



Coming Undone

By Susan Andersen

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Well, she doesn't care how hot he is. It's been too many years and too much water under the bridge, and she'll be damned if he gets to tell her what to do now.

Jared remembers exactly how headstrong P.J. can be and he knows she's going to be a handful. Problem is, he'd *love* to have his hands full of her. But he's cool. He's professional. And he's always in control.

He'd better be. Because for five long weeks he's stuck in close quarters with the wildest girl in show business.

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Editorial Review

About the Author

New York Times bestselling author Susan Andersen lives in the Pacific Northwest with her husband of a *really* long time and their kitty boys, Boo and Mojo.

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Front cover headline, *Country Now* magazine: Where in the World is Priscilla Jayne?

"Oh, for the love of pete!" P. J. Morgan, known on the country music circuit by her first and middle names, tossed aside the magazine and jumped to her feet.

"Mysterious disappearance, my butt! Where do they get this crap?" Scary to think *Country Now* was one of the reputable publications. She could only imagine what the tabloids were saying.

Crossing the room to the window, she pulled aside the faded olive drape to look out. Not that there was much to see in this wide-spot-in-the-road rural town. At a time in her life when she could finally afford to stay in posh four-star hotels, it was ironic that she'd instead picked a low-rent motel off a secondary highway on a hot, still Texas plain.

"Well, hey." A humorless laugh escaped her. "You can take the girl out of the trailer park, but there's just no getting that trailer trash out of the girl."

Blowing out a breath, she dropped the curtain and turned away. This wasn't exactly what she'd planned when she'd taken off on Monday. She'd been headed for Los Angeles, a city she had never seen. It had seemed exotic, was a good long way from home and she'd figured not many of its citizens were likely to give a good goddamn where one beginning-to-make-a-name-for-herself country singer had gotten herself off to.

With thoughts of parking herself by a palm tree-shaded pool to drink her fill of fruity concoctions sporting frilly paper umbrellas, she'd driven seventeen hours straight, stopping only to stretch her legs and fill up the tank. When she couldn't keep her eyes open to drive another mile, she'd pulled into the Wind Blew Inn, a clean but ancient motor court in the Texas panhandle. She'd promptly fallen into bed and when she'd awakened thirtysix hours later, she'd stayed put instead of hitting the road once again. Something about this nowhere little town's one-block-long main street reminded her of the neverending series of hick towns she'd lived in growing up.

And when things go to hell, she always said, stick with the familiar.

Her stomach growled, and she realized she was hungry. What day was it, anyway—Thursday? No, God, it was Friday.

Her appetite had been nonexistent since Monday. And if that wasn't indicative of her state of mind, she didn't know what was. One summer a lifetime ago, she and a boy named Jared had gone hungry together on the streets of Denver. It was an experience that had hardwired her ever after not to miss another meal. Yet, except for about six gallons of coffee and the occasional candy bar grabbed when paying for her gas, she'd barely

eaten a bite.

Twisting her hair up off her neck, she reached for her baseball cap and pulled it on, then donned a pair of oversized dark glasses. Slipping a handful of bills into her shorts pocket, she headed for the door.

It was hotter than usual for early June and the swamp cooler laboring in her room's window dripped greentinged condensation onto the concrete next to the twostep stoop outside her door. Blinking against the glare, she tugged the brim of her navy cap down and set out across the lot.

The Prairie Dog Café was a squat orange building next to Elmerson's Feed and Seed, and P.J. pulled open its screen door to the clatter of heavy crockery, the rumble of male voices discussing crops and Lari White singing about flies on the butter from an old Wurlitzer in the corner. She stepped out of the sun into the smell of frying meat and cigarette smoke. Slipping off her dark glasses, she noticed that the only customers who didn't have John Deere tractor caps planted firmly on their heads had straw Stetsons hooked over the back rails of their chairs.

Conversations faltered for a second, then resumed their accustomed rhythms. P.J. noted she was the only woman in the café this time of day, then shrugged the observation aside and crossed to the counter to claim one of the few vacant red-vinyl swivel seats. If she'd allowed men to intimidate her in her line of work, she would've quit singing about the same time she'd first attempted to go professional. The truth was, she liked the company of men. She worked primarily with them—her backup band consisted of two of the species, and the roadies that set up and broke down shows and transported the equipment from city to city were almost exclusively male.

