

Alexandra's Appeal

Chapter 1

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Only the strict training brought about by her upbringing kept Alexandra Fisher’s mouth from falling open at her father’s suggestion. Well, he called it a suggestion. Alex knew he meant it as an order, no arguments allowed.

“Why do I have to?” Did her voice have a petulant tone to it? Maybe. She felt rather petulant.

Impatience and a spark of disdain flickered in Winston’s green eyes. With an unyielding mouth, he explained, “I do not explain myself to you.” He turned his back on her and resumed his examination of the dusty bottles of wine on the rack in front of him. Alex knew that he had not yet excused her, so she unclenched her fists, stood perfectly still, and waited. She schooled her expression to reflect a countenance of tranquil serenity. Andrew, the head chef, went through his menu for the dinner party tonight and conferred with her father on wines for each course. While two members of Andrew’s staff carried boxes to the dumbwaiter, Winston looked back at Alex. “Are you quite finished with your pout?”

Setting her jaw, she crossed her arms over her chest and tried to interject reason. “Father, it’s not my responsibility to babysit Whitney. Why do I constantly have to be punished alongside her?”

“You think it’s a punishment to go to my property in Tennessee and enjoy the luxury I afford you there?”

If she closed her eyes and tried to get a handle on her patience, he’d see that as a sign of disrespect. She’d consider herself lucky if he didn’t lock her down here until she felt like she’d learned a lesson. Again.

Intentionally lightening her tone, she uncrossed her arms and casually slipped her hands into her pockets. “Father, I appreciate the luxury of my surroundings wherever I am able to enjoy them.

However, I am currently preparing for my upcoming contract. When I go places with Whitney, she is very demanding of my time. I think she has a hard time being alone.”

He gestured toward the elevator and she immediately felt a release of tension she hadn't realized gripped her neck. Clearly, her tone had appeased him enough to prove she didn't need a lesson. She followed him and gladly stepped in front of him and got into the elevator. Once inside, she added, “I have a lot of work to do.”

“Everything that needs to be done can be handled remotely.”

With typical narcissism, her father assumed she referred only to the work she did for him. Even Whitney would leave her alone to accomplish that. However, she referred to her upcoming contract to photograph the last three months of the Vice President's presidential campaign. “I have to be ready to leave with the VP on August first.”

Winston did not even spare her a glance as he fielded a communication on his phone. “It puzzles me that you think you have a say in the matter. Today is June fifth. You leave August first. The matter is decided.”

Maybe she should try a different tactic. “Ephraim and I had plans in the city next week. I haven't seen him since he got back from San Francisco.”

Winston paused and looked up from his phone. “Ephraim Haskins works for me. His time is my time. Pack a bag or purchase a wardrobe there. Whatever. The plane is waiting at the New Haven airport. Leave as soon as your duties as hostess for tonight's party are adequately fulfilled. End of conversation.”

The doors slid open and he stepped out into the corridor that led to the kitchen. Through the wide doorway, she saw the hustle and bustle of the catering staff preparing for tonight. When she started to follow him, he turned back to her. “Now, Alexandra. You need to get dressed for your duties. Guests arrive in an hour. Go up to your room. It's not in this direction.”

Without a word, she took a step backward and let the elevator doors slide shut. Even when it began its ascent, she remained stoic. She stepped out onto the third floor and walked down the long hallway, fingertips lightly brushing the railing that looked down three floors to the great hall. She kept her eyes straight ahead, though, and continued to her room. At the fourth door on her right, she stopped and turned the antique handle.

Whitney had not waited for her to return. Her eyes moved over the four-poster bed with the gray cover and white and black pillows, the window seat in black and white stripes. Six more steps, through her dressing room, into her walk-in closet. She crossed the room and pushed aside the ball gowns hanging in the far corner.

Only when she had her back to the wall and the dresses closed around her, when the ever-present cameras no longer captured every movement and facial expression, did she allow herself to release the pent-up rage simmering in her breast. She grabbed her well-used pillow and brought it up to her mouth, releasing a muffled scream.

At twenty-eight, Alexandra “Alex” Fisher had no freedom whatsoever. No liberty to make her own plans, task her own movements, or speak her mind. Instead, she lived at Winston's pleasure, and throughout her entire life, he'd dominated everything and constantly bent her to his will. She'd learned very early not to make those things that were important to her appear important. In college, he'd denied her a photography or journalism degree, but condescended to allow her to continue to

write for her college newspaper, provided she maintained straight A's.

