



The Rancher's Addiction

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Category: Romance

Description: Jenny Newman is a genius and comes from a family of brilliant people. While her parents might love her, they had never shown it. They had been too caught up in their own careers to notice they had a daughter. The final straw was their disappointment when she decided to be a vet instead of a surgeon, 'a real doctor', like her parents.

So, she moved over a thousand miles away, hoping to start a new life with good friends and an excellent partner in their vet practice. The only stick in the mud was a large, hostile man who didn't like her but couldn't seem to stay away.

Mac wanted to dislike Jenny, but she drew him in every time he saw her, and it pissed him off. The more he tried to ignore her, the more times they ran into each other. Now, he needed to decide if he was ready to take a chance at love again or lose Jenny forever.

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Jenny followed Nicole and Elise into the massive barn and was instantly bombarded with the smells of barbecue and beer, the sounds of conversations, the country music band on the far end, and the sight of dozens of people milling around.

Nicole grabbed her hand and pulled her along. “Come on.”

Jenny chuckled. “I’m coming. I don’t have your energy, Nicole.”

Elise snorted. “No one does, but you’re damn close.”

Nicole pulled them over to an eight-foot rectangular table, where her parents and a few other older people were already seated. Jenny knew most of them because she’d been out to their ranches, or they had brought a pet into the clinic for her to see.

Jenny sat and answered questions about being a veterinarian for about an hour. She was used to it and actually didn’t mind. She loved being around people about as much as she did animals.

She was about done with her first and last beer when Nicole tapped her on the shoulder.

Jenny just about groaned at the mischievous expression on the woman’s face. She was grateful for these women. They had befriended her right from the beginning, making her feel like part of the community, and that had never happened before.

It had always been hard for Jenny to fit in. She’d always been the youngest in the class because her parents had kept her ahead in school. She knew why they had done

it. She was at the lower spectrum of “genius” level and had surpassed all the students in her age group.

When she graduated from high school at the age of fifteen, the situation had worsened because she had moved to college. She completed her undergraduate degree in less than two years and then proceeded to veterinary school.

She had slowed her rush to graduate when she found the few kids in her class who accepted her, so she wanted to experience having friends. Everyone would be leaving for different parts of the United States, so the chances of seeing them again were slim.

There were only a limited number of openings for veterinarians, so they had to go where jobs were available.

Jenny had to move from Chicago to Wyoming for her position.

She'd been thrilled to get the job. She would eventually take over for Dr. Sherman when he retired in a few years.

His practice had grown so much that he needed help, and thankfully, he had hired her.

So far, she loved the town and the people. She'd bought a small house she adored and had been renovating in her spare time. Her life was finally settling into something she'd only dreamed about.

Nicole's smile brought her back to the present.

At the moment, she was frankly suspicious and a bit terrified of what her friend was up to.

She narrowed her eyes on Nicole. She'd learned quickly not to trust that look in her friend's eyes.

The two had talked her into a dare-dare game, and when it was her turn, the other women would dare her to do something outrageous.

The first time they had dared her, they made her wear puppy ears all day at the clinic. The people who stopped in or had appointments had enjoyed it even if she hadn't. The three had a match of wits going, and unfortunately, it was her turn to take a dare.

Nicole pointed across the barn at three men standing together. "You see the tallest one?"

Jenny nodded. "Yes." How could she miss him? He stood a head taller than the other two men, and she could see his air of authority and arrogance from where she stood.

"I dare you to go ask him to dance."

Elise gasped. "Are you talking about Mr. McKenzie?"

Nicole's grin grew, and she nodded.

Jenny looked back and forth between the two women. "Why?"

"He's just really ... intimidating," Elise told her.

"Is that all?" Jenny asked.

Elise stared over at the man. "It's just ... oh, I don't know how to describe him."

Jenny turned back to Nicole. "What's my dare?"

Nicole chuckled. “Just to go ask him to dance.”

“Okay. What if he says no?” Jenny asked.

“It doesn’t matter what he says as long as you ask him.”

Jenny looked at Elise. “Why are you so afraid of him?”

“I don’t know. He’s always affected me that way. He’s not going to dance with you. I’ve never seen him dance with anyone.”

Jenny shrugged. “That’s okay.” She turned to Nicole. “So, all I have to do is ask him to dance? Nothing else?”

“Nothing. I promise.”

Jenny nodded and handed Nicole her cup. “I’ll be right back.”

As she walked away, she heard Elise argue with Nicole but couldn’t make out the words because the music and conversations around them were so loud.

The closer Jenny got to Mr. McKenzie, the tighter her stomach got. What freaked her out was that it wasn’t fear affecting her, but lust—something she’d never had to deal with at this level—and it threw her.

Before she could grasp what that meant, she stood in front of him with only two feet separating them.

Her gaze started at his worn boots, moved up his long, jean-clad legs, and then to the substantial bulge behind his zipper.

Her eyes ran over his black button-down Western shirt to his wide, muscular chest and broad shoulders.

She bit back her gasp when her eyes finally got to his masculine facade.

She could tell he spent many hours in the sun. She didn't know his age. He was definitely older than her, but the brackets on the sides of his mouth and the squint lines around his eyes maybe put a few years on him, and he looked a bit younger than she first thought.

His black hair was cut close to his scalp, and his chin was square with a slight cleft in the middle. He had a large nose that fitted his face. It was crooked at the bridge, telling her he'd broken it at least once.

Her eyes landed on his lips, and she saw that they were full, with the bottom lip a bit plumper than the top, and she had several ideas about what he could do with them.

She finally came to his dark green eyes and inhaled. The fact that he was staring right back made her stomach tighten, and a red flush covered her face at being caught so blatantly staring at him.

Jesus, what was wrong with her? God, she'd never ogled a man in her life, so why did she have to start with this rigid, intimidating one?

"I ... I'm sorry."

He didn't say anything. His lips thinned a bit, and his eyes narrowed.

She waited for him to say something and sighed when he stayed mute.

Jenny's gaze went to the other two men who stood with him, and she could feel her

blush deepen.

She jerked her eyes back to him. She really wished they didn't have an audience with the two men who stood with Mr. McKenzie, but she wanted to get this done.

"So, I'm new in town..." She stopped and took a breath. She wasn't a person who beat around the bush. "I was dared to come over here and ask you to dance."

His eyebrows rose.

"If you could just shake your head, it would tell her I asked."

His eyes went over her shoulder, and then he scowled.

Jenny looked in the same direction and watched both women fumble and then turn away suddenly. She grinned.

Her smile fell when she turned back to him. "I'm sorry I bothered you..."

"I'll dance with you," one of the other men said.

The third man straightened. "I will, too, darlin'."

"Oh, well, I was just supposed to ask him..."

"Do you know him?" the third guy asked.

She shook her head. "No. My friends called him Mr. McKenzie, though."

The shorter men chuckled.

She gritted her teeth when the guy just stared at her. “Okay, I’ll take your silence as a no and stop bothering you. I hope you all have a nice night.”

A hand grabbed her upper arm before she took two steps away.

She looked back to see Mr. McKenzie hand his cup to one of the men before he pulled her out onto the dance floor.

A streak of unease grew, and her heartbeat increased. “Hey, wait. They said you’d say no.”

“I’m not.”

She shivered at the deep, rough timbre of his voice. “But I don’t know how to dance.”

He looked down at her and pulled her into his arms. “I’ll teach you. Why haven’t you ever learned?”

“I’ve never had the time or the inclination to dance.”

She could see the surprise in his eyes. She wasn’t about to go into her childhood with him. At that moment, she couldn’t if she tried. He pulled her against his chest and wrapped an arm around her waist, and his other hand gripped hers. Damn, his hand was over twice the size of hers.

“So, what do I do?” she asked.

“This is it. You’re dancing.”

“But we’re hardly moving,” she sputtered and then laughed.

“We don’t have to.”

She caught several startled faces as he moved them slowly around the dance floor. She gathered it had to do with the fact that the man had never danced before, as Elise said.

“So, you work on one of the ranches around here?”

He grunted.

She took that as a yes.

“My name is Jenny.”

“People call me Mac.”

She nodded and concentrated on keeping up with him and avoiding tripping. “I’m not very coordinated. I’m sorry.”

“Doesn’t matter.”

She bit her lip to keep from laughing at the looks on her friends’ faces.

He grunted again. He maneuvered them back over to where they started when the song ended, let her go, and took a step back. She nervously smoothed her shirt before she looked up at him. He was glowering down at her again and sighed.

“Thank you for my first dance.”

He nodded once.

She turned and walked back to her friends.

Nicole screeched, and Elise had a hand over her mouth.

“What is with you two?” Jenny asked.

Nicole grabbed her arm. “I would have bet a thousand dollars he would never dance.”

“Then it’s a good thing you didn’t,” Jenny said and grinned. She took the cup Elise handed her and was pulled into a conversation with an older woman.

When she finally got a chance to glance over at Mac, she found him glaring at her. She bit back a grin and waved her fingers at him before she turned away.

“Are you flirting with him?”

She looked at Elise, mortified. “Oh, God, no. The man can’t stand me.”

Elise’s eyes widened. “So, you’re goading him?”

Jenny’s smile grew as the tone of Elise’s voice rose. Why were they so afraid of him? He was just a man, for God’s sake. A very handsome one, but still only just a man.

“I should be headed home. I open the clinic tomorrow,” Jenny said.

Elise and Nicole nodded.

Nicole tossed her cup into the garbage can. “We do, too. Let’s walk out together.”

They managed to make their way through the crowd of people to the front door.

Jenny took a deep breath of the cool, crisp air as she made her way to her vehicle.

She waved. "I'll see you two tomorrow. Be safe."

Both girls waved and walked off.

Jenny grinned a few minutes later as she pulled into her driveway.

She'd had a pretty fantastic night and accomplished several firsts. She'd gone to her first barn party with friends she enjoyed being around, and had her first dance. She couldn't ask for better than that.

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Jenny washed her hands in the consultation room where she had just finished with a feisty cat.

“Jenny, the M & M Ranch needs you out there right now.”

Jenny turned to Cathy, the clinic receptionist. “Did they say what for?”

Cathy held up the piece of paper. “They think one of the horses has colic.”

“Got it. How much more do we have today?”

“Nothing, unless there’s an emergency.”

“Okay. Call Charles if something comes up before I get back.”

“You got it.”

Jenny rushed out the back door and jumped into her SUV.

She put the address into the GPS and headed out.

Less than twenty minutes later, she pulled under a black wrought-iron sign with two big M’s.

This was the first time she’d been to this ranch.

Her gaze swiveled right and left, taking in the beauty.

This was a huge ranch, she determined after seeing all the horses, barns, and men milling around.

She'd like to explore more when she had time, but right now, she had a job to do.

She saw a man wave from one of the barns and headed that way. He met her at her door as she was getting out.

"What do we have?"

The man's brows shot together. "Why did they send a tech? We need the vet."

Jenny fought to roll her eyes. It wasn't the first or last time she'd heard this. The fact that she was a small, young woman threw some of the ranchers because they didn't think she could do the work. She knew she'd have to prove herself, and that was fine with her.

She held out her hand. "I'm Dr. Newman, the vet. I'm helping Dr. Sherman with his clinic."

He reluctantly shook her hand. "I'm Gary, the stable manager." He rubbed his chin. "Well, since you're here, why don't we look at the stud?"

She grabbed her bag from the back seat and followed him into the barn. Every man she encountered did a double-take, which she was also accustomed to and ignored.

"He can be mean, ma'am. Why don't I bring him out for you?"

She shook her head. "There's no need." She pulled open the gate and walked in. The horse in front of her was large and pure black. The only white she saw was on two of his hocks. She ran her hand down his neck. "Well, aren't you a handsome boy?"

What's his name?"

"Rush."

She nodded and then ignored the man who stood nervously in the doorway. She pulled out her stethoscope and started listening to his gut.

"Is it colic?"

She nodded. "Yes, but colic is only a symptom. I have to find the source of it." She checked the horse's pulse, respiration, and temperature.

"Has his feed been changed?"

Gary shook his head.

"Can I have a lead? I want to see him walk."

"I can do it, ma'am."

She reached for it and hooked it to the halter. "I know. But I can, too."

She led the horse out of the stall. She studied the way the horse acted and his gait to see if there was any distress. At the end of the barn, she turned and walked back.

"He's usually pretty feisty, isn't he?"

"Oh, yes," Gary said and smiled.

"I figured. He's in pain and has colic, but it's a mild case. I think it's just an upset stomach. I don't see any signs of infection or impaction. I think anti-inflammatory for

the pain and a dose of flunixin will take care of it, but I'll be back out tomorrow morning to check."

She got the horse settled back into the stall and then bent to her bag. She pulled out two syringes and stood. Ten seconds later, both shots were given.

"I don't think he even felt that?" Gary commented.

"I excel at giving shots," she said, laughing. She petted the animal, and then laughed when its head came around, and it nibbled on her jacket.

"Well, I'll be," Gary said and smiled. "He's certainly taken to you."

"I've always had a way with animals. It comes in handy being a vet."

