

# The Wyoming Romances



## Getting It Right To the One I Never Forgot The Widow's Window

Christi Williams

## **WYOMING ROMANCES: THE COLLECTION**

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# To the One I Never Forgot

by  
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Hawk Point, Wyoming

*There's nothing like sitting around feeling sorry for yourself.*

Dusk descended. With only the glow of her laptop's screen for illumination and with nothing that sounded more appealing than looking for clues by stalking people from high school on social media, Gianna propped her chin in her hand and continued to search. She was almost positive after so many fruitless nights that Zack wouldn't have friended any of these people. They hadn't ever liked him, and he had seemed oblivious to them and their exclusive groups. And she certainly didn't care about connecting with any of them.

Zack was the only one she was interested in discovering. He was the first and only one she had ever been interested in. But wasn't it just her luck that the people she really didn't have any fond memories of were so easy to find online? Just a few keystrokes brought up their broadly smiling faces. Minus the braces and acne, it was true, but still not any more attractive than they had ever been although she suspected they were much more likely to invent exciting backgrounds and beautiful wives earning top salaries in their fields. Not to mention perfect little families of two children who had lots of adorable pictures snapped while traipsing along on fabulous vacations.

Her own profile was pretty skimpy. She avoided having a recent picture taken because she still saw the same skinny nobody she had been back then when she looked in the mirror. She owned her own company, but didn't bring up its existence on her personal page. Most of her accomplishments and her education, along with her whereabouts, weren't available for public consumption. In fact, the only people she was connected to on social media had sought her out. She spent her time online looking, not interacting.

The one Gianna tried so hard to find—just to see how he was doing of course, if he was happy, if he had a good life—seemed to have disappeared off the face of the earth.

So far this had been yet one more wasted night. What did it say about her that she would rather stay home and look for Zack than start up again with somebody new? But the truth was she didn't want anybody else. She had never wanted anyone else. She had only ever wanted Zack.

Yet the thought nagged: wasn't it about time to give up? Anyone would tell her she had spent enough time chasing a dream. If her mother knew how Gianna spent her nights, she would try to get her back in therapy. So she didn't confide in her mother. In fact, she hadn't felt close to her mother in years...not since the last time Gianna had seen Zack. Six long years ago.

As she sat in the dark and the silence tapping keys, what the search engine brought up, as if it had been waiting for her to find it at just that moment of loneliness and bittersweet nostalgia, was a new website called *To the One I Never Forgot*. Similar to those sites where you could send an anonymous apology out into the ether for the unkind or downright cruel things you had done to other people and always felt bad about, this site was a place to post memories of, and explanations to, the one who got away. As much as the apology sites, *To the One I Never Forgot* was not specifically designed to reach the person who had been wronged or left behind. The anonymous confessions were designed merely to ease the guilt of the guilty.

Well, she was that, Gianna thought. Guilty. She had always felt bad about the way she had let Zack slip away without a word. She still couldn't believe he could just disappear. He had to have had a reason, no matter how lame. Maybe if she took the time and wrote it all down, she

would feel better about the non-resolution of their abruptly truncated affair. Maybe she could start to forget.

Before she could think better of it, she typed in a user name and a password, and created a profile along with a pretty, free stock picture of fireworks. And then she started typing.

*To the one I never forgot,*

*I remember the first time I saw you. I was fifteen and starting a new school in a new town. I was late because Daddy had just got his new job and we hadn't moved soon enough to register for the school year. I was so nervous I couldn't eat breakfast, but my stomach felt sick as I walked into that classroom filled with people I didn't know. Most turned their heads and stared at me as I clutched my book bag to my stomach while trying to find an empty seat. But when you turned and looked at me, I remember you had the biggest, friendliest smile on your face, as if you had just been waiting for me all your life and were so glad to finally see me. You had on this shirt, some kind of safari shirt, it had five or six pockets, even one on the sleeve. I remember thinking you must be big into science or computers; no one with a hint of fashion sense would be caught dead in a shirt like that. I found a seat and class started. I was still feeling too anxious to really hear much of anything that was said, until my name was called. When I looked up, the whole class had craned their heads around again to look at me. And nobody looked exceptionally friendly. Nobody except, once again, you. Again you had that warm, wonderful smile on your face when you looked at me, and in your smile I found confidence. I knew we were destined to have meaning in each other's lives.*

She stopped typing. Maybe that was enough. Maybe she had finally got it out of her system and could settle down to sleep. She signed the post *Brown Eyed Girl*, clicked SEND, logged off and closed the lid on her laptop, plunging the room into darkness.

Zack stared at the screen of his phablet. Almost as big as a tablet computer, it was also a full-featured camera phone. He knew he looked like a geek holding the thing up to his ear to talk, but what the hell, he was a geek so it didn't matter who knew it. The duality of the machine charmed him. It saved him from having to buy a computer, since he was seldom within reach of Wi-Fi to use the Internet. And when he needed a phone, which was even more seldom, he had the phone in the mini tablet, which was another good thing since he was rarely in the area of a cell tower. He supposed he could break down and pay for satellite communications up on the mountain. But there were so few people he needed to communicate with, he thought the expensive service for rural areas a waste of money.

He had come into town for supplies, autumn rapidly giving way to winter in the high country near South Pass. He owned a snowmobile, so it wasn't like he couldn't escape from his solitude if he really wanted to make the trip, but he didn't like the thought of being caught in an avalanche when winter truly arrived and the snow fell and melted to ice and then more snow fell on top, making conditions extremely treacherous. And anyway, he was a pretty careful guy. He liked the sight of food in his cupboards when he opened the doors, and so if he was a bit obsessive about stocking up, so what? Better safe than sorry.

But staying overnight in a motel so he could keep a longstanding dental appointment the next day wasn't his idea of time well spent. He couldn't sleep with all the coming and going in the parking lot, the vibrations in the walls from televisions turned up too loud, the slamming of room doors and echoes of strangers' voices. He was especially bothered by the heavy tread of feet on the concrete walkway outside his room. He was grateful that at least he had snagged a room on the second floor and could probably convince his eyes to close as soon as things quieted down and everyone else settled in for the night.

Just a small touch of PTSD, he thought wryly, legacy of his time in the Middle East. He was glad that at least that he was on the second floor and didn't have to contend with the sounds of people walking overhead, which was something guaranteed to cause him a bad night.

Antsy but at the same time bored, idly scrolling the timeline of a social medium he rarely visited under the assumed name he sometimes had trouble recalling when too much time passed between sign ins, he barely noticed an invitation to “like” the page of a website called, of all the cheesy names, *To the One I Never Forgot*. He stopped, scrolled back up, and looked again. Then, curious in spite of himself and his initial reaction to the site’s sentimental come-on, he clicked on the page.

“In the words of the immortal P. T. Barnum, there’s one born every minute,” he murmured to himself. But sucker or not, the next click on a blue URL link took him to the website. He hesitated at the requirements of user name and password. He was suspicious by nature, a trait almost ground into his pores during the war, and he was sure that he would have to cough up more personal information as well as a credit card number if he registered. But what the hell, he could afford it, and he had become skilled at making up a persona to fit any occasion. But to his surprise nothing else was required of him. When his invented login information was accepted, he was free to peruse the profiles of all the sad people pouring their hearts out as they described their long-lost loves.

It felt a tad creepy in a way, sitting in the dark in a rented room, reading all the angst-ridden stories of people looking for forgiveness for messing up and closure for relationships gone awry. He had never dreamed there were so many stories of metaphorical ships passing—or sometimes—colliding in the night, tales of old passions and the seeking of forgiveness and maybe even some hope of renewal. He found that although some were, most of the people doing the confessing weren’t actually looking to take up again with lost loves. They seemed to be just trying to get past that place where they thought they had grievously wronged somebody, and years later still didn’t have a clue how to go about trying to fix it.

He looked for a while, idly hoping he could soon log off and get to sleep. But the longer he looked, the more stupid he felt, like some kind of voyeur or something. He should get off the Internet and go to bed, whether sleep came or not. He wasn’t sure what he thought he was doing wasting time on a website with a name like *To the One I Never Forgot*. He didn’t readily admit to himself any longer that there was someone in his own past he had never forgotten, someone who still brought up unwanted and deeply buried pools of sorrow for a sweet connection severed without explanation and a solemn promise broken. He wasn’t prepared to admit, even now, how much he missed Gianna.

And then he saw the profile picture of bright fireworks against a black night sky. He paused. Just like the fireworks from that night so long ago. He read the user name: Brown Eyed Girl. He thought, No, it couldn’t be. And then he started reading.

It was that damned shirt. As soon as he read the entry and the description of the geek shirt he had once owned, he was sure he knew the author.

Gianna. It had to be.

The next day was a Monday. But a big attraction of owning her own company was she didn’t have to go in to the office on Monday morning. Gianna didn’t have an office. In fact, with the economic slowdown she had seen her fledgling business start to struggle financially. She was down to consulting with just a few firms, mostly in China where her designs had seen fruition during the boom times, and she did all her work from home.

A normal person would be ecstatic for the unexpected day off and a chance to sleep in, she thought. But she had gone beyond normal a long time ago, and instead she was wide awake at five A.M., tapping the keys on her computer as soon as the coffee in her one-cup system finished brewing. She didn’t like to admit that maybe there was still something wrong with her, but as the years passed she was proving absolutely unable to sustain a relationship, becoming more and more resistant to starting up with someone new again, and it was getting harder and harder to deny that it was probably all her fault.

She did try. She tried to please. But she just wasn't very successful at it. She was too different. Take this morning, for instance. All she wanted to do was to check in and see if anyone had commented on her post. How pathetic was that, that the social highlight of her week would be an answer to a paragraph she left on a whim at a website, that could have described anyone's first day of class in a new town. Still, it was what she wanted to do. She had scant hope that Zack would have somehow miraculously seen her post and answered. Yet she had nothing better to do, she couldn't sleep, and so what was the harm in checking? It was nobody's business but her own if she was a loser.

But when she logged on, and checked her post, she saw that overnight it had become someone else's business.

*To Brown Eyed Girl from Desert Rat,*

*I remember that shirt, it was a color somewhere between brown and olive. I thought it was pretty rad, but I remember you laughed at me whenever I wore it, even though you tried not to. And I remember you, too, from the very first time saw you. The way the light from outside framed your strawberry blond hair with a blazing circle of gold as you stood before the window. The way you clutched that book bag for dear life, your pretty long-fingered hands with the clean, shiny nails gone all white knuckled in terror. When you finally found an empty seat, you looked so relieved—until the teacher called your name and thrust you right back into the spotlight. I think I loved you then, from that moment when I first set eyes on you. You had a model's build, tall and slender and willowy, with such a long neck. And those pouty lips. What thoughts they inspired in a randy teenager. I think neither of us was prepared for the kinds of feelings we brought out in each other. We were way too young. Your mom was totally against us, and so you had to slip out even to study with me. I wanted you, though. Always. It wasn't long before I was burning for you. But you were afraid of the intensity of our feelings, I understand that now. I tried to wait for you to grow up. I shouldn't have tried to force you to a maturity you didn't possess.*

Gianna found herself gnawing a knuckle. She couldn't believe it. She had lured him out of hiding. At last. She was sure of it. Nobody but Zack could have written that answer. Nobody but Zack would have understood.

So she had actually found him again. What were the odds against him visiting this new website on the very night she posted? Astronomical. Zack would know, oddball math freak that he probably still was, but the chances of finding him with that one post were vanishingly miniscule, she was sure.

So it must be fate that she finally found him, she told herself. It was destiny that she run across him again, at just the moment when she needed him so much. And he openly admitted that he had loved her all those years ago. A barely detectable handhold for her to cling to, but definitely visible for all the world to read, not just her.

She started typing frantically, afraid if she wasted a single moment more, his answer and maybe even he himself would vanish back into the guts of some anonymous server farm, never to be rediscovered.

*To the one I never forgot,*

*I remember rides home from school on your motorbike. I remember sitting in the stands during football games with baked potatoes in our pockets to keep our hands warm. I remember doing homework together and watching movies in your basement. I remember spring dance, the blue dress I wore, and the look on your face when it first hit you that I had a pretty nice shape. I remember your mom's sugar cookies, and you almost breaking your leg when you agreed to go horseback riding when I dared you, and then you ended up falling off. I remember picnics, and holding hands, and our first kiss. But what I remember best is loving you.*

*Brown Eyed Girl*

She wanted to write more, but she made herself stop. She told herself she only wanted an explanation and then she would be content. She would see if Zack answered again. Before she said too much, before she tried to explain too much, too soon. Her minimal profile had been on social media sites for a long time, she used her real name and an old photo that he would recognize, and so she was easy to find. If Zack had wanted to contact her, he could have done so at any time over the years. But he hadn't.

She thought it was still possible she could make things infinitely worse than they already were. If it sounded like she was placing blame, she was afraid she could drive him so far away he would never come back. And then she would never know what had happened to them.

Zack was eating an early breakfast when he checked the phablet to see if Gianna had written any more. She had. Not much, but she had hit the highlights of high school, writing about a few memories that they shared.

Was she being extra careful, or did she truly only remember the teen romance novel stuff: football games and sugar cookies, dances and baked potato hand warmers.

How far would she go with this if he pushed her past high school? How far did he want to go down memory lane with its dangerous ruts and narrow escapes from falling off steep cliffs? He had planned to be back at the cabin in the mountains by dark tonight, where he would once more soon be cut off from the rest of the world by worsening weather. And then he would be alone. The way he liked it, he told himself, tugging thoughtfully at his lower lip.

He could just get up, pay his bill, and head out of town, leaving Gianna hanging. As she had left him hanging all those years ago. There would be a sort of karmic fairness in that, just turning and walking away from Gianna. A younger Zack might even have felt justified in paying her measure for measure.

But time and circumstances had conspired to replace that starry-eyed little nerd with a hard, lean ex-soldier who mostly preferred solitude and his own company. A man who didn't spend much time contemplating the feelings of himself or others. There was no point in looking inside. Or in looking back.

So what was he doing, playing Internet games with an old girlfriend? Was he bored? Was he lonely? Was he *out of his mind*?

Maybe...he was getting better. He didn't like to think about it too much, the fact that he had been diagnosed with Post Traumatic Stress and would likely have symptoms for the rest of his life. He had been advised that shutting himself off from society for months at a time was probably the wrong thing to do. That choosing no company but his own, and day after day of toil underground without even the healing rays of the sun, was a mistake. The doctor didn't come out and say he thought it was like being buried alive, but Zack got the distinct idea that's what he meant.

But, hell, maybe it wasn't a mistake. Maybe he had stumbled, all unknowing, into an unconventional treatment for his condition. A treatment that worked for him. After all, what had always been good for others had rarely been good for Zack. He had been different, was different, would probably always be different.

The only one who had ever begun to understand him, who really seemed to get what he was about, was Gianna. At least he thought that was the case until without a word she had turned her back on him.

So did he really want to dredge all that up again? A hard rock miner going exploring inside his own psyche. Hard telling what he might dig up.

But maybe the reason she had dropped him without telling him why was sitting waiting to be discovered. Maybe she would tell him now why she had ditched him without even the requisite Dear John email. Maybe, if he prodded her hard enough, she would tell him. Gianna

had always been pretty easy for him to manipulate. She had always done what he wanted when he pressed her—because she loved him, he thought with a sharp twinge of guilt.

Yet if he wanted a quick answer so he could make an equally quick escape back to his mountain lair, like it or not he would have to tweak her a bit.

*To Brown Eyed Girl from Desert Rat,*

*I remember those innocent high school days, too. But I also remember the summer after high school, the summer we left innocence behind. I remember stealing a bottle of your mom's wine with a name we couldn't pronounce, and heading for our favorite spot at the river. I remember the moon was up, reflecting in your wide eyes. I remember tasting pinot grigio with your kisses, and undoing your blouse one slow button at a time. We were both virgins—how long ago was that, when we were innocent and just beginning to explore our sexuality? I admit I shouldn't have rushed you into that kind of relationship. Your mom didn't even let you date. You were younger than your years. Vulnerable. And I knew that. But I had just a few precious months left, and I wanted you so bad. I shouldn't have hurried you. I should have waited. I realize that now.*

He stopped. Would she answer? He would have been willing to bet that she wouldn't. She had always shied away from the truth, maybe not even admitting to herself, let alone her gargoyle of a mother, that their relationship had gone beyond loving friendship. He remembered how she looked, naked in the moonlight. He remembered her sweet taste, and the flowery smell of her hair, and the feel of her long, smooth legs sliding along his hips as he sank into her warmth. He remembered his fumbling inexperience that first time, and how they had quickly learned each other's bodies over the next few months, what pleased...and beyond mere pleasure, what made them catch their breath in an ecstasy of desire.

He remembered that she wouldn't talk about it. Ever. As if speaking of what they did together every chance they got to be alone would make it real.

He pinched the bridge of his nose. What was the use? It was way too late for him and Gianna. They were different people now, she surely as much changed as he, with the passage of time...and the long silence of the distance between them.

Gianna's breath caught. Desert Rat's latest reply was so personal. Definitely meant for her alone. And so revealingly suggestive, although he stayed within the site's PG rated guidelines.

But it was clear that she wasn't the only one who remembered what it had been like between them. Two gawky teenagers who fit so well together, the outsiders in any group, whose virtuous beginning as friends had blossomed that fateful summer into heated sensuality. She could recall the feel of his hands on her, the way he fit inside her, the smell of their lovemaking. She had given everything she had to Zack. And since he found it so easy to walk away from her without a backward glance, she wondered if what Zack had felt for her back then was truly love—or just whether constantly being thrown together on the fringes of any social activity caused him to turn to her as some sort of consolation prize.

Well, here he was. In the flesh, so to speak, after all the intervening years. If she really wanted to get at the truth, all she could do was ask. Maybe he would even answer.

*To the one I never forgot,*

*I remember there were those who considered us an oddity, the weird couple. A joke. But what I felt for you had little to do with our outsider status. I didn't love you just because we were on the fringes together looking in.*

*I couldn't understand how the other girls weren't as crazy for you as I was. You were beautiful to me. Your eyes were always warm when you looked at me. You always had a smile for me, your fingers always searched mine out, your arm going easily around my shoulder. Ready for hugs. Ready for kisses. Ready to prop me up when I was feeling at my lowest.*

*It's true I lost my way that summer, and for a long time I didn't know how to get back. Daddy died and then you were leaving, and I didn't know what I was going to do without you.*



*But nothing that happened between us involves any blame on your part. I meant to make love with you. I meant it with all my heart. What I gave to you I gave freely. I loved you. How could I have let you go without sharing that love with you?*

*Brown Eyed Girl*

She stopped typing, hesitated, and then clicked SEND. She felt constrained by the fact that anyone who stumbled across this exchange could read what she was writing and judge her for being so weak. Already her and Zack's conversation was one of the highest rated on the site; she had to wade through a long string of comments to find his answers. They had hundreds of readers, which was ironic considering how unpopular they had once been, separately and together. She had so much to tell him, and so many questions she wanted to ask, but it didn't feel right to lay herself bare for the world to examine. Yet unless she revealed to the world what had truly happened that summer, how could she expect him to keep reading long enough to understand?

Here was her chance, the opportunity she had yearned for to finally set things right with him. In the end if he walked away from her again, at least she had had her say. She wouldn't have to hold her feelings inside anymore, waiting for the day they finally ended up flowing over her and drowning her in a river of burning sorrow.

She could let it all out, and hope that Zack would follow her lead and let it all out along with her. After all, no one besides the two of them knew who Brown Eyed Girl and Desert Rat were in real life. It didn't make any difference to anyone but the two of them if they aired long buried secrets online.

**Z**ack sat back against the booth, studying what Gianna had written. There was something off about her posts. He didn't understand how she could still be professing her love for him when she had been the one to dump him like last week's stinking garbage. He felt the waitress eyeing him again, giving him the fisheye for having lingered so long over breakfast. She probably wanted to clear his booth, wipe the table, and collect her tip. It was time for him to go. If he wanted to say anything more to Gianna before his dental appointment, he'd better get to typing. But he didn't know if he wanted to say more. He didn't know if he wanted to pursue this at all. It was ancient history, done and gone, water under the proverbial bridge.

Ah, shit! he thought, as despite himself his fingers started typing.

*To Brown Eyed Girl from Desert Rat,*

*To my way of thinking you were never odd. You were the best thing that ever happened to me. I felt so lucky when you walked into my life. Nobody before had ever really understood me. You were like my other half, like we were meant for each other.*

*You knew I had enlisted. We agreed that it was probably the only way I could pay for college, which you said was important to you. I thought I was doing what you wanted. You said you would wait. I had no inkling that when I left it would be the end for us.*

*As the days passed and I didn't hear anything from you, I thought you had decided we had made a mistake. I knew your mom was happy to see me go, and for all I knew, maybe you had decided that you were glad too.*

He willed himself to stop. Enough. Enough already with dredging up the past. As he had learned the hard way, continuing to pick the scabs off old wounds only ensured that they would never heal. He had scars instead of scabs, because he refused to let the past influence the present. He clicked SEND with an air of finality, swallowed the last of his cold coffee, reached into his back pocket for his wallet, threw some bills on the table and left the restaurant.

**G**ianna read and then re-read Desert Rat's last comment. She was shocked at the idea that he thought she was the one who had inexplicably discarded him. He was obviously still angry and hurt. Had they both been mistaken about the other's motives for letting go? Would it have

been so easy to correct if she had just contacted him instead of letting the hurt silence stretch out for months...and then years? Was it possible? Could two so allegedly intelligent people have been so blindly stupid?

She wondered if there was any hope of fixing this situation after all this time, or if she should just let the past remain truly past.

She heard a noise in her quiet apartment, and suddenly realized she wasn't the only one awake now. Before receiving her usual morning kiss, before taking up again the comforting routine of the life she led, she would try one more time.

*To the one I never forgot,  
I don't understand. I am still waiting.  
Can we meet?  
Brown Eyed Girl*

She hadn't asked if he were in a relationship. She had just assumed he wouldn't be. Which was naïve at best. Why wouldn't he be married, or at least seeing someone? Up until a few days ago, she herself had been entangled in yet another dead end affair that concluded by going nowhere. She was the one who apparently couldn't bond with an adult member of the opposite sex. She had no reason to suspect Zack couldn't sustain a loving relationship. So why wouldn't he have someone special after all this time?

She went through the motions of her day while she waited, nervously checking for an answer whenever she had a spare moment. By late afternoon she had about given up. She felt extremely let down and recognized she was teetering on the edge of the chasm of depression. All she had to show for a day and a night of renewed hope were a sour stomach and some startlingly rude comments concerning her request to take Brown Eyed Girl and Desert Rat offline, as if people who had been tagging along for the exchange thought they were somehow owed the final outcome. But historically there had already been too much interference in what happened between herself and Zack. She owed an explanation only to him, and maybe he owed her one as well.

As she chewed her lip, suddenly an answer popped up on the screen.

*To Brown Eyed Girl from Desert Rat,  
I've been asking myself all day if it would change anything if we met now. But the truth is,  
I've been waiting too.  
Where are you?*

Her heart clenched in her chest. He was wavering. As if he would change his mind if she didn't answer immediately, Gianna typed fast, feeling she couldn't make her fingers fly over the keyboard swiftly enough.

*To the one I never forgot,  
I'm still near the place where the rockets went off.  
Brown Eyed Girl*  
The answer appeared instantaneously.  
*To Brown Eyed Girl from Desert Rat,  
Meet me.*

**Z**ack paced along the riverbank. A lot had changed since he had been here last, in just a few months more houses and streets and the detritus of development crept ever closer to what had been a wonderful and wild place. Here he and Gianna had first made love, well hidden from prying eyes by a thick screen of willows. Now the banks were trampled and a boardwalk path, mowed grass, and a ragged line of sickly looking saplings followed the contours of the water. Here they had watched the annual fireworks show before setting off some better internal ones for each other as they shed their clothes and joined young bodies to become one.

They had both shown so much promise, individually and together. What they lacked in social skills they made up for with whip-crack intelligence. It was odd that their relationship had come apart so rapidly, and even more strange that they were both apparently still tied to this little town of Hawk Point where they had first met and which had been so discouraging for them. They had been held back by society and held apart by Gianna's wealthy mother's disapproval of the boy who wasn't good enough for her daughter, yet still back then he had thought they would somehow have a future together. If only things had been different. If only Gianna had waited. Maybe now he could finally find out the truth of what happened to cancel that outcome.

He heard a car approaching, and then, suddenly, before he had fully prepared himself to see her again, there she was. She climbed out of the driver's side of the vehicle, the long legs that he still dreamed about unfolding as she stood to her full height. A little boy who didn't look very much like her, with his dark hair and olive skin, scrambled out the other side and headed across the grass toward the water.

"Be careful," she called after the boy, in the voice Zack's heart still remembered. "Stay well away from the river!"

"I will," the boy yelled back over his shoulder, already stooping for a rock to throw in the sluggish current.

Well, it would have been too much to expect that Gianna would remain completely as he remembered her. No more a girl, she was all woman now: apparently a mother. Maybe she had a husband waiting at home for dinner. Maybe she had other children besides this one young boy, who although he didn't much resemble his mother, yet looked familiar to Zack.

Gianna peeled her gaze from the boy and pushed her hair back from her eyes. She gave Zack a tentative smile as she checked him out thoroughly, eyes scanning his torso and down his legs and then slowly back up. "Hello, Zack," she said with a smile. "You look good. You've filled out."

Despite his intentions, he felt himself heating at her perusal of his body. "The same back at you, Gianna," he mumbled, thinking she might not take it so well if he returned the favor of ogling her.

"Well..." she said, after an awkward pause.

"Well," he echoed. "We seem to owe each other some kind of explanation. Would you like to go first?"

She eyed a bench bolted to a concrete pad near the wooden walkway. "Could we sit, so neither of us has the sun in our eyes?"

They moved to sit side by side, and he had to admit it was better not to have to stand and stare at each other.

"I had a...breakdown that summer," she said quietly, without preamble. "I couldn't handle what was happening with Daddy, and then with you. I know you'll find it hard to believe in this age of instant communication across all kinds of devices, but I was prevented from contacting you. Mother took away my phone and my laptop, and locked me in my room. And as you know, I didn't have close friends to check on me. There was no one to help me get a message to you."

He looked out over the water. With anyone else, he would have had trouble believing this lame explanation. But since it was Gianna, who had always seemed fragile to him, and knowing her mother and how she had never liked him, he had to accept that she was telling him the truth.

"I'm sorry," he said. "I didn't know."

"Nobody said anything to you? I assumed people knew. That someone would tell you that I had...cracked up." She glanced sideways at him.

"Nobody said a word to me," he assured her, and hoped she would give him the benefit of the doubt and believe the truth when she heard it. "Maybe they thought I didn't want to hear anything about you since it looked like we broke up."

She looked out over the water instead of in his direction. “When I didn’t start to get better right away,” she said softly, “Mother had me put away for a few months.”

“Put away? In an institution?”

“Yes. A very nice, very expensive hospital for people who couldn’t handle it when things went wrong in their lives.”

“Gianna, I had no idea. Why didn’t you try to contact me, to tell me any of this, when you got out?”

“When I got home, and could finally check my phone, I saw there hadn’t been even one message or call from you. I realized Mother could have erased them, but when none arrived from then on I just thought you didn’t want to hear from me.”

He swallowed painfully. “I did write to you. When there was no answer, I thought you didn’t want to hear from *me*,” he said, realizing her mother must have destroyed his letters before Gianna could see them. He rubbed his eyes. “We were so young. And, it turns out, so incredibly short sighted. Have you been all right since then?”

“I still have episodes of depression, but nothing like that. And, anyway, it wasn’t all bad. By the time the doctors discovered I was carrying Zachary,” she smiled in the little boy’s direction, “it was too late for Mother to do anything about it. When I got better I moved out of her house and into an apartment, over her strenuous objections. It was hard going to school and caring for a small child, but I stuck it out and borrowed as much as I could until I got my trust fund from Daddy. It was important to me, so I did get my degree: I’m an architect. With Daddy’s money and Zachary being so young, now I don’t have to work if I don’t want to. But I will want to. Zachary is growing up, so the day when I want to build up my business again is coming very soon.”

He didn’t say anything for a while. He heard everything she said, but had focused in with laser-like intensity on only one thing. Rubbing his chin, his eyes following her gaze toward the boy, he asked, “Zachary?”

“Your son.” She turned to him and smiled. “I’ve been anxious to tell you about him. Would you like to meet him?”

“Wow. Wait,” he said, his heart suddenly lurching along and stumbling in his chest, making it hard for him to breathe. “Give me just a minute to absorb what you’re telling me.”

Why hadn’t he guessed? Of course the kid looked hauntingly familiar to him. Zachary was the image of Zack himself at that age.

“Of course. I don’t mean to rush you.” She waited, and he thought how utterly selfish he must sound. She had given him more than five years already to prepare to accept her shocking news. The first of those years he had spent just trying to stay alive in the desert of the Middle East, and then the time since he had returned home he had been so selfishly absorbed with his own raw needs. It had been his choice to remain hidden from discovery, his conscious decision to never try to touch base with her again. He had gotten out of the Army and burrowed into his mine shaft like a wounded animal. He couldn’t blame Gianna for not finding him before, when he had done everything he could not to be found.

“I’ll give you the short version. Here’s the thing: I have PTSD,” he finally said. “I took a few classes in the military, but I never finished college. I live alone in a cabin in the hills. I work a gold claim. I put what I make in the gold mine into the stock market. I’m sick, but I’m rich.”

She laughed, the sound ringing out across the water, causing the little boy to turn and look at them. It was a healing sound, one that started to breach the cold distance between the two adults. “Oh, Zack. We are a pair, aren’t we? Mother would be proud of you,” she said with a giggle.

“She would, wouldn’t she? Having money was always pretty important to her.”

“So if you live in the mountains now, ‘Desert Rat’ comes from the war?”

He nodded. “It seemed appropriate. I’m not sure if there are any mountain rats.”

"I don't know either. Pikas, I think. Well, it sounds as if neither of us is much stronger emotionally than we ever were, but at least we have money," she said. She didn't sound as if that made any more difference to her than it ever had. "Tell me: are you happy, Zack?"

"I'm not sure, Gianna. I don't know if I'm capable of being happy. I know I haven't really thought about happiness since...well, since I went away. What about you? Are you happy?"

"Zachary definitely makes me happy, but I'm still...I don't know, I feel half-finished or something. I'm a mother, but not a complete woman. Does that make sense? I haven't been right, not really, since you left."

He reached for her hand, clasped her fingers. "So what now?"

She curled her hand in his. "What do you want to do, Zack?"

"We have unfinished business between us. I'm thinking I would like to try to get back to where we were, but I don't know if that's possible now. Is there anyone else in your life?"

She shook her head. "I could never make it work with anyone else. It was just always wrong. Never right."

"Sounds familiar. Listen, I could try to find a place in town. See how it goes. I'm not real comfortable around people anymore. Or...you and Zachary could maybe come home with me."

"Zachary's in kindergarten. We couldn't live in the mountains except for summers. But you could come live with us. See how it goes."

"I have nightmares," he said. "I'm not the easiest guy to live with. I have moods, and sometimes I wake up screaming."

"Zachary should know his own father. I'll do my best to deal with your issues. Will you return the favor?"

He thought of living in town, of the ton of supplies he would have to store in order to spend the winter at her place. They wouldn't go hungry, that was for sure, even if they never got out of bed for the whole season.

"I promise I will try my hardest to be a regular guy." He leaned to kiss her. Memories of other times and other kisses flooded him. She was like—and yet not like—the Gianna he remembered. In some ways she was very familiar, and in others she was a stranger. She probably felt the same way about him. They each had big, complicated emotional problems. Yet they were still more alike than anyone else was like them, as if they really had been made for each other. As her lips parted under his persistent assault, he felt like he had a puddle of hot oil inside and someone was cranking up the wick. But before he could actually burst into flames, she ended the kiss and drew away. He turned his head in the same direction her face was pointed, to see the sturdy little figure at water's edge, gaping at the sight of Mommy kissing a stranger.

"Poor kid," he murmured. "Does he have any idea?"

"I haven't said anything to him about you yet. But he'll be all right. He's a pretty tough little boy." She held tightly to Zack's hand and he clutched her fingers back as if holding tightly to life itself, while she raised her voice to call: "Zachary, honey, come over here. There's somebody special that you need to meet."

**Z**ack was glad Gianna wasn't the kind of mother to push her child into something he wasn't ready for. After dinner, after she got the boy ready for bed, there had been no request for a bedtime story from Zack or even a hug. He would be granted time to grow into the role of father to his child.

He was glad, too, that she wasn't the kind to keep the TV on endlessly. He had become used to silence, and could barely tolerate the constant electronic noise most people seemed to crave. It didn't take long for Gianna to return from tucking in Zachary. When the boy was finally asleep and she came to sit beside Zack on the couch, it was as if no time at all had passed and they had regressed to a younger version of themselves.

He reached for her. "Is it too soon to take up where we left off?"

“Oh, Zack, it’s been too long,” she answered, already undoing the buttons of her blouse and then working on those of his shirt as he kissed her. Their lips met, and she tilted her head and opened her mouth to his questing tongue. When he could force his lips from hers, they were both panting for breath. Her blouse lay open and he trailed kisses down her neck to the valley between her breasts.

“Sweet, sweet Gianna,” he breathed against her skin, making her shiver. “I’ve been a selfish ass. I am so sorry.”

Her fingers twined in his hair. “Please don’t apologize. We both made mistakes. In a way we are the immature people we were, but we’re also totally grown-up and new. We just need to start over.”

He tugged with his lips at the lace over one breast. “I like the new you,” he whispered. “As much as I liked the other one. She was a pretty girl but you are beautiful. Womanly. Sexy. You smell good.”

“And you’re much more handsome,” she whispered back. “Hot. A hunk even. I love the feel of you beneath my hands, so hard and manly. Wait, that didn’t sound right. Your chest is so hard and manly.”

He laughed quietly so as not to wake the little boy, cupping her breasts with his hands. “I know what you meant, but we’ll get to the other hard, manly parts in due time. Would you like to continue this reunion out here on the couch, or in your bed?”

“In our bed,” she corrected. “Everything I am, everything I have, I give to you. I just hope it’s enough.”

They stood, slowly making their way to the bedroom, stopping for more kisses and to shed various articles of clothing piece by piece along the way.

He urged her back on the bed in her room, spreading her legs and looking his fill before kissing every inch of her and then guiding himself into her remembered warmth. He clasped both of her hands, raising them over her head as her legs wrapped around him with the slide of silky skin, just like he remembered. “I love you,” he said. “Only you, Gianna. Always you.”

“And I love you.” The dim light from the living room reflected in her eyes. “My Zack. My only one. The one I could never forget.”

**Z**ack opened his eyes the next morning to sun streaming in the window. For a moment, he couldn’t remember where he was. His eyes scanned the pale pink walls, the sheer curtains tied back at the sides of the window, the raised white blind with a fringe on the bottom. A female’s bedroom, for sure. And then he remembered, he had spent the night with Gianna, an all grown up Gianna who had learned a thing or two about heated, satisfying sex while he had been away.

So she hadn’t been a nun, but he hadn’t been anything resembling a monk either. And so they would accept the people they were now, and go on from here.

He wondered what time it was. He never slept late. But he never slept as well as he had last night, spooned with Gianna’s ass up against his semi-hard cock all night, without a hint of the night terrors that sometimes kept him awake.

He could smell coffee, probably the scent that had awakened him by wafting into his nose from the kitchen, and either pancakes or waffles cooking. He could hear Gianna talking, but nobody answered, so he assumed she was on the phone. He rolled his head to the side on the crisp pillowcase and prepared to slide his legs out of bed.

His eyes widened. Good thing he hadn’t just popped naked out of bed, since Zachary was standing in the open doorway, watching him. Still dressed in his super hero pajamas, the boy had a plastic truck clutched in one hand.

“Good morning,” Zack said, sitting up with the sheets tucked around him. The little boy just looked at him without answering.

“Sure smells good in here. Your mom making breakfast?”

Zachary nodded. "I'm going to Grandma's after we eat," he said.

"You like to spend time at Grandma's?" Zack asked.

The boy nodded. "She lets me watch movies on TV and we go shopping, and out to lunch sometimes." There was a brief pause. "My mom said you're my dad."

The segue in the conversation caught Zack off guard. He hesitated, wondering how far he should go since he didn't know how far Gianna had pursued the subject with Zachary. "Did your mom say that to Grandma, or to you?" he hedged.

"To Grandma. Then I could hear Grandma's voice getting real loud, so I guess she didn't like hearing that you're my dad."

"Well, it's the truth. I am your dad. Don't worry, Grandma will get used to the idea eventually. But how do you feel about it? About me being your dad?" Zack held his breath, waiting for the boy's answer. He had missed so much of Zachary's life already. He could accept Gianna's mother's poor opinion of him; she had never liked him so it didn't hurt his feelings to find out she hadn't changed her mind in the intervening years. But if the child couldn't accept him as his father, it could make for a tense situation, living with Gianna and Zachary.

The boy tilted his head, dark eyes never leaving Zack's face. "Do you play baseball?" he asked.

"I do, a bit. I'm not very good at it, but I know how to play. I know a little more about basketball, but I'm not very good at that either. I'm good at electronics, though. I can program a computer," Zack offered.

The boy shrugged, unimpressed by Zack's technical skills. "I'm in Tee Ball already, so I don't need to learn that. But I would like a basketball hoop."

Great. His kid was into sports, his own least accomplished area. Zack said, "We will get a basketball hoop, and then you and I can practice whenever you want."

"Okay," the boy said, at the same time his mother called out, "Zachary, it's time to get dressed now."

Gianna came to stand in the doorway behind their son.

"If you want breakfast, you better get dressed too," the dark-eyed boy advised Zack.

"Good idea," Zack said. Gianna placed her hands on Zachary's shoulders and then smiled at Zack as she turned the boy toward his own room.

Then she just stood looking at Zack, a musing smile curving her lips as she gazed at him, caught in a shaft of sunlight in her bed.

"What?" he whispered. He knew his body was just okay. He stayed in decent shape in the mine, but he would never win any prizes in the pecs and abs department. He just hoped he wasn't too big a disappointment when seen in all his naked glory in the daylight.

"I'm just looking at you, enjoying the sight of you. I still can't believe you're really here."

"Zachary heard you tell his grandma that I'm his dad," he said in a low voice.

"I figured as much. But I had to let her know you were here before she came to pick him up. She's still a little...unpredictable sometimes."

He hesitated, unsure how far to go with this, or even if he had a right to approach the subject. "I think it's good that they have a relationship. That you allow them have one, in spite of everything."

"There's no question that my mother does love Zachary. And she's good to him. I'm still not too sure whether she really loves me, but I guess at this point that's neither here nor there."

"I love you. That's what counts; that we love each other," Zack said. "I think we're going to be all right. I'll be here for you and for our son from here on out, Gianna."

Tears shimmered in her eyes as she nodded. "Let's eat. We'll start out slow, doing all the normal little things other families do, and work our way up to the big ones."

"Sounds like a plan," he said as he rose to get dressed, hurrying to join his newly discovered family for a breakfast that smelled nothing short of heavenly.

# Getting It Right

by  
Christi Williams

*For Joyce, sister, friend, beta reader*

*L'tempo, l'vento, I siori, le femme e la fortuna, iolta e I torn coma la luna.*  
The times, the wind, women and fortune, change with the moon.  
—Tyrolean folk saying

## Prologue

*Powell County Library*  
*Magickal! Mystical! Metaphysical Fair*

Selene rolled her eyes after scanning the posterboard sign propped next to the door of the library's meeting room. In this era of online information, the local library must really be hurting for walk-in patrons if they had to resort to this sort of entertainment. She herself had almost had to be dragged here. The last thing she wanted right now was to have her palm or her aura read. In fact she refused to even consider it. Deep inside, where the truths she was afraid to examine resided, she knew all the indications for the unhappy ending she predicted for herself could be revealed today if she let her guard down.

Inside the meeting room, Selene and her long-time friend Sarah stood in front of a plastic folding table draped with a blue silk shawl and printed with silver stars and white crescent moons. *Really, could it get any more phony?* Selene thought. But Sarah giggled and nudged Selene, wanting to continue. A woman with shoulder length dark hair and piercing dark eyes watched them from the other side of the table, her hands toying with an oversized deck of cards.

"You first," Sarah said.

"I only came here today because you wanted to, Sarah," Selene answered. The woman seated behind the table continued to watch them closely. Sarah's fidgeting and giggling made Selene feel like a teenager, definitely not a good thing in her estimation. "I worked late last night. I'm tired. Let's just get this over with so I can go home to bed."

"Sit down," the woman seated behind the table invited, gesturing to the chairs placed in front of the table.

Selene glanced at the woman, certain she would see it was Sarah being addressed. But instead the tarot card reader looked directly at Selene. A shiver ran down Selene's back at the woman's unblinking dark-eyed scrutiny.

Selene shook her head. "I don't want my fortune told."

"Maybe you should allow me to take just a peek at the cards for you," the woman insisted in a soft voice. "There might be interesting things in store for you. Things that you've never dreamed possible."

"Right. Like what? Tall, dark, and handsome?" It sounded to Selene's own ears like she was sneering at the woman's talent, so she probably was. No, she definitely was. But the woman didn't seem to take offense. "You never know," the card reader answered softly.



Selene shrugged, turning her back and walking away, beginning a slow circuit of the other offerings lining the meeting room's walls while she waited. Sarah took the proffered seat across from the tarot card reader and immediately became engrossed in whatever the woman proceeded to tell her.

Selene kept moving, afraid if she sat while she waited for Sarah she would fall asleep. *Reiki* she read on one card atop a blanket-draped bench. *Life force healing through the laying on of hands.*

*Reflexology* was printed on another sign taped to the door of a smaller adjacent room. *Reflexes in the hands and ears and especially the feet correspond to every part, gland and organ of the body!*

There were tables for *Hypnosis*. For *Crystals* and *Meditation*, and one for a devotee of something called *Spirit Guides*. That particular woman came prepared with large fold-out displays that explained how to identify and understand the messages sent by spirit animals to humans.

Part of her bored, a small part fascinated, and a large part amused, Selene wondered how these practitioners of alternative therapies managed to survive in southwest Wyoming. They must constitute a veritable underground belief system in a place populated by rough oilfield workers and their giant pickup trucks.

Only one of the many exhibitions caused Selene to stop long enough to actually read any of the literature scattered across the table top. *Ghosts* explained how the belief in spirits was ancient. Practices of spiritualism and ritual magic were not just intended to return restless spirits of the dead to their repose, but for the living to interact with them.

The explanation caught her attention because it jibed with her own beliefs. *Animism* one page of a brochure read: the belief that spirits existed in all things, animate or inanimate. The universe itself possessed a spirit, and the spirit of everything combined was universal. Selene knew this to be correct because her *nona* had told her so.

Selene was the last of a long line of *streghe* or nature witches. With a history stretching back before the time of the Etruscans, the old knowledge was now almost buried by the avalanche of Christian doctrine blanketing the fertile valleys of the Dolomites. By the time the belief filtered down through the years and distance from Europe to reach Selene the flame burned so low it had almost guttered out.

But not quite. She still believed in the ancient agrarian spirits, the gods and goddesses of Nature and fertility, agriculture and fecundity. Even though she lived in the dry high desert and had for her whole life. Even though her last true link with the old religion, her *nona*, had been dead for twenty years.

And that's why, when she completed the circuit of the room and stood once more before the dark-haired psychic, almost against her will Selene extended her hand to receive the business card the woman held out to her:

Tarot \* ) Divination ( \* Clairvoyant  
\* ) Spells ( \*  
\* ) Spiritual Healing ( \*  
20 years' experience  
**Madame Fortunata**

"Call me," Madame murmured, her finger tapping the card where her phone number was printed. "Make an appointment. Please. I can help you."

In spite of the pull of modern rationality and the tendency to disbelieve, the inner voice strongly urging her to run before she made a choice whose consequences she couldn't control,

Selene stared helplessly into the deep pools of the woman's hypnotic eyes. "All right" she was aghast to hear herself agreeing.

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"What do you suppose she wants to help you with?" Sarah asked as they walked out to her car.

"How should I know? I don't need her help. I'm fine."

"She saw something." Sarah nodded wisely. "You should listen to her. You know you're unhappy; maybe she can tell you what you can do to fix it."

The door of Sarah's old Taurus squealed as Selene pulled it open. Once seated, she had to yank hard several times on the seat belt to get it to unwind enough to buckle across her lap. "I'll tell you what *you* can do, you can buy a new car. This one is piece of shit."

"Yeah. So what? I can't afford a better car. And don't change the subject. Are you going to call Madame Fortunata?"

"No. I. Am. *Not*. Now will you drop the subject, please?"

"You should call her, Selene." Sarah ground the car's starter and glanced over her shoulder before backing out of the parking space. Selene turned to look out the window so she wouldn't have to meet Sarah's eyes.

"One of these days. Maybe. Does that satisfy you? Are you happy now?" Selene wished Sarah would just drive and quit talking. They might be best friends, but Sarah pushed the limits sometimes.

"I think the real question here might be, Are *you* happy, Selene?"

Selene just grunted. She had a boyfriend and a lover, a house, and a job. Sarah had just one of those things, a boyfriend. So pray tell, if Sarah was so perkily cheerful all the time, with all she had in comparison to Sarah what reason did Selene have for not being happy?

## Chapter One

The light of the full moon shining on her face woke her. She hadn't meant to fall asleep. She hated to admit it, but half the excitement Kevin represented came from the fact that Robert would hurt her if he found out. If she wasn't so tired, she would certainly be more excited by tonight's main event.

*Selene, Selene, Moonbeam's child. What do you harvest in the days—and nights—of your life?*

She rose naked from the bed, careful not to wake her lover. For the moment she didn't want any intrusion on her solitude. What pulled her was the old magic, and no matter the attractive portrait Kevin's sprawled nude body made all silvered by moonlight, she didn't want his physical distraction right now.

Silently she made her way down carpeted stairs, across the kitchen and out the back door. Kevin's two monstrous dogs rose, neck chains rattling. But they didn't bark. *Lucky me*, Selene thought as she stepped from the wet lawn to the cool, moist soil of what used to be a flower bed, now gone all to weeds.

Her grandmother had told her that the land was ready for planting when it reached body temperature. If she could sit comfortably, bare-ass naked in the soil of Kevin's yard, the earth would welcome seeding. Selene had always had a green thumb, her legacy from her female agrarian forebears. She had no place to plant a garden, but her house plants flourished with a verdant gusto that almost made it seem sometimes they were trying to break out of the confines of her house.

Of course, Kevin accepted none of Selene's nona's wisdom. Selene had told him over a bottle of Rolling Rock one spring night that root crops like potatoes and carrots should be

planted by the dark of the moon. Those that bore above-ground needed planting by the moon's full light. Kevin had scoffed, saying he had no intention of planting anything, that she was only giving him more proof of her witchy woman ways. And wouldn't she like to prove her powers someplace where he'd have a better chance of believing her?

The men in her life—and there were usually more than one lately—made Selene feel insubstantial when they laughed at her. As if when she talked her words floated unheard into the ether, as if she had no reality to them outside of bed.

She leaned back on her elbows, tilting her face toward the moon. The damp earth cradled her flesh where it touched, all along the length of her legs, shivering her and yet warming recesses a mere human lover had never yet reached.

An owl passed, its wing beats so near Selene could almost feel the brush of feathers on her face. It sounded like the heartbeat of the earth, keeping time to a rhythm so ancient she felt she could touch eternity. She closed her eyes and dug her fingers into the soil, whispering in kinship to the earth and her dead nona. Kevin's dogs snuffled in response, shaking themselves fully awake and breaking Selene's fleeting mystical mood.

Tossing her head at her own foolishness and the urge that had driven her out naked into the night, she brushed loose soil from her thighs and buttocks. Not bad, she thought, hands sweeping the curves of her body while her eyes scanned the darkened windows of Kevin's neighbor's houses, wondering if her nighttime wanderings had been observed. Kevin would be pissed when he found out his dogs, a Rottweiler and a pit bull, hadn't let out a whimper when she'd entered his fenced backyard. He certainly wouldn't believe that no dog ever barked at Selene.

She hurried back to the relative safety of Kevin's house. Robert would be a little more than pissed if he heard just where she'd been spending her nights from some snoop who spied her sitting on the ground of Kevin's yard in the dark of night, naked as a jaybird.

Small town, small minds. Sooner or later she'd get caught. Someone would tell Robert what she was doing when he worked the midnight shift and then he really would kill her, never suspecting that he'd already killed her spirit a long time ago. She silently entered the house, re-crossed the kitchen and ascended the stairs. She didn't care this time if she woke Kevin. She half hoped she would.

When he merely slept on, she jostled him with her foot and her elbow, making sure she poked hard enough to rouse him. His arm automatically came around her middle as he rolled toward her. She pushed it away, saying, "You know there's probably more alcoholics per capita here in Wyoming than anywhere else in the United States?"

Kevin brushed long dark hair from his eyes. Every woman's bad boy dream, the rock-star hair and the tattoos covering his arms were what had attracted Selene in the first place. Not to mention narrow hips, long legs, and broad shoulders. They could see each other clearly in the moonlight, and he stared at her for a long moment before his black eyes narrowed. "Jeezus, Selene," he said. "You want to pick a fight? *Now*? It's the middle of the fucking night."

"I'm not picking a fight." She rubbed her heels together, probably smearing garden dirt on his sheets. It surprised Selene that Kevin would care about such things as clean sheets. But as they hadn't been lovers very long maybe he wanted to impress her. She was sure of one thing, that state of fragile newness to their affair was about to abruptly slough off. Hard telling what would emerge then from the chrysalis of her cheating.

"I've given this a lot of thought. What is it about the West that makes men and women want to kill each other?" she asked in a perfectly normal voice. "Is it the emptiness? The solitude?"

Kevin groaned, throwing himself on his back and covering his eyes with an inked forearm. "What the *hell* are you talking about, Selene?" he mumbled.

"It's almost a thirst for religious knowledge, some bedrock of faith that drives the men here to drink. They seek solace, almost, in the glitter scene and the strippers. You know, the bars are where the modern West is really being won—or lost."

“You’re crazy, Selene. You know that? You are bug-fuck raving nuts.” Kevin sounded shaken. For all his hard-bitten looks, sometimes he seemed untested, young, naive. Didn’t he know what she was after? Didn’t he realize if Robert didn’t kill her as she envisioned, she was pretty sure she could eventually drive Kevin to do the deed?

“Yeah.” Selene felt almost happy. “Robert agrees with you one hundred percent. I am crazy. Too bad you didn’t know that before we tumbled into bed together, huh, Kevin?”

His silence told her he agreed with her. Suddenly she was sorry she’d baited him for something that wasn’t his fault. She was furious with Robert, not Kevin. All Kevin had done was take advantage of her offer. It wasn’t his fault he was like every other man she’d met in her life, whose attitudes were apparently imbibed at their fathers’ knees along with their beer. It wasn’t his fault that she kept repeating the same pattern over and over with men who hurt her, because somewhere deep inside she thought she deserved to be hurt.

She turned toward his rigid body. “Come on, baby,” she wheedled, cajoling then. She could still save the situation if she wanted. She spider-walked her fingers across his abdomen, tickling, teasing. “Come on, Kevin, honey. Don’t be mad at Selene.”

When he refused to lower his arm from his eyes, she used the pads of her fingers to massage the tension from his knotted forearm. “Don’t be mad, sweetie,” she whispered. “I was just teasing. I didn’t mean anything by it.”

But she had. She’d deliberately brought Robert into this bed, neatly inserting him between herself and Kevin. She’d done it to get back at Robert...and Robert wasn’t even aware of it. Pathetic.

Thankfully, Kevin wasn’t aware of much of anything at the moment either, except her breasts pressed to his side and her bare leg thrown across his. Men were such easy targets. Selene almost hated herself when Kevin lowered his arm to pull her atop him.

“You are one strange woman,” he said, but her peculiarity must not have mattered all that much to him at the moment because his hand on the back of her neck pulled her into a long, deep kiss.

But in her mind she heard the echo: *One strange woman, strange woman, woman...*

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Fortunata could not get the young woman who had appeared before her, weeks ago now, out of her thoughts. A most unhappy young lady. A young lady dallying with disaster, clearly on a collision course with bad fortune.

The young woman needed so much to be loved, the desire for her perfect lover rolled off her in palpable waves. She was deserving of love, yet no one loved her. She reeled from one man to another, Fortunata knew, desperately seeking. Of course the young woman had not called for an appointment. Despite the invitation Fortunata had extended, she knew she would not hear from her. Yet Fortunata feared the fate she saw for the girl if she did not break down and ask for help. Or at least attempt to change her ways so that bad fortune was not so enticed by her, her pain obvious and multiplied by keeping it balled up inside.

It would be so simple for Fortunata to change the young lady’s destiny. But she had not been consulted. No one asked her for help and Fortunata hesitated to interfere, lest the spirits take offense at her meddling. And a love witch’s magic was powerful. Once cast, a spell was difficult if not impossible to undo.

And yet. Fortunata debated. What could one little spell hurt? There were all kinds of spells: gypsy, Native American, voodoo as practiced in Africa, the Caribbean, Brazil and many, many more. Fortunata was a collector of spells, especially love spells. Those worked best, of course, if the witch possessed at least one little piece of the substance of the object of the request for

sympathetic magic. It was cliché but true that a witch needed a body substance such as fingernail parings for the strongest of enchantments to take hold.

Another requisite was visualization. And there again Fortunata had only half the essentials. She could see only the unhappy young woman from the library, but she saw her in perfect detail: wide brown eyes flecked with green, long brown hair with russet highlights, uptilted little nose, expression of such sadness it tugged the corners of her full lips downward at the corners.

At last Fortunata threw up her hands and decided she would do it. The first step in magic, after all, was to take the first step. She had to try. Afraid she would wake one of these first days to the picture of the girl she couldn't get out of her mind staring up from the obituary column of the newspaper, Fortunata felt she must do something.

The witch knew the girl hung out with the wrong people, men who weren't good for her. Therefore what she needed was to encounter someone who was good for her. Fortunata would begin by casting a *Spell to Change Her Habits*. Later, after the first spell had time to settle around the girl and Fortunata judged the time was right, she would cast the *Meeting Spell*. And then the young woman's life would definitely change.

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Selene had breakfast ready when Robert got home, and many more breakfasts, lunches, and dinners after that. Before the nasty breakup, that was. While she was still contemplating ending her life by someone else's hand, and before she inexplicably decided one day that she wanted to live.

She wasn't exactly sure when or where she had decided she was worth the effort to change her life, only that she had so decided. Somewhere inside lived another Selene who liked herself and wanted a new life, and that Selene had nagged and harried and harassed until she prevailed.

So. Now bad-boy Kevin was gone. And Robert was gone too, after coming close to fulfilling her prediction that he'd kill her. For a full eighteen months she'd had no man in her life, and she had decided it was better that way. She enrolled in college after Robert went to jail and she vacated his house, living for a time on the proceeds from selling some of their stuff and working when she could find jobs. On the weekends she bartended. She still looked over her shoulder sometimes, expecting Robert to be there, arm raised and ready to strike. She had foresworn all men, despite the best efforts of her friends, co-workers, and even the teachers who tried to find her a mate. Supposedly she needed someone.

They didn't seem to trust that she knew how to attract men if she wanted them. She did, but she had also learned how to ward them and their attentions off. So it surprised her that the man who seemed to be following her today didn't give up when she pointedly ignored him.

Had he been following her? Was the long-legged man outfitted in snug jeans the same one she'd glimpsed at the bank half an hour ago? She could swear she'd seen him at the filling station pumping gas into a gray SUV which looked exactly like the one that belonged to her friend Carole fifteen minutes before that.

Standing at the meat counter in the local grocery with one hand on the basket and the other wavering uncertainly over a really-too-expensive-for-her-budget cut of steak, Selene slid her eyes sideways to surreptitiously study the man's tall form again. Not bad, she thought, but not the type that usually made her heart pitty-pat. Tight jeans clearly delineated his man's goods and a set of superb buns. But he sported pointy toed cowboy boots along with a black satin scarf knotted at his neck.

*A real, actual shit kicker...or a wannabe cowboy?* Either way, even thick black hair just starting to gray at the temples wasn't enough to get Selene to look directly at him, inviting conversation. If he really was following her—in Carole's car no less, while Carole was out of town—what did he want?

He sidled closer. Selene moved a step away. She shouldn't have been so suspicious, or so biased based on appearances. But she was done with men. She didn't want to start anything. Especially with someone who looked so conservatively straitlaced as this man, and especially not if he had just stolen her friend's vehicle.

Selene's friend Sarah—and Selene realized she had a lot of female friends eager to give her advice—said she was just being bitter. And maybe that was so.

She considered herself mature enough to concede the possibility that her recent experiences with men had turned her off the whole species. She slid her eyes sideways to eye the man as he slinked ever nearer. Inhospitable probably didn't describe what she felt toward a stranger who would steal Carole's car. On the other hand, maybe realistic better described her attitude. Selene could now honestly face the fact that she was no good at relationships with men. Period. *Finito*. The End.

Hadn't the fiasco of her long-term relationship with Robert, and the abortive affair with Kevin—not to mention the others which hadn't lasted long enough to be described as affairs—proved to anyone besides herself that she was a failure at love?

"Tough decision?"

The plastic-wrapped package of T-bones slid from Selene's suddenly nerveless hand to land upside down in the meat case. She'd been so wrapped up in her thoughts she'd failed to notice the man she suspected of following her in Carole's car had actually approached, and now stood so near his striped shirtsleeve brushed her bare arm. She felt a prickling sensation and watched goosebumps break out on her skin.

"I-I beg your pardon?" Stammering. *For Pete's sake*. Why was this guy affecting her so? Irritated with herself, Selene moved away from the stranger's too-familiar proximity. She rubbed her arms, telling herself the combination of the chilled air rising from the refrigerated display and the air conditioning inside the store had caused the fine hairs on her arms to stand on end. She wasn't afraid of men, not even thieves. That part of her life was over for good.

So why couldn't she meet his eyes? Why, against her will, had her gaze wandered south of his gaudy belt buckle? *Trouble!* The warning began blinking in her brain like an LED signboard gone bonkers as she almost let her gaze rest where it shouldn't. She looked swiftly back up at his face.

"I didn't mean to startle you. It's obvious you're in deep deliberation." Smiling to show a set of strong white teeth, the man reached to right the dropped package of steak. One long finger traced the price sticker sensuously for a moment before he turned his gaze back toward her.

"Hmm, T-bones. Expensive. Cooking for someone special?" His eyes crinkled at the corners. His chin dimpled very slightly, but a crease in his lean right cheek showed prominently when he smiled. He really was astoundingly sexy for such a bold burglar, even if he wasn't her type.

"No. No one special," Selene found herself admitting while, despite herself, she stared into amused eyes whose true color she couldn't define. They reminded her of honeyed chocolate. Remembering her vow to be good to herself since no man seemed willing to, she looked away and added truthfully, "The steak's for me. I guess I'm special."

"Are you now? Well, I thought you were when I started trailing you." His voice was low, but she could hear suppressed laughter in it.

Hackles rising—how dare a common thief laugh at her?—Selene pounced on his admission. "So you *have* been following me?"

"Guilty as charged," he admitted cheerfully. "Once I set eyes on you, I couldn't resist. I know it's not politically correct anymore to admit that a man finds a woman sexually appealing, but just the look of you knocks my socks off."

