



Can't Wait

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Description: Jennifer Ryan, author of the New York Times bestselling The Hunted Series and the upcoming Montana Men Series, takes us to the very beginning in this Christmas prequel about two people who finally receive the one thing they've always wanted ... each other.

Though she is the woman of his dreams, Caleb Bowden knows his best friend's sister, Summer Turner, is off-limits. He won't cross that line. Summer shares a connection with Caleb she's never felt with anyone else, but the stubborn man refuses to turn their flirtatious friendship into something more. Summer will have to take matters into her own hands if she wants her cowboy for Christmas.

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Chapter One

SUMMERTURNER STOOD between the two tall men and tried to ignore their impatient and sour expressions. Well, her brother Jack's, anyway. No ignoring the other man on her left. Whenever he was near, all she wanted to do was throw herself on top of him and kiss him until he finally acknowledged her as something more than his best friend's baby sister.

Caleb wore his usual pasted-on look of indifference, but behind his sable brown eyes she glimpsed fleeting moments of interest. Not in the brightly decorated Christmas parade floats, but in her. Sometimes she thought she caught him staring at her, but he'd look away or through her like she wasn't even there. Maybe it was nothing more than wishful thinking.

A shiver of need ran through her. How she wanted that man.

One of these days, she'd stand on her tiptoes, wrap her arms around his neck, and kiss him until the iceman melted.

The last parade float passed. Jolly Old St. Nick waved to the crowd with a hearty "Ho, ho, ho," and tossed mini candy canes from his overstuffed sack. Kids scrambled free of parents to scoop up as much candy as possible.

People stepped off the curb and followed Santa's sleigh, making their way along the street toward the park for the tree-lighting ceremony. Summer turned and stared at Jack and Caleb, standing with their arms behind their ramrod-straight backs, eyes scanning the crowd and roofs for nonexistent snipers. Discharged from the military

two months ago after a very dangerous and deadly tour in Iraq, neither of them spoke a word about their experiences, but their quiet intensity told her they'd seen and done things neither of them would ever forget.

"I'd say at ease, soldiers, but you already are. Seriously, dial it down. Everyone stood crushed along the street for six blocks, except for the five-foot restricted zone you two intimidated folks into keeping around us."

Jack rolled his eyes. "What did we do now?"

"Glared at everyone. Frowned at the cheerful floats. Grunted at the carolers. Sucked the fun out of yet another tradition."

"Another?"

"Yes. Another. Remember Thanksgiving?"

"Good food. Beer. Sam, Caleb, and I watched the game. The Broncos won."

"Had fun, did you?" she asked Jack, then turned to Caleb. "How about you?"

"Yeah. You're an amazing cook," he said, not quite meeting her eyes.

Secretly, she thrilled at the compliment.

Outwardly, she threw her hands up and let them fall, slapping her thighs.

"I set the table with Grandmother's best dishes. Crystal wine glasses, candles, flowers. I spent hours making a perfect turkey and all the trimmings. You lug-heads grabbed a plate, piled it high, and flopped back on the couch to watch the game. I sat in the dining room alone."

Caleb's gaze fell away.

"You should have joined us," Jack said.

"I wanted to have a family meal. Mom and Dad are away on their trip. Sam came home, you made it home safe from the war. I wanted to sit around the table together and share a meal and remember how grateful we are for all we have. You're here, Jack. You and Caleb survived. Couldn't you take an hour to appreciate all you have left, instead of holding on to your anger and hurt and resentments and whatever else it is you feel when you're quietly moody."

"I'm not moody."

"When's the last time either of you smiled?"

"How did I get lumped into this family squabble?" Caleb asked when she shot him a disgruntled frown.

"Come on, sis, I'll buy you a hot chocolate and we'll watch the tree lighting. Will that make you happy?"

"I'm not ten."

"I know that."

"Do you? Ever since you got home, you've treated me like I'm a kid. You may run the ranch, but you don't run me."

"You're my sister. I'm trying to look out for you."

"I don't need you to look out for me. I need you to find your way out of the dark. I'm

trying to lead you there, both of you, but you refuse to follow. I can't imagine the things you've seen, the things you've done to survive. But you're alive." She looked from Jack to Caleb and back again. "So live." She turned to Caleb. "Find whatever it is that makes you happy, grab hold of it, and never let go."

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Her stomach fluttered when Caleb instinctively leaned toward her, but caught himself and drew back into that tightly controlled rigid stance. After weeks of doing everything short of throwing herself at him, maybe she needed to face facts. He didn't want her. Not really. Away from the States for over a year, maybe he just wanted a woman, but not her.

"I don't know why you're so worked up over a parade." Jack's irritation showed in his voice and face.

"Summer, come dance with me," Charlie called from across the street.

"It's more than that and you know it, even if you refuse to acknowledge you're having a hard time adjusting back into normal life. Go home. Drink beer. Watch a game. I'll find my own way home. I'm going to do something you two have forgotten how to do. Have fun."

CALEB OPENED HISmouth to yell,Where the hell do you think you're going?

He snapped his jaw shut, thinking better of it. He couldn't afford to let Jack see how much Summer meant to him. He'd thought he'd kept his need for her under wraps, but the too-observant woman had his number. Over the last few months, the easy friendship they'd shared from the moment he stepped foot on Stargazer Ranch turned into a fun flirtation he secretly wished could turn into something more. The week leading up to Thanksgiving brought that flirtation dangerously close to crossing the line when he walked through the barn door and didn't see her coming out due to the changing light. They crashed into each other. Her sweetly soft body slammed full-length into his and everything in him went hot and hard. Their faces remained close

when he grabbed her shoulders to steady her. For a moment, they stood plastered to each other, eyes locked. Her breath stopped along with his and he nearly kissed her strawberry-colored lips to see if she tasted as sweet as she smelled.

Instead of giving in to his baser need, he leashed the beast and gently set her away, walking away without even a single word. She'd called after him, but he never turned back.

Thanksgiving nearly undid him. She'd sat alone in the dining room and all he'd wanted to do was be with her. But how could he? You do not date your best friend's sister. Worse, you do not have dangerous thoughts of sleeping with her, let alone dreaming of a life with a woman kinder than anyone he'd ever met. Just being around her made him feel lighter. She brightened the dark world he'd lived in for too long.

He needed to stay firmly planted on this side of the line. Adhere to the best-bro code. This thing went beyond friendship. Jack was his boss and had saved his life. He owed Jack more than he could ever repay.

"Can you believe her?" Jack pulled him out of his thoughts. He dragged his gaze from Summer's retreating sweet backside.

"Who's the guy?" He kept his tone casual.

Jack glared. "Ex-boyfriend from high school," he said, irritated. "He's home from grad school for the holiday."

"Probably looking for a good time."

Caleb tried not to smile when Jack growled, fisted his hands, and stepped off the curb, following after his sister. He'd counted on Jack's protective streak to allow him to chase Summer himself. Caleb didn't want anyone to hurt her. He sure as hell didn't

want her rekindling an old flame with some ex-lover.

He and Jack walked into the park square just as everyone counted down, three, two, one, and the multicolored lights blinked on, lighting the fourteen-foot tree in the center of the huge gazebo, and sparking the carolers to sing “O Christmas Tree.”

Tiny white lights circled up the posts and nearby trees, casting a glow over everything. The soft light made Summer’s golden hair shine. She smiled with her head tipped back, her bright blue eyes glowing as she stared at the tree.

His temper flared when the guy hooked his arm around her neck and pulled her close, nearly spilling his beer down the front of her. She laughed and playfully shoved him away. The guy smiled and put his hand to her back, guiding her toward everyone’s favorite bar. Several other people joined their small group.

Caleb tapped Jack’s shoulder and pointed to Summer’s back. Her long hair was bundled into a loose braid he wanted to unravel and then run his fingers through the silky strands.

“There she goes.”

“What the ... Let’s go get her.”

Caleb grabbed Jack’s shoulder. “If you go in there and demand she leaves, it’ll only embarrass her in front of all her friends. Let’s scout the situation. Lie low.”

“You’re right. She’ll only fight harder if we demand she come home. Let’s get a beer.”

Caleb grimaced. Hell yes, he wanted to drag Summer home, but fought the compulsion.

He did not want to watch her with some other guy.

Why did he torture himself like this?

Chapter Two

SUMMER LEANED OVER the pool table, sliding the cue back and forth without hitting the ball. Charlie hovered over her back. “Let me show you how to shoot.”

She stood up, making him stumble. Not wanting to make a scene, or draw any more attention from her brother or Caleb, she laughed and said, “I took the last two games. I think I’ve got it.”

He grabbed her waist with both hands and pulled her close, their middles bumping. “Come on, Summer. Remember how we used to have fun.”

He swayed her back and forth, their hips locked together. She gave his cheek a friendly pat. “That was a long time ago.”

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“Let’s get out of here, for old times’ sake.”

“Those times are dead and buried. No sense digging them up. Besides, if I sink two more balls, you owe me twenty bucks.”

She stepped away and leaned over the table and took her shot, sinking the last striped ball.

“Come on, honey, you know you’d rather play with my balls.”

“Jeez, Charlie,” her friend Teri called from the table behind her. “No amount of beer will erase that image from my head.”

Charlie’s laughter halted abruptly when she sank the eight ball. He dipped his hand down his Wrangler’s front pocket, pulled it free, and smacked the folded bill into her outstretched hand.

“I shouldn’t play with you when I’m drunk.”

“You’re not playing with me when you’re sober, either,” she teased, and pulled her hand free.

Caleb’s eyes blazed from across the room. She ignored him. If he wanted her, all he had to do was come over here and claim his place beside her. She’d made it clear without saying the words outright that she wanted to take their friendship to the next level. He was the one who backed off. Not her.

Teri bumped a shoulder into hers. “That is one gorgeous man.” She cocked her head in Caleb’s direction.

“Ew, that’s my brother.”

“I’m not talking about Jack,” she said on a laugh. “He doesn’t smile much anymore, does he? His friend, either.”

Summer frowned and let her gaze rest on Caleb. He ended whatever he said to Jack and looked up. Gazes locked, he raised his beer in a kind of salute. She mimicked him and gave a smile. He didn’t return the grin, but his eyes took on an intensity that both drew her in and made her pause.

“That man is hot for you.”

With a heavy sigh, she turned away from Caleb. “He’s a stubborn one.”

“The war took both their smiles, huh?” Teri read her mind.

“Yes. And their sense of humor. It’s like living with two bears fresh out of hibernation. They’re pissed off and hungry.”

“He certainly looks hungry for you.”

“They’re hungry for normal and the way life used to be, but it will never be that way again. Not after what they’ve seen and done. Look at them, a room full of women, all of them interested in those two guys, and yet no one approaches them. Everyone can see the minefield around them, keeping everyone away.”

“Come on,” Teri said, slipping off her stool.

“Where are we going?”

“To get those two hot and sexy guys to play pool with us.”

“Okay, but you’re partnering with Jack.”

Teri laughed. “No doubt. Caleb is all yours. The way he looks at you. You’re the light to his dark.” She tugged Summer’s hand and drew her through the crowd. They stepped up to the table, and Caleb and Jack stared up at them.

“Finally ready to go?” Jack asked.

“No,” she shot back. “I’m ready to play another round of pool. Come on, Caleb.”

“Let’s go, Jack,” Teri coaxed.

Caleb remained quietly passive, but Jack spoke up for them both. As usual.

“We didn’t come to play pool. We came to keep an eye on you and that yahoo you used to date.”

She spoke directly to Caleb. “Charlie is an old friend. Nothing more.”

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“You used to sleep with him,” Jack blurted out, making her jaw drop.

She snapped her mouth closed and glared at her brother.”Are we listing all the people we’ve slept with, because if we are, I can count the long-term relationships I’ve had on two fingers, while I’m sure we’ll need all our fingers and toes to count up the numerous women you’ve slept with and left in your dust.” She planted her hands on the table and leaned forward, right in her brother’s face. “Who I sleep with is none of your business.”

“It is when he’s a drunken jerk.”

“I am not interested in Charlie. The man I want is good and kind and makes me laugh when he puts his mind to it. He’s strong and resilient. Although he’s been through a rough couple of years, he wants the same thing I want for his future. A simple ranch life, living as husband and wife with our children, making a good life and growing old together, happy and in love.”

She felt the tension roll off Caleb beside her. Gaze on the beer bottle in his hand on the table, he gripped it so tightly his knuckles went white. Maybe she’d gone too far, pushed too hard for what she wanted, and he resisted. Usually she was not this bold, but he had to know how much she wanted him and the picture she’d painted for Jack. If he knew for sure that’s what she wanted with him, maybe he’d stop fighting against her and fight for her.

“Are you seeing someone?” Jack asked.

“I see him for the man he used to be, the man he is now, and the man he wants to be

for me.”

“Who is this guy?” Jack asked.

“He’s honorable and loyal to a fault.”

“Why haven’t I met him?”

“If he sat beside you, you wouldn’t see him, you’re so wrapped up in your own warped world.”

“What does that mean?”

Oblivious as usual; it made her sad. “Jack, I wish you could open yourself to the - people around you again.”

“I’m fine,” he grumbled, taking a deep swallow of his beer.

Time to retreat. He didn’t want to open up to her. For reasons she didn’t fully understand, he needed to defend himself against everything in order to cope with the dark world in his mind.

The tension in Caleb eased when she didn’t out their non-relationship to Jack.

“Let’s play.” She held out her hand to Caleb. He stared at it like some rattlesnake about to strike. Brooks & Dunn’s “Boot Scootin’ Boogie” played on the jukebox. Everyone formed lines and danced, smiling and laughing. Just what these two needed.

“Come on, cowboy,” Teri coaxed Jack.

Neither of them moved. Frustrated, Summer spun and fell onto Caleb's thigh, straddling it. She leaned back against his chest and crossed her arms.

"Summer," Caleb croaked, surprised by her daring action.

"I'm not moving until you say you'll play with me." The innuendo wasn't intentional, but made her smile all the same.

Caleb grunted. His hand clamped on to the side of her thigh and he turned his head, his lips to her ear. "Get off me."

She turned and glared, their faces an inch apart, his breath hot on her face as he breathed hard. He smelled of beer and peanuts, horses and leather and him. God, she could get used to being this close to him. Close enough to smell and touch and fall into his hungry gaze and arms.

His hand slid up the side of her thigh to her hip, blazing a trail of heat. He squeezed and kneaded. His words told her to go away, but his hand said stay.

"No."

"Honey, if you want to ride a cowboy, I'm all yours," Charlie called from two tables over where yet another girl turned down his drunken advances. He weaved toward their table. "Come dance with me, pretty lady."

Caleb growled an expletive and wrapped his arm around her middle, stood up, and took three steps toward the dance floor before her feet hit the ground again.

"You're dancing with me," Caleb ordered.

"Surrender, Jack," Teri said.

Her brother grunted, but stood and escorted Teri to the dance floor, too. “Don’t you have a husband to harass?”

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“He took the baby home after the tree lighting, so I could hang out with Summer.”

“If he’d taken you home, Summer would have come home with us.”

“Oh, stop. Having fun is not a crime. You might even enjoy yourself.”

Jack didn’t answer, just took Teri loosely in his arms and ushered her around the dance floor next to Summer and Caleb as Billy Currington’s “Pretty Good at Drinkin’ Beer” filled the raucous room.

Caleb resisted the urge to crush Summer to his chest. He held her rigidly at arm’s length, but slowed his pace enough to let Jack and Teri move several feet ahead of them and disappear behind three other couples. Summer stepped into him, closing the distance he tried to impose on her. The woman refused to give him any peace.

“Why are you doing this?” he asked.

“Deep down, you want me to.”

“I want you to back off.”

“If that were true, you wouldn’t be holding on to me so tight.”

He checked himself, loosening his hold on her hand and waist. “Sorry, did I hurt you?”

“Every time you deny yourself from being in my company.”

“Summer...”

“Caleb, shut up and dance. Be with me. Right here. In this moment. You and me and the music.”

He sighed and moved mechanically around the dance floor, looking anywhere but at her. He ignored the intoxicating scent of her citrus shampoo. Her soft skin made him ache to touch more. His thumb brushed along hers as he held her hand, and he stopped himself immediately. Her hand tightened in his, but he didn't acknowledge the unconscious stroke of his skin against hers.

The song ended and several couples, including Jack and Teri, moved back to their tables, or off to play pool. Caleb stood with Summer in his arms and hesitated just a second too long to escape. Garth Brooks's "The Dance" moved the couples around them into a soft sway and slow rotation around the dance floor. More couples joined in, and he and Summer were crushed between all the moving bodies. Summer shifted and moved with him, guided by his hand at the small of her back, pulling her closer. She settled against him like they'd danced like this a thousand times. His whole body jolted with heat at the contact. She sighed and her breasts rose and fell against his chest. He glanced down and couldn't stop himself from staring at the bounty before him. Her breasts rounded against her white sweater, the deep V between them enticing him to dive in and taste. Devour was more like it. One taste of her would never be enough. He'd need more and more, never content with just a sample. He needed all of her, or he'd spend the rest of his life wanting. She consumed his every thought and dream, that is, the good ones. The bad ones he could do without. But not her. He couldn't do without her, but he had to find a way.

“Relax. Teri made Jack sit facing away from us.”

Caleb glanced over at their table, and sure enough, Teri sat facing them, Jack's back to him, and she talked, keeping his attention. She caught him staring and gave him a

slight nod and a bright smile.

“Your friend thinks she sees something between us.”

“Everyone but Jack sees what’s between us. Deny it all you want, but I can feel the truth.”

“Summer...”

“Relax. Dance.”

She settled into him and laid her head on his shoulder. He gave in and wrapped his arms around her, steering her across the dance floor and as far away from Jack’s sight as possible. Shrouded in the back of the crowd, he held her close and prayed this song would never end, and if it did, that he could stop time and keep her close forever.

The song blended into the next slow song that kept the couples entwined and the atmosphere in the bar sultry. He didn’t need the music or the mood, he only needed the woman in his arms. For those few minutes, he didn’t think of anything but her.

The song ended and Jack let out a familiar whistle. One they used on night raids in the military.

“Time to go.” Reluctantly, he stepped away and took her hand to lead her back to the table. She stood firm and tugged him back.

“Don’t do that. Don’t leave me because he called you.”

“This can’t be.”

“It can if you want it.”

He didn't want to do it. Hurting her hurt him more than he could bear, but he endured it for both their sakes. "I don't want it."

"You lie."

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He put his hand to the small of her back and pushed her toward the table. She resisted, but fell in line with him after a few steps. He hated to do it, but the woman had pushed him time and again. A man could only take so much.

“Let’s go,” Jack announced when they reached the table.

Charlie stumbled over, hooked his arm around Summer’s shoulders, and pulled her close. Caleb had enough. He grabbed the guy’s hand, pulled it up and over Summer’s head, and wrapped it around the guy’s back and up behind his shoulder blades.

“Ow! Let go. I didn’t mean anything.”

“Caleb,” Summer snapped. “Let him go.”

“Summer’s my girl, I’d never do anything to hurt her,” Charlie swore, setting off Caleb’s temper even more. He pulled up on the guy’s arm, ready to snap it and him in two for even thinking, let alone speaking, that Summer belonged to him.

Summer settled her hand on his shoulder. “Caleb, honey, let him go. Take me home.”

Caleb released the dirtbag and shoved him forward. Teri caught him before he fell flat on his face. “Come on, Charlie, I’ll drive you home.”

“Finally, we’re out of here.” Jack shoved Charlie after Teri. When he tried to turn back for Summer, Jack grabbed him by the back of his neck and propelled him forward.

The crowd around them stopped staring and went back to partying and dancing since the brewing fight had been averted.

Summer stared up at him, her eyes saying so much without her saying a word. He broke the stare-down and grabbed her purse and jacket from the table, shoving them into her arms.

“Let’s go.”

Chapter Three

SUMMER SAT BETWEEN Jack and Caleb in the front seat of the truck. Tired from a long day and night, maybe one too many beers in the mix, she planted her feet on the dash, leaned back, and closed her eyes, snuggling closer to Caleb’s shoulder.

Jack’s gaze touched her face, but moved back to the road. She watched through her lashes, and when his interest stayed on driving, she settled more into Caleb. He sat beside her rigid and indifferent for several minutes before he relaxed again.

