

**Annie
Baremore
Pictures**

Published by Annie Baremore

Chapter 1

“He doesn’t matter anymore,” Alana muttered as she climbed into her 2004 Chevy Malibu in the crowded Raley’s parking lot. She wondered if seeing her stepfather would ever get easier. Fourteen years after leaving his home, she still felt the pains from the wounds inflicted on her as a child.

Alana’s eyes burned as she left the parking lot into the late afternoon traffic. The words of her stepfather echoing inside her head, “You’re an ungrateful tramp. Slut. Whore. You’re not worthy of the ground you walk on.” She reached over and turned up the radio, the music competing with the memories of the past. The song ended, and the familiar voice of her boyfriend, Steven came over the air waves. “Here’s the latest from Chris Reed, Livin’ My Dream on KALF, Chico’s top country station.”

“Thank you, Steven,” Alana whispered wiping her tears away with one hand. The sounds of the past finally replaced with the music that was coming from the speakers. By the time Alana pulled into the parking space at her apartment complex, her composure was restored. Her past was locked tightly away in the recesses of her mind. She grabbed the bags of groceries from the back seat and headed up the stairs to her small two bedroom apartment.

As she walked into the kitchen the phone began to ring. She raced to answer it. “Hello?”

“Hey, beautiful,” Steven greeted her, “Did you hear your song?”

Alana chuckled, “Yes, I did. You had perfect timing.”

“Good. I thought about calling you before, but got busy. Anyways... about tonight.”

Alana groaned, “What about it?”

“I’m going to be late,” Steven apologized, “I need to run over to John’s and help him with some stuff and you know how that is.”

“So I’m not going to see you tonight?” Alana asked disappointed. She needed him tonight. She needed to feel his love.

“No. I’m just going to be late. I promise, I’ll be there by seven thirty.”

Alana sighed, “Okay, do you want me to wait for dinner or are you going to eat with John?”

“I’ll wait and eat with you, unless you don’t want to wait.”

Alana could hear the song ending in the background and new he’d have to leave in a moment. “Okay. I’ll wait. Love you.”

“Me too.”

Alana hung up the phone and put the groceries away. At seven she went back into the kitchen and pulled out the frozen lasagna she’d bought and put it in the oven. While that cooked, she pulled out the prepackaged salad and put it into a bowl. Cursing herself for forgetting the French bread, she went to the cabinet and pulled out her toaster and plugged it in. With time to kill, she went to her bedroom and pulled out her suitcase. It didn’t take her long to pack for her two day trip to Ohio.

Alana went into her spare room that served as her office and darkroom in addition to the guest bedroom. She opened up the closet and pulled open a drawer in the closet organizer and got out a gift bag and some tissue paper. She crossed the room, to her cluttered desk and picked

up the latest edition to the collection of scrapbooks she'd put together for Chris Reed and wrapped the tissue paper around it. Slipping it into the gift bag, she set it aside and turned her computer on. While she waited on it to boot up, Alana left the office and headed back to the kitchen.

She opened up the oven. The lasagna was done. She pulled it out and took it over to her small dining room table. She glanced at the clock, it was just past eight. The smell of the lasagna made her stomach growl. She crossed over to her phone and dialed Steven's cell phone.

"Hello?" Steven answered amidst a bunch of loud music and chatter.

"What's going on?" Alana asked casually.

"John has some of the guys over. I didn't even notice the time passing. I'm on my way now."

"Sure. I'll see you later," Alana sighed. She hung up the phone. She knew better than to expect Steven anytime soon. She grabbed a plate from the cupboard and then set it down. "Steven will be here. He knows that I'm leaving tomorrow," she told herself.

Alana went back to the computer. She checked her email and replied to a few of her friends. She printed out her itinerary for her trip, two copies so she could give one to Steven. When that was done, she found herself surfing over to Chris's website and browsing the posts on his message board.

By nine she couldn't deny the hunger. She went back to the kitchen and dished herself up some lasagna and took it to the living room. She flipped through the channels as she ate. She paused on Lifetime, a man and woman was arguing. She watched, debating on if it was going to

suck her into the drama of the show. A teenage girl walked in and the man turned on her. The woman that Alana now assumed was the mother stepped back letting it the man unleash his anger on the young girl. As soon as the man's hand went up, Alana changed the channel. She put her plate on the coffee table. Her appetite was gone.

A few minutes later, Alana turned off the television set. There was a knock at the door. Alana went over to it and got it. Relief washed over her as she looked at the giant six foot six man that was her protector. She flung her arms around Steven. Her body trembled against his firm frame.

"Are you okay?" Steven asked practically carrying her inside and kicking the door closed.

"I saw Jim today at the store," Alana whispered.

"He didn't say anything to you or do anything, did he?" Steven asked his body tense from the hatred he felt for Alana's stepfather.

"No," Alana choked out.

Steven relaxed just a little. "Why didn't you tell me this on the phone? I would have canceled with John."

Alana let go of Steven. She brushed a stray strand of hair over her ear, "There's nothing you could do."

Steven sighed, "I know how you get when you see him, you don't have to deal with it alone."

Alana shook her head, "It's like you've told me a thousand times, I just need to get over it. That was years ago."

Steven pulled Alana's head to him and kissed her forehead, "I just don't like to see you get so upset."

Alana nodded, dismissing the subject. "Are you hungry?"

“John ordered some pizza,” Steven replied.

“Oh.”

“I was thinking,” Steven said sitting down on the couch and stretching out, “Tomorrow, I’ve got Kyle covering my shift, so I thought that maybe we could drive up to the mountains and go for a hike or something.”

“That sounds great,” Alana said meekly, “But I told you last week that I found cheap airfare so I was going to Ohio tomorrow.”

“Ohio? What’s in Ohio? Oh wait don’t tell me, Chris,” Steven said with disgust.

“Yes, Chris is in Ohio.” Alana braced herself. She could see Steven’s eyes clouding over. She never knew how he’d react to her concert trips.

“When are you going to out grow this groupie thing?” Steven demanded.

“It’s not a groupie thing and you know that!” Alana declared.

“Then what do you call it? How many shows have you been too? How much money have you spent in airfare, hotels, car rentals, and concert tickets? This is not normal, Alana!”

“What isn’t normal about it, Steven? Chris is a friend.”

“He is not a friend! He never does anything for you. He’s used you! He let you run his damn fan club for years, before he thought he was too big for you and handed it over to professionals, which he should have done from the very beginning.”

Alana’s heart began to race as Steven insulted Chris. She tried to keep her cool, but it was more than she could do, “You’ll never

understand what this is about. It's no longer just about Chris. It's about the friends I've made through his fan club. It's about getting away and just having fun."

"Normal people can have fun in their own town, hell even their own state, but not you!"

"Why are you here if you think I'm so abnormal?"

"Alana, don't go putting words into my mouth," Steven warned.

"I'm not. You're the one that keeps saying what normal people do."

"You saw him just three weeks ago, why do you have to go again?"

"Because I want to. Isn't that good enough?"

"Why do you want to? What does he have that I don't?"

Alana stood up, she was not about to have this conversation again, not after the day she'd had. "Go, Steven, just go. If you think I'm going to cheat on you then I have nothing more to say to you."

"I didn't say that," Steven growled standing up and grabbing her forcefully by the arm, "I just want to know what's so wrong with your life here that you always have to run away?"

"There's nothing wrong with my life here. I just enjoy getting out and seeing the country, hanging out with my friends, listening to music, being free from ... the past," Alana ended barely more than a whisper.

Steven rubbed the bridge of his nose. He waited to speak until he felt his body relax, "Okay, if you need to go... I hope you have a good time."

Alana's lower lip trembled. "Thank you," she said hoarsely.

Steven pulled her into his arms, "I just want you to be happy."

Alana looked up at Steven. He was still the same as he was in high school. He towered over her with a staulky build that resonated strength. Whenever Alana was near him she felt safe. "I am happy with you," Alana said rubbing his cheek gently.

"Are you?" Steven asked searching her face.

Alana looked down at his shoulder and pretended to pick some lint off of it. She lifted her gaze up to meet his, "Of course I am."

Steven leaned down and kissed her. "I love you," he whispered to her.

"I love you too."

Chapter 2

The speakers vibrated through the floor into Alana's body. It took control of her. Her fingers moved with the skill and gracefulness of a professional dancer over the dance floor that was her camera. In rhythm with the music, she snapped the pictures capturing on film the magic of the show. In and out she moved the lens, at times focusing on the well groomed goatee, sometimes, on his hands either around the microphone or during their dance on the guitar. She brought up the camera and zoomed in for a head shot. Just as her fingers pushed the shutter, Chris flashed his dimple staring straight into her camera. Alana let the camera fall, and smiled up at Chris Reed on stage.

Alana stood dancing with the music. The rhythm controlling her body, the melody stirring something from deep within Alana, this is what Alana lived for. The concert was a two hour break from her life, controlled by the harmonies of those on stage. The wail of the fiddle drew her in, pulling her deeper, and hypnotizing her. The power of the music takes her to her limits emotionally. The song fades away into the screams of the crowd, Alana's breath is stolen as first a tear, then a sob, makes her body shake. Just a brief moment of calm before the roller coaster begins again. The guitar kicks in, the men on stage dancing around calling to her soul. The tidal wave of emotions made Alana question how sinful the concert experience was, there was no doubt she was riding the waves of sensual tide.

Alana's attention turns to center stage, the seduction that she found there bombarding her consciousness with a thousand different

sensations.. She was trapped in the power of his presence waiting for what was to happen next. His voice through the speakers is entrapping, so silky and so deep. The softness with which he looked in her direction was enough to make Alana's heart weep. Then the music builds once more, and the life of the rhythm demands her attention.

"I'll see you when I get there," Chris says into the microphone as the lights go down finally and the crowd returns.

Alana exhales slowly. Over come by a strange mixture of adrenaline and utter exhaustion, Alana turned to her friends and they headed out towards the bus. The festive feeling of the crowd was still riding the high of the show. Everyone discussing their favorite moments from the show, Alana was no different. She thrived on this time after the show with other people.

It was a time when there was no expectation of behavior. Everyone just celebrated the moment they just lived through. The attention was on the bus hoping for one last glimpse of the star that had brought everyone together. The back door opened, and in a wave the crowd turned towards the door. Chris walked out adjusting his hat. He walked through the crowd with a smile.

Alana whistled at him. He smiled at her and tipped his hat. Alana grinned back and waved. Alana was blessed with the friendship that she had with Chris. She'd been able to develop a friendship with him, before he was hounded by people wanting to cash in on his fame. She'd been there to help build what was now one of country music's top selling performers. Now it was hard to believe that there was ever a time when it

was just her waiting outside for him. Now they were lucky to steal a few minutes to catch up, Alana reminded herself with a sigh.

Just as fast as he appeared in the crowd, Chris disappeared into his bus. Alana turned her attention to the crowd. She snapped a few pictures and conversed with the women standing around. Even these had changed. Alana understood why the friends she'd made over the years didn't hang out anymore, what she didn't understand is why she still continued to do the same rituals. Her only explanation was that it was a ritual, and although most of the conversation annoyed her, there was still the buzz from the show that Alana thrived on.

Alana's phone sounded, notifying her of a text message. She excused herself from the conversation, and pulled out her cell phone. "Room 1225 at the Embassy if you've got the time? It's been awhile. CR." Alana smiled and responded, "I'll meet you over there in an hour. You are in for the night, right?"

A few minutes later, Chris responded, "See you when you get there."

Alana rejoined the group and continued catching up until the bus left, and slowly people started to straggle out of the parking lot. Alana drove around searching for the hotel. They were in Cleveland and she didn't have a clue where the Holiday Inn was. Finally, she came across it and spotted the buses. She pulled in and locked her camera in the trunk, before heading inside.

Alana knocked on the door. Lonnie, Chris's fiddle player, answered the door. "It's about time you showed up, beautiful," Lonnie greeted her fondly.

“Funny, I think that about you guys all the time,” Alana laughed.

Lonnie swung the door open. Everyone was scattered about the room drinks in hand. The radio was blasting old southern rock. “When you going to drop that boyfriend and give me a chance?” Lonnie asked sliding his arm around Alana’s waist.

“As soon as you show me that you don’t have to have all the women’s attention.”

“That’s only because I never have your attention,” Lonnie said kissing Alana’s temple.

“Then I guess we’re stuck, because why should I give you my attention when you’ve got an abundance of women.”

Lonnie glared at her, “Oh that’s just low. How have you been?”

“Great, better when someone gives me a drink,” Alana teased.

Lonnie slid his arm away and went and retrieved the drink. Chris was sitting on the bed next to a blond that Alana didn’t know. Alana leaned against the wall across from Chris. Chris stood up and gave Alana a hug. “Hey, darlin’, I don’t think you’ve met Amy before?”

Alana shook her head, smiling warmly at Amy. “Nice to meet you, Amy.”

“Like wise, I’m sure,” Amy said with a glare. The insincerity in her voice irritated Alana. Amy reached out and slid her hand in Chris’s back pocket pulling him back to her.

Lonnie handed Alana her drink, which Alana took gratefully. Ted, Chris’s guitar player came over to them. “Alana!” Ted greeted pulling her into a bear hug, casually pulling her away from Chris.

In a hushed voice, Alana asked, “What’s up with her?”

Ted's annoyance was clear, "It's visit three of hers. You know what that does. It's nothing but bitching because Chris has to go do this, doesn't have enough time for her, and god forbid another female talk to him."

Alana glanced over her shoulder, "When will he learn?"

"Never." Alana nodded, she knew better than to hope for a change. Chris needed companionship; he just didn't know how to choose it.

"Met this one in a bar in Tulsa, claimed she didn't know who he was," Lonnie said with a chuckle.

"And what rock did she crawl out from under?" Alana said.

"Your guess is as good as mine, but finally we have a distraction... so let's get busy and have some fun."

"Have you boys been deprived of all fun with her around?"

"There's never any fun without you," Rick said joining the group.

"Now if that isn't pressure," Alana feigned a sigh, "Anyone up for a swim?"

Lonnie grinned, "Oh yeah!" The band and Alana left the hotel room and headed down to the hotel pool. Alana kicked off her sandals and dove in with her shorts and tank top. The guys all stripped down to their boxers or briefs and followed her into the pool. Alana loved spending time with the guys like this, just kicking back having fun. They wrestled around in the water goofing off.

Alana pulled herself up out of the pool and went and into the far corner away from the lights. She sat in a one of the lounge chairs and laid back. The stars were sparkling in the dark sky. Alana's heart raced from

the excitement of the day. Her mind was blank free from all her responsibilities of home. This is what kept Alana coming out to Chris's show. For the time she spent with them she was free.

The creak of the chair next to her, brought her attention away from the stars. She slowly turned her head to see Chris sitting next to her. He handed her a towel, "Thought y'all might use some of these," Chris said in his southern drawl.

Alana smiled at him. His face looked tense in the moonlight. Alana took the towel, "Thanks. You okay?"

"Of course, I am," Chris glanced up at the stars, "Anything exciting happening up there?"

"No, of course not, are you happy?"

Chris rolled over to face, Alana. Her hair clung to her as did her clothes. He admired the ease with which she moved between the front of the stage and hanging out behind it with them. Things were always simple with her. He tugged at his ear, trying to think of how to respond to Alana question. He could feel Alana's eyes reading his thoughts. He lied anyways, "Of course, I am."

"Someday Chris, you're going to stop going for these bar flies. They always come with more rules than they give love," Alana said gently.

"Where else am I to meet someone, if I'm not on my bus or at a show, it's a bar. I don't really want to be picking up women from my shows."

"I think that goes right back, to the whole, Chris needs to play more. You guys have put the time in to be able to take some breaks."

Chris shook his head, “And spend it alone at my house. You know me, I’ll go stir crazy.”

Alana’s laughter filled the night air. “You need to learn how to relax.”

“I’ve had too many years fighting to be here, I need some one to help me relax. And Amy isn’t that bad, can you really blame her for being insecure?”

“Yes, anyone who knows you, knows that you’re as loyal as they come.”

The wind shot up, sending Alana shivering from the blast. Chris shook his head, with a grin, “You bring extra clothes?”

Alana blushed, “No wasn’t really planning on swimming.”

“That’s it, I think you’re going to have to leave a change of clothes on my bus. You never intend on going swimming but somehow always end up drenched.” Chris stood up and offered her his hand, “Come on, I got some sweats on the bus.”

Alana rolled her eyes, “What fun would that be?”

“None, but it’d at least be practical,” Chris smiled easily leading her through the parking lot to the buses. He pulled his keys out and unlocked the bus, “You haven’t seen the new bus have you?”

“No, they all match finally,” she teased.

“I almost seem like a professional now,” he laughed leading her back through the bus to his room.

“Oh wow, your own room now, you’ve moved up, Mr. Reed.”

“Yes, ma’am.” Chris jumped back to miss the swing Alana was taking. “You really shouldn’t be so violent to me, after all I am offering you my clothes.”

“You shouldn’t be calling me ma’am!” Alana explored the new bedroom. Impressed by the spaciousness of it and functionality of it. “Oooo gadgets!” Alana exclaimed finding the button to make the closet spin around. “I need one of these at home!”

“Yeah, it is kind of nice,” Chris smiled sitting down on the bed with the sweats in hand. “The bathrooms right over there.”

Alana grabbed the sweats, and headed to the bathroom. “Oh man this bathroom has better lighting than my house!” Alana yelled through the door.

“I told you I wasn’t scrimping on my bus anymore.”

“It’s about damn time!! So are you traveling alone on this bus?”

“Most of the time, Lonnie will ride with me occasionally.”

“That’s cool,” Alana said lowering her voice as she came out in the way too baggy sweats.

“Want something to drink?” Chris offered standing up.

“Sure.” Alana followed him back through the bathroom to the kitchen. She left Chris there to further explore the bus. She sat down in one of the reclining captain chairs, “I’m moving in!”

“Those are my favorite,” Chris agreed handing her the soda he was carrying. He sat beside her in the other captain chair. “So how are things?”

“A bit disgusted with your last video. Really did you have to do yet another video with you dancing around on stage? You could have done so much more with that song!”

“I’m just not that comfortable in front of the camera to attempt to do anything else.”

Alana rolled her eyes, “That’s only because you don’t give it a shot. You do great in interviews, and you don’t have to do anything other than be yourself. You write your own songs, they’re about your life... the video is just another aspect of that.”

“How many times have we had this discussion?” Chris sighed tugging once more at his ear.

“We’ll continue to have this conversation until you at least attempt to do something new with your videos,” Alana grinned. She swiveled her chair and put her feet up on Chris’s lap, “You can do it. I know you can. I don’t give up.”

“I know you don’t give up, believe me!” Chris laughed.

“Okay, well I’ll give you a break there. What’s going on with the fan club, I haven’t gotten anything from them in ages.”

Chris rubbed his neck with a sigh, “I don’t know. They’ve gone more artist under them, and I don’t know. We keep talking about doing different things, I guess we just can’t make a decision.”

“Is it we or just you?” Alana said knowing all too well what the answer was.

“It’s a team effort,” Chris insisted.

“Have you forgotten who you’re talking to? Remember I ran your fan club for three years...”

Chris smiled at her fondly, "I miss those days."

"Me too, I always knew what was happening then."

"And you forced me to make decisions... but that's all past."

"I know, I just wish there was something I can do to help. Your message boards are filled with people complaining about the lack of information, and those that remember I used to run it email me all the time."

"They still do?" Chris said almost apologetically.

"Yeah, it's not a big deal, they just want to know what's happening with you."

"I'm sorry. I guess I'll just have to make some decisions and stick to it."

Alana laughed, "I want to watch that!"

"I still don't know how you did it all... I never had any complaints with you running things."

Alana blushed, "I had help and I'm a list freak. It's really that simple."

"It can't be that simple, you had your job, school, and still traveling god knows how many days to be at the concerts. I swear you must have clones."

Alana smiled playfully at him, "You'll never know."

The bus door flew open. Chris's laughter stopped instantly, and he shoved Alana's legs off of his lap. Amy came on the bus and stared at Alana, her arms folded across her chest. Alana smiled, "Hey Amy."

Amy crossed over and stood between Chris and Alana, her back to Alana. "You've been out here almost an hour."

“Sorry, I didn’t realize it had been so long,” Chris said with a small smile. He stood up and gently pulled Amy to him so he could see Alana. “It was nice catching up with you, Alana. Have a safe trip home.”

Alana nodded and watched them get off the bus. The thrill of the night gone, Alana gathered her things and headed to her own hotel.

Chapter 3

Alana Murphy reached up and adjusted the blindfold Steven had placed over her eyes hours ago, “Where are you taking me?”

Steven glanced away from the road and couldn’t help but smile at the redhead sitting next to him. Alana always looked so fragile until you looked into her eyes; there was toughness there, a strength that came from the untold troubles that she’d buried deep inside. That frailty had drawn him to her and made him want to be the guardian of the treasure that was her spirit. He’d been in love with her now for a majority of his life.

“Patience, my love, you’ll see when the time is right.”

Alana groaned, “Come on Steven, you know I hate surprises.”

Steven slid his hand from the gearshift onto Alana’s leg. “I’d believe you more if you hid that smile a little better. Now just relax.”

Alana placed her hand on his, “You drive me nuts with these surprises.”

Steven chuckled, “At least you can’t complain that our life is dull.”

“Far from it. I love you.”

Steven leaned over and kissed her cheek. “I love you too, Alana.” He watched the shudder that ran through Alana’s body at his touch. After all these years, he still got butterflies just being near her. At times it made him wonder if he was would be enough for her, but then he’d see those little trembles, feel the goose-bumps, or hear her breath catch and then he knew he would be.

Steven turned up the radio and focused on the countryside. The road leading to Konocti Harbor was very windy but beautiful. The resort had always been one of their favorite places to get away to. It was nestled right on Clear Lake, and the scenery surrounding the resort was beautiful. No matter what time of year it was, there was plenty to do there with a marina, pools, gym, and a full service spa, it was the perfect place to relax. It didn't matter if you wanted to reconnect with nature, or spend the weekend being pampered, the resort offered it all. Steven bypassed the parking lot at the front of the hotel. He followed the road back around to where the guest parking was. He spotted his parents' car and pulled into the vacant parking spot next to it. "Sit tight, I'll help you out in a minute."

Steven hopped out of the truck and walked toward the hotel. His mother met him by the room and gave him the key, "Everything is exactly like you wanted," Gloria said smiling at him.

Steven leaned down and kissed his mother's cheek, "Thanks mom. Tonight's the night."

Gloria patted him on the arm, "Good luck, honey. We'll see you later."

Steven opened up the door to the room and just glanced around to examine the final product. He knew Alana's patience was running thin so he'd better hurry. It had been months since Steven and Alana been able to go out of town together. Steven's promotion to program director at the local radio station had meant he almost always had to be nearby. Alana smiled, being blindfolded for hours was a small price to pay. She knew Steven wanted to make up for the long hours he'd been putting in and she

didn't want to ruin the moment. "Alright, beautiful, your surprise awaits," Steven said softly taking her elbow and helping her out of the truck.

The late afternoon sun smoldered on Alana's hair, reflecting the soft golden embers hidden within the red mass of curls. Steven couldn't resist her, he gave her a tender kiss. "If I didn't tell you earlier, you look amazing." He smiled, waited, and then rubbed her crimson cheek. "One of these days, I'm going to tell you that and you are not going to blush."

Alana moved away pouting. "You pointing it out only makes it worse!"

He chuckled, "I know." He carefully escorted her into their room.

"I smell roses," Alana said quietly groping the air trying to feel for them.

"I thought photographers were dependent on their eyes, not their noses," Steven said softly tweaking her nose. "You could be a blood hound, I swear." Steven untied the blindfold.

Alana inhaled sharply. The room was beautiful. Everywhere she looked, there were vases of red long stem roses. Candles were all over the room waiting to be lit. A tray of finger foods was on the center of the creme colored bedspread along with a card. Alana walked over, picked up the card and read it aloud, "Without you, my life would not be complete. Thank you for being my princess. SD."

Alana looked up at Steven and couldn't help but smile. A man of such contradictions, standing at six feet six inches, he looked like he could be a quarterback, rough and driven but that wasn't him. Steven was a gentle spirit who believed in dreams. Alana felt herself pulled towards

him. "Thank you, Steven." His arm quivered as she ran her hand up it. Alana yanked her hand back. "Is everything okay?"

"Everything is great," Steven spoke softly. "We've got some time before our reservation, shall I start your bath?"

With just a nod from Alana, Steven disappeared into the bathroom. Determined to find out what he was up to, Alana shook off the spell Steven had cast on her and flew into action. She opened all the drawers and cabinets, there was no phone book, no advertisements for the hotel amenities. Only Steven would think of having every possible clue to their whereabouts removed. Exhausting her search, Alana followed Steven into the bathroom. It was no surprise that there was a large Jacuzzi tub there, he always made sure they had one.

Alana leaned against the door frame and just watched him. He was stealing petals from the roses and dropping them in the bath. He moved about laying out the towel, and pouring her a glass of wine. His movements were awkward and forced, contradicting the peacefulness of the room. They gave Alana an uneasy feeling.

Steven turned the water off and walked over to her. "I need to go check on a couple things." He kissed her forehead. "Take your time." Steven left her to the serenity of her bath.

Alana smiled slipping out of her clothes. She slipped into the tub, her whole body relaxed in the warmth of the water and she exhaled slowly. "How do you do it?" she mumbled.

Steven poked his head in the bathroom with a grin. "Do what?"

Alana turned to his voice, smiling, "Get the temperature perfect?"

"Oh that's easy, 'cause I'm perfect. I'll be back in a few."

Alana smiled and closed her eyes, letting the water and the scent of the roses take her away. She sipped on her wine and turned the bubbles on. It was easy to get lost in the atmosphere of the room, everything was aiding her relaxation. Despite all of this, Alana couldn't help but dwell on the fact that Chris was playing at Konocti Harbor that night and for the first time, she was missing one of his shows in California. Alana looked around the bathroom and couldn't help smiling. Steven had gone through a lot to make this weekend a romantic one, and she was determined as he was that it was going to be. She could feel that everything was just going to be perfect, she just wished she knew where they were. She hated surprises, yet Steven was constantly surprising her, in good and bad ways.

Alana pushed those bad memories away before they could ruin her night. She owed Steven a lot, and she knew she wasn't always the most appreciative of everything he did. She sat up and finished off her glass of wine. He'd done all of this to make her feel special, and she did. She closed her eyes and concentrated on the sound of the bubbles.

When the water started to cool down, Alana got out wrapping a towel around her. She floated out of the bathroom, pausing to smell the roses on the counter. "He even bought a dress," she mused to herself seeing an unfamiliar dress lying on the bed. Alana walked over to it the fabric was as soft as the rose petals. Carefully she let the fabric fall over her head on to her body. It felt like it had been made for her. Alana hugged herself in the mirror, she felt like a princess waiting for her prince to come back. She let her arms fall and went back into the bathroom.

Alana hummed to herself while she carefully applied her make up.

She heard the door to the room open. The electricity surging through her body at the sight of Steven dressed in a suit and tie, she hadn't seen him this dressed up since her senior prom. "You're not in shorts!"

Steven blushed a little straightening out his suit pants, "I figured I'd clean up a little."

Alana walked over to him and straightened out his tie, "A tie even, we must be going somewhere fancy."

Steven shrugged, pulling her to him, "Not really, I just wanted to... I knew you'd look... and well... I had to."

Steven's nervousness was endearing to her, Alana giggled, "You don't have to worry about a thing. I'm not used to seeing you like this, but I definitely love what I see."

Steven leaned down and gave her a gentle kiss. He stepped back and let his mischievous side out once again. He pulled the blindfold from his pocket, dangling it in front of her.

Alana stared at the blindfold, "You are joking right. You're not going to blindfold me again, are you?"

Steven's eyes danced, "Yes, I am. I promise it'll only be for a few minutes."

Steven tied the blindfold around her head. Alana felt him tuck her hand through his arm as they began to leave the hotel room. She listened intently to the sound of water lapping against rocks. She could smell the fresh air and the sound of cars around them moving slowly. Her mind raced through all the places they could be but there was nothing that she

could get a lock on to pinpoint the location. Steven's hand tightened around hers, "Careful, the walk here is slippery." Steven slowed his pace as they continued walking. Steven scooped her up into his arms and carefully set her down on board the small boat, he'd chartered for the night.

"Where are we, Steven?" Alana asked puzzled, feeling the floor rocking beneath her feet.

Steven kissed the side of her head, "On a boat."

Alana jumped at the sound of a strange man speaking, "Are you ready to depart, Mr. Daniels?"

Alana didn't hear Steven answer the captain as they continued walking, but Alana heard the engine come to life. Steven grabbed Alana's waist. "Careful now, there's about four steps right here," Steven whispered. As she stepped down from the last step, Steven took off the blindfold.

Alana surveyed the room she was in. The table was set with candles and food. Music was playing softly in harmony with the sounds of the water lapping on the sides of the boat. Alana wrapped her arms around Steven, "It's perfect."

"No, you're the only thing that's perfect in here." Steven leaned down towards her. Their lips met tentatively at first but the kiss soon grew in intensity. They both parted struggling to catch their breath.

The love in Steven's eyes was enough to take off the chill from the night air and make everything else disappear from Alana's mind. "Let's eat before this stuff gets cold," Steven said with a smile guiding her over to the table.

As dinner progressed, Steven began fidgeting more and more with his tie. Even Alana was beginning to feel like the air was getting thicker, almost suffocating. Carefully, Alana set her fork down. She sipped her wine, watching Steven scoot the food around his plate. Tired from trying to keep the conversation going, she asked, “Why don’t you tell me what has you on edge? I’m sure whatever it is, it can’t be that bad.”

Alana watched Steven launch from his seat, knocking over his glass of wine. She jumped up catching the spreading puddle of wine with her napkin.

Steven twisted the watch on his wrist around, cursing under his breath.

Alana glanced up from her task. “What is it, Steven?” She begged.

Steven didn’t respond. He turned his back and continued to play with his watch. He could feel Alana’s eyes searing into his back and it was interfering with his thoughts. He needed time to figure out how to salvage his plans.

Alana’s breath was getting shorter, as she watched Steven struggling for control of the situation. She knew that he only played with his watch when he felt he wasn’t in control; and when he wasn’t bad things happened.

Her body was shaking, parts of her wanted to run from the cabin. She knew the dangers all too well of what happened when men lost control, but this was Steven and he wasn’t most men, she tried to console herself. Alana mustered up her courage and crossed over to Steven. She

placed her hand on Steven's shoulder. He jumped away. "Steven, you're really starting to scare me now. What is it?" Alana pleaded in a panic.

Steven turned to face her. Her face was tense, her eyes darting over his face. He could see the fear in them. He took her hand. "Come with me," he said hoarsely.

Alana was barely able to follow Steven on deck because her legs were so weak from the anxiety she was feeling.

Slowly Alana's eyes adjusted to the dark and the scenery became familiar to her. The boat was coming to a stop near the amphitheater. The music drifting in over the water, she could see the stage and recognized the familiar backdrop. Alana's eyes lit up as the music drifted over the night air. Their location was now clear to her: Konocti Harbor where Chris was performing tonight. She shoved Steven's chest firmly to show her dismay at being so close to the concert and missing it.

Steven grabbed her wrists in one of his hands, his eyes pleading with hers, "Don't be mad at me. I can't compete with him."

"You don't have to compete with Chris."

"I know, but when you're at a show, that's all that matters. You're so focused." Steven apologized, his hand cupping her chin, his thumb caressing her cheek.

Alana's stomach tied into knots. Steven's voice was filled with insecurity. It was something that never happened to him, and that insecurity was enough to rock Alana. She reached up and rubbed his cheek, "Steven, what is it?"

"I don't want to screw this up," Steven began. Looking at Alana, in the moonlight, reminded him of the first time he'd seen her. They'd

been at a party following a football game in high school. John had called her a life size Barbie doll. He couldn't help but agree. It'd taken him almost the whole night to get up the nerve to walk over to her. With just one conversation, Alana had stolen his heart. That had been almost seventeen years ago. Now, just like that first night, he was suddenly very conscious of the fact that he towered over her. Like that night, he found himself slouching down as he tried to find the words to tell her what was on his mind.

"You're slouching again," Alana chuckled nervously breaking into his thoughts.

Steven smiled sinking down to one knee. He took her hand and stared at it. "I know I don't deserve you, but you're still here after everything I've put you through. That has got to mean something, doesn't it?" He glanced up at a very confused look from Alana.

Alana gave his hand a squeeze. Her voice shaking uncontrollably as she spoke, "Just get on with it and tell me what's going on, Steven. I can't take this." Alana stared down at him watching the little beads of sweat forming across his forehead. The beads broke through Alana's last nerve. She couldn't stop the tears from falling or her heart from racing.

Steven brought their hands to his lips and kissed the back of her hand. He knew he had to get the words out. He had to end Alana's uncertainty, reassure her that things were okay. He licked his lips. Then he took a deep breath before continuing, "Alana, we've wasted so much time, waiting for things to be just perfect. I don't want to wait anymore... things will never be perfect until you're my wife. That is, if you'll marry me?" Slowly Steven brought his gaze up to Alana's face. The question

hung in the air like a dense fog. Steven was frozen, he couldn't move as he waited for her to say something, anything. The tie he was wearing began to feel like noose as he waited, he didn't dare move to adjust it. He didn't want to bring attention to his own feelings. He wanted Alana to answer from her heart. He tried to read what was going on in her head, but he could only focus on his own thoughts.

Alana pulled her hands from Steven's when he closed his eyes. Gently she placed them on his face and leaned down and kissed him. "Of course I'll marry you," she whispered. Instantly her fingertips felt the moisture of Steven's tears. His arms enveloped her pulling her tightly to him. In the moonlight, their lips met in a flurry of emotions. The kiss punctuated by the glow of fireworks that was now lighting up the night sky. Alana pulled back and looked overhead and laughed, "Okay, for a second I was imagining the fireworks."

Steven chuckled and pulled her to him as he stood up. He hadn't planned for the fireworks, but he was pleased by the effect. He let out a long sigh, content to spend the night there with his love in his arms, if only other surprises weren't awaiting them. After the fireworks, they sat on deck and enjoyed the trip back to the marina. Steven helped her off of the boat.

When they stepped off the dock on to the small dirt trail, Steven stopped. In the pale moonlight, Steven's cheeks turned a faint shade of pink as he reached into his pocket. "You might want this," He said.

Alana looked down at his hand. In it was a small black jewelry box. His hands were shaking as he opened it and pulled out the ring. She

held out her hand and let him slip the ring onto her finger. “It’s perfect,” Alana whispered, staring at the diamond sparkling up at her.

Steven smiled and gave her a small kiss. “The surprises aren’t over yet.”

“What more could you have planned?” Alana asked sliding her arm around his waist.

Steven smiled down at her, “Let’s go dance.” He lead her up the trail to the where one of the resort’s bars was located. With a deep breath, Steven opened the door to the bar and gently escorted her in with a hand on the small of her back.

Steven was guiding her through the bar to the back patio. The bouncer at the door to the balcony opened the door, “Enjoy yourself, Mr. Daniels, Ma'am.” Alana glanced at Steven. Well-wishers were instantly surrounded them. It took Alana a minute to realize what was happening. One by one the faces of all of their close friends came into focus. She gazed up at Steven, “You did all of this?”

Steven’s face lit up like a child’s on Christmas morning, “Yeah, so it’s a damn good thing you said yes. Otherwise it would have all been for nothing.” Alana just shook her head. Steven had once again succeeded in surprising her.

From the back of the crowd, Cheyenne Conley called out, “And no party would be complete without me.” The crowd parted and Cheyenne came forward. Cheyenne had become Alana’s best friend despite the fact that they lived in separate states and hundreds of miles apart. They were brought together thanks to Chris Reed. They had met through his fan club and after a little bit became the strongest of friends.

Cheyenne had been Annie's support though a lot times good and bad. Seeing her there now, Alana was stunned. She couldn't move. She looked up at Steven, who was just beaming down at her.

Alana gave Cheyenne a hug, whispering, "I can't believe you're here."

"Believe it. Steven wouldn't take no for an answer."

"But," Alana said still amazed glancing back at Steven. "I don't know what to say."

"Don't say a damn thing. Just enjoy the fact that I'm here, for crying out loud! That is after we figure out what that fiancé of yours is up to."

Alana glanced over her shoulder seeing Steven slip out the door. Alana smiled turning her ring around, "Whatever it is, I'm sure it'll be worth the wait."

Chapter 4

For November, the night sky was unusually bright. Away from the pressure of surprising Alana, Steven could soak in the moment. He headed down the two small steps to the sidewalk. He walked around the corner and spotted the three long sleek black and silver buses parked in a row. He walked over to the only one that wasn't professing their owner on the side and knocked on the door.

Chris opened the door, "Hey Steven, how'd it go?"

Steven sighed, "Better than I could have hoped."

Chris slapped him on the shoulder, "Good! Congratulations."

Steven couldn't stop smiling, "Thanks... She's amazing. I've got to be the luckiest man on this planet."

Chris chuckled, "I won't argue with you there. Let me grab my guitar and we can get this party going." Chris disappeared in the bus and came back guitar in tow, followed by the rest of his band, "These guys don't want to be left out."

Steven looked at all of the men, "It doesn't seem like nearly enough but I don't know what to say except thank you."

Chris patted him on the shoulder, "You don't even have to say that. Now let's go find us a party!"

As they entered the patio, Steven motioned to the corner, "They have a microphone set up over there. I'm going to go find Alana."

"Don't worry we'll take care of it," Chris said heading in that direction.

Steven squirmed his way through the crowd trying to find Alana. The buzz on the patio was already circulating the news that Chris was there. Steven prayed Alana wouldn't hear it before he could get to her. He finally found her in the corner with Cheyenne and Chris. Almost as soon as he saw Alana she was in his arms.

"Hello," Steven smiled down at her pressing his body against hers.

Alana sighed, "Hello to you too."

Steven pushed the hair back from her face, "Are you surprised?"

Alana ran her hand up Steven's back into his hair, pulling his head down to her. She mumbled her agreement as their lips met. Alana slowly released his head, their lips parting. She whispered, "Thank you, Steven."

Steven beamed down at her. "Does it make up for missing the concert?"

Alana gave him another kiss, "You didn't have to make up for that."

Steven laughed, "No, I'd have just had to hear about it for the next thirty years."

Alana shoved him playfully, "I'm not that bad!"

"Let's watch the show," Steven whispered spinning her around to face the show.

Chris smiled watching the two of them standing there. Alana was leaning back against Steven, his arms holding her close. Chris smiled swallowing the envy he was feeling. Chris brushed off the sweat dripping down his cheek and focused on the crowd beyond Alana and Steven. He finished the song and looked over the crowd yelling into the microphone,

“Is this a party or what?” The crowd screamed back their agreement causing Chris to chuckle.

Chris played with his ear, “When my road manager came to me this afternoon telling me that someone wanted us to come back and do a few songs for an engagement party, I told him no. He neglected to tell me who it was for. But then Steven caught me in the weight room and filled me in.” He caught Alana’s eyes, “Darlin’ you’re absolutely glowing tonight. With all the shows you’ve made it to over the years, we’ve joked for years that I should put you on my payroll, or at least have a bunk for you on my bus. After meeting Steven today, I’m glad I never did,” Chris said shaking his head, “Let’s just say this redneck knows when he’d be in for an ass whoopin’ and that man you got behind ya, he’d be happy to do it.” Chris saw Steven stiffen up. He quickly added, “Not that anything would ever happen or we’d be able to put up with you on the bus. We can take only so much talk about how great Steven is.” The crowd laughed at Chris’s admission.

Chris stretched to look over the crowd towards the bar, “We got some champagne back there.... Get it out and pass it around.” Chris waited as the waitresses began passing out the champagne. “Seriously, all joking aside, I see the two of you together and I’m awed by it. Anyone who can love the way you two do, and trust the way you two do, deserves the absolute best. I wish you both the best of luck and all of the happiness life has to offer.” Chris’s road manager handed him a glass of champagne, “Here’s to love the way it’s supposed to be... to Alana and Steven!”

Steven gave Alana a kiss while everyone toasted them. He let her go and joined Chris. The two men shook hands before Steven took the microphone and sang one of Chris's love songs.

As Alana watched, she put her arm around Cheyenne. The two women swayed back and forth singing along. Alana leaned her head on Cheyenne's shoulder watching the two men she loved most in the world on stage together. Steven stood there singing to her a tune she loved dearly, but she was reminded of a bull ready for show, well groomed and antsy. Alana diverted her attention to Chris. He was prancing around the stage playing his guitar, like a wild stallion on the open range. The song ended. Alana's arm slid off of Cheyenne and she went up to the two men. She kissed Chris's cheek, "Thank you," she choked.

Chris smiled at her, "Its my pleasure, darlin'. Congratulations."

Alana returned the smile and then turned to Steven. She looked up at him and the tears crawled down her cheeks, "I love you. Thank you tonight has been amazing."

Steven wiped his own tears away and leaned down and kissed her. "I promise to make all your dreams come true."

The crowd applauded as Chris gave them a little shove, "Get going... I've got a party to host here!"

Steven and Alana smiled at Chris as they moved away and began dancing to the music. Alana sighed contentedly in Steven's arm. She looked up at him, "When are we getting married?"

Steven played with her hair, "Tonight?"

Alana shook her head, "Oh no... this night deserves a fairy tale wedding."

Steven pulled her in tighter, “We can worry about that later.”

They danced in their own little world until Chris told the crowd goodnight. Alana pulled away, “I’ll be right back.”

Alana rushed outside to find Chris getting ready to climb onto his bus, “Chris!” she called to him.

Chris stopped and smiled at her, “Hey babe.”

Alana halted in front of him, “Are you okay?”

Chris chuckled, “Of course I am, why in the world are you asking me that?”

Alana looked at him quizzically. In the pale moonlight, Chris looked older than his thirty-seven years. “You look.... tired I guess.”

Chris gave her a little nudge, “Gee, could that have anything to do with the fact that I did two shows tonight?”

Alana rolled her eyes, “Whatever... that wasn’t why I came out here.”

Chris leaned against the bus and crossed his arm over his chest, pulling his foot up under him, “What brought you out here, then?”

“I just wanted to thank you,” Alana said smiling at him.

“You already did, you didn’t need to come out here.”

Alana eyebrows knitted together as she thought about it, “I know, I didn’t need to, but I wanted too.”

Chris tugged at her hair, “Okay well ya did that. Now you got a man in there that I’m sure is missing you.”

Alana inhaled, her eyes dancing in the moonlight, “I know he’s the best. Have a safe trip... I’ll see you at the next show.” She leaned over and kissed his cheek.

Chris nodded and mumbled, “You too.” He watched her wave and head back into the bar. He pushed himself up off his bus with his elbows. “Let’s get the hell away from here,” Chris told the bus driver as he went back to his room.

Chapter 5

Alana had spent months planning this party for the Daniels' fiftieth wedding Anniversary. She'd planned every possible surprise she could, including tracking down some of the friends they'd lost touch with that had been at the wedding. Now with everything in place, she could relax and just be the photographer.

The camera sat on the table, a classic, Cannon AE-1, with hand grips that were well worn. The F-ring around the lens rubbed flat in two spots. The strap was fraying in the middle, "Cannon" barely a blur against the faded blue. When she picked the camera up and placed it around her neck, the fit was better than a glove. Life had used her, almost as hard as she'd used that camera.

Alana demanded perfection from her camera, just as those around her held her to such expectations. Spun around over and over, hoping to perform at the perfect aperture. Squeezed into the tiny square of the viewfinder, she was at the mercy of those around her. She was never allowed to run on auto, perhaps that is why she never allowed herself to trust her camera to use its auto settings.

With just a simple move of her thumb, she advances the film within the camera. A glance into the viewfinder, and all else is blocked out. The abuses she feels, she inflicts onto her camera. Her camera takes it and still performs. Here she is the master, here she is in control, she is one with the camera. Checking her watch, she headed back towards the side of the Elk's lodge.

A gust of wind shot through the garden tossing leaves about like confetti. Alana gently pressed the shutter on her camera capturing the look of surprise on Gloria and Harold Daniels' faces as they turned the corner and entered into the crowd of people awaiting them. Swiftly Harold grabbed Gloria and gave her a kiss that became frozen in time on Alana's film. She moved out of the way and found a chair to stand on. Her mind was on autopilot, there were pictures to be taken.

The crowd swarmed the elderly couple. This was the picture she kept in her head for what her life would be like with Steven. Gloria had met Harold when she was just seventeen, and they'd married the day after her eighteenth birthday. They'd raised four boys while running a successful contracting business. They'd weathered every storm that life had thrown at them. Alana admired them for that.

At thirty-three, Alana could finally relax. In just under seven months, she'd marry their youngest son and begin marking off the days to her own fiftieth wedding anniversary. Finally, she'd be truly a part of the family. The thought made Alana smile as she stepped down from her perch. She went over to her camera bag quickly changing out the used film for a new roll and grabbing a few extras. She slipped them into her pocket.

From the corner, Alana scanned the crowd. There was Steven playing with his nephews. Someday, she reminded herself, someday they'd have a family of their own. She caught Gloria's eye and waved as she brought her camera to her eye. There were pictures to be taken, she told herself. Alana was always where the pictures were, catching the young girls huddled together planning their lives with the boys of their

choices, capturing the mischief in the little boys' eyes as they snuck food off the buffet. Alana went bouncing through the crowd in the shroud of her camera.

She paused, when the sun went down, only long enough to help light the lanterns that were hung around the garden. By then she was eager for the party to be over. She wanted to get into the darkroom and begin developing the pictures, observe the magic of her gift. The whirl of the camera winding the film back into the canister, allowed her a break in her world of images.

Alana jumped at the hand that appeared on her shoulder. She turned with a smile, "Hey, stranger."

Steven smiled down at the beautiful photographer. He'd spent the night watching Alana fluttering around the crowd like a bee, pausing only long enough to gather the nectar in her camera. He rubbed her wind-bitten cheeks, "Hey beautiful. Got time for at least one dance?"

Alana glanced at her camera. Reluctantly she swung it around to her back, "I suppose one dance won't hurt."

Steven shook his head, "Honey, you're off duty now." He gently took the camera from around her neck, "The point of a party is for all the guests to have some fun. You may have planned this, volunteered to take the pictures, but you're still a guest. Now, let's go empty those pockets of yours." He took her hand and led her over to her camera bag.

Sheepishly, Alana opened the bag. The bottom of the bag filled with used yellow film canisters. She added another fifteen rolls from her pocket. "I guess I have enough," she said smiling.

Steven's feigned a pout, "It's hibernation time, I see."

Alana gave him a little shove, “You won’t even notice me gone.”

