

Chapter One

Donetta Presley's nerves were flat-out wrecked. And no wonder! She'd had another run-in with the town's new fire marshal; the contractor who'd renovated her trendy hair salon and her upstairs apartment wasn't returning her phone calls; and, despite feeling like road kill and hugging the porcelain throne more times than she cared to remember, she'd actually given a haircut to a toy poodle named Debbie!

On top of that, she'd had to drive clear over to Austin just to buy a home pregnancy test. Hope Valley had the fastest gossip mill in Texas and she did *not* want the whole town discussing the nature of her purchase before she could even get home and remove the cellophane from the box.

She could have saved herself the trouble.

Pretty soon everyone would know anyway.

She wiped her clammy forehead with the back of her wrist, tempted to lower the thermostat on the salon's air conditioner another notch. That probably wouldn't be a good idea. Her clients were shivering as it was.

Trying to take shallow breaths, praying the nausea would pass, she removed the last few bobby pins and rollers from Millicent Lloyd's blue hair and tossed them into an open drawer. The pink-and-gray perm rods she'd used on a client who'd left more than an hour ago were still scattered in the shampoo bowl. Too bad the scent hadn't gone with the woman, because the acrid smell of ammonia that wafted from the shiny black sink bowl made Donetta's stomach revolt anew.

Wasn't that a hoot? The owner and operator of Donetta's Secret, the only hair salon in Hope Valley, Texas, couldn't bear the smell of permanent wave lotion.

Lordy, she didn't need this grief. Her schedule was so messed up she was now juggling three clients at once. And Miz Lloyd expected to leave here at two-forty-five on the dot—same as every Friday.

She patted the woman on the shoulder. "Be patient with me, okay, Miz Lloyd? I'm tryin' my best to get you out of here on time."

She reached for a bottle of finishing spray and gave Millicent's short barrel curls a squirt, then pumped a couple of aromatic spurts into the air.

Millicent's blue-tinted eyebrows shot up. "Did you just blast me with air freshener?"

Donetta forced a smile and retrieved her small teasing brush from the top drawer of the laminate workstation. "No, silly. It's finishing spray. It sets the curl and gives your hair more body. Don't you just love the way it smells?"

"You've never used it on me before," Millicent said, her light-blue eyes narrowing.

Donetta looked down at the sectioned curls. "It's a new product. Just came in this week."

"Expensive, I bet. Ought to have a care about wasting it." She sniffed, still clutching her taupe gloves in her age-spotted fist. Millicent Lloyd never went to town without matching gloves, shoes and pocketbook. "Squirting it all over the place like it was toilet water perfume from the dime store. Why, if I wasn't trussed up in this cape, I'd be needing a bath."

"You're fine," Donetta soothed. "It's not sticky."

As she backcombed Millicent's thin hair, she glanced at the chrome clock above the front door and checked the minute hands, shaped as neon-red scissors. Barring any more interruptions, she could probably finish these last three clients within the hour and close up early.

Then again, maybe not.

Her hand tightened around the red plastic handle of the brush when she saw the sheriff's car wheel into a diagonal parking space in front of her salon.

Storm Carmichael.

He was her best friend's brother—an ex-Texas Ranger who was now the sheriff of Hope Valley.

And he was the last person Donetta wanted to see today.

"I declare, Donetta. You're about to snatch me bald-headed."

She jolted and quickly smoothed out the two-inch-long section of hair she'd just teased into a ball of frizz.

"Sorry, Miz Lloyd. My mind wandered."

"Good thing you didn't have a pair of scissors in your hand. No telling what I'd look like." She cut her eyes toward the front window, then back to Donetta's reflection in the mirror. "That Carmichael boy is heading this way. Is that what's got you in such a tizzy?"

Storm Carmichael wasn't anybody's idea of a boy, Donetta thought, which was partly the reason her knees were shaking. Thank God she hadn't worn her miniskirt today. The man was more observant than a hawk, and Donetta had learned a hard lesson about showing vulnerability.

"Just running behind schedule is all that's wrong with me," Donetta said.

The door swished open, sucking out precious degrees of the salon's cool air. And there he stood, Sheriff Storm Carmichael, six feet five inches of sinfully delicious masculinity in boots, jeans, a khaki uniform shirt with a sheriff's star pinned above his breast pocket, and a Stetson sporting a cattleman's crease.

The very man responsible for this god-awful, debilitating morning sickness.

His gaze locked onto hers and never wavered, yet she knew he could probably give a detailed description of every customer in the salon, as well as the hairstyle models in the photos on the walls. Despite her outward control, her heart galloped like a thoroughbred on an open range.

