

Fourteen years ago

A newbie waitress at the Vista del Mar Beach and Tennis Club, Sarah Richards still knew the number one rule for servers: Never spill hot coffee on a customer's lap.

But after less than a week at her new after-school job, she almost messed up. Big-time.

Sarah grabbed the hot glass pot with both hands to keep from upending it into onto the middle-aged guy waiting for java to go with his tiramisu. Her nerves, however, were tougher to steady as she stared through the wall-long window.

Where *he* leaned against the hood of his El Camino by the ocean. Rafe Cameron.

The pot searing her hands was almost as hot as the guy outside. Light from the big fat moon overhead glistened on his shaggy blond hair, which brushed the collar of his black T-shirt. Muscles stretched the cotton fabric. He was lean but toned from working construction after school and on weekends. No

matter how many times Grandma Kat told her eighteen wasn't grown-up yet, she saw how Rafe was already a man, mature beyond his years from having experienced a lifetime of hurt.

What was he doing outside? And how long would he be there?

A cleared throat brought her attention back into the fancy dining area with lit candles, clanking silver and, most importantly, big-tipping, wealthy patrons she couldn't afford to ignore.

"Sorry about that, Mr. Worth," she said, pouring his coffee, a good idea anyhow before she scalded her hands. "Is there anything else I can get for either of you?"

Ronald Worth was the big kahuna of Vista del Mar. His factory, Worth Industries, employed almost everybody in the town, including her parents and her grandmother. He was pretty much a hard-nosed boss from what she heard. But it was tough not to feel sorry for him right now as he sat having dinner with his little girl, all alone since his wife had died just over a year ago from a sleeping pill overdose.

Nobody knew if it was suicide or an accident, but there were lots of theories out there to pick from. And yeah, people were talking. Vista del Mar was such a tiny town, secrets were tough to keep.

She leaned down toward little Emma Worth, who couldn't be more than about ten or eleven. "Could I get you something else, sweetie? Maybe another scoop of ice cream since this one has pretty much melted all over your brownie."

Emma shook her head without raising her eyes. "No thank you."

Poor kid. The girl might have a reputation as Daddy's spoiled princess, but Sarah wouldn't trade places with her for even a second. She had her family—and maybe soon she would have the attention of the guy she'd just about given up hope would ever notice her.

Suddenly, she panicked. What if he left before she could get out there?

She straightened quickly. “If that’s all then, Mr. Worth, I’ll send someone over with your check.”

Backing away, she almost stumbled over a busboy clearing a table.

“Sorry, Quentin,” she apologized quickly before racing to find the manager in the break room so she could claim a seriously bad stomach flu.

Sure she was probably being silly rushing out to meet Rafe this way. He hardly seemed to know she existed even though they’d gone to school together all their lives. She could make a big fool out of herself here. But ohmigod, she would lay awake all night regretting it if she didn’t at least take a chance. Before she knew it, their senior year would be over and what if she never had the chance to find out if her crush was real?

Leaving early tonight cost her a promise to pull a Saturday morning breakfast stint—the kiss of death for tips—but it would be totally worth it if she finally, finally got Rafe Cameron to acknowledge she was alive.

She whipped off her apron and stuffed it into her backpack. Making tracks through the steamy kitchen smelling of boiled shrimp, she tucked her shirt in tighter, smoothed a hand over her black pants and chewed her lips to pinken them up. Too bad there wasn’t time to change into something other than her standard work uniform of a white shirt and black pants, but, well, she would make up for that at school on Monday by wearing her favorite denim miniskirt.

She pushed out through the back exit.

The cool Pacific wind hit her square in her flushed face. She tasted the salt air mixed with freedom on a crisp January breeze. She hadn’t been outside all day except to change classes, then had come straight to work. Sometimes she felt like her life was spent staring through windows at her awesome California beach town. She couldn’t remember the last time she’d felt the sand between her toes.

Tonight, that would change.

Shrugging into her sweater, Sarah jogged through the packed lot to where she'd seen Rafe parked on a bluff overlooking the shore. And there he was, still leaning against the hood like something straight out of one of the old James Dean movies her grandma watched. All bad boy, bad attitude that just screamed "reform me."

Sarah's stomach rolled faster than the waves. They shared the same homeroom teacher, but he hadn't seemed to know she existed other than passing her a lunch tray on pizza day two months ago.

Breathless, she slowed a few feet away and tried to look casual as she walked up to his car. "What are you doing here?"

"Giving you a ride home from work." He stared right back, unsmiling, his blue eyes locked on her face until her hand gravitated upward to check for stray hairs slipping out of her ponytail.

And then it hit her. He was here for her. Oh. God.

The palm trees rustled and the waves crashed while she searched for something cool to say back when she really wanted to break out a quick happy dance barefoot on the sand.

She trailed her fingers along the hood of his car. "What if I'd worked for another two hours?"

"Why are you out here then?"

Um, well, she would have to admit to coming outside just for him. "What if I already have a ride?"

"Fine then, I'll leave." He turned away.

"Wait. Don't go." She clasped his arm.

Sheetrock-hard muscles flexed under her fingertips. His skin was so hot it sent tingles up her hand, then showering throughout her whole body. Wow. Just... Wow.

She let go slowly, fingers curling into a fist to hold on to the feeling a little longer. "My feet hurt and I'd rather not wait for my grandmother. My parents' second car has a busted transmission. So yes, thank you. I'll accept with a smile."

“Good.” He nodded, slowly pushing away from his car. “I enjoy it when you smile, Sarah.”

And she enjoyed the way he said her name, low and rumbly, like the way distant thunder carried softly over the water. “I need to call my grandma and let her know she doesn’t have to come get me. She’ll be happy to turn in early, actually.”

“Okay then.”

Backing up for as long as she could without stumbling, she finally turned, running up to use a payphone by the tennis courts. If she went into the restaurant, her boss might figure out she wasn’t sick.

She stuffed down the twinge of guilt over the lost work hours—the lost wages. Her parents needed the money now more than ever since their second car finally gasped its last breath and went to that big car lot in the sky. They were all crossing their fingers that her dad’s truck would last long enough for them to save up for a replacement for her mom’s hatchback.

God, it was selfish of her to punch out early just to spend time with Rafe Cameron, to act like the carefree high school girl she couldn’t afford to be. Still, she couldn’t make herself stop. There was something about Rafe that tugged at her, a maturity and focus in his eyes she didn’t see in the other boys.

Five minutes later, she’d called Grandma Kat—and lied about who was driving her home after work since her grandmother always referred to him as that wild Cameron boy. Sarah didn’t agree. In her opinion, Rafe was more of a loner, a nonconformist.

But she would deal with her grandmother’s worries later. Right now, she was sitting in the passenger seat of Rafe Cameron’s El Camino and her family thought she was still at work.

For two more hours.

The scent of the ocean and surfboard oil drifted in through the window and she wondered when he found time for the beach. He worked more hours than she did. His tool belt bounced

lightly on the bench seat between them with the occasional thunk and rattle of wrenches colliding.

“Thanks for the ride.” She couldn’t resist asking, “What made you decide to pick me up?”

“I saw you walking home alone last night.” The dashboard lights illuminated the hard line of his jaw as he stared out at the two-lane coastline road. “It’s not safe.”

“My grandmother said the same thing, which was why she was coming to get me.” Grandma Kat had been mad, really mad when she figured out Sarah had walked home on her own, and Kathleen Richards didn’t get angry often. All the more reason to keep this drive a secret. “My parents work the night shift at Worth Industries and I hate to put other people out. It’s not that far to walk if I catch the bus. And Vista del Mar isn’t exactly inner-city crime central even in the summer.” More of a sedate seaside town, just north of San Diego if she needed a big-city experience. Which she didn’t.

She’d lived in Vista del Mar all her life and couldn’t imagine anywhere else she would ever want to be other than here with her family and the beach. A beach she didn’t get to see nearly enough of lately.

“Rafe, would you mind if we drove around for a while? I’ve been cooped up inside all day and I could really use the fresh air.”

“On one condition.”

Her stomach knotted as she thought of her grandmother’s warnings about Rafe’s wild reputation as a rule breaker. “What would that be?”

“Smile. Remember? I really like seeing you happy.”

Relief flooded through her and before she realized what had happened, she was grinning. She threw caution off faster than she whipped her confining hair tie from her ponytail.

Rafe just nodded and floored the gas pedal down the shoreline road.

* * *

Rafe steered his beat-up, piece-of-crap El Camino along the seaside road toward the highest bluff, Busted Bluff. People went there to make out, but the spot was his favorite for another reason. From there, he could look over Vista del Mar and imagine getting out of this dead-end town.

He had plans.

So what was he doing here, tonight with Sarah Richards? Hell if he understood. He only knew that all day long he hadn't been able to shake the image of her walking home alone last night. He'd followed her the whole way to her house to make sure she got inside safely.

Then he'd realized she never noticed him trailing her. That scared the hell out of him. What if he'd been a perv or murderer? He could have followed her right off the street and no one would have noticed.

His gut knotted.

Now here he was. Giving her a ride with gas he couldn't afford and a deep, deep need to watch the way her red hair whipped in the wind. To find out if the lip gloss she wore was flavored, to find out what she tasted like.

To see Sarah smile again.

Crap. This was a stupid idea.

She shifted in her seat, elbow hooked out the open window. The gusting breeze teased open the neck of her shirt, revealing a hint of curves and lace. His body tightened. No surprise. He'd been attracted to her since the first day of ninth grade when she came back from summer break with breasts.

Really bad idea, Cameron.

Sarah reached for the radio.

He stopped with a touch to the wrist. "It doesn't work."

Her gaze snapped straight to his, her eyes wide. Aware.

"Oh, okay." Her hand fell away. "I just thought some music would fill the silence. You don't talk much."

Tearing his gaze off her and back to the road, he hooked

his hand over the steering wheel. The feel of her soft skin still burned his fingers. “How about you do the talking for me?”

Good thing the January night wasn’t too cool or too hot, because his heater and A/C had long ago died, too, and a replacement was outside his budget.

“I’d like that. To talk to you, I mean.” She scraped her long hair from her face. “We, uh, don’t have to go straight to my house. Grandma Kat isn’t expecting me to check in for a while.”

Alarms jangled in his head again. “Do you think it was smart to tell me that? Nobody’s expecting you and nobody knows who you’re with.”

“What makes you think no one knows I’m with you?”

He just looked at her.

“Okay, right.” She scrunched her nose. “My parents would be...upset that I’m riding with you rather than at work or at home studying.”

He should probably tell her to opt for studying next time and stay away from him. His father had brought him up to believe a real man protected women. Except in the end there hadn’t been anything they could do for his mom.

His fists tightened around the steering wheel. “You should be more careful.”

“Like not walking home alone. I get it.” She rolled her eyes with her signature redheaded spunk he silently applauded. “Are you here to give me a ride or a lecture?”

“Both, if you need them.”

That hushed her up, but not for long, he would bet. Sarah Richards always had something to say, an observation, an opinion. She never let anyone or anything get her down, and he liked that about her. So he waited...

