



# LEARNING the ROPES



AVON  
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**T. J. KLINE**

*Author of *The Cowboy and the Angel**

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## *Dedication*

*For my non-cowboy, football-loving boys.  
Thank you for always keeping me on my toes  
and reminding me of the joy boys bring.*

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An Excerpt from *Finding Miss McFarland* by Vivienne Lorret

An Excerpt from *Take the Key and Lock Her Up* by Lena Diaz

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An Excerpt from *Hard to Hold On To* by Laura Kaye

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About the Publisher

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## Chapter One

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ALICIA KANANI SLAPPED the reins against her horse's rump as he stretched out, practically flying between the barrels down the length of the rodeo arena, dirt clods kicking up behind them as the pair galloped. The gelding ate up the ground with his long stride. She glanced at the clock as she pulled him up, circling to slow him to a jog as a cowboy opened the back gate, allowing her to exit. 16.45. It was good enough for only second place right now. *Damn it!* If only she'd been able to cut the first barrel closer, it might have taken another tenth of a second off her time.

She walked her favorite gelding, Beast, back to the trailer and hooked the halter around his neck before loosening his cinch. The titter of female laughter floated on the breeze, and recognition dawned as the pair of women moved from behind her trailer. Alicia cringed.

"Look, Dallas, there's Miss Runner Up." Delilah jerked her chin at Alicia's trailer. "Came in second again, huh?" She flipped her long blond waves over her shoulder. "I guess you can't win them all . . . oh, wait," she giggled. "You don't seem to win any, do you? That would be me." The pair laughed as if it were the funniest joke ever.

"Isn't it hard to ride a broom *and* a horse at the same time, Delilah?" Alicia tipped her head to the side innocently as Delilah glared at her and stormed away, dragging Dallas with her.

Delilah had been a thorn in her side ever since high school when Alicia first arrived in West Hills. There'd never been a lack of competition between them but, years later, only one of them had matured at all.

Alicia snidely imitated Delilah's laugh to her horse as she pulled the saddle from his back and put it into the back of the trailer. "She thinks she's so funny. 'You haven't won, I have,'" she mimicked in a nasally voice. "What a bitch," she muttered as she rubbed the curry comb over Beast's neck and back.

"I sure hope you don't kiss your mother with that mouth."

"Chris!" Alicia spun to see Chris Thomas, her best friend Sydney's brother, walking toward her trailer. She hurried over and gave him a bear hug. "Did you rope already?"

"Later tonight, during the slack. Too many entries, so hopefully we finish before the barbecue starts."

She'd rodeoed with Chris and Sydney for years until Chris had gone pro with his team roping partner. For the last few years, they'd all been pursuing the same goal, the National Finals Rodeo and their events. So far their paths hadn't crossed since Sydney's wedding nearly two years ago. She suspected she might see him here since they were so close to home and this particular rodeo boasted

huge purse for team ropers. Her eyes did a quick survey of him, realizing the past couple of years had been very good to him. Unfortunately, he had always oozed self-confidence and she was sure he was aware of the fact.

“I see Delilah’s still giving you a hard time.”

She shrugged and gave him a half-smile. “She’s still mad I beat her out for rodeo queen when Sydney gave up the title.”

“That was a long time ago. You’d think she’d let it go.” Chris stuffed one hand into his pockets and leaned against the side of her trailer, patting Beast’s neck. “Maybe you should put Nair in her shampoo like she did to you.”

Alicia cringed at the memory. “Ugh! It was a good thing I smelled it before I put it on my head. That could’ve been traumatic. But I got her back.”

Chris laughed out loud. “Didn’t you put liniment in her lip gloss?”

She pinched her lips together, trying to keep from laughing, at the reminder of the prank. They had some good times together in the past. She wondered how they’d managed to drift apart over the past few years. She missed his laugh and the way he always seemed to bring the playful side of his personality to the surface. One minute they were traveling together, the three of them inseparable, and the next they hadn’t spoken more than a few words in years.

“So, how’d you do?” he asked.

“Second, so far. Again,” she clarified.

Chris gave her a lop-sided grin and crossed his arms over his chest. She tried not to notice how his biceps bulged against the material of his Western shirt or how much he’d filled out since she’d last seen him. And in all the right places.

“Second’s nothing to complain about.”

“It’s nothing to brag about either,” she pointed out, tearing her eyes away from his broad chest and trying to focus on the horse in front of her. She went back to brushing Beast, feeling slightly uncomfortable at the way Chris continued to silently watch her, as if he wanted to say something but wasn’t sure how to bring it up. She finally turned and faced him. “What?”

He grabbed the front of his straw cowboy hat with his palm and adjusted it nervously. “Are you going to the dance tonight?”

Alicia felt a sizzle begin in her stomach and spiral outward. She fumbled with the brush, nearly dropping it and prayed she’d misheard him. Like his sister, Chris had a heart of gold and would do anything for his friends but, unlike Sydney, he was a flirt. A player. The type of guy with a new girl on his arm at every rodeo and never serious about any of them. He always had been and, she suspected, always would be. But, in spite of the way she and Sydney teased him about his philandering ways, unmercifully growing up, she’d always harbored a huge crush on him, even if he’d never seen her do anything more than another pesky sister.

She stared at Beast’s back, her hands no longer moving, unsure how to answer him. Chris must have seen her discomfort—he’d always been able to read her too well—and pushed himself away from the trailer, curling his lip with distaste.

“It’s not for me,” he exclaimed. “That’d be so wrong.” He reached over and pinched her ribs, causing her to squeal and scoot away from his fingers. “It’s for . . . someone else.”

Alicia forced out a shaky laugh. “Are we back in high school again? Did some guy send you over here to see if I *like* him?” She tossed the brush into the bucket in the tack compartment and slipped a flake of alfalfa into a hay net before hanging it on the side of the trailer for both of her geldings, grateful they were easygoing enough to share. She arched a brow and cocked her hip to the side. “

some guy wants me to go to the dance with him tonight, he better be brave enough to ask me himself.

Chris ran his hand over her gelding's neck and shook his head, laughing. "Damn, woman, wonder you're still single. You're brutal on us guys." He slapped her butt as he walked by. "Maybe I'll see you there tonight."

"Hey," she yelled after him. "That's mine, and unless you put a ring on this finger, keep your hands to yourself."

