



Alanna Coca
TREAT

Treat

ISBN 978-1-4658-6792-6

Alanna Coca
Published 2012

Copyright 2012, Alanna Coca.

This is a free read.

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic, mechanical, recording or otherwise, without the prior written permission of the author.

Manufactured in the United States of America

Cover Artist
Michael Hart / Booknibbles.com

This is a work of fiction. The characters, incidents and dialogues in this book are of the author's imagination and are not to be construed as real. Any resemblance to actual events or persons, living or dead, is completely coincidental.

"Can't we go somewhere like Hawaii or Mexico? Wyoming sounds like...work." Rachel sneered, making a horrible snapping sound with her chewing gum.

Andria rolled her eyes. Rachel was the biggest crybaby in the senior class. She didn't even last a month at a part time job. "Come on, you weenie." Andria gave her a friendly sock in the arm. "This is our last summer together before we split up for college. We're going, and it won't be as much fun without you."

"Yeah, please?" Jennifer threw herself on the bed, making the mattress lurch violently.

Rachel scowled at the disruption. "You guys always gang up on me."

"And you always give in." Andria rolled onto her back and grinned up at the ceiling. "So save us all some time and energy and give in now."

Jennifer and Andi took turns badgering her, and even had to promise to pay for a mani-pedi when they returned to California before she finally gave in.

"If I hate it, you have to buy me a first class ticket home too."

"Okay, Princess." Andi made a face. "As if your daddy would let you fly home by yourself."

"My daddy loves me." Rachel lay beside Andi, hooking their arms together. "Even if you are a bad influence on me."

Jennifer joined them, and hooked her arm with Rachel's. "We did it, guys. We made it through four years of Westmoreland High Cafeteria food."

"And Mr. McClarkson's public denunciation of antiperspirant." Andi giggled.

"And Bobby Jensen's lame come-ons." Rachel snorted. The three laughed, then lapsed into silence.

Andi had her life planned out, almost to the week. High school graduation day was only the first in many goals, and by far the simplest to attain. She'd been accepted to Stanford University, where she'd take a small class load and a part time job during her freshman year. She refused to overload herself and burn out quickly. Summer school, and more credit hours in her sophomore year. Andi had everything arranged, only stopping short of ordering her college graduation announcements. But she did have a design in mind.

These next few months would be her last as a carefree young lady before real life took hold. She was determined to enjoy every moment of her summer. The mountain getaway looked great in the brochures, and Andi couldn't wait to let loose.

"So do we have to call and reserve rooms, or what?" Rachel elbowed both girls.

Jennifer and Andi leaned up to share a grin.

"What? What's so funny?"

"We reserved the rooms a month ago." Jennifer giggled.

Andi scooted away from Rachel before she shared the rest. "And your plane ticket. We leave on Monday."

"You guuyys!" Rachel groped on the bed for the closest pillow. "No fair!"

Andi grabbed another pillow to defend herself.

They were going to have a blast.

They spent their first day at the V-Bar Guest Ranch in southern Wyoming alternately lounging by the pool, and soaking in the hot tub.

Three families shared the guest ranch house with them, and while the parents gave the girls a wide berth, one grade-school girl had taken it upon herself to invite Andi, Rachel, and Jennifer to just about every activity she'd signed up for. It might be hard to resist a week of her sweet begging.

Another fourteen year old boy spent his days reading books, and recently moved from his indoor perch to a covered picnic table in clear view of the pool.

"Those uptight parents should really thank us." Rachel blew on her nail polish, the bright red glinting in the sunshine. "I do believe we're keeping their young son entertained."

They napped in the sun, and stayed up all night watching black and white slasher films.

Much of the second day was spent in the same way, with the additional distraction of scoping out each of the V-Bar's hired hands.

"Oh jeez. Look at that one."

Jennifer loved the big bad boys. The bigger the better. This one had to be at least two-hundred pounds of pure Wyoming cowboy, complete with chew-can ring in the back pocket of his Wranglers.

"Go for it, Jen." Rachel tilted back her lounge chair and straightened her sunglasses. "Just don't come crying to me when he breaks your rib doing the horizontal mambo."

"I'm not as fragile as I look."

"Ugh. We don't want that mental image, thanks anyway."

Andi took a sip from her lemonade, the straw still in her mouth when she saw him, walking down the path surrounding the pool with a tall lanky cowboy.

He carried a child-sized saddle over one arm, and smiled at something his companion said. Denim shirt unbuttoned, but a red kerchief tied around his neck covered any skin that might have shown.

Too bad.

From the shadow of the brim of his hat, she followed the line of his nose to a sensuously shaped pair of lips.

"Damn."

"I second that." Rachel fanned herself. "He should be on their brochure, this place would be packed."

"Don't fight over him, girls."

Andi leaned way over in her lounge chair as the men disappeared into the barn. "Yeah, don't fight me for him, Rach. He's mine."

She hadn't even had time to close her mouth before they reemerged and both turned to face the girls. Across the thirty yard distance, the sexy cowboy's gaze met hers. Since she couldn't pretend that she wasn't staring, she smiled and even wiggled her fingers in a flirtatious wave.

Her sexy cowboy grinned back until his buddy elbowed him hard enough to make him stumble.

"Damn."

"Yeah. I've got no chance." Rachel sighed. "Judging by the look in his eye, that boy's all yours."

Andi didn't reply. She just watched him walk away, and even blushed a little when he paused in the barn doorway to glance over his shoulder.

Damn.

She spent the next day in the same lounge chair, hoping to see him again. Just as she gathered her belongings before dinner time, he rode by on horseback, slowing just enough to tip his hat.

He wasn't close enough to speak, but she got a better look at him this time. She now saw

his dark blond hair almost reaching his collar, and brilliant white teeth. Andi steadied herself against the picket fence as he rode away.

Rachel waved a hand in front of her eyes. "So what, are you going to just lust after the guy from afar? Go get him, Andi!"

Andi tamped down her hormones. By the time her heart returned to a normal pace, she could answer her friend. "Yes, I'm just going to lust from afar. There's no way I'd start anything. Not with some guy I'll never see again. Besides—" she slipped into her flip-flops "—a summer fling isn't in my three year plan."

"Yeah, yeah." Jennifer rolled her eyes. "You probably planned which day you'd meet your future husband, when you'd propose to him, and what you'll name your two-point-five kids."

"I've got a plan."

"You've had that plan since you were twelve." Rachel led the way back inside and up the old oak staircase. "It would do you good to pencil some hot steamy sex in on your plan. It's not like it would hurt anything. You're a big girl now, right?"

Andi dressed for dinner, Rachel's words echoing in her head. *Pencil in some hot steamy sex*. As long as nothing derailed her goal, adding some fun wouldn't hurt, right?

