

# Chapter 1

The harsh sunlight bursting through the wood slatted blinds awoke Alexis from her deep sleep. She groaned as she opened her eyes, annoyed that she couldn't finish the dream she'd been having. She and Jackson had been out riding Luc and Stone. She had named her horse Lucifer when he was a pony, but as she trained him and began to ride, and she shortened his name to Luc. At just 15, she had fallen victim to a crush on her neighbor Jackson, whom at 18, was leaving the small town of Rakesford, Texas to attend college out in California. Her dreams, like usual, were of the two of them riding together, ending up by the lake, or the ocean, or anywhere alone for that matter. Tonight, they had been riding in the surf along the beach in Barbados, a country she had dreamed of visiting, but didn't think she'd ever get to.

They had dismounted the horses and began to stroll along the beach, reins in hand. They reached a small outcropping of rocks and tied the horses up to a tree nearby. They sat down and removed their shoes and their socks. The cool breeze felt good on her hot feet after the long ride. She rolled up her pant legs and wandered down to the ocean, she could hear Jackson following her, and then the footsteps stopped. All of a sudden she was scooped out of the surf into his muscular arms. She wrapped her arms around his neck and looked into his baby blues. He leaned towards her; she could almost feel his lips on hers. And that is where she awoke, as she always seemed to do, just before she got that kiss she so deeply desired.

She got out of her plush bed and stepped down onto cold hardwood.

"For it being summer and hot already, you would think the floor might be warm," she griped to her empty room. She walked into her closet; she had always had a shopping fetish, especially for a tomboy. She threw on a pair of jeans, cowboy boots and a lightweight fitted t-shirt. Green. It brought out the hint of it in her eyes. As she walked downstairs to join her parents for breakfast, she could hear the pounding of punk rock music coming from Brandon's room, he was a pain, but she loved him. At only 11, she couldn't blame her brother for being a pain; he was just at "that age" as her parents said. Katherine and Scott had been great parents, a tad protective, but with Alexis' wild streak and her brothers age, who wouldn't be?

"Hey darlin'," Scott drawled, "taking the horse out today? You ought to ask Jackson to go, he's leaving in two days and he'll want to say goodbye to his horse Stone."

His last comment was followed by a little wink. Her father knew about the crush she had on Jackson. At 6'1", dark unruly hair, shinning blue eyes and a cowboy's build, he was definitely the heartthrob type. Her mom and dad knew she had a romantic side under that tomboy exterior; she was just damn good at making sure others didn't. Being a tomboy had kept her from acting like a fool around the guys like most of her girlfriends did.

"Yeah dad, I planned on it, thanks."

She plopped down at the table and downed the glass of OJ in front of her.

"Sweetie, you might want to take it easy on him racing today"

"And why is that, mom?"

"You know how much he hates to lose baby, and it is his last couple days in town."

"Well then, tell him to stop treating me like a little sister and I might give in," Alexis chided back.

She hated that Jackson thought of her as a little sister. For once, she wished he would just see her as a young woman, someone he would want to date. Alexis was pretty. Nothing superb, but she was young. At 5'4" and a mere 110 pounds with long brown hair and green eyes, she was a simple beauty who just hadn't matured. With a quick wave goodbye to her parents and a yell upstairs to Brandon, she headed to the corral. She expected to be the first there, to have some time to herself to get the horses ready to ride, but to her surprise, Jackson was already there.

"Hey kid, how's it going?"

"Hey J, I'm good, but what are you doing here." The 'you' came out a little harsher than she had intended.

"Ouch, I'm sorry, would you prefer I left?"

"No! Um, I mean, um, of course not. I was actually going to invite you to race down to the lake.

Oh, I see, looking to beat me once more before I leave, huh?" he finished saddling up the horses as she laughed and replied, "Well, don't I always?"

He jumped on Stone's back and began to head out of the stables before she could even get on. Stone was already out of the gates and almost into a full gallop before she was out of the pen with Luc. She screamed 'cheater' as she raced after him. He glanced back just to see her disappear into the trees to his right. Little did he know, she had found a shortcut through the thick branches and was hell bent on her continuing tradition of beating him to the lake. When he came into the clearing ten minutes later, she was already off Luc and had him at the edge drinking in the cool water. She grinned at him as he walked up next to her. The smile was brief as he grabbed her and threw her into the water. She sputtered to the surface just as he dove in after her, just in his boxers. Suddenly, she wasn't so mad anymore. He swam up next to her; she could feel the heat radiating from his wet body.

"So, how'd you pull that one off, I was sure I had you beat?"

"You can never be too sure about me; I've got lots of tricks up my sleeve."

"Sure you do."

"You doubt me? That's never a good idea Jackson. We girls can be dangerous!"

"Ha. Most girls are. You, I have all figured out."

How wrong he was. He knew her tomboy side; he knew nothing of her romantic, frolicking on the beach one. He swam to the shore, climbed out, and laid down in the grass to dry off. She sat down next to him.

"So what made you decide to leave Texas," she asked?

"I don't know, I wanted a change and California seemed like a good place. Plus the colleges are great; UCLA will definitely push me in the right direction. Why, you gonna miss me or something?" He pushed her gently.

"A pain in the butt like you? Not one bit." Her mouth said one thing but her heart was screaming "yes, please don't go, stay here and be with me." She felt stupid even thinking like that.

"C'mon," he said, "lets head back, I have packing left to do." They climbed back on the horses and headed back to the stables. They unsaddled the mares and began to groom them before putting them away.

"I'll keep in touch and let you know how California is" Jackson told her as they finished the task at hand. He gave her a big hug and she prayed that he wouldn't let go. But, of course, he had to and as he walked back to her house a small tear dripped down her cheek. She wiped it away quickly and chided herself for being so emotional. After all she was just a "little sister" to him.

# Chapter 2

"Alex Venn, Rakesford Realty, how can I help you?"

"Honey, why don't you ever use your full name? Alex makes you sound like a boy."

"Hi mom." She stifled a groan; her mother only seemed to call when she had the town gossip or another "wonderful guy" to set her up with. She had yet to agree with her mother's taste for her in men and wasn't in the mood today.

"Have I got news for you Alexis! Guess who is rumored to be coming back to our little town next month." "Mom, I don't have time for this today. I am ridiculously bu..." "Jackson Taylor!" her mother said before she could finish her sentence. And then, she realized the name that had come out of her mother's mouth and almost dropped the phone. "Could it be true? Could he really be coming back?" After all these years just the thought of Jackson still made her stomach jump.

"...Alexis, hello? You still alive?"

Her mom's voice brought her back to reality.

"Oh yeah, sorry. So when is he coming back and why?" She was never a huge fan of gossip but when it came to Jackson, she always had time to listen.

"Well, if my sources are correct, he is getting transferred back to Texas to work. In Austin." Austin was a mere 20 miles up the road, and living in Rakesford was a great way to get out of city living without a terrible commute.

"But the biggest thing is he will need a place to live, it's a perfect way to see him again. You two always had so much fun together."

"Mother, need I remind you, I haven't heard from him in seven years; what makes you think he even remembers me?" He had promised to write, and he had, first it was once a month then once every two months, and after about two years, he just stopped writing. Her last letter to him had met with no response.

"Well, I am sure he will remember you, but I must head to the salon. Come home for dinner sometime soon we miss you. With Brandon at Rice, we barely see him; I want to at least see the one child still in town."

"Okay mom." She didn't see how it was possible for her mother to miss her, she talked to her at least four times a week; she never got the chance to miss her. She hung up the phone and leaned back in her chair.