With her Masters in Business firmly in hand, she'd started working for Winston in his Connecticut offices, but also writing articles on the side. On a trip with him to the Middle East two years ago, she'd taken a picture that the Associated Press had picked up, and that shot had eventually landed her a Pulitzer nomination. By then, she had access to her trust fund and she left working for her father full time to pursue a career as a photojournalist.

That decision had not amused her father, who considered her photography little more than an expensive hobby and a tremendous waste of her time and talent. He threatened to revoke her trust fund, but she struck a deal with him. She'd continue to serve as his hostess for important functions and travel with him as needed in exchange for the freedom to pursue her desired career. He'd agreed, as long as her pursuit never interfered with his needs. He even gave her enough latitude to move from his home in Connecticut into an apartment in Manhattan.

Now she had to deal with her cousin instead of getting notes ready for the upcoming weeks of intensive work on a Presidential campaign. No way would Whitney leave her in peace and just let her work. Whitney, who shirked even the suggestion of responsibility, delighted in disrupting Alex's life as often as she could.

Feeling more in control of her frustration, Alex pushed herself free of the ball gowns and pulled a suitcase down from a shelf. Opening it in the middle of the floor, she grabbed items and tossed them in, not really caring what she packed. She went through the bathroom door, grabbed soaps, lotions, and other needed toiletries, then tossed those into the suitcase.

She shut it and zipped it, then pulled it into her room. As she lifted the phone, someone tapped on her door while simultaneously pushing the door open. Her cousin Justin walked in with a backpack slung over one shoulder.

With a glare as a greeting, she turned her back on him and responded to the answered call. "Steph, please send someone for my suitcase. Father said the car to the airport is to leave as soon as the event concludes tonight."

She hung up and glared at Justin. "You realize that opening the door defeats the purpose of knocking in the first place. Suppose I had been changing, as it so happens, I am just about to do?"

Justin shrugged, "You and I used to take baths together, Alex."

"We were six."

He shrugged again. "What's your problem?"

"My problem? Oh, nothing. Except your sister's attempted elopement is going to ruin our entire summer."

He set his backpack at his feet and threw himself into the wing-backed chair next to the fireplace. "I didn't have anything to do with it."

"Looks like you're getting shipped off with me, though."

"You understand that there is very little difference between our fathers. Your dear uncle Douglas offered me little choice in the matter."

Knowing he had as much control of his life as she had of hers, Alex relaxed a little and slid into the chair across from him. She drew her legs up to her chest and wrapped her arms around them. The cameras would capture every movement, but they didn't do sound inside the bedrooms. So, she kept her face calm.

Justin had a lean face, perfectly proportioned features, and ice gray eyes. He wore his sandy blond hair trimmed and styled so perfectly that he perpetually looked as if he were about to step out onto a runway or into a magazine photoshoot.

“Maybe we should mutiny.”

He pressed his lips together and glared at her, finally saying, “You wanted to do that when we were twelve. I don’t remember that working out for us.”

She screwed her nose up at him. “Yeah. I remember. At least your father wasn’t as hard on you as mine was on me. I got cameras installed in my room and he grounded me for the rest of winter break. Remember that?”

“You got off easy. I had to report to my dad’s office in the city every day after school.”

If he’d known what she had endured in the twenty hours following her “mutiny,” he would never think he’d gotten off easier than her. She gestured at the door. “How does she get away with it? Breaking all the rules? Doing whatever she wants? It seems rather unbalanced.”

He smiled, but the light did not go to his eyes. “Because, unlike you and I, Whitney doesn’t care what they think, and Grandfather set up her trust before he died, so they don’t have any leverage on her.”

“I don’t want to care,” she mumbled. A sharp rap on her door had her pushing out of the chair. “Enter,” she announced, meeting the maid at the door. “It’s just there,” she said, gesturing at the suitcase. “Thanks.”

“Yes, Miss,” the maid said as she grabbed the handle.

Justin held out his backpack. “Take this, too, please.”

“Of course, sir,” she said, then snatched it and rushed from the room before they found anything else heavy for her to haul.

