# Strong Hearts

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**Chapter One**

Brutus would have pounded that asshole into a pancake if the bouncers hadn’t stopped him. It took two of them to drag him off. Bad enough the little moron had disrespected the United States Marine Corps, but making rude remarks about Brutus’s mother crossed the line. Nobody badmouthed his mama. The blood dripping from the little shit’s nose made him want to smile. Smiling hurt his split lip, though, so he settled for a sneer.

“That’s what you get,” he said, allowing the bouncer to pull him a little further away. He knew the bouncer, Matt Martinez, was a Marine himself. “Did you hear what that little rat said?”

“No, and it doesn’t matter.” Martinez sighed. “Come on, Doc, you know what Billie said last time you got into a fight here.”

“That was three months ago!”

Brutus shot the rat one last dirty look and followed Martinez to a stool at the end of the bar. Along the way, they passed several patrons at the bar who seemed to be pretending to be deaf and blind. One caught his eye—a platinum blonde who had to have had breast implants. The Dolly Parton wannabe didn’t impress him. He plopped himself down on the barstool Martinez pointed him to and waved for Jerry, the bartender.

Before he could order a beer, Martinez spoke. “Coffee or a Coke, Doc. When your buddy gets here, you let him take you home.”

“You’re cutting me off? It’s only ten o’clock!”

Martinez thumped a fist on his shoulder. “That’s Billie’s rule. If you fight, you leave. And you’ve had too much to drink to drive home yourself, so you just sit here and wait for your ride.”

Brutus slumped on the bar. “Who’dja you call?”

“Wolfe. Who else? You gonna cause any more trouble?”

“No.” He’d drink his coffee like a good boy and let his friend take him home.  Brutus rested his forehead on a fist and stared morosely into the black coffee Jerry brought him. He heard the jukebox switch to a different song, something slow and melancholy.

He tried a sip of coffee. It hurt his split lip. With careful fingers, he gingerly explored the injury. Damn. The swelling had better go down before his next shift. Three days. It should be gone by then. If not … Hopefully, Captain Stewart wouldn’t be around to notice. Brutus didn’t need another lecture from his boss. He reached for the bowl of pretzels on the bar and had to hide a wince. His ribs were sore from a right hook. That kid had some good moves, at the pool table and away from it. Brutus was going to feel this tomorrow. It was a lot like that fight he’d had back in Camp Fallujah. Or was he thinking about that fight in Camp Dreamland?

“Gunnison.”

Brutus jerked his head up. His partner stood there, looking down at him with a frown. “Hey, Wolfe. You got here fast.”

“I was already out.”

That’s right, Wolfe was taking his latest piece of arm candy to a movie or something. “Damn, did this mess up your date?”

“No, Cherilyn wanted an early night. I just dropped her off.”

“Aw, too bad. So, you hafta sleep alone tonight?” Brutus looked his partner up and down. Wolfe was everything Brutus was not: handsome, light on his feet, tall and muscular without being a hulk, and charming. “Well, it has to happen to everyone sometime, right?”

Wolfe blew out a breath and shook his head with a half-disgusted, half-affectionate smile. “Shut up. Ready to go?”

“Yeah, sure,” Brutus pushed the still full coffee cup away and lurched to his feet. He had to catch himself on the bar. Maybe he’d had more than he’d realized. He straightened and tested his walking ability. Wolfe watched him without offering to help. Yeah, his buddy understood a man’s pride. “Lead the way.”

He did okay until he tripped over the pointy toe of a sparkly high-heeled shoe and landed nose-first in bountiful cleavage. Brutus might not have the polished manners of some men, but his mama had whupped common decency into him. He jerked upright and staggered a step back.

“Sorry, ma’am,” he blurted. “Are you hurt?”

The platinum blonde gave a throaty laugh and made minute adjustments to neckline of her low-cut dress.  “Why, I just don’t believe I know.”

