
HIS TROUBLE IN TALLULAH

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Former army Security Specialist Garrett Andersen wasn't sure which he disliked more, flying in small, overstuffed airplanes or attending big, over-the-top weddings. This, of course, made him wonder why he was boarding a plane at the Austin airport and heading to Tallulah, Louisiana, for just such an event. But it wasn't every day his kid sister got married, and he wasn't about to rescind on the promise he'd made to walk her down the aisle.

Knowing he was running late, he hurried onto the fully loaded aircraft and pulled the buds from his ears as the flight attendant rushed him along, closing the overhead bins behind him.

Sucking in a breath, Garrett twisted sideways and walked down the narrow aisle in search of his row. He briefly paused to help a harried woman secure her bag in the overhead compartment while her young son bounced excitedly in his seat.

Garrett cast the rambunctious child a curious glance in time to see him pull a wad of pink bubblegum the size of a shooter marble from his mouth. He wrapped it around his

thumb and forefinger, then shoved it back in again, all the while climbing the headrest and playing peek-a-boo with the elderly man and woman behind him.

The mother gave Garrett an apologetic look. "It's his first time flying and I'm just trying to keep him pacified."

"It seems like you're off to a good start," Garrett assured her.

The boy continued to jump in his seat, gaining momentum with each lunge. On his descent his foot slipped and he came down hard, hitting the firm headrest stomach first. The huge ball of gum shot from his mouth and landed with an undignified splat on the man's lap. The boy blinked a few times, then let loose an ungodly howl, sharing his outrage at full volume.

"Or maybe not," Garrett retracted.

Panicked, the woman rifled through her purse for more gum, only to come up empty handed. Garrett grimaced as the shrill sound cut like a blade, and snatched a new blister pack from his rucksack, partly to pacify the kid and partly for his own self-preservation. He quickly handed it to the woman as all eyes turned their way.

"Don't worry, pal," Garrett said, scrubbing his hand over the boy's head. "We'll have you back to blowing bubbles in no time."

The kid's mom gave Garrett a grateful smile before he continued up the aisle, happy to find his section of the craft kid-free. Even though children weren't in his future, it wasn't like he had anything against them. It was just that after last night's meeting with his boss and other members of the Security Committee, a hyper kid with a penchant for big gobs of gum was a distraction he didn't need. Not when his game plan for this flight was to figure out a way to convince the Committee he had what it took to head up the new security alarm response team in Austin's business district.

Emotionally damaged my ass.

His hand went to the scar on his face, and that's when he noticed the gorgeous stranger in the window seat—*his* window seat. He gave a slow shake of his head, not at all surprised by to find a woman claiming his spot. After all, he knew firsthand that beautiful women played by their own rules. Then again, it wasn't like he had a problem with their conduct, considering he was happy to play their game. At least that way everyone walked away satisfied. And Garrett Andersen, ex-soldier turned corporate security specialist, *always* walked away.

Her sweet scent filled his nostrils, and his cock twitched in response, the enticing aroma garnering his attention while erotic images flashed in his mind's eye. He took a moment to peruse the woman next to him. His glance drifted over the sunshine-yellow strappy dress that showcased a slim frame and killer legs he'd do just about anything to feel wrapped around him. His glance traveled back to her pretty face, and he couldn't help but wonder how those long, loose curls of hers would feel on his skin, or look spread across his pillowcase.

As he considered the sensual image a moment longer, his game plan instantly headed south. No surprise really. After all, he was a red-blooded male and this sexy beauty was a distraction any guy would be crazy to ignore.

Big brown honey-flecked eyes that looked stark against pale skin and chestnut hair darted to his and then flicked back to the ground outside.

Despite his aversion to the aisle seat, Garrett secured his rucksack in the overhead bin and dropped down next to her. He reached for his belt, his hand accidentally brushing her leg. She recoiled, her eyes wide and troubled as they flashed back to his. Okay, so flinching wasn't quite the reaction he'd hoped for.

He was about to introduce himself when he noticed the way she shifted restlessly in her seat, and that's when understanding hit harder than the hot blast of flying shrapnel.

Appearing more panicked with each second, her entire body tightened as if under assault, and something in the anxious way she tented her fingers seemed so familiar to him. Garrett turned to her, and held his hand out in an attempt to pull her attention away from take off.

"I'm Garrett."

She hesitated for a moment, then slipped her hand in his. His fingers closed around her hand, swallowing it whole. "Tallulah," she returned. There was a hitch in her voice when she rambled on with, "But my close friends call me Lu, or Lula and sometimes even Lala."

"So, Tallulah," he said, holding her hand longer than necessary, "it's nice to meet you."

After a long moment, he released her hand and she pulled it back to her lap. Unease registered on her face as she smoothed her dress over her thighs. "I didn't mean to suggest...I know we're not close friends or anything, and I'm not suggesting that we should be," she said, her attention on him as she fumbled over her words. "I mean, it's just that we're going to be sitting together for hours...I was only trying to say..."

The plane taxied down the runway and in an effort to keep her focus off takeoff, Garrett held his hands up, palms out. "Whoa, hang on there, Tallulah. We just met. Stop trying to rush things along between us. Heck, the next thing I know you'll be trying to get me to join the mile-high club with you."