His hand settled over hers on the bench seat, hidden by her hips and his jacket sleeve.

“She asleep?” Jack asked.

“Yeah,” Caleb’s deep voice rumbled out the lie. She flipped her hand over and linked fingers with his. Their secret communication added a layer of danger. If Jack discovered them holding hands, well, she didn’t care, but Caleb did. She settled into him, and though he froze for a second, he settled back into her again. His pinky finger swept up and down against her thigh. She smiled on the inside as wave upon wave of shimmering tickles rippled over her skin from that one spot. Such a small thing, really, but it said so much. When it came right down to it, if she was close enough to touch without discovery, he reached for her in even this small way.

Caleb's heavy sigh drew Jack's attention in the quiet truck cab. Summer tried to keep her breathing even and not draw Jack's gaze.

"We've got a lot of work to do tomorrow, since we spent most of today doing the whole parade and Christmas tree lighting stuff to make Summer happy."

"The tree looked good," Caleb commented, indulging his inner beast with yet another stroke of his finger over Summer's thigh. He knew better, but didn't stop.

"Yeah. Every year my parents took us. When I was little, I loved seeing Santa. As a teen, it was a great opportunity to sneak off with a girl. Sam and I got into a lot of trouble back then."

"Same for me and my family. We always went to town for the holiday parades."

"You miss your folks?"

"Yeah. They're thinking of doing some traveling like your parents."

"You think your dad will actually leave the ranch?"

"He said Mom stayed with him all these years in Montana, the least he can do is follow her to whatever far-off place she wants to go."

"Sounds like my parents. Dad loves my mother something fierce. Never could say no to anything she wanted to do, but ranch life is everyday life."

"Yep. Dad's thinking of leaving Dane in charge. Gabe and Blake already have their own places. Dane spreads his time between all three spreads and the rodeo."

"Summer seems to be looking for something more in her life. Stuck here on the ranch

has severely limited her prospects if Charlie is the best she can do in this town.”

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“She’s not interested in Charlie.”

Summer squeezed his hand to let him know she agreed. He shouldn’t feel this relieved, but he did.

“I think she’s lonely,” Jack said, a touch of unease in his voice. “Maybe she’s not happy on the ranch all alone.”

“She loves the ranch and her life here,” Caleb answered for her.

“Do you know who this guy is she’s talking about?”

The truck slowed and took the sharp turn into the drive to the ranch, making Summer fall off balance.

“Jack, my love life is none of your concern.”

“It is when you’re talking about marrying some guy and having babies. You’re only twenty-three. You can’t possibly want to settle down.”

“Why not? If he’s the right man for me, why can’t I want those things?”

“Well, I don’t know. Who is he?”

“Does it matter who it is if I’m happy? Isn’t that what you really want for me no matter who the man is?”

“What? Yes. I guess. But you still haven’t answered.”

The truck stopped. Caleb released her hand, especially now that she wasn’t pretending to sleep and Jack had turned his attention to annoying her. Caleb slipped out of the truck and waited by the door for her exit.

“I’ll walk you home,” Caleb offered.

“What?” Jack looked around confused. “I keep forgetting you moved into the cabin. I’m so used to you living in the big house with me.”

“If you got more than a few hours’ sleep and stopped working yourself to death, you might think more clearly.”

Jack frowned, but didn’t deny her claim.

“See you tomorrow.”

“I can drive you over,” Jack offered.

“It’s not that far, I’ll be fine.”

“I’ll see her home. I need to stretch my legs anyway,” Caleb said, trailing after her.

The front door slammed behind Jack, and she and Caleb made their way along the gravel road and across the pasture to the cabin Jack built the summer before last. She’d moved in when Jack and Caleb took over the big house. She couldn’t be in there with both of them all the time. Her attraction to Caleb made it impossible to hide her feelings. Jack teased her about flirting with Caleb. That became annoying and embarrassing real quick. Jack made her out to be some lovesick teenager, and she desperately wanted Caleb to see her as a woman.

“You have to stop talking to Jack the way you did tonight.”

“When I told you, through my conversation with him, exactly what I want.”

“He’s my best friend, Summer. You do not date your best friend’s sister.”

“You do if you like her and want to get to know her better.”

“We know each other well enough. We spend a lot of time together.”

“Yes. The three of us have become very cozy ranch mates. I want more.”

“He saved my life. He’s my boss. I owe him more than taking his sister to bed to scratch a long neglected itch.”

Was that all he wanted? Sex. She didn’t think so, but still, her heart sank. She stepped onto the stairs leading up to the porch and turned to face him. On her elevated perch, they stood eye to eye.

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“So, what you’re saying is it isn’t worth risking your friendship with Jack to see if there could be something worth it between us.”

“I owe him my life. You never turn your back on a buddy. I’d lay down my life for his. He’d do the same for me.”

“So, there you go. You’ll give up a chance to be with me for your buddy Jack, a man who can’t see his best friend is hurting. A man who can’t see his buddy overfills troughs and stumbles over rocks because he’s too busy staring at his sister. Jack may be surprised, but he’d never turn his back on you. I’ve seen the bond you share. He cares for you like a brother.”

“Exactly. It’s complicated. You’re his baby sister. He’s protective of you.”

“He trusts you with his life. Don’t you think he’d trust you with my heart?”

Caleb planted his hands on his hips, hung his head, and shook it. “Summer...”

“I’ve overstepped, put words in your mouth, and made rash assumptions. You obviously don’t feel for me the way I feel for you. After all these weeks, what you must think of me, trailing after you all over the ranch and making excuses to see you.”

“It’s not like that,” he said, trying to let her down easy.

If the man didn’t want to date her because his loyalty to her brother outweighed his desire to be with her, what else was she to think? Time to back off and save some

pride.

“No need to explain further. I misread the situation. I’m sorry if I’ve embarrassed you, or made you feel uncomfortable.”

“You’ve done neither. I like being with you. If we’d met under other circumstances, maybe...”

“Yes, but here we are. I understand. Get some rest, Caleb. You look like you haven’t slept in a week.”

Unable to stop herself, she reached up to touch her fingertips to the dark smudges under his eyes, but dropped her hand just short of touching him. They both held their breath for a moment. She wanted all those bunched muscles he held so rigidly still to finally leap forward and bring her into his arms. No such luck. As always, he kept his thoughts, his emotions, his body just out of her reach.

“Good night. Sleep well,” he said, doing an about-face and stalking off.

Summer let him go without another word. The man was driving her insane. She unlocked the front door, closed it behind her without locking it, went through the dark living room and up the stairs to the loft. She stripped off her clothes, tossing them over the chair, and fell into bed naked, aching, and wanting a very large, confused male in her bed with her.

She thought over the conversation and realized one thing. He never said he didn’t want her. Maybe there was still hope.

CALEB STALKED BACK to the house, telling himself every step of the way that he couldn’t take his best friend’s sister to bed, make love to her all night, and wake up in the morning and still have his life remain exactly the same. That thought stopped him

cold. He turned and stared back at the large window in the peaked roof and thought of her in bed. Naked. Waiting for him to come to her.

She tied him in knots and made him think and wish for things he had no right wanting.

She was all he thought about. He'd never met another woman as happy and carefree. Someone who woke up smiling and giggled at the smallest things she found such delight in. More than just beautiful to look at, she had a big heart. When she spoke of family and friends and spending her life with him, he wanted to believe in the dream because she believed in it so deeply. She believed in him and his ability to make her happy the rest of her life.

The thought she might actually love him, scared him. What if he made her promises and couldn't keep them? What if the whole thing ended in her unhappiness? His blood chilled at the thought of hurting or disappointing her.

Well, he'd disappointed and hurt her tonight.

They'd never even kissed. They'd shared nothing more than a few flirtatious touches, like the soft caress he gave her in Jack's truck. So how could he feel this much and this deep for her?

How could she believe he didn't want her enough to go against Jack's wishes? She didn't. The devious woman just wanted him to think she thought that.

He smiled at the black windows, staring at him like some haunted house while she slept peacefully in her bed, irritating him because sleep eluded him more nights than he could count, and she knew that, too.

Right about one thing, he didn't know how Jack would react. Maybe he'd be okay

with Caleb dating his sister. Maybe not.

Again, everything inside Caleb stopped cold. He didn't just want to date her. He wanted to make a life with her. Days, weeks, months, years stretched ahead of him, and he wanted her by his side. Always. Forever.

He'd talk to Jack, broach the subject in a roundabout sort of way and gauge Jack's reaction.

What will you do if Jack is against your seeing his sister?

He didn't want to think about it anymore. Too bad his every waking thought revolved around her.

Chapter Four

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THREE DAYS AFTERhis late-night conversation with Summer outside the cabin, Caleb cornered Jack in his office and sat in the seat in front of his desk. Jack didn't say a word, or acknowledge him, but kept clicking away on his new computer, inputting data into his custom spreadsheets.

"Have you seen Summer in the last few days?" Caleb asked, breaking the lengthening silence.

"She's been working at the salon and helping out Mary at the diner, taking the evening shift," Jack answered with an easy tone.

"That place is a wreck. Someone should buy it and fix it up."

"Yeah." Jack's focus remained on the computer and work.

Caleb had no idea she'd been working two full-time shifts. To avoid him? He missed her and wanted to see her.

"What's up?" Jack asked.

"I was thinking of the other night. Summer and that loser Charlie. Did Summer ever date any of your or Sam's friends back in the day?"

"Why would any of our friends want to date her? You don't date your buddy's sister."

Well, that answered his unspoken question.

“Besides, she had her own friends and dated a couple of guys in her class. Charlie might have been drunk the other night, but that loser is in grad school. He’ll pull his act together and probably make more money than the two of us combined.”

“The ranch is doing better, right?”

“Dad and Mom got by and saved a small nest egg, but this place needs some major upgrades. It’ll be a couple of years before I’ve got it running the way I want.”

“I hate to make things harder on you, but I’m going home to Montana.”

“Your family wants you home for Christmas.”

“I’m moving back.”

“You’re serious?”

“Things just don’t feel normal.”

“I thought you liked it here.”

“I do. I love it, but there are things I want that I can’t get here.”

“What?”

“Look, man, this is your ranch and your family. After everything we’ve been through in the army, I need something of my own. Something I can build a life on.”

“I thought that’s what we were doing here together. Building this place, making a new kind of life.”

“We are, but this is your ranch.”

“Yes, but you’re the foreman. Haven’t we made most of the decisions together? We’re partners, right?”

“We have been, yes. It’s just ... I don’t know. I’m tired. I want to go home, see my family, regroup.”

“Nightmares.” Jack only needed to say that one word for them to share a knowing look that they each suffered the same nightly hell.

“Take all the time you need,” Jack said. “Your job and I will be here when you want to come back.”

“You mean that?”

“Of course I do. You saved my life. I owe you everything.”

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“Jack, man, you’re the one who saved me after that rocket-propelled grenade opened up my side and I nearly bled to death.”

“I may have stitched you back together, but you stayed by my side more times than I can count, holding off the enemy with gunfire while I helped one of our guys. Covering my ass is saving my life—and the guy bleeding at my feet.”

Caleb hung his head, hating to think about the things they’d seen and done to stay alive. Fighting as army Rangers, Jack a specially trained medic, they’d seen way too much killing and dying.

“When are you leaving?”

“In a few days. Maybe a week. I don’t want to leave you high and dry.”

“Don’t worry about me, man. I’ll manage without you until you come back.”

“What if I don’t come back?” Caleb hated to think he’d never see Jack again. Their friendship meant the world to him, but he couldn’t spend the rest of his life here, wanting Summer and never being able to have her. The nightmares tortured him enough. He couldn’t take anything more.

“I hope you don’t mean that. Summer will miss you. Seems you two became friends the moment we arrived.”

“I really like your sister. I’ll miss her.”

“Yeah, she’s been a bright spot in my dismal mind. I think she might be mad at me about the night at the bar. Maybe it’s time I stopped being the overprotective brother and let her live her life without my interference.”

“You want the best for her. It’s understandable.”

“I do, but she has to make the decision about what is best for her, not me.”

“When did you have this epiphany?”

Jack laughed. “I saw her the other night when she got home and we got into it. Those were her words, and she’s right. With my head the way it is right now, I can barely keep track of everything I need to do for the ranch, let alone figure out what my sister wants or needs.”

“I’ll let you know when I’ve got my plans set.”

Jack frowned, but gave him a nod. Caleb left the office and walked to one of the stall doors and Summer’s horse, Speckles. The mare came to him, dropping her head into his waiting hands for a scratch.

He let the feelings building inside him well up to the back of his throat, threatening to choke him. His chest ached. He feared he’d live with this miserable emptiness the rest of his life.

He pressed his forehead to the mare’s and sighed out his frustration and sadness.

“How am I going to say good-bye to her?”

Chapter Five

CALEB WORKED HIS body and mind numb for the week he didn't see Summer. She left for work each morning without coming up to the big house for coffee and breakfast. She came home after dark each night and hid away in her cabin. He did not breach the walls she put around her, both physical and mental.

The snowstorm last night kept her home this morning. The roads this far out of town wouldn't be plowed for several more hours. He'd have to find an opportunity to talk to her soon. With Christmas two weeks away, he needed to say his good-bye and get to Montana before the snows up there kept him here longer.

Lost in the rhythmic stroke of the brush over the horse in front of him, he didn't hear her come up behind him.

"Caleb." Her tentative voice made his heart ache. It shouldn't be like this. Not between friends.

Braced to face her, he held back a gasp, seeing her beautiful face framed in her golden hair. Sometimes, the woman took his breath away. Her blue eyes held a touch of sadness. She looked lovely in tight blue jeans and a red sweater beneath a brown leather vest lined in thick shearling.

"Jack told me you're leaving. Going home to Montana and your family."

He dropped the brush on a nearby shelf and took the few steps to stand in front of her. He owed her that much, to face her eye-to-eye when he said good-bye. He hoped she knew how much it broke his heart to leave her.

"I meant to tell you myself. I need time to figure out what I want to do."

"Time to heal, too. How long's it been since you slept a whole night?"

“I’m fine.”

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“That’s what Jack says. You both need ... well, neither of you cares what I think you need.”

“That’s not true.”

“Then why are you leaving?”

“Because it’s best.”

“For who?”

Caleb tucked his hands behind his back and bowed his head, unable to answer. Nothing he said would make sense, because leaving her didn’t make sense. Not when he wanted to be with her, and she wanted to be with him.

Summer sighed out her frustration and hurt. She rubbed one hand over the box in her hand and touched her fingers to the sparkling red bow. “This is for you.”

“What?”

“Your Christmas present. Since you won’t be here, I thought you’d like it now.”

“I’m not leaving for a couple of days.” He shouldn’t keep putting it off. He made one excuse after another to delay the drive to Montana. Why? He’d made up his mind to go. He should leave. Now. Before this got any more complicated and difficult.

Who was he kidding? Leaving her was impossibly hard.

“Open it.”

“Did you wrap this yourself?”

“Just for you.”

“It’s a pretty package. I hate to mess it up.”

“You don’t have to. Just lift off the lid. I’ll hold the bottom.”

The excitement built in his gut. He didn’t know what she’d bought him, he didn’t care. He’d have something to take home with him to remind him of her.

He pulled the lid free and set it aside at his feet. Tissue paper concealed the gift inside, so he pulled the loose paper away and took a step back, surprised and floored by the gift she’d picked out for him.

“Summer, that’s...”

“To remind you of who you really are. Who you were when you left for the war and who you are now. A cowboy.” She pulled the dark brown Stetson from the tissue paper and dropped the box on the floor. She closed the short distance between them and set the hat on his head. “Perfect fit, Montana Man. Matches your eyes,” she said, her voice husky with emotion.

“Summer, you ready to go?” Jack called from the open barn doors.

“Yeah, I’m ready.” Choked up, she swallowed hard and blinked away the shine in her bright eyes.

“Nice hat,” Jack said, stepping up to join them.

“Thanks,” Caleb said, unable to say anything more at the moment, gaze locked on Summer’s pretty face.

“No wonder you’ve been working all those extra shifts at the diner.” Jack’s gaze held his, and something came and went in his eyes Caleb didn’t recognize or understand. Did he suspect something going on between him and Summer?

“I can’t wait to see what you got me if you’re spending that kind of money on your friend.”

Again, Jack’s gaze shot to his, but fell back to his sister as he gave her an assessing stare.

“You won’t be disappointed,” she said, turning away from Jack’s scrutiny.

“Where are you two off to?” Caleb asked, confused the two of them would saddle up and ride out into the snow-covered hills.

“We always get the Christmas tree the first snow of December.” Jack continued to study Summer, then turned back to him. “Saddle up. I’ll need your help.”

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Caleb wanted to ignore the implied order. Technically, he still worked for Jack, even if he'd given his notice. This was a family thing. So why did Jack invite him along? Close as brothers, yeah, he felt like part of the family. Jack and Summer and the rest of them always made him feel a part of it.

What better way to say good-bye than one last ride, in the snow, picking out a Christmas tree. He'd add the memory to all the others and pull it out when he missed her most.

"I promised her. She's been down this last week. When you leave, it will just be me and her and maybe Sam at Christmas. She doesn't want us to forget or forgo all the things we did as a family growing up just because the whole family isn't together." Jack glanced at Summer again. "Come with us."

Did Jack finally see what he and Summer shared?

SUMMER HOISTED HERSELF into the saddle and walked Speckles around the yard in a circle, waiting for Jack to come out. When he did, with Caleb saddled on another sorrel, she hid her smile of surprise.

"Ready to go?" Jack asked, saddling up and riding toward her, the sled dragging behind his horse to pull the tree back.

"Yeah." This time she smiled. At Jack. "Thanks for doing this with me."

"I just want you to be happy, sis. You will bake Mom's chocolate chip almond cookies, right? You promised."

“It’s tradition,” she said, smiling and feeling lighter.

Caleb rode up beside her. Speckles took interest in his horse and scooted closer. Summer’s leg brushed against Caleb’s and sparks flew, their eyes met, and heat flashed in his eyes.

“Nice hat,” she teased.

“I love it,” he said, his voice deep and earnest.

“I’m glad you’re coming with us.”

“Me, too.”

Jack led them through the pastures to the old fire road that wound up into the hills. No one spoke, everyone taking in the beautiful, sunny, crisp day and the blanket of fresh snow covering the ground. The nude trees stood like sticks reaching up to the blue sky, making it easy to spot the evergreens as they searched for the perfect Christmas tree.

Caleb stayed beside her as the horses took them deeper into the forest. The quiet wrapped around them, creating an intimacy they’d never shared on the ranch. She loved it out here, and having Caleb with her in this place she loved made it all the more special.

They lost sight of Jack around a corner and Caleb pulled his horse close to hers again. Their legs rubbed together and another blaze of awareness and heat rushed through her. His hand covered hers on her thigh.

“You forgot your gloves.”

“I got distracted back at the barn.”

“Too busy giving me gifts and staring at me.”

She smiled, shy and embarrassed about being caught. She turned to the trees, avoiding his steady gaze.

He squeezed her hand, brought it to his mouth, and breathed on her frozen fingers. His warmth seeped into her.

“I like looking at you, too. You’re so beautiful.”

She sucked in a breath and turned to face him.

“Why do you always braid your hair?”

“It gets in the way,” she answered with the lame excuse for not taking the time to do her hair every day.

“I like it when it’s down.” He reached into his inner coat pocket and pulled out his olive drab ski cap and handed it over to her. “Here, put this on.”

She took it and went still when his fingers brushed against her earlobe, sending a shiver through her.

“Your ears are pink, sweetheart.”

Sweetheart?

“Caleb, I...”

“Are you two coming, or what?” Jack called from up ahead.

“If you’re too cold, you can have my jacket.”

“I’m fine. Thank you.”

He gave her hand a squeeze, indicating she should put the hat on. She did and he smiled at her. It felt like before everything got weird between them.

“Go on ahead. Catch up to Jack. I’ll be along in a minute.”

“You sure? I don’t mind staying with you.”

“I’m sure,” she said, smiling to encourage him to go and to hide the devious plan she hatched before leaving the barn.