Her accept was deep south, not Texas, and her sex kitten purr was directed at Wolfe, not him. Brutus took one long look and decided his buddy was welcome to her. She was beautiful but fake. Too much makeup, and too much of her body on display. Billie’s Bar & Grill was one step above a dive, and that short, sequined dress should be worn in a place where fancy cocktails were served.

He glanced at his friend to see his reaction. Wolfe, as usual, showed little. He liked living up to his Native American ancestors’ reputation for stoicism, but Brutus had known him since the old days in Iraq. Behind that coolly polite façade, his buddy was laughing his ass off.

The blonde flicked her foot. The sparkly shoe landed at Wolfe’s feet. “Why, look at that,” she cooed. “My shoe just plumb fell off.”

There was a pause in the noise as the jukebox switched songs. From the other side of the blonde came a sigh. Brutus stepped a little to the right to see who was sitting there. For a full five seconds, his lungs forgot how to work.

This was how a woman ought to look. Brown hair pulled up in a bouncy ponytail. Blue jeans neither too baggy nor too tight, and a plaid shirt worn open over a white T-shirt. Her cleavage wasn’t as impressive as the blonde’s, but it had a perfect curve. He followed the long line of her leg and saw she was wearing cowboy boots. Worn out cowboy boots, not the pretty, shiny kind city cowgirls wore for show. If she was wearing makeup, Brutus couldn’t tell. Her face was pretty. Not Miss America beautiful, but pretty.

Damn. She was Brutus’s prefect woman.

Right now, she looked annoyed. Even that looked good on her.

“Stella, for crying out loud.” She turned on the barstool to Wolfe. “I’m so sorry,” she said.

Brutus sighed. Now that she’d gotten a look at his buddy, she wouldn’t have the time of day for him.

But she remined slightly apologetic, not even blinking at Wolfe. No gasp. No staring worshipfully, no blush or smile. She took the shoe Wolfe held out to her. “Thanks,” she said briefly, and thrust it at the blonde. “Put your shoe on, Stella,” she said in a furious whisper.

“Relax, Sissy.” The blonde pouted and turned slipping her shoe on into a languorous tease. If she wasn’t careful, those tits were going to pop right out of her dress. The pouty smiles and bedroom eyes were directed at Wolfe. The ponytail girl sighed again. Wolfe didn’t respond except to punch a light fist into Brutus’s bicep. “Ready to go?” he asked.

Brutus couldn’t resist one last look at the pretty brown-haired girl. Her eyes, large and blue, looked at him with a hint of disapproval. His back went up.

“What are you looking at?” he demanded.

Her cool blue eyes ran up him, and then down him. “Nothing much,” she said, turning back to the bar.

“Ouch,” murmured Wolfe, hidden laughter in his voice. Probably no one else heard it, but Brutus did. “Come on, buddy.”

Outside, the air was hot and laden with humidity. Normal for Dallas on the first day of September, even at ten at night. Brutus took a lungful of the thick air in before climbing in Wolfe’s pickup.

“Man, did you see her?” Brutus sighed happily. “If I dream about her tonight I’ll be a happy man.”

Wolfe drove out of the parking lot. He stopped at a red light and raised a dubious eyebrow. “I didn’t think she was your type.”

“What? You kidding?” Brutus closed his eyes and remembered the sweet curve of breasts against a white T-shirt half covered by a western style shirt. “She’s exactly my type. Such perfect tits.”

The light turned green and Wolfe stepped on the gas. “Yeah, I guess they were pretty spectacular. Big enough to fill even your hands.”

Brutus’s eyes popped open. “I’m not talking about the blonde!”

“Oh?”

“No. The little brunette gal sitting next to her. The cute one who looked like an actual person.”

“Oh,” Wolfe said with a note of comprehension. “Sure, she was pretty. Looked nice, too. Someone you could really talk to.”

The truth of that hit Brutus’s drunken mind like a sledgehammer. The blonde looked like a man-hunter, the kind you took to bed and that was all. The brunette looked like the kind you took home to meet mom. A girl like that wouldn’t want anything to do with a big brute like him.