She opened her mouth, but Garrett gave her a wink and cut her off. "And just for the record," he added raising his voice to be heard over the roar of the engine as the plane skyrocketed, "just because I gave my seat up to you, doesn't mean I'm going to give anything else up."

Eyes full of genuine shock shot to the overhead seat numbers, and a soft pink flush crawled up her long neck as scrabbling fingers went to her belt.

Garrett sat in stunned silence, because he fully expected this beautiful woman to come back with some smart-ass comment, not, “I...I’m so sorry...I didn’t know. I never meant to take your seat. I don’t know what I was thinking.” She gave a hard shake of her head and her fragrant hair flared around creamy shoulders. The floral scent of her shampoo filled his senses as she finished with, “I guess I’ve just been preoccupied with other things.”

Aww shit...

He sat quiet for a long moment, feeling like a world-class prick for embarrassing her. When the plane finally began to level off she unhooked her seatbelt.

“I’ll switch with you.”

He closed his hand over hers to stop her, then snapped her belt back into place. “No, wait. It’s fine. I was just trying to...” He stopped, not wanting to mention the words “take-off”, otherwise she might start panicking again.

“You were just what?” she asked, the honesty in those big eyes of hers catching him off guard. Christ, was she for real? He wracked his brain, unable to remember the last time he’d seen a woman blush, if ever, or the last time he’d come across a woman who was as sweet as she was sexy.

“Nothing, it’s just...” He exhaled slowly and shook his head. “Maybe we should start again.” He extended his hand and smiled. “I’m Garrett Andersen.”

She slipped hers into his. “I’m Lu, but you can call me Tallulah Duncan.”

Garrett laughed, and a smile pulled at Tallulah’s lips. Sweet, sexy *and* funny. The perfect trifecta.

“So, Tallulah Duncan,” he began, once again noting that there was something about her that seemed so familiar. Now

that the plane had leveled out and she seemed more relaxed, he put his mouth close to her ear, filling his lungs with her arousing scent. "What's so important in Louisiana that you'd subject yourself to flying when you hate it so much?"

His breath washed over the long column of her neck and he felt a shudder move through her. She cleared her throat. "I don't hate flying."

"Oh yeah? You could have fooled me."

Shifting closer, he crowded her, his body craving intimacy even though she was all kinds of wrong for him. Everything in the way she talked, moved, looked around with bright-eyed innocence screamed that she was a forever kind of girl—far different than the women he normally associated with. The last thing he wanted was a wife and family. He'd only end up letting them down.

She sucked in a tight breath, her small breasts rising and falling in the most mind-fucking ways. His body stiffened and his thoughts raced, sorting through all the things he could do to relax her.

"It's not the flying. It's the wedding."

Whoa.

Garrett pulled back and glanced at her ring finger. "The wedding. You mean—?"

She gave a quick shake of her head. "No, not me. My brother."

"Ah," Garrett said, finally clueing in as to why her gestures seemed so familiar. "Let me guess. Your brother is Ving Duncan."

"How do you know that?"

"Because he's marrying my sister, Jenny."

Garrett watched as understanding dawned in her eyes. "You're *that* Garrett Andersen?" she asked, her eyes wide, her mouth hanging open. "The one who served overseas with my brother?"

“The one and only.”

“I’ve heard Ving talk about you.”

Garrett tugged on his T-shirt collar and inched back to put a measure of distance between them. “He talks about you too. But he calls you Tally, which is why it took me a minute to figure out who you were.”

A warm smile came over her face and it was easy to tell how much she adored her older brother. “He’s the only one who calls me that.”

The flight attendant came by and Garrett accepted a cup of water. He drank it down, but it did little to cool his heated libido. Thank Christ he found out who she was before he really turned up the heat. Unlike Ving, he wasn’t the settling down kind, and if his comrade knew he was interested in his sister, his intentions less than honorable, fly boy would hand him his ass back on the blade of his Apache.

“I can’t believe we haven’t met before this.”

He stuck his plastic cup in the magazine holder in front of him. “Yeah, what are the odds?”

“Well, Ving and Jenny did have a bit of a whirlwind romance,” Tallulah said.

He looked at her a moment longer, and wished he’d paid more attention when Ving talked about her. The one thing he did remember his comrade saying was that she was a small town girl—sweet and naive—and he wanted to keep her that way.

“So Tallulah, huh?”

She nodded, like the question was one she was asked often. “I was adopted, and all the paperwork had Tallulah written across the top. Obviously because that’s where my adoptive parents lived, and where I was going,” she went on to explain. Then with a resigned shoulder roll she added, “So it just sort of stuck.”

“Well I’m glad, because I think it suits you.”

She arched a brow. “You think being named after an old railroad water stop suits me?”

Garrett laughed. “And your brother?”

She leaned into him and he tried not to stare at the dip in her cleavage or note the way his body reacted to her heat. But he was a man. And he was weak. So he looked.

In a conspiratorial voice, she said, “Well Ving is short for Irving. Irving, Texas. That’s where our folks lived before moving to Tallulah. But he hates it, so you didn’t hear that from me.”

“I guess you two should be thankful that your folks weren’t from Bullfrog, Arkansas, or Barney, Georgia, when they adopted.”

She laughed, and as the sweet sound settled deep in his groin, he wondered if that sexy voice of hers would drop an octave during pillow talk. Not that he should be wondering about such things. Not with her, especially after finding out who she was. But damned if he could help himself.

