
Chapter 1

"He's here again," her wizened coworker cackled with a truly indecent amount of glee in her tone.

But Liz was too involved in trying to make sure she got the salt actually into the shakers and not onto the counter to even look up when she responded, "He who?"

Wilda snorted. "Like we get men in here every day who can't take their eyes off of us and leave puddles of drool on the floor," she cackled sarcastically, then paused. "Well, at least not in *my* case."

Barely able to prevent herself from murmuring, "No wonder," Liz, instead, flicked her eyes up—carefully *not* her head, so that, if he *were* looking, he wouldn't be able to tell that she was aware of his presence. But, of course, they collided directly with his as she watched a slow, all too knowing grin spread over his face.

The intensity of his gaze caused her body to react in the way it always seemed to with him—nipples tightening painfully, the arousal so quick and sharp that it took her breath away, causing her to baptize her panties in a telling gush as he gave her a look that said he knew exactly what he was doing to her.

Dragging her gaze away from his with a herculean effort, she forced herself, instead, to concentrate on the menial task before her, noticing with a depressing sigh that she was being even less successful than before she'd realized that he was within fifteen feet of her, her hand now shaking slightly as she poured, rendering her efforts even messier than they had been.

Still, she persevered, not about to give him the satisfaction of looking at him again. It wasn't the first time he'd appeared here since she'd come back, and it probably wasn't going to be the last. He wasn't doing anything that could get him ejected from the place or that would give her cause to call the cops, but then she'd never really worried about that kind of behavior from him.

He may have been a cowboy, but that wasn't his style at all.

Having finally finished—and making a mental note to buy the diner a raft of salt to replace what she'd wasted—Liz cleaned up her mess and took up a coffee pot to make the rounds of the four or five tables who were still hanging around even though it was only about fifteen minutes before closing.

The lovebirds were first. They were practically having sex in the booth, but at least her appearance as she inquired with deliberately annoying chirpiness, "More coffee?" had the desired effect, forcing him to climb off her—however reluctantly—with a surprisingly deep blush suffusing both of their cheeks.

"Uh, no thanks. Just the check."

She was nothing if not prepared for that request, setting it down and thanking them as she wished them a good night, mentally hoping for her sake that he was a much better lover than she'd been given ample evidence of.

The next table, down in back, was Boner, the town drunk. Liz had refrained from ever asking how he'd gotten that nickname, preferring to think that it referred to his skeletal frame rather than anything else that didn't bear thinking about.

He was shyly grateful for the refill as she smiled softly at him while dropping a couple of creamers on the table.

He was drunk as a skunk, as always, but at least he didn't smell, and, unlike some patrons, he had never gotten handsy with her, ever. In fact, if she was pressed, Liz would have to say that it was Wilda he was more interested in, not that the viperous bag of wrinkles even bothered to be civil to him. She was much more likely to chase him out of the restaurant with a broom, but Liz was a soft touch and always allowed him the refuge the diner offered, since he always behaved himself around her.

The single woman in the back booth on the other side was busy on her phone, as always, but put her hand over her coffee cup when she appeared, so Liz glided by her to the table she dreaded, which was full of rambunctious teen-aged boys in varyingly egregious stages of puberty—not that many men ever actually slipped its grasp completely. Some of the boys were gangly tall and thin, some shorter and rounder, all with faces ravaged by acne and with less than no impulse control when it came to harassing their tiny, pretty waitress.

But Liz ignored their crudeness, figuring to do otherwise was to invite more of it.

"Can I get you refills or warm up your coffee, boys?" she asked, not looking at any of them.

That caused a collective snicker, and the biggest and boldest of them—Jacob Hawthorne—commented crudely, "I've got something else I'd rather you warm up—how's about you sit on my lap and we see what comes up?" He was closest to her and actually reached an arm out as if to draw her to him.

But it froze in mid-air as everyone in the restaurant heard someone drop his big, booted foot on the floor, then scrape his chair against it, as if to get up.

There was no mistaking the origin of those sounds. The hand was retracted as if he'd reached for a rattler instead, and suddenly, four starkly terrified adolescent faces were demanding their checks.

She had them ready, of course—they'd only gotten sodas and

coffee, anyway. "Wilda'll cash you out at the register, boys. Have a nice night."

Carefully skirting around—without looking at him—going near where the man she knew would classify himself as her rescuer was sitting, she headed back behind the counter to grab a fresh pot, pouring a mug and adding a dash of cream before bringing it out to him.