Wolfe must have misunderstood his silence, because he went hastily on. “I don’t know that blonde lady. For all I know, she’d be great to talk to. We shouldn’t judge someone by the way they dress.”

Brutus snorted. “Right. We should judge by the way they act. The blonde’s shoe fell off right in front of you, and that didn’t happen on its own.”

“Thank God your little brunette saved me from having to put it back on the blonde’s foot.”

His little brunette. Brutus reveled in the sound of that. “Yeah. Lucky you.”

Wolfe pulled his pickup into the short driveway in front of Brutus’s house. “Look, give me a call in the morning and I’ll give you a ride back to your truck.” He turned to study him, eyebrows pulling low. “You’ve been partying a lot lately, even when we have back-to-back shifts. You okay?”

That Indian had always been a little too perceptive. “Geez, Wolfe, you want to talk about our feelings now?”

His buddy snorted. “Get out of here. See you tomorrow.”

Brutus unlocked the front door and tossed his keys on the table in the front hall in time to catch his dog, Rowdy. The brown mutt was big and mean-looking, but loyal and even loving with the right person.  Just like him.

“We’re a lot alike, boy,” he whispered, scratching behind the floppy ears. “One thing is different, though. You had your balls cut off, but the lady dogs still like you. I still have mine, but the ladies don’t like me.”

With that happy thought, he went to bed.

Denise watched the two men walk away. Two men who were so hot in such different ways didn’t cross her path often, and she wanted to watch them for as long as possible.

“That right there,” drawled her sister beside her, “is one fine Mr. Hottie McHotPants.”

Denise turned to Stella with an arched brow. “Which one?”

“Which one?” Stella’s blue eyes opened wide. “The handsome one, of course. Not the oaf who fell on top of me.”

“The one who fell on you wasn’t as handsome as the other man,” Denise conceded, “but he had a great physique.”

Her sister shuddered delicately. “Oh, sure, if you like men who look like wrestling stars.”

“I do.” She remembered the way the big man’s arms stretched the sleeves of his t-shirt. The shirt was the kind that had been washed so much the blue had faded to gray, and the thin fabric clung to every taut curve and valley of his sculpted torso. “I really, really do.”

“Oh, Sissy, you’re simply hopeless.”

*Maybe I am,* she thought*. Twenty-nine and not a single serious relationship to show for it.* Denise tipped her longneck to her lips for the last swallow. “Ready to go?”

“It’s only ten!”

“I work at six,” she reminded Stella.

Stella looked around, maybe hoping for someone else to trip. After a minute, she sighed. “Alright. Let’s go back to that dump you call home.”

Denise set the bottle on the bar very carefully. “Since I’m letting you stay there rent free until you find a job, you shouldn’t complain.”

“Oh.” Stella covered her painted mouth with delicate fingers. “I know. I shouldn’t have said that. You’ve been better to me than I deserve. I’m sorry.”

Denise nodded. Her sister always apologized when she said something mean. It was as if Stella was simply unaware of how her comments sounded, but Denise didn’t buy it. Stella was twenty-nine, a little old for the innocent act. In Denise’s opinion, Stella had plenty of smarts, but she was stupid when it came to men. Stella probably thought the opposite. Denise shook her head. Her sister had left Mississippi dead broke and desperate after her fiance kicked her out of their apartment. Denise would never, ever put herself in a position where she depended on a man for everything. Nope, as sure as God made Texas, she would never be under a man’s control.

But it didn’t do any good to try to convince Stella that she could be self-sufficient. The main reason Stella had wanted to go out tonight was to meet some men. Billie’s Bar & Grill was a place where Denise and her last boyfriend had gone to unwind. She should have known it wasn’t Stella’s kind of place as soon as she came out of her room in that tiny silver dress.

With a sigh, Denise pushed off the bar stool. “Let’s go.”

