squeaky toys including a small furry doll.

"I think Gracie's going to like a cuddle better than fetch," said Carrie.

He looked at the overflowing cart. "I think we're going to need both cars to transport all this.

Carrie hadn't been this excited since she was a little girl. She took the dogs into the house and let them off their leashes. Both looked around and began sniffing out their new environment. Joe brought the supplies into the mud room.

"Let's bring them out for a run," he said.

"Let's take them out the mud room door. They can get used to it. I think we can wait for them to get used to the pool."

"Good plan." Joe whistled and Major's ears perked up. Joe grabbed the fluorescent ball and stick. "Come on, boy." Major bolted out the door behind him.

"Come on, Gracie. Let's go outside with Major. You can stretch your legs after being in that small cage." Carrie held the door open and Gracie inched her way out. She looked for Major and when she spotted him she did her version of a run. More like a scamper. She watched as Joe flung the ball and Major took off after it. She would have to spend a lot of time keeping a dog with his energy level busy. Gracie started pawing at her leg. Carrie sat on the ground and Gracie jumped up in her lap. She started petting her and she rolled over on her back. She started petting Gracie's belly and she could swear she was smiling. She was definitely blissed out. She looked up at Joe as he was petting Major's head. "I know how you feel, girl." Then it hit her, a flood of emotion she'd never expected. Tears started flowing and she couldn't stop them. Gracie noticed, sat up and

began to lick her face. She held the dog tight as the sweet girl tried to make her feel better. Major noticed and walked past Joe and sat beside Carrie.

“Sweetheart, what’s wrong?” Joe took a seat next to her.

“Nothing’s wrong. It just kind of hit me. I’ve changed everything in my life in the last six months. I sat here watching you play with Max and Gracie looked so happy. I have the home I’ve always wanted, the pets, and most of all I have you.”

He wiped the tears from her cheeks and gave her a soft kiss. “Yeah, you do,” he smiled.

“What do you do when you’ve gotten everything you’ve ever wanted? Now what?”

He cupped her cheek with his hand. “Be happy.”

Sonny said hi to Bobby and went over the two songs he'd sit in on. It was Saturday night and the house was packed. He'd spent most of his days off with Carrie. They spent a lot of time wearing out Max. Andy, the man who looks after her acreage, met the dogs and they took a shine to him. They'd spent some time at his place and Carrie was anxious to start riding lessons.

He'd made sure Danielle kept their booth free for Carrie. He looked out and smiled. She was sitting at the booth and sipping an ice tea. He smiled as he shook his head. He was behaving like a school boy. There were several hundred people who were looking forward to his performance with Bobby. He walked out on stage to cheers.

"Hey everyone. Thank you for coming. I've known Bobby Nicholas for ten years and he's earned and deserves every success he now has now. Which is why I'm so surprised a big shot like him would want to come hang out with an old dude like me. I'm really happy to welcome him for the first time to Sonny's. Ladies and Gentlemen, Bobby Nicholas!" Bobby walked out on stage to thunderous applause and gave Sonny a tight bro hug. Sonny went backstage to sit in the office until the next set, when he would join him on stage. He didn't want to deflect attention from Bobby. He walked into the office and found Chip on the phone, with his back turned.

"Sherry, no. You can't do that. No. A tour bus is no place for a child. It's not part of the agreement. I don't care if Dylan got a lawyer. I'll get one too. You're not taking my son on tour!" He slammed the phone down. "Bitch!"

"Sounds like it," said Sonny.

"Oh, boss. I'm sorry."

"Don't be. What's going on?"

"Apparently Dylan got Sherry on as an opening act with Jimmy Conway. Sherry wants to take Billy with her on tour. Sonny, it's almost a year, here and overseas. I can't let that happen."

"I don't blame you."

“Sonny, I don’t know what to do? Dylan is from oil money. I can’t compete with that.” He looked at Sonny. “Why are you smiling?”

“I can help.”

“I appreciate it but I can’t take your money.”

“I’m not talking about money.” He pulled out his phone and text Carrie. He knew she’d never hear the phone over the music. A few minutes later Danielle opened the door for Carrie. “Chip you haven’t officially met Carrie. Sweetheart, this is Chip Bryant, my club manager and good friend.”

“It’s very nice to meet you, Chip. Joe’s told me a lot about you.”

“Joe?”

Sonny chuckled. “Carrie said she couldn’t call a grown man Sonny. Joseph is my real first name.”

“And no one has called me Carrie since I was a kid.”

“It’s very nice to meet you,” said Chip as he shook her hand. “This old coot has seemed markedly less crotchety lately.”

“Good to know,” she smiled.

“Sonny, I still don’t understand.”

