



Shielded Hearts (Black Heart Security #3)

Author: *Em Petrova*

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Description: Her dream job comes with hidden risks—and he's her only shot at survival.

Colt Malone doesn't do emotions—or attachments. The elite soldier turned bodyguard prefers the solitude of his family ranch, where the nightmares from his past can't haunt him as much. But when a new assignment lands him in close quarters with Aspen Grace, the vibrant force of nature he's sworn to protect, his carefully built walls start to crack.

Aspen has stared death in the face and lived to tell the tale. After beating cancer, she made a promise to herself: live boldly, love fiercely, and never look back. But when a threat from her past resurfaces, she's forced to rely on Colt—the stoic protector who's as infuriating as he is magnetic.

The closer danger comes, the more determinedly Colt keeps his distance, even as Aspen refuses to let him slip away. With shadows closing in and time running out, Colt must face his own demons to protect the woman who's breathing life back into his soul.

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Aspen Grace adjusted the leather messenger bag over her shoulder and slipped out of the big rusty pickup truck. As her designer high heels hit the gravel driveway, her ankle tilted sharply, threatening to launch her face toward the ground.

She quickly found a spot of level footing to stand on and threw a look back at the man who'd kindly offered to drive her. "Thank you for the ride..." She paused. He'd introduced himself as Big Mike, but she couldn't bring herself to use that name.

He gave her a nod. Around the chewing tobacco stuffed in his bottom lip, he said, "Enjoy the weddin'."

After she closed the door and got her bearings, she turned toward the expansive ranch house. The sprawling home seemed to have been added on to several times and was recently painted in a deep color that was nearly black, giving the country home a modern appeal.

A big lawn stretched toward several more impressive buildings, including a massive barn. Aspen looked around.

Music pulsed in the air, the strains of violin and acoustic guitar music drifting on the Wyoming breeze along with the low hum of voices.

Aspen's heart sank. Well, this was terrible timing. It sounded like the wedding was about to start. Her plan of arriving at the Black Heart Ranch to personally hand-deliver the honeymoon portfolio to the newlyweds, Oaks and Shiloh Malone, quickly took a nosedive.

First, her plane left late. She thought owning a private jet would put an end to her days of following somebody else's schedule, but she was wrong. Her crew came highly recommended and they had never let her down—until today, when she had a tight timeframe. She couldn't imagine what caused them to be delayed, but she could only roll with it.

Then, she arrived in the teeny-tiny town of Willowbrook thinking that she'd have a rental car waiting, only to learn that she couldn't rent a car in Willowbrook.

After talking to every single person working in the small hangar of the airport where she landed, she finally found someone who would give her a ride to the ranch. Big Mike's truck smelled like exhaust and the seat looked like it had been smeared with motor oil weekly for the past decade, but it had gotten her here.

Late.

She adjusted the strap of her messenger bag again and plastered on her best wedding-crasher smile.

Hurrying forward, she tried not to twist her ankles on the uneven lawn. She hoped that the grime of the truck seat hadn't left stains on her dress. Not only did she want to give the best first impression possible to the newlyweds, but the deep green was one of her favorite dresses to wear in the fall season.

She also hoped that she could track down the best man of the wedding before the wedding actually started.

The venue was set up on the lawn with pristine white chairs tied in blue bows that swished in the wind.

A thrill hit Aspen. It wasn't easy finding the exact shade of blue for the honeymoon

portfolio, but she'd done it.

Aspen's personal goal was to always give her customers the best travel experience, from start to finish. In this case, a hand-delivered portfolio containing the itinerary and tied with a "skydiver blue" silk bow. The not-quite-navy hue wasn't well-known and even rarer to find.

The music changed from gentle and beautiful to...Mendelssohn's "Wedding March."

Oh god. Not now . Was she that late?

She was.

She groaned and spun around to see the bridesmaids drifting toward her. Panic hit. Should she rush up the aisle in front of them or wait and slip in after the bride?

She darted to the side—hopefully out of sight—and waited respectfully as the first bridesmaid made her way up the aisle.

When the woman, dressed in a lovely shade of blue that complemented the color of the bows on the chairs, reached the big traditional white wooden arch, she took her place opposite the groomsmen.

Aspen felt her eyes widening. She'd been to plenty of celebrity events, rubbed elbows with models and actors. All very attractive, but these groomsmen were mouth-watering—tall and muscular with perfectly tailored tuxedos.

She glanced from the groom to his best man. The dark-haired man said something to the groom that made him chuckle, but the best man didn't laugh with him. Instead, his attention fixed on something at the back of the venue.

Oh god. Was he narrowing his eyes at her ?

She gulped and felt the disturbance of someone passing by her. A second woman floating down the aisle in blue. Her blonde hair was teased by the light wind that seemed to have cooperated just for this day by giving the wedding party and guests a way to cool off against the warmth of the autumn sun.

To a crescendo of the music, the bride appeared. Glowing. Stunning. Shiloh looked like a model in a dress that stroked every curve.

Aspen felt a silly smile spread across her face. Weddings always made her cry.

The guests surged to their feet, twisting to watch the bride walk the short petal-strewn path to her groom. Aspen waited until she was certain she wouldn't be spotted before quickly sliding into a seat in the back row.

She hated being late...but this had all worked out. Looking around, she noted just how small the wedding actually was. With such an extravagant honeymoon planned, Aspen had anticipated a wedding of around five hundred guests. But there couldn't be more than fifty people here.

Much harder for her to blend in. At the first opportunity, she would hand over the portfolio to the best man for safekeeping and leave fast.

How was she getting back to the airport? Big Mike had dropped her off, leaving her no way of returning to her plane. She'd figure it out after the ceremony.

The notes of the wedding music faded away on a poignant wisp of the breeze, turning her attention to the special event taking place in front of her.

The ceremony was beautiful and touching. The groom totally choked up, which had

the bride dabbing at her eyes with a small lace handkerchief one of the bridesmaids pushed into her hand.

Soon the happy couple was pronounced husband and wife. With a happy glow, they turned to the guests, the smiles on their faces unstoppable.

The groom let out a cowboy whoop that made the bride break into laughter and sent a ripple of amusement through the guests.

Quickly, the wedding party made their way down the aisle.

As the best man passed Aspen, he turned his head and gave her a hard stare.

Her stomach dipped. He didn't look happy about her posing as one of the wedding guests, but she didn't have much choice. She'd just have to get him alone and do what she'd come here to do.

Though she tried her hardest to stay at the back of the group of guests headed to the reception tent, she got pushed into the middle of the pack.

Before she knew it, she was moving through the receiving line.

The tall stunning bridesmaid with dark, gleaming hair offered her a welcoming smile as if Aspen belonged there. Next to her stunning beauty, Aspen stood about six inches shorter and felt like a schlump. But she smiled back and got ushered along.

Coming face-to-face with the man she'd been corresponding with over the past week to pull off the most romantic, amazing honeymoon ever, she gulped.

Colt Malone.

His stormy gray eyes landed on her face. “What are you doing? Why are you here?”

“Uh...I have your portfolio.”

Behind her, more people pushed close, urging her to keep moving. With no choice, she stepped up in front of the bride and groom.

Aspen slapped a smile back on her face. “Congratulations! What a beautiful ceremony.”

The bride shot a look at her groom, a question on her face. His broad shoulders rippled in a shrug as if to say that he didn’t have a clue who the hell Aspen was either.

“Thanks for coming.” The bride hugged her, followed by the groom.

Dazed, Aspen was shoved out of the receiving line into the group of people milling around the tent. The musicians had set up in the corner and were playing some light music to accompany the happy hour before dinner was served

Someone tapped her on the shoulder, and Aspen spun.

“Time for photos!” The dark-haired bombshell bridesmaid twitched her head for Aspen to follow.

She held up a hand, shaking her head.

“You have to get in the photos. Come on!”

Inwardly, she groaned as she forced herself to follow the group returning to the white arch for photos.

Before she could figure a way out of this mess, she was shoved into the group wedding photos.

Catching sight of her from the corner of his eye, Colt turned his head and looked straight at her.

She thought she saw him mouth: What the...

He moved positions, placing himself between her and another man, then pushed her to the end of the group. "Why exactly are you here again?"

"I have the honeymoon portfolio."

"This could have been an email."

As if she didn't already feel awkward.

Her late mother's words filtered into her mind. Don't ever let anyone tell you that you don't belong.

Aspen straightened her shoulders and smiled with the group when the photographer directed.

Luckily, the photos were finished quickly, and she was able to slip away. She caught up to Colt, who was striding away from everybody.

"Wait up!"

He stopped walking. For a moment, he didn't turn to face her, making it clear that he was far from thrilled to be talking to her. Again.

Slowly, he spun.

Wow.

Controlling that big machine of a body must require a lot of skill.

He took a step toward her.

Trying not to appear flustered, she swung the bag off her shoulder and unzipped it. She pulled out the beautiful tan leatherbound portfolio tied in the perfect skydiver-blue ribbon and offered it to him.

“Ta-da! Here’s the portfolio.”

He stared at her for a beat before clasping the portfolio.

Aspen plucked a small stack of business cards from the interior pocket of the bag. “Here. Business cards. You can pass them out.”

He looked at her like she’d grown two heads, and neither of them were human. “You’ve gotta be joking.”

She stared up into his gray eyes. A deep, stormy gray like a shifting sky.

He snatched the cards out of her hand and crushed his fist around them. Without another word, he whirled and took off to the tent, leaving Aspen alone.

Stuck. With no ride.

* * * * *

Even though the crowd was small, it was still too big for Colt.

He cut a path around people standing in clusters with champagne flutes in hand to the head table. With a grind of his molars, he yanked out his chair and set the portfolio on the seat. Christ, he hated events. All events.

Family was challenging enough, but about fifty close friends of the Malone family and a few townspeople who'd been extended an invitation made the ranch feel crowded as hell.

Add in a nosy travel agent who'd stuck around way too long and Colt was ready to saddle up his horse and make a getaway into the mountains.

He couldn't leave, though. His brother Oaks had asked him to be his best man, and that came with a sense of duty he could not shirk.

Dammit. Why hadn't he seen it before now? Oaks asked him to be the best man instead of their oldest brother Carson for exactly this reason. And he fell for it! He couldn't believe he'd been duped into performing all these stupid duties as best man.

As he pushed out a sigh, he felt the seams of his tux jacket stretch as if about to burst. Now that the photos were over, he could at least shuck the tuxedo jacket. Suits were always too tight across his shoulders and made him feel claustrophobic. He stripped off the coat and draped it over the back of his chair.

Sudden applause broke out as the newlyweds took the floor for their first dance as man and wife.

Colt walked straight to the bar and poured himself a whiskey. If Oaks required him to dance, he would need the bottle.

He tossed back the shot just as a familiar hoot sounded from the crowd. Without turning, he knew that sound came from his kid sister Willow.

Now, if anyone was in their element, it was Willow. People, fancy clothes and music. Three things that often got her in trouble with guys and usually sent any of her six brothers to hunt down her boyfriend-of-the-month and threaten to remove his front teeth in a variety of ways.

He scanned the crowd and saw Willow on the dance floor with the rest of the wedding party. Hell. Was he required to get out there now, before the alcohol even hit his system?

His brother Denver appeared at his side and bumped his shoulder against Colt's.

Around the burn of the second shot of whiskey he tossed down his throat, Colt grunted. "Punk. Just because you're back from the dead doesn't mean a thing. You're still my little brother."

Denver was assigned to a SEAL team that was so deep ops nobody knew any of them were even alive. Including their families.

When Colt got the news that Denver was dead, he'd been gutted. He also had a lot of time on his hands—time to dig up information about Denver's team. In the process of finding out exactly how his brother died, he discovered he wasn't dead at all.

Denver tossed him a crooked grin. "Lighten up, best man. Get out there and bust a move."

"Why don't you go dance?"

Denver's lips twitched at one corner. "It's not required of me."

At that moment, the travel agent started toward the bar. She saw Colt, turned around and headed back the way she came.

Dammit. He needed to get her out of here. Oaks and Shiloh deserved the best day, and that didn't include offering the travel agent fish or beef.

With a low groan, he shot Denver a dirty look. "I'm going to dance."

"Good luck, bro." Denver grabbed the bottle that Colt had just poured from and brought it to his lips.

Colt made his way around a group of people gathered with drinks in hand, talking. He caught up to the travel agent and curled his hand around her shoulder.

She whipped around. When she saw it was him, she started to shake her head, but he grabbed her wrist and towed her onto the dance floor.

As soon as he placed a hand on her waist and felt her smooth skin slipping underneath that dress that was the color of pines on the mountain—and incidentally her eyes—he forced a sigh through his nostrils.

She blinked up at him in shock. "Wait—we're dancing?"

"Well, you crashed my brother's wedding and were even in all the group photos. Don't you think that dancing is required?" He cocked a brow.

She let out a low sound like a moan. Over the music of what had to be the longest first dance in the history of weddings, he couldn't be sure.

"I don't dance with the brothers of my clients," she said.

“Today you’re breaking that rule.”

“I liked it better when we were just emailing each other.”

“Do you deliver portfolios to all your clients?”

“No.” She tilted her jaw upward. “Only for premiere honeymoons.”

“Well as I said, this visit could have been another email when you sent me the honeymoon itinerary and tickets for my brother and his wife,” he bit off.

All of a sudden, the musicians ended the song, and music projected from the big speakers the deejay had set up in the opposite corner.

Oh fuck no. It was one of those group dances. Cupid Shuffle .

The travel agent’s eyes flared wide with panic.

“If I can’t get out of this, neither can you.” She kind of deserved it for sticking around so long when she wasn’t invited.

Colt took off across the floor, performing the steps that weren’t much different from line dancing. And he’d done plenty of that in honkytonks while in basic training. Back when he didn’t mind being part of society.

He grabbed his partner’s hand.

The travel agent dragged her feet and gave her head a wild shake. Dark, thick curls bounced on her shoulders. “I can’t do this dance!”

“If I’m doing it, you’re doing it. Come on.” He dragged her through several more

steps. Turning his head, he pierced her in his stare. “I’m not one to mince words. Why are you still here?”

She fumbled through a few steps while watching other dancers around her so she could follow. “I don’t have a ride. Someone from town brought me to the ranch and dropped me off.”

Christ.

“I could have sent someone to meet you at the airport to get the portfolio. You didn’t have to come all the way out here.”

She shouted at him over the loud music. “I didn’t want to bother anyone.”

“Being an uninvited guest isn’t bothersome?”

Someone careened into him. Colt looked over to see his oldest brother Carson dancing like he had two left feet.

“Sorry, bro.” Carson looked past Colt at the travel agent. “Who’s your date? She’s cute.”

“She’s not my date. She’s the travel agent.”

The woman—what the hell was her name again? Aspen something. Grace. Aspen Grace. The name sounded made up to him.

She issued a huff of anger. “I’m not an agent. I’m a travel concierge!”

Colt leveled her with a what-the-fuck look.

She narrowed her green eyes in a glare and then spun on her high heels and stalked off the dance floor.

Good riddance.

Except she still didn't have a way off the ranch.

He started after her, but Carson tapped him on the shoulder. "Time for the toast!"

Motherfucking hell. Could this best man gig get any worse?

The terrible dance ended, and the wedding party made their way to the head table. Shiloh was radiant after dancing, and Oaks was grinning from ear to ear. He'd never actually seen his brother so happy.

No pressure to deliver the best toast ever or anything.

Too bad he didn't have anything prepared and would be winging it.

How hard could it be? As a Navy SEAL, he improvised on ops all the time. This should be easy.

He grabbed a flute of champagne and raised it in toast to the newlyweds and then faced the wedding guests.

His stare landed on Aspen positioned at the front of the crowd.

He arched a brow at her, and she gave him a wide-eyed go-fuck-yourself look as she held her own champagne flute aloft.

He ran his tongue over his lips. "Good evening, everyone. On behalf of Shiloh and

Oaks Malone, I'd love to thank you for sharing this very special day. After all, how many times is Oaks going to get married? I mean...this was the second. To the same woman."

Everyone laughed, including the bride and groom.

Colt barreled on, "In all seriousness, I'd like to thank Shiloh for giving our brother a new chance at life and happiness, proving that even stubborn guys can learn a thing or two."

His gaze fell on Aspen again.

Damn, Carson was right. She was cute. Her dark hair was a perfect cloud of loose curls around her oval face, accentuating her angelic features.

What the hell was the matter with him? That whiskey must have been spiked with something harder. Two shots would not have him thinking about how a woman's features looked otherwise.

Quickly, he lifted his glass higher. "Let's raise a glass to these two: Shiloh and Oaks, who have shown us that love finds us in unexpected places. And hopefully, there's no need for a third wedding."

Everyone laughed at his joke. Colt barely got one sip of his champagne before the photographer was back, waving at everyone to smash together for a group picture.

Layne, Shiloh's bridesmaid and Carson's significant other, waved at Aspen. "Get in the picture!"

Oh Christ.

They were shuffled into a line still clutching their drinks.

Colt glanced down the line. Where the hell was Aspen? In most of the photos earlier, he managed to put her on the end, thinking he'd have a talk with the photographer and tell her to crop Aspen out.

But he was on the end.

Shit. She was between two people in the wedding party.

"Swap me places," he said to Willow.

As he jostled everyone around like a Rubix cube, trying to position the unwanted guest at the end of the group, Willow touched Aspen's arm. "I love your dress."

She gave her a tense smile. "Thanks!"

Willow turned to Colt. "Your date is cute!"

"Not my date. Travel agent."

"Travel concierge!" Aspen hissed to him as they swapped places. "And I need a ride!"

He stared down at her as they crossed paths to reach their new positions in the group photo. "Say no more. I can get you out of here."

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A spen paused at the open door of Colt's old truck and looked down at the dusty seat. "What is up with the men in Wyoming? Don't you ever clean out your trucks?"

Colt grunted as he slid behind the wheel. The movement stretched the seam of his tuxedo pants around his muscled thighs so much that he swore he felt a couple threads snap.

"We clean them out when necessary. Since nobody rides in my truck, it isn't necessary." He twisted the key in the ignition.

His unwanted passenger eased onto the seat as if she'd catch a disease from the dust settled on the leather. "If nobody rides in it, how does the seat get so dirty?"

"Oh, you know." He backed out of the parking spot, careful not to ding any of the seven trucks that belonged to wedding guests. "Tractor parts. Greasy tools. The odd newborn calf."

"Calf!"

He shrugged and took off down the driveway that led to the main road back to Willowbrook. "What's your destination?"

"The airstrip."

He turned his head to look at her. The airstrip was reserved for private planes or choppers, mainly wealthy Wyoming landowners.

“Did you give the bride and groom their honeymoon portfolio?” she asked.

Her question sent a ripple of annoyance through him, mostly directed at himself. Damn. During dinner, he’d moved it off his seat to the floor and completely forgot about it.

“Of course I did.” He wasn’t outright lying to her—the portfolio would get into his brother’s hands eventually. If he hurried, he could drop Aspen at the airstrip, hightail it back to the ranch and give it to Oaks himself.

Or he’d just call Willow and ask her to do it so he could continue with his own plans—taking a short break from society. He’d already discussed his plan to take off into the wilderness with Carson. His brother had looked at him with that concern he hated seeing in any of his siblings’ eyes, but had agreed it was a good time to take a vacation.

Colt already had a bag packed and thrown in the back seat of his truck for an easy escape after the wedding. The black duffel bounced around on the seat as they rolled to the end of the driveway.

Aspen was silent the entire ride, which couldn’t end fast enough for either of them. When he turned onto the familiar lane leading to the hangar, he shot a look toward the private jet his family owned. It sat off to the side of the runway, ready for the next Black Heart Security call.

Aspen cut a hand through the air. “I’m surprised an area like this even has an airport. I wasn’t prepared to fly into such a small place. I thought I could at least rent a car.”

“So that’s how you got stuck bumming a ride from somebody.”

Nodding, she nibbled at her bottom lip. The pout was stained a soft pink that matched

the light flush in her cheeks.

“Who gave you a ride anyway?”

“A guy calling himself Big Mike.”

“Ah.”

“You know him?” Her stare drilled into him.

“Yep. Mike’s a good guy.” And thank god for it. A woman hitching a ride from a stranger could end in disaster. He’d seen it himself in other parts of the world.

When he pulled into the parking lot adjoining the hangar, he saw a small private plane through the big bay doors. He and Aspen climbed out of the truck and approached the building. He felt odd still wearing his wedding clothes. From how comfortable Aspen appeared in a dress and high heels, the woman must dress up every day.

Colt entered the metal building, casting a look at the walls. Just weeks before, a shootout had taken place here. Oaks got hit, but luckily, he was a Malone and that meant he healed quickly.

A man dressed in a navy-blue mechanic’s uniform crossed the open area to reach them. “Hey, Colt.”

“What’s up, man?” He stuck out a hand to grasp the mechanic’s.

The employee gave Aspen an appraising look. “You made it back. Your pilot was worried you got lost.”

Aspen issued an exasperated breath. “I’m more than ready to board that plane.” She turned to Colt. “Thank you for driving me. It was...nice to meet you.”

He knew when someone was only making the right noises out of politeness. She sounded far from pleased.

They all exited the hangar to allow the plane to roll out. Every aircraft that came into Willowbrook underwent several safety inspections before it took flight again.

The silver body gleamed in the fading rays of sun. No name was painted on the side, only the usual identifying numbers.

Colt moved in closer to examine the bird. He knew very little about small aircraft, but this plane cost a few million dollars. Either the travel agent had a booming business or she came from old money.

The breeze washed across the expansive field, carrying the scent of pine from the Wyoming mountains, the tang of dry grass...and a bland, oily smell?

The hatch door opened. As soon as a guy from Aspen’s flight crew lowered the steps to the ground, she took a step toward them.

Colt caught her arm.

She twisted to stare at him. “What now?”

“Stay here. Don’t get on. I need to look at something.” He jerked his head at the mechanic to follow him.

Circling the small jet, Colt dragged in a deep breath through his nostrils, trying to detect that odd, oily smell again.

Sure enough, it hit him and the mechanic at the same time.

“That’s not good.”

“Hydraulics?” Colt asked him.

He nodded. “Yup. Should have been found during the safety check. Let’s have a look.” They ducked under the wing to inspect the landing gear, the most obvious part of a plane that used hydraulics.

The mechanic ran a finger over a streak of fluid leaking down the metal. “We gave this thing a full inspection only a few hours ago. We ran through the checklist, and everything was fine. I don’t understand. But this bird’s grounded until the landing gear gets fixed.”

Colt’s gaze shifted to Aspen. She stood in the open, silhouetted by the big sky and a backdrop of mountains in the distance. The breeze caught her dress, fluttering the loose fabric, and teased her dark brown curls around her collarbones.

She wasn’t going anywhere tonight.

He was stuck finding a place for her to stay until her plane got fixed.

“I’ll break the news to her.”

The mechanic nodded, and Colt took off in long strides toward Aspen. “Bad news.”

He could almost hear the groan of irritation she didn’t voice.

She gave him a flat look. “This day’s just getting better and better. And here I thought dancing the Cupid Shuffle was the real low point. What’s the bad news?” She folded

her arms, drawing his attention to her full breasts and a line of perfect cleavage.

“There’s an issue with the landing gear. You’re grounded for the time being.”

“What? How long?”

He directed his focus to the sky and judged the time by the angle of the sun over the mountains. “It’s going to be dark soon. I’d say you’re stuck here until tomorrow. If you get back in the truck, I’ll take you to the nearest motel.”

She released that small groan he knew she’d been holding back and raked her fingers through her soft hair. “I need my luggage off the plane.”

He nodded and returned to speak to the flight crew. Once they were in the truck again, her expensive bag next to his utilitarian duffel, he drove straight to town.

A small motel boasting a whole five rooms for rent lay on the outskirts. When they pulled up, he noticed that the parking lot was filled with big, expensive SUVs belonging to city folk who came every year to spend time in nature and see the autumn foliage.

This didn’t bode well. He put the truck in park. “I’ll go inside and see if there’s a room.”

“Thank you.”

Two minutes later, he exited the small motel office and strode back to the truck. As soon as he jumped in, he turned to Aspen. “Full up. No extra rooms.”

“Is there any other lodging in Willowbrook? Maybe a bed and breakfast? Rentals?”

He shook his head. “I asked the motel clerk. She said dozens of people have stopped here today looking for rooms. There’s no lodging in town to speak of, and this is the only motel for miles.”

He could take her back to the ranch, but he already knew that was a bust. Friends from out of town had already laid claim to the single guest room. Even his humble quarters in the barn had been given to a couple who’d driven in from Colorado. They were gracious enough to agree to sleep in the barn. Colt couldn’t turn them out in the cold for the travel agent.

He worked through his options and finally shook his head. “The next place to stay is about twenty minutes down the road.”

She eyeballed the small, log-sided motel. “Is it bigger than this?”

“Yes.”

“Do you have time to drive me? I know you probably have obligations after the wedding.”

“Christ, I hope not. But no, my family doesn’t expect me back. I planned on taking a weekend away. I’ll just start my vacation a little late.”

Her shoulders slumped. “I hate to be a burden.”

Up until this moment, he hoped she’d tell him to drop her back at the hangar and she’d find her own accommodations. Seeing her crestfallen expression tugged at the heartstrings he thought he’d been born without.

“I’m not leaving you here.”

She issued a low sigh, breathy and soft. “Thank you. Let’s try the next motel.”

They drove on. The next town might have a bigger hotel, but unfortunately, when they both entered the small office, the clerk informed them that a scrapbooking convention was in town.

Aspen wrapped her arms around herself, an action that he was starting to become familiar with as her way of closing up.

On the way out again, he glanced at Aspen and tried to lighten the mood. “What the hell is scrapbooking, anyway?”

“You don’t seem like you’d be interested in learning what that is.” She exhaled slowly, her narrow shoulders even more slumped since hearing that the second motel had no vacancy.

This day was dragging on and on, but Colt was no quitter. He was a goddamn Malone. And he would unload the travel agent in a safe place before taking off into the mountains.

In the truck once again, he turned to her. Darkness had fallen, casting her in blue shadows and making her white skin appear even paler.

She looked cold.

He switched on the heat to warm her up. “The next town is forty minutes away.”

She nodded. “If you’re willing to drive, I’m game.”

But forty minutes later, he found that every single room in that town was booked too. He eyed the desk clerk.

“You must have an extra cot you can put in a broom closet.”

She arched a brow at him. “Sorry, no closets.”

He scrubbed a finger between his brows, but even that didn’t smooth the pucker there.

When he returned to Aspen, she took one look at his expression and buried her face in her hands.

“You’re kidding! How is this place full too?” Her voice pitched louder with every word.

He leveled her in his gaze. “Shouldn’t you be on your phone or something? Isn’t this what you do? Find people rooms?”

She gave him a flat look. “Travel concierge . Remember? This isn’t my thing. No one comes to me saying they want to go to Buttfuck Nowhere!”

Her profanity made him choke on a laugh. He struggled for two heartbeats before he managed to swallow the outburst.

She ran her fingers through her hair, collecting herself. “I am a concierge of travel. This is not concierge. I’m baffled that people actually want to stay in any of these small towns. This area of Wyoming isn’t even a blip on the travel industry radar. It’s a black hole.”

He leaned back in his seat, body angled to face her. “How does someone become a travel concierge exactly?”

She issued a roughened sigh as though she was more exasperated with him than the

entire situation she'd landed in. "I had the benefit of traveling for six months with a friend who had the resources to stay anywhere she wanted. Thanks to my friend's social media posts, my name became well-known. That's how I ended up starting my business."

"Are you headed home?"

She stared out the window at the dark landscape. "No. I'm supposed to be going to Montana. I have days mapped out on my schedule to look at new destinations."

"You're saying that Montana is good for travelers and Wyoming is Montana's poor cousin?"

She gave a little grunt. "Pretty much."

He huffed out a laugh. "You must not see what I do."

"And what is that?" She angled her body toward him too.

"What is great about this part of Wyoming? Is it that nobody wants to come here? Wait. Are you saying you already have a place to stay in Montana?"

"Yes."

"I can get you there."

She perked up, her eyes glittering in the darkness. "Really?"

"Yeah, let's go."

She shook her head as if trying to clear it of too many margaritas he'd seen her down

after the Cupid Shuffle.

Then she turned to him, her eyes round with shock.

“Wait—did you just say we are going to Montana?”

* * * * *

The road stretched before them, so black that even the canopy of stars didn't illuminate it. The headlights of Colt's older model truck appeared dim too, barely lighting up the grass on the sides of the road or showing the odd wildlife before it leaped out in front the truck.

Aspen shifted in her seat, tossing Colt look after look.

His jaw was taut. His shoulders stiff. One hand stayed locked around the steering wheel in a death grip.

Some women loved broody men. She wasn't one of them. And Colt Malone was definitely the broody type. She didn't know what her type actually was—she hadn't found it yet. She only knew it wasn't him.

Throwing him another glance, she earned a groan from him.

“Why do you keep looking at me?”

“You seem tense.”

“So?”

“I wondered if you were tired. I can drive if you are.”

“I’m good.”

“You’ve barely spoken since we crossed the state line.”

“I’m not much of a talker. You’re welcome to talk if you want.”

She blinked at the ring of dull yellow from the headlights. Now she was on the hook. She had to come up with something to fill the dead airspace.

“I’m visiting a few different properties in Montana.”

“So you just pop in to inspect these places and then leave?”

“Oh no. I stay there. Use all the amenities. Visit the cities or towns around them to see what’s on offer there. It’s important that there is decent food and places to shop for my clients. Entertainment is sometimes important to them as well, but not always. At times, they want quiet escapes.”

“Hmph.”

The noise he made deep in his throat reminded her that he was supposed to be on vacation too, and she was keeping him from his plans.

In a rush, she babbled, “I take photos for publicity and market them on my website or put them into a portfolio.”

The word dropped like a bomb between them, obliterating any hope of ease their brief conversation might have given them.

“My attention to detail is what gains me repeat business.”

“So what is this place we’re going to? Some kind of resort?”

An excited thrill fluttered in her stomach. “Let me read the description to you.” She pulled her phone out of her designer handbag and flipped to the notes she kept on her destination.

“Nestled in the heart of the wilderness, this authentic rustic cabin offers a truly off-grid experience for its guests. Doesn’t that sound charming?”

He grunted in response.

She didn’t expect him to be impressed. Nothing seemed to impress this man.