“I was always partial to Peach, Pennsylvania,” she added.

Enjoying their easy banter and the intimate way she confided in him, Garrett settled deeper into his seat and contemplated her other secrets. “Peaches it is, then.” He had no doubt that she would taste as sweet—everywhere. “So, Peaches,” he teased. “I’m really looking forward to meeting these creative parents of yours.”

At the mention of her parents apprehension returned and once again she began tenting and un-tenting her fingers.

Garrett’s glance moved over her face. “I hope you don’t play poker.” When she gave him a confused look, he nodded toward her hands. “You’re an easy read.” She parted her hands, and nodded her head in agreement. “You want to tell me about it?” he asked.

A noise sounded in her throat. “Not really.”

Garrett scanned her face a second time. A barrage of

mixed emotions swam in her almost-too-big brown eyes. “Let me guess, your brother is getting married, and now your folks are going to be pestering you, wondering when you’re going to be walking down the aisle.”

“Pretty perceptive, aren’t you?”

“So I’m right?”

“Yeah, but that’s not all.”

He gave a mock shiver. “Isn’t that enough?”

Her small hand closed over her stomach, her eyes widening with interest as she watched his reaction. “It’s just that, well, they’re very protective of me.”

“And?” he probed.

“They didn’t want me to move. But after college I wanted to get away. My brother was in Austin so I moved there. Then I got at a job at a daycare, with lots of room for advancement.”

He nodded. “It’s a big city. You’re their baby girl. I get it.”

“And when my ex insisted that if I was still single when I came back, we’d get engaged, I agreed.” She groaned inwardly. “I didn’t want to rock the boat, and my parents only gave me their blessing to go because they figured with Jason waiting at home for me, I’d eventually come back and reunite with him. Honestly, everyone believes we’re as good as married and now they’re expecting an engagement announcement.” She buried her face in her hands. “It was a stupid thing to do.”

He let loose a long whistle. “Oh, yeah. Damn stupid.”

“Hey.” She shot daggers at him. “You don’t have to agree with me.”

“So what are you going to do now?”

She pursed her lips for a moment then crinkled her nose before saying, “I was thinking of fibbing and telling them I’m engaged.”

He gave a slow nod of his head as the full picture of

Tallulah Duncan formed in his mind's eyes. "Because the truth is harder and you don't want to hurt anyone?"

"Yeah. They all think they know what's best for me."

God, she really was sweet. The women he knew cared little about other people's feelings. Their thoughts and actions were always self-fulfilling. "Do they?"

She glanced out the window, and once again he noticed her touching her stomach. "I don't know. Maybe I should just do it."

Garrett frowned as he watched her and something strange tightened inside him. Christ, he barely knew this girl, yet everything in his gut wanted to care. Fuck. "You don't want to do that."

Her voice was soft, hushed when she said, "I know."

She stayed quiet, too quiet, and Garrett touched her chin and turned her back to face him. The second those worried, honey-flecked eyes met his, it completely disarmed him, bringing out the protector in him. But he knew better than to step into that role.

"So what will you do when they start asking about him?" he probed. "Wanting to know all the details about this phantom fiancé of yours?"

"I'll make it up. Then when I return to Austin I'll tell them it didn't work out."

Garrett shook his head. "You'll never pull it off."

"How do you know?"

Because he was a specialist. An expert. A hard-core military man trained to read people. His hand went to the scar on his cheek. At least he used to be.

"Because I do," he said, offering no further explanation.

He took a moment to give her dilemma further consideration. As he mulled it over, a crazy idea hit, his mind finding a solution—for both of them. She needed a fiancé and he needed to show the Committee he was their guy. What better

way to prove that he was emotionally stable than to have a fiancée—a sweet and sexy daycare teacher nonetheless—by his side.

Tallulah let loose a long, slow breath and pinched the bridge of her nose. “I have no idea why I’m telling you all this.”

“I do.” Garrett thought of his time overseas with Ving and how they were always pulling pranks on each other to help loosen the tension. As he thought of the fake snake he’d put in his friend’s rucksack, one that damn near sent his comrade over the edge, he couldn’t help but chuckle. This half-cocked scheme he was currently cooking up might actually prove to be fun, as long as behind bedroom doors he kept things platonic—the last thing he wanted was for a sweet thing like her to get under his skin—then they’d both get what they wanted, and walk away satisfied.

“You do?” she asked.

“Yeah.” He pulled the tight silver band off his pinky and placed it onto her left index finger. “Because I’m your fiancé, that’s why.”

Dumbfounded, Tallulah stared at Garrett, hardly able to believe what he was suggesting.

“So what do you think?” he asked. “Are you up to pretending we’re engaged for the next month or so?”

“I don’t know.” She turned to look out the window, trying to wrap her brain around this unexpected turn of events. “This is all coming at me rather fast.”

“But you do think it will work, don’t you?”

She shook her head. *Was he for real?* “You can’t be serious.”

“Why not? It will get your ex off your back and give your parents the engagement they wanted.”

She turned back to him and all teasing was gone from his

expression. She took in his dark hair, slightly longer than military standards, and sapphire-blue eyes as they stared at her, waiting for her answer. Her gaze moved to the crescent scar running along his right cheek, but it did little to distract from his good looks. In fact it made him look rugged, sexy, a man who'd go to battle for what he believed in.