“Carrie is Carolyn Ashworth, attorney at law. Family law.”

Chip looked back and forth between them. “He told me you’re retired.”

“My license is still active. What’s going on?”

“Chip’s ex-wife wants to take their son on tour with her.”

“Billy would be living on a bus for nearly a year. I can’t let happen.”

“How old is Billy?”

“He’s only four.”

“Good lord, what is the woman thinking? Of course you can’t let that happen. If you can get me a copy of your original custody agreement I’ll put something together for her attorney.”

“I don’t have a lot of assets but I’ll work something out.”

Carrie smiled. “No charge. It’s a favor for a friend.”

“You don’t even know me. I may be a terrible parent.”

She looked at Sonny. “What kind of parent is Chip?”

“The best. He would die for his kid. He’s a good, hardworking man. He’s my friend.”

Carrie smiled and nodded. “Good enough for me.”

Chip bit his lip. “I hate to ask this. Beggars can’t be choosers but are you good at this sort of case?”

“Chip, that was an excellent question. Quite honestly, I’m the best in the state.” She leaned closer. “I’m really good at this but feel free to research me. I would if I were you.”

Chip smiled. “Thank you, I don’t know what to say?”

“Thank you will do nicely.”

“I better get out there. We’re full up.” He looked at Sonny. “Thank you, boss.”

“No problem, buddy.”

As Chip closed the door behind him Joe pulled her to him. “That was really nice of you, but if there are expenses...”

“No, I meant it. This one’s on me.”

He gave her a deep kiss. “You really are extraordinary.”

“Why thank you, kind sir,” she grinned. “When do I get to hear you sing?”

“End of Bobby’s set. About thirty minutes.”

She gave him another kiss. "I'm going to freshen up then get back to my seat and resume my groupie duties."

He pulled her close. "So you're my groupie now."

She gave him a wicked grin and grabbed his ass. "You better believe it. Do I get to go home with you tonight?"

He grinned and grabbed her ass. "You better believe it."

Carrie ran a brush through her hair then started touching up her lip gloss. She hadn't thought of taking another case but she was surprised she was feeling the adrenalin rush she always had with a new case. She supposed it was because she'd done it for thirty years it was an automatic response, like Pavlov's dog.

"It's you."

Carrie saw a bleach blonde came up from behind her. She was a thirty something, desperately trying to look twenty something. "Excuse me?"

"I saw your picture with Sonny in the paper." She looked Carrie up and down. "What is he doing hooking up with an old broad like you? He needs someone fresh, like me." Carrie pushed her way passed the woman into the hallway. The woman grabbed her arm. "Hey, bitch. I'm talking to you."

Carrie calmly looked down at the woman's hand. "Let go."

"You know he's never going to stay with you. He always smiles at me when he's on stage."

"I'm going to say this one more time. Let go."

"What are you going to do, bitch?" she smiled as she tightened her grip.

"This." Carrie formed her free hand into an L shape and jammed it quickly into the woman's throat. She fell flat on her back and didn't move. She didn't know if it was from the alcohol or the blow, but she was out cold. She looked closer and saw the woman was breathing. She started to come around and Carrie whispered, "I may be old, but I'm old for a reason." Danielle came up from behind her.

"What the hell? I saw it on the security camera."

"Good. Then you saw she was the aggressor."

"This bitch attacked me."

"I'd be quiet if I were you," said Danielle as the woman pulled herself to her feet. "Carrie, do you want me to call the cops?"

“No need. She was just leaving, weren’t you?”

“And she wasn’t coming back. Carrie, I think Sonny is still in the office. Why don’t you go there until I clear up this mess,” she said as she grabbed the woman by the arm.

Carrie knocked on the office door before she walked in. Sonny was sitting on the couch going over lyrics. “Hey, sweetheart. I thought you were going back to the booth?”

“Well...there was an incident.”

Danielle followed her into the office. “I turned her and her friends over to the bouncer. Are you sure you’re okay?”

“I’m fine, Danielle, really.”

“Boss, you should have seen her. She was so badass.”

“Somebody better tell me what’s going on,” Sonny demanded.

“I was approached in the ladies room. Apparently one of your admirers is not pleased you hooked up with an old broad like me.”

“What?” he growled.

“I assumed you don’t have camera in the ladies so I went out to the hallway. That’s when she grabbed me.” Carrie was nervous as she say his face turn bright red. “I’m fine, really.”

“Boss, you have to see this.” Danielle sat down at the desk and pulled up the security feeds. She pulled up the camera from the restroom hallway and reversed the feed. “Watch this.” He could see the woman grab Carrie and how she tried to pull away, twice. Then he gasped when she jammed her hand on the woman’s throat and she went down like a rock.