She continued reading. “Enjoy a weathered wood exterior, vintage furnishings and a woodburning fire. The outdoor shower and stunning vista of the mountain will leave guests wanting to return again and again.” She bounced a little in her seat. “Plus it says there’s a soaker tub.”

Holding up the phone for Colt to see, she flipped through several photos, which he glanced at before returning his attention to the road.

“Rustic, you say?”

She bristled at his condescending tone. “Rustic can mean charming.”

“Or just shy of condemned.” His hard lips twitched. He actually had very nice lips, like a particular actor who did action movies.

Why was she noticing that?

She blew out a breath of exasperation through her nose. “You don’t know this

business. In fact, what is your business?"

"My family has the ranch and several other businesses. I jump around where I'm needed."

"How nice for you to be so flexible." That was her way of saying that she wasn't impressed by his lack of direction, but he didn't rise to her veiled taunt.

"You're going to this place sight unseen, based off a few grainy photos that look about twenty years old."

"Nooo." She dragged out the syllable to give him time to catch up, since he seemed a little dim. "The owner simply tried to enlarge the photos. They're pixelated."

"Or they're trying to hide the fact it hasn't been cleaned in a decade."

She rolled her eyes to the dark ceiling and struggled not to rise to his taunt. "I'll decide whether or not the property is right for my clientele. Just drive, please."

"You got it." His soft tone stroked against her senses, catching her off guard. She wrapped her arms around herself, and Colt tracked the move. "Cold? You can adjust the heat."

"Maybe a little." She reached for the dial and boosted the temperature by a couple degrees, but that didn't stop goosebumps from breaking out on her arms.

She prided herself on being intelligent, but when he agreed to drive her to Montana, she hadn't given much thought as to what he would do once they got there. It was late. Dawn was hours away. Did he expect to share the cabin with her?

She worried over the possibilities for the rest of the drive. When they bumped onto a

pitted lane, she grabbed the handle over the window to keep from being thrown out of her seat.

“Driveway’s a little rough,” Colt remarked.

The headlights panned over the front of the cabin. Aspen’s eyes rounded as she stared at what was indeed a weathered wood exterior.

In this case, “weathered” meant that it appeared to have seen better days.

She shrugged off the tenth blip in her plans that day.

When Colt parked the truck, she climbed out carefully, careful of her high heels and recalling how she’d almost broken an ankle back at the Black Heart Ranch. The Malones’ ranch was a working ranch, and while she knew his brother Oaks had enough money to afford her services and a high-end vacation, they didn’t pour money into paving the long driveway.

This place didn’t appear to have even that level of upkeep.

“Looks rustic all right.” Colt’s drawl had her inwardly groaning.

She slammed the door. As she approached a sagging flight of steps, she noted how the roof sagged in the same shape as the wood steps. A layer of snow clung to the flat portion projecting over the front door.

She pulled up her notes in her phone again to locate the keycode for entrance. But when she looked at the door, there wasn’t an electronic keypad, only an old tumbler lock.

Colt, far too close behind her, issued a low chuckle. “Can’t get more rustic than a

combination lock.”

“Stop! I’m sure it’s much better inside.”

She entered the numbers and pulled the lock free, hoping that the door could also be locked from the inside. In case it couldn’t, she took the old metal lock with her and hurried inside.

“I’ll grab the bags.” Colt turned for the truck again.

The bags. Plural. Did he intend to sleep here with her?

She slammed the door and heard a sliding noise followed by a low thump.

“What the hell is that?” She whipped the door open and stared at the huge amount of snow now covering the saggy steps.

Ugh. Colt was right about this place.

She couldn’t find a light switch and finally used the flashlight on her phone to light the interior.

Her stomach bottomed out. Just when she thought it couldn’t sink lower.

The place was a mess even in this dim lighting.

Behind her, Colt stomped his boots to dislodge the fallen snow from them before he entered the cabin behind her. One look at the inside had his hard lips twitching.

He closed the door and dropped their bags on the floor. She shuddered to think of the dirt that might be on that floor, but a second later she saw it for herself when Colt

struck a match and held it to the wick of a candle.

“Rustic!”

She hoped it was light enough for him to see her glaring.

They turned at the same time toward the big, bulky black potbelly stove.

“Guess this is the woodburning stove.” He rapped it with his knuckles, creating a hollow sound. “My bet is it must be real old. 1800s at the latest.”

“You’re not helping.”

No. Nothing could help now.

Her gaze fell on the purported “soaker tub,” which appeared to be a horse watering trough next to the stove with a big metal pot to heat the water for it.

Colt hooked his thumb in his jeans pocket, silently eyeing the tub.

“Don’t say a word,” she almost pleaded. “At least there’s an outdoor shower.”

“Let’s go take a look.”

They crossed the small space to a back door that didn’t fit well in its frame. Cold wind blew in through several large cracks. Surely this outdoor shower would be just what she needed to soothe her frazzled nerves from the day. Plenty of hot spring water heated by natural gas or a propane tank on the property—

Colt shined his cell phone flashlight over a tree not three steps from the back door...and an old water hose looped over a low-hanging branch.

Oh god. The blows just keep coming.

“I’m going back inside.” Dejected and exhausted, she turned.

“I’ll grab some firewood. It’s going to be a cold night unless we get that stove going.”

She had no response. There weren’t words.

In the dim light cast by the candle, she saw the single double bed, the saggy mattress sliding off an old iron frame.

One bed. One set of blankets.

What else had the owners lied to her about with their listing?

She blew through the small kitchen and rummaged through the “stocked pantry.”

It was full of expired canned food.

They were stuck. She couldn’t ask Colt to drive to another place, not when he’d already gone so far out of his way to accommodate her.

Hungry and defeated, she turned away from the pantry and stared at the biggest hurdle in this impossible situation.

The bed they would have to share.

Page 3

Source Creation Date: July 24, 2025, 1:07 am

The cabin was one of the worst Colt had ever stayed in, and that was saying a lot when he'd slept with his head in the mud between military skirmishes.

He hauled in two armfuls of split wood and stacked it next to the stove. Aspen had found several more candles and lit up the space enough for him to see it was worse than he imagined.

From the corner of his eye, he threw her a glance. He didn't know her well, but he'd have to say her silence spoke volumes. Even he had enough of a heart to see how disappointed she was in the place.

While he got a fire going in the stove, Aspen carried her bag into the bedroom. When she emerged wearing thick gray sweats, his gut did something weird.

It tightened.

She was a beautiful woman, and she'd worn that green dress well. But something about Aspen looking undone had his body more awake than it had been in a long time.

"Good thing you've got something warm to wear to bed. This place has a lot of drafts."

"It also has a pantry full of expired food."

He cocked a brow at her. "Gotta be something in there that's fit to eat."

She waved a hand. "I'm not that hungry. I can wait."

He nodded and returned to arranging logs in the open door of the woodstove. After he got the fire going and some heat rolling out of the old iron, he addressed the next problem: their sleeping arrangements.

When he stepped up to the open bedroom door, his gaze fell over the old bed.

"I'll take the floor."

Aspen stood behind him, peering in at the bed with the same reservations he had about sleeping with a stranger.

He disliked people. He preferred to be alone, and there was a good reason for that. His nightmares of war weren't something that went away. Sleeping in the barn was his way of keeping his family from waking up to his screams at night.

Maybe he should have told Aspen he'd sleep in the truck. But the idea of leaving a woman alone in a cabin rubbed him wrong.

"Sure you don't want something to eat before bed?" he asked her.

"Let's just end this day already. I've been up for ages."

He had too, but he was used to it. Seeing bruises of tiredness under each of her eyes pushed him into action. He returned to the front to check the lock and make sure that the woodstove wasn't going to catch the place on fire with them inside.

Satisfied, he returned to the bedroom.

His gut did that weird thing again.

Clenched.

Aspen had set a candle on a rickety wood table next to the bed. She was huddled under the covers, with the shabby blanket pulled up to her chin. And she was shivering.

Dammit.

His inner protector couldn't let that go on for long. He climbed into bed fully clothed and stretched out on his back, shifting his body close to Aspen, just short of touching, in hopes that she could share some of his body heat.

Before long, he heard her breathing change, relaxing into a slow, easy rhythm. This was typically the hour when most people replayed their day, thinking about work, family or going over worries. It took him all of a week of being a SEAL before Colt realized he wasn't built like everyone else.

He blanked his mind and fell into what he hoped was a dreamless sleep.

As soon as his eyes popped open, he knew where he was, what time of day...and was well aware of a small, curvy woman plastered against his side.

Aspen.

Not moving a muscle, he let his senses take over. From one deep breath, he picked up the sweet scent of her perfume, its notes enhanced by her body heat. Thanks to him.

Oh hell. Now he was extremely aware of his not-so-small problem...of waking up with morning wood.

His stiff cock was mere inches from a female. She was pretty. No ring was on her

finger, and if there were, it would be a fat diamond worth three months' salary.

And his cock surged with plans of giving this old bed a run for its money.

He had to put those thoughts out of his head.

Focusing on anything but his erection, he studied the low ceiling, water-stained and strung with old cobwebs.

It wasn't a nightmare—this place was even worse in the daylight.

A laugh rumbled through his chest.

The princess was not going to be impressed.

Speaking of princess, Aspen jolted awake. At the same time, she grew aware that she was curled up against him and rolled away.

She scrubbed a hand over her face. "What's funny?"

Damn, that husky quality of her voice wasn't shutting down his hard-on. If anything, it encouraged the situation.

"This is a coyote ugly place."

"What does that mean?"

"Coyotes will chew off a limb if they're caught in a trap. It means you'd chew off your arm to leave."

She groaned, rolled onto her face and didn't move again.

He stifled another laugh at her response and swung his legs over the side of the bed.

The place was chilly. The fire had gone out during the night. In the front of the cabin, he changed out of his wedding clothes—finally. Then he went outside for another load of wood and set about relighting the fire.

When he finished, Aspen still hadn't emerged from the bedroom. "What's for breakfast?" she called to him.

He moved over to the tiny kitchen that looked like the first wagon train brought the materials to build it.

The pantry consisted of a space between two rickety old cupboards with three shelves stacked with a few cans of food.

Crouching before the shelves, he began sifting through the cans, sorting them into expired and not expired.

"Well, Aspen. Good news, there are three cans of food that aren't expired," he called to her. "We've got beets."

Her subdued moan reached his ears, making him shake with a silent laugh.

"Lima beans."

"What the hell do we do with lima beans? Eat them out of the can?"

He didn't know what it was about a prim and proper woman like Aspen cussing, but it amused the hell out of him. His grin stretched wider.

"Corned beef," he went on.

“ Oh god. What even is that?”

“And I have granola bars in the truck.”

She popped into the open doorway, dark curls mussed and as disheveled as if she'd just been carried to that bed and thoroughly loved.

Dammit, and he just got his erection to go down.

Her green eyes and the faint roses of sleep in her cheeks were the best thing this cabin had to offer. “Granola bars sound great.”

He pushed to his feet and left the cabin to retrieve the food and a couple of the bottles of water he always stashed in the truck. In the mountains, a man was prepared for any eventuality. That could mean anything from a hunting accident to a flat tire. Having a few basics on hand meant life or death.

He came back inside and set the food on the old wood table. One of the spindle legs had been replaced by a two-by-four post. Angling his head, he eyeballed it. “Vintage furniture.”

“Don't remind me.” She snatched up a granola bar and tore into it. In three bites, she had polished it off and reached for a second. Seemed she didn't want the corned beef.

“So this place won't make the travel portfolio.”

As if restored by the food, she gave him a small shake of her head rather than biting his off. “I'm looking for hidden gems. Things off the beaten path. Some of my clients like privacy and elite retreats, not resorts. And yacht vacations aren't the same now that the whales are sinking them.”

His brows shot up. “I heard about that.”

She tipped her head to the side like an interested bird. “You don’t seem like the kind of man who follows current news.”

“I was a Navy SEAL. Anything that goes on in the water interests me.”

She straightened, her gaze cutting from his face to his shoulders and down over his chest. If she kept eyeing him like that, he was never going to make his cock un-swell.

He had to put some distance between him and the woman who made gray sweats look sexy and irresistible.

He turned for the door. “I’m going outside to have a look around.”

* * * * *

The water was barely warm. The metal edges of the horse trough were freezing if Aspen even bumped into it.

What must have passed for steam in the days of pioneers wisped up from the water that barely covered her thighs but was making her curls frizz. Her knees jutted upward, even her shorter legs too long to fit in the small tub. She still couldn’t believe she’d gotten brave enough—or desperate enough—to heat water over the stove and take a bath.

After the endlessly long day she had yesterday, getting up early and flying to Wyoming to hand-deliver that portfolio, followed by one roadblock after another, she deserved hot water.

If only it were hot.

She closed her eyes and sucked in a breath of the light lemon-scented body wash she'd picked up last time she was in France. What she wouldn't give right now to be back there, staying in luxury accommodations and visiting farmer's markets.

Instead, she was stuck in a lukewarm bath, trying to quickly scrub herself clean before Colt returned from whatever he was doing outside.

She pictured him standing under that water hose they claimed was an "outdoor shower." All six-foot-two or three of raw, muscular Navy SEAL power, scrubbing himself down with cold water in the wilderness.

A tight string in her lower belly tugged, and she clamped her thighs together in response.

She needed to stop thinking about Colt Malone. He was broody, and she disliked broody men.

One problem—did broody men ever laugh? He'd laughed about their situation—several times. The deep sound had raked over her senses and left her wondering just how he looked when he let go and smiled. That sound had urged her out of her depression nap and to the bedroom door to catch the sight before it faded away. Only she'd seen him squatting in front of the pantry shelf and got too distracted by the hard planes of his thighs in those jeans.

Did she have time to heat more water? She cast a glance at the wood pile. That stove really devoured wood. Only one stick remained.

She'd just have to finish her bath.

She glanced around. Oh damn. She was in such a hurry to get the bath started before Colt returned that she never grabbed a towel.

She weighed her options—run naked to the bedroom and hurry into her clothes, or search for a towel.

The door blew inward, announcing Colt's return and severing all possibility of leaving the tub.

She drew her knees up against her chest. She was very self-conscious about her body—especially her breasts—and the last thing she wanted was Colt seeing her naked.

He kicked the door shut and turned for the woodstove. He froze when he saw her. "You're taking a bath."

She gulped. "Yes. And it's cold. Can I get more wood?"

He twisted, presenting her with his back. "There is no more wood. Someone took it all."

"What? Who?"

"I don't know. The owner of the cabin? A neighbor? Last night I grabbed some that was stacked on the side of the cabin. I saw a larger stack sitting out back, but it's gone."

"I see. Um...could you hand me a towel?"

His big machine of a body jerked forward in a hasty stride. He reached into a cupboard and pulled out a thin towel. Without turning around, he tossed it to her. It slipped to the floor, which forced her to lean over the freezing side. She banded one arm across her bare breasts to save them from being seen, and from the biting cold, and grabbed the towel.

Colt still stood in the middle of the room, his back to her, giving her a chance to soak in the long line of his spine. He wore a canvas coat, but she knew from dancing with him at the wedding that his body was layered with muscle.

Then there was his carved backside.

“We need a plan, Aspen. There’s no more wood here. Even if we wanted to stay, we can’t heat the place. We have to leave.”

“Um...can you go back outside while I...”

“Absolutely.” In two strides, he reached the door and whipped it open. A blast of frigid air blew over her wet body before he slammed it shut.

She stood, dripping, and wrapped the flimsy towel around her body. Shivering, she returned to the bedroom. She could throw on the gray sweats again, but she wasn’t really one of those women who dressed down. Her career required that she always looked ready to take on the world on a billionaire’s budget, and she stuck to that uniform.

Though she didn’t come from money, she had come into a tidy inheritance—the hard way. First when she lost her mom, then by losing a dear friend.

She rubbed the towel over her goose bumps, but they refused to smooth out. She dug through her bag and located a pair of winter white pants that conformed to her body and added a pale blue cashmere sweater to the ensemble. After unearthing white hiking boots from the bottom of her bag, she sat on the edge of the bed to put them on.

Even the feel of the mattress beneath her made her mind whirl back to her night spent on it—with Colt. A flush burned in her cheeks. She couldn’t believe she had the guts

to share a bed with a stranger. It was so out of character for her.

Not to mention waking up with her body glued to his big, steely hard one.

But god, he was toasty warm, and she could use some of that body heat now.

Still shivering, she tossed everything she owned into her bag and zipped it up, praying she wasn't bringing home any unwanted travel companions. The cabin was surely too cold for vermin to live, so she was probably safe.

When she carried the bag to the front, she found Colt standing right outside. He gave her a once-over, his gaze lingering on her legs in the fitted pants made for the ski slopes and drinks afterward in the lodge. Then he dropped his stare to her boots.

“White?”

“Do you have something against white?”

He shook his head and muttered something about city girls. Then he held out a hand to her.

She stared down at it. Broad palm, long fingers with small, hard bumps of callus in all the spots you'd expect of a working man's hand.

She glanced up at him.

“Your bag, princess.”

Her mouth popped open in outrage at what he just called her.

Instead of handing him the bag, she decided to show him that she was no princess.

With a flick of her curls, she gave him a direct look. “I’ll carry my own luggage.”

There it was again—that twitch of his hard lips.

“Suit yourself.” He stepped aside, allowing her to pass by him to reach the truck. She heard the cabin door shut...and something that sounded like a low, soft whistle that carried on the breeze.

Why was she imagining that Colt was staring at her as she walked away with that same deep, hazy expression that slid into his dark gray eyes when he looked at her curve-skimming pants?

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Source Creation Date: July 24, 2025, 1:07 am

Colt was accustomed to country life. Back roads and potholes were the norm. But the noise of gravel crunching under the truck tires was the first bad sign.

“Didn’t you say this was a paved driveway?”

Aspen glanced down at her phone, reading the description of the second cabin they were visiting. “It does say paved driveway.”

“Paved with gravel, looks like.”

The bone-rattling ascent to the property had her bouncing in the seat. They hit a jarring rut that rocketed her forward. She grabbed on to the console to steady herself.

“The driveway could use a little work before I’d book any guests.”

He had a bad feeling about this cabin. After the last, he realized that owners who listed these places as vacation stays didn’t give a damn about anything but money in their pockets.

By the time they reached the small cabin carved into the side of the mountain, the sun was dipping low, emphasizing the jagged peaks in the distance.

He rolled to a stop in front of the structure that looked more like a cold, gray box in Siberia.

“Wow.”

She snapped her head to look at him. “People make the exteriors of their homes look a little rundown so they pay less taxes on them. The inside is probably very nice.”

He shook his head. Nothing about this place looked warm, inviting or remotely comfortable. Unless all of Aspen’s clients loved the Cold War aesthetic, they weren’t choosing this as a destination.

He rolled his shoulders, stiff from driving, and studied the front. A second look revealed that the cabin had once been painted red, but now it was peeling, exposing gray, weathered wood beneath.

The wind struck in a hard gust on the north-facing cabin, a shutter swinging back and forth like a broken wing.

“Rustic charm? Check.”

“Are you always so negative? Give it a chance, Colt.” She climbed out of the truck. Those white boots only a city girl would wear in the mountains were sure to be caked in brown muck by the time she reached the front door.

He hurried to intercept her. “Let me go in first.”

“Oh okay, big man.”

He threw her a look. “When was the last time anybody checked out this place? There could be a family of raccoons living inside.”

She let out a small squeak and jumped behind him.

His chest rumbled in a silent chuckle as he located the key she told him was hidden under the moldy mat and opened the door. Feeling along the wall, he located a switch

and flipped it on.

“At least there’s electricity.”

Her soft sigh of relief sounded behind him. “It feels warmer in here. The heat’s running.”

Colt explored the front room, head swinging right and left.

“You’re not looking for raccoons, are you?”

He paused, throwing out his hearing. “Do you hear something beeping?”

Their gazes met as they both listened hard.

He took off into the bedroom. A quick sweep of the space showed a bed that was in better condition than the one in the last cabin as well, but the old carpet wasn’t something Aspen would want to curl her bare toes into.

He almost bumped into her coming out of the room.

“How is it?”

“You’re going to want to wear boots to bed, but I didn’t find the source of the alarm.”

Her eyes darted past him to the bedroom. Then she wrinkled her nose in the most adorable way.

As he passed by a closed door, he automatically slid his hand to his spine where he kept his sidearm. Aspen let out a gasp.

“What are you doing!”

“I don’t trust closed doors.” He grasped the old handle and twisted. Pushing the door inward, he shot a look around. No one was in the room, but he did find the source of the beeping.

“The carbon monoxide detector is going off. Get out, princess—now!”

She whirled in a cloud of curls and shot to the front door. He rushed out behind her and slammed the door.

“Get in the truck. On the way down the mountain, you can call the owner and let him know what’s happening.”

They slammed their doors at the same moment. He started the engine while she dialed the owner.

The call went to voicemail, so Aspen left a message detailing what they found upon entering the cabin.

As the truck bumped down the rutted driveway, she gripped the seat with both hands and silently weathered the latest storm all the way to the main road, where it was smoother.

“What now?” he asked her.

“Don’t worry. I have reservations at a third place.” She recited the address.

He stopped at an intersection and took a moment to punch the address into his phone. One look at the exterior on the photo and he groaned. “I have a bad feeling about this. Do we want to risk it?”

Stare glued to her phone screen, she sank her teeth into her bottom lip and nibbled. “I don’t know. But I have a new problem.”

“Worse than someone stealing firewood or poisonous gas?”

“So much worse.”

“What the hell could be worse?”

“A billionaire just contacted me. He needs a retreat booked ASAP.”

He gaped at her. “If that’s worse than being gassed in a dilapidated cabin, you have your priorities all wrong.”

“You don’t understand—this is my career. My livelihood .”

He wanted to bring up the fact that she traveled by private jet and likely didn’t need a job. But he didn’t know her situation and held his tongue.

“I was afraid this would happen. After talking to him a little bit, I knew what he was looking for. I also knew I didn’t have any places that would suit him. It’s why I was taking time to search for new places to add to my portfolio.”

“Okay, so what do you need?”

She leaned forward to peer up at the sky. “Will I have uninterrupted phone service? I need to start searching for places that are open on such short notice.”

He jerked a thumb over his shoulder, pointing back up the mountain. “I think that place is open. You want to set your billionaire up here?”

“Hell no.”

He held back a chuckle. Coming from a woman wearing white pants and boots, not to mention a sweater that was probably hand-knitted by Scottish grandmothers from the finest lambswool harvested by monks, her use of profanity amused him every time.

He studied her profile for a moment. Her rounded cheek had a few small freckles spattered across it. A small nose added to her soft appearance. And those pouty lips she occasionally nibbled while in thought weren't things Colt should be noticing.

But he did.

At that moment, she twisted her head and pierced him in her gaze, catching him staring at her.

“Are you still trying to decide where we're going next?” she asked.

“I can tell you one thing—it's not going to be this cabin.” He held up his phone, flashing the photo of the front. He wasn't risking another one of her cabins.

“I'll call my flight crew. Maybe the plane's ready.”

He nodded and sat back, waiting for her to place the call. After a few moments, she had her answer. By the slump of her shoulders, it wasn't the news she wanted to hear either.

With a shake of her head, she lowered the phone from her ear. “They're having trouble finding the right part. It's being shipped in.”

“I have a plan.”

“What kind of plan?”

“I know a place.”

“You just know a place?”

This was his vacation. He had a right to enjoy it in a place that wasn't going to give him a disease or kill him.

“It may be an alternative for you. One that will be up to billionaire standards.”

“Where is this place?”

He sent her a hint of a smile. “I'm no travel concierge , but I know a better place than any of the ones you've come up with so far.”

* * * * *

The soft glow of Aspen's phone screen was starting to blur, and her eyes burned with fatigue. After searching for cozy yet romantic retreats for her client... Well, she hadn't come up totally emptyhanded.

But she was a little shaken by the last two hideous cabin failures.

She looked up from the screen, aware that her temples were throbbing to the thrum of the truck tires on asphalt. “My brain is starting to melt. I need to take a break.”

Colt sat like a statue behind the wheel, hardly moving or speaking over the past hour they'd been driving.

“Where are we going anyway?” Curiosity bubbled inside her. The Black Heart Ranch

was well-kept, which took money. But she couldn't imagine Colt would know a good place if it jumped up and bit him.

As they passed a gas station lit like a fluorescent oasis, he slowed and then rolled through the parking lot. Instead of stopping at the pumps, he parked in front of the convenience store.

He eased the truck into park. "You hungry?"

She stared at the front of the building. "I don't see a restaurant."

"This is a travel concierge gas station."

Narrowing her eyes on him, she attempted a glare while battling a laugh. She twisted her head before he could catch her being amused.

"You like hot dogs?"

She wrinkled her nose. "As much as corned beef."

His gaze traveled over her face, lingering on her lips before lifting back to her eyes.

"Surprise me." She waved a hand and went back to scrolling for elite properties off the beaten path for her client's next getaway. She had so much work to do if she was going to keep this client happy. Pleasing people like this billionaire would only help her business remain at the top.

When the truck doors locked, she realized Colt had locked her inside.

A little tingle sparked through her. Her mind jumped to that moment back in the cabin when he reached into his waistband and put his hand on a weapon she didn't

know he was carrying.

It all made sense—the SEAL in him was a protector by nature and prepared to face down any danger. It was hot. Very hot.

If she had to be stuck with a stranger traveling through the mountains, she was glad it was a man who had her safety in mind.

Not to mention his looks. Did she say he was hot?

She stared through the big wall of windows, watching Colt interact with the clerk at the counter. Whatever he said made her laugh and toss her head in a ripple of blonde hair.

So Colt Malone wasn't always broody.

The pair chatted for a minute while the clerk moved around behind the counter, out of Aspen's sight.

When he accepted a bag and a box the clerk pushed across the counter, he paid and exited the store. He unlocked the truck doors and slid behind the wheel, thrusting a box at Aspen as he did.

She stared at the red and white box. "Pizza?"

"Not just any pizza. See here? Famous Pizza from the Romano brothers." He tapped a finger on the box over the name.

"I see. Are we planning to eat in the truck?"

"Yup. Hand me a slice, princess."

The box rested on her thighs, making her aware that grease was probably soaking into her white pants.

She lifted the lid and looked at the pizza. Oily pools gleamed on the sauce and cheese. It was speckled with about ten different kinds of meat.

“Hope you like meat lovers. Drinks are in the bag.”

She didn’t, but it had been a long time since the dry granola bar she had for breakfast. She was starving.

She started to reach into the box and stopped. “Did you get napkins?”

He popped the console and reached inside, pulling out a thick wad of napkins collected from different drive-thrus. She was surprised that small town Colt lived in even had a restaurant, let alone one with a drive-thru.

She took the whole stack from him. A small packet fell out, right onto the pizza.

With a groan, she looked down.

“Uh.”

“Oh damn. Sorry. Forgot that was in there.” He reached over and plucked a condom off the pizza. He used a napkin to wipe it off before dropping it back into the console and shutting the lid as if nothing at all happened.

Aspen shook her head and picked up a slice of pizza for him. He took it, folding it in half lengthwise and gulping it down in four big bites.

Apparently, the man did get around enough to carry condoms in his truck. He was

good-looking— hot —and she imagined women swooned over him.

“You looked friendly with the clerk.” She lifted a slice to her own lips. As soon as the flavors hit her tastebuds, she swallowed back a moan. Gas station pizza wasn’t supposed to be good.

Maybe the Romano brothers know their stuff.

“Let me grab another slice.” He flipped open the box lid and helped himself while she waited for a response to her statement. None came.

“Well? Did you know that woman?”

He paused mid-bite. “What woman?”

“The clerk!”

He grunted. “That’s not a woman. That’s a young girl.”

Aspen straightened. At least he had standards. But that made her wonder how old he was. Maybe Aspen was a lot older than he was.

Who gave a damn?

“Can I ask how old you are?”

“I’m thirty-three. How old are you?”

Normally she’d give some coy answer that a lady never shared her age, but it was only fair since he’d told her.

“I just turned thirty. I spent my birthday in Paris.”

What a birthday it had been too. A milestone she always thought she'd spend with loved ones had been spent entirely alone. She almost hadn't even taken the trip, but her dear friend's words echoed in her head. Your mother would want you to enjoy your special day. Celebrate life.

Suddenly, the pizza felt stuck in her throat, and she barely managed to swallow the lump along with her food.

She had to get out of her own head if she was going to survive what was turning out to be the second longest day of her life.

Colt reached for a third slice. “Well, happy birthday, princess.”

Her throat thickened. He had no way of knowing that he was the first and only person to wish her happy birthday this year. He probably didn't think it was a big deal to say it since he had a big family. After doing some checking into the Malones, she knew they were a large bunch with several siblings she'd seen at the weddings.

Been in photos with.

She inwardly groaned but her pizza went down a little easier. After they finished their meal, Colt took the empty box to the trash can outside the store.

Aspen snuck a look at the console. What else did he have in there? He carried a concealed weapon in his jeans and condoms in his truck.

He returned before she could steal a peek. Soon they were on the road.

After a short drive, he took a turn. A sign flashed past her vision.

She twisted in her seat. “Did that sign say airport?”

“Yup. Private.”

She blinked at him.

“I know a guy.”

Ten minutes later, they were parked and had their luggage in hand. Colt ushered her across the tarmac to a private jet. This couldn’t be happening. He had connections? Why hadn’t he told her that in the first place?

As they approached the aircraft, the pilot nodded at them in greeting. “Colt.”

“Ashford.”

“Make yourselves comfortable. We’ll be taking off for California in a few minutes.”

Aspen spun on Colt. “California?”

“Yup.”

“Are you trying to dump me?”

His lips usually just twitched, but this time both sides eased upward into a real smile.

“Nope.”

“Where are we going?”

“It’s a surprise.”

Page 5

Source Creation Date: July 24, 2025, 1:07 am

“O h. My. God.” The princess stared at the cabin on the lake. Her mouth open. “How do you know about a place like this ?”

Colt gave her a flat look. “I flew you here on a private jet. I told you I have connections. Come on.” He climbed out of the car that had been waiting when they landed for their use and collected both of their bags from the trunk.

Aspen stood next to the vehicle, gazing at the house. Knowing her level of expectations, he could only guess at what she thought of his cabin.

He moved up beside her.

“How did you manage to get a house on Lake Tahoe on such short notice?”