She packed her bag and shook Gary's hand. "If you see any change, call me. If not, I'll be out tomorrow early to check on him."

"Thank you, Doc, for coming out."

"It was my pleasure."

"What the hell is going on?"

She twirled around to see Mac, the man from the night before.

Gary stepped forward and opened his mouth.

"Who let this piece of fluff in my barn?" Mac asked.

She knew that should have pissed her off but instead, he just made her want to laugh.

“Boss, she’s the new vet Dr. Sherman took on.”

Mac stared down at her. She saw his jaw clench when her mouth twitched, and one of her eyebrows rose.

He sneered at her. “Bullshit. You’re not a vet. You’re like twenty years old.”

“Ahhh,” she said sarcastically. “That’s sweet of you to say, but I’m actually twenty-seven.”

She knew she was pushing him, but she couldn’t help it. He was so fun to poke at.

“Where’d you get your degree?”

“Veterinary school in Chicago. Do you want to see my diploma?” she asked with an edge of mockery and a raised brow.

He crossed his arms over his chest and scowled.

“Boss, she done really good with Rush, and you should have seen him. He’s already in love with her. I’ve never seen anything like it.”

She waited for him to say something and then sighed. “Talk to Dr. Sherman. He’ll give you my credentials.”

“I don’t think that’s going to matter. You’re not big enough to deal with large animals.”

She gasped dramatically and pressed a hand to her heart. “Oh, wow, I didn’t know you had to be a certain height. No one told me. You’d think the seven years in college and working with four different vets, one of them would have said something.”

Mac glowered. “You’re a smart-ass.”

She shrugged and grinned. “It’s one of my failings. If there’s nothing else, I have other patients to see.”

“Doesn’t it actually take like eight years for vet school? You said you were there for seven years. Did you flunk out?”

She turned to him and smirked. “I actually finished in six and a half. I finished early because I’m kind of smart.”

He raised an eyebrow. “Oh, really?”

She heard the disbelief and shook her head. It didn’t matter if he believed her or not. She waved and walked off.

Besides the times she couldn’t save an animal, working with obnoxious animal owners was the worst part of her job, but she wouldn’t trade it for anything.

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Mac watched her pull away. He knew Gary was waiting for instructions, but he couldn't take his eyes off her vehicle as it left.

He hadn't been able to get her out of his head.

She was a little-bitty thing and was beautiful.

She had long, light brown hair that had a silvery look to it, and the two times he'd seen her, she'd had it in a ponytail.

Her eyes were bright blue, and she had a round face.

He thought it might have been her dimples that made her look even younger than she was.

Twenty-seven. Shit, she looked more like a teenager.

The night before, he couldn't take his eyes off of her. When she swept her gaze over him, he'd been instantly hot and needy. He'd made a mistake of pulling her onto the dance floor because she'd been close enough to catch her vanilla and orange scent, and it made his mouth water.

He was brought back when Gary cleared his throat behind him.

"What exactly did she say?" Mac asked.

"He's got colic, but it's not a bad case. The doctor gave him some pain meds and

something for the upset stomach. She said to keep him in the stall today.”

“That’s what I thought it was.”

“Yeah, but it’s good to being in a professional just to make sure.”

“I’m not so sure she is a professional,” Mac griped.

“She seemed to know what she was doing.”

“That’s not hard to fake.”

“She’s coming back in the morning to check on him.”

Mac looked at his manager. “When?”

“All she said was early.”

“I’ll make sure I’m out here.”

“I’ll get back to work,” Gary said and walked off.

Mac stood for a minute longer before coming to a decision. He walked back to the house and into his office. He sat at his desk and dialed his phone.

“Sherman.”

Mac smiled. He was a cranky older man but damn good at his job. “I just met your new vet.”

“Yeah? I was damn lucky she chose me.”

Mac's eyebrows rose. "What do you mean?"

"She had like fifteen offers from all over, and she chose to come here."

"Why?"

Charles chuckled. "She said it was because she fell in love with me, but it was the town and the beautiful area she fell in love with."

Mac was a bit taken aback when the vet laughed. He couldn't remember the last time he'd heard it. "Why was she so in demand?"

"She has a genius IQ and a way with animals I've rarely seen.

She was always at the top of her class, and she works hard, always with a smile.

She's worked under a few of the leading vets in the US.

She could have stayed with them, they all wanted her to stay, but she decided to come here. We're damn lucky to get her."

This was not what he wanted to hear. "I don't understand how she can deal with the large animal. She's so damn small."

"She has different equipment to help compensate for her lack of strength. A few of them she's designed herself and sold the patent for a hefty amount. I wish I'd had them years ago."

"So, she's rich?"

"Oh, yeah. Besides what she's made from her patents, her parents are both doctors,

and she's an only child, so she comes from a wealthy background.

She has also been paid a substantial amount of money to give speeches at various venues throughout the country.

The woman doesn't have to work, but I'm damn glad she wants to.

Funny thing, you couldn't tell she was rich by the way she dresses or acts. ”

Mac had heard enough.

After a short talk about grain prices, Mac hung up and then dropped his head back against his chair. Fuck. He wanted to find something he could use to push her away. He didn't know why, but the woman made him think of things he shouldn't—like a relationship.

He had been married before, and it had been disastrous.

His ex-wife had been a gold digger, and he hadn't seen it until she already had the ring on her finger.

She'd made his life a living hell for three years before he finally got enough evidence to get a divorce that she vigorously fought against.

The only smart thing he'd done was to get a prenup, so she wasn't able to take him for every cent.

She fought it and still tried, but he only gave her the amount the courts said he had to and not a penny more.

It went directly into her account on the first of every month.

It was plenty of money for the average person, but Carly wasn't average.

She wanted the best of the best, and God forbid she didn't get it.

She would usually call or come to the ranch about two weeks into the month, asking for more.

He always gleefully told her she got a hell of a lot more than she deserved, and if she kept bugging him, he'd bring her back to court and take it all. That usually corrected her behavior for at least a couple of months, and then she would be back.

The last time she'd stopped there, he could tell she'd been drinking.

It seemed to worsen over time. He also suspected it wasn't just alcohol that was making her moods swing all over the place.

He'd called the sheriff a few times to keep an eye on her when she left the ranch.

The last thing he wanted was for her to kill someone on the road.

He rubbed a hand over the back of his neck. Dammit. He didn't want to go against Charles, but he also didn't want her around either. He didn't like the way his body reacted to her and the feeling of desperate hunger that twisted his gut into knots.

If Charles found out he refused her, he'd be so pissed and probably drop his account.

He could call Dr. Reynolds a few counties over, but his practice was an hour and a half away.

Mac would think about it and call his friend, Devin, who also had a large ranch, and get his perspective. His first concern was his animals. His discomfort being around

her shouldn't be brought into the equation, and it really didn't mean anything.

He'd do what he had to for the ranch because that was where his heart lay.

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Jenny pulled up outside the barn at M & M Ranch early the following day before the sun even came up over the horizon.

She took another long swallow of coffee, something she considered the juice of life because it kept her going most days.

Since coming to the area and finding they had no specialty coffee shops, she'd splurged and bought a fancy coffee maker so she could make her own.

It was strong, which is exactly what she needed every morning to start her day. She had gotten hooked on it in college.

She looked around and knew it was early by most people's standards, but she also knew how early ranchers started every morning. She guessed right. At least ten men were milling about doing different chores.

She got out and turned to get her bag.

"You're up bright and early."

Jenny stiffened at the gruff voice and almost groaned. It was too early to fence words with this man, and she had nowhere near enough coffee to take him on. But it looked like she didn't have a choice. She plastered on her smile and turned.

Her physical awareness of him sent shivers of need down her spine, but she ignored it. He'd be the last man that would want her and had already taken an instant dislike to her.

“Good morning, Mr. McKenzie.”

“What’s good about it?” he growled.

She sighed. “How is Rush doing this morning?”

“How about we go see?”

She followed him into the barn and walked past where the horse had been the day before. Mac took her to a small paddock and opened the gate to let them in. Right away, she could tell Rush felt much better because he was prancing around with his tail up.

She chuckled. “Well, I’m not needed here.”

Mac grunted, making her eyes roll.

She whistled and was pleased when the horse came to them. She saw Mac stiffen beside her and didn’t know if he was afraid the horse would hurt her or the opposite.

Jenny laughed when the horse pushed between them and started to nuzzle the side of her head and snorted out a greeting. She ran a hand down his neck.

“How are you doing, handsome?”

She laughed when he breathed in her face and then rested his head on her shoulder.

“Are you feeling better, boy?”

Rush snorted.

She bent and grabbed her stethoscope out of her bag.

“How about I listen just to make sure?”

The horse stood still but turned his head to be able to see her.

She listened carefully, moving the diaphragm over his side. “Much better.” She flipped the stethoscope tube around her neck and checked his pulse.

She patted the horse's neck, bent, and put her equipment away. She grabbed her bag and stood. “I think he’s good.” She held out a hand and waited to see if Mac would take it or just stare at it. “If there are any problems, call the office. I’m on-call all weekend.”

Her heartbeat accelerated when his big hand engulfed hers. She tried to pull away, but his grip just tightened. Her eyes flew to his to see him study her face.

“Well, I must be going.”

She tried again to pull away.

“I’m going to call in another vet to make sure Rush is okay.”

The words didn’t register at first, and then when they did, dejection twisted her gut, but after years of hiding her feelings, she was able to keep a blank face. She tried for the last time to get her hand back.

“Of course, that’s your prerogative. May I have my hand back?”

He dropped it and took a step back. She waited to see what his next move would be and then gritted her teeth when he frowned down at her like she’d done something

wrong.

She opened the gate and walked through, wanting to close it as a barrier between them, but he caught it and walked around to stand beside her.

“Well, have a nice day,” she said brightly and walked away. A gasp tore from her throat when he twirled her around to face him.

“Is that all you’re going to say?”

She didn’t understand why he was so angry. “I don’t know what you want me to say.”

“Do you care that I’m calling another vet?”

She rubbed the headache that was starting between her brows. Every word out of the man’s mouth was harsh and filled with resentment. “It doesn’t matter how I feel. It’s your horse and your money.” She turned and walked away.

She thought she heard a low growl from him but ignored it, got in her truck, and drove away.

Jenny didn’t understand why his approval meant so much to her.

She was used to people underestimating her.

It had happened her whole life. Hell, even her parents had done that.

But something about that man made her want him to look at her with approval and pride.

The fact it probably would never happen was something she had to come to terms

with.

It would be better all around if they never ran into each other. Although the community was relatively small, everyone was so spaced out she could go for months and not see him.

The day was going to be beautiful, and if there were no calls, she might just have time to finish the tile in her master bathroom and would be able to grout it the next day.

His teeth clenched at the ache the woman caused. Ever since he got his first glimpse of her, he'd been aching. Some kind of biological reaction to her had his stomach tied in knots, which made his already rigid demeanor more intense.

A gut-wrenching feeling of loneliness hit him as he watched her drive away.

It was ridiculous because he had thirty employees around him every day.

Hell, he was rarely alone. His bedroom was his sanctuary and the only place no one else was allowed.

He had a seating area on one side of the huge room and a small bar.

He liked to go up after he'd worked in the office to relax, watch the news, and have a drink before going to bed.

In the beginning, when Carly was there, he would want her in bed every night before going to sleep. He had an overlarge libido and was thrilled to have an outlet besides his hand. That was until she started using sex as a tool to get money and other things

from him.

The caring he'd felt for her had quickly diminished. Any affection he had felt apart and died when he found out about the other men. He'd had her bags packed when she came home one day. He'd told her calmly that she was kicked out and he was filing for divorce.

She'd gone crazy throwing anything she could get her hands on at him. He told her if she didn't take her things with her when she left, they would be burned. He thought he'd get some satisfaction out of destroying her, but all he wanted at that moment was peace.

No more nights of listening to her complaints. No more nights of going to bed frustrated with both her and his sex drive, but he wasn't willing to let her use sex as a tool against him. When she figured out he didn't care, she had moved into another bedroom months earlier.

Their marriage had lasted less than two years, and it was still too long for him.

It took another year to go to court to get rid of her.

He hadn't anticipated her coming for money just about every month.

He'd vowed as she drove away that he'd never put himself through that type of relationship again.

Now it was a few years later, and he craved having a woman in his bed every night instead of him driving an hour to a widow's house to relieve his frustration every other week. It wasn't enough.

Another thing that bothered him was he was the last of the McKenzie's, and if he

didn't have any children, the name would die with him.

Children were something he'd always dreamed of having.

He remembered riding on his father's lap when he was young and then on his own horse beside his dad's as they surveyed the ranch.

He'd dreamed of doing the same thing with his own children.

He was thirty-five years old and had almost given up on it until he'd seen Jenny.

She made him want to work for that dream again.

The problem was she terrified him. She was the first woman to catch his interest in years, and it would tear him apart if she didn't want him.

So, he pushed her away at the same time he craved to pull her into his arms.

He knew his anger with her was irrational, but the emotions twisting inside him were something he'd never dealt with before. He always tended to hide behind a wall of cruel irritation and indifference when he was confused about something—especially women.