Chapter Six

CALEB JOINED JACK around the bend and dismounted next to his horse. He tethered his horse to a tree limb and joined Jack in the middle of the road.

“Where is she?” Jack whispered.

“Why are we whispering?”

“Family tradition.” Jack held up a handful of snow. “Snowball fight.”

Caleb propped his new Stetson on the saddle horn. Like old times, Jack used hand signals for him to go left down a short embankment and follow the road back around the bend to come up behind Summer as she approached Jack. Caleb grinned and headed out, gathering up snow in each hand. He felt bad about ambushing her, but liked being part of her family traditions.

He made his way along the road inside the tree line. He had a moment of *déjà vu*, but shook off the demons that attacked him in the night, which he kept at bay during the day.

The spot he’d left Summer came into view and he stopped short, surprised to find the road empty. No way she got past him. He’d have seen her.

All of a sudden, two large snowballs pelted him square in the back of his head. Snow slid down his collar, chilling him. He held back a yelp and brushed it away and spun around to catch her with one of his snowballs. He didn’t see her. Cagey woman. So, she wanted to play. Well, he’d been trained by the best. No way she got away from him.

A twig snapped off to his right. She’d already passed him and closed in on Jack’s location. Caleb made a beeline for her and laughed when Jack grunted and yelled out, “Man, that’s cold.”

She got him, too. Impressed, he made a wide circle to come up behind her, but before he spotted her, she tagged him with another large snowball right in the chest. He looked down at the icy mess on his jacket and glanced up just in time to catch her jump down from a low tree branch and make a run for a clump of rocks.

He signaled Jack with a low whistle, caught a glimpse of him through the trees, and

gave him a hand signal to indicate Summer's direction. They smiled at each other. Caleb swore he heard Jack's thought, Just like old times. Caught up in the game, they stalked their prey.

He couldn't hide the crunch of snow under his boots, but neither could she. Ahead of him, he gathered icy ammunition. Snowballs at the ready, he came around a tree only to get pummeled by a barrage of snowballs. She laughed and launched another one when he chanced a look around the tree he hid behind. The snowball hit him smack in the face. He had to give her credit. The woman threw a mean snowball.

Jack whistled, signaling their attack. Caleb came out from cover firing. Jack did the same, twenty paces away. Summer took the high ground and stood atop a large boulder with at least a dozen snowballs at her feet. She launched one after the other at him and Jack as they advanced on her. Her laughter rang out in the forest, setting what few birds remained to flight. Jack laughed along with her and he joined in. The most fun he'd had in ... he couldn't remember when.

He and Jack pummeled her. He got her in the gut and one to the chest. Shock widened her eyes when the snow went down her sweater between her lovely breasts. She shook it out, but Jack didn't relent and hit her in the top of the head with another barrage. She stood to lob another at him and Caleb tossed another, hitting her in the thigh. She slipped on the icy rock, stood tall to gain her balance, but her other foot hit an icy patch and she fell backward, arms wind milling in the air. She disappeared off the back of the rock yelling, "Ow," when she hit the ground with a thump that stopped his heart.

"Summer," he yelled, and ran for her. He beat Jack and fell to his knees beside her. Without a thought, he wrapped his arm around her back and pulled her up to his chest and held her close, examining the gash on her head at her hairline. "Are you okay, sweetheart?"

She grabbed his shoulders to steady herself and gave him a tentative smile. “I’m okay. A branch caught me on the head when I fell.”

“You could have been really hurt.” He crushed her to his chest and held her close, giving his pounding heart a minute to settle.

Summer wrapped her arms around Caleb and set her chin on his shoulder, loving the feel of him so close. She looked up and caught Jack watching them with a strange look on his face. Caleb’s concern for her touched her deeply, and she couldn’t hide how that made her feel.

“You sure you’re okay?” Jack asked, not coming any closer.

“I’m good.” Being safe in Caleb’s arms made her feel better than good. She felt loved.

Jack gave her a nod.

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Caleb stiffened and pulled away, holding her by the shoulders at arm's length.

“Caleb, put some snow on that gash. It'll stop the bleeding and take down any swelling. I'll go up and check on the horses. Meet me up there when you've got her squared away.” Jack turned to leave, but looked back at her and smiled. “You were right about sticking to our traditions. The snowball fight was a lot of fun. You've gotten better.”

“I know. I won.”

Jack headed up the short hill, laughing. “Yeah, you did.”

Caleb's head fell to her shoulder. “I thought you were really hurt.”

Surprised he didn't comment about Jack seeing them in an embrace, she slid her fingers through his hair to the back of his head and held him to her. “It's just a small scratch. Nothing to worry about.”

“Jack'll kill me for putting a mark on you.”

“Not your fault. I slipped and fell.”

Caleb raised his head and met her gaze. “You're bleeding. I can't stand to see you hurt.”

The moment stretched and his eyes narrowed. He swore and crushed his mouth to hers. Something primal sparked inside both of them and they dove at each other, their

lips meeting in a frenzied need denied far too long.

His hands remained gentle, cradling her face, but his lips took possession and consumed. His tongue slipped past her lips to taste and slide against hers. Her fingertips dug into his shoulders, pulling him closer.

Caleb broke the kiss first, holding her head between his two hands. He didn't open his eyes right away, but gathered himself. They gulped in deep breaths and let them out on wispy gasps into the cold, crisp air.

He brushed a soft kiss on her forehead, her temple, and the small cut at her hairline. He pressed his forehead to hers and held her close. She covered his hands on both sides of her head with hers.

"Caleb, honey, it's okay."

"Jack's going to kill me."

"I think he knows there's something between us."

"He suspects, but if he caught me kissing you..."

"What? He wouldn't be your friend because you like his sister?"

"What I feel for you goes far beyond like, sweetheart."

"Then shouldn't he be happy for us, that we've found something special together?"

He stood and turned his back on her. The stab of pain in her heart hurt. She brushed her fingers through her unbound hair and realized that during their kiss he'd somehow knocked off her cap and undone her braid. She giggled, drawing his

attention.

“What’s so funny?”

“You.” She pointed to her head.

“What?”

“You couldn’t wait to get your hands on my hair.”

The look on his face and the hot gaze he swept over her body said he’d like to get his hands on a lot more than her hair.

“It’s really soft and always smells like spring flowers.” His massive shoulders went up and down in a dismissive shrug he didn’t really mean. The moment they shared meant something deep and profound. As much as it meant to her.

She took his offered hand and he pulled her up to her feet. He took the cap from her hand and slid it over her head, making sure it covered her ears. His fingertips brushed the small cut.

“You okay?”

“I’m fine. Are you okay?” she asked, knowing he needed some rest and, unfortunately, more time to figure things out.

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Without a word, he took her into his arms and held her close. She settled her chin on his shoulder and hugged him.

“I’m leaving in a couple of days.”

She fell back onto her flat feet, reached up, and cupped his rough cheek in her palm. “Trying to convince me, or you?”

She walked up the hill, met Jack by the horses, and pointed out a beautiful spruce. “That one is just the right shape and height. Let’s get it.”

“How’s the head?” Jack asked.

Her heart hurt more over losing Caleb before they’d ever really had a chance. “I’ll be fine,” she said, as much for his benefit as her own.

Jack’s gaze fell on Caleb coming up behind her. He wore that same strange look.

“Grab the saw. Let’s get Summer her tree.”

Caleb grabbed the two-man saw from the sled. They worked together to cut the tree down and load it. The bond between them showed in the way they joked and teased, and the easy way in which they worked in unison. They’d spent years working together, bonded by what they’d seen and done in the name of freedom. For the first time, she really understood and saw why Caleb clung to his friendship with Jack, instead of following his heart. They shared a bond born of need and necessity, forged during a time when trust and loyalty meant life or death.

Caleb stopped midstride to his horse and stared at her. She met his steady gaze and silently let him know she understood with a simple nod. He frowned, planted his hands on his hips, and nodded once to let her know he understood. She felt the wave of grief roll off her and blend with the wave of anguish he let out with a heavy sigh.

“It’s time,” Jack called from up ahead.

She mounted her horse and followed them. Yes, time to let him and the sweet dream of a future with Caleb go.

Chapter Seven

CALEB HELDSUMMER’S legs just above the knee as she stood on the ladder and put the star at the top of the twelve-foot tree. She smiled down at him. He had to admit, he loved her idea of using only white, silver, green, and red decorations. The tree looked elegant, like it belonged in some home decorating magazine. White bows; silver, red, and green glass balls in varying sizes; and cranberries strung together by all of them. The smell of cinnamon and hot apple cider filled the air, mingling with the tangy pine scent. The fire crackled in the huge stone hearth. Country Christmas. Perfect. Just what Summer wanted. Home and tradition. Family and friends gathered together around the tree.

He wanted to stay. He dreamed of making love to Summer, waking with her in his arms on Christmas morning, and sitting with her on the floor next to the tree opening presents, sharing some laughs, and enjoying the company and the holiday together.

“Caleb, we need to get down to the barn and finish our work for the day,” Jack’s voice intruded on his thoughts. Dreams that would never come true.

He indulged his inner beast and slid his hands down Summer’s outstanding legs before he stepped back, watching as she came down the ladder, ready to catch her if

she fell. She wouldn't, of course; not agile, capable Summer. Still, the compulsion to keep her safe overrode good sense sometimes.

Summer stepped off the ladder and headed straight for Jack. She wrapped her arms around him and hugged him tight. Caleb wished that hug and smile were for him.

"Thanks, Jack. It turned out beautiful."

"Cookies. You promised."

Summer's laugh hit him in the gut. He loved the sound of it and would remember it for the rest of his lonely days.

"I promise. I'm off to the cabin. I've got more presents to wrap."

"Thanks again," Caleb said, drawing Summer's attention back to him. He placed the Stetson on his head and touched his finger to the brim.

"You're welcome." She bit her rosy lip, her gaze falling to the floor before she looked back at him. "You won't leave without saying good-bye, right?"

He gave her a noncommittal nod, which didn't please her, judging by the deep frown, but she let it go. He didn't know if he could say good-bye to her. Not when everything in him wanted to stay and be with her.

They walked out of the house together. Summer took the road back to her cabin and he followed Jack to the barn, neither of them saying anything. Inside the house, everything seemed fine and normal. They walked through the barn to Jack's office. When they entered, Jack turned and faced him, his eyes blazing with anger.

"Did you sleep with my sister?"

“No.”

“But you want to?”

Caleb didn't answer that loaded question, which set Jack off, because anyone who'd seen him near Summer in the last few months knew he wanted her. No hiding something this strong and powerful.

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Never underestimate an enemy or a girl's overprotective brother. Caleb took the blow to the jaw in stride, surprised but accepting of Jack's anger all the same.

He rubbed the side of his face and worked his jaw side to side until the sting subsided.

"I did not and I will not sleep with your sister, man."

"What? She's not good enough for you?"

Caleb wanted to laugh, but held it back. "She's the best person I know. She's smart and kind and cares about everyone around her."

"So all you want to do is sleep with her."

Anger flared, but he kept it in check. "You're my best friend. I'll forgive and forget the punch and that remark about my character. Let this go. I'm leaving day after next and how I feel about Summer won't matter."

"You can forget her that easily?"

"Man, what do you want from me? I'm trying to do the right thing here."

Jack's cell phone rang. He pulled it out of his pocket and checked caller ID, smiling, but not in a good way.

"Sam," he answered with his twin brother's name, putting the call on speaker. "Guess

what? I'm here with Caleb..."

"Did he and Summer set the forest on fire yet?" Sam asked without Jack having to say anything.

"What?" Jack asked, confused and suspicious.

"You saw the two of them at Thanksgiving. Seriously, how long can two people who want each other that bad stay apart? I mean, I'm surprised the whole ranch didn't combust the moment those two met."

Jack and Caleb stood not two feet apart staring at each other, the silence between them lengthening.

"Jack?" Sam's voice broke the awkward silence.

"You're my best friend," Caleb said. "You saved my life and gave me this job when I needed something to do beside sink into nightmares. We stick together and work side by side to make this place better, just like we fought side by side against our enemy. I would never do anything to jeopardize the trust we share, or dishonor everything you've done and given me."

"Caleb, man, is this why you've been so down? You want to be with Summer, but because of our friendship you've stayed away from her? You're leaving because you can't be here with her and, well, not be with her?"

"Duh," Sam said. "I for one think the two of you would be great together, even if Jack is too dense to see it."

How could two people who looked and acted exactly alike see things so differently? Sam saw what was between Caleb and Summer, but Jack refused to see it all these

weeks when it was right in front of him.

“I always thought you two had a lot in common. You relate to each other so easily. When she’s around you always seem lighter, like whatever troubled you eased away,” Jack said.

“She makes him happy,” Sam said.

Caleb refused to answer, because despite Jack finally understanding how he felt, he still didn’t look happy about it. Jack also didn’t give any indication that he’d be okay with Caleb dating his sister.

“Are you in love with my sister?” Jack asked the bold question.

Caleb evaded. “It’s like you said, you don’t date your buddy’s sister.”

“Forget what I said.”

“Yeah, what the hell does he know,” Sam teased.

“Would you really leave this ranch, go back to Montana, live five hundred miles away from her just to save our friendship?”

Caleb didn’t answer. His bags were packed, and Jack knew it.

“You’d leave my sister, make her unhappy, just so nothing would change between us?”

Again, Caleb remained silent.

“What the hell kind of friend are you? What kind of friend do you think I am that I wouldn’t want you to be happy? I saw the look on her face when she gave you that hat and when you held her after she fell and hurt her head.”

“What hat? Summer fell? Is she okay?” Sam asked, but Jack ignored him.

“In the house, she smiled down at you from the ladder.” Jack ran his fingers through his hair and stared hard at Caleb. “My sister is in love with you.”

Caleb understood Jack’s turmoil. When it hit him how deeply he loved Summer and discovered she returned that love, though neither of them acknowledged it to each other, it had taken him some time to get used to the idea and let it settle in. He’d waited for the rush of fear, the need to run from any kind of commitment, but found all he wanted to do was be with her. Sam nailed it. She made him happy.

“Catch up, Jack. It’s obvious they love each other, the only question left is, when’s the wedding?”

Jack sat on the edge of his desk and crossed his arms over his chest. “Yes, Caleb, when is the wedding?”

Caleb opened his mouth, but shut it again. He had no idea how to answer. Did she want to marry him? She said as much that night in the bar a week ago.

Jack read his mind. “That night at the bar. She said she wanted a simple ranch life,

married with children. Did you knock up my sister?"

"No," Caleb answered immediately, knowing death waited if he didn't make that clear.

"Sounds to me like you've kept them apart," Sam pointed out.

Caleb assumed that would make Jack happy; instead, he frowned even more.

"I'm sorry, man. I'm trying to wrap my head around this. My best friend and my sister. All this time, I thought you two were just friends."

"The only reason a man wants to be that close of friends with a woman is because he wants to sleep with her."

"Sam, you're not helping," Caleb said diplomatically, when all he wanted to do was tell Sam to shut up.

"Listen, Summer and I are friends. That's all. Because of our friendship, yes, I've kept my feelings for her in check. Now that you know..." Caleb took a minute to collect his thoughts. "I care deeply for your sister."

"Then stay. You're the kind of guy I'd want with my sister."

"You're a good man," Sam added. "I don't know that I'd have put my friendship with anyone above the woman I want, but you did because of what you and Jack have been through together. That says a lot about you. Jack will agree, Summer can see through any guy who's trying to play her. She knows her own mind and it's set on you. If you leave, you'll both always wonder what could have been."

"If she's what you want, if she makes you happy, and the same is true for her, stop

worrying about what I think and go be with her,” Jack added.

“The thing is, I do care what you and Sam think. You’re her family. That’s important to her and me.”

Jack stood and held out his hand.

Caleb took it and they shook, but Jack didn’t let go. “It’s because you care that much about what I and the rest of the family think that I know you’re right for her. No matter what happens between the two of you, I know you have no intention of hurting her. That’s enough for me.”

“Me, too,” Sam reiterated.

Jack pumped his hand one last time and let go.

Caleb took a minute to let his mind wrap around the new reality he faced. “Um, I have to go. I have some Christmas shopping to do.”

Jack waited for Caleb to hightail it out of his office before he let his smile show.

“How much do you want to bet he buys her a ring?” Sam asked.

“No bet. Looks like Caleb really will be my brother.”

“You two have been that close for years. You’ll get over him being with Summer.”

“I’m over it already. I just needed to know he’s as serious as she is.”

“Did she say something to you?”

“No. During the snowball fight, she fell and scraped her head. He rushed to her, frantic she was hurt bad. He held on to her like his life depended on it. The look in her eyes. I knew.”

“Hundred bucks says we’re uncles within a year.”

“No bet. He had this look about him when he left here.”

“Yuck,” they said in unison, laughing together. Jack felt better for it. He envied his best friend. Finding someone special to share his life was probably not in the cards for him.

Chapter Eight

CALEB WOKE WITH a start, breathing heavy, his heart pounding so hard his chest hurt. He shook off the savage wartime nightmares along with the sweat-soaked sheets. Naked, he padded into the bathroom and ran cold water into the sink, scooping up handfuls and splashing it over his face. He grabbed a washcloth and soaked it, dragging it over his body to wipe away the sweat. Chilled, he dried off with a soft towel Summer had helped him pick out on one of their many supply runs in town.

Just thinking about her tightened his body until he was hard and aching for her. The clock read the same time he got up most nights. Two twenty-two.

Awake, but tired to the bone, he'd never get back to sleep. He dragged on sweats, a t-shirt, socks, and shoes, and grabbed his jacket. Quiet and deliberate, he moved through the house and went out the kitchen door and down the path toward the front of the house. He veered right and took the path to the cabin, but didn't go too close. Instead, he went around back and stood in his usual spot on the bank of the creek and listened to the rushing water. For whatever reason, the monotonous tone soothed his mind and evened out his heart and breathing. Okay, he also had secretly hoped for weeks that Summer would find him out here and they'd ... well, he'd be warm in her bed and not freezing his ass off right now.

I better buy one of those noise machines before I'm walking hip-deep through snow to an iced-over creek.

He let the quiet night clear his mind and reminded himself he'd left that life behind for something better.

Yeah, your something better is in that cabin and you're out here in the cold.

He couldn't believe Jack gave him the all-clear. He'd waited months to be with her; he could wait until tomorrow, explain what happened with Jack and Sam, and ask her for a date.

Cold, exhausted, his mind a whirlwind of thoughts of Summer and war, he turned to stare at the cabin and sort out his thoughts about his future—with her. It had to be with her, because he just couldn't go on without her. The minute Jack and Sam didn't freak about him with their sister, he realized he'd have been back for her. No amount of time or distance would ever let him forget her, or allow him any kind of peace.

At first, he didn't believe his eyes. He thought her a golden dream in the midst of his nightly wandering, but there she stood on the back porch, blond hair haloing her beautiful face and floating around her back and shoulders on the wind. She held her

arms wrapped around her middle, warding off the cold. He liked her in nothing but a t-shirt and pajama bottoms, bare feet poking out the bottoms. She shivered, her nipples standing out against the cotton t-shirt.

She reached out one hand to him, palm up, offering for him to take it. He didn't need any more invitation than that and closed the distance between them with quick, long strides. He took the five steps up to the deck, took her hand, pulled her into his chest, and wrapped his arms around her.

"Aren't you cold, sweetheart?"

"Aren't you tired?" Her arms held him tight, and he squeezed her back, needing her comfort. Tired of the nightmares, fighting his need for her, tired of being without her.

"You're out here almost every night, lost and alone and hurting."

"You knew?"

"You never once came to the cabin."

"I couldn't."

"You know I'm here. I left the door open, hoping you'd want to be with me, but you never came."

"So, tonight you came to get me."

"You're leaving. I don't care if we only have this one night. Isn't it better than spending the rest of our lives wondering what we might have shared?"

"We don't have one night."

She pulled out of his arms and stared up at him with eyes so filled with hurt, his chest tightened and his throat ached.

“You’re really going to leave and that’s it. I have no say. My feelings don’t matter. Caleb, please, stay with me.”

“Okay,” he interrupted, but she kept talking over him.

“We can work this out. Jack will understand.”

“He does.”

“Wait, did you say okay?”

“Come inside. We need to talk.”

“Talk now.”