She mulled it over through the next morning, and even while watching Jennifer on her horseback riding lesson. Rachel napped in her room, leaving Andi to her own devices. She wandered around the property, totally not looking for the blond cowboy.

Finally she picked up a fishing pole and headed for the small stock pond a short walk away. She was close to falling asleep on the wool blanket she'd brought along when she heard the rhythmic cadence of an approaching horse.

She sat up. It was him. Her sexy Wyoming eye candy. After recognizing him, she smoothed her hair and hoped like hell that her mascara hadn't smeared during her catnap. He slid out of the saddle, loose limbed and fluid.

"Catch anything?" His voice was deep and rich. Like hot chocolate syrup. She shook her head, mortified at the blush that rose to her cheeks. She wasn't a shy person. She was the captain of her high school cheerleading squad, and the president of the debate team. She had dated the most sought-after guys in class. She was popular throughout school, and never went to pieces when confronted by a boy, no matter how good looking. So why would she blush at the two

simple words from this complete stranger?

It was uncharacteristic, and it made her feel pathetic. That was nothing, though, compared to the weakness she experienced when he folded his lean body to squat before her.

Whatever cologne he used, it worked for him. Ginger? No—citrus and pine. It mingled in with the scent of his body and his rugged outdoor occupation in such a way to make her practically melt into a pool on the plaid blanket. It was a good thing she was already seated, or she would have collapsed.

"It's hot," he said softly. From beneath the shade of his wide-brimmed hat, his eyes were as busy as hers.

It was hot. And growing hotter. She nodded dumbly, her eyes busily cataloguing everything about this cutie pie. Westmoreland High School boys had nothing on this man.

"The fish won't bite until it cools down. Maybe you'd have more luck this evening."

Oh. Fishing. That's right. Finally she found her voice. "I don't mind. I just throw them back anyway."

"If you take them back to the house, our chef will cook them for you."

"Is that right?"

"Yeah, he's real good. He can even make fish taste decent." He grinned, flashing a set of straight white teeth that could easily be the "after" picture on the wall of an orthodontist's office.

"Not a fan of seafood?"

"No. Give me a steak or greasy hamburger any day." Not only did he look like a meat eater, he looked like a predator who had just sighted his next meal. His eyes had narrowed, and his lip curled in a carnivorous grin. Rather than sending her running for cover, she wanted to crawl on top of him, and devour him first.

"Jacob Walker." He peeled off his leather glove and stuck his hand out.

"Andi Hamton." She accepted his hand, warm from his glove, and deliciously rough against her palm.

"Very pleased to meet you, miss." Rather than shake it politely, he held it firmly.

Andi was struck dumb. Afraid to look away from his mesmerizing blue eyes, even to glance down at their clasped hands, though she was dying to see why the contact felt like sparks flying.

"Mind if I join you for a bit? I've got a break, and nothing to do." He gave her hand a

squeeze before releasing his hold.

"Not at all." She moved her tackle box to the other side of the blanket, clearing a spot beside her. "Maybe you can show me how to bait a hook."

He shrugged, then stretched his long legs out beside her. "I'm not much of a fisherman. If you don't mind, I'd rather just sit and talk to you."

She couldn't help the smile that spread over her face. "I don't mind at all, Jacob."

"Just Jake."

The intimacy of his shortened name shouldn't have sent a bubbling lake of desire through her veins, but it did. "Jake."

"There ya go. So where're you from?"

"California."

"Big city girl?"

Andi leaned back, mimicking his pose, propped on her elbows. "Yeah. I came out here to see how the civilized half live."

He laughed. A husky full laugh that rolled over her and licked her senses. "City folk have a strange sense of civilization, I take it."

They talked for much longer than a work break ought to be, but Andi didn't dare remind him of his duties. When his two-way radio blared from his belt, he struggled to answer quickly.

"Just talking one of our guests into riding lessons, Pete." He winked her way. "I'll be back in soon."

He clipped the radio back in place, and Andi's heart sunk when he stood up. She found her feet as well. "Riding lessons?"

He flipped the reins over the horse's head and grinned over his shoulder at her. "Yeah. Don't make a liar out of me. You start in the morning."

"Well, I wouldn't want to get you fired." She grinned back.

The sunlight shone through the overhead leaves, casting a speckled pattern on his face and neck. Again, he held out his hand. "Thank you for your company, Andi Hamton."

This time, she slid her fingers across his palm before curling them around his hand. "It was my pleasure, Jacob Walker."

He released a breath, long enough to stir the air between them. He took one step closer. "See you tomorrow?"

"Yes." She gripped his hand, unwilling to let him go. "When?"

"I'll let you sleep in. Ten o'clock. Stable B."

God, his voice was even sexier when he spoke in low tones. He dropped his gaze to their linked hands, then back to her eyes.

"I'll be there." Blood rushed through her head, leaving her dizzy.

He reached up with his free hand and ran his thumb along her jaw. "I'll be waiting."

Jake had both horses saddled a good half hour early. He paced the alley in Stable B until she walked through the open doors.

"Am I late?"

Jesus, the woman was gorgeous. Even her voice sent his temperature up ten degrees. He reached for her hand, because he had to touch her. Smell her. It was just like a California girl to wear perfume at a dude ranch. "Right on time."

He introduced her to Jauntie, the docile chestnut mare he'd chosen for her. He waited for her to fasten the helmet beneath her chin, then explained how to mount Jauntie. He stood behind her to help her into the saddle, swearing he didn't keep his hand on her derriere any longer than absolutely necessary.

Andi was confident, a strong mark in her favor. She sat high in the saddle, and kept a steady hold of the reins. She followed his instructions to a tee.

"You sure you haven't ridden before?"

Andi smiled. "I rode a pony at a friend's birthday party when I was nine."

Jake led her around the paddock a few times, laughing at the image of her in pigtails.

"You're a natural."

"I think you just picked a good horse for me." She reached over to pat Jauntie's withers. "She's very patient."

"And a good judge of character. I think she trusts you." He led them back into the stable. "How about moving on to lesson two?"

She raised an eyebrow. "No fence-jumping I hope."

"No," he laughed. He handed her the reins and even took the time to curl her fingers around the leather for her. "Just like that. Loose but firm. Now Jauntie knows what to do, but you're in control, okay?"

"Okay. What—"

"Just follow me. We'll take it slow." He mounted Rowdy, and rode to her side. "Ready?"

"I think so. Take it slow."

Jake nodded, naughty images flooding his brain. "I don't mind taking it real slow. Nice and easy, Miss Andi."

Did she blush? He couldn't say for sure, but the Mona Lisa smile was encouraging.

"Okay, tap her with your heels, we'll head out these doors."