The old Selene was used to men coming on to her. The new Selene was not. She couldn't decide whether to be affronted or flattered. Surely if he'd stolen Carole's SUV, he wouldn't be

lingering to flirt with her in the same small town where he'd stolen it. Arms crossed in front of his flat abdomen, he leaned his long frame against the rounded metal edge of the counter, looking quite at ease with his rugged sex appeal.

Selene didn't know whether to call the police or allow him to dally here in the store until she found out exactly what he was up to. She decided to act flattered. "I find it odd myself that some women are offended by a man's attention," she said, with a hint of the old Selene's throaty whisper. "But men don't make a habit of following me around, and I guess I just got a little scared, that's all."

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Beck McNeal gazed at the petite woman whose alluring scent he'd been following half the afternoon. She did seem more than usually standoffish, but she showed intriguing flashes of heat. He'd bet the last share in his mutual fund that she was another of the walking wounded. A casualty, like himself, of the love wars.

He tried extra-hard to behave himself. Prominent nipple bumps strained the front of her tight tank top, but he kept his eyes determinedly above the line of cleavage between generous-sized breasts. He'd bet his two hands could span her tiny waist, but he'd better not even think about putting his hands on her. He hadn't meant to frighten her. If he wasn't in a public place, he might try to kick himself.

He was such a bumbler, no good at the preliminaries. Why did it have to be so hard to meet someone, start again, do it all over? And besides, he wasn't sure he wanted to expend the effort only to get knocked on his ass again. Annie had really let him have it, both barrels right to the core of his middle-aged heart. And he didn't know how to, or if he actually wanted to, begin again with somebody new. He'd come to southwest Wyoming to get away from all the painful memories, and here he was toying with the idea of starting a romance with the first attractive woman he saw, the very last thing in the world he needed right now. Had he left all sense, along with the pieces of his heart and his broken marriage, in that cold courtroom in Boston?

He'd definitely set out on the wrong foot with Selene Pertunda. The shapely dark haired woman stared at him with cool suspicion in her jade-flecked eyes, despite her ready comebacks to his clumsy attempts at witty repartee. Well, no matter what he said to women lately, it seemed to be wrong. He was rusty, no doubt about that. But it was so hard to meet decent women. He'd been at a loss how to approach her once he'd caught sight of her in the bank and heard the teller call her by name.

Damn, but the sight of her set something aloft inside him, something light and airy he hadn't felt in a long time. Too long, maybe. He'd ended up tripping right over his own big feet with her. Carole always said he was a big old marshmallow bear.

A smile tugging at the corners of his mouth, he held out a long-fingered hand. "Let's start over," he offered. "My name is Beckett McNeal. I was just taking care of some business at the bank when I looked up and saw you. Since there's no proper way to meet a woman anymore, I thought I'd just tag along after you until I got a chance to introduce myself. I wonder if you might consider having dinner with me. I'd deem it an honor to cook a steak for such a special lady."

Whew, he thought, watching for her reaction. Overly wordy, but it might work. She had been pretty prickly so far, even though she was very easy on the eyes. He especially liked the way her thick mane of russet-tinged hair swung in time with the motions of her ass when she walked. He'd followed the trail of that twin swing like a bloodhound pup, to the gas station and then across town here to the grocery store, making a fool of himself along the way.

"Beckett?" She tilted her head to the side, and that swath of dark hair fell like a curtain over her slim shoulder. The way she looked at him with such open suspicion made him wonder what

she was thinking. Her distrust of him was obvious, but Beck tried not to take it personally. Carole had said Selene had a rough time getting through her own breakup and then getting her life back together. Maybe it wasn't just him. Maybe she didn't trust men in general.

"My mother's maiden name," he said. "Call me Beck."

Finally, after staring at him for a long time, she stuck out her small hand and said, "Selene."

Just that. Selene. He could still read the uncertainty in the set of her porcelain face as he gingerly shook her hand, but revealing her name was a start.

She wasn't finished, however. She removed her hand from his to place it on one cocked, shapely hip. "You really can cook?" She sounded dubious.

He couldn't help liking her immediately: Carole had been right about that much, that he would like Selene. Beck stifled the urge to smile again. "Sure," he said, shrugging as if all men of forty-two could cook, which he knew was far from true. "I'm a good cook."

Again he could see doubt in her eyes, but there was only one way to test his veracity. Would she take him up on his offer?

"Okay," she said after another lengthy pause, and Beck wanted to shout in triumph. But of course he couldn't. He'd scare her into thinking he was crazy, and that was the last thing he wanted from Selene Pertunda. She'd shown many sides to her personality already in the few minutes they'd been talking, and he wanted to see more. He liked her sassy, not scared.

God, she was beautiful. She filled out her form-fitting jeans with a body so luscious it almost screamed aloud for some loving. And she'd agreed to this small step with him. If she had any idea what he had initially wanted to approach her about, it might have been easier for her to accept his invitation. But it seemed awkward now to admit that once he heard her name called at the bank he knew exactly who she was.

By now Beck had come to the conclusion he didn't want to keep their relationship on merely a business level. He wanted a lot more from pretty brown-and-green-eyed Selene Pertunda. Suddenly he found he wanted what he hadn't known he had come home to Wyoming wanting.

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Selene left the market with less than she'd intended to buy, but more than she'd imagined from a simple shopping trip. She had a date. A real honest-to-goodness dinner date with a man who wouldn't have drawn a second glance from her yesterday.

She couldn't explain what had driven her to accept his invitation. She'd initially only hoped that she would find out whether he had actually stolen Carole's car or not. But when he actually offered her Carole's address as the place for their date, she had to give up the idea that the man was an out-and-out thief. Unless he'd just taken over Carole's house along with her car, he had to have permission. So who exactly was Beckett McNeal? And had Carole arranged for more than his living in her house and driving her car? Had she arranged for Beck to somehow meet Selene?

The whole time they'd stood talking in the grocery store, Selene hadn't let on that she knew the owner of the car he was driving.

But neither had Beck admitted he knew Carole. So what, exactly, was he up to? Just following a pretty woman like he said, or something more sinister and underhanded? And why didn't she feel threatened or afraid of that? And why had she accepted a date for dinner alone with a man she'd never set eyes on before and knew nothing about except that he was apparently living at her friend's house?

Was she falling back into her old self-destructive ways of tumbling into bed with strangers in order to avoid fixing her life? She'd worked so hard to change who she was, would she allow yet another man to upset all her plans? Caution had become Selene's watchword where men



were concerned, and she'd been concentrating solely on graduating from college so she could support herself.

Yet the out-of-the-ordinary simple acceptance of dinner with Beck seemed to set something free in her that had been locked up too long. Suddenly she saw the world with different eyes as she drove toward her apartment. She felt freer, more in control of her destiny, than she had in a long time.

Which was totally ridiculous. She still didn't trust Beck McNeal. She knew nothing of his motives in asking her to Carole's house for dinner.

Yet didn't life suddenly hold a tinge of the wondrous? Didn't the most amazing things happen when she least expected them? Didn't the greasewood on the surrounding hills look greener and the sun a little brighter?

She was being silly. She sounded to herself just like her ever-optimistic friend Sarah. It had been a long winter of two and three blinding blizzards a week. The daily drive to the college campus fifteen miles east in that weather had taken its toll on her nerves and she rejoiced to see signs of spring again. That was all. The fact that a man had asked her to dinner, and she'd accepted, had nothing to do with her bubbly mood.

But she smiled as she drove the few short blocks to her apartment. She couldn't wait to tell Sarah. She had a date.

It scared her terribly to admit she felt happiness.

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"And you said yes?" Sarah hugged herself in excitement, bronze curls jouncing. Sarah changed her hair color as often as her boyfriends. At the moment she was a strawberry blond, and pretty enough to be the model for the hair dye she used, despite the faint network of fine lines at the corners of her eyes. If a man didn't look too closely, he'd never suspect Sarah was thirty-five years old, exactly Selene's age. "Selene, I'm so proud of you! You're ready to start living again."

"Sarah, I've asked you a thousand times, please don't bounce." Sarah looked properly abashed, and Selene continued, "We're just having dinner." Selene's fingers shook as she separated hangers in her closet, looking for something appropriate to wear. Something appropriate to Beck McNeal, not a biker she met in a bar. Something that didn't reveal too much leg or too much cleavage. Something not too dressy, not too casual. "You don't need to act as if no one ever asked me to dinner before."

"I'm making a fuss over the fact that you finally said yes for once, not that no one ever asked. There was Jim, and Tony, and Paul, and Kevin, and—" Sarah stopped enumerating on her fingers as Selene turned her attention from her wardrobe to give her friend a stern knock-it-off look. "Well, it's true," Sarah protested, big gray eyes wide with sincerity. "Kevin called and called after you finally dumped Robert. You wouldn't give the poor guy the time of day. It's been two years since Robert, Selene. You've had men interested in you since, but you haven't been interested back. So what's so different about this one?"

Sarah nudged Selene aside to pull a pumpkin-colored sleeveless gauze dress from the rack. Selene shook her head. Too brazen for a first date, and besides it was still a little chilly at night for gauze. She still felt guilty about Kevin, although it really wasn't her fault he'd fallen and she hadn't. She'd told him from the beginning what she went home with him for; she hadn't intended that he actually develop feelings for her.

There was yet the question of exactly what Beck McNeal was about, and Selene didn't want to make the mistake of dressing to seduce a criminal. Even if she wasn't, she told herself firmly, out to seduce anyone. She had learned her lesson.

Ignoring the inner voice that continued to question what she was up to, and the knowledge she was hiding from herself, Selene said, “Well, he’s...” She subsided to the edge of the bed, trying to think how to describe what made Beck McNeal different from other men. The problem was, she didn’t know.

She didn’t want to admit to Sarah that she knew exactly zero about Beck McNeal, and had said she’d show up at seven for dinner alone with him anyway. What she’d done was too close to the way the old Selene acted, and she was scared she would just revert to her old ways without a second thought. She’d come too far to risk it all for a man, any man, even a hotly attractive man like Beck McNeal.

“He’s what?” Sarah snagged a ruffled white blouse and colorful scarf skirt from the closet. Selene wrinkled her nose at her friend’s choice, and Sarah replaced the hangers on the rod.

“He’s...mature, for one thing.”

“How mature?” Sarah pounced on the shred of information. “Way older than you, or just a little older? You don’t want an old man, Selene, I’ve heard you say you still hoped for kids someday.” She whipped out a pant outfit of crinkled chocolate rayon.

Selene considered, tapping her teeth with a fingernail, before dismissing Sarah’s choice as too staid.

“Not that much older than we are,” she said, considering. “Maybe early forties. He’s tall, and he’s built. He’s polite. And we’re not getting married and having children. We’re having dinner.” She did not add, *Alone, at Carole’s*. She didn’t want Sarah to think the old promiscuous Selene had made a surprise, unscheduled reappearance.

“Your powers of description are failing. I’m disappointed in you.” Sarah held a white bouclé knit sweater up in front of herself with one hand, and a pair of black leggings in the other, a questioning look on her face. “Is he generally traditional, but a little flashy, like this?”

She had to give Sarah something, Sarah who’d tried numerous times in the last year to set Selene up with the perfect man. She had always used the excuse that she was too busy with her studies. Now she had taken up with a possible thief, one who inexplicably set her insides to almost pre-orgasmic quivering, and she had to find words to describe him to Sarah. She thought of Beck’s skin tight jeans and silk neckerchief. “Traditional but flashy. Yes, I guess maybe that describes him. I don’t really know, Sarah.”

“Well, find out.” Sarah dropped the chosen clothing on the bed next to Selene. “You haven’t liked any of my choices—in clothing or men—so it will be interesting to see what you choose to wear to dinner with the one who finally tipped you over the edge into a real date. When do I get to meet him?”

“Sarah, please. I told you I only just met him myself.” Selene followed Sarah and her bouncing curls out of the bedroom and into her cramped living room. She really had kept too much furniture and way too many plants after the explosive breakup with Robert. She needed to get rid of some of the chairs and tables and overgrown jungle foliage now that she was single and had so little room.

“Finding a man at the meat counter. How appropriate. Too bad I never thought of it myself,” Sarah said, leering and licking her lips while opening the front door to let herself out. “Don’t forget to call me as soon as you get in,” she ordered before disappearing into her own apartment across the open central stairwell.

Selene sighed. She had leaned overly hard on Sarah the last year or so. Now if Sarah treated Selene like a broken-winged little bird, she guessed it was no more than she deserved.

Avoiding knocking her shins on the two coffee tables only out of long familiarity with the layout of the living room, Selene returned to her bedroom. A frown appeared between her brows as she peered into her closet, thinking maybe she should have accepted some of those dates Sarah had set up. At least then she might have an idea of what to wear for dinner with a possible felon.

Beck couldn't believe how sweaty-palmed nervous he was. This meal had taken on an importance that he hadn't intended for his first engagement with Selene Pertunda. He'd expected to meet her in a neutral setting, ask her to help him with his project, she would agree, and they would proceed from there.

But although he'd been given a description, he hadn't expected her to be so sexily striking. The dry description Carole had given him hardly did her beauty justice. The woman in the flesh, all her womanly flesh, literally made the breath catch in his throat.

He'd never seen anyone quite like Selene, and he wanted very much to impress her tonight. But his fingers were so clumsy he almost dropped the bowl he was attempting to fill with torn romaine lettuce. Two juicy rib eyes marinated in Worcestershire sauce and his own blend of seasonings, ready to pop under the broiler. He'd sliced a French loaf lengthwise, in danger of cutting off a finger in the process, and slathered it with butter and a light sprinkling of garlic. He doubted if Selene was the kind of woman who kissed on a first date, no matter that her pouty lips begged for attention, so he didn't think he needed to worry about a touch of garlic. What he needed to worry about was thinking about her pouty lips, which brought up unwanted visions of those full lips wrapped around his Johnson, which caused said organ to begin stirring restlessly beneath his zipper.

What he really should worry about was bleeding to death, he decided as the bowl actually did slip from his sweaty hands to shatter on the floor, bringing salaciously erotic visions of a naked Selene smiling and invitingly licking her shiny lips to an abrupt halt. Cursing and kneeling to gingerly pick up the glass shards amid shredded lettuce, he was totally unprepared when the doorbell rang.

He quickly swept the whole mess into the trash, wiped his miraculously uninjured hands on the dish towel hanging from his belt, and went to answer the door.

Once again the sight of Selene Pertunda swept the air from his lungs. She stood in the doorway in an outfit that in cut resembled white jeans and a Western shirt, but something in the material shimmered silver and definitely dressed up a pair of Levi's. With her porcelain complexion and satiny dark hair, and backlit by the yard lamps, she shone like a Renaissance portrait.

"Hi," she said uncertainly as he continued to stare. He wondered if his tongue were hanging out. She clenched a bottle of merlot tightly in one hand. But there was no way she could be as nervous as he was.

"You're beautiful," he blurted, feeling like the most awkward of acne-prone teenagers. He realized he was still blocking the door, and moved aside, almost bumping into the parson's bench Carole had installed in the formal entryway of the old Victorian house. Hanging on to the door handle to keep his balance, he was sure he detected suppressed laughter in Selene's slitted green-speckled eyes.

"I'm sorry. Come in," he said, starting to wipe his palms on his pants before realizing he still wore the dish towel dangling from his belt. Removing it, he waved Selene down the hall.

"I'm still getting used to the changes in the place," he said as he reached for another bowl in the glass-doored cupboard in Carole's homey country kitchen. He would have to replace the broken bowl before she got back and discovered its absence.

"It is a lovely old house," Selene offered. "I've been here many times as Carole's guest." She was too polite to ask, but the question lingered unspoken nevertheless.

"Carole's my cousin," Beck hurried to explain. He probably should have explained that before. From the doubt in Selene's voice, he wondered what conclusion she'd reached about him already. "She's working on her doctorate while she's on sabbatical, living at my apartment in

Boston. I've got the summer off, and I'm lucky enough to be living at Carole's wonderful house here in Rocky Creek. We sort of traded places."

"So you're a teacher, like Carole?" Her voice was tight, restrained. What had she been thinking about him all afternoon? Obviously, nothing flattering. He had some explaining to do, and he should have done it to begin with.

He had said something else wrong just in the few minutes since she'd walked in the door, but he'd be damned if he could figure out what. He reached for the remains of the head of romaine. "Uh, Director of Western American Studies, actually," he said. "Was. I spent most of my time entertaining rich patrons and chasing grant money, managing the department rather than teaching. Sit down. Make yourself at home. I'm being a terrible host. Can I get you something to drink?"

She waggled the bottle of wine.

"Oh. Of course." He began opening cupboard doors, searching for glasses, unaware Selene had come right up behind him until he heard the whisper of satin when she moved.

"Here," she said, reaching around him to unlatch the next door. Her breasts lightly brushed his back but he felt like their impression burned into his skin. She had the uncanny knack of dropping her voice to a sexy almost whisper, and his cock rose instantly to attention. Selene pointed to the top shelf, where she obviously couldn't reach unless she dragged a chair over to stand on. Beck easily snagged the stemware.

Turning toward her, he held up the wine glasses helplessly, hoping she would look at them and not at his bulging zipper. His voice sounded squeaky when he asked, "Corkscrew?"

"Middle drawer, left side." She sank on to one of the benches at the trestle table in the corner by a double casement window, studying his movements. When he finally succeeded in removing the cork and pouring them each a glass of wine, she was still watching him expectantly. Although he would feel more comfortable with something to do, like completing the salad, he chose the safer course of the opposite bench and sat, hoping to get his mind off her nipples.

"Okay, professor," Selene said, raising the glass to her glossy lips and taking a delicate sip. "What's going on here? I find the all the coincidences that got me here tonight more than passing strange. Is there something I'm missing? Something I should know?"

Carole had said Selene was sharp, and there was obviously no point in trying to carry on the charade any longer.

Selene waited patiently while he fidgeted with his glass. With nothing more to do than tell the truth, he raised his eyes to meet her stormy green-dappled ones. He'd already made a mess of meeting Selene, when he'd so looked forward to working with someone he could depend on. Now she distrusted his motives and would probably refuse to work with him at all.

Might as well get it over with.

Beck swallowed the dryness in his throat. "I have a confession to make," he said at last.

## Chapter Two

"I've known who you are all along."

Selene heard Beck's admission echo inside her head. She felt as if she stood on one precipice and Beck McNeal on another, as they faced each other across a wide chasm. She couldn't believe she'd let herself be suckered by a man again. Didn't one of them know how to tell the truth? She'd been absolutely right to concentrate on her goal of getting her degree, forsaking all men for the duration, and wrong to accept this invitation from a man she knew nothing about.

Now she knew he wasn't a thief, but he was a fraud. And a highly educated fraud at that. She felt betrayed. And why did she feel betrayed? She should have expected Beck McNeal to lie. Selene lied; everybody lied. She thought of the way she'd used Kevin, just a body to soothe the pain of her final breakup with Robert. She'd been smarter than Kevin, all right, but more cynical too. If she could judge men, she judged that Beck was a lot smarter than she. So maybe the tables had turned. Maybe all he wanted was a warm body to ease his pain.

Karma, after all, and she would deserve it. This was so, so wrong. If poor Kevin was on one end of the intelligence spectrum, Beck had to be on the other. Selene Pertunda the bartender, or even Selene Pertunda the student, had no business with Dr. Beckett McNeal. All her self-protective mechanisms kicked in.

"I came back here to work on a pet project I've wanted to do for a long time, taking oral histories of the remaining residents who immigrated from Europe to work in the coal mines. When I found out my cousin's house would be empty for the summer, it seemed the perfect time to proceed with my own plans." Beck's self-confident smile wavered in the face of Selene's continued silence.

Selene's fingers rested almost casually on the dainty stem of the wine glass, only through sheer force of will. She thought if she let them squeeze as they wanted to, the glass would shatter.

"Carole said you were her best student. When I asked her to recommend someone to help me, her first—and in fact only—choice was you. I understand you're taking a full course load, and I know you're busy, but I thought just for the summer, maybe you might..."

His voice trailed off. Selene thought if she were more polished she should jump in here and save him. He was obviously flustered. But she wasn't feeling refined right now. She was feeling used, and deceived, and definitely inferior. Her lack of education, which she'd been trying desperately to remedy since the breakup, caused her some discomfiting moments. Carole had been more than kind, rescuing Selene and taking the nontraditional student under her wing, even to inviting her to parties in her home. But more often than not, Selene felt she was reaching beyond herself, masquerading to save face in the rarefied academic company Carole kept. Carole's friends' conversation was often too esoteric for Selene to follow, and so she subsided into silence. Although Carole said she was being silly and that no one judged her, Selene felt her lack intensely and was extremely self-conscious about it. Now her date not only revealed himself to be well educated, his interest in her extended only to how much time she could devote to his lofty scholarly venture. Karma indeed.

What a fool she was.

"I would pay you," Beck said, sounding a little desperate in the face of her continued silence. "I have grant money available specifically for this project. And I could certainly use the help, typing and that kind of thing."

A typist. Beck McNeal wanted her for her typing skills.

Well, let's see, she thought. She could use the money. She had clothes and furniture, a decently reliable car and her own apartment. But except for the apartment, her material possessions were remnants of her relationship with Robert. She had a very meager income, she was finding her flashy old clothes often didn't fit her new persona, and her meager savings coupled with what she had been able to sell from the furnishings of the house, was rapidly being depleted while she went to college.

But why shouldn't she spend much of her summer with an attractive man whose sole interest in her lay in how many pages she could produce in a day? Wasn't this exactly what she'd been wishing for? She had wanted to change her life, so there was nothing wrong with a man who wasn't sexually attracted to her, right? But...if that were so, why had he gone through the whole rigmarole of following her around the entire afternoon and then telling her how attractive she

was? Did she want to spend any time at all with a man who lied to her to get what he wanted and then dumped her at the end of the summer?

And why was she so damned upset anyway? Hadn't she always dreamed of finding a man who took her seriously, who saw her as more than a convenient lay? Though she had little experience in having wishes come true, maybe she really should watch what she wished for, because once she seemed to get it she was still griping about it.

"Please. I could use your help," Beck said with an ingratiating smile that made her want to dump her wine on his expensive chamois slacks. And then he added the final insult. "Besides, I'd get an opportunity to know you better."

"Don't." The word emerged a trifle strangled. Selene suspected she knew which parts of her he wanted to know better, and they didn't include her sparkling personality or her impressively high IQ. She thought she might cry, which really made her angry. She'd spent enough time crying. She swore she'd never cry again, and she meant it. "Don't muddy a perfectly normal business proposition with flip personal remarks. You should know better, professor. If you want an assistant, I'll be glad to fill out an application and supply you with a copy of my résumé."

He leaned back and studied her, his mouth a grim slash. "That won't be necessary, Selene," he said. "I'm well aware of your capabilities. Carole has only the highest of praise for your talents and persistence in the face of adverse circumstances. She admires you greatly."

Selene studied him with a sour feeling in the pit of her stomach. What had Carole told him about her? Carole accepted Selene's past—what little Selene had told her about it—but Carole also accepted with complete trust that Selene was trying hard to change old habits. And Carole was right, dammit! Selene could change. If Carole trusted Beck and liked him, maybe there was something more to him than Selene's overactive sense of inferiority wasn't letting her see past their clear differences.

Maybe she was being too hard on him. She, not he, had jumped to conclusions. If he'd duped her about his motives, she had allowed him to do it, dazzled by his good looks. She'd been fooled by not asking questions. By being flattered that a man of his caliber would be physically attracted to her. By her own stupidity.

But on the subject of Carole, at least, they could agree. "I admire Carole too," Selene admitted in a softer voice. "She's been more than role model to me. She rescued me and gave my life direction. It was my lucky day when the college assigned her as my advisor."

"Well, certainly Carole is a wonderful person but she didn't decide to change your life. You did. You had to take those first steps and enroll. Older students don't have an easy time of it."

Selene paused. What, exactly, had Carole told him about her? Did Carole and her sexy cousin suspect Selene had in the past engaged in a whole lot of carnal knowledge, a.k.a. revenge fucking, with men she didn't care about? Did Beck pity her? Or was he telling the truth: did he really appreciate how difficult it was to try to change her life? She'd been looking forward to the summer, the smaller class sizes and the chance to accelerate her studies in six week blocks. Now she had to choose whether she wanted her cherished grade point average or the extra money Beck offered.

Beck seemed discomfited by her steady gaze. "So, have you decided whether you're willing to help me out? Or shall we have dinner and you can take your time and let me know later?" Did he still want her to stay the evening? Why? She'd been at her most unfriendly, cool and suspicious. Usually when she acted like that, it put men off immediately. They thought her cold and uninviting. Which, Selene thought, wasn't completely far from the truth these days. She'd gone from being one hot piece of ass to something more like a chip off a glacier.

But she was at a loss how to act with Beck. Carole trusted him, and she trusted Carole's judgment, so she felt she should trust him too. But she didn't. She felt off balance. If he thought she hadn't noticed his erection earlier, he was wrong. She wasn't quite sure what was going on here. "I should go," she said. "I'll think it over and let you know."

“Stay,” Beck said, rising to return to the counter and his lettuce and effectively cutting off her urge to flee. “Please. You haven’t committed any error. I have. Let me make it up to you, at least in part, by feeding you.”

Tossing the words over his shoulder, he continued with his dinner preparations. Two potatoes in the microwave, oven turned on, steaks inserted and beginning to broil while he finished tearing lettuce leaves, humming along with the strains of music coming from Carole’s music system in the little room she called her parlor.

Despite her misgivings, Selene found herself beginning to relax in Beck’s presence. She didn’t know why she hadn’t insisted on leaving, but since she’d decided not to run away it wasn’t so bad. So far, anyway. She was in familiar surroundings. She loved this quaint old house almost as much as Carole herself did. She had eaten many meals here, had many discussions, serious and light, with Carole. Selene had contributed a few furnishings for this place: a brass floor lamp, an antique camel-back steamer trunk that she knew she wouldn’t have room for and that Carole would appreciate. Only the chef here tonight was different. The cook was Carole’s long-legged male cousin instead of Carole dressed in her long flowered hostess caftan.

And Selene had to admit that despite her anxiety, she still found Beck appealing. His movements graceful between counter and stove, the play of muscle in his forearm when he opened the broiler door, the fact that when he broke into a snatch of song he stayed on key in a wonderful true baritone. Her first instinct about him—that he most definitely wasn’t her type—had been right on target and she should have trusted it. Carole and her cousin Beck had some things Selene could only strive for, and specifically those things were wealth, education, and bred-in-the-bone class. But the obvious differences between her and Beck didn’t mean that she couldn’t appreciate traits in him that attracted her enormously, not the least of which was that he was obviously completely at ease in a kitchen.

He hadn’t lied about that part. He could cook. The smells emanating from the stove made her stomach rumble.

The sound must have been audible even across the cavernous kitchen. Beck smiled at her. “Hungry?”

She nodded.

“Glad you stayed?”

“Don’t push it, professor.” Had she really said that? What was it about this man that brought all her insecurities to the forefront? If it had been Robert standing there, she could have expected a slap to her smart mouth.

But Beck only smiled wider, as if her low-class sass pleased him. He did have a nice smile. His square jaw softened and those impish dimples appeared when he grinned. He’d gotten rid of the goofy silk kerchief. Selene couldn’t help noticing the curly chest hair peeking from the V of his open necked shirt, and dark black fuzz the same color as the hair on his head adorning muscled forearms.

He wore his hair a little long. She wondered what it would feel like to run her fingers through the thick strands along his collar. She eyed his ass. Nice. Broad shoulders also nice, and she’d already noted the length of his legs. He’d probably be good in the sack. She couldn’t help where her thoughts led; she did miss the pure physicality of sex, of being able to lose herself in sensation. Speculating on sex with Beck McNeal was just that, just a thought, she assured herself. No harm in thinking about tumbling mindlessly into bed with him.

“Almost done,” he pronounced as he bent to check the sizzling steaks. Selene mentally shook herself. What the hell was she thinking, wanting to run her hands through his hair? Wanting to squeeze his tight buns? The man wanted a secretary.

But he was sending a garbled message. In the grocery store, he’d said she “floored” him. The way he looked at her made it clear she wasn’t exactly unattractive to him, but mixing

business and pleasure had always seemed a bad idea. Mostly because, in her limited experience at least, if anyone ultimately paid for an ill-advised office affair it was the woman.

Better keep her mind on the idea that he would be her boss.

A little surprised, that without consciously thinking about it she'd already nearly made up her mind that she would help him with his summer project, Selene gazed with real pleasure at the steaming slab of beef Beck set down on the table in front of her.

Seating himself and slathering his own potato generously with butter and sour cream, Beck looked at Selene as she hesitated. "Dig in," he said.

"This is enough food for three or four meals," Selene protested. "I could have done nicely with a corner cut off your steak and a piece of your potato."

"Unh-uh." He curled a hand around his plate protectively. "It's not often I eat red meat and artery-clogging dairy food, but when I do it's all mine. I don't share."

Selene smiled as she followed his order. The food was exquisite, everything cooked and seasoned to perfection, which pleased her beyond words. After praise for his culinary skills, the rest of the meal passed in small talk. She was grateful he didn't pick mealtime to put her on the spot again, but waited until she'd pushed her plate aside with a satisfied groan before approaching the subject of working for him.

"You've lived in Wyoming your whole life?"

Selene nodded.

"You could discover some of your own roots then, a bonus if you say yes. I know that's initially what got me started in this direction, the bits and pieces I learned from my own grandparents. I grew up around this area. Unfortunately, I was too young to appreciate what they were telling me and now they're gone." His face took on an endearingly wistful look before he pounced. "So will you consider adding my project to your summer agenda?"

"Yes, I'll help you," Selene found herself assenting. It must have been the part about his grandma and grandpa that finally shoved the word *yes* out of her mouth, she thought. Was she so far gone in prejudice against men she had to force herself to agree to something she actually wanted to do? Working on an oral history project could only aid and not hurt her as a history major.

It couldn't have been the man himself who made her say yes. It couldn't be the dangerous attraction growing in her toward Beck McNeal, who she already knew would be disastrous for her personally. She would keep her eye and her heart on attaining her goal of getting her degree. She would help Beck McNeal because it would help her.

She would work with him without letting her mind keep wandering to the subject of how sexy he was. He was just another man, and a man way beyond her grasp. She would care only for his project. She would not allow herself to care a bit for Beck McNeal, who could only bring out the ruinous side of Selene if she forgot her promises to herself and got involved in a summer affair.

### Chapter Three

Beck was absolutely right about one thing. Selene Pertunda didn't kiss on the first date. In fact, she apparently didn't believe in touching at all. At least, she didn't believe in touching him. If he so much as reached across the table toward her hand, she chilled him with a warning look. If she'd worn a sign on her smooth-skinned forehead saying *Don't Touch, and I Mean It!* she couldn't have made herself more clear.

At least in trying to put her at ease with inconsequential patter, Beck lost his own clammy nervousness. But he couldn't shake the feeling that his approach toward her had been terribly wrong from the very beginning. Even after dinner, when he walked her to her car in the gold



tinged glow of the Victorian era yard lamps, Selene's stiff body language put a distinct damper on things. She was polite, but assuredly distant.

"I'll call you in the next couple of days, and we'll get started—if that's all right with you," Beck said, leaning in the open window of the car, trying his best to appear friendly.

Selene started the engine. He realized there would be no more dallying. "It's fine with me. If I'm in class, leave a message on my voicemail."

She put the car in gear and Beck backed away a step, half afraid she might run over his toes if he didn't move. But then she added as she pulled away, her words floating back on the night air, "Thanks for dinner, professor."

Beck spent the next few hours wondering what Selene really thought of him. *If* she was thinking of him. He considered calling her before going upstairs to sleep in Carole's big four-poster. At one point he actually had his hand on the phone. But he kept hearing her call him professor and knew the tone of irony he thought he detected was real. She was deliberately putting distance between them. He advised himself to leave well enough alone. He had his assistant for the summer, and that was enough. For now.

He'd have to think a bit about pursuing anything more with Selene Pertunda. Maybe she was more perceptive than he. Maybe they didn't have enough in common to sustain a relationship beyond working together. Maybe, he thought, he was just too old or—the truth was painful sometimes—she simply didn't find him attractive.

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"Well?"

Selene hadn't wanted to call Sarah, hadn't wanted to recount the whole disastrous evening in excruciating detail. But she couldn't seem to stop herself. Besides Sarah expecting her call, Selene herself needed to get an expert's opinion on exactly what had, or had not, occurred tonight. She knew Sarah would be awake because her latest boyfriend worked swing shift this week at a local soda ash mine. He wouldn't get in until after midnight, so Sarah would still be up waiting.

"Well, nothing," Selene said in answer to her friend's query. "We had dinner and he asked me to do some typing for him. He's working on an oral history project, and needs someone to do some transcription."

"You're kidding." Sarah sounded as flabbergasted as Selene felt.

"Why would I kid you?" Selene sighed, rubbing cream into her hands as she held the phone awkwardly propped on one shoulder instead of putting it on speaker.

"He didn't make any moves?"

"No moves. He started with some compliments, which I shut off when I found out he just wanted a secretary. I don't believe in flirting with the boss."

"Selene. You did your best Ice Queen imitation, didn't you?"

"Sarah, he wants a typist. Besides, I need to concentrate on getting my degree, not on getting a man."

"Why can't you do both? Loosen up and have a little fun while you're working."

"No way. The last thing I need is a summer romance, and then good-bye when he flies back to Boston. Been there, done that quick fling thing. Thanks, but no thanks." Selene was adamant.

"Maybe a summer romance is just what you need. Maybe it could turn into something more, who knows? Give the guy a chance, Selene. Boston, huh? Are oral histories what he does for a living? That sounds kind of interesting. Can you make good money doing that?"

"I'll have you know he's *director* of Western American Studies at Boston University, no less. And no, I don't have the faintest idea how much money he makes. So don't ask."

Sarah sounded a little hurt. "I wasn't going to ask."

“You were. In your mind, I’m already married and living in Massachusetts, where Good Fairy Sarah can fly in for Christmas with tons of gifts to spoil my fairy tale children.” Selene examined the fine skin around her eyes for signs of wrinkles. There weren’t any yet that she could detect. She thought she might just get off the phone, have a good cry, and live with the puffy eyes tomorrow.

“One can only hope about the kids,” Sarah said dreamily. “Need a shoulder, Selene? Eddie won’t be in for hours yet. We could have some wine and girl talk.”

“I’m fine,” Selene said firmly. She didn’t think she could handle Sarah’s cheery optimism in person. Sarah accused Selene of using her education as a way to avoid living—and maybe to avoid getting wounded. Sometimes Selene thought Sarah was right. Certainly, attending classes day after day, she knew exactly what was expected of her. When it came to relationships, she’d always had to guess. And more often than not she guessed wrong. She wasn’t ashamed to admit she was no good at love.

“My ego’s a little bruised but nothing major,” she continued. “Nothing like the old days, when a lot more of me than my feelings was regularly bruised. Anyway, I have early lab tomorrow. I’ve got to get some sleep.”

“Okay,” Sarah said dubiously. “But listen, Selene, I meant it when I said to let up on the guy. You know those highly educated types, real smart except when it comes to living real life. Maybe his head’s in the clouds. Maybe he just doesn’t know how to operate with his nose outside a book.”

“Maybe,” Selene agreed reluctantly, mostly to get Sarah off the phone. She hadn’t expected Sarah to take Beck’s side, and to pounce on her for being hard on him. Where was a friend’s loyalty? Now she’d have trouble sleeping, worrying that Sarah was right and she was too unforgiving.

It wouldn’t be the first time they disagreed. Sarah changed boyfriends at least twice a year. Each one, of course, being the one who would last forever. While he did last, Sarah got weekends in Jackson Hole or a gambling trip to Las Vegas. All paid for by her flush boyfriend of the moment.

Selene couldn’t imagine falling in love and then healing from the broken relationship twice a year. She could do the physical part as long as she didn’t try to pretend it was love. Screwing was easy. Falling in love was serious and had, for her, only meant getting hurt. And as far as gifts, Selene had never accepted money from men, even at her lowest financial ebb.

She knew she was a mass of contradictions and probably a complete social misfit, but if she had become stiff-necked and Victorian as Carole’s house in the interest of self-preservation, then so be it.

And yet the friendship between her and Sarah persisted. Despite their differences, despite some arguments that became heated at times, their closeness endured. High school chums, Sarah had seen Selene through her rocky relationship and rough split from Robert, and the all-too-brief fling with Kevin. And with the other nameless and faceless men. The ones who had come and quickly gone from Selene’s life. Sarah still believed in knights in shining armor. The big difference between them was that Sarah thought that deep down, Selene was looking for a white knight too. Selene, with her experience and a hard cynicism, didn’t believe in myths.

Yet she’d almost found herself making that silly mistake with Beck McNeal, almost seen him as kind. Good thing he’d shown his true colors before she went and fell for him, and all too soon found out he was just like the rest.

Realizing she was brushing her hair so hard her scalp was starting to hurt, she placed the hairbrush down on the vanity top with rather more force than necessary. But better to take out her frustration on inanimate objects than on her own head.

She had been a silly girl once. Silly head-over-heels for Robert. Robert could be so charming when he put forth the effort. Their whole affair, from their meeting, to moving in

together, to the escalating cycle of abuse, to his apparent disappearance off the face of the earth, had taken barely two years. She had gone into the affair loving him with all her being, making him the reason for her existence, and he had taken advantage of that love, beaten and belittled it out of her. She had become Selene the Ice Queen in self-defense, her heart granite cold and untouchable.

It took months and many a long teary conversation with Sarah to realize that the love of her life had in reality been a user, a twisted soul who took his own unhappiness out on the supposed love of his life. Even now, the thought of how she'd fallen for Robert's early lovemaking caused Selene's cheeks to heat in shame. She'd mistaken sex for love once. Never again.

Thankfully, Sarah had never blamed her, only listened and commiserated. Good old Sarah. "It happens," she said philosophically. "We want to believe in true love so much, we do things that aren't good for us. So Robert wasn't good for you. Take the lesson and move on."

But there lay the problem. Where Sarah could change her hair color and begin a whole new life, for Selene a true new beginning came hard.

She didn't think she felt emotions more deeply than Sarah or that lost love etched more permanently on her soul. It was just that Sarah healed faster, a lot faster, than Selene.

"I will heal," she promised herself as she turned down her bedding and set the alarm. "I'll move on. I will. I'll find someone after I get my degree—and it won't be Professor Beckett Sexy Fibber McNeal."

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Beck waited what he thought a reasonable amount of time after Selene should have gotten home from class before calling. He couldn't help himself. He knew he'd said he would call in a couple of days, but besides being eager to start on his project and at loose ends in Carole's big old house all by himself, he wanted very much to see Selene.

Her reception was cool. "I just now got in the door, professor," she said, as if reprimanding a child. Beck wondered why he bothered. What was it about her that made him seek out her particular brand of punishment? Was he crazy or what?

"Could you bring yourself to call me Beck? After all, I'm not your teacher." He hoped she didn't take that as a return reprimand, but her tone of voice stung more than he wanted to admit.

"No, you're not my teacher. You're my employer. But Beck it is, if that's how you prefer it." Was her voice even chillier than it had been? Damn! Round one to the female ice sculpture.

Forcing his battered male ego out of its corner and back on its feet for a second round, he said as casually as he could, "I thought we might have dinner tonight. I'll spring if you tell me where you like to eat."

"Is this business...Beck?"

Is that what she was angry about? That he wanted to see her on business? He couldn't decipher what she expected. No matter what he did, it seemed to be the wrong thing. What, exactly, did she want from him?

"Well, not really," he hedged. "I just wanted to see you again. The project might creep into the conversation, I can't promise it won't. But my main purpose in calling was to see if you would just go out somewhere with me tonight."

"I thought I made it clear that we were to stick to business, professor. If you can't do that tonight, then we'll have to make it another time."

Beck wanted to curse. He'd never met such an ice cube. For one moment, he had the strongest urge to tell her to just forget it, he'd find some nice retired lady in need of extra income to supplement her social security to do his summer transcription. But then reason won out over momentary temper. He wanted to get going on the project. He didn't have time to look for someone else.

“Business it is, then. I am, in fact, raring to get started. I bought several packages of tape as well as a backup digital recorder. We’ll use both. But we can discuss that over dinner. Where would you like to go?”

A muffled sound, laughter or her choking from anger, came over the phone. Then she said, “Do you like Chinese, Beck?”

He decided she’d been laughing, and felt the last of his exasperation drain out in a burst of intense relief. “Chinese, Thai, Japanese. It’s all good.”

“I know just the place,” she said.

“Sounds great. I’ll pick you up in about an hour.”

“You’ve got a deal,” she said, and hung up. Beck felt a huge, foolish grin stretching his cheeks. He didn’t know how such a cactus of a woman could affect him so, but Selene Pertunda’s good mood elevated his own to an almost alarming degree.

He didn’t want to depend on a woman ever again, but he was already softening toward Selene. He knew he should be more cautious with his bruised heart, but she made him want to throw caution to the eternal Wyoming wind.

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Once more Selene faced her closet. It had been a long time since she’d fretted about what to wear. She knew most anything looked good on her; she had the classic hourglass shape that most women envied. Sarah was right; Selene would have no trouble attracting a man if she’d just loosen up. She turned men’s heads, she knew that. But she also deliberately turned them off.

So she didn’t know why she was so worried about impressing Beck McNeal, her new employer. She didn’t want to turn his head, so what difference did it make what she wore? But it did matter. He’d made her laugh. She had been deliberately baiting him, and instead of getting angry he’d turned it around on her and made her laugh. Instead of feeling grumpy about being outwitted, she felt buoyant, as if Beck’s small victory was a win for both of them.

She didn’t know why that was, that his successful detouring around her moodiness made her happy. Maybe because no other man had ever tried. If she was cranky or even tired around Robert, he took it as a personal affront and a good excuse for a rousing fight. If she dared show Robert that she wasn’t Miss Happy-Go-Lucky every hour of every day, he simply beat the hell out of her and then disappeared without explanation for a week or so until, he said, her moodiness passed—mini preludes to what she should have known would be his final disappearance from her life. What she ended up feeling was that Robert didn’t want to deal with a real person with real emotions and real problems. A life-sized Barbie doll with a fixed plastic smile would have suited him better.

And Selene would be the first to admit that she wasn’t always the queen of optimism, like her friend Sarah was. But if she had to put up with Robert’s imperfections, why was he not required to live with hers? Why did she have to be perfect in order to please him?

And she wasn’t always gloomy, either. In fact, once she finally let go of Robert she felt much more cheerful and happy. And once she admitted that what Robert’s harsh lessons gave her was confidence in her ability to attract a man sexually and not to spare a moment on worrying about love, she thought if she ever saw him again she should thank him.

That idea alone elicited a short guffaw. Because she could just picture the expression on Robert’s face if she got the chance to give him credit for ramping up the situation between them until she had the excuse she needed to call the cops. From her psychology classes, she knew she was already one of the lucky ones. Too many domestic violence situations escalated into murder; she was lucky Robert had controlled himself enough to vanish into the legal system instead of putting her in the hospital or killing her.

But she wouldn't think about the past. She would concentrate on the present. What to wear? What did she want Beck McNeal to think of her? Did she want sexy and cute, severely businesslike, or something in between? How about neutrally casual—maybe something in bright turquoise?

The color enhanced the green of her eyes and the milkiness of her complexion. It showed off her legs to advantage, but the outfit she picked was neither in-your-face sexy with lots of boob showing, nor overly dowdy.

Good choice, she complimented herself. And I put it together out of my own closet all by myself, without Sarah's help. Way to go, Selene!

And then she did laugh aloud.

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Beck arrived at Selene's apartment precisely one hour after he hung up.

"Am I late?" he asked. "I have a little trouble with the newer parts of town. All the streets named after states confuse me."

"But you can figure out the difference between West Second North and North Second West?" Selene laughed.

"Hey, I delivered the Rocky Creek *Star* as a kid. Of course, hardly anyone I remember lives in the houses where I used to deliver. It's been a long time." Beck returned her smile, but there was a wistful twist to the corners of his mouth. His black hair was brushed casually, a thick hunk hanging attractively over his forehead. He wore glasses today, and a pair of neatly pressed jeans along with the cowboy boots and another Western-cut shirt. "The changes give me a greater sense of urgency to get started. The older people, the ones I need to talk to, are fast disappearing." He sighed, then gestured toward the parking lot.

They started toward Carole's SUV.

"Is that what you've been doing today? Out prospecting the old neighborhoods?" Selene found herself wishing she'd had the afternoon free so she could have gone with him. He was right about the old part of town, it had a character and ambience completely different from the newer housing divisions that had sprung up south of the river.

He held the door for her, and Selene climbed in as gracefully as possible. As they pulled away, she saw the curtains of Sarah's apartment swing back into place, and knew she would be expected to do some explaining later. For right now, she wanted to concentrate on Beck McNeal. Despite herself, she found she liked him when he showed her his hidden vulnerable side.

"Part of what I did today was just finding out who was still around," he said as he pulled into traffic. "I knocked on some doors, talked to some of the older residents, got some leads. Then I went back to Carole's and made some phone calls, started some lists. Then I mowed the grass and fixed a few things around the house, loose hinges and such. That house was our grandmother's, you know. Carole inherited it. I always envied her the house, but my life was in Boston and I could hardly transport the old place clear across the country. But I'm rambling. Sorry. How was your day? Did your classes go well?"

"They went fine. The usual Wednesday," Selene said neutrally, unwilling to admit biology lab had completely eluded her since her mind had been elsewhere. Her mind had been on Beck McNeal, in fact. In spite of her resolve not to think about him, in spite of her assurance that no good could come of a relationship with a man like him, she still daydreamed about him. Like a silly schoolgirl, and not the experienced woman she was.

"I understand you hold down a job as well?" Beck asked conversationally.

"I work when I can, mostly weekends," she mumbled, not wanting him to know about Selene the bartender.

Beck glanced sideways at her.

"What do you do? Can you type?" They were out on the interstate by now, and he turned his attention back to his driving.

"I do ninety words a minute," Selene muttered. He didn't really want to know how she earned her living. His inquisitiveness merely confirmed the fact that he was interested in her for her typing skills.

Well, she was the one who had insisted they stick strictly to business. It was her own fault if he wanted to talk exclusively about his work. Yet she found the little glimpses he gave into his personal life fascinating. She wondered what he'd been like as a little boy; if he had delivered newspapers he obviously knew the value of hard work for meager pay. He'd also mentioned fixing hinges for Carole, so he evidently wasn't all thumbs around a tool box.

He was a good driver, too, his lane changes smooth and his speed even, though his experience with Boston traffic probably made driving in Wyoming easy by comparison. Except for the semi-truck drivers who made the road hazardous at times, heavy traffic wasn't generally a problem on I-80.

"It's so green this year," Beck murmured. Selene, too, tried to keep her eyes on the view outside the car's window, the hills lining the highway carpeted in a vivid green atypical of southwest Wyoming. Usually the vegetation blended in with the iron red and tan hills, so that people unfamiliar with the high desert thought it a stark and denuded place. But this wet year of frequent snows had brought out wildflowers and grasses in exuberant abundance, and the taller sage and rabbitbrush vibrated with verdant green.

But her eyes kept straying back to Beck. His sharp profile softened by his glasses. The shock of unruly hair that insisted on straying to his forehead. A pair of sensuously shaped lips made for kissing. She found herself dreamily wondering what it would feel like to have those lips on hers. Her eyes traveled down a column of a neck set on wide shoulders that made her wonder if he worked out regularly. That led to wondering what he looked like in gym shorts and a thin T-shirt...and there she reined in her reckless train of thought.

Soon she'd be imagining his lips exploring other places on her body than her mouth. Then she'd be picturing herself returning the favor. Then they'd move on....

"Yes! We're certainly having a green year!" she blurted, too loud and too fast for the absolutely normal conversation they'd been having just a moment before. Beck glanced at her again, his brow wrinkled in concern. Or annoyance. Selene blushed, wishing she could read him better. He turned back to his driving, fiddling with the radio until he found a station that mixed oldies with modern tunes.

"Is this okay with you?" he asked.

"It doesn't matter," Selene said in what she hoped was a more moderate voice. "The country station was fine. This one is fine. I listen to them all."

"Really?" He seemed surprised. "I wouldn't have thought you liked country music."

"Why ever not?" She had told him she worked in a bar. Country music was almost a requirement. She wouldn't have thought he liked syrupy ballads either, but she was curious why he thought she didn't.

"You seem too...contemporary. A touch brittle, I guess, if that description doesn't offend you. I don't mean it to. It's just I thought you probably listened to something more snappy."

Snappy. Brittle. Was that how he saw her? Selene flinched.

"I have offended you." Once more he looked at her before taking the last exit into Hawk Point.

"Not at all," Selene said distantly, keeping her eyes on the roadside scenery and blinking back tears. Her feelings were hurt. How utterly, stupidly silly.

The restaurant lay a mere block from the exit, so Beck was occupied with pulling in and parking for the next few moments. But when the car stopped and he turned off the engine, he just sat for a moment. "I'm sorry," he said before turning toward her in the seat. "I think you've been very badly hurt somewhere along the way, and you react by withdrawing. I can feel it when you go away. The last thing I ever want to do is hurt you. I apologize."

Selene turned to look at him. Now that she really looked into his eyes in the light of the lowering sun, she realized they were a warm shade of brown, almost amber. She'd never seen eyes precisely that color before, and they fascinated her. She wasn't offended, she really wasn't. She was...oh, God, there was no other word for it...beguiled. She forgot all about tears in the warmth of Beck's concerned gaze.

For a moment she abandoned all her lofty goals and her fear that she wouldn't attain them. She forgot all about classes, and the fact that she still had studying to do when she finally got home tonight.

She forgot her vow to only think of Beck McNeal as her employer and not a man. She was afraid she could drown in those eyes. She was afraid she'd abandon her goal and replace it with one even more unattainable, of making this man care for her.

She was afraid she would forgive Beck McNeal anything.

She was afraid.

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If she could see what she looked like, Beck thought. Big brown eyes wide, moist lips slightly parted, head tilted so the reddish rays of the setting sun lent an alluring blush to her pale cheeks.

He wanted at that moment to kiss her senseless. Just wrap his hand around the back of her slim neck and pull her over into a kiss so deep and so passionate she'd forget all about their bargain. Stay away from personal subjects? He wanted nothing more than to get personal with this woman.

But he had agreed. Business. The project. Dinner.

No touching. He had agreed.

He snatched the keys out of the ignition and opened the door so violently it squealed in protest.

Business. He swung around the back of the SUV and opened the passenger door for Selene, almost groaning in frustration when she swung a pair of shapely bare legs out for his inspection. He didn't offer his hand. He couldn't. He'd been stupid to agree to such a bargain, anyway, when he was so mindlessly attracted to her and had been since he'd first laid eyes on her. But he kept his hands firmly on the door of the vehicle and let her climb out by herself. He knew if he touched her, even so much as held her hand, all previous deals were off and he'd grab her and mash her hips up against the erection that was becoming a constant torment.

He had to find some way to make Selene see what fools they'd been to agree there would be no romance and nothing physical between them. She filled all his waking thoughts. If he had to spend the summer just thinking about her and not touching her, he not only wouldn't be able to finish his project, he'd begin his new career a crazy man. A crazy old man, he amended, trapped and scared by the heady rush of feeling she engendered in him. She made him feel eighteen again, young and vital, and just as prone to mistakes of the heart as an eighteen-year-old. He had retired at the end of the spring semester. Now he just wanted to move back to Wyoming permanently, do some research and some writing. He couldn't afford any more mistakes. It had to be right this time or not at all.

So he reverted to trying to delude himself. Being so hot for Selene's perfectly shaped body didn't mean he was falling in love. He was too old for that, and certainly too mature to mistake a stiff dick for lasting love.

But as he followed Selene's swaying hips to the door of the restaurant, a persistent bit of folk wisdom kept echoing in his head:

Face it, McNeal, there's no fool like an *old* fool!

## Chapter Four

A fixture in Hawk Point, the Chinese restaurant sprouted from the hills on the westernmost edge of the city. The city owed much of its prosperity to the oil and gas industry, so it was understandable that it had a hard time amending the zoning maps to exclude endless metal warehouses, equipment rental yards, auto repair shops and gas stations cheek by jowl with massive brick apartment buildings, motels, acres of paved parking lots, plus the single restaurant.

"Some things change and some stay the same," Beck said as he held the door of the establishment for Selene.

"It's been remodeled," she pointed out, surveying the new interior of the restaurant. *Kind of like me*, she thought. *You don't know it, Beck McNeal, but what you're seeing is the new and improved Selene Pertunda.*

"I meant, no matter how the interior of this place changes, it still seems the same," Beck said with a smile. And Selene had to agree. The smells of Chinese cooking when the green batwing doors to the kitchen swung open, the sounds of conversation and laughter from the diners, were the same no matter how much it had changed cosmetically or how long it had been since she'd last eaten there.

"And the portions are the same," she said after they had been seated, ordered, and served. The tiny table top fairly groaned under the weight of the separate dishes of rice, soup, and main course. She had to laugh at the popeyed look on Beck's face as he forced himself to sample every dish. "I tried to warn you. But they're nice about providing boxes for leftovers."

"Good thing," Beck agreed, finishing one last bite of before pushing his plate away. "Do you want to take yours home or let me have it all and you can come over and help me eat it?"

"We seem to be spending a lot of time over food and not much on your project. When are we going to get started?" Selene toyed with her fork, deliberately not meeting Beck's gaze. She didn't want to fall under the spell of his mesmerizing gaze again, afraid if she looked into his eyes she'd agree to anything: like stripping off her clothes in public, lying across the half-eaten meal, letting him spoon wonton from her navel.

"As soon as you can," Beck said, snapping her back to reality. "How about Saturday? You could help me make some phone calls and set up initial interviews. I'll begin by hitting the Senior Centers in the next couple days, talking to some of the folks there, getting leads. The hard part is getting the first person to agree to talk. Then it seems to snowball and they all want to participate."

Selene hesitated. She bartended Friday and Saturday nights. Her Saturdays were usually reserved for sleeping and studying.

"Oh, a sleepyhead?" Beck's lazy smile teased, guessing what she was thinking. "Most older folks get up early, you know. But I'll wait until later in the day if that's what suits you."

So now he thought she was lazy. "I thought I'd only be typing," she hedged, setting her fork down. Beck just kept pushing her, first to work on the project at all, and now to making contacts for him. Selene tensed, afraid to admit she was afraid. Beck tested her limits constantly, and she didn't know how to react.

Carole introduced her to new people and new situations slowly, letting her become accustomed in her own good time. She encouraged rather than forced the situation. Beck, in contrast to his cousin, was more forward, more hurried. She wasn't used to calling strangers on the phone, asking for their time. She didn't know how to approach old people—well, except maybe for her nona—and she hardly thought they would be receptive to two utter strangers barging into their lives.



He was so different from his cousin it was hard to believe he and Carole were related at all. Where Carole nudged, smiled, encouraged, Beck plowed full speed ahead. You will do this, Selene. You will do that, Selene. Would his demands never end? Would they escalate to punishment if she didn't do well?

"The more I consider how little time I have, the more I think I'd better move on this thing," he said earnestly. "Carole will be wanting her house back by the end of summer. You'll have plenty of typing later on. Maybe enough to keep you busy through the winter. For now you could go on a couple of interviews with me, get a feel for how to conduct one, and then you can take it on your own."

Selene swallowed nervously. Interviewing? The winter? He already had plans to dominate her thoughts all winter? She tried desperately to keep her gaze on her plate, but knew she was weakening already. "I couldn't possibly interview," she said weakly.

"Why not?" Involuntarily she looked up to see Beck grinning. "I'll give you a list of questions. It's easy and, I have to admit, fascinating. It's fun."

Selene was shaking her head, but she already knew it was too late. She wanted to do this project. And besides, she'd looked into his eyes again. She was such a sucker. She was already lost. Of course, Beck only had the summer. He would be hurried, she could understand that. And how else would she learn to jump in with both feet unless she just did it? Still, she hesitated. "I don't think—"

"Come on. You can do it. I'll set up a couple interviews for this weekend and you can go with me." He was at his most persuasive, his arresting amber eyes alight with enthusiasm behind faux tortoiseshell glasses.

"Well..." Selene hedged.

"Hey, who's the boss here? You are working for me? If you want to quit, I'll just start convincing you to make our relationship more personal instead of businesslike. So what's it to be?" He smiled wickedly.

*Don't tempt me, mister,* Selene thought. But she knew when she'd been outmaneuvered. The marvel was that, at the moment, she didn't mind being outmaneuvered. Maybe she'd change her mind later. She could already see her grades going down the toilet for the time she'd be spending on Beck's obsession, but for now she said, "Let me know what time to be ready."

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Beck had visions of getting Selene ready, all right, but it wasn't to go interview elderly people about their experiences in the coal mines. He could imagine parting her legs, licking his finger, massaging her until she was wet with desire. This whole dinner had been torture. He'd like to get her alone on an island, just the two of them, where she couldn't escape into her chilly reserve. She'd have to spend all her waking hours with him, getting to know him and he getting to know her. Taking their sweet time, talking and exploring each other's minds and their bodies.

And somehow, despite her reserved formality, he knew Selene would be sweet. A touching vulnerability and purity hid behind the wall of reserve in her green-speckled eyes. There was a side to her that she showed no one, and Beck itched to scale that wall and get at the true Selene Pertunda.

But that would take time and a slow building of trust. He had a scant couple of months—and he hadn't yet even begun to make a positive impression.

He wondered how far he could coerce her before she backed away for good. He'd threatened to fire her, threatened heavy-handed wooing if she didn't do what he said. He knew better; American college campuses were hot beds of politically correct ideology. A man shouldn't bully a woman into doing what he wanted. But Selene brought out the animal in him; one he hadn't

even known existed. He wanted to tear her protective layers away along with her pretty, feminine blue clothing, and see if he was right about what lay underneath.

His hands clenched at the thought. He wondered if his desire for her showed plainly on his face, and had no doubt it did. It was a miracle she didn't get up and walk out on him.

But she didn't.

In the extended silence she fiddled with a tiny gold earring decorating her small shell ear.

Head tilted to one side, she gazed at him.

*What's your question, Selene?* he thought. *Ask me anything.*

But she'd set the rules. No personal stuff.

There was no way he could take two months of this torment, and then at the end leave, unfulfilled and empty. Abruptly, he pushed away from the table. "Are you ready?" he asked. At her slightly uncertain nod, as if she questioned if he might be asking what she was ready for, he almost groaned, choking out a strangled "Let's go, then."

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Fortunata had been pleased when she caught sight of the pretty young woman from the metaphysical fair enter the Chinese restaurant in the company of an extremely good-looking man. They made a handsome couple and she was happy for the young lady's good turn of fortune. But as their dinner arrived and she unabashedly watched while they proceeded to eat without any special looks or touching between them, she felt disappointment.

As she watched, she became more convinced that what she saw emanating from not just one of them but both, was fear. They were afraid to take the next step. Which, she supposed, was understandable. But it was plain to see that the man the magic had conjured up for the lucky young woman was just right for her, as well as being an exquisite example of male hunkiness. Fortunata would hate to see the woman she'd taken such an interest in make a huge mistake by turning that one away.

As soon as they got up to pay their bill and leave, Fortunata hurried to follow suit. Her long, midnight blue skirt imprinted with silver symbols and runes billowed around her legs as she climbed into her car. She had things to do. Important things. Among them was the casting of a certain *Spell to Overcome Anxiety*.

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Selene thought she had angered him. Somewhere during shrimp chow mein and her fortune cookie she had unintentionally said or done something that caused Beck to clam up for most of the fifteen miles back to Rocky Creek.