In the car, Stella twisted a lock of hair around her finger. “Did you truly like that big guy?”

“Yeah.” He hadn’t been handsome. His face was too hard and blunt for that, but every muscle defined by his tight T-shirt oozed masculinity. Just remembering the ridges and valleys of his torso made her girl parts remember what they were for. Denise cleared her throat. “Yeah, I did.”

“Well … The bouncer called him Doc. Do you think he’s a doctor? A doctor would make a great boyfriend.”

Denise recalled the tattoo on the guy’s arm. It was a military unit’s emblem. He might have been a medic, but a doctor? “I doubt it.”

“I suppose not. He didn’t look like a doctor,” her sister agreed regretfully. “If you had a rich boyfriend you wouldn’t have to live in such a dump. I mean,” she quickly corrected herself, “such a small place.”

*It’s not that small*, Denise wanted to say, but she kept her mouth shut. She parked her car on the street and led the way up the steps to her admittedly crappy, but fairly roomy, two-bedroom apartment. She tried to see her place through the eyes of a stranger. The entryway was tiny, so she moved into the kitchen so Stella could come in. Yeah, maybe it was a dump. The couch in the living room was upholstered in gold and green plaid that matched the avocado green shag carpet that may have been new in the 1970s. The stains and worn spots testified to its age. The jumbo-sized recliner, bought at a secondhand store for next to nothing, was neon pink. It might be an eyesore, but it was comfortable.

Denise hung her keys up with a shrug. It was home. The neighborhood was decent, and the rent was low enough that even a full-time student at UT Dallas, who served in the Texas National Guard, and worked twenty hours a week at an animal shelter could afford it. The carpet was clean, if stained, and it didn’t matter if the appliances gave out now and then, because she knew how to get them working without pestering the landlord.

In her glittery cocktail dress, Stella looked as out of place as a hothouse flower in a tin can stuffed with daisies. She headed off to the second bedroom, which until a week ago, had been Denise’s office. “Good night, Sissy. See you in the morning.” She paused to flash a cheeky grin. “Dream of your muscle man. Maybe that will put you in a better mood.”

Denise rolled her eyes and went to her room to get ready for bed.

She did dream of the muscle man.

She woke, sweaty and heart pounding a hundred miles an hour, shuddering with the strength of her orgasm. *Wow*, she thought, wiping the sweat from her upper lip, *if that’s what a dream of him does to me, imagine what it would be like with the man himself!*

But in her busy life, where would she find time for a boyfriend?

She kicked the tangled sheet off and stretched out on her back. Tomorrow was her busy day. Work at Dog Heaven for three hours, attend three classes, and then another two hours at the shelter. Maybe she could swing by Billie’s for a beer tomorrow after work and ask around about her dream lover? She flung her pillow over her head and told herself to not be an idiot.

But after work, she swung into Billie’s. What could it hurt, right?

# Chapter Two

The great thing about Billie’s was that no one ever dressed up. Denise, wearing jeans covered with dog hair and slobber embedded in the denim, pushed opened the door, and stepped to one side. She paused there for a moment to let her eyes adjust. After the bright sun, she was nearly blind in the lower light in the bar. The delicious smell of greasy burgers hit her nose and woke a growl in her stomach. The clack of pool balls and the *whoop* of men told her at least one game was in progress. She might head back that way later, but for now she wanted a beer, a burger, and some information. All of those could be found at the bar. She made her way through a scatter of tables and parked her butt on a tall stool.

Billie herself was working the bar, and she greeted Denise with a nod and something close to a smile. For Billie, that was a warm welcome. The bar owner was a trim fifty-something with short salt-and-pepper hair and a brisk, no nonsense manner. Even if Denise hadn’t known it, she would have guessed Billie was retired military. Billie had put in her twenty-five in the Marine Corps, and was now enjoying retirement as the owner of a neighborhood bar. Military and ex-military were always welcome here.

“Hey, Chickie,” she called as Denise hooked the heels of her boots over the bottom rung of the stool. “What’ll it be?”