“Sure, I will, I always notice when you’re not by my side.”

Alana shook her head, amused. “Not when you’re at the station.”

Steven sighed, there was no use arguing the point. He knew how she was in the studio, nothing else mattered. “Let’s dance,” Steven said pulling her to him roughly.

Alana glanced up at him, fear racing through her body. Steven smoothed out her hair and kissed the top of it. Alana sighed as she laid her head on his chest, listening to his heart accelerate. The day Steven had walked into her life was the beginning of her life. For the first time, she mattered to someone. Even now she still waited for morning to come and everything to disappear.

Steven felt Alana’s arms tighten around him. He watched the crowd around them, this was his life. He gave her a small squeeze as he sighed. He leaned back, “Come on, let’s go talk to mom and dad.”

Alana’s eyes darted to where Harold and Gloria were standing still talking with people, “Oh let’s not bother them.”

“We won’t be bothering them. I bet you haven’t even talked to them at all tonight.”

“I’ve been busy,” Alana said a little defensively.

“And now you’re not. Now you can talk to them and everyone else,” Steven spoke firmly as if he was talking to a child.

Alana planted her feet. “No, really it’s not necessary. We’ll see them tomorrow.”

Steven taunted, “You are always telling me how important family and friends are, but when we get them all together you always hide behind that camera.”

“Someone has to capture it on film,” Alana pleaded, her face distorted with fear.

Steven placed his hands on Alana’s cheeks and leaned over and gave her a gentle kiss. As they parted he locked eyes with her. His voice was softer now, “Alana, I’ll be right by your side. I promise it won’t be painful.”

Alana forced a smile, “Let’s go.” She took his hand and let him lead her into the crowd. Alana’s hand started getting clammy in his as they began to mingle. She listened to the conversation buzzing around them. Steven gave her hand an encouraging squeeze. Alana and Steven were proof that opposites did attract. He was at home being the center of attention, Alana cringed at any attention. He was free with showing his affection for those that mattered to him, Alana struggled with it. Yet, somehow they managed to make their differences work.

After what seemed to be an eternity, they made their way to Harold and Gloria’s side. Alana couldn’t help but feel affection for these two people. She gave them each a hug and muttered, “Congratulations”.

Gloria smiled warmly at her, “This party was wonderful, Alana. Thank you.”

Alana shifted uncomfortably, “You’re welcome, but it was Steven’s idea.”

Steven rolled his eyes giving her a nudge, “My idea was a barbecue in your yard.”

Gloria showered both of them with the affection in her gaze, “And that would have been just fine too.”

“Then it wouldn’t have been a surprise,” Alana said.

“The only thing that matters is having everyone we care about here. And that includes you,” Gloria said.

Gloria’s words echoed through Alana’s head bringing tears to her eyes. She knew that Gloria loved her and thought of her as her own, but still Alana wondered if that was just because of Steven. Alana turned quickly and walked away back to her camera bag. Alana put her camera back around her neck, like a shield the camera allowed her to get control of herself. The sanctuary of the camera didn’t last long. Steven was by her side. He grabbed her bag, “Let’s just get out of here, you’ve had a long day.” Relieved Alana followed him out.

“Now that the party is done, maybe you can spare a few minutes tonight?” Steven said on the drive home.

Alana sighed, “I know, I’m sorry, I’ve been a little obsessed with this party.”

The traffic light turned red, Steven leaned over and gave Alana a kiss. Steven’s eyes twinkled under the streetlights, “No need to apologize, my love. I understand. I just have something I’ve been waiting to show you for a few days.”

“Can’t it wait until morning, I’m exhausted.”

Steven shook his head, “Nope, it has to be tonight.” Alana leaned her head on the cool car window. “Is anything, wrong?”

“I’m fine, just tired.” Alana watched as they went through the city streets to their home.

Steven made the turn onto Welcome Lane. The road was lined with cottonwood trees. Half way up the street the break in the trees revealed the small green mailbox that matched their country cottage styled house. As Steven maneuvered the truck through the circular drive, Alana couldn't help but be impressed by how the house had shaped up over the last few months.

They'd taken possession of the house back in July, but it had needed a lot of work before they'd been able to move in last week. They had needed to get some wiring in the house redone, which then resulted in a lot of walls needing to be replaced. The wrap around porch had to be almost entirely redone because the wood had rotted. Walls that remained in tact had to be stripped of the lead filled paint and repainted. There were many times during this process, Alana had felt less than enchanted with the house, but Steven believed in it. Alana had to agree that it was the perfect house now.

The house was a perfect match for them. There was plenty of room to park extra cars when they entertained. The yard still needed some attention, but there was plenty of room to barbecue and hang out in. Steven was finally getting a garage that was separate from the house to use as a workshop where he could dabble with wood to his hearts content. There was even a basement that was perfect for Alana to have a permanent darkroom rather than trying to do it all in the bathroom. From their porch they could see the street, but still feel shielded by the trees from prying eyes.

As soon as Steven parked the truck, he was out and at Alana's side. Alana struggled to keep up with Steven. He was dragging her

around to the back of the garage. He came to an abrupt stop outside the separate garage. “Close your eyes,” Steven demanded with a smile.

Alana rolled her eyes, at his excitement. “Why must I close my eyes? I’m really not that excited about a shop.”

“Just humor me,” Steven said seriously. With a sigh Alana closed her eyes. Steven opened the door and grabbed her hand, pulling her inside, “Okay you can open them now.”

Alana froze. She tried to speak but her voice was gone. The cement floors were covered in tile, the walls were finished and lined with shelves on one side. The room was brightly lit. One row of shelves had a variety of toys and colorful props. Another column of shelves only went part way down the wall and then had a pole with clothes hangers on it. There was a four-foot curtain hanging over part of the shelves. On the other side was the staging area for the portraits.. There was a door beside it. To Alana’s right, there was a short railing that sectioned off the corner. A handmade rocker was sitting in there. A window seat was next to this. A door went off of there. It took her a minute to realize what she’d walked in on. She looked at Steven, “Is this what I think it is?”

Steven grinned with a nod. Alana moved in closer her shoulders were shaking. She it was a perfect studio, one she would have designed if it had been what she’d wanted to do. Alana crossed the studio to the door next to the stage. Her hand flew to her mouth as she took in the darkroom.

Steven watched Alana’s eyes fill with tears. His chest swelled with pride as he watched Alana. She walked slowly around the darkroom. He’d listened to her complain about all the darkrooms she’d been in over

the years, and had kept a mental list of what she'd liked and didn't like. He was relieved seeing her reaction. "Do you like it?"

Alana turned to him, tears slipping down her cheek, "It's beautiful. I... don't know what to say."

Steven leaned down and gave her a gentle kiss. "Come with me." Steven took Alana's hand and took her to what he called the kid corner. He easily undid the latch on the little gate. "There's a mini kitchen in here," he said leading her to the door. There was a small mini fridge and hot plate with a sink and two cabinets.

Alana looked at him, "Why?"

"You said you wanted a place to be able to work and have our kids," Steven began, "I just figured having a kitchen out here would be easier than having to run to the house if you needed anything. It's small because I didn't want it to take away too much work space." He turned her around and pointed out the window seat. He lifted up the seat and slid out a railing and brought it up locking it into place converting it into a crib. The moonlight shined down on the crib making it look as if it was awaiting a precious gift from heaven. The pride on his face made Alana smile. "See the baby could even sleep right here," Steven explained running his hand over the railing.

"Steven, I don't know what to say."

Steven rubbed her cheek, "You don't have to say anything. Come on, we haven't even looked at the lobby yet."

Alana just stared at him, "You're kidding right?"

Steven only smiled, as he led her out of the corner and back across the studio. She followed him into a small lobby. Everything was

done in soft blues and creme. He'd hung several of her portraits on the wall, added a creme sofa and several large plants. There was a counter to the side.

Alana looked up at Steven, her hands running under his shirt. His heart was racing. She tilted her head and studied him with a soft smile. "You are amazing, Steven. But what about your shop? You need a place to work and have all your tools."

"We can add a shop later, if we want. I've made it this long without one. I'm really not at all interested in doing that much anyways, I don't have time." Steven gazed lovingly into Alana's eyes tracing the lines of her face with his fingertips.

Alana closed her eyes, his normally soft fingertips had become rough from all the work that he'd been doing around the house and this studio. Her head beginning to swim from the sensations she was feeling. The studio was perfect, but she wasn't at all certain she deserved it. Suddenly she found the idea of her camera frightening. Steven lifted her chin and brushed his lips over hers.

Alana spoke softly letting her hands fall to her side. "This is just unbelievable, I can't believe you did all of this."

Steven turned to look at his handiwork, "I had some help. Are you sure everything is okay? I know I should have probably told you what I was doing and let you help design it."

Alana could hear the arguments between Steven and Harold as they worked on this. The vision of them coming together to work on something this huge was almost as touching as the studio. Alana couldn't

help but smile. "Steven, I wouldn't change a thing." Alana looked around and thought to herself, 'except for not wasting the money on it.'

"Good. I want you to have everything," Steven sighed relieved, "Now the only question is when are you putting in your notice at the paper?"

"I can't do that. We need that to help pay for this," Alana said in a panic.

Steven picked up Alana's hand, bending down to be eye level with her, "What do you think this is for? You'll make money in here. We'll cover the bills. You have got to do this."

Alana shook her head rigorously, "Not now. We need the steady paychecks."

Steven rolled his eyes, "Alana, you worry too much. I didn't slave over all of this so it can sit idle." He put his hands on her shoulders and turned her around. He forced her to look at the pictures. "You have talent, Alana. You have to share that with everyone and you can't do that on a crummy paper."

"I don't know..."

"Alana." Steven spoke with a slight annoyance, "This is what you've dreamt of your entire life. You've got everything you need right here to make it a reality." He brushed the tears that were slipping down Alana's cheek away, "I know it's scary, but I'm going to be right here with you, every step of the way."

Alana swallowed taking another look around. Her mind was working overtime. All the possibilities were overwhelming to her. She was afraid. "I know you will."

“Do you really, Alana? I know, I’ve screwed up in the past and left you hanging a lot, but we’re really doing this. This is going to be our life. And you need to begin building up this studio before we start having kids.”

“I know. You’re right,” Alana said hoping she sounded more confident than she felt. So many times, Steven had made her promises, convinced her to do things and then disappeared into his own world. She’d be left to deal with it on her own.

“Then you’ve got to take the first jump.” Steven walked behind the counter and pulled out a couple large catalogs, “Pick out the stuff that you need to get this place going.” Alana stared at the catalogs as if they were snakes ready to strike. Steven reached over and opened them up to pages he’d marked, “Here I already looked at some of them. You need lights, right?” Alana took a hesitant step towards the counter. “What about these ones?” Steven asked pointing to the page.

The curiosity won out, Alana smiled up at him, “You’ve been researching this stuff?”

Steven beamed, “A little,” reaching down and pulling out a stack of photography magazines.

Alana shook her head, “Okay now, this can all wait.”

“Wait on what?”

Alana blushed as she took his hand, “There are more important things to do right now.”

Steven grinned, “Like what?”

“Like me showing you my gratitude,” Alana trailed off as she led him out of the studio.

Chapter 6

Steven came into the house and dropped his keys on the table. He sighed. It was good to be home. It wasn't often that he didn't enjoy his days at the station. Yet it never failed when corporate came in that things at the station got stressed. On those days, he couldn't wait to leave. Today had been no different; they'd come with a list of things to change. They wanted to make this station another carbon copy of the big city stations, but his listeners liked the small town feel of this station. It was on these days that he wished he was just a disc jockey.

Steven made his way to the bathroom. It was still a few hours before Alana would be done in the studio and he needed to unwind. He turned on the shower and then went back to the bedroom for clothes to change into. Getting back into his shorts would help. There was nothing like dressing up for corporate to make his nerves fray. It wasn't until the steam from his shower faded that the stress from his day at the studio did too. He wrapped the towel around his waist and grabbed another to wipe off the condensation from the mirror.

Life is good, he thought to himself as he shaved. At thirty-five, he was living the American dream. He had the job of his dream, was buying the house of his dreams and was counting down the months until he had the wife of his dream. There was nothing about his life that he'd change. He rinsed off the razor he was using and tossed it in the trashcan. A bright blue box caught his attention. He leaned down and picked it up. He turned it over in his hand. "EPT home pregnancy test." He looked up at the mirror, his smile slowly spreading across his face. "Could Alana be

pregnant?” He whispered. He poked around the trashcan, but couldn’t find the test. Steven put the trashcan back.

She must want to surprise me with the results, he thought. He looked at his watch it was only three. “What am I supposed to do for two hours?” he asked his reflection. He turned off the lights to the bathroom and went into the bedroom. He pulled out some jeans from his dresser but put them back, reminding him self that he needed to act as normal as possible. He put on some shorts and a t-shirt and went back out to the kitchen and grabbed a soda.

The sound of the clock ticking away the seconds was putting a cage around him. He searched for something to do, but there was nothing. The thought of their house becoming a real home with the pitter-patter of little feet made his grin grow larger.

Steven sat down on the couch and started making a mental list of everything they’d need to do before the baby got there. He jumped up and raced into the kitchen. He cursed as he stared at the contents of the fridge. He didn’t know how to cook, and he was pretty certain that Alana would need more than just top ramen to nourish her and the baby. “Baby,” Steven whispered to the air. What a surreal feeling, Steven thought. Steven picked up the phone and ordered take out from Alana’s favorite restaurant. Steven set the phone down, “That should kill a little time,” he said as he grabbed his keys on his way out the door to get the food.

Steven got home and set the table for dinner. He arranged the flowers he’d picked up in a vase at the center of the table. He lit the candles and turned some music on. He went back to the refrigerator and pulled out a bottle of wine. His hands shook as he opened the bottle and

poured the glasses and set them on the table. Finally, the table passed his inspection. He looked out the kitchen window and saw Alana heading towards the house. His heart leaped into his throat. She was having his baby. He flipped around and grabbed the wine off the table and dumped it down the sink. He forced himself to turn around calmly at the sound of the door opening.

Steven raced over to her, scooping her up and giving her a passionate kiss. He didn't want to let her go, but he did. He set her down gently and just stared down at her.

Alana smiled up at him, "Hello to you too."

Steven blushed, he couldn't help it. "How was your day?" he managed to get out.

"Not as good as the night's looking." Alana glanced over at the table, "What's all of this?"

Steven stared at her warning himself not to let anything slip. He had to let her tell him the news. He didn't want to take that from her, as much as he wanted to know right then. "With everything going on, we haven't had a chance to celebrate the missing boxes."

Alana looked at him skeptically, but chuckled, "It looks great."

"Thank you," Steven said putting an arm around her and leading her over to her chair. His hand brushed against her stomach and it sent a chill through him. He closed his eyes and tried to calm himself. He could feel Alana's eyes on him.

"Are you okay?"

Steven smiled going around to his chair, "I've never been better."

Alana laughed shaking her head, “You do have a glow about you. So it was a good day at the station?”

“Heck no, corporate was there. I couldn’t wait to get out of there. How were things in the studio today?”

“They were slow, but I got a lot done in the darkroom, so it was good.”

Steven picked up his fork, and took a few bites. ‘Normalcy,’ he kept repeating to himself. The food tasted like cardboard to him. He wasn’t interested in it at all. How long was she going to wait to tell me, he wondered. “You ready for your trip?”

Alana smiled, “Yeah, the bags are packed, but I wish you were going with me.”

Steven nodded, “I know. I just can’t get away.” Alana was leaving in the morning to go see Cheyenne in Colorado and see Chris in concert.

Alana reached across the table and patted Steven’s hand, “I know. I’ll be back on Sunday.”

“So anything out of the ordinary happen today?” Steven asked fishing for the information.

“No,” Alana said slowly wondering what had got into Steven, “Like what?”

“I don’t know, get tested or something?”

Alana laughed, “And how would I be tested?”

Steven blushed, “I don’t know.”

“Then neither do I.” Alana said continuing to eat. Her smile faded as she remembered that morning. She looked up at Steven and wondered how he knew. She lowered her eyes to her plate and

concentrated on finishing up her dinner. She got up to clear the dishes but Steven grabbed the plate from her.

“Go sit down and relax. I’ll clean up this mess.” Steven didn’t give her a chance to argue. Alana laid down on the couch. Her head pounding, things made sense now. How was she going to break it to him that she wasn’t pregnant and was relieved by it. A few minutes later Steven came in and moved her legs so he could sit and massage her feet.

“We should get you a stool for the dark room. You don’t need to be standing in there all the time.”

Alana looked at him. His excitement was clear, and why wouldn’t it be? Kids were always on the top of his priority lists for his life. Alana couldn’t look at him as she spoke, “I’m not pregnant, Steven.”

There was a long pause. Steven’s hands stopped moving over Alana’s feet. Steven’s voice came out choked up, “It’ll happen soon.”

Alana sat up, “I don’t want it to happen soon.”

Steven struggled to catch his breath, “What do you mean?”

“We’ve got too much going on to have a baby right now.”

“We do not,” Steven said forcefully. He stood up and began pacing the room.

“Steven, we do. We have the wedding. Our jobs. We’re still figuring out how to live together.”

“Those are just excuses. You can find excuses for anything.”

Alana stood up, “Yes, maybe they’re excuses, but they are valid. A baby needs security.”

Steven couldn’t explain the panic that ran through him, “What would you have done if the test had been positive.”

“I don’t know,” Alana said quietly ringing her hands.

Steven sank down into the chair. The woman standing there, he didn’t know. His eyes burned, “How can you not know?” Steven’s voice came out sounding strange to him.

“I just don’t know. I suppose we’d have figured it out, but how I don’t know.”

Steven couldn’t hold back the rage at the unexpected turn of events, “Suppose? You SUPPOSE we’d have figured it out.”

Alana rubbed her hands over her face, “Why are we fighting over this? We’re not pregnant, there is no baby.”

“Will there ever be a baby?” Steven pulled Alana’s hands from her face, squeezing her wrists.

“Of course there will be a baby, someday,” Alana said her voice shaking with fear.

Steven’s eyes bore holes into Alana. He shoved her backwards letting go of her, “I know how you and someday work.” Alana fell to the floor. She looked up at him her body shaking. “Someday would never come for you, if you didn’t have someone forcing it on you.”

Alana stopped shaking and crawled on to the couch, “No one forces things on me.”

Steven folded his arms across his chest and raised an eyebrow, “Name one thing that you actually went after.”

“You.”

Steven laughed. A sinister laugh that made Alana’s blood run cold, “You did not come after me. I came up to you. I hounded you for

dates. Every time we broke up I came back crawling to you. What a fucking fool I've been."

"We would have never gone out if I hadn't accepted them."

"You're a coward, Alana," Steven spat disgusted by her presence, "You do not go and do anything that involves change without a really strong shoves in that direction."

"What does it matter? I do it. And it works out."

Steven's jaw dropped. He couldn't look at Alana anymore.

"Motherhood can't be forced on anyone and 'work out', as you say."

"It's not going to be forced on me."

Steven's shoulders slumped. He could feel all of his dreams slipping out of his hands and he didn't know how to stop them. "Yes it is. We will always have our job. We will always be figuring out how to live together, because people are always changing."

"Steven, we're just starting out," Alana pleaded with him.

Steven shook his head, "No, we're not, Alana. We've been doing this dance for over twelve years now." He headed for the door. He needed to clear his head.

"Where are you going?" Alana asked fighting back the tears.

"I need to go sort things out. I don't know what to think right now." Steven walked out the door, slamming it behind him.

Chapter 7 Alana leaves

Alana fell to the couch when the tires squealed out of the drive. She was lost. She sat there staring ahead rubbing her wrists where Steven had grabbed them. She tried to wrap her mind around what had happened, how things had gotten so out of hand? She sat there letting the tears run freely. The phone rang through the darkness. Alana pounced on it, relief rushing over her as she said, “Hello.”

The bubbly voice on the other end, shattered her hopes, “Hey, Alana, its Cheyenne. I just wanted to tell you to have a safe flight. You’re flight is getting in at one right?”

Cheyenne’s excitement pushed some of the despair away a little. “Yes, I’ll be there,” Alana said quietly.

“Good, I can’t wait to see you again.”

“I still need to finish some stuff before I get to bed. I’ll see you tomorrow,” Alana said quietly

“All right sweetie. I’ll be at the airport with bells on.”

“See you tomorrow, Shy,” Alana said hanging up the phone. Alana looked at the door. Alana tried to push the image of Steven’s departure out of her mind, but she couldn’t.

Alana got up and went into the kitchen searching for a distraction. She opened up the refrigerator and pulled out some left over Chinese food and picked at it, still staring into the refrigerator. She tossed the carton of food back into the frig and slammed the door. “Food is the last thing I need right now,” she muttered to herself. Alana constantly fought to keep her weight within the doctor prescribed healthy range. Opening

up the cabinet above the stove, Alana got out the tequila and made herself a drink. Reassuring herself that Steven would be back soon, she went into her office. Her office was her haven. It was home to her computer and as Steven called it, her shrine to Chris. That wasn't what the pictures of the concerts were about to her. This was her reminder that life could be uncomplicated and that life was about living in the moment.

Living in the moment, Alana thought. "Why can't I live in the moment with Steven?" she whispered to the pictures. Alana hung her head, right now the moment wasn't where she wanted to live. She took a big drink of her sunrise, the tequila burning her throat. Alana prayed for the tequila to calm her fears.

Alana reached for the computer's power button but stopped. She wasn't in the mood to deal with things on the computer. In a fog she moved through the house, pulling out the vacuum focusing on making crisp lines in the carpet. She went to the linen closet and rearranged the towels that were there. Back in the living room, she dusted the pictures on the wall, fluffed the pillows on the couch, anything she could do to keep herself from watching the clock. Finally exhausted, she fell into bed.

Alana rolled over and turned off the alarm clock. She laid back, the plans for her trip rushing through her mind. She rolled over and kissed Steven's pillow. The softness of the cotton pillowcase on her lips startled her. She sat up. Steven's side of the bed hadn't been slept in. She tossed the covers back and ran out to the living room.

Everything was as she left it when she went to bed. That realization weighed heavily on Alana. She grabbed the phone and called Steven's cell phone.

“Hello,” a drunk Steven answered.

“Where are you?” Alana said relieved to hear his voice.

“I’m out with friends.... Shouldn’t you be on a plane?”

“Are you okay?” Alana asked concerned.

“Of course I’m fine. Go have your fun. I’m having mine.” The phone went dead. Alana stared at it through the tears. She tried to call back but was sent straight to voice mail.

Alana went back into the bedroom and threw on some sweats. Her eye fell on the empty pregnancy test box, and the tears came harder. It is for the best that the test was negative, Alana reminded herself. Alana looked at herself in the mirror, “It is better this way.”

Alana grabbed the hair tie off the counter and put her hair up. She laid back down on the bed and hugged Steven’s pillow. She wondered if she should cancel her trip and wait for Steven to return. The memory of the long night that she’d just gotten through and the harshness of Steven’s words urged her to go. She sat up and looked around; all of this could all wait, there was nothing she could do to change it.

Alana got off of the plane in Denver. Cheyenne was standing there waiting for her with open arms. “Did you have bags to claim?” Cheyenne asked after they’d hugged.

Alana shook her head, “I’m traveling light this time. How’s Mark?”

Cheyenne laughed thinking about her husband. “He’s ready to run away, he’s still recovering from your last visit.” The last time Alana had come out to see Cheyenne, they’d driven her husband crazy with their

antics. Something about it when these two got together they knew no boundaries.

“Then he should be thankful we have the show tonight.”

“Oh he is, although it’s probably just because I’m not dragging him with me this time.”

Alana slung her arm around Cheyenne’s shoulders, “I’m happy to replace him,” she laughed.

Cheyenne led Alana out of the airport to her husband’s Dodge pickup. “We have time to get something to eat and change before we head over to the show.”

Alana shuddered, the excitement already beginning to build “Then let’s get this show on the road!”

Alana sat silently for a little while as Cheyenne headed towards Denver. “Steven never came home last night.”

Alana’s admission startled Cheyenne. She glanced quickly over at Alana to try and see how Alana was taking it. She could see how upset Alana was over this and it infuriated Cheyenne. This wasn’t the first time Steven had gone out pouting, every time it left Alana feeling responsible and this time didn’t appear to be any different. Resisting the urge to attack Steven, Cheyenne commented, “He didn’t.”

Alana nodded staring at the glove box, “We had a huge fight last night. I thought it was him calling when you called last night. He found the pregnancy test box.”

“Oh.”

“Yeah, he got his hopes all up,” Alana sighed.

“You’ve been through this before.” Cheyenne sighed, “When you get home everything will be fine.”

Alana shook her head staring at the passing terrain, “It wasn’t like the other fights... I should have waited and taken a test here.”

“Don’t even blame yourself, Alana. Steven should have known better than getting his hopes up, besides what’s the big deal? You’re not pregnant, it’s not like the timing was perfect for this.”

Alana sighed, “I know that, I tried to tell him.... I guess his biological clock is just ticking.”

Cheyenne couldn’t hold back the burst of laughter. On of the things that had drawn these two together was their sense of humor. “Men and their clocks!” Cheyenne exclaimed through the laughter.

Alana laughed fighting back tears, “Okay. Let me try calling him and then it’s out of mind for the night!” Alana reached into her purse and grabbed her cell phone. She waited for the beep on Steven’s voice mail, “Hey, Steven, I love you. See you tomorrow night.” She hung up.

“You look like you could use a drink, I figured we could go to Rio Grande, they’ve got ‘ritas you can swim in,” Cheyenne said pulling into the Mexican restaurant in downtown Denver.

“I always knew you had good ideas,” Alana said getting out of the truck and grabbing her bag.

They walked inside and were greeted by the host who promptly led them to their table. The restaurant was very open with brick walls and brightly colored paintings hung on the wall. Of course there were the typical sombreros scattered around on the walls and as centerpieces on the larger tables. As soon as they were sitting, Cheyenne told the host,

“Go ahead and tell our waiter to bring us some of your famous strawberry margaritas.”

The host nodded and left the women alone. Alana got up, “I’m just going to go ahead and go change really fast.”

Alana wandered around for a bit finding the bathroom. She went into the vacant handicap stall and opened her bag. She slipped into the black leather skirt and white tank top that she’d brought. The skirt went to her mid calf and the tank top clung to her chest. She replaced her black knee high boots with the tennis shoes she’d been wearing. She grabbed her make-up bag and closed her carry-on. She slipped her boots on and zipped them up. Coming out of the stall she went to the mirror. She applied her make-up and gave her self the once over in the full-length mirror. Almost satisfied with her appearance, she pulled out the hair tie and let her hair fall around her shoulders. Confident and carefree, Alana tossed her bag over her shoulder and joined Cheyenne at the table.

Alana walked through the crowded restaurant with growing confidence. She smiled at some of the men that were gawking at her and slid into the table across from Cheyenne. “Have you lost weight?” Cheyenne asked appreciatively.

Alana blushed, “A little, mostly just toned up and actually bought something that fit.”

“Whatever you did, you look amazing.”

Cheyenne watched the waiter come over with their drinks. He set Alana’s in front of her with a smile spreading over his face as his eyes ran down Alana’s top. The women gave him their lunch order and the waiter walked away with a glance back at Alana. Cheyenne shook her head with

a laugh, “Damn girl everyone is checking you out. I think I should have dressed up a little more.”

Alana rolled her eyes at Cheyenne’s compliment. “That is so not true. Besides it doesn’t matter how much they ‘check me out’ I have Steven.”

“Yeah, Steven,” Cheyenne mumbled taking a drink of her margarita. “Just wait until Chris sees you.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

“It doesn’t mean anything really... just that his reaction should be pretty good,” Cheyenne said with a small smile.

“Chris is just my friend nothing more. I’m happy with Steven.”

“Are you? Are you really all that happy with Steven? It seems like he does more to make you miserable than happy,” Cheyenne observed.

“Of course I am. He’s perfect. He takes care of me. He’s always there for me,” Alana insisted.

Cheyenne about choked on her drink, “He’s what?”

“You heard me, Cheyenne. You don’t know him like I do.”

Cheyenne looked out the window watching the cars pass by while she took a few calming breaths. She turned back to Alana. “You’re right I don’t know Steven all that well. But I do know how many times you’ve called me in tears over what he’s done to you.”

“That was because of me not what he’s done.”

“And what about Rhonda and Joy... and all the times he’s guilted you out of your trips to see Chris?”

“Rhonda and Joy happened when we were broken up,” Alana said quietly.

“A fight doesn’t automatically mean you’re broken up. If he really loved you, he wouldn’t just go off and pout and get some cheap thrills with women he works with. And what do you think he’s doing now? You’re wearing his ring... you don’t just go running off and pouting over something stupid like a negative pregnancy test. You just move on.”

Alana stared at the condensation on her margarita glass, “He isn’t out with anyone now... He’s changed... we’ve changed.”

“You might have changed but I seriously doubt he has. And why should he change? No matter what he does, you wait around for the jack ass to come crawling back when ever it suits him.”

“I’m here aren’t I?” Alana said defensively.

“And I’d bet money that before you left you called him... and he told you to go so he could use this trip later against you.”

Alana’s eyes jumped to meet Cheyenne’s briefly, “I – I didn’t.”

Cheyenne raised an eyebrow, “I can see that you did.”

“I couldn’t leave things the way they were.”

“Why not? He did. And you’ve already called him once since you were here. How many more times are you going to call him tonight? And why even bother calling him, just so you can find out the sob is doing exactly what you know he’s doing? Getting drunk... finding someone to pass the night with? You don’t need that shit Alana. You deserve a lot better!”

“This is just one time,” Alana whispered.

“It’s not one time! Why am I even wasting my breath here? You obviously enjoy being controlled like a damn puppet.”

“Shy,” Alana sighed, “He’s the best thing that’s ever happened to me. Sure it may not be the best relationship in the world... but I know he loves me.”

The waiter came over and set their food down. Both women stared down at their plates long after he was gone. Cheyenne finally looked up at Alana picking at her food. Her heart went out to the woman sitting there. She knew how much Alana loved Steven, yet she couldn’t help but think Alana would be better off with him out of her life. There had been a time long ago that Alana did need the guidance and control that Steven executed over her, but now Alana needed to know that she could stand on her own. Cheyenne saw the sparkle of a tear sliding down Alana’s cheek. She reached out and grabbed Alana’s hand and gave it a little squeeze.

“What did you bring for Chris this time?” Cheyenne asked gently.

Chapter 8

Cheyenne pulled in to the Grizzly Rose. The parking lot was still empty except for the buses and the cars of employees. As they got out of the truck, one of the men standing outside wearing a security tee shirt walked over to them, “The show’s sold out for tonight.”

Alana smiled at him, “We’ve got our tickets.”

“Then why are you here so early?” he asked.

Cheyenne laughed, “It’s just what we do. We get here early to make sure we can get backstage passes.”

The security guard gave them a skeptical look, “Well, you have to stay out front.”

Alana laughed at the retreating guard, “How many times have we heard that one?”

“Too many to count!” Cheyenne laughed, then pointing back by the buses, “Hey there’s Lonnie!”

Alana looked at where Cheyenne was pointing. Chris’s fiddle player had just emerged from the bus lighting up a cigarette. Alana put her fingers to her lips and let out a loud whistle. Lonnie looked around spotting the girls, he yelled towards the bus, “Hey Alana and Cheyenne are out here!”

Alana and Cheyenne took off running towards Lonnie only to be stopped by the security guard, “I told you, you guys have to stay in front.”

Lonnie came up to them, “It’s okay. They’re with us.” The guard scowled at Lonnie but walked away. Lonnie turned towards the women

giving them hugs. He stood there playing with Alana's hair while he talked, "How have y'all been?"

"We're doing great!" Alana said leaning into Lonnie sliding an arm around his waist.

Cheyenne laughed, "Don't mind her we had dinner and a few drinks."

"There ain't nothing wrong with that," Lonnie laughed.

Ted, the guitar player, came out freshly showered. "It's trouble showing up again," he teased

Alana put her hands on her hips, "What ever trouble we may or may not get into, you guys are always to blame."

Lonnie laughed, "Remember the time we all got thrown out of the Waffle House in Cincinnati."

Cheyenne groaned, "Do you have to remind me. It took me months to get out all the syrup out from my hair."

"You're the one that was complaining about needing something to calm your hair down, I think I handled it nicely with that syrup," Ted said throwing his arm around Cheyenne's shoulder.

"No, my favorite was still the time we were in Phoenix and you guys had Chris convinced we'd hired him a stripper for his thirtieth birthday," Alana laughed.

Lonnie's eyebrows danced, "Yes that was good. Thank god he didn't end up in jail over that one."

"Come on guys, we've got to get the sound check done," a young man called from beside the bus.

"Who's that?" Alana asked.

“That’s the new road manager, James. Good kid but I don’t think he’ll last. We’ll catch up with you ladies later,” Lonnie said over his shoulder.

The girls walked back to the front of the bar and waited. As other fans showed up the women greeted them. The familiarity wiping all of Alana’s cares away. The hours passed quickly and before they knew it, the doors were opening.

Alana handed her ticket to the doorman and walked in. Holding Cheyenne’s hand, they weaved through the club to find the merchandise table. Finding Rick, the merchandise man, at his post, the ladies got their passes to go back during the meet and greet to visit with Chris for a few minutes. They stayed at the merchandise table catching up with Rick until it was time to line up for the meet and greet.

The woman ahead of them in the meet and greet line turned around and asked, “How can you guys be so calm?”

Alana smiled knowingly at the woman’s obvious anticipation. “This isn’t our first time.”

The woman’s eyes lit up, “How many times have you met him, is he as nice as he seems?”

Alana’s smile faded, she’d had this conversation too many times not to realize where it was headed. She sighed as she said, “He is even nicer.”

The woman squeezed Alana’s arm, “You don’t know how relieved I am to hear that, we’ve met other stars that haven’t been so nice, totally blowing us off.”

Alana smiled, “Chris won’t blow you off. He loves this time with his fans. He wants to talk to you, but you have to remember he doesn’t have a lot of time during these things so real in depth conversations don’t happen very often.”

The woman sighed, “So what are these things like, and really how many times have you met him?”

“Honey, I can’t even guess how many times we’ve done this. If I had to guess it’d probably be a few a hundred times, but I was there when he was playing --” Alana replied.

The woman jumped towards Alana, “So he like knows you?”

Cheyenne laughed, “Oh yeah, Chris knows Alana.”

Alana gave Cheyenne a playful glare, “I can get a little rowdy at the shows. But really he is exactly as he portrays himself. You have nothing to worry about. This is a pretty finely oiled machine. You go in, give him whatever it is you brought for him to sign. Then you get to take a picture, talk for just a minute or two, pretty much just as long as it takes to sign and pose for the picture.”

Alana started to turn back towards her friend, but the woman pulled at her. In a hushed voice the woman whispered, “What about his looks? Is he as sexy as he is in his videos?”

Alana just shrugged, “He’s not hard on the eyes.”

The smile on the woman’s face made the hair on Alana’s neck stand on end. She could practically see the images that were going through the woman’s mind, she didn’t need to hear her say, “I would love to get a handful, if you know what I mean,” to know that the woman saw Chris as a piece of meat.

Alana clenched her teeth and turned towards Cheyenne, unable to say anything. Cheyenne looked at the woman, “Do us a favor and don’t. He is a person. He doesn’t deserve to be mauled.”

The woman tsked at them, “I was never going to actually maul him. It’s much more enjoyable when they think they’ve started it.”

Alana was relieved to see James approaching. He led the crowd through the bar to a room in back. Alana and Cheyenne hung back until they were last. When they got to James, they stopped and Alana asked, “James, we were wanting to surprise Chris you think we could wait right outside here until the meet and greet is about done?”

James glanced at Alana. He knew how much Chris’s fans meant to him and was warned when he took the job, that there was a group of the fans that he was extremely close to, and although he’d only been on the job a few weeks, he recognized the women from pictures that Chris kept on the bus. “Yeah, that’d be fine.”

They watched James go inside and begin his spiel on what was allowed. Alana leaned against the wall to wait. Alana’s mind wandered back to the first concert trip she’d taken to see Chris twelve years ago. She marched up to the bartender and asked, “When does Chris Reed start performing?”

The bartender looked at her like she was crazy, “How do you know who he is?”

“I was here a month ago. I flew back to see him again,” panic set in as she realized she should have called ahead to see if he was a part of the house band and not just a one night performance, “He is performing here this weekend?”

The bartender shook his head in disbelief, “Are you really telling me you flew in just to see Chris? He ain’t nothing but a country boy, with a guitar and a band of wannabees musicians. **Where** did you fly from?”

Alana smiled and nodded, “Yeah, I flew here for the weekend from California just to see Chris.”

The bartender laughed, “You’re insane!”

Alana shrugged, “Just answer my question.”

“He’ll be on in about an hour. If you don’t want to wait that long, go on out back; they’re probably out there waiting for their set.”

Alana smiled and went around back of the bar. Her heart raced as she tried to figure out how to approach Chris and his band. While she was still getting up her nerves, the back door opened and the bartender stepped out. “Chris, you won’t believe what some chick was just telling me at the bar.”

Chris looked up from his guitar with a mischievous smile, “What? That they wanted to go home with you?”

“No, that wouldn’t surprise me. You got yourself your first groupie.”

Chris rolled his eyes, lighting a cigarette, “There’s no way in hell I have a groupie.”

Alana stepped around the corner into view of the guys, “No you don’t have a groupie, but you do have a fan.”

Chris whipped around to face Alana, his face as red as the Coca-Cola sign behind him. He reached up and tipped his hat to her, “Hello, ma'am”

Alana turned to see who he was talking to, “You’re not calling me ma'am, are you?”

Chris played with his ear, “Well, yeah I was. I’m Chris Reed.”

Alana took Chris’s outstretched hand and shook it, “I’m Alana Murphy. I was here last month and you just stole my heart with your performance.”

Chris again blushed, “Well thank you, Alana. I do my best.”

The bartender chimed in, “She flew from California just to see you this weekend.”

Fear crossed Chris’s face momentarily, “Is that true?”

Alana shifted her weight as she nodded, “Yeah. I didn’t get a chance to talk to you the last trip.” Chris stunned into silence walked over to her and gave her a bear hug that should have broken a few ribs.

Alana rubbed her side. It took her a minute to realize the pain had come from Cheyenne's elbow and not the hug from years ago. She looked over at Cheyenne, “What was that for?”

“It’s time to go in,” Cheyenne said with a grin

Alana took a deep breath, the excitement of seeing Chris was still there after all these years. The women stepped into the room and were greeted enthusiastically by Chris. “Oh my god is that really Miss Cali and Miss Colorado?” Chris exclaimed running over to them, bringing them to him in a group hug, “How the heck have my girls been?”

Alana laughed, “That settles it, we’re making sure all of our shows are spanned out more.”

Chris glared at her briefly before his trademark dimples broke through, “You wouldn’t dare.”

Alana dismissed his comment, shoving the bag she was carrying at him, “Here, take this I’m tired of carrying it.”

“Woman, you don’t have to bring me a present every time you come see me.”

Alana rolled her eyes watching Chris hand off his present to James. Alana loved listening to him talk. One word out of Chris’s mouth and you knew he was from Texas. The smoothness of his accent always lulled Alana into a trance. Alana moved her head back as Chris’s hand waved in front of her face.

“Where the heck were you, woman?” Chris asked grinning.

“I was right here,” Alana said with a slight blush that was met with laughter.

“No, darlin’ you were miles and miles away.”

Alana rolled her eyes at Chris, “No.”

Cheyenne looked at Alana, “Be nice to her Chris, she had to get up at three this morning to make her flight out here for your show.”

Chris looked over at James, “Let’s get these women out of here before they start getting really violent.” The women handed over their cameras to James who quickly snapped a few pictures. “Now remember, go to the merchandise table after the show. Someone will take you to the buses.”

Cheyenne linked arms with Alana as she gave Chris a smile, “Don’t worry, we’ll be there.”

Chris watched the women disappear. He followed James out of the room to the back of the stage where his band was waiting for him. He could already hear the crowd beginning to chant his name and feel the

adrenaline pumping through his veins. There was no denying it; this is what his life was about. As was the ritual, the guys crowded around him in a huddle. He met eyes with each one before he began to speak, "I don't have to tell you, Alana and Cheyenne are out there tonight, which means we've gotta work harder to entertain them, any screw ups they'll tell us about it." Chris chuckled thinking about how Alana was always quick to notice the little things about the show. Let's go have some fun." The guys didn't break right away. They all closed their eyes and offered their own silent prayers before exchanging looks and breaking.

As soon as Chris came out, he could feel the change in the crowd. He stood straighter as he grabbed his guitar from the stand, and looked out over the crowd coming to life. The momentary doubts of being able to give them what they paid to see floated through the Chris's mind, but as soon as he began to sing all that faded away. With the expertise of a seasoned performer, Chris worked the crowd making eye contact with as many people as possible, yet he found himself constantly checking on how Cheyenne and Alana were doing with the show. As long as they were having fun, he knew he was doing it right.

Chris left the stage and listened to the crowd calling him back for the encore. While he waited for the band to retake their places and bring the music back up it hit him. After all these years, people like Alana and Cheyenne were still spending their money to travel and see him. The realization sent chills through him. He went back out on the stage and threw every last ounce of energy he had into it. When the song ended he turned to his band and raised a finger singling he wanted the music to wait.

Chris walked up in front of Alana. He wiped his brow with the back of his hand and grinned at them and then looked up at the crowd, "Forgive me," he began out of breath, "This ol boy needs to spend a little time at the gym," he laughed at himself, as he pulled nervously at his ear. "It's about time for me to get out of here, but before I do, I need to do something." The way the crowd silenced themselves made Chris more nervous. For a moment, he wondered if he shouldn't be doing this, but he'd already started and now they were waiting for him. Chris took a deep breath and pulled out the ear piece from his ear and began to pace the stage. "Y'all are the best fans out there and I'm so blessed to have you," He stopped and played with his ear thoughtfully, "When I was first starting out, I was told when you get people traveling to see you, you know you're doing something right. I was excited years ago, when I first started to recognize familiar faces popping up at shows."

Chris wandered back over to Alana and Cheyenne meeting their eyes before continuing, "Now that I've been doing this for a while, I have to disagree. The sign of success is that years later, I'm still seeing the same people night after night, traveling to see me."

Chris's voice began to tremble as he fought back the powerful emotions that were stirring up within him. He pulled at his ear once more. He had to look away from the women he was talking about to continue. "I'm out there traveling two hundred days out of the year, trying to be everywhere making it easier for people to see me without traveling. Tonight, I look down and see these two women who have made it out to god knows how many shows every year," Chris shook his head as he ran his hand over his goatee smoothing it out. He turned and walked back to

the drum set and grabbed some water before going back to the front of the stage. He reached up and took off his hat and placed it over his heart, “Seriously, I’m truly honored to have you ladies here. I can’t thank y’all enough for what you’ve done for me over the years.” He looked back up at the crowd, wiping away the tears before blowing them a kiss. “I love you, ladies.”

Chris went back to get his guitar, chuckling to himself, “And I wonder why they call me the cry baby of country.” He turned to the crowd as he put his guitar strap around him, “Let’s end this party with a bang.” Chris launched into his last song of the night. As the band played on, he set his guitar down and waved to the crowd, “I’m Chris Reed and I’ll see you when I get there.”

Chapter 9

The women screamed as the lights went down and the radio came over the loudspeakers. They exchanged knowing glances as they began to move with the crowd away from the stage, headed for the merchandise table.

“Don’t leave without me. I’m going to step outside and try and call Steven again,” Alana said with a weak smile. She turned and went outside and dialed Steven’s number. Her phone went to Steven’s voice mail. Alana didn’t bother leaving a message, she just hung up and dialed John, Steven’s best friend’s cell.

When John answered there was music blaring in the background, “Talk to me,” John yelled into the phone.

“Hey, John, it’s Alana. Is Steven with you?”

There was a pause, “Um, yeah, we’re out drinking.”

“Can I talk to him please,” Alana begged.

“Yeah, hold on.” Alana waited as she heard him moving through the bar. In the background someone yelled, “Hey John.... Put that phone away, Steven just took off with Rhonda.”

“Fuck!” John said before the line went dead. Alana stared at her phone. It had to be a mistake she told herself. But the image of Steven holding her wrists, the door slamming behind him, told her it might not, she collapsed to the ground. Frantically she tried to call Steven again, it went straight to voice mail. “Steven, Steven, please tell me it’s not true... I mean Rhonda...” Alana pleaded. She hung up the phone wiping the tears away.

Alana stood up regaining her composure before walking inside. She bypassed her friends at the merchandise table going straight to the bar. She ordered a double shot a patron and downed it. With the liquid courage coursing through her veins, Alana rejoined Cheyenne.

Cheyenne looked at Alana. She could see the worry on Alana's face. "Are you okay?"

"I'm great, who's taking us to the bus?" Alana asked looking around unable to meet Cheyenne's questioning gaze. The call with John was still echoing in her head. She prayed for a distraction.

"James is. He said he'd be right back for us."

On cue, James approached and led the women on to Chris's bus, stepping aside at the top of the stairs to allow the women to pass into the bus. "Chris is just finishing up with a couple reporters and he'll be right in," James explained.

"Yeah, we've heard that story before, James, but don't worry as long as there are drinks available, we won't complain," Cheyenne said heading for the kitchen.

"There's beer in the fridge," James called after her.

"We know," Alana said over her shoulder as she followed Cheyenne through the bus to the kitchenette.

Cheyenne grabbed a couple beers out of the refrigerator and handed one to Alana. Cheyenne twisted the top off of her beer, "You think he still sleeps with that damn bear?"

Alana smiled mischievously. "There's only one way to find out."

Cheyenne's long legs gave her the edge as the women scrambled for the hall. Alana shoved Cheyenne from behind as they fought through the cramped hall to Chris's room.

James looked at the women fear crossing his face, "You can't go into his room."

The ladies stopped right outside Chris's bedroom door, "Why not?" they asked together barely able to control their laugh.

"No one goes into Chris's room."

Alana rolled her eyes, "Oh puhleeze, James, we do this all the time."

James tried to push his way in front of them, "No, really you can't be in here. I don't even go in here." Cheyenne opened the door. The women crossed the small room to Chris's closet and began rummaging through the contents.

James fled the bus. He paced around it. He could hear the women's laughter from outside. He started back towards the door when he saw Lonnie and Ted approaching. James ran over to them, "I'm so glad to see you! Those... those women, they're in Chris's closet. What do I do?"

Ted gave James a sympathetic look, "You let them on the bus already?"

"Chris told me to take them to the bus," James eyes darted anxiously between the men.

"I don't know what you're going to do but you better think fast, because if Chris catches them in his room. You're out of here faster than I go through women," Lonnie laughed.