He felt more for Jenny than he had anyone, even his ex-wife, and it freaked him out, turning him into a senseless bastard. He didn't know if he wanted to alter his attitude or not. It seemed safer to let things go on the way they were.

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Source Creation Date: July 17, 2025, 9:08 am

Jenny was just about finished with the bathroom floor when she ran out of glue. She was annoyed that she'd had to stop because it had been going along relatively well, then she told herself to suck it up.

With a frustrated sigh, she pulled on her jacket and grabbed her purse and keys.

Several people waved at her as she passed on her way to the hardware store on Main Street, and it lightened her mood and melted her aggravation.

She raised her hand to Stanly, who stood behind the counter at the hardware store.

She and the older man had become friends over the last few months she'd been living there.

He was someone she secretly wished was her father.

He was kind, helpful, and full of knowledge.

He'd taken over the store from his father fifty years before, and he was still going strong.

She grabbed a bucket of floor glue, walked up to the counter, and waited while he was checking out another customer.

A presence behind her caught her attention, and she turned with a smile.

It quickly froze in place at the sight of Mac.

She nodded and turned away, hoping he'd leave well enough alone.

"Hello, little lady," Stanly said.

"Hi, Stan. How is your knee feeling today?"

"Better. That joint cream you told me about works great. Thank you."

She set the small bucket on the counter. "Good, I'm glad."

Stanly looked at the bucket. "Are you still working on the tile?"

"Yes. I'm just about done."

"This is the wrong glue. Let me go get the right one."

She held up a hand. "I can get it." But Stanly walked away. The presence behind her seemed to grow, making her stomach twist and her body heat.

She pretended to study the back wall with the different stuff Stanly had hanging.

"Are you going to ignore me?"

Jenny stiffened. She took a few breaths, stiffened her spine, and turned. "Good afternoon, Mr. McKenzie."

He grunted. "Is that the way we're going to play it?"

"I don't know what you mean?"

His eyes narrowed. "I get it. You're taking the fact I don't trust your abilities as a vet,

so you're sore about it."

She rolled her eyes. "If you think you're the first person to doubt me, you're wrong. I've had people bigger than you trying to put me down. I knew I would have to deal with skepticism when I decided on my career. I'm tougher than you think."

He snorted. "You're what ... five foot three?"

"And a half," she added.

"And you expect me to believe you're big and strong enough to pull a calf or fix a breech?"

"I don't care what you believe. You've got other options for vets in the area. We don't ever have to see each other again except in passing."

She watched a muscle start to tick in his jaw. Now, why would he be getting angry about that? God, this guy confused her. She wasn't belligerent or insincere, she was just telling him the facts. The stiffness relaxed when Stanly came back.

"Here you go."

She turned back to him and smiled. "Thank you for catching that."

"Oh, sure. I can't believe you're doing your own tiling."

"Once you know how to do it, it's easy."

"Have you been tiling long?" Mac said behind her.

Stanly snorted out a laugh. "No, Mac, this is the first time she'd ever done it. She

read how to do it, and now is just about done.”

“Don’t forget YouTube,” she reminded him.

Stanly threw his head back and laughed. “Yes, I forgot.”

Mac cleared his throat. “Where do you live.”

“She bought the old Smith place.”

“That small run-down house off Fourth?”

“Yes.”

She handed over the money and picked up the bucket. “Thank you again.”

“You’re welcome. Call if you have a question.”

She glanced at Mac and nodded. “Have a good day.”

She wanted to smile when he grunted.

Twenty minutes later, the sound of a car door closing got her attention. She grabbed a rag and stood when someone knocked. She was brought up short at the sight of Mac on the other side of the screen door.

Her head tilted to the side. “Can I help you?”

“Are you going to invite me in?”

“Why?”

He grunted, opened the door, and walked in.

She rolled her eyes. Jesus, is that all the man could do was grunt? “Make yourself at home,” she said sarcastically.

He smirked down at her. “Okay.”

“What do you need, Mac?”

“I was curious.”

“About what?”

“This,” he said as his gaze swept the room.

“Why?”

“Well, I know you’re wealthy...”

“How did you know that?”

He snorted. “Welcome to small-town living, Baby.”

She sighed and waited.

“So, I’m wondering why you’d pick a small, run-down house?”

“Why do you need to know?”

“I just do,” he said with a sliver of impatience in his tone.

“Okay, well, I don’t need a big house because it’s just me, and I wanted to learn how to do renovation because I needed a hobby, and it’s good to know how to do things on my own since I don’t have anyone here.”

“Anyone in town would help if you needed it.”

She nodded. “I’m sure they would, but I’m used to depending on myself. Besides, this is relaxing for me.”

“Doing construction is relaxing?” he asked in disbelief.

“Anything with my hands.”

He looked down the short hallway and saw the light in one of the rooms. He nodded toward it. “Is that it?”

She looked over her shoulder and nodded.

He moved around her.

“Hey, what are you doing?”

“I want to see.”

“Shouldn’t you wait for an invitation?”

He grunted and kept walking.

He stopped in the doorway and looked down at the floor. “You did this?”

She smiled at the disbelief in his tone. “Yes. I still have a few tiles to set, but then all

I have to do is grout.”

He glanced at her and scowled. “I’m impressed.”

She bit back a smile. The way he complimented her sounded painful. She knew she could mess with him, but decided since they were actually getting along, she didn’t want to break the peace. She followed him as he walked back to the front door.

“I’m not convinced you can be the type of vet I need.”

She sighed. That didn’t last long. “And I already told you it’s fine. It won’t affect me if you go to another veterinarian. I’ve got plenty of clients.”

The muscle in his jaw started to throb again, and she wondered what had pissed him off this time. He took the three steps to stand in front of her and then slowly cupped her face. He studied her for a moment, then his head lowered, and he took her lips.

The shock held her immobile for a moment, and then the taste and feel of his lips made whatever resistance she had disintegrate. Her breath caught in her lungs, and her heart and pulse pounded.

He tore his mouth from her, stared down at her with intent, and made a feral growl in his throat.

She blinked up at him when he lifted his head and inhaled raggedly. What had just happened? She licked her lips nervously and squeaked when his head dipped again.

A minute later, he tore his mouth from her, with his gaze frozen on her, and made a savage rumble in his throat.

He turned and walked out of her house without another word. She watched him drive

away with dazed fascination. She'd never been kissed like that in her life, and she found she wanted more, which scared the hell out of her. The man didn't even like her, so why did he kiss her?

She pressed her fingertips to her lips. But he kissed me , she thought. Maybe he really did like her, and he just hated that he did. Hell, she'd probably not find out the truth. The man was beyond bizarre.

She closed the door and walked back to the bathroom to finish the floor.

The rest of the day was spent grouting the floor and then cleaning her house. The problem was she couldn't get Mac out of her head. And she really didn't want him there.

She decided that time was the only thing that would push him out of her brain. Until then, she'd work.

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Source Creation Date: July 17, 2025, 9:08 am

Jenny rolled over and picked up her phone. "This is Dr. Newman."

"Hello, Doc, this is Gary from M & M ranch. I'm sorry to bother you, but we have a situation here."

"It's no problem, Gary, but does Mac know you're calling me?"

"No, ma'am. He's out of town, and since I'm the manager, I'm making a decision. One of the mares is having a problem birthing. I think it's a breech."

"I'm on my way."

"Good. Thank you."

Jenny rolled out of bed, threw on the first clothes she found, and rushed out the door. She drove as fast as she could, knowing every second counted. She screeched to a halt outside the barn, where a man stood waving his arms.

"What do you know?" she asked the moment she grabbed her bag and raced after the man.

"Gary will tell you, ma'am."

Jenny got to a large stall and saw the mare was in apparent distress.

"How long has she been in labor, how old, and is this her first birthing?" Jenny asked as she started to examine the mare. She could tell she'd been in labor longer than she

should have been, which usually meant breech.

“Close to two hours. She’s six, and it’s her fourth birth,” Gary said worriedly.

Jenny’s stomach twisted. “Has she had any problems with the others?”

“No, ma’am.”

Jenny pulled on a long glove, lifted the horse's tail, and shoved her arm into the horse. Right away, she could feel the hind legs.

“She’s a breech,” Jenny grunted.

“Dammit. Sorry, ma’am.”

Jenny ignored him. Her concentration was all on the horse. She could tell the foal was in distress. “I’d try to turn the foal, but we need to get it out now, or we might lose both.”

“Tell me what you want me to do?”

Jenny crouched and grabbed some chains and then shoved both arms into the horse. That was one good thing about being small. Both of her arms could easily fit in the backside of a cow or horse.

“I’m going to tie both hind legs together, and then we’ll pull. Have a bucket of cold water on hand.”

She vaguely heard one of the ranch hands race away.

Within a few minutes, she had the foal where she wanted it. She pulled the ends of

the chain out. “You grab onto this handle, and I’ll get the other. When I tell you to pull, pull hard but don’t jerk.”

“You got it.”

Jenny counted in her head, and when the horse started to have a contraction, she yelled. “Pull.”

She and Gary did this four times, and finally, they were making progress.

“This should do it. One more pull.”

The only sounds she heard were Gary and herself grunting in exertion and the horse whinny as the painful contraction hit her.

Jenny felt the foal slide out and drop to the hay-covered ground. She could tell the foal wasn’t breathing and would die if she didn’t do something instantly. She bent and started pulling the membrane away from its head and the mucus out of the horse's nose.

“Hand me the water.”

Gary handed it to her.

She dumped it on the foal's head, making the baby jolt, gasp, and then start to breathe. She patted the foal’s sides as it gasped for breath.

“Well, I’ll be,” Gary said.

Jenny stood and pulled the foal off to the side and stuck her arm back in the horse.

“What are you doing now?”

“I want to make sure there was no internal damage done to the mare, and she needs to expel the placenta. There’s still a chance we could lose her.”

The crowd that had gathered waited with bated breath.

She felt the placenta start to slide out and stepped back. It plopped onto the ground, spraying mucus and blood all over her, which she overlooked.

She stuck her arm back in and felt around. She exhaled. “I think she’s good. Let’s take care of the foal.” She pulled the chains off the legs and examined him. “He looks to be in good shape. Congratulations, Papa, you have a colt.”

Gary grinned and then laughed.

Jenny maneuvered the mare around and made sure she was taking to her foal. She stood back and let nature take its course.

When the mare started cleaning her foal, a low cheer went up as the ranch hands celebrated a new life on the ranch.

Gary’s hand shot out, and they both laughed when she showed him the long glove she still had on. She pulled it off and shook the man’s hand.

“I’m impressed, Doc. You just saved one of our favorite prized mares and her beautiful colt that the boss will be able to sell for a hefty amount later.”

“It was my pleasure.” She started putting her things away. “Is there a hose I can use?”

“Sure thing.”

She followed Gary with her bag to an outside spigot. She washed her hands and the chains she'd used and then pulled off the paper overalls she put on before leaving the house to protect her clothes.

“Call me if you're concerned about anything. You might ask Mac before you do. I know this was an emergency, and I was the closest...”

“I didn't call you because of that,” Gary said. “I can tell you know your stuff, and I like that you're bringing in new techniques and tools. You did an awesome job, ma'am, and I'll tell Mac that, too.”

“Please call me Jenny.” And then she thought of something. “Is there a possibility you could get fired for bringing me in?”

Gary laughed. “No. I've been here since Kaden was Baby Mac. That's what we called him since he was born until he got bigger than us. He doesn't trust very many people, but I am one of the few he does.”

“All right. Good. Have a good day.”

“You, too.”

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Source Creation Date: July 17, 2025, 9:08 am

Jenny went home and showered before dropping back into bed.

It could have been five minutes or five hours before she was jerked awake by a pounding on the door.

She dragged herself out of bed and headed that way. She didn't care that she was in an old t-shirt and loose shorts, or her hair was probably sticking out every which way. She just wanted to get rid of the person so she could go back to sleep.

She opened the door as she was rubbing her eyes. Jenny sighed when she caught sight of an angry Mac. She crossed her arms over her chest.

"Good morning, Mac."

He leaned against the doorjamb. "You were at my place this morning?"

"Yes, I'm sure you heard I was."

"What have I told you?"

The menace in his tone should have warned her to tread lightly, but she was too damn tired to put up with his bullshit.

She raised her chin. "You told me to stay away and that you were calling in another vet."

"Yes."

She gritted her teeth. “You might want to tell your ranch manager that. He’s the one who called me.”

“I’ve made my thoughts clear to him.”

“What did he say?”

“He told me to go fuck myself, that he’d do it again, and you saved both animals.”

She smirked. “I knew I liked Gary.”

If anything, Mac’s scowl grew darker. “You know he’s old enough to be your grandfather.”

Her eyebrows rose. “What does that have to do with anything?”

“It would be gross if the two of you ... you know.”

What the hell was this man thinking? “No, I don’t know.”

“It would be gross for the two of you to have an affair.”

She stared at him speechless for a brief second, not knowing if she should laugh, tell him where to stick his opinion, or slam the door in his face. She did all three.