“What the fuck?” he said.

“I told you, Sonny. Your girlfriend’s a badass.”

“What did you do with the girl?”

“Carrie said not to call the cops so I handed her over to Terry. Don’t worry, she’s on our do not fly list now.”

“Thanks Danielle.”

“Sure thing and you’re on in ten minutes,” she said as she closed the door behind her.

“Why wouldn’t you let her call the cops?”

“Joe, I’m fine really. I didn’t want to make a big scene.”

He slipped his arms around her waist. “I’m sorry.”

“It’s not your fault.”

“I’m afraid you may run into this kind of thing, as ridiculous as it is.”

“First of all, it’s not ridiculous.” She smiled and looked him up and down. “You’re hot stuff, Joe. I understand why they’re jealous. I also understood when we went public it could happen. You’re worth it.” She leaned in and gave him a kiss. “Besides, as you can see I can handle myself.”

“You sure can. What the hell was that and should I be afraid of you?”

“I took self defense classes. In my line of work I could make people very angry. Parents who didn’t get custody. Spouses who thought the settlements I got out of them were too high. I learned to protect myself. And, it’s probably a good idea not to come up from behind me and try to surprise me,” she smiled.

“Noted. Carrie, wasn’t there anyone...”

“Anyone else to protect me? Like Mabel, my seventy year old secretary? No there wasn’t.” She got quiet. “Ever since my parents died it’s just been me. I’ve always been alone.”

He put his hand under her chin. “You aren’t alone anymore.”

Sonny waved to the crowd as Bobby called him out to the stage. He looked out to their booth where Carrie was smiling back at him. She was always so quiet and self-possessed. But the woman in the hallway was someone he didn't know, at least not yet. He smiled and winked at her. He sure as hell wanted to know all about her.

The musicians started the chorus of "Oh Lord", Sonny's latest hit. Whenever he was singing it was the song the crowd expected him to sing. Bobby joined in on the chorus. They rocked it out and finished to roaring applause. He smiled at Bobby and hooked his mic back into the stand. He picked up his guitar as the rest of the musicians sat back.

"Bobby has agreed to do an old classic with me."

"I'm just taking it easy on you, old man." The crowd laughed.

"Old man, my ass," he grinned. "You ready for this?"

"Let's do it." Sonny smiled and started picking a slow melody then started to sing.

I'm sitting in the railway station

Gotta ticket to my destination

On a tour of one night stands my suitcase and guitar in hand

And each stop is neatly planned for a poet and a one man band

Bobby jumped in on the chorus.

Homeward bound

I wish I was

Homeward bound

Home where my thought's escaping

Home where my music's waiting

Home where my love lies waiting

Silently for me

They continued singing in perfect harmony until he looked at Carrie and sang the last chorus.

Home where my thought's escaping

Home where my music's waiting

Home where my love lies waiting

Silently for me

They finished the song to a standing ovation. Sonny gave Bobby a hug and waved to the crowd. He looked over at Carrie who was part of the standing ovation. And crying.

Sonny had Danielle bring Carrie back to his office. Before he could say anything she put her arm around his neck and gave him a deep kiss.

“That was so beautiful,” she whispered.

He rubbed her back. “Thank you, sweetheart.” He nodded toward the couch. “Carrie, this is Bobby Nicholas.” Carrie gasped. “Bobby, this is Carrie Ashworth.”

Bobby stood and extended his hand. “Hi Carrie. It’s nice to meet you.”

“It’s nice to meet you too.” She looked at Sonny and ducked her head into his chest. “I’m so embarrassed.”

“It’s okay, sweetheart.”

“Yeah, I wanted to meet the woman who could put a smile on this old coot’s face and cold cock a groupie.”

“Oh, you heard about that.”

“It’ll be all over the tabloids by tomorrow.”

“Good Lord.”

Sonny ran his hand up her back. “Don’t worry about it, sweetheart. The video clearly shows she was the aggressor. I made sure Danielle copied it so it wasn’t lost.”

“Smart move. I could have used you as my investigator.”

“Excuse me?” asked Bobby.

“Before I retired I had a law practice.”

“Cool, but not that. There is video and you haven’t showed me yet?”

Sonny looked at her and she nodded. “Go ahead.”

He pulled up the video file and played it for Bobby. “Damn! You better never piss this woman off.”

“Don’t I know it.”

“Seriously Carrie, I’m glad you were able to protect yourself. Sonny’s right. It’s obvious you were trying to get away and she wouldn’t let go.”

“Thanks, Bobby.”

“Ah, buddy, it’s been a long night for both of us and I want to get Carrie home.”

“Sure thing. I’m sure I’ll see you again. We’re playing next weekend too.”