He kept to her side, instructing her along the way. They rode past the edge of the property and onto a path into the field beyond. She experimented with speed and direction for the better part of an hour. On the way back they paused beneath a copse of trees, enjoying the shade for a moment. He uncapped his canteen and took a long draw. "You're doing great, Andi. You'll be jumping fences in no time."

She took the canteen out of his hand. "Is that your idea of taking it slow?" She put those luscious lips where his had been and tilted her head back to drink.

Christ, no woman should look this good in a safety helmet. He'd just quenched his thirst, but now his mouth was dry as a bone.

When she lowered the canteen, he took it from her and tossed it aside. "I can go slow." He slid one hand around her waist, the other up her arm and around her neck. "Or I can pick up the pace just a bit to get just where I want to be."

A drop of water clung to her bottom lip, and before he could wipe it away, her dainty pink tongue peeked out to draw it inside.

"Christ, Andi. I want to kiss the hell out of you right now."

Her hands slipped behind him and curled into his sweat-damp shirt. "Go for it, cowboy."

With a growl, he covered her mouth with his. She immediately opened for him, inviting his tongue inside. Cool and refreshing, her tongue danced with his.

He changed angles, sending his tongue deeper into her sweet mouth. Her breath escaped her in telling pants, small noises escaping her throat inflamed him.

She tore free and gasped. "Jake."

"So damn sweet."

"Mm, Jake. God, don't stop."

"I sure as hell don't want to." With one flick of his fingers, he released the chin strap on

her helmet and let it fall to the ground. Her hair tumbled into his hand, a silky perfumed cloud.

"Jake?" Damn it. Pete's craggy voice came across the two-way like some stodgy old chaperone.

"Shit." He released her only enough to fumble for the device on his belt. "What do you want, old man? I'm working, here." He winked at Andi, and wiped moisture from the corner of her mouth.

"Where's that damn fine-bristled brush? You're always moving it and you never put the damn thing back where you got it. I swear your momma never taught you a lick of sense..."

Jake let Pete ramble, since he couldn't interrupt until the guy let go of the talk button. He used the spare minute to plant another kiss on Andi's lips.

"...and now I'm lookin' all over the damn place."

Jake held the radio to his mouth. "It's on the grooming shelf. I haven't cleaned up after this morning just yet. Impatient old coot."

Andi giggled, the banter between the two obviously belied the affection behind it.

Pete grumbled a moment more, then signed off with, "I'm done with you."

Jake clipped the walkie back onto his belt, and gave her a sad smile. "I guess Pete had good timing. If he hadn't interrupted me, I'd probably have you up against that tree right now."

Her eyes darkened, and she lowered her lashes just a bit. "How many lessons do I get?"

They met every day. He was kept busy elsewhere on the ranch most of the day, so she'd officially paid for lessons. Not only to keep Jake out of trouble, but also to ensure that he would be hers for ninety minutes a day. Sometime during each ride he'd find a sheltered area where they'd kiss and touch, whisper and learn.

Ninety minutes was never enough.

He'd begun meeting her after dinner when she and her friends took a swim after dark. Just having him near was enough to keep her libido on high alert. One evening they left Jen and Rachel in the pool and they snuck off to the hot tub.

He rubbed her feet beneath the water. Each toe tantalized by his nimble fingers. They sat across from each other, sharing the steamy frothing bubbles and equally steamy stares.

"Why do you have so many calluses on your toes?" He pulled one foot from the water to kiss one particular callus.

"I've spent years building them up, I'm very proud of them. Twelve years of ballet, six years of tap." She gasped when he took her toe in his mouth and loved it with his tongue. She had to grip the slippery seat beneath her so she wouldn't slide under the bubbling water.

"God, Jake. Your mouth drives me crazy."

"Good. I like you crazy. Then you stop thinking." He licked down the arch of her foot. "Then you'll do something irresponsible like take your clothes off."

"Can't you two keep your hands off each other for five minutes?" Rachel stood on the edge of the Jacuzzi, her hands on her hips.

"No." Jake pulled her foot until she floated across the tub to straddle his legs. Once he kissed her, she could barely hear Rachel's groan.

Before they could break for air, a flood of cold water covered them both.

Andi gasped for air.

Jen laughed, lowering the bucket. "I thought you two were going to get stuck together like my dogs."

Andi made like she was going after them both. Once they ran squealing from the pool area, she settled back against Jake's chest and continued where they left off.

"Mmm, now we're alone."

"And you're almost naked."

She rubbed up against him, his slick warmth so tantalizing against hers. "What would we do if we were naked?"

He whispered his ideas in detail.

"Soon?" She panted against his mouth.

"Tomorrow? During your lesson?"

She pulled back to blink at him. "You know I'm leaving in a week."

"I know. I go back to college in the fall too."

"We'll never see each other again."

"I know, but we can enjoy the time we have. No commitments, Andi. No strings attached."

She smiled. No strings sex sounded like it would fit in perfectly with her short and long term plans. "Tomorrow."

She showed up fifteen minutes early the next morning. Only because Jennifer and Rachel forced her to stay inside for the last hour.

He was waiting.

"There's my star pupil." He brought both horses down the alley and right up to her.

"Eager for your lesson, are you?"

She nodded, unwilling to voice her innermost thoughts.

"Well, here you go, Miss Hamton." He handed her Jauntie's reins and her helmet. "Show me what you know."

She shook her hair back to put the helmet on. "I know lots of things." She lifted an eyebrow and sauntered around him to mount the horse. "Might take all morning to show you."

Jake shook his head, a devilish grin hiding behind his eyes. "City slickers get so cocky with any kind of horsepower." He swung into the saddle and spurred his horse through the doors.

He didn't waste any time seeking out that tree, and Andi kept Jauntie right on his heels. Her entire body pulsed with excitement. She'd spent the rainy evening curled up by the lobby fire, and barely slept a wink due to fantasies of this ride, and she couldn't wait to get Jake Walker alone to play them out.

They'd only made it to the trees. The recent rain made a muddy mess of the grasses beneath, so they had to be creative. Jake kissed her until she couldn't think. The bark rough against her back, the clean scent of rain-dampened leaves strong in the air.

"You want this, right? It's not just me hoping you do so damn bad that I'm seeing things that aren't there?"

"I want this." Andi kicked one shoe off, and struggled with her jeans. "I don't know why. This is totally out of character for me. I'm not usually this—"

"Wild?" He nibbled on her earlobe and worked his way down her neck.

"No, I'm just not usually—"

"Hot? Anxious?" He pulled her shirt and bra up to get at her breasts. "Delicious?"

Andi forgot what they were talking about. With his mouth tantalizing her breasts, she struggled to free one leg, letting her jeans gather around her other ankle. Then she tugged his shirt free. "Jake. Please."