She'd had a major crush on him when she was a dreamy ten-year-old and he was sixteen. But that was twenty years ago—and at this particular moment, puppy love was *not* the emotion she was feeling.

"Excuse me just a minute, Miz Lloyd." She set the brush on her station, then strolled toward the reception desk to head him off in case he had any ideas of coming in and getting comfortable. Not that he'd ever hung out in the salon, but he looked like a man with something on his mind, a man willing to wait until she was finished with her clients.

That was all she needed, she thought with a mental sigh. To have Storm's eyes trained on her backside while she worked. She'd likely give Darla Pam Kirkwell a Mohawk.

She stopped at the reception desk, realizing she'd almost walked right up to Storm to automatically give him a hug.

That was what happened when a person had sex with a friend. Normal, lifelong habits became awkward. She'd *always* greeted him with a hug—even if she was miffed at him. Now she was afraid the simple gesture would give away more than she wanted him to know.

Wishing she could sit down for about five hours, she leaned against the red laminate counter and put on her polite, welcome-the-customer face. It took a Herculean effort. She felt about as sociable as a she-bear in satin.

"Afternoon, Sheriff. What can I do for you?"

His eyes blatantly lowered to her V-neck tank top that sported a large, dramatic face of a cat, then to her slim khaki pants and open-toed platform shoes. Although it was October, a warm front had moved in from the Gulf, making it feel like the middle of summer. Storm Carmichael's visual caress cranked up her internal thermostat to triple digits.

"I guess you didn't see that red tag on the door," he said in his perfectly charming Texas drawl. He was one of those men whose smooth baritone voice had an innately sensual, teasing tone.

His thumbs were hooked in the front pockets of his jeans, a purely masculine gesture that drew the eye and put a woman in danger of losing her good sense.

"Now, don't you start in on me, too, Storm. As soon as I get ahold of my contractor, he'll take care of everything. And park those eyeballs back in your head, why don't you. I'm not in the mood to deal with one more condescending male today." She'd couched her annoyance in her trademark sultry tone, but for once, she wasn't quite certain she'd pulled it off.

She knew just how to flirt with a guy, to let him down easy without making him feel as though he'd struck out. It was her means of holding men at bay.

The trait was pretty much the only useful lesson she'd learned from a mother she hadn't seen in eight years.

"Can't blame a man for admiring. All these bold colors in here, and you still stand out like a million-dollar supermodel."

She arched a brow. "Flattery, Sheriff? My goodness, you must want something."

"Oh, I want a lot of things," he said softly, making her shiver even though she was burning up. "Right now, though, I'll stick to business. That citation on your door isn't part of a beautification project. It doesn't say 'Pretty please' and it doesn't mention a thing about phoning your contractor. It's an official injunction mandating you to vacate these premises until the issues that have been itemized for you—more than once, I'm told—are corrected and in compliance with county and state building codes."

At the formality of his words, Donetta's heart pounded with a mounting sense of dread. This was Storm Carmichael the cop. Not Storm Carmichael the friend she'd slept with, the man who held her heart and didn't even know it.

"Now, I don't know how these infractions slipped through the cracks for two years, but the improvements on this unit have been declared unsafe by the fire marshal—"

“Would you just hush?” she whispered fiercely. “I know what the damn thing says.” She looked around to see if any of the customers were listening. Of course they were. The three elderly women were practically leaning forward in their chairs, not even trying to disguise that they were exercising what they clearly viewed as their God-given right to eavesdrop.

“Listen, Storm, this will just have to wait.” He wasn’t wearing a gun belt and she didn’t see any handcuffs, so it was a safe bet that he wouldn’t actually arrest her for violating a court order. Hope Valley was a relaxed small town. The judicial system was naturally a bit more laid-back. And she wasn’t ignoring the stupid paper—even though she’d flipped it the bird as she’d unlocked the front door this morning to open for business.

“I intend to take care of everything,” she said, “but first I need to finish styling Miz Lloyd and rinse Darla Pam before the bleach fries her hair. And I promised Cora I’d have her out of here before three o’clock. She has errands to run and has to be home before dark—you know she can’t drive at night.”

Glancing down, she skimmed a fingertip over her appointment book, noticed that her acrylic nail was chipped at the very tip. Swell. One more thing she could add to her to-do list. She swallowed back the queasiness again working its way up her esophagus. She really, *really* didn’t feel good.