“That’s nice of you. I’m sure you’re in great demand.”

Bobby looked at Sonny. “I owe this old coot a lot. Plus it’s only thirty minute drive to my Mama’s house.” He clapped his hands together. “Home cooking. See you later.” He grabbed his coat and walked out the door.

Sonny pulled her close. “Now where were we?”

“I believe you were about to take this groupie home with you.”

He gave her a deep kiss. “I believe I was.”

Sonny took Carrie back to his place. It was only a few minutes down the road from her place but he'd promised to give her a riding lesson in the morning. He had bought the place when he decided to move back to Texas. Once he decided on the opening the club in Waco he picked a farmhouse a few miles outside of town. He'd actually wanted the Tucker place Carrie bought but when he was in the market it wasn't for sale.

He liked his place, mostly for the grounds and the barn. He was able to keep his horses and ride whenever he wanted. He liked the quiet. It was a nice break from a lifetime of sound. Music was his life but the older he got the more he needed the peace of his home to write. Long gone were the days of writing a top ten hit while riding on a tour bus.

She took off her jacket and hung it in the closet. "That was quite a night."

He was about to agree with her when he saw her hand was trembling. "Sweetheart, what's wrong?"

She forced a smile. "Nothing."

"Bull." He pulled her into a tight hug. "Talk to me."

"I haven't had to use what I learned in a long time. I hated it when I had to use it. I'm supposed to be able to talk my way out of tight situations. It's how I made my living."

"Sweetheart, there was no talking to her. She was drunk and delusional. I'm sorry it happened but I'm glad you were able to defend yourself." He noticed she was shivering. "Come with me." He led her into the kitchen where he put on the new electric kettle he'd bought. He'd also picked up her favorite tea.

Carrie came up next to him and kissed his cheek. "I'm very impressed. That's my favorite."

"I pay attention."

"Yes, you do," she said quietly before she gave him a deep kiss. They pulled apart when the pot clicked off. He poured the tea and let it sit. "Tomorrow we'll get out early. Harley and Rosa can both use a good ride."

"I don't now how good a ride I'll give her but I'm looking forward to it."

“I think you’ll be a natural.” He poured the cream and sugar into the mug and handed it to her. She wrapped her hands around the mug and took a sip.

“Ahhh. Perfect. Thank you.”

“You’re welcome.”

“What makes you think I’ll be a natural?”

“The way you are with Gracie and Max. Animals trust you. That’s a very important quality when you’re sitting on top of an animal that weighs a thousand pounds.” He rubbed his hand down her back. “Better?”

“Much.”

“Do you want to take that upstairs?” Carrie smiled and walked out of the kitchen and he followed as she walked upstairs to his bedroom. She took a sip of her tea then set it on the nightstand. “Do you want some sweats? I have some that would work for you.”

She grinned and started unbuttoning her blouse. “Don’t be ridiculous. I have my hot man to keep me warm.”

He grinned as he kicked off his boots and pulled his t-shirt over his head. They raced to see who’d get into bed first. Carrie got under the covers first, but he definitely won. He covered her body and she pulled him into a deep kiss. “Warmer?” he grinned.

“I’m getting there.”

He started rubbing his hands down her body. “I guess I had better heat you up.” He started nipping at her ear, then her neck. He began his exploration of her body, touching and loving every part of her.

“Joe, please,” she gasped.

He claimed her mouth as he claimed her body.

Sonny was sipping his coffee as Carrie made them some eggs. They'd just sat down to eat when he got a call from Chip. "Chip? What's up? Is there a problem at the club?"

"No, I'm sorry for calling so early but I just found out something and I think my case against Sherry just went down the tubes. I wanted to tell Carrie but I don't have her number."

"Calm down, Chip. She's right here."

"Oh crap, boss. I'm so sorry."

"It's no problem. Just talk to her." He handed the phone to Carrie.

"What's going on, Chip?"

"I just found out that Sherry married Dylan. That means the court will favor them. I can't lose Billy."

"Chip, calm down. That's not always the case. You are looking to provide a stable environment for your son. They are not. Do you have that custody agreement?"

"Yeah. I have a copy on my computer."

"That's excellent. Send it to me right now along with all of Sherry and Dylan's information. Be sure to include Sherry's maiden name and their lawyer's name. I'll text you the email address."

"Okay. I'll do it right away."

"And try and calm down. Chip, were you paying Sherry alimony?"

"Yeah?"

Carrie smiled. "Not anymore."

Chip laughed. "Oh yeah."

"Try not to worry. I really am as good as I said."

“Thanks, Carrie.” Chip hung up the phone. Carrie text him her email address and handed the phone back to Sonny. He was grinning.