When he pulled up in front of her apartment building, the light of the street lamp revealed the tight line of his jaw, the strain around his eyes.

"Saturday," he said. "I won't bother you until then."

Her fingertips already on the door handle, she nodded, throat tight. Then she ignominiously and wordlessly fled the too close interior of the vehicle before he could make a move to get out and assist her.

He pulled away with a squeal of tires.

Her hand shook as she tried to insert the key in the door lock to let herself in. Before she succeeded, Sarah's door opened, and without turning she knew her friend stood watching, inquisition at the ready.

"Been out?"

"Yes." Selene jabbed the key at the lock.

"The interviewer guy?"

“Yes.”

“Well?”

Selene gave up on the lock and turned on the landing to face Sarah, who stood lounging nonchalantly against the doorframe in a sheer black negligee. “Well, nothing.”

Sarah tossed copper curls over her shoulder. “Selene.” She sighed in disappointment. “Not again? ‘Nothing’ is getting to be your standard answer. Come over here, girlfriend. You need some lessons.”

Selene cocked a hand on her hip. “It was a business dinner, Sarah. You needn’t have waited up for me.”

“As you could probably tell if you were paying the least bit of attention, I’m obviously not waiting up for *you*.” Sarah grinned, arching pert breasts suggestively beneath sheer black nylon. “But since we’re both still wide awake and Eddie won’t be home for a while yet, why don’t you tell Aunt Sarah all about it?”

“There’s nothing more to tell. You already know the extent of it. He wants a secretary. I said okay.”

Sarah paused a beat. “And what does Selene want?”

Sarah had a knack for going for the throat. Selene turned away, toward her own door, and began anew the struggle with the key. She wanted her education, damn it. She wanted straight A’s, to make the grade, to make something of herself. She wanted the respect that Carole enjoyed because of her position and her erudition. She wanted...to be worthy of a man like Beck McNeal. Oh, damn, damn, damn it! She could feel tears starting to sting her eyelids.

“Selene,” Sarah called softly, just as she got the key to turn and the door to open. “If nothing else, at least be honest with yourself.”

Selene stepped inside and shut the door, leaning hard against it before she gave in to the urge to shout at Sarah to just *shut up*. Darn snoopy Sarah, anyway. Friend or not, it was none of her business how the evening had gone. Sarah knew exactly what Selene wanted and how bad she wanted it. Moreover, Selene thought she had made it clear to both Sarah and Beck that she had no romantic interest in him.

She flicked on the overhead light. Too harsh. Too easy to read the truth in her own face in the mirror over the sofa. She turned it off and threaded her way, by the dim light of the street lamp toward one of her several table lamps, through the furniture and plants so luxurious she sometimes swore she could hear them growing. Better; softer light would hide her confusion and near panic even from herself.

She flung the turquoise cardigan across a chair and then flung herself down on top of it, not caring if she wrinkled it. She picked up a magazine, put it down without reading a word.

So Sarah could be right. She could be hiding from herself. In that case, she wanted more from Beck McNeal. She wanted more from herself. She was holding back, and it didn’t feel good. She had lied to herself for years, convincing herself that things would get better, that Robert would stop hitting her, that they would work things out. She liked lying to herself even less than she liked feeling stupid.

If she did something impulsive, if she did something that went against her rigid plans, would something disastrous happen as a result? Would she die if things didn’t work out the way she wanted them to with Beck? She hadn’t died before when a serious relationship hadn’t worked out. She might get hurt, but she wouldn’t perish from the pain. She’d learned that much.

She wanted her degree. But she also wanted Beck McNeal. If only a taste, if only for the summer. She calculated: Had enough time passed for Beck to have made it across town to Carole’s yet?

She felt an almost overwhelming compulsion to do something. She picked up the phone, pressed the numbers.

What if he didn’t go straight to Carole’s? What if decided to stop somewhere for a nightcap?

What if she never had the courage to do again what she was about to do now?

He answered.

"I didn't thank you for dinner," she said without preamble, afraid she'd hang up without saying anything at all if she didn't plunge right in.

"You're most welcome," Beck answered.

A suffocating pause while she gathered all her resources. Then she said, "You said you hadn't been honest with me. Well, I haven't been honest with you, either."

He waited, saying nothing. He wasn't going to make this any easier. Selene couldn't blame him. She hadn't made it easy for him thus far.

"You talked about making our relationship more personal." She took a deep breath, forged ahead and damn the consequences. "I'd like to explore that. I'd like to see what it is about you that I find so attractive."

She endured another eternity of silence. She couldn't even hear him breathing and wondered if he'd disconnected and she just didn't realize it yet.

At last, his voice so soft and intimate her insides began to melt like chocolate left out in the sun, he said, "Come on over here, Selene. Let's make a new start and see where we can go."

## Chapter Five

Selene had thought she could resume acting like the old Selene and get away with it. Just tell Beck what she wanted and then go on from there. But the problem was, she wasn't that Selene anymore. Or she didn't want to be. She had become some reserved creature who'd called a man on the phone and proposed getting to know him better, then immediately she lost her nerve and wanted to back out.

Stupid. Ridiculous. Silly Selene. She could hardly recognize her own self, she made herself so mad sometimes.

"Right now?" She hated that hesitant tone in her voice. Where the hell was the real Selene when she really needed her? "Oh, I...I don't think—"

"Selene. New beginnings. Remember? Come on. I don't bite, I promise. At least, not unless you want me to." Beck laughed, and Selene warmed to the easy affection in his voice. She really liked Beck McNeal, and liked the totally new feeling of just enjoying a man's company.

He hadn't turned her off, turned her away, turned her down. She'd been afraid of all three, afraid the tension in his jaw when he dropped her off indicated he didn't want her company. She'd been afraid she'd never see him again.

"We are a little intense for two people just interested in business, aren't we?" she ventured.

He chuckled again. "Intense. An apt description for what I'm feeling. Come on over, Selene. I'm wide awake and could use the company. Let's forget about business for a while."

"Okay." Still uncertain, she hung up.

But it felt right to go now, as Beck asked. If she resisted this time, she knew there wouldn't be another chance. She'd seized the initiative. Now she must act, or lose all the ground she'd apparently made up with him.

She would do it. If it wasn't quite the right thing to do, it wasn't like the old days either. Beck wasn't punishment for a Selene who thought she didn't deserve anything good happening to her. Beck was something new. Beck was what he was, a man she was attracted to, and if it didn't last past the end of summer she would live with that.

She wasn't sure why, but she desperately didn't want to let this opportunity pass by. She grabbed up the discarded cardigan and threw it over her shoulders, snatched her keys and left the apartment before she could change her mind. She didn't even take time to turn out the light.

Sarah's curtains didn't move this time, and Selene smiled as she drove away. Probably certain that poor old dull Selene had retired to her lonely bed with her biology text, Sarah had given up on her for the night. Well, it just went to show that even best friends didn't know everything about each other.

The problem, Selene thought as she drove, wasn't that she refused to take risks. The problem was that she took the wrong risks. She had taken the risk with Robert, and look what happened. The new Selene had been born out of old Selene's confusion and inability to handle the way Robert cast away her love like yesterday's trash, after first grinding it under his boot heel. The Selene who rose from the ashes of that sick relationship never fell in love—and so never got hurt.

So should she be gambling on another man who had started out by withholding the truth from her? There just wasn't any way she could be dead certain she was doing the right thing. Beck McNeal was probably wrong, wrong, *wrong* for her.

And yet. She found him irresistibly appealing. She yearned to be with him. There was no getting around it. She wanted to know him better in all the ways possible.

There were no guarantees everything would work out. She had no illusions about the differences that lay between them. They might have been born in the same little corner of Wyoming, but Beck had moved on to a life much different from the insular routine of school and home and work on Fridays and Saturdays that had become her life.

She was afraid he'd find her boring. She was afraid he'd find her quaint—and wouldn't the old uninhibited Selene have had a good laugh at that! She was afraid he was just interested in a quick fling with a hometown girl to pass idle time left over from working on his project. At one time not too long before, Selene would have been able to handle such an eventuality with breezy aplomb, but now she feared she would not do so well at walking away unscathed.

Beck McNeal was different from other men. Terrified, Selene realized she cared what he thought about her.

And yet she'd called him. She had taken a step that, unless she turned around right now and went back to her stuffy apartment, was irreversible.

*New beginnings*, he'd said. *A fresh start*. Selene clung to that idea, wanting so much to believe that there really was such a thing as starting over. She shut her car door carefully after turning off the engine, and climbed the wooden steps to the balustraded front porch of the old Victorian. The leaded glass entry door was already open in welcome, only the storm door between herself and...what? Her happiness? Her future? More heartbreak?

Her knees started shaking. Instead of turning around and running away, she forced her hand to press the doorbell.

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Beck couldn't believe how a simple phone call from Selene could raise his dashed hopes. He'd been sure he wouldn't see her before Saturday, when they were scheduled to conduct their first interview together. He had been sure, in fact, that he would spend the entire summer convincing Selene to maybe let him hold her hand. He'd been certain the voice on the other end of the ringing phone would be Carole's, or his mother's, or perhaps even a wrong number.

He absolutely had not expected Selene. He at first refused to believe it was indeed her voice. From the way their disaster of an evening had ended, he'd thought maybe she was calling to cancel their Saturday business date. Instead she'd chosen to extend their curtailed evening into the night. And who knew? Maybe he'd get lucky and not screw it up this time.

Unpredictable woman. Absolutely wonderfully impulsive Selene. Such a small thing to make him so happy; a phone call. Such a tiny, timid gesture.

But it was the promise implied in the fact that she did call that filled him with such optimism. She said she thought he was attractive. She said she wanted to explore a more personal relationship.

He'd have to see what he could do about obliging her. Without scaring her off, of course. He'd have to go slow with Selene, take time to find out what pleased her and what didn't.

Which wouldn't be easy, he admitted as the bell rang and he leaped from the sofa to answer. Try to look casual, he advised himself as he opened the door and forced his strained features into a smile.

Try to act as if this doesn't matter so much. Try to act as if your dick hasn't been threatening to pop your zipper since you first set eyes on her.

He opened the storm door and held out his hand. She was so damn beautiful, skin like porcelain and dark wings of eyebrows drawn into a delicate frown as she hesitated. At last she tentatively put a small, well-manicured hand in his and the tightness in Beck's chest loosened. Caught somewhere between modern and old-fashioned, between the things his mother told him eons ago about how to treat girls and all the contrary years of living in between, he didn't know exactly how to approach Selene. He tightened his hand on hers, ever so slightly, and started urging her to come inside.

She did, her eyes lowering to take in his sock feet. He laughed lightly, unwilling to let go of her soft hand. "Kick your shoes off, too, if you want," he offered. "These antique wool throw rugs of Carole's feel wonderful under bare feet."

"I know," Selene agreed, still holding onto him as he led her deeper into the house. "Carole has some lovely old furniture too. It almost feels as if this house is caught in a time warp."

So she was sensing it as well, the dichotomy between the old and the new. They came to the dining room and Beck veered off into a room whose original purpose must have been a ground floor bedroom. But it now held only an overstuffed sofa, an entertainment center, a plant that was drooping from his benign neglect, and walls of shelves for Carole's music and movie collection. A room with tall casement windows and fancy molding from another time, its purpose now was modern entertainment. "I'm glad you appreciate old things," Beck said. He started to sit, tugging slightly on Selene's hand to get her to sit beside him. "That attitude will help when you start interviewing."

"Beck!" Selene's laughter sounded shocked. "You talk as if the people you intend to interview are antiques too."

He smiled and shrugged. "In a way, they are. And they'll tell you so themselves. They're like this house. Born and raised in a different time, they have different attitudes and mores. But don't let them fool you. They've seen a lot in their lives, and if they relax with you they'll talk about it. That's when you get the good stuff. They'll talk about things you never dreamed might have happened in the good old days."

Selene tensed. Her fingers clasped his, her eyes wide. "I'm very nervous about this," she said.

Was she nervous about doing interviews or nervous about being with him? She was so close, so accessible. Just one little kiss? What could it hurt? Beck held himself in check. If just touching her hand drove him nuts, if the brush of her breasts against his back set him on fire, what would happen if he pulled her into his arms?

"Don't be nervous," he said, although he could feel the moisture of his own palm in their locked hands. "You're a natural. They'll love you, I promise."

He swallowed. Were her lips naturally that glossy, inviting him to taste? Did she wear makeup or were those incredibly long jet lashes framing vulnerable green-stippled eyes hers alone? Would she look just like this when he woke next to her, creamy skin ever so slightly flushed, breath warm and sweet when he lowered his lips to hers?

He came back to reality with a jerk, loosening his grip on her hand as he compelled himself to let go of the lascivious visions that kept appearing, so real he was startled to see they were standing in Carole's parlor and not in bed together. What had they been talking about? He could barely remember.

"Would you like to listen to some music?" he asked, to have something to say. He felt like a teenager with his first crush, not sure what to do. He had her alone, just like he wanted. Now what? "Or would you rather watch a video? I could make popcorn."

Lame, he thought, but to his surprise Selene went for it. "Sounds like fun," she said, smiling as he watched her lips and thought of them sheened with butter. He could taste her already, salt mingled with her natural sweetness.

His eyes came back into focus. He wondered if he were actually drooling. He gulped, disengaging his fingers to wipe his mouth, and scrambling off the sofa before he did something completely unforgivable. He had the oddest sense of conversing with two people—one the sweet, innocent Selene he was becoming used to, and the other a more ancient version of woman. A sexpot. A wanton. A Lilith, temptation and desire, the promise of eternal fulfillment on her dewy lips. He shook his head. *Whoa, boy*, he told himself. *Watch those fantasies!*

Selene followed him to the kitchen, where once again he was at a loss. "Does Carole have a corn popper?"

"I don't think so. She uses that big skillet in there, and usually makes two batches." Selene pointed to a cabinet alongside the stove, where he indeed found an oversized skillet among the collection of pots and pans stuffed inside. Carole's many interests included gourmet cooking, and there were utensils in her kitchen whose purposes were foreign to Beck. He could cook, but he wasn't a master chef, and his cousin's kitchen almost intimidated him.

Selene proved helpful, though. She knew where to locate oil and corn, and she knew how hot the oil needed to be. She located a pitcher and filled it with water for the droopy plant in the parlor. He watched her move, and wanted her. He couldn't help it. Flashes of heat as searing as the simmering oil emanated from her. She sizzled. And he burned in return—for her.

"You have to keep the pan moving or it will burn," she warned as she returned with the empty pitcher. The echo of his thoughts shook him, and he tried to come back to reality. Eventually Beck conceded that she knew better than he what to do, so he moved aside and left her to it. He insisted she wear the dish towel wrapped around her middle to protect her pretty clothes, and tried to tell himself as he fastened it in a snug knot that the idea really hadn't been to cinch in her cardigan so he could better see the generous curve of her breasts. Although lucky for him it worked out that way. And he thoroughly enjoyed the sight, too, he admitted as he leaned against the counter and watched her. Her slim arms worked the skillet and her breasts bounced slightly in rhythm. He shifted uncomfortably, trying to stifle the tingling warning behind the zipper of his pants. If he didn't start concentrating on something else, in a matter of seconds he'd have another full blown erection.

She poured melted butter expertly over the bowl of steaming popped corn, and tossed it to mix like a pro. Then she held it out for his inspection, saying, "How's that?"

Beck leaned to take a whiff. "Mmm," he said, although his eyes were glued to the pert mounds straining the top of her outfit, and not on the mound of fluffy corn in the bowl.

Somewhere Selene had lost her cool reserve, and Beck was too thankful that she had to question why or how. He liked her so much this way, open and smiling, proud of her accomplishment in making popcorn the old-fashioned way without benefit of modern doodads like an air popper.

"I'll have to watch my waistline if we keep eating like this," he said, straightening reluctantly from the view offered over the bowl and patting his stomach. If he were to play amateur psychologist, would he come to the conclusion they were using food to replace something more carnal they might like to overindulge in?

“Me, too,” Selene agreed.

Beck eyed her doubtfully, wondering if she really had trouble keeping that luscious figure. Somehow he didn’t think so, but didn’t think it politic to ask—if Selene got an inkling of the way his thoughts had been straying she probably wouldn’t agree to stay and watch the movie with him.

Which set up another problem. What movies did Carole have that Selene might be interested in, but which contained no heavy sex scenes that might prove more than a little discomfiting to the two of them to watch together?

He gestured for her to precede him. She set the bowl on the table for a moment in order to remove the cotton dish towel, and Beck felt a twinge of regret when her clothes settled into their ordinary concealing lines. Her hips undulated invitingly when she walked, he noticed when she picked up the bowl and moved ahead of him back through the dining room. Selene settled herself comfortably on the sofa in the parlor. She kicked off her sandals and drew her legs up beneath her, the bowl on the sofa next to her.

Beck rubbed the frown between his brows and cleared his throat as he stood in front of the entertainment center. Did she mean to have that damned bowl between them like a greasy chaperone all night? Maybe popcorn had been a bad idea, although he wouldn’t have given up for a fortune in gold tying that dish towel around her and getting a truer picture of her contours. “What would you like to watch?” Did he sound as grumpy as he suddenly felt? He hoped not, but he was getting to where he viewed anything that came between him and Selene as the enemy, and at the moment it was that damned huge bowl.

“I’m not picky,” Selene murmured. Beck would have bet he did look crabby. Better change his expression right now. He tried a bright smile, to which Selene responded with a tremulous one of her own. Apparently she sensed the smile was fake and he wasn’t fooling her one bit.

He turned to examine the selection on the shelves, naming aloud several titles and noticing that the plant in the corner was already starting to perk up in response to Selene’s attention. Then he looked over his shoulder inquiringly at her.

“I don’t care. Really. You pick. As long as it’s not too heavily action oriented.” She smiled again.

“Action films are out? I hope you’re not going to request a chick flick, where a group of women get together and dump on men for three hours.” The words were out before he could stop them. He could have bitten his tongue.

Selene flinched, and Beck clenched his teeth while he hurried to explain. “You’re shocked. Sorry. My personal pet peeve. I just feel that movies exacerbate the division between the sexes that isn’t as bad as it’s portrayed.”

“I’m not shocked.” Selene shook her head, causing that drape of gleaming dark hair to sway. “It’s just not something I’d have expected you to say.”

“Because of my background? Not politically correct enough?”

Selene nodded. “Something like that.”

“There’s still freedom of expression, you know, despite where I made my living.” He didn’t know what he expected her to say to that, it sounded so self-defensive. But sometimes, as a male in his age group, he did feel under attack. Take this situation right now, for instance. He didn’t know exactly what he might do or say that would set her off, make her decide to get up and leave forever. Like Annie. Supposedly there had been a big upsurge in dominant males if he judged by what he could see was getting published these days, but he had yet to see any woman, especially on campus, act submissive to any of his male colleagues.

What he didn’t expect was for her to pat the sofa next to the bowl, and say, “Forget the movie. Let’s talk.”

He grinned. For the first time that evening, he felt a real smile stretch his lips. He’d thought he was putting Selene off, and instead she wanted to meet him halfway. The signals she



occasionally sent weren't off-putting—they were a bit challenging, as his admittedly were. She was feeling him out as much as he was feeling his way along. But if she thought that bowl was going to stop him, she was mistaken. He chose music instead of a video, something soft and innocuous that would serve as background and settled himself on the floor at her feet instead of on the sofa next to her.

His choice was inspired, he congratulated himself as Selene squirmed a little above him. She couldn't get off the sofa without touching him, and she couldn't very well move to the other side without it being obvious that she wanted to get away from him. Sitting at her feet wasn't too aggressive, nor as passive as sitting on his own side of the sofa. It was so much better than each of them staying self-consciously to their own cushion with the enormous bowl between them. Choosing the middle ground seemed the natural course with Selene. "Please pass the popcorn," he said, enormously pleased with himself.

"I hope you like a good argument," he continued as her leg slid along his bicep when she leaned to get the bowl. "Not fight, you understand. Just debate passionately for a while until one or the other of us concedes."

"I just want to talk," Selene repeated, setting the bowl in her lap. Perfect, absolutely perfect, Beck thought as he reached into the bowl, letting his arm rest casually against her rounded thigh.

"Semantics. I'll tell you a secret," he said, munching contentedly. "Annie used to think I was raring for a fight when I wanted to debate. She didn't understand that if I had a different opinion, I didn't necessarily think she was wrong or that—as she said—I thought she was stupid. I'm talking about reasoning your way through something. I'll even play devil's advocate and argue the side I don't believe until the other person 'convinces' me I'm deluded."

"You're just a needler, then." Selene moved her leg, letting her shapely calf rest companionably against his shoulder. Amazingly, she seemed to be relaxing rather than being nervous. Could he dare hope he'd finally met his match in this spunky woman? He'd seen flashes of Selene's mettle, but now that he'd decided to test it he hoped he hadn't been wrong. He had sworn not to push her, and he'd done it anyway. Yet she didn't back away.

"Guilty," he admitted with a shrug that slid his shoulder along her silky leg. He grinned. Well, he might as well find out what she was all about. He very badly wanted to know what Selene Pertunda was all about, and what better time than the present. And what better way than to get her to defend herself? "A good debate gets the blood pumping."

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Selene hated arguments. Explosive disagreements had always preceded Robert's rages and pounding fists. To Selene, arguing with a man meant escalating violence preceding the finality of a door slamming. Having an opinion different from her man's had always been grounds for punishment or flight. Now here was Beck, eager for some friendly debate—and Selene was afraid if all went according to bad experience, he'd end the evening hating her.

So what was her leg doing almost hanging over his chest? And why did he have that endearingly cockeyed grin on his face, as if the thought of her actually having a brain in her head and the wits to stand up for herself excited and pleased him?

But instead of taking up the challenge he issued, she seized on the one thing he said that really got her attention. "Who's Annie?" she asked.

Beck's hand, full of popcorn, froze midway to his mouth. One kernel dropped to his lap, and though he picked it up casually, his expression remained rather stiff.

"Annie was my wife," he said tonelessly. "She decided she wasn't happy being married to me, so now she's not."

"I see," Selene said. A guilty relief flooded her. She hadn't admitted to herself that she worried he was merely looking for a little extramarital hanky-panky. Sorry he'd obviously had a

very painful divorce, she was also secretly thrilled to find he was one hundred percent unattached. A thousand questions popped into her head. How long ago were you divorced? Did you want the divorce or was it all her idea? And most important...do you still love her? But she held her tongue. Although she itched to know, she couldn't bring herself to ask.

Apparently Beck didn't have the same reservations. He looked up into her face with keen brown eyes. "Carole says you were in an unhappy relationship."

"That's right." She locked her knee to keep her leg from jiggling nervously against his arm. "It wasn't happy."

It also wasn't something she cared to discuss. She hoped Beck wouldn't ask.

"What happened?" he asked.

Her short answers, meant to discourage him, obviously had no effect. She sighed. "Do you want the lengthy version or the short one?"

Beck grinned, the skin beside his eyes crinkling. "Kind of like two sides to every story? His and hers."

"Something like that, I guess," Selene agreed.

Beck rubbed his chin, shiny with butter, considering. "I'll take the short one," he decided.

"Okay." Selene paused. "Robert had money. He inherited his parents' company. But he worked very little...and he drank quite a lot."

"So you fought." Beck's head tilted as he looked at her.

Selene wished it had been so easy. She'd tried everything she could to please Robert, only to find that nothing pleased him. In the end, like Beck's former wife, Robert had declared he wasn't happy being married to such a doormat. She would have let him go, but he couldn't just quit. He had to try to destroy her. "We didn't fight much," she said quietly, trying to imagine Beck's reaction if she told the truth about her abusive relationship with Robert. "I didn't live up to Robert's expectations, and he didn't live up to his own. He talked incessantly about being famous for something, anything, but he spent less and less time actually doing anything to achieve that goal."

"So he wasn't very talented."

Selene wished Beck would stop looking at her like that. His gaze was unswerving, direct, dissecting her and every word she said. She was trying hard to tell the truth, but she didn't know exactly what the truth was about her failure. All she knew about her time with Robert was that she still felt like a failure. She chose her words with care.

"Oh but he was. He was talented, very smart, and educated. It was just...he had a tortured soul. Do you know what I mean? He couldn't find peace or beauty or happiness—in anything."

"And so he took it out on you."

Selene nodded slowly. That was very close to the truth of it—that no matter what she did, Robert was going to punish her because he was unhappy.

"Did you have children?"

The popcorn bowl lay forgotten in her lap. Beck's whole attention focused on her.

"No," she said in a distant voice. "Robert never wanted them. At first, I thought it was because I was enough for him, and in a way, I was flattered. But later, I came to realize it was just because he—"

Beck waited. "Because he what?" he finally prompted.

Would it sound too bitter if she told the truth? It was, after all, the truth. "Because he was so self-centered he had nothing to give another human being," she said. "Not to me, and especially not to a child."

"I see. Annie wanted children," he said. "Boy, did Annie want kids. We did the whole doctor routine, her reproductive organs, mine, test after test. They never did find anything wrong except a little scar tissue on her fallopian tubes. She should have been able to carry a baby, but it

never happened. Even the twenty-thousand dollar eggs, fertilized in vitro, never took. It was all a huge disappointment.”

“For both of you?” If he wanted to talk, she might as well seize the opportunity to find out as much about him as she could. She was intensely curious and she did, after all, want children someday. Beck had to be around forty years old. Did he still want children?

His squinted eyes focused on the past. Then they zeroed in on her again, and Selene felt her heart skip a beat in her chest. Was he weighing his answer according to what he thought she wanted to hear? *Oh, please. Please don't lie*, she begged silently. *I'll tell you anything, about Robert, about the other men, the whole painful, sordid mess—if only you tell me the truth.*

“I was disappointed when we couldn't have children,” he admitted slowly. “But it was nothing like Annie's obsession. She wouldn't consider adoption, it had to be a child of her own body. And when that wouldn't happen, when it became a chore to make love by the calendar and her thermometer, it devolved into being my fault. She thought it made her less of a woman somehow so she couldn't share any blame when she couldn't conceive.”

“You didn't consider her less of a woman?” The words hurt coming out. So much pain. So much misunderstanding. So much blame. It was all so familiar. How could she even consider doing it again?

His smile was forced, a mere deepening of the lines beside his mouth. “I wasn't looking for a brood mare. I thought it was enough that we had each other. Don't misunderstand me,” he continued when he saw the look she couldn't hide. “I would have loved children. A son, or a little girl. Maybe one of each. But it didn't happen. And when the things we want absolutely won't happen, I think some higher entity is at work and we just have to accept that *no* is the answer.”

“And Annie wouldn't accept that answer.”

He leaned an arm across her thigh to look directly into her face. “That's right.”

“And she blamed you, and so you got divorced.”

“Not exactly.”

Selene looked down on his handsome face, set now in a slight scowl. For Pete's sake, was there more?

There was more. Beck propped his chin on his hand, very deliberately not removing his elbow from her thigh. “I have to get back to my original thesis about society widening the chasm between the sexes. When Annie couldn't have the family she wanted, she decided to continue her education. She majored in Women's Studies, and it was in those courses that she discovered what pigs men are and how oppressed women are. The more she learned, the more militantly independent she became and the less I seemed to matter to her any more. By the time she graduated, I was extraneous to her. The enemy. A stranger in my own marriage.”

Selene felt a rip open in her stomach. She'd known Beck had been leading up to something, but she hadn't known what. Her own education was uppermost. She would not stop now with only one year under her belt. She'd barely skimmed the surface, barely started the courses she needed to fulfill the prerequisites. She had years of study yet to go.

Would education, then, be the barrier between them? Did Beck blame the fact that Annie went back to school for the end of their marriage? If Selene continued with him into a deepening relationship, would he consider her pursuing her education a threat? Would he, at some point, forbid her to go on furthering her education so that she could focus exclusively on him? What, exactly, was he saying? And maybe the more pertinent question: What did he see in her? The parallels between herself and his ex-wife were too close. What if she said she wanted children? What if she said seeking her degree was paramount in her life?

What if what he wanted was the Annie he had before she became the Annie she was now? What if he thought he could freeze Selene just at the point where she now was, and recreate a lost relationship at the place where he'd been happy? Selene had heard of men who—

consciously or unconsciously—ended up with mirror image replicas of their ex-wives, women who reminded them in looks or demeanor of the woman they'd lost.

Would Beck try to hold her back so she there would be no chance she would become like Annie?

Or was she reading more into what he said than he meant? Was she complicating things because of her own fear of commitment, x-ing Beck off her list of eligible men before he had a ghost of a chance, as she'd done with all the others, just because she was scared to try? Was Sarah right about her?

"Relationships are so complicated," she ventured, because she didn't know what else to say at the moment.

Beck studied her. "Yes, they are," he agreed in a mild voice that belied the searching look in his eyes as if he sought the truth of her in her soul.

"Well!" Beck said with false cheerfulness when she said nothing more. He straightened his curved posture and removed his propped arm from her thigh. "Enough of light conversation. Let's get into some serious discussion. What do you think of the Colorado Rockies this year? Think they've got a chance at the Series?"

Selene blinked. For a moment she didn't know what he was talking about. He'd lost her with his abrupt veer. Then it dawned on her he referred to the area's only professional baseball team. At least she thought the Rockies played baseball. "I don't follow sports," she said.

"I'm surprised. I had a layover in Denver on the way here, and everybody there is nuts for the Rockies. I guess I thought everyone here would be too." He reached for the popcorn again, as if he was sorry he'd let her see inside him so much and wanted the evening to begin all over on a lighter note.

"This is Wyoming, not Colorado," Selene reminded.

"How well I know it. Home of the individualistic, self-reliant cowboy. Where men are men, and sheep are nervous."

"Beck!" He had an aptitude for startling laughter from her by stepping out of his role of cultured, educated male. When he did, she didn't want to admit he shocked her.

"I know," he said contritely. "I just won't stay inside your comfortable picture of the college professor, will I? I'm sorry. I'll try to act more scholarly from now on. I really want to impress you, you know."

He smiled, one of those genuine heart-melting smiles that made Selene want to drift off the sofa and into his arms. "You don't need to worry about that. You impress me," she said.

"I do?" He seemed surprised. "Even after telling you what a dud I am with women?"

"You're no dud." Selene laughed.

"Neither are you," he said in a low voice, leaning in to rest both arms on her thighs. "I've got an idea, Selene," he continued, gazing into her eyes until all her doubts about him faded into faint memories. "Why don't you remove that monster of a bowl from your lap, and I'll come up there and sit beside you? I want to kiss you and Carole will disown me if I accidentally spill buttered popcorn all over her precious wool rugs."

He captivated her. Swerving all over the place, he kept her off balance and she couldn't keep up. But through it all he retained his sense of humor, his sexy smile, his talent for coming back to their attraction for each other. Like an exotic moth, he kept hitting on the secret flower of her desire, flitting away before she knew what happened, and then zooming in again when she least expected it.

Now he lit for certain. There was no more drifting back and forth. He deliberately removed the bowl from her lap while her hands lay limp at her sides. Then he settled beside her, removing his glasses and hovering over her, waiting for her willing sweetness. Selene opened in response like a jungle flower to morning light.

As he'd known she would. Selene could see it in his eyes, the triumph when she leaned into his kiss as if she were hypnotized, all questions laid aside for the moment. He seemed to float up to sit beside her, and when he wrapped his arms around her, hers raised dreamlike until her hands rested on his muscled back.

For a moment she wondered if his triumph was reflected in her own eyes, for she felt as if she'd won some kind of prize. He wanted to kiss her. He wanted her. She wanted him. At the moment, at the second his lips descended on hers, just as she'd been dreaming about, what else was there besides meeting that probing need to touch him?

"You are a bewitching woman," he murmured. His hand on the back of her neck pulled her into a long, deep kiss.

It was right. It felt so right to have his lips on hers, her hands on his body. She was tired of fighting her desire for him. If this was something the old Selene would do, giving in to heated lust, then for this moment, so be it. For now, the old Selene and the new Selene would meld into one and melt into Beck.

As their lips met, in her mind she heard the faintest of echoes: *Woman, woman, woman....*

## Chapter Six

If Beck thought that one kiss from Selene would end his torment, he was mistaken. The single kiss went on and on, probing, tongues meeting, twining, exploring. Selene tilted her head to welcome him more deeply, meeting each thrust with flicks of her own soft tongue that nearly drove him mad.

He could not get enough. In a few moments her cardigan was discarded along with his shirt. Her hot hands on his chest felt as if he were being branded. She flicked one of his nipples with a long fingernail and he groaned, crushing her to his chest. Between them, her hands were already busy at the button of his jeans, and she slowly lowered his zipper to free his straining cock.

She sat back to admire what she had discovered, a smile tilting the corners of her full lips as she gazed at his rapidly elongating shaft. Beck had the oddest sensation, again seeing two Selenes shimmering inside one lush body: a voluptuous vision of femaleness full of confident ancient knowledge, and a younger, more innocent version of that goddess of desire who hesitated before wrapping both hands around the prize she claimed. He put the hallucination down to being drunk on the taste and feel of Selene, salty, buttery kisses and the feel of skin like satin. He watched, helpless to assist or intervene, as she quickly removed one hand from teasing and squeezing him to whip the blue dress over her head. She was left dressed only in a peekaboo concoction that barely covered the lower half of her sumptuous breasts and a scrap of matching lace that couldn't by any stretch of the imagination be called panties.

He reached for those lovely, perfectly round breasts. Effortlessly, with the merest urging they slipped from the demi cups of the bra, exposing already hard pink nubs of nipple, which he rolled between his thumbs and forefingers until they grew into tiny replicas of his own tower of need.

He lay back. "Take them off," he grated, gesturing at the lace decorating her hips. Something primeval flared in her eyes as she stood to comply, and again that goddess of desire answered. The acknowledgement of raw need meeting raw need seemed to peek, smiling slyly, from behind the mask of Selene's smooth face. He shoved his jeans down and off, kicking them away.

She left her panties dangling on the dainty ankle of the leg she balanced on, and swung the other up and over his hips until she settled her hot wet slit on his erection. He could watch the head of his cock disappear and reappear as she moved sensuously back and forth on him in a game of hide and seek that almost had him losing all control. She reached for his hands, placing

them once more on her breasts, squeezing and tugging nipples darkening with passion between her own thumbs and his.

“Do you like?”

Certain it was the skilled goddess who asked, he answered helplessly with a groan, “Like.”

She leaned back, giving him a glimpse of the glistening prize between her legs. She used one finger to lightly stroke her rose folds. “Do you want?”

He reached for her hips, intending to raise her up and impale her as answer, but she placed restraining hands atop his. “Answer. Do you want?”

He found himself breathing so hard he was almost panting, like a wild animal. “Yes. *Please*. What more do I have to say?”

“It is enough,” she said. She raised up and with one hand in front of her and one behind, guided him inside her hot female tunnel. Once again he grasped her breasts, kneading them lightly so as not to hurt her. Licking her lips, the tip of her pink tongue protruding a bit as she concentrated on her task, she rode him to quick completion.

She lay atop him, with one leg pinned between him and the sofa, his contracting dick still inside her.

He was stunned. Replete. Sated. Never more contented in his life.

He was frightened as well. What the *hell* had just happened here? It was as if two people other than Beck and Selene had ripped their clothes off and mated like a pair of wildcats right here on Carole’s antique divan. He never acted like he had here with Selene; never let himself go enough to act on such base impulses. She raised her head to kiss him, another of her searing kisses that signaled she wanted more.

He moaned, his hand rising of its own volition from her hip to mold a supple breast—and at that point he tore himself away from her and back to reality. They were hardly teenagers, after all, no matter how young and vibrant she made him feel. Kisses like hers meant one thing to an adult male; they signaled that Selene was ready for another go, and Beck would have a hell of a time stopping himself from cooperating.

He looked into those incredible brown eyes with their jade rims, heavy-lidded now. Gazing at lips swollen from his kisses, he wanted nothing more than to sink back into her embrace, devour her until he was drained and limp. He was scared shitless of this mindless reaction to her. Used to critical thinking and analysis, he didn’t know how to handle such impulsiveness. What they’d done was reckless. And he wasn’t a rash person.

“I think you should go,” he said, voice gruff.

“What?” Selene’s gorgeous eyes widened in shock.

“You must have studying to do or something,” Beck said distractedly, running big fingers roughly through his hair merely because what he craved was putting his hands back on her silky body.

“But—” She fumbled to a stop, frowned, clearly puzzled.

“For your own good, Selene.” Beck put his hands on her hips and held her aloft as his now-soft dick slid out of her. “Neither of us is ready for this. I’m sorry.”

“Whoa. All right. I get it. Class dismissed.” Eyes blazing with green fire and two spots of angry color high on her cheeks, she got to her feet and retrieved her clothes, pulling them on with jerky motions of anger.

“Selene, I can’t even think straight right now. I know I’m not saying this right. I’m not doing anything right. You’ll forgive me if I don’t see you out,” Beck apologized. He didn’t think he could manage the walk out to her car in his present painful state, so hard again it hurt. He’d never been in quite this condition before. It actually terrified him. “I’ll call you before Saturday,” he ground out.

“I can’t believe this. Whatever you say, professor.” She turned and walked, immensely gracefully considering her obvious hurt and outrage, out the door. She didn’t slam, he noticed.

Maybe one day he'd have the chance to explain. Maybe he and Selene would last long enough that he would have an opportunity to tell her that he wasn't in his right mind. In fact, while he was fucking Selene he doubted if he had any conscious mind at all. He'd been, for the time their passion lasted, a being of pure sensation.

At the same time he was scared by his own reaction, he wanted more. He wanted his naked body on hers all night, touching the whole silken length of her, inside and out. He wanted it all, all of her—and he couldn't think what to do except to put some distance between them. This wasn't like him at all. He felt he'd been taken over by someone else for the time the two of them spent locked together. And that idea was downright creepy.

He wondered, as the residual ache for her ever so gradually eased a bit, when and how he had become ready to place so much faith in a woman again. He knew, with a bone-deep certainty, what continued sexual activity between himself and Selene would mean. Commitment, a future, maybe marriage. Selene was no passing attraction. She was for keeps.

He knew, absolutely and without doubt, that this kind of sex meant love. And were either of them ready for all the conditions and obligations that came with *that* little word?

He'd said to only one woman in his entire life, not counting his mother, that he loved her. He'd given everything he had to Annie, and sometimes more than he knew he had, and what had it gained him? Divorced and alone, facing middle age with barely half the material things they'd accumulated together. And though he didn't mean to place a dollar amount on the years they'd spent together, he wondered sometimes if it had all been worth it emotionally or financially.

Sex was an overwhelmingly powerful force. Could he only be fooling himself that he was falling in love with Selene? Could the fact that he wanted her right now, naked and hot, be blinding him to the fact that it was really only sex—and not love?

He had thought he and Annie loved each other. He thought they would be together forever, into middle age and old age, and beyond until death. That's what they'd promised. Until death.

But marriage vows were cheap. Sex was cheap and easy, and commitment lasted only until one or the other wanted out. And then it was time to call the lawyers.

Well, not ever again. Not for Beckett McNeal. He'd take it slow and easy this time if it killed him. Which it very well might if he had to constantly fight the powerful force that had overtaken them tonight.

He vowed to himself to take the whole summer to see what it was about with Selene Pertunda, if it was something real or just infatuation. He'd hold her off, and himself, until he knew if what he felt for her was love or merely desire.

Because if it was love, he'd never let her go. Not again, not ever, would a woman he loved leave him without a backward glance as Annie had done. Tonight he'd sent Selene away. But if he came to the conclusion that he really and truly loved her, she wouldn't ever have another chance to walk out.

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Selene drove home in a daze, reacting to traffic signals and other drivers automatically, not remembering later even getting into or out of her car. Fury warred with rejected embarrassment inside her, and she let herself into her apartment and flung off her cardigan without thought to where she might find it in the morning.

How dare Beckett McNeal order her out of the house like a stray cat? Where did the man get his gall, inviting her over and kissing her until she warmed to a blaze that overtook them both—and then sending her off home with a negligent "I'll call."

He certainly had a nerve, and apparently a will of steel; there were darn few men who would turn a naked Selene Pertunda out to the street, she knew that for a certainty.

Her pride was wounded. She had thought that when she was ready, when the right time came, all she would have to do is crook her little finger and any man she had her eye on would come running. She knew how she looked. She could read the appreciation of her assets in the eyes of men of all ages. She only had trouble in long term relationships, not in attracting a man in the first place. She had never, ever been turned away before.

So what was wrong with Beck McNeal?

She flung herself into a chair and grabbed her English textbook. He was right about one thing: she did have studying to do. But her mind refused to stay on her reading, and she knew already she might as well skip class tomorrow morning because she was going to flunk the quiz.

*Look how you let him rile you,* she chided herself.

What happened to her cherished goal of getting good grades? Why was she letting Beck affect her so that she couldn't even study? What was the big deal, anyway? There were plenty of times *she* sent guys away when her use for them was sated. Fair was fair, and it was obviously her turn to get a taste of how abrupt rejection felt. So Beck didn't need her after the fact; so what? She didn't need him either.

It was all too crazy. She barely knew the man and yet she allowed him to dominate her thoughts to the point that her goal of graduating with high honors was being threatened.

No way. She would make a new vow, right here and now. If she had to stay up all night, she would get the lesson down well enough that she would ace tomorrow's test.

No man, and especially not a tease like Beck McNeal, would stand in her way.

But still, over the next few days, she found herself thinking about the tormented look in his eyes when he'd asked her to leave. She thought about what he'd said, that neither of them was ready for a sexual relationship, and wondered what really had made him send her away. What if he'd thought he was saving her virtue or something equally old fashioned, instead of outright rejecting her as she assumed? She was the one who had come on to him. She was the one who had virtually seduced him. It had taken but a moment for her to throw away all her good intentions not to do any more casual fucking. Even the thought of that was a laugh now. Exactly what had she done with Beck McNeal? At the very first opportunity? She obviously couldn't control herself. She was hopeless.

She got more hopeless yet as the days passed with no word. She found herself compulsively checking her voicemail. She expected him to call, and when he didn't, her spirits sank lower and lower. Had Beck McNeal decided that she wasn't worth romancing, even for the summer? If he really did want just a secretary she had committed herself to an awfully uncomfortable couple of months—with a man who attracted her powerfully, a man she'd had hot sex with, and whom she apparently didn't impress enough to warrant so much as a phone call.

Maybe he wouldn't ever call. Maybe he'd let her gracefully out of their agreement and find someone else to transcribe his interviews. She even confessed to Sarah, who did call, that she thought the whole thing was off.

"What do you mean, it's off? What have you done, Selene?"

"What have I done? Damn it! I didn't do anything!" She almost hung up. Wasn't it just like Sarah to take the man's side, even a man she'd never met, against her supposed best friend?

"Why do you always assume I did something?"

"Because I know you." Sarah sighed. "So what happened?"

"Nothing happened. Absolutely nothing." How could she admit, even to Sarah, that she thought things were going along just fine when Beck had peremptorily dumped her naked ass off the couch and ordered her out of the house? She did have some pride, even in front of her old friend who knew most of her secrets. She'd rather Sarah keep the mistaken image of her as a drudge to her studies than to admit that she'd had the hottest sex of her life with Beck and he'd been so little affected by it he'd sent her off home like the bad girl she had proven to be.

"So how do you know you've seen the last of him?"



"I just know," she said with finality. Half wish, half certainty. After she hung up from talking with Sarah, her phone played dead for another two days.

She had turned to wishing so powerfully Beck wouldn't call that when he actually did, on Friday night, she felt ambushed when she picked up, only to hear his voice.

"I've set our first interview for ten o'clock tomorrow morning. Is that all right with you?"

What could she say? She had agreed to work for him, no matter how discomfited she was by his physical nearness. They were going to be thrown together for a good two months, but she had agreed and unless she were to turn liar herself and plead illness or something equally untruthful she couldn't get out of it.

"I'll meet you," she ventured. Driving herself to Hawk Point from Rocky Creek would at least save her the fifteen minutes each way in his company. "Just give me the address."

"No. I'll pick you up."

All of a sudden he decides he's alpha male, making all her decisions for her? Selene started to bridle, and then suddenly thought better of it. Why begin an already difficult weekend with an argument? The least she could do to pay him back for the embarrassment of being kicked out of Carole's house was to deny him the enjoyment of a rousing good confrontation.

"All right," she agreed. Let him do what he would, she wouldn't react. He'd get no emotion out of her. She'd see how he liked that—that he had such a negligible effect on her, he couldn't provoke a reaction.

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And her passiveness must have puzzled him, for he kept glancing at her on the drive to Hawk Point the next morning.

"Feeling all right?"

"Just fine, thank you," she said, keeping her gaze on the lush green hills outside the passenger window. It was a beautiful, sunny morning with the breathtaking kind of sky that often graced the West: wide open, bright azure, and cloudless.

"I'm afraid I waited a little too long to start this project," he ventured. "The men who actually worked the mines are mostly gone by now. But I've located several widows, so I guess it's the women we'll be talking to. Puts a different slant on things, but it will still work."

"Do you have something against talking to women?" Still smarting, Selene couldn't help badgering him a little, despite her promise to herself.

"No." Beck chanced one more quizzical glance at her. "I have nothing at all against women in general. It's just that, in talking to the wives, you don't get the immediacy of the actual work in the mines. They took care of their men and their families, but they didn't work down in the shafts. So the stories are secondhand, even if the women lived with the men who originally told them."

"So not nearly as good." She twisted a corner of her shirt between her fingers. Why couldn't she let it drop? This was Beck's project, not hers. What did she care how it turned out, and why was she taking the side of some old women she didn't even know?

"Just not quite the *same*, Selene," Beck insisted. A scowl creased the skin between his eyebrows. "No matter how accurate one tries to be, memory is subjective. Each interviewee puts his or her own spin on a story. It's not a male or female trait; it's human nature. I don't want to get into a man versus woman thing with you. You already know my opinion on that. I want us to be partners in this and working toward the same end, not two people in a tug of war over which gender's viewpoint happens to be more valid."

"You're the boss, professor," she said, her jaw clenched.

He sighed. She could see his struggle to keep calm, his hands tightening noticeably on the steering wheel. "I think you'll find that interviews often take on a direction of their own. I've

printed up a list of questions, but I want you to follow your gut instincts. If you're getting good history, whether from a man or a woman, go with it, please. Don't stick so religiously to my line of questioning that you lose sight of the objective, which is to get a rounded picture of the times. Just watch me today, and you'll see. Give me a chance to show you how it's done, and then you can take it from there in any direction you want, okay?"

"In other words, sit tight and shut up."

"Shit!" Beck pounded the steering wheel once with the side of his fist. "What is it with you today?"

*What is it with me?* So he was going to put their failures all on her. That was familiar. So...she just wouldn't answer. It had always been safer in the past to retreat into silence. Anyway how could she say, "You didn't call me." She couldn't say, "You sent me away." She couldn't admit she wanted him to call. She had ended up praying that he wouldn't call. Now she was angry with him because he hadn't called. None of the emotions churning inside her made sense, and he wasn't making things any easier. She wished she'd insisted on driving herself.

"You're the one who said he liked to argue."

Beck looked nonplussed for a moment. Then he sucked in his cheeks, managing to look guilty. "I did say that, didn't I?"

"You did. But you forgot to specify that only you get to pick the time, the place, or the topic." Selene crossed her arms tightly in front of herself.

"Point taken." Beck glanced at her briefly. "I'll remember to watch every word I say to you in the future."

"You don't need to watch every word. Just don't lie to me."

Beck seemed to contemplate her serious tone. "I don't lie. It's a matter of personal honor with me," he said at last. "Listen, Selene, if it's the other night you're still upset about, I can explain."

"Don't," she almost cried, holding up her hands to restrain him. *Upset?* Was that all he thought she was, a little *upset*? She'd begged for the truth, but she didn't want to hear that her body repelled him so much he had to send her away. "I hate postmortems."

"Postmortems?" He shook his head, and the attractively unruly lock of dark hair fell over his forehead again. He tried to brush it back with no success. "Odd word choice. Nobody's died."

His attention was on his driving as they took the exit into Hawk Point, and Selene was glad he couldn't look her way. She was certain her expression would betray her. It wasn't that she was afraid she would die from Beck's rejection, but that all feeling inside her would finally curl up and die. One of the reasons she hadn't given any of the men Sarah introduced her to so much as a chance was that she was afraid even one more wrong choice would kill all responsiveness forever. And then she'd gone and let Beck McNeal get under her skin. Into her pants. One kiss and she was out in the stratosphere. What a fine example of women's strength she was! She was a marshmallow. A pushover.

A slut.

She was in severe danger of losing sight of her hard won objectives, and she wished it was Carole sitting beside her in the driver's seat of the SUV and not her sexy cousin, Beck. Carole would give Selene back her direction, remind her of her goals. But Carole was in Boston for the entire summer, and Selene would have to make all decisions concerning Beck McNeal on her own. But she didn't trust herself to make rational decisions when he was near. His scent, his habits, like that of brushing casually at the hair hanging over his forehead, drove her to unreasoning, ravening distraction.

Just sitting next to him, even taunting him, set up a tingly quivering in her lower belly and between her thighs. It didn't matter what he'd done. She wanted him still. Even if he didn't want her. And that was just crazy. She was setting herself up for a huge letdown. She was paving the way toward destroying the new life she'd chosen for herself, and it wasn't Beck's fault. He'd

made plain that he wasn't interested in her. It was her fault alone. She must harbor some self-destructive demon where men were concerned, one that led her to make the most god-awful choices in men. Over and over and *over*.

No, nobody died. But she'd made herself sick. The squirming in her belly had turned to actual illness, and she hoped their interviewee didn't live too far away so she could step out of the car soon for some deep breaths of fresh air to settle her stomach.

She replayed their conversation in her head, and realized she'd done just what Beck accused his ex-wife of doing: making him the bad guy when it hadn't been his intention to impugn women. Well, she had her honor too. She could apologize when she was wrong. "I'm sorry I've been so cranky," she said, pushing the button to get the window all the way down and let the breeze blow on her hot face. "Maybe you're right about modern women's attitudes being shaped by society. Maybe everybody's too quick to take offense."

A small smile quirked the corner of his mouth. "Apology accepted," he said graciously and without lingering rancor. He didn't, she noticed, offer her an apology in return.

He pulled up in front of a small white clapboard house, laying a hand on her arm to restrain her when she would have moved immediately to get out. "And I owe you an apology for running you off the other night. I should have explained then. Communication is important, and I let an opportunity pass that I should have taken. I was scared things were getting out of hand, Selene. I don't know how I let things get so out of control. It's too soon. I want you, but I want the timing to be right. If things between us don't take a natural progression, I don't want you to be sorry about what happened...either that, or that it might keep happening. Am I making any sense at all?"

His caramel brown eyes brimmed with sincerity. Selene melted inside. She would never have guessed that the self-assured Professor McNeal might have been frightened. She had misunderstood—and underestimated—him again. He had such absolute power over her already. He could make things so right with just a few words, wipe out all the uncertainties of the last few days of solitude and make her feel desired again. Would she ever understand him, or were they doomed to a long series of misapprehensions? Why was it so darned hard to figure out one man?

"I'm an adult," she said. She took a deep breath and plunged forward. "I was there too. I had a choice. I want you just like you want me. Whatever happens, when it happens, I won't ever be sorry."

"We're adults." He smiled crookedly. "That doesn't mean we don't make mistakes. I don't ever want to make big, life-altering errors with you."

Then he was out of the car and opening her door for her, before Selene had a chance to react. She had said she wanted him. Would he remember that? Would words make any difference or was he still set on holding her off physically?

She helped him unload equipment, two expensive tape recorders and several packages of blank tape, a digital camera and pocket recorder. He let her precede him up the steps to a tiny front porch overlooking a tiny front yard. The houses in this part of town were original railroad company houses, packed tightly together on winding streets. Beck laid his equipment down and gave her a thumbs up before knocking. Selene smiled back, her lips quivering. She was so powerfully aware of him, she hardly noticed their surroundings. She definitely had other things on her mind than history.

A tiny, stooped woman answered immediately; Selene thought she'd probably been waiting for them. She wore a smile as trembly as Selene's, along with pearl earrings and a freshly pressed blouse and slacks. Selene looked down at her own and Beck's jeans. Perhaps they should have dressed a little more formally for the occasion.

But Beck was already shaking the woman's fragile-looking hand, careful not to crush the prominent bones, and performing introductions. "Mrs. Carotta," he was saying, "Selene Pertunda, my assistant." The woman paused, giving Selene a curious look, before nodding

politely and stepping nervously aside as Beck and Selene entered her immaculate living room. “I don’t get much company these days,” she confided in a whisper to Selene as they passed.

“Pertunda?” she added, in a voice meant only for Selene’s ears as Beck moved away. Her gaze slid toward him questioningly.

Selene shrugged. She couldn’t explain it even if she wanted to, how she had inherited the name of the Italian goddess of sexual desire. Few people these days, in this country at least, knew the derivation of the name and Selene was glad for that. It was too apt for someone with her apparently still-slippery sense of morals, and too embarrassing as well.

She hung back, gaze following Beck, while he and the elderly woman located enough empty receptacles to plug in his recording equipment, and he unwrapped tape and set up for the interview. Mrs. Carotta eyed the recorders nervously, as if they were squat black monsters being arranged to best advantage to attack her. “Nobody cared before what an old lady had to say,” she said, smiling tremulously and sidling up to stand next to Selene as if for reassurance. In a lower voice meant to keep the confidence from Beck, she added, “You know my English is not so good.”

“It’s my first interview too. We’ll both do just fine,” Selene assured the woman, echoing what Beck had said to her. She’d been so apprehensive herself, she hadn’t thought how these old people would feel about strangers invading their homes and asking personal questions. Beck looked up and gave Mrs. Carotta one of his beautiful, encouraging smiles, and Selene noted that in response the woman’s knotted hands ceased their incessant rubbing against each other.

“You want something to eat? Something to drink?” Mrs. Carotta fluttered her hands. “I got coffee, tea. Some cookies. You want cookies?”

“Coffee would be wonderful,” Beck said from where he knelt by a hassock gone lumpy on top from the imprint of Mrs. Carotta’s little feet. “Selene?” he asked.

She agreed, more to give Mrs. Carotta something to do than out of thirst. When they were all finally settled with a steaming cup, Selene’s thigh snuggled uncomfortably up against Beck’s muscular one on the old sofa starting to get threadbare, he explained the purpose of his project and then turned on the recorders. He started with easy questions, but Mrs. Carotta’s answers were wooden, her eyes watching the whirring tape. Selene could sympathize with the old lady’s nervousness. She was nervous too, if for a different reason. Just the touch of her leg against Beck’s caused her nipples to tighten and her muscles to quiver.

But as the minutes went by and Beck persisted with his questions, Mrs. Carotta finally began to relax, her old eyes gone unfocused and soft with distant memory. As Beck leaned back, his arm slung casually across the back of the sofa on the antimacassar above Selene’s shoulders, the old woman talked. She reminisced about her husband’s work in the mine, and then she described the typical coal camp, one water pump to two houses, and how most of the miners were single when they came over from the old country. When the men had enough money they sent, or went back for, wives—and often a brother or other unmarried male relative accompanied the newly married couple back to the United States, sharing cramped quarters until he in his turn could save money to repeat the process of finding a wife.

Selene watched and learned, admiring Beck’s technique as he carefully unwound the knotted strands of the old woman’s memory, having more success than she in ignoring the heat emanating from where his leg nestled against hers. He coaxed Mrs. Carotta when she hesitated, waited patiently as she backtracked, gently phrasing and rephrasing his questions until he got the information he sought.

“Why did you and your husband come here?” Beck asked as the hour wound down. “Was there one reason above all others?”

“For the freedom,” Mrs. Carotta said firmly, without hesitation. “We were proud to come to America. We came, and we never looked back.”

“Do you mean you never went back?”

“No. We went back for visits, you understand. But we were Americans, not Tyroleans anymore. And proud to be American.”

The recorder ran out of tape, shutting itself off with a final click. Beck leaned forward, removing his arm from the back of the sofa, allowing Selene to finally breathe again. She hadn't realized until he moved away from her that she'd been holding her breath.

“Well, I think we've covered it, Mrs. Carotta. Thank you very much.” Beck excused himself to use the bathroom. Selene's head turned as her eyes involuntarily followed his every movement.

Mrs. Carotta had relaxed thoroughly by now. She sat with hands folded in her lap, studying Selene with wily old eyes that had seen a lifetime of changes. No more did she wash her husband's, her brother's and all the children's clothes by hand and hang them out like shards of ice to dry in the yard. She didn't have to haul coal for the fire or water by the bucketful. She had a pair of bum knees from a life of hard labor, but her mind was like a razor.

“So, he's your *ragazzo*?” she asked when the bathroom door shut and Beck was safely out of earshot. “Your boyfriend, huh?”

Selene jumped guiltily, tearing her gaze from the doorway where Beck had disappeared. She pushed the delicate china cup and saucer aside. “No,” she said. “He's my boss.”

“Boss, huh? He's not married. I didn't see no ring.” Mrs. Carotta stared pointedly at Selene's own bare finger.

Embarrassed, Selene mumbled, “Neither of us is married.”

“You two should maybe get married,” Mrs. Carotta said, sagely nodding her head. “What are you waiting for, a woman your age, Prince Charming?”

Selene wondered what expression her face had worn during the interview to encourage the old lady's presumptuousness. Had she been staring at Beck all dreamy-eyed while Mrs. Carotta talked?

“I-I would have to be in love to get married,” Selene stuttered.

“Love.” Mrs. Carotta blew air dismissively from between her lips, waved a knotted hand. “Love grows, like a garden. You know, I didn't love my husband when we got married. But we had a good life. We each had our own job, him in the mine and me at home. We worked hard, side by side, and eventually love came. It's not good to be alone. You should have some babies, be happy, Miss Goddess. With a name like yours, I bet you know how to make a man happy, *sì*?”

The bathroom door opening caused the old woman to clam up, although she winked conspiratorially at Selene as Beck thanked her for the interview and turned his back to begin packing up his equipment.

Mrs. Carotta saw them out, her knees creaking audibly as she walked them to the door. Her gnarled hand rested for a moment on Selene's shoulder before she could escape. “Come back and see me sometime when we can talk,” she said. “Like I said, I don't get much company.”

Beck eyed them curiously, but he said nothing until he and Selene were safely enclosed in the car. “You were a hit with her,” he said as he started the engine.

“I guess she liked me.” Selene twisted her hands together in unconscious imitation of Mrs. Carotta's nervous gesture, hoping Beck would drop the subject.

“I told you they would love you.” Beck paused, then added, “Um, did she say anything interesting while I was locked safely away?”

Selene almost choked. He was smirking. How did he know? But she couldn't lie. “She says we should get married. She wanted to know if I was waiting for Prince Charming.”

Beck snorted laughter. “I wondered if it was something like that. I'm sorry,” he said. “They can get pretty blunt in their old age.”

“Don't be sorry. It wasn't your fault. She says what's on her mind, that's all,” Selene said. “It just makes me wonder what she was like when she was young. The times were so different. You did note that she said she ate alone after she served the men and the children. Was she

forced to keep her mouth shut and now that she's on her own she can make up for a lifetime of not speaking out?"

"Maybe. Who knows?" Beck shot a glance at her. "Why don't you go back and ask her? You could do your own history project on the changes women immigrants have seen."

Now he was encouraging her to start her own oral history project. Selene didn't know what to think. Did Beck support the idea of women getting their education or not? Maybe, as an educator himself, he supported the option for the general population but not for his wife. He carefully sidestepped the topic of marriage. Was he indicating he would never consider marrying her?

