



TAMRA BAUMANN

It Had  
to Be Love

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ALSO BY TAMRA BAUMANN

*It Had to Be Him*

# It Had to Be Love

TAMRA BAUMANN



Montlake  
Romance

This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, organizations, places, events, and incidents are either products of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously.

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Published by Montlake Romance, Seattle  
[www.apub.com](http://www.apub.com)

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ISBN-13: 9781503945449  
ISBN-10: 1503945448

Cover design by Laura Klynstra



*This book is dedicated to my husband, Mark, the basis for all that's good in every hero in my stories. While I fall a little bit in love with all my written heroes, none could ever equal you.*

# CONTENTS

[CHAPTER ONE](#)

[CHAPTER TWO](#)

[CHAPTER THREE](#)

[CHAPTER FOUR](#)

[CHAPTER FIVE](#)

[CHAPTER SIX](#)

[CHAPTER SEVEN](#)

[CHAPTER EIGHT](#)

[CHAPTER NINE](#)

[CHAPTER TEN](#)

[CHAPTER ELEVEN](#)

[CHAPTER TWELVE](#)

[CHAPTER THIRTEEN](#)

[CHAPTER FOURTEEN](#)

[CHAPTER FIFTEEN](#)

[CHAPTER SIXTEEN](#)

[CHAPTER SEVENTEEN](#)

[CHAPTER EIGHTEEN](#)

[CHAPTER NINETEEN](#)

[CHAPTER TWENTY](#)

[CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE](#)

[CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO](#)

[ACKNOWLEDGMENTS](#)

[Sneak Peek: \*It Had to be Fate\*](#)

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR



## CHAPTER ONE

For the first time since he'd become sheriff, Ryan Anderson was tempted to lie. Who thought up the ridiculous questions online dating apps asked anyway?

He had no idea what his "ideal first date" would be. He wasn't one of those all-in-touch-with-his-feelings kind of guys.

Probably a movie. Less talking.

With his deputy returning soon from answering another trespassing call, Ryan only had the office to himself for a few more minutes. Maybe he'd tackle the easy questions first.

Height: 6'5

Weight: 220

Age: 30

Hair Color: Dark brown

Eye Color: Blue

After that the questions got complicated.

Favorite hobby?

Would running and going to the gym be considered hobbies? He liked keeping fit, but it was part of his job to do that, being in law enforcement. Or how about reading mysteries? No. That made him sound like a wimpy bookworm, but he liked getting lost in a great story.

How about hiking and whitewater rafting? But if a woman didn't want to do those things it wouldn't be a deal breaker. He'd just go by himself.

A glance at the clock in the bottom right-hand corner of his computer screen showed it was almost time to go.

His tongue slid over his jagged, cracked tooth. No choice. He had to go

this time.

As annoying as the questions on the application were, going to the dentist could be just as aggravating. And chances were slim someone in sleepy Anderson Butte, Colorado, would commit a serious crime in the next five minutes so he could cancel his appointment—again.

It'd take him all of two minutes to cross the grassy square, so he'd leave in three.

Turning his attention back to the screen, he skipped the hobby question. He'd come back to it later.

Next it asked what he preferred in a woman's build and coloring.

A vision appeared of a cute, short woman with a pretty smile and brown hair. Sarah—someone who'd never cheat and lie like his mother had. He'd been in love with Sarah—a quiet, sweet, loyal woman—since middle school, but he'd had a hard time telling her how he'd felt. Now she was married to a jerk she'd never leave.

He held the women he dated to high standards. Maybe too high. He'd been accused of being too rigid, too black and white, on top of being too quiet, but he'd seen what the poor choices in his parents' marriage had resulted in, and refused to make the same mistake. Many of his friends had come from good homes with awesome parents and he'd always vowed he'd have that, or stay single.

He typed the opposite of Sarah: Tall and blonde.

At the echo of heavy footsteps approaching outside his office, Ryan quickly saved his profile just as Mike, one of his deputies, stepped inside.

Ryan called out, "Gotta go. Make sure you file that call report before you leave for the day."

His deputy, a fellow football player on their high school team, shot him a stupid grin. "In a hurry to visit our pretty new dentist, Sheriff?"

Nope. He'd never admit it out loud—he had a reputation to uphold—but he'd always feared going to the dentist. It was the last thing he'd be in a hurry to do. No matter how good-looking Tara was.

Ignoring Mike's question, he said, "Do you get a weird vibe from her? Like she's hiding something?"

Mike sat down at his desk. "The kind of vibes I get from Tara would earn me a smack upside the head from my wife."

"She should smack you anyway, you deserve it."

“A man can look.” He chuckled. “Hey, the mayor stopped by earlier. He said, and I quote, ‘Tell Ryan I want this bogus hunt for the long-lost whiskey recipe that surely doesn’t exist to stop,’ end quote. You think your crazy uncle really buried that map? Those barrels of whiskey from Prohibition days could be worth a fortune if they’re still intact. I’ve been tempted to look myself.”

It’d been a week since that letter with cryptic clues had been accidentally unearthed and posted online. The recipe for what was once known as the best whiskey west of the Mississippi had caused the biggest stir the town had seen in a long time. The mayor, his father, had been on Ryan’s case to be harder on the trespassing, treasure-hunting townspeople so all the digging would stop.

Like that would happen anytime soon. Bets were being placed on when that buried box with the recipe and map would be found. “No idea. It’s your turn to make the breakfast burrito run in the morning. See you.”

Ryan slapped his laptop closed, then he locked it in his top drawer to prevent curious eyes from checking out his browser history. He didn’t want anyone to know he’d been perusing dating sites—and jobs—in Denver..

He headed out of his office in Town Hall, still thinking about Tara. Mike was right. The new dentist was beautiful, tall, blonde, and easy to look at. The kind of woman men stopped in their tracks and stared at. But his brother, Ben, had asked her out so bro-code dictated Tara was off-limits. Not that he’d ever want to date a dentist in the first place. That’d be like Superman dating the female version of Lex Luthor.

He made his way down the long hall, past all the ancient pictures hanging on the walls of Andersons who’d served the town before him, and headed for the main entrance.

An old, croaky woman’s voice called out, “Good luck, Ryan. I hear Tara hands out sugar-free lollipops if you’re real good.”

*Now they were keeping track of his dental appointments? He really needed to move.*

Forcing a smile, he waved a hand in the direction of the elder members of the church council, known as the Three Amigos. The women sat behind a long table strategically placed by the front doors so no one could pass by without their notice. Sticking to their usual MO, they combined saving souls with peddling arts and crafts to raise money for some cause or another.

“Bye, ladies. Be good while I’m gone. No shortchanging anyone, you hear?”

Their gray heads all bobbed as they chuckled.

Slapping the glass doors open, he trudged down the wide stone steps. The August sunshine reflected brightly off the freshly whitewashed bandstand in the middle of the square. Forgoing his shades, because he’d be there by the time he could wrangle them out of the front of his shirt, he strode across the grassy park.

Once on the other side, he hopped onto the raised wooden walkway and reached out to tug on the office door. His hand stopped midair as he glanced at the radio on his belt, begging it to squawk.

No such luck.

The door swung open and the curvy little dental assistant, Missy, reached out and grabbed his wrist. “There you are, Ryan. Tara and I had a bet whether you’d cancel again. She now owes me twenty bucks, so thank you very much for showing up.”

Great. Now they were betting on *him*?

---

Grateful Ryan’s procedure had gone smoothly and quickly, Tara said, “And we’re done!” She tilted Sheriff Sexy up. Best to make a hasty retreat. “See you in two weeks to place the permanent crown.” And to endure another round of none-of-his-beeswax questions.

With a nod at Missy to finish up and make the next appointment, Tara forced herself to calmly walk to her office.

After closing the door behind her, she leaned against it and shut her eyes.

He knew she was hiding something. She could feel it.

She slipped out of her white lab coat and hung it on the peg next to her license—the ink barely dry with her new name—and whispered, “Tara Carter, you need to avoid that man. No falling for that gorgeous smile.” She’d made that mistake before.

She circled her desk to answer e-mails until Ryan left. Then she’d have a little chat with Missy about her unprofessional behavior toward a patient—

for the tenth time.

Missy, like Anderson Butte, had a quaint, small-town charm about her, but underneath lay a complex history Tara still hadn't quite figured out. Much like the ins and outs of the longtime feud between the Grants and Ryan's family, the Andersons. People not related to either clan seemed to back one family or the other.

Even more surprising was finding the town had a "secret pact" she'd had to sign before she could buy out the practice from the previous dentist. They'd evidently run a background check on her before deeming her trustworthy enough to let her in on their incredible secret. Luckily, between the police and her wealthy father, her new background looked perfectly normal.

Who would ever have guessed tiny Anderson Butte was a secret celebrity hideaway? She'd seen some of the biggest names in Hollywood strolling down the street, going completely "unnoticed."

All the townspeople received profit sharing, health and dental benefits, and 401(k) plans in return for keeping their mouths shut about the celebrities who visited year after year because of the total privacy the quaint lake town provided them.

Any place where people stuck together like that and could keep that big a secret seemed a safe place for her to be. Well, as long as she could avoid Ryan and keep her own secret safe.

The jingle of the bell over the front door signaled Ryan's departure, so Tara joined Missy to help with the end-of-day cleanup. "We need to talk."

Her assistant's eyes widened in apology. "Tara, I'm so sorry. I was annoyed with him. I know the things I said weren't"—she lifted her fingers and made air quotes—"professional behavior. I'm still working on that."

"Well, work harder, okay?" But Missy *had* been doing a little better. Especially with some of the Grants she loved to hate, even though she wasn't an Anderson. "So what's the deal with you two? Former boyfriend?"

Missy snorted. "I wish. Ryan doesn't date local girls. So the other night after we'd tossed a few back at Brewster's, I asked him if he wanted to take me home for some one-night-stand kind of fun. He said there was no such thing as one-night-stand kind of fun when we'd have to see each other all the time for the rest of our lives. He's the only guy I know who would turn that down. It's not like I'm a gargoyle or anything, right?"

“No, you’re a beautiful woman.” Missy was five years her junior at twenty-eight, and cute as a kitten. Tara could never stay mad at her for long. “People say Ryan’s quiet, but he always seems to have plenty of questions for *me*.”

“Today was the most I’ve ever heard him speak if it wasn’t about a book.” Missy finished wiping down her workspace. “He’s the typical ‘strong, silent type,’ unless you get him talking about reading. I mostly just ask him about his latest book and then ogle him while he jabbers on. He’s so damn *hot*. It’s a crying shame for all of us local girls.”

Tara wouldn’t have pegged a big guy like Ryan as a reader. She was too. Lately, her idea of a fun Friday night had been to spend the evening curled up with the new man in her life—her adorable mixed-breed puppy, Sherlock. Add in a few glasses of yummy wine and a good book on her e-reader and she was a happy camper.

“Well, keep working on your game face, okay? Especially because we have three Grants in a row on tomorrow’s schedule.” Tara flipped the switch to turn on the sterilizer, then killed the lights in the back.

Missy beamed a sweet smile. “Thanks, Tara. You’re the best boss ever.” She held up a pair of sunglasses. “So great a boss, I’ll bet you’d save me the embarrassment of reliving Ryan’s rejection and return these to him?”

“Um . . .” Would it look odd if she didn’t comply?

“Thanks.” Missy handed over the glasses. “You can catch him at the diner in a few minutes. Ryan is a man of routine. He eats at the diner every Tuesday and Thursday evening. And he exercises every day. As soon as the snow melts in the spring, he runs around the lake in the morning, then hits the gym at the hotel. Every. Single. Morning. Not that I’m stalking him or anything. It’s just hard not to notice. See you tomorrow.”

Tara had noticed his routine too. It was how she usually avoided him. “Wait. You instructed Ryan how to care for his temporary crown and about eating while still numb, right?”

While working for the previous laid-back dentist, Missy had formed bad habits. It had been another of the challenges of retraining her.

Missy blinked. “Whoops. Sorry. I’ll work on that part too. Okay?”

Before Tara could chastise Missy, she said, “I promise I’ll be so sweet to those Grants tomorrow they won’t know what hit them. Bye!” And she slipped out the door.

Tara frowned at the sunglasses in her hand as she pulled her office door closed behind her. Ryan should have been warned to be careful eating until the numbness wore off so he wouldn't bite his lip or cheek.

She was going to have to track him down at the diner before he ate.

She'd rather give herself a root canal.

Resigned to the task, she stuffed Ryan's sunglasses into her purse, then headed toward the diner. It was a beautiful, warm summer evening. The kind that could make her forget her worries, for at least a little bit.

The beautiful lake, visible in quick glimpses between the buildings, reflected bright streaks of the slowly lowering sun. She drew a deep, pine-scented breath of air into her lungs and smiled. She loved living in the prettiest little town in Colorado. The brightly painted buildings all stood in straight rows surrounding a grassy park with a cute bandstand in the middle. The park was usually filled with kids all summer. It was like a town out of the old movies her mother liked to watch. Never any trash, or graffiti—that would be bad for celebrity business.

"Hi, Doctor Carter!" the boys on the town's soccer team called out in unison.

She lifted a hand and waved. Their coach, a blond beach bum who had made it clear he'd like to know her better in a naked way, had a big naughty grin on his face. "Hi, Tara. I'll be at Brewster's later if you'd like to keep me company."

"Thanks, Toby. But I've got plans." With her dog, but Toby didn't need to know that.

He threw a hand over his heart. "You're killing me, Tara!"

The boys laughed as Toby pretended to be mortally wounded by her rejection. He'd surely try again the next time she saw him. But she wasn't a poacher. Toby was sleeping with the hairdresser, Pam—a blonde bombshell with a big heart.

Tara tugged open the glass door to Good Eats and Better Treats, then glanced toward the counter in the fifties-themed diner looking for Ryan. He wasn't there yet. Might as well eat dinner while she waited. It wasn't like she'd have to share a meal with the man. He always sat at the end of the counter with his back to her. She'd just say what she needed to, then do her best to ignore those broad shoulders, so like her ex-husband Spencer's, as she always did.

She slipped into a red vinyl booth and Gloria, the owner, appeared. She handed over a plastic-coated menu. “Hiya, Tara. The usual? Salad, with grilled chicken? Dressing on the side?”

Tara glanced up from her menu and smiled. A person couldn’t help but smile at Gloria. She was like a cartoon character come to life with her beehive hairdo, blue eye shadow, bright-red lipstick, and pink bowling shirt with “Gloria” boldly embroidered across her chest. A spunky woman stuck in the fifties who had a kind heart.

“Nope. I’m going to walk on the wild side tonight and let you bring me whatever the special is.”

Gloria’s brows shot up under her teased bangs as she shoved her pen into her tall hair. There were four other pens in there already. “Well now, is that so? The whole town is going crazy lately, what with the hunt on for that box and now you risking the daily special. There’s red meat involved, you still game?”

She nodded. “Bring it on.”

It wasn’t like she *never* ate red meat. Just not most of the time. It’d be a great way to push her boundaries. Her former shrink in Denver who’d helped her move on from her ordeal would be proud of her.

She was proud of herself for overcoming what Spencer had done to her. Well, mostly. She had a few more tiny things to work on. Like learning how to date without engaging her emotions, because she’d never make that mistake again. Her heart couldn’t be trusted to choose the right man.

Shaking her head, she dug the e-reader from her purse, opened the cover, and started where she’d left off the night before. Nope. She’d never make that mistake again.

---

He’d had to skip lunch, so Ryan was seriously looking forward to his favorite Tuesday night dinner—meatloaf, mashed potatoes, corn on the cob, and his aunt Gloria’s awesome chocolate mousse pie. He opened the diner’s door and did a quick scan of the room as he made his way to his usual stool at the counter. No big-named celebrities tonight they’d have to pretend to ignore. Then he spotted Tara’s blonde head tilted over whatever she was reading.



She looked up and called out, "Ryan?"

Now she wanted to talk? Every time he tried to ask her a question earlier, she'd stuck some new tool in his mouth, cutting him off.

When he reached the table her fingers clenched around her e-reader like he was going to snatch it from her hands. She always tensed up like that when he was around.

She said, "Hi. You forgot something earlier." She dug inside her purse and came up with his sunglasses.

"Thanks." He slipped them into the front of his shirt and turned to go.

"One more thing." Tara held out a hand toward the red vinyl bench across from her.

After he'd slid into the booth, she tucked a few strands of her pretty blonde hair behind her ear and cleared her throat. "I wanted to remind you about how to care for that temporary crown."

Every time her eyes wandered away from his, she quickly snapped them back as she told him the dangers of sticky food to his temporary crown. Like she was forcing herself to maintain eye contact with him.

What was up with that? Was it his cop instincts making him suspicious, or was she just a little shy? Maybe he'd run a deeper background check on her later to quiet his gut feeling that Tara was hiding something.

When she'd finished, he said, "Got it. Thanks." He'd started to slide out of the booth again as Gloria laid plates of Tuesday specials in front of them both.

Aunt Gloria planted her hands on her wide hips. "So, this is a nice change. Usually you both sit on opposite sides of the diner." Gloria lightly cuffed the back of his head. "'Bout time you noticed what a beautiful woman Tara is. Even if she is a 'dreaded' dentist." Gloria chuckled at her own joke as she made her way back around the counter to top off more coffee cups.

His eyes cut to Tara's. "Sorry. I know you prefer my brother's, or just about anyone's, company to mine." He grabbed his plate and made to leave.

She reached out and laid a soft hand on his arm. "Wait, Ryan." Then, as if his skin were on fire, she jerked her hand away. "It's . . . nothing personal."

She moved the food around on her plate and avoided looking at him again.

Maybe he should just go sit at the counter.

But as he turned to go, he could've sworn he heard her whisper, "I can

do this,” under her breath before she finally looked him in the eyes again and asked, “So what’s up with that buried box, anyway?”

“It’s a long story.” His stomach growled. Loudly. But maybe she hadn’t heard that?

Tara’s lips thinned as she wrangled back a grin. “Go ahead and eat. You can tell me after.”

Great. He’d just embarrassed himself, and next he’d need to have a long, drawn-out conversation with a woman who could barely look him in the eyes. He should’ve stayed home and made himself a sandwich.

---

Tara took a bite while surreptitiously watching Ryan eat. While he did it neatly, the speed at which he ate was as if he’d just spent a week lost in the wilderness. Probably took a lot of food to fuel all those toned muscles.

She’d rather be home snuggled up with Sherlock instead of sitting across from the nosiest, albeit most gorgeous, man she’d ever laid eyes on. He was bound to ask her more questions. But the flash of something in Ryan’s eyes when he’d said she’d prefer anyone else’s company over his made her stay. Hurting anyone was the last thing she’d ever want to do.

He paused between bites and beamed one of his big, sexy smiles. Her traitorous stomach always clenched when he did that.

He said, “Long time no see at the gym. What’s up with that?”

She forced herself to look into his stunning blue eyes, rather than at his chin like she usually did. His perpetual five o’clock shadow made him even more dangerously handsome. “Nothing. Just . . . been busy, I guess.” Lamest answer ever. The man was trained to sniff out lies. She needed to step it up.

“So you never answered earlier. Did you leave a heartbroken boyfriend behind when you moved here, Tara?”

*Showtime.*

“Maybe I left a whole string of brokenhearted men, like I hear you have with the women around here?” She cocked a brow to add some confidence she wasn’t feeling.

The corner of Ryan’s upper lip quirked. “A string would be an exaggeration. You’re good at avoidance techniques.”

“I’m even better at knowing when someone is prying.”

He chuckled. “Maybe I was just checking to see how single you really are.”

“Why would you do that if you don’t date local women?”

“Being a good wingman. Heard my brother asked you out, but he had to cancel?”

She’d accepted Ben’s invitation because all the girls said he didn’t commit to relationships. Just what she was looking for. She’d never let herself be fooled by so-called love again. Marriage was a thing in her past. “Yeah. Medical emergency. Part of the problem with being the only doctor in town, I guess.”

He nodded as he stared so deeply into her eyes it was as if he could see all the way to her soul. Could he see the damage?

She had to look away.

Why couldn’t Anderson Butte have a craggy old sheriff? Ryan stirred up some serious physical desire within her. He was the first to flip her attraction switch since her divorce. She’d figured that piece of hardware was gone for good in her, until she’d met Ryan three months ago.

The next time she looked up from her plate, Ryan had finished off his meal and was swiping a napkin across his mouth. He glanced across the table at her almost full plate and winced. “I missed lunch today. I don’t usually . . . eat that fast.”

Being numb hadn’t hindered him in the least. Except he’d missed a spot with the napkin because he couldn’t feel that side of his lower lip.

“You’ve got a little something right here.” She reached across the table to wipe the corner of his mouth with her napkin.

When his brows shot up, she realized what she was about to do and stopped an inch from his face. “Oh, I’m sorry. What was I thinking?” She quickly tugged her hand back and put it in her lap. “Work habit, I guess.”

“Thanks, Mom.” Ryan’s eyes twinkled with amusement as he swiped his mouth again. “Am I good now?”

Mortified, she just nodded.

Maybe it’d been good his brother had canceled their date. She’d clearly forgotten how to share a simple meal with a man.

As soon as his napkin was back in his lap, Gloria appeared with Ryan’s pie.

Ryan thanked her, then turned his intense, blue-eyed gaze on Tara. "I'll wait until Gloria brings yours."

That was nice of him. But then, Spencer could be nice too. Until he wasn't.

"Thanks." Digging deeper into the heap of creamy mashed potatoes on her plate, she said, "So, that long story about the box?"

"Oh, yeah. Well—" A scratchy noise sounded from the radio on Ryan's belt. A woman's voice said, "Zeke called and said he saw a digger on your grandma's land. Know you're not on call, but since you're probably still at the diner, you're closest."

Ryan glanced at his pie and sighed. Then he unclipped the radio from his belt and lifted it to his mouth. "On it."

"Saved from that long tale by the radio, or a digger in this case?"

"Yep." A little grin stretched his full lips. "Maybe you should ask someone else. I'm not one for storytelling."

"Or talking in general, I hear." She stuffed another bite of the best meatloaf she'd ever had into her mouth and nearly sighed too. "Unless it's about books? Or asking me personal questions?"

"Yeah. I like to read." His grin turned into a full-on lethal smile, only just a little lopsided because of the Novocain.

Her stomach did that floppy thing again.

He slid out of the booth. "The town website has all the details about the box." With a quirk of his brows, he said, "And maybe I find you as fascinating as a good book, Tara Carter. Bye."

"See you."

Fascinating? He probably thought she was a serial killer or something. Not someone trying to hide from a sociopathic, computer-genius ex.

Ryan was related to half the town. If she confessed to him, asked him for help, would he try to dig up her past, or tell everyone else? Her contact at the Denver police had said to tell no one but him if she had any problems. Even a simple Google search of her real name could alert Spencer of her whereabouts. No, she wouldn't risk it.

As Ryan disappeared through the doors, Tara's shoulders finally relaxed. It was like the man cast a spell on her sometimes with those pretty eyes of his. She'd almost wiped his mouth, when the last thing she wanted was to touch him again and feel that zap of awareness she had when she'd

laid her hand on his arm.

But maybe the embarrassing almost-wiping-of-his-mouth had been a good thing. He'd probably be the one to avoid her in the future instead of vice versa.

She hoped.

## CHAPTER Two

As soon as Tara finished her meal, Gloria plunked down a piece of chocolate pie, then scooped Ryan's into a to-go box. "Be a pal and drop this off at Ryan's house on your way home, will you? Maybe he'll invite you in and show you what a great job he's done renovating the cabin. On his own, by the way. He's really handy." She added a wink.

Tara was full, so she put her pie into Ryan's box too. "I'm sure his home is lovely, but nothing is going on between me and Ryan, Gloria. He just forgot something at my office earlier, and I returned it."

Gloria slid onto the seat across from Tara. "Yeah, but then he stayed and ate dinner with you. Something he never does. He eats alone so he doesn't have to chitchat. And I saw that big grin there at the end." Gloria pushed the box closer to Tara's side. "You have to walk right by his house anyway."

Tara pushed the box back. "You *trapped* him into eating with me. And he just got called to his grandmother's house, so Ryan won't be home anyway, Matchmaker Molly." She slid out of the booth. "Besides, I have to get home before Sherlock gets too bored and tries to bust himself out under the fence. Will you put Ryan's meal on my tab too, please?" It was the least she could do after making that the most awkward meal two people had probably ever shared. She had some work to do if she wanted to start dating again. Not that that was a date.

"Will do." Gloria chuckled as she rose from the booth. "I don't know, Tara. Never seen him let any other pretty woman almost wipe his chin."

She groaned. "That was . . . he was numb from earlier . . . oh never mind. See you later." She grabbed her purse and headed out the door.

That Gloria didn't miss a trick.

A few minutes later, as she walked past Ryan's big, beautiful cabin near the lake, she stopped to look. If the inside was as nice as the outside it probably *was* something to see. The wood was freshly varnished, it had a shiny new blue tin roof, and he had pots of blue, red, and yellow wildflowers strategically placed at the front porch. Touches a woman would think of, not usually a man. It didn't match his so-called strong-but-silent personality.

Her cell rang, pulling her back to the present and pointing out that she was standing in front of the man's house staring like a stalker. He'd think she was one of those next. She didn't need to give him any more ideas about the "mysterious criminal past" he seemed to always be searching for. She dug her phone out of her purse and glanced at the screen.

Her overprotective mother.

She considered letting it go to voice mail, but then her parents would worry and call out the National Guard. She started walking again and poked the green button. "Hello, Mother. How are you?"

"Annoyed with your father as usual. Checking in to be sure you've been pushing your comfort zone like the doctors said."

Tara sucked in a deep breath for patience. "I'm thirty-three, not ten. And I'm fine."

"You always say you're fine even when you aren't. And it's beyond me how anyone can live that far from a Nordstrom. Maybe we'll come for a visit and check out this little town for ourselves?"

"No! It's too soon. You both still forget to call me Tara. You guys really need to work on that or you'll ruin everything. I'll see you at Laura's wedding soon anyway."

Her mother became quiet, which was never a good thing. Nefarious plotting usually occurred during those pauses. "We're just worried about you being all alone there, Jamie."

She really couldn't blame her mother for the name slip. Or for worrying after what Spencer had done to her. He'd had her parents as fooled as she'd been. He'd even been a top executive in her father's company. Everyone thought Spencer was the nicest guy in the world, not the monster he turned out to be. "Then you'll be happy to know I had dinner with a man tonight." That wasn't a lie and it was for a good cause. To help her mother relax.

"You did? Can you be sure he's . . . safe?"

“He’s lived here his whole life. I’m friends with his sisters—I’ve told you about Meg and Casey—and he’s the sheriff. Can’t get much safer than that, right?” Except for the part about him digging around in her past.

“I guess not.” Her mother made a humming noise. “He’ll do for a transitional man, but you can’t possibly have a long-term relationship with someone . . . in public service, can you?”

Public service? Her mother was such a snob.

“It was just dinner.”

“Well, dinners lead to more dinners and then so on. What happened to the date you were going to have with that doctor? He’d be more the type your father and I would choose for you.”

“No doubt. Sorry, I need to let you go now, so say hello to Dad for me, and thanks for calling. We’ll talk soon. Bye.”

She quickly ended the call, thankful she’d held off one more of her mother’s attempts to invite herself for a visit. She just hoped she could keep her parents away so her secret would be safe. Her father was a powerful man who was used to getting his way. And he was just as bad about calling her Jamie as her mother.

But she needed to stay hidden.

---

Ryan jogged down his grandmother’s long gravel drive and found her on the shore of the lake peering through the scope of her Remington. Her cane rested against her leg.

He didn’t want to startle her, so he called out quietly, “Grandma? We need to talk.”

“Go away. I’ve got me another trespasser. I’m gonna scare the pants off of this one so he never sniffs around here again.”

“I’d rather you put down that gun.”

“This is my land, and I’ve got the proper signs posted. You know as well as I do I can legally shoot anyone on it who doesn’t belong!” She squinted her eyes and shifted the gun. “You’ve been awful cranky lately. What’s up with that?”

Him, cranky? His tall, feisty grandmother cornered the market on



cranky. And a few other things like stubborn, short-tempered, and crafty. But she'd helped raise him and his brother and sisters after their mother had died and he loved her more than anyone else.

He worked some false mean into his growl. "I'm serious, Grandma." Grams was one of the best shots in the state, but she was getting older and might actually hurt someone.

"Was that supposed to scare me?" She lowered her gun and laughed. "Oh, all right. You get five minutes to go and shoo that damn Grant off my land before I shoot the both of you. Now, get!"

"Grandma—"

"Clock's ticking, boy!"

"Fine. I'm going."

What was making him cranky lately was all the trouble that damn note being unearthed had caused. It had the whole town in a digging frenzy.

He slipped behind his grandmother's house and toward the sounds of a pick rhythmically hitting dirt. His grandmother made it her duty to keep the rivalry alive between his family and the Grants, a rivalry that dated back to the day the town was founded. Her feisty side loved keeping the pot stirred within the factions.

Near a stand of trees that formed a triangle with the biggest tree at its center, the old guy who used to run the gypsum mine just outside town took another swing. Ryan called out, "Hey there, Pete."

The man stopped swinging and pulled a red rag from his back pocket to wipe his brow. "Whadda you want?"

Pete had about as much respect for anyone with the last name of Anderson as Ryan's grandmother did for the Grants. "You're trespassing. Best to grab your things and go before my grandmother starts shooting."

"Nope." Pete spat chewing tobacco juice on the ground next to Ryan's boot. "That note was written by an Anderson, but it said anyone who found where the box is hidden could keep the spoils. The way I see it, that was an Anderson giving special permission to hunt on the land in question."

A loud gunshot echoed through the air just before a bullet thumped into the bark of a tree three feet above Pete's head. He spun around to inspect the damage. "That crazy old bat."

Ryan stood perfectly still. It was safer.

Straining to keep a straight face, he said, "She has been acting a little

more crazy than usual lately. Maybe even a little unstable.”

Another shot rang out before a puff of dirt flew up two feet from Pete’s shoe. “Well, hell. Then I’m outta here. For now anyway.” He scooped up his pickax and bucket filled with smaller tools before he called out, “You’re a loony tune, Ruth, and everyone knows it!”

Ryan’s grandma answered with a shot that knocked Pete’s bucket clean out of his hand. Pete dropped his pickax and turned tail to run.

Ryan lifted a hand over his head in farewell to his grandmother. Surely she was watching through her scope and was laughing her butt off. His grandma could press charges but she wouldn’t. She had more fun shooting at the trespassers than having them arrested.

He’d probably have to take her guns away soon. But this way, the situation was done and over with. It might have gotten ugly if he’d had to arrest the old guy.

He hit Main Street and spotted Mrs. Wright juggling three cloth grocery bags. He crossed the street and called out, “Let me help you with those.”

“Well, this is handy.” She handed him two bags. “A big strapping lad to save the day.”

He held out his hand for the third sack. “That one too.” While only in her fifties, she had debilitating arthritis that had left her hands as twisted as claws. “You shouldn’t be carrying these on your own.”

“I could’ve made it, but won’t turn down the help.” She handed the last bag over. “I often wonder why my daughter didn’t choose a nice man like you instead of Ed, Ryan.”

He often wondered that too. But he was done pining for Sarah. “To each their own I guess.”

He slowed his pace and matched hers until they reached her house, grateful Sarah’s mom was about as quiet a person as he was and didn’t feel the need for idle chatter.

He followed her inside and put the bags on the counter in the kitchen. “Need any help putting stuff away?”

“Nope.” She patted his arm with her gnarled hand. “Some lucky girl is going to hit the jackpot with you one day, Ryan. Thank you for the help.”

“Welcome. Take care.”

He closed the door behind him and walked down the hill toward his house, hoping she was right. Little did she know, he’d recently made it his

mission to move on and find a woman who wanted to settle down and have kids too. He loved spending time with his niece and nephews and he was ready to have a few kids of his own. He'd always wanted a nice family, like his friends had growing up. He'd never be a distant, cold father like his own.

Ryan checked his mailbox and grabbed the two envelopes inside before he sat on his front porch and tugged off his boots. He hadn't spent hours refinishing his wood floors just to scuff them up again.

He'd finally finished the renovations that had taken him four years to complete. He'd held out hope that maybe Sarah would see the mistake she'd made by marrying someone as cold as Ed, and he'd have another chance with her. Evidentially she loved Ed enough to put up with the way he treated her.

Now it looked like he might end up selling the place back to his family and moving to Denver if one of his job applications hit.

Padding inside in his stocking feet, he headed straight for his den to fire up his computer. He wanted to check on his job applications, and then figure out what was going on with Tara.

---

Tara unlocked her front door, picked up a package on the front step from her mother, then disabled the alarm system. Sherlock's yelps had her crossing the living room to the back door. She opened it and said, "Hi, little man. Come in and sit."

Her black-and-white fur ball raced inside. His excitement at seeing her had him chasing his stub tail in ecstasy for his usual solid minute before he plopped his butt down at her feet and stared up at her, waiting for his evening meal. Sherlock's daily routines varied about as much as Ryan's did. Oddly, Tara found comfort in that.

"Good sit. Are you hungry?"

He vibrated with impatient excitement at the prospect of dinner. So she gave him the release signal with her hand and said, "Let's go!"

She'd spent many of her quiet evenings on Sherlock's training. Mostly because she'd just redecorated the interior of her house and didn't need a puppy messing things up. She'd been thankful for her sealed hardwood floors a time or two until they'd gotten the potty training skill mastered.

She ripped open the package from her mother and read the note. *Thank your stubborn ass of a father for this.* It was a pretty crystal vase that Tara didn't need, but she'd add it to all the other things her mother had sent. Her parents must've gotten into another argument, because the cut crystal vase weighed a ton and must be worth a fortune.

Her house would soon be overflowing with loot at the rate her parents got into fights lately. Afterward, her mother retaliated against her father by buying expensive things. Her parents' last row, perhaps a little too conveniently timed by her way of thinking, had resulted in a gorgeous living room, dining room, and master bedroom set from one of the most exclusive stores in Denver. All delivered to Tara's front porch three days after she'd signed the lease. One more of her mother's little ways to be sure Tara had the luxurious things in life that her mother couldn't imagine anyone living without.

Her parents could be exhausting at times, the way they bickered, hovered over her, and found sneaky ways to spoil her even after she'd begged them to stop, but neither of them had left her bedside when she'd been in the hospital. She loved them and her little sister, Laura, more than anything else in the world.

After her pup had gulped down his food, and she'd changed into a T-shirt and comfy yoga pants, she settled on the couch with her laptop. Sherlock curled up by her feet and fell fast asleep.

She sent a thank-you e-mail to her mother, then navigated to the town webpage to see for herself what the missing letter business was all about. The headline stated: *Old Mystery Dating Back to Prohibition Days Solved At Last?*

She scanned the article. Seemed Mrs. Beechum, the mayor's new assistant, had been looking for an old document and stumbled upon a sealed envelope in a file. After the childless Arthur Anderson died, someone went into his home office and put anything legal-looking into the file, and then dumped it off to the town clerk at the time, who was an Anderson too. A scanned copy of the note in question appeared on a pop-up screen.

*July 20, 1995*

*To the Residents of Anderson Butte,*

*My relations ribbed me for marrying a Grant, as Jane's did the same for marrying me. And you all never understood why we were such devout teetotalers when brewing whiskey was where the Anderson family fortune originated. But, being a man of the cloth, it was the lifestyle choice Jane and I made. I can't wait to watch how you all deal with this from my perch in Heaven above.*

*Before Jane died a few years back, we couldn't decide who deserved the Andersons' world-famous whiskey recipe my father entrusted me with, along with the location of where he'd hidden many barrels of it during Prohibition. The aged whiskey alone will bring a fortune, but we never felt right profiting from something we opposed the consumption of. But my father asked me to be sure the recipe was passed along if the drinking laws ever changed, so I feel obliged.*

*It was an Anderson who concocted it, but a Grant died helping him hide it, so we decided whoever kicked the bucket last (me) would pick an appropriate place to bury the recipe and the location map. If they aren't found, then God has played his hand and all will end up for the best.*

*If it is found, it's probably too much to hope you'll work together and perhaps use the profits for the betterment of the whole town. So whichever Anderson, Grant, or any other finds it first can have it. Happy digging. Here's a few clues to the location:*

*There's a sealed box buried not too deep—about three feet.*

*It's by something that existed before paved streets.*

*It provides shade and shelter, but beware of a fake.*

*It's located not too far west of the lake.*

*There's even a pattern to where it is placed.*

*Find that design, go to the south, and dig at its base.*

*If you hit metal, you're in the right place!*

Tara chuckled at the thought of Ryan having to recite that silly poem to her. No wonder he'd hesitated. Although, if he liked to read as much as he claimed, he might be as big a Keats fan as she was. Maybe she'd ask the next

time she ran into him.

A vision of her almost wiping his chin popped into her brain again and she cringed. What was she thinking? She needed to avoid the man at all costs.

---

Ryan called up his e-mail. The first one was from Aunt Gloria.

**Tara paid for your dinner tonight. And I saw the way you smiled at her. Maybe she's THE ONE?**

Tara had probably paid for his meal because Missy had forgotten the instructions for his temporary crown. When he and Missy had been at Brewster's the other night, she'd told him Tara took her job very seriously and everything happened by the book.

He tapped back, **She likes Ben, and please put both our meals on MY tab.**

**P.S. Did you save my pie?**

He hit "Send," then navigated to the screen that showed the status of his applications. Still no news on any of the jobs he'd applied for.

Next he pulled up the background check he'd already done on Tara when they vetted her the first time, and tried to find something he might have overlooked.

He didn't see anything out of line, but his gut felt the same way it had when he'd been checking out Josh, his sister Meg's fiancé. It was all a bit too clean and perfect. Like Josh's had been. Later they'd found out Josh had been an undercover FBI agent.

Maybe he'd ask Tara a few innocent questions. She jogged around the lake every day just after he did. She might not like it, but she was going to have some company on her daily runs.

A ding sounded, alerting him of an incoming e-mail. It was from his aunt again.

**Your pie is at the diner waiting for you. Tara added hers too. I think that shows she likes YOU, not Ben! :0)**

He smiled, happy his pie had been rescued, and typed back, **I think it means she's a dentist and probably doesn't eat sweets. I'll drop by tomorrow and pick it up, meddler.**

He'd miss his family if he moved to Denver, there was no denying that. Especially his matchmaking Aunt Gloria, who, because she'd divorced Uncle Brewster, wasn't technically his aunt on paper, but would always be to him. But he'd never meet someone he could have a serious relationship with if he stayed in Anderson Butte.

---

The next morning, Ryan changed up his routine by going to the gym first. He did a hard workout, finished up by seven, then headed out to the boat ramp on the other side of the hotel where Tara usually started her run. When he rounded the corner, there she was, dressed in something snug-fitting and pink, stretching out her long, tanned legs.

She popped her earbuds in and took off at a brisk pace. He jogged in the opposite direction, intending to run into her at about three-quarters of the way on the paved path, so it wouldn't look like he was shadowing her.

After twenty minutes at a full run, he spotted a guy just ahead. By the man's build, deep spray tan, and girly highlighted hair, he must be the celebrity his sister Casey mentioned had checked into the hotel the night before.

Then he spotted Tara's pink outfit running toward them. As the action hero in front of Ryan passed Tara, her eyes grew wide. The shirtless celebrity, white cords from his earbuds bouncing against his shoulders with every step, lifted a hand at Tara as he passed by her.

Tara took a few more steps and then her feet turned 180 degrees to follow him. Ryan increased his speed to catch up with her. She must've forgotten the rules about giving celebrities their space.

When he got close behind her, he called out softly, but she probably couldn't hear him with the music playing in her ears. He didn't want the movie star to know they were following him, so he slipped a hand on her shoulder and gave a soft squeeze to get her attention.

Her sharp elbow whipped back and jabbed him in the solar plexus, stopping him dead in his tracks, doubling him over. Then she stomped on his foot. Before he could straighten up and catch his breath, the heel of Tara's hand slammed up and into his nose so hard he saw stars.

Blinding pain made his fingers fly to his face. His nose wasn't sitting the way it should be.

Tara's hand slipped over her mouth. "Oh, it's . . . just you." She yanked out her earbuds.

He didn't know what ached worse, his nose or his pride. He'd just been beaten up by a woman. "What the hell was that about?"

Tara ripped off the pink cloth thing that held her hair back and stuck it under his nose to stop the bleeding. "You grabbed me from behind and I . . . reacted."

Yeah. He probably shouldn't have done that. She was from the city. "Sorry." He took the lump of fabric from her and pressed harder against his nose. "I was trying to stop you from following Mr. Academy Award there." He pointed down the shore as the oblivious man ran the opposite way.

A slow wave of pink rose up her neck and cheeks. "I wasn't going to talk to him, I was just going to . . . look."

If his face hadn't ached like he'd been hit with a baseball bat he might have laughed. "I'm gonna go." He needed to stop the bleeding that wasn't letting up.

"Let me see."

He shook his head and walked away. "I'm fine."

Tara caught up. "Please?"

Huffing out a breath, he stopped and lowered the cloth.

She winced. "We need to get you to the clinic."

"I'm good." He tossed the blood-soaked cloth into a nearby trash can. Then he lifted his favorite T-shirt over his head and balled it up, jamming it under his nose. "See you."

Tara caught up with his long strides and laid her soft hand on the lower part of his bare back for a brief moment before she yanked it away again. "Ryan, I think I broke your nose. You really need to go to the clinic."

He was sure it was broken, dammit. He hated that he'd have to tell his brother how it happened. "I'll go to the clinic. You need to get to work or something, right?"

She shook her head and kept walking beside him. "Not for a bit. I want to be sure you make it okay."

"I'm not going to pass out or anything."

"You could. The angle of that punch is designed—"



When he sent her his best “stern cop” look, she snapped her mouth shut.

They walked beside the lake for a few more minutes until she broke their silence again. “I’ll pay your medical expenses and replace your shirt too.”

“You can’t.” He increased his pace as his nose swelled even bigger and pounded harder with each step. They were almost to the clinic and he hoped to God his brother could make the pain stop.

“I insist.”

“This shirt is from the Rolling Stones’ farewell tour. Can’t be replaced.”

“Now I feel even worse. But haven’t they had like five farewell tours already?” Her face brightened. “Maybe they’re having another one? I’ll see if I can buy you tickets so we can get you a new shirt.”

He shook his head. “Not likely. Mick Jagger is really old, something like . . .”

“Seventy. You’re right.”

As they approached the clinic, Tara moved ahead to get the door. Couldn’t the woman leave him with even a shred of his manhood?

He lunged forward and beat her to the handle. Swinging the door open for her, he said, “After you, Kung Fu Panda.”

“Thank you.” She smiled at him for the first time and a wave of warmth shot through his chest.

Tara was the prettiest woman he’d ever met. Weirdly, he admired the way she’d beaten the crap out of him.

Too bad she had her eye on his brother. Tara might have been the one woman able to tempt him to break his in-town dating rule.

## CHAPTER THREE

Tara felt horrible about hitting Ryan. Who would have thought she'd be able to do that much damage with one punch? But the dentist in her needed to know his teeth were all right, so she quietly followed behind Ryan and the nurse who'd sent her a scowl after they explained what had happened.

Once the nurse got Ryan onto his back with an ice pack on his face, she turned to Tara. "You aren't family, so you can't be in here." She placed one hand on her hip and the other pointed to the door. Her name tag read "Joyce" and she looked about as old as Mick Jagger.

"I just wanted to check his mouth. I'm the new dentist in town."

Joyce raised a brow. "I know who you are, young lady, and I don't appreciate sass—"

Ben walked in. "She can stay. I do my best work with pretty ladies around to impress."

Ryan and Joyce both grunted.

Joyce shook her head and stood silently by Ryan, like she was protecting him from her.

Then the door opened and Ryan's sisters, Casey and Meg, flew inside. Casey said, "We heard Ryan broke his nose."

Casey, tall, elegant, and willowy, ran the hotel. Meg, short and cute, was opening a lodge across the lake. Both were pretty brunettes with big smiles just like Ryan's.

Ryan groaned. "It's no big deal."

Ben turned to Tara. "See what you got yourself into, moving here? Word travels fast."

Meg said, “Yeah, Joyce called and told us Tara beat you up, Ryan. We wanted to see for ourselves.”

Casey moved the ice pack from Ryan’s face. “Man, she clocked you good.”

“Wait!” Meg’s brows shot up. “That had to hurt. Let me see your hand, Tara.”

Tara reluctantly held out her aching palm.

“Ouch.” Meg cringed.

That had Ben zipping across the room and taking her bruised hand in his. “Can you move your fingers?”

The girls gathered around as Ben gently probed her hand. He finally said, “I think it’s just a bad bruise. Joyce, will you get Tara an ice pack too?”

Joyce huffed out a breath as she left.

Ryan sat up. “I’ll go home and take some aspirin.”

“Nope.” Ben pushed Ryan onto his back again. “We aren’t done with you yet.” He turned to his sisters. “Meg, get up here and sit on him and hold his shoulders down. Casey, you hold his head still. Sorry, buddy, but we need to straighten out the damage.”

Tara couldn’t watch. She shut her eyes as Ben counted backward. “Three, two, one.”

Ryan let out a loud curse, and then a slow groan. He scowled at his brother. “You enjoyed that, didn’t you?”

“Only a little. Tara, you want to come check his teeth now? He’d probably bite my fingers if I tried.” Ben helped Meg off of Ryan and to the floor, while Casey moved away from the table to make room.

Tara slipped on a pair of gloves and stood beside Ryan. As badly as her right hand throbbed, it was obvious Ryan’s pain was ten times worse.

Because of her.

Her eyes stung with tears.

Meg ran a hand up and down Tara’s back. “He’s going to be fine and just as pretty as before, Tara. He must’ve startled you somehow, huh?”

Not too long ago, Meg had accidentally seen the scars on Tara’s torso. Tara hadn’t told Meg what happened, but she must’ve put two and two together. Tara was grateful Meg had never pressed for an explanation. “Yeah. Maybe I took that self-defense training a little too seriously?”

Ryan’s eyes locked with hers. “I’m not mad at you, Tara.”

“Thank you, Ryan.” Relief washed through her. “Open up, please.”

Concentrating only on his mouth, not all his glorious, bare-chested muscles, she pressed two fingers against his front teeth, happy when they didn’t move and he didn’t flinch. After a little more gentle probing, she tugged off her gloves. “Luckily, your teeth fared better than your nose. If they’re still bothering you after a few days, will you promise to come see me?”

Ben slid next to her and said, “I’d listen to her, Ry. Tara just proved she’s the only one in town who can kick your ass.”

Ryan closed his eyes. “I’m never going to hear the end of this, am I?”

His sisters and brother all said, “Nope!” in unison.

Joyce finally came back with an ice pack. Ben traded it for a prescription from his pad, and then gently took Tara’s hand. He gazed into her eyes and smiled before he laid the blessedly cool pack on her palm. “Fifteen minutes on, fifteen off. And if it still hurts in a few days, promise you’ll come back and see me?”

Ben was an incredibly handsome man. So why wasn’t her stomach doing that flipping thing it did when Ryan smiled at her?

While Ben flirted with her, Ryan slid off the table and stood to leave. Tara pulled her hand from Ben’s and said, “Can you make it home all right, Ryan?”

Casey wrapped her arm around her brother’s shoulders. “Meg and I will walk him home and tuck him into bed.”

Ben called out, “Pick up his meds on the way out from Joyce. Be sure he eats before he takes them. And Ryan, take it easy today!”

Ryan lifted a hand in response.

Casey said, “We’ll make sure he does.”

Tara started walking behind them, but Ben said, “Can you wait a second please, Tara?”

“Sure.”