He looked down at her. He wasn’t one to make up stories, but he wasn’t the type to brag either. So he just stared at her until understanding dawned on her.

She blinked rapidly and spun back to the two-story log-sided cabin nestled between old-growth pines. The cabin had started as an A-frame and he’d built out on both sides and added a wraparound porch so he could see the lake from many angles.

She whipped back around. “You own this place, don’t you?”

He gave her a single nod.

“That was your private jet!”

He shrugged. “My family’s.”

“Colt, I never would have guessed, and I know wealthy people. They’re not good at concealing it. They drive...”

“Old trucks with dusty seats?”

She snapped her mouth shut, a reaction which made him want to laugh.

“Let’s go in. It’s been a long day, and I’m ready for a drink.”

When they entered, Aspen drew in a breath and drifted to the expansive window. He dropped the bags and came up behind her. In the glass, he saw their reflections. He was a head taller than her, but he only took notice of that for a heartbeat because he was too busy watching her react to the view.

Awe widened her eyes. “This is some view, Colt. This is the kind of place my billionaires would love to visit.”

Her hair smelled nice. Which made him think of her in that horse trough earlier that morning—Christ, it felt like a week ago—and how he’d almost jumped into the bath with her. After waking with a hard-on that would dent steel, he barely had control of himself, and seeing her bare skin and her knees tucked up to cover her nudity from him almost stole what little control he had left.

In the reflection, their gazes met.

He jerked his head. “I’ll give you the tour, then we can have that drink.”

As he showed her the living room with an enormous sectional sofa and large flatscreen TV, he saw how impressed she was with the place.

He hoped that she didn't treat him differently. Or worse, kiss up to him.

"You about finished staring at the artwork, princess?"

"You about finished calling me princess?" She turned her head from the art his sister called abstract but just looked like a bunch of blotches to him. Aspen locked gazes with him for one beat...two.

"I still think you're a jerk too."

A laugh burst out of him. Her own soft smile transformed her face from pretty to stunning. Riveting.

Christ, she was the most beautiful woman he'd ever seen, and that was saying a lot for a Malone. He and his brothers were never lacking for beautiful women.

Quickly, he set off through the rest of the house, showing her the huge kitchen.

She stepped up to the enormous gas range with about five burners more than he would ever need. "A chef's kitchen? Colt, I didn't know you cook."

"I don't."

She tossed her head on a laugh, eyes dancing with a happiness he hadn't seen on her up to this point. But what would she have to be happy about? His grumpy response to her crashing his brother's wedding, followed by the bad news that her plane was grounded and two terrible cabins.

He showed her two bedrooms, both with comfortable beds. "This is the blue room."

She made a sweep of the space, ending at the tall window that looked down on the

deck.

He led her to the second room. “This is the green room.”

“So calming.”

He didn’t tell her that she could take her pick of them.

When he opened the door to the master bedroom suite made up in shades of khaki and brown that he preferred, Aspen let out a little squeal. “Colt...this is stunning!”

He stared down at her, gaze roaming over her angel’s features. “I know.”

Whatever she heard in his voice made her jerk her gaze to his. She stood inches away. He could settle a hand on her lower back, over the curve of her ass, and draw her against his body.

“You’ll want to check out this view.” He stepped back and waved a hand to urge her to the massive window.

She let out a gasp. “Look at the leaves! All the fall colors are reflected on the lake! Oh my god. Is that a private dock?”

“Yep.”

“Two stories?”

“Mm-hm. We can go down later if you want.”

She turned to him, shaking her head. For once when it came to a property, she seemed speechless. “This window is frickin’ amazing. I’m in love with this window. I

could stay here forever.”

“Stay and take in the view. Freshen up if you’d like—the bathroom’s through that door. I’ll grab those drinks for us and we’ll head down to the dock.”

The gleam in her eyes was worth all the crap he’d had to go through over the past few days. After he left her alone, he washed up and went into the kitchen. He located a big picnic basket exactly in the spot his sister Willow told him it would be last time she’d visited the cabin. Then he added a bottle of wine and a few snacks from the pantry that boasted more than expired cans of food.

He set the basket at the back door leading down a couple flights of stairs to the dock. He found Aspen still staring out the big window.

“This view is amazing,” she said without turning.

“It’s what made me fall in love with the property.”

“I can see why.”

“Want to head outside?”

She nodded, and he ushered her out ahead of him. Downstairs, he passed by the sofa and snagged a plaid wool blanket. He draped it over his arm.

She spotted the basket by the door. “Is that a picnic?”

“Just snacks and that drink I promised you. C’mon.”

The scents of cedar and pine filled the air. The sun hadn’t completely set, leaving a lingering warmth that he knew would cool off fast after sunset. Tiny waves rippled on

the water that now reflected a more blurred image of the foliage everyone flocked here to gawk at.

Once they stepped onto the dock, Aspen turned in a circle, drinking it all in. “It’s so nice that you have a covered dock.”

“Wanna see the upstairs?”

“Yesss.” She gave him a look like he must be crazy for asking. Again, he chuckled, low in his throat.

With the basket and blanket in hand, he followed her up the stairs. The deck boasted a gas fireplace and had all the makings of a perfect romantic evening.

If someone was into that.

She took a seat on the outdoor furniture while he set the basket down. “Can I take a look?” she asked.

“Help yourself.”

She opened the lid and stared at the wine, specialty crackers and some almonds that he thought would pair well with the wine.

She jerked her gaze to his. “You just threw this together?”

He scooted close to her—within grabbing and throwing her down on the outdoor sofa distance.

“There’s a lot more to me than meets the eye.”

She raked her gaze over his chest. When it skimmed lower to his groin, his cock began to swell. Leaning near, she let out a soft sigh. Her long lashes dipped over her smoldering eyes. “I can see that, Colt.”

He moved in. Her sweet breath washed over his lips. “Does that mean your opinion of me has changed?”

She tipped her face up, bringing her mouth a breath away from his. “No. I still think you’re a jerk.”

He laughed, and then crushed his lips down on hers.

* * * * *

When Aspen arrived at the ranch to hand-deliver that portfolio, she never guessed at the chain of events that would take place after. And she especially did not see this coming.

This hunky god, a former SEAL, kissing her like he had been waiting for it forever.

Truthfully, this kiss had begun long before he actually took action. Back in the master bedroom suite, their gazes locked with a sizzling chemistry she tried to brush away. Colt clearly felt it too.

He slipped his hand under her hair, cradling her nape as he brushed his mouth over hers three times, then four. As he slid his hand upward, her breath hitched at the feel of his callused fingertips running over her sensitive skin.

His touch was surprisingly tender considering how stormy his gray eyes were a moment before he claimed her mouth.

Aspen's arms moved on their own, looping around his neck. As he applied more pressure to her lips, a growl rumbled through his chest. She echoed it with a breathy noise of her own.

Dashing his tongue over her lips, he sought entry. She parted them on a purr, and he plunged his tongue inside her mouth with a deliberate hunger that started a dark heat low in her core.

She melted into him, taking his kisses and feeding back her own.

He skimmed his thumb over her jaw with more tenderness than she would have ever expected from a hardened man like Colt. With a mewl of desire, she pushed closer, sliding her tongue over his.

He deepened the kiss, arm banded around her, locking her against him. Her heart pounded loudly in her ears, drowning out the sounds of the lake at night. In that brief moment, nothing else existed. No itineraries, no plans. Just the sheer, raw connection between her and Colt right now.

Breathless, he broke the contact. The tumult in his eyes reminded her of stormy seas.

Through the daze, she looked at him in return.

An unspoken question hung in the air. What happens next?

She gave a small shake of her head to clear her brain. Even that didn't help. Not when Colt was dazzling her with his mere presence.

His eyes creased at the corners. "You look shaken up, princess."

"I never expected..."

“Me to have money and a place like this?”

She blinked. His words doused the warm desire pulsating through her veins. “That’s not what I was going to say, Colt. I didn’t kiss you because you have an amazing home on Lake Tahoe. Why did you kiss me?”

“Because I’ve been thinking about it since I saw you in that damn bathtub in the first cabin.”

His words sent tingles through her body. She had lowered her arms, but they ached to wrap around him again, to feel the steel of his muscles.

She flicked her stare up to his. Their gazes locked. “Do you...want to...try it again?”

His lips quirked in that bad-boy way that would never get old, even if she saw it a thousand times. “Damn right I do.”

He yanked her into his lap. The hard planes of his thighs cradled her bottom, raising a gasp from her as he captured her mouth in a hard, claiming kiss.

Oh god, this man didn’t just kiss—he possessed her. Every thought she had centered on Colt. Every nerve in her body awakened to him, leaving her desperate for more.

When he tore his mouth away and stared into her eyes, her pussy gave a hard squeeze of want.

“Aspen, you can probably feel how much I want you.”

She nodded. Though he couldn’t tell how badly she wanted him too, she did.

Was this just a wanton mistake on both their parts? Could she live with a single night

of passion with this man when she'd never experienced a one-night stand in her life?

Yes. Yes, she could.

She ran her palm down his sculpted chest. "I want you too."

With all the gentleness in the world, he angled his arms under her and stood with her in his hold. Once he set her on her feet, he immediately reached for the blanket he'd brought to the dock. With a quick flick, he unfurled the fabric on the floor.

In a move she wasn't expecting, he dropped to his knees in the middle of the blanket. She inched closer. When he yanked her down with him, a laugh of surprise bubbled up.

His grin flashed a moment before he took her mouth again. They tumbled down in a tangle of limbs. Somehow, she ended up straddling his strong hips, her aching pussy settled over his bulging erection.

He ran his palms up her sides. As he came closer to cupping her breasts, she tensed. Was she really ready for this?

She hadn't been with a man since her reconstructive breast surgery.

He tore off her top, lips plundering hers. Even though his kisses drugged her, she stopped him before he could pop the clasp of her bra.

"Someone might see us."

"Whatever you want." He spattered kisses over her jaw and throat, leaving her searing with desire.

She wasn't about to miss out on stripping such a beautiful man. She yanked his shirt over his head. As soon as she saw his hard muscles in the fading daylight, she let out a moan.

“God, your body is fucking amazing.”

He threw her a grin. “Give me your dirty mouth.”

A whimper escaped her as he claimed it for himself. At the same time, he cupped her ass and ground his cock into her pussy. In a blink, their intensity skyrocketed. He cupped her breasts and kissed her long and hard. She ran her hands over his body, learning the dips and swells of his impressive chest.

When she reached his washboard abs, she had to stop and look down so she could imprint him on her mind. Since this wouldn't be happening again.

He watched her intently, letting her explore. As she ran her palm over his bulging erection, he only tolerated her dominance for a heartbeat.

He rolled her onto her back and went for her pants. Kissed her mouth until she was panting. Her neck until she wiggled, over her breasts where they rode above the cups of her bra.

She arched as he kissed a path down her stomach. “Yes!” she cried out as he wiggled her pants down her hips, dragging her panties with them.

Once she was bare to him, his eyes hooded, concealing the satisfied glint in the gray depths.

He skimmed his thumb over the short hair of her mound. When his rough fingertip stroked over her hard clit, she threw her head back on a cry.

He let out a low growl. “Christ, you’re gorgeous.” He strummed her clit again. Juices slicked his finger, and he issued a louder noise. “You’re fucking drenched for me.”

Leaning in, he kissed her again. At the same moment he thrust his tongue into her mouth, he plunged two fingers inside her. The stretching sensation shot her right...into...the...stars.

With a jerk of her hips, she rode his fingers while kissing him back with everything she had. She raked her fingers down his spine. The soft sounds of his fingers inside her filled the air, along with her moans as he drove her toward ecstasy.

He crushed his thumb down over her hardened bud. She perched on the ledge of sanity.

“Come for me, princess. Then I’ll slide my cock inside you and you can come on it.”

His dirty words sent a thrill to her core. The next strum of his thumb across her clit made her explode. Her orgasm pounded through her body, making her arch and writhe in his hold.

When she came down from her high, she opened her eyes. Colt stared down at her, his eyes burning with lust.

“Hell yeah, woman.” He pushed onto his knees and whipped open his fly, pulling out his thick, hard cock.

Her insides pulsed. She wanted to be filled. Taken.

As she watched, he extracted a condom from his wallet and slid it over his rock-hard length.

He wasn't completely undressed, but neither was she. Though she had a good reason for modesty, the slight tremor in his hand as he guided the condom to the base of his shaft showed her that he was more in a rush to get inside her than worried about taking off the rest of his clothes.

She grasped his hips and spread her thighs in the same move. When she brought his thick head to her pussy, desire rolled through her.

“Take me!”

He captured her lips and in one smooth push, filled her with his cock. The weight of Colt's body, the hard muscle surging around her, stole her last brain cell.

“Fuck, princess. You drive me crazy. I'm...so...close.” His jaw flexed. His eyes glazed over.

The seconds pounded by way too fast. After just ten thrusts of his cock, he let go. Feeling the big, strong SEAL give himself up to her sent her flying again.

Long moments later, she felt Colt rise from her. She reached for her clothes.

“Leave them.” His gruff tone sent a ripple of awareness through her.

Then he did something completely unexpected. He held out the blanket for her to step into.

Reluctantly, she stepped forward. He wrapped the blanket around her shoulders.

With all the protectiveness of a movie hero, he lifted her into his arms.

And carried her to the cabin.

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Source Creation Date: July 24, 2025, 1:07 am

Colt never woke up feeling rested. He never woke up with a stretch and a smile to greet the day.

For the second time in forever, he woke up without a nightmare clinging to him like a dirty second skin. As a SEAL, focusing on his breathing came without thought. Instead of rough, violent heaves of his lungs as his body searched for oxygen, his breaths came nice and even and his heart thumped in a steady rhythm—a stark contrast to the usual wild panic he usually felt when he woke.

Upon leaving the military, he retreated to the back country, staying for months in a cold, desolate cabin in the mountains. After surviving a harsh winter, he sought something that offered more creature comforts, which was how he found the Tahoe cabin.

But he'd only stayed here a couple months before his little sister barged in, demanding that he was coming home with her to reconnect with the family.

Colt knew what his nightmares were like. He knew how restless his nights could be. The whole reason why he slept in the barn was to spare his siblings the same terrible sleep he got. Or worse, to keep them from running into his room when he woke up screaming from a dream of battlefield chaos.

He blinked at the ceiling. Early morning light trickled through the blinds, drawing soft lines across the down comforter. His mind struggled to make sense of waking without disorienting nightmares or the fight-flight reflex that began long before he ever opened his eyes.

From the pillow beside him came the sound of soft breathing. He turned his head and saw her there—Aspen.

Dark lashes fanned over her cheeks. When he continued to study her, he realized that one of her hands was still latched on to his arm as if he might vanish in the night.

When he laid her down on the king-sized bed, he thought to leave her alone in the master bedroom, but she'd hooked her arms around his neck.

“Stay, Colt.” Her husky tone countered any resistance he would have put up. “Please.”

It was his sanctuary, but she deserved a good night's rest, and she'd never get that with him beside her.

Only, she had.

Military life had stripped him of the ability to connect with or trust anyone outside his family. It also robbed him of the ability to feel worthy of a moment like this.

Peace.

His scars ran deep. Not many were visible. Yet Aspen had seen something worth holding on to the previous night.

He'd also slept better than ever and woke up feeling rested. Was it her presence or the pre-sleep bump-and-grind workout they'd shared down on the dock?

He had to stop the workings of his brain.

Coffee. He knew from yesterday they both enjoyed starting their day with coffee.

Only this morning, he wouldn't be relying on it to zap him awake enough to function. He felt ready to conquer the world.

When he shifted to roll out of bed, Aspen tightened her grasp on his arm.

He looked down at her. Her eyes must have just popped open, but they were already cleared of the haze of sleep.

“Where are you going?”

“Coffee.”

“Oh, I'd love some coffee. But this is some mattress! The comfort level—I've never felt anything like it. And I know mattresses.”

“I'm glad you had a good rest, princess.”

“I did. And these sheets! They have to be two thousand-thread count.”

“I have no idea what that means.”

She issued a husky laugh. “It means they're soft and perfectly cozy. Everything about this cabin is cozy and warm. Not at all detached like a billionaire's mansion, which is sometimes too modern and stark.”

“I'm glad it meets your standards.”

She pushed into a sitting position, drawing his attention to her attire. Sometime in the night, she'd thrown on an oversized T-shirt.

He wanted to rip the thing off her.

“Did you have an interior designer for the house?”

Her question didn’t mesh with his own focus of getting her naked and speared on his cock again.

He shook his head to clear it. “No, why?”

“This place has a woman’s touch.”

He grunted. “Good eye. It has.”

She pulled her rosy bottom lip between her teeth. Her fine brows drew downward.

He didn’t know much about women, but he could see she was visibly upset at being the second woman to be here. Nobody wanted to come in second.

Slipping out of bed, she faced him with a mattress between them. All that space to spread her out and claim her.

“I know I should have asked this last night, but I just assumed. You didn’t have a date at the wedding—”

He cut her off. “Aspen, are you trying to ask if I’m in a relationship?”

“Well...yeah.” She wrapped her arms around her middle, making that short hem ride up her bare thighs. “It’s clear that a woman decorated this place, and you said as much.”

In slow, measured steps he rounded the bed. He came to a stop in front of her.

She tipped her head up, jaw set in a cute little challenging jut.

“A very important woman decorated this cabin, Aspen. My baby sister Willow.”

* * * * *

After waking up clinging to her travel companion and then making a fool out of herself with the whole woman’s touch on the cabin thing, Aspen needed some precious time away from Colt.

She took a shower in the huge bathroom and while lathering herself with fragrant body wash, she marveled at how the shower wasn’t tiled with marble. Complete slabs of marble made up the walls. It sure beat the horse trough and water heated on the old smoky woodstove.

She quickly dressed in sleek dark jeans and her favorite black blouse, the one that packed perfectly for travel. Whenever she wore it, she thought immediately of Vivian. Her sweet friend had always complimented Aspen when she donned the top, and there were multiple photos of them in various locales—in Stockholm, the Cotswolds and even in Japan.

Aspen added a berry-red lip stain and went in search of her host.

Her lover.

Oh god, had she really slept with him? The twinges in muscles she didn’t use often told her loud and clear that she hadn’t imagined their encounter.

When she followed the decadent scent of good coffee into the kitchen, her stare fell on the long, hard planes of Colt’s spine. At the sound of her footsteps, he swung to face her.

His gaze latched on to her lips and then skidded back up to her eyes. Her lower belly

heated, and her pussy squeezed in reaction to a single look from the man who'd filled her so completely the night before.

Actually, Colt filled her like nobody ever had. The dark sensation of him moving inside her made her clench her thighs.

"Coffee." She couldn't seem to string any other words on to that one.

He wasn't capable of speaking at all and only pointed at a small coffee bar set up on one side of the kitchen.

She hurried to it and selected a distinctive pale gray hand-thrown pottery mug from the wood shelf. "Is this pottery by Kissick in Seattle?"

"I have no idea. Willow bought it in town. I just gave her my credit card and told her to knock herself out."

Aspen flipped over the mug and inspected the maker's mark on the bottom. With a nod and a smile, she turned the mug over again and filled it with the rich, dark brew.

She carried the warm drink to the wood table that was artistic in its sheer minimalism. If his sister Willow really decorated this cabin, she had an amazing talent.

"It is Kissick pottery, if you wondered."

He grunted and began pulling items out of the refrigerator. She sat sipping her coffee and watching him. The bacon, she expected. Three different varieties of fresh berries surprised her.

"What do you usually have for breakfast besides granola bars from my glove compartment?" He asked with a look over his shoulder.

“Anything is fine. I’m not picky.”

He shot her a sidelong glance that told her he believed otherwise, but set to work laying strips of bacon in a pan. Then while the bacon sizzled, he tossed a handful of each type of berry into a bowl, drizzled it with honey and gave them a toss.

“Colt.”

“Hm?”

“Thank you for bringing me to your cabin. If you would consider letting me add it to my portfolio, I’d love to.”

“I figured as much. And I wouldn’t have offered if I didn’t mean it.” He wore worn jeans and a black T-shirt with the Black Heart Ranch logo across the chest, his feet were bare. He offered a delectable view as she sipped her coffee.

He strode to the big refrigerator and rummaged in a bottom drawer. He came out with a package, which he set on the counter and used a knife to open.

She had to be the first to broach the topic more concretely. “If you agree to the terms, I start by inviting a professional photographer in. There’s also a contract.”

“I don’t want personal stuff on this. No names. No personal photos.”

“Of course not. We’ll make it very discreet.”

As he pulled out a small pan and sprayed it with nonstick spray, she eyed him. “What are you making?”

“Crepes. Willow made a big batch and froze them for me last time she was here.”

“And you just...reheat them?”

“Yes. It will surprise you. Give them a chance.”

“Since you’re giving me one, and doing me a huge favor by providing access to such a special place, I will give your frozen crepes a chance.”

“Willow came up with the technique and it always works.” He peeled a layer of parchment paper off the top and popped the confection into the warming skillet.

She stopped with her mug halfway to her lips, stunned by how gorgeous this man was. And ohhh, her body remembered all too well how he felt pressing her down.

“You said you became a travel ag—I mean concierge after traveling with your friend. Was that her business too?”

A sudden lump rose in her throat, making it impossible to drink. She set the mug carefully on the table. “It’s really important that these travel experiences are perfect for people.”

The uneven tone of her voice made him throw a look at her. “Aspen?”

“There’s stuff we haven’t talked about.”

He withdrew his attention from the range and directed it all to her. “I’m listening if you need an ear.”

She knew that the Black Heart Ranch also housed a therapy program for military veterans. The way he said that made her wonder if he spent time with the vets, listening to them and responding in that same soothing voice.

With a fingertip, she traced a line of wood grain on the table. “I know I can seem uptight. That I have all these perfectionist tendencies, but...I’m living my life for two. Me and my mom.”

Tongs in hand, he fixed her in his stare.

“I lost my mom to cancer.”

“I’m sorry, Aspen.”

“There’s more. I got diagnosed before she did.”

His eyes widened. “Jesus.”

“I had the whole thing—double mastectomy, chemo. While I was undergoing treatment, my mom got tested too. And hers was more advanced.”

“That’s why you kept your bra on last night.”

She nodded. “I haven’t been with anybody since the reconstructive surgery, and I’m still self-conscious.”

“You’re beautiful no matter what, princess.”

His words came as a soft embrace to her emotional state of being. She dragged in a deep breath and told him everything in that difficult time of her life and how she’d coped with a fight for her own life after losing her mom.

“There was a woman who was also getting chemo. I was at my darkest point, and Vivian was there for me. I was there for her too. We formed a tight bond, and after we both battled our way to remission, Vivian told me that she wanted to travel while

she could.”

“I see her point.”

She nodded. “I didn’t initially feel like traveling. Somehow, I thought that having fun after all that happened was wrong.”

He gave her a serious look, like he knew what she was talking about. Then again...he was a SEAL. He’d probably watched friends fall, and survivor’s guilt was real.

“In the end, Vivian told me that my mom would want me to live my life and have experiences that she never did. She was right.”

After the funeral, she tried reaching out to some of Vivian’s family, to keep her memory alive. She pictured one man in particular, a nephew who shut the door in her face. Aspen only had herself to share her memories with. No one else seemed to care.

A short time later, she realized the reason Vivian’s nephew’s had a problem with her.

He switched off the pans and abandoned his post by the range. When he approached Aspen, she balled her hands in her lap, unsure what to expect from Colt. He wasn’t like any man she’d ever known.

When he took her arm and lifted her to her feet, she gulped back the tears she’d been holding inside. As soon as his strong arms wrapped around her, she felt a new emotional comfort. He’d listened to her story and offered her unconditional support in that moment.

He didn’t say anything to undermine her experience either, and that was huge for her. She didn’t need to hear a comparison to his own difficult times. She knew he had them, but the fact that he allowed hers a moment to be in the spotlight left her feeling

closer to him.

He held her tight, giving her time to let her emotions ebb out of her.

He brushed a tender kiss between her brows, and she turned her face up to meet his stare.

“Thank you, Colt.”

“Of course.” He held her for another full minute. When he started to pull away, she fisted his shirt.

“I...”

He waited with all the patience in the world.

“I want you to see what I look like, Colt. All of me.”

His eyes burned. “You don’t owe me anything, Aspen.”

“I want to show you.”

He gave her a nod of understanding.

Before she could lose her nerve, she lifted her hands to her shirt buttons. When her blouse hung open, she reached for the tiny gold bra clasp nestled between her breasts.

His gaze clung to her every move. When she unfastened her bra and exposed her breasts, Colt gave no hint that the scars she bore—even ugly ones—were as terrible as she believed.

“We all have scars, princess. Some are just easier to see than others.”

She gulped down her emotions.

When he took a step closer and traced his finger along the curve of her cheek, her heart jogged a little in her chest.

“You’re even lovelier this morning.”

Her lips curved in a small smile. “Thank you.”

“Why don’t you sit down and I’ll fix you a plate.”

After she picked up her coffee again and took a sip, she found she appreciated the warm drink even more because a caring man had brewed it for her. He didn’t have to take care of her...but from the very beginning of this journey, he did.

He set a plate in front of her. She blinked down at the dish that matched the Kissick Pottery mug, filled with crispy strips of bacon and a crepe slathered in berries and honey.

She shook her head. “This looks amazing, Colt.”

He smiled at her compliment and returned to fix himself a plate. Once they tucked into their meal, she realized something had shifted between them. It wasn’t her imagination either—a new warmth had settled into his eyes.

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Source Creation Date: July 24, 2025, 1:07 am

Colt stood at the big wall of glass that overlooked the lake. Pines soared into the air, framing the view that Aspen seemed to love as much as he did.

“I bought this place to heal.”

He felt her shift closer, the warmth of her body heating his side.

“I got out of the military and I was so fucked in the head, I knew I couldn’t go home and dump that on my family. The way we grew up wasn’t easy, and they’ll always be there for me, but I didn’t want to ask that of them.”

“Your family loves you. I could see that much at the wedding.”

He nodded but kept his stare locked on the end of the dock. How many nights had he sat there alone, watching the moonlight ripple on the surface of the water and trying to master his emotions?

“I went to a cabin in the mountains that wasn’t much better than the first cabin you and I went to.”

“Oh god. That’s how you knew.”

He nodded.

“I wanted some time before I was around people again.” When he began speaking, he thought it was to make Aspen more comfortable, less exposed after what she shared with him.

Now he realized he was ready to open up to someone, and she was the perfect listener.

She set a hand on his shoulder, and he turned to her. She slipped her arms around his waist and rested her head on his chest, over his heart. He held her close, breathing in her sweet smell.

“You shared your scars, so I’ll share mine. I have violent dreams.”

She met his gaze.

“I don’t want to scare you or shock you, so it’s best if we don’t share a bed during our time here.”

She shook her head. “You didn’t have any last night, did you?”

“No, but that is unusual.”

“I see.”

“I thought I’d never have a relationship because of it. I knew my siblings would find partners, but I figured I’d be the eccentric uncle who never had a real relationship.

“Oaks and I are close, but the only reason he asked me to be his best man was to make sure I showed up. If he hadn’t asked me, I would have taken off before the wedding day.”

“Your family cares about you a lot. I see things like that.”

He shook his head, trying to cast off the deep emotions seizing him. “I’m the middle brother. The forgotten brother. And I got really good at hiding to avoid my father’s

wrath.”

“You would have just faded away...but your family wouldn’t let you.”

“Seems that way.” He smoothed his hands down her spine, learning the way she felt in his hold and loving it more with each heartbeat that passed.

“You hid from your father, from your thoughts and feelings...from everything.”

He nodded at her assessment. “My father was not an easy man. Guess I learned from him.”

“What did you learn?”

“That men don’t have emotions. It’s why I ended up here, keeping to myself. Till my baby sister came to check on me. I couldn’t get rid of her.” He issued a low laugh. “She stayed, decorated and helped me heal enough to want to return to the Black Heart. Not enough to live in the main house with everyone, but enough I did go home.”

He thought about his time with Willow. How she kept up the cheerful chatter, not seeming to mind that he didn’t have much to add to the conversation. He turned his head and fixed his gaze on the dock once more.

He and Willow had sat there together plenty of nights. Several times, he tried to talk to her about his time in the military—about the things he’d seen and done. In the end, he couldn’t utter a single word.

But Willow knew. They just sat and stared at the same scene that Aspen was sharing with him now.

At the same time he turned back to her, she tilted her beautiful face up.

Cupping her cheek, he closed the distance between them, his movements deliberate. Each inch became a promise of what he was about to do. Her eyes gleamed with excitement as his lips finally claimed hers.

At the first soft brush, he closed his eyes. She let out a small moan, and he tugged her flush against him. In all his years, he never confided to another human being. Horses, he talked to regularly. Even the occasional barn cat. None of those talks provided such a buoyant feeling in his soul the way talking to Aspen did.

As he drew her deeper into the kiss, she rubbed against him. Desire gripped his gut.

Stretching his fingers through her cloud of curls, he swept his tongue out to taste her. She returned the caress with a stroke of her own honey-sweet tongue. She angled her head, drawing him deeper until his cock throbbed and she was practically climbing him like a tree.

Breaking the kiss, she clung to his shoulders as if her knees were too weak to stand. “There’s a bed three steps away from us.”

He arched a brow. “You want to have sex in a bed? I thought a travel concierge would have a more exciting plan.”

“You’re right—how boring. I can’t believe I had such a lame idea.” She gave her head a small shake, causing her loose curls to float around her shoulders.

God, she was adorable and fascinating. And he wanted her.

With a deep chuckle, he lifted her and spun for the bed. She made one of those irresistible sounds that had his cock surging with lust.

Bed.

Naked.

Claim.

His body fired off monosyllables, but his brain pushed to slow things down.

With unhurried movements, he cradled Aspen like precious and fragile cargo. Gently, he eased her down, his hands supporting her until she sank into the pillowy top.

He let his touch linger like heat on her skin after the sun set, and he hovered over her, gazing deep into her eyes.

Her eyes blazed up at him like green fire. She wrapped her arms around him, urging him down on top of her.

“You’re warm. Are you sure you’re not part furnace?”

“Well, I did singlehandedly keep you alive back in that first cabin.”

“It was freezing, but I remember there being a woodstove heating the place.” Her words came out as a rasp of desire even as she teased him.

“And I remember you using all the wood to heat bath water.” He dipped his head to sample the skin on her throat.

Arching, she let out a shivery sigh.