“They won’t listen to me! You have to help me.” James pleaded, the blood draining from his face.

Ted backed away from the bus, “Oh no, we don’t. We’re not going to be even remotely associated with this mess.”

“He can’t get that mad at you guys, you’ve been with him forever.”

Lonnie leaned up against the bus, “And we’ve been with him forever because we haven’t got involved in stuff like this.”

“Come on, guys, please,” James pleaded.

“Please what?” Chris asked coming up behind James. He watched James jump at his voice. James turned to face Chris with little beads of sweat on his brow. “What’s going on?” Chris demanded.

“I’m sorry, Chris.”

Chris’s eyes narrowed on James, “I never like it when a conversation starts with an apology.”

James swallowed hard, “I just want you to know that I’m really sorry. I tried, but I couldn’t help it.”

“Help what?” Chris asked gritting his teeth.

James eye’s darted towards a retreating Lonnie and Ted. James continued his voice cracking, “They... I tried to keep them out, but they wouldn’t listen. They’re in you’re room.”

Chris glared at James, “Where are they?”

James cowered under Chris’s glare, backing up against the bus, “In your room.”

“They better not be in my room, if you value your job.” Chris threw open the door of the bus and stomped his way back to his room.

The giggles from the room producing a smile on Chris's face, he had to stop and force a scowl before turning back to James. "I can not believe you let them in my room. You know the god damn rules about my bedroom. Can't you do anything right?" Chris turned back towards the bedroom and threw open the door. "What the--" Chris stumbled backwards falling against the wall.

Chris couldn't take his eyes off of the women dancing on his bed. They were wearing his clothes, including his boots. They attempted to sing through their own laughter as the oversized boots and instability of the bed caused them to fall over themselves. He could barely focus on them through the tears, his whole body shaking silently from the laughter. He looked over at James cowering in the kitchen and lost it. He pulled himself up and went into his room.

James inched his way closer to the door to peak in. Chris hopped up on the bed with his boots on and put an arm around Alana and Cheyenne. The women turned to look at Chris startled by his appearance, but soon continued dancing around with Chris until all three of them fell to the bed in hysterics. Chris met James's frightened stare and winked at him. Only then did James let out a sigh of relief, closing the bedroom door.

Chris looked at the closed door, "You guys shouldn't scare my tour managers so badly," still laughing.

"We didn't scare him. You did. How dare you have him terrified of us coming into your room." Alana tried to reprimand Chris but her sides hurt from laughing too much.

Chris grinned, “And that’s the way it should be. Someone has to make me feel important, might as well be the new guy.”

Cheyenne pulled away from Chris, “We don’t make you feel important?”

“How do you think you make me feel important, coming in here raiding my clothes, dancing on my bed, making fun of me.”

Alana smiled innocently as she straightened out Chris’s shirt she was wearing, “We’d never dream of doing that.”

Chris flicked his hat off of Alana’s head, “Yeah and I can’t play guitar.”

Without missing a beat, Cheyenne chimed in, “We know you can’t, but we’ve learned to ignore that flaw.”

Chris’s jaw dropped as he pulled the women closer to him, “God I missed you ladies.”

Cheyenne stood up, “What else do you have on this bus to drink?”

Chris shrugged, “I’m sure the bar’s fully stocked.”

“Any requests?” Cheyenne asked looking at Alana. Alana shook her head before Cheyenne left the bedroom.

Alana stood up and took off Chris’s clothes and sat back down next to him. “It looks like we’ve been ditched.”

“Doesn’t it though?” Chris said tossing his cowboy hat onto the dresser. He laid back on the headboard of his bed, putting his hands behind his head.

Alana leaned back on one elbow, “Tired?”

Chris shook his head, “Nah, it’s just good to have you here. It’s been a while.”

“I know it has. I’m just a slacker, what can I say?”

Chris played with some of Alana’s hair, “Darlin’ you’re anything but a slacker.”

Alana laid her head on Chris’s chest, “So really how have things been here with you?”

“You know it’s the same ol’, same ol,” Chris said with a sigh.

Alana laid there listening to the sound of Chris’s heart beating, “You still seeing, Amy, was it?”

Chris shook his head, “Oh hell no. You were right once again. God I hate how you’re always right!”

Alana looked up at him, “I’m sorry. What happened?”

Chris gritted his teeth, “She started complaining about the tour schedule, about wanting me to go shopping with her and then getting mad cause we’d get stopped by people wanting to talk to me for autographs or something.”

Alana sat up. She touched his cheek gently, “I’m really sorry.”

Chris shrugged her hands off, “It’s like what the hell am I working for? Or maybe the question should be what do I take breaks for?”

“Because you can’t do this twenty four seven, you need time to be just who you are.”

Chris took a deep breath moving Alana so he could get up, “I know. Need another drink?”

“Oh yeah, don’t be stingy!”

Chris laughed, “Yes ma’am I’ll be right back.” Chris left and came back with a bottle, “I believe patron is still your drink of choice?”

“Always,” Alana said reaching for the bottle.

Chris winked at her, “That’s why I love you, a woman who can keep up with us boys.”

Alana laughed, “Some wouldn’t be so willing to accept that as a virtue.”

Chris’s guitar caught his attention, “Hey, want to hear what I’m working on?”

“Do you really need to ask?” Alana asked scooting back on the bed to give Chris plenty of room to play. She twisted the cap off of the bottle and took a drink. Half way through the song, Alana started giggling. Chris glared at her making her laugh even harder.

“You’re not supposed to be laughing at me. This is a serious song,” Chris said with a smile playing at his lips.

Alana smiled still laughing, “I can’t help it.”

Chris set the guitar aside. He grabbed the bottle and took a big drink. “You know there are penalties to be had for laughing at me,” he warned.

Alana shook her head, “You won’t do a thing to me.”

Chris grabbed her legs pulling her down the bed towards him. He flashed his dimples before straddled her. “You’re pretty secure about that aren’t you?” Alana nodded grinning at him. Chris lunged forward and began tickling her.

Alana squirmed her way out from under him and grabbed the bottle standing up. She watched him carefully as she took another drink. Chris snatched the bottle and took a drink. Their eyes met in a playful

dance. Alana waited. Chris set the bottle down. Alana tackled him to the bed. “Two can play this game,” she laughed.

The war was on. They wrestled around tickling each other. Their play releasing them from their cares that waited for them outside of the room. Chris got the upper hand as he rolled Alana over on to her back, pinning her hands above her head. They both froze staring into each others eyes. Chris tried to pull back, but his body was betraying his commands. His lips passed over hers. The very softness of her lips sent a shock through Chris. He jerked back. Alana’s stare was filled with questions. He had to get away form those eyes, those lips, he thought. Slowly his body responded, putting distance between them. Chris turned and ran his hand over his goatee as he spoke in a voice that was strange sounding, “I think we need another drink.”

Chris stood up with his back to Alana. He ran his hand over his face. He gave his body a chance to recover from the jolt of her lips. He looked back over his shoulder at Alana downing another shot of the patron. She’d never looked more beautiful with her hair slightly messed up from their struggles, her cheeks with a soft red glow from the patron. Her lips glistening from the patron, he wanted to lick it off of them. Alana smiled and wagged her finger at him.

Chris sat back down next to her, his body sparking from the closeness of hers. He tried to keep his voice steady as he spoke, “What darlin’.”

“We’re having a party, no somber looks allowed,” she whispered passing him the bottle.

Chris stared at her as he lifted the bottle to his own lips. He shuddered from the thought of her lips having just been on that bottle. He looked away, his own temperature skyrocketing, but not from the alcohol. He set the bottle down. He couldn't fight the draw of Alana's neck. He wanted to explore the softness. He leaned over and kissed her neck laying her back. He moaned beneath the power of her perfume. His lips pushed aside Alana's shirt to explore her shoulder.

Alana nudged Chris back, "We shouldn't be doing this."

Chris groaned, "I know." He rolled away from her. Reminding him self that this was Alana in his room with him. Alana. His friend. One of the guys. Alana. She wasn't a woman to pass a night with.

The bus rumbled to life. "Where are you taking me?" She asked quietly after a few minutes.

Chris smiled shyly, "Where ever you want to go, darlin'."

Alana looked at her hands, "Where dreams live, please."

Chris reached out and rubbed Alana's cheek with the back of his hand, "Are you okay?"

Alana nodded, "Nothing my patron fairy won't cure."

"I see." A silence settled between them. "Maybe we should go join the others?"

"No, I'm really not up for a gang of people." Alana scooted closer to Chris, "I'm sorry."

Chris put an arm around her pulling her tightly against him. Having her so close now, pained him. He played with her hair, gently nudging her head back so he could look into her eyes. "You've got nothing to be sorry about darlin'," he whispered.

Alana nodded the scent of cool waters reminding her of Steven. The tears came flooding out.

“Shhh, shhh, What’s going on?” Chris choked out. He held his breath fearing what she might say. He couldn’t take being the cause of her tears, yet he knew he had to be. He couldn’t kid himself, he had made her cross a line and now she had to be feeling guilty.

Alana’s voice weakly interrupted Chris’s thoughts, “Steven’s out with an old girlfriend.”

“I see.” Chris said uncomfortably. He rubbed her back, staring at the ceiling waiting for her to continue. Listening to the sobs coming from Alana made Chris’s rage burn within him. ‘Dumb bastard,’ Chris thought to himself. He’d give anything to be able to find Steven right then and give him a piece of his mind. The bus came to a stop. Chris exhaled, “We must be at the hotel.”

Chapter 10

Once up in the hotel suite, Alana was relieved that Chris went to hang out with some of his band members. She didn't need to have to worry about what had almost happened there. None of it made sense to her. They always roughed housed when they were together, but never once in all of the twelve years she'd been coming out had they ever came close to kissing each other. Alana's hand put her hands to her lips; she could still feel his lips there.

"Are you okay?" Cheyenne asked.

Alana's hand fell from her lips. "Yeah... I'm fine."

Cheyenne looked across the room at Chris. "Is everything okay with you and Chris?"

Alana glanced quickly at Cheyenne. Was it possible that Cheyenne knew, she wondered? "Nothing is wrong."

Cheyenne nodded slowly and then shrugged. "If you say so, are you have fun?"

"What's with all the questions, Shy?"

"I'm just wondering. It's not like you to just hang out here on the side of things, and when you came back into the bar after the show, something wasn't right. You know you can talk to me."

Alana took a drink from the bottle of patron that was still in her hand from the bus. "You were right, Steven's out with Rhonda."

"What?"

"You heard me, Shy, he's out with Rhonda. He's drunk and he left the bar with Rhonda."

Cheyenne hugged Alana, "I'm sorry, honey. What are you going to do?"

Alana shook her head. "I don't know. I love him..."

"You don't deserve this," Cheyenne said disgusted.

Alana played with her engagement ring. Her thoughts were everywhere: at home with Steven, the kiss on the bus, the engagement party, the studio, and her family. Alana looked up at all of the guys she counted on to take the cares away. Tonight their laughter annoyed her. She looked over at Cheyenne, "I think, I'm going to find a bed and go to sleep."

"We can go if you want," Cheyenne offered.

"Have fun, Shy, these nights don't come around that often anymore. I'll be fine." Alana went down the hall and found a bed. She curled up on it holding the pillow over her face to block out the noise. In the darkness, Alana's mind was consumed with what was going on at home, images of Steven kissing Rhonda. 'If only I kept my mouth shut,' Alana thought, 'We wouldn't have fought. He wouldn't be with her.' Her finger burned where her engagement ring sat.

There was a tug at the pillow, Alana let it go. Even in the nearly pitch black room, Alana knew it was Chris standing over her. She felt the bed shift as he sat down beside her. He was close enough now, for Alana to make out his face and the concern that was in his eyes. She watched them come closer. She inhaled and held her breath until their lips met. His lips erased the images that were haunting her. She knew she should stop him; she wanted to stop him, but she couldn't. It was a relief to be freed from those images.

Chris pulled away from Alana. He leaned up on his elbow beside her and brushed her hair back from her face. "Want to talk?" he whispered.

Alana shook her head. She felt Chris tracing her lips with his finger. "It might help... Why is he out with an ex?" Again Alana shook her head. She slid her arm over his waist and buried her face in his chest. She felt herself being pulled over and could feel Chris lying beneath her. She leaned up and looked down at him. She searched his eyes to find the escape she always found there, but there was none. His eyes were searching her own. In slow motion she watched his hand go into her hair. He pulled her down to him and she closed her eyes. The escape she was searching for was there in that kiss, she tried to resist it at first. The pressure of his lips on hers and the serenity of the warmth was too much. She returned it, begging for more, welcoming all the peace it could offer.

Chris's hand ran down her back to the edge of her shirt. The feel of his calloused fingertips on her back destroyed what serenity she had been feeling. Inside, Alana screamed for Chris to stop. She couldn't do this to Steven, but then the images of him with Rhonda came into Alana's mind and she pulled Chris closer to her. In the cover of the alcohol and darkness, Alana let go. She felt herself detaching from her body.

An hour later, Chris collapsed against Alana. Their bodies covered in sweat. He laid there briefly before rolling over and bringing Alana with him. She snuggled up to him, her hand tracing lines in the hair on his chest. Slowly, Alana felt herself returning to her body. She let her hand run down Chris's bare skin. Alana jerked away pulling the sheet up around her. Her voice trembled as she asked, "What just happened?"

Chris jumped up confused and pulled on his jeans, “What do you mean what just happened?”

“We didn’t... I mean... this has to be a dream...” Her phone rang. She rushed over and answered it, “Hello.”

“Alana...”

Alana couldn’t place the voice. Her stomach was in knots. Her head clouded from the alcohol and the confusion of the night. “Yeah, it’s me,” she said.

“Alana, it’s John.” Alana fumbled for her clothes and struggled to put them on as she waited for John to continue. “Steven was.... Steven was in a car accident.”

Alana sank to the floor, “No... no...no.”

“I’m sorry, Alana. I don’t know what to say....”

Alana glanced up at Chris, who had knelt down beside her. She swallowed hard before asking, “Was she with him?”

“You heard that?”

“Is he okay?” Alana croaked covering her face with her trembling hand.

“He’s gone, Alana. They’re both gone.” Alana hung up the phone crying into her knees. She felt Chris’s hand on her shoulder, “Don’t you dare touch me!” she screamed.

Chris jumped back. “What happened, Alana?”

Alana got up and looked around the room for her shoes. She slipped them on as she stammered, “I did... he’s... I have to go.” She grabbed her purse and started running for the door.

Chris jumped in front of her, “Come on, Alana, talk to me. What happened?”

“Steven’s DEAD!” She yelled shoving him with all of her might and leaving the room.

Chris chased Alana through the suite. “Alana wait!” Chris called to the closing door of the suite. Chris stopped, his shoulders slumping. He was suddenly aware of all the eyes on him. Chris looked at Cheyenne and barked, “Don’t stare at me. Go find her.”

Cheyenne was stunned but quickly shook it off and grabbed her things and raced out the door. Lonnie went over and turned the music off. The other guys scattered to their rooms. Chris walked over to the bar and poured himself a drink. Chris collapsed against the bar, shaking his head. “What happened?” Lonnie asked quietly.

“I fucked one of the best friends I’ve ever had.”

“Woah what you and Ted do on your free time is none of my business,” Lonnie said waving his hands in front of him. Chris glared at him as he downed his drink. “Okay, comedy is not appreciated right now. So are you saying... you and Alana?”

“What the hell was I thinking?”

“You didn’t like force her?” Chris slammed his drink down and glared at Lonnie. “I didn’t think so, but chicks don’t usually run from you afterwards.”

Chris grabbed his head trying to force out the cloud of alcohol that was hanging over it, “How the hell should I know? I just went in to check on her... she wasn’t right. She was just laying there...fuck...”

Lonnie took a deep breath, "Okay... so you guys did the deed and then what?"

"It wasn't the deed," Chris growled.

"Sorry. It was whatever... "

"She got a call telling her Steven was dead," Chris rubbed his hands over his face. "All these years..... we've just been friends... no desire whatsoever to be more.... what the hell possessed me?"

"Blame it on the alcohol."

Chris shook his head, "If only I could..."

"What else are you going to do? It's done."

Chris poured himself another drink, "I need her in my corner... I can't just blame it on the alcohol. God, what I wouldn't give to take it all back."

"You can't take it back, Chris."

"Good deduction there, Watson!" Chris grabbed the bottle of Jim Beam, "I'm going to bed."

"Wait, Chris, sit."

"What's the point Lonnie?"

Lonnie shrugged, "Misery always likes company."

"No, not this time.... Look what mess company made of things tonight."

Chapter 11

Alana cried on Cheyenne's shoulder most of the flight home. The drive from the airport had been silent. Alana now pulled the car to a stop in front of the Daniels' home. People were milling all around it. Alana looked at Cheyenne, "I don't know if I can do this."

Cheyenne smiled reassuringly, "Yes, you can. This is where you belong."

Alana pulled the keys out of the ignition and reluctantly got out of the car. As they walked up to the house everyone stopped talking and focused on Alana. Alana struggled with the tears that were on the verge of breaking free. Her hand shook as she opened the door to the house and walked in. Gloria was sitting in Harold's chair with him standing next to her, his hand on her shoulder. Alana walked over and squeezed Harold's other hand as she fell to her knees at Gloria's feet. The tears broke free as she laid her head on Gloria's lap. Gloria played with her hair shedding her own tears.

The murmur of people whispering around her stopped the tears. Alana pulled herself together before looking up and addressing Harold, "Has anything been done?" Harold shook his head. "I'll take care of it." She stood up and caught Cheyenne's eye. Silently Cheyenne followed Alana into the kitchen.

"I can get stuff started, Alana, you don't have to do this."

Alana smiled gratefully at Cheyenne, "I need to do this for them, for him."

"Then what do you want me to do?"

Alana looked around, "I don't know."

"Do you want me to stay in here with you?" Cheyenne searched Alana's eyes. Alana nodded and grabbed the phone and notepad from beside it. The name of the funeral home written was on it. She took a deep breath and dialed information.

Harold came in while Alana was on the phone and sat at the table across from the two women. He sank further in his chair listening to the funeral preparations being made. Cheyenne reached out and squeezed his hand. Alana hung up the phone and met his eyes.

Harold pushed himself up from the table, "I just came in to tell you I was taking Gloria up to bed. It's been a long day."

"I'm sorry, Harold," Alana mumbled.

He smiled weakly his eyes showing his heartbreak, "There's nothing to be sorry about. I'm the one who's sorry. I don't know what got into him," Harold's head hung with shame, "He really did love you."

Alana got up and crossed over to him, "I know he did."

Harold hugged her tightly, "We'd be lost without you. Such a good girl." He kissed her forehead, "There are beds upstairs if you two want to stay here tonight."

"Go on to bed, we'll show ourselves out and be back in the morning," Alana said quietly. She watched Harold shuffle out of the kitchen. She turned to Cheyenne, "Ready?"

Cheyenne got up and put an arm around Alana. "Let's go. I'll drive."

Alana gave directions to Cheyenne as she drove. Seeing her house for the first, Alana broke into tears. The realization that Steven wasn't

coming home hit her hard, knocking the wind from her lungs. “Maybe we should have stayed,” Alana said through her tears.

Cheyenne squeezed Alana’s hand, “It’s going to be okay. I’ll be with you.”

Alana looked into her friend’s soft brown eyes. Alana tried to form the words that were rushing through her mind but she couldn’t, they were coming to fast and barely made any sense to her. Alana reached for the car door and opened it.

Alana leaned on Cheyenne as they walked up the cobblestone to the front stairs of the house. She let Cheyenne open the door. As soon as the lights were turned on and Alana could see Steven’s face in the pictures on the walls, she wanted to run. There was nothing but reminders of what had happened and all the dreams that would no longer be fulfilled. Cheyenne pulled Alana inside and shut the door. Alana jumped at the sound of the door shutting. Cheyenne took her to the couch and made her sit.

Alana drew her knees up to her chest. For a second she thought about taking her shoes off so they weren’t on the couch, but that required more energy then she had at the moment. She lowered her head to her knees and rocked. The tears stopped. Cheyenne’s hand was on her back. Alana could hear Cheyenne’s voice but couldn’t make out her words.

“Alana, honey, talk to me please?” Cheyenne pleaded with her.

Alana turned her head, continuing to rock herself. In a hoarse voice, Alana responded, “Not now. “

“Alana, I know you’re hurting.”

“Cheyenne, I can’t. You saw Harold and Gloria. They need me to get them through this.” Alana closed her eyes. She could still see Harold shuffling out of their kitchen. The man in that picture wasn’t the man she’d known all these years. The life had almost completely left him. She couldn’t even bring herself to imagine Gloria. Everyone she depended on, on a daily basis was no longer there for her. The only person left was Cheyenne and Alana knew how temporary that was. Cheyenne would have to go back to her family and Alana would be completely alone. The realization paralyzed her.

Alana felt Cheyenne’s hand on her cheek. She opened her eyes. Cheyenne’s face was near hers. She could see the tears filling Cheyenne’s eyes. The phone rang and Cheyenne left to get it. Alana let herself fall over to lie on the couch. She grabbed the crocheted blanket from the back of the couch and covered herself with it.

Cheyenne followed the ringing phone to the kitchen and answered it. “Hello?”

“Cheyenne?” Chris asked.

“Yeah, Chris, it’s me,” Cheyenne said lowering her voice.

“You went home with Alana? Of course you did, you answered the phone. How is she?”

Cheyenne ran her hand through her hair, “How do you think she is? She was doing okay until we came back here.”

“Oh.”

Cheyenne nestled the phone on her shoulder and began to search for some tea. “She’s lost, Chris. Her world revolved around Steven and he’s gone.”

“Can I t-talk to her?” Chris stammered.

“I don’t think now is the time. She’s exhausted from the last few days all the traveling... all the emotions. I’ll tell her you called.”

Chris sighed, “Okay. Take care of her, Cheyenne.”

“I’ll do my best. Night, Chris.” Cheyenne said and hung up the phone. She finished up the tea and took the two cups back into the living room. She set them down on the coffee table and turned to the couch. She sat down on the floor and put her forehead against Alana’s. She had a blank stare on her face. Cheyenne sat there rubbing Alana’s back until she fell asleep.

The next morning Alana got up before Cheyenne did and took a shower. She threw on a pair of sweats and went out and made coffee. Just as Alana was pouring herself a cup, Cheyenne came in. “How you doing this morning?” Cheyenne asked.

“I’m doing. I need to go over to Gloria’s.”

Cheyenne nodded, reaching for the cup of coffee Alana offered her. “Just give me five minutes and I’ll be ready.”

“You don’t have to rush. They’re still sleeping over there.” Alana left the kitchen and went back into her bedroom. She walked over to Steven’s dresser and opened the second drawer. Right on top of Steven’s ratty jean shorts. Alana pulled them out and hugged them tightly.

“What are you doing?” Cheyenne asked gently from the doorway.

Alana looked up. “We’re going to have to take some clothes for Steven.” She looked down at the shorts she was holding. “I can’t see him wanting to be ... I can’t see him in a suit.”

Cheyenne went over to Alana and put her arms around her. “This can wait or I can find him something to wear.”

Alana shook her head. “He’d die to keep these—“ The tears came out of no where. Alana fell against Cheyenne.

Cheyenne gently took the shorts from Alana’s arms and let the fall to the floor. She held her trembling friend in her arms. “Then that’s what we’ll take. It’s going to be okay, honey.”

Alana sniffed back the tears and picked the shorts up. She closed the open dresser drawer and opened the one beneath it. She rummaged through it until she found one of Steven’s favorite tee shirts. She closed the drawer with her hip and looked up at Cheyenne. “We need to go.”

Chapter 12

Alana stared at the casket. The priest's words were buzzing around her like mosquitoes. The only thing she could feel was the contrast in the hand temperature between Gloria and Cheyenne. Gloria's was like ice while Cheyenne's was warm and filled with reassurance. Alana tore her eyes from the casket and looked at Cheyenne; she'd have been lost without her. Alana returned her attention to the casket. Alana felt a peace knowing that Steven would rest comfortably for eternity in his beloved ratty shorts.

Alana felt Cheyenne pulling at her hand. Alana forced a smile and shakily found her feet. The walls of the church seemed to close in on Alana as she walked past the casket. She looked down at Steven. She kissed her fingertips and placed them on Steven's lips. She looked back at Cheyenne. Even Cheyenne had mascara stains on her cheeks.

A cold hand was on her elbow; she looked down at and followed it up to meet the priest's eye. She let the priest lead her up to the podium. She took a few deep breaths and gripped the podium until she felt the pain of the wood on her palms. At least she could still feel that, she sighed. She turned to face the filled church. Her voice trembled, and her hands shook.

"Steven used to constantly hound me about stressing myself out. So I guess finally I'm trying to do that. I have no idea what to say up here." As she tried to speak in a normal voice, there was no controlling the trembling. Her eyes fell onto the casket and they quickly darted away from it. "I guess, first just thank you all for coming. I know it would

mean a lot to him. There was nothing more important to him than family and friends, but I don't have to tell any of you that." Alana looked towards the ceiling. "See, Steven, I do better when I stress." The crowd met Alana's comment with an uneasy chuckle. "It's okay to laugh. He was always the first to laugh."

Alana looked around the church as she searched for what to say. She met Cheyenne's eyes and tried to smile. She looked down at the podium and began to speak again, "Everything with Steven was a dream, so I guess I shouldn't be surprised that this feels like one too, granted it's a nightmare... Anyways, when I met Steven, I had a dream-catcher in my room. When I got my first apartment, Steven helped me move into it," Alana gripped the podium harder causing herself to flinch. The skin on her finger was being pinched between her ring and the wood. "That dream-catcher vanished without a trace during that move. For months, Steven teased me about it because I was obsessed with finding it or a replacement for it. I never found one to replace it.

"Now I understand that I had. Steven captured dreams better than any dream-catcher could." Alana couldn't finish. She couldn't stand there any longer. She let her hands fall from the podium. Her legs felt like lead as she climbed down the steps and walked out of the church. The murmurs from the mourners followed her out like the wind through a field of corn.

Alana pattered around her house, darting through the crowd that had gathered there after Steven's funeral. She stopped and chatted briefly with the guests. She still found herself jumping at every hand that

touched her, turning and expecting to find Steven beaming down at her. He was the one that loved having people all around, being the center of attention. This wasn't her role. She wanted to escape. She wanted to run into her darkroom. That was her world, her solitude. It was preferred, acceptable to be alone there.

Alana went into the kitchen the counters were buried beneath the casserole pans. Alana had never seen so much food in her life. She opened the drawer and pulled out more serving utensils. She reached for a plate and began heaping food on to it. Stopping only when she was afraid she might spill some. She looked at the plate and watched it start to shake before she threw it into the sink. She wasn't hungry. She hadn't been dishing herself up a plate. That had been Steven's plate. Alana wiped her hands on her dress and left the kitchen. She ignored the hands that tried to stop her and talked to her. She needed a break from people. She fled the house and ran across the yard to her studio.

The day dragged on in horrible slow motion. Finally, well after dark, Alana closed the door behind Gloria and Howard. She leaned her head on the door, her hands still on the knob. She was exhausted. "What do you say to a bath?"

Alana stiffened at Steven's voice. She whipped around prepared to throw her arms around Steven but stopped seeing Cheyenne there. "What did you say?"

Cheyenne reached out and touched her friend's arm, "I asked if you wanted a bath?"

Alana sighed, "That sounds great."

Cheyenne smiled weakly at her friend. She was amazed at how well Alana seemed to be holding up. She knew that Alana hadn't come to terms with what had happened, but at least she was dealing with what had to be done. She didn't even want to imagine the shape she'd be in if the roles were reversed. Cheyenne put an arm around Alana and lead her back to the bathroom. Alana sat on the edge of the bed, Cheyenne started to say something but instead went and started the bath.

Cheyenne watched the swirl of the water filling the tub. More than anything, Cheyenne wished that her husband was there. Cheyenne reached over and turned the water off. Going back into the bedroom, "I'm going to just go clean up the kitchen. The bath's all ready for you."

Alana watched Cheyenne go. She looked around the bedroom it seemed huge to her now, the whole house felt that way and empty. Alana pushed herself up off the bed and went into the bathroom. Alana stuck her toe into the tub and pulled it back. The tears came. She'd never have the perfect bath again. How did he do that she wondered. She sat down on the edge of the tub.

"Hey, Alana, who is-?" Cheyenne started to ask, coming into the bathroom with a book in hand. She stopped seeing Alana still sitting on the edge of the tub. "Did you get in?"

Alana looked startled and rubbed at her eyes, "I'm waiting for it to cool off."

Cheyenne set the book down on the counter. "Honey, it's been an hour. The water is probably cold," she said gently as she closed the lid on the toilet and sat down.

Alana looked back at the tub and the tears started again. She slid off the edge of the tub to the floor in the fetal position. She couldn't stop the tears. Cheyenne wrapped her arms around her and cradled her. "It's going to be okay," Cheyenne tried to soothe her friend. Alana just shook her head letting the tears pour out. Cheyenne rocked her in her arms.

"It's not going to be okay."

"Yes, it is. It'll hurt for a while but it'll get better, I promise."

"I need him. I don't know how to do this without him." Alana's word came out almost as a whimper.

Cheyenne got up and grabbed the book from the funeral and reception. She fanned open the pages for Alana to see, "Look at all these people that came to pay their respects. Any one of these people would be more than happy to help you with anything you need help with. You just need to believe in yourself."

Alana shook her head, "It won't be the same. We ..."

"Alana, you're strong. You'll get through this."

Chapter 13

Chris sat on the bus tapping his cell phone on his leg. It had been two weeks since he'd talked to Cheyenne and he still hadn't heard anything from Alana. The wait was killing him, but he still couldn't bring himself to make another call. The images of Alana running from him was too clear, yet he needed to know she was okay and felt like he needed to let her know that things didn't need to change between them. Chris stretched out his legs and put his arm over his eyes still holding the cell phone. He heard the bus door open and felt someone sitting down on the couch. When he opened his eyes, Lonnie was sitting next to him.

Lonnie handed Chris a beer. "Still agonizing over calling her, huh?" Lonnie asked.

"What do I say to her?"

"Hey darlin' how ya doin? Hi, Alana, it's Chris...need I go on?" he teased.

"It's not that simple."

Lonnie looked at Chris while he took a drink of his beer. "Sure it is. No matter what happened in Denver, you're still her friend and the truth is that might be all you ever are to her. If you don't call her soon, it'll just get harder to make that contact. She just lost the person she was supposed to spend her life with on the same night things changed between the two of you."

"It feels like such a cop out to just call. I feel like I should be running out there and making sure she's okay. You know that's what she'd do if the roles were reversed."

“And you know, she’d be kicking your ass for running out there. She knows your job doesn’t allow for trips like that and I really don’t think she wants to see you at this point in time.”

“She’ll probably never want to see me again,” Chris said bitterly, “Not that I can blame her.”

“Stop with the pity party already! You guys finally acted on something that’s been there for years. It’s not your fault. Hell we’ve had bets on you two for years!”

Chris glared at him, “What sort of bets?”

“From the time she went behind the bar in Texas, I could see the sparks flying. I’m shocked it took this long for it to be something more.”

“She was always with Steven.”

“Not always.”

“What do you mean not always?” Chris barked.

Lonnie gave Chris an odd look, “I can’t count how many times, she told me they broke up. Didn’t she ever tell you?”

“No.”

Lonnie laughed, “Not that it’d probably matter, you two are way too pigheaded.”

“It’s not funny,” Chris muttered.

“Be a man. Just call her up.”

“How can I after what’s happened?”

“It wasn’t your fault.”

“Sure it was... I should have known she wasn’t her self.”

“Chris, you know Alana as well as I do if not better. She doesn’t do anything she doesn’t want to do.”

“Then tell me why, after all these years she suddenly wants to.”

“I don’t know why women do anything. It was the right time for her I guess. I don’t know. All I know is that since we left Denver you’ve not been yourself and you’ve got to do what ever it takes to make it better. Just call her, at least you’ll know where you stand.”

Chris stared at his phone like it was a snake ready to strike. Lonnie got up, “let me know how it goes.” Lonnie got off the bus. Chris continued to stare at the phone. He still hadn’t called when James came and got Chris for the show.

Three days later, Chris laid there in his bed listening to the bus ramble down the freeway. He rolled over and looked at the picture from fan fair a few years back. It had been taken at his fan club party. Alana was there next to him. “What am I going to do?” he asked himself.

He picked up his phone and before he could have any second thoughts called Alana. Just when he was about to hang up after the third ring, Alana picked up, “Hello?”

“Alana? It’s Chris,” he responded uncertain.

“Hi,” Alana said quietly.

“How you doing?”

“Good, what did you need?”

“Why do you think I need anything?” Chris snapped.

“Cause you don’t just call out of the blue to chit chat.”

Chris got up off of his bed and began pacing his room. He ran his hand over his goatee trying to calm his frazzled nerves. “I’m just calling to see how you were doing.... After every thing that’s happened, I’m just worried about you.”

“There’s nothing to worry about, I’m doing fine.”

Chris sighed with relief, “You sure?”

“Yeah, I’m sure Chris. Thanks for calling but I need to go.”

Chapter 14

Armed with her trusted recipe cards and her lists, Alana began pulling out all of the ingredients for Easter dinner. Her stomach was in knots as she began putting the brown sugar and pineapple on the ham. A lot was riding on this day. In the weeks that had passed since Steven's death Alana had watched these people age right before her eyes. It had become a struggle just to get Gloria to get out of bed to shower and eat. That was taking a toll on Harold who had been trying hard to move past his grief. She felt like she was losing the battle to save them. If she couldn't save them, she knew she had no hope for saving herself.

Now in the midst of dinner preparations, the pressure was almost unbearable. Gloria had set very high standards for these family holidays. No one's heart was in to celebrating this holiday and she knew if everything wasn't just perfect, the whole day would be ruined. The very thought of today not bringing Gloria out of her depression made Alana sick. Alana shook the thoughts from her mind. She had to concentrate on what she was doing and follow everything to the letter.

Once Alana got the ham started, she went out to her car. The sun was shining bright and it felt good on Alana's face. She stood there letting it beat down on her with her eyes closed. After a week of rain, Alana took this as a good sign that the day would work out. She opened the trunk of her car and pulled out the shopping bags filled with Easter candy and toys for the kids' baskets. She struggled under the weight of the bags as she brought them back into the Daniels's dinning room.

Alana spread the contents of the bags out on the table and went and retrieved a large bowl from the kitchen. Back at the table, she

dumped the bags of colorful plastic eggs into it. Methodically, she picked out each color of egg and filled the blue ones with quarters, the pink ones with kisses, the yellow ones with jelly beans, and the green ones with stickers.

Just as Alana settled into a nice rhythm of filling the eggs, Harold came in carrying extra chairs for the table. Alana watched him as he sat them down. His breathing was labored for them exertion. Alana fought back tears watching him sit down next to her. “Want some help,” Harold asked after he’d caught his breath.

Alana smiled at him gratefully. “I’d love some. How’s Gloria doing?”

“She’s still in bed,” Harold sighed after a couple minutes, “She doesn’t want anything to do with this.”

Alana reached out and squeezed his hand, “When everyone gets here, she’ll come around. Gloria lives for these sorts of family gatherings.”

Harold nodded, his hands shaking as he tried to fill the eggs. “I hope so.”

“It can’t hurt,” Alana said trying to be confident enough for both of them.

“She’s everything to me, Alana,” Harold said, the deep fear was evident in his strained voice.

The sound of that fear made Alana struggle with her own tears. “I know. We’ve just got to be strong.”

Harold tried to smile. Alana watched the smile die before it made it fully to his face. Harold dropped the egg he was filling. His shoulders

began to shake. Alana rushed to his side putting her arms around him. “I can’t lose her too,” Harold sobbed into Alana’s embrace.

“We’re not losing anyone else. The house is just too quiet for Gloria. Soon it’ll be filled with all your grandkids, and we both know Gloria will be down here to direct everything.” Alana kissed the old man’s head, “Why don’t you go into the living room and watch TV.”

Harold nodded. It took a great deal of effort for him to get to his feet. Alana tossed one of the plastic eggs in the air absently. Since Cheyenne went home, she’d spent every moment she hadn’t been working at the Daniels. She’d been doing the cooking and cleaning, watching Gloria wander around the house lost to everyone. She could only hope that having all of Steven’s brothers and their families together today, that it would do the trick and bring back the Gloria she loved.

Alana tossed the egg into the bowl and began cleaning up the mess on the table. There wasn’t time to dawdle this morning. Alana looked up from clearing the garbage from the table Gloria was standing there wearing her housecoat with her hair uncombed and looking lost. Alana went around the table to her, “Morning, Gloria.”

Alana put her arms around Gloria, who was staring at the Easter eggs on the table. Alana could feel Gloria beginning to shake as she asked, “Why did you do that?”

Alana looked at the bowl and then back to Gloria. For a moment, she wondered if she’d gone too far hosting the Easter dinner there. “The boys are coming over with their families. It’s not Easter without a hunt,” Alana said gently.

“But who’s going to hide them? That was Steven’s job,” Gloria whispered.

“I know,” said Alana calmly, “I’m going to check on dinner and then I’ll do it.”

“Oh,” Gloria said before absently heading for the kitchen. Alana followed her in there. Gloria inspected all the preparations that were underway, “You didn’t put onion in the dressing, did you? Martin’s wife is allergic.”

Alana smiled. Gloria’s inspection gave Alana hope that today might just be what Gloria needed. “There’s not a piece of onion anywhere. I’ve watched you long enough. I’m trying to keep with all the traditions,” Alana said with a smile.

Gloria sighed, “I suppose you have. I’m just going to go lie down.”

“You want to help?” Alana asked hopeful. As Gloria left the kitchen, Alana’s hopes plummeted.

Alana went over to the stove and checked on the ham, turned down the potatoes and beans on the stove and headed out in the backyard. A chill ran through her as she stepped out there despite the lack of a breeze and the warmth of the sun. Images of Steven lounging in the hammock lazily watching the kids hunt the eggs filled her head. The backyard was filled with a million memories of Steven. Alana took a deep breath and pushed the thoughts aside. She hid the eggs in the flowerbeds, in the trees, on the picnic table, and in the toys that were out there. She went into the garage and got out the name stakes, and placed them in the yard in the appropriate spots. It was tradition in the Daniels

family to provide each child with their own corner of the yard to hunt for eggs. Tradition was all that mattered, even if no one's heart was actually into the festivities, at least they'd be going through the motion.

The final step in preparing the hunt was placing the baskets for each grandchild in the yard. Satisfied, Alana went back inside and to the kitchen. She glanced at the clock; it was almost one and everyone would be arriving soon. Another quick check on dinner and Alana darted outside to her car and grabbed her camera bag. She tucked the bag under the table at her spot and then went back to preparing the feast.

Before long the house was filled with noise from the boys arriving with their family. Melanie, Travis' wife came in with a smile, "Thank you, Alana for doing this. Everything smells so good."

Alana returned the smile. , "It's my pleasure. I just hope everything tastes as good as it smells."

Melanie laughed, "I'm sure it will. What can I do to help?"

Alana consulted her list, "Want to start the gravy?" Melanie nodded and got to work. Soon the other wives came in and conversation was running smoothly. Alana's ears perked up hearing Gloria's familiar voice come in from the living room. Alana wiped off her hands and went to check on what was happening. Gloria was sitting on the couch surrounded by her grandkids all dressed in their Easter best. Gloria had showered and changed. Alana leaned on the door frame and watched as slowly the gray tint from Gloria's face faded. Relieved, Alana went back to the kitchen.

The women in the kitchen were just beginning to start taking things to the table when Gloria came in. She went into the pantry and

came out with her apron. “Now what needs to be done?” she asked with a smile.

The women all looked at each other but quickly reverted to taking Gloria’s commands. The tension in the room made Alana queasy as she waited to see if Gloria would breakdown into tears once again. As the table began to be filled with platters of food, Alana couldn’t believe that her plan seemed to have worked.

While the other women called the kids and men to the table, Alana slipped outside to her car and retrieved her camera. Alana grabbed her camera thankful that she’d brought it with her after all, without the distraction of hosting it Alana felt weak. The realization that Steven wasn’t there to help her through the day, made her head swim and her heart ache.

Alana went inside to the dining room. The food was already being shuffled from hand to hand. Alana eased around the room snapping pictures. The normalcy of the dinner conversation hit a nerve with Alana. Her head began to ache. Her stomach tied up in knots. Wave after wave of heat washed over her, her mouth began to water. Trying hard not to draw attention to herself, Alana edged her way out of the room to the bathroom.

Inside the bathroom Alana knelt down on the cold tile. She spit out the excess saliva that was building up and waited. Her stomach began to lurch forward and the morning coffee ended up in the toilet. She wiped her mouth with some tissue. Pushing herself up using whatever she could grab a hold of, Alana turned to the sink. She carefully washed her face and closed the toilet lid.

Alana sat there trying to regain her strength but it wasn't coming. She felt worse by the moment. A small tap on the door and little Jessica the three-year-old's voice, "Aunt Alana, Aunt Alana... I got to go."

Alana sighed and plastered on a smile and let Jessica in. Alana went back into the dining room and took her seat, setting the camera beside her on the table in easy reach. While she listened to the conversation, she nibbled on a roll. Soon the men moved into the living room and the women got to work cleaning up the kitchen.

"Alana, dear go sit down and rest, you've done more than your share already," Gloria said shoving her out of the kitchen. Alana didn't know whether to be grateful or insulted. Either way she went and found the children begging their fathers to let them go outside and hunt for their baskets.

Alana grew antsy listening to the men tell the children to wait. She wanted to get it over with. She wanted to make her escape. She wanted her bed. She tried to listen to the men discussing fishing trips and cars, but echoes of Steven's voice kept ringing in her head.

Finally the women came out of the kitchen. Alana jumped up, "Let's go find those eggs!" She herded the kids outside, camera in tow. She glided around the yard snapping pictures of the hunters as they carefully searched. The adults were gathered right outside the door with their drinks cheering the kids on. Another wave of nausea swarmed over Alana. She snapped a picture of the adults and then walked towards them. From the adults she took a wide-angle shot of the kids in the yard and then slinked inside. She grabbed her camera bag and headed for her car.

She wasn't up for an argument about her early departure, so she just went home without saying goodbye.

Alana barely locked the front door before she had to run to the bathroom. When she was done in the bathroom, she crawled to her bed. The house quiet, her bed empty, Alana cried herself to sleep.

Chapter 15

Alana grumbled in her sleep as the knock on the door interrupted her nap. The knocking got more insistent as she tried to gather her bearings before answering it. She opened it. Gloria came barging at her throwing her arms around Alana. Alana returned the hug reluctantly. “What’s up?” Alana asked stepping back and rubbing her face.

“That’s what I wanted to know? What have you been doing with yourself? I haven’t seen you in weeks.”

“Oh,” Alana said looking around. ‘Had it really been that long’ she wondered. Alana went over to the coffee table and began to clear off the clutter of dishes, “I’ve just been here working.”

“Were you sleeping?” Gloria demanded.

Alana nodded, “Yeah, I close the studio down for a few hours in the afternoon to get a nap in. I just can’t seem to get enough sleep.”

Gloria took the dishes from Alana’s hands. “Maybe we should take you to the doctors,” Gloria said with concern.

Alana shook her head, “It’s not necessary. I’m not sleeping very well at night and so I just take a little nap.”

“I’ll clean up in here, go ahead and finish your nap,” Gloria said gently.

Alana didn’t have the strength to argue. She went back to the couch and laid down. The clatter of dishes along with her own thoughts kept her from falling back to sleep. Finally after a couple minutes, Alana got back up and folded the blanket and laid it over the couch. She followed the sound of water to the kitchen. “You really don’t need to do that,” Alana said quietly.

Gloria stopped washing the dishes and turned to face Alana. “Honey, I don’t mind. It’s the least I could do. I’m sorry I didn’t come over sooner.”

“Why? I know you’ve had a lot of stuff to catch up on.”

Gloria crossed her arms across her chest and raised an eyebrow, “I’m never too busy for you Alana. All you have to do is call me and I’ll be over.”

“I know... I’ve just been busy too.”

Gloria sighed, “I’m here now. Are you still planning on taking your trip to Nashville next month?”

“No. Definitely not. There’s too much to do around here.”

“When was the last time you did something fun?” Gloria’s concern rising.

Alana went over to the refrigerator and pulled out a bottle of water, “I’m fine Gloria. I just can’t go to Nashville now.”

“It might be just what you need,” Gloria said gently.

“No,” Alana said a little too quickly.

“Alana, you’ve always been one to take these trips and I’m worried about you. This house isn’t like you, it’s in total shambles. All of your friends will be there. You should go. All of this will be here when you get back.”

Alana’s eyes welled up with tears, “I can’t Gloria not knowing that Steven should have been there.”

Gloria cradled Alana in her arms. “I’m sorry, honey, I know it’ll be hard. Maybe you’re right.”

“I know I’m right,” Alana insisted.

“Have you had lunch already?”

Alana had to think about it before she mumbled “Yeah, I need to get back to work.”

Gloria nodded and went back to the dishes. Alana stood there and watched Gloria for a moment. Gloria seemed out of place in her kitchen. “Stop!” Alana screamed within herself. The tears began to well up. With her shoulders hunched over Alana scampered out to her studio. She craved solitude and sought it in her darkroom. Today the rhythm of the chemical table bouncing from side to side agitated her. “Stop!” Alana yelled at the table that ignored her commands. Alana reached out and tried to stop it. Alana used her hands to try and stop the table. It balked back at her with a horrible grinding noise coming from the gears. Alana released the table.

Alana sank to the floor. “It’s been almost three months,” she thought to herself, “I need to go. I need to get away.” She’d been to enough fan fairs to know that a week in Nashville would be fun and be just what she needed. She sat there hugging herself for a moment getting lost in the possibilities of what the trip would be like. The softball game, nights out on Broadway, fan club parties, and multiple concerts, there wouldn’t be time to think about the wedding that would have interrupted the activities. “But would I want to come home?” Alana whispered.

Suddenly she felt like a caged animal within the darkroom, she’d once loved. The rage festered inside of her. She wanted to find Steven’s axe and destroy the chemical table. There was satisfaction in thinking about taking a sledge hammer to the equipment that was in there. She

threw open the door and went to the house searching for Steven's toolbox.

"Alana. Alana." Gloria called after her.

Alana blocked her out. There was only one thing on her mind, finding the toolbox. She found them in the basement. Her hands shook as she grabbed the sledgehammer and turned back to the stairs. Gloria was at the top of the stairs waiting.

"What are you doing?" Gloria asked blocking Alana's exit from the basement.