Chris shot her a quick wave but continued to laugh. She watched as he walked away, trying to drag her eyes away from admiring the way he filled out his jeans and to slow her racing heart. Then he looped his arm around the shoulders of a pretty redhead who didn't look like she'd ever touched a horse, let alone ridden one. *She might be looking for something to ride, but it isn't a horse.*

She rolled her eyes as she turned back to her animals, trying to quell the flutter in her stomach. She couldn't believe Chris could still make her feel this way. It didn't even make sense. She would never act on her feelings for him. In fact, she'd never told anyone, not even Sydney. It was just a stupid, girlish crush. Chris was nothing more than a friend, not to mention one of the most eligible cowboys on the circuit. And she was just a girl from the poor side of the barn who never registered as anything more than a nuisance on his radar.

CHRIS SAT ASTRIDE his bay gelding, Jaeger, in the practice arena, one leg casually looped around his saddle horn, while he and David waited for their turn. There were at least thirty pairs of team ropers in the arena, and the slack and, so far, it was taking forever to get through them. At this rate, they were never going to make it in time for the barbecue tonight. His stomach rumbled, reminding him he hadn't eaten all day.

"Who was the girl you were talking to earlier?"

He casually glanced at his partner, David Greenly. He raised his brows at his friend. "Why are you interested?"

David shot him a disdainful glare. "Hardly."

They'd been rodeoing together for the last five years and when David encouraged him to go pro, Chris jumped at the chance. The two of them shared a common goal—to win the National Finals so they could open a roping school together. However, it took time to build their reputation and Chris wasn't known for his patience. He needed to remember they were taking it one step at a time, one goal at a time. In the meantime, he wanted to enjoy every spare moment, while David seemed content to be a workaholic.

At this point, they knew each other well enough to finish the other's sentences. If he didn't watch himself, David would realize Chris was setting him up. Chris was tired of watching David push himself day after day, striving to be the best without any thought to what he was giving up. If he heard it once, he'd heard David complain about wanting to settle down and have kids a thousand times. Neither was high on Chris's list of priorities, but that didn't mean he couldn't help his friend have what he wanted—the family he'd missed growing up with a single dad on the rodeo circuit. Besides, he was tired of David being his wingman and never having a woman of his own. It was beginning to make him feel guilty, like he was hoarding the ladies all for himself.

Not that. Chris had any intention of getting tied down like his sister had, regardless of his mother begging for another grandchild. It wasn't that he had anything against the institution of marriage, he was just having too much fun enjoying his freedom.

He shot David a sly look. "I've talked to a lot of girls today. Which one are you talking about?"

"At the trailer. The barrel racer with the paint?" David absent-mindedly slapped the end of his rope.



against his thigh while his horse hung his head, bored and dozing. "She didn't look like one of your usual bunnies."

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He was known to flirt with the women who lurked behind the chutes trying to find a cowboy tame. Chris chuckled at the thought. Like he would ever be tamed. "Dark hair? Really pretty?"

"Yeah, she was pretty." David shrugged but didn't look away. "I suppose."

Chris could see he was interested but didn't want to appear overly so and laughed at him. "That's Alicia Kanani, Sydney's best friend. You don't remember her?"

He looked surprised. "The one who was rodeo queen a few years ago?"

"That's the one. Why? Want me to talk to her for you?"

David frowned and shook his head. "The last thing I need right now is a female distraction. You don't either," he pointed out. "Get your head in the game. We are sitting fourth in the standings and we need to be higher before the National Finals."

"Yes, sir." Chris snapped him a mock salute while David glared at him. "But if you think I'm going to act like a monk because you do, you're insane. With all these available females just vying for my attention? I mean, just look at them."

Chris nodded his head toward the fence where several women in miniskirts, cowboy boots, and half-shirts waved, trying to catch his attention. He winked at one of the women along the fence line and laughed as she started whispering to her friend. "You see? I'm just being friendly, the way my mama taught me."

"Sure you are." David shook his head and jerked his chin toward the chutes. "Quit fraternizing with the bunnies and pay attention. We're almost up."

The pair jogged their geldings to the gate and waited for their turn. As the steer was loaded into the chute, David walked his mount into the heeler box while Chris urged his into the opposite side and waited for the cowboy manning it to stretch the barrier rope across the front. He backed his horse into the corner of the box, feeling his haunches bunch under him, twitching with anticipation.

Chris settled the loop of his rope in his right hand, slipping his reins through his left until they were exactly the way he liked them. His gelding pawed his front foot, anticipating his opportunity to bolt forward. He inhaled deeply, practically tasting the damp earth. A slow smile spread over his lips. He loved this life.

Settling into the saddle, murmuring to his gelding, he let out the breath. He glanced over the chute at David and, seeing he was ready, nodded to the cowboy who released the steer from the chute. He nudged the gelding's sides, breaking from the box as the rope snapped, clearing him to make a clean run.

Swinging the loop over his head, he felt the rope slide deftly through his fingers until instinct told him it was exactly the size and position he wanted it to be. Reaching his arm forward, he tossed it perfectly over the steer's horns, flipping his hand over and catching the rope in his fingers as he simultaneously wound it around the saddle horn and turned his gelding. He directed the steer forward, the rope pressing against his thigh, as David aimed his loop downward to catch the steer's back feet. Watching over his shoulder, he heard the zip of the rope and saw David catch both feet. Chris spun his horse to face his partner, stretching their ropes taut as the official snapped his flag, signaling the start of time. 5.2. It was a great time; enough for first place, but they wouldn't know if they could hold the position until after tomorrow's performance.

The men rode toward one another causing the rope to loosen and slip from the steer's hind leg. David wound his rope as Chris followed the steer to the end of the arena where another cowboy removed his rope and a third opened the back gate for him to exit.

“Nice run, Chris.”

He twisted in his saddle in time to see Alicia loading her horses into her trailer. “Thanks. You’re leaving?” A curl of disappointment twisted through his gut, surprising him.

“Yeah, if I leave now, I can get home in time to help Dad feed the horses.”

“Oh.” He noticed David riding up behind him. “Hey, do you remember David Greenly?”

“Who wouldn’t? You’re practically rodeo royalty,” she said, her pretty almond eyes turned toward David as she smiled up at him. “That was a great catch.”

“Thanks,” he muttered.

Chris looked from one to the other and frowned. David might be a man of few words but he’d never known him to be shy. He wondered at David’s uncharacteristic surly frown. From the way his eyes slid over her curves, he was obviously attracted to her but you sure couldn’t tell it by the look on his face. If he could get David to loosen up and find a nice woman to put up with his hyper-competitive, driven nature, they could start having fun roping again. Right now, David seemed intent on making it work.