"Because I don't even know you," she said.

He glanced at his watch. "We have time."

"My brother..."

Garrett screwed up his handsome face, and it made him look so damn cute she nearly swooned. Thank God she was buckled in, otherwise she feared she'd drop to the floor, or float to the ceiling.

"Yeah, I know he's going to kick my ass. But if we can convince him we're madly in love then he'll back off." He squared his shoulders. "And if not, I'm pretty sure I can handle a beating." He snorted, and a grin curled his lips like was remembering something from the past. "He probably owes me one anyway. Besides, when this is all over and we tell him the truth, we'll all have a good laugh over it. In the meantime we can have some fun with him."

"And how do you suggest we convince him we're in love?"

He shifted closer, and the warm heat of his body wrapped around her in the most enticing ways. She tried not to stare at those broad shoulders and hard body of his, but by God, she was only human, and this guy had hot, thigh-melting sex written all over him. Not that she'd ever indulged in that kind of sex before. No, her experiences weren't anything to write home about. They were clumsy and awkward and something she endured, not enjoyed. But she'd read about hot sex before, and damned if she didn't want to experience it. Just once.

Too bad she wasn't a one-night-stand kind of girl. Her hand went to her stomach. If she was, then she never would

have considered following through with the pact she'd made with her ex—a pact that would lead to a quick marriage and possibly give her the one thing in life that she really wanted before it was too late.

“I guess the first thing you should do is try not to flinch when I touch you.”

Oh, Gawd...

“You’re going to touch me?” she croaked out.

That bad-boy grin on his face tightened her nipples. “Oh yeah, lots.”

Her pulse leapt as she thought about this guy touching her for the next few days, months even, with those huge work-roughened hands. She envisioned his palms sliding over her bare skin and pleasuring her in ways she'd only ever dreamed about.

“Tallulah,” he said, pitching his voice low. “Are you okay?”

“Yes,” she lied, trying for calm as she forced that one word past her lips. “So this touching, what will it involve?” she questioned, far more intrigued than she really should be, seeing as this was just a ruse and he had trouble written all over him.

“When we’re in public we’ll have to be touching all the time. You know, to convince everyone we’re lovers.”

“And when we’re not?”

“Then I’m afraid you’ll have to try to restrain yourself,” he teased with a smirk. “You’ll have to keep your hands to yourself behind closed doors.”

“That shouldn’t be a problem,” she lied. “You’re not my type.”

Ignoring her comment—and no doubt seeing right through it—Garrett took her hand in his and ran his finger over the inside of her arm. A warm shudder moved through her.

“That’s a good start,” he murmured.

“What?” she asked, her thoughts fragmenting as her skin came alive beneath his fingers.

“You didn’t flinch. In fact, you almost made me believe you liked it.”

“I...uh...just trying to do my part,” she said as his glance dropped to her mouth.

“Tallulah,” he murmured as she moistened her lips.

“Yeah?”

“I think you should touch me.”

Her eyes slid over his chest. “And here you accuse me of trying to rush things along,” she mumbled under her breath.

He grinned and placed her hand on his chest. She could feel the rhythmic beating of his strong heart beneath a layer of packed muscles. As though moving of their own accord, her hand trailed lower, taking pleasure in his hardness and the rippling waves along his washboard stomach. She stopped before she reached the buckle on his jeans, even though her fingers itched to go lower, to discover if he was just as hard...everywhere.

A low groan crawled out of his throat, the heat between them tremendous when she pulled her hand back and murmured, “That’s good, Garrett. Very convincing.”

“High school drama club,” he said without missing a beat and moved closer. As he pressed his arm and leg against hers in scintillating ways, everything inside her urged her to step out of character, to throw caution to the wind and have her wicked way with him. “Oh, and there’ll have to be kissing. Lots of kissing.”

She swallowed.

“We should probably practice that too,” he suggested.

While she sat there trying to wrap her brain around what he was suggesting, he dipped his head, his mouth hovering close.

“But—”

“You do want to get this right, don’t you?”

“Yes, but—”

Before she could finish, his lips closed over hers, taking full possession of her mouth. Heat thrummed through her bloodstream and, despite her better judgment, she found herself opening for him, welcoming the kiss and all he had to offer. Somewhere in the back of her mind she registered his soft moan, the increased pressure on her lips and the blazing fire licking over her thighs.

His tongue slipped inside to play with hers, and tension grew in her body, her heart racing wildly. One hand gently cupped her face and everything in the way he held her felt deeply intimate, highly erotic. Her body quivered, beckoning so much more from this hot, heroic soldier, a guy who went to war for his country and all the people in it.

The fresh scent of his recently showered skin curled around her, fueling her hunger in the most frightening ways. If the man kissed this good, she could only imagine how skilled he’d be between the sheets. And imagine she did...

A moment later Garrett eased away and she found herself leaning toward him as he inched back. Then she drew a ragged breath, forcing oxygen back into her brain before she did something she might regret later, something like ask him to initiate her into the mile high club.

“Another good start,” he said, running his tongue over his bottom lip as though savoring the taste of her.

“Garrett?” she asked, barely able to string together a coherent sentence.

“Yeah?”

“Why would you do this for me?”

He pushed deeper in to his seat and once again offered her that sexy lopsided smile that nearly turned her inside out. “Because I need a favor too.”

