

Chapter One

“Shit, this stinks,” Brian muttered as he crouched behind the Dumpster in the back alley of the strip mall.

The bottoms of his boots were coated with the unidentifiable fluids that had leaked from the huge steel bin, and he struggled to keep from gagging. He hated these jobs, but they were the bread and butter of a private investigator, and they paid the bills.

The manager of the video game store suspected his employees were cleaning him out, and he needed proof. His corporation had refused any safeguards, like electronic sensors attached to the packages, let alone any sort of video cameras. He was losing a thousand a month in stolen merchandise, and if it didn't stop, he'd lose his job. Desperate, he'd contacted Brian and hired him to do a little surveillance, take some photos, and get the evidence to catch the thieves.

Brian figured the employees, just teenagers, were using the old trick of putting the stolen property in a garbage bag and then taking out the garbage. After they closed up, they'd come back and do a little Dumpster diving, retrieve their loot, and be on their way. That's when he'd catch them.

Simple. Straightforward. Easy money.

Except the part about Brian spending his entire Friday night hiding behind the most disgusting Dumpster in all of Houston. Had something died in there? Shit. He'd really have to scrub to get the stench off when he got home, maybe even burn the clothes he wore. And have the interior of his SUV cleaned, too.

On top of that, he'd been unable to shake the too-familiar feeling that something was going to happen tonight. Something important, maybe even life changing.

In a gesture of comfort, he pressed his hand to the Beretta tucked in its holster under his armpit. He'd learned as a kid not to ignore his premonitions. When he got them, they always happened. Always.

A door opened at the other end of the strip. Loud music and a bass beat blared out. Not the door he was waiting for, but he ducked back into the inky blackness between the Dumpster and the wall. No sense in anyone seeing him and raising some sort of alarm.

A man exited and let the door shut behind him, cutting off the music. Brian's eyes widened, and all the blood rushed from his head straight to his cock. From the guy's boots, up his long, black denim-clad legs, and over a pair of broad shoulders that would put Brian's to shame, this guy was every inch a cowboy. Shit, he even wore his black Stetson low on his forehead, letting Brian catch only a glimpse of a strong, rugged jaw and corded neck muscles that disappeared beneath a plaid flannel shirt and denim jacket.

As if posing just for Brian, the cowboy leaned against the building and propped the bottom of a boot flat against the wall, emphasizing a muscular thigh. From where Brian sat, he could hear the guy's soft exhale and had to hold back his own sigh of appreciation at the sight.

The cowboy dug in his jeans for a lighter, reached in a pocket of his shirt, and pulled out a pack of cigarettes. After knocking out a smoke, he put it in his mouth and cupped his hand around the end as he flicked the lighter. After the end caught, he sucked the smoke in deep, held it, and then raised his head to blow out a long stream of grey through slightly parted lips.

Shit. Brian's cock grew another inch just watching the way the guy moved, slow, sure, and so fucking sexy. Brian didn't smoke, but damn, if this cowboy didn't make it the hottest thing he'd ever seen.

As the cowboy smoked, Brian raised his digital camera and clicked off several soundless shots of him. They'd make a fine addition to the two cowboy calendars Brian kept next to his bed just in case he ever needed inspiration during the night.

Down the alley, the door opened. Shit. The video store. So caught up in watching the cowboy, Brian nearly forgot what he was there for. Swiveling, he took a few shots of the young man who approached carrying two garbage bags, holding them as if they were really heavy. Brian bet his Justin boots they were loaded with merchandise.

The kid approached the large bin, saw the cowboy, and froze.

The cowboy nodded. "Evening," he rumbled. Damn. He had to rumble, didn't he? Brian loved the sound of a man's deep voice and this one shot tremors straight to his prick.

The kid nodded, then continued to the Dumpster and tossed the bags in with a grunt, turned, and headed back. The cowboy's face was hidden in the shadow of his hat, but Brian was sure he watched the kid all the way to the door.

Brian had to come out from behind the Dumpster and check the bags, but the cowboy was still there. He glanced at his watch. They'd be locking up in the next few minutes, and then they'd drive around to the alley and pick up the stash. He had to move quickly.

Standing, he stepped out from behind the bin and came around to the front of it.

"Wondered if you're going to spend all night behind that thing," the cowboy drawled in a deep voice as he flicked the remains of his cigarette into the darkness of the alley.

The guy didn't seem very surprised, as if he'd known Brian was back there all the time. But that was impossible. Brian had hidden in a spot that was absolutely black; he'd checked it from the alley before he ever got back there.