"I want to slow down. I want to take my time with you. In a bed." He straightened, and looked her in the eye. His were dilated and hazy, a sure sign of his arousal. "Not under a tree."

Andi swallowed. "Later." Who was this girl? When had she become so bold? "We can go slow later. Right now I want fast. Please, Jake. I've wanted you long enough."

With a strangled groan, he took her mouth again, plundering into the depths as he struggled with his pocket, then the buttons on his fly. He got them down as far as his knees before covering himself with the prophylactic. "I've been wanting you too, Andi. Slow later. Promise me."

"Yes. Later. Please, Jake."

He entered her with one long thrust of his hips. Her cry joined his. As promised, he didn't go slowly, he pumped long and deep until she trembled in his arms. "God, Andi. I'm sorry."

"Don't be. Don't."

Excitement built inside her. She'd never done anything reckless like this. A virtual stranger. Sex outdoors. No strings attached. The danger of the whole episode only added to her desire. She squeezed around him, welcoming each entry stroke and panting through each withdrawal.

"So good."

"Yes. Jake." Moments later, she came undone, her release flooding her and leaving her weak. He grunted against her once, twice, before falling still.

"Is it wrong for me to pay you for this?" She nibbled on his neck. Her pulse still pounded, her body still trembled.

His labored breath hot and moist against her temple. His hands cupped her bottom and held her against him while he laughed at her question. "Riding lessons. That's what you paid for right?" He lowered her to the ground, and adjusted her clothing. As though he couldn't keep his distance, he kept his mouth fastened to hers while he tucked himself back into his jeans, and buttoned his fly.

"Mm hm." She allowed him to re-zip her jeans as well; her hands busy scaling up his back. He pulled back to smooth down her shirt and flashed her a grin.

She loved that smile. It was mischievous and extremely sexy. Whenever she saw it she wanted to taste it, consume his happiness, and devour his naughtiness.

"Well, there are a few different interpretations of 'riding lessons', I'm just making sure I cover my bases."

Andi spent her last few nights in Wyoming in Jake's arms. His on-site apartment was smaller than her hotel room, but it was private and he had a big comfortable bed.

The night before her flight, she lay replete on his rumpled sheets, both arms spread wide as he dedicated himself to tasting each inch of skin from her wrists to her neck.

"I'll visit you in October." He braced himself over her and licked the tip of her nose.

Her smile had to have been the sappiest in the history of the world, which was why she didn't take his words seriously. "You can't. You have school." She spoke into his mouth as it brushed over hers.

"I'll take a long weekend. As soon as you get to your dorm room, you call me with your phone number."

"But...you said no commitments. We weren't going to—"

"I changed my mind."

"You can't." She giggled when his teeth worried the soft skin of her earlobe.

"You've said that already. Don't say it again." He pulled away from her, the seriousness behind his gaze enough to spur her heartbeat into a gallop.

Her mind emptied as she stared into his blue eyes, filled with warmth and an emotion she couldn't name.

"I love falling asleep breathing your scent. I love waking up with your hair tangled in my fingers." His voice was low and sexy. "I love to talk to you. I love to hear your laugh, I love seeing your joy. I love watching you make love to me." His gaze left hers to roam over her face, only to return with such intensity she grew afraid. Well, maybe not afraid, but certainly anxious. "Andi, I—"

"No." She pressed two fingers against his lips. "Don't say it." Her heart had accelerated to a dangerous level. She could barely focus on his face, filled with hot emotion. She wasn't ready for that. She didn't have time to analyze why, but stopping those words was imperative. She was on the edge of a cliff, and had just caught herself from hurling over the edge.

"Why not?"

"We agreed. It's just sex. Wonderful, delicious," she kissed him, "amazing sex. Better than I knew existed."

"No."

"No?" Blood drained from her face. Was it not as good for him? Had she disappointed

him?

"It started out that way, Andi, but it changed. You feel it too, you know I'm right."

"But, I'll be on the other side of the country for the next four years at least. It would never work."

His blue eyes sharpened into bright beams of light in the darkness of the room. "Try me."

She wasn't going to cry.

Andi zipped the last suitcase, and even joined in the conversation with Rachel and Jennifer without sounding too desolate. But while they worried about carry-ons and carefully packed souvenirs, Andi could only think about Jake's blue eyes.

She wasn't going to cry though.

Rachel answered the knock on the door. The bellboy collected their luggage before Andi could even second guess her decision to leave.

As if she had a choice.

She couldn't stay here. Even if she didn't have her young adult life precisely planned out, this was no place for her. She'd miss her parents. Her friends. The ocean. Warm winter weather.

She walked over to the window and leaned against the frame. She'd miss Jake.

There was no more denying. Her no-strings-attached plan was blown. The string turned into a metal cable.

"You gonna be okay?" Rachel slipped her arm around Andi's shoulders.

"Yeah. I guess I'm just not any good at casual sex."

Jennifer joined them and tousled Andi's hair as if she were a four-year-old. "I knew you were falling for him that day in the hot tub."

Andi pinched her eyes shut and relived the sensation of his hot skin against hers. Then she felt his lips beneath her fingers when she stopped his words last night. Now she'd have to spend the rest of her life without hearing them. It was for the best though. As difficult as it was going to be, it would be ten times worse if he finished that sentence.

God, how she wanted to hear it though.

"...and didn't come in until three in the morning. I don't know how the poor guy got through his workday."

Andi gave her friends a watery smile.

"Aw come on, cheer up. It doesn't have to be over. Long distance relationships can work, you know. This isn't the dark ages. There are ways to communicate. Even good old fashioned love letters with naughty photos."

"Yeah."

She still didn't cry.

Not until the big white shuttle bus drove into view.

####

A Note from the Author:

There is a lovely Guest Ranch nestled at the base of the Snowy Range Mountains known as the [Vee-Bar](#). I borrowed the setting and tweaked the name for my book Wyoming Solace, and continued the story here.

I loved the chance to revisit Andi and Jake in this prequel. Although the romance author in me hates the fact that I can't end it with a happily ever after. Fortunately their story continues in my novel Retreat, which takes place ten years later.

Following is chapter one. I hope you enjoy it.

~Alanna

Retreat: Chapter One

Her headache just got worse.

It went from a mild annoyance at her office, to worse since she'd been practically parked on the interstate, stuck in traffic for forty minutes, and breathing the exhaust of hundreds of vehicles. Andria Thomas used one hand to massage the spot between her eyes, and the other to turn up the air conditioning, though it was already cranked to the max.

The accident ahead must be pretty bad. An ambulance had come from behind the long row of cars ten minutes ago, and was forced to drive on the shoulder in order to reach the scene.