“You are a despicable human,” she said and laughed before trying to slam the door closed on his face.

He was quicker than she’d given him credit for. He blocked the door with his boot, pushed it in, and stepped into the house before closing and locking it.

Shit. He was not on the side she wanted him to be on, and now she still had to deal with the obnoxious dumbass.

“If you wouldn’t mind leaving, I’d like to go back to bed.”

She took a hasty step back and then another when he took menacing steps toward her. She gasped when her back hit the wall. He settled heavily against her, pinning her to the Sheetrock, and set his hands on either side of her head.

“You really want to put that out there?”

“W-what?” she asked shakily.

“You in bed.”

“I-I’m tired. I was out on calls most of the night.”

He pressed harder, grinding his aching cock against her lower stomach.

“I can make you want to stay awake. I can make you beg for me to make you feel good.”

His tone made the hairs on the back of her neck stand up.

“I ... you don’t even like me.”

“Oh, I like you just fine. The problem is I like you a little too much.”

She tried pushing against his chest. “I think you should go.”

He bent and nuzzled her neck, making her bite back a moan.

He pinched her chin, bent enough to be level with her face. “You need to stay the hell away from me. Don’t come to the ranch, don’t try to talk to me on the street, just stay away. You got that?”

She nodded and then watched him walk out the door. She knew she didn’t like the man. He was obnoxious, rude, and belligerent. So why then did his leaving make her feel like something shattered inside her?

She slowly walked to the door, locked it before moving back to the bedroom, and diving back into bed.

Jenny felt tears burn beneath her eyelids as she stared up at the ceiling.

How could he growl at her, then turn around and kiss her?

He wasn’t making any sense, and it was driving her crazy.

She rolled out of bed and jumped into the shower.

She knew she wouldn’t be getting any sleep for a while, and there were always things she could do.

At the diner, near the clinic, she grabbed a breakfast sandwich to go with the coffee she’d made at home before heading to the clinic. Although it was Sunday and the clinic wasn’t open unless it was an emergency, she decided to clean and organize to keep her mind off things.

She didn’t like when she didn’t understand something, and when her emotions were involved, it made it harder.

She knew a lot of it had to do with her upbringing. She’d spent so much time alone

that she'd learned not to depend on anyone, and it helped keep her emotions in check and under control.

The few friends she'd had in college made her see the world differently, and that having friends and letting people get close was okay and safe.

The only thing was, she'd never had the urge to date.

There had been several men who had asked, but she'd always said she was too busy when in fact she knew they would want to know her on a deeper level and eventually have sex.

That was something she knew she couldn't handle because she was too young and inexperienced, and the chances of her getting hurt were too high.

There had also been the fear that she wouldn't be able to open herself up enough, that she was too closed off and almost frozen inside, making it impossible to have a normal relationship.

Growing up with only a nanny and a few servants as companions put her at an extreme disadvantage to normal children. Also, the fact that she rarely saw her parents, and when she did, it always left her feeling more alone than ever.

Jenny tried to concentrate on what she was doing because she didn't want to think about things she knew would never change.

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Source Creation Date: July 17, 2025, 9:08 am

“What might you be doing here today, little lady?”

Jenny jerked her head around to see Dr. Sherman. She was sitting cross-legged on the floor in front of one of the cabinets with cleaning spray, rags, and supplies all around her on the floor.

“I’m cleaning.”

He tipped his head to the side and studied her.

He didn’t have any children. Unfortunately, his wife, the love of his life, had died a few years after they were married, and he just didn’t have it in him to try to find someone else who would hold a candle to her.

So, he concentrated on his practice and spent time with old friends.

He had no other relatives alive and had taken to Jenny quickly.

She reminded him of his late wife in some ways.

He also knew if he could have chosen a daughter, it would have been Jenny.

“What happened?”

She shook her head and looked away. “Nothing.”

He pulled a rolling stool over to her and sat. “We could sit here all day if you want,

but you won't leave here without telling me."

He smiled when she looked at him in frustration, which made her snort.

"I don't think we should talk about it. I don't want to cause friction between you and your friends."

"Ahhh, are we talking about Mac?" he guessed.

She sighed and nodded.

"What did he do?" Charles asked.

He watched her start to put things back in the cabinet. He couldn't remember the last time, if ever, anyone had organized them.

"Tell me, Jenny."

"He doesn't like me. It didn't really bother me, but he also doesn't trust me with his animals, and that's his prerogative. I know that, but he acts like I killed one of his animals. I try to stay away from him, but he always seems to be where I'm at, or he'll come to the house to yell at me."

His eyebrows shot up. Mac didn't go off his ranch if he didn't absolutely have to. That told Charles quite a bit.

"What does he say?"

"This morning, he told me to stay away from him and his ranch, but he..."

"He what?" he asked when she paused.

“He kissed me first. He’s confusing the hell out of me. I really do try to ignore him, but he pokes at me until I can’t anymore.”

Charles coughed to hide his chuckle at her evident frustration and confusion. “Can I tell you a story?”

She sighed, nodded, and turned on her butt to face him.

“Kaden was married several years back.”

Her eyes widened. “He was married. Like with a woman?” she asked, stunned.

Charles threw his head back and laughed. “He didn’t used to be so hard. His ex-wife, Carly, is a horrible person. She was only after his money, and if she didn’t get what she wanted, she’d have affairs.”

He saw her take it all in and waited.

“I can’t believe she’d be so stupid as to want another man.”

She said it so softly, Charles wondered if she knew he could hear?

He cleared his throat. “It hit him hard. Hell, he’s still having problems with her.”

“How?” she exclaimed.

“She demands more money and will try to embarrass him if she catches him in town.”

“What a bitch,” she hissed, making Charles chuckle. This could turn into something if he played his cards right.

Like himself, Mac didn't have any family, and Jenny had her parents, but they weren't involved in her life and had never really been.

Both of her parents were doctors who specialized in different areas of the body, which occupied most of their time.

Both were respected and well known, from what Charles could gather.

The fact that they'd left Jenny on her own most of her life made him want to shake them.

Did they not know what they were missing?

Since she was basically on her own, he figured if he could get her and Mac together, they'd be the kids he'd always wanted and give him the grandkids he dreamed about. He'd have to get Mac to agree.

"Yes, I agree with you. He acts all gruff, but I think if Carly hadn't hurt him so badly, he'd be a lot more approachable."

She looked down and studied her fingers.

"Why don't you go home? You looked tired."

She nodded. "I will, after I put everything away."

He patted his knee. "Well, okay."

"Hey, Charles, have you eaten lunch yet?"

"No, I have not."

“Do you want to go to the diner with me? Kind of like a date,” she said and wiggled her eyebrows.

He snorted and then grinned. “I would love to. I’ll be in my office. Come get me when you’re ready to go.”

He closed his office door, walked behind his desk, and sat before making his call.

“Mac,” the voice on the other end barked, making Charles roll his eyes.

“It’s me, Charles. Will you be around this afternoon?”

“Sure. Why?”

“I’d like to stop and talk. We really haven’t had a chance lately, and I’ll be out that way anyway.”

“Sure. I’ll be in one of the barns. Honk when you get here.”

“You got it.”

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Source Creation Date: July 17, 2025, 9:08 am

A few hours later, Charles pulled up outside the big barn and honked before he got out and looked around. He was impressed with the changes Mac had made to the ranch and how it had turned into one of the most successful ranches in the state.

“Charles,” Mac yelled from the doorway of another barn.

Charles walked that way and waited for Mac to give one of his ranch hand's instructions.

Mac shook Charles's hand. “It’s good to see you.”

Charles smiled. “You, too.”

They walked side by side down the middle of the barn, where he kept the pregnant horses and the ones that had just given birth.

“How’s that mare doing that Jenny helped with?”

Mac’s jaw tightened, but he took him over to one of the stalls. They both watched as the foal drank greedily from his mother.

“He looks like a fine horse,” Charles commented.

“Yes.”

Charles hid his smile. Mac was trying to avoid talking about what happened, but Charles wasn’t going to let him get away from it.

“Jenny said you don’t want her to set foot on the ranch. Is that right?”

Mac sighed and rubbed the back of his neck. “Yes, that’s correct, but don’t I get to choose who my vet is?”

Charles nodded at the man’s belligerence. “Absolutely. I just wanted to know if there had been a problem?”

“No.”

“Then, can I ask why?”

“She’s too damn small.”

Charles’s eyebrows rose. “That’s it?”

“And she irritates me.”

Charles sputtered and then laughed. “Really? How?”

“She’s ... sweet.”

Charles nodded and bit back his grin. “She is that. I think it’s a miracle she’s stayed so upbeat and happy.”

“Really? Why?”

Charles was pleased by his interest, but he was going to make him work for it. Charles shrugged nonchalantly. “Oh, she’s had a time of it. That’s for sure.”

Charles walked on, biting on the inside of his mouth to keep from laughing when

Mac growled behind him and started stomping after him.

“What are you talking about?” Mac asked.

“She’s had a lot to overcome, but she’s doing great, and she is fitting in well around here.”

“You haven't told me anything?” Mac grumbled.

Charles looked innocent. “Oh? About what?”

“Why she’s had a hard time of it.”

“Oh, well, her childhood was not good. Her parents didn’t have any time for her, so she had nannies raising her.

She commented once they would come home from work and go to their wing of the house without seeing her, and the only time they would seek her out was if she weren’t living up to their expectations. ”

Mac looked deep in thought, so Charles moved on.

“Is there anything else?” Mac asked as he followed the older man.

“They never had holidays together. Her parents would go to parties, but she was always left alone.”

“Jesus.”

Charles nodded.

“Does she talk to them?” Mac asked.

“Rarely. She tries to call, but they are always busy and don’t have time to call her back. They have her information, but have never tried to call her. They were extremely disappointed in her for going to vet school instead of becoming a surgeon.”

“They’re not proud of her at all?”

“Not to my knowledge.”

Mac leaned over the fence to the padlock to watch a few of his horses. He didn’t say anything and seemed deep in thought.

“So, you will have to call on another vet if you need anything, if you don’t want her out here. I can’t do fieldwork with my arthritis acting up nowadays.”

Mac narrowed his eyes and looked at him suspiciously. “I didn’t know you were having problems.”

“Well, it’s not something I go around talking about,” Charles muttered.

Charles could tell Mac didn’t trust him, but there wasn’t anything he could do about it. He wasn’t going to come out and call him a liar.

Charles turned toward Mac and held out a hand. “Well, I better be on my way. I’ve got paperwork to do.”

Mac shook his hand. “I’ll walk you out.”

Charles walked alongside him, taking it slower and making Mac have to shorten his stride. He was acting a lot older than he felt, but it would make Mac think twice about

his arthritis.

He should probably read up on it so he would know how to act if Mac got suspicious because he had no idea what it felt like. He chuckled to himself. He'd planted the seeds into the young people. Now he had to watch them grow.

He waved as he pulled away from Mac. He chuckled when he looked in the rearview mirror to see Mac, with his hands on his hips and a scowl on his face.

Good. He deserved it after harassing Jenny. Even though Charles knew she could take it and give it back tenfold, he was still protective of her. She was the only chance he had to have a daughter or family of his own.

Now, he'd have to sit back and watch what happened.

Source Creation Date: July 17, 2025, 9:08 am

Jenny rushed around her house, making sure everything was as perfect as possible. This was a day she'd been waiting for so many years. Her parents were coming to visit for the first time in her life.

Every year she'd been in school, she'd prayed they would come and visit her as all the other parents did, but she should have known better. Most of the time, she guessed they forgot all about her.

She pulled back the curtain when she heard a car drive up in front of her house. Oh, yes, it was her parents. She didn't know if they had a driver everywhere they went because of their egos, or if they just didn't know how to drive.

Her teeth snapped together when she caught her parents' expressions of disgust and disappointment. She drew in a deep breath and smiled as she opened the door.

"Hello, Mother and Father. I'm so glad you came to visit."

Her father walked up to her and scowled. "We were at a convention nearby and thought we could take time to see you."

Her cheeks hurt already from trying to keep the smile on her face. "I'm glad you did. Come in."

Both her parents walked in, and she could tell they wanted to make a hasty exit already. If her mother's lip curled up anymore, she'd block the air from getting in her nose. She started mentally counting down because she knew what was coming.

“Why do you insist on living in this hovel when you have just about as much money as your father and I do?”

She sighed. “For one thing, I’m hardly ever home, two, I’d have to hire someone to take care of it, and three, there is nothing built around here except a few ranches I’ve worked on.”

“You could always have something built,” her father suggested.

She opened her mouth but froze when a fist pounded against the door.

“Oh, my word,” her mother exclaimed. “What is that?”

“I’m guessing it’s one of the ranch owners I was just telling you about. If you’ll excuse me.”

She opened the door to see an angry Mac scowling down at her. “What did I do now?”

“Whose car is that?”

She raised her brow. “I could say it’s none of your business...”

“But you won’t if you know what’s good for you,” he advised.