“Ah, I get it. You scratch my back and I’ll scratch yours.”

His grin widened, and his voice came out a little deeper when he said, "Sure. If that's what you want."

Want? Good God, he had no idea... Then again, he was a man of experience, so maybe he did.

"What I want to know is what I have to do in return."

"Pretty much the same as we'll be doing during the wedding. When we get back to Austin, I'll need you pretend to be my fiancée in order to lock down a security job I'm vying for. I'm in competition with a guy named Phillip McNeil. He's a stand-up guy, married, kids, the whole package. The kind of character the Committee is looking for."

"What will we have to do?"

"We'll have to attend a few dinners where you'll meet the Security Committee in charge of putting together the new team, and help me convince them we're in love and that I'm the better candidate. Nothing too serious. Besides, I'm sure we'll have the part nailed by the time we return."

Nervous anticipation moved through her as she thought about what she was getting into with Garrett Andersen. According to her brother and a few other soldiers she'd once heard talking about him, he would protect the brotherhood at all costs, and die for any one of his comrades. She also knew he helped his comrades train service dogs and put them into the hands of soldiers who were working to defuse munitions that had been left over from former training camps during the wars. But when it came to women he was a playboy with a different set of rules. Ones that didn't involve long term.

Not that she was looking for long term from him. She wasn't. But she couldn't deny that Garrett Andersen made her think of sex—hot, wild, rattle-the-headboard kind of sex that would forever rock her world. And Lord, that kiss. It was pretty damn incredible and left her dormant libido craving so

much more from him. She nibbled her lip and started to rethink this dangerous game they were playing.

Steeling herself, she pulled her hand away. "Maybe this isn't a good idea."

"It's your call, Peaches," he said, putting the ball in her court.

She took a long moment to mull things over. While she might have had a moment of weakness where her ex was concerned, understanding a quick marriage could give her the baby she always wanted—before her endometriosis got any worse and she ended up in surgery that would forever leave her barren—she knew she didn't love him or want to spend the rest of her life in a small town with preconceived notions of women's roles.

Then there were her parents. They were strict disciplinarians and she'd learned to do what was expected of her. She'd never been taught to stand up for herself and always tried to please them. Right now they wanted her to come home, because, like everyone else, they thought they knew what was best for her. But Tallulah loved her job in the city and was in line for the director's position. And as much as she hated to deceive them, this would give them the engagement they were looking for and help cement her reasons for staying in Austin. Her glance moved over Garrett, and to the way those perceptive eyes of his were watching her too carefully.

Garrett certainly wasn't the local boy they'd want to see her with, and her folks would undoubtedly praise the good Lord when she eventually told them it didn't work out. But in the meantime a pretend engagement with this seriously attractive guy would buy her some time until she really did find a fiancé. Plus, she wouldn't have to sit through a family intervention where everyone insisted it was time for her to come home and get married.

Oh, and there'll have to be kissing. Lots of kissing.

She exhaled slowly and continued to think things over. She considered her choices, and while one was less than appealing—she stole another glance at Garrett—the other held a promise of excitement. And kissing. And touching.

At least in public.

“Okay, Garrett.” Good God, she could hardly believe what she was about to do as she checked her watch. “Tell me everything. Starting with where you were born.”

A half hour before landing Garrett and Tallulah pretty much knew all the basics about each other's lives, all except the intimate details. But as long as he stuck to the plan behind closed doors—and he had every intention of keeping his distance with this sweet and innocent forever kind of girl—those private particulars would always remain a secret. He did, however, learn about her childhood and her best friend, Kat Stiller, who she couldn't wait to see. He also learned about her few failed relationships, and the director's job at the day care that she'd been coveting and working her butt off for. And oddly enough he'd come to realize that they both attended the same health club, and on the weekends she taught dance to the young and water aerobics to the old.

“So I'm thinking that just about covers it,” Tallulah said, drawing a feeling breath and taking a drink of water after their long flight and even longer conversation. “Hopefully we can just wing the rest.”

“There is one more thing I want to know” With curiosity getting the better of him, his gaze moved over her face.

“Oh, what’s that?”

“Why were you thinking of doing it?”

She frowned, because she knew exactly what he meant.

“It’s a long story.”

Even though he was treading on personal boundaries, and he’d just lectured himself on keeping his distance, he said,

“We still have time.”

A long pause, then a pained expression crossed her face.

“I want a baby more than anything in the world.”

“Oh,” he said for lack of anything else because he hadn’t seen that coming. “And you want to have this baby with your ex?”

“No, not really,” she murmured, then tossed her arms up in the air and gave a resigned sigh. “I guess you know everything else about me so you might as well know this too.” Her glance met his and she went on to explain, “You see, Garrett, I have endometriosis and two days ago the doctor told me that with every passing day my chances of conceiving are getting slimmer and slimmer.” She shrugged. “Jason’s a good guy, and I suspect he’ll be a good father. Chances of meeting someone, falling in love, getting married and conceiving in the next few months are pretty slim, so I just thought...”

“What about adoption?” he suggested, knowing she was adopted herself.

“I’m a twenty-five-year-old single woman. Not a great candidate.”

Garrett considered that a moment longer. “What about artificial insemination?”

“It’s expensive and doesn’t always work.” She became quiet, thoughtful for a moment. “Plus, I really want my baby to know its biological father. Maybe it’s because I never knew mine.” She shrugged, and added, “I guess that’s important to me.”