“Nevertheless.” Before Justin could say anything else, the door flung open and Whitney made a grand entrance, throwing herself onto Alex’s bed in a sprawl, arms spread wide as if crucified, and stared dramatically toward the ornate ceiling. Her blonde hair spread out like a fan on the bedspread.

“They’re ruining my life!” she wailed.

“Right,” Alex agreed sarcastically. “It had nothing to do with your attempt at marrying a man who only wanted to snag you before you could say the word prenup.”

“I loved him,” she wailed.

Alex shrugged. “I love a good Cabernet.”

Justin grinned. “Puppy love is real if you’re a puppy.”

Whitney bolted upright. “Loved!” she declared. “True love surpasses all things monetary.”

Justin pushed himself to his feet. “Does it? Clearly, your lover agrees with your philosophy. That must be why he scampered away back under the rock he crawled out from under the second Father handed him that check. Right? He didn’t care about all things monetary?”

Alex watched in fascination as Whitney sniffled and snorted but didn’t actually shed any tears, thereby keeping her makeup fresh and streak-free. “You don’t understand! I’ll never love again.”

This pronouncement made Alex snort. “You did say that last time, you know.”

“And the time before that,” Justin reminded with a raised finger.

Whitney struggled with exactly who should endure her ineffectual glare, eventually settling on

Alex. "At least you have Ephraim. Your father approves of him. He'd never dare leave you at the altar."

Thinking of her fiancé and his sharp allegiance to Winston, she mumbled, "Very true. He wouldn't dare."

"Yeah," Justin subvocalized while pretending to inspect his nails. "That Ephraim is a real mensch."

Whitney flopped back then rolled over and propped her chin in her hand. Her face showed none of the misery she so loudly exclaimed mere seconds earlier. Her green eyes sparkled with excitement. "Nashville, huh? Wonder what exciting things can be happening down in the land of cowboys and belt buckles."

Alex tilted her head in her direction. "I'm sure you'll find out."

Whitney pushed herself into a sitting position. "I just got a new pair of Melody M. boots! I bet they'll be perfect." She rushed to the door. "I need to make sure Verity packs them."

Justin put a hand on Alex's shoulder. "She'll burn out fast. After a week or two, you can probably make an escape."

Alex pressed her lips together and nodded. Once he left the room, she walked over to her desk and packed her computer bag. She checked and made sure she had her laptop, charger, notebooks, recorder, and a hand-full of pens in varying colors. From her closet, she grabbed her camera bag, confirming that it held backup batteries and spare SD cards. After checking the time, she realized she had just thirty minutes to get ready for tonight.

Calmer, she straightened the bed where Whitney had wrinkled the covers and went into her dressing room to get ready.

Twenty-seven minutes later, she descended the stairs wearing a snug sleeveless black gown made from a shimmery fabric that looked like it rippled when she moved. It fit tight all the way to the slit that came up to her knee. A golden chain bounding her waist matched the gold trim around her neck. She decided to keep her arms bare, keeping her jewelry simple with dangling gold earrings and, of course, her engagement ring. She'd remembered at nearly the last second to put on the two-carat square-cut diamond ring. Ephraim definitely would have noticed its absence.

She stood next to her father and greeted guests. He'd sent her the guest list a week ago, and she'd spent time researching each person, the spouses, the details, so that she could make small talk, know who to pair with whom, what drinks to arrange, and how to seat everyone. By the time the guests arrived, she knew them so well she couldn't always remember who she'd actually met before.

After making sure the Undersecretary for Political Affairs had a twenty-three-year-old bourbon in his hand, she started back through the room. A momentary sense of relief filled her when she spotted Ephraim. When he looked in her direction, headed his way, he disengaged himself from her Uncle Douglas and met her halfway. Putting a hand on her elbow, he lightly kissed her cheek.

"You look good enough to eat," he greeted. "That's quite a dress that's wearing you."

She ran a hand down the lapel of his black dinner jacket. He had a lean face, strong chin, and light blue eyes and wore his curly dark hair short and carefully styled. "When did you get here?"

"Only just. Missed the first train by, like, five minutes. Thankfully, your father had a car waiting at the station."

Ephraim managed one of her father's brokerage firms in New York. She didn't annoy him with the minor detail that she had arranged for the car to meet him. "Well, I'm glad to see you. Apparently, this is it for the rest of the summer."