“What?”

“You’re something else.”

“Thanks,” she smiled. “I better grab my phone.” She grabbed her purse from the living room and sat back down. She looked at the screen and smiled. “He’s already sent it.” She opened the file and laughed. “Oh this is gonna be good.”

“What is?”

“Their lawyer is Wendell Clement.”

“You know him?”

“I’ve gone up against him a few times. All flash, no substance.” She got Chip’s number from Sonny’s phone and called. “Chip, it’s Carrie. This is my number. Call me anytime. I’ve got your email. There is one thing I want you not to do. Under no circumstances do you tell them who your lawyer is.”

“Sure, what ever you say.”

“I need you to trust me, Chip. I wouldn’t risk your child’s future.”

“Okay Carrie.”

She hung up from Chip and made another call. “Tony? Sorry for calling so early.”

“You didn’t call this early to say hello, so you must have taken a case.”

“Yeah. It’s for a friend. Guess who’s opposing counsel. Clement.” Carrie turned the phone so he could hear Tony laughing. “Okay. My client sent me his original agreement. The ex is a singer and wants to take their four year old son on a year long tour. Obviously we’ll be looking for full custody. She just married Dylan Rollins who is from oil money. I need you to find everything you can on both of them.”

“Will do.”

“It’s urgent. I need it yesterday.”

“Got it, boss. It’s good to have you back.”

“I’m not back. I’m just helping a friend. Go to work, Tony.” She smiled as she hung up the phone.

“Sweetheart, I don’t want to seem like I doubt you but…”

“I understand. Chip is your friend. Clement is all flash. I’ve faced him several times and I’ve always chewed him up and spit him out. We’ll see what Tony finds out and I’ll give Chip his best shot at getting full custody.”

He reached across the table and took her hand. “You really are amazing.”

“Thank you.”

“Now eat your eggs. Harley and Rosa are waiting for us.”

Carrie changed into jeans and a long sleeve shirt. She pulled on her boots and walked downstairs. "Will this do?"

He smiled. "Hell yeah, cowgirl. You're just missing one thing." He opened the hall closet and pulled out two cowboy hats. He put a black hat on his own head and the brown hat on Carrie. "Now you're good."

She smiled and slipped her hands around waist. "So are you, cowboy."

"Oh yeah?" he grinned.

"This look is working for me." She gave him a kiss.

"Umm. Hold that thought," he smiled and gave her a kiss. "Harley and Rosa are waiting."

They walked out to the barn and Joe opened the door. "Hey Harley, Rosa. I've brought a friend."

Carrie gasped at the magnificent jet black horse. "Wow," she whispered.

"Harley, buddy. This is Carrie. Carrie, this is Harley." Harley nodded his head. "You can pet him. He looks intimidating but he's a big pussy cat."

Carrie ran her hand up his nose. "Don't listen to him, Harley. You seem very fierce." Harley snorted and shook his head. "Harley agrees with me."

"He's just flirting with you. Come on. I'll introduce you to Rosa." They walked over to the next stall where there was a beautiful brown and white pinto horse. "Hey there, sweetheart," he said to the horse. "I'm sorry I've been so busy."

"Hey Sonny." Carrie turned around to see a man standing in the doorway.

"Hey, Willie. Carrie, this is Willie Brown. He has the land between you and me. He comes over and checks on the horses when I'm busy. Willie, this is Carrie Ashworth. She bought the Tucker place."

Willie extended his hand. "Nice to meet you."

“Willie is going to help us out today. Willie, would you saddle Harley and take him into the paddock. I’m going to show Carrie how to do it on Rosa.”

Joe took her into the Rosa’s stall, carrying the saddle. He showed her how to brush Rosa and the saddle pad. Then he showed her how to saddle her up and secure it. “You ready for this?”

“Oh yeah.” Joe led her out to the paddock where Willie had Harley ready to go. He helped her up into the saddle then mounted Harley.

“Thanks, Willie.”

“I’ll take care of the stalls while you show your lady friend how it’s done.” The man chuckled and walked back into the barn.

“He seems nice.”

“Oh yeah, he’s a peach,” Joe said through his blush. He showed her the basics in the paddock and then led her out to the field. Rosa took it easy on her, taking a well worn path at a light trot.

Joe looked over at her and smiled. “Not bad for a newbie.”

“Thanks.”

He grinned and made a clicking noise with his mouth while he pressed into Harley’s sides and they took off at a gallop. Carrie watched as they ran at full speed to the end of the property line and back. He pulled up next to Carrie and smiled. “We both love that,” he said patted Harley’s neck.

“Looks like it.”

“Let’s get them back. You’ve ridden enough for a newbie.”

