

Story created by Julie Kenner and Dee Davis

RISING STORM

*Storm Season:
Ginny & Jacob – the Prequel*



DEE
DAVIS

BESTSELLING AUTHOR

Storm Season:

Ginny & Jacob – the Prequel

By Dee Davis

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EVIL EYE
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Storm Season: Ginny & Jacob – the Prequel
Rising Storm
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Book Description

Storm Season: Ginny & Jacob
Rising Storm – the Prequel
By Dee Davis

Secrets, sex and scandals ...

Welcome to Storm, Texas, where passion runs hot, desire runs deep, and secrets have the power to destroy...

Ginny Moreno takes control of her life again when she breaks off an affair with a powerful man. But when she has a run-in with him at a public event, it's her best friend, Jacob Salt who consoles her—even though he can never know the real truth about what she's done.

[About Dee Davis](#)

Bestselling author Dee Davis has a masters degree in public administration. Prior to writing, she served as the director of two associations, wrote award winning PSAs, did television and radio commercials, starred in the Seven Year Itch, taught college classes, and lobbied both the Texas Legislature and the US Congress.

Her highly acclaimed first novel, [Everything In Its Time](#), was published in July 2000. Since then, among others, she's won the Booksellers Best, Golden Leaf, Texas Gold and Prism awards, and been nominated for the National Readers Choice Award, the Holt and two RT Reviewers Choice Awards.

Recently she was honored with a Lifetime Achievement Award from the New York Romance Writers and has also been nominated for a Lifetime Achievement Award for romantic suspense from Romantic Times. In addition, she is Hall of Fame member of the New Jersey Romance Writers and was awarded an Odyssey Medal from Hendrix College.

To date, she has written over twenty-five romantic suspense, time travel, and women's fiction novels and novellas. Among her latest books you'll find her A-Tac, Liar's Game, and Last Chance series.

She's lived in Austria and traveled in Europe extensively. And although she now resides in an 1802 farmhouse in Connecticut, she still calls Texas home.

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Chapter One

Austin, Texas

Ginny Moreno sat on the end of the rumpled bed staring out at the rippling waters of Lady Bird Lake. The room smelled like sex. Cheap, dirty, mindless sex. Ginny crossed her arms over her bare breasts, wondering why she'd thought this was such a romantic thing.

Looking around the sterile hotel room, she knew it was anything but. This was about sex, nothing more. And just thinking about it made her shudder. She wasn't that kind of girl. At least she hadn't been.

Until now.

The senator—she couldn't even bring herself to say his name—stood in front of the bathroom mirror, combing his hair, already dressed again in his fancy suit and tie. She had to admit, he was a looker, tall, well-muscled, with a chiseled chin and a touch of gray in his dark hair. She'd been attracted to his maturity. His charisma. Anything that helped her forget about Jacob. Forget the fact that he'd found someone. Someone that wasn't her.

She felt a niggle of shame. She'd never meant to let it get this far. Bad enough that she'd given in once. But at least she could blame that on anger. She been so pissed off, and the fact that she'd had a couple of drinks had just made it easier to give in, to let herself be seduced. To feel wanted. Needed. That had been excusable or at least understandable.

Harder to fathom was the fact that she'd let it go on. Met with him in secret. Let him treat her like his mistress. Or worse, like a whore. It wasn't like she had any illusions. The senator was interested in her for one reason only. And it wasn't anything remotely romantic. She filled a need. And until now, maybe he'd filled one for her as well.

But not anymore. Now she just felt sick. And ashamed. What would Brittany think if she found out the truth? And Jacob? God, she didn't even want to consider the notion.

Blowing out a long breath, she reached to the floor, grabbed her camisole and pulled it over her head. The senator walked into the room, a rakish smile curving his lips as his gaze trailed along the curves of her body. There was a spark of heat in his eyes. Ginny clenched her hands and fought the urge to puke.

"This just isn't right." She pushed to her feet and slipped into her jeans, surprised she'd managed to get the words out.

"Ah, but my sweet girl, that's what makes it so appealing." The senator shrugged, then reached out to pull her into his arms. "To both of us."

"Maybe for you," she said, pushing free. "But not for me."

He frowned, straightening his cuffs. "You're not suddenly growing a conscience, are you? I mean, if this got out, it wouldn't just be ugly for me, it would be devastating for you. I can't imagine Marisol would be too pleased to learn that her baby sister is so"—he paused, eyeing her speculatively—"promiscuous. Not to mention what my daughter would think."

Ginny swallowed her disgust as she buttoned her shirt, certain now that she'd made the right decision. "Don't worry. I'm not going to tell anybody. I just don't want to do this anymore. Okay?" She tried not to think about what she'd do if he refused. The cold, hard truth was that he held all the power.

He searched her face for a minute more, and then, seemingly satisfied with what he saw, nodded once. "If that's what you want. But you know how to reach me," he said, reaching out to run the tip of his finger along her lower lip. "If you change your mind."

“I won’t.” She stuck out her chin and squared her shoulders. “It was great while it lasted.” The lie tasted bitter on her lips. “But it’s time to move on.” To what she hadn’t the slightest idea, but whatever it was, it had to be better than this.

The senator gave her a last searching glance, then shrugged his elegant shoulders. “I guess I’ll see you around then. The room is paid for. Feel free to stay.” Without even a backward glance, he strode through the door and out of her life.

Well, at least as much as that was possible. They were from the same small Texas town, after all. Damned if that shouldn’t have been something she thought about before she’d allowed him to seduce her into his bed. Acting out had been easy. Living with the consequences was going to be a hell of a lot harder.

She shuddered, then walked over to the bureau to retrieve her purse. After a quick look to be sure there was nothing damning—no sign of her continued fall from grace—Ginny walked out of the room, closing the door on not only the affair, but on the part of her that had welcomed such a despicable act in the first place.

She’d weather this storm just like she had every other. She’d hold her head up and move on. And pray to God that no one ever found out.

* * * *

“I’ll never understand women.” Jacob Salt tossed the football to his friend Max Marshall. “I mean, just when you think you have them figured out they go and totally screw you over.”

“I hear you, man. And you’re preaching to the choir.” Max grinned, returning the football as they stood beneath the pecan trees on the UT quad. “But I take it this is more than a general pronouncement?”