“Just so we’re clear, premium snuggling like this doesn’t come cheap,” he murmured against her pulse point.

“Mmm. How much is it going to cost me?”

He sucked a bit of her sensitive flesh between his lips, and she moaned, rolling her body against his. “I might be willing to bargain.”

She drew back to meet his gaze. A playful light twinkled in the depths of her eyes. “Let’s strike a deal. I take off my clothes...and you take off your clothes.”

He ducked his head in a nod. “Sounds fair to me.” A wolfish grin stretched over his face.

He pushed onto his knees. Aspen scrambled onto hers. Facing each other, they began to take off their clothes. First, he whipped off his shirt and cast it to the floor. She worked those dainty, fussy buttons on her black blouse and then slipped it over her arms.

When he reached for the waist of his jeans, she lifted her hands to the front clasp of her bra. A remote expression washed over her face, and she hesitated.

“You can leave it on if it makes you more comfortable.”

“It doesn’t bother you that they’re not real?”

He focused solely on her. “Princess, most men don’t care about what’s real and what’s not. They just like boobs. I fought with plenty of men who lost limbs, some of whom have prosthetics. What I see in you is a survivor.”

A soft puff of air passed her plump lips. A rosy flush settled in her cheeks. Holding his stare, she slowly undid the bra clasp. Her rounded breasts bounced lightly as they were freed from the silk.

Slowly, he reached out and touched her. Cradling her smooth, rounded breast in one hand, he leaned in and captured her lips. She stretched her fingers along his scalp, raking through his short hair as he nuzzled the part of her body she had hangups over but allowed him to share.

An honor that touched him deeply.

Moved, he dragged her off her knees and laid her on the bed. Gliding his mouth down the point of her chin to her throat, he teased her for long moments before he kissed a path down between her breasts to her navel.

As he worked open the button of her jeans, his balls clenched with need. Their first sexual encounter had been fast and furious, and neither had totally removed their clothes. This time, he would take his time with her and show her every pleasure he could.

With extreme slowness, he inched her jeans down her body and off her small bare feet. Next, he traced the slim string of elastic riding along her hip before he hooked his finger beneath it and drew her panties down.

Goose bumps pebbled over her skin. Passion clamped around his heart, and he couldn't resist kissing her lower belly and nuzzling the short curls of her mound.

When he stretched out with his face between her thighs, she parted for him, inviting him in.

The folds of her pussy glistened with desire. He slowly rubbed his bristly jaw over her inner thigh and snaked his tongue out to taste her.

The first touch of his tongue pulled a harsh cry from her. She raked her fingers over his scalp and bucked her pussy into each swipe of his tongue. Over and over again, he

lapped through her folds, flicking in and out of her sweet heat before dragging his tongue back up to her clit.

Suctioning it between his lips, he stared up the length of her body, watching pleasure ripple across her beautiful face.

Christ, she was lovely. So strong and smart. He never took the time to get to know any woman he slept with in the past, but with Aspen, he wished they had more time to spend together.

He'd take what he could get. Right now, that was her throaty moans.

With soft pulls of his lips, he continued to tease and torment her. Licking and spearing his tongue inside her before suckling gently on her hard clit until she threw her head back on a wild cry.

Her lips parted in an O of bliss. Her pussy quivered and pulsated under his questing tongue.

A tremor ran through her thighs. In a hard pulse, she came.

“Colt!” Her breathy moan shot him to a new level of need. Good thing he'd left his jeans on because the pressure of his zipped fly was the only thing keeping him from exploding.

A final shiver coursed through her...and she melted into the mattress.

* * * * *

Aspen ran her fingers over the warm velvet of Colt's chest in sweeps. The swells enticed her. The ridges of his abs made her burn. And the hard length of his erection,

stiff between their bodies, had her insides clutching.

She shot him a heated look. “I’m going to taste you.”

He waited, watching her with an intensity that stole her breath for a moment and rendered her frozen.

Slowly, she curled her fingers around his thick shaft. It jerked against her palm as he let out a rumble of pleasure that enhanced the moment. It had been a long time since she felt this bold. It made her head swim.

She gave him a slow stroke, letting his length slide through her hand. His abs hardened before her eyes, and his jaw firmed.

Driven on by the surge of lust in him, she slowly parted her lips around his mushroomed head. The instant she enveloped him in her mouth, his rough groan rumbled through his body.

He curled his fingers in her hair. “Christ, princess. Oh god, baby.”

Inch by inch, she swallowed his cock. He was big—too big to take all of him, so she curled her fist around the base and jacked him slowly as she sucked him in.

“Jesus! Your mouth is fucking heaven.”

Drunk on his bliss, she moved up and down on his length, sucking him deeper on every pass.

His body bowed, but in contrast, the tender brush of his fingers over her scalp raised a different kind of shiver inside her. This battle-hardened man could also display such softness that it stunned her speechless.

She applied more pressure with her lips, taking the spongy flared head along her tongue until he let out a low growl.

“Christ, Aspen! Stop.” He wrapped his hands around her upper arms and drew her up his body. His eyes flashed dark with need as he settled her over his hips, straddling him.

Leaning in, she kissed him long and deep. Three heartbeats didn’t pass before he took complete control of her mouth.

Her insides blazed. This new need pulsing inside her drove her on as he rubbed his stiff cock against her slippery wet folds.

“We need a condom,” she murmured against his lips.

He stilled and let out a groan. “Dammit.” He stretched out a long arm and yanked open the nightstand drawer.

She shouldn’t be surprised that he kept condoms on hand. After all, how a gorgeous man like Colt didn’t have a different woman in his bed every night of the week astounded her.

He closed his fingers on a small box of condoms, but when he tried to pull the cardboard free, the corner got stuck. He shook the box to free it but only managed to make the nightstand legs scrape on the wood floor.

He barked out a low cuss that had her giggling. Swinging her leg over his strong hips, she crawled across the bed to get the condom herself. She was a strong, independent woman who knew what she wanted and how to get it. And right now, she was getting Colt inside her.

When she had a foil packet in hand, she threw him a coy smile.

He lunged for her, tore the condom out of her hand and ripped it open. She giggled and gladly gave up the task to him. But when he hovered over her, his erection poised at the entrance of her pussy, she stilled.

Their gazes locked.

“Give me your mouth.” His rough command ignited her insides.

Surging upward, she tipped her face up to his while hooking her ankles behind his back.

In one stroke, he joined them.

Her muffled cry was echoed by his low groan as they began to move in tandem. He grasped her ass and yanked her off the mattress to meet every plunge while blowing her mind with his talented, endless kisses.

Their soft sounds mingled, growing more intense by the heartbeat. The thick feel of his cock coupled with the hard steel of his body moving overtop hers stole coherent thought. She couldn't wrap her head around how she'd gone to Wyoming to deliver a honeymoon portfolio but ended up in bed with the groom's brother in his amazing Lake Tahoe cabin.

More confusing was the amount of intensity in his gray eyes as he thrust deep and ground his cock against her G-spot.

“Come for me, princess. Come on my cock.”

She panted. “Yes! Yesss.” She threw her head back. Electricity zapped along every

nerve ending. Her heart tripped.

“Fuck! I can’t hold out with you. You drive me...fucking crazy.” He bit off the words in gritty rasps. His muscles hardened.

She locked her body around him and angled her hips to take him deep. The spicy scent of his bodywash flooded her senses. His lips trailed fire over her skin. She tilted her head to give him better access to the extremely sensitive area he’d sucked on earlier.

When his lips hit the sweet spot, her desire amped up higher and higher. The light filtering into the room cast him in a golden glow, highlighting the strength of his biceps, shoulders and chest.

She twisted her mouth against his skin, needing to taste him too. When she grazed his pec with her teeth, he let out a low growl. She felt his movements grow jerky, disjointed.

“Take me, Colt!” Her orgasm hit, bowing her off the bed.

He grasped her ass and yanked her into him in quick thrusts at the same moment his release struck. The tight knot in her core snapped, and his liquid heat spread through her. The dark whip of sensation inside her felt like a heartbeat of its own.

She watched pleasure play across his rugged features. The cords in his neck stood out, and a vein pulsed under his tanned skin.

Holding him close, she let her fingers patter over his spine, down to his carved ass. When he collapsed on top of her, half rolling to the side so he didn’t crush her, she studied his face.

A curl tumbled into her eye, and she pushed it away, not wanting her view of him obscured at all. The lines of stress etched around his eyes had smoothed out, leaving him looking rested.

Satisfaction spread through her entire body. A sudden giggle bubbled up her throat, and she did a terrible job of squelching it.

Colt turned his head to pierce her in his deep gray gaze. “Do I want to know what you’re laughing at?”

“I was just thinking that if I’m going to write up a contract for this place, I’m going to have to ask you to add working smoke detectors...because that sex was a five-alarm blaze, and not a single one went off.”

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Source Creation Date: July 24, 2025, 1:07 am

The cool night breeze came across the lake, carrying the scent of autumn and pine. It teased at Aspen's curls and tugged at the wool blanket she had wrapped around her shoulders. They hadn't done more than sip wine and talk, but the evening had been one of the most memorable ones of her life.

Colt walked ahead of her, leading the way back to the cabin. The water lapping at the dock was the only sound breaking the quiet.

It was peaceful. Soothing.

"How can you see where you're going? It's pitch black."

In front of her, he stopped walking and half turned to her. "Sorry. I wasn't thinking." He pulled out his phone and turned on the flashlight. He directed it at their feet, giving her a better view of the path leading from the dock.

The glow also sent shadows dancing across Colt's face. She studied the lines between his brows, wondering what secrets put them there.

As if sensing the serious turn of her thoughts, he looped out an arm and tucked her against his side.

"Cold?"

"A little." She burrowed deeper into the blanket draped around her. There was no way the fibers still held the warmth of Colt's body, but she imagined that they did.

“When we get inside, I’ll draw you a bath.”

Her skin thrummed at the prospect. “That sounds divine. And you don’t even have to heat water on a woodstove.”

When they reached the flight of stairs leading up to the house, she paused and looked back at the lake.

She had lost a lot. From those losses, she’d learned how to live. Stopping to soak in the moment was one of her ways of keeping the memory alive.

Colt stopped too. He didn’t hurry her into the house. Instead, he took in the quiet surroundings along with her.

When she was ready to continue, she squeezed his arm. He threaded his fingers with hers and they mounted the steps to the cabin.

Once they were inside, he set the picnic basket he’d carried on the kitchen counter and went straight to the master bathroom. She trailed behind at a more leisurely pace, enjoying the view of Colt’s muscled body as he leaned over and switched on the tub faucet.

Water trickled out, tinkling in calming music into the modern oval tub. Aspen shrugged the blanket off her shoulders and folded it, then set it aside on the vanity.

Her lover opened a cupboard and withdrew a fancy bottle. When he tipped some fragrant oil into the bath water, she stepped up beside him and dragged in a breath through her nose.

“That smells amazing. What is it?”

He showed her the bottle with a handwritten label. “Something my sister found in town. There’s a night market every weekend.”

“Oh! Clients will love that event!” She pulled out her phone to make a note.

Colt chuckled and placed the bottle back in the cabinet. He extracted a fluffy white towel and draped it over the heated rail. Finally, he flipped a switch on the wall. Warm orange flames came to life in the fireplace, licking at a gas log.

“I’ll leave you to it.”

She set aside her phone and reached for him. “What are you going to do while I relax in this awesome tub in front of the fireplace?”

He directed a lock of her hair behind her ear, a small smile playing on his hard lips. “What would you like me to do?”

She shot a look at the tub and then back to him. “Join me?”

Surprise lifted his dark brows. “You want me to get in the tub with you?”

His question gave her pause. Maybe it was a little too romantic for the likes of the former SEAL, but she wasn’t going to back down now. Her momma always told her to own it.

Taking a step back from him, she reached for the hem of her top. With only a beat of hesitation, she pulled it over her head. Still grasping the fabric, she dropped her arms, letting the cloth graze the floor.

Colt’s eyes hooded as he zigzagged his gaze over her breasts. They filled out the bra cup in the perfect B she’d requested from the surgeon. She could have had any size

she wanted, but she only wanted the size she'd been born to have, nothing more, nothing less.

She released the top, and it puddled by her feet. She unfastened her jeans next, aware of the low tingles darting through her belly at taking off her clothes for Colt again.

She wasn't usually so insatiable, but something about spending time with the hunky man made her body come alive. Soon they'd go their separate ways. She wanted all the good memories she could get.

He whipped off his shirt and tossed it. She followed the arc of the garment as it flew straight into the sink.

"Nice shot."

He chuckled. "Thanks." Veins snaked up his strong arms as he reached for his belt. In a few quick moves, he had his belt unbuckled and his fly unzipped.

Behind his tight black underwear, his swollen cock stretched clear up to the waist of his open jeans.

She darted her tongue over her lips, practically tasting that salty-sweet flavor of his precum.

When she stripped away the rest of her clothes and dipped one toe into the tub, he stepped up, offering his hand. Warmth spread through her chest as she accepted his assistance as she stepped into the tub.

She sank into the heated depths. Seated in the center, she felt small. "This is huge compared to that horse trough."

“I hope so. It cost a hell of a lot more.” He stepped in behind her. Water surged up her skin, and then he sat down, taking up all the space.

“You’re big. Guess you needed a big tub.”

He stretched his long, muscled, hairy legs on each side of her and hooked her around the waist, drawing her back against him. With a sigh, she rested her head on his chest and let the heat and sweet bath oil work to relax her.

That seemed impossible when every fiber of her being shivered on the edge.

She’d expected this to get very sexual. Instead, it was sensual.

He settled his fingertips into the muscles on the back of her neck and began lightly kneading it.

She let out a low moan. “That feels so good.”

His breath tickled over her earlobe. “You like being pampered.”

“Who doesn’t?”

“Me.”

She twisted to shoot him a look. “You don’t enjoy a good massage or breakfast in bed?”

“I might if I ever experienced those things, but I haven’t.”

She sputtered. “You’ve never even had a massage?”

“Nope. I played baseball in high school, but I wasn’t going to be one of those pansies who needed the trainer to rub them down all the time.”

“Colt.” She stared at him. “You don’t always have to be the toughest guy in the room.”

The noise he made in the back of his throat was part grunt, part chuckle.

Before he could guess her intention, she climbed out of the tub and got back in behind him. Wrapping her thighs around his waist, she leaned in close to whisper in his ear.

“Relax.”

“Hmph.”

She pressed her fingertips into the stiff muscles on the back of his neck. Using the water on her fingers, she skimmed her hand up and down his neck. When she felt him begin to relax, she moved a hand to each shoulder and started working what felt like years—maybe decades—of tension out of his muscles.

She had no idea what hour it was, and she lost herself in giving back to the man who’d shared his space so generously with her. Touching a man at all was strange. Touching one without the intent to gain sexual pleasure... Well, that was very different for Aspen.

“I bet you bring all the ladies here.”

She felt him go still.

“I figured you guessed by now that I don’t date.”

She stopped working on the tense knots on his shoulder blades. “Never?”

“Never.”

She drew in a breath to share that she didn’t go out with the opposite sex often either, but a vibrating sound came from somewhere nearby.

“That’s your phone.”

“Oh!” In a flurry, she rose from the tub and made a dive for her device she left on the counter. Water dripped off her skin, but she ignored it as she skimmed the text she just received.

With a slosh, Colt emerged from the tub. He grabbed the towel off the heated bar and swathed her in it, then grabbed a second for himself.

She glanced up from her phone to find him staring down at the screen. “Thank you,” she said absently.

He scrubbed the terrycloth over his bare chest like it had offended him. “Who is texting you at eleven-thirty at night?”

“The client who wants a cozy cabin retreat.”

He leaned in closer to read over her shoulder. “‘Let’s plan a trip to Wyoming’ doesn’t sound like a client to me.”

She peered at his face. “Are you jealous?”

“Hell no. You’re free to do as you please.”

“Colt. I can assure you that I’m a free woman and this is my client. He’s a billionaire—he is eccentric. If he gets the idea to take a vacation, he texts me right away, even at eleven-thirty at night.”

He leveled her in a flat look that said he didn’t buy her story but he wasn’t going to argue about it. He swiped the towel over his shoulders.

“Billionaires keep weird hours. He’s actually married, and he wants to plan an anniversary trip for him and his wife. I expected something like this would come up soon...”

Another text rolled in, and she redirected her attention to the screen. This message had her biting down on her lip. “He needs me to find a place now —or he’ll find someone who can. I can’t let that happen. I was afraid of this. It’s the reason why I was searching in Montana for a retreat. I thought this client would want to go to Montana because he loves fly fishing there. Now I only have a few hours to find a place for them in Wyoming!”

Colt lowered the towel from his body. Aspen didn’t know what to focus on. His big, hard body was very distracting, but she needed to focus on her job. Her business was her life.

But does it have to be?

“I don’t see the issue, princess. I live in Wyoming.”

Agitation sputtered inside her veins. “But we didn’t find any places to add to my catalogue!”

He stepped up to her. Took the phone from her hand. “I know a place.”

Then he lowered his mouth to hers in a hard stamp that felt like he was leaving his mark on her soul.

* * * * *

Colt couldn't resist the draw of Aspen's warm, damp body. He cupped her ass and hauled her naked body up against his.

She issued a rasp of surprise.

"Like you don't know I've been aching hard in that tub with you, waiting for the minute I could take you." He ground out the words at the same time he ground his stiff cock against the V of her thighs, raising a sharp cry of want from her.

He was acting like a possessive dick, but he couldn't stop himself. He didn't like the idea of any man texting Aspen after business hours, and certainly not when she'd just been naked with him.

Later on, when he located his wits again, he would give that thought the time it deserved. Right now, he was going to get what he wanted. And he wanted the taste of her pussy on his lips.

Sliding his hand between her damp thighs, his fingers met her slick folds.

"Colt!"

He circled her clit two times, then three...and shoved two fingers into her channel. Her tight walls clamped around his digits.

Her body bowed. Supporting her quaking limbs, gaze fixed on her beautiful face, he thrust his fingers in and out of her pussy.

Her soft moans drove him even crazier. For a moment, he felt his grasp on control slip.

No. He refused to slake the dark need pounding in his balls until she came first.

He captured her mouth, delivering kisses that drugged him as much as her. Each juicy push of his fingers inside her brought another cry to her lips.

When he dropped to his knees and met her gaze, he saw the knowledge of what he was about to do ripple through her vivid green eyes.

Planting his hands on her rounded thighs, he parted them and buried his tongue in her sweet folds.

She sucked in a harsh gasp and grasped his shoulders. Rocked her body into his mouth as he swirled his tongue around her clit. The points of her nails sank into his skin like tiny sharp daggers.

Damn, he loved that. He'd never been one to tolerate a woman clawing him, but he wanted to feel the sting of Aspen's nails on his flesh as he drilled her.

She arched, rolling her curvy hips forward.

He thrust his fingers deep again while trapping her hard nubbin beneath his tongue. The push and pull of her body with his, as he gave her what she needed and she took it without apology, had his cock throbbing.

"Come for me, princess. Then I'm going to thrust my cock inside you while you're still coming and make you come again." He lapped at her faster.

"Colt! Oh yes! Yesss!" Her body quaked with tension as he drove her on and on

without mercy.

When she let out a groan, he curled his fingers against her G-spot and suctioned his lips to her clit.

In a rush, she let go. Pulsing. Contracting. Liquid heat bathed his fingers and threw him off the edge.

True to his word, he jerked to his feet and lifted her, turning for the bedroom in the same move. In eight steps he reached the bed but it was eight too many.

And getting a goddamn condom in place took even more precious seconds. By the time he had his cock at her entrance and ensnared her in his gaze, her orgasm was over.

But her eyes still burned with desire.

“I need to start timing this better.”

“Next time! Get inside me!” Her urgent whisper stole the last thought in his brain.

In one hard jerk, he filled her. To the hilt.

She wrapped her legs around his back and rode each plunge of his cock. The smooth, slick glide in was torture. The tight, gripping withdrawal was torment.

“Deeper. Colt, I need you deeper.”

He slid a hand under her ass and held her off the mattress at the angle they both craved.

Her eyes rolled back in her head.

Yes, that was the face he wanted to see her wearing, morning, noon and night.

With a disjointed rhythm, they galloped toward the pinnacle of bliss. The music of their bodies and cries flooded the air. He felt her clamp around his stiff length as her orgasm struck...and he was a goner.

He came in hard, fast pulses. Over and over again, he filled her until the final jolt of electricity rendered his brain mush. He collapsed on top of her. She lay still beneath him, the rise and fall of her chest the only indication that he hadn't killed her with pleasure.

When he lifted his head and met her stare, he couldn't stop a cocky grin from taking over his face.

"You look pleased with yourself."

"You know it."

"I guess you should be. Two orgasms in about five minutes."

"I can do better."

She issued a throaty giggle and kissed him with a tenderness that ignited sparks much, much higher in his chest.

He liked the travel concierge. He liked her brains, her wit and her outlook that when life handed her lemons, she made lemonade. She made him smile more than he had in years. Hell, maybe ever.

What would his family think?

He rolled off her and couldn't resist delivering a pinch to her bottom.

"Hey!" She giggled.

"You'd better get a good night's sleep. We head out first thing in the morning."

She eyed him, suddenly serious. "You said you know a location in Wyoming? Why didn't you just take me there in the first place?"

"I couldn't have taken you there. You needed a place to stay overnight while your plane got fixed. And you were bent on visiting those dumps in Montana."

She groaned and plastered a hand over her face. "Do we have to think about those places ever again?"

"Sometimes you have to look back to see how far you've come."

Her beautiful eyes took on a glint of emotion. "That's really beautiful, Colt. And deep."

"I can do deep."

She trapped her lip between her teeth. "Pretty sure you just did."

They burst out laughing.

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Source Creation Date: July 24, 2025, 1:07 am

Whenever Colt left the Lake Tahoe house, he felt like he was saying goodbye to a close friend. Morning sun slanted through the trees, casting ripples of shadow on the ground. The cabin stood quiet and still. While the place didn't look any different, Colt felt a change, as though the log walls had trapped the laughter and good times they'd shared.

Would he ever bring Aspen here again? Unlikely.

She stood at the railing, arms wrapped around her middle, gazing out at the water. "There aren't many spots I don't want to leave. But this is one." Her voice echoed the melancholy he felt. She turned to look at him.

His chest tightened. If she asked if they'd ever come back, he didn't know what to say.

In the end, she didn't ask.

He reached out, and she slipped her hand into his. With both of their bags in his grip, he led her down the porch steps to the SUV that had been waiting for them at the airstrip. They'd return to Wyoming via his family's private jet, and his old truck was parked at the ready for him to drive them to the next location.

Neither of them spoke as they got on the road. Aspen clasped her hands in her lap, her head twisted toward the side window.

He grabbed his phone and sent her a pinned location of their next destination.

Her phone chimed, and she glanced at it. “Oh. Thank you.”

“No problem. Have you checked in with the mechanics about your jet lately?”

She gave a small start as if her mind had been far, far away. “Actually, I texted my crew this morning. They’ve received the parts they need for the repair and planned to start work today.”

He dipped his head. “That’s good. Real good.”

She’d be on her way, back to her life of travel and billionaires who texted her at all hours of the day.

Colt would return to his lonely days and longer, lonelier nights at the ranch.

“I’ve enjoyed traveling with you, Colt.”

It was his turn to be startled. He directed his attention from the road to her pretty face.

She let out a throaty laugh. “You look so surprised.”

“I am.”

Her soft smile sparkled in her eyes. “The trust test is whether or not you can travel with someone. My time with you has been pretty effortless.”

“I’m surprised to hear you say that, especially after the mishaps we’ve had.”

She waved a hand. “Those weren’t your doing—or mine either. The cabins weren’t great places to stay.”

“That’s an understatement.”

She laughed again. “It’s probably the military man in you. You pack for yourself. You don’t need any direction. Your training has probably made you into the perfect travel companion.”

“Perfect, huh?” He smirked.

She rolled her eyes. “Great—now I’ve fed your already monstrous ego.”

He chuckled and considered what she said. “It’s partially military training, but growing up with my father, I learned to prepare for every eventuality and fly under the radar. None of us kids wanted to make him angry, especially when he’d been drinking.”

“That sounds rough, Colt. I’m sorry.”

He wished he’d gotten one more look at her as he’d last seen her, standing at the porch rail, staring at the water with that sweet, faraway expression making her features even more angelic.

“I joined the military to get away and see the world. I thought I’d end up in a cushy job stationed at an embassy like my kid brother Theo.”

Her brows puckered. “Did I meet Theo at the wedding?”

“No. He was the only Malone who couldn’t make it.” He considered telling her more about all of his brothers, then recalled Aspen wasn’t going to be sticking around. In fact, those wedding photos she was in would outlast her by a lot. As soon as her plane was repaired, she’d be leaving Wyoming—and her time with him—in the dust.

“And you didn’t get to guard any embassies?”

Her question drew him from his thoughts. He gave a sad shake of his head. “My skillset landed me in combat.”

She didn’t speak, but she did reach out and rest her hand on his forearm where it rested on the console. Her warm fingers spread over his skin. A week ago, he’d jerk away at the feel of being touched. Now, it didn’t feel so odd.

In no time, they arrived at the airstrip. The Malone plane was at the ready.

As Colt followed her onto the bird, he gave the pilot a brief nod in greeting. Soon, they were in the air. When Aspen reclined her seat and closed her eyes, he spent too many minutes studying her features in repose. The fan of her lashes across her pale cheeks, the few freckles dotting the bridge of her upturned nose and the full pout of her lips were etched on his brain.

When he was alone again, he might want to remember this moment. He might want to remember her.

The short flight ended too soon. As soon as they touched down, several texts came through on his phone, which he ignored until they disembarked from the plane and he was behind the wheel of his old pickup once again.

One from his older brother Carson to let him know that a new security job had come through, and he was traveling south to meet the client. There was another from his sister, asking how things were going and a bunch of cutesy emojis.

“Smartass,” he mumbled.

“What was that?”

“Just a text from my sister.” He opened the last message to see a photo of Oaks and his bride standing on the beach at sunset, smiling and enveloped in each other’s arms.

He grunted and put away his phone.

All his life, Colt knew that he wasn’t meant for things that other people had. Romantic relationships and family fun were for everyone else—not for him.

* * * * *

“Colt Malone. You’ve been holding out on me!” Aspen slowly climbed out of the truck, her stare fixed to the cabin they’d just arrived at.

Nestled high on a snow-covered cliff, the remote cabin oozed rustic charm and just the right amount of luxury to fit the bill.

Cedar logs crafted the walls and framed the panoramic windows overlooking the most breathtaking view she’d seen since...well, since leaving Colt’s Lake Tahoe cabin.

The roof was layered in thick shingles sprinkled with a layer of fresh snow, and a stone chimney jutted toward the white sky, cold until they went inside and lit the fire.

She drifted to the quaint porch steps leading to a heavy door painted a dark forest green. The low thump of Colt’s footsteps behind her made her look over her shoulder.

“Do you own this cabin too?”

He snorted. “No. We know the people who do, though. They live in Palm Springs and come up here once or twice a year. My family keeps an eye on the place.”

“That’s nice of you.”

He crowded up to the door, and she stepped aside, giving him access. When he pushed the door inward, a blast of cool but not frigid air wafted at her face. It carried a little staleness from being closed up, but it wasn’t anything like the first two cabins they visited.

He shut the door behind them and set their bags on the floor. Aspen immediately set off to explore through the cozy, spacious rooms. The open floor plan and the oversized solid wood furniture were exactly what her clients were looking for. And the cabin possessed the charm of the old days with cozy nooks for reading or sipping coffee while gazing out at the Grand Tetons not far off, where they could ski and snowmobile—activities the billionaire loved.

She heard Colt approach her from behind, his steps quiet. She spun to face him. “It’s perfect.”

A slow smile spread over his face, enhancing his rugged features. “I’m glad to hear it.”

“You’re sure your friends won’t mind if I add this place to my portfolio?”

“I texted them last night, and they’re up for people staying here.”

“Great news.” She waved a hand at the mountain scene. “I need to text my client right away. It’s the perfect time of year for him to visit this place too. He’s outdoorsy, and so is his wife.” She shook her head. “I always envy people who enjoy the outdoors. I’m the girl who waits at the lodge with hot cocoa while everyone else skis.”

He chuckled. “I like the privacy of remote places like this, but you’ll never see me on a set of skis either.”

She flicked her gaze down his broad chest and long legs, trying to picture him in ski pants and a sporty coat. That just wasn't Colt. He was outdoorsy in the way ranchers were, in jeans and leather boots and thick workman's jackets with sherpa lining.

"It's a little cold in here. I'll get the fire started."

He didn't wait for her response, just walked away. She pulled out her phone and texted her client.

Then she walked through the cabin, snapping photos. She was no professional real estate photographer, but the light streaming through the big windows provided a charming filter to the rooms she wanted to capture for the client to see.

When she made her way into the living room, Colt was squatting before the stone fireplace. As she looked on, he fed a log to the kindling that he'd set on fire. The sweet scent of burning wood reached her nose.

God, could Colt look any hotter? The hard planes of his shoulders and the way his biceps bulged with every move he made had her insides on fire like those logs.

He twisted his head and shot her a look. Whatever he saw on her face made his eyes hood.

"Did you contact your client?"

"Yes, but I haven't heard anything back from him yet." She extended her hands to the fire and chafed them together to make it look like she needed to warm up and wasn't trying to get closer to him.

He set another log on the fire and pushed to his feet. They stood side by side, watching the flames.

At the same moment, they turned to each other. He opened his arms, and she threw herself at him. Their lips collided. Aspen dug her fingers into his hair and parted her lips for his tongue.

Just then, the phone in her pocket chimed.

“Ignore it,” he grated out between heated kisses.

Three more chimes indicated she had more incoming messages.

With a groan, she drew back. Colt cut his hand through his hair, chest heaving.

It took her a second to make her eyes focus on the texts from the client.

“Great news! He loves the place and says it’s perfect. His wife is going to adore it.”

“Good to hear.”

“I’m going to set up the dates, then we need to go into the nearby town.”

His stare lingered on her mouth for a long heartbeat before lifting to her eyes. “Do we need to fill the place with supplies for them?”

“No, I need to go to any quaint shops I can find. Bespoke and artisan.”

“What does that even mean? Is that anything like rustic?”

She let out a laugh that was a little throatier than she intended. “Kind of. I need to buy things for a personalized gift basket for the couple.”