"I need to fix something," Alana said simply.

"What are you fixing with that hammer?"

Alana shook her head. The concern in Gloria's voice broke through her anger. She let the sledgehammer go. It clamored down the stairs. Alana looked at it over her shoulder. An image of herself tumbling down into the darkness frightened her. She looked at Gloria and whispered, "I don't know."

Gloria sighed as she pulled Alana to her. "You're going to Nashville," Gloria said firmly, "You need to get away from things for awhile. If you want me to go, I'll go with you."

Alana just nodded breaking out of Gloria's embrace and heading towards her room and setting everything else aside.

Chapter 16

The hot June sun began to set over Nashville's skyline. Chris drove down Broadway smiling as the neon bar signs lit up. The sidewalks were still packed with tourists in for the four-day festival known as Fan Fair. Broadway had honky-tonks lining both sides of the street with a few souvenir shops shuffled in. Visitors flocked to this street at all times of the day, but especially at night in hopes of getting a glimpse of their favorite performers. Chris made a right turn onto Sixth Avenue pulling into the parking lot behind the Presbyterian Church. He looked in the rear view mirror and rubbed his face. In preparation for the night out, Chris hadn't shaved for two days in hopes that he could slip through the crowd undisturbed. There would be plenty of time later in the weekend for that. Tonight, he wanted to blend into the crowd and hear what people had to say. He tossed his customary Cowboys baseball cap in the passenger seat and slipped on his new Yankees ball cap in its place. He unfastened his cross from around his neck and hung it on the mirror. Satisfied that he'd removed all the identifying accessories, Chris got out of his truck and slipped into the crowd.

He walked the three short blocks to Tootsie's Orchid Lounge. The two-story honky-tonk was where many stars learned how to handle a crowd in Nashville and Chris was proud that he was one of them. The place was packed. It took Chris a good ten minutes to make his way downstairs and get a place at the bar. He sat there and ordered a beer. He turned towards the stage watching the house band perform to the crowd's

delight. Beyond being a place that felt like home, it was also one of his favorite places to find opening acts for his tours.

Chris scanned over the crowd. He recognized a small group of his fans up front by the stage. Cheyenne turned and faced him. He looked closer at the group and was disappointed to see that Alana wasn't amongst them. It'd been almost four months since Denver, when she'd ran out of his hotel suite and maybe his life.

The thought of Alana leaving him permanently was devastating to him. She'd been there for almost every important event in his career. She met him in Nashville when he'd moved there. She was there in the front at almost all of his showcases for labels, including the one that resulted in a deal. She was there for his album release parties, his number one parties, his fan club parties, his awards. She was just always there, even in the bad times like when he'd faced throat surgery and the possibility that he might never sing again. The truth of the matter was he depended on her more than anyone else in ways that he couldn't explain.

Chris turned back to his drink and finished it off. Suddenly he didn't want to be out; he didn't want to wait all night hoping to see her. He didn't want to face that disappointment..

Chris stood up and turned around coming face-to-face with Alana. Instinctually, he brushed Alana's lifeless hair back from her face. Alana jerked away from him. "Alana," Chris gasped.

Alana gave him a small smile as she squeezed into the bar and ordered. Chris leaned in and spoke in her ear, "How are you doing?"

Alana's smile began to crumble. Chris took Alana's hand and kissed it, "Would you mind going for a walk?"

Alana stared at Chris. Her heart was racing she wasn't prepared to see him so soon. The bartender brought her the drinks. She gave the bartender a grateful smile and then leaned in to talk into Chris's ear so he was sure to hear, "I've got to take these drinks back to everyone."

"I'll wait," Chris responded.

Alana just nodded taking the drinks from the bartender and returned to the group. Chris watched Alana whisper to Cheyenne before getting lost in the crowd. A few minutes later, Alana appeared at his side. Chris took her hand and led her upstairs and onto the street.

Concentrating on the rhythmic sound of their steps and the cars passing by, Alana watched her feet passing the cracks on the sidewalk. "I'm really sorry about not making it to many shows lately," she said quietly.

"No need to apologize, baby. I didn't really expect you to."

Alana stopped walking and faced him. 'After all of these years, how could he not expect her to be at more shows,' she wondered to herself. Then the image of how she left him in Denver, flashed through her head. Her eyes filled with tears. She whispered, "I'm sorry."

Chris reached out and cupped her face in his hands. The light from the street lamp shining down on Alana's eyes, highlighting the uncertainty there, broke Chris's heart. He stared into her eyes, as he spoke softly, "Just take things one step at a time."

Alana lifted her face out of Chris's hand and buried her face in his shoulder, letting the tears fall onto his shirt. Chris pulled her closer to him. "It'll get better, darlin'. I promise," he whispered to her.

Alana pulled away from Chris. Exhaustion washed over her. She reached out to find support. Chris grasped her arms steadying her. Alana stared at his hands on hers. “Thanks, Chris,” Alana whispered, “I better get back to the others.”

Chris reached out and grabbed her hand, “Please don’t run from me.”

Alana swallowed hard, the tears filling her eyes again. “What is it, Chris? I’ve had a really long day traveling.”

Chris rubbed his face, “I don’t know. I just missed you. I’ve been wondering how you were doing with... everything.” Chris watched what little color Alana had drain from her as she toppled towards him. Chris picked her up and carried her the remaining block to his truck. Chris set her down in his truck and rushed her to the hospital.

Alana could hear a familiar tune being hummed in the distance. She struggled to open her eyes. The stark white walls, the steady rhythmic beeping sound, eased into her consciousness. The realization that she was in the hospital disoriented her. She turned her head to the humming and struggled to get her eyes to focus on the man that was standing there. Her mouth was dry. Her tongue seemed to be too large for her mouth. “Chris?”

Chris jumped at his name being called. He leaned over Alana’s bed, “Yes, darlin’, it’s me.”

“What happened?”

“You scared the shit out of me,” Chris answered the relief rushing over him, “You passed out.”

“Why?”

Chris brushed the hair back from Alana’s face, “I don’t know. The doctor’s haven’t told me anything yet. They did some blood work. I think they’re waiting for the results.”

Alana nodded closing her eyes. Why did she have to wake up, she thought to her self. The thought of being in permanent darkness appealed to her. There was no pain, no expectations in darkness. The feel of Chris’s calloused fingertips on her cheek kept her from slipping back into the darkness.

She turned her head towards a noise. A blurry figure was entering the room. She tried to focus on it but couldn’t. She felt the coldness on her hand as Chris’s hand left her. A chill ran through her body, and she closed her eyes. She couldn’t concentrate on the mumbled voices. She prayed for the peaceful darkness. “Baby” broke through the falling darkness. She felt her eyes fly open. Her vision was crisp as she looked at the doctor’s face. “What did you say?”

The doctor smiled at her. He had a soft, gentle face, one that had been aged from too many nights in a busy emergency room. His hand was gentle on her leg. “You’re dehydrated, exhausted, and going to have a baby.”

Alana was bombarded with emotions, “A baby? How?”

The doctor gave her a funny look, “You didn’t know you were pregnant?” She watched the doctor look expectantly at Chris.

Alana could feel Chris’s eyes on her. Silently he took her hand in his and turned to the doctor, “No, sir, we had no idea.”

The doctor turned to Alana, “I guess you’re about three or four months along.”

Alana could feel the tears rolling down her face. No matter how hard she tried she couldn’t concentrate on what the doctor was saying. She couldn’t process the information. She touched her stomach lightly.

Chris watched the doctor leave and sat down on the edge of Alana’s bed. He sat there waiting for Alana to say something or do something. She just laid there. Chris put his hand over hers, “You’re not alone.”

Alana opened her eyes and looked at him. “How can you say that?”

Chris reached up to play with his ear with his other hand. “You’re not. I’m right here. What ever you need, I want to help you.”

Alana pulled her hand from Chris’s. “The only thing I need is your word that you won’t tell anyone about this. I need time. The test-”

Chris felt his chest tighten at the desperation in Alana’s voice. “You can’t keep this from everyone,” Chris said trying to remain calm, “You’re going to need people to help you. Your friends at home will see the baby growing. They’ll know.”

Alana knew Chris’s brown eyes were demanding an answer from her. She smoothed out the wrinkles in the blanket covering her. She tried to silence the thoughts in her head. She was pregnant the test had been wrong. She’d been pregnant. The thoughts were too much for her. “No one needs to know.”

“What are you going to do, Alana?” Chris couldn’t hide the panic in his voice. There was only one way he could think of that no one else

would find out, and he would have never thought that Alana would consider an abortion.

Alana took a deep breath, "I'm going to keep this baby. I'll make sure its okay."

Chris spoke calmly, "How are you going to do that? You're not taking very good care of yourself."

"I didn't know. I didn't care."

Chris shifted so he was beside her and could put his arms around her. "Alana, darlin' how could you not know you were pregnant?"

Alana's shoulder shook from the pent up tears. "The test was negative. I was sick from the heartache of Steven. I was busy. I didn't know," she whispered.

Nothing was making sense to Chris. He pulled Alana closer, it was the only thing he could do. Words escaped him. He had no idea what had been going on with her. The guilt for not calling her was growing. There had to have been something someone could have done to keep things from coming to this.

The nurse came in and Chris stood up, "I'll be right outside."

Chris went out in the hall and leaned against the wall. The events of the evening began to settle on him. He depended on Alana, and now she was pregnant, three or four months pregnant. Chris's heart race as he ran that over in his head. However small the possibility might be, it could be his. Chris exhaled. He didn't know how he felt about that. Chris opened his eyes Alana was standing before him looking at him expectantly. Chris slung his arm around her shoulders and led her out of the hospital.

Chris didn't give her a choice. Chris helped Alana into his truck. After five hours in the hospital, the city streets were practically empty. Chris was on autopilot as he maneuvered his truck through the streets of Nashville to his house. Chris turned off the truck and let his hands fall from the steering wheel. He exhaled slowly, "I guess, I should have asked you where you wanted to go?"

Alana stared at the large ranch house that was surrounded by trees and pastures. There were a couple horses grazing out there. The house was the perfect fit for the Chris Alana knew. "Is this your place?" she asked.

Chris nodded reaching for the door handle, "Yeah. I figured you might need a little more time away from everyone."

Alana climbed out of the truck. She wasn't ready to face anyone. She followed Chris out of the truck to the porch. There was a porch swing there. She could picture Chris sitting out there with his guitar and notepad struggling to write what ever melody was in his head. The railings had flower boxes at the base with a mixture of flowers in them with a mixture of colors. Chris flipped on the light switch and led her into the living room. "Can I get you something to drink? Eat?"

"I'm fine. I'm just really tired."

Chris smiled. "Then let's get you settled into bed." He took her down the hall and flipped the light on in his room. "I'll let you crash in here. It's the best bed in the house, just please no dancing on it," Chris teased.

Alana gave him a weak smile, "It really doesn't matter to me which bed."

“It matters to me.” He walked over to the dresser and pulled out a t-shirt, “The bathroom is right over there. Make yourself comfortable.” He set the shirt down on the bed and walked out shutting the door behind him.

Chris went back out to the kitchen and grabbed himself a beer. He went into the kitchen and sat down. The room was pretty bare except for a few mismatched chairs and a line of guitars. The wall opposite of him was nothing but shelves that housed the prized gifts he’d received from fans over the years. On the wall next to the shelves was a stone fire place and his gold and platinum records surrounding it.

Chris’s eyes rested on the shelf of his favorite gifts from Alana. He rubbed the bridge of his nose. “She always knows just what to do for me; why can’t I figure out what to do for her,” he thought.

He stood up and walked over to the shelf. A smile crossed his face as he looked at an empty candle jar hidden in the back below an inch of dust. He didn’t know why he kept it, except it was that candle that started his endless supplies of candles from his fans. It was in Seattle. He’d ran into Alana at the hotel and he’d told her that he’d filed for divorce. They’d spent an hour together. It was the only time he’d allowed himself to cry over his failed marriage. He felt the anxiety in the pit of his stomach when she walked into the meet and greet later that night. He’d been exhausted from their conversation earlier and feared that one look from Alana and he’d lose his composure once again. She didn’t mention it, just handed him the gift bag she was carrying and explained the reason for the candle. Alana told him the candle would be relaxing and it had. For Chris the serenity came from watching the flame jump around. Alana

had always been his light among the insanity of his world. Chris leaned his head against the hard wood of the shelf, turning slowly to look down the hall towards his room. He'd never felt more helpless in his life. He'd find a way to help her, he swore to himself.

Chris grabbed a guitar and sat doodling on it attempting to chase his thoughts away. He must have sat there a couple hours playing before he put the guitar away. He headed down the hall to his guest room. He sat on the bed and pulled off his boots. He took off his shirt and crawled into bed. In the darkness and quiet of the early morning, he could hear Alana's muffled crying. He grabbed his shirt and threw it back before leaving the room.

Chris tapped on his bedroom door. The crying got more muffled. He opened the door. Alana was a huddled mass on the center of the bed curled up, her face buried in a pillow. Chris crossed the room and laid down to her. "Hey baby, it's going to be okay." He eased his arm under her drawing her up to him. Alana reluctantly let go of the pillow and put her arms around him.

Chris laid there watching the clock beside the bed change. After several hours, the tears finally stopped. The clocked turned to nine thirteen. The house was once again silent. Chris closed his eyes and drifted off to a very light sleep.

Chapter 17

Alana awoke with a start. She tried to place her surroundings but couldn't. The room was definitely a man's room. Everything in it was dark woods and dark colors, but it wasn't dreary from all the darkness that surrounded her, it was warm and comforting. Alana rolled over and hugged the pillow. The scent of Cool Waters filled her senses and it startled her. She sat up and looked around the room again. The cowboy hats hanging on the wall by the door confirmed her instinct. She was in Chris's room. Her hand flew to her stomach.

Alana threw the covers back, and grabbed her jeans. Slipping the jeans on, she followed the scent of cooking bacon to the kitchen. She stood in the doorway of the kitchen, watching Chris chopping up chives. It was a little strange seeing him move around the kitchen. She knew he loved to cook and was good at it, but had never witnessed it. He was lost in his preparations and moved around with same sort of confident grace as he did on stage.

Alana put her hand over her mouth to keep from laughing. His hair was still wet from a shower, and he was barefoot. She almost felt like she was intruding, but the platter of bacon was calling her name. She passed through the kitchen and sat on the stool opposite of where Chris was working and snatched a slice of bacon.

Chris saw her hand out of the corner of his eye. He looked up and smiled, "Sleep well?"

Alana broke off a piece of the bacon and popped it in her mouth. Taking twice the length of time necessary to swallow the small piece as she thought about it, “Yeah, I did.”

Chris smiled to himself and turned towards the stove. He flipped over the rest of the cooking bacon as he spoke, “Good you needed it.”

Alana waited for him to turn back to her. She reached out and grabbed his hand tightly. Chris stared at her hand on his. Such a tiny hand for such a strong grip, he thought. He looked up and saw the seriousness on her face. Their eyes locked. “Chris, you can’t tell anyone what happened in that emergency room. I’m begging you.”

Chris nodded, “If that’s the way you really want it, but I have conditions to keeping this secret.” He watched Alana sink back into the barstool. She watched him with a mixture of what looked like fear and defeat. “I’m worried about you. If you want me to keep this secret, you’ve got to be honest with me.”

Honest with him? When was she not honest with him, Alana thought. Alana met his eyes it didn’t matter what ever he wanted she’d agree to. She couldn’t risk letting anyone in on this baby. Chris’s usual soft brown eyes were black as he looked back at her. She’d never seen such a stern look on his face. She’d seen his face red with fury when his eyes would glow. She’d seen them soften into a golden tan color when he was moved to almost tears, but never had she seen them almost black before. There was no way she could risk him spilling her secret. She had to know what he meant, so she asked him.

Chris turned back to the stove and replaced the bacon he took out of the pan with new slices. He knew he was stalling, but the roles were

being reversed and he had to wonder if he wasn't risking their friendship or whatever the relationship was by getting too involved. He forced himself to pick up the knife before continuing to speak, "Over the last few months, Cheyenne, and some of the others have told me what was going on with you. Everyone has told me how well you're adjusting to it. You don't pass out from exhaustion and dehydration by adjusting to things. That's not doing well. I'm not going to pretend to know what you're going through, but you need someone."

"I wasn't pretending!" Alana shot back defensively.

"You weren't?" Chris asked his voice dripping with skepticism. He reached over and turned the burners off. "Come here." Chris offered her his hand and took her into the bathroom. Moving behind her and forcing her to look at herself in the mirror, "Let me tell you what I see here. The Alana that I know and love dearly is always full of life. There's a sparkle in her eye that just makes you want to know what's going on in her mind. I don't see that now."

"How can it after what I've been through?" Alana turned from the mirror. She didn't want to see what she had become. Chris's hands were on her face pulling it towards the mirror.

"You're right, the dark circles, loss of the spark. I can deal with. But look. Really look at yourself." His fingers rubbed gently on her cheek, "You're losing weight, you're face is hallow." He turned her around to face him. He could see her eyes filling with tears and it hurt him to be the cause of that pain, but he had to keep going. "You keep on like this you'll lose this baby and I'll lose you. I cannot be responsible for that because I've kept my mouth shut."

“But—”

Chris shook his head, “There is no but in this. I’m going to have to trust you. I’m not going to be watching over you like a watchdog, but you’re going to have to call me. I need to know that you are really honestly taking care of yourself.” Alana looked down at his chest she couldn’t look at his face. “Alana, darlin’, I’m really not trying to be the bad guy here. I just want you to be okay.”

“I am okay,” Alana said her jaw set defiantly.

“You are not okay. What have you been doing with yourself?”

Alana had to get out of the bathroom. She couldn’t think about what had been happening. How close she’d come to losing the baby. “I’ve been working, visiting with Gloria. She needs me.” Alana knew what she was saying wasn’t the truth, but it was the best she could come up with and it wasn’t entirely a lie she told herself.

“She needs you to take care of yourself. You still have your own life.” Alana just stared back at him blankly. Chris took a deep breath and went back into the kitchen. He needed something to do with his hands to keep from shaking her. He focused on preparing the breakfast he started. He told himself to wait. That there was still time to reach her, but right now he needed to make sure she ate. Putting the omelets on the plates, he saw her watching him. Still holding the pan in his hand he looked at her. Wondering if what he saw was really her waiting for him to give her direction. Chris tossed the pan in the sink. He handed her the two plates, “Put those on the table. Do you want some orange juice?”

Alana nodded taking the plates, “Don’t you have anything else to say?”

Chris poured the juice and took the glasses to the table. He sat down and picked up his fork, "I have a lot to say, I'm just not sure you really want to hear what I have to say."

"I know I don't," Alana mumbled into her plate.

Chris looked up at her, her eyes disagreeing with her words. "If you can't live for yourself now, the child that you have inside you needs you to really live. We've been friends long enough. Why should I care about what happens to you when you don't?"

Alana flinched, "I do care."

"The hell you do." Chris got up and got himself a cup of coffee. "I'm not going to argue with you. You want me to keep your secret, you know the rules: you're honest with me on how you're doing. If I suspect otherwise, I will find a way to tell Cheyenne or someone else close to you what's going on so they can make sure you're okay."

"I don't need a babysitter."

"Those are the rules."

"Fine!" Alana glared at him. She wanted away from him. He had no right to be putting demands on her. This was her life she made the rules, not him.

Chris sat down at the table and finished his breakfast. He looked at the clock. He knew they had to go. He had to get to the convention center to sign autographs soon. He stood up, "Ready to go back to the hotel?"

Alana looked up at him with relief, "Yeah. Just let me go change." She got up and went to the bedroom. She came back out a minute later in her shirt and they left. Neither one of them said anything on the drive,

when they got to the hotel, Chris didn't know why but he felt he had to make sure she made it to her friends.

Alana didn't argue with Chris when he got out of the truck. She led him to the elevator. It wasn't until she put her key card in the door that Alana realized that her friends would be worried about her. As soon as she opened the door, Cheyenne was there.

Cheyenne's eyes were blazing as she let Alana past her into the room. With a hand on Chris's chest she stopped him from entering the hotel room. She stepped out into the hall and shut the door behind her. "What the hell did you do to her?"

Chris stepped back, he hadn't expected Cheyenne's reaction, "I didn't do anything to her."

"The hell you didn't. She looks like hell."

"She looked like hell before she left with me last night."

Cheyenne's mind raced, she tried to picture what Alana had looked like. She was certain that Alana didn't look like that before. She knew Chris had done something, "No she didn't."

"She did, Cheyenne, maybe it was you who didn't want to see it." Chris knew he was out of line, but he didn't understand how Cheyenne hadn't seen the trouble Alana was in. The sting on his cheek was proof that Cheyenne agreed that he'd been out of line. Chris clenched his jaw.

"Stay away from her, Chris. She doesn't need you messing with her head."

Now Cheyenne had crossed the line. Chris grabbed her arm with more force than he'd intended to, "I'm not messing with her mind. You are not the only one who cares for her."

“If that’s how you care for her,” nodding towards the hotel door,
“Then she doesn’t need you. Are you trying to kill her?”

Chris took a deep breath, “We both know that’s not the case. I’m late.”

Cheyenne snorted at Chris’s back, “Don’t worry about her. I’ll pick up the pieces.”

Chapter 18

Alana went into the hotel and cringed at the door shutting behind her. She tried to distract herself by picking out her clothes for the day, but it was no use. She wanted to know what Chris and Cheyenne were talking about. Her hands shook as she thought about Chris telling Cheyenne about the baby. Alana jumped at the door opening. She collapsed to the bed looking at Cheyenne closing the door. She held her breath as Cheyenne crossed the room to stand in front of her.

“What did he do to you?” Cheyenne demanded.

Alana jerked back from the accusation. “He didn’t do anything to me, Shy, he didn’t.”

“The hell he didn’t! I can see the tear stains. You could have called, I’d have taken a cab to get you and beat his ass while I was at it. No one gets away with hurting you, especially not Chris!”

“Shy, would you please calm down. Chris didn’t do anything. We talked that’s it. I fell asleep and he brought me back here this morning. That’s really all there is to it,” Alana pleaded.

“I don’t buy it, Alana. You’re upset and so is he. Something happened. Something has changed between you two. You know you can tell me anything. I’ll help you.”

Alana’s head was spinning. She crawled up on the bed and laid there for a minute with her eyes closed. “Cheyenne. I passed out last night. Chris took me to the hospital. When we got out, he took me back to his house.”

Instantly, Cheyenne's anger was replaced with concern. She sat down on the bed next to Alana. "You passed out? Why? What did they say?"

"Just that I need to take better care of myself, I'm exhausted. I haven't been eating right. It was nothing that Chris did," Alana sighed.

"Why haven't you been taking better care of your self?"

Alana shook her head, "I didn't realize I was doing such a bad job. I've just been working."

Chapter 19

Alana slept most of the flight home. As she drove to her house, the heaviness she'd been consumed with returned. Walking in to the house, the emptiness of Alana's life hit her. She tried to block out the pictures, but everywhere she moved she felt Steven's eyes on her.

Alana slammed the bedroom door. Throwing herself down on her bed, she let the tears flow freely, her phone range. She laid there as her heart raced out of control as she waited for the answering machine to pick up. Gloria's voice rang out through the answering machine. Her voice was strained, "I hope you had a good time, dear. I'm looking forward to hearing all about it tomorrow over lunch."

Alana felt her body shake. Her eyes fell on a picture by her bed of Steven and her. She took it and tossed it at the answering machine, "GO AWAY!" she screamed.

The house fell silent. She pushed herself up off the bed, and went into her office and turned her computer on. While it booted, she returned to the living room, where she'd left her suitcase. Fumbling through her luggage she pulled out her camera bag with all the memory cards she'd filled during the trip. Returning to her office, Alana sat at her desk and inserted the first memory card into her computer.

Alana sat back and looked at the clock above her desk. It had been a couple hours since she'd sat down at the computer. She looked around realizing just how many pictures of Chris she had hanging on her walls that he'd signed. Each picture had a special message on it: "Alana, always dream big." "Alana, thanks for coming." "Alana, thank you for

always believing in me.” Tears welled up in Alana’s eyes as she continued reading the messages. She had never thanked Chris for always being there to run to when life at home got to be too much. She grabbed her phone and dialed his number.

“Hello?” a groggy voice answered.

“I’m sorry, Chris,” Alana said remorse flooding her voice.

Still in a state of half sleep, “Sorry for what, who is this?”

“I’m sorry for waking you up,” Alana apologized.

“Who is this?” Chris said beginning to wake up.

“It’s Alana.”

“Alana? Alana! Hey. Don’t worry about it.”

“No, I’m sorry. Really I am.”

Chris chuckled, “No, I said to call me any time. I meant it. What’s going on?”

“I feel so stupid. It’s really nothing. I got home and was messing with the pictures from the trip, and I just... I just wanted to thank you.”

Chris spoke softly, “You don’t have to thank me, Alana. It’s really my pleasure. And I’m glad you called. At least I know you made it home safe now.” Alana grew silent concentrating on the pen she was fiddling with. “Are you still there, Alana?” Chris asked after a few minutes.

“Yeah. I’m here.”

“Well, darlin, you called and woke me up, the least you can do now is talk to me. What’s going on?”

“I never realized how entrapping pictures can be,” Alana said her voice hollow.

Chris thought about it for a minute, “I don’t understand.”

Alana shook it off, “It’s nothing. I just wanted to say thank you. I promise I won’t call again.”

Chris groaned, “Remember our deal.”

“I’m fine, Chris.”

“That’s great, I still want to hear from you.”

“You will. I’ll still go to your shows like I always have. Things don’t have to change.”

“Things have changed,” he sighed, “Whatever, Alana, it’s your life. I’ll see you when I get there.” Chris said hanging the phone up.

Chris’s use of the familiar parting line, told Alana things hadn’t changed. Things would never change. He’d always be the man in the pictures or in her radio. He’d continue on living his life while she struggled to be a small part of it. She saved the picture she was working on and turned the computer off. Alana got up and turned the light off.

There was a cold chill to the house, despite the fact that it was in the middle of summer. She didn’t bother turning on the bedroom light. She discarded her clothes to the floor and climbed into bed. Tossing and turning, fluffing the pillows, she struggled to get comfortable in her king size bed. No matter how hard she tried, the bed would never lose the emptiness. As she lay there, she contemplated selling the bed, a smaller bed would be better, she thought.

At seven, Alana got up and quickly took a shower before pattering out to the kitchen to make the morning coffee. The house was stifling already, as she looked out the kitchen window, she knew today was going to be a scorcher. Opening the refrigerator, she surveyed the contents. The

view of the suitcase of Coors light filled her heart with lead. She knew she should just throw it away. Those were Steven's beers, and she'd never been much of a beer drinker. She reached in and grabbed the carton of eggs to discover it was empty. Cursing herself as she threw it away, she shoved the mayonnaise to one side finding a slim fast in the back of the fridge. She opened it, leaning against the counter as she drank it waiting for the coffee to brew.

The telephone rang. The slim fast slipped from Alana's hand spilling the contents all over the floor. Again, she chastised herself for being so jumpy. She bent down to clean up the mess she'd created when the phone rang again. Dropping the towel to the floor over the spill, Alana stepped over it to the phone. "Hello."

"Hello, Alana? This is Chris."

Alana pulled the phone away and stared at it. There was no denying the phone call was indeed from Chris. She slowly put the receiver to her ear, "Hello, Chris."

Uncertainty in his voice, Chris hesitated before speaking, "I didn't wake you up, did I?"

Alana laughed. Pouring herself a cup of coffee her hand shook, "No,, and it wouldn't have mattered if you had. After last night, it would have only been fair to wake me up this morning."

"No, it wouldn't have been. With my schedule, it's hard to ever know when I'll be sleeping or not. I just wanted to make sure you were okay."

"Of course I'm okay," Alana said, a little too quickly.

"Yeah, I buy that."

“Then why are you calling and asking if you’re not going to believe what I say,” Alana said defensively.

“I don’t have time for this argument, Alana. I just wanted to make sure you understood that I want you to call if you need anything. I don’t care if you wake me up, interrupt a meeting, I don’t care. I want you to know that I’m here for you.”

Alana took a drink of her coffee. Taking a few slow calming breaths, “Chris, you’re busy. Don’t waste your time worrying about me. I’m going to be fine. No matter how I feel about it, life goes on. Now I hate to cut this short, but I have a job to get to.” Alana hung up the phone. Leaving the coffee on the counter, she went back to her room and threw on her clothes.

Chapter 20

Chris tossed the phone down on the couch. Lonnie looked up from the book he was reading, “Problems?”

Chris looked at Lonnie, “There was no answer.”

“And what do you do for a busy signal?” Lonnie teased glancing at the phone.

Chris glared at him. He knew he was over reacting to the whole situation, but he hadn’t talked to Alana in weeks. At this point the truth was he’d rejoice at a busy signal, throw a party, set off fireworks... sleep. “I just haven’t talked to her in awhile and I’m worried.”

“What’s going on?”

Chris wanted to tell Lonnie, he needed someone to talk reason into him because right now he was ready to board a plane and find out what was happening with Alana. He hadn’t seen any of her friends at any of the shows so he couldn’t even get secondhand information. He knew his schedule was packed and he didn’t have the time to just fly out to California without a good reason. The fact still remained, though he’d given her his word.

Lonnie watched Chris. He could see the battle brewing within his friend. “Forget I asked.”

“Sit, Lonnie.” Chris waited for Lonnie to sit back down. “I know I can trust you, but I can’t stress enough that this stays between us. I wouldn’t even bother to tell you, but it’s driving me insane.”

Lonnie nodded, “You don’t have anything to worry about there.”

Chris grabbed the guitar from beside the couch, "It's Alana."

Lonnie nodded. Chris began to mindlessly play on the guitar, "I ran into her in Nashville. She passed out. I had to take her to the hospital."

Lonnie stopped Chris, instantly concerned. "What happened?"

Chris's patience was running thin, "I was getting to that, but this is why it's so important this stays just between you and me. She doesn't want anyone to know."

Lonnie looked at him completely lost. He could tell by the way Chris was abusing his guitar as he played that he was incredibly nervous about this secret. Lonnie also knew for Chris to even consider violating that trust, the secret had to be huge and put Chris in a spot he couldn't handle. "If it's that big of a deal maybe you shouldn't tell me," Lonnie paused running what Chris had said and Chris's reaction over in her mind. Suddenly it dawned on him; he could barely get the question out, "Is she... dying?"

"No." Chris sighed, "I just need to tell someone and I know I can trust you. I need to figure out what to do." Lonnie nodded slowly. Chris went to the kitchen and grabbed a couple beers out of the fridge. He handed Lonnie a beer and set his down before picking up the guitar again. Chris took a drink off his beer, and started playing the guitar again, "She's pregnant."

Lonnie couldn't hide his surprise. He'd seen Alana at the fan club party in Nashville and she definitely hadn't looked pregnant. He certainly didn't understand why she'd want to keep it a secret. "Okay so why the secrecy over that? Unless... Who's is it?"

“I don’t know why she wants to keep it quiet but that’s definitely what she wants. I just don’t know what to do. I thought we had an understanding that she’d stay in touch with me, but she hasn’t.”

“Don’t you think she might be a little busy getting ready for this baby?”

Chris glared at him, “Did you not see her?”

“Yeah I saw her, but what do you expect? She’s pregnant, alone, and lost who she thought was the love of her life.”

“She didn’t know she was pregnant before that weekend. And that’s exactly why I’m worried about her.”

Lonnie looked at Chris. “If you’re that concerned, call someone, go see her.”

“She made me swear not to tell anyone.”

“Chris, what do you expect to do? She’s an adult. You can’t make her do anything. You’re not around. You have no influence on her life at all.”

Chris took his frustrations out on his guitar. There had to be something he could do. He couldn’t just sit back and wait for news that something horrible had happened. What if it was his child, what if she’s alone and needs help, what if... what if.. went through his head.

“Chris. Chris. Yo Chris! What are you thinking about?” Lonnie asked.

Chris put the guitar aside, “I need to go out there. That’s the only answer.” Chris stood up.

Lonnie grabbed his arm and pulled him back down, “You can’t just run out to California. Unless you think that maybe it’s...?”

Chris rubbed his face. "I don't know, Lonnie. I just don't know, but I have to do this. Alana's always been there for me. Always. I finally have a chance to start repaying her," his voice trailing off, his mind wandering back to his first years in Nashville.

He'd been in Nashville about six months, when Alana came to visit. He'd tried to convince her not to bother with the trip, but she came anyway. Against his protests, Lonnie had brought her from the airport to the house they'd shared. The day before Alana had arrived the power had been shut off. They had no food in the house and had to go hunting for cans and bottles to get enough money to be able to pick Alana up from the airport. Without batting an eye, Alana had paid their power bill and filled their fridge with food. To this day, she hadn't let them pay her back the money she'd spent. She never mentioned it, she'd probably forgotten that years ago, but it was humiliating to him. Yet, if it hadn't been for her, he'd have left Nashville right then and never looked back. There was no doubt Chris had to make sure she was okay.

The silence spoke for itself. "Then, Chris, you have your answer. I don't know what you're talking to me for."

Chris nodded. He prayed he was blowing things out of proportion and would go back to find Alana busy getting ready for the baby. He stood back up and climbed off the bus. He found James. "Hey, James, I need you to make something happen."

James hung up his cell phone, "Make what happen?"

"I needed to go to California like yesterday."

James looked at Chris puzzled, "Why?"

“You’re not paid to ask me questions. I need to get to California. Sacramento area. I don’t need a lot of time there just a day, day and a half.” Chris could see how uncomfortable James was. He didn’t mean to make him uncomfortable. “Cancel some interviews. Charter me a private jet if you have to. I don’t care. I just need to get out there as soon as possible.”

“I’ll see what I can do.”

Chris sighed he didn’t have the strength to push it anymore. He needed to find a way to clear his head. He knew what he had to do. He went over to the trailer that housed the motorcycles that he brought with him on the road. He went over to his custom Harley. He definitely needed the power of the Harley to take his mind off of everything.

As the wind blew past him, so did the events of the last few months. The fact the doctor said four or five months, meant it was possible that it was his. What did that mean? Could that be why she isn’t calling? Would she really keep his child away from him? He shook his head, and reminded himself that he was talking about Alana and she’d never do that to him. Chris opened up the throttle on the bike. He had to get away from these thoughts.

Chapter 21

Alana lay on the couch in the studio. She could hear the fireworks going off outside. She just wanted to go to bed, but didn't have the courage to get up and walk outside. She picked up the phone and thought about calling Gloria, her attention diverted from the phone to her stomach. She concentrated on the sensation in her stomach. It didn't quite feel like nerves, or like she was upset. It felt like a flutter.

Alana grew antsy and that gave her the courage to leave the studio. She paused and looked up at the fireworks in the sky. They were gorgeous. Her hand went to her lips. Steven kissed her the first time beneath the fireworks. He'd made love to her the first time beneath fireworks. When he proposed there were fireworks. Tears streamed down her cheeks, life would never be the same again. "I miss you, Steven," she whispered.

The night sky grew dark. The lingering smell of sulfur was enough to make Alana sick. She sighed and walked to the house. Chris stood up from his seat on the steps when he saw her approaching. Alana stopped in her tracks, "Chris?"

Chris looked Alana up and down. In the dim lighting he couldn't tell how she was. He walked over and gave her a hug, "Hey Alana."

Alana couldn't believe Chris was standing there. Somehow it was a comfort to her, "How long have you been out here?"

"A while, I guess I should have checked the studio, huh?"

A small laugh slipped out of Alana. She slipped her arm through Chris's, "That would have insured you some type of company." She opened her door and let Chris in.

“You’re always the best company, darlin’,” Chris said, with an easy smile.

Alana flipped on the light switch in the living room and went and curled up in the corner of the couch. “I wouldn’t go that far these days.”

Chris watched Alana cowering in the corner, an image that didn’t fit in his mind of Alana. Chris looked back at the door weighing his chances of escape. He didn’t know what he was getting himself into and Alana wasn’t making this easy on him. Chris sat down on the other end of the couch. His eyes falling to Alana’s stomach, he couldn’t even see as much as a slight bulge. In the light though, he could see that her face had filled out some. His eyes drifted up to Alana’s face as it changed to a look of confusion. Her hand shifted to rest on her stomach. Chris reached out and touched her hand. She slipped her hand out from under it. Chris’s eyes got huge at the very slight but undeniable movement coming from under her shirt. Chris’s smile broke out slowly and he felt himself getting choked up, “Is that the baby?”

Alana tilted her head looking at him.

Chris watched Alana in an instant her expression went from wonderment to intense sadness. He looked down at his hand and was amazed at what he felt there and then it stopped. Alana was staring at his hand, tears starting to retrace the tear stains. He wanted to take her in his arms, but he didn’t dare make a move. Instead, he leaned back on the couch.

Alana stood up, the pictures that surrounded her felt like they were reading her thoughts. Her eyes were drawn to one picture by the television set. It had been one of her favorites. Steven was cradling his

niece in the hospital just hours after her birth. “Why are you here?” She asked.

“I came to see you. See how you were doing,” he said playing with his ear.

“Didn’t you have a show or something tonight? Is everything okay?”

The tears had shut off and Alana seemed at peace, almost as if she turned the switch off on her emotions, which blew Chris’s mind. “You’re the one that can answer that question.”

Alana’s brow wrinkled, “How can I answer that. I haven’t talked to you in weeks. And I’m sorry to admit it but I haven’t been on your site or the computer much. I have no idea what’s going on.”

Chris picked the hat off his head and rubbed it. “This isn’t about me, Alana. At least I don’t think so.”

Chris’s words echoed in her head. The constant bombardment of his words shattered any composure she had. “I’m fine. There was no reason for you to come out here.”

“Darlin, you haven’t answered your phone, returned any messages, I was worried.”

Alana went into the kitchen. She opened the fridge and the cabinets there was nothing in them beyond the bare necessities: some bread, milk, eggs, juice, a few boxes of cereal, some hamburger helper. None of that appealed to her and nothing looked appropriate to offer a guest. She leaned on the counter and shed more tears. Alana could feel Chris’s presence in the room. She had to find a way to get rid of Chris.

He shouldn't be there. She wiped the tears away and turned to face him, "Thanks for coming out here. I'm sorry you wasted your time."

Chris stepped forward and cupped her face. He looked in her eyes searching hoping to find out what was going through her mind there, but there were no answers to be found. "Have you told anyone about the baby?" Alana shook her head. "Have you been to the doctor?" Alana shook her head again. Chris let his hand fall from Alana's face. He stepped back. Dealing with Alana was beginning to feel like he was stuck in the middle of the ocean treading water and he didn't like his odds. "Do you not want this baby? I mean really want this baby?"

Alana's chest tightened at Chris's question.

Chris tapped his foot. He couldn't believe he'd spent weeks worrying about this woman and now she didn't even know if she wanted the secret he was keeping. He'd never had the urge to slap a woman before, but right now his hand itched to do it. There had to be something he could do to snap her out of this funk and make her realize what she was doing to herself.

Chris had to leave. He wasn't going to invest more into this than she did. He'd been there before and had paid the price. He wouldn't go back there again, not even for Alana. There was no choice left, he had to bring their relationship back to the way it had always been. He shouldn't have come here. He felt the weight lift off of his chest and it felt great. "k, Alana," his voice soft, "I'll see you at your next show."

Alana watched Chris leaving the kitchen. She knew he was leaving, and she couldn't stop him. She was barely able to make her legs work enough to see Chris closing the front door. All the emotions of that

night came flooding back over her. Alana collapsed to the floor yelling, “Steven.”

Chris was about to get into his rental car when he heard the scream coming from the house. In a flash, he was throwing open the front door and beside Alana. “Shh Shh darlin’, I’m right here. I’m not leaving. It’s okay.” He scooped Alana up and laid her on the couch. Her hair was clinging to her face. She’d lost all the color in her face.

“I can’t do this alone. Don’t leave me. Please don’t leave me?” Alana begged over and over, clinging to Chris.

“I won’t leave you, baby. You’ve got me right here,” Chris said his own tears beginning to come. As he spoke, the weight returned to his chest.

Chris woke up and rubbed his neck. The floor hadn’t been the most comfortable place to fall asleep. He saw Alana’s still asleep on the couch. The night had given him a headache. Alana had cried for hours and all that he could do was sit there on the floor by the couch and play with her hair, until they’d fallen asleep. He needed to get up and make some calls. He needed another day there. He tried to straighten out his legs, but they’d barely move revolting, punishing him for falling asleep where he had. Feeling like he was fifty, Chris finally stood up.

He went outside. The blast of heat added to the weight on his chest. He sat down on the porch steps, leaning against the railing. He laid his head back and breathed in deeply, an understanding of how deep Alana’s grief was hit him. She was trapped in the prison of her dreams. She didn’t have an escape from it; like he did. The road was always his escape. While on tour, there wasn’t time for any other matters to weigh

on him, the constant on the go pace kept those thoughts away. He sighed knowing; it wouldn't keep these thoughts away anymore.

It had been years since his divorce, since he gave up the dream of ever having more than his career. He had nothing to complain about; he had the career he always dreamed about, a circle of friends that were closer to him than family. Yet sitting there on the stairs, he found himself wanting more.

Chris sat there watching the occasional car pass by in front of her house. Looking out towards the studio and the small light on the back of it, he could imagine teenagers playing basketball there or a late night bicycle lesson with preschoolers. It was a house made for a family. Chris pulled out the pack of cigarettes from his shirt pocket and lit one. Inhaling deeply as he put his lighter away, he waited for some relief to flow through his body. When he found none, he exhaled slowly.

The door opened and shut quietly. Chris forced himself not to look until there was a hand lying softly on his shoulder. He glanced up seeing Alana standing there. He moved his feet and sat up facing the yard. Chris watched Alana take a seat next to him; there was no denying this woman held a special place in his heart.

Alana looked at her hands, "Thank you for staying, Chris."

Chris put his hand on her leg, "Where else would I have gone?"

"You've always got some place you need to be."

Chris watched the birds settling on the telephone wire across the drive. One by one they'd leave their perch fly around on patrol and then settle back down. Only one bird didn't participate in this maneuver. It was in the center, almost as if the rest of the flock was protecting that

one. Chris glanced back at Alana. “You’re right, but that doesn’t mean I’m not always available to you.”

Alana shook her head, “No, you’re not. I’m fine there’s nothing to worry about here.” She rose from the steps and turned towards the house.

Chris followed her, “Prove to me there’s nothing to worry about here.”

Chris watched Alana stiffen. It seemed like an eternity before she turned to face him. “How do I prove that to you? You’ll make your own judgment. You always do.”

“I’m sorry, Alana. I know I’ve been an ass all these years.”

Alana shook her head, “You are who you are, Chris. You never pretended to be anything that you weren’t. You don’t have to apologize. Our friendship was never meant to be a mutual thing.”

“That’s being an ass, Alana. You gave me everything I could have asked for in a friend. I never gave you anything.”

Alana turned and went inside. She busied herself straightening pictures. Each picture irritated her more than one before it. She started pulling them off the wall and chucking them. Chris dodged the first two as he made his way over to her. “Alana! What are you doing?”

Alana fought her way out of his grasp, and continued her attack on the pictures. Chris stood back and watched. Every picture she grabbed was one that had Steven in it. When there wasn’t a picture left in the living room with him in it, Alana moved through the house finding the rest of the pictures of Steven. Chris just looked around at all the broken glass and frames that laid on the floor. When the shattering stopped, Chris carefully made his way back to the bedroom. Alana was laying

curled up on the floor. Her body shaking, Chris knelt down beside her.

“What is it?”

“Just go, Chris, go. I know it’s what you want to do.”

Chris shook his head, rubbing her cheek, “I don’t want to go. I want to help. You just got to tell me how.”

Alana pulled herself up, “You can’t help me. You did this!” She went into the bathroom and slammed the door. Chris flinched as he heard the lock engage.

Chapter 22

Chris did the only thing he could while he waited for Alana to come out of the bathroom. He started cleaning up the mess she'd created, stacking the pictures on the table for her to decide what to do with later. In many ways he felt like he was intruding watching the pictures stack up. She had a life here, one that he'd have loved to have had. He had never dreamt that this is what Alana had left to come visit him. What he really couldn't understand is why Steven had allowed her to go so freely.

Chris's cell phone rang, "Hello?"

"I figured you'd have called me by now to tell me how it was going out there?" Lonnie said cheerfully.

Chris walked outside, "I don't even know how to describe it man. She's a mess."

"Of course she is what did you expect?"

"I feel responsible. I want to fix it." Chris sighed, lighting up a cigarette.

"You find out if it's yours?"

"How am I supposed to do that?" Chris snapped back.

"I guess you can't really, can you?" Lonnie shrugged, "Oh well, so what's going on?"

"I just finished cleaning up the mess she made destroying all the pictures of Steven. They had it all... everything, and he just let it go."

"Dude, he's dead he didn't have much choice in letting go?"

"He was out with another woman."

Lonnie snorted, "She was out with you."

“Nothing would have happened if it hadn’t been for him,” Chris said firmly.

“How do you know that?”

Chris started pacing the porch, “How else can I explain it? We were just doing what we’ve done for years, but something was different.” Chris sighed, “Look, I don’t need you adding to my guilt here. I’m doing just fine on my own.”

“I just know what I’ve seen over the years. You partition people off into certain areas of your life. You give them roles and do not let them break from it. You put her into your fan category.”

“I’ve never thought of her as a fan,” Chris said defensively.

“If you say so, but man, I saw how you looked at her at the engagement party, how you’ve always looked at her...”

“Don’t even start with that, Lonnie,” Chris said clenching his jaw.

“Fine, I’ll let it go, but I just want it to be on the record that I’ve told you how many times that men and women can’t just be friends.” There was a pause before Lonnie continued, “So what are you going to do? When you coming back?”

Chris sighed, “I don’t know. I can’t leave her like this... tell James to cancel one more show. I’ll be back before the one after that.”

“Chris, you know what that’s going to do...”

“I can’t leave her like this.... No matter whose kid she’s carrying.”

“I’ll pass it along. I know this is Alana we’re talking about here, but be careful.”

Chris just hung up his phone. He took some time outside to gather his thoughts before going back inside. Alana was sitting at the table looking through the pictures. Chris sat down cautiously, "Want to talk?"

Alana looked up at him, shaking her head, "I don't know what to say."

"You guys looked pretty happy," Chris said nodding towards the pictures.

"We were, I guess."

"I didn't know what to do with those, so I just stacked them up there. I hope that was okay." Chris played with his lighter nervously.

"That's fine," Alana said her voice cracking.

Chris sat down next to her, "Darlin' I know you're hurting here, but you're killing me seeing you like this. I'm sorry if what happened between us is adding to this..."

"Nothing happened between us," Alana shot at him.