A surprised look crossed his face. Then he pursed his lips and asked, "Whitney?"

"Yes, indeed." It took reserves of self-control not to snarl. "We are being banished to the southern climes there to live out our life of exile. Nashville, apparently."

"Well, at least that's just one time zone away. It has been worse."

Remembering the time Winston had sent them off to his villa in Sardinia, Italy, she sighed. "True. I think he believes that sticking her out on the ranch is going to be more of a punishment than an island off the coast of Italy. Who knew the kind of trouble she could generate there?"

"I remember the story." Ephraim shook his head. "Speaking of sex, drugs, and rock-and-roll, maybe take her to visit Graceland."

Alex shook her head. "That's in Memphis, actually."

"Ah," Ephraim nodded as if he already knew that tidbit of trivia.

"Although," Alex mused. "There is a to-scale reproduction of the Parthenon in Nashville they built in the '20s. Maybe I'll shoot it if the weather's nice."

"That could be fun." He looked around as if checking for eavesdroppers, then bent to put his lips near her ear. "Your cousin needs to be committed."

Her hand flew to her mouth to contain the laughter. Then she slipped her arm through his and steered him toward the bar. He paused, putting a hand over hers to stop her. "Your father is beckoning for me. Talk to you later."

Without even looking at her, he disengaged and headed straight to where Winston and Douglas stood talking to a royal family member from some disputed African nation. Feeling abandoned and exposed, she spun quickly and spotted a banker's wife standing alone near the grand piano. Pushing down the sudden emotions, Alex glided in her direction, hoping the woman would be easy to engage.

Jonathan Dixon sat in his idling truck staring at the doorway of the honky-tonk settled in the outskirts of Nashville, Tennessee. Though the place looked a little grubby from the outside, he could drive to this bar in less than twenty minutes when starting from the extended-stay hotel his Atlanta team had secured for him. The next closest bar required nearly a forty-five-minute drive, and who had that kind of time?

Jon had arrived in Tennessee nearly two years ago, assigned to a \$200 million shopping mall construction project south of greater Nashville. Glancing around the parking lot and identifying several trucks, he assumed that some of the men on his team had already gone inside. He still didn't know whether he would go inside. So, he let the engine run and stared at the building as if it could give him some indication to assist him with that decision one way or another.

He pressed his fingertips to his temple and closed his eyes. He'd lived in that hotel for two years. For the last six months, he'd stayed sober. Every single day he craved the numbing effects that the over-consumption of alcohol offered, and every day he had managed to exercise that temptation away. But tonight, after seeing the news during dinner, he didn't feel like fighting it anymore.

Fanatical extremists had attacked a girl's school in a village near the southern coast of the Mediterranean Sea. They'd locked the little girls inside the small schoolhouse and set it on fire. They watched it burn and killed any locals who tried to help the girls. In the end, thirty-seven girls, three teachers, and nine villagers died.

When Jon was sixteen, he went on a mission trip to Egypt. While there, he and his brothers had helped build a girls' school. Unlike the metropolitan areas near Cairo, most women in that particular region could neither read nor even manage more than simple math at best. The school they helped build was the first school in that area that welcomed girls as students in more than five centuries.

Jon thought the school represented hope, that he and his team fought off prejudice and a culture that historically treated women as property, or worse. He'd felt so good about that, so right, so valorous. Two years ago, he'd had the chance to go back to that country to teach and train. While there, he went to visit the school just hours after terrorists had burned it down—just like the one last night. A group had worked to systematically invoke terror and make sure their objections to the education of girls dominated any attempt to enlighten and elevate. Centuries-old sectarian prejudice and hatred aided in the effort.

Jon closed his eyes and started to pray. "God, why? Why God? You hear me? I know I'm not perfect, but I've been willing to try to see and do things Your way my whole life. Why can't you end this hate? You made me with a heart that wants to help those in need, help those who are hurting, help those who never heard the good news that Your Son saved us from all of this. You give me that heart, and then you break it over and over again? Why, God?"

Maybe it wouldn't have affected Jon so much if he hadn't built a school; if he hadn't stood there on that January morning and smelled the unforgettable odor that hung in the air over the still smoldering ruins. They had murdered seventeen little girls in a horrible, inhuman way—all because those girls had wanted to learn—and they had used the school he had helped build as the instrument of their deaths.