“Wendy dumped me.” Jacob was surprised that saying the words out loud didn’t hurt as much as he’d thought they would. Still, they carried a pretty powerful punch. “Said it was her and not me.”

“Ouch.” Max shook his head and lobbed the ball back. “That’s never a good thing.”

“Yeah, I know. And the shitty part is that I really thought things were going pretty good. I mean, not love of my life stuff, but serious enough for now. You know?”

“Maybe that was it. Girls like to believe they’re the one.”

The two of them settled on top of a picnic table, still idly flicking the ball back and forth.

“Yeah, but that’s just girls. I mean, you don’t actually believe there’s one person for each of us, do you?” Jacob queried, shaking his head.

“To be honest, I never really thought about it that much.” Max frowned as he considered the notion. “Who wants to settle down at our age? Shoot, give me a willing girl that’s easy on the eyes and I’m there. As long as she doesn’t start trying to manage me—you know?”

“I do indeed.”

“So is that why Wendy dumped you?”

“Sort of. I guess. I think it really had more to do with Ginny.”

“Ah, well, that makes sense.”

“I’m glad it does to somebody. It sure as hell doesn’t to me.”

“Dude, you and Ginny are seriously close. And I’m guessing that Wendy didn’t like the competition.”

“Oh, give me a break. We’ve known each other since we were kids. She’s like my sister.”

“Only not.” Max waggled his eyebrows suggestively.

“I don’t think of her like that.” Jacob tucked the football under one arm, glaring at his friend.

“Right. That would explain why you practically slugged me when I told you I was thinking about asking her out.”

“Come on. I stopped you because you wanted to screw her. If I thought for a second you were really interested in her...”

“You’d have let me go out with her?” Max sat back, crossing his arms over his chest.

Well, actually, no. He wouldn’t have. Jacob frowned. “I just want what’s best for her.”

“And that precludes not only me, but Brad and David, too?”

Jacob fought against an uncomfortable wash of emotion. He hadn’t realized he’d been so vocal in protecting Ginny. She sure as hell wouldn’t appreciate the protection. She’d always been quick to remind him that she could take care of herself. Which didn’t mean he wasn’t supposed to keep an eye out.

“I just don’t want to see her get hurt.” It was a lame excuse. But it was the truth. Ginny deserved the best. And as much as he loved his friends—they weren’t the kind of guys he wanted for Ginny.

“You keep telling yourself that.” Max grinned, his teasing expression taking the sting out of his words.

“Look, I just want her to be happy. Which means I’ve got to look out for her, you know? She doesn’t have a father or a big brother. Luis is too young to care one way or the other. And Marisol does her best, but she’s not here.”

“So it’s up to you?”

“Yeah.” He met Max’s gaze. “It is. Want to make something of it?”

“No way, dude.” Max held up a hand in supplication. “I’m just trying to say that I can understand where Wendy was coming from.”

Actually, as much as he hated admitting it, Wendy had been jealous of Ginny. Which was stupid actually, because not only was their relationship strictly built on friendship, Ginny had been keeping distant of late anyway. Acting downright weird if he had to put a finger on it.

At first he’d thought it was because of Wendy. But then it had been pretty damn apparent that she’d just had other things on her mind. Something not so good. But she’d deflected every attempt he’d made to get her to talk about it.

“So did Wendy give you an ultimatum? Her or Ginny?”

“More or less.” It had sure felt that way. “But I’m not going to let her dictate who I’m friends with. Anyway, the point is Wendy is history. She made it abundantly clear that we’re finished.”

“And now you’re devastated.” Max’s smirk was hard to ignore.

“I’m not happy.” Jacob shrugged, fighting a grin. “But hell, there are a lot of fish in the sea.”

And in the meantime, he wasn’t about to let anything screw up what he had with Ginny. They’d been through too much together. He wasn’t going to let any girlfriend start dictating who he could and couldn’t be friends with. To hell with that. And, more importantly, he wasn’t going to let Ginny push him away either.

Whatever the hell was going on with her, he just needed to get to the bottom of it. Then he could do whatever was necessary to make it right. That’s what they’d always done for each other. And he wasn’t about to let anything change that now.

Chapter Two

Brittany Rush stared across the table at her two closest friends. Neither of them was a hundred percent present. Which, considering Wendy had just dumped Jacob, made sense at least. Ginny's funk was less explainable. In truth, Brittany would have expected Jacob's news to make Ginny smile, at least on the inside. She'd never been a fan of Wendy's. And if Brittany was understanding things correctly, basically Jacob had chosen Ginny over Wendy. Which was a win all around as far as Brittany could see. Not that she was going to say that.

"Come on, you guys. I've been to funerals that were more fun. Seriously, I could have slept in this morning." The three of them had gathered for their weekly breakfast at Magnolia Café. An Austin fav, the place seriously had the best pancakes Brittany had ever eaten. Well, except for Rita Mae's secret recipe at the Bluebonnet.

"Sorry," Jacob apologized. "I guess I'm still reeling."

"I know, it's tough," Brittany commiserated over a mouthful of pancakes. "No one likes to get dumped. But you weren't really that serious about her, were you?"

"Probably not." Jacob shook his head. "But I liked her. And I was happy enough with things the way they were. I certainly wasn't expecting to be hit with that kind of ultimatum."

Ginny frowned down at her breakfast taco. "I'm sorry she pulled me into it." She lifted her gaze to meet his. "You know I'd never want to stand between you and someone you really care about."

"That's just the thing, Gin," Jacob said with a shrug. "If she really cared about me, she wouldn't have asked me to make a choice. Anyway, we all swore a long time ago that we'd stick together no matter what." His lips slid into a crooked grin. "With blood and everything."

"That was just plain gross if you ask me." Brittany shook her head, remembering the summer Ginny, Brittany, and her cousins Jacob and Callie had spent the night in a tent in her backyard. They'd been all of eight or nine, and they'd sworn to friendship forever. And then Jacob, being well...Jacob, had insisted that they seal the pact with their blood.

"You just wanted to use your new camping knife," Ginny laughed, showing the first sign of animation Brittany had seen from her all morning. "I'm amazed you didn't manage to seriously injure one of us."

"Although you did do more than nick Callie's finger, if I recall," Brittany added.

"It was her fault. She jerked away at the last minute." Jacob's smile broke into a grin. "For a doctor's kid she was always a little bit squeamish."