“All right. When do you want to go?”

She paused. They'd been right in the middle of making out, and her flustered senses were not finished with Colt Malone.

A fifth text from the client made the decision for her.

"Now. We need to go now."

All the travel was getting to be a lot, even for her. She wanted nothing more than to throw on her coziest sweats and curl up in front of that fire with Colt beside her. But she didn't have much time to set this up for her client, and she did need to run her business.

With a sigh, she gave Colt an apologetic look. "I know we've been traveling all day."

"It's no big deal. The fire will be fine while we're gone." He pulled a screen in front of the flames.

She hesitated. Wishing they could pick up where they left off, wrapped in each other's arms, well on their way to the bedroom.

The faster she shopped for this gift basket, the faster the job was complete. And the sooner she and Colt would be parting ways.

She wasn't ready for their time to be over.

Colt met her stare. Several long heartbeats stretched between them.

"Let's go into town. We can grab some lunch while we're out."

Lunch meant more time spent in his company.

“Let me grab my coat.” She returned to the bedroom where she’d removed her coat while snapping wide angle views of the king-sized bed and the view of the mountains through the window behind it.

When she found Colt by the front door, he stood with his back to her. His head was bowed, and his shoulders appeared to be slumped. But he quickly spun when he heard her and slapped a small smile on his face.

“Ready?”

Why did she get the feeling that he wasn’t talking about going into town?

She nodded, and he ushered her outside before him. On her way past Colt—her lover—she sucked in a deep gulp of the fresh mountain air mingled with his scent.

They said that smells were the biggest trigger of memories, both good and bad. She could attest to this herself. She knew the smell of her mother’s cookies and her dear friend Vivian’s perfume. She knew the market in Spain carried notes of spice and fresh lemons.

Colt was man and pine and all things warm and good...and she wanted to remember.

Source Creation Date: July 24, 2025, 1:07 am

Aspen dragged Colt on a relentless march through store after store in search of the “perfect” items for her welcome basket. Shopping ranked below getting a tooth drilled or a family birthday party on the list of things he wanted to do less—unless the store sold hunting equipment.

But watching Aspen light up in delight at quirky little trinkets and turn them over in her hands with such a thoughtful expression gave him more insight into how her mind worked.

She took all the purchases out of the bags and arranged them on the granite kitchen island. There had to be at least two of everything. Standing back, she brought her fist to her mouth as she pondered what she’d bought.

Three different scents of candles were grouped together, and she picked up the first one, giving it a sniff for what must have been the tenth time.

“I’m not convinced this is the right scent.” She set it aside.

He leaned against the counter, watching her process of elimination. “What’s the matter with it?”

“Too many notes of vanilla.”

He read the label. “Says cinnamon roll.”

“Yes, but there’s a hint of vanilla, which my client hates. He prefers spicier.”

“How do you know his preference of scents? That’s a little personal, don’t you think?”

She fixed her gaze on him. “That’s my job.”

“Well, does your job include eating lunch? It’s getting cold.”

They’d stopped off at an Italian restaurant in the foothills. The joint was a well-known spot for holiday parties and anniversaries. Colt had even heard about one of Willow’s old boyfriends taking his new lady and popping the question there. For a week, it was all his sister could rant about, even though she hadn’t wanted the guy on a permanent basis.

Colt had never been there, and Aspen declared that she didn’t have time to sit down and eat, so he’d ordered ahead and picked up the food. It sat in a bag at the end of the island.

At his comment, Aspen abandoned the gift basket she was in the middle of creating and grabbed the food instead. “You’re right. Let’s eat. I’m starving.”

He twitched his head toward the living room. “What do you say we eat in front of the fire?”

She turned those big green eyes on him. Whenever she did, his heart gave a little hitch. He didn’t know what that was about, but he filed it away with the other questions he would think about at a later date. Like once he was back on the Black Heart Ranch, living his normal life.

Aspen carried the bag into the living room and sank to the floor in front of the fireplace. The flames burned low, leaving plenty of glowing red coals. All they needed was a few logs to get it going again.

He jerked a thumb toward the front door. “You set out the food. I’ll go outside and grab a couple more logs for the fire.”

She nodded and peeked inside one takeout container. “Ooh! Breadsticks!”

He swung back. “Don’t eat them all before I get back.”

As she laughed, she tossed her head, sending her soft curls tumbling around her ears and drawing his attention to the small diamond studs in her lobes. Every single thing about this woman oozed femininity.

He stared at her for a beat longer than he should before he headed outside. When he opened the door, a low, hard thunk sounded.

He stopped on the porch, swinging his head right and then left, straining to detect what it was.

He spent a lot of time in the mountains and knew all the sounds, from chainsaws to the call of birds of prey. That thunk wasn’t one he recognized.

It sounded hollow like a dead tree falling...but echoed with something metallic too. Maybe a branch fell on the metal roof of a distant neighboring property.

No more noises reached him, so he hurried down the steps and rounded the back of the cabin to the neatly stacked pile of wood. There was enough wood here to last any couple for most of the winter, which might be something for Aspen to note in her portfolio.

Planning ahead, he filled his arms with the split wood. If things got heated up between him and Aspen again, the last thing he wanted to do was stop and come outside for another load.

When he turned toward the cabin again, a light tremor in the ground made him stop in his tracks.

The ground was vibrating.

Fuck!

That could only mean one thing.

He dropped the logs and sprinted up the steps. He burst into the house, calling Aspen's name.

She rushed out of the living room, eyes wide with fear and her chest heaving at what she must hear in his voice. "What's wrong?"

In three strides, he grabbed her by the shoulders. "We need to get out of the cabin—now! There's an avalanche!"

She stumbled forward, the soles of her boots biting into the wood floor. Thank god she had her boots on. He snatched her coat on the way out, thrusting it into her arms as they bolted into the cold.

Snow swirled in the air around them, but her frantic voice reached him over the roar of the entire mountainside coming down.

Panic trembled in her voice. "The ground—it's shaking!"

A low, deafening rumble rolled down the mountain, vibrating through the soles of his boots and into his chest. Ice froze the blood in his veins as he spun toward the sound.

A wall of snow thundered down the mountain, swallowing trees and everything else

in its path.

There was no time for escape. They'd be lucky to survive.

The snow began to shift under their feet. Trees cracked and splintered as they were ripped out of the ground like matchsticks.

His voice boomed out over the roar. "Aspen! Move diagonal to the slide—toward the cliff's edge!"

Her hand shot out. He clasped it, gripping tight, but the shifting snow made every step more treacherous. He was not letting her die this way. She'd battled her way back from cancer, and this would not take her out.

The snow buckled beneath them. The world tilted, knocking his feet out from under him. Aspen's fingers were ripped out of his grasp.

"Aspen!" He flipped onto his stomach, clawing at the snow in an attempt to crawl up. His gaze darted around as he watched a wall of white engulf the cabin, obliterating it from view.

The truck disappeared next, swallowed by the pummeling slide.

Raw terror tore through his chest, threatening to swallow him too.

Aspen was gone. Swallowed by an ocean of white.

"Aspen!" His voice cracked. The wind stole his bellow. "Aspen!" He scrambled forward. "Stay calm, do you hear me? I'm coming! I'll find you!"

Fear dug its icy fingers into him harder than it ever had on a battlefield.

* * * * *

The ground vanished under Aspen's feet as the roar of the avalanche consumed her. The deafening roar filled her head, rattling her teeth in her jaw and her skull. The heavy weight of the entire world seemed to press down on her, making it impossible to move.

The brutal snow packed around her, squeezing her tight from every side. By some small mercy, a small pocket of air around her head allowed her to breathe. Where was she?

Where was Colt?

All sense of direction had fled the minute the world shifted under her feet and flipped and flattened her to the ground. Every instinct inside her screamed to try to kick herself free, to battle her way—

Where? Up or down? She didn't have a damn clue where she was in relation to the universe.

She forced herself to remain still, to be calm even as terror clawed up her throat. She wiggled her fingers and found that she wasn't touching snow. The air pocket must be larger than she thought.

She tilted her head back, gulping in shallow breaths. The snow around her ribs pressed inward, making it difficult to expand them. Her heart thudded hard and loud in her ears. Suddenly, she realized that the avalanche had ground to a halt.

The snow was silent now. Eerie and still.

"Colt." Her voice cracked. The sound muffled and deadened by the crypt of snow

hemming her in from all sides. She lifted her hand, stretching in a direction she hoped was upward.

She believed in Colt. He'd know what to do. He'd find her and rescue her.

The need to start screaming burned in her lungs, but she battled against the urge.

A rough noise came from someplace to her right. She slowly turned her head.

A soft thunk, thunk, thunk continued to fill her ears, growing louder by the minute.

He was digging her out!

How had he found her so fast? The man was even more amazing than she thought.

The color of the snow changed from dark gray to light as more and more of it was removed from over her head. When a hole appeared, she tipped her head up, a smile of joy and relief stretching over her face.

The smile froze.

It wasn't Colt.

She stared at the man's face harder. Her scrambled mind tried to place him.

Oh god. She did recognize him. What was he doing here? He was a friend or relative of Vivian. He was at her friend's funeral.

Disjointed pieces clicked into place.

It was Vivian's nephew. Aspen had met him a few times before.

She cast around for his name, but she couldn't grasp hold of it. Gary? Grant?

"Gideon!"

He jerked his arm back. He held a shovel.

"Gideon, what are you doing here?"

He reached into the snow, tough hands digging into her underarms as he hauled her out of the deep drift.

"Gideon!"

"Shut up, dammit."

The tone of his voice made it clear: this wasn't a rescue.

As soon as her head cleared the surface, she sucked in deep gulps of oxygen. Was she imagining her friend's nephew was here? Her brain must be oxygen-deprived if she was seeing people.

She searched the blinding white landscape for Colt, but her gaze landed time and time again on Gideon. She hadn't seen him since the reading of the will.

He glared down at her, eyes fixed on her face and a twisting snarl on his lips.

She opened her mouth to scream for Colt, but pain rocketed through her skull, wiping out the whole world.

Aspen had no sense of time or place. She only knew that her clothes were wet, and she was shivering from the cold. Her eyelids felt as if they were weighted down by

tons of snow and uprooted trees and whatever else that avalanche had torn off the mountainside.

She peeled her eyelids open. They immediately snapped shut. She tried one more time.

This time they stayed propped open. Her vision cleared and she focused on a seat right in front of her.

An airplane.

Her airplane.

She turned her head, and a wave of dizziness slammed her. The face of Vivian's nephew swam in her vision for several heartbeats before she forced her mind to clear.

Gideon was really here. And they were really onboard her plane.

This was no coincidence.

The pieces of the puzzle slipped away. Her mind was too foggy to fit them together. She knew Vivian's nephew had pulled her out of her tomb of snow, but why?

Where was Colt?

Panic jittered through her, and she curled her fingers into the armrests.

This could not be good. Gideon didn't even like her. She'd never forget the expression on his face when Vivian's will was read...and he learned he didn't gain more than a pittance from his aunt's death.

“I see my plane is fixed.” Her mouth was as dry as cotton.

Gideon’s light blue eyes blazed through her. “I’m the one who broke it. Makes it much easier to fix.”

Another wave of panic slammed her with as much force as that avalanche. She floundered the same way, fighting to figure out up from down.

Was Colt alive? She had to stall and pray that he was—and that he would find her.

She slowly turned her head to meet Gideon’s gaze. “What are we doing on my plane?”

“You mean the plane that you bought with my aunt’s money?”

If she answered him, he’d only grow more agitated by what he had lost, even though Vivian had never intended to make him the beneficiary of her legacy.

Aspen’s damp clothes clung to her chilled skin. She was still shivering from cold and fear, but the last thing she wanted to do was show weakness to Gideon.

“Where are we going?” she asked him.

His hair was messy and oily, plastered to his head like he hadn’t washed it in a long time. His beard grew in patches on his cheeks and jaw, leaving bare spots in between.

“We’re going to the cabin in Montana. Remember the cabin you were going to look at for your clients?”

She racked her brain for which cabin that would be. She and Colt visited two out of the three before taking off for Lake Tahoe.

“A cabin way off the beaten path is the best place to take you.” He nodded as if solidifying his plan in his deranged mind. “I’d say it’s an excellent choice. No one will hear you scream there.”

He had to mean the third cabin that she’d never visited. If he knew she had been headed to Montana, he was tracking her moves.

Her gut dipped in fear. She had screamed Colt’s name right before the snow swallowed her up. When she heard digging, she expected to find her lover standing over her, prepared to pull her out of the snow and into his warm, strong arms.

No, this was no coincidence, she thought for the second time, knowing it in her gut now. Gideon had set this all up.

A wild light burned in his pale eyes as he watched her closely. “Thanks to you, Aspen, I have nothing. You took it all. Now I’m going to do the same to you.”

Her mind cast around the plane cabin for something to defend herself with. Some heavy object to bash him over the head the same way he’d bashed her back on that mountain. But there was nothing except the sleek overhead compartments, empty of anything she could use.

She needed to get out of here. She opened her mouth, thinking to scream for her small flight crew. But Gideon reached inside his coat and withdrew a small pistol.

“You’re not going anywhere, Aspen. Fasten your seatbelt. It’s going to be a short flight.”

“No!” Her voice projected as a hot rasp.

What if Colt was dead?

The thought hit Aspen like a punch to the chest.

Impossible. Colt was a SEAL. He had survival skills that most people couldn't even fathom. He knew how to fight, and he was the one who told her how to survive the avalanche.

Doubt crept in. Goose bumps pebbled her body at the icy whisper in her ear—the one that told her that Colt might not have survived at all.

Gideon might have gotten to him first.

If Gideon knew exactly where to find her, that meant he had been watching the cabin. That avalanche wasn't just an act of nature. It was a deliberate act meant to hurt her.

She and Colt walked right into the trap.

Colt, where are you?

Her mind screamed for her lover...the man who was more than just a great travel companion or fun in bed.

She cared about Colt.

Now she felt helpless, suffocated by the possibility that Colt was dead, just as she had felt trapped back on that mountain, buried in the avalanche.

Colt wouldn't give up on her, and she was not giving up on Colt.

She wasn't giving up on them.

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Source Creation Date: July 24, 2025, 1:07 am

“A spen!” Colt’s chest blazed from the frigid air and the terror that rocked him on his feet. He fisted his hands and stumbled around the yard, searching the thick layer of snow that covered any landmarks he might recognize.

Walking around was next to impossible. If he fell into a pocket of snow, he’d have almost no chance of being found.

He had to find Aspen. He’d heard her cry out a name. He heard her say...

Dammit, what the hell was the name she screamed?

Someone had pulled her out. Someone she knew.

He slowly skirted the edge of the cliff, where—judging from the path of the avalanche slide—he knew the snow would be more solid.

“Aspen!” He racked his brain for all the things he’d heard her say.

The noises had come from his right.

He turned that direction. The glare of sun on the blinding-white snow made his eyes water, and he swiped the back of his hand over them. By some grace, he’d been spared and that meant that he had a purpose in this world.

Right now, that purpose was to find Aspen and make sure she lived to fight another day.

Shadows darkened one area of the snow. Setting his boots carefully down in even steps to test that the snow would hold his weight, he made a slow but steady path toward the spot.

The outline of where her body had been buried was clearly visible, as were footsteps leading to the area.

Leading away from the area too.

Someone had dug her out.

A fist clamped around his heart. Only one set of footprints marred the snow, which meant she couldn't have walked away on her own.

Oh god. Who the hell was this guy?

He played and replayed the sound of her voice, coming muffled on the still air.

She said a name. What was it?

For what felt like hours, Colt edged carefully along the cliff. He followed the foot tracks leading in an arc. He knew how to hunt men down, and he was more determined than he ever was fighting for Uncle Sam to find the man who had taken Aspen.

When he spotted the narrow road leading off the mountain, his heart clutched hard like a fist was clamped around it.

Aspen. Oh god, Aspen.

Who had her?

The road was intact and passable, sheltered from the path of the avalanche. The boot prints led to a set of tire tracks. Thick winter treads cut down the mountainside, away from the destroyed cabin.

Someone had driven up here. And what? Witnessed the destruction, pulled Aspen out of the snow?

His mind whirled. With only one set of footprints, Colt could only think that she was unconscious. The man who'd pulled her out had carried her here and put her into his vehicle.

For all Colt knew, he'd taken Aspen to the hospital.

But the bigger question in Colt's mind had his senses on the sharpest sniper alert—how did the guy find Aspen, unless he watched the avalanche swallow her?

Or caused the avalanche.

That sharp metallic thudding noise echoed in Colt's memory.

He slapped at his back pocket. As his fingers brushed the outline of his phone, relief made his nerves feel like overstretched rubber bands. "Thank Christ!"

He yanked out the device and called his brother Carson.

As soon as the line connected, a deep chuckle filled his ear. "Colt. Man, did you finally come up for air after running off with the travel agent?"

"Concierge," he ground out without thinking, and then shook his head.

"What?" Carson asked.

“This isn’t that kind of call. I may need backup.”

“That means you do need backup. Where the hell are you?”

His truck was gone. The only way off the mountain was to start walking down the road. His chest tightened as he realized the odds he was up against.

But he was no quitter. None of the Malones were.

He spouted off the address of the cabin.

“Okay, the Underwood place. What happened?” Carson’s tone sounded with a sharp edge.

“Avalanche.”

“Jesus Christ! Are you all right?”

“Yes. But Aspen... Carson, she’s gone.” His throat closed on the words he never thought would hurt so much to say.

“Fuck! Colt, is she...?”

The question hung in the dead air.

“Someone dug her out. She can’t be conscious. If she were, I would have heard her screaming.” He walked faster, aware now of the bruises and muscle strains in his body even as he failed to give a damn about anything but the woman he had to find.

“I’ll send Gray to get you.”

Their younger brother must still be on military leave after the wedding.

“I’m walking down now. He’ll find me.”

“I’ll call the hospitals. See if anyone brought Aspen in.”

“Carson, the guy who has her...she knew him. She said his fucking name!”

“Holy fuck.” His voice cracked. “You think someone followed you up there? What’s the name?”

“I can’t remember it. I just know she called out the name and said, ‘What are you doing here?’ Call the hospitals. Get Gray here.” His words sounded like a plea to his own ears.

“Consider it done. Colt, you’re not alone. You don’t have to do this alone. You never did.”

He pinched the bridge of his nose, fighting back the sting of emotion. “I gotta go.”

“I’ll let you know about the hospitals as soon as I hear.”

“Thanks, bro.” Before he lost his shit, he ended the call and pocketed the phone for safekeeping.

Focusing on the road that angled at a steady path down the mountain, he studied the tracks. Only the one set of tracks led down, and he could see a slightly overlapping set of tracks where the driver had driven up the mountain.

Who the fuck was this guy?

He mentally calculated the time it would take Gray to reach him. The Underwood cabin where he'd taken Aspen—and was now mere rubble buried under the snow—was on the other side of Willowbrook from the Black Heart Ranch. Half an hour, tops.

He walked faster, ignoring the dull pain in his knee. It was nothing compared to the pang he felt in his heart with every second that passed without Aspen.

He grew so desensitized to the road lined by trees and the endless tracks that carried Aspen away from him, that he didn't acknowledge the vehicle speeding toward him until the driver braked.

The door opened, and a buzzed head popped out. "Jesus, Colt. You look fucking shellshocked. You okay?"

"Yes." He didn't want to talk about how he looked right now. Nothing mattered except Aspen.

He bolted to the passenger door and leaped in. Gray performed a multiple-point turn on the narrow pass to head back the direction he'd come from.

"No word from Carson on the hospitals?" he asked as soon as they got turned around.

Gray shot him a look. "All quiet."

"I'll text him now."

Silence prevailed as he sent a message to his brother. Immediately, Carson sent one back.

Nothing.

Colt stared down at that word, trying to make sense of what it meant.

“She’s not at the hospitals. Take me to the airport.”

Darkness fell earlier at this time of year, and with it came a thick fog. The headlights glared off the white world, making all the trees and shapes popping up seem more jagged and nefarious.

He fisted his hand on his knee and tried not to bellow at Gray for their slow pace, knowing one wrong move in this fog could pitch them off the steep mountainside to their deaths. Long, tense moments passed.

“What’s at the airport, Colt? Talk to me. I can’t read minds.”

“It’s the only place I know to check. Aspen has a private jet that’s under repair.”

“Call ahead and check the status.”

They neared the end of the road that ran east and west. “Wait!” He leaned forward, staring at the tracks from the vehicle that passed before them. “He turned toward the airport. Go!”

Reaching the end of the road, Gray shot onto the road. The SUV’s tires squealed as they hit dry road, and the vehicle picked up speed.

“What the hell happened up there, Colt?” Gray wasn’t going to stop pressing him for answers until he provided them.

Again, he replayed the moments in his head. “I heard a weird noise and I felt the ground rumbling. I knew an avalanche was coming. We just got out of the cabin before it got wiped off the mountain, along with my truck. Aspen’s hand was ripped

out of mine.” He flexed his hand and gulped against the thick lump lodged in his throat.

“You didn’t see who took her?”

His knuckles popped as he tightened his fist. “By the time I got out, she was gone. I followed footprints to the road. I could see that someone must have carried her out and put her in a vehicle.”

“Fuck. Who could it be, Colt? Any ideas? Does she have any bad breakups in her past? Pissed-off exes?”

“Not that she told me. She’s single. She’s dedicated to building her business and she had some health problems.”

“What kind of problems?”

“Cancer. She’s in remission.”

“Jesus.”

The airport loomed into sight.

“The runway’s lit.”

Gray threw him a look and stomped the gas pedal to the floor. When they screeched to a halt in front of the hangar, both of them jumped out and sprinted to the building. He threw a wild look around at the empty bay where Aspen’s plane had been days before.

He ran into the office, a cold, sparse place at the front of the building. Two

employees were there, kicked back, foam cups of coffee on the desk between them.

At his entrance, they looked up.

“Malone.” He looked past Colt. “And Malone. What’s going on?”

“Aspen Grace’s jet. Where is it?”

“It took off about thirty minutes ago.”

Dread swept him like an icy tide. “Where did she go? Who was with her?”

The men exchanged a look. One of them stood. “Let me get the flight plan.” He walked out and a minute later returned carrying a sheet of paper.

Colt ripped it out of his hand and stared at the location. “Montana.” With a sinking feeling, he realized it was the same private airfield that he and Aspen flew from when they took the trip to Lake Tahoe.

Gray leveled the employees in his stare. “Ready our jet.”

“I’ll call the pilot on standby—”

“No time,” Gray interrupted. “I’ll fly it.”

Colt jerked his head to look at his brother.

“What? I’m a Navy pilot. I didn’t go into that profession for nothing.”

“I thought you went into that profession so you didn’t have to get your hands dirty.”

Gray's mouth twitched at the corner. "That's the Colt I know." He nodded at the employees. "Get that plane ready. We're leaving immediately."

In a much shorter time than he could have guessed, they were seated in the cockpit with Gray at the controls.

He flipped switches and set the flight path while Colt sat next to him, reeling at what they were about to do.

Gray threw him a glance. "You look like you're about to have a stroke, Colt."

He was silent.

"You always did get scary when you got quiet. Look, bro. Trust me. I can get us there safe."

He stared out the big windshield at the lit runway. "Gideon!"

"Who the hell is Gideon?" Gray got the bird rolling, taxiing down the runway.

He whipped out his phone and started pulling up searches. He was so fixated on the screen that he didn't notice they were in the air until they hit altitude.

He swung his head to stare at his brother, looking calm as hell while piloting the family jet. Later, Colt would give him the pat on the back he deserved.

"I found something. Aspen had a friend who went through chemo with her. They finished their treatments and went on a big world tour, traveling everywhere. Then the woman died...and according to public records, left Aspen her money. But look." He held up his phone for Gray to see the photo he'd found.

A nice-looking older woman dressed up at a philanthropic event, with a younger man next to her. Both of them were smiling.

“Is that your guy?”

“His name is Gideon Page. He’s the nephew of Aspen’s friend who died. I know what this is about, Gray.”

“What’s that?”

“Money. He didn’t inherit.”

“Aspen did.”

“What connects the nephew to this area? Does he live here?” Gray stared at the horizon.

“No.” Colt’s heart pulsed faster. “He only came for Aspen. He knew her plans. He must have accessed her travel itinerary. He knew she was going to locations in Montana. The airfield they’re flying into is close to a cabin that we never visited.”

“He must have access to her phone.” The lights of the dash shot shadows over Gray’s face.

“There’s no way he could know we were at the Underwoods, except...fuck! I shared the location to her phone.”

“This cabin in Montana she was supposed to visit. You think that’s where they could be going?”

“Damn good chance.”

“And you have the address?”

“It’s in my GPS. I was looking out for her. She was visiting the worst places.”

Their gazes locked.

“Gray. How fast can you make this bird fly?”

* * * * *

Aspen sat in the corner of the cramped, dingy cabin, her wrists raw from the ropes binding her hands in front of her. Her spine ached from sitting on the floor so stiffly. Fear and anger made her muscles quiver.

In the middle of the room, a single bare lightbulb sent a greenish glare over the space.

“Ambient lighting, my ass,” she muttered.

Occasionally, the bulb would flicker, causing her to worry the filament was about to burn out. She couldn’t think of anything worse than being tied up in the company of her friend’s crazy nephew, other than being tied up in the company of her friend’s crazy nephew in the pitch darkness.

Goose bumps rippled up and down her arms. This cabin made the first cabin she and Colt visited look like a five-star establishment.

Gideon perched on the only chair in the room, facing her, a smug smile on his ugly face.

“You think you’re so damn clever, don’t you?” she taunted, voice hoarse but defiant. She hadn’t stopped talking since she regained consciousness on that plane. Several

times, he'd ordered her to shut up or threatened to knock her out again, but she didn't have anything to lose and kept up a constant volley of harassment.

At first, she pleaded with him to let her go. He ignored it. She promised him money as soon as they landed. He waved that off.

Then she begged him to tell her what happened to Colt. He only smirked at her and shrugged, saying he was probably dead. He'd seen the cabin fall and the truck get swallowed up by the snow.

At that point, Aspen had succumbed to noisy tears, which seemed to anger Gideon more than talking had. But she eventually dried her face on her sleeve and did what her momma would have told her to do.

She straightened her shoulders and fought back.

"If it's not about the money, then why are you holding me here? Why come after me at all?" she shot at Gideon.

"It's not about the money," he snapped. He stood so fast that the chair skidded across the wooden floor and fell over with a hard crash.

She bit back a cry and lifted her chin a notch higher.

He poked a finger at her face. "It's about pride, you little bitch. You humiliated me. In front of everyone. Do you know what that does to a man?"

She watched fury flash in his eyes, made more horrifying by the green light in the cabin. "You stupid dickhead motherfucking, cock-sucking asshole! How did I humiliate you? You had every opportunity to create a good life for yourself. But you waited around for your aunt to die, thinking that you'd get an inheritance."

By now, she lost all hope of Colt finding her. She'd be damned if she'd go down without kicking, screaming and clawing.

She continued on, pushing her captor to the breaking point. "You had family money of your own, if I remember correctly. Plus a good-paying job as a mechanic. You had connections and resources in your hometown, but you wasted them all, didn't you?"

He started pacing in front of her, bringing the oily stench of sweat every time he circled near. Her nostrils pinched, and her stomach rioted at the smell.

"All you needed was ambition, Gideon."

He whipped around and grabbed her chin in his hard, biting grasp. She stifled a yelp and glared him down.

"You think I don't have ambition, Aspen? I got to you, didn't I? I cloned your phone."

The breath punched from her lungs. So that was how he found her.

"When?"

"When you set your luggage down to board your private jet . Your phone was in your handbag. I knew it would be after I watched all those touching videos you recorded with my aunt. I know everything about you, Aspen."

For the moment, she was struck speechless.

He released her jaw, surely leaving bruises where his fingertips bit into her flesh. Then he whirled around to pace the other direction. He cut a hand through the air. "I disabled your landing gear once we reached Wyoming."

“Wait—once we reached Wyoming? You were on my plane?” Her voice pitched louder. The bulb flickered like in a horror feature.

His face broke into an evil smile. “You don’t keep very good track of who’s around you. You slept on the flight and you didn’t even notice me slipping out because you were in such a hurry to get to that ranch and deliver the honeymoon portfolio.” He made another rotation, his voice mocking.

She stared at him, stunned.

“Once I had your phone cloned, I saw every place you were going. I went to the cabin and took all the wood so you’d freeze. I went to the next cabin and broke the furnace so the place would fill with carbon monoxide.”

She gasped.

“I started an avalanche!” He threw his arms in the air like some demented villain proud of his master plan.

Aspen’s heart hammered, but she refused to look away. If she was going to die, she wasn’t going to cower.

“I remember the lawyer that read the will said that Vivian left you a thousand dollars for therapy. Obviously, you didn’t use the money for therapy.”

He narrowed his eyes on her and reached inside his jacket. “No, but I did use it to buy this gun, and killing you is going to be really therapeutic.”

Her blood ran cold. Even if Colt was never coming for her, she still wanted to live.

Gideon twisted the gun right and left, examining the short barrel and then checking

the chamber for bullets.

As he took a step toward her, a scream built in her throat. Before he could reach her, a loud crash shattered the silence. The cabin door blew inward, splintering on its hinges.

The scream she held inside burst out in a long note just as a big man rushed into the space and tackled Gideon to the floor with a force that sent the gun spinning across the wood floor.

Her breath caught as she recognized the intruder.

“Colt!”

A second man blasted in. It was one of Colt’s brothers she’d seen at the wedding. As Colt scrambled up, his brother cocked his fist and slammed it right into Gideon’s face.

Colt’s strong body pushed close to where she hunkered in the corner. He started to untie the rope around her wrists. When it was apparent that picking the knots free would take too long, he whipped out a knife.

“Hold still,” he grunted.

Tears of relief threatened at the back of her eyes, but she bit down on her lip to remain silent as he cut her free.

He yanked her off the floor and into his arms.

In the middle of the cabin, Gideon and Colt’s brother were engaged in an all-out brawl. Gideon was no weakling, and he delivered several blows that made Aspen cry

out in concern for Colt's brother.

With her locked in his arms, Colt ran outside. A vehicle sat waiting in front of the cabin. He threw her into the front seat and barked out, "Lock the doors!"

"Colt, wait! Don't go back there!"

His dark gray eyes blazed. "Lock the doors, Aspen. I'll be back."

