



EMILY HEMMER

Just One

by

EMILY HEMMER

OceanofPDF.com

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For Taylor, my one and only.

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STALK EMILY

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8:00 p.m.

No Cheez-Whiz? What kind of party is this? Quail eggs. Mango chutney. Goat cheese. *Caviar*. I spent two hours in the car and forty minutes squeezing myself into this dress. Are a few little smokies and some crescent rolls really too much to ask for?

Beyond serving utensils, I pick food from various trays with my fingers, and pop asparagus tips into my mouth like a handful of M&M's.

My ankles wobble dangerously atop four-inch stilettos. I swear, my feet are as swollen as a rodeo bull's balls. Paige has a devious mind. I'm starting to think kidnapping via high heels was all part of my baby sister's plan to keep me prisoner at her party. But hunger is a powerful motivator so here I am, risking life and limb for mini crab cakes.

Thank the Lord I'm alone out here. No one's around to stand witness to my shameless binging. This is what you get when you invite a country girl to a big city shindig. Public displays of redneckedness.

Taking a handful of cubed cheese for the road, I head back to the safety of the garden wall. It's the only way I can stand upright in these shoes for any length of time. An errant rock in my path buckles my ankle and I topple over like a Jenga tower.

"Oh!" I slide between leafy branches and land hip first on the hard ground. Fancy cheese sprinkles around me and as I roll over onto my back, a piece of it forms around my elbow. My head thumps against the soft dirt and I count my lucky stars it's so hot out tonight. Ten degrees cooler and there may've been a whole mess of people here to witness my complete lack of womanly grace.

"Are you alright?" A deep, concerned voice speaks at me from the other side of the hedge.

Crap. "Uh, yeah?"

"C'mon, let's get you out of there."

A caramel-colored hand, big and strong looking, reaches through the foliage and pulls me up. His size is the first thing I notice. I'm five-six without the heels and this man towers over me. He's six-three at least.

“Thank you, I can’t believe I did that.” I raise my eyes to his face. “I’m not used to... to...”

Sweet Jesus, did I break my neck when I fell over? His eyes are dark, nearly black in color, and his skin looks like smooth light toffee. My throat’s constricted on its own accord, preventing any form of hospitable communication. He’s gorgeous, like a Spanish angel sent from Heaven to guide me to the Promised Land.

“Anything broken?” One of those big hands wipes the leaves and dirt from my side and I grab it out of reflex. I have seven male cousins whose preferred method of torture is the side tickle. I’m not taking any chances.

“Are you sure you’re all right?” He’s perplexed, by my muteness or because I’m holding his hand against my waist, I can’t say.

“I’m, uh, I’m just fine, thank you,” I say, smiling. “Fit as a fiddle.” I release his hand at my hip and it falls away, skimming my side and leaving a tingle in its wake.

Oh no, no, no, no... Two deep dimples act like bookends around an amused, white smile. Dimples are my undoing, my cowboy kryptonite. They’ve gotten me out of two pair of panties and a college education.

“Glad to hear it. I just came out to get some fresh air and saw you go down. It looked like you were stuck in there,” he teases.

“Stuck? Oh, no I wasn’t stuck. I was just praying for a speedy death before anyone saw me tail end to the sky.”

“Then I guess I should apologize for ruining your plans.”

“Not at all. I’ve got big plans to fall into the birthday cake later on, so I’m all set.”

There’re those dimples again, like a pair of secrets, waiting for me to find them out. “I’m Charlie. Charlotte, really, but everybody calls me Charlie.”

His eyes move over my face and linger a split second on my lips. “Alex Ramirez.” He offers me his hand. “Pleasure to meet you.”

The connection between us is instantaneous, like somebody turned on a light and blew up a transformer. I sway when he releases me, and he catches me around the waist before I can fall over again.

“You seem to be having some trouble staying on your feet. Don’t tell me you’ve been into the punch already?”

The sensation of his hand on my body mixed with the oppressive Texas heat makes standing damn near impossible. “It’s the shoes, they’re not mine. I borrowed them from my sister. They’re hell-bent on introducing me to the pavement.”

“Then I’d better get you to a chair. We wouldn’t want you breaking a leg.”

“What are you? A doctor?” I allow him to lead me slowly toward a small bistro table near the garden path.

He grabs my left hand as his right applies a delicious pressure against my back. “Just the friendly neighborhood lawyer, I’m afraid.”

“Oh, I get it now. You’re here to make sure I don’t sue anybody.”

“You’ve uncovered my motives.” He winks. “Helping you out of those bushes was a ploy to deter any potential litigation. I take my job very seriously, especially when the alleged victim has beautiful blue eyes.”

It’s a good thing it’s a hundred degrees out here, or he’d be able to see the blush creeping up my neck. “Well don’t worry, counselor. The only thing that got injured tonight was my pride.”

Alex helps me into a chair before moving around to take a seat. He leans forward, his forearms flat against the tabletop and his dark eyes sparkling with mischief. “Lucky for you, I was the only one out here to witness your fall from grace and I found the whole thing quite...enjoyable.”

I fan myself with a cocktail napkin, pretending it’s the heat that’s got me flustered.

Alex’s hair is black and shiny; just long enough that one stubborn piece hangs loose over his forehead, grazing the top of one perfect black eyebrow. He’s broad-shouldered, and undoubtedly in great shape. If I hadn’t just gorged myself on hors d’oeuvres, I’d consider sampling that strong jaw of his.

“So.” He leans closer. “Are you a party crasher, or do you know the birthday girl?”

I cross my legs beneath the table and lean forward myself. I paid good money for this push-up bra, best to not let it go to waste. “I’m Paige’s sister.”

“You’re Paige’s sister?”

I nod. “Why do you sound so shocked?”

“I guess I figured the laws of nature wouldn’t allow that much beauty in one family.”

Oh, he’s good. “I’ll take that as a compliment.”

“As well you should. I guess I should’ve known. The blond hair, so light it’s almost white, that must be your family’s signature color.”

“I guess it’s a little different.” My fingers slide against the long, straight hair that’s been pulled back into an elegant chignon, courtesy of Paige’s hair stylist. When she insisted on trussing me up for her twenty-third birthday party, I tried to object. But nobody says no to Paige. Nobody.

“It’s the eyes, too. They’re the same shape, only yours are more of a sea-blue.”

I drop my gaze and concentrate on a piece of dirt still clinging to my dress. Paige’s eyes, crystal blue like colored diamonds, have always been a source of envy to me. “She’s got me there. People are always going on about her eyes.”

“I like yours better.” Alex cocks his head to the side, recapturing my attention.

Sea-blue meet deep brown. His eyes remind me of melted chocolate and suddenly, I’m hungry again. “That’s awful nice of you.”

Grinning, he leans back in his seat. “So, before I interrupted your death by landscaping plan, what you were doing out here all alone? There’s a party going on inside, you know.”

“I wasn’t hiding, exactly. I was trying to avoid embarrassing myself in front of Paige’s sorority sisters.”

“I see. So you didn’t follow in your sister’s Delta Gamma footsteps? What? You have something against community service and wet t-shirt contests?”

I'm not prone to a lack of self confidence but I admit, I'm embarrassed to reveal to the man before me I'm a country-western cliché; trailer park trash who couldn't hack it in the big city. "No, it's my footsteps *she* didn't follow in. Paige is my younger sister."

"Is that so? I just figured with Paige being so, uh..."

"Bossy, demanding, determined to rule all of mankind?"

"Yes. I figured with her being...that way, she must be the older sister."

"Nope, I'm older by four years. I've resigned myself to being the eccentric aunt to all her bratty blue-eyed babies."

"Eccentric aunt, huh? What does that entail?"

"Oh, you know. I'll wear lots of tunics and turquoise. Maybe dance naked at Burning Man every year; invest in cats."

"You a big cat lover?" he asks, his dimples winking at me.

"I've only got Fluffy, Muffy, and Snowball now, but I'm well on my way to a pack."

Alex laughs but is distracted when the door to the hotel restaurant opens and a waiter appears, heading toward us. "Is there anything I can get for you?" he asks, sweat beading along his hairline.

"I'll take a scotch, McLaren's if you've got it," Alex replies.

"And for the lady?"

I open my mouth to order a mojito, but hesitate. I'm a notorious lightweight when liquor's involved and given the current state of dimples present, I'm not sure alcohol's a wise decision tonight. "I'll have a sweet tea, please."