"Yes, something happened—"

"No. Nothing happened," Alana said firmly. She got up and moved the pictures to the couch.

Chris followed her, "You can't tell me you don't remember, Alana. Just before you got the call... we... I made love"

"No. You didn't. I don't know what you're imagining happened but nothing did. I'm sorry."

Chris grabbed her and kissed her. Alana pulled away and slapped him. "You need to go." She turned him around and shoved him towards through the door.

Chris rubbed his cheek as he got into his rental. He sat there staring at the house confused by what had happened. He pulled out his cell and called Lonnie.

“I didn’t do it, I swear!” Lonnie laughed.

“How can a woman claim to not remember sleeping with someone?” Chris said putting the car into gear and backing out of the driveway.

“What do you mean?”

“I mean, she sat there and told me we never did anything!” Chris said exasperated.

“Not as memorable as you thought, huh?” Lonnie asked before he could stop himself.

“Go to hell, Lonnie!” Chris said hanging up his phone and tossing it into the passenger seat. Chris got onto I-5 and headed south. Chris could still picture her beneath him, feel Alana’s velvet skin, smell her. It had meant something to him. It had been more than sex to him, he’d never experienced anything like it and it pissed him off that she didn’t share any of it. He had struggled with what had happened for months, being consumed by the guilt of Alana’s departure, but now he felt used. He’d expected more from Alana than that. He’d been certain she’d never give in to the urge to use him for her own personal gain or in this case to get back at Steven, but now he wasn’t so sure.

Chapter 23

Alana stared at the tiny black and white image of her baby on the monitor. The technician set aside her wand, and smiled, “Everything looks great, Alana. The baby looks nice and strong. I know you said that your last cycle was in January, but based on the measurements I’d say you’re probably closer to being five months along than six.”

Alana nodded, “Oh.”

The technician patted her leg, “It’s nothing to worry about, these measurements vary a great deal later on in the pregnancy. I’m sure Dr. Nasise will be ordering you an amino to get a better idea and to make sure everything as good as it looks.”

Alana’s lower lip began to quiver, “Are those painful, dangerous?”

“I’ve never had one, but I know they’re safe as safe as they can be. Once you have this test, then you’ll be able to relax. They can find out so much about the health of your baby that whatever risks or discomfort you feel, it’ll be worth it,” the technician said gently, “You’re going to be just fine, Alana. This is exciting.”

Alana nodded grabbing the towel she was offered and wiping off her stomach. “Am I done here?”

“Yep, you’re free to go.”

Alana got up and left the hospital. She drove around for a while before stopping at the Daniels. “Gloria, are you here?” Alana called out.

“What is it honey?” Gloria answered wiping her hands off on her apron as she came out of the kitchen.

As soon as Alana saw Gloria the tears started flowing. “I’m pregnant. The fight... was for nothing....”

Gloria looked down at Alana’s stomach. She heard what Alana said, but it didn’t make any sense. Alana’s stomach was almost as flat as it’d always been and she didn’t know of anyone that Alana had seen since Steven’s death. “You’re what?” she asked.

“I went to the doctor... I’m pregnant... I’m going to have a baby in just a few months. What am I going to do?” Alana cried.

Gloria led Alana into the living room and made her sit down. In a soothing voice, “It’s going to be okay, honey. You’re going to be a great mother and I’ll be right here with you.”

“But it’s a baby... Steven’s baby.. and he’s not here.”

Gloria wiped the tears from Alana’s face, “I know, baby, but it’s going to be fine. Steven will be watching over both you and the baby. You need to calm down. What did the doctor say?”

Alana pushed the hair back over her ears, “Said everything looked fine but I have to go in for all sorts of test since... since... I didn’t go to the doctor sooner. And that it’d be here in September.”

“It’s going to be okay. We’ve got two months to get everything ready. That’s plenty of time.”

“But what do I know?” Alana looked at Gloria frightened.

Gloria smiled softly, “Nobody knows anything the first time around and everyone does fine. We’ll get you through this. This is good news.”

“I’m scared, Gloria,” Alana whimpered.

Gloria hugged Alana and rocked her, “Shh baby girl. It’s going to be fine you have to trust me.”

“I do trust you,” Alana cried.

Harold came in and gave Gloria a questioning look. Gloria smiled at him, “Grandpa we’re going to have another baby.”

Harold looked at her confused, “Really?”

“In two short months,” Gloria said with a smile.

Harold looked at the two women sitting there, “Is everything okay?”

“Just go in and turn dinner off for me.” Harold left the women to do as he was told. Gloria nudged Alana back a little, “We’ll get you some dinner. And put you to bed here, no arguments. Then tomorrow we’ll get up get you breakfast and take you to get some maternity clothes. That baby needs room to move around.”

“Do you think I’ve hurt it by not having maternity clothes?”

Gloria laughed, “No baby girl. You haven’t hurt the baby at all.” Alana nodded. “Okay now wash your face and come to the table.”

Alana went and did as she was told. As soon as the plates were dished up, Gloria started in. “We need to get a crib, the car seat, you should just come over here to eat dinner that way I know you’re getting enough. And you should really name the baby after Steven, we can name her Stephanie...” Gloria drowned on. Her face was animated and there was life in her eyes, that hadn’t been there since Steven’s death.

Alana took a couple swats at the imaginary mosquito that was swarming around her ears. Alana stabbed at the fish on her plate with

growing hatred. Each bite was like another brick on Alana's already fragile shoulders. Alana stood up from the table and ran for the bathroom.

The mosquito gone, Alana felt the food rising from her stomach. She knelt down by the toilet, leaning on the sturdy porcelain. Alana felt the waves of heat floating over her, but nothing was coming. Sitting there, Alana's eyes fell on to the cabinetry that had been made to look worn a feeble attempt to make the place seem used and comforting. Under the cabinet a small decorative wheelbarrow that had a crackle white finish. Over the toilet was a rustic farm picture. Fake autumn leaves were sitting on a basket on the top of the toilet tank. Alana felt herself grow faint. She leaned her head on the cool porcelain. Her heart raced, beads of sweat ran down her face. Slowly she pushed herself up and washed her face.

Alana left the bathroom. Gloria was standing there outside the door. Gloria put her arm around Alana and took her upstairs. Gloria tucked Alana in to Steven's old room, "Now get some sleep, baby, we've got a big day tomorrow."

Alana nodded weakly. With Gloria out of the room, Alana studied it. The room hadn't changed since Steven had moved out. Some of his high school mementos were still hanging on the bulletin boards. In the center was a blue and gold certificate announcing Steven's status as most likely to succeed. Right below it a similar one for most popular. Alana's heart festered as she stared at them. The tears began to slip down her cheek. That was the Steven she'd loved, but now it caused her pain. The most troubling fact was she didn't understand why.

Alana tossed and turned the night away haunted by dreams of Steven. She finally got up around four and went home. The house was cold and dark as she entered. Alana went to her room and grabbed a sweatshirt and laid on the couch, rubbing her stomach. The reality of being pregnant settling in on her, her breathing grew rapid. Her heart was racing and the house was growing with each breath. In a panic she picked up the phone and called Cheyenne.

“Hello,” Mark answered it still asleep.

“I’m sorry, Mark,” Alana whispered.

“Is anyone there?” Mark asked annoyed.

“It’s Alana,” she choked out. Alana listened to the phone getting tossed around. She waited for Cheyenne to come on the line. Instead, the only thing she heard was Mark snoring. Alana hung up.

Alana knew she couldn’t go to sleep. She sat there. “More like five months” kept ringing in her head. The possibility frightened her. She grabbed the remote for the stereo and turned some music on, cranking the volume hoping to feel the void of the house. Her body still refused to quiet and relax. She got up and began to pace the house struggling to find something to do.

Coming back into the living room, she scoped it out. It wasn’t her living room. She needed it to be her living room. She went to the couch and turned it around so it sectioned off part of the living room. Her breathing slowed a little. She went over to Steven’s large screen television set and unplugged it. She started a list of things to get rid of, on the top of it the television set. She went to the bedroom and brought a

floor lamp to light the corner. She struggled with the **bookcase** moving it to her new sitting corner and putting in her most beloved books.

Alana's heart continued to race, not from anxiety but from hard work. Alana smiled as the room began to resemble what she had in mind. Alana felt a sense of calmness about her that she hadn't felt in years.

Alana went into the kitchen and made herself some coffee. Pen and paper in hand, and coffee by her side, she started making a list of things she needed to do. She set it aside when there was a knock at the door. She got up and opened the door.

Startled by the worry on Gloria's face, Alana pulled her inside, "What is it?"

"You didn't leave a note or anything to tell us where you'd gone. I was afraid something had happened to you."

"Oh, Gloria, I'm so sorry," Alana apologized, "I didn't mean to scare you. I just couldn't sleep."

Gloria hugged her again, "It's okay, the only thing that matters is the baby and that you're okay."

Alana smiled uncomfortably. She pulled back and mumbled, "I'm fine. Really I am."

Gloria patted her hand, "I know you are." Gloria went to set her purse down where a table usually was. When it hit the floor and spilled, Gloria looked around her. "What did you do?"

Alana put her hands in her back pocket and took a deep breath. "I changed things around. Isn't it great?"

"But why? What possessed you to change things around?"

"I needed a change," Alana said weakly.

“Well this just isn’t going to do, Alana. You can’t be doing stuff like this. You’re pregnant. You could have hurt yourself and the way you have this... do you know how many dangers you’ve created for Steven’s child.”

“No, did I?”

Gloria sighed, “I’ll call Harold and he can help me move things back the way they’re supposed to be. Shopping is just going to have to wait.”

“I’m sorry,” was all Alana could get out before running to the bedroom. She laid on her bed for a little while. She listened as Harold came in. As they’re muffled voices took on an angry tone, Alana got up and started throwing some clothes in a bag. The voices stopped and her bedroom door opened. She looked up as if she’d been caught doing something wrong.

Gloria stared at her, disapproval all over her face, “What are you doing?”

Alana zipped up her bag, “I need to get away for a little while.”

“You can’t go anywhere. I saw your stack of bills, have you been paying anything?”

Alana sat down on the bed, staring at her hands, “I’m doing the best I can.”

“Look at me when I’m talking to you, Alana. If that’s the best that you can do then maybe you should be thinking about what it is you’re going to do. I shouldn’t have to remind you that you’re going to be a mother. Do you know what that means?” Alana nodded. “Lord knows I’ve tried to teach you and Steven responsibility,” she sighed, “I guess

you just didn't learn anything, did you? Of course not, Steven always bailed you out."

The tears were welling up in Alana's eyes as she shook her head. "No, he didn't cover anything for me."

Gloria waved her hand, "Don't try and tell me that. I know he paid off your credit cards and helped you out before you two moved in together. I think you better start considering selling this house. Until you can get your head on straight, you can come stay with us. We have plenty of room."

"I- I can't do that."

"And what other option do you have, Alana?" Alana started unpacking her bag. Gloria's voice softened, "That's a good girl. We'll figure this out."

Alana just nodded unable to hold back the tears. Gloria came over and gave her a hug, "Shhh! It's going to be okay there's no reason to be crying. Harold should be done in the living room. I'll let you get some rest. We'll be over in the morning to sort this stuff out."

Chapter 24

Chris parked on the street. He stared at the sale pending sign in front of Alana's house. His uncertainty for coming increased. He took a deep breath and got out of the rental car and walked up to the studio and went inside. The lobby was empty. He just stood there not certain what to do.

Alana came through the door behind the counter and stopped, "What are you doing here?"

Chris studied her, "You're selling the place?"

"Don't have much choice," she mumbled looking at her feet.

"I don't understand what do you mean?"

Alana sighed, "I'm in the middle of a shoot, I can't talk right now."

"I didn't mean to bother you, Alana," Chris whispered, "Can I watch and we can talk afterwards?"

Alana gave him a small smile, "Sure." Alana went back to the young family that she was photographing, "Sorry about the interruption." Alana took her place by the camera. She had the family positioned in a semi circle with the baby crawling around between the mother and father. With ease she moved around managing to coincide the flashes with the baby's glances towards her. Chris watched the monitor as the pictures changed. Each picture the family looked alive, not like a typical family portrait. Chris wondered if maybe Alana had been right about the photographs he'd used for his promotions. None of them felt like they really captured a part of who he was.

Chris smiled at the family as they walked past him. "You're really good at this," he said quietly.

Alana smiled at him while she took the film out of the camera, "Thanks."

Chris shoved his hand in his pocket, "So why are you selling?"

Alana sat down on the edge of platform the family had vacated, twirling the roll of film in her hands, "I don't have a choice."

"You always have a choice," he said going to sit next to her.

"No, I don't. Some things just aren't meant to be, and this is one of them."

Chris stared at the toe of his boot, "Why isn't it? You're good at what you do, you've got to do this." Alana stood up and began moving the lights back away. She stopped and turned them back on. "What are you doing?"

Alana smiled, "I got you in my studio, you know I've been dying to do this."

Chris put his hand in front of his face blocking the camera, "No, now isn't the time, Alana."

"There's no time like the present," Alana said with a smile moving his hand away and snapping a picture.

Chris couldn't help but smile, "No really Alana."

Alana chuckled, "That's it. You're a pro at this, it shouldn't take more than a minute." Chris rolled his eyes at her. "Now that's the Chris Reed I know. Always disgusted at everything I do."

"You're absolutely ruthless. I'm not supposed to be doing anything remotely associated with work here."

“You’re not, you’ll never buy any of my photos, you’ve got professionals to do that stuff,” Alana mimicked.

Chris reached out and grabbed her, “Don’t you have a timer on that thing?”

Alana nodded, “Uh yeah... why?”

“Then if I’m in front of the camera, so are you.”

Alana shook her head, “That’s not part of this deal...” her voice trailed off.

Chris ran his fingers over her cheek. “How are you?” he asked softly.

“I’m okay,” Alana replied hoarsely.

Chris let go of her, “That’s good.”

Alana didn’t move, she took his hand and gave it a squeeze, “How are you?”

Before Chris could answer, the sound of tires squealing out of the drive made them both run to the lobby. Alana sank to the sofa, “It was Gloria.”

Chris looked at her lost, “Who’s Gloria?”

“I need to call her,” Alana said struggling to get up off the couch.

Chris finally noticed that Alana’s stomach was really beginning to show the baby in the month and a half since his last visit. He reached out and helped her up. “It can wait... she didn’t look too happy. Talk to me, what’s going on here.”

“Let’s go up to the house.”

Chris nodded and followed up to the house. They went through the back door to the kitchen. Alana went straight to the fridge and poured herself a glass of milk. She looked over at Chris, "Want some?"

"Nah, I'm good."

Chris looked around as they went into the living room. There were boxes packed all over the place. The house felt pretty empty. Alana followed his gaze to the boxes, "Sorry about the mess."

"Don't worry about it, what's going on?" Chris asked a little impatiently.

"Before I get into that, I need you to tell me something.... What did you mean the last time you were here?"

Chris searched her face as he spoke, "Are you really serious that you don't remember?"

Alana nodded, "We drank a lot that night..."

"We didn't drink that much, Alana. What happened then... don't even worry about it. It doesn't affect anything that's going on now."

"It matters to you, I can see it in your eyes."

Chris stood up and ran his hand through his hair, "If you don't remember, then it doesn't matter. It's probably best we just forget about it."

Alana tapped her glass with her nail nervously, "I can't afford to keep this house. The studio was never meant to pay for the house, this is a small town with limited need for a photographer."

Chris sat back down next to Alana. He could see the shame in her face. "What are you going to do? How are you going to take care of this baby?"

“I’ll find a job. Gloria and Harold, Steven’s parents are giving us rooms in their house,” Alana said her voice trembling, “It won’t be so bad.”

Chris exhaled as he ran his hand over his goatee, “Is there any chance that this baby is--”

“No, it’s Steven’s” Alana said firmly.

“Alana, I know you don’t want to admit that we slept together, but we did.”

“Just stop, Chris, it doesn’t matter. This is Steven’s baby, and even if its not... you can’t be the father. Don’t even start thinking about coming in here... and doing what you do. I’m sorry you even got involved with this. You don’t need this mess.”

“Don’t be telling me what I need. You don’t know everything about me.”

“I’m always right about you. Just like I’ve always known that all of your girlfriends haven’t been right for you, I know I’m not right for you.”

“How do you know that, Alana? Has it ever occurred to you that you’re the only woman who is remotely close to me and has stuck by me through everything?”

“And that’s because I’m your friend nothing more. You’ve got your life in the lights. That’s not a life for me.” Chris stared at her he opened his mouth a couple times and then closed it. “See you can’t even argue with me because you know its true.”

“Then as your friend let me help you keep this place. This is your home. That studio is where you belong. It’s the very least that I can do after all these years of you keeping me where I belong.”

Alana shook her head, “No, you do that and you’ll feel obligated to me. No.”

“I already feel obligated to you. You’re all that I think about anymore, wondering if I totally ruined your life because I was stupid one night.”

Alana got up frustrated, “Damn it Chris! You didn’t do anything.”

Chris’s eyes filled with tears, the image of her huddled on the floor screaming at him not to touch her was still fresh in his mind. No matter how hard he tried he couldn’t get rid of that image. It haunted him every time he closed his eyes, “Alana, you can’t look me in the eyes right now and tell me that you aren’t being eaten away by the guilt from sleeping with me. That’s the only explanation for you not remembering it.”

“No, the reason I don’t remember is because it didn’t happen,” Alana cried.

“Alana, it did...”

“Will it make you feel better to buy me off?” Alana demanded.

“Not when you put it like that.”

“Then how do you want me to put it?”

Chris sighed, “Do you remember this?” Chris pulled out his wallet and tossed an old faded piece of paper, “Do you remember coming to Nashville and paying to get my power turned back on.”

Alana looked at the paper and back at him, “Yes, of course I do.”

“There were no strings attached to that, right?” Alana nodded annoyed. “This is the same thing.”

“No, it’s not, Chris. A couple hundred dollars is not going to do anything for me. The payment for this place is fifteen hundred a month.”

“Alana, a couple hundred dollars to you then is like a few bucks to me now. If you hadn’t paid that then, I would have left Nashville and the music behind. Do you realize that?”

Alana shook her head the tears slipping out, “But I can’t...”

“Darlin’ right now you don’t need to be moving in with people you ain’t even related to and you don’t need to be stressing over money. I can help you with this. I promise there’s no strings attached and if it makes you feel better when you can afford to you can pay me back.”

The phone rang. Alana grabbed it, “Hello.”

“Alana, it’s Gloria.”

Alana sat down on the couch and clutched the pillow, “Hi... Gloria...”

“I want you to thank your friend for coming to visit you,” Gloria’s voice was cold and steady as she spoke, “Seeing the two of you in the studio, reminded me of the scene by his bus during your engagement party. Steven’s father and I have felt badly for what we thought our son did to you, and now it’s perfectly clear. If he did do anything with Rhonda, it was because he was tired of what you and your friend have been doing for years. You’ve made me feel like a complete fool, and I can’t have you in our lives any longer. I won’t let you continue to make my family look like idiots.”

Alana pulled the phone back and stared at it. Slowly she put it back to her ear, her voice trembling, “Gloria...it’s not like—”

“I don’t want to hear your excuses. Good bye, Alana.”

“Bye, Gloria,” Alana said to the dial tone before she hung up. Chris looked at her expectantly. “Whatever you want to do Chris, it’s up to you. I need to go lay down for a little while.”

“Are you okay?”

Alana nodded, “I’m great. Bye, Chris.”

Chapter 25

Alana found herself walking up to the Daniels' home after work. The garage door was open and she could hear the sounds of the sandpaper sliding on wood. The smell of wood comforted Alana as she walked up the driveway. Harold was intently working on a rocking horse as he whistled to the radio. Harold, a meticulous craftsman, was surrounded by his tools neatly hung on the pegboard above his workbench. Alana's eyes filled with tears as she stared at the picture. Alana rubbed her stomach, Steven should have been making that rocking horse, she thought.

"Hello, Alana. It's been awhile," Harold's voice greeted startling Alana from her thoughts.

Alana smiled fondly at Harold, hesitatingly coming into the garage. Her voice wavered as she spoke, "Is Gloria here?"

Harold set the sandpaper aside and picked up the small hand broom. In even gentle strokes, he dusted off the horse. He ran his hand over it, "Of course she is, but she can wait. What do you think of this ride?"

"It's very nice," Alana replied looking at the trashcan.

"You, young people!" Harold exclaimed in mock exasperation, "Come on in and take a look at it. Mama's got to approve of it before the baby sees it.

Alana drifted closer to the horse, rubbing her stomach in disbelief, "It's for my baby?"

"Of course it is. I make all my grandbaby's one, I'm not about to stop now."

Alana met Harold's eyes, her voice coming out like the sandpaper on the wood, "It is yours."

Harold smiled, putting his hand on her shoulder, "I never doubted it for a second."

Harold's kindness made Alana feel weak. She struggled to keep the tears at bay, "It's late I should go."

Harold only nodded as he picked up the sand paper once again. His attention on the horse, he spoke softly, "Steven's gone. It's okay to have friends... you know... male friends."

"I don't—" Alana jumped back the clatter of tools falling interrupting her. She bent down to pick them up, hitting the table and knocking off the picture. The tears clouding her vision, Alana bent to pick the picture up but drops it as if it burned her hand. "I'm sorry... I'm sorry," she mumbled as she ran from the studio. Harold watched her running to her car before going over to pick up the tools and the picture, putting them back into their homes. He turned back to the disappearing car, "I hope she's going to be okay."

Harold was just getting back to work when Gloria came from the house, "Was that Alana?"

Harold barely noticed his wife as he examined the horse once more. With a sigh, "Yes it was, poor thing."

Gloria threw her hands to her hip, "Poor thing! God knows I've tried with that woman and for her to repay us like this."

"The way I see it, Gloria, she has not done anything to us. We owe it to her to be supportive and to help her."

“Do you have to make such a mess out here!” Gloria reprimanded as she began to clean up after Harold, “We don’t owe her anything. Our son’s barely been in the ground and she’s having someone else’s baby. We don’t know how long this has been going on with that... that musician!”

Harold pried the broom out of Gloria’s hand and set it down. He purposefully turned Gloria to face him, “Gloria, Steven is gone. He died in an accident. She didn’t have any control about it and now she has to raise this baby alone.”

Gloria threw her hands up in the air, “I’ll never understand you!” Gloria went into the house slamming the door behind her. Harold sighed and got back to work on his horse.

Chapter 26

Alana sat down on the couch, facing Cheyenne. In just one afternoon the two women had transformed her house from the dreary cage that Alana had been living in, to a festive home. While Alana would be working in the studio finishing up the last of her appointments before the baby would come, Cheyenne was heading back to Sacramento to pick up all of their friends for Alana's baby shower.

Alana reached out and gave Cheyenne's hand a squeeze, "Thank you, Shy, for doing all of this."

Cheyenne rolled her eyes, "This is exciting and we would have done this a lot sooner had someone been honest with me."

"I know," Alana said quietly, "I need you to do one more thing for me."

Cheyenne turned to her, eager to help, "What's that?"

"That night.... When Steven died...."

Cheyenne sighed, "Yeah... what about it?"

"I don't remember much of it.... I'm just trying to figure out why Chris..."

"Chris cares about you, Alana, he always has," Cheyenne said with encouragement.

"Not like this..." Alana began to play with the designs on the couch, "He's been out here several times, calling... he's the reason I still have this house..."

“I know, it all seems out of character for Chris, to actually get involved in what’s going with you, but you’ve never needed help like you do now.”

“I’m grateful for it, next to you he’s the only one that really seems to care right now.”

Cheyenne waited for Alana to continue. It was as if Alana slipped into another world as her finger ran along the designs of the couch. Cheyenne reached out and stopped Alana’s finger, “What is going on, Alana. You haven’t been yourself in months. I know everything has changed but I don’t even recognize who you are right now. It’s like since Steven died you’ve have no direction, and I can only imagine what it would be like without Mark in my corner, but still I’d like to believe if something did happen I’d still be me.”

“You would be, Shy, I know you would. You’re so sure of everything.”

“No, Alana, I’m not like that at all. I depend on Mark for a lot of things. It’s nice to have someone you always feel safe with and that you know loves you no matter what you do.”

Alana’s lip began to quiver, “That was Steven.”

“Can I make an observation?” Cheyenne said gently. “Oh, honey, don’t look like that. You’re not a child, you’re about to be a mother. You need to have faith in yourself.”

Alana shook her head, “The only thing I have is this baby.” Alana stared at her stomach watching the teardrops fall onto her shirt.

“You’ve got a lot more than this baby. You have your studio. Do you know what talent you have in there?”

“It’s just luck.”

“Maybe some of it is, but you see the world differently from me. You see the picture in your head. When the camera is in your hand, you can capture just that precise moment that tells the story of the moment. Think about it. Really think about it, Alana. How many thousands of pictures have you taken at concerts?”

Alana swallowed hard, “A lot.”

Cheyenne smiled, “Yes, a lot. The majority of those pictures are so unique. Sure, the background might tell you where it was, but that’s not what makes them unique. Despite the fact that Chris does a lot of the same things at each concert, you manage to get those special moments on your camera that makes the entire image represent that one moment.”

Alana shook her head, “That’s because I take a million pictures at each one.”

“No, you could take just one picture and it would be the same thing. I’ve seen it. You know what you want in life, and you’re not afraid to fight through everything that stands in your way to get there.”

“No, I don’t, Shy. I don’t. I want to run.”

“Are you running? You knew you wanted a life with Steven, and how many times did I tell you he didn’t deserve you that you should move on.”

“But he’s not here now,” Alana whimpered.

“That’s not your fault. You need to just decide what it is you really want right now and go for it. You need to finally let go of Steven and begin to heal and move on. His stuff is still in your closet and all over this house.”

“Gloria thinks it’s too soon to move it, and I just can’t bear to do it.”

“To hell with what Gloria wants or thinks. She can’t live your life. Besides, is she here now to help you?”

Alana shook her head, “But that’s what I was getting at...”

“What is it then?”

“She thinks this baby is Chris’s, that we’ve been having an affair for years.”

Cheyenne stared at her dumbfounded, “Why?”

Alana shrugged, “Something about the engagement party and one of Chris’s visits.”

“What happened during his visit?”

“I don’t know. We were just talking in the studio and she didn’t like what she saw...”

“Then to hell with her, you know who the father is...?”

Cheyenne’s voice trailed off into a question.

“It’s Steven’s of course!” Alana said defensively.

Cheyenne cringed, “Is it?”

“Of course it is.”

“Alana, I don’t mean to pry here, but we need to figure this out. No matter what, I still love you like a sister and nothing that you say or have done will change how I feel about you. You do realize this don’t you?” Cheyenne asked concerned. Alana nodded hugging the pillow to her. “You had a fight with Steven the night before you came to see me about a pregnancy test that was negative. Obviously, you got pregnant right around that time... so unless the night before you took that test or a

couple nights before that test you and Steven did something....I know you guys had been extremely busy around that time....”

“What are you implying? Nothing happened with Chris!” Alana cried.

“Alana, I’ve seen you and Chris together for years. You two have always had a very special bond...”

“We’ve been friends. That’s it! How can you accuse me of something more?” Alana asked hurt.

“I’m not accusing you of anything, sweetheart. That’s not what this is about at ALL! You’re living in a prison here, trying to be faithful to a man that’s not here... Steven is dead. He was a ...a large part of your life, and I know you’re really close to his family, but if you continue like this...”

The emotional floodgate broke as Alana sat there listening. Into the pillow she cried out, “It has to be Steven’s. Don’t you understand that?”

Cheyenne rubbed her back gently, “Why? Why does this baby have to be Steven’s if it may not? I don’t know what happened between you and Chris. I just know what I saw as you went barreling through the hotel room... Chris was just in jeans and your clothes looked like they were just thrown on, your pants weren’t even fastened.”

Alana glanced up at Cheyenne shaking her head vehemently, “No no no! It can’t be. We’re friends. He’s got his life, he can’t be anything more than that.”

“Chris may not be able to be a father and a partner for you, but at least you’d be able to move on from Steven.”

“I don’t want to move on. I love Steven. I love his family.”

Cheyenne shook her head, “Alana, darling, I love you dearly but this insane love you’re professing has to stop. You are not a part of their family.”

“Yes I AM!” Alana declared, “This baby... it’s their grandchild they can’t turn their back on me!”

Cheyenne sighed, “Alana, they have turned their back on you. You haven’t talked to them in weeks. You going to quit living your life in hopes that one day that might wake up and realize that, ‘hey, this child is my grandchild?’”

“It’s not like that, Gloria is just hurting right now,” Alana insisted.

“What about you?” Alana got up off the couch and began pacing the living room. “What’s wrong, Alana, am I right?”

“I don’t know what happened that night.”

Cheyenne sighed, “What does Chris say?”

Alana turned pale. “He says we....”

Cheyenne got up and put her arms around Alana, “And did you and Steven...”

“I don’t know...”

“You don’t know or you don’t want to say?” Cheyenne sighed, “It doesn’t matter, Alana. You know the answers and you have to live with how honest you are about those answers.”

“I just can’t....”

Chapter 27

“That concert had to be the biggest fuck up yet,” Chris sighed walking of the venue with Lonnie towards the bus.

“It wasn’t that bad, Chris, the crowd didn’t even notice.”

“What does that say?”

“That your fans adore you and you should be grateful for. Honestly though, you’ve got to refocus here. I know you don’t pay much attention to the critics but they’re starting to talk.”

Chris sighed as he climbed into the bus but stopped short, Lonnie bumping into him. “What are you doing here?” Chris asked.

“Who?” Lonnie asked.

Chris turned back to Lonnie, “Get on the other bus.”

“Why? Who’s in there?” Lonnie asked stepping back off the bus.

“Don’t worry about it, just go.”

“Is it Alana?” Lonnie asked concerned.

Chris closed the bus door and told the driver to take off. He went and grabbed a beer from the refrigerator and leaned against the cabinet staring at Alana sitting on the couch. “How’d you get on the bus?”

“James let me on it,” Alana said meekly, “I needed to see you.”

“You can’t just come on my bus when ever you feel like it!”

Alana flinched, “I’m sorry.”

“Why? Why did you need to see me?” Chris demanded, his eyes beginning to darken, as he began to tap his foot impatiently.

“We had a deal...” Alana floundered.

“The deal was for you to call and check in, but the deal isn’t even in effect anymore. You’ve told everyone that you’re pregnant.”

“Are you really mad at me?” Alana asked on the verge of tears.

“Yes! You had no business coming on the bus. This is my space. I’ve done everything I could for you.... What more do you want?”

“I just thought...”

“Just thought what? You found a sucker to take care of you. Well, guess what, you’ve finally done what you’ve been trying to do for years. I know I’m a sucker for a family, and I’m choosing now not to be that sucker.”

“But this baby...”

“This baby,” Chris snorted, “You’re not going to tell me now that all of a sudden you remember what happened and that this baby is mine, are you?”

“I don’t know,” Alana said wiping the tears away.

Chris’s jaw dropped, “That is exactly what you were going to do. You’re just like all the other women.” Chris stormed back to the bedroom, punching the wall on his way in.

Alana stood up and followed him in there, “I’m not like the others.”

Chris turned on her, “You’re worse than the others!” His eyes were shooting poison at her, “You’ve pretended all these years to be on my side.”

“No, Chris, it was never like that. You have got to know I’m telling you the truth,” Alana pleaded.

“How am I supposed to know what to believe here? I’ve pleaded with you for months about the possibilities... begging you to let me help you and you’ve refused. What changed?”

“Cheyenne convinced me...”

“Oh great, so Cheyenne put you up to this convinced you to go after the meal ticket!”

“You jackass! I can’t believe I came all this way just to be treated like shit!”

“Go out and sit, leave me alone,” Chris said through gritted teeth. Alana cowered out of the room. Chris slammed the door after her and threw himself down on the bed. He tried to will his heart to slow down. His whole body was shaking and he was beginning to sweat. He pulled himself up, “A shower is what I need.”

Chris walked over and cranked his Lynnard Skynnard cd and went into the bathroom. He discarded his clothes and turned the water on. “Damn it!” He yelled, getting scalded by the water. He reached down and turned the hot water down. He turned around, the walls of the shower stall seemed to be closing in on him. He kicked at the walls trying to push them back, but it only made things worse. He felt the bus stop. Chris turned off the water and just leaned against the stall until he started to shiver from a chill.

Chris walked out of the bathroom in his jeans. He looked around the bus and couldn’t find Alana. He sank to the couch relieved. It was clear to him that the only thing he could do was let Alana go. The bus was small not a place for a child. He couldn’t give up the road for

anything, and what kind of father would he be out drinking every night. Chris closed his eyes. “My father,” he muttered.

Chapter 28

The phone shattered Alana's thoughts. She laid the baby blanket over the railing of the crib. Alana waddled out of the nursery into the kitchen and grabbed the phone, "Hello?"

"You realize I've been calling you for days, leaving you emails and you have not returned one of them. Where have you been?" Cheyenne asked frantically.

"I went out to see Chris," Alana said with a sigh.

"What did he do to you?"

"He didn't do anything... I screwed up. I convinced James to let me on the bus. That just didn't go over very well."

"You've got to be kidding me, he gave you attitude?" Cheyenne growled.

"That's his home, I had no business inviting myself in there, Shy. It's okay."

"The hell it is! Just wait... I'm seeing him next week in Houston. He's going to get a piece of my mind."

"Cheyenne Conley, you can not do that! I'm fine. I don't need him or anyone else. I have my baby. It'll all work out."

"That's great, Alana. I'm thrilled you feel that way, but he doesn't have any business treating you like that. Everyone lets him get away with shit just because he's some star. Well, damn it, it's time he wakes up and realizes that just because he's pampered and coddled in that bus of his, that he has to give other people respect."

“Cheyenne, you have got to swear to me, you won’t do this. I changed things and I shouldn’t have. I don’t know what I was doing going out there. I’m proud of him. He stood his ground on this and that’s what he needs to do. We could have ended up... he could have ended up resenting me and I can’t live with that. I know I’m a mess and not thinking things out clearly before I act. Thank god, he was.”

“You’re the most pigheaded person I know. Alana, he’s treating you like crap!”

“How, Cheyenne, by being honest? You said I needed to move on, and you know what it’s time I moved on with everything not just from Steven, but Chris too. Not that I can really go to any more shows, but still I’m done. I need to grow up and focus on giving my baby a home and I can’t do that gallivanting around the country.”

“It’s the way it has to be. I need to go.” Alana hung up the phone. She went down the hall to her office. Tears sprang to Alana’s eyes as she began to take down the pictures of Chris from her walls.

Chapter 29

Chris had an uneasy feeling stepping off his bus to face Cheyenne who reminded him of a caged tiger waiting for food. As his foot hit the ground he put on his cowboy hat and plastered on a smile.

Cheyenne sank her claws into Chris's arm, "It's about time you stepped off that bus!"

Chris tried to control himself, "How are you, Cheyenne?"

"Cut out the happy crap. You know I'm not happy with you. What the hell do you think you're doing?"

"I don't know what you're talking about Cheyenne. I'm just trying to get inside to do my show."

"Bull shit, Chris! We both know the reason you've canceled shows lately is because of one person. You pried your way into her life and when she was ready to accept it you threw her away. What the hell?" Cheyenne glared down at Chris.

Chris took a few steps back, "Cheyenne, this is not the time nor the place to be talking about this."

"Like you'd really talk to me any other place, I could have waited and did it in your meet and greet."

"This isn't going to work. I know you put her up to coming out here to try and get me in her little trap. I'm not biting."

Cheyenne's hand flew to Chris's face leaving behind an imprint. "She's done everything in her power for years to make you a success and this is how you repay her. She's absolutely right, you're not worth any of our time. All this success has gone to your fucking head!" Cheyenne

reached in her pocket and grabbed her ticket for the show, “Here, I don’t need this!” She crumpled the ticket up and threw it at him before she turned on her heel and walked away.

After the show, Lonnie brought two blondes to the bus. “Chris meet Kelly, Kelly Chris.”

“Nice to meet you, ma'am” Chris said politely.

“Cut the formalities, brother, this is the evening’s entertainment.” Lonnie said with a scandalous smile.

Chris set his beer down and went to his room. Lonnie followed him in there. “What’s up with you? You could use a nice distraction.”

“Women are nothing but trouble for me, so take your bimbos and go elsewhere. I don’t want to deal with it tonight.”

“Why? Cause of Cheyenne’s visit?” Lonnie challenged him.

“No because of me. I’m tired of this life. I’m tired of the endless parade of women throwing themselves at me. They don’t give a damn about who I am or what I want or what I need. They’re just interested in the man that’s out there on that stage, and that’s not me.”

“Then who are you? I hear you saying that’s what you want, but you’re not doing a damn thing to get those things.” Lonnie walked out of the bedroom slamming the door.

Chapter 30

Chris smiled as he walked up the red carpet for the CMA awards. He paused a few times to talk to some of the media there pausing to take pictures and sign a few autographs. He headed for Landon Meyers of CMT when Lonnie ran up to him. “Chris,” Lonnie said out of breath.

“What is it?” Chris asked concerned. Lonnie shoved his cell phone at him while he struggled to catch his breath. Chris gave him a curious look and said, “Hello.”

“Chris, it’s Cheyenne.” A distraught Cheyenne said.

“I’m in the middle of something what is it?”

“Sorry, to bother but I had to,” Cheyenne took a deep breath, “It’s Alana.”

“What is it?” Chris said everything beginning to fade away.

“She called me, I can’t leave to get to her,” Cheyenne’s voice began to tremble.

Chris looked at Lonnie, his heart began to race. He didn’t like the tone of the conversation. “Why do you need to get to her?”

“She’s in labor. She’s freaked out of her mind and I can’t leave here until Friday like I’d been planning, but by then the baby will be there and she can’t go through this alone.”

Chris tugged at his ear, “What do you want me to do?”

“Damn it, Chris, don’t be such a jackass. She’s scared and alone. You know this baby could be yours.”

“What- what makes you think she wants me there?”

“I don’t have time for this, Chris. Can you get out there to her?”

“I’m at the award show on the red carpet, I can’t just leave.”

“If you wanted to leave you could. If you really loved her, you’d be running away from there and to her. There’ll be other award shows; a baby is only born once.”

“There’s press everywhere. I can’t just leave.”

“Yes, Chris it is that simple. There comes a time when something has to come before work. You said anything she needed you would do. Well now she needs someone there to be with her.”

Chris was silent. He glanced at Lonnie and all the people staring at him. “Chris, are you there?” Cheyenne demanded.

“I’m going.” Chris hung up the phone. Lonnie shook his head putting his hand on his shoulder. Chris gave him a small nod before they both took off running back down the carpet to the line of limos. Chris stood there on the street looking around. People were everywhere and there was no easy way out of the area.

Lonnie grabbed his arm, “Come on let’s go around back.” Chris nodded and they wandered through the crowd to the back of the Ryman auditorium.

Chris looked around, “Now what?”

“Head over to Printer’s Alley. I’ll call you a cab to meet you over there.”

“Thanks...”

“It’s going to be fine. Don’t worry about anything here. I’ll let them know you had an emergency.”

Chris’s eyes burned as he gave Lonnie a one armed hug and took off running through the alleys. The sound of the crowds fading into the

distance, Chris began to slow down. The realization of what he left behind hitting him a performance and four nominations, there'd be a lot of explaining to be done later. He shook it out of his head, it didn't really matter. Cheyenne's words rang in his head, "If you loved her you'd run to her... it could be your baby." Chris couldn't remember the last time he'd felt so helpless and scared.

He saw the sign for Printer's Alley ahead. He began to scan the streets for signs of a cab. He reached into his pocket for his phone and realized that he didn't have it. "Shit!" He muttered as a cab pulled up underneath the sign. Chris ran over to it, "Take me to the airport."

The six-hour charter flight seemed to go on forever. Chris couldn't help but wonder if he'd make it there on time. At least once the plane touched the ground, he'd be able to just hop in the waiting rental car and drive the short distance to the hospital. He prayed he wouldn't be too late.

Chris followed the signs in the hospital to the maternity ward. The doors were shut. The sign posted said visiting hours ended at seven it was now nine. Chris rubbed his neck trying to figure out what to do. Chris looked up a nurse in pink scrubs turned the corner, "Excuse me, ma'am?"

The nurse smiled at him and then her jaw dropped, "Chris Reed?"

Chris blushed, he tipped his hat to her, "Yes, ma'am"

"I'm a huge fan... I can't believe you're standing here. What are you doing here?" she stammered.

Chris cringed slipping into his stage persona, "Thank you ma'am I just flew in. A really dear friend is in here. She called me hours ago."

“Your girlfriend?” the nurse’s face fell.

“No, just a really good friend is all. Do you work in here?”

“Yeah, I’m the nursing supervisor.”

Chris smiled tugging at his ear, “Do you think you could let me in. I know the visiting hours are over, but she’s alone and needs someone.”

“Who’s your friend?”

“Alana Murphy.”

“She’s one of my patients. Come on, she is pretty lonely.” The nurse waved her name tag over the scanner and the doors opened.

“Thank you, so much. What is your name?”

“Kelly. I know this is out of place, but do you think you could do me one favor?” the nurse asked hopeful.

Chris took a deep breath careful to hide his annoyance. He wanted to see Alana. “If I can.”

“I have a picture of you at the nurses station. Do you think you could sign it?”

“Sure. Where’s Alana’s room.”

“She’s in room 420 last one on the right,” Kelly said pointing down the hall.

Chris tipped his hat grinning at her, “Thank you.”

Chris peeked into the room. Alana was standing looking out the window, her shoulders were shaking. He watched Alana grasp the windowsill with one hand the other going to her stomach. The hospital room was cold. Chris took off his hat and tapped on the wall by the door. Alana turned towards him. The shock was clear. She kept looking up at

the television that was playing the awards and back at him. Chris played with the rim of his hat as he stepped into the room.

Alana lifted her hand to him. Chris placed his hat back on his head and came forward taking her cold hand. "Hey, darlin'."

"How did you know?"

"Cheyenne called Lonnie," Chris said getting choked up. Alana's hand began to shake in his. He lifted her hand to his lips, "I'm sorry baby."

"No, I'm sorry, you shouldn't have come. You created a hornet's nest by leaving like you did," Alana said nodding towards the television set.

Chris forced a smile, "How've I done?"

"Going No Where won for single of the year, and you're the male vocalist."

Chris brushed the hair back from Alana's face, "How are you?"

Alana turned towards the window. Alana's voice was strained, "I'm scared."

Chris took off his hat and placed it on the nightstand before turning her around, "I'm sorry, darlin', I'm here now. You're not alone."

Alana fell into his arms, her arms going around his shoulders. "Thank you for coming," she gasped in between sobs.

Chris eased her out of his arms. He let her hair run through his hands while gazing softly into her eyes, "You could have called me."

Alana looked down at his chest, "I was ashamed."

Chris pressed his lips to her forehead, "It doesn't matter. I'm here. We can watch the rest of the show together."

Alana pulled away wiping the tears away. "That sounds good." Chris sat down. Alana went back to the window. The nurse came in with her clipboard and picture frame. She went to the counter and fumbled with it. She handed the picture to Chris without saying anything. Chris didn't even look at the picture, he just scrawled his name across his shirt and handed it back. The nurse set it aside.

"How are you doing?" the nurse asked Alana.

Alana turned to face her, "They're coming about every three minutes."

The nurse patted the bed, "Why don't you climb back in and we'll see how things are progressing."

Alana did as she was told. The nurse shifting her eyes towards Chris, Alana followed her gaze. Alana said meekly reaching out for his hand, "He can stay."

Chris got up and took. The nurse slipped on her gloves. Alana stared at Chris through out it. Chris focused on playing with Alana's hair suddenly very conscious of what was going on.

The snap of the gloves coming off, took Alana and Chris's attention off of each other. The nurse smiled patting Alana's leg, "A hundred percent effaced and eight centimeters, not much longer at all. Can I get you anything?"

Alana shook her head already beginning to get up out of the bed. The nurse grabbed her stuff and left the room. Chris looked at Alana, "What are you doing?"

"It's not comfortable laying down," Alana groaned. The pain from the contractions was worse than the others, she had trouble breathing

through it. Chris stepped up to her and put his arms around her. Alana leaned her head on his shoulder, her hands resting on his shoulder as she pressed down on them.

Chris rubbed Alana's lower back. Alana sighed from the relief. As the contraction faded, Alana closed the gap between them. Chris began humming to her swaying with the tune. "Thank you," Alana whispered. Chris wrapped his arms tighter around her and continued humming. He kept his eyes on the clock timing when Alana would tense up in his arm. Alana began to sob, "It hurts."

Chris picked her up and set her on the bed, "Your contractions aren't ending. Let me go get the nurse."

Chapter 31

“Get out of here!” Alana screamed at Chris with the onslaught of her hardest contraction yet. She wanted to push but the doctor was telling her not to. Chris kept telling her to breathe and kept playing with her hair. Her head hurt almost as much as her back and pelvis.

Chris pulled his hand away from her, “I’m not leaving you now.”

“Yes, you are! I never asked you to be here!” Alana wailed.

“Alana, don’t push,” the doctor said calmly.

“But I have to push!” Alana yelled back. Her whole body aching for relief. She turned back to Chris, “I told you to leave! You shouldn’t have come here. I don’t need you here. You’re just going to leave.”

Chris clenched his jaw, praying for patience, “I’m not going anywhere. Just please do what the doctor tells you to do, darlin’”

Alana swung at Chris, “I’m not your Darling. Stop calling me that! Can’t I please push?” Alana grabbed on to the bedrails and bore down.

“You’re going to rip” The doctor warned too late. Alana felt the burn and pain as the baby’s head came out.

“Oh my god,” Chris whispered.

“I’ve had enough. I don’t want to do this anymore,” Alana whimpered.

“It’s too late to change your mind. We just need a few more pushes and it’ll all be over,” the nurse said soothingly.

Alana shook her head. Chris moved closer to Alana. His voice very calm as he lightly brushed the hair clinging to Alana’s sweaty face,

“Baby, you can do this. You’re the strongest woman I know. In just a few minutes, you’re going to have your baby in your arms. You can do this.”

Alana looked up at him, her lip trembling as she shook her head slowly.

“Yes. You can. I believe in you, darlin’ just a few more.” Chris picked her hand and put his other hand on her thigh, “Push, baby, push.”

Alana took a ragged breath. She closed her eyes and blocked everyone but the doctor out of her mind and concentrated on getting the baby out until she heard the tiny little cry. The doctor placed the little girl on Alana’s chest. The nurse quickly cleaned up the baby a little while Alana ran her index finger over the baby’s arm. Tears were trickling down her face. She looked up at Chris and saw the tears on his cheeks. Alana just stared at her baby girl.