She drummed her fingers on the seat between them. Close. But not touching. “Eighteen years in the same town, twelve grades in the same schools and this is the first time we’ve really talked. How strange is that?”

“We’ve talked, twice, as a matter of fact.”

“Hah,” she laughed once and shook her head. “You mean in the second grade when I fell off the monkey bars and you said, ‘Get up and quit crying, you big baby’? I hardly think that counts as a conversation. Especially since my wrist was broken. You’re lucky I didn’t punch you.”

He remembered the day well. How freaked he’d been seeing her hurt. After school, he’d beat up that little snot Quentin Dobbs, who’d shoved her off the monkey bars. “I made you quit thinking about the broken wrist for a while.”

“Hmmm... I hadn’t thought of it that way. Fair enough. You get double conversation points for that one. And what about the other conversation? Passing me a lunch tray doesn’t count, by the way.”

He hadn’t meant to bring up the other time. Since she already knew the answer anyway, he said, “When we were fifteen, you spoke to me at my mother’s funeral.”

Her fingers stopped drumming. The air went still as he remembered that day. She’d squeezed his hand, tucking a tissue into his fist so no one would see. Her heart was too damn big for a world where people took advantage of anyone who wasn’t always checking their back. His chest went tight.

Sarah ducked her face into his line of sight. “I’m surprised you remember anything from that day. I can’t imagine a world without my mom or dad, or even my grandma.”

Rafe stared unblinking at road leading up to the bluff. He’d spent a lot of hours there looking out over Vista del Mar, getting a bird’s-eye view of the vast gap between the haves and the have-nots. Lights burned from inside thousands of little stucco houses crammed together. Then a handful of mansions glowed in large, exclusive lots on the beach. The Worth mansion, the largest of all, was lit up like a football field.

Deep in his gut, he knew he would own one of those waterfront estates someday. And he would always regret that he couldn’t have given his mother that favorite view of hers to look out over one last time.

His chest went tighter. “Can we talk about something else? I shouldn’t have even brought it up.”

“Of course. I’m sorry.” She settled back into her seat.

Sarah Richards was too nice. He should turn the car around and take her straight home. He didn’t need to complicate his life, especially not now, so close to graduation. So close to kicking off his plans, to make something of himself, to pay his mother back for all the sacrifices she made for him. Sacrifices that cost her life.

And yet, as he pulled the car to a stop on top of Busted Bluff, he couldn’t keep the words from falling out of his mouth. “Want to sit in the back of the truck and check out the stars?”

Sitting on a worn-soft quilt in the back of Rafe’s El Camino, Sarah hugged her knees to her chest. Vista del Mar twinkled in the night, half-awake, half-asleep. Not in some big-city way, though, but lights from houses and families. A breeze blew in off the ocean, lifting her hair and teasing her nose with the sea-salty scent she’d been craving all day.

Wearing a jean jacket as the temperature dropped, Rafe settled beside her. He carried two cans in his hand, labels eclipsed by his big grip.

Unease skittered up her spine. She scooted away, the blanket snagging on the rusty rasp of metal. “Um, no thank you. I don’t drink.”

Chuckling softly, he set the can beside her. A Dr Pepper.

“Oh, sorry.” She felt the flush heat her skin. “I didn’t mean to judge you.”

He rolled the soda can between his palms. “I don’t have the luxury of getting busted for a DUI. My dad can’t afford some rich lawyer to get the case thrown out on a technicality.”

“Maybe in that sense being poor isn’t such a bad thing—” she popped open the can “—when it teaches us to be responsible for our own actions.”

He pinned her with a piercing blue stare. “Is that what you tell yourself when you’re walking home alone in the dark

because your parents can't afford to get a busted transmission fixed? Did I get that guess right?"

"Negativity breeds more negativity." She sipped her soda to avoid sinking too deep, too fast into his amazing eyes.

"Okay then, how about this?" Hand still holding his soda, he gestured to the city skyline as if toasting Vista del Mar. "I'm going to own this town one day."

Such a deep conviction rang in his voice she could almost believe something so outrageous was possible. "I imagine Mr. Worth won't like that much."

"I imagine he won't." His Dr Pepper can pinged and dented under his tightening fist. "He'll just have to get over it."

Rafe made no secret of how much he resented the town mogul. How he blamed Ronald Worth for his mother's death from COPD, insisting particulates from the factory killed her. Sarah shivered. It scared her to think the plant might not be up to the right codes. Her parents worked there, after all. Her grandmother was Mr. Worth's personal assistant. He might be a tough businessman, but she couldn't bring herself to believe he could be downright dishonest. Evil even.

Maybe if Rafe could see a different side to Mr. Worth, see the person underneath the wealth, then he could find some peace about his mother's tragic death.

"Mr. Worth was in the restaurant tonight with his daughter, Emma," she said carefully, watching his eyes for any sign of impending explosion. "They were so quiet through their whole meal, and they both kept looking at the empty chairs. Her brother's in boarding school now, and her mom... Well, you understand how tough it is for Emma right now, getting over her mother's death."

His fist crushed the can. He flung it away so hard it thudded against a tree, then rolled off the edge of the bluff.

She touched his arm lightly. "I'm sorry. I didn't mean to upset you."

"You're right to feel sorry for the kid, losing her mom that way, then being stuck with a cold jerk for a father."

Okay, making him sympathize with Ronald Worth was a lost cause. Time to move on to safer territory before she sabotaged her time with Rafe.

“Tell me more about how you’re going to buy up the town.” She grinned at him, scrunching her nose. “I like it when you smile.”

He raised one eyebrow at her repeat of his words. “Are you flirting with me?”

“Honestly?” She exhaled hard. “I’m too nervous to flirt.”

“I make you nervous?” Leaning toward her, he flattened a hand just behind her. Close. Really close. “Good. I should.”

She drew in his soap-fresh smell. Wanted to lean into him and find out what it felt like to have his mouth on hers.

What if she didn’t have another chance? “And yet you prove yourself to be nice with all these warnings.”

“But I have you here, parking with me.” Each word brushed warm breath over her in an almost kiss.

“What do you intend to do about that?” she asked, she wanted...she dared.

Silently, he skimmed the back of his knuckles down her arm. Even with her shirt and sweater muting his touch, a tingle spread through her. All her nerve endings pulled tight and hot. He linked his fingers with hers and raised her hand.

Rafe pressed his lips against the racing pulse in her wrist, right over where she’d broken it in the second grade. “I’m sorry I wasn’t nicer to you that day on the playground.”

Her hand shook. God, all of her insides quivered from the feel of his mouth on her. “You’re forgiven.”

“Thanks, Sarah...” His smile caressed the sensitive inside of her wrist.

Then his hands stroked higher, up her arms until he cupped the back of her neck. Finally, thank goodness finally, his head dipped toward her, blocking out the moon and all of Vista del Mar until it was just her and him in their own little world.

He slanted his mouth against hers, more gently than she would have expected. He was such a guy of tough angles,

attitude and even bitterness. But right now, she felt all the good in him she'd hoped—known—was there.

The stroke of his tongue along the seam of her lips was the only encouragement she needed. She locked her arms around his neck and committed her all to the kiss. She tested the glide of his hair through her fingers, mussing it the way she'd imagined doing so many times. This was the Rafe in her dreams, the man in her diary fantasies.

She'd told herself it was just a high-school crush. A really long-held high-school crush that only her grandmother had guessed. He wasn't her type. He wasn't even attainable, this brooding guy who only went out with girls who dressed all in black.

But she didn't want to think about the other people he'd dated. She didn't want to think about her grandmother's warnings to set her sights on another boy.

Tonight, Rafe was here with her. Kissing her. Stroking up and down her back in a way that sent goose bumps prickling along her skin. Making her ache to press closer and demand more from the kiss, from the moment, from him.

The buttons of his jean jacket pressed into her flesh as she burrowed closer. Her hands parted his coat and twisted in his T-shirt.

And then suddenly cool air was rushing between them. Rafe had pulled away. His chest pumped fast, his hand heavy on her shoulder. It was like he was keeping distance between them, but couldn't totally let her go.

She struggled to get her bearings, but the lights of Vista del Mar swirled on the horizon. She loosened her hold on his T-shirt and smoothed the wrinkles she put in the body-warmed cotton.

Oh, my. Muscles.

His low growl of pleasure rumbled under her fingertips. Her nails dug in lightly.

"Ah, kitten, this isn't smart," he said softly, hauling her against his chest anyway.

He was breathing every bit as fast as she was. His heart hammered under her ear. She swallowed hard against the kick of relief. The crazy way she felt wasn't one-sided. He wanted her, too.

She might be reckless for coming here with him. Her grandmother would chew her out, lecturing her into infinity if she found out.

But she couldn't ignore the hopeful voice whispering in her head that maybe all her late-night fantasies about Rafe, about them together, could come true. Sure they were young, but she knew deep inside they were meant to be together. She could help him follow those dreams, be by his side every step of the way.

She understood all the hard work that went into making it in this town. God, did she ever understand. He needed her, whether he realized it or not.

So for his sake as well as her own, she was here. If it all worked out for her and Rafe, then the risk would have been well worth taking.

And if it didn't?

She refused to think that way. Tonight was the start of a future with Rafe and she wouldn't let anything stand in her way with keeping him right here in her arms.

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Vista del Mar, California—14 years ago:

Whoever decided flowers made the perfect Valentine's Day gift never spent backbreaking hours at a greenhouse shoveling manure.

Muscles shouting, Rafe Cameron scraped the remaining muck from the truck bed and walked to the pile five feet away behind the Worth family's glassed nursery. Sweat soaked his back and beaded his brow even in the fifty-five degree February weather. He'd ditched his pullover straight away, good thing since now his T-shirt and jeans were caked in filth.

But he was lucky to find a job to make extra money before school since afternoons were already filled with work at the construction company. Money was tight and he needed the additional cash to treat Sarah to a real Valentine's Day, a dinner out at that new fancy place in town, Jacques'. Not some cheapskate date like the ones they'd gone on over the past month.

Ice cream at the beach—then making out.

Sodas while driving around—followed by making out.

Free concert at the park—and more making out.

Rafe speared the shovel into the pile and leaned on the wooden handle to catch his breath. Hell, it was a wonder he had time for a girlfriend to give flowers to, anyway. He hadn't meant to start dating Sarah Richards, but then he'd kissed her that night a month ago when he'd picked her up from her job waitressing at the snobby Beach and Tennis Club.

Now here he was, working for that scumbag Ronald Worth, the richest dude in Vista del Mar. At least he didn't have to see Worth. Technically, he'd gotten the job from Worth's gardener, Juan Rodriguez.

Still, his senior English teacher would call this short-term job the ultimate in "irony" since he'd always sworn nothing would make him kowtow to Worth's millions. Except he'd started dating Sarah, which changed a lot of things fast.

Funny what a guy would do for a girl, but then it must run in his genes. His dad had sure worked his tail off to pay medical bills piled higher than the fertilizer reeking up the morning air... not that it had mattered in the end since she'd died anyway. Hannah. His mother. And now his dad had started up a *friendship* with Penny.

Rafe threw back his head and stared at the cobalt-blue morning sky until the sun burned away the lame moisture in his eyes.