"It would be years before I would be ready to take on such a task. Use it in your own project," Selene offered. When Beck shrugged noncommittally, she added, "She said something else, about men and women having their roles cut out for them. Perhaps it contributes to the confusion these days, that the lines between roles are blurred. Why couldn't you include that, use it to your advantage."

Beck hesitated, directing a searching look at her. "I would have to rethink the focus of the whole project."

"If you remember, you're the one who brought up the subject of the modern divide between the sexes in the first place. So it must have been on your mind."

Beck puffed out his cheeks in thought, then exhaled slowly. "Okay," he said. "How's this? I'll issue you a challenge. If we can work on this thing together the whole summer and come up with some kind of resolution to the modern man/woman dilemma, I'll include it. Otherwise, I stick with my original theme of the actual work in the mines."

"Resolution?" Selene frowned. Only days ago she'd been a typist. Now suddenly she was a full partner, responsible for the theme of Beck's project. How did the man turn things around on her so easily? "Am I supposed to provide some kind of blueprint for modern relationships by exploring those of the past—for the length of a summer?"

"Oh, not you alone. I fully intend to learn something too." Beck directed one of his blazing smiles toward her. "With your help, of course. In this particular area, you'll be the teacher," he added meaningfully.

What, exactly, was he saying? Did he want to resume having hot sex? She could certainly teach him a thing or two. Was he aware that she had a little more experience than she let on? Maybe the Goddess of *Strangosar*—Desire—had arrived on the scene. She could only hope the Lady Goddess wouldn't give her a surprise kick in the ass again.

Sometimes she thought Beck wanted a more long-term commitment than their summer project. Sometimes she wasn't sure. Was he saying he wanted answers in his life, too? Well, she couldn't blame him for that. So did she.

But could the two of them provide any answers for each other? In her opinion, they were ill-suited to the task. Judging from what Beck had said so far about his marriage and its sad denouement, his wounds ran deep. Maybe deeper than hers if that were possible. Could they heal each other? Did she want to try? Letting someone inside meant letting herself open to hurt. Would Beck McNeal take everything she could give, and then just walk away?

She had only moments to think about it before he turned right back to business again. "Do you want this tape now, or do you want to get more interviews before you begin the transcription process?"

He'd succeeded in putting Selene back in her place. Oh, hadn't she been riding high there for a minute, thinking he wanted some kind of answer from her? She could almost feel herself deflating. He was the most elusive of men, she decided. One moment she thought she had him all figured out, the next he jumped back into professor mode and she hadn't the foggiest notion what he was thinking.

She would never understand Beck McNeal.

And she sure wasn't going to marry him, no matter what Mrs. Carotta might think.

"It's the weekend, so I don't have class. And I don't have anything else to do on Saturday night," she said pointedly. She might be fishing, but she'd already said she wanted him. Would he stubbornly ignore her thinly veiled invitation?

Beck took his attention from his driving to look at her for a moment. "What else would you like to do tonight, Selene?" he asked softly. "Be forewarned: If we spend too much time alone together, I won't be responsible. I'm trying to take this one step at a time and still remain professional. But there are limits to how much of your company I can endure at any one time without having you, as we've already discovered."

So he hadn't completely glossed over what she had said. He was still thinking about their encounter on the couch, just as she was. The sexual current which had been at an ebb during the interview was starting to wash up against them at high tide, undercutting all they said and did, heightening the already intense attraction between them. Involuntarily, the tip of her tongue stole out to moisten her suddenly dry lips. Beck's eyes greedily followed the small movement, and Selene's breath caught at the instant sexual tension zinging between them like bolts of electricity.

"Give me the tape," she said, gasping for air in the suddenly charged atmosphere of the car. When push came to shove, she thought it best to chicken out. She wanted him, wanted him with avid greedy hunger, but she had made a vow to herself to keep to the straight and narrow and not go spreading her legs for Beck McNeal again at the least little provocation. She drew a deep breath. "I'll get it done tonight."

## Chapter Seven

Beck took Selene home and promised he'd give her that week to concentrate on her studies. He knew the pressure of condensed summer classes, and despite the inexplicable urgency he felt to be near her, his professorial side prevailed. They each needed time to examine the strong erotic pressure that flared between them without warning. He'd felt it all through the interview with Mrs. Carotta, making concentration difficult if not impossible. Its very strength scared him. He didn't trust it. Such strong feeling for a woman—so soon—couldn't last. What he felt for Selene, someone so different from himself, was surely infatuation.

But those seven days away from Selene were some of the longest of Beck's life. He'd promised to give her space to focus on her studies. He would keep his promise. On Monday afternoon he conducted an interview with one of the few surviving coal miners he could locate. He got a real nuts and bolts overview of coal mining in the early part of the century in Superior, thirty miles east of Hawk Point and a virtual ghost town now. The old man he was interviewing painted a vivid picture of accidents and explosions in the shafts and described some spectacular train wrecks hauling coal in the days of heavy Big Boy steam engines laboring to climb the steep grade to the mines.

The man was a strong labor sympathizer, even having come to the mines decades past the days of union organizing and aggressive busting of a work force trying to earn a living in a town where everything from housing to the mercantile stores were owned by the coal company. Although the days the man was talking about were of his father's era and not his own, Beck came away from the three hour interview quite pleased, with some nice quotes on the fundamental differences between bosses recruited in England and the workers lured by newspaper ads in middle Europe who spoke little if any English.

It had been a man-to-man interview, just what he'd been seeking. And yet he couldn't help comparing—contrasting—it to the interview he'd gotten from Mrs. Carotta in Selene's presence. The more he thought about it, the more he decided he had been right to encourage Selene to conduct interviews on her own. She had an edge he didn't have just by virtue of her gender:

older women took to her like maiden aunts to a beloved long-lost niece. Selene had gotten Mrs. Carotta to open up as she wouldn't have done in his presence alone. *Married*. A grin tugged at the corners of his mouth.

He had issued the challenge to Selene to help shape the project. It was going to be a success, he could feel it in his bones. Thanks to Selene, this oral history project would be one of those that added flesh to the dry bones of history.

He was so excited by the prospect, he almost called her to share his gut feelings with her. But he held back, his finger hovering over the number keys.

Would the personal side of their collaboration ultimately prove to be successful? Was it only sex between them? Could he stay away from her for a week, a mere seven days? Maybe he was only making up excuses to see her during the week he had promised her.

He had to talk to somebody. Somebody with a cooler head than his. He picked up the phone and touched the numbers on the keypad.

Carole answered on the second ring, real pleasure in her voice at hearing from him. "How's it going?" she asked. "Have you been able to track down Selene yet?"

"I found her," Beck said, unable to bring himself to admit that the brown-eyed enchantress was the reason he'd called. "The project is starting off well. We did one interview together on Saturday. I think she'll be a big help."

"I'm so glad, Beck," Carole said. "She needs something to take her mind off her own past, besides studying herself to a frazzle. Don't work her too hard this summer, you hear? I know you let your research consume you, but take time to have some fun. Rent a houseboat or something. Go up to Jackson for the weekend. Invite Selene to go with you. I'm sure she'd enjoy it."

He paused. He could all too easily envision a weekend alone with Selene on a houseboat. Just the two of them, the open sky and taking slow advantage of the rocking of the boat. He gulped. "Um, I don't think that would be such a good idea."

"Why not?" Carole sounded indignant, a mother hen protecting her favorite chick. "I thought you said you liked her."

He twisted one of the tails of his shirt into a knot around his finger. What could he say, except the truth? "I do like her, Carole," he finally admitted. "Very much."

"Beck..." she said quietly, disbelievingly, before her voice hardened. "You've barely been there a week. You're a couple of months past a divorce after a very long-term marriage. Selene is also on the rebound, and extremely vulnerable. I will feel personally responsible if that girl gets hurt. Do you understand me? I never would have suggested you look her up if I thought—"

"Whoa! I would never intentionally hurt Selene," Beck interrupted. In the absence of children of her own, sometimes Carole became overly mother-hennish.

But, then, why else had he called her except to have his cousin put the brakes on what flared so hot and fast between him and Selene?

"Intentionally? No, I'm sure you wouldn't *mean* to hurt her. But you know even the best of intentions sometimes go awry."

"I'm glad you're so much older than I am," Beck teased, trying to inject a note of levity. "Your wealth of wisdom from such a long life comes in so handy sometimes."

"Don't you be a smartass," Carole said. "And don't you dare reveal to Selene that I suggested a weekend in Jackson if that's how you feel about her, you old lecher. I'm warning you, Beck, keep your hands off my students."

"You know I've never even looked at a student that way before," Beck protested, stung. "Besides, I'm retired now. She might be your student, but she's not mine."

"It's bad timing, Beck," Carole said softly. "Don't make a mistake. Not with Selene."



He hung up, after promising Carole he'd keep her posted, a promise he knew she now would not let him break. Carole was right. Selene was all wrong for him. To continue with her was inviting trouble he didn't need.

But all his cousin's dire warnings had little effect on his body's yearning for Selene. He still wanted to call her right now. He still wanted to see her, touch her, push her into promising him forever and then practice making each other come until she screamed his name.

*Don't make a mistake.* Carole was right. He'd said he would contact Selene at the end of the week. A few more days, he told himself. He would wait until then. He'd set up her interview, and they could get together Saturday afternoon and see how it had gone.

He could wait until Saturday—even if he was haunted by almost palpable memories of Selene riding him naked on Carole's couch.

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Fortunata was pushing a cart up and down the aisles of the grocery store when she ran into Maddalena Carotta.

*"Como 'sta?"* she asked the older woman in the dialect she'd learned at her mother's knee.

Almost immediately Mrs. Carotta launched into a detailed recitation of the most important thing to have happened to her in a long while, the recent interview. Fortunata listed indulgently, with half an ear, until the old lady got to a description of the young woman who had accompanied the handsome male interviewer.

The more the other woman talked, the more Fortunata thought mysterious young woman who had affected her so deeply and the woman Maddalena Carotta was describing had to be the same young woman.

"Get this," Mrs. Carotta said, nudging Fortunata in the ribs. "Her name is Pertunda. Sah-lay-nah Pertunda."

Sah-lay-nah: *Selene*. Translated, it meant the moon, in Greek. *Pertunda*, Goddess of Desire, in Italian. Fortunata's knees wobbled. She felt a little faint. She'd had no idea of the forces already at work when she dared to step in.

"And the man with her did not act as if he was interested in her, ah, charms?" Fortunata asked in a voice of disbelief. He must be made of stone to stand up to the double whammy of the Goddess and Fortunata's love spells.

"Oh, I think he is *interested*, sí. How could he not be? I think Selene is interested in him as well, Mr. Prince Charming. But it seems to me they are both trying hard *not* to be interested."

To what purpose were the two of them fighting their destiny, Fortunata wondered. And how strong did her spells have to be to overpower a couple consciously resisting the effects of the magick?

Maybe she should just step back and allow Selene Pertunda to go on making the kind of mistakes that had guaranteed such misery for her up to this point. Maybe Fortunata was being shown in no uncertain terms that Selene's romantic affairs were *none* of her *business*.

Instead she found herself grasping Mrs. Carotta's arm. "Maddalena, this is important: do you have anything they used? Something they touched?"

Mrs. Carotta looked at Fortunata questioningly. "Coffee cups, maybe," she offered finally. "I think they're still in the dishwasher. I don't run it but about once a week since I don't dirty too many dishes all by myself."

"Don't wash them," Fortunata ordered. "I'll be over to borrow them for a day or two, but I can't use them if they're washed."

"Ah. I know what *you're* doing." Mrs. Carotta reclaimed her arm to shake a finger in Fortunata's face. "You're making the charms, eh? For *amore*."

"Sí, yes. Love charms. Will you help me?"

“Sure, why not?” Mrs. Carotta smiled. “It’s been a long time since I had a chance to play match-maker. Selene and Prince Charming are a nice couple. They’ll make babies and be happy and fall in love.”

Fortunata didn’t correct the old woman’s predicted sequence of events. After all, who knew? Fortunata herself certainly didn’t claim to know everything. Maybe Mrs. Carotta had things lined up in the proper order, according to the will of the Goddess.

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It was one of the longest weeks of Selene’s life. Several times she found herself picking up the telephone, wanting to tell Beck she’d finished transcribing. She wanted to ask when she’d see him again. Was he going to send her out cold on the next interview? He’d said he would prepare a list of questions for her. Did he have it ready?

Why didn’t he call?

Was he truly concerned about giving her time to attend to her studies? If that were the case, then why wasn’t she taking advantage of his generosity? Why, at all hours of the day—and night—did she find her thoughts straying to the glint of sunlight on the black hairs of his forearms as he drove, the way his hands curled around the wheel, setting her to musing about how those same hands cupped her jaw when he kissed her, cupped her breasts as she rode him to climax.

Was she falling in love with him, reaching beyond her grasp for a man she could have no possible future with? She found herself returning again and again to Saturday’s interview with the immigrant woman. If there was no class structure in America, there were certainly divisions based on money and education. Could a woman who was struggling to get through her second year of college hope for any kind of future with a man of Beck’s status? How long could she hold his interest once they got past the initial potent sexual attraction between them? Did she hold any fascination for him besides her body—and perhaps her keyboard skills?

When she couldn’t stand for another minute the questions revolving uselessly around in her head, she called Sarah, even though she knew what her friend’s answer would be.

“Last week you said there was nothing between the two of you. Now you’re afraid it’s just sex. So what? Where else are you supposed to start?” Sarah demanded. “If you weren’t attracted to each other, there wouldn’t be anything to build on, would there? I know you, Selene. You wouldn’t give this guy a second glance if you didn’t think he was sexy.”

“I didn’t think he was that sexy the first time I saw him,” Selene protested.

“But now you do, right? Just proves that old chemistry is working. Give it a chance to do its job. When are you seeing him again?”

“I don’t know,” Selene admitted. “I’m supposed to interview on Saturday, but alone. I don’t know what Beck’s plans are.”

“Well, call him and find out,” Sarah said. “I would.”

“I know you would,” Selene said. “But I’ll have to think about it.”

“Don’t think. Call! You know what happens when you start thinking about things. You’ll *think* yourself right out of a meaningful connection with him.”

Selene hung up before Sarah could wangle a promise from her to call Beck. Sarah didn’t have all the facts. How could she know if there was chemistry between Selene and Beck or not? How could Sarah be sure Beck would welcome a phone call from Selene when he didn’t bother to call her? What did his indifference portend? Surely not a *meaningful connection*.

He was ignoring her. After she said she wanted him. How could he do that? Was he made of stone?

She needed answers. One person knew Beck better than anyone in this town where he was a stranger, after all his years away.

She tried to picture the place where Carole was now living. Was Beck's place the quintessential bachelor apartment, stark and spare? Or was he like her, carrying too much baggage from the past in the form of a clutter of furniture, wall hangings, and knickknacks?

Somehow she expected Carole to sound distant when she answered, because to Selene Boston was so far away. But it sounded as if her mentor were just across town, speaking from the Rocky Creek house where her enigmatic cousin now resided.

"Selene!" Carole said excitedly. "How good to hear from you. How are classes going this summer?"

"Fine. Just fine," Selene said, wanting to avoid the subject of her neglected studies.

"And you've met Beck. Were you surprised when he looked you up after my recommendation? How's the project going? Has he needed you to do any typing yet?"

"I've transcribed one tape. But I'm going to interview for him on Saturday. I have the feeling things will be heating up soon." Selene thought about what she had said, and felt a blush creeping up her neck. "Uh, I mean I think I'll be busy once the ball really gets rolling with both of us doing interviews."

"You're doing interviews too? I thought he said he just wanted you to do some typing." Somehow Carole sounded a lot less pleased than Sarah had been about Beck's pushing Selene to do more than type. Where good old Sarah thought Selene was so smart she could accomplish anything, did older, wiser Carole think her incapable adding any value to Beck's project?

"Well, I initially thought he just wanted some transcribing done. But he seems to be pretty confident I can interview," Selene said in a small voice, feeling less and less certain instigating this particular conversation had been a good idea.

"Well of course you can handle it," Carole said. "That's not what I meant at all. In fact, I've spoken with Beck. He likes you. He thinks you have a lot of talent."

"I will just be asking a list of questions he's making up for me," Selene said, trying to deny the surge of hope her former advisor's words inspired. What else had Beck said about her? She was dying to know, but somehow Carole's strange reserve concerning Beck made her hesitant to ask.

"This project is really important to him," Carole continued. "He's wanted to get back to conducting oral histories for a long time. I think he has plans to try to write this up and find a publisher for it."

Selene felt the weight of the success or failure of Beck's project and perhaps some responsibility for his future descending on her narrow shoulders. She had already more or less talked him into changing the focus of the whole project. What if it failed to come together, and she was at fault? Was Carole trying to warn her?

"Really important," Selene echoed, thinking of what Beck had said about including the homier aspects of her interviews versus his more technical research.

"But I know you'll do good job," Carole said reassuringly. "And this summer could be important for your future too, Selene. Think what the experience can do for you personally—as a historian yourself, of course."

"I know," Selene said miserably. She was not only *not* getting her questions about Beck answered, she had the distinct impression Carole was in no uncertain terms cautioning her against getting romantically involved with her cousin.

"Keep your eye on the prize, Selene," Carole said, just what Selene had wanted her to say the week before. Now she wasn't so sure what prize she wanted—her education and a career in the field of history, or Professor Beckett McNeal. Did one necessarily cancel out the other? Couldn't she have both? She and Beck share a future as partner historians. Maybe. Would he, could he, let her climb so far with him, without jealousy, without shooting her down?

She wanted to ask Carole, What is Beck like, really? Did Annie's education contribute to their divorce? Was Beck threatened by his ex-wife's success?

But she asked none of those things. At this point, she wasn't confident Carole would give her a straight answer. After some talk about Carole's own course of study and her pleasure at spending the summer in Boston, Selene hung up, more confused than ever.

"You've met Beck." Carole had stated it flatly. Had he said something, indicated in some way that Selene was interested in him for more than oral histories? Did Carole think a relationship between them a bad idea? Did she think Selene wasn't good enough for her eminently sexy, and highly educated, cousin?

Selene's cheeks burned. Old wounds, half healed, started to tear open, and her self-confidence plummeted. Was that why Beck didn't call, because between them he and Carole had decided Selene wasn't at all a likely candidate for inclusion in their lofty family?

Carole had never seemed elitist, the saner part of Selene reminded. She had involved her in functions at her home, invited Selene over as a friend and not just one of her students. Or so Selene had thought at the time.

Could she have been so wrong? Was her judgment so impaired she couldn't tell who was her friend? Did Carole have her best interests at heart? Did she know something about Beck that caused her to discourage romantic interest in him from Selene?

Oh, it was all so damned complicated! Why didn't he call and settle her fears, irrational or otherwise. She had said she wanted him, and it was clear to her he wanted her back. She had never been mistaken about that, about a man's desire for her. Why couldn't they just jump in the sack once more and get it over with? Why all these maneuvers that tied her stomach up in knots?

The dark sky outside the window lit and thunder boomed, rolling in long waves down the valley to the east. Her head pounded. So wrapped up in her thoughts, she hadn't even noticed the weather, angry gray clouds gathering into an early dusk. It was going to rain again. A good, pounding rainstorm suited her mood just fine, she decided as the wind rattled the window screens in their frames. It bent the young trees in front of her apartment almost in half, and she watched their whipping branches fight the potent force.

She opened the window and took a deep breath as the curtains billowed around her. Maybe a soaking rain would wash away her doubts and fears, leaving her clean as the gleaming leaves on the elm saplings. Maybe she could begin again, and get it right this time, despite all the strikes against an alliance between herself and Beck.

And when had she begun to think of a permanent union between herself and Beck McNeal anyway? At what point had she started to contemplate a true partnership? Had Beck himself implanted that notion with his talk about changing the focus of his project to include a woman's point of view?

Maybe Carole hadn't meant anything except to encourage her not to give up her education. She had to believe that, she thought, in order to sleep tonight. If she were to make it through the week, she would have to stop torturing herself with unanswered questions.

But if she could force herself to stop the incessant querying in her head, she couldn't force out the pictures. Beck filled her head, whether she was wide awake or asleep and dreaming. His face floated before her eyes, his scent filled her nostrils. Their kisses and their heated joining endured, and in those visions he molded her breasts in his warm palms, kneading in sinuous circles until she begged for more and gasped his name. In her dreams, his mouth followed his hand until his lips enclosed her nipple, the moist seeking causing ripples to echo and quake inside her. In her dreams, Beck undressed her slowly, mouth caressing each exposed part of her—until finally she woke, sobbing with unfulfilled desire, electric waves of erotic sensation still zinging through her.

Oh, she wanted Beck McNeal. With every fiber of her being, she wanted him. Her mind might agonize, but her body had no qualms.

So the only real consideration was, could she live with the consequences if she continued a summer fling with him and it meant nothing? How much was she willing to risk? Her future?

But...what if it didn't need to mean her whole future? What if she could become like the older version of Selene, and just take it as it came? If Beck were only interested in her for the summer, so what? If she took the risk, opened herself, would she perhaps gain something valuable even if he left her at the end of a couple of months?

One thing was sure. She couldn't take much more of these aching, incomplete nights.

If she got in the car right now and went over there, would he welcome her...or reject her outright again?

The former Selene wouldn't hesitate to find out. That old Selene wouldn't lie in damp sheets and just think about Beck. As Sarah said, there was always the risk Selene would *think* herself out of what she really wanted to do. At this point, the Goddess of Desire was clamoring to come out and help Selene make love with Professor Beckett McNeal. *Right now*. And the Goddess would keep up her demands until Selene couldn't deny her anymore.

She got up and took a quick shower. Then she quickly dressed and slipped out of the apartment in the dark of night to her car. The Goddess's needs were simple, and she knew how to get what she wanted. If Selene had two months to secure a future with Beck, which was what she was almost convinced now *she* wanted, she would have to use that time convincing him to arrive at the same conclusion.

## Chapter Eight

A mighty gust of Wyoming wind blowing outside wouldn't have been necessary to knock Beck over when he cautiously opened the door in the middle of the night to find Selene standing on the porch. He was so surprised, the tiniest puff of breeze would have finished the job.

"Selene...what?" He stumbled over his words.

She wore a huge smile and little else, some tight black sheath that barely covered her breasts and buttocks. "Did I wake you?" she asked. "The light was on, so I thought maybe you couldn't sleep either."

"No, no. Not sleeping," he said, although he had been dozing in front of the television and his head still felt fuzzy. She shimmered, her outline wavering. He was almost sure there were definitely two of her. He couldn't decide if maybe he were dreaming that she stood on the doorstep with every line of her body delineated and a seductive smile on her beautiful face. "Come in," he added as she continued to retain direct eye contact.

She preceded him toward the murmur of the television, and he couldn't help watching the sway of her hips above long legs. Red stiletto heels gave her height and molded sexy calves.

"Have you been out?" Dancing, he thought, in that outfit? Her cheeks were flushed and her lips slightly swollen. Had some other man been kissing her while he dinked around with the excuse of giving her time to study? She apparently wasn't getting much studying done tonight, although it was a week night and she supposedly had classes tomorrow.

"No, I haven't been anywhere." She licked red lips. "I told you I couldn't sleep so I came straight over here."

Was she nervous, licking her lips like that? Would she lie to him? He tried not to be too obvious about sniffing the air. He couldn't detect the smell of a bar about her, liquor or cigarette smoke, but her hair still looked damp from a recent shower.

What right had he to be jealous anyway?

They had only the flickering light of the television and the reflected glow of the torchere in the dining room to see each other. He started to reach for the light switch to turn it on, but she laid a hand on his arm. "No," she said, almost purring. "I like it like this."

"Okay," he said uncertainly. "Uh, sit down. Would you like something to drink? I still have the rest of that bottle of wine you brought."

“Only if you’ll join me,” she said, planting herself square in the center of the sofa and crossing those supple legs.

“I’ll be right back.” He fled for the kitchen. What in the world was she up to? Did she have any idea what she looked like in that so-called outfit? Of course she did. She wasn’t stupid. So what was her purpose in coming here partially clothed?

Stupid. He knew who was being stupid. The both knew exactly what she was up to. He poured the wine with unsteady hands. On his return to the room where the television still droned, he turned off the floor lamp in the dining room. Then he crossed in front of the television and seated himself gingerly next to her, holding out one of the delicate, stemmed glasses.

She took it with murmured thanks, but barely touched the rim to her lips before setting it down on the low table at their knees. Then she turned fully toward him, arching her back to do so. Her breasts splayed tightly against the shiny black material, nipples prominent. The wine sloshed in his own glass as he shifted and averted his gaze, attempting to stifle a groan. His fingers curled, hands aching to reach for those tempting mounds.

She reached out to run a painted oval fingernail up the shirt sleeve covering his bicep. He shuddered as if those shiny nails were skimming his spine.

“Beck,” she said softly. “What’s wrong?”

He tore his arm from contact with her to set his own glass down before he succeeded in spilling it or shattering crystal.

“Nothing’s wrong.”

When he straightened again, she was waiting to capture him again in that steady gaze tinged strongly with emerald. This time he couldn’t look away.

“Won’t you kiss me?” she asked, bottom lip set in a provocative pout. She leaned forward expectantly, eyelashes fluttering as she closed her eyes.

“Selene...” He laid a fingertip to her glossed lips. “I told you what would happen if—”

Her eyes opened as a tiny frown creased her brow. “Don’t turn me away again, Beck. Unless you mean it this time.” Steely resolve undercut the sexy velvet of her voice.

He had a sane moment to consider a future empty of Selene, because he knew in that instant if he forced her to walk out she wouldn’t come back.

He shoved aside Carole’s warnings and his own hesitations, and reached for her. *What the hell*, was the last thing he remembered thinking with any clarity, *it’s going to happen between us again sooner or later. Might as well be now.*

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Selene’s own thoughts became a little muzzy at that point as she sank into Beck’s kisses. Their tongues sparred as soon as their lips met, the hunger in his kiss matched by her own deep need. She arched against his chest as his kiss gradually gentled, and their tongues intertwined more slowly and yet more demandingly. With his hand curved to cup her breast he hesitated momentarily, but then molded his palm firmly over its roundness.

And it was better than her wildest erotic dream. His fingers massaged her, ever so slightly rubbing and circling her aureoles. The sensual circles narrowed until he was flicking her nipple lightly through the thin fabric with his thumbnail. She almost fainted with pleasure.

Her head lolled weakly as he trailed hot kisses across her cheeks, brow, down her nose, stopping to nip her lips again before descending the column of her neck to her bare shoulders. His hands to either side of her chest, he inserted his thumbs beneath the elastic top of her dress, pausing only long enough to whisper, “Are you sure about this?”

“Yes,” she groaned. He wouldn’t turn her away, would he? Not now, not when they’d once again reached this point. She flung her arms tightly his neck, tipping her breasts demandingly toward him, and he obediently peeled the clingy material away.

She wore no bra. He laid her back on the cushions, pausing to gaze reverently at the revealed twin peaks. He took so long just looking, his hot breath causing her nipples to pebble, that Selene finally twined her fingers in his hair and tugged his head down where she wanted it.

“Like that?” he asked, lips moistening one crest while his fingernail drew patterns on the other. Wild bolts of pure pleasure zinged through her body, down to her curling toes.

“Love that,” she gasped. She wanted him so much. There was no hope for her. She loved him. It was too late for pretense. “I love it any way you want it. Beck... please don’t make me wait.”

“Shh, love. We’ve got time,” he whispered, the words sending waves of sensation outward from where his lips had so recently fastened. Had he really said that? *Love?* He trailed wet lips across her chest to pay equal attention to the other breast with identical results.

As he blazed searing kisses from her chest to her navel, he was halted by the material of the dress gathered at her waist. His hands turned suddenly ferocious from their former gentleness, plucking at the offending garment that clung to her and barred his way. She lifted obedient hips to his questing hands, and he peeled the scrap down her legs. He flung it aside, leaving her clad only in filmy panties and black heels. Her flesh tingled. Even that small distance between them caused her to feel cold. She wanted his weight on her, crushing all doubt.

She reached for his head and his thick hair as he once again brought avid lips into contact with her flesh. Her tummy quivered at the touch, and every nerve sang as his warm lips sought lower, inevitably lower, regions. When his tongue touched her through her panties, dampening the material, she nearly floated off the cushions as wave after wave of erotic sensation engulfed her.

She cried out his name as he continued his explorations down both legs, finally kneeling beside her on the floor. Then suddenly she felt the chill as he left her to stand. She opened heavy eyelids to see him standing magnificent beside the sofa, peeling out of his clothes.

He was glorious, muscles rippling in his abdomen as he unbuckled his belt and let his trousers drop. Then he bent to reach for something on the low table. The room was plunged into darkness as the TV clicked off.

“Beck?” She felt abandoned.

But it was only a moment later the cushions gave beneath his weight. His hands immediately sought the elastic band of her panties, and she gave up her last defense willingly, kicking off her shoes in the bargain. Then he let his chest settle slowly against hers with a sigh of pleasure. “Too heavy?” he whispered.

For answer she tugged at his wide shoulders. He took most of his weight on his elbows and knees, but where his length touched hers she eagerly absorbed every sensation. Furry chest, points of pelvis matching hers, long legs rough with hair. She wrapped her arms around his back, fingertips learning the musculature and smooth skin along his spine as he began kissing her again.

The length of his cock pressed against her belly. As their kisses once again grew tempestuous and he rocked against her, her own need spiraled out of control. She raised her legs to wrap them around his firm buttocks. He lifted his lower body slightly away from her and the tip of his shaft slid into place. She had the merest sensation of the protection he wore as he probed for position, and then he slipped easily, slowly inside her.

She sucked for breath as he filled her. For a brief time he lay absolutely still as they became accustomed to how well they fit together. She was the first to tentatively move beneath him, using the muscles inside her pelvis to grip and squeeze. He gasped his own pleasure, rocking with his hands supporting her ass until their movements met and matched.

They were as good together the second time as they had been the first. With each thrust of his tongue in her willing mouth matching the jackhammer thrusts of his pelvis, he drove her to a heightening spiral toward the completion she sought. Her own hips bucking and matching his

plunging, she climbed heights she'd never explored before. The tension inside her mounted, the friction he created building toward an explosion whose force she couldn't anticipate.

Her world shattered into millions of glittering shards. She screamed his name as sensation split her asunder and she careened off the precipice. He clutched the cheeks of her butt, driving into her as he reached for the apex with her.

Then at last she took the full impression of his weight as he collapsed and lay spent atop her. "I can't move," he finally said in a strangled whisper, still pulsing weakly inside her. "And I have to move. If the damned thing slips off inside you, all my efforts at protection will have been for nothing."

Selene tried to chuckle, unsuccessfully. Her own legs quivered in uncontrollable reaction. She seriously doubted if they would hold her if she tried to stand. "Can you roll off to the side?" she whispered.

"That'll work," he agreed. With herculean effort he heaved himself to one side as Selene slid out beneath him. Grateful for the width of Carole's oversized couch, she lay on her back. He squeezed in beside her, lying on his side with one arm beneath her neck and the other claiming one of her breasts.

"This is wonderful." She snuggled against his warmth.

"You were wonderful," he said sleepily.

"You were magnificent." She laid a hand on his thigh. The crinkly hair there was still moist from their exertions.

"We're magnificent together."

"I know," she said. But he was already dozing, breathing deeply and evenly, nose in her hair above her left ear.

She slipped easily into sleep herself, a contented smile curving her lips, wondering if the sexual heat they engendered in each other would always prevent them from delaying their pleasure long enough to make it to a real bed.

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She woke as dawn was breaking, tendrils of peach-tinted light barely streaking the gray sky outside the window. Beck lay beside her, propped on one elbow as the forefinger of his other hand tenderly traced her jaw, her lips, her nose.

"You are absolutely beautiful," he said.

"Thank you," she said with a flirtatious smile. She was amazed to find she felt not a smidgen of embarrassment at Beck's close scrutiny of her face and body. She gloried in the fact that he found her pleasing. She reached to run her fingers through his thick dark hair. "You're not half bad yourself."

"For an old man, you mean?" He lips stretched, but it was hardly a real smile. Did the difference in their ages bother him so much? Was that one of the reasons he held back with her?

She frowned. "I didn't say that. You're the best thing I've laid eyes on in a very long time. Like forever."

He sighed, placing both hands beneath his own head and lying back to look at the ceiling. "You didn't say it," he said. He sighed. "Carole did."

"She said you talked to her." Selene turned toward him, rising on her own elbow to watch his face.

"Have you?" He searched her eyes.

"Yes."

"And did she warn you off her cousin, the old lecher?"

"Not in so many words. I just got the impression she wouldn't be pleased if there was anything personal between us." She paused. "Did she really call you an old lecher?"



“She did. She said, and I quote, to keep my hands off her students.”

“Do you make a habit of...pursuing...students?”

“Never,” he said vehemently. He raised both hands to cup her face. “Do you often run around town in outfits like you wore over here last night?”

“Not that blatant,” she said just as honestly. “It doesn’t even belong to me. I borrowed it a couple days ago from my friend Sarah, expressly with the intent of seducing you.”

He blinked. “You did?”

She nodded, as well as she could with his hands still on her face.

“I’m glad I didn’t tear it off your body, then.” He paused. “Selene, can I ask you...why?”

“Why you?” She smiled. He nodded. “I told you, you’re the most attractive man I’ve ever met.” Could she just blurt out that she loved him? She didn’t think so. Maybe sometime soon, but not now.

“Do you look at a lot of men?” He tried to look fierce, but his vulnerability poked through the holes in his bravado.

She laughed. “I used to. I don’t anymore. Sarah looks, though. Then she tries her best to set me up with her choices.”

“Do you go?”

“Sometimes,” she admitted. “But most don’t come back.”

“Why not? Are they crazy?”

She laughed at his sudden turn from wanting no one to look at her to wanting everyone to admire her. It was good to know he was maybe as mixed up as she was.

“They think I’m cold,” she said. “And I guess I can be, when I want. I have a real problem trusting men.”

“I have a similar problem with women. But cold?” he mused, shaking his head. Then he grinned. “I’d say you’re hot.”

She laid a hand on his chest. His skin felt as if his own personal furnace roared inside. “So are you,” she said.

“Selene,” he said, suddenly serious. “Do you think we might have made a mistake?”

She lay back with a sigh. “I don’t know, Beck,” she said at last. “I can’t see the future. All I know is I couldn’t stand thinking and dreaming about you all the time. I feel...bewitched, I guess is the word. It was so bad I couldn’t function. I wasn’t getting any studying done—I wasn’t getting anything done. So I thought I may as well go for the reality instead of wasting all my time dreaming about you.”

He seemed immensely pleased. “I think about you all the time too.”

“You do?” She was surprised, and as pleased as he seemed to be.

He shifted onto his elbow again, leaned to kiss her, once, hard. “All the time. Yes. I do.” Then his amber brown eyes sobered. “But what I was getting at was, do you think we can work together now? I’ve never...slept...with a colleague before.”

Colleague. She thrilled at the implications, while the nag in the back of her mind who refused to go completely away questioned whether deep down he thought the project more important than she was herself.

But if Carole had nothing else right, she was at least on target about the project’s importance to Selene’s future. So what was uppermost to Beck should perhaps become most important to her too. It only made sense, after all. Didn’t it? Falling in love made everything so much more confusing.

“I hope we can continue a good working relationship, Beck,” she said. “We’re both adults, right?”

“Carole seems mighty protective of you.”

Selene reached for his hand, brought it up to her bare breast. "I guess I was pretty needy not too long ago. Carole filled a void in my life...but I guess neither of us realized what I really needed. Which turns out to be you."

He grinned whitely, voraciously. "Got class today?"

"Yup. But I've got a little time if you want..." She trailed off suggestively.

"I do want, so very much," he said as he lowered his lips to hers.

## Chapter Nine

Selene's first interview alone on Saturday almost got completely away from her. A gregarious Slovenian woman who sang in her youth at immigrant gatherings, the interviewee insisted on spending most of the morning singing songs from the old country into the tape recorder, accompanying herself with a wheezy button box accordion. Selene went along with good grace and a frozen smile, as Beck had instructed her to do if the interviews ever went off track, but she was afraid he would ultimately write this one off.

She was to meet Beck at Carole's house in the early afternoon to review what each had done in the morning. Her stomach churned nervously, so sure was she that she hadn't gotten what Beck wanted.

He greeted her with a big smile and a kiss. He fed her tuna salad sandwiches and chips, and then he reached for her. She went into his arms eagerly, more than willing to put off discussing the interview. Her appetite hadn't begun to be sated by the delicious lunch.

He led her upstairs this time. Her giggles over finally aiming for a bed didn't last long as he stopped on several stairs and the landing for deep, longing kisses that sent tingles down her spine, through her center, and all the way to her toes. In the bedroom, they slowly undressed each other, lingering over every inch of exposed flesh with seeking tongues.

He backed her against the edge of the high mattress of Carole's big four poster, and when Selene went down he came with her, rolling until she lay atop him. "Want to switch places?" he asked, one eyebrow quirked.

Selene shook her head. It was her turn to be in control. She liked watching his expression in the afternoon light. She meant to enjoy every moment of her power over him.

"Okay, then," Beck said with a quirky grin, reaching into a drawer beside the bed. "You can do the honors."

Selene sat between his legs, the square package in her hand, his eager erection twitching before her. "I've never done this part," she admitted.

He laughed. "You know how it works. Just unroll it. Come on, sweetheart. Don't you want to get started?"

*Yes, indeedy.* She did as he instructed and found it wasn't so difficult after all. The act was merely another part of touching Beck, which she enjoyed immensely. He sat up, pulling her onto his lap facing him and slipping easily inside her. They rocked for a long while that way, each leaning back on their elbows as by turns they watched their joining and gazed deeply into each other's eyes.

Selene thrilled to watch uncontrollable excitement build in Beck until he could hold his position no more and lay back with a deep sigh. She sat up and doubled her legs to each side of him, increasing her momentum, hands busy in the hair of his chest and then lower to dip a fingertip in his navel. Lifting with her legs and squeezing with her interior muscles, she drove him to distraction, all the while quivering so she herself didn't know how much longer she could hold back a reaction.

The sight of the two golden bodies bathed in the sunflower light of a hot summer afternoon, joined and moving as one, almost flipped her over the edge. But she gritted her teeth, insisting on pleasuring Beck until he groaned and seized her hips to make her stop.

His face twisted almost in pain, he grunted, "I can't hold it anymore, Selene. You're driving me insane."

He sat up, clutching her tightly to his chest. Both their bodies were sheened with sweat. She twined her fingers in the damp hair at his neck, rubbed her slick breasts against his chest. She couldn't get enough of him, of the feel of his body against hers. "Now?" she whispered.

"Now," he agreed urgently, lips demanding hers, begging the release she withheld. Their mutual deliverance was a virtual implosion, leaving them both limp and gasping. Selene rolled to the side, chest heaving just like his.

When his labored breathing finally eased, he lowered his arm from his eyes to roll his head toward her. "My God, woman," he said reverently. "You could kill an old fool like me with loving like that."

"I don't think age has anything to do with it," she said as she gazed into his caramel-colored eyes. "We're just very, very good together."

He paused, and she wondered if he was thinking they could be good together outside of bed too, as she was. At last he said thoughtfully, "Yeah, we are." Then he smacked her rump playfully. "Ready for a shower and some real work?"

"Separately or together?" She grinned.

"Together, of course." He tugged her into a sitting position and kissed her. "Race you," he said when he released her lips with a light nip.

Selene beat him easily. When he joined her under the spray behind a curtain circling the deep clawfoot tub, they spent many long minutes lovingly soaping each other's bodies and playing in the water. When the shower began to run cold, they stepped out and toweled each other dry, then returned to the bedroom to gather scattered clothing.

Once again downstairs, a quiver of apprehension ran through her when he asked for the morning's tape. She sat silently beside him as he concentrated on Mrs. Gonovich's introductions to her songs. By the second tune, he was frowning, and the frown continued to deepen as she segued from tune to tune without pause.

He clicked off the tape player in the middle of a song. "That's it?"

"As far as the interview is concerned, yes." Selene wondered if she should try to defend herself. Mrs. Gonovich was a strong personality, and she had more or less run away with Selene's interview.

"Well, you got some good stuff on the Slovenian Grape Festival and the ethnic lodges of the early part of the century—before she started singing," Beck conceded magnanimously. "She also mentions some of the other ethnic groups here at the time, the Greeks, the Chinese, the Croations, and the Tyroleans. All in all, not bad for your first attempt."

"She didn't say much. All she wanted was an audience for her performance." Selene let out a pent up breath. Wasn't he going to yell at her, tell her what a failure she was?

"Happens." Beck shrugged. "Obviously, she's gotten a lot of attention for her singing. Maybe she thought this was her big chance to record for posterity." He grinned.

"You aren't mad?"

"Nah." He reached for her hand. "If they refuse to cooperate, they just refuse to cooperate, that's all. Sometimes magic happens, more often it doesn't. You could have been a touch more insistent that she answer the questions, but my feeling is she would have started singing anyway. What you did get is useful, Selene. Don't worry about it. You did a good job."

She sat back, still clinging to his hand. His praise bathed her, soothed away her worries that they couldn't work together if they were lovers. She sighed. "Thank you," she said. "For the opportunity. And for being you."

Beck looked surprised as he leaned his own spine against the back of the sofa. "Have I done something so amazing?" He waggled his eyebrows wolfishly at her.

She laughed. "You don't know, professor," she said. "You have no idea how amazing you are to me."

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If Selene thought finally getting Beck to agree to sex with her would stop the erotic daydreams during class, she found the opposite was true. Now she had some dynamite reality to contend with in her musings, and she often came to in the midst of a lecture to find the teacher glaring at her. She walked the halls dreamy-smiled, not even noticing her surroundings or the concern she was causing. In the middle of the next week she was called in for an unscheduled conference with her biology instructor.

One of her favorite teachers, Ms. Meredith was also another of her role models. Near Selene's age, Barbara Meredith had only recently begun teaching, having hired on at the college after a short stint as a government biologist. Owned body and soul by two beloved German Shepherds, Ms. Meredith had also recently acquired a good humored husband who tolerated his tongue-lolling predecessors in his wife's affections as part of the bargain.

Now, called in to Barbara's tiny, cluttered office, Selene repressed a tremor of fear at the unaccustomed stern look on her teacher's face.

"Sit down, Selene." Barbara waved absently toward the single chair almost obscured by towers of books and papers sitting on the floor next to the desk that dominated the cubicle.

Wondering how Barbara could possibly get any work done in this claustrophobic atmosphere, Selene gingerly seated herself on the very edge of the indicated chair. She held her textbooks tightly to her chest, as if to ward off what she was almost certain was coming.

"You're a second year student. Your first year in my class, you did an excellent job." Barbara peered at Selene while she tapped the eraser end of a pencil on the desk. "I had no reservations about your ability to handle second year biology. Before Carole left, I assume she advised you of the amount of work summer block classes demand."

"Of course." Selene clutched her books with sweaty hands. "Carole is an excellent advisor."

"Then if you knew ahead of time what you were facing, I'd like to know what the problem is. You've failed two weeks of lab tests in addition to several lecture quizzes. Are you working too many hours to concentrate on your studies?"

Selene swallowed. "I'm not working this summer, that is, not at a regular job," she babbled. Barbara studied her intently. She laid the pencil down on the desk, squarely aligned with the edge of the blotter. "Then what's the problem?"

How could she say to this competent woman who seemed able to juggle all the facets of her life with such ease that she couldn't keep her mind on her studies because she was consumed by thoughts of a man? On the face of it, it sounded silly to admit that all her big talk about emulating the professional women she'd met at the college had flown out the window upon meeting a man.

"I'm having some...complications in my personal life at the moment," she finally said.

Barbara leaned back in her chair. "I see. That's all you have to say about this?"

Selene nodded slowly. The wire binder of her notebook was cutting into her palm, but she couldn't make herself loosen her grip.

"This is a two year community college. There are numerous opportunities in biology, scholarships and grants, that I could recommend you for, should you choose to go on. But you must keep your grades up." Barbara indicated the posters cramming the bulletin board that advertised various higher institutions before adding, "Is there anything I can do to help you?"

Selene shook her head. There was nothing anyone could do. She'd made her choice when she insisted on making love to Beck—and she didn't know if they had a future together, let alone if she would be able to continue her studies later even if they could make a life together.

"All right then." Barbara picked up the pencil she'd discarded and pulled a memo pad toward her. "Who's your advisor now that Carole's not here?"

Selene choked out the name of her history professor.

Barbara wrote, then laid the pencil aside again and looked a long moment at Selene. "If you fail one more test, my best advice would be to drop the course. An incomplete on your transcript is better than a failure, which can never be wiped off your record even if you take it again and pass. Do you understand?"

Selene nodded miserably.

"I know it's hard to start with another advisor," Barbara said. "I can't help you there unless you change your major. Care to consider biology instead of history?"

Selene choked out, "I could think about it."

"Do." Barbara smiled. "In any case," she continued, "have you talked to Carole at all this summer? She's in Boston, but maybe she could help if you were willing to confide in her."

*Oh, that wouldn't be a good idea.* Just what would Carole have to say if Selene confided that she was so consumed with Beck that she was flunking out of school? Carole would be more than disappointed. She would assume Selene couldn't be left alone for a minute for fear she would do something so utterly stupid as to jeopardize the future they had so carefully mapped out. She shook her head. No, the last thing she would do was call Carole.

She had made her bed, so to speak, and now she would lie in it and hope to heaven she hadn't made the biggest mistake of a life where she'd made some doozies.

She stood, shifting her books under one arm to offer her hand to Barbara. "I want to thank you for the chance to take biology from you. I've learned a lot," she said.

Then she headed downstairs to the business office to withdraw from her summer classes.

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"You did what?" Sarah, apparently stunned into speechlessness, couldn't continue. She set her glass of cola carefully on one of the coffee tables in Selene's living room.

"I dropped out of school," Selene repeated, setting her jaw and tilting up her nose.

"But, Selene, *why*? I thought graduating was all you cared about. Is it the professor guy?"

Sarah peered at her owlishly. Selene had never seen her friend truly shocked by anything before.

"I can always go back later." She took a sip of her own drink, holding back tears and trying hard not to choke. "And yes, it's the professor. I think I'm in love with him, Sarah."

"Omigod. It was the black dress, wasn't it? I feel so responsible," Sarah wailed.

Selene smiled tremulously. "It's not your fault. It wasn't your dress. It was what I did in your dress."

"But I encouraged you. I said you could do both, study and see him at the same time." But easily distracted from talk of books and studies, which she herself couldn't wait to abandon after high school, Sarah retrieved her cola and said, "Um, so what did you do in my dress, Selene?"

"What do you think?" Selene grinned bravely through brimming tears.

"Really?" Sarah stared at her. "I was beginning to be afraid you didn't have it in you anymore." She paused. "So...is he worth it?"

"In the way you mean, yeah," Selene admitted, thinking of how she and Beck fit together so perfectly he filled her up and never failed to hit all the right spots. She rubbed tired eyes. "In the long run, who knows?"

“He’s not talking commitment, huh?” Sarah tapped her upper lip thoughtfully. “Is he old-fashioned? Maybe it’s not wise in this case to give away the milk when he doesn’t have to buy the cow, as the saying goes.”

“You’re a fine one to give that kind of advice, Sarah.” Selene curled her legs beneath her.

Sarah didn’t take offense. “I know. But we’re not talking about me. We’re talking about you. If Eddie left today—I hate to admit it but you know me—I’d be over him by next week. You falling for this guy, on the other hand, that is serious business.”

Selene leaned back. “I have about six weeks, Sarah, and then he’ll be gone.”

“So you’re going to use the rest of the summer convincing him not to leave you behind.” Sarah nodded. “That’s why you left school.”

“Something like that, although I guess I’ve never put it in such plain English before. That—plus the fact that I was flunking out anyway.” She gazed off into space, then faced her friend again. “Sarah, do you think it’s really love this time?”

“Me?” Sarah pointed at herself. She laughed harshly. “You’re asking me what true love is? Get real, Selene.”

“You’re not in love with Eddie?” Selene was surprised.

“Of course I’m in love with him. But is it the to-die-for kind of love that it looks like you’re getting swept up in? No.” Sarah shook her head. “I’m not like you, Selene. I love them all, in one way or another, but none of them ever really touches what’s inside here, you know?” She placed a finger over the area of her heart.

“Looking at us, nobody would ever guess that I’m the giddy one and you’re the pragmatist,” Selene said.

“Pragmatist? Don’t use such big words, okay?”

“Realist, then. For true, you’ve never been head-over-heels for any of them?”

“For true.” Sarah’s mouth tightened. “But don’t you dare tell Eddie. Or the one after him, or the one after that either. Promise?”

“Promise,” Selene said, crossing her heart, awed by Sarah’s unexpected revelation. “So you’re not looking for happy-ever-after like the rest of us fools?” she asked.

“Of course I am. I always have been, just as much as you are,” Sarah said. “My knight in shining armor is out there somewhere. I just haven’t found him yet.” She paused, then added, “Selene, I really and sincerely hope this professor guy is the one, and that he doesn’t end up breaking your heart. I’ll be praying that it all works out for you.”

“Thank you, Sarah,” Selene said, so touched she felt tears threaten again.

“And don’t you start blubbering,” Sarah said, finishing off her cola.

“I wasn’t going to blubber.”

“Yes, you were. I know you, Selene.” Sarah stood up to go. At the door, she turned and blew a kiss. “Good luck, sweetie. And remember, you’re welcome to raid my closet any time.”

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“Excuse me. You did what?” Beck demanded. “I thought I heard you say you dropped your summer classes.”

Selene and Beck lay entwined in Carole’s bed after making love. She was glad it was dark so she couldn’t see the expression on his face, but she could well imagine.

She sighed. “I can always go back in the fall.” She held her breath, waiting for him to intimate there was some chance that they might be together in the fall. But he didn’t.

Of course he didn’t. He had no intention of taking her back to Boston with him. Silly Selene, who couldn’t make the grade. How would a college drop-out fit in with Beck’s educated friends? She’d only embarrass him.

The longer his silence went on, the more uncertain and upset she became.

At last he said, “Carole’s going to kill me.”

“Is that all you can think about, what Carole’s going to say?” Selene scooted angrily away from him to her own side of the bed. She had given up so much for him already, changed the course of her life for an uncertain future with him—and all he worried about was what his cousin would say.

Beck kicked the sheets aside to scoot after her. “Don’t, love,” he said, placing an arm firmly across her middle when she would have gotten out of the bed. “You have to admit, Carole’s going to blow her cork when she hears. She’s probably going to be mad at you too. And she’s going to blame me.”

“Why should she blame you? I’m an adult, after all. I came after you.” *And for what?* the nag in her head demanded.

“You did, didn’t you? Flattered the hell out of this old man.” He traced her brow with his forefinger.

“For the last time, Beck, you’re not old,” she ground out from between clenched teeth. If that’s the way he felt, he’d never want to have children. He’d always use the excuse that he was too old. She saw the last vestige of her unacknowledged lifelong dreams going up in smoke.

“Well, what’s done is done,” he finally said in low voice. “We’ll just have to face the consequences.”

“Alone or together?” She couldn’t help that one. It seemed the consequences for Beck were few. He could walk away at any time and resume his old life without missing a step. Selene had quit even her part-time bartending job on the expectation that Beck’s grant would cover her expenses. Her former mentors at the college were all hugely disappointed in her, and she had no way to tell if Beck thought they might ultimately stay together because he never even hinted anything of the sort.

Now she’d put him on the spot, and she could feel the arm he’d thrown across her stiffen in response. So was that answer enough for her? Did she understand by now that he was going to walk away from her when the summer was over?

Her eyelids stung. Tears threatened to spill the longer his silence went on. At last he said, “We’ve only known each other a little while, Selene.”

“And look where we are! What we just did—does it mean nothing to you? You think we made a mistake, don’t you?” Her eyes brimmed and the tears finally fell.

He touched the moisture leaking down her cheeks and then looked at his finger as if in wonder. “Ah, love.” He gathered her close. “Don’t cry. It will be all right. Please don’t cry.”

Still he made no promises. No reference to a life together. Selene let herself be held because she needed the comfort, no matter its source. A part of her wanted to fling herself out of the bed away from him...but then where would she go?

So she stayed in his arms and cried, letting him murmur meaningless nothing words in her ear, until she cried herself empty of tears.

## Chapter Ten

“W hacha doing?” Sarah, lounging in the open doorway, watched Selene struggle to move the heavy sofa in her apartment.

“Cleaning.” Selene shoved and grunted. “Moving things. Getting rid of extra baggage.” She shoved again.

“How come?”

Selene could tell Sarah was trying to act casual. She wiped sweat from her brow. “Because I’ve got too much stuff, Sarah. It’s time to let go of some of it. Besides, I could use the extra money.”

“Are you moving?” Sarah didn’t meet Selene’s eyes, running a forefinger along the top of an upholstered chair as if she found something interesting in the pattern.

Selene collapsed on the sofa, puffing out her cheeks as the breath whooshed tiredly from her. “Sit down, Sarah. You’re acting all weird and making me nervous,” she said.

Sarah placed herself in the chair she’d been examining. “So, are you moving?” she repeated.

“No,” Selene replied. “I told you, I’m just cleaning some extra stuff out of my life.”

“Sounds kind of ominous.” Sarah plucked at a nonexistent hangnail. “So how are things going with the interviewer guy?”

“His name is Beck. Beckett, if you want to get formal about it.”

“I never heard of anyone with that name. And you’re not answering my question.”

“Obviously.” Selene wrapped her arms around her middle. Her nose itched from the dust she’d stirred up, and her clothes were dirty. She really shouldn’t be sitting on the sofa until she’d had a shower. But who knew? She might decide to sell this sofa too. She was in that kind of mood.

“That bad, huh?” Sarah got up to help herself to a cola from the refrigerator in the kitchen. She held it up before returning to the living room. “Want one?”

“Sure,” Selene said disinterestedly.

When Sarah had set the drink in front of Selene and resumed her seat, she said, “I hate to keep repeating myself, but what’s happening between you and Beck?”

Selene glared at Sarah, which had absolutely no effect. Sarah lifted the can and took a casual swallow while she waited for an answer.

Selene looked at the ceiling and puffed out her cheeks again.

Sarah waited some more.

Finally Selene said, “We’re having sex. Okay, Sarah?”

“Fine by me,” Sarah said. “Been there. Done that. Feels awful, doesn’t it?”

Selene felt the tiniest smile tugging at the corners of her lips. “The sex itself feels pretty good,” she admitted.

Sarah choked on her cola, sputtering laughter. “That’s not what I meant.”

“I know what you meant.” Selene examined the beads of condensation collecting on the cola can. “I guess I’m just not sure if I want to talk about it, the fact that Beck and I aren’t going anywhere.”

“You quit school for the guy, Selene. You have a right to be upset.”

“No, I didn’t quit for him. Yes, I did. God, I don’t know anymore.” Selene rubbed at her forehead with chilled fingers. “He didn’t ask me to quit. He was doing his best to stay away from me during the week and give me time to study. Until I went over there in that damned dress...”

“Oh, right. Blame me and my dress,” Sarah complained, but she smiled as she said it.

“I’m not blaming you. And I don’t blame Beck.” Selene paused. Then she pointed at herself. “I know where the blame lies.”

“You’re sure he’s the one. Mr. Right. Mr. Wonderful.”

Selene gazed at her friend. “It’s as if there’s something bigger than us at work. I can’t stay away from him. Except for getting any kind of commitment, he’s the most wonderful man I’ve ever met, Sarah. He’s kind, considerate. He builds my self-confidence by always having confidence in me. He’s a great teacher. I’m learning so much from him. But...”

“But you think he’s in this for the short term.”

“Right,” Selene said forlornly. “For about four more weeks, to be exact. He acts scared to death that I’m going to want something from him beyond his departure date.”

“What kind of birth control are you using, if you don’t mind my asking,” Sarah examined her fingernails again.

“Don’t even think about it,” Selene warned. “I won’t lower myself to that old trap. Besides, after he leaves, how would I be able to go back to school with a baby to look after?”



Sarah sighed. "I guess you're right."

"I am right. He either wants me for myself alone, or he doesn't."

Sarah peered at Selene. "You're taking this whole thing very well. Showing strength I didn't know you had. Good for you, Selene."

Selene's brave front suddenly crumbled. "No, I'm not," she wailed, starting to cry. "Oh, S-Sarah, I don't know what to do. I'm falling apart. I love him."

Sarah rushed to Selene's side. "'Oh, honey. Don't cry, sweetie. We'll figure something out. You'll see. Between us we'll have that professor guy on his knees in no time."

Selene just sobbed harder.

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Beck and Selene faced each other across the table in Carole's kitchen, after a working meal where he'd gone over the latest transcribing she'd done.

"I'm going to be busy Monday through Saturday of next week," she said out of the blue.

Beck leaned back slowly, using a forefinger to push his glasses higher on his nose. "Okay," he said. She'd been different the last few days, tense and almost what he would describe as short-tempered.

"I have plans," she continued, not meeting his eyes. "Something I have to do."

"Selene, it's all right," he said. "I'll just use the time to regroup and get an overview of where we need to go in the time we have left."

He could see her stiffen. Each time he mentioned the length of his stay, she tightened up and spoke in monosyllables. He felt bad for making her suffer. Deep inside he knew what she wanted, but right now he couldn't give it to her. He couldn't promise her a tomorrow until he was sure.

Of her. Of himself, most of all.

This latest for example—this taking off of six days right in the middle of a project she'd promised to help him complete. And without a word of explanation. Did it indicate flightiness, that she didn't care if she things through to completion?

Or was she calling the whole thing off between them? Letting him down easy. A week here, half a month there, until he left for good?

Had she found someone else? Was that why she needed almost a week? To get to know a new man?

His stomach felt hollow at the thought. Selene was his, dammit.

He brought himself up short. No. Wait. Selene wasn't his.

He'd made no commitment, spoken no words of promise. She was free to go and do what she pleased. She had done an excellent job for him and she deserved some time off. He'd been dominating her every waking hour, and most of her sleeping hours as well.

He forced himself to smile, try to sound casual. "Will I see you at all for those few days?"

"I don't know," she said vaguely, waving a hand.

Suddenly he wanted to grab that delicate hand and force an answer from her. What would she be busy doing? He hated her vagueness, the way she sidestepped his questions. It reminded him so much of Annie.

But he choked his feelings down, unsure if this was a new anger with Selene or an old bone of contention with Annie. Or if he were mixing them both in his head into one—a most dangerous and intellectually lazy habit to indulge in.

So he would ask no more questions. He would let Selene go, let her do what she wanted. If she called him in that week, fine. If she didn't, fine. But he wouldn't bother her. It was clear she wanted those six days and he would let her have them.

He stood and gathered the dishes, turned to place them in the sink. She came to stand beside him, picked up a dish towel from habit.

"Leave it," he growled. "I'll do them later."

She dropped the towel as if burned, hurt and confusion plain in her eyes.

He couldn't stand it. He reached for her, felt her familiar warmth beneath his fingers. He stroked her back, her fragile neck. "Selene, I'm sorry," he breathed into her fragrant dark hair.

And then he was kissing her. Passion swift and hot as prairie fire blazed between them. Before he knew what was happening, before he could exert the slightest hint of self-control, they were back in bed again. The walk up the flight of stairs a vague memory, their undressing of each other a frenzied, hurried affair as if they couldn't wait for the act that made them one. Only here in the big four poster were they fully attuned to each other, each answering and meeting the other's needs. And it was perfect, as always. In bed, they responded to every want. Joined, they completed each other. But out of bed?