Alex lifts his eyebrow. "Sweet tea? I thought this was a party?" His slow grin reveals bad decisions one and two.

Don't fall for the dimples, Charlie. "Sweet tea, please."

The waiter smiles and scurries back through the hotel door, probably desperate for the air conditioning.

Nerves prickle the back of my neck, and I look at the hotel's garden. It's lushly green and dimly lit by strings of twinkle lights. The buffet table is wilting fast, thanks to the lingering heat. Warm weather's never bothered

me. Working out in the oil field, the sun beating down on your back day after day, you get used to it. Still, I'm sweatin' like a whore in church out here. Though, I have a feeling it's more to do with the man across from me than the heat index.

"So," I begin, desperate to break the silence, "are you a friend of my sisters?"

"I'm a friend of Ken's."

Kenneth Chamberlain the Third is my sister's boyfriend. He's got blonde-hair, deep pockets, and a wicked sense of humor. I'd disapprove of Paige falling for such a playboy if he wasn't so spectacularly in love with her. "Oh? Have you two been friends a while?"

"Since we were kids."

Well Charlie, party's over. Ken's family is so rich they may well use hundred dollar bills to wipe their butts. If he and Alex have been friends since they were kids that must mean... "So you're rich too, huh?" The words escape my mouth, and try as I might, I can't roll the seconds back.

Alex's eyes crinkle in amusement. He fights to hold back laughter. "I can't believe you just said that!" His smile is startled and wild.

Sheepish, I look around for our waiter. "Now do you see why I ordered the sweet tea? I apologize. I've gone and lost my manners. I only meant to ask if-"

"If I was a spoiled socialite, like so many of the other guests here tonight?"

I purse my lips together and fold my arms over my chest, embarrassed by my semi-accusation.

"It's okay, Charlie. The answer is yes and no. My family's got money, but I prefer to make my living myself." Alex leans forward and lowers his head to meet my eyes. He smiles reassuringly. "Do you like me less now?"

The corners of my mouth lift and I drop my forearm to the table, just a few inches from his hand. "Maybe a little." Being around rich people has always made me jumpy. Paige and I grew up at the Pueblo Princess Trailer Park on the outskirts of Harlow County, about as far from the bright lights and fancy ways of Dallas as you can get.

The hotel door opens and the breeze of air conditioning follows the waiter outside. Our drinks sit neatly on his tray. He places the sweet tea in front of me and I wrap my hand around the sweaty glass, pulling a long sip from the straw. Out of the corner of my eye, I watch Alex bring the scotch to his lips. The ice cubes tinkle against each other. I can't imagine what's kept him out here so long -- unless he's hiding from someone... I open my mouth to ask but a group of rowdy partygoers traipse out into the garden, cigarettes and profanity lighting their way.

"Alex! Hey, buddy," one calls, his smile lopsided and clumsy from drink. The man walks casually toward us, a hand in one pocket of his white linen pants, the other pulling the cigarette from his mouth. A haze of smoke stings my nose. "And who have we got here?" Alex's jaw twitches. "Spence, this is Charlie. Charlie, this is Spencer Ross."

His eyes carelessly examine the length of my body as I stand to greet him.

"Oh c'mon now, Alex, that's hardly a proper introduction." Spencer grabs my hand and bends over, grazing my knuckles with dry lips. His breath is hot against my skin and I fight the urge to pull my hand back.

"Spence is an old college friend." Alex comes to stand next to me. The word 'friend' lands with a thud on the ground, but Spencer doesn't seem to notice. "Charlie is Paige's sister."

Unlike Alex, Spencer doesn't seem the least bit surprised. "Well of course you are. I could've pulled you out of a crowd. Same platinum hair, same fantastic body..."

"Easy, Spence." Alex's low tone rumbles through me.

"C'mon, Alex, I'm not bothering anybody. I was simply complimenting Charlie here on her beauty." His eyes focus on my chest. "Say, Charlie, how about a dance?"

I've known men like Spencer Ross. Brought up to be a wolf in gentleman's clothing. I cross my arms against my cleavage and Alex moves to stand between us. "You're interrupting our conversation, Spence. Time to head back inside."

Spencer doesn't flinch, but the bitterness creasing his green eyes feels threatening.

He takes a long drag from the cigarette, picking a piece of tobacco from his lip as he exhales. "My apologies. It was lovely to meet you, Charlie. A rain-check, perhaps?"

I give him a tight-lipped smile and nod, desperate to see him go. I learned back in my college days that money and boredom ignite like wildfire when you throw liquor into the mix.

Spencer clasps Alex on the shoulder and squeezes. "I'll see you around, buddy," he says, his voice void of any good humor.

Alex doesn't turn around until Spencer and his cronies make their way back inside. When he does face me, his eyes are dark, serious, and his body stiff with anger. It floods me with excitement. "Sorry about him."

I smile and wave the apology off. "There's nothing for you to be sorry about. Anyway, when you're in my line of work, creeps are a dime a dozen," I say, trying to lighten the mood.

Alex helps me back to my seat. "Don't tell me you're a lawyer too," he jokes.

I laugh. "No, definitely not a lawyer. I work at the oil fields over in Harlow, with my dad."

Alex's eyebrows arch in surprise. "I wasn't expecting that." His smile acts like a drug and his body relaxes. "I thought they called those places 'man camps?' Isn't it a little rough?"

I lift my chin. Alex wouldn't be the first man to have a hard time believing I can hold my own with the roughnecks and engineers at the field. He wouldn't be the first to be proven wrong. "It's not a glamorous job but it keeps me close to home, close to my dad. I'm saving to open a bakery in my hometown. It's been a dream of mine since I was a little girl."

He shakes his head. "You're just one surprise after another. I don't know what's coming next. You're not married, are you?" The question is asked cautiously and it makes my heart beat quicken.

"Not married."

His dimples deepen. "Good, because if you were married, I couldn't ask you for a dance."

My insides jump. The thought of dancing with him, the idea of feeling his strong arms surrounding me, has me all hot and bothered. Well, hotter and bothered, anyway. “That’s awful sweet of you but I don’t think my feet could take it.” I lift a leg and wiggle my fancy shoe at Alex. His eyes roam across the smooth expanse of skin from ankle to thigh. Suddenly, the damn thing feels as heavy as a tree trunk.

Alex reaches and grabs my calf, pulling my foot into his lap. “How about,” he says, his fingers working the tiny clasp at the ankle, “we save you from another possible disaster and get rid of these things before you do some real damage?”

His hand is warm against the arch of my foot as he slides the shoe off. My toes curl when he brushes past my calf sending another power surge straight through me. When he guides my shoeless foot to the floor, and rubs his palm against the back of my leg, my heartbeat leaves my chest and travels south. Auntie Brook warned me about this. *“Any man with an ounce of charm and a clear conviction record is capable of making your heart skip a beat. It’s the ones that make your vagina jump you need to keep an eye on.”*

Alex reaches for my other leg and I don’t resist. He works the other shoe off, again brushing his hand along my leg. I salivate, his touch stirring up lusty feelings. I grab the sweet tea and down the rest in one go.

He watches, a contemplative look in his eyes. “Dance with me, Charlie?” He extends his hand and stands.

“But...there isn’t any music.”

“So?”

His relaxed smile and cool patience make me feel a little stupid for bringing it up.

“C’mon, Charlie. One dance won’t kill you.”

“Just one?” I ask.

“Just one.”

I twiddle my fingers nervously. What’s the harm in one little dance with a guy who, let’s face it, doesn’t exactly run in my social circle? I somehow don’t see Alex Ramirez waltzing into The Cavern for dollar draft night.

I let him help me to my feet. Without the shoes I'm significantly shorter, and I have to crane my neck backward to look in his eyes. "Good Lord, you're a tall one," I say, allowing my internal trailer park to lead the conversation.

Alex chuckles and pulls me forward. "I'll lean over."

We come to a stop near the middle of the garden's grassy floor. The spongy Kentucky blue feels like kitten fur against my sore soles. It's a good thing he removed the stilettos. I would've sunk like quicksand trying to dance on this lawn.

Alex brings me in close, his free hand rests low on my hip. I allow him to guide me, to tug me forward until our bodies make contact. It's like getting zapped with a stun gun. I turn my head toward his chest and am faced with the open collar of his button down shirt. His skin is smooth and I can feel the hard ridge of muscle beneath his clothes. I follow his lead, my hips moving side to side, my brain about to short circuit from the friction between us.