“Well...” She growled when he pushed by her to walk into her house. She rolled her eyes. “Please, won’t you come in?” she said sarcastically.

He smirked. “I don’t mind if I do.”

She knew when he got his first look at her parents because he stiffened. She just

didn't understand why.

"Mac, let me introduce you to my parents, Dr. Terrance and Dr. Rosalyn Newman. Mother and Father, this is a..." She stopped short because she didn't know what to say.

"Kaden McKenzie. I'm a friend of your daughter." He took a few steps forward and held out his hand.

Jenny tried not to cringe at the expressions of distaste on her parents' faces when they looked at his hand before shaking it.

"Nice to meet you folks. I'm sorry to say, I haven't heard a lot about you."

Jenny choked and hid her smile.

"Oh, well, I'm sure you've heard of us through other avenues," her father said.

Mac shook his head. "No, sorry. Are you two also vets?"

Jenny had to bite the inside of her mouth at the horrified looks on her parents' faces.

"I have never touched an animal in my life," her mother burst out.

Mac looked shocked. "Like ever?"

"No."

"Not even a cute kitten or a puppy?"

Her mother hissed and curled her lips. "Not ever."

“Oh, well, you’re missing out. So, what kind of doctors are you?”

“I’m a heart surgeon,” her father said stiffly. “And my wife is a brain specialist. We’ve both been written about in medical journals...”

Mac shrugged. “Sorry. Not my type of reading.”

“I can see that,” her mother said.

Jenny gasped and turned to her mother. “I want to remind you that you are in my home. I won’t have you disrespecting my friends.”

“Well, I think we’ve overstayed our visit, Terrance.”

He nodded. “I agree.”

Jenny’s shoulders straightened as she led them to the door and opened it. “I’d like to thank you for coming, and I hope your convention goes well and you have a safe trip home,” she tried to sound as sincere as she could. At the moment, she was too embarrassed to care.

Her mother air-kissed her from a foot away, and her father awkwardly patted her shoulder.

“We would be pleased if you were ready to come home and act like an adult.”

Jenny sighed. “Thank you, Father.”

Jenny wrapped her arms around her waist and watched them get into their car and drive away, knowing it would be the last time she would see them unless she flew home, and even then, it was iffy, whether they would give her the time.

“Are you going to stand there all day?”

She sighed, gritted her teeth to keep the tears at bay, stepped back, and held the door open for him. “Thank you for stopping.”

His eyebrows went up. “You think you can get rid of me?”

“Could you please leave? I have to get to the clinic, and I don’t want to fight anymore.”

He studied her closed expression and sighed. He fucked up. Again. For some crazy reason, he’d thought she had a man in her house, and it threw him.

It was that old saying— he didn’t want her, but he didn’t want anyone else to want her either. He had to be honest, at least to himself. It wasn’t that he didn’t want her. Instead, he was afraid to take a chance with her.

Now she stood in front of him with a sturdy wall she’d built around herself, not only from him but her parents, too. He didn’t want to guess what was going through her head right then. She didn’t exactly look upset, but he couldn’t be sure because her expression was blank.

“I’m sorry if I made them leave.”

She shrugged. “I knew it would happen sooner rather than later. Now, if you don’t mind.”

He could tell she was desperate to get him out of the house, but wasn’t sure why. He took the steps he needed to stand before her and stared down at her. He studied her

for a moment, slapped his hat on his head, and walked out.

“Wait,” she called out, making him stop and turn. “Why did you stop by?”

No way in hell he’d tell her the truth. “I was in the neighborhood.” He turned and walked to his truck.

He caught a look on her face when she closed the door. He might be mistaken, but it looked a lot like despair, and it wrenched his heart, knowing he was partly to blame for it.

He decided to drive, park down the street, and see if she left.

If she wasn’t out of the house in ten minutes, he was going back to check on her.

His breath caught in his throat when she walked out the door with thirty seconds to spare.

But it was the swollen red eyes and blotchy face that told him all he needed to know.

She wasn’t as tough as she wanted everyone to think she was, and it deepened his feelings for her.

He followed her when she got into her SUV and drove off.

He wanted to know if she had been telling him the truth about going to the clinic.

He gritted his teeth when she drove by it and out of town.

He put space between them so he had a better chance of not being seen, but not too much that he’d lose her.

Mac stiffened when she was coming up on a ranch a competitor owned that was doing about as well as his.

He exhaled when she drove by. The thought of her going to Patrick when she was upset made him furious.

“Where the hell are you going, Baby?” he whispered to himself.

Another ten minutes passed before she started to slow down.

“Oh, damn. The bluffs.”

The bluffs were a deep canyon with a shallow river at the bottom. It was about a half mile deep in some areas. A lot of people came to the site to rock climb or hike.

He pulled over farther back, behind the bathroom facilities, and watched.

She had parked her car facing the ravine, but didn't get out.

He couldn't see what she was doing and thought he'd best stay away and give her space because he'd caused at least part of her upset, and he didn't want to make it worse.

Less than an hour later, she pulled out and drove back toward town. He didn't think she'd seen him because her concentration had been on the road, but from what he could see, her face had looked ravaged and red from crying. He wondered for a brief moment why she came out here.

Then it dawned on him as he was following her back to town. Fuck, she came out here to be alone because she probably had people stopping by her house occasionally, so she had to drive somewhere and hide and give in to the pain.

Damn. He just wished he hadn't been a part of it. He banged his head against the steering wheel after she'd gone into her house.

He needed to stay the hell away from her if he didn't want to acknowledge his feelings for her because all he was doing was hurting her, and she didn't deserve it. The more he got to know about her, the more he knew she'd been through enough without his input.

He'd leave her in peace. At least for the moment.

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Jenny followed Nicole and Elise into the bar. They liked to go dancing on the town's outskirts on weekends. They usually tried to get Jenny to go with them, but she always had an excuse of having to work, but mostly she wanted to be alone and work on her house.

Jenny looked around the dim and crowded interior of the Western bar. "I can't believe you talked me into this."

"Oh, for God's sake, quit whining," Nicole retorted without looking at her.

Jenny laughed. She loved how they bullied her into things she normally wouldn't do, and they weren't intimidated by her at all. They were just her friends. Ones she had needed for a very long time.

Nicole grabbed a table that someone was just leaving.

A waitress stopped at the table. "What can I get you guys?"

Jenny raised her hand. "A bottle of beer."

"Same with us," Nicole and Kristine piped in.

Jenny looked around the massive room in amazement. It was the first time she'd been in the place, and now she regretted not coming sooner. It was a cowboy bar down to the peanut shells on the floor, and all the men with cowboy hats staggered around the room.

The waitress came back and set the bottles on the table. Jenny reached in her pocket.

Nicole put her hand on her arm. "I got this one."

"Thanks. This is the only one I can have, but I'll buy the next round."

An hour later, a screeching sound caught all three women's attention.

"What's going on?" Jenny asked as she looked over her shoulder at where the sound was coming from.

"Mr. McKenzie must be here," Nicole commented.

"Why do you think that?"

Elise sighed as the woman yelling got louder. "It's Carly."

"Kaden's ex-wife?" Jenny asked incredibly.

"Yes. Every once in a while, if she catches him out, she'll tear into him."

"What does he do?"

"Stands there with his arms crossed."

"God, why doesn't he lay into her?"

"It just makes it worse."

"Let's go," Jenny said and stood.

“Where are we going?”

“Play along with me. If I start laughing, you do too. Got it?”

“Be careful. She’s about twice your size,” Elise said.

“I bet she doesn’t wrestle with horses or cows like I do.”

The other women laughed and followed her through the crowd.

Jenny took in the scene. A crowd was in a circle around Carly and Kaden, and no one was doing anything.

She pushed past people. “Move,” she demanded.

“Hey, Doc,” someone said.

She ignored everyone except Kaden. She smoothed her hair, pasted on a smile, and sauntered over to Kaden. Her smile widened at the look on their faces. She wrapped an arm around Kaden's waist and was thrilled when he wrapped his around her.

“Who’s this, Babe?” she said and looked up at him.

Kaden’s mouth twitched. “My ex.”

Jenny looked the stunned Carly up and down and knew she had very little time before the woman got over her astonishment.

She made her eyes widen dramatically. “The slut?” she asked incredibly.

Kaden choked, and several people started laughing.

“Yeah, Babe, the slut.”

“Why is she screeching like a demented chimpanzee?”

More people laughed, and Carly’s face grew darker.

“Who the hell are you?” Carly shrieked.

“Jenny,” she said simply and smiled.

“Jenny,” she scoffed. “Is this your new stupid whore?”

Jenny laughed. “No one has ever called me stupid before.” She looked up at Kaden. “Have they, Honey?”

He looked down at her and shook his head before turning back to Carly. “No. She’s actually a certified genius with a doctorate in veterinary medicine.”

Jenny looked at Carly. “That means I’m a vet,” she said slowly as if she were talking to an imbecile.

Jenny almost got a bit concerned when Carly started to turn purple.

“What’s wrong with her, Doc?” someone in the crowd asked.

“I think she’s trying not to choke on being the center of unwanted attention.” Jenny looked around the crowd. “Does anyone want her here?”

A chorus of “No!” rent the air.

Jenny shrugged her shoulders. “You see, Carly. No one wants you here. Although

you could stay because you're really quite entertaining.” The crowd laughed. “Kaden’s been working so hard he needs a good laugh.”

They listened to Carly start to sputter and her fists rigid against her side. Jenny knew what was coming and was ready for it.

Carly threw out her fist, trying to connect with Jenny’s face. Jenny jerked back away from it and then went in for her own chance and popped the woman in the nose, making it bleed and her scream. Kaden put himself between her and Carly when Carly started to move toward Jenny.

Kaden sighed. “You should go, Carly. You’re making a spectacle of yourself.”

Jenny growled and tried to go around Kaden, but he held her back.

Jenny sneered at the woman. “And Carly. Kaden’s my man now, so you need to move on, girlfriend, because you’re not getting anything more from him. I’ll make sure of that.”

“You bitch!” Carly screamed. A large man came up beside her and grabbed her arm.

“It’s time to leave, Carly. No one wants you here.”

The crowd started to break up. The entertainment was done for the night. Jenny heard Carly yelling and screaming all the way to the door.

Jenny grinned and then looked up at Kaden to see him glowering down at her. Whoops. She did just barge into a situation that was none of her business.

She pulled away from him and took a few backward steps. Thankfully, her friends had come up on either side of her to give her their support.

“Sorry. I know I shouldn’t have done that. I just have a thing about bullies, you know. So...” she said and took a few more steps away from him. “I’ll see you later.”

“Don’t...”

She ignored his growl and jumped into the crowd, which instantly surrounded her and her friends.

“That was amazing,” Nicole said, laughing. “Oh, my God. The look on both their faces was priceless. They’ll be talking about this for years.”

Oh, great. Jenny stopped when she thought she was far enough from him, as her beeper buzzed. She glanced at the number. “Sorry, guys. I have a call. I have to run.”

Both women laughed.

“I think it would be a good idea to make a hasty exit,” Elise said, a little worriedly. She looked around like she was expecting Mac to come at them at any moment.

Jenny hugged them both. “I’ll see you at the clinic in the morning.”

“Be careful,” Nicole called as she walked away.

Jenny was out the door in her vehicle and driving off in less than a minute, headed to a ranch twenty-five minutes away.

She gave herself a moment to reminisce about earlier. She laughed and shook the hand she’d used to hit Carly. It would ache, but in no way would it bruise or give her problems.

It made her miss her boxing class she’d attended in the city. Maybe she could put up

a bag in her garage or basement? She'd think about it later. She needed to get into the zone she used to concentrate on her patient and nothing else.

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Jenny pulled herself out of bed the following day. She desperately wanted to crawl back under the covers and sleep for a week. Just long enough to get over the oppressive weight of sadness because she had lost a patient.

Actually, the calf had been dead by the time she got there, but it still made her sad and debate with herself if she'd only been there an hour earlier.

That's the one thing she had always done was internalize every patient she lost. She thought after years of being a vet, she'd toughen up, but it hadn't happened yet.

She kept telling herself at least she had saved the cow, but some damage had been done inside of her, so it might be impossible for the cow to get pregnant again in the future.

Jenny rushed through her shower and grabbed an extra-large cup of her strong coffee before heading to the clinic. Elise was already starting to open when she walked in.

"Good morning..." Elise stopped, came around the counter, and looked Jenny over. "What happened?"

"I lost a calf last night."

Elise pulled her into her arms. "Oh, hun, I'm so sorry."

Jenny hugged her tightly, needing the human connection more than she thought.

"Thank you. I'm going back to fill out the report before we have patients coming in."

“We have a few set up, but not for an hour.”

“Good.”

“I’ll get some coffee started.”

Jenny held up her big cup. “I’ve already got mine.”

“I don’t know how you drink that stuff. It looks like tar.”

“The milk helps mellow it.”

“Have you eaten?”

Jenny shook her head.

“I’ll have Nicole pick you up something. You shouldn’t drink that sludge on an empty stomach.”

Jenny smiled. Even though she didn’t know if she’d be able to eat it, Elise’s concern went a long way in making her feel better.