“Why don’t you give me a call around five,” she said, fully aware she wouldn’t be here. Millicent, Darla Pam and Cora were her last three clients for the day. “I should have a break by then. Meanwhile...” She stepped back and fixed a phony smile on her face. “You have yourself a real nice afternoon, Sheriff, ya hear?”

Storm watched Donetta’s long cinnamon-red hair swish across her shoulders as she calmly turned around. That he’d been dismissed took a second to sink in. His eyebrows shot up, raising his Stetson a good inch, he was sure.

Without an ounce of respect for the badge pinned to his shirt, the confounding woman had left him cooling his heels beside the small reception desk. He was both astounded and aroused by her cheekiness...and seriously annoyed at himself because of the reaction.

His gaze naturally fastened on her sexy derriere as she sashayed across the red-and-black linoleum. Long and lean, she stood nearly five-foot-ten in her bare feet. He’d never once seen her slouch to minimize her height. Hell, she accented it with four-inch platform shoes that would cause a less coordinated person to end up in traction.

His lips twitched when she breezed by the wall and flipped the air-conditioning switch without even looking. The domed hair dryers would likely have icicles hanging from the rims in a few minutes. Ms. Donetta Presley wasn't so calm after all.

Ignoring him, she went back to work on Millicent Lloyd's blue hair. In Storm's opinion, that attention-getting shade wasn't the best advertising for the beauty shop. Hell, the woman even had her eyebrows painted blue.

He shifted his gaze back to Donetta, and just that quickly, his groin tightened. He couldn't believe how he was responding to her after all these years. She'd always been just his kid sister's friend. Now he couldn't look at her without thinking about mind-blowing sex.

She frustrated the hell out of him, though. As a lawman, a big part of his job involved reading people. Yet he'd be damned if he could figure out what made Donetta Presley tick.

She was sexy, flirty and in-your-face sassy, but there was a vulnerability in her exotic amber eyes that worried him, made him want to wrap her in silk and slay her demons. She'd probably belt him if he tried—provided he could get close enough for her to take a swing.

She'd been holding him at an arm's distance for the past month, ever since she'd driven out to his ranch on an errand for his mother. He'd invited her to stay for dinner. God knows he hadn't planned it, but between drinks and friendly conversation an explosive chemistry had taken them both by surprise and culminated in a night of stunningly carnal sex.

Now she was determined to act as though they'd never seen each other naked, as though she hadn't rocked his world right off its axis. And it was making him nuts.

Donetta Presley was not a forgettable kind of woman.

Talk about straining a relationship—what he was about to do could well snap it altogether.

He moved up behind her as she emptied half a can of hair spray on Millicent's hairdo.

"Afternoon, Miz Lloyd," he said.

"It's polite to take off your hat indoors, young man. I know your mother taught you better manners." She sniffed and worked her birdlike hands into a pair of lacy brown gloves when Donetta stripped off the cape.

Storm removed his hat and combed his fingers through his hair. "Yes, ma'am."

Donetta shook out the vinyl drape and folded it over the chair Millicent had vacated, nearly butting against him when she stepped back. "I thought you were leaving."

“Not without you, darlin’.”

She merely scowled at him. “Same time next Friday, Miz Lloyd?”

“I imagine if you don’t find me dead in my bed, I’ll be here.”

A nearly imperceptible look of distress flashed in Donetta’s eyes, yet she hardly missed a beat as she said, “Now, don’t you be talking like that.” She fixed the collar on Millicent’s dress and brushed away a couple of stray hairs.

“You take care, Miz Lloyd. I’ve got to go shampoo Darla Pam. Think about letting me cancel out some of the blue tones when you come in next week.”

Storm’s jaw went slack. Hadn’t he just explained to this irritating woman that she wouldn’t be using the salon until the fire marshal gave his approval?

“I’ve told you time and again,” Millicent said, her neck rising like a rooster ready to crow, “this is exactly the way Harold liked my hair, and that’s how I intend to keep it.”

Donetta patted her on the shoulder. “I’m betting he would have loved the softer blue, too. You give it some thought. I’ll see you next Friday.”

Without so much as an “excuse me,” Donetta headed across the salon, straining his patience to the max. Her delicate vanilla perfume lingered in her wake.

Millicent placed money on Donetta’s station. “Don’t you have work, Sheriff?”

“As a matter of fact, I do. Thank you for reminding me. You have a nice day, Miz Lloyd. And be careful not to trip on that extension cord.” The cord was safely secured to the floor with black electrical tape, but he was annoyed enough to comment. Damn Blane Pyke for forcing him to come here in the first place.