"Are you headed home tonight or are you staying at the hotel?"

I've been so focused on the pressure of his hand against my back, his voice startles me. "I'm, uh, staying overnight. Paige got me a room."

"That's nice."

"Don't be so sure. If I know my baby sister at all, it's part of her master plan to get me out of Harlow."

"How so?"

Alex's breath tickles the top of my head. I'm afraid to look up because I know the only thing keeping my lips off those dimples is simple geography. "She's got some crazy notion I'm too good for that place. Her mission is to sway me toward greener pastures by showing me how the other half lives."

"I take it you remain unconvinced?" The hand holding me to him draws me nearer. His fingers tap out a melody against the small of my back, and two years of pent-up sexual frustration bubbles to the surface.

I lean against him and close my eyes. His cologne smells expensive and exotic. I press into him, undone by his closeness. "I just don't belong here is all."

He brushes his lips against the sleeked-down hair on the top of my head, sending thunder down under. “You seem like you fit in okay to me.”

“This isn’t me; this is all Paige. The hair, the dress, the shoes, all her doing. I’m not fancy like her. I’m simple, plain old Charlie.”

Alex stops moving, pulling just far enough away to look down at me. “We just met, and you are surely many things, but simple isn’t one of them.”

In the dimly lit garden, his eyes look almost black. I lick my lips, my mouth dry from quick breaths. His gaze follows the movement and the hand on my back forces me flush against him.

Mama, I know you’re up there in Heaven, watching over me, but could you shut your eyes for just a minute? Your little girl’s about to get her some.

I arch my neck and focus on the fullness of Alex’s lips. It’s been so long since I’ve been kissed, I hope to hell it’s like riding a bike. I flex onto tiptoes, ready to make my move, when the hotel door opens behind us. The cool conditioned air makes a whooshing sound behind whoever has stepped into the garden. A shiver runs down my spine.

Alex’s hold on me slackens. His hard body pulls away from my eager one. “Hi,” he calls. “What’s going on?”

“We’re bringing out the birthday cake, I came to find you.” I’d recognize that voice anywhere.

I drop Alex’s hand and turn slowly, dread chasing away the lust. Cadence Spelling, my sister’s best friend and porcelain-skinned demon, has ascended from the mouth of Hades, and is standing at the far end of the courtyard.

“Lord have mercy, is that you Charlotte Davies?” Cadence’s shrill twang sounds happy and excited but she doesn’t fool me. Southern women know how to make an insult sound like a lesson in good manners. “Oh my God, I hardly recognized you. You look so pretty!”

“Hi Cadence.” I watch in dread as she moves toward Alex and me on impossibly thin legs. Some years back, Cadence had an ill-fated love affair. Her *very* personal trainer left her with a botched boob job and a touch of anorexia. The poufy coral couture dress she’s wearing makes her look like an orange caught between two toothpicks.

“I’m so glad I thought to look in the garden.” She reaches us, and leans in to give me an air kiss. “Paige has been absolutely beside herself looking for you, Charlotte.”

I bite my lip, refusing to rise to the bait. She knows how much I hate being called Charlotte.

“What were y’all doing?”

“We were dan-”

“I was just introducing myself,” Alex interrupts.

I turn sharply and look up at him. Before Cadence showed up he was going to kiss me, I’m sure of it. So why is he acting like nothing happened?

“Oh, I didn’t realize the two of you had never met. I would’ve thought with Paige and Ken getting so close, you’d be old friends by now. But I guess Paige doesn’t make it back to the trailer park much these days. How is your daddy, Charlie? You and he still living at the Pueblo Princess?”

I cringe inwardly. I’m not ashamed of who I am or where I’ve come from, but that doesn’t mean I want Alex thinking of me as the trailer trash he found lying in the dirt at a fancy party. “We’re doing just fine, thank you.”

“Well I’m glad to hear it. Paige was so excited to get you up here this weekend. She thought she could win you over to life in the big city, but I told her to just let you be. I mean, can you imagine, Charlotte, you out of Harlow County? That’d be like putting a fur coat on an armadillo.”

The hell you say? I stare Cadence down and place a hand on my hip. That’s Southern for, *‘Come and get it, bitch.’*

Cadence laughs uncomfortably and turns her attention to Alex. “And you, mister, I’ve been around and around trying to find where you went to hide. Alex is notoriously surly at parties, Charlotte. He’s practically famous for sneaking off early.”

Alex shoves both hands in his pockets. “I’m not much of a party animal, I guess.”

The tension hovering over the three of us is so uncomfortable, even the crickets have stopped chirping. I risk a look in Alex’s direction. He’s turned

away from us but I can see the outline of his frown. What in the name of George Dubya is going on between him, and the hoofed waif at my side?

Cadence's prep-school manners come to the rescue. "Goodness gracious, it's like an oven out here. Charlotte, we better get you inside before all that makeup just slides right off your face."

Oh no she did not. I open my mouth to lay a few choice words on her, but Alex speaks first. "It was a pleasure meeting you, Charlie. Enjoy the party." His smile doesn't reach his eyes and his hands stay firmly in his pockets, as though he doesn't want to be witnessed touching me. "Give my best to your sister."

"Silly," Cadence coos, "you can tell her yourself. I promised Jackson James I'd introduce the two of you. He's looking for someone to negotiate a new lease on some land out near Fort Smith. It's quite a big deal, from what I gather."

Alex gives a tight nod to Cadence. I swallow my disappointment and allow her to usher me toward the bistro table. What happened to the charming guy who saved me from the bushes and took off my shoes so we could dance?

"Grab your shoes, Charlotte, this isn't a hoedown for Heaven's sake. " She waits as I gather my sister's discarded heels. "And don't stay out here too long, young man," she calls to Alex, marching me toward the hotel. "The birthday girl's about to make her wish!"

I catch a glimpse of Alex for a split second as we pass him by. He looks strained, like he wants to say something, but can't. Disappointment covers my arms in goose bumps. Cadence doesn't seem to notice.

"Oh Charlotte, my, you are a surprise. Here I thought you'd be hiding out with the help, suffering through every moment until you could run back home. Instead I find you with...with Alex." She finishes the sentence awkwardly, as though strained. For a moment that ever-present debutant smile slides from her face, but she recovers quickly. "What a story you'll have to tell when you get back to the trailer park." Cadence's words drip with condescension.

She yanks the door open and steps through, immediately lost amidst the throng of beautiful guests. I hesitate. I can feel his eyes watching me. The

hand he laid on the small of my back as we danced feels as though it branded my skin, the outline of it hot and uncomfortable. A minute longer and I'd have let him round third base on course for a home run.

I never thought it possible, but I ought to be grateful to Cadence Spelling. She saved me from making a huge mistake. Alex Ramirez and I are from two different worlds. I step into the air conditioning, and let the door close behind me.

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8:55 p.m.

“What’d you wish for?”

“My lips are sealed on this one.” A sly smile flitters across Paige’s mouth. The button-sized dimples make her look like a little girl. She learned early on, the power of those dimples. The world has been at her mercy ever since.

“But you always tell me. You tell me what you wish for and I-”

“You make sure it comes true,” she finishes.

Six months after our Mama died, I’d found Paige crying in our parent’s closet. Bundled in Mama’s old terrycloth robe, tears streamed down her pudgy eight-year old face.

“What’s the matter, baby girl?”

Paige shook her head violently, her platinum hair stuck to her cheeks.

“Please don’t cry. You can tell me what’s the matter. I won’t tell nobody, I promise.”

Her bottom lip quivered but her blue eyes, so light and clear they looked like quartz, looked up at me. “I’m never gonna get my birthday wish ever again.”

I closed the door behind me and wiggled in next to my little sister, wrapping my arm around her slender shoulders. “Now why would you think a thing like that? Don’t you know birthday wishes are the most powerful wishes of all?”

“More powerful than eyelash wishes?” she sniffled.

“More powerful than ladybug wishes too. When you blow out your candles and make a wish, God himself hears it and makes sure it comes true.”

Paige let out a low groan and her small body shook from the force of a powerful sob. “I... I...,” she hiccupped, “I wished for Mama to not be sick last year, and it didn’t come true. God hates me, Charlie!”