He took off into the darkness, heading back into the cabin with the crazy man who had a gun.

With shaking hands, she hit the locks. She wasn't safe yet, but for the first time since this nightmare began, she saw a flicker of hope.

Colt was here. He was alive.

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Colt's long legs ate up the ground to the front of the cabin. He burst in to see Gray scrambling to his feet. His knees dipped, and he staggered. Then he stood swaying.

Blood dripped from his nose at a steady pace. He raised a forearm and swiped the blood away on his coat sleeve.

"Son of a bitch got away." His brother spat a glob of blood on the floor.

"He ran out?"

Gray gave him a grave nod. "I'm sorry, man. He got a bonus punch in that made me see stars. By the time I could see straight, he was gone." Embarrassment seeped into his voice, thickened by his bloody nose.

Gray took a hasty step toward the door gaping open to the elements. "I'll go after the bastard."

Colt whipped an arm out, barring Gray's path. "It's my fault for leaving. I should have beaten the guy to a bloody pulp and made damn sure he couldn't get up anytime soon."

"You had to get Aspen safe."

Gray took a step and swayed on his feet, his face draining of color. He looked about to collapse like a building wired with explosives.

Colt grabbed his brother by the shoulders and looked into his eyes. His pupils were

blown.

“Fuck. How hard did he hit you?” He’d seen head injuries before, and Gray had one.

“I’m okay.”

“Neither of us is going after that motherfucker tonight. You need medical care, and I’m taking Aspen back to the ranch. Come on.” With his weapon in hand, Colt took Gray by the arm and led him out to the vehicle.

Through the windshield, he met Aspen’s wide-eyed stare. He gestured for her to unlock the SUV, and by the time he reached for the back door handle, she’d hit the locks.

“I got it.” Gray slashed a hand through the air in protest as Colt insisted on aiding him inside.

With another quick scan of the empty cabin yard, Colt jumped behind the wheel and took off into the night.

“Colt! Gideon got away!” Aspen’s raspy tone sent an ache into his chest.

“I know.” His jaw flexed with anger about Gideon’s escape, but he had more important things to concern himself with at the present time. Like getting his brother checked out and Aspen to a place where no one would ever be able to get to her again.

He shot her a look. Fear burned in her eyes, and he reached out to squeeze her arm in reassurance. “Gray’s injured. That fucker hit him hard enough to give him a head injury.”

“Oh no!” She twisted in her seat to look at Gray.

“I’m fine,” Gray muttered.

Colt stepped on the gas. “It could have happened to anybody, brother.”

A humorless laugh burst past Gray’s lips. “All those years you were the quiet brother, the guy who didn’t get involved. Now you’re giving me a pep talk?”

“If we could defeat every villain, the world would be perfect and we wouldn’t have to fight anymore.”

Aspen twined her fingers with his. Her shivers telegraphed into his arm, and he steeled his muscle to absorb them. If he could take on every tremble of her fear, he damn well would. And he’d take on his brother’s injuries as well.

Dammit. He blamed himself for Aspen getting snatched in the first place. He should have gotten her out of the cabin before the avalanche. He shouldn’t have left his brother alone, locked in hand-to-hand combat with a man who had nothing to lose and everything to fight for.

He gently extracted his hand from Aspen’s and pulled out his phone and dialed Willow. As soon as his baby sister answered, he growled out, “Willow, I’m coming in hot with Aspen and Gray. Aspen was kidnapped.”

She gasped.

“Gray has a concussion.”

Gray’s low groan followed. “Dammit, Colt. Why did you have to tell our sister? You know how she fusses.”

“What do you need me to do?” Willow’s voice was calm and cool despite what he’d just told her.

“Get the ranch doc to meet us in...” He glanced at the dashboard clock, checking their ETA. “Two hours. He can check out Gray and then the therapist can talk to Aspen.”

“Two hours? You sure you don’t need to get them to a hospital now?”

“No,” Gray spoke up loud enough for Willow to hear. “I’m fine. If I can’t handle a little concussion, I’m too weak to return to the military.”

Amusement tinged Willow’s tone. “Well, you’re a pilot. Don’t you have the softest hand in the military?”

“That’s the Coast Guard,” Colt spoke up.

“We don’t even count them as military,” Gray ground out. “And no, my hands are not soft. Why are we even having this discussion? You’re not in the military, Willow.”

She issued a low chuckle. “Sounds like you’re going to be okay, Gray. All right, I’ll get things rolling now and have everything in place when you arrive.”

“I’m going to drop you a pin. Get the police out to the location to hunt for a man named Gideon Page. About five-nine. Two hundred pounds. Muscular build. Brown hair, blue eyes. Last seen wearing a black coat.”

“Got it. I’ll have my phone on me, but I’ll be in the barn most of the night. One of the horses is colicky.”

For all her rough, sassy and tomboyish ways, his little sister possessed a tender streak

when it came to all animals. She was the Malone sibling who dragged home stray kittens, and they all tried to hide them away from their father, knowing he would get rid of any animal he deemed useless. Unless it was a horse or cow that could bring in a dollar, their father didn't see animals as having any purpose.

"I hope your horse is all right, Willow."

"I have Dutch with me. Between the two of us, we've got it covered."

"Dutch is good." The veteran had been in the program a little over a year now, and after spending all that time totally mute, he was beginning to have breakthroughs. "Call the vet if you need to."

"Oh, I will," she breezed out as if that should be obvious. And it was—no one would stop Willow once she set her mind to something.

Colt scrubbed a finger under his nose as emotion struck. "Willow?"

"Yes?"

"I'm damn glad to have you in my corner."

For a moment, his sister was rendered speechless. Silence throbbed in the vehicle.

"Are you sure you don't have a concussion too, Colt?"

His rough laugh burst out, and Gray issued a hiss of mirth from the back.

He ended the call and set his phone in the cup holder, reaching for Aspen's hand once again.

She clasped his hand, and he noted that she wasn't trembling as much as she had been minutes before.

"Two hours," he told her and his brother. "Hang in there, okay?"

"If you were a pilot, Colt, you could fly the jet and get us there faster."

He snorted at his brother's jab.

"Both of you are amazing." Aspen's words came out softly. "Your entire family is beyond capable. I feel so safe with all of you."

Colt sent her a look, hoping that he was still good at masking his feelings, but the more time he spent with Aspen, the softer he felt himself growing.

He couldn't let her see a single trace of sadness on his face. Later, once he had her safe behind locked doors, he would break the news to her—that she wasn't safe.

Until Gideon was captured...or killed...Aspen wasn't safe.

* * * * *

The thick woolen blanket that Colt wrapped around Aspen's shoulders slipped down her arms, and she drew it more snugly around her. She curled into the warmth, but she didn't seem to gain much from the blanket.

Could this day get any longer? It seemed like a week ago that they'd arrived at the Wyoming cabin. How carefree she'd been, eager to explore the space as a prospective destination for her clients.

And it seemed like ages ago that she and Colt had browsed through the shops in

search of specialty items for a welcome basket.

They'd almost died. They could have died.

The terror of surviving an avalanche felt fresh in her veins.

The leap in her chest at being rescued felt like it just happened minutes ago, when really hours and hours had passed.

Looking up through the hole in the snow only to see Gideon's face made her stomach bottom out all over again.

Unexpectedly, a huge yawn cut short the rest of her memories of the day. It was too many emotions for one person to feel in a year, let alone in twenty-four hours.

Colt hadn't left her alone since they arrived at the ranch, hardly venturing more than a few steps away.

Right now he hovered close, on the phone with his oldest brother. When she yawned and huddled deeper into the blanket, he stopped talking to give her his complete attention. Deep gray eyes studied her with shocking intensity.

"Copy that," he said to the caller. "For the time being, we're here. I'll see you in a little while."

He swiped his thumb over the screen to end the call and set aside his phone on the rustic wood coffee table. It looked old, scarred from so much use. Aspen imagined the furniture had been in the Malone family for years and years, given how beat up it was. In contrast to the updated leather furniture in the space, it added a lot of interest.

When Colt dropped onto his knee in front of Aspen, she blinked at him in surprise.

Just being so close to her savior created a new wakefulness in her mind.

He cupped her cheek in one broad hand. “You’re tired.”

“I’m okay. I know your brothers want to talk to me about what happened.”

He studied her for a long beat, gaze roaming over her face as though he was trying to puzzle out whether she was really capable of talking, though she’d already spoken briefly to the ranch therapist at his insistence. The ordeal hadn’t been nearly as painful as she thought it would be. The woman named Bella had asked only a few questions about her mental state before promising that they’d speak more the next day. Then the ranch’s medical doctor cleared her as well.

“Is there coffee? I could use some.”

“Coffee I can do.” He pushed to his feet in a smooth, graceful move, reminding her of an elite athlete.

She watched his broad back disappear through the living room doorway. God, she really was exhausted after all that happened. The comfortable cushions underneath her made her aware of all the aches and pains she’d suffered during her ordeal.

The back of her head, where Gideon had struck her to knock her out, pounded in time to her heartbeat. Her eyes slid shut.

The scuff of a boot on the floor made her eyes fly open. Across the beautiful living room, she met Colt’s stare.

He carried a small tray bearing two mugs. The rich scent of coffee perked her up, and she pushed into a more upright position. The blanket slipped again, and she drew it over her shoulder.

“I can’t seem to get warm.”

With a pinch of concern between his brows, he set the tray down on the coffee table.

“No wonder, after being buried in that snow.”

“You don’t seem to be hypothermic.”

He gave her an appraising look but he didn’t respond to her statement. The expression on his rugged features told her enough—he didn’t want to talk about himself.

She knew that Colt was kicking himself. During the trip to the Black Heart Ranch, the hard line of his jaw suggested that he believed things should have gone much, much differently.

She slipped one hand free of the blanket and reached for him.

He took her fingers in his warm, rough clasp. “God, you are frozen.”

Without asking first, he sat down beside her and drew her into his lap. As he tucked the blanket around her body and shared his heat with her, she let out a contented sigh and snuggled into his embrace.

“Looks like being stuck on the ranch isn’t such a bad thing.”

“Thank god I got you back.”

His statement stunned her. Her lips parted, but no words came out.

For the first time in hours, his eyes crinkled slightly at the corners in something other than strain.

Just then, two more dark-haired, gray-eyed Malones entered the room, dragging her attention away from her lover. Her rescuer.

Colt's siblings stopped in the middle of the room, gazes locked on her nestled in Colt's lap. She started to wiggle off, but he banded an arm around her middle and held her against him.

"You know Gray. And Willow." Colt's brief introduction brought nods from his siblings.

Aspen returned it with as much decorum as a woman could when she was sitting on her lover's lap. Colt didn't want her to move—and honestly, she didn't want to either.

"Carson's ETA is five minutes." Gray swept across the space to one of the big sofas and sank to it without so much as a twitch to convey that he might sport a headache.

Willow was as tall as a model, but the big leather armchair swallowed her up. Aspen didn't know much about her, other than she had been in the wedding party and was friendly to her at the reception.

Colt reached out and hooked a long finger through the handle of the coffee mug. He held it in front of Willow, and she snaked her hands out of the blanket to accept it from him.

Curling her palms around the heated mug brought her comfort. The semblance of normalcy. Even though her world had gone topsy-turvy, there was still coffee. And for Colt, there was family.

She'd been through much, much worse in her life, but she had to admit that she was frightened. Those hours she had been trapped with Gideon, she barely held it together. The only way she hadn't lost her mind was by stuffing down her emotions,

shoving them to the back burner.

Now the Malones were going to drag everything out of her that she could remember. They meant to help her, and for that she was grateful. But she didn't know how well she'd be able to keep it together once she started sharing what happened.

She sipped her coffee, and Colt grabbed his own. He took a big gulp and set the mug back down on the tray without so much as jostling her.

He tipped his jaw toward Gray. "How's the head?"

"As hard as ever," Willow spoke up before Gray could answer.

Gray gave her a flat look Aspen imagined only siblings were capable of giving each other. "Thanks, Willow." He directed his attention to Colt. "Doc says I'll be fine."

"But he has a mild concussion," Willow put in.

Gray widened his eyes at her. "Which is no big deal."

Willow seemed to be enjoying herself. She crossed her amazingly long, slender legs clad in dark brown riding pants and gave him a sassy look. "Probably as a result of the fractured nose."

Gray groaned. "A hairline fracture."

Aspen winced in sympathy. "I'm sorry that happened to you. And I really appreciate you fighting for me."

He returned her look with a short nod, acknowledging her gratitude.

At that moment, a door slammed shut somewhere in the house.

“That’ll be Carson.” Willow turned to look at the door. Seconds later, a third Malone brother appeared in the doorway. As tall and broad as Colt.

He strode into the room, casting off his heavy canvas jacket as he did. He tossed it over the back of the sofa and plopped down next to Gray.

“Your head?”

“Fine.” Gray shot Willow a warning look.

She caught Aspen’s gaze and rolled her eyes as if to say, “Boys.”

Suddenly, Aspen was wide awake and the chill in her skin vanished, leaving her toasty warm in Colt’s arms.

Carson’s attention fell on them, taking in how Colt held her on his lap with absolutely no apology or self-consciousness.

“Let’s get straight to it. I know Colt and Gray’s part of the story. Aspen, maybe you can fill in some gaps for us.”

She hesitated a beat, gathering her thoughts.

Colt’s voice rumbled close to her ear. “My family owns the Black Heart Security agency. We’re trained to handle this.”

She realized he thought she’d paused because she didn’t trust their credentials. With a shake of her head, she said, “Oh, I trust you all. With my very life.” One by one, she met each of their gazes, lastly twisting to look at Colt. “I’ll tell you everything I

know.”

Carson nodded. “Can you tell us what happened following the avalanche, after you were pulled out of the snow?”

“I saw a man hovering over me. I thought it was Colt coming to my rescue, but then I realized I knew this man. It took me a minute to place him. When I said his name, he yanked me out of the snow. I don’t remember much after that. He hit me over the head, and he’s strong from hard labor. He knocked me out.”

Her gaze shifted to Gray. Only a small tightening around his lips told her that he felt the same aftereffect of Gideon’s strength.

“I woke up on the plane— my plane,” she continued. “Gideon is the nephew of my dear friend who passed away. He was furious at the reading of the will because... Well, she left me what was left of her fortune. It was enough money to set me up in business and purchase the jet that helps me shuttle my clients all around the world if they don’t have their own arrangements.”

Everyone listened, and she took another sip of coffee to wet her dry lips.

“Gideon told me that he caused all my recent troubles. He messed with the landing gear of my plane. He stole the wood from the first cabin so we’d freeze. When we went to another cabin, he got there before us and broke the furnace so it would poison us with carbon monoxide.”

“Jesus Christ.” Carson scrubbed a hand over his face.

“Then he confessed that he started that avalanche.”

“The avalanche is the first time he stepped outside of his wheelhouse.” At Willow’s

contemplative statement, everyone looked at her.

“What do you mean?” Colt’s rough tone vibrated through his chest into Aspen’s body.

“Before that, he sabotaged mechanical things. The landing gear, the furnace. For the firewood, he only had to load it up and haul it away. But to create an avalanche, he had to do something much bigger and hope his plan went the way he intended. That disaster he created could have easily killed him too.”

A shudder ran through Aspen. “Gideon has snapped.”

“And got himself caught.” Colt issued a low noise like grinding stone. “Just before the avalanche, I heard an explosion. I thought it was just a tree branch hitting something metal in the area. Once I felt the ground start to shake, I knew what was happening. Now I realize Gideon probably used explosives.”

Aspen was suddenly bone-cold again, unnerved by the prospect of all the things that could have happened to her.

To Colt.

When he felt a quiver run through her, he cleared his throat. “You have enough to start the investigation. We’re going to stay in the guest room tonight.”

Willow’s jaw dropped. Carson and Gray both gave Colt identical looks, eyebrows cocked like that facial feature had been cloned.

Carson’s mouth twitched. “You always sleep in the barn, brother.”

“Not tonight.” Colt shifted forward, gently setting Aspen on her feet. The blanket

started to fall off her shoulders again, but he quickly grabbed it as he stood.

Staring down into her eyes, he draped the wool around her body. “Aspen’s had a long day. I’m taking her to bed.”

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Source Creation Date: July 24, 2025, 1:07 am

An echo of boxing gloves thumping against a punching bag floated through the gym. From several feet away came the metallic clank of weights being racked.

The gym was a great addition to the Black Heart Ranch. It was a place where the veterans in the therapy program could go to stay fit and where they and the Malone brothers could blow off steam.

Colt threw another punch at the bag, a sheen of sweat coating his skin as he threw himself into pummeling something—anything.

He wished to hell it was Gideon Page.

The bastard had kidnapped Aspen. Harmed his brother. Despite them all ribbing Gray for being a soft pilot, Gray was a fucking badass. Only a man who knew how to fight with all the muscle backing him could lay his brother out.

Over and over again, he smashed his gloved fist into the bag, imagining it was Gideon's face.

From the corner of his eye, he saw Carson lying on his back, doing his reps with a heavy amount of weight on the barbell. They didn't need to talk, and Colt appreciated that. Having his brother here to keep him company was exactly the support he sought from any member of his family.

He may not be one for talking out his feelings; they all knew that and didn't expect him to. Just knowing that they loved him and supported him in the way he needed made his heart swell with love and gratitude for his siblings.

Aspen didn't have that. She'd only talked about her mother passing, and her good friend too. As far as Colt knew, she was alone.

Not now. Not anymore.

A bead of salty sweat stung Colt's eye as he threw another jab at the bag. Carson stood from the lifting bench and came to stand behind him.

"You're dropping your right arm."

He swiped his forearm over his forehead. "I'm not here to impress anyone—just hit something."

Throwing five more punches at the bag in quick succession didn't seem to knock down the anger still boiling inside him. He dropped back and pulled off the gloves.

Carson watched him. "I got word this morning that Aspen's pilot flew the plane back to Willowbrook."

Colt met Carson's stare. "Is that wise? Gideon could still be in the area."

"I set a guard on the hangar. Nothing will happen to her plane. Our pilots are en route to fly our jet back too."

He walked over to the mini fridge and grabbed two bottles of water. He tossed one to Carson, who caught it neatly out of the air.

"I also got word from Underwood about his cabin."

Colt paused in twisting off the cap of his bottle. "He knows about the avalanche?"

Carson nodded. "He heard the avalanche and went up to check his property."

"Christ, there's nothing left of it."

"I know. There's more, Colt."

He leveled his brother in a look. "I don't like the sound of that."

"When he got there, he took a brief look around. Someone jumped out at him."

Colt's muscles hardened again with the urge to batter. Harm.

"Underwood was assaulted and robbed. His vehicle was stolen."

"And you're just now telling me this? We both know Gideon's on his way here. To the ranch, coming for Aspen!" Colt took off toward the door leading outside. He had to get to the house. He'd left Aspen sleeping, and although the ranch was sealed up like Fort Knox, this man was unhinged. Colt had to be on guard.

Carson stepped in front of him, stopping him in his tracks before he could walk away. "She's safe in the house. I've got Dutch watching the place."

Colt sliced his fingers through his damp hair. "This son of a bitch cares more about hurting Aspen than getting caught. It's not about the money."

"No."

"He's too cocky. That makes him dangerous."

"It also makes him susceptible to making mistakes. We're going to get him, Colt."

“I can’t just sit here waiting. I have to do something.”

“I know the feeling.” Carson’s dark gray eyes blazed with fury, gone as quick as it had come. He’d almost lost Layne to her stalker.

The realization crashed over Colt like a wave. He cared about Aspen—a hell of a lot.

“If anything happens to her...” The word stuck in his throat, a searing coal.

Carson gripped his shoulder hard. “We’re not going to let that happen. Black Heart Security wouldn’t have gotten to where we are if we weren’t the goddamn best.”

He filled his lungs with air and held the breath until his nervous system realized he wasn’t being hunted by an enemy.

But Aspen was. She wouldn’t be safe until Gideon was behind bars...or in a shallow grave.

“I waited to tell you because you needed to work some of this anger out of your system, Colt. It’s the only way for you to clear your mind, and you have to think straight if we’re going to get this guy. If you’re going to keep Aspen safe.”

Now he understood, and his brother was right.

“We need a plan of attack,” Colt ground out.

“Today.” Carson gave a hard nod of agreement.

As Colt turned to the exit and quickly crossed the short span of yard leading to the ranch house, he swung his head right and left, on high alert. He wished to hell he had his sniper rifle at the ready and that Gideon would step out and show himself.

When he entered the house, he strode directly to the guest room. He needed to see Aspen with his own eyes. He was her protector.

He was also her lover, and he had to make sure she was okay.

They had planning to do. He and his brothers needed to prepare for the worst.

* * * * *

Aspen quietly padded through the spacious ranch home. The early hour meant the place that was usually bustling with multiple siblings was still. The golden morning light streamed through east-facing windows and puddled on the dark hardwood floor.

She wasn't exactly sure where she was going, only who she was searching for.

Colt's brother, Gray. Ever since Colt slipped out of bed before dawn, she had been lying awake, worrying about Gray's injuries. If not for her, he wouldn't have been hurt, and she hated thinking that she was the cause of his suffering.

A long corridor with several doors on each side led to the main rooms of the home. Typically, hallways were just quick pathways to reach the place you wanted to go, but whoever decorated this one—probably Willow—had added family photographs interspersed with artwork that made Aspen stop to study them.

She stopped in front of a group photograph of all seven Malone children sitting on the front porch of a house she didn't recognize. They looked like any kids—like they'd been riding bikes all day and slurping down cups of Kool-Aid. She leaned in close, trying to pick out Colt in the bunch.

She smiled when she spotted his red drink mustache and some red drops on his faded gray T-shirt. From what he told her about his father, the Malones didn't have it easy.

But they had each other.

She had to make sure Gray was okay so he could spend many more moments with his family just like these captured in the photos.

She continued on to the bedroom she'd seen him slip into the previous night. When she reached it, the door was cracked open wide enough to give her a view of his bed. Neatly made with the covers tucked beneath the mattress, tight enough to bounce a quarter off, it looked pristine.

Pausing, she listened hard for sounds coming from inside, but she didn't hear any.

She moved on down the hallway, past a pretty collection of art featuring wildflowers done in pastel watercolors, and a funny photograph of an old horse that someone had stuck a straw hat on.

As she neared the end of the hallway, she caught the soft clink of a coffeepot being set down.

When she stepped into the kitchen, Gray looked up from the coffee he seemed to be scowling into. Seeing her, he made an attempt to rearrange his features into something more pleasant.

"You don't have to pretend your head's not aching. I can see it does." Aspen crossed the kitchen to him. As soon as she saw the bruise across the bridge of his nose and extending beneath each of his eyes, sadness washed over her.

"Gray...I'm so sorry."

He searched her face. "Why are you sorry? You didn't do anything."

“If not for me, you wouldn’t have been put in a position to be injured.”

He shrugged, the bulk of his shoulders heaving in an almost exact mimicry of how Colt shrugged. “It’s part of the job.”

“Doesn’t sound like you’re part of the security agency.” She reached for a mug on the shelf and flipped it over to pour dark coffee into.

“I’m not, but I’m a Malone. We have each other’s backs.”

Relief that he was feeling well enough to talk, and not slurring his words or anything that would show his head injury was more serious than they were letting her believe, filled her. She tipped her head toward the kitchen table in silent question.

He nodded and carried his mug over. She followed, and they sat down together.

“You two are up early.” The soft voice coming from the doorway made Aspen and Gray look up at the person joining them.

Willow wasn’t only dressed for the day but already dusty from what Aspen guessed were barn chores. Her dark hair was piled up in a messy bun, and several wisps floated around her striking face.

Aspen considered herself to be a confident woman. After all, she had to be when dealing with billionaires and their families. But Willow was so sensationally beautiful and at the same time nonchalant about her appearance that Aspen felt a little shy around her.

“Here I was rushing around to get the horses fed so I could start the coffee early. I planned to bring Gray a mug in bed, where you should still be, I might add.” She threw him a dirty look as she poured a giant mug full of coffee.

She set the coffee on the table and took the seat across from Aspen.

“I wanted to check on Gray too. Make sure he didn’t need anything. You know, since it’s my fault he’s hurt.”

Gray stopped short of groaning. “Both of you can quit fussin’. I’m fine.”

Willow’s stare roamed over his bruised face. “Looks really fine.”

“Looks worse than it feels. You should know—you’ve been kicked by your horses enough.”

She let out a soft moan of appreciation as she sipped from her mug. “Mm. Who made the coffee? Aspen?”

“No, Gray beat me to it. It seems like I can’t get ahead of any of you Malones.”

“What do you mean?” Curiosity sparked in Willow’s eyes.

“Um...” She probably shouldn’t have spoken so hastily. Now there was no way of getting out of saying it outright. “You decorated Colt’s place at Lake Tahoe.”

As soon as the words were out, she bit down on her lip hard. “I mean... That sounded...”

“Like you wish you could have been the woman who decorated Colt’s cabin?” Willow didn’t bother hiding her smile. “I gotta say I’m surprised he took you to Tahoe. That’s his fortress. The place he went to get his life together after getting out of the military.”

“Willow’s the only family member to ever set foot in that cabin. You should feel

special,” Gray added. He pushed his chair away from the table and stood, mug in hand. “I’d love to stick around, but you know me and sappy conversations.”

Willow laughed at him as he walked out of the kitchen. Now that she was alone with Colt’s sister, Aspen felt she should at least attempt to conceal what she’d laid awake half the night thinking about.

She was feeling things for Colt.

She was falling for him.

Lying in bed beside him, wreathed in his strong arms and inhaling his spicy, masculine scent had been the best way to fall asleep. When she woke to him slipping out of the room in the wee hours of morning, she missed him with a physical ache even though she knew he wasn’t far away.

In mere days, they’d been through so much. Lived an entire lifetime together, between the wedding and the road trips, jet-setting across the country and then Colt finding her tied up in that cabin.

She shook her head and took a sip of coffee to settle the events scattered across her mind like wadded-up notes tossed at a wastebasket. None of the events had hit the mark of what Aspen set out to do on this trip to Wyoming. But something else happened...to her heart.

Willow was staring at her. Judging from that expression on her face, she shared a trait with Colt—the ability to read people’s shifts in mood.

“I’m really glad that Colt found you.” Willow tucked a thick lock of hair behind her ear.

She almost choked on her coffee trying to swallow it too fast. “What do you mean?”

“We never thought he would come back to us. We’d have to hold a gun to his head to get him to sleep in the house. But you did it, Aspen.”

Her heart squeezed in her chest. She hadn’t realized how worried Colt’s family was about him and his choices. Or what her being here might look like to his family. What it might mean.

She set her mug down and eyed Willow. “I’m glad that Colt felt comfortable last night.” She didn’t know what to say even if she finally understood what she felt for Colt.

What she needed right now was a nice change of topic.

“You did all the decorating in the ranch house as well as at Colt’s cabin?”

Willow nodded. “I didn’t wait for an invite from Colt—I go where I’m needed. Right now, they’re all going to need a big rancher’s breakfast. Do you want to help me?”

She smiled. “Sure. But I know very little about fixing food for a crowd. I live alone and I eat a lot of takeout.”

Willow pushed away from the table and walked over to the refrigerator. Aspen followed, watching her pull out eggs and some meat wrapped in thick white butcher paper.

Over her shoulder, Willow shot her a look. “Grab the big cast iron pan and get it hot for the ham slices.”

“Okay.” Aspen wasn’t the most skilled in the kitchen, but she’d taken a few classes in

her time.

As she located the skillet and hefted the heavy object onto the burner, she cast around for more topics of conversation to share with Willow. She asked about the horses and if this was their childhood home.

To her surprise, she learned they'd grown up in Texas but after their father passed away, the siblings couldn't leave the old homestead fast enough. They'd settled in their second home here in the mountains.

Their talk was nice and provided more insight into who Colt, Willow and the other Malones were. But in the end, she and Willow bonded over fixing the rancher breakfast of fried eggs, slices of ham and stacks of pancakes.

"It must be so nice having your brothers around." Aspen looked at the spread of platters.

Willow bobbed her head. "It's nice but a pain in the ass too. Not one man I date passes their inspection."

"I can imagine that they'd be protective."

"You don't have siblings?"

"No. Only child. Dad took off when I was young, and my mom passed away."

"I'm really sorry to hear that, Aspen." She gave her a sympathetic look that, to Aspen's surprise, did not make her want to burst into tears. Instead, it felt like a sisterly hug, even though they didn't touch.

"I appreciate it, Willow."

“Our mom has been gone for so many years that I hardly remember her. How did you lose yours?” Willow asked.

“Cancer.”

She made a low noise of sadness and shook her head in sympathy. “That must have been so difficult.”

She eyed Willow. She rarely discussed her own health issues at the time, but she found the words perched on her lips.

“It was harder because I was fighting cancer at the same time.”

Willow whirled, eyes wide. She gasped. “Oh my god. How scary, Aspen.”

“Breast cancer.”

Willow’s gaze dropped to her breasts. For once, she didn’t feel self-conscious about how they looked. She realized that since Colt saw her as a survivor, she felt that burn of pride for all she’d managed to overcome.

“Wow. I mean, you look great!”

She let out a small laugh that eased her into a more comfortable zone with Willow. “I appreciate that.”

Willow stepped between the range and the counter, stacking more pancakes on the platter while Aspen made herself as useful as possible locating maple syrup.

“I’m sure your brothers are glad to have you working so closely with them.”

“I only dabble in the security agency as I’m needed. Oaks started the veteran therapy program after losing a good friend. It’s his brainchild and baby. I guess I do more for the veterans than I even do around the ranch.”

“What do you do to help the vets?”

“I always loved horses, and it made sense to use them to help others too.”

“So you’re in horse therapy.”

“Not officially, but yeah, you could say that. It’s amazing how some of the guys who come here have never even been around a horse, but it becomes a way of life they adopt. Not all people respond to the animals the same way. They each require different ways of healing. Like Colt.” She carried the platter of pancakes to the table and set it down. “I never could guess what would help Colt heal.” Willow turned to Aspen, a soft, knowing smile on her face. “But he seems to have found it.”

“Who found what?” At the deep timbre of Colt’s voice, Aspen whirled around to see him striding into the kitchen.

Her heart jogged in her chest. Damn, he looked sexy as sin in workout shorts and a Black Heart Ranch T-shirt. His muscles were even more pumped than usual, and veins snaked down his forearms.

