



Heat waves drifted across the concrete as the '63 Thunderbird slid from the shadow of the garage. Her big V8 and Holley two-barrels purred like a satisfied woman, all warm and sexy and throaty. The hot Texas sun made a hundred little bursts of light within her wire wheels, slid along the chrome fins, and poured over the glistening black paint. The owner watched as she rolled toward him, and he smiled in appreciation. Several months ago, the Sports Roadster had been little more than a home for mice. Now fully restored to her former glory, she was dazzling – a reminder of a time when Detroit had been more interested in cracking sixty in eight seconds than miles per gallon, safety features, or where to put the cup holder.

Jackson Lamott Parrish sat within the red leather interior of the big T-Bird, one wrist hanging over the red steering wheel. The light caught in his thick brown hair, and fine lines creased the corners of his green eyes as he

lowered his lids against the blinding sun. He revved the big engine one last time, took his hand from the steering wheel, and shoved her into park. He swung the door open, and the sole of his cowboy boot hit the pavement. In one smooth motion, he stood and the owner of the restored Roadster stepped forward and handed him a check. Jack glanced at it, noted that all the zeros were in the right places, then folded it in half. He slipped it into the breast pocket of his white dress shirt.

‘Enjoy,’ he said, then turned and walked into the shop. He moved past a nineteen-seventy ’Cuda 440-6, its huge Hemi engine suspended from a cherry picker. Over the sounds of air compressors and power tools, Jack’s younger brother, Billy, called out to a mechanic beneath a ’59 Dodge Custom Royal Lancer.

The space just vacated by the T-Bird would be filled the next day with a nineteen-fifty-four Corvette. The sports classic had been found in a dilapidated garage in Southern California, and Jack had flown out three days ago to take a look at it. When he discovered it had only forty thousand original miles and all the numbers matched, he bought it for eight grand on the spot. Once fully restored, the ’Vette would bring ten times that. When it came to restoring vintage cars, Parrish American Classics was the best. Everyone knew it.

Ground-pounding, ear-assaulting muscle cars were in the Parrish boys’ blood. Since they’d taken their first steps, Jack and Billy had worked in their daddy’s garage. They’d yanked their first engine before either of them had grown their short-and-curlies. They could tell a 260 V8 from a 289 with their eyes closed and could rebuild fuel injectors in their sleep. Proud native sons of Lovett,

Texas, population nineteen thousand three, the Parrish boys had grown up loving football, cold beer, and tearing up asphalt on the flat open roads – usually while some big-haired, loose-moraled female repaired her lipstick in the rearview mirror.

The boys had been raised in a small three-bedroom house behind the garage. The original shop was gone now. Torn down and replaced by a bigger, more modern space with eight bays. The yard behind the garage had been cleaned up. The old cars and junked parts had been towed away long ago.

The house was the same, though. Same roses their mama had planted, same patches of dirt and grass beneath the towering elm. Same concrete porch and the same screen door that needed a good dose of WD40. The house had just been given a fresh coat of paint, inside and out. The same white color as before. The only real difference was that Jack now lived there alone.

Seven years ago, Billy had married Rhonda Valencia and had happily given up his wild ways for domestic bliss. As far as anyone in town could recall, Jack had never been tempted to give up his wild ways. As far as they knew, he'd never met a woman who'd made him want a one-on-one. A forever.

But they didn't know everything.

Jack made his way to his office at the rear of the garage and closed the door. He stuck the check in a desk drawer and pulled out his chair. Before he'd purchased the '54 Corvette, he'd searched out her history then flown to California to inspect her to make sure there wasn't any serious damage to the structural integrity of the car. Searching the history of a vehicle, finding replacement

parts, and restoring it, compelled him and kept at him until the vehicle was once again perfect. Fixed. Better. Whole.

Penny Kribs, Jack's secretary, walked into his office and handed him the day's mail. 'I'm leaving to get my hair done,' she reminded him.

Jack looked up at the wispy black pile on top of Penny's head. He'd gone through all twelve years of school with Penny, and he'd played on the football team with her husband, Leon.

He rose and set the mail on his desk. 'You goin' to get yourself beautiful for me?'

She had rings on just about every finger and long pink nails that curled like claws. He'd often wondered how she typed without hitting extra keys or managed to put on all that mascara without poking out an eye. He didn't even want to think about her wrapping her hand around Leon's johnson. The thought sent a shiver down his backside.

'Of course,' she said through a smile. 'You know you've always been my first love.'

Yeah, he knew. In the third grade, Penny'd told him she loved him then she'd kicked him in the shin with her black patent leather shoes. He'd always figured he didn't need that kind of loving. 'Don't tell Leon.'

'Oh, he knows.' She waved a hand and moved to the door, leaving a trail of perfume in her wake. 'He also knows that I would never get involved with you.'

Jack folded his arms across his chest and leaned his butt against the edge of his desk. 'Why's that?'

'Because you treat women like an anorexic treats a Whitman Sampler. You nibble here and nibble there. Maybe you take a few bites, but you never eat one whole.'

Jack laughed. 'I think there are a few women who could set you straight on that.'

Penny wasn't amused. 'You know what I mean,' she said over her shoulder as she walked out the door.

Yeah, he knew what she meant. Like most women, Penny thought he should be married, raising children, and driving an SUV. But as far as Jack was concerned, he figured his younger brother had taken care of that task for both of them. Billy had three daughters ranging in age from six months to five years. They lived on a quiet cul-de-sac with a swing set in the backyard, and Rhonda drove a Tahoe, the alternative choice of soccer moms everywhere. With all those nieces, Jack felt no pressure to bring another Parrish into the world. He was 'Uncle Jack,' and that suited him just fine.