“Paige Jolene Davies, don’t you say such a wicked thing! God doesn’t hate you. He don’t hate nobody.”

“Then why didn’t he make her better? Why’d he take her away?”

“He needed a new angel is all. He must’ve looked down at us from Heaven and seen how pretty and sweet she was and he just had to have her by his side.”

“But you said he can hear birthday wishes. I wished for her not to have cancer and he didn’t listen.”

“Who says? She doesn’t have cancer anymore, does she? He took away all her pain and cancer. Now she gets to live in a fancy house up in Heaven.”

“What kind of house?” Paige’s cries subsided.

“Oh it’s a grand old house with a windy staircase and a fireplace in every room.”

“Does it have a pool?”

“Of course it does! And it’s got a tire swing in the front yard and a chicken coop in the back.”

Paige remained quiet for several minutes. I hummed softly, inhaling her sweet scent, content to sit in the closet with her for as long as she needed me.

“Charlie?”

“Yes?”

“Know what I’m gonna wish for this year?”

“Tell me.”

“I’m gonna wish for a horse so I can be a horseback rider when I grow up.”

Of all the things she could’ve wished for, none seemed further out of reach than that. The only horses Paige and I were ever likely to ride were the plastic ones outside the K-Mart.

“Why do you want to be a horseback rider?” I asked, cautiously.

“So I can be famous and make lots of money. Then I can move to Dallas and live in a big fancy house. Just like Mama’s in Heaven.”

“You don’t like it here?”

“I don’t belong here, Charlie.”

Even at twelve years old, I knew she was right.

Later that day, I took a hammer to my piggy bank. Three years of babysitting, countless aluminum cans turned in for recycling, and every birthday dollar I’d ever received gave me just enough to buy a year’s worth of riding lessons for Paige that birthday.

It was the best money I ever spent and every year since, I’ve made it my personal mission to make her birthday wish come true.

“C’mon, Paige, tell me. How can I make sure that wish is going to come true if you don’t spill.”

“Sorry, Charlie.” She embraces me in a hug. “This time there’s nothing you can do. Besides, it’s time you start working on your own dreams.”

“Meaning?”

Paige’s crystalline eyes blink innocently at me.

The doe-eyed look is a sure giveaway. “Alright, who is he?”

“Who?”

“The guy you want to set me up with.”

She rolls her eyes and drops the act. “You don’t have to say it like that! He’s a successful trader, dairy futures I think, and he told Ken he’s looking to settle down. Stop shaking your head like that, Charlie.”

“I knew it.” I raise an eyebrow. “I knew when you were trussing me up like Miss Texas you were going to try and set me up with someone.”

“I’m only thinking of your best interest. You are my sister after all.” Paige crosses her arms. One gloriously pointed heel taps against the marble. “Why’s it such a crime to want to see you settled and happy? You ain’t getting any younger, you know.”

“Oops. Careful, baby girl. Your trailer park is showin’.”

“Ugh, you’re so infuriating! Just like Daddy. Pig-headed and stubborn as a couple of mules.”

I stand my ground, unmoved by her indignation.

I look around us for my intended beau. It could be any of these guys. They’ve all got the perfect hair, pressed linens, and pearly-white orthodontia bought with old money -- Paige’s favorite virtue. I’m plotting my escape when I see Alex. He’s leaning against the bar to our right with Cadence and a couple of people I don’t know. They all have that effortlessly comfortable air of success. He belongs there, not in the garden with me.

“Fine.” I sigh. “You win. Who is he?”

Paige claps and her heels clack excitedly against the floor. “He’s just over there.” She points a polished finger in the opposite direction of Alex. “Standing next to Ken.”

Ken is standing with his back to us but there’s no mistaking his thick, sandy hair. To his left is a man in his mid-forties. His tanned arms bulge with muscles beneath a bright pink polo shirt. Paige must think I’m getting desperate. This guy’s old enough to be my father. Though admittedly, he’s got a killer smile.

“Daddy’d have a fit if I dated someone that old, Paige,” I whisper.

“No, not him. That’s Ken’s golf pro. You should be so lucky. I hear he’s hung like a horse.”

I gasp. “Baby girl!”

“Oh stop it. I’m no more a baby than you are a virgin, Saint Charlie.”

She’s got me there.

“Besides, he’s taken. It’s *that* guy.” The man on Ken’s right turns in our direction. He’s wearing a shit-eating grin.

“Oh no, not that guy.”

“Don’t be a snob. He’s nice.” She’s still pointing in their direction.

I lower her arm and keep hold of her hand. “No way, Paige. I’ve already met him and I wasn’t impressed.”

“When? When did you meet him?”

“Earlier, in the garden. I was out there with Alex and-”

“Alex? Alex Ramirez?” She gapes at me, ready and longing for gossip. “You were in the garden with Alex Ramirez? What happened? How’d you meet?” She squeezes my hand in a death-grip and pulls me closer.

“Good grief, calm down. I sort of fell over and he helped me up. Anyway it’s your fault. If you hadn’t forced me to wear these stupid shoes I wouldn’t have gone tail over tits in the hydrangea.”

“Forget about the shoes and tell me what happened.”

“I just told you what happened. What makes you think *anything* happened?” I’m a terrible liar. I swallow and wait.

“Oh my God...you like him.” It’s more an expression of wonder than an accusation. Why liking Alex Ramirez stirs such amazement in my sister’s eyes is beyond me.

“I don’t like him, I hardly know him. Anyway, what’s got you so riled up? Is it outside the realm of possibility that I’d be interested in a hot guy with dark eyes and two, uh, two... eyes?” Paige knows my weakness for dimples. Better to let her think I’ve gone senile than admit Alex’s lured me in.

“You’re my sister and I love you to bits so listen to me. I’m going to give you some good advice. Stay away from Alex Ramirez.”

I can’t help it. I turn and look in his direction. Our connection in the garden was magnetic. Just knowing he’s in the same room is playing haywire with my better judgment.

The little group around him are laughing, but his smile doesn’t reach his eyes. To the casual observer, Alex fits like a midlife crisis and a red corvette in this crowd. But for a moment tonight, I saw the man behind the suit. The smile he’s wearing is as fake as Cadence Spelling’s C-cup.

Paige squeezes my hand. “He’s just... He’s not for you, Charlie.”

I suppose I saw that one coming. Reluctantly, I put on a brave face and turn back to Paige. “So, the dairy trader, huh?”

Her entire body reflects her sigh of relief. “C’mon, I’ll introduce you. He’s not bad once you get to know him.”

I’ll reserve judgment. I allow Paige to pull me toward Ken, the golf pro and the stockbroker. I throw a last fleeting look over my shoulder at Alex.

He's staring right at me. His glass is halfway to the lips I nearly kissed out in the garden.

I'm not burdened with an over-abundance of confidence but there are two things I'm absolutely certain about. First, I'm certain I will never trade my cowboy boots for a pair of stilettos...ever again. Second, my pumpkin-carriage is about to turn back into a trailer and there's not enough magic in this world to turn me into a princess, Pueblo or otherwise. Not even a birthday wish.

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10:30 p.m.

“Eight, please.”

The elderly woman moves like a glacier but finally pushes the button marked eight. The doors begin to close and for the first time tonight, I allow myself to truly unwind.

“Hold the elevator!”

His voice propels me into action. I jump in front of the old lady and violently hold down the Close Door button.

“He wants us to hold the elevator, dear. You’re pushing the wrong button.”

“Shh,” I hiss, my eyes wild. She flattens herself against the elevator wall.

Just as the doors are about closed, a caramel-colored hand reaches between them and the Ritz-Carlton’s fancy elevator, equipped with sensors to avoid limb amputation, opens. *Damn.*

Alex’s look of success is quickly replaced by surprise. “Charlie...hi?”

“Alex.” I make room for him inside the small space. He gives a polite smile to the other frazzled passenger. “Thanks for holding it for me.”

“You’re welcome.” I glare at the old lady, daring her to contradict me. She doesn’t.

“It must be my lucky day; you’ve already pushed my button. Eight.”

Of course.

I can’t stop the ironic smile from springing to my lips. He returns it with a hint of confusion. “I saw you and Paige talking to Spencer. You decide to give him another chance?”

I knew he was watching. I could feel his eyes following me around the room. “Paige wanted me to meet him.” The elevator rises slowly, in contrast to the quick beating of my heart.

“Don’t tell me she actually wants to fix you up with that clown?”