Several hours later, Elise and Nicole were closing and locking the doors.

They stayed open until noon on Saturdays if at all possible, and that morning had fortunately been slow.

“Hey, Jenny. We’re headed out unless you have something else for us?”

Jenny looked up from her desk and shook her head. “No, you guys go. Thank you.”

Elise studied her. “Why don’t you come with us? We’ll grab lunch and maybe go hiking?”

Jenny smiled. “Thank you, but I’ve got a ton of paperwork to do. I’d love to go another time, though.”

“You got it. Call if you need us,” Nicole said, turned, and walked away.

Jenny heard the click of the door, sat back, closed her eyes, and exhaled.

It had been a long couple of days, and she was feeling a bit beaten down.

She knew it would pass because it had happened so many times in the past. A good cry and some mint chocolate-chip ice cream, and she’d be as good as new.

She’d only had herself for so many years because she’d been unable to count on the people who were supposed to love her. Then she hadn’t made friends easily because she’d always been several years younger than them.

She sighed as she felt the first tear roll down her face. She pressed her face into her hands and let them go, knowing it would make her feel better.

“You mind telling me what the hell you think you’re doing?”

Jenny’s eyes flew open, and she jerked upright at the low, gruff voice from her doorway. She quickly wiped off her face.

“I didn’t know anyone was here, and I thought the place was locked up. What can I do for you, Mr. McKenzie?” she said in an abrupt but scratchy professional tone.

He snorted and walked in, closed the door behind him, and leaned against it with his

arms crossed over his chest.

Jenny's eye widened, and her body stiffened. "What are you doing?"

His eyes narrowed on her. "Don't you dare be afraid of me," he growled. "You know I'd never hurt you."

She wiped her hands on her jeans. There was no way she would admit to being afraid of him even if a ball of fear was twisting her stomach at that moment.

"What do you want?" she asked.

"We have some things to discuss."

She sighed and rubbed her forehead, where the headache she'd woken with grew as the minutes went by and threatened to develop into a migraine. "Can we do this another day? I'm kind of swamped right now."

He walked around, sat on the edge of her desk close to her chair, and stared down at her.

"Why are you crying?"

She tried to smile. "It's been a long couple of days."

"Why?"

She looked down at her lap. "Kaden, please don't act as if you care. What is it you want so I can get back to work?"

"I care."

She snorted out a laugh. “I’d hate to see what you act like if you disliked someone.”

“I don’t hate you. I never could.”

Her eyes snapped to his. He did not just say that. God, he was driving her crazy.

She pushed her chair back so she could stand. She didn’t like him towering over her, but he blocked her by wrapping his boot around the leg of the chair.

“Is this about last night at the bar? I know I owe you an apology. I’m sorry for interfering in something that was clearly none of my business. All I can say is I’ve always hated bullies.”

“You got bullied?” he asked.

She rolled her eyes and snorted. “You could say that. I was always the smallest and the youngest. The fact I was always smarter than they were made it worse.”

“I don’t understand why you helped me last night even though you think I don’t like you?”

“I already told you. I don’t like bullies.”

“I think it’s more than that.”

“What do you want from me?” she yelled in frustration.

He stood and pulled her up to stand in front of him. He kept her there with his hands on her shoulders. His hold was firm but in no way painful.

“I just want the truth.”

There was no way she would be able to get away from him until she told him the truth, even if it embarrassed her.

“Fine. I hated that she was embarrassing you. Now, are you happy?” she burst out in anger and frustration.

He didn’t say anything for a moment as he studied her. “Now, tell me, why were you crying?”

She tried to jerk away from him as she fought the tears that stung her eyelids. “Goddammit. It’s none of your business. Now, get out.”

He sighed and held her gently, but with a grip she couldn’t begin to break. “I’m not going anywhere.”

She narrowed her eyes on him as she swallowed down the agony of knowing she’d done nothing to deserve this. “What did I ever do to get you to torment me as much as you do?”

He tried to laugh, but it came out sounding more like a grunt. “Torment? Not even close. Now, tell me.”

Jenny angrily wiped her tears away because she couldn’t hold back. She hated crying in front of anyone. She knew if she was to be respected, she couldn’t show weakness. But she knew him well enough to know he wouldn’t leave until she told him.

“It’s several things. One, my parents. I know they’ll never come back here, and as used to it as I should be, it still hurts.”

“Go on.”

She gritted her teeth. “Secondly, I’m embarrassed for intruding into your life with your ex. I had no right, and I’m afraid I might have made things worse for you.”

“Anything else?”

“The third thing should make you feel good.”

“Oh?”

“Yes, I lost a patient last night.”

She waited for any reaction and then shook her head when there was none. “Please leave.”

“What patient?”

She hit her fist against his chest. “Screw you. I don’t deserve this, and if you’re trying to push me out of town, you’re succeeding. There are a lot of other places I can get a job and not be harassed.”

He looked shocked. “I’m not trying to get you to leave.”

“I don’t believe you. You’ve tried to ruin my career, you’ve driven my parents away, and you’re hurting me.”

His hands fell to his sides, and his head snapped back as if she hit him.

“Jesus, woman. I don’t want you to go anywhere, and I’d never try to ruin your career. I respect the hell out of what you’ve done.”

She snorted.

“No, Baby. It’s true. My problem is I’m terrified you’re going to get hurt.

That’s all. And as far as your parents go, I can’t tell you how sorry I was that I disrupted your visit with them.

I saw the car in the driveway, and I got jealous.

And the last thing I want to do is hurt you.

I’m an asshole, and I can’t seem to figure out how to deal with my feelings for you. ”

She stared at him in disbelief. She didn’t know what to say to him. Everything he just said was a shock to her system.

“I tried to find you last night, but Nicole said you had a call. I wanted to thank you. No one’s ever stepped up for me. Oh, I know they think I can handle myself, and I can, but I still hate dealing with that bitch.”

He seemed to be waiting for something, but she didn’t know what to say.

“As far as the calf last night...”

“How’d you know it was a calf?” she asked.

“I ran into Ron in town, and he told me what happened. He said the calf was dead an hour before you got there. He thought he could deal with getting the calf out. He said if it weren’t for you, he would have lost the cow.”

She didn’t know what to say, so she stayed quiet.

“Did you hear me?”

She nodded. There were too many emotions raging through her, and she wasn't able to stick to just one.

"I heard. Now, if you could leave, I want to be left alone."

He studied her for a long moment. "I think you've been alone too long."

She shrugged. "It's what I'm used to."

He ran his hands up and down her arms. "That doesn't mean you can't learn something different."

She gritted her teeth when she tried to step back, only to have him pull her closer. She pressed her hands against his chest to keep some space between them.

"Listen, Kaden. I'm not sure why you stopped by, but I really do have a lot of work to do, and I'm already tired."

"I wanted to check on you."

Jenny shook her head. "I'm not sure why, but now that you have, can you please leave?"

"I don't want to leave you alone."

She tried to laugh. "It's all I've ever known."

"As I said before, you can learn something different."

"I will think about it. Just not right now."

She didn't think she could handle anything more at that moment.

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K aden studied her expression . He could plainly see the turmoil she was going through and the wall she was trying to build between them, but he wasn't going to let that happen.

He came to the conclusion that his feelings for her were never going away and only got deeper as time passed, so he decided to stop fighting them.

He wrapped his arms around her and then set his chin on the top of her head.

“I’m going to hold you while you cry.”

Jenny shook her head and tried to push him away again. “I don’t want you here.”

“I know. It’s because you’ve never had someone support you or be there for you when you were down. I want to be that person for you.”

He looked at her and almost smiled at the stunned look on her face.

“But...”

He shook his head. “Don’t say I don’t like you because I do. That first moment I laid eyes on you standing in front of me made me hungry for things I never thought I’d want again.”

“Like what?”

“Like a relationship with a woman.”

“You’re talking like us ... dating?”

He snorted. “Quit sounding so surprised. I am a man, and you’re a woman, and we are both attracted to each other. I’m not going to fight it anymore.”

“Why have you fought it?”

“Because I was afraid you wouldn’t want me. The fact that I’ve never wanted a woman the way I do you makes my insecurities ten times worse.”

“I never would have thought you were insecure.”

“It’s only happened one time before, and it’s when I took over the ranch from my dad when he became ill. I was terrified I’d do something or not work hard enough, and I’d lose the place.”

“Well, you didn’t.”

“No. It’s actually grown in the time I’ve been in charge.”

“That doesn’t surprise me,” she told him.

He pressed her head to his chest. “Do you still need to cry?”

She shook her head. “No, you holding me is helping. I’m always amazed at what a hug can do for a person.”

“You never got hugged?”

“Oh, I think the nannies would hug me sometimes.”

“That’s so fucked up. I can’t believe you came from them. They both had ... I would say sticks up their asses, but I’d say it’s closer to poles up their asses. It’s got to be mighty uncomfortable.”

She chuckled and moved a few steps away. “I don’t think they planned to have me.”

“But they did, and you’re a wonderful person.”

She leaned back and raised her eyebrows. “I think I’m dreaming. You just gave me a compliment.”

He grunted. “I’ve done that before.”

“What do you want to do now?” she asked.

He arched an eyebrow. “You really want to put that out there?”

She looked confused and then apprehensive when he stood and took the few steps to stand in front of her again.

He placed his hands on her hips.

“What ... do you mean?”

One side of his mouth kicked up. “It means I’ve wanted to get my hands on you from the first moment I saw you.”

“Oh.”

He stared down at her. “Do you really have work to do?”

She nodded. "I always have work."

"Can it wait?"

"I guess. Why?"

"Are you on call?"

She nodded. "Yes."

"I was going to bring you home to the ranch and take you riding, but we'll have to do that another day. How about lunch, and we'll go from there?"

She pretended to look shocked and pointed at herself. "You want to go on a date with me?"

"All right, you smart-ass. Yes. Do you want to go to the café on Main, or can we grab some groceries and make a meal at your house?"

"You know how to cook?" she asked.

He snorted. "No, but I figured you being a genius and all, you'd be able to figure it out."

"Wow. Thank you."

He laughed.

She smiled. "How about we just go to my house? I made lasagna last night, and I have a ton left."

“I like lasagna.”

“Then follow me.”

He squeezed her one more time, released her, and followed her out of the building. It took about five minutes to get to her house, and he pulled in behind her.

He looked around outside the house. It needed to be re-sided, but the yard was in good shape, and she had planted flowering bushes on either side of the front door, which added color to the otherwise drab-looking house.

A thought popped into his head, and he turned to her. “You’re not thinking of roofing and siding this house by yourself, right?” Jesus, just the thought of her on a tall ladder, or even worse on top of the roof and falling, made sweat beads on his forehead.

She shook her head. “No, I’m going to have one of the construction businesses in town do it. One, because I like to use local businesses, and two, I hate heights.”

“Good. I would have had nightmares.”

She laughed. “Come on in.”

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He followed her into the kitchen and looked around. The white cabinets' granite counter, farm sink, and appliances looked new.

“What have you done in here?”

She set the pan she pulled from the fridge on the counter. “Everything but the floor. The kitchen was one of the things I did first because it was in bad shape, but I brought in the construction company for that, too.”

“Are you going to do the floor yourself?”

She nodded. “There’s the original oak floor under the vinyl and carpet in the other rooms. I’m going to take it up and refinish it. Or at least try.”

“I can’t believe you have the energy for it.”

“It helps me settle. When I’m upset, I usually clean. It helps me think.”

“I usually clean out stalls, yell, or drink.”

She laughed.

He sat on one of the chairs at the small table she’d fit in the room, and his gaze followed her around the kitchen and watched her put two servings on plates.

She put the big one in the microwave. They stood looking at each other for the minute it took to heat his meal.

He could feel and see the tension grow in strength and the nerves she tried to hide.

The ding of the microwave had them both jerking before she took his plate to him.

“Here you go. Go ahead and start. I’ll get us something to drink while I’m waiting for mine to heat. What would you like?”

“Water is fine,” he said.

“Mmmm,” he hummed after he took his first bite. “Damn, woman, is there anything you can’t do? This is delicious.”

She laughed. “Yes. Quite a bit, actually. For starters, I can’t sew, keep an indoor plant alive, and you already know one. I can’t dance.”

He grinned. “Oh, I thought you did just fine.”

She snorted. “Because we barely moved. I tried line dancing at the bar the other night. I don’t know how many times I tripped or bumped into someone.”

He reached over the table and squeezed her hand. “I’m glad. If you were perfect, I would have disappointed you so much with all my flaws.”

“Why? What are you bad at?” she asked and took a bite.

“Oh, hell. Let’s start with communication.”

He grinned when she started to choke and was about to spew her food across the table.

She glared at him as she wiped her mouth. “I can agree with that.”

He laughed when she frowned at him.

“What else?” she asked.

“I’m not good at lovey-dovey stuff.”

“No PDA?”

His brows snapped together. “What the hell is that?”

“Public display of affection.”

He rolled his eyes. “Yeah, that. I hope that’s okay?”