“I can understand that.”

“Then there’s the fact that my parents don’t believe in artificial insemination. They’re extremely religious.”

He nodded, knowing from his sister, Jenny that her soon-to-be in-laws were old school and deeply involved in the Catholic church. Which was one of the reasons they were having the wedding in the town’s century-old cathedral, the same one Tallulah’s parents had been attending for the last twenty-five years. Since it was only him, his sister and mother—and a handful of others, including Ving’s fellow comrades and a few of Jenny’s closest friends, it was much easier for them to fly to Louisiana for the wedding than for Ving’s huge, close-knit family to fly to Texas.

Then another thought hit and his chest tightened. While he was happy to help Tallulah out in the fiancé department, there were some things he just couldn’t do, and he needed her to be clear on that before they went any further.

He shifted, uncomfortable. “Listen, Tallulah about this baby. I can’t help you out with that. I’m not cut out to be a dad.”

Curious eyes met his. “Don’t worry, Garrett, I’m not looking for anything more than a pretend fiancé. And besides,” she said, her voice breezy, like she was trying to lighten his suddenly somber mood, “you already warned me to keep my hands to myself behind closed doors.”

He attempted a smile, thankful that she hadn’t probed deeper into his personal life, and they both knew where each other stood on the matter of children. “Just for the record,” he said, “I think you’d be a great mother.” With that he sank back in his seat and prepared for landing.

A short while later, they exited the plane and made their way to the luggage carousel. As Tallulah stood there, her nervous glance darting around all the people milling about, he slipped his arm around her waist, stepping into the role of adoring fiancé. He felt her tighten at first contact, then she

sagged into him and waved to her brother from across the airport as he stared at the two with equal measures of confusion and anger.

A scowl came over Ving's face. "Garrett," she murmured, her voice unsure.

"It'll be fine." He gave a reassuring squeeze. "If we can convince our siblings, then we can convince anyone."

Just then he saw Jenny coming from the washroom. She hurried to catch up to her fiancé, who was storming their way.

"Show time," Garrett said, putting on his best charming face.

"What the fuck do you think you're doing?" Ving asked, his glance bobbing back and forth between the two as he approached. In a familiar fashion he tented his fingers, cracking each knuckle in the process.

"Garrett," Jenny cried, and pushed past Ving to give her big brother a hug. "I'm so glad you're here."

Garrett let go of Tallulah, and returned Jenny's hug. "I wouldn't miss it for the world, kiddo."

She whacked him and gave a playful roll of sapphire-blue eyes that mirrored his. "Yeah, because I know how much you love weddings and believe in happily-ever-after."

He grinned, not bothering to correct her. But truthfully, it wasn't that he didn't believe in happily-ever-after. He just knew he could never be the guy a family needed him to be and he'd eventually let them down, the same way he'd let down everyone he'd ever cared for: his mother, his father, his sister, the family in Afghanistan. The army might have discharged him a hero, but he knew he was anything but.

"Which brings me back to my question," Ving said, pulling Garrett's attention back as he took a threatening step toward him. "What the fuck is going on?"

Jenny's eyes widened and she placed her hand on Ving's chest. "What's the matter with you?"

Ving looked at Jenny and his dark eyes softened. Garrett felt his heart pinch. There was no doubt that while his comrade was as tough as nails, he was a big pushover when it came to Jenny. "Your brother here had his arm around Tally."

Jenny spun around, her long, dark ponytail swinging wildly. "What? Really? What's going on?"

Garrett once again pulled Tallulah close and Ving snarled. Keeping the grin from his face, Garrett curled his arm around her shoulders and anchored her to his body in a show of possession. His pretend fiancée blinked up at him and when he saw something briefly move over those eyes of her—something that resembled heat—it took all his effort not to drag her to the nearest hotel to sate his need to taste her.

Jenny's eyes widened in delight as she watched the exchange. "You mean you two? Are you kidding me? When? How?" She whacked her brother again, her bony knuckles digging into his biceps. "Why didn't you tell me?"

Garrett's mind raced for a plausible explanation, but without missing a beat Tallulah came to his rescue. "Because you were going through your own whirlwind romance and this week is about you, not us."

Jesus, Tallulah might be an easy read, but when push came to shove she was quick on her feet and good with her words, making up for her misgivings. Damned if he wasn't impressed.

Garrett could feel Ving's hot gaze burning a hole in his plan. Unflinching, Garrett squared his shoulders and stood eye to eye with his comrade.

"I don't like it." Ving rubbed his palm over his shaved head and he shifted his weight from one foot to the other. "She's my kid sister."

Jenny spun around and glared at him. "I'm *his* kid sister,"

she countered and pointed at Garrett. "And he never had a problem with us hooking up."

"Yeah, but he's a...he's not a...he doesn't even want..."

As the implication of what he was and what he wasn't hovered over them, Tallulah piped in, "What he is, is a wonderful man, and the most attentive guy a girl could ask for. He's very in tune with my needs and you should see the way he is with kids." They exchanged a long look then she added, "He came to a little boy's rescue on the plane."

She'd noticed that?

She shifted closer. "He'll make an awesome father."

Oddly enough everything from the conviction in her voice to the way she gazed up at him, her eyes honest and sincere, had him wishing it was true. But he knew better.