He'd switched seats, having moved from a table to the booth in the corner, nearest where she would be working—even after they closed—on cleaning up and doing her best to leave things in a state of readiness for the morning shift, which was something she was in the habit of doing even when she wasn't going to be there herself.

The boys were all clamoring at the register, being berated for their loudness and demanding tendencies by Wilda as he both devoured her with his look and kept one eye on them at the same time, just in case.

As soon as she appeared before him, he rose gracefully to his full, intimidating height, her name rumbling slowly out of his chest, as low and intimate as if she was lying naked beneath him in his bed.

"Miss Elizabeth." He actually touched the tip of his hat to her, too, before doffing it and throwing it onto the seat.

She couldn't deny the fact that the title, "Sir," was on the tip of her tongue—as it always seemed to be with him—but she managed not to say it.

"Blaid," she responded as neutrally as her body would allow, still without looking at him.

He sank back into the booth, taking the cup from her and drawling just as softly, "Thank you, darlin'," effortlessly making her feel as if he was grateful for her having given him a particularly powerful blow job rather than just a cup of coffee made the way he liked it.

"Welcome," she responded automatically, returning to the

remainder of things she needed to do and praying she'd be able to fill her mind with them rather than the uncontrollably naughty thoughts that were flooding through her brain. Like how wonderful he smelled, a combination of leather and undeniable maleness, along with how big he was—easily taking up her entire field of vision, his size making her feel even smaller—as he always had—but in a good way, in a way that she knew meant that he still felt as protective of her as he had before.

As if she'd ever had any doubt.

Her body was firmly in his camp, as it always had been, and she had to constantly fight the urge to run back to the booth and straddle him in front of whatever customers remained as well as the inevitably disapproving Wilda.

But her flesh didn't much care about anything except renewing its submission to his, as humiliatingly quickly as possible.

When everything had been filled and was ready to be distributed to the tables, she hefted a big tray up on to her shoulder and made her way out to the floor, only to find it deserted except for him, and the weight of it lifted from her as he held it in one hand.

Still doing her best not to look into his eyes—knowing that way lay certain ruin—she murmured, "You really don't need to do that. It's not too much for me."

"I think it is, and it weighs little enough to me."

She knew just how strong he was at least as well as she knew he wasn't going to be dissuaded, so she gave in with an exasperated sigh and let him help her, ignoring the derisive snort from behind the counter that came when Wilda noticed what he was doing for her.

But, far from being angry, Blaid just smiled and winked at the old woman. "I'd be doing this if it was you, too, you know."

"And you wouldn't much like where I'd be putting the stuff,"

she snapped back with a huff at the idea that she needed help from anyone.

When the tray was empty and all of the tables had full napkin dispensers, salt and pepper shakers, ketchup and mustard squeeze bottles, jelly baskets, as well as place settings, she took the tray from him without even saying thank you, which was unlike her. Liz was almost obsessively courteous, saying "excuse me," "please," and "thank you" to everyone, always.

As she was filling the areas behind the counter with clean glasses and mugs fresh from the dishwasher, Wilda asked loudly, "Will you be all right with that wolf in the dining room if I go home a little early? Henry's waiting for me."

She would have said yes even if she didn't think she would be all right, just so that Wilda wouldn't get the chance to give her any kind of details about what might be going on between herself and her much maligned "boyfriend", the mental images of which she'd already been subjected to having already scarred her for life.

"I'll be fine."

The older woman scowled—although it was hard to tell, because that was her resting face. "You sure? He's a pretty big 'un, and he's had designs on you since before you were legal. Even more so now that you're back, I'd wager. He was none too easy to live with while you were gone, in case you didn't know. Like a bear with a wounded paw. I can stay, if you want me to. Henry'll keep."

It was a very generous offer—one she probably wouldn't make to anyone else on the planet, she knew, but Wilda had a bit of a soft spot—or as close to one as she ever got—for Liz, although she tried not to take advantage of that fact.

"Yes, but I'll be fine, thanks," she replied, with more confidence than she felt. Not that she thought she was in any kind of physical danger from Blaid—despite his strict disciplinary tendencies, she'd never felt anything but safe with him.

Liz helped her into her raincoat, then headed out to put the chairs on the tables in preparations for washing the floor as the last act before she left for the evening.

Wilda, of course, couldn't resist getting the last word in as she deliberately walked by where Blaid was sitting.

"You behave yourself, Blaid Ross," she growled threateningly in passing.

But her obvious censure didn't faze the big man in the least. "Yes, ma'am."

Liz just tried to get on with what she needed to do and not to worry about what was going to happen when she was done and wanted to go home.