He returned to his chair and unbuttoned his cuffs. He rolled his sleeves up his forearms, and got back to it. It was Friday and he had a mountain of work to clear off his desk before he could start his weekend. At five, Billy opened the door to tell him he was leaving. Jack glanced at the Buick Riviera clock sitting next to his computer monitor. He'd been at it for three hours and fifteen minutes.

'I'm headed for Amy Lynn's T-ball game,' Billy said, referring to his five-year-old daughter. 'You gonna make it by the park?'

Amy Lynn was Billy's oldest and Jack tried to make it to her games when he could. 'Not tonight,' he answered and tossed his pen on the desk. 'Jimmy Calhoun's bachelor party is tonight over at The Road Kill,' he said. Until recently, Jimmy had been a real carouser. Now he was giving up his freedom for a pair of matching gold rings. 'I told him I'd stop by for a few.'

Billy smiled. 'Is there gonna be strippers?'

'I imagine.'

'Don't tell me you'd rather watch naked women than a game of T-ball?'

Jack's grin matched his brother's. 'Yeah, it was a tough choice to make. Watch women take their clothes off or five-year-olds run around bases with their helmets on backward.'

Billy laughed, in that special way he always had of tipping his head back and letting loose with a few heh-heh-hehs. It sounded so much like their father, Ray, Jack figured it had to be genetic. 'Lucky bastard,' Billy said, but without much heart. They both knew that Billy would rather watch Amy Lynn run around with her helmet on backward. 'If you need someone to drive you home from The Road Kill,' Billy added on his way to the door, 'call me.'

'Of course.' A drunk driver had taken their parents' lives when Jack had been all of eighteen. The brothers made it a point to never drive drunk.

Jack worked for another hour before he turned off his computer and headed out of the garage through the bays. Everyone else had already left for the day, and his bootheels echoed in the silence. He locked the door and set the alarm, then he jumped into his Shelby Mustang. It started to rain as he drove toward the outskirts of Lovett. A light sprinkle of drops mixed with the dust and wind, and turned the car's shiny black paint a dull gray.

The Road Kill was a lot like other bars strewn throughout the Texas panhandle. Country music poured from the juke while the patrons drained the beer spigots of Lone Star. A big red-white-and-blue DON'T MESS WITH

TEXAS sign hung on the mirror behind the bar, while old road signs, stuffed armadillos and rattlers decorated the walls. The owner of the bar was also a taxidermist, and if a patron was so inclined, or was drunk enough, he or she could purchase a rattler belt or an ultra-attractive armadillo handbag at cut-rate prices.

When Jack walked into the bar, he pushed up the brim of his Stetson and paused in the doorway long enough to allow his eyes to adjust before he made his way to the bar. He exchanged a few heys with some of the regulars. Over Clint Black on the jukebox, he could hear the sound of Jimmy's bachelor party going full tilt in the back room.

'Bottle of Lone Star,' he ordered. A bottle appeared on the bar and he handed over a five. He felt a soft hand on his arm and looked across his shoulder into the face of Gina Brown.

'Hey there, Jack.'

'Hey, Gina.' Gina was the same age as Jack and twice divorced. She was a tall, lean cowgirl who liked riding the mechanical bull at Slim Clem's over off Highway Seventy. She wore her Wranglers tight, her Justins stacked, and her hair dyed red. Jack knew she dyed her hair because she liked riding him too. But lately she'd hinted that she had him in mind for husband number three. He'd had to cool things down so she would get that idea right out of her head.

'You here for the bachelor party in the back?' She gazed up at him out of the corners of her blue eyes. He would have to be blind to miss the invitation curving her lips.

'Yep.' Jack raised the bottle to his mouth and took a long drink. He had no interest in heating things back up. He liked Gina, but he wasn't husband material. He grabbed his

change from the bar and shoved it in the front pocket of his jeans. 'See ya around,' he said and turned to walk away.

Gina's next question stopped him in his tracks. 'Have you seen Daisy Lee yet?'

Jack lowered the bottle and suddenly had trouble swallowing the beer in his mouth. He turned back to face Gina.

'I saw her this morning at the Texaco. Pumping gas into her momma's Cadillac.' Gina shook her head. 'I think it's been what, about ten or twelve years since she was last in town?'

It had been fifteen.

'I recognized her right away. Daisy Lee Brooks hasn't changed that much.'

Except that Daisy Brooks was now Daisy Monroe and had been for the past fifteen years. And that had changed everything.

Gina took a step closer and played with a button on the front of his shirt. 'I was sorry to hear about Steven. I know he was your friend.'

He and Steven Monroe had been almost inseparable since the age of five when they'd sat next to each other at the Lovett Baptist Church, belting out 'Yes, Jesus Loves Me.' But that had changed too. The last time he'd seen Steven was the night the two of them had beat each other bloody, while Daisy looked on horrified. It was the last time he'd seen Daisy too.

As if she didn't notice that Jack wasn't keeping up his end of the conversation, Gina rattled on, 'I can't imagine dying at our age. It's just horrible.'

'Excuse me, Gina,' he said and walked away. An old anger, one he'd thought he'd buried, threatened to pull him

into the past. He pushed against it, tapped it down tight, and shut it out.

Then he felt nothing at all.

With his beer in his hand, he wove his way through the rapidly filling bar and moved to the crowded room in the back. He leaned a shoulder into the doorframe and turned his full attention to Jimmy Calhoun. The man of honor sat in a chair in the middle of the room, surrounded by a dozen or so men, all watching two women dressed like rodeo queens bumping and grinding against each other while the Dixie Chicks sang about a sin wagon. Already stripped down to sparkly G-strings on the bottom, the girls popped the snaps to their silky blouses. In unison their shirts slid down their toned shoulders and perfect bodies, exposing big breasts crammed into tiny sequined bikini tops. Jack lowered his gaze from their full breasts to their G-strings tied at their hips.