Jenny clasped her hands and squealed in delight, and once again Garrett couldn't help but admire Tallulah's quick intelligence as she stood up for him. "You're engaged? Already?" She hugged Tallulah. "But then again who am I to talk. When you know it's right, you know it's right." She clasped Tallulah's hand and tugged her from Garrett. "Come on. Let's go grab your luggage and you can tell me all about it."

"Nope," Tallulah said. "Like I said, this week is about you, not me."

As the women walked away, Ving took a threatening step closer. "So help me, if you hurt her."

Garrett patted his old friend on the shoulder. "If I hurt her, you have my permission to kick my ass."

"I'll do more than kick your ass."

"And I wouldn't expect anything less. Now come on. How about I buy the groom a beer? You look like you could use one."

After collecting their luggage, Garrett and Tallulah climbed into the back seat of Ving's SUV. Jenny talked non-stop about the upcoming bridal shower, the dress fittings

scheduled for later that day, the bachelorette party, the private get together at the local pub later that night, and how she was so excited about the two of them hooking up. Every time she turned the attention to them, Tallulah turned it right back around again, and lucky for them Jenny was happy to talk about the wedding.

Ving cast him a glance in the rearview mirror and Garrett pulled Tallulah in close to drop a soft kiss onto her cheek. A shudder moved through her body, and no matter what she said about him not being her type, he knew she felt the sexual tension between them every bit as much as he did. He also knew better than to act on it.

“Do Mom and Dad know about this, Tally?” Ving asked.

Tallulah placed her hand on Garrett’s thigh, and her heat seeped through his jeans, damn near igniting his blood to boil.

“Not yet,” she said. “We thought we’d surprise them.”

Jenny beamed at Garrett. “Well, our mom is already at the hotel, and she’s going to be thrilled when she hears.” Just then Jenny’s cell rang and she fished it out of her purse.

As Jenny spoke excitedly into her phone, Garrett leaned in to Tallulah and lowered his voice for her ears only. “It might look odd to our friends if we get two rooms.”

“I guess I never thought that far ahead.” She nibbled her bottom lip and looked thoughtful for a moment. “Actually I planned to stay with my folks.”

“Then I guess I’ll stay there with you.” When she gave him an odd look, he explained. “People will expect that we’ll want to be close to each other.”

“You know they’ll want us in separate rooms.” The hand on his leg relaxed a bit, and as she bit her lip in thought, he suspected she had no idea it was drifting farther up his leg. He clenched his jaw when his blood began flowing hot and heavy, and his muscles tightened, one in particular. Wide eyes

blinked up at him and her nose crinkled. "Which is probably for the best, don't you think?"

"Yeah," he agreed, because they both knew this heat between them was explosive, and a locked door and soft bed might be all the spark they needed to ignite the short fuse.

Even though he knew they should sleep apart, he couldn't help but feel an unwise sense of disappointment. She was sweet, sexy, intelligent as hell, and all kinds of wrong for him, but that didn't stop him from wanting to take a small taste. One long, leisurely lick from head to toe.

Shit.

He worked to bank his desires, but his damn cock refused to obey. Maybe he never should have suggested this ruse, because keeping his hands to himself when no one was looking just might be harder than he ever anticipated.

The second Ving pulled his SUV into the driveway Tallulah's folks came out to meet her. Tamping down her anxiety, she climbed from the vehicle and rushed up the porch steps to give them a hug. She stole a quick glance around, half expecting to see her ex, Jason Landry, exiting through the swinging screen door behind them.

After they spun her around and did a thorough inspection to ensure the big city hadn't corrupted her, her mother looked past her shoulders to see Garrett coming her way. She tented her fingers. "You must be Jenny's brother. I can see the resemblance."

"That's not all he is," Ving murmured under his breath.

When her mom gave Ving a perplexed look, Tallulah rushed out. "Mom, Dad, this is Garrett Andersen. My fiancé." She turned to Garrett, "This is my mom and dad, Barbara and George Duncan."

Garrett came up the stairs to stand beside Tallulah, his hand outstretched to her father, who looked utterly skeptical, and maybe even a bit perturbed. Not that she could blame him. Garrett wasn't the type of guy they expected her to bring home. Then again, when this was all over, and they faked a breakup, her parents would be happy once again. No harm, no foul. Right? But then, wouldn't she be right back to where she was before this, with her family trying to convince her to move back home because they felt they knew what was best for her? She pushed the thought aside, deciding to cross that bridge when she came to it. Right now she didn't want to spend any more time agonizing over what it would eventually take to convince them otherwise.

Her mom's eyes widened and after shaking Garrett's hand, George glared at the two with obvious suspicion.

"Fiancé?" he asked, his gaze going back and forth between the two. "Now what is this all about, young lady?" He stared at Tallulah but she didn't miss the warmth in his eyes when they met hers.

"Yeah, that's what I want to know," Ving said, and Jenny gave him an elbow to the gut.

"We didn't want to steal Ving and Jenny's thunder," Garrett supplied. "So we kept things on the down low."

"Now that you've spilled the beans, we want to hear all about it," her mother said firmly, and Tallulah couldn't help but squirm under her scrutinizing gaze. "Come on inside. I'll put on the tea." She cast Garrett a harsh look. "I want to learn all about the man who is taking my daughter away." With an efficient clap, her mother began ushering the group inside.