“So his teeth and gums looked okay?” As Ben jotted notes in Ryan’s chart, a single strand of his perfectly styled and gelled hair moved. Ben was like a Ken doll, perfect in every way. Maybe too perfect. Would a woman have to fight for bathroom mirror time in the mornings with a man like that?

“His teeth looked fine. But he has some bruising on the upper gum, so he must be sore.”

Ben scribbled another note and then slapped the file shut. "I'll make sure to ask about it in a few days. Thanks."

"It was the least I could do." She started for the door. "I feel awful about this. I hope he takes his meds instead of trying to tough it out like most men."

Ben caught up and walked out beside her. "Casey will make him take the pills I had Joyce send along. They'll knock him out for hours."

"Ryan doesn't strike me as someone who likes to be told what to do."

Ben chuckled. "Nope. But Casey helped raise Meg and Ryan and is the one person besides our grandmother who those two stubborn mules will listen to." He shot her a grin, showing off his movie-star white teeth again. "I hope your hand doesn't pain you too much today."

"I'll be fine, thanks." The gleam in his eyes made her fear he'd ask her out again. After her awkward conversations with Ryan, maybe she wasn't as ready to date again as she thought? Especially with a guy who wore more expensive shoes than she did.

What had she been thinking when she'd accepted Ben's earlier offer? He wasn't her type at all. True, she vowed to never marry again, and though a confirmed bachelor like Ben would be just the ticket, the attraction just wasn't there.

She said, "Better go, I have patients in a few. Thanks for the ice pack and send me Ryan's bill too, okay?" She started for home at a jog.

Ben called out, "No charge. Take care."

---

Ryan's face hurt too much to protest his sisters' babying, so he just gave in. Arguing with them was futile.

After they'd served him breakfast in bed and made him take the pills Ben had sent along, he considered pretending to be asleep so they'd leave. Then he'd go sit on the couch and read or something.

When Meg popped her head inside his bedroom to check on him, he recalled the conversation Tara and Meg had in the exam room.

"Do you know why Tara reacted so strongly today?"

Meg blinked rapidly like she always did when she didn't want to tell

him something. Luckily, she never lied. “Maybe. She hasn’t told me where the scary-looking scars on her stomach and back came from, but when I mentioned them to Josh, he said he suspected she’d suffered some sort of attack by the way she reacts to men.”

Josh was a former FBI agent whose specialty was extracting the truth from people, so his instincts were good. “She seemed fine with Ben earlier.”

Meg nodded. “Josh thinks it was a larger man who hurt her. She gets nervous around Josh too, like she does around you.”

Tara was nervous around him because of his size? It wasn’t that he was a cop and she had something to hide? Or maybe it wasn’t size at all. Maybe she was nervous around Josh because he could tell if she was lying?

Meg added, “Don’t tell anyone else, okay? She’ll tell us when she’s ready.”

“Fine.” But that just set off a dozen new questions about Tara he felt compelled to know the answers to. Mostly, where was the person who’d hurt her and was she safe?

“Ryan, you have to give me your word you’ll leave this alone. I would’ve never told you, but I know you can keep a secret.”

He couldn’t promise he wouldn’t look into it. It was his duty to be sure she wasn’t in danger. “I’ll keep whatever I find to myself.”

Casey slipped inside behind Meg. “I called Mike and told him you wouldn’t be in today. He said he’s eating your breakfast burrito. And he wanted to know who hits harder, him or Tara?” She crossed her arms. “Can you be trusted to rest if we leave?”

Tara hit ten times harder, and he’d be sure to rib Mike about that later. “I promise to stick around the house if that’ll get you two to go away.”

“Okay.” Casey tugged Meg out with her. “But just know we may drop in unannounced later, so be good!”

As they left, he called out, “What makes that different from any other day?”

His answer was the extra loud slam of his screen door.

He waited a few minutes to be sure they’d really left, then changed into sweats and headed out to the living room. He wasn’t going to lie around in bed all day like a damn invalid. He switched his big screen TV to ESPN for background noise and then picked up a book.

He tried to read but his mind kept going back to what Meg had said

about him making Tara nervous. Maybe if he could help her understand he'd never hurt her, and that maybe he could help her, then he'd have a chance with her?

But Ben was interested in her so that was a stupid thought. Must be the pain meds clouding his thinking. And making him really tired. But his face felt a ton better. He turned off the TV, closed his eyes, and laid his head on the back of the couch. Maybe he'd rest for just a few minutes.

He awoke to the sound of knocking on his screen door. That was his first clue it wasn't one of his pushy relatives who always just let themselves in. He rubbed the sleep from his eyes and called out, "Come in."

His face ached again. Must be time for more medicine.

The door creaked open and Tara tentatively stepped inside with three Styrofoam boxes in her hands. "Hi. I brought you some dinner. Gloria sent extra pie along too."

He glanced at his phone on the coffee table. How the hell was it five thirty? His brother had drugged him up good. "Thanks. You didn't have to do that."

"It was no . . ." Tara's eyes widened when she spotted the cherry wood built-in bookcases he'd just finished. Dropping her big purse and the boxes onto the coffee table, she crossed the room and danced her fingers lightly across the fragile spines of his antique books. "Wow! Are some of these first editions?"

He stood and moved near her, careful to keep some distance. "A few. But mostly they're just my favorites."

She pushed her blonde hair behind one ear as she tilted her head to read the titles. "You do have some Keats. I'd wondered."

He hated that she'd gone straight for that. He only had the two, but it probably made him look wimpy. "They're collector items. I'm not really . . ."

Tara glanced up and grinned. "Poetic?"

He shook his head. "Nope."

"Just a curious guy full of personal questions then, I guess."

He smiled. She was such a contradiction. One minute it was as if she was afraid of him, and the next she teased him. He liked a woman with a sense of humor. "I love a great story. When you're ready, I hope you'll tell me yours."

---

She wasn't falling for that one. No matter how cute the man was. "Mine isn't all that great."

Tara glanced out the window, away from his penetrating gaze, and took in the fantastic view of the lake. The story of her life was more like one of the psychological thrillers he had on his bookshelves. "Gloria said you did all of this yourself?"

"Yeah. Want a tour?"

When she turned to look at him again, he wasn't studying her like a science experiment anymore. If she didn't know better she'd think he might be interested in her. She should leave, but she really was impressed with the house. "Okay."

Tara followed behind as Ryan pointed out all the renovations he'd done to his gorgeous home. It was no cabin as the outside suggested, but a beautiful, light-filled, elegant home.

They passed by the dining room, which held a lovely wooden table that could've used some pretty flowers in the center. The large kitchen had been remodeled with stainless steel appliances that rivaled the ones her parents' chefs used. The gleaming granite countertops offset the same beautiful cherry wood he'd used in the living room.

When she turned to tell him how impressed she was, he was just a few steps behind her. He walked quietly for a guy who must've weighed as much as an NFL player.

She backed up to put a little distance between them until her lower back hit the kitchen island. "Your home is stunning, Ryan. I'm impressed."

"Thanks." He held out his palm. "Can I see your right hand, please?"

"I'm fine. Are you hungry?"

Ryan took a small step closer and her blood pressure spiked. But then he stopped, with his hand still held out, waiting for her to comply.

He wasn't taking no for an answer, apparently.

She slowly moved closer and laid her hand in his big, rough one. "It's nothing compared to your nose. I'm still just sick about that."

When his thumb slowly, and ever so gently, swept across her bruised palm, it sent a sensual shiver up her spine. Not so different from how her stomach reacted when he smiled at her. Why did she have to be so attracted



to someone she needed to avoid? Had he noticed her mixed reaction to him?

His slowly growing mischievous grin answered that question. Now she was back to being mortified again.

He stared into her eyes as his thumb continued to caress her palm. “How about I promise to stop sneaking up on you, and you promise you’ll refrain from beating me up?” His grin turned into a wide smile and her traitorous lips couldn’t help but follow suit.

She nodded as she gazed into his eyes that shone with amusement. Her sensible side told her to leave and never look back, but his touch felt really . . . nice. “Deal—”

The screen door banged and a little voice called out, “Uncle Ryan?”

Ryan gave Tara’s hand a gentle squeeze before he released it. He spun around and caught Meg’s daughter, who had launched herself at him. “Hey there.”

Blonde, adorable Haley patted his chest. “You don’t have your police shirt on. So no candy for me?”

Meg walked in carrying a bag slung over her wrist and a big pot in her hands. “It’s too close to dinnertime for a Life Saver anyway, Haley.” Meg put the pot on Ryan’s eight-burner stove and tossed the grocery bag on the counter by the built-in double fridge. “Hey, Tara.”

“Hi, Meg.” So Ryan kept candy for Haley in his uniform pocket? How adorable was that? “Do you need a hand?”

“Nope, I got it. Just going to put some stuff in the fridge while I finish getting dinner ready. Josh and Eric will be here in a minute. You should stay.”

Eric was Tara’s puppy walker, and a sweet kid Meg and Josh were adopting. Eric had saved the puppies and their mother from starvation on the boys’ ranch where he’d been living before Josh brought him and the dogs to live in Anderson Butte. Eric loved the dogs but couldn’t keep them all, so she’d happily taken Sherlock.

She loved Eric and would have liked to stay because of him. But Josh was a former FBI agent who probably sensed she was lying too. She’d better go.

While Meg’s back was turned, Ryan opened a cookie jar on the counter and pulled out a pack of cherry Life Savers, then slipped one to Haley. When she squealed, he tapped his finger against his lips, then put her down. Haley

grinned as she ran toward the couch and the television's remote.

With her back still to them, Meg called out, "You're supposed to be an adult and setting a good example for your niece. Not sneaking her candy behind my back. You're paying Tara's dental bill if Haley gets a cavity!"

Ryan's answer was a smug smirk.

Sounded like they'd had that discussion a time or two before.

Tara walked to the living room and grabbed her purse. Then she picked up her to-go meal, leaving Ryan's boxes behind. "Bye, Haley."

Haley sent her a sweet grin and a wave before her attention went straight back to some Disney princess on the screen. Haley was almost three and about the cutest little girl Tara had ever known.

A pang shot straight to her heart. Spencer had stolen that from her too. The ability to ever have a little Haley of her own.

Ryan appeared by her side. "You're not staying?"

"I'd better get home and feed my puppy. But thanks."

He walked beside her toward the door. Beating her to the screen, he pushed it open. "Thank you for the dinner. And the pie." He slipped his hands into the pockets of his sweats and asked, "Sure you don't want to stay?"

Did he really want her to stay? No, he was just being polite. Or looking for another opportunity to snoop. "Thanks, but no. I hope you feel better soon, Mr. Nosy."

As she started down the steps he said softly, "Hope your hand feels better too, Bruce Lee."

She chuckled as she headed up the hill to her house. She could feel him watching her. Just before she turned the corner she glanced over her shoulder.

He sent her another smile she felt in her gut, then lifted a hand.

She returned the gesture and then stared down at her bruised palm.

Could she be with a man like Ryan and still keep her secret? Being tall herself, men with Ryan's build had always been her type—before.

What was she thinking? She'd just broken his nose. She'd be the last person Ryan would ever want to be with. Besides, any man who turned down easy one-night stands and took the time to make his house that beautiful was probably the type who wanted a wife and kids to fill it. Something she could never be again or give him.

She should just stick to spending her free time with Sherlock and forget how nice Ryan's touch had felt.

As she unlocked her door and typed in the code to her security system, her cell rang. She dug it out of her purse and checked the screen. She didn't recognize the number. "Hello?"

Soft breathing sounded in her ear, so she said, "Hello?" again.

Then the line went dead.

Her heart lurched. It couldn't be happening again. But Spencer was a genius computer hacker. If he'd gotten access to . . .

No. Just a wrong number. That's all. And all her bills had her parents' house address just in case. But there were always cell phone GPS locations.

She was being paranoid, that's all.

But getting a new number in the morning, just to be safe, couldn't hurt.

## CHAPTER FOUR

Ryan waited fifteen minutes by the boat ramp for Tara to show up for her morning run before he gave up. She must've decided to skip it.

He set up his favorite playlist on the phone strapped to his arm and took off down the paved path. He hadn't lasted a full song before the pain in his face became too much, forcing him to stop. Each pounding step sent a jarring punch to his nose that wasn't worth it. The knockout pills from the day before were out of the question, so he'd only taken some aspirin earlier. Maybe he'd be able to take a longer run tomorrow to make up for it.

Walking toward home to grab some breakfast before work, he remembered he was out of oatmeal, so he changed direction and headed for the store.

Once inside, he slipped around the hardware section to the food aisles and spotted a familiar blonde head of hair. Tara stood in the rear at the phone kiosk chatting with Fred, the short, chubby owner who always played Santa at the town Christmas party. Besides having the right physique, Fred sported a long white beard that bobbed as he spoke to Tara while pointing to a cell phone in her hand. When Fred glanced Ryan's way, the owner lifted his chin in greeting, so Ryan walked toward the rear of the store. A few yards away from them, he cupped his hands around his mouth and called out, "Sheriff Anderson asking permission to approach Dr. Carter."

Tara swiveled her head over her shoulder and sent him an eye roll. "Very funny, Ryan. Permission denied."

He stopped dead in his tracks. He hadn't counted on her saying that.

She spun around and smiled. "I was just kidding."

"Oh." He joined them as Fred handed Tara—all dressed up and looking

nice for work—an instruction manual.

Fred chuckled. “Can’t blame you for that after yesterday, Ryan. The lady packs a mean punch, eh?” Then he said to Tara, “I got you all fixed up with your new number, and I transferred all your contacts. But I noticed your boyfriend’s cell number wasn’t in there, so I added it for you.”

Was Fred talking about Ben?

Tara frowned. “I don’t have a boyfriend.”

Fred pointed at Ryan. “What do you call this guy? Word’s all over town the two of you are the new hot item. Gloria said you shared dinner with him two nights in a row.” Fred sent her a wink. “Tough to keep secrets around here, Tara.” He chuckled and walked away.

As much as Ryan wouldn’t mind dating Tara, she probably didn’t feel the same. “Gloria means well, but she has a big mouth.”

Tara huffed out a breath while tucking her new phone inside her purse. “He’s the third person today who’s mentioned it. The more I protest, the more they think it’s true. Gotta go. Have a nice day.”

As she walked toward the door, he fell in step beside her. Why was she getting a new number? “Changing your number to avoid your new boyfriend’s calls?”

Not missing a beat, she said, “Yeah, you’ve become entirely too needy lately. I think we should break up. Maybe at the diner tonight, so Gloria can see it happen live.”

Ryan pushed the door open for her and waited while she passed by him. “What if I don’t want to break up?”

“What?” Tara stopped in the doorway.

He smiled at the confusion on her face. “Kidding. I know it’s Ben you have your sights on.”

Tara shook her head and walked toward her office. “Ben’s a nice guy and all, but he’s really not my type. Besides, I’ve decided I’d rather focus on getting my practice up and going before I start dating again.”

So she wasn’t interested in his brother after all?

Sweet!

But that didn’t mean Ben wasn’t still interested in *her*.

Dammit.

She never answered the question about the phone number, though. “So who are you trying to avoid?”

Tara's eyes shifted away from his as she picked up her pace. "Since when have you become interested in idle small talk, Mr. Chatty?"

Since he wanted to get to the bottom of the mystery known as Tara. "Maybe you're easier to talk to than most?"

Her forehead crinkled as her eyes cut back to his. "Is that a pickup line, Sheriff?"

"Don't need one. You're already my girlfriend. Just ask anyone in town."

Her eyes lit with amusement and she grinned. Tara's smile packed as big a punch as the one she'd dealt him yesterday.

"You were saying?" When he quirked a brow, silently waiting for her answer, she let out a long sigh.

"I got a new number because of all the charities and their telemarketers. You try to be nice and give, and then they turn into piranhas."

Her answer seemed to roll off her tongue as if practiced. His gut begged to differ.

Tara stopped walking and fished through her suitcase-sized purse. She had a can of pepper spray strapped inside.

Once she found her keys she said, "Unless you'd like to come in and let me clean your teeth, because you're way overdue for that, I'll see you around."

"Negative." He pulled his phone from the strap on his arm. "But I should get your new number."

Her hand stopped midway to the lock and her eyes lined up with his. "Why?"

"In case someone has a dental emergency." Or, so he could track her phone in the future in case it became necessary.

Tara turned the lock and said, "Do you promise to call less often than you have been?"

Teasing him again. He liked that about her. "I'll try." He made a crisscross against his chest. "Scout's honor."

"Fine." She recited the number.

Zeke, the town handyman, showed up. He had to be close to seventy, and was so tall and thin it made Ryan want to buy him a meal every time he saw him.

Zeke nodded. "Morning, you two. Figured I'd try to get that chair fixed

before you open for business, Tara.” He turned to Ryan. “So it’s true, huh? You’ve finally given up that silly ‘no dating in town’ rule of yours?”

Ryan opened his mouth to say something, but Zeke had already slipped inside.

Tara laughed. “Seriously, if this ‘you and me’ thing gets any worse, we really might have to come up with a public breakup plan. Bye.”

He waited for the glass door to swing closed before he hit the number he’d just added to his phone.

She glanced at her cell, then spun around and blinked at him through the glass door as she lifted the phone next to her ear. “This is your idea of calling me less?”

“Unlike you and your many phone rules, you can call *me* anytime. Especially if you feel unsafe. Day or night, Tara.” He hit “End” and walked away before she could respond.

That ought to give her something to think about. And he’d just proved he could carry on a conversation when he made the effort. Maybe he’d try doing that more often. Especially with Tara.

Smiling, he headed back to the store to pick up his oatmeal.

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Tara stared at the phone in her hand, debating which she was more annoyed with. That he’d just hung up on her and walked away, or that he seemed to be snooping into her personal business.

She hated getting hung up on. It was a serious pet peeve. But it’d be worse if he suspected her lies.

And he’d definitely been flirting with her.

Hadn’t he?

Oddly, she’d kind of liked it. He was funny when he put his mind to it. And Missy was right, he really was damn *hot*.

She slipped behind her desk and fired up her computer while Zeke banged on something in the other room. Maybe she should just buy new exam chairs rather than having to call Zeke once a week. She could just dip into her trust fund. There was more money in there than she could ever spend.

But if she bought new chairs she'd miss her weekly gossip sessions with him. Zeke was always happy to give her the scoop about all the residents of Anderson Butte. Maybe she'd ask him about what made Ryan tick. The sheriff was quiet, but not all the time. And when the man smiled it lit up his whole handsome face—not to mention what it did to her insides.

While she waited for her scheduling program to load, she scribbled a reminder on a sticky note to call her mother later. Her mom would still be sleeping and a voice mail about a cell number change would set off all kinds of alarms.

Thankfully she'd had her excuse for getting a new number all planned out for her parents before Ryan asked her about it. But he didn't seem to buy it.

What was she thinking? She needed to push aside all thoughts about how hot Ryan was and avoid him.

The bell over the front door jingled, signaling Missy's arrival. Tara glanced at the clock on her wall and smiled. Missy was early for once. Maybe her always-five-minutes-late assistant was finally coming around.

Missy burst through Tara's office door in a blur of bright colors she'd soon hide behind a white lab coat. "I came in early to hear all the deets on you and Ryan!"

Tara's hopes of future punctuality from Missy quickly fizzled. "Nothing's going on with me and Ryan."

Missy flopped into the guest chair across the desk. "Gloria said he ate with you on Tuesday night and then you brought him dinner last night." She crossed her arms and huffed out a breath like a petulant child.

Tara withheld the urge to scream. Gloria must've called a town meeting and announced the news of Tara Carter's eating habits to the whole world. "First off, you asked me to return his sunglasses because you didn't want to see him. Remember? And then I told you yesterday how bad I felt about breaking his nose, so I picked up dinner for him while I ordered mine. I dropped his off on my way home. I didn't stay and eat with him." The way he'd held her hand and smiled at her might have convinced her to stay if Meg hadn't shown up, but that was beside the point, so she kept that little fact to herself.

"Oh." Missy blinked at the new information. "So, it's just wishful thinking on Gloria's part?"



Tara shrugged. "I guess. Now let's forget all this and get ready. We have a packed schedule today, many of them Grants you're going to be extra nice to. Remember?"

"Okay." Missy slowly rose from the chair. "I guess I really couldn't blame you if the Ryan thing were true. He's so good-looking, even if he can't hold a decent conversation. Figures it'd take a woman like you to finally turn his head."

Tara rose and slipped into her lab coat. "Woman like me?"

"Perfect *and* pretty." Missy rolled her eyes and then headed for the exam rooms, so Tara followed behind. "Most women would instantly hate you for it, except you make it awful hard because you're nice. It stings a little about Ryan eating dinner with you, though. As many times as I've offered, he's never done that with me." Missy picked up a tray and began her prep.

"I'm far from perfect, and have more flaws than you know, Missy." Tara frowned as she helped prepare the room, searching for something to make Missy feel better. "Ryan stayed and had drinks with you at Brewster's the other night. That's gotta count for something, right?"

"Yeah, that's true I guess." Missy's lips curved into a slow, cute smile. "So let's get those damn Grants in and out of here this morning as quickly as we can. Then we can have a nice afternoon."

Tara closed her eyes and sighed. It could be a very long day.

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Ryan thought he'd actually make it through his first whole day without a trespassing call since the note had been unearthed, but at four forty-five his radio squawked, summoning him down the street. He locked up his office and headed out.

When he arrived at his father's house, he walked to the rear. Billy Grant had his Bobcat tractor fired up and the bucket ready to take its first bite into Ryan's stepmother's garden.

His father, Mitch, and stepmother, Sue Ann, stood nearby on the patio. His dad held a seething Sue Ann back from tearing Billy's eyes out with her lethal fingernails. Sue Ann looked like a younger, pissed-off version of Dolly Parton.

His dad growled, “Dammit, Ryan. Throw his ass in jail and let him be the example for the rest of the town. This is never going to end if you keep letting people off the hook!”

Ryan walked over to the Bobcat, reached for the key, and turned it off. Billy had played football too, and was a good friend. “What the hell were you thinking?”

“That they’d be gone a lot longer.” Billy grinned. “Mrs. Beechum said they went to Denver and weren’t expected back until later tonight. They came home early.”

Ryan dragged a hand down his face and dug deep for patience. “What would make you look for the box here?”

“This would be the most logical place to look. This has always been the mayor’s house, even before the streets were paved, and here is where the garden with all its straight rows has always been. Why not bury it here where the dirt is softer?”

“The note said the recipe and map were buried at the base of something that provided shade and shelter. How would a garden do that?”

Billy frowned. “Oh yeah. I forgot that part.” Shrugging, he started up his Bobcat and put it in gear. “See you around.”

His dad called out, “I’m pressing charges! Don’t let him go!”

“I’ll handle my father.” Ryan tilted his head, releasing Billy. “Get your butt off his property. See you Friday night for poker?”

“Yup.”

Ryan waited until Billy rolled the Bobcat onto Main Street before he walked back to his father and Sue Ann, who both stood with their arms crossed, staring daggers at him.

“No harm, no foul.”

Sue Ann spat out, “You’re lucky he didn’t dig up my carrots or you’d have been sorry, Ryan!” She turned on her spiked high heels and slammed the back door behind her.

His dad’s eyes narrowed. “What’s gotten into you lately, Ryan? Why are you refusing to put a stop to this nonsense?”

“Because it *is* nonsense. And so far, no one has suffered any damages.” Might be as good a time as any to tell his father about his plans. “But since you disagree, go ahead and look for a new sheriff. Especially since I’ve applied for jobs in Denver.”

His father's face turned three shades of red. "That's not happening. We've had an Anderson as the sheriff since this town was founded by my great-grandfather. You're staying, and I don't want to hear another word about it!" His dad crossed his arms across his big barrel chest.

"If I get the right job offer, I'm leaving. You're always on me to settle down and have some kids to carry on the Anderson name. That's not happening here. You should be happy I'm moving."

Before his dad could spit out a rebuttal, Ryan turned and walked away.

His father called out, "This is about Sarah, isn't it? You're leaving because of her, aren't you? If you want her so badly, then be a man and go steal her away from Ed!"

Be a man?

By breaking up Sarah's marriage, and then what? Force her to love him? He refused to let his dad push his buttons, so he kept right on walking.

His father had been telling him to act like a man since he was in middle school. To stand up for himself, fight the bullies at school, and use his size to take what he wanted in life. But he wasn't wired that way. He liked to use his brains not his brawn to get what he wanted, unlike his grizzly-bear-sized father. He'd never been able to please the man.

Walking toward his office, Ryan almost considered looking for the damn buried box himself just to make it all stop.

In the Town Square his nephews were playing baseball with his soon-to-be new nephew, Eric. The ten-year-olds, Eric and Caleb, were playing keep-away from the youngest. Ryan would've said something, but Ty grinned widely even as he got burned. Ty was probably just happy to be included with the older boys.

Seeing them laughing and having fun lifted his spirits.

If it took dating a bunch of strangers until he found the right one to share his life with and have a few fun kids like them, he'd do it. He wanted what Meg was soon getting. A real family, not the kind they had. As a kid, he'd loved spending time at the houses of friends who had parents who clearly cared for them. Not like his dysfunctional family. They had a dead mother full of resurfacing secrets and a gruff father who didn't seem to love anyone but Sue Ann.

A stray baseball rolled in front of Ryan's boots. He picked it up and sent it sailing.

Caleb called out, "We need a fourth, Uncle Ryan. You're on my team!"

Ty said, "No way! I get Uncle Ryan!"

He had a ton of paperwork to do but it wasn't going anywhere and it was after five. He'd just go in a little early in the morning. "I'll hit some pop-ups. Let's see who can be the first to twenty."

The boys handed him a bat before they scrambled across the park to catch fly balls.

Eric called out, "Hit one this way, Sheriff!"

"You got it!" Ryan tossed the ball up, double-fisted the bat, and sent the ball flying.

After a half hour of intense competition, and with each jarring smack of the bat resonating to his sore face, Ryan wanted to stop. But the boys were having so much fun he didn't have the heart to quit. But then, out of the corner of his eye, he spotted a long black limo pulling up and stopping at the curb.

He called time-out.

The jogging action hero who had inadvertently caused his broken nose had bought out the entire hotel for the week, and they weren't expecting any new celebrities. Might be a paparazzi trick.

When the boys moaned, he declared a tie and sent them home for dinner. Then he strode toward the limo.

A tinted window slid down. A slightly familiar-looking woman probably in her late fifties stuck her head out. "Hello, officer. Can you help us, please?" A man studying a sheaf of papers in his hands sat next to her.

"Happy to."

"We're here to see our daughter. She's the new dentist in town. Can you tell us where her office is?"

Tara's mother? That's why she looked familiar. He lifted a hand in the direction of Tara's office. "It's right there."

Her mother's eyes narrowed. "You wouldn't happen to be the sheriff, would you? The one Tara is dating?"

She'd told her parents they were dating and yet seemed annoyed when the whole town thought so? The Tara mystery just got a whole lot more interesting. Maybe he'd play along and see what was what.

He plastered on a big smile and stuck out his hand. "Yes, ma'am. Ryan Anderson. Nice to meet you."

---

Tara locked up for the day, worried that for the first time Zeke might not be able to fix the part that had gone bad in chair number two. She was closed on Fridays, so Zeke had the weekend to work on it. But she had a packed schedule Monday morning and needed both chairs. He'd assured her he'd fixed that same part many times before and he'd have it back after the weekend and installed on Monday before ten o'clock.

It'd been the busiest day she'd had since moving to Anderson Butte, and she loved it.

She turned to head for home and spotted a familiar limo. And Ryan talking to her parents.

Crap! She'd been so busy, she'd forgotten to call her mother. Had they called and found out her number had been disconnected, then panicked?

She crossed the street just as Ryan smiled and stuck his hand out for a shake.

Her awesome day had just become her worst nightmare.

When she slipped beside Ryan, he said, "Hey, babe. Look who's here."

Babe? What was that about?

"Hello, Mother. This is a surprise." She leaned down and peered inside. "Both of you? This is a really big . . . surprise."

Her mom beamed a bright smile. "Yes, and your father and I happened to run into your new beau here."

*Crap. Crap. Crap!*

When she glanced at Ryan, he stared into her eyes, waiting for her to make the next move.

Dammit. Would her parents remember to call her Tara?

Was her cover about to be blown?

## CHAPTER FIVE

Tamping back her panic, Tara said to her mother, “Ryan’s not really, I mean there’s a little more to the story . . .” Her mind scrambled for what to say with Ryan standing right there grinning at her. “So what are you guys doing here?” she asked as she tucked a strand of fallen hair behind her ear.

“Just thought we’d—” Her mother’s eyes widened. “What happened to your hand, sweetheart?”

Could things get any more embarrassing? “I hit . . .” She threw her thumb Ryan’s direction. “Him. But—”

Before she could explain, her father hopped out of the car and marched toward them. He took her hand and examined the damage.

Her father’s eyes narrowed before he said to Ryan, “What made her hit you?”

She laid her hand on her father’s arm. “It’s not what you think.” She forced a smile. “Ryan surprised me and I overreacted. You can understand how that could happen, right?” She held her father’s gaze until understanding seemed to replace his anger.

Her dad said to Ryan, “Young women have to be extra careful these days. Guess your face paid the price.”

Ryan nodded. “It’s my fault. I startled her.”

When her mother slid out of the car and joined them, her dad stuck his hand out toward Ryan. “We should start over. Nice to meet you, Ryan. This is Tara’s mother, Eva, and I’m Joe Mc—”

Tara elbowed her father in the ribs to cut him off before he said their last name. She didn’t want to give Ryan any more ammunition to snoop.

Quickly recovering, her dad said, “Great little town you’ve got here. I

can see why Tara chose it.”

Her father winked at her, obviously proud he’d remembered to call her Tara.

Probably wouldn’t last long. She needed to get her parents tucked away somewhere out of the nosy little town’s clutches. “So, if you’ll excuse us, Ryan, I’ll take my parents over to the hotel and get them settled.”

Ryan asked, “How long do you folks plan to stay?”

Tara held her breath, waiting for the answer.

*Please say just one night.*

Her mother said, “We have a charity event tomorrow evening in Denver, so it’ll be a quick in and out.”

*Thank God!*

As her parents climbed back into their car, Ryan leaned his mouth near her ear. His warm breath sent a tingly zip up her spine. “The whole hotel is booked through next weekend. By the jogger you were just going to . . . *look at yesterday.*”

The erotic jolt he’d just sent rushing through her quickly fizzled. Ignoring her misplaced, confusing lust for Ryan, and her embarrassment that she’d told him that, she searched her mind for a solution.

She only had two bedrooms and one was an office. Her parents could take her bed and she could sleep on the couch. That’d work. But what about the rest? “So, does that mean the hotel’s dining room is closed to the public too?” The hotel had a five-star chef, like her parents were used to at home.

Ryan nodded. “The diner’s the only option.”

“No offense to Gloria, but my parents aren’t . . . diner people.” She held up a finger toward her parents to signal she’d be right there. “And I’m sorry about the boyfriend thing. I’ll explain all that later. After I figure out what to feed them for dinner.”

“Grilling something is easy enough.”

“I . . . don’t know how to grill. Or cook.”

“How is that even possible?” Ryan blinked at her in confusion. “What do you eat?”

“A lot of salads. And sandwiches. Learning to cook real food is next on my to-do list.”

“To-do list?”

“I never learned how to do certain things because I grew up with . . .”

She swung her hand out toward the limo. "That. And when I was married, I didn't have to cook because my parents gave us a chef as a wedding gift."

Ryan's right brow spiked.

Dammit. Why had she mentioned Spencer?

Because she had been totally thrown off her game by her parents' surprise visit, that's why. And because something about Ryan seemed to always tempt her to blurt out the truth.

But what was she going to do with her parents for dinner?

A vision of Ryan's kitchen with its professional equipment suddenly filled her mind. "Do you know how to cook?" Desperate times, desperate measures had never been a truer saying.

Ryan crossed his arms. "Yup."

She waited a beat, hoping he'd catch up. Instead he just stood there with a little smirk on his face. Clearly he was enjoying this and was going to make her beg. "Would you consider cooking for us tonight? I'd owe you a really big favor. Perhaps even my left kidney."

"What kind of favor?" His lips tilted into a slow, gorgeous smile.

"Anything—except for that getting-me-naked gleam in your eyes."

He chuckled. "I'll have to settle for something else then, I guess. But feel free to change your mind. Seven o'clock. Any foods to avoid?"

Thoughts of getting naked with Ryan sent that hot jolt throughout her body again. She hoped her eyes weren't gleaming too. She needed to focus on the food.

"Nope. They like most everything." Asking him to be sure to use only the best ingredients like her parents were used to would make her sound like a jerk, so she'd just take her chances. "And please put everything on my tab at the store." And wouldn't that start a whole new round of rumors?

She started to walk away when he called out, "Aren't you forgetting something?"

When she spun around, he was right in front of her.

"You should probably kiss your boyfriend goodbye—for your parents' sake."

She hadn't been kissed by anyone since Spencer, and her spine automatically stiffened. But it was just a kiss. She'd have to have her first one again sometime. Why not now? She'd look at it as moving forward, marking off another box on her recovery checklist. Who better than a safe man like the



sexy sheriff to do it with? He didn't date local girls, so he wouldn't want anything more from her.

"Okay." Steeling herself, Tara closed her eyes.

*I can do this.*

His big, rough hand slowly skimmed her cheek before he ran his fingers into her hair, pulling her closer. As his scent, wood-spicy and all male, filled her senses, her hands automatically went to his hard chest in defense. When familiar panic started to rise from what Spencer had done to her, she forced it back, refusing to give in to the urge to shove him away.

He laid a soft kiss on her forehead. "How about a rain check for when you're ready?"

She blinked open her eyes. "No . . . I . . . want . . . you . . ." She didn't know what the hell she wanted from him.

He whispered, "Then why are you about to rip the pockets off my shirt, Tara?"

"Oh. Sorry." She loosened her grip, but left her hands on his chest. The fast thump of his heart and the fierce desire in his eyes belied his kind action. "I guess I need to add remembering how to kiss properly to my to-do list too." God, how pathetic could she be?

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As badly as he'd wanted a real kiss, he wanted her trust even more. Ryan searched her gaze, looking for answers that weren't there. He'd like to beat the crap out of whoever had hurt her so badly she feared a simple kiss. "What hap—"

"What have we here?" His brother's voice ended their staring match as Ben joined them. "So, the rumors are true about you two, huh? Moving in on my territory, Ry?"

Could his brother's timing be any worse?

Tara whirled on Ben. "What's that supposed to mean? I'm no one's territory!"

So, Tara had a temper. Interesting.

Ben lifted both hands in surrender. "I was just doing my big-brotherly duty and giving Ryan a hard time. I didn't mean to offend you. Of course

you're not any man's territory. I apologize."

It took all Ryan had not to roll his eyes. What a schmoozer. Ben belonged in politics.

Tara frowned as she looked back and forth between them, as if debating whether his brother was telling the truth.

After he sent her a slight nod, she said to Ben, "Fine. Apology accepted."

She turned her full attention on Ryan next. He braced for the fury he probably deserved for kissing her in Town Square, even if it was only on the forehead.

Instead, her face softened and her voice turned sexy quiet. "We'll be there at seven. And I'll bring the wine my parents like. Thanks again." She sent him a weak smile. "For everything."

As Tara approached the limo, an older, uniformed chauffeur hopped out and opened the door. She slid into the car beside her mother and they drove off toward her house.

After they were gone, Ben asked, "What the hell was that?"

"That was you being an asshat." He started across the grass, toward the store.

"Me?" Ben caught up. "I don't go around kissing the women you've asked out—oh, wait. That'd be impossible because you never ask anyone around here out."

"Whatever." That was why he never talked about his dating life with anyone. Especially his brother and sisters. Too damned messy.

Ben laughed as they both hopped up on the wooden sidewalk in front of the general store. Ryan reached out and yanked open the glass door as Ben asked, "What's going on with you, Ry? Grandma's right. Lately you've had the biggest stick up your—"

Ryan let the door slap closed in his brother's face, then grabbed a cart and started throwing ingredients into the basket.

Ben caught up again with his own basket, but was thankfully silent as they made their way up and down the aisles, filling their shopping carts.

After they checked out, they walked side by side toward their respective homes, still not speaking.

Ben not jabbering on about something was out of character.

Ryan couldn't stand the silence any longer, and that was out of

character for him. “I know you asked her out first. Didn’t mean to cross the line. It just . . . happened.” And he felt rotten about it. “I’ll back off.” But he didn’t want to back off, dammit.

He wanted Tara.

But family came first. Always.

Ben shrugged. “I knew I’d struck out with Tara after seeing the way she was all about you in my office yesterday. The woman clearly has bad taste.”

Ryan’s lips tilted before he could stop them. “Maybe you’re getting old or something?”

“Now who’s the asshat?” Ben shifted his bags and stopped walking. “My advanced age has given me seven more years of dating experience, and I can see Tara’s into you. I was looking for you earlier to tell you to go for it with her. And to remind you to tear up that ridiculous mental list of requirements for the perfect woman. She doesn’t exist!” He turned to go, then called out, “Try to have actual conversations sometimes, if you want to keep her around longer than the others. See you, lughead.”

“Later.” Ryan walked down his driveway, relieved things with Ben were back to normal again.

He’d take his brother’s advice and work on talking more—while he tried to extract intel on Tara from her parents.

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After Tara got her parents—and their six pieces of luggage for just one night—settled in her bedroom, she arranged for accommodations for their driver, Jimmy, at the hotel fifteen miles away in the next town south, and then sent him on his way. The hotel was part of a popular chain, perfectly fine for anyone other than her mother, or she would have sent her parents there too.

She snuck out to the backyard to call Ryan. He answered with, “Hey.”

“Hi. Everything under control? Need me to pick up anything?”

“Nope.”

Never a wasted word with the guy. “Um, would it be okay if I brought my puppy? He’s all discombobulated by my parents showing up out of the blue.”

“Discombobulated?”

“Sherlock likes his routine. I don’t know what he’ll do if I leave him home alone.”

“‘Kay.”

“Do you always talk on the phone like this? With one-word answers?”

“Yeah?”

Tara smiled.

Determined to make him utter a full sentence she said, “For my parents’ sake and to keep up the ruse of you being my real boyfriend, tell me something I should know about you.”

He was silent so long she wasn’t sure he’d answer until he finally said, “I don’t like to talk on the phone?”

Eight words. She’d take it. “That I already figured out. Something else.”

“I’m an excellent cook. But stuff is going to burn if you don’t stop asking me questions.”

Laughing, she said, “Okay. We’ll be there in a few. Thank you for doing this, Ryan. I really appreciate it.”

“Welcome.” He hung up. No goodbye. Just silence.

He’d hung up the last time without saying goodbye too. Maybe he did that to everyone? So she shouldn’t take offense?

Her phone rang again. It was Ryan. “Hello?”

“I probably should have said goodbye. I’m told it’s a bad habit of mine.”

“Yeah. Hard to keep girlfriends happy when you hang up on them all the time.”

“Happy would be good. My broken nose shows how hard you hit. Bye, Tara.”

That was three whole, but short, sentences. Maybe there was hope for the man yet. “Goodbye, fake boyfriend.” She quickly hung up first.

Shaking her head and smiling, she grabbed her dog’s leash and clipped it on her excited pup. “As for your bad habits, little man, no jumping on my mother, you hear? Be a good boy and mind your manners.”

Sherlock’s stub tail wagged in answer as he lurched for the door, nearly tugging Tara’s arm out of the socket. He loved going on walks and still hadn’t gotten the “heel” part down.

Once inside, Sherlock headed straight for her mother.

Using her sternest voice, Tara tugged on his leash. “Sit!”

Sherlock stiffened before he stopped dead in his tracks and plopped his butt down. The confused expression on his little face at her harsh tone poked at Tara's heart. "Good boy."

"It's cute enough, I guess." Tara's mom tried to hide her disgust at a dog in the house, but her nose still wrinkled. "What will you do with it while we eat?"

It? She started to remind her mother that *his* name was Sherlock, but picking her battles seemed more prudent. Long night ahead.

"He's coming along." Tara ignored the mortification on her mother's face. "You guys didn't have to get all dressed up. We're just going to Ryan's house. Would you like to change?"

Her mom wore something fit for a state dinner and her dad looked handsome in his crisp, dark suit and red tie.

Her mother shook her head. "One should always dress for dinner, Jamie. Maybe you should change too? Surely you'll want to look your best for Ryan."

Her father rolled his eyes. He was happiest when dressed for his golf game. "Jamie looks fine, Eva. Leave the girl alone."

"That's *Tara* to you guys. And Ryan won't care. He's a casual, laid-back kind of guy."

Her father mumbled, "That'd be a nice change from our usual dinner partners," and earned an arm swat from her mom.

Tara stifled her grin. "Let's go."

Any man who'd cook for her parents and let her bring her rambunctious pup to his newly remodeled house without hesitation got extra points from her. Maybe she and Ryan could end up being friends after all.

After she grabbed the wine and locked up, her father asked, "Where'd Jimmy go?"

"I sent him to a hotel in the next town. We can walk to Ryan's house. It's just down the hill."

Her dad nodded sharply. "A walk sounds good. Love the way the air smells. Clean and fresh."

"Walking is out of the question." Mom looked down at her skyscraper Louboutins.

"Fine." Tara handed the bottles of wine in the cloth carrier and Sherlock's leash to her father. "We'll drive."

She went back inside to get her BMW out of the garage, realizing she hadn't driven her car in weeks. It probably needed to be started anyway.

After they were all loaded up and on their way, she glanced in the rearview mirror. "Ryan just remodeled his home and it's beautiful, Mom. You'll especially appreciate all the cherry wood built-ins. And the view of the lake is stunning."

Before her mother could answer, they were at Ryan's house and heading down his drive.

"Is this it? A cabin?" Her mom's forehead knitted as much as a forehead could when filled with Botox.

Tara pulled around the back of the house and parked in front of Ryan's garage. "Just wait. You'll see."

As they unloaded from the car, Ryan walked onto the deck and lifted a hand in silent greeting. He wore a snowy white dress shirt, charcoal slacks, and black leather loafers. She'd never seen him in anything but his uniform and running gear. The action hero she'd been starstruck by the day before had nothing on Ryan, even with the bruises on his face.

When he smiled, her heart nearly stopped.

Tara's mom whispered, "See? Ryan changed for dinner too. And so handsome on top of it? I think I like him already."

Ryan walked down the steps from the deck then slipped beside her as she tried to wrestle Sherlock out of the car.

"You drove?" he whispered.

"Don't ask." She leaned down and tugged on Sherlock's leash, but he dug his paws in, refusing to budge. It was another new situation, and her puppy was already at his limit for the day. "Come on, Sherlock. Please?"

After a few more failed attempts and much pleading, Ryan reached in and scooped Sherlock up. "Let's go, bud."

Her dog wagged his tail and happily snuggled against Ryan's chest, already best of friends.

"Little traitor." Why hadn't she just done that? She was totally off her game.

"You have to show a dog who's in charge, Tara." He turned and smiled at her parents. "Eva. Joe. Nice to see you again. Please, come in."

As she followed behind them, Tara glanced down at her slacks and silk shirt, suddenly feeling way underdressed on top of being a hot mess on the

inside.

Ryan stuck his hand out to help her mother up the two steps. The deck held a stainless steel outdoor kitchen and a seating area. He'd set the table for them to eat outside.

She expected Ryan to follow behind her parents but he waited for her too, holding out his hand to help her up the steps as well.

"Thank you."

He leaned close and said, "Relax."

The easy way he held Sherlock, along with the amusement dancing in his pretty eyes, helped some of the tension drain from her shoulders. But the last thing she should do is relax around the snoopy, cutie-pie sheriff. "I'll try."

After a tour of Ryan's house, Tara and her parents settled into comfy outdoor furniture on the deck, drinks in hand, under the shade of a giant pine tree. Ryan tied Sherlock's leash to a nearby post and then joined them.

Her mom glanced out across the beautiful, still lake, and sighed. "This is just a lovely spot, Ryan. Thank you for having us."

Just when Tara thought things might actually go well, her mother added, "And I'm so glad Tara will have a date now for her sister's wedding next weekend. We look forward to having you stay with us."

What was her mother thinking? Everyone coming to the wedding had known her since she was a kid. No way would she be able to keep her secret from Ryan if he came.

"Mom, Ryan is on duty on Saturdays. He won't be able to come." She stared at her mother, hoping she'd catch a clue.

Her dad said, "He's in charge. I'm sure he can switch things up."

Had her parents both lost their minds?

She turned to Ryan and shook her head ever so slightly. "You really can't, right, Ryan?"

Ryan stared into her eyes for a moment, as if debating, then said, "I wouldn't miss it. Thanks for inviting me."

She wanted to kill all three of them!

"I need to help Ryan with dinner. Please excuse us."

Ryan shook his head. "It's all—"

She didn't let him finish; instead she grabbed his arm and pulled. "We'll be right back!"

## CHAPTER Six

He was in trouble. Tara's stiffened posture left no doubt as Ryan followed her into the kitchen. But he wasn't giving up the perfect opportunity to get to the bottom of whatever Tara was hiding. Between staying with her parents and talking to the other guests at the wedding, he'd surely get closer to the truth.

She spun around and crossed her arms. "Why did you say yes to the wedding? What could you have possibly been thinking?"

Probably time to dig deep and have a real conversation. "I just found out I have a job interview in Denver on Saturday. I was going to be there anyway." The e-mail should have been good news, but something hadn't sat right with him ever since he'd read it.

"Oh." Tara cocked her head, no longer looking like she wanted to hit him again. "You're thinking of leaving? Bored with small-town life?"

"No. More like I'm tired of dating and ready to have a family. I've pretty much exhausted my choices around here."

"And Sarah married Ed. Your sisters told me all about that." Tara shot him a "you're not telling the whole story" look.

"My sisters have big mouths." He didn't want to discuss Sarah, especially with Tara. "And it was your idea for us to play a couple for your parents."

Tara opened her mouth, then snapped it shut. He could practically see the wheels spinning inside her brain.

She finally said, "Yes. But just for tonight. Please tell them you can't go."

"I'm not your type. Okay. I get it." That she wasn't interested in him



hurt. She'd awoken feelings in him he wasn't sure he'd ever have again.

"No! That's not what I meant." Tara looked him straight in the eyes for a change as she laid a soft hand on his forearm. It was the first time she'd touched him without jerking away.

Progress.

She leaned in, her warm breath feathering lightly across his cheek. "You would be just my type, if I wanted to have a type right now, but I don't. This doesn't have anything to do with you, Ryan."

It took all he had not to smile at the "just her type" comment. Her eyes told him she was telling the truth about that. "Then what does it have to do with, Tara?"

Panic lit her face as her arms crossed again. "It's . . . umm . . . complicated?"

That only served to pique his interest.

He walked to the fridge and pulled out the marinating chicken. "Why'd you tell your parents we were dating in the first place?"

Tara moved to one of the barstools and sat down, covering her face with her hands. "I don't want to tell you the truth, but I really don't want to lie to you either. Is pleading the fifth an option? Or just plain insanity, perhaps?"

He chuckled as he went back to the fridge and pulled out the fixings for a salad. "I'd prefer the truth."

"Well, if we're stating our preferences, I'd prefer to help with the salad and drop the rest. Salads are the one thing I know how to cook. Please?"

Ryan washed his hands, and then the lettuce, as he debated his next move. He wanted to stay invited to the wedding.

He'd drop the topic for now. Because he just figured out what he was going to ask Tara for in return for the favor. And she wasn't going to like it.

After he dumped the clean lettuce in a bowl, he handed Tara all the vegetables and feta cheese crumbles, along with a knife. "Can an insane person be trusted with sharp objects?"