He knew David’s dad was putting him under a lot of pressure to make the Finals this year, and Chris could see it taking a toll. David needed to find a woman to loosen David up while keeping his eyes on the championship, and Chris was sure Alicia was perfect for him. Sweet and fun, she’d always been a smart girl with ambition and a knack for talking them both out of trouble. She was just as driven as either of them. To tell the truth, growing up he’d always wanted to hook up with her himself but didn’t want the complication that would arise from dating his sister’s best friend. If David liked himself, Chris knew he would fall for her dark beauty immediately. That is, if he would quit frowning and actually talk to her.

Chris leaned on the horn of his saddle as Alicia locked the back gate of her trailer and leaned against it. “How is your dad? I haven’t seen him since the rodeo last year.”

“Good, still working at the Diamond Bar.” She crossed her arms, leaning against her trailer and smiled up at him.

“He hasn’t moved on yet?”

Alicia cocked her head. “As if he would ever leave. He’s been working for them since before I was born.”

“And your mom?”

Alicia glanced at David, sitting stick-straight in the saddle, his eyes sliding over her as if he was trying to gauge her worth. It wasn’t hard to see he was uncomfortable and wanted to move on. Chris knew David was irritated with him, but Alicia was sure to think she was the cause and Chris wanted to warn him to dial back the attitude. Just because his family was rodeo champion stock didn’t mean Alicia was going to let someone treat her like chopped liver.

“She’s still working for them too, running their house. I’m sure she’d love for you to stop by to say hi before you head out of town.”

“I’m sure we could do that.” Chris sat up and glanced at David. “Matter of fact, we’re finished. If you want to wait for us, we can load our rig and head over to the house to help your dad feed.” He didn’t wait for David to agree, avoiding the pointed look he shot at Chris.

David sighed and shook his head, clenching his jaw. He refrained from commenting but it didn’t hide his irritation. Chris glared at him in warning. What did David have to complain about? Chris was setting him up with a beautiful woman—unless David didn’t realize what Chris was doing and thought Chris was trying to hook up with her. The thought almost made him laugh out loud. David would know by now that Chris liked women without strings attached. No commitments, ever. Alicia was the opposite. She was the girl you built forever with and Chris had no interest in forever. But, David? He

was a different story.

Chris wasn't worried that Alicia might not be interested in his partner. He was the type of guy every girl wanted to settle down with—sturdy, dependable, ambitious—and for some reason, women were drawn to his “Aw shucks” demeanor. Chris had enough of them ask him about his friend to know the air of dependable, quiet strength surrounding him was what women sought in marriage material. They weren't looking for a fun-loving, irresponsible husband. They wanted a guy they could count on, and, of the two of them, that was definitely David.

Alicia glanced at David again cautiously. “I'm sure Mama and Daddy would love for you guys to come have dinner with us but I'm not sure David wants to.”

Chris shot David a warning look and cocked his head, smiling at Alicia's forthright comment. “Who cares what this guy wants.” Chris jerked a thumb at David. “I'd love a home cooked meal. I'm sick of his ironed grilled cheese and cold French fries.” He grimaced and she laughed.

“It can't be that bad.”

“It is,” David agreed, barely cracking a smile. Chris wished his friend would just lighten up for a few minutes. “I guess I'll get started loading the horses then. Sounds like I'll see you in just a bit, Alicia.” David spun the horse and headed past several large stock trailers on his way to the one he shared with Chris.

Alicia watched him leave, curiously, before raising her brows and turning to Chris. “Wow, he's kinda intense.”

Chris stifled a chuckle, glad she wasn't judging him by their first encounter. “Yeah, but he's a good guy and I know he's got my back no matter what.”

“You mean he'd bail you out of any kind of trouble you get yourself into,” she said, jingling her keys, trying to hide the smile tugging at the corners of her lips.

“I mean, he has. Several times,” he clarified before giving her a guilty smile. “Probably will again before this weekend is over.” Chris glanced back in the direction David had gone. “I better go help him. If you want to head out, we'll just be a few minutes behind you. I think, after all these years, you can still remember the way,” he said before winking at her and watching her pull out of the arena before nudging his gelding toward his trailer.

As he rode closer, he could see the fury in David's face and wondered at the wisdom of their dinner plans.

“What the hell was that?” David tossed the saddle blanket into the trailer. “I thought we were going to go to the barbecue before we headed out tonight. We were leaving remember?”

Chris shrugged off his friend's anger. “So? We have a change in plans. It's not a big deal.” He loosened his gelding's cinch. “Since when do you complain about a meal you don't have to pay for?”

“I'm not complaining about the meal. I'm complaining about you being so obvious.” He leaned over his gelding's back and crossed his wrists. “If I want a date, I'll get one myself. I don't need your help.”

“Yeah, because it's happened so often over the past three months.”

David shook his head and sighed as he brushed the horse. “Have you ever stopped to think that not everyone is like you? You have more notches on your bed than I have trophy buckles.”

Chris laughed out loud. He wasn't offended by David's comment. He knew he had the reputation of being a playboy and he'd never tried to correct the rumors that he slept with the women he flirted with. He'd assumed they would get cleared up eventually. The truth was, when they were on the road, he gave most women a ride home only when they were too drunk to drive, and then he slept in his truck or a spare bedroom if they were generous. He'd seen the devastation drunk driving created after

losing a friend on her way home from a rodeo. After that night, he vowed to do his best to see any woman home safely. He'd never thought it might make him look like a dog.

Then there were the women he took home because he was afraid if they were left to their own devices, they'd be taken advantage of by some of the less than gentlemanly cowboys who preyed on "buckle bunnies." Sure, he was a red-blooded man and there were nights he didn't go to bed alone, but not nearly as many as people suspected. But only Sydney knew the truth. These rumors following him were getting out of hand and he was going to need to clear all of it up before it bit him in the ass.

"Walk a mile in these boots, my friend, and you might find it's not all you think it is." He shook his head. "I'm sick of listening to women trying figure out how to get your attention. Alicia is a pretty sweet woman who can cowboy with the best of them. I just thought you two have a lot in common and you're not the type of guy to love 'em and leave 'em so I know you won't hurt her. Besides, you'd better settle down and start having that family you talk about soon or you're gonna be too old to have kids."

"Whatever, Chris." David rolled his eyes and tossed the brush into the shelf on the door. "You've already roped me into this. It's not like I can back out now. It just would've been nice to have some warning."

"It's feeding some horses. We have to do the same with our own."

David untied his horse's lead rope and loaded him into the trailer. "Just do me a favor and ask for me next time."

"Sure." Chris chuckled quietly, congratulating himself on a match well-made. Tonight they'd have dinner and, hopefully, he'd convince the pair to go to the dance. Tomorrow, they'd head out and, if all went according to plan, David would be so busy watching for Alicia at the next rodeo that Chris might get ten minutes all to himself.