Focus on the right now. Besides money for a date, he needed a proper Valentine's bouquet to give Sarah when she got off work tonight. The job was doubly perfect in that Mr. Rodriguez had offered to wrap up some flowers as part of the pay.

The gardener—a middle-aged, Zen kinda dude—clapped him on the back. "*Niño*, you have worked enough this week. Go shower up before you are late for school. As I tell my little Ana, education is important."

"I agree, sir." His dad hammered the same thing into his head often enough.

"The flowers of your choice will be wrapped and waiting with floral tubes of water on their stems. But make sure you keep them cool, in your refrigerator when you go home to shower."

"Thank you for helping me out with this job and letting me

come in so early.” He peeled off the disgusting glove and shook the older man’s hand. “I won’t forget it.”

“No thanks are necessary. You are a hard worker. Do the same favor for someone else someday. That is how the world should move, people helping each other out, helping each other find fulfillment and happiness in the moment.” Rodriguez reached into his pocket and pulled out a check.

Rafe stared at the Worth Industries label scrolling across the top, a company that had once carried his parents on their payroll, a company that fired his parents unfairly, taking away their income, their health insurance, their future.

He fought hard against the urge to crumple the slip of paper. “I won’t forget.”

Damn straight, he had a long memory, as Ronald Worth would one day find out.

Rafe’s hair was wet and she wanted to touch it.

In the high school parking lot, Sarah sat in the front seat of Rafe’s El Camino, making the most of the final five minutes before the bell rang. Her fingers itched to stroke over his damp, swept-back hair, a darker shade, almost brown when saturated with water. Threading her fingers through his thick hair was such a turn-on.

Okay, everything about Rafe was a total turn-on.

Happiness sang through her veins. It was the best Valentine’s Day ever and she wanted to soak in every second. Even though it was basically a day like any other at Vista del Mar High, everything seemed crisper, brighter. Details, she wanted to remember each and every one.

A sophomore couple wove through cars, arms around each other in spite of the ban on PDAs on school property. A trio of basketball cheerleaders raced past, carrying boxes of heart-shaped lollipops for a Valentine’s Day fundraiser.

Officer G drove his cruiser slowly in front of the brick school, always on the lookout for drugs. And if he couldn’t find those, he seemed just as content to nab anybody going two miles per hour over the speed limit. Yep, it was a school day like any

other—except school wasn't half as boring these days. Since Rafe. She snuggled deeper into the seat that smelled like Rafe... and something else.

Frowning, she sniffed again, confused by what teased her nose. "Your car smells like perfume."

He raised an eyebrow, lazy, slowlike. "Are you accusing me of cheating on you? Because honest to God, Sarah, I don't know when I would find the time."

"Are you accusing me of being jealous?" And maybe she was a little. The thought of him being with anyone else made her chest hurt.

"I don't have time for games either, Sarah." His blue eyes went sort of cold.

Rafe sure didn't have much of a sense of humor, but he'd said one time that it worked out okay since a smile from her chased away his bad mood.

So she smiled now, enjoying the way she could make him happy. "And yes, I also know you don't have time for another girl."

"Good." He smiled back.

She gave into temptation and skimmed her fingers over his damp hair. She still couldn't believe she had the right to do this anytime she wanted. A shiver of excitement skipped down her spine. His blue eyes lit with a look she recognized well from make-out sessions on Busted Bluff.

Swallowing hard, she pulled her hand away before they started necking in the high school parking lot and got busted for real—and not on the bluff. "I was just curious if maybe your dad used your El Camino for a date."

His grin faded along with the light in his eyes. "He didn't use my truck and he doesn't date."

"Not even Penny?"

"They're friends and they spend time together, but it's not really dating," he insisted with too much force.

Abruptly, he opened his door and stepped out into the parking lot packed with teenage-style wheels and students rushing toward the concrete steps.

Rather than wait for him to open her door the way he always insisted on doing, she leapt out after him, hauling her backpack hooked on her elbow by one strap. Guilt stung and blood rushed to her face. She shouldn't have been so pushy. But he didn't talk about himself much and she wanted to get closer, to understand him better.

Sarah met him in front of the hood, dropping her backpack to the ground so she could hold his face in her hands. "I'm sorry."

"Don't apologize," he said brusquely.

Her fingers slid away from his cheeks. She leaned back against the car watching him go all moody on her, and she sensed a smile alone wasn't going to chase away his frown.

She wanted to tell him to lighten up and enjoy Valentine's Day. But right now wasn't about her. It was about him. "It must be tough seeing your dad with somebody else."

He stayed quiet, his shoulders tensed and braced under his denim jacket.

"I can't imagine how I would be if something happened to my mom or my grandmother." Even thinking about it made her throat close up for a second. Sure his mom had died three years ago, but she wasn't sure a person could ever totally get over losing a family member. At least she would have people to turn to for comfort and sharing memories if someone she loved died. "You don't have a lot of people to depend on since your mom passed."

His stony jaw flexed as if he was chewing over her words. "Sorry doesn't mean much when you turn right around and do the same thing all over again."

Anger edged aside her sympathy. She came by her red hair honestly, with a temper to match. Sometimes she could control it, sometimes not. She clenched her teeth together for a second, holding back the urge to snap at him.

Three heartbeats later, she took a deep breath. "You're being grouchy because I upset you. I really am sorry, and if you knew me at all you would realize that I didn't mean any harm. I was just trying to help."

He hooked a finger in the loose silky scarf looped around her neck and tugged her closer. “Is that an offer to soothe my hurting heart?”

“Argh!” She punched his shoulder, temper winning out. “God, Rafe. Don’t be a jerk. It’s Valentine’s Day. And I’m trying to be understanding here, but Valentine’s Day is supposed to be all about the girlfriend.”

“You’re really pretty when you get fired up like that.”

His words stopped her tirade dead in its tracks.

“Oh,” she said. *Brilliant.*

He eyed her with that steamy look that sent shivers up and down her spine until she ached to climb in the back of his El Camino and make out on a blanket under the stars. And just that fast, he clamped his hands around her waist and plopped her down to sit on the hood of his car. *Yum!*

The chatter and revving engines in the parking lot faded as her world zeroed in on Rafe. What would his hands feel like against the bare flesh under her sweater? Under her bra. They’d had some heavy-duty make-out sessions and he’d touched her—there—with her clothes between them, not that he would have been able to miss just how crazy he made her as she went all tight from his touch. Her breasts tingled even now just thinking about all the time they’d spent at Busted Bluff.

Her skin went hotter than from any embarrassed flush. He stepped closer until his legs pressed against hers, denim to denim. He could be a model in one of those bad-boy faded jeans commercials and she would buy out the store. Her emotions were all roller coaster careening inside her, but then that seemed pretty much the norm around Rafe.

She leaned forward, nibbling her bottom lip in anticipation.

Thump. The sound echoed, jolting her upright. She looked left fast—at Quentin Dobbs from English class and work.

Quentin’s backpack dragged along the side of Rafe’s El Camino. “Sorry. Didn’t mean to scratch your paint.”

Rafe angled away, placing his body between her and Quentin. “Really, Dobbs, do you think I would even notice?”

“Yeah, right, I guess so.” He glanced from Sarah to Rafe,

then back again. “Bell’s gonna ring in a second. You don’t want to get a detention and be late for work at the restaurant. See you inside.”

She watched him walk away, feeling bad about things she couldn’t change.

Rafe draped his arm over her shoulder. “He has a crush on you.”

“I know.” She pulled her eyes off her classmate and back to Rafe. “But it’s harmless. He’s a nice, good-looking guy. He’ll find somebody else.”

“Nice, good-looking guy?” He stared down at her intently. “Maybe I’m the one who should be jealous.”

As if. “Do you see me wearing his school ring?”

“You’re not wearing mine, either.” His jaw flexed again so hard she worried he would crack a tooth over the fact that he didn’t have a high school ring to give her.

“Stop with the money thing, okay? I’m with *you*. The day you see me wearing his ring—” she rolled her eyes, certain that would never happen “—then you can worry.”

That night, Rafe stood on the front doorstep of Sarah’s mustard-yellow stucco house, flowers behind his back, his jaw just about on the ground. “You look amazing.”

And she did. Her red hair was loose, how he liked it most. She’d curled it, though, until it danced all around her face, on her shoulders and down her back the way he wanted to touch her. She wore a silky dress the same shade of green as her eyes, like the leaves on the exotic plants in the greenhouse. Over her shoulders, she had a black sweater with some kind of silver threads in it that winked like the stars.

She was all prettied up and as much as he enjoyed looking at her, he hated that his change in plans tonight might disappoint her. But he didn’t have any choice. For a minute, though, he just wanted to memorize the smile on her face.

Her grandmother—the old battle-ax didn’t like him, which chapped his hide since she seemed to like everyone else in town—stood behind her granddaughter with narrow eyes and a

tight frown. “Have her home before midnight. Just because her parents work the late shift doesn’t mean she can run around town doing whatever she wants.”

“Yes, ma’am.” He put on his best manners, for Sarah’s sake.

Grouchy granny Kathleen Richards hugged her granddaughter, whispering something in her ear. No doubt something bad about him. Kathleen worked as Ronald Worth’s assistant, so she wasn’t particularly high up on Rafe’s list of favorite people, either. But he would do whatever it took to wrangle his way into her good graces since that was the key to Grandma Kat loosening the reins when Sarah wasn’t at work.

The two Richards women kept their heads close together. Kathleen’s was the same color of red but cut short and with some silver in it, kinda like the threads in Sarah’s sweater. Finally, Grandma Kat finished whatever it was she had to say and stepped back.

He pulled his left hand out from behind his back, with a pink tulip in his fist. “For you, ma’am. Happy Valentine’s Day.”

Kathleen’s green eyes lit with surprise, then suspicion. Still, she smiled politely enough. “Thank you, young man. That’s very thoughtful of you. But you still have to have her home by midnight.”

Nodding, Rafe laughed lightly. “Of course.”

Sarah stepped out on the front porch, closing the door behind her. “Sorry about that. Grandma Kat is just overprotective.”

“I’m glad you have someone watching out for you when your parents are working late.” True enough. Between him and Grandma Kat, they made sure Sarah didn’t do something reckless like walk home by herself from work.

“Yeah, well, she’s never been the kind of person to hide what she’s feeling.” Sarah tugged the sweater around her arms, the night breeze lifting her curls. “She may be feisty, but she’s up front and honest.”

“Like her granddaughter.” Although thank God the granddaughter seemed to like him more than the grandmother.

“Thank you. I’ll take that as a compliment.”

She tugged the tie that he’d borrowed from his dad. His dad’s

only jacket hadn't fit though, so Rafe was stuck with just a shirt and work khakis to go with it.

"As long as you're smiling, Sarah, I'm good with however you want to take it." He watched the way her green eyes grinned right along with her mouth. He lost track of how long he stared while the porch swing creaked in the wind.

Then she tipped her head to the side, curls swaying to the side. "What else is behind your back?"

He pulled his fist around in front of him, clutching the bouquet full of flowers, most of which he didn't even know the names of, but it looked like a burst of color with pinks, yellows, purples and reds. It was freaking huge and he probably owed Mr. Rodriguez extra work for all of this. But he wasn't one bit sorry when he saw the way Sarah's eyes lit up.