Someone was hurt. Somebody's loved one, so Andria forced her impatience aside. It looked like she would be confined to her driver's seat for a while. Good thing she didn't have anything pressing to do.

She scanned through the radio stations for anything worth listening to. She needed something upbeat. Something to draw her out of this funk. No, maybe something sad and sappy to match her mood. Station after station, still nothing.

She turned the radio off completely, and glanced at the portfolio on the passenger seat. That innocuous envelope would change her life forever. All she had to do was sign each copy, and send them back to the judge.

Why was she hesitating? They'd already called it quits. If not legally, then certainly emotionally their marriage was over. In that regard, they'd been divorced for months. Years maybe. There was nothing left in the marriage to fight for.

Except Jessica. Their daughter would end up taking it the hardest. They'd just celebrated her seventh birthday, and even that joyous occasion had resulted in a stupid fight about ... *what was that fight about?* God, who knew anymore. Their daily arguments about the most ridiculous things seemed to be the only time they even talked. How was she going to tell Jessie about this? Would she even be surprised? She had to have noticed her parents' discord. Kids were smart that way.

If only she could take her away for a few weeks, just the two of them. No work, no hassles, no fighting with Kyle.

She laughed without mirth. *Dream on, Andria.*

Since she was stuck in traffic, with nothing better to do, she did dream on. She had two weeks of vacation coming up. She usually worked through them and took the cash, because being at work was preferable to spending any length of time with Kyle, but this year she could actually take it. Leave town for two weeks, get away from it all.

Two weeks wasn't nearly enough. She would love to have months, but that would entail a leave of absence, and—

Wait. Wasn't there a clause in the company's policy that included a major change in family status? Did divorce count toward—

Andria's world brightened, like the sun suddenly broke through the haze of smog that had engulfed her for years.

Oh yes. Her mind went over every angle of her plan. She could take Jessie out of school a few days early, and be out of town during the finalization of her divorce. Wouldn't that be much easier than sitting around waiting?

For the first time in a long, long time, Andria Thomas laughed out loud. It sounded strange in her own ears, and she knew the carload of teenagers that had been stuck beside her for the last hour was entertained by the weird lady laughing at nothing, but who cared?

She craned her neck to try to see the front of the massive traffic jam. There didn't seem to be an end. Rather than stop to think about what she was doing, she grabbed her cell phone, and dialed information.

Oh, please let the guest ranch still be there! It would be perfect. Calming, soothing, and rejuvenating. It had changed her life ten years ago, fresh out of high school; perhaps it would do the same for her now. And Jessica.

* * * *

The van jostled Andria against her daughter. The little girl barely noticed the motion; she was plastered to the window, staring at the virgin land, so different from the city where she'd lived her entire seven years.

The country-western music played low in the background, but its twang was smothered by the sound of the tires hitting each of the washboard ridges on the dry dirt road. The driver, an older man who introduced himself as Charlie, continued to apologize for the ride.

"We're having the road paved next month, I'm sorry you had to be some of the last guests to suffer through this."

Charlie had short white hair, a round face, and blue eyes that had a jolly slant with permanent crinkles at the corners from long years of smiling in the sun. If he could grow a beard, he would make an amazing Santa Claus. He wore a brown ball cap with the V-Bar emblem embroidered in gold on the front to shield against the sun that now streamed through his windshield.

"Really, it's all right," Andria assured him. "We'll just pretend we're in a stagecoach like the Old West."

Charlie chuckled, and slowed to take a turn.

The flight from Los Angeles had taken its toll. Her linen slacks were wrinkled, and strands of hair had come loose from the barrette at her nape. She didn't even want to know how her mascara held up.

Andria watched the guest ranch come into view. She looked for the rambling old house from her last trip here. Sure, it had been ten years, but she would know it on sight. Instead she was greeted by a sprawling new complex. Gone was the log home with its primitive appeal, in its place a collection of new buildings that complemented the two story stone and brick ranch house. It still had the appeal that she remembered, but now it came from a carefully designed layout.

"This doesn't look like the guest ranch that I remember," she remarked to the driver.

"Yeah, 'bout six years ago the new owner built this one, the old house that you remember is still there." He pointed to the right, and she saw one side of the grey log structure peeking out from behind the bigger and better version. "The owner lives there now. This one's strictly for guests. He wanted to build it on the same piece of land as the original V-Bar that was torn down in the nineteen-twenties."

As he went on to enumerate the modern conveniences built into the facility, Andria couldn't help feeling a pang of disappointment. She'd wanted to relive those memories. She hoped to put things back into perspective, start over. Most of all she wanted her daughter to experience the simplicity that was the old ranch home. As more of the complex came into view, she was awed by its upscale feel. It looked more like a millionaire's retreat than a guest ranch. The weathered fence posts with the peeling white paint were gone, in their place sturdy columns of sanded pine and brick. The gravel path that once ran throughout the property was replaced with a permanent and well maintained cobblestone walkway.

"Mommy, it's so pretty!" Andria glanced at her daughter, who looked up at her in excitement. Jessie's dark blue eyes were filled with anticipation. Smiling, she pulled the small body against hers. Charlie pulled the van to a stop in the circular driveway beneath the canopy. Andria gathered Jessie's things while the driver came around to open their door. When she laughingly allowed Jessie to scramble over her legs to get out first, she clutched her handbag and Jessie's backpack to step clumsily out of the vehicle. A man and teenage girl were standing by, in the shadows of the portiere waiting for their guests to alight. As the van door closed behind her, the man spoke.

"Andria and Jessica, welcome to The V-Bar Guest Ranch! My name is Jacob Walker, and this is—"

She met the man's gaze, and her heart skittered to a stop.

It was him. After nearly ten years.

In the back of her mind, Andria had imagined that she could possibly meet him here. In fact, it was one of the more thrilling fantasies that she'd allowed herself while planning the trip. It was farfetched, surreal and more or less impossible, but hey, it was her fantasy right? Of course in her imagination he didn't look anything like this; he was still the young cowboy—tall and lanky, with dark blond hair a little longer than fashionable.

The boy had grown up. The hottest boy she'd ever seen had turned into the best-looking man.

She took in his familiar broad shoulders behind the bold plaid western-cut shirt, tucked into a pair of tight denim jeans. Her eyes traveled back up the dark grey fleece vest, over the sharp contours of his chin, full lips beneath a straight nose and then to his eyes.

Oh those eyes. A blue so pure they almost glowed. They were framed by a pair of angled brows, currently arching in surprise. When she realized that her eyes widened and her mouth gaped most impolitely. She shut it with a snap.

Andria was glad to note that he seemed just as taken aback by their surprise reunion as she.

"Mommy, come *on*! There's a horse over there, can I pet it? And look at the waterfall!" Jessie squealed in delight, and even bounced on the balls of her feet. Andria glanced down at her daughter.