“Beer and a burger basket,” Denise replied. “You know how I like it.”

Billie hollered the order to the back where her husband, Big Joe, manned the grill. She grabbed a longneck out of the case and placed in on the bar in front of Denise. “We haven’t seen you in here for a couple of months. What have you been up to?”

“Just the usual. Work, school, and more work.” She downed a swallow and let it roll, fizzing, down her throat. “That’s good.”

Billie nodded. “Nothing like a cold beer on a hot day. So, what’s up with you and what’s-his-face? That sailor you were seeing last year.”

Denise drank some more. “That’s done. He wanted me to spend more time with him, but you know.” She shrugged wryly. “Work, school, and more work.”

Billie didn’t say any of the usual sympathetic words, just nodded. “When will you be done with school?”

“This is my last year. God willing and the crick don’t rise, I’ll graduate next spring.”

“You will.” Billie sounded sure. “You work harder than anyone. That’s just who you are.”

Another patron down the bar waved for Billie’s attention. Alone, Denise nursed her beer. The big, flat screen TV mounted in the corner showed a baseball game. The Rangers were down by one in the bottom of the eighth. She hadn’t been to a single game this summer. She loved baseball. Why hadn’t she made the time before school started?

“Hey, sweet cheeks.”

She turned to see Dale, one of the regulars, slide onto the stool beside hers. “Hey, Dale. You do know that anyone else who called me sweet cheeks would regret it, right?”

He laughed and raised a finger to catch Billie’s eye. Billie nodded and headed for the case. Dale turned to grin at Denise. “I know, but you like my wife too much to hurt me.”

That was true. Dale might act like a flirt, but he was a safe flirt. He was utterly devoted to Marilyn, and had been for the last twenty years. “You’re lucky to have her.”

The creases that age and sun had put on his face shifted in a small, soft smile. “Don’t I know it.” The smile grew. “I saw you here last night, with some high stepping looker.”

“My sister,” she confirmed. “She’s moving to Dallas from Mississippi. She’ll be staying with me for a little while until she finds a job.”

Billie joined them and gave Dale his beer. “Yeah, I heard you were here last night with a woman in a cocktail dress.” Billie shook her head. “A cocktail dress,” she repeated, in something between disgust and wonder.

“I know.” Denise winced. “My sister asked me to take her to my favorite place to hang and get a drink. I guess she meant a club.”

Dale hooted with laughter, and Billie chuckled.

“I don’t go to clubs.” Denise took another sip of her beer. “Last night was interesting. There was a fight back there.” She jerked her chin toward the back where the pool tables were. “The guy who was in it tripped over my sister on his way out.”

Billie muttered something that Denise didn’t catch. Trying to act casual, she asked, “I don’t think I’ve seen him around here before. Is he a regular?”

Billie’s expression was a mix of exasperation and fondness. “Gunnison. He’s trouble. No one you need to know.”

Denise’s mind went to armed robbery, drug dealing, and breaking kneecaps for a crime lord. “Trouble with the law?”

Billie shrugged and wiped her towel over the bar. “Not that kind of trouble. He fights. The man will fight at the drop of a hat. Hell, he’ll drop the hat himself.”

Denise remembered the smear of blood on his swollen lip. “Has he ever sent someone to the hospital? Killed anyone?”

“No.”

Big Joe dinged the bell in the kitchen, and Billie turned to get the burger basket he put on the shelf. She grabbed the basket and a little caddy with ketchup and salt, and set them down in front of Denise. “Bon appetite,” she said, with a terrible French accent.

“Gracias,” Denise replied and grabbed a ketchup bottle to drown her fries.

After Billie had gone down to the other end of the bar, Dale snitched a fry and popped it in his mouth. “Boy, I tell you what,” he said, savoring the fry with closed eyes and a smile. “That is a hell of a good potato.” He opened his eyes and became serious. “Gunnison isn’t a bad guy. He’s just like the rest of us who came home from Iraq. A little messed up and a lot angry, with nothing to do with it.”