She let herself drift off in thought, remembering the last time that she saw him 9 years ago. When she closed her eyes she could almost feel the breeze off the lake and hear his deep laughter. Last time they were face to face she had been just a young girl, insecure in her looks and her personality. Now at 24, Alexis had become a beautiful woman. She had grown a couple inches and now stood at 5'6", although she was rarely without some heel, even in her riding boots. Her brown hair was longer, falling at her mid back, and the time she spent in the sun had given her natural highlights. Her soft waves had turned into soft curls, and she most often wore it loose, with just enough styling to keep in from frizzing in the Texas humidity. Her green eyes still had the sparkle of a young girl, excited by everything they saw, but with a hint of experience and growth. She'd always hated the gym, but stayed in shape from riding and walking by the lake, and loved the fact that she had 'curves'. So did all the men in town. She tended to capture attention everywhere she went, as she carried herself with poise and confidence that added to her natural beauty. Alexis didn't know Jackson's type, but she hoped that the woman she was now might capture his attention.

She wiggled her mouse, as her screen saver had come on while she was enveloped in her thoughts. She had a few new emails and browsed through the subject lines. One caught her eye. "JT countdown, meet at TLR at 3". It was from her best friend Valerie (or Val as everyone referred to her) Brooks. Alexis knew that meant

Val had heard about Jackson coming back into town and wanted to see how she was handling it. She hit reply, and entered "Be there, beer waiting plz" in the subject line and hit send. The girls had stopped writing actual emails years ago; they talked via subject lines and text messages. "TLR" was Valerie's restaurant, rather her family restaurant, but her father had left it to her when he decided to retire and take her mom to travel the country. Valerie had turned it from a local dive bar to the local hot spot, where by 3pm Friday it was filling with an array of Rakeford's best. That included everyone from lawyers and construction workers to nurses and teachers. Valerie always kept fun and attractive staff (both men and women) which meant that flirting was a common occurrence. The girls rarely went to flirt as they were both too busy to really date.

Valerie and Alexis became friends their freshman year in high school when they met at an intramural soccer game. The day of their first practice it was pouring down rain, and the team was about to cancel the first practice. Valerie had been running late and as she ran up to the group, she slipped and slid through a huge mud puddle. She stood up, dripping wet and laughing. The mood switched right away, and the team immediately started playing, slipping and sliding over the soaked and muddy field. At the end of the practice, Alexis came up to Valerie and asked if she wanted to grab dinner with her and a few of the other players. Val agreed and she and Alex spent the entire night learning about each other, by the end of the night it was as if they'd know each other for ages. They spent the next 4 years as best friends, confidants, study buddies and party partners. And the end of High School, they decided to head off to University of Texas together, Alexis heading into Real Estate Law and Valerie into Restaurant Management. They stayed best friends and became roommates.

Through their four years at UT they grew up, but not apart. They both had their share of male adorers but only Alexis fell subject to heartbreak. They often spent weekends at Val's restaurant - The Long Ride, and during their sophomore year, a new bartender had started working there. Alexis and he immediately hit it off. His name was Tony; he was everything that fit 'tall, dark and handsome'. Unfortunately it turned out that his temper was just as dark. Their relationship had started like a fairytale. They went riding together, out to dinner, romantic beach trips to south Texas; he spoiled her in every aspect of the word. They saw each other almost every day, and fell deeply in love, or so she thought. After about a year together, Tony became more protective, demanding and needy. He would call 5 or more times a day, and heaven forbid she didn't answer. When she did get to call him back he was questioning, untrusting and dramatic. She soon realized that the man she thought she was in love with wasn't there anymore. She ended things, but as it is often hard to do, she never forgot the good times that they had. Since then, she had not opened her heart for fear that her partner would change, much like Tony did. She still dated, and loved the accompaniment of an attractive man, but refused more than a couple dates, never risking getting too close.

Valerie loved men as much as Alexis, but she had never gotten her heart broken, she refused more than 5 dates with any man, that was enough time to enjoy a few great meals, a good movie, and depending on the guy, a nice gift. Now, Valerie wasn't greedy, or selfish, but she knew how to date, and enjoyed playing the game. If guys wanted to spoil her, she was happy to receive the perks. It was nothing she ever asked for, it was just what she usually received. The fact of the matter was that if she found a guy that *didn't* use any of the 'expected' dating tactics, she might stick around for more than a handful of dates.

Alexis glanced at her computer screen. She had received a few emails in the last couple minutes, none that she really wanted to answer. Glancing at the clock, she saw that it was 2:45. She was only 5 minutes walking distance from 'The Long Ride', but she figured with everyone in town on Fridays, it would take her 15 minutes to get there.

She clicked off her monitor and decided to call it a day. Unfurling her feet from under her, she slid her feet back into her black Christian Louboutin pumps. Her one weakness was beautiful shoes: Choo, Blahnik, Louboutin, Weitzman, Dior, her closet was filled with designers from all over the world. She planned her outfit around the pair of shoes she was craving that morning. Valerie always teased her that if it weren't for her shoe

collection, she would have no vices. Alex didn't drink too much, had only ever tried a cigarette once (it made her choke) and didn't gamble.

She finished tidying up her desk and walked out of her office. It was a beautiful spring day, and she couldn't wait to see who was out and about.

"Hey Sarah, send the rest of my calls to my cell please? I'm heading to 'The Long Ride'. You're welcome to head out too." Alexis called to her personal assistant as she walked out the front door and into the sun. She had just hired Sarah last week, and hadn't had much of a chance to get to know her yet. Normally, she would have invited her along to get to know her better, but she didn't really want anyone else to hear the Jackson discussion.

She shaded her eyes as she opened her purse to hunt down her sunglasses. Of course they had fallen to the bottom of her bag...whatever she needed at that moment always seemed to. She located her favorite silver ray-ban aviators. They reminded her of 'Top Gun', one of her favorite movies. Plus, they were great for sun protection.

"Hey Alex! What's up chica?!" Alexis turned to see Becky, the local coffee shop owner, walking towards her. Becky was in her late 20's and always looked like she rolled out of bed and headed to work. Today, her red hair was in a knot at the top of her head, she was wearing a flowing flowery skirt in shades of pink, red and orange, a white tank, and cowboy boots. She had completed the look with long turquoise beaded necklaces. She rarely wore make-up, and today was no different. Despite her disheveled look, everyone loved her. She was fun, creative and just a little kooky.

"Hey Becky. How are you? How's business", Alex asked?

"It's going great, although I wish I could figure out a way to keep it packed during the day. The morning and the evening, we can barely brew fast enough. But between about 11am and 4 pm...it's pretty dull. We have a few people that come in to grab a pick-me-up during lunch, but other than that..." she trailed off, lost in a thought..."Oh, um anyway...how are you"?

Alexis giggled; she couldn't help it when she listened to her friend change subjects so easily.

"I'm doing wonderfully. Business is good, people love buying homes in the spring. So, I can't really complain. Plus, I just hired a personal assistant that is really making my life easier".

"Make sure to bring her by and introduce her to our fabulous coffee!" And with that, Becky turned and headed off. Alexis could hear her humming under her breath to her own melody. Becky never stayed and chatted long. It always seemed that she was heading somewhere, but had no idea where.