As she walked past him to get the mop and bucket, he stood again and caught her wrist—asking rather than demanding, which was a bit of a surprise—when she stopped. "Sit?"

"I need to mop the floor." She tugged at her wrist, and he only waited a second before letting go, but she felt him watching her the entire time. When she was done, she'd mopped herself into a corner behind the register, where she usually ran the last reports from the ancient NCR while the floor dried.

But not this time.

Instead, she started to realize that he was there, at her elbow, lifting her gently into his arms to carry her back to his booth.

"Wouldn't want you to slip on the wet floor," he whispered.

Liz had a hard time not rolling her eyes at that, but then he paused uncharacteristically.

Somehow, she knew that he was debating with himself about whether he was going to put her next to him on the same side, thus trapping her there, or whether he was going to allow her some autonomy and put her down on the cushion opposite him.

In the end, he put her on her own side, although she knew that wasn't really what he wanted to do, deep down.

And it wasn't what he would have done before she'd left, either.

Apparently, you *could* teach an old dog new tricks. Wonders would never cease.

Since she hadn't been given any choice about sitting there, she felt absolutely no obligation to speak to him, and she didn't. Nor did she look at him, preferring, instead, to glance at her phone, not that there was anything interesting going on there—until she found it plucked from her hand and placed on his side of the table, well out of her reach unless she wanted to lean most of her top half on the table to try to reclaim it.

And she wasn't about to expose her butt to him in any way, shape or form, even if it would have been facing away from him. He would have found some way to spank it. She didn't know how; she just knew he'd manage it somehow.

And she knew she'd still not have her phone, either.

"How've you been?"

"Fine, thank you," she answered primly, staring at her hands and willing them not to fidget nervously.

"Have you gotten settled back at your place?"

"Yes, thank you."

"And Evie, is she okay?"

That got her eyes to dart uncertainly up at his, but then down again. "Yes, she's fine, thank you."

"I would love to meet her sometime."

This time, there was no mistaking the alarm in her eyes at that idea. "No, I don't think so."

"Why not? I don't care that she isn't mine. She's yours, and that's enough for me."

Liz snorted. "I highly doubt that. I can't imagine that you're in the least happy about the idea that I left here—I left *you*—and married someone else." Her expression transformed into one with the slightest edge of apprehension, and it made his gut and his heart ache painfully to see any trace of real fear from her. "In fact, I know you weren't happy."

He'd arrived on her doorstep—where she'd settled literally

across the country from him—just once, but it was more than enough.

"I'm sorry for that. I was drunk, although that's no excuse. I will apologize to you for that until the end of my days. You said you forgave me. Is that still true?"

Liz nodded slowly, twisting her fingers together just short of painfully, concentrating on that pain instead of what was brought by the uncomfortable memories he was invoking.

"Yes. I forgive you." For that, anyway. But definitely not for what happened before that drove her away. Or for the fact that she couldn't seem to get him out of her mind—despite being married to someone else.

Blaid sighed, feeling more relieved at her words than he wanted to. "You know I'm not the type to pussyfoot around. You're divorced; I'm single, and I want you back."

She chuckled derisively. "And that's all it takes, huh? You want me, so I should come a runnin'?"

He'd been leaning back, deceptively casually, but he sat up quickly enough to make her jump a bit, grabbing her wrists and holding her hands—and thus her—in place as he put his face mere inches from hers.

His warm breath smelled of coffee, with no hint of booze whatsoever.

"It's more than that, and you know it. I've never stopped loving you—never stopped wanting you—not once. Ever. And I never will."

Liz met his eyes squarely and said to him exactly what she should have known not to say, "The fact that you want me does not in any way obligate me to feel the same."

There was that wolfish smile, the one that said he knew better—that he knew she was lying—and that she couldn't continue to meet, trying, instead, to concentrate on extracting her wrists from his hold, with no success.

His tone was deep and intimate, his words curling around her

heart and her lady bits with the same potency; the truth that was plain in them not aiding her cause in the least. "Ah, but we both know that those feelings are there, anyway, whether or not you want them to be."

Still trying to regain her dignity and her autonomy, both of which most of her wanted to surrender to him unconditionally, she answered, "Whether or not that's true, it doesn't mean that I intend to act on them in any way."

He suddenly let go of her completely, leaning back again while giving her a considering look. When he spoke, it was soft and firm, but not strident at all, as if he didn't feel he needed to be. "You're mine, Elizabeth. We're destined to be a bonded pair, you and I."