"Oh, Rafe!" she squealed and her feet did a speedy, impromptu tap dance on the wooden porch. She gave him a quick kiss, then gathered up the flowers to her nose, inhaling deeply.

She moaned with a pleasure that made his groin pull tight as he imagined other ways to bring the kittenish sound from her throat. Or maybe it was the kiss that sent his pulse skyrocketing. Either way, he was one uncomfortable dude.

"Oh, Rafe!" she said again with an obvious excitement that couldn't be missed or faked. "These are amazing. I can't believe you did this, and ohmigosh, you are such a good secret keeper since you didn't even give me a hint all day."

"I'm glad you're happy."

"Very much so." She smiled at him over the flowers, the porch light playing with the hints of gold in her red hair. "Is this what I smelled in your car this morning?"

"You've got me there."

She scrunched her nose. "I can't believe I was such a jealous brat."

"I would feel the same if I thought you were seeing someone else." Rafe couldn't shake the image of how Quentin Dobbs had looked at her. He knew she wouldn't lie to him, but still. The guy liked her and didn't make any secret of it even though the whole world knew Sarah was dating Rafe.

Possessiveness pumped through his veins. Not smart. He prided himself on being calm, focused.

Sarah put her flowers on the porch swing as carefully as she placed an expensive dinner on the table at work. “I have something for you, too.”

“You didn’t have to do that. I seem to recall someone with the most amazing red hair and a smoking hot body telling me—just this morning—that Valentine’s Day is for girls.”

She flicked her hair over her shoulders with a sass that never failed to turn him inside out.

“And this girl wanted to get you something.” She reached into her purse and withdrew a small gold gift bag. “Hope you like it.”

He plucked through all the tissue paper, decorative white and clear, both flecked with gold to match the bag. He and his dad exchanged gifts on Christmas and birthdays, but they usually passed them over to each other in the plastic store bag. He hadn’t had anything wrapped up like this since before his mom died.

Rafe pushed aside the last of the paper and found...“A money clip?”

Fat lot of use that was going to get. But he smiled anyway, fast, so as not to hurt her feelings.

“It’s for all the millions you’re going to make.” She pulled the gold money clip from his hands and hooked it on his tie playfully. “And there’s something else in there, too. Something little and maybe kinda silly, but I thought you would enjoy it.”

He stuffed his hand inside, found something small and metallic. He pulled out...a Matchbox car, a black Porsche. Now that made him smile for real. She’d remembered how he talked about dreaming of owning one and driving it right down Main Street so fast that Officer G wouldn’t even be able to catch him.

Rafe closed his fingers around the toy car and leaned forward to kiss her, lingering, knowing he should pull back for a bunch of reasons. Number one reason being that Battle-Ax Granny was on the other side of the door. But he’d been thinking about Sarah all day—and it had definitely been a long day that started way too early. So yeah, he wanted to take a few extra seconds

to enjoy how soft her lips felt against his, the way she sighed as she kind of melted against his chest.

Her purse thudded to the porch and her sweater slid away. Her fingernails dug into his shoulders in a way he was starting to learn meant she was every bit as into this as he was. He cupped her neck to hold on to not just her, but the kiss a little longer. Fiery red curls brushed against the back of his wrist, softer than anything he could remember feeling. His hands itched to tangle up in her hair, have it all over him. Have her all over him. His blood pounded in his ears, demanding *more, more, more*.

His hands started shaking from restraint. He needed to cut this short before he lost control right here on her front porch, for crying out loud.

Pulling back, he sketched his fingers down Sarah's creamy smooth cheek. "Thank you. For both gifts. They're great. You're great."

And he really would have been wiser to leave her alone because he didn't have a clue where they could take this relationship once they graduated. But for tonight—for Valentine's Day, for Sarah—he would put the future aside and live in the moment. The way she did.

Sarah raked her fingernail along the toy Porsche's wheels, spinning the tiny tires. "Okay then, I guess we'd better get going or we'll be late for our reservation at Jacques'."

Damn it.

He'd forgotten the crummy news for a few minutes, distracted by her smile. By her mouth. By her.

When he'd come home to shower up after the greenhouse job, he'd found the power cut off in his house. He'd called his dad at work, and Bob had said he was late with the bill but would figure out a way to pay it on Monday. They would just have to take cold showers for the weekend. All would be fine.

But Rafe had known all wasn't *fine*. His dad was still trying to pay off the medical bills three years after Hannah died. From what Rafe could tell, his dad was barely paying the interest on the loans. Forget about making a dent in the principal.

Standing in the cold kitchen, Rafe had held the Worth Indus-

tries check in his hand, hating Ronald Worth all over again for the numerous ways he'd screwed up the Cameron family's lives. But at least today Worth's money could achieve something positive. Rafe had told his dad he had the extra cash and he would pay the power bill after school on his way to work at the construction company. A quick trip to the bank, and he'd had the money in hand to pay the electric company—Worth's checks were always honored on the spot at the bank, the teller had assured him.

At least he'd still had the flowers to give Sarah. Although it felt like poor consolation as he looked into her pretty glittering green eyes, realizing he couldn't even give her half of what she deserved...

Not tonight. And not even a few months from now when they both graduated.

But first he had to break the bad news to Sarah about their dinner plans.

* * * * *

Rafe & Sarah—Part 3

Vista del Mar, California—Fourteen years ago

Checking her watch out of the corner of her eye, Sarah held her notepad in her hand, waiting for the five customers at patio table seven to make up their minds. Jeez, it was nine forty-five, for crying out loud, nearly the end of her shift and she was stuck waiting for them to decide who ordered what of the umpteen specially made dishes she'd brought to their table.

And yeah, she was getting antsy to punch out so she could go home and turn in early. Tomorrow, she and Rafe both had the day off, which never, never happened. They'd been lucky to find any time together over the past month.

Valentine's Day hadn't gone according to plans. But she was glad Rafe hadn't wasted a lot of money splurging on an expensive restaurant. She worked with fancy foods galore at the Vista del Mar Beach and Tennis Club. Honest to goodness,

she preferred the simpler pleasures of life. She would take Grandma Kat's grilled cheeseburgers on a picnic blanket over pan-seared sea bass in a ritzy hot spot any day of the week. And the burgers cost a lot less.

Rafe had been flat broke on Valentine's Day because he'd paid the electric bill for his dad. Not that Rafe had told her the reason. She'd learned later from his father when Bob had thanked Rafe in front of her. Rafe had been embarrassed.

Sarah had been touched.

What an amazing guy she had, someone who would help his father out that way. So many boys at school expected money and cars just to be given to them without putting forth any effort. She saw too many overprivileged teenagers at work as well.

Like tonight.

Teenage vacationers on spring break were *the* worst. They thought it was their right to order her around because their daddies gave them flashy gold cards. Well, some things in life couldn't be bought at any price.

She hoped that message was getting through to Rafe, so he would quit trying to spend so much money on her. Honestly, she just wanted more time with him. And she would get that as soon as she finished her darn shift at table seven.

The current jerk in question pointed to his plate of prime rib with juice as red as his sunburned face. "This isn't what I ordered. I wanted the pan-seared sea bass."

She looked down at her order pad and saw clearly written prime rib. In fact, nobody at the table had even mentioned the sea bass until now. Hadn't mentioned it until they saw Mr. Worth at the table next to them get his when he came in from working late.

Mr. Worth always got the five-star treatment since he owned the town. But hey, it was her job to serve, much easier

when the diner was someone like Mr. Worth who was always polite, even if he was stuffy.

“I’ll swap this out for the sea bass right away.” She scooped up the plate in front of the deep-fried spring breaker decked from head to toe in J. Crew and entitlement.

Arguing wouldn’t get her anywhere anyway, and could likely bring a complaint she didn’t need, especially when she was still so new to the payroll here.

The griping customer clamped his fingers around her wrist, his gold class ring broadcasting a highbrow prep school that had apparently failed to teach him manners. “You know, I’ve changed my mind. I’m not in the mood for sea bass after all.”

“Okay, then...” She held her temper in check. “Is there something else you would like instead?”

“Call me Chip.” He looked her up and down lewdly.

Sheesh, did he really think that was a turn-on?

Chip elbowed his friend beside him with a laugh and a wink before turning back to her. “What I want isn’t on the menu, gorgeous.”

He reached to grab her arm again.

She sidestepped quickly. “I’ll ask the chef to come out and speak with you personally about his recommendations.”

Sarah pivoted away, plate clutched in her white-knuckled fists. Someone pinched her thigh. Hard.

Ouch! She spun around, anger stinging to the roots of her red hair. Chip was grinning while his friends laughed.

Her face burned with embarrassment—and fury. She set down the prime rib on the table and reached for a pitcher of ice water, ready to upend it on to his sunburned head—

Quentin Dobbs, the usually quiet busboy, jostled her out of the way, dropping a tub of dishes. Mashed potatoes with asparagus splashed all over Chip’s leather boat shoes.

Chip shot to his feet, jostling the table and flipping his

prime rib. “What the hell, dude? You wrecked my shoes and my dinner.”

Shocked gasps from the customers filled the patio. Other diners stood to get out of the way of the drip, drip, drip of spilled water glasses sending rivulets down the linen tablecloth and on to the floor. Sarah set down the pitcher, looking over quickly at Mr. Worth’s table, worried about this scene taking place in front of him. He simply shuffled his chair away from the pooling water and continued eating his own pan-seared sea bass, regally ignoring the chaos two feet away.

“Sorry about the mess.” Quentin stepped in front of Sarah. “You weren’t going to eat the prime rib anyway, right?”

Chip puffed out his beefy chest and crowded Quentin. “You are so fired.”

“Someone made you the boss while I wasn’t lookin’?” Quentin looked around, sweeping back his hair from his forehead as if it might have obstructed his view. “I could have sworn you needed a high school diploma for that job.”

Sarah didn’t know whether to wince or cheer as things escalated. But once the real manager walked over, it was all about the wincing as he ordered both Sarah and Quentin into the kitchen while he handled the matter himself.

A half hour later, Sarah hung up her apron in her locker and took out her purse. Her shift was over after a solid chewing out from the manager. At least she still had her job, unlike Quentin, who’d gotten fired.

Still irate, she walked out into the parking lot to her mom’s “new” used car, a blue Toyota. While she was glad her parents had been able to afford a second vehicle after her mother’s old one bit the dust, she missed having Rafe pick her up. Which was really kinda selfish since it meant his days were even longer. He already worked construction after school.

A shadow shifted against her car.

Her stomach took a roller-coaster dip, all thoughts of work

scattering. Rafe had come to see her after all. Her feet picked up the pace.

Only to slow.

The person lounging against her Toyota was shorter than Rafe and more muscular than lanky—waiting in the dark corner of the parking lot, ocean waves crashing against the bluff like in some freaky slasher movie. Her nerves gurgled.

She looked over her shoulder fast at the nearly deserted employees' lot. She pulled out her keychain with the mace on it, a gift from Rafe. He had been on her case about being safe and she should have listened. She backed away. The guy straightened, and she sagged with relief as recognition dawned.