She laughed. "I have a diploma on my office wall that says so."

He'd never get tired of seeing how her whole face brightened when she smiled.



It may have been all the wine or Tara's imagination, but Ryan just got better looking as the night wore on. The man could cook, remodel a house, and put up with her parents for an entire evening.

She locked eyes with Ryan as he returned outside to serve them dessert. When he sent her a warm smile, the thought of confessing their lie to her parents dissipated. He'd make a pretty damn great boyfriend—if she were in the market.

Tara laid a hand on her full stomach and sighed at the chocolate-covered strawberries Ryan slipped in front of her. "While I should, I can't say no to these." She glanced over her shoulder and met his amused gaze as he refilled her wineglass. Again. He'd been doing that before she could get to the bottom all night, fueling her pleasant little buzz. "Thank you."

"Welcome."

Ryan took his seat at the head of the table. Had it been accidental that his arm had brushed hers repeatedly throughout their delicious meal? Worse, that she hadn't minded?

He'd been such a good sport to put up with her parents and their nonstop questions during the feta-and-artichoke-heart salad. During the margherita chicken, grilled asparagus, and roasted potatoes, they'd talked about how Casey had run the hotel since she'd graduated from high school, and about Meg getting married soon. When her parents asked how he'd beaten his brother out for a first date, Tara wanted to slink under the table. Even worse, they'd drilled him relentlessly for details about his parents.

Ryan and his brother and sisters hadn't had an easy life, with their mother dying so young in a car accident and then having the gruffest, scariest man Tara had ever met for a father. Ryan explained it was why he could cook so well, that he and his brother and sisters had taken turns making meals since they were tall enough to reach the stovetop.

It always warmed her heart whenever he and his siblings talked about each other. While there was usually teasing involved, there was so much love between them. The side bonus of the evening was that it'd been the perfect way to learn more about his past without him thinking she was interested in him enough to ask on her own.

Ryan had kept his answers short, but she guessed it might have set a record for the most words he'd spoken in a single day.

Her mom took a bite of berry, closed her eyes, and sighed. "Ryan, how

is it you weren't snatched up long ago? What's wrong with the women around here?"

Tara wanted to give the poor a guy a break, so she answered, "There are more than a few women in town who'd have him, but he doesn't date locally. The town's too small and breakups can get nasty." She glanced at Ryan. "At least that's what your sisters told me."

"But he's dating you?" Her dad's forehead scrunched.

Crap. That was the problem with fibbing. She was terrible at it!

Before she could reply, Ryan said, "Actually, Eva, I've been told by the women I've dated that I'm too quiet. And my expectations are too high. Tara owes me a favor, so I'm going to ask her to teach me how to date the right way, from a woman's point of view, so I can keep her for a change."

Tara dropped the strawberry that had been on its way to her lips.

Did he say keep *her*? As in her, or any woman? Probably he meant any woman. "Like dating lessons? You're serious?"

He nodded. "You said it could be anything."

She must've looked as gobsmacked as she felt, because Ryan's not-so-innocent smile just widened as she stared at him with her mouth gaping. That was the last thing she wanted to do. She had a hard enough time ignoring her raging hormones around him as it was. She intended to stay single forever, and Ryan wanted just the opposite. He'd be a temptation she didn't need.

Her mother nodded in approval. "Ja . . . uh, Tara is the right woman for the job, Ryan. Our other daughter, Laura, was sickly as a child. Leukemia. When Laura finally got better, Tara gave her a complete makeover and helped her gain the confidence she needed to shine. Come to think of it, you're a lot like Brad, our future son-in-law."

"Then this should work out great." Ryan ignored her shoe jabbing into his shin and beamed a smug smile at her mom. He finally turned and met her gaze. "We can make your sister's wedding one of the lessons, right, Tara?"

How was she going to get out of this one? Maybe she should just come clean. Then he'd run the opposite direction. The man wanted the perfect wife, not emotionally damaged goods like her.

Her mom said, "Training them correctly right from the start is smart, honey. I wish I could have done that with your father. Heaven knows he could have used it."

That started a whole new round of loud bickering between her parents

that woke her snoozing pup.

Tara crooked her finger at Ryan. When he leaned closer, she whispered, “We need to talk about this, but before my parents get too far into their battle, I’d better take them home. Leave the dishes. I’ll come by and do them tomorrow after they leave.”

Ryan leaned even closer. The hint of erotic aftershave mixed with the slight scent of chocolate from the strawberries was dangerously sexy.

Damn that wine.

He whispered, “What are you going to do about breakfast?”

She hadn’t thought that far ahead. All she had was cereal and yogurt. Toast and jam wouldn’t cut it either.

“This might be a perfect time to start our lessons. Women love it when you offer to cook breakfast—for her parents too?”

The corner of his mouth tilted. “Breakfast after a date usually doesn’t involve enough clothing to invite parents too.”

She glanced at her parents to see if they’d heard that, but they were still going at it.

The vision that popped into her head of Ryan serving her breakfast in bed in only his boxers was too much to bear. “Right. Uh . . . we better go.”

She hopped up and untied Sherlock’s leash. “Thanks again, Ryan.”

He stood and joined her. “I’ll skip my workout in the morning. Does seven work?”

Missy said he never skipped his workout. “Are you sure?”

“Yep.” He kneeled down to give Sherlock an ear rub. Ryan seemed to like Sherlock as much as her puppy liked him. It sent another little jab at that concrete re-enforced wall around her heart.

“Thanks. I’ll stop by early and help, then.”

Her mother never got up before nine, but the sooner they were out the door and on their way back to Denver the better. Her mom would just have to suck it up. “I’ll call you when I get home so we can talk some more about returning your favor.”

Ryan cringed.

He was probably talked-out for the day. “Never mind. We can talk tomorrow.”

“Okay.” He gave Sherlock one last rub all over. “I’ll drive you home. You’ve all had too much to drink.”

“It’s like a two-minute drive. I’m fine.”

“Not negotiable, Tara.”

A memory of Spencer saying something was not negotiable raised her hackles for a moment, until she tried to count her drinks. Ryan had topped off her glass all night. She’d decided to take Fridays off until her business grew a bit, so she’d indulged more than usual. How many had she had? She’d been nervous and the wine had helped.

When she couldn’t come up with a solid number, her argument died on her lips.

She handed over her keys.

Her parents finally came to an impasse, so they stopped their bickering and stood to join them, and then they all loaded up in the car with Ryan at the wheel.

Once home and inside the garage, she punched in the security code and then let everyone in. Her parents, now not speaking to each other at all, said goodnight and quickly slipped down the hall to her bedroom. That left her standing in the small foyer, entirely too close to Ryan.

“Well, goodnight.” She reached for the doorknob.

His hand covered hers to stop it. “Something wrong? I thought we had a good time tonight.”

She glanced over her shoulder to be sure her parents weren’t lurking about and then opened the front door. “Let’s talk on the porch.”

They both sat down on the glider and Sherlock decided he’d better sit between them.

Normally that wouldn’t be tolerated, but Sherlock separating her from Ryan would probably be a good thing at the moment. Ryan looked way too handsome for his own good.

She couldn’t tell him the whole truth. Best to give him a modified CliffsNotes version. “I want to be clear on where I stand on this whole dating thing. Even though I’m probably violating girl-code by revealing secrets to the other side, I’ll agree to give you a few tips, but nothing more. I had a bad experience with marriage, and I’m not interested in another serious relationship.”

Ryan frowned. “You don’t want kids? A family of your own?”

The familiar sting of tears whenever she thought about never having a child of her own hit her. Along with memories of how Spencer, in a crazy,

misguided, jealous rage, had made certain she'd never have another man's child.

"Something hap . . . my ex hurt . . ." She stopped and pulled it together. Water under the bridge. She would not give Spencer the power to ruin the rest of her life too. "I can't have children . . . anymore."

She glanced at Ryan, whose gaze focused intensely on hers.

"What did he do to you, Tara?"

The honest concern in his eyes made her want to tell him the whole story. To tell someone other than a family member, or a shrink, what it'd been like for her. While she'd been slowly getting better, how she still struggled with it daily. But the fewer who knew the truth, the better. Just in case. Her safety hinged on that.

"Doesn't matter." A single tear escaped and slipped down her cheek, so she quickly brushed it away. "I just wanted you to understand that you and I will never be together. I only told my parents we were dating because they worry about me, and they want me to be happy again. You and I had just had dinner the other night when my mother called, and I saw it as a way to ease her concerns. I shouldn't have involved you in this." Although, why had she? Especially when she'd been trying to avoid him. Maybe it was because Ryan was different from any other man she'd ever known? She wanted to trust him even though she shouldn't get involved and give him the wrong impression.

"No problem." Ryan slipped his arm around her, but didn't move any closer because Sherlock was still snoozing between them.

Ryan remained silent while running his hand slowly up and down her arm. An urge to lay her head on his shoulder and let her tears fall filled her. Instead she blocked out the feelings and cleared her throat. "Now that you know the truth, if you'd like to change your mind about all this, I'll understand."

"Nope." Ryan's jaw clenched ever so slightly. "Where is your ex-husband now?"

Incarcerated in a psych ward in New York. "On the East Coast."

"Good." He gave her arm one last quick up-and-down rub. When he laid a sweet kiss on the top of her head, more tears threatened. "Goodnight, fake girlfriend."

Her lips reluctantly tilted. "Night."

She slowly rose and gathered up her sleepy pup. After she'd locked the

door behind her, her cell phone dinged with a text.

It was from Ryan. I'd never let anyone hurt you, Tara. You're safe here.

*God, she hoped so.*

She leaned her forehead on the wooden door and let her pent-up tears flow for the baby she'd been carrying when Spencer had attacked her. It had been a boy. His name would have been Sean.

---

When the edge of Ryan's king-sized bed dipped with someone's weight the next morning, he slowly cracked an eye open. Too bad it wasn't Tara.

He needed to start locking his damn door.

Glancing at the clock, and then at his siblings surrounding his bed, he said, "All of you before six a.m.?"

He sat up and leaned against the headboard as Meg yawned and laid her head down on the spare pillow beside him. "Blame them. I told them you wouldn't really leave. Wake me when there's coffee."

Casey sat on the edge of his side of the bed while Ben stood with his arms crossed at the foot.

Ben said, "What's this BS about you moving away, Ry?"

Meg, with her eyes still closed, said, "Grandma said she saw Tara's fancy BMW here last night. I'd rather hear about that."

Casey tilted her head. "Really? Something going on with you and Tara?"

"I saw him kiss her yesterday." Ben's voice rose two octaves as he added, "On the forehead. It was all so sweet."

Ryan threw his pillow at his brother. "Tara and I are just friends. She's going to give me some dating tips for when I move to Denver."

Ben caught the pillow and then threw it back. "Dating tips? Right. Perfect excuse to spend more time with her. I like it."

That would be an added side benefit. If she hadn't just told him a relationship between them was out of the question.

Casey said, "Why are you thinking of leaving, Ryan? Is it Dad?"

Meg snorted. "Dad's the reason I left a time or two. Weirdly, it doesn't

help. He finds ways to annoy you from afar. Trust me.”

“It’s not Dad. I just want a change of scenery. And people.”

“People?” Casey’s eyes narrowed. “You mean women. Tara would be a reason to stay, I’d think.”

She would be, but not if she didn’t want him. Been there, done that. “I haven’t heard back about the job I really want. I doubt I’ll take this one.” He’d decided that was the reason for his unrest since he’d read the e-mail. It wasn’t about leaving.

Meg finally opened her eyes and sat up. “I always thought you stayed because of Sarah. In case Ed’s temper got out of hand?”

That was true, but he’d never told anyone. His sisters were like mind readers. “I can’t wait around for Sarah anymore. I need to move on.”

“You do need to move on.” Casey patted his arm. “But I’d rather you stayed here and did it. We’ll miss you too much.”

Meg frowned. “How come I never got a speech like that when I was thinking of leaving?”

Ben said, “Because you needed to leave to grow up. Ryan came out of the womb an old man.”

“True. So back to Tara . . .” Meg slid closer and stared at him with a mischievous grin. “You *really* like her. I can tell.”

He and Meg had always been the closest, being the two youngest and only a few years apart in age. Casey and Ben were older and had to be more like parents, rather than siblings, at times. “Yeah. But she says she’s not interested in long-term relationships.”

Meg punched his shoulder. “Then it’s your job to make her see how awesome you are and change her mind. That means you need to stick around to do it. My work is done here.”

Meg slid off the bed and grabbed Ben’s arm. “Come on, you two. We said our piece. Tara will be here any minute and we don’t want to be in the way.”

“Please reconsider.” Casey sent him a weak smile as she rose to leave too.

Ryan called out to their retreating backs, “How the hell did you know about Tara coming over?”

Meg said, “Tara texted Eric last night and asked if he could take Sherlock for the morning. Guess her mom isn’t keen on dogs. And Tara



wanted to help with breakfast.” Meg stopped in the doorway while the others kept going. “I get the wanting to leave, Ry. But it’s not the same in Denver. I got really lonely sometimes, even when I was surrounded by people. There’s something to be said for knowing people your whole life. As annoying as it can be to live here, I guarantee you’ll miss it. Good luck with Tara. We’re all rooting for you guys.” Meg lifted a hand and disappeared out the door.

Yeah, but it could be just as lonely living in the same small town with the second woman he wanted but could never have.

But was Meg right? Tara had been through something bad; it was no wonder she’d decided to retreat from real relationships. He’d done the same in the past, but it hadn’t lasted. Should he try to change Tara’s mind about dating?

He had feelings for Tara he’d like to get to the bottom of. And if something more developed between them, he wouldn’t mind adopting a great kid like Eric. Tara seemed to like kids even though she couldn’t have them.

*Could* he change her mind about dating him?

Or would that be making the same mistake he’d made with Sarah all over again?

## CHAPTER SEVEN

The fragrance of smoky bacon mixed with roasted coffee beans called to Tara like a siren's song as she approached Ryan's front porch. It made her mouth water.

The front door stood open so she tapped on the screen. When there was no answer, she called out, "Ryan? It's Ja . . . Tara." She'd almost slipped and said her real name. Probably because she'd heard it so often in the last twenty-four hours. Her parents refused to call her Tara when no one else was around. She needed to stay on her toes until they left.

When there was still no answer, she tested the screen door. It wasn't locked. Had he gotten called away? Maybe he'd left the door unlocked for her?

Tentatively stepping inside, she called out his name again.

A pair of bare feet appeared on the stairs. "Sorry. Running behind."

Ryan wore a pair of jeans and nothing else. His hair was damp, like he'd just gotten out of the shower.

Holy crap! The man was built like a well-trained athlete. It made her mouth water all over again. "Stop right there."

Ryan's foot halted midair as he frowned at her in confusion.

"That look is perfect for cooking for your *real* girlfriend. But since it's me, please turn around and go put on a shirt."

"Am I distracting you, Tara?" Ryan's lips tilted into a slow, naughty grin.

*Distraction* was too mild a word. More like downright attraction. She didn't need any more of that. "Yes. Now, go."

“Always this bossy in the morning?”

His smile hadn’t dimmed, and it made her want to smile right back at him. “I’m worried if my mother gets that eyeful she’ll leave my father and propose to you. You made quite the impression last night.”

Ryan chuckled and started back up the steps. “Coffee’s ready.”

Tara went to the kitchen and searched the cabinets until she found the mugs. He hadn’t saved the dishes for her to do from the night before, but there’d probably be plenty to clean after breakfast. She hoped he’d let her do them. She felt like she was always one favor behind the man.

Tara grabbed two mugs from the cupboard and filled them. She took her coffee black and as strong as she could get it. Hopefully it would taste as great as it smelled.

While rubbing her sore neck, she took the first sip. She hadn’t gotten much sleep the night before on her uncomfortable, two-inches-too-short couch. A Murphy bed for her office was going on the shopping list.

When the bold, rich flavor of Ryan’s coffee hit her tongue, she nearly moaned with pleasure. Closing her eyes, she savored the sensation.

“Good?” Ryan asked.

She opened her eyes. “Yummy!” He looked pretty darn yummy too, but she needed to knock it off and get serious about breakfast.

Ryan had left his dark-blue button-down shirt untucked. The top two buttons stood open, displaying his strong neck muscles, and he’d rolled the sleeves up to show off his toned forearms. Putting a shirt on hadn’t dimmed his attractiveness in the least.

She handed over his mug.

“Thanks.”

He drank his coffee black too, apparently, because he took a long, slow drink.

She asked, “What can I do to help?”

“After seeing your poor knife skills yesterday, I think you should stick to dentistry.”

“Ha ha. Always this funny in the morning?”

“Most people don’t get my sense of humor.” His mouth did the crooked-corner-tip thing again. He always did that when he teased.

“That’s because you’re a big, tough guy. If you want people to know you’re joking, just add one of your killer smiles.”

“Fine.” He sent her a wide, toothy grin. “Get the hell out of my way, then. Watch and learn.”

“Smart-ass,” She said as she climbed onto a barstool at the counter. “We should have a practice date that involves cooking. You could teach her, or in this case, me, how to make something special. Women think it’s pretty sexy when a guy cooks for them. It’d be a good third or fourth date thing.”

“Yeah?” Ryan cracked eggs into a bowl with one hand and then poured in some milk. His forearm flexed nicely as he whisked the mixture together. “Why not good for a first date?”

She concentrated on the whisk instead of his arm. “You won’t know each other well enough yet. It could be uncomfortable. On the first date it’s best to be somewhere busy. Busy helps the conversation flow better—gives you something to talk about.”

Ryan plopped some butter in a skillet and turned up the flame below. “I’m better at cooking than talking.”

“No way? Really?” She shot him a big fake grin.

“Now who’s the smart-ass?” Ryan dipped thick slices of Texas toast into the egg mixture before laying them in the hot pan. Then he sprinkled a little cinnamon on top. “It’s hard to find busy around here. I’m hoping Denver will be better.”

Tara took a hit of coffee as she thought about that. “If you can’t find busy, then you could *be* busy. Like, I’ve always thought whitewater rafting would be fun. And it’d be a good opportunity to be all *I’ll protect you* when she gets scared and screams like a girl.”

“Probably ruin things if I screamed like a girl too, though, huh?”

Her mug stopped halfway to her lips. “Do you?”

“No. When I scream it’s always manly.”

She laughed. “You got me that time. But you screwed up. This is where you should’ve asked me on a date because I showed interest.”

Ryan flipped the French toast over. “Tara, would you like to go whitewater rafting with me on Sunday afternoon?”

“Why, yes, Ryan, I would. Shall I wear my little red bikini?” Not that she had one of those anymore. She had to hide her scars under a one-piece these days.

His eyes cut to hers for a moment, as if checking whether she was serious, before he turned his attention back to the stove. “There’s some

hiking involved. You might be more comfortable in a T-shirt and shorts over the . . . suit.”

It warmed her heart when he couldn't say *bikini*.

“That is if your neck isn't too sore to go. You've been rubbing it since you got here.”

Had she been? “Lumpy couch last night. I'll be fine once the kinks are out.”

Ryan scooped the golden toasted bread from the pan. “I'm good with kinks. May I?”

“Uh. Sure.”

He circled behind her and laid his hands on her shoulders.

Ryan's big hands gently kneaded her tight muscles while his thumbs circled in between her shoulder blades. It bordered somewhere between pain and sexy pleasure. But then, whenever they touched there was a spark and connection she'd never experienced before. “Oh my God, that feels good.”

“Which date should I save this for?”

Without thinking she blurted out, “Do this, and it'll be the one when you sleep together for the first time.”

His husky voice whispered in her ear, “How many dates would I have to wait to get to that one, Tara?”

If she didn't know better she'd think he was asking to sleep with her. But she'd made the ground rules clear enough. “Ummm—”

Loud knocking along with Tara's father's voice rang out from the porch. “Anyone home?” Her dad's voice put an instant end to all the naughty thoughts about sleeping together.

Ryan gave her shoulders one last gentle squeeze before moving his hands away. He called out, “Come in.”

Making themselves right at home, her parents settled beside Tara at the counter. Her mom beamed a bright smile. “Good morning, Ryan. How are you today?”

“Great. Breakfast is almost ready. Coffee?”

Her father said, “Please. Black for me. Bring the sugar bowl for this one.” He tilted his thumb toward her mom.

Worried that might set off another argument between them, Tara quickly said, “So how are the wedding plans coming? Anyone panicking yet?”

Her dad grumbled, “My checkbook is panicking, that’s for sure.”

“Ignore him.” Her mom rolled her eyes for Ryan’s benefit. Then she turned and said, “Oh, by the way, Jamie, hair and makeup for the rehearsal dinner starts next Friday at four. And Laura asked me to remind you to bring the necklace you promised her for the something borrowed.”

Tara nodded. “I won’t forget.”

“Jamie?” She looked up to find Ryan staring at her.

Crap! Her mom must’ve just called her that and she hadn’t noticed.

Her mouth opened, but nothing but air escaped.

Her dad jumped in. “Nickname. Long story, but all her family calls her that. Her real name is Tara.”

*Way to go, Dad. No wonder the man made the big bucks.* And her real name was Tara—now. She glanced at Ryan to see if he was buying it. Didn’t look like it.

Ryan handed out the coffee, then stared into her eyes. “I like long stories.”

Her mom quickly said, “You know how little girls are. They always wish they had a different name. Tara decided at a young age we were to all call her Jamie, and it stuck.” She waved a hand toward her dad. “Tara is a name from *his* side of the family. I never really liked it anyway.”

Her dad shrugged and drank deeply from his mug.

That part was actually true. Tara had been her beloved great-grandmother’s name. That’s why she’d chosen it. And her new last name, Carter, had been gleaned from a character in a favorite book. But her parents’ excuse seemed just a little too slick.

Dammit! Had they concocted that tale so Ryan could come to the wedding? She’d just talked to them about that earlier, pointing out how it would be impossible for him to come. Everyone at the wedding would call her Jamie. Was this her dad “fixing” everything as usual?

Ryan laid out their breakfast, quickly ate a piece of French toast, and then excused himself to get ready for work. He climbed the stairs and disappeared.

Tara leaned close to her mother and whispered, “What was that? You know Detective Bailey said to tell *no one*!”

Her mother nodded as she took a bite of French toast. Her dad leaned behind her and said in a low voice, “I called Detective Bailey right after you

left this morning. He'd rather you skipped Laura's wedding, but knew you wouldn't. He approved of this plan. Oh, and Ryan's background checks out all clear too."

Of course Ryan's background check was all clear. All someone had to do was ask Zeke or anyone else in town and you'd get a background check more thorough than the FBI's. "So you two, who usually can't agree on a single thing, are in perfect harmony when it comes to plotting behind my back?" Tara laid her fork down and crossed her arms. "Seriously? You should have talked to me about this first. Now Ryan is just going to have more questions."

Her mother shook her head. "We thought you'd be happy to have your new boyfriend there. And you know we're only inviting family and very close friends. Your father will send out an e-mail to everyone warning them not to talk about your past. If Ryan asks questions at the wedding, we'll all be on the same page. And if Ryan snoops on his own, he won't find out your married name. He probably thinks Carter was your married name. Dad hired that top-notch firm to make all your online presence under your real married name disappear."

Nothing ever really disappeared completely on the Internet. No matter how much money her father had paid for that. And she probably should have come clean about Ryan not really being her boyfriend. This was partly her own fault. "It's a risk you shouldn't have taken."

Tara lost her appetite, so she hopped up to get started on the dishes. As she stewed about what to do, two big, strong hands landed on her shoulders and gave a gentle squeeze. It sent a nice shiver down her spine.

Ryan sexy mouth next to her ear whispered, "Gotta go to work."

She turned and forced a smile, not wanting him to see how upset she was. "Be extra careful out there on those mean streets, Officer."

"It's a dangerous job, but someone has to do it." He gave her a sweet peck on the cheek like a real boyfriend might do before he turned to her parents. "Safe trip home, guys."

Her father jumped up and shook Ryan's hand. "Great to have met you, Ryan. See you next weekend."

Dammit. Her parents were out of their freakin' minds.

"Thank you so much for all the great food, Ryan." Her mom stood and gave Ryan a hug, making it a complete love fest. They seemed happy and not

worried about her for the first time since she'd come home from the hospital. She didn't want to pop their happy bubbles and tell them Ryan was a fake now. But Ryan still couldn't come to the wedding. It was too risky.

After Ryan said his goodbyes and left, Tara turned to her parents. "He's not coming. End of discussion."

Her dad moved around the counter and wrapped her up in a tight hug. "Detective Bailey said he was happy you'll have a cop for a date. As low-key as we've tried to keep things, Spencer knows you'd never miss Laura's wedding. We've beefed up security to presidential levels, but I'll feel better too. We almost lost you once, sweetheart."

Tara laid her head on her dad's shoulder and blinked back her tears as memories of that horrific night filled her. Maybe they were right. It could be safer.

Her dad gave her one last squeeze before he released her. "Besides, I like Ryan."

Her mom chimed in. "Me too!"

"Really, Mother?" Tara arched a brow. "Even though he's in 'public service'?"

"We just want to be sure you don't end up with someone who's after your trust fund. Ryan's background check shows he's actually quite wealthy for a sheriff. Does he have other business interests?"

It was probably the town's profit sharing. Everyone, including herself, was paid quite well. It was what kept everyone's mouths closed about the celebrities who visited. The income definitely rivaled anything a rag would pay for pictures. "Ryan and I are still getting to know one another. That's never come up."

Then a thought struck her. "You didn't come because of my cell phone number change, did you?"

Her parents both quickly grabbed their plates and headed for the sink. Carrying dirty dishes? That was something they hadn't done for themselves since she could remember. "When exactly did you have Ryan's background checked, Dad?"

He spun around. Guilt shined brightly on his face. "Uh . . ."

Her mom said, "Tuesday night right after I talked to you." She spread her hands. "We worry about you, honey. Surely you can't blame us for that."

She really couldn't. But now when she wasn't busy with her wedding



duties, she'd have to stick to Ryan's side. She'd already told Ryan she'd been in a bad marriage, but she couldn't allow him any more details. Spencer's prominent father had gone to great lengths to hide the details about her attack. As far as the media was concerned, she and Spencer had been in a terrible car accident right before their bitter divorce. But Detective Bailey had warned that searching for information using her married name or Spencer's online could trigger alerts to someone as skilled at hacking as Spencer was. Then it could be as easy as tracking an IP address to find the searcher's location. Wouldn't be hard to find her in Anderson Butte if Spencer ever got that close.

Maybe while she was busy at the wedding, she could have her cousin Gina run interference with Ryan to be sure her secret stayed buried?

That might actually work.

---

Ryan fired up his laptop. No one else was around the office, and he was determined to dig out Tara-aka-Jamie's secret. Her parents had calmly related that story about Tara's nickname, but the panic in Tara's eyes had been real when he'd called her Jamie. Her maiden name started with a Mc- something, and Jamie was most likely her real name.

Tara had a dental license. Maybe he could see if he could find more there.

He'd start with Google.

A loud squawk came from his belt. "Sheriff? You copy?"

Ryan snatched his radio. "Go, Mike."

"Uh. I have something a little unusual. Can I get a hand out at the Barkers' place?"

Sighing, he said, "Be right there." Mike was a great guy, but wasn't one who could think on his feet when confronted with anything outside of his tiny comfort zone.

He'd have to come back to his search later.

As he walked outside, guilt for snooping sat like a lead ball in his gut. He'd rather Tara just tell him herself. Maybe after a few "dates" she'd realize she could trust him to keep her secret. And to keep her safe from whatever

she was obviously still afraid of.

Ryan walked the quarter mile to the Barkers' place. Mike had driven his squad car to the bottom of the drive near the lake, where Nate Barker stood holding a rifle pointed at something in the distance. When Ryan spotted the gun, he picked up the pace. "What's going on, guys?"

Mike turned and grinned. "Seems Nate has caught him a pair of fornicators down the shore there."

Ryan glanced in the direction the gun was pointed and spotted the naked pair. Pam, the hairdresser who'd flirted with him since high school, and Toby. "Nate, put the gun down."

"Nope. They'll get away. I'm tired of all the trespassing going on by folks looking for that buried recipe."

His deputy said, "I think Nate's just enjoying the fine view."

Mike probably was too. The guy was the same age as Ryan, but he still acted like a hormonal teenager.

Ryan rubbed the back of his neck as he searched for a solution to make everyone happy. "Clearly, these two weren't searching for any recipes. Put the gun down. Now."

Nate grunted but did as he was told. Ryan shot a glance to Mike, silently telling him to secure the gun. Ryan unbuttoned his shirt to give to Pam as he approached the naked couple. Pam stood, making no effort whatsoever to cover up, and smiled at him. He tossed his shirt to her. "What the hell, you two? Where are your clothes?"

Unfortunately, Toby lifted his hands that had covered his junk when he started to explain. "We took my boat out to Sunset Cove last night, then decided to lose our suits and do some skinny-dipping. Pam said she didn't want to drown while we . . . were going at it, so we had a race to the shore. Afterward, we needed to, uh, rest a bit, if you know what I mean, and we accidentally fell asleep. When we woke up this morning for round two—"

Ryan held up a hand. "Got it. So Nate saw you in the act?"

Toby nodded, as a smirking Pam took her time buttoning up the shirt.

Ryan had been guilty of skinny-dipping at Sunset Cove, a crescent-moon-shaped island in the middle of the lake, a time or two himself—but in high school. Trying to maintain a serious demeanor while standing in his white T-shirt, he said, "Toby, get your ass back out there and get your clothes. Then meet me at my office for your sentence. Pam, you need to come

with me.”

As Toby dove into the lake, Pam’s eyes grew wide. “You’re seriously going to arrest us, Ryan?”

“Have to.”

She laid her hands on his shoulders. “I can think of a few better ways to pay my debt to society.” She moved her mouth next to his ear and whispered all the sexual positions on her bucket list she’d yet to try. Pam had teased him like that since middle school, but he had to admit, the positions were a lot more creative than those way back then. He gave her credit for that, but it still wasn’t happening.

“Toby’s a lucky guy. But *your* sentence won’t involve handcuffs; rather, free haircuts for all the guys on the force. Now let’s make this look good for Nate.”

“Thanks, Ryan.” Pam batted her eyes. “At least I got to live out one of my favorite secret fantasies today—to wake up in just your shirt.”

“I’m flattered. Now knock it off and look concerned.”

After he loaded Pam into the back of Mike’s cruiser, and then stayed until Nate seemed placated, Ryan walked back to his office for the punishment he’d have to dole out.

He smiled thinking of what Tara had said earlier. That was about as “mean” as the streets of Anderson Butte got—having to scold fornicators. Or the occasional domestic disturbance, stolen item, or drunk and disorderly celebrity. There hadn’t been a murder or a major robbery since he’d been sheriff. Might be nice to have a little more excitement in Denver.

But who’d take his place when he left? Mike wasn’t sheriff material and Joe and Nick, his other two deputies, were older and only part time.

Wasn’t his problem. His dad could hire someone new.

Or, maybe Josh would do it. He’d had more training during his time in the FBI than all of the current force combined.

He’d bring it up later at poker. He didn’t like the thought of leaving the people in town in the wrong hands.

## CHAPTER EIGHT

**R**elieved her parents and their secret-spilling mouths were on their way back home, Tara sent an e-mail to her cousin about the new plan for babysitting Ryan at the wedding. After convincing her cousin that Ryan was truly handsome and not some geeky nerd she'd have to deal with, Gina finally agreed. Luckily her dad had already sent the e-mail warning people not to talk to Ryan about her past. Spencer knew she'd changed her name to hide from him. And that she'd never go back to using her maiden name.

So if Ryan Googled her parents, he'd figure out her maiden name from their doctored online presence, but he wouldn't find out Spencer's name or her former married last name. That was the most important piece of information to keep buried. Combined with the fib her parents had told Ryan about Jamie being her nickname, all the bases should be covered.

Still, she wished Ryan would change his mind about coming to the wedding. Or maybe something would come up in town to keep him home. She could only hope.

All her cover-up duties done, Tara jogged around the lake to pick up Sherlock.

As her tennis shoes hit the gravel in Meg's drive, Tara slowed her pace. Work crews were on the roof, and another set worked on the siding on Meg's lodge. Must be hard to live in all that noise and mess.

She spotted Eric conducting what looked like obedience training for Sherlock and his littermate, Captain Jack Sparrow. Their mother, Oreo, lay in the shade observing. Sherlock loved Eric and was being the perfect little gentleman.

"Hey, Eric."

He glanced over his shoulder. "Hi, Tara."

When Sherlock heard her, his manners disappeared and he bounded toward her. There was nothing better than her puppy's enthusiasm every single time he saw her. She leaned down and gave him a rub.

Meg joined them. "I think Eric has a future as a dog trainer. Wait until you see their latest trick."

Eric lined up all three dogs, told them to sit, and placed a dog treat on each of their snouts. Sherlock quivered in anticipation, but held his position until Eric gave the command, and all three flipped up the treats and caught them in their mouths.

"That's awesome!" Tara circled an arm around Eric's bony shoulder and gave him a hug as she slipped him some money for babysitting. "You're the best dog sitter ever."

"Thanks. I'll go get Sherlock's leash." Eric ran off and all three dogs followed behind him. Like he was the Pied Piper of dogs.

Meg slid Tara a look. "You pay him way too much. He loves Sherlock and would watch him for free."

She shrugged. "He's saving up for a special birthday gift for Josh." She'd offered to buy it at a place she'd told him had it cheaper online. She planned to help pay for some of it while maintaining his pride. She'd always had a soft spot for Eric.

Meg smiled. "That's sweet. I didn't realize that."

"Which means it was probably a secret I just blew, so don't mention it, please."

"Kay. So, rumors are a flyin' about you and Ryan. Deets, please."

Tara shook her head, while reminding herself she'd wanted small-town life. "Ryan asked me to help him be a better 'dater' for when he moves to Denver. Nothing is going on between us."

"Good luck with that." Meg sighed. "Sadly, our mother wasn't a saint, and Ryan has sworn he'd never be with a woman who lies and cheats like she did. Because of that, he's held the women he's dated to impossibly high standards. But even if he finds the right one, he'll probably lose her because he doesn't talk to her. He's not one to waste unnecessary words."

Great. Now she felt ten times guiltier for lying about her secret to Ryan. "I've noticed the quiet part when he's around everyone else, but weirdly, he's not that quiet around me."

“Reeeaaaally?” A slow, mischievous smile lit Meg’s face.

Meg had that same gleam in her eyes that Tara’s mother got when plotting her next sneaky move.

Eric returned with Sherlock on his leash. Tara took the lead. “Our first ‘practice date’ will be whitewater rafting day after tomorrow. Maybe we’ll work on his expectations.”

Eric’s eyes lit up. “I’ve always wanted to go whitewater rafting.”

Perfect! That way she wouldn’t be alone with Ryan. He was too damned attractive for his own good. “Why don’t you come along? We’re going Sunday afternoon.” She turned to Meg. “Is that okay?”

“Bringing kids along on dates can be a bit of a buzzkill, Tara.” She smiled at Eric. “No offense, buddy.”

“It’s not a real date anyway. I hear you’re an excellent guide, Meg. Why don’t you come along too?” His sister being there would guarantee nothing would happen between her and Ryan.

Meg’s brow furrowed. “Um. I’m not sure Ryan . . .”

“He won’t mind. Will I see you later for Blitzed Bingo at Brewster’s?”

“Yeah.” Meg nodded. “Josh is playing poker tonight, so I’m in.”

“Great. See you later, then. Bye, Eric.”

Tara started off at a jog with her puppy in tow. When Sherlock suddenly crossed in front of her, she nearly face-planted. She’d tried to get Sherlock to learn to run alongside her, but he still hadn’t gotten that down. He had to stop and investigate at every opportunity, hence his name. Resigned, Tara gave up and slowed to a walk, looking forward to a fun Friday night with the girls, and maybe a few hours with no worries about Spencer and if he’d make trouble for her at the wedding.

---

Ryan got dealt another crap hand. They were gathered around Ben’s dining room table playing poker and Ryan hadn’t won a hand all night. It tempted him to fold and call it a night. He’d had a hard time concentrating when his mind kept going back to the frustrating lack of information he’d found online about Tara. And without a search warrant, the state licensing board could only give out basic information. He’d just have to hope the wedding would

prove more fruitful.

Ben said, "Pot's light, Ryan. Ante up."

Ryan threw a dime in the center of the table and hoped for the best. It was only ten o'clock. The guys would razz him if he went home early.

Ben, Josh, Mike, Billy, and Ryan had been competing in an ongoing nickel, dime, quarter poker rivalry. Currently his brother was in last place and pissy about it.

Ben dealt the next round, took one look at his hand, then threw the cards on the table. "What does a guy have to do? I've had nothing all night!"

Billy chuckled. "You're just hacked because Mikey and I are totally taking advantage of your brother's losing streak and you're not." He gave Mike a high five.

Ignoring them, Ryan threw two cards away and scooped up their replacements. He'd hoped to talk to Josh in private about taking his position after he left but Mike had been early for the first time in his life. He'd talk to Josh later.

Ben said, "Ryan is distracted by our new pretty dentist. He's got it bad for her."

Ryan shot Ben a shut-the-F-up look and threw a quarter in the pot to bluff.

"She's a looker, that one." Billy threw a quarter in too. "How'd you get so lucky there, dog?"

Ben chuckled. "Oh, they aren't actually dating. She's just giving Ryan 'dating lessons' because she lost a bet or something. Genius. I'm surprised Ry had it in him."

"Fifty to you, Josh." Mike threw in a quarter and then added another. "What the hell are dating lessons, Ryan?"

"We're going rafting on Sunday and then to her sister's wedding next Saturday." Hopefully opportunities to change Tara's mind about having a relationship with him.

"Wedding?" Mike drained his beer. "You're getting lucky for sure. Am I right, gentlemen?"

The guys all nodded.

"Haven't been to a wedding yet that I haven't gotten some afterward." Ben drained his glass.

"It's a guaranteed score with the wife," Mike said. "Something about all

the romance in the air.”

“I hate weddings,” Billy said with a grunt. “Only thing that makes them bearable are all the hot babes. Like Tara. She makes going to the dentist—”

“Hey.” Ryan held up a hand. He’d had enough. “No more smack talk about Tara or I’ll kick all your asses.”

Ben laughed. “Yeah, because you’re not dating, so that’s why you’d get all bent outta shape. No feelings at all for her. Totally obvious.”

Ryan shot him the finger. “We’re not dating. Next subject.”

“The man doth protest too much, me thinks, brother of mine.”

Billy’s forehead scrunched. “What are you talking about, Ben?”

“Ask Mr. Reader over there.”

“Bad Shakespeare.” Ryan’s phone buzzed in his pocket. He hoped to God someone had committed a crime so he could leave. He swiped his screen. It was a text from Meg. **You need to get your butt over to Brewster’s now! Trey Jackson is moving in on Tara. Hard.**

Nope. That wasn’t happening. **Be right there.**

“Sorry guys, duty calls.”

“Nick’s on call. Let him handle it,” Mike said as he laid down the winning hand.

“No need to get Nick out of his recliner on a Friday night. Just something at Brewster’s. Later.” Ryan gathered his things and headed for the door. When he hit Main Street, he picked up the pace.

Trey Jackson, action star, returned to Anderson Butte every year. The female staff at the hotel knew to steer clear. But Tara wouldn’t know that, and she clearly liked the way he looked when they were jogging the other day. It just added to Ryan’s already dark mood.

He yanked open the door to Brewster’s and was body slammed with loud country music, the scents of greasy bar food and beer, and heat from too many bodies jammed inside the small space.

Glancing around, he spotted his sisters sitting at a table filled with paper bingo cards, Sharpies, and half-full glasses, but he didn’t see Tara.

A pit formed in his stomach. Had Tara gone back to the hotel with Trey?

Then he spotted two blond heads above the crowd on the dance floor and his gut relaxed. After shouldering his way through the milling people, he



sat beside Meg. “How long has that been going on?”

Casey smirked. “That was fast. You must’ve run.”

He hadn’t run. Jogged a little maybe. “So should I go break that up?”

“No. Tara will be pissed.” Meg took a long sip of her beer. “Just be patient. When she’s done, get her back out there and keep her there until Trey gets bored waiting and moves on.”

He tried not to watch but he couldn’t help it. Tara smiled at Trey as they talked. Then Trey did some dip thing that surprised her and her hands slipped around his neck to hang on. Pretty slick move. He’d have to remember that one.

As his sisters blathered between themselves about how many drinks they’d won playing bingo, Trey’s hand slowly slipped farther and farther south to Tara’s rear end. One of Tara’s hands caught his and then lifted it to neutral territory. After a few moments, Trey’s hand went for the prize again.

That did it. Ryan jumped up, pushed his way through the other dancers, and then laid a hand on Trey’s shoulder.

He might have squeezed a little harder than necessary.

Trey winced. “What the—”

“Thanks for keeping my girlfriend company until I got here. Mind if I cut in?” Ryan shot him a big, fake, toothy grin.

Trey rubbed his shoulder while staring daggers into Ryan’s eyes. Just as Trey opened his mouth to speak, Tara’s hand wrapped around Ryan’s arm and she yanked. “Thanks for the dance, Trey. Excuse us. I need to have a little chat with my *boyfriend*.”

Meg was right. He’d pissed Tara off.

He slipped his arm around her waist and swept her up into a two-step before she could drag him outside and rip him a new one.

“What was that about?” Tara growled through gritted teeth.

He pulled her closer so he wouldn’t have to yell above the music. “He’s a jerk. I was saving you from him.”

“Saving me?” She tapped a finger on his bruised nose. “Looked in the mirror lately? I can take care of myself, Ryan.”

The music stopped so she started to pull away, but he wasn’t done yet. He held her in place. “He was pawing you.”

Tara crossed her arms as the next song started up on the jukebox. “I had it under control.”

Because they were causing a traffic jam, he swept her into a dance again. Moving his mouth near her ear, he whispered, “He’s one of those celebrities who thinks he can have whoever he wants, whenever he wants her. He’s got a rap sheet in LA. Multiple sexual assault charges that have mysteriously never been prosecuted. His lawyers make them go away. He and I have had a discussion about his behavior here, but I don’t trust him. I wanted to be sure he didn’t hurt you, Tara.”

“Oh.” Her eyes grew wide. “No wonder Meg acted so weird when he asked me to dance.”

He nodded. “She texted me. That’s why I’m here.”

“I’m sorry, Ryan.” She smiled before she circled her hands around his waist and gave him a hug. And then kept holding on. “I appreciate that more than I can tell you. Thank you.”

“Welcome.”

He loved holding her in his arms. Six feet of the most beautiful woman in the world. He could dance with her all night.

But she wasn’t ready for anything serious yet, so he slowly slipped his hand lower toward her butt, stopping right before the critical point.

When her chest rumbled against his with a laugh, it made him smile.

She leaned back, her eyes still sparkling with humor. “Move your hand or lose it.”

He slowly moved his hand a few inches higher, loving all the curves. “What’d Trey say to make you smile? I never know what to say to a woman when we dance. It’s awkward.”

“He was telling me about filming his last movie in Bali. Sounded beautiful and fun.”

“Tough to compete with that.” He pulled her a little closer.

“You don’t have to compete with that. Women just want to know you’re interested in them, Ryan. You could just ask her how her day was and that’d be enough.”

“How was your day, Tara?”

“Great. How was yours?”

He thought about that for a minute. “Weird. I arrested Pam and Toby for being naked in public.”

“Pam mentioned that earlier.” Tara laughed. “She said she hated how you didn’t even look—much. If I was your real girlfriend, I would appreciate

that. A lot.”

“Yeah?”

“Mm hmm.” She snuggled closer and smiled. “Pam said she had a huge crush on you in high school. But you only had eyes for Sarah.”

“Pam wasn’t and never has been girlfriend material.”

“What does that mean?” Tara leaned back and frowned. “She’s really nice.”

He shrugged. “It’s just . . . she sleeps around . . . a lot . . . and a guy doesn’t want . . . the mother of his—”

“Stop right there. So it’s okay for a guy to sleep with as many girls as he wants, sowing his oats until he decides to settle down, but a woman can’t, Mr. Stuck-In-The-Fifties? If a woman is single, that’s her right.”

“I’m just not attracted to that type of woman.” His mother had slept around. No way would he ever want to be with someone like that.

Before he could figure out how to explain that to Tara, she said, “Well, it’s a good thing we’re just a fake couple, then, because I plan to become that type of woman from here on out.”

Here on out? Damn her ex-husband for whatever he’d done to make Tara feel that way. “I tried sleeping with women just for the sake of it, without the rest, and all it did was make me feel like a jerk for doing it.”

Tara’s eyes found his and held for a long moment before she let out a sigh. “We’ll see, I guess. You’re a good dancer, Sheriff.”

Avoidance from her, as usual. “You too. I like dancing with someone a little closer to my own size.”

“You do need dating lessons, pal.” Tara rolled her eyes. “You mean closer to your own *height*. A woman never wants her size compared to a man’s.”

“So *you* won’t be asking to borrow a shirt anytime soon?”

“Only if I decide to go skinny-dipping and get caught without one.”

He loved that she got his sense of humor. “I’d happily share. But with you, I’d *definitely* look first.”

Tara’s lips parted, but she just blinked at him. It was the second time he’d seen her speechless. The last was when he’d used her real name.

The song ended so he quickly asked, “Want a drink?”

She slipped out of his arms. “At the risk of offending your old-school ways, I’ll buy *you* a drink for saving me earlier. I saw Corona in your fridge.

One of those?”

“Great. Thanks.”

He didn’t want her to buy his drinks and had almost said so, but then he’d have been proving her point, so he made his way back to his sisters. The smirks on their faces made him want to keep right on walking.

Meg said, “Now I’ve seen it all. You talked to Tara the *whole* time you danced?”

“She was kicking my ass.” He sat beside Meg. “A guy has to defend himself.”

Casey finished off her drink. “Yeah, I always smile like that too when I get my ass kicked. We’d better go, Meg. Grandma’s probably tempted to drown our kids in the lake by now.”

“Kay.” Meg gave him a shoulder bump. “Walk her home. And when you get there, ask her how a guy knows if he’s a good kisser.”

“Tara’s not going to fall for that.”

“She will, because earlier, Pam told the story about how badly you and Sarah both fumbled through your first kiss in middle school. Look a little pathetic and she won’t be able to *not* help you.”

That was freakin’ embarrassing. It was just that one time. “Why the hell did Pam do that?”

“It was on purpose. Trust me. Do as I say and you’ll get that kiss. We all want to see you guys together, Ry. Here she comes. Good luck.” He stood so his sisters could slide out of the booth. They said goodbye to Tara on their way out.

The embarrassed middle school kid in him wanted to prove to Tara that he’d improved in the kissing department.

Would that line really work? As annoying as it was, his sisters were rarely wrong when it came to advice about women. But they hadn’t seen the way Tara had nearly ripped the pockets off his shirt the last time he’d almost kissed her. She’d have to be the one to make the first move. Not him.

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Tara said goodbye to the girls and then made her way to the table. Ryan stood beside it, waiting for her to sit first. The man had manners. She had to give

him points for that. “Ran them off too, huh? You’re batting a thousand tonight.” She added a smile so he’d know she was just kidding as she laid their drinks on the table then slipped into one of his sisters’ vacated spots.

He sat across from her and then tapped his glass lightly to hers. “But now I have you all to myself. Thanks for the drink.”

She grunted. “You’re welcome. But us sitting here alone is going to get tongues wagging even harder, you know.”

“I don’t mind.” His eyes locked with hers as he took a pull from his glass.

She didn’t mind as much anymore either. It was easier than trying to convince everyone otherwise. “I’m afraid the women are going to hate me for being the one to break your in-town-dating rule. Missy will be first in line.”