“You’re freezing. In another minute, you’ll have frostbitten toes.”

“I don’t care. Tell me what you mean.”

Talking wasn’t his strong suit, so he wrapped one arm around her back and dragged her body against his. He took her mouth in a passionate, possessive kiss that spoke far better than any words. He brushed the hair from her face and buried his fingers in the mass of golden silk. He slid his tongue over hers, tasting her sweetness and filling up his heart and soul with her love. He didn’t need the words to know. He felt it in the way she returned his kiss, pouring everything she was into telling him how much she needed and wanted him. Her body molded to his and she rocked her hips against his hard cock pressed to her belly. A deep moan escaped him to match the soft one she let loose when he tilted her head and took the kiss deeper.

He could take her to bed right now, love her into the night, and seal the bond they’d shared since the moment he met her, but he owed her more than that. He needed her to understand why he’d kept her at arm’s length all this time. He needed to find a way to tell her how much she meant to him. He loved her, and she deserved to be told in the most perfect way.

With a heavy heart and deep reluctance, he broke the kiss, stroking his fingers lightly over her cheek. Her eyes fluttered open, filled with passion.

“We need to talk, sweetheart.”

“I don’t want to talk.”

She went back up on tiptoe and kissed him, her arms locked around his neck. “Take me to bed,” she said against his lips.

He’d like nothing better, and would probably kick his own ass tomorrow for not doing it, but he wanted to do this right.

He backed her toward the door without breaking the kiss. Careful of her toes, he stepped cautiously on the outside of her feet, which only brought her soft, lovely body closer to his. Such sweet torture. He indulged himself with the feel of her against him as he reached for the doorknob and walked her into the warm cabin and shut out the cold.

Caleb kicked the door shut behind them. Those strong yet gentle hands swept down her neck to her shoulders where he pushed her away, breaking the kiss at the last second when she couldn’t reach him anymore, and he held her at arm’s length, sucking in one deep breath after another to calm himself. She had to admit, she needed a minute, too. If they kept this up, they’d set the cabin ablaze.

“I need to talk to you.”

This time, the deep richness of his voice penetrated. Whatever he had to say was more important than sating their shared hunger for each other.

She took his hand and led him to the sofa. He fell into it, exhausted from too many

nights without sleep. Still chilled, she went to the fireplace and lit a match to the paper. The kindling and logs crackled as the fire took hold and burned. She held her frozen hands to the warmth and gave Caleb a minute to collect himself.

She turned and found his gaze had been plastered to her ass. She gave him a knowing smile.

“You are so beautiful.”

She appreciated the compliment because the words didn’t come easy for him. He didn’t toss out flattery just to flirt. He meant it.

“Yeah, it’s unfortunate you got stuck with that handsome face and rock-hard body,” she teased.

“I like kissing you even more.”

“Then why are we wasting what little time we have left together talking?”

“We have all the time in the world. I’m not leaving. Well, not without you.”

“Do you want me to come with you?”

“No.”

She opened her mouth to question him, but he held his hand up to stop her.

“I’m sorry. I’m not doing a very good job explaining.”

“Are you asking me to move to Montana with you?”

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“I think we should live here. This is your home, the place you love most, and I want to keep working with Jack.”

“When you say we should live here, you mean the way things have been?”

“No, the way I think we both want it to be.”

Hope rose up so swift, her throat ached. Her eyes filled with unshed tears and she prayed he meant what she thought he said, but she didn't say. She'd spent too many days and weeks hoping for this.

“What are you saying exactly?”

“I talked to Jack and Sam today. Well, yesterday at this point. I told them I have feelings for you. Deep feelings, and I want to be with you.”

“You do?”

“More than anything, but you already know that.”

“And my meddling brothers gave you their blessing?”

“Sam already knew how we felt about each other.”

“He's an FBI agent. Nothing much gets past him.”

“Jack didn't take it as well at first.”

“But he’s your friend and knows you aren’t messing around.”

“I’m not messing around,” he confirmed, giving her one of those deep, penetrating stares that said so much when they’d been unable to speak to each other about how they really felt. He didn’t want a casual affair, dating just to have fun with no strings attached.

“This is serious.”

“Yes,” he confirmed.

Her stomach did a flip-flop. She held back the joyful squeal. He looked far too serious for her to go all girly on him.

“How serious?”

“We’ve wasted so much time already, and while I want to do this right, I don’t want to draw this out for months.”

So the man took all this time to finally come around and now he was in a hurry to bind her to him.

“We’re on the same page.” She hid another secret smile. Oh, he might think he had this all planned out, but she had plans for him, too.

It hurt her to see him dig the heels of his hands into his tired eyes and exhale so deeply she felt his relief.

She went to him, stood between his knees, and combed her fingers through his short brown hair. “It’s okay, I’m not mad it took you forever to tell me you want to be with me.”

He laughed and wrapped his arms around her middle and rested his forehead to her belly. “You should be.”

“The point is, now we can be together and you have a clear conscience.”

“I wish I did.”

“I thought you said Jack is okay with our seeing each other.”

“He is. It’s not about him, but other stuff.”

“The stuff that keeps you from sleeping.”

He fell back against the couch and stared up at her, so much turmoil in his sad eyes.

“The things I’ve seen, and even worse, done, haunt me. Maybe after everything I’ve been through, I’m not the right man for you, or anybody.”

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“Caleb,” she whispered, “you are a good and decent man. It takes a brave and strong man to do the necessary things you did and survive.”

He reached for her hand and pulled her down on the couch next to him. He needed to talk about his time in Iraq and put it behind him.

“Tell me about your life over there. How did you and Jack spend your days?”

“You don’t want to hear about any of that.”

“I think you need to remember that there were moments when things were good.”

“Being here with you is good.”

“You will always be with me.”

“Do you mean that?”

“If it’s what you want.”

Caleb didn’t say anything, just reached up and cupped her cheek in his hand, his fingers sliding into her hair. She leaned into his touch and gave him a smile. Something he had a hard time doing most days.

“Did you and Jack live in a tent? How hot was it there?”

She hoped the innocuous questions would get him talking. Reluctantly, he gave her

the answers. She waited patiently, and with a sigh, he elaborated and told her one story after another. He talked about the people, the children, and the markets. How he had to be on guard at all times against roadside IEDs and suicide bombers. He talked about Jack and the team of soldiers they worked with and the kind of work they did.

Late, his voice trailed off after a cute story about playing soccer with some of the local boys, and he and Jack coaxing some of the little girls to play, too.

She sat beside him, her head on his shoulder, listening and letting him talk about the ghosts he lived with. He leaned in and kissed her forehead.

“Now, when I sleep, I see nothing but the enemy coming at me through the dark, and my guard goes up and my heart pounds, and it’s all I can do not to sit watch with a gun in my hand praying for daylight.”

Those words tore her heart to shreds. After everything he’d been through, he couldn’t even find peace in sleep.

He went quiet after that, staring into the dying fire as the quiet wrapped around them. She shifted into the corner of the couch and pulled his hand to make him lie with her.

“I’ll squish you, sweetheart.”

“Tonight, I’ll keep watch and you sleep.”

He opened his mouth to protest, but she put her fingertips to his lips. “Just try.”

He settled onto the sofa, toeing off his shoes, and settling between her legs with his back to her chest and his head on her shoulder. She wrapped her legs around his waist, one arm over his chest, her hand over his heart. She brushed her fingers through his hair again and again. It took a few minutes before he relaxed into her and

his breathing evened out. She leaned in and kissed his temple, still brushing her fingers through his hair. She stared at the flames in the fire and sighed.

“You’re safe with me,” she whispered.

His big hand covered hers on his chest. Within seconds, the tension in him gave way, and he fell asleep in her arms.

She stayed awake, watching over him until the predawn twilight broke the dark night. Sometime later, Caleb shifted to his stomach, dragging her beneath him. He slept with his head on her breasts and his arms wrapped around her.

That’s how Jack found them when he tapped her shoulder to wake her.

She squinted against the bright morning sun. Jack held up his hands in a gesture to ask. What’s up with Caleb?

She pointed to her forehead and then held her hand up with her index and thumb held up like a gun. That’s all Jack needed to understand Caleb couldn’t sleep because he’d been having nightmares. She wondered how many nights Jack lay awake at night, alone, and wishing for someone to protect and watch over him so he could find some peace.

Jack reached over to wake Caleb, but she grabbed hold of his wrist and held him off with a glare. He tried to pull free, but she gave him a dirty look, and he relented, so she released him.

“She’s fierce, isn’t she?” Caleb asked, opening his eyes and raising his head from her chest to stare up at Jack.

“She can be.”

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Caleb rubbed at his eyes with one hand and met her gaze. He smiled. “Hey,” he said, looking rested and good.

“Good morning.”

“Yes, it is.” His gaze roamed down Summer’s face to her breasts. He shot Jack a sheepish look, but didn’t apologize for where he’d spent the night.

“I take it I’m late for work.”

“By more than four hours. It’s after ten.”

Surprised, Caleb met Summer’s steady gaze and silently thanked her with a look. She brushed her fingers through his hair as she’d done so many times last night that the gesture felt familiar now.

“Sorry, man, I overslept.”

Jack studied Caleb for a minute before he answered. “The point is, you slept.”

Caleb might have taken that answer to mean he’d slept and not spent the night making love to the woman underneath him. They didn’t often talk about it, but they shared the same experiences and suffered many of the same consequences.

“I have Summer to thank for that. She found me wandering outside last night.”

“Yeah, I heard you leave.”

Which meant Jack hadn't slept either, and Caleb hadn't made it out to help Jack with the horses this morning, leaving him to do all the work.

"Sorry. I'll get dressed and be down to help you..."

"I'll see you when you get there," Jack said with an easy tone and turned and walked out the front door like nothing happened or mattered.

Caleb laid his head back on Summer's breasts, indulging the raging beast inside him even as he ruthlessly beat him back from taking her right here on the couch. She'd saved him from another sleepless night, and he wouldn't repay her generosity by forgoing all the things they'd denied each other these last months. She deserved better, and he'd give it to her no matter how hard his body protested the self-imposed celibacy. He'd gotten through it this long, he could hang on until they shared a few dates, cemented their relationship on solid ground, and solidified their bond to each other.

Her fingers worked through his hair in that hypnotic way that eased all his muscles and made all the thoughts in his head disappear.

"What time do you have to be at work?" he asked, wishing for more time to stay like this, but knowing they both had responsibilities.

"An hour ago."

He shot up and leaned over her with his hands on both sides of her shoulders. "Ah, honey, I'm sorry. Why didn't you wake me?"

"I fell asleep, too. Besides, you needed the rest." Her hands came up to cup his face. "You look so good this morning."

“How could I not, waking up with you?”

She smiled, leaned up, and kissed him. He kept things light, brushing his lips against hers like he had all the time in the world.

She fell back into the pillow and smiled up at him. “Want to play hooky with me today?”

“Yes, but...”

“You’re already late and you don’t want to give Jack any reason to think you and I seeing each other is a bad thing.”

“You know me so well.”

“You better get up then.”

“I don’t want to,” he teased, rocking his hard cock against her sweet center where his hips rested between her wide thighs.

“I’m already late, another hour won’t matter.” Completely serious, her gaze locked on his.

“Ah, Summer, you deserve so much better.”

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“I have exactly what I want.” Her hands slid up his chest and around his neck. She pulled him down for a kiss that turned hot and needy in seconds. His tongue slid past hers while her hands roamed down his back to the hem of his shirt. Her fingers slipped beneath and skimmed up his bare skin, sending a shiver down his spine. He kissed a trail down her neck to the swell of her breast. He licked the round softness and grabbed her shirt with his fingertips and dragged it down, taking her hard nipple into his mouth. She arched up, offering him more, and he took it, hungry to bury himself in her soft heat.

She rocked her hips, grinding herself against the hard length of him, making him groan. The woman was lethal. He shifted and her leg fell off the couch, her foot hitting the floor with a soft thud, bringing him back to his senses. He didn’t want to make love the first time in a frenzied need on the couch. He wanted her in a bed, where they had all the space they needed to explore and the time to do it right without the outside world intruding.

With a heavy heart, he released her sweet breast from his lips, kissed the rounded top, and laid his forehead to hers, taking in deep breaths to calm his raging body and leash the inner beast again.

“Woman, you’re going to be the death of me.”

“Don’t stop and we’ll both die happy.” She slid her hands down his back to his ass and squeezed while pushing him closer to her. He nearly disgraced himself.

In one swift motion, he gave her a quick kiss and pushed off her to stand beside the couch, looking down at her adorably rumpled hair and clothes and the gorgeous

woman beneath.

“God, you’re beautiful.”

Her smile and brilliant blue eyes softened at his words.

“What time will you be home from work?” he asked.

“About six-thirty. Why?”

“Have dinner with me.”

“Okay.”

“I need a cold shower before I go to work. I’ll see you tonight.” He made it two steps out the door and went back. She sat on the sofa and looked up at him. He leaned down, gave her a quick kiss good-bye, and grabbed his shoes from beside her pretty feet.

“Forgot my shoes.”

Her giggle followed him all the way out the door and down the steps. It made him feel light and happy. He carried that feeling with him through the day.

Chapter Nine

CALEB HIT THE bottom of the stairs, stood in the foyer, and checked his watch. He had an hour. Probably not enough time to do all the things he planned, but he’d rush and hopefully give Summer a really great surprise.

“Where are you going?” Jack came down the stairs freshly showered, too.

“Over to Summer’s place. I’m surprising her with dinner.”

“She’ll be surprised if it turns out edible.” Jack slapped him on the back and laughed.

Caleb joined him, and some of the tension in his gut eased. “So, you’re cool with this?”

“Look, any other woman, I’d be all for it. This is my sister, which means you’ll be extra careful about the way you treat her. Not that you aren’t nice to women in general, but ... ah, you know what I mean. So, yeah, we’re cool.”

Caleb smacked Jack on the back and headed for the kitchen to grab the rest of his supplies.

“Need some help?”

“I’ll take the box, you take the bag.”

Caleb turned to grab the bag from Jack at his truck and found him with his face practically inside the thing.

“Wine, pasta, sauce.” Jack pulled out the flowers. “Pink roses. All her favorites. You went all the way to town to get her flowers?”

“After I hit the grocery store. Yeah.”

“Did you get any work done today?”

“Not much,” Caleb said with a sheepish smile. “I want to do this right. You may not want to hear this, but I have some making up to do with Summer for all the times I avoided her, or made it seem like this thing between us wasn’t really there at all. I

hurt her feelings more times than I care to count. I'm moving forward, and that woman is going to be mine by Christmas."

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For a second he thought he'd gone too far, revealed too much.

Jack's face lit up, and he let out a hearty laugh. "You've got it bad, man."

"You have no idea."

"Please, no details." Jack held up his hand and made a disgusted face. Caleb laughed with him and it felt like old times. "What's with the tree and other boxes in the back?"

"She's so into the Christmas tradition thing, I thought she might like to have a small tree at the cabin. I'm going to set it up before she gets home with some of the extra decorations."

"Want some help?"

"Actually, I'd like to do it myself."

"She'll love it."

"I want to make her happy."

"The tree, flowers, dinner, her favorite dessert, whatever else you've got planned tonight." Jack went quiet for a second. "I don't want to think or know what you've got planned for later tonight. All of it, you, will make her happy."

"Thanks, Jack. I gotta go if I'm going to get all this set up before she gets home."

“Call my cell if you need me to stall her. I can ask her up to the house for some reason or another.”

Caleb nodded and climbed behind the wheel and drove across the property to the cabin. He might not be a gourmet cook, but he could throw together a decent meal. Pasta sauce soon simmered on the stove. A green salad sat on the dining table.

To shake off his nerves, he set up the fresh-cut pine in the living room and decorated the boughs with soft white lights, and green, red, and silver glass balls.

Next, he built a fire and set it ablaze. Yes, the cozy living room looked perfect.

He checked his watch and his heart raced. Summer would be home any minute. He set the table and grabbed the wine glasses out of the cupboard just as Summer’s car pulled up out front. He met her just as she came in the door, flowers in his hand.

“Hi, sweetheart.”

“What’s all this?”

“Dinner.”

“Is Jack coming?”

“Let me clarify.” He stepped close, wrapped his free hand around her back, and pulled her close, his lips meeting hers just as she gasped when her body slammed into his. He took complete possession, sliding his tongue along hers in one long sweep. She melted into him, and something inside him sighed with such relief he felt a hundred pounds lighter. He ended the kiss with a soft brush of his lips over hers.

“Dinner date.”

“Huh?”

“Our first date. Jack is not invited.”

“Something’s burning.”

“Me for you.”

“No. Well, yes, but something in the kitchen is burning.”

Caleb smashed the flowers into her chest and hands and ran for the kitchen, pulling the bread from the broiler just in the nick of time. The edges were a bit dark, but overall, it remained edible.

“Caleb?”

“Yeah, honey.”

“What are you doing?”

She didn't mean the meat sauce he poured over the pasta. He stuffed the large spoon into the bowl and mixed the two together and sprinkled the whole thing with a heavy dusting of Parmesan cheese. His thoughts in order, he gave her the only answer that really made sense.

He took the flowers from her hand and set them on the counter before drawing her close.

“I'm making up for lost time. When I got here, I didn't feel anything. Numb from the inside out. The war ... I thought it killed everything good inside of me. Then you came along. As much as my nightmares keep me awake, you share the blame.”

Summer turned and stared at the beautiful dining room table set with her pretty dishes and crystal wine glasses, flowers, and a dozen flickering votive candles. The fire crackled in the stone hearth, adding to the intimate atmosphere. The tree glowed with tiny white lights, decorated for the holiday much like the tree they put up at the big house.

Caleb bent and kissed her on the side of the neck. “Do you like it?”

Tears stung her eyes, but she blinked them away. Touched beyond words, she didn't know what to say. Overwhelmed and incredibly happy, she placed her hand over his on her stomach and gave it a squeeze.

“This is amazing.”

“You’re amazing for putting up with me these past months. What you did for me last night ... I needed to sleep and shut down and not think. With you, I could let go.”

She turned to face him, standing so close her breasts brushed against his chest with every breath. The tension between them burned as hot as the fire behind her. She reached up and touched his face, tracing her fingers over his cheek and jaw, down his throat to rest on his chest.

“You look better today.”

“I feel better, thanks to you.” He took her hand and kissed her palm. “Let’s eat dinner. I got your favorite dessert.”

As much as he wanted her—and she knew he did—he wanted to give her this night. Not just a simple dinner date, but one he’d planned and executed especially for her. He’d seen to every detail and prepared everything just the way she liked it. The man had been paying attention even when she thought at one time he barely noticed her. She didn’t want to deny him, or herself, this opportunity to sit and eat and be together as a couple, not just friendly companions. They’d stepped past the invisible line they never crossed last night. She’d seen Caleb at the limit of exhaustion, hurting and trying to hide it. He’d stopped pretending they were and would always remain only friends. She took a second to bask in her victory and pressed her lips together to hide the smile.

“What is that look?”

“Nothing. I’m happy, that’s all.”

He drew her by the hand to the table and held out her chair. She sat and draped her napkin across her lap. He brought the large bowl of pasta. The garlic bread smelled amazing, and luckily had survived the broiler. Before he sat, Caleb poured her a glass

of wine and she took a sip. He took the chair at the head of the table next to her. She smiled. He didn't want to sit all the way across from her. No, he'd set the table so they sat close.

She reached over and put her hand on his. "This is really wonderful. All of it. Thank you."

"You're welcome, sweetheart."

He held the pasta so she could scoop a portion onto her plate before he did the same for himself. He filled her salad bowl and his own. She grabbed two slices of garlic bread for herself and put two more on his plate. He smiled. She smiled. Everything felt right and they settled in and took the first bite.

She closed her eyes and let out a satisfied hum. "This is so good."

"I think you're just hungry. It's one of three things I can cook well."

"What are the other two?"

"Steaks and baked potatoes on the grill, and omelets."

"You do cook an awesome steak." He and Jack manned the grill many nights, but she didn't mention her brother. Tonight, she wanted to keep things just him and her. She sensed he felt the same way. "I can't wait for the omelet," she added, giving him a seductive smile.

He swallowed hard, getting her reference that he might be here to share breakfast with her in the morning.