“Quentin.” She took in his familiar face and the same brown curls she'd once cut a chunk out of when she sat behind him in kindergarten, curious to test out her fancy new first-day-of-school scissors. “Oh. My. God. You scared me.”

“I just wanted to be sure you made it to your car without any trouble from those guys.”

“You sound like Rafe.”

He clapped a hand over his chest. “After what I did for you tonight, you insult me that way? I'm wounded.” He thumped his chest again. “Truly wounded.”

Quentin was kind of funny when he wanted to be. “I know you two don't like each other, but he would say thanks if he was here.” And she owed him a thanks and apology as well. “I'm sorry you lost your job because of me.”

“Now hold on.” He took her keys from her hand. “I lost my job because of those creeps, not you. So don't blame yourself. Besides, I don't really need the money and now I can enjoy the rest of my spring break.”

Quentin's family wasn't rich, but they weren't hurting for money, either. His dad was the night shift manager at Worth

Industries. Quentin even had a pretty nice car of his own. Although...

“That still doesn’t make it fair for you to lose your job over my problem.”

“It’s done. Now be careful, okay?” He opened her door for her. “Most teenage guys are bozos thinking with their, uh, hormones.”

Laughing, she looked up at him as she slid into her car. “You’re a teenage guy.”

“Right.” He patted the top of her car. “Good night, Sarah.”

Rafe hefted himself up the sprawling oak tree beside Sarah’s house. She slept in a second-floor room, the bedroom over the garage. Her parents were deep sleepers. Good thing. He was working twelve-hour days at the construction site to sock away some money during spring break. Tomorrow was supposed to be his day off, but they’d called him in to work an extra shift. And they were gonna pay *overtime*. That, he could not pass up.

Meanwhile, he had to do some fast talking to smooth this over with Sarah.

Potato bugs—or Jerusalem crickets as his dad called them—chirped in the quiet night. There weren’t any car sounds that he could detect, and he was definitely listening hard. Swiping aside a low sweeping branch, he steadied himself on the tree limb and tapped on the glass pane. Shadows shifted inside the dimly lit room as Sarah came closer.

She cranked open the window and looked outside, checking past him quickly while grabbing his jacket to haul him inside. “You’re crazy. I couldn’t believe you were serious when you called to tell me to be on the lookout for you—and by the way, my dad was pissed when the phone rang so late on his night off.”

“Sorry,” he said simply, rolling to his feet and looking around her room for the first time.

Wow, he was really in here. Damn. It had been far too easy, and he was almost glad he hadn’t thought of it sooner or he might have been way too tempted to see her on the sly when he had free moments at night.

Her walls were yellow, with posters of rock stars all over them. Bright like her. And on her bedside table rested a half-dead lily he’d given her a week ago.... Which reminded him.

Rafe pulled the rosebud from where he’d stuffed it inside his jacket to climb the tree. Helping out at the Worth estate greenhouse before school kept him well-stocked in flowers for Sarah, the one luxury he’d been able to give her.

Sarah took the flower and skimmed the petals under her nose, her smile huge. Then she was kissing him. The best part about giving her flowers. She leaned into him, her legs bare in her blue school gym shorts. And even through his jean jacket, he could tell she didn’t have a bra on under her faded tank top. His hands shook as he tunneled them into her hair. Her hair was even softer than the flower.

Sighing, she eased back, her arms still looped around his neck. “How was work?”

“Long. Sweaty. How about you?”

“Busy. Lots of spring breakers.” She looked away quickly. “After you called, I ran down to the kitchen and got you something to eat.”

He looked past her to the blanket on her floor, set up like a picnic with a cheeseburger, chips and lemonade. Thank God. He was always starving these days, never enough time to grab more than a snack. Since his mom died three years ago, he and his dad hadn’t cooked much. And now that his dad was going out with Penny, he’d pretty much stopped cooking altogether.

Rafe shrugged out of his jacket and dropped to the floor, leaning back against the wall. The cheeseburger was half gone before he realized he wasn't even talking. How lame that he was focused on stuffing his face when he was in the middle of Sarah's bedroom. She sat three feet away in a tank top and tiny gym shorts, leaning against the foot of her bed.

Her bed.

Another hunger shouted a great big hello inside him, urging him to toss back that yellow-and-green-striped bedspread and lay her down in the middle of the double mattress.

His body pulled tight, and he tossed the napkin over his lap while reaching for a handful of chips. "I should be taking you out." He downed the chips and another bite of the burger. "I still owe you a meal at Jacques's after the way I had to cancel on you at the last minute."

"Valentine's Day was wonderful because I was with you." She sipped from her own glass of lemonade. "We ate at the beach. We danced under the stars. It was perfect."

"You're perfect." He angled forward to climb past the food, toward her.

She nudged his shoulder, pushing him back down to sit. "Nope. Finish your supper, and maybe you can even talk a little."

"Talk about what?" He finished off the cheeseburger. The faster he ate, apparently the sooner he would get to make out with Sarah.

"You never did tell me how you managed such a good meal for the Valentine's picnic. I know for a fact that you and your dad can't cook worth a darn."

"Dad's friend Penny helped."

Sometimes Penny even left food in the kitchen. She'd found him standing in front of the pathetically empty refrigerator and offered to help. She'd shared the picnic dinner she'd made for his dad on Valentine's Day.

Getting used to his father dating someone else was tougher than he'd expected. Getting over his mother's death was even tougher. But his dad really liked Penny and there wasn't a thing Rafe could do about that.

Best to focus on what he could change. He moved a half-finished history class collage and brushed aside stray cut-out articles from the *Seaside Gazette*. "We're wasting time, and we don't get nearly enough together."

"I agree." She rose up on to her knees and reached for him.

Moving fast, he scooped her into his arms, eyeing her nice soft bed, conveniently located two steps away. When he turned, she wriggled against his chest, her breasts so soft and perfect against him.

"Careful," he teased. "Wouldn't want to drop you and wake up the whole house."

Jokingly, he tossed her lightly, confident there wasn't a chance in hell he would ever drop her. He caught her smoothly.

She gasped, wincing.

He frowned. "What's wrong?"

"Nothing," she said quickly, too quickly.

He set her on her feet again and looked her over in front, then in back. A quarter-size, fresh bruise was purpling up on her thigh.

"What happened to your leg?"

She twisted to look at the back of her thigh, then shrugged. "Oh, um, I must have, well, bumped against a table at work, I mean backed up into something."

Her stumbling explanation sent his instincts on alert. "You're a really bad liar."

"Fine..." She rolled her eyes dismissively. "Some spring breaker at the restaurant got fresh."

Rage exploded behind his eyes hot and fast. “Who?” he demanded. “I want his name.”

Sarah rested a hand on his chest, smoothing his T-shirt. “He’s probably already left town.”

“Doesn’t matter.” Five minutes. He only needed five minutes to pry an apology for Sarah from the jerk’s mouth.

“No,” she said, as if reading his mind. “You’re not going to get rich if you’re in jail for kicking some moron’s butt.”

“That’s assuming I would get caught. Who is he?”

“Believe me, he’s already sorry.” She crinkled her nose, grinning. “Quentin dumped an order of mashed potatoes on the guy’s expensive shoes.”

His anger cooled to something else entirely. “Quentin Dobbs protected you?”

“I could have taken care of myself. And believe me, I would have and it would have cost me my job.” She sat on the edge of the bed, clasping his hands in hers lightly while he stood stock still. “Quentin did more than take care of the problem. He kept me from doing something rash. I know you don’t like him, but for tonight, he’s the good guy. He’s on our side, okay?”

He bit back the words he wanted to say. Bottom line, he owed Quentin. As much as that stung, Rafe always paid his debts. He refused to owe anyone. Ever.

That didn’t mean he would let Dobbs suffer any delusions about who Sarah belonged with. Because come graduation, Sarah would be leaving town with him.

An hour later, Sarah grabbed Rafe’s wrist and pulled his hand out from under her tank top.

“Enough,” she gasped, flopping onto her back on her bed. Her comforter had long ago been kicked to the floor as they rolled around making out. “If we keep going, I’m not sure if I can stop, and I’m just not ready. Okay?”

Breathing heavy, he rolled onto his side, toying with her hair, his eyes lingering on her chest. Where he'd been touching her two seconds ago. Driving her absolutely crazy. She pressed her legs together against the ache that built more and more every time she was with Rafe.

"Okay, Sarah, we're both eighteen, adults, but it's your call." He still played with a lock of her hair, but otherwise kept his hands to himself.

She knew that had to be costing him. She'd felt just how bad he wanted her. "We'll have to make sure we're at a really public beach tomorrow so we don't get too tempted."

His eyes slid away from hers again, this time scanning the rock posters on her wall. "Someday, I'm going to give you a real vacation. I'll take you to the best concerts in the biggest cities. How about London?"

"I'm happy with a day at the beach. And who wants to waste all our time together traveling? What's wrong with a simple drive to San Diego?"

"I offer you England and you want somewhere we've seen before?" He tugged her hair lightly. "Where's your sense of adventure?"

She nudged his bare foot with hers. "You're about as much adventure as I can take."

"Okay, let's try this again. If you could plan a vacation anywhere—" He rushed to add, "Anywhere other than California, where would it be?"

She thought hard. That kind of life seemed so far in the future, but if playing the what-if game would make Rafe happy, then okay. "I would want someplace where we could be alone, just the two of us. No interruptions."

Totally committed. Totally married. But she kept that part of the dream to herself for now.

Thank God he hadn't seen the inside of her history notebook when he'd shuffled her project around, since she'd practiced

writing Mrs. Rafe Cameron about a hundred and fifty times during class.

He tucked her closer. “Alone together sounds good. Continue.”

Snuggling against his side, she listened to his heartbeat and inhaled the clean soapy scent on his neck. “No work or obligations. But it would still need to feel homey. I wouldn’t want some generic hotel room.”

“So you want to own a vacation home.” His knuckles skimmed along her back, up and down her spine deliciously. “Where would you like to build it?”

“A *vacation* home?” She wouldn’t have to move, and she wouldn’t be stuck in some stark hotel. “Yes, I guess that would work.”

“Everything would be there for you so you wouldn’t even need to pack. Now, where?” he asked again.

“If a person’s going to have a vacation house, then it should be somewhere different than where you live every day. I can go to the beach anytime. Somewhere cooler maybe.” She blew against his neck lightly. “The mountains, I think. A ski cabin with a pond.”

“Keep going.” He dug his head back into the pillow.

“Nevada.” She plucked the state out of the sky at random, somewhere not too far away. “A woodsy, homey cabin that has high ceilings with big fat beams and windows that take up an entire wall.”

“Consider it yours.”

“You’re so funny.” She arched up to kiss his jaw. “Really though, I just want more time with you. And if you’re working eighteen-hour days to buy us stuff, then what’s the use? We won’t get to enjoy them together.”

He stayed quiet, their old money versus simple pleasures argument sort of bouncing around in the air between them like a beach ball just out of reach.

She hated wasting her time arguing with him, but she also wasn't the type to simply back down. She toed an itch on the bottom of her foot, thinking. Waiting. Hoping he would say something.