She nodded, eating her hamburger. “Fighting is his outlet,” she guessed.

Dale grinned, saluting her with his beer. “You’re the shrink-in-training, sweet cheeks.” His gaze shifted over her shoulder. “Uh-oh. Speak of the devil.”

Denise glanced toward the door and saw the big man from her dream last night striding toward the bar. Their gazes met, and he froze for a split second. Denise swallowed and forced herself to look away, but she was somehow aware of every step he took until he stood beside her.

“Hi,” a deep, gravelly voice said.

She turned to him and looked up. Even when she was perched on a tall barstool, she had to look up. Way up. “Hi.”

He stuck out a paw. “Brutus Gunnison.”

Brutus? Was that a nickname? She took his hand and shook. His hand was twice the size of hers. All of him was pretty much twice the size of her. “Denise Friedlander.”

“Nice to meet you.”

Silence fell between them, a little awkward. He was staring at her so intently she felt a little intimidated. She didn’t do intimidated. She put her shoulders back and waved a hand at Dale. “Do you know Dale Greenway?”

The two men shook and said the usual things. Billie came over with a scowl. Before she could speak, Brutus ordered a cup of coffee. Billie blinked twice and went to get it.

When she set it down in front of him, he thanked her and turned his attention to Denise. “Come here often?”

He had a little smile that seemed to make fun of himself for using such a cliched line. The smile looked good on him. “I used to,” she replied. “Not so much lately. I’m pretty busy.”

Maybe he guessed that she didn’t like to crane her neck to look up at him, because he leaned an elbow on the bar and relaxed into a comfortable slump. “So, what do you do to keep pretty busy?”

“I’m a student at UT, and I work for Dog Heaven.” She was suddenly excruciatingly aware of the dried slobber on her jeans.

He straightened, great interest on his face. “Really? I got my dog there a year ago.”

A dog lover. That alone made her warm up to him. “That’s great. How is it going with him? Her?”

“Him. Real good. Rowdy is a great dog. I’m lucky to have him.”

It always made her happy to hear that one of the dogs had found a good home. “I wonder if I know him? What’s he look like?”

“Big and ugly.” Again, that little smile came out, almost shy. “Brown. He looks like he might be part Rottweiler, part German Shepherd, and part who knows what. When I adopted him, his name was Diesel.”

She remembered Diesel. One hundred pounds of mean and frightened dog was hard to forget. “He gets along with you?”

“We get along just fine.” He slouched again and took a sip of his coffee. “At first, he was sure skittish, but he came around. He just needed some extra love.” He frowned. “Not that you folks at the shelter don’t love the dogs there, but …”

“But there are a lot of dogs and only a few of us,” she finished for him. “I real glad Diesel found a good home. What do you do?”

“I’m with Dallas Fire and Rescue, Station Fifty-Eight.”

With his muscles, he could carry a buffalo out of a burning building. “A fireman?”

“A firefighter,” he corrected. “There are plenty of female firefighters who don’t appreciate the sexist label.” He looked almost adorably sheepish when he cleared his throat. “Uh, sorry. Didn’t mean to lecture you. We just had our annual sexual harassment training, so it’s fresh in my mind.” He coughed. “But, no. I’m an EMS.”

Dale startled her by joining in the conversation. “A medic. That’s what you did overseas, right?”

Brutus —she was still having a hard time with that name— nodded. “Hospital corpsman attached to the Fifth Regiment, U.S. Marine Corps.”

She glanced automatically at the tattoo on his forearm. She remembered the bouncer calling him Doc, a common nickname for hospital corpsmen. A cheer distracted her and sent her gaze to the television in the corner in time to see a replay of a run batted in. The Rangers had tied the game and forced extra innings. “Way to go, Gallo,” she cheered.

Brutus looked at her with an approving smile that made her want to blush. “What?” she said, almost defensively.

“You like baseball?”