The four of them had been inseparable from the time they'd been old enough to walk. Callie was at SMU now, which meant a little more distance. But Brittany figured if push came to shove, it would still be the four of them against the world. Which meant she had to ask.

"Something up with you?" Brittany studied her friend. "You've been awfully quiet."

"I'm fine." Ginny took a sip of coffee. "Feeling bad about Wendy, I guess."

Somehow Brittany didn't think that was the case, but now wasn't the time to call her on it.

"I told you there was nothing to feel bad about." Jacob reached over to loop an arm around Ginny's shoulder. "Blood oath, remember? Nothing separates us."

"He's right," Brittany said. "Us against the world."

"Okay, when you put it like that." Ginny smiled and punched Jacob in the shoulder. "But I'm still sorry you got dumped."

"Me, too." Jacob grimaced. "I'll admit my pride is a little banged up. But it's nothing that

won't heal. Or at least feel a hell of a lot better after a couple of shots of tequila. You guys going to Maggie Mae's tonight? The Turbo Fruits are playing."

"Hadn't really thought of it one way or the other," Brittany said. "You want to go, Ginny?"

Ginny tilted her head, thinking about it as she chewed another bite of her taco.

"Come on, Gin," Jacob urged, wagging his eyebrows. "Max will be there."

Wrong thing to say. Brittany watched as Ginny grimaced.

"It'll be fun," Brittany rushed to add. "We haven't partied together in a while. Might as well take advantage of the night."

"As long as you guys entertain Max." Ginny shot them both a pointed look. Not that Brittany blamed her.

Max Marshall had been trying to capture Ginny's attention since they'd started UT. Not that he was having any luck. Until recently, Brittany would have sworn that was because Ginny just wasn't that into him. But now, well, Brittany couldn't help but wonder if there was somebody else.

"I'll handle Max," Jacob said. "He's harmless, really. He just thinks you're cute."

Ginny's lips quirked at the corners. "Well, I can't fault him on his good taste. And I do like him." She wrinkled her nose. "Just not like that. Maybe we should push him in your direction." She shot a self-satisfied smile at Brittany.

"No thanks. I'll pass." Brittany waved her hands in protest, knowing that her heart had been pledged years ago. Without so much as a by your leave. "Not that there's anything wrong with Max."

"We know, he's just not Marcus Alvarez." Jacob rolled his eyes, but there wasn't any rebuke in the pronouncement.

Truth was, there was no one who could ever take Marcus's place. Brittany knew it was a totally stupid obsession with a guy who probably didn't know she existed. But there was nothing to be done about it. Lord knows she'd tried.

"Hey, give her a break," Ginny chided. "You can't help who you fall in love with."

"No. I suppose not." Jacob shrugged. "And Marcus is a good guy. Or he was until he blew out of town."

"Well, we all know why he left," Brittany said. "Hector drove him to it." Hector Alvarez, Marcus's dad, was a really mean drunk. Everyone in Storm knew it. Everyone except Marcus's mother, Joanne, and his stick-up-her-butt sister, Dakota.

"I never said I blamed him." Jacob's expression turned serious. "But I'm not sure I can condone him walking out on his mother and sisters."

"So how about it, Ginny?" she asked, pointedly trying to shift the conversation. "Are we going with them to Maggie Mae's tonight?"

Ginny drained the last of her coffee. "Why not? Like you said, everything looks a little better after a couple shots of tequila."

* * * *

Senator Sebastian Rush closed the file folder with the proposed bill he'd been perusing and sat back in his chair, swiveling so that he could see the lush green grass of the capital lawn. In the distance, he could just make out the white structure that marked the governor's mansion.

With a smile, he reached for the glass of bourbon next to the file folder and let his mind picture the future. Governor of Texas. He took a swallow, the fiery liquid warming all the way to

his gut. It was a grand ambition, no doubt, and yet one he felt more than equal to fulfilling. He'd stacked his cards very carefully. Played his game close to the vest. And as long as nothing happened to throw the hand, he should be a shoo-in.

Of course he had to get reelected first. Not a difficulty. His family was synonymous with money and power in Texas. Old money. Deeply rooted power. He took another sip, his mind turning to the not insignificant matter of Ginny Moreno. Having an affair with the girl hadn't been his best move. But she had a lithe beauty. A youthful grace that appealed.

And she'd sure as hell been ready and willing, ripe for the plucking, so to speak. Women had always fawned on him—pandered actually—and he'd taken their adoration in his stride, loving each one as they came to him. But there was something in Ginny's innocence that had particularly appealed to him. Conquering hero and all that.

Maybe it was the fact that she'd been so overwhelmed by his interest. Which begged the question as to why she was walking away. He frowned, taking another sip of bourbon. Usually he was the one to end his affairs, but that wasn't always a good thing. There'd been a time or two when he'd worried about repercussions, but money could solve even the most sordid of problems.

Ginny's walking away most likely meant she was less of a threat than his usual choices of bedmates. But there was the not-so-insignificant fact that she was a college coed. One from his hometown no less.

Still, here in Austin, it had been easier to assuage his concerns. She was here. She'd wanted him. He'd wanted her. What the hell? Honestly, they'd both been a little bit drunk the first time. And after that...well, the girl was passionate as hell and a willing pupil. What more could a man ask for?

Which left the question of where her walking away left them. It wasn't as if he'd formed an attachment. But there was danger. Hell, that was no doubt part of what had drawn him to her in the first place. She knew his family. Knew them well. Especially Brittany. He'd never purposely hurt his daughter. But as long as Ginny kept her mouth shut, there shouldn't be any problem.

Better, though, that it had ended now. They'd spent over a month together. Which was more than he usually allowed himself. But now it was over and it was time to move on. Find some other willing young lady ready for a dalliance.

For a moment his mind conjured a picture of Payton. His icy bitch of a wife. Well, maybe bitch was too strong a word. But frigid certainly fit the bill. It was her fault he'd been forced to look outside his marriage. Her fault there wasn't anything to hold him at home. A man had needs.

"Senator." Bob Wickersham, his assistant, hovered near the open doorway. He wasn't much older than Brittany and Ginny. "Is there anything else before I take off?"

"No." He swiveled his chair to face forward again. "I'm good to go. I've got everything I need for the committee meeting." He patted the closed file folder.

"Excellent." Bob smiled, still hovering.