What good had it done to build the school in the first place? Did the cost of seventeen lives equal his individual sense of self-righteous accomplishment?

Now, another one, and even more children had died. As far as Jon understood it, this school made eleven of its kind destroyed in the last two years. That amounted to hundreds of girls, and dozens of other people, killed. And all in the name of hate.

To any casual observer, Jon might have looked a little strange just sitting in that truck with the engine running, shaking his head with his eyes closed. Jon didn't care about that at the moment. "Just tell me this, God. Tell me how to make my heart stop hurting. At least tell me that. Because if you can't even do that much, then I think I can make it stop. Just tell me what I need to make my heart stop breaking. Amen."

He opened his eyes, and instantly a happy couple bounded out of the honky-tonk, laughing. The light-haired man had his arm draped casually over the shoulder of the slim brunette at his side. In turn, she had her arm around his waist. They looked well acquainted with walking this way. Jon heard a few words between gales of laughter, something about something someone had said, and how someone else had reacted, and just how funny it all was. He looked at how happy these strangers appeared in their own private little world, in their private little bubble, as they casually

headed to a pickup truck to leave for the evening. He almost felt angry toward them for their joy.

“So, that’s what I need?” Jon sneered, thinking of his brother Brad who had recently married the woman he had loved since they were teenagers in high school. Jon had never been in love and could not, at that moment, imagine anyone ever loving him enough to even make it worth his while. “Nice try, God.”

That settled it. Oh, he’d go in tonight. He’d go in and find a corner table and just drink. Drink away the smell of smoke in the air that still clung to the inside of his nostrils. Drink away hatred and ignorance on a level that brought people to commit acts of genocide in the name of their hateful deity. Drink away all the pain and poverty he’d seen in the world in his lifetime, and especially drink away how it damaged his soul every single time he returned to his little world, his little bubble, his life of privilege and materialism.

He killed the engine and hopped out of the truck. He bumped the door with his hip to make it shut all the way and latched. Last week, a bulldozer had backed into it. Most of the damage occurred on the passenger’s door, but the frame of the truck had torqued enough to make it not always shut properly. It annoyed him, but he just hadn’t yet bothered to swap it out and send this one to the body shop.

He remembered how the dozer operator had stared at the truck in complete horror, absolutely certain Jon would not only fire him on the spot, but also ensure the man never had work on any other site anywhere south of the Mason-Dixon line. The ironic thing is that Jon probably could have done exactly that if he cared to do so.

Jon had his job site superintendent, Walter Gross, write the man up for a safety violation, and that was that. Construction work is a dangerous business, and people, mostly men, get hurt and killed doing it. Safety mattered on the job site and could never be ignored or taken lightly. Having worked construction his entire life, Jon also recognized that accidents happen in all walks of life. Human beings make mistakes. For a first time infraction, Jon didn’t feel like burning the guy to the ground over a wrinkle in his paint. At the same time, something like that could never happen again.

All things being equal, Jon truly didn’t care how bruised or battered his truck looked on the outside as long as it started every time he got behind the wheel and drove him wherever he needed to go. Tonight, it brought him to this honky-tonk.

Once inside, Jon scanned the crowd. It was early, so he waved at a couple of the guys on his team then found a table in the corner exactly like he’d hoped. It was just far enough away from his crew that they could relax and not sweat the fact the boss had an eye on them. He pulled out the corner chair and tilted his ball cap back on his head. A waitress in a pair of too short denim shorts and a nearly transparent white shirt tied right under her breasts approached him. She wore her blonde hair in pigtails and had on bright pink lipstick, exactly the opposite of Jon’s type, if he had a type. “Hello there. What can I get you?”

“You got a local lager on tap?”

“We do.”

“Bring me a pitcher. And keep it full.” He gestured around the bar. “That group there and,” he looked toward the pool table, “that group there as well. On me.”

“You got it, Sugar.” From her reply, Jon assessed her as a lifelong local. In Atlanta, the “Sugar” would have come out as “Honey” or possibly “Hon.” North of here, in Kentucky, a “Darlin’” or a

“Sweetie” might have stood in for it instead. Here, the Tennessee equivalent of “Customer” was “Sugar.” Jon didn’t think there was a single thing about him that qualified as sugary or sweet.