“Crap!” Rafe bolted upright. “Somebody’s awake downstairs.

“Ohmigod!” She rolled to her knees quickly. Listening.

The bottom step creaked, just like it always did when someone started walking up. Rafe jumped off the bed, grabbed his jacket and shoes while Sarah shoved their picnic under her bed. He raced for the window, checking outside quickly before swinging a leg out.

Sarah clasped his hand, stopping him. “I’m sorry,” she whispered fast. “I hate to fight. I’ll make it up to you tomorrow. We’ll have a great day hanging out by the ocean. You’ll see.”

“About the beach.” He hesitated, half in, half out of the window. “I’ll call you in the morning.”

“Okay, okay, hurry. You need to go before my mom or dad finds you, or we’ll never get to see each other again.”

Rafe cupped the back of her head and kissed her hard, fast. “Nevada cabin. I won’t forget.”

Her toes curling into the carpet, she watched him climb down the tree like it was nothing. He managed everything that way. She could almost believe he might build that Nevada cabin someday.

The footsteps creaked just outside her door.

Spinning fast, she yanked the rumpled bedspread off the floor and dove under her covers. Tucking the extra pillow to her chest, she closed her eyes just as her mom peeked in to check on her then closed the door softly again.

With the light scent of the rose still hanging in the air,

Sarah thought about the way Rafe had asked what she wanted for a vacation. She started to hope he was finally seeing things her way about a simpler life together.

* * * * *

Rafe & Sarah—Part Four

CATHERINE MANN

Vista del Mar, California

14 years ago

Sarah Richards saw stars in more ways than one.

Dots sparked in front of her eyes from the camera flash, then began to fade. As she stood with Rafe against the photographer's backdrop, the celestial-themed prom came into focus again. Since she was part of the decorations committee, Sarah had spent most of the school day hanging glow-in-the-dark stars from the ceiling along with luminescent planets and a crescent moon. The whole gymnasium glowed like a sixth-grade science project on steroids.

Hokey? Sure. Even the DJ was over the top in a spaceman suit, with his helmet resting on top of a speaker. But how could the evening be anything other than perfect since she spent it with Rafe?

The photographer snapped his fingers for their attention. "One more shot, just to be sure. Now look here and smile big for the camera."

Rafe's arms tightened around her waist, her hands folded

on top of his, perfectly placed so her wrist corsage showed. She had no idea how Rafe afforded to shower her with so many flowers. When she asked, he always said not to worry. Just enjoy.

And speaking of enjoying. She leaned back against his broad chest, wishing the whole night could last about ten hours longer.

His ribs expanded and she knew he was inhaling the scent of her hair. She'd been sure to put perfume on it since they would be slow dancing. She'd even gotten a new haircut, like Jennifer Aniston, if Jennifer Aniston had red hair. The look was all layered and fell around her shoulders, sort of messed up as if she was always breathless from making out with a guy. Which she was. Her grandmother had pulled two strands back with little fake diamond pins.

The camera flash popped again and the photographer shouted, "Next."

Rafe's arms fell away, his palm landing possessively on the small of her back. Yum! A Spice Girls tune pumped through the speakers as she walked past stacked-up gym mats draped with a solar-system-patterned bed sheet.

As they stepped aside for another couple waiting to have their picture taken, Rafe whispered against her ear. "You're the prettiest girl here."

His compliment stirred a meteor shower in her stomach that beat anything hanging from the rafters. "And you're too hunky in that tux, you know."

He filled out the tuxedo so much better than any other guy in the room. He wore a regular black one, no funky-colored tie to match her seafoam green dress. He looked like some prince or secret agent in his sleek simplicity up next to guys who'd chosen everything from an ice blue jacket to a fuchsia cummerbund.

Glancing at him again, she swallowed hard, her mouth

drying right up. "I'm going for a refill on the punch before we dance again."

"I can get that for you." He slid his arm from her waist.

"I'm a big girl. I can take care of myself, you know."

"Of course you can." He tucked a strand of her loose hair over her shoulder, his knuckles along her collarbone exposed by the spaghetti straps on her dress. "But I'm trying to be a good date here. Don't wreck it for me."

"Only you could figure out a way to make it sound like I'm doing you a favor by letting you do something for me." She tugged his tie straight, keeping an eagle eye out to make sure the PDA police weren't watching. Luckily, the chaperones all seemed plenty busy booting party-crashing college students.

He closed his hand around her wrist, his blue eyes flaming with awareness at her touch. "Do you want the punch or not?"

"Thank you, if you're sure. I wanted to make a request from the DJ, anyway." Something slow so she could stay in Rafe's arms without worrying that the chaperones would have a hissy fit.

She backed toward the DJ table, keeping her eyes on Rafe for as long as she could. He vowed he'd never worn a tux before, but he seemed as at ease in the formal gear as he did in his work clothes. She felt guilty that he'd spent so much money on the evening, but the second she'd hinted that they should skip the whole thing, he'd cut her short. There was no missing how she'd stung his pride by even suggesting it.

She watched as Rafe stopped in front of the refreshments table covered in a midnight blue tablecloth. He reached for one of the plastic cups, holding it up to be filled. Fellow student Margaret Cole stood behind the big clear punch bowl. Margaret was years younger, but teachers were giving out extra credit to anyone willing to help with the prom.

Margaret's little brother, Jason, sat on the floor behind her,

leaning against the wall. Ten years old, he played a handheld video game, his backpack beside him. He was young to be out this late, but Margaret rarely went anywhere without her brother in tow. Her parents worked nights, too, sometimes. Where Margaret always did the right thing, her brother Jason was always in trouble. Her parents didn't dare leave the kid alone. Of course, living in a small town where everyone knew everybody helped keep extra eyes on the kid.

Rafe smiled at Margaret, stopping Sarah's thoughts short. She hated the stab of jealousy. She knew deep in her gut that he wasn't interested in the other girl. Still, possessiveness gripped Sarah tighter than the sweaty junior to her left squeezed his giggling girlfriend while they shuffled around the dance floor. She wanted to yank the microphone away from the DJ and shout to the whole gym, "Hey, ladies? Rafe Cameron is all mine. So keep your mitts off him, please."

Of course, doing something like that would be totally juvenile. Not that Margaret would chase Rafe anyhow. The girl was totally into her studies and completely unaware of how pretty she really was behind those glasses and scraggly ponytail.

Rafe turned away from the refreshments. Sarah grabbed a pencil from the DJ table and quickly scrawled her request. She spun back just in time to face her date.

He passed her the cup. "Here you go."

Sipping, she tasted...blue raspberry punch. Yum. "Aren't you going to have any?"

"Water's fine for me." Prisms from the spinning disco ball cast tiny spots of light across his face.

"You don't know what you're missing." She drank again. "Thank you. I feel bad for Margaret, doing so much work and not getting to have any fun."

Rafe glanced back over his shoulder. "She'll make a sharp businesswoman some day."

The admiration in his voice made her eye the refreshment table again. Maybe Margaret needed a guy of her own to help her have fun. Somebody like Quentin Dobbs. It would be nice to make that happen once Margaret was older. Then Sarah would get to see them together over time when she came back to town for visits.

The fact that she and Rafe would actually be leaving in another month still blew her mind—and scared her to her toes. But since she'd started dating him in January, she'd realized the only way to keep him would be to leave town with him.

She drained her drink, set aside the glass and took his strong, calloused hand. "Let's dance. I requested a song for us."

"And that would be?"

"Something slow." The DJ talked through the fade over to the next song...Garth Brooks. She stepped into Rafe's arms, loving the way his hands felt against the small of her back. Heat flooded her and she went lightheaded thinking about later. With Rafe.

He pulled her more firmly against his chest, his cheek against her forehead, his breath warm and sexy in her hair. "I like the way you think."

As much as she wanted this night to last forever, later couldn't come soon enough.

Rafe shifted the car into park on top of Busted Bluff, the highest point that overlooked the town and the Pacific. Finding a halfway secluded spot up here had been tougher than usual since it was prom night, but at least his dad's car had tinted windows. His father's beat up old Chevy Blazer was only marginally better than his own El Camino, but he was all about doing anything he could to make this night as special as possible for Sarah.

He'd wanted to take her to that fancy new restaurant,

Jacques', since their Valentine's plans had been canceled. However, the place was catching on so fast, reservations had to be made far in advance now. Well, unless you were some rich dude like Ronald Worth and could buy yourself a last minute table anywhere. Might as well rename this town Vista del Worth.

So Rafe had moved on to plan B—the steak house. Sarah had ended up eating a salad because she was all freaked out over that Mad Cow Disease scare. As if Vista del Mar could get any nuttier.

He eyed the night sky, already counting down the days until he was out of this Nowhereville, California, town.

Sarah toed off her high heels, kicked them under the seat. "This whole evening has been absolutely perfect."

Her dress rode up to show off slender calves and glittery toenail polish.

He ached to kiss every inch of her. "I'm glad you had fun."

He'd willingly endured the expense and overabundance of crepe paper for her, but if the DJ had played one more Spice Girls song, his head would have exploded. Of course, his cranky mood could have more to do with abstinence than music choices. Taking care of himself in the shower wasn't cutting it anymore, but he wasn't the kind of guy to push a girl if she wasn't ready.

"More than fun. Perfection." Sarah sank deeper into the seat with a sigh that pushed her breasts against the fitted top of her greenish blue dress.

He eyed the spaghetti straps, his fingers aching to nudge them away. Tearing his attention from her, he turned on the radio and searched for an easy-listening station. At least his dad's sound system worked.

Even though it pained him to offer, he said, "We can still go to the after-prom party if you want."

“No, thanks,” she answered without hesitation. “I would rather be alone with you.”

Thank God. With any luck, she was getting closer to “ready.”

“Then we’re in agreement.” He angled his mouth over hers. Finally, he had her all to himself. She melted against him, her arms looping around his neck as she wriggled to get closer. She tasted like blue raspberry punch and something he couldn’t quite pinpoint, but then she usually scrambled his brain.

And the scent of her?

She drove him crazy. He thrust his hands into her hair, the two pins tink-tinking onto the floor. The natural waves curved around his fingers as if binding him closer to her. She tugged at his tie, shoving aside his jacket, her touch more frenetic than usual. He understood one hundred percent. Making out, touching her, was mind-blowing, but also frustrating as hell when he knew it wouldn’t play out.

But there was a new edge in her tonight, too, a peeling away of nerves and inhibition that made him wonder if finally, *finally* they could go all the way.

Sarah nipped his bottom lip. “I think the punch was spiked.”

Her words all but splashed ice water in his lap.

Pulling back, he looked into her dilated green eyes. “Why do you say that?”

“I’m still seeing stars behind my eyes and we’re not at the gym anymore.” She crinkled her freckled nose. “And the sky’s spinning. God didn’t make the moon into a disco ball, did he?”

Ah, hell. He sagged back. “No, Kitten, he didn’t.”

“Too bad. ’Cause it’s really pretty,” she said, her voice a little slurred now that he listened more closely rather than

staring at her breasts. “And you’re really hot in that tux. I dream about you, you know.”