I meet Alex’s eyes briefly and give him a tight-lipped grimace. The white-haired woman against the wall coughs and I shoot a warning glance in her direction. She jumps out of my line of sight. *Now she’s fast.* “He’s not so bad.”

“How’s that?” Alex redirects his gaze to the rising digital floor display. Four, five...

“Well, he does volunteer a lot at the youth shelter.”

Alex snorts. I can practically hear his eyes rolling.

“And...he’s got a boat. It’s a big one, from what I hear.”

The elevator chimes and the doors sweep open. The old woman scoots past Alex and practically runs out onto the plush carpeting of the sixth floor.

“What was that about?” Alex asks as the doors close.

I shrug. “No idea.”

As the cab rises, my belly does a somersault. Trapped in the elevator, alone, with Alex, I feel like I’m on the world’s slowest rollercoaster. Seven, eight...

“I’ve got a boat.”

“What?” The chime sounds.

“Nothing,” he says quickly, smiling tightly at me.

The doors open on our mutual floor. Alex stands aside and ushers me into the hallway before him. I should’ve removed these damn shoes the minute I was out of Paige’s sight. I cautiously place one foot in front of the other, determined not to fall over twice in one night.

Alex follows, his pace matching my slow gait. The sign on the wall points me to the right and I smile back at him. “Well, goodnight, then.”

“Goodnight then,” he responds in a low voice.

I take a few shaky steps in the direction of my room and Alex resumes his walk behind me. He’s not--

“I’m not following you.”

I worry that I may’ve voiced my suspicion out loud. “Oh, I, uh, I didn’t think you were.”

“My room’s down this hallway.” He points. “Eight twenty-three.”

Of course. Just three rooms down from me.

“I guess we’re neighbors then.” I force my aching feet to carry me faster, but he remains hot on my heels. “At least you know where you can borrow a cup of sugar!” I cackle over my shoulder, cringing at my high-pitched attempt at humor. *Pathetic. This is no time for bad jokes, Charlie...*

As Alex reaches his door, I stutter-stop next to him, secretly hoping to get a glimpse inside. A set of pink luggage may explain his behavior in the garden.

He smiles and places his keycard in the reader. The light flashes green and he turns the handle. “Goodnight, Charlie.” His voice is soft, practically a whisper. But he doesn’t walk inside.

I hold my breath and meet his eyes. They're as dark and hooded as they were in the garden.

I watched him behind Paige's back all night. Though he rarely left Cadence's side, I never saw him touch her. No intimate moments, no secret, desire-laced glances; nothing shared between them like the moment we're sharing right now. What drove him away from me in the garden? If not some attachment to Cadence, what kept his lips from mine? "Goodnight."

Alex shoulders his way inside and lets the door click shut behind him.

I place a steadying hand against the wall and allow my fingertips to trail along the textured paint until I reach my own room. My sore feet are unable to bear my weight a minute longer. I sink to the floor as soon as I cross the threshold. How am I supposed to get a wink of sleep, knowing there's two-hundred-and-twenty pounds of Spanish man-meat forty feet from my bed?

I carefully unbuckle the beautiful shoes and throw them mercilessly toward the trash can. No luck. They land beneath the room's mahogany desk. I release the tight chignon and let the loose waves fall across my back. I run my hands through it, massaging my tender scalp and remember Paige's warning. "*Stay away from Alex Ramirez.*" And then I hear the words she didn't say, "*He's taken.*"

Paige was insistent on keeping me away from Alex. But why? He's certainly not taken by Cadence, if his body language was any indication. Of course, I've never been the best judge of body language. I used to think cousin Barry was just clumsy, always falling into me. It wasn't until the thong debacle of 2007 I realized he had ass-magnets for hands.

I heave myself off the floor and walk to the bathroom. What I need is a good long soak in the tub. The Ritz's bathroom is stocked with high-end toiletries, all of which I will steal upon checkout tomorrow. I pour a miniature bottle of lavender and lemon-scented bubbles into the running water and unzip my dress. The stiff blue fabric falls neatly to the floor and I shove it aside with my toe. My breasts feel unusually heavy without the support of my bra. I massage them gently before slipping off my panties and sinking into the deliciously scented bath. Ahhh...

As I close my eyes and rest my head comfortably against a rolled up towel, a knock jolts me upright. Bubbly water sloshes over the white porcelain and I grab for the terrycloth towel behind me. Another knock, louder this time.

“Coming!” I yell, placing a wet foot on the cold floor tile. I wrap the towel around me and pad softly to the door. The peephole is high and I stretch to get a view. All I see is a black head of hair bowed on the other side. “Who is it?” My heart hammers against my chest.

“It’s me.” The deep tenor voice rebounds against the heavy wood as he raises his head. Dark eyes peer at me from the peephole. I lay my hand flush against my heart.

What’s he doing here? Did he sneak into the hallway to see which room was mine?

Shocked by his sudden appearance, I forget my state of undress and pull the door open. Alex cups a small, empty dish in his hands. His suit jacket is gone, his shirt collar is unbuttoned another notch. But the relaxed smile slides off his face as he takes me in.

I secure the towel around me, watching as his eyes travel over the soft material. His Adam’s apple bobs and his chest broadens as his body flexes, expands. It sends a chill across my damp collarbone. My vagina jumps, intent on ignoring my sister’s warning.

“What’re you doing here?” I’m breathless.

He steps toward me and the little bowl falls from his grasp. His hands land low and heavy against my hips. “I came to borrow some sugar.” He pushes me back and the door clicks shut behind us.

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11:03 p.m.

His lips are dexterous and insistent, encouraging my own to part so his tongue can slip inside my mouth, and taste me. I respond with vigor. Grabbing a fistful of silken black hair, I try to bring our mouths closer. Alex keeps one hand on my hip as his other snakes north. He tugs the luxurious cotton once, and in a heartbeat, I'm naked.

I break the kiss and take a succession of quick, shallow breaths. His eyes stay focused on my mouth but his hands come up to cup my breasts, still slick from my interrupted bath. "Oh..." I moan. My head is suddenly too heavy to hold upright.

Alex's lips find the tanned column of my neck and he kisses, nibbles and soothes until he reaches my collarbone. His thumbs and index fingers pinch my nipples, rolling them back and forth, tweaking my desire for him.

My hands find his broad shoulders and the feel of poly-cotton beneath them, frustrates me. I push Alex back with more force than intended and he hits the wall. His hands leave me. He watches with half-closed eyes as I slowly approach.

I know I shouldn't be doing this. He's off limits and even without Paige's warning, we're from two different worlds. Tony and Maria, Romeo and Juliet... But his hungry smile launches a dimple attack against my better judgment. I grab the open collar of his shirt and buttons fly in all directions. His naked torso is a masterpiece of chiseled perfection. A smattering of black, well maintained chest hair tickles the palms of my hands as I explore him. Fuck me, the guy's hot.

"That was an expensive shirt." He pulls me against him.

"You can afford a new one."

Alex drags his fingers down my back and grabs my ass as I place my hands behind his neck, pressing the full length of my body against him. His dick is hard against my belly. Our kiss starts slow, our breath intermingled as we mutually tease one another with a hint of tongue.

"I still think you're overdressed," I whisper against his mouth.

His fingers run lightly over my forearm and he pulls my hand to settle on the impressive hard-on throbbing beneath his pants. "I'm definitely overdressed." He finds my neck again and savors the tender flesh beneath my ear.

I easily remove and discard his belt on the floor, making a mental note of where it falls in case he's extra naughty. The raspy sound of his zipper amplifies my need to feel him. His pants follow the belt to the floor and he steps out of them, kicking them toward the bathroom. I take a step back.

"Where do you think you're going?" Alex grabs my hand and brings me hard against him.

"To the bed." I stand on tip toes to kiss him deeply.

His fingers threaten to bruise my hips, his grasp is so strong. "I can't--" He *kisses me*. "--wait--" He *sighs*. "--for the bed." He spins us around until my hot skin jumps from the cold impact of the room's air conditioned walls.

Alex's fingers hook in the waistband of his boxer briefs and he pulls them off, revealing a long, thick erection. He doesn't allow me time to touch him but lifts me in the air. I wrap my legs around him. My back slides up and down the wall. I feel as light as a feather when one of his hands leaves me to roll on a condom I didn't realize he was holding. Thank God. I already live in a trailer park. Add in a baby daddy and I'll be a walking, talking Jerry Springer show.