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## Chapter Two

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ALICIA PULLED THE truck into the circular drive, hoping there was enough room for both rigs to fit in front of her parents' tiny modular home. She was worried about Chris and David coming over. She wasn't blind. She knew Chris was trying to set her up with David, which was embarrassing enough, but she didn't really want him to see where she lived. Her parents worked hard but she wasn't exactly proud of the fact her mother was a glorified housekeeper and her father cleaned stalls for a living. She sighed, guilt sweeping over her. She hated feeling ashamed of her upbringing but the emotion wouldn't stay buried.

*Face it, you're poor, she scolded herself. That's not going to change anytime soon.*

She'd always been the poor kid growing up. When she was young, she'd worn clothes that smelled like moth balls and musty books, never owning anything new or firsthand. What she wouldn't have given for a trip to the mall, just once. Even when they'd moved into West Hills and she'd gone to high school, everything had been second hand. She'd been grateful for even the little she had, but it wasn't easy when she saw girls coming to school in every new fad, while she was wearing the same jeans she'd had for four years. She hadn't wanted anyone to know so she learned to sew, managing to refurbish thrift store deals into Western couture, and made all of her own riding shirts for rodeo. She'd even sold a few of her designs to other queen contestants to make ends meet and help her parents out. Chris knew because he'd seen it firsthand over the many years she and Sydney had been friends, but what would David Greenly think when he saw what little they had?

*You saw the look on his face. He'll think you're not worth his time.*

She sighed as her mother came onto the porch. Alicia had already called her from the rodeo grounds to let her know Chris and David were coming to dinner. Of course, her mother was thrilled. Both of her parents adored Chris since meeting him. Who could blame them? Everyone loved Chris. He was one of those people who excelled at everything with minimal effort. His easygoing nature drew others to him like a magnet and he never seemed to lack people vying for his attention, especially women. Not that he ever turned them away. In all the years she'd known him, she couldn't believe he'd never realized she had a crush on him, too. Maybe, like David, he didn't think she was worth his time and attention.

Alicia unloaded her horses and turned them loose into the small pasture beside their home. Both geldings took off at a run, kicking their hooves into the air as she hung the halters on the hook beside the gate.

"Where's Dad?" she called to her mother.



“He’s out in the mare barn, feeding.” Her mother looked toward the gate. “Where are Chris and his friend?”

“They’re loading up and will be here in a few minutes. Does Dad need my help?”

Her mother waved her off. “The boys can help him. I’m going to head over to the house and get dinner on the table for Mrs. Langdon. I’ll be back in a few minutes but can you take the lasagna out and put the garlic bread into the oven in ten minutes?”

“Sure, Mom.” Alicia headed into the house, plugging her phone into the charger on the counter. “Anything else you need me to do?” She took a bottle of water from the refrigerator.

“Nope, Dad will be in after he checks on the yearlings.”

Alicia sighed as she watched her mother walk down the pathway leading to the main house. She had been the Langdons’ housekeeper and cook throughout her pregnancy while Alicia’s father ran the entire stable of champion cutting horses. For years, the Langdon family had been trying to get Alicia to work for them, showing their horses and training, but she couldn’t give up on rodeo and settle for the same life her parents had. The Langdons were wonderful people who had taken care of both of her parents over the many years in their employ but Alicia refused to quit rodeo until she reached the pinnacle—the National Finals Rodeo. She had to prove to herself and everyone else that she wasn’t just some poor kid the Langdons helped. Reaching her goal would also help her do the one thing she wanted most: help her father train his own horses instead of someone else’s. Watching her mother head over to the Langdons when she should be having dinner with her family made Alicia realize that nothing short of the Finals would be enough.

She sighed, rising from the chair as the buzzer sounded, and reached for the oven mitts her mother left on the counter. This year she was closer than ever to making the Finals. She might not win even first rodeo but the second place purses were adding up. If her luck and her geldings continued to hold out, she’d place in the top ten this season and be in Las Vegas competing this December. The mere thought caused flutters of nervousness in her stomach.

Her parents didn’t have any idea what she was planning but she already had her eyes on a ranch on the outskirts of town. Nothing as large as the property the Langdons owned, but it was plenty of room for the three of them to build a house and enough space for her father to finally raise his own horses the way he’d always talked about doing. Adding this season’s winnings to what she’d already saved over the past two years should give her enough for a nice down payment. But she didn’t want to get her parents’ hopes up until she put an offer on the place. She couldn’t bear to get their hopes up only to have it fall apart later.

DAVID PARKED THE truck behind Alicia’s trailer and looked around at the tiny house. “Not much to look at, huh?”

“We can’t all have parents who own cattle ranches or were world champions,” Chris pointed out, wondering if David realized he sounded like a snob.

His friend arched a brow at him in indignation. “I wasn’t criticizing, just stating a fact. Sensitive, huh?” David climbed from the driver’s seat and Chris followed.

Maybe he was being a bit oversensitive but he knew how Alicia hated being judged for her parents’ lack of money and he didn’t want to see David get off on the wrong foot from the start. Noah Kanaoka had come from Hawaii and worked hard to earn the respect of Bradley Langdon, one of the largest cutting horse breeders in the nation. Jessenia was one of the sweetest women he’d ever known and he’d thought of her like a second mother when he was younger. As much as he hated to see how hard

she worked as both housekeeper and cook for the Langdon family, he could only imagine how troubled Alicia.

“Hey,” Alicia called from the front porch. “You can either tie your horses to the trailer or turn them out in the pasture behind the house. We don’t have any broodmares out there right now.”

David glanced at Chris, letting him make the decision. “Pasture?”

“Might as well. You want me to do it and you can head inside?” Chris wagged his brows at his friend suggestively.

“Why don’t I handle the horses?” David muttered, opening the back of the trailer.

“Chicken,” Chris chuckled and shrugged. “Whatever. More food for me.” He hurried up the porch steps and followed Alicia into the house, immediately hit with a whiff of Italian spices and garlic. His stomach rumbled loudly and Alicia glanced at him over her shoulder, laughing.

“Dinner is just about ready, if you want to wash up in the bathroom at the end of the hall. Towels are in the bottom cabinet.”

“I remember,” he said, winking at her. “David should be in shortly. Does your dad need any help?”

She bent over and checked the bread in the oven. “No, Mom just left for the main house but she’ll be right back.” She shot him a sideways glance and the corner of his mouth curved up. “I think she’s pretty excited to see you.”

“I’ve missed your mom. I know I should stop by more often when I’m home. But you know how it is.” He shrugged by way of apology. “I’m on the road most of the time and when I do come back, David needs my help at the ranch. Time flies and I never realize it’s gone.”

“I know.”