Marvin Ferrell paused in the doorway beside him to watch the show. ‘Do you think those breasts are real?’ he asked.

Jack shrugged a shoulder and raised the beer to his mouth. Obviously Marvin had been married too long because he was starting to sound like a woman. ‘Who cares?’

‘True.’ Marvin laughed. ‘Did you hear Daisy Brooks is back?’

He looked down the bottle at Marvin then lowered it. ‘Yeah, I heard.’ Again he felt the old anger, and again he tapped it down until he felt nothing. He returned his attention to the strippers and watched them sandwich Jimmy between their half-naked bodies while they kissed each other above his head. The wet, open-mouthed tongue-thrusting kisses had the guys hollering for more.

Jack tipped his head to one side and smiled. This was getting good.

‘I saw Daisy at the Minute Mart,’ Marvin continued. ‘Damn, she’s still hot as she was in high school.’

Jack’s smile flat-lined as an unbidden memory of big brown eyes and soft pink lips threatened to drag him into the black hole of his past.

‘Remember what she looked like in that little cheerleader outfit of hers?’

Jack pushed away from the door and moved farther into the room, but he couldn’t escape. It seemed everyone wanted a trip down memory lane. Everyone but him.

While the strippers took off each other’s tiny bikini tops, the topic of conversation was Daisy. Between whistles and catcalls, Cal Turner, Lester Crandall and Eddy Dean Jones all asked if he’d seen her yet.

Disgusted, Jack left the room and made his way back to the bar. It was a hell of a deal when a man wasn’t allowed to enjoy two mostly naked women making out with each other six feet in front of him. He didn’t know how long Daisy would be in town, but he hoped like hell it was a short trip. Then maybe people would have something better to talk about. Mostly he hoped she had the good sense to stay the hell out of his way.

He set his bottle on the bar and made his way back out of The Road Kill, leaving behind talk and speculation of Daisy Monroe. Rain pelted the top of his hat and wet his shoulders as he made his way across the parking lot. But with each step he took, the memories followed close behind. Memories of looking into a pair of beautiful brown eyes as he kissed soft lips. His hand sliding up the back of her smooth thigh, slipping beneath her blue and gold

cheerleader skirt. Of Daisy Lee wearing a pair of red cowboy boots with white hearts on the sides, and nothing else.

‘Leaving the party so soon?’ Gina asked as she walked toward him.

He looked over at her. ‘Boring party.’

‘We could make a party of our own.’ Typical of Gina, she didn’t wait for him to make the first move. Usually that bothered him. Not tonight. She raised her mouth to his, and she tasted of warm beer and need. Jack kissed her back. With her firm breasts crushed against his chest, the first tug of desire stirred low in his gut. He pulled Gina into him and heated things up until all he felt was lust and the rain soaking his skin through his shirt. He replaced all thoughts of brown eyes and cheerleader skirts with the woman pressing herself against his button fly.

Daisy Monroe raised her hand to the screen door then lowered it again. Her heart pounded in her chest and her stomach twisted into one big knot. Rain beat against the porch all around her, and water ran from the downspout and into the flower beds. The garage behind her was lit up, illuminating every nook and cranny surrounding Parrish American Classics. But where she stood was pitch black, as if the light didn’t dare creep any farther into the yard.

The garage was new, rebuilt since she’d seen it before. The yard surrounding the garage had been cleaned up. The old cars towed away. From what she could see the house was exactly the same, though, bringing a memory of a nice summer breeze lifting her hair and carrying the scent of roses. Of the many nights she’d sat on the porch

where she now stood, wedged between Steven and Jack, laughing at their stupid jokes.

Thunder and lightning boomed and lit up the night sky, shattering the memory. An omen that she should leave and come back again some other time.

She wasn't good at confrontation. She wasn't one of those people who liked to face problems head on. She was better at it than she used to be, but . . . maybe she should have called first. It wasn't polite to just show up on someone's doorstep at ten o'clock at night, and she probably looked like a drowned cat.

Before she'd left her mother's house, she'd made sure her hair was brushed smooth and flipped under just below her shoulders. Her makeup looked perfect and her white blouse and khaki pants pressed. Now she was sure her hair had frizzed, mascara had run, and her pants were splattered with mud from the puddle she'd accidentally dashed through. She turned to go, then forced herself to turn back. Her appearance wasn't really important, and there was never going to be a good time for what she had to do. She'd been in town three days already. She had to talk to Jack. Tonight. She'd put it off long enough. She had to tell him what she'd been keeping from him for fifteen years.

She raised her hand once more and nearly jumped out of her skin when the wooden door swung open before she could knock. Through the screen and dark interior, she could make out the outline of a man. His shirt was missing, and a light from deep within the house cast a warm golden glow from behind, pouring over his arms and shoulders and halfway down his naked chest. She definitely should have called first.

‘Hello,’ she began before she could give into her trepidation. ‘I’m looking for Jackson Parrish.’

‘My-my,’ his voice drawled in the darkness, ‘if it isn’t Daisy Lee Brooks.’

It had been fifteen years and his voice had changed. It was deeper than the boy she’d known, but she would have recognized that nasty tone anywhere. No one could pack as much derision into his voice as Jack. She’d understood it once. Known what lay behind it. She didn’t kid herself that she knew him anymore.

‘Hello, Jack.’

‘What do you want, Daisy?’

She stared at him through the screen and shadows, at the outline of the man she’d once known so well. The knot in her stomach pulled tighter. ‘I wanted to . . . I need to talk to you. And I-I thought . . .’ She took a deep breath and forced herself to stop stammering. She was thirty-three. So was he. ‘I wanted to tell you that I was in town before you heard it from someone else.’