He could *not* listen to another word, especially if her dreams were even half as steamy as his own.

“I should take you home.” He reached for the ignition.

She gripped his hand. “If you take me home drunk my grandma will kick your ass.”

Quite possible, but he was more concerned about Sarah. He pulled her hand gently, but firmly, off his. “You’ve got quite a mouth when you’ve been drinking.”

“Just because I don’t say the words doesn’t mean I don’t know them.” Exhaling in frustration, she picked up her pins one at a time off the floor. “Hell is a useful word. As in, this night sure as hell isn’t turning out like I planned right now. But my all-time favorite curse word is sh—”

“That’s okay.” He stifled a grin. “I’ve heard it before and I’m betting you’ll be embarrassed tomorrow by what’s coming out of your mouth tonight.”

Her hands slid up his neck. “Then shut me up.”

She pressed her lips to his, her tongue thrusting with more enthusiasm than art. His grin faded and his heart rate ramped all over again. Sarah on a regular day tested his self-control. A tipsy Sarah with dwindling inhibitions had his hands shaking.

Without once pulling her mouth from his, she swung her leg over his until she straddled his lap. She wriggled enticingly, her hair falling forward all around him. He wanted her, and he knew she wanted him every bit as much, even when sober. Except she’d been clear she didn’t think she was ready to take things to the next level. He was pretty sure she wanted a ring first.

She cupped his crotch.

Her favorite curse word blasted through his brain. He

thought he would explode right then and there, he ached to have her so damn bad.

Not. Cool.

He clamped her wrist. "Sarah, that's enough." As much as it pained him to say it, he had to tell her, "We need to stop."

"I thought you wanted me to touch you." Her hand moved up then down against the fly of his tuxedo pants, cupping and caressing. "Am I doing it right?"

"Uh-huh." His eyes closed and fire-hot want pumped through him, pushing reason to the far corners of his brain. He damn near cracked a crown clenching his jaw.

"I want us to go all the way right here." She whispered exactly what he'd been hoping to hear for so long. "This is the perfect night."

And she was drunk, which made it not perfect. As much as he wanted this, wanted her, he knew it couldn't happen now.

But if he took her home this way, her grandmother would have an absolute fit. Kathleen Richards ruled that family, and oversaw almost every aspect of Sarah's social life since her parents worked the night shift. He would never get to see her again. And even the thought of that made his gut knot.

He scrambled for something, any kind of solution that could salvage this date. He settled on a solution that would take care of her, help him stay in control and keep her family from hitting the roof.

"Come on, babe. We need to get some coffee into you before I take you home."

"I don't want coffee." She tugged down the straps on her dress until the frothy fabric inched dangerously low. "I want more punch and more of you."

The gown fell away from her breasts. His mouth went dry and not a chance in hell could he look away. He'd touched her,

stroked her, felt every inch, but *seeing* her? Wow. He didn't have words.

Blood surged south so hard and fast he was quickly losing the ability to think. He needed to put a stop to this ASAP.

Rafe scraped her dress back in place and hauled her off his lap. "Well, Kitten, we don't always get what we want. Come on. We're going to see my dad and Penny."

In Rafe's kitchen, Sarah cradled the mug of coffee, her third, and sipped the kick-butt strong brew. She didn't feel a hundred percent steady yet, but at least the refrigerator had stopped wobbling from side to side. She hadn't wanted him to bring her to his father and his dad's fiancée, Penny, but Rafe had insisted it was here, or go home to face Grandma Kat.

So here she sat in her prom dress, with her corsage wilting as fast as her buzz. "I am *so* embarrassed."

Penny nudged aside the stack of Rafe's textbooks on the table and patted her hand. "It's not your fault someone spiked the punch."

Bob's fiancée was a nice lady, kinda quirky, but Sarah actually liked that about her. And Penny was clearly devoted to Bob. The woman rarely took her eyes off her Harrison Ford look-a-like fiancé.

Bob Cameron turned on the water for a second pot of coffee, then shoved it under the yellowed-with-age maker. "Who would have spiked the punch?"

"My guess?" Rafe leaned against the orange countertop, his tuxedo tie undone and loose. "Jason Cole probably snatched a bottle out of his dad's liquor cabinet. The kid's only ten but I wouldn't put it past him. He's done worse."

Bob shook his head, settling back against the countertop beside his son—who'd grown two inches taller than him. "Sounds a little farfetched, but trouble does follow that kid for sure."

Did the adults believe she hadn't known the punch was spiked? She cringed that they might think she was lying. Their approval was really important to her. These two people would be her family forever once she and Rafe got married.

Would Bob and Penny stay in Vista del Mar? She knew that Bob had been looking for a better job since he got his GED. Her hands trembled around the mug as she thought of everything changing so fast. Would there be anything familiar to return to here?

The linoleum floor vibrated under her feet and it had nothing to do with any alcohol this time. Car headlights swept through the window, tires crunching as the vehicle pulled into the driveway.

Rafe frowned. "Who would be coming here at midnight?"

Penny looked down and away quickly. Bob clapped his son on the shoulder, an apology already stamped all over his face.

Penny covered Sarah's hand and patted. "Your grandmother is here, honey."

Rafe jerked away from his father, anger radiating off him in waves. Sarah shot to her feet, jostling the table. She grabbed the edge to keep from swaying. The stack of textbooks slid to the side, spreading tourism flyers about Los Angeles across.

Tears stung her eyes over how the whole evening had fallen apart, but she blinked them back. She busied herself with gathering up a couple of maps of LA while she blinked away the moisture. The last thing she needed was for Rafe to get more upset and no doubt, if he saw her crying, he would grow angrier. God, she wanted to drop-kick that little Jason or whoever was responsible for spiking the punch.

Bob opened the squeaky screen door just as her grandmother stepped inside. Grandma Kat had passed down her red hair—and her temper—to Sarah. From the look of her

grandma's tightly pressed lips, the temper was simmering close to the surface.

"Sarah," her grandmother said tersely. "Time to go home."

"Rafe will take me." She stood her ground. Rafe might not be much like his family. But there was no mistaking Sarah was completely, through and through, a Richards.

Kathleen Richards's gaze zipped from her to her date then back to her again. "I think it's best that you come with me now."

"Someone spiked the punch at the prom," she said slowly, carefully. "He brought me straight here for coffee, like a responsible date."

Her grandmother brushed her feet on the doormat and walked farther into the room. "These people aren't your family or legal guardians, which is why they called me. Rafe should have brought you home. If you had nothing to hide, there wouldn't have been a problem, now would there?"

Her face burned with a flush of anger over her grandmother's refusal to believe her. "I'm a senior in high school, only a month away from graduating and being on my own."

"Almost on your own. But not quite." She waved a hand toward the door. "Sarah, get in the car."

Rafe stood tall and tense, his jaw tight as he faced her grandmother, strongly but respectfully. "Ma'am, I am sorry. You trusted me with your granddaughter and I let you down."

"Thank you for the apology," Kathleen answered, some of the starch going out of her spine. And then her eyes narrowed. "Young man, one of the best things in life a person can learn is when you're in over your head. Tonight, you were in over your head with Sarah. Think about it. Now if you'll excuse me, Sarah should be at home, with her family."

Her grandmother wrapped an arm around her shoulders and steered her toward the door. Sarah looked back at Rafe,

pleading with her eyes. Their prom night couldn't end this way. He should charge in, claim her, declare they were a couple. They were going to leave together after graduation.

But he didn't say a word. He didn't even walk with her to the car. As she sat in the front seat of her grandmother's old boat-sized sedan, she watched in the rearview mirror as Rafe simply closed the front door without so much as a glance of regret her way.

She scraped a sliding spaghetti strap back up and tried not to think about how she'd almost tossed away her clothes and her virginity tonight. She'd been ready to give him everything, her body, her heart, her future. She'd been so certain he cared about her as much as she loved him when he didn't take advantage of her offer on Busted Bluff.

But now she wondered if he'd stopped for another reason. Her mind skated back to those flyers and maps of Los Angeles mixed in with his textbooks. She'd assumed it must be for a school project, but now she wondered if he'd been making plans to go already, without even talking to her. He had to know a big city like that would be dead last on her list. She couldn't ignore the niggling sense that he was holding back in their relationship so he would have fewer regrets after graduation when he left town...

Without her.

14 years ago

“Parents, family, friends, I present to you this year’s graduating class of Vista del Mar High School.”

Along with all her classmates, Sarah Richards pitched her gold-tasseled hat up into the air. Then she hitched up her gown and started pushing through the crowd and darting around the empty folding chairs. Who cared about getting the silly old cap back? She just wanted to hug Rafe.

Finally, they’d made it. They were both eighteen. They had high school diplomas. They could really be together now.

Stretching up onto her toes, she looked over the heads of graduates and families. Across the gymnasium, she saw his blond hair in the distance. The halogen bulbs overhead glinted off the natural highlights he’d gotten from working so hard at his construction job after school. Love bubbled up inside her. She was so proud to call him her boyfriend.

Since everyone was seated alphabetically, there were lots

of folks between where she sat as a Richards and he sat as a Cameron. But she didn't even question if the top of a head she saw was really him. She knew Rafe, *her* Rafe.

Her feet raced as fast as her heart. She angled sideways.

"Excuse me, please." She smiled as she passed Quentin Dobbs's parents trying to push through to their son.

An arm slid around her shoulders and she stopped short. Her father, mother and Grandma Kat were all holding programs and grinning from ear to ear. God, she was going to miss them when she left. If she could just talk Rafe into picking someplace a little closer than Los Angeles so it wouldn't cost so much gas money to get home.

Home. Her happy mood dimmed.

She had to get used to thinking of somewhere else as home. Rafe was going to be her new safe harbor, forever. Still, she looked around at her familiar school, her family, her friends. The town she'd called home all her life.

She swallowed down a wad of tears fast. She didn't want to answer a bunch of uncomfortable questions before she and Rafe had firmed up their plans. They'd been fighting a lot this past month about whether they would spend the summer here or leave right away. They'd fought hardest about where to go when the time came. She loved him so much, but she was getting scared if she didn't act fast, she would lose him.

Her throat threatened to close up. She forced a smile for her family.

"Hi, Daddy." She kissed her father on his leathery cheek. "I'm so glad you could get the time off from the factory to be here."

"Wouldn't have missed this for anything. We're so proud of you, baby." Her dad hugged her, his wiry red hair standing up in sprigs in the back. Then he passed her over to her mom and grandmother.

Her parents worked the evening shift at Worth Industries, Vista del Mar's only real factory. They pulled lots of overtime,

too. Having Grandma Kat on call at night for free sitting had offered them options since Sarah was a toddler. Was it any wonder she was especially close to her grandma after all the time they'd spent together?

As she hugged her grandmother extra tight, Sarah caught a clearer view of Rafe.

He was shrugging out of his graduation gown and accepting his congrats from Bob and Penny and Penny's son, Chase. Rafe said he'd only marched because it was important to his dad. He would have just as soon blown off the whole thing, but since Bob hadn't gotten his GED until recently, it was a big deal that his son finished on time, at eighteen.

"Sarah?" Her grandmother's voice drew her eyes away from Rafe.