Chris narrowed his eyes, wondering if she really did know. She’d never travelled as much as he and David did, staying close to her parents and helping them whenever she could. Even at that, she was still sitting pretty in the standings.

He watched her adjust the tray of bread in the oven, trying not to notice the rounded curve of her rear, although parts of him were making the task extremely difficult. She’d always been a pretty girl, but she was his sister’s skinny best friend, smart enough to be a year ahead of him in school even though they were the same age. Back in high school he’d almost asked her to the prom but hadn’t been brave enough. When she told him she was going to a rodeo instead, he insisted on driving her and went there to celebrate her first professional win. In the end, he never did ask her out, for fear of jeopardizing their friendship. Instead, he’d forced himself to back off, admiring Alicia from a distance. He arched a brow. He didn’t remember her having these curves back then, or even at his sister’s wedding.

The front door slammed and Chris tore his gaze, and wandering thoughts, from Alicia’s backside, poking his head around the corner to see Jessenia come inside.

“Cristobel!” She hurried forward and enveloped him in a hug, squeezing him impressively for such a tiny woman.

“Jessie!” He laughed at the Spanish nickname she’d given him in high school, as he lifted her from the ground and swung her around once. He placed her back on the floor. “I’m sorry I haven’t been home sooner.”

She gave him a frown. “I should hope so. I don’t even know how long it’s been since I’ve seen you,” she scolded in her thick Spanish accent.

Chris tried to look sheepish when he heard the clomping of boots on the steps of the front porch. The door opened as Noah came inside, making sure not to track dirt into Jessenia’s immaculate house. “I’m sure hope that cowboy putting horses in the back is with you, young man.”

Chris laughed and thrust out a hand to Alicia's father. "He's my roping partner. It's good to see you again, sir."

"Alicia, why don't you go see if that young man outside needs anything else?" Jessie suggested.

Chris wondered if she wasn't already having the same thoughts as he was about the pair and looked over at Alicia, leaning against the side of the doorway, watching their interaction.

"Sure, Mom." Alicia sighed and pushed away from the wall, rolling her eyes as she moved past them to head outside.

"Don't mind her," Noah said as she closed the door. "She's just mad about quitting rodeo."

"I CAN'T BELIEVE I let him get me involved in this," David muttered as he threw two flakes of hay over the geldings.

It wasn't as if they didn't have plenty they needed to work on. What they really should have done was head to Chris's parents' ranch to practice before their second go-round tomorrow. If they didn't get some better times, there was no way they were going to stay in the top ten and get to Vegas. David was pissed him off that Chris would rather spend precious practice time flirting with girls from his past and trying to get him to do the same.

"You know, some people think talking to your horse is a sign of insanity."

The quiet laughter at the pasture gate made him clench his jaw. She might be a great girl but he wasn't looking to get involved with anyone nor did he have time for a relationship, contrary to what Chris seemed to think.

"Yeah, well, that tends to happen anyway when Chris Thomas is your roping partner."

She leaned her arms over the fence, resting her chin on them. "He does have that effect on people," she laughed. "Need some help?" She pushed herself from the fence and opened the gate.

"I'm about finished, unless you want to grab a can of grain from the trailer?"

"Sure," she said, hurrying toward their trailer in front of the house.

David couldn't help but notice the way her full lips curved into a pretty smile making her dark eyes light up or the slight sway of her hips as she left. She was exactly the type of girl he was attracted to, girl-next-door with natural beauty, even with her hair pulled back and no makeup. Chris knew it, too, damn him. But what he didn't realize was that it only made him more driven to focus on winning so he could earn enough money to be able to settle down and have the things he wanted in his future—wife, kids, his own ranch—like his brother.

She returned with a coffee can of grain, shaking it. The horses jerked their heads up and whinnied for their approval as she came near, drawing him out of his pointless daydreams, and she passed it to him over the fence.

"Nice looking boys," she commented, jerking her chin toward the animals. "You two are doing pretty well in the standings, at least for now."

David shrugged. "Not if I can't keep Chris's head in the game."

She gave him an understanding smile. "You guys have been roping together for almost five years, right? You know he'll manage to pull it out in the end. I have no idea how he always seems to do it but he does. I wish I had that talent."

He caught her frown from the corner of his eye as he poured the grain over the flakes of hay and locked the pasture gate. "Let's hope so," David grumbled. "Personally, I'm tired of almost making it to the Finals. I want to be there this year and I'm not letting him lose focus."

She cocked her head at him, as if she was trying to read his thoughts, and he wondered if he'd said

more than he should've. He didn't normally let his mouth get ahead of his brain and good sense but for some reason this woman had him acting out of character, admitting things he wouldn't under normal circumstances.

"I mean . . ." He closed his mouth, wishing he'd just kept it shut from the beginning, and wondered again how she was able to get him to let his guard down so quickly.

"I know what you mean," she cut him off. "It's hard to come so close over and over only to be disappointed, especially when it's not your fault." She glanced up at the back of the house. "I'm hoping to make it to Vegas, too. Even if other people do have a different opinion as to where I should be."

He stopped walking and stared at her, knowing there was far more she wasn't saying. He arched his brow. "Maybe we have more in common than either of us thought."

She smiled at him, and the sadness he'd seen in her eyes disappeared for a moment. "Maybe we can do," she agreed.

"So, tell me," he began, looking around him at the various fenced pastures. "What's up with this place?"

"Dad's run the day to day operations for the Diamond Bar for the last twenty-five years and Mom works for them in the house. I guess you could say it's turned into a family affair." The frown was back, marring her brow. "They're nice people and they've been good to us."

"You're sure it's fine for the boys to be in the pasture?"

"What?" She glanced at the horses quietly eating. "Oh, they're fine. It's not like you guys are staying long. It's just dinner."

David felt a twinge of disappointment. She was different than he'd expected her to be. He assumed any woman Chris introduced him to would be shallow and, well, a floozy. Alicia wasn't like that at all. He found himself interested in her and wanted to spend more time with her. He needed to stay focused, and keep Chris focused, but they obviously weren't going to do any practicing tonight. Why not invite this pretty barrel racer to the dance tonight after all? If they weren't going to work maybe one night of fun with an attractive woman wouldn't be such a horrible idea. If nothing else, it might get Chris to quit pestering him.

"THE PLACE LOOKS great, Jessie. I like the new counters in the kitchen," Chris said, reaching for another piece of garlic bread, wiping the excess butter from his hands on the paper towel beside his plate. "Did you have it professionally done?"

"No, I did it myself." Alicia shook her head as her mother blushed slightly at his compliment. "But, thank you."