“They’ll get over it. Especially when I move away.”

“You’re really serious about that?”

“I just need the right job offer, and I’m out of here.” His jaw clenched before he took another long drink.

She studied his face. For someone so sure about moving, he didn’t seem happy about it. Maybe time for a subject change. “So, back to your lessons. Your past girlfriends said you were too quiet. Since they didn’t live in town, how often did you talk to them?”

He shrugged. “On the weekend when I saw them. We usually made plans for the following weekend before I left.”

“What?” Was he kidding? When he just stared back at her looking perplexed, she said, “So you never called on, say, a Wednesday night, just to see how she was? You just showed up for the weekend date and booty call?”

Ryan frowned as he rubbed the back of his neck. “You make it sound bad. It wasn’t like that.”

“Well, I bet it sure felt that way to the women you dated. I’d have dumped your ass too!”

He fiddled with a bingo card for a minute before he said, “I don’t like to talk on the phone. I’ve tried but it just feels . . .”

His voice had turned so quiet she suddenly felt sorry for him. “Women will do all the talking if you just ask them the right questions. Then all you have to do is make sounds of approval and go with the flow.”

“Asking the right questions is where the problem lies.”

“You’re a cop. Someone trained to notice things.” She closed her eyes.

“What color are my eyes?”

“Blue.”

“See?” She opened her eyes again. “How tall am I?”

He smiled. “Six feet plus or minus a half inch.”

“Correct again. We’ll skip the weight question. Since we’ve already been on three dates now, sort of, what do you know about me?”

“That your weight is perfect, and you actually eat, unlike some of my other past dates. You avoid answering questions about anything personal, especially about your former husband or marriage. Your big purse holds an ever-present e-reader and pepper spray. You have a nice family, but you don’t want one of your own. You run most every day. You prefer your wine red and your coffee black. You moved here from Denver. You’d like to go whitewater rafting and you spoil your puppy.”

“Wow. That was a lot of words in a row.” She chuckled as she took another sip of her wine. “And I don’t spoil my puppy. I may indulge him a bit. But otherwise that was very good. And for your information, I also love movies. Any kind except horror—even guy flicks. So out of that list, what would be the easiest thing to discuss for you?”

“Your weight?”

“Be serious, we’re having a class here.”

He took her hand and stared deeply into her eyes. When his lips tilted into a slow, sweet smile, her stomach clenched again. Would that ever stop?

“While I’d love to ask about your ex, and your need to carry pepper spray in Anderson Butte, I suppose I’d do better asking about the book you’re reading or about Sherlock.”

“And you’d be right!” She tugged her hand from his and glanced at her phone. “I didn’t realize how late it was. Let’s resume class on our next date.” She sent him a smirk. “I need to go home and spoil my puppy.”

“I’ll walk you.” He drained his beer glass.

She slid out of the booth. “You don’t have to protect me, Sheriff. That’s what my pepper spray is for.”

He opened the door for her to step first into the blessedly cool mountain air. “I was hoping you’d protect *me*. You’re the one who’s armed, here. I’m off duty.”

She laughed. “Come on, then. I’ll see you safely to your front door. But don’t expect a goodnight kiss. I hear you’re bad at that.”

He ran a hand down his face. “Meg told me about Pam’s big mouth. But that was actually a plot on the girls’ part to get you to let me kiss you.”

“What?” She stopped walking.

“They like you and mean well.” He slid an arm around her waist and tugged her along with him. “I was supposed to ask you how a guy knows if he’s a good kisser. And if you’d help me know if I am. But you’re not ready.”

She hated that she’d let fear get the best of her the last time she’d agreed to a kiss from him. Hated worse that he’d seen it. She needed to move on, start fresh again. Forget Spencer and what he’d done. It was in the past and she *was* ready to get back out there.

Probably.

She’d been thinking so hard she hadn’t noticed when they passed by Ryan’s house and ended up at hers.

He was moving to Denver soon. He’d be the perfect one to give her that first kiss since her ex’s hate-filled ones.

She was going to do it.

Tara hopped up on the porch before he could step up, then turned and faced him. Eye to eye with him, she laid her hands on his shoulders. “For the sake of our lessons, let’s see if you’ve improved since middle school.” Before he could respond, she laid her mouth on his.

Memories of Spencer’s last angry kiss stiffened her spine just like it had the last time, and her hands went to Ryan’s chest again in automatic defense. But she needed to move past her fear. She wanted to kiss Ryan, so she fought back the anxiety and focused only on his warm lips pressed against hers. They were soft and full and tasted like the Corona with lime he’d just finished. Their mouths fit together perfectly, like they were created only for each other.

When he tilted his head for a better angle, her lips parted of their own accord, inviting—no, begging—him to take more. Three years was a long time without a man’s touch, but the spark of awareness that swept through her, warming her from the inside out, was a response her body had never had to a simple kiss before. It confused her as much as it ignited the long-dormant urges that screamed for more.

As his tongue danced lightly with hers and found a primal rhythm they both seemed to know, he took her hands, still fisted on the front of his shirt, and moved them to his waist. Then he slowly wrapped his arms around her

and pulled her so close his heart pounded against hers. Even their heartbeats seemed to be in synch.

She moaned at the sexy pleasure his mouth sent straight to her core, and slipped her hands around his neck as their kiss grew more intense. Urgent. Needy. And damn hot.

An alarm in the back of her brain finally broke through the spell he'd woven, warning that things were moving too quickly. She should stop before she didn't have the will left to resist taking him to bed to see if he was as good at making love as he was at kissing. She'd have to guess he was.

Reluctantly, she slowly leaned back ever so slightly, ending their kiss, and blinked her eyes open. They stood with their arms wrapped around the other, warm breath mingling, as they stared into each other's eyes. A full minute passed before he finally whispered, "So? What's the verdict, Tara?"

She cleared her throat and released him, begging her wits to take over for her hormones so she could sound unaffected rather than all churned up inside. "Kissing is definitely not your problem with women. We'll work on the other stuff on Sunday. Bye."

Before he could reply, she darted for the door. After locking it behind her and then punching in her alarm code to stop the incessant beeping, she leaned back against the wood and sighed. Why had she done that? Just to prove something to herself? Or because she *had* wondered if he was a good kisser more than once late at night? But she'd done it. Had her first kiss and survived. Check that one off the list.

She shook her head as she made her way to the back to let Sherlock in. That had to have been the dumbest thing she'd ever done in her life.

Because, dammit, that was one of the best kisses she'd ever had.



## CHAPTER NINE

On Sunday afternoon Tara walked down the hill toward Ryan's house, her stomach churning with nervous energy about the day ahead. She wasn't entirely sure if her unrest was about seeing Ryan for the first time since their kiss, or if it was the anticipation of going whitewater rafting for the first time.

Memories of their kiss on Friday night kept popping back into her head, but she quickly shut them down each time. She really shouldn't go there, no matter how well the man kissed. It wouldn't be fair to lead him on. Good thing Meg and Eric were coming along to keep things on a "friends" level for their adventure.

Ryan was loading up the raft on the trailer hitched to his truck. He had on a pair of board shorts and a navy T-shirt that highlighted his broad shoulders and toned muscles.

Dammit! Why did he have to be so good-looking? Spending the day with him was going to be torture—well, sweet torture. But still.

The crunch of gravel under her feet made his head swivel her direction and he grinned. "Hey." His smile quickly faded as he tied down the raft.

"Hey back. Need any help?"

He shook his head. "Got it."

"I'm really looking forward to this today."

His response was a nod and another tight smile.

Ryan had reverted back to silent mode it seemed. Or maybe things were weird because of their kiss?

He handed her a life jacket. "Try this on."

"Kay." She slipped the vest over her shoulders. It fit just fine until the

zipper hit her chest. “Um . . . I think a guy wore this last?”

Without a word, he loosened some buckles on the sides to give her more room.

Something wasn’t right. He’d never been this quiet.

After he fixed the jacket, he said, “Number one rule. If you fall out, keep your feet in front of you, downstream. Try to stop yourself on a rock and wait. I’ll do the rest.”

“Is this going to be scarier than I think? Am I going to be screaming like a girl?”

“Maybe.” He quickly got back to work.

Was he mad at her? She should probably say something about their awesome kiss. But what? Apologize? Their kiss probably sent messages as scrambled and complicated as her feelings were for him. She honestly liked him. He seemed to be a great guy. Just not the guy for her, because they wanted different things.

While she worked out how to approach the subject, Ryan’s grandmother slowly walked down the drive. She used a cane with her right hand and her left held a pie tin. When Ryan saw her, he stopped what he was doing and quickly moved to her side.

“Careful.” He accepted the pan she stuck in his direction. “You made me a pie?”

“I figured you deserved this after what happened earlier. Probably not right to call your own child an ass, but your dad acted like one.”

Ryan nodded as he held out an arm for her to lean on.

So maybe that’s why Ryan was quiet. A fight with his gruff father?

As they got closer, Ryan’s grandmother said, “Hello, Tara.”

“Hi, Mrs. Anderson. What kind of pie did you bake?”

“Kick-ass apple.”

Tara laughed as she slipped out of the life jacket and laid it with the others. She’d never get used to how direct Ryan’s grandmother was. “What makes it so kick-ass? Secret ingredient?”

Meg and Eric walked up, and Meg said, “Because she’d kick our asses if we said otherwise.”

Mrs. Anderson laughed, revealing a new gap in her front bottom teeth. “Apple is Ryan’s second favorite. He likes Gloria’s chocolate mousse the best, but always tells me my apple is better. He’s no fool.”

Tara leaned closer. "Did you lose a crown, Mrs. Anderson?"

"Yes." She waved a hand. "Bit into one of those apples earlier and off it popped."

Eric looked at the pie more closely. "So is there a tooth in there?"

"You'll have to eat it at your own risk." She winked at Eric and made him smile.

Tara asked, "Do hot and cold bother you?"

She nodded. "Nothing I can't live with until I can get in to see you next week. I drink too much damn coffee for my own good anyway."

"No, let's go over to my office now. I'll get you fixed up so you can enjoy your coffee in the morning."

"I don't want to ruin your fun. I'll just call you tomorrow."

"We can go another time, right, Ryan?"

He nodded. "Sure."

Eric's eyes followed the conversation back and forth like he was watching a tennis match. He'd really wanted to go.

"On second thought, you guys should go on without me."

Eric nodded with enthusiasm.

Ryan glanced at Tara, then tilted his head in a "follow me" kind of way as he walked toward his deck.

She called out, "Seriously, Meg. You guys should go," and then followed behind Ryan.

When they were out of earshot, Ryan laid the pie on the deck's railing. "You sure? My grandmother wouldn't have said that if she didn't mean it."

"Yeah. I have an unusually packed day tomorrow. It's actually easier for me to see her today. I'll just run home and grab my office keys. I don't want her to be miserable until I can squeeze her in."

"Okay. I'll drop her off on our way." Ryan surprised her when he wrapped her up in a tight hug and whispered, "Thank you, Tara. I appreciate you doing that for my grandmother."

She didn't know quite what to do with her hands. Hug him back and risk giving him the wrong idea, or stand there like an idiot. She didn't want to be an idiot, so she hugged him back.

It was nice. He was so solid and . . . comfortable. And he smelled really good. Like soap and aftershave and . . . sexy man.

Then a thought struck her. Maybe he was upset about his father and

*needed* a hug? It sent a sharp pang to her heart. “Everything okay? Are we okay?”

He leaned his head back, but continued to hold her. “Why wouldn’t we be okay?”

“I . . . probably shouldn’t have kissed you. My feelings haven’t changed about having a serious relationship. I don’t want to give you—”

“If anything further happens between us, and I’ll leave that decision up to you, it’ll just be strictly for pleasure between two single adults. No commitments. Got it.”

“Wait. Last night you said you felt like a jerk when you’d slept with women just for the sake of it.”

“That’s different. Those were strangers. You and I have gotten to know and respect each other. And we wouldn’t be going into this with any other expectations.”

Before she could wrap her head around a guy like Ryan saying that, he said, “Think about it. Because I liked that kiss, Tara. A lot.” He patted her butt and then walked away.

What had happened to the man who wanted to find the right woman, have 2.5 kids, and own a minivan? It was completely confusing.

They were going to have a serious discussion later.

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As they drove north to milder rapids for Eric’s first time down the river, Ryan told Meg about his conversation with Tara.

Meg said, “Why would you tell Tara that? That’s not what *you* want.”

He checked his rearview mirror to be sure Eric still had his earbuds in. The boy stared out the window with his head bobbing.

“I’m guessing it’s not what she really wants either.”

Meg frowned at him. “Since when are you a mind reader?”

“I’m basing it on what we know about her, and some of the things she said to me. Her ex hurt her. Badly. I think she just needs time to heal.”

“So in the meantime, you’re going to develop deeper feelings for her and then get your heart broken again if you’re wrong?” Meg laid a hand on his arm. “I don’t want to see you hurt, Ry.”

“No pain, no gain.”

“So how does this fit in with you moving away?”

He hadn’t thought it all the way through yet. He’d only come up with the plan after lying awake all night thinking about that kiss. All he knew for sure was he wanted her more than ever. “Who knows how long finding the right job might take? Could be weeks, months, or even a year. In the meantime, we’ll hang out and see if anything more develops. Not really any different than some of the other women I’ve dated recently.”

“It’s very different because you really care about Tara. I don’t like this plan.”

“It’s all I got. If you think of something better, let me know.”

Meg said, “Believe me, I will. This could be a recipe for disaster.”

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The adhesive on Mrs. Anderson’s temporary crown needed to set, so Tara tilted Ryan’s grandmother up in the chair. “Would you like a magazine to read?”

“Nope. Now that your fingers are out of my mouth, I want to talk about you and Ryan. What’s this cockamamie scheme I’m hearing about dating lessons?”

Tara smiled. She hadn’t heard the word *cockamamie* since her cartoon-watching days as a kid. “It was Ryan’s idea, not mine. But he really does need help. It’s like he’s stuck a few decades ago with the way he thinks about women.”

“You mean because he has manners, he’s tired of dating, and he wants a family? I’d think a young woman would be happy to be with a man like that. It’s what all the girls wanted when I was your age.”

Which just proved Tara’s point. “I’m not saying there isn’t a woman out there for him who wants those things too. It’s just women are much more independent now and want to live a little and experiment before they settle down. Like only men used to be able to do. A man has no right to hold that against a woman.”

“Well, one thing will never change. Men don’t buy cows when they get the milk for free. Are you sleeping with my grandson?”

*Blunt much?*

“No. We’re just friends.” But that kiss wasn’t one a friend would give another. It’d been . . . hot.

“Hmmm.” Mrs. Anderson’s wrinkly eyes narrowed before she said, “You were married before. So what went wrong there?”

Wow. Just when Tara didn’t think it could get much worse. “He wasn’t the man I thought he was when I married him. I’ll even admit I used to want all the things Ryan wants. And thought I’d have them, until everything went very wrong.” And that was all she was going to say about that. “And since you’re prying, I’m going to do the same. Why do you think Ryan is so quiet? He’s a handsome man. It’s not a lack of confidence that I can see. He’s smart and really kind. He should be able to have any woman he wants. I can’t figure him out.”

“Ryan chooses to be quiet. He can talk your ear off if he’s passionate about something.” She let out a long sigh. “His father was hard on him as a kid. Thought he was too introspective and that he needed to be more aggressive. Use his size to intimidate like my son does. Fight for what he wanted instead of analyzing things so much before he leaps. But Ryan’s not wired that way, so he sort of turned inside himself and tends to stay there unless you coax him out. Didn’t help he grew up without a mother, then later found out the perfect mother in his mind wasn’t a person of the highest morals. I’m going to take a stab in the dark here and guess that he’s not all that quiet with you, is he?”

“No.” Tara blinked in surprise that Ryan’s grandmother had figured that out. “He’s actually funny when he wants to be. I like him very much. But we don’t want the same things. He and I have already talked about that and have an understanding.” Although Ryan might have just changed the rules earlier. It still confused her.

“An understanding.” Ryan’s grandmother slowly nodded. “Well, that just told me everything I wanted to know right there. I’ll ask you to be careful with his heart, Tara. He’s got a good one that doesn’t deserve to be broken again.”

“You’re talking about Sarah. What went wrong there? No one has ever said.”

“A little too much of that analyzing before doing. She got tired of waiting, I suspect. But if you ask me? She wasn’t really right for him

anyway. He needs someone who coaxes him out of that shell. Like you do.”

Thankfully it was time to finish Mrs. Anderson’s temp. “He’s moving away soon anyway, so I’m pretty sure it’s a moot point.” She slowly tilted the chair back again and adjusted the light above. “Open again, please. Just a little tuning up and then you can get back to fueling that ‘damn coffee habit’ of yours.”

Mrs. Anderson laughed. “I like you, Tara Carter. And I don’t often say that to people because most of them annoy me.”

“I like you too. Except I think I like you better when my fingers are in your mouth so you can’t pry. Now I see where Ryan gets that annoying habit from.”

Smiling, the old woman said, “Yup, you’re just the one to kick Ryan’s ass. This should be fun to watch.” Her eyes twinkled with amusement.

Tara had nothing, so she just said, “Hmmm.”

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After Tara had finished the sandwich she’d made herself for dinner, she grabbed Sherlock’s leash. “Want to go—”

She couldn’t even get the sentence out before her puppy was at her feet chasing his tail in excitement. “I’ll take that as a yes.”

She’d been thinking about what Ryan had said earlier. About it being her choice if anything more happened between them. They needed to have a little chat about that. So maybe she and her puppy would walk by Ryan’s house and see if he was back yet. If not, they’d take a spin around the lake and then check again.

While she was convinced *she’d* be better off casually dating, she didn’t believe Ryan would be happy doing that. So why his sudden change of heart? It didn’t sit right with her. She intended to get to the bottom of it.

They walked down the hill to Ryan’s house. His big truck was in the drive, so she and Sherlock hopped up on the porch. The front door stood open, so that boded well.

Just as she lifted her hand to knock on the screen, the mayor’s loud voice thundered, “Dammit, Ryan. The digging nonsense has to stop. You don’t do it, and I’ll make sure from here on out that anyone who’s caught

loses their profit-sharing privileges.”

Ryan said, “Do that, and I guarantee someone will go to the rags with celebrity pictures and ruin it for everyone. I’ll handle it my way.”

“Like you handled that call earlier? You let those kids go without even a slap on the wrist. They deserved punishment for their crime.”

“They’re just a couple of kids trying to find a map—besides being your grandchildren.”

The screen door flew open and barely missed Tara’s face. “They’ll be stealing cars next, knowing their soft-hearted uncle will let them off the hook. Fix this!” The mayor stomped down the steps. “Maybe you can talk some sense into him, Tara.”

Ryan’s jaw clenched as he poked the screen open for her. “Sorry. Come in.”

Sherlock didn’t hesitate and pulled her inside with him. “Bad time?”

“Nope.” He closed his eyes and ran a hand down his face.

Yes it was. Their talk could wait a bit.

She whispered, “I’m sorry about . . . that.”

He shrugged. “No big deal. I’m used to it.”

That broke her heart. And made her appreciate her scheming parents a bit more. “So, on a happier note I hope, did you guys have fun today? Everyone stay in the raft?”

“Yeah.” He smiled. “Eric loved it.” He threw his thumb over a shoulder toward the kitchen. “Have you eaten? I was just about to make some dinner.”

Sherlock couldn’t stand being well mannered any longer and jumped up on Ryan, hoping for a rub.

“Sherlock, sit!” Pleased when he promptly listened to her, proving her puppy wasn’t all the way spoiled, she smiled and said, “Does a PB&J count as dinner?”

“If you’re in the third grade.” Ryan leaned down and pet Sherlock, who rolled onto his back for a belly rub.

“It’s not nice to make fun of the cooking impaired.”

“But it’s fun.” He quirked a brow. “Watch and learn, grasshopper.”

“Fine.” In the kitchen, she hopped up on a barstool as Ryan unclipped Sherlock’s leash and then set him up with a bowl of water. It warmed her heart he’d think to do that for her puppy. “So, are we having that cooking date now, Sherriiff?”



His eyes locked with hers. “It’s whatever you want it to be, Tara.”

He’d said the same thing about their relationship. That it was her choice.

It’d be nice if she had a clear answer.

Jamie McDaniel would have loved to be with Ryan. But Tara Carter shouldn’t.

## CHAPTER TEN

Ryan leaned over Tara's shoulder as she attempted to roll out biscuits. She really was clueless in the kitchen. "Nope. Like this." He wrapped his arms around her and took the ball of dough from her hands. "Punch it out flat and then be sure you have enough flour on the rolling pin or it'll stick."

She huffed out a breath. "How about I run over to the diner and pick up some biscuits from Gloria? It'd be so much easier."

"That'd be cheating." He laid his hands over hers on the rolling pin and quickly rolled out the dough. "See? It's all in the wrist."

Man, her hair smelled nice. And she'd pulled it back into a ponytail, exposing her long, kissable neck.

Tempting.

He quickly released her hands and took a step back. She hadn't given him the green light yet. He wished she'd say something about their relationship. That is, if they were even going to have a relationship. He didn't know how to bring something like that up again.

She swiveled her chin over her shoulder and beamed a pretty smile at him. "Okay. What next?"

He slid his hands into his jeans pockets so he wouldn't be tempted to touch her. "Use the cutter, then put them on the pan."

"That seems easy enough." Tara cut out the biscuits. They mostly stayed together as she laid them on the sheet. After she'd closed the oven door, he set the timer.

"When these are done, you can pull everything else out of the oven. About ten min—" A loud squawk sounded. "Sheriff? You copy?"

It was Mike.

Ryan crossed the kitchen and picked up the radio. "Go."

"Got a call from Mrs. Elliott. Ed's on a tear. She's worried for Sarah. Need some backup, pronto."

"Be right there." He ran upstairs to grab his gun. He didn't want to take the time to change, so he slipped his leather belt on over his jeans and headed toward the door. He called out to Tara, "Don't know how long I'll be. Can you turn off the oven before you leave?"

He didn't wait for an answer. When Ed drank he got mean. He hadn't hit Sarah yet, as far as Ryan knew, but he'd always feared for her safety. Ed was a loose cannon. Unpredictable.

Ryan jumped into his truck and tore up his driveway. Would Sarah ever wise up and leave the man?

He soon hit the short dirt drive that led up to Sarah and Ed's log cabin. Mike was just ahead of him. At least Mike had followed the rules for a change. Domestics always required at least two officers.

They pulled up side by side and hopped out. As they approached the front door together, Ed was screaming something about "damn kids." Ryan pounded a fist on the door. "Police. Open up!"

The screaming stopped, only to be replaced by a blue streak of cursing before the door swung open. Ed leaned against the doorjamb in his grimy work clothes with a beer in his hand. "What?"

Ryan glanced past Ed to see if Sarah was there. The living room was empty. "Got a complaint about excessive noise. I need to see Sarah too. Now."

Ed called out, "Sarah? Your ex-boyfriend is here to see you!" He stared into Ryan's eyes as he took a long drink from his beer bottle. Then he wiped his mouth with the back of his hand. "I was just watching a movie. Enjoying a brew after a long day's work. No harm in that, is there, Sheriff?"

Ryan wished he could smack the self-satisfied grin right off the lying bastard's face.

Mike said, "That wasn't a movie we heard, Ed. It was you, screaming your ass off."

Mike had about as much tolerance for Ed as Ryan did.

Sarah finally appeared. Her eyes were red as if she'd been crying. "Hi, guys. What's the problem?" She sent Ryan a half smile before quickly looking away. If Ed had hurt her, Ryan wouldn't stop until he found a way to

lock the man up forever. “Mike’s going to talk to Ed. Sarah, can you please come outside and talk to me?”

Ed scowled. “Sarah don’t want to talk to you, Ryan. She chose me, not you, loser.”

“Ed, please.” Sarah slanted a look at her husband before she quickly slipped past him.

“Don’t make this worse.”

Ryan walked beside her down the drive a bit, slowing next to his truck. Why did Sarah put up with Ed’s verbal abuse? Why couldn’t she be more like Tara? She’d never allow a man to treat her that way.

Ed called out, “That’s far enough. I’d better not see you touching my wife, Sheriff.”

He ignored the ass and turned to Sarah. She stood with her arms crossed, staring at her tennis shoes. “We were just having a disagreement.”

“A loud one, apparently. Look at me, Sarah.” She slowly tilted up her chin. When he noticed a dark spot on her cheekbone, partially hidden by makeup, anger speared through him. But by the coloring, the bruise didn’t look fresh. “What happened to your face?”

“Oh, this?” Her hand reached up and quickly covered her cheek. “That happened at work. I was trying to get a game off the top shelf. The perils of being so short. I ended up pulling three boxes down along with it. Didn’t get out of the way fast enough.”

That was possible. She worked at the toy store in town. He’d be sure to check her story out with the owner.

“Ed doesn’t hit me, if that’s what you were thinking, Ry. He yells, especially after a bad day like today, but he doesn’t physically harm me. I’m fine.” She laid a hand on his arm. “Thank you for still worrying about me.” She sent him a shy smile.

In the past, when she used to look at him like that with those big brown eyes, he would have done anything for her. Now he wanted to shake some sense into her. Why would she stay with a guy like Ed? “You’re sure?”

She nodded. “I’ve been wanting a baby. He doesn’t think we can afford one. It’s an old argument. I should’ve realized it was a bad time to bring it up again.”

“You want me to drive you over to Meg’s for the night? Give Ed some time to cool off?” His sister would get the truth out of Sarah, if there was any

more to tell.

She shook her head. “That would just make Ed angrier. Sorry to disturb you. Night, Ry.” She turned and walked back to the porch.

He couldn’t help someone if they wouldn’t take it. Anyone as mean and spiteful as Ed was bound to break one day. Moving away might be for the best. He’d have a hard time not beating the living crap out of Ed if he ever laid a hand on Sarah.

Mike walked down the steps and joined Ryan. “I gave him a warning, but I wish he would’ve taken a swing at me so I could arrest him.”

“Yep. Now all you get is the satisfaction of filling out the call report. See you later.”

Ryan climbed into his truck, backed down the drive, and headed toward home. Would Tara still be there? A smile formed at the thought. She was the one person he actually enjoyed talking to. Even though most of the time she corrected his bad habits and teased him.

He pulled his truck into the garage and then headed inside. The aroma of freshly baked biscuits filled the air. Hopefully they’d taste as good as they smelled. He hung up his gun belt on the coatrack by the door.

Sherlock came bounding over to greet him.

Nice not to come home to a quiet, empty house for a change.

Tara laid down the book she’d been reading. “That was quick. So Sarah’s okay?”

“She’s fine. Ed was just being an ass, as usual. Did you eat?”

“No . . . well, yes. Sort of. You *have* to try one of my awesome biscuits!”

“Can’t wait.” It was cute how excited Tara was about something so simple.

Tara had cleaned up the kitchen and put all the food away. She’d placed the biscuits in a covered bowl on top of the cooling stove to keep them warm. After she buttered one up and handed it over, she said, “So? What do you think?”

He took a bite of the light, flaky, buttery bread. It *was* awesome. “I think I’m a damned good teacher.”

“That you are. This was the most productive date I’ve ever been on. And the most fattening—I ate five of those darn biscuits.” Tara grabbed a dish from the fridge and popped it in the microwave. “I wasn’t sure how long

you'd be, so I made you a plate. I think I may get hooked on this cooking thing now. Who knew I could make a whole meal like this? Thank you!"

"Welcome." As he enjoyed his ham, mashed potatoes with gravy, and green beans from his grandmother's garden, he thought about Sarah again. And how he'd let her slip away because he hadn't acted quickly enough.

He needed to suck it up and talk to Tara about their relationship. "So, have you thought any more about what I said earlier? About us moving to the next level?"

"Yes, and I'm confused." Tara wiped down the counter before she slid onto the stool next to his. "Why the change of heart?"

"I still want to find the right woman and have kids one day. That's not changed. But I'm attracted to you, and moving away soon, so if you want to sleep with me as much as I'd like to sleep with you, it makes sense to keep our hearts out of it. So what do you say? Want to sleep with me, Tara?"

That hadn't come out right at all, dammit!

"Geez, you must be taking blunt lessons from your grandmother." She laughed as she crossed to the front door and picked up Sherlock's leash. "I need to think this through some more." She clipped Sherlock in.

He stood and joined her. "It's what you wanted, right? No-strings-attached sex?"

"Yeah." Her forehead crinkled. "But I didn't picture having it with someone I actually liked so much, Ryan. It could get confusing."

Picture it? "So you haven't slept with anyone since your divorce?"

Tara's cheeks pinked up. "Well . . . no."

"So all that talk about sleeping around was just that, huh?" He moved so his mouth was a fraction of an inch next to hers, then stopped. "Talk?"

She nodded as they stood toe-to-toe, staring into each other's eyes. He wanted to kiss her, but she might not be ready for him to make the first move yet. He didn't want to mess up his chances with her, so he whispered, "I think you should kiss me again, Tara. Let me convince you."

Eyes still locked with his, she slipped a hand around the back of his neck and laid her perfect, sweet lips against his.

Thank God.

He wrapped his arms around her and pulled her closer. Her tall, curvy body drove him nuts. His hands ached to explore. To caress every inch of her.

When she deepened their kiss as if starving for more, it took all his

control to hold back. He didn't want to scare her off by going too fast, yet she was all he could think about at night. What it'd be like to have her sexy body wrapped around him as he made love to her.

Giving in to his cravings, he let his hands wander to her perfect rear end, gently kneading. When she let out a low, quiet moan, it tempted him to throw her over his shoulder and take her upstairs. Instead he slowly backed her up against the door and took her soft face in his hands. Staring into her pretty blue eyes, he whispered, "Convinced yet?"

She smiled. "Nope."

He ignored Sherlock jumping on his leg to get into the action, and gently kissed her jawline. Savoring the sweet, flowery scent of her skin, he took his time as he made his way to her ear. When he playfully nibbled on her lobe, she shivered.

Caressing her pretty skin with his lips, he kissed his way down her neck, to her collarbone. Tara let her head fall back against the door to allow him greater access and whispered, "Ryan?"

"Ummm?" He released the top two buttons on her blouse and laid soft kisses in the valley between her breasts as his fingers danced lightly over the silky lace of her bra. Then he filled his palm and gently squeezed.

Her back arched as she gasped, "I'm . . ."

He moved his mouth to hers and was just about to kiss her again when he saw the answer in her eyes. "Not ready yet?"

"No." She slowly shook her head. "Sorry. I just wanted to see if that 'thing' that happened last time we kissed was still there."

What happened both times they'd kissed was a whole lot more than a "thing," if anyone asked him. He reined in his disappointment as he buttoned up her shirt. "And?"

"Yeah, it's still there. And still confusing. What time shall I pick you up for the wedding on Friday?"

Changing the subject—again.

He blew out a long breath. Her ex had really played a number on her, so he'd be patient. "How about I drive?"

"Is this another of your fifties throwback rules? The man always drives?"

"I didn't realize you had your helicopter pilot's license too. Because that's how I planned to get to Denver on Friday. My family keeps a car at the

airport.”

“Oh. That’ll be fun. And so much faster. What time?”

“One o’clock work?”

“Yep. See you then. Goodnight *fake* wedding date.”

“Bye.” He walked them out to the porch and then watched her and Sherlock until they disappeared around the corner.

Hopefully he wouldn’t be a fake *anything* much longer. And maybe he’d just cancel that job interview in Denver. It wasn’t the one he really wanted anyway.

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Tara, deep into the story she was reading while curled up on the couch, glanced at her vibrating phone as it shimmied its way toward the edge of the coffee table.

Who was calling her at nine o’clock on a Wednesday night? *Please don’t let it be another scary hang-up.* She wouldn’t sleep all night if that started up again.

She laid her e-reader down and then grabbed her phone before it fell to the floor. Detective Bailey had called earlier assuring her that Spencer was still where he was supposed to be. That didn’t stop her recurring thoughts of him getting hold of a computer and doing God knows what at the wedding. It made her paranoid.

When she read the caller ID, her gut relaxed. “Hello, Sheriff Anderson.”

“Hello, Doctor Carter. Why are we using titles?”

She smiled. “Just messing with you. What’s up?”

“You told me I was supposed to call in the middle of the week to check in. So, how are you?”

“Oh. Gold star for that.” He’d been listening during their dating lessons, apparently. “I’m fine. And you?”

“Good. What are you doing?”

“Reading. How about you?”

“Same.” A long pause stretched out.

She should jump in and save him, but she wanted him to get better at talking on the phone. After a few more seconds passed she couldn’t stand it



any longer. “So this is the part where you say, ‘I’m looking forward to seeing you on Friday.’”

“I was actually trying to figure out how to ask if you’ve been avoiding me again. I wanted to be sure everything is okay with us.”

She *had* been avoiding him because she was struggling with what she thought she should do and what her hormones wanted her to do. What his grandmother said about protecting his heart weighed on her too. “We’re fine. I’ve just needed a little space to figure this out. I don’t want anyone to get hurt.”

“Okay.” A few more seconds passed before he said, “I’m looking forward to seeing you on Friday.”

She chuckled. “Me too. Now ask a question to get me talking.”

“Before I do that, just how long do these check-in calls have to be?”

“No one is going to time them. You’ll know when to hang up.”

“No I won’t, because I’d be happy to hang up right now. You’re fine, we’re fine, so everything is fine.”

She held back a sigh. “Ask me the *perfect* question and I’ll let you go. Dig deep.”

Silence filled the air, until finally he said, “Want to have phone sex?”

She laughed. “I should say yes, just to make you do it.” That’s the last thing Ryan wanted. It’d require way too much talking. “Points for trying. You can hang up now.”

His low chuckle in her ear sent a warm wave of lust to her belly. “Maybe if I ever get better at this we could do that someday?”

“It’d be something to strive for . . . grasshopper.”

“Sounds like a plan. Goodnight, Tara.”

“Night, Ryan.” She still had a smile on her face as she hung up. He even remembered to say goodbye. He’d made some serious improvement. And she honestly looked forward to seeing him on Friday. She’d missed him a little the last few days. But she needed to get through the wedding, keeping her secret intact, before she dealt with sleeping with him.

---

Friday afternoon, Tara handed over her bags for Ryan to stow into the

helicopter. He looked nice, all dressed up in a pair of dress slacks and a crisp shirt for the rehearsal dinner later. He'd be the most handsome man there.

"So, I should probably ask how long you've been a pilot before I let you take my life in your hands?"

"Three or four months now."

"What? Wait, I—"

He smiled. "Kidding. As soon as the kids in my family turned sixteen, we all got lessons from Zeke. We take turns picking up celebrities in Denver to stay current on our hours."

She crossed her arms. "That wasn't funny, Ryan."

"The look on your face was." He chuckled as he circled around the helicopter, looking for who knew what. "Hop in and put the headphones on. Almost ready."

Soon after she'd settled in, Ryan got in beside her and started the engine. As they rose straight up, her stomach took a quick dip. Nerves about the wedding, and being home where Spencer knew she'd be, mixed with her excitement at flying over the beautiful terrain below.

Looking down at the lake as they crossed it, and then at all the beautiful green trees and majestic mountains below, stole her breath. "Wow. This is awesome!"

His voice, slightly tinny through the headphones replied, "Not scared?"

"No. I love how much lower you can fly. You can see everything!" She turned and smiled at him. "Thanks for this."

He nodded as a cute grin stretched his lips.

Ryan flying a helicopter was too damn alluring. She should probably focus on the beautiful scenery below and not her sexy pilot. They needed to stay friends for the weekend. Then after they were back, and not surrounded by her relatives on the cusp of revealing her secret at any given moment . . . maybe she'd reevaluate.

He asked, "What'd you do with Sherlock? I figured you'd bring him along."

"My mother would have a fit if I brought a dog into her house. He's staying at Meg's this weekend. Eric spoils him more than I do."

"Doubt that."

"Weird." She tapped on her headset. "There's a pesky buzzing in my headset, so I can't hear a word you're saying."

His response was a smirk.

After about a half hour of smooth flying, Ryan took something out of his shirt pocket and scanned it before putting it back. “So, describe your perfect day, Tara.”

“What?” It was so out of character for him to ask that she held out her hand. “Let me see that.” She waggled her fingers.

He met her gaze briefly before slowly pulling the paper from his pocket and handing it over.

“Five surefire conversation starters?” She read down the list. They weren’t bad, but so not Ryan. It was cute he’d tried, though. “Don’t under any circumstances use the ‘If you found a hundred-dollar bill what would you do with it?’ question at the wedding this weekend. To most of the guests, a hundred-dollar bill is what they use to tip the busboy at their favorite restaurant.”

“Figured you came from really big money. But I don’t hold that against you.”

“Says the man whose family owns a whole town and who has a healthy portfolio of his own?”

Wait. Crap! She wasn’t supposed to know that.

He cocked a brow in typical Ryan fashion, waiting for her to explain herself.

“My father checked you out. I have a large trust fund he worries about. You passed muster, if it helps.”

His jaw slowly clenched. “That information was obtained without my permission. Illegally, Tara.”

“I . . . don’t really know how . . .” What could she say? She had no idea what her father had done to get that information. “I’m sorry, Ryan. He meant no harm. He was just protecting me.”

“From what, Tara? A gold digger, or something worse?” He turned and looked at her, his eyes hard and intense. “You can have this one-time free pass, but in return I want one question. Answered truthfully. I know you’re hiding something.”

*Dammit.*

“It’s nothing illegal if that’s what you’re afraid—”

“One question.”

“Fine.” She crossed her arms and turned away to gaze out the window.

“What?”

“Look at me, please.”

She turned and stared into his eyes again. They weren’t hard with anger anymore, but filled with concern. “Are you in danger?”

She closed her eyes and swallowed back the wave of tears crawling up her throat. God, she wanted to tell him how scared she was of Spencer. How badly he’d hurt her with that knife. And how she couldn’t sleep at night sometimes for all the fear. But she couldn’t. Detective Bailey had told her to trust no one. He’d said her life depended on it. “No, not that I know of. I’m just trying to leave my past behind and never look back.”

He laid his hand on her thigh. “I hope that’s true, Tara.” He gave a gentle squeeze. “I couldn’t stand if anything happened to you, especially if I could’ve helped prevent it.”

Happy their fight seemed to be over, she laid her hand over his and ran her thumb back and forth to soothe—herself or him, she wasn’t sure.

After a few more minutes of silence between them, the outskirts of Denver appeared ahead. Suddenly, their journey couldn’t end fast enough for her.

He didn’t believe her. What if he got curious enough to try to find out about her using his police resources? How could she ask him not to dig into her past without admitting to him she could be in danger if Spencer ever found her? That by digging, Ryan could accidentally alert Spencer to her whereabouts. She’d never forget the hate in those cold, dead eyes the last time she’d seen her ex in court. He’d threatened to finish off what he’d started.

To kill her.

## CHAPTER ELEVEN

After he tied down the chopper, Ryan found the family car in its usual spot. He loaded the suitcases into the back of the SUV while watching Tara out of the corner of his eye. She'd been shaken by their conversation and had since clammed up tight. The quick flash of fear in Tara's eyes right before she'd closed them earlier told him she *was* in some sort of danger. The thought sat like a lead ball in his gut.

At least she'd finally admitted to having a secret. He likely needed to show her she could trust him before he'd get any more out of her. Chances were better he'd figure it out on his own if he could find a few pieces of key information from her relatives. The first order, which should be easy, was to find out her maiden name. He only had Jamie Mc- something.

He slapped the hatch shut. "Tara?"

Her head jerked up as if he'd interrupted some deep thought. "Yeah?"

"You want to drive?" He tossed her the keys.

She caught them and forced a smile. "Didn't think you had it in you, Sheriff. Let's go."

After driving for about forty minutes, in mostly stony silence, they entered a residential area with a series of driveways and gates. Not a single house could be seen from the road. Must be getting close.

He needed to clear the air. "So, are you going to stay mad at me all weekend?"

"I'm not angry with you, Ryan. I've just been thinking. Coming home again brings back memories . . ." She turned to him, her eyes pleading with his. "So how about no more questions about my past? At least for the weekend. Please?"

“Deal.” He felt like a heel for adding to her distress.

“Thank you.” Evidently relieved by his promise, she shot him a cute grin. “Better brace yourself. We’re almost there.”

“What am I bracing myself for?”

“You’ll see.”

They approached a big set of iron gates, complete with two types of guards. The largest men wore suits and had earpieces like the FBI used, and the other wore khaki uniforms. “Are these guys always here? Or is this just for the wedding?”

“Never this many.” Tara bit her bottom lip as she hit the button to roll down the window.

A uniformed man leaned down and smiled. “Oh, hey, Jamie. Welcome home.” The guy tilted his head and stared into Ryan’s eyes. “And you are?”

“Stand down, Jason.” Tara patted his cheek. “Ryan is a friend. How’re Pat and Tiffany?”

He glared at Ryan for another moment before nodding a greeting. “Sir.” Then he pressed a button on his radio to open the gate. “Wife’s great and Tif’s growing like a weed. Thanks for asking. Good to see you again.” He winked at her.

Clearly that guard worked there regularly, but what about the suits?

As they drove away, Ryan said, “Stand down, Jason?”

“We dated for a while when we were young and stupid.” Tara chuckled. “Talk about driving my father nuts. Jason is married with a kid now, but he’s still protective of me.”

“How many more protective former boyfriends are going to stare daggers at me this weekend?”

She shrugged. “A few maybe. I used to date a lot, but we usually stayed friends after. You’re benefiting from all that experience now, so wipe that scowl off your face.”

He wasn’t scowling. Was he? He glanced in the side mirror. Okay, maybe he was. He forced a smile and asked, “So, even the guards call you Jamie? Not just your family?”

Her eyes quickly met his for a moment, before she turned her attention back to the long driveway ahead. “I didn’t start using my real name again until I graduated dental school. I figured my name should match my diplomas and license, right?”

“Hmmm.” Made sense, but it seemed like just another of her practiced answers.

After a few more minutes, the trees cleared and a huge building came into view. “Is that a country club or your house?” He knew they were rich, but that went beyond anything he could’ve ever imagined.

“That’s my parents’ house.” She sighed. “I know it’s outrageous. So I’ll apologize in advance for all the crazy things you’ll be seeing. You’ll never be so happy to be back in Anderson Butte after this weekend.”

As they pulled up under a huge portico, a line of men came out the front door, followed by a shorter version of Tara who was probably her sister, Laura. She slipped past the men all dressed in matching Dockers and polo shirts and ran to Tara’s side of the car. The men surrounded the car and opened their doors.

When Tara hopped out, the woman said, “Finally! It’s been ages, Jamie! I’ve missed you so much!”

Tara handed the keys to one of the clones, and then launched herself into the woman’s arms. “I’ve missed you too! Getting excited? Ready to walk down that aisle tomorrow?”

Yep. Her sister.

Laura released Tara and nodded. As they chattered on, Ryan went to the back of the car to get the bags, but they were already gone.

Not knowing what to do with himself, he wandered back toward the women, who hadn’t wound down a bit. Maybe he’d find one of the matching guys and ask where they’d taken his stuff. He had a gun in his bag.

Tara and Laura were just like his sisters when they hadn’t seen each other for a while. Talking a mile a minute and finishing each other’s sentences.

But it was nice to see a genuine smile on Tara’s face again.

Tara made it clear her past and her secret were off limits for the weekend, so maybe he’d pull Tara’s dad aside later and dig a little.

Tara broke away and slipped her hand in his, tugging him toward her sister. “Ryan, I want you to meet Laura. The soon-to-be Mrs. Bradley Acton.”

“Congratulations.” He stuck out a hand. “Nice to meet you.”

Laura had a big smile, very much like Tara’s. She ignored his hand and drew him into a hug.

After she released him she said, “Wow. Jamie told me about you, but she failed to mention just how handsome you are, Sheriff Anderson.”

That embarrassed him. Before he could think of a reply, Tara’s parents arrived along with an older woman using a walker.

Eva gave him a hug too. “Hello, Ryan. So nice to see you again.”

“Good to see you too.” Hugging family seemed foreign to him . . . but nice.

Tara gently wrapped her arms around the older woman. “Hi, Grandma. I’d like you to meet my friend Ryan.”

The blue-haired lady wearing a fancy bathrobe blinked as she studied him. “He’s much better looking than—”

“Grandma!” Tara cleared her throat. “Let’s go pick out a dress for you to wear tonight to the rehearsal dinner. Laura, want to join us?” Laura nodded and caught up with the slow-moving caravan to the front door.

“Ryan, glad you could make it.” Joe stuck out his hand for a shake. “Let’s go find you a drink before the women suck you into the wedding vortex.”

“Sounds great.” Could be just the opportunity he’d hoped for to glean the information he needed.

“I want to show you my favorite room in the house. An Irish pub I bought and had shipped here.”

A whole pub? Who did that?

Tara’s grandmother called out, “Don’t know what good it does to have a pub when not everyone is allowed to use it!” Her head slowly swiveled over her hunched shoulders and she glared at Tara’s father.

Joe forced a smile. “Nothing wrong with your hearing, Mildred.” Then he mumbled under his breath, “Even if you are crazy as a loon.”

Eva swatted Joe’s arm before she joined the women. “You can have *one* glass of wine with dinner, Mother.”

“That’s the last thing Mildred needs. She can’t remember which way is up these days.” Joe laughed and wrapped his arm around Ryan’s shoulder. “Come on.”

As they caught up with the women inside the three-story-tall foyer, Joe said, “I just figured out that your great-grandfather used to make my grandfather’s favorite whiskey. I want to hear more about that.”

Joe hadn’t finished digging into his life, evidently.



Tara called out, “I’ll catch up with you guys in a minute. Dad, no giving away any of *our* family secrets, please.”

Joe sent Tara a thumbs-up.

After taking a series of twists and turns, they approached a wooden door with a stained-glass shamrock in the middle.

Joe opened the door and stepped aside. Ryan walked inside but pulled up short. It was like stepping into a new dimension—early 1900s Ireland.

“So, Ryan, what do you—” Joe’s cell rang, cutting him off. He answered with, “McDaniel.”

That answered the last name question. It was going to be like shooting fish in a barrel.

After Joe quickly wrapped up his call, he proceeded to interrogate Ryan about Anderson Butte whiskey. Tara’s dad had even researched the hidden note on the town website.

Then Joe asked what Ryan’s intentions were toward Tara. Luckily, Joe’s phone chirped in his pocket again before Ryan could respond.

He wasn’t sure of the answer, but weirdly, he didn’t mind all the questions. Tara’s dad clearly loved her, unlike his own father, who seemed to barely tolerate his children.

As Tara’s father talked business on his cell, Ryan glanced around the incredible room, authentic to the last detail. The highly polished wooden bar that took up one whole side was complete with tall tap handles, mirrored glass shelves with dozens of varieties of whiskey, and other liquor displayed behind it. Many a villager had probably sidled up to the bar on a dark winter’s eve for their pint of Guinness after working in the fields all day.

On the walls, photos of verdant Ireland, metal beer signs, and Irish drums filled the space. Worn leather booths lined the opposite wall while small wooden tables were scattered haphazardly in the middle. There was even a raised stage in the corner that had most likely hosted many a talented fiddler back in the day.

An Irish pub made sense now that he knew Tara’s, aka Jamie’s, maiden name was McDaniel. Now he just needed to figure out what her married name was and he’d be one step closer. Carter hadn’t come up with any credible results in his earlier research.

Surely wealthy people like the McDaniels announced marriages in the society pages. A quick Google should do the trick.

Tara's father still yammered away about real estate prices on his cell as Tara walked through the stained-glass door.

When she spotted Ryan, she sent him a tight smile. "I figured my father would be drilling you with questions, not ignoring you."

"It's okay. You doing all right?" She still seemed stressed.