As the waitress sashayed away with her short-shorts barely containing her backside, he monitored the door, watching people coming and going. About five minutes later, his job site superintendent came up to the table.

“Evening boss,” Walter Gross greeted. He gestured at the chair opposite Jon’s. Jon gave a slight nod of his head and the older man pulled out the chair and straddled it. His white hair was in stark contrast to his dark brown face. “Waitress said you bought a round for us.”

“Hope that’s okay with you, Walt.” Jon straightened his chair when the waitress approached with a pitcher of beer and a stack of plastic glasses. He handed her his credit card. “Thanks. Just put all these boys on my tab tonight. Sound good?”

The waitress headed back to the bar. Jon poured a glass and held it out to Walter, then poured another and leaned his chair back again, resting the glass on the top of his denim-clad thigh.

Walt lifted his glass in a casual toast and took a sip of the straw-colored local brew. “Perfectly okay with me, boss. Much appreciated, in fact.”

Jon shrugged. “You guys have been working hard for a minute or two—more like fighting a fire this week what with one thing after another. Didn’t go unnoticed. Spread the word if you see any more of our guys. I got the tab tonight. Just make sure no one drives home if he doesn’t need to.”

“I’m sure they’ll appreciate it, boss. But I think they’ll appreciate you noticing how hard they’ve been working even more.”

“You’re a good man, Walt. I’ve known that since the day I met you.” Jon scanned the room for more of his people. “I haven’t been in here before.”

Walter took his turn shrugging. “Decent for a local joint. Good place for pool and darts. Waitresses are all pretty nice. Food’s okay. Especially the burgers.”

Jon really wanted Walter to leave. Walter probably wanted nothing more than to leave. Both men knew this situation called for them to stay put and make manly chit-chat until one or the other of them finished a beer, at least. They weren’t going to talk shop, religion, or politics. It seemed unlikely they would talk about guns or fast cars. That left the only remaining topic men discussed with any amount of genuine interest.

A tall, incredibly thin woman walked in. She had on a pair of designer jeans and a silver cowboy-style shirt and carried a designer purse Jon knew retailed for at least four figures. His eyes roamed down her body and he noticed the silver and custom black Melody M. cowgirl boots. “She’s certainly looking for attention,” Jon remarked. “Think she’s lost?”

Walter turned his head and followed Jon’s gaze. “I hear she’s from that big ranch just outside town. She was in here last night holding court. Watch.” As he spoke, the blonde slid into a chair at the bar. Immediately, four men surrounded her. She managed to speak to all four, giggle, place an order, and fan herself within a matter of seconds.

“That’s a skill only queen-bee cheerleaders learn,” Jon said.

Walter stood with his beer. “Not to be rude, but I’m going to excuse myself. I need to go over there and collect Ballard. That boy just got paid. He does not need to be near that particular queen-bee right now.” Walt chugged down the remainder of his beer and headed toward the bar.

While Jon watched, Walter grabbed young Cory Ballard by the back of his neck and pulled him

out of the group surrounding the blonde. Cory scowled but did not go back. Instead, he found himself sitting at a table pouting into a fresh beer. Walter sat next to him, talking to him low and slow with very few gestures.

Finally alone, Jon lifted the frosty cold lager and took a long drink, swallowed three large gulps, then set the nearly empty glass back on the table in front of him. The months of forced sobriety had lowered his resistance and he immediately felt the effects of the mild dose of alcohol as it hit his system. He straightened his chair and filled his glass again, then leaned back into the corner.

He idly wondered if the Israelite slaves in Egypt drank cold beer or hot beer all those hundreds of years ago. It was an established fact that they drank beer, but had their beer been tepid or icy? If they drank it cold, how had they gotten it cold? This train of thought led him to start designing all kinds of primitive cooling systems in his imagination as he continued to drink.

About twenty minutes after the band started covering decades-old country music songs, he watched a couple come through the door. The man stood tall and slender, with dirty blond hair and clothes that made Jon think of the discotheques he had visited in Eastern Europe. The woman had straight blonde hair that brushed against her chin and wore a pair of skin-tight black pants, a loose-fitting white tank top, and a tan sweater that fell off one shoulder. He knew without asking that they belonged to the woman currently holding court on the dance floor.