Alicia caught Chris's eye. "I think you have a little something right there." She rubbed at the end of her nose. David choked back a laugh, covering his mouth with his napkin. Even her father laughed at the joke.

"You hush," her mother warned, playfully slapping at Alicia's arm with her fingertips. "He can compliment my taste any time he wants to if it means he'll come around more often."

Chris smirked at Alicia and turned toward her father. "Dad told me Bradley just sold one of his studs for \$12,000. Was it the one you've been training?"

"He was a great horse before I ever got my hands on him. I was just lucky to work with such a talented stud."

Alicia watched her father shake his head, lowering his eyes in humility. She hated that he wouldn't

take any credit for the work he did. He was an amazing trainer and was wasting time mucking stalls and grooming for someone else. He should be training and selling his own horses for that price. If only she was able to get the down payment for that property sooner . . . She looked down at her plate suddenly losing her appetite.

“That’s pretty impressive, Noah,” Chris commented. “You still afraid of them, Jessie?”

Her mother laughed quietly. “Not afraid, just cautious. They’re so big! Did Alicia tell you she will probably be working with Noah soon?”

“Really?” David asked as both cowboys turned to Alicia in surprise. He’d been quiet throughout the meal and Alicia glanced up at him.

She set her napkin on the table and cleared her throat, unsure how to answer the question. She had no intention of taking Bradley Langdon up on his offer to train and show his horses. She wasn’t about to get trapped into the same life her parents had, working for a dream that wasn’t her own, but she hadn’t broken her decision to her parents yet. Until she could offer an alternative solution, or purchase the property she wanted, she’d been stalling.

“Her riding prowess hasn’t gone unnoticed all these years and Bradley wants her to show his horses. Maybe even start training a few and giving lessons.”

“That’s a big accomplishment,” David acknowledged, smiling at her.

Her father looked at her proudly and her heart ached. He saw it as such a compliment and she saw it as a prison sentence. How could she ever make him understand?

“I guess,” she agreed, hoping they would assume her hesitancy was discomfort and change the subject. “I still have to finish out this rodeo season,” she pointed out.

Why was it that no one seemed to care that she wanted nothing to do with helping anyone else earn money from her work? If she ever quit rodeo to train, it was going to be to train her own barrel horses and give lessons on her own ranch. Why did everyone assume she would jump at the chance to train for the Diamond Bar.

Chris frowned, his brows dipping low. “I think it’s a waste of talent.” Every set of eyes at the table spun to look at him. “I mean, Alicia is an amazing barrel racer, she always has been. Why quit to train cutting horses? Do you even *want* to show cutting horses?”

She glanced at her father, biting her lower lip nervously. He turned to her expectantly, waiting for her answer. She couldn’t help but appreciate that Chris seemed to understand her desire to race, voicing her thoughts, but she could’ve kicked him when she saw the disappointment in her father’s eyes. “I don’t know. I never really thought about it before.”

Chris sighed and rolled his eyes. “You’ve always talked about being a barrel racer and teaching other girls to run. I never once heard you say anything about showing.” He wiped his mouth with his napkin and placed it in his plate. “In fact, I remember you laughing at the girls who went to horse shows.”

She saw David’s body jerk to the side and Chris shot a glare at David. Alicia silently thanked him for shutting Chris up, even if it was with a kick under the table. This was something she needed to talk about with her parents privately. She didn’t need his help or, in this case, him instigating trouble.

CHRIS RUBBED AT the knot forming on his shin and glowered at David.

“Are you guys ready for dessert? Blackberry pie?” Jessie asked, looking at him pointedly. “If you remember right, that’s your favorite, isn’t it, Cristobel?”

He gave her a grin. “I love your blackberry pie but you’ve stuffed me with lasagna and garlic



bread.” He shot a sly look at David who was watching Alicia intently. “I guess I could have a small piece and then work it off dancing tonight.”

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“I thought you said you wanted to head out?” Chris didn’t miss David’s suspicious glance.

“We should go to the dance and have some fun.” He nodded toward Alicia across the table. “I know how much this one likes to dance. Maybe she could teach you a thing or two. Your moves are pretty horrendous.”

“I don’t know,” Alicia hemmed. “I have to be back down there early tomorrow for the next round.” She stood and started to clear the table.

“You’ll do fine, hon,” Noah chuckled. “Beast knows the pattern in his sleep.”

Alicia rolled her eyes as she hurried to the sink with the plates, not wanting her father to see her irritation. She needed to focus on tomorrow’s run. If she came in first it would move her up in the standings, bump her above Delilah, and add a hefty chunk to her savings. She had to be at the top of her game, not exhausted from dancing with a couple of cowboys, no matter how ruggedly good looking they might be. Although, an ice cold beer and some loud music might curb the frustration building in her right now.

“Come on, Ali.” Chris came up behind her with a stack of plates. “It’ll be like old times.” He cocked his head to the side and gave her the puppy dog eyes that used to get him his way with his sister.

She glanced up at David, who followed Chris into the kitchen, bearing more dishes. He shrugged and looked resigned to Chris getting his way again. She wanted to be angry and shake him. Maybe if people told him no once in a while, he’d understand responsibility and that life wasn’t all about fun.

Instead, she looked back at his pleading blue eyes and sighed. Her heart thumped in her chest as he took a step closer before lowering his voice.

“Come on, Ali. You know you want to go.”

She did and couldn’t fight it when her heart did a flip in her chest. Alicia sighed. “Fine.” How did he always manage to turn her brains to mush?

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## Chapter Three

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ALICIA FOUND HERSELF squished between two cowboys in David's pickup truck on her way back to the rodeo grounds to attend a dance she hadn't wanted to be at in the first place. The entire truck reeked of men's cologne, and she wanted to beg Chris to open a window before she choked but kept silent, unsure which of them had taken a bath in the stuff. It practically made her eyes water. What in the world ever possessed her to agree to this?

She tapped her heel on the floorboard nervously, feeling herself on edge but not sure why. Both men were oozing with charm and neither was hard on the eyes, as her mother had pointed out several times before they left, but seated between the two of them, she couldn't help but feel awkward. Most women would kill to be in her position and she just wanted to get out of the truck and get back to her horses. She shifted nervously in the seat and Chris glanced her way, nudging her with his elbow and jerking his chin in a "watch" gesture.

"First round is on David," he declared.

David turned his head toward them. "Why me?"

Chris smiled broadly and Alicia fought to keep a straight face. Something about him pushed the constant chatter of worry in her head aside and drew out her playful side. "You're the designated driver. It was my turn last time."

David rolled his eyes and looked out the windshield again. "Can't you just go out and have a few beers? Aren't we getting kinda old for this?"