Chris followed the nurse when she took the baby to get its measurements and clean her up better. A nurse by Alana’s side asked if she wanted a shower. Alana just nodded and went and took what seemed to be the quickest shower of her life. When she came out, Alana smiled seeing Chris sitting in the rocking chair with the baby, humming her. She’d never seen Chris look more in love than he did right at that moment. Alana looked around the room, it had been emptied while she was in the shower. She was taken by the coziness of it that she didn’t notice when she was moved into it. It didn’t seem like a hospital room but instead it reminded her of the room at Knocti that she’d shared with Steven.

Alana walked over to the bed and sat down. “I always knew you’d be good with babies,” Alana said softly.

Chris looked up at her, there were still tears in his eyes as he smiled. "She's beautiful. I suppose this means I have to give her up."

Alana nodded holding out her arms. Chris stood up and gently gave her the baby. Alana held her amazed at just how beautiful the little girl was. The baby turned her head towards Alana's breast opening her mouth. Alana pushed aside the flap on her gown that was covering it. With ease, the baby latched onto it. Alana sighed the feeling of her baby taking nourishment from her sent her into an almost euphoric state. Alana scooted back on the bed and closed her eyes just enjoying it.

Chris sat down in the rocking chair. As hard as he tried to look away from Alana feeding the baby, he couldn't. The simple beauty and naturalness by which Alana sat their holding her daughter and feeding her amazed him.

A commotion at the door broke the spell they were under. The nurse pushed in the wheelchair. "I see she took right to the breast, that's great." The nurse said going to Alana's side. "Ready to get settled into your room for the night?"

Alana nodded, scooting to the edge of the bed. The nurse helped her to the wheelchair and looked at Chris, "Would you mind taking the bassinet there with us?" Like a little caravan they went down the hall to Alana's room. The nurse helped settle Alana into bed and made sure Alana had everything she needed.

After the nurse left, Alana looked over at Chris in the chair, "What was that tune you were humming earlier?" Alana asked weakly.

"I don't know... just a little melody that was running through my head."

“Melody,” Alana rolled the name over in her head, “Melody.”

“You mind sharing what you’re thinking there, champ?” Chris laughed.

“She needs a name, I thought it was going to be a boy,” Alana said softly.

“Melody—” Chris stopped himself, “I like it. Darlin’ you look like you’re wiped out.”

“Your generosity astounds me, of course I’m exhausted,” Alana said her eyes still closed.

“You want me to take her so you can sleep?”

Alana’s eyes flew open, “No! Why don’t you go and get some rest.”

Chris stood up rubbing the side of his face, “I suppose I could use a shower. You sure you’re going to be okay? Need me to bring you anything?”

Alana smiled, “Peanut buster parfait.”

“Okay. I’ll be back in a flash.” Chris leaned over and kissed her eyelids and then kissed Melody.

Melody’s cry woke Alana. Half awake, Alana fanned herself. Reminding herself to ask the nurse for a shower to get rid of the clamminess, she tried to sit up and the room started to spin. Alana fell back to the bed. Melody’s cry got more insistent. Alana swung her legs over the edge of the bed and tried using the bedrail to get up. Alana gripped the railing trying to steady her self. Alana heard the nurse walk

in. "I need help," Alana whispered. A hazy figure appeared before her, nudging her back towards the bed.

Alana opened her eyes. She flinched against the blinding pain that was piercing her skull. She turned away from the harsh light. Everything was fuzzy and distant. This must be what it's like to have cataracts she thought as she tried to focus on the voice she thought was her doctors.

"Alana, how are you doing?" The doctor asked.

Alana tried to move her lips and make words come out but nothing would. She shook her head and cried. She felt something hugging her arm and tried to get it off but her body wasn't responding. In a brief moment of clarity, Alana lifted her head. The room was filled with people and she could hear what sounded like water dripping. She looked down the doctor and two of the nurses were covered in blood.

Her doctor walked up beside her, "Is there anyone you want us to call? Do you want us to give you some blood." Alana closed her eyes shaking her head. "Are you sure there's no one you want us to call... the father?"

Alana shook her head. She looked around at the people in her room, the seriousness of what he was asking her began to sink in. "Paper?" A moment later, a nurse was shoving a clipboard and pen in Alana's hand. She closed her eyes gathering her strength, "I Alana Murphy in the event of my passing give Melody to her" Alana scribbled out her name and began writing again, "To Chris Reed's custody. Alana Murphy" Alana shoved the paper back at the nurse and closed her eyes. Relieved that things would be taken care of, Alana prayed for darkness.

Alana opened her eyes. She started kicking her leg. A nurse stood up and put her hand on her leg, spoke soothingly, “Shhhh relax, sweetie.”

Alana turned it was the old nurse from the day before. “What’s happening?” Alana asked.

“You hemorrhaged. You’ve lost a lot of blood is there someone you want us to call?”

Alana shook her head, “Am I going to be okay?”

“Of course you are,” the nurse said brushing Alana’s hair back.

“My baby?”

“She’s fine. She’s in the nursery.”

“Do you want me to call anyone?”

“My house... Chris.” Alana said closing her eyes. As the darkness encompassed her one more thoughts of Chris performing on stage filled her mind.

Chapter 32

Chris walked through the maternity ward laden with the peanut buster parfait, balloons and flowers. He was humming to himself as he approached Alana's door. Chris walked in and stopped, "Oh dear god, what happened?" The nurse was standing beside Alana checking her vitals. Alana made the crisp white pillow she was laying on seem dingy. She looked as if she had a white mask on around her eyes. She had an iv in her arm and in her leg. Chris set what he was carrying down on the counter. His eyes still glued to Alana. He watched the nurse come at him and nudge him back out the door. "Are you Chris?"

Chris was still staring into the room at Alana. He wanted to run by her side and hold her, protect her, make it all better. He nodded absently at the nurse. He couldn't even hear what the nurse was saying his heart was pounding in his ears. "Wait what did you say?"

"After you left, she began to hemorrhage. She lost a lot of blood. We got the bleeding to stop with some medications, but she's very weak."

Chris nodded, "Is she going to be okay?"

The nurse patted him on the shoulder, "She's going to be weak a long time."

"She's just sleeping right?" Chris asked his heart going erratically.

"Yes she's asleep and probably will be most of the night, if you want to go home and get some rest."

Chris nodded and shuffled down the hall. He went outside and lit a cigarette. There was a chill in the air. Chris walked away from the hospital. He took a long drag of his cigarette and tossed it. He turned around and looked at the hospital and collapsed to the sidewalk. "Please let her be okay, Lord. I know I'm a screw up. I don't deserve anything more from you, but I'm begging you....please," he sobbed to the stars. "Take everything... just take it. She doesn't deserve to be put through this."

"Son..." Harold spoke quietly placing his hand on Chris's shoulder. Chris stiffened under Harold's hand. "Son, stand up. It's going to be okay."

Chris looked up his eyes red, for a moment he thought his grandfather was standing there. Chris shook his head, "Yes, sir."

Harold helped Chris to his feet. "I know we were never properly introduced, but I'm Harold Daniels."

Chris rubbed his neck. Usually he was good at names and faces, but his mind was blank. "Do I know you? Should I?"

Harold smiled, "Probably not. I'm Steven's father. A friend called and told me what was happening. Why are you out here and not in there with her?"

Chris ran his hand over his face, wiping the tears away, "I came out for a cigarette."

Harold nodded, "And to have a word with the man upstairs?"

Chris shrugged, "It couldn't hurt."

"You're right it can't and nothing like talking to him under the stars. Did you get that cigarette?"

“Sort of.”

“Then what are you waiting for, light one up.” Reluctantly, Chris pulled out another cigarette and lit it. Harold waited patiently, “So now you were making some pretty big wagers there...”

“Yes, sir, I was, I guess.”

“The way I see it, son, is you best not be making promises to the man up there,” motioning to the sky, “Unless you’re damn certain you’ll be keeping them.”

“I’d do anything right now to make things better for Alana, sir.”

“I suppose you would... but what about tomorrow or the next day?”

Chris shrugged, “I don’t know I can’t think that far ahead.”

“One of you needs to be, and I can guarantee you right now, Alana isn’t. If you can’t do it then, son, it’s probably best you get back on that bus you came in on and hightail it out of here. Alana doesn’t need anyone around her she can’t count on.”

Chris stared at the old man. His mind racing with possibilities, an ambulance passed by, Chris followed it with his eyes. “There’s time to think about tomorrow when today isn’t so pressing.” Chris put out his cigarette, contemplating what Harold had said.

His heart raced as he walked back into the maternity ward. The nurse stopped him, “Mr. Murphy, do you want your daughter with you?”

Chris started to correct her but then nodded and went and sat in the room. The nurse brought the baby in and Chris picked her up gently. Cradling her to his chest, he sat down and pulled out the recliner. He tilted his head to look at the tiny baby’s face. She was staring at him with

the most stunning sea green eyes. “You’re the most beautiful thing I’ve seen in my life,” Chris chuckled. She turned a baby bird searching for a worm to Chris’s chest, “Whoa there darlin’ you’re not going to find what you’re looking for here.”

The nurse suggested, “Offer her your knuckle, she’ll suck on it.”

Chris gave her a funny look, but did as she suggested. “Don’t tell me you actually think that thing tastes good,” he chuckled leaning back. The melody from earlier started running through his head once again and he started humming it. He watched the baby fall asleep. In her sleep she continued to suck. Every so often dimples would come out from hiding. “Oh no you don’t...” Chris said softly.

The nurse came over to Chris and looked at the baby, “Oh she doesn’t what?”

Chris smiled up at her, his voice trembling, “She has dimples.”

“Just like her daddy.”

“She’s just beautiful and perfect. I’ve never...” Chris said getting choked up.

The nurse patted him on the shoulder, “Welcome to fatherhood, Chris.”

“Is... Alana...?”

“Of course she’s going to be fine.”

Chris settled into the chair. The phone in the room rang. He reached over and got it, “Hello.”

“Thanks for calling me,” Cheyenne scolded.

“Sorry, but I don’t have your number or my phone,” Chris said quietly.

Cheyenne sighed, "So what is it? Where's Alana?"

"A little girl, she named Melody," Chris said the love in his voice. He glanced over at Alana his voice changing, "She's sleeping."

"What is it, Chris what happened?"

"She lost a lot of blood. They say she'll be fine."

"How?" Cheyenne said trying to stay calm already making plans on how to get there sooner, "Are you going to stick it out?"

"I can't leave her... them. I don't know what I'll do if she doesn't..."

"You can't talk like that! You have to be strong. Be positive!" Cheyenne said her whole body beginning to shake.

"Hey, Cheyenne, I didn't mean it like that," Chris said panic in his chest.

"Then how did you mean it? Don't you realize if she lost a lot of blood she's in there fighting for her life! She's all but given up! And you're to blame for this. She tried to reach out to her and you threw her off your bus."

Chris's neck constricted as the rage began to build, "I never threw her off my bus."

"Didn't you? You made her feel like she was intruding on your space and she never wanted to do that, but she needed someone to love her."

"She had you."

"And she always will. But I'm not good enough. She wants you!"

Chris shook his head, "I'm not going anywhere. I love ... I'm not going anywhere until I know she's okay."

“You son of a bitch, she’s going to wake up and think you give a damn about her just so you can run off to your bus and hide afterwards. You’re a coward. They don’t need that.”

“What the hell am I supposed to do? My job is the road.”

“There comes a time, Chris, when the lights and applause aren’t enough...”

Inside Chris screamed his agreement, “I have to be able to provide for my future family.”

“Future,” Cheyenne questioned, “I give up. You’re not worth it.” Cheyenne hung up the phone.

Chris cursed her under his breath. He stood up and put Melody back in her bassinet, “I need to go for a little walk,” he said to the nurse.

Chris left the hospital, he pulled his coat tight around him and started walking. He left the hospital complex and started walking down the gravel shoulder of the road towards town. The crunch of the gravel beneath his feet, squashed the dreams he’d begun to build up. No cars passed him at the hour. Up ahead he saw the gas station. He picked up his pace and went inside and bought a 40 oz bud light. “Here’s to shattered dreams,” he toasted himself as he continued his walk.

“What the hell does she know?” he muttered to himself. “I’m in a bus six hundred miles a day or more, hours spent on the phone answering questions, being pulled from one place to the next... when would I have time for them?”

In his mind all of his past relationships flashed through his mind. Brenda from college, who later became his wife, he’d done nothing to save that marriage. She needed someone at home to help raise her

children, but he chose the road. Trina had come on the road with him and annoyed everyone. He'd done his best with her, defended her against everyone, including Alana, but she hurt him. His mind flashed the image of Melody in his arms. "Are you mine?" he whispered to the Wal-Mart sign as he passed. There was Tanya, Mandy, Michelle, Tiffany, Stephanie and some he couldn't even remember their names. Each one had proclaimed to love him and want him to be successful, but they didn't want to pay the price of being separated.

Chris sat down on the bus bench, bottle in hand and closed his eyes. Alana was under the pillow. He laid down behind her and pulled it from her face. Her lips had been so full and filled with such torment. Her cheeks stained with tears, the trails glistened in the soft moonlight. As he leaned in he wanted to erase the pain. His lips missed the **tearstains** and fell on hers. They felt angry at first and he was about to pull back when they parted, begging him to continue. He followed their command, his head rushed with sensations as the lifeless body below him came to life, pressing against him. His hands ran under her shirt, the sensation on his fingertips, was like the first time he'd touched the guitar and she responded.

Chris struggled to restrain himself, but the desires had built up so strong he couldn't comprehend what happened. The need... he'd never felt the demand like for pleasing someone else like he did right then. His body worked on autopilot, Chris struggled with the emotions that were colliding within his head. Exhausted but still wanting more wanting affirmation that she was feeling what he was, Chris collapsed to her. Her body was shaking and she was struggling to catch his breath. His

thoughts shoved from his mind that was being consumed with a melody that he'd never heard before but was so intense he could almost hear the words that went along with it. He felt like his life was completed. Then she pulled away. Chris pried his eyes open.

Chapter 33

“Melody is her name, she plays within my arms, but lives in my heart. She’s the most beautiful thing in the world” Alana began to hum along with the song that was going through her head as she drifted back to consciousness. She lifted one eye lid just enough to see where the music was coming from. Chris was standing over a bassinet changing a diaper. She let her eyelids fall. She tried to turn her body towards him, but she was too weak. She turned her head and tried to muster the strength to open up her eyes again. It seemed to take forever before her eyes opened.

Her heart warmed laying there watching Chris who was now sitting and feeding Melody a bottle. The adoration of Chris gazing down at her, Alana was certain that she could scream out bloody murder and he wouldn’t even notice. As if he’d heard her thoughts, Chris glanced over and blushed. Alana struggled to speak, “You just figured out how to break your ear habit.”

Chris’s blush deepened, “How are you?”

“Tired... very very tired.”

Chris stood up confidently and brought Melody closer, “Congratulations, you and Melody have been having a competition on who can sleep more, you’ve won hands down.”

Alana raised an eyebrow as she reached to set her bed up, “how long have I been asleep?”

“Two days. Do you want to hold her?”

Alana shook her head, “I can barely lift my arms. Can I see her?”

“Of course you can,” he pulled the bottle from Melody and laid her on Alana’s chest briefly while he laid down on the bed on his side. With ease, he slid his arm under Alana’s neck and the other provided protection for Melody. “She’s beautiful.”

Alana turned her eyes moist from the tears, “Yes, she is.” She kissed Chris’s cheek, “Have you been here the whole time?”

“I’ve gone back to your house a couple times to shower and change, otherwise, you wouldn’t want me this close.”

Alana laughed, “Oh that hurts,” she whimpered.

“I’m sorry darlin.” Alana tried to lift her arm up to touch Melody but only got it up about a half an inch and let it fall back down. “Want some help?” Alana nodded. Chris pulled his arm out from under her and lifted her hand to Melody. He rested up on his elbow, “She looks a lot like you.”

“That’s just because of the hair.... I can see a lot of her father in her.”

Chris coughed startled by Alana’s comment. “You think so? Did Steven have dimples?”

Alana shrugged, “When do they say I can go home?”

“They haven’t really said. I think they’ve been waiting for you to get a little more coherent before they said anything.”

“Her skin’s so soft.... When are you leaving?”

“I don’t know, depends on how long you need me. Cheyenne had to go home yesterday, something with her daughter or something.”

“But you’re tour?”

Chris leaned over and kissed Alana's forehead, "Please, darlin' don't worry about any of that stuff. I'm taking care of it."

Chapter 34

Chris set Melody's car seat down in the living room and ran back out to the car. Alana was struggling to stand up, "Baby, don't even try to tire yourself out like that. I told you I'd be right back out."

"I don't want you waiting on me hand and foot. I should be able to do something."

Chris rolled his eyes scooping her up in his arms, "There's going to be plenty of time later for you to be doing stuff. Right now, I'm your slave." He walked in with her and went back to Alana's bedroom, placing her gently on the bed.

Alana smiled, glad to be at home and relived her bedroom felt cozy for a change. "Will you bring her in here and the bassinet."

Chris smiled, "Absolutely. Whatever you need or want."

Alana curled up to her pillow. The silence of the house being broken by Chris cooing at Melody, Alana smiled. There was a knock at the door. The familiar ring of Gloria's voice drifted in. Alana's peace shattered, the walls of the room flew away from her. Her eyes flying around the contents for a place to hide as Gloria's voice grew louder. A blast of cold air drifted into the bedroom as Gloria entered. Alana tried to plaster a smile on her face but couldn't.

Melody was in Gloria arms. Chris followed her in. Gloria set Melody down on the bed, inspecting her. In a barking tone to Chris, Gloria demanded, "Get me more blankets for her, this house is cold."

Chris looked up and saw the pain in Alana's face. He went and got the blankets. His dislike for this woman growing as she went on in her tirade of how to care for Melody. He watched Alana shrinking in the

bed, cowering beneath the old woman's strength. "There that's better, are you nursing her? When was the last time she ate?" Gloria demanded.

"I- I- "

"Come on, Alana, spit it out. You need to feed her often." Gloria brought the baby to her shoulder and stood there tapping her foot. "Here take her. Nurse her."

Alana shook her head, "I – I can't."

"You can't or you won't? Now is not the time to be thinking about yourself. You have to care for this infant."

"Ma'am," Chris said through gritted teeth.

Gloria stared him down, "Was I talking to you?" She started to turn back towards Alana, but Chris stopped her.

"Alana just got home. She's very tired." He took Melody from her arms and cradled her close to him. Just the nearness of that little girl calmed him, "I'll make sure Melody is well cared for, but now I'm going to have to ask you to leave. Alana's been given very strict orders to rest."

Gloria reached for the baby and got Chris's arm instead, "You have no business being here, Chris. She has her family."

"That isn't you, you – now isn't the time for this. Just please leave. Let me help Alana get settled and ready for visitors." Gloria paused before heading out the door. Chris laid down next to Alana, "I'm sorry baby."

Alana exhaled, "Thank you."

Chris smiled, "You want me to put her in the bassinet, or you want her to lay down next to you?"

Alana fought back the tears, "Bassinet."

Chris got up and put Melody in her bed. He pushed it right up against the bed, “Now, get some rest. I’m going to go make us some dinner.”

Alana grabbed Chris’s hand and kissed it, “Thank you.”

Chapter 34

Chris walked down the hall towards the kitchen. Gloria was in there making a list. “What are you doing?”

“There’s no food in this house fitting a new mother. I’m going to go shopping and then fix dinner.”

“I’m quite able to take care of that.”

“Hmmp! I know about your kind and she does not need the likes of you here,” Gloria said firmly continuing with her list.

Chris took the pad and pen from her, “I’m trying to be respectful here.” He forced himself to take a few calming breaths, “It’s very clear to me that right now, Alana doesn’t want you here. She needs to be able to relax and bond with her child without fearing you. I assure you that I will take good care of her and as soon as she’s up to seeing you, I’ll have her call you.”

“You’ve ruined her life enough. If it hadn’t been for you, my baby would still be here and I’m sure he’d be taking much better care of her than you could.”

“Your son was killed in a car accident with another woman. You don’t even have a clue how much that knowledge has destroyed that woman. For that matter how much you’ve destroyed her. She looked up to you and you left her when she needed a woman in her life the most. Don’t try and make me out as the bad guy here. I’ve done NOTHING wrong. I’m sorry for your loss, truly I am. I can not even begin to imagine your pain, but you need to think about the woman lying back there.” Chris cringed at the devastation on the old woman’s face. Her

hand shook as she reached for her keys. "I'm sorry," Chris tried to apologize to the retreating figure.

Chris's cell rang. "Hello." Chris barked.

"Hello to you too," his manager chuckled.

"What do you want?" Chris growled.

"We need to talk about your tour... we can't just cancel a few dates without an explanation."

"There doesn't need to be one. I can't do the shows, it's that simple."

"What the hell is going on with you Chris? You left the awards and people are still hounding me for explanations. What is it that is in California that is more important than your career? You're the entertainer of the year, you're expected to be out there entertaining people not hiding out."

"I've got my reasons."

"That's not good enough. I need to at least know what's going on."

"This isn't about business. You don't need to know. I've made the decision, you make it happen. That's what I'm paying you for, isn't it?"

"Listen, Chris, I don't need your attitude here. I'm just trying to do my job and make it happen for you, but I can't unless you talk to me. Every since Fan Fair, you've changed people are talking they want to know why. I have to toss out some bones or else they're going to find out the truth." Chris sighed, he knew his manager had a point. He ran his hand through his hair, trying to collect his thoughts. "Chris, are you still there?"

“Yeah, I’m here. One of my friends, fans, whatever, is in some serious trouble, I’m helping out.”

“Ooh that’s good, why not tell the press about this?”

“Because she doesn’t need to be hounded by the press, this is a small town and I realize that it’s only a matter of time until people find out where I’m at but I don’t want to help them.”

“Okay... fine... I’ll keep trying to bide you some time, but when do you think you’ll be back out here?”

“I don’t know... a couple weeks at least.”

“Are you at least getting some writing done? Where are you can I send you some tapes to listen to. We can get the plans in the works for the new cd.”

“Now isn’t the time. I have to focus on what’s going on here. I’ll let you know if I change my mind.” Chris turned his cell phone off and went about making dinner.

Chapter 35

Alana awoke with a start. The house was quiet, the alarm clock read three oh three. Her heart raced, the bassinet wasn't in the bedroom. Alana carefully got out of bed and moving as fast as she could, Alana started to search the house.

In the living room with the moonlight shining down on the couch, Melody was asleep in just her diaper on Chris's bare chest. Melody's blanket all crumpled up on the floor. Alana tiptoed into the room, kneeling down beside them. "I love you," she whispered. She picked the blanket up and covered Melody kissing her gently. Alana grabbed her keys and slippers and went out into her studio bringing back her camera. Expertly she moved around them snapping them from all angles. In her mind she could see a Christmas card proclaiming home for the holidays. Alana lowered her camera and looked at the man that was laying there. The last week or so, Alana kept catching her self finding it hard to remember who he was. She set the camera down and gently picked up Melody and placed her in the bassinet that Chris had wheeled out there. She kissed her fingers and placed them on Chris's lips. Chris's eyes fluttered open.

"I didn't mean to wake you up," Alana whispered.

Chris sat up rubbing his face, "Its okay. Is everything all right?"

Alana sat down by his hip, "Everything is fine. I just woke up and didn't see Melody and came looking for her."

"Oh sorry. I she was beginning to stir and you were sleeping so peacefully."

Alana smiled at him. She could see him still fighting off the sleep he'd been in. Alana reached out and rubbed his cheek, his eyes boring into her soul. Her eyes fell to his lips, dried from sleep her fingertips ran down to them. His mouth catching her fingers gently sucking on them, sucking the breath from her lungs. Alana closed her eyes, her hand falling. His hand rising, fingers tangling themselves in her hair pulling her closer. With a pressure of a feather, his lips brushed over hers. She let out a low groan. Chris's hands fell from her hair. The coldness of the late November night settling with in Alana, she opened her eyes. Chris was staring at her with a million questions in his eyes. He fell back onto the couch. Using his forefinger and thumb he straightened out his goatee.

Embarrassed by the effects of the kiss, Alana stood up. "I should take Melody back to bed."

Chris watched Alana push the bassinet out of the living room. He sighed thinking to himself, 'At least she didn't ask what happened.'

Alana stopped in the hallway. She turned back to Chris, in barely a whisper, "My bed would probably be more comfortable..." She turned back around and went on into her bedroom.

Alana sat down on the edge of her bed. Her heart was arcing out of control as she waited to see what Chris would do. His kiss was still burning on her lips and the room seemed to be getting too large for her. She picked up Melody, holding her tightly, she still felt like she was shrinking in the room.

Chris stepped into the room. As fast as the room had felt too big, it was now suffocating. He crossed his arms across his chest several times, "You sure you want me in here?"

Alana nodded, standing back up and putting Melody in her bed. Turning slowly to face Chris, praying for normalcy she spoke, "I know that couch isn't the most comfortable."

"If you're just thinking of my comfort, the couch was fine."

"I'm trying to be nice here," Alana said bitterly.

"I made the mistake once with you, I'm not making it again."

Alana cocked her head to one side, "What mistake?"

"You know what I'm talking about."

Alana looked down at her feet, "I don't want to be alone."

"So I'm elected cause I'm here. You've got Melody in here,"

Chris said nodding towards the bassinet.

Alana shook her head, "That's not it."

"Then what is it Alana? You've been home a week and this is the first time you've wanted me in here at night."

"I want you," Alana said softly.

"Why?"

"I don't know," Alana said her voice shaking.

"When you figure it out, let me know." Chris turned and left the room.

"I love you, Chris," Alana gasped falling to her bed.

Chapter 36

Alana got up in the morning and fixed breakfast. She set a plate for Chris on the coffee table. She got Melody into her car seat and took her into the studio. Alana turned on the safe lights and set Melody on the counter next to her enlarger and set to work. For hours, Alana whizzed around the darkroom printing up pictures, numbing her mind with the mechanical precision of making the pictures. Finally finding the peace of mind she needed, Alana called it a day.

On her way to the house, Alana noticed Chris's rental car was gone. On the refrigerator, she found a note saying he'd gone shopping. Alana settled Melody in her bassinet and went to the basement retrieving some empty boxes. She slowly began the process of packing up Steven's things. There were no feelings as Alana packed the clothing. They didn't mean anything to her, it was just clutter.

In the back of the closet, Alana pulled out a box of old journals. Alana sat on the bed with the box and began flipping through them. She pulled one out and opened it, and began to read. "Yesterday was horrible. My father was at it again. I don't know what I did, but I made him mad. He looked so angry and strange. His face was a solid red his eyes turned beady and then he came after me. I couldn't stop him. I tried to tell him that nothing had happened with Steven, but he didn't believe me. He locked us in the bathroom and there was nothing I can do. No one was home. He hit me. I can't believe he tried to do ... I shoved him off of me and he hit his head... unfortunately I must have only knocked him out for a few minutes. At least I was able to get away from there. When will

someone just love me?” Alana wiped the tears away and pulled out a different book.

“I just got back from Nashville. I think I’ve finally found a family that’s all my own. If only we were actually related. I saw Chris again and hung out with some of the other fans. They’re just so accepting. I don’t have to worry about anything but being me. That feels so good. If only these trips didn’t have to end.”

Alana flipped through some more pages. Her hands began to shake as she began to see a pattern. Steven said to do this. Steven said I should do that. I can’t do that because Steven won’t like it. Alana closed the book and pulled out a different one finding similar patterns with Gloria and even Cheyenne. Alana shoved the box back from her. Her heart was pounding in her ears. She needed to do something.

Alana got up and threw the box away. One thing was clear to her, she had a baby girl and it was time that she started to live her own life. With a vengeance Alana started going through the house moving what she could and using post it for the things that she couldn’t move. This was her home, and it was over due to reflect that.

Chris walked in the door and was greeted by piles of boxes in the living room and post-its everywhere. “Alana?” Alana came into the living room with a smile, but her face was pale and she was looking exhausted. Chris rushed to her side, “What’s going on?”

“I’m claiming my life, but I need your help.”

Chris raised an eyebrow, “What do you need?”

“Everything with the post-its needs to be brought into here. Gloria’s on her way over and she’s going to pick out what ever she wants.”

“Okay, but maybe you should go lay down. You’re not looking that good,” Chris said cautiously.

Alana rubbed her forehead, “I suppose I could take a break.”

Chris sighed relieved, “Yeah you can.” Alana gave him a quick kiss on the cheek before going to the bedroom. Chris shrugged off his jacket and began moving things into the living room. Not too long afterwards, Harold and Gloria showed up. Gloria’s face was carved into stone as she began surveying the scene. Chris wondered how these two old people had managed to live together for so long without killing each other. Gloria didn’t even acknowledge him unless she was passing on orders to move things out to their truck.

Chris and Harold made several trips that night to the Daniels home. Neither men spoke at all during the trips, just worked in compatible silences filling up the workshop with discarded items from Steven. Finally around nine o’clock they entered Alana’s house and the living room was almost bare. Gloria came in from the kitchen, “Dinner’s on the table boys.”

Chris followed Harold into the dining room. Alana was sitting at the table. Chris took the seat across from her. Gloria and Harold sat at the ends. A setting that could have been one reminiscent of a family was heavy with tension. Chris followed Harold’s lead and just ate his dinner. Chris felt like he was in the midst of a play, but no one bothered to give him a copy of the script. He struggled to follow along, although there was

nothing happening. After the plates were empty, Alana and Gloria got up and began clearing the table.

“Dinner was very good, ma'am,” Chris said standing up.

Gloria looked at him with disdain, “Thank you.”

Harold put his hand on Chris’s shoulder shoving him out of the house. Once outside, Harold lit a cigar. Chris sighed and lit his own cigarette. Hoping this was a sign of comfort, Chris tried to make conversation but Harold only answered with one-word answers. The conversation died away. They sat out there until Gloria came out and Harold followed her like a puppy dog to the truck and they left.

Chris went inside to find Alana asleep in bed with Melody. “I didn’t really want to talk anyway,” Chris sighed going out to make his bed on the couch.

Chapter 37

For the fifth day in a row, Gloria came buzzing into the house at eight in the morning. Despite every effort Chris had made to remain calm and respectful, his patience was running very thin. Alana was going back to work and now he faced the day alone with Gloria.

The house was tiny. Her voice reverberating off the walls, Chris had to find some place to hide. He needed to call and talk with his manager. Chris opened up the door to Alana's office. The sight of all the pictures on the wall caught him off guard. He closed the door quietly behind and inspected them further. There had to be over a hundred pictures of him on the walls from various stages of his career. The desk cluttered with empty soda cans and piles of pictures. Post it notes all around the computer screen. The bulletin board beside the desk had snapshots of all of Alana's friends, most of which he recognized as his fans, a thick stack of airline tickets thumb tacked to it. In the corner was a tall stack of magazine clippings. Chris walked over to them, all of them about him.

Chris sat down in the computer chair. Had this been a room in anyone else's home, he'd be really scared but he found it to be very comforting. Chris opened the top drawer of the desk, the drawer was very neatly organized with all the pens and paperclips and whatnots in their own trays. He opened the second one and found a series of scrapbooks. He pulled the first one out, on the cover read 'The long road to nowhere.' Curious, he opened it up. The front page had a picture of him and his band hovering over their smoking bus. Chris smiled remembering that

nightmare of a day. On his first major concert tour as an opening act they were about four hundred miles from their next show and the bus had overheated due to a broken belt. He'd been frantic trying to figure out how they were going to get to the show on time. They were in the middle of nowhere and didn't have any cell reception. They'd tried everything they could think of to rig up a new belt even using their own belts but it was clear that none of that would work.

They'd been sitting there for two hours and hadn't seen a car go by when a white blazer passed by. They tried to wave it down but it kept going. It got about a mile down the road before it stopped and turned around. Alana stepped out of the driver seat. They crammed their instruments in the back and had to practically sit on each other's laps, leaving his road manager with the bus. They'd made it just in time to do their set.

He continued through the book taking a trip down memory lane all of it captured in pictures and a few choice captions in these books. Chris carefully put the scrapbooks back right where he got them.

The door to the office flew open, Chris looked over at it. Gloria was standing there. Her hands on her hips, "Are you going to hide out in here all day?"

"I'm taking care of some business," Chris said with a sigh.

"You know, Steven never came in here. This is Alana's space."

"I'm not Steven," Chris said coolly.

"I know that. Now make yourself useful. The trash needs to be taken out." Gloria turned and left.

Chris muttered to himself as he took the trash out. When he came back inside he washed his hands and went and found Melody. He sat on the couch with her. The tiny perfection of this child awed him. He never thought it was possible to love someone as much as he did that baby. Chris kissed her tiny little feet.

“You need to keep her wrapped up,” Gloria barked.

Chris glared at her briefly, before returning his attention to Melody. She laid there in his arms, staring at him. Her face wrinkled up, she gulped for air before she started crying. Chris swooped her up to his chest, gently bouncing her, humming to her trying to soothe her.

“Here, give her to me. You’re not doing it right. Men know nothing about babies,” Gloria admonished trying to take Melody from him.

Chris turned, “I’ve got it.”

“You’re going to break her neck that way. You have to support her head. Now just give her to me!” Chris glared at her as Melody’s cries got more intense. “See you’re upsetting her now hand her over.”

“I said I got her.” Chris said stepping around Gloria.

Alana walked through the door and swiftly took Melody from Chris’s arms. In an instant Melody stopped crying. Gloria walked over to Alana, “Here dear, let me take her so you can go get back to work.”

Chris watched with disbelief as Alana handed Melody off and went into the kitchen. The smug look on Gloria’s face was enough to send him over the edge. Chris followed Alana into the kitchen. “Why did you take Melody from me?” Chris demanded.

“She was crying.” Alana said pouring herself a cup of coffee.

“So I was calming her down.”

Alana shrugged, “Sorry, I didn’t mean to offend you.”

“See, I told you Chris you weren’t needed here.” Gloria’s grating voice said in his ears.

“This has nothing to do with you,” Chris snarled at Gloria.

Turning back to Alana, “You had no reason to take her from me.”

Gloria cut Alana off, “She had every right to, she’s the child’s mother and what are you?”

“I’m-“

“You’re nothing, Christopher. You need to stop pretending like just because you have money and are a celebrity that we need to be thankful that you’re here. We’re not. You’re nothing special.”

Chris turned to look at Alana but she wasn’t there. Chris stormed out of the kitchen. Hearing some noise from the bedroom, he went there. Alana was sitting on the bed in the midst of laundry. Alana’s shoulders were hunched over and shaking. Chris’s temper was getting the better of him, “Do you agree with them?”

Alana fought the tears as she concentrated on the clothes she was folding. She hated fighting and never knew how to handle it. She prayed he’d just go away.

Chris raised his voice, “I’m talking to you? What do you have to say?” Chris grabbed the blanket from her hands, “Do you want me to leave?”

Alana’s voice trembled, “You do need to get back to your tour.”

Chris was blinded by the hurt he was feeling. He grabbed Alana by the shoulders and shook her, emphasizing his words, “I didn’t ask you

what I needed.” Chris got a blank stare in return. He released her with a little shove. Like a rag doll Alana fell backward on the bed. Her knees came up. She laid there in a curled up in a ball. “Why the hell am I here, then?”

Alana sat back up and picked up another blanket and began to fold it. Her voice barely more than a squeak, “I don’t know.”

Chris ran his hand through his hair. He began to pace around the room struggling to control his emotions. “I’ve put my life on hold for weeks, and this is what I get?”

“I’m sorry. I never asked you to. I have Gloria here, she can help me.”

Chris stopped and faced her. His breath ragged. “Is that what you call taking care of you? She’s controlling you like a damn puppet. You haven’t had an independent thought since she came in.”

Chris stuck a nerve. Alana stood up determination in her eyes. “You’re the one that’s bent out of shape because you’re not the hero anymore.”

“I don’t need this. I never asked to be here.”

“And I did?”

“You’re not doing anything to not be in this position.”

“I need her. She knows how to take care of Melody.”

Chris snorted his disdain, “Better than her own mother?”

Alana stepped back. Her body shaking with fear, “I don’t know how to. I need her.”

“That’s bullshit, we were doing just fine before She got involved.”

“No we weren’t Chris. We were in a dream world. Pretending that we could do this, but we can’t. You have your life and that’s not here in California. Your duty is done. You kept the secret now every one knows. You’re free to go back to your little world.”

Chris felt the air leave him. His voice quieted from the shock, “You think this is all about duty? “

Alana went back to the laundry and began folding the clothes. Trying to hide her pain, “You can stop pretending to care.”

“I don’t pretend, unlike some people in this room.”

Alana threw down the shirt she was folding. She turned and faced Chris, her face distorted in anger, “I never pretended with you. You’re the one that’s changed. In all the years that we’ve known each other, you never showed any concern for my life until now.”

“Don’t give me that crap. You’re the one that went around in a masquerade pretending to have the perfect little life. If that wasn’t the biggest line of crap I’ve ever seen. You are the biggest fake I’ve ever met.”

Alana pointed towards the door her hand shaking, her jaw set, “Then here’s your chance to leave. I don’t need you.”

“And I certainly do not need you. I have enough shallow people in my life. How could I have been so stupid to fall for your little ruse?”

“It was never a ruse. You wanted what I had. We both know you’d do anything to be a father, even if that meant taking over another man’s child.”

“Go to hell, Alana.” He turned and stalked towards the door.

Alana turned back to the laundry her shoulders shaking from the tears.

Chris slammed the door.

Chapter 38

Chris walked into Tips, a small bar in the center of town and ordered himself a drink. The bar was relatively empty with just a couple men in there playing pool. Country music was playing from the jukebox in the corner. Chris sat there nursing his beer.

Harold came in and spotted Chris. He walked up to the bar and sat next to him. He caught the bartender's eye, "I'll have what he's having."

Chris glanced at him briefly and then turned back to his beer, "How'd I get myself into this situation?"

"You talking about Alana?"

Chris watched the beer swirl around in his glass as he twirled it. He continued mumbling to himself, "I put my life on hold, canceled tour dates and for what? I'll tell you for what... just to be told I'm dispensable. I never wanted to be involved. I was happy with my life. I had what I needed. Then she storms in and what choice did I have. She was in need of someone. Whatever made me think I could be that person? Why couldn't I just close my eyes to it? I mean, I've put up with a lot of crap these last few weeks. I don't deserve to be treated like some lout who doesn't have a right to be here. Maybe I should have just left as soon as the secret broke, but I couldn't. She looked so helpless around them. How can I blame her though, not like I really made a stand for myself either? Is it my place though to do it? I don't know what's best for her."

Harold raised his glass in front of Chris's face startling him out of his tirade. Chris looked at the old man sitting there, his face aged from

years of understanding, “Son, it’s all going to work itself out. You just need a little patience. You do much fishing?”

Chris looked at him annoyed because fishing was the last thing on his mind, but his upbringing told him to treat the man with respect, “Not too much anymore, sir.”

Chris watched Harold stand up from the bar as he spoke, “Come on; filling your mind with spirits isn’t going to help you.”

The last thing he’d wanted to do that day was listen to an old man, but for whatever reason, Chris stood up and paid for the drinks and followed him outside. Out on the deserted street, the two men began walking down, Chris losing his patience with each step. They’d gone several blocks before Harold finally spoke, “You look like a pretty smart man; you know what you’re doing.”

Chris stopped in his tracks and looked at Harold as if he had two heads. Careful to reign in his temper before speaking, Chris shoved his hands in his pocket and began to walk some more, with as much respect as he could muster, Chris replied, “I wouldn’t go that far, sir.”

“You know you love that woman.”

Chris was quick to correct him, “As a friend.”

Harold laughed at him shaking his head knowingly, “As I see it, you’re looking at her like the granddaddy of catfish. You can smell how close he is to your line and its ticking you off that people are disturbing the waters.”

Once again Chris had stopped and faced Harold. There was fear in Chris’s voice that he tried to hide with confidence “No, sir, Alana is a

dear friend. Nothing more, my life isn't one for a lady or a child to be involved. I've been down that road before."

Harold shook his head skeptically. His eyes pierced through Chris's disguise. "Be that as it may, son, you can't force the hook in the fish's mouth. You can't beat the other fisherman away. You've got to sit and be patient, you keep your hook out there long enough, and it's going to bite," Harold's voice trailed off as the smile grew on his face, "And when she bites... the best part of it is the fight to get them in the boat. The satisfaction of reeling them in and watching them struggle. You know that fish could just flop its way right out of the boat, but stays right at your feet. That's what we all live for."

Chris couldn't help smiling at the old man's story, that's exactly what he wanted, but Chris knew the reality, "It doesn't work that way for me."

Chris watched the old man's hand land on his shoulder. The firmness of Harold's hand reminded Chris of his grandfathers, "It works that way for all of us, when we're smart enough. We just have to stay in the game longer than anyone else. Fight them every inch of the way and then let them go free in the boat."

"I understand what you're saying, but I don't think you understand my life."

Harold shrugged and began to walk again, "What's there to understand? You have a job that takes you away a lot, but who says that it has to destroy the catch?"

Chris struggled to catch up to Harold, "That's just the way it works."

“The way I see it, you must have been a little too stingy with your line and just never got ‘em in the boat before.”

Chris adjusted his hat, “Perhaps...”

“Son, I’m an old, old man, I’ve seen many a fishing trips end without a catch. I know what I’m talking about. You got to give them line to pull away from. I remember how it was when I was younger... that first tug of them hitting your line and you just throw everything you got into that pole, pulling and yanking on it, reeling as fast as you can. The line snaps every time.”

Chris’s confidence grew as he began to see what the old man’s point was, “What about the other fishermen?”

Harold laughed at the question, “Aw, yes, the other fisherman. Well that’s a hard one right there, since you’re not dealing with fishermen but actually game wardens. So damn territorial. They’ll cut your line; steal your bait, anything to get you out of their waters. You either got to stay and fight back, or lay some traps and wait for them to finish their patrols.”

Chris contemplated what Harold was saying. He felt his shoulders relax. “Thanks, sir. I got a plane to catch.”

Chapter 39

Alana sat holding Melody on the couch. She had Chris playing on the radio. He'd been gone for over a month and now listening to him was painful. She didn't know what to do. He left because of her but she'd been right to make him go back to the road, she knew that. She'd tried to call him a few times but always got his voice mail and couldn't bring herself to leave a message. Now she was certain she'd been right about him being there. It was just an obligation.

The phone rang. Alana grabbed the remote and shut off the stereo. She placed Melody in her bassinet and went to get the phone. Before she could get to the phone, she could hear Gloria answering it.

"No, Alana can't talk right now." Gloria paused. Alana waited outside the kitchen eavesdropping. "Yes I've told her that you called. When she wants to talk to you she'll call you back. You need to just leave her alone. She's trying to become a mother." Gloria began to lose patience with the caller, "She has everyone she needs right here. Good bye."

Alana was stunned by what she overheard. She walked into the kitchen, "Why didn't you let me talk to him?"

Gloria straightened out her apron and spoke reassuringly, "You don't need to deal with it. You have enough to deal with taking care of your little girl".

Alana slouched like a puppy dog being remanded, "But—"

A tone of finality in Gloria's voice, "Go feed Melody. Dinner will be ready soon."

Alana just couldn't believe what had happened. She struggled to understand, "How long have you been screening my calls? Who else has called that you haven't told me about?"

Gloria gave her that motherly disappointed look, "You really need to go feed Melody. There isn't much time before dinner."

Alana started to leave the kitchen, but stopped, "You didn't answer my question."

"What does it matter? Everything is finally settling into a routine here. You don't need Christopher." Gloria watched Alana pick up the phone. She snatched the phone from Alana's hand and hung it up, "You're better off without Chris in your life."

The reality of what had been happening settled on Alana. She wrung her hands "All these weeks, I thought he didn't care. And he's been calling this whole time hasn't he?"

Gloria lost all sympathy. She stood up straight and placed her hands on her hip, "He's not really concerned about you."

Alana turned around lost. Her whole world was shifting. She ran her hand through her hair, "You let me think he didn't care."

"He doesn't care."

"You're making him think I don't care. How could you be so heartless?"

In a very matter of fact manner, Gloria spoke, "I'm being practical. He's not a family man. You'll never have a future with him."

"Who are you to decide that?"

"He's a musician. He's selfish. It'll always be about what he can get out of you... never what's right for you and Melody."

Alana was furious, "Like you?"

"How can you say that? I'm the one that's always been here for you," Gloria said calmly.

Alana shook her head, "No, I've always been here as your little project. I'm done. It's time for me to be my own person. You had no right keeping Chris's calls from me."

Gloria turned back to the meal she was preparing, "He's a playboy. He can never be a father."

Alana folded her arms defiantly, "I'm not looking for a father."

"Anyone you become involved with has to be considered as a father for Melody."

Alana took the spoon out of Gloria's hand, "The key is someone I become involved with. I'm not involved with Chris. He's my friend."

Gloria took a few deep breaths as she turned off the stove. She turned to Alana hatred in her eyes, "You stole Steven from me."

Gloria's words startled Alana, "I didn't... It's not..."

"Don't lie to me. You know as well as I do if you'd been honest with Steven. He'd never have left that night," a demeaning tone was in Gloria's voice.

Alana shook her head, "I couldn't control what happened. I didn't know I was pregnant."

The sarcasm dripped from Gloria's voice, "How can I believe that. You didn't tell anyone you were pregnant besides you supposed friend."

Alana tried pleading with her, "I didn't know."

Gloria brushed her aside, “It doesn’t matter. If you’d loved my son you’d have stopped him.”

Alana was almost in tears, “Don’t you think I would have if there was any way? I loved him.”

“Not if you’ve always been in love with that man. That’s the only logical explanation, why you’ve always traveled to see him, choosing that man over Steven constantly.”

“That’s not the way it was.”

“Yes it was. It all makes perfect sense now. You’ve loved that man from the day you met him. You used my son because you were afraid of the times that man would be gone. Now you’re desperate, chasing after him because you have nothing left here.”

“That’s all wrong. You don’t know what’s going on.”

Gloria’s eyes narrowed, her disdain clear, “You were good. I believed you’re little sob stories, to think that I helped keep you and my baby together, when the whole time you were probably sleeping with that... that... coward of a man.”

“Coward?”

“Yeah, that’s what he is. As soon as I began to wake up, he hightailed his ass to the hills.”

“No... no... I made him go.”

“You made him go... and why is it you made him go?”

Alana fumbled for words, “I – I- I had my reasons.”

Gloria spoke sadistically, “Yeah, before he demands couldn’t be put off any more. And you were afraid I’d figure it out on my own?”

“Hell no. That wasn’t it at all. I have nothing to hide,” Alana said struggling to keep up with the path of this confrontation.