"So, dear, how was your day?" he asked, teasing like they were an old married -

couple. “What’s the gossip down at the beauty parlor?”

She laughed, and it felt good to share this moment with him. “It’s not called a beauty parlor anymore. It’s a salon.”

“That’s just another word for high-priced haircuts.”

“You never complained when you came in.”

“That’s because you were touching me.”

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“You don’t have to pay for a haircut to get me to touch you.”

The smoldering heat in his eyes blazed as his gaze held hers for several racing heartbeats. She loved the rush of heat, searing its way through her system and straight to her belly. She squirmed under his intense stare. He looked away first, taking a bite of his meal and chewing thoroughly.

She held back a laugh, enjoying the flirting immensely.

“Mrs. Little came in today.” She took a bite of her salad and grinned.

Caleb took the bait and asked, “What color streaks did she get today?”

“Cotton candy pink to match her pedicure. I have to say, it’s my favorite color on her. Makes her striking white hair stand out.”

“How old is she again?”

“Eighty-three. I hope I’m as adventurous and daring at that age.”

“You will be. You love life.”

“I don’t see any reason to wallow, when having fun is so much more enjoyable.”

“That’s one of the things I love most about you.”

Love?

He didn't mean it. It's an expression. Still, her heart skipped a beat and thrashed in her chest, hope welling up inside her until she had to swallow it back.

"Which coat did she wear today? The blue one with the purple feathers?"

Summer focused on him again and tried not to think about love and happy endings. "With pink hair streaks? Not a chance. She wore the white."

"With the white fur trim?"

"I like that one."

"Me, too."

They shared another smile. He poured her more wine and she took a deep sip, letting the warmth settle through her system. The evening wore on as they sat together at the table sharing conversation about the people they knew, their work, movies, and family. When he spoke of his brothers, his face lit up with happy memories of them together on their family's ranch.

"You miss them."

"I miss the way things used to be. We've all grown and gone our separate ways."

"But they all live in your hometown."

"My two older brothers are back in town. Dane, the youngest, is riding the rodeo circuit. Last I heard, he's in Texas."

"Well, you'll see them soon." If she had her way, he'd see them for their wedding.

“I told you last night, I’m staying here.”

“I’m glad you are, but that doesn’t mean you can’t go for a visit.”

“Are you coming with me?”

“Are you asking me to?”

“I just did. My mother would love to meet you.”

Meeting his parents made her nervous, but she squashed the butterflies, wanting more than anything to belong to Caleb and his family.

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“She must be something to raise four boys.”

“You remind me of her in some ways.”

“How so?”

“You’re kind and easy to be around. You smile even when no one is looking. Under everything you have a strength and determination that gets you through everything. You’re tenacious.”

“You like that about me.”

He laughed and shook his head. “When you want something, you don’t stop.”

“You didn’t want me to stop. Not really.”

His big hand settled on her thigh. He rubbed it up to her hip and squeezed, his eyes locked on hers as the ripples of pleasure surged through her system. Everything emptied from her mind, except her sole focus on the warmth of his hand on her.

“Don’t ever stop.”

Wanting mewent unsaid, but she heard it loud and clear.

“Never.”

Chapter Ten

CALEB WANTED TO kiss her and never stop, but he'd planned this night so carefully. He wanted to give her everything. Make this a perfect date. Ask her for another. Treat her like the special gift she was in his life. She deserved more than one night of dinner and flowers before he seduced her into bed. As much as he wanted her, he'd drag her there if his resolve didn't hold up. She deserved better than him rushing her. He'd give her all the time she needed to decide, because once she did, he'd never let her go.

The attraction between them had been building since the day they met, but he'd held himself in check and her at bay. He wanted to pull her close and love her forever. He hated waiting. It made him edgy and impatient.

He gave in to his baser need and slid his hand back down her thigh and leaned in and kissed her softly on her rosy lips. A man would die drunk and happy on her kisses. Sometimes, she did in fact make him dizzy.

Reluctant, but ready to devour her, he pulled away and stood to put some space between them. "I'll get dessert."

Dishes clinked and rattled behind him as she cleared the table. He put dessert on plates and took his time, breathing deep to calm himself and not think about making love to her. By the time he finished and left the kitchen, she settled on the sofa in front of the fire, her glass of wine in her hand, and his set on the coffee table. She sat peacefully, her eyes on the flames. He settled next to her, their thighs brushing. He could have scooted over, but he liked being next to her.

She took her plate and used her fork to take a bite of the creamy cheesecake with raspberry and chocolate sauce. Her eyes closed and she made that soft little moan like she did at dinner. He wanted to slide his tongue over her breast and make her sound like that again and again.

“Good?”

“Rainy days in front of a fire with a book are good. This is amazing. My favorite.”

“You order it any time we eat out. You even have raspberry chocolate ice cream bars in the freezer.”

“Only because if I eat cheesecake every day I’d weigh a ton.”

“Well, you’ve got at least a few days’ worth of dessert in the fridge.”

“I’ll eat a piece for breakfast with my coffee.”

He laughed around another bite. “Maybe I’ll come back and make you that omelet, so I know you’ve had something good to eat.”

“You should just stick around and make sure I don’t have a midnight snack.”

He wanted to, but held firm to his plan. “I thought we’d take this slow, spend a decent amount of time dating and get to know each other better.”

She placed her plate on the table and took his and did the same, despite the fact neither of them had finished their dessert.

“You think too much. When I look at you, when I think about you, there is nothing inside me that wants to be decent.”

“Summer.”

“Yes.”

That simple word held a world of meaning. The devil in him jumped for joy and prodded him to leap. She leaned into him and pressed her lips to his. Every thought in his mind shut off, except the fantasies he'd dreamed of night after night alone in his bed. He kissed her back, but didn't touch her. He kept his hands on his thighs until she kissed her way along his jaw to his ear and whispered, “Take me to bed.”

A military man, used to carrying out orders, he had no trouble following hers. He wanted her too much to deprive himself and her of what they wanted most, to be together, despite his best-laid plans.

Summer let out a yelp when Caleb wrapped his big hands around her waist and hoisted her into his lap. She straddled his thighs, and his mouth took possession of hers and he devoured it, sliding his hands up her sides, his thumbs caressing the sides of her breasts in soft half circles.

“Last chance, sweetheart, because in a minute it will be too late.”

“It's already too late,” she answered, tilting her head back while he kissed a blazing trail down her neck to her chest. His big hands covered her heavy breasts and squeezed. It didn't ease her need, but made her want more.

Caleb wrapped his arms around her back, slid his hands down to cover her ass, and stood up with her legs wrapped around his waist. She laughed and leaned back and looked at him.

“I love it when you laugh,” he said.

She traced his face with her fingertips. “I love how you make me feel.”

“I love you.” The words came out gruff and filled with emotion. They sank into her heart and filled it.

“Show me.”

His lips found hers even as he moved to the stairs and started up them. His hands held her bottom firm against him. She squeezed her legs around his waist to keep him close.

“You are so strong,” she said against his lips.

He used all that strength to wrap her in a hug that made her feel safe and surrounded by his love.

He stood beside her bed in the loft. She let her legs drop down his sides, so she stood on her own. He held her hips loosely in his hands and stared down at her.

“I want you so bad. I’ll try to be gentle.”

“Don’t be,” she said, practically daring him with a smile.

“Ah, sweetheart, how did this happen?”

“Some things are meant to be.”

“Yeah, like this.”

She expected speed and urgency. Instead, he took his time and planted a soft kiss on her lips. Their gazes locked, he reached for the hem of her shirt and pulled it over her head as she raised her arms to help him. When her hands came down, she reached for his t-shirt and stripped him of it. His gaze dipped and he stared at her breasts. She didn't feel self-conscious, but beautiful under his appreciative stare. It didn't take long for him to reach for the button and zipper on her pants. She wiggled her hips to help him slide them down her legs, taking them and her shoes off at the same time.

Once he had her nearly naked in front of him, he lost the battle to take his time. She felt his urgency in the way he jammed both thumbs into the sides of her panties and pulled them down her thighs. Unable to stand, she fell back onto the bed, giving him the perfect opportunity to drag the swatch of lace right off her feet.

He came to her then, leaning over her, crowding her until she had to fall onto her back. He smiled like the big bad wolf ready to eat her up. He practically did. His head dipped and his breath caressed the inside of her thigh a second before his lips touched her skin and his tongue flicked out to taste. She melted into the mattress, closed her eyes, and savored the feel of his mouth and those big hands caressing every inch of her body.

Caleb trailed kisses up her thigh and over her hip. He wanted to plant his face between her legs and feast, but he had far more ground to cover before he indulged his baser needs. He loved her flat stomach and licked a circle around her belly button and up the center of her to the annoying barrier that hid the bounty of her breasts. She moaned when he slipped his hand around her back, massaging and caressing as he went to find the catch on her bra and release it, so he could finally see her completely naked below him. He pulled the offending barrier free and let it sail across the room. Leaning over her on his hands, his feet still planted on the floor, her legs dangling over the edge of the bed, he scanned her body from her gorgeous face to her creamy thighs.

“You are so beautiful.”

“You’re overdressed.”

She reached for his button and fly, releasing them and his hard cock. Her fingers locked around him, pumping up and down, stoking the fire burning inside of him. He wanted to slide between her legs and bury himself deep in her heat, but not yet. He played the explorer, mapping her body with his hands and mouth.

Her hands never stopped touching him, roaming over his arms and chest and around his back. She came up off the bed, and he stood before her as she slid his jeans and boxer briefs down his legs. Hindered by his boots, he reached down and pried them off. Not easy, off kilter, tied up in his jeans. Her hands raked down his back, sending a shiver of heat and need through his system. Free at last, she pulled him down on top of her, and for the first time, he let his body slide over hers. She gasped as his skin touched hers. He sank into her, his mouth finding hers in a searing kiss. Cradled between her thighs, he rocked forward and nudged her entrance with the head of his cock, but pulled back even as she tilted her hips to take him deep.

Summer let out a frustrated grunt, but it died on the exhale she let loose when his tongue licked down her throat, sending a shiver over her skin. He planted openmouthed kisses down her chest to the valley between her breasts before one hand clasped her breast and he took the hard tip into his mouth and suckled, his tongue sweeping out to taste and drive her wild.

“You taste as good as you smell. Raspberries in spring.”

“I’m Summer.”

“You’re mine.”

To prove it, he slid one hand down her side in a long, hot sweep, turned it over her hip, found her center, and pressed one long finger into her slick core. His palm cupped her mound as he worked his finger in and out. His mouth never left her breasts. Within seconds, he had her writhing under him.

Two could play this game. She spread her hands wide over his back and smoothed them down over the corded muscles, down past his hips to his fine ass. She grabbed both cheeks and squeezed. He moaned against her breast and sucked harder, sending a shaft of heat to the very place his hand worked, driving her to the crest before he slowly pulled out and rubbed ever so gently over the sweet spot he’d found when she grinded against his palm. She smoothed one hand over his hip and dipped it low in front and found his hard shaft. Fingers locked around him, she caressed and stroked until he tore his mouth away from her hard nipple and rose above her on both hands. The heat in his eyes made her shiver.

Caleb grabbed his jeans, pulled the condom from his wallet, tore the wrapper open with his teeth, and tossed it away. Summer took the condom from him and sheathed his hard cock in one fluid motion that nearly sent him over the edge.

She lay below him, ready and waiting, her face soft and open. Her eyes dreamy and certain as he lowered himself to her. The head of his cock nudged against her heat, sinking in an inch. Gazes locked, he tried to go slow.

“I love you.” She hadn’t said the words back to him when he told her how he felt. He thought he didn’t need the words because he knew how she felt. The certainty in her voice, the emotion in her eyes so clear to see, he lost it and drove hard into her.

He did need the words. He needed her to know she belonged to him, because he already belonged to her. He had from the beginning, and though he’d fought it, he’d always known you can’t fight the inevitable.

He moved over her and in her, loving the feel of her skin against his. Not enough. He wanted more. Leaning on one hand, he reached down and drew her leg up and wide, giving him better access to drive into her harder and deeper. She moaned and gasped when he sank into her and rubbed his hips against hers. She spread her legs wider. He sank deeper, driving both of them to the crest before slowing his pace and making her urge him for more. He gave it to her because he needed more of her and those hands that never stopped roaming over his chest and around and up his back and shoulders. Never passive, she gave as much as he did, and he fell under her spell.

She shifted beneath him, increasing the sweet friction. Her body tightened around his. He took her mouth in a searing kiss, sliding his tongue deep, even as his hard cock thrust into her. Her hands clamped onto his hips. She pulled him to her as her hips rose to meet him. Everything in him focused on her and sending her over the edge. Her body convulsed around his, and he threw his head back, thrust deep one last time, and let himself go.

Summer didn’t know how he did it. One minute, she lay beneath him after he collapsed on top of her, his chest heaving as deep as her own. The next, she found herself lying completely on top of him, her head on his shoulder, and his arms locked around her back.

“Was it something I said?” she teased.

“Say it again,” he whispered into the dark night. At first, she thought it might be a dare that she’d say it and he’d make love to her like that again. With her head on his chest, her ear pressed to his skin, she realized he’d stopped breathing, waiting for her response.

She rose up on her elbows and stared down into his dark eyes. “I love you, Caleb, with my whole heart.”

He traced her forehead with his fingertip down to her ear, tucking the wild mass of hair away from her face. “I love you, too.”

Chapter Eleven

SUMMER LAY IN Caleb’s arms, her leg thrown over one of his, their feet tangled together. She didn’t know what woke her, but she felt Caleb stiffen beneath her. She cocked her head back and stared up at his handsome face. After two weeks, she still couldn’t believe how things between them had changed, how close they’d become.

This time she felt Caleb jolt. His hand fastened onto her thigh where it usually rested through the night. Oh, how she loved the way he held her, so safe and protected and loved.

She moved her leg up and over his hip, straddling him, her heart pressed to his. She leaned up and kissed his chin and then his lips, waking him slowly and in the most fun way. The hand on her thigh moved up to her ass, and he pressed her down onto his growing erection. She rocked her hips against him, making him groan.

“Good morning,” she crooned.

“It is now,” he said, a smile brightening his face.

“You were having another dream.”

“About you,” he lied to cover for the nightmare she’d pulled him from. “And here you are, right where I want you.”

Both his hands slipped down her panties and covered her bottom. His fingers squeezed and she sighed, enjoying the first steps of the dance they did so well together.

She traced his smile with the tips of her fingers, happy the terrifying and disturbing nightmares had eased over these last days. He slept more peacefully, and when a nightmare overtook him and he woke in a cold sweat, he hugged her close and she stroked his hair until his heart stopped thrashing and he breathed easy again.

He pushed her legs down the side of his, her panties sliding down and off her legs. Her tank top didn’t stand a chance against his marauding hands. Somehow he managed to lose his boxer briefs and pay homage to her breasts at the same time. The man could multitask. One hand slipped over the back of her thigh. His fingers stroked and caressed, one dove deep into her wet core, stroking until the tingling started and her body tightened. He reached for the condom on the side table. Always prepared, her military man. She smiled down at him, took the condom, and slid it on his hard shaft. Falling forward on her hands again, she leaned down and kissed him, her tongue sliding over his just as he guided her down on his hard cock, both his hands locked on her hips, urging her on as she rode him.

He loved her so well and in so many ways, she liked them all and craved more and more. His need quickly turned to demand. His hand smoothed up her back to grab hold of her hair. He pulled back, drawing her face up, making her back arch as he drove into her hard and fast. He kissed her throat with a sweep of his tongue over her sensitive skin, sending a shiver down her back. She loved his show of dominance and strength coupled with his gentleness. It made her feel sexy and wanted and drove her

need higher. He thrust deep once, twice, and on the third time, they both fell over the edge in a blazing orgasm that made them both groan and melt into a puddle of spent passion. She fell on top of him, her face in his neck. She breathed as hard as he did and smiled against his skin.

Caleb wrapped his arms around her and held her close, feeling her lips pull back into the smile she always had for him after they made love.

“Ah, sweetheart, you do the nicest things to me.”

“Merry Christmas.”

“Looks like I got my gift early.”

“I know, you like the hat,” she teased him, deliberately misunderstanding he meant making love to her.

Just to be ornery, he squeezed her ass and kissed her on the side of the head. “It is my favorite thing.”

She pinched his side and made him squirm and laugh. He blocked her hand from repeating the small hurt. “Besides you, sweetheart. You know you’re my favorite in the whole world.”

“Better,” she said, stacking her hands on his chest and smiling at him.

“You’re the best, honey.”

“I’m so glad you remembered.”

“I’m sorry about last night. Jack and Sam dragged me into town for a beer after the outstanding dinner you made us. We got to talking and playing pool and time got away from me.”

“It’s okay. If you want to hang out with my brothers more than me, I get it. I mean, what’s not to like. Beer. Ball games. Talking about horses and whatever nut-job case Sam’s working on at the FBI.”

“Nothing compares to you, sweetheart. Sam’s only in town for a couple days. Now

that we're seeing each other, I thought it important to get to know him better."

"You all seemed thick as thieves when you got home last night."

"We had fun." He rolled her onto her back and leaned down and kissed her softly. "I made it up to you when I got home."

He'd fought so hard to make it back home after the war, only to discover he didn't feel normal anywhere. Then he found her and discovered home was with Summer. Now he needed to make that home permanent.

He checked the time on the bedside clock. If he didn't get her moving, they'd be late meeting Jack and Sam for his surprise.

Caleb gave her a playful smack on her very fine behind. "Go take a shower and get dressed. Something warm. I'm taking you somewhere."

"Where are we going?"

"Christmas surprise." He rolled out of bed and dragged on his jeans. "I have to run up to the big house for some clothes."

"You can bring your stuff here. I'll make room."

They'd talked in general about the future they both wanted, but since this was so new, they'd skimmed over the details. No matter how long he'd known her, or what anyone might think, he aimed to make her his forever. Soon. Starting today.

"This place is rather small."

"Yeah, we'll need a bigger house soon."

Her easy words made his heart leap. He hid his smile.

“I’ll be back in an hour to pick you up.”

He gave her a quick kiss and tried to pass her, but she grabbed his arm and pulled him back. Her lips met his in a soft kiss, so tender, he felt her pour all her emotions into it. She ended the sweet kiss and touched her forehead to his.

“Our first Christmas together.”

“The first of many, sweetheart. Get ready. I’ll be back for you soon.”

She stepped out of his arms and walked into the bathroom. He rushed down the loft stairs and grabbed the bag he’d left outside the back door. He pulled the wrapped packages out and tucked them under her little tree for later. He turned on the Christmas lights and stepped back. She’d love it. After dinner and presents with Jack and Sam, they’d come back here and sit by the fire and open them.

Caleb rushed to the house and found Jack and Sam in the kitchen putting the turkey in the oven.

“Are you Betty Crocker wannabes ready?”

“Almost. We just need to finish off the stuffing, and then we’ll help you with the rig.”

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“Cool. I’ll be down in twenty minutes.”

True to his word, Caleb raced down the stairs after his shower and met Jack and Sam in the kitchen again. The place smelled amazing. “How did you two learn to cook overnight?”

“We called Mom. She walked us through everything. She and Dad are in South Carolina with our aunt and cousins,” Jack said.

“I wish they could be here for this.”

Summer would want her whole family together.

“They can’t wait to talk to Summer later,” Sam said, slapping him on the back.

“Well, to that end, let’s get this show on the road.”

The three of them went down to the barn, uncovered the sleigh they’d borrowed from Mrs. Little last night, and harnessed up the horses. Sam tossed a thermos on the front seat.

“What’s that?”

“She loves hot chocolate on Christmas morning.”

“Thanks, Sam, for all your help.”

“Keep making my sister happy.”

“I plan on it.”

Jack slapped him on the back and gave him a hug. “Go get her, brother,” he encouraged.

Caleb worried things between him and Jack would get weird and strained. Instead, they’d grown closer after Caleb confessed his plans for today and enlisted Jack’s help. Jack meant that brother, and Caleb appreciated it so much, especially since he was spending another holiday away from his family.

It didn’t take long for him and Jack to ride over to Summer’s place. Jack held the horses while he went inside to get Summer. He found her in the loft, zipping up the garment bag she’d left hanging there days ago.