His stare lit on her. In steady strides, he crossed the kitchen to reach her. Each step he took, her heart picked up an extra beat. When he wrapped his hands around her upper arms, tingles scattered throughout her body.

All at once, she understood what Willow saw happening between them.

She gazed up into his eyes. Just like that, she promptly fell totally...completely...in

love with him.

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Source Creation Date: July 24, 2025, 1:07 am

The mouthwatering scent of fried ham had Colt's stomach knotting with hunger, but Aspen's sweet, plump pout made a body part much lower clench with a different hunger.

He stared down into her green eyes, dark, vivid pools that he could get lost in far too easily. Like now.

A soft smile tilted her lips, and her eyes softened even more.

"I can see I'm just in time."

"For breakfast? Yes."

"No." His smile stretched. "To save you from my sister."

"Jerk." Willow delivered a punch to his shoulder as she flounced over to the table and took her usual seat. But he caught her sly smile before he turned his attention back to Aspen.

"What were you two ladies talking about?" With a hand on Aspen's elbow, he guided her to the table.

"Feelings." Willow speared a pancake and dropped it onto her plate.

"Ew. Sounds like it was about to get messy in here."

Aspen's smile lit up her eyes. So did another glint that he hadn't seen in them before.

They all tucked into their breakfasts, and a minute later, Carson entered with Layne.

“Hey, save some for us.” He’d grabbed a quick shower and had a towel slung around his neck. Layne was as beautiful as always in her fresh, sophisticated way. Her blonde hair was sleek and shiny, hanging down her back in smooth waves.

Colt couldn’t help but note that while both Layne and Aspen carried themselves with a queenly grace, Aspen was the opposite of Layne in appearance. Dark curls tousled around her beautiful face, and Aspen was more petite in height.

Both women had built good careers for themselves with thriving businesses. They’d have a lot in common. Willow and Aspen didn’t have those same links but even so, they looked to have hit it off.

“Where’s Gray? He doing okay?” Colt asked the group.

“He’s grumpy, so that means he’s doing just fine.” Willow raised her coffee mug to her lips.

“But he’s feelin’ all right?” Colt asked.

“Yes, he’s okay. Just needs some rest.”

“He’s beating himself up over what happened in the cabin.” Colt and Carson exchanged a look at Willow’s words.

“Sounds like someone else we know.” Carson dug into his ham, his appetite fueled by their workout.

Colt had to admit that he felt very different than he had when he first returned to the Black Heart. He wasn’t the same man. Whether time was a balm to his harried soul or

just being surrounded by nature and around people who cared about him were behind the change, he didn't know. But he was grateful, nonetheless.

After Aspen worked her way through a slice of ham and two eggs, she set her fork down.

"If you're finished, I'd like to show you around." He reached for her dish and stacked it with his own to take to the dishwasher.

"Sounds nice."

On their way out of the kitchen, he saw his family exchange looks and had no doubt that after he and Aspen left, they'd become the topic of conversation. For once, Colt didn't mind. This time, they wouldn't be exchanging concerns about his mental wellbeing between them.

Outside, he swung his head left and right, checking on their surroundings. The ranch was probably the safest place in the state. Between the siblings who were all trained bodyguards as well as trained by the US military, there was little chance of a threat getting past. Add in the veterans on the premises who were still willing and able to fight for what they believed in, and the Black Heart Ranch was a stronghold.

He still wasn't taking any chances with Aspen. As he took her hand and led her down the wide porch steps, he tuned in to the world using his other senses. In the distance, horses nickered in the paddock. The breeze freshened, carrying the scent of mountain snow and the hay that the workers had put out for the horses.

"This way." He led Aspen across the yard to the big barn.

"I love that the barn's painted black. Goes with the name of the ranch."

He cast her a smile as they reached the door and he pushed it open.

The space was like a homecoming. No wonder too—it was where he slept.

Dust swirled in the air. The place was pristinely clean according to Willow's standards, and they all did their best to uphold that.

At the rear of the barn was a staircase leading to the loft. When Aspen tipped her head to look up at the steps, she gave a soft shake of her head. "Is that your room up there?"

"Yeah. I want you to see it."

"I expected one of those ladders going vertically up the wall."

"There was one, but I built the stairs. Easier to navigate, especially in the dark." He waved a hand toward the wood steps, and she began to climb them, giving him an amazing view of her round backside and toned thighs.

His cock twitched, eager to be buried between those thighs all day and all night long.

When they reached the top, she turned in a slow circle. He tried to see the place through her eyes. What must she be learning about his personal sleeping quarters? About his life?

A humble wooden twin bedframe took up one wall. A thick navy-blue quilt and simple sheets neatly covered the mattress that Willow wanted to replace but wasn't too uncomfortable in his opinion. Of course, he'd slept rough in dangerous enemy territory. Compared to that, the loft looked like a king's lodgings.

Beside the bed was an old wooden crate packed with books. On top was a lamp with

a naked lightbulb.

Aspen migrated to the crate and crouched to read the titles. She ran her fingertip along the spines of classics and espionage thrillers.

“Do you read a lot?”

“Every night. Except the week I’ve been with you.”

She twisted to pierce him in her gaze.

Not knowing what to do with himself, he stuffed his hands in the pockets of his shorts. “What do you think?”

She gained her feet and turned to him. “It looks...lonely.”

He filled his lungs with a big breath of hay-scented air. “I don’t know if it fits me anymore.”

She stepped up to him, looping her arms around his neck. The feel of her body brushing against his made him feel like he finally could catch a breath. With a shudder, he pulled her into his arms and buried his face against her neck.

“I thought I lost you.”

She stilled in his hold, probably shocked by his confession that was more of an admission of those feelings he’d joked about being icky back at breakfast.

“I was scared too.” Aspen tilted her beautiful face up to his.

He swooped in and captured her mouth. The soft, seeking kiss they shared felt like

turning a corner, flipping a page in his life and coming up for air all at the same time.

Slanting his mouth over hers, he drank in her sweet sounds and delicious flavor he might be addicted to.

As one, they spun toward the bed. “You deserve more luxury than a twin bed.”

“I only want you, Colt.” Her eyes glowed with desire and...something else. Something he didn’t dare to contemplate in connection with him.

He skittered a hand down her side and clamped onto her hip. “Christ, you’re so sexy. I can’t get enough of you.”

She hooked her calf behind his back and dragged him closer so he settled his weight on top of her. Passion licked at his insides. Need throbbed in his core.

When she rocked her hips into his, he let out a growl.

“Let’s hope no one comes into the barn.”

She issued a soft giggle, but a pink flush flooded her cheeks. “We’ll have to be quiet.”

He cocked a brow at her. “Is that even possible?”

“Let’s try it and see.” She drew him in and kissed him, taking control with long, deliberate passes of her tongue.

Sliding his hand under her top, he glided his fingertips over her silky skin up her ribs. When he cupped one breast, he leaned back to look at her in concern.

“It’s fine. They haven’t felt like a part of me before. You make me feel beautiful and sexy.” She pushed her breast into his hand, and he moaned as he claimed her mouth again.

In a flurry, they stripped off their clothes. Settling her astride him, he dragged the quilt over her bare body to both keep her warm in the cool barn and offer her privacy.

Wrapped in the warm cocoon with her, he slipped his hand between her thighs and found her soaking wet for him.

She moaned out as he ruffled his fingers through her slick folds. Watching her face, he thrust his fingers inside her. Stretching her. Tunneling deep.

Her lips opened on a silent moan, and her eyelids slammed down over her blazing green eyes as he teased her pussy. Her inner walls clenched and released on his fingers, and he set his thumb over her hard clit, applying pressure that made her cry out.

“Colt!”

With his stare locked on her face, he explored her body with his hands, lips and tongue. Her muscles quivered as he drew her closer and closer to the edge.

He hadn’t been with a woman like her in his whole life, and he couldn’t imagine being with another. There was no one like Aspen.

“Come for me, princess. Come on my fingers.” At his quiet urging, she issued a low cry.

He stoppered it with his kiss, thrusting his tongue into her mouth again and again as he fucked her with his fingers and strummed her clit.

Her release struck with a force that bowed her body. She shook apart in his arms...and he lost himself in her bliss.

When she collapsed on top of him, he cradled her against his chest, breathing hard with the effort not to blow.

“I need you inside me!” She sucked on his neck, drawing on his skin with a little stinging bite. Marking him as her own.

A growl rumbled through him. His movements were jerky as he reached under his bed and located a box of condoms he’d never used but had on hand just in case.

“I’ve never brought anyone up here, I swear.”

“Just get it on your big, hard cock. Now!”

With a strangled laugh at her exuberance, he shoved off his shorts and fisted his cock, sliding the rubber down to the base in a swift jack of his fist.

Holding her gaze, he brought the thick head toward her soaking pussy.

They both held their breath as he slid deep in one glide.

His head swam with the mind-bending feel of being inside her. Their mouths crashed together in a blinding kiss that spiraled out of control. Each wild thrust of their hips created music like waves crashing on a shore.

He hadn’t planned on looking for love. He never thought he’d consider living in the big house again, but here he was thinking of how to make that room suit her tastes too. Could Aspen fit into the new future he was starting to envision?

His answer was a swift hell yes.

But she was in business. She loved travel.

Could he fit into her plans?

She was already in Oaks's wedding photos.

A grin stretched over his face.

"Having fun, you gorgeous man?" Aspen cupped his jaw, bringing his mouth back to hers in hungry kisses.

"Damn right I am, beautiful woman." He took her mouth in a long kiss as his release hovered at the edge of his senses. Pressure built at the base of his spine. His cock surged inside her.

"Oh god! Colt!" Her insides gripped at his cock, and suddenly she was coming, her pussy clenching around him, milking him from base to tip.

In a hard pulse, he came. Jets spurted from him as he continued to thrust inside her.

Their kiss slowed. When he drew back and stared into her eyes, he knew what he wanted.

Aspen.

* * * * *

Standing at the back door of the Malones' home, staring out at the striking land of the Black Heart Ranch, Aspen let out a soft sigh.

The wind was picking up. Occasionally, it would howl across the fields. The screen door behind her rattled in its frame, just like her heart rattled in her chest.

Nothing lasted forever. She'd come to this wild land to deliver a honeymoon portfolio to a couple of newlyweds...and then fell in love herself.

She was in touch enough with her emotions to know that the feelings she had for Colt were real. Very real.

The ache settling in her chest felt like it would never go away.

This was the thing she'd been worried about. Nothing was permanent, which was why she took every new opportunity when it cropped up, and chased all her dreams, old and new. Well, she'd chased them right to Colt's door and let him into her heart.

A soft creaking sound from the screen door opening made her throw a look over her shoulder. Though she wasn't surprised to see Colt emerging from the house in search of her, it sent a new pang of pain to her chest.

Without a word, he stepped forward and draped his heavy canvas coat over her shoulders.

"Thank you," she said softly, her words almost snatched by the wind.

He didn't slide his arms around her, just stood at her back, a presence as solid as those mountains in the distance. She only wished it was enough.

"I can't stay here forever, Colt."

Her statement hung between them. She couldn't see his face.

She needed to see his face.

Slowly, she pivoted. His coat slipped on her shoulders, and just as he had with the quilt the previous night, he drew the garment closer around her.

She snuggled into the quilted lining. The collar smelled like spice and man. Like him.

A smell she'd never, ever forget, just like the way the house smelled after her mother baked cookies, or Vivian's expensive French perfume lingering around the woman like a warm cuddle.

Three people she'd loved. Two she'd already lost.

She couldn't lose Colt...but she didn't know how to keep him either.

He didn't respond right away, but his stare roamed over her face, snagging on her eyes for a beat too long. On her lips for longer.

"We can figure this out, Aspen."

"I still need to do business. My client can't come to that cabin in Wyoming now."

"I know. Tahoe's on the table for your client, though."

"At least you don't have to shop for a replacement gift basket."

She loved his attempt to lighten the mood but nothing seemed good about this situation. "I appreciate that. I only have my good name left."

He gave a rough shake of his head. "That's not true. You have—"

He broke off, but she feared what he almost said as much as she feared not hearing it.

Lifting his hand, he tugged at the brim of his tan Stetson. Everything about the hat suited him, including the way he used it to hide from people. Like now.

“I can’t protect you if you leave. I’m not going to let you leave.”

Their gazes locked. The ache in her chest swelled like a rising tide. Tears prickled at the back of her eyes.

“What are you saying?”

He touched her. The rough calluses of his fingers sliding along her cheek shifted a loose curl at her temple and brought a shiver to her, but not from the cold Wyoming wind.

Taking a step closer, he searched her eyes as though he needed to find something—anything—to grasp on to. “If you’re mine, princess...I’ll make damn sure nobody ever hurts you again.”

She sucked in an inaudible gasp.

“We have to get the nephew. We need to make sure he can never touch you again.”

Colt was giving her a future—with him. If she wanted to grab it, and she did, she needed to figure out a way to make sure Gideon was captured quickly.

“Stay here with me—with my family. My brothers and I will come up with a plan to stop Gideon from coming after you. Then...”

She studied his face. “Then?” Her voice was a soft lilt of hope.

He slid his hand from her cheek around to her nape, curling his fingertips into her sensitive flesh. “Then we’ll let what’s between us take its course.”

Tipping her face up to his, she waited for the tender brush of Colt’s lips over hers. She wasn’t disappointed.

Sliding her arms around his neck, she clung to him, arching her body into his tight hold and knowing that for once, this wasn’t a goodbye.

It was the beginning.

Source Creation Date: July 24, 2025, 1:07 am

Beside Colt, Aspen's breath came slow and even. The bed in the guest room was large, but she curled close to him, her bare curves soaking up the heat from his body.

A glance at the closed blinds told him that dawn was near. He should know—he'd spent years of his life watching light fill the sky increment by increment and knew the look by heart.

The window was cracked, admitting the scent of pine and fresh mountain air. In the tangled warmth of the sheets with his lover, everything felt right.

Except she was still a hunted woman.

He eased his weight from the bed. As he slipped away from Aspen, the mattress dipped.

She let out a stuttering sigh in her sleep and drew her knees upward to hold on to the heat where his body had been. For a moment, he stared at her oval face on the pillow and the wayward curl tumbling across her cheek, contemplating getting back into bed with her.

But both of his brothers would be up soon, and they needed to talk.

He took a couple steps away from the bed and located his jeans slung over the footboard. Careful to make no sound, he dressed in discarded clothes from the night before. Barefoot, he crept to the door and slipped out of the bedroom.

The scent of coffee hit his nostrils first. When he reached the kitchen and saw Gray,

he let out a grunt.

With a full mug of coffee halfway to his lips, Gray cocked a brow at him. “For once, I beat you. I thought you started your day when the first bird pops an eye open.”

With a crooked smile, he strode to the coffee bar that Willow took such pride in keeping neat and totally ruined the effect by searching for his favorite black mug. It wasn’t there.

Then he saw it in Gray’s grip.

He leveled his brother in his stare but Gray wasn’t giving up that mug. Colt pushed out a sigh. A lot of things were changing for him. Letting go of a fight over something as trivial as a favorite mug seemed like a good first step toward growth.

He pushed the dainty girly mugs Willow preferred out of the way and plucked a different mug off the shelf. After filling it with coffee, he leaned on the bar and eyed Gray.

“When is your leave up?”

“Three days.”

“You feelin’ up to returning to duty with your head injury?”

He scoffed at Colt’s mention of the injury. “Never been better.”

“Still look like hell.”

The bruise around his nose and extending to his eye sockets wasn’t as dark as it had been the previous day, but it was still ugly.

Colt was getting a heavier feeling from his brother, though.

“How much longer you got in the service, man?”

“I’m close to the end of my contract.”

“Going to re-sign?”

He scrubbed a blunt finger over his jaw, creating a scratchy noise on his beard stubble. “Been thinking you guys need me here. After what happened to Layne, and Carson almost losing his damn mind thinking he’d lost her...then Oaks getting in deep shit to save Shiloh...” He waved a hand. “And now you.”

Colt didn’t know whether to grunt in irritation or laugh at being lumped in with his brothers and their significant others.

“You don’t have to pull a hero act to rescue us from the shit we fell into. You know that, right? If being in the military still makes you happy, then you should sign for another tour.”

He lowered his mug from his mouth. “That’s just it—I’m not sure it does anymore.”

He bobbed his head. “It gets to that point for some of us. Carson pushed on for so long, I figured he’d end up a lifer. Oaks lost his friend and that brought him home. The rest of us are bound to fall at some point.”

“Even Denver? He’s fucking black ops.”

He shrugged. “Not sure what path he’ll take, but we’re not talking about Denver. What do you want, bro?”

He never got to respond because at that moment, their discussion was cut short by Carson entering the kitchen. He was dressed for a day in the office in jeans and a dark gray Black Heart Security T-shirt.

He locked his gaze on Colt and Gray and then twitched his head. “Meet me in my office.” He pushed past them to get at the coffee, pouring the rest of the pot into a huge mug.

Once they were all crammed in Carson’s small personal office that he preferred over the larger spaces in the house, Colt took immediate control.

“I don’t know what you have planned for this meeting, but I have something to discuss. It’s about Aspen.”

Both of his brothers remained silent, waiting to hear what he had to say.

“That bastard is still on the loose, and most likely in the area. We need to fortify the ranch, make damn sure the guy can’t slip past us and get to her.”

“You really think he’s going to come onto the ranch to get at Aspen?” Carson settled back in his big desk chair while Gray and Colt took over the leather sofa.

Gray cradled his mug. “I think the man is unhinged, but he’s never going to attack the ranch.”

“Maybe you’re both right, but the best action is preemptive. We need to be on guard.”

Carson nodded. “I’ll add more patrols around the property.”

“I can set up some more cameras,” Gray added.

Colt ducked his head in a nod. “Good. That’s one order of business on my list. I have something else to discuss with you.”

He had his brothers’ attention and went on.

“The way to Gideon is through Aspen. We need a trap. We need to make him think she’s been left alone. When he comes after her, we take him down.”

A feminine voice filled the beat of silence that followed his statement. “Solid plan, Colt. Only problem is that Gideon isn’t going to let down his guard here in Wyoming.”

All three of them whipped toward the open doorway. Aspen stood there, dressed in loose pants and top and wrapped in a thick sweater, the dark chocolate color of her hair. As she swept into the room, Colt gained his feet, reaching out a hand to guide her to the sofa next to him.

She shook her head and stood in the middle of the small office, looking at each one of them in turn. “We have to go to California. That’s where Gideon is going to feel in control. Then I can lure him in.”

She could lure him in?

“No fucking way.”

She tilted her head in challenge. “It’s the only way this is going to happen fast. Otherwise, it could drag on for years. Gideon can go into hiding and I’m sure he knows all the good places to evade capture.”

“We’re not putting a target on your back, Aspen.” His tone was gruff with barely controlled frustration.

When she turned her head and pierced Carson in her stare, Colt knew she and his brother were going to gang up on him. He'd been the little brother his whole life.

"She's got a valid point, Colt."

He cut a hand through the air. "No way. No goddamn way am I letting the woman I—" He stopped and met her gaze before declaring, "I'm not letting you put yourself in danger, Aspen."

She folded her arms. "And you have a better plan? One that's going to end this fast so we can move on with our lives?"

Her words seemed to throb with a hidden meaning.

Their gazes locked. In that moment, Colt knew exactly what she was telling him. And it made her being the one needed to trap Gideon so much worse.

She wanted that future. With him.

* * * * *

Aspen could see how upset Colt was getting by the tension in the crease of his jaw and the way he fisted a hand at his side. She had to admit that deep down, his reactions over keeping her safe left her feeling washed away by a sea of love and passion.

On the other hand, he was going to be stubborn as hell.

Too bad she was more stubborn.

To take the irritation in the room down a notch, she sat on the sofa and patted the

cushion beside her.

Colt dropped to it with such force that she bounced on the seat. She swore she caught a chuckle coming from Gray's end of the sofa, but she didn't give him her attention.

She looked at Carson. "Gideon has lived in California his whole life. He grew up not far from where I did. It's a smaller town in the northern part of the state. His pride took a blow when he didn't inherit. There's a reason for that. He's well-known in that area as a trustworthy mechanic with a good business. Everyone takes their vehicles to him for repairs."

"What you're saying is he is very comfortable on his own stomping ground." Carson picked up a pen and tapped it lightly on the leather desk blotter.

She dipped her head in a nod. "If he hears I'm in town, he's going to be confident that he can get me."

A strangled noise in the depth of Colt's throat drew her attention. She swung her head to look at him.

"Colt," she said softly. "If I didn't know you'd keep me safe, I wouldn't even suggest this plan."

Carson kept a tight rein on the topic. "She's right."

"But we aren't vigilantes, searching for criminals on the lam. We protect people." Colt's words ended on a low growl like he was close to losing it.

"Do you really want to leave it to the cops to make sure your woman is safe?" Gray spoke up.

Aspen met Gray's stare. A beat of knowing pulsed between them. He saw the same thing that Willow had—that Carson probably saw too. She and Colt were involved.

“You know damn well I don't, but I refuse to put Aspen in danger.”

She touched his arm. The tendons and sinew rippled under her touch. “It's the best way, Colt. Can't you see that?”

“Fuck!” He sliced his hand through his mussed hair.

They all waited for Colt to come to the same conclusion that everyone else already had.

He blew out a breath through his nose. “How would we feed the news that you're in town to Gideon?” Though Colt sounded about to gnash nails in between his molars, the fact that he was even entertaining this idea proved that they were halfway there.

She threw him a coy look. “I don't suppose you'd consider throwing a parade in my honor?”

Her joke had the effect she was hoping for. Chuckles echoed around the office, and some tension eased from the group.

Before they could continue the discussion, Carson's phone buzzed on his desk. He didn't reach for it immediately, but the sound made Aspen's jaw drop.

“Oh my god. I've got it!” Her words pushed off her tongue slowly.

The Malone brothers stared at her.

She jumped up, unable to sit still when there was so much chaos going on inside her.

She snatched Carson's phone and held it up. "He would know after confessing that he cloned my phone, the first thing I'd do is wipe it. But this is how I communicate."

Colt blinked as understanding hit. "You let the information slip."

She nodded.

"Post to your social media about how excited you are to be heading to this place, just like you did with your friend."

"Yes!"

"Tell your followers that you're headed to California to do research on a new locale."

She bobbed her head in enthusiasm.

Colt pushed to his feet and reached for her as if he couldn't stand to lose contact with her for more than a few minutes.

Gray cleared his throat, but it sounded like a swallowed laugh to her.

Carson nodded at the plan. "We'll use Colt's Lake Tahoe address to lure him via a potential client meeting. That way we have control on our terms—not the nephew's."

"Since my client needs the vacation property in two weeks, the dates won't overlap. It's perfect." She and Colt locked gazes. Earlier, when Aspen heard him slip out of their shared bed, her mind immediately came awake and started picking apart ways to stop Gideon and keep Colt in her life.

As the guys started volleying ideas back and forth concerning the plan, Willow entered the room, bringing with her the scent of clean, crisp air. Even in worn jeans,

boots and a coat that looked like it belonged to one of her bigger male relations, she looked amazing.

“I can hear you guys all the way in my room on the other side of the house. The sun’s barely up. What’s so important, and why didn’t you think to include me?”

“We’re forming a plan to catch the man who’s after me.” Aspen’s statement brought Willow around to stare at her.

She gave a small shake of her head. “You’re so brave.”

Aspen blinked. She’d heard those words before. When people learned she had cancer, they all muttered similar things. But coming from this strong, amazing woman, Aspen actually believed it.

Her spine straightened, bringing her to her full height. “Thanks, Willow.”

They shared a small smile that had all the feels of a new bond—a sisterhood. Aspen’s chest bloomed warm with affection for Colt’s sister, and for the rest of the Malones.

The talk resumed, and Willow took a seat, legs crossed, to go through her phone. “Oh!”

Her brothers stopped talking to look at her.

“The photographer emailed with Oaks’s wedding photos.” She skimmed through them with a fingertip on the screen. “Wow. These are amazing.”

Oh, great.

Aspen was in all those photos. At the time, it was the last thing she wanted. Now, she

wasn't so sure about where she stood within the Malone family, only that she hoped that the small sprout of emotions between her and Colt would continue to grow into something beautiful.

When she slanted a look his direction, she found him staring at her. A crinkle formed between his brows. Was it there because he didn't know how to respond to there being photographic evidence of her in their family? Or something more?

At the time, he couldn't wait to get rid of her.

His deep gray eyes softened, and the crease between his brows smoothed out.

She didn't remember taking a step toward him until suddenly his big hand engulfed hers in a warm clasp.

He drew her a step closer. When he lowered his lips to her ear, a shiver ran through her. "I'll give my life to keep you safe, princess."

She rested a hand on his sculpted chest, right over his heart. Under her fingers, she felt the soft thump-thump of its beat. "I trust you, Colt. I know I'm in good hands with you."

Source Creation Date: July 24, 2025, 1:07 am

Colt fucking hated this plan. He'd spent two days punching holes in it, only to see how strong it was.

Dammit, what he and his brothers had put together was going to work.

He wished to hell there was any other way to lure that bastard out of his hiding place, but Aspen was right. If they wanted to catch him now, and end this ASAP so they could move on with their lives, he had to put her at risk.

The California sun streamed through the big windows on the front of the restaurant. Around them, the buzz of indie music and the conversations of the hipsters who visited this local spot distracted the hell out of Colt.

He sank into his brooding thoughts of how to place safeguards around Aspen so nobody could touch her. Gideon was too smart and capable, and that made him an even bigger threat. He'd already proved once that he'd stop at nothing to get her.

Colt wished to hell he could make himself the target. But Gideon knew what he and Gray looked like. Neither of them could be the bait.

They sat around the table with plates of sandwiches in front of them.

Aspen had only picked at her sandwich, and Colt gave up trying to eat at all. He had no appetite when everything hung in the balance.

It was high time that he was honest with himself. During their initial planning back in Carson's office, he'd almost slipped and blurted out that he wouldn't let the woman

he loved put a target on her back. Why had he stopped himself?

He knew what he wanted. She was sitting right beside him, close enough to reach out and touch.

Under the table, he settled a hand on her thigh. The warm, firm muscle twitched beneath his fingers. Then her silky fingers tangled with his. Their gazes connected for a moment, and in her eyes, he read what must be in his own.

She felt the same.

“There has to be a better way.” He thumped a fist lightly on the table. “Than to let my little sister...”

He thumped it again, harder this time.

“And my woman ”—he hit the table a third time, with force—“be the bait.”

Aspen let out a small noise, scarcely a puff of breath. A pink flush climbed her cheeks.

Carson pushed away his plate with a few crumbs left there and leaned forward, his voice low and urgent. “We fucking hate it too, bro. But if all goes according to plan—and we have to believe it will—then we will be the ones in control.”

Gray nodded. “In an hour, Aspen will arrive at the lake and drive slow enough for Gideon to see her. If he’s in the vicinity, he’ll follow. Aspen will continue on to the cabin, and Willow will meet her.” He cast a glance at their surroundings, making sure no one could overhear, but the closest diners were toward the front of the restaurant.

Brushing crumbs off her lips, Willow picked up on the thread of the plan. “Gideon

will believe that Aspen is going to the Tahoe house to meet with a client. That client will be me.”

Colt narrowed his eyes at her. “How the hell can you eat knowing what you’re about to do?”

She blinked at him.

He barreled on, “No. Of course you’re calm. What girl with six brothers isn’t chill about danger? Hell, we urged you to jump off the porch roof into stacks of hay. You’re going to trust anything we ask of you.”

Aspen squeezed his hand. “Colt, you’re going to be watching us every minute. You won’t let anything happen to us.”

He hoped to hell they weren’t leading Willow into something much worse than the possibility of breaking her neck in a daredevil jump.

And Aspen...

Christ.

He had to bury all of his fears for this.

He shoved away from the table, the metal chair legs screeched on the floor. “Let’s get this party started.”

Willow raised her hands in the air and pulsed them in a mock dance, which had his brothers chuckling and a smile twisting Aspen’s sweet lips. But Colt was anything but amused.

He'd been in enough battles to know how quickly things could go bad.

As they left the restaurant and piled into the SUV, Colt worked on getting his head in the game. He was good. The fucking best. This son of a bitch wasn't going to best him. He had the skills with a sniper rifle to end Gideon from half a mile away, and if it came to a threat against his sister or the woman he loved, goddammit, he would take the shot.

Everyone in the vehicle was silent as they drove to the next stop. The big car park had two cars planted just for them.

Carson stopped at the end of a row. "Red Mercedes. Third space in." He twisted in his seat to level their baby sister in his stare. "Good luck, Willow."

She tossed them all a smile and climbed out. Through the glass, Colt watched her walk with the long, confident steps of a woman who knew her role, but he couldn't help but think how young she was. A baby compared to the rest of them who had seen war, taken lives to preserve others.

Before she even reached the Mercedes, Carson pulled away and drove to the back of the lot. In the row, Colt picked out the vehicle that Aspen would drive. His muscles hardened one by one.

Aspen turned to him. "This is me."

She started to get out, but he wrapped his fingers around her wrist, keeping her in place.

Swooping in, he kissed her with a hard stamp on the lips. When he pulled back, he stared deep into her eyes. "Be careful, princess."

With a nod, she smoothed her thumb over his bottom lip. Then she jumped out and took off walking with all the confidence that Willow did.

“Fuck, those two are going to kill me,” he muttered.

Carson scrubbed a hand over his face. “I know the feeling.”

Before Colt could catch a glimpse of Aspen again, Carson drove away.

The next steps of their plan continued seamlessly, with them driving to the lake and parking far away from the cabin.

Carson went off to man his position in easy access to the cabin.

Colt grabbed his rifle, prepared to head to the sniper position—the second floor of his own dock. He paused, swinging back to face Gray.

“You’re supposed to be back at base tomorrow.”

“Yeah.” He didn’t sound excited about returning to his aircraft carrier.

Colt stepped up and gripped him by the shoulder. “Have you made a decision, then?”

“I’ve got a few more hours to make up my mind. This fight better live up to its promises and give me the adrenaline rush I need or I’ll be signing on that dotted line.” He sliced a grin at Colt.

He huffed out a chuckle. “For Willow and Aspen’s sake, let’s hope it doesn’t.”

Gray extended a fist, and Colt bumped knuckles with him.

Colt started to turn away.

“Hey, bro,” Gray called out.

He twisted toward him.