Alexis continued walking towards 'The Long Ride', wondering who else was out and about this afternoon. As she fell back into her stride, her thoughts came back to Jackson. Wondering where he was this very moment, if he still looked as good, and if he even remembered her. Realistically, she knew that he probably did, but also knew that he probably still thought she was 15. She could still remember every word of the letters that she had written to him while he was gone. They were all full of hidden messages, which he obviously never got. She would tell him that things were busy, but that she always had time to dream and think about the future. What she meant was that things were busy but that she was always dreaming about him and the future when he would come back to Texas. She talked about riding her horse out to the lake, hoping he would remember riding with her so long ago and think of returning. She thought about every word that she chose carefully, trying to sound as mature as possible. She hoped that as he read her words, he would see her maturing as a woman, rather than the 'friend' he left behind. All she knew was it had been a long time since they'd written, let alone seen each other. Her heart half hoped that his good looks and charm had been lost in California. If that were the case, it would be easier to forget her old feelings when he returned. The other part of her hoped that he remembered every bit about her and had been looking forward to coming back to Texas. But she knew that neither was bound to be true.

She was jolted out of her thoughts as her foot caught on the sidewalk. She stumbled, but was able to maintain her balance. She looked at the ground and caught sight of nothing that should have tripped her up. Although, it didn't take much for her to miss-step, as she was fairly accident prone. She shrugged it off as her normal clumsiness. And, for the first time since she had left her office, she actually looked around. She loved her little town. It really was a stereotypical Texas town, with tree-lined streets, colorful storefronts and more colorful people. But, there were certain things about the town that made it all their own.

Off to the North-East was their town park. The first weekend of December was set aside for the town holiday celebration. All the trees would be covered in white lights, with the large pine in the town park glittering with multi colored lights and a Texas star. On the Friday night, Santa came through on horseback and lit their town Christmas tree. Everyone came into town that night to wander through the stores and catch up with everyone. The stores always had hot apple cider, cookies, and treats for the town to enjoy. It was one weekend that everything just seemed to stop. Fighting among neighbors, homework for the kids, and stress from work disappeared.

Once the night had fallen, the kids headed home and the rest of the town was ready to party. The stores closed, and so did the street. All of the 'adults' stayed out and mingled. 'The Long Ride' pulled out tables and chairs, and created a bar in the streets. It was a great night, full of dancing, drinking and music.

To the South of Rakesford was their lake, which she still rode to almost every weekend. Around the lake were beautiful trees, flowers, and the perfect areas for picnicking. During the summer, the lake was filled with the sounds of splashing kids; groups of teens enjoying being away from the schools and families, trying to capture every bit of time they could. During the fall and winter, it was much less occupied. There were still the couples enjoying a Sunday date, and the other horse riders like her. But no matter the season, the lake held a beauty rivaled by nothing.

When she went riding to the lake, she felt like nothing could touch her. She was free to day dream about anything she wanted. Years ago, she would ride, imagining herself in Jackson's strong arms. Sitting at the bank of the lake she would imagine herself traveling the country not stuck in a small town. As she grew older, she began to fall more in love with the town and began to think less of traveling and more of finding someone that she could enjoy the lake with. When she found Tony, she thought she had found that man. They would ride to the lake together and be one of those cute couples, picnicking, kissing and cuddling on a blanket. She cherished their moments around the lake together, but when it ended, she lost her love for him, but never for the lake. It had always been her rejuvenation when days were tough or emotions were high. No man would ever ruin the lake for her.

Her thoughts stopped as she arrived at "The Long Ride". The bar could always make her smile. The front looked like it was ripped right out of an old western, complete with swinging bar doors out front. There were horse tie up's out front, which there were usually at least a couple waiting for their owners to come claim them again. Inside, the tables were already packed with the people who, like her, had decided that 3pm was a perfect time to stop working for the day. All the tables and chairs were real wood, worn from the years of use. It was a place for meeting, drinking and forgetting about the day. The walls were covered in pictures from when Rakesford was just a wide open range, full of wild horses, and wilder cowboys. The only thing that looked 'modern day' was the full bar, always packed with the most attractive bartenders, both male and female.

She lifted her shades and saw Valerie waving at her from a corner of the bar. The waving was really unnecessary. Valerie was hard to miss, as she attracted attention everywhere she was. Standing at only 5'2", most would assume it was easy for her to get lost in the crowd. But her stunning looks made sure that wasn't possible. Valerie was a petite blue-eyed blonde that looked like she just walked off the beach in Hawaii, but with the attitude of a true Texan. Her straight blonde hair was shoulder length and flattered her face shape perfectly. And, unlike Alex, Val worked out every day; she always said it was the best place to meet guys, and she always did.

Alexis weaved her way through the tables, smiling and waving at the some of the locals that she knew. . Looking around, she couldn't help but smile. Everyone seemed so relaxed when they were here; laughs were louder, smiles more honest and stories more interesting.

Despite the chairs being wood, they were undeniably comforting after a long day. She could feel the stress melting away as she sat down at the table. She took off her blazer and hung it over the back of the chair. Once the bar got packed, it tended to get a little warm

"Hey Val, where's my beer", Alex asked as she got settled? Normally, she wouldn't be drinking, as she never liked to feel like she was out of control. She had such a low tolerance, that even one beer could impair her judgment. But, she figured that if they were going to be dredging up old stories and trying to figure out what to do when Jackson came back into town, a drink was in order.

"Don't worry, hun, I already ordered it". Just as Val finished her sentence, their server sidled up next to them and placed a frosty mug in front of Alex.

"See, I told you!"

"Thanks Val and thanks," she paused to read the girls nametag, "Jessie". She was a stereotypical female 'Long Ride' bartender. Pretty, petite, bubbly and attention grabbing. The male bartenders weren't much different. They were all attractive, muscular and could hold attention for hours. When Valerie had taken over the management of the bar, that was one of the first things she focused on, she wanted to make sure that the men and women that visited the bar had equal amounts of eye candy in the servers. People love going to drink; they love to drink even more when sexy bartenders are serving.

The first sip helped calm her stress levels instantly. It was bound to be a long night. "Ok, so what's new with you", Alex asked Val, hoping to avoid the J word for as long as possible. She knew they would have to talk about him, and that the conversation was bound to be intense, but it didn't need to start yet.

Valerie giggled, "Avoiding something are we? Ok, well I guess I can give you a break for a bit. Everything's doing well. As you can see, the bar is packed and you know as well as I do, that it's like this almost every night", she glanced around the bar to prove her point. "I just went on another date with that guy Matthew, that I met the other week at the grocery store" She paused to see if Alex remembered hearing about him.

Alex nodded, "yeah, I remember you telling me about him. I thought he was kind of boring though?"

"Oh he is! But he has great taste and took me out into Austin to that great new steak house that just opened. I really wanted to go, so I said yes, but I won't be going again", Valerie smiled. She knew it drove Alex crazy that she would go out for dinner with someone she wasn't interested in, just because the place sounded good. At the end of the day, Valerie didn't feel like she was using the guys, she felt like she just giving them what they wanted. If they were willing to pay for great dinners, she didn't mind being the object of affection.

"Oh Val, you crack me up. Does he know that you only agreed because of the restaurant?" Alex laughed, sometimes she wished she could be as carefree with men as Valerie was, but she'd never tell her that.

"Of course not, Alex! I would never crush his ego like that. I want him to think I went for him. I'll just make up some excuse for why I can't date him again. Just because I go for the food, not the guy, doesn't mean that I am not a fun, entertaining and sweet date".

"Ok, ok, fair enough Val. I just was checking. I would hate for these guys to leave with hurt feelings and an emptier wallet". She finished laughing just as their server Jessie walked back over with a couple of shots in hand.