"Yep. I have to go to a hair-and-makeup party in a bit, but first I want to show you something I think you'll appreciate." She held out her hand.

Tara waved to her father as she led Ryan out the door and along with her down the wide, polished stone hallway. Apart from the bar, the house had a Tuscan villa feel about it. Only super-sized.

"You people need to put up directory signs. Like at the Denver malls. A guy could get lost."

She laughed. "You wouldn't be lost for long. You'd run into some sort of staff fairly quickly. My parents like to be well tended. I always hated the lack of privacy."

Yeah. He would too. It'd drive him nuts to have someone touching all of his things. Knowing all his business.

It reminded him of the gun in his bag. "I haven't been to my room yet. Do you know which one is mine?"

"No. But I can find out. Here we are."

Tara placed her hands on both handles of a wide set of double doors and pushed them open. Bright sunlight through tall windows blinded him for a moment before he saw two stories of shiny dark wooden bookcases framing a large room with big leather furniture and tables with lamps in the center. There were tall ladders that rolled around on tracks above to get to the higher books. "Wow!"

She stepped inside ahead of him. "My dad gave me this for my tenth birthday. The windows are treated so the sunlight doesn't hurt the books, but allows you to read during the day without any extra light. He filled it with the classics to vintage comic books in the cases over there. It's *my* favorite room in the house."

It made his collection seem amateurish. As he looked around, Tara went to a panel on the wall and pushed a button. An English-accented man's voice replied, "How may I be of assistance?"

Tara talked to the voice about where his room was. Some wing or another. They must have so many they had to name them to keep them

straight. He'd never seen anything like it.

He was so lost in his exploration of the mystery section he didn't realize Tara had slipped beside him until she spoke.

"I have to run. A nice man named Jonathan will be here in a few minutes to take you to your room. Don't bother dropping breadcrumbs, they'll just come along behind you and sweep them up."

"Blows that plan right out of the water. Do I look all right for dinner, or should I wear a suit?"

"You look perfect." She stood on her tiptoes and kissed his cheek. "I'm sorry about earlier . . . in the helicopter. And my dad's snooping."

"I wish you'd trust me, Tara." He slipped his hands around her waist and pulled her into a hug. "Maybe I can help?"

She shook her head as he ran a hand up and down her back. "I'm not good at trusting anymore. Learned that lesson the hard way." She held on tight for a few moments before she gave him a hard squeeze and then leaned away. "I asked Jonathan to take care of you because he's worked for us forever and I adore him. He'd be happy to give you the grand tour if you'd like. Or get you anything you need. I'll see you at dinner."

On her way out, Tara stopped in front of a tall guy dressed in a butler's suit like in the movies. She laid a hand on his arm and whispered something before she left.

Worked for them forever? Perfect. Then Jonathan knew everything there was to know about the McDaniels. It could be just the break Ryan had been looking for.

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Later that evening, Jonathan showed Ryan to the living room. "The guests should be here momentarily. Do you need anything before I go?"

"I'm fine, thanks."

Jonathan nodded and then quietly slipped away. Unfortunately, Jonathan was *just* like those English butlers in the movies. Discreet. It was like banging up against a cement wall to get him to talk when they'd taken the grand tour earlier.

Ryan glanced around at the room with furniture too fragile and fancy to

sit on, and decided he'd just stand.

His phone dinged with a text.

It was Mike again. He'd already texted three times. So, your dad said I have to either arrest Walt for digging on your grandmother's land or let her shoot him. I'm thinking I shouldn't let her shoot him, right?"

Seriously? No shooting. Tell my father I'll deal with everything on Monday.

10-4. Hope you get lucky!

Ryan shook his head as he stuffed his phone back into his pocket. He really needed to find someone capable to replace him before he moved away.

The thump of a walker sounded behind him. He turned to find Mildred approaching, still dressed in her fancy bathrobe. She pulled up short when she spotted him. "Who are you, again?"

"I'm Ryan. Tara's friend?"

"Tara?" She blinked for a moment before she moved toward the couch and flopped down. "Right. She had to change her name because of her crazy ex. Is there any gin around here?"

Here was just the opportunity he needed. But Joe had mentioned earlier that Eva's mother was a little mixed up. "Sorry, don't see any gin."

"One of them will just take it away from me anyway. Then tell me it's not good for my memory. Sure, sometimes I forget where I put my glasses." She tapped a finger to her forehead. "But I'm still ninety percent upstairs. They don't think I'm onto them, but everyone's in a tizzy around here because of Spencer."

"Spencer?"

"Jamie's ex-husband." Mildred frowned and closed her eyes. "Hateful, crazy son of the devil. Deserves to die a slow, hard death for what he did to her. She was going to name her baby after my late husband, Sean. Instead of jail they threw him in the loony bin. It's just not right."

Tara had been pregnant when her ex hurt her? So she'd wanted to be a mother, but he'd hurt her so badly she could never have another child?

Anger made his fists clench. What kind of monster was he that he'd hurt a woman, especially one carrying his own child? He'd like to go a few rounds with the guy with his bare hands.

Just as he was about to ask for more details, a maid rushed into the

room. “There you are, Mrs. Wellington. Come now, we have to get you changed for Laura’s dinner.”

Mildred looked down at her bathrobe. “What’s wrong with what I have on?”

The maid smiled as she slipped a hand around Mildred’s arm and helped her up. “Laura wants you to wear the pretty blue dress she picked out for you. Let’s hurry, so we won’t be late to her party.”

Mildred blinked. “What party?”

Crap. Tara’s grandmother wasn’t even close to ninety percent. But hopefully she had enough left to get Tara’s ex’s first name right. Now he had Tara’s maiden name too. That ought to be all he needed.

He reached for his cell, eager to figure out who the bastard was. But he stopped. The rest of the family would be there any minute for dinner. He’d check once he got to his room later. Instead, he needed to shake off the image in his head of Tara’s ex hurting her—while she was pregnant. She must’ve wanted kids before whatever happened. Maybe that meant one day she’d want them again.

As he waited for the others to arrive, Ryan wandered through a set of open French doors to a large stone balcony overlooking the massive grounds below. Tidy terraced lawns with crushed stone paths leading to the stables and riding area on one side, the tennis courts and greenhouses on the other. The sounds of matching tinkling fountains emptying into long shallow ponds filled the air. Sculpted hedges and beds with vivid flowers were surrounded by large trees that had to have been there for hundreds of years.

He drew a deep, calming breath and tried to think like a cop—not a man set on revenge for the woman he cared for.

The only thing he’d learned from his tour of the property earlier with Jonathan was that Tara’s family’s wealth seemed endless. Probably a good motive for someone who wanted to get their hands on some of it through a daughter. Especially a sweet, unaffected-by-all-the-money daughter. Like Tara, a hardworking dentist who’d cared enough to help his grandmother on a Sunday afternoon. Who’d mentioned earlier that she had a large trust fund. He’d guess Tara wouldn’t have to work a day in her life, if she didn’t want to. He admired her even more for it. And for moving past what her ex had done to her and making a new life for herself.

A glass of whiskey suddenly appeared in front of him on the wide stone

railing. “You must be Ryan. I’m the groom.” The man stuck out a hand. “Brad.”

Brad reminded him of his brother, Ben. Dark haired, tall, and thin. Not a hair out of place and dressed like a mannequin in a fancy department store.

Ryan returned the shake. “Congratulations.”

“Thanks.” Brad sipped his drink. Then, using the hand that held his glass, he swept a large arc toward the gardens. “Makes my parents’ wealth look like Monopoly money. But if you ask me? There’s something called too much.”

Ryan liked the guy already. “So you passed the background check too, huh?”

“Didn’t need one. My dad is partners with Joe in a few ventures. Laura and I have known each other since we were kids. I could never get her to think about me any other way than as a friend until recently.” He lifted his glass in a mock toast. “Persistence pays.”

Ryan had the same problem with Tara. Locked in the friend zone too. “So what changed her mind?”

“She needed a last-minute date for New Year’s Eve. So of course she asked her old buddy. Lucky for me, there was plenty of liquor mixed with a hot midnight kiss, and the rest is history. Best New Year’s Eve of my life.”

Ryan nodded as he sampled the smooth whiskey in his glass. Brad probably wasn’t after Laura’s money. He seemed like a decent guy.

Laughter suddenly filled the room as Tara and Laura came in. Tara seemed relaxed and happy again. When she saw him, she beamed a bright, sexy smile that sent a shot of heat straight to his gut.

Tara looked beautiful in her red dress. It was short, showed off her long, hot legs, and was low cut and tight in all the right places.

He needed to bust out of that friend box too, and convince Tara he was the right man for her.

And not just for the short term.

## CHAPTER TWELVE

Tara watched Ryan over her aunt's shoulder as he talked with the guys. Just as she'd suspected, he was the most handsome man in the room.

He and Brad seemed to be hitting it off. For some reason that made her ridiculously happy.

It was getting late; dinner had ended hours earlier. Ryan was doing more listening than talking, so maybe she'd go save him. See if he wanted to go downstairs to have a dip in the hot tub with her to relax. Spending time in the hot tub with Ryan sounded a whole lot more fun than hearing about her aunt's denture woes for the tenth time.

Excusing herself from the conversation, Tara made her way over to the cluster of men. When her eyes locked with Ryan's, she said, "Hi. Want to sneak away with me?"

"Yep." He laid his drink down on the bar so fast it made her smile. "See you, guys."

Laura appeared at her side. "Hey. Where do you two think you're going? It's early yet."

"I'm going to introduce Ryan to the hot tub."

"Ah." She turned to Ryan and smirked. "It's like the best orgas—"

"Laura!" Tara swatted her sister's arm.

Her sister shrugged. "Well, it is. We're still having a sleepover later, though, right? It's my last night as a single woman, and I want to spend it with my sister."

"Yeah. Come on up when you're done partying. Night, everyone." She tucked her arm through Ryan's and led him outside the living room and down a long flight of stone steps.

“Thanks for the save, Tara.”

“I figured you were at your limit.”

“Yep. But I didn’t bring a suit.”

“Neither did I.”

His head swiveled toward hers as a slow smile bloomed. “Does that mean—”

“Nope.” She laughed. “We have suits in every size. Take the one you wear home, otherwise it’ll just get thrown away. My mother has never heard the one about waste not, want not.”

When they got to the indoor pool area with the oversized, in-ground hot tub housed in its own glass enclosure for privacy, she pointed the way. “Men’s cabana over there. Meet you at the tub. Be prepared to be amazed.”

Tara poked at the ladies’ room door and walked to the dressing area. She flipped through the bathing suits on the rack, bypassing the cute little bikinis until she found a modest one-piece to hide her scars. At least it was red.

She stripped out of her dress and then wiggled into the suit. Then she found a hairband in the vanity drawer and swept her hair up. Grabbing a handful of fluffy white towels on her way out, she headed for “Tub Orgasmic,” as Laura had dubbed it.

Ryan was already there—looking even more tempting than their death by chocolate cake dessert earlier—studying the remote control. When he noticed her, his eyes did a slow up and down over her whole body, warming her skin in his gaze’s wake.

“I haven’t found a bad setting yet. Pick whichever you like.” She walked down the steps and into the heavenly hot water.

Ryan pressed a few buttons, and the tub came to life. He messed with the mood lighting and then found the aromatherapy button that sent out a soothing, lavender-scented mist into the air.

“You can bring that in with you. It’s waterproof.”

He quickly stepped into the deep tub and sat beside her.

After he hit a few more buttons, the jets pumped in a rhythm that instantly stole all the tension from her tight shoulders and back. He laid the remote down on the edge, then he scooted closer so their legs and hips touched. When his hand landed on her thigh, she’d have sworn the water temperature rose a good ten degrees.



“This is awesome, Tara.”

“Mmmm hmmm.” She laid her head back on the cushioned edge and closed her eyes. He probably didn’t want to talk anymore, so she wouldn’t push him.

“I don’t get it. How are you and Laura not a couple of spoiled Kardashians?”

“Kardashians?” She opened her eyes. “How do you even—oh yeah. Anderson Butte, favorite hangout for the top celebrities. You’ve probably met them.” She closed her eyes again. “My mother is from old-school money, but my dad is self-made. He had Laura and me working for him as soon as we could walk and talk. The opulence you see is my mother’s doing. My dad would rather live in a nice house like yours on the lake. He said so when they visited last weekend.”

“So why become a dentist instead of working for your father?”

“In high school, we had this incredibly dynamic woman come talk to us about Doctors Without Borders. She mentioned there was an even greater need for dentists in developing countries. It inspired me to do something noble with my life. After I graduated from dental school I gained some experience in another dentist’s office for a year, then I signed up to go overseas, but . . . my life’s direction took a detour.”

“You met your ex and got married?”

She didn’t want to discuss Spencer so she just nodded.

Ryan was quiet for a minute, then asked, “So you went to regular schools and had to actually earn the money for things? Like your first car?”

“Now you’re just being silly. Eva would never allow her daughters to be seen in anything less than a Benz or a Beemer. We went to the best private schools in town and had tutors to prep us for college, private music lessons, art lessons, Latin lessons, but sadly, no cooking lessons. I’m sure it wasn’t anything close to the normal I imagine you guys had.”

He gave her leg another gentle squeeze. “I’m amazed you turned out so great despite all that.”

*That* was probably the nicest compliment anyone had ever given her. “Thank you, Ryan.” She rested her head against his broad shoulder. “I think the same of you. I hate that you grew up without a mother. And your dad scares the hell out of me.”

“Yeah. He’s a piece of work.” He was quiet for a bit again and then

asked, "So, just how does your father make all this money? What does he do?"

"Banking, real estate, movie producer, you name it, he's done it." She chuckled. "I thought you were talked out."

"Party talk, yeah. But I just can't seem to get enough of you, Tara." He wrapped an arm around her waist and scooped her up and on top of him.

Desire swirled in her belly as she stared into his intense blue eyes.

He whispered, "On second thought. Talking *is* overrated." He slipped a hand behind her head and drew her lips to his.

God, the man could kiss. The urges she'd been suppressing since their last kiss came rushing back all at once, sending a fist of hard lust straight to her gut. She matched the intensity in his kiss with her own as she snuggled closer to his perfect body. Her hands explored the hard peaks and valleys of his chest muscles as she settled on his lap.

When they came up for air, he leaned back and whispered, "You're so beautiful, Tara."

Ryan might change his mind when he saw the scars on her torso. Should she warn him? Before she could figure out what to say, his lips distracted her by trailing soft kisses down her neck. She tilted her head back and nearly moaned. She loved when he did that.

She closed her eyes, relishing in the soft touch of his hands and lips wandering over her aching, needy body. He slowly and gently explored her curves as the beautiful scent of lavender hung heavy in the air around them.

Intoxicating. And dangerous, because she should put a stop to it all, but didn't want to.

What she wanted was to kiss him again, so she framed his face with both of her hands and drew his mouth back to hers. While she ran her hands through his thick hair, he slipped one of her straps off her shoulder.

Then he changed the pace and slowed their urgent kiss down, taking his time about it. It drove her nuts, making her ache for more. She could kiss Ryan all night.

When her other strap slipped lower, it set off a warning alarm. Things were moving a little too fast. But she hadn't been with a man in so long, she ignored the annoying buzz in her head and kissed him deeper.

"See? Tub Orgasmic. I rest my case." The annoying buzz turned into her sister Laura's voice.

As Tara opened her eyes, Ryan quickly slid her straps up. Her sister and Brad stood on the edge with two drinks each and smirks on their faces.

Laura held out a martini glass. "We figured you might need this to get in the mood. But you guys seem to be doing just fine."

"Thanks." She accepted the glass. "Seems nothing's changed since you turned fourteen and started spying on me and my dates, Laura."

"Yeah. I learned the subtle nuances of making out from the best!"

Brad handed Ryan a beer. "Sorry, bud."

"Would you guys like to join us?" Ryan asked as he grabbed the bottle from Brad.

"Sure!" A slightly drunk Laura kissed Brad before she headed for the changing room.

Brad shook his head. "I'm going to bed. Laura made this stupid rule about no sex for two weeks before the honeymoon. I don't need the frustration. Goodnight." He turned and walked out.

Ryan met Tara's gaze. "I completely understand his frustration."

"Sorry." His *frustration* was quite evident beneath her. She gave Ryan a quick kiss before she slowly moved from his lap to the bench beside him, carefully balancing her drink. Not sure what to say, she took a long sip of her cool martini as Ryan drank his beer in silence too. She needed to decide what to do before that happened again. She still sat firmly on the fence. Well, her mind did anyway. Her body obviously voted for sleeping with him.

She asked, "So do you really think we can pull this me-and-you thing off with no one getting hurt? Because I'm pretty sure if it goes wrong, your grandmother would shoot me."

Ryan laid his bottle on the edge of the spa and then pulled himself out. The water droplets slowly meandering around all the hard planes of his chest and abs distracted her so much she barely heard him say, "I'd take the bullet for you. I vote we risk it, Tara."

He picked up his beer and a towel and headed to the changing room, reappearing a moment later with his clothes in his hands. "Night."

"Goodnight, Ryan." Take a bullet for her? He'd probably actually do it.

Spencer used to say nice things like that, and she'd bought them hook, line, and sinker. She'd been so completely fooled by Spencer's false charm that as badly as she wanted to believe Ryan, she probably shouldn't.

She took another drink as she wrangled with her confusion. The martini

wasn't helping. Her defenses lowered with each sip. By the time she hit the bottom of the glass, she'd surely follow right behind him and up to his room if it weren't for her slumber party.

Laura reappeared in a tiny red bikini and scooped up her drink before she slipped into Ryan's vacated spot. "Where'd the boys go?"

"Neither had any prospect of getting any so they went to bed."

Laura laid her head on Tara's shoulder. "Looked like Ryan had great prospects until we showed up. Sorry."

"That was embarrassing. Let's talk about something else, please."

"He's hot, Jamie. How have you not hit that yet?"

"Hit that? Are we in high school?"

"Speaking of high school behavior, when would having Gina-the-man-stealer babysit Ryan tomorrow *ever* be a good idea?"

"She's our only single cousin, that's why."

"She's a ho." Laura took another sip of her martini. "If you're not careful, she'll have her tongue farther down Ryan's throat than yours was just now."

Gina was a mid-twenties, hot, red-headed, curvy bombshell. Maybe that *had* been a mistake.

Laura whispered, "Are you happy living in that small town? Wouldn't you rather come live here again? Where you're safe?"

Tara attributed the abrupt subject change to Laura's steady martini consumption all evening. "Safe. But in jail. With guards twenty-four seven like this weekend. With Mom and Dad constantly hovering and not wanting me to go to work? No. I feel safe, yet still free in Anderson Butte. The people there are super nosy, but for the most part, really good and kind. Like Ryan."

Laura blurted out, "Speaking of Ryan, are the sheriff's hands rough? That's the problem with only dating rich men. They all have soft hands. I've always wondered what it would feel like to have a big set of rough, construction-worker hands wander all over my body. Like you read about in books."

Tara chuckled. Her sister was drunker than she'd thought. "You're getting married tomorrow. It's no time to be thinking about a different set of hands all over your body."

"It's the perfect time." Laura paused for another long drink. "It's the last night I'll ever be single. So answer the question, please."

“Yes, he has rough hands. Send Brad to visit for a week sometime, and Ryan will take him backpacking and rafting and roughen up his hands too.”

“Great idea!” her sister said with a sharp nod.

Okaaaay. Time to get Laura to bed. A hangover on her wedding day would suck.

Tara plucked the glass from Laura’s hand. “You’re officially cut off for the night, kiddo. Let’s hit the hay. Then you can dream about all the construction workers’ hands you’d like. Just be sure to stay on your own side of the bed, please.”

Laura slowly made her way out of the hot tub, and then grabbed the towel Tara held out as she said, “Don’t worry. You’re safe. You have soft hands too.” Laura laid a smacking kiss on Tara’s cheek. “I love you. Thanks for coming. I know it was a risk. Why the hell does that sick, obsessed bastard have to be so smart? It’s not fair you have to hide from him the rest of your life.”

Tara circled her arm around Laura’s waist to steady her as they headed upstairs. “What’s not fair is that you had to have your wedding here, in Fort Knox, so I could come. You should have had some lavish affair in Italy or something. With more than our closest family and friends. But Spencer’s wealth still provides him minions Detective Bailey worries about. So I’m sorry about that.”

Laura shook her head. “It doesn’t matter where we get married. Just that we do. Who’d have ever thought I’d marry good old reliable Brad?”

Tara had always hoped for it. “He’s the best. And that’s what you deserve. I’m happy for you guys.”

Laura sighed as she leaned even harder on Tara. “You need to ditch that stupid ‘I’ll never marry again’ attitude and look at what’s right in front of you, Jamie. Ryan is freakin’ hot. And he has *rough* hands! How could you go wrong there?”

Tara laughed as she dragged her drunken sister up the stairs to her room. Laura had a point about Ryan’s hands. They’d felt pretty nice earlier.

Damn her sister. She’d pass out as soon as her head hit the pillow, but Tara was going to lay awake all night and think about Ryan’s rough hands roaming all over her body.

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The next afternoon, about an hour before the wedding was supposed to start, Ryan stood on the balcony overlooking the lawn where the chairs and the tents were set up.

After dealing with more texts from Mike, he'd done a quick search for Tara's engagement announcement last night, but couldn't find one that matched. Frustrating. But he'd dig deeper when he got home and could use some of the resources available at his office.

A man in charge of the suits below gave instructions to two guys. He pointed to the nearby trees. Ryan had seen four others disappear into different parts of the surrounding woods earlier. There was tighter security than the UN probably had.

What the hell were they so afraid of? Could the ex-husband in the loony bin, as Mildred had said, be that dangerous? Was that part even true? Tara had said her ex was on the east coast.

Making his way to the backyard, Ryan navigated the maze of doors and corridors until he finally stood next to the guy in charge. Ryan held out his hand. "Sheriff Ryan Anderson."

"John Bailey." He returned the shake. "Nice to meet you, Sheriff."

"You private or with the force?"

Bailey glanced at Ryan. "I'm with Denver PD, but Mr. McDaniel is friends with the mayor, who asked me to oversee the security detail today."

"Big operation. What's the threat?"

"Not at liberty to say."

"Got it." Ryan studied the surrounding trees. There were guards every few feet. "I've been looking for a job in these parts. Know of any?"

"Why would a sheriff of a small town want to move here? Seems to me you got the better gig."

So the man knew who he was. "Can be a little too quiet. Looking to be a detective."

Bailey studied him for a minute. "Well, tell you what." He pulled a card from his pocket and handed it to Ryan. "Call me next week, and I'll see what we can do. We're a little shorthanded right now. We could use a few more people in my department if they can shake loose the budget to hire some."

Ryan read the card. Detective John Bailey. Special Crimes Unit. "Great. I'll call you."

"Are you carrying the gun you brought, Sheriff?"

So that's why they took the bags so quickly. To search them. "Yep."

"In that case, we need to come to a little understanding. You're in charge at home, but here, all orders come from me today. Understood?"

"Got it."

"You want to be useful? Eyes on Tara today." He turned and walked away.

He'd already planned to stick to Tara's side anyway.

Bailey was the only person who hadn't called Tara Jamie. And he worked in Special Crimes. While it could vary, most cities used those units for particularly heinous acts.

That lead ball in Ryan's belly had just become a boulder.

He turned to find Tara and almost ran into a curvy redhead carrying two drinks.

"Hi, Ryan. I'm Gina. Jamie asked me to keep you company today while she does her sister-of-the-bride thing." She held out a glass.

"No thanks." He wasn't going to drink until after they got through the wedding. And whatever the possible threat might be.

"Well, that's no fun, Sheriff." She shrugged. "Guess I'll just have to drink them both. I plan to have a good time with you today, handsome." She arched a brow as she took a long drink.

"Thanks. But I don't—"

"Don't want to hurt my feelings, now, do you?" She stuck her bottom lip out and pouted.

He'd never actually seen a grown woman do that.

Dammit. He didn't need the distraction. He needed to keep an eye on Tara. "Of course not." He stuck his arm out. "Let's go find a seat."

## CHAPTER THIRTEEN

It took all Tara had to resist the urge to hop off the raised dais at the reception and strangle her cousin. It had been a colossal mistake to ask her to babysit Ryan. Gina'd had way too much to drink and was hanging all over him.

Laura had been right. Gina could be a little much, but Drunk Gina took being obnoxious to a whole new level. And if Gina "accidentally" rubbed that big set of fake cha-chas against him one more time . . . she was going to lose it.

Turning her attention back to the best man's speech, Tara forced her shoulders to relax. She should be thankful. Everything had gone perfectly so far. No rain or wind. The night was clear and starry, and her speech had gone well a few moments ago. So after the best man finished his long-winded ramble, her duties would be done. That left only cake and dancing on the evening's agenda. Best of all, there'd been no surprises from Spencer. Hopefully it'd stay that way until they left in the morning. She missed Anderson Butte, and Sherlock. She looked forward to being home again.

Laura leaned over and whispered, "You're looking a little green around the gills there, Jamie. Jealous?"

As the best man droned on, she whispered back, "No. Ryan and I aren't even in a relationship." She wasn't jealous. That'd be ridiculous. She was just annoyed at her cousin's rude behavior toward Ryan.

Laura chuckled. "You may not think *you're* in a relationship, but I'll bet the sheriff would disagree. He hasn't taken his eyes off of you all night."

Yeah, she'd noticed that. It made her smile. "He's probably been fantasizing about all the ways he's going to make me pay for saddling him



with Gina.”

Laura rolled her eyes. “What he’s fantasizing about is how to get you naked. Wait. It just got worse. Gina’s got her hand on his leg. Won’t be long before she hits the intended target.”

Tara leaned closer to her sister to get a better view. Sure enough. Ryan’s big hand caught Gina’s to stop it. That was it. “I’m—”

“Definitely jealous. Go!”

“Am not.” Tara frowned at her sister before she quietly slipped off the stage and headed for *her* intended target. Ryan’s lap. That’d put an end to it all. And she wasn’t jealous, dammit! She was just . . . okay. Maybe a little jealous. But mostly just mad at her cousin.

She moved quickly down a side aisle and then weaved her way between the tables set up on the grass. The big smile on Ryan’s face as she approached cut her anger in half. Whenever he did that she couldn’t help but smile right back.

Ryan stood and slipped his arm around her waist. “Gina. Excuse us, please.” He guided Tara toward the house.

“Sorry about Gina, Ryan.”

He kept on tugging.

“Where are we going?”

“Anywhere Gina’s not. And where I can get you alone.”

She’d been watching him for hours in his dark, nicely fitting suit with his crisp white shirt and pretty blue tie, fending off her cousin. And only having eyes for her. She was all for being alone with him. “Let’s go to the library.”

He opened a French door for her and stood aside. “Lead the way.”

Tara took his hand, taking extra note of its sexy roughness thanks to her sister, and headed toward the library as fast as her heels and tight dress would allow. She felt like a teenager again, sneaking around the staff to find a place to kiss her boyfriend.

As soon as they were inside the room lit only with soft moonlight, she quickly closed the doors behind them.

Using his whole body, he slowly pressed her against the wooden door. “I’ve wanted to kiss you all day.” He framed her face with his hands and drew her mouth to his. The kiss was urgent and deep, making it clear how much he wanted her.

She slipped her hands under his suit coat around his waist and snuggled closer. He had a gun strapped to his lower back. Why would he bring a gun to a wedding? She didn't want to stop kissing him long enough to ask about it. Probably just a cop habit.

When they leaned back slightly for some much-needed air, the hunger in his gaze stole what little breath she had left. His darkened eyes and his sexy five o'clock stubble made him pretty much irresistible.

Still staring deeply into her eyes, he slid his hands along her cheeks and into her hair. His lips twitched as if he knew what she was thinking about him before his mouth covered hers and he kissed her. He pressed his big, powerful body against hers as if he couldn't get close enough.

The man kissed like no one else.

As his hands wandered her body their kisses became more urgent. She needed to make her decision. Was she going to sleep with him?

His mouth left her lips and slowly trailed soft kisses down her neck, confusing the situation even more. Then his mouth found hers again, and she kissed him back with equal intensity.

When his hand slipped up her thigh and under her dress, the stakes grew higher. He gave her bottom, barely covered by the tiny thong she wore, a gentle squeeze, sealing the deal. She was going to sleep with him. "Do you have protect—"

"Yes."

"This'll be just sex, right? Nothing serious?"

He whispered in her ear, "It's whatever you decide it'll be."

That was all she needed to hear. Her hands dove for his belt buckle and got busy unclasping, untucking, and unzipping while he hiked up her dress and slipped off her panties.

When he lifted her up, pressing her back firmly against the doors, she wrapped her legs around his waist.

It'd be quick this way, and he wouldn't see her scars. Perfect for their first time.

He nibbled on her bottom lip as he stared into her eyes. "We'll take it slower—next time."

The longing in his gaze sent a warm shiver up her spine. Slower would be fine, but for now, she wanted quickie sex against the door with Ryan. It made her feel decadent and . . . desired. Attractive for the first time in way

too long.

He smiled as he trailed his fingertips along her jaw. “So beautiful.”

Then he kissed the sensitive skin just in front of her ear, his teeth softly nibbling her lobe as he entered her. He went slowly at first, letting her body that hadn’t been with a man in three years adjust to him. Then he gently increased the pace. Drawing out each long stroke and driving her insane with need.

His body, hard against hers, radiated with lust, desire, and pure strength as he buried his face in her neck. It drove her wild and she ached for more.

She wanted to kiss him again so she drew his mouth to hers. When she nipped his bottom lip, he let out a sexy groan she felt in her gut. Her whole body pressed harder against his, silently asking for more. She wasn’t going to last much longer at this rate.

As if reading her mind, he leaned back, closed his eyes, and picked up the pace. Hard and fast—just what her body asked for. She slid her hands into his thick hair and kissed him again, losing herself in the delicious, sensual pleasure. When she opened her eyes, she found him staring at her, with need and . . . did he feel the same thing she suddenly did? Something more than carnal desire. Something that made her heart warm as she stared back into his enticing blue eyes.

But it’d been far too long for her—her body screamed for release. She’d just barely hung on until she couldn’t take it anymore. With her body tightening around his, clenching harder with each stroke, she let her head fall against the wood at her back. “Ryan, I can’t—”

“Together.” His gruff voice whispered.

When he drove home one last, hard stroke, she gasped as he called out her name and tumbled over the edge along with her.

As she panted for air, recovering from the most intense sex she’d ever had, he closed his eyes and leaned his forehead against hers, their chests heaving against each other’s.

After a few seconds he drew in a deep breath and whispered, “You okay?”

“Mm hmm.” She ran her hands through his thick hair that she’d messed up, finger combing it back into order. “But we better get back before they miss us.” How long had they been gone? That had to have been quick, but she felt completely sated.

He slowly released her, giving her butt a pat as she slid down his body. “Do we have to?”

“Look on the bright side. There’ll be cake. And dancing.”

“And Drunk Gina.”

“Nope. You’re all mine for the rest of the night.”

He pulled her against him, wrapping her up tight. “I’m all yours as long as you’ll have me, Tara.”

She closed her eyes and snuggled into his warm embrace. Keeping her emotions out of things had been the plan, but now her heart glowed with new, even deeper desire for him. What they’d just shared hadn’t been only about hot, quickie sex, but she didn’t want to examine it any closer at the moment.

She leaned back and gave him a kiss before leading the way to the bathroom.

When she opened the door, the light automatically came on in the mirrored vanity area, blinding her for a moment. After her eyes adjusted, she stared at their reflection. They made a nice, if not totally disheveled, picture of two people flushed with satisfaction from a quick roll in the hay. They needed to fix that, pronto. “You can go first.” She pointed to the door on the right.

She needed a moment to pull herself together.

Had that been a mistake? Or the best thing she’d ever allowed herself to do? Ryan was considerate, sweet, funny, and . . . no, she wouldn’t even consider it. He *wasn’t* perfect for her. She’d thought that about Spencer and look where that’d gotten her.

No more thinking. It was fantastic sex, nothing more. She deserved that after her long drought.

After finding a tissue, she wiped away the stray mascara under her eyes. Her French braid was hopelessly ruined, so she took it down and ran her fingers through the tangled mess. One of her earrings was missing, so she took out the remaining one. Hopefully no one would notice with her hair loose.

She smoothed out her dress the best she could and figured it was as good as it was going to get. She’d hunt down her clutch and find her lipstick first thing.

Ryan reappeared. “Why there’d be a jet tub and a steam shower in the library bathroom escapes me.”

She straightened his tie, then wiped a smudge of her lipstick off of his neck. “Me too.”

“Since they’re there, wanna blow off the rest of the reception and try that steam shower out with me?”

They needed to have a serious talk about her scars before anything like that happened. “If you’ll put on a big smile for my sister’s sake and get through the rest of the reception, we’ll use the one in my bathroom later.”

“Can’t wait for cake and dancing.” He shot her a big, fake grin.

“That’s a good start—smart aleck.” She closed the bathroom door behind her. Keeping her heart out of their affair had just become even more important. What if the totally naked Tara, scars and all, repulsed him? That’d hurt. But she couldn’t blame him if he felt that way.

Her scars repulsed her.

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Ryan held the door that led to the backyard open for Tara. “After you.” He let the guard who’d been standing outside the library door the whole time they’d been in there go next, and then he followed behind. Clearly he wasn’t the only one keeping eyes on Tara. It was cute how Tara had turned three shades of pink when she spotted the man in the hall waiting for them.

Hopefully the cake and dancing would already be underway so they could be done with that and then get back to their own fun. Albeit with a guard standing outside their door again, most likely.

When he caught up with her, Tara swatted his arm. “Wipe that grin off your face.”

He couldn’t help it. And with the prospect of more later, his grin wasn’t fading any time soon. “You should take your own advice.”

When they rejoined the reception, a hundred sets of eyes seemed to turn their attention from the dancing bride and groom to them. Laura smirked over Brad’s shoulder while they danced. Tara’s mother’s arched brow told it all—they were busted.

Rather than worry about it, he swept Tara up into his arms and joined the other couples on the dance floor.

Tara snuggled closer and whispered, “Everyone knows.”

“They’re all jealous.”

She smiled. “Especially frustrated Brad.”

“He won’t have too much longer to wait.” He leaned back and stared into her eyes. “And neither will we—they all have cake.” He shot her a quick eyebrow hitch.

“Yeah. About that.” A frown creased her forehead. “I need to talk to you about something.”

The seriousness in her tone made his stomach sink. “You’ve changed your mind about us?”

“No. It’s just . . . I wanted to warn you about some scars I have on my stomach and back. I didn’t want you to be taken by surprise. They’re not pretty.”

“I already knew about the scars, Tara. No big deal.”

She blinked at him. “How?”

“Meg. She can’t tell a lie to save her life. She asked me not to tell anyone else. And I haven’t.”

“Thank you. But they’re bad, Ryan. So if after you see . . .”

“Stop. I’m not worried about a few scars.” They danced in silence for a few minutes until he couldn’t stand not telling her the truth any longer. “Your grandmother told me a little about your ex yesterday. That he hurt you.”

Tara’s eyes widened before she stammered, “Uh, she has dementia . . .”

“And that you changed your name because of him?”

“Ryan, I don’t—”

“I just want to help, Tara.”

When tears filled her eyes, she squeezed them shut and dropped her forehead against his shoulder. “There’s nothing you can do, Ryan.”

The defeat in her tone shot straight to his heart. “Spencer is responsible for your scars, isn’t he?”

He didn’t think she’d answer until he felt a slight nod against his shoulder.

“And now he’s locked away in a mental institution for it?”

After another long pause, she nodded again.

But he was still a threat, obviously. Who was he? What kind of monster could hurt a sweet woman like her? He wanted to demand she tell him, so he could keep her safe, but checked his temper. “Where exactly—”

She shook her head and started to pull away.

“Okay. No more questions.” She was shutting down again like she’d done before, so he held her closer. “I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to upset you.”

As they slowly swayed to the music, he whispered, “I . . . care about you, Tara. Enough that I didn’t want to lie about knowing what your grandmother told me.”

She finally lifted her head from his shoulder and looked him in the eyes. “I care about you too, Ryan.”

She cared too? His heart wanted to soar, but the sadness in her eyes quickly grounded his happiness. He hated seeing her so troubled.

The song ended, so he took her hand and led her back to his empty table. Thankfully Gina was across the room, flirting with one of the bartenders.

He pulled out a chair for her and whispered, “You need a drink. And some cake.” He laid a kiss on the top of her head. “Be right back.”

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Tara watched Ryan’s broad shoulders weave through the people to get cake, suddenly so sick to her stomach she’d never be able to eat a bite. She should’ve stood up to her parents and left Ryan home. He knew way too much. And he wasn’t going to let it go.

Her grandma was the one person they hadn’t considered. She didn’t read e-mail like everyone else at the wedding who’d been warned not to talk about her past. Just proved there was no such thing as a perfect lie.

Detective Bailey stood nearby, watching her. Maybe she should ask him what to do. But what if his answer was to move and change her name again? She liked living in Anderson Butte. And she liked Ryan. Her growing feelings for him were making it even harder to lie to him.

She needed to pull it together and decide what to do. Ryan hadn’t told anyone about her scars. Someone in their nosy town would have asked her about them by now if he had. Maybe she *could* trust him with the truth. She *wanted* to trust him.

Ryan reappeared and laid a flute of champagne in front of her, along with a slice of cake. He sat beside her and dug into his piece.

“Thank you.” He hadn’t gotten himself anything to drink. “I’m sure we

can find you a beer if you'd rather?"

He shook his head. "Not drinking. Detective Bailey asked me to keep an eye on you."

Detective Bailey trusted Ryan enough to ask him to do that? Then she probably could too. She was going to do it.

She leaned her mouth near Ryan's ear. "If I promise to tell you the whole story later, will you promise *me* something?"

He laid his fork down. "Anything."

"Spencer is a computer hacker. One of the best. If you really want to help me remain safe, please don't dig around in my past on the Internet. He's obsessed with me in a . . . sick way. As of now, we don't think he knows where I live or what my new name is, but he's surely monitoring any references to my married name. He might trace anyone who Googled him too in hopes of finding me."

Ryan's face hardened. "I did a search on my phone last night using your maiden name. I looked for your wedding announcement, but didn't see it. Could that have alerted him?"

"No. My father hired people to remove all of that from the Internet. And I'm sure he's figured out I'd never make it easy for him by going back to using my maiden name."

"Good." He reached for her hand and laced her fingers through his.

Coming clean had lifted the stifling weight of her secret from her soul. And knowing Ryan wouldn't accidentally alert Spencer now gave her renewed hope she might actually have a chance at a normal life again. The thing she longed for the most.

"Come on." She drained her champagne glass. "We'll talk about all of this tomorrow. I refuse to let Spencer ruin my sister's wedding."

With her arm tucked through his, they headed for the dance floor filled with people doing the Chicken Dance. It was just what they needed. A silly, fun song to chase the negative energy away. And seeing a big, manly guy like Ryan flapping his arms like a bird would be priceless.

After a few more songs, the dance floor thinned out as people started to leave. Snuggling against Ryan for the last hour had made Tara as eager to skip the rest of the reception as Ryan had been earlier.

As if reading her mind, he whispered softly in her ear, "Can we go upstairs now?"



She glanced around the reception, happy to see her parents deep in a discussion with Brad's parents. Laura and Brad had just left, so they could probably sneak away too. "Let's make a run for it."

The steam shower in her brightly lit bath suddenly sounded like a bad idea. Doubts about her ugly scars had her scooping up small candles from the centerpieces on empty tables and stuffing them into Ryan's suit pockets as they headed inside. Her darkened bedroom lit only by candlelight sounded like the better choice.

As they climbed the stairs to her bedroom, soft footsteps sounded not far behind them—the same guard who'd surely known what they'd been up to in the library. Embarrassing. But she was in such a good mood, about to be with Ryan, a sexy man she . . . liked a lot, so nothing could dampen her enthusiasm about the fun night ahead of them.

She swung her bedroom door open, blinking in surprise that all the lights were on. It'd been daylight when she'd left for the wedding.

Maybe the maids had cleaned and forgotten to turn off the lights?

She pulled Ryan inside and shut the door behind them. Just as she reached for the light switch, Ryan's face hardened.

When she turned to see what had made him react that way, the breath whooshed from her lungs. On her bed lay a doll propped up on the pillows. A little boy, his small hand holding a note, with a name tag that read . . . Sean. Her baby's name.

The child she'd always wanted. The child Spencer made sure she'd never hold.

Hot fear knifed through her anguish—was he nearby? Still in her room? She grabbed Ryan's arm before her shaking knees collapsed from under her.

Tears welled in her eyes as she whispered, "Only Spencer could be that cruel."

*Please, God, don't let it be happening all over again.*

## CHAPTER FOURTEEN

Ryan handed Tara into the arms of the guard who'd followed them. "Take her somewhere secure. And then call Bailey. I need to search the bedroom."

The guard grabbed a radio from inside his suit coat as he guided a shaking Tara away. Ryan drew his gun. Blood pounded in his ears as he quickly searched the room, hoping he'd find the bastard so he could take him down.

A few moments later, Bailey burst through the door with five other men. Ryan called out, "All clear." Then he holstered his gun.

Bailey's gaze locked on the bed for a moment before he quietly instructed his men, "Hurry and take pictures of the doll. We need to see what the note says."

Ryan asked, "Is Tara secure?"

"Yes. And I had Spencer put under extra guards this weekend, but I'll double-check that now." He pulled out his phone and stepped into the hall.

Ryan wanted to be sure the crime scene was handled properly. A simple mistake might let Spencer off the hook, and that wasn't happening if he could help it. Anyone who'd do that to Tara . . . he couldn't get the haunted look in her eyes when she'd seen the doll out of his mind.

Shaking it off, he took a place against the wall to observe. With the amount of security they had in place, how had this happened? And was it just good luck that Laura had spent the night with Tara the evening before so she hadn't been alone?

After they'd photographed the doll from all angles, Bailey returned and pulled on a pair of latex gloves. He took the note from the doll's hand and

opened it. “Son of a bitch.”

“What—”

Bailey cut Ryan off. “Come with me, please.” He placed the note in a plastic bag.

“What does it say?”

“I’d rather go through this just once. Let’s go to the study where the others are waiting.”

Ryan fell into step with Bailey. “Tara’s not safe here. We need to leave. Tonight.”

“Agreed.” As they walked down the staircase Bailey added, “We had this place sealed tight as a drum. Whoever it was is probably long gone with the caterers or florists. Unless he paid off one of the house staff. We’ll go at it from both angles, although Joe has done thorough background checks on all his staff.”

Ryan had endured the same, but couldn’t be angry about it anymore.

When they entered the study, a visibly shaken Joe stood from behind his desk. “What do you make of it, John?”

Eva sat on a couch with her head in her hands as Tara rubbed her back to soothe her. It should be Eva comforting Tara, not the other way around. Only the lack of color in Tara’s face and the set of her lips gave away her own internal struggles. Tara was the strongest woman Ryan had ever met. Watching her hold it together while her mother fell apart shredded his heart.

He crossed the room and sat on Tara’s other side, drawing her against him. “It’s going to be all right. We’ll get to the bottom of this.”

---

Tara hoped he was right. Laying her head on Ryan’s shoulder, she closed her eyes. While she was happy he was there, grateful for the big, strong shoulder, she hated that he’d been drawn deeper into her bad situation. She shouldn’t have come home and brought danger to her family.

Detective Bailey sat down across from them and tossed a plastic bag on the coffee table. “Spencer must have paid off one of the guards where he’s being held, or asked someone on the outside to arrange this for him. I called his warden. He said he’d check the security cameras to see if they could

figure it out.” He stood and paced the room. “We’ll interview the caterers and the florists. If we can prove Spencer sent this, then maybe we can get him moved to regular jail, rather than that damn country club for crazies his overpaid attorneys talked the judge into.”

“But Spencer’s still there, right?” She couldn’t stop her hands from shaking so she folded them together and laid them on her lap.

“Yes. They just did a bed check.”

Her mom moaned a quiet, “Thank God.”

“What does the note say?” her dad asked.

The detective locked eyes with her father. “The man’s crazy. Maybe—”

“I need to know.” Tara blinked back her tears. “I have to know.”

Detective Bailey quietly answered, “It said, ‘I’m sorry I missed you this weekend, Jamie. But I’ll be seeing you very soon.’ It was signed with a capital S.” He handed the little plastic bag to her. “Does this look like Spencer’s handwriting?”

*But I’ll be seeing you very soon?*

Little spots formed before her eyes. She blinked them back, forcing herself to look. She studied her name written on the outside of the note. “Spencer wrote it.”

“He’s locked up, Tara,” Ryan whispered. “And once we’re home, I’ll be sure you’re safe.”

She needed to focus on that and not allow Spencer to intimidate her. That was what he thrived on. She had to keep it together. “At least he called me Jamie. If he knew my new name, he would have used it to scare me.”

Her father said, “We can’t send you home without security, Tara.”

She shook her head. “I can’t have guards in Anderson Butte, Dad. Why would a dentist need a security detail? Ryan will keep me safe.” He’d already promised he’d let no one hurt her. She trusted his word.

Tara exchanged a confirming glance with Ryan. He nodded sharply.

Detective Bailey said, “Maybe we’ll get lucky and catch a break this time so we can throw him into a stronger cage. One where he won’t have access to so many civilians, and the Internet. He’s just proved the meds they must have him on aren’t working. If we can nail this on Spencer, I’ll petition the court and make sure they understand how dangerous he is. He needs to live the rest of his life in solitary confinement with no outside access at all.”

“Agreed.” Ryan stood and held out his hand. “Let’s go home.”

“Let me go get my things.”

“No. We both need to leave everything. He could have had someone place trackers in our luggage or on our phones.”

Bailey asked, “Can you fly at night, Ryan? Or will you need somewhere secure until daylight?”

“It’s a full moon. We have plenty of light, but helicopter flight is definitely more dangerous at night. I’ll leave that up to Tara.”

It had to be much more dangerous to stay in Denver where someone who worked for Spencer might have access to her. “Let’s go.” She hugged her mother, and then her dad, while fighting back tears. She needed to stay strong for them.

She whispered to her dad, “Don’t tell Laura about this, please. Let her enjoy her honeymoon. Okay?”

“Sure.” Her dad cleared his throat and then handed Ryan his card. “Send me an e-mail tonight when you’re both home safe?” He was trying to be strong too. It broke her heart.

“Will do. Bye, Eva.” Ryan gave her mom a hug and then shook her dad’s hand and said, “I’ll keep her safe.”

Her dad smiled tightly and returned the shake. “I’m counting on that, Ryan.”

Ryan pulled her against his side as they made their way to the front portico, where three black SUVs with darkened windows waited. They crawled into the back of the one in the middle, Detective Bailey took the front passenger seat, then all three vehicles took off.

She’d been transported this way before, during the trial, with decoy cars, making it harder for someone to tail them.

As Detective Bailey and Ryan talked about the logistics of getting Ryan’s car back to the airport and having all their things scanned and returned, Tara tuned them out and stared through the window into the dark night. She forced her mind to focus on getting back home to Anderson Butte, where she’d be safe again. She didn’t want to think about the alternative.

When they pulled onto the airport tarmac, Ryan got out of the SUV to meet one of the employees. He needed to retrieve the keys to the helicopter.

As she reached for her door handle, Detective Bailey said, “Wait for the guards, please. And if we’re unable to get Spencer moved to a higher security compound, I’d like you to reconsider witness protection, Tara. He just proved

he's too dangerous to be in minimum security."

The tears she'd been forcing back all night welled up in her eyes. That was what she'd tried to avoid thinking about. It meant disappearing for good. Possibly never seeing her family again. A last resort. "I'm hoping he gets moved so I don't have to consider that. Thank you for everything, Detective."