Alex positions himself against my core and slowly pulls me down his length. My body stretches effortlessly, my lust coating him, making the entry easier. I moan against his ear when one of his hands squeezes my breast. I want to move more, grind against him, but the in-flight position I find myself in doesn't allow it. Instead I hold him closer as his pace quickens. He fills me then nearly deserts me with each thrust. His erection satisfies every inch of me, going deeper than anyone before.

"Tell me what you want." His lips move against the side of my mouth, too out of reach for my liking.

The rhythmic crescendo of each penetration makes speaking difficult. "I want to come."

A shudder tears across the skin beneath my hands and suddenly Alex withdraws from me. My whine of protest is quickly replaced by a moan of

ecstasy as he releases my legs, kneels before me, and runs his tongue across my clit. My head bounces off the wall as I rear back, unprepared for the intense assault he levels against me. He lifts my leg, just under my knee and places it atop one broad shoulder, gaining better access. I thread a hand through his hair and grasp at the empty wall with the other, desperate for something to cling to.

Alex's tongue flicks and delves. He sucks and moves his lips against me. The powerful exhale from his nose tickles my flesh, bringing more intense arousal every few seconds. One commanding hand teases me, spreads me open. The tip of a thick finger slowly eases its way inside and I sink a bit, desperate for the connection. He senses my need because before I have to beg, he pushes in deeply.

I gasp, moan, call out to God and all that's holy when he adds a second finger and closes his mouth over that little hidden part of me. The orgasm builds quickly, low in my belly. The pleasure spreads through me like the night sky, vast and explosive with shooting stars.

I release my non-existent hold on the wall and grab his head with both hands, holding him tight against me as wave upon wave of fulfillment washes over me.

Alex's fingers trail across my legs to my hip. My grip on his hair loosens and my body goes weak and heavy. If he wasn't holding me, I'd be a tan slushy spill across the white carpet.

He eases me down, kissing the hot skin of my belly, then the swell of each breast before reclaiming my mouth as I slide to the floor. The taste of myself on his lips is erotic and fuels the fire within me. He pulls me beneath him, his lips never leaving mine. My back scrapes hotly against the fibrous carpet.

"Now," he says, his voice rough with restrained need, "for what I want." Alex positions himself between my legs and pushes the stiff head of his erection against me, opening me.

I gasp and clutch his shoulders, wrapping my legs around his waist as he skillfully seats himself inside me. The muscles of his back are strong and I run my hands over them with every flex and release.

His lips move against my neck, my ear, sending a tremor straight through me. He pulls himself up and I'm rewarded with an unobstructed view of his sculpted chest and ripped abdomen. Alex sits back on his calves, pumping in and out of me at a new angle, pushing my legs back. The position fills me with exquisite pain, his reach is so deep.

One big hand leaves my leg to cup and massage my left breast. With only one sense satisfied, he leans forward to taste me, pulling my hardened nipple into his mouth.

I hold him to me with one hand and use the other to keep my leg from falling. He grunts, increasing his speed, then moves to pay much needed attention to my right breast.

The feel of his tongue on my nipple, his hard length within me, and the hot friction of the carpet on my bare back, is too much. Overwhelmed by need and pleasure, a sob tears through my throat.

Alex responds immediately, his mouth leaving my breast to spread light, sweet kisses across my forehead. His movements slow and he shifts position, bringing my legs back to the floor as his arms encircle me. There's no room inside to feel ridiculous for crying, I'm too full of *him* to care. He kisses away my tears. No questions, no offers to stop, he simply waits for me to gain control.

How can this man, this stranger, really, know exactly what I need?

I take a trembling breath and release it slowly, relishing the feel of his body pressed so tightly against mine. We hold one another for a long moment.

His slow and steady thrusts sooth my out-of-control emotions. When I no longer feel as though I'll burst from the pleasure, he rolls over, taking me with him.

I wipe the wetness from my face and sit up slowly. Already missing the feel of his chest against mine, I place one hand flat over his heart. The strong beat tugs at my own like an invisible string.

I move, experimentally at first. It's been a long time since I've ridden upright in the saddle, and never on someone who filled me so completely.

Alex's thumbs rub gentle circles against my hips, encouraging me to move. I roll my hips forward, our pelvic bones rubbing against each other.

He groans and closes those dark eyes, trusting me to take control. I place both hands on his shoulders for leverage and pull myself up and forward, grinding against him on the way back down.

“Yes...” he mutters. His face crumples in absolute pleasure.

As my speed increases, I study him. With every movement, I’m bringing him closer and closer to his own release. There’s something deeply satisfying about taking control and making a man like this lose his. I move faster, rolling back and forth, rubbing against him to chase the swell of my own orgasm that flutters just out of reach. The hands on my hips become vice-like, seating me deeper and deeper with each return. The friction is too much. I dig my fingers into his shoulders and hold on for dear life as my orgasm crashes through me.

My muscles clench and convulse around him, electricity coursing through me like an undammed current. Alex grips me fiercely and pushes hard, his own orgasm gnashing his teeth in beautiful agony. I lean forward and he holds me close. Aftershocks move through him, and he moans against the roundness of my shoulder.

I pay Alex the same respect he paid me earlier and wait for him to gain control.

“My God, woman, that was amazing.”

Well how about that? Little old Charlie Davies, blue-collar trailer-trash, made a country club boy moan like a wild animal. I sit up and allow him to slide from me, then snuggle at his side. He’s sweaty and panting and I have to restrain myself from licking the little bead of perspiration that’s formed around his nipple. Alex’s fingers tickle my naked hip. I giggle against him.

“Oh no, don’t tell me you’re ticklish too?” His fingers pull further laughter from me. “That’s such a turn on.”

“A turn on?” I rise on my elbow and match his smile. “Did I just do the deed with a tickle fetishist?”

“We prefer the term, tickle enthusiast.” Alex rears up, forcing me onto my back and grazes my sides with his fingertips. Goose bumps spring to my flesh as my poor spent body is racked with laughter.

I squeal and try to wiggle free. He catches me around the waist and draws me back beneath him. “No more tickling,” I plead as tears collect in my

eyes.

Alex's hands still and he leans down to kiss me. His lips are soft and full. I can't stop my tongue from darting out to run across them. He responds by pressing his mouth against mine.

"Mmmmm." He pushes himself up. My naked chest is laid out before his hungry eyes like a booty-call buffet. "Damn you're sexy," he says, shaking his head, a goofy smile plastered on his face. "Where'd you say you come from?"

My lungs swell with pride. "Harlow County, Texas."

"I may have to change zip codes." Alex sits back on his calves and gives me a final, appraising look. "Why don't you make yourself comfortable in that big bed over there. I'll be right back."

I'll take the view from the hotel floor over the city lights of Dallas any day. Now *this* is scenery. The sound of the faucet stirs me from my sex-induced stupor, and I roll over onto my hands and knees. My bones feel like jelly but miraculously, they stay solid long enough to carry me to the bed. I flop atop the heavy down comforter and stretch, feeling like a lazy cat.

The phone next to the bed rings. It startles me but I reach over and pick it up. "Hello?" I answer cautiously.

"Why'd you leave so early?" Paige's voice is laced with accusation and tequila.

"Paige, I stayed until ten-thirty. My toes were about to fall off. What more do you want from me?"

"What I want is for you to let loose for once in your life; have a good time."

I swallow the irony that fizzes to the surface at her words. "I had a great time tonight, really." *You've got no idea, Sister.*

Paige sighs heavily. I'm glad Ken chose a hotel as the venue for her birthday party because I can hear the hangover in her voice. "I just love you so much," she cries.

"I love you, too. Now go to sleep and stop fretting over me. Okay?" She snuffles into the phone and I hear Ken laugh boisterously in the background.

The alarm clock on the nightstand reads eleven fifty-seven. “Are you still downstairs?”

“Yeah. Cadence has been looking for Alex and Ken and I were recruited to join the search party.”

The bathroom door opens and I jump, suddenly intent on keeping this conversation from Alex’s ears. “Why would she be doing that?” I’m careful to keep my tone mundane.

“She thought he was giving her a ride home. They’ve got a Junior League brunch in the morning. She had to buy a special hat for it and everything. Peach with a white fishnet veil and a little pearl broach at the side,” Paige sighs, sleepy.