"Uh, no Jessica, we don't pet the horses unless their owner is with us. Just ... hold on for a minute." She straightened and again fell under the trance of Jacob's gaze.

"I can show her around, if that's all right Mrs. Thomas." The girl beside Jacob spoke, only now calling Andria's attention to her. She was young, probably fifteen or so, with dark olive skin and almond-shaped eyes. Her braids were long behind both ears, and she could have easily passed for a Native American.

"Oh, yes that would be fine. Thank you ... uh..."

"Clarice. Come on Jessica, I'll give you the nickel tour." Clarice comfortably grasped the child's hand and led her away as Jessie informed her companion that she didn't have a nickel. When she faced Jacob Walker again, his mouth tightened into a straight line. With that small

movement, she was reminded how she'd severed all ties between them, and left him wondering. Hoping.

"I didn't recognize your name from the reservation."

"I believe the last time you saw me I was 'Andi Hamton' not 'Andria Thomas'."

His eyes travelled down her body. Was he noticing the changes that ten years had made? *Ten years, and one child*, she amended. Were his eyes lingering on her abdomen, or the hands she'd clasped at her waist? Either way, her blood warmed under his perusal.

Charlie had unloaded their luggage from the van, and led the way toward the entrance. Jake blinked slowly, a calming gesture she recognized from years ago, and then motioned for her to follow him.

His still-trim body moved gracefully. Fluid and cat-like. Not one movement was wasted. She indulged in the sight of his buttocks ensconced in the tight jeans, faded and fit to perfection. She kicked herself for the memories that they evoked.

He took the four steps up to the knotty wooden porch, and through the two glass doors that opened into a grand front entrance.

She continued to follow him across the lobby, afraid to look away from him, lest she trip on her unsteady feet and fall flat on her face. She almost pinched herself, thinking she'd fallen asleep on the shuttle from the airport. Surely this wasn't Jake Walker. No way. So lost in her whirling thoughts was she, that she almost ran into him when he stopped, which might at least prove that he wasn't an apparition. She couldn't hear over the rushing in her ears to understand whatever it was that he said when he turned and spoke, and Andria found herself watching his mouth move. Unwittingly, her mind remained on the last time they were together. She could still feel those lips against hers. She remembered his taste, the texture of his tongue gliding against hers. When he sucked in a harsh breath, she brought herself back to reality. Had she just licked her lips? Yes. *Damn*.

"I'm sorry ... what did you say?" Only her experience in front of judge and jury kept her voice steady.

"You'll just need to sign in." His face showed no emotion as he gestured toward the elaborate front desk.

Andria nodded, and even managed a fairly steady smile before she stepped around him. The beaming young clerk stood beneath an arch of dried aspen branches, a tan cowboy hat hanging

precariously on the back of her head.

"Mrs. Thomas, welcome to the V-Bar! It looks like you've pre-registered, so I'll only need a signature here." Andria complied, and was handed a keycard. "We've got you in a mountain-facing room on the second floor, room 208. Enjoy your stay."

When she turned around, she saw Jake—*Jacob*, directly behind her.

"I'll show you to your room." The tone of his voice lent a much more intimate connotation to his words, but Andria refused to dwell on that. She walked a step behind him up the staircase. She had to forcibly tear her eyes away from the hard-muscled perfection of his backside, but his all too familiar scent surrounded her, and she almost stumbled before she reached the top of the staircase. He made a sharp right turn, and led her down a wide hallway with five doorways on either side of the hall, he took her to the middle one. "There's an elevator by the balcony. You'll be alone on this hallway all week." He used his own master keycard to open the door, and allowed her to precede him into the room.

It was more like a studio apartment. Simply furnished, but definitely posh. The walls paneled with naked pine; the bare wood lent a natural feel. Large windows lined one wall, and a plush cream-colored rug was centered on the parquet floor. There was a kitchenette in the corner, and on the other side of the room, two double beds. Andria crossed to the windows to admire the unobstructed view of the mountains.

"It's beautiful," she whispered. The snow-capped peaks looked close enough to touch, and just to prove to herself that they weren't, she reached out toward them, and traced their outline on the glass. "I'd almost forgotten."

"Andi." At his quiet inquiry, she spun around. Jake was so close behind her that she almost ran into him. Her old nickname sounded so right coming from his lips. No one called her Andi anymore. That, more than anything, reminded her of their history together, and the intimacy they shared.

Lord, he smelled good. Pine trees, spicy cologne ... man. Just as she remembered. The memory was ten years old, yet still clear in her mind. She barely resisted the compelling urge to grab his shirt and wallow in that scent. Her body gravitated toward him as if he reeled her in with some invisible magnetic line.

Her imagination undressed him. Was his chest just as she remembered it? Was it still hairless, or had age changed him there also? She'd never forget how those muscles felt beneath

her fingers, but now ... he looked more ... muscular. Masculine. *Male*. When he took another step toward her, she was forced to tear her eyes away from that chest. She glanced toward the door, where her luggage was set, and the door was closed. They were alone. Reluctantly, she raised her eyes to his. He looked down at her with a serious expression.

"You didn't return my calls," his voice was low, but steady and even, "or my letters."

"No. I couldn't. I thought it would be better."

"Better for who?"

"I thought it would be easier for both of us. A clean break. Didn't you think so?"

"I wasn't given much of a choice, was I?"

She lowered her eyes. She tried to focus on her hands, which were knotted together at her waist. He reached out to her chin, and grasped it in his strong fingers, forcing her eyes back up to his.

"You ran away."

"We were young. It was a fling. We knew from the start that nothing would come of—"

"I changed my mind. I told you during that night, the last night you spent with me. You remember, I know you do."

His hand still held her jaw, gently but purposefully. The last night they spent together was etched into her mind as surely as the faces were carved into the mountain on Rushmore. She'd relived those hours so often in the last decade she thought she'd wear the memory out like an old videotape. Instead, the memories became more precious, more real.

"Yes, I remember." She heard herself say. His hand released her chin to slide up along her jaw in a sensuous caress. When his fingers tangled in her hair, she released a sigh and her eyes slid closed.

"I'll never forget, Andi. Lord knows I've tried."

With his words, she inhaled his breath, like a gourmand in a feast. Her own was shallow. With him so close, his heat seeped through her clothing and caressed her skin. She prepared for his kiss. His lips would touch hers at any moment. Instead, his hand left her scalp, and the warmth of his body against hers dissipated. She blinked a few times before he came into focus. He'd stepped away from her, and shoved his hands into the front pockets of his jeans. His jaw clamped tightly.