Her eyebrow rose. "Apparently not, according to what you told me yourself, since I married—and thus fucked—someone else."

His unabashedly angry growl set her on edge in every possible manner. "That was my fault. In my own eagerness to have you, I ruined what should have happened between us."

Liz sighed. "Blaid, you know that I don't believe in any of that stuff—"

His eyes caught and held hers, mesmerizing her for long moments as he had in the past. She was dismayed to realize that she was just as susceptible to it as she always had been.

"To borrow a phrase a lot of religious people use, you don't have to believe in it; it believes in you. And I didn't get the chance to prove it to you because I lost control of myself before I could truly make you mine and knot—"

"Stop!" Liz slammed her hands down on the table, succeeding in doing something few others had ever done—she'd startled Blaid Ross, who was always almost excessively in control of himself.

Except with her, apparently, in several different ways.

But then he also leaned towards laconic with everyone but

her, too, despite the fact that he had multiple advanced degrees in various languages from some pretty prestigious places.

"I don't want to hear any more about that stupid Delta/Gamma stuff—"

"Alpha/omega," he corrected firmly, although he knew she was pulling his leg.

"Whatever," she dismissed with a wave of her hand. "It's all in your head."

Liz wanted to wipe that filthy grin right off his face. "That's quite a bit north of where it actually resides."

"Shut up, Blaid. I'm not coming back for desperate want of you, I'm not coming back to you. We're not going to sleep together again, and that's that. I'm here because, since Steve is out of the picture, I need to have my family around me in order to be able to make ends meet." She wished she hadn't admitted quite that much to him, but it was the truth. "And besides that, I want Evie to know her family—her cousins and aunts and uncles and everyone—and to be raised around them, not thousands of miles away from everyone I know and love."

He was nodding. "Smart girl. But then you always were, except when it came to me."

Her eyebrows rose again. She couldn't really find a reason to argue with that statement. There had always been something about him that had driven her past the ability to think—that had brought her sexuality to the fore from the beginning, to the exclusion of everything else—and that wasn't a good thing, since it had been proven that she couldn't trust herself around him. To say nothing of the fact that he used it against her to shore up his argument about their stupid pairing or bonding or whatever.

She really didn't want to do anything to encourage him along those lines, despite the fact that her body was completely willing—from the start—to buy into every single bit of it.

Liz knew that, when she was within a ninety-mile radius of him, she only had her intellect to rely on. And, in her experience,

that wasn't necessarily enough. Sometimes, it was nowhere *near* enough.

Gentle fingers looped around her wrist again. "You belong to me—with me, Elizabeth. Just as I do you. And I'm going to prove it to you if it's the last thing I do."

She jerked her arm away, somewhat amazed when he allowed her to have it back.

"Stop deluding yourself, Blaid—you're too smart for that."

But then she heard it. That agonizingly familiar sound that she'd never heard anywhere else—only ever from him—and that she knew, instinctively, he'd only ever made with her. It was somewhere between a purr and a hum, not quite as deep as a growl and with no threatening undertones whatsoever. It had within it the ability to both quiet and excite her. And it was powerful enough to cause a very physical, involuntary reaction in her as if he'd reached between her legs and stroked a big, calloused finger over her clit.

As his fingertips stroked the sensitive area inside her wrist, over that rapidly rising pulse point, a slightly mournful, slightly distraught whimper—her body's automatic answer to his primitive call—escaped her lips before she could stop it as her eyes closed involuntarily and she let out all of the breath in her body at once, leaning limply against the back of the booth as the unfettered arousal it stirred within her had its way with her.

Only a few seconds later, Liz tried to force herself to shake it off, to slog through the cocoon of sensuality that he had instantly woven around them merely by him making that terribly private sound, and had only limited success until she opened her eyes to see him looking annoyingly self-satisfied. He was not quite smiling, though, which was a good thing because she might have had to reach across the table and smack it clean off his face.

That would get her into a terrible amount of trouble, and she had no doubt exactly where she'd end up if she did that—being hauled out to his truck to either be thoroughly spanked and

fucked there or being subjected to exactly the same fate back at his sprawling ranch.

Very likely, the first scenario was more valid, since he didn't much believe in delaying punishments.

Neither outcome was to be desired, she kept telling herself as her essence literally dripped down her slit, making her worry that she was going to leave a wet spot on the seventies avocado green pleather of the booth cushion beneath her, which would only encourage him if he saw it.

And of course, he would see it. He had eagle eyes for everything about her; the intensity that radiated from him was one of the reasons she'd left, not figuring she could handle him.