Alex crouches like a lion at the end of the bed, prowling toward me on hands and knees. His erection is back with a vengeance.

I press the phone tight against my ear and do my best to put a sexy, unbothered smile on my face as my heart pumps wildly. I pray the flush spreading across my skin doesn’t give me away. “Well that sounds...nice.” Alex reaches out to pry apart my thighs but I cross my legs against his assault.

“You’re a terrible liar, Charlie. I know it’s not your thing but it’s important to Cadence, and Alex is her date. If he doesn’t turn up soon, she may well strangle him with a pair of silk gloves. I mean, she just got elected to the board last month, showing up without her date isn’t an option.”

Her date. Alex smiles wickedly at me as I shoo his hands from my breasts. His eyes show no sign of deception but if he’s here with me now, and promised to Cadence tomorrow, one of us is leaving Dallas short two dimples. I want to ask Paige if they’re serious, but he surprises me by gently running his lips along my side, and a giggle escapes.

“What was that?” Paige’s voice sounds decidedly less tired and drunk.

I bite my lip to hold in a moan as he manages to force my thighs apart. “Nothing.”

Alex pulls a softened nipple into his mouth and lavishes it with his tongue.

“You sound funny, what’s going on?”

“I was just, ahhhh-ha-ha-ha...” I squirm against the delectable invasion of fingers on my neither region. I swat at him with my free hand, but he’s persistent, and I’m horny.

“Charlie? Do I need to come up there? Are you sick or something?”

Alex’s smile is devilish and unapologetic as he kisses my jawline. His skilled finger moves inside me. “Paige I gotta go... to bed, I’ll, uh, I’ll call you in the morning, okay? Bye.” I half throw the phone back into its cradle.

“That was very naughty of you.” My hands move over his chest as he continues to drive me wild.

“You want to see naughty? I can show you naughty.” His fingers leave me and he grabs my wrists, pulling them above my head. “Why don’t we see how much pleasure you can stand?”

I look to the floor and he follows my gaze.

“Hand me that belt,” I say.

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2:59 a.m.

“Did you just spank me?”

A deep, throaty laugh erupts behind me.

“I can’t believe you did that.” My fingers dig into the quilted cream headboard.

“Think of it as punishment for the torture you just put me through.”

The delicious prickle of Alex’s leg hair brushes against the backs of my legs. His hand reaches around and cups my breast, caressing it gently before pinching my nipple, teasing me.

I sigh. “You’re the one who wanted to see which of us could hold out longer. It’s not my fault you’re such a wimp.” I push back against him, eager to feel his erection inside of me. *Slap*. “Ouch!”

“As your lawyer-”

“I don’t recall putting you on retainer-”

“As your *self-appointed* representation, Miss Davies, I strongly advise you hold that wicked, wicked tongue of yours. It’s going to get you in trouble.”

“You didn’t seem to mind when I was using it to help you with your, ah, *caseload*.”

Alex’s hand leaves my breast to roughly grab my hip. He pulls me down his length in one long, hard stroke. Four hours, four orgasms, and one very abused black-leather belt later, he’s still rock solid. I clench around him and smile when he whimpers.

My bottom slaps against his pelvis, a fantastically erotic noise that fills me with fresh excitement. “Do it again.” I pant, forcing my hips to match his speed.

“What?”

“You know...” I beg, unwilling to voice aloud what my treacherous body wants.

Slap. “That?” Alex rubs the spot his hand just reddened.

“Yes.” My voice is breathy. I’m choked with lust. *Slap. Slap. Slap.* “Yes!” I scream, relishing the hot burn. My body thrums with need.

I’ve never been one for wild sex but the feel and sound of his hand slapping me while he takes me from behind awakens something uninhibited.

He slows his movements and presses his chest against the smooth skin of my back. Lips trail a series of soft kisses across my shoulder blades.

At this angle, his pubic bone is flush against me, his dick buried deep inside. Alex minimizes the reach of his thrusts to mere centimeters but every three strokes he rolls his hips. I want to scream, whether in agony or ecstasy, I’m not sure.

“Fuck me, Alex.” I try to buck my hips against him. It’s impossible. His hold on me is unrelenting.

“Give me a minute.” His forehead presses into the nape of my neck. “I’m about to lose it here.”

“Please, touch me.” I plead, encouraging him to pick up the pace by rocking back and forth.

“Charlie,” he gasps, “you’re in serious danger of killing me.”

“Wrongful death by doggie style?”

I literally feel his laughter inside me.

“You’re crazy, you know that?” He lifts his head from my back and slowly, excruciatingly, begins thrusting his hips forward once more. His hands grab my shoulders for better leverage. “I’ve never been this turned on in my life.”

I close my eyes against the flood of satisfaction he’s bringing to my body and sigh. “Ditto.”

“I tell you this is the best sex of my life and you say, ‘Ditto?’”

“I live in a trailer park, what do you expect?”

Another of his laughs rumbles through me. “Funny, sexy, smart, thank God you’re clumsy too or we might never have met.” He picks up the pace.

“You talk too much, Ramirez. Shut up and fuck me.”

Being a good little rich boy, he does as he’s told.

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3:57 a.m.

In romances, they always go on about the smell of sex lingering in the air. I don't know what sex is supposed to smell like, but five hours after Alex dropped the sugar bowl outside my door, the room smells like maple syrup.

"So good," I mumble around a mouthful of warm pancake. Twenty-four hour room service has to be the best invention of the twenty-first century.

Alex, still gloriously naked, picks up the spoon from the room service tray and digs into homemade vanilla ice cream. "Pancakes and ice cream at four in the morning is an odd choice."

"Classic post sex food. We need to carb up if you want to go again." I push his spoon away from my pancakes.

An amused grin splits his face. "Again? Remind me to prepare my will beforehand next time."

The idea of a next time with Alex fills me with an uneasy delight. As close as I feel to him at this moment, I've lived in the South all my life, and I know that money can create an impossible divide. A reality as true now as it was a hundred years ago. I push the thought from my mind and offer him a bite of my pancake. "So, tell me something."

"What?" His spoon slides tantalizingly from his mouth.

"Anything. But not your name and where you live or that kind of thing. Tell me something real. Something personal."

He's contemplative for a minute, taking my request seriously. "When I was seven my dad took me to a baseball game and lost me."

"No he didn't."

"He did." Alex sits up and removes the tray from my legs, setting it on the floor on his side of the bed. He lifts the heavy comforter and joins me beneath satiny sheets. His feet are cold, but I don't complain. Reaching across me, he pulls the chain on the lamp, throwing the room into darkness.

"Come here." He grabs my hip and pulls me to face him. My eyes haven't adjusted to the dark yet, but I can make out the silhouette of his face. His breath tickles my nose.

We've only known one another a few hours but I feel so...connected, to him. "Tell me more." I'm desperate to keep him here, next to me for as long as possible. "Did your dad come looking for you?"

Alex runs his finger gently down the arm I've left on top of the bedding. The quiet mixed with his gentle touch makes me shudder. "We went with a group of people, mostly my dad's clients. I think he must've brought me with him as some kind of marketing gimmick. He's always trying to sell himself as a family man." His voice holds a grimace, as if the words leave a bad taste in his mouth. "Anyway, he left me in my seat when they went to go speak with some other big shot, and he never came back."

I wait patiently for him to continue.

"This older couple sitting behind us called over a security guard when he didn't show up for the seven inning stretch. The guard took me down to fan-jail."

My heart aches for him. "They threw you in jail?" I stroke the shadow around Alex's jaw, affronted on his seven year-old behalf. I can feel the outline of a small smile.

He shakes his head. "It's the only place they could put me while they were looking for the old man. The security guards were nice. They gave me a hat, a hot dog, and they put the game on this little TV set on their desk. It was pretty fun, considering."

"And your dad? When did he come to get you?"

"Sometime around the bottom of the eighth. He was totally hammered, Charlie. His clients were a rowdy bunch and he'd jumped right in the thick of it, completely forgetting me in the process."

Alex's hand mirrors my movements, touching the sweep of my jaw, caressing the expanse of my neck. The move is intimate. His fingertips trail across my skin slowly, mapping every exposed inch. I trace his.

"I'm sorry that happened to you," I whisper.

"It was a long time ago. Twenty-two years." His hand dips beneath the comforter and rests on my hip. His thumb moves over the skin there, back and forth. "There's more."