He lay awake long into the night, just watching her sleep. He was losing her. He could admit that when they weren't in the midst of heated sex. And it was his own fault. All it would take to hold her, to bind her to him forever, was three little words—*I love you*.

But could he bring himself to say those words to her? When would he be able to force himself to say them? The longer he waited, the further she distanced herself from him. One day soon it would be time for him to go. Would he leave Rocky Creek alone, as alone as he had been when he returned to Wyoming?

He'd been looking for something when he came back here, although he hadn't known it and couldn't have defined what it was. Now he'd found her, his lifelong love, and coward that he was, he couldn't even tell her.

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Selene cleaned like a demon that next week, sorting, stacking, and pricing. *Out with the old*, she kept thinking. Sarah helped when she wasn't at work or spending quality time with Eddie.

"This apartment's going to be so easy to take care of when I go back to school in the fall," Selene told her. "All this junk, gone! I'm only going to keep what I really need."

Sarah just looked at her, with nothing to say for once.

During that week, Selene didn't remember what day, Sarah did dare to venture "I didn't mean that you should completely avoid the guy, Selene. I just said to tease him a little, you know. Put some distance between you and let him think about it a while."

"This isn't about him, Sarah," she said seriously. "It's about me. About making up my mind what to do when he goes."

"You still think he's going, huh?"

He was almost gone. "I know he's going," Selene said distantly, pretending all her attention was on the pile of old dog-eared paperbacks she sorted. She didn't dare look at Sarah for fear the despair she was feeling would be reflected in her friend's eyes.

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It was a sunny Saturday morning in late July, one of the few bright weekend days so far of the rainy summer. Beck sat at the kitchen table, trying to read the thin weekly newspaper. He'd been at the task for an hour already, and hadn't absorbed a single word.

Selene's quitting school shook him to the core. From everything Carole said, and everything Selene herself professed, completing her education had been everything she had always wanted. Carole had spoken of her in glowing terms, a model student, the non-trad everyone thought would succeed in changing her life.

Educators at the undergraduate level liked nontraditional students anyway. Older students attended classes because they wanted to, not because mom and dad were paying the bills and there was nothing better to do. Mature students came to class prepared, did their homework, and generally studied their asses off to get good grades.

According to Carole, Selene had been the shining star—and more, she had begun to fit into the academic company Carole kept, setting herself up with a support system for the life she would lead as an instructor herself after graduation. He knew how the system worked. As head of the history department, Carole had a big say in who was hired and who was not. Selene had easy entry at the college if she wanted to come back and teach after she got a higher degree.

So...what happened to those cherished goals?

Could Selene not stay the course without Carole's guidance and encouragement? And if that was correct, what did it say about her? Would she be perpetually clinging to him for direction, support, advice? Not that he didn't feel mutual support was an important part of any long lasting relationship. But he couldn't envision the clinging vine sort of wife who pounced on her husband the moment he came through the door, so starved for conversation and companionship she demanded all his spare time and energy.

Home to Beck meant a retreat from the world, a haven. He wanted someone to share it with, sure. But he wanted a whole person. A companion. Someone who had something to talk about besides the leaky bathroom faucet and the neighbor's cat digging in the flower beds. Someone who had interests besides worrying what to fix for dinner.

And...if Selene had no stick-to-it-iveness, what did that portend for a long term relationship between them? Would she walk out as soon as things got rough—and he knew they would, eventually. All marriages faced uneven patches sooner or later. Would she refuse to work with him to mend the rips? Would she just give up and walk away?

Not again.

He couldn't take it again, the woman he loved walking out on him.

He gave himself credit, though. He could see the irony of his feelings. Annie had abandoned all pretext of being interested in his life, his goals, his pursuits. In the end, their marriage had been a sham. Not only did they not sleep together, they did very little at all together. At home, they barely spoke. They didn't take their meals together. Attending university functions as a couple became a painful experience of mumbled explanations about why Annie carefully avoided him for the entire evening. It would have been easier if she'd stayed home and let him go alone. When she finally divorced him, he couldn't admit that along with the anger and grief he experienced a vague sort of relief that at least when he went home to an empty house, it was because nobody was there.

On the other hand Selene had given up all. For him? He wasn't sure, but if so the thought made him uncomfortable. Now she had no job, no classes to go to, no Carole to lean on. She had only him and his interests. Working on his project. Sharing meals with him. Making love with him.

The responsibility settled on his shoulders like a cement coat. Being her everything, ultimately could he truly be enough?

His directorship, his oral history projects, his research and reading: they had been plenty enough for him. But would they prove to be enough for Selene? Now he had taken early, early retirement and his life was about to change.

What if he did marry her and move her to his planned retirement abode where she knew no one but him? Without Carole to guide her, would she get out, make friends, begin a new life on her own but also with him?

He didn't know. He didn't know Selene well enough to predict what she would do.

Damn. She expected to marry him. He was sure of it. He'd actually known it all along. He shouldn't have given in to her seduction and made love to her. Now he couldn't keep his hands off her.

It seemed he had no will, despite all the pep talks he gave himself, that when next time came they wouldn't end up in bed.

Selene offered, and he took. When it happened, every time it happened, he berated himself for possibly hurting her and probably himself. Each time they made love it bound her more tightly to him. And he wasn't at all sure that was such a good idea. If he had no anchor himself, how could he hope to anchor her?

But he couldn't help himself. He couldn't stop.

He suspected there was something more at work here than hot infatuation, but he was damned if he understood what. He only knew he couldn't resist her. A wildfire had been lit between him and Selene that now burned out of control. If it would end by consuming them both, he had no idea.

He tried to return to his reading, with as little success as before. A small ad tugged at his attention, but before he could read it, his phone jangled.

He hesitated, letting it ring. He knew who it was. He had been expecting a call from Carole any day now. He hadn't called her back as she had ordered him to, and he knew she wouldn't just let up on him.

Finally he gave in and answered. If he didn't, his cousin would just keep calling back.

"How's it going?"

He knew Carole was trying her best to seem casual.

"The project is right on track," he hedged. He fiddled with the stem of his glasses, looking out the back door at a lilac bush full of chattering sparrows. "Ahead of schedule, in fact. I'm very pleased."

Maybe if he didn't mention Selene by name, Carole wouldn't either.

"And Selene?" Carole persisted. "She's working out well for you?"

The sparrows erupted in a flock from the bush and took flight, winging away just like any hope of a well-ordered life Beck might once have entertained.

He felt hollow inside. His throat tightened. He'd messed up so badly, he thought he might throw the phone down and start breaking dishes if he said a single word about Selene. So he held himself in check and said nothing. He could just imagine Carole's reaction if she heard, even long-distance, her china shattering.

"Beck?" Carole waited, then said urgently, "Beck, I think you'd better tell me what's going on."

"I—" he said, unable to continue.

"Beck," Carole said, gently, but with a trace of panic in her voice. "It's bad, isn't it?"

"Bad," he repeated in a choked voice. He removed his glasses, laid them on the counter with a shaking hand.

"Is Selene all right? Are you? Beck, please talk to me."

"Selene's...um, fine," he said uncertainly. He didn't exactly know how Selene was, since he hadn't seen her in days, but he assumed she was all right physically. "I'm a little torn up right now, but I think I'll be all right too. As soon as I get away from here, I'll be just fine."

Once the words started, they tumbled out over each other in a flood. He knew he was babbling, sounding like an idiot, but he couldn't help it. The only thing he could think of at the moment that might make him feel better was putting some distance between himself and the woman who dominated his thoughts to the point of near insanity. After Carole finished her summer work in Boston, he had to go back for a while and clean the place out. Boston was clear across the continent. That should be far enough away...he hoped. Just another three weeks here in Wyoming.

Could he get through three weeks?

“Beck, could you please enlighten me a little bit about what’s going on? Or do I need to call Selene myself?”

He panicked, gripping the phone as if clenching it would stop Carole in some way. “No! No, don’t call Selene.”

“Then you’d better tell me exactly what’s wrong,” Carole said in the no-nonsense voice of the elder relative.

Trapped.

Cornered.

No way out.

“I think I’m in love with her,” he mumbled.

“What?” Carole barked the word into the phone. “Did I hear you correctly, Beck?”

He cringed. He could imagine the expression on his cousin’s face. He’d done exactly what she had warned him against, fallen in love with a student. Never mind that Selene wasn’t technically his student.

“I said,” he voiced each word separately so Carole would have no trouble understanding, “I. Am. In. Love. With Selene.”

And in the shocked silence over the phone line, he realized how good it felt to finally say what he felt. Admit it. Get it out in the open. Examine it. Have Carole tell him exactly how many different kinds of fool he was.

Maybe if Carole threw cold water on the whole thing, he’d wake up and smell his Boston baked beans burning.

“I see,” Carole said slowly. He could almost hear the wheels spinning in her brain as she made the connections between what he was telling her and what he was deliberately leaving out. “I take it you’re sleeping with her.”

Leave it to Carole to strip the varnish from his evasions. He let the statement stand without comment. What could he say? He had no defense. What he’d done was indefensible. Let Carole do her worst. He deserved it.

“Beck, how could you?” she wailed then. “I told you to be careful! I warned you that you were both too vulnerable. Oh, this is all my fault. I should never have given you her name.” With barely a pause for breath, she continued, “What do you intend to do now, may I ask? Are you planning on marrying her, or just dumping her at the end of the summer so she has you to get beyond in addition to everything else she’s coping with?”

“And I suppose I have nothing to cope with, in addition to the guilt I feel about Selene?” Because he had no defense, he tried the offense.

It didn’t work. It never did with Carole; she would cut him no slack. “Damn you, Beck,” she said in a low, deadly voice. “You’re almost ten years older than she is, and a damn sight more worldly. You let her fall for you because it fed your battered ego, didn’t you? You were hurting after Annie, and you let Selene salve your wounds. And you’re going to leave her in a few weeks to resume your comfortable little life and your new little plans, aren’t you? I can hear it in your voice, Mr. Former Director of American Studies. A summer fling. I would never have thought you could stoop so low, Beck. I’m so disappointed I could cry.”

“Take it easy, Carole,” he said, biting his thumb hard to keep his own emotions at bay. “You’re too old to get so upset. Your blood pressure’s probably shooting through the roof.”

“How dare you talk about my age, you old reprobate?” she shrieked. “I’m not the one sleeping with a student.”

“Selene’s not a student,” he said before thinking. He would have bitten his thumb off and swallowed it whole if by doing so he could take that awful admission back.

“What? What did you say?” Carole’s shock was palpable, no matter the distance between them.

Beck felt cold suddenly, and with good reason.

“Are you saying she’s quit school entirely?” Carole yelled. “I’m getting on the next plane, Beck. When I get home, I will deal with you!”

“For Pete’s sake,” he said, unconsciously using Selene’s favorite expression when she was exasperated. “Stop overreacting. Selene’s not a baby. And I can’t help how I feel about her. Will you give me a chance to straighten this out myself before you come charging in? What good is it going to do any of us if you come home to murder me and don’t complete your own courses this summer?”

Carole was silent a moment. Then she sighed. “You’re right. She’s an adult, no matter how protective I feel about her. But you better do the right thing, Beck. She’s endured enough.”

“The only question, Carole, old girl,” he said before hanging up, “is what is the right thing where Selene is concerned? When I find out, I’ll let you know, okay?”

He disconnected. He returned to his seat at the table and his newspaper, his hands unsteady, his mind barely on what he was reading. But something besides the lashing he’d just taken from Carole kept nagging at him, and he stayed with the columns of ads until he found what he’d been looking at before his cousin’s call.

“Shit!” The exclamation was torn from a man overwhelmed. The classified ad he stared at bore Selene’s address. He was sure of it. Selling her furniture? Her books, her clothes? Her house plants? He shook his head. As if he needed more questions about Selene at this point, the obvious one begged an answer. What the *hell* was Selene Pertunda up to now?

## Chapter Eleven

The sun almost straight overhead, its heat beat down on Selene, burning her scalp and her shoulders. She’d greeted the cloudless sky happily for the sake of her yard sale, but she was hot and tired and about ready to call it quits and pack the leftovers in her car for donation to the local thrift store.

“How’d we do?” Sarah asked lazily, leaning back in a lawn chair and tilting her face toward the welcome sun.

“Very well,” Selene said. “I’ve got almost four hundred dollars here. And a lot less junk in my apartment. We sold all the furniture and plants, and most of the clothes.”

“I could have sold the chair I’m sitting in, but Eddie would have been mad since it belongs to him,” Sarah said with a smirk.

“Thanks for helping me out today, Sarah,” Selene said. She reached into the box that held the crumpled bills she’d taken in all morning, extracting two twenties and holding them out toward her friend.

“Forget it. I don’t want your money. It was fun.” Sarah waved away the offer. Then she shaded her eyes to watch the street. “Hey,” she said slowly, “don’t I recognize that car? Isn’t that your professor man pulling in?”

Selene looked up quickly, her heart skipping at the sight of the gray SUV as it never had when Carole drove it.

“Well, I should be going,” Sarah said uncertainly, but she hung around, obviously eager for her first close-up glimpse of Selene’s mystery man.

“Stay and meet him. I know you want to,” Selene said, not sure how her first meeting with Beck in many days was going to go. She couldn’t read his expression behind the sun’s glare on the SUV’s windshield, but he didn’t have a happy demeanor. She wanted Sarah to stay. Beck was way too polite to fight with her in front of Sarah.

He got out of the vehicle slowly, and she could read the appreciation in Sarah's eyes as she took in the long legs. By the time he stood like an Adonis, reaching his full height, with wide shoulders and tapered waist and the sun glinting off his thick black hair, Sarah was grinning.

"Wow, Selene. He's gorgeous," Sarah said in an awed whisper.

"I know," Selene answered icily. She couldn't believe she felt jealous of her best friend, but she did. She hoped her tone warned Sarah to keep a respectful distance.

Beck walked forward, a tentative smile warring with a slight frown on his lean face as he looked from Selene to Sarah. Selene performed introductions, wanting all the while to reach out and slap Sarah's slack jaw shut.

Beck smiled down into Sarah's upturned freckled face, holding on to her hand. "So you're Sarah," he said, easily turning on the charm Selene knew so well. Sarah glowed like a Botticelli painting, strawberry curls tumbling around her beaming face. "I've heard so much about you. I'm pleased to make your acquaintance."

If Sarah had been butter, she would have melted all over the sidewalk. As it was, it seemed Beck was preventing her from swooning only by continuing to hold her hand.

Disgusted and bristling, Selene said firmly, "Sarah was just leaving. Weren't you, Sarah." When her friend merely continued to gaze dreamily up into Beck's warm caramel eyes, Selene took Sarah's arm, prying her loose from Beck and forcibly turning her in the direction of her own apartment.

He watched her go, a pleased smile of inflated male ego on his face while Selene snatched up a carton of unsold paperbacks and stomped toward her car.

"Hey," Beck said, tearing himself away from the sight of Sarah's exaggeratedly swaying buttocks, "Selene, let me help you with that."

He held the cardboard box while Selene dug in her pocket for the keys to open the trunk. "I can't believe you didn't ask me before," he said mildly as she jabbed the key in the lock and swung the trunk open. "Your ad said furniture. Did you move it all yourself rather than ask me to help you?"

"Sarah and Eddie helped me," she muttered. "You're way too busy to bother with a yard sale."

"I'm not that busy," he said in a wounded tone as he placed the carton in the trunk. "I've tried to tell you how much you've helped me, that you put us ahead of schedule. I could have returned the favor."

He straightened to face her. She could feel his probing gaze, but she avoided it. She started back for another load. He swung strong arms out to capture her and prevent her from escaping. "Selene," he said, tilting her chin up in an effort to force her to look at him, "why didn't you tell me you needed money? I don't have my grant funds yet, but I could have paid you at any time. It hurts me to see you selling your things when you could have mentioned that I needed to pay you."

"That's not the only reason I had the sale," she mumbled, refusing to meet his eyes.

"Oh?" Beck waited.

Would she tell him the rest of her reasons? That she had expected to be leaving for Boston soon and wouldn't be needing her furniture? That she had expected him to ask her to marry him? Would she give him the opening he needed in order to ask her to marry him?

"I decided to get rid of some things before I return to classes in the fall," she said, finally meeting his eyes defiantly as he continued to say nothing about a shared future. "I can use the money, since I lost my scholarship this summer because of my grades. I'm tripping over the past in there," she nodded toward her apartment, "and I need to go forward now."

"You've decided to return to classes in the fall?"

"Yes." She tilted her chin up. Her ivory cheeks and forehead were pink with sunburn, he noticed.

“At Western, in Hawk Point?” He felt lost, all his righteous anger collapsing like a punctured balloon. She’d been making plans, all right, but they didn’t include him. Somewhere in the time between the phone conversation with Carole and the drive over here, his vague intention to ask her to marry him had hardened into resolve. Now she nodded in answer to his question about resuming her studies right here, and he felt his world tilt under his feet.

“I see.” He dropped his hands from her arms. He had no right to detain her now. He had no right to touch her. She’d effectively cut him out of her life. A small glitch in her software, that’s all he’d been. Now she’d fixed the problem, and was ready to return to work writing her own life. Carole would be so proud.

He pasted a sick smile on his face. “Well, by all means let me help you,” he said, striding forward to seize armloads of clothes and fling them in the trunk. He couldn’t let her see how bereft he felt. His eyes stung and he was afraid real tears would fall. Selene had made her decision.

He had to be man enough now to help her implement it.

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Selene read shock and then something else in Beck’s face as she revealed what she’d decided to do after he left. Was it pain she saw there?

But if she’d caused him pain, why? What had she said that hurt him? Why didn’t he *say* something?

He obviously had no intention of deflecting her plans by asking her to go with him when he left. So if she arranged to get back to her studies as soon as possible, what difference did it make to him?

She had thought that just once during the endless week away from him, he would have called her. *If he cared*, she thought, *he would have called*. He didn’t call. He didn’t care. End of story.

But the way he picked up her discarded clothes and slung them in the car made her question her assumptions. Could she be wrong? Did he care after all?

It was enough to make her crazy. Just when she had her plans set again, he came along and upset them just by his mere presence. Damn him. What right did he have to be angry with her? She wished he’d go back to Boston right now so she could be done with the whole affair. Once he got on that flight, she’d never think of Beck McNeal again in her entire life.

She wondered if Sarah were watching from behind the drapes in her apartment. They must make a pretty funny sight, she and Beck marching past each other, refusing to speak to each other, arms mounded with clothes they flung into the car.

At last they had the trunk and the back seat loaded. She shut the doors. Beck stood looking at her, an unreadable expression on his face.

“Are we done, then?” he asked. It sounded to Selene as if he were asking more than if they’d finished loading her car.

Were they done, the two of them? Finished? “That’s the last of it,” she said, wiping her hands nervously on her jeans. “Sarah can come down and get her lawn chairs later. Thank you.”

“You’re most welcome, Selene,” he said distantly.

He waited, hands in his pockets. She hated his reserve, his refusal to come right out and say what he was thinking. What more did he want of her?

“I have another interview tomorrow afternoon,” he finally said. “I’d appreciate it if you’d go with me. It’s another of the older ladies, and they seem to take to you right away.”

Oh, well...of course. *The project*. That’s why he’d been standing there like a big dope. Not because he missed her or wanted her. Or even needed her, except where the all-important oral history project was concerned.



“What time,” she asked through gritted teeth.

“If you’d rather not....”

“It’s okay.” She had agreed to work for him, she would see it through, no matter how it hurt. “Just tell me what time.”

“About one.” Damn it, he didn’t have to appear so relieved that she would still agree to help him. “I’ll pick you up.”

“Fine,” she said, starting to turn away to get in her car.

“Selene.” He seized her arm, halting her as she swung the car door open. “I’m sorry.” He halted, stared at his fingers indenting the flesh of her upper arm, then dropped his hand. “I’m sorry,” he repeated, looking agitatedly into her eyes as if he could find answers there.

“For what, Beck?” She stared into those melted caramel eyes, beginning to be hypnotized all over again. If he kissed her now, at this moment, she would be lost again. She knew it as well as she knew she was alive when she was with him, the breath singing in her lungs, her heart beating madly in her chest, blood charging through her veins in as if in torrents.

“For...everything. For not being the man you expected me to be. For disrupting your life.” He looked so sincere, she wanted to smack him.

So he was sorry about it all, was he? Wasn’t that just peachy. Did he feel she’d disrupted his orderly life too? He was probably sorry he’d ever met her.

“Beck,” she said almost in a whisper, “why don’t you find someone else to help you finish the project? You said we were ahead of schedule—can you get someone else to type?”

“Is that what you want, Selene?” An odd expression crossed his face, something akin to panic. The lines next to his mouth deepened with strain and whites showed around his eyes.

“It’s not necessarily what I want,” she admitted. “But it might be best. Just cut it off now. Why wait another month?” She tried to smile, but felt it fail miserably before it got anywhere near her lips.

“I can’t.” He reached for her, halted with his arms in midair. “I can’t let you go yet, Selene.” He beckoned. All she had to do was walk into his arms. One step. He’d reach for her, and she would be there. Home, clasped tight against his chest.

He couldn’t let her go—yet. Could she let him go? Now, or a month from now?

She felt tears spring up and begin to trail down her cheeks.

Beck took the step she hadn’t, and raised a finger to wipe her tears. “I’ve made you cry again. I hate it when that happens,” he said, enfolding her in his strong arms.

He held her, rocked her. “What are we going to do, Selene?” he said in a voice full of sorrow. “Tell me, love. I’m so confused. What are we going to do?”

She trembled in his arms. Her eyes took in the buttes surrounding the town nestled in the valley cut by the Rocky Creek, the outcroppings towering above layers of ancient sediment. She loved this spare country, its daily struggle for survival rewarded when the infrequent rains fell, the vegetation so different from the water-loving ferns and horsetails revealed in the rock record of a more ancient world.

So much was buried between herself and Beck too, under layers of distrust created in former marriages. Could she come right out and say, *Marry me*? Could she promise, *I’ll give it all up for you, this corner of Wyoming that I love, even my studies, just to be with you*?

She couldn’t make herself say the words. He made no promises, spoke no words of the future. They had no bedrock of trust to build on, only the rapid passing of one short summer of nourishing rain to see them through the drought years ahead.

She had so little time left. Barely three weeks with him and then he would be gone. Could she accept that and live with the memories through the winter? Accept him for what he gave now, and regret nothing when the cold came and she slept alone once again?

She burrowed snugly into his chest for a moment, clutching to him, before forcing herself to pull away.

“We’ll live for the moment,” she said bravely, her lips quivering. “No regrets. No more tears, I promise.”

He held her a moment longer, his palms warm on her upper arms as he gazed down into her eyes. “Is that what you want, Selene?”

“It’s what I’ll take,” she said.

He cocked his head, eyes still searching her face. Emotion flitted across his own face, puzzlement, brief dismay as she stood firm, then resignation. He rubbed her upper arms briskly before dropping his hands and gesturing toward the car. “Well,” he said in a hearty tone she might have believed if she didn’t know him better, “let me help you with this stuff. Some of it’s pretty heavy.”

“That’s not necessary, Beck. I can manage.” She had better learn to manage on her own again, she thought drearily.

“But I want to,” he insisted.

“Oh, okay.” She gave in, holding out her car keys to him. She sat next to him on the drive to the thrift shop, just drinking in his nearness, storing up memories against the day he would vanish from her life.

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Beck couldn’t get over the change in Selene. She wasn’t distant...exactly. Nor cold...exactly. He didn’t know how to describe her behavior. She acquiesced to his every suggestion. They had dinner together after dropping her stuff off at the church-run thrift store, and then at his suggestion they went to Carole’s house for an evening of rented movies. She cuddled willingly with him through the films, and then followed him up the stairs when he turned off the TV. Without a word she discarded her clothes and climbed into bed.

But once between the sheets, she was like a wild thing, all arms and legs and heated lips. Hours passed in pure sensation, until there was nothing left in the world but the feel and taste and smell of Selene. She worked over him in the darkness, hair brushing his chest, his stomach, hands now whisper soft on his skin, now rough with unrestrained ardor. He had the sensation of drowning, lungs unable to fill despite the deep, ragged breaths he forced into them. She brought him to the edge again and again, lips and teeth drawing fevered response, until he cried out in the darkness, “Selene, what are you doing to me?”

She didn’t answer, mouth busy at its task of driving him to quivering madness. At last she granted him the release he desperately craved, staying determinedly with him, his hands tangled in her hair, while his hips bucked and heaved.

Absolutely drained, he lay helpless, panting, while she straightened and then knelt motionless between his thighs, waiting. It was scary, in a way, the manner in which she remained absolutely still, waiting for him to recover. He had a strong suspicion that if he turned on the light, he would see someone besides Selene behind her eyes. Not instead of, but in addition to. He had no idea what she was feeling. Triumph? Defeat? As alone as he—though their thighs were sealed flesh to flesh with the sticky sweat of their mating?

When he could force himself to move he raised his arms to her. She came to him without protest, her whole length laid out atop his body. He held her, the questions he longed to ask stifled by her slight weight.

He fell asleep like that, his hands stroking her back, the indentation of her spine, the rise of her buttocks, his manhood completely sapped of any inclination toward further action.

The next morning Selene slept in. Beck, stiff in the joints and still puzzled by her behavior, let her sleep.

He descended the stairs and pattered around the kitchen, naked, enjoying the hedonistic feel of the cool morning air on his bare skin. His penis flopped against his leg, and he bent to

examine it briefly, wondering if it would ever in his lifetime be capable of withstanding another round of Selene's not-so-tender ministrations.

He stood in a patch of morning sun, letting it warm his lower body, while he thought about the previous night. Selene had been intent on showing him something, but he wasn't certain what. That she could drive him to distraction with sex? He would grant her that. That she could give him such pain/pleasure and then allow him to leave without a backward glance?

Had those brief hours of exquisite punishment been her way of saying, *You will never forget me. You will miss me when you go.*

She was right about that. He would miss her.

But no regrets, she said. No tears.

So be it, Beck thought as the pipes in the old house rattled to life and the shower came on in the overhead bathroom. If their last days together were to be spent in a bittersweet gathering of sun-warmed memories to hold him through the long cold winter, he guessed he could go along with that.

It wasn't what she wanted, she said. It was what she would take. Just what did that mean?

Perhaps she was just more realistic than he, less the bookish dreamer. Maybe she saw things more clearly than he did, and realized they had no future together.

If so, she was being quite adult about the whole thing. He had to admire her grit. He would do well to emulate her. He'd give it his best shot, anyway.

He climbed the stairs again and slowly opened the bathroom door. Behind the shower curtain, Selene raised her arms to suds her hair, unaware that he watched her. He pulled the curtain aside. The slide of plastic rings couldn't be heard over the steady splash of water, he had her eyes closed, and still didn't realize he was there until he touched her.

She jumped when he cupped his hand over the slight roundness of her belly, the tip of his index finger inserted in her navel. She ducked under the spray, trying to clear the shampoo from her eyes. He watched the water sluice between her breasts and down her belly to stream from the dark patch between her legs. His cock leapt to life, despite his previous doubts about its ability to ever again rise again from the dead.

When she pulled her head from the water, swiping her hair from her incredible green-flecked eyes to stare accusingly at him, he said, "Mind if I join you?"

She lowered her eyes to the evidence of his desire. Then she raised hooded jade-dappled eyes to look into his. "Come on in, Beck," she said, all the meaning in the world in her throaty invitation.

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Selene wondered how long she could keep up the pretense that she didn't care whether Beck left her or not. Only two days, and already the pressure of having him near and not begging him to stay with her forever grated on her nerves. They'd eaten a leisurely brunch after making love in the shower, and then she'd taken her leave to go home and change clothes before that afternoon's interview.

In truth, she needed a break from Beck's presence, his availability any time she wanted to touch him, kiss him, reach out and possess once more his splendid body. What she'd done the night before flustered and thrilled her at the same time. She had never taken a man in her mouth before, not in all the years of her relationship with Robert. In that area, she was a virgin—and in order to prove to Beck that she would do anything in bed to hold him, she'd gone a bit overboard, making him beg for deliverance.

Oh, well, he hadn't seemed to mind. His tender endeavors in the shower proved he still wanted her, even if she had manipulated him past all control.

But that had been the idea, hadn't it? To give him a tiny taste of what it felt like to lose command of one's senses to someone who barely cared. She'd been trying to prove she could take it or leave it, and wondered how successful she'd been. All it took was a tender touch from him under the shower water and she turned to jelly inside. She'd climaxed fast and hard. He had to hold her up to keep her legs from sliding nervelessly out from under her and her head from hitting on the edge of the clawfoot tub. He took his own sweet time playing with her, tit for tat, drawing out his own pleasure while he gazed deliberately into her eyes. With one hand on her buttocks, he used the other to assist him as he slowly rode her into a second frenzy, when he finally reached the peak himself. Then they'd gone back to bed.

She had to get away, at least for a little while, before she found herself begging him to take her with him when he left.

But what was she going to do without him? How would she live when he left? She felt barely half alive without him.

She dressed with care, makeup and outfit perfect. Her hair gleamed, her cotton shirtwaist dress crisply ironed. She looked competent, professional, in control. She laughed silently, mirthlessly. In reality, she'd never in her life felt so out of control. Beck McNeal had taken over every aspect of her life. With Robert she'd found little ways to fight back, to show him that he never had absolute control over her. With Beck, she felt helpless to even try to fight. Anything he wanted was okay with her.

He picked her up a little after one, and they rode to Hawk Point in companionable silence, the radio turned up and the windows rolled down. Beck yawned, and she grinned. "Tired, are you?" she asked.

He gazed at her for a moment since there was no traffic around them, and she could almost read his thoughts as his eyebrows rose.

"How about you? Care for a little nap later?" he rejoined, challenge in his voice. *I can take more if you can*, he seemed to say with his debauched grin.

What did it say about them, she wondered, that they both knew he had less than three weeks left here and they couldn't keep their thoughts—let alone hands—away from each other?

She tried to regain some semblance of normalcy as he pulled up in front of a ranch style house. An extremely attractive woman in her early sixties answered the door. Gray shot her jet black hair at both temples, and her skin glowed.

Not at all what she'd expected, Selene glanced in consternation at Beck. He'd led her to believe the woman they were going to interview was elderly.

"Change of plans," he said smoothly. "I wanted you to meet Caterina. Mrs. Rosselli, my associate, Selene Pertunda."

Caterina Rosselli gave Selene a quick look before ducking her head shyly. Her smile revealed a gap between her front teeth, but somehow it added to her charm rather than detracting from it. "Come in, come in." She gestured for them to come inside, noticed she still had flour on her hand and wiped it on the apron she wore at her waist. "You lucky. Today I bake. You just in time."

"We're not interrupting?" Selene glanced accusingly at Beck. It looked as if he'd barely given the woman notice before they descended on her.

"No, no. Come in," she insisted, smiling. She led them toward her fragrant kitchen, unfamiliar sweet smells wafting out to meet them. "No church today. The priest is out of town. So I bake."

"Sit," she invited, still smiling. She removed the apron to reveal a slim form in dark slacks and blouse. "You want coffee? Is strong—like espresso. Is good. You have some."

She carefully poured three cups of thick black coffee, and set a plate of flaky dessert and a fork in front of each of them. "Try," she said shyly, while Selene tried to decide whether her ready smile or her warm welcome for unexpected guests was more attractive.

Selene took a bite, her teeth sinking into scrumptious sweetness. She closed her eyes and swallowed, savoring the unfamiliar blend of tastes. “What is it?”

“You like?”

Selene nodded, looking toward Beck, who signaled his agreement.

“Is cannoli. Made with ricotta. You take some home.” She shot up from the table and wrapped two more of the scrumptious desserts in wax paper.

She set them on the table while Selene grinned helplessly, patting her waistline. “It’s so rich.”

“Americans, always on a diet,” Caterina said dismissively, waving Selene’s protest away. “Cannoli is an old treat, good for the love life, you know.”

“I beg your pardon?” Selene almost choked. Everywhere she went, she kept running into references to the creed of the Goddess.

“Oh, sí.” The beautiful woman continued. “In Sicilian, cannoli is little tube.” She blushed. “But I make the regular size. I don’t make the *cannulicchi*, the *little* little tube.”

“We just ate a fertility symbol,” Beck teased Selene. “Wonder what that means.”

Selene slanted him a look. It had better not mean anything.

When they finished and Caterina cleared the table, Beck brought out the recorder. Caterina suddenly fell silent, dark eyes big in her white face.

“It’s okay,” Beck said while Selene looked from one to the other. “You don’t have to talk about anything you don’t want to.”

She nodded, hands clutched together on the piece of clear plastic that covered a fine lace tablecloth.

“You were born in Italy?” Beck began.

Selene sat back while Caterina nodded. “In the Tyrol,” she said. “Where they have the Winter Olympics.”

“Sure, in the mountains between Italy and Austria. You lived there with your parents?”

“Mother and father. Two brothers. One sister.”

“What did you do there?”

“Farm,” Caterina said. “Hard work, all day. But not like here. Here is harder.”

“You have a job here?”

Caterina nodded. “I wash dishes in restaurant. My English is not so good, and I need money. The work is not so hard, but different than the old country. Faster, always faster. Harder. I don’t know how to explain.”

“More stressful?” Selene offered. “You’re talking about the pace of the work?”

“Yes,” Caterina smiled gratefully across the table at her. “Stressful. We didn’t move so fast on the farm.”

“Why did you come to America?” Beck asked.

“My husband come to get me. He give my father money—dowry—say he want to marry me.”

The familiar story, Selene thought. The man came to America to make money to get a wife.

“He left the Tyrol poor?”

“Poor, yes,” Caterina agreed. “But he have his eye on me before he go to America.” She smiled shyly again, and Selene could well imagine the beauty she must have been as a teenager. “When he get the money, he come back for me.”

“This was in the late fifties?” Beck asked. “You were born after World War II.”

“Yes. I come to New York harbor 16 April, 1963. A new bride. Is all new to me.”

“What happened then?” Beck prompted.

“We come to the coal mine where he work. Lot of different people there, Tyrolean, Italian, Slav, Poles. But the railroad going to diesel, they don’t need so much coal. The mines starting to shut down, no work for the men. Then...my husband get hurt and can’t work at all.” Her eyes

clouded with pain. "We don't know what to do. He have small pension, but not much. We have two *popi*, and I ready to have another." She paused a moment, struggling for composure. "I lose that baby."

"I'm sorry," Beck said gently.

"Is a long time ago," Caterina said as if to convince herself. "We move to Hawk Point, open the store, the work is hard. He can't work hard, he's hurt. So I work. At night, I fall into bed tired."

"You had a grocery store," Beck said.

"Foreign foods market," Caterina agreed. "Things you don't find in supermarket. Polenta flour, *Krauti*, *luganega*, *cotegin*."

"And those are?"

"Oh, *scusi*. Sauerkraut, and sausages."

You served the Italian community?"

"Oh, and the rest," Caterina said airily. "The old people who live in the neighborhood, the women don't drive. Not only the Tyroleans. They need a place to charge till the end of the month. The young ones, with no money and babies to feed. The big supermarket don't carry you till the check comes in. They don't care if you starve." She laughed.

"You didn't have more children?"

Caterina flinched.

"You don't have to answer anything you don't want to," Beck said.

"My husband, he don't...he can't," she whispered. "He was hurt. We don't have no more children," she finished.

*But you stayed with him in that bed*, Selene thought. *You didn't give up, get divorced, go home to Europe*. She wondered why Beck had arranged for her to hear Caterina's story, what he was trying to tell her.

"You had the market for how long?" Beck asked.

"Twenty years," Caterina said proudly. "It was a pretty good business. But then come the supermarket and the convenience store. The kids, they're American, they don't cook *canederli*. They don't cook nothing. Everything frozen and heated up in the microwave. No more customers for the neighborhood store."

"You were alone by this time," Beck said quietly.

"Yes. My husband, he die when we had the store about ten years." She paused, held her head in her hands for a moment.

"Stop," Selene ordered, eyes blazing toward Beck. What, exactly, was his purpose in dredging up this woman's pain? "Turn the machine off and stop this right now."

"No, is all right," Caterina said, raising her head and smiling gently. "I want to tell the rest. I promised Fortunata."

"And what is the rest?" Beck asked quietly.

"He die, and leave me alone with two kids," she said, voice catching. "It was hard. Life was hard."

"Why didn't you go back to Italy?"

Caterina smiled. "My kids are American. They both go to college. They got good jobs."

"And how was that, raising American kids?"

She laughed. "Hard."

"So you stayed for them?"

She nodded.

Beck leaned forward. "Why?"

"Because I love them," she answered simply. "I love my husband. You tell me. What else is there?"

“Besides love?” Beck looked meaningfully at Selene, and her heart skipped. Then he returned his gaze to Caterina.

“Besides love,” she agreed, looking curiously from Beck to Selene. She raised long-fingered hands. “If you finish your life and nobody love you, what was it all for?”

Beck let the question hang, ending the interview by turning off the recorder. He sat for a moment, beaming approval at Caterina while Selene’s eyes swam.

The question, she knew, would haunt her forever. *If nobody loves you, what’s it all for?* Damn Beck McNeal for everything he was and everything he dredged up in her!

## Chapter Twelve

Beck drove back to Rocky Creek, Selene quiet and pensive beside him.

Trying to draw her out, he asked, “Did you like Caterina?”

“Of course.” Selene glanced at him. “She’s got that old world demeanor, an innocence I guess, that makes her all the more beautiful. But you led me to believe we were interviewing someone much older, a woman in her eighties or nineties like the others we’ve talked to so far. She looks maybe seventy.”

“I especially wanted you to meet Caterina,” he said.

“Why?”

*Don’t close up on me, Selene*, he wanted to say. But he was afraid she’d do exactly that if he pushed her.

He’d wanted her to meet Caterina to hear what the woman had to say about love. He wanted Selene to see that love endured despite the obstacles, so long as both people in a relationship remained committed. He wanted her to see that—sometimes—love lasted forever.

“She was recommended to me. By Mrs. Carotta, in fact. I thought if you were really interested in doing a project on female immigrants, I just would introduce you to one who seemed to fit your theme,” he said instead.

“You mean you wanted me to see that modern women aren’t the first to have to do it all? Work outside the home, and raise the children, and be a model wife all at the same time? You wanted me to see how it’s done?”

“In a way,” Beck admitted. Her shrill tone warned him she wasn’t understanding his motives at all.

“Why?”

She fairly bristled with suspicion. Beck wasn’t sure what to say that wouldn’t set her teeth on edge. “It seems to be the topic we’ve been circling all summer. Caterina did it all without any of our modern support systems for working mothers, like day care.”

“And without the resentment that some modern women feel.” Selene crossed her arms defensively across her chest.

“Exactly.” Beck dared to hope she understood.

“You’re making me feel inadequate, Beck.”

“Now, wait a minute. That wasn’t my purpose at all,” he protested.

“Well, let’s take a look at the comparison,” she said, tilting her stubborn little chin. “Are you saying I should have stayed with Robert no matter what?”

“No! You’re putting words in my mouth. I’m not judging you. I would never suggest you stay with an abuser.”

“I think I want to hear exactly what you do mean, Beck.”

“She did it with love! That’s what makes all the difference. Don’t you see? Caterina loved her husband. She followed him to a country where she didn’t even speak the language, and when he couldn’t work anymore, she supported him and their children.”

Her green-speckled eyes blazed. “So if only I’d loved Robert enough, I would have stayed no matter how bad things got.”

Frustrated, Beck fairly shouted, “I’m not talking about you and Robert!”

Frozen for an instant, her mouth a perfect *O*, Selene sat stunned. She struggled for composure, trying to hide the instant hurt that contorted her face. Then she said quietly, “So you’re talking about you and Annie?”

“In a way,” he admitted. “I’m talking generalities. Modern marriages *in general*, their failure, and the reasons they fail.”

“Because women don’t love enough. Or give enough. Or they give up too soon. Or...what? What, Beck?”

This wasn’t at all what he’d expected to result from the interview with Caterina. Was Selene being deliberately obtuse?

“All of those. And understand me, Selene, I think they apply equally well to men. We take too much, and don’t give enough. People don’t love enough, or trust enough. And it’s not just women. A marriage vow is a contract that both parties have to live up to, not just the wife.”

“You would expect a lot of a wife the next time around, wouldn’t you, Beck?” she asked quietly.

He couldn’t read the exact meaning of the look in her narrowed eyes. But she’d asked, so he might as well tell her. “I would expect it all,” he said intently. “All her love, all her trust, all her affection. I want it all next time, Selene. No half measures.”

She stiffened. “So a career for her, this perfect wife, is out of the question?”

“I didn’t say that. “ He deliberately modulated his voice even though he felt like shaking her. “A career would just have to come second to me. Call me a chauvinist if you want, if you even know what the word means. You’re a lot younger than I am.”

His lame excuse for a joke fell on deaf ears. “I would expect her to want the same from me,” he added. But Selene’s eyes had gone distant, thoughtful. She wasn’t listening. If he hadn’t been driving, he would have forced her to look at him.

As it was, the exit for Rocky Creek loomed and he slowed to take it. “Almost home,” he said conversationally, hoping to draw her back from wherever she’d gone. “What would you like to do for the rest of the afternoon? Would you like to get something to eat?”

“I’m not hungry, thanks.” The look in her jade-flecked eyes chilled him. He had never in the world imagined that the interview with Caterina would drive Selene away from him, but that sure seemed to be its result.

Her next words were so casual, it took him a moment of negotiating the curves of the exit before he grasped their meaning. His reaction was instantaneous. He almost wrecked the SUV.

“You promised me a *nap*,” she purred.

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Selene repressed a smirk at Beck’s difficulty exiting the vehicle when they reached Carole’s house. Even if she had no other hold on him, the mere hint of sex had him in dire straits in seconds.

Their conversation on the way back from Hawk Point only confirmed her earlier estimation that he had no intention of marrying her. She had been right. He wanted a stay at home wife with no other interest outside of him. He encouraged her pursuit of oral history precisely because he had no long term interest in her. She was his summer fling. His sexy little Selene.

She had tried all summer to tell him with her body that she loved him. In the end all she’d proved was that they had nothing in common, outside of bed. And what else had she expected from a man like him? She could never live up to his lofty expectations.



Well, she would show him that she was the best sex he'd ever have. If that was the only way he remembered her, she vowed that he *would remember her*.

He had difficulty getting the key in the front lock. Selene stood behind him patiently, only taking the lead when he succeeded in getting the door shut behind them.

She kicked off her shoes, and he followed suit. She flung her belt away, and he did the same. She reached for the first button of her shirtwaist, gazing into his eyes as she tantalizingly worked each tiny buttonhole.

Beck peeled his shirt off, hurriedly stepping out of his slacks. He hopped comically on one foot to pull his socks off. His shorts followed the rest of his discarded clothing in the pile on the floor.

Then he stood, erect cock bobbing, while Selene reached by infinitesimal inches for the front clasp of her demi bra. Once it was undone, her breasts sprang free. Beck reached for them, cupping them savagely and drawing her closer. His mouth descended in a plundering kiss, his pelvis grinding into hers. His hands descended to her ass to lift her up, and a savage growl escaped his throat at the discovery of the forgotten scrap of satin. He ripped the panties from her body, hoisting her up and onto his staff in one brutal motion.

And then he was walking with her, carrying her up the stairs and making wild love to her at the same time. His mouth claimed her ears, her neck, her shoulders. He whimpered, snarled, the sounds escaping him matching his fierce lovemaking. They collapsed on the bed in a tangle of limbs, biting, scratching, nails digging into tender flesh. Her heels beat a mad rhythm on his ass, and she chanted his name as she surrendered again and again to primitive waves of pleasure.

But what she'd intended to show Beck, he showed her instead. His movements slowed, gentled, as he began an excruciating exploration of just how high he could make her go. She climbed heights unimaginable as he nibbled her earlobe, lapped her neck, suckled her breasts. His tender ministrations, in comparison to their previous tumultuous lovemaking, caused the central white hot core he'd built to burgeon into wave after wave of sweltering heat flowing through her limbs. Conquered, drained of will, she stared into his eyes and surrendered completely.

The muscles of Beck's back tensed as he gazed into her eyes while holding his body motionless. Then he closed his own eyes and a long, trembling shudder shook his entire frame. He opened his incredible eyes again, gathered her to him, so tenderly now, kissing her eyelids, her cheeks, her lips, all so softly, while he poured his seed into her.

He held her long afterward, whispering, exclaiming quietly, apologetically, over each tiny bruise, each scratch he'd left on her body.

*How I wish you loved me like I love you*, Selene thought as he carefully examined every square inch of her and kissed away the sting of his fiery loving. *How I wish we could go on together forever*.

She was sitting on the edge of the bed, his arms around her trying to convince her not to leave him, not even to cross the hall to the bathroom, when the afterthought hit her. *Oh, God*. She sat stunned at what they had done in their overpowering passion.

She gazed disconsolately at the long afternoon rays of the sun throwing mellow pink light on the walls. She felt sick.

"Selene," Beck whispered when she failed to respond to his fingertips dancing up her spine, "what's wrong?"

She turned to him, and he placed both hands on her hips, raising his head to rest it on her thigh. She resisted the urge to run her hands through his magnificent black hair.

"Do you know what we've forgotten, not once but twice, today?" she asked in a trembling voice.

He smiled up at her. "What?"

“Beck. We’re not children. We’re adults—and we didn’t even think of it. Twice.” She was horrified.

Dawning realization widened his eyes. “I just assumed—you’re not on any other form of birth control?” he asked in a hushed voice.

She shook her head. “I had no need,” she said. “I hadn’t been seeing anyone, so I wasn’t...”

“But Selene, you’ve had all summer to do something,” he pointed out.

“And you were always prepared,” she countered angrily. “Did you come here expecting me to tumble into bed with you?”

“Of course not,” he said hotly, the lines to either side of his mouth deepening.

“Well, I’m not totally at fault,” she said, crossing her arms over her bare breasts.

He withdrew her hands immediately from blocking his view. “Of course. You’re right. We’re both equally at fault,” he said soothingly, pulling her toward him so her breasts rested against his broad chest. “It must have been those little tubes.”

She tried not to laugh. His easy sharing of guilt was one more reason to love him. He did so many things just right. But she couldn’t love him, because he didn’t love her.

She couldn’t resist the urge to run her fingers through his hair. “It’s probably all right, anyway,” she said, temporizing.

He quirked an eyebrow. “Probably?”

“Almost certainly,” she said, tugging at a lock of his hair.

He nuzzled a breast, then snuggled his nose into her navel. “You will let me know if it’s not all right?”

Why couldn’t he love her like she loved him? He was so perfect, she ached inside at the thought of losing him. But she would not, could not in good conscience, use the old pregnancy trap to get him to marry her.

If she were pregnant, he’d never know about it.

Instead of a direct answer, she bent to kiss him, and soon enough he forgot all about an answer to his question.

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Fortunata racked her brain, trying to come up with a spell that would peel the cobwebs from the eyes of two stubborn lovers and show them the way to their intermingled happiness. At last, after much consultation of her written works, some quite old and valuable, and even a session perusing the Internet, she settled on a little used spell called *For Friends’ Interference*. A particularly apt spell, she thought with a wry twist of her lips. And little used because it often caused more mischief than rendering aid. She herself had already interfered so much, it was entirely possible Selene Pertunda and her man friend were now reacting out of a rebellion against a persistent irritation that remained hidden from them, smoke in the impenetrable mists of the spirits that they could feel but not explain.

Sighing, Fortunata gathered the necessary herbs. Her motivation was pure: love. Love was always worth the risk. And so even if things did not work out to her mortal design, she was fairly certain the Goddess would be amused...and not angry.

And that nothing tragic would come of her intrusion into the plans of such an older, higher power.

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That week passed, and then the next. Selene waited, but her period didn’t start.

There were mere days left before Beck’s departure. She had to talk to someone. So she called on Sarah.

Selene nervously rubbed the rigid ball of her uterus through the wall of her lower belly. Sarah watched in concern, although they both admitted nothing looked different about the fit of Selene's sweatpants.

"Not yet, anyway," Sarah said. "Have you tried a home pregnancy test?"

"That was my next move," Selene admitted. "I've just been putting it off, hoping against hope...."

"But you're not wrong," Sarah said knowingly. "So when was your last period?"

Selene raised a hand to rub at her temples. "I don't remember," she said slowly. "Early June, I think. Right before I met Beck."

"So it's been all summer?"

Selene nodded dejectedly.

"I think you're more pregnant than you think you are," Sarah said, nodding wisely.

"But he used protection," Selene protested.

"So?" Sarah raised an eyebrow. "You know the failure rate for those things, Selene. You should have taken care of it yourself."

"Now you sound like Beck!"

Yes, she should have done something to avoid pregnancy. Yes, she should have taken care of birth control herself. Yes, yes, yes! She would admit it. She'd been an idiot.

"So he knows?" Sarah leaned forward eagerly.

"Not really," Selene hedged. "I told him it would probably be all right."

Sarah rolled her eyes. "You're going to just let him walk away, aren't you? I can't believe it. You're not even going to tell him. This could be your chance, Selene. You better think about it before you burn your bridges."

"For Pete's sake! I have thought about it. I don't think about anything else. He doesn't love me, Sarah! And that's all there is to that." Selene's hands unconsciously moved to cover her belly. "What makes you think he'd want a child of mine, when he doesn't even want me?"

"Calm down," Sarah said. Then she asked, "Has he said so? That he doesn't love you?"

Selene stared at the flowered wallpaper in Sarah's living room. "Not in so many words," she said slowly. "But he never said he does love me, either."

"Have you told him you love him?"

"No!"

"Why not? Maybe he doesn't think you do. Guys aren't real bright when it comes to the romance stuff, Selene. You've got to tell them what you're feeling. They're not good guessers. You're playing things a little too close to your chest."

"I can't tell him unless he tells me first," Selene said stubbornly, even though she knew how stupid and childish *that* sounded.

Sarah rubbed her nose thoughtfully. "I wonder..." she said slowly, "would he trick you, Selene? Try to get you pregnant on purpose?"

Would Beck do such a thing? She thought about it. No, not at first. They'd known nothing about each other's sexual histories the first few times, and Beck had been too careful about protecting her and himself. Maybe...maybe later on, though? Had he been a little too casual when she confronted him about not using protection? "You will let me know," he had said, nuzzling her belly as if privy to some secret knowledge she didn't share.

If Sarah was right, Selene was more than a month farther along than she had thought. Would Beck deceive her like that, just to get the stay-at-home wife he wanted?

She tried to think of all the things he'd said about Annie trying to get pregnant. That it didn't matter to him one way or another. That he hadn't wanted a brood mare.

Her head spun. He said he wanted her to continue with oral histories. He said, if she heard him right on the way back from Caterina's, that it was all right with him if his next wife continued her education so long as he was foremost in her life.

Did he mean that nothing, not even a child of his own, would come between him and his next wife? He'd said so much, confused her so much, she didn't know by now what he meant.

But she knew one thing for sure. He had never, not once, not *ever*, said he loved her.

All his talk didn't change that one simple fact.

"No, I don't think he would try to force me into marriage," she finally said. "I think if he wanted to marry me, he'd come right out and say so. He's never even hinted that he might want me forever. So. I guess that means I just let him go next week."

Sarah rubbed her chin. "I think you're making a mistake, Selene," she said quietly.

"It won't be the first time, will it?" Selene asked, trying to look at the whole mess philosophically and rising to go back to her own apartment. She felt vaguely disappointed. She didn't know what she had expected Sarah to say, but it wasn't that she was supposed to run to Beck and tell him he had to marry her because she was pregnant.

Besides she didn't even know for sure that she was pregnant.

### Chapter Thirteen

Selene stared at the telltale color of the test strip. She was pregnant. There was no doubt about her condition now.

The question was how could she have let herself get in this predicament? A modern woman had all kinds of barriers to conception at her disposal. Any competent adult woman could easily prevent pregnancy.

So how had she gone all summer trusting Beck to protect her from such an eventuality? How could she have been so stupid?

Well, it only went to prove how people could fool themselves, she thought dismally. She'd thought she was so smart. She thought she could be like Carole and the other poised, confident women at the college. This whole summer had certainly proved her wrong. She was just plain old stupid Selene.

She'd flunked out of college, spent the summer in bed with a man who didn't care about her, and now, to top it all off, she found herself carrying his baby. She was worse than stupid, she was a total idiot.

Her hand shook as she flung the strip, the test bottle, the instructions, and the box it had all come in into the garbage.

She'd already registered for the fall semester. She had no medical insurance. What was she supposed to do now? Drop out again and get a job? Work as long as she could, until the baby came? Then what?

The phone rang. It was the worst possible moment for anyone to call.

Wondering why she'd answered when she was on the verge of tears, Selene tried desperately to make light conversation when she heard Carole's voice.

"I've been trying for days to reach you," Carole said cheerfully. "Had a busy summer?"

"Very busy." Selene gulped for air, feeling a sudden tightening of her chest and throat. If Carole only had a hint of how busy Selene had been.

"Are you finishing your typing?" Carole asked. "Beck should be wrapping up the project soon, right?"

*Please let's not talk about Beck*, Selene begged silently. "Uh, yes. He should be back in Boston by next Friday," she said.

"I'll have to call him, make arrangements to meet his flight," Carole said. "I wanted to ask you if you'd watch the house for me after he leaves. I still have a few weeks here, and then I'm going to Europe for a bit before coming home. If you don't mind, I'll ask Beck to drop off the key."

Selene shivered. Could she, after Beck was gone, spend time alone in that house? With the ghosts of herself and Beck romping naked, laughing, through the empty rooms?

"Okay," she whispered, unable to think of a way to turn Carole down.

"Selene..." Carole's voice changed from cheerfulness to concern. "Are you all right?"

Just how much did Carole know? What had Beck told her? Was Carole aware her cousin and her former student were sleeping together, and had been for most of the summer?

"I'm fine," Selene said, forcing false heartiness into her voice. Did Carole know or suspect she'd dropped out of school? What would Carole say if Selene dropped the bomb about carrying Beck's baby?

It was too much. Everything was such a mess. Sometimes Selene wished she'd never met Beck McNeal.

But she had met him. And, oh, so much more. And it was Carole's fault. She'd thrown them together. Didn't she realize how sexily irresistible her cousin was? She wasn't blind, after all.

"Are you registered for the fall semester?" Carole asked carefully.

So her former advisor probably did know that she hadn't gone to school as planned this summer. Selene could tell Carole knew from her cautious tone.

And of course it wasn't Carole's fault Selene had fallen into bed with Beck. Carole had trusted Selene to remain true to her goals, only introducing Beck into her life as a means of enlarging her options as a history major. It certainly wasn't Carole's fault that Selene made bad choices. Selene had a history of bad choices. She had made bad choices before she met Carole, or Beck for that matter. She'd probably go on making them for the rest of her miserable frickin' life.

"Yes, I'm all set for the fall," she lied through her teeth. If she couldn't tell Beck about the baby, she certainly couldn't reveal the truth to Carole. She could hardly extract a promise from Beck's cousin not to tell him about his looming fatherhood. Such a burden of secrecy wouldn't be fair to Carole, who trusted Selene to make rational decisions.

She wanted to cry.

"You will call me if you need anything, even if it's only long distance advice," Carole urged.

"Sure," Selene agreed in a listless tone. "I have to go now, Carole. Beck is expecting me in a few minutes. We have one more interview to do."

It was a bit too late now to seek Carole's advice, wasn't it? It was too late for anyone's advice. Selene had made her bed, so to speak, and she would have to lie in it. At least for the next eighteen years or so, until her child grew up and was ready to move out.

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A few moments later, Beck received a call.

"What's wrong with Selene?" his cousin Carole in Boston demanded without preamble.

"Well, I'm not sure what's wrong with her lately," Beck said, his hackles already rising defensively.

"She seems extremely unhappy, and she won't talk to me about it." Carole's tone was biting, all her mother hen instincts kicked into high gear because one of her chicks wasn't happy.

"I don't think either of us is exactly ecstatic about my leaving in a few days," he said.

"Ask her to come with you then. What's the big deal after all? There's nothing holding her in Wyoming."

"She's already registered at Western. She doesn't want to come with me." Beck ran a hand through his hair. Carole was sure damned nosy. Why did he feel he had to explain anything to her anyway?

"Have you asked her?" Carole persisted.

“Well, no. Not exactly. She just acts like she’s all set here.”

“Men!” Carole exhaled the word disgustedly. “Do you ever talk to her while you’re in bed with her, Beck? Or maybe before, or even afterward? How can you know what she’s thinking?”

“That’s pretty crude, Carole.” Beck frowned so fiercely it hurt between his eyes. He took off his glasses and held them by one stem. “You make it sound as though we’ve done nothing else all summer, except—” He stopped. No matter how angry she made him, he couldn’t say *fuck*, not to Carole.

The thought of returning to Boston and spending up to a month with his cousin, the shrew, gave him the shudders. Carole wouldn’t let the subject of Selene drop until she saw with her own eyes that her former student was okay.

It didn’t matter a bit that he, her own cousin, was already hurting about leaving Selene behind. Carole acted as if he’d deliberately seduced Selene, only to dump her at the end of the summer. Which absolutely was not true.

Was it?

Selene had come over in that slinky dress and thrown herself at him. She’d made herself available all summer, never once turning him down. In fact, she suggested lovemaking more often than he did. And she *never* mentioned a future with him in it.

To his way of thinking, Selene Pertunda didn’t want him around after the end of August. He stood in the way of her grand plans. So she sounded a little bit sad now. She was only sad because she was losing her readily available stud. She’d probably start looking for a younger replacement the moment she hit campus.

Damn it all to hell! He didn’t want to leave her to find somebody else.

“I think I know Selene a tad sight better than you do, cousin,” he said sarcastically. Carole wanted to bring up the fact that he hadn’t been able to resist Selene’s charms—and bring it up, and bring it up—let her know that he wasn’t about to deny their intimacy. “She wants to stay and go to school here. Case closed. I’ll see you in six days. Don’t bother calling me back because I won’t answer. Good-bye.”

He hung up, feeling more depressed than ever.

It looked to be a long, gloomy next few weeks, with Carole constantly yammering at him so that he could never forget Selene even for a moment.

As if he wanted to forget, he thought ruefully as he twisted the cord of the old wall phone in Carole’s kitchen so tightly around his finger he almost cut off the circulation.

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The days marched inexorably by. Beck and Selene finished the last dry interview, anticlimactic really, after Caterina’s much more personal account.

Selene typed doggedly, getting everything finished up before Beck’s departure. Beck went over the material in the afternoons, glasses perched on the end of his nose, using a highlighter to mark what he would use later.

And they made love, lingeringly, whenever one or the other felt the impulse. Saying their good-byes with their bodies, holding desperately to each other, sometimes tears would slide silently down Selene’s cheeks into her hair.

Why couldn’t she tell Beck how she felt about him? Was pride such a precious commodity she would watch him, the father of her unborn child, fly out of her life without a word to stop him?

Was she so easily crushed that if she asked to go with him and he said no, she would die from the rejection? She already felt that she might die when he left. Sadness, and a terribly fragile gentleness, permeated their relationship now. They spoke in hushed tones, touched each

other with tentative fingers, often catching the other gazing with unfocused eyes into the distance.

He was already gone from her, even when he lay right beside her.

He wasn't going to ask her to come with him. And she wasn't going to tell him about the tie that would bind her to him forever, even after he was long gone.

She had made an appointment and seen a doctor, and there was no doubt left now. She was carrying Beck's baby. He was going to be a father, and she couldn't even tell him about it because she was afraid it wouldn't make any difference to him.