"Jenny and I are going to check on the horses," Ving said, bailing, because he clearly felt a speech coming, every bit as much as Tallulah did.

With Garrett's hand on the small of her back, they

stepped inside the house and she watched the way he glanced around, looking at the baby pictures lining the walls as they walked the long length of the hall.

“You were a cute kid,” he whispered. When they reached the kitchen, he pulled her chair out for her. Tallulah caught the way her mother was eyeing them, her probing gaze assessing them both carefully. Garrett sat next to her, and since they’d only really just met, it was odd how comforting it felt just having him there, supporting her as she faced her folks and told them a bold faced lie.

Her mom steeped the tea and cut a loaf of banana bread, then placed it on the table. Her father sat at the head of the table and helped himself to a generous piece. As he chewed he kept his eyes on Tallulah, and she tried not to fidget under his inspection.

“So, you’re engaged,” her mother said, getting right to the point as she poured sugar into her tea cup and chased it with a spoon.

Tallulah accepted a cup and took a sip while Garrett added milk and sugar to his. “Yes, I thought you’d be thrilled.”

She looked pointedly at Tallulah and, never one to beat around the bush, she said, “And here I thought you were coming back home to stay.”

Tallulah placed her elbows on the table and began tenting her fingers. Garrett reached out, grabbed her hands in his and pulled them onto his lap.

He gave a reassuring squeeze. “She can’t come back now. She’s up for the director’s position at the day care. She’s been working so hard for this and I’m so proud of her.”

Her mother took a sip of her tea and stared at Garrett over the rim. “But this is where you belong, Lu. This is where your family is.”

Tallulah exhaled slowly, hating the double standards her

parents had for their two kids. But she also knew her folks had been getting on in their years when they adopted her and Ving, and their notions on family roles hadn't changed with the times. Men worked. Women stayed home. Nothing she could do or say would ever change their old-fashioned principals and standards.

"Shouldn't you be thinking about giving up work so you can stay home and have kids?"

"Mom, lots of people work and raise kids," Tallulah said carefully, not wanting to upset anyone. The truth was they only wanted what was best for her, and somehow thought they knew what that was.

"Well this is a much better place to raise a family than that dangerous city you're in."

"I won't let anything happen to her." Garrett put his arm around her in a protective manner, and she met his glance. She caught the possessive way he looked at her, and took a quick breath in a bid to remind herself this wasn't real. "Not that she needs my protection. She's an independent woman and can take care of herself."

Just then her father piped in and turned the conversation to Garrett, grilling him on his work and how he planned to take care of Tallulah now that he'd gotten out of the military.

He told them all about the job he was up for and when he finished Jenny and Ving returned and Tallulah was glad for the interruption.

"We're going to take off," Ving said. "We have some last minute things to take care of before our get together at The Hop Yard tonight."

Tallulah jumped from her chair. "Hang on. I need to get my suitcase."

Her mom set her cup down and narrowed her eyes. "I didn't think you'd be settling in to your old room until after the wedding."

Tallulah's stomach tightened, not liking the sound of this as her glance bobbed between her mother and father. She dropped back down into her chair, and Garrett reached out for her. "What's going on?"

"I gave your bedroom away to Aunt Jo and Uncle Bert. They just drove in for the wedding and are up there resting now."

Tallulah gave a casual shrug and tried to focus on a solution, a difficult task with Garrett's arm around her shoulders. The combination of his heat and enticing scent were melting her brain cells faster than a nuclear explosion.

"That's fine, I'll take Ving's old room," she said, knowing Ving and the rest of the bridal party were all staying at the hotel where the wedding activities were taking place.

"Afraid you can't do that, either." Her father's bushy gray brows knitted together over cloudy blue eyes.

She pulled a worried face and leaned forward in her chair. Garrett's arm fell to the small of her back, his fingers lightly brushing her sensitive skin in a manner that made her wonder how they'd feel moving over another part of her body. A slow burn worked its way through her bloodstream and settled deep between her legs. At least the two would have no problem convincing everyone there was heat between them, a real physical attraction.

"You gave that away too?" she croaked out, struggling to focus her scattered thoughts.

"Your Aunt Betty and Uncle Stan are here too." Apologetic eyes blinked rapidly. "We thought you'd be staying at the hotel with the rest of the bridal party," her mother added.

"I didn't bother to book a room." A nervous feeling settled in the pit of her stomach, because she suspected the hotel would be full by now. If she didn't do something fast she would have to bunk with the hot hunk of a guy sitting next to

her, a guy who continually made her rethink her position on one-night stands. "I guess there's always the sofa."

"I can't have one of my bridesmaids sleeping on the sofa. Don't worry, we'll find you a roommate," Jenny said, exchanging a private, knowing look with her, one that said her old-fashioned folks never needed to know that her roommate would be none other than her fiancé.

Her glance went to Garrett, and she noted the intense way he looked at her, his piercing baby blues full of heat as they moved over her face. The air around them charged, and her entire body tightened in a way it had never tightened before as warm shivers of awareness hurried down her spine. She bit the inside of her mouth, acutely aware of the sexy man beside her and all the delicious things they could do together. In an instant she knew sharing a room—a bed—with him would be a very, very bad idea.

Not because she didn't trust him, but because suddenly, she didn't trust herself.