“Watch yourself. This guy is unstable.”

“Don’t you have a cloud to go fluff or something?”

Gray flashed a grin. “Cloud fluffing isn’t official pilot protocol.”

He snorted, and they went their separate ways.

When he took up his position, crouched out of sight on the second story of the dock, his heart thundered in sync to the hum of the comms device in his ear. He and his brothers were all linked, but Willow and Aspen were operating in the dark.

He steadied his breaths—the only thing he had control over. Soon Gideon would show up and Black Heart Security would end the threat.

This wasn’t about duty. It was about family. It was about making sure that Aspen could sleep without fear.

It was about protecting the woman who had managed to break through all his walls.

Three hundred yards away, a light snapped on in the cabin.

“It’s go-time,” he murmured. He clenched his fists, laser-focused on what he was about to do.

No hesitation. No mistakes.

They would end this—together. And when it was over, they would return to the ranch.

Then he would make damn sure that Aspen knew where she fit in...

Right beside him.

* * * * *

Aspen's heart rattled around in her chest as she entered the lock code on the door. Pushing it inward and actually entering the space took a strength of will she hadn't felt since the days of battling cancer. Then, she had to force herself to leave her house, to get in the Uber and go to chemotherapy.

She was in no less of a fight for her life now.

With a deep breath, she opened the cabin door and stepped into the cool space. Her boots scraped on the tile of the entryway. Now that she'd been inside the Malones' home, she recognized several similarities between the materials used in both places. Willow's touch was evident.

The hominess of the space hit her immediately. The lingering scent of cedar and pine seemed to have seeped in even though it was closed up.

As per her instructions from the guys, she set out through the house, switching on lights. She flung the patio door wide open to allow the cool fall air to circulate and clear out the smell of a house unoccupied. It also offered a quick entry point for Carson, who was lurking nearby.

Or an escape for her and Willow.

When she entered the living area, she stopped. The normally cozy area would have soothed her under any other circumstances. She envisioned nights in front of a flickering fire in the hearth, wrapped up in Colt's arms.

As she passed by the sofa, she reached out and stroked her fingers along the plaid wool blanket that they'd made love on by the water.

Even though everything looked beautiful and calming, to her, the world was warped and ominous. The walls felt claustrophobic and looming. The rustle of branches outside the big windows made her heart seize. Her pulse spiked.

Did Gideon take the bait?

They had to hope.

She must be crazy to suggest that she put herself in the middle of danger. Gideon proved he would stop at nothing to hurt her...but she was counting on that, wasn't she?

She continued toward the stairs, heart pounding. Each step she took, every creak of the wood beneath her boots, had her gut clenching.

Upstairs, she switched on the lights in the blue bedroom and the green. Then she went to the master bedroom and switched on the overhead chandelier as well as the light in the master bathroom. Then she stood at the big window she admired so much and gazed out at the view.

The lake reflected the gray sky of evening. The water was choppy from the wind, adding to the frightening feel.

Colt, Carson and Gray were out there, watching and waiting. They were wired, connected with earpieces.

Aspen hated being in the dark.

She glanced at her wristwatch—her mother’s—to check the time. Willow would be here soon.

Pulling her gaze away from the view, she hurried downstairs to wait for her arrival. A rustic clock on the mantel ticked a little too loudly. So did her heart.

A few minutes later, a knock at the door made her jump. She squelched a cry and rushed to answer it.

As soon as she opened it and saw Willow, relief passed between them. They were both on edge, but they had each other.

She slapped a smile on her face. “Welcome! You must be Emma.” Her voice carried just the right amount of forced cheer in case Gideon was close enough to hear.

“So good to meet you at last, Miss Grace.”

Reaching out, she clasped Willow’s hand. “Please, call me Aspen.”

The warm feel of her palm felt like a lifeline. They shared a smile and Aspen moved to close the door. The hair on her nape stood up as she realized Gideon might be watching them right now.

If everything went according to plan, he was.

Willow stepped into the entryway, looking around as if she’d never seen the place

before. “Wow, this is just as lovely as you claimed.”

Their plan was to act their parts. Willow was in the market for a vacation retreat. Aspen was the travel concierge.

She waved a hand at the space. “Shall I show you around?”

“That would be wonderful.” Willow breezed through the rooms like she did this every day instead of working with veterans and horses.

They crossed the living room, and Aspen chattered on about the history of Lake Tahoe and what year this cabin had been built. She didn’t know the facts, but she made them up with far more ease than she ever guessed possible under such duress.

When they reached the open patio door, Willow stepped up beside her. They faced the outside, neither of them breathing.

This was it. The next stage of the plan. Aspen and Willow were supposed to go outside onto the wide deck and put themselves in the open. To show Gideon that they were here, alone.

In slow steps, they sauntered out. Willow moved to her side again. “Think he’s out there?” She murmured so quietly that it might be the wind blowing through the fall leaves.

“Yes,” she breathed back.

Long seconds passed...and nothing happened.

She caught Willow glancing down at the time on her phone. Then she looked up and held Aspen’s stare as if to tell her that they had to stay a bit longer in order to stick to

the schedule.

Time ticked by with so much slowness, she felt like she was caught in a time warp.

“Think it’s been long enough?” she whispered as she stepped up to the railing.

“Let’s give it another minute.”

Her heart throbbed in her throat. Fear swamped her insides, knotting her up.

She started to count the seconds in her head. Then, as one, they turned away from the door and went inside.

She continued talking about the features of the cabin as well as its proximity to entertainment. Only a couple times did her voice wobble. Willow nodded and smiled encouragingly, pretending that she was excited about the property, but underneath every word, she offered sisterly support.

They walked around the kitchen, checking everything out even though Aspen knew it was rare that a billionaire on vacation would cook for themselves.

Her frayed nerves crackled like live wires, zapping in her chest until it was hard to breathe. Had Gideon fallen for the bait, or was this a wasted gamble?

She moved to the kitchen counter, her fingers curling on the cool granite. Looking out the window into the fading light of day, Aspen said a silent prayer for Colt, for Willow and their brothers. They were all risking their lives to end this nightmare for her tonight.

The silence pressed in on her, unnerving and thick.

It was too quiet. Too still.

Something was coming. Something big, like a storm about to break.

Source Creation Date: July 24, 2025, 1:07 am

In Colt's earpiece the crackle of static shattered the silence of the darkened property. He didn't so much as blink as Carson's voice filled his ear.

"Anyone have eyes on him?"

"Negative," came Gray's reply. "I drove the lake road twice. There's no sign of an abandoned vehicle. Clean as a whistle."

"Nothing has moved on the lake side of the property either." Colt didn't like this. It wasn't likely that Gideon had just given up. Beneath his calm exterior, frustration simmered.

Jaw clenching, he scanned the trees between his position on the dock and the back of the cabin. A good hour before, Aspen and Willow had appeared on the deck. They'd walked up to the railing and stood in the open for long enough that Gideon would be guaranteed to spot them if he were in the area. Carson was just feet away, prepared to take a bullet in his body armor for them.

"Maybe the plan didn't work—he didn't get the message or something." Gray's suggestion had Colt grinding his molars.

"I don't think so. He's been on Aspen's trail since she came to Wyoming. Maybe before, and we just didn't know it. He's waiting for the perfect opportunity." He lowered his eyes to the rifle scope to get a better view of the cabin. "Where are you, you son of a bitch?" he muttered.

"I'll do another perimeter search now," Carson said.

The lake was a smooth mirror under the moonlight. The wind had died down, leaving a shimmering reflection like a sheet of glass. Tall evergreens soared into the sky all around them, casting long shadows on the landscape.

His cabin stood proud on the slope. The warm light glowed through the windows, cutting into the darkness that seemed to beat with evil intention.

He never was one for using his imagination. Colt's brain didn't work that way. But he wasn't often wrong when it came to his instincts. Gideon was here.

As he scanned the bedroom window, his gut clenched. His gaze darted between the cabin and the gentle slope of the land leading to the shore. Small tufts of foliage grew along the edge of the water. Were they big enough for a man to hide behind? Probably.

"What the hell?" Gray's voice rasped in his ear.

"What's going on?" Colt demanded in a rough whisper.

"That boat was tied up to the neighbor's dock earlier."

"And now it's not?" His voice pitched louder.

"There's no way he slipped past us and untied the boat. It must have come untied from the rocking of the water." Carson always came with logic on his side, but Colt's instincts roared in disagreement.

"Search the perimeter!" he commanded Carson.

As his brother performed the search, Colt remained on high alert. He could make out the shadow that was his brother, moving in a crouched position from point to point on

the property, but nothing else. When he swung his weapon toward the neighboring dock, he spotted the boat bobbing away from the structure with no rope in sight.

They'd prepared for this. Trapped Gideon in the web. But he wasn't showing his face.

It didn't make any sense—he didn't wait to disable the landing gear or break the furnace. Was it possible that their target had gotten cautious? Nothing was adding up.

Clinging to the shadows, Carson moved swiftly from the bushes to the air conditioner unit.

Gray's gritty tone dragged over Colt's senses like road rash. "The water's too still to untie that boat. It's barely rocking."

The truth gnawed at him.

Gideon had slipped through their net.

"Get to the house! Now!" Colt scrambled up from his position and was already running to the stairs leading to the bottom of his dock.

"It could be nothing," Gray said.

"It's not. I feel it in my gut. He beat us here. He's already inside!"

Why didn't he see it before? Why didn't Colt plant himself inside the cabin with Aspen and Willow?

His insides knotted, creating pressure on his lungs that punched the air out of them. As he trundled down the stairs, his heart thundered. He pitched to a stop at the bottom

and swung his rifle up to look through his scope at the cabin.

Through the high-powered lens, he made out the girls. Aspen stood by the bed, her phone held tight in her hand. She glanced at Willow, her brows furrowed in concern.

Did she sense something was off too? He felt so connected to Aspen that it wouldn't surprise him if she picked up the waves of his frantic worry clear across the property and from inside the cabin.

Through the glass, he could even see the worry etched on her beautiful face. A face he would die to protect.

"Are you sure he's inside, Colt? How would he breach the doors?" Carson's voice came with another crackle of the device.

"I don't know, but he is. I feel it." His throat was tight with rage. "Fuck!" He ripped his gaze from the window and sprinted down the dock, his boots pounding the weathered wood.

"I'm inside," came Carson's voice, sharp and urgent.

"Front door's secure and clear," Gray rattled off.

Colt skidded to a halt at the shore, breathing hard as he lifted the rifle to his shoulder. His scope locked on the window. He couldn't breathe as he saw the closet door open behind Aspen.

"He's in the bedroom with them! Go, go, go!" he roared.

The world exploded in chaos. Through the comms device, he heard Gray blasting through the front door and Carson's feet pounding up the stairs. His own heart jolted

with desperation.

Through the scope, Colt saw the knife in Gideon's hand. Aspen was completely oblivious. Why the hell didn't they give her and Willow earpieces too?

What good would it do? the voice in the back of his head played devil's advocate. Neither woman was trained to fight off a man wielding a knife.

His finger twitched on the trigger, his instincts screaming at him to take the shot and end this nightmare. But there were too many what-ifs, and he couldn't take a chance that Willow or Aspen might be hurt.

His universe narrowed to one pinpoint. One goal. Make that fucker pay.

At that moment, Willow turned and saw Gideon. She let out a scream that echoed faintly through Carson's comms, since he was closest to her.

"Willow!" Gray's voice shredded on their sister's name under the thunder of his boots on the stairs.

With a calm honed by years of battle, Colt's nervous system stilled. His breathing steadied as he set his finger over the trigger, waiting for the perfect shot at the man who was out to kill the woman Colt loved.

* * * * *

The cabin seemed to pulse with the tense silence. But that was silly—it was just four walls. It couldn't pick up the fear of its inhabitants.

Aspen clutched her phone. She was supposed to be going over details of her client's stay with Willow, but neither of them seemed able to utter a word. Willow stood with

her gaze riveted on the window, and Aspen knew she was watching out for her brothers.

A creak on the floor behind her created ripples up and down Aspen's spine. What was that sound? It didn't make any sense—Willow was in front of her.

Willow heard it too and swung toward the noise. She let out a shrill scream that wobbled as a man leaped out and shoved her.

Aspen whirled to Gideon, eyes wide. As she saw the big, lethally sharp blade he held, her eyes bulged.

She threw up her hands. "Gideon. Let's end this. I'll give you anything. Money. The jet. My house and car. Just let us walk away unharmed."

He looked like he'd been living rough since he held her captive in that mountain cabin. Dirt streaked his face and blackened the fingers wrapped around the hilt of the knife. His hair was even oilier than she last saw him, clinging to his head in dark clumps.

But the madness in his eyes wasn't something she expected to change. It had just gone from crazy to deranged.

She wrenched her gaze from him, stomach lurching with terror.

Meanwhile, Willow regained her balance after being shoved. She staggered and then drew herself upright with all the confidence of a queen about to walk to the gallows.

Aspen wouldn't let her new friend come to any harm. If it came down to her or Willow, she'd throw herself on that blade to save her.

Gideon's mouth stretched in a parody of a smile. The state of his teeth made her stomach turn, but that volatile sneer had adrenaline pumping through her veins hard and fast.

Though he didn't take a step toward her, the threat he posed clawed at her from all sides. Aspen's mind couldn't process what was happening.

Willow getting shoved. The glint of the knife.

Gideon, right here in the house. Hiding in the closet the entire time.

Fear was a hot ball in her throat, making it difficult to draw enough air.

"Gideon, let's talk this through. There has to be a way we can come to an agreement."

He seemed past the ability to speak. He took a slow step toward her. Light flashed off the keen edge of the blade.

When he kidnapped her before, her nonstop chatter had driven him over the edge. But did she want to do that again? He was even more unhinged now.

From the corner of her eye, she saw his reflection in the large window overlooking the water. The edges of his image were blurred, but that didn't make him any less terrifying.

She risked a look at Willow, making sure she was okay. The woman was totally still, her stare fixed on the man who wanted Aspen dead.

His image flickered in the glass. Then she saw it—his blade raised high as he lunged at her.

This is it. This is how I die.

Then came the explosion. With a crash that deafened, the glass window shattered. Shards sprayed over her and Willow like tiny daggers. Throwing up her hands to shield herself, Aspen let out a scream. The sting of glass slicing her skin was sharp and yet Aspen didn't connect to the pain, only the fact that she was still on her feet, still alive to fight.

An absurd thought filled her mind. I loved that window!

She wanted to stand there with Colt again, to watch the sun setting on the water before they turned into each other's arms.

A big male body blasted into the bedroom, followed by a second. Aspen's stare locked on the Malone brothers even as her confused mind failed to put the pieces together.

Willow grabbed at her. "Are you okay? Are you all right?"

Her stunned mind finally jerked into action. She clasped Willow, their tremors melting into one big shaking sensation, like the whole cabin was about to crumble.

"I'm all right. What happened?" She swung her head toward Gideon.

He was sprawled on the floor, blood pooling beneath him.

A single bullet hole between his empty, staring eyes made bile rush up her throat along with a cry of relief that they were safe.

"How? What happened?"

Carson strode forward, stepping around Gideon and the blood—god, there was so much blood—and wrapped his arms around both women who were clinging to each other.

Her legs shook, threatening to give out, but another set of arms pulled her gently away from Willow.

“Gray,” she choked out.

“I got you. Colt, I got her.” Gray locked an arm around her middle and towed her to the bedroom door.

“Get them out of here!” Carson barked the order from behind her, but Gray was already moving her to the stairway. She didn’t realize Colt was standing in front of her until he yanked her off her feet into his arms.

“Fuck, princess. Jesus Christ, you’re bleeding all over the place.”

She was?

The homey décor of the cabin blurred past her vision as he carried her into the kitchen. Using his foot, he snagged the leg of a chair and dragged it out. When he carefully set her on it, she blinked for what felt like the first time since she saw Gideon dead on the floor.

Strong, warm hands closed on her shoulders, and dark gray eyes burned into hers with worry. “Aspen, are you okay? Are you hurt from more than these cuts?”

She looked down at her bare arms. Blood streaked her skin where the glass had nicked her.

The scraping sound of another chair being pulled out made her turn her head to see Willow sinking to the seat.

Their gazes met. In that moment, Aspen saw that she had a friend for life. Even before this horrible ordeal, she and Willow had formed a bond. Tonight's events cemented it.

Her friend nodded as if she understood the unspoken emotions. Carson grabbed a towel and pressed it against a cut on Willow's forearm.

"Gray." Colt didn't look away from Aspen's face. "Get the first-aid kit under the kitchen sink."

"On it."

When Colt lifted his hand to cradle her face, she felt her tremors morph into shivers. "Aspen. Talk to me. Are you all right? I didn't see him hit you, but—"

"I'm all right." Her voice was a low rasp.

Again, she looked down at the thin streaks of blood. "The window exploded."

He gave her the faintest of nods.

"Gideon's dead. Shot."

His face tense, he searched her eyes.

"You did that."

"I wasn't trained to injure. I was trained to kill."

Gray set the box on the floor between her and Willow's seats. Colt ripped open the lid and started tearing open gauze pads.

She watched him dab at the minor cuts. They stung, but it could have been so much worse. It could have been the knife.

"Christ, Aspen. I'm so damn sorry. For the glass, for the cuts—"

"Stop." She rested a hand on his chest, feeling the solid thump of his heart. "You saved me, Colt. I could have been stabbed. I was seconds away from it."

"I should have been here." His hand hovered over one of the longer scrapes on her forearm, lightly shaking.

"You were here. You saved me and Willow."

Willow let out a scraping laugh. "You scared the hell out of us when you shot through the window, but you saved us, Colt."

He dropped his head. "You don't know how scared I was. Seeing him raise that knife... I thought I'd lose you." He looked up at Aspen, his jaw clenched as he struggled with the emotions he rarely let himself feel. "I can't lose you, Aspen. Not ever."

Her heart clenched. Tears, which had seemed so far away this entire day as she operated in survival mode, spilled down her cheeks, hot and soothing. She curled her fingers into his shirt front.

"You won't lose me, Colt. I'm here."

"You're stuck with her now. She's in all those wedding photos." Willow's matter-of-

fact statement brought a laugh bubbling up Aspen's throat.

Colt's eyes burned as he studied her. "Thank god you're all right."

She leaned forward, and he carefully wrapped his arm around her back, drawing her against his chest. The scent of gunpowder mingled with man didn't even frighten her.

"I'm so sorry for giving you these cuts, Aspen," he muttered into her hair.

"You protected me. You did what you had to do."

"But you're bleeding."

"Hello? I'm bleeding too. Guess I'll just go rub some dirt in it like the old days." Willow's comment brought a snort of laughter from Carson, who was cleaning her cuts, and from Gray, crouched in front of the first-aid box, passing him supplies.

Colt's chest shook on a rumble of a laugh. Then he withdrew from Aspen to study her face.

"Colt." His name sounded thick on her tongue. It was now or never. She had nothing and everything to lose.

"Yes, princess?" he whispered.

"I have a confession to make. I'm in love with you too."

The silence in the cabin seemed to swell as seconds ticked on.

"Jesus, princess. I love you too. So damn much." He drew her into his arms again, his hold tender as he minded her wounds.

When she melted into him, careless of the sting of the minor cuts, her tears started to flow with the strong love pouring out of her.

He swooped in and brushed his lips across hers in the sweetest, most meaningful kiss a woman could ever want—and she never thought she'd experience.

When he lifted his head, she plunged into the gray depths of his eyes. A small laugh of joy burst past her lips.

“What do we do now?” she asked.

“Anything we want.” He started to dab at the blood on her arm again.

“How about a real vacation?”

His stare met hers.

“Not in a cabin,” she rushed to say.

His lips twisted to a quirk of amusement. “Where do you want to go? Abroad? How about skiing?”

She lifted a brow at him. Love swelled out of her for her handsome protector. The love of her life. “Do you really want me all bundled up in all those layers?”

“Um, guys? We're all really thrilled for you, but can you share those thoughts when you're alone?” Willow gave an eye roll that had all of them laughing again.

Aspen reached out a hand to squeeze her friend's. Then she looked from Carson to Gray, letting them see the gratitude for their support on her face. They gave her nods of acknowledgement.

When she slid her attention to Colt once more, his eyes were glowing.

With love.

For her.

Source Creation Date: July 24, 2025, 1:07 am

The Malone family home buzzed with warmth, life and chatter. A fire crackled in the hearth they all gathered around to welcome the newlyweds home from their honeymoon trip of a lifetime.

Snow dusted the windowsills, framing a picture-perfect view of the Black Heart Ranch and the snow-capped mountains beyond. Colt cradled his whiskey glass on his thigh. As he raised it to his lips, the spicy liquor played through his senses and mingled with the sweet perfume of the woman nestled close to his side.

Tonight was special for a lot of reasons. The family congregated to welcome home Oaks and Shiloh and to hear the stories of their recent adventures.

Layne, Shiloh and Willow clustered around the coffee table, leafing through the wedding albums that had just been delivered. When Aspen spotted them, she let out a quiet groan that drew a smile from Colt.

“I hate that I’m in all those photos.”

“You’re not in all of them.”

She blinked at him. “What do you mean?”

“There are two sets—one with you in the group photos and one where you’re cut out.”

Her jaw dropped, and outrage battled in her eyes with a flicker of relief. “I was always at the end of the group,” she said slowly as realization dawned on her.

He gave her a simple nod even as he snaked an arm around her. “I couldn’t have known how things would turn out or that you’d be in my life.”

Out of nowhere, she balled a fist and delivered a punch to his shoulder. A laugh rumbled through his chest, and he buried his nose in her hair, breathing her in. “Sorry, princess. You would have done the same thing.”

“I would.” With a sigh, she pulled back to meet his gaze. “Guess that’s why we get along so well. We’re so much alike.”

They shared a smile. Colt never thought he’d be able to claim he was happy. But in this moment, with his siblings around him and the woman he’d fallen in love with snuggled against him, he couldn’t claim to be anything else. His heart was full.

He still had nightmares. But now that he’d let Aspen into his life, they were in this together. He was much more willing to let his siblings in too. With them around him, supporting him, he would heal in time. He wasn’t alone.

“Oh! Look at this one.” Shiloh pointed a manicured finger at the wedding album. His sister and sister-in-law leaned in to get a closer look.

“Everyone looks amazing. And look at how Aspen’s dress picks up the color of the pines on the mountain.” Willow turned her head and waved a hand for Aspen to join them.

“Hell, why not?”

As always, her bad language made Colt laugh. Then she left his side and dropped to her knees next to Willow to study the album.

Layne pointed at one picture. “This is when Faye ran forward to catch the bouquet and tripped.” She giggled, fist pressed to her lips to hold in her amusement about her

treasured family friend. “I’m glad the photographer caught that!”

The ladies shared her laughter as they flipped to the next page.

He felt Aspen go still before he turned his head and looked at her.

“Oh my,” she said quietly.

Willow, Layne and Shiloh all turned to him, big smiles on their faces.

What were they looking at? That photographer probably snapped a picture of he and Aspen arguing. Lord knew they’d done it enough during the reception.

When Aspen swung her gaze to his, he saw she was rattled.

“Let me see.” He shifted to the edge of the sofa and set aside his drink to take the leather album that Aspen held out to him.

He skimmed a few other photos on the pages before landing on the one that had the ladies shooting him sly smiles.

It wasn’t Faye tripping to get to the bouquet.

He and Aspen were dancing. She was in the wreath of his arms, and though he knew for a fact they’d been arguing at the time, the way he was looking at her made it obvious that he was attracted to her.

He handed the book back to her. “You’re gorgeous, princess. I could see it even then.”

Her eyes softened, melting at his, and a tender smile played around the corners of her plump lips.

Aspen directed her attention to Shiloh. "I'm really sorry to crash all these photos. Everyone kept urging me to get in."

"That's because the way Colt was looking at you made everyone believe you were with him. And it's totally great that you're in the photos."

"I wasn't there to crash your event."

Oaks cleared his throat. "Speaking of events. Are we going to talk about what happened to you guys while we were on our honeymoon?"

Colt knocked back the rest of his whiskey, hoping the burn would wipe out some of the memories. He had plenty of memories from battle that he never wanted to revisit, but it would take a long time before he stopped having nightmares of almost losing Aspen.

Waking in a sweat, heart racing, to find her sleeping calmly beside him helped. A lot. In time, he knew the nightmares would fade and he'd be able to put it all behind him.

"The window's getting replaced in the Tahoe cabin tomorrow."

Oaks arched a brow. "I figured you and I'd go out and do the work ourselves."

He waved a hand. "What good is it having money if we can't use it to make life easier? I didn't figure you wanted to leave your new wife, and I don't want to travel so soon after all that happened either."

"Home sweet home." Oaks threw him a knowing smile.

"Speaking of home. Aspen and I are going to take over the guestroom. Redecorate."

Willow grinned from ear to ear. "It was always your room anyway, Colt. You and

Aspen should make it comfortable for yourselves.”

They’d discussed staying at the ranch for a little while. She could run her business from anywhere in the world, and neither of them were ready to be parted. Not after they just found each other.

After the shift in topics, the mood in the room lightened. Aspen pushed from her kneeling position and moved in front of him, hand out.

Without a care what any member of his family thought, he slipped his hand into hers. “Well, guys, it’s been nice.”

Carson and Oaks flashed knowing smiles. In the corner, on the far edge of the group, Gray sat nursing his drink. He hadn’t offered much to the conversation. In fact, he was silent and sullen—probably similar to how Colt had been when he first left the military.

Gray didn’t know what to do with himself after his recent decision to exit the only life he knew. All of the brothers in this room could identify. Gray would be all right in time. Later on, Colt would make it a point to get him alone and give him the ear he probably needed.

Aspen gave his hand a little tug, and he offered her a heated look, allowing her to lead him out of the living room.

As soon as they reached the bedroom, he pulled her flush against him. Before she could tell him her reason for coming in here, he claimed her mouth for his own.

The seeking kiss morphed into a deep one throbbing with harnessed passion. He plundered her with passes of his tongue. She raked her fingers through his hair and rocked her body into his hardening cock.

All at once, she twisted away from the kiss and stepped back, panting. When she slipped her fingers through her curls to rearrange them, she actually did the opposite and mussed them further, giving her a thoroughly loved look.

He hooked an arm around her middle, dragging her back to him. “What did you want to come in here for if not for this?” He dipped his lips to her earlobe and delivered a flick of his tongue over the silky lobe.

She wiggled in his hold. “Not that. But”—she gasped, “it is nice!”

With a chuckle, he released her, waiting to hear what was on her mind. With Aspen, that could mean anything. Since the topic of discussion had been redecorating the room and making it their own when she chose to leave the gathering, he could only guess that was the reason.

He waved at the wall behind the bed. “You think we should paint?”

She shook her head. “You really want to talk about paint and colors?”

His eyes lidded. “You have something better in mind?”

She nibbled on her bottom lip. “I’d love to make this into a cozy space for us. A real retreat. That leads me to the thing I wanted to talk to you about.”

Searching her eyes, he couldn’t find any trace of worry in her direct gaze. Her green eyes were clear of fear or sadness that he’d seen too much of in them recently.

“I’m listening.”

“Um. I need just a minute. Okay?”

He laughed at her sudden flustered words. “Okay.”

“Don’t go anywhere.” She rushed into the bathroom and slammed the door.

He stood there staring at the door for a moment before drifting to the bed. He sank to the mattress and listened to the faint sounds coming from within.

When she whipped open the door, he stared at her in shock. He couldn’t believe his eyes.

Aspen wore a sexy red bikini. The tiny strings holding it up made his tongue loll out. And the miniature triangles covering her breasts had his cock growing even stiffer.

“Holy fuck. Princess, what’s going on?”

With a cute little push off the doorframe, she padded across the floor. Even her bare feet had him aching hard, and he’d never been turned on by that body part before.

In the crook of her arm, she cradled a leather portfolio.

“That looks familiar.” He nodded at the object. It was tied in a silk bow the same color as her bikini.

“Mm-hm.” She sauntered close enough for him to grab. But he was a good boy and held back.

“What’s this all about, princess?”

Tilting her face up to his, she smiled into his eyes. She presented the portfolio to him in the same way she’d handed off the honeymoon one at the wedding meant for Oaks and his bride.

He took it from her. Upon closer inspection, he realized the bow wasn’t a bow at all. His cock surged against the fly of his jeans. “A thong?”

“Untie it and look inside.”

“I’d like to do something else right now.”

She stomped her foot. “Colt! Play along please.”

He tugged at the knotted thong, and it sprang free. Dangling it on one finger, he held it up for closer inspection.

“Colt!”

He laughed along with her and dropped the thong to the mattress so he could give his full attention to the portfolio.

Aspen hovered over his shoulder. “What you’ll see is a plan for a real getaway. Not a cabin or hot springs. A real couple’s trip.”

He skimmed the brochure and photographs layered with a printed itinerary for an exotic bungalow while his heart thumped at the fact that he was actually in a relationship with Aspen. They were a real couple, something he never thought he’d have.

“Well?” She bounced a little on her toes.

“I love it, princess. I really do. I can’t wait to be alone with you, to spend quality time together.”

She let out a small squeal and threw her arms around him. “I was worried it wasn’t your thing.”

“Anything that includes you is my thing.” He slid his hand down her spine. When he reached her ass, he stilled.

“Goddamn, woman. I need to see more of this.” He tossed the portfolio on the bed and circled her to stare at her bare ass in the thong bikini.

Swiping his hand over his face, he let out a groan. “We’re going to celebrate our trip. Now.”

“Now?”

“Right fucking now. Get on your hands and knees, and put that gorgeous ass in the air. I’m going to peel that thong off you, and unwrap you like a package. Then worship every inch of you with my tongue.”

“Hell yes!” She spun to face him, crushing her lips to his and hooking one bare thigh around his hip.

The kiss spiraled out of control for long minutes. When they came up for air, she studied his face, her heart in her eyes. “I love you, Colt Malone.”

“I’m the happiest man alive. I never thought I’d find love, but here you are.” He walked his fingers down her spine again to cup her glorious bare ass in one hand and her breast in the other.

When he spun her to the mattress and guided her to her hands and knees in the position he craved, she issued a throaty laugh, shooting him a come-and-get-me look over her shoulder. “My hunky SEAL...cowboy...bodyguard. Let’s get this celebration started.”

In that moment, Colt knew that whatever challenges lay ahead of them, they would face them together—stronger, braver...and with their hearts wide open to love.