I hold my breath.

“When Father Dearest came to get me this guard, Jonesy, I think was his name, hit him. Punched him right in the mouth.”

“Why?”

Alex moves closer, resting his head on my pillow. His face so close I can feel every word he says across my cheek. “When he showed up, drunk and disorderly, he was really mad. I’d *embarrassed* him in front of his clients. Why couldn’t I just do as I was told? All that shit. He shook me so hard, I thought that hot dog was going to come up all over him. Jonesy pulled him off and yelled, “*Hey, that’s your kid there, what’re you doing?*” My dad was irate. He took a swing at the guy but Jonesy hadn’t just downed ten Coors Lights. He ducked and then, whamo, nailed the bastard right in the kisser.” Alex laughs. Sadly. I wrap my arm around him.

I imagine a dark-haired little boy with Alex’s soulful eyes. He’s trying to laugh it off, trivialize what happened, but his words are angry. My mother was taken from me too soon but I know she loved me. I felt it in her hugs and kisses, in the stories she told Paige and me at bedtime. The bitterness in Alex’s voice tells of a very different childhood and I wonder how deep those wounds go. I snuggle in closer, placing my head beneath his chin and kiss the spot on his chest that’s just above his heart. “Good for Jonesy.”

He again copies my movement, wrapping me tightly against him.

“It was one of the best moments of my life,” he confides, then kisses the top of my head. “I can’t believe I told you that. I’ve never told anyone.”

“I reckon there are few subjects off the table once you’ve done what we just did.”

He chuckles. “You’re probably right. So what about you? Tell me something about Charlie.”

My mouth moves before my brain can stop it, but my heart knows what it wants to unburden. “Mama died when I was twelve. Paige was eight. She had breast cancer. It was too advanced to stop by the time we found out and back then, it was a lot harder to stop at all.”

“I’m sorry, I didn’t know.”

“It happened a long time ago, too.”

“It must’ve been hard.”

“It was.” I sigh. “But I had Paige and Daddy to look after.”

“And who looked after you?”

I let his question fall unanswered. I’ve been looking after myself for fifteen years. It’s my burden and right now, all I want is to fall asleep in Alex’s arms. I want to forget real life.

The sun will rise soon but I wish it wouldn’t. I have a terrible feeling that with those first pink rays of sunshine, the spell will be broken. Alex will remember I’m no Cinderella. A fancy dress and a pair of new shoes won’t be enough to keep him.

“Charlie?” Alex’s voice is nothing but a whisper. His heart beneath my ear slows considerably.

“Yeah?”

“I’m glad you fell.”

I smile against his warm body, and allow the dream of tonight to wash over me.

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6:17 a.m.

Alex's arm is heavier than the cinderblocks holding up the Dauphine's pop-up camper, or the love lounge as Teddy Dauphine called it. Teddy tried to feel me up there after the freshman formal and I broke my hand politely refusing his advances.

I use my oil-field muscles and lift, sliding from beneath him. The carpeted floor muffles my footsteps as I tiptoe across the room. Pushing Alex's pants out of the way, I carefully close the bathroom door. The clock on the nightstand confirmed I've only been asleep a couple of hours, but a full bladder waits for no one. As I sit on the toilet, bursting with three glasses of room service champagne, I catch a glimpse of myself in the mirror. My light blond hair is a tangled mass and there are smudges of black mascara beneath each tired eye. I flush the toilet and cringe as the sound reverberates against the room's marbled surfaces.

"You're a mess, Charlie," I whisper to my reflection.

I wash my hands and violently rub away the remnants of my party face. I pull the travel-sized toothbrush and toothpaste from my bag on the vanity and close my lips around the brush, trying to mask the noise. I want to slip back under the covers refreshed and fabulous, without Alex being any the wiser. Spitting in the sink, I turn the faucet onto a dribble and splash water around, cleaning up my mess.

The deafening, loud vibration of a cell phone on tiled floor makes me jump ten feet in the air. Heart thumping, I reach down to find the offending device beneath Alex's pants.

Cadence Spelling calling

I silence the volume on the side of the phone, but there's no getting rid of the thunder in my ears. It jostles wildly, demanding someone answer the call. Three more long alerts and it finally goes still.

I sit heavily on the side of the bath, staring at the Missed Call alert displayed on the phone's sleek face.

I'd forgotten. Cadence had been looking for Alex last night. He's supposed to be getting ready for their brunch date and instead... Instead,

he's slumbering peacefully, and naked, in my bed.

The phone vibrates again, this time alerting its owner of a new text message. My thumb hovers over the little envelope and a red, circular number 1 tucked in the top right-hand corner.

Don't even think about it, Charlie. Alex's phone is none of your business. For goodness sake, you just met the guy ten hours ago.

But he likes me.

Says who?

He said he was glad I fell over.

Yeah, any wonder? He does the gentlemanly thing and helps you up and what do you do? You welcome him into your room and screw him like a Phillip's-head.

He told me that story about his father. He's never told anyone that story!

And you fell for that? Have you learned nothing from the guys at work? Men lie to get women into bed. Don't be a fool.

But, but...

But nothing. It was fun. You got to use that trick you saw on YouTube, and now it's over.

He likes me.

Correction, he liked you naked and ordering twenty-nine dollar pancakes. He's from another world and you're no Paige...

The display on the phone goes dark and instinct kicks in. I rub my thumb across its surface and the little envelope with the red-circled number 1 comes back. I tap on the icon and Cadence's message appears.

Where are you? You didn't come home last night. Did you sleep at the hotel? Call me, I'm worried. XO

Home? Worried? The words stick in my throat like a piece of ten day old dry toast. I toss the offending phone and it lands with a gentle thud on Alex's pants.

Paige warned me to stay away from him. I got so caught up in his eyes. His dimples. *Damn!* I knew they were going to land me in a heap of trouble.

It's reality check time. Alex Ramirez is a smooth talker with a proclivity for kinky sex. It was great. Now it's over.

I pull my dress from the floor and shimmy into it, pulling the posh fabric over my hips, zipping it closed at my side.

Shoving the toothbrush and paste back into my makeup bag, I snatch a few miniature bottles of shampoo, conditioner, and body lotion from the sink and stealthily open the bathroom door.

Alex's soft snores verify he's still fast asleep.

I walk slowly toward my rollie suitcase and shove the vanity bag into the outside pocket. Thankfully, Paige cornered and accosted me with her hair and makeup team on arrival, and I didn't have time to unpack.

I snatch the shirt and jeans I wore into town from the chair beside me and shove my feet into the glory of my beloved cowboy boots.

Paige's pointy stilettos accuse me from beneath the desk and I silently loop them around a finger. All I need is for Alex to show up at my trailer with a lost slipper. Not that *that* is likely to happen.

My possessions accounted for, I straighten, and look at him. The outline of his thick, tan muscles are every bit as sexy now as they were when he used them to lift me up against the wall. His hair is rumpled and impossibly black against the bright white linens. My fingers itch to run through it.

The shadow of a dimple is barely perceptible through the dark stubble on his face, but I know it's there. I uncovered those secrets myself last night. He's gorgeous, perfect even. *What in hell was I thinking?*

I turn from the bed and pad across the room. The door handle is cool and heavy but it doesn't make a sound as I pull it down. I wheel my suitcase into the hall; disappointed the empty sugar bowl has already been cleared away. I look back.

The only thing visible from this angle is one tan foot, draped lazily over the bed. My side. In another world, things could be different. Maybe.

In this one Alex and I were only meant to have one night together. Just one.

To be continued...

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Want to know what happens after Charlie and Alex's one-night stand? **Plus None**, the companion novel to **Just One**, will be available for purchase on September 30, 2013 through Amazon (print) and Amazon Kindle (digital).

Plus None

Book 2 in the Dangerously Dimpled Series

For Charlie, the only thing worse than watching as her baby sister sprints down the aisle before her, is the possibility of showing up to the wedding with no plus one. She's got two months to find a date, defeat her sister's she-demon Maid of Honor, and avoid her third cousin Barry, who's got ass-magnets for hands. Unfortunately for Charlie, there's no escaping her one-time one-night stand Alex Ramirez, who's looking for a second chance at Charlie's heart. As the wedding date approaches, Charlie will have to decide if she's better off on her own, or if she's willing to say, "I do," to love.

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Stalk Emily

(it's okay, she loves attention.)

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