"Okay," Chris laughed, deepening his voice to mock David. "It's time to grow up and be serious, right? Fine. Since you're so old and mature, you can be the designated driver at every rodeo." He shook his head but smiled at his friend. "Can't you loosen up and just have some fun?"

Alicia didn't want to be stuck in the middle of their banter, joking or not, and breathed a sigh of relief when David dropped the truck into park. She shoved Chris out of the passenger side door.

"Easy, woman! Where's the fire?" He moved to let her out.

"I'm trying to breathe some fresh air. I almost died from the lack of oxygen and cologne poisoning. Did you use the entire bottle?" she teased, inhaling deeply the sweet, clean scent of straw in the air. They headed for the entrance gate.

Alicia reached into her wallet to pull out the money for her entry when the girl at the table reached for her hand, connected a band around her wrist and stamped her hand. "Um, I need to pay."

"I've got it," David said, his voice husky and deep.

"Thank you."

Was this a date? Did he expect her to spend the entire evening with him or was he just the designated driver, as Chris said? She wasn't sure what sort of idea he had about tonight and the lack of certainty made her nervous. She glanced up in time to see Chris heading toward the bar at the other end of the makeshift dance floor.

"You know, you don't have to babysit me. You'll have your hands full keeping an eye on Chris."

David followed her gaze in time to see Chris throw an arm around a pretty brunette waiting in line behind him. He turned back to Alicia and chuckled jerking a thumb in Chris's direction. "That's the never-ending chore of a best friend, especially when it comes to that guy. However, I'd much rather hang with you. If you don't mind?" he clarified.

He *wanted* to be with her? This was David Greenly. His father and brother were both world champion rodeo cowboys. He could have his pick of any girl here, and there were several waiting in line from the glances being cast in their direction, and he wanted to be *her* date for the night? She rubbed her suddenly damp palms against the thighs of her well-worn jeans, the best she had in her closet. Maybe this was a pity date, something he promised Chris he'd do as a favor. She eyed him suspiciously. He didn't seem like the type of guy to be dishonest. Quiet and perhaps reserved, but not conniving. Could he be for real?

So far, she liked what she'd seen of David. He might not have Chris's easygoing nature but he seemed mature, responsible, and ambitious. She could appreciate those traits and most cowboys didn't seem inclined to cultivate them.

"You want to dance?" He glanced at the couples already rocking to a quick country two-step as the band played. The steady beat of the drums and bass guitar gradually grew louder as they picked up the pace.

She bit her lip. It had been a long time since she'd danced with anyone. These days, she headed straight home or back to her trailer instead of attending the extra rodeo events. Those she had attended with friends were meat-markets for the groupies who hung out behind the chutes all day waiting to rope their own cowboy. Most of the real cowgirls stayed near their trailers because once the sun went down and the music cued up, it was harder to tell the buckle bunnies from the real cowgirls. Especially once the cowboys had their beer-goggles on.

"I promise, I won't break your toes." The corners of David's mouth tipped up.

It was the first real smile she'd seen from him yet and it was disarming. His dark eyes gleamed with mischief and she had to admit, David Greenly was an enigma. One minute he was serious and the next, teasing. She wasn't sure what to make of him.

"Sure." He reached out for her hand, leading her to the dance floor. "But it's been a long time for me so I can't promise I won't break yours."

He gave her a grin. "I'm sure you can't do too much damage. You can't weigh more than the steel who stepped on my foot last week."

"Hey!" She slapped at his arm playfully as he spun her away from him before twirling her back into his arms and resting one hand at her waist.

"I'm kidding," he teased, his eyes glimmering from the lights surrounding the dance floor as they moved with the other dancers. "That was for the cologne comment."

Alicia rested her hand on his shoulder and looked up at him, apologetically. "I didn't think you heard that." Her eyes fell to the base of his throat and she watched him swallow. "And that was directed more at Chris than you."

"Uh huh."

He didn't sound convinced and she wondered if she'd injured his male ego. She looked back up

him, mesmerized by his dark eyes and the way there was just enough five o'clock shadow on his jaw to give him a natural sex appeal. She inhaled and the scent of laundry detergent and the muskiness of the outdoors filled her senses. So, he hadn't been the one wearing cologne after all. She liked the natural scent of him. His lips were close to hers as he spoke and she watched him form words but her brain wasn't connecting the sound with anything familiar. Finally, he smiled and his voice broke through the haze surrounding her brain.

"Do you want something to drink?"

"What? Oh, sure." She nodded slightly, bumping his chin with her forehead. "Oh, I'm sorry!" She pulled back from him as he chuckled.

"I guess my toes were the least of my worries." He rubbed his jaw. "You've got a hard head." He led her to the stacked bales of hay people were using for seating. "I'll be right back. Beer, water, or soda?"

"Whatever you can get is fine."

David nodded and headed toward the end of the long line for the beer tent. For someone with such a quiet demeanor, he had a mischievous side to his personality she found surprisingly endearing. Her mother always warned her not to judge a book by its cover. Perhaps David's subdued personality only seemed more so because of Chris's boisterous nature, but with his dark good looks, he was every bit as attractive. David wasn't quite as tall or muscular as Chris, a bit on the lean side, but if the muscles she'd felt under her hand were any indication, David was solid as a brick wall. Her eyes grazed over his form, still waiting in the slow-moving line and she bit her lip, wondering why she was even comparing David to Chris.

"Aw, isn't that cute, Dallas? Little Miss Second-Rate thinks she has a chance with David Greenly." Delilah moved toward Alicia, her cat eyes narrowing as she stalked closer. "I heard he was slumming tonight."

Alicia wasn't sure what drove Delilah to make her life hell but she wished she'd find a new hobby. Dealing with her was becoming exhausting. "Don't worry, Delilah, you still win that title. You're still the first choice when a guy wants to slum."

The corner of Delilah's eye twitched and Dallas gasped, covering her mouth in shock but not before Alicia saw the smile she tried to hide. Alicia hadn't expected her comment to hit its mark, especially after some of the other barbs she and Delilah exchanged in the past. Knowing it did only made her feel immature and uncomfortable. This wasn't a real date. David hadn't asked her; Chris had conned them both into coming. Provoking Delilah would only make her go searching for answers and that would surely backfire but Alicia wasn't sure how to backtrack and diffuse the situation.

Delilah glared at her and pointed a manicured finger in her face. "Look, we both know you're nothing but a fraud. Just because you got lucky with a horse that can run doesn't mean you can keep up with the big girls. Go home, clean houses or stalls, whatever it is your parents do, and leave it to the real cowgirls to get the job done."