"Sorry to interrupt girls, but these are from the guys up at the bar. I guess they thought you were to intent on your conversation and needed a drink. Either that, or they were just hoping to get your attention". At that, all three girls laughed. The bartenders knew as much as the girls did about getting hit on. It was a common occurrence at 'The Long Ride'.

“Thanks Jessie, I guess we better tell them thanks too.” Valerie waved at the guys and mouthed ‘Thanks’. She turned back to Alex, “Bottoms up!” They both took the shots and it sent shivers down Alex’ spine.

“Ugh, tequila! This stuff is brutal.” She made a face at Valerie, “it’s your fault, if it had just been me, I would have sent the shots back!”

“Yeah, Alex, I know. Which is why I made you drink it. The only way I’m going to get you to be honest about the whole Jackson situation is if you get your tongue a little loosened.”

“Fine, whatever, I guess you’re right.” Alex could feel the heat of the tequila rising up, she was already feeling more relaxed.

“Ok, so we have two options: one, you can keep avoiding the topic and I will tell you more about the boring details you already know of my life. Or two, we can get this Jackson talk underway.” Valerie smiled, knowing that if she just called Alex out, she might get somewhere.

“Whatever Val, I guess we can start”, Alex lightly shoved her friend and laughed. “Ok, so all I really know is that he is coming back in town in the beginning of April, so a couple weeks?” She paused to count, “Yeah, like 10 days.”

“Ok, well then we have 10 days to brainstorm how to make sure that you are at the front of his attention when he does get back. You know that the minute he sees you, he’s going to want you. How can he resist?” Valerie raised her eyebrow and grinned, her signature ‘trouble’ smile.

“Yeah, right. More than likely he won’t even recognize me. Even if he does, the last time we talked was 7 years ago, we probably have nothing in common now!” Alex hoped this wasn’t true, as she could still remember everything about him. She could remember how he looked when he rode his horse, how his eyes lit up when he smiled and the deep drawl of his voice.

“Ok, Alex, I know that you don’t think he’ll remember you, but I guarantee that he will. Who could ever forget you?” Valerie smiled, and stood up from the table. “I’m getting you another drink. If you’re going to be getting depressed about the whole thing, you might as well get drunk at the same time.

6 hours later, the girls were laughing hysterically, 4 empty beer glasses and a couple empty shot glasses in front of each of them.

Alexis laughed. “I guess we should probably get out of here. I can’t believe we’ve been talking for so long!”

“Yeah, I guess you’re right,” Valerie looked around the bar. It was only about 10pm, so the bar was still packed, “I can’t believe we drank so much!”

They both stood up from their table and hooked arms. They were swaying and giggling the whole way to the street. Alexis waved goodbye to Valerie, hopped into a cab waiting outside and headed home. It was time for sleep.

# Chapter 3

Looking out the airplane window, Jackson watched the city drop from view. He took a deep breath, as flying always made him a little nervous, and leaned back into his chair. He closed his eyes and tried to get himself to relax. His mind drifted back to the last time he had been in Texas, 9 years ago, and how he felt like he would never love a place like he loved Rakesford. It had been his home for 18 years, and he had loved every detail about it. When he left, he thought he would go back and visit as often as he could. But he never did.

It hadn't been easy to get adjusted in the beginning, but much to his surprise, he had fallen in love with the big city life, where he was always busy, always with something to do. He got so involved at UCLA with school and extracurricular, that it just never seemed right to go home. Plus, his parents loved to travel so they had no problem coming to visit him, and usually did about every six months. His friends and he spent weekends traveling the coast, from Santa Barbara to San Diego and during the week they were either on the lawn playing soccer or in class. He worked hard and in 4 years, he had his degree in Business Marketing. When he graduated, he was offered a position with Modern Vision, one of the top marketing and ad agencies based in Los Angeles. He was a started as a junior copywriter and worked his way up to Vice President in just 5 years. Which was the reason he was sitting on an airplane flying to Texas. Jackson's boss had been so proud of the work that he had done in Los Angeles, that his boss asked him to open their new office in Austin, Texas. The company had already expanded to Chicago, Manhattan and Miami, so the southwest was the next place to go. He had hesitation as he had built a life for himself in LA, and didn't know if he was ready to go back to the heat, humidity and small town lifestyle. Although Austin was a big city, similar to LA, he knew his parents would want him to live in his home town again, as it was only 20 minutes away. It would be difficult to say no, as he did miss his horse, Stone, and he could never say no to his mom. She was the toughest and sweetest woman he knew. About 6 years ago, doctors discovered ovarian cancer, but after a year of treatment, she was cleared. She fought it and survived. She had been healthy for 5 years now and the experience had made her a stronger woman, and Jackson looked up to her for her strength.

The other reason he had hesitated saying yes was because of Leslie. In his sophomore year he had met what was to become his first love. Her name was Leslie Banning and thinking about her now made his heart hurt. The instant they met, he was attracted to her, much like the rest of his friends. She was blonde, tall, bubbly and beautiful. She was also smart and funny, but had been born with a platinum spoon in her mouth, and every once in a while, it was made very apparent. They had immediately become best friends, studying, partying and enjoying life together, but never as more than friends. It took 2 years and his graduation for them to finally take that step towards a relationship. During the planning of their graduation party he finally admitted he wanted to date her. Their 5 year relationship had its ups and downs, but they fell in love and made it work. When he was offered the job to go to Texas, he had to take a long hard look at his relationship and decide if he was ready to ask her to come with him. Asking her to come with him would mean that he was ready to settle down, and as much as he loved her, he wasn't sure if he was ready to make it forever. When he told Leslie he was struggling with his decisions, she made it easy, telling him that without a proposal, she wasn't going. Giving him the ultimatum made his decision easy, as he was never one to be told how things were going to be. Despite the fact that it was his decision to end their relationship, it still wasn't easy to say goodbye.

Jackson opened his eyes and looked out the window. At cruising altitude it looked like they were floating through the clouds. The man to his right was engrossed in the book he was reading, something about politics and business. Despite Jackson's business successes, he was never one to read business books for fun. He

had enough of the business world when he was at work. He decided he ought to close his eyes, as he had about 3 more hours on the plane.

“Flight attendants please prepare for landing”. The captain’s voice over the intercom system jolted him awake. “Wow, I guess I was more tired than I thought”, Jackson muttered to himself. He rarely slept on planes, let alone for 3 hours, unless he was exhausted. He looked out the window again. This time he could see them descending through the clouds and Texas coming into view. It was a sight that, surprisingly, made him smile and warmed his heart a little. Maybe this was going to be a good change for him. Somewhere he knew he loved once, and was sure he could love again. Somewhere he could further his career even more. Somewhere to clear his head and forget about the stress of his failed relationship. The landing was a little jerky, but at least they had made it safe and in one piece. The fasten seatbelt sign turned off as they pulled up to the gate. Everything from his house in California was going to be shipped to Texas once he bought a house there. The realtor was the second thing on his list, right after he got to the hotel and took a shower. He always hated the feeling he got after being on a plane for 4 hours. He stood up and grabbed his briefcase out of the overhead bin. He slipped his mp3 player in and pulled out his cell phone, powering it back on. The minute the screen was up it beeped to tell him he had a message. Just as he was about to check who had called, the phone began to ring. “Friends in low places”. The ringtone for his best friend Greg.

Jackson clicked answer, “Hey man, I just landed, what’s up?”

“Just wanted to see when you were arriving in Texas, but I guess my question was answered.” Greg laughed.

“Yeah, flight wasn’t too bad a little rocky, but I’m here in one piece, so I’m good.”