‘Too late.’ The rain pounded the rooftop and the silence stretched between them. She could feel his gaze on her. It touched her face and the front of her yellow rain slicker; and just when she thought he wasn’t going to speak again, he said, ‘If that’s what you came to tell me, you can go now.’

There was more. A lot more. She’d promised Steven that she’d give Jack a letter he’d written a few months before his death. The letter was in her coat pocket, now she had to tell Jack the truth about what had happened fifteen years ago, then hand over the letter. ‘It’s important that I talk to you. Please.’

He looked at her for several long moments, then he turned and disappeared into the depths of his house. He

didn't open the screen for her, but he hadn't slammed the wood door in her face either. He'd made it clear that he was going to be as difficult as possible. But then, when had he ever made things easy?

Just as it always had, the screen door squeaked when she opened it. She followed him through the living room toward the kitchen. His tall outline disappeared around the corner, but she knew the way.

The inside of the house smelled of new paint. She got an impression of dark furniture and a big-screen television, saw the outline of Mrs Parrish's piano pushed against one wall – and she wondered briefly how much had changed since she'd last walked through the house. The light flipped on as she moved into the kitchen, and it was like stepping into a time warp. She half expected to see Mrs Parrish standing in front by the almond-colored stove, baking bread or Daisy's favorite snicker-doodle cookies. The green linoleum had the same worn patch in front of the sink and the counter tops were the same speckled blue and turquoise.

Jack was in front of the refrigerator, the top half of him hidden behind the open door. His tan fingers were curled around the chrome handle, and all she could really see of him was the curve of his behind and his long legs. One pocket of his snug Levi's had a three-corner tear, and the seams looked like they were just about worn through.

Adrenaline rushed through her veins, and she balled her hands into fists to keep them from shaking. Then he rose to his full height, and everything seemed to slow, like someone flipped a switch on a movie projector. He turned as he shut the refrigerator door, and he held a quart of milk

in his hand by his thigh. Her attention got momentarily stuck on the thin line of dark hair rising from the waistband of his Levi's and circling his navel. She lifted her gaze up past the hair on his flat belly and the defined muscles of his chest. If she'd had any lingering doubts, seeing him like this removed them. This was not the boy she'd once known. This was definitely a man.

She forced herself to look up at his strong chin, the etched bow of his tan lips, and into his eyes. She felt the back of her throat go dry. Jack Parrish had always been a good-looking boy, now he was lethal. One lock of his thick hair hung over his forehead and touched his brow. Those light green eyes that she remembered, that had once looked at her so full of passion and possession, glanced back at her as if he were no more interested in seeing her than a stray dog.

'Did you come here to stare?'

She moved farther into the kitchen and shoved her hands into the pockets of her raincoat 'No, I came to tell you that I'm in town visiting my mother and sister.'

He raised the milk and drank from the carton, waiting for her to elaborate.

'I thought you should know.'

His gaze met hers over the carton, then he lowered it. Some things hadn't changed after all. Jack Parrish, bad boy and all around hell-raiser, had always been a milk drinker. 'What makes you think I give a shit?' he asked and wiped the back of his hand across his mouth.

'I didn't know if you would. I mean, I did wonder what you'd think, but I wasn't sure.' This was so much harder than she'd envisioned. And what she'd envisioned had been pretty dang hard.

‘Now you don’t have to wonder.’ He pointed with his milk carton toward the other room. ‘If that’s all, there’s the door.’

‘No, that’s not all.’ She looked down at the toes of her boots, the black leather spotted by the rain. ‘Steven wanted me to tell you something. He wanted me to tell you that he’s sorry about . . . everything.’ She shook her head and corrected herself. ‘No . . . was sorry, I mean. He’s been gone seven months and it’s still hard for me to remember him in the past tense. It seems wrong somehow. Like if I do, he never existed.’ She looked back at Jack. His expression hadn’t changed. ‘The flowers you sent were really nice.’

He shrugged and set the milk on the counter. ‘Penny sent them.’

‘Penny?’

‘Penny Colten. Married Leon Kribs. She works for me now.’

‘Thank Penny for me.’ But Penny hadn’t sent them and signed *his* name without *his* knowledge.

‘Don’t make it a big deal.’

She knew how much Steven had once meant to him. ‘Don’t pretend you don’t care that he’s gone.’

He raised a dark brow. ‘You forget I tried to kill him.’

‘You wouldn’t have killed him, Jack.’

‘No, you’re right. I guess you just weren’t worth it.’

The conversation was headed in the wrong direction and she had to turn it around. ‘Don’t be ugly.’

‘You call this ugly?’ He laughed, but not with pleasure. ‘This is nothing, buttercup. Stick around and I’ll show you how ugly I can get.’

She already knew how ugly Jack could get but while

she might be a coward, she was also as stubborn as ragweed. Just as Jack was not the same boy she'd once known, she was not the same girl he'd once known either. She'd come to tell him the truth. Finally. Before she could get on with the rest of her life, she had to tell him about Nathan. It had taken her fifteen years to get to this point, and he could get ugly all he wanted, but he was going to listen to her.

A flash of white caught the corner of Daisy's eye a second before a woman entered the kitchen wearing a man's white dress shirt.

'Hey, y'all,' the woman said as she moved to stand by Jack.

He looked down at her. 'I told you to stay in bed.'

'I got bored without you.'

Heat crept up Daisy's neck to her cheeks, but she seemed to be the only embarrassed person in the room. Jack had a girlfriend. Of course he did. He'd always had a girlfriend or two. There had been a time when that would have hurt.