“My eyes are fine, young man. I can still see to pick up my feet. You, on the other hand, had better watch your step. You were off chasing hooligans for twelve years, and just because you were raised here in Hope Valley, that don’t mean you know everything. If you did, you wouldn’t be standing here now, trying to enforce rules that new Yankee fire marshal ought to have the gumption to handle himself.”

Millicent Lloyd didn’t miss too much that went on in this town. For as long as he’d known her, Storm had never had a conversation with her that he’d fully understood. The undertones in this puzzling discourse clearly had something to do with Donetta, and the fact that he didn’t know what it was gave him a jolt of unease.

“My hands are tied, Miz Lloyd. I have to follow the law.”

“Things aren’t always black and white, young man. What you see isn’t necessarily the whole picture. You ought to know that better than most.”

Direct hit. She was referring to his suspension several years back, allegedly due to excessive use of force on an obstruction-of-justice arrest involving a woman named Shantelle Kingsley. The fiasco had turned into a media circus, splashed across the news and carefully edited to show only what the television and cable stations wanted people to see—regardless of the accuracy. The reminder twisted his gut into knots.

But what did that have to do with Donetta?

“If there’s something I should know about Donetta, why don’t you just say it?” Great. Interview 101. Non-accusatory. Gain the subject’s confidence and make him—or her—*want* to tell his story. He’d just blown this one like a rookie right out of the police academy.

As expected, Millicent took a step back from him. “If you’re smart, you’ll stop thinking with what’s in your pants and look a little deeper than skin.”

She hugged her purse to her side as though expecting a mugger to accost her on the way to the door and left him standing by Donetta’s empty station, stunned.

What the hell did that mean? The woman almost seemed to know that he’d slept with Donetta. Millicent Lloyd clung to a personal standard of what was and was not proper. He was pretty sure her parting words put him in the *improper* category.

He felt as though he’d just been chastised by his mother. And he had no idea what he’d done wrong. Maybe she’d seen him checking out Donetta’s backside a few minutes ago. It might have looked crass, but by God she didn’t have all the facts. The woman ought to be paying a little more attention to her own riddles.

As far as the building-code violations went, he’d taken an oath to uphold the laws of the court. He might not *like* the assignments that crossed his desk, but rules were made to be followed.

There was one thing, though, that he was fast learning: dealing with hardened criminals was a damned sight easier than going up against the women of Hope Valley. Between his mother and her pals, his sister, Sunny and her Texas Sweethearts group—which included Donetta, Tracy Lynn Randolph and Becca Sue Ellsworth—he’d be lucky to survive the next few days without blood being spilled. Namely his blood.

He shoved his Stetson back on his head and stalked across the salon. The hat was part of his uniform and he could wear the thing indoors if he felt like it.

He was tired of being ignored. He had better things to do than follow Donetta Presley around like an adoring puppy.

Folding his arms, he waited while she shut off the water in the shampoo bowl and wrapped a towel around Darla Pam's hair.

"Oh, my land, Storm Carmichael. Shame on you for catching us girls lookin' like a mess." Darla Pam, not a day under sixty, twittered and held the towel in place on her head, thrusting her chest out in the process.

Storm glanced away and saw Donetta roll her eyes in disgust. He wanted to mimic the gesture, but he'd probably hear about it from the mayor.

"You still look real fine, Miz Kirkwell."

This time Donetta didn't bother rolling her eyes. They snapped to his. If the sparks shooting from them had been packed with gunpowder, his mama would be pressing his burial suit right about now.

Before Darla Pam could reply, Donetta aimed a falsely sweet smile at the woman. "No flirting until everybody has her hair done. We allow only genuine compliments in here. I think I'll put you under the dryer for a few minutes, Darla, while I start on Cora."

Storm was smart enough to stand back as she ushered Darla Pam to the red vinyl chair, dropped the dryer dome and cranked the blower on high with a vicious twist of her wrist. Darla didn't seem to notice anything was amiss.

Side stepping, Donetta lifted the dryer hood from Cora Harris—who was Jackson Slade's housekeeper, and Sunny's, too, now that his sister had married the rancher. Cora wiggled her fingers at Storm and giggled.

"Cora, go ahead and have a seat in my chair."

Storm cleared his throat. "Sorry, ladies. Cora. Darla Pam." He looked at each woman, lifted Darla's dryer hood and shut off the blower.

"Donetta's Secret is closed for business until further notice—fire marshal's orders. I'll have to ask you both to gather up your belongings and exit the building.