What a godawful mess.

She sat on Carole's front porch with her face lifted to the hot afternoon sun. Beck had just finished cutting the grass, and the alfalfa-like smell lay heavy in the air. Flowers, white-faced Shasta daisies, blue flax, and bright orange poppies grew lush against the foundation of the old house. The wishing well where Carole usually planted begonias in the summer stood bare this year. She should have planted some there for Carole, Selene thought, but it was too late in the season now.

Beck came and sat beside her on the steps. He lifted a hand to run it through her hair.

"What are you thinking?" he asked.

Why was he asking that question now? Did he really want to know?

"I was wondering if my wish would be granted if I threw a penny in a fake well," she said, nodding toward the lawn decoration.

"You can always try," he said, his eyes crinkling at the corners. "What would you wish for?"

"If I tell, would it still come true?" She gazed into his honey brown eyes, looked away. She couldn't stand the pain written there. She felt almost as sorry for him as she did for herself.

But they would get over the pain. They would have to.

"I guess I'd wish to change some of the events of my life," she said at last, wistfully. "Some of the things I've done. Some of the choices I've made."

"Like the choice to begin a relationship with me?" he asked quietly.

"Maybe that," she admitted. "I'm not sure, after all is said and done, if it was a good idea, Beck."

"We were good together." He held himself stiffly beside her. She supposed she'd hurt his feelings.

"We were good together in bed," she agreed thoughtfully. She would give him that: he was a wonderful lover.

"We were good partners, too," he insisted. "The project is going to be better because of your input. You helped me immensely this summer, and I want to thank you."

"Maybe all hurtful experiences are learning experiences," she said faintly. "I learned so much from you."

He dropped an arm around her shoulder, gathered her into his embrace. "I never meant to hurt you, Selene," he whispered into her neck. "I never, ever meant to hurt you."

"I know." She hugged him goodbye and got up to go. She never said the most important words, and neither did he. She held her posture erect as she got in the car, belted herself in carefully, and drove away. She didn't look back.

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Beck called a friend of Carole's to drive him to the airport. He didn't think he had the courage to call Selene to do it, and he knew he didn't have the guts for an extended good-bye.

He wondered what, at this late date, Selene would say if he called her and begged her to come with him.

She'd think he was crazy, that's what. She'd think he'd misplaced his mind, and she would tell him to get lost. Get on the plane, go home, and get on with his life.

Because that was what she was going to do. Get on with her life. Without him.

He tried to read on the flight, but it was no use. His mind stayed stubbornly on thoughts of Selene. He removed his glasses and rubbed burning eyes. For the rest of the time on the bumpy ride, he stared sightlessly out the window. He changed planes in Denver, politely but firmly refusing offers of conversation from his seatmate, a businessman on his way to Atlanta for a conference on pest control. Of the things that least interested Beck at the moment, ants and termites probably topped the list.

Finally in Boston in late afternoon, he caught a cab to his apartment. He savored the familiar sights—so many trees! But the traffic and the press of people and cars everywhere made him nervous. He wanted to get home as fast as possible. He found himself yearning for Wyoming's uncramped spaces and wide blue sky.

Carole met him as he opened the door. Unable to make her schedule in Boston mesh with the start of school in Wyoming, she had a few weeks here yet and then would extend her sabbatical to travel a bit before going home. Her mouth curved in a smile of welcome, but her eyes betrayed her mixed emotions at seeing him arrive alone. She relieved him of his shoulder bag containing his laptop, and the carry-on that contained the pages Selene had typed.

"Good flight?" she asked noncommittally.

He was grateful she didn't jump him about Selene the second he came in the door.

"It was okay," he said. "You know how that crop duster is out of Hawk Point, every jolt amplified. I was glad to get on a real plane in Denver."

"Who drove you to the airport?" Carole bent to deposit the laptop in a nearby easy chair, not meeting his eyes.

He knew what she was after, but he wasn't going to mention Selene's name. And he hoped Carole wouldn't either. "Some kid named Steve. Your friend Barbara sent him to collect me. I left your car in your garage, locked up safe and sound."

"I trust you with my car, Beck," Carole said quietly. He dropped into a chair, and Carole seated herself across from him, next to his pile of luggage. "It's my students I'm not so sure I can leave you alone with."

He held up a hand. "Please. Don't," he said tiredly. "My hero, Samuel Beckett, is known for having said, 'Fail better.' I have unquestionably done that. I admit I made a mistake. Can we let it drop?"

"Ah, yes. Samuel Beckett, the modern tragi-comedian. Come on, Beck! If you can't even talk about Selene, I'm not sure you know what your failure was," Carole said. "You look like hell. Are you sure leaving her was the wisest course?"

"I made several mistakes," he grated through clenched teeth. "The first was letting you know there was anything personal between Selene and me." He glared at his cousin.

Carole didn't even flinch. "Why don't you call her? Let her know you arrived safely?"

"No."

He didn't want to fight with Carole. She was right. He'd made many blunders this summer. But there was no sense in adding yet one more to the inventory of his foolish acts. If he called Selene right now, he didn't know how he would react. What if he broke down? And in front of Carole? She'd have him on the next flight back to Wyoming.

It was better to just let it go. Let Selene go. No matter how it hurt. No matter how empty he felt inside.

"No," he said again. "I won't call her. And I don't want to hear any more about her, if you don't mind."

Carole shrugged. Her mouth was pinched as if in anger, but her eyes betrayed some other emotion.



Pity. Carole was feeling sorry for him! Where did his cousin get off, an old maid like her, feeling pity for him?

But Beck held his anger in check. Deep down he knew Carole didn't have a shred of meanness in her. He'd been unfair and overly self-defensive in thinking of her as a shrew. All svelte bloneness, immaculately groomed and dressed, she was nowhere near an old maid. She only wanted what was best for him. And for Selene. If she pitied him, it was because she felt his loss as keenly as he did. He knew he'd guessed right when she rose and bent to hug him gently.

"Don't blow it like I did," she whispered in his ear. "Don't end up alone like me, Beck. Pride is a cold companion. Take it from me, a book in bed at night for companionship just doesn't cut it."

He knew she'd never say another word about Selene unless he broached the topic. Carole had said all she meant to say, and they would go on from there for as long as she stayed with him.

But it wasn't over. It was far from over between Selene and him. It wouldn't be over until he could think of her without feeling anything more than the fondness he felt for Carole.

At the moment, he just couldn't see when—if ever—the time might come when he could think of Selene with nothing more than an emotion as indistinct as fondness.

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Fall semester started. Selene went to financial aid, signed to borrow the money, and started classes. She wouldn't think how she might ever pay the loan back. She couldn't think beyond the end of this semester.

She felt rootless. Lost. The days came and went, she attended classes and did passingly well even though her heart wasn't in her studies. She found a job in a local fast food outlet. It didn't pay much, but it meant steady money coming in.

"You look terrible," Sarah said one chilly October morning.

Selene stared out the window, not daring to face Sarah. The trees seemed as lost as Selene, caught in the twilight between summer and autumn, their leaves yellowing for weeks and rustling drily in the breeze but refusing to fall. A mail truck meandered down the street, stopping in front of the apartment building. "Thanks for the compliment, Sarah," she said lifelessly, without rancor.

"Well, it's true," Sarah insisted. "Your complexion is pasty, and you drag yourself around as if you're sick all the time. Do you feel sick?"

"No, I'm not sick." And it was true. Luckily, she had escaped all traces of morning sickness. Physically, she felt fine. She and pregnancy, ironically, seemed made for each other. The only thing missing from the picture of happy impending motherhood was a father for her child.

"So what's wrong, then?" Sarah probed. "Are you lonely? I could introduce you to one of Ben's friends—"

"No thanks," Selene said more sharply than she intended. The hapless Eddie had been replaced in Sarah's life by someone named Ben in late September. Selene had yet to meet Ben, but she hadn't much desire to either. All of Sarah's men friends were essentially the same, easily replaceable, interchangeable. They were nice enough people, she guessed, but they didn't interest her in the least. No one could compare to Beck.

She stopped that line of thought dead in its tracks. "I get lonely," she conceded, turning from her perusal of the trees. "But not enough to do anything about it."

"I don't know how you can go months at a time, all by yourself." Sarah frowned. She sat at Selene's tiny kitchen table, fiddling with a cup of tea on a saucer.

The noise of stoneware against stoneware grated on Selene's nerves. "Would you please knock it off?" she asked, seating herself across from her friend.

Sarah jerked her hand back from her cup. "You're sure cranky," she accused. "You need to get out of this apartment. The place looks so bare since you got rid of most of your furniture. And, gosh, without your plants. It doesn't even look like you live here anymore. I can't get used to it."

"I like my place just fine the way it is," Selene said. Babies required a lot of extra furniture and assorted gear. If her apartment looked empty now, it wouldn't for long. "And if you're hinting I should get out and meet a man, you can knock that off right now." The mere thought of looking for another man while carrying Beck's baby repelled her.

"Okay. You don't want my help, I give up." Sarah rose to leave, leaning over the table to search Selene's face. Apparently deciding Selene really didn't want to talk, she added, "Let me know if you need anything."

"Sure," Selene said. "Thanks, Sarah."

She accompanied her friend out. Sarah wasn't angry, or if she was she wouldn't stay mad. She would just be back at a later date to chip away at Selene's defenses. Sooner or later Selene would crumble, and then Sarah could offer advice to her heart's content.

*But not right now.* Not yet. Not while she still felt so fragile she thought she would break in half every time she even brushed up against the mere thought of Beck McNeal.

She approached the mailbox without enthusiasm. Probably more bills, she thought dismally. But when she pulled out the assorted envelopes and fliers, her hand froze at the sight of one particular envelope.

Undistinguished, it bore a Boston postmark. Clutching it tightly to her chest, she forced herself to walk back up the steps to her apartment. Afraid to hope, hope flared inside her anyway. Chilled and shaking, she sat at the table staring at the envelope. In more than six weeks she'd heard nothing from Beck. Did he miss her? Want her with him? Did she dare trust the surge of optimism she felt at the mere sight of his return address in the corner of the plain white envelope?

She tore the edge off with trembling fingers and removed a single sheet of paper. A blue check fluttered to the table. She gasped at the amount—enough, surely, to move to Boston. She unfolded the letter. A single paragraph, not enough to really call a letter.

As she read, the tiny flicker of hope was extinguished:

*Dear Selene,*

*The grant for the project finally came through. You were so helpful to me, the enclosed hardly seems adequate but it should pay a few bills. Hope the semester is going well for you. Carole sends her love.*

*Beck*

She let the letter fall from her fingers. He didn't send his love. No news of what he was doing. Absolutely nothing personal in the short note. Not a word betrayed that they'd been lovers all summer.

She didn't know how she was supposed to feel. She didn't know exactly how she did feel. Let down, certainly. Awkward. Embarrassed, as if the check was meant to pay for more of her services than just typing.

She knew deep in her soul Beck hadn't intended to insult her, but still she felt insulted. She picked up the check, wanting to tear it to bits. But she stopped herself. She would save the money. She would need it, eventually, for the baby. Beck had been more than generous. All unknowingly, he would support his child for its first few months of life.

Carefully, she placed the note and the check back in the envelope. She badly needed advice, but at this point she didn't know where to turn.

And then it came to her. Caterina. Talking to Caterina would almost be like pouring salt into her open wounds, but the Italian woman had been left in a situation much like the one Selene

faced now. Alone, with young children depending on her, Caterina had somehow seen it through. Where there was no hope, Caterina had succeeded.

She picked up her phone.

"Sure, I remember you," Caterina said warmly. "You come over, *cara*. We talk."

Selene's bones ached on the drive to Hawk Point. The heater in the car worked fine, still the cold inside her wouldn't abate. But when she stepped inside Caterina's warm, fragrant kitchen the chill finally began to subside.

Dressed as always in the dark tones of an old-fashioned Italian widow, Caterina welcomed Selene with her charming gap-toothed smile. "Sit, please." She gestured toward the plastic covered table. She served Selene a cup of the strong black coffee. "You got more questions?" she asked, seating herself across from Selene.

"Just one, really." Selene wrapped her hands around the hot cup. She looked at Caterina from beneath her eyelashes, suddenly shy. "It's personal. Not for the project I was working on this summer."

"Okay. Ask," Caterina urged, dark eyes gently questioning. "I give you the best answer I can."

"I need to know how you did it...raising children alone, I mean." Selene hesitated.

Caterina sat a moment, gazing at Selene. Salt and pepper hair brushed back from her face, thin shoulders straight beneath the black cardigan, she radiated the inner warmth and strength that Selene wanted so much to possess. "You have baby?" Caterina finally asked, gesturing toward Selene's belly and nodding slightly in answer to her own question. The question was a formality. She knew.

Selene waited.

"Is not easy to do alone," Caterina finally said. "No money, and they always needing something, clothes, shoes, medicine. But they grow up some way, new shoes or no new shoes." She smiled encouragingly.

"With love," Selene said, trying to lead Caterina to the answer she wanted. If only she loved the baby enough, everything would be all right, wouldn't it? Wasn't that what Caterina had said before?

"Well, sure," Caterina said now. "But is easier with father."

Selene swallowed. "My baby won't have a father."

"Every baby have father," Caterina countered mildly.

"I mean...I haven't told him. I don't plan to tell him." Selene twisted her fingers together. This was harder than she thought it was going to be. She'd thought Caterina would be gently encouraging. Well, she was gentle.

Caterina's slim fingers tapped her chin as she considered. "This summer," she finally said slowly. "The man who ask questions about Italy and coming to America. He is father."

It wasn't a question. Selene would have to rethink her original opinion that Caterina was innocent in the ways of the world. The older woman saw and recognized more than Selene had given her credit for.

"Why you not tell him?" Caterina asked pointedly now, apparently unaware that polite society dictated she should ease into these kinds of questions.

But Selene had come here looking for support. If she wanted Caterina's support, she would have to tell the whole truth. "He doesn't want me," she said. "He wouldn't want the baby either."

Caterina's dark eyes sparked with something close to anger. "He seems like good man to me. You don't give him a chance to show you he is good man if you keep his baby all to yourself."

This wasn't at all what Selene had expected to hear. "But you did it all by yourself," she protested.

"I didn't have choice," Caterina countered. "You have choice. Think about what is best for baby."

Defeated in her purpose for coming here, Selene rose to go.

"Stay." Caterina waved her back to her seat. "I have things to show you."

She disappeared into the bedroom while Selene sat and waited, feeling like she had in fourth grade when the teacher had yelled at her. Then, she put her head in her desk and cried. What was she supposed to do now? Caterina thought she was wrong. That she was stupid. That she wasn't giving Beck a chance.

Caterina returned with a photo album which she set in front of Selene. She stood at Selene's shoulder, turning the pages, pointing. "Is me," she said proudly, "coming to America."

Selene had thought Caterina would be beautiful as a young woman, and the photo bore this out. A slim young Caterina posed in front of the Statue of Liberty. Dressed in the style of the early sixties with fitted bodice, folded collar and full skirt, she stood with the sun on her face, smiling.

The next photo showed a man, average looking, with pomaded hair and pencil mustache.

"My husband," Caterina said.

"My girls." Two little girls with their dark hair in ringlets stared solemnly at the camera.

"Our house." The picture showed a small clapboard structure surrounded by a wire fence. The yard was bare of vegetation, and the soil looked comprised of equal parts of coal dust and dirt. A board sidewalk led up to the door.

"Very nice," Selene said faintly, comparing it in her mind to Caterina's present neat little house with its tended yard and the potted plants in the window.

"Very dirty." Caterina laughed. "I clean a lot of mud and coal dust from that house." She paused, her finger on one of the photos. "I show you pictures so you see happy family. We happy there, together, in the mud."

She flipped the pages. The little girls grew, played in the dirt with a spotted puppy, dressed in their Sunday best for school pictures. There was a picture of the family standing in front of the market, and then suddenly the photos contained only three people, Caterina and the girls.

"We not so happy there," Caterina said quietly, lingering over a picture of herself and the girls in matching Easter dresses. "I make those clothes. Is a hard life with no husband, no father. I do my best, but is not easy."

She reached across the table for the other item she'd brought from her bedroom. She unwrapped crinkly tissue paper to reveal a startlingly bright red party dress that she held up to herself for Selene's inspection.

Selene found it hard to imagine Caterina—eternally dressed in grays and blacks and navy blues—in such a getup, even with it held up against her still-willowy frame. But she turned back a few pages in the album with a slim hand, and there she was, aglow, in the same dress, clinging to her husband's arm in the time before he was injured.

"He love me in this dress," Caterina said dreamily. Then she blushed, pulling the dress away from her body and hurriedly folding it back in its wrappings.

"I never show nobody I keep this dress," Caterina said, her voice husky. "But I show you, so you understand. If you got love, you do everything you can to keep it."

Tears burned Selene's own eyes. She had such a dress herself, a slinky black number that she had borrowed and had yet to return to Sarah. Because memories clung to it like sweet perfume. Because she had seduced Beck in that dress, hoping that he would love her enough in it to keep her forever, just like Caterina treasured a dress she would never wear for her man again.

Caterina shut the photo album and returned it and the dress to her bedroom, giving Selene a chance to collect herself. When the woman again seated herself across from Selene, she said, "So, now you go home and call baby's father, yes?"

"I don't think so." Selene shook her head.

Caterina mimicked the motion, clucking her tongue. “You Americans all got hard heads,” she said. “And too much pride.”

“I’m sorry if you think I’ve wasted your time,” Selene said quietly.

Caterina waved the apology away. “No. Is good to take out that dress sometimes and remember.” She paused, sighing. “But you got to do what you think is right, not what an old woman like me says to do. My girls always telling me: Mama, you old-fashioned. I guess I just don’t understand America.”

“I don’t think that’s true,” Selene protested. The last thing she wanted was to leave with Caterina thinking her advice was worthless.

“Is true,” Caterina said sagely. “The world is different now. Women don’t need a man.”

If the problem were only that she didn’t need Beck, Selene thought. And if the solution were only so simple that she go home and call him, and tell him her news.

Caterina had touched on the same theme Beck had expounded on again and again all summer, the modern dilemma of changing roles in modern relationships. Too bad Selene had never found the answer. Maybe if she had, she wouldn’t be in her predicament. Maybe if she had any answers, she could trust Beck enough to tell him about their baby.

The words were simple. *Trust. Love. Commitment. Forever.* But she wondered sometimes if anyone nowadays knew what they meant.

Wistfully, she thanked Caterina for her time and her advice. It wasn’t that the woman’s advice was wrong. It was only that in Selene’s case it didn’t apply.

She would have to find her own way through to some kind of lasting happiness. For herself and her child. Without Beck.

Nothing had changed. Since she’d met him, her future had been uncertain. It still was, despite Caterina’s reassurances to the contrary.

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Caterina called her friend, Fortunata. “She was here again,” she reported.

“Selene?” Fortunata was excited. Maybe things were finally starting to work out. “Selene Pertunda?”

“Si,” Caterina said. “The goddess herself.”

Fortunata was almost afraid to ask. “And how is she?”

“She is *una testa dura*. A hard head.”

“I know.” Fortunata bit her lip. “What’s going on, Cat?”

“I made them the cannoli like you said, and gave it to them, the goddess and her man. Well, it worked. Now she have baby, Selene Pertunda. But she don’t tell him. She thinks she don’t need him.”

A pregnancy resulting from the fertility pastry. It had to be a sign that the Goddess smiled on the union between Selene and her man; maybe even that The Lady was pleased with Fortunata’s continued intrusion. So how could the two mortals still be stubbornly resisting their obvious destiny?

Fortunata chewed her lip, baffled. She wasn’t sure what her next move should be.

## Chapter Fourteen

“**Y**ou seem to be getting along pretty well,” Sarah said. “Considering.”

It was a Saturday morning in early December, and Selene couldn’t hide her condition any longer. Sarah had taken the confirmation that Selene was pregnant with aplomb, but then nothing much ever threw Sarah. She just took it for granted that Selene would find a way to work out her problems.

“Yeah, if I haven’t grown personally, I’ve certainly grown,” Selene said, patting her stomach. The baby kicked in response. She was quite proud of the fact that she’d reached the point where she could laugh again.

She bloomed in pregnancy, her skin smooth and luminescent, her nails for the first time in her life perfect, seemingly unbreakable ovals. She’d bloomed in another sense of the word, she thought ruefully as she examined the unfamiliar contours of her enlarged breasts and belly. She doubted if she’d ever get her figure back, but she was so contented in pregnancy at the moment it didn’t really matter.

“Have you decided yet what you’re going to do?” Sarah asked.

“I can finish this semester,” Selene answered. “The baby’s due in March, so there’s really no point in going back after Christmas. I’ll sell my car, and that money should see me through until I can get some kind of job in the spring.”

“You can’t sell your car!” Sarah was aghast. “How will you get to your doctor appointments or even to the grocery store?”

“I’ll tell you a secret if you promise not to make a big deal about it.” She looked sidelong at her friend, gauging whether to trust Sarah not to make a mountain out of a red ant pile when she knew better.

“So? Give,” Sarah urged.

“Robert said he’d drive me to my appointments and stay with me during the birth.”

Selene waited for the explosion. She wasn’t disappointed.

“Robert?” Sarah nearly tipped her chair over backward in agitation. “You’re seeing Robert again? Geez, Selene, have you thought about this? You seemed so sure you were well rid of that guy who *beat up on you*, if you care to recall, and now you’re taking up with him where you left off?”

“I’m not ‘taking up’ with him again.” Selene set her chin stubbornly. “We’re just friends. He seems content on his own, so much more mature. Going to jail turned out to be good for him. He’s offered to help me because we’ve discovered we can be friends, that’s all.”

She thought it best not to reveal to Sarah at the moment that Robert had offered to marry her and give her child his name. She had too many bad memories concerning Robert to trust his word that he had really changed; friendship was all she was willing to grant him.

And it wouldn’t be fair to accept any man’s proposal, Robert’s included. She couldn’t pretend she was happy in a relationship while she continually superimposed another man’s image, another man’s personality, on the man she clung to out of simple desperation.

“Hmph. Friends, huh?” Sarah looked unconvinced.

“That’s right.” Selene had explained to Robert that she still loved Beck and probably always would. He had seemed to accept that, for the time being at least. “If he pushes for more, I’ll just stop seeing him.”

“Just like that.” Sarah snapped her fingers. “Seems to me you’re kind of painting yourself into a corner, selling your car and depending on Robert to get you around. Even invited him into the delivery room. Sounds to me like it’s gone way beyond friendship.”

“I didn’t invite him to the delivery. He offered to be with me. I’ll need somebody, Sarah.”

Sarah’s lower lip protruded thoughtfully. “Do you think he’ll go through with it? I don’t recall you ever describing Robert as dependable. What if he gets scared, goes out and ties one on instead of being there for you.”

“You think he’d be afraid to watch the actual delivery?”

Sarah nodded.

“Okay. You’re probably right. I don’t know for sure if he will.” Selene drew circles on the tabletop in her kitchen with a fingertip.

“Well, you’ve got my number if you need me in the middle of the night,” Sarah said. “Since it doesn’t look like I’ll ever have kids of my own, I’d stand by you.”

“Uh-oh. You sound down on the future all of a sudden. Ben’s not working out?” Selene was more than glad to get away from the subject of whom she would prefer helping her through the delivery of her baby. There was no question that it wasn’t Robert, and despite the warmth she felt at her friend’s generous offer, it wasn’t Sarah either.

Sarah leaned her chin on her palm glumly. “We’re not getting along. He’s talking about moving out.” Then she brightened. “Hey, I’ve got an idea. When Ben goes, probably in the next couple of days, why don’t you move in with me? Share the rent, save yourself some money until the baby comes.”

Selene laughed. “And what will I do when Ben’s replacement comes along? I know you, Sarah. You won’t be alone for long. I don’t want to be there standing in your way.”

“I don’t think I like the sound of that.” Sarah glared mock fierceness across the table. “You make it sound like I don’t have morals, Selene.”

Selene grinned. “Not at all. I just don’t want to be living in your apartment when you finally find Prince Charming.”

Sarah grimaced. “Yeah, right. Prince Charming. They’re all princes when we first meet them, right, Selene?”

“Right.” Selene squirmed uncomfortably, recalling Caterina’s accusation that by hiding his fatherhood from him, she wasn’t giving Beck a chance to be his best. She didn’t know exactly what happened to end all of Sarah’s relationships. Maybe Sarah didn’t give a man a chance either? One mistake and he was out, replaced in a few days by another who was expected to be perfect?

They had grown up together in a disposable age. Perhaps they’d come to expect that relationships were disposable too, not requiring any effort to maintain.

But men were guilty of the same unfulfillable expectations. Sarah’s men left without a backward glance. Robert had never put an ounce of effort into seeing Selene’s point of view while they were together. And Beck had disappeared before she even had a chance to make a mistake with him.

Despite her protests, privately she agreed with Sarah. If he didn’t resume hitting her first, Robert most probably would vanish on her when she needed him most. It had been his pattern in the past; why should she expect better of him now?

She would keep Sarah’s offer to accompany her to the hospital firmly in mind. If she could depend on no one else, she knew she could depend on Sarah.

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Everywhere Beck traveled in Massachusetts he drove past tradition. Steeped as Boston was in historical events and places, it was one of the reasons he had gone to school there and later accepted a position at Boston University. A historian’s dream, the city, along with nearby Concord and Lexington, fairly reeked of the history and culture that had brought about the birth of a nation.

But progress overwhelmed much of Boston’s historical legacy. Where Beck had once seen charm, he now saw the curse of half the population of Massachusetts stuffed into the greater Boston metropolitan area. Ben Franklin’s cow once grazed the grass of Boston Common; it now offered its acres to harried downtown workers eager to escape the surrounding traffic and crowds. Faneuil Hall, once the sight of protests against British taxation, now sat dwarfed by towering modern buildings.

The old city, and his life’s work, had lost their previous luster. He functioned, and that was about all he could say about his performance nowadays. He missed teaching. He missed the contact with his students, he’d become so wrapped up in the politics and day-to-day functioning of his department and his own research. Now since he’d quit his position, he even missed that.

He'd only ever wanted to be a teacher. Maybe his marriage wouldn't have failed if he'd remained a professor; he didn't know, he still couldn't second-guess all the factors that had led to the breakup.

But he suspected accepting the director's position had been part of a pattern of distancing himself from emotional events he couldn't handle. He'd thought he could hide his own unhappiness behind a position and title.

He thought about going back to what had made him happy in the past. Maybe he wouldn't miss Selene so much if he had the bustle of the classroom to distract him.

Perhaps when he got his life straightened out to where he was content with himself, he would have something to offer a woman again. It was just a crying shame he hadn't thought of this remedy before he'd met Selene.

"Come home to Wyoming with me," Carole suggested on more than one occasion. "You promised Madysen you would come back and help her on the ranch. You should have been there by now. And there's certainly no sense in both of us spending the holidays alone."

His battered heart leaped at the thought of going back to Wyoming—and perhaps in the process seeing Selene again—but he refused to entertain the notion of more heartache. "No," he said morosely. "I'll stay here, thank you."

"And do what? Depress yourself even further? You have unfinished business in Wyoming, Beck, on more than one front. I'm buying you a ticket, and you're going to finish packing this place up and going with me."

"Any 'unfinished business' I may have is *my* business, not yours," he growled. He knew Carole had been on the phone to her friends at the college lately, laying plans for her return, and he knew darned well she wouldn't let a long distance conversation end without asking about news of Selene. She often looked like she was bursting to tell him something after these chats with her colleagues, but he wouldn't allow it. If Selene was doing well this semester, he was glad. But he didn't want to hear about it. Selene had her own life to rebuild, just as he did. He didn't see the point in revisiting their painful past when he had no hope of a future with her.

But Carole was getting more and more insistent about making holiday plans that included him, and he was getting the feeling that she knew something about Selene, something that she very desperately wanted to tell him. She looked right now as if she were biting her tongue to keep from blurting something out, keeping the information back merely because he was so grouchy she was afraid he'd bite her head off.

He didn't want to be this way, everyone from Carole to his former associates at the university tiptoeing around him for fear of his snarling temper. He didn't want to feel this way, barely half alive most of the time and the other half brooding that he'd somehow been cheated out of what was rightfully his.

He sighed. "You're right," he said, feeling like a heel when his cousin's face lit with a bright smile. He guessed he hadn't been a joy to live with these past few months, but perhaps he hadn't realized just how touchy he had been. He didn't know exactly how long it was since anyone smiled at him. He was surprised at the warm feeling that rose in his chest at something so simple as a smile of approval directed his way. "I've at least got to get out to the ranch. Here's my credit card. Order the tickets. We'll go home."

"Oh, Beck. I'm so glad you've finally decided to straighten things out," Carole said, wrapping her arms around him in a fierce hug.

He patted her back absently. He didn't recall saying that he was ready to straighten things out—with Selene, he presumed. But why else would he agree to go back to Wyoming, unless it was to see Selene again? Yes, he had other business. He had promised his sister Madysen he would come and help her out. But Madysen had survived on the ranch for many years, and he doubted if his presence now would really make a big difference to her.



It was Selene who drew him. He missed her profoundly, the loss of her these past few months a void inside him that had continued to grow until it engulfed him, robbing him of feeling for life itself.

He couldn't get the woman out of his head. She lived in his dreams. Everywhere he went he saw her face, her smile, her stunning body. He remembered the taste of her, the feel of her russet hair brushing his chest, the warmth that zinged through him when he touched her.

Maybe it wouldn't do him a scintilla of good to go back, but he had to try. Once and for all he had to try to make Selene see that he couldn't live without her.

## Chapter Fifteen

The phone rang where Selene had left it lying on the kitchen counter. Before she could maneuver past the bed where her clothes lay stacked in neat piles, she heard Robert answer it.

She repressed a surge of hot annoyance. More and more, he'd been insinuating himself into her life, and she was starting to feel trapped. But what did she expect? She had agreed to move back in with him—temporarily. She had just a couple of weeks left this semester and then she was done with school for a while. She hadn't found a job and on the days when she got home from class and fell on the bed for nap, exhausted, she wondered if she could keep up with the demands of a job even if she found one. She hadn't given up her dreams, she told herself. She had merely deferred them.

She rode the bus to class and back. She'd been shocked at how little her car was worth, barely enough for two months' rent, and she was going to try to save for the baby the money Beck had sent. In a couple more months she'd be huge, and she didn't want to have to move again even more pregnant than she was now. The choice had come down to moving in with Robert or moving in with Sarah. Logic told her she had a better chance of staying the full four or five months with Robert than with her friend.

But could she pay the price? With Sarah, the threat would always be that she would be expected to move out when a new man came into her friend's life. With Robert, the threat was more tenuous. She knew him well; despite his protests that he had changed, she had never known him to do anything out of simple human kindness. When her stay with him was over, she would owe him for five months of food and shelter. She just didn't know yet what price he would ask her to pay.

But better the devil she knew than the one she didn't. She just couldn't settle in with Sarah and be politely asked to move out in her eighth or ninth month of pregnancy. Moving in with Robert was better than being out on the street.

Wasn't it? She chewed her lip.

"It's for you," Robert called out. Well, of course it was for her. He had answered her phone. She waddled into the kitchen and snatched the phone from his hand.

"Hello," she said, turning her back on Robert and hoping he'd get the hint. But she glanced over her shoulder to find him settling back at the glass-topped table with his cup of coffee, quite at ease in her apartment.

"Selene, it's Carole," the voice in her ear said. She almost dropped the phone, fumbling with it as cold sweat broke out on her slippery palm.

One more day and she would have escaped, living at Robert's where Carole would never in a lifetime have guessed to find her. Why couldn't Carole have waited one more day to call? It was as if something bigger than she was kept interfering in her life. Just when she thought she was set, things turned around on her.

"How are you?" Carole asked when Selene, chilled to her bones, offered no glad greeting.

"F-fine," Selene stuttered.

“Are you working over the holiday?”

“N-no. I’m between jobs.” Selene glanced at Robert. He lounged in the chair, watching her with heavy-lidded blue eyes that she’d once found so irresistible. Now his reptilian stare reminded her of a fat frog or a snake. He’d done nothing lately to make her feel this way, she realized. She just didn’t love him now, and didn’t want him watching her every move like a crocodile.

So how would she feel about him after another four months had passed?

The baby was hers, hers and Beck’s. She didn’t want Robert watching her. She didn’t want him taking any proprietary interest at all in her or her child.

“It’s so good to hear your voice,” Carole said. “But I’d like to see you in person. Listen, sweetie, I’m back in town and holding a small dinner party tonight. Why don’t you come over? About six.”

“Oh, I...” Selene could just imagine the look on Carole’s face when she sashayed through the door in maternity clothes. “I-I can’t. But thank you for asking, Carole.”

Robert’s face registered the new information, and Selene could have bitten her tongue for giving him Carole’s name. She frowned. It was none of Robert’s business. Nothing she did was any of Robert’s business.

Suddenly she knew she’d made another very bad choice. She had the strongest urge to escape. Robert wasn’t good for her, he never had been. Had she forgotten that he used to hit her? What if he hit her while she was pregnant? What if he did something to the baby?

Her heart felt heavy in her chest, thumping away in the constricted space atop the mound of the child she and Beck had made together.

“Please consider it,” Carole wheedled. “You said you weren’t working. So you don’t have to get up early tomorrow, right?”

“I really can’t. I’m busy.” Robert smirked at that and pointed to himself. Selene turned her back on him. He wasn’t a part of this conversation and it irked her that he was including himself.

“Well, I’ll put the dinner off until tomorrow then,” Carole said decisively. “Is that better for you?”

“I don’t want you to change your plans on my account.” Selene squirmed uncomfortably. Carole wasn’t making it easy for her, and Robert was making it worse, assuming that she’d be busy with him. Well, they were in the midst of moving, but she wondered if that was all he meant when he’d gestured toward himself. Surely he wasn’t so self-centered he could think she would be interested in him romantically while she was pregnant with Beck’s baby. Of course he is that self-centered, an inner voice of wisdom counseled. In Robert’s mind, nothing matters but Robert.

The truth was, Selene really wanted to see Carole again. But she could hardly walk in and let her condition announce that they were soon to be related through the birth of Beck’s child. Carole was calm and worldly and knowledgeable, yes, but not completely unshockable.

And then how would Selene prevent Carole from telling Beck her secret?

“Okay, then, name a day. We’ll get together at your convenience.” Carole wasn’t about to give up.

Selene chewed a fingernail. At that moment she felt Robert come up behind her and place his hand over hers on the phone. She hadn’t even heard him get up from the table.

She moved away from him, glaring. But he didn’t get the message, and reached again for the phone. “Let me,” he mouthed.

Selene watched his lips move, wondering how she could have once found them so attractive. Now he seemed overbearing and intrusive, unable to comprehend that she didn’t want his help. He hadn’t changed at all, obviously, always thinking he knew what was best for both of them when in reality he hadn’t a clue.

What had she done by almost moving back in with him?

Panic seized her as his hand once again closed over hers. He wasn't a big man, but he had a powerful presence. His blue eyes bored into hers.

She shook her head. "Robert, don't," she breathed, while aloud she said, "Just a minute, Carole."

She held the phone muffled to her full breasts.

"Knock it off," she warned. "I'll handle this."

He dropped his hand, but his stance didn't relax. "She's related to the guy who knocked you up, right? Just tell her you're moving back in with me and get it over with."

"I can't do that." Selene's lips trembled. She knew it was a mistake to show weakness in front of Robert. But what else had she done in admitting that she needed his help? Sooner or later he'd take advantage, she knew that. But she'd been so desperate she had agreed to move in with him anyway, just to have a place to go until she had the baby.

*Stupid. Really stupid.* She should have known better.

"Why can't you say it?" Robert demanded. "You don't have to tell her about the kid. You're hiding the brat from her snooty Boston cousin, right? Just tell her you're coming back with me, and that will be the end of that. Neither of them will ever have to know a thing about the little bun in your oven." He gave her a nasty smirk.

She felt sick. There had to be another way out. Robert would hold any help he gave against her, and against her child, until the end of time. She knew it. She had always known it. His show of friendship had been a front. It would only be a matter of time until they fell into their old patterns of behavior, he blaming her for feeling put upon and she trying desperately to make up for it. He would hit her. She knew it. It was only a matter of time.

As if to prove her point, Robert seized her shoulders. "*Tell* her you're moving in with me," he insisted.

"No." Selene shook her head. She couldn't make another mistake. This time, she had to make the right choice. Her baby depended on her. For once in her life, she had to get it *right*.

His hands fell. He looked a little stunned, his expression a mixture of shock and anger, as if Selene had never stood up to him before. And maybe she hadn't. "You're not coming back with me? One lousy phone call, and you've changed your mind again? The guy doesn't want you, Selene. Don't you understand that yet? I do, damn it. I need you."

Yes, but for what, exactly, did Robert need her? The sound of that adolescent wail brought vivid memories of his tantrums, his slamming of the door as he left to drown his troubles, his anger that she couldn't provide what he thought he needed. Robert's needs were boundless, unfulfillable. If she moved back with him, in mere days she'd be mired once again in his unappeasable needs. Soon she wouldn't have one child, she'd have two, one merely in the guise of an adult.

"I'm sorry," she said.

Robert's face clouded with anger as the realization hit that she had once again changed her mind. "I guess you are sorry," he snarled. "You're about the sorriest piece of crap I've ever seen in my life. All promise and no action. I can't believe you're backing out, Selene. Where the hell do you think you're going to go?"

"I don't know," she said honestly.

Robert shrugged angrily into his coat. "Fine. I'm outta here. And don't call me when you need somebody, okay, Selene? I've had enough of your shit."

The door slammed and he was down the stairs and into his car before she could draw a full breath. He was driving off in the only means of private transportation she had left to her.

Giddy and scared at the same time, she lifted the phone back to her ear.

"Selene?" Carole was saying in a loud voice. "Selene, what's wrong?"

A hiccup of tears and foolish laughter escaped her throat. “Nothing,” she managed to gasp. “Nothing is wrong, Carole. Something in my life, for once, just went right. I finally did something right.”

Carole hesitated. “I don’t like what I’m hearing in your voice, Selene,” she finally said. “I think you’re covering something up. If you won’t come over here, I’m coming to your place. I’ll be there in ten minutes. Put the coffee on.”

Before Selene could protest further, the phone went dead.

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“What’s up?”

Still dressed in pajama bottoms, Beck ran a hand through his tousled hair before reaching for a coffee mug in the cupboard. He’d been working on his oral history manuscript on his laptop without bothering to get dressed.

Their flight into Salt Lake City had arrived late. Instead of making connections to Hawk Point, they decided to rent a car and drive to Rocky Creek. By the time they arrived, he had been bushed. The biggest thing on his agenda today, besides the book, was returning the car to the rental agency. In a day or two, he’d buy a truck and head for the ranch, start pitching in and relieve his sister of some of the responsibility they’d inherited along with the Willow Valley property.

He sipped from the steaming mug. Carole sat with her chin in her palm, frowning. Finally she raised her gaze and said, “Get dressed. We’re going over to Selene’s.”

Hot coffee scalded his tongue. “I thought you were going to talk her into a nice, leisurely dinner,” he gasped through the pain.

“Something’s wrong with her. I’m not sure what, she won’t tell me.” Carole rose from the table, already flawlessly dressed and groomed for the day. As she spoke she replaced the gleaming gold earring on her left lobe that she’d removed to talk on the phone. “Are you coming with me, or am I going to find out for myself what’s the matter with her?”

“I have the feeling you already have a pretty good idea,” Beck observed as drily as he could with his mouth still aflame. “Why don’t you just tell me what the big secret is? I know you’re dying to tell me what you found out about Selene from your buddies at the college.”

Carole couldn’t have discovered Selene had another man. She couldn’t be so cruel, could she, to insist that he go with her to Selene’s and confront the fact that she had someone else already? Beck’s stomach roiled as the acidic coffee hit it.

Carole’s mouth pursed. If she knew something, she wasn’t going to tell him. She was going to force him to go over to Selene’s and find out for himself.

Very well. He would make his cousin happy. He would go to Selene’s. But he would go alone. He didn’t need Carole butting in and telling him what to do anymore. Whatever Selene’s problem was, it obviously involved him or Carole wouldn’t be trying so hard to get him to contact her.

“Sit down,” he ordered. “You’re not going anywhere.”

Carole started to protest, but he held up a hand. “You’ve pushed me this far,” he said. “You apparently won’t rest until I see Selene again. So, okay. I’ll go see Selene. Whatever she has to tell me, she can tell me alone.”

“I don’t want to overwhelm her,” Carole said. “She doesn’t even know you’re in town. I’ll go first. You’ve still got the rental car, you can follow in a few minutes. At least give me time to prepare her.”

And time for him to take a shower and try to look presentable, Beck thought. In Carole’s estimation it would never do for him to arrive at Selene’s all rumpled from sleep. And if Carole had her own transportation, she could leave while he and Selene worked things out on their own.

He'd had about enough of his cousin's meddling, no matter how well meaning. Carole had got him this far. He was at least in the same town as Selene now, and not clear across the continent.

It was time for him to take charge of the direction of his own life.

"Okay," he agreed gruffly. "But you warn her I'm right behind you. If she runs away before I get there, remember it wasn't my idea to do it this way."

He hoped his voice didn't betray the churning in his stomach or the tightness in his chest. Could it be that he was afraid to see Selene again? Could it be relief he felt that Carole was going first to prepare the way? What a man's man he was; what a champ.

What a *chump*, he thought grimly as he headed up the stairs toward the shower. Hiding behind Carole's silk skirt. It was no wonder Selene wanted nothing to do with him. By this late date he wondered if there was anything he could do to change her mind.

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Selene's hand shook as she extended it toward the doorknob. She didn't know what to expect when she opened the door—but it sure wasn't Sarah's curious face.

"I saw Robert leave," her friend said as she gently but firmly pushed past Selene into the apartment. "He looked a little huffy. Did you have a fight?"

"You could say that," Selene admitted distractedly. "Um, Sarah...I'm expecting company."

"You are? Who?" Unflappable, Sarah stood her ground.

"Carole's coming over." Selene started toward the kitchen to brew a fresh pot of the coffee Carole expected.

"Don't dump that yet," Sarah ordered as Selene removed the lid from the pot. "I can heat it in the microwave until the new pot's done." She helped herself to a clean cup, holding it out to be filled and completely ignoring the fact that Selene had pretty obviously been trying to get rid of her.

"So you've quit packing for the day?" Sarah continued as she seated herself at the table. "Are you not moving in with Robert now?"

"No, I'm not moving in with Robert." Selene turned the heat on under the fresh pot. "When push came to shove I just couldn't make myself do it."

"Good," Sarah said with satisfaction. "You would have been sorry. He would have started shoving you around, probably sooner than later. My offer still stands. You always have a place with me."

"I know. Thanks, Sarah." Selene sighed. She wasn't totally without options. Her plans had been deferred, that's all, not completely derailed. She could still work and go to school and raise a baby at the same time. Other women did it. She could too.

A knock sounded at the door and her hands started shaking again.

"The cavalry to the rescue," Sarah announced with false brightness. "Want me to get it?"

"No." Sarah could be really irritating when she wanted to be, Selene thought. She took a deep breath and opened the door.

Carole looked at her a moment, then gathered her into a hug. Tears stung Selene's eyes. She had missed the older woman terribly.

"You look great, honey," Carole said, unwrapping her arms from Selene to remove her coat and lay it across the back of a chair. She didn't mention the obvious bulge beneath Selene's clothing. She breezed into the kitchen, stopping only when she caught sight of Sarah perching on one of the chairs at the table. Then she stood, waiting for introductions.

Flustered, Selene performed the niceties mechanically.

"Nice to meet you," Sarah said. "Have a seat."

Carole looked questioningly at Selene, who merely shrugged, barely succeeding in hiding her annoyance at Sarah's attempts to take over hostess duties.

“So you’re Beck’s cousin,” Sarah said in her nasal voice as Selene went to pour Carole a cup of coffee. “I’m Selene’s next door neighbor and oldest friend. We’ve been discussing the possibility of her moving in with me, haven’t we, Selene?”

“Sarah,” Selene warned.

Carole seated herself, looking curiously from Sarah to Selene. “Oh, are you moving?” she asked mildly, as if she hadn’t noticed the boxes strewn about and the empty condition of the apartment’s walls, the lack of greenery, and closets with doors standing open. Still she said nothing about Selene’s obvious weight gain and the fact that she was wearing voluminous maternity clothes.

Selene served them all and then seated herself between the two women. Carole stirred sugar into her coffee, studying Sarah for a moment, before asking Selene, “Can we speak freely?”

“Go ahead. Sarah knows it all—or thinks she does,” Selene said, shooting Sarah a look that would have withered a lesser woman. Sarah just smirked and took a sip of her coffee.

“I see. In that case, I think we’d better get down to brass tacks, Selene. What’s the problem?” Carole asked.

“The problem is, Selene’s pregnant with your cousin’s baby and she’s too proud to ask him for help,” Sarah announced blithely, tossing a mass of red curls over one shoulder. “Maybe you can make her see sense. She should at least tell Professor Beck about his kid, don’t you think?”

Selene could easily have killed Sarah in that moment. She looked daggers at her before slowly turning her head to judge Carole’s reaction. She expected to see shock, but there was none. Carole returned a cool, bland look to Sarah’s truculent one.

“You don’t seem surprised, Carole,” Selene ventured timidly.

“I’m not surprised. I already knew.” Carole turned appraising blue eyes on her. “However, I am disappointed in you, Selene. Sarah is right. Beck has the right to know he’s going to be a father. Which is why...” she paused “...I asked him to come over this morning. He should be here any moment.”

“What?” Selene fought for breath. If she thought Sarah was an interfering, meddling third party, what did that make Carole? Carole, formerly her trusted advisor, always her friend. Selene reeled at the betrayal.

Even Sarah seemed shocked into speechlessness. “Wow,” she breathed, her gray eyes wide.

“I’m truly sorry,” Carole said, reaching for Selene’s hand. “I should have delivered that bit of news more discreetly. But, my dear, I can’t stand by any longer and watch the two of you flounder ahead without each other. You’re absolutely two of a kind—stubborn to the point of ridiculousness. You’re not only hurting yourselves, you’re hurting each other. You need Beck.”

Selene bristled. “I don’t need anyone,” she protested. “I’m doing all right by myself.”

Sarah snorted eloquently. Selene glared at her, but Sarah only wrinkled her freckled pug nose back at her.

“Do what you can to prepare yourself,” Carole said. “Beck will be here in a matter of minutes.”

“I can’t believe this.” Selene withdrew her hand, looking accusingly at Carole. “I thought you were my friend. How could you interfere like this?”

“Somebody has to,” Sarah offered. She shook her head of red curls. “You’re not doing such a hot job on your own, Selene. I was thinking of getting his number and calling him myself.”

“You wouldn’t dare,” Selene said through numb lips, knowing full well that sooner or later Sarah would have contacted Beck if she continued to refuse to do it herself.

“Selene.” Carole once again reached for her cold hand, holding tightly when she would have pulled away. “Have I ever offered you bad advice?”

Selene shook her head dumbly. No, Carole had never led her to make bad choices. She did that very well, and completely, on her own.

Such as her choice of friends, she thought, glaring alternately at Sarah and then Carole.

"It's obvious to me you and Beck can't live without each other. I advise you to say everything there is to say, completely and fully to him," Carole continued. "Everything you've been holding back, everything you ever wanted to say. Please, please let him in on this small miracle in your lives."

Miracle? Did Carole say miracle? Although up to this point she had been feeling pretty optimistic about her pregnancy, she'd only been trying to make the best of a bad situation. She loved the child unreservedly already but she had hardly been looking upon its arrival as a miracle.

Maybe she'd been too wrapped up in herself, she thought. Though she never considered ridding herself of the baby, she hadn't exactly been putting the child's welfare first, either. The baby had become merely another obstacle to work around in attaining her own goals. Not that she didn't want the child or look forward to its birth, just that the baby had not been her first priority. Maybe Sarah was right. Maybe Carole was right too....

A firm knock sounded at the door.

Sarah and Carole exchanged glances before they both looked expectantly at Selene. Sarah grabbed her other hand and gave it a squeeze before pushing her chair away from the table and rising to her feet.

"I better go," she said.

"I'll be going, too," Carole chimed in, rising to go claim her coat.

For all her resentment at their dual interference, now that they planned to leave her Selene wanted to wail, *Don't go! Don't leave me alone, I'll make a mess of things, I know I will. Don't both of you go and leave me to handle this alone!*

But of course neither Carole nor Sarah could take care of her from here on in. If she was to face Beck, she must do it alone. She and Beck had created this mess, this miracle in Carole's words, together. Together they must find a mutually agreeable way to share their child's future. Another vista opened up, a lonely and disturbing vision of the child shuttling back and forth across the country between them. Would Beck be content with just summer and holiday visits from his own child? Once he found out the truth, would he try to take the baby away from her?

She opened the door.

Beck filled the doorway. Inexplicably, a teddy bear dangled from one hand. Had someone let the cat out of the bag about the baby? Wordlessly, he stared at her. When she also said nothing, his eyes strayed briefly to his cousin and then to Sarah, both of them standing there watching. Then his eyes zoomed back to hers, and Selene started to tremble. Over the top of Sarah's head as she excused herself and squeezed out the doorway, and then Carole's as she paused to hug Selene and then to clasp Beck's denim coated bicep in encouragement before taking her leave, his searing honey brown eyes never left hers.

It wasn't until awareness of the cold air seeping into the apartment around her sank in, causing her teeth to chatter, that she finally could bring herself to say woodenly, "Come in, Beck. Please. Shut the door."

He shook himself, as if coming out of a dream. Without taking his eyes off her, he leaned against the door to close it.

"You look different," he finally said. "You look good, don't get me wrong—but different." He gazed at her, head cocked as he assessed the change.

"Yes. I've gained a little weight." She laughed soundlessly. "Won't you sit down?" she offered, removing a cardboard carton from a chair.

He folded his long frame into the proffered chair, neglecting to remove his coat. He sat with the bear in his lap as his puzzled eyes raked her from head to toe and back again. They lingered at her stomach level, then jerked up to her full breasts before returning to her face.

He shook his head slightly, denial written all over his rugged features.

“Would you like a cup of coffee?” she asked. “It’s hot. I made it for Carole, but she...couldn’t stay.”

“Did she tell you I was coming?” he asked. “It wasn’t a surprise?”

“She told me.” *Mere seconds before you arrived*, she added to herself. Moving to the kitchen, she poured two fresh cups of coffee. Even if Beck didn’t want any, it gave her something to do.

“You’re going somewhere?” he asked, looking suspiciously around the living room as she entered with the steaming cups.

“Well...I’m moving.” Saved from that fate, anyway, she thought gratefully. Sarah was right. Moving in with Robert would have ultimately destroyed any shred of self-esteem she had left.

His eyes zeroed in on her again. Seeming to gather his resources as he took a deep breath and then exhaled. He held out the stuffed bear to her and said, “I’ve missed you, Selene.”

“I’ve missed you too.” She paused, while they each clutched one of the bear’s arms. A quotation briefly flitted through her head: *Beware of Greeks bearing gifts*. But surely Beck meant her no harm.

“There was a woman standing outside your door when I got here. She handed me the bear without any explanation. I guess I was so flustered, I just took it. She was a nice looking woman, not a panhandler or anything. Still, I should have asked what she was doing.”

Selene studied the stuffed bear. “It looks brand new. She couldn’t have thought it maybe belonged to someone here. It still has its tag.”

“Maybe I should get rid of it.” He reached for the bear.

Selene felt a sudden urge to protect the fuzzy toy as she looked into its dark plastic eyes. “No,” she said, clutching it. “I want to keep it. Beck,” she added slowly, “I have something to tell you.”

“You got the check?” he asked hurriedly, apparently trying to stave off her news. Did he suspect? Did he know? Did he not want to talk about it? “You’re not giving up the apartment because of money, are you? I could help you out...or Carole. Carole would be glad to help. You could stay with her if it came to that.”

“Beck.” She held up a hand. “Money’s not important.”

“Of course money’s important,” he exploded, nervous energy surging to the forefront. He laid the untouched coffee cup aside and leaned toward her. “More so when you don’t have any. I worry about you, Selene. I need to know you’re all right.”

“I’m fine,” she said, and suddenly knew it was true. Things would work out one way or the other. She would stay with Sarah or not. The baby would be born; that much was certain. She would start her new job and attend some classes until she could go back full time. It was only a matter of a few months one way or the other. She didn’t know now why she’d been in such a panic she’d actually considered moving in with Robert.

Perhaps she had the overpowering instinct to protect the child, even if she was unaware of the urge. But in that case, why Robert, for Pete’s sake? She must have been out of her mind. Now that the father of her baby sat right across from her, she questioned her lapse of sanity in even considering such a thing. Maybe her pregnant hormones had been raging out of control, rendering her temporarily insane. As soon as Beck stepped through the door clutching this silly teddy bear, all had come clear. The contrast between Beck and Robert was so obvious. How could she have thought Robert would begin to replace Beck, even as a friend?

The cup she held rattled in its saucer. She had to tell him, and tell him now.

She laid her own cup down and leaned as far forward as her belly would let her. “I need you to hold my hand, Beck,” she said, and held out trembling fingers of the hand that didn’t grasp the bear. Could she trust him—finally, fully? “I’ve got something to tell you, and I need your support.”

How would he react? What would he say?



He extended his hand and held her fingers without question. His eyes bored into hers, making her stomach jump with anticipation of his reaction. Would he still offer unreserved support once she told him?

He didn't give her the chance. It was hardly like Beck to interrupt, but he began, "I've got something to tell you first, Selene. The study we did this summer, the oral history...I've found a publisher. They were so pleased with the final result—the woman's point of view, which was your idea. You're listed as co-author. I brought the contract with me for you to sign."

Delighted surprise shot through her. He had given her equal status on his project? If he didn't love her, still he valued her collaboration. She had influenced him after all; he regarded her as a full partner and not just a typist.

"It's like the realization of a dream," she said gratefully as she stared at the contract. "Thank you, Beck."

"Sorry. I couldn't wait another second to tell you. And now your news," he urged, amber brown eyes shining.

She took a deep breath. He waited expectantly, smiling. Would she wipe the happiness from his face with her own news? Might as well get it over with. "I'm pregnant," she breathed.

His fingers tightened their grip on hers while his eyes strayed once more to her middle. "I knew it," he muttered. "I knew it was something like that. Carole knew, didn't she? And she didn't tell me. Did you tell her? Was that it? Did you ask her not to tell me?"

She shook her head. "I haven't told anyone. But now I'm starting to show so it's no secret. It must have been somebody at the college who told her."

He said nothing for the longest time, and she began to wonder what he was thinking. Was he shocked, disappointed, aghast? Would he turn from her, deny paternity, leave again without a backward glance?

"A baby," he said at last. "My baby, yours and mine. It's...magical, isn't it?" He smiled wonderingly, beginning to consider the reality she had lived with for five months. He handled shock well, she thought.

"Well, that settles it," he said decisively. "We'll just get married."

It was she who felt shocked. She hadn't expected him to offer marriage. No one held a shotgun to his head, and the last thing she wanted was for him to feel forced to marry her. "We don't have to do anything," she said, inexplicably hurt that he would assume she would want to marry him just because she was pregnant. "If I marry again, it will be for love."

"And you don't love me, is that what you're saying? You don't want to marry me?" He looked puzzled and hurt. "I want to marry you, Selene. I was going to ask you, anyway, but now it's been clinched, hasn't it. Say you'll marry me."

"Nothing's clinched," she said. Each word was a struggle to get out, as if she was fighting the will of some force a lot stronger than she was. Part of her wanted to just say, *Yes, yes, yes!* and shout for the pure joy of it. "There's too much against us for marriage to work."

"Like what?" Completely taken by surprise, to judge by his face, he searched her eyes for answers.

"Like the fact that you're the director of American Studies at Boston University, and I'm a second year student at a community college. I'd embarrass you at university functions. It would be like you were marrying the cleaning lady or something."

His jaw fell. "Do you think I feel superior to you, Selene? Did I ever make you think so? I never meant to. Anyway, I'm retired from all that. I'm going to help my sister on the family ranch. As soon as you sign the contract, you and I will be equals, published historians. You can continue your studies if you like, and in a few years you'll have the same amount of schooling as I."

This was a lot of information to take in. She had never suspected he was a man of the land. She had thought him an academic. Her nona would have been pleased at this turn of events, even

though it felt to Selene rather like she had been manipulated behind the scenes somehow. But that was impossible. With her old nona gone, who would care enough to interfere on Selene Pertunda's behalf?

"I thought you didn't want a highly educated wife. I thought that's what broke up your first marriage, your wife going back to school. You said you had to be first in somebody's life. Doesn't that effectively rule out a career for any wife of yours?" Confused, her voice rising, she nevertheless continued to hold his hand—and the bear.

He frowned, apparently as confused as she. "I wanted Annie to do whatever she wanted to do, Selene. I want you to do whatever makes you happy." He shook his head. "Besides loving you, I loved working with you. All I ask is that you continue to share your life with me. I had already decided I wanted to go back to the ranch. I want to try to grow wine grapes, and it will take years to get the vines established. Money and prestige aren't everything. We'll compromise. I'll give you the time and resources to get what you want: your education. And you give me what I want: a wife who loves me more than anything else in the world."

He paused before continuing. "Yes, I want to be loved best. Is that so wrong? I want to spend the rest of my life with you. I want you to be happy so that I can be happy, and our child can be happy. You make me out to be such an ogre, Selene. Did I ever ask you to give up anything in order to make me happy?"

She had to be honest. No, he had not asked her to give up her schooling, skip classes, flunk out. She'd done all that on her own, thinking somehow that she would please him by sacrificing her own happiness. Foolish notion, and something Beck had never asked of her.

"You asked me to define the modern marriage," she said, grasping at the straws that had held up her house of self-delusion. Had she so misjudged him, failed to hear what he had been saying? "I can't. I don't know how."

"Nobody does, sweetheart. It's one of those learn-as-you-go-along things. Let's make a home and a life together, you and I and our baby. Let's give it our best shot. Together, we can find the way to make our dreams possible." He knelt in front of her.

He seemed so sincere. Where along the line had her thinking gone so wrong? Had he loved her all along and she refused give him a chance to tell her? All along, he had encouraged and supported her. Her own insecurities had made her suspect his motives. She had to learn to trust. To trust Beck.

He made it sound so easy. She had missed him so much. She longed to touch him, to be reassured that he loved her too, baby or no baby. She set the bear down beside her. A little spray of sparkles which neither of them noticed erupted from it. Her free hand automatically went to his thick hair, and she ran her fingers through the black curls.

"Talk to me, Selene. Share with me. Love me. Trust me. Marry me and make me complete. I promise to make you as happy as possible. I promise to be the best husband and father I know how to be. You need me, admit it."

More sparkles from the bear.

"That's true. I-I do," she said wonderingly as truth dawned bright and clear. "I really do need you. You're the best thing that ever happened to me, and I almost let you get away."

He grinned crookedly. "I've been miserable without you."

He wrapped his arms around her as tears began streaming down her face. Could she have so misjudged him? Could she have been so wrong about him, misinterpreting so much of what he'd said?

She loved him. Loved him, loved him madly. Long after their child was grown and gone, he was the one she hoped to live with for the rest of her life. She wanted to grow old with Beck, to grow as a woman and as the woman who loved him. They made each other better. He was right, they completed each other. She, with her innate talent with plants, could make a success of a

dreamer's venture like a Wyoming vineyard. The baby, the baby they had started together, was a bonus.