"Dinner is served at six. Breakfast from seven until nine." His words were curt, his voice

husky. He was all business now. Something she'd done had pulled him from the sensuous cloud that surrounded them moments ago, and placed him into this no nonsense body, with no memories of that night so long ago. He gave her another raking gaze, before he spun on one booted heel and strode through the door without pause. She stared at that door for a long time, until her eyes began to dry out.

With a groan, Andria braced herself against the window. Could she survive the next month? She'd planned to use this time to relax. Find herself. Regroup. Meeting an old lover was not the shortest path to her new self. Even in her fantasies, where he was still a V-Bar employee, she'd imagined a quick meeting, maybe a fond recalling of their time together so long ago. She hadn't imagined him to be so ... real. Alive.

She pressed her forehead against the window, allowing the cool glass to soothe her fevered skin. He was better looking than she remembered, if that was possible. The angles of his face had sharpened. His chest was wider, his shoulders broader. The changes that time had made only enhanced his appeal. Boyish energy had turned into masculine intensity. She closed her eyes and drew a deep breath, willing her erratic heartbeat to slow. It took long moments before she opened her eyes again to peer through the window.

Just then she saw Jessie skipping out of the stables, dragging Clarice behind her. Andria smiled when the older girl began skipping also. The pair stopped near the wooden fence, and Jessie climbed onto the lower rung. Andria was tempted to call out in warning, but Clarice was there. The horses in the corral didn't charge, in fact they hardly noticed the seven-year-old perched on the fence calling out to them. Clarice bent down to pull some long weeds from the ground. She handed them to Jessie, who waved them inside the corral. Soon, one horse ambled over to investigate.

Andria held her breath when the horse gently nibbled on the handful of grasses. She raised the window up to lean out, just in time hear the musical sound of her child's giggle.

"Are you behaving yourself Jessica?"

Jessie looked up at the window and waved. "Mom! Come down here! They have horses and cows and pigs!"

Andria couldn't help smiling. As difficult as the next four weeks might be with Jacob's presence, the guest ranch was the perfect setting for her daughter to adjust to her parents' divorce. She must ensure that Jessie wouldn't blame herself.

"I'm unpacking our things. I'll be down shortly."

Jessie had already returned her attention to the docile mare. Without hearing the words, Andria could tell that Clarice instructed her on the best way to approach the horse. Jessie listened avidly. She watched her daughter for long moments, committing the scene to memory. *She's growing up so fast!* Tears blurred Andria's eyes until she saw Jacob approach the girls.

She immediately pulled herself away from the window, and flattened her back against the wall. When her heartbeat slowed again to a normal rate, she laughed at herself. *Are you going to hide from him throughout your stay?*

No. They had their words; the past is now put to rest. It would just take a few days to stop reliving those precious nights long ago.

She slid down the wall to sit on the floor and buried her head in her folded arms. Who was she kidding? She'd never forget those nights. Andria and her friends Jennifer and Rachel had used their high school graduation money to treat themselves to two weeks in the Wyoming wilderness. Andria laughed when she remembered Rachel's reluctance.

Andria placed Jessica's clothes into the small bureau, her own in the larger one, while she indulged in reliving that day. Now, after lining up her toiletries in the sumptuous bathroom, she stored the emptied luggage in the closet, and took another look around the room. This would be her home for the next four weeks. After that, back to Los Angeles. Back home with her mother.

Her heart sunk. Her life would be permanently changed. She had no home. Not that living with her widowed mother wouldn't be home, but it wasn't hers. Not anymore. Andria straightened her back. It wouldn't be for long. Then she'd get her own place, and she'd really start over.

She'd wasted enough time, so she left the room to find Jessie. Surely Clarice wouldn't want to babysit all afternoon. Besides, she had her own exploring to do.

She hadn't been able to really take in the beauty of the new V-Bar. She leaned over the banister that overlooked the lobby.

Two staircases, one on either side of the wide room curved gracefully down to the lobby. Above her head there was another balcony on the third floor, and huge skylights to allow the natural light in. The main focus of the lobby was a huge circular fireplace built in the same rock that littered the mountainside. It sat in the middle of the room surrounded by mahogany leather couches. The walls had more glass than brick, and each view was picturesque. It was rustic and

wild, but at the same time modern and comforting. She walked down the staircase, sliding her hand along the rich wood handrail, and gave the desk clerk a quick smile on her way outside. Maybe she wouldn't miss that old ranch house after all.

The air was crisp and clean. The scent of wildflowers and sage rode along the breeze that swirled around Andria, and pulled strands of her dark hair from the ponytail at her nape. How could she forget this relentless Wyoming wind?

Jessie was no longer at the stable where she'd fed the auburn mare. Andria walked past the corral toward the big barn, but stopped to rub the horse's nose, just because she seemed to expect it. The barn was quiet, so Andria continued on around to the back of the home, where a large swimming pool, the likes of which she'd never seen sat nestled among tall Evergreen trees and limestone boulders. The sides and bottom of the pool were clear blue like the sky. It had been designed to fit in with the landscape, and it didn't look a bit out of place. Andria could see herself spending long hours in that wicker chaise while Jessie played in the pool. On one corner of the patio was a smaller clump of trees and rocks, behind which she found a secluded hot tub. Screened as it was by the rustic pine and rock, she wouldn't have been surprised to find it occupied, but it sat empty.

Unwittingly, she imagined herself in those swirling hot waters. With Jake there with her, his hand against her scalp, holding her head steady for his ardent kiss. There was that one night, when they spent hours in the Jacuzzi—

"Mommy!" Jessie's voice snapped her from her fantasy, "You were right, it's so pretty here, but it isn't like you told me. You want me to show you?"

"Yes, of course." She cleared her throat. "You'll need to show me around, because things have changed since I was here last." She smiled at Clarice. "Thank you for keeping your eye on her."

"No problem at all. I love kids. If you need some time alone while you're here, I'll be happy to watch Jessie. She's a good kid."

Andria ruffled her daughter's curly locks. "Yes she is. Thank you Clarice."

Jessie snatched her mother's hand from her head and dragged her across the patio. "That's the pool. We can go in there any time, but there isn't a lifeguard so we have to be careful. That's the san ... saw ... sauna. It's hot in there, but old people go in anyway to sweat."

Andria smothered a grin.

"Over there is Clarice's house. She says the guests used to stay there, but her dad fixed it when the new place got built." She gestured toward the old log home that bordered the far side of the pool. Andria didn't get to study the home she remembered—Jake's home—because Jessie pulled her along behind her.

"The cow is for milking if you want to learn. Can we mom? The pigs are just for fun, but Clarice has to feed them all the time, and I haven't shown you the best part yet." Jessie grinned. "They have a playground!"

After the whirlwind tour, Andria grabbed her daughter's arms and spun her around, laughing when she shrieked.