"Is there something more?" Sebastian lifted an eyebrow—waiting.

"Just a reminder that you're set to open the springtime music festival at Maggie Mae's tonight."

"Oh hell, I'd forgotten. No chance I can get out of it?"

"No, sir. They're expecting you. But it shouldn't take more than a few minutes. Just welcome everyone. Introduce the opening band. Shake a few hands. And you're out of there."

"Such is the life." Sebastian signed and shrugged. "No worries, Bob. I'll be there." He shot

his assistant a megawatt smile and then turned back to the window again, his thoughts moving back to his private life. Ginny Moreno wasn't worth worrying about. She was a kid. And he was always careful. No one had seen them. At least no one that mattered. It was over and done with. He should be thankful that it had been so easy.

And hell, Maggie Mae's was as good as any place to start looking for someone new.

Chapter Three

As always, the room at Maggie Mae's was packed. Since it was opening night for the music festival, the crowd was mixed. Old hippies, young businessmen, college kids and hipsters, with a few wannabes from all of the above thrown in for good measure.

Ginny let her gaze slide over the crowd and spotted Jacob and Max as they made their way over to the corner table she and Brittany had snagged.

"Quite a crowd," Jacob said as he slid onto the barstool next to hers. He was wearing the Turbo Fruit T-shirt she'd bought him last winter, after a concert they'd seen together. It hugged his lean frame, and Ginny wondered if she'd ever find a way to get over him.

"You guys were lucky to get a table." Max sat down across from her, eyeing the empty glasses. "Another round?" He lifted a hand to signal a passing waitress.

"Not ours," Brittany said, raising her voice to be heard above the growing din. "We just got here and figured it was better to grab a spot while we could."

The waitress arrived, looking harried as she grabbed the glasses and wiped down the table. "What'll you have?" she asked.

"Beer for me," Max answered. "Dos Equis."

"Same," Brittany echoed.

Ginny looked to Jacob, who grinned at her, waited for her to nod her agreement, and then turned back to the waitress. "We'll take the beers plus two shots of tequila."

"Only make mine a Shiner," Ginny said, returning Jacob's smile.

Since they'd come to college, a shot had become their way of celebrating or commiserating. Tonight, for Jacob, it was commiseration over losing Wendy. For Ginny, although none of the others knew, it was about both. But mainly celebration. A bullet—if not exactly dodged, at least not fatal.

"I'd forgotten it was opening night for the festival," Max said as they settled back to wait for their drinks. "Going to get a lot more crowded if I had to call it."

"Always is when Turbo Fruit plays."

"Says the boy who has three different Turbo Fruit playlists on his iPhone." Brittany laughed. At the moment, Jacob was super into indie rock. Which meant he'd been in heaven the minute they'd left Storm and arrived in Austin. Storm was more about jukebox renditions of songs by Asleep at the Wheel and Willie Nelson.

Not that Ginny had any complaints on that score. She loved country music almost as much as her sister did. And if Jacob was being honest, he'd admit he loved it, too. Nothing like a night at the Broken Spoke to remember why they were proud to be from Texas. Of course the chicken fried steak didn't hurt a bit either.

"Well, whatever the reason, I can't say that I disapprove of the scenery," Max said, tipping his head toward two scantily clad, clearly inebriated girls walking by.

"Fortunately, that goes both ways." Brittany grinned as a tall guy dressed in all black raised his eyebrows and lifted his beer in salute. Max and Brittany started to argue good-naturedly and Ginny turned her attention back to Jacob.

"You doing all right?" she asked, studying his face.

"Better than I expected actually. Like I said at breakfast, I think it was more my pride than anything else."

Ginny was surprised. Watching him and Wendy together, she'd thought it might be the real

deal. But then maybe she'd been too eaten up with jealousy to see anything clearly. That and guilt.

The waitress arrived with their drinks, plunking the beers down on the table, followed by the shot glasses with tequila.

"Straight up?" Jacob asked. "Or limes and salt?"

"Limes and salt."

"Lame ass," Jacob teased as Ginny licked the salt off her hand, gulped the tequila, and then shoved the lime between her teeth.

"Might be, pretty boy, but mine is gone and you're still talking."

Jacob picked up the glass and tossed the tequila back. No salt. No lime. Then he slammed the empty shot glass upside down on the table and grinned. "That, my friend, is how it's done."

"Well, as far as I'm concerned," Brittany said, joining the conversation, "you're both nuts. Quickest way to wind up knee-walking drunk is straight tequila."

"That's why they serve it in the itty bitty glasses," Max assured her. "Although I tend to agree with you. Give me a good margarita over a shot any day."

"Hey, whatever gets you through the night." Jacob lifted his beer glass and the others followed suit, everyone clinking their glasses together. "Good friends. Good music. And good beer."

Ginny sucked in a deep breath, feeling for the first time in months that everything was right with her world. That maybe, despite everything she'd done, things were going to be okay. She sighed, sipped her beer, and smiled at her friends.

Then her gaze caught a familiar tall figure striding across the bar—determinedly heading for their table. Ginny's breath caught in her throat, her stomach churning. She carefully set down her beer, moving her shaking hands under the table to her lap.

Jacob caught the motion, concern and questions mirrored in his eyes.

Ginny forced a smile, looked first to reassure Jacob and then up at Senator Rush as he stopped on the other side of the table, his hand dropping to his daughter's shoulder.

"Brittany," the senator said, his cool smile encompassing them all, "I had no idea you and your friends would be here tonight."

It was clear from her expression that Brittany felt exactly the same way about her father. "Jacob's really into the band," she said, a frown forming a line between her eyebrows. "I wouldn't have thought this was exactly your scene, Daddy. Not that I'm not happy to see you." She lifted her chin as her father brushed her cheek with a kiss.

"Don't worry." His smile was for Brittany, but somehow Ginny knew the words were meant for her. "I'm not staying. I've been tapped to kick off the festival. So a few official words and I'll leave Maggie Mae's to you and your friends."

Jacob was still shooting a puzzled look in Ginny's direction. Damn if he didn't know her too well. She fought for composure. After all she'd done to extricate herself from the situation, it would be ironic as hell if she gave up the game now.

"Well, at least have a drink with us," Brittany said, waving at an empty stool.