Willie brushed down Harley while Joe showed Carrie how to take care of Rosa. They were just finishing putting fresh water in the trough when Willie announced he was finished. “You good, Sonny? Need me for anything else?”

“No, we’ve got this. You can take off.”

“Okay. It was nice meeting you, Ms. Ashworth.”

“Carrie, please.”

“You let me know if you need anything, Ma’am. We are neighbors after all.”

“Thank you, Willie, that’s very nice of you.” She fed Rosa an apple as Joe checked on Harley. “Does he work for you full-time?”

“No. I wish I could. I just don’t have enough work for him. He’s had a rough time of it since his wife got sick. He used to break horses and train them but it put him on the road. Now he sticks to being a farrier. He doesn’t have to travel so far.”

“Well I’ll remember that if I get some horses.” She smiled at him and closed the barn door.

“What are you doing?”

She slipped her hands around his neck. “You remember when I said the cowboy thing was working for me?”

He gave her a lopsided grin. “Yeah.”

She grabbed a blanket and threw it over a bed of hay. “Don’t want to get scratched,” she smiled as she took off her hat and started unbuttoning her blouse.

“Are you kidding me?” he laughed.

She grinned as she threw her blouse to the floor. She reached behind her and unhooked her bra. It joined her blouse. “Does it look like I’m kidding, cowboy?”

“No it does not, Ma’am.” He watched as the rest of her clothes piled on the barn floor. He tossed his hat with the and started pulling at his boots. “Well, yee hah!”

Sonny sat in his office with a very nervous Chip. They were set to meet with Chip's ex-wife and her attorney in just an hour. Carrie had asked Sonny to wear a suit too. He assumed she wanted him along for Chip's moral support. He was trying to distract Chip with idle chatter but he it wasn't working and he didn't blame him. There was a knock on the door and it opened. He barely recognized the woman who walked through. Carrie was wearing a beige suit and her hair was pulled into a tight twist. She was wearing a strand of pearls and small pearl stud earrings. The outfit highlighted her pale skin and her English ancestors. She was carrying a briefcase and looked every inch a lawyer. Carrie said she had a cowboy thing. He wondered if he could have a thing for an English rose.

He stood to greet her and kissed her cheek. "Wow, babe. You look so different."

Carrie smiled and she looked much more like herself. "That's the idea." She whispered in his ear, "You look great." She sat down next to Chip and took a breath. "I told you I would do everything I could to get you full custody of your son. I think we have a very strong case."

"You do?" Chip gasped. "But they're married and have all that money."

"That's not all they have." She opened her briefcase and handed him a file. "Before you open that, there are things in there I doubt you know. It's going to change how you look at your son's mother."

"What do you mean?"

"First of all her name isn't Sherry Weston, at least it's not the one she was born with."

"What?"

"She was born Cheryl Fortineau in New Orleans. If I were her I'd have changed my name too. She had multiple arrests from the age of fourteen to twenty for everything from shoplifting to," Carrie paused and cover Chip's hand with hers. "To prostitution."

"Oh my God," he gasped.

“It does look like after she changed her name at twenty two her record is clean. At least she never got caught.”

“Dylan Rollins also has quite a jacket he’s got a couple of assault charges and several for possession of cocaine. The most recent was eight months ago before he hooked up with Sherry. She may not know.”

“What?” Now Chip was angry. “I don’t care. I don’t want my kid anywhere near him.”

“I don’t blame you. When we get into the meeting I want you to let me do all the talking. I don’t want this to go to court because it will become public record. This information about his mother will follow Billy.”

“Oh God.”

“It won’t come to that.”

“Are you sure?”

“Yes I am because I know how Clement works. Once he finds out what his clients have been hiding from him he’ll advise them to sign the new agreement. I’ve left in the visits from Sherry you asked for but I’ve put in they will need to be supervised.”

“You want Sherry to visit Billy?” asked Sonny.

“She still his mother. He loves her.”

“You’re a good man, Chip,” said Carrie. “Better than she deserved. Now the only thing they can fault us on is you’re a single man.”

“My mom doesn’t live far. She’ll stay with Billy when I have to work. I will be with him early in the day.”

“He can have whatever schedule he needs,” said Sonny.

“Thanks, boss.”

“You may have a bit more flexibility than you think. You no longer have to pay alimony but as the primary custodial parent, Sherry will now have to pay you child support.”

“What?” Chip started laughing. “She doesn’t have any money.”

“Oh yes she does. She married it last week.”

Sonny looked at Carrie and smiled. This was gonna be good.