Caterina had been right: Selene had almost robbed him of the chance to be the best man he could be. Carole and Sarah were right: the two of them should have talked this out long before, before she almost made the most ruinous mistake of her life.

"I plan to be in town a couple of weeks," he said, drawing away slightly and gazing at her belly. "Think about it, Selene. We could have a wonderful life collaborating." He smiled wickedly, and she knew exactly what kind of collaboration he meant.

"You can stop convincing me." She laughed. "I don't need weeks to think about it. I love you. I want to marry you."

He relaxed, the tension he'd been attempting to hide draining from him as he rested his head against her stomach, the baby pushing back from the other side. She supposed she wasn't the easiest person to convince; she didn't deliberately try to make it hard on Beck, it was only her own low level of confidence that begged constant reassurance. She hadn't really needed him to get down on his knees. Or had she?

The baby chose that moment to kick and Beck's ear bounced against her belly. He looked at her and they both laughed.

"He has his mother's temperament," he said.

"She has her father's muscles," she countered.

"You think it's a girl?" Beck asked. "I'd like a girl. Or a boy. Or maybe one of each. Have you picked out names?"

"How about Caterina for a girl?" She gazed lovingly into his eyes. "A very wise woman. She said once that if nobody loved you in life, then what was it all for? She was trying to convince me to let you know about the baby. I should have listened."

"You seem to be surrounded by wise women," Beck said.

"Let's don't leave out one wise man." She ran a fingertip from the bridge of his nose to its tip. "I'm glad you came back. Maybe we should name the baby after Carole, who nagged until she brought us back together. Or Sarah, who threatened to call you and tell you about the baby."

"Whoa! That's three names already." Beck held up a hand. "We can't name her after everybody who put in a hand to help us. We only need one, right? Or is there something else you're not telling me...we are having just one baby, right?"

"Only one. As far as I know. If I find out differently, you'll be the first to know."

"Please." He rose up on his knees to her height. Their eyes locked, and his mouth descended hungrily on hers. "Let me know everything from now on," he murmured against her lips. "No secrets between us. I've missed you so much, Selene. I want to be a part of you forever."

His hands explored the new contours of her enlarged belly and breast. "I've got an idea," he said. "Want to play doctor? I need to examine this baby of ours more closely, and its mother too, of course." He leered, waggling his eyebrows.

"You don't need to *play* at being a doctor. You are a doctor."

"I don't think a doctorate in history counts," he grinned. "So does that mean you don't want to play with me?"

"That's not what I said, doctor," she said as she once again sought his kiss. She would just have to explain, and keep on explaining what she meant, probably for the rest of her life. But that was okay. As long as Beck listened, she would willingly spend her life explaining how joyously happy he made her.

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The man and the woman made their way hand-in-hand down the hall to the bedroom, leaving behind the mysterious teddy bear. It didn't take long before the woman sitting in her car

in the parking lot detected every window in the apartment she was watching light up from within with an explosion of sparkles like fireworks.

Chalk up one more happily-ever-after for the Goddess.

Fortunata smiled as she drove away.

# The Widow's Window

by  
Christi Williams

*L'è meio 'na stala mia che 'n palaz en compagnia.*

A cottage of your own is better than a palace shared with others.

—Tyrolean folk saying

## Chapter One

The wind kicked up. Dust, leaves, and bits of straw swirled around Madysen's boots as an early dusk cast ranch buildings into dark gray shadow. She zipped up the canvas Carhartt, a favorite of Carl's that still smelled comfortingly like him. The jacket was so old the cuffs and corduroy collar were fraying to strings and wrinkles worn into the fabric showed as white zigzags against the jacket's faded black. Yet, as suitable as it was to be tossed, she couldn't bring herself to part with it.

A spotted cattle dog trotted at her heels, another of Carl's favorites and the only one of the dogs ever allowed in the house. It sniffed the night breezes for scent of fox or coyote or wolf. So far, wolf sightings this far south had been just unsubstantiated rumor, but she and the several Great Pyrenees dogs and the goat-minder llamas kept up a vigilant guard.

She stopped and cocked her head once more, trying to ascertain if the thin wail actually came from the barn as she thought or just from the wind whistling through the double row of almost century-old spruce standing like sentinels against the fence. She was headed for the barn and adjacent goat sheds anyway, to make sure all were safely tucked in for the night, so it wasn't out of her way to go check. But the sound was so out of place, and eerie, almost like a child crying. As she reached for the door handle, the wail came again, louder and more insistent. Now she was sure it came from inside the barn, but still her ears had to be playing some cruel trick: it really did sound like a baby crying. And not an animal baby either, whose calls and squawks and whines had become so familiar to her. This wasn't a calf, or a foal, or a kid, or any other bleating or whinnying or bawling creature that lived on her ranch.

She opened the door, listening intently. No. Definitely not an animal. This was the sound of a very upset baby, a human baby, voicing a high-pitched demand that someone come to its aid *immediately*.

She took a step inside, boots crunching bits of fresh-smelling straw that Antonio had laid down in the stalls that day. The horses, two huge Percherons like those that had always resided here at Willow Vale since Madysen's great-grandparents' time, started nickering and blowing greetings. Big Sam, the latest in a long and distinguished line of ranch horses named Sam, stamped his foot repeatedly, sending a Morse code-type message that he expected to be first in line for any handout of apple or sugar or carrot secreted in a deep canvas pocket. Madysen could feel the dull thuds under her booted feet. In response to the noise and vibration transmitted from Sam's hoof through the barn floor, the strange cries, so near, rose to terrified screams.

She flipped on the light. Everything looked normal, the horses safely in their stalls, the interior of the barn neat and tidy. The horses watched her expectantly as she moved toward the increasingly shrill noise coming from the tack room at the end farthest away from the goat pens, their heads swiveling to keep her in sight. “Not now, Sam,” Madysen muttered. “I’ve got to check this out.” She eased the door to the tack room open, not really certain what might await her, or what might be startled into jumping out at her.

The crack of yellowish light grew brighter as she pulled, widening the space between the door and the jamb. Nothing leaped out. On the floor, bundled tightly in a neon pink blanket and lying atop a pile of folded, badly pillowed blankets of various cheap patterns and colors, lay a red-faced, open-mouthed baby. Eyes pinched shut in fury, little, shiny, toothless gums working, the baby girl—Madysen thought it must be a girl from the color of the blanket—shrieked her displeasure at being so tightly swaddled and then left all alone in the dark.

At least Madysen had assumed she and the child were alone. Maybe she shouldn’t make such an assumption. The horses hadn’t acted as if anything were out of the ordinary and rarely did anyone who didn’t belong on the ranch find an excuse to be there. But still.

“Hello?” she called over her shoulder. “Is anyone out there?”

Only the nickering of horses and the muted bleating of goats outside answered.

She stepped cautiously into the room and when nothing threatening appeared, knelt next to the pile of blankets. Gingerly, she picked up the angry baby, holding it so its hot, wet cheek laid against hers. *Poor little thing*. She wondered how long it had been out here, alone and becoming more and more frantic when no one responded to its cries. Automatically, she began to rock while patting the baby’s back.

“Shh, ssh, little one,” she crooned. “Everything will be all right now. Madysen’s here. Everything will be just fine.”

Antonio Marquez’s cell phone rang. He had been idling away the evening with half his thoughts on a game of Solitaire on an old, extremely slow laptop that belonged to the ranch, while in the background a CD of *norteño* music played. He had satellite television, but he wasn’t in the mood for phony canned audience laughter or badly plotted dramas. He had read every book in the place: musty volumes that had sat around the cabin for years, some leather-bound classics but mostly Zane Grey and Louis L’Amour novels. He supposed he could start over again at the beginning and reread them all, but didn’t feel like putting forth the effort tonight. It was *la patrona*’s turn to check the stock and consequently he had nothing better to do than watch the screen, occasionally tap a key or click the mouse, and muse. Privately, he thought it peculiar that the boss lady should insist on taking her turn every other night on rounds. He would gladly have performed the task each and every night, he in fact rarely had anything better to do with his evenings and would have welcomed the diversion. But Madysen Collins paid his wage, admittedly a generous one at that, and she made all the rules. He thought it the better part of valor to keep his mouth shut even if he did find those rules a bit eccentric at times.

He answered the phone.

“Antonio? I’m sorry to bother you. Can you finish checking the goats and the hens? I was just in the barn; the horses are fine.”

“Sí, of course,” he said. A loud cry from her end interrupted them; it gradually trailed off to a hiccupping keening. “Are you all right, *señora*?” he asked in a louder voice, trying to be heard over the unfamiliar sound.

“I’m fine...I think. Antonio, could you come over here to the main house when you’ve finished your rounds? I found something. And I’m not quite sure what I should do with it.”

She wanted his advice? That was a first. Madysen Collins was one very self-contained woman. She rarely showed what she was feeling about anything, and had kept their relationship

on a business-only basis for as long as he had been here. “Sure. Yes. I will be there as soon as I check the animals.”

“Thank you, Antonio,” she said, and disconnected as the wailing from her side of the conversation began rising in volume once more.

He pulled on his boots, donned his jacket and leather gloves, jammed his *Tejana* cowboy hat down on his head, and left the little log house that had been fully updated this past summer for his personal use. Walking across the yard, he neared the goat pens. The males, kept separate from the females, were still in high rut, pawing and snorting, butting each other, the fence posts, and whatever else they could while making the strange blubbling noise that girl goats seemed to find irresistible. The males hardly slept or ate while in rut, they smelled awful, they fought, and they had worn a deep furrow next to the fence as they paced the enclosure, waiting impatiently for their chance at the does. But the strong wire fence continued to hold and the channel wasn’t deep enough to allow them to escape, and so they seemed as content for the night as goats with nearby females in estrus could possibly be.

Sometimes Antonio really despised those goats. But goats were what had brought him here in the first place. If he felt he had hardly advanced in life from tending his *abuela*’s goats as a young boy, such feelings didn’t signify. Working the dairy goats for the senora’s cheese business was how he made his living, and so he was hoping that as the rutting faded with the coming cold weather he would come back around again to liking them somewhat. And he didn’t have much choice in the matter anyway. He had applied to the manpower broker that provided foreign agricultural workers to Americans, la señora had provided the letter and done all else necessary to get him here with a valid green card, and so he did what he must in order to ensure her animals remained safe and healthy, and so thereby retain his job.

He had worked for Madysen for over nine months now. He was among those who were willing to come and work on isolated ranches, as sheepherders, or as migrant farm workers picking lettuce, peaches, or beets. The difference was, he didn’t have to go back. His knowledge of goats, of all things, had assured him a place here. It wasn’t a bad life, except for the remoteness and the sometimes crushing boredom, and much better than scraping along trying to make a living at home. He hadn’t really expected to be chosen for this particular job, and he especially hadn’t counted on finding a tough ranch woman with unexpectedly dazzling looks like Madysen Collins when he got here. He still couldn’t get over such a young, beautiful woman living out here all alone and in charge of a bunch of goats, horses, chickens, dogs, and llamas, as well as a milking operation, a dairy, and an artisanal cheese business. Madysen ran herself to the point of exhaustion trying to keep it all going. In Antonio’s opinion she didn’t take proper care of herself—she was too thin. He often noticed her bedroom light on well into the wee hours, and assumed she wasn’t sleeping well either. Not that he kept close track of her activities, he assured himself. But from what he could determine, she seemed to operate largely on nerves and caffeine for approximately eighteen or nineteen hours a day. And so it was obvious she did need him here, and he was happy to be here, so he was glad to be of service to her any way he could.

But the longer Antonio remained at Willow Vale and the better he got to know Madysen Collins, the more he found himself fruitlessly wishing *la patrona* might eventually need him for something besides tending her animals, and that his services might be required elsewhere than her barn, coop, or stock pens. She really was a stunning woman, and if a little emotionally remote, still fairly easy to work for. Her demands were few, and as long as he did his job, she kept her distance and said little directly to him.

He checked that the chickens were all safely roosting for the night, and then headed for the big house. His boot heels pounding up the front stairs, he crossed the porch and raised his hand to rap on the glass of the front door.

“It’s open,” Madysen called. “Come on in, Antonio.”

The sight that greeted him as he opened the door could not have been more surreal. Pretty, blond Madysen Collins perched in an old wooden rocker, a tiny brown-skinned baby topped with a shock of straight, black hair in her arms. Madysen was trying her best to aim the plastic tip of a large syringe filled with what he assumed was goat milk into the child's greedy little mouth. He stood there staring, hat held loosely in the hand hanging at his side. No words adequate to his surprise occurred to him.

"I found this baby," Madysen said.

"Sí, señora," he replied.

"In the barn," she said.

He nodded mutely, as if for all he knew Wyoming ranch women discovered babies in their barns every day. He didn't know what she expected him to say. It was probably wise to say nothing.

"What do you think I should do?" she asked.

Antonio tried to swallow. He couldn't seem to drag his gaze from the baby. His throat was very dry.

"To tell you the truth, I'm at a loss here, Antonio." The boss lady carefully squirted a little more milk in the baby's mouth. They had bottles for the goat kids that didn't take well to the teat or whose mothers rejected them, but she apparently didn't want to try one of those on a tiny baby. "Do you think I should call the sheriff?"

He forced himself to speak past a mouth gone as sere as a desert. "No, señora," he said. "I do not think you should call the sheriff."

She glanced at him sharply as she hoisted the baby to her shoulder and patted its back. "Why not?"

He hesitated, then said, "Because if you call the authorities, they will take away the baby."

She examined him closely from where she sat. "You want to keep it? How can we possibly do that?" She paused, her gaze narrowing. "Is there something that you know about this situation, that perhaps I should know as well, Antonio?"

"I...ah, I think so, yes, señora." He fingered his turned-up hat brim.

"Well? And what might that be, this something that I should know?" Her voice was beginning to acquire an impatient edge as he continued to hem and haw. He knew she liked to face things head on and deal with situations as they occurred. He knew she didn't much like surprises and she especially didn't like evasion.

"Well, the baby...that baby, I recognize her. I mean, I know whose baby that is. I'm pretty sure. No, I am sure."

"Okay, we got that much." The boss's full lips tightened with exasperation. "Whose baby is this, Antonio?"

He swallowed again. "Mine. You cannot call the sheriff. Please, señora. That baby is mine," he said almost in a whisper.

Madysen's head tilted. She frowned, staring at him as if trying to decipher the meaning of words that made no sense.

"I mean," he hurried to add, "that is my daughter's baby. My granddaughter. She is three months old. Her name is Lidia."

He crossed the space between them and held out his arms. With a stunned expression on her pretty face, Madysen wordlessly let him take the baby from her. She even handed him the half-empty syringe and a dishtowel that she had been using to wipe dribbles from the baby's chin.

She watched as he sat on the sofa across from her, an old wagon wheel end table on the worn carpet between them. He began attempting to feed the baby as he had seen her do.

Antonio looked down into the baby's dark eyes. "*No te preocupes, pequeña*," he said softly.

"What are you saying to her?" Madysen asked.

"I told her not to worry. That things will be all right."



"That's funny. That's what I told her, too." Madysen's lips stretched over her teeth, but Antonio didn't think it was a real smile, more an expression of tired resignation.

There was a long silence as Antonio continued feeding the baby. At last, as the child's eyelids started drooping, Madysen asked, "What are we going to do? This is temporary, I hope. Your daughter is planning on coming back?"

"I cannot say." He paused, looked up at the beautiful woman sporting dark circles beneath her tired-looking eyes. She sat watching him feed the baby with her cheek propped on one hand, blinking as if fighting sleep herself.

"But I do not think my daughter will be returning."

It was Madysen's turn to hesitate. "In that case, what do you suggest we do?"

He began inching toward the front of the sofa, trying not to jiggle the baby awake while he got to his feet. "I will keep Lidia, of course. I will take her home with me. We will not bother you further, señora."

He almost made it to the door before she said, "Wait right there."

He turned back toward the light. Back toward Madysen.

"Have you ever taken care of a baby before, Antonio?"

"Well...not by myself. Gaby's mother took care of her mostly. I wasn't really home that much, always working or else off looking for work."

She heaved a sigh. "Then your plan to take that baby to the cabin is impossible. Stay here," she said in a decisive voice. "I'll make up the bed in Jillian's room. We both need to get some rest. If the baby wakes up during the night, we can take turns tending her instead of you trying to do it all yourself."

He was moved that the boss would do so much for him, a hired hand, and the child who meant nothing to her. "That is very generous of you, señora."

Madysen sighed. "*De nada*," she said and waved a slender-fingered hand that sported short, blunt nails.

But, no matter what she said, it was something. She looked so tired, Antonio felt sorry for her, and especially sorry that he had inadvertently caused her even more work. He had known nothing of Gabriela's plans to abandon her baby, but still, Gaby was his daughter and Lidia his granddaughter. Their relationship to him meant he was partially responsible when shame such as this descended on his family.

He helped *la patrona* make up the bed in her absent daughter's room, and then she pulled a drawer from the dresser and lined it with blankets from a linen closet in the hall to make a crib for the baby. Antonio placed Lidia there on her back. She had apparently worn herself out; she slept soundly and didn't stir.

"I'll leave the doors open so I can hear if she needs me," Madysen said.

Watching the woman carefully for some clue as to how he should act as a guest in her home instead of her hired man, he said, "Okay."

"Milk's in the fridge. There are more clean syringes on the counter."

"Maybe she sleeps through the night," he said hopefully. When Madysen didn't answer, he said, "But probably not, huh?"

"Probably not," she agreed. "If I hear her fussing, I will get up."

"I hope that will not be necessary," he said. "Good night, señora."

"Good night, Antonio," she said. She crossed the hall, gathered her night clothes and went into the bathroom.

Antonio undressed and got between the cool sheets of Madysen's daughter's single bed. The mattress was too short for him, and he thought between that and the unfamiliar presence of the small person lying next to him in a dresser drawer, he probably wouldn't get much sleep.

He was still awake when Madysen exited the bathroom in a cloud of perfumed steam, clad in a nightgown that revealed the shape of her long legs and generous breasts when illuminated by

the bedside lamp in her room. Antonio was astounded. He rubbed his eyes, thinking he might be dreaming. But his cock responded to the vision she presented without hesitation, as if with the display of the boss's body—no matter how unintentional—a silent invitation had been issued.

It couldn't be. No. Could it? Could she be advertising to him what she meant for him to have?

*Impossible.* He would be a complete *idiot* to think so, only the long period of enforced celibacy out here in the middle of nowhere making him think something existed that did not exist outside of his fevered imagination.

He watched for as long as he could stand it, and then flung an arm over his eyes so he didn't have to continue looking. He'd caught sight of her completely naked, more than once, framed in that same bedroom window. But that had taken place at a distance. If perhaps a little wrong of him to stand at his own window staring at the vision, still it had been safe. This right here was up close and personal. If he even attempted what the sight of her body beneath the sheer gown made him want to do, he would probably get himself fired from his job and thrown off her property.

He to his side, his eyes tightly shut as he tried to ignore the twitching of his erect cock brushing his belly.

Now he was positive he would spend the night without sleep.

## Chapter Two

Well aware that the nightie she wore was transparent—it had been one of Carl's favorites—Madysen delayed actually getting into bed. First she stood in front of the nightstand in direct line of sight of the open bedroom doors facing each other across the hall as if debating with herself over something, while giving her guest a good, long look. Then she bent to open the lower drawer, and stayed that way for a minute or two, rummaging around with her legs spread and her breasts swaying loosely. When she heard a muffled groan, she knew she had the attention of the audience she desired. She stood, turning sideways and taking a deep breath, stretching her arms over her head with her tummy tucked in and back arched so her large breasts were nicely pointed. As the material of her nightgown brushed against her nipples, they hardened into little peaks. She yawned, running her palms lightly over her breasts and down her flat stomach to rest on her hips, stretching the gown tight and outlining her shape. There was an answering creak of bedsprings from across the hall, and another groan, a bit louder than the first.

Smiling to herself, she reached for the switch and turned off the light, plunging the room into darkness and thereby pulling the curtain on the show for the night.

She had mourned Carl hard for more than a year. When he died, it felt like the stuffing had been yanked out of her. Then before Madysen was ready for it, Jilly left for college. For months now, she had dragged herself around like a limp cotton rag shaped like a woman, faking being alive and just going through the motions.

She had held herself firmly in check in these last couple of weeks since she had begun to emerge from the fog of widowhood—and at the same time had begun to notice what an extremely attractive man she had hired. Covertly, she watched Antonio Marquez when she thought he wasn't aware of her scrutiny. And she liked what she saw: the fluid sureness of his movements, the strength in his muscled back and arms and flexing thighs. Sometimes, she was almost sure he watched her too, although it was just a feeling and she had never caught him openly ogling her. She had kept them on an unequal footing, boss lady and hired man, longer than she really wanted to. She knew she came across as tough and unyielding—but better that, she told herself, than too easy.

Only now she felt herself coming alive again. Now she was coming back to herself, and found she was already wanting to play with fire. She had so loved showing off her body. Carl had loved her showing off her body. The lush valley, Willow Valley, was a closed society of few

people. The ranch itself, Willow Vale, was an isolated little paradise in a fertile valley hidden away by itself in the high desert. Her exhibitionism had always been their exciting secret, hers and Carl's.

Now Carl was dead. Jillian was off starting a new life. Madysen was suddenly no longer wife or mommy or anything recognizable to herself except goat milker and cheese maker. She was left here on the ranch all alone...well, all alone with the Latin hunk, Antonio Marquez, living just across the yard.

Alone with Antonio...except for the new wrinkle of Antonio's little granddaughter Lidia, of course.

Madysen asked herself if she was really ready to start up again. Relationships, even those built strictly on sex, had a habit of becoming so complicated. She had waited to test her kinky little routine out on Antonio, and she wasn't certain what daring impulse made her put it on display the very same night she found little Lidia crying in the barn. The discovery of the baby had been a convenient way to get Antonio inside her house, and to give him a little preliminary show, but already the difficulties of the situation were more than she felt ready to handle.

She would just have to wait and see how things went.

Antonio woke suddenly, the unfamiliar snuffling sound coming again as he gained full consciousness. He tried to think what the sound might be, and then remembered Gaby's baby. Remembered that he was sleeping in *la patrona's* house in a bed next to Gaby's baby.

He slid an arm out of the covers to try and comfort the baby, see if she would be willing to just go back to sleep so he wouldn't have to get up and risk waking Madysen. As he extended his arm in the darkness, his hand brushed fabric, as well as the outlines of two round, warm mounds. There was a sharp intake of breath, which he echoed when he suddenly realized what had just happened.

Madysen, dressed in her filmy nightgown, knelt next to the baby, who was in a dresser drawer next to his bed. Without knowing she was there, when he reached his hand out, he brushed her breasts.

He didn't move. Neither did she.

Her generous breasts, too large really for such a slender woman but somehow perfection attached to her body, remained resting lightly on his hand and wrist. Her skin radiated the warmth of her bed through the thin fabric. His skin burned with an answering heat where she touched him.

Madysen bent forward. He couldn't believe it. Could she deliberately be mashing one of those luscious breasts into his palm? He didn't dare cup the ripe roundness pressing against his open hand as every instinct urged him to do. He lay supine and didn't allow himself a response as the boss lady got to her feet with Lidia grasped in her arms, hesitated for a moment, then turned and left the room.

Sometime later, an eternity or perhaps only minutes, she returned with the baby. He didn't dare extend his arm again, even though he wanted to. He really, really wanted to. But he wasn't quite sure what was going on here. All the glimpses of Madysen's body by lamplight, the feel of her soft breast in his hand, could be accidental. If he was misreading the situation, if he made a move toward her and she became offended, she could fire him. She was, after all, the boss.

He tried to decipher what she was doing by sound alone. Out here, miles from civilization's street lights and security lights and porch lights, the only illumination came from the stars or the moon. There was no moonlight tonight, and starlight didn't penetrate very far inside the house. So he listened. She bent to carefully place the sleeping baby back in the nest of blankets. Then she stood for a moment beside the bed where he lay, as if undecided and trying to make up her mind about something. But she made no further move toward him. Finally his ears told him, and the receding swish of her nightgown against her legs affirmed, that she was gone.

He thought he probably wouldn't sleep, since his breathing was harsh and uneven and his steel hard cock a torment, but eventually he did. He woke to the smells of bacon frying, bread toasting, and coffee brewing. Beside him, in the drawer on the floor, Lidia began whimpering. He hurriedly rose from the bed and dressed, and by the time he picked up the soaking wet baby, the hitch in her breathing told him little Lidia was preparing to cut loose with some really unhappy wails. "You are wet and you are probably hungry as well, *sí*, Lidia? Maybe the smell of bacon makes your stomach growl as loudly as your *abuelo*'s."

He had to smile at the improvised plastic pants she wore over her dish towel diaper. Madysen had cut leg holes in a grocery bag and taped the ends together around the baby's waist. It was fairly effective, but the heavier the wet diaper became, the more the improvised affair sagged and threatened to tear away completely.

When he descended the stairs to the kitchen, Madysen, standing over an old gas range of chipped white enamel, pointed with her spatula to a stack of cotton dish towels. He retreated to the sofa in the living room with Lidia and a sweet-smelling dish towel printed with cheerful daisies. Antonio couldn't recall ever changing a diaper before, but he didn't think it could be that hard. So he was surprised at how difficult it was to diaper an angry, hungry, kicking baby. He was terrified that he would jab her soft skin with a safety pin, which, thankfully, didn't actually happen. He was feeling pretty pleased with himself at accomplishing his task until he lifted her up and the diaper drooped to her knees, threatening to fall off completely.

There came an unfamiliar noise. He turned toward the kitchen to find Madysen propped against the doorframe. She was laughing. At him. He couldn't recall ever hearing the sound of her laughter in the nine months he had known her.

"Antonio, you're hopeless," she said. "Go eat breakfast. I'll get Miss Lidia fixed up, and then you can feed her while I eat."

He grinned, shrugging, and yielded his place on the sofa to Madysen. Almost before he could seat himself in her kitchen and pick up his fork, she was back with the baby. Propping Lidia over her shoulder, she took a pitcher of milk from the fridge, poured some out into a measuring cup and put it in the microwave to heat. When it was done, she stuck the tip of her little finger in it to check the temperature. Then they waited for him to finish eating, Madysen patiently and Lidia increasingly peevishly.

He was uncomfortable with the boss lady's blue eyes watching his every move. But he was also hungry. He hurried to finish, hoping he wasn't making her think he was completely without manners, gulping his food and swigging his coffee.

"May I ask, Antonio, what your daughter was thinking when she dropped her baby off here? How did she assume you were going to manage?"

"I do not know." He wiped a bit of egg from his lips and stood to fill the syringe and then to relieve Madysen of Lidia. "Honestly, I wonder sometimes if Gabriela thinks at all about what she is doing, or if she only goes along with whatever she feels at the moment. I am sure that is how she ended up with Lidia in the first place, by not thinking. And that is probably how she came to abandon her own baby."

Madysen sat and picked up her own utensils preparatory to eating breakfast, then paused. "How old is Gabriela?"

"Sixteen," he said, not raising his eyes from Lidia's innocent deep black eyes intently studying his face, to what he was sure were the boss's accusatory blue ones. "Gaby always did whatever she wanted. And what she wanted, ever since she laid eyes on him or so she said, was a young hotshot named Rafael."

"And did her mother not try to stop her?"

"I do not know, *señora*," he said. "I was not married to Gaby's mother. I have not lived with them for many years. I sent money when I could find work, and saw Gabriela when I could, which was not often. I only met Rafael once, here. Gaby was already big with his baby, and he

was talking about going back. I think, after she had Lidia, Gaby decided to follow him. Lidia would have been inconvenient.”

He watched Madysen run her coffee cup contemplatively across her bottom lip. “It’s none of my business, but may I ask why you didn’t marry Gabriela’s mother?”

He looked down into the round-cheeked, innocent face of Gaby’s baby. “There were...others. Gaby’s mother always had men hanging around. I could not bring myself to marry that kind of woman.”

She glanced up sharply. “Yet when she told you Gabriela was your child, you believed her?”

He shrugged. “Gaby is mine.”

She put her coffee cup down, staring at him. “I’m sorry, but how can you know that? Have you had blood tests?”

“I just know.” After another pause where she just continued looking at him, he said, “You think me a fool, sí?”

She examined him, blue eyes traveling from his booted feet all the way up to meet his gaze again. After a long moment, she said, “I think you might be a man of honor, Antonio.”

He couldn’t help himself. She was making him so nervous, watching him with a fascination not unlike a housecat playing with a cornered insect. “A foolish man of honor,” he insisted. “Like Don Quixote and his windmills.”

She shrugged. “I wouldn’t know. Perhaps.”

If she was surprised he knew of Don Quixote, she didn’t show it. As she added nothing more, he felt embarrassed suddenly, as if she couldn’t help but think he was fishing for compliments. “If you could watch Lidia, if that is not asking too much, I will start on the morning chores,” he said.

She held out her arms, and he handed her the baby. “I’ll be out pretty soon to help you with the bucks, Antonio.”

He thought of her stinky male goats and how he had to dress in heavy coveralls and gloves in order to handle them and not get their reek on his clothes. “It is not necessary, señora. I can do it alone.”

“Antonio. I will be out to help you with the bucks as soon as Lidia goes down for her nap.”

He nodded his head in assent and turned to leave. For all the sharing of secrets, he had risen to no higher position in Madysen Collins’ estimation than the one he had previously held. Extraordinary circumstances aside, he was still just the hired man.

He fed the goats, filling the troughs that ran down a center aisle in the shed so they had to poke their heads through pipes to get at the feed. Goats were the most wasteful creatures on earth, he thought. If allowed to, they would scatter and trample all their food. And these particular goats had to be fed a careful, expensive mixture. These pampered goats couldn’t be allowed like other goats to eat anything they could find in an ordinary pasture; for Madysen’s cheese business she needed consistent results from their milk with no odd wild taste to ruin the product.

He fed the big horses, led them out to the corral, and then cleaned the barn.

He was scattering feed for the chickens when Madysen emerged from the house. She had on a clean pair of coveralls, disguising her curves, and leather gloves and work boots. With no ado, assuming Antonio would follow her lead without spoken directions, she chose one of the females in heat, herded her out of the communal pen and down a fenced aisle to a place where she could be penned up alone. Then she approached the enclosure where the bucks were. When he could determine which buck she had her eye on, Antonio headed Madysen off to begin manhandling it where they wanted it to go. Once the animal caught on to the idea that he was destined to mate with the single bleating doe, he began blubbing his lips in earnest and fighting to get to her.

The mating itself took only seconds, but in order to be sure the does came up pregnant, Antonio and Madysen let the bucks have at them three or four times before separating the amorous pairs.

Near noon, Madysen grimaced, saying, "I think that's enough for now, Antonio. I'm more than ready for a shower."

He held himself in check as best he could from following that line of thought where he could well visualize her naked, wet body. Instead he contented himself with watching as she unzipped her coveralls and peeled them off, revealing a tight shirt and jeans that hugged her body. When she bent over, presenting her ass to him, he thought the top of his head might blow off from the instant explosion of heat that rose inside him like a geyser.

"Come on. Hurry up and get your clothes off," she said over her shoulder. "We'll have to take turns in case Lidia wakes up. Do you want to go first?"

He was amazed at this offer. He had thought he would go to the little cabin where he lived to get cleaned up, but Madysen was right. In that case there would be no one to tend Lidia while Madysen was in the bathroom. Unversed in the ways of mothers, who all over the world showered while no one watched their babies, Antonio could only agree. Unsuspecting, he had no idea he was being steered toward another of Madysen's favorite kinds of erotic activity as he shucked his smelly coveralls.

"Why don't you go first, señora?" Antonio asked when he saw that Lidia was awake and starting to fuss. "I will feed Lidia, and then go over to the little house to get some clean clothes."

Madysen seemed to consider this, then making up her mind that he probably couldn't manage on his own, she said, "Don't you want me to change her diaper first?"

"I will manage," Antonio asserted with supreme confidence.

After his initial disastrous experience with diaper changing, Madysen found this hard to believe, but she tried hard not to laugh aloud.

"Well, okay then." She went out to the mudroom attached to the back of the house, and kicked off her boots. Then she wriggled out of her jeans and wearing only her panties, bent to pull off her socks, making sure the mounds of her ass faced in Antonio's direction. She straightened, pulled off her shirt, and threw her clothes in the washer. "Just add yours to this load when you're ready," she said, and nonchalantly sauntered toward the stairs. She was grinning her head off at the look on his face as he stood open-mouthed and with his feet planted to the floor in her kitchen, staring at her breasts.

"And don't drop Lidia," she called as she mounted the stairs.

"No. I won't," he said, and she could imagine him clutching the little girl tightly until he could safely lay her down and change her diaper.

Madysen hurried through her shower. If Carl had been there and she'd walked across the kitchen in her bra and panties on the way upstairs, he would have taken up the unspoken invitation and followed. But this situation was so different. Not only were she and Antonio not married, they were hardly acquaintances. She would be willing to bet he wouldn't dare come up the stairs after her.

And she was right. When she went back downstairs, toweling her hair, Antonio was sitting in the living room trying to feed Lidia with the syringe. There was a stack of neatly folded clothes on one of the kitchen chairs, so she assumed he had made it to the cabin and back in the interim.

"Your turn," Madysen said, smiling, hoping he would follow her lead and undress right here so she could watch. But no such luck. He rose, handed her the baby. She noticed with a grin that he had dispensed with the pins. Lidia now wore a taped-on dish towel as well as the modified plastic bag arrangement.

Antonio headed for the stairs, fully dressed and carrying his clean clothes. Madysen sighed. She was disappointed. But not defeated. Not by a long shot.

She carried Lidia into the kitchen, where she rummaged through the drawers for something baby-safe to amuse her. She heard the water in the bathroom come on. Returning to the living room, she pulled an afghan from the sofa, tossed it on the floor, and placed Lidia on it. Then she handed the baby one red plastic spatula and one blue one, watched to see that they would suffice for a while as toys, and headed for the stairs.

She waited a few moments after she heard the metal shower curtain rings sliding along the rod, telling her Antonio was under the spray. Then she eased the bathroom door open and slipped inside.

The small room was filling up with steam, but it was no more steamy than she already felt. She approached the tub, put her hand up to the curtain, and started pulling it aside as slowly and noiselessly as she could manage.

Antonio had his back to her, busily soaping his arms and chest. He had wide shoulders, a narrow waist, a really nice pair of butt cheeks, and long, muscular legs. His hair gleamed wetly blue black and his skin was an all-over lovely shade of milk-and-coffee brown.

He bent to wash his lower legs and feet, and she had a nice rear view of his package, hanging scrotum with large oval testes. The head and a few inches of his cock hung below that. Madysen appreciated its length and girth even while soft. She licked her lips, an anticipatory hum starting low in her throat.

Antonio straightened and reached for the shampoo, then began lathering his hair. Madysen followed the tracks of the bubbles with her eyes, down the firm column of his neck, between the wings of his shoulder blades, down the ridges of his spine, and finally between the cheeks of his ass, where strings of bubbles plopped onto the shower floor.

He turned toward her, eyes shut against the sting of shampoo, and leaned back to begin rinsing his hair, running his hands through it and massaging his scalp. He let the water run down his face to rinse off the last of the shampoo, flicked it away with his hands...and then he opened his eyes.

Madysen let her gaze slide unhurriedly from his cock up to his horrified, wide open eyes, and then just as slowly back down. His cock twitched, immediately starting to harden and to lengthen and then to rise. He stood, just letting the water sluice off his shoulders as his erection grew.

She smiled.

“Just lovely,” she murmured.

She slid her right arm inside the curtain, out of the spray and deliberately not close enough to touch him. She made a circle of her fingers, mimicked jacking him off, raised her eyes to his face to see if he would get the message. She licked her lips again in anticipation.

A slight frown marred his features, as if he wasn't entirely sure he was reading her right. She made the stroking motion again, and as if without volition, his hand obediently rose to grasp his cock.

Not taking his eyes from hers, he slid his curled fingers up and down his shaft. Harder, and then faster. She could hear the sound of his fingers tightening and loosening, a light slapping noise, as they worked his wet cock.

As she watched, she knew when he was close and getting himself ever closer. She held up one finger, and unquestioningly, he stopped. She placed that finger over the little eyehole in the head of his cock and rubbed delicately, once, twice, while she watched his face for his reaction.

He closed his eyes. Moaned. She deliberately slid her finger once more over the little opening, slick with his excitement. Smiling, Madysen licked her finger, gently closed the curtain, and walked back downstairs.

### Chapter Three

Madysen had Lidia in her lap, waving the spatula in front of her face as the baby reached for it, when Antonio came silently down the stairs. He stood looking at the two of them, his dirty laundry in his arms. But when Madysen said nothing, he continued through the kitchen to the mudroom. She heard the washer lid drop, the dial spin, and the water start flowing.

Antonio returned to the living room and again stood before her. He looked nice, cotton pants and a button-decorated *guayabera* shirt, square cut on the bottom and not tucked in. He smelled good too. He smelled like her shampoo, but still.

"Would you like to drive to town with me?" Madysen asked. "The baby needs some diapers and a bottle, and a car seat and probably a playpen as well."

"That's all you have to say?" he said. "Do I want to go to town?"

"Would there be something else to say, Antonio?" Madysen put on her most innocent expression, but refrained from batting her eyes. She was playing with him, but she didn't think he really minded, despite his stern expression.

"What's happening here, between us—" he began, gesturing with his long-fingered hands.

"Don't you like it?" she hurried to ask before he got too far into questions and explanations and justifications. She was what she was, she liked what she liked, and there was no reason behind it. It just was. He either agreed that he liked it, or he didn't.

"Sí, yes, of course I like it," he said.

"Well, then." Madysen got to her feet as if the subject had been fully covered and was now firmly closed. "Were you wanting to go into Hawk Point with me?"

He stood his ground. Then he asked, "Would you at least call me Tony?"

She smiled. "I'm Madysen," she said.

Antonio drove the ranch pickup over dirt roads until he hit pavement, and then turned north. Their conversation had been fairly desultory, ranch talk of goats and feed and new kids in the spring, of the growth of her cheese business with the rising national hunger for natural products and the need for a new pasteurizer soon. Madysen really should hire more help, the business was growing beyond her ability to handle it even with Antonio there, but she was putting it off as long as she could. She liked the valley the way it was, quiet, and distant from town noise, and town smells of diesel exhaust and fried food, and town experiences of congested streets and impatient, rude people, and crowded parking lots and stores.

"I only have one question for you," she said when she thought he was totally off guard. "Are you married now?"

He took his eyes off the road to give her a narrow look. "Would it make any difference if I was?" he asked.

She hesitated. "Probably not much."

"But maybe a little?"

"Maybe a little," she admitted.

"Well, I'm not married."

"*Bueno*," she said, "good. The fewer the obstacles, the better."

The corner of his mouth twitched, not enough to be considered a true smile. "I have a question for you," he said.

"That's fair," she said. Lidia had slid down during the ride; Madysen hitched her back up on her shoulder so she had a firmer grip on the baby, her little round butt riding one forearm.

"Do you do what we did, with other men?" He gave her a brief sideways glance.

She drew in a breath, considered how to answer. Then she said, "Would it make a difference if I did?"



He paused. "Maybe not," he said slowly, apparently thinking hard about it before giving her an answer.

"But maybe yes?" she prodded.

"Probably yes," he said.

"You're the only one since my husband. He was my first. You are my second."

She saw the corner of his lip twitch again. "Bueno," he said, without looking at her.

He turned into the lot of a big box discount store. They were lucky to have made it this far without getting a ticket for having the baby riding in Madysen's lap, and she intended to remedy that lack and the danger to the child before they headed back home.

But there were more than just things lacking. She had been lacking something for a long time. She was coming to suspect that maybe Tony and baby Lidia had been sent to address that lack in her life. Maybe they were even meant to start filling the big hole that had been carved out of her heart when Carl died.

Inside the store, Madysen complained of the heat. She handed Antonio the baby while she removed her jacket. Jeans like a second skin covered her perfect heart-shaped ass, pleated just so beneath the knee with the bottom hem riding atop her ostrich skin boots. Her blond hair hung in waves down her back. Her form-fitting Western shirt clung to her, accentuating those impressive tits on her chest. She was a cart-stopping sight in the crowded store. Honestly, he thought her *chichis* alone could halt a wild bison stampede.

Antonio enjoyed hanging back, holding the baby, just watching Madysen shop. She was a methodical shopper, no aisle traversed twice, rarely pausing to read labels and compare. She knew what she wanted and where to get it. Before long, the cart was full of clothes, diapers, toys, and whatever else she deemed necessary for the proper care of Lidia. Antonio had not had the faintest inkling that one little baby required so much stuff.

Every male eye, and not a few female ones, was drawn ineluctably to the sight of those twin knolls straining the front of Madysen's shirt. She seemed to appreciate the attention while not overtly courting it. She was just a natural eye magnet; she couldn't help the way she looked. But now he could understand how she came by her need to show off. It was either try to hide her endowments in slump-shouldered big shirts, or straighten her spine, throw her shoulders back and walk tall. His participation in this harmless exhibition in the store was limited to checking her out, noticing her effect on other men, and relishing it as much as he could without actually running into anyone since he was not paying attention to where he was going.

He drew a few oblique glances himself, but he was used to that. After all these years, he still didn't quite fit in here, his rolled up hat brim and dark eyes and skin announcing that he was different. And yet, as time passed, he found he didn't fit in at home anymore either. The last time he had been to Durango, he had been left out of conversations several times because there were so many new words he didn't understand what people were talking about. It was crazy, this feeling of being suspended somewhere between two worlds: the poverty and hopelessness of his home country, and the casual wealth so taken for granted in the United States, where the only difference between rich and poor was the size of their credit spending limit.

Speaking of which, he thought, the credit card he had been so proud to obtain courtesy of his permanent resident status was going to take a major hit from the small mountain of baby goods now going through the checkout. After Madysen finished piling things on the belt and went to stand near the card reader, he bumped her gently with the cart. When she looked up with a frown wrinkling her smooth forehead, he motioned with his chin for her to move out of the way.

"I assumed at least some of this would be my gift to Lidia," she whispered as they pushed the cart through and then stood side by side, she holding the baby now while he slid his card through the reader.

“Not necessary, señora,” he said in a low voice for just her ears. “Lidia is my responsibility.”

They refilled the cart and headed for the iron benches near the door, where they unpacked the new car seat and looked at the directions to make sure they understood how it was to be used correctly in the truck. Lidia rummaged through the bags until she found a pink fleece snowsuit, bundling the baby into it for the ride home.

“We won’t have time to stop and eat before Lidia starts getting hungry again. Do you want to pick up something before we head out? My treat.”

He thought of what he had just spent on the baby. The boss’s offer sounded good to him. “Very well. Thank you, señora.”

“De nada,” she replied, handing him the baby so she could put her jacket on. “And I thought we agreed you were to start calling me Madysen.”

They hurried home to the ranch, to feed the baby from a proper bottle, have dinner, get the horses in the barn, and give a quick check to the other animals. While Tony was outside, Madysen bathed Lidia, washed her hair with her new baby shampoo, lotioned and powdered her, and put her in a cloth diaper/plastic pants combo with Velcro closures that even her grandpa should be able to master, and finally a pair of warm jammies. She held the baby close and inhaled deeply. There was nothing like the smell of a clean, sleepy baby, she thought. She rocked with Lidia until the child fell asleep. Then she laid her down in the new playpen, covered her warmly, went upstairs and brushed her teeth and her hair, and came back down wait for Antonio.

She heard his boots on the porch, then the door opening, and then there he was. How had she missed for most of a year how incredibly good looking he was? Tall and slim, with a rangy musculature that she was beginning to find irresistible. Tall, dark, and handsome indeed.

“Madysen?” he whispered, after glancing at the sleeping baby, the first use of her name a bit awkward on his tongue.

She pointed in the direction of the stairs.

He gave her one of those corner-of-the-mouth twitches, retreated to the mud room and removed his boots and hat and coat. He paused a moment when going back through the living room, watching her just rocking and waiting for him. Once more she raised a finger to indicate that he should go upstairs. He grinned and obeyed.

She gave him time for using the bathroom, getting undressed, and climbing into bed. Then she followed him up the stairs.

She was surprised to find him back in Jilly’s room in the little twin bed. She had thought her invitation was clear. But that was okay, she decided. She could make this work.

She entered her room, leaving the door open as he had done across the hall, and turned on the bedside lamp. She turned toward him, reached for and opened the tab of her jeans, and then slowly unzipped them. Her hands on her hips, she turned her back toward him and began inching her jeans down over her long legs. When she finally had them in a bunch on the floor, she bent, giving him a good view of the crotch of her red lacy panties and the twin globes of her ass. The sheets on the bed across the hall rustled, and she heard him groan. She slowly straightened, and then repeated the whole process with her panties, this time spreading her legs as she bent over, in order to give him a good look at what awaited him. She shook her head, setting her blond hair swaying from side to side.

Once again she straightened, throwing her long hair over her shoulders. She turned sideways, reaching for the buttons of her shirt. One by one she undid them, and then aching slowly started peeling the shirt from her arms. She threw it to the floor with her jeans and panties, and then just stood there, letting the light illuminate her magnificent breasts enclosed in red satin and lace. She ran her hands over them, cupping and squeezing, her head thrown back and her spine arched.

“Madysen, *por favor*,” she heard him whisper in an agonized tone.

She reached behind, undid the clasp of the bra. Her heavy breasts dropped, pulling the cups of the red bra with them. Holding the cups up with one arm, she slid the bra strap down, and then repeated the process with the opposite arm. She slipped a finger beneath the bra and then swiftly yanked it away, standing naked and proud at last, the red scrap of garment dangling from her finger.

Once again she faced him, and step-by-step, stalked from her bed, across the hall to his. His erection was a tent pole beneath the sheets. As he had done once before, except this time it was deliberate, he held out his hand. She reached for it, gently bent all his fingers except the index one, and then stepped forward. She guided his extended finger between the lips of her pussy. He needed no further instruction to slide his finger in and out as she spread her legs wider to accommodate him.

“You want me, Tony?” she whispered raggedly.

He rolled toward her, sat up, wrapped an arm around her and pulled her close. Still rubbing her clit with one hand, he clutched her ass with the other and buried his face in the cleft of her tits.

She raised one long leg and bent the other knee until she straddled him, his cock sliding easily inside a pussy already lubricated with her own nectar of arousal. She began to slide slowly up and down his length, squeezing him tight with her interior muscles while he licked and sucked her nipples. A strong ranch woman, it took a considerable time before the muscles of her thighs and calves started burning with her effort. “Help me,” she whispered.

His hands, which had been busy molding her breasts to burning peaks, dropped to her hips. Then he was lifting her and letting her glide back down, faster and faster, until finally he said through clenched teeth, “I cannot hold any longer.”

“Give it to me,” she said and he pistoned into her after slamming her down hard and holding her imprisoned and impaled on his burning rod. She dangled on the ragged edge of orgasm, just waiting for him to join her.

He sucked in a breath, held it, thrust once more savagely upward, and she could feel him spurting hot inside her. And then she was jolted into her own electrified release, every nerve tingling and firing in successive waves of pleasure.

As the aftershocks receded, he lay back, his hands on her ass, holding her captive on his lance of a cock.

“You are *una diosa*,” he said when he got his breath back. “A goddess. *Verdaderamente*.”

“Don’t put me on too high a pedestal,” she said, laughing a little. “I’m just a country girl who likes sex.”

“*Esta bien*. Lucky for me,” he said, urging her closer with his hands on her back and burying his face once more between her breasts.

It was the middle of the night, after they’d migrated to her bed for one more bout of hot sex, and he had gotten up to feed Lidia and then returned, before Madysen thought to ask the important question: “Tonight was safe, wasn’t it, Tony?”

“Safe? You mean safe from making a baby?”

“No, I took care of that part. I mean, you have no history I should worry about?”

“You are safe on both counts, *diosa*. Before I arrived here, I had the money for the operation to prevent babies, and at that time my blood was clean.”

“And since?”

“And since, I have lived here on your *rancho*, alone with you.”

“I had to ask,” she said.

“A little late, but understandable,” he said, pulling her body toward his to spoon until they both fell into a contented sleep.

## Chapter Four

Madysen frowned down at the screen on her cell phone, then blew out a breath and rolled her eyes.

The air was chilly. The water in the Burntfork near the old cabin had worn a skim of ice at dawn, but now the sun reflected heat from the barn walls.

Antonio drew near enough to see she was looking at a text message. "Is something wrong?"

"Honestly. That brother of mine. I wish he would make up his mind."

Antonio waited, not questioning her. If she wanted to explain, she would do so. She looked up to meet his gaze. "My brother is—was—supposed to come live here on the ranch. Now he's putting it off again. But he says to expect the backhoe."

He nodded as if he understood what she was talking about. Hot sex or not, she was still the boss, and he didn't often push her. Outside the bedroom, anyway. Sometimes in bed he took plenty of initiative. He couldn't help it; he grinned every time at the thought of her naked and panting his name.

"What?" she demanded, still gnawing her lip over the message from her brother but catching his sly look.

"I am done with chores," he announced.

"Well, so am I," she said, a cranky note lingering in her voice.

"I could make *quesadillas* for lunch. But then we would have many hours yet to fill before darkness."

He had her full attention now. She tilted her head back to look at him. "What did you have in mind?"

"I think it would be nice to see you in the daylight. Without clothes," he said.

He watched the pupils of her blue eyes grow large as the thought of what he had been contemplating suddenly began filling her mind as well. She was so transparent in her arousal; he could read the fact that she was instantly afire at his suggestion. There was hardly any dissembling to her nature and none at all when it came to sex.

"I think that's an excellent idea," she said, her voice husky. "Unfortunately, we'll have to make it quick. The damned backhoe will be here soon."

"Would you like to leave the quesadillas for another time? Lidia might not wake up if she doesn't smell food cooking. You and I could perhaps think of something else to satisfy our appetites." He leered at her suggestively.

"Suddenly, this day has gotten a whole lot brighter." Madysen grabbed his sleeve and started towing him toward the house.

They removed their boots on the porch so there was less chance of waking the baby. Madysen waggled her ass at him as she bent over, looking over her shoulder through the strands of her long blond hair.

Once out of their coats, holding hands like teenagers and trying not to giggle, they snuck in stocking feet past the playpen where Lidia continued to snooze in the buttery light of a ray of sunshine.

At the top of the stairs, she paused to work the buttons of his shirt. "You first," he whispered.

She grinned and started quickly unbuttoning her own clothes. "No time for the striptease today," she said, and pouted a little.

"It is unfortunate. Perhaps next time." From behind, he finished pulling her shirt from her arms and then worked on the clasp of her bra while she unzipped her jeans. She turned to face him, started shimmying out of her pants and panties and socks, and her breasts popped free from the cups of her bra. He already had his shirt unbuttoned, and started to free the erection being tightly restrained by his jeans.

“Me, me, me,” she chanted in a whisper, licking her lips and grinning at him while she reached for his zipper. She pushed his jeans down just far enough to free his cock, and then she knelt and took him in her mouth. She rimmed the head of his cock with her tongue, and then took him more fully in her mouth. While her hand worked up and down on the lower half of his shaft, she copied those motions with her lips and tongue on the upper half.

He wound his hands through her hair. Everything in him told him not to pull her long hair or scratch her scalp, but it required every ounce of will he possessed not to force himself deeper down her throat. “Ay, *dios*,” he said in a hoarse whisper, pushing her away even though halting her was the last thing he wanted at the moment. “Get on the bed,” he ordered in a low, urgent voice. “Hurry. Spread your legs.”

She did as she was told, her bra still hanging unheeded from one arm. He took a moment to admire those magnificent breasts, and then let his eyes wander down to the apex of her thighs. He knelt, tugged her hips closer to the edge of the bed, and buried his face in her pussy. Spreading her legs even wider, he extended his tongue and licked and lightly bit her clit. She moaned, now wrapping her hands in his hair, and she didn’t seem to care a bit if she pulled hard enough to make him wince. To punish her, he dipped his tongue inside her opening while at the same time inserting the index and middle finger of one hand. He spread the petals of her woman’s lips even wider with the other.

She bucked her hips wildly. “Antonio!” she cried, clenching his fingers inside her with the force of a quick, intense orgasm.

“Shh, don’t wake Lidia,” he said, petting her slick wetness while her shudders calmed. Then he pulled her closer and roughly rammed his throbbing cock inside her where his fingers had been.

Through the closed bedroom door, they could hear the baby starting to fuss.

“She’ll be all right for just a minute,” Madysen assured him in a quiet voice, fingers clutching his ass. “Give me the ride of my life, cowboy.”

He took her at her word, butting into her while her legs hung over the side of the bed. His heavy balls slapped her ass and her breasts jiggled madly with each hard thrust. He looked into her eyes as he continued to pound, wanting to watch her until he was positive she came for him again. As soon as he was certain from her closed eyes and hard shudders, he let himself go and joined her.

When he could manage the feat, he rocked back on his heels. Madysen got up from the bed, one long leg to each side of his bent ones. He lifted his hand and ran a finger between her legs, where she was now slippery smooth and wet.

“Sorry. Gotta go,” she said, grinning and stepping over him to grab her clothes.

“Until next time, then.” He got to his feet, pulling up his jeans.

“Promises, promises,” she said over her naked shoulder as she and her flawless ass disappeared into the bathroom.

Antonio headed for the kitchen first, to get out the milk and a jar of baby food. They had begun feeding Lidia solids earlier than the literature advised, but it worked. She wasn’t always so hungry anymore and often slept through the night now that her belly was full. The baby rolled over, pulling her knees under herself, but not quite able to manage getting herself upright yet. She tracked him with her big, black eyes as he passed.

“Lunchtime, Lidia,” he sang, placing the milk and food in the microwave and then going to lift the baby out of the playpen. “Diaper change first, eh, *nieta*?”

There were times he was grateful his friends from childhood couldn’t see him now, Madysen’s virtual sex slave and Lidia’s pet grandpapa. He was becoming soft in his old age, he thought, women both young and those more mature able to wrap him securely around their soft little fingers. He wasn’t really an old man, not in years anyway. But there would be no more macho man antics for Antonio Marquez, that was sure. He would never have dreamed of such a

future for himself; it would have been inconceivable for a boy with as few prospects as he had. His personal salvation, incredibly enough, began with Gabriela's mother coercing him into promising financial support for their baby. The next years were spent searching for sufficient work to do just that, a few months here and a few months there, on temporary nonimmigrant visas. Then Gaby was all grown up and didn't need him anymore, but in her stead she left him baby Lidia. And then there was Madysen, who definitely needed him, but not for any money he might possess. He smiled, shook his head slightly, amazed at life's unpredictable twists and turns. Despite it all, despite very little of which he would have chosen for himself had it been left up to him, he was happy and content.

So the sudden rumble of the big yellow machine approaching up the lane to the house sounded to him like the thunder of an impending storm of destruction. He didn't know why the sound was so ominous to him; he had heard the sound of rolling tires of construction machinery many times before, in fact had worked construction jobs, especially road building, on more than one occasion because the pay was so good for temporary work. He had no reason to fear the arrival of the backhoe Madysen was expecting—but still he dreaded it without knowing the reason.

"Sorry, I've got to go see to this," Madysen said as she crossed the kitchen to snatch her jacket from a hook in the mudroom.

"We will be fine," Antonio said. "I will feed Lidia her lunch."

"Good. I'll be right back."

"No hurry," he assured her. Yet the urge to peer out the window to follow her progress across the yard was strong. Instead he deposited the baby in her highchair after getting her in dry pants, retrieved her food from the microwave, and began spooning processed carrots into her eager little mouth. She still had her little fat baby cheeks, but her hair was growing longer, requiring a barrette to hold it out of her eyes, and she now made sounds that often sounded like she was trying to form words.

She drooled and smacked her pink gums together. Madysen suspected there was a tooth or two waiting to break through, but they had seen no evidence of one as yet. He offered Lidia a sippy cup of milk, although more for his benefit than hers as she still preferred the bottle.

As he rose to take the baby's lunch things to the sink, the back door opened and Madysen entered accompanied by a big, sandy-haired stranger. The man studied Antonio and the baby, a quizzical look on his face, and then turned to Madysen.

"My...ranch manager, Antonio Marquez," she said with only the slightest hesitation over what to call him in front of the other man. "Tony, this is Clay Thorpe. He grew up here in the valley, but now he's a sheriff's deputy in Hawk Point."

"Sit," she said to the man, with a wave of her hand toward the table and chairs. "I'll get us some coffee and then we'll go outside and figure out what the hell Beck thinks he's doing."

The big man eased himself into a chair at the table. He eyed Lidia still sitting in her highchair, and then his eyes traveled back to Antonio, obviously trying to assess what the domestic situation was here.

Despite the fact that his papers were in order, and although Lidia possessed no official papers yet she had been born a few miles away and so had every right to be here, Antonio felt the palms of his hands grow moist with anxiety as the deputy continued to rake the two of them with his hazel-colored eyes. "Be cool, Maddy," the deputy said without looking in her direction. "I'll get it done right for you."

"But he just makes me so angry," Madysen said.

"Still with the sibling rivalry?" Then he did look at her and his eyes twinkled. Antonio did not like that twinkle at all. He didn't like their obvious long-standing affection for each other. He did not like this man calling her *Maddy*.

“Sibling rivalry, my butt,” she said. “He’s plain inconsiderate. What do you call sending me a text on the morning of the same day you were planning on coming out here, Clay? What if I wasn’t home? What if I had plans?”

Antonio shifted uncomfortably, hoping the deputy wouldn’t decipher what kind of plans Madysen might have had for her afternoon. The man’s eyes shifted back toward Antonio at the slight movement, his sandy eyebrows knotting. Antonio turned toward the sink, giving the curious man a view of his back.

“He made pretty plain where he wants the pipe to the septic system to go, Maddy. You didn’t need to be here.”

“But he didn’t ask me! I don’t want it there. I don’t want his house facing my house. Move it away so it faces out over the pasture.” Antonio caught a glimpse of Madysen crossing her arms stubbornly under the swell of her breasts.

The man called Clay hesitated. “Beck wanted his house to face the Burntfork, just like yours does.”

“He wanted! He hasn’t been here in years. All the work and worry of this place has been left up to me. I am not moving my entire goat operation so Beck can have a water view. Those goats are my livelihood. Beck can look out over the pasture. It has a pretty enough mountain view.”

“Shit, I hope I didn’t come all the way out here for nothing, wasting my day off,” Clay said, getting to his feet. “Let me call him and see what he says.”

“You do that.”

Madysen was fuming. Beck had a nerve, sending Clay out here on a Saturday when he probably thought she would be in town doing her weekly shopping, sneaking his damned sewer pipe location in where he wanted it while she wasn’t home.

She went and sat at the table next to Lidia, who smiled toothlessly at her and said, “Meh-meh-meh.”

“She thinks you are mama,” Antonio said.

Madysen felt her heart might burst. She was terrified she was going to lose this little bit of happiness she had with Antonio and Lidia when Beck showed up to claim his half of the old homestead. “Don’t you say that, Antonio,” she said, not looking at him. “Don’t say that to me.”

Antonio closed his mouth to a tight line, took out a pan and some cheese and tortillas to make a late lunch, and said nothing more. Madysen sat and chewed her lip. After a time, Clay returned. “He’s not happy about it, but he says to put the line where you want it.”

“Good,” Madysen said.

“I gotta tell you, he sounds messed up, Maddy. Maybe you should have a little compassion for the guy.”

“And maybe he should have some for me,” she couldn’t help replying.

“Okay. All right. Peace.” Clay held up a hand, palm out. “I’m going to go get started.”