Ginny's heart sank, but she brightened her smile and nodded as if the senator hanging out with his kid and her friends was an everyday occurrence. In truth, Senator Rush had never been a hands-on father. Not that Brittany or Jeffrey would ever say anything. They both loved their father. And as such accepted that his role in their life was principally absentee.

That explained why Brittany had no idea of her father's philandering. And certainly not his philandering with her best friend. Oh God, Ginny thought she just might be sick.

“Thanks for the invitation, sweetheart,” the senator was saying, “but I wouldn’t want to cramp your style.” His smile widened. “Besides, they’re motioning for me.” He nodded toward a dais where the band had been setting up. The manager of Maggie Mae’s was indeed beckoning.

“Knock ’em dead, Daddy.” Brittany reached out to squeeze her father’s hand.

“Thanks, I could use a little encouragement. Not exactly my usual constituents. I’ll tell your mother I ran into you.”

Brittany nodded, and then her father walked away.

Ginny released a breath she hadn’t realized she’d been holding.

“Geez, Brit,” Max said. “I knew your dad was some muckety-muck, but I didn’t realize he was a senator.”

“Yeah, well, when you’ve lived with it most of your life, it ceases to be impressive.” There was a hint of bitterness in her tone, but she covered it with a smile.

“The good news is that if it’s time for your dad to open the festival, that means it’s almost time for the music to start. And that’s what we came for.” Jacob signaled the waitress for another round.

“Order the same for me,” Ginny said, her head spinning as, behind her, Senator Rush took the mike. “I’ll be right back.”

Again Jacob frowned, but didn’t comment, and Ginny was grateful. Brittany and Max were watching Brit’s father and so didn’t notice her defection. She headed up the stairs to the rooftop bar. With all the action down below, it wouldn’t be as crowded, and she needed a moment to get her act together.

Jacob saw far too much. And if Brittany was paying attention, she’d see it too. All Ginny needed to do was put some distance between herself and the senator. He’d do his thing and then when he was gone, she’d rejoin her friends. And hopefully, they’d remain none the wiser.

God, she’d been a fool to let herself get involved with him. It hadn’t meant anything. No risk to her heart. But he was married and his daughter was her best friend. What kind of person did that make her? She thought about Marisol. About everything her sister had given up to make a life for Ginny and her brother.

When her parents had died, Marisol had taken over their role, giving up any chance she had for her own life to take responsibility for her siblings. Ginny didn’t always appreciate her sister as “mom,” but she knew what a sacrifice it had been. One she’d made without a second thought.

Marisol deserved more from her than this.

Ginny hit the top of the stairs and crossed the planked floor to slide onto a stool by the bar. She’d been right. There weren’t as many people up here.

“What can I get you?” the bartender asked with a friendly smile.

A new life. Ginny harrumphed. No chance of that. Better to just make the most of the one she already had. “Shot of tequila.”

It wasn’t the most adult of choices, but then, despite her actions—or maybe because of them—she was most certainly still a kid. At least in most of the ways that counted. And kids made stupid mistakes. Sometimes hurting the people they loved most. But she was trying to make it right—well, if not right, then over—and that had to count for something. Except that she still felt sick just thinking about all she’d done. As if to underscore the memories, the senator’s powerful voice wafted up the stairs.

The bartender placed the shot glass in front of Ginny and without thinking, she lifted it to her lips and tossed it back. Shuddering as she swallowed, she felt the liquid warm her throat and belly. Maybe with enough of these she’d manage to forget. At least for tonight.

“What’s going on, Gin?” Jacob’s voice slid down her spine, warmer than the tequila.

She looked up at him as he slid onto the stool next to hers, his concerned gaze falling to the empty shot glass.

“Nothing.” She shook her head and forced a smile.

“Come on. This is me you’re talking to. I know you better than anybody. And I sure as hell know when something’s bothering you. So spill.”

She thought about blaming it all on Wendy. She’d already used that tack with some success, but he’d also made it clear that he didn’t hold her responsible for his or Wendy’s choices. Besides, he was right. He did know her best. And they never lied to each other. At least not directly.

She felt a wash of guilt, then ruthlessly quashed it. It wouldn’t help to confess to Jacob. Besides risking hurting a lot of people she loved, it would also change forever the way he looked at her. And that was the one thing she simply couldn’t bear. But she had to tell him something. As much of the truth as she dared.

She blew out a breath. “I screwed up big time. Did something I really regret. But there’s nothing I can do to undo it. I just have to find a way forward.”

He studied her for a moment, then reached for her hand. “Did you hurt anyone?”

“I don’t think so. There might have been potential, but I stopped things before it got that far. At least I think I did.”

“And you’re sure there’s nothing more you can do to right whatever this wrong is?”

She thought about it, then nodded, acutely aware of the warmth of his hand encompassing hers. “Yeah. I’ve done all that I can.”

“Then there’s nothing more you can do. We all make mistakes, Gin. It’s how we live with them that defines us.”

It was a remarkably grown-up thing to say. Ginny smiled up at him, feeling the prick of tears. But then Jacob was a remarkable person. “I hope you’re right.”

“I’m always right.” He laughed, the moment passing. He wasn’t going to press. Another thing about him she adored. “What do you say we get out of here?” He pulled her to her feet.

“Brittany and Max—” she began.

“—will be fine,” he assured her. “I told them you were under the weather.”

“But what about the music?” she protested, feeling off balance, knowing it was more than the tequila. “You love Turbo Fruit.”

“I love you more.” He shrugged. “And you need to get out of here. So let’s go.”

Chapter Four

“More?” Jacob looked down at Ginny, offering the tequila bottle.

She took it and lifted it to her lips, taking a tiny swig, shivering with the effort. He smiled. Ginny could hold her liquor as well as anyone he knew, but she’d never really developed a taste for tequila. It was obvious every time she took a swallow.

The fact that she drank it at all was a testament to her feelings for him. A true friend in every possible sense. Which was why he worried about her. Whatever she was keeping from him, it was eating her alive. He’d known something was wrong for more than a month, but every effort he’d made to discover what exactly it was had been met with either silence or deflection.

He frowned. It wasn’t like Ginny to keep secrets. At least not from him. They’d been through pretty much everything together. The ups and downs of living small-town life. The loss of her parents. The growing distance between his. The undeniably annoying antics of their younger siblings. Their first romances. Their first breakups. No matter what—they were always in it together. It was the one thing in his life he knew he could truly count on.