"Faster, mom! Higher!"

They didn't stop until Andria's arms grew sore, and her head spun. "Now it's my turn to show you something. Wait until you see our room." Andria skipped toward the house. Jessie laughed and joined her.

"I didn't know moms could skip." She giggled.

"Of course moms can skip. Who do you think taught you?" She was then reminded why moms didn't skip often, at least not without a sports bra. They climbed the stairs to the wide porch, and Andria pulled the little girl into her arms. "I love you so much baby. You know that?"

"Yeah, I know." Jessie seemed to sense her mother's need for closeness, and she thankfully didn't pull from the smothering embrace like she usually would. Maybe now was the time to broach the subject.

"Jessie, I have something to tell you. Something important, and I need you to be a grown up about it, alright?"

"I am grown up," Jessie crowed. "I've got six adult teeth remember?" She bared them for inspection. Andria couldn't help smiling.

"That's right. How could I forget?" She clasped the little hands in between hers. She searched her mind for the speech she'd rehearsed, but a joyful tinkling bell interrupted her thoughts.

"Oh, that's the dinner bell!" Jessie exclaimed. "I thought Clarice was teasing me about that. She said they'd ring a bell to get people to come to dinner. Isn't it neat mom? When we get home can we have a dinner bell?"

So much for the serious talk. Andria sighed and led her daughter to their room to wash, but

only after the little girl opened each door and drawer, and wallowed in the bed which she claimed was the most comfy bed in the whole wide world.

Jessie reached the staircase first, and even lifted one leg to climb onto the banister before Andria could stop her with a firm hand around her daughter's elbow.

"Jessie, no!" Andria's heart pounded at the disaster averted. "I know that's tempting, but look how far you would fall if you lost your balance." She took Jessie's hand and led her down the stairs at a more sedate pace. "Don't scare me like that."

The long elegant table was situated in the middle of an equally long room. It could easily seat fifteen or more, but there were only five settings clustered together. A plump matronly woman stood by the sidebar, a welcoming smile spread across her face.

"Mrs. Thomas, welcome back, and welcome to you Jessica!" She greeted them both. A friendly grin for Jessie, and a warm hug for Andria. Barb was the only employee other than Jake that she recognized from her last trip. Additional silver in her hair, and a few more smile lines were all that had changed in the last decade. "It's always nice to see returning guests. My, it's been a while though hasn't it?"

Andria nodded, and Barb gave her a thorough once-over. "It's been ten years. I'm surprised you remember me, and please call me Andria." She wouldn't be Mrs. Thomas for long. Just a few more days. Of course now that she'd moved her things from the house, why would Kyle wait to shack up with that—

"I remember you." Barb interrupted her thoughts. "You and your friends always slept through breakfast and raided the kitchen late at night." Barb's ample bosom shook like Jell-O when she laughed heartily.

"Oh. That's right. That's when you started sending us a tray of snacks after dinner."

"Come now. The chef has prepared a delicious beef roast and potatoes for you. Please, have a seat. Jacob and Clarice haven't arrived yet. There's only one other guest right now, so it will be a nice quiet supper." She led them to their seats, took their drink order and scurried across the room.

The other guest arrived, seating himself across the table from Andria without a word. The grey tufts of hair stuck out from his head as though he'd just pulled it out in frustration.

"Good evening Mr. Harney." Barb welcomed him in a much more subdued manner. Andria could see why; he wasn't a personable man. He only grunted in response, and took the glass of

water from her with a mumbled thanks.

"Sorry we're late," Jacob said from the doorway. "It was Clarice's fault." Jake's eyes swept over the room, and Andria studiously avoided looking directly into them. Good Lord he was handsome.

Clarice shoved him playfully. "It was not. I was waiting for you!"

They took their seats, and Barb hurried into the kitchen. Jacob cast a smile around the table.

"Did you show your mother around?" he asked Jessie.

"Yeah. I can't wait to go swimming. Mom said after dinner."

"You'll have to wait at least an hour after eating," he said seriously.

"Why?"

"Cramps." Mr. Harney's voice was gravelly, as if rusty from lack of use.

"That's right, you'd get cramps, and those hurt." Andria wasn't sure Jessie even heard Clarice. She stared at the older man with awe.

"How's the book coming, Mr. Harney?" Jacob asked as Barb brought out the cart filled with plates full of food.

"It's crap." Mr. Harney's words were curt, and while Andria was shocked, Jacob threw back his head and laughed.

"You've said that every day since you got here two weeks ago."

"And it's just as true today." Jacob's laughter didn't seem to faze the man, who dug into his plate.

Andria looked at her plate, sure that she could never eat so much food in one sitting, but the roast smelled heavenly, and was professionally arranged and garnished with asparagus tips and roasted potatoes. The chef certainly took a lot of pride in his work. The food tasted as good as it looked. "This is delicious, my compliments to the chef."

Jacob smiled with pride. "I'll pass that along." He tapped a crisp linen napkin to his lips. "She'll be happy to know you were pleased."

Andria thought she was fairly successful in hiding her surprise that the chef was a woman.

She savored every bite of buttery potatoes, and the succulent roast all but melted in her mouth.

Barb circled the table, removing the empty bread basket and refilling their drinks. "More wine, Andria?" She hadn't realized that she'd drained her first glass.

"Yes, please."

"Mommy, I'm full."

Jessie's plate was almost clean. She hadn't eaten this well in a long time. "Very good, Jessie, give me a few more minutes." She looked up to find Jacob's eyes on her. They held her gaze; she had no choice but to stare back. His face softened into what could almost be called a smile, albeit a sad one. Only then did her mouth twitch into what *she hoped* might be called a smile, then tore her eyes away to resume eating.

"Dessert? Tonight we have chocolate mousse and New York cheesecake." Barb removed Jessie's plate, then Andria's, who was surprised to find that she'd finished that large amount of food.

"There isn't a way I can eat another bite. Thank you, Barb." Even Jessie declined.

"I can have it sent to your room later, if you'd like," Barb offered. Jessie's excited nod made Andria laugh.

"That would be great." Andria moved away from the table, and automatically, Jacob stood. To her horror, a girlish blush warmed her cheeks. "Dinner was wonderful." She hoped her voice sounded steadier than she felt.

"Have a good evening ... Mrs. Thomas."

She didn't correct his use of her name. The more formal they kept their relationship while under the same roof, the better. She stared for a minute at the way his dark blond hair held the kink from his hat, circling his head. She clenched her fingers to keep from ruffling those thick strands, and swore to herself that she wasn't using the arm around her daughter's shoulder as a prop to keep her shakiness from showing.

Find Retreat at your favorite digital bookstore.

All links and more about the author can be found at

AlannaCoca.com