The couple looked around, and the man pointed toward the band. Together they crossed to the bar. Cory Norman, one of the job site foremen, immediately descended upon the blonde. She was a few steps behind the man, and he kept walking. Cory had clearly had about two too many and grabbed her wrist as if he had the right. Jon's chair found all four feet, and he glided to his feet shortly after then casually walked over.

At six-five, Jon usually stood out in a crowd. These men had worked for him for years, knew his father, knew his brothers, and knew his family. The sight of Jon walking toward him, staring right at him, made him let go of the woman and step back.

"Hey, Cory," Jon greeted when he reached them and could yell above the sound of the band.

"Hey there, Mr. Dixon."

Jon jerked his head in the direction of the exit. "Best go on, then. I'm guessing you've had enough."

"Look, Mr. Dixon," Cory said, waving a finger in his face.

Jon didn't hesitate to grab the finger and twist up behind Cory's back, propelling him toward the door. "I said, get. If you're drunk enough to be grabbing a lady who doesn't want to be grabbed, you've had one too many. If I weren't already sure, you thinking you can go wagging your finger in my face sealed it."

A group of his workmates who had witnessed the exchange got to their feet and rapidly took Cory off Jon's hands. This allowed Jon the opportunity to turn to the woman. "Awful sorry about that. You okay? He didn't hurt you, did he?"

She looked up at him with wide, almond-shaped, light green eyes. Even though he'd just rescued her, nothing about her screamed helpless female. Instead, she looked downright furious. "He did not."

"That's good, then." He left it at that. The last thing he needed tonight was some doe-eyed blonde distracting him from his mission of consuming beer. He went back to his table and settled

back into the corner, fresh beer on his knee. When the woman appeared beside the table, he raised an eyebrow. Slowly, he lowered his chair until all four legs contacted the ground. She just continued to stare at him. Something about her look got under Jon's skin. He gestured toward the chair Walter had vacated nearly half an hour earlier. "Take a seat?"

"Thank you." Ignoring the chair opposite him, she sat to his right and faced the dance floor. "I just had three propositions. I thought it might be safer to wait for my cousins here, if you don't mind."

He stared at her as she shifted her sweater onto both shoulders and craned her head around. He extended his hand. "Jon."

She lifted her chin in acknowledgment and placed her fingertips lightly against his calloused palm. "Alex."

For several minutes, they watched the man argue with the woman holding court on the dance floor. "Beer?"

When the woman on the dance floor screeched and went after the man's face with her fingernails, Alex nodded. "Yes. Yes, I think so." She helped herself to a fresh glass and poured from the pitcher.

The man dragged the woman toward them, holding both her wrists with one hand. When he arrived at their table, he said, "Let's go."

Alex shook her head. "I think you need to be alone with her. I'll get a cab or something. Besides, I'm not riding in the same car with her screeching and screaming all the way back to the ranch."

He gritted his teeth and warned, "Alexandra."

"Sorry, cuz. She's your sister. Not mine. You have fun, now." She slowly lifted her beer and took a purposefully slow sip.

When the woman started screeching again, the man glared at Alex one more time and continued out of the bar, dragging a fighting, yelling woman behind him. After the door closed behind them, Alex took a long pull of her beer and then looked at Jon. "We've been here a week. I really need a break from those two for a little while."

"Can't say as I blame you."

The band announced a ten-minute break, and Jon silently appreciated the sudden relative quiet. It might afford him the ability to talk to someone without yelling if the need arose. He hated yelling. Only mildly curious, he asked, "What's her story?"

When Alex shrugged, the sweater fell again, revealing a perfectly tan shoulder. "Oh, she's just kind of a hot mess." She took a long drink of beer. "Her father sent her out here to hide from the press, if that gives you some idea. So, she just makes a spectacle of herself as much as possible, which kind of defeats the purpose of hiding out. Just bad decisions, really."

He straightened his chair and leaned his arms on the table. "What about you, Alexandra? What is your story? You hiding from the press, too?"

She ran her tongue over her teeth and smiled. "Well, Mr. Dixon, I think I'll just hold my cards close to the vest for a while if it's all the same to you."

Jon nodded. "A woman of mystery." He raised his glass in a mock toast then took a sip. Feeling the tug of attraction and the lack of inhibition that could only come from steady drinking, he tipped his hat further back on his head and grinned. "I like a good mystery, and I've been known to be

pretty patient in my time. I can wait.”

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