"You're welcome. Oh, before I forget, Ryan asked about a job here. Should I put in a good word for him?"

She wanted whatever Ryan wanted. He deserved to be happy. "Yes, anything you could do would be appreciated. I'll call you after I get a new cell tomorrow."

"Sounds good. Looks like Ryan's ready for you. Take care, Tara."

"You too." She opened her door and moved between the two men who waited for her. They flanked her as they headed for the already-running chopper. It was her ticket home no matter how dangerous the ride might be.

Hopefully Anderson Butte could *remain* her home.

---

The full moon illuminating the clear, starry night sky made for an eerily peaceful chopper ride home. That and Ryan had grown unusually quiet. When he glanced at her with that worried look in his eyes for the twenty-fifth time, she couldn't take it anymore. "I promise I'm fine now, Ryan. I'm not going to fall apart on you."

"I wasn't worried about that." He shrugged. "Much."

"We need to lighten things up in here. I'll start." She pasted on a big smile. "What did the cat say after eating two robins lying in the sun?"

"Assuming cats could talk?" He cocked a brow.

"Yes, Mr. Literal."

He stared deeply into her eyes, as if searching to see just how scared she really was under her false bravado. "Yum?"

"No. I just love Baskin-Robbins."

When that slow, cute smile of his returned, what remained of her anxiety melted away. "Okay, now your turn. I'm dying to hear your all-time favorite joke."

His forehead furrowed. "I have to get ready to land in a second. And the

only ones I can ever remember are stupid knock-knock jokes from when I was a kid.”

“Perfect, those are short. Shoot.”

“Okay. You asked for it. Knock, knock.”

“Who’s there?”

“Gimme.”

“Gimme who?”

“Gimme a kiss, Tara.”

She grunted. “Only a good-looking guy like you could get away with that line—in high school.” Framing his face with her hands, she laid her mouth on his, tempted to linger, but she needed to make it quick if she wanted to land in one piece.

His lips tilted into a smug smile. “Still works, apparently.”

Ryan got busy adjusting controls as they made their approach. It was just after three a.m. when Anderson Butte appeared below them.

After Ryan set the helicopter down behind the clinic, she hung up her headphones and sighed. “I just realized I can’t get into my house. I don’t have my keys.”

“I’ll get the spare key from my dad in the morning. You can bunk with me tonight.”

“How will you get into *your* house? You don’t have keys either.” She opened the chopper door and stepped out. Her high heels were killing her feet, so she bent down and slipped them off. It wasn’t far to Ryan’s house.

He appeared by her side and slung an arm over her shoulder. “The old key-under-the-flower-pot-on-the-front-porch trick.”

“But of course. What was I thinking?”

“You were thinking about walking home barefoot, but we can’t have that.”

Ryan surprised her when he swept her off her feet and lifted her against his chest. With her shoes dangling from her fingertips, she wrapped her arms around his neck. Snuggling closer she said, “My hero. Even if you tell really lame knock-knock jokes.”

Ryan set off toward his house. “I’m not that heroic. For letting you spend the night, I expect payment in return.”

Tara leaned back and cocked a brow. “Payment?”

“I want your homemade biscuits for breakfast. I’ll make the gravy.”

“So you give a woman a cooking lesson and she’s supposed to be your biscuit slave for life?”

“Of course not. But after I teach her how to make gravy too . . . then maybe.” He laid a quick kiss on her lips. “And only if the biscuit maker is you.”

She opened her mouth to reply, but her heart was so busy being confused, nothing but air passed her lips. Before her brain could pull it together and come up with a good retort, Ryan stepped onto his front porch, dropped her to her feet, then retrieved the key.

Once inside, he locked the door behind them. Something she’d never seen him do. He must be more worried than he let on.

Without turning on any lights, he took her hand and they climbed the stairs to his bedroom. He opened a dresser drawer and pulled out a T-shirt. “Will this be okay?”

“Fine. Thanks.”

“Do you want to sleep in the guest room?” He took off his suit coat and tossed it onto a chair, then removed his gun and laid it on a nightstand.

“I’d rather sleep with you. If that’s okay?” After the day she’d had, the only bed that appealed was one with Ryan in it.

“That’s the answer I’d hoped for. You can go first.” He pointed to the bathroom before he sunk onto the bed to untie his shoes. “I’ll go send your dad an e-mail. Be right back.”

After washing her face she dug through drawers until she found Ryan’s toothpaste, then finger brushed her teeth. The dentist in her cringed at that, but it was just going to have to do. All she wanted was her head on a pillow.

She crossed his darkened bedroom to the king-sized bed.

He probably slept on the same side where he’d laid his gun. It was her preferred side too, but she was so tired it didn’t matter. She slid under the cool sheets on the opposite side and closed her eyes. As tired as she was, her mind still raced with unwanted thoughts about what had happened earlier.

Ryan got ready for bed and then slipped under the sheets beside her. He wrapped his arms around her, pulling her close, then nibbled on her ear. “Can’t wait for those biscuits in the morning.”

She turned in his arms and answered his smirk with one of her own. “I never agreed to those terms, pal.”

“In that case, I’d be willing to take payment in something along the



lines of this.”

When he kissed her slow, sweet, and deep, her toes curled. “Mmmm. Morning sex or homemade biscuits. Tough choice.” She snuggled closer and closed her eyes, exhausted but finally feeling safe. “Goodnight, Ryan.”

“Night.” A few seconds passed before he whispered, “For the record, I vote for both.”

She chuckled as she drifted off to sleep looking forward to hot sex and homemade biscuits in the morning.

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With the steady patter of rain falling on the metal roof, Ryan blinked his eyes open way too early. A glance at his watch confirmed it. Eight o’clock. Tara lay sprawled on top of him, using his chest as a pillow.

His hand rested on her lower back, under her T-shirt. He slowly caressed her warm skin, hating the way his thumb bumped over the raised scars Spencer had put there.

With her eyes still closed, Tara snuggled closer.

He’d like nothing better than to go back to sleep along with her, but dark thoughts about Spencer and what he’d done to Tara made him slowly slip out of her embrace. He pulled on some sweats, then headed downstairs to start the coffee. While the machine gurgled, he fired up his iPad to catch up on e-mail until Tara woke up. He also sent an e-mail to Bailey asking to be kept in the loop.

After he finished reading his e-mail, he pulled out the ingredients for biscuits and blended them together. Serving Tara biscuits and gravy in bed sounded like the perfect start to a rainy day.

Just as the timer dinged, signaling the biscuits were done, his front door handle wiggled back and forth. He laid the hot pan on the granite countertop and headed for the door.

Then a loud knock sounded. “Ryan?”

It was Meg.

He unlocked the door and pulled it open. Both his sisters stood on his front porch. “Hey. What’s up?”

Meg’s brow furrowed as she pushed her wet hood back. “Why was your

door locked? And why haven't you been answering your cell?"

"What's the matter?"

"Dad saw the chopper was back, so he asked me and Casey to find out how your job interview went. And to convince you to stay."

Casey lifted her chin and sniffed. "You're making biscuits? As in your famous biscuits and gravy? Awesome!" She and Meg pushed past him, hung up their dripping coats on the rack by the door, and then headed for the kitchen.

"I'm sort of busy right now," he said to their backs.

Meg asked, "Doing what?" as she pulled out a stool at the kitchen counter and settled in. Casey sat down too.

As he struggled with what to say, Tara appeared on the steps wearing his robe. "Ryan, I was going to make the bis—" She pulled up short. "Oh, hey, you guys." Tara glanced over her shoulder as if looking for an escape hatch.

His sisters exchanged satisfied smirks before they said in unison, "Good morning, Tara."

Ryan crossed to the kitchen and pulled out four plates from the cupboard. Biscuits and gravy would just have to do—morning sex wasn't happening.

## CHAPTER FIFTEEN

Tara wanted to crawl under the nearest rock. Instead she threw her shoulders back and prepared to face Ryan's sisters. She felt sixteen again, just caught kissing her first boyfriend goodnight by her father.

Meg said, "Nice robe, Tara. Looks just like the one I gave Ryan for Christmas last year."

Casey snorted her coffee.

Ryan sent his sisters a dark look. "Knock it off."

That just made his sisters' smirks grow wider.

Tara pulled out a barstool and sat beside Meg, knowing just what to do to put a stop to things. She turned to the girls and lowered her voice. "How come no one told me how awesome your brother is in—"

"Stop!" Meg and Casey said in unison.

Casey cringed. "God, that *almost* made me lose my appetite. We get you guys slept together. Next subject, please."

Tara caught Ryan's gaze and sent him a grin. When he smiled back at her something shifted in her chest again. If she hadn't already decided to stay detached, she might have mistaken the little hitch her heart just took as . . . no. She wasn't going there ever again. She and Ryan both knew that.

While Ryan handed out the breakfast, Meg asked, "So how did the wedding go? Besides all the romance in the air finally making you guys realize how much you couldn't keep your hands off each other?"

"The wedding went fine." Ryan snatched Meg's plate from in front of her. "You want this back?"

Meg nodded.

"Then cut out all the comments and eat." He shot Casey a look as he

handed Meg's plate back. "That goes for you too."

Meg frowned as she dug into her breakfast. "Spoilsport."

When Ryan settled next to Tara at the counter, she leaned over and kissed his cheek. "See? You are my hero."

That sent up gagging noises from Ryan's sisters.

He shook his head and dug into his meal. "To be an only child . . ."

"Tara, you realize we're teasing Ryan. Not you, right?" Casey laid her fork down and smiled. "You're the only woman he's ever spent the whole night with. He says he hates the awkward morning-after chitchat."

Tara glanced Ryan's way. She was his first? He hadn't even hesitated when she'd asked to stay. And he'd held her all night long. Despite her best efforts, her heart went completely gooey. "Really, Ryan?"

"Yep." He took his half-full plate to the sink. "But it's totally *not awkward* having my sister point that out. I'll go get that key, Tara."

"Thanks." She smiled as she watched him go upstairs to get dressed. When he was out of earshot she said, "You guys are bad."

Casey's smile slowly dimmed. "He just pretends to be annoyed when we tease. Honestly, we're hoping he changes his mind about Denver. He belongs with his family here, Tara."

She wanted to belong here too. Hopefully Spencer would be moved to a more secure location so she could stay.

---

After the girls left and she'd done the dishes, Ryan returned with the key to her house. Time to go get dressed and then take her walk of shame the short distance home. Maybe everyone would be in church so she wouldn't have to explain to anyone why she was still wearing her dress from the wedding at nine in the morning.

"I'm going to change and then pick up Sherlock. After that, I'll go get us new phones. I still need to think of something to tell Fred, though. He'll wonder why we *both* need new phones. Do you think I should change my number again?"

"Definitely." Ryan slipped his hands around her waist. "But I'll handle the phones. Then how about I teach you how to make chicken enchiladas for

dinner tonight?”

She loved Mexican food. “Both sound awesome.” He was awesome. But she still owed him an explanation about Spencer before she left. Ryan had been more than patient with her about that. Might as well get it over with. “Before I go, do you want to talk about the elephant in the room?”

“What? That I still owe you morning sex because my sisters ruined breakfast in bed this morning?”

“Really? You were going to bring me breakfast in bed?” Her traitorous eyes got misty.

“Yes.” He drew her into a hug. “But you’re talking about Spencer, right?”

“Yeah. Let’s go sit down.”

She took his hand and led him to the couch. After she tucked her legs underneath her, she turned and faced him. “Where do I even begin when it comes to Spencer?”

---

Ryan struggled for a light tone. It had to be hard for her to relive the pain. “How’d you meet? Was he a patient?”

“No. Spencer and I met at one of my father’s company gatherings. We hit it off instantly. He was handsome, witty, a genius, and in charge of IT security for my dad’s main holding company. Spencer came from a well-known, wealthy family in Denver. Our fathers often played golf together. My mother considered Spencer ‘a most acceptable match’ for me.”

He’d wondered how a smart woman like Tara could have been so deceived by Spencer. “So everyone trusted him?”

“Yes. Exactly. Spencer was the perfect gentleman. Attentive, always by my side at parties, sweeping me off for fun weekend getaways, showering me with beautiful jewelry, the whole bit.”

He took her hand and wove his fingers with hers. “So you probably didn’t have to remind *him* to check in with you in the middle of the week, huh?”

“Just the opposite.” She shook her head. “He checked in many times a day, always wanted to know what I was doing. If I was seeing patients when

he called, he'd ask the receptionist to tell me that he was thinking of me. He asked me to marry him just a few months after we met, and I quickly agreed. I'd never been with anyone who treated me so well, seemed so devoted . . . so perfect. He and I could discuss any topic, we had similar backgrounds, and we generally liked all the same things. We never even had a fight before we got married. But I didn't realize until much later what motivated his devotion and complete attention."

Tara's whole body had tensed, so he ran his thumb over the back of her hand to soothe her. "So, his attentiveness was more like an obsession?"

She nodded. "Remember how I told you I remained friends with most of the guys I'd dated? After we married, if we ran into one of my former boyfriends at a party and I talked to him, Spencer would fly into a jealous rage on the way home. I had to assure him for hours after that he was the only man I wanted to be with. It should've been my first clue that something wasn't right with him, but I didn't see it. I wish I'd never agreed to get pregnant so quickly. I should have gotten to know him better, but I was so eager to have a baby."

The tears in her eyes as she stood to pace stabbed at his heart. She'd clearly wanted children. He wanted to pound the bastard to a pulp. "Spencer fooled a lot of people, Tara. You can't blame yourself for that. What happened next?"

She looked away, toward the lake.

He wasn't sure she'd finish the story until she said in a voice so soft he had to strain to hear, "One day, when I was about ten weeks pregnant and battling morning sickness so badly it was hard to get out of the house each morning to go to work, I realized I'd forgotten my cell. I'd just pulled out of my driveway, so I turned around and went back inside the house. When I walked into the bedroom I noticed Spencer in the bathroom, shaving. The music was turned up weirdly high and he was singing along at the top of his lungs, something I'd never seen him do. He didn't hear me walk up behind him before I saw three brown prescription bottles lined up on the countertop in front of him. When I tapped his shoulder to get his attention and ask what the pills were for, he flew into another of his rages and said I was being a nosy bitch and can't a guy take a few painkillers after a tough tennis match?"

She finally glanced Ryan's way again, then drew a deep breath. "From what I saw on two of the bottles before he scooped them up and put them in

his robe pocket, they weren't painkillers. After I Googled them, I realized he was on meds that could be used for treating mental illness. Delusions and schizophrenia."

"Tough to hide such a serious illness from a spouse—unless you're a sociopath. No one is prepared to deal with that, Tara. What did you do next?"

"I got really scared when I started thinking about his rash behavior. I figured maybe it was best to call his mom and ask about it before I talked to Spencer. She denied any knowledge, but looking back, she must've told him I knew."

She hugged her arms around her waist and closed her eyes, clearly struggling to go on. He hated what must be coming next. "Tara, if you don't want—"

"No, I can do this." She opened her eyes and threw her shoulders back. "A former boyfriend of mine, Richard, was a shrink, so I asked if I could meet with him for lunch that day. After I told him everything, Richard said I should pack my things while Spencer was at work and move out. At least until I got to the bottom of what was wrong with him. Richard worried that Spencer could be just as you said, a dangerous sociopath. Thank God I'd called my father and told him what I planned to do . . . or I'd be dead."

She sank beside him on the couch again. "I was packing when Spencer flew into our bedroom shouting that I was a whore. That he knew I'd had lunch with Richard earlier, and was the baby even his? He admitted to having me followed whenever I left the house. So I tried to reason with him, tell him if that were true, then he should know the baby was his. But his eyes just glazed over as he pulled out a big knife."

She paused and bit her bottom lip, struggling to hold it together.

He should stop her. It wasn't worth it. He couldn't stand seeing her in so much pain. "I can piece the rest together on my own. Never mind—" Tara's eyes suddenly drifted from his and her gaze became unfocused.

It was as if Ryan wasn't even in the room anymore when she said, "The pain was unbearable, to the point I just wished I'd die and get it over with. But I fought as hard as I could to try to save my baby."

When he leaned close to hold her, she snapped out of her trance and held up a hand to stop him. "No, please don't. I will *totally* fall apart if you touch me."

"Sorry." He reluctantly leaned back again, silently waiting while she

reined her emotions back in.

She turned her focus to her clenched hands in her lap. “Spencer told me he was going to make sure I could never have another man’s baby. I screamed, praying someone would hear me, but we only had help in the afternoons, so we were alone in the house.”

Tears fell down her cheeks faster than she could wipe them away. “The last thing I remember was my father rushing into the room and pulling Spencer off of me. When I awoke in the hospital they told me I’d lost my baby. Worse, I was too damaged to ever have another. I’d always seen myself with kids, so I was devastated. And I felt so insecure after letting myself be fooled by Spencer that I went into a deep depression for the months I spent in the hospital. Once I was released, I had physical therapist and shrink visits almost every day for a year until I was finally able to function again, both physically and mentally.

“While my parents had focused on my recovery, Spencer’s family went into overdrive, covering up the details and hiring experts to keep things out of the public record. Spencer took an insanity plea deal to avoid a jury trial.

“At the sentencing, it came out that Spencer had been on meds since he was a child, and had been married once before. After he’d beaten her badly she left him—but with a fat check from Spencer’s parents in her pocket to keep his secret. They claimed they had his meds adjusted after that, so they didn’t think he’d be a danger to me. But Spencer is too smart—he knew what to say to convince the shrinks and his parents he’d gotten better. I’m sure he’s doing that right now too. His parents used their money and influence to spare him jail. It took almost two years to finally get him sent to the psych hospital. After that I changed my name so Spencer couldn’t keep tabs on me and then I looked for a new place to live. That’s when I found Anderson Butte. And the rest you know.” She blew out a long breath. “Okay, you can hold me now.”

He quickly pulled her onto his lap and held on tight until she’d cried all the tears she had left. He’d known what had happened to her had been bad, but he’d never imagined she’d had to endure something that heinous. It was something out of a horror movie. Not something real people had to endure.

He wished he knew what to say to make her feel better. But anything that came to mind seemed inadequate after what she’d been through. It amazed him how strong she was. And how brave she was to face every day uncertain if it’d be the day Spencer found her. He hoped Bailey would find



the evidence he needed to be sure Spencer got locked up tight. In the meantime, he'd do everything he could to convince her to spend her nights with him so he could keep her safe.

As he ran a hand slowly up and down her back, he whispered, "His parents should be in jail too. I'm sorry you had to relive that again by telling me. But thank you for trusting me with your secret, Tara."

"Actually, I feel better that you know now." She laid her head on his shoulder. "It's like I've been living in jail too, albeit a much nicer one, here. Detective Bailey wants me to consider witness protection if we can't get Spencer moved. So if I just disappear one day at least you'll—"

"Let's not go there yet, okay? We'll hope for the best." He couldn't handle the thought of her disappearing from his life one day.

"Kay. Thanks for letting me spend the *whole* night and for that fantastic breakfast. How about Sherlock and I bring the wine for dinner?" She stood and tightened the belt on his oversized robe. "I don't want to leave him alone again after being gone for a few days. He might retaliate by eating another of my Jimmy Choos."

How could she be worried about a shoe with all the other crap going on in her life? "Sure, he can come. But Tara, are you okay? Do you need me to —"

"I'm fine now. I just needed a minute." She leaned down and kissed him. "I've been living like this for a while now, so it's nothing new. I just try to be aware at all times, but not let the fear overwhelm me. And don't you dare pay for your new phone—have Fred put it on my tab, please."

He worked up a smile for her sake. "Nope. If I do that, everyone in town will think I'm a kept man. Just someone to cook your meals, give you massages, and fly you places whenever you have a whim."

"Fine." She chuckled as she headed up the stairs to change. "Then I'll have no choice but to pay you back in biscuits . . . or maybe something else later?" She glanced over her shoulder when she hit the top of the stairs. Then she sent him a naughty smile that hit him straight in the gut.

"Deal." And after, he hoped she'd spend the night again. He needed to keep her safe. And change her mind about having a real relationship. He'd never wanted to be with someone twenty-four seven like he did with Tara. They just . . . fit. It was as if he'd known her all his life rather than a few weeks. Like they were always meant to be together.

He refused to lose Tara because of his inability to communicate his feelings, like his father. He never wanted to become cold and bitter like him. Maybe Tara would reconsider if he could find a way to say the words he'd never been able to say to anyone.

That he loved her.

---

Ryan had known Fred his whole life. He didn't want to lie to him. It didn't help that the general store owner had played Santa every Christmas for as long as Ryan could remember. People probably went to hell for lying to Santa.

As he made his way down the bread aisle, Ryan scooped up a pack of corn tortillas and laid them in the cart beside the chicken breasts. As he rounded the next endcap, he spotted some short, white candles, sort of like the ones Tara had stuffed into his suit pockets at the wedding. He picked up a dozen and tossed them in the cart.

After all the ingredients for their dinner were in the basket—including sundae toppings for that gallon of French vanilla ice cream in his freezer—Ryan headed toward the phone kiosk. Fred, always eager to make a phone sale, appeared right away.

“What can I do you for, Ryan?”

He picked up a brochure from the rack and pretended to read it. “I need two new phones today, Fred.”

When there wasn't an immediate response, Ryan glanced up from the brochure. The older man looked perplexed as he stroked his long, white beard.

“Why two phones?”

Pretending to read the brochure again so he wouldn't have to look Fred in the eyes when he lied to him, Ryan said, “One for me and one for Tara. We had a little mishap this weekend.” That wasn't totally untrue. “Water and cell phones don't mix.” A well-known fact.

“Water? Heard you two went to a wedding in Denver.”

Of course the whole town knew they'd gone to Laura's wedding. It was the topic of conversation at poker the other night. Mike was a bigger gossip

than Aunt Gloria. “Yep.” Ryan leaned closer and lowered his voice. “Fun in the hot tub, if you know what I mean?”

Fred leaned closer too. “With or without suits?”

“None of your business.” Ryan hitched his brows.

Fred laughed as he moved to his computer and tapped a few keys. “So both the same model as before?”

“Yes, but Tara hasn’t had her new number long, so she asked if you had one a little easier to remember?”

“Oh, sure.” Fred rattled off a few combinations.

Ryan picked a number for Tara and then said, “Maybe I should get a new number too.”

Fred’s fingers stopped typing. “Now why would *you* get a new number?”

Yeah. Why would he? He hated this lying business. The story he was going to tell Fred about a new start for when he moved to Denver suddenly sounded pretty stupid. Before another idea materialized, Fred’s eyes lit up.

“Oh, wait. I get it. All those past girlfriends still texting? You never dated in town until Tara, so she must be the one, right? You want a clean slate.”

Tara *was* looking like she’d be the one. “Something like that. Thanks.”

“Sure. Be right back with your phones.”

As Ryan drummed his fingers on the cart’s handle while he waited, Pam spotted him and made a beeline his way. He hoped Fred wouldn’t come back and mention the new phones and numbers in front of Pam. She wouldn’t buy his story as easily as Fred had.

Pam grinned at him. “Hey there, Ryan. Missed you in church. Did you hear what your father announced to everyone this morning?”

“Nope.” He didn’t care to know, but Pam would surely tell him anyway.

“He said that anyone caught trespassing while digging for the whiskey recipe is subject to losing their town benefits.” She rolled her eyes. “He said it went for kids too. Their parents would pay the price.”

Dammit! They’d talked about that. “I’m not sure he can legally do that. I’ll look into it.”

Pam gave his forearm a squeeze. “We all figured you’d save the day. As usual. And we’re all hoping Tara changes your mind about moving away. We’d miss the sweet eye candy too much.” She sent him a wink and walked

away, her hips swaying to some beat only she could hear.

Fred returned. “Two brand-new phones all ready to go . . . Sheriff Eye Candy.” He laughed as he held out the boxes.

Ryan shook his head as he placed the phones in his cart. He’d bet Detective Bailey never had to endure being called Eye Candy—by Santa.

---

Tara found her spare car key in the junk drawer in the kitchen, then headed out to pick up Sherlock. The rain hadn’t let up. Not that she minded a brisk walk in the rain occasionally, but the prospect of wet dog smell for hours after the walk back didn’t appeal, so she decided to drive.

She glanced at the sweet ducks floating on the lake, seemingly unaffected by the raindrops pelting them, as she drove to the other side. She loved Anderson Butte. It was even pretty in the pouring rain. God, she hoped she wouldn’t have to leave.

If so, she shouldn’t have adopted Sherlock. They’d told her if she had to go into hiding she wouldn’t be able to bring anything with her. She needed a plan for him in case that happened.

*Please let Spencer get moved so I wouldn’t have to give up Sherlock too.*

As she pulled into Meg’s drive, her hopes for a clean-smelling pooch instantly faded. Eric had all the dogs outside playing fetch as if it were a bright, sunny day. Tara pulled up the hood on her raincoat and stepped out of the car. “Hey, Eric.”

“Hey.”

Eric’s response lacked his usual enthusiasm.

Sherlock came racing back ahead of the pack, his little mouth stuffed with a tennis ball. He spit it out at Eric’s feet and then rushed toward her. Tara’s melancholy mood instantly lifted as she leaned down to pet her adorable wet dog. “Hey, buddy. I missed you. Were you a good boy for Eric?”

Sherlock rolled onto his back to expose his belly for a rub, seemingly unaware of the muddy puddle he’d landed in.

Eric threw the ball again for the other dogs and then shoved his hands

into the front pocket of his soaking wet hoodie. "He's always good."

Tara handed Eric the money she owed him. "I really appreciate you watching him, Eric. Thank you."

He nodded and accepted the money, jamming it into his jeans pocket.

"Everything okay?"

He shrugged. "This morning the mayor said we had to stop looking for the buried map. Meg and Josh were nice enough to take me in, so I can't get them in trouble by looking for it anymore. I wouldn't want to mess things up for my adoption."

So the mayor had done what she'd overheard Ryan tell him not to do the other day. "What would you do with a bunch of barrels of whiskey, Eric?"

He grabbed Sherlock's leash from a nearby tree and then clipped Sherlock in. "It's not the whiskey, it's the money everyone says it'll bring. I really want to go to college to be a veterinarian. I can't ask Meg and Josh to pay for that. It's too much."

That sent an arrow through her heart. Eric would be an awesome vet. Or whatever else he chose to be eight years from now.

She slipped her arm around Eric's bony shoulder and gave him a quick hug. "I'm not sure a kid can sell whiskey, but I could if we found it. And it just so happens I need a favor, so maybe we can make a deal?"

"What kind of deal?"

"You of all people know that sometimes unexpected things happen in life. I don't have anyone to take care of Sherlock if something happens to me. So how about you help me look for the whiskey, and if we find it, you can have all the money we get from selling it. If we get caught, I'll take the fall. But in return, you'll promise me to always take care of Sherlock if I can't." She stuck her hand out. "Deal?"

"But you could lose your shares in the town corporation if we're caught. I can't ask you to do that, but I'll still take care of Sherlock no matter what."

Tears welled in Tara's eyes at how sweet Eric was. He'd lost everyone he loved, but he still had more compassion than most adults she knew. "I don't care about my shares in the town, Eric. A dentist makes plenty of money. So do we have a deal?" Even if they didn't find the whiskey, she'd be sure Eric had the money he needed on his eighteenth birthday to go to college.

A slow grin formed. “Yep.” He gave her hand a hard shake. “I’ve already done some research at the library. They let me check out all sorts of old stuff. Want to come inside and see?”

“Sure.” Looking for lost whiskey could actually be fun. But would Ryan be okay with her breaking his father’s new rule?

She hadn’t thought about that part. Maybe she’d better check with him to be sure. But maybe she’d wait until after dinner—and a few glasses of wine.

## CHAPTER SIXTEEN

Tara snuggled closer to Ryan on the couch after the fantastic dinner he'd helped her cook. "Hey, I found out something interesting about your great-grandfather today, Ryan. How he was shot three different times while running whiskey, but he died of an infected cut on his finger."

A bad sitcom played while they ate the best chocolate sundaes Tara had ever had. Sherlock sat at her feet, hopeful for a taste. No chance of that happening—it was too darn good to share.

"Actually it was four times. And yeah, people said he'd only see a doctor if he had to have a bullet dug out of his stubborn hide." Ryan scraped the bottom of his bowl clean. "How did you know that?"

"Eric and I are going to try to find the buried whiskey recipe, despite what your father said. We did Anderson Butte research all afternoon." She glanced his way and held her breath. She hoped the wine with dinner and then the sundae after had put him in the right mood to hear that.

He laid his empty bowl on the coffee table. "Because you need the money so badly?"

"Funny. Not me—Eric. He wants to pay for his own college."

Ryan ran a hand down his face. "I'm never going to hear the end of it from my father, if my girlfriend and nephew get caught digging for the box."

"Good thing I'm not your girlfriend, then. And just don't catch us. Here." She offered him the last of her sundae.

"What's this? A bribe?" He took the bowl and dug in.

"No, it's just me sharing my ice cream with my *friend* who is not my *boyfriend*. We're not getting serious, remember?"

"I don't know, Tara. Most women would only share a sundae this good

with their boyfriend.”

“But we had a deal.” She nibbled on his neck. “Let’s compromise and call you my bene-friend instead.”

He finished up the rest of her ice cream, then laid the empty bowl beside his. “Maybe I’m too full now to offer you any benefits.”

“I bet I can change your mind about that.” She quickly straddled him and framed his face in her hands. “Prepare to be convinced.”

“Wait.” Ryan patted her rear end to get her to move off his lap. “Stay right here. I need to set something up before you try to distract me from this digging plan with sex.”

Crap. He wasn’t going to let that go easily. “What are you going to—”

“Patience.” Ryan hit the stairs to his bedroom two at a time.

What was he up to?

She turned to ask Sherlock his thoughts, but with no more prospects for a treat, he’d crawled under the coffee table and fallen sound asleep. She smiled as she watched his little furry chest rise and fall in slumber.

Who knew how much a person could love a pet? Thankfully, he’d be in good hands with Eric if she had to leave.

Ryan’s voice drifted down from the second floor. “Okay. You can come up now.”

She rose slowly from the couch, not wanting to wake Sherlock. Resisting the urge to run, she tiptoed her way up the stairs. When she rounded the corner to Ryan’s bedroom, she pulled up short.

Soft light danced off the walls and ceiling, shadowing the hard planes of Ryan’s sexy face. He’d scattered the candles from the wedding and a few more about the room.

For her.

She’d just gotten all gooey about Sherlock. Now the candles made her heart melt the rest of the way. Who would care for Ryan if she had to go?

“Thank you, Ryan. This is beautiful.”

“You’re welcome.” He crossed the room and scooped her off her feet. Then he gently laid her on his bed before covering her body with his. He brushed a piece of fallen hair from her forehead and said, “I promised we’d go slower this time, so I hope your mother bought long-lasting candles.”

Tara stared into his eyes, pushing her sad thoughts away, regaining focus on the moment. She’d looked forward to being with him again all day.



“The caterers guaranteed six hours. They were only used for about three . . .”

“Challenge accepted.” He laid a gentle kiss on her lips.

“Mmmm, I think I’m glad we fueled up on sundaes first, then. But about my scars—”

He cut her off with another kiss while his hands got busy removing her shirt.

There’d be no hiding her scars without that.

Determined to get past the first awkward part, she lifted Ryan’s T-shirt above his head. His hard chest and sculpted abs banished all thoughts of her scars.

The man was built. The shadows cast by the candlelight only served to deepen the contrast in his fine form. She admired his muscles as she unbuttoned his pants and then slid the zipper down. “A little help with the jeans here, please.”

Ryan had somehow already gotten her stripped down to only her panties. The man worked fast for someone trying to take things slow. After he stood and got naked, he slowly slid her last article of clothing down her legs, laying kisses on her inner thighs along the way.

When his mouth headed north, she squeezed her eyes shut and grabbed the bedspread with her fists. She didn’t want to see his reaction when he got to the uneven skin on her stomach.

He steadily kissed his way up her torso, no hesitation whatsoever at her marred skin. When he reached her ribcage, she let out the breath she hadn’t realized she’d been holding. Maybe the scars didn’t look as bad in the candlelight?

The sweet sensations as he kneaded and suckled her breasts drove her crazy with the need to explore his body too. Releasing her tight grip on the bedding, she ran her hands down the hard ridges of his back, marveling at the soft skin covering hard steel beneath it.

By the time his mouth finally made it all the way to her earlobe, her body hummed with need, begging for release. Going slow had been a fine idea in theory but he was driving her nuts.

He whispered, “You’re the most beautiful woman I’ve ever been with, Tara. Scars and all.”

“There’re worse ones on my back . . .”

“We’ll get to those next time. I’m a little busy admiring this side now.”

Unable to take much more, she said, “My turn to admire. Switch places.”

“Gladly.” He rolled onto his back and slid his hands behind his head. “All yours.”

All six and a half feet of the most delicious man she’d ever laid eyes on. Staring at his perfect body made her hands ache to explore.

She straddled his waist, then ran her palms down his chest. Ryan was every woman’s dream. Muscles in all the right places, big, strong shoulders and arms, tight abs, long, sinewy legs—built just right for pleasing a woman.

The smug grin on his face as he watched her check out his body only made her want him more. Maybe she’d help make that happen a little sooner.

When she took his hard length in her hand and began to stroke, he closed his eyes and gritted his teeth. He gripped her waist with both hands as his hips begged for a faster pace.

Ryan quickly flipped their positions, making her yelp in surprise. Then he kissed her deeply before he reached for a condom.

Thank God.

He stared intently into her eyes as he slowly slipped inside her. That same hot desire quickly welled up inside of her, and much like the last time they’d been together, her heart warmed right along with it. She ran her hands through his thick hair and pulled his mouth to hers, letting that overpowering feeling of connection with him overtake her once again as his strokes became faster and harder.

She let her hands wander over the muscles in his back, as her own arched in sheer pleasure. Just as he tenderly whispered, “God, Tara,” her body convulsed around his.

He drove home one last long thrust that made her gasp his name before she took the headlong dive off the edge.

Ryan followed right behind.

He fell onto his back beside her, his chest heaving. “Five minutes and we’ll start on the other side.”

“Kay.” She turned and snuggled her face into the crook of his neck, drawing a deep breath. She loved the way he smelled. Clean and simple. No fancy cologne for him, which suited her just fine.

When he ran his hand up and down her back in a long, slow pattern, she shivered in delight. Her sister was right, those rough hands were magical.

He whispered, “Would you consider staying here with me? At least until we know what happens with Spencer?”

That sounded awful nice. But she’d never be able to stay detached if she did that.

She laid her palm on the side of his face and tilted it her way. “Thank you for worrying about me, Ryan. But I’m fine. You’re just a phone call and a minute and a half away.” She laid a quick kiss on his cheek. “Your five-minute rest period is up, pal. Let’s get a move on.”

“Tara, I think we should talk about—”

“And I think those candles are going to win the challenge if you don’t get busy ravishing me again.”

He grunted. “You can avoid a conversation better than anyone I’ve ever met.”

“Thank you. Now please proceed.”

He rolled on top of her. “We’re going to talk about this, and about digging for the recipe, in the morning.”

She wrapped her arms around him and gave him a hug. “Fine.” She’d like nothing better than to stay with him longer than just the night, and feel as safe as she did at that moment. But she didn’t want him to think that she’d ever be able to give him what he wanted so badly—a wife and kids.

She couldn’t break Ryan’s heart like Sarah had. She cared about him way too much for that. But things weren’t going at all as she’d planned.

Snuggling closer, she sighed. Maybe she’d pull a Scarlett O’Hara and worry about it in the morning.

---

A warm tongue wet Ryan’s cheek, waking him from a deep sleep. He reluctantly blinked his eyes open. Sherlock. He must need to go out.

The sun reflecting off the walls was too bright . . .

Crap. They’d overslept.

He grabbed his watch from the nightstand and winced. “Tara, wake up.”

Nestled at his side, she shook her head. “Ten more minutes.”

“It’s seven fifteen.”

Tara’s eyes flew open and she leapt out of bed—naked and the most

beautiful woman he'd ever known. The scars weren't off-putting at all. Instead they served as a reminder of how courageous she was.

He plopped his pillow up on the headboard and enjoyed watching her scramble around the room in a mad search for her clothes.

She swiveled her head back and forth. "I have a packed schedule today. I can't believe I didn't think to set my phone. Where's my shirt?"

"On the chair. In the corner."

"Thanks." She scooped up her shirt, ran to the bathroom, and turned on the shower.

Sherlock let out an impatient whine, so Ryan swung his feet to the floor and pulled on his jeans. "You want to go—"

Sherlock was out the door in a flash. He moved as fast as Tara when he had a mind to.

After Sherlock was done with his business outside, Ryan grabbed two bagels and put them in the toaster. Just as they popped up, Tara hurried down the steps, her hair still wet. "Sorry to run out like this." She grabbed her huge purse from the countertop and then leaned down to leash up Sherlock.

Ryan spread cream cheese on a bagel and held it out. "Here. You need to eat."

"Thanks. I'm starving!"

She smiled so sweetly at him as she took her first bite, his heart clenched. "So will I see you tonight?"

Her bagel paused halfway to her lips. "Actually, I have plans with another guy tonight."

"Another guy?" What the hell?

She laid her bagel down and then slipped her arms around his waist. "Eric and I have . . . stuff to do."

Instant relief shot through him. "Stuff you don't want me to catch you two doing?"

She kissed him. "Yep."

"Will there be digging involved?"

"Hopefully."

"Text me and I'll help. It'd be the best way to put an end to all of this once and for all."

"Really?"

He nodded as he stuffed his bagel in his mouth and headed for the

stairs. He didn't want to be late either.

Tara called out from below, "You're the best bene-friend a girl could ask for. You even do manual labor. See you later."

After the front door slammed closed, he huffed out a breath and stared at his reflection in the bathroom mirror.

Bene-friend? He needed to figure out how to move past that. Maybe if he practiced saying the words out loud? "Tara, I lo . . ."

He cleared his throat and closed his eyes, recalling how her gaze softened so sweetly every time he made love to her. It did something to his insides when she looked at him that way. "Tara. I . . . love you."

There. He'd said it.

Popping his eyes open, he smiled like an idiot at himself in the mirror. "Bene-friend, my ass!"

---

At four forty-five Tara flopped into her office chair and picked up her cell. It had been a long, satisfying Monday. And Missy had been on her best behavior, so she'd let her go home before five.

She dialed Detective Bailey's number. It went to voice mail. "Hi, it's Tara. Just checking in and hoping for some good news. Call me when you get a chance, please." She hit "End" and leaned back in her chair. Maybe things would work out after all. Still, she needed to get a move on and help Eric find that buried box just in case.

She was still in shock that Ryan wanted to help. She'd never want to cause him any more trouble with his father, but if they got caught, maybe he could tell his dad he was just trying to put an end to it all like the mayor wanted.

She tapped out a text to Ryan. **My date is coming over at six thirty. If you'd like to compete for my favor you could show up too. You'd probably be a shoo-in if you brought dinner. And a couple of shovels. I don't have any.**

She smiled as she thought about how he'd outlasted the three hours left on the candles last night. Gotta give a guy points for that.

Her phone dinged with a response. **No thanks. Don't feel like**

cooking tonight.

What?

She stared at her phone. Maybe running out on him so quickly earlier had made him angry? She started to tap out an apology when her phone dinged again. I might be persuaded to join you for dinner and bring shovels too if you figure out how to make me and Eric some spaghetti.

She laughed.

Blackmail. But how hard could it be? Fine. See you at six thirty. Bring dessert!

His text flashed on her screen. You got it. Can't wait to see this.

Well, she'd just show him, then.

Tara found her purse and keys, then locked her office door behind her. She needed to stop at the store on the way home and pick up what she'd need. But what exactly did she need? She pulled her phone out to Google it, but then realized Ryan's grandmother's house was only a little ways in the opposite direction. She'd surely know how to make a spaghetti meal Ryan would like.

Tara made her way down the long drive toward the lake. Mrs. Anderson knelt in her garden, wearing a big, floppy hat and gloves, filling a basket with fresh vegetables.

"Hi, Mrs. Anderson. How are you?"

The old woman glanced her way and smiled. "Well, hello, Tara. Heard you and Ryan have finally done the deed."

*Oh. Dear. God!*

"You've been talking to Meg and Casey, I take it?"

"Yep." Mrs. Anderson laughed. "I don't think I've ever seen quite that shade of red that's running up your neck, Tara. You need to sit or something?"

Resigned, Tara plastered on a smile. "Nope. What I need is to know how to make Ryan's favorite spaghetti dinner by six thirty tonight."

"That so?" Mrs. Anderson beamed a sly smile. "Well, it's lucky I was just out here gathering up fresh tomatoes, then. Normally I'd rather the sauce stew longer, but I have a fast version too. Come on in. We're going to have to hurry."

Pleasing Ryan in the kitchen won out over embarrassment. “Thanks, Mrs. Anderson. I appreciate it.”

“Well, you’ve already given the milk away for free. I might as well give you a hand so he’ll see what else he’ll miss if he lets you get away.”

Tara shook her head and followed behind. “Ryan and I have a deal, remember? By mutual consent, *milk*’s the only thing on the table. And if you don’t promise to cut out the nosy questions I’ll have to thank you for your trouble, but then figure it out on my own.”

Ryan’s grandmother stopped and cocked a brow. “Bossy lady for someone asking a favor, aren’t ya?”

“Takes one to know one.” Tara crossed her arms and lifted her chin, doing her best not to quake in her shoes. Ryan’s grandmother fascinated her as much as she scared her.

“True.” Mrs. Anderson smiled and then tilted her head in a “come-hither” gesture. “But the joke’s still on you, Tara. Because the best way to a man’s heart is through his stomach.”

Tara blinked as she processed that statement. She was making a mistake by cooking for Ryan? She needed to keep things easy and light. “You know what? I think maybe I’ll just take a rain—”

“Chicken.” Mrs. Anderson turned and walked through her back door, letting it slap closed behind her.

Tara stood in the yard staring at the screen door.

Chicken?

She wasn’t a chicken. She’d been to hell and back but was still standing.

The screen door creaked open and Mrs. Anderson called out, “Coming in or not? I’m getting older by the second here.”

Tara threw her shoulders back. “Be right there!”

The heart and stomach thing was probably just an old wives’ tale anyway.

She hoped.

## CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

Tara slid steaming plates of spaghetti in front of Ryan and Eric, then passed the bread and salad. The aroma of garlic and tomato mingling in the air made her realize how hungry she was.

Ryan's brow crumpled. "My grandmother's cheesy French bread? How did you—"

"I stopped by her house on my way home today. You said I should figure this out, so I asked an expert."

Eric bit into the warm bread and his eyes lit up. "Wow! This is really good, Tara!"

"Thank you, Eric." She turned to Ryan, who was still scowling at the bread.

He said, "You made this? All on your own?"

"Yep. Ruth—that's what she told me to call her from now on—said it was going to drive you nuts that I know what the secret topping is but you don't."

"I can't believe she told you. I've been asking her for years." He took a bite and closed his eyes. "This is incredible, Tara. What is it?"

"Nope. My lips are sealed."

Seeing how much Ryan enjoyed the bread filled her with more pride than even the day she graduated from dental school. It was just plain silly how much she'd hoped he'd like her meal. How much she loved to see him happy.

She needed to get a grip. She couldn't allow herself the feelings she had for Ryan. She was already in way deeper than she'd ever planned to be. She couldn't even think about how much she'd miss Ryan if she had to leave.



She took a break from eating and said, “Eric and I have identified the two best potential dig sites. One is on your grandmother’s land. The other is behind the T-shirt shop, which after doing some sleuthing and slogging through a ton of material from the library, we figured out used to be the old stagecoach stop. We found a picture of people standing under the shelter as they waited for the coaches to arrive. Now it’s the covered and enclosed area where the Dumpster is.”

When Ryan reappeared from the kitchen with seconds, she smiled. She couldn’t wait to tell his grandmother how much he’d liked the meal in the morning.

Ryan said, “Is the place on my grandma’s land a stand of trees in a diamond pattern surrounding one big tree in the middle?”

“Uh-huh,” Eric said with his mouth full.

“I caught Pete digging there. Seems like a good spot, but I like the T-shirt shop. I re-read the clue. Makes sense that wherever the box is buried might be somewhere that *used* to provide shade and shelter. My uncle really didn’t want that whiskey recipe to be found. He’d make it difficult. Probably nothing obvious.”

Tara pushed her empty plate away before she succumbed to seconds. She wanted to save room for the chocolate mousse dessert Ryan had brought. “Or, just the opposite. So obvious, no one would ever think to look there. Hidden in plain sight, so to speak. Could go either way.”

Tara’s heart warmed as she watched Ryan and Eric wolf down the food she’d made. It was nice to share a meal with her two favorite guys in town. If only she could stay . . . no. She needed to stop. She didn’t know if she’d be able to stay, and thinking how nice it’d be to have dinners like these every night was just making her sad.

But she hoped they’d actually find the map for Eric. The kid deserved a break. And Ryan did too. If they found it, then maybe his father would stop hounding Ryan and he’d stay in Anderson Butte where he clearly belonged. She hated how Ryan’s father treated him. He deserved so much better.

Just as they were about to head out, her phone rang. It was Detective Bailey. She flipped the screen around so Ryan could see who it was. She couldn’t talk in front of Eric. “Why don’t you guys go on ahead? I’ll catch up.”

Ryan gave her a worried look. “We’ll start at the Dumpster first.” He

slung an arm around Eric's shoulder and then grabbed Sherlock's leash, leading them out the front door.

Tara answered her phone. "Hi, Detective. Any news?"

"Nothing." He let out a long sigh. "The surveillance system at the hospital had been undergoing an upgrade, so the IT people had taken different sections offline for periods of time last week, leaving big gaps. Our interviews of the staff and caterers is almost complete, and we still don't have a suspect."

Tara's hopes for finding the accomplice quickly plummeted. "And my parents' staff? Nothing there?"

"No. I'm looking at the possibility we may have an internal leak in my department. That's why I'm calling you from home. I think it's time I start looking for a new place for you."

*No, not yet!*

Hot tears stung her eyes. "I'm not sure I want—"

"Nothing has to be decided tonight. I want to have someplace ready for you, though, just in case. Are you still insistent on practicing dentistry?"

The thought of never talking to her family again, and of leaving Anderson Butte, Ryan, Eric, and Sherlock, made Tara's legs grow weak. "I'd like to keep just one thing I've worked so hard for in my life. But I understand it's another way for Spencer to find me." She made her way to the couch and sank into it.

"Let me see what's available. But it's important you don't take instructions or discuss relocation plans with anyone but me. Understood?"

She cleared away the lump in her throat. "Yes. Only you."

"I'm not giving up yet. Not until we've exhausted all the possibilities. I'll let you know immediately if there's any news."

"Thank you. But if we don't catch a break, how soon are we talking about moving me? I want to tell my parents good—"

"You can't do that, Tara. You can't tell anyone. Especially because we don't know where the leak is coming from. I'll get word to your parents after I have you safely tucked away somewhere."

She couldn't even say goodbye? "Maybe I should just stay and take my chances. I'm so tired—"

"Tara, you have that option, but I'm afraid it'll only be a matter of time before he finds you. Relocation is the only way to keep you safe."

Keep her safe, maybe. But what about her happiness? What was that worth? “Okay. Go ahead and start looking for a new place. But I still need to think this through some more.”

“Will do. I’ll be in touch.”

“Thanks.” Tara hit the “End” button, then tossed the phone on the coffee table. What was she going to do?