“Nice, well hopefully Texas isn’t as boring as you thought it would be. There’s gotta be at least a couple hot women out there”. Jackson could hear Greg grinning through the phone.

“Yeah, I’m sure there are, but I am definitely not worried about women right now. You know I just want to get the office opened, and get back to California as soon as possible. I’m not planning on staying.” Jackson had gotten off the plane and arrived at the baggage claim. “Hey, I gotta run, my bags are just getting here.”

“Ok, well have fun, if you can”. With that, Jackson hung up and grabbed his suitcase. He wandered out of the airport and over to the rental car office. He needed a car to get him into town and for the first couple days until he picked out the right car for him. Normally, the type of car wouldn’t even be a question, but for a short stay, it was bound to be tough. He had an addiction to old classics, and he had almost cried when he had to leave his baby in California. A Plum Crazy Purple 1970 Convertible Hemi ‘Cuda. He had been putting away money since he turned 16, promising himself that someday he would have the car. After his first year with Modern Vision, he received a pretty nice bonus check, just enough for him to finally purchase his dream. Every time he got into that car, he felt all his problems melt away. Nothing could touch him when he was cruising down PCH with the top down, sun shining and the engine growling under his foot. It was going to be impossible to find something that gave him the same thrill to drive, but he had to have something. He was thinking he’d probably just lease a BMW M3 or maybe a Dodge Charger SRT8. His company was giving him a stipend for the car, so he wanted something fun, but fairly reasonable.

He pulled his shades out of his briefcase, slipped them on and walked out of the airport and onto the sidewalk. The power of the Texas heat and humidity stopped him in his tracks. The sun felt like it was reaching through his skin and to his core. He had expected it to be hot, but he hadn’t remembered how hot. When he left Los Angeles, it was sunny and 68 degrees, the perfect temperature for spring weather. Here it felt like it was in the high 80’s, with about 90% humidity. By the time he got across the street to the rental agency, he could feel his shirt sticking to his body. He walked into the rental car office, the cool air conditioning felt amazing. Luckily, it was fairly empty in the office and he walked right up to the counter.

“Good afternoon, last name please” The counter lady looked up at him and he handed her his paperwork, driver’s license, insurance and company credit card. “Thanks, your company has already taken care

of picking a car for you. I just need to enter everything into our system. I'll have everything ready in just a minute". He looked around the office while she typed his information into the computer. A few of the other travelers from his flight had begun to come in to pick up their cars too. "Here you go Mr. Taylor, you're all set," she handed him the keys to his rental car, "just walk out the doors and turn to your right. It's in space 17". He walked out front and was pleased to see that his boss had rented him a convertible Mustang. His boss and he had discussed cars often enough, it was nice to see that he remembered. He hadn't really thought about leasing a Mustang, but it was a possibility. He tossed his bags in the trunk and slid into the driver's seat. The seat leather was hot, but luckily they kept the cars in a garage, so they weren't in direct sunlight. The minute he turned it on, he cranked the AC up full blast and cracked the windows, letting the heat escape.

Jackson pulled out of the garage and turned on the radio. The strong southern drawl of the announcer made him realize how much of his own accent he had lost in the last 9 years. Pretty soon the dj's voice gave way to country. Jackson may have lost most of his accent, but he never lost his love for country music. He glanced down at the directions on the passenger seat. The airport was about 20 minutes from his hotel in Downtown Austin, and the drive was pretty straightforward. He got out onto the freeway and stepped on the accelerator. The engine purred under his foot. Not quite the sound he had grown accustomed to, but it wasn't terrible. He glanced at the clock, 4pm. He was going to have to put Rakesford Realty on the schedule for tomorrow, as he wanted a shower more than he wanted to start finding a house. As he thought, the drive was easy and before he knew it, he was at the front of his hotel. He was staying at a beautiful historic hotel. He had been here once as a kid, and remembered how amazed he was when he looked up at the tall peaks of the architecture. Even now, it was still dramatically beautiful. He was in the heart of the business and entertainment district and planned on heading out to one of the local bars as soon as he cleaned up.

Fifteen minutes later Jackson was in his room, bags tossed into the corner and the hot water turned on. Check in had been a breeze and the bellmen were on top of their game. He stripped, tossed his dirty clothes in the corner of the bathroom, and climbed into the shower. The heat of the water immediately began to melt away the stress he had accumulated from his flight. He finished shampooing and washing and was letting the water beat off the rest of his stress. Unfortunately, his relaxation didn't last long as he could hear his cell phone bleating from his jeans on the floor. Todd Rundgren "Banging on the drum all day". His boss' ring tone. He knew if he didn't answer, his boss would never stop calling. Jackson sighed as he turned off the water, wrapped a towel around his waist and grabbed the phone.

"Hello Bruce. Thanks for taking care of the rental car and my hotel". Jackson held the phone with one hand toweeling himself off with the other, so he could stop dripping on the floor. Walking into the bedroom and sitting on the edge of the bed, he tried to keep the frustration of his interrupted shower out of his voice.

"Oh, no problem Jackson. When you get cleaned up, head down to the concierge desk. You have reservations in town with the guys that are helping you to open the office in Austin. They'll meet you there at 6pm". Jackson glanced at the clock, 5:00pm. That would give him enough time to relax a couple minutes, get changed and downstairs.

"Ok, thanks. I better get going if I want to meet them in time." With that, Jackson signed off and tossed the phone onto the bed. He scooted back against the pillows, grabbed the remote and clicked on the TV. He flipped through the channels, landed on Sports Center and left it there. Leaning his head back against the wall, he thought back to his horse, Stone. Stone, a Palomino Quarter Horse, was just a year old when Jackson's parents surprised him for his birthday. Now at 15, Stone was a strong, well trained, and great to ride. His parents had kept Stone stabled and trained while Jackson was in California and he was excited to get to ride Stone again. Jackson remembered riding him all over Rakesford, and especially down the lake trails. Thinking about riding to the lake, he wondered if Alexis Venn was still living in town. She had been the only one in Rakesford that could give him a run for his money on horseback. He meant to ask his parents about her, but it

always slipped his mind. When he visited them tomorrow, he would have to ask. Sitting upright, he checked the clock again, 5:30. Time for him to get cleaned up to meet his new co-workers.

25 minutes later, Jackson was slipping his wallet and cell phone into his jeans pocket and heading out his hotel room door. He hoped that jeans and a button up were 'cleaned up' enough for these guys. The Los Angeles office was fairly laid back, but he didn't know how the others were run. When the elevator doors opened on the lobby, he saw 2 gentlemen standing at the concierge desk – in jeans and polo shirts too. They both looked a little uncomfortable, trying to make small talk with one another. He knew they were from different offices, but assumed they might have met before. Although, he hadn't met either one, so he wasn't sure where his assumption had come from. One looked like he was in his late 20's like Jackson, probably about 6' tall, with a shaved head. The other looked more like his mid 40's, graying brown hair and only about 5'6".

"Hello gentlemen, I'm Jackson Taylor from the LA office", Jackson extended his hand to the man on the right of him first, which happened to be the older one. They shook hands. He had a good grip, but it was obvious from the way he held that he felt he needed to maintain control of situations.

"Good evening Jackson, I'm John Peterson from the Miami office and this", John gestured at the younger man, "is Clark Worthington from the Chicago office".

"Hi Jackson", Clark extended his hand, "and thank you for the introduction, John. As he said, I am from the Chicago office, and I was brought here as the Client Manager. John was telling me that he is the new Human Resources Manager, so I assuming that you are the new Creative Manager?"