Which meant that whatever it was that was bugging Ginny, it was a fucking big deal. Nothing else would keep her from confiding in him. He wanted to push. To force her to reveal whatever it was. But there was a part of him that respected her right to privacy. And an even stronger, maybe not so admirable part of him, that just didn’t want to know what it was.

Especially if he was right and it involved some other guy.

It was a stupid notion. He didn’t have those kinds of feelings for Ginny. Who she dated was her business. Unless the bastard hurt her. Jacob fisted his left hand as he took the bottle back and had a significantly larger slug. At least whatever—whoever—it was, it seemed to be past tense. And that, he sighed, could only be a good thing.

“Penny for your thoughts?” Ginny asked.

They were sitting side by side, leaning against a dormered window on the rooftop of the house he and Max rented. Above them the Texas sky stretched high and wide, framed with the arching branches of pecan trees. The leaves rustled in the wind, the stars twinkling above them.

Maybe she wasn’t the only one who avoided the truth. “I was just thinking about the time you climbed the live oak in our backyard. The big gnarly one. I’ve never seen anyone scramble up faster.”

“Your grandmother’s dog was scary. And I was only seven.”

“My grandmother’s dog was a Lhasa apso.” He looked down at her, raising his eyebrows.

“Well, he seemed pretty threatening to me. And he absolutely wasn’t keen on my being in the backyard.”

She’d climbed over the fence with the intent of sneaking into his room to see him. He’d had the flu or something and she’d been forbidden all contact for fear she’d catch it, too. But his mother’s edict hadn’t stopped her. His grandmother’s Lhasa apso had.

“Yeah, but even after my grandmother called him off, you wouldn’t come down out of that tree.” He grinned at the memory. He’d watched the whole thing from his bedroom window, the two of them being almost level with her in the tree and him up on the second floor.

She grimaced, then reached for the bottle and another sip. “I’d probably still be up there if you hadn’t managed to talk me down.” She shook her head, remembering. “I’ve always been pretty good at going up, but I’ve never been any good at coming down.”

“Seems to me that you should fear falling more on the way up. I mean, once you’re up

there..." He trailed off. It was an old argument and he'd only meant it as a distraction.

"When you're climbing, you're looking up," Ginny insisted. "And once you're there, well there's nothing but down. Anyway, I gave up tree climbing after that."

"What about the post oak at the lake?" he asked. "I've seen you climb it a hundred times."

"Not climb climb it," she said, as if that made any sense at all. Except that it did. The tree was what they used as a jumping-off point from a cliff above Monarch Lake. A long time ago a lightning strike had split the tree so that it forked in two directions. The cleft was the perfect place to stand and then leap out into the lake below. "Just enough so that I can jump."

"Which is down—in a rather big way, I might add."

She laughed. "Yes, but the water is deep and not nearly as hard as the paving stones beneath the tree in your parents' backyard."

"So I should probably take back the climbing lessons I got you for your birthday?"

She elbowed him and handed back the bottle. "Like you're really going to give me something athletic for my birthday."

Ginny was perfectly capable of athletic endeavors, but she wasn't all that interested. It was one of the few interests they didn't share. Still, she'd been more than willing to keep up with him when they were kids. And he had no doubt that, push come to shove, she'd be up to any challenge he threw at her these days as well.

Except that they seemed to be moving further apart. It wasn't anything he could put a finger on really. Maybe Wendy had something to do with it. He wasn't stupid enough not to realize that his ex had a point when it came to him and Ginny. But surely there had to be a way for him to have someone in his life—romantically speaking—and still have Ginny.

Anyway, it wasn't Wendy, or at least it wasn't just Wendy that was causing the distance. The thing or the person that was worrying Ginny—that was part of the problem too. But he couldn't make her share it with him. Hell, he'd never been able to make her do anything.

"So how did you know that Wendy wasn't the one?" Ginny asked, pulling him from his tumbling thoughts.

He blinked, blew out a breath, and considered the question. "Well, at first I didn't know. I mean, I don't think I'd have gone out with her if I didn't think there was potential for something more."

"Something permanent," she added.

"No." He shook his head, feeling the rise and fall of her breathing as she sat next to him, her side pressed against his. "I don't think permanent was ever part of the equation with Wendy. I mean, if nothing else I'm way too young to be tied down."

Ginny nodded. "True that. But you did think there was something. So how did you know you were wrong?"

"Part of it was the fact that she couldn't accept my relationship with you. I mean, we kind of come as a package, you know?"

"I do." She frowned, the expression exaggerated slightly, no doubt with help from the tequila. "But I can see where that might present a problem for some women. I mean, I don't think I'd want the guy I loved to be so close with another girl."

"Yeah, well, let's just say I value my friends." Something flashed in her eyes but was gone before he could put a finger on it. Still, he suddenly felt like they'd veered off into unsettling territory. "What about you? Have you ever found someone like that? Someone you thought might be the right one?" His mind replayed her past boyfriends, none of whom had been good enough for her.

“I have,” she whispered. “Or at least I thought I had. But I was wrong.” She shrugged and took another sip from the bottle.

“What happened?” He frowned, wondering if inadvertently he’d stumbled on a way to get her to tell him the truth about whatever it was that was bothering her.

“He didn’t love me back. Simple as that.” She gave a short laugh that held little humor. “Anyway, it doesn’t matter anymore. I’m over it.”

“Good,” he said, taking the bottle and a final sip before putting it down on the rooftop beside him. “Because I’d hate to have to hurt the guy.” He slid an arm around her and she leaned against his shoulder with a sigh.

“Nice to know you have my back,” she murmured.

“Always.” He smiled and they sat in silence, letting the night surround them. Despite the fact that they were in the heart of the city not far from the UT campus, it felt for just a moment as if they were home in Storm. Surrounded by all that was familiar. “You ever think about life after college?” he asked.

“Sometimes. But not too much. It scares me, I guess. The thought of leaving Storm. Making a life on my own.”

Her words surprised him. “You’d leave Storm?”

She nestled closer. “I don’t see that there’s any choice. I mean, what would I do?”

“I don’t know, something. Open a business or partner up with your sister.”

He felt her frown as she considered the idea. “I guess I just want more than that.”

“Hmm... I can understand that. For me, as far as my dad is concerned, there really isn’t an option. He expects me to come home and run the pharmacy.”