'Hello, Daisy. I don't know if you remember me. I'm Gina Brown.'

It didn't hurt any longer, and Daisy was a bit ashamed to admit to herself that what she mostly felt was an overwhelming relief. She'd come all the way from Seattle to tell him about Nathan, and now all she felt was relief. Like an axe had been lifted from her throat. She guessed she was more of a coward than she thought. Daisy smiled and moved across the kitchen to offer Gina her hand. 'Of course I remember you. We were in American Government together our senior year.'

'Mr Simmons.'

‘That’s right.’

‘Remember when he tripped over an eraser on the floor?’ Gina asked as if she weren’t standing there wearing Jack’s shirt and, Daisy would bet, nothing else.

‘That was so funny. I just about—’

‘What the hell is this?’ Jack interrupted. ‘A damn high school reunion?’

Both women looked up at him and Gina said, ‘I was just being polite to your guest.’

‘She isn’t my guest and she’s leaving.’ He pinned his gaze on Daisy, just as cold and unyielding as when she’d first walked in the door.

‘It was nice to see you, Gina,’ she said.

‘Same.’

‘Good night, Jack.’

He shoved his hip into the counter and crossed his arms over his chest.

‘See you two around.’ She walked back through the dark house and out the door. The rain had stopped and she dodged puddles on her way to her mother’s Caddie, parked on the side of the garage. Next time, she would definitely call first.

Just as she reached for the car door, she felt a hand on her arm whipping her around. She looked up into Jack’s face. Security lights shined down on him and shadowed the angry set of his jaw. His eyes stared into hers – no longer cold, they were filled with a burning rage.

‘I don’t know what you came here looking for, absolution or forgiveness,’ he said, his drawl more pronounced than before. ‘But you won’t find it.’ He dropped her arm as if he couldn’t stand the touch of her.

‘Yes, I know.’

‘Good. You stay away from me, Daisy Lee,’ he said, drawing out the vowels in her name. ‘You stay away or I’ll make your life a misery.’

She looked up into his dark face, at the passion and anger that had not abated in fifteen years.

‘Just stay away,’ he said one last time before he turned on his bare heels and disappeared into the shadows.

She knew she would be wise to heed his warning. Too bad she didn’t have that option.

Although he didn’t know it yet, neither did he.



Daisy blew into the mug of hot coffee as she raised it to her lips. The sun had yet to rise, and her mother was still asleep in her bedroom down the hall. Besides updated appliances, little had changed in her mother's kitchen. The counter tops and floor tiles were the same matching blue, and the same Texas bluebells were painted on the white cabinets.

As quiet as possible Daisy slipped into her raincoat, hung by the back door the night before. She threaded one arm then the other through the slicker until it covered her short pajamas. She crammed her feet into her mother's garden clogs, then she slipped outside into the deep shadows of early morning. Cool air touched her face and bare legs, and a slight breeze pulled several strands of hair from the claw at the back of her head. The Texas air filled her lungs and brought a smile to her lips. She didn't know why, or how to explain it, but the air was different here. It just seemed to settle in her chest and radiate outward. It

whispered across her skin and answered a hidden longing she hadn't even known rested deep in her soul.

She was home. If only for a short time.

For fifteen years she'd lived in the Seattle, Washington, area. She'd grown to love it there. She loved the rich green landscape, the mountains, the bay. Snow skiing. Water skiing. The Mariners. So many things.

But Daisy Lee was a Texan. In her heart and in her blood. In her DNA, like her blond hair. Like her birthmark in the shape of a little love bite on the top of her left breast. And like her love bite, Lovett hadn't changed in the past fifteen years. The population had grown by several hundred; there were a few new businesses and one new grade school. The town had recently added an eighteen-hole golf course and a country club to its landscape, but unlike the rest of the country, and more urban Texas, Lovett still moved at its own laid-back pace.

Daisy gazed into the shadows of her mother's backyard. The outline of the five-foot windmill, an Annie Oakley statue, and a dozen or so flamingos were etched in black. Growing up, her mother's taste in exterior decor had been a constant source of embarrassment for her and her younger sister, Lily. Now the parade of flamingos brought a smile to her lips.

She took a drink of coffee, then she sat on the top concrete step next to a stone armadillo with several babies stacked on its back. Daisy hadn't slept well the night before. Her eyes felt puffy and her mind sluggish. She shivered and set the mug on her knee. Before she'd seen Jack last night, her plan had been so clear. She'd come to Lovett, intending to visit with her mother and sister for a few days, then talk to Jack and tell him about Nathan. All

within twelve days. Which, until last night, she'd figured would be plenty of time.

She'd known it would be difficult, but clear-cut. She and Steven had talked about it before he'd passed. In her pocket, she still had the letter Steven had written before he'd lost the ability to read and write. When he'd accepted that he would die, that there would be no cure for him, no more experimental drugs to take, no more radical surgeries to try, he'd wanted to make things right with the people he'd felt he'd wronged in his life. One of those people was Jack. At first he'd thought to send the letter, but the more the two of them talked about it, the more they'd concluded that it should be delivered in person. By her. Because ultimately, she was the one who had to deal with Jack Parrish, and she was the one who'd wronged him most.

They'd never really meant to keep Nathan a secret from him. Her mother knew. So did her sister. Nathan knew too. He'd always known that he had a biological father named Jackson who lived in Lovett, Texas. They'd told him as soon as he'd been capable of understanding, but he'd never expressed any interest in meeting Jack. Steven had always been enough father for him.

It was time. Perhaps past time that she told Jack he had a son. A moan escaped her lips and she took a sip of coffee. A fifteen-year-old son with a pickle green Mohawk, a pierced lip, and so many dog chains hanging off him he looked liked he'd broken into the animal shelter.