"That would be correct. Bruce said that we were to co-manage all hiring, but that we would each be the managers of our own departments once we found the new employees. Unless you guys are in desperate need to get started tomorrow, I figured we could take a 3-day weekend to get settled and start business on Monday?" Jackson waited for a response.

Clark grinned and smiled, he could tell Jackson and he was on the same page. "Sure, sounds good."

Jackson sensed John's hesitation, but heard him say, "Yeah, that's okay". John obviously was more determined to get started immediately.

With that settled, Jackson decided to see if the guys were ready to get dinner. He was starved after his flight. "So, are we ready to head to dinner? There is a great steak place that I know of about a block and a half away – if it's still here. We can walk there, if that's okay with you both?" They both looked at him, a little confused. "Oh, sorry, I grew up in Rakesford, which is about 20 minutes from Austin. I moved out to California 9 years ago." Jackson's explanation lifted the puzzlement from their faces. He continued, "I'll check with the concierge and make sure the place I'm thinking of is still in business."

The concierge confirmed that Samuels, the restaurant he had been thinking of, was still in business and reserved a table for their party. Jackson walked back over and let the men know they were ready to head to dinner. "Thanks for taking care of plans for us", Clark smiled and headed towards the door. They all walked out into the still, warm evening air and headed into downtown, towards Samuels. The walk was quiet, the men still sizing each other up, determining who felt that they were the leader. Jackson broke the silence, "So John, how was your flight out?"

"It was really easy, but I actually got here a couple days ago, I wanted to have a little bit of time to get settled before we got down to business. My wife and son are starting to look for homes." John looked at Clark, "When did you arrive?"

"I flew in today, like Jackson, but I arrived about 6 hours ago. I have just been trying to get adjusted to the heat. Chicago isn't this warm during the spring." Clark laughed. They arrived at the restaurant, and Jackson held the door for the others to walk in.

The three approached the counter, "We have reservations, under Taylor". Jackson looked at the hostess; she was younger, probably in just about 22, but very cute. He smiled, maybe Texas wouldn't be too bad.

“Right this way gentlemen”, as she led the way he couldn’t help but glance at her rear end, he had always been a butt guy. He looked at the other two; they were doing the same thing. She paused at a table and waited for them to sit. As she handed Jackson his menu, she winked. Texas was definitely going to be better than he thought. When she walked away, Clark was first to speak, “Nice ass! Good thing my fiancé wasn’t here to see me looking”.

John nodded in agreement, “Yeah, my wife would have killed me if she caught me staring”. They both looked at Jackson to hear his response.

“Oh, I’m free to look – and touch. I’m single, my girlfriend and I split when I came here. I wasn’t really ready to settle down, and so she decided to end things”. Jackson got quiet as he ended his sentence. He really didn’t want to be thinking about Leslie tonight. Luckily, the server walked up at that moment.

“Good evening gentlemen, can I start you with something to drink?” All three nodded vigorously.

“I’ll have a gin and tonic, Bombay sapphire”, John spoke up first. Jackson looked at John as he ordered his drink; he seemed like a gin and tonic type of guy.

Clark ordered next, “Heffeweizen, please”. Jackson knew he was going to like this guy already, beer guys we always the easiest to talk to.

“I’ll take a Sam Adams, thanks”. Jackson smiled; a beer would mellow him out from the flight. Once the server left with their order, the table went quiet.

John broke the silence first, “Did either of you see the draft this week? I was surprised by some of the picks, and the not picked”.

Jackson nodded, “Yeah, I was too. It will be a really interesting season I think.”

Clark chimed in, “The pre-season games will definitely be revealing”.

Once the conversation of sports had started, the guys were able to maintain a solid conversation. They paused as their drinks arrived and to order food, other than that, they maintained a solid conversation that rotated from football, to cheerleaders, to women and back to sports. Two hours later, the men were stuffed; a little buzzed, and had gotten to know each other a little bit better. The three argued over whose company card it was to go on, settling on Jackson’s, as he picked the restaurant. Once that was settled, they all got up and headed back to the hotel. After a fairly quiet walk back, they parted ways to their own rooms, planning on meeting at the new office at 8:30am Monday morning. Jackson was looking forward to having 3 days to get settled, see his parents and his horse. He was hoping he’d be able to get a good start on his house hunt as well.

Jackson stuck the key in his door, ready to hit the hay, and hoping avoid too much jet lag in the morning. The room was cool, he had left the air conditioning on before he left, one of the perks of not paying the electric bill. He tossed his shoes into the corner, too tired to actually put them away. He stripped off his close and slid in the cool sheets. Setting his alarm on his cell phone, he hit the light and relaxed into sleep as his head hit the pillow.

# Chapter 4

Alexis grabbed her cell phone, just as the alarm went off. After 4 years of waking up at 6:30am every day, her body was pretty well trained to wake up the minute before her alarm. She had tried many different kinds of alarms, and her cell phone worked the best, it was loud, obnoxious and she could change it to different noises every day if she needed to. She turned off the alarm and set her phone back on the nightstand. Stepping out of bed, she wrapped her robe around her shoulders. It was a 3-quarter sleeve, thigh length, dark green, pure silk, traditional kimono robe her mother had given her 2 years ago, after her parents came back from a trip to Japan. She always kept it right next to her bed; the feeling of softness as she first woke up gave her a feeling of being pampered and was a good start to her day. Alexis walked into the bathroom and turned on the hot water for her shower. While it was heating, she checked her reflection in the mirror, grabbed her tweezers and cleaned up a few stray hairs in her eyebrows. She was a firm believer in first impressions, and she had a bunch of meetings for potential buyers this morning. She knew it would bide her well to look her best.

The shower had reached the perfect temperature and Alexis opened the glass door and stepped in. She still had a little bit of a fuzzy head from the night before. Although she had gotten a lot of sleep, she was always a little out of it the morning after drinking. The feeling of the hot water and steam helped to loosen the fog but until she had her coffee, she wouldn't be completely awake.

It had been good to talk to Valerie about Jackson, but she wasn't really looking forward to running into him, a run in that was undeniable to happen. She shampooed and conditioned her hair and ran through her schedule in her head. She had a showing at 10:30 and 12:30 and 2:30, and a meeting with a potential seller at 4. She loved her busy days, especially when it was full of showings, walking through a beautifully decorated house always perked up her mood. Her own 3 bedroom, 2 bath home had been her second big purchase on her own – first was her 2006 Mustang GT in red. She had loved the car, and the house, the minute she saw them. She rarely bought anything that she wasn't absolutely in love with.

She always kept her house spotless and decorated up to the highest trends. Of course she also mixed some of her favorite old comfortable furniture, but she wanted to feel like she was encased in beauty every time she came home. Out of the whole house, her bedroom and kitchen were her favorite parts of the house. She loved to cook, even though most of the time it was just for her. She tried a new recipe almost every day, and had a book of her favorites that was about 3 inches thick. During the holiday's, she went all out, and loved hosting thanksgiving dinner for everyone.

The centerpiece of her bedroom was a large 4 poster cherry wood bed. Her comforter and pillows were all down, and the covers were in shades of green. When she curled up at night, the bed made her feel small and like a little girl again. The other aspect of her room that made the rest of her friends a little jealous was her walk-in closet. It was a 15 x 15 foot closet, packed with designer shoes and enough clothes to make sure she always had something new to wear.