“But surely he would understand if you wanted something different. I know you’ve thought about it. I mean, you’re working hard here so that you can get into med school.”

“Yeah, but I haven’t done that yet. And even if I do, there’s always the possibility that I could still wind up back in Storm. Maybe join Dr. Rush’s practice.”

“Well, whatever you decide, I’ll be behind you all the way.”

He bent down to press a kiss against her hair just as she looked up. Their lips met, the touch incendiary. Jacob felt his body respond in an instant. Muscles tightening, hardening. The reaction should have made him pull away. This was a mistake. More than that, it was dangerous. His brain screamed that this was Ginny. His heart countered with the very same thought.

This was Ginny.

Tormented, he fought the urge to crush her to him, but then he heard her sigh and felt her lips move under his and he was lost. From somewhere out in the night, strains of George Strait’s “The Chair” floated on the breeze. Fitting somehow.

She opened her mouth and he thrust his tongue inside, reveling in the taste and feel of her. They surged together, fitting as if two halves of a whole. The kiss deepened, the power of their coming together threatening Jacob’s control. He fought again to find some semblance of rationality. But her lips were so soft, and her body pressed against his felt somehow right.

It was the tequila. It had to be the tequila.

And yet, still, he couldn’t force himself to push away. He pressed her closer, holding her with one hand at her back, the other sliding up to cup her breast. She arched closer, and he circled the nipple with his thumb, feeling it harden beneath the soft cotton of her shirt.

He swallowed a groan. “Oh God, Ginny. We shouldn’t be doing this.” He whispered the words against her lips, but she shook her head, breaking away enough so that her gaze could meet his.

“Just tonight, Jacob. I need you tonight. I need to forget. And you can help me. Please, Jacob. Just tonight?” Her lips were moist, her eyes dark with passion.

God, he wanted her. And maybe she was right. Maybe there was no harm in one night. One tequila-fueled night.

He silently pulled her to her feet, and together they stepped back through the open window, into his room.

“You’re sure?” he asked, praying that she’d say no, but even more so praying that she’d say yes.

She nodded. Once. And with a groan of satisfaction he pulled her back into his arms, his mouth closing over hers as they moved backward toward the bed. For once in his life he was going to ignore the warnings in his head.

Chapter Five

Ginny closed her eyes, fighting an inner battle as Jacob's mouth lowered to hers. She knew rationally that she should be saying no. Should be pushing him away. But this was what she'd wanted for so long. It didn't matter the reasons. They were here, together, now. And for all she knew she might never get this chance again. Never get to feel his arms around her. His lips against hers.

They'd kissed once in fourth grade, but only to see what it felt like. Truth was, neither of them had been impressed, but a lot had clearly changed since then. For a moment the ugly specter of the senator filled her mind, but she pushed the thought away. Memories of her monumental mistake had no business here. Not here in the moonlight with Jacob.

"Are you okay?" he asked, pulling back enough so that his dark, probing gaze met hers.

"I'm fine," she whispered, pushing up on her toes, sliding her arms around his neck. "I just need you. Here. Now."

He searched her face for a minute more, then slanted his mouth over hers. She sighed, their tongues tangling together, thrusting and parrying. Taking and giving. It was as if they'd done this a million times before. She knew his smell, his taste. Everything about him was intimately familiar. And yet this was uncharted territory, her need and his twining together into something more powerful than just hunger or desire.

She ached inside. Not just from wanting him. But from needing him. Jacob was already so much a part of her. His hands spanned her waist as he pulled her closer, the hard line of his erection pressing against her hip. His mouth moved from her lips, raining kisses along her cheeks and jaw. He pulled her earlobe between his teeth, sucking lightly as heat pooled in her belly.

Then he dipped his head, his tongue following the smooth curve of her neck, pausing to caress the hollow at its base where her pulse pounded. She trembled, her body responding to his on a level much deeper than just physical. His hands rose to her back, holding her as his mouth plundered. Sucking and licking until she squirmed with need.

With a muttered oath, he yanked open her shirt, buttons flying everywhere, and Ginny gasped as he flipped the hook on her bra and her breasts fell free. Still holding her with one hand, he bent her back and his lips closed around one bare breast, his tongue circling her nipple, his heated touch sending shivers coursing through her. He teased the nipple, biting gently, and then pulled it into his mouth, sucking deeply.

Ginny clenched, sensation threatening to overwhelm her.

From one breast he moved to the other, and then lifted her again so that his lips crushed down on hers. The hunger between them stretched tight, and Ginny found it impossible to breathe. Never in her life had she felt this kind of heat—this kind of power. It surged through her—through them—as the kiss deepened, their passion threatening to consume them.

She pulled his T-shirt out from his jeans, sliding her hands up across the rock-hard muscles of his abdomen and the velvety smoothness of his chest. Never before had she been so aware of his strength. His masculinity.

Her desire reaching a fever pitch, she pushed his shirt higher and he raised his arms, breaking their kiss as she pulled the garment over his head. Her own shirt and bra followed his and his eyes dropped to her breasts, his gaze caressing her.

Shivering with need, she swallowed, and then he was there—holding her, his mouth closing over hers, taking possession of not just the kiss but of her. For a moment she hesitated, guilt and

shame threatening as she remembered another time. Another man.

“You’re sure you’re all right?” he asked again, his dark gaze capturing hers.

She nodded as his arms tightened around her and suddenly she felt safe. Protected. Loved. Somewhere deep inside, her mind protested the validity of the last thought. But then he was kissing her again and she pressed closer, her breasts tight against his chest. His hands slid down the smooth skin of her back, then lower still to cup her bottom, fingers kneading as he deepened his kiss. His touch was powerful and possessive. And Ginny arched against him, wanting more—wanting him.

Their tongues danced together as his hands slipped lower, caressing the backs of her thighs as he worked the hem of her skirt higher, and then higher still. She shuddered in anticipation as his hand slipped beneath the elastic of her panties, brushing across the sensitive skin of her inner thighs as he pushed them down to get them out of the way.

Without breaking their kiss, Ginny stepped free as his hands slid back up her body, fingers stroking the curls at the apex of her thighs. Their lips still locked together in a hungry kiss, he pushed her backward until she was sitting on the edge of the bed, her skirt bunched around her waist.

“Jacob?” Ginny sucked in a breath as he knelt and pushed her thighs apart.