“Sure.”

“I have tickets for next Saturday’s game. Would you like to go?”

Denise looked at him, lingering on the swelling of his lower lip and the slight discoloration of a bruise on his jaw. “Oh, I don’t know. I mean, no offence, but I don’t know you.”

“Sure, sure, I get that.” He looked crestfallen, but after an uncomfortable moment, he brightened. “How about if we meet at the stadium? We wouldn’t have to be alone. Just two baseball fans taking in the game. Do you have your own car?”

“Yeah.” She thought about it. Being alone in a car with him might make her uncomfortable, but if she drove herself she could leave any time. Here was her chance to get to know the guy with no pressure. If she decided she liked him after spending a few hours with him at the game, maybe they could see each other again. “Okay,” she said. “That sounds pretty good. Where should we meet? What time?”

His smile was sudden and turned his rough face startlingly attractive. “Great.” He named a spot at the stadium and suggested half past six. That would give them half an hour to meet and get settled before the game started.

“I’ll be there,” she promised.

He looked around. “Where’s your friend?” When she blinked, he clarified. “The blonde you were with last night.”

“That’s my sister, Stella. She’s home. Um. She moved here from Mississippi last week. She’s staying with me until she finds a job and can get on her feet.”

“The garage is looking for a parts runner,” Dale said helpfully.

Denise tried to imagine her sister delivering auto parts and failed. “Thanks, Dale, I’ll mention it to her.”

She turned back to find Brutus staring at her. A slight flush crept into his cheeks. He swallowed the last of his coffee and tossed a five on the bar. “I better get home to Rowdy. I’m sure glad I ran into you, Denise. See you Saturday.”

She watched him go. That T-shirt fit him perfectly, from his broad shoulders to his narrow waist. His worn jeans cupped his perfect ass in a way that made her want to give him a squeeze to see if his glutes were really as hard as they looked.

Dale coughed. “Boy, I tell you what. If he could see the look on your face right now, he’d either run for the hills or buy a jumbo box of condoms.”

“Dale!”

“Sorry, sweet cheeks.” Dale appeared to try to control himself, but his hooting laughter rang out. “This is gonna be fun.”

**Chapter Three**

“Hey, Wolfe, it’s me.” Brutus squeezed the phone between his ear and shoulder while he dumped a scoop of dry food in Rowdy’s bowl. The dog looked at him like he was only minutes away from starvation. “There ya go. Good boy.”

“What?” said Wolfe.

“Not you. I was talking to the dog.” He dropped the plastic scoop into the trashcan he used to store Rowdy’s food and flipped the lid shut. “Hey, look, I was in Billie’s tonight and—”

Wolfe cut him off with a groan. “You got drunk and had another fight?”

“Oh, for ... No! All I had was a cup of coffee, and I was there for only thirty minutes.”

He should have stayed longer, taken the opportunity to talk some more with Denise, but he had been so elated when she agreed to meet him at the game he hadn’t trusted himself to make sense during a conversation. Which reminded him of why he’d called his buddy.

“Look, I ran into that girl. Her name is Denise. The game was on at Billie’s, and it turns out she’s a big Rangers fan. So I asked her out to the game on Saturday.”

There was a moment of silence on the phone. “The game we’re going to on Saturday?”

“Uh, yeah. Could I buy your ticket from you?”

“I don’t know. I was looking forward to seeing the game.”

Brutus’s heart fell. “Aw, c’mon, Wolfe. The season is almost over, and there’s no way the Rangers can pull up enough to make the playoffs. Culver is pitching. It’s not like you’d be missing anything.”

A sigh came over the phone and Wolfe’s voice turned dreamy. “Except some quality time with my best bud.”

Brutus took the phone from his ear and stared at it. “The fuck?”

Wolfe’s snicker grew to a howl. “Gotcha.”

Brutus huffed a weak chuckle. “You suck.”

“Yeah, but you can have my ticket anyway. Hope you and Denise have a good time at the game.”