She stared at the wall, watching the shadows lengthen as warm tears dripped down her cheeks. Running different scenarios through her mind over and over, she couldn’t find a way around moving. But there had to be another option. Wasn’t there some way she could stay? The thought of leaving—no. What she was going to do was hope for the best. Stay positive. Maybe they’d find who they were looking for tomorrow. Then she could stay.

She went to the bathroom to wash her face. She’d been crying for the better part of an hour and couldn’t let the guys see how upset she was. After patting her skin dry, she went to the kitchen and grabbed a flashlight from the junk drawer. In the time she’d been pondering her fate, it had become dusky outside. When she opened the front door, Sherlock bounded across the porch followed by Ryan. He had a grim look on his face.

“Hi. No luck?”

“Nope.” Ryan leaned the shovels on her front porch then stepped inside. “Eric was pretty disappointed so he went home.”

She was disappointed too. And now she was even more determined to find that box. Especially because she might not be around to help soon. “We’ll have to go back to the beginning and look for more clues, I guess.”

After Ryan freed Sherlock from his leash he asked, “So what did Detective Bailey have to say?”

He’d said not to talk to anyone about her possible relocation plans. “They’re still investigating and he’ll let me know as soon as he knows something.”

“It took him an hour to tell you that?”

Frown lines on his forehead told her he suspected she wasn’t telling him the whole truth. “No. But it was a great excuse to get me out of digging.” Taking his hand, she led him toward her bedroom. She didn’t want to waste a moment of the little time she might have left with Ryan. “How about I give your poor, tired muscles a massage as my punishment?”

“Oh, no you don’t.” He swept her off her feet and then dropped her on

the couch. “No bene-friend sex until you spill my grandmother’s secret ingredient.”

Tara picked up the remote and turned on the TV. “You might want to reconsider, pal. I’ve already proven I can go without for almost three years.”

“Which is exactly why I’m betting you won’t last ten minutes making out with me on the couch.”

“You’re going to torture me with almost-sex?”

“Yep.” Ryan took the remote from her hand and turned off the TV. Then he framed her face in his hands and kissed her.

Slowly, and so sweetly her defenses were already cut by half.

Dammit.

She leaned back for air. “I’m not telling—”

He cut her off with another kiss. Then he nibbled on her earlobe. That always drove her nuts. When he moved to her neck, she sighed.

After two more minutes of his sweet torment, her brain had only a few functioning cells left—the only things stopping her from blurting out the truth. She had the hardest time lying to the man. “It’s in the fridge. Top shelf on the right.”

He hopped up so fast it startled Sherlock out of his deep slumber under the coffee table.

She called out to his retreating back, “I didn’t tell you, that’s how you figured it out if your grandmother asks!” Ruth had sent the ingredients along with Tara so she could take the bread out of the oven right before Ryan arrived. When the three kinds of cheese were still hot and gooey.

He replied, “It’s mayonnaise? You put that on before the paprika and cheese? My grandmother shouldn’t be eating all that cheese, much less real mayonnaise. That’s bad for her cholesterol.”

She moved beside Ryan, who still stood with the fridge door open, examining the jar with utter horror on his face. “She said, and I quote, ‘Don’t tell Ryan, he’ll have a fit, but the mayonnaise is what makes it so damned good. You’ll be guaranteed all the *milk* you can handle if you make him his favorite bread tonight.’”

“Milk?” He put the jar back and shut the door. “What does that have to do with anything?”

“You know the one about how a man won’t buy the cow if the milk is free?” She turned and headed for her bedroom. “Was she right?”

Ryan caught up with her. “Depends on the cow.” He scooped her up and kicked the bedroom door closed behind them.

“No, I meant the part about how I’ll have all the *milk* I can handle tonight.”

“Yep.” He laid her on the bed, then started on her blouse buttons. “Guaranteed.”

---

Tara, in her office the next day between patients, checked her cell. It was noon and still nothing from Detective Bailey. She tried to stay positive, but the more time that passed made it even more difficult.

*Please let them catch a break today.*

Missy stuck her head inside the door. “Lunch is here.”

“Thanks. I’m starving!” Tara followed Missy to the break room and grabbed two waters from the fridge.

When Missy unloaded their to-go order from the diner, her brows quirked up. “Chicken pot pie? You usually get the grilled chicken salad with dressing on the side. All that ‘just friends’ sex with Ryan must be increasing your appetite.” Missy’s lips tilted into a sly grin. “Or maybe you’re eating for two?”

Tara accepted her lunch and sat down at the table. “Seeing as I’m missing the necessary parts for that to happen, we’ll just go with all the fun sex.”

Missy’s grin quickly disappeared. “I’m sorry, Tara. I had no idea. Foot in mouth once again.”

“No worries. It is what it is.”

Missy took a bite of her sandwich. “So, since you and Ryan are just sex buddies, do you think he’ll get back together with Sarah now that she’s left Ed?”

“What?” Tara’s stomach took a dive. “When did that happen?”

“Over the weekend. She’s staying with her mom temporarily. I ran into her at Brewster’s the other night, and she told me the whole story. She says she’s going to move in with her sister in Denver as soon as she can find someone with a truck to help her get all her things there. Is it just a

coincidence both Ryan and Sarah are moving away to Denver? Or do you think they've been planning this all along?"

The prospect of losing Ryan slammed home what Tara had been trying to deny. The thought of him with anyone else made her stomach ache. But she couldn't be in love with him. It was too soon. They'd only known each other for a short time. *No*. The ache in her gut made a liar out of her. She *was* in love with him. Dammit!

Forcing a smile, she shook her head. "Ryan would never do anything so underhanded."

"You're right." Missy nodded as she chewed. "Well, don't kill the messenger, but there's a new betting pool in town. Who'll win Ryan's heart—you or Sarah?"

Of course. The people in Anderson Butte loved their bets. "Well, I hope you put your money on Sarah, because I'm not after Ryan's heart." She should've told *her* heart that sooner, though.

"Too late. I bet on you." Missy dug back into her sandwich.

"Why would you do that when I've told you all along how things are between Ryan and me?"

"Because I see the way you light up when you talk about him. And for him to break his in-town dating rule? Face it. You're falling in love with each other."

Ryan hadn't said the "L" word to her so she couldn't be sure of his feelings. He had said he cared for her at the wedding, though . . .

Oh, God. What if he really was in love with her and then she just up and left him? She couldn't tell him the details about the relocation. He'd know after she left what had happened, but that was no way to say goodbye.

She needed to break things off with him first. In a nice way. One that wouldn't hurt his feelings too much. But how?

Then a thought struck. Sarah.

She'd point out to Ryan how Sarah would be the better choice for him. At their last girls' night, Sarah had talked about wanting kids in the worst way. And everyone in town said Ryan was in love with Sarah but too shy to tell her. She'd help him tell her. Then she'd remind Ryan about their original deal—for her to help him date better so he could find the right one for him.

"Hey, where'd you go off to there?" Missy said between bites.

Tara snapped her head up. "Sorry. Just thinking. I need to run a quick

errand. Be right back.”

“Something I said? Did I just stick my foot in my—”

“No. If I’m not back when Martha gets here, set her up and tell her I’ll be with her shortly.” She headed out the door and straight to the toy store, hoping Sarah hadn’t quit yet. If she had, Tara would have to track her down at her mother’s house.

After a short walk, Tara stepped inside the store. The place was empty, so she crossed to the register and rang the bell. After a few moments, Sarah appeared with her arms full of stuffed animals. “Oh, hey, Tara. How are you?”

“In a hurry, unfortunately, so I’m just going to cut to the chase. Are you still in love with Ryan?”

Sarah’s cheeks turned pink. “He’s with you now. I would never—”

Tara held up a hand to stop her. “I want what’s best for you both. So please answer the question.”

Sarah put all the stuffed animals on the counter. “I’ve always loved Ryan. But I don’t know how he feels about me. I don’t think Ryan heard the words ‘I love you’ much growing up. Meg told me he’s never even told his family that he loves them, but we all know he does.”

That made Tara’s heart ache even more. “So he never said he loved you?”

“No.” Sarah’s gaze dropped to her shoes. “When Ed asked me out I accepted, hoping it’d make Ryan finally tell me how he felt. But it backfired. I should have known better than to test Ryan that way. He would never let anything get in the way of another person’s happiness, so he stepped aside.”

The pain in Sarah’s voice had Tara blinking back her threatening tears. That was so true about Ryan. He was the kindest, most patient man she’d ever met. And Sarah was Ryan’s perfect match—kind, sweet, wanted a family, and wanted Ryan with all her heart. Tara had to step aside herself. That it would be for Sarah made it slightly easier to do. “I think you need to have a talk with Ryan. Tell him how you feel.”

Sarah finally met Tara’s gaze again. “I think Ryan has real feelings for you, Tara. I had my chance. I think you should take yours.”

A rogue tear threatened to slip down Tara’s cheek as she worked up the courage to tell Sarah a lie. She blinked it back and said, “I don’t love him, Sarah. So please, ask him to have dinner or something. Then you can see if

the old spark is still there?”

A frown line split Sarah’s forehead. “You’re sure?”

“Yep.” She needed to leave before she fell completely apart. “Good luck.”

She quickly slipped out the door but walked slowly back to her office to give herself time to pull it together. She’d have to have a talk with Ryan next. Sooner rather than later would be best. Then when she left, they’d have a clean break. And she’d be able to leave knowing that Ryan would end up with someone who’d loved him all her life.

Sweet, kind Sarah was the better choice for Ryan. She’d be able to give him children, and Sarah wouldn’t have to worry about a scary ex coming back one day to hurt her and her family. It’d be best this way, before hearts got any further involved.

She’d vowed to never get emotionally involved with a man again, for solid, real reasons. Reasons that made sense for everyone’s safety. Better to stick to the plan and live a life free of all the messy emotions that came with a relationship.

She nodded sharply as she pulled her office door open.

It was the right choice.



## CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

Ryan finished up the last of his paperwork and was just about to call it a day when Tara appeared in his doorway. “Hi. I ran into Mike on his way out. He said to come on back.”

“Hey.” Something was wrong. Tara seemed nervous. Bad news from Bailey?

He stood and gave her a hug before leading her to a chair. “You look upset. What’s going on?”

“We need to talk, Ryan. About us.” She looked away and folded her hands in her lap.

No. It couldn’t be happening again. He’d lost Sarah. He wouldn’t let the same thing happen again. “What is it? Is Bailey pressuring you to move? Because I’ll go with you, if that’s it.”

“That’s incredibly sweet.” She blinked back the tears forming in her eyes. “But I’d never ask anyone to live my life. Hiding from Spencer, having to pick up and move just as I get settled somewhere. Not to mention Spencer would hurt you and I can’t let that happen. I should have never let this relationship happen.”

The sudden band of pain constricting his chest made it hard to draw a deep breath. “So your idea is to break up to protect me? I can take of myself. You have no idea what I’d put up with just to be with you, Tara.”

“I’m asking you to recall what our original deal was. I was going to help you with your dating skills and you’d teach me to cook—along with no-strings-attached sex. I think we’ve both done our part, so it’s time to take a step back. That way we can both move on and get what we want.”

He needed to turn this around. Fast.

He took her shaking hand. “Look me in the eye and tell me you don’t have feelings for me, Tara.”

She closed her eyes and whispered, “Sarah told me she’s loved you her whole life, Ryan. She doesn’t have to live her life on the run, and she’s able to have children. Sarah wouldn’t be endangering their lives, along with any man she’s with. Because of Spencer, I *can’t* be with you, Ryan.”

Couldn’t be with him? Dammit! “I don’t want to be with Sarah. I want to be with you. I’ll do whatever it takes.”

When tears leaked out of the corners of her closed eyes, he nearly lost it too. She thought she was protecting him, but she was killing him. He needed to tell her how he felt. To say the words.

“Tara. Look at me. Please?”

When she blinked her lids open and met his gaze, he said, “I will do everything in my power to keep you safe. I can’t lose you, I . . .” Dammit.

He could say it. “Tara, I—” The words wouldn’t come. As badly as he wanted to say them, he couldn’t make them form.

She shook her head. “I can’t do this anymore, Ryan. I let things go way too far and now I need to be fair to you. Go find the woman who can give you back what you deserve. Because that woman isn’t me.”

She slipped her hands from his and stood to leave.

He couldn’t lose her. “Tara, wait!”

She slowly turned and faced him again, clearly fighting back her emotions. “What?”

“Tell me you don’t think we could have a future together and I’ll let you go without a fight. Otherwise, stay and let’s make this work.”

She stood there blinking at him with her bottom lip quivering for what seemed an eternity. *Please don’t say it.*

*Please. Don’t. Say. It.*

Finally, she threw her shoulders back and said, “I don’t see a future with you, Ryan.” Then she turned and ran out the door.

Her words sliced through him like a knife to the gut as he dropped into the chair. What was so damned wrong with him that he couldn’t just tell her that he loved her? But would it have even made a difference? She didn’t see a future with him. He couldn’t see one without her.

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Tara hurried out of Ryan's office with tears blurring her vision. She hated that she had to lie to him, but he wasn't going to let her go otherwise. No matter how much it hurt, it was the right thing to do.

Her legs shook, so she slowly sank onto a bench in the long hallway that led to the lobby. She opened her purse and dug out a tissue to wipe away her tears before she ran into anyone in the lobby who'd ask questions.

She felt horrible for what she'd done to him. He'd even offered to come with her if she had to leave. That had been so tempting. To have Ryan by her side to help her face whatever challenges the next town . . .

What was she thinking? She couldn't endanger his life too. All this heartache was her own fault. She knew better than to have a real relationship ever again, dammit.

She'd be better off swearing off men for good.

She dabbed at her eyes, and as she gathered up the strength to walk home, she studied the old black-and-white pictures on the walls before her. Anderson Butte in the early days. Ryan's great-grandfather's days. Dusty roads with carriages parked in front of the few buildings surrounding Town Square. There were more buildings now, but the square hadn't changed a bit. The same whitewashed bandstand stood in the center, or perhaps one rebuilt to look just like it, surrounded by grass and paths that led across the park to the other side of the square.

Ryan's family had worked hard to preserve their pretty little town and make it prosper. She hoped Ryan and Sarah would stay now that they had a shot with each other. The residents in town needed Ryan to offset his hard-nosed father.

A door opened at the end of the hall. Afraid it might be Ryan, she stuffed her tissues into a nearby trash can and headed for the main lobby exit. She couldn't look him in the eyes so soon or she might break down and confess her lie.

She pushed the lobby's glass door open just as her cell rang. She looked at the caller ID, but didn't recognize the number. Bailey said he'd called her from home last night so maybe he was calling from a secure number? She tapped the "Answer" button. "Hello?"

Silence filled her ear. "Hello?"

Finally a deep, gravelly voice said, "Sorry. Hit the wrong contact number, Tara." Then the line went dead.

She didn't recognize the voice. And he'd called her Tara. Someone in town? But she hadn't given anyone her new number yet. Had that been Fred? Or . . . someone working for Spencer?

Had Spencer figured out her new name?

Picking up her pace, she headed home while dialing Detective Bailey's number. That call was all she needed to make her decision. Ryan didn't need her. He had Sarah now and seeing them together would just be too painful to bear.

When Bailey answered, she said, "Hi. I'm ready to be moved as soon as possible."

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Ryan walked home, replaying his and Tara's conversation in his head. She'd told him right up front what the ground rules were. Meg had been right. It had been a stupid plan to try to change Tara's mind and in the process fall in love with her.

He walked down his drive and found Sarah sitting on his front porch. Learning that Sarah had loved him her whole life should have made him happy. Instead it just muddled things. "Hey." He sat on the step beside her. He wasn't ready to invite her in.

"Hi." She smiled but quickly looked away. "So, Tara came to see me earlier."

"Yep."

While drawing curlicues in the dirt with a stick, she said softly, "Did she tell you what we discussed?"

"Mm hm."

"Well, it looks like we're both going to be living in Denver soon, so . . . maybe we could get together and have dinner or something? After I get my separation papers all filed and I get settled in?"

"Sure. But can I ask you something?"

She finally met his gaze. "Anything."

"If you've always . . . had feelings for me, why did you start dating Ed?"

"I didn't know how you felt about me, Ry." She shrugged. "There's

nothing worse than unrequited love. A woman needs to hear the words to know for sure.”

“Yeah. I need to work on that. So, is Ed helping you move?”

She shook her head. “He took a job up north for a few months. I told him I’d be gone when he got back. Seeing you at our house the other day and how you showed honest concern for me made me face the realization that Ed doesn’t love me. He just wanted to steal me from you because he’d never been able to best you at anything else. I’d thought maybe with time he’d come to love me, but it’s never going to happen.”

“Yeah.” He’d always known that was true. At least Sarah had finally figured that out.

He turned and studied her, searching for a clear-cut answer, but nothing materialized. He had feelings for her, but not like the hit-him-in-the-chest ones he felt for Tara. Maybe that’s just because he’d known Sarah his whole life? “So when do you plan to leave?”

“Toby was going to help me move on his day off on Thursday, but then his truck died. Zeke said it’d take a week to get a part to fix it. Ed took our car, so I guess I’ll have to wait until the truck is fixed. My sister said I could use her old car once I get to Denver.”

Silence fell between them again. Finally she asked, “So, you have a truck. Could you drive me to Denver?”

He opened his mouth to tell her that probably wasn’t a good idea, but she looked so lost and fragile sitting there staring up at him with her sad brown eyes. She had to be hurting from her breakup. How could he say no?

Besides, maybe a drive to Denver and a visit to Bailey were just what he needed to figure out what to do with his life. “Sure. I can drive you on Thursday. I need to see about a job there anyway.”

Sarah’s whole face lit up like it used to whenever she saw him. “That’d be great, Ryan. And it’d give us a chance to catch up on the drive, right?”

He nodded. “How about we load up around seven thirty? Get an early start? Do you need help packing before?”

She stood and wiped her dusty hands on her pants. “Nope. I’m all packed and ready to load. I’ll call my sister and let her know.” She leaned down and kissed his cheek. “Thanks, Ry. You’re the best.”

“No problem.” He leaned back on his elbows and watched her walk away. He’d waited four years for her to leave Ed.

Why wasn't he happier about it?

Because it was Tara he wanted to be with. But she'd made it clear she didn't want him. He'd never met anyone like her. Would he ever find someone he could love as much again?

He slowly got up and made his way inside. He crossed to the kitchen and opened the fridge, looking for something to make for dinner before realizing it was Tuesday. Used to be, he ate at the diner every Tuesday—before Tara, that is.

Slapping the door shut, he turned and headed out for some damned meatloaf.

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Tara stared at the contents of her fridge. She had all the ingredients to make a homemade pizza, but the thought of eating it alone when she'd planned to make it for Ryan as a surprise made her slam the door shut again. She'd lost her appetite.

Slumping down on the couch, she crossed her arms.

Alaska.

That's where Bailey said he'd found a spot for her—a small town that desperately needed a dentist to service not only it but also many small towns for miles around. They'd be thrilled to have her. She'd leave on Saturday.

Alasssska. Where it was cold. And it stayed depressingly dark for months at a time. Yay.

She glanced down at her puppy, who stared up at her with such adoration in his eyes it shattered what was left of her broken heart. "I'm going to miss you so much, Sherlock."

When he whimpered, she let her tears fall and gave his ears a rub. How did he always know when she was sad?

She wished she could bring Sherlock. He'd probably like Alaska. It'd make it less lonely for her. But the rules Bailey had e-mailed to her earlier said no pets.

A loud knock on her door startled her. Was it Ryan?

She hopped up and ran to open the door, but then forced herself to slow down. If it was Ryan, she had to send him away.

*Stay strong. It's the right thing to do.*

She squinted through the peephole.

Eric. And Ryan's grandmother with a wrapped plate in her hand.

No gun in sight, but Tara had been forewarned by Ruth about the consequences of breaking Ryan's heart. Were the cookies laced with arsenic?

Ready to take her medicine, Tara opened the door. She might rather be shot or poisoned than go live in Alaska anyway.

## CHAPTER NINETEEN

Hi, guys. Come on in.” Tara opened the door wider for Eric and Ruth to pass by. Maybe Eric being there would save Tara from the wrath of Ryan’s grandmother.

“Hope we aren’t interrupting your dinner, Tara.” Mrs. Anderson held out a plate of chocolate chip cookies.

“Sorry there’s one missing.” Eric grinned. “They’re my favorite.”

And therefore probably safe to eat if Mrs. Anderson had given one to Eric.

Accepting the paper plate, Tara said, “I think *these* will be my dinner. Thank you. And how are you, Eric? Besides feeling not at all guilty for eating my cookies?”

“Sorry. But we’ve been busted.”

“Busted? What do you mean?” Tara led the way to the living room and held out a hand toward the couch. “Have a seat.”

Ryan’s grandmother hobbled to the couch and then dropped into it. “I saw Eric and Ryan digging on my land the other night. Got me a new pair of those night vision goggles off of Amazon just to catch trespassers. Eric came clean with the details. Now I’m trying to decide if I want to squeal on you or if I’m going to join you all.”

Tara chuckled at the thought of Mrs. Anderson peering through night vision goggles. But then, nothing the woman did surprised her anymore. “So in other words, you’re blackmailing us so you can be in on the hunt?”

“Yep. You could say that.”

Tara glanced at Eric. “Do you have any objections if she joins us?”

He quickly shook his head, clearly terrified of the woman. She couldn’t



blame him.

She sampled a cookie so good, she had to have another. “I think we’re one down anyway. Ryan isn’t likely to help us from here on out; rather he’ll just ignore us so we can find the box. And I don’t mind if you want to help, but all the proceeds from this hunt have to belong to Eric, or we can’t let you join us.” Tara placed her hands on her hips the way she’d seen Mrs. Anderson do to appear more formidable.

Ruth waved a hand. “It’s not the money I’m after. It’s only right an Anderson be a part of finding the box. And I want to finally taste this so-called world-famous whiskey. It wasn’t polite for womenfolk to drink it back when I was young. Now I say, *PFFFT* to that!”

“Me too. Let’s polish off these cookies while we put our heads together. Ruth, maybe you can fill in a few blank spots in Anderson Butte history for me and Eric. Be right back.” She retrieved their research from her study, then plunked the box on the dining room table. “The answer has to be here somewhere.”

And she only had a few more days left, so they needed to hurry.

After Ruth, Eric, and Tara had chosen three more potential sites to dig, Tara reached deeper into the box for more archived newspapers. They were full of interesting facts.

She munched on her cookie dinner as she scanned the pages.

When her hand landed on the last newspaper in the stack, she gently lifted the fragile, yellowed paper out. The front page showed a picture of a man holding a number under his chin. A mug shot. The picture was black and white, faded and dark, but the man who’d robbed the Anderson Butte Bank had haunting eyes.

She held out the page for Ruth to see. “Did you live here when this guy robbed the bank in town?”

The old woman glanced at the photo then huffed out a breath. “Yep. The one and only time we’ve had a bank robbery.”

Tara studied the picture more closely. “He’s seems too good-looking to be a bank robber. I wonder what color his eyes were.”

“As blue as the Mediterranean Sea. He was the most handsome man you’d ever lay eyes on. That’s my first husband.”

Eric’s eyes widened. “You married a bank robber?”

“Well, I didn’t know he was a bank robber when I married the man. We

didn't have the Internet and such to check people out like you kids do now."

"Spill." Tara leaned closer. "This is the most interesting thing I've heard since I moved here."

Ruth took off her glasses and rubbed her eyes. When she slipped them back on, she said, "It was one of the biggest scandals in town history. No one ever spoke of it in polite company. But now I guess it is kinda interesting and what do I care? My reputation is what it is." She picked up the picture and stared at it. The slightest smile tilted her lips before she said, "Jake was the most charming man I'd ever met. When he rode into town that day, I knew my life would forever be changed."

Eric slurped his milk then wiped his mouth with the back of his hand. "Rode into town? Like on a horse? It was that long ago?"

Ruth laughed. "No. I meant in a car. A flashy red convertible to be exact. I'm not that old, Eric. This was in the fifties."

"Oh." Eric glanced at Tara and frowned. The fifties must still have been ancient history to Eric.

Ruth waved a hand. "Anyway. My father was the bank manager at the time. Worked directly for Ryan's great-grandfather. He'd been disappointed that I wouldn't accept the next Anderson in line's marriage proposal. Believe it or not, Eric, I was a good-looking woman at one time. I had my share of beaus."

Before Eric expressed out loud the shock that shone on his face, Tara quickly said, "I'm certain you were quite the catch. So, how long did you and Jake date before you were married?"

"Well, since back then we weren't as loose with our," she glanced Eric's way and then back at Tara, "*milk* allowances, people tended to marry quicker. We dated for maybe four months before I accepted his proposal."

That was about as long as she and Spencer had dated too. And shorter than her time with Ryan. Weirdly, she felt a little better that a smart and strong woman like Ruth had been fooled by the same type of deceitful man as she had. "So did he stay charming after you married him?"

"Nope." Ruth pursed her lips and shook her head. "He turned out to be a real devil in disguise, that one. He only married me so he could get his hands on the keys to the bank. It wasn't two months after we were married that he was in jail serving time for bank robbery. A few months after that he was shot and killed while trying to escape. I was all of nineteen at the time.

People either laughed at me behind my back for my lack of judgment or pitied the poor young widow.”

“So, naturally you were afraid to be fooled by a man again, right?”

“Nope. Plug your ears, Eric.” After he complied, she said, “The things Jake could do in bed provided me with memories to live off of for the rest of my life. But I finally realized I’d been fooled by a no-good but extremely charming man. So I did the sensible thing and married a reliable man I’d known my whole life. I loved him, even though he could be a tad boring. But as steady as they came. He was the same in the sack too, but it was probably too much to ask for a man to be both reliable *and* exciting in bed.”

*Ryan was both.*

Ruth tapped Eric’s arm. “You can unplug your ears now. The rest of the story is we eloped because his daddy, the mayor, wasn’t pleased his son was dating a tainted woman like me, but he got over it as soon as our first son was born.”

Tara shook her head in wonder. Ruth had gone through a lot, especially living in a small town where everyone knew her business. Probably explained her gruff nature. “That’s quite the story, Ruth. Glad it all turned out for the best.”

“Things usually do. Unless you do something dumb to mess it all up.” Ruth stared deeply into Tara’s eyes. “Just because one man doesn’t work out isn’t any reason to throw in the towel, Tara. There’s good ones out there and there’s bad ones. You throw out the bad and keep the good. It’s as simple as that. Plug your ears again, Eric.”

He rolled his eyes, then stood and headed for the back door. “Come on, Sherlock. Let’s go play ball outside until they’re done.”

Tara chuckled and waited for the back door to close. “Ryan told you about us, then, I take it?”

Ruth nodded. “I called him earlier about something else and he told me. Can’t quite figure out how the same woman who was so excited to make Ryan a meal one day could turn around and tell him to hit the road the next.”

“Circumstances changed. And it’s because I care about him that I want what’s best for him, Ruth. If Jake had asked you to go on the run with him after he’d robbed the bank, would you have gone?”

“I’ll tell you something I’ve never told anyone, Tara. He’d asked me to move away with him. Away from my family and friends and the only life I’d

ever known. I was so infatuated with him I didn't hesitate." She shook her head and sighed. "Jake said he had an errand to run and to be ready to go. I had my bags packed, all ready to jump into his spiffy car, but he never came for me. He took off the opposite way so fast it broke my heart. He'd never planned to take me along. He'd just used me to get what he wanted and then he left me behind like yesterday's trash on the side of the road. I found out later he'd had me pack because we'd been evicted for not paying the rent."

"I'm sorry for that. But in the end, isn't it better that he broke your heart and left you behind rather than endanger your life or your freedom?"

Ruth frowned. "Just what are we really talking about here with your circumstance, Tara? Surely nothing as bad as robbing banks?"

"As dangerous, but very different." What would it hurt to say a little without specific details? She'd be gone for good in a few days anyway. "I have things going on I can't share with you. But it wouldn't be fair to saddle Ryan with my problems. Just like it wouldn't have been right for Jake to take you with him."

"We'll never know, I guess, but maybe you should let Ryan decide if he wants to jump in the getaway car with you. Unless it's really that *you're* the one afraid to take a chance on another man and be brokenhearted again?"

She *was* scared she would fall for the wrong man again and get her heart broken. "It's a little of both, I guess."

"You already don't look all that happy about the breakup to me, so maybe you should rethink that last part." Ruth stood and leaned on her cane before she bellowed, "Eric, time to go!"

Eric and Sherlock quickly reappeared.

Ruth asked, "So, we still on for tomorrow night for the big dig? We'll meet up at my house just before sunset. I might have a few more ideas by then. But I'll leave you two to do the digging."

Eric said, "I'm in!"

Ruth's lips tilted into one of her rare smiles as she turned to Eric. "I have a good feeling about this. You ask anyone in town and they'll tell you I'm always right—even when I'm not." She winked at Tara and headed for the door. "Come on, Eric. Be a gentleman and walk an old lady to her doorstep."

Tara beat them to the front door and held it open for them. Feeling like she was about to lose a best friend she said, "Ruth, thanks for everything. The

stories you told tonight only confirm you're the scariest and yet most amazing woman I've ever met."

Ruth laughed. "I like the scariest part. I work on that, you know." She suddenly stopped walking and glanced over her shoulder. "Wait a minute. That sounded an awful lot like a goodbye, Tara. You going somewhere?"

She hadn't meant to tip her hand like that. Her emotions were getting the better of her.

Before she could reply, Eric said, "You never know when you might never see a person again. That's why we made the deal. I'm taking Sherlock for Tara in case something happens to her, and she's helping me look for the whiskey so I can pay my own way through college."

Ruth's eyes narrowed at Tara. "That's some pretty detailed planning ahead, now isn't it? Got your bags all packed waiting for the getaway car, Tara?"

"My parents don't like pets, so I'd have no one to take Sherlock in, that's all. And I was just thanking you for teaching me how to make dinner the other night. Ryan really loved it."

Ruth slowly nodded. "Well, I hope you're not planning to do something dumb, Tara. That always messes things up. So *will* I see you tomorrow?"

Dammit. Ruth saw right through her. Must be where Ryan got it from. "Yes. I can promise you'll see me *tomorrow*." But she couldn't make any promises after that.

She hated to leave and have everyone think she didn't care about them. She'd found her true home in Anderson Butte. It killed her to think of leaving it and everyone behind.

Especially Ryan.

## CHAPTER TWENTY

The next evening after work Tara walked into the diner, taking an extra-long look around. She memorized each detail so she could revisit the place in her mind on one of the long, cold, wintery nights that was surely in her future. She smiled when her gaze landed on the booth where she'd had her first sort-of date with Ryan.

Her mind kept going back to the question Ruth had asked her. If she could have Ryan—which she never could, for his own safety—but if she could, would she risk her heart again? She'd been so fooled by Spencer's charms, like Ruth had with her bank robber, she'd actually fallen in love with him. Or was it just infatuation? They hadn't known each other all that long. That's what scared her the most. Could she trust her heart's desires?

Gloria called out a greeting and waved. Tara lifted a hand in return and then slipped into her favorite booth. It was unlikely her next home would have as warm and welcoming a place for someone new in town to have dinner by themselves without feeling alone. She'd never realized it until then, but that was how she'd always felt about coming to Gloria's to eat. Maybe that's why she hadn't been in any hurry to learn to cook for herself until she'd met Ryan?

"Hiya, Tara." Gloria slid into the booth across from her. "Sorry to hear about you and Ryan. I placed a bet on you winning out over Sarah."

That was sweet. "Sorry you're out the cash."

She shook her head. "I don't care about the money. I care about you. I'm rarely wrong when it comes to stuff like this. And just so you know, Ryan came in for dinner last night. He's driving Sarah to Denver tomorrow because he needed to go for a job interview anyway, just in case you hear

different. I'm hoping you and Ryan can still work things out." She slid out of the booth and started to walk away, but then stopped. "Look at me. So flustered I forgot to take your order. What'll you have?"

It warmed her soul that Gloria sensed Tara's true feelings for Ryan. And that'd she care enough to try to help them stay together. "Gloria, you have the biggest heart in town and I hope you'll find someone to share it with again soon. Are you dating anyone?"

Gloria smiled. "I have a few gentlemen callers now and again, but I'm pretty much married to the diner. And all my regulars here are like my children. I'm happy and content. Now, what can I get you?"

A serving of happy and content would be great, but Tara gave that up when she'd screwed up and married Spencer. "Whatever the special is will be fine, Gloria. Thanks."

Gloria shoved a pencil into her tall hair, then gave Tara's forearm a gentle squeeze. "Hope it all works out, sweetheart."

Yeah, she did too. But the most she could hope for was that the people in her new town would be half as welcoming and caring as the people in Anderson Butte.

After she finished her meal, she walked to the store to pick up some dog treats so Eric would know the kind Sherlock liked the best. She tugged open the door to the general store and made her way to the pet food aisle.

A gravelly voice she didn't recognize called out, "Evenin', Tara."

She turned to find Fred waving at her from the register. She picked up the box of treats and then headed his way. "Hi, Fred. Got a cold, huh?"

He coughed into the crook of his elbow and nodded. "That's why I was hunting for Doctor Anderson's number yesterday on my phone but I hit Doctor Carter instead. Sorry about that."

So it was Fred who'd called? Not someone working for Spencer? Had she panicked too soon? "No worries. I hope you feel better soon. I don't need a bag."

"Thanks, Tara. Have a good evening."

"You too."

She walked slowly out of the store while considering her hasty decision to leave. As she wandered across Town Square, she detoured to the bandstand that stood in the middle and sat on the steps. Had she been too quick to pull the trigger based on fear? She already regretted her decision to

leave.

She took in the tidy buildings that stood so straight and neat around the square. Drawing in a deep breath, she held the scent of hundred-year-old pines in her lungs until her chest burned for release. Another memory she'd always have.

No. Leaving was for the best. But in the next town she would not make the same mistake of trusting anyone with the truth again. Look what that'd gotten her. A broken heart.

She glanced up and spotted Ryan slowly walking down the steps from his office, headed her way. Dressed in his uniform, he looked so handsome it made her smile. But when his eyes locked with hers, her stomach clenched.

It pained her to look him in the eye knowing how much she'd hurt him.

"Hi." He sat on the step beside her. "What are you doing?"

"Nothing. Well, maybe just saying goodbye to the town."

"So it's official?"

As much as she wanted to blurt out how badly she wished she could stay and how she didn't want to go to Alaska, she only nodded.

He laid a hand on her thigh and gave a soft squeeze.

That unspoken gesture of support for her troubles clogged her throat with emotion.

He said, "We need to talk about this. I'm not ready—"

"Ryan, please don't." Tears welled in her eyes. "I have to leave. End of story. I just hope one day you'll be able to forgive me for hurting you."

"I just . . ." His jaw clenched like it did whenever he was annoyed. "So there's nothing that would change your mind?"

She could only shake her head. Her throat was so constricted words couldn't possibly squeeze past the lump that had formed.

He huffed out a breath and pointed to the dog treats. "What will happen to Sherlock when you go?"

She managed to clear her throat enough to whisper, "Eric said he'd take care of him for me."

"Could I keep him?"

Tara turned and met his steady gaze. "Really?"

"I'll need a friend when I move to Denver." He smiled weakly. "And he'd always remind me of you."

That did it. The dam burst and tears slowly dripped down her cheeks.



That he'd love Sherlock and think of her when she was gone moved her beyond reason. "Thank you, Ryan. I'd like that very much." She slid her arms around his shoulders and snuggled her face into the warm crook of his neck, breathing in his unique, sexy, intoxicating scent—another memory to tuck away in her heart forever.

She whispered, "I'll never forget you, Ryan."

"I'll never forget you either." He gave her a tight squeeze.

She held on for another few moments, relishing that small dose of happiness and contentment only he seemed to be able to give her, before reluctantly releasing him.

He cleared his throat. "My grandmother called and said I was to stay out of your hair tonight. Good luck with the digging." He stood and jammed his hands into his pockets. "I'll be back from Denver on Friday evening, if you want to drop Sherlock off?"

"Okay. Thanks, Ryan. For everything."

He opened his mouth to say something, but then huffed out a breath and turned to go. "Goodbye, Tara."

"Bye." She watched him slowly walk away, and out of her life. Forever. Unbearable sadness descended upon her at the thought of the rest of her life without him. She sat there numb with grief, while reliving that horrible conversation she'd had with Ryan in his office. And the lie she'd told him about never seeing a future with him. But she couldn't bring the kind of trouble Spencer represented to Anderson Butte. The long line of Anderson sheriffs whose pictures hung outside of Ryan's office had kept the town safe all these years.

She smiled thinking that one day Ryan's picture would hang right next to all the others who had served before him. He came from a long line of handsome men, the pictures on the walls proved that. And Ryan would age well, most likely. She wished she could have stuck around long enough to see for herself.

Suddenly a brief flash of memory from the old pictures hanging in the hallway outside of Ryan's office appeared. The bandstand she sat on was in the pictures. It had been there the whole time. Before paved streets. And it was located exactly in the middle of the town, according to the old newspaper articles she'd read. It provided shade and shelter, and wasn't located too far west of the lake. She blinked as realization dawned. The box might be buried

right there!

She hopped up and stood at the south side of the structure. That was where they needed to dig. And she wasn't going to wait for dark to do it. She didn't care who saw them digging, she knew in her heart she was right. She grabbed her cell to call Eric. Hopefully he was about to become the wealthiest kid in town!

After Eric agreed to meet her in ten minutes, Tara jogged home and changed into jeans and tennis shoes, then she grabbed the shovels that Ryan had lent them off the porch. She was tempted to ask Ryan to come too, so he could be a part of the fun, but thought better of it. It'd just prolong their painful goodbye.

She jogged all the way to the bandstand, eager to start digging. When she got there Ruth and Eric were sitting on the steps waiting for her.

"Hey, guys. Ready to dig?"

Eric jumped up and grabbed the shovel Tara held out. "Yep. You're right, Tara, this spot makes perfect sense."

The note Arthur had left said the box was buried about three feet deep, but the south side of the bandstand was at least ten feet wide. That was a big stretch. Should she start right in the middle? "Ruth, if you were going to bury a box at the south end of this bandstand, where would you bury it?"

Mrs. Anderson stood and moved next to Tara. Looking over her shoulder, she said, "He was probably skulking around at night." She looked up. "The closest street lamp is over there so I'd say on the opposite side of that, in the shadows by the steps."

Made sense. "Then that's where we'll start. Let's do this, Eric!"

She and Eric got busy. Three feet hadn't sounded so deep until her shoulders and arms starting screaming in agony at about two feet. But they needed to hurry before they attracted too much attention, so after wiping the sweat from her brow, she kept going.

When they got a little deeper, she slowed down, wanting Eric to be the one to see the box first. But by the time they were nearly four feet deep, they hadn't found it. "Eric, I think this is the wrong place." But where to dig next? Were they going to have to dig a ten-foot-long trench to find it?

Tara looked over her shoulder and smiled at the onlookers they'd attracted.

If that's what it took, then they'd just have to do it. She and Eric quickly

filled the hole back in, then tapped down the grass on top. Not perfect, but not a bad patch job.

Zeke wandered up and stood next to her. “You know, old Arthur was a precise one. And the town doesn’t sit exactly true north. It sits a little catawampus to the west. If I had a compass I could show you.”

Tara dug her phone from her back pocket. “I’m sure there’s an app for that—let’s check.”

After she’d downloaded a compass app she handed the phone to Zeke. “Here you go.”

Zeke chuckled as he scratched the stubble on his wrinkled chin. “Who’d a ever thought a person could just pull a compass out of thin air like that? Pretty slick.” He held the phone flat in his hand and walked to the middle of the south side of the bandstand. Tara looked over his shoulder as Zeke slowly walked to the right until the needle stood dead to the north. “And here you go. I’ll bet this is where you’ll want to dig.”

The spot was a bit to the right of the center point. “Thanks, Zeke!” She and Eric quickly started in while the others cheered them on. They had about ten people lined up.

Gloria called out, “Tara, we feel awful for not helping, but none of us want to risk our shares. Can I run back to the diner and get you guys some cold water or something?”

“No, we’re fine, but thanks, Gloria.”

The encouragement from the crowd fueled the excitement as she and Eric got closer. Only a few more inches and maybe they’d hit pay dirt.

Fred called out, “The mayor’s coming, Tara!”

Crap!

“Eric, stop digging and lay the shovel down.”

Eric quickly dropped the shovel and stuck his hands in his pockets.

She turned around and waited as the mayor barreled his way through the crowd. “What the hell is going on here?”

She lifted her chin, refusing to be intimidated by the bully. “I’m looking for the box your uncle hid.”

He crossed his arms and leaned closer. “Just because you’re sleeping with my son doesn’t give you the right to disregard my rules!”

She leaned even closer. “And just because you’re the mayor doesn’t give you the right to force people to live by your silly little made-up rules

either!”

A gasp went up from the crowd.

Red slowly seeped up the mayor’s neck. “You listen here now, young la  
—”

“That’s enough, Mitchell!” Mrs. Anderson moved by Tara’s side. “I asked Tara and Eric to dig for me because I’m too damned old to do it on my own. It’s me you need to be directing all that bluster to.”

The mayor turned toward his mother. “You don’t think I’ll cut you off from the corporation just like anyone else in town, Mother? Because I will if you don’t stop this right now!”

“Really?” Mrs. Anderson laughed. “I think you’re forgetting that just because you run all the Anderson business in town doesn’t mean you own it. I still do! You dare cut me off, and I’ll give every last thing to a damned Grant when I die!”

Low murmurs arose from the crowd of now twenty people.

“You’d never give the town to a Grant.” The mayor’s jaw clenched. “You’re bluffing.”

Mrs. Anderson shrugged. “Cut me off and you’ll see, now won’t you?”

Maybe that’s really why Mrs. Anderson wanted to help them look? To protect them from the mayor in case they got caught. Ruth had a much bigger heart than she let on.

As Ruth and the mayor stood toe-to-toe, arms crossed and staring daggers into each other’s eyes, she said, “Keep digging, you two.”

They picked up the shovels and got back to work. Six more inches or so and they’d know if they’d chosen the right spot. If they hadn’t, Tara didn’t have high hopes they’d be able to do any more digging in Town Square. The mayor would find a way to stop it. It was probably their last hope.

When Eric’s shovel hit something solid, he yelped. “I think I found it!”

Using their hands, they brushed the dirt away from an old Army footlocker. Once it was mostly exposed, Tara grabbed a handle on the end and tugged so hard she ended up on her rear end on the grass with the box in front of her.

“Since the box was found on town property, I’ll just be taking that from you now.” The mayor reached for the box.

Tara shook her head and held on tighter. “Your uncle’s note said whoever finds it can have it. This box and whatever is inside belongs to Eric.

That was our deal, right, Ruth?”

“That’s right, Mitchell.” Ruth turned to the people watching. “And you all just witnessed that Eric was the one who found the box, right?”

Everyone nodded in agreement.

The mayor grumbled under his breath but backed off, so Tara placed the box back on the grass, her heart pumping with excitement to see what was inside.

Eric reached out to open it, but stopped. “It’s locked.” A rusty padlock dangled from the clasp that held the lid closed.

Zeke knelt beside them. “Let’s take this back to my shop, and I’ll cut that old lock right off.”

Eric looked at Tara for confirmation, probably not trusting that one of them wouldn’t run off with his box. “Good idea, Zeke. Eric, you take one side and I’ll take the other.”

She and Eric carried the box between them, leading the parade of people eager to see what was inside down the street to Zeke’s mechanical shop.

## CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

Tara, Eric, and Mrs. Anderson stood behind Zeke as he lopped the padlock off the metal box. The mayor and the others stood outside the shop, waiting to see if the box held the promised contents.

“There you go, Eric.” Zeke tossed the old padlock into the trash and stepped aside.

Eric blew out a deep breath and whispered, “Please be in there.”

Tara leaned over Eric’s shoulder as he lifted the lid. There were bundles inside wrapped in plastic wrap and packing tape. Must not have used Ziploc bags much back then.

Eric handed her one of the packages. “You open this one and I’ll open the other.”

“Okay.” She carefully peeled away the tape, then gently slid the papers out of the plastic. The typewritten pages were stapled together at the corner and the cover read, “Anderson Butte’s Finest Aged Whiskey.”

She held up the pages so the people standing outside the shop could see. “Here’s the recipe!”

A cheer rang out as the mayor pushed his way inside the shop. “Let me see that.”

“Nope. It’s proprietary.” She pulled the recipe close to her chest. “And it belongs to Eric. He’s going into the whiskey-making business with my father.” She’d called her dad the night before and made all the arrangements in case they found the box. She wanted Eric to have a trustworthy adult to run the business for him until he turned eighteen, since she wasn’t going to be there to help him. Her father was looking forward to the challenge of replicating the old recipe.

The mayor turned to his mother. “I’m calling my lawyer. Since that box was found on Anderson land, everything in it belongs to us and the town and you know it! Why are you helping them?”

Tara said, “The whiskey will still benefit the town. My dad fell in love with Anderson Butte on his last visit and agreed to set up production right here. He’s prepared to share some of the profits he and Eric make by giving back to the community, just like Arthur wanted.” She smiled. “You don’t want to try to fight my dad in court—he’s got the best lawyers in the country on retainer. And he has the money to tie this up in the system for years.”

“We’ll see about that.” The mayor frowned and crossed his arms. “So is there a map in there too, Eric?”

Eric had laid out his unwrapped pages on a nearby workbench. He and Ruth quietly studied them.

Ruth said, “Yep. There’s a map here all right. But we’re certainly not going to show this to you. We’ll let you know soon enough if the barrels are still intact.”

When the mayor started forward to have a look, Zeke stepped in his path to stop him. It was like the scarecrow from *The Wizard of Oz* standing up to Goliath. “You heard the lady. I’m going to have to ask everyone to leave now until we can sort this out.”

The people watching became so silent and still, only the chirping crickets outside could be heard as the mayor stared Zeke down.

About a minute into their match of wills, Ryan’s voice called out, “You heard the man. Everyone move along.” All the onlookers started to leave, but the mayor still stood toe-to-toe with Zeke, refusing to budge. “You too, Dad.”

Ryan’s father poked Zeke’s chest. “I won’t forget this.” He turned and left.

Thank goodness for Ryan, or who knew what the mayor might have done.

She hoped Ryan would stay and celebrate their find, but his eyes were filled with pain in the brief second he glanced at her before looking away and following his father out the door.

She couldn’t blame him for not wanting to stay. She’d hurt him by deluding herself into thinking they could have a simple relationship. She deeply regretted what her actions had done to him. As much as she hated the thought of never seeing him again.

Maybe she'd reserve a corner of her heart just for him. And on those lonely, cold, wintery nights, she'd allow herself to remember his smile and the way he made her laugh, if only for a few quiet moments before she fell asleep. It seemed a bleak way to live, but necessary going forward. She would not make the same mistake of allowing herself to care for a man the way she did for Ryan ever again.

Zeke slid the big shop doors closed behind him with a solid clunk, so she joined the others at the workbench. "Can you tell where the barrels are?"

Ruth said, "They're in an old mine just outside of town. But this map was drawn long ago, and they've dug a few more since. We might have to do a little research before we can pinpoint which one. Even then, it might be too dangerous to go after the whiskey. Once the mines are closed, everyone knows it isn't safe to go in one. It's actually the perfect place to hide the barrels."

Tara studied the map. "Couldn't we just ask Pete Grant to help us? I read he used to be in charge of all the mines."

Ruth laughed. "Pete and I go way back. There's no way he'd help an Anderson if he had a choice. More likely he'd pretend to help and send us on a wild-goose chase, so he could find the whiskey himself."

Eric, still studying the map, said, "Why don't we just go out there tomorrow morning? Maybe we'll get lucky and find it. It shows exactly how far the mine is from the middle of town, which now we know is the bandstand."