“What’s in the bag?”

“New Year’s Eve dress.”

“We going to a party?”

“I hope so,” she said vaguely.

Too nervous about what he planned, he dropped the New Year’s thing. “Let’s go.”

He took her hand and led her downstairs and to the Christmas tree.

“Where did all these presents come from?”

“Santa.” He pulled one of the small packages free and handed it to her.

A bright smile bloomed on her face. Without hesitation, she tore into the paper, revealing the black velvet box. Her eyes went wide, but she hesitated to open it.

She thought it was a ring. He meant her to. He'd laid a few traps to throw her off.

She opened the box and discovered the blue topaz earrings inside. "They match your eyes," he said, giving her a kiss and trying not to laugh as her face changed from disappointment to surprise and happiness.

"I love them." She put them on and held her hair back for him to see.

"I wanted to get you something special for our first Christmas together."

"You shouldn't have spent so much money." She wrapped her arms around his neck and kissed him. "Thank you."

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Nervous, he led her to the door and grabbed the jacket off the peg and handed it to her. She pulled it on and he opened the door and let her go out first. She stopped short and gasped.

“Surprise.”

“We’re going for a sleigh ride?”

“It’s Christmas.”

“It’s wonderful. Where did you get it?”

“Mrs. Little.”

She sighed. “Her husband used to take her out every year.” Her eyes went soft and misty with the memory.

“Come on, honey.”

He waited for her to hug Jack hello, then helped her into the sleigh and took the reins. Jack winked and gave him a reassuring grin as they rode away, sleigh bells jingling.

Summer grabbed the blanket and draped it over both their legs. She snuggled close to his side and giggled. “This is so much fun.”

He laughed with her. “I’m glad you like it.”

“Where are we going?”

“You’ll see.”

They rode for twenty minutes along a roundabout route to the spot he’d picked out with Jack. When they came around the bend, she sat up straight and stared.

“Snowmen.”

“The one with the pink scarf is a snowwoman.”

“Is that supposed to be me and you?”

“Kinda. Come see.”

He helped her down and walked her toward the snowpeople. He stopped her a few feet away and stood behind her, looking over her shoulder.

“Do you see it?”

“What am I looking at? What are all these lines drawn in the snow?”

“Open this.” He reached around her and held out another small black velvet box on the palm of his hand.

She took it with shaking hands, glanced over her shoulder, and he gave her an encouraging smile.

Summer opened the lid and frowned at the necklace with an old-fashioned key charm inside, not understanding at all. She’d thought the first box contained an engagement ring. She thought the same of this box. The man might drive her insane by the end of

the day.

He took the necklace and clasped it around her neck.

“It’s lovely, but I don’t understand what this has to do with the lines drawn in the snow.”

“You’re standing on the porch of what will soon be our new house. Mr. and Mrs. Snowman are standing in the living room.”

She scanned the wide open area and realized he’d drawn out a floor plan. The key necklace was a symbol of their future home.

“You said, Mr. and Mrs. Snowman.”

She turned and found Caleb down on one knee in the snow, a beautiful diamond solitaire glinting in the sun held up to her between his index finger and thumb.

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“I love you so much. You are my favorite thing in this whole world,” he repeated the declaration he’d made just this morning in her bed. “I want to make a life with you by my side. I want us to have a family and grow old together, here on this ranch, in our house. Will you marry me, Summer, and be the sunshine in my life always?”

“Yes.” The word burst from her mouth and tears filled her eyes, spilling over.

Caleb sighed out his relief and stood, taking her shaking hand and sliding the ring on her finger. He kissed her palm and held it to his cheek, wrapping his other arm around her and drawing her close. He kissed her and didn’t stop for a long time.

“I love you, sweetheart.”

“I love you, too.”

“We’ll meet the architect in January. They’ll start construction in April. We should be in our new home by September.”

“You really mean it. We’re going to live here?”

“Literally, right here.”

She took in the snow-covered ground, the towering green pines and other nude trees. Close enough to the big house, but far enough away to have their privacy and space to be together and raise their children.

“It’s perfect.”

“It will be once we’re married.”

“I can’t wait.”

“I’ll leave the date and details to you, sweetheart. I don’t care when or where, just so long as you’re my wife.”

He kissed her again, rubbing his hands up and down her back. “Let’s get back. It’s freezing out here, and you’re shaking.”

“I’m excited.”

He led her back to the sleigh, helping her in and pouring her a mug of hot chocolate. She wrapped her cold hands around it and settled in next to him as he took the reins and set the horses in motion.

“You guys didn’t go to town last night, did you?”

“No. Your brothers helped with the snowmen and getting the sleigh. We did share a few beers while they alternately threatened to kill me if I didn’t make you happy and encouraged me to propose a hundred different ways. Ninety percent were stupid and corny.”

She laughed and kissed his cheek. “Sounds like them. It was perfect. I’ll never forget this day.”

“We’ll make a lifetime of memories.”

They came around the bend and she spotted her brothers with a tall, dark-haired stranger, who looked a lot like the man beside her.

“My Christmas gift to you arrived.”

“What’s that, sweetheart?”

She pointed to the porch.

“Blake?”

“I didn’t want you to spend Christmas without your family.”

Caleb reined in the horses. Her brothers and his came down to join them. Sam plucked her out of the sleigh and hugged her close, spinning her around.

“You sure you want to keep him? I could arrest him for something.”

Sam turned her loose and Jack hugged her close. “I can probably call in a few favors and get him deployed again.”

“Not a chance.” Caleb folded her into his chest and kissed her on the head. She melted into him.

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“If you’re into tall, dark, and handsome, honey, I’m your man,” Blake said, shaking her hand.

Caleb laughed, let her go, and socked his brother in the gut. “She’s mine. Get your own woman.”

“I want yours,” Blake teased, and wrapped Caleb in a bear hug and gave him a hearty slap on the back.

“You can’t have her.” Caleb held out his hand and she took it and he pulled her close. “I can’t believe you two plotted behind my back.”

“Oh, your girl didn’t have to do much prodding. Gabe and Dane will be here Wednesday as requested by your lovely bride-to-be. Mom and Dad will arrive on Thursday.”

“Wait. What?”

Summer smacked Blake’s arm.

“Uh-oh,” Blake said. “Guess I let the cat out of the bag.”

“Someone want to tell me what’s going on? Summer?”

“I did what you said.”

“What did I say?”

“That you’d marry me anytime, anywhere, and that I can plan the wedding.”

“That was, what, twenty-five minutes ago.”

“She sure is amazing,” Blake said, making her, Jack, and Sam laugh. Caleb didn’t.

“You knew I was going to ask you to marry me?”

“Not exactly. I hoped you’d ask, but if you didn’t by Wednesday, I planned to ask you.”

“You did?”

“Jack and Sam called me crazy, but at the rate it took for us to have our first date, I thought it might take you forever to ask me.”

“So you were going to ask me, my family will be here by the end of the week, and what, we’re getting married?”

“Yes.”

“We haven’t even talked about this.”

“We did a half hour ago. You said...”

“I know what I said, but you don’t have a dress. We need to get a license. Where are we getting married on such short notice? What about inviting people? Food? Flowers?”

“My dress is hanging in the loft.”

“That’s what’s in the garment bag?”

“Yes. We’ll be married on Saturday at eightP.M.at the old chapel on River Road.”

“That place has been closed down for years.”

“Jack, Sam, and Blake are going to get it ready. I have permission from the town council to use the property. Reverend Cooper agreed to do the ceremony. My mother and father are flying home from South Carolina on Friday. They’ve ordered the flowers to be shipped in from my aunt’s friend’s florist shop. Jack picked up the license a couple days ago. We just need to sign it and turn it in this week.”

“You’re serious. You don’t want to wait and take some time to make plans. This is what you want?”

She stepped close and put both her hands on his chest and stared up into his too--serious brown eyes. “I want to be your wife. I’m a simple girl. I want a simple wedding. You. Me. Our family. A few close friends. That’s all we need. Unless you want to wait. You want something bigger? Fancier?”

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“I want you, crazy woman. I can’t believe you already have your dress.”

“You’re not mad?”

“No.” A smile finally spread across his face. “I’m excited. What do you need me to do?”

“Show up looking gorgeous in a black tux and bow tie.”

“You’ve got this all planned out, don’t you?”

“I want country elegance.”

“She gave us a list,” Jack added with a roll of his eyes.

“You’ll have everything you want, sweetheart. I promise.” He sealed it with a kiss.

Chapter Twelve

SUMMER STOOD AT the back of the chapel and stared down the white rose petal-dappled aisle at Caleb waiting for her. Candles and the dimmed chandelier overhead cast a soft glow over the room. Evergreen boughs with white roses, freesia, and hydrangeas decorated the ends of the pews and the altar, filling the air with their sweet scent. Beautiful; she loved the warm and cozy feel. With everyone dressed in tuxes and elegant dresses, she’d achieved the country elegance she dreamed of for her wedding day.

Caleb's eyes went wide with surprise, then darkened with pure heat. She smiled, knowing exactly how he felt. She'd missed him this past week. Jack, Sam, and Blake kept him busy with the wedding preparations. Every time he tried to sneak over to see her at the cabin, they detained him and took him back to the big house. At first, she thought it funny and a bit traditional for the bride and groom to forgo any intimacy before the wedding, but she missed him. Tonight, they'd come together as husband and wife. She felt the crackle of electricity and passion between them all the way across the chapel.

"Are you sure about this, baby girl?"

She glanced up at her father's rugged face. "I've never been more sure about anything or anyone."

Her father placed his hand over hers on his arm and gave it a squeeze. Believing in her and the certainty she put into the words, he took the first step with her down the aisle. As they approached, Jack, Sam, Blake, and Caleb's other two brothers, Gabe and Dane, stood and moved into position next to Caleb. Her bridesmaids waited on the other side. The men wore black tuxes with red bow ties. Caleb's was black to set him apart. Only he wore a hat, the Stetson she'd given him for Christmas. Her girlfriends wore red dresses and their hair styled in chic old Hollywood styles. They looked gorgeous and received many appreciative glances from her and Caleb's brothers. Caleb only had eyes for her.

The preacher moved into position. Her father turned to face her and traced his finger down the curve of her hair as it cascaded down over one shoulder in a sleek wave. He squeezed both her shoulders and leaned in and kissed her forehead. His hand brushed down her bare arm to her hand. He took it and placed it in Caleb's. Her father didn't let go, but covered their joined hands between his. He looked from her to Caleb.

"Always be kind to each other. Love each other each and every day."

“We will, sir. I’ll make her happy,” Caleb promised.

“I know you will, son.”

Son. It meant so much that her father accepted him into the family.

Caleb kept his hold on Summer’s hand, and her father took his seat beside her smiling, misty-eyed mother in the first pew. He glanced at his own smiling parents, thankful to have them here and all his brothers at his back along with his best friend, Jack.

He couldn’t take his eyes off Summer. She glowed, more beautiful than any woman he’d ever seen. He loved the dress with jeweled clips at the tops of her shoulders and a deep V down to her lovely rounded breasts. The silky material dappled with crystals hugged her curves and draped all the way to the floor. Crystal jewels over lace made a belt at her waist. She reminded him of a gorgeous actress in an old black and white movie.

Truthfully, he couldn’t believe they’d pulled off this wedding in a week, but Summer knew what she wanted and made it happen with help from family and friends. Seemed everyone loved the idea of a New Year’s Eve wedding, and especially seeing him and Summer together.

“We are gathered here today to join Caleb and Summer in holy matrimony,” the preacher began.

Caleb held Summer’s hands and didn’t feel any nerves. She smiled up at him, completely at ease. As he focused on her, the preacher’s words sounded hollow around him until Summer said in a clear voice, “I do.”

The preacher repeated the vows and Caleb answered with an easy “I do.”

“You may now kiss your bride.”

Caleb didn't need to be told twice. He pulled her close and gave her a very respectable but intimate kiss on the lips.

“I love you.” He took the hat from his head and held it in front of both their faces so the crowd in the chapel couldn't see the kiss he laid on her. He took his time, showing her a glimpse of the hunger and need he'd unleash later when they were alone.

The men behind him whooped, hollered, and whistled. Summer's friends giggled. The photographer snapped pictures.

He ended the kiss with a sweep of his mouth over hers and put his hat back on his head before her eyes opened again, making him smile.

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“Mrs. Bowden, shall we?” He held out his arm for her to take. They faced the crowd of well-wishers, who clapped and cheered.

“May I present to you Mr. and Mrs. Bowden,” the preacher announced, which only made everyone cheer more. The guests took the white satin bags Summer had left at all the seats and tossed white rose petals as the couple made their way to the back of the chapel. Caleb pulled on his overcoat and helped her with hers.

He escorted her out to the waiting sleigh and horses. She tugged on his hand and he stopped and stared down at her. “Caleb, it’s perfect.”

“Like my bride.”

Their family and friends gathered on the steps to watch them leave.

“Kiss her again,” his mother called.

He obliged, leaning down to give her a soft kiss that conveyed all his love and promised everything.

They settled in the sleigh. Jack stood among the others, tossing flower petals this time instead of snowballs. Caleb touched a finger to his hat and pointed to his best friend in a show of thanks for introducing him to the love of his life.

“Ready, Mrs. Bowden?”

“For the rest of my life with you?” She snuggled close, and he took the reins. “I can’t

wait.”

Get ready for the first installment in an exciting new series from Jennifer Ryan, New York Times and USA Today bestselling author of the McBrides and Hunted series.

AT WOLF RANCH

After years on the rodeo circuit, Gabe Bowden wants nothing more than land of his own and a woman who will claim his heart for more than one night. When he has the chance to buy the enormous Wolf Ranch spread, he snaps up the incredible deal. Everything is set—until Gabe rescues a woman on the deserted, snowy road leading to the property, and the half-frozen beauty changes everything.

Ella Wolf rushes to her family’s abandoned Montana ranch after her twin sister is murdered. She knows she’s next ... unless she can uncover a secret hidden somewhere at Wolf Ranch. The last thing Ella expects is to be rescued by a rugged rancher with his own agenda. A man who almost makes her forget how dangerous love can be...

As an unlikely partnership sparks something so much more, and a killer closes in, can Ella and Gabe learn to trust one another before it’s too late?

Coming February 2015

New York City

THREE LONG DAYS without a word. No call. Not even a text. Ella stared at her phone, willing it to ring. She tapped her finger on the screen and stifled the urge to call Lela for the hundredth time that morning.

The coffee shop buzzed with activity. People headed off to work with their lattes and

scones. She sipped at her caramel macchiato, reading over the newest projections on her laptop for the cosmetics line debuting in March. The numbers looked promising.

Ella jumped when her phone vibrated on the table. She snatched it up and read the caller ID.

“Finally.” She swiped the screen to accept the call. “Lela—”

“Where have you been?” Uncle Phillip’s demand surprised her.

Why did Uncle Phillip have Lela’s phone?

Ella opened her mouth to answer her uncle’s question, but he spoke first.

“I oversee the estate. You answer to me.”

“Twisting the truth again, Uncle. Ella and I sign off on everything,” Lela said, her tone unusually sharp. “You’re just a watchdog, there to ensure we adhere to the terms of the will. You have no real power, but you’ll do anything to steal it away, won’t you?”

What? Ella had never heard her sister talk to their uncle in such a disrespectful and spiteful way, or anyone for that matter. Why did her sister call and not say anything to her? Maybe she’d pocket dialed?

“Lela, it’s me. What is going on?” Ella got no response. Uncle Phillip continued to speak over her.

“You have no idea what you’re talking about, my dear.” Uncle Phillip’s soft voice belied the steel in his words. “Don’t make me ask again. Be a good girl and tell me where you’ve been.”

This time, her sister answered, but didn't explain a damn thing. "Uncovering your dirty secret. I know what you did," her sister accused.

Secrets?

Butterflies in Ella's stomach fluttered like a flock of birds taking flight. The uneasy feeling she'd carried with her these last days intensified.

Ella gathered up her laptop and notebook, stuffing them into her oversize tote. She dumped the dregs of her coffee in the trash on her way out the door. The penthouse was only a block up from her favorite café where she had breakfast every Tuesday when the house staff had the day off. She kept the phone to her ear and headed home to find out what the hell was going on.

"You won't get away with this." Lela's voice rose in pitch. It took a lot to rile her sister. Whatever Uncle Phillip had done touched a nerve.

"Whatever you think you know doesn't amount to anything without proof." Her uncle used that chilling, yet utterly calm voice.

Ella picked up her pace, sensing the escalation of the situation into something more than just an argument about company business. She pulled her bag close to her side under her arm and ran for her building, knocking elbows and shoulders with other pedestrians. No time to apologize, she ignored their outraged remarks.

"Oh, I have the proof."

Proof of what?

"You're lying." Uncle Phillip let out a nervous laugh.

“You wish.”

Ella past her building’s doorman and ran for the elevator, pushing the button three times, frantic for the doors to open.

“Where is it? Show me.”

Come on. Come on. The elevator doors finally opened and she rushed inside and pressed the button for the penthouse. Ella prayed she didn’t lose the cell signal and drop the call. She only ever got one bar in the elevators.

“You think I’d be fool enough to bring it here? To you? I’ll see you in jail before this day is over.”

“I’ll see you in a grave first.”

The ice in her uncle’s tone frosted Ella’s heart. The evil laced there erased all trace of the man she knew. He meant those ominous words.

Lela gasped and let out a startled shriek. Ella didn’t want to believe her uncle actually struck Lela, but that’s what it sounded like.

“What. Did. You. Find?”

“Everything,” Lela sputtered.

What? What are you talking about?

“If you’re lying to me—”

“Let me go. It’s over. There’s nothing you can do. I can prove you did it.”

Did what?

“Don’t look at him,” Uncle Phillip snapped.

Him? Who else is there?

“Please, do some—”

“He’s not here to help you, you stupid girl. He works for me. Everyone works for me. You should have left well enough alone.”

Lela shrieked again. Ella’s heart dropped into her stomach.

“This is your final chance. Tell me where it is and I’ll make this quick. Refuse and I’ll take my time. You’ll know the meaning of the word ‘pain’ when I’m done with you.”

Touch her and I will make you pay.

“Go to hell.”

“Where is it, you little bitch?”

“You will pay for what you’ve done. I’ll never cave.”

“Tell me what I want to know, and maybe I’ll show you mercy.”

“You won’t ... get ... away ... with this,” Lela stammered, something choking off her words. “The truth will ... roll out. Come out.”

Something about the way she said it the first time struck Ella, but her mind couldn’t process anything right now. She slammed her palm against the elevator doors, wishing the damn thing would hurry up.

Please, Lela, get out of there.

“Last chance. Where did you hide it?”

The intensity in his voice sent a shiver up Ella’s spine.

The elevator doors finally opened. She ran down the hall to her door, shoved it open, and nearly tripped over the suitcase Lela left in the middle of the foyer. Where had she been?

Ella shoved the cell phone in her purse and turned toward the voices coming from the other room.

“If you won’t help me, I’ll find someone who will.”

Who is she talking to?

“Uncle Phillip, please. Put the gun down.”

“Where. Is. It?”

“I’ll never tell you where I hid it.”

Ella ran across the living room toward the open library doors. Her gaze locked on her uncle’s outstretched arm, the gun in his hand level with her sister’s chest. Her father’s bloodred ruby pinky ring winked in the morning light streaming through the windows.

“Tell me,” her uncle yelled.

“Never.”

“Then you’re of no use to me anymore.”

The crack of the gunshot stopped Ella in her tracks. Her sister’s eyes went wide when the bullet plowed into her chest. Blood blossomed over her cream-colored sheath dress, like some gruesome poppy. Lela wilted in slow motion into a heap on the floor. Her legs kicked in a quick jerk, and she never moved again.

Ella stood frozen, rooted to the spot just outside the library doors, her gaze fastened on her sister’s lifeless green eyes.

“Damnit, we needed her alive,” a man she couldn’t see said from inside the room. It took her a second to place the voice. Detective Robbins.

What is he doing here? Why didn't he help?

Self-preservation kicked in and she scurried to the side of the door before the men off to the side saw her. Hands shaking, her stomach in knots, a whirlwind of thoughts circling her mind, but nothing explained why her uncle killed her beautiful sister. It couldn't be, she denied the stark reality. She leaned over and spied through the crack between the open door and frame.