“It’s too late I already had figured it out. And now you’re mad because you’ve been found out. I’m not going to let you pass off this little girl as my baby’s baby while you tramp around with a musician. You wanted the world to believe this baby was a culmination of my baby’s dream. Well now it is. And now you’re going to have to grow up and give her the life my son would have given to her. You’re going to stop being a coward and pay for what you did to this family?”

The tears Alana had been shedding stopped. She stood up straight. With conviction she spoke, “I didn’t do a damn thing to this family. You’re right I’m going to stop being a coward. I will raise this baby on my own. I don’t need you telling me how to do it. The last thing I want to do is wind up an old bitty that can’t let go of her deceased son’s girlfriend and that none of her living children want anything to do with.”

“You ungrateful bitch. Go. Run off to your gigolo. Don’t expect us to be waiting for you,” Gloria said grabbing her purse and leaving.

Melody started fussing in the living room. Alana went to her picking her up and rocking her, “It’s going to be okay.”

Chapter 40

Alana laid awake staring at the ceiling. Christmas didn't feel like Christmas. It was just another day except she didn't even have the studio to go to. She'd tried to call Chris several times but just got his voice mail. Alana rolled over and hugged her pillow, she missed Chris. It was strange to realize that she hadn't missed Christmas with the Daniels like she'd thought she had. The only thing she could think about was Chris.

Alana crawled out of bed, dying to feel a connection to someone. Alana went and sat in the rocking chair in the nursery. She watched Melody sleeping. She reached in rubbed her soft strawberry curls. "I love you, Melody. Do you miss him too?" Melody opened her soft aquamarine eyes to look at her mother. Alana picked her up cuddling with her back in the rocking chair.

"You think you're up for your first plane ride? I have to apologize to him, he never did anything wrong but love us, do you think he loved us?" Alana sighed. "You know its really hard having a conversation with you."

Alana rocked in the dark room, humming to Melody. The realization that she was humming the tune Chris had hummed while waiting for Melody to be born saddened her. "You know," Alana said softly to Melody, "Your daddy, Chris, and your grandmother have all told me I was coward and a fake... I think they're right."

Alana stared in front of her. The teddy bear that Chris had bought Melody was sitting on the dresser. Alana closed her eyes images of Chris flashed through her mind. They'd always had an easy relationship, a

special bond that was just theirs. “I know him,” she whispered, “He isn’t able to divide his attention between his career and personal life, that’s always been his problem. He can’t live without the music.” Alana looked down at Melody. Alana stared closer at her. It was almost as if she was staring into Chris’s eyes. Alana took a few slow breaths and then stood up and put Melody back in her crib.

Alana turned on the light in her office and stared at the pictures of Chris. She couldn’t deny the eyes were the same. She sank down into her chair and laid her head on the clutter of her desk. “What happened that night?” She cried.

The phone rang. Alana answered it, “Hello?”

“Merry Christmas! I know it’s late but we just got back,” Cheyenne voice came through the line.

The tears were flowing to heavy to stop, “Merry Christmas.”

“Oh honey, what is it? I knew you should have come out here for the holidays.”

“No that’s not it, well maybe its part of it, but it’s not all. I... she looks like him. It did happen and I’ve been a total idiot.”

“You have totally lost me, Alana. What’s going on?” Cheyenne asked concerned.

“Chris and Melody.”

“It’s not too late, Alana.”

“He’s not talking to me. And I can’t face him. I know, I had to have hurt him tremendously.”

“Alana, calm down. I can barely understand what you’re saying and I’ve had way too much to drink to be able to follow you. You know

the best way to deal with Chris is face to face. Go to him. Talk to him. If you're ready to accept the possibility that he may be Melody's father, then go to him. But do not go if you're not ready to accept that or ready to let go of Steven."

"I'm ready to be happy again," Alana said quietly, her hands running over a picture of Chris.

"Then the best thing you can do is go see him. You know he's in Dallas for New Years Eve. We've got tickets to the show. Mark I'm sure won't mind hanging out at his friends while we go."

"I can't take Melody to that show."

"Then I'm sure you can still go and track him down somewhere before the show. I'll keep Melody while you do, or you can take her with you. You're going to have to make the move here. Chris has tried and you slammed the door on him."

"I know," Alana sobbed.

Cheyenne sighed, "Decide Alana and let me know when you've made the decision. I need to go now."

"Night, Shy. Love you. Alana hung up the phone. She grabbed the picture off of her desk and took it to bed with her.

Chapter 41

Chris walked into the studio of KWJJ. His baseball cap pulled down low. He hated getting up for the morning shows. He plastered a smile on, as he was hustled into his position. Headset and microphone were quickly adjusted for him. He smiled across at the two disc jockeys sitting opposite of him. "Morning" he said with a small nod of his head.

Lindy Lincoln returned the smile. Before she was able to say anything the on air light came on. She pulled the microphone closer to her, "Alright ladies, it's time to wake up. Sitting right here with in arms reach is Mr. Chris Reeds."

Chris blushed at her whoops into the microphone. "How you doing?"

"We're doing great. We've been waiting for you to come back and see us forever."

Chris played with his ear, "I'm sorry, things got a little crazy."

Lindy's sidekick, Trevor piped in, "So what was the real story behind the canceled shows?"

Chris smile faded, "I had things I needed to take care of."

"What things? Was it your voice again?"

Chris shook his head, "NO no no it wasn't anything like that. It was just some stuff that needed to be handled in person. It's all good now. I'm back, where I belong."

Lindy and Trevor exchanged looks before Lindy spoke, "Let's go to the phone lines. Hello got a question for Chris?"

“No, not really,” the woman’s voice shook . Chris’s face went pale at the sound of the woman’s voice.

“Okay, then what can we do for ya?” Trevor laughed.

“I just a wanted to tell Chris something.”

Chris took a deep breath, “I’m listening darlin.”

“I love you.”

“I love you too baby.” Chris said getting choked up. The phone clicked on the other end and a dial tone came across the line.

Lindy asked, “Do you know who that woman was?”

Chris ran his hand over his face nodding. Trevor turned on some music. “Are you okay?”

Chris shook his head, “Can you give me a minute.” He got up and left the studio. He went outside and lit a cigarette. Focused on inhaling the comfort from the cigarette, he closed his eyes. “Alana is done. She doesn’t matter. She’s just a fan,” he reminded himself before tossing the cigarette. One last inhale of the fresh air and Chris went back inside.

Lindy smiled at him as the on air light switched back on, “I saw that you brought your guitar with you. You think we might get a sneak peak into the album you’re working on?”

Chris looked at her puzzled, “Sure.” He reached over and grabbed his guitar. “I haven’t really selected any of the songs yet, so I don’t know what’s going to be on it.” Chris closed his eyes and began to play. His hands froze over the guitar strings when he opened his eyes. Alana smiled weakly from the window. Chris forced himself to close his eyes once more. When he opened them, Alana was gone.

The disc jockeys applauded when the last notes faded away. He went through the motions of finishing up the interview, cursing himself for letting Alana get in the way once more.

Guitar in tow, Chris left the studio. The hotel shuttle was waiting right in front of the station for him. Chris smiled at the driver as he set his guitar inside the back and reached for the front door. "Chris!" Chris stopped and scanned the small parking lot. His heart was in his throat as he watched Alana running over to him, Melody in her arms. "What is it Alana?" Chris sighed.

Alana took a deep breath, "Can I give you a ride to the hotel?"

Chris glanced at the driver, "Can you make sure my guitar gets up to my room?" The driver nodded. Chris closed the door and waited for the shuttle to leave. "You shouldn't have come here."

"Chris, I meant what I said on the phone. I love you."

Chris shook his head, "No you don't love me."

"Yes, I do. I had no idea... but I did, I do."

Chris shifted in his seat, tracing the seal on the window, "No you don't."

Alana hit the stirring wheel, the thud causing Melody to cry from the backseat. Chris bristled at the sound, scooting closer to the door. Alana reached behind her and touched Melody's foot instantly soothing her. "You don't know what's in my head, Chris."

"And you do?"

Alana sighed, "I've become a different person since I accepted my pregnancy. I fought this change every step of the way. Do you know how scary it is having to take responsibility for your life. I mean, before I had

it easy, with Steven, Gloria, and everyone else in my life directing it. When it didn't work I could blame them. But I don't have that anymore. I can't have that."

Alana gripped the steering wheel tighter trying to find some stability there, "I really don't know why I made you keep Melody a secret. You didn't react like you were supposed to. You didn't help direct me. I guess I shouldn't have expected that either, not like you really direct your own life. That's why I had to let you leave." Alana used the back of her hand to wipe away the tears. "You were always there. The disappointment in your eyes... do you know how guilty that made me feel? Every time I'd listen to Gloria, you'd look at me. Those eyes," groan, "Sharper than a needle bursting my safety net. I needed them to direct me, didn't I?" Alana paused. The only sound competing with the road noise was Chris's breathing. "I asked you a question," she demanded. "Isn't that what we both need?"

"No." Chris barked.

"Geesh you didn't have to snap at me. I get the point, but do you get mine... of course not. No one understands me, and I really wish someone did, maybe they could explain me to me." Alana focused on the road for a bit, glancing in the rearview mirror, a small smile crossing her face seeing Melody asleep, "I'm a mom now, I'm supposed to know my own mind. Isn't this progress to recognize that I'm doing something wrong? I just don't know how to fix it, or honestly I need help fixing it. So okay, maybe I haven't really changed." Alana pulled into the hotel. She glanced at Chris hovering beside the door waiting for his chance to escape. Humiliated Alana, rested her head on the steering wheel.

Chris watched her slumping over. He was more confused then ever, "What was your point, Alana?"

Alana shook her head, "I don't know."

Chris reached over and twirled a strand of Alana's hair around his finger, "What do you want from me?" Alana shook her head pulling her hair free from Chris's hand. He let his hand fall to the armrest, "I need to know that."

Alana eased her head up. The softness of Chris's voice gave Alana courage, "I want you to love me for who I am."

Chris nodded, his eyes caressing Alana's face, "I've always loved you for who you let me know you to be."

"Even now?"

Chris smiled at Alana's lower lip that had become as unstable as a bowl of jello. He nodded. He leaned over to her, his finger tracing her lips, "More so." He let his lips brush over hers, "I need to go upstairs. Will you be at the show?"

Alana shrugged. Chris laughed, "I'll take that as a yes."

Chapter 42

Alana sat on Chris's bus holding Melody. The crowd was just departing from the club. She wiped her hands on her jeans. She knelt on the sofa and pushed down one of slabs on the blinds and peaked out. A crowd had gathered around the bus waiting for Chris. There were a lot of familiar faces out there that still showed the excitement from the show. The back door of the club opened, Chris came out surrounded by security.

She watched the crowd flooding around him. He signed a few autographs and swapped a couple stories. He was so comfortable in the center of adoring fans. Alana let go of the blinds and went back over to Melody. "At least you can sleep." Alana pulled Melody in closer to her, "Melody, I hope I'm not making a mistake here."

The door swung open. Alana turned and watched Chris climb on to the bus. His shoulders slumped. His face looked older. He stared at her as he walked past. Without a word he went into his bedroom. Alana could hear him moving around. The noise added to her stress. Alana tapped her teeth with her nail. Time stood still as she sat out there waiting for him to return.

Finally he came out in an old t-shirt and jeans. He'd left his hat off. She'd seen him before with a hat off, but never for very long. Alana watched him walk over to Melody and pull her out of the car seat. His face relaxed, the star image slowly drifting away as he looked at her. Alana had never noticed that there was a difference in Chris on stage and around fans and other times.

“You just going to stare at me all night?” Chris asked softly. Alana jumped at his voice, “Sorry I didn’t mean to stare.” Alana reached out and ran her fingers through his goatee.

Chris shifted his eyes to look at her, “You’re acting like you’ve never seen me before.”

Alana shook her head, pulling her hand back, “I don’t think I have.”

“Are you going insane or something?” Chris asked scooting away from her.

Alana chuckled, “Being out there wears you out, doesn’t it?”

“It’s what I live for...” Chris trailed off.

“No, it’s not... I mean I know it is but it takes its toll on you.”

“Jesus, Alana, you’re really acting strange. You’ve been telling me for years I needed something besides my job.”

“It just sounded good, I don’t know. I mean I ... I’m sorry.”

Chris shifted his gaze to Melody. Letting her peaceful slumber bring him peace, “You have nothing to be sorry for.”

“I know, I have, and I guess that you actually did. I just didn’t know how true it was. You always seemed so happy and content with being out there on stage. I guess I never really wanted to imagine another side of you, because I wasn’t involved in it...” Alana trailed off.

“Alana, since I met you, you’ve been a part of my personal life as well as my career. You know what I love about you?”

Alana’s lip trembled, “No.”

“You’ve always made me want to have both. You’re one of the few people I’ve met since I started this road that really made me believe that they cared about the man I was in here,” he pounded on his chest.

“I do care,” Alana whispered.

“And that’s why I’ve always wanted you around me. What I didn’t realize, is that every relationship I’ve had, I’ve compared them to you. You came out to the shows and looked like you enjoyed yourself, and if time allowed we’d get to hang out. And you had just as good a time just kicking back with the guys. I never worried about what I was going to do, I was able to just be. You never made me feel guilty for having to leave or talking with other women. So each relationship, when they’d become bored with the shows or started getting demanding, I’d shut down. I knew there was someone out there that I didn’t have to work at to be who I was with them.”

Alana nodded, she understood what he was saying. She knew now that Steven never really loved the woman that she was, just the image she had portrayed to him. “I thought the same thing about Steven the night before I left. I wanted him to be like you,” Alana confessed.

Chris brought Melody up and kissed her. “So now what, Alana?”

Alana got up and took Melody and put her in the car seat. Her heart raced as she turned back to Chris. He was looking at her with expectations, questions, demands. She sat down on his lap. She caressed his goatee, closing her eyes, her breath growing ragged, she let her fingers run up his cheek, through his short brown hair. She opened her eyes. Chris’s eyes were closed, the wrinkle around his eyes were showing. He wasn’t breathing. He was waiting. Alana leaned down and

brushed her lips across each eyelid. The smell of Cool Waters, his sweat, and the mix of cigarette smoke made Alana's head swim as she trailed her lips down his jaw line, eventually finding his lips. The tickle of his mustache as he began to return the kiss made Alana withdraw from the kiss.

Chris reached up and smoothed out his mustache and then brought her back down to him. He tangled his fingers in her hair, using them for leverage, bring her in closer to him. His tongue leisurely exploring the softness of her mouth, the complete surrender of Alana opened up the locks to the doors Chris hadn't even realized he'd protected from her. If there had been any remaining doubts in his mind, they were gone. He loved Alana more than he ever thought it was possible to love another individual..

Lonnie clearing his throat brought Chris out the wonderment of the kiss. He released Alana slowly. She fell forward against his chest. He put his arms around her, he'd found a home right there. He closed his eyes and opened them slowly. Lonnie was still standing there. "What did you need, Lonnie?" Chris spoke softly rubbing Alana's back.

"Cheyenne's outside as is everyone else. She a wanted to know if Alana wanted to meet her at the hotel to give her a ride or should I just tell her everything's fine."

Chris kissed the top of Alana's head. "Tell her not to worry. If she wants to come hang out with you guys then that's fine."

"You're the boss." Lonnie said smiling.

"Do me a favor... tell them to get us out of here. Just lock up the bus at the hotel. We're not leaving here."

Lonnie gave Chris a little salute and disappeared off the bus.

The bus rumbled to life and slowly moved out of the parking lot. Chris continued to hold Alana in his arms. He sat there listening to the familiar sounds of the bus shifting gears. The smooth purr of fourth gear, he nudged Alana back. "Let's go get more comfortable."

Alana nodded nervously. Chris stood and picked up Melody's car seat. He took Alana's hand and took them back to his room. Alana sat down on the bed and watched Chris. He pulled out a bag and tossed his socks from his drawer into the bag. Alana looked at him with curiosity, "What are you doing?"

"She needs a place to sleep," he said with a boyish grin.

"But your drawer?"

"It's the best I got," Chris said apologetically. He opened another drawer and pulled out a few sweatshirts carefully folding them and placing them in the bottom of it. He pulled out the drawer and set it on the floor next to the bed. "Nice and soft now." He carefully lifted Melody out of her car seat and set her down in the drawer and covered her. Chris disappeared out of the room for a moment coming back with his guitar.

Chris sat down and began to play. Alana recognized the tune as the one he'd been humming to her. Chris began singing softly to Melody,

"I made my living writing songs,

but never knew the meaning of a melody,

until the day you came into my arms,

hair of red, eyes of green, you rocked my world.

I never took another breath without the song of you in my head,

You're my sweetest melody."

Alana crawled up behind Chris and kissed his neck. Chris's fingers froze over the guitar, the last of the tune fading away into the murmur of the bus's engine. Alana took the guitar and set it aside. Chris turned and placed a hand on either side of her, "Was my playing bothering you?"

Alana nodded laying back, "We've spent many nights in here with you playing that guitar... and I've spent many nights worried about the man that was the performer... tonight I want Chris Reed the man that's turned my world upside down." Her hand ran over his arm and down the inside of his wrist, she felt his pulse quicken, her own pulse racing to keep up. He leaned closer to her, his lips parting. Her eyes followed the path of his tongue as he licked his lips. The bus faded away as she waited for the moment their lips met. Her hand drifting up to the back of his head pulling him in tight as she opened her mouth, consuming all that he'd give to her. Their bodies drawn together, Chris leaned into her letting his hands draw her up and eventually slowly rolling her over so she was on him.

Alana's heart pounded as she drifted into the intoxication of the kiss. Everywhere his hands touched her ached when they departed. She laid there yearning to make the demands of her body known but the kiss had stolen her voice. The only thing she could concentrate on was the power of the emotions that were swirling through out her. His lips closed and then vanished from hers. Alana opened her eyes. Chris's eyes were glazed over, the pupils had dilated to consume the color of his eyes. Alana leaned in once more to resume the kiss but Chris turned away.

Alana grabbed a handful of his shirt, his hands stopping hers from pulling open the shirt.

“Not like this, darlin. I want to make sure you always remember tonight,” Chris’s voice was rough from his own desire. It pained him to nudge her away from him, but he did.

Without their bodies touching, his breathing began to steady. He got up and offered Alana his hands. Alana took them, he pulled her up to him and kissed her gently. As quickly as their lips met, they parted. He took two small steps and turned on the stereo. He quickly rummaged through the stack of cds and put one in. He slowly turned back to her as the music began. Alana recognized the song, My Best Friend, by Tim McGraw. Alana’s eyes misted over as Chris took her hands and pulled her into his arms. His arms circling her waist, he gazed down lovingly at her as he began to sing,

“I never had no one I could count on
I’ve been let down so many times
I was tired of hurtin’”

Alana placed her fingers over his lips, Chris stopped singing and just stared into her eyes. A tear slid down his cheek. Alana kissed the tear away. Her body was trembling from what she couldn’t express. She let the music and Chris lead her body’s movements. Their eyes conversing, what their voices couldn’t.

Alana closed her eyes, letting her hands wander over Chris, up his back, through his hair, down his face. His mouth catching her fingers, the warmth of his mouth lighting Alana’s deepest passion, Alana groaned.

Chris released her fingers from his mouth. Her hand fell to his shoulder. Chris's mouth consumed Alana's. She gasped for breath beneath his lips. Chris released them before the need to have her became too much. He traced her lips with his finger, staring into her eyes. His fingers lead the way for his mouth from her lips to softness of her neck. Beneath his lips, her pulse pounded echoing his own. A low moan escaped from him.

Alana leaned into the harsh tickle of his goatee on her neck. She pressed her body up against his, just the slight pressure of her body against his seemed to set the desire free in Chris. Chris's hands traveled up and down Alana's body, demanding to know all the hidden secrets. Alana's shirt seemed to just melt away. Alana's breath held as she watched him examine her newly exposed skin. In his eyes, she saw acceptance, desire, need. Tears came to her eyes as she realized this must be what love was really like.

Chris turned her around as he kissed her shoulder. The warmth from his kisses running down her spine was more than Alana could take. She fought to turn around, but Chris stopped her. His lips covered her back, slowly savoring every taste. He reached around her and undid her jeans and nudged them downward. His mouth going with the jeans down her legs, he finally let her turn around as he slowly stood up. He started to take his clothes off, but Alana stopped him.

She reached out to him, her hands shaking. He rubbed her cheek with his thumb, gently. The roughness of his thumb, Alana knew was from all the years playing the guitar. She loved the roughness of his fingertips. She looked up at him through her eyelashes, smiling

nervously. Slowly, she unbuttoned his shirt. She watched her hands pushing the shirt back over his shoulders and down his arms.

She's scared, Chris thought. He tipped her chin up and gently brushed his lips over hers. When they parted, the only thing Chris saw in her eyes was love. Now he was scared. He closed his eyes concentrating on the kisses that Alana was placing on his shoulder. He took a deep breath fighting the urge to take back the control, Alana now had. Just keep breathing in and out, he told himself. Alana moved the kisses down his chest and it was becoming unbearable. He heard a noise come from him, but he didn't know what it was. The kisses were gone. He looked down at Alana, she was standing there frightened. Instantly, Chris was back in control. He quickly slid off his jeans. Cautiously, he reached out a hand to Alana and waited for her to take it. He smiled, closing the gap between them. Gently he scooped her up and laid her on the bed.

Alana laid there looking up at Chris, his hand playing in the mass of curls on the pillow. Images of him from over the years flashed through her mind. He was blushing in front of the coca-cola sign. He was ashamed when she'd visited him in Nashville in the house with no power, He was excited, waving his record deal. He was playfully tossing pillows at her. He was on stage pleasing the crowd. He was in tears, admitting he was getting a divorce. He was in love. He was enraged. He was exhausted coming on to the bus tonight. Alana wondered if she even knew who this man laying there with her was, yet she knew. She knew better than anyone what it was like living between images. She lifted her head to kiss him. She didn't want to think about images now.

Chris deepened the kiss. He could feel the uncertainty in it. He ran his hand down her side, brushing lightly against the brush. Just that slight stimulation, milk sprayed from that brush. When Alana blushed, Chris's breath caught. He'd never seen anyone look as beautiful as she did right then. He pulled her to him, kissing her. "I love you," he whispered between kisses.

Alana tightened her grasp around him. Somehow she managed to croak out I love you back to him. It didn't matter how it came out, just that it had and she'd meant it. Chris rolled her over gently laying over her. The weight of his body didn't phase her. Her hands slid down his back. She hadn't meant to, but her nails dragged across his back. as he entered her. Her body shuddered from the excitement of their bodies connecting.. She heard Chris groan her name and she could feel her mouth move but didn't hear a sound.

Chris groaned from the nails in his back. Slowly, steadily he increased his rhythm until she was his, until there was no controlling their bodies that shook from the intensity of the moment. At that moment, his mind was blank. The trembling stopped. Chris rolled over, bringing her with him. He closed his eyes and played with her hair. The softness of the silky red locks was a sharp contrast to the music that was running wild with in his head. He wanted to jump up from the bed and grab his guitar. He wanted to capture that melody on paper, but that would require a clarity he didn't have at the moment.

Alana could see the wheels turning in Chris's head. She leaned up on her elbow and let her hair fall over her shoulder. She looked in to the hazy brown eyes, "You're thinking of a song, aren't you?"

Chris tugged at his ear, “I can’t help it.”

Alana chuckled as she placed her head on his chest. “I’ve never experienced anything like that.”

Chris hugged her. “Neither have I.”

Chapter 43

A couple hours later, Chris, Alana, and Melody ventured out of the quiet of the bus. They went into the hotel to see what was happening. They slipped into the suite unnoticed by all the partiers. Alana smiled up at him, “Looks like we were missing all the fun?”

Chris’s eyes sparkled as he gazed down at her, “Something like that. Get you a drink?”

“How about I get the drinks, since you’re a hand down.”

Chris smiled down at Melody, “Yeah might be a better idea.”

As soon as Alana left Chris, Lonnie appeared at his side, “So this the infamous Melody?” Lonnie eyed Chris.

“Yes, it is. We’re just making an appearance.”

Lonnie smiled, “So everything’s good... not like last time?”

Chris gave a contented sigh, “Not even close. I think, I might be on to something here.”

Lonnie smacked Chris on the back. “Then we’ve got reasons to celebrate! Although I feel obligated to say this... you screw her over and we’ll know and not be happy with you,” Lonnie teased.

Chris knew Lonnie was only partially teasing about that. He looked over at Alana talking to Cheyenne. “I don’t plan on it. This really feels right...”

Lonnie raised an eyebrow, “I hear a but coming... I don’t like that.”

Chris shook his head, “Things don’t have to change that much. This’ll be fine.”

“I don’t even want to know what’s going through your mind. Now hand her over,” Lonnie said holding out his arms for Melody.

“How much have you had to drink?” Chris asked suspicious.

“What’s that got to do with anything?”

“You ain’t touching her if you’re drunk. She’s an infant.”

Lonnie rolled his eyes, “I’m not going to drop her for pete’s sake!” Chris reluctantly handed Melody over, as Alana brought the drinks back.

“I never thought I’d ever see Lonnie holding a baby,” Alana said tilting her head at the strange image before her. Lonnie was enthralled by the baby, his faced completely relaxed making faces at her, while his body was tense, awkward with the small bundle cradled in his arms.

“I know,” Chris mumbled, reaching for Melody, “That’s enough before you do drop her.”

Lonnie returned the glare but gladly relinquished Melody back to Chris’s arms. “We were just thinking about breaking out the instruments for a little jam session, interested?”

Chris passed Melody off to Alana, “Sure, we haven’t done that in a while.”

Lonnie rolled his eyes yet again, “Yeah not since someone thought he was better than the rest of us and had to have his own bus.”

“Pay for your own bus and you can have it too,” Chris grinned.

“Yeah as soon as someone gives us a pay raise, I’ll look into it.”

Alana laughed at the two friends’ banter. The devotion between those two is what held the music together. They’re playful relationship was witnessed nightly on stage, in one of Alana’s favorite parts of the

show when they'd show off in dual between the fiddle and Chris's voice. Chris put his hand on the small of her back, bringing her back to the present. Lonnie had already disappeared. Chris led her over to the sofa.

Music soon filled the hotel suite, as the guys played what ever came to them. Their personality coming out in the lyrics they were making up. Alana smiled over at Cheyenne. A nameless hotel room, typical in every furnishing, at that moment seemed to be home. Alana put Melody into her car seat and went over to Cheyenne and Mark. "You guys having fun?" Alana asked.

Cheyenne smiled, "Yeah, but I think we're going to head out soon. Are you sure you're okay here?"

"Definitely."

Cheyenne studied her friend, there was a new glow about her. Alana's eyes had a new fullness to them, which reflected love and dreams. Before she could speak, Mark spoke up, "Well, then enjoy yourself. Give us your rental key, we're heading out pretty early in the morning and can drop the car off here."

Alana smiled up at Mark, "Thank you, that'd be great." She gave them each a hug and they left. While the band continued jamming, she fluttered around the hotel room talking to the rest of the crew. Unaware of the time passing until her breasts started to burn, she glanced at her watched amazed that Melody had been sleeping for more than four hours. Conscious of the fact that she didn't bring extra breast pads, she decided she had to wake Melody. She crossed the room, to the car seat. Melody was awake staring up at Chris waving her hand like a metronome. She looked up at Chris, his eyes were following Melody's hand through the

air. Alana sat down on the couch just watching as the two stared in sync with each other.

Chris leaned over and whispered into her ear, "If you need to take her to feed her, go ahead."

Alana looked at him puzzled. He raised an eyebrow staring at her chest. Alana's gaze fell to the giant wet spot on her right breast. Alana scooped Melody up and went to one of the doors off the main room. Finding it to be a bedroom, Alana settled in on the bed with Melody beside her. As soon as her breast was exposed, Melody was attached to it. The velocity of the sucking, brought tears to her eyes. Melody's persistent nursing slowed as her eyelids got droopy. Alana laughed, "You look like you're getting drunk." Melody's eyelid raised as she stared up at her mother out of the corner of her eye. Alana rubbed the side of her cheek, "Sorry, honey." Melody's eyelid closed once more. Alana switched her to the other breast and just laid there enjoying the quiet serenity of their closeness.

A while later Alana heard the music stop. A few moments later, Chris poked his head in the door, "Did you fall asleep in here?"

Alana opened her eyes, "Another five minutes and I would have. Are you guys done?"

Chris walked in and closed the door behind him. The bed curved under his weight as he sat down beside her. "Yeah, you want to stay up here or go down to the bus?" he asked quietly.

"You've already got her bed made downstairs," Alana said lazily.

"Okay then the bus it is." Chris whispered. He leaned in and gave her a soft kiss. "Did you have a good time tonight?"

“Absolutely.”

Chris sighed contentedly, “Good. I need to talk to James and then we can go down together, or if you want to go get settled, I’ll meet you down there.”

Alana groaned, “I have to get up?”

“You’re the one that voted for the bus.”

Alana smiled, “I know. We’ll meet you down there.”

Chris stood up, “I won’t be long, I promise.”

“We’ll be fine don’t worry about it. I just don’t promise to stay awake.”

Chris laughed, “Fair enough. I’ll see you in a few.” He got up and left the room.

Alana smiled down at Melody, “This is really happening, can you believe it?” Alana got up and settled Melody into her carseat and then headed for the bus. Alana sat on the bed, and looked around. Chris had hung up pictures since the first time she’d seen the bus, and despite the fact that the room was small, it was comfortable. The light brown of the wood panels and the track lighting, made the room feel open and inviting. She took a deep breath, the smell of Cool Waters was still lingering, mixed with the smell of pine, made Alana ache for Chris’s presence.

On cue, Chris came into the room. He stopped in the door way and their eyes met. Electricity sparked between them. Alana broke the silence, “Get everything straightened out with James?”

Chris leaned on the doorframe and nodded, “Get settled?”

Alana shrugged, “Got Melody all settled.”

Chris pushed himself up off the doorframe and came in and sat beside her. “What needs to happen for her mama to get settled?” He cupped her face. Alana leaned into it then turned to kiss his palm.

“Nothing, it already has happened,” Alana said her heart already started pounding out its own rhythm.

Chris leaned over and kissed her, “I want you to be comfortable.”

Alana smiled up at him, “I always am out here.”

Chris inhaled sharply. The sincerity of her eyes, was the best gift he could have possibly gotten. There was a security in knowing that, Alana knew the road, knew the schedule and didn’t have any preconceived notions about what his life was like. For once, he had a woman in his room that he was optimistic about the future. The years they’d spent building his career made him relax and push aside his concern about moving from friends to lovers.

Chris watched as Alana got up and floated over to his closet. He’d never noticed the grace with which she moved. As if it was a natural occurrence she pulled out a shirt and sauntered into the bathroom. Chris watched the door close and exhaled slowly, glancing down at Melody, he smiled. Then he reached down and pulled off his boots, hung up his hat on the hook above the bed, and unbuttoned his shirt, laying it over the dresser. Chris laid down on the bed and waited for Alana.

Alana finally came out of the bathroom, wearing his t-shirt. She’d brushed out her hair and left it hanging free behind her. The red locks, hanging down to her waist like silk. The vibrant color of her hair drawing out the paleness of her skin. For someone who lived in California she lacked the sun kissed tan. Chris pulled back the covers for her. Chris

watched the nervous steps she took to the bed, for some reason it made him smile. Alana laid down and pulled the covers up over her. Chris looked at his jean covered legs, and wondered if he should take them off but he was acutely aware of the fact that he did not have anything on underneath them. He jumped up off the bed and went to the dresser. He took a pair of sweats to the bathroom and changed into them. When he came out Alana was curled up to the edge of the bed, her hand dangling off of it onto Melody. Chris laid down behind her carefully, and whispered into her ear, "Are you okay?"

"Yeah... I'm just a little nervous, I guess. This seems a little strange."

Chris rolled her over to her back, "It's okay. I know I am."

Alana smiled up at him, "I just don't want to screw up what we've had for the last decade."

Chris curled up to her rubbing his nose on her cheek, "Darlin, I promise there is nothing that can effect how I feel about you. You'll always be my best friend."

Alana leaned into the caress, "You can't promise that."

Chris sighed, "I know, but we have to believe in it. Darlin' I've never felt like this..."

"Neither have I," Alana admitted.

Chris leaned up on one elbow, "I don't expect things to change really. I know you have a very comfortable life in California, I don't expect you to give that up. The only thing I expect to change, is that you let me help bring you out here to visit. I know the situation out there, and that you can't afford the plane tickets to be running back and forth. Let

me help with that, at least through the rest of this tour. Then the next tour, I'll make sure my schedule is more relaxed so I can do most of the traveling. I want to make this to work, Alana.”

Alana nodded, “That’s what I want too.”

Chris leaned down and gave her a very tender kiss, “Good then we have nothing to worry about. We'll make it happen, one day at a time...”

Alana reached up and caressed his face, “One day at a time.”

Chris laid down and pulled her close to him, “Good night, Alana.”

“Good night, Chris.”

Chapter 44

Alana got home and found a note on her door. The scraggly handwriting of Harold's scrawled out, "We have presents for you, please call us with a good time to bring them over. Love Harold and Gloria." Alana smiled fondly at the note as she shoved it into the diaper bag and unlocked the door. Without giving it much thought Alana called the Daniels. Gloria answered the phone, "Hello."

"Hi... Gloria... it's Alana. I got your note."

"You just got the note? We left it there almost a week ago," Gloria demanded.

Alana took a deep breath, "Yeah, well I was out of town for awhile."

"Seeing him no less," Gloria muttered.

Alana kept her voice calm, "We're home now, so when ever is convenient for you." She hung up the phone and went back to the car and unloaded the bags into her room.

Fifteen minutes later, there was a knock on the door. Alana plastered a smile on her face as she opened the door. Gloria was standing there with two large bags of presents and Harold had in his arms the rocking horse he'd made. Alana couldn't help but smile at the rocking horse. The mane and tail was a soft pink silk, the wood stained a rich almond color. Melody's name beautifully scrolled across the seat. Alana reached out to touch it, Gloria's voice stopping her, "Are you going to let us in?"

Alana smiled, "Sorry," She stepped back and let them come in.

“Where is she?” Gloria demanded. Harold smiled apologetic.

“I’ll go get her, have a seat.” Alana went to the nursery and picked up Melody. As soon as she stepped into the living room, Gloria was yanking Melody out of Alana’s arm. Alana tried to take a deep breath but her temper continued to flare as Gloria undid Melody’s blanket and mumbled at the outfit she was wearing. She swaddled the Melody back up. “Are you still breastfeeding her?” Gloria demanded. Alana nodded. Her teeth gritted as she kept from lashing out at Gloria. “It’s a good thing we bought her some bottles and some formula. She’s clearly not getting enough to it. It’s nothing to be ashamed of a lot of mothers can’t produce enough milk for their babies.”

Alana was impressed with the amount of restraint she showed as she spoke, “I appreciate your concern, but the doctor says she’s doing just fine.”

“The doctor’s like to keep the babies too thin. Besides I’m sure you could use some breaks now and then and with you breastfeeding it makes it hard for anyone to help you out.”

“I’m doing just fine.”

Harold put her hand on Gloria’s shoulder silencing her. “We know you are, Alana. We only came over to give you, your presents not to give out lectures,” Harold said pointedly at Gloria.

Gloria sighed, “Yes, that’s what we came over for.”

“Did you get the gifts I sent over for you?”

Harold smiled, “Yes we did. They were very thoughtful. Why don’t you go ahead and start opening these and then we can be out of your hair.”

Alana sat down and opened the presents. There was a variety of baby clothes and toys for Melody, as well as the starter bottle set and formula. For Alana there was two books on caring for infants. Alana forced a smile, "Thank you." She set the stuff aside. The shrill of Gloria's voice as she jabbered away at Melody irritated Alana worse than nails on a chalkboard. Alana lowered her eyes and tried to think of what it was about Gloria she loved, but her mind was blank.

Harold finally spoke up, "Come on, dear, we've kept them long enough. They just got home and I'm sure Alana could use some time to unpack and settle back in."

Alana smiled at Harold, "Thank you, Harold. I am really beat but thank you for the gifts." She stood up and walked over to Gloria to take Melody. Gloria turned away from her.

"We'll stay a few more minutes. You can go ahead and unpack if you want. We'll be fine here with Melody."

Alana sighed and went to her room. She stared at the phone and picked it up. She started to dial Chris's number but decided against it. She knew what he did when he was hounded and that's not what she wanted to do to him. They needed to take things slow, if it was to work out. Alana sighed. The sound of someone in the nursery, made Alana go investigate.

She stood in the door way watching as Gloria started moving things around. "What are you doing?" Alana demanded.

"Just making things a little more functional for you," Gloria said with a smile.

“They are functional. Leave things alone!” Alana went in and scooted the crib back to the center of the room.

“You’re taking up so much space like that. It would be a lot better to put it to the wall,” Gloria said starting to pull the crib.

“No! This is my house, Gloria. There is no reason for you to come in and move things around. I don’t have a problem with you coming to visit, but please leave things alone. If I need help, I will ask for it. Until then, please keep your thoughts and suggestions to yourself. It’s getting late now, and I need to feed Melody.”

“How are you supposed to ask if you don’t know what it is you’re doing?”

“I’ll figure it out when things don’t go right, I don’t know. What I do know is that I do not appreciate you just changing things.”

Gloria sighed, “Fine, I’ll come back tomorrow.”

Alana sighed too, “Fine just make sure it’s after five. I’ve got some appointments in the studio.”

“Well I’ll just come over in the morning so that you don’t have to worry about Melody.”

“Gloria,” Alana said beginning to lose her patience, “I do not need you during the day. We have things worked out in the studio. Please come after dinner.”

Gloria smiled and patted her hand, “I’ll see you tomorrow.”

Alana followed her out to the living room where Harold was sitting with Melody. Harold stood up and handed Melody to Alana. “Take care, Alana,” Harold said softly leading his wife out.

Alana walked into the kitchen and got some aspirin, her head was pounding. She grabbed a soda out of the fridge and took the aspirin. She stood there staring at the phone, willing Chris to call her. The phone didn't ring. She wandered out into the living room and laid down on the couch with Melody. She looked around and wondered when her house would feel like a home. She closed her eyes reliving her time with Chris. More than anything she wanted some sort of consistency in her life. She was tired of trying to juggle the two different worlds. She knew she had to get honest with herself, if only she knew how. She opened her eyes, Melody was sleeping. She closed her eyes once more and focused on taking slow deep breaths. As her breathing deepened, her thoughts faded away. Sleep overcame her.

The ring of the phone shattered Alana's sleep. She jumped at the sound. Melody started crying for the jolt. Alana sat up gently, bouncing Melody. As Melody quieted Alana reached for the ringing phone.

"Hello?"

"Hey beautiful?" Chris's calm voice caressed her ear.

"Hey, Chris. What are you doing?"

"I just wanted to make sure you made it home safely."

From the tone of Chris's voice, Alana imagined him playing with his ear. She chuckled, "Yeah, we did. You on the road again?"

"We're headed to Fort Lauderdale. Sleep well."

"You too. Thanks for calling," Alana whispered.

There was a long pause. "Bye, I guess."

"Was there something else?" Alana asked gently.

"Not really."

Alana waited for Chris to continue. When he didn't she whispered, "Bye." Alana hung up the phone. She kissed the top of Melody's head and took her into bed. Once again an overwhelming feeling of loneliness washed over Alana.

Alana walked out the door towards the studio. The sound of a car pulling up made her look. The forest green Pontiac was easily recognizable as Gloria's. Alana pulled Melody to her protectively, continuing to the studio. She was tempted to lock the door behind her but figured it would be better to deal with her before people started coming in for their portraits. She put Melody in her crib. She was startled to turn around and see Gloria standing right there.

"Good morning, Gloria." Alana said politely.

"How are you?"

"Fine, but I was expecting you until after I closed shop." Alana folded her arms across her chest.

"Melody doesn't need to lay in the corner all day. I'll take care of her. We can go to the park."

"No. Melody isn't going anywhere."

"Now, honey, there's no need to be so stubborn. I have nothing to do. I'm more than willing to take her off your hands for a few hours. She needs her grandmother," Gloria said brushing Alana aside. She swooped Melody up.

Alana swiftly took Melody from her arms. "I mean it, Gloria. I do not want my daughter out of my sight. I don't have any milk pumped, she needs to be close to me."

“That's why I have formula and bottles. You don't have to worry about breastfeeding her.” Gloria tried to take Melody back, but Alana moved.

“You want to help watch her? Then fine. You can stay here in the corner and watch her. You're not to leave with her. You aren't to give her a bottle. If you can agree to this than you can stay,” Alana said the conviction in her voice even surprised herself. The shock of it was clear on Gloria's face.

“Fine. Can I have my granddaughter now?”

Alana reluctantly handed Melody over to her. She went into the kitchenette and made a pot of coffee. She did her best to ignore Gloria's presence, but it was harder than Alana thought. Finally at five, Alana went back over to Gloria. “Thank you for your help today.”

Gloria smiled, “Anytime, dear. I'll see you tomorrow.”

Alana groaned, but decided not to fight it. She picked Melody up and headed for the door. Without another word to Gloria, Alana took Melody into the house and locked the door.

Chapter 45

Alana stared at the computer screen. Over the years she'd seen the rumors flying over the bulletin boards about whom Chris was dating. She was usually the first to come to Chris's defense, but this time she was immobilized. The words on the computer screen screamed at her, "Chris did it again. Another woman with a child. When will he learn?" The comments that followed the initial post were increasingly more hostile. There was nothing she could say, the truth was that he had, but she wanted to scream it was different. She couldn't stop reading the posts. It amazed her the details that they'd figured out, everything except her identity and that is was with a fan or a friend. They'd figured out that he had canceled dates because of the woman. There was a growing fear that this could mean serious changes for Chris. They were speculating that Chris would eventually do what he'd always said he would do, put his personal life before his career.

Alana's eyes burned as she continued surfing through the message boards. Alana's phone rang. She picked it up, "Hello?"

"Hi. How did the rest of your trip go?" Cheyenne asked.

"Good. Have you seen

"The boards?"

"Yeah, I did. Don't listen to them, Alana. They don't know what's really going on. They're just going on past experiences."

"I know," Alana sighed, "I guess I just didn't think about anyone finding out. I mean we've always hung out together."

“They don't know it's you. Their reaction would probably be different if they did. Everyone loves you. Did you respond to the post?”

“I didn't know what to say.”

“I'd suggest you go in and post what you usually post to those things, if you don't they might raise questions about it. That is if they noticed that you were even on the boards. The best thing is to probably just ignore it and sign off. You don't need to worry about that. I saw how happy you were. This is the right thing for you. I know it is!”

Alana sighed, “It did feel great, but I... Shy, what do I do? Gloria is driving me crazy. She's been over everyday since I got back. She's Melody's grandmother, I can't tell her to get lost, but I can't take this anymore.”

“You've got to make some boundaries for her and stick to them. Just because she is the grandmother doesn't mean she has a right to be there everyday. You have to create your own life. You are the one responsible for Melody, and you can't be the mother you want to be, if you're miserable.”

“I'm trying, really I am, but I hate to fight.”

“What do you hate more? Fighting or being controlled?”

“I'm not being controlled.”

“Alana, you are being controlled, if you're letting her take control of things. If you don't want her there than you've got to tell her and not let her be there.”

“But it's easier just letting her take care of Melody during the day. Besides, I don't want to hurt her feelings. I know it's taken a lot for her to accept Melody as her grandchild.”

“Alana, you've bragged about how Gloria was like a mother to you, if that's the case, then there should be no accepting involved. If she thinks of you as a daughter, the simple fact that Melody is your child should be enough.”

“You're not being fair, Cheyenne. She lost her son. She thinks of Melody as her connection to him.”

“Then how are you helping her. She has to accept the fact that Steven is dead. She's no longer a parent. Her children are grown. What was she doing before Melody came along?”

Alana sighed, “I don't know. I'm at a loss. I'm probably just taking my own frustrations out on her. I'm bored with the studio. There's only so many different poses you can do.”

Cheyenne was silent for a minute, “I thought you wanted to be a portrait photographer?”

Alana bit her lip. She'd never admitted to anyone that this wasn't what she'd wanted, she wasn't even sure of exactly what she wanted to do. Her voice shook as she began to speak, “No, I never wanted to do that.”

“Do you want to go back to the paper?”

“No... It doesn't matter, I have Melody and need to think about what is best for her.”

“What is it you want to do, Alana. Having a child doesn't mean you have to give up your own dreams,” Cheyenne prodded gently.

In practically a whisper, “I never wanted to stay in this town. I wanted to be free to travel, go wherever I thought to go. My best work always comes from concerts. Why not put some of those together and

pitch them to different artists and see what happens. I don't know how it would work out, but I'd like to try it. Or maybe even get into doing the fan club thing again. I don't know. I'm just looking at what my life is like. I can't get away from the studio to go to concerts because I can't afford the tickets, but I can't get away from it either. And just the more I'm here, the worse I feel.”

“What do you have to do to start making it happen, or to find out if its possible?”

“I don't really know. I thought about possibly putting together some pitches and going to Nashville and seeing if anyone wants to take up the idea. It's all impractical though. The income wouldn't be steady, and I need a steady pay.”

“There's nothing wrong with checking things out and seeing what happens, you don't have to make any huge changes. You'll never know until you try, Alana. You have to try.”

Alana took a deep breath, “I know, but I've never admitted this to anyone else before, and I just don't know how to do it, or if its even what I really want.”

Cheyenne sighed, “I just don't know about you anymore girl.”

“There's nothing to do about me. I'm hopeless. I'll probably die in this town. I should just face it. And it's not that bad.”

Cheyenne groaned, “Oh god, Alana. Stop it. The truth is you have no idea what your future holds.”

“All the more reason not to make any more changes.”

“Your life is unsettled, now is the time to change it. What about just looking into getting a job with like Country Weekly, or Country Music America, or something like that?”

“I don't think so. Anyway, I need to go.”

“Okay. Are you going to watch Leno tonight? Chris is scheduled to not only perform but actually talk to Jay.”

Alana sighed, “Yeah.”

Cheyenne laughed, “I know just eight hours away and you won't be able to see him except on the television set.”

“Life is just easier out there with them, than here.”

Cheyenne teased her, “Especially now with the added benefits.”

“Shut up!”

Cheyenne couldn't control her laughter, “You know the next show you go to, I have to go with you. I've got to see how you handle the fantasies of all the women there.”

“Bye, Cheyenne!” Alana hung up the phone.

Before she had a chance to dial Chris's number, Gloria was walking into the house. Alana groaned as she plastered on a smile. “It's Friday, the shop is closed today.”