“It’s okay. You said you wanted to forget. Let me help you.”

With a reassuring smile, his gaze locked with hers, held for an instant, and then he dipped his head and kissed her soft, swelling heat. Ginny swallowed a moan as he pushed her wider still, his tongue probing, circling, caressing, and stroking until she tangled her hands in his hair, urging him onward.

The heat rose inside her, building until she was quivering with her need. And still he licked and stroked her, his tongue finding the tender nub and pulling it into his mouth. Ginny jerked with the contact, her body tightening as her passion ratcheted higher. Sucking now, he slipped one strong finger inside her, moving it in and out—the motion finding rhythm with the ministrations of his tongue.

Teetering at the edge, Ginny clutched his head, as if in so doing she’d found an anchor, but then his fingers, two of them now, thrust hard and deep, his mouth moving over her. Laving, loving. Ginny screamed and arched as she flew apart, sensation banishing all coherent thought.

Moving up to sit beside her, Jacob gathered her close as she struggled to regain her breath. For a moment she lay against him, boneless, her body still shuddering in the aftermath. He stroked her breasts, her shoulders, her hair, and then he was kissing her again, his hunger raw and unsated.

Ginny felt her need rising again. Together they pulled off the rest of their clothes and fell back onto the bed, bodies twined together as they began the dance again. Still reeling from the power of her climax, Ginny was surprised to realize she wanted more. Needed more. This was Jacob, her brain reminded her, and she allowed herself to smile up at him. Jacob. She was with Jacob.

“You’re sure?” he asked as their gazes met and held.

“I’ve never been more sure of anything.”

With a groan, he took possession of her lips again, his hands moving across her body. Touching her everywhere. Stroking. Caressing. Tormenting her.

But two could play at that game. She slid her fingers down the hard length of his chest, across the ridges of his abdomen, and then lower still until her fingers circled the velvet steel of his erection.

Jacob sighed as she closed her fingers around him, and slowly—so slowly—began to stroke. Up and down, tightening her hand then releasing it, only to tighten it once again, savoring his strength, his power. With a crooked smile, she pulled back, sliding along his body to let her lips follow the path of her hands. Her tongue circled his nipples, then moved along the sprinkling of hair leading downward, pausing to tease his belly button. And then she moved lower, sliding her mouth over the silky head of his erection, her tongue circling his heat.

She felt him tighten and harden even further as she took him deeper. Sucking now. Tasting him as he'd tasted her. His fingers tangled through her hair, his body bowing upward as she sucked harder, her hand tightening around the base as she continued to knead him.

With an audible groan, Jacob pulled her back up to his mouth. "Enough," he whispered. "I need to be inside you. Now."

Ginny nodded, her own body thrumming with the thought. She'd never known it could be like this. So powerful. So consuming. She swallowed as he rolled her beneath him, pushing apart her thighs, the head of his erection pressed against her opening. And then with one slow thrust he was inside her.

Ginny marveled at the rightness of it. The way he filled her. Completed her. For a moment they held still, gazes colliding as they both absorbed the enormity of what was happening. And then he began to move. She tilted her hips, taking him deeper, finding his rhythm and moving with him.

Stronger and deeper. Faster and harder. Until Ginny was no longer certain where she left off and he began. His mouth found hers and their tongues moved together, mimicking the rhythm of their bodies. His hands cupped her hips, lifting her higher, and she wrapped her legs around him, taking him deeper still.

Body to body. Soul to soul.

Ginny felt every part of her responding, dancing with him higher and higher until she shattered, convulsing around him as he too found his pleasure. As she drifted slowly back to the soft warmth of the bed, there was no doubt in her mind that tomorrow there would be hell to pay. But tonight—tonight she belonged with Jacob. And at least for this one moment—he belonged with her too.

Tequila be damned.

* * * *

Ginny woke slowly, drifting to consciousness with a frown. What the hell was she doing in Jacob's bed? For a second her mind remained stubbornly blank and then it all came rushing back. The bar, the senator, tequila—Jacob. Swallowing a wash of trepidation, Ginny rolled over to find an empty bed.

Fearing the worst, she sat up, her head swimming with the action, her stomach churning. Shit, shit, shit, shit. Shit.

"Hey, you're awake." Jacob walked into the room, wearing only his jeans, his hair and skin glistening with the water from a shower. He looked...well, to her mind, absolutely awesome.

She nodded, struggling to find her voice. Not at all sure what to say. The whole thing was a little bit hazy, but one thing was perfectly clear. She'd spent the night in this bed. With Jacob. And it sure as hell hadn't been platonic.

In fact, it had been so intense she'd thought she might incinerate. But the cold hard facts were that she'd begged him to take her. Pleaded, in fact, if memory served. Which meant that it

was what? Pity sex? Or if not that, then tequila-induced sex. She wasn't sure which was worse. Ginny swallowed again, trying to keep her expression light.

"Look," Jacob said as he slipped into a shirt. "I hate to do this, but I'm supposed to be at the basketball court in half an hour. I'm teaching some kids the fundamentals." He paused, his gaze meeting hers. "I can cry off if you want me to."

"No." Ginny held up a hand, clutching the sheet with the other. "It's fine. I'm sure Brittany's wondering where I got off to. I should head home."

"Ginny this, us, it's—"

"Nothing," she inserted. "Just a one-off. I know. You were bummed about losing Wendy and I, well, I needed someone and you were kind enough to step in. I can't tell you how much that means to me." She forced a breezy smile.

He frowned, something flashing in his eyes, but then he shrugged. "We'll talk about it later. Okay?"

"There's nothing to talk about. Honestly." She sucked in a fortifying breath. "Now go. Those kids will be waiting."

He shot her another indecipherable look and with a quick smile strode from the room, the matter seemingly already behind him.

Ginny lay back against the pillows, looking through the window at the white wisp of clouds against a blue Texas sky. Tears filled her eyes and she roughly wiped them away. Out of the frying pan into the fire. At least with the senator she hadn't given a damn. But with Jacob? Just the idea that she'd let him know how much she cared for him made her heart twist. She might not have said it in so many words, but he'd be an idiot not to have felt it in her touch, in her kiss. And Jacob was anything but stupid.

She rolled over, curling herself into a ball, feeling literally sick to her stomach. What the hell had she done? Oh dear God, what had she done?

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