Uncle Phillip knelt next to Lela and touched his finger to her bloody neck. "If I'd had more time, I could have gotten her to talk."

"You mean if you hadn't lost your temper."

Ella's heart broke into a billion sharp pieces that slashed her soul to shreds. Her other half—gone. The emptiness engulfed her. She covered her mouth with both hands to hold back the scream of pain rising up her aching throat. Her eyes filled with tears, and Lela's face, the same one Ella saw in the mirror each morning, swam in front of her.

Uncle Phillip stood, tugged at one shirt cuff and then the other to straighten his crisp white shirt. Her father's ruby cuff links sparked with a glint of light from the overhead chandelier. He ran a hand over his more gray than dark brown hair, smoothing it back. Composed again, he turned to the door. Her breath hitched and stopped. She thought he saw her. His next words startled her even more.

"The stupid girl doesn't know when to quit." He pulled a handkerchief from his gray slacks pocket and wiped his sweaty face, devoid of wrinkles thanks to his many trips to the dermatologist for Botox injections.

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“You’re lucky she called me. That she saw me as a friend.”

“Did she tell you what she found?”

“No. She asked me to meet her here. Her confidence in whatever she had on you convinced me to take her seriously. If she actually had something and shared it with anyone, you’ll go down for everything.”

“Don’t think you won’t fall with me,” her uncle threatened.

The detective moved forward, blocking her view of her uncle, and stared down at Lela. “What do you want to do with the body?”

Lela was a body. Bile rose in Ella’s throat.

Her uncle clinked open a crystal decanter at the bar across the room, pouring himself a drink of the expensive bourbon he preferred. She prayed he choked on it.

“Give me a minute to think.” The ice in his voice melted and turned less definitive and more hesitant.

“We need to find that evidence. If it falls into the wrong hands—”

“Shut up.” Her uncle sounded as out of control as she felt. Her insides in chaos, not a single thought of what to do taking shape in her mind.

“We need to retrace her steps over the last few days. Find out where she went. Who

she saw. We'd have the state attorney and FBI banging down the door if she gave the evidence to anyone. She hid it somewhere. We need to find out where and get it."

"Easier said than done. She was smart."

"Not smart enough to pull this off. She contacted you without ever considering your association with me. She was naive." He toed Lela's still body with his Italian leather shoe.

"Our business arrangement has been mutually beneficial, but if you think I'll be your patsy, you're wrong. So, think, damnit, where would she hide the evidence?"

"I don't fucking know." Her uncle slammed the empty glass down on the desk. "But Ella might."

"Do you think Lela told her what she uncovered?" Detective Robbins asked.

"No. Ella asked me and the staff several times if Lela came home or called. I'm almost certain Lela worked this out on her own and left her recalcitrant sister out of it."

"Almost certain isn't good enough. Why the hell didn't you cover your tracks better?"

"I did."

"If you did, we wouldn't be here right now."

Ella needed to call the police and have them arrest these two for killing her sweet, gentle sister. But the police were standing right there, helping destroy her life.

The room was silent for a moment, and Ella was certain they'd hear her ragged breathing. She jumped when her uncle spoke again.

“Detective, let me tell you a story.” Uncle Phillip’s voice went eerily calm. “Our studious, prim Lela earned her master’s degree and worked as an executive at the company to satisfy the terms of the will and earn her place at Wolf Enterprises. Sadly, her Princess Party Girl twin sister barely made an effort, working in the mailroom and every other odd job at the company. While it satisfies the general terms of the will for them to inherit and take over the company on their upcoming twenty--fifth birthday, Lela’s carried the weight and shouldered all the responsibility for the business.

“Lela finally had enough and confronted her sister right here in this room. Ella, party girl that she is, had been out all night and was high, not at all in her right mind. The fight escalated. Ella knows I keep a gun in my desk drawer. She grabbed it and shot Lela. She panicked, but somehow had the wherewithal to try to cover it up, making it look like a robbery gone wrong. With Lela gone, she will inherit the company and other Wolf assets.

“It’s heartbreaking, isn’t it? Such a pity. Lela had such a promising future. I couldn’t be more heartbroken.

“Set the scene, Detective, and then find Ella. Take her to a hotel. Not a dump, but not extravagant either. She’s hiding out. Make the place look like she’s been on a bender, drinking, doing drugs. The pain and grief send Ella over the edge. She ODs. No one will question it. Use your contacts in the police department and morgue to prove what happened ... make the evidence show Ella murdered Lela.”

“This is more than I signed on for,” Detective Robbins said.

“Don’t think you’re so indispensable. There are plenty of others on my payroll in this

town, higher up the food chain than you, that would do my bidding without blinking.”

“I’ll get it done. I’ll need to use some of those contacts to pull this shit off.”

“You know who to use to make this clean. I want all the evidence, reports, and public perception to corroborate the scenario I’ve outlined.”

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Uncle Phillip knelt by Lela and used his handkerchief to remove her diamond stud earrings. The ones their mother always wore. He unclasped Lela's bloody necklace with the pendant of a heart made out of roses that matched Ella's. Ella reached up and wrapped her trembling fingers around the one against her chest and sighed. Lela's ring came next. Ella had given her the emerald encircled with diamonds for their twenty-first birthday. The night they shared a quiet dinner in an exclusive uptown restaurant and planned their future and fulfilling their parents' wishes and dreams for them.

She took a step forward to snatch back the ring and everything else her uncle took from them. She wanted to claw his eyes out and see him in a grave. Not her sister. Not Lela.

Uncle Phillip handed the bundled items to the detective, except the bloody locket.

"What are you going to do with that?" The detective indicated the gold necklace her uncle tucked away in his pocket.

"Don't worry about it. Do your job. The one I pay you extremely well to do."

Her uncle went to the bar, grabbed a towel, and wiped down the gun. He wrapped it in the towel and handed it to the detective. "The household staff knows I keep this gun in the top drawer of my desk. Unlocked. Easy enough for Ella to take it and use it on her sister. Plant it, along with the drugs and alcohol, at the hotel room. Make sure the report shows Ella's prints are on the gun and it is a ballistic match to the bullet in her. Tomorrow morning the staff will arrive for work and discover the body. You've got until then to find Ella and kill her."

Ella had wasted enough time. She needed to get away. Fast.

Her gaze fell on her dead sister. Her soul pleaded with Lela to wake up and make this all just a bad dream. But Lela remained motionless on the floor.

Ella backed away from the door, walked a wide arc around the living room to stay out of their line of sight, and rushed back to the foyer.

“What the hell is that?” the detective asked.

“Lela called someone.”

Oh God, they found her phone.

“Shit. She called her sister.”

The panic squeezed her gut tight. If they discovered her, she’d be dead. Ella grabbed her sister’s suitcase, coat, purse, her own tote, and slipped out the door, closing it with a quiet snick of the latch. Maybe she’d find a clue in her sister’s things.

She rushed to the elevator, hoping to outrun the detective before he came after her. She took the elevator down and walked through the lobby and out the door. The doorman took the coat draped over her arm. “Let me help you with that, Miss Wolf.”

She mechanically stuffed her arms in the sleeves of Lela’s favorite cobalt blue coat—she’d forgotten her own in her rush out of the coffee shop. Her sister’s scent brought tears to her eyes. She blinked to keep them at bay. The doorman hailed her a cab, and she tossed her stuff in the backseat and slid in, checking the front of her building to be sure the detective hadn’t come down and spotted her escape.

“Where to?”

Ella couldn't think past the fear and grief eating away at her insides. She didn't know where to go or who to turn to that she could definitely say wasn't in her uncle's pocket. Detective Robbins would check with all her friends. She couldn't risk going to one of them and putting them in danger.

Her gaze fell on her sister's suitcase and the baggage tag still on the handle. She didn't know the BZN airport code. The purse lay on her lap, her fingers clutching it in a death grip. She made herself relax and unzip the bag. She found the airline ticket voucher inside. Bozeman.

Why did you go to Montana?

They hadn't been back to the family ranch since their father died in a plane crash when they were fourteen.

"Where are we off to?" the driver asked again, pulling her out of her dark thoughts. A plan started to form.

"LaGuardia airport." She barely choked out the words.

She'd retrace her sister's steps, find out what she'd been doing the last three days, where she went and who she saw. She'd find the evidence Lela died for, and God help her uncle when she did.

Three Peaks Ranch, Montana

GABE BOWDEN PUT the quarter horse through its paces around the corral, stopping him short to make an abrupt turn, then pulling on the reins to make him back up. All in all, he liked the horse's attention and readiness to follow commands. His brother Blake trained the animal well. The horse would be a fine addition to his new ranch and a big help with the cattle due to arrive in six weeks. Gabe couldn't wait to take

over Wolf Ranch. He'd worked his ass off to earn the money to buy the place, and in nine short weeks, the deal closed and he'd have everything he ever dreamed: the huge spread with wide-open meadows, rolling hills, rivers snaking out over the land, grass as far as the eye could see for the cattle. A livelihood he could depend on, and a legacy he'd leave to his kids. If he ever found a woman and had some kids.

After Stacy left him standing at the altar all alone, turning her nose up at his little ranch, the plans he had to build it into something more, and a quiet life as his wife and the mother of his children, it couldn't be just any woman. He needed to find the right woman. One who wanted the same kind of simple but meaningful ranch life he wanted. Since he bought Wolf Ranch, he had a hell of a lot more to offer now than he did when Stacy left him.

Finished getting a feel for the horse, he rode over to the rail and stopped next to Blake and dismounted. He ran his hand over the horse's flank.

"You did a fine job with this one. Where'd you find him?"

"He's one of Ross's."

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“Something about that guy puts me off. Don’t get me wrong, his horses have the bloodlines, but I don’t like the way he runs his ranch.”

“Me either, but you asked for the best I could find. Sully is gentle, attentive, a hard worker, and a fast learner. He’ll suit you.”

“Sully? You named him already.”

“I’ve spent the last six weeks training him. I couldn’t keep calling him horse.” Blake grinned and patted Sully on the white patch on his brown forehead. The horse leaned in and closed his eyes, completely enamored and content with Blake. Gabe had to admit, his brother had a way with horses.

“How do you like it here at Three Peaks Ranch?” Gabe asked.

“I love it.”

Though Blake trained quarter horses for cutting cattle, he was making a name for himself training Thoroughbred racehorses.

“The partnership with Bud working out? It’s been a few years, you ready to get your own place?”

“Naw, I like it here. I’ve found exactly what I wanted and more.”

“I’m glad you’re happy, man.”

“You must be chomping at the bit to get into the Wolf place.”

“I can’t wait.”

“I still can’t see you rambling around that huge house.”

“It’s the stables and pastures I’m more interested in.”

“Please, that house is beyond awesome.”

Yeah, it certainly would appeal to that elusive wife he kept looking for.

“Did you get it cleaned out like the owner asked?”

“Get this, I’ve dealt solely with Phillip Wolf, but Lela Wolf showed up the other day.”

“What’s she like? Spoiled rich girl?”

“Hell if I know. I only spoke to her for a couple of minutes. I met her in the driveway. She wanted to know what I was doing there. When I told her Phillip requested I put the contents of the house in storage, she told me to leave the place alone and tore out of there. You’d have thought the hounds of hell were after her.”

“So you didn’t pack the house?”

“No, I did. Moving trucks showed up fifteen minutes later.”

Blake frowned. “Why didn’t she want you to touch anything in the house?”

“She didn’t say.”

“Did you tell her you own the place now?”

“I don’t own it until escrow closes in nine weeks. That’s the deal.”

“Did you tell her that?”

“She didn’t give me a chance. Come to think of it, she thought her uncle sent me to find her.”

Blake frowned and narrowed his eyes. “That’s strange.”

“I had my orders from her uncle and delaying the inevitable seemed stupid. The stuff sat in that house for the last ten years untouched. People like them, from the city, more money than they know what to do with, they don’t care about all that land. Hell, Travis Dorsche took over running their prime cattle, and that guy’s just this side of worthless, and they don’t give a shit. So, yeah, I cleaned out the house. When the deal goes through they’ll still have all that stuff sitting in the lockers Phillip rented. With those people, it’s out of sight, out of mind.”

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“Too bad you didn’t get the cattle as part of the deal. That would have saved you some big bucks getting the place set up.”

“Tell me about it.” Gabe rolled his shoulders to ease the ache.

“Still sore.”

“I’m too old to be riding bulls and roping calves. I’ll leave that to Dane.”

“You won the bull-riding championship. Again.”

“It felt good to beat our little brother one last time. I got the last of the seed money I needed to pay for the cattle.”

“When do you expect delivery?”

“The day I move in. Things will be tough the first year. I sank everything I have into this deal, but after that, sky’s the limit.”

“You’re on your way.” Blake gave him a thump on the shoulder. “Come on, let’s load this guy and get you moving. The snow will pass us by here, but you’ll meet it head--on. It’ll be sunset in another hour.”

Gabe led Sully to the gate Blake held open and walked him straight to his truck and trailer. He unstrapped the saddle and pulled it off, handing it over to Blake, who took it inside the stables to put it on the rack. Blake walked out carrying a brush and handed it to him. Gabe tossed the saddle pad Blake’s way, and his brother caught it

and took it back inside too. Gabe shook his head and thought of them back on their parents' ranch, always working together to get the chores done. He missed those days. Now that they were all scattered—Caleb down in Colorado with his new wife, Summer; Dane traipsing all over Texas, Arizona, and Nevada riding rodeo; and Blake here— it wasn't often they all got together at one time. He missed being with his brothers. Maybe Blake was right about him rambling around that big house alone.

He thought often these days about having a wife and kids. Seeing Caleb last month with his pretty bride, how happy they were together, made him think of finding someone special, instead of someone just for tonight, or this week, or this month. Tired of roaming, he wanted to settle down to a normal ranch life like his parents shared and Caleb found with Summer. The life he planned to have with Stacy before it all fell apart.

Blake slapped him on the back, bringing him out of his thoughts.

“Go anywhere interesting in that mind?”

“Just thinking about Caleb and Summer.”

“Never seen two happier people.”

“Me either. Maybe that will be us someday.”

“Let's hope,” Blake said, surprising him with his candor. Whenever they talked about women it was to razz each other or brag about some conquest. They never talked about getting married and settling down.

Gabe brushed Sully down before leading him into the trailer and changing out his bridle for the halter. With the horse settled into the trailer, Gabe stepped out, closed the gate, and faced Blake.

“What do I owe you for the feed and training?” Gabe pulled out his wallet, but his brother put his hand on his arm.

“Call it a housewarming gift from me to you.”

“It’s not necessary,” Gabe tried to argue.

“It’s a gift. I can’t wait to come out and see your new place once you get settled.”

“I’ll probably need some help when the cattle arrive to get them into the right pastures.”

“I’m there. Just give me a call, and we’ll set it up.”

Gabe gave his brother a hearty hug and smack on the back. He wanted to stay, take his brother out for a beer and some food, but sunset came early this time of year. Just after four in the afternoon, it’d be dark in another hour.

Gabe sat in the cab of his truck and started the engine, cranking the heater to ward off the cold. Thirty-three degrees, the temps would plummet come dark. With the snow coming, he needed to get home without delay.

“Hey, drive careful. Sorry you’re getting off to a late start.”

“My own fault. I wanted to spend time with you.”

“I’ll see you soon. If not, definitely in nine weeks when you take over the Wolf spread.”

“See you then.”

“Was she pretty?”

Taken off guard, Gabe narrowed his gaze and asked, “Who?”

“Lela Wolf.”

He didn’t even have to try to recall that heart-shaped face, those green eyes, the sweep of her light brown hair over her eyebrows and tucked behind the curve of her ear. She smelled like a field of lilies.

“Yeah, she’s pretty.” Gorgeous. Stunning. Unforgettable. Fragile, but he caught a glimpse of steel when she found out about him clearing the house and ordered him to stay out.

“Maybe she’ll come back.”

Gabe smirked at his brother and shook his head. Blake gave him a lopsided grin, obviously reading that Gabe indeed thought she was more than just pretty. Gabe hit the gas and left his brother in the dust, but not the thoughts he’d had of a beautiful woman in a blue coat with a face he couldn’t forget.

Gabe concentrated on the slick road. Due to the earlier rain, he slowed down considerably on the back roads. When he hit the highway farther north, rising up toward the pass, the rain turned to snow and slowed him even more. Way past schedule. The sun had set nearly an hour ago and visibility was getting worse by the minute along the two-lane road. If he didn’t have to worry about the horse and trailer, he’d make better time. By morning, he’d need a snow plow to clear the roads if this

kept up all night. Right now, it didn't look like the snow would stop anytime soon.

Tired after a long day and in need of a hot drink, he scratched at his rough jaw and thought about all he needed to do when he got home. Settle Sully into the stall he'd prepared in the stables that morning. Crack open a couple of cans of stew for a late dinner and make a pot of coffee. Grab the clothes he kept tossing over the seat and take them to the laundry room. Tomorrow, he'd do all the laundry. He'd get the guest room cleaned up in case Dane dropped in for another visit.

His phone rang, and he checked the caller ID. Speak of the devil. He hit the button on his steering wheel for the hands-free to answer.

"What's up, Dane?"

"Checked out your Black Angus beauties at my buddy's place." His brother's voice filled the truck cab. "Man, those are some prime beef cattle."

"They ought to be for what I paid," Gabe grumbled.

"Like I said, they're a bunch of beauties. Get them certified organic and you'll make a killing."

"Well, it's going to take some time, but once I get the certification and the breeding program up and running, I hope to start turning a decent profit."

"I confirmed the delivery and verified all the records and bloodlines for the cattle. You're good to go, man."

"Thanks, Dane. You saved me the trip down to Nevada. How're things going with you?"

“Rambling around, kicking ass on the rodeo circuit. I’m ranked number two behind Kurt Collins.”

“You’ll catch him.” Gabe had all the confidence in the world his brother would not only catch Kurt but beat his ass by the finals. Dane wanted that prize money and a chance at setting up his own place.

“No doubt. Gotta run, man.”

“Hot date?”

“Always. You should try it sometime. You spend far too much time alone with your horses.”

“Horses are less trouble than women.”

“Women smell better.”

Gabe chuckled. “I’ve got other priorities right now.”

“Doesn’t hurt to have some fun.”

“You’re having plenty enough for me and half the men in Montana.”

This time Dane laughed. “That’s for sure.”

“So go have your fun.”

“You used to come out with me. I miss those days.”

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“I don’t.” After Stacy, he’d left his ranch and rambled around on the rodeo circuit, chasing the thrill of the ride and every woman he could get his hands on, until he woke up one morning with another buckle bunny beside him and no idea what her name was. He didn’t care. She’d scratched an itch, but left him empty. They all did. He’d used them to fill up the emptiness inside him that grew with every meaningless encounter. He’d needed the thrill of the conquest, knowing he could seduce a woman into his bed. But he woke up and realized that’s all they wanted from him, because that’s all he had to offer. If he wanted to build a life with a woman, he’d have to have something more to offer than meaningless, mindless sex. So he came home to build something he could be proud of, a life someone would want to share with him.

“I miss hanging with you, but not the reckless lifestyle. I’ll leave that to you, bro. See you when the cows come home.”

“I’ll be there.”

Dane clicked off. Gabe couldn’t wait to see Dane when the cattle arrived. Dane promised to help him get things set up on the ranch.

Gabe didn’t hold back the smile, thinking of Dane, his wild-at-heart brother, and Blake, living his dream, training racehorses. Gabe worked his ass off over the last three years to pull together the money he needed for his ranch, to buy the cattle, and finally have everything he ever wanted. Still, Dane’s words rang in his head. Have some fun. Seemed he’d forgotten how to do that these last years living alone at his place, barely going into town for more than supplies. When it came to the women, a few new ones had moved to town, but mostly they were the same faces he’d seen growing up, and none of them appealed.

He wanted something different. Something new. Someone who challenged him.

Eyes the color of spring grass, the same ones he'd thought of ever since he saw her, floated into his mind.