Nathan had had such a hard time these past two and a half years. When Steven was diagnosed, he'd been given five months to live. He'd lasted almost two years, but it hadn't been an easy two years. Watching Steven fight to live had been hard on her, but it had been hell on Nathan.

And she hated to admit it, but there had been times when she hadn't been at all attentive to her son. Some nights, she hadn't even known he was gone until he'd returned. He'd walk in the door and she'd scold him for not telling her where he'd gone. He'd look at her through those clear blue eyes of his and say, 'I told you I was going to Pete's. You said I could.' And she'd have to admit to herself that it was entirely possible that he'd told her, but she'd been focused on Steven's medication or his next surgery – or perhaps that had been the day when Steven lost his ability to use a calculator, drive a car, or tie his shoes. Watching her husband struggle to maintain his dignity while trying to recall a simple task he'd been performing since he was four or five had been heartbreaking. There were times when she'd simply forgotten whole blocks of conversations with Nathan.

The day Nathan had walked in the house with that Mohawk had been a real wake-up call for her. Suddenly, he was no longer the little boy who played soccer, loved football, and watched 'Nickelodeon' curled up on the couch with his special blanket. It hadn't been the color of his hair that had alarmed her most. It had been the lost look in his eyes. His empty, lost gaze had shocked her out of the depression and grief she hadn't even known she'd fallen into for almost seven months following Steven's passing.

Steven was gone. She and Nathan would always feel his loss, like a missing part of their souls. He'd been her best friend and a good man. He'd been a buffer, a comfort, someone who made her life better. Easier. He'd been a loving husband and father.

She and Nathan would never forget him, but she could

not continue to live in the past. She had to live in the present and begin to look toward the future. For Nathan, and for herself. But in order for her to move forward, she had to take care of her past. She had to quit hiding from it.

Fingers of morning sun crept into the backyard and sparkled in the dew-covered lawn. The early sun cast long patterns in the wet grass, crept up the windmill, and shot sparks off the tip of Annie Oakley's silver rifle. Daisy wished she had her Nikon and wide-angle lens on her. It was up in her room, and she knew if she ran up to get it, she'd miss the shot and the rising sun. Within seconds, dawn broke over Daisy's feet, legs and face; she closed her eyes and soaked it all in.

Living in the Northwest, Daisy had lost most of her accent, but she'd never lost her love of wide-open spaces and the huge blue sky stretching across the horizon in unbroken lines. She opened her eyes and wished Steven were here to see it. He would have loved it as much as she did.

Daisy looked down at the rubber garden clogs on her feet. She wished for a lot of things. Like more time before she had to confront Jack again. She was in no hurry to see the anger in his face. She'd known that he would not welcome her back with open arms, but she was surprised that after all of these years, he clearly hated her as much as he had the last time she'd seen him.

You call this ugly? he'd said. *This is nothing, buttercup. Stick around and I'll show you how ugly I can get.*

She wondered if Jack had realized he'd called her buttercup. His old name for her. The name he'd first called her on her first day at Lovett Elementary.

She remembered being nervous and scared on that day,

so long ago. She'd been afraid no one would like her, and she'd suspected that the big red bow clipped to the top of her head looked stupid. Her mother had pulled it off the handle of a Welcome Wagon basket filled with coupons, a recipe book, and Wick Fowler's chili kit. Daisy hadn't wanted to wear the bow, but her mother had insisted that it looked good and matched her dress.

All that first morning, no one had spoken to her. By lunch, she'd become so upset, she was unable to eat her cheese yum-yum sandwich. Finally, during recess, Steven and Jack walked up to where she stood with her back against the chain link fence.

'What's your name?' Jack had asked.

She'd looked into those green eyes of his, surrounded by long black lashes, and she'd smiled. Finally someone was talking to her, and her little heart leapt with joy. 'Daisy Lee Brooks.'

He'd rocked back on the heels of his boots as he looked her up and down. 'Well, buttercup, that's the stupidest hair bow I ever did see,' he'd drawled, then he and Steven howled with laughter.

Hearing that the bow was stupid confirmed her worst fears, and the backs of her eyes started to sting. 'Yeah, well y'all are so stupid you have to take off your shoes to count,' she'd responded, proud that she stood up for herself. Then she'd ruined everything by bursting into tears.

The memory of that day brought a sad smile to her face. She'd vowed to hate those two boys as long as she lived. It lasted until Jack had asked her to play on their softball team, three weeks later. It was Steven who showed her how to play second base without getting hit in the face with the ball.

At first, Jack had called her buttercup to tease her, but years later, he'd whispered it as he kissed the side of her throat. His voice would go all dark while he discovered whole new ways to tease her. There had been a time when just the memory of his kiss had sent a warm shudder through her chest, but she hadn't felt anything warm and tingly for him in years.

She thought of how he'd looked last night, half naked and fully ticked off. His lids lowered over his sexy green eyes, and that sardonic curl of his lips. He'd grown even more handsome than the last time she'd seen him, but Daisy was older and wiser and no longer tempted by good looks and bad attitudes.

Nathan didn't resemble Jack much. Except maybe the attitude part. He was staying with Steven's sister in Seattle while Daisy was in Lovett, but he knew the reason behind her trip. She'd learned her lesson about lies, no matter how well intentioned, and she never lied to Nathan. But she had purposely chosen his last week of ninth grade to make the trip so he couldn't come along. She didn't know what Jack's reaction would be once she told him about Nathan. She didn't think he would be cruel, not to Nathan anyway, but she wasn't certain. She didn't want Nathan here if Jack got truly ugly. Nathan had had enough pain in his life.

From inside the house, she heard her mother moving around. She stood and walked back inside.