Carrie had Chip and Joe walk into the conference room first. She saw Sherry from the doorway and she was everything Carrie had imagined and more. She was wearing a skirt so short it looked it belonged on a twelve year old. The stilettos were nearly as high as her hair. The low cut flaming red top shouted mother of the year. Dylan Rollins was a walking example of how money couldn't buy class even with a thousand dollar suit. And then there was Wendell Clement. Old school Texan. His signature Stetson was hanging on a hook on the wall. He was wearing the same badly fit brown three piece suit she'd seen on him at least half a dozen times. She tried to fight back a smile.

She followed the men into the conference room. Joe took a seat at the end of the table. Chip sat opposite Sherry. Carrie sat down next to Chip. "Good morning everyone. Shall we get started." Wendell finally looked up from his file.

"What the fuck?" he said.

"Good morning to you too, Wendell."

He looked at his clients. "I thought you said he doesn't have any money."

"He doesn't," said Sherry. She would know. She went through what little he had during their marriage.

"This is Carolyn Ashworth the most vicious and most expensive family lawyer in Texas."

"It must be Sonny," said Sherry. She looked like she could spit venom.

He smiled and shook head. "No. I'm just here for moral support."

"I heard you retired," said Wendell.

She put her hand on Chip's shoulder. "I'm just here to help a friend." She opened her briefcase and pulled out the file. "Okay, let's get to work. This is the new custody agreement, which you will sign by the time I leave here in the next fifteen minutes."

"What?" asked Wendell.

"This agreement awards full physical custody to Mr. Bryant."

“What? No!” said Sherry.

“I’d save your comments for your attorney, Mrs. Rollins.”

“Since Mrs. Rollins is now married that terminates any alimony payments.” Carrie enjoyed the fact that Sherry’s face now matched her blouse. “Since Mr. Bryant will be custodial parent, she will be responsible for child support payments, all of which are detailed in the agreement.” Dylan grabbed the file and looked up the payment schedule.

“You expect me to pay for her kid?!”

“Your stepson, Mr. Rollins. Now, if I may continue?” She looked at Chip and smiled. “Mr. Bryant has insisted you still be allowed to visit Billy when you want but those visits will be supervised at Mr. Bryant’s residence.”

Wendell closed the file and shoved it back at her. “Forget it. Don’t you ever get tired of being a bitch, Carolyn?”

Carrie caught Joe’s glance and he was ready to leap over the table at Wendell. She smiled at Wendell. “Never. Now, if I may continue. We could take this to court but I guarantee you will lose.”

“I’m his mother,” said Sherry.

“Yes you are, Ms. Fortineau.” All the color drained from Sherry’s face.

“Fortineau? Who the hell is that?”

“Shut up, Dylan,” Sherry whispered. She knew she was beaten.

“Like I said, we could take this to court but I doubt any court will allow Mr. Rollins to be around a child with his record.”

“What record?” demanded Sherry.

“There are several charges of assault and battery.”

“I was never convicted.”

“And the multiple charges on possession of cocaine. Now you can fight this and take us to court but your attorney will tell you that you won’t win, especially against me.”

Wendell grabbed the file again and sat back against his chair. “Some of this stuff is from sealed juvenile records. Carolyn, you really are a total bitch.”

Joe stood and leaned across the table. “Watch your mouth!”

“Now I know where I’ve seen her before,” said Sherry. “I saw their picture in the paper. That’s Sonny’s girlfriend.”

Wendell sighed as he closed the folder. He saw not only Dylan’s arrests but Sherry’s when she was Cheryl. “It doesn’t matter. She’s right. She’s got you. If you go to court, you’ll lose. Sign the agreement.”

“This can’t be right,” said Dylan. “I pay you to win.”

“You pay me either way. Sign the agreement.”

Everyone signed in turn and gave Carrie the folder. She put it back in her briefcase. “I’ll file it with the court this afternoon.”

“Sherry, when do you leave for your tour?” asked Chip.

“Saturday.”

“Okay, drop him off Friday. That way you’ll have some time before you go.”

“Thanks,” she muttered.

“Thanks for nothing,” said Dylan, for which he received a shot in the shoulder from Sherry.

They began to file out when Carrie stopped Sherry. “Mrs. Rollins, you know Chip will never say a bad word against you to your son. That’s not who he is. But if you breach this agreement by speaking against Chip or not coming through on a promise to see Billy you will have to deal with me. Ask your attorney. You really don’t want that to happen. I have a particular distaste for mothers who use the children as pawns.” Sherry glared at her as Dylan pushed her out the door. “Good to see you, Wendell.” He looked like he was

about to say something to her but thought twice about it when Joe came up behind her. He closed his mouth and walked out the door.

“Oh my God, Carrie,” Chip yelled as he pulled her into a hug. “You did it. I have my son. I don’t know what to say.”