"Yes, Grandma Kat? Sorry, I was, uh..."

"I can see exactly what you were doing," Kathleen said with a knowing smile. She'd softened up a little when it came to Rafe. About time. "Why don't you go over and speak to him?"

She started to accept the offer so she could race right over. But then she looked at her parents, all dressed up and taking an evening off work to be here.

Her parents were quieter than Grandma Kat and she were. And even though she felt closer to her grandmother, she still loved her folks.

Soon, she would have all the time in the world with Rafe and none with her family. "It's okay, Grandma. He and I have plans later tonight, with the graduation party and all."

Okay, that part was a lie. Rafe didn't want any part of a celebration like that. She would have liked to go, just to say unofficial goodbyes to everyone. But in the end, Rafe was what mattered.

Tonight mattered.

Because tonight, once they were away from the ceremony

and alone together, she was going to tell Rafe she would leave town with him as soon as he was ready.

Parked in Rafe's El Camino on Busted Bluff, Sarah sighed as the last ripples of release shimmered through her. Her arm slid to the floor, Rafe still on top of her, his hand between her legs.

They'd gotten really good at finishing each other without actually doing everything. As much as she wanted to take that final step, she was still kind of nervous.

At first, that had been an amazing relief, orgasms anytime she wanted them with the hottest guy in the world. But already a new frenzy was building with the increasing need to have him inside her.

She slid her hands inside his open jeans and cupped his butt. His amazing butt. "I want us to leave town this week. Together. We can go to L.A., or anywhere else that you want. I'll be happy as long as I'm with you."

Maybe if she said that enough times she wouldn't be scared to death.

Rafe shifted off her, his eyes wide with shock as he sat up. He didn't get surprised very often. She enjoyed knowing that for once she wasn't the only person knocked off balance by all the changes in their lives.

"You really mean that?" he asked warily, zipping his pants again, adjusting the polo shirt he'd worn under the cap and gown at graduation.

"Why? Did you not really want me to go with you?" She hadn't even considered that possibility, a notion that took her fears to a whole new level.

"I asked, didn't I?" He scowled.

Her feelings more than a little hurt, she tugged her dress back over her knees and kicked her pink panties under the seat. "You don't sound all that enthusiastic."

He studied her for a minute by the glow of the dashboard

lights, crossing his arms over his chest before speaking. “I think you have a glorified idea of what it’s going to be like. You already complain about how we don’t spend much time together now. It’s going to be worse when we’re actually paying rent on a place.”

“Complain?” Anger began to overshadow her hurt feelings. “You think I *complain*?”

“Are you spoiling for a fight?” he asked too damn calmly.

Maybe. Probably. “I’m just nervous about the decisions we’re making. My parents work all the time. I understand we need the money, but for as long as I can remember they have pulled the evening shift, leaving Grandma Kat to watch over me, tuck me in when I was in elementary school, fix my hair for the prom. When we go away together, I don’t want to live that way anymore, not with you.”

She didn’t want their kids to live that way. But talking about kids and how expensive they were would really freak him out.

“Sarah, I’m working this hard so that won’t happen.”

“That’s what my folks said.” She gripped his shirt, desperate to make him understand. “Tomorrow was always going to be better. But here I am graduating from high school and things still haven’t changed at my house.”

“I guess you’ll just have to trust me then, won’t you?” His hands covered hers. “Because there’s only one other choice. Not being together at all.”

Panic squeezed her ribs at talk of not being together. “You really think you can’t get ahead if we go to one of the smaller towns?”

He sighed heavily. “I thought you said you were willing to go to L.A.”

“I am,” she rushed to reassure him.

“It’s the right choice, you know.” He brought her hands to his lips. “Did your parents get ahead staying here in Vista del Mar their whole lives?”

He had a point, and his point scared her because she realized there really might not be a compromise. Tears burned her eyes.

She eased her hands from his and scrubbed her wrist along her cheeks, smearing a little mascara on the back of her hand. “I’ve never lived anywhere else before. I’ll feel better once we’ve settled where we’re going to be.”

“Los Angeles—”

“Los Angeles. Right.” She nodded, her jaw trembling just a little. “For real. The two of us.”

He swept her into his arms with a whoop of happiness, then kissed her. It was so rare to see Rafe happy. The move would be all right. It had to be.

Rafe angled her back on the seat, tucking her under him. His kisses grew more intense, more persuasive as he nipped along her jaw, her collarbone. Further. Until the shoulders of her dress were down and he had his mouth all over her. She was almost climbing out of her skin with the need to be with him. Fully. The past month, giving each other release in every manner possible other than going all the way was starting to get frustrating.

She didn’t know how much longer she could hold out. His hand slid up her dress, along her thigh. As much as she wanted to be with him, a part of her was still so hurt that he couldn’t see his way clear to find a compromise. Why did she have to be the one to give in on everything? If he could just give her some sign to show her he was as committed to making a life together as she was...

He bunched the hem of her dress in his hands, higher and higher, air brushing between her thighs since her panties were still somewhere under the seat. Rafe kissed along her neck just the way she liked most, whispering in her ear how hot she made him, how much he wanted her.

So many words and not one of them having anything to do with love.

“I love you, Rafe.” Her fingernails dug into his shoulders.

“I love you, too, Kitten,” he said, but it sounded kinda automatic, and he seemed a lot more focused on pushing down the top of her dress. “And God, I want you so damn much it hurts.”

“I want you, too. But I want us to be married first.” The words fell out in a rush before she even really thought about them.

Rafe went very still on top of her.

The air went quiet all around them until she couldn't tell whose heart was thumping louder, hers or his. She looked up into his eyes, hating that she felt hesitant, but no way was she going to pull back the words now that they were out there. She was making big changes in her life for him. Was it so wrong of her to want a sign of commitment from him in return? “Aren't you going to say anything?”

Still, he didn't move, just stayed stretched out over her, his face all emotionless. “You want us to get married before we have sex, before we can go to L.A.?”

Yep. Pretty much.

“Call me an old-fashioned dinosaur if you want, but I can't go all that way and just move in with you.” What if he dumped her and she was stuck in that big city with nothing, not even him? “It wouldn't feel right to me.”

His chest heaved with a huge sigh, then he nodded as he rolled off her and back into the driver's seat. “Okay then. Let's elope. Tonight.”

Rafe pulled up outside the Any Day Wedding Chapel outside of San Diego, his rusty El Camino just about on empty. But they'd made it. Sarah was nearly levitating off her seat with happiness. He tugged at his collar.

Lights from the little white chapel blink, blink, blinked, except the “W” was burned out. The lot was filled with about a dozen other cars parked haphazardly by people apparently as

impetuous as Sarah and he were. It was graduation night at a lot of high schools in the area and apparently they weren't the only ones who'd come up with this reckless idea.

Two couples charged up the stairs lined with plastic flowers, at least one of them was drunk. This wasn't what he'd planned for when he thought of marrying Sarah. And yeah, he'd thought about it, especially over the past month. Except she wasn't leaving him much choice on how this played out, and bottom line, he didn't want to lose her.

So, he was really going to do this. He was going to marry Sarah tonight.

He pulled his hand out of his pocket and held up a thin gold band—his mother's ring. His dad had given it to him a while back, said it was his to do with as he wished. That even if he needed to pawn it someday, Hannah would be cool with that. She'd only wanted the best for her son.

Luckily, when he'd stopped by the house to get the ring, his dad had still been out with Penny and Chase. Rafe placed the band in Sarah's palm.

"It was my mom's," he said, his throat tight.

Her hands shook and her eyes filled with tears. "It's lovely and so very special. Rafe, I don't even know what to say."

"It doesn't have a stone or anything, but I'll get you the biggest diamond set to replace it one day."

"You will not." She folded her hand over his. "This ring will stay on my finger forever."

Forever. He would have been happier if forever started when he had more than five hundred bucks saved up, not nearly enough for a decent safe place to live and reliable wheels for both of them. His mind started churning with the practical things Sarah seemed to just brush aside with that amazing smile of hers. A smile that made him do very impractical things.

"You can keep the ring, but I'm still going to add diamonds to it, huge ones that will make even Ronald Worth sit up and take notice."

She clapped a hand over his mouth. "Can we please not bring up Mr. Worth? Not tonight. Honestly, as long as I have you, that's all I need."

"You're so naive sometimes." The words fell out of his mouth before he could think.

"Don't be a jerk." She thumped him on the shoulder. "I refuse to let you wreck this night for me. We're going to get married, remember? We're really going to be husband and wife by morning."

His libido gave a great big throbbing shout of encouragement. He slid his hand behind her neck and brought her to him. Kissing her, taking in the familiar taste and feel of her, he could forget all the rest. Maybe if they had sex, lots and lots of sex, he could shut up the doubt demons. Sounded like a plan to him.

Sighing that kittenish sound that always drove him crazy, Sarah eased back, her hands flat on his chest.

She stared up into his eyes, her green eyes reflecting the stars overhead. "Tell me you love me. I know you think words are silly, but I need to hear them."

"I love you, Sarah," he said automatically, already angling to kiss her again, to get as close to her as he could in the confines of his car.

Her eyebrows pinched together and he realized he must have screwed up somehow. Damn, but women were tough to figure out.

She nibbled her bottom lip. "You don't want to do this, do you?"

"Of course I want to be with you." He dodged her real question. "I don't want to leave you in Vista del Mar, and God, I don't want to wait another second to be with you."

"That's not the same as wanting to marry me." She studied him with a wisdom, a seriousness he hadn't seen before.

"I do want to marry you."

"Just not now," she pressed.

All the tension of the past five months built inside him. He'd been trying to plan out his life but dating Sarah had knocked everything off-kilter. "I would be lying if I said this was an ideal set up. Why would I *want* to give you a tacky quickie ceremony?" His frustration, his anger at the whole damn unfair world rose with each word. "Why would I want to take my bride to a crappy one-room apartment in the worst section of town? But there aren't a lot of options here until I start making serious money."

"I'm in your way." The starlight faded from her eyes.

"Damn it, Sarah." He clasped her shoulders. "Don't put it like that."

"You don't want to get married."

He stayed silent this time.

She looked at the ring in her hand, then pressed it into his palm and folded his fingers over it. "I'll make this easier for you. We're not getting married. Go to Los Angeles and follow your dreams. Mine are in Vista del Mar."

She leaned across the seat and pressed her lips to his, holding, not moving, her eyes squeezed shut and a single tear escaping. "I'm going to get out of the car now and I do not want you to follow me. I'm going to call my grandmother for a ride. And I mean it. I don't want to see you again. I can't. Goodbye, Rafe."

She slipped out of the car and into the wedding chapel. Relief jockeyed with regret in his gut. He didn't follow her inside, but he would wait around just out of sight to make sure her grandmother arrived safely. After that, he was leaving for Los Angeles. He had five hundred bucks saved up.

This wasn't goodbye, damn it. He would be back for her, once he made enough money to give her a safer, more secure life. She wouldn't have to wait long. Just three years, four at the most until he could work while going to night school. He wouldn't last longer than that without her anyway.

And God forbid some other guy try to step into his place.
Because he would be back. And when he returned, he would
claim Sarah as his wife.

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