Knowing she had to get away from him, Liz stood suddenly, saying, "I have to get home," making her way hurriedly out of the booth, as is she was afraid he might change his mind at any minute and decide to sweep her up into his arms as he had before.

And if he did that, she'd be lost.

But he didn't. He did rise behind her, but remained where he was. "I'd be glad to take you home."

"I have my car, thank you," she replied as neutrally as her full-on arousal would allow.

"All right. I'll see you to your car."

She struggled into her coat, but then he was right there to help her as he followed her out. "You don't need to do that."

"I know I don't, Elizabeth."

But he was going to, anyway.

It wasn't as if Rossville was a hotbed of crime. She'd never been scared to close by herself. The parking lot was well lit, and the diner was in the middle of town. All she'd have to do is get one good scream out and the entire town—the majority of which rolled up its sidewalks at five in the afternoon—would be awakened.

She locked up behind them, if clumsily, with him standing

entirely too close to her, feeling him put his big hand all too familiarly on the small of her back as they walked towards her tiny, beat up car and his big truck. It had felt as if he was branding her as his whenever he'd done that in the past, and it was even more so now, for some reason.

He took her keys from her and opened the car door, then handed them back to her. "I wish I'd thought to come out and turn the car on for you so it would be warm for you to get into. I'll remember next time."

It was very like him to think of things like that—to think of her comfort and safety and wants and needs well ahead of his own, as no one in her life ever had.

"There isn't going to be a next time, Blaid," she wasted her breath telling him.

She thought she was going to get away cleanly, but then, she should have known that he would never allow that to happen—especially after he'd seen the results of her very primal response to him in the diner.

He was rumbling in that very particular—very peculiar—way, even before he reached for her, turning her away from the seat she was attempting to claim and holding her flat against him. Some men might have tried to steal a kiss from her as quickly as possible at that moment, being grabby and fumbling and simply trying to achieve their goal.

But not Blaid.

Even if he hadn't had that terribly enticing bass trill of his, he wouldn't have been like that. He might have grown up in a small town in Texas, but he was no hick, and he was far from inexperienced—although he had nowhere near as much of it as he wanted with her.

Still, he forced himself to take his time, watching the effects of the vibrations that started in his chest as they soothed and settled her while further awakening her body to him, even against her will.

It was yet another reason why he knew—beyond a shadow of a doubt—that she was his.

He'd never purred for anyone else, but it was instinctive to do with her, and no other woman had ever responded to him quite the way she did.

Only Elizabeth.

One hand cupped the back of her head, where her challengingly neat bun was—which he desperately wanted to ruin in order to see those auburn locks fanned over his arm—the other resting partly on her hip, partly on her backside as he brought his lips to rest against hers while just slightly increasing the volume of his crooning. For long moments, he teased her with his tongue, licking at and outlining her lips with the tip until Elizabeth could bear it no longer, grabbing him, pressing herself more fully against him, and initiating the kiss he'd been withholding from her, herself.

His soft chuckle at her actions was much more annoying than soothing, but she couldn't think about that now. He was kissing her, finally, having appropriated control of the kiss immediately—not that she cared.

She was good as long as he didn't stop.

She never wanted him to stop, especially when he bent her back over his arm, thoroughly claiming her mouth with his, his hand just beginning to wander towards her breast as a car drove by, bathing them in their headlights brightly enough to drag her back to her senses.

It was a testament to his strength of will that, the moment she began to struggle, he stopped, setting her back on feet that were—at first—unsteady without his support, so he kept her safe until she felt she could take a step away from him.

With one last, inappropriately longing, ragged-breathed look at him, she ducked into the driver's seat and he closed the door, warning sternly, "Drive carefully, little girl."

And, to her horror, she did drive more sedately than she

usually did to her little flat in a converted Victorian on the edge of town, knowing that the fact that he was behind her had a lot to do with that.

He pulled over and shone his lights on her door, obviously wanting to assure himself that she got home safely, not leaving until she'd done so.

The bastard, she thought, completely devoid of anger.

By the time she made sure that Evie was okay, got her mom settled in her own apartment, and crawled between the cool sheets of her own—now lonely-seeming—bed, she was surprised to hear the beep of her text tone.

Sleep well and dream of me, Miss Elizabeth. I can still taste you on my lips.

Several responses to that—the majority of them flippant to downright insulting—floated into her mind, but then she decided that, much like the adolescent boys in the diner tonight, any kind of response would encourage him, so she, instead, chose to simply ignore it and go to sleep.