'Good morning,' she said as she hung up her coat. The warm scent of her mother's kitchen filled her nose. The smell of baked bread and home-cooked comfort food surrounded her like a familiar blanket. 'I watched the sun come up, and it was absolutely gorgeous.' She kicked off

the garden clogs and looked over at her mother, who was stirring cream into her coffee. Louella Brooks wore a blue nylon nightgown, and her blond hair was piled on top of her head like cotton candy.

‘How was your party last night?’ Daisy asked. Every second Friday, the Lovett single’s club held a dance, and Louella Brooks hadn’t missed one since she’d joined in nineteen ninety-two. She paid fifty dollars a year to belong to the club, and she believed in getting her money’s worth.

‘Verna Pearse was there, and I swear she looks a good ten years older than her real age.’ Louella placed her spoon in the sink and raised her mug to her lips. Her brown eyes looked back at Daisy over her coffee. ‘She was surely saggin’, baggin’ and draggin’.’

Daisy smiled and filled her own mug. Verna had once worked at the Wild Coyote Diner with Louella. The two had been friends at one time. During Daisy’s junior and senior years of high school, she’d worked at the diner too, but she couldn’t recall what had happened to break up the friendship. ‘What happened between you and Verna?’ she asked.

Louella put her mug on the counter and grabbed a loaf of bread from the pantry. ‘Verna Pearse is as loose as a slipknot,’ she said. ‘For a year she told me she got paid ten cents more an hour than me because she was a better waitress. She bragged and held it over my head, but come to find out, she was earning it in other ways.’

‘How?’

‘With Big Bob Jenkins.’

Daisy remembered the owner of the diner, and he hadn’t been called Big Bob for nothing. ‘She was having sex with Big Bob?’

Louella shook her head and pursed her lips. ‘Oral gratification in the storeroom.’

‘Really? That’s criminal.’

‘Yes. It’s a form of prostitution.’

‘I was thinking it was more like slave labor. Verna blew Big Bob for what turns out to be like – eighty cents a day? That’s not right.’

‘Daisy,’ her mother scolded as she got out the toaster. ‘Don’t talk filth.’

‘You brought it up!’ She’d never understand her mother. ‘Oral gratification’ was okay, but somehow ‘blew’ wasn’t.

‘You’ve been in the North too long.’

Maybe she had, because she just didn’t get the difference. Although there had been a time when she never would have uttered the word in that context.

Louella opened the loaf of bread. ‘Do you want toast?’

‘I don’t eat in the morning.’ She took a drink of coffee and moved to the corner breakfast nook. The bright morning sun poured in through the sheers and lit up the yellow table.

‘Did you go out last night?’ her mother asked as she toasted one slice of bread.

Meaning, did she work up her nerve to drive to Jack’s. ‘Yes. I went to his house last night.’

‘Did you tell him?’

Daisy sat on one of the bench seats and looked down at her hands wrapped around her mug. She had a chip in her red fingernail polish. ‘No. He wasn’t alone. His girlfriend was there, so it wasn’t a good time.’

‘Maybe that was a sign you should leave it alone.’

Growing up, her mother had always liked Steven more

than Jack. Although, Louella liked Jack too. When the three of them got into trouble, Jack was often blamed. And while it was true that he'd usually come up with the offense that landed them in hot water, Daisy and Steven would gladly go along with him. 'I can't do that,' Daisy said, 'I have to tell him.'

'I still don't understand why,' Louella's toast popped up and she set it on a little plate.

'I told you why.' Daisy didn't feel like discussing her reasons again. She opened the bottle of fingernail polish she'd left on the table yesterday and set about repairing the chip.

'Well, if you're determined to do this, you shouldn't go over there at night.' Louella lifted the lid off the butter dish and buttered her toast. 'People talk about widows. They say you're desperate.'

Daisy's father had died when she was five, but she'd never heard any gossip about her mother being desperate. 'I don't care.' She covered her index fingernail with red polish, then screwed the lid back on the bottle.

'You should.' Louella grabbed her plate and coffee and sat across the table from Daisy. 'You don't want people to think you're going over there for relations.'

Daisy blew on her wet fingernail to keep from laughing. It had been over two years since she'd had *relations*, and she wasn't sure she knew how to do it anymore. After Steven's diagnosis and first surgery, they'd tried to have a normal, healthy married life, but after a few months, it just got too difficult. At first she'd really missed sex with her husband. Then the more she'd gone without, the less she'd missed it. Now, she really didn't think about it all that much.

‘Tell me about all those flamingos in your backyard,’ Daisy said to change the subject.

‘I think they’re pretty,’ her mother said. Growing up, her mother had been into Disney. Their yard had been overrun with Snow White, the Seven Dwarfs, and several characters from *Alice in Wonderland*. ‘I got the big flamingo with the little pocket book in its beak from Kitty Fae Young. Her granddaughter Amanda makes ’em up special order. You remember Amanda, don’t you?’

Just like she was a kid again, Daisy felt her eyes glaze over. Her mother had always had a tendency to ramble on forever about people Daisy didn’t know, had never met, and didn’t give a rat’s about. Growing up, she and Lily had been involuntary victims, trapped into listening to the hottest gossip going around the diner, which usually wasn’t all that hot. It didn’t matter how often they hinted that they didn’t care about so-and-so’s new Buick, arthritis or yummy homemade cookies, Louella was like a needle stuck in a record groove and absolutely couldn’t stop until she came to the end.

She shook her head and said a weak, ‘No.’

‘Sure you do,’ her mother said. ‘She had those really bad buck teeth. Looked just like a little beaver.’

‘Oh yeah,’ she said although she didn’t have the foggiest. There were quite a few kids in west Texas with buck teeth.