"Delilah," Chris drawled, looping an arm over her shoulders. "Are you still mad because Ali beat you out for the rodeo queen title?" He clicked his tongue against his teeth, a sympathetic look on his face. "That's probably because even the judges could see she's one hundred percent woman and everything about you is fake." His eyes skipped from her blond extensions to her ample breasts.

Alicia's mouth dropped open in shock. Dallas looked like she wanted to run and hide while Delilah's face turned color, her lips parting in fury. "I . . . you . . . hmph!" She shoved Chris away from her and stormed away.

"Don't be too mad," he called after her. "It's not Ali's fault she's smarter, prettier, and can ride

better.”

Delilah looked back at him, her eyes narrowing in fury as she flashed her middle finger at him. Alicia couldn't stop the appalled laughter that bubbled up from her chest.

“I can't believe you said that!”

Chris shrugged and rolled his eyes, unapologetically. “She deserved it. I'm tired of watching her prance around every rodeo like she owns it. Just because her father spoils her doesn't give her a right to expect everyone to bow down to her.” He looked around. “I can't believe David left you to deal with her alone.”

“He's in line.” She pointed him out. “And I was doing fine.”

Chris snorted. “Yeah, looked like it.”

Alicia pressed her hands together over her heart and gave him her best damsel-in-distress voice. “Thank you for the sarcasm, oh knight in shining armor.” What made him think she needed his protection? “I've been dealing with Delilah since high school. I know it's hard to believe but, so far I'm still breathing and my reputation is intact. I'd say I'm doing just fine. Without your help, I might add.” Chris looked properly contrite so she dropped it.

He jerked his chin toward his friend. “So, what do you think of David?”

She grinned and shook her head as he changed the subject, blatantly trying to pump her for information. “You just don't give up, do you?”

Chris gave her a guilty grin. “Not until I get my way.”

“And you called Delilah spoiled?” She shrugged her shoulders, unwilling to give in so easily. “I'll give him the answer he wanted. He was already too confident. “He's okay, I guess.”

“What do you mean ‘okay’? David's . . . oh, I see, you're screwing with me now.” He frowned at her, his deep blue eyes narrowing.

“You're really not good at this matchmaking thing,” Alicia pointed out, bumping his shoulder with her own. “You're supposed to be subtle.”

He sighed in resignation. “Yeah, not my strong suit. I'm usually the set up not the one doing the setting up.” He sipped the amber liquid in his cup.

“Why the big push to get us together? I haven't even talked to you since your sister's wedding. From all you know, I have a boyfriend.”

He shot her a look of disbelief, looking down his nose, and she hid the stab of pain in her chest. “What made him so sure she didn't?”

“Sydney would've told me.” He shrugged. “And there's not really a hurry. I just hate to see him so serious all of the time. He's so focused on the prize at the end of the road he's forgetting to enjoy the ride.” A blond with breasts spilling over the top of her peasant blouse walked by and winked at Chris, his eyes following her movement. “And the perks that go with it.”

“Chris, you're a pig,” Alicia scolded, crossing her arms over her chest and shaking her head with disapproval. “And I'm nobody's *perk*.”

“That's not what I meant and I'm not a pig.” He turned back to her, slightly offended. “I just appreciate beauty when I see it. Like you.” His gaze heated as it slid over her, making her stomach flutter awkwardly. Chris finished his beer and tossed the cup into a nearby trash can. He reached for her hand. “Come dance with me. That's a swing I hear playing and you were always a great partner.”

Alicia held her hands out. “Oh, no, you don't! It's been a long time and you only liked dancing with me because I was light enough for you to toss around like a rag doll.”

“Exactly,” he agreed, dragging her out to the dance floor, not giving her another chance to refuse.

The music was fast, a blaring rockabilly rhythm that had Chris twirling, twisting, and spinning her.



until she gave up trying to figure out which direction was up. A crowd began to surround them, giving them room to dance and cheering them on. She'd forgotten how much fun she had dancing with him. He was a strong lead and she never had to think with him. He was always in the right place at the right time to catch her, no matter where she ended up. When he spun her back against his chest and reached for her hands, her body responded without even thinking. Curling her hands into his, he slid one arm under her lower back and the other under her knees, flipping her into the air and backward over his arm, catching her effortlessly while the crowd cheered. As the strains of the music slowed, Chris spun her back against him and dipped her.

She stared up at him, her dark eyes locking with his deep blue, dizzy from the exertion and trying to regain her focus. Her heart thudded heavily against her ribs, feeling like it would burst. She expected him to lift her to standing again but he continued to stare down at her, his eyes going dark and languid. His fingers at her lower back were against her skin and she could feel the heat burning into her, scalding her and making shivers of delight course up her spine.

She was breathless but, suddenly, she wasn't sure if it was from the exertion or the way he was looking at her. She was the first to break the silence, unable to hold his smoldering gaze any longer without melting in his hands. "Um, Chris, just how long are we going to stay like this?"

The look in his eyes vanished as quickly as it appeared, replaced by his usual grin and impishness. He bent toward her and pressed a quick kiss to her lips, causing her heart to plummet to her toes before lifting her upright and taking her back to where David waited for them as if nothing had happened.

*WHAT IN THE hell was that?*

Chris wasn't sure what had come over him. One minute he was flirting with some blond walking past him, the next he was kissing Ali on the dance floor. Of all the women he could kiss tonight, she was the last one he should even consider locking lips with. Here he was pressuring David to ask Ali out and then he kisses her, in front of everyone. What kind of friend was he? He wasn't even sure who had possessed him to do it. He had to get it together.

*Damn it!* Ali seemed awkward as well, pulling her hand away from his as he walked her back to David, and tucking it into her pocket. He had to do some damage control otherwise this was going to get messy. This was exactly why he'd avoided her for the last two years. He didn't want to ruin the friendship. What was he thinking? He caught the look of surprise on David's face as they headed toward him and quickly decided to play it off as a joke.

David eyed him curiously but refrained from commenting, turning his attention back to Ali and handing her one of the cups he held. "I see I missed all the fun."

"Thanks," she said, taking the drink. "I think I better sit down. I'm dizzy now."

David arched a brow and Chris could read the unspoken question in his eyes. He shook his head slightly, letting David know they could discuss it later. He wasn't about to try to explain his actions right now. Not when he wasn't even sure what to say or what had just come over him. He had to get away from them. Looking around and spotted one of the women he'd been flirting with earlier today standing near the band.

"Thank you for the dance, Ali, but I'm off to enjoy a few of those perks we talked about."

He knew the comment made him sound like a jerk but he didn't want her to get any wrong ideas about why he'd kissed her. Especially when he found himself wanting to do it again and was trying to keep himself from letting his mind stray out of the friend zone.

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