“I’ve no idea. I’ve never really had a boyfriend.”

His mouth dropped open. “Like ever?”

“No, there was either no time, or the boys around me were dorks. I’ve gone on dates, but they never amounted to much.”

He didn’t know what to think of that. On the one hand, she wouldn’t be expecting a lot because she’d never had a relationship. On the other hand, he’d be the one to teach her how a relationship worked. He could even make things up. Damn, he really was a dumbass.

“Is there anything else?” she asked.

“There are too many to count, but you’ll find out in time.”

She tilted her head to the side. “Hell, that sounds ominous?”

He laughed. “No, not at all. I know I don’t have any bad habits, and I’m not a disaster waiting to happen. You’re safe with me.”

They finished eating, and she washed the dishes before turning back to him and leaning against the counter.

“Do you want a cup of coffee?”

He nodded and pointed at her large silver coffee maker on the counter. He’d never seen a machine like it before. “That’s pretty fancy.”

“I have to admit I’m addicted. Coffee is what keeps me going sometimes, and I got hooked on one of the stronger coffees that no one sells here, so I splurged and bought this.”

“Sure, I’ll try one.”

He watched her as she moved around the small kitchen. The fact that she was so graceful and even delicate didn’t fit with the fact that she had to be incredibly tough to do her job. He found the contrast extraordinarily sexy, and it made him want her even more.

He actually hadn’t found anything he didn’t like about her. Beautiful, hardworking, smart—fuck, yes, very smart—and sweet as could be.

“Here you go.”

She set a cup down. He almost laughed. It was one of those fancy drinks with frothy milk on top that high-priced coffee shops sold.

He almost choked when he took his first drink. “Jesus, this is strong.”

She grinned. “Yeah. It’s espresso with milk to tame down the bitterness, but it still has the punch. It got me through some long nights that I had to study or work.”

He took a few more sips. “Won’t this keep you up?”

“I won’t drink a lot right now, but I definitely stop around three or four in the afternoon, or I know I’ll be up.”

Jenny studied his expression. “Don’t you have work to do?”

He smirked. Trying to get rid of him, was she?

Good luck with that, Sweetheart . “I’ve got everything under control.

I’ve hardly set foot off the ranch in years.

Besides, the guys like me being gone because they don’t have me breathing down their necks or barking at them, and they say I usually come back in a better mood. Not a great one, but better.”

She chuckled. She stared down at her cup as the tension in the room grew.

“Come here, Honey. Let’s go sit on the sofa.”

She exhaled, nodded , and then followed him into the living room. It wasn’t a huge room, so she’d only been able to fit a chair and a small sofa in the space. She did have a television, but she rarely got to watch it.

She almost snorted when he sat next to her and took up the rest of the sofa. She bit

her lip to keep from smiling. He had to be uncomfortable, but he just leaned back, turned her way, and set his arm on the back of the sofa.

“Do you like the town?”

“Yes. Very much. And besides Carly, I’ve liked everyone here. They’re so down to earth, and they don’t treat me like I’m different. Tell me if this isn’t any of my business, but how did you and Carly meet?”

“We both grew up here. I’ve known her most of my life. After my father died, all I did was work to help with the pain, and then I missed having someone to talk to at night and...”

“And?”

“I wanted someone in my bed every night.”

Her eyes widened, and she blinked. “Oh, I ... um...” She could feel the heat of a blush cover her face.

He chuckled. “You and I are going to be in bed eventually.”

“I...”

He ran his fingers through her hair that had come loose from the ponytail. Without asking, he pulled the rubber band off.

A shiver coursed through her as she reached up. “What are you doing?”

“I’ve never seen your hair down. I like it.”

She finger-combed her hair. It had to look pretty messy. When she glanced up at him, her nipples tightened, and her womb pulsed at the possessive, territorial look in his eyes.

“Do you have any other family besides your parents?”

She shook her head. “No. Do you?”

“No. I’m the last McKenzie. Do you want to have children?”

“I want children more than anything. I’ve dreamed about having a big family.”

“Me, too.”

She fidgeted when he sat there and stared at her, making her anxiety rise. “Wh-what are you thinking?”

He lifted her easily and set her on his lap. “I’m thinking you’re about as perfect as I’ve ever seen.”

The feeling of his erection under her bottom made her thoughts scatter.

She sat very still while he ran his fingers over her face as if to memorize it before he cupped the back of her head and then took her lips, covering hers with a hunger that took her breath.

A ball of pleasure quickly grew to make her already sensitive breasts ache, and her nipples tightened painfully.

The heat from his body surrounded her, causing her pulse to beat erratically.

When he forced her mouth open by twisting his mouth on hers and his ravaging tongue tangled with hers, jolts of electricity coursed through her veins, making her moan.

She had no idea how long they sat there holding each other and kissing before the sound of her beeper penetrated. She pulled away from him.

“My beeper is going off. I have to get it.”

A feral growl slid from his throat, but he did release her.

She checked the message. “I’m sorry, Kaden. I’ve got to go.”

He stood and walked to her. “I know, Honey. The next weekend you have off, plan on being at my house.”

Her eyes widened. “The whole weekend?”

“Yes.” He pressed a hard kiss on her lips, turned, and left.

She hurriedly locked the house and jumped into her vehicle. She had plenty of time to think about what Kaden just said. At that moment, she needed to stop being a woman and let the vet side of her take over.

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A nother busy week passed for both, so they hadn't been able to see each other except in passing.

That was all right with her. The more she thought about the two of them in a relationship, she decided things were going too fast. They needed to get to know each other better before she spent the night.

Jenny dragged herself into her house and into the bathroom. It had been one call after another, and she was beat. All she wanted was a hot shower and her bed.

It helped her to know that, unless there was a major emergency that required both her and Charles, she had the next two days off to rest.

The hot spray beat down on her head, loosening up knotted muscles and the slight headache she had had most of the afternoon. She washed, dried her body, and blow-dried her hair before pulling on a long t-shirt and panties to sleep in.

The blinds were closed, so she turned off the light and fell into bed. She didn't know if it was five minutes or an hour before she heard pounding at her door. She almost ignored it, but there was always a chance it was someone who needed help.

She fumbled, getting the lock open, and then cracked open the door. Her pulse immediately spiked when she caught sight of a glowering Mac.

"Hi."

He tilted his head forward, but his expression didn't soften as he studied her.

“Did you forget about the weekend, Sweetheart?”

A shiver skated up her back. “I ... oh, not really.”

“Then do you mind telling me why your little ass isn’t on the ranch like it’s supposed to be?”

“I had a really long day, and I came home to shower.”

“You could have done that at the ranch.”

“But I also thought it best if we backed off a bit.”

“Backed off?”

The words were spoken softly, yet with an underlying tone of menace.

“I was going to call you earlier, but the day was crazy, and I forgot. I’m sorry.”

“Back off?” he asked again.

She cleared her throat. “It’s just we really don’t know each other...”

“We don’t know each other?” he asked.

She swallowed. His voice grew rougher, and his scowl darkened.

“I...”

She squeaked when he gently pushed on the door, making her back up. Her heart felt like it was going to gallop out of her chest when he closed the door and then took a

step toward her.

Her hands came out. “Wait.”

“I’ve been waiting, Baby. I can’t anymore.”

She gasped as her back hit the wall. He stopped when his chest touched hers, making her already aching nipples start to throb, and then put his elbows up on the wall on both sides of her head.

Her hands went to his chest to push him away, but she froze at the feeling of his steely muscles, hot skin, and hard nipples. Air lodged in her lungs as she pressed both hands against him.

“You see, Sweetheart. If you think you’re getting away from me tonight, you’re plum crazy. I’ve waited a long time to get into your panties, and nothing short of an earthquake will make me stop.”

“But, Mac ... what if I don’t want that?”

He smirked. “Oh, you want it. You’re just too innocent to know what it all means, but that is what I’m here for. I’m going to teach you everything you need at the same time I make you feel so damn good, you’ll never want another man.”

God, his arrogance should infuriate her, but it only intensified her already overwhelming desire. She never thought she’d want to be with a dominant man, but with Mac, any common sense she used to have flew out the window.

“Why can’t we wait until tomorrow? I’m so tired.”

“I’ll let you rest, Baby. We’ll go home now. It’s only five, so you can nap while I

finish up the day. I'll wake you to feed you, and then...you're mine."

A shudder shook her body as she inhaled. The breath stuck in her throat when one of his hands slid down her waist and then over her hips to the end of her t-shirt, and then slowly slid up until his hand was at the junction of her thighs.

"Let me give you a little taste of what I can give you, Sweetheart."

Her eyes slid closed when one of his fingers delved underneath her panties to press against her clit.

"Oh, God."

"This is nothing. Let's see if I can't get my finger into you. Jesus, woman, you're so fucking wet. I love it."

She could feel her embarrassment clashing with her passion, making her feel like she had no control and lost the sense of time as rivers of emotions she'd never felt before built inside her.

A high whine slid from her as he worked his thick finger into her tight cunt.

"Easy, let me go slow. Baby, you're so fucking tight. I can't wait to work my cock into you and take you on a ride you'll never forget."

Before his words penetrated, he bent his head, claimed her lips with his, and pushed his tongue into her mouth when she gasped. He took her mouth like he was starving, and it only made her want more.

His head rose, and he looked down at her. "Jesus. Look at you. I've never seen anything as beautiful as you."

She stared up at him. She tried to follow the conversation, but her heart pounded so loudly in her chest that's all she could hear. A spear of pleasure/pain hit her as his finger bottomed out inside her.

“Fuck. You took my finger.” He pulled out, raised her hands above her head, and gripped them with one hand while his other explored her. “Let's try two.” He started pushing two of his fingers into her.

She twisted her hips to help ease the pressure in her tight, wet cunt.

God, she didn't know how much more she could take.

It felt like she was burning from the inside out, and it wasn't the most comfortable feeling she'd ever had.

She didn't know how much longer she'd be able to take it without losing her grip on sanity.

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Damn, she was so tight he had to really work his fingers into her cunt.

On the one hand, the thought of pushing his erection in her made him feel like he was going to blow, but on the other, he was worried he was going to hurt her, and that terrified him.

Because that was the last thing he wanted.

He scissored his fingers inside of her, trying to stretch her as much as he could.

“Please...”

“I know, Baby. Just be a good girl a little while longer, and then I’ll make you come.”

Her head tossed back and forth, and her hips undulated against his hand, telling him she was too far gone to hear him.

He pressed his thumb to her clit and started pumping his fingers into her. “All right, Sweetheart. Come for me.”

A high wail came from her throat as she tightened on his fingers. “That’s it,” he encouraged.

He continued to work her through it until she collapsed against the wall.

He’d never seen a more erotic sight than her coming, and he wanted to do it again and again.

His fingers slid from her body, and he couldn't stop himself from bringing them up to his mouth and tasting her sweet cream.

He decided that honey didn't taste half as sweet and delicious as her cunt juice did.

She made a distressing sound that grabbed his full attention, so he brought her against his chest and held her while her breathing slowed.

"I've got you, Sweetheart." He pressed a kiss to the top of her head.

His teeth snapped shut when her hips surged against his erection for a second.

As much as he wanted to drive himself into her, he wanted to make it perfect, and her pinned against the wall was not going to be the first time they ever made love.

She jerked against him.

"Shhh, it's okay," he murmured and nuzzled her neck, making her sigh. "Let's get you dressed and pack a bag, and then I'll take you home."

She looked up at him. "I can drive."

"No, Sweetheart. You're wiped out."

Her back stiffened. "Mac, I might need my vehicle."

His brows snapped together. "I thought you said you were off this weekend?"

"I am unless there's an emergency."

He thought about it for a moment. "I'll drive you in your vehicle, and I'll have a few

of my men come back for the truck.”

“That’s silly. I am perfectly...”

He cupped her chin. “It’s not going to happen. Now, go pack a bag...”

He nudged her toward her bedroom. She turned and looked over her shoulder at him.

“But to spend a few nights together...”

“Jenny, enough talking. Go get dressed and pack a bag while I call my men.”

He waited until she turned and walked away to release the breath he’d been holding. He’d been terrified she’d refuse, and he didn’t know what he would do then besides go crazy. He made a quick phone call before he headed toward her bedroom.

She had put on a pair of shorts and a smaller t-shirt and was putting some things in a bag. He watched as she stopped and looked around in a daze.

“Here, Sweetheart. Let’s get going. Get your shoes on.”

She was sluggish, but he was just glad she was moving. He grabbed onto her arm and lifted the bag with the other. After he made sure the house was locked up, he got her in the vehicle and strapped her in before making his way around to the other side.

It took him a minute to adjust the seat as far back as it could go, and then he took off for home. Within twenty minutes, they pulled into his driveway and parked in front of the house. He grabbed her bag and then helped her out of the vehicle.

“Let’s get you to bed.”

His arm wrapped around her waist to steady her as they entered the house, walked up the wide steps, and then down the hallway back to his room.

Once in, he pulled back the covers. “Take your shorts off and get in, baby.”