Ruth said, "That was before they came in and straightened out the highway, though. It might be different now."

It looked like Tara would be on her way to Alaska by the time they could start the hunt for the whiskey barrels. "It's getting late. Why don't we go scan all these pages for safekeeping? I'll send a copy of everything to my dad. Then I'll drive you guys home."

Ruth waved her hand. "I'll leave the computer things to you two and walk myself home. See you all tomorrow?" Mrs. Anderson raised a brow as she stared at Tara.

It'd be her last day of work tomorrow since she was closed on Fridays. But she only had one appointment first thing in the morning. "Yep. I'll be at your house, say around nine o'clock?"

Mrs. Anderson smiled. "Sounds good. Goodnight, you two."



“Night,” Tara and Eric called out in unison.

With everything packed up to go, they headed for her house. As they walked up the hill, she glanced at Eric. How disappointed would he be in her when he woke up Saturday morning and thought she’d abandoned him? He’d lost his whole family and she couldn’t bear to let him think she’d ever run out on him on purpose. She loved him. “Eric, can you keep a really big secret?”

He nodded. “I kept this one, didn’t I?”

“Yes. But this one is even bigger. Do I have your word you won’t say anything to anyone, at least until Sunday?”

“Okay.”

She unlocked her front door and disabled the alarm. After she locked the door behind them she said, “You’ve been the best puppy walker, puppy sitter, and treasure hunter I’ve ever met. I’m so glad we were able to become friends. But I have a very bad ex-husband who wants to hurt me, so I have to hide from him. And that means I’m going to have to leave town, but I can’t tell anyone where I’m going.”

Eric’s forehead creased. “But . . . I thought you were going to help me with the whiskey. We had a deal.”

“I know. And I’m sorry. That’s why I asked my dad to help you. My parents won’t even know where I am. The police said I have to leave everyone and everything behind if I want to stay safe.”

Eric blinked back tears that sent a dagger to her heart. “So I can’t ever talk to you again? Ever?”

“No.” She shook her head and drew him into a hug. “I’m really going to miss you. You’re a good kid and I know you’re going to turn out to be a great guy.” She leaned back and tilted his chin up with her hand. “And I know you’ll be the best vet ever, or whatever else you want to be. Your family would be so proud of you. And I know your new family is already proud of you. Meg, Josh, and Haley love you.”

Eric wrapped his arms around her and buried his face against her middle. “Can’t Ryan keep you safe so you can stay?”

“He would if he could. But it’s not fair to put any of my friends or family in danger too.” Tara bit her lip to stop her tears. She needed to put on a brave face for Eric. “But will you do me a big favor? Will you let Ryan take Sherlock so he won’t be all alone after I leave?”

“Okay.” Eric wiped away his tears on his T-shirt. “But are you sure you

have—”

She cut him off before he could ask her to stay, and before she fell completely apart. “Yes.” She forced a smile. “Now let’s get all this stuff e-mailed off to my dad so you two can get your new business started. You’ll like my dad, Eric. He’s a great guy.” And maybe working with Eric would give her dad what Sherlock would give Ryan—a small reminder of her now and then.

They scanned all the documents in silence. Once they were done she said, “I’ll call my dad and let him know to look for this e-mail. Then I’ll run you home.”

“Kay.” The sadness in Eric’s voice pinched at her heart.

He said, “Maybe we’ll find the barrels tomorrow. So you’ll know what happened to them before you have to go?”

She forced a smile while reaching in her back pocket for her cell. “I doubt it, Eric. But maybe I’ll be able to keep up with things by reading the town webpage from afar. I just won’t be able to leave comments, but you and I will know I’ll see it.”

Eric nodded and even managed a tight smile. “That’d be good. You’re just being nice by letting me have the whiskey anyway. You’re the one who found it.”

Her back pocket was empty, so she reached for the other pocket. “It’s enough that I know the whiskey is in the right hands, not with some greedy adult.” When her other pocket came up short she said, “Can I borrow your cell? Mine must’ve fallen out when I was digging.” Wouldn’t matter all that much, she’d have to get a new one in a few days anyway.

“You lent it to Zeke, remember? I think I saw your phone on the workbench by where we opened the box.” Eric handed over his phone.

“Oh, that’s right. For the compass. In all the confusion, I forgot to get it back.” She’d run by the shop tomorrow first thing and get it.

She dialed her dad’s number. When he answered, the sound of her father’s voice—one she might not hear for a long time to come, if ever again—constricted her throat. How was she going to live without all the people she loved?



The next morning, Ryan loaded the last of Sarah's boxes into the back of his truck and slammed the tailgate closed. She didn't have nearly as much as he would've thought. Maybe she feared Ed would get angry with her for taking things? He'd ask her to be sure she got what she deserved.

He had a huge knot in his stomach, dreading all the hours of small talk ahead. Sarah wasn't like Tara, who seemed to get him talking without him even realizing it. Sarah was quiet like he was. He wished he'd thought to bring that list of surefire conversation starters he'd printed out for the helicopter ride with Tara.

Winging it had never been his forte.

He climbed up into the truck and started it. "Sure you have everything you need? If you're worried about Ed—"

"No." Sarah shook her head. "It's nothing like that. I don't want reminders of my mistake, so I'm just taking the essentials."

"Okay." Ryan pulled out of the drive and headed for the main highway.

After about fifteen minutes of silence, Sarah finally broke it by saying, "So, pretty exciting about Eric finding the whiskey recipe, huh?"

Dammit. Why hadn't he thought to talk about that? It was so obvious. "Yep. Amazing that it was there the whole time."

Sarah smiled at him like she was waiting for him to expand on that, so he added, "And great that whiskey production might bring jobs to town."

"Yeah. It was nice of Tara to let Eric have the recipe."

The mention of Tara's name sent a hot dagger to his heart. He hoped that would go away soon. "Yeah. It was."

He needed to change the subject. "So, do you have a job lined up?" Way to be clever and witty. It was a question her mother would ask her. He sucked large at this. He'd have to get better if he'd ever survive the dating scene in Denver.

"My sister got me a receptionist job at the law office where she works. It's just temporary, though, until the regular person comes back from maternity leave."

"Oh. Well, maybe they'll keep you on after."

She just shrugged in response.

The conversation well went dry once again.

Another fifteen minutes passed while he scrambled through his mind trying to conjure one of the questions from that conversation list. Then he

remembered Tara grabbing the paper from his hand and warning him not to ask that one question around her family. “So, what would you do if you found a hundred-dollar bill lying on the ground?”

Sarah frowned at him. “Ryan, if you don’t want to talk, that’s fine with me. We don’t have to. I’m just happy to be with you.”

Surefire conversation starters, his ass. In what world did those questions ever work? That was strike two. “It’s not that I don’t want to talk, I do. I just don’t . . .”

“I know, Ryan.” She patted his arm. “You were never very good at communication.”

He’d been better with Tara than he’d been with anyone else. It hadn’t been hard at all to have normal conversations with her. What he wasn’t good at was expressing his feelings. Putting what he really felt on the line. His father had always said, “Real men don’t cry, get in touch with their damn feelings, or whine.” Was having that pounded into his head his whole childhood the reason he hadn’t been able to tell Tara he loved her? To end up a heartless man like his father would be the last thing he’d ever want.

As he pondered, Sarah said, “Funny, here we are, all grown up now and yet not much has changed. You’re still quiet and broody, and I’m still shy around you.”

Panic raced through him. What was he supposed to say to that? Was it a test? Dammit!

“Maybe people can’t change?” He wanted to change, but then when he’d had the chance to tell Tara he loved her he ultimately couldn’t do it. Maybe the saying was true?

She nodded as she nibbled on her bottom lip, like she always did when deep in thought.

Did that mean he’d answered correctly? He’d forgotten how she used to do that. Throw little questions out there and wait. After he’d answer he could tell by the look on her face he’d usually given the wrong answer, but she never said anything.

Tara never played those games. She wouldn’t agree, but sometimes she could be as direct as his grandmother. It was sorta cute.

Sarah cocked her head. “What’s so funny?”

Was he smiling? He hadn’t even realized it. “Nothing. It’s just . . . nothing.”

“Well, one thing’s changed. It’s the way you look at Tara.” Sarah sighed. “You don’t look at me that way.”

He scrambled for the right words. He didn’t want to hurt her feelings but he and Sarah weren’t going to end up together. Especially not after seeing how great things had been with Tara. “You and I have known each other since we were kids . . .”

She laid a hand on his arm and squeezed. “It’s okay. I didn’t mean to put you on the spot. You and I will always be just friends. Good friends. But after Ed, I want a man who looks at me like you look at Tara.”

His cell rang. Thank God. He had no idea what he was going to say to that. He dug the phone out and glanced at the screen. “It’s the detective I have the job interview with tomorrow.”

Sarah smiled sweetly. “Then you should take it.”

He hit the speaker button. “Anderson.”

“Ryan, it’s Bailey. Do you know where Tara is? She’s not answering her cell.”

His gut tightened at the urgency in Bailey’s voice. “I don’t. I’m driving to Denver. What’s wrong?”

“It’s Spencer. He’s escaped. He hasn’t been seen since bed check last night.”

Dammit!

Ryan pulled the truck over. “That means he has an eight- to ten-hour lead, then?” His heart pounded with fear for Tara’s life. Could Spencer somehow get ahold of a plane? Or rent a car? He had to be sure she was safe.

“Yes. I’m at the airport trying to arrange a flight to come get Tara. Call your deputies and have them find her.”

“Will do.” He clicked off and sent Sarah a sidelong glance. “Tara’s in trouble. We have to go back.”

“I hope she’s okay.”

“Me too.” It was one thing to lose her to witness protection, but another to let a madman hurt her again. He’d give his life to protect her from Spencer. He’d already given her his heart.

Sarah was silent for a moment then said, “You really love her, don’t you, Ryan?”

Nodding, he did a one-eighty and headed back to Anderson Butte, pushing a hundred while waiting for Mike to answer on the speakerphone. He

couldn't let anything happen to Tara. He did love her and he needed to figure out how to tell her.

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Tara pulled her office door closed behind her while composing a note in her head for Ryan for when she left. She'd leave it on her dining room table where someone would eventually find it.

Whoever rented her place next would certainly be lucky. She had to leave behind all the beautiful furniture and knickknacks her mother had sent. Her parents wouldn't know her new address, so she'd have to redecorate all over again, but on her own next time. That might be fun, at least. She'd been struggling to look at the bright side of her move but hadn't found much to be hopeful about.

She absently reached for her phone to check the time as she headed to Ruth's house, but her hand stopped midair. The battery was dead. Zeke hadn't known to turn off the compass app, so it'd kept searching all night, draining the power.

It had to be close to nine, so she walked down Ruth's long gravel drive, excited at the prospect of possibly finding which mine held those old barrels of whiskey.

When she lifted her hand to knock on Ruth's front door, it swung open and Meg stepped out.

Pulling up short, Meg said, "Oh. Hi, Tara. Have you seen Eric? I've been searching everywhere. Grams said you guys had a meeting planned here at nine?"

"Yeah, we were all supposed to meet—wait. I'll bet he went looking for the whiskey on his own. Let me get my car and I'll go look for him." Eric had been so eager to start the hunt, he'd probably planned to go out and be back in time for their meeting. He was a responsible kid, so she'd probably run into him on his way back into town.

"Thanks. I'll go home and see if he's back yet. I'll call you if he's there."

Tara started down the steps. "My cell's dead. But it's not far, so I'll meet you back at your house in a bit after I look."

Ruth hobbled out onto the porch. “Tara, do you remember where to look? Or should I come along?”

She waved a hand as she headed up the drive. “No, I remember.” She just hoped Eric hadn’t gone inside one of the old mines on his own. It could be dangerous.

That thought had her jogging the rest of the way to her house to get her car and then head out.

The map had stated that the mine was 2.3 miles from the center of town. She’d kept track of the mileage after she passed the bandstand so the mine should be close. There wouldn’t have been an easy way back then for Arthur to measure as the crow flies, and Ruth had mentioned the road had been straightened out, so the mine would probably be closer by a few tenths of a mile.

Just after she passed the two-mile mark, Tara slowed the car while searching both sides of the road. There wouldn’t be much sign of an old mine after all this time. Thick stands of tall trees dotted the hillside to her left and suddenly there was a sharp drop-off on the other side of the guardrail on the right. Must be on the left, then.

A dark SUV closed in behind her, so she pulled to the side and stuck her hand out, waving it around her. She glanced in the rearview mirror, waiting for the car to pass. When it didn’t, she came to a near stop and waved her hand out the window once again. It slowed like it was going to pull in behind her. Suddenly another car appeared from the opposite direction, and then the dark SUV sped up and passed her. The windows were tinted, but she made out a man in a baseball cap and sunglasses behind the wheel staring straight ahead. Not a local, or he would have waved.

After both cars disappeared, she moved slowly back onto the road. A flash of red on the left caught her attention. Eric’s bike!

She found a place to pull over and then went in search of Eric. Walking toward the bike, she found an old overgrown road and ventured farther into the shade of the tall trees. Soon a wide clearing covered in meadow grass appeared. Maybe the old parking lot for the mine?

She walked toward the boarded-up entrance that had been fenced off with rusty chain link. The padlock stood in place at the gate, so she called out, “Eric?”

When there was no answer, she glanced around and spotted a gap in the

fence big enough for a little boy to slip through. But was it big enough for a six-foot-tall woman? She'd soon find out.

After wrestling her length through the hole in the fence and ripping her shirt and pants in the process, she headed for the entrance. She cupped her hands around her mouth. "Eric?"

"In here, Tara. I'll be right there."

Thank God he was safe. But the vision of creepy spiders and who knew what else might be inside sent a shiver down her spine.

Eric appeared with a big grin and a flashlight in his hand. "It's here! I found it! Come see."

"Wow! That's fantastic!" Amazing that the whiskey had been there all that time and no one had ever known. Suddenly her heart sank at the thought of not being able to see the whole venture through. "Okay, but is it creepy in there? 'Cuz I don't do well with—"

"No. Come on! I pulled all of the boards away from where the big doors used to be so it'll let more light in. It's not bad at all. The barrels are down below on the next level."

Probably a little boy's idea of creepy and hers weren't the same, so she drew a deep breath and followed behind, ready for a fast retreat if necessary. "This might not be safe, Eric."

"It's just inside. But I'm not sure how we'll get the barrels out."

She followed Eric inside the mine, happily surprised that it wasn't a cramped, dark space. Instead it had a ceiling about ten feet tall reinforced by old wooden beams. The sides were propped up the same way.

She followed Eric across the dirt floor toward a rickety railing. When he leaned on the wood, she grabbed the back of his shirt and tugged him away. "Stay back from the edge. This wood is old. It might be rotted out."

"Okay." Eric shone his flashlight below. "But look down there."

Tara slowly moved a step closer and followed the beam of Eric's flashlight. There were the barrels, all lined up in rows. How had they gotten them down there? Maybe over the railing? Or was that an old loading area? There might be another way in.

The chain-link fence outside rattled. Someone else must be squeezing through it. Maybe Meg and Ruth had decided to help in the hunt for Eric. Tara called out, "We're in here."

A deep voice growled, "I've waited a long time to finish what we



started, Jamie. Or should I call you Tara now?”

The familiar voice sent chills up her spine as painful memories sent fear to her pounding heart. It was difficult to draw enough air into her lungs as she slowly turned around to face him.

Spencer had found her.

Fear for her own life had been with her since the trial. But a new, even greater fear for Eric had her mind racing for a solution.

Spencer would surely kill them both.

That was not happening.

She had to find a way to save Eric.



After he dropped Sarah off at the diner, Ryan dialed Mike’s number again. “Have you found her yet?”

“No. But I just found out she went to the mines to search for Eric. He’s been missing for a few hours. She told Ruth her cell battery died.”

“Okay. I’ll head that way. Meet me out there.”

Why was Eric missing and since when did Tara ever let her cell battery die? As hard as he’d tried to reassure himself that Spencer couldn’t get on a plane so they had a head start on him, Ryan’s gut told him Tara was in danger.

He drew the gun he had tucked in the back of his waistband and laid it on his lap. If Spencer was there, it would take all he had not to shoot the man on sight.

## CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

Tara shoved Eric behind her. Her knees shook as she struggled for an even tone. Spencer was insane. She'd have to play along if she wanted to get Eric out alive. "Hi, sweetheart. I'm glad to see you."

Spencer blinked rapidly for a moment, then his brow creased as he walked toward them with his gun pointed at her chest. "Nice try. But you know I'm smarter than that, Jamie."

"So smart I knew you'd eventually find me, even though the police made me hide from you." As he came closer she circled slightly to the right, hoping to eventually get her back to the door so Eric could run. The crazy gleam in Spencer's eyes made her heart pound. How had she ever loved him?

The demented look in his eyes suddenly faded. Then his whole face softened and he smiled warmly, like he had when they'd been dating and she'd loved him. He was a handsome man with the most charming smile she'd ever seen. The quick transformation threw her off guard momentarily. How should she proceed?

He said, "Luckily, your mother's generous gift habits haven't changed. I had a peek at a few of her usual stores' customer lists, and sure enough, she'd sent all sorts of designer things here, to someone named Tara Carter."

Dammit. She'd never thought to worry about that. But that he'd turned back into the sane man he'd acted like when they'd been dating gave her an ounce of hope they'd make it out alive. "That was very clever. How did you bust out of the ward, babe?"

"Babe?" Hate filled his eyes again. "I paid off one of the guards at Laura's wedding. I saw pictures of your new '*babe*.' Interesting how similar he and I are in build and coloring. Maybe you're having trouble letting me

go?”

A shiver ran up her spine. The crazy was back. “That’s true. I’ve missed you.”

“Liar.” He glanced up at the ceiling. “You’re just like the idiots at the ward. Telling me things I wanted to hear. But I showed them. I bribed an orderly to let me borrow his keycard, then I made a new one of my own.”

Eric let out a low whimper behind her. His hands on her waist gripped tighter in fear. They needed to hurry.

She took a few small steps toward the door as Spencer inspected the ceiling more closely. Maybe if she could keep him talking Eric would have a chance to escape.

Tara forced herself to remain calm while she struggled to draw enough air into her lungs. “How did you get here from New York?”

Spencer walked to the wall and kicked a support beam loose as his gun stayed aimed at her chest. “Private cars, private jets, my brother’s ID. Money buys whatever a person needs. My parents are such idiots, they never even knew I’d been slowly siphoning off funds to a foreign account for years.” When he kicked out another beam, a steady stream of dirt trickled from the ceiling.

She needed to get Eric out before Spencer made the mine collapse.

“Well, I’m glad you’re here now. But let Eric go, okay? He has nothing to do with this. If we hurry, we can make the Mexican border by this evening.”

“I don’t think so.” Spencer moved to the rear and glanced over the railing. “You found the whiskey, I see. I read about that on the quaint little town website.”

As Spencer moved a step closer to the railing, Tara nudged Eric farther toward the door behind them. Just a few more feet. “It’s worth a fortune. Would you like to share in that with us? It’d make your father proud of you for a change.” It was a risk pushing that button, but she was running out of options.

He slowly shook his head. “My dad can go to hell, the bastard. I told you what I’m here to do. Finish what we started. You always did have a listening problem.”

Sweat dripped down her spine as she pushed Eric back another few inches. “I’ll work on that. Let’s go before they find us.”

“They’re going to find us all right, because I’m tired of living among fools. It’s so tedious. But I’m not going to tolerate that sheriff touching my wife, so we’re going to die together. Right here. You picked a great place for it.” He tilted the gun toward the roof and pulled the trigger.

She winced as the loud gunshot deafened her, but as bits of dirt poured down from above, she pushed Eric farther toward the opening. “No. Let’s run away. Remember how happy we were on our honeymoon? We could go to Europe in my dad’s private jet. You love Italy.”

“Just shut up, Jamie. We’re going to die right here. Together. As we were always meant to be.” He pointed the gun up and pulled the trigger again, then again, so many times she stopped counting. Dirt cascaded down both sides of the wall as he kept shooting.

Time to make the move. She shoved Eric and then screamed, “Run!” between one of the shots.

She hoped he’d listened but didn’t wait around to see. Moving toward Spencer, she made herself as large an obstacle as possible, so he couldn’t get a shot at Eric. Spencer would have to shoot her first.

---

Ryan ran toward the mine with his gun drawn, praying he was there in time. Gunshots echoed through the air as he ripped the fence open wider. Eric suddenly appeared from the opening of the mine with dust billowing from behind him. Tears streamed down his face as he shouted, “That man is trying to bury Tara!”

“Go. Get in my truck and hide until Mike comes.”

Eric nodded and kept moving toward the truck.

Once inside the mine, thick dust choked Ryan as he strained to see. He lifted his T-shirt over his nose. Blinking the dirt out of his eyes, he moved farther inside. Tara was on the ground on her stomach, her face almost buried by the dirt falling all around them. Spencer twisted her arm behind her back, holding her in place.

Tara spotted him. Her eyes silently pleading for help ripped his heart out.

“Drop the gun, Spencer, or I’ll shoot.”

A sick grin spread on Spencer's face as dirt continued to pour down on them like rain. He released Tara and stood. Pointing his gun he said, "Not if I shoot you first, Sheriff. You should've never touched my wife!" He pulled the trigger.

Time moved in slow motion. Ryan dropped and rolled, bracing for the bullet headed his way that he somehow avoided. Tara stood and landed a punch to her ex's nose like the one she'd given Ryan by the lake. Spencer stumbled backward.

Ryan lunged at Spencer. Dirt billowed over them from the ceiling. "Get out, Tara!"

"But . . ."

"Get help," he shouted. "Now!" He hoped she'd believe the request, because his chance to survive looked bleak at the rate the roof was collapsing.

Thankfully, she took off toward the entrance. An angry roar sounded deep from the mine shaft, like an approaching freight train as he fought to restrain Spencer. Adrenalin-fueled crazy wasn't easy to hold down. At the sound of a loud crack, Ryan looked up to see a beam headed directly for them. "Move!"

He rolled away. The beam landed on Spencer's head.

Grabbing the unconscious man's legs, he headed for the entrance as planks and beams joined the dirt and stones falling all around them. He wanted to leave the sick bastard behind, but his police training wouldn't let him.

Moving too slowly, he slung Spencer over his shoulder and stumbled forward as the roof above continued collapsing. Rocks the size of fists knocked Spencer from his shoulder and Ryan ducked, covering his head with his arms. Wood planks and dirt poured over him so fast he'd be buried soon if he didn't get out.

As he crawled on all fours, a large beam crashed down from above. Sudden pain knifed through his leg. He struggled to free himself from under it, but his leg was stuck. He had no intention of being buried alive, so he tugged on his leg, willing it to come loose.

Suddenly, the noise stopped and eerie silence filled the air. The calm before the big storm?

Once the dust settled a little, he glanced at Spencer. His eyes were open,

staring blankly. He was dead.

Coughing and choking on the dirt in his lungs, Ryan yanked on his leg before the collapse started up again, but it wouldn't budge. If he couldn't make it out, Tara would never know how he felt.

He needed her to know how much he loved her. He'd find a way to tell her.

Giving it all he had, he grit his teeth and pulled. When his leg finally came a little loose, the adrenaline rush fueled him to keep tugging.

Finally his leg came free, but it didn't work right, so he rolled onto his stomach and crawled toward the entrance.

The pain was beyond any he'd ever felt, but he ignored it and straightened some, half limping, half crawling to his freedom. When he saw hints of blue sky he tried in vain to draw a deep breath. Dragging his leg behind, he finally made his way out of the mine.

Once outside, he leaned his hands on his thighs, struggling to breathe as he coughed dirt from his lungs.

Glancing up, Ryan had never been so happy to see Mike. Bailey was a step behind him and shouted, "Where's Spencer?"

Ryan coughed so hard he could barely speak. Relief that Tara was finally free of the bastard made the pain in his leg almost bearable. Throwing a thumb over his shoulder he rasped, "Dead."

"Thank God. Let's get you away from here and then we can have a better look at you."

With great effort, he finally managed to croak out, "Tara?" He needed to tell her he loved her. Right away. If she still insisted she didn't want a serious relationship, then at least he'd have told her how he felt. He'd made the mistake of letting his father mess with his head before. He wouldn't do it again.

"She's on her way to the clinic. We found Eric and sent him there too. You're next."

A loud crash behind them sent a huge cloud of dirt flying into the air as the opening to the mine collapsed and boulders cascaded down the hill.

Everyone turned and ran. Ryan lagged behind because of his leg. Mike waited for him then threw an arm around his shoulder. "I gotcha, bud."

When they were in the clearing, they all turned and watched as the whole front of the hill came tumbling down. He'd gotten out just in time.

He coughed so violently it was difficult to catch his breath. Bending over again, he hoped it'd pass. When he tried to speak, he could only make croaking noises. Ryan started limping toward his truck to go find Tara, but Mike grabbed his arm and tugged him toward the cruiser. "You're not driving until after we get you checked out."

Coughing and unable to argue, he climbed into the cruiser beside Mike and then they sped toward the clinic.

---

Tara winced as Ben moved her broken hand into position for the cast.

"Sorry, I know it hurts, but if you hold still for me, we'll be done in just a few."

She was eager to get the cast on so she'd be able to see Ryan when he got there. When he stumbled out of the mine, she could finally draw a full breath. She'd been so afraid she'd never see him again. She'd started to go to him, to wrap her arms around him and hold him, but the other cops with Bailey wouldn't let her. They'd hustled her into the waiting car. They'd found Eric in Ryan's truck, but she hadn't seen him yet either.

The sound of women's voices preceded Casey, Meg, Ruth, and then Eric as they all walked into the exam room. When Eric saw her, he ran across the room and hugged her. "I'm glad you're okay."

She ran her good hand up and down his back. "You too. I'm so sorry. I know that was scary."

Ben said, "Take it easy there, Eric. Tara needs to stay still until her cast sets."

Joyce, Ben's ancient nurse and not a fan of Tara's ever since she'd punched Ryan, threw her hands up in frustration. "Why do we bother to have privacy rules, Doc?"

Ben chuckled. "Are these people bothering you, Tara?"

"Nope. Hi, everyone."

Casey said, "We're so glad you guys are okay."

Eric added, "The detectives out there just told us that guy is dead. So does that mean you can stay now?"

Tara glanced up. All the ladies were nodding in agreement. Eric

must've told them the whole story.

She hadn't even fully processed the fact that she suddenly had her life back again. That she wouldn't have to hide anymore, or feel her gut clench every time her cell rang with an unknown number.

She closed her eyes and blew out a long, slow breath. It was finally over.

But seeing Spencer again had driven home the horrendous misjudgment she'd made by listening to her unreliable heart. She'd changed her whole life for the man. Been fooled by his charm. She'd made up her mind that she'd stay single and unencumbered from now on. Maybe it'd be best to go back to her original plan of volunteering her dental skills for the poor. Give herself time away in a developing country and figure out what she really wanted?

Her heart was telling her she wanted Ryan, and that scared her. Would Ryan be another mistake she'd figure out a few months down the road as she'd done with Spencer? "I'm . . . not sure Eric."

Ruth said, "You forget the bad and keep the good, Tara. Hiding and never taking risks is no way to live." She leaned on her cane and turned around to leave. "Eric told us how you shielded him from your ex. For a brave woman, you can be awful chicken sometimes. Come on, everyone, it's crowded in here." Ruth hobbled out the door, and one by one they all trailed behind her like little ducks, even Joyce. Except for Eric—he hung on, seemingly unable to let go.

Meg stopped and said, "You coming, Eric?"

When he shook his head, Meg locked eyes with Tara as if asking if it was okay. When Tara nodded, Meg quietly slipped out the door.

While Ben worked, she said, "Are you sure you're okay, Eric?"

"I thought you were going to die . . ." His voice trailed off to a whisper.

"Me too." She laid a kiss on the top of his head. "You were very brave."

Tears filled his eyes. "But I ran away and left you."

"We might all be dead if you hadn't listened to me and run when you did. It distracted Spencer, and that's just what I needed. I left when Ryan told me to go get help for the same reason. Everything worked out just as it was supposed to." That wasn't exactly the way things had transpired, but she couldn't let Eric think he'd done anything wrong.

Ben finished up and then scooted his chair away. "Hey, Eric. There's a secret stash of Dove bars in the kitchen freezer. I think you deserve one for



being such a hero today.”

“Okay. I’ll be right back.” He reappeared a moment later. “Ryan’s here!”

Tara’s heart skipped a beat as she hopped off the table to make room. God, she hoped he was okay. She’d gotten out of it with a broken hand and some scrapes and bruises. Hopefully Ryan’s injuries were minor too.

Ben hurried out into the hall, and then reappeared with a very dusty Ryan in tow. Ben pointed to the table but Ryan ignored him and circled his arms around Tara’s equally dirty body.

Her traitorous heart melted as he pulled her against his chest. “I’m so glad to see you, Ryan. Are you hurt?” She held on tight, so thankful he’d made it out alive.

He opened his mouth to speak, but only a croaking noise came out. Mike followed behind and said, “He lost his voice from coughing up a ton of dirt.”

“I need to listen to your lungs, Ry.” Ben pulled his stethoscope from around his neck and grabbed Ryan’s arm, but Ryan shook him off.

He looked into Tara’s eyes and tried to speak again, but nothing came out. He frowned and pointed to his chest.

“Your chest hurts?” She wasn’t sure what he was trying to tell her.

He shook his head. Then he turned toward his grandmother and sisters, who’d all crammed into the small room behind him and gestured for them to help him.

Casey called out, “Oh, he’s playing charades! I think he meant himself, Tara.”

Ryan patted his nose and then turned back to Tara again.

She said, “So we’re playing a game?”

He nodded and pointed to his shirt.

She guessed, “Pocket?”

He threw both hands on top of his head in frustration, then his eyes lit with an idea.

He stuck his knuckles together with his thumbs touching below, then laid the shape over his pocket. She guessed, “CPR?”

“No!” Meg called out. “He’s making a heart!”

Ryan nodded and stared into her eyes. He repeated the sequence all over again by pointing to his chest. His sisters both said, “I.”

Then he made the knuckle gesture again, and they said, “Heart.”

Then Ryan pointed to her and his sisters called out, “You. He loves you, Tara!”

He coughed violently as he nodded his head.

“You love me?” Her own heart nearly soared out of her chest. He’d never told anyone that before. That he’d chosen her to be the first to say it to almost made her blurt out a resounding “I love you too!” before she stopped herself. Could she risk *her* heart again?

Ryan’s coughing became so bad it doubled him over.

She reached out to help him, but Ben grabbed Ryan’s arm and pulled him toward the exam table. “Everyone out! Now!”

She asked, “Can I stay, Ben?”

Joyce reappeared and took her by the arm. “Nope. You heard the doc. Everyone out to the waiting room.”

He’d said he loved her. Was it just all the adrenalin from almost dying? Could she believe him? Or her own heart that enthusiastically begged for her to take a chance?

After they all trooped out to the empty waiting area, she bit the thumbnail on her good hand as she contemplated what Ryan admitting his love for her really meant. Assuming she could get past her fears and take the risk, did he love her enough to give up having his own children? He’d made it clear he wanted a family. And did she want to go the serious relationship route again when she’d sworn she wouldn’t? She’d only known him well for a few weeks.

“Tara!” Ruth said loudly. “I can practically see those negative thoughts turning in your head. Either you love him or you don’t. End of story. Stop overthinking this and man up!”

Man up? Was it really that simple?

After an hour of waiting and pondering, Ben reappeared. “Tara? Ryan won’t rest until he sees you. But he’s not allowed to talk.”

She hopped up and followed Ben down a long hall toward the back of the clinic. “Is he going to be all right?”

“His lungs should be back to normal in a week or so, but he has a hairline fracture on his tibia and a severely sprained ankle. He should be able to go home soon but he’ll need some help once he gets there. For now, he needs rest.”

“This is my fault. I’ll sign up for home-care duty.”

Ben chuckled. “Ryan’s a horrible patient. Just warning you.”

“I can handle Ryan.”

He glanced at her casted hand. “You do have a mean right hook.”

She laughed softly as she entered Ryan’s room. She never knew there were hospital beds in the clinic, but Ryan was in one, with oxygen tubes on his face.

“Hi.” She sat next to him on the bed. “Now there’s no denying it. You’re officially my hero. Thanks for saving me, Ryan.” She laid a kiss on his forehead.

When he smiled at her, her stomach twisted like it always did. It’d become something she looked forward to.

Ryan picked up a pad of paper on the table by his bed. After grabbing a pen, he scribbled something, then held out the note. *Sorry about your hand, but thanks for saving MY life.*

She glanced at her aching, casted hand. “When he aimed that gun at you, I stopped thinking and just reacted. But I’m so sorry you were hurt because of me. I hope you’ll let me make it up to you somehow?” How was it she was always in debt to him? And why was it the only kind of debt that had ever felt right?

Shaking his head in disagreement, he scribbled on the pad again. After what seemed like forever, he handed the paper to her.

*I love you, Tara. If you’d gone away I wouldn’t have stopped looking until I found you.*

She lifted her head and blinked at him. Until that very moment she hadn’t realized that deep in her heart she’d hoped he’d come after her too. It chipped away at her hard-line defense. She lifted the page and read more.

*I remember the first time you smiled at me—it was the same day you broke my nose—because it did something to my heart I couldn’t explain. That had never happened before, and I’m afraid it’ll never happen again. You worry you can’t have children with me, but if that’s all that is stopping you, and after some time we decide this is going to work, look at Eric. If we could get a kid like him we’d be the luckiest parents in the world.*

Tara nodded as tears slid down her cheeks. They would be lucky to have a child as sweet as Eric. She laid the paper on the bed and slipped the fingers on her good hand through his as she continued reading his words that

touched her soul deeper than any had ever before. The wall protecting her heart began to disintegrate.

*Meg once told me women want to hear men's own words to express their feelings, not something from a book, but I don't know words that could adequately tell you how I feel. So I'd like to borrow some from an author I know you respect—Keats: "My Creed is Love and you are its only tenet."*

That did it. Ruth was right. Either she loved him or she didn't. She'd work out the rest later.

Slowly folding the paper, she smiled, then put the page into her pocket to keep forever. Quoting Keats. From memory, no less? She would've never seen that coming in a million years. There was a lot more she had to learn about Ryan. And she was going to enjoy doing it.

Wiping her cheeks dry, she forced a serious expression. "You think by writing all this down and quoting my favorite lines that I'm going to just turn into a big puddle of goo at your feet, don't you?"

Ryan winced, but then slowly nodded.

He was so cute. "You realize that I'm going to need to hear all this again, once you get your voice back? You're going to have to say the whole thing out loud so I know you're serious."

Frowning, he grabbed the pad and wrote, *Even the Keats?*

"Especially the Keats, buddy. Still up for it?"

He rolled his eyes, but then he nodded.

She kissed him on the cheek. She should go; Ben said Ryan needed the rest. "Okay, then . . ."

He grabbed her hand and drew her close. In a whisper so soft she had to strain to hear, he said, "I love you, but how do you feel about *me*?"

Her heart melted at the uncertainty in his gaze. "So men need to hear a woman's own words too?"

He nodded.

"I love you too, Ryan."

Relief crossed his face as he cocked a single brow, asking the silent question she finally knew the answer to. Any guy who quoted Keats, could kiss like no other, and who wanted kids like Eric was the best deal she'd ever get. She'd be foolish not to take the gift he offered—and to deny her heart the gift she so badly wanted to give him in return.

She leaned next to his ear and whispered, "I heard you need someone to

make biscuits for your gravy in the mornings while you heal. It just so happens I'm darn good at that now."

His lips tilted into a naughty smile as he wrote, *Is that a pick-up line, Tara?*

"Don't need one." She laid a quick kiss on his mouth. "You're already my boyfriend. Just ask anyone in town."

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

*It Had to Be Him*, the original book in this series, was my first published story. Because I wasn't sure I'd ever sell another, I thanked all the people I could think of who helped make my dream of becoming a published author come true. Many of my writer friends teased me about how long those acknowledgments were. The most common phrase I heard was, "Hello? You thanked everyone but your dog!"

True. So the first thank-you goes to my dog, Beau. Thanks, buddy, for always being happy to see me when others—who shall remain nameless—don't seem to share your joyful enthusiasm at my mere presence. You never judge, you're a good listener, and you love unconditionally—all the traits of a true friend.

Speaking of true friends, thanks to my critique partners, Robin Perini, Shea Berkley, and Louise Bergin. Our weekly meetings are always filled with laughter, fun, and lots of great advice.

A special thanks to my other go-to girls, Monique, Gina, and Laurie. I appreciate all the great e-mails and chats every writer needs to keep her sane. (Although my family might disagree with the sane part.)

I'm also thankful for my awesome, hardworking agent, Jill Marsal. Thanks for cheering me on, giving me the best advice, and for keeping me on the right track when I so often tend to want to veer.

I'm eternally grateful to my editor, Maria Gomez, for buying my books; to Charlotte Herscher for editing them; and to all the Montlake team for working so diligently to be the best publishing house an author could ever work with! Smooches to you all.

And as always, thanks to my readers—thankfully supplemented by my humongous number of family members—for choosing to read my books so I can write more. You are appreciated more than written words can express.

Read on For a Sneak Peek at Tamra Baumann's  
New Novel:

# It Had to Be Fate





# It Had to Be Fate

TAMRA BAUMANN



Montlake  
Romance

## CHAPTER ONE

Casey Anderson-Bovier's hands shook as she slowly lowered the letter from her ex-husband's lawyer to her desk. How dare Tomas sue for full custody of their children? Based on some bogus claim that the boys would be better off in Europe with him and the rich socialite he'd run off with. That the celebrities who stayed at the hotel she managed were a bad influence on his children.

*His children?* Her French-chef ex hadn't given a second thought to *his children* when he'd left a hasty note scrawled on a piece of stained butcher paper he tossed carelessly on the granite counter top in the kitchen.

*"Sorry babe. But I finally found true love. Gotta go with it. Be in touch."*

Later she'd found out that one of the dessert options on the room service menu had been her former husband. She'd given Tomas her implicit trust and in return, he'd made a fool out of her.

The radio on her belt let out a loud buzz before her new chef's voice called out. "Casey, can you come and approve this week's menus please?"

She blinked back the hot tears forming in her eyes and lifted the radio. "Be right there, Dax."

Casey stood from her desk and pulled herself together—she still had a hotel to run—and then made her way to the kitchen. Dax handed her the menus as he teased her oldest son, Caleb.

"The milk at the bottom counts too. If you want muscles, Toothpick, drink up." He pointed to Caleb's cereal bowl.

"But it's gross. It's all warm and full of little chunks. *Dad* makes us chocolate chip pancakes, not stupid good-for-you bran flakes."

Casey said, “Well your *mom* asks Dax to serve you healthy food for breakfast. So finish up and then get a move on, Caleb. It’s six forty-five. We have guests arriving soon.”

“Fine.” Her ten-year-old sighed, then lifted his bowl and slurped the last of the milk from his cereal. As he slumped toward the rear door of the hotel to clean the dock, he muttered, “Dad *never* makes us do *chores*.”

Yeah, because his father—who’d emptied their joint bank accounts before he left—only had one goal in life: to have a good time, no matter who he hurt in the process.

But she’d made it a policy to never speak poorly of Tomas in front of their kids. “What doesn’t kill you makes you stronger. But maybe I’ll ask Dax to make our favorite dessert tonight if I don’t hear any more complaining.” Their new five-star chef’s Death by Chocolate cake was really to console *her*, but she could share.

Caleb twisted his chin over his shoulder and pasted on a big, fake grin “Yay! Can’t wait to scrape the bird poop off the dock!”

She lifted a brow to show him she wasn’t amused with his sass. But something about his smile with its latest missing tooth combined with the adorable freckles sprinkled across the bridge of his pudgy nose was so cute, it zapped her anger away completely. It’d been a long summer with Caleb and Ty away in France with their dad. She was so happy they were finally back, it made her heart swell. She’d fight Tomas with all she had to keep her kids in Anderson Butte where they belonged.

Dax waited until Caleb was outside before he said, “Death by Chocolate cake is your go-to when you’re upset.”

“True.” She glanced at Dax who looked more like a buff Navy SEAL than a chef.

When Dax first arrived, her sister, Meg, had told her he’d shown some interest in being more than just Casey’s new chef. But she and Dax had a professional, friendly relationship. And he seemed to be head over heels in love with Pam, the town’s hairdresser.

Besides, Dax wasn’t her type. She leaned toward tall and lanky. And he deserved someone great, not a perpetually tired, single mother of two rambunctious boys who worked her tail off to please her never-happy father.

“These look fantastic.” She handed the menus back. “And I need cake because Tomas is suing for full custody of the boys. He says the celebrities

who stay here are a bad influence on them.”

Dax laughed. “Yeah, because Tomas is such a stand-up guy, running off with that French poodle and her millions, not speaking to his kids for the first three months after he’d left. And now all of the sudden all the celebrities he used to love to cook for are a bad influence on the boys? That’s a load of BS.”

“Yeah. But fighting his BS costs thousands in lawyer fees and keeps my bank accounts perpetually empty.” Luckily her dad, the mayor of their tiny celebrity hideout of a town, paid her a generous salary. But it didn’t come without a price. Her gruff father was no picnic to deal with.

Dax shrugged as he mixed a batch of cookie dough. “We have mostly rich business types and a few older celebrities on the books for the next few months. No one Tomas can use to prove his little theory.”

“That was true until a half hour ago. Kip called and asked us to keep one of his rocker clients for a few weeks until the trouble he’s gotten himself into dies down. The guy has a terrible reputation, so I made Kip sign a contract for five times our normal rate plus damages. But ten times the rate wouldn’t be worth it to me now.” That’s all she’d need. For Tomas’s lawyer to get wind of their new guest. He’d smell the blood in the water and attack like the shark he was.

She couldn’t lose her boys.

Dax stopped mixing and frowned. “Who is it?”

She grabbed the remote and kicked the volume up on the muted TV that rested high in the corner of the hotel’s industrial but elegant kitchen. Tomas had insisted they remodel it before he’d stoop so low as to work for a small-town hotel—even if their kitchen had served some of the most famous celebrities in the world—instead of one of the Michelin starred restaurants he’d been used to.

After switching to a news channel, she pointed to the screen. “*Zane Steele*.”

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Zane Steele rolled over and grabbed the phone buzzing beside his head on the nightstand. Whoever was calling before seven a.m. better have a damn good

reason. Cracking open just one eye, he read the screen. His business manager, Kip, knew Zane's late night habits when in the middle of songwriting marathons. It couldn't be good news.

"Lo?" Zane cleared the sleep from his voice.

"Hi. Nick's done it again."

His identical twin brother had been on the fast path to destruction lately. "What now?"

"Turn on CNN."

Zane searched the nightstand, and then the floor beside his bed until he found the remote. Changing from box scores blaring on ESPN to the news report on CNN, it didn't take long before a clip with his brother in handcuffs—resisting arrest—appeared on the screen. The words "Zane Steele, Public Drunk and Disorderly—Again!" scrolled along the bottom of the screen.

*Dammit!*

Zane slumped back against the headboard. "I told you we should've put a stop to letting Nick impersonate me in bars. While you rubbed your hands together with glee that Nick's antics finally helped me have a bad-boy rocker image, he's turned into an alcoholic."

Kip grunted. "It gets worse. He falsified his driver's license so they think it's you they've got in custody. After I realized he'd stolen your identity I had your financial advisor dig a bit. Nick's been stealing money from you too. You've never been arrested so they can't make a fingerprint match. If we come clean, he could go to jail for a ton of charges your lawyers are saying he'd face. But maybe he needs to go to jail."

"Out of the question. Nick needs to go to rehab, not jail." After not speaking to his brother for over ten years, Zane had searched for Nick to tell him their mother was dying. Once Zane had convinced his brother to cut his long stringy hair and shave his beard for their mother's sake, he'd looked presentable for a change. And exactly like Zane again.

He'd thought he'd been doing Nick a favor by letting him live in the guesthouse in his compound and giving him steady behind the scenes work instead of drifting his life away from one construction job to the next. But Nick had always hated Zane. Had tried to be his opposite since high school, growing his hair long, and sporting a full beard, so no one would know Zane was his brother. The press kits mentioned Zane had an estranged sibling, but Nick spent so much time wandering from one job to the next, the media

always tired of trying to find him.

But after Nick had cleaned himself up and had all the money he needed from Zane, he soon figured out he could go to clubs and be Zane for the night. Get any woman he wanted. Have groupies hang on his every word. Things Zane had grown weary of years ago.

That Nick had stolen money didn't matter. Zane had more than he could ever spend. Besides, he'd promised their mom he'd take care of his brother. "What are our options?"

"Not sure yet. I have the van waiting outside to take you to the airport. Your pilot is standing by. There's a celebrity hideout I've sent clients to over the years. Anderson Butte, Colorado. You can't be seen in public until we figure this out. Ask for Casey at the hotel. She has a suite waiting for you."

The "delivery van" had served him well to fool the aggressive paparazzi. "How long are we thinking?"

"Don't know. The lawyers are talking about copping a plea, maybe some community service, and then sending Nick, AKA you, straight to a rehab close by in Malibu for a couple of months."

A couple of months? "I can't stay locked—"

"Hold up. That's the beauty of this place. The town survives on the money celebrities who visit bring. They won't let the media know you're there. You can go anywhere you like. There's a lake, whitewater rafting, hiking in the Rockies. It might do you good. Get you out of that rut you're in."

He *was* in a rut. He hadn't written a decent song since his mom had died last year. And the touring and media appearances had gotten old. He'd taken a much needed break from the road to write again, while his brother kept the unknowing media happy with his antics.

"Fine. But keep me in the loop." He punched the "End" button and closed his scratchy, tired eyes. Two months in hiding? That'd be tough to pull off. But he couldn't stay home. The photographers would be camped out front soon, if they weren't there already.

But would Nick be better off in jail? It'd sober him up. Might even straighten him out. It'd probably be the best thing he could do to *help* his brother.

Zane grabbed his phone and was just about to hit redial when his thumb stopped mid-air.

He couldn't send Nick to prison. His mother would've never forgiven him. He had to cover for Nick because of a deathbed promise to his widowed mom. She'd taken a second job to send him to Juilliard—he owed her anything she'd asked. His mother had believed in him when no else in the music industry had.

After she'd died he'd been left with a huge hole in his heart—and his pain-in-the-ass brother to deal with.

But it was her warning right before she'd passed away that still lingered in the back of his mind. At first he'd blown it off as sentiment, but a pit formed in his gut every time he recalled her words.

*“Take care of your brother. Family and love are all that matter, Zane. One day the fame will be gone. And all you'll have is scads of cold hard cash—along with a cold, empty heart.”*

Shaking off the memory, burying it deep where it belonged, he stood, grabbed a duffle, and threw in enough clothes for a week. Hopefully his legal team would figure something out. If it took longer his staff could ship him whatever he needed.

After showering, he changed into jeans and a T-shirt, packed up his favorite guitar, then stuffed his laptop into a backpack. He slid his shades on, pulled a baseball cap down low on his head, and was ready to roll.

Anderson Freakin' Butte.

Great.

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR



*Photo © 2012 Robyn Adams*

Tamra Baumann is an award-winning author who writes lighthearted contemporary romance. Always a voracious reader, she picked up her first romance novel off the bestseller table in her favorite bookstore and was forever hooked. (Thank you, Nora Roberts!)

She lives in the Southwest, where the sun shines most every day and the sunsets steal her breath away. She has two kids, both bilingual in English and sarcasm, and a dog who is addicted to Claritin because he's allergic to grass. Her husband, who gamely tolerates her many book boyfriends, has been her real-life boyfriend for almost thirty years.

Stop by and say hi at [www.tamrabaumann.com](http://www.tamrabaumann.com).