Daisy slid from behind the table and stood. While her mother talked about Amanda and her yard art, Daisy walked to the sink and rinsed her mug. She glanced up at the purple and green stained-glass frame making patterns on the sill. She’d taken the photo in the picture frame. It was Steven and Nathan on Nathan’s fourth birthday, and

she'd used a wide-angle lens to distort the closeup shot. Both wore party hats and were grinning like lunatics fresh from the asylum, their eyes huge. She'd taken it when she first started photography classes and was experimenting. They'd all been so happy then.

A frown creased her brow and she looked away. She didn't want to think about the past today. She didn't want to get sucked into the emotional morass of it. She put the mug in the dishwasher and her gaze fell on a grocery list clipped in a clothespin recipe holder.

'... but of course you didn't live here then,' her mother was saying. 'That was the year a twister took out Red Cooley's trailer.'

'Are you going to the store?' she interrupted.

'I need a few things,' her mother answered as she rose from the table and put the bread away. 'After church tomorrow, Lily Belle and Pippen are coming over for Sunday dinner, and I thought we'd have a nice ham.'

Lily was three years younger than Daisy, and Pippen was her two-year-old son. Lily's husband had run off with a cowgirl, and they were in the process of a messy divorce. She was having a difficult time, and as a result, men in general were on Lily's hit list. 'I'll go to Albertsons for you,' she offered. That way she could choose something beside ham. She'd never been a big pork fan, and after Steven's funeral, a lot of well-meaning people had dropped off baked hams. Some of them were still in her freezer in Seattle.

She took a shower then dressed in a pair of jeans and a blue T-shirt. She dried her hair and put on a little makeup. With the list in her back pocket, she jumped in her mother's Cadillac. The car had several dents up and down

each side due to her mother being nearsighted. A flamingo air freshener hung from the rearview mirror, and the Caddie whined when she turned corners.

Inside Albertsons, the Muzak of choice was Barry Manilow's 'Mandy,' an abomination in any state, but especially Texas. She tossed a box of tea bags and a can of coffee into her cart, then she headed for the meat section. She was in the mood for steak and grabbed a package of three rib-eyes.

'Well hey, Daisy. I heard you were back in town.'

Daisy glanced up from her steaks. The woman in front of her looked slightly familiar. Her hair was pinned up in big pink rollers, and she held a large can of Super Hold Aqua Net in one hand and a pack of bobby pins in the other.

It took Daisy a few seconds to place a name with the face. 'You're Shay Brewton, Sylvia's little sister.' Daisy and Sylvia had been on the same cheerleader squad at Lovett High. They'd been good friends but had lost touch when Daisy and Steven had moved away. 'How's Sylvia?'

'She's good. She lives in Houston now with her husband and kids.'

'Houston?' She set the steaks back in the case and placed her foot on the bottom rung of the cart. 'Shoot. I'm sorry she moved away. I'd hoped to look her up before I left.'

'She's in town this weekend for my wedding.'

Daisy smiled. 'You're getting married? When? To whom?'

'I'm marrying Jimmy Calhoun over at Whiley Baptist Church. Tonight at six.'

'Jimmy Calhoun?' She'd gone all through school with Jimmy. He'd had flaming red hair and a silver tooth. There

were six Calhoun boys; all of them trouble. If she'd had to lay odds, she would have bet the lot of them were living in Huntsville with prison tattoos by now.

Shay laughed. 'Don't look at me like I've come off my spool.'

Daisy hadn't realized her mouth was hanging open and she snapped it shut. 'Congratulations, I'm sure you'll be very happy,' she said.

'Come to my reception afterwards over at the country club. It starts at eight.'

'Crash your wedding?'

'It's going to be a big party. Lots of food and liquor, and we hired Jed and the Rippers to play music for us. Sylvia will be there, and I know she'd just love to see you. Mom and Daddy, too.'

Mrs Brewton had been an adviser for the squad. Mr Brewton had made his own liquor in the back shed. Daisy knew from experience that it could eat a hole in your esophagus. 'Maybe I will.'

Shay nodded. 'Good, I'll tell her I ran into you and that you're coming to the reception. She'll be tickled.'

Daisy hadn't brought anything to wear to a wedding reception. The only dress she'd brought was a white tank, and it really wasn't appropriate. Maybe she'd just send a gift. 'Are you registered anywhere?'

'Oh, don't worry about that.' She smiled. 'But yes, I am. Donna's Gifts on Fifth.'

Of course. Everyone registered at Donna's.

'See ya tonight,' Shay said as she moved away.

Daisy watched her disappear around a corner and she smiled again. Little Shay Brewton was marrying wild Jimmy Calhoun. Growing up, there really hadn't been any

boys more insane than Jimmy and his brothers.

Except maybe Jack.

Jack had always been wrapped crazy. It had never been enough for him to race his bike as fast as it would go; he had to lift his hands from the handle bars, or stand on the seat. It wasn't enough to chase dust devils; he had to play outside when the weather service predicted an F1 tornado. He thought he was invincible, like Superman.

Steven had been more daredevil than Daisy, but even he hadn't attempted half the stuff Jack had. He'd never jumped from his roof into a pile of leaves and broken his leg. Or put a motorcycle engine on a homemade go-cart and driven around town as if he were at Talladega.

Jack had done that. He'd done it even though he knew his dad would whoop his butt. And Ray Parrish had, but it'd been worth it to Jack.

Steven Monroe had always been the safe one – dependable – while Jack had raced through life full throttle as if his hair was on fire.

Hanging around with the craziest boy in school had been a lot of fun. Getting romantically involved with him had been a huge mistake.

One in which she and Steven and Jack had all paid a high price.