Moving aside an ashtray, she reached across the counter for a laminated menu stuck in the rear prongs of the stainless steel condiment holder.

A waitress with *Sandy* embroidered above the breast pocket of her pink uniform came over a few minutes later and set a glass of water in front of P.J. "What can I getcha, honey?"

She ordered a ham and swiss on sourdough and knew she should ask for it to go. But the murmur of voices was comforting to a woman accustomed to being surrounded by people and she couldn't quite bring herself to relinquish the sound to return to her too-quiet room.

She realized it wasn't a smart choice, however, when Sandy said something as she clipped her order to the wheel above the pass-through to the kitchen and the short-order cook immediately poked his head through the opening to give P.J. the once-over. She also caught the waitress stealing glances at her as she bustled about the room filling coffee cups and slapping down bills torn from a pad in her apron pocket. Then "Mama's Girl," P.J.'s very first recording, came on the jukebox and with an inward groan she settled a little deeper into her chair.

Sandy brought the bill a moment later. "That's you, isn't it?" she demanded with a tip of her chin toward the Wurlitzer.

P.J. could lie with the best of them and she looked the other woman straight in the eye. "Don't I wish." She smiled wryly. "People are *always* mistaking me for her. Darn shame I can't sing a lick."

"It's you," Sandy insisted. "I saw you on *Austin City Limits* once and I'll never forget your speaking voice."

Damn. Didn't it just figure *that* would give her away? She hated her speaking voice. It was raspy and made her sound as if she were a three-pack-a-day smoker. She'd always figured God had given her a good, strong singing voice to make amends for saddling her with such a ridiculous conversational one.

Still she insisted, "Oh, this isn't the way I usually sound. It's the tag end of a nasty case of laryngitis." But recognizing a blown cover when she saw one, she left a hefty tip and headed for the door. It looked like she might see California after all.

"Pretty cold-blooded to fire your own mama, you ask me," the waitress called after her.

Ouch. Ouchouchouch! Given the mess with her mother earlier this week, Sandy's parting shot was a direct hit. When she was out of earshot. Damn if she intended to make excuses to someone who didn't know the first thing about her relationship with her mother. She stomped back to the Wind Blew Inn.

She had just zipped her suitcase closed and was looking for her flip-flops when there was an authoritative knock on the door.

She stilled, her head raised to stare at the peephole-free door. Dear Lord. Reporters already?

Then she willed herself to relax. *Don't be ridiculous, it's probably just the manager.* Even if Sandy had called someone, which was iffy, the only reporter who could have gotten here this fast would be from a local weekly, and she could be three states away by the time its next edition hit the streets. She crossed to the window and lifted a corner of the curtain, trying to see who was on the other side of the door.

A tall man stood on her tiny stoop, but the angle was wrong to see more than the fact that he had wide shoulders in a navy-blue T-shirt, neatly trimmed brown hair and was wearing a faded pair of jeans. His right forearm, she saw as he raised his fist to knock on the door once again, sported a long, narrow tattoo that undulated subtly with the movement. It was mostly green and almost looked like a praying mantis.

"Ohmigawd."

She lunged for the door, pulling it open. The man jerked back his fist, but she barely even noticed how close it had come to her forehead. Her gaze went first to the tattoo, which was exactly what she'd expected to see, then to the man's face. "Jared?" she whispered.

"Jared Hamilton?"

"Hello, P.J."

"Ohmigawd!" she said again. A frisson of pure pleasure buzzed along her spine and, laughter erupting, she leaped out at him, her arms snaking around his neck in a stranglehold, her legs wrapping around his waist. "Oh. My. God!" Leaning back, she gazed into his face. And grinned. "You sure grew up good."

That was an understatement. He'd been goodlooking at seventeen, but now his features were honed in a way that made it nearly impossible to look away. Hard jaw, aristocratic nose, stern mouth with a full lower lip. His hair was still the sun-streaked brown she remembered but he wore it shorter these days. And he'd grown into his long, skinny bones. He was still tall muscular.

His fingers, which had clasped her butt with a light touch when she'd jumped him, tightened infinitesimally.