Alexis finished washing out her hair, and rinsing off her body wash. She shut off the faucet, opened the glass door and grabbed her towel. Once she had dried enough, she stepped out of the shower, hung her towel on the rack and slipped her robe back over her shoulders. Walking back into her bedroom, she sat down at her vanity and ran a comb through her hair. She decided to wear it loose and wavy, and with the humidity in Texas, her waves would practically create themselves. She put a little of her favorite hair smoothing serum in her palm and ran it through her hair, it was all she needed to make sure it didn't frizz. She picked up her powder brush, her morning make-up routine was minimal; she usually just wore a little powder, blush and mascara. Every once in while she would add a little eye shadow and eyeliner to perk her up a bit, especially after a night like

she'd had last night. Putting on her deodorant and a splash of perfume, stood up, dropped her robe over her chair and walked into her closet.

She riffled through her blouses, trying to decide what she wanted to wear. It was going to be a warm day, so she figured she would wear a skirt and one of her lightweight short sleeve silk blouses. She selected a baby pink and white polka dotted blouse, a black pencil skirt and a pair of strappy black Jimmy Choo's. Tossing the clothes onto her bed, she wandered to her lingerie drawer and picked out a white lace bra and panty set. She loved knowing that underneath her clothes, there was something a little sexy. She buttoned up her blouse, zipped her skirt and slipped on her shoes. Walking over to her mirror, she looked herself up and down. Not too sexy, but it flattered her shape. Satisfied, she grabbed her purse, cell phone and keys, and walked down to the kitchen.

Alexis grabbed her coffee grounds and filter from the shelf above the coffee maker. She measured out enough grounds for 2 cups of coffee and placed them in the filter. She filled the coffee maker with water, dropped the filter in the top, closed the lid and pressed start. While she was waiting for it to brew, she opened her fridge door. She always kept it packed with her favorite foods so it was easy for her to cook. The only thing she never kept in her fridge was meat, as she liked going to the butcher each day, to see what looked good, so she always got what she was craving that day. Her friends always teased her that if it was a necessity for cooking, it was in her kitchen. Her one guilty pleasure that she was never without was kettle corn popcorn, the mix of salty and sweet killed any craving. And of course, a few pieces of really high quality dark chocolate. No woman could ever live without chocolate.

This morning she was craving something with eggs. Looking through her supplies, she grabbed out 2 eggs, milk, shredded cheddar cheese, tomato, avocado and bacon. She chopped up the tomato and avocado while she tossed the bacon in the microwave. She whisked the eggs with a splash of milk in a bowl, pouring it into the frying pan, she turned on the burner. The timer on the bacon dinged, she pulled the plate out and broke the bacon into pieces. The edges of the egg had started to firm up, which meant it was time to add in the other ingredients. She tossed in the tomato, avocado, bacon and some shredded cheddar cheese. Grabbing the spatula, she began to fold them into the eggs. The smell of cooking food filled her kitchen, beginning to wake her up. She finished fixing her eggs and scooped them onto a plate. She poured herself a cup of coffee, added a little cream and sugar, and sat down to eat. She always ate breakfast at the island in the kitchen, which had a couple of stools for when people wanted to sit and visit while she was cooking. When she had friends over, they used the dining room, but when it was just her, there was no reason to. Plus, she loved the smell of her kitchen after she finished cooking. It always enhanced her meals, and she was closer to the coffee pot for refills.

Alexis finished her breakfast and began cleaning the dishes. She wasn't really a neat freak, but she hated leaving dirty dishes in the sink. Sliding her plate in the dishwasher, she flicked the door closed with her foot. She grabbed her purse and keys off the counter and walked out to her garage. She couldn't help but smile every time she slid behind the wheel of her Mustang. When she picked out the car, it had been easy. She had walked into the dealership, walked right up to a sales guy and told him straight out that she wanted a red mustang GT, manual, black leather, interior upgrade package and wanted to be out the door for under \$25K. The sales had looked at her like she was crazy, which she probably was, but that is neither here nor there. Unfortunately for him, rather than say okay and begin working on getting her into the car she just requested, he decided to question her judgment. 'Wouldn't you love a convertible or what about tan leather?' So, she politely asked to speak to another sales associate. An hour and a mound of paper work later, she had a new car, and the original sales guy was none too happy. She has never worked well with people who questioned her judgment.

She pressed her garage door button and the door opened. She back out of her driveway, shifted into first, and turned on her radio. Country music filled her speakers and she began to sing along. Her mother and Valerie always teased her about her 'car singing'; it was always at the tops of her lungs, and always out of key. She loved to sing, she just didn't do it very well.

Alexis arrived at her office and pulled her car around back. She parked and finished singing the last couple lines of the song she had been listening to. She hopped out of her car, grabbed her purse off her seat and shut the door. She clicked the lock button on her remote and listened to the beep of her car locking. It was such a bubbly sounding lock, it always made her smile. She reached her office back door and unlocked and opened it. It led her directly into her own office, giving her the ability to come in and work, without having to open the front door. Since her office was in the middle of downtown, if she came in the front entrance, she was often stopped by locals who wanted to chat. She liked being able to sneak in unnoticed.

She sat down and pressed the buttons to turn on her computer. While it was firing up, she noticed the red light blinking on her answering machine. She picked up the receiver and dialed in her password. The first one was from her 10:30am appointment. He wanted to change it to 10am, and was assuming that it was okay, and would see her then. She hit delete, shaking her head. Why did people always think that their schedule was the most important? Just because he wanted a 10am appointment, didn't mean he could have it. Luckily, she didn't have any appointments before his planned, so it was okay, but his assumption frustrated her. She looked at the clock, 9am. She heard her voicemail tell her she still had 2 more messages, but she needed to get ready for the meeting, so she hung up the phone. Just as she placed the receiver back into the cradle, she heard the lock in the front door. Her assistant was always right on time; it was really nice to not have to worry.

She heard the front door open and Sarah walk in. She heard the chair slide out and Sarah sit down. Alexis knew it would be only a couple moments before Sarah stood up and knocked on her door, like she did every morning, to see if Alex was in there. Alex saved her the trouble and walked over to her door. She opened it and walked out into the lobby.

“Hey Sarah. How's your morning going so far?”

“I'm doing good Alex, thanks. I'm just a little sluggish, in need of some coffee. Didn't you say that there is a great place just down the street?”

“Yeah, it's called 'The Fix', run by a woman named Becky. She is really sweet, but just a little kooky. She keeps reminding me to bring you down and introduce you. She likes to know everyone that works in town. “

“Okay, well I will head down there and pick something up, if that's okay with you?”

“Sure! Will you bring me back an iced coffee? Just tell Becky it's for me, she'll know what to add. Hold on; let me go grab some money.” Alexis walked back into the office and grabbed the company credit card. She handed it to Sarah. “Oh, and be careful, she'll keep you there for hours if you let her!” Alexis laughed, and Sarah smiled.

“Don't worry, I'll be back soon, we have to get ready for your 10:30!”

“Oh, yeah, Mr. Samuels called, apparently he wants it to be at 10am, although he didn't really give me a chance to say no.” Alexis shook her head, “people like that really drive me crazy. If he wasn't looking at the house on Pine Ridge, I would be more upset.”

Sarah nodded in understanding. Most of the homes Alex sold were between \$500K and \$1.5 million. There weren't too many houses over \$2 million in Sugarland, although the hills above the lake had a few. The Pine Ridge house was one of them. It was on the market for \$5 million, and was worth every penny. It was a gigantic house, located on one of the hills of Rakesford, secluded from everyone, with a great view down to the lake. It was a 7,000 square foot monster with a 7 car garage and its own tennis court. The backyard had been featured so many times in home magazines that Alexis had lost count and the interior of the house was just as beautiful. Alex's commission on the house would enable her to take a month off to travel during the summer.