He no sooner left than her phone rang. Antonio turned off the stove and retreated to the living room with the baby while Madysen answered the phone. It was her cousin Carole, calling from Boston. At first she was glad to hear Carole’s voice, until the older woman started excusing and trying to explain Beck’s latest behavior.

“And so you’re sticking up for my brother as well?” Madysen asked. “Beck was supposed to be here to help me after he retired. That was about seven months ago. I had to hire somebody to help me out because I couldn’t handle all the work. Clay says Beck is messed up. What does that mean, exactly?”

“Well, Beck got involved with somebody. It got fairly complicated very quickly.”

“Involved? Involved?” Madysen’s voice rose. She saw Antonio glance at her from the living room and tried to modulate her pitch.

“Selene is a lot younger than Beck, and I think before he knew what was happening the situation just got a little out of hand. You know he was pretty cut up when Annie left him.”

“Oh, for sure, Annie leaving Beck was a whole lot worse than my Carl *dying* in that fire.” Madysen’s eyes were tearing up, her voice breaking. She felt like she was choking on the lump in her throat. “Look, Carole, this isn’t a good time. Call me back, okay? Maybe tomorrow.”

“I’m so sorry, Madysen. I only meant to try to make things better, and I seem to have dredged up all kinds of grief. I will call you later, honey.”

“Okay,” Madysen said, reaching for a paper napkin to wipe her eyes and blow her nose after she disconnected and set her cell phone down. “Damn!” she said to herself. She looked at Tony, who was looking silently at her. Thanks to Beck, it was all going to come tumbling down. She knew all along this sweet little interlude with the two people occupying her living room at this moment had been too perfect to last.

Outside, the noise of the big bucket’s engine came closer, then faded a bit as Clay drove it toward the pasture. Then the sound of the backhoe’s shovel scraping the earth started up.

Might as well get it over with, she thought. She went and sat next to Antonio. She held her finger up in front of Lidia, and the baby grabbed for it, trying to get it to her mouth.

“I have something to tell you, Tony,” she finally said. “Jillian will be coming home for her school break soon, and then I guess my brother is going to come back here to live. I’m going to have to ask you...to go back to the cabin for a while.”

He said nothing for the longest time. Then he said in a quiet voice, “I see.”

“I don’t think you do. It’s Jilly I’m worried about, really. I don’t know how she would take me and you being together. It will only be for a few weeks, until she goes back to Laramie after New Year’s.” It sounded to her own ears as if she was pleading. But she had the eerie sense of the first in a line of dominoes falling, or maybe a tower of blocks defying the laws of gravity to remain suspended in midair momentarily after the bottom one had been snatched away.

“Sure,” he said. “I understand. Lidia and I will go this afternoon.”

“You don’t have to go today!” She snatched at his arm.

“We won’t go far. The cabin is just across the yard,” he said. “So close I can see your window, remember?”

“This is just awful, Tony. I feel so bad.” She shuddered and hugged herself.

Antonio rose to his feet with the baby in his arms. “Don’t feel bad, señora,” he said. “I really do understand. It is just the way things are. Do you want your lunch now?”

## Chapter Five

Madysen heard the backhoe shut down around four o’clock. She had watched Lidia for Antonio while he made the trips back and forth that transferred all the baby’s things, and those possessions of his that had migrated from the cabin, back across the yard and into the little house. Even when the baby napped, he had deflected her help, and so after he made the final trip and departed with Lidia she sat at the table with the ranch spreadsheets that needed updating, trying to make sense of rows of numbers that blurred in front of her eyes. Tony had been so polite. So distant. As if everything between them except their employer/employee relationship had been wiped out with a few ill-chosen words from her.

She heard boots cross the porch and then a knock at the door. Her heart sped up a little; she hoped it was Antonio. But it was Clay Thorpe. He stuck his head in the back door and said, “Hey, lady, would it be too much trouble for you to give me a ride over to my dad’s?”

“Come in. I want to apologize for how I acted earlier, Clay. I’m really sorry. Are you finished digging the new line?” she asked, rising to her feet to get her jacket and keys, grateful for an excuse to get out of a house that suddenly seemed way too quiet.

“Not quite. I’ll have to come back. But it’s getting dark, and I promised Emma I’d be home in time for dinner. And you don’t have to apologize to me. I know this last year or so has been rough on you. How are you holding up?”



They stepped off the porch, Madysen shrugging into the faded black Carhartt. “Fine, really. Antonio has been a lifesaver. It’s like I don’t even have to tell him what to do, he just knows. I’m lucky to have been able to hire him. Anyway, how is Emma?” she asked. “It’s been ages since I’ve seen her.”

Clay grinned. “We’re pregnant,” he said.

“What? Clay!” Madysen grabbed for his coat sleeve to halt him. “Nobody told me. I’m so happy for you!”

She went to give him a big hug and instead he picked her up and twirled her around. “I’m gonna be a daddy,” he sang. “Yeehaw!”

Madysen laughed, placing her hands on his shoulders until he stopped spinning and put her down. It was only then that she caught sight of Antonio watching them from the door of the cabin. The look on his face said it all, how he was misconstruing this little celebration of an old friend’s long-anticipated happiness, and she wanted to run to him and explain. But Clay needed a ride, so he wouldn’t be late getting back to Emma. She would explain to Antonio as soon as she got back.

“I’m so out of the loop here at the ranch. I’ve got to get into town more often,” she said. “I want to see Emma. I bet she’s blooming with motherhood.”

“She is that,” Clay said as they resumed the walk toward the ranch pickup. “Blooming as big and pretty as a peony bush—don’t tell her I made that comparison! And she’d be glad to see you again, Maddy.”

They climbed in the truck, Madysen in the driver’s seat. As they passed the little house, she looked for Tony, but he didn’t make a second appearance.

Once out on the road, silence descended, an interlude between friends that neither was desperate to fill. But finally Clay said, “Antonio, huh? Where did you find him?”

“I applied to an agency that furnishes agricultural workers. These jobs out in the boonies aren’t so easy to fill. And he has experience with goats. I was fortunate he was looking for work at the same time I needed someone.” She halted, her cheeks warming as the inadvertent thought entered her head of the many ways she needed Antonio.

Clay watched her carefully from the passenger seat. “He legal?”

“Yes, he is.” Madysen felt herself stiffen defensively, her hands tightening on the wheel. “He has his green card. His social security number is legit.”

“Relax. I’m just asking. It doesn’t make much difference to me either way. There’s not a big effort around here in enforcing federal law unless immigrants without papers are caught in a drug bust or something. Local law enforcement has enough on our own plates.”

“He’s very nice. Very helpful.”

He studied her. “You hiding something, Maddy? You’re not being very forthcoming.”

“No! Why would I hide anything?” She tossed her head.

“Were you aware he had a baby when you hired him? I noticed the baby stuff all over your house. You’re watching his kid? Where’s his wife?”

“It’s complicated, Clay,” she said, telling herself she gripped the wheel so tightly because the dirt road was in such bad shape.

“I was beginning to suspect that,” he said.

“Oh, stop being such a cop! There’s nothing wrong.” Nothing except that Antonio was hardly speaking to her now.

“And the baby?” he persisted. “I’m just curious, Maddy.”

“It’s none of your business,” she said as they turned into the lane to his dad’s place and she stopped to let him out.

“Okay then,” he said, dragging out the word while opening the door. “Thanks for the ride.” He closed the door with a little more force than necessary.

Madysen leaned her head back and blew out a breath. What a day. What an awful, gut-wrenching day. Then she put the truck in gear and backed up alongside Clay's pickup. He was just climbing in the driver's side. "Hey!" she yelled. He halted, but didn't turn around. "I'm sorry for being so cranky!" He waved a gloved hand, as if her unfriendly attitude was already a thing of the past.

She looked around for a moment before turning the truck around to leave. Clay's dad's little house was dark, no dogs barked, and no cows mooed. Clay had sold off almost everything except the land after his dad died, keeping the house and the ranch against the day he retired from the sheriff's office. She liked the valley quiet, she thought, but not this quiet. The old folks were dying off, and new residents had yet to take their place. Ranching wasn't exactly a glamorous profession, and most young people couldn't wait to grow up and leave the valley.

As her brother Beck hadn't waited. He had left the day after his high school graduation, and for the most part he had stayed away. But now he was coming back. Making demands, going behind her back to have things his way. As much as she had wanted him to come home at one point while she was in the deepest depths of shock and sorrow, now she wished he would just stay away. He wasn't even here yet, and he was already making himself a big pain in everybody's ass.

She watched Clay start his truck and turn his headlights on preparatory to leaving. She gave him a short honk of the horn, pushed down on the gas pedal and drove away. She had yet another apology to make before this day was over. She would go see Tony, invite him to dinner, try to explain in a way he would understand why he had to leave her house for a while. Surely he would realize that Jillian wouldn't appreciate him taking her father's place while she was gone off to college. Jilly would need some time to absorb the fact that Antonio was not only doing all her father's work around the place, he was also sharing her mother's life. And her mother's bed. Madysen shied from even the thought of such a confrontation. She couldn't just smack her daughter in the face with her relationship with the hired man.

And yet wasn't she dissembling, she wondered as she pulled into her own lane, just making excuses for herself? She wasn't ashamed of Antonio, but she was not looking forward to explaining him either. She was sure it would be the same with any man, not just him. She wondered if she could make him believe that.

But if she thought Antonio was going to hang around waiting for her to crook her finger for him to come over so she could explain, she was mistaken. The little cabin was dark. His rusty old Ford pickup wasn't in its familiar spot. He was gone.

Antonio drove slowly, carefully, into Hawk Point. He had never driven alone with Lidia before, in fact had never had sole care of his granddaughter. He had come to rely on Madysen to be there whenever he or Lidia needed her. A most mistaken and lazy assumption to make, he now realized. Madysen Collins was not going to be taken for granted, no matter the circumstances.

He parked in the mall parking lot, opened his creaky door, and went around to retrieve Lidia and all her necessary paraphernalia stuffed into a big shoulder bag. He wondered how absurd he must look. He never saw his compatriots lugging a baby in a car seat like American men and women who insisted their children—and oftentimes their dogs—be allowed to accompany them everywhere.

He headed for the lighted windows and brightly painted store front of the Arroyo Café. For tonight, just for a little while, he wanted to hear the accents and the music of his people. He and Lidia could sit back, order hot, familiar food, and just enjoy being part of an expatriate community that somehow managed to thrive in these foreign surroundings where they were not welcomed outright, but yet were tolerated because they were so useful.

The young waitress fussed over Lidia, making her smile and coo. Soon the cashier, grandfather to the large brood who served in every capacity in the business, came over to sit and talk. Even the cook, busy as he was, came out from the kitchen to ask how things were going. They knew Gabriela, knew this was her baby, but just accepted that Antonio, instead of the baby's mother, should appear with Lidia. Antonio's people came to Wyoming, they stayed or they left, and nobody asked too many questions. Everybody had their problems, he was hardly unique in that respect.

He stuffed himself with rice and beans, spicy beef and a mound of tortillas. Madysen would have had a fit to watch him feed Lidia such piquant fare, but Lidia gobbled it up. Madysen wasn't here, and so Antonio could do as he thought best. If the baby was awake all night with a belly ache, he would deal with that when the time came.

When the staff of the café started cleaning up, stacking chairs on the tables and sweeping the floor, Antonio realized how much time he had spent there and how late it was. He paid his bill, said his goodnights, and bundled Lidia in her car seat back into the old pickup with the door hinges that needed oiling.

When he pulled up to the little cabin at Willow Vale, he sat and looked at his surroundings, and then sighed. It wasn't much, a little half-dugout cabin with an old root cellar beside it. And yet it was more, much more, than what he could afford at home. He couldn't, despite his hurt feelings, just pack up and go. Now he had Lidia to care for. She had been born here and she would be raised here, no matter the cost to her abuelo. And so he would set aside any dashed hopes he might have had concerning Madysen Collins, any thwarted dreams. It had been nice while it lasted, in truth more than he had ever dreamed of: she was ¡caliente! But he wasn't a young man anymore, and so he would set aside a foolish young man's expectations. A woman like Madysen Collins wasn't right for a man like him. *Estúpido*, he chided himself, to ever begin to entertain the hope that she might be.

He took the baby inside, changed her diaper, washed her hands and face, and put her to bed. She slept the entire night without waking.

Madysen picked without appetite at her solitary dinner, finally giving up and offering it to the spotted dog that she had let inside to keep her company and that eagerly accepted her meal before being let back outside.

She missed Antonio. She missed Lidia. There was always something to do with a baby in the house, and now that Lidia was gone, Madysen didn't know what to do with herself. She tried watching television, but the laugh track and loud ads grated on her nerves so she snapped it off. She tried reading, but couldn't keep her mind on the words.

She donned her jacket and walked outside several times, but she didn't have to go far to see that Antonio's truck was still missing. It was getting late. She knew she shouldn't worry, but she hoped nothing had happened to them. She hoped that they were coming back. She saw once again the look on Antonio's face as he caught sight of her in Clay's arms. Was Tony capable of becoming so upset he would drive carelessly with Lidia in the truck? She didn't think so; the man was very good at hiding his emotions. Except in certain circumstances, where it was guaranteed she could cause him to lose his cool.

She gave up on repeated trips to the cabin. As it got later and later, she decided maybe he was gone for good. She went inside, dragged herself upstairs and through a shower. She dressed for bed, and then stood at her bedroom window, whose view was of the little cabin, and stood very still.

She waited for a long time in the dark but Antonio and Lidia didn't return.

Sometime in the deep darkness of night, she woke and returned to the window. Stars in their thousands crowded the night sky, those arranged in the center like a silk scarf twisted by a celestial wind. Finally, she forced herself to lower her gaze and peer out into the yard once more,

her nose almost touching the cold glass. All the windows of little house across the yard remained dark, and she clenched her hands at her sides until her short nails dug into her palms at the thought that she had really succeeded in running off Antonio.

But in the deeper shadows at the side of the little house, there was a shape that anyone could have mistaken for a pickup's rear bumper. Even from this distance and in the dark it sure looked like the diamond plate on Antonio's rusty old Ford. She knew sleeping was out of the question until she went and checked it out. In just her nightgown she hurried downstairs, pulled on her boots and coat, opened the door and crossed the yard, her heart thrumming in her chest. The spotted dog followed her, tilting its head and looking up toward her face as if trying to catch her eye and ask what the heck they were doing out in the yard in the middle of the night.

When they drew near, Madysen raised a hand in relief and rested it on the frigid tailgate. The dog hiked his leg on the tire, and then they both turned for the warmth of the big house. All was well. Almost in tears, Madysen assured herself that all was truly well.

In the morning, she rose early, ate a bite of breakfast, and headed for the steel building housing her cheese-making operation. The goats were winding down their milk production for the year as the days grew short and temperatures outside dropped. It was almost time to close up shop for the winter, leaving just the cheese aging in climate- and humidity-controlled conditions on the shelves in a separate room, to distribute for the holidays and into spring, when Madysen could start up the operation again.

The door opened. Antonio stepped inside, carrying Lidia in her combination carrier and car seat. The baby was dressed in her pink snowsuit, more like stuffed into her snowsuit, Madysen thought. "She doesn't look comfortable, Tony. Her clothes are already getting too small."

"Good morning," Antonio said. "I will see to Lidia's clothes as soon as I get time to go shopping. Are you feeling better today? Would it be possible for you to watch the baby? I don't know what else to do, it's too cold to take her in the barn with me."

"Have I given you any reason to think I don't want to watch Lidia? Yesterday was a misunderstanding between us, Tony. I didn't express myself well. I'm sorry."

"A misunderstanding," he repeated tonelessly.

"Yes! It's just until Jillian goes back to school after the first of the year. Her father has only been gone a short time. I can't just replace him while Jilly is gone away to school. Please try to understand."

"How long do you think it will take for you to begin thinking about it?" The words seemed torn from him, as if he would prefer to keep silent but couldn't.

"About replacing Carl?"

"That...and other things."

"Nobody will ever take Carl's place. If I truly loved another man, he would have his very own piece of my heart. As for the other, there's something I need to show you." She reached for his hand, pulled him toward the door.

Out in the yard, she pointed to the little house and then to the big one. "Do you see which way these houses face? You know that the big house overlooks the original, little house. All you have to do is look out your window at night. If my light is on, I'm awake. If I stand in the window, it's safe for me to see you. If I see your light on, I will call you, and then come over if that agreeable to you."

He looked toward the little house, tilted his head up toward where her bedroom window was. "So you have been thinking of this all along?"

"Only since yesterday. Only since I thought of my daughter coming home, and also of my brother's return. Why do you think I was so adamant that his house face the other direction? I couldn't have his house facing my window, have him finding out what I am...or I should say, finding out how easily you accept me for what I am."

"All that big fuss was about me?" He looked a bit bewildered.

“Well, mostly. Beck has no right to come around here and start making demands. But it was about us, Tony. If you want me, like I want you, we will have to be a little more cautious while I make an effort to straighten out some things. It’s too easy to forget that we’re not the only people who matter here.”

He looked again at the high window of her bedroom. He was a proud man. She could see the struggle to step aside for her sake playing out on his usually impassive features. At last he said, “Okay.”

Whether he was okay with the long term plan, or just the more immediate prospect of resuming their erotic activities, she couldn’t tell. “So. Bueno. Now hurry up and kiss me, dammit. We don’t have much time—I hear the baby starting to fuss already.”

She grasped his coat collar and pulled him toward her. She was afraid he would resist, but once their boot tips touched he crushed her to him, mashing her breasts to his chest, his lips descending on hers in a grinding kiss that expressed a deep need that went beyond mere sex.

She returned it with equal fervor, lips and tongue and rough hug meant to convey what she couldn’t yet put into words. She was afraid that somewhere along the way she had already fallen in love with this man. But she couldn’t let him know that yet. Not until she smoothed his way with her family.

## Chapter Six

Madysen returned to the cheese building. Lidia had been just whimpering, but now she held her breath until her face turned bright red and then opened her mouth and let out a shriek of displeasure. Madysen had thought to start getting some aged cheese wheels wrapped, labeled, and packed in wood crates with excelsior for the holiday gift market. Instead she bent to see to the baby, unbuckling the strap that held her in the carrier. Lidia twisted her little body, her face once again turning red, and drew her knees up.

“I swear I would suspect you had colic, Lidia—that is, if babies suddenly developed colic at five months old. I bet Grandpa’s been feeding you things he shouldn’t have on your date last night. Is that right, you poor little thing?”

As Lidia began screaming, Madysen picked her up, pulled over a stool and sat, turning the baby face down over her knees. The position seemed to ease Lidia’s symptoms a bit. Madysen wondered if she still had peppermint oil from the days of Jillian’s childhood stomach aches, and if so, how long peppermint oil stayed fresh when shoved to the hidden recesses of a kitchen cabinet.

She really needed to get her product packed and ready for distribution. She had only a week until Thanksgiving, and with the holiday season starting earlier every year, she was already late.

Her cell phone in her pocket rang. One-handed, she pulled it out and looked at the screen. “Jillian?”

“Hi, Mom. How’s it going?”

“Good, except I’m behind as usual. How are things in Laramie?”

“Great. I wanted to tell you as soon as I was sure that I won’t be home for Thanksgiving, so don’t make big plans.”

“Oh?” Madysen felt her stomach clench. For years now Jillian had been steadily pulling away from her mother and the ranch as she made her own life and friends, and developed her own interests. Madysen hadn’t planned a huge feast, maybe turkey and dressing and a pie. But still, she felt a pang of bitter disappointment. Now she would not even have the comfort of Jilly’s company to help compensate for the big deal about it she had made it sound to Tony.

“There’s a guy here who takes over the kitchen of a closed school for Thanksgiving and feeds anyone who walks in the door. So all of us who are going to be in town have volunteered to help cook and serve and clean up.”

“Well, that’s real nice of you, honey.” Madysen tried to sound happy. The realization that she had made Antonio hurry and move back to the little house for no reason made her want to cry. Lidia grunted, hiccupped, passed some gas and then made a tentative word-like sound.

“Did I catch you in the middle of something? What was that noise?” Jillian asked.

“You remember Antonio, he was here before you left.”

“Antonio, sure.”

“Well...he’s got his little granddaughter here with him now. I’m watching her this morning.”

“What? Mom! How did Antonio get his granddaughter? How old is she?”

“Lidia is five months old. Antonio’s daughter couldn’t care for her, and so now he has her.”

“So am I getting this straight, she just left her baby, expecting that Antonio or you would take care of her? That’s just not right, Mom.”

“A lot of things in this world aren’t right, Jillian. We do what we can. It kind of looks like we’ll both be taking care of people less fortunate than we are for the holiday, doesn’t it, honey? Like mother, like daughter.”

Jillian hesitated. “I guess,” she finally agreed without enthusiasm. “Finals are over in the middle of December. I’ll be home after that, until the middle of January.”

“A whole month. That’s great, honey. I’ve missed you. A lot.”

“I miss you too, Mom. I’ve got to go now.”

“Take care. I’m proud of you, Jilly.”

Lidia let out a loud belch, and then a huge sigh. Jillian hesitated as if she wanted to say more, then just said, “Love you, Mom. Bye.”

Madysen disconnected and put her phone back in her pocket, pondering on the events of what had proved to be such a bittersweet morning. Talk about mixed feelings, she thought. She wasn’t sure whether to feel sad or relieved. Certainly she wanted her daughter to come home; she had waited months for that event. Yet Jilly’s phone call had given her the opening she needed to introduce the idea of Antonio and Lidia being part of the family. And her daughter’s absence over Thanksgiving break gave Madysen more time to get the last of the year’s cheese made, and another batch out to the wholesaler.

Not to mention more time alone on the ranch with Antonio, which promised its own rewards. She only wished she hadn’t been so hasty in sending him back to the cabin before she found out her daughter’s plans for the holiday didn’t include coming home.

When Antonio returned to pick up Lidia, Madysen came out of the stock room and said, “I need to ask what you’re feeding this poor baby, Tony.”

“Is something wrong?”

“She had a bad stomach this morning. I gave her a little peppermint in her bottle, and it seems to have helped.”

“Maybe the beans and rice from the café last night didn’t agree with her. She ate them right up. I thought she was fine.” He shrugged, looking sheepish.

She shot him a look. “Peppers, too? She’s just getting used to solid food. You can’t be feeding her adult food, Antonio. Especially spicy food.”

“Do you have so little confidence in me? I would not feed Lidia peppers.”

“It’s a matter of experience. Caring for babies is a thing you learn as you go along. I have jars of baby food in my cupboard. You need to be feeding her that, so come and get some.”

“Okay.” He went to pick up the sleeping baby in her carrier.

“I had a phone call from my daughter,” Madysen said.

“Oh, yes?”

From his tone she thought he might as well have said, *That’s nice*. She threw on her jacket for the walk to the house. “She’s not coming home for Thanksgiving.”

“No?”

“What I’m trying to tell you, Antonio, is that you can come back to the house for a while if you like.”

His footsteps faltered. “For a while? So you can tell me to leave again later? No, thank you, señora.” His gaze remained on the path.

“I thought we got past the *señora* business, Antonio.”

“Until yesterday, I thought we had as well,” he said.

“So we’re not going to go back to where we were right away, are we?”

“Not right away, no.” He kept walking.

“I apologized. Don’t you believe me? What more do you want, Tony?”

At last he stopped and looked at her. “The question is not what I want. It is what you want, Madysen. I think you should take this time until your daughter comes home to decide exactly what that might be.”

“I told you. I already know. I want you.”

“Do you? I wonder.”

She hadn’t expected to be turned down. But if the situation were reversed, if he had asked her to leave his house because someone he cared about was coming to visit, wouldn’t she feel hurt? If not cheap. As well as used. “But...but what about what we had together? That was good, wasn’t it?”

“I am not an *imbécil*.” He smiled. “Yes, it was good. I will watch your window tonight, and all the nights ahead, with much anticipation. Okay?”

“So it’s only sex for you?”

He hesitated, studied her face for a long moment, and then looked into her eyes. “I could ask you the same, Madysen, if I thought either of us really wanted to know the answer.” His tone was mild, but she didn’t miss the fact that he wasn’t answering her question.

She jammed her hands in her pockets and started walking ahead of him. At the house, he accepted a few jars of baby food, but turned down the offer of a midday meal. Later in the day, she saw the telltale dust cloud on the lane rising above the trees as his old beater pickup pulled out of the yard. He was spending a lot of his free time in town lately. Was he deliberately keeping his distance from her?

And if she asked him that, would he answer her question with a question, as he seemed prone to do when he didn’t want to answer?

At the moment, Antonio had no thoughts of Madysen. He was a man with a purpose. Madysen insisting that he return to the little house had shocked him into an examination of his situation and that of his little granddaughter. His mind was filled with thoughts of Lidia’s welfare.

He had many questions, but no answers. What if Gabriela showed up one day, his silly, capricious daughter Gaby, and wanted her baby back? Could he just hand Lidia over to the unreliable teenaged mother without a second thought? What if Gaby wanted to take Lidia out of the country? Gaby had no papers, and therefore could not legally return if she later changed her mind. Where did that leave baby Lidia, if Gaby took her away and then could not bring her back? Lidia would be trapped outside the country of her birth.

What if Lidia got sick while here in his care? Could he just show up at the hospital with a sick baby and trust that they would treat her without question? That they wouldn’t turn both grandfather and granddaughter over to the authorities on unfounded suspicions that they were undocumented? Lidia had been born here...but he had no papers to prove that. He was a legal immigrant and Lidia’s grandfather...but did that relationship give him any rights when it came to deciding her welfare?

Was it even possible he could be granted guardianship of the baby if he had only a green card and not citizenship?

He was a simple man. How had his life suddenly become so complicated? It wasn't something he wanted to dwell on, but he grumbled to himself that all the snarls in his life had always been, and were now, and probably always would be, caused by females.

He stopped at the library, was issued a library card since he could prove legal status, and with Lidia clutched in one arm, checked out what books he could find on immigration law, which were few—and on guardianship and adoption, which were fewer.

Finally came thoughts of Madysen. He was very dependent on her to finance his ability to stay here. He wondered if things got any more personally complex between them, or if things didn't work out at all, if she would still be willing to keep him employed at Willow Vale so he could continue to watch over Lidia while he tried to straighten out the tangled skein of custody law.

He made one last stop. Lugging the baby past jewelry display counters backed by a wall display of rifles and shotguns and tables piled so high with jumbled electronics amid tangles of wires like nests of skinny snakes, he could barely navigate the narrow aisles without bumping anything. He finally came to the camping gear, finding what he wanted almost immediately. He checked out several sets to make sure the lenses weren't cracked and that the focus wheel worked. He wasn't planning on hunting game; the quarry he pursued didn't require a very long-range, powerful or expensive pair, but he wanted to be sure that what he bought worked, and that he would have a clear picture. Satisfied at last, he juggled the baby and his purchase out to the truck and headed home.

Lidia had been a little angel all day, but by now she was hungry and cranky and tired. It was amazing how one tiny creature could emit such a loud sound that grated on her grandpapa's ears. She began wailing as soon as the truck stopped in the yard, and didn't stop until he had her winter clothes off and her solid, squirmy body parked her in the high chair, her dinner warmed, and the tip of a baby spoon full of peas in her mouth.

He was afraid she would choke before she discovered he really was doing his best to feed her, so he didn't dare stick the spoon any farther in her mouth. "Lidia," he said. She ignored him and continued to shriek. "Lidia," he said more loudly, and when that didn't do the trick, he hollered, "Lidia!"

She opened her eyes and closed her mouth, a shocked expression on her tear-tracked, chubby little face. He was sure she was quite surprised; her abuelo had never raised his voice to her before. But at least she got a taste of the peas. She smacked her lips, made an *mm-mm* sound as she decided she liked them, and finally settled down in earnest to the business of eating.

And so his evening was spent amusing and bathing the baby, dressing her in clean pajamas and putting her to bed, and then showering himself. It was late when he finally turned out the light and stepped to the window with his new binoculars. As he feared, Madysen's window was also dark. Still, he waited, and suddenly yellow light bloomed in her window and there she was. He hurried to flip his own light on and then off, their signal. His cell phone rang almost immediately. He picked it up as he regained his post at the window that faced Madysen's.

Her voice purred in his ear: "Is that you, stud?"

"At your service, señora," he replied, unable to decide at the moment if he were pleased or pissed off at how she thought of him, a cock to be used at her pleasure or discarded, as she saw fit.

She ignored his use of the title that distanced him from her. "Can you see me, Tony?" she asked. Her voice sounded a bit hollow. She must have placed the phone down on the nightstand by her bed, turned to speaker and leaving her hands free.

"I can see you," he replied.

"What am I wearing?"

"Night clothes. Something short and white, with lace. I can't see through it, but I can see your legs."



“Can you? That’s nice.” She lowered one hand to the juncture of her thighs, stroking herself like a cat. “Can you see what I’m doing, Tony?”

“Yes.” His cock started stiffening. The little brain hadn’t registered that he wasn’t happy with Madysen. It seemed more than happy to see her again. He had to pause for breath. “You’re petting your...”

“Yes, I’m petting my pussy. It needs some attention. It’s feeling lonely for you, Tony.”

He peered through the binoculars. It was like standing next to her, but almost better in a way. The image of her hand fondling her own *chocha* was crystal clear and bigger than life. His cock throbbed. His throat almost closed. “Are you wet for me?” he whispered.

“Yes, I’m wet for you, Tony. I wish you could feel how hot and wet I am.” She moved a bit of material aside so her middle finger disappeared between the soft blond curls at the juncture of her thighs. Her head tilted back and he had a glimpse of her long hair as it swung down her back. Her other hand slid beneath the hem of her nightie, lifting it to give him a good picture of a pair of white lace panties stretched to one side so she could pleasure herself and then, slowly as she peeled the hem up her torso, those glorious breasts came into view. She ran her free hand over them, first one and then the other. He could see her nipples responding. She pinched and tugged at each in turn, causing them to blush from pink to red, all the while sliding that busy finger in and out of herself. The digit glistened in the light when she withdrew it before slipping it back in, evidence that she was truly getting off on teasing him from a distance.

“Do you want me?” he asked.

“Yes,” she answered, panting. “I want you bad, Tony.”

“Then you need to come over here where I am. Now, Madysen.”

She withdrew her hand from between her legs, twirled away and dropped the hem of her nightgown before disappearing from view.

Tony stepped away from the window, tearing his pajama bottoms off and going to stand beside the entry door without bothering with the light. She must have run down the stairs and across the yard. She flung open the door, a robe flapping loosely around her and a pair of slippers on her feet. He grabbed her, and without preamble positioned himself behind her, bent her over, flung the robe up and tore her panties down her legs. He felt for himself how slick and warm she was, one hand holding her wide open while without preamble he rammed himself up to the hilt inside her. She gasped.

“Are you sorry now for teasing Tony?” he growled.

“No!” She shook her head, blond hair tumbling forward over her face.

He pulled out to the very tip of his cock, slapped her ass once with an open palm, and then shoved back in, holding her pelvis and slamming her back against him at the same time, doubling the force.

“Feel this?” He tightened his hold on her hips, and rammed home once again. “I will make you sorry.”

She grunted, grinding against him. “No, you won’t. You can’t make me sorry.”

“Tell me how it feels for you when we are together.” He didn’t move as she started to do the work, hands on her knees for balance, rotating her hips while holding him inside and squeezing with her inner muscles as she pulled away, before sliding home on his cock again.

“You fill me up,” she said. “You make me complete.”

“You feel how hard I am for you? How much I want you? How long and hard I get for you?” He reached for her breasts hanging free, the nipples rigid and hot to the touch. He bent over her, bit her neck. “Answer me,” he growled.

“Yes!” she cried. “I can feel every inch of you inside me. Hot and hard and long. Don’t tease me, Tony.”

“It is only what you deserve. Tell me what you want. Say the words.”

“I want you. I want...you...to make me come.”

“Is that all you want?”

“No! I told you. I want you. All of you, Tony.”

In a voice so soft he didn't think she could possibly hear, he said, “I want you, too, Madysen.” His strokes gentled, slowed and stretched, becoming an unhurried exploration of her heated, slippery chamber. He kept bumping up against what he assumed was her cervix, the entrance to her womb. Every time he did, he heard her suck in air. So he kept it up, nudging her just there, one hand sliding back along her belly so his fingers could find her clit. Once he did, he pinched gently each time his cock bounced against the firm surface deep inside her. She started sobbing. He could feel the tremors begin in her, traveling up her long legs and echoing inside her pelvis. The fingers of the hand still at her breast sought and found a nipple. He rolled it between his fingers, and then pinched lightly at the same time he squeezed her clit. She sucked in a long breath, shuddered all over, while inside her he could feel the waves of her orgasm build and recede, build and recede, drawing the same rolling response from deep inside him.

When it was finally over, both of them a shattered mass of raw nerve endings, it was all he could do to drag them over to the sofa where they collapsed. Thrown sideways, one of her legs flung over his lap, the other foot on the floor, it took a while for her breathing to slow. At last she straightened so she was sitting upright in his lap, facing away from him.

“You're mad at me, aren't you, Tony?”

His arm tightened around her middle, her big breasts resting on his arm. He could feel a huge sigh building up inside, the urge too big for him to fight. At last he surrendered. Gave in to what he really wanted, which was Madysen. “Not anymore,” he said as he exhaled.

“I told you I'll fix it. You believe me, don't you?” She swung her leg off his lap and changed position so she was facing him.

“Yes, sure,” he said, shrugging.

She slugged his shoulder. “Stop that ‘sí, señora’ stuff right now, Tony. It really pisses me off.”

“Sí, señora,” he said, smirking and trying to draw her hand toward his still semi-hard cock. “Convince me to stop, *patrona*.”

“Okay, now you're asking for it, mister.” She scooted back on his thighs, her hand curled around his rod as they both smiled in renewed anticipation. “Now you're gonna get it.” They tussled playfully for a while and even though he ended up on top of her, clutching her ass on the narrow couch to stay there with her while he emptied himself once more inside her, it was hard to say which of them actually won.

Later, in the dim yellow light of an old table lamp as she was standing and straightening what few clothes she had arrived in, she caught sight of the binoculars lying next to the small pile of library books on the coffee table. She bent to lift them. “Taking up birdwatching?” she asked, her full lips curved into knowing a smile.

“Yes, one pretty bird in particular. It's all yellow and white. I've never seen one like it before. I see it preening itself sometimes, but I don't know what kind of bird it is.”

“Hmm. It's probably one of those common Western titmice.” She bent to lift the books one by one, studying their spines and front and back covers.

“A very clever bird,” he said. “But I think not so common.”

“You studying immigration law, Tony?” she asked, growing more serious.

He sat on the couch, watching her. Even when she wasn't deliberately posturing for his viewing pleasure, he liked looking at her. “I need to know my rights when it comes to Lidia,” he said.

“Maybe you could seek legal guardianship of her,” Madysen said. She lowered her voice, as if what she was thinking would hurt him if she voiced her thoughts. “Gabriela is an unfit mother. She abandoned her child. Her actions have legal ramifications. Before the government can take Lidia from you, maybe you should take custody away from her parents.”

He blew a breath. "I don't like to admit it, but I agree with all you say. But...do I have the right to take custody from Gabriela and Rafael?" He stood and started pulling on his pants.

"I don't know. You probably need a lawyer."

He looked at her over his shoulder. "Lawyers cost money."

She hesitated just a second. "I have some money. You're welcome to use it."

He hesitated in turn. He already owed her so much. Sometimes he felt emasculated by the inequities in their relationship. "Let me read the books. See what I can find out."

"I'll help you. Let me take one or two with me." She picked up a couple of the few volumes he had borrowed from the library.

"You're leaving?" He rubbed his cheek with one finger.

"I wasn't asked to stay." They had circled back around to the sore point between them. She looked at him with her big green eyes.

"You own this place; stay if you like."

A look of hurt stole over her face, as if she thought he was just trying to get back at her, so he amended in a soft voice, "Madysen. It would please me very much if you stayed."

## Chapter Seven

The days passed swiftly. Tony didn't mention Thanksgiving. Madysen wasn't sure if he celebrated the holiday or not, and so she didn't knock herself out preparing a special meal. She spent the days in hard work, it had always been her habit to fill with work the hours that otherwise she would have spent thinking of things that caused her pain. She spent most nights in the little cabin with Tony, and was surprised to find that she didn't mind leaving the big house unoccupied. It seemed it didn't matter where she slept, so long as it was with Antonio.

Clay arrived one day and finished digging the sewer line for Beck's house, and trenches for water and power lines. He claimed he didn't have time to come in for coffee, so Madysen assumed the chill hadn't lifted which she had imposed on their friendship when she deflected questions about Tony. But as the afternoon wore on toward darkness, she heard the backhoe's engine sputter to a stop. Coming out of the barn to see if Clay might need a ride back to his dad's, she caught her old friend deep in conversation with her lover. She might have known Clay's overbearing cop side would eventually override his diminishing old-friend side, and he wouldn't be able to help interrogating Antonio the first chance he got.

She tried to judge by their body language what they were saying, and was on the verge of stepping in when the two of them suddenly broke into laughter. Clay clapped Tony on the shoulder, turned and climbed back into his machine, started it up and drove down the lane, heading toward his dad's spread.

From the way they had both bristled the last time they met, she had thought they might have to do more circling and neck-hair raising, like a couple of feral dogs. But they seemed to get along fine—as long as she wasn't around to interfere. She wanted, but was reluctant, to ask Tony what they had said. What they laughed about. More and more she deferred to Tony, afraid to inflate anything and every little thing into a boss and employee situation. She wanted him on a more equal footing with her, but she had made a big strategic error in asking him to leave her house. When it came to sex Tony was becoming more and more dominant, but elsewhere in their relationship he hung back. As if distancing himself? Was he planning on leaving? Madysen didn't know.

She read his library books. There seemed one sure solution to Tony's dilemma, but she didn't know how he would take it if she suggested it so she held off.

A few days later another man showed up with a load of cinder blocks and after Madysen intercepted him to show which direction she wanted the new house situated, he began building a foundation. A week before Jilly was due home for winter break, Beck's new house came

trundling up the lane, hauled behind a semi-truck belching black fumes from its twin exhaust pipes. A small man with a tobacco chaw making a bulge in his lower lip and legs that looked too spindly for his barrel-shaped body climbed down. "Howdy!" He smiled, showing a gap between his two front teeth. "Got a new, pretty, little house here for ya."

Madysen didn't bother explaining it wasn't her new house. She just led the man through the pasture gates and pointed out where the new sewer and water pipe connections were sticking up out of the foundation. "I'll come back tomorra, get 'er all set up for ya," the man said with a grin, spitting tobacco juice off to one side.

"Whatever it takes," she said. "I hadn't realized it would have a little front porch, but that's all the better. I thought facing it toward the mountain would make for a nice view."

"Whatever you say," he said, spitting again and wiping his lip with the back of his hand.

Madysen repressed a shudder and turned back to her work. He climbed into the passenger seat of the pilot vehicle with the rotating yellow light whose driver had followed the modular house out to the ranch, and they took off. The next day when she had time to pay any attention to the little blue clapboard modular, the man had it situated over the utilities and was starting to jack it up and get it leveled on its foundation. She was surprised at how much she liked the looks of it. Despite her feeling that against her inclination for solitude the beginnings of a family compound might be starting here at Willow Vale, once fenced off from the pasture and a yard and garden put in, she had to admit the new little house would look right at home. In quick succession over the next few days, an electrician arrived to finish hooking it up to power, a propane tank for heat was delivered and set up, and then suddenly it was all ready for Beck to move in.

She didn't hear Tony come up behind her as she stood rubbing her lip and thinking. Her impulse to turn the new house in a direction opposite to the old ranch house and the cabin made it very private even though the other two structures were nearby. "Your brother's new house?" he asked.

"Do you like it? Maybe I can talk Beck out of it."

"Why would you want to talk him out of it? You have a house."

"Look at it, Tony. It would be perfect. For us."

He said nothing, seeming to consider. "Nobody could see us," he finally said. "Even if we forgot to close the curtains."

"You catch on fast, cowboy." Madysen smiled and turned to kiss him.

Jilly arrived home the second week in December. Although she tried to participate fully in the cookie baking and tree trimming, she seemed to Madysen to be wary and watchful. "It's different here," she finally said. "Last year we were in such shock there was no celebrating. This year I wanted it to be like it always was, and you're trying. But it's not the same, is it, Mom?"

Madysen pulled her daughter to her, smoothed her hair. "Nothing will ever be like it was," she said. "Your dad's gone, and you're all grown up and moved away to college. From now on we can only make new lives and new traditions."

Jillian stilled in her mother's arms. "I noticed some of the presents under the tree are for Antonio...and the baby. Are they coming over for Christmas?"

"I thought so, yes, Jilly. I thought it would be nice to ask them, since they're alone and we're also alone. Would that be all right with you?" Tony and Lidia had kept to themselves since Jillian's arrival. Madysen felt their absence with a keen pang despite Jillian's familiar presence in the house. She wondered if the time was approaching when she would have to explain to her daughter Tony and the baby's true meaning in her life.

"You're not trying to...replace Daddy and me already. Are you, Mom?"

"Never, never, never! Look at me, Jilly." She tipped her daughter's chin up with one finger so Jillian would have to face her. "No one will ever take your place in my heart. Understand? No

one will ever erase the memory of your dad either. If life is like a photo album, we can keep adding pictures, but that doesn't affect the sentimental feelings we have for the old ones. Does that make sense?"

"I guess." Jillian ducked her head again, and Madysen knew her daughter would need time to think about things. "I just wouldn't want you to love a new baby more than me."

Madysen rested her arms on her daughter's shoulders before letting her move away. "Jillian. You will always be first in my heart."

"Well, I just wanted to make sure, that's all."

"I could give you a chance to get to know Lidia. Tony could use some help this morning if you would agree to watch the baby for an hour or so."

"Tony?" Jillian gave her mother an accusing look, her lower lip threatening to quiver.

"Antonio. Tony. Yes. If I could just go help him for a little while, it would make me feel better than leaving all the chores to him. Especially since he has the baby to tend. You like Antonio all right, don't you?"

"Well, I guess I never thought much about it." Jillian gave her mother a searching sideways look from beneath her lashes. "But you like him, is that what you're telling me, Mom?"

"That's what I'm saying, yes." She waited for Jilly's reaction.

"Wow," her daughter said. "I come home and everything's changed. I never expected something like this."

"To tell you the truth, I never did either," Madysen said.

There was a knock at the back door, and Tony entered with Lidia. Jillian stood stock still while Madysen went to the kitchen to meet them and take the baby from her grandpa. Madysen gave Tony a kiss before heading back to the living room to sit and start taking Lidia's jacket off. Tony hung back in the kitchen. "Hello, Jillian," he said.

"Hello, Antonio," Jillian replied. Her gaze swung from Tony standing in the kitchen doorway to the baby in her mother's lap. Once Lidia's hands were free, she lifted one to pat Madysen's face, chortling her infectious baby laugh.

"She's glad to see you," Jillian said.

"She's generally a pretty happy baby," Madysen replied. "Here, take her, why don't you? She's had lunch, Tony? And she's dry?"

He nodded, rotating his hat by its brim in his fingers. "She's all ready, then, Jilly, if you could just watch her for a little while," Madysen said.

Reluctantly, Jillian held out her arms and took the baby. Once Lidia was in her arms, they studied each other with twin somber expressions. Having accomplished her goal, Madysen hurried to don her jacket before Jillian could change her mind. "Here's her diaper bag, with some toys and a bottle and some teething biscuits," she called over her shoulder as she hustled Tony out the mud room door ahead of her.

Once outside with the door safely shut behind them, she said, "Whew. That went better than I expected."

"Do you think it's a good idea to just leave them together like that?" Tony said, clapping his hat on his head. "I truly don't need any help, you know. There's not that much left to do this morning."

"I know. That's not the point. The point is to get Jilly comfortable with Lidia, so we can eventually be one big, happy family."

"Excuse me?" He halted in his tracks.

"Where did you think I was heading when I said I would fix things, Tony?" Madysen kept walking, and eventually he followed until they were standing inside the barn. "I've read your library books, but they only reinforced what I already knew. You and I need to get married, and then we can work on getting custody of Lidia."

"This is no way to...to propose marriage." He was shaking his head.

“It’s my way, and I just did. Now kiss me and tell me you love me. You do love me, don’t you, Tony?”

He just looked at her, his handsome face radiating confusion.

“Tony? Don’t you?” She was a little less sure of herself as he continued to balk at telling her what she needed to know.

“Sí. Yes, no question,” he finally admitted.

“Then say it,” she demanded, sticking out her chest.

His eyes dropped to her tits. “I love you,” he mumbled.

“Look me in the eye, dammit.”

He raised his gold-flecked brown eyes. His generous lips curved as he continued to stare at her, making her wait. “¡Te amo!” he finally said. “Madysen Collins, I love you! Is that better?”

“Much. Antonio Marquez, I love you too. But this month of going without you is going to kill me. Now kiss me before I die of wanting you.”

“Sí, señora,” he said, teasing her about her bossiness but tacitly admitting that her plan was sound. They sealed their bargain with an open mouthed tongue-thrusting smacker that left her weak in the knees.

When they finally parted so their breathing could return to normal, she said, “That still leaves Beck.”

“Your brother.”

“Yes.”

“Whose new house you are now going to try to take away.”

“Yes.”

“Sometimes you scare me, Madysen Collins.”

“But I make up for that, hmm, Tony? You still like me, don’t you?” She stepped up and rubbed her breasts against his chest, watching his eyes glaze over.

“A month without you might kill me as well, if you keep up that kind of teasing,” he growled, backing up a step.

“Then you’ve got a long time to think of ways to punish me, don’t you?” she whispered.

“I will think of so many ways, you might die of pleasure before I’m finished with you.” His eyes glinted as he grabbed her ass and pulled her close against the erection straining his jeans.

“We will never be finished with each other, Tony. I can promise you that,” she said before their lips met again in a searing kiss.

They tiptoed across the porch like the conspirators they were, Madysen quietly opening the mud room door to see how it was going before they stepped inside.

Jillian sat with Lidia on a blanket on the living room floor. The baby’s face and hands were smeared with drool and biscuit, and Jilly was trying to teach her pat-a-cake. The baby was so eager to high-five Jilly, she fell over sideways when her reach exceeded her balance. They both laughed as Jillian settled her solid little body upright so they could begin again.

Madysen stepped aside, a finger to her lips, so Tony could take her place in the doorway while she tried to peer around his bulk and not miss anything. One of the ranch dogs barked behind them, and the noise caused Jillian to look up and see them. They stepped inside the kitchen, trying to appear nonchalant as if they hadn’t been watching her interact, perfectly happily, with Lidia.

Jilly got to her feet and started toward them. “I need to wash my hands,” she said, turning them palms up so they could see the smear of sticky teething biscuit.

Tony moved sideways to let her pass. Lidia started to whimper when she discovered they were all in another room and she was left alone. Tony walked to the baby but didn’t pick her up. He just looked down at Lidia as her distress mounted.

Jilly turned to watch as she dried her hands. “Why isn’t he picking her up, Mom?”

Madysen shrugged, so Jillian called, “She wants you to pick her up, Antonio.”

“I know. But you need to look at her. I can’t believe it. Jillian, you have taught Lidia to sit up by herself.”

“I did? She never did that on her own before?” Jillian looked pleased. “Well, that’s pretty amazing.”

“We were only gone such a little while. You are a good teacher, Jillian.”

“She’s a good baby.” Jilly’s admission didn’t sound forced to Madysen, but she was glad Tony bent to pick up Lidia before she worked herself into a frenzy and belied Jillian’s nice picture of her. Lidia was a good baby, but she had her moments when nothing would do but getting her own way. Maybe that was why Madysen liked her so much: they were two of a kind. She put her hand to her mouth to hide her secret grin.

“I’m going into town tonight, Mom,” Jillian said. “Some of us from high school are getting together since we’ve scattered all over the country and now are home for break.”

Madysen’s gaze caught Tony’s as Jillian turned to hang up the dishtowel. She sent him an elaborate wink. “It will be nice for you to see your friends, honey.”

Jilly turned back and Madysen bit her lip, unsure if she’d been caught making goo-goo eyes at her man.

“That’s what I thought,” Jilly said. “I just wasn’t sure it would be right to go off with my friends and leave you alone. But I guess it’s okay, huh?” She gave her mother a searching look.

“Don’t worry about me, honey. You’re young. You need to spend time with your friends, so if you want to go out tonight, go on and have fun.” She couldn’t help looking at Tony, and saw in her peripheral vision Jilly’s head turn to follow her gaze. Madysen hoped by now Jilly could accept that it wasn’t only people her own age who needed companionship. Mothers needed love too.

## Chapter Eight

Two down, one to go, Madysen thought as she erased the text message from Beck. He would be there within the hour, he had written. *Can’t wait*, she thought. Her plans had worked out well the previous day with Tony, and then, miraculously, also with Jilly. But she had hardly ever been successful in the past in getting her big brother to see things her way. So she wasn’t looking forward to what she was sure would be more of a confrontation than a reunion.

“Your Uncle Beck’s on his way,” she said to Jilly, who was again entertaining Lidia on the living room floor.

“Oh, good. I’ll be glad to see him,” Jilly enthused.

Tony was sitting on the couch watching Jillian playing with Lidia. He sent a look Madysen’s way, probably to see if he could decipher how she was feeling about her brother’s impending arrival. It was amazing how fast Jilly had taken to Lidia, once she got past her concern that she still had the biggest piece of her mother’s heart. And she had already developed an easygoing, relaxed manner with Tony. Madysen was grateful for her daughter’s maturity, and glad Beck had chosen to finally show up when Jilly was there—his favorite and only niece’s presence would be sure to diffuse any blowup. If she wasn’t such a big chicken, Madysen thought, she would have told him about Tony already. She wondered if their mutual friend Clay had mentioned that she had insisted on changing the location of the utilities, and paved the way to Beck accepting her plans for his new house.

Madysen went to the kitchen to arrange a plate of cookies and set out glasses for cider and eggnog. It wasn’t long before she heard a car in the yard, and then silence outside. Beck didn’t come in the house, and she wasn’t going out to meet him, taking what she was sure was going to be a disagreement into the yard. Tony rose to join her in the kitchen, his arms going around her as she peered out the window.

“Are you all right?” he asked.

“I will be. At the moment, I’m feeling a little nauseated.”

“Would it be better if I took Lidia to the cabin? Your brother is going to have many changes to take in at once.”

“Don’t leave,” Madysen said. She turned toward him, catching sight of Jilly watching the open display of affection between them as she did so. Tony’s arms tightened around her. Madysen sent a wavery smile in Jillian’s direction, but her daughter gave no sign of what she was thinking and just turned her attention back to Lidia.

At last there were footsteps on the porch. One sharp rap, a turn of the knob, and the door was opening.

But the person who entered was not who Madysen was expecting. This person was female, and had long dark hair with reddish highlights. This person was in her mid-twenties, and she was unmistakably pregnant.

The arm holding the door open for this astonishing vision belonged to her brother Beck. He ushered the young woman inside, and shut the door on the cold draft entering with them. Then he, and Tony, and Madysen, and Beck’s unexpected guest, just stood taking each other’s measure for a long pause. Madysen didn’t dare think *pregnant pause* or she might burst into nervous and horribly inappropriate laughter.

“Maddy, what the hell—” Beck began, his brows lowered and thunderclouds building in his eyes.

The young woman laid a restraining hand on his arm. His eyes lowered to her hand and then raised back up to her face. Madysen had never seen anyone so easily stop Beck in his tracks like this young woman did. She kind of sparkled; there was no other word for the faint gold aura that surrounded her. She stepped forward, hand outstretched. “Hi. I’m Selene. You must be Madysen. I’ve heard so much about you.”

Madysen wanted to say *I’ll bet*, but the sarcastic words wouldn’t form while sparkly Selene had hold of her fingers. Instead she said, “This is Antonio Marquez. Tony, my brother Beck.”

Tony stepped forward and shook hands with the two newcomers. Madysen beckoned toward the living room. “And my daughter, Jillian, and Tony’s granddaughter, Lidia. Jilly, come and meet Selene, Uncle Beck’s, uh, *friend*.”

“My wife,” Beck corrected.

Jilly hurried forward, handed Lidia to Tony, and threw herself in Beck’s arms. “Your wife! Uncle Beck! Congratulations!” She turned to hug Selene, and so she was enveloped in little gold sparklies too.

Madysen thought, what in the world is it with this woman and her fairy dust? And Beck’s *wife*? He had to be at least fifteen years older than this child-woman, who was more Jillian’s age. But she found she couldn’t bring herself to say anything of that nature, either.

It looked like Beck was also choking back words, a most unusual occurrence with him, so she had that small mercy to be thankful for at least.

“Let me take your coats. All of you go on in the living room, and I’ll get us something to drink. Beck, would you like a little rum in your eggnog?”

“I think I would, yes, please, Maddy,” he said, sounding in restraint as if his back molars were glued together.

“Tony?” she asked, noticing Beck’s eyes shift from her to Antonio.

“Sure,” Tony said pleasantly, his tone alone the only natural one since he hadn’t been sprinkled with sparkle dust. “Why not?” He gestured with the hand not holding Lidia for Beck and Selene and Jillian to precede him into the living room. As Selene passed Tony, Lidia bent so far forward as to topple from her abuelo’s arms. Selene laughed and held her arms out for Lidia, and then the baby was besparkled as well.



Beck gave Tony an assessing look as he passed, trying to gauge his exact role in his sister's house, Madysen was sure. But if Beck could nonchalantly spring Selene on them, she could return the favor with Tony.

"I'll take some rum, Mom," Jillian said with a teasing twinkle in her eye.

"No, you won't." Madysen flipped her daughter's hair over her shoulder. "Plain eggnog or hot apple cider?"

Jillian sighed. "Cider. Selene?"

Selene nodded. "Me, too."

"So, Tony," Beck said as he claimed one end of the couch, slinging one ankle over his knee. "You worked here long?"

"About a year," Tony said as he dropped into an armchair. Madysen noted that Beck did at least have the grace to look uncomfortable at the reminder of the stretch of time that she had been left to take care of everything herself when Carl died.

"Tony is Mom's boyfriend," Jillian supplied helpfully, grinning. Beck almost choked on the eggnog Madysen had just finished handing him and that he had raised to his lips.

"That's not quite true," Madysen said as, with an evil smile that said *I'm going to choke you later*, she handed her daughter a cup of cider.

Jillian grinned back at her mother. "It's not? The secret is out. I saw you two kissing in the kitchen, you know."

"The secret is that Tony is not my boyfriend. He is my fiancé."

"What? Mom!" Jillian spilled cider as she jumped up to hug Madysen. "More congratulations to you and to Antonio! But what does that do to Willow Vale? I don't want to sound selfish or anything, but I always thought it would be..."

"Yours. And it will be," Madysen assured her daughter. "And it will be Beck's child's as well, and Lidia's when Tony and I adopt her. Kent Reed and Francesca Sittoni's legacy, Willow Vale, is in an unbreakable family trust, to be passed down in perpetuity."

"Pretty name," Tony commented. "Francesca. I like it."

"She was an immigrant from the Tyrol. Like you, Tony. With a little daughter who became Beck's and my grandmother. The parallels are quite striking, aren't they, Beck?"

"Now that you mention it, I think the man was named Marquez. The one who lived on the old Broadbent place and worked for Kent and Francesca for years, until he was an old, old man."

"I think, from the way Grandma Elena told the story, Señor Marquez was always a little in love with Francesca," Madysen said, smiling at Tony.

"Another pretty name: Elena," Tony said, deflecting attention from himself.

"Oh, I agree," Selene said. "Do you know, my great grandmother was also from the Tyrol? Beck, if we have a girl, would you like to name her Francesca or Elena?"

"Maybe both. Elena Francesca sounds nice, but so does Francesca Elena."

"They would have been so pleased," Madysen said.

"How in the heck did I end up with a name like Jilly?" Jillian demanded, and they all laughed.

"Your dad liked it, honey," Madysen said, sinking down on the arm of the chair where Tony sat.

"Well, speaking of the family trust...is it time to get down to some business here?"

"Beck," Selene said quietly where she sat beside him. "Be nice."

"Selene, our house faces the *wrong way*," he told her. "I specifically asked Clay to make sure it would face the river, like this one does and like the original homestead cabin does."

"It's my fault it doesn't, Beck," Madysen admitted quietly.

"Well, I figured. Clay wouldn't just ignore my instructions without some strong input from you," Beck said. "What gives, Maddy?"

"How important is it to you that you have a view of the Burntfork?"

"I think it's pretty obvious by now that it was damned important to me, Madysen." Beck set his drink down and leaned toward his sister. Once again all it took was for Selene to touch his arm, and he reined himself in, sighing and sitting back against the cushions.

Tony sat very still while Jillian's eyes grew round and ping-ponged back and forth between her mother and her uncle, probably scared her holiday was going to be ruined by a big family fight.

"Would you consider a trade, Beck?" Madysen asked. "I'll take your new house if you take this one."

"Wait a minute. I hate to keep saying 'what about me,' but what about me?" Jillian asked. "Do I have a vote?"

"Nothing's decided. But if we take this house and it's left up to me, you can certainly keep your room as long as you want it, Jillian," Selene offered in her quiet voice.

"Or you can stay with me and Tony if your uncle agrees to switch houses. Or you could take over Francesca and Kent's little cabin. Whichever you like."

"But what about Lidia, and Uncle Beck and Selene's baby? They'll need bedrooms."

"It sounds like we're going to have our own little preschool," Selene said. Beck smiled at her fondly, and patted her belly. Madysen thought: *Holy crap, I can't believe how he acts with her. She's bewitched him or something.*

"We can always build more rooms later, Jilly," Beck said. "First things first. Maddy, you're really willing to hand over this house just like that?"

"I've had my turn here, Beck. And while I love the house that Kent built for Francesca, it's very small. I would like to start in a new place with Tony and Lidia."

"Well, let me ask you this since we're springing surprises of all kinds on each other. What would you think about grapes?"

"Excuse me?"

"Grapes. A winery. It's something I've always dreamed about."

"In Wyoming? It gets a little chilly here for grapes, doesn't it?" Madysen couldn't help the skepticism in her voice.

"I wouldn't be the first to try it, Maddy. There are already several vineyards in the state."

"And I'm very good with growing things," Selene offered.

"Well, we've certainly got the land. Do whatever you like, Beck. I've already got the cheese business to keep me busy. And now that I've got Tony, I'm perfectly happy."

But Beck was still distrustful. "I don't get it. Why would you want the modular house over this one?"

Madysen laughed, but couldn't immediately manufacture a reason off the top of her head without revealing secrets she didn't want anyone but Tony to know.

Beck waited, until finally Tony offered, "For the view."

She turned her head away from the company, pursed her lips, and blew Tony a kiss of gratitude.

"You would seriously choose the mountains over the river, Tony?" Beck asked doubtfully.

Madysen hoped she was the only one who noticed Tony's lashes lower as his gaze brushed over her shirt front. "*Las montañas*," he said with great feeling. "Sí, yes, I assure you I love the mountains, and will be very happy wherever Madysen chooses to live."

"I love you," she mouthed silently.

He raised his eyes to her face. "*Te quiero*. I want you. *Te amo*. I love you," he replied in his normal soft voice, as if he didn't care who heard him. Tony really was fitting in quite nicely here in Willow Valley. Beck was happy with his new wife and the old house. Jillian was happy that she would never be ousted from her place on the family ranch or any of its dwellings. And although she had never expected to be so happy again, Madysen couldn't wait to begin her new

life in her new little house with her new husband and the ranch's youngest new resident, baby Lidia.