A slight smile pulled up one corner of his mouth. "You grew up pretty well, yourself."

Well. Not good—*well.* Some of her pleasure dimmed. It was due to Jared that she'd worked as hard as she had in her language arts and English classes in junior high and high school, and her grammar was much better than it had been at thirteen. Not good enough, though, evidently. "Grew up good, grew up well." She shrugged. "Not everyone has the advantage of your prep-school upbringing, rich boy. Some of us are simply never gonna speak like some stick-up-the-butt banker."

"It wasn't a put-down, Peej." His hands slid from her rear to her hips. "It was merely an observation. You look great."

"Oh. Well. Thank you." Unwrapping her legs from around his waist and loosening her choke hold on his neck, she allowed him to set her back on her feet just inside the door. Curling her bare toes into the worn motel carpet, she tipped her head back to look up at him. "Want to come in?"

"Absolutely." He stepped over the threshold.

Her native caution belatedly kicked in as she backed deeper into the room. "What on earth are you doing here? This isn't exactly your type of accommodations."

"I wouldn't have thought it was yours, either, these days."

His eyes were the same gray-green she remembered, but no longer did the fear and worry she'd once seen reflected in them exist. Instead a watchfulness lingered in their mossy depths, a cool reserve that she had a difficult time reconciling with the boy she'd known. And she was beginning to get a bad feeling in her stomach. "What brings you to the Wind Blew Inn, Jared? How did you find me?" She inhaled sharply as sudden suspicion hit her like a bomb out of the blue. "Oh, jeez, tell me you're not a reporter!"

"For Christ sake, Peej." His dark eyebrows slammed together over his nose. "That would be the last occupation I'd choose!"

She'd forgotten for a moment about his own persecution by the press back in the days when he'd been the number-one suspect in his father's murder. "Of course it is. I'm sorry, J," she said, the old nickname slipping out easily beneath the press of old memories of a time when he'd been the one person in the world who made her feel safe. "I forgot all about your dad." But her desire to make peace only went so far and she narrowed her eyes at him. "So why are you here?"

Straightening to his full height, he met her suspicious gaze head-on. "Wild Wind Records hired me to see that you get to all your shows while you're on tour."

"They did what?" She couldn't possibly have heard that correctly.

He merely looked at her, however, and her stomach went hollow. She hadn't felt this stunned since the time one of her mother's boyfriends had backhanded her for sassing him. "My label hired a watchdog?"

"If you care to look at it that way."

Anger started low and slow but escalated faster than smoldering embers sprayed with kerosene. She straightened to her full if less than impressive height. "No one gets to accuse me of being irresponsible. I've

been taking care of business as long as I can remember!"

He shrugged. "I'm merely telling you what I was hired to do."

"Well, bully for you." She strode back to the flimsy door, yanked it open and gave her one-time true friend a pointed stare. "It's been a long time, Jared, and it was good to see you again. Don't let the door hit you in the butt on your way out." She hated that her breathing had grown so ragged she was nearly panting, and, inhaling and exhaling a deep breath, she got herself back under control.

"I've been getting myself to gigs since I was eighteen years old," she continued quietly. "I'm damned if I plan to blow my career now by failing to show up for the biggest concerts of my life." It was probably unfair to hold Jared responsible for the mess she was in, but learning her label felt compelled to hire someone to ensure she showed up for her own tour was a huge slap in the face. Not to mention he was handy and she was disappointed that he'd turned out to be nothing like the boy who'd filled so many of her daydreams over the years.

Users Review

From reader reviews:

Margaret Watkins:

A lot of people always spent all their free time to vacation or maybe go to the outside with them family members or their friend. Do you realize? Many a lot of people spent they free time just watching TV, or perhaps playing video games all day long. If you would like try to find a new activity here is look different you can read a new book. It is really fun for you personally. If you enjoy the book which you read you can spent the entire day to reading a publication. The book Coming Undone it is very good to read. There are a lot of individuals who recommended this book. These folks were enjoying reading this book. Should you did not have enough space to develop this book you can buy often the e-book. You can m0ore simply to read this book from your smart phone. The price is not too costly but this book offers high quality.

Scott Tucker:

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