About the Author

JENNIFER RYAN writes romantic suspense and contemporary small-town romances featuring strong men and equally resilient women. Her stories are filled with love, friendship, and the happily-ever-after we all hope to find. Jennifer lives in the San Francisco Bay Area with her husband, three children, dog (Bella), and cat (Shadow). When she isn't writing a book, she's reading one.

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ALOVE ANDFOOTBALLNOVEL

By Julie Brannagh

An Excerpt from

VARIOUS STATES OF UNDRESS: VIRGINIA

by Laura Simcox

If she had it her way, Virginia Fulton—daughter of the President of the United States—would spend more time dancing in Manhattan’s nightclubs than working in its skyscrapers. But when she finds herself in the arms of sexy, persuasive Dexter Cameron, who presents her with the opportunity of a lifetime, Virginia sees it as a sign... but can she take it without losing her heart?

Virginia threw her hands in the air and walked over to face him. “Come on, Dex! Be

realistic. You need a team to fix this store. An army.”

“So hire one.” He leaned toward her. “I need you. And you need me.”

“I don’t need you.” She narrowed her eyes. There was no way she was going to tell him about dumping Owlton. Not right now, anyway.

Dex slid off the desk and covered the few feet between them, frowning. “Yes, you do,” he said.

She stared at his mouth, her legs suddenly feeling wobbly. “No, I don’t.” She raised her hands to his shoulders to steady herself.

“You can choose to keep telling yourself that, or you can make a move.”

“What do you mean by that?”

“Move forward.”

She took a deep breath. “I don’t know if I can.” The words came out raspy, and the look of irritation in Dex’s eyes changed into something much more focused. He hesitated for a moment and then leaned closer. “Make a leap of faith, trust your instincts, and take the job. You’ll have my full support.”

As she gazed up into his steady eyes, she was all too aware of her fear. Because of cowardice, she never acted as if she expected anyone to take her seriously—and so they didn’t. It pissed her off. She didn’t like being pissed, especially not at herself. Dex took her seriously, didn’t he? She closed her eyes. “Okay. I’ll do it.”

When she opened them, he smiled. “Great. Now ... about moving forward?”

“Yeah?”

“Literally moving forward would be fantastic. I never got to kiss you back, you know.”

“I ... didn’t expect you to,” she said.

“That might be, but the more I thought about your kiss last night, the more necessary kissing you back became to me. And now? I can’t think about much else.”

She gripped his shoulders and gazed into his eyes. “To be honest, neither can I.”

“Please tell me we can try again. Kiss me and see what happens.” His voice was low and thick.

Virginia’s legs almost gave out from under her, and a shuddering breath left her body. She should be taking a step back, not contemplating kissing him again. Her body swayed forward, and she tightened her grip on his shoulders to steady herself. Just as she closed her eyes to think, his mouth descended, hot and sweet, angling over hers and stopping a hairsbreadth from her lips.

“Mmm,” he uttered, the sound coming from deep in his throat, and it was all she needed.

Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 6:02 am

She pushed up onto her toes, her fingers laced behind his neck, and she kissed him. He tasted earthy—wild, almost—and that surprising discovery sent a shock wave through her brain. She kissed him again. “More,” she murmured, even though she knew she shouldn’t. His tongue invaded her mouth; he turned and, in one motion, lifted her onto the desk. Electricity sang through her body, and, as she twined her tongue with his, the idea of shouldn’t started to become hazy. Her hands threaded through his cropped hair and she leaned back—arching her breasts toward him—wanting Dex to press her down with his body. Please, she whispered in her mind, Please, Dex.

His hands ran over her hips, but he didn’t move closer, so she deepened the kiss, letting her hands trail over his smooth jaw, the taut sides of his neck; then she slid her fingers around the lapels of his suit and tugged. With a groan, Dex pulled her against his chest again, his hands skimming up her back to gently tug on the blunt ends of her hair. She complied, letting her head fall back, and his hot, open mouth slid down her throat and nestled in the crook of her neck. He kissed her there, lingering.

“More,” she gasped out loud, clinging to his shoulders.

He kissed her throat again, his tongue branding a circle under her jaw. Then slowly, he pulled away. “We have to stop,” he said, looking into her eyes. “If we don’t ...” He swallowed and she watched his throat work. She hadn’t gotten to kiss him there, yet. Dipping her chin, she leaned forward, but he pulled away. He gave her a sheepish smile. “I think we sealed the deal, don’t you?”

An Excerpt from

THE GOVERNESS CLUB:LOUISA

by Ellie Macdonald

Louisa Brockhurst is on the run—from her friends, from her family, even from her dream of independence through the Governess Club. Handsome but menacing John Taylor is a prizefighter-turned-innkeeper who is trying to make his way in society. When Louisa shows up at his doorstep, he's quick to accept her offer to help—at a price. Their attraction grows, but will headstrong, fiery Louisa ever trust the surprisingly kind John enough to tell him the dangerous secrets from her past that keep her running?

Her eyes followed his movements as he straightened. Good Lord, but the moniker “Giant Johnny” was highly appropriate. The man was a mountain. A fleeting thought crossed her mind about what it would be like to have those large arms encompass her.

He spied her packed portmanteau and looked at her questioningly. “You are moving on? I thought your plans were unconfirmed.”

Louisa lifted her chin. “They are. But that does not mean I must stay here in order to solidify them.”

He put his thick hands on his hips, doubling his width. “But it also means that you do not have to leave in order to do so.” She opened her mouth to speak, but he stayed her with his hand. “I understand what it is like to be adrift. If you wish, you can remain here. It is clear that I need help, a woman's help.” He gestured to the room. “I have little notion and less inclination for cleaning. I need someone to take charge in this area. Will you do it?”

Louisa stared at him. Help him by being a maid? In an inn? Of all the things she had considered doing, working in such a place had never crossed her mind. She was not

suited for such work. A governess, a companion, yes—but a maid? What would her mother have said about this? Or any of her family?

She pressed her lips together. It had been six years since she'd allowed her family to influence her, and this job would at least keep her protected from the elements. She would be able to protect herself from the more unruly patrons, she was certain. It would be hard-earned coin, to be sure, but the current condition of her moneybag would not object to whichever manner she earned more. It would indeed present the biggest challenge she had yet faced, but how hard could it be?

“What say you, Mrs. Brock?”

His voice drew her out of her thoughts. Regarding him carefully, Louisa knew better than just to accept his offer. “What sorts of benefits could I expect?”

“Proper wage, meals, and a room.” His answer was quick.

“How many meals?”

“How many does the average person eat?” he countered. “Three by my count.”

Would her stomach survive three meals of such fare? She nodded. “This room? Or a smaller one in the attic?” She had slept in her fair share of small rooms as a governess; she would fight for the biggest one she could get.

“This one is fine. This is not a busy inn, so it can be spared.” He rubbed his bald head. “My room is behind the office, so you will never be alone on the premises.”

Hm. “I see. Free days?” Not that she expected to need them. She knew no one in the area and had no plans to inform her friends—herformerfriends—of where she was.

“Once a fortnight.”

“And my duties?”

“Cleaning, of course. Helping out in the kitchen and pub when necessary.”

“Was last night a typical crowd?” she asked.

“Yes. Local men come here regularly. There are not many places a man in this area can go.”

“And the women? I am curious.”

He shrugged his boulder shoulders. “None have yet come in here. I don’t cater to their tastes.”

Louisa sniffed and glanced around the room. The condition truly was atrocious. If the other rooms were like this, it would take days of hard work to get them up to scratch. It would be an accomplishment to be proud of, if she succeeded.

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Ha—if I succeed? I always succeed.

She looked back at Giant Johnny, watching her with his hands on his hips, legs braced apart. She eyed him. He stood like a sportsman, sure of his ground and his strength. A sliver of awareness slipped through her at the confidence he exuded. This man was capable of many things; she was certain of it.

And if she were to agree to his offer, she would be with him every day. This mountain, this behemoth, would have authority over her as her employer. It was not the proximity to the giant that worried her; it was that last fact.

It rankled. For so long she had wished for independence, had almost achieved it with her friends and the formation of the Governess Club, only to have it collapse underneath her. And now she found herself once again having to submit to a man's authority.

It was a bitter pill to swallow. She would have to trust that she would eventually be able to turn the situation to her advantage. Nodding, she said, "I accept the position, Mr. Taylor."

An Excerpt from

GOOD GUYS WEAR BLACK

by Lizbeth Selvig

When single mom Rose Hanrahan arrives in Kennison Falls, Minnesota, as the new

head librarian, she instantly clashes with hometown hero Dewey Mitchell over just about everything. But in a small town like Kennison Falls, it's tough to ignore anybody, and the more they're thrown together, the more it seems like fate has something in store for them.

Waves of anger, like blasts of heat, rolled off the woman as she turned to the pumps. Rooted to the spot, Dewey watched the scene, studying the mystifying child. He was standing a little too close to the gas fumes, but irritation took a reluctant backseat to curiosity and captivation. What kind of kid couldn't follow a simple directive from people in uniform? What nine- or ten-year-old kid knew the year, make, and model of a fourteen-year-old fire truck, not to mention its specs—right down to the capacities of its foam firefighting equipment?

Asperger's syndrome. He knew the phrase but little about it. He certainly believed there were real syndromes out there, since he'd seen plenty of strange behavior in his life. But this reeked of a pissed-off mother simply warning him away from her weird kid. He knew in this day and age you weren't supposed to touch a child, but, damn it, the kid could have gotten seriously hurt. And she sure as hell hadn't been around.

Then there was the car. Over ten years old and spotless as new. The red GT didn't fit the woman. Or the situation. You just didn't expect to see a mom and her son driving cross-country in a fireball-red sports car. She had some sort of mild, uppity accent and used words like "ire." In a way, she wasn't any more normal than her kid.

He tried to turn away. She wasn't from town, so he wouldn't have to think about her once the gas was pumped. But something compelled him to watch her finish—something that told him the world would go back to being a lot less interesting once she'd left it.

She let the boy hang the nozzle up, and then did something amazing. She opened her door, took out what appeared to be a chamois, and bent over the gas tank door to

wipe and buff an area where gas must have dripped.

She doesn't deserve it if she doesn't know how to take care of it. That's what he'd said about her.

Dang. She sure knew how to keep it ... red.

His observations were cut off by a sudden wail. The boy lunged like a spaniel after a squirrel. The woman grabbed him, squatted, and took his hands in hers, pressing his palms together like he was praying. Her mouth moved quickly, and she leaned in close, her forehead nearly but not quite touching her son's.

It should not have been a remotely sexy picture, but it was nearly as attractive as the sight of her polishing the Mustang. The over-reactive Mama Wolverine morphed into someone intense and sincere with desperation around the edges, and something he didn't understand at all tugged at him, deep in his gut.

The boy finally nodded and quit fussing. The woman dropped her hands and leaned forward to kiss him on the cheek. After straightening, she glanced over her shoulder, and the boy's wistful gaze followed. Dewey remembered that he'd begged only to look at the gauges on the truck. Should he just give in and let the kid have his look?

Then everything soft about the mother hardened as she met Dewey's eyes. Her delicately angled features tightened like sharp weapons, and the wisps of hair escaping from a long, thick brown ponytail seemed to freeze in place as if they didn't dare move for fear of pissing her off further. She stood, her shapely legs—their calves bare and browned beneath the hems of knee-length cargo shorts—spread like a superhero's in front of her son. She didn't say a word, so neither did Dewey. He didn't need to take her on again. Let the kid look up the gauges online.

With a parting shot from her angry eyes, she ushered the boy into the passenger seat,

darted to her side, and climbed in. The engine came to life and purred like a jungle cat. She clearly cared for the car the way she did for her son. Or somebody did.

However angry she was, she didn't take it out on the car but pulled smoothly away from the pump. Dewey smiled. It was her car all right. Had it not been, she'd have peeled out just to punctuate her feelings for him.

Impressive woman. A little crazy. But impressive.

An Excerpt from

SINFUL REWARDS 1

A Billionaires and Bikers Novella

by Cynthia Sax

Belinda “Bee” Carter is a good girl; at least, that’s what she tells herself. And a good girl deserves a nice guy—just like the gorgeous and moody billionaire Nicolas Rainer. Or so she thinks, until she takes a look through her telescope and sees a naked, tattooed man on the balcony across the courtyard. He has been watching her, and that makes him all the more enticing. But when a mysterious and anonymous text message dares her to do something bad, she must decide if she is really the good girl she has always claimed to be, or if she’s willing to risk everything for her secret fantasy of being watched.

An Avon Red Novella

I’d told Cyndi I’d never use it, that it was an instrument purchased by perverts to spy on their neighbors. She’d laughed and called me a prude, not knowing that I was one of those perverts, that I secretly yearned to watch and be watched, to care and be

cared for.

Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 6:02 am

If I'm cautious, and I'm always cautious, she'll never realize I used her telescope this morning. I swing the tube toward the bench and adjust the knob, bringing the mysterious object into focus.

It's a phone. Nicolas's phone. I bounce on the balls of my feet. This is a sign, another declaration from fate that we belong together. I'll return Nicolas's much-needed device to him. As a thank you, he'll invite me to dinner. We'll talk. He'll realize how perfect I am for him, fall in love with me, marry me.

Cyndi will find a fiancé also—everyone loves her—and we'll have a double wedding, as sisters of the heart often do. It'll be the first wedding my family has had in generations.

Everyone will watch us as we walk down the aisle. I'll wear a strapless white Vera Wang mermaid gown with organza and lace details, crystal and pearl embroidery accents, the bodice fitted, and the skirt hemmed for my shorter height. My hair will be swept up. My shoes—

Voices murmur outside the condo's door, the sound piercing my delightful daydream. I swing the telescope upward, not wanting to be caught using it. The snippets of conversation drift away.

I don't relax. If the telescope isn't positioned in the same way as it was last night, Cyndi will realize I've been using it. She'll tease me about being a fellow pervert, sharing the story, embellished for dramatic effect, with her stern, serious dad—or, worse, with Angel, that snobby friend of hers.

I'll die. It'll be worse than being the butt of jokes in high school because that ridicule was about my clothes and this will center on the part of my soul I've always kept hidden. It'll also be the truth, and I won't be able to deny it. I am a pervert.

I have to return the telescope to its original position. This is the only acceptable solution. I tap the metal tube.

Last night, my man-crazy roommate was giggling over the new guy in three-eleven north. The previous occupant was a gray-haired, bowtie-wearing tax auditor, his luxurious accommodations supplied by Nicolas. The most exciting thing he ever did was drink his tea on the balcony.

According to Cyndi, the new occupant is a delicious piece of man candy—tattooed, buff, and head-to-toe lickable. He was completing armcurls outside, and she enthusiastically counted his reps, oohing and aahing over his bulging biceps, calling to me to take a look.

I resisted that temptation, focusing on making macaroni and cheese for the two of us, the recipe snagged from the diner my mom works in. After we scarfed down dinner, Cyndi licking her plate clean, she left for the club and hasn't returned.

Three-eleven north is the mirror condo to ours. I straighten the telescope. That position looks about right, but then, the imitation UGGs I bought in my second year of college looked about right also. The first time I wore the boots in the rain, the sheepskin fell apart, leaving me barefoot in Economics 201.

Unwilling to risk Cyndi's friendship on "about right," I gaze through the eyepiece. The view consists of rippling golden planes, almost like...

Tanned skin pulled over defined abs.

I blink. It can't be. I take another look. A perfect pearl of perspiration clings to a puckered scar. The drop elongates more and more, stretching, snapping. It trickles downward, navigating the swells and valleys of a man's honed torso.

No. I straighten. This is wrong. I shouldn't watch our sexy neighbor as he stands on his balcony. If anyone catches me...

Parts 1, 2, 3, and 4 available now!

An Excerpt from

COVERING KENDALL

A Love and Football Novel

by Julie Brannagh

Kendall Tracy, General Manager of the San Francisco Miners, is not one for rash decisions or one-night stands. But when she finds herself alone in a hotel room with a heart-stoppingly gorgeous man—who looks oddly familiar—Kendall throws her own rules out the window...

Drew McCoy should look familiar; he's a star player for her team's archrival, the Seattle Sharks. They agree to pretend their encounter never happened. But staying away from each other is harder than it seems, and they both discover that some risks are worth taking.

"You're Drew McCoy," she cried out.

She scooted to the edge of the bed, clutching the sheet around her torso as she went. It was a little late now for modesty. Retaining some shred of dignity might be a good

thing.

She'd watched Drew's game film with the coaching staff. She'd seen his commercials for hair products and sports drinks and soup a hundred times before. His contract with the Sharks was done as of the end of football season, and the Miners wanted him to play for them. Drew was San Francisco's number-one target in next season's free agency. She'd planned on asking the team's owner to write a big check to Drew and his agent next March. And if all that wasn't enough, Drew was eight years younger than she was.

What the hell was wrong with her? It must have been the knit hat covering his famous hair, or finding him in a non-jock hangout like a bookstore. Maybe it was the temporary insanity brought on by an overwhelming surge of hormones.

"Is there a problem?" he said.

"I can't have anything to do with you. I have to go."

He shook his head in adorable confusion. She couldn't think of anything she wanted more right now than to run her fingers through his gorgeous hair.

Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 6:02 am

“This is your hotel room. Where do you think you’re going?”

She yanked as much of the sheet off the bed as possible, attempting to wrap it around herself and stand up at the same time. He was simultaneously grabbing at the comforter to shield himself. It didn’t work.

She twisted her foot in the bedding while she hurled herself away from him and ended up on the carpet seconds later in a tangle of sheets and limbs, still naked. Her butt hit the floor so hard she almost expected to bounce.

The number-one reason Kendall didn’t engage in one-night stands as a habit hauled himself up on all fours in the middle of the bed. Out of all the guys in the world available for a short-term fling, ofcourseshed pick the man who could get her fired or sued.

He grabbed the robe hed slung over the foot of the bed, scrambled off the mattress, and jammed his arms into the sleeves as he advanced on her.

“Are you okay? You went down pretty hard.” His eyes skimmed over her. “That’s going to leave a mark.”

He crouched next to her as he reached out to help her up. She resisted the impulse to stare at golden skin, an eight-pack, and a sizable erection. Shed heard Drew didnt lack for dates. He had things to offer besides the balance in his bank accounts.

“Im okay,” she told him.

She felt a little shaky. She'd probably have a nice bruise later. She was going down all right, and it had nothing to do with sex. It had everything to do with the fact that, if anyone from the Miners organization saw him emerging from her room in the next seventy-two hours, she was in the kind of trouble with her employer there was no recovering from. The interim general manager of an NFL team did not sleep with anyone from the opposing team, especially when the two teams were archrivals that hated each other with the heat of a thousand suns. Especially when the guy was a star player her own organization was more than a little interested in acquiring. Especially before a game that could mean the inside track to the playoffs for both teams.

Drew and Kendall would be the Romeo and Juliet of the NFL. Well, without all the dying. Death by 24/7 sports media embarrassment didn't count.

He reached out, grabbed her beneath the armpits, and hoisted her off the floor like she weighed nothing.

"I've got you. Let's see if you can stand up," he said. His warm, gentle hands moved over her, looking for injuries. "Why don't you lean on me for a second here?"

She tried rewrapping the sheet around her so she could walk away from him while preserving her dignity. It wasn't going to happen. She couldn't stop staring at him. If she let him take her in his arms, she'd be lost. She teetered as she leaned against the hotel room wall.

"I'm—I'm fine. I—"

"Hold still," he said. She heard his bare feet slap against the carpeting as he grabbed the second robe out of the coat closet and brought it back to her. "If you don't want to do this, that's your decision, but I don't understand what's wrong."

She struggled into the thick terry robe as she tried to think of a response. He was

staring at her as she retrieved the belt and swathed herself in yards of fabric. Judging by his continuing erection, he liked what he saw, even if it was covered up from her neck to below her knees. He licked his bottom lip. Her mouth went dry. Damn it.

Of course the most attractive guy she'd been anywhere near a bed with in the past year was completely off-limits.

"You don't recognize me," she said.

"No, I don't," he said. "Is there a problem?"

"You might say that." She finally succeeded in knotting the belt of the robe around her waist, dropped the sheet at her feet, and stuck out one hand. "Hi. I'm Kendall Tracy. I'm the interim GM of the San Francisco Miners." His eyes widened in shock. "Nice to meet you."