All the witty comebacks he was so good at failed him, and he swallowed hard. He shrugged, then leaned over the Dumpster and looked in.

The two bags sat out of reach at the back, almost at the bottom. If he wanted them, he was going to have to go in there and get them. With a quick glance back at the man still leaning against the wall, Brian boosted himself up on his arms and swung his legs over the side of the steel bin and into the midst of the garbage.

The bag he landed on burst and his boots were buried in the flotsam and jetsam of a Chinese restaurant. Between the sickening squelch of the contents and the paint-peeling stench, Brian's vision blurred, and his stomach threatened to erupt.

He'd never eat lo mein again.

Great. The only guy he'd seen in two years to pique his interest and stiffen his cock was going to watch him puke. And then dig through garbage. Just fucking great.

A soft chuckle floated on the air. Brian swallowed hard again, clamped his lips shut tight as he held his breath, and bent to the bags. He untied them, pulled a small flashlight from his back pocket, and inspected the contents.

A dozen video games nested in shredded paper. Bingo. Brian held the flashlight in his teeth as he pulled out a marker and made an X on the bag. Under florescent light, the X would show. Then he opened the other bag, checked it, and closed it. After marking it, he straightened and felt his back pop.

At thirty-three, he was getting too old for Dumpster diving.

He looked up to see the cowboy push back his hat and give Brian the sexiest lopsided smile he'd ever seen. Shit. Was that a fucking cleft in his chin? Despite standing almost knee-deep in garbage, Brian couldn't stop his cock's renewed stiffening.

Strong and rugged was the best description he could come up with in the dim light of the back alley, but Brian didn't need a spotlight to tell him this was one hell of a handsome man.

"Found what you're looking for?" the cowboy drawled, clearly enjoying Brian's odorous predicament.

"Yeah." Brian hopped out and landed on his feet. Looking down at his own boots and the stained bottoms of his jeans, he grimaced. "Shit." He shook his head and looked up to catch the man's smile turn into a wide grin. Brian stifled a groan. He wanted to explore that deep dent in the guy's chin with his tongue.

"I hope you got a good reason to be digging in the garbage."

"I'm a PI, and I'm trying to catch a couple of employees stealing." Brian wiped his hands on his jeans. The stench coming off him made his eyes water. Surely, the cowboy had to smell him from where he stood.

The big man jerked his chin up. "You can keep the photos."

Struggling to keep his face from showing his surprise, Brian said, "What photos?"

"Never mind," he said with a knowing smile.

How the hell he knew Brian had taken pictures of him was beyond Brian's understanding. The man had to have eyes that could see in the dark, like some cat.

They stared at each other in the dimness and squalor of the back alley. From the cowboy's eyes, a jolt of pure lust leaped across the distance. Bypassing Brian's brain, it swept through him and lodged deep in his loins to set his body on fire. He'd never been promiscuous, never fucked anyone in a bathroom, or in the back rooms of gay bars, much less had sex in an alley, but if given the chance with this man, he didn't think he could stop himself from going down on his knees right here and right now.

Hell, his jeans were already ruined.

The cowboy straightened and rubbed the back of his hand across his chin, as if pondering what was going on. Had the stranger been thinking about sex in a dark alley also? Reseating his hat on his head, he gave Brian a glimpse of thick, tawny gold hair.

The door opened. A man leaned out and frowned at the cowboy.

“There you are. We’re leaving. John’s in a snit and wants to go home. He’s pissed that you just got up and left.”

“He was boring, and I needed a smoke,” he said, his gaze locked with Brian’s. There was no apology in his deep voice.

The intensity of their gazes superheated. Brian felt an unmistakable pull toward the man on the other side of the alley, his cock leading the way as it tried to burst through his jeans.

“Come on, then.” The man reached out, but before he could touch the cowboy, he’d pushed off from the wall and ambled toward Brian, whose prick was now a thick lump.

“You smell like you tangled with a skunk and lost.” His eyes, dark blue if Brian could tell right, smiled at him, but his full lips stayed in a straight line. Reaching into his back pocket, he pulled out his wallet, opened it, and took out a business card.

Hand extended, he offered it to Brian, the small white rectangle held between two long fingers like a playing card. He searched Brian’s face as if memorizing it. The moment seemed frozen in time, along with Brian’s heartbeat. Time sped up. Brian’s heart thudded hard as he took the card.

“Call me.” The cowboy turned away, headed back across the alley, and went inside.

The door slammed shut leaving Brian hard as a rock, aching, and alone.