“Is there a rule that I can only come and visit when the shop is open?”

“No, but listen we really need to talk,” Alana said.

“What is it dear?”

“Doesn't Harold miss you being around?”

“Of course not, he's happy I'm not around pestering him all day.”

Alana mumbled to her self. "Well, you can't be here all the time. I need time with my daughter."

"You get that in the evenings."

Alana ran her hand over her ponytail, "Look, Gloria, I love you to pieces. You've been absolutely great to me, but you don't do this with the rest of your sons' family. I need that same respect. Everyone has to learn to stand on their own at some point. Now is my time. I don't want to hurt you, but the whole point of Steven giving me the studio, was so that I could work with the kids right there, without needing anyone else. The simple fact is with you there, it's very distracting."

"Then Melody and I can spend the day in the house. She shouldn't be going in the darkroom where there's all those chemicals and fumes. Everyone needs help. And since Steven isn't here to help you, the least I can do is provide that help."

"When I need help, I'll ask for it. Right now the studio is very quiet. I can take care of things now."

Gloria's eyes filled with tears, "Are you trying to force me out of her life?"

"Of course not. I just need space."

"Is this baby's Steven's?" Gloria asked her foot tapping waiting for the response.

"Of course it is," Alana's voice wavered.

"Then I'll continue to help."

"Does it matter if she's Steven's or not?"

"Of course it does, if she isn't then she's not my grandchild. Is there a possibility it's not?"

The room got cold. Alana's heart raced, her palms got sweaty, images of Chris pulling the pillow from her face flashed through her head. The feel of his lips, and his hands over her body. She felt herself giving in to the kisses, the touches. She could hear herself pleading with Steven to forgive her. She could see the images of Steven with Rhonda. Then her clothes disappearing as she let herself go.

“There is, isn't there?” Gloria demanded, “When, when did you cheat on him?”

Alana wiped the tears that were sliding down her face. “The night of his accident,” she said hoarsely.

“You don't deserve to have her. She needs moral guidance, which you clearly can not give to her.”

Alana struggled to catch her breath, “She's my baby. I'm not sleeping with a ton of guys. There's only been Steven and one other.”

“Don't try and hide his identity, I know it's Chris. How long has this been going on?”

“It was just that night. You need to go,” Alana whispered.

“You don't tell me what I need to do. I'm taking Melody with me.” Gloria headed down the hall.

Alana flashed into action. Stopping her just outside the door, “You can't just take Melody. You have to go now, or I will call the police.”

“You can't keep her from me.”

“You don't care about her, just that she might be Steven's daughter. Just go!”

“You're in no shape to be caring for that infant, I don't care whose child she is.”

“Leave my house!” Alana screamed at her. Her head was pounding, she needed to call Chris. She needed to see him. Alana put her hands on Gloria's back and shoved her towards the door.

“What are you going to do, Alana?”

“It's none of your business. Go!” Alana said opening the front door and shoving Gloria out it, locking it behind her. Alana ran to her bedroom and picked up her cell phone. Her hand shaking as she scrolled through the phone book to Chris's number. She paced the room waiting for him to answer.

“Hey beautiful, I only have a minute,” Chris answered.

“Are you in LA for the night?” Alana asked through the tears.

“Yeah, are you okay? Is Melody okay?” Chris asked alarmed by the tears.

“I need to talk to you, see you. We're getting on a flight down there”

“What about? Are you sure everything is okay?”

“Yeah, I just need to see you.”

“Okay, be careful. We're over at the Beverly Hills Hotel.”

“I'll see you soon.”

Chapter 46

Chris walked into the hotel room, relieved to see Alana and Melody sitting there with his band. Alana stood up and faced him. Her eyes met his with confidence, yet there was still a glimmer of fear. He took the few short steps over to her. The back of his hand rubbing over her cheek. "What is it?" He asked through the knot that was forming at his throat. Chris watched the effort it took for her to form a smile, it shook him to the core. He glanced around looking for Melody. She was sleeping in her car seat. He looked back at her and repeated his question.

Alana took his hand, "I need to talk to you." Chris nodded. He pulled his hand from hers, and put his hand trembling on her back, leading her to one of the rooms. Alana sat at attention on the edge of the bed.

Chris stood in front of her, waiting. Then pacing. He kept glancing back at her, but she made no move to talk. He stopped in front of her and squatted down, "If you make me wait any longer, I'm going to go crazy. What happened?"

"Sit please," Alana said rubbing the bed beside her. Chris sat still staring at her. Alana took a deep breath, "Before Denver... Steven and I... things had been crazy... it had been weeks..." Chris started tapping his foot his patience was running very thin. "Since I got home, I've been fighting with Gloria. Today we got into a pretty big argument, and I remembered."

"Remembered what, Alana?" Chris asked trying to be understanding.

“What happened between us in the hotel in Denver. I'm sorry.”

Chris exhaled slowly, “It's okay, we're past that. Do you regret it?”

Alana shrugged wringing her hands, “I don't know. No, I do. I shouldn't have done it. I don't know what Steven was or wasn't going to do. And I shouldn't have let it happen because I was upset with him. That wasn't fair to either of you.”

Chris put his hand over Alana's, “Darlin' I'm the one that is sorry here. I knew you were upset and drunk. That was my fault.”

A few tears slid down Alana's face, “What I'm trying to say... before I left we had a fight about a pregnancy test that was negative. Before that things had been crazy with the studio, and the wedding plans, and his work. Maybe I'm forgetting a time, but I don't think we'd done anything for a couple weeks before that, and obviously we didn't do anything after.”

Chris moved his hand to rub Alana's back, “And?”

“I think Melody might really be your daughter,” Alana whispered.

Chris licked his lips as he took a few deep breaths, “Alana, it doesn't matter to me, if she's my daughter by blood or not. I was there when she was born. From the moment I first laid eyes on her, she was my daughter.”

“It matters to me though,” Alana said wiping the tears.

“Why does it matter to you?”

“I love Gloria and Harold. They've been really good to me over the years, but I need to know if she's really their granddaughter. The last few weeks dealing with Gloria, I've wanted to tell her off, yet I know she

sees Melody as her connection to Steven, so I've kept my mouth shut. I'm not suggesting that if she's not theirs that I'd take her away from them, but I wouldn't feel so bad enforcing my wishes. Besides, wouldn't it better just to know one way or another if she is yours?"

"I don't understand what difference it makes. She's your daughter. It's up to you to decide how she is raised and who she spends time with no matter if they're related to her or not."

"I know, it should but... I still need to know."

"All right, then we can find out how to get a paternity test done and do it."

Alana relaxed, "Thank you."

Chris leaned over and kissed her, "You do not have to thank me. I'm glad you came, because there's other things we need to talk about."

"The boards?"

Chris smiled, pushing some hair back, "Yeah the boards. I take it you've seen what's written on there?"

Alana nodded, "Yeah, pretty routine stuff."

"But it's not routine... it's about us," Chris heard him say aloud. It felt strange to be sitting there having this conversation, but he knew the reality of what it feels like to have people talking about you. He wanted to spare her that, but knew there was no way out of it.

"They don't know who I am. And it is routine, I've told them for years they didn't know everything and should keep their mouths shut. It's still the same situation."

Chris smiled, "Yeah, but you know that they are talking about you. I wish I could spare you from this, but you know I can't."

“I'm not asking for protection, Chris.”

“I know you're not. We go in for this test, it's possible that word will get out. Are you ready for that?”

“I've always stood beside you. It won't change.”

“I guess, what I'm trying to get out is how out there do you want to be?”

Alana went pale she hadn't thought about it. She didn't want anyone to know. She wanted to cherish this as her secret, yet still she wanted to be free to be with him. She bit her lip, “I don't know, Chris.”

“Well, then I guess we'll let the rumors control it.”

“I guess that's one way to handle it. How'd Jay go?”

Chris smiled, “It went fine. I didn't perform or anything. I just talked with him for a little bit.”

“You going to let me watch it tonight?”

Chris laughed, “Not near me. You know I don't watch myself doing interviews.”

“It was worth a shot, I guess I'll have to be satisfied just watching you,” Alana teased.

“I promise to try and be entertaining,” Chris said with a smile, “When do you go back home?”

“My return flight is Sunday morning.”

“Good, I've missed you,” Chris said giving her a lingering kiss. Alana groaned from the pressure of his lips. When they broke from the kiss, Chris whispered, “I'll go get Melody.”

Alana nodded settling down on the bed and waiting for Chris's return.

Chapter 47

Alana dropped the rest of the mail on the porch, when she saw the return address of **DNA** Testing Inc. It had been a month since she'd sent off the samples to be tested. Her hands shook as she opened up the envelope. She left the mail on the ground and went inside. Before pulling the paper work out, she dialed Chris's phone number.

“Hey beautiful, how's your day?” Chris said easily.

“It came, it's in my hands.”

“Oh.. well?” Chris held his breath.

“I'm trying to get it out,” Alana said her hands shaking so bad it made it difficult to get the paper out of the envelope.

“Come on all ready! What does it say?”

Alana was silent as she scanned through the technical information. “You're her dad. It says you're her father,” Alana whispered.

“I can't hear you. What did you say?” Chris asked his voice filled with anxiety.

“You are Melody's father,” Alana said louder.

“Really?” Chris's voice trembled.

“Yes, really.” Alana waited all that she could hear was broken up breaths. “Are you still there?”

Chris sniffed back the tears, “Yeah, I'm here. I just...”

“It's okay, Chris. I understand. Congratulations.”

“I'm speechless. God I wish I was there!”

Alana chuckled, “I'm sorry. I wish you were too.”

“Come out. Come see me.”

"I can't come right now. We've planned to meet you out in Nashville next week."

Chris sighed, "I know. I can't believe this."

"Believe it. It's right here in black and white, what you've suspected all along," Alana said gently.

"I know." There was a murmur of voices in the background, "I'm sorry, darlin' but I need to go. I'll call you tonight."

"Break a leg." Alana hung up the phone. There was a knock on the door. Alana went to it, to see Gloria bent over picking up the mail.

"Does your mailman do this all the time?"

Alana shook her head, "No, I did it. I'd been waiting for something and it came. How are you?"

"You're in good spirits."

"Come in and sit down. We need to talk," Alana said stepping back. Gloria grabbed her purse with both hands and followed Alana in and sat on the couch. Alana sat next to her and put her hands over Gloria's. "What I'm going to say, you might not take as good news"

"What is it?" Gloria stuttered.

"I'll get to it. I just need you to know that I loved Steven completely, blindly. I'd never want to intentionally hurt him, but you know everything that we've been through over the years. I've never been one that had a very high opinion of her self. I latched on to Steven because he was great and he loved me, and he had dreams. He had you and Harold, and more than anything I wanted a place to belong. I didn't realize it until recently, that the way I loved him... wasn't really the way I should have loved him." Alana paused watching Gloria, who continued to

fiddle with her purse. "I never let myself be who I really was, I mean I wanted to be the person that I was with him, but I don't think that's who I am. I was afraid that he'd stop loving me if I disagreed with his plans. The few times I did, we'd always break up. He'd come back and I'd vow to be the person he wanted me to be."

"He would never have done that," Gloria said quietly.

Alana got tears in his eyes, "Yes he would. He wanted to replicate the life you and Harold had as much as possible. I thought that's what I wanted... I know that's what I wanted. I want to spend my life with one person, where there's nothing more important than the family that we've created, but not with so many expectations. The reasons I went so nuts with going out and seeing Chris was because those people I met, never had any expectations for me. I could be just who I was, it didn't matter I was coming home and they were doing whatever. I never worried about what my opinions would reflect on me, because I had the security of coming back to Steven."

Gloria started to get up, "I'm not going to sit here and listen to you talk about how bad your life with Steven was."

Alana grabbed Gloria's hand, "Please sit. I'm not meaning to talk badly about it. I've got a lot of fond memories, and I owe him a lot. My point is that since Steven's death, I've had to really think about what I want from life. I don't have a lot of answers and I needed something to give me permission to let go of those expectations and be able to make a clean break. I kind of got that today," Alana said quietly.

"What? What did you get today?" Gloria's face was going pale.

“The night Steven died, I heard that he left with Rhonda. I was hurt and angry that things go so messed up. I got drunk... and one thing led to another. Last month when you pressed me on if there was a possibility that Melody wasn't Steven's, you broke through my denial of what happened. I went and saw Chris and we did a paternity test. The results came back today...”

“She's his bastard baby?”

“No, she's his child,” Alana sighed, “He's going to be a part of our lives from now on. And what this has done, is that I don't have to feel stuck here in order to keep up Steven's memory. I can completely let go over those dreams and define my own, but I don't want to lose you.”

“I need to go,” Gloria choked out.

“Please don't go like this,” Alana pleaded.

“I need to go.” Gloria stood up.

Alana grabbed her arm, “Gloria, I love you. I want you to be a part of my life, a part of Melody's life.”

“Steven's gone. I have nothing left of him,” Gloria sobbed collapsing into Alana's arms.

Alana cradled Gloria, “I know. I know it's hard.”

“I miss him, I wanted her to be his.”

“I know, we've just got to let him go, as much as it hurts too. You know he wouldn't want you living like this,” Alana said gently. Gloria just continued to cry into Alana's shoulder. Alana sat with her on the couch.

“He isn't good enough for you,” Gloria said pulling out some tissue from her purse.

“He is. If you just gave him a chance... I know you'd see.”

“I want the best for you.”

“I know,” Alana whispered.

“I don't want you to leave.”

“I don't know what I'm going to do in the future... we'll just have to wait and see.”

Gloria pulled away and wiped the tears away from her face, “I need to go make Harold's dinner.”

Alana nodded, “Call me later?”

Gloria just nodded and left.

Chapter 48

Alana pulled up to Chris's house in Nashville. Her stomach was in knots. She knocked on the door, holding Melody close to her. Chris threw open the door, and grabbed both of them into a hug ushering them inside. "How was the trip?" He asked.

"It was long. What about you?"

Chris rolled his eyes, "I felt like I was on a horse and buggy, but I guess that's not really true since we got in yesterday afternoon. I hope you don't mind, but I kind of went shopping."

Alana looked at him puzzled, "Why would I mind?"

"Cause of what it was..." He took her hand and led her down the hall to what used to be his guest room. When he opened the door, the light pink walls hit Alana first. Then her eyes fell to the crib with a small canopy over it. There were stuffed animals and baby dolls everywhere.

Alana's jaw dropped, "You did this all in one afternoon?"

Chris tugged at his ear, "I've been planning it for a while."

"I'd imagine so, probably had it all ordered online?" Alana asked with a raised eyebrow.

"Okay maybe. You're not upset over it, are you?"

Alana reached up and patted his cheek, "Not at all. It's beautiful. She needs her own space."

Chris sighed relieved, "Good, I didn't want to presume anything, but I just couldn't help it."

Alana chuckled, "It's perfect."

“Then let's see what she thinks of it,” Chris said taking Melody from Alana's arms and putting her in the crib.

“How do you expect to judge her appreciation of it?”

“Well... she's not crying is she?” Chris laughed.

“I guess then you've got yourself a winner,” Alana laughed.

“I'd have to say that,” Chris said putting his hands on Alana's shoulders and gently turning her towards him. “I've missed you guys.”

“I've missed you too,” Alana said slipping her arms around his waist.

“I've got dinner going in the kitchen, I should go check on it,” He said softly.

“Don't let us keep you,” Alana whispered.

“I don't want to leave you.”

Alana rolled her eyes giving him a little shove, “I don't want eat a burned dinner, I do that enough on my own.”

Chris leaned over and gave her a small kiss, “Okay, I'll go check on it. I cleared out a couple drawers in my room if you want to settle in.”

Alana smiled, “I'll look into it.” Alana watched Chris leave the room and then she turned back to Melody who had fallen asleep in the crib. She went out to the rental car and grabbed the bags she'd packed and brought them into Chris's room. She couldn't help but notice that there appeared to be even more candles in there, a little more color had been added to the browns of the room, adding to the welcoming feeling of the room. Alana sat on the bed, it was hard to believe that things had moved to this. Since her conversation with Gloria, she hadn't really thought about what the future would hold, but here she was forced to.

Chris's life was here in Nashville when it wasn't on the road. When he was off, Alana knew that he was always running between meetings with his management, his label, or other writers. Expecting him to spend any amount of time in California was impractical, but what would her life be like if she were to move here, she wondered.

Alana surveyed the room again. It was comfortable, but it was Chris's and she couldn't imagine how it would feel when he wasn't just in the other room. Yet she couldn't imagine changing anything. She loved her visits to Nashville, but they always included seeing Chris. The images of her house in California crept in. It was a house not a home. It was a house built for her to share with Steven, not with Chris. The images of Chris's girlfriends over the years flashed through. She couldn't help but wonder how many of them had been there, left their marks on the house that she didn't know.

Alana forced her self up off the bed, and opened up her suitcase. She walked over to the dresser and opened them up finding the top drawer open, Alana made quick work of emptying her suitcase. She pulled open the second drawer and found a present in there. She pulled it out and sat down with it, her name was scrawled on the tag. She fingered the silk ribbon gently tugging on it. The ribbon fell away from the package and the paper opened a book was revealed. The cover was black with gold edgings, there was nothing printed on the cover. She opened up the cover, and there on the page was a picture of Chris and her from back in Texas. She recognized the Coca-Cola sign from the Ft. Worth bar. The next page had more pictures and one line of text, she continued flipping through the book each page with just one line of text. She turned back to

the beginning and just read, she could almost hear the music behind the emotional words written on the page. By the time she closed the book, she had tears running down her face. She jumped seeing Chris standing in front of her. He knelt down in front of her, “I love you.”

Alana smiled at him, “Me too,” She choked out.

Their lips met. Hungry to be reunited. Chris leaned her back on the bed. She pulled him to her. The murmurs of their conversation was inaudible, their lips and tongues doing all the talking that was needed. Finally their lips parted and Chris pulled her up to her feet, “I hope you're hungry.”

Alana blushed, “Not really for food, but I'll give it a shot.”

Chris chuckled, “That comes later.” He tweaked her nose gently before standing up. Alana let him pull her up off the bed. Together they walked out to the dining room.

The dinning room was set with the food on the table, candles lit all around. Music playing softly in the background. “You're nothing but a romantic,” Alana teased.

“Guilty as charged,” Chris whispered in her ear, helping her with her chair.

“Everything smells so good,” Alana said surveying the food.

“Thank you.”

The tension between them was as thick as the aroma of the food. They both ate dodging each other's gaze. The territory was new, and no one wanted to make a wrong step. For the first time in years, they didn't know what to say with each other.

Alana cleared her throat, “So what do you have to do this week?”

Chris smiled, “We've got rehearsal tomorrow. The show on Wednesday, and then we're taping the CMT Most Wanted Live on Thursday, and then its vacation time.”

“You're actually taking a vacation?” Alana asked skeptically.

“Well... sort of... I have to get stuff together for the next album, but there's plenty of time for that. I wanted to come out with you to California, if that's okay?”

Alana smiled nervously, “Of course that's okay.”

“I can stay here if you'd prefer that,” Chris said tugging at his ear once more.

Alana reached over the table, taking a deep breath, “No, it's fine. I want you to come home with us. We kind of need the time together. I just... I'm just nervous about it.”

Chris rubbed the back of her hand with his thumb, “So am I.”

Alana laughed nervously, “Who'd have ever thought we'd be nervous around each other.”

“It's taken us so long to get here, I don't want to screw it up. If there was ever a real chance of having a relationship work, it would be this one.”

Alana lowered her eyes, “I know. Have you thought about how we're going to work this out?”

Chris exhaled, his own concerns about the logistics of this relationship floating through his mind. “We'll figure it out as we go. The important thing, I think, is that we don't make any hasty moves. After twelve years of making it this far, what's another twelve?” Chris chuckled nervously.

“I'd hope that we'd go a little faster than that.”

Chris gave Alana's hand a squeeze, “Me too. We'll figure it out though. We might have to rack up some frequent flyer miles, but we'll figure it out.”

Alana got up from the table and started clearing the table. Chris pulled the plates from her hand, “I'll get those.”

“No, you cooked, I'll clean,” Alana said taking them back.

Chris laughed, “How about we do it together.”

Alana smiled, “I like the sounds of that.”

Chapter 49

Chris waited in the wings of the stage at the Wild Horse Saloon in Nashville. The host, Joe Miller, was on stage making the introduction. The crowd was screaming their enthusiasm. Chris felt the blood beginning to pump through his veins. Chris walked out on the stage, waving to the crowd. He quickly found Alana and Melody sitting with some of his other fans that had flown in for the show right in front. He winked at them as he took a seat on the stool in center stage.

“What a year you've had, Chris!”

Chris tugged at his ear, “It's been one for the books, that's for sure.”

“Yeah, it has, CMA Entertainer of the Year, you seventh number one album, three number one singles, one of the top grossing tours despite several canceled shows.”

“Wow, hearing it all laid out like that makes it even more unbelievable,” Chris chuckled.

Joe laughed with him, “You probably haven't had a chance to sit back and take inventory of it.”

“No, we haven't. We've been out there just charging straight ahead, putting out fires and starting other ones. It's been an amazing ride. Now I think we're all looking forward to taking a few months off to regroup.”

“You're doing that right after this show, aren't you?”

Chris smiled, “That we are.”

“Then let's get this done, so you can enjoy your time off. You know how this works. The last few weeks we've been gathering questions and requests from your fans.”

Chris smiled, “Hit me with your best shot.”

Joe shuffled through the prompt cards he held in his hand, “There's a pretty solid theme through most of these questions. A lot of them dealing with the canceled shows and your personal life. As you probably know there's been a lot of rumors surrounding what's been going with you. The latest being that you recently found out you have a child... is that true or just rumor?”

Chris smiled down at his boots, giving a little nod of his head, “This year has been filled with a lot of unexpected pleasures, one of them being finding someone I think I might actually have a strong future with and finally realizing the dream I've had for a very long time being a father. My time off will definitely be focused on making the most of those two ladies.”

“Are you going about this any differently from past relationships?”

Chris looked out from under the rim of his cowboy hat, his grin as wide as the brim, “This one is different. We've known each other for a lot of years. She's been behind me one thousand percent through everything that has happened. In the past, there's always been something missing.” Chris sighed. “It's going to be different..”

“Do you think there'll be a time when your career isn't the number one priority?”

Chris rubbed his face, “No one should be counting the days until I announce my retirement or anything, but the priorities have already shifted. I think that's only natural when you have a child I think that what's going to actually happen is that my shows and my albums are just going to be better because my life is more balanced. I know it's a hard adjustment for fans when you suddenly go off the market, and there's a natural resentment to the person responsible but I hope that my fans will give this a shot and see what happens before they pass judgment.”

“I've known you a while, and I have to say, that I don't think I've ever seen you look so content. I wish you the best of luck with this relationship,” Joe responded.

“Thank you, I appreciate it.”

Joe stood up, “Let me run out to the audience and see what questions the fans here have for you.” Joe walked into the crowd and stopped next to a young blonde.

“First off, I just love you, Chris,” The blond gushed.

Chris smiled, “I love you too, darlin'.”

The girl's smile grew. “I've been following your career for years now, and a member of your fan club almost as long. Will we be seeing this new woman in meet and greets and on the side of the stage like we have with previous girlfriends.”

“Absolutely. I'm not going to block off any part of my life from her. I want her to be my partner and that means in my career as well as the time away from the spotlight. Yet, I can promise that you won't notice her. She's already been to a lot of the shows, a lot of the meet and greets

and there's yet to be a problem with her being there. There's no reason for that to change now."

Joe pulled the microphone to him, "So does that mean people already know who she is?"

Chris glanced over towards Alana briefly, "We're trying to keep this as private as we can right now."

Another woman next to Joe, grabbed the microphone and asked, "How do you know this child is really yours?"

"Not that it really matters, because after watching this little girl be born, she was my daughter. Still we did do a paternity tests and there can be no doubt that she is mine."

"If she's all that then why are you keeping her a secret?"

"It's my decision to be in the spotlight not hers"

Joe took control of the microphone again, "We need to go to commercial right now." The cameras turned off and Chris got up and walked back to the band.

Alana smiled nervously at the women surrounding her. They were staring at her and Melody. One of them leaned over, "Are you who Chris is talking about?" Alana couldn't say anything, she just hugged Melody closer to her. "Oh my god it is you... how could you not tell us?"

"Shhh everyone around here will hear you," Alana hissed. "Who cares, you should have told us a long time ago. This has been going on a long time and you didn't even hint to it!" The old woman said a little hurt.

“I know, but honestly there wasn't anything to talk about except for the last few weeks maybe. With Steven's death and everything, there was nothing going on.”

“Nothing going on! You just created a child with him!”

“Keep your voice down please,” Alana pleaded looking around, but it was already too late. The tables around them were glued to what was happening. As soon as Alana stood up, the ladies at the table behind were also standing. Alana turned back to her friends, she'd never felt so betrayed before. They were all still sitting looking at her with a mixture of hurt and disbelief. Alana was tapped on the shoulder. She turned back to see who it was, the glares she got from the women there, frightened her. Alana backed up against the stage. The music started. Alana turned to look back at the stage. Chris's attention was the other way. She looked back at the women. They were crowding past Alana's friends towards her. Alana was forced to try and scooting between people to get to the side of the stage. Her heart was pounding. She only focused on getting out of the crowd, towards security. She felt like as she moved the women were all staring at her. Alana stopped and took a couple deep breaths. And turned back around. No one was looking at Alana. They're eyes were glued to Chris. Alana sighed. She calmed herself down, and continued towards the side of the stage. Catching James's eye, he came over to her and let her backstage.

“Will you tell Chris, I'll be in the bus.”

“Sure, are you okay?” James asked.

Alana nodded, “Yeah, I'm just a little tired.”

“I can get you a chair, you can watch from right here if you want?”

Alana shuffled Melody to her other hip. “Yeah, that'd be great,” she said with a sigh.

James quickly found her a chair. He stood by her side as they watched the rest of the show. Alana couldn't concentrate on Chris's performance, the visions of the audience haunting her. Chris came off the stage and grabbed Melody from Alana, “You okay, darlin?” He put his arm around Alana pulling her close to him.

“Yeah... I was just... there's going to be a lot of changes I guess.”

Chris gave her a funny look, “What happened out there?”

“The girls were a little hurt. They put it together that you were talking about me... and then I flipped out. I thought they were all out for me then,” Alana said quietly.

“I'm sorry, I said too much, didn't I?”

“No, it's okay, they're going to find out sooner or later...”

Chris took a deep breath, “Come on, let's get out of here and then we have got to make some decisions.” Chris lead her out to the bus.

They didn't have time to talk that night. The band and crew came to Chris's house to celebrate the end of the tour.

Chapter 50

The next day, Chris, Melody, and Alana boarded a private plane back to California. Alana leaned up against Chris and played with his hand. “Alana?” Chris asked his voice trembling.

“Yeah?”

“Do you really want to give this a try? It's only a matter of time, before everyone finds out about you. Some already have, and that's going to mean more things will be said about you.”

Alana sat up and faced him, “They'll talk about me no matter if we continue to have a relationship, or just be friends... I have your daughter.”

Chris twirled some of Alana's hair around his finger, “I know. I just don't want this to end up hurting you.”

Alana curled up her legs under her, “Chris... I love you. I want to see where this goes, but I don't want things to change either. I know it's too much to hope for.”

“I'm sorry, baby.”

Alana took a deep breath, “I like being able to watch you from the front of the stage, in the meet and greets being that bridge from the fans to you. I like being able to escape into that craziness.”

Chris tilted his head, “Escape?”

Alana nodded, “Hopefully that'll change.”

“What were you escaping from?”

“From Steven from the lies I was living,” Alana shifted nervously, “I let Steven decide a lot of things for me. I don't want to do that again. I don't want the studio. I never wanted to live in California.”

“You don't have to do anything you don't want to do. I hope that you'll tell me if you ever feel like I'm pressuring you into something.”

“I can't promise you that. I have a very bad habit of just meshing in, I mean it's never been a problem with you. He spent years beating me telling me how worthless I was. My father, well stepfather, raped me when I was sixteen because he thought that Steven and I had had sex.” Alana's voice shook as she spoke, “I've always felt like I was on the verge of everyone finding out how unworthy I am, so I do what I can to keep that from happening and that was by being who ever they wanted me to be.” Chris gritted his teeth as he rubbed Alana's cheek. “Even Steven... he never really laid a hand on me, but he knew what to say to change my mind.”

“And I've been different?”

Alana nodded, “You were safe. I could say what I thought, because I knew you'd ride off into the sunrise and I wouldn't have to face you until I was ready.”

“And now? Are you saying you want to leave California because you know that I need to be in Nashville?”

Alana shook her head, “No, I don't think so. I'm scared about being in Nashville without you there, I don't know what it'll be like. I had never intended for California to be my home. My family still lives there, I still see them around town. I see all the people that have influenced my life, and that also scares me. Even Gloria and Harold, they love me and

accept me on some level, but I fear them hating me. I know, I've messed up and you're probably wishing you could get the hell away from me," Alana said wiping the tears away.

Chris pulled Alana's head to his lips kissing her forehead and then pressing his forehead against hers. He stared into her eyes as he spoke, "No . I don't want away from you. We all have skeleton's in our closet. You know what my childhood was like, it was far from a picture book. I just don't want to influence your decisions here."

Alana tried to smile, "I need that right now. I so don't know which way to go."

"I can't tell you that. The only thing I can do, is give you the freedom to be able to make those decisions. You want out of California, we can pack up your stuff and leave there. I know all of this seems rushed. I know that we've got a lot of stuff to work out, but I know we can work it out and make this work. You know me better than almost anyone, you know what my life is like and you've always been so accepting of it. It's nice going into a relationship without worrying how you're going to handle the schedule, how the guys are going to handle you being around."

"Don't say that, you don't know that. I don't know that. I've had my fits of jealousy over you."

"You have?"

Alana nodded, "Granted most of the time it was with the women you were dating, but I also have a short temper with fans who treat you like a piece of meat. I don't know how I'm going to handle that now, but then I also don't think I'll really be spending that much time in lines

surrounded by that. And I know I'm not going to like the time you're gone, but I'll do my best to deal with it."

"Alana, you have an open invitation to be on the road with me, when I'm out there. I'm not going to like that time either, and I promise you, I will have more breaks in my schedule from now on. You and Melody are the most important things to me now. I've needed this for a long time. I needed something to pull me away from this insanity and give me balance."

Alana leaned over and kissed him, "I love you."

"I love you. We've spent so much time discussing my dreams, my career... I have everything I could want... now it's time we figure out what your dreams are and give you those. We can have it all."

Alana smiled softly at him, "I know, and I want that."

"Before Steven, what did you want to do with your life?"

Alana took a deep breath closing her eyes, "I dreamed of traveling the country, traveling the world with my camera. Documenting my travels on film, maybe selling some of those pictures, maybe working odd jobs to pay for the travels, I don't really know. When I was talking to Cheyenne about this, I told her I might want to try and publish some photo books of the concerts I've been too. Those shots have always been my favorite ones."

"What's stopping you?"

"I don't know how to go about doing it. I know I have to get permission from those pictures I have... fear. That and I'm not even sure if that's what I really want to do."

“What's made you the happiest, Alana?” Chris asked searching her face.

“What do you mean?”

“I mean, when are you at your most content. What are you doing when you think you could do this for the rest of your life.”

“Honestly?” Alana asked biting her lip.

“Yes, honestly.”

“When I was doing your website and fan club. I was able to obsess on perfecting the site, share my pictures, and I felt like I was actually doing something to help you and it passed the time between concert trips.”

Chris studied her, “Are you serious?”

Alana nodded, “When you took the fan club away, it really hurt. I felt like I'd done something to piss you off.”

“I'm sorry... I didn't know. I thought you were tired of it and it was asking too much of you to do all that,” Chris said quietly.

“No, the only reason I was getting frustrated was because of Steven. He was annoyed I wasn't getting anything for it.”

“Did I come between you guys a lot?”

Alana shook her head, “No, he was really pretty good about it. It was more that it wasn't what he'd imagined his life being like. I was happy tending bar, working in the one hour processing lab and doing the fan club. He thought it was just an excuse not to be a real photographer.”

Chris nodded letting everything settle in, “The fan club is huge now.”

Alana shook her head, "Its all settled in with them. I'm not even sure I'd want to do that anymore. Things have changed now. That was just when I was happiest."

"I liked it when you had the fan club. I never worried about it. I just want you to be happy. You have all the choices in the world available to you. You don't have to work if you don't want to. You can travel with us. You want to do the fan club, then we can make that happen. You want to do those books, I'll help you get the permissions you need. I owe you a lot and I plan on spending the rest of my life making good on those debts."

Alana shook her head, "You don't owe me anything."

Chris pulled Alana to him and kissed her.

Chapter 51

Chris was in the grocery store in California. The decision had been made finally, Alana was going to move to Nashville. Chris was in picking up supplies for the dinner they'd invited Gloria and Harold too. Chris was busy picking out lemons when he heard a familiar voices ahead. He looked up and there was Harold and Gloria. Chris finished picking out the lemons and limes keeping one eye on where they were. A million different ways to start the conversation popped through his head which he quickly dismissed as sounding to rehearsed. They turned the corner into the meat department. Chris followed them. He stopped in front of the seafood. As he picked out some salmon fillets for dinner, he couldn't help but notice Harold and Gloria piling their cart full of hamburger and sausage. He came up behind them.

"We're going to need another cart," Gloria said.

Harold nodded and turned to see Chris, "Hello, Chris."

Chris tugged at his ear, "Hello."

Harold passed by leaving Chris with Gloria. They stared at each other. Finally Chris said, "That's a lot of hamburger you got there." As soon as he said it, Chris wished he hadn't.

Gloria nodded, "We're buying stuff for a spaghetti feed."

"Oh... that'd make sense."

Gloria eyes filled with tears. Chris put his hand gently on her arm, "Is everything okay?"

Gloria quickly reigned in her emotions, "Of course it is. We're just trying to help a family."

Chris smiled, "What happened?"

"What do you care?" Gloria demanded.

Chris tugged at his ear, "Maybe there's something I can do to help."

"There's nothing you can do. They've lost everything. Their eight year old died from leukemia. They've lost their jobs and are about to lose their house. They have no money to pay his hospital bills."

Chris got all choked up listening to it, "How are you paying for all of this?"

"With donations from our church."

Chris squeezed Gloria's hand, his eyes red from fighting the tears back, "Let me buy it, let me help you prepare it. I don't know these people, but I'm sure they'd appreciate you being there for them not stuck in the kitchen. Do they have other children?"

"They have a six month old little girl. I'm sure you have other things to do than cooking spaghetti."

"Sure, I do, but nothing more important. When is this?"

"Tomorrow night."

"Let me do it, how much do they need to save their house?"

"We've got several events planned to help them. It's nothing for you to worry about."

"Gloria, I know you have your issues with me on a personal level, but don't let that come in the way of helping this family." Chris said gritting his teeth.

Harold came up and put his hand on Gloria's. Turning to Chris, "What did you have in mind son?"

Chris looked at Harold, he didn't really have a plan. He said the first thing that came to his mind, "I'd like to help with the spaghetti feed, but give me two weeks, I can bring out my stage and band, we can do a concert for them, possibly even get a few of my friends to put together an auction or something."

Harold smiled, "That would be very generous of you. I'm sure they'd really appreciate it. And all the help we can get with the spaghetti feed would be greatly appreciated. Alana knows where the Elks lodge is. We're meeting there at noon to start cooking."

Chris smiled, "We'll be there."

Harold patted Gloria's hand giving her an encouraging look. Gloria reluctantly said, "Thank you."

Chris tugged at his ear, "I'm glad I ran into you both. Alana invited you over to tell you something, and I should let her tell you. I just wanted to assure you that I only want the best for her."

Gloria raised an eyebrow, "Then why don't you--"

Harold assured, "We know you do, son."

Chris looked down at his boots, "I'm glad you know that. I just really hope that what she tells you tonight, doesn't come between you guys. I appreciate how important family is and I know she looks at you two as family."

Harold gave Gloria a silencing look before turning to Chris, "There's nothing she can say that will do that. She's one of our own."

Chris sighed, "Good. I know she's really worried about how it'll go tonight."

"Then there's nothing to worry about."

“Come on Harold, we've got a lot more shopping to do,” Gloria said shoving the filled cart ahead. Chris let them go keeping them with in his sight as he gathered the rest of his supplies. When they got to the front there was only one line open. Chris rushed a head of them. After the clerk was done ringing up his stuff, “Add their stuff to my bill please.”

Gloria started to say something but Harold stopped her. The clerk looked between them but did as he was asked to do. When he was done Chris handed him his credit card and paid for it. Chris nodded to Harold and Gloria and then took his bags to Alana's car.

Chris had just finished putting the rest of the dinner on the table, when the doorbell rang. He went to get it, but Alana was already letting Harold and Gloria in. Gloria headed straight for Melody. Chris just stood back watching Alana caught his eye and he nodded back towards the dining room. Alana eased Melody out of Gloria's hand, “Dinners ready. We should eat before it gets cold.”

Gloria let Melody go and tucked her arm in Harold's. The two old people went into the dinning room. Chris walked over to Alana, “I'll put her down and meet you in there.”

Alana smiled at him, “You look like you're going to the firing squad.”

Chris chuckled nervously, “I kind of feel like that.”

Alana gave him a quick kiss, “It's going to be fine.”

Chris smiled and took his time putting Melody down. When he came into the dining room the three were discussing the family. Harold

filling Alana in on what Chris had mentioned in the store. Alana looked up at him and smiled.

As soon as Chris sat down, Gloria glared at him, “So what's this news you want to tell us?”

Alana sat up straighter and looked Gloria square in the eye. “After a lot of thought, I've decided to sell the house and move to Nashville.”

The table was silent. Chris looked at Gloria and Alana staring at each other. He wasn't sure if it was a stand off or a silent goodbye. He reached for his glass of wine and took a sip. Listening to the tic of the clock, waiting for someone to say something. No one did. Chris cleared his voice, “Anytime you want to come and visit you can.”

Gloria broke the stare. Her eyes narrowed on Chris, “That's mighty generous of you.”

“I didn't mean it like that.”

“Then you should be more selective of what you say. Do you realize what you are doing? You're taking her clear across country where she knows very few people and dumping her there while you're gallivanting around the country.”

“Ma'am, I know my past schedules have not been one that was very supportive of personal relationships, but that's going to change. This was a joint decision. I was just trying to make sure you realized that we both want you to continue to be a part of Melody's life.”

“That's very nice of you, but we're not as young as we used to be and traveling that far is not going to happen very often.”

“If it's because of money, I'll help. If it's just the traveling itself, then we can always come out here to visit.”

“You think money can buy everything, don't you?”

“No ma'am, I'm very much aware of the fact that money can do very little for you.”

Alana squeezed Chris's leg under the table, “Gloria, we don't need to discuss this anymore. I wanted to tell you about the plan before we put the house for sale. Chris has issued the invitation to come and visit. There's nothing more that we can do to make this any better. I have to move on with my life, and that's not going to happen here. So you can accept it or be against it. It doesn't matter and it won't change anything. If you'll excuse me, I'm not really hungry anymore.” Alana stood up and walked out of the dinning room.

Harold looked over at Chris, “I'm sure we'll be taking you up on that offer to come visit from time to time.”

Chris smiled, “We'd like that.”

“Don't hurt her,” Harold warned. He stood up and helped Gloria up. “I think it's probably best we just call it a night.”

Chris nodded. He let them show themselves out before he began to clear off the table.

Chapter 52

Between the buses and the semis Alana and Chris got everything Alana wanted in Nashville packed. After the show they'd be flying home with the band and crew and waiting for the stuff to get there.

In three weeks, Chris had managed to get almost a hundred items autographed and up for auction. The tickets for the Senate theater sold out for the nights show. Alana watched as the guys did their final sound check before the doors would open.

Alana went backstage. She'd agreed to mc the night's events starting with a photo tribute to the family but especially Bobby. Chris came up behind her and put his arms around her waist, meeting her gaze in the mirror. "You look beautiful," he whispered.

Alana smiled in return, "Thank you."

"The guy from the paper is here."

Alana nodded, "What are you waiting for?"

"For you. You worked just as hard as I did on this."

Alana turned to face him, "No, you did this."

"We did this. It's time you get some recognition. I'm not taking no for an answer."

Alana sighed, "Then let's get this done."

They walked through the crowds back stage to the dressing room. Sitting in there was Neil Helpburn, who Alana recognized from the local paper. Next to him was another woman she didn't recognize. They both stood up. The woman offered her hand, "Hello, I'm Christine Meyers from Country Weekly." Alana took her hand and shook it, glancing at

Chris. Chris winked at her. And then shook both the woman's and the man's hand.

Chris helped Alana sit down opposite of them, "We don't have a lot of time so let's just get this going."

Neil smiled, "Of course. Let's start with the easy questions first, is there any preliminary totals in so far for the money you've raised?"

Chris played with Alana's hair as he spoke, "We sold almost 1000 tickets at ten bucks apiece. We raffled off one pair of tickets to my fan club that brought in almost twelve thousand dollars."

"What did they get besides two ten dollar tickets?"

"We flew them in, paid for their hotel, we had lunch with them today and they'll get to come to the party when this is done tonight."

Alana smiled up at Chris, "And the fans also just donated money on top of that. They're a very generous bunch of people. When I talked to Sharon at the fan club this morning the total she's received so far was close to another ten thousand, with more promised. And the auctions do not close until seven tonight when the show starts. We should have an ending total by the end of the night."

Christine spoke up, "Why are you doing all of this?"

Chris tugged at his ear, "I heard about the family at the grocery store here in town. We're very fortunate to have a healthy daughter. And hearing about Bobby..." Chris trailed off getting a little choked up.

Alana squeezed Chris's leg and continued, "No one wants to imagine losing a child especially one so young. It's devastating. This family was on the verge of losing everything. They have another child

who deserves to have hope for her future. The only way to do that is to give some to the parents. We can't give them their child back

They've suffered enough, they've lost their jobs have a stack of bills that they can never pay off without a lot of help. It's a very small thing to do to give a few weeks of our time, to help raise money for them to secure the home they've built for their family, make a dent in those bills, and help them put their lives back together so that they can be there for their daughter.”

Everyone in the room had tears in their eyes as Alana stopped talking. Chris leaned over and kissed her temple. Alana watched Christine scribble something in her notepad. She glanced up at Chris who was smiling down at him. She knew that there was no turning back now. Soon their relationship would be well known. Surprisingly she wasn't scared by the idea. She brought Chris's hand to her mouth and kissed it. Chris squeezed her hand.

Alana turned back to the reporters, “If you'll excuse us, we really need to finish getting things set up for the show.” Neil and Christine stood up as Chris and Alana walked out of the room.

Chris stopped Alana at the side of the stage, “I love you. Thank you for helping me do this.”

Alana smiled at him, “It was my pleasure. Go get the guys ready. I'll see you after the show.” Chris leaned in and gave her a quick kiss. Alana went on stage. The lights went down and the stage lights came up. Alana grabbed the microphone off the mic stand. She gave a nod to the back, and the projector came on. Alana's voice shook as she began to speak, “Welcome everyone, and thank you for being here. Tonight as you

all know is for the memory of one courageous little boy, Tommy Cosper. He was taken from his family because a marrow donor couldn't be found in time. Those of you who took the time to be tested on your way in thank you. The people from Blood Source will remain out in the lobby tonight until no one that wants to be tested is left.

“Since Tommy's passing this community has come together during pancake breakfasts, spaghetti feeds, rummage sales, and donations to raise almost 25,000 dollars. Tonight, we already know that we've doubled that amount from your ticket sales and also from the generosity of people around the country. All the profits from the merchandise table and from the concessions stands tonight will also be going to the family. By the end of the show tonight, we should have a good idea how much we've made tonight. But first, let's hear from Tommy, his family, and friends about the very short life he lived.”

Alana stepped aside and watched the images of Tommy that she'd put together from the family's pictures and videos. When it was done, she wiped the tears away, “Let's get the show on the road. Let's give a warm north state welcome to Capitol recording artist, Chris Reed.” Chris's band took the stage and began playing. Chris came out with his cowboy hat down low. Alana started heading towards him. Using his index finger, he pushed his hat back and then reached out and stopped her. He gave her a tight hug and kissed her ear. Alana smiled up at him and mouthed love you before going to the side of the stage and watching the show with Gloria, Harold, and Melody.

Alana watched Chris moving on stage. She'd seen it a hundred times. Perhaps it was the emotion behind why he was there, or what

they'd been through over the last year, but tonight, the image was clear. This was a job, just a job that had a beginning and an end. It wasn't a nine to five kind of job, but still it was just a job. For years she'd shouted to the world that he was more than the performer on stage, for years she thought she'd known both the performer and the man, but that wasn't the case. She'd pictured him a performer and that was it. She was just a fan not a person. Alana went for her camera but stopped. She took Melody from Gloria's arms. The precious child that captured who they were. The precious child that broke through the images they'd had for years, that had developed a new image for the future. Alana kissed Melody. Chris looked over at them and smiled as he waved. Alana waved Melody's arm back at him. It was time to leave the camera behind and let go of the camera tricks that had been her saving grace. Life passed her by through the viewfinder. Now was the time to be a part of the picture and not in the manipulation of those pictures. Alana sighed.

Gloria nudged Alana towards the stage. Alana looked at her and Gloria nodded to the stage. Alana turned towards the stage. Chris had his arm out to her. The music had stopped. Tommy's family was out there. Chris motioned for her to come to him. Alana handed Melody back to Gloria and inched forward. Chris's dimples came out as he shook his head and walked towards her. Their eyes met just before their hands did. Chris took her back out to the center of the stage. Alana waved to the crowd. What Chris was saying was mumbled behind the crowd. Alana looked back at Chris. His eyes peering into hers, coming closer. Their lips met. Alana collapsed into his arms. His arms wrapping around her his hands moving over her back. The thud of the microphone hitting the ground

broke the kiss. The stage lights went down. Chris kept his arm around her as they walked off to the side of the stage. Gloria handed Melody to Chris. A soft smile on her face, Gloria gave Chris a hug. Chris returned the hug. Alana watched with tears in her eyes. Harold was beside her. “We’ve got a party to get to,” Harold said.

Alana smiled at him, “That we do. We have a lot to celebrate tonight.”

The five of them walked out the back of the theater into the waiting limo. Just before they got to the Elk’s lodge where the party was, Gloria took Alana’s hand. Alana smiled at her. Gloria looked across Alana at Chris, “I hope you meant it when you said I could visit.”

Chris smiled, “Absolutely.”

“Good, I don’t want to miss out on anything,” Gloria said as the limo stopped. They walked inside. On Chris’s arm Alana mingled with everyone there, finally relaxed and freed from her camera.