“Well hopefully you can get an offer from him today. I'll be back in 10 with some caffeine.” Sarah headed out the door and Alexis walked back into her office.

Alex pulled out the Pine Ridge file, figuring she would brush up on the details of the house. 8 bedrooms, 10.5 baths, with huge sliding glass doors in the master bedroom and views out to the lake. Custom built kitchen with top of the line cook top and fridge. All marble counters. The list of gorgeous amenities went on

and on, but she knew that all it would take was for the Mr. and Mrs. Samuels to see the house to be sold on it. They had been looking for a house above the lake for 6 months, and this one just came on the market 3 days ago. They had 2 kids, both of whom were in college, so the huge house was really just for them. They wanted a home that the kids would want to come back to, but more importantly, a home they could host all of their lavish parties in. Mrs. Samuels was known for throwing formal dinner parties almost every weekend. Alex heard the gossip from her mom, as she was usually invited.

Despite the high price tag, the houses in that area sold very quickly, as it was rare for them to come up for sale. She even had a list of people on file that she was supposed to call every time one went up. Mr. Samuels had been at the top of the list, and it only took him 2 days from when she called for him to come in for an appointment. She just wished he hadn't 'assumed' Alex would be available whenever he wanted.

Alex wiggled her mouse; her computer had gone to sleep while she was out talking to Sarah. She scanned through her emails; she had about 40 junk emails, a few requests for info about homes, and a few she actually cared about. Her dad had sent her a joke, her mom had sent her some article about dating, and Val had sent her a comment on her FaceBook. Her dad's jokes tended to be funny, her mom always sent her dating advice, and the FaceBook comment from Val was probably about how hung-over she was. She decided to ignore the emails and went straight to her RSS feeds. Clicking on her folder for Perez Hilton, she was excited to see what was going on in the world of gossip.

She heard a knock at her door, and looked at the clock, surprised that it had already been 10 minutes. She called out 'come in' and looked back at her computer screen, clicking on the next post.

"Hey Alex", the deepness of the voice surprised her. She had expected Sarah, but when she looked up, she locked eyes with a 9 year older, but still just as handsome as ever, Jackson Taylor.

She couldn't believe her eyes. She tried to find words, but her mouth had gone dry. He was more handsome than she remembered, if that was even possible. He had grown an inch or so she figured, and guessed he stood at about 6'3" now. He still had dark brown hair, but he kept it a little shorter than he had when he was living in Texas. It was still a little unkempt, but fit his face. His eyes still shone a gorgeous deep blue, and she could feel them staring at her. He was dressed in khaki shorts, a white polo shirt and flip flops. She could see that he had maintained his physique; his arms looked great in his shirt, and she could only imagine the rest of him.

"Hi Jackson." She had regained her composure and felt her heart rate go back to normal. "I had expected my assistant back with coffee, you surprised me." Just then, there was another knock at her door, this time it was her assistant, coffee in hand. She handed Alex her coffee and slipped out the door, shooting Alex a 'who is he?!' look before it closed. "Like I said", Alex commented, pointing to her coffee.

"Sorry to just barge in here, but this was the only real estate office I knew in town. But I didn't know you worked here until I saw your name on the door. I thought your dad was still running the place?" Jackson paused to let her answer.

"He retired when I finished school, and I took over the office for him." She glanced at the clock, 9:30. She was basically ready for the appointment, but she didn't want Jackson here when the Samuels showed up. He made her nervous, and the last thing she needed when she was trying to sell a \$5 million dollar house was to be nervous. "So I am assuming you stopped by for a reason?" She realized that had come out much ruder than she expected.

"Oh, sorry. Yes, I got transferred to Austin to open the new office for my marketing agency, but don't want to live in the city. I was hoping to find a house here. And I was hoping your dad could help me. But, I guess it's I was hoping you could help me?" He smiled at her and she felt her crush coming back again, he was so adorable when he smiled.

“Not a problem, why don’t you sit down with my assistant and go through what you are looking for. She will let me know what you want and I will set up some house tours for next week, if that works?” Alexis pulled up her calendar to see what she had available. “I have time next Friday?”

Jackson shook his head, “We are opening the office on Monday and the next month is going to be crazy, trying to find new hires and get the business going. I was really hoping to find and buy a house this weekend.”

Alex looked at him, “Well, my schedule is pretty booked, but I do have between 2pm and 5pm tomorrow.” She had planned to use that time to catch up on some back paperwork and research for other clients. If it had been anyone else she would have told him tough luck, and he’d have to wait a week. But she just couldn’t say no to him.

“Great! So should we go through what I am looking for?” Jackson went to sit down in one of the chairs opposite Alex.

“Oh, no, I have an appointment in 20 minutes. Like I said, sit down with my assistant Sarah and you can tell her what you are looking for. When I get back later this afternoon I will go through what you want and pull some houses for Saturday. We will meet here at 2pm and I will take you around”. Alexis smiled at him.

“Okay, and thanks again for making time for me. I look forward to seeing you tomorrow.” Jackson stopped talking and stood there, like he was waiting for something.

Alexis reached her hand out to shake his, assuming that was what he was looking for. He looked at her hand like it was a foreign object, “Alexis Venn! I have known you since you were a little squirt, and you are going to shake my hand? I can handle being put off until tomorrow,” Jackson winked, “but I will not handle a hand shake like I am some random guy looking for a home!” He stepped around the desk and lifted her out of the chair in a big bear hug. He set her down and stepped back, “look at you, all grown up!” He laughed. Alexis cringed. She was not a little girl, and she sure as hell didn’t want him thinking of her that way. “Although, I never pictured you as a pink girl” Jackson said, looking at her pink blouse.

“It has been 9 years since you’ve seen me; things tend to change in that period of time.” She stepped back from him and put a hand on her hip. Jackson couldn’t help thinking she was right. The woman standing in front of him was definitely not the Alexis Venn he remembered. She was a cute girl when they were growing up, but she was definitely a woman now, and a very attractive woman at that. He had expected to see her father sitting behind the desk when he walked in, seeing her name on the door had surprised him, but not nearly as much as seeing the woman that was sitting behind the desk.

“I hope you haven’t changed too much, you were always so sweet to me.” He smiled at her, trying to shake the thoughts of her more adult body, and gorgeous face out of his head.

“Ha, thanks Jackson,” She decided that it was better if she ended this conversation before her appointment showed up, “I will see you tomorrow. I have to finish getting ready for my appointment.” She opened the door to let him out into the main office. “Sarah, can you sit down with Mr. Taylor and get the details of what he is looking for? I will talk with you about the houses when I get back later today”.

“Sure Alexis, I will put the parameters on your desk.” Jackson looked back at Alex and sat down in the chair in front of Sarah. Alex shut the door and could hear Jackson introduce himself as an old friend of hers. Right, a friend, great.

She sat back down at her desk and put her head in her hands. She needed to get her composure back. Her breathing slowed down and she started going back through her emails. A few minutes later Sarah buzzed to let her know her 10am arrived and she walked back into the main office. Jackson was still sitting and talking with Sarah about floor plans and square footage. She said hello to the Samuels and led them out the door.

The rest of the day passed as a blur. The Samuels offered the full \$5 million on the house, even willing to go as high as \$6 if need be and the rest of her appointments went well too. But, despite the good day, all she could think about was Jackson and how good he looked. He would be in the next day to house hunt, and she wasn't sure how she was going to handle an entire day with him.