“You’re welcome, Chip.”

“Are we good? I promised I’d call Mama and let her know.”

“We’re good. I just have to file the paperwork.”

“Thanks, Carrie. You’re the best,” he shouted as he ran out the door.

Carrie started through the door when Joe pulled her back and closed the door. “You were incredible.”

“Thank you.”

“No, I mean really. You were so in command of the room. It was great.” He wrapped his arms around her waist. “You look great too.” He gave her a deep kiss.

“I’m free after I file the paperwork, what about you, cowboy?” she grinned.

“I’m all yours.”

“I’ll just stop home and change.”

He ran his finger down the lapel of her blazer and grinned. “Don’t.”

Sonny let himself into Carrie's place. They'd traded keys weeks ago but he spent more time here than at his own place. Max greeted him and Gracie deigned to look up from her bed. "Where is she, boy?" Max walked to the patio door leading to the pool. "I know. Stupid question." He opened the door but left Max in the house. He'd toss the ball with him later. For now he just wanted to see his girl. He found her reading, sitting on a chaise. "Hey babe."

"Hey. What's up?"

"You have room on there for me?"

"Always." She tossed the book aside and mover over to give him enough room. She sat down and gave her a kiss. "What's wrong?"

"Damn, you're good. I'm never going to be able to hide anything from you, am I?"

"Nope, so give."

"I was just talking to Willie. He's not going to be able to afford the tax hike. He's going to have to sell."

"What? That's awful."

"It is. He worked his whole life to buy that place and now if he doesn't sell it he'll lose it."

She rested her head on his shoulder. "How is his wife taking it?"

"He hasn't had the nerve to tell her. She's comfortable there. Her friends are close. I think he hates that more than the idea of losing the place."

Carrie was quiet for a moment and then looked at him. "I have an idea. Why don't we buy it?"

"What?"

"We could take down the side fencing between all our places. That would triple the room Harley and Rosa would have to run." He stared at her, not knowing what to say. "If you don't want to buy it I can, but I thought we could do it together."

“No I like the idea but that still leave Willie and Emma. Where are they going to go?”

“Oh, I wouldn’t want them to move. What would we do? Rent the place? Who needs that hassle?”

He looked at her and smiled. “You really are something.”

“Why thank you, kind sir. Does this mean you’re in?”

“Hell yeah, I’m in.”

“Great. I’ll draw up the paperwork and then you can have your attorney go over it.”

“I don’t think that’s necessary.”

“Joe, we have separate homes, separate assets. It only makes sense to be sure that all the legal l’s are dotted and the t’s crossed. I don’t want our lives to ever get messy. I’ve seen too much of that.”

“So have I. And that leads me into a conversation I’ve been wanting to have.”

“Uh oh.”

“No uh oh.”

“You do know I’m in love with you. I may not say it, but you know, don’t you?”

Carrie smiled. “Yeah, I figured. I’m in love with you too.” She gave him a kiss.

“Here’s the thing…”

“I hate sentences that start out here’s the thing. They never end well.” She looked concerned.

“Just hear me out. I’m head over heels about you and you’ll never have to doubt that.”

“Okay. Good to know.” Still concerned. He better get to the point.

“Sweetheart, I’ve been married twice. I don’t do it well. I don’t think I want to do it again.”

He was stunned when he saw her sigh with relief. "Is that all?"

"What do you mean, is that all? That would be a deal breaker for most women."

"Babe, I've seen too much of the bloody aftermath of a marriage gone wrong. You love me, I love you, we're together. I'm great with that. Oh, in case you haven't figured it out, I'm not most women."

Sonny grinned, "Hell no, you're not." He gave her a deep kiss.

"There is one item I would like to put on the table."

He tried to maintain a serious face. "Please proceed, counselor."

"I would like it if we lived together. This traveling back and forth is ridiculous."

"Let me guess, you want me to move in here."

"I'm not giving up my pool and the barn is plenty big enough for Harley and Rosa."

"That leaves me with an empty house we can't sell because we want the land."

They both thought for a moment and then said it at the same time. "Chip!"

Sonny laughed and pulled Carrie tight in his arms. "I really do love you, Carrie."

"I love you too, Joe."

"What's say we take this party upstairs?" he grinned.

"Call Willie first. We don't want him to worry."

"I'll call him right now."

Carrie stood and gave him a kiss. "I will be upstairs trying on my new negligee."

"You know they never stay on long."

Carrie grinned as she walked toward the house. "I measure the success of the item by how long it takes it to hit the floor."

He stood and watched her as she disappeared up the stairs. He knew there was a song here, a best selling, top ten, once in a lifetime hit. He was just too busy living it to stop and write.