Without a word, she pulled off her shoes and shorts and slid onto the bed. She turned on her side, sighed, closed her eyes, and was out within seconds.

He set her bag on the dresser and then stood, looking at her. He couldn't believe the feeling of supreme satisfaction he had with having her in his home and bed, and he didn't know if he'd be able to let her go anytime soon.

His lips pressed against her temple before he walked out. His men cornered him with several questions before he was able to set foot in any of the barns. He'd keep as busy as possible in hopes it would distract him from the sultry thoughts filling his head.

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Jenny rolled over when she heard a shower turn on. It took her a moment to remember where she was. She was actually in Mac's bedroom.

She glanced around the huge room, trying to learn as much as she could about the man she was quickly falling in love with.

Besides the large bed, there was a sofa and a chair on the other side of the room.

The area also had a television and what appeared to be a small bar.

She could see him in the space after a long day of work with a glass of something, stretched out in the chair, watching the news.

Her head jerked around when she heard the bathroom door open. The air lodged in her lungs when Mac walked out in nothing but a towel and used another one to dry his dark hair.

Jesus, there wasn't anything about the man that wasn't attractive. His chest was broad, and the muscles were clearly defined with just the right amount of hair in the middle. His arms were muscular from the long hours he spent working on the ranch.

The top half of him was a teak color from the sun, while the bottom half was a few shades lighter. The muscles in his legs bulged, and she thought his thigh was as big around as her waist. Even his feet were sexy.

"Woman, if you keep looking at me like that, you won't get fed anytime soon."

She inhaled, nodded, and kept her eyes on his. "I ... I'm not that hungry." She almost gasped. Oh, Lord, she hadn't meant to say that out loud.

His hands went to his waist. "You're killing me, Sweetheart. I want to make this good for you, but you keep doing shit like that."

She bit her lip to keep from grinning at the petulant tone of his voice. "I'm sorry."

His eyes narrowed, and he growled. "No, you're not."

She laughed.

"We'll make a compromise," he said.

One of her brows rose. "Really? What's that?"

"I'll have a tray sent up to us with snack food, that way, we don't have to get dressed, and we won't go hungry. If we're still hungry later, we can go down to the kitchen. Lucia always has food if I get hungry."

Her heart picked up at the innuendo in his words because she knew what "later" meant. She cleared her throat. "Lucia?"

"I guess you'd call her my housekeeper, but she pretty much manages the whole house. She has girls come in a few times a week to clean because she likes to stay in the kitchen."

"Has she been here long?"

"My whole life. She worked for my dad before me. She's more like a part of the family than anything."

“That’s wonderful.”

“I’ve got a great group of people here.”

“You’re fortunate.” She couldn’t believe they were so casual about the fact that he was about naked, and within minutes, they’d be having sex for the first time.

He picked up the phone on the bedside table. When he was done talking, he sat down on the bed by her hip and faced her while he braced himself on one hand that he planted on the opposite side of her as if to hold her in place.

Her heart felt like it was about ready to gallop out of her chest.

He raised one hand and smoothed the hair from her face. “I can see how nervous you are, Sweetheart, and I don’t want you to be. Everything’s going to be fine. I’ll make sure of it.”

“It’s just that I don’t have much experience.”

He nodded. “I know that. That’s why we’re going to take it slow.”

She reached out and placed her hand on his chest. He closed his eyes, and his head tilted back in bliss. Her fingertips traced over his chest, around his nipples, and then down to his abdomen.

He moaned. “I love when you touch me, so don’t ever stop.”

That was good because she loved touching him as much as she loved his hands on her.

A knock at the door startled her.

“Easy. It’s just our tray.” He got up, walked to the door, and opened it a little. He said a few words and then closed and locked it. When he turned, he held a tray laden with food and a bottle.

“She even brought wine?” Jenny asked.

Mac grinned. “She usually thinks of things I don’t. Why don’t you move up and lean against the headboard, and I’ll put the tray by your legs?”

She did and crossed her legs under her before he set the tray on the bed. “Oh, my.” There were small sandwiches, crackers, cheese, fruit, cookies, nuts, and wine. How in the world had the woman put this together so quickly?

He grinned and handed her a sandwich. “Try this. She makes the best chicken salad I’ve ever tasted.”

Jenny took one bite and hummed. It had a few spices in it she couldn’t decipher, but it was the right blend of mayo, meat, and it even had cut-up grapes in it.

“This is delicious.”

They ate in silence for a few minutes. All that time, she had to fight to keep her gaze above his waist instead of the towel that was still wrapped around him and the apparent erection that tented the material.

“Do you want any more?” he asked.

She took a last sip of wine and handed it to him. “No, I’m full. It was delicious.”

“You’ll have to tell her that when you meet her.”

Jenny watched as he stood and set the tray on the dresser. She swallowed when he came back and sat down next to her with only a foot of space between them.

“How are you doing?”

She made herself release the grip she had on the blanket. “Nervous.”

“That’s understandable, but I don’t want you to be afraid. There is nothing I will do to hurt you.”

“I know that.”

“Good. Now, give me a kiss.”

She leaned forward and pressed her lips to his, and desire immediately consumed her thoughts, and her body heated.

They reached for each other at the same time, and before she knew it, she was across his lap and having the breath sucked out of her, and it didn’t seem to matter.

He took her mouth like he was starving for her. Nipping, licking, and tasting every part he could reach as one of his large hands cradled the back of her head, and the other was sliding up and down the side of her body from her armpits to her upper thighs.

Mac raised his head and looked down at her. “Jesus, woman, you’re so beautiful.”

At that moment, she felt beautiful and desired, and she never wanted the feeling to end.

Sample Chapter

“Yo, brother, I think you need to go back home and mellow out.”

Alastair turned abruptly to face his brother, Calum, getting in his face and gritting his teeth. “Would you like to say that to me one more time?”

“Jesus Christ.” Calum raised his hands and took a hasty step back. “Man, it’s just that you’re really pissed off....”

“Aren’t you usually like this after talking to your mother?” Alastair asked.

“She’s your stepmother. That counts, nut fuck. But yes, I do. The woman’s a viper. It’s just when you’re pissed like this, someone usually ends up dead.”

Alastair rolled his eyes, turned, and walked down the long hallway.

The woman, Calum’s mother, was his fourth stepmother.

Alastair’s mother died a few days after giving birth to him, which ruined his father.

From what his family had told him over the years, they had been passionately in love, surprising because of their lifestyle.

Being a part of the mafia was not easy. You had to be cold and vicious to survive. It was especially hard for the women. The wives and mistresses had to deal with a lot.

His father had married four more times, trying to find the love he'd had with Isabella, Alastair's mother, and it had never happened. This last one, Una, Calum's mother, was the worst.

The first three stepmothers had died of surprisingly natural causes and not murder like one would expect living with the mafia—one in a car accident, one in an accidental drug overdose, and an accidental fall down the steps.

Alastair had liked that one the most. Nessa had been Logan, Ewen, and Rory's mother and had been sweet as can be. It had hit his father hard when she passed away. Not as hard as Alastair's mother, Isabella, but it took a while for him to want to have another woman in the house and in his life.

This last wife was a viper, and Alastair hated her, but he had to get along with her because his father was alive. After the stroke, his father had been unable to lead the Maclean clan, so Alastair had taken over the whole operation then, which was fine because he ran most of it anyway.

He shivered inside. Two minutes with his stepmother was torture. The woman was as mean as they came, and he couldn't understand what his father saw in her. She might have been attractive if not for the permanent sneer she had on her face.

His brother was probably right, but he couldn't stand the thought of going home to the same house his stepmother lived in, knowing she'd probably try to hunt him down to talk some more because he'd walked out on her tirade.

The temptation to just kill her was too strong, and he didn't know if his father would ever forgive him.

"What exactly are we looking at?" Calum asked.

"Our strip joint in Newport needs new women, and I sent out some of our guys to

find ones who were attractive and loved being a stripper. Most of the ones we have now are getting old and tired, so we'll get them other jobs in the business."

"Cool. Maybe think about taking one of them home," Duncan, another brother, said. "It might help your disposition."

"Fuck off," Alastair said without turning around.

Alastair opened the door to what could pass as a conference room. It had a long table and chairs and a small bar off to the side. Some meetings went late, and the guys were more pleasant if they had some alcohol in them. But not too much, or they started killing each other.

The women were already there waiting. The ones that noticed him stood as seductively as they could, begging for his or his brothers' attention. Being one of their mistresses was sought after not only for their good looks but mainly for the money.

"Hey," Stuart, one of his best men who had been with him for years, said and walked over to shake his hand. "I think we did well."

"You checked for diseases and made sure they had no children?"

"Sure, boss. I know what you like."

Alastair nodded. "Where's Ross? He was supposed to be helping you."

"He's coming in with the last one or two."

Alastair turned to Calum. "Can you get me a bourbon on the rocks?" He wouldn't admit it to his brothers, but he did need to mellow out, and a nice drink helped every time.

“Sure.”

The first drink went down smoothly and helped calm his anger a bit as he talked to Stuart and ignored the women trying to vie for his notice and interest. He shook his head and snorted when his brothers did give the women their attention and had girls all over them.

“Craig is going to take these women to the club if you’re okay with them,” Stuart said.

Alastair turned and whistled for Duncan.

“I’m going to put you in charge of this.

Take them to Speedy’s, get the women who will live in our apartments next to the club moved in, and take the rest back to their place but tell them they have to be at work tomorrow.

If they are late, they’re fired. There are no second chances. ”

“I got it,” Duncan said.

His brother and a couple of the men rounded up the women and took them out a back door to the vans waiting.

“Are you going to wait for the last of them?” Stuart asked.

Alastair looked at his watch and sat down. “I’ll give them a few minutes.”

He hadn’t finished with his second drink when a side door opened and Ross, one of his guys, walked in, dragging a woman. She was crying and fighting to get away from him.

“Shut up, bitch,” Ross said and shook her.

“What the fuck are you doing?” Stuart yelled.

Alastair held up a hand, set down his drink, and stood to face Ross. He walked to stand in front of the man and crossed his arms over his chest to keep from strangling the man, trying to ignore the woman’s pleas and cries. “Tell me.”

Ross stuttered. “Oh, well, her uncle owed us some money, and I was supposed to get it, but he didn’t have it, and so I thought we could use her as collateral until he pays up.”

Calum, Stuart, and the rest of his guys cursed, and the tension rose in the room.

Alastair just stared at the woman. She was tiny but had curved hips and larger breasts. She was dressed in a long white nightgown with lace. Her dark hair was tousled like she’d been pulled from bed.

“Who gave you permission to do that?” Alastair asked when he turned back at Ross.

“Well, no one. I just thought...”

“Is it your job to think?” Alastair asked.

“Well, no.”

“Jesus Christ, you dumbshit,” Stuart said.

Alastair walked up, cupped the woman’s chin, and raised her face.

His breath stalled in his lungs because her eyes were the most beautiful he’d ever seen, even when they were red and swollen from crying.

They were light blue in the middle and green on the other part, and they seemed to look right through him.

“Who is your family?” Alastair asked her.

She sniffed. “I don’t have one besides an uncle I haven’t seen in years.”

“No husband?”

“No. Please, let me go home. I won’t tell anyone. I don’t even know you,” she said.

For once in his life, he made a decision with his heart instead of his head. He pulled out a gun and shot Ross in the forehead in one smooth move.

Everyone in the room stood frozen and in shock until the woman screamed.

Alastair put his gun away and reached for her when it looked like she was going to faint, only to have her flinch in horror away from him. He knew why, but it still pissed him off, which was ridiculous. Of course, she would be terrified of him. He just murdered someone in front of her.

He didn’t like the blood that had been sprayed over her from Ross’s head, and he wanted her clean as soon as possible.

He kept a few feet away from the woman and waited for her to be calm enough to hear him. “My name is Alastair Maclean. We’re the mafia in this part of the city.”

Alastair heard his brother curse behind him and ignored him.

The woman was hunched against the wall. Tears mixed with blood and brain matter ran down her face. “Why are you telling me this? Are you going to kill me next?”

Alastair shook his head. "I'm making sure that you won't be able to go anywhere, ever."

"I don't understand. I've never done anything to you or anyone."

"I know. Sometimes your life takes a path you didn't expect." No kidding. He never predicted he'd kidnap a woman and plan to keep her forever. "My advice is to make the best of this. I'll treat you like a princess as long as you're loyal to me. Do you understand?"

"No, I don't. I don't understand any of this."

He sighed. "That's okay. We have plenty of time." He held out his hand and waited.

She shook her head.

"You can either take my hand and walk out of here with some dignity, or I can have a few of my men carry you out. Choose."

She studied him for a moment and before she reached for his hand. He could see how much she was trembling, but he would take care of her as soon as they got home. When her shaking, tiny cold hand slid into his hand, something inside of him settled, and a warmth filled him.

"That's good, baby." He pulled her along and looked at one of his men. "Take care of Ross."

"You got it, boss."

As he led her out to his car, he felt something shift in his universe, and he knew he'd forever be changed. He just didn't know if it would be for the good